

Pakistan will throw a spanner

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It would have been inconceivable even a year ago to think of a gathering in which politicians and academics from both sides of the Line of Control in Jammu & Kashmir would get together to discuss ways to address aspirations of people of the State and foster cooperation in areas that benefit people in their day to day lives. But such gatherings have indeed taken place in Kathmandu, New Delhi and Jammu in recent months. These interactions have thrown up ideas that could move the India-Pakistan dialogue process forward. It is also evident that there is no political consensus within Jammu & Kashmir on either the contours of an eventual settlement, or even on measures that could ease current tensions and problems.

The Geneva-based Nobel Prize winning Pugwash International recently organised an interesting get-together in Islamabad to focus primarily on "self-governance" in Jammu & Kashmir. Such initiatives have been frowned upon by the security establishments in both Islamabad and New Delhi. This was the third occasion on which I had participated in such an exercise. Participants from our side included Mr Omar Abdullah of the National Conference, Maulvi Iftikar Ansari of the PDP, Mr Abdul Ghani Bhat of the Hurriyat (who seems to have made Islamabad and Muzaffarabad his home over the last several months), Mr Yaseen Malik of the pro-independence JKLF, Mr Sajjad Lone of the People's Conference and representatives of the Congress, CPI(M) and BJP.

The representation from PoK was largely made up of pro-Pakistan personalities, though veteran leaders Sardar Qayyum Khan and Amanullah Khan of the JKLF voiced different views. While New Delhi denied Syed Ali Shah Jilani permission to travel to Islamabad, the Pakistan Government ensured that no individual invited from the Shia majority Northern Areas of Jammu & Kashmir (Gilgit and Baltistan) participated.

General Pervez Musharraf gave considerable time to all the participants and also met persons like Omar Abdullah and Yaseen Malik separately. He repeated his proposals on demilitarisation, self-governance, dividing the State into regions and joint management, but acknowledged that he had not thought through precisely what "self-governance" would involve in Jammu & Kashmir. He ruled out independence for Jammu & Kashmir as a viable option and appeared hesitant on proposals bringing together and promoting cooperation between people in Kargil and Ladakh with their compatriots in the Northern Areas.

He also candidly acknowledged that no single leader or grouping had the stature to credibly claim to speak for the people of the entire State.

Thus, while Pakistan and the Hurriyat Conference will continue to tango with each other, we will now see a wider cross-section of Kashmiri politicians engaging people in Pakistan and in PoK. While Mr Omar Abdullah presented the NC's proposals on autonomy and expressed strong reservations about Pakistani jihadi outfits like the Lashkar-e-Toiba, there were also constructive suggestions from representatives of the PDP, CPI(M), BJP and the Panther's Party. Mr Yaseen Malik, too, spoke eloquently about the need to support the dialogue process and associate the people involved in the diplomatic effort. The Hurriyat, however, could do no more than echo Gen Musharraf's proposals.

Discussions in Islamabad revealed differences in approach between the elected representatives who are members of the Senate and National Assembly on the one hand and some

of those close to the military establishment who seem to believe the situation in Jammu & Kashmir today is no different from what it was in 1990, on the other. More interestingly, some of those who had been in the military establishment appeared to have a more realistic understanding and appreciation of the domestic problems and international criticism that Pakistan faces today than their civilian counterparts, who seemed to believe that loud tantrums are a good substitute for reasoned argument.

Visiting Pakistan is, as always, a fascinating experience, more so because of the gracious hospitality, warmth and courtesy one personally experiences when meeting friends there.

New Delhi's interests will be ill served if it chooses to remain silent on what Gen Musharraf has laid on the table. It will face international criticism and reach a political impasse on some of the bold initiatives that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has taken in promoting a dialogue with a wide cross-section of people within Jammu & Kashmir, if it does not move proactively in coming months. There should be surely no dearth of ideas on promoting "self-governance" across Jammu & Kashmir with people on both sides of the LoC enjoying the same rights and privileges on such issues.

There can, however, be no question of extensive "self-governance" on India's side of the LoC, while PoK and Northern Areas are administered by the Federal Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and priorities and policies are dictated by unelected "Councils" headed by Pakistan's Prime Minister.

While India has rejected division of Jammu & Kashmir along communal and sectarian lines as proposed by the New York-based Kashmir Study Group, there is surely political space for Regional Development Councils to be constituted. Similarly, while "joint management" can be construed as eroding state sovereignty, there can surely be mechanisms or commissions comprising representatives from the Governments of India and Pakistan and from both sides of the LoC in Jammu & Kashmir to address issues of common concern.

Discussions in Islamabad showed that there are several areas of common interest like economic cooperation, tourism, environmental protection, trade, agriculture, education and media, where coordinating mechanisms can play a useful role. As India has a sovereign right to deploy its armed forces in any part of its territory, any talk of "demilitarisation" is a non-starter, though troop levels can be regulated depending on levels of violence and terrorism. Given the absence of any political consensus in Jammu & Kashmir, these are issues that need to be looked at closely by academic institutions and experts in the country, including in Jammu & Kashmir.

The next round of the composite dialogue process is to commence shortly. Discussions I had with friends in Pakistan showed that at the public level there is recognition of the need to end sterile competition and build bridges with India. People in Pakistan appear to be far more concerned about rising food prices and the situation in Waziristan and Baluchistan than in pursuing the mirage of "parity" with India.

But has the mindset of the ruling military establishment changed? Following President George Bush's remark that "Pakistan and India are two different countries with different needs and different histories," Gen Musharraf proclaimed that his country should end its "India-centric" approach to foreign policy. But, a few days later he described the India-US nuclear deal as "disturbing," adding that the deal adversely affected the balance of power in the region.

Thus, if Pakistan spared no effort in 2005 attempting to sabotage India's quest for permanent membership of the Security Council, it will spare no effort in 2006 to subvert moves to

implement the Bush-Manmohan Singh nuclear agreement. National Security Adviser MK Narayanan has warned of moves by the ISI to encourage terrorist attacks like those that have taken place in Bangalore, Hyderabad, Ayodhya and Varanasi. While one had heard former ISI chiefs speaking of "weakening India from within" or making Kashmir an "issue of faith" for Indian Muslims, one was amused to learn recently of another former ISI chief asserting that there can be no transparency in Pakistan's defence policies till "India disintegrates like the Soviet Union".

The challenge we face today is to display the strength, resilience and commitment to communal harmony to thwart such moves, even as we proceed with our diplomacy and political initiatives imaginatively.