

India's Kashmir conference — a step in t

By Praveen Swami

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JAMMU and Kashmir Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad stood alone along the line that divides India and Pakistan, grimacing occasionally as a band from the Dogra Regiment hammered out folk tunes with military energy. No high officials from Pakistan had arrived to mark the reopening of the newly rebuilt Kaman Bridge in Uri on February 20; there were no hugs or handshakes.

"There's a lot of noise," Mr Azad said wryly, "but I don't see a lot of enthusiasm."

Come February 24, Mr Azad will be at Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Maha Panchayat on Jammu and Kashmir, an event its critics charge will also be characterised by lots of noise but no real enthusiasm. Leaders of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference as well as secondary secessionist figures like Yasin Malik and Shabbir Shah will stay away from what is being called the Delhi Conference. Islamists like Syed Ali Shah Geelani and the terror groups in the United Jihad Council have made known their contempt for the effort.

Whomsoever shows up at its doors, though, the Delhi Conference is of real value in itself. For the first time in Jammu and Kashmir's post-independence history, New Delhi will be seeking to engage in a dialogue with the State's peoples, rather than to cut an expedient back-room deal with powerful political actors. At last it would seem, lessons have been learned: Deals made in 1952, 1966, 1971, and 1975, after all, barely survived the time it took for the ink with which they were signed to dry.

Just why have secessionists in Jammu and Kashmir rejected this process? In

essence, the APHC has restated its longstanding position that it alone ought to speak for the people of Jammu and Kashmir — a representational claim that it has for long refused to legitimise through any kind of democratic test.

Speaking after the February 20 meeting where the APHC rejected an invitation to participate in the Delhi Conference, its chairman, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, said that while "the Hurriyat is not averse to New Delhi's consultation process with others," it "believes that for permanent resolution of the Kashmir crisis, the governments of India and Pakistan shall have to essentially deal with those people who have been treating Jammu and Kashmir as a disputed territory from day one."

A plausible line of argument? Not quite. In fact, the APHC has participated in similar discussions held on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control. On November 17, 2004, for example, the APHC leadership in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir met with President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz to discuss the State's future. Mainstream parties from PoK also attended the meeting, without even a whimper of protest from the APHC.

Since the APHC had no difficulty speaking with politicians who are committed to the State's accession to Pakistan, it is unclear why it rejects dialogue with those who want it to remain a part of India. Moreover, the politicians invited to the Delhi conference do not represent a unified a pro-India stance. For example, the National Conference wants greater autonomy and the Congress does not, while the Ladakh Union Territory Front wishes for direct administration by New Delhi.

At the APHC meeting, where leaders like Maulvi Abbas Ansari, Bilal Gani Lone, Mohammad Nayeem Khan, Aga Syed Hassan, and Fazl-ul-Haq Qureshi spoke against participation in the Delhi Conference, a number of other reasons for

rejection were offered. Some argued that the Conference would be futile since it had no fixed agenda, and could also create mistrust and confusion between the APHC and the jihadi groups. Others believed the Conference was only intended to cut the APHC to size.

Identical arguments have been made, ironically enough, by pro-India parties opposed to dialogue with the APHC. The former chief minister, Farooq Abdullah, was deeply suspicious of the National Democratic Alliance government's decision to reach out to both the APHC centrists and pro-dialogue elements in the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. Dr Abdullah believed that these enterprises were intended to cut him and the National Conference to size, and criticised the dialogue process for having no apparent agenda or purpose.

The APHC's refusal to attend the Delhi Conference indicates it wants a deal that hands it power, not a real dialogue. However, it ignores that the National Conference, Congress or the People's Democratic Party do speak for substantial sections of the peoples of J&K. Thus acceptance of this plurality of voices is the fundamental prerequisite for a meaningful peace

As things stand, it appears that the APHC and other secessionists want a deal which hands them power, not a real dialogue — a replay of the New Delhi-Srinagar pacts involving Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, which they claim to abhor. Whether the APHC likes it or not, the National Conference, Congress or the People's Democratic Party do speak for substantial sections of the peoples of Jammu and Kashmir. Accepting this plu-

rality of voices is a prerequisite for a meaningful peace.

