

Towards A Kashmir Solution*

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To many, peace seeking generals sounds like an oxymoron. Yet a number of military men are known more for their contribution to peace than their exploits in war. General George Marshall, as the Chief of Staff of the US Army and one of the principal architects of the US victory in the Second World War, is today known more as the innovator of the Marshall Plan, which led to the recovery of Europe. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953.

Knowing more fully the consequences and the ravages of conflict, military men are ideally suited as peacemakers. The former Naval Chief, Admiral Ramdas, one of the highly decorated officers during his naval career (he was awarded the Vir Chakra for the 1971 Indo-Pak War) turned his efforts to peacemaking after retirement. He has recently been awarded the Magasaysay Award for his assiduous work in bringing about better relations between India and Pakistan and nuclear control.

Now a naval officer, who has quietly worked behind the scenes in trying to discover solutions to Indo-Pak problems, has made a major contribution to the peace process. In his book, *Crafting Peace in Kashmir*, Vice Admiral Verghese Koithara has suggested some new approaches and solutions to this long festering dispute between the two countries.

Koithara had a brilliant career in the Navy. A logistics officer, he rose to head his branch and retired in 1998, receiving a doctorate in political science after that. Since then the officer has devoted himself to research on peace processes and nuclear issues. Although he resides in the cool and remote Nilgiris, Koithara is no armchair analyst.

In his new book, Koithara has studied and analysed three major conflicts in the world, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka and Israel-Palestine to seek pointers to the resolution of the Kashmir conflict. Some of these even precede Kashmir. Not all of them have been resolved, indeed two continue even today. Yet all of them offer major lessons to negotiators who are today seeking solutions to the Kashmir issue.

No two conflicts are alike. None of the three analysed by Koithara are on all fours with the Kashmir problem. There are major political, military, religious and economic differences. Yet, there are a number of

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similarities also, especially in the mistakes made by either side in each conflict. Koithara feels that hope lies in learning lessons from these examples and avoiding similar pitfalls in future actions. Out of the three conflicts, the one in Northern Ireland, which has been resolved somewhat successfully, offers a glimmer of hope for India. At first glance there are not many similarities between the two issues. Ireland was primarily an internal problem in Northern Ireland between two religious communities, whereas Kashmir has become an international problem. The unification of the two Irelands is a symbolic aim of the Irish constitution but it has done precious little to bring it about. The IRA has received only lukewarm support in Eire and the Catholics of Northern Ireland have no great desire to join their southern countrymen. Yet it is the manner in which both Britain and Ireland have gone about the issue which should teach us some lessons. Far from taking a macho and militant attitude about its claim to the north, Eire concentrated on uplifting the economic well being of its people with spectacular results. Whereas the per capita income of Ireland was half that of Britain in 1955, today in terms of purchasing power it has surpassed the latter. Pakistan on the other hand with its obsession on Kashmir has neglected its economy and allowed both its rate of economic growth and per capita income to drop below that of India.

The Sri Lanka problem too offers some genuine lessons to India and Pakistan. By initially disregarding the genuine demands of the Tamil