

# On India Musharraf pushes ahead

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**W**hen Kargil, instead of being restricted to the Drass sector, snowballed into a multiple-sector military cross LoC operation, Pakistan's COAS General Pervez Musharraf had hoped it may expedite the settlement of the Kashmir dispute. There was an expectation that Pakistan's near control of the Drass-Kargil highway, India's life-line to Leh and Siachin, would prompt India to come to the negotiating table and opt for a quick settlement of the Kashmir dispute. Or at least agree to return Siachin to Pakistan. Neither happened. "We need a fair and quick resolution of Kashmir so confrontation can end, co-operation is possible and above all Pakistan can progress," Musharraf had then argued.

A flawed Kargil operation, the October coup d'etat and the international environment prompted Pakistan's COAS-President's high gear diplomatic and political efforts to resolve Kashmir and normalise Pakistan-India relations. Ever since Musharraf has been in a hurry to justly resolve the Kashmir dispute. Post-Kargil Musharraf's commitment to normalising Pakistan-India relations has matched that of the former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. His 'peace' offerings to India have been numerous; the unilateral decrease in troops, the May 2000 unilateral cease-fire, the 2001 discussions at Agra, the January 12 2002 commitment that Pakistan will not allow its territory be used for terrorism against India, mid 2002 offer to India at Almaty that Pakistan would prevent LoC infiltration, the November 2003 cease-fire and the January 2004 statement reiterating Pakistan's commitment on anti-terrorism. Musharraf has consistently argued that the Kashmir dispute is easily solvable, provided the Indian leadership demonstrates political commitment. His agreement, on former US President Clinton's intervention, to establishing a back channel with Delhi, yielded the January 6 joint statement. Significantly, Clinton followed through his commitment of July 4 1999 to facilitate whenever possible, Pakistan-India dialogue on Kashmir.

He, himself, the man in uniform meanwhile wields enough power to declare flexibility on many fronts; a solution on Kashmir that all three parties find acceptable, a solution outside of what the UN resolutions prescribe, direct bilateral negotiations, all parties need to go beyond the blame game, construction by India of a two-tiered fence along the LoC tolerated, reducing criticism of India's Kashmir policy at international forums and dropping his demand of a time-line for settlement. Interestingly, in his September meeting with the President of the Pakistan Muslim League Chaudary Shujaat Hussain, the Indian High Commissioner had indicated that increase cross-LoC infiltration and demand for a time-line to resolve Kashmir could derail the dialogue process. In November, the PML President will be visiting India on the Congress' President Sonia Gandhi's invitation.

Musharraf calls the final shots on Pakistan's India policy. Since January, he has



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personally chaired almost a dozen inter-institutional policy meetings on India. In addition to the Foreign Office and the military's input, Musharraf has kept the political channel open. His trusted aide Tariq Aziz has faithfully relayed to him the Indian political leadership's thinking. Likewise J N Dixit has done the same for the Indian Prime Minister. Musharraf's 'read out' on the Congress government's approach on the Kashmir dispute is hopeful. More than that of the Foreign Office and the GHQ. Where they see no sub-

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stantive change in Indian policy over Kashmir, even before his New York meeting, Pakistan's President believed there is a 50-50 chance that India would engage substantively on the Kashmir issue. Clearly Musharraf does not subscribe to the thinking that a predominantly political protracted Kashmiri struggle supported by Pakistan will yield a solution favourable for the Kashmiris and for Pakistan. Instead, he appears committed to pushing an early and sustainable settlement.

In New York, Musharraf must have felt somewhat vindicated. He has pushed Kashmir to the centre-stage of Pakistan-India dialogue. However, now to the million dollar question of what solution?

The Indian advise that Pakistan not raise the Kashmir issue was heeded because there was a quid pro quo on offer. In a stark contrast to last year, when Musharraf's and Vajpayee's UNGA speeches were followed by the Pakistani and Indian Permanent Representatives, this year Musharraf urged Manmohan Singh to cease the opportunity to resolve Kashmir. The Indians did not accuse Pakistan of cross-LoC infiltration. The joint

Manmohan-Musharraf statement was reminiscent of the Vajpayee-Nawaz Sharif's 1998 meeting in New York, which led to the Lahore summit. This holds more promise. The statement commits the two to "explore possible options for a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the issue in a sincere spirit and purposeful manner."

While no mention by India of cross-LoC infiltration maybe read as Indian acknowledgement of a major decrease, it is unlikely that India would give up, one accusing Pakistan as at least a partial trouble-maker in IHK and two framing of the Kashmiri struggle within the terrorism framework, unless India and Pakistan have arrived at a broad common understanding on how to proceed on the Kashmir dispute. Clearly the most likely next step, even if behind the scenes, would be the examining of possible options. Musharraf has ruled out the LoC as a solution and any other solutions unacceptable to the Kashmiris. For Delhi, the 'defensible frontiers' solution has been the only acceptable one. It involves minor adjustments in the existing LoC, so as to end the interdiction capabilities the sides have against each other from different points of the LoC. It is still unclear if the Indian National Security Advisor's assurance to the Pakistani Foreign Minister and Foreign Secretary that the Indians will now think "outside the box" while dealing with Pakistan would mean new thinking on Kashmir, too.

**B**etween now and the December round of the composite dialogue, many roadblocks need to be cleared. If minds must meet on Kashmir, solutions to lesser disputes like Siachin, Sir Creek and Wullar should be in the offing. No less finding a way forward on the yet aborted talks on Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service.

Musharraf seems determined to push ahead with dialogue and dispute settlement. Among other confidence-building measures, he is also keen to follow through with the gas pipeline project initiated during Nawaz Sharif's period. In Pakistan, political battling notwithstanding, there is a strategic consensus that normalising relations with India, on the basis of sovereign equality, international law and good neighbourly relations, is in Pakistan's interest. Pakistanis will support Musharraf's India policy as long as it moves within this consensus.

Meanwhile, as the bilateral dialogue appears to proceed rapidly, the Kashmiris must demand that India and Pakistan facilitate the holding of an intra-Kashmiri leadership dialogue at a neutral place. They must meet to agree on Minimum Common Demands regarding their political future. Pakistan remains convinced that without major Kashmiri support a sustainable solution to the Kashmir dispute would be unlikely. In fact, President Musharraf must encash the goodwill generated in New York, and personally intervene to organise the intra-Kashmiri dialogue. And ensure that the Kashmiri voice is heard loud and clear in deciding their politics.