

Kashmiri table talk

BY M.A. NIAZI

President Pervez Musharraf is making a bit of a habit of talking about Kashmir while breaking bread with journalists. Back in Agra in July 2001, he apparently overturned his Summit with Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee over breakfast with Indian editors; in Islamabad in October 2004, over iftar-dinner with Pakistani editors and columnists, he set a new cat among the pigeons by putting forward a new set of proposals on Kashmir.



In Agra, his forceful insistence that Kashmir was the core issue in the Indo-Pak relationship did not sabotage the Summit, as some circles speculate; the Summit was more or less dead by then, because the Indian side could not bring itself to accept a draft joint statement which did give the Kashmir issue the prominence it deserved. Musharraf's speech to the Indian press magnates would not have stopped the Indians if they were indeed bent on a settlement, but at that point they weren't. Vajpayee had probably already made up his mind not to settle after his one-on-one session with Musharraf, their first, at which there was no meeting of minds.

But one of the major consequences of that speech was to boost Musharraf's home image. It was probably his finest media moment in Pakistan, where he won support, admiration or at least grudging respect from more people here before or since. (Since has been mostly a series of explanations of unpopular post-9/11 foreign policies, or of domestic political issues like the referendum, or the transfer of power.) It is almost possible to interpret the Agra Breakfast Meeting as an address primarily to the Pakistani people, with an awareness of the Indian audience in the foreground, as well as an eye on the wider international audience in the background.

Similarly, his recent iftar remarks should be seen as primarily addressed to the Pakistani people, with India as the secondary audience, and the international community in the background. So far, the reaction has been negative, but that seems more a division on partisan fault lines rather than the result of a debate, or after any thorough consideration of the merits of his proposals.

However, the significant difference here is that he has now apparently jumped ahead of the process. Why is he talking in terms of specifics of solutions when India has not yet accepted his premise that Kashmir is the core issue of the Indo-Pak relationship? At Agra, India was not even willing to concede that Pakistan considered it the core issue. What has changed since then? In public and in substance, nothing, but it is possible to postulate that progress has been made as a result of the 'quiet diplomacy' that has been operating since the Islamabad Declaration this January, after the second meeting between Musharraf and Vajpayee.

There are at least four channels that have been operating, three of them overt and one covert. The overt channels have been at the level of the foreign secretaries, then of the foreign ministers, and most recently, of Musharraf and Manmohan last month in New York. The covert channel, the backdoor channel, has been that of the National Security Councils: NSC Secretary Tariq Aziz has worked first with Vajpayee's National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra, and now with Manmohan's J.N. Dixit, on this issue, as far away from the glare of publicity as possible.

Kashmir cannot be resolved on the battlefield, but can it be decided on the negotiating table?

However, it has not been denied that Aziz and Dixit have made more than one meeting on neutral ground in the Middle East. One should also consider the timing of US Secretary of State Colin Powell's statement that the Indo-Pak dialogue process involved him making phone calls. This cryptic admission that the USA was involved is a factor that also needs to be kept in mind.

India's reaction has been huffy, but it is more from irritation rather than anger, and consists of two points. First, that it would like to see proposals before publicly commenting; second, that it would prefer that diplomacy was conducted through normal diplomatic channels rather than through the media. In short, it has problems with the procedure, but it has nothing to say at this point on the substance.

It is also interesting that many of the interested parties, like the leaderships in both Azad Kashmir and in Held Kashmir, have quibbled more about the effects of such proposals, or whether they should have been made in their present format, rather than about their substance.

Musharraf is nobody's fool, and it is a safe assumption that he knows what he is doing, and there is more in the background that is known to the public. This should not automatically raise cries of a sell-out, though there is a natural suspicion in this part of the world about backroom deals reached behind closed doors. But it should not be forgotten that diplomacy does involve secrecy and discretion. This allows time to think, and to evolve a considered response to whatever has come across from the other side.

