

The Kashmir dispute

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Richard Nixon once said that they were two kinds of men who run for the Presidency: those who want to do big things, and those who want to be big. Musharraf is the first kind of man in the Nixon formulation.

Of all the military rulers I have known, I have found President Musharraf the most self-confident and the most articulate. I think it is fair to say that Musharraf did not aspire to be great. Greatness was thrust upon him when he was high up in the air. He was literally pushed into history. He knows why he is in the Presidency and what he wants to do. Among other things, he wants to fulfil some sense of personal destiny and receive self-validation as America's staunchest ally in the so-called war against terrorism. The problem with Musharraf is that he genuinely believes that Destiny had placed upon his shoulders the awesome responsibility to address all the intractable problems of Pakistan because he alone knows how to solve them. His problem is that his ambitions surpass his capacities.

Analyzing the differences in the national styles of diplomacy, Kissinger explains how various societies produce special ways of conducting foreign policy. The absolute nature of Musharraf's power enables him to run the country, and its foreign policy, *arbitrarily and idiosyncratically*. None of the obstacles that restrain or thwart democratic rulers – a genuinely elected parliament, accountability, separation of powers, divided responsibility, constitutional forms, a fiercely independent judiciary, a vibrant and free press – exists for Musharraf. No wonder, he is conducting a unique kind of foreign policy.

On October 25, addressing an Iftar reception hosted by his Information Minister, Musharraf called for a national debate on possible ways to resolve the Kashmir dispute – independence, condominium or joint control of the Himalayan state. He proposed identifying different regions in Jammu and Kashmir, demilitarizing them and changing their status before looking for possible options to resolve the dispute. The regions on both sides of the Kashmir divide, Musharraf said, would need to be analyzed with reference to local culture and demographic composition.

After identifying these regions, there could be gradual demilitarization following which the two sides could discuss whose control these areas should be under. Pakistan and India could also have joint control of these areas or the United Nations could be asked to play a role. "I strongly believe there are options and there is a solution", he said. "For the first time", in full glare of national and international television networks and press, he said, "we see light at the end of the tunnel"! Everybody was taken aback.

I am told the Foreign Minister who was present at the Iftar party heard about it for the first time. The Foreign Office came to know about it from the morning newspapers. Anyone who knows anything about the art and practice of diplomacy knows that such pronouncements are not made at Iftar parties.

Today Pakistan is dangerously at war with itself. Politically we are too weak to secure a fair and just settlement of the Kashmir dispute in accordance with the wishes and aspirations of our own people and the people of Kashmir. This is no time for a settlement of the Kashmir dispute.

Foreign policy should never be secret in the sense that the citizens of a free country should never be committed to treaties without their previous knowledge and consent. Diplomacy, on the other hand, must always be confidential. Even the management of the Islamabad club would not consider the possibility of framing their rules or electing new members in the presence of a tape recorder or in front of a microphone or a television camera.

The irony is that, unknown to Pakistanis, President Musharraf had already shared his views on this highly sensitive subject with Kuldeep Nayar, a well-known Indian journalist. "The problem with Musharraf", Kuldeep writes (DAWN October 23), "is that he has a solution to every problem. All that a ruler has to do is to 'show courage' and people will follow him. Musharraf does not see much of a problem in Pakistan".

His announcement, he tells Kuldeep, will be adequate! "Democracies, I am afraid", Kuldeep writes, "function on the basis of consensus, not dictation, however courageous the ruler may be... after meeting Musharraf, I felt that he should know more about the ground realities in India. There is no political party – the ruling Congress, the BJP or any other – that can risk disturbing the Line of Control. Softening borders or giving more autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir is achievable.

Even demilitarization of the valley is possible provided militancy within and without Kashmir ends. Any other formula seems difficult in a democratic and secular India to sell". The situation in Pakistan is quite different. What Musharraf dreams

of at night, he can carry out in the morning. He runs this country as if there was no tomorrow.

"Any people which has been united with another people", Lenin wrote, "not by the voluntary desire of its majority but by the decision of a Tsar or government is an annexed people, a captive people". This sums up the essence of the Kashmir dispute. It reminds me of a couple who, for years, have suffered through a bad marriage. They separated long ago but the divorce lawyers are still working on the divorce deed.

And the only unresolved question is: who gets the custody of the child? For us, this is the most inappropriate time for a permanent settlement of the dispute. Today Pakistan has a dysfunctional political system that people describe as sham democracy with a dictator sitting on top. The substance of power vests in the President who is also the Chief of Army Staff. He is not elected in accordance with the constitution, is not accountable to the parliament or any other organ of state, refuses to vacate his office as Army Chief and doff his uniform. Democracy is in limbo, parliament is paralyzed. The Prime Minister is a figurehead. Who has the mandate to resolve the Kashmir dispute? Who can speak for Pakistan? This is no time for a final settlement of the Kashmir dispute.

Talking about Taiwan, Mao told Kissinger, "We can wait for hundred years". Why can't we wait? We can live for a long time on a diet of hope. What is the hurry? What is the compulsion? Is it foreign pressure? Are we following the American road map outlined in the FY 2005 plan for regional stability?

Our first priority should be to set our own house in order and secure the restoration of the nation's core values: sovereignty of the people, inviolability of the agreed constitution of 1973, supremacy of civilian rule, a fiercely independent judiciary, ruthless accountability of past and present rulers and, above all, national interest above self, and national needs above personal survival. Permanent settlement of the Kashmir dispute should be left to a democratically elected government accountable only to a freely elected, sovereign parliament representing the will of the people.

Never before has public faith in the country's leadership sunk so low. Today Pakistan is dangerously at war with itself. Politically we are too weak to secure a fair and just settlement of the Kashmir dispute in accordance with the wishes and aspirations of our own people and the people of Kashmir. This is no time for a settlement of the Kashmir dispute. We have lived with the status quo in Kashmir for 57 years and can live with it a little longer in the hope of a change in the geo-political landscape.

At least the status quo does not call for the sacrifice of our vital interest in the strategic and highly sensitive Northern Areas adjoining China's Province of Xinjiang and in close proximity to Tibet. Why disturb it? Some disputes, they say, had better be left to history. Kashmir is one of them. History creates the opportunity. We must be patient.