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Stepping Carefully in Kashmir

The year 2000 ended on a hopeful note in Kashmir, with India's ceasefire for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan being extended until January 26. The principal Kashmiri political umbrella group seems interested in a dialogue with New Delhi, and the Pakistan military has withdrawn some forces from the Line of Control separating them from Indian units. All three constituencies now must consider who will talk, about what, and how they can continue the momentum. Discreet diplomatic encouragement from the United States has helped the process thus far, but the heavy lifting needs to be done in Delhi, Islamabad and Srinagar.

India: learning lessons from last August: The Indian government has tried to avoid the missteps that undid the ceasefire last August. It chose the most solemn month in the Muslim calendar as the "hook." It persisted despite continuing internally generated violence in Kashmir. India apparently looks on Pakistan's response and the willingness of an important Kashmiri group to talk with them as the key indicators of success.

Prime Minister Vajpayee and Home Minister Advani hewed to a carefully crafted public line, avoiding discussion of "code words" that could impede talks. In extending the ceasefire, for example, Vajpayee said that he would "initiate exploratory steps" toward a "composite dialogue process" with Pakistan. This elliptical phrasing offered some assurance of Pakistan's eventual inclusion without a commitment on timing or format. The Indian government has also issued passports to several leaders of a Kashmiri political group so they can travel to Pakistan for discussions with the government there.

The initiative has received broad political acceptance. The Congress Party, the main opposition party, agreed not to ask for clarifications in Parliament regarding the ceasefire extension. The principal Communist party has supported talks with both Kashmiris and Pakistan. Spokesmen for the BJP and even the RSS, a militant organization from the Hindu nationalist movement, have suggested that a settlement along the Line of Control might become a basis for talks with Pakistan – a big change from their traditional view. Even eight days' bedlam in the Indian Parliament following controversial remarks by the Prime Minister supporting his nationalist allies' goal of building a temple at the birthplace of the god

Ram, where a mob of activists pulled down a major mosque eight years ago, did not weaken the government's resolve.

Hope and concern among Kashmiris: Kashmiris greeted the ceasefire with hope, but also with internal divisions. Three main political tendencies are represented in the Kashmir Valley, the part of the state that arouses the strongest emotional pull. Pro-independence forces are the most numerous. Second to them in numbers but better financed are pro-Pakistan groups. Both groups are represented within the All Parties Hurriyet Conference, an umbrella grouping of most of Kashmir's political parties as well as among Kashmir's armed groups. The armed groups also include several composed chiefly of "guest fighters" from outside the region.

The third constituency is the supporters of Dr. Farooq Abdullah, who now heads the state government and favors continued association with India. Farooq Abdullah has little credibility. He does, however, dispose of state government patronage, and he periodically espouses elements of the Kashmiri nationalist cause in an effort to shore up his base.

The July 24-August 8 ceasefire had been initiated by the Hezbul Mujahideen, a predominantly Kashmiri armed militant group with ties to Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami party. Not surprisingly, India's ceasefire announcement put them under pressure to show their toughness, and many incidents early in the ceasefire were attributed to them. Following a meeting in Saudi Arabia, their leaders have now cautiously welcomed the new initiative.

This time, the Hurriyet, a political rather than militant group, has been the key organization to welcome the ceasefire. A key figure in bringing the majority on board was Abdul Ghani Lone, a hard-line pro-independence Kashmiri who spent many years in Indian jails. The Indian government's let him travel to Pakistan for his son's wedding, giving him the opportunity to consult with other Kashmiri groups and the Pakistan government. While in Pakistan, he urged militants, and especially foreign militants, to "help in solving the Kashmir problem" by honoring the ceasefire. He went on to add, in a press conference shortly after his return to India, that the BJP government, having impeccable Indian nationalist credentials, offered the best chance to make peace in Kashmir. "No other party has this kind of constituency...Only [a] party with that support can talk about Kashmir."

Even within the Hurriyet, however the initiative remains controversial. The meeting at which it agreed to participate was punctuated by harsh words and fisticuffs. More recently, Lone has bowed out of the Hurriyet delegation going to Pakistan for consultations. And while the Hurriyet assumes it will be India's interlocutor, other groups may insist on a place at the table or question Hurriyet's standing to speak for them. Dr. Farooq Abdullah poses a special problem: the Indians will not want to leave him out, but Kashmiris outside his party regard him with suspicion and contempt. Anxiety about being manipulated by India will be strong, and will feed internal divisions. Acutely conscious of the need for unity, Kashmiris will be struggling to maintain a common front.

