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India, Pakistan peace prospects

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In an effort to achieve a political solution acceptable to both India and Pakistan Musharraf has made a significant shift in Pakistan's Kashmir policy. His statement about sidelining the UN resolution, if India shows its willingness to move away from its stated position, however, has come under severe criticism. Politicians opposed to his policies have blamed him for letting down the Kashmir cause and differ with his government's policy of trying to improve relations with India without a solution of the Kashmir impasse. Has Musharraf made another U turn and if so have the prospects of peace between India and Pakistan become brighter?

President's recently addressed the Azad Kashmir Assembly and assured them that Pakistan would continue to give diplomatic, political and moral support to the Kashmiri freedom fighters. There should be no doubt that Musharraf is dedicated to the Kashmir cause and is absolutely clear in his mind that without a settlement of the Kashmir issue peace and normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan cannot take place. What he has, apparently, now realised also is that supporting the freedom fighters physically is not helping in the solution of the problem and that peaceful negotiations on all issues are the only way out of this imbroglio. He has of late, therefore, repeatedly stated that he would not allow the use of Pakistan territory for terrorist activities. He, however, remains supportive of the freedom movement in IHK, the nature of which is questioned by India. What ever may be the facts

Pakistan can no longer run with the hare and hunt with the hound.

Some ministers and government officials have tried to prove that the president has not deviated from his earlier stand, but it is quite obvious that the Kashmir policy has indeed been altered. And why should that not be? The environment and circumstances have radically changed and the old policy of using force, either overtly or covertly, was not achieving the desired result. (India too has learnt that lesson). This does not mean that the objective has been given up. That is very much in place. Only the modus operandi has altered.

Seeking a solution to the Kashmir problem is one of the national goals of Pakistan. It is clearly spelt out in the green folders of the state. No government can put Kashmir on the back burner and still survive. But what has not been stated is what measure Pakistan should take to achieve that goal. We have tried clandestine operations, limited conflicts and all out wars on Kashmir but even after the lapse of more than half a century the issue remains where it was in 1947. The tragic events of September 11 have changed the atmosphere completely. War on support of terrorists or even freedom movements military is no longer an option.

In IHK the APHC has split into a moderate faction headed by Abbas Ansari, which also includes the religious leader Mir Waiz Umar Farooq. They had a meeting with the Indian leadership at New Delhi and offered to end violence if India also agreed to do so. The hard line faction headed by the pro-Pakistan leader Syed Ali Gilani still insists on the holding of a plebiscite in

keeping with the UN resolutions Unable to maintain his position as the head of the APHC Gilani has declared that he would be forming his own party. It is yet to be seen how many Kashmiri leaders of significance would join the new alliance. The head of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) Amanullah Khan still insists on Kashmir becoming an independent state.

In these changed surrounding peaceful efforts must now be given a chance. The majority of the people on both sides of the border want to see relations normalised. America, Britain, China and Japan, with whom we have to interact frequently, all want peace in the region and are persuading both India and Pakistan to settle their dispute peacefully. The PPP, the Muslim League (N), and the Muslim League (Q) all want to see an improvement in Indo-Pakistan relations.

All eyes are, therefore, on the Indo-Pakistan official level talks scheduled for 16-18 February. Ceasefire in Kashmiris holding. Infiltration across the LOC has almost stopped. Whether it is due to the winter snows or a genuine shift in the Kashmir policy will only be known when the summer months set in. India has implicitly recognised that Kashmir is an issue, which has to be settled. New Delhi has also agreed to talk about Kashmir without any pre-conditions. Vajpayee is not making anti-Pakistan an issue in the upcoming general elections. In fact he is banking on the Muslim vote on the basis of bringing about peace with Pakistan. Large delegations from all segments of society on both sides of the international border

are meeting each other. There is an atmosphere of bon home. A semblance of trust and confidence seem to exist. Will it last is uncertain but as of today the required peaceful conditions to a large extent have been created.

But we should not make the mistake of raising the expectations of a break through on Kashmir at this forthcoming dialogue. A caretaker government in India, whose leaders are now fully engrossed in the general elections to be held in April-May, are unlikely to move away from their stated positions. Major decisions, like that on Kashmir, will have to be left to the new government in New Delhi. To expect a road map to be outlined at this upcoming meeting is asking too much and will be an incorrect reading of the political situation. Similarly, talking about solutions is also premature. All that one should expect at this session is the designation of several committees to deal with various problems. A committee to discuss the Kashmir issue will hopefully also be formed. The dialogue is likely to continue in each other's capitals for quite some time to come.

If the BJP comes to power again and can form the government without the support of the hard line Hindu religious parties, then perhaps future meetings between India and Pakistan on Kashmir may move in the fast lane. Vajpayee, because of his advancing age, may feel the need to achieve the impossible in his lifetime. But if another political grouping takes control of the reigns of government in India, then all issues may have to be re-examined. India and Pakistan must now stop the propaganda against each other. Pakistan must fulfil its commitments of not allowing non-state actors

to send volunteers into IHK. Islamabad must strictly limit itself to providing diplomatic, political and moral support to the indigenous freedom movement in IHK.

India must stop the fencing of the LOC to create the right climate for talks. New Delhi should reduce its troops in IHK and avoid committing atrocities of innocent Kashmiris. It should release the political prisoners and accept the proposal of APHC (A) in ordering a cease-fire in IHK. Stop stating that Kashmir is an integral part of India. Slogans like Kashmir banega Pakistan and India must quit Kashmir are also not conducive to creating the right environment for a solution to the Kashmir problem. Ultimate arbiters are the people of Kashmir but who represents the collective will of the people? Is Gilani, Ansari or Amanullah? Each one of them has different views on the future status of Kashmir. Should we disregard those who would like to obtain maximum autonomy within the Indian Union? The Hindus of Jammu, Kashmiri Pundits, the Buddhists of Laddakh would want to retain its ties with India. The Kashmiris should get their act together first, if they want to avoid the situation that developed in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The international community are wanting India and Pakistan to settle their differences peacefully. The Kashmiris want to end all violence. The ordinary citizens of India and Pakistan want to live like good neighbours. It is up to the leadership in both countries to help them in fulfilling their dreams? Will they rise up to our expectations?

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