The 16-month freeze suddenly broke on 18 April. The credit for the thaw goes to Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee. Analysts are bound to search for reasons and rationales, political and economic factors, domestic and international influences but no one can ignore the decision-maker. Goodwill on the Pakistan side is manifest. The Government and people have been unstinting in giving Mr. Vajpayee praise for the initiative. Prompt responses emphasised the positive.

Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali expressed appreciation for the positive evolution in India's policy. President Musharraf endorsed Mr. Jamali's view, adding that he considered Mr. Vajpayee's gesture "genuine." Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri gave what was described by Asian Age a "passionate" interview in favour of resumption of dialogue. He noted the "new nuance" in Mr. Vajpayee's offer of resumption of dialogue, namely that it did not refer to "cross-border terrorism" as a condition. Kasuri reciprocated the restraint saying, "Pakistan, too, does not want it. Targeting innocent civilians is counter-productive."

On 29 April Mr. Jamali took the initiative to telephone Mr. Vajpayee to welcome his dialogue offer and invite him to visit Pakistan. He described the 15-minute conversation as "most cordial and useful."

On 6 May, the Pakistani Prime Minister announced a 6-point package of initiatives, including

- Release of 14 crew of 'Raj Laxmi';
- Exchange of High Commissioners
- Restoration of full-strength missions
- Addition of 78 new items on import list
- Resumption of sports links. SAF games
- Scheduling of SAARC summit.

II

These tidings of hope have brought relief at a time of gloom over developments in the adjoining region of the Gulf. Over the past two months humanity has been an outraged witness to shocking events: Rejection of impartial findings of UN/IAEA inspectors, defiance of UN Security Council, an unjust war on Iraq, invasion and occupation, killing of uncounted thousands, destruction of economic and administrative infra-structure, descent into anarchy and insecurity.
The United Nations has suffered a crippling blow. Confidence in a law-based world community has been shaken. The ideals of common interest and collective security seem more remote than ever. New doctrines of "regime change" and "preemptive war" subvert recognised principles of international law. Premonitions of 'Who next' stalk the Middle East.

History has turned a corner. What troubles humanity is the prospect on the other side of the bend. The Emerging International Order is not what we hoped for. Instead of emerging, it is submerging; internationalism is turning to unilateralism and order into disorder.

The events have blighted the hope that arose after the end of the Cold War. Working in harmony, the permanent members of the Security Council could have cooperated to fulfil the promise of the Charter. That opportunity has been squandered.

III

Perhaps the coincidence between the war on Iraq and Mr. Vajpayee's initiative is fortuitous. In any case, anxiety over the international environment should be an added incentive for defusing the Pakistan-India tension and negotiating an enduring settlement of the Kashmir issue. The stakes in our region are very high.

A new beginning provides a new opportunity. The opportunity has to be seized. Our history is too full of new beginnings that failed to fulfil the promise. Either the goals were unrealistic and flawed or persistence was lacking. The hope immanent in the present opportunity therefore needs to be carefully nurtured and sustained.

The challenge facing the two countries calls for vision and wisdom on part of leaders and a determination to shape a future different from the past.

Islamabad appears to be cognisant of the responsibility. The President, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and we must not fail to mention - our official spokesman have all exercised scrupulous and deliberate care. No one has sought to score points. President Musharraf even rebuked a journalist who asked if the Pakistan side had won, and went on to emphasise that both countries stood to gain from peace.

Prime Minster Jamali convened a meeting of leaders of parties both from the government and opposition coalitions to build domestic consensus in favour of a serious and purposeful dialogue. He must have found the response heartening.

Foreign Minister Kasuri, whose first statement after taking over his office last November emphasised the primacy of the objective of improving relations with India, has been consistent in his approach. Last month he exercised deliberate restraint in the face of provocative statements by some Indian ministers who said Pakistan was a fitter case for preemptive attack. He told us last week that he resisted the temptation to make political capital by pandering to popular preferences. In his border constituency he would have added ten thousand votes to his majority by throwing stones in answer to bricks.

Kasuri nourishes a wholesome but cautious respect for serving officials as well as
"retired gurus." He praises them for their knowledge but as a politician he is wary of opinions of bureaucrats. He keeps ears open to the views of political colleagues. He told a meeting of retired ambassadors last week that he checked my account of Agra with his Track-II friends in India. (I was glad to hear that his Indian friends confirmed my account!)

