

Kashmir: is a solution in sight?

By Maqbool Ahmad Bhatty

Kashmir
Dawn
28/3/05

THE turn for the better in Indo-Pakistan relations is proving durable, despite reminders of traditional mistrust and continuing differences. The CBMs have contributed to a relaxation of tensions, and are being maintained despite the halting progress on the agenda of the composite dialogue.

The visit of the Indian foreign minister, first such visit in over a decade, was marked by a landmark decision to open the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road, which was seen as a win-win decision that would enable members of divided Kashmiri families to see each other, and possibly restore trade along the LoC.

Serious observers of the South Asian scene feel concerned over the slow pace of progress, but are reassured by the fact that the leadership in both countries is against abandoning the quest for peace and stability, and is disinclined to break off the dialogue process. In a world that is witnessing a further polarization between the rich and the poor countries, the incentives for economic reform and modernization are proving irresistible, though there are certain core issues that will not go away.

After twice going perilously near war, in 1999, and in 2001-02, the two nuclear-armed neighbours have realized the wisdom of seeking a peaceful resolution of their differences, so that the economic resurgence achieved in recent years can be maintained.

The road towards durable peace and mutual trust is

some progress has been made on nuclear CBMs. Various political organizations have begun accusing the government of a "sell-out" over Kashmir, and President Musharraf's display of flexibility is viewed with suspicion.

Apart from political groups, think tanks have also been holding discussions, to enable consideration of available options. The press and independent TV channels have also reflected the concern that is emerging that given India's military superiority, and growing economic strength, as well as international standing, Pakistan may have to compromise over Kashmir in a manner that favours India.

Among the more important discussions in the capital was an international seminar organized by the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) recently on 'The Kashmir imbroglio: looking towards the future.'

The practical way for the two sides to proceed would be to lay stress on CBMs, like the opening of the road between the two parts of Kashmir. In the meantime, it is necessary to end violence along the LoC and inside occupied Kashmir, and India has to reduce its forces. Pakistan should continue to extend moral and political support to the Kashmiris.

between freedom fighters and terrorists.

One key point made as a result of the discussion was that all three parties to the dispute, India, Pakistan and the people of Kashmir, had to find a solution acceptable to all of them. The participants from the region and abroad took up the issue of repercussions in South Asia, the Islamic world and the European Union. All of them felt that the prolonged hostility between the two leading powers of South Asia had not only held back the whole region economically, but had also provided a nuclear flashpoint after both became nuclear powers. The path of conflict had to be avoided, and a peaceful settlement found.

Scholars representing the major powers gave useful assessments of the role their countries could play. The US, which attached importance to its relations with both Pakistan and India, was anxious that the two should work out a settlement through their own initiatives, with due regard for the wishes of the people of Kashmir. However, the US did not wish to mediate or "facilitate", though it had used its influence to reduce tensions, whenever they threatened peace in the region.

China, the only great power having common borders with Pakistan, Kashmir and India, was also keen to see a settlement through peaceful negotiations. The UK, which was the power ruling South Asia before independence, had a responsibility to play a role in finding a solution that would promote peace and progress in the region.

A session was devoted to considering various options.

reassured by the fact that the leadership in both countries is against abandoning the quest for peace and stability, and is disinclined to break off the dialogue process. In a world that is witnessing a further polarization between the rich and the poor countries, the incentives for economic reform and modernization are proving irresistible, though there are certain core issues that will not go away.

After twice going perilously near war, in 1999, and in 2001-02, the two nuclear-armed neighbours have realized the wisdom of seeking a peaceful resolution of their differences, so that the economic resurgence achieved in recent years can be maintained.

The road towards durable peace and mutual trust is proving a bumpy, one, since the issue of Kashmir keeps cropping up and creating an obstacle to meaningful progress. This is because it resurrects the political debate and contention over the largely Muslim state that resulted from the handing over process when the British transferred power to the two successor states.

Though the majority Congress party, that was largely Hindu in its following, adopted the partition plan offered by the British in June 1947, they maintained their opposition to the two-nation theory, that formed the basis of the demand for Pakistan. When India defends its refusal to give up Kashmir on the basis of this rejection, it implies its reversal of a stand on the very principle that was the agreed basis of independence. In other words, the Indian elite does not accept the emergence of Pakistan, and their retention of Kashmir suggests that they might make a bid for reunification (Akhand Bharat), whenever they are powerful enough to achieve that.

