

to actualization of India's economic potential and undermines its political standing at the regional and global levels.

In fact, Kashmir casts a long shadow over the entire region by distorting priorities of the two major countries in terms of development and fighting poverty to diverting resources on defence. Another aspect is countering each other's influence internationally. It is therefore prudent that as India and Pakistan enter the second and more substantive round of talks, they seriously examine the various options on Kashmir, whether they relate to the plebiscite in, or partition of, the state or the different variants of each.

It may also be desirable to move away from some of the traditional approaches and start looking at the Kashmir conflict as a human rather than a territorial issue. In any event, an attempt to impose a one-sided agenda by any of the three parties to the dispute — India, Pakistan and the people of Kashmir — should be avoided at all costs as it is bound to fail.

New Delhi, for political expediency, has from the very beginning opposed the plebiscite idea, but in the last five decades this option has genuinely been overtaken by events and for all practical purposes considered a redundant idea. Even UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, remarked four year ago that the UNSC resolutions on Kashmir were no more implementable.

Unfortunately, the major powers are more interested in conflict management of the Kashmir issue rather than its resolution. The United States and the world at large are too preoccupied with fighting terrorism that securing support for the cause of Kashmir is difficult. Moreover, from their perspective lines between freedom struggle and terrorism have blurred and Islamic militancy remains an anathema. Domestically, Pakistan is facing a serious challenge of religious extremism and bigotry and support to Kashmir militants further aggravates the problem, which it can ignore only at its peril.

India, because of its larger size, resources and democratic credentials, carries more clout with the international community and is in a position to ignore the adverse foreign reaction to

## would further reduce the strategic depth of Pakistan.

ical to move beyond these positions and explore new options.

India's desire to maintain the status quo and its apparent willingness to go along with a solution on Kashmir by converting the LoC into an international border is unacceptable to Pakistan and to most Kashmiris. This would only perpetuate the injustice against the Kashmiris. As our UN representative Munir Akram aptly remarked, "The status quo is the problem; it cannot be the solution".

Furthermore, acceptance of the LoC by Pakistan would mean that it had no case on Kashmir. Besides, this solution will be totally tilted in favour of India. Converting the LoC also does not address the fundamental problem of alienation of the Kashmiris, particularly of the Valley and their refusal to accept the legitimacy of Indian occupation.

But it cannot be ruled out that New Delhi, as in the past, is, still seeking an internal solution of Kashmir and would like a de facto territorial status quo with perhaps some measure of autonomy. For this it may be willing to work out an arrangement with most of the political forces, including the APHC, the People's Democratic Party and the National Conference leaders and present a fait accompli to Pakistan and the world.

Because of alienation from India and disenchantment with Pakistan, the popular sentiment for independence seems to have surfaced, particularly among the people of the Valley. They feel that they have been cruelly oppressed and brutalized by India and manipulated and exploited by Pakistan and therefore, independence is the only solution. The problem in this popular approach, as in others, is how to determine the wishes of the people when India refuses to agree on a plebiscite in Kashmir. An independent Kashmir may again get caught up in the sub-continental rivalry with various groups and regions being manipulated and from into it. It could also trigger a domino effect leading to the balkanization of South Asia.

Western countries have

LoC the two countries should retain control of the remaining parts of Kashmir. This would proximate to the Kashmir

Study Group's proposal and is close to the Andorra model, a territory held under the joint sovereignty of France and Spain.

Meanwhile, both countries should soften the borders by facilitating travel and establishing communication links between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad and Sialkot and Jammu and re-deploy troops to stabilize the border and ensure continuity of the ceasefire. The faithful implementation of these Kashmir specific and other bilateral CBMs should create a climate of trust and understanding that could go a long way in transforming Kashmir from being the most divisive issue to becoming a bridge for a future partnership between the two antagonists. *The writer is a retired Lt-gen.*

## Thoughts on paper

PREDICTIONS that touchscreen voting machines would enable massive fraud on the election day seem to have gone the way of Y2K. Still, watchdog groups are continuing to report machine failures, including screen malfunctions that voters said hindered attempts to record their choices accurately.

That is the haunting question still not addressed in most states using touch-screens: Without any paper records of how votes were cast, who will ever know how accurate the machine tallies were?

In Bernalillo County, N.M., for example, a number of voters reported that when they attempted to select John Kerry, the electronic machine selected the Libertarian presidential candidate, according to the Election Protection coalition, a nonpartisan group of civil rights organizations. After making several attempts and then notifying poll workers, the voters were able to record their choices correctly — or so it appeared on their screens.

In Maryland, officials of TrueVoteMD said the group received reports of various machine problems.

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