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**Reading the ceasefire**

The Indian media and political analysts have been saying that Pakistan's COAS' statement that "Pakistan and India must resolve the longstanding issue of Jammu and Kashmir in a dignified and peaceful manner as per the aspirations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir" reportedly encouraged the Modi government to agree on the LoC ceasefire.

This seems implausible as the COAS had merely restated Pakistan's consistent focus on dialogue to resolve differences with India. For the past four years, the same stance miserably failed to convince the recalcitrant Modi to halt his anti-Pakistan policy. Even when Imran Khan addressed the Sri Lanka-Pakistan Trade and Investment Conference on February 24, he underlined that “Our [India-Pakistan] only dispute is Kashmir and it can only be resolved through dialogue." After coming into power he explained to Prime Minister Narendra Modi that the way forward for the subcontinent is to resolve our differences through dialogue". MEA spokesperson Anurag Srivastava responded, “Our position is well-known. India desires normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan in an environment free of terror, hostility and violence." Who or what factors nudged Modi to soften his stance against Pakistan?

Since its inception, Pakistan has suffered from an existential threat from India. Its security driven foreign policy largely aims at countering this dangerous trend. Whether Pakistan could materially afford the policy, it did not matter. It continues defying Indian dominance. This consistent resolve generated unabated tension, if not active conflicts between them.

Since Modi became prime minister, the fifth generation hybrid warfare has been in full bloom against Pakistan, with India publicly committing to not only diplomatically isolate Pakistan but also weaken it internally by fueling insurgency in Balochistan and hitting the country's economy. The prospect has been high that India, as in the past, may carry out some false flag operations to project Pakistan as a terrorism-sponsoring state. This act was not at all beyond the Modi government. In the wake of its unilateral illegitimate decision of abrogating the special status of Occupied Kashmir and annexing it, India escalated the frequency of firing on the LoC to deflect global attention from the massive human right violations in Kashmir.

Though watchful, Pakistan's response has been measured and focused more on exposing Indian brutality rather than tit for tat across the LoC. Pakistan's civilian population residing closer to LoC suffered mortalities due to Indian massive artillery hits. Pakistan avoided retaliation in the same manner, as the population likely to be hit mostly on the Indian side is also Kashmiri Muslims. Pakistan therefore has to choose its targets carefully. Tranquillity and disengagement along the LoC is the most required step to make living conditions better on both sides of the LoC. The recent ceasefire agreement can thus be welcomed as a positive development.

Against the backdrop of continuing hostility, the announcement of the ceasefire came as a surprise. The interesting turn is that the mainstream Occupied Kashmir political parties including the Hurriyat Conference welcomed the joint statement.

The disturbing and intriguing aspect is the timing of the ceasefire agreement and how it has been welcomed in India without it abandoning its brutal and oppressive measures in Kashmir or lowering down public hostility towards Pakistan. One wonders how this ceasefire agreement would lead to peaceful co-existence without a meaningful and result oriented dialogue on the Kashmir dispute. Will the Hindutva-driven Modi government soften its anti Muslim attitude? Is it a propaganda ploy, a clever tactical move to influence US administration as was the de-escalation and ceasefire understanding of 2003-2008 to discredit our position on Kashmir with the Arab bloc within the OIC?

Now the two sides have announced that they have agreed to "strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease firing along the LoC and all other sectors.” This seems somewhat incomprehensible as India violated all the existing Kashmir related understandings and agreements by unilateral changing the status of Occupied Kashmir in complete violation of the UN resolution. Until the joint statement leads to a dramatic departure from the current anti-Pakistan RSS mindset and politics in India, in all probability the said agreement will turn out to be either eyewash or a time-gaining antic. It cannot be lasting by ignoring immediate concerns of Kashmiri Muslims in IHK. Desperate India, as in 2008, may resume regular firing across the LoC on some pretext.

In the meanwhile, India will definitely exploit the intervening period to: i) consolidate its position with pro-India Kashmiri leaders; ii) project normalcy in Kashmir; and iii) effectively deflect global pressure over human right violations.

Diplomacy and disengagement at the LoC is a welcome development. Conflicts cannot be put to rest through wars. But diplomacy requires negotiations in good faith and this element is missing from the Indian side. India's ulterior motives for agreeing to the LoC ceasefire may aim at creating misunderstanding among Kashmiri leaders that Pakistan may not mind shifting its Kashmir policy. The statement of Syed Ali Geelani, issued by his special representative, is the first pointer to this situation.

US State Department spokesman Ned Price has welcomed the joint statement between India and Pakistan. Such an innocuous pronouncement is meaningless if not accompanied by a firm commentary on the serious violations of human rights in Occupied Kashmir. Pakistan needs to realize the futility of such statements. It is a page from the old book; on February 26, 2019 then US secretary of state Mike Pompeo had said that the US encouraged India and Pakistan to exercise restraint, and avoid escalation at any cost. "I also encouraged both ministers to prioritize direct communication and avoid further military activity."

No doubt, the US wants peace and stability in the region but is least bothered about the final solution of Kashmir. The looming instability and specter of active war threaten its interests. Fortunately, South Asia is not the key zone for US-China rivalry or competition. The reality is that the US cannot and will not change the fault-lines of power competition in South Asia profoundly. But at the same time it would be naive to visualize that the US is not concerned about the protracted rivalry between nuclear India and nuclear Pakistan. It does not want the rivalry to aggravate the existing insecurity and potent dangers.

The new American administration will further deepen its strategic partnership with India through synergy in their diplomatic and security efforts. The policy of strengthening Indian capacity to serve as a regional counterweight to curb China in SouthEast Asia and to a lesser degree in South Asia will likely get traction. Conversely, the US will continue to struggle how to scuttle Pakistan’s growing military and economic tight embrace of China. American interests in Afghanistan where Pakistan has influence with crucial Taliban factions will probably be taken care of by offering some carrots.

On its part, there is no change in Pakistan’s principled position on the Jammu and Kashmir dispute which calls for a free and impartial plebiscite under the UN auspices.” Restoration of diplomatic ties at the high commissioner level is desirable, as the process may prove helpful in injecting positivity in the decaying veins of bilateral relations.

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