

Bhutto's election has kindled thaw in troubled South Asia .(1989,January 04).The Ottawa citizen.

World

Bhutto's election has kindled thaw in troubled South Asia

When Benazir Bhutto became the prime minister of Pakistan in a sudden outburst of democracy following the mysterious death of military dictator General Zia ul Haq, it triggered events which substantially changed the political climate in conflict-stricken South Asia.

Bhutto's inauguration as the first woman prime minister in the Islamic world hasn't directly influenced the decision-making process in Moscow, Beijing, New Delhi or Kabul.

But the atmosphere of tension, mistrust and militancy has begun to melt.

Moscow was one of the first to notice the difference between Zia and Bhutto. While the policy-makers in the Kremlin have no illusions that Bhutto will abandon the Afghan nationalists, it is clear that she will be far less enthusiastic than her predecessor in channelling military aid, training officers and advisers for the alliance of resistance groups now in their 10th year of war against the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan.

It was Bhutto's ministers and experts who advised the leaders of the Afghan nationalists to accept the Soviet offer of negotiations in Islamabad and Saudi Arabia.

The new Pakistani prime minister's flexibility and realism have contributed to Moscow's decision to resume and even accelerate the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. The Soviets expressed a hope that the Pakistani influence on the Afghan



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nationalists will prevent the latter from increasing military activities as their soldiers leave.

To Bhutto's credit, her new government has not changed its support for the resistance. She just made a pragmatic step toward the end of the Afghan war — no more than that.

Her program for democratization — an uneasy project in Pakistan with its legacy of military regimes and political catastrophes — has allowed the start of a much-needed détente with India, the main rival and threat for many years.

The recent talks between Bhutto and India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in Islamabad were symbolic rather than practical. But such symbolism is a better beginning than practical yet insignificant agreements.

Both prime ministers symbolize the new generation of the world leaders. They don't harbor the bitterness of the late '40s, when both countries were consumed by

the tragedy of the split, war and religious massacres. They are more sensitive to international trends of co-existence, compromise and co-operation.

And they both lead countries that have become — unofficially — members of the nuclear club.

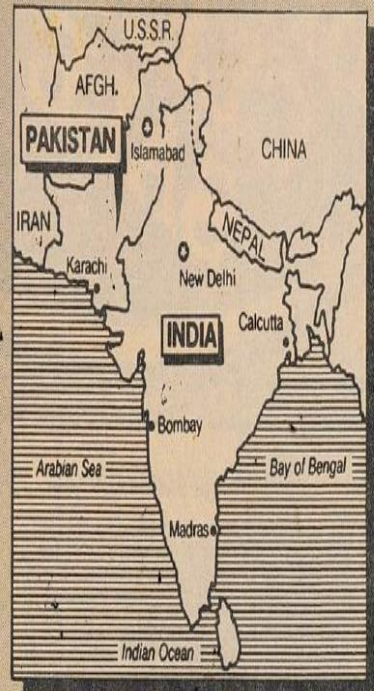
All this helped them proclaim a new spirit of relations and helped create an agreement to secure their nuclear installations against sudden attacks.

Gandhi's visit to China in December had also been colored by changes in Pakistan. Beijing is a strong ally of Pakistan while India has relied on the Soviet Union. The possibility of India and Pakistan inching towards each other freed Gandhi and the Chinese from the pressure of emphasizing their loyalty toward their allies.

The picture is not as rosy as it looks despite the propaganda spewing forth after the visits, talks and conferences in South Asia.

Pakistan faces immense internal problems, including separatism, the presence of 3.5 million Afghan refugees, economic difficulties and massive illiteracy.

India exhibits a strange political phenomenon. On the one hand there are sectarian, communal, economic, religious and political problems and on the other New Delhi shows its imperial face by sending troops to Sri Lanka or the Maldives, spreading its political presence in Bangladesh and Nepal, and buying more than \$4 billion worth of Soviet military equipment.



The war in Sri Lanka continues despite or perhaps because of the presence of 50,000 Indian troops.

Yet the realization that the economic and social problems of South Asia are immense and could not be solved by militancy, threats or imperial gestures is finally dawning in South Asian capitals.

When the conflict in Afghanistan is finally solved, South Asia could become as dynamic an area of economic and political co-operation as its neighbors in South-east Asia.

The process could take years but it looks as if the directions are set.