

Kashmir Peace Initiative: Depriving Pakistan Army of A Lifeline

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The appointment of the new interlocutor for Kashmir, former Intelligence Bureau chief, Dineshwar Sharma, has the potential to deprive the Pakistan Army of a *raison d'être*. The potential for this needs to be examined in order that the peace initiative gets the requisite heft. There are currently two schools of thought. One is that the Pakistan Army requires to keep stoking the fires in Kashmir in order to stay atop the power grid in Pakistan. By this reasoning, India has limited options in Kashmir, faced as it is with a proxy war. Thus, the peace initiative can at best be a conflict management tool. The other is that there are genuine grievances in Kashmir, which, if tackled with wisdom by India, can result in a dissipation of any Pakistani *locus-standi* in Kashmir. The peace initiative can bring a closure to the troubles in Kashmir, cutting off the oxygen of alienation that enables proxy war. This is a conflict resolution approach. The relative salience of the two approaches will determine the direction of the initiative, whether it reaches its full potential as a conflict resolution measure or whether the appointment is merely a conflict management tool.

The Current Peace Initiative

The current peace initiative in Kashmir was launched in late October 2017.¹ Given the coincidence in the timing of the first visit then to New Delhi of the US Secretary of State, the appointment of the new interlocutor was taken as having something to do with the visit. The critique was that the appointment was to undercut any US push for getting India to talk to Pakistan, as part of the new US

policy in Afghanistan, unveiled by President Donald Trump in a speech in late August.² Since the new policy was rather severe on Pakistan for its nursing of terrorism and provision of sanctuary to terrorists on its soil, the US had decided to give Pakistan one more chance to come aboard in the international quest against terrorism. Pakistan, for its part, has, no doubt, tried to milk its last chance to its advantage, requiring US pressure alongside on India in relation to India's strategy in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Since Rex Tillerson, on his inaugural visit to India, flew in from Pakistan, New Delhi wanted to preempt any messaging from Pakistan for talks through Tillerson. Thus, commentators observed a link between the visit and the appointment.³ India could point to the appointment of a union government's representative for talks with the Kashmiris in case the matter came up with the US. India could argue that as a responsible government, it is fulfilling its obligation towards its people to return normalcy through all means, but it is not beholden to talk to neighbours under the threat of a gun.

Irrespective of any international impetus to the initiative, there is a case for the same in the strategic light. The Army Chief, appraising the initiative, has said that it is from a position of strength.⁴ He was referring to the higher tempo of operations in Kashmir since the surgical strikes of the previous year. There is the ongoing Operation All Out under which over 200 terrorists have been eliminated, mainly foreigners. This summer, there was no resumption of the agitation of mid-2016. Along the Line of Control (LoC), India has remained proactive, tamping down on dozens of infiltration attempts. Cracks are appearing in the terrorist ranks, with some, such as Zakir Musa, the former Hizbul Mujahideen commander, being cast out of the mainstream terrorist ranks for his advocacy of the Islamist strain.⁵ The Centre's hard line in terms of talks with the umbrella separatist organisation, the Hurriyat, has kept the separatists on a leash. This has been further tightened by the National Investigation Agency's raids on the terror financing money trail.⁶ Internationally, India has been on the offensive, attempting to isolate Pakistan for its support for terrorism, in both bilateral settings and multilateral fora. At the UN General Assembly session in September, in its right of reply to the speech by the Pakistani Prime Minister citing Kashmir, India characterised that state as "terroristan".⁷ Finally, there was the winter setting in, when the operational dynamics usually subside, allowing greater space for political thrust lines. Thus, it would appear that New Delhi had set the conditions for a peace initiative. It now bears taking to its logical conclusion.

This energy behind the initiative is crucially dependent on which of the two approaches predominate in the corridors of power. A new book on India's engagement in Afghanistan since the departure of the Soviet Union suggests that

Pakistani Army needs to keep stoking fires in Kashmir to stay atop the power grid in Pakistan.

there are lobbies at play in policy and decision-making circles that seek to influence the direction and outcome of policy. The book describes the interplay between the relative power of the ‘conciliators’ and the ‘partisans’, with the former depicted in brief as softliners and the latter as hardliners.⁸ Drawing an analogy, it can be said that a similar policy tussle may have preceded the peace initiative in Kashmir and is also likely to attend its course. The two lobbies are loosely taken here as minimalist, conflict management oriented; and maximalist, conflict resolution aspirant.