Musharraf has not, in recent times, been silent on the issue. His statement that, with sufficient preparation, a single day's negotiations should suffice for evolving a solution, does not reflect a commando's impetuosity, but an insight into how the process might evolve. However, his Monday iftar is clearly an attempt to move matters forward, just as much as his Agra breakfast can now be seen in retrospect as an endeavour to jolt the Summit and give it a chance of achieving something. It didn't work in Agra, and it might not work now either.

One significant difference between Agra and Islamabad is that his breakfast went down extremely well with his Pakistani audience; the iftar has not been such a success. At Agra, he was on familiar ground, where most Pakistanis find themselves standing as well. In Islamabad, however, he has moved into uncharted territory, where Pakistanis do not find themselves at ease, and where they have never travelled.

It is also possible to identify another dilemma that is exposed in the Islamabad iftar. Whereas it is now so often repeated as to become a cliché, that Kashmir cannot be resolved on the battlefield, it is not so well realized that the corollary is that it cannot be decided on the negotiating table either.

When it is said that Kashmir cannot be resolved on the battlefield, it means that Pakistan cannot wrest it from India by force, and India can neither subjugate

the Kashmiris nor can it defeat Pakistan so badly as to force it to give up its support for the Kashmir cause. But what factors are there which would incline either India or Pakistan to make a settlement on the negotiating table? India is bleeding in Kashmir, but it isn't bleeding so much that it needs to get out by any means whatsoever. Pakistan has no strong advantage, no unanswerable lever, which might force India to come to a resolution.

The only way diplomats can solve the problem is if one side is desperate for a solution, and willing to concede almost everything and the bathroom sink to get a deal, any deal, no matter how disadvantageous. That situation does not exist, not unless we come back to Secretary Powell's phone calls. There we can see a factor that, although shadowy and indistinct, might lead to a settlement. Unfortunately, the USA is not likely to force a settlement favourable to Pakistan, or giving the Kashmiri people a genuine choice of self-determination, not so long as it views India as a long-term strategic ally across a broad range of issues, and Pakistan as a sort of auxiliary in the War on Terror. The prolonging of the War might keep the Pak-US relationship going for longer than was expected in the autumn and winter of 2001, but in the end, it is a limited relationship. It should also be noted that the USA sees its relationship with India as between two countries, while it is well aware that in Pakistan, the warmth is government-to-government, and that too depending on who forms the government (hence the strong support for Musharraf personally).

So the substance of Musharraf's proposals is not that relevant. He is making a brave attempt, but it is not likely to succeed, not in view of the obstacles that face it. No Pakistani government could be expected to accept a manifestly unfair settlement, and that is to Musharraf's credit that he will not accept one out of conviction rather than for fear of public opinion.

However, the conundrum remains. How is the plight of the Kashmiri people to be alleviated and how are they to be accorded their right to self-determination, denied to them these five and a half decades? Can Pakistan alone do it for them? Not in its present stance, which is one of avoiding trouble for itself. It was willing at one point to accept the wrath of the world for this goal, but now it is not. To take up such an effort again, it requires an inspirational national leadership that carries the people with it, because it would require great sacrifices and perhaps even greater risks. Even then, it is possible that Pakistan alone might not have the strength and resources.

So where are the Kashmiris to turn for justice? There is only one tiny ray of hope for them, and that is in the Muslim world. Not its governments, which are almost all bent on remaining friends with the USA's great ally, and their fellow traveller in the faded non-aligned dream. But despite what Pakistani leaders never tire of telling us, the ordinary Muslim, both Arab and Ajami, does see Kashmir as one of his causes, just as Pakistanis see Palestine or Iraq. How exactly this strength of over a billion people is to be brought to help nine million, is another matter. However, it is reasonably sure that the present structure of the Muslim world does not leave any room for optimism. Can that structure be changed? It cannot, not until the day the Ummah chooses to take its destiny into its own hands, out of those of the despots and monarchs who hold it today on behalf of, and at the sufferance of, inimical external forces.

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