Despite the popularity of the ceasefire among ordinary Kashmiris, there have been incidents nearly every day, apparently carried out by hard-line militants. The two most hard-bitten pro-Pakistan groups, the Lashkar-e-Toiba and the Harakat-ul-Mujahideen, continue to denounce the ceasefire.

Pakistan: struggling for the moral high ground: After an initial skeptical response, the Pakistan government on December 2 announced that it would exercise "maximum restraint" along the Line of Control in the hope that this would lead to India-Pakistan talks. On December 20, after the Indian extension of the ceasefire and cryptic reference to talks with Pakistan, the Pakistanis announced that they would withdraw some of their forces from the Line of Control. Indian spokesmen have acknowledged that the level of violence across the line has dropped, and that Pakistan's "restraint" has had an effect.

Lowering tensions in Kashmir is difficult and divisive for Pakistan. A hard line on Kashmir is one of the few issues on which most Pakistanis agree. Any Pakistan government will need to show that it has a clear and decisive role in a Kashmir settlement. Religious organizations have opposed Pakistan's "maximum restraint" policy, and the controversy surrounding General Musharraf's recent decision to pardon and exile former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will increase the pressure on him to show that Pakistan is not being taken advantage of. For the time being, however, Pakistan has evidently decided to stick to the moral high ground and to be flexible on the timing and format for talks with India.

A bumpy road ahead: There will be further crises on the Kashmir front even if, as now seems possible, the current ceasefire leads to initial talks. Renewed fighting across the Line of Control would stress the process severely. In that regard, the decision to start this process in winter, when movement across the line is more difficult, was probably wise. Similarly, a high profile attack could also undo the fragile Indian political support for the move. Opponents of the ceasefire understand this. Lashkar-e-Toiba claimed responsibility for a December 21 attack on Delhi's Red Fort, long a symbol of India's nationhood and power, and publicly threatened to attack Prime Minister Vajpayee's office.

One fundamental problem is the absence of a generally accepted Kashmiri leader. India and Pakistan have both discouraged Kashmiri leadership in the past. They would be well advised not to hobble a leader if one now emerges. It will take a strong leader to develop a consensus for the compromises a settlement will require.

At least three dialogues need to get under way. New Delhi and Srinagar must decide who should talk, and about what. The easiest starting point would be to discuss improving the immediate conditions of life in the Kashmir Valley, such as easing travel regulations, reviving the economy, and thinning out the Indian security presence. Talking about the political structure of the state and revisiting its relationship with the Indian central government will be much more difficult, but without an early road map which leads in that direction, Kashmiris will find it difficult to sustain a dialogue.

The second dialogue is between Islamabad and the Kashmiris. This takes place regularly through Pakistan's High Commissioner in India as well as in Islamabad. India's decision to grant passports to the Hurriyet leaders who wish to travel to Pakistan for consultations is a good sign.

The third track is India-Pakistan talks. India has publicly acknowledged that it needs to bring Pakistan into the process, but remains vague on how and when, and continues to reiterate that "all violence" across the Line of Control must stop. In the short term, consultations between Pakistan and the Kashmiris will ease the pressure a bit, but if violence across the line continues to diminish, early political-level contact between the two countries will be essential to keep Pakistan's restraint policy in place. One element of such discussions might be ensuring that both sides have the same understanding of what is occurring in their respective talks with the Kashmiris.

The US role... India, Pakistan and the Kashmiris are the key players. Without their support, no settlement can be effective. The past month illustrates some of the ways outsiders can quietly help the process along. The United States has actively but discreetly encouraged the parties to move toward a peace process. Without attempting to mediate or broker, it has demonstrated the utility of backstage diplomacy, and can be expected to continue in this vein.

...And the Kashmiris: In both the August ceasefire attempt and the current one, Kashmiris played a central role. The peace constituency is inherently strongest in Kashmir, and the costs of continuing violence fall most heavily on Kashmiris. If they can fill the leadership gap, the Kashmiris are uniquely qualified to keep all three parties focused on the need for a stable peace.

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