

Kashmir: What prospects for a lasting settlement?

General Discussion

by John Quigley

Dr Bradnock's presentation to the European Institute for Asian Studies on 12th March was followed by a general discussion and questions and answers from the floor. Dr Tazeen Murshid, Maître de Conférence, Université Libre de Bruxelles, raised the issue of diversity, wondering how changes in the majority and minority ethnic groups affected how Kashmiri's see themselves. Would these changes increase the chances for a solution to the conflict? Dick Gupwell, Secretary General, EIAS, recalled the demand by the government of Pakistan for a plebiscite in Kashmir based upon the United Nations Resolution and whether Islamabad still insisted upon this as an essential requirement for progress. How important is the issue of the military alignment of the regional powers in the Kashmir issue, with Pakistan looking towards China and India looking towards Russia for military technology? Would the Kashmiri's be prepared to accept the Line of Control as an international border?

Malcolm Subhan, Vice-Chairman, EIAS, commented on the UN Resolution and the debate in the General Assembly where, Pakistan realised early on that Kashmir was a political issue whereas India stuck to legal considerations. Dr Willem van der Geest, Director, EIAS, wondered what role outside players, such as either the US or the EU, could play. If Kashmir had economic benefits to offer, could this help reach a settlement.

In reply, Dr Bradnock indicated that the issue of diversity in Kashmir is fundamental, as there are substantial political implications. Any solution will have to include some system to assist the communities to live together. India could serve as an example of a country with a secular constitution but which allows free religious practice. The diversity within Kashmir also means that many sections of the population will have to be engaged from the outset in the process towards reaching a solution. The breadth of the diversity is bewildering but nothing new. Indeed, the Hurriyat Conference suffered from constantly shifting alliances. It should be seen as a positive thing that people are open to new ideas and that leaders can change positions, even though this has sometimes cost them their lives.

Dr Bradnock said he did not believe Kashmiri's would ever accept the Line of Control as final. While privately, Pakistan recognises that there will have to be some compromise, neither side may have sufficiently estimated the significance of the two states that would emerge from the division of Kashmir, in any settlement. Any resolution of the issue will not be found in a settlement of the 1947-48 problem.

Following the significance of the events of 11th September 2001, there have been a number of changes within Pakistan. While those such as the end of co-operation with the Taleban or restricting Al Qa-ida are well known, others such as the growing urban population (estimated at 40%) and domestic economic concerns are less well known. Increasingly, Pakistani business wants to get involved in south Asia but the Kashmir problem prevents access to the largest market, India. The various assassination attempts on President Musharraf and other senior military personnel are coming from

the fringe of society. In general, the military supports Musharraf and the shift towards greater economic liberalisation. There is also a sense that Pakistan is keen to move away from having Kashmir dominate the tone of its international relations.

Attitudes in the international community have changed over time also, with States no longer prepared to accept militancy as a means of achieving political objectives. India's attitude remains constant and, in any event, there is very little chance of India being forced out of Kashmir. India has placed a lot of emphasis on the peace talks and its leaders seem keen to arrive at a solution. This is more than Prime Minister Vajpayee seeking a gloss to the end of his career. Even under a subsequent government, India could be expected to continue on its current engagement course. One major economic benefit Kashmir can offer is water and through it, power generation. Another asset could be tourism but, of course, only if there is peace. ■

See also:

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