**What can Pakistan do for Kashmir?**

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Kashmir is no ordinary dispute. It is about a territory, its people, and the dynamics of their history, culture, and aspirations for freedom. And it is about the ethics of international politics.

The dispute affects and reflects the tensions between the national identities, political ambitions, and contrasting views of the history of the two disputants – India and Pakistan.

In five years, Indian Prime Minister Modi has expunged the above reality by rewriting the script of the Kashmir tragedy. India knew that the success of the Kashmir cause depended on two factors – the strength of the insurgency and Pakistan’s support to the Kashmir cause. It was not just the Kashmiris that stood in India’s way, Pakistan did too.

So the Indian strategy was to launch a campaign of isolating and defaming Pakistan and to put it on the defensive and make it off balance. The idea was to marginalize it and force it to back away from supporting the Kashmiris with a view to demoralizing them as they would have no one to look up to for support. And then unleash extreme repressive measures to bludgeon them into submission.

The theme of the new Kashmir tragedy may have been Hindutva inspired but its plot was built around India’s rise and Pakistan’s diminished international status in recent decades. The power disparity and the widening gap between the global standing of the two countries enabled India to break loose from the gravitational pull of the past India-Pakistan hyphenation. This hyphenation had inclined the big powers to always consider the two countries and their disputes together. But that has all changed.

India is a global player now serving the West’s economic and strategic interests. Pakistan is still useful to the international community as a partner but has also become a source of concern as the alleged host of extremist organizations.

Taking advantage of the seat at the high table and the West’s, especially America’s, concerns about security, India went on to launch a campaign of isolating and vilifying Pakistan by accusing it of ‘terrorism’ which became India’s code word for attacking Pakistan’s Kashmir policy. The Indian propaganda exaggerated the terrorist threat and insinuated that it was aimed at the destabilization of India in whose stability the West had come to have a big stake because of its role in the containment of China.

With these arguments India managed to dictate its own view of Kashmir which the West, and even Pakistan’s friends in the Gulf, accepted unreservedly for their own reasons. Pakistan’s international image, which was already damaged due to governance issues and troubled relations with Washington on account of the failure of the Afghanistan war, got a further hit.

As Pakistan lost, so did Occupied Kashmir – providing a perfect setting for Prime Minister Modi’s August 5, 2019 action. Rightly calculating that Pakistan would not be able to mobilize any international support for the Kashmir cause, the Indian prime minister with his move stripped Pakistan of whatever locus standi it had on the dispute. And confident that the West would turn a blind eye he set the process of annexation in motion beginning with maximum repression.

The repression continues. To quash any form of resistance unbearable restrictions have been placed on the freedom of expression and basic civil liberties. A pervasive atmosphere of fear has been instilled among the citizens of Occupied Kashmir to intimidate and coerce them into unlawful assimilation. Consequences of dissent range from job suspension to incarceration in distant Indian states. Media coverage is virtually non-existent as journalists have been detained, and media organizations subjected to raids.

The illegal occupation has seeped through every aspect of life in Kashmir. Public school educators and officials are coerced into displaying allegiance by posting pictures with the Indian flag on national occasions like Independence Day and Republic Day, sometimes even being pressured to hoist the flag at their residences. This practice is just one instance of the myriad ways in which Kashmiris are subjected to humiliation, being forced into actions that contradict the spirit of Kashmiri resistance and promote pro-Indian sentiments.

India’s state machinery, including intelligence agencies, frequently employs tools such as the Public Safety Act (PSA) and the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) – both part of colonial sedition laws – to quell any form of resistance and instill a pervasive atmosphere of fear. People are hesitant to even speak about their grievances, fearing severe consequences ranging from job suspension to incarceration in distant Indian states. This pattern underscores India’s efforts to reinforce its authority and perpetuate its occupation of the region.

Utilizing the rhetoric of ‘development’, the state has embarked on initiatives such as establishing ‘smart cities’, alongside initiatives to resettle non-Kashmiris and alter the demographic landscape. This exemplifies the broader strategy of complete assimilation of Kashmir into India.

Historically Kashmiris have contested Indian repression through various means, including armed resistance. However, the dynamics of protest have shifted significantly. Kashmiris find themselves largely powerless to take action, let alone mount any effective resistance.

The significance of any possible role by Pakistan has largely faded. Young Kashmiris have come to the realization that, with its ability to aid them in ending the occupation being limited, Pakistan has lost its earlier relevance to the cause.

India feels it has found the solution to the Kashmir ‘problem’ without Pakistan’s help and is under no obligation to give any concessions. So what are Pakistan’s options? Neither wars nor Pakistan’s support for the Kashmiri resistance has helped solve the dispute. Nor will the UN resolutions help since without big powers and the concerned parties’ backing for them they are ineffective, and relevant largely as an historical document.

That leaves Pakistan with only one option – normalization of relations with India, especially the resumption of trade. Even though trade will be more to India’s advantage, it may not agree to talk much less normalize unless Pakistan drops the Kashmir related pre-conditions.

Normalization if it happens might ease tensions with India but will not give any influence to Pakistan. But it could open up future possibilities of Pakistan calibrating the level of economic engagement with transit rights giving Islamabad some leverage regarding Kashmir. But for that Pakistan has to rise economically and rebuild its international standing to the level that India cannot isolate it, and the benefits of the relationship exceed the cost of ignoring it.

Bottom line: The struggle of Pakistan and the Kashmiris is for the long haul.

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