The conflict management lobby can easily be taken as practical and aware of the uphill struggle. They are also cognisant of the Pakistani ability to keep stoking the fire, besides of the other ill winds from West Asia. They are possibly also politically tuned in to the Indian political scenario in which major political concessions may neither be thought desirable nor possible. The conflict resolution lobby, for its part, is the more ambitious. It is more aware of the limitations of a security solution to a political problem. Equally aware of the arc of instability stretching westwards, it wishes to put out the fires that can invite adverse attention towards India. It is more sensitive to the possibilities enabled by the liberal underpinnings of India’s Constitution. A creative legal thrust line, duly backed politically, in the light of a strong Centre, can bring about an internal settlement. There are examples in the northeast which can serve as precedents. Thus, both approaches have some weight. It bears further probing as to which can deliver more and better. The criterion to judge this is: which approach will facilitate Pakistan’s falling out of the equation better?

The Conflict Management Approach

The conflict management approach is realism inspired in that it posits conflict as a given condition, with states in an adversarial relationship engaged in a zero sum game. Since a proxy war is on in Kashmir, there is little that can be done than to manage the consequences. This requires a multi-pronged approach. However, despite the security aspect being at the fore, the economic, social and developmental angles are of consequence. This has been the Indian approach to Kashmir. As part of this, interlocutors have also periodically been dispatched across the Pir Panjals, sometimes, such as most recently the Yashwant Sinha led Concerned Citizens’ Group,⁹ in response to a spike in violence on the streets. The interlocutors’ engagement with the people and stakeholders not only has a cathartic effect, but the reports are also useful in tweaking the government’s response as necessary. The conflict management approach has space for peace initiatives, but stops short of

going the full distance on the political track. It uses – to its critics, instrumentally – the peace process for calming the situation and bringing it back under control. In a sense, the peace prong of the strategy is to supplement the security prong. This distinguishes it from the conflict resolution approach, wherein the ‘resolution’ is sought on the political track, with the other prongs of the strategy being supportive of the effort.

India must cash on its leverages with Pakistan to hedge its Kashmir Initiative.

The interlocutor has set himself a limited, if realistic, ambit, restricting himself to tamping out terrorism. He wishes to target the youth so as to keep the terrorist ranks from swelling.¹⁰ This indicates that the initiative does not have an ambitious mandate. The results are already apparent, with the police working on encouraging the surrender of locals. The upshot is in a manageable sub-conventional operations situation, which troops on the counter-insurgency grid can handle with routine aplomb. The political fallout is in the Kashmir issue receding from the headlines, making for little pressure on New Delhi to ‘resolve’ it either internally or through interfacing with Pakistan. This is in keeping with the policy of marginalising the separatists within and ‘no talks’ with Pakistan without. The byproducts are, for example, externally, in keeping the US at arms’ length, and internally, with a political dividend for the ruling party, depicted as strong on defence. Thus, the initiative is within the wider framework of a tougher national strategy and posture.

The conflict management approach has an advantage of keeping a lid on the situation till the government wishes to take it up on its own terms. The Home Minister, for instance, has indicated that the government has some ideas on conflict resolution.¹¹ The management of the conflict, therefore, needs to continue till such time this is rolled out. The military template is, thus, an intrinsic part of the resolution menu. The stability necessary for moving to the next stage of conflict resolution is provided by conflict management. Indeed, even while the resolution is unfolding – in the next phase – management of violence would in any case require to continue apace. This indicates an overlap between the two approaches, making them less antagonistic than supplementary. Conceptual clarity on this can help the switch or gear shift as necessary.

Conflict Resolution Approach

Conflict management is what is usually settled for when conflict resolution is not seemingly possible or thought desirable. Conflict resolution through victory in war, for example, especially against a nuclear power, may not be desirable. Alternatively, it may not be possible in the light of an impossible compromise

required, such as in the case of Kashmir, granting independence. However, short of independence – or, worse, it's joining Pakistan – conflict resolution can be envisaged, such as oft said, within the parameters of a liberal Constitution.

