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**A shared Nobel Peace Prize?**

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On February 25, 2021 the joint statement of the DGMOs of India and Pakistan regarding the restoration of the 2003 ceasefire along the LOC went into effect.

Various questions are being asked about this development. Is it a positive or negative development? Is it likely to last? Will it lead to a substantial re-engagement and dialogue between India and Pakistan? Did President Biden play a role and, if so, why? What reasons lay behind the respective decisions of India and Pakistan to reach such an agreement? How are Kashmiris likely to read this development? Was this a military rather than a political and diplomatic initiative? Is this a win-win or a zero-sum (win-lose) development?

The following is a response to each of these questions. The joint statement by the DGMOs is indeed a positive development considering the significant casualties and tragedies suffered on either side of the LOC which was also further hardening opinion and resolve in both Pakistan and India. Whether this ceasefire will last will be clearer in the days ahead and, from Pakistan’s point of view, it will depend on the ground and human rights situation in Indian-held Kashmir. Whether the ceasefire will lead to re-engagement and dialogue will depend on other necessary developments which, again from Pakistan’s point of view, primarily require significant movement towards a revocation of India’s decision of August 5, 2019 to unilaterally change the status of IHK.

This was in violation of UN resolutions and the Simla Agreement. The LOC derives from the Simla Agreement which India effectively denounced through its unilateral change of the status of IHK. For similar reasons, Pakistan needs to meet the political aspirations of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan and fulfill the legal requirements of its stand on Kashmir dexterously and sincerely.

One of India’s leading commentators, Karan Thapar, said insisting on a return to the pre-August 5, 2019 situation would be tantamount to imposing a pre-condition for re-engagement and dialogue which the Modi government would not agree to. He observed, however, that in announcing the ceasefire agreement India refrained from reiterating its standard position that “terror and talks could not go together” and similarly, Pakistan had refrained from reiterating its condition for talks that India must first undo its decision of August 5, 2019. This he saw as a positive indication of the intent to move towards re-engagement and dialogue which should dissuade both sides from making pre-conditions which could thwart rather than facilitate the process. His observation is realistic and justified, provided a substantial alleviation of the military repression and improvement in the political and human rights situation in IHK occurs. Otherwise, an Indian fait accompli through brute force in IHK would block any normalization process.

As to whether the Biden Administration played a role behind the scenes, it is possible. It welcomed the development. It is concerned about possible military conflict between two nuclear armed neighbours who have gone to war over Kashmir on three occasions. It needs Pakistan’s cooperation with respect to bringing about conditions in Afghanistan which would allow it to withdraw with a semblance of prestige and influence intact, and it is aware that Pakistan has grown tired of pulling American chestnuts from Afghan fires for nothing in return except temporary suspensions of sanctions. Pakistan deeply resents the cynical US use of the FATF against it. Accordingly, the new US administration may see its own interest in defusing an increasingly dangerous situation along the LOC, inside IHK and between India and Pakistan.

As for why India may have seen a reduction in tensions with Pakistan to be in its interest, there are a number possible reasons. The international image of India has indeed suffered since August 5, 2019 and numerous political and human rights bodies around the world, including those of the UN, have criticized or even condemned Indian actions in IHK. Moreover, its relentless repression in IHK resulted in a Genocide Alert issued by Genocide Watch and more recently a very strong statement by the founder of Genocide Watch who described the situation in IHK as “proto-genocidal.” The continuous lockdown and communications blackout in most of IHK apart from being a serious human rights violation has also been a confession of having forfeited the trust of almost the entire population in IHK including those who were seen to be 'pro-India'.

The farmers’ revolt in Punjab and Haryana which does not appear to be going away soon, and could spread to other regions of India, may also have been a consideration for reducing tensions with Pakistan and allaying international concerns. Some observers have also referred to India not wishing to be caught up in a two-front situation with Pakistan and China which could negate its great power aspirations.

Similarly, for Pakistan there may have been a reconsideration of the maximal response it committed itself to in the immediate aftermath of India’s decision of August 5, 2019. There may be a realization that its range of options is actually very narrow, and if it took a maximal stance it ran the risk of being seen by the international community as a greater menace than India. The supremos in Pakistan may also have realized that, while international criticisms of India’s actions are a huge embarrassment and irritant for India, they can never lead to the kind of isolation and pressure that could compel it to reverse its August 5, 2019 decision because that would threaten the Modi government despite the lack of any current and coherent political opposition to it. The US had shown during the Pulwama-Balakot crisis that it would always side with India against Pakistan no matter what the facts.

Moreover, China has no interest in seeing major conflict between India and Pakistan, although in the event of an unprovoked Indian attack on Pakistan or across the LOC it would almost certainly do everything to ensure against a serious setback for Pakistan. The parlous economic and dysfunctional political situation in Pakistan had also rendered any fiery commitments regarding Kashmir less than credible.

The Kashmiris welcomed the ceasefire along the LOC because of the immediate reprieve it grants to the Muslims living on either side of it. Nevertheless, an oppressed people resisting on the knife-edge between life and death always have an enhanced capacity for discerning the truth behind the façade. They value Pakistan’s support for what it is – limited and insufficient to realize their cause. But they know ultimately they are on their own and the restoration of the 2003 understanding, while welcome, is also a reminder of this abiding reality. They will not surrender even if they can never win. The Modi government has ensured that. But if the Kashmiris have to, they will sacrifice themselves for Azadi, not for any other entity.

The agreement between the DGMOs was a façade in the case of India where the military does not make, even if it contributes to, policy regarding “core issues of mutual concern.” But in the case of Pakistan it represented the overwhelming reality. The statement of the COAS that Pakistan wants peace “in all directions” provided the policy framework and driving force for the Pakistanis (whether military or civilian or both) who did the preparatory work with their Indian counterparts for the restoration of the 2003 understanding.

Finally, is the LOC agreement a zero-sum or win-win development? It is a win-win development in the small, and in the short-run. But it runs the risk of being a zero-sum development if it does not lead to a re-engagement and dialogue process that creates space for a peacefully negotiated and principled compromise Kashmir settlement in which representatives of the Valley of Kashmir are able to participate through modalities acceptable to Pakistan and India. The challenge is to convert a zero-sum longer-term prospect into a positive-sum or win-win prospect for the Kashmiris, and Pakistan and India. This challenge has not yet been taken up by Pakistan or India and the fear is it will not be taken up. This would have dire consequences.

Can India and Pakistan summon the leadership and foreign policy required to avert the consequences? They can if the political will, humanitarian imagination and moral courage are there, and provided the capacity to educate and inform a politically manipulated public opinion in both countries with regard to the imperatives of the 21st century is also there. A shared Nobel Peace Prize should await the leaders of the two countries if they can rise to the challenge.

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