**Is Kashmir Diplomacy on the Right Track?**

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This week marks the second anniversary of New Delhi’s illegal annexation of Indian-occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IOJK) when it invalidated Articles 35A/370. Subsequently, Modi regime introduced draconian measures that not only confined Kashmiris locked up in their homes, but also introduced legislations with grave ramifications for IOJK’s demographics and culture.

While some local leaders eventually decided to reconcile with the new reality, albeit with a heavy heart, and chose to interact with the South Block, others remain defiant as ever. Politically, the region is engulfed in a fire that refuses to extinguish. Options for an amicable solution to the crisis are dwindling by the day, with no light at the end of the tunnel.

Steps taken by Islamabad in the aftermath of the crisis, though quite robust and resilient, have proved to be inadequate in terms of their actual potential for materially altering the situation, despite all the courage and commitment on the part of Prime Minister Imran Khan, who vowed to rally Kashmir cause around the world through all available diplomatic means and followed up on his words.

Incidentally, in terms of mobilising the diaspora, the performance of some of our diplomatic mission in key capitals abroad, with heaviest concentration of Pakistanis, remained underwhelming. While some missions with dynamic ambassadors/high commissioners, such as in Italy, Canada and Australia, were able to punch far above their weight in terms of the size of Pakistan communities available to them for projecting the cause.

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Renaming a highway, using politically accurate maps, lobbying with the UN or the European Union (EU), and the indefatigable spirit shown by the Pakistani diaspora around the world in mounting frequent protests and demonstrations, all helped to highlight the Kashmir issue. But in the ultimate analysis it had not much real impact in the context of creating an environment where India would desist from tormenting Kashmiris as well as actively pursuing the strategy to change the demographic of the region to an extent where the whole question of a right to self-determination of a people would become a moot point. The global media, which did highlight the human rights violations in IOJK and exposed Indian PM Narendra Modi’s Hindutva agenda more than ever before, also eventually resigned to the ‘fait accompli’ given India’s immense political and economic clout and its place in the Western scheme of things in relation to China.

Countless reports and articles in the international media have taken a toll on India’s undeserved glossy image under the Modi regime. Is that dent in India’s soft power enough on its own to make a difference? Not exactly, if it plans to settle the issue the way Israelis are doing in Palestine by incessantly expanding the settlements. Sadly, any meaningful diplomacy towards resolving the Jammu & Kashmir dispute through peaceful negotiations is not in sight.

The situation is quite complicated to be fair and PM Imran Khan cannot be blamed as he has been very vocal and steadfast in his approach. The playing fields are not levelled, given New Delhi’s much greater weight in international arena and its current closeness to the West, whereas Islamabad was destined to face an uphill struggle. The problem partly lies in some historical missteps on one hand and the limitations of the Foreign Office, of Pakistan, in terms of its capacity for formulating and carrying out a well thought out strategy and policy on the other.

Bereft of any strategic thinkers in key positions, who have all been sidelined to accommodate officers of one particular clique at the highest echelons, both in Islamabad and the most important capitals abroad, the organisation has become a den of mediocrity, fit enough only for producing hackneyed statements and knee jerk reactions to events and crises that are never anticipated in time, so as to enable a well thought out and well calibrated policy response and strategy.

The Foreign Office of Pakistan needs to be strengthened by bringing the best lot back in key positions. The return of senior and capable people like Raza Bashir Tarar from abroad may help in repairing some of the damage but much more needs to be done to make a meaningful difference. The key capitals abroad need to have seasoned, well rounded and most experienced diplomats as envoys, who could make a difference with the host government, and send the right advice back home.

Similarly, the National Security Division (NSD) also needs to be reorganised and strengthened. While Dr. Moeed Yusuf is doing a great job as the National Security Advisor (NSA), the NSD’s secretary is an Office Management Group (OMG) officer with no clue or experience in international affairs and diplomacy. A veteran diplomat with fitting academic credentials and experience needs to head that institution at the bureaucratic level.

Kashmir diplomacy does not have to be only aimed at highlighting the Kashmir dispute and the plight of the Kashmiris in their legitimate quest for the right of self-determination, but also needs to be viewed as a primary pillar of Pakistan’s national security; because this long festering dispute has the potential to imperil the very security of the country if the situation is allowed to deteriorate indefinitely. With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan resulting in an undeniable security quagmire, Islamabad cannot afford a haphazard and unsure approach on Kashmir – articulated by some unimaginative and uninspiring minds at the Foreign Office. It needs the best and the brightest to be handling this existentialist issue rather than those who excel in intra-institutional politics.

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