

A Ray of Hope

After 11 dark years, rays of light have entered the long tunnel of violence that has enveloped Kashmir, one of the world's most intractable and dangerous problems. Indian prime minister A. B. Vajpayee has promised "bold and innovative steps" if the Pakistani government is prepared to stop supporting militant organizations committed to *jihad*. Within the last year, the Indian government has announced two month-long cease-fires in Kashmir and has allowed dissident political leaders to travel to Pakistan for talks with government officials and *jihadi* groups. Pakistan's chief executive, General Pervez Musharraf, has responded by announcing a cease-fire along the line of control dividing Kashmir and by announcing an unspecified retreat of forward-deployed forces.

Peacemaking is a dangerous enterprise in Kashmir because many individuals have vested interests in continued bloodshed. Positive developments can easily be countered by new waves of infiltration and violence once the winter snows melt. In addition, no Kashmiri, Indian, or Pakistani leader has great maneuverability to exit the current morass, and very few have begun to lay the groundwork for a retreat from maximalist positions. Each positive step therefore generates political exposure, and exposure requires backtracking. Nonetheless, something is clearly different in Kashmir today: Kashmiris have begun to imagine an alternative to tragedy. The Bush administration has an opportunity to engage in quiet diplomacy to reinforce a nascent peace process.

Dissident groups in Kashmir have reacted warily but positively to India's diplomatic moves, while militant groups based in Pakistan, largely composed of Punjabis and Afghan Arabs, have vowed to continue the fight. The win-

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ter season, however, is not conducive to infiltration. Instead of making this point, Indian leaders, including the hawkish home minister, L. K. Advani, have publicly noted a marked decrease in violence. Vajpayee hinted that a dialogue with Pakistan—suspended after the high-altitude war in the summer of 1999 and the subsequent Pakistani military takeover by the general who presided over the war—might well be resumed.

Most of the daily violence usually takes place along the line of control, an enduring wound from Great Britain's 1947 partition of the subcontinent. Across this jagged divide, ranging from glacial heights to humid plains,

travel well-armed *mujahedeen*, freedom fighters or terrorists, depending on which side of the divide one resides. Perhaps half of those crossing speak Kashmiri; the remainder are "guest" militants. Six Indian Army divisions are deployed along the line to try to stem infiltration. The militants receive training, communications, and logistical support from Pakistan's army and intelligence services to help them get across. They also have training camps in Afghanistan.

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According to Indian Lt. General J. R. Mukherjee, commander of the Fifteenth Corps based in Srinagar, perhaps 3,500 hard-core militants operate in Kashmir. Arrayed against them are approximately 320,000 Indian security forces. Although these numbers strongly favor New Delhi, the rugged terrain and deep public disaffection in Kashmir have so far allowed the militants to retain their foothold. Indian officials believe they are winning the battle against militancy, but local observers find that the recruitment of young Kashmiris is again on the rise. The reserve of foreign *jihad* fighters in the Pakistan and Afghan pipelines also appears to be bottomless.

Kashmiris have been caught between the desire to remove India's heavy hand and the high costs of doing so. Militancy has produced approximately 34,000 fatalities to date, mostly innocent Kashmiris. Nonetheless, locals rarely voice criticism of foreign militants, whether out of fear or sympathy.

The largest, most important, and most indigenous militant group in Kashmir is the Hizbul Mujahedeen. Last July, the Hizbul's top commander in Kashmir, Abdul Majid Dar, announced a short-lived, unconditional cease-fire that stunned Kashmiris accustomed to unflinching militancy. No opposition political group in Kashmir or Pakistan could have initiated a cease-fire; to do so would have been considered a betrayal of the cause. The Hizbul and Dar, however, have impeccable credentials; they have operated in the line of fire, unlike armchair champions of *jihad* based in Pakistan.

The Hizbul quickly rescinded its cease-fire offer under pressure from Pakistan's military government, because of ill-advised public statements by Indian officials, and a rejectionist front of Pakistan-based *jihadi* groups. Nonetheless, the Hizbul's initiative has unfrozen the politics of Kashmiri opposition to Indian rule. Kashmiri dissidents have now conditionally supported the suspension of violence to see if that action will lead toward more meaningful steps toward peace by New Delhi. This development places foreign militants, as well as primary host nation Pakistan, in a bind: if dissident Kashmiris are willing to give peace a chance, on whose behalf does the *jihad* continue to be waged?

As the snows melt in the high passes across the line of control, new political gestures will be needed to counter acts of violence and to pursue peace with dignity. Much now depends on New Delhi's willingness to permit disaffected Kashmiris to reenter political life, instead of closing down their rallies. Lasting peace also requires the cooperation and participation of Pakistan's army leadership, whose Kashmir policy has relied heavily on the operations of "guest" militants to pressure the Indian government to relax its grip. This policy has run its course. The acts carried out by *jihadi* groups now cause far more damage to the economy and social fabric of Pakistan and Kashmir than to India.

