

An Infrastructure of Hope

by

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Against the wishes of militant Shiv Sena activists, and of Pakistan's Islamist parties, Pakistan and India are talking. General Pervez Musharaf, on his recent visit, said that military force was "not the option anymore" for settling Kashmir. A year-long ceasefire still holds and the artillery remains stubbornly silent along the LOC as well as on the Siachen glacier. The joyous reception given by Kashmiris to the maiden voyage of the Srinagar to Muzaffarabad bus was a decisive rejection of Islamic extremists who had threatened to bomb the bus and kill its passengers. Agreements in Delhi on encouraging trade and travel add yet more opportunities for contact, cooperation and inter-dependence.

These developments are cause for rejoicing. Just three years ago, gripped by war psychosis, the two countries nearly came to blows. But all the present openings can be closed by either state at a moment's notice. The real test is: are the two states ready to make meaningful concessions and to make them irreversible? Kashmir is central to this.

General Musharaf insists that a solution to Kashmir must be found expeditiously. This may be public posturing or the expression of genuine conviction. In either case, he surely knows that, just as certain mathematical equations have no solution, the Kashmir problem is unsolvable inside the current solution space. India has categorically rejected the idea of a second partition or a territorial readjustment.

Pakistan's options have run out. This is not just because Pakistan is militarily incapable of wresting Kashmir from Indian rule. Its assumption – that keeping the world focused on Kashmir was good – has also turned out to be a miscalculation. In fact, once the world fully understood, the reaction was not at all what Pakistan had in mind. The idea of jihadists active in, and supported by, a nuclear-armed state set off alarm bells everywhere, including Washington.

Extremist Islamic groups irreversibly eroded the moral high ground held by Kashmiris. They allowed India, the occupying power in Kashmir, to successfully portray itself as a victim of covert terror. So, in spite of rhetorical denials, Musharaf was forced to put Kashmir on the back burner. He got away with it, thereby demolishing a myth that no Pakistani government which compromises on Kashmir can survive.

Nevertheless, it will be a big mistake for India to declare victory or claim that the present situation vindicates its claim on Kashmir. Over the past two decades India has been morally isolated from Kashmiri Muslims and continues to incur the very considerable costs of an occupying power in the Valley. Indian soldiers continue to needlessly die – and to oppress and kill innocents.

At some point both parties must move boldly on a final solution. The LOC can be fuzzied, made highly permeable, and demilitarized up to some mutually negotiated depth on both sides. True, there will be protests in Pakistan. But if accompanied by appropriate sweeteners, these would not be fatal to Musharaf's government provided it appropriately negotiates the terms and prepares the Pakistani public.

The path forward is becoming clear. It is time to build a political, social and economic infrastructure of hope and of mutual interests that can sustain the difficult journey to a peaceful future. The reasons for India desiring a rapprochement with Pakistan, and thus ending decades of hostility, are obvious. They need not be re-stated here. For Pakistan – or at least for its civil society – the need for peace with India includes all the same reasons plus one more.

The conflict within Pakistan grows between those who seek to be part of the modern world, and those who want to put a beard on every Muslim man and a veil on every Muslim woman. An alliance of Islamic parties (MMA) runs the government in the NWFP and is a coalition partner in Baluchistan. It wants to end co-education, totally segregate women from public life, pass laws banning women from appearing on television and in advertisements, and heap yet more Islamic materials into school books. The ferocity of this conflict increases by the day: MMA activists recently went on a violent rampage to stop girl students from running in a marathon race; the column in Pakistani passports specifying religion has been reinstated; and Pakistani public schools are becoming as grim as madrassas.

Conflict with India directly fuels religious fervor. The use of jihad by the Pakistan Army as an instrument of foreign policy in Kashmir, and earlier in Afghanistan, profoundly changed Pakistani society. The Army showed concern only after sectarian Sunni-Shia warfare threatened to engulf the country, but woke up only after its senior officers – including General Musharaf himself – repeatedly became the targets of assassination by irate jihadist ex-allies, summarily abandoned after 9/11.

General Musharaf is suspected by the mullahs to be a closet secularist, while his international backers in Washington and London hope the allegations are true. But he is no Ataturk, and has no strong agenda for social reform. Further, he is still a general and his real constituency is the military high command which puts the army's institutional interest above all else. The Islamists have discovered, to their great delight, that even mild pressure suffices to make a celebrated commando retreat. Attempts to modify the blasphemy laws, moderate the madrassas, change the curriculum, and remove the religion column in Pakistani passports, have all failed for lack of resolve. This lack of resolve, in turn, comes from wanting to keep options open on Kashmir – the army may need the help of its former allies again.

Peace with India will not instantaneously transform Pakistan into a modern, forward-looking society. But it will go a long way in making this transition possible. The stakes for Pakistan are very high.

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