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Exploring the alternatives

Commenting on the Kashmir dispute, Federal Minister for Information and Media Development Sheikh Rashid Ahmed is reported to have said that the dispute may be resolved within the next three years. According to the published reports, the minister believes that the direction of incumbent trends in international developments are indicative of hopeful signs towards the settlement of the dispute. These reports also quote the minister as saying, "...settlement may not be in accordance with the aspirations of the peoples of Pakistan and India, but we must be mentally prepared for that situation." Scanning through the important aspects of the statement, one is certainly attracted by an interesting mixture of optimism and realism. Both aspects of the statement - the direction of international developments and settlement of the dispute under some formula that may not be reflective of popular aspirations in the two countries - are equally important and deserve attention.

Ever since India undermined the stability of the operative nuclear restraints in May 1998 and opted for nuclear weapon tests forcing Pakistan to do the same, South Asia has been the focus of considerably increased interest of the international community. Initial efforts were directed to prevent the nuclearisation of South Asia but Indian determination to acquire nuclear weapons irrespective of what the international community thinks or what is good for humanity frustrated almost all world efforts.

But at the same time the Indian nuclear tests inadvertently interna-

tionalised the Kashmir dispute. Despite Pakistan's consistent and repeated efforts to highlight the dangerous implications of the Kashmir dispute, the international community had earlier opted to remain somewhat apathetic. The Indian tests, however, highlighted the fears of a possible nuclear exchange in South Asia. Given the hostile relationship that exists between India and Pakistan, many members of the international community began to entertain the notion that the world might experience an undesired nuclear war.

Cognisant of the past history of different interpretations of the Kashmir dispute along with varied policy pursuits by both India and Pakistan, the international community began to focus more attention on the need to resolve the Kashmir dispute. The acquisition of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan injected a sense of urgency. The past history of relationship between India and Pakistan is sufficiently studded with ugly situations to warrant any allowance on this front. Perhaps that is why many world leaders began to refer to Kashmir as the most dangerous nuclear flashpoint. In consequence, they initiated somewhat belated efforts to make some progress towards the resolution of the dispute.

Not only many world leaders offered their services to mediate between the two parties, many others offered facilitation in order to see the resumption of talks between the two countries. Both insiders as well as outsiders have frequently suggested the idea of a neutral third party's involvement. While APHC is currently seeking the me-



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diation by former American President Clinton, Imran Khan, a cricketer-turned-politician, has suggested the name of Nelson Mandela to act as a neutral umpire. All such suggestions are meant to facilitate the initiation of a process that might lead to the much-desired peace in South Asia.

Recognising the fact that Pakistan would be responsive to a third party involvement and India would oppose any such move, many members of the international community have been periodically highlighting the need for resolving the Kashmir dispute and at the same time continuously increasing the application of pressure. Undoubtedly, international pressure is constantly increasing on both countries to find a way to resolve the dispute.

The second aspect of the statement is somewhat speculative and deals with the anticipated settlement of the dispute that may not be in accordance with the aspirations of the peoples of India and Pakistan. Ever since the dispute arose, Pakistan has maintained that it should be resolved in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir, which can be easily ascertained through a plebiscite held under the auspices of the UN. Equally consistent has been India in its policy to avoid the holding of the UN-supervised plebiscite.

In comparison to Pakistan, the Indian case on Kashmir has been

changing with the change in circumstances. Perhaps that is why Pakistan's case on Kashmir is often referred to as consistent and principled. Despite having accepted the UN Security Council's resolutions dealing with the fate of Kashmir and promised the plebiscite, India has never facilitated the process of plebiscite. Instead some years after accepting the UN resolutions, it began to wriggle out of its commitments to the UN Security Council and started to change its declared stance on Kashmir. With the lapse of some more time, it began to claim that Kashmir is an integral part of India.

The passage of more than five decades has made the conflict over Kashmir rather more complex. Given the developments that have taken place during the last 55 years, it is not easy to find an acceptable solution. What the minister for information reportedly said is only the recognition of complexities that have crept in over the years, which, in turn, force all concerned to be somewhat realistic about the anticipated settlement. It is a foregone conclusion that no party is going to quickly accept a solution that does not provide substantive satisfaction. Realistic outcome could indeed be a compromise or face-saving formula. Indeed the most appropriate way to work out an acceptable formula is through a concerted process of dialogue.

It is indeed a welcome approach to administer injections of realism especially when one realises the nature of complexities involved. How-

ever, realism would only work if both parties opt for such an approach. If either of the parties misinterprets as has been frequently done in the past, even a realistic approach would result in a complete failure. Adoption of a realistic approach implies strong determination and courageous resolve to peace accompanied by a much-needed vision of stability in the region.

The Indians are treading on a the wrong path. Assertion that Kashmir is an integral part of India in defiance of the accepted UN resolutions does not augur well for a future settlement of the Kashmir dispute. Besides, one cannot afford to overlook the ongoing Kashmiri freedom struggle. India has made no efforts to prepare its people for a compromise formula. The minister for information appears to be preparing people that the anticipated peace formula may not come up to their expectations. Therefore, it is imperative to be mentally prepared and willing to explore other feasible alternatives. If this was the intention, then the statement certainly deserves appreciation and support.

Exploring alternatives implies not only that the concerned parties in a complex situation have recognised the difficulties and dangers involved in the conflict situation but have also demonstrated willingness and courage to undertake such initiatives. All such initiatives deserve to be appreciated and encouraged. Like all other regions of the world, South Asia needs peace and stability in order to create an environment for quick economic development.