The Indian government's moves over the winter have been quite adept, suggesting a broader game plan behind the cease-fire. New Delhi has figured out how to contain militancy, but the heart of the problem in Kashmir is political disaffection, not counterinsurgency. Everyone involved agrees that resolution of the Kashmir dispute requires a representative government of Kashmiris, but who speaks for the Kashmiri people?

Among the many claimants, Farooq Abdullah is the current leader of the Kashmiri government and the son of Kashmir's most significant political leader. He has won largely uncontested elections but lost the affection of many Kashmiris. A coalition of dissidents, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, claims to speak for most Kashmiris, an assertion strongly supported by the Pakistani government. These claims cannot be verified, however, as the Hurriyat have chosen not to run for elections, citing previous irregularities. The Hurriyat leaders have said they will stand for election, but only if elections are free and fair and only if they are about determining the future disposition of the state. Militant groups also claim to defend and represent the will of the Kashmiri people. Ultimately, until free and fair elections are widely contested, the Indian government—as well as the outside world—will not know how to sort out these claims.

New Delhi's recent moves appear aimed at promoting the resumption of political life in Kashmir. Passports have been returned to dissidents, who are

free to travel. Other basic political freedoms must follow for the next state elections, to be held in 2001 or 2002, to yield a representative government.

Given Kashmir's sad history, one can never underestimate the potential for electoral deceit and public disillusionment. Nonetheless, Kashmiris now appear to have internalized two basic truths: the Indian security forces are not leaving, and Pakistan and the foreign militants are not helping their own cause. Acceptance of these truths opens the way for creative political outcomes—if New Delhi is willing to allow breathing space for political life and if dissident Kashmiris have courage enough to contest elections against the die-hard opposition of well-armed militants. Kashmiris widely believe that foreign observers are needed to ensure free and fair elections and to encourage dissident Kashmiris to compete at the polls. The Indian government has opposed this issue.

In effect, the Hizbul's cease-fire initiative last summer has made it possible for Kashmiris to enter into a political dialogue with New Delhi and Islamabad. Kashmiris of many stripes want peace with dignity and are now prepared to entertain talks about how to achieve these goals. Their proposals for triangular negotiations about Kashmir's future have been turned down flat by New Delhi. Formal trilateral talks are not needed, however, since informal channels of communication already exist. Formal talks, whenever they resume, are likely to involve parallel discussions between Indian officials and Kashmiris and between Indian and Pakistani teams.

Developments during the winter place Pakistan in a bind of its own making. The military government in Pakistan has learned that it needs to react quickly and positively to Indian initiatives, but the more this process unfolds, the more likely it is to jeopardize Pakistan's equities. If India can succeed in normalizing political life in Kashmir, Pakistan will become increasingly marginalized. If, however, Pakistan supports the disruption of a peace process by acts of violence, it will become increasingly isolated and impoverished.

Pakistan has valid historical claims on Kashmir, but these contentions have been progressively diminished and weakened over the past decade of bloodshed. Pakistan is no longer a model or a magnet for Kashmiris. Meanwhile, the nuclearization of the subcontinent has made border changes by violent means as difficult to envision as major territorial changes achieved by Pakistani diplomacy. The international community, on which Islamabad has depended to resolve the dispute in its favor, is unlikely to reward the means chosen by Pakistan to press its case.

The tactics of the Pakistani Army and intelligence services to maintain its claims on Kashmir have backfired. Acts of violence carried out by "guest" militants were long presumed to provide leverage for Pakistan's claims. In-

stead, these actions now place Pakistan in a bad light. For years, proponents of Pakistan's Kashmir policy have taken comfort in the knowledge that, for a very modest investment in militancy, Islamabad could tie down considerable numbers of Indian security personnel. Now it is abundantly clear to most observers that Pakistan's support for militancy has grievous domestic economic, political, and social costs.

Does the Pakistan army leadership understand the extent to which its Kashmir policy has failed? If so, can it take steps to change course? Much is riding on the answers to these questions because lasting peace in Kashmir requires the consent of Pakistan. This winter's moves by Pakistan can be interpreted as mere tactical maneuvers or as the early manifestations of a fundamental reassessment of Kashmir policy. The level of violence and infiltration after the winter snows melt will provide preliminary answers to these key questions.

Even if Pakistan's moves are purely tactical at this stage, they could still evolve into more consequential steps. Positive steps on Kashmir are never completely erased by violent means. If the Indian government continues to allow Kashmiri politics to normalize, the diplomatic bind on Pakistan would tighten. If New Delhi also has the wisdom to provide a new opening to Islamabad, Pakistan's dilemma would grow. Answering positive Indian steps with continued militancy would accelerate Pakistan's spiral into isolation and economic ruin.

The situation in Kashmir is consequently at a stage of unusual fluidity, despite the customary political backsliding. New and important opportunities exist to chart a different course for Kashmir, if Indian and Pakistani leaders have the grace and courage to pursue them. Adroit, quiet initiatives by the Bush administration could help produce surprisingly positive developments.

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