**The Srinagar Highway**

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One of the easiest ways the Pakistanis have learnt to resolve the Kashmir issue is to substitute the name of the Kashmir highway for the Srinagar highway. This happened in the capital Islamabad in August 2020. The renaming was done to express solidarity with the Kashmir cause. Solace was found in the fact that the road could lead to Srinagar. If the name-changing were a solution!

Pakistan could neither forestall nor remedy the crisis that surfaced on August 5, 2019. On that inauspicious day, India changed the status of its part of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. India removed the princely status and merged it into the mainland to be treated on par with other merged princely states.

Even today, Pakistan’s main reliance is on mentioning the Kashmir issue in the speech delivered yearly in the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN). That is it. Years ago, Kashmir used to be a nuclear flashpoint. Several retired generals used to emphasize Pakistan’s governments for practising nuclear brinkmanship on the Kashmir issue. What happened to that resolve? Nobody knows.

The status change was a huge step that India took to affect the future of Kashmir. In principle, Pakistan should have been active by submitting a resolution to the Security Council (SC) to invite its attention towards India’s violating both the bilateral agreement called the Simla Agreement of 1972 and the relevant UNSC Resolutions (such as Resolution 47) calling for a plebiscite on the issue. Both kinds of documents recognized the unresolved disputed status of Kashmir. The Lahore Declaration of 1999 endorsed the same point.

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The question is how India could violate all three vital milestones. There may be certain reasons.

First, Pakistan’s falling into the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in 2018 offered sufficient leeway to India to temper the status of Kashmir. The allegations of terrorism financing threw Pakistan on the back burner of international relevance, although Pakistan was a partner of the United States (US) and its allies in the war against terrorism. The Mumbai attacks of 2008 constrained Pakistan to keep looking for cogent protection, which remained in short supply. The decade (from 2008 to 2018) rendered Pakistan defensive and opened opportunities for India to watch its interests. By 2022, Pakistan complied with all the conditions of the FATF. Though Pakistan is out of the grey list, it stands in disbelief. It is not finding the lost courage to raise the issue of Kashmir with India.

Second, Pakistan remained focused on its internal situation after 2008. The departure of General Pervez Musharraf and the arrival of civilian political parties in 2008 foreshadowed a new democratic era in Pakistan. Both the main political parties returned to politics to implement the Charter of Democracy signed in London in 2006. The charter posed a threat of political relevance to the parties not a signatory to it. The same was its implication for non-democratic forces. Politics got embroiled in political make-and-break as to how to dilute the charter’s effect vis-à-vis how to enhance the charter’s influence. The first display of charter-induced camaraderie was the 18th Constitutional Amendment passed in 2010. The amendment was an embodiment of the promises enshrined in the charter. The post-2010 era was entirely a bizarre one, fraught with civil-military tension on one issue or the other. The focus of the intelligence agencies shifted inward: what ruling politicians are doing, and how to manipulate politics to find space for a third political party? Pakistan’s inward-looking approach kept it oblivious to the developments impacting Kashmir.

Third, Pakistan became habitual of high spending and a victim of low earnings. From 1999 to 2007, policies of economic liberalization coupled with privatization introduced by Shaukat Aziz – both as the Finance Minister and Prime Minister – rejuvenated the economy on the one hand, but it gave impetus to the trend of high spending on the other hand. Wealth got circulated and re-circulated to produce more wealth, but with that, the import bill also soared manifold. Wealth made people conscious of their status and living standards. The web-based connection of Pakistan with the outside world – driven by the forces of globalization – made the citizens import oriented. Local manufacturing and export industries either vanished or relocated to foreign countries, including Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The post-2008 era has been a period of a steady rise in taxes – especially indirect taxes – to run the economy. In 2022, Pakistan is looking inward. Debt servicing is the major challenge that stares the country in the face. Preference is on how to run the country financially and not how to raise the issue of Kashmir.

This is why Pakistan is left with the choice of merely changing the titles of roads to mollify its conscience. Pakistan is overly relying on symbolism to show solidarity with the Kashmiris, despite the fact that Pakistan is connected to one-third of Kashmir, called Azad Kashmir. There is also found no urge in the residents of Azad Kashmir to express disquiet at the changing status of their state and raise a voice for the Kashmiris living on the other side of the fence, called the Line of Control. The Pakistan of today is more focused on delivering speeches on international forums than doing anything substantial to make India realize its mistake. Pakistan seems to have exhausted its diplomatic energy to convince the world of the right of the Kashmiris to self-determination.

In April 2022, it was hoped that Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, as Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, would make efforts to serve the cause of Kashmir, but he is more focused on how to rehabilitate the flood victims than to offer solace to India’s victims, the Kashmiris.

Pakistan must make a formal attempt to make India realize its commitments under the Simla Agreement of 1972, especially when its excuse to top the list of bilateral negotiations with the issue of terrorism is over. Invoking the Simla Agreement, Pakistan should formally invite India to talks on Kashmir.

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