**India-Pakistan ceasefire pact a positive step!**

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India and Pakistan have agreed to a ceasefire along the Line of Control. The United States has welcomed the joint statement of India and Pakistan on ceasefire along the Line of Control and other sectors, and called it a positive step towards greater peace and stability in South Asia. Top UN leadership has also welcomed the announcement by militaries of India and Pakistan to strictly observe all agreements on ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir and other sectors, with UN chief Antonio Guterres expressing hope that this positive step will provide an opportunity for further dialogue.

The Director Generals of Military Operations of Pakistan and India held discussions over the established mechanism of hotline contact. The two sides reviewed the situation along the Line of Control and all other sectors in a free, frank, and cordial atmosphere. In the interest of achieving mutually beneficial and sustainable peace along the borders, the two DGsMO agreed to address each other’s core issues and concerns which have the propensity to disturb the peace and lead to violence. Both sides reiterated that existing mechanisms of hotline contact and border flag meetings will be utilized to resolve any unforeseen situation or misunderstanding.

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Though India and Pakistan went to war three times – in 1947, 1965 and 1971 – not once did they conclude a formal ceasefire agreement in writing with the usual internationally recognised provisions. The history of the ad-hoc arrangements that followed at the end of each war provides a lesson which is still relevant; especially of the one in 1948. In 1948, both parties accepted the two resolutions of the UN Commission for India and Pakistan, the first one of which, of Aug 13, 1948, said that the governments of India and Pakistan agree that their respective high commands will issue separately and simultaneously a ceasefire order. Later, when they accepted the proposals for a plebiscite, the high commands declared a ceasefire effective before the midnight of Jan 1-2, 1949; before the UNCIP adopted its plebiscite proposals in a resolution on Jan 5, 1949. Line of Control has always been the bone of contention between India and Pakistan for the last 50 years, the two armies have been in an eye ball to eye ball confrontation. In this situation, border skirmishes and firing are the order, and peace is a rare interlude.

The adherence to the ceasefire agreement is a welcome proposition, as not only does it prevent the unnecessary loss of lives of soldiers and civilians residing in border areas but because it could provide an impetus to bring some normalcy to India-Pakistan bilateral ties. After an extended period of steadily worsening relations, and for want of a better term, it is the sharp bite of strategic reality. The aggression on the Line of Control (LoC) mirrors the state of India-Pakistan relations. While the relationship had been worsening for some years, there was a steep dive after India’s decision of August 5, 2019, on occupied Kashmir. Resulting Pakistan successfully pushed the Kashmir agenda internationally highlighted. The recent decision by India and Pakistan to commit to the 2003 ceasefire agreement is a welcome step that can go a long way in ensuring peace at borderlands situated on both sides of the Line of Control (LOC) in Jammu and Kashmir. The discussion which paved the way for the decision was also an ice-breaker after a long spell of silence, where the two nation-states interacted minimally with each other after 2015.

Let us understand why strictly observing the cease-fire agreement henceforth is the need of the hour, not just for these two nation states but for the sake of larger mankind. There was also a need to rethink, wielding the blunt military instrument in the absence of diplomacy was yielding limited results. Fears of a war breaking out between the two countries led to President Trump offering to mediate between India and Pakistan on Kashmir issue, going against India’s stance that this is a purely bilateral issue. It is likely that the new Biden administration could also have given a gentle nudge as the continuing India-Pakistan conflict would have a corresponding effect on the future of Afghanistan after the American withdrawal.

The military threat to India from China is visible and real, leading to a scrambling to reorient army assets from the western to the northern borders. The two-front threat, which many strategic experts often dismissed in the past, is now being openly spoken about in the highest levels of military leadership. Dealing with the contingency of a war on two fronts will require more resources than the current state of the Indian economy can provide. It, therefore, makes eminent sense to calm the heated borders, and solve the core issue of Kashmir according to UN’s resolutions. There is also a moral responsibility of governments of the two countries towards their border population. Often, in the rhetoric about showing military resolve, we forget that the biggest sufferers of the firing exchanged between the two armies were the civilians whose lives and livelihood was very severely affected. The ceasefire agreement will bring tremendous succour to them.

The easing of military tensions could also have a positive impact on the situation in Kashmir. A peaceful and inclusive resolution of the Kashmir issue requires many more healing touches by both the governments, but a good step has been initiated. There are questions on whether the ceasefire agreement will last and be translated into a normalisation of India and Pakistan relations. The success of the agreement will depend on two factors. First, solution of Kashmir issue, whether the two countries view this as a short-term fix to band-aid the immediate challenges or as a precursor to improving relations. If it is the latter, the firing on the border will be controlled to ensure that border incidents do not vitiate the overall environment. The second factor is how successfully both countries can prevent the foreign policy from being sabotaged by domestic politics. This is perhaps the more difficult challenge.

With the guns falling silent, it is time to give diplomacy a chance. Diplomacy is bargaining; it seeks outcomes that, though not ideal for either party, are better for both than some of the alternatives. In diplomacy, each party somewhat controls what the other wants, and can get more by compromise, exchange, or collaboration than by taking things in his own hands and ignoring the other’s wishes. The ceasefire agreement provides an opportunity for India-Pakistan ties to move beyond a zero-sum game. The governments of India and Pakistan have welcomed the border ceasefire announced by the two armies after months of back-channel contact at military and diplomatic level. The peace along the border comes after firing and shelling by border guards on both sides for several years. The incidents had peaked in 2020. The ceasefire is a win-win for India and Pakistan and for the border population in the two countries, not a single shot has been fired along the border since the ceasefire came into force.

Due to decades of violence across borders, a large chunk of the population living in borderlands has been bereft of good education and health that otherwise remain restricted to towns and district centres these frontier villages belong to, as no private entity as basic as a good private school would invest in a conflict zone. Therefore, India and Pakistan should see that their current commitments regarding ceasefire take a step in this direction and serve larger mankind.

Although when it comes to occupation of lands or bothering the neighbours, India has an unprecendented record, all its efforts have resulted in a gradual decline in the living standard of the people of South Asia. An analysis of the cost conflict gives substance to this statement. In 1990, India spent $30.2 billion on its military alone. Between 1989 and 1991, Indians rate of growth declined by 40% while its level of debt increased by over 20%. Pakistan economy is also in much more troubles. Apparently, there is no chance of a peaceful co-existence without a proper solution of this Line of Control, which ultimately would mean a decent and acceptable solution of Kashmir, as per UN resolutions. There shall be a bright day when Pakistan and India shall solve this issue as per the aspirations of Kashmiris and as per UN resolutions. The world is anxiously waiting for that day.

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