Yet New Delhi must carry at least part of the blame for the unhappy start to the Delhi Conference. Carelessness and haste were evident in the decision-making processes that led up to its initiation. Indeed, the classified preliminary list of participants the Prime Minister's Office drew up for the Conference on February 14 excluded the Panthers Party, which has a significant presence in Jammu and Kashmir; Ladakh Union Territory Front leader Thupstan Chhewang was invited but the region's Congress unit was not.

The idea of a broad-based dialogue among all major political formations in Jammu and Kashmir, along with discussions that would cut across the LoC, had engaged Indian policy-makers since at least

2003-2004. By January 2005, a blueprint for such a dialogue had been drawn up. National Security Adviser JN Dixit played a key role in these preparations along with Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, Intelligence Bureau Director Ajit Doval, and secretary of the Research and Analysis Wing, Vikram Sood.

After Dixit's death, however, these plans were shelved and policy on Jammu and Kashmir re-shaped. Dixit's successor,

the right direction

the former Intelligence Bureau Director, MK Narayanan, believed that dealing with Pakistan, which alone could deliver an end to terrorist violence, deserved primacy. The eternal dimension of the conflict in Jammu and Kashmir thus began to be privileged over dialogues focused on addressing the grievances of political actors, both among secessionists and in mainstream parties, within the State.

However, pressures to deal with the APHC continued to build, notably from Pakistan and the United States. Prime Minister Singh's meeting with Mirwaiz Umar Farooq in September was in large part the consequence of these pressures. Mr Narayanan, notably, was excluded for the decision-making process that led up to the meeting. Little, however, came from the meeting: Although the APHC promised to provide a map for future discussion, no document was produced.

Beset by a wave of terror strikes in Jammu and Kashmir, New Delhi was in turn unwilling to meet APHC demands for prisoner-releases and a reduction of Indian forces in Srinagar. After Mirwaiz Farooq failed to call for an end to terrorist violence during a visit to Pakistan, New Delhi came to believe that the limits of the process had been reached. It's APHC partners could not help deliver what New Delhi wanted — an end to infiltration and terrorism — for the good reason these trophies were not theirs to gift.

What can now be the way forward? While the Cabinet Committee on Security has rejected dialogue on President Musharraf's still-undefined call for self-rule in parts of Jammu and Kashmir, New Delhi could push ahead with giving greater meaning to democracy within the State. It could, for example, initiate a substantive dialogue on the constitutional amendment orders, which eroded the substance of Article 370, by imposing everything from the metric system to Election Commission

jurisdiction on Jammu and Kashmir.

Similarly, Jammu and Kashmir's political parties need to be asked to spell out their vision on greater federalism. Those who have asked for an end to the central civil services' presence will need to consider if denying the State's citizens Union Government jobs is in Jammu and Kashmir's best interests. Financial autonomy, and the demand that Jammu and Kashmir's citizens be protected by State-specific fundamental rights rather than those granted by the Constitution of India, are other questions that need serious discussion.

Groups like the APHC are reluctant to engage in such a dialogue precisely because it will be substantive. Few among the secessionists have a workable vision for the future; those who do are willing to risk the consequences of articulating one that does not have Pakistan's approval. It is no one's case that the Delhi Conference will lead to an end to violence or a permanent peace. However, its progress could force an end to the evasion and polemical grandstanding that have characterised the dialogue process so far.

What is also clear is that progress on Jammu and Kashmir and dialogue with Pakistan need to be separated. Last week, when the Thar Express rolled across the India-Pakistan border in Rajasthan, its passengers were treated to a musical illustration of the state of the détente process. Folk tunes greeted the train's passengers in India; in Pakistan, a customs band had instead chosen to play military music commemorating the martyrdom of that country's soldiers in the wars of 1965 and 1971.

For all the progress made in recent years, metaphors like these illustrate, India-Pakistan peace is still a considerable distance away. Jammu and Kashmir's people cannot be expected to remain hostages to history until that journey is complete.

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