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## Islamabad rendezvous

### Will Clinton be more expansive on his general outlook?

**N**OW that weeks of will-he-won't-he speculation has been put at an end with US President Bill Clinton's affirmation that he will stop by in Islamabad after his Indian sojourn, hopefully a touch of realism will pervade proceedings. Indeed, over the last couple of months feverishly voiced expectations of the presidential trip have oscillated between two extremes. Cynics have argued that Clinton, having been consigned to premature lame-duckhood, has left a visit to the subcontinent too late for it to result in any concrete breakthrough. Others, no doubt alert to the rarity of a touchdown by Air Force One, are all aquiver with anticipation of a cornucopia of goodies — in the foreign policy and trade sectors alike — that will be showered by the leader of the lonely superpower.

It is instructive, however, that both camps have expended an inordinate amount of energy on the possibility and the implications of a Clinton stopover in Pakistan. This is unfortunate and self-defeating. Given the tentativeness in New Delhi and in Washington, sober assessment of the long-term, post-Cold War, bilateral processes that could be set in motion has been eclipsed — and precluded — by an obsession with the Pakistan angle. But now that Clinton's date with Pervez Musharraf has been confirmed, it's time to banish the fanciful for the pragmatic. For all talk of India lobbying otherwise, the Islamabad rendezvous was inevitable. For all the pressure exerted on Washington to shed its Siamese-twins approach to India and Pakistan, at no point did the US betray any thought of forsaking its strategic interests in Pakistan. New Delhi has argued that Clinton's itiner-

ary is America's sovereign decision, and so it is. In fact, while some decry Washington's eagerness to do business with Pakistan's new regime, it also cannot be gainsaid that a humiliated, globally isolated military dictator could only be a catalyst for a further escalation in Pak-supported militancy in Jammu and Kashmir.

Yet, if the wisdom in undertaking a detour passes muster, the same cannot be said of the manner in which it was effected. Clinton's spokespersons have piously claimed the Islamabad halt is aimed at fostering dialogue between India and Pakistan, besides encouraging the return of democracy to that country. Pessimism in India notwithstanding, if he achieves this aim, the US president would fly back home with a feather in his cap. India, for its part, has amply articulated a desire for a productive dialogue, as Prime Minister Vajpayee demonstrated by undertaking his Lahore bus ride. But given Pakistan's perfidy, its subsequent shenanigans in Kargil and at Kandahar, New Delhi is correct in requesting some evidence of sincerity before setting itself up for a possible hoodwink. It is all very well for Clinton to engage the general, but emphatically voiced ambitions of setting in motion a new phase of amity on the subcontinent need to be laced with realism. Instead of raising suspicions in India by regularly uttering the K word, perhaps he would be better off extracting from Musharraf the promise he got from Nawaz Sharif: respect for the sanctity of the Line of Control. In any case, New Delhi is stuck with a considerable what transpires between the two in Islamabad will not be known till after Clinton leaves Indian soil.