

Natwar Singh's advice to Pakistan on Kashmir

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The statement of India's newly appointed foreign minister advising Pakistan to follow the example of India and China in dealing with the lingering disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir is out of place. "We are saying don't forget Kashmir but keep it aside for faster progress in other issues" said Natwar Singh recently. He would like to see a forward movement in all other matters even if the new Indian government deliberately drags its feet on finding an amicable solution to the Kashmir impasse.

It is true that China holds similar views. In various international seminars held in Pakistan and in China, Chinese scholars have indeed emphasized the need for not letting political disputes hamper economic cooperation between countries.

But what the head of the South Block needs to be reminded of is that there is a vast difference between the two disputes. The area in adverse occupation along the Line of Actual Control in the Himalayas has very little strategic, political, economic or social ramifications to either India or China. Neither India nor China took the dispute to the United Nations. Jawahar Lal Nehru did not seek the involvement of the World Body in the territorial dispute between India and its northern neighbour. He did so in the case of Kashmir as it was of an issue of great importance to both India and Pakistan. The dispute unlike Aksai Chin and NEFA is still on the UN agenda.

The Chinese territory occupied by

India is of no strategic significance to Beijing. In terms of area it is only a drop in the ocean. In the case of Kashmir it is a very large chunk of territory, whose political future will have a significant bearing on the security of both countries. The areas under adverse possession of New Delhi and Beijing cannot be used as jumping off points for a major attack on each other's territory. Both Pakistan and India have launched major offensives from areas held by them in Kashmir.

A stretch of Pakistan's vital communication infrastructure is overlooked from the mountains in Indian Held Kashmir. Sialkot is only a few miles away from Jammu and the Pukhlian Salient is referred to as a chicken's neck. As long as Kashmir remains in Indian hands the threat to them will be real. Muzaffarabad is only a stones throw away from Indian bases in Kashmir, necessitating the presence of substantial number of regular army troops in Azad Kashmir.

Neither China nor India has deployed large-scale forces in the disputed area. The few troops that are facing each other in that remote corner of India and China have no impact on the rest of the Indian or Chinese forces. China knows full well that India has learnt a lesson in 1962 when Nehru committed the Himalayan blunder of challenging the Peoples Republic of China. It, therefore, does not need to tie down its regular army along the LAC Kashmir, on the other hand, has the largest concentration of troops per square Kilometres than in any other part of the globe. It claims the dubious distinction of having the highest battlefield in the world where sol-

diers lose their limbs more because of frostbites than by the enemy's bullets. Where officers and men have to remain in non-family stations for years on end. All of them would like to see the issue settled so that they can go back to their peace stations.

India and Pakistan have fought two major wars and entered into a number of conflicts over Kashmir. Natwar Singh could not have forgotten Kargil. Does he want it to see another conflict or another yearlong military stand off, both of which are possible if the issue of Kashmir drags on indefinitely. Possibility of a war breaking out between China and India is very remote even if their territorial dispute remains unsettled.

The international community recognises Kashmir as a nuclear flash point. All major powers are persuading Islamabad and New Delhi to try and settle the issue before a local conflict on Kashmir gets out of hand and results in a nuclear exchange. The United States is, today, willing to act as a facilitator and is working on the sidelines to persuade both countries to come to a solution. This situation may not last long. Both India and Pakistan must not let this opportunity go by. In the case of China and India there is no third party involved.

China can afford to look the other way on its territorial dispute with India as it involves territory alone. In the case of Kashmir it is not just a territorial dispute, but it involves the future of 16 million Kashmiris. Pakistan cannot follow the Chinese example because there is a freedom struggle going on in IHK, which is not the case in the territories occupied By India or China. Indian sol-

diers are being killed by the freedom fighters. Innocent Kashmiri men women and children are being martyred and tortured by the Indian security forces in J&K. Over 60,000 Kashmiris have sacrificed their lives. To maintain 70,000 Indian troops in Kashmir is costing the Indian taxpayer heavily. Pakistan too is diverting its energies and precious resources in keeping the issue of Kashmir alive. The earlier the Kashmir issue is settled the better will it be for all the three parties to the conflict. How long should they live in this miserable condition? How long does Natwar Singh want them to wait before they can see some light at the end of the tunnel?

Neither India nor China is faced with a refugee problem because of their territorial dispute. There are hundreds of thousands of Kashmiri refugees eking out a miserable existence in refugee camps close the LOC. They are yearning to go home. Those in Kashmir want peace to return so that they can look forward to a revival of economic activity in the valley

China is not concerned so much about the occupation of its territory by India as no rivers flow into China from Indian-held territory. In the case of Pakistan three important rivers flow into Pakistan from Indian Held Kashmir. The threat of India building dams on these rivers and stopping the flow of water at critical times will always remain till the issue of Kashmir is settled. The Indian foreign minister must be aware of the fact that even the Quaid had referred to Kashmir as the jugular vein of Pakistan. How long should we wait for the grip of the jugular vein to be in friendly hands?

As the former High Commissioner in Islamabad Natwar Singh should be aware that no government in Pakistan can have a smooth sailing if it puts the issue of Kashmir aside and goes ahead with other issues in order to normalize relations between India and Pakistan. The leadership in Pakistan, those who are present today and those that were at the helm of affairs earlier, never said that Kashmir alone should be discussed, President Musharraf and Prime Minister Jamali have repeatedly stated that Pakistan is willing to discuss all issues including that of Kashmir. Neither has Musharraf given a dead line for its solution. But what is expected is that India will enter into a serious, sustained and purposeful dialogue on Kashmir along with all other issues.

No one expected that the new government would stick to the schedule agreed upon by the two foreign secretaries in February. The postponement of the meeting between the foreign office officials on nuclear confidence building measures, which had been scheduled for 25 -26 May was understandable. The inability of Manmohan Singh's government to propose a firm date for the foreign secretaries meeting in June can be explained away, but a major shift seems to have taken place in India's policy on Kashmir so carefully worked out by the BJP government.

Hopefully Vajpayee, whose dream remains unfulfilled, will as the leader of the opposition, put some pressure on the new government to stick to the road map agreed upon during his Premiership and implement it with all sincerity.

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