



Manage, Don't Mediate Kashmir's Cunning Passages

by Satu P. Limaye

The 50 year old Kashmir dispute has all the attributes T.S. Eliot assigned to History. It has "many cunning passages, contrived corridors" and "deceives with whispering ambitions, guides us by vanities." During the past year, as India and Pakistan faced-off militarily and the U.S. searched for al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists nearby, the dispute seemed especially dangerous, U.S. interests in the subcontinent compelling, and America's influence and Pakistani as well as Indian receptivity to U.S. mediation high. Many called for U.S. mediation to resolve the dispute. These calls, however well-intentioned, are misguided.

Kashmir's dangers and costs, U.S. influence, and Indian and Pakistani receptivity to mediation are overstated. U.S. interests in Kashmir are negligible; and the value of resolving Kashmir to improving relations with India and Pakistan and achieving wider strategic objectives are debatable. Anyway, the prospect of a Kashmir compromise is remote. Most problematic is the dispute's "whispering ambitions." Kashmir is not the lone or even most important cause of India-Pakistan enmity. Irreconcilable nationalisms, India's growing power asymmetry with Pakistan, and India's desire for regional pre-eminence and Pakistan's determination to prevent it are the cores of discord.

Pakistan, which most seeks mediation, can least afford compromise. An option for the U.S. is to offer Pakistan a security guarantee in exchange for a Kashmir compromise, and simultaneously move to "transform" relations with India. This approach has two limited merits. First, it could resolve Kashmir. Second, it would call the subcontinent's two enduring bluffs. India's is that it is reconciled fully to the creation of Pakistan. Pakistan's is that it fears only Indian hegemony, but does not harbor ambitions to be equal to it — whether by pulling India down or pushing itself up. The major demerit of such a policy is the requirement for a massive U.S. commitment of diplomacy, cash, military equipment, security guarantees — and possibly military presence. U.S. interests in India, Pakistan, or their amity do not justify such a profound commitment. Behind-the-scenes facilitation and episodic crisis management, though cumbersome and unsatisfying, are effective and commensurate with U.S. interests.

Kashmir's exaggerated dangers and costs India and Pakistan have fought two brief, limited wars over Kashmir since 1947. Given India and Pakistan's overt nuclearization and shared penchant for brinkmanship, today's dangers seem greater. Divergent risk assessments exist about the possibility of nuclear war. Still, policymakers must consider its humanitarian costs and strategic implications. India and

Pakistan pay for Kashmir in lives, treasure, and reputations. Kashmir thwarts India's global ambitions, as does the diplomatic and perceptual hyphenation with Pakistan it produces. Pakistan is being undermined by the Kashmir conflict's guns, violence, and radicalism. The Kashmiris bear the brunt of conflict.

Kashmir's dangers and costs are sobering, but should not be overdrawn. Brinkmanship is used by all parties to purpose. Weaker Pakistan ratchets up tensions to gain U.S. pressure on India to negotiate. India uses coercive diplomacy to get U.S. pressure on Pakistan to halt the infiltration of militants. Both seek these ends without war: Pakistan because it might lose; India because it might not win. Each wants the U.S. to hold them back, while pushing their interests forward. Militants use dramatic attacks to loosen India's grip on Kashmir, and warn Pakistan against reducing commitment to their cause. Outsiders use acute tensions to leverage influence. Tensions employed carefully are creative. Outsiders should not be "guided by vanities" that they are the most important bulwark against war.

Nor should the negative implications of nuclear war in the subcontinent be exaggerated. Horrific as the humanitarian costs would be, they must be set against the staggering existing humanitarian challenges in the region. Second, many feared that India and Pakistan's 1998 nuclear blasts would unhinge the nuclear order. They did not. Similarly, if India and Pakistan use nuclear weapons other countries involved in disputes with their neighbors will not necessarily follow. A nuclear war in the subcontinent could give a fillip to nonproliferation efforts. Resolving Kashmir would remove a nuclear flashpoint, but not the capabilities and underlying antagonisms that make nuclear war possible.

Kashmir is not the magic formula for fixing the subcontinent's ills or America's difficulties there. Identifying it as such allows India and Pakistan to blame only each other and manipulate the U.S.