IV

Islamabad and New Delhi seem mindful of the need for careful preparations. The sequence too is provident. They have decided to exchange Ambassadors as soon as possible. They will provide a reliable channel for authoritative communication of views of governments. India has selected an able and experienced professional. Pakistan gave the agreement in record time. (May be Ambassador Aziz Khan can tell us who is to go from Pakistan!)

Agenda: I understand a meeting of officials of the two countries is projected for June. One of the items they will discuss is bound to be the agenda. It is a good augury that both sides have eschewed public discussion of what should be the content. The need for caution is obvious, given the fact of Indian sensitivity in regard to the Agra draft.

Former Foreign Secretary Rasgotra told us in November, that if and when the dialogue was resumed, negotiations would have to begin with a clean slate. That is a legally sustainable position. There was no closure, as EAM Jaswant Singh correctly stated afterwards, and therefore India is not bound by the draft text that was all but agreed.

I am glad that Islamabad has not said the dialogue should start from where it was broken at Agra. It is presumable that both sides would wish to avoid a contentious debate on the draft declaration.

Whether the reasons for the Indian side to postpone a decision on the draft declaration lay in the text or in political judgements of one or more members of the Security Committee of the Cabinet, as far as we understood these did not relate to the agenda. The list of subjects to be taken up by heads of government, Foreign Ministers or Senior Officials was comprehensive. It included Jammu and Kashmir as well as each and every other subject proposed by either side. Terrorism and Drug Trafficking were on the list as were CBMs, both conventional and nuclear. Economic and commercial cooperation and promotion of friendly exchanges were specified.

If now either side has additional subject to suggest for dialogue, it should not present a problem. I shall gladly trade pride of co-authorship of the Agra draft for happiness at the success of new interlocutors.

We on Track-II are not decisions makers. Our purpose is to assist progress and contribute to avoidance of a Sisyphean fate. To that worthy end, it would be useful if participants from India gave us clues as to the likely Indian approach to the agenda question and, if possible, also about the dialogue structure. On my part, I offer comments on some of the likely issues.

Jammu and Kashmir: Both sides recognise that progress toward settlement of Jammu
and Kashmir would be conducive for normalisation and further the establishment of a cooperative relationship in a mutually reinforcing manner. Neither seems to expect that this issue will be taken up at the first meeting. Optimally, the two sides would decide to establish a dialogue structure to address this issue.

Cross-LOC Infiltration: It is self-evident that both sides have the right as well as the obligation to prevent violation of the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir. The question that begs serious consideration is how to achieve the objective. A purely legalistic approach is possible. Similarly, deployment of forces to interdict movements is an obvious and tried method. More efficacious, however, would be a realistic approach that takes cognisance of underlying causes and motivations of the Kashmiri people on both sides of the LOC. An atmosphere of hope for a peaceful solution is therefore crucial to success.

Overflights: I am under the impression that the India side is likely to raise the overflights issue. A solution should not be difficult. The two countries are parties to the ICAO Conventions, which provide a universally recognised framework for both air links and overflights. It is obvious that disruption entails not only inconvenience to millions of passengers but also commercial losses for their airlines. In order to obviate recurrence, the two sides could agree to avoid unilateral actions in contravention of international obligations.

Trade is an important if tortured issue. A step-by-step approach seems the only way. Prime Minister Jamali has had the matter studied in advance and announced a decision to add 78 new items on the import list for India. New Delhi probably is not satisfied but I hope a forward step will not go wasted. It is not the last word on the subject and surely progress is possible toward the optimum. Each side should move forward taking into account the known position of the other.

Indus Basin: Time may not be ripe yet to raise the issue of projects on the Chenab River to the level of governments. Procedures for neutral inquiry have not been exhausted. It would be desirable nevertheless to ensure compliance with the Indus Basin agreement and preclude another dispute.

Normalisation Issues: Sports and cultural exchanges, visa facilities and even CBMs are basically non-controversial issues. Inevitably, these are linked to the political environment.

Dialogue Structure: A step-by-step approach to settlement of outstanding issues is the obvious and the only viable option. Equally necessary is a tiered structure for sustained dialogue. Diplomatic missions, meetings of senior officials, ministerial exchanges and summits have each their due role. The sequence need not be rigid however. Visits of leaders generate goodwill and impart a fillip to the dialogue process.

Finally a word about us: Tracks II and III people are not decision-makers but can be bridge builders. Thanks to Pugwash and Secretary General Paolo Cotta Ramusino we have this opportunity to deepen understanding and thus enhance our ability to make a useful contribution. I offer him sincere thanks.