

Debating Kashmir

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There is a widespread response-and quite varied, on President General Pervez Musharraf off the cuff elaboration of the Kashmir question to initiate a national debate on possible options. Most sections from among the *Kashmiris* have welcomed some of his points, especially on allowing Kashmiri a greater say and autonomy which they have read as independence (*azadi*). They have misread President's reading of geographical regions as a signal to the division of the former J&K state, which President Musharraf had not suggested. While the opposition in Pakistan was overtaken by expediency in thoughtlessly rejecting the glasnost the General had initiated, even though it suited the civilian and democratic mind, New Delhi has diplomatically avoided making a response through media, despite recourse to press leaks saying no to "second partition" or re-drawing of borders". Did the General commit a blunder or take yet another U-turn?

It requires courage and straightforwardness to speak up your mind in politics, more so in diplomacy, especially when most emotive and divisive issues are involved, in conflict situations in particular. No body dares to stick his neck out or become the proverbial first drop of rain. Perhaps no one else, except the COAS-President remembered in popular perception as a fighting soldier or identified by media as the alleged captain of Kargil boys, could dare open a debate in public that has been going behind the scenes since Liaquat-Nehru, Bhut to-Swaran Singh round, Naik-Mishra talks and, lately, Dixit-Aziz behind-the-scene diplomacy. What the General had spelt out without identifying his preferred option but encouraging the range of options to be debated is not new to the informed circles. What, of course, was new (and there are many points to be discussed) was that he is the first leader to have initiated a debate in order to defreeze most frozen positions that have not taken forward Indo-Pak dialogue in the past 57 years. He is absolutely right in admitting that the Indian leaders also concede that no solution is possible within the framework of stated-positions. Former Prime Ministers Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif said it, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Musharraf have been saying this and there is a long list.

What distinguishes Musharraf from his predecessors and interlocutors is that he has kept his words that if India will take one step he will match with two steps. Before and after the Agra Summit, this was he who kept repeating offer of talks anywhere, anytime and at any level. In response to Vajpayee's second initiative, Musharraf offered his first ceasefire that was disrupted by the attack on the Indian Parliament. When Vajpayee again offered his hand of friendship from Srinagar in April last year, Musharraf responded with ceasefire not only along with the LoC, but also across the LoC, besides offering a withdrawal of troops from the international border while addressing the Indian parliamentary delegates to SAFMA's Indo-Pak parliamentary conference in August, 2003, at Islamabad. Imme-

diately knee-jerk response from New Delhi was outright rejection that was not shared by the worthy Indian parliamentarians who had appreciated Musharraf offer. In fact confidence building measure suggested by the Indo-Pak parliamentary conference and some endorsed by the President during that interaction were later formally announced by both New Delhi and Islamabad.

The January 6 Islamabad statements speak of resolving Kashmir issue to "the satisfaction of India and Pakistan", and October 24 New York Statement quite emphatically commits two sides to explore all "possible options" on Kashmir. When, during our visit to Indian-administered J&K and, during, the SAFMA Conference on Interstate Conflicts, in New Delhi, we reiterated our support to Manmohan-Musharraf agreement to explore all possible options on Kashmir, not a single objection or reservation was shown by anybody from the Indian side. It was, rather, welcomed by them. Even the evaluations and reports written by various scribes from the journalists group did not come under criticism in India. The Declaration of the SAFMA Delhi conference, attended by 57 leading Pakistani and more than 150 Indian journalists, on Indo-Pak relations emphasises a simultaneous approach to improve relations and resolve the Kashmir issue: "There was a consensus that Kashmiri interests and aspirations needed to be addressed" and "only a solution from which all parties felt they had gained would be viable in the long run". What's wrong with a win-win option General Musharraf has asked to explore? One wonders!

Let us now focus on what President Musharraf had meant. With the change of times, co-relation of forces, the ways to resolve contradictions and the tactics to achieve objectives, that never remain constant, also undergo changes. Those who remain a prisoner of old times and formulae and refuse to take into account the changing ground realities fail to achieve even what can be achieved. And General Musharraf has proved, on more than one count, he is cognizant of the dynamics of change and is responsive to appropriate alternatives. Identifying the regions, he has produced a geographic reading of J&K that shuns secular objections without ignoring any Muslim-majority part. In fact it is closer to Chenab formula and goes beyond the valley. Much negative reaction from J&K is due to overwhelming view against any division as opposed to New Delhi which is unlikely to accept redrawing of borders or another partition rooted in the un-acceptance of the Partition of the sub-continent by most Indians, both secular and Hindu communal. Those who have made it do not understand the criticism in Pakistan on this count. His purpose seems to be, in case the regions at stake are to be identified and division becomes an option, that he can lay claim on almost 80 per cent of J&K that India is not likely to cede as a status quo power Pakistan is not in a position to snatch by force.

Next step of demilitarising the two-occupied regions of J&K, as proposed by him, has been welcomed by an overwhelming opinion in J&K and the international commu-

nity, although it will warrant a lot more J&K-specific confidence-building measures. They include: normalisation of relations and building of enough trust between India and Pakistan; end to both militancy and cross border infiltration and Indian military repression; withdrawal of all cases, release of prisoners and an all-sided ceasefire, including the militants; engagement of *Kashmiris* in talks and the process; softening of LoC and allowing bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, Jammu and Sialkot and opening all points to enter for the divided families and clans and tribes; reviving traditional trade routes. This can be done in the framework of Indo-Pak military amity and understanding on wider issues of security concern of both countries.

Re-defining the status of various parts of J&K will be the most ticklish issue not only between an annexationist India and irredentist Pakistan, but also among different ethnolinguistic and religious groups of J&K. India and Pakistan are unlikely to vacate their respective parts of occupied Kashmir whose inhabitants don't want a division, even if they disagree on accession to this or that country or independence. Although Pakistan has in formal constitutional terms kept AJK as an independent entity with Northern Areas separately treated at a municipal level, India has constitutionally annexed Kashmir under an otherwise most reducible and also enlargeable tag of "special status". Here comes the issue of options. General Musharraf has dared to ask the *Kashmiris*, the Indians and the Pakistanis to debate all options, including '*khodd-mukhtari*' (self-determination), joint control, and condominium (s) or UN tutelage.

Between Vajpayee and Musharraf it was recognised that both plebiscite and LoC as permanent line was not acceptable to the two sides. However, even the hawks in India talk about solutions that are ready to grant a step-down 'independence', at least to the Valley, without compromising formal territorial sovereignty in the hands of India. Leading analysts, attached to officialdom on both sides, also show preference for a variety of solutions found and implemented elsewhere, such as Aaland Island, the Trieste model, the Andorra experiment and the Good Friday agreement on Northern Ireland. All these living examples show how conflicts over territories and aspirations of the concerned people were addressed without a loss of face to the claimants of territory. A win-win formula can only emerge, as a by product of a sustained process without pushing India and Pakistan back into the same grove of territorial claims and making one lose at the cost of the other and, above all, letting *Kashmiris* determine their fate in a physical context that the two states would like to either jointly or separately supervise without losing sovereign territorial hold in a formal sense. The General has done well by opening the discussion without taking a U-turn or blundering. Why should anybody feel shy of contributing to the process? Now as President Musharraf has done his part, let India's peak out.

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