
Pakistan's Kashmir policy needs continuity not change

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KEY developments within our region are likely to influence how Islamabad and Delhi will approach, in the weeks and months ahead, the settlement of the Kashmir issue.

These include Pakistan's new government, the October Jammu and Kashmir state elections, the continued huge presence of Indian security forces (especially in the valley), the new wave of criticism by the APHC leadership of Islamabad for pursuing the post-Jan '04 Kashmir policy that neither improved the human rights situation nor genuinely facilitated cross-LOC Kashmiri movement and cooperation, the continued criticism of Delhi by the APHC and electoral forces including NC and PDP for continued human rights violations and the recent declaration of independence by Kosovo and its recognition by some important countries.

At the core of Delhi's policy has been the seeking of a solution to Kashmir through 'containment' of the problem using the internal track dialogue. The Congress government has, while retaining the huge and oppressive presence of security and para-security forces, engaged in dialogue with J&K's electoral forces. Delhi has meanwhile unsuccessfully offered dialogue to the APHC leadership and remained unengaged with the third plank of Kashmiri politics, that is, the largely depleted yet still present militant forces.

Meanwhile, Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) agreed upon by Islamabad and Delhi, aimed at increasing cross LOC movement, seem to have been virtually still-born. The cross-LOC bus service, for example, takes across the LOC maybe fifty Kashmiris a week. So cumbersome is the paper work that the security clearance for intending travellers takes months at end. With such an impediment to civilian movement, any hope to see greater movement of goods and non-Kashmiris would be unrealistic. Hence the CBMs which were intended to ease the social and emotional pressures on divided Kashmiri families have drawn almost a blank.

Similarly, other political initiatives, especially the four point formula put on the bilateral table by General Pervez Musharraf in 2004, also drew a blank. The formula which suggested demilitarisation to the pre-1989 position, self rule and self governance by the Kashmiris and subsequently Joint Management of some areas on both sides of the LOC by Pakistan and India, found no response from Delhi. The complexity of Indian democracy pleaded paralysis as the generally accepted Indian analysis was that it was not easy for a democracy to respond to what a one-man rule can easily offer. Indian politicians did not rise to the challenge of leadership. Musharraf's offer was not isolated from the political thinking in Pakistan. The politically inspired occasional criticism of Pakistani politicians notwithstanding, the general's four points were only a logical progression from what the elected leader Nawaz Sharif and Atal B Vajpayee had agreed upon at the Lahore summit.

In fact, Musharraf has worked on building support for the four points across the LOC and even internationally. PDP less and the National Conference more, supported the points. Omar Abdullah met General Musharraf in 2006 and earlier in London in 2005. Abdullah saw wisdom in breaking the political logjam on J&K and supported the initiative. Similarly, Musharraf directly took the APHC leadership from both sides of the LOC plus indirectly the militants in confidence. There was across the board, even if grudgingly, an appreciation of Musharraf's intent. His out-of-the-box thinking on Kashmir was an effort to move forward on the 60 year-long political impasse on the dispute. It was to be a step forward not a solution. It also received international support.

Delhi's refusal to reciprocate on the four points was publicly criticised by the NC leadership. Omar Abdullah went on record to say that Delhi did not want to respond until time ran out.

Delhi's Kashmir policy continues to yield continuing Kashmiri alienation vis a vis Delhi. Results of surveys ranging from the 2007 Hindustan Times to the 2006 New York Times and the NDTV-Dawn all indicate 70 per cent pro-Azadi sentiment. Yet Delhi has still not seen reason to break the political and security apparatus-dictated status quo, which sustains, if not heightens, this sentiment.

With the new government in place, the refrain from Delhi and the Srinagar's electoral forces that they hope the new government would keep the dialogue process moving on Kashmir is misplaced; as is the concern that the new political leadership may derail the dialogue process. There is also concern even within Pakistan that the new government may put Kashmir on the back burner, in deep freeze or give unilateral concessions to India. None of this is at all likely.

The debate within Pakistan on how to move forward on Kashmir revolves around three approaches. One is the future-oriented approach. This approach advocates that since at present Pakistanis and the Kashmiris are not in a strong position to negotiate a settlement of the disputed territory according to UN resolutions, the settlement question must be put off for a better time. For now, some in Islamabad and Srinagar argue that it should be put on hold, while others in both the capitals argue that while settlement can come later the Kashmiri struggle and Islamabad's pressure on New Delhi, in all its dimensions, must continue. The second approach, advocated by sections in Islamabad and in Srinagar, calls for engaging with New Delhi on finding a solution. This approach seeks an end to the dispute, allowing improved

Pakistan-India relations.

The third approach is a combination of the first two. It believes Kashmir is a living dispute and one that will not go into freeze. Equally, it is not one that can be solved through an instant or defined solution. Instead the problem, involving the Kashmiri people, requires initiation of a process, which must focus on steps that begin to improve the political, physical and economic conditions of the Kashmiris. The yardstick of how correct and credible is such a process is the degree to which it is accepted by the majority of Kashmiris across the LOC.

There is continuity in Pakistan's policy on Kashmir as it began with the Nawaz Sharif–Vajpayee initiative. It is a policy that adheres to the third approach. And there is no doubt that the new government in Islamabad will move forward with the third approach as it will use its diplomatic and political capital to improve the human rights situation in the Valley, increase cross-LOC movement and cooperation and end Delhi's policy of militarisation or as Farooq Abdullah said in 2007 of turning J&K into a military garrison.

With Pakistan and India both on an even keel as democratic states, Delhi must reciprocate Islamabad's initiatives on Kashmir without seeking refuge in democratic paralysis. It is in Pakistan and India's interest to turn Kashmir into a bridge for genuine cooperation from which Kashmiris, Pakistanis and Indians will jointly benefit.

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