

Is Kashmir Ready for a Farewell to Arms?

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan - When U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage made his swing through South Asia last week, he sounded cautiously optimistic. He welcomed Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's overture to Pakistan on Kashmir, calling it a "far-reaching act of statesmanship." But he also acknowledged that it would be a "long trip" to resolving conflicts over the region.

That just about sums things up. India's current approach to Pakistan is welcome, but resolving the issues between the countries won't be easy.

The troubles in Kashmir date to partition, in 1947, when Pakistan and India became separate countries. Kashmir, though predominantly Muslim, had a Hindu ruler who chose for Kashmir to remain a part of India. Not surprisingly, troubles quickly flared and have continued since. The current round of strife began in 1989, when New Delhi's unconscionable manipulation of Kashmiri politics led to a popular uprising of Kashmiris that Pakistan moved quickly to exploit.

The Afghan war with the Soviets had just ended, freeing up Pakistani fighters, and large numbers of Kashmiri refugees were pouring across the border. Pakistan's military establishment hit upon a bleed-India-through-jihad policy, in which Muslim fundamentalists were enlisted to wage a cross-border guerrilla campaign. Pakistan, of course, denied involvement.

The strategy was imagined as a low-cost option leading to eventual victory, a means to end a stalemate. But over the years, through all the flare-ups and border confrontations, which have taken an estimated 70,000 Kashmiri, Pakistani and Indian lives, it has become clear that the troubles in Kashmir cannot be resolved militarily. Pakistan lacks the muscle to wrest Kashmir from Indian rule, and India cannot win decisively over Pakistan in difficult, mountainous terrain.

And so Vajpayee's overture is welcome. There is indication that Pakistan's president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, is also looking for a way out of the Kashmir morass. Recently, he met with a diverse group for what turned out to be an intense session focusing largely upon Kashmir policy. That the president was willing to listen to dissenting voices, including mine, was encouraging - although real change is still far off.

Pakistan's rationale for its covert war in Kashmir has been twofold. The first objective of the long-term, low-intensity war was to bleed India in hopes that it would eventually cut its losses and quit Kashmir. But although Indian forces sustained high losses in Kashmir, and although India's costs in maintaining large contingents have been considerable, India's resolve and strength have not been weakened. On the contrary, an unprecedented show of national unity

emerged in India in response to Pakistan's infiltration of troops and jihadis across the Line of Control.

More significantly, confounding the expectation of Pakistani strategists, India's economy was not harmed. Instead, it boomed. Indian foreign exchange reserves currently stand at some \$77 billion, and Indian scientific institutions are now being counted among the world's best. Its high-tech companies alone last year brought in \$10 billion - more than Pakistan's total foreign exchange holdings. This figure is expected to double in the next two to three years.

By contrast, Pakistan's economic resurgence, such as it is, owes more to Musharraf's adroit handling of the U.S. after the Sept. 11 attacks than it does to any real economic strength. The country's industry is barely crawling along. Education and scientific research seem moribund – a devastating weakness in a technology-driven world.

The second Pakistani rationale for the Kashmiri conflict has been to keep Kashmir in the news. The implicit hope has been that a high level of tension between two nuclear-armed states would alarm the international community - most particularly the United States - which would then force a recalcitrant India to see reason. To raise international fear levels, Pakistani leaders have deliberately tried at times to cultivate an image of Pakistan as a defiant, nuclear-armed state ready to commit suicide. At other moments, though, they have sought to project an image of being calm, confident and responsible. These mixed signals have made the threat of nuclear apocalypse seem sufficiently real to keep a steady stream of foreign leaders coming to Islamabad and New Delhi.

But Pakistan's assumption that keeping the world focused on Kashmir would work to its advantage turned out to be another miscalculation. In fact, once the world in general, and the U.S. in particular, fully assessed the situation, the reaction was not at all what Pakistan had in mind. The idea of jihadists active in a nuclear-armed state set off alarm bells in Washington, where the State Department recently declared the largest mujahedeen organization fighting Indian rule in Kashmir, Hizbul Mujahedeen, a terrorist group.

This should send a clear message to Pakistan that continued violence in Kashmir is unlikely to win sympathy. In the international press, Pakistan is now frequently accused of inciting violence and using the nuclear card to provoke fear, while India is blamed less frequently now than in the past. To be in the news is now no longer a good thing for Pakistan.

The consequence of waging covert war has been a steady loss of international support for the Kashmiri struggle. This is known to all Pakistani diplomats who represent Pakistan's position in the world's capitals, including those of Muslim countries. The moral high ground - the most potent weapon of the weak - erodes every time Hindu civilians are massacred in Kashmir, despite the attempts of mujahedeen groups to blame the killings on Indian security forces. On the other hand, India, the occupying power in Kashmir, has successfully portrayed itself as a victim of covert terror.

There has been movement on both sides lately, but there is still little to suggest that Pakistan actually has a new game plan. The Pakistani government fears a backlash from the religious

parties and extreme elements within the military. Moreover, a large standing army like Pakistan's needs an enemy. Inertia dominates planning and design. The late Pakistani writer and scholar Iqbal Ahmad passionately argued that although India's leaders bore much responsibility for Kashmir's tragedy, Pakistan's defective Kashmir policy had repeatedly "managed to rescue defeat from the jaws of victory."

So, is there hope? Yes, but it will require a spirit of compromise as a prerequisite. The two countries must abandon positions fixed more than half a century ago. They must abandon their your-loss-is-my-gain mentality in favor of one that embraces economic prosperity and social stability for all sides. The slogan "Pakistan First," recently popularized by Musharraf and Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali, could offer an out. Properly interpreted, the words could suggest that Pakistan should provide moral, diplomatic and political support to Kashmiris struggling against India, but nothing more. Military tensions, after all, drain Pakistan's coffers and damage its reputation, and are therefore not in keeping with a "Pakistan First" philosophy.

If Pakistan pulls back from the brink, it will be important for India to act quickly and positively. The undeniable fact is that India is perceived as an occupying power by the Kashmiri people, and that comes with considerable costs. By formally acknowledging Kashmir as a problem that needs a solution, releasing political prisoners from Kashmiri jails and agreeing to a mutual reduction of hostile state-sponsored propaganda, India could demonstrate to the world that it, too, seeks a peaceful resolution to the situation.

In the end, both India and Pakistan will need to explore long-term solutions that go beyond the obvious. One proposal that may make sense envisions two Kashmiri regions, each with its own government and constitution. These neighboring entities, one associated with Pakistan and the other with India, would have soft borders allowing for easy transit of people and goods. It has recently come out that in 1999, the Pakistani and Indian prime ministers nearly resolved the crisis by agreeing to something similar, with the Chenab river, which forms a natural boundary, as the international border. This or a similar deal would need to be worked out by all three parties - Kashmiris, Pakistanis and Indians - but it would be helpful if the United States served as a facilitator.

Pakistan and India must decide whether they can afford for the next decade to look like the previous one. Their conflict is like a cancerous growth, a malignant organism expanding unchecked. With Vajpayee's upcoming visit to Pakistan, which he dramatically describes as the "third and last" peace effort of his lifetime, it is essential to understand how yet another failure can be averted.

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