It may be recalled that when India carried out its nuclear tests in May 1998, some of the extremist Hindu members of the ruling BJP declared that the time had come to reunite the subcontinent. It was only after Pakistan carried out its own nuclear tests a fortnight later that such talk ended. That is why the solution of the Kashmir issue is described as completing the agenda of partition.

Even as cautious steps are taken to improve communication links, and other forms of economic cooperation, the need to keep plugging away at major issues in the agenda of the composite dialogue, such as Kashmir and peace and security is stressed, notably by Pakistan. Within Pakistan, there is restiveness over failure thus far to address the issue of Kashmir, though

The practical way for the two sides to proceed would be to lay stress on CBMs, like the opening of the road between the two parts of Kashmir. In the meantime, it is necessary to end violence along the LoC and inside occupied Kashmir, and India has to reduce its forces. Pakistan should continue to extend moral and political support to the Kashmiris.

Specialists from the US, Britain, China, Japan, as well as from the region and diaspora Kashmiris were invited.

Interestingly, though participants from India had accepted the invitation to attend, they absented themselves at the last moment, perhaps to demonstrate that India was not ready for a substantive discussion on the issue at this stage.

In his inaugural address, Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri recalled the joint statement issued in New York on September 24, 2004, in which Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India had joined President Musharraf in pledging to "explore all peaceful solutions of Jammu and Kashmir." he stated that having started the composite dialogue, the two countries were in a "win-win" position to move forward towards a bright and peaceful future. The government of Pakistan was ready to take decisions to this end through the composite dialogue resumed in January 2004. In the meantime, he called for an improvement in the human rights situation in occupied Kashmir.

The proceedings over the two days of the seminar went over all aspects of the dispute, including its history, role of the UN, and earlier efforts to promote dialogue, at Tashkent and Shimla, following the conflicts of 1965 and 1971. The indigenous struggle launched by the people of Kashmir, in 1989, which was the year of democracy as well as the year that marked the end of the cold war, showed that the people of Kashmir were determined to win freedom from Indian occupation.

During the struggle, over 100,000 Kashmiris had lost their lives. The effort to dub them as "terrorists" was at variance with the distinction made by the UN

two should work out a settlement through their own initiatives, with due regard for the wishes of the people of Kashmir. However, the US did not wish to mediate or "facilitate", though it had used its influence to reduce tensions, whenever they threatened peace in the region.

China, the only great power having common borders with Pakistan, Kashmir and India, was also keen to see a settlement through peaceful negotiations. The UK, which was the power ruling South Asia before independence, had a responsibility to play a role in finding a solution that would promote peace and progress in the region.

A session was devoted to considering various options.

Though the implementation of the UN resolutions was soundly rejected by India, the idea of regional plebiscites suggested by President Musharraf found some support among scholars. The Kashmiri case for autonomy / independence was also presented, as was the one for partition on the same basis as the partition of the subcontinent. India's refusal to make any territorial adjustments appeared to rule out an immediate solution.

The practical way to proceed would be to lay stress on CBMs, like the opening of the road between the two parts of Kashmir, and other measures to improve life for the people of Kashmir. In the meantime, it is necessary to end violence along the LoC and inside occupied Kashmir, and India has to reduce its forces, and share the prosperity being acquired at the national level with the people of Kashmir. Pakistan should continue to extend moral and political support to the Kashmiris, and maintain the composite dialogue, though there should be faster progress on some tracks, and slower movement on others. There is no need to compromise on the principles, but resort to violence or repression has to be avoided, in order to address the more urgent problems of poverty and deprivation in the region.

At the concluding session, Mr. Hamid Nasir Chaththa, chairman of the Kashmir committee of the parliament, expressed confidence that the heroic struggle of the people of Kashmir would succeed. A durable peace and mutually beneficial cooperation between Pakistan and India depended upon finding a solution of the Kashmir dispute that would recognize their democratic and human rights. Such a settlement, that required flexibility from both the countries, was central to regional peace.