Illusory U.S. influence and regional receptivity

A beguiling but illusory notion is that U.S. leverage and Indian and Pakistani receptivity to it is at a peak. India's reliance on Washington to wring and validate commitments from Pakistan to halt infiltration into Kashmir, and its desire for closer ties do not make New Delhi receptive to mediation. India is peeved at Washington's new-found friendship with Islamabad and doubts that Washington will hold President Pervez Musharraf to his pledge to permanently end infiltration. Pakistan suspects that the U.S. has been complicit in India's coercive diplomacy and is disillusioned that Kashmir is seen as a terrorism problem rather than as a freedom struggle. India and Pakistan's grievances indicate that the U.S. is well-placed

to play a mediatory role. But they also show that neither is really ready to receive it.

America has no dog in the Kashmir fight

America's interests in Kashmir are limited. Kashmir's future is not the target of a unified, powerful lobby within domestic politics or the subject of U.S. domestic laws. Its intricate history rarely and fleetingly overlaps with ours. The dispute is unfamiliar to most Americans save a few academic and government specialists. Kashmir contains no resources the U.S., or its allies and friends, must have. Its dispensation does not involve clear ideological values that America holds dear. U.S. allies and friends are not directly threatened by the dispute or clamoring for its resolution. The chance of another power displacing America's centrality in the subcontinent and addressing the dispute to America's detriment is negligible. The dispute sometimes detracts from other U.S. priorities but not unsustainably so. American credibility depends far more heavily on the outcome of other flashpoints. Long-standing U.S. commitments are not at stake. The Kashmir dispute is not equivalent to the cross-Strait quandary. Kashmir's line-of-control (LOC) is not Korea's demilitarized zone (DMZ). Simply put, the U.S. does not have a dog in the Kashmir fight.

The dispute does complicate U.S. relations with India and Pakistan and wider strategic objectives (e.g., the war on terrorism) but not unmanageably so. During the Cold War and during a decade of Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, America relatively successfully pursued its core interests while managing rather than resolving India-Pakistan tensions or the Kashmir dispute. The global war on terrorism need not be different. Indeed, pressing for resolution of Kashmir now threatens to hamper, not ease U.S. relations with India and Pakistan and the pursuit of wider strategic objectives.

Pakistan can least afford compromise

An irony of the Kashmir dispute is that Pakistan, which most wants mediation, can least afford compromise. First, Kashmir is central to Pakistan's national identity in a way it is not for India. Second, any reasonable compromise would involve a tacit recognition of the current LOC, a position India already accepts but Pakistan does not. President Musharraf recently reiterated that the LOC is part of the problem, not part of the solution. Third, the Kashmir dispute allows Pakistan to assert parity with India in perceptions and diplomacy - if not real power. Kashmir is the hyphen in the India-Pakistan relationship; a punctuation mark vital to Pakistan's grammar of geopolitics. If Kashmir is resolved, Pakistan loses a way of blunting India's ambitions for regional pre-eminence. Even Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons does not afford the same parity. Pakistan's nuclear weapons especially matter when they are linked with the Kashmir conflict. Finally, the Kashmir dispute serves Pakistani leaders as a domestic pressure release valve. President Musharraf, mocked at home for behaving like Busharraf (i.e., too cooperative with President Bush in the global war on terrorism), makes like Musharrafat - hedging by supporting the Kashmir freedom struggle.

What's so funny about behind-the-scenes facilitation and episodic crisis management?

By providing Islamabad with a security guarantee and economic and military assistance, the U.S. theoretically could make a Kashmir compromise palatable to Pakistan. U.S. protection of Pakistan would also serve as a restraint on it. India might accept such an arrangement if U.S. support helped Islamabad feel secure, end support for the Kashmiri militancy completely, marginalize its domestic extremists, stabilize its economy, and establish a sustainable democracy. Once Pakistan is secure, a U.S.-India relationship to include military sales, technology transfers, and economic cooperation could theoretically develop. Is it worth it? Not now. Such an approach would lock the U.S. in a relentless and expensive engagement; more enduring and costly than trying to resolve Kashmir — much less manage it.

At a time when Washington seeks solutions to international problems rather than to manage them, behind-scenes-facilitation and episodic crisis management might seem an unsatisfying sop — even an abdication of bold leadership. But management of the Kashmir dispute saves the U.S. from making promises it cannot keep, making commitments that outweigh benefits, and hitching itself to a region whose importance to the U.S. must not be over-sold. Calibrating levels and types of engagement with interests is a tricky and dynamic challenge. Currently, U.S. efforts call for management, not mediation of the Kashmir dispute.

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