

Kashmir

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In the most significant policy initiative for any Pakistani leader since independence in 1947, General Pervez Musharraf seemingly abandoned Pakistan's long-standing demand for a plebiscite, something enshrined in the UN Security Council Resolution on Kashmir. In a major speech to media bigwigs recently, the President encouraged both India and Pakistan to move away from their oft-stated positions for the sake of peace in South Asia.

India's response has been rather cool, saying such negotiations should be confidential and through diplomatic channels rather than being debated in the media. Pakistan's major departure of policy, coming from a soldier, is a 180-degree change of direction in the Army's thinking. While recognizing the harsh ground realities, this is certainly a courageous move to settle this outstanding dispute with India. However, one has to agree with India's contention that using other than quiet diplomatic channels is a risky proposition.

On the other hand, what about the personal risk the President is taking domestically for having dared to touch a national sacred cow? Musharraf has thrown down the gauntlet to friend and foe alike, both domestically and externally. On the one hand, friends have been told to either line up and be counted or else be counted out; on the other hand, enemies have been provoked to come up with a better alternative to solve this bloody impasse. Above all, India has been challenged to respond with ideas of its own to untangle the proverbial Gordian knot over Kashmir.

On June 28, 2000, in an article entitled "Economically and politically", I had said: "Considered at one time to be the region of the most concentrated misery, on a pro-rata basis the world's most industrious people come from South Asia, its entrepreneurs an optimistic bunch that tends to see more often than not an half empty glass as a glass half filled with water." The article went on, "two of the countries of South Asia possess nuclear arsenals and the means to deliver them, not as much as the US and Russia can deploy but enough to destroy each other many times over."

This is compounded by an ineffective command and control system, a sure recipe for disaster given the uncontrolled emotions that govern the actions of even our responsible citizens. Two of the largest conventional armies of the world confront each other in a daily game of playing chicken; the flashpoint threshold is very low. Money that should be earmarked for education, health and socio-economic infrastructure facilities goes to replenish bombs and shells, an unproductive and senseless "investment".

There are many problems between India and Pakistan but none as intractable as Kashmir, which is the core dispute. In the same article, I had said, "let us look at it as a South Asian problem. The Kashmir question will not go away; too much blood has been spilt for the issue to be simply washed away. India has to recognize that the Kashmiris have a legitimate right to have a choice, Pakistan has to also accept

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India's need to safeguard the Hindu minority population. Why not then first settle those issues which are a fait accompli?

Azad Kashmir and the Northern areas comprising Gilgit and Skardu are Muslim and part of Pakistan. Similarly Pakistan should accept Jammu and Ladakh as de-facto parts of India. This leaves only the valley. Let us put the valley in limbo for the next decade with law and order to be supervised by lightly armed troops from South Asian countries i.e. Bangladesh (three brigades), Sri Lanka (two brigades) and Nepal (one brigade) as South Asian Forces (SAF). Both Indian and Pakistani troops to move back from the Line of Control (LOC) into peacetime locations with free movement across the borders. Militancy in any form not to be tolerated, SAF having the right to cross borders in hot pursuit. People on both sides to be allowed to engage in commerce but without power to purchase real estate during the period of limbo".

On January 19, 2001, in an article entitled "Untangling the Kashmir Knot", I had said, "The same analogy can be applied to Pakistan and India. India cannot ever hope to negotiate the difficult Kashmir problem with any civilian leader in Pakistan; only a military regime can do that. Similarly Pakistan cannot ever hope to make any headway if the Congress Party or a Janata Dal-type alliance of Center-Left is in power."

The only hope it has of negotiating with conviction over Kashmir is with the Hindu-extremist BJP and other right wing parties. Unless the hardliners of both countries are an integral part of the process, dialogue will be meaningless. And to complicate issues, because of continuing atrocities by the occupying Indian Army, there has been a proliferation of disparate freedom fighter groups with widely differing thought processes and objectives. Given that they could be made to settle differences between themselves, will they be prepared to accept the logic of sensible argument?

On the other hand, the same Hindu chauvinism that holds the BJP together with its disparate coalition partners will hardly be amenable to Indian PM Vajpayee's sane logic stated in a visit to Kashmir, that

"Insaniyat" (humanity) was more important than the Indian Constitution. Both sides will have to sacrifice their egos as well as material positions for a solution; the hard rock on which all peace moves may well collapse will be sovereignty over the vale of Kashmir with millions of refugees scattered in Azad Kashmir and all over Pakistan who will, Palestinian-like, want the right of return to their homeland guaranteed in any agreement".

Credit must be given to the BJP for having the courage to start negotiations with Pakistan and for recognizing Kashmir as the core dispute. I was wrong about a Congress-led coalition not taking up the ball with respect to Kashmir; the present Indian government under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has stepped smoothly into the negotiations. Pakistan's foreign policy is very much in the hands of the military ruler of the "democratically elected" government. An autocrat is always in a better position to "build" consensus in Pakistan on this extremely sensitive issue.

There are many ideas for settling the Kashmir dispute, at one count, more than two dozen. Three years ago, I repeated the earlier option enunciated on January 19, 2001, and fine-tuned it to add, "A concrete solution would be to (1) install a well-equipped buffer force on the LOC with adequate satellite and electronic back-up to cover all movement (the best would be to have a joint buffer force consisting of units of the Pakistan and Indian Armies but that may be asking too much); (2) the buffer force will have right of pursuit on both sides of the LOC to counter any militancy; (3) free and fair elections throughout Kashmir, both Azad and Indian-occupied Kashmir; (4) thereafter install a government that would govern the area, forswearing the issue of accession or independence during the freeze period; and (5) run programs to rehabilitate the freedom fighter groups and bring them in from the cold.

No solution will satisfy everybody but to obtain peace, all sides will have to render meaningful sacrifices. No solution can ever be complete; there will be issues which will bedevil the body politic but in the larger interest of South Asia and the peripheral regions, we must untangle the Kashmir knot, sooner rather than later."

Once the principles of settlement are agreed upon, the details can be worked out given patience and commitment. India keeps talking about the need for an economic union in South Asia, so why not start with an economic union in Kashmir? Why not test the "South Asian Rupiah" as a common currency of the proposed economic union? It is important that India does not dismiss Musharraf's bold initiative out of hand. The future of the peoples of South Asia lies in lasting peace. That is only possible when the two major countries in the region turn from rabid confrontation in the subcontinent to maximum co-operation.

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