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The Kashmir saga

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On September 22, 1965, Lal Bahadur Shastri, the Indian Prime Minister ordered a ceasefire to the Indian Army advancing on Lahore. This marked the end of the conflict started two months earlier when Pakistan launched military 'infiltrations' to capture Kashmir.

Forty years later, President Pervez Musharraf raised again the question of Jammu and Kashmir in his speech to the UN General Assembly at New York. He wanted a 'just' solution to the Kashmir issue. But where is the solution?

After a 4-hour meeting between Manmohan Singh and Pervez Musharraf, the two sides issued one of the shortest Joint Statements in the history of their bilateral relations. They "expressed their commitment to ensure a peaceful settlement of all pending issues including Jammu and Kashmir to the satisfaction of both sides."

Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran was at pain to explain to the media that the Joint Statement was not a setback to the peace process. "... we are not in the business of event-making."

But why is the progress so slow?

I once came across a document in the French Archives which stunned me and opened my eyes to the difficulties in finding a solution. In a letter sent by the French Ambassador to Pakistan to his Foreign Minister in Paris, the envoy reported a meeting held in July 1953 in Karachi between Nehru and Mohammed Ali, the Prime Minister of

Pakistan. It had been announced beforehand that Nehru had a 'compromise solution'.

The Ambassador wrote: "Remained (to be discussed) the dreadful question of Kashmir, which through the multiple political and technical solutions tried out during the last 6 years, did not yield any results acceptable by both parties. The main talks began in the afternoon of July 27. Immediately, Mr Nehru pointed out the final solution that he had chosen: the Kashmir territory would be divided between the two countries according to the Line of cease-fire (now LOC) laid down under the UNO authorities. It would mean that India would keep all the territories with the exception of the part known as "Azad Kashmir" (which included the Northern areas).

The Pakistani Prime Minister and his colleagues were dumfounded. The Pakistani side remained silent for some long minutes and when Mr Mohammed Ali spoke with a shattered face, he severely rejected the proposal of Mr Nehru. He had to face the frosty determination of the Indian Prime Minister. One by one, Sir Zafrullah (Foreign Minister), Mr Malik, PWD Minister, strove to bring back Mr Nehru to a more sensible plan. He did not move of an inch and it is in this atmosphere of helplessness and suppressed anger that the meeting ended."

The above account shows that even during a civilian rule, Pakistan has never been ready to accept the transformation of the LoC into an International Border. In 1972, a similar proposal was made in Simla and though Bhutto accepted it in principle, he made sure that it did not materialize during the following years.

What was the background of the 1965 conflict? Knowing that Delhi was not going to compromise further and that the US attitude was quickly changing (after the 1962 War with China, the US administrations believed it was necessary to support to Delhi to check Communist

China's advance on the subcontinent), Ayub Khan sensed that the Pakistani dream to rule over the Valley was fading away. There was only one solution: to organise infiltrations of troops in mufti (as in September 1947) and create a popular insurrection. The people of the Valley would then ask for their reattachment to Pakistan. It was to be an 'Algerian-type' people's struggle for self-determination.

Air Marshall Asghar Khan, the then Pakistani Air Force Chief wrote that Operation Gibraltar was based on three assumptions: the raiders would receive the support of the local population, India would limit its retaliation to "Azad Kashmir" and finally most importantly that Indian troops would in no circumstance cross the international border. The three assumptions were wrong.

The code name 'Gibraltar' was chosen in memory of an Arab General Abdur Rahman Tariq who several centuries earlier had asked his men to burn their boats when they reached Gibraltar; explaining to them that they would not need them anymore: their new home was Spain. The first assumption simply failed because most of the raiders the Gibraltar Force were foreign to the valley, they did not speak the language and did not even know that the metric system was in use in Kashmir. Their origin was immediately betrayed and the population of the valley, who still remembered the atrocities of the tribal raids of 1947, were not ready to accept foreigners as new masters.

When the strategic pass of Haji Pir opening the gate to "Azad Kashmir" fell into Indian hands, the Pakistani military rulers realised the failure of the Op Gibraltar. They had to implement a new plan: Op Grand Slam. The intention was to capture and destroy the Akhnur bridge (in an area known as the 'Chicken Neck'); this would cut off the road which was the umbilical cord for the Valley, completely

isolating it from Jammu, 30 km away from Akhnur. Jammu could even be captured and become a bargaining chip to exchange against the Valley.

With the fate of Kashmir was in the balance, Shastri took the boldest decision that nobody had expected: India would cross the International Border and advance toward Sialkot. On September 5, at 5 am, the Corps XI moved into Pakistan. The rest is history.

On September 22, when Shastri agreed to a cease-fire under pressure from the UN Security Council, India had occupied 1,920 sq km of Pakistan territory and lost 540 sq km. A little-known anecdote is worth recounting.

Bhutto, the Foreign Minister, was directed by Ayub Khan to proceed to New York to accept the cease-fire. On that day, New York Airport was closed due to a snow storm and Bhutto's arrival was delayed. The dramatic Security Council session finally began after midnight. As usual Bhutto spoke brilliantly. Sultan Khan, a former Pakistan Foreign Secretary, recalls: "With an American audience in mind, he talked of the Wilsonian principle of self-determination: quoted Jefferson and Lincoln on the theme of liberty and freedom; reminded the Soviets of their own struggle against the Nazis; referred the French to their Revolution when Liberty and Equality were the inspiration of their people and, in a voice breaking with emotion, asked, "Are the people of Kashmir some kind of pariahs to be denied the right of self-determination?"

He then personally addressed Swaran Singh, the Indian Foreign Minister: "Sardar Sahib, we are determined to see that the people of Kashmir are enabled to exercise their right of self-determination and we will continue to wage this struggle for a thousand years if necessary."

All this time, he knew that he had been instructed to accept the ceasefire. As he concluded, in an arranged move, an assistant walked into the Security Council room and passed a message to the Pakistan Ambassador to the UN, who in turn passed it on to Bhutto. After reading it, the latter asked for a brief adjournment, he had to take an urgent phone call from his President. Bhutto went to a cabin and pretended talking to Ayub. Sultan Khan remembers: "We could see him gesticulating and expressing himself with vehemence. He emerged crestfallen and took his seat looking very subdued."

He told the Council in a broken voice: "I have been talking about waging war for a thousand years, but I have been over-ruled by my President."

He then accepted the ceasefire proposal on behalf of Pakistan.

He later told Sultan that though Ayub would be displeased with him, "people will put garland on my neck."

We may witness more drama, but a solution to the Kashmir issue is probably not for tomorrow!