

Options on Kashmir

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There has been a favourable as well as angry reaction to President Pervez Musharraf's public debate on possible solutions on Kashmir.

The Kashmir dispute has defied solutions for over 57 years, the main cause being the maximal and rigid positions of both Pakistan and India. Persistent hostile propaganda by both countries for over half a century against each other has created such a negative public mindset that both now find it politically impossible to compromise. There has seldom been a statesmanlike approach to find a solution.

The losers have undeniably been the people of the subcontinent, especially those of Indian Held Kashmir (IHK). Three generations of the latter have been traumatised by the barbaric military occupation of their land. In Azad Kashmir, the conditions are somewhat better but there too the people have remained comparatively neglected. There is no such thing as good governance and the development of infrastructure; economic, social and human resources have lagged far behind the desired level, despite billions being spent year after year by Pakistan on this tiny area of less than three million people.

The beneficiaries of this conflict on both sides of the Line of Control (LoC) have been a class of politicians and their hangers-on who have thrived on, and want to continue, the status quo in Kashmir. Indian politicians have used this emotive issue to scare their public that India might break up if Kashmir breaks away from it, while in Pakistan politicians have indulged in rhetoric to maintain the status quo, knowing full well that this zero-sum game cannot be won. Against this mind-set, mere public mention of alternatives to their stated positions has been labelled as unpatriotic and even treasonable.

Whatever might be the "principled" stands of both countries, the fact remains that the Kashmir dispute is the main hurdle in the way of political, economic and social progress that not only affects India and Pakistan but the whole SAARC

opt for a military solution of the Kashmir issue for fear of a nuclear war. Major world powers, particularly the USA, will prevent an Indo-Pak war by all means at their disposal. Both countries can ignore this reality only at their peril. However, it is not unlikely that in case of failure of Pakistan and India to negotiate a peaceful solution of the dispute, the Security Council may pass a mandatory resolution amending or superseding its previous resolutions. Both countries will have no choice then but to comply.

Thirdly, India cannot indefinitely continue its military suppression in IHK, nor can it ever win the hearts and minds of Kashmiris. Sooner or later, human rights violations in Kashmir will find a major focus in world opinion, forcing India to settle the dispute with Pakistan and the people of Kashmir. India also cannot realise its ambition of world power status unless it resolves the Kashmir issue.

Lastly, the accession of the whole of Jammu and Kashmir to Pakistan is not feasible. It is unrealistic to expect an overall settlement by treating it as a single entity. The non-Muslim population of Jammu province and Ladakh will never accept this option, considering our anti-secular Islamic policy, and the world will support these minorities.

Jammu and Kashmir is not a homogeneous single unit. Geographically, ethnically, culturally and by religion, the state of Jammu and Kashmir has five distinct groups of peoples, four of whom will not accept the hegemony of the Kashmir majority of the Valley in a unified state.

It is evident from the fact that in the days of Sheikh Abdullah, there were frequent agitations against what they called "oppressive Muslim domination". There is therefore no validity in the claim that the people of J&K demand unity of the State. Such unity can only be artificial and imposed by force, as was done during the Dogra regime.

Pakistan has two core strategic interests in the State which must be protected at all costs to ensure Pakistan's progress and survival.

region.

To a great extent, both the countries are poor and backward mainly because of the Kashmir dispute. Pakistan has sacrificed and suffered more as it has become a fertile ground for religious extremists spawned by India's brutalities against the Muslims of IHK. The Jehadi movement has degenerated into a way of violence, drugs and terrorism.

Increasing poverty has created social tensions, making Pakistan a highly intolerant society with little respect for the rule of law. No political leader who wishes his country well should tolerate this dangerous slide into anarchy. Unfortunately, politics as practised in South Asia has the attainment of power as the sole aim of elected public office, leaving no space for statesmanship, which is the need of the hour. Unpopular decisions and debates about Kashmir have to be initiated by statesman to tell the people the truth about the intricacies, complexities and dangers involved in the Kashmir dispute.

Reverting to the options on Kashmir, I hold no brief for President Pervez Musharraf but one must give him credit for saying openly what our leaders, both civil and military, have been afraid of even mentioning publicly. He has shown courage by throwing open the whole issue for public debate, by-passing the parliament, politicians, bureaucrats, and diplomats. However, while giving an opinion on the merits of the President's initiative, certain ground realities must be kept in mind:

First, the world has changed fundamentally since 9/11 and so have the aspirations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir and the perceptions of the world about South Asia. Kashmiris can no longer be expected to be satisfied with the restricted option of only choosing between Pakistan and India through a plebiscite.

They cannot be denied their fundamental right of self-determination including total independence from India and Pakistan. Those who are obsessed with a plebiscite must ponder whether independence may not be more attractive for Kashmiris than acceding to Pakistan or India, considering what little progress these countries have made over the past fifty years.

Secondly, it is an undisputed fact that neither India nor Pakistan can

First, the uninterrupted flow of river waters from Jammu and Kashmir into Pakistan.

Secondly, the removal of the Indian military threat in Pakistan's backyard at the Line of Control.

Another very important objective of Pakistan is to secure the right of self-determination and ensure the welfare of the Muslim population of Jammu and Kashmir.

Provided these concerns are taken care of, Pakistan should be able to live with any option. We have to appreciate that the age-old religious, cultural, social, economic and geographical links of the State with Pakistan will guarantee that, in their own interest, any government inheriting the present set-up will not jeopardise the vital interests of Pakistan.

President Musharraf has opened windows of opportunity for both Pakistan and India to find a solution without losing face. The criticism that he has given these options as alternative solutions and that they have prematurely compromised Pakistan's bargaining position is not valid.

While elaborating these options offered by the President, the Government of Pakistan has made it quite clear that Pakistan will show flexibility only if India reciprocates. Negotiations with India can now be more purposeful and result-oriented. It is, therefore, time that the implications of status-quo versus a flexible approach for other options are laid bare before the public to bring about a climate of give and take.

It needs to be realised that the options announced by the President are not new or original. Over the years, they have been floated in one form or the other by different sources interested in resolving the Kashmir dispute. As a native of Jammu and Kashmir who has served for many years on both sides of the LOC and who has followed closely the developments in the State for over 60 years, I have suggested a way out of the Kashmir imbroglio in my autobiography "In Retrospect - The Story of a Bureaucrat".

The solution proposed is based on the salient features of the same positions, albeit with modifications relevant to the current situation. A solution, generally on the lines of a regional settlement, can be the answer. President Musharraf has done well to give a lead.