The conflict resolution approach by no means abjures the use of force. It is predicated instead on intent backed by a sound plan. This entails negotiations, with a willingness to compromise – within bounds – on the part of the stakeholders. The design of these in relation to participants, location, pace, agenda, perception management, spoiler handling, contingency planning, timelines, parallel processes, creating and sustaining political capital and managing of the external are of significance. It requires a battery of experts with multi-dimensional expertise and experience and a lead negotiator synergising the initiative. The lead negotiator has to have political savvy, integrity, stamina and moral courage. The other lines of operation such as the use of force, governance and development, are subordinated to the requirements stemming from the meander of the negotiation.

By this yardstick, the current peace initiative in Kashmir would have to evolve considerably to measure up to the demands of conflict resolution. Sharma's initial press statements and his two visits (at the time of writing) to the Valley suggest that this is a preliminary stage, with Sharma, at best, testing the waters, intending to come up with a conflict analysis for the government. This can be the first step for the major initiative to follow, either with the lead horse changed midstream or with Sharma continuing in position. This can be rolled out once the winter's operational respite is taken to shore-up political intent, put in place a negotiation team, chalk out a plan, whistle-up the infrastructure, broadcast the agenda and manage perceptions. The following year can see a dedicated round of talks on the key political questions, including the taboo word, *azadi*. If interpreted as autonomy, conflict resolution comes within reach. The release of political detainees, pardon for the stone throwing youth, leashing the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), modulating operations, progressively rolling back disturbed area notifications are some of the arrows in the negotiator's quiver. Whereas the Army Chief has indicated that currently military operations will not be affected,¹² further down the road, narrowing these to directing them solely at foreign terrorists could be called for. There is a precedence of managing an operations drawdown in the ceasefire of the year 2000 in Kashmir, suspension of operations against various groups in Assam and the ceasefire in Nagaland. There is also the Muzaffarabad based Jihad Council to think of. This would require opening a line to Pakistan.

The key question to answer is whether Pakistan would bite. The conflict management votaries believe otherwise. They see a vested interest of the

Pakistan Army in stirring the pot. This critique needs being taken on board in a shaping of the regional security environment. Pakistan has, over the past few years complained of India creating a 'two-front' problem for it. India has attempted to isolate it diplomatically. It has objected to the Chinese life-support of the economic corridor. It has articulated a claim to the northern areas. It has suspended the comprehensive bilateral dialogue. The US is readying to weigh in against Pakistan finally. India and Pakistan have had their national security advisers talking all through this. These are leverages that India can now cash in on to hedge its Kashmir initiative. Pakistan, for its part, has the option to cry 'victory' and quit. It had attempted to disconnect from its Kashmir commitment even during the Musharraf years. If it can take credit – at least propagandistically – for a return of peace in Kashmir, it has a face saver. India could allow it a line to the separatists, who, having an increasing stake in the peace process, can persuade Pakistan to back off. Alongside, Pakistan would require to initiate DDDRR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Repatriation, Reintegration, Resettlement) best practices for its 'good terrorists', with India seeing how to coopt the Pakistan-based Kashmiri terrorists. By no means can all this be done in quick time, but strategy demands identifying the steps towards such an end.

Conclusion

The debate, as carried here, is likely informing decision-making on the future direction of the peace initiative. Currently, it is within the conflict management parameters. It has the potential to move towards conflict resolution. This is predicated on the assessment decision-makers arrive at on whether upping the peace ante would make Pakistan fall out of the equation. There is an element of risk-taking in this. Political decision-makers are usually not impressed by the argument that a decision requires political courage. Political survival requires discretion, even if possible political dividends from bold decisions are given a go-by. They cannot chance elusive political dividend at the risk of national interest. However, the tough line in Kashmir and against Pakistan over the past three years makes strategic sense only if it is taken to a logical conclusion. Having sensitised Pakistan and conditioned it, thereby, extracting the necessary mileage from it would require the strategy to move from conflict management to conflict resolution. Allowing Pakistan off the hook with a face-saver might just see it take the chance on offer – to sidle off its Kashmir engagement to set its own house in order.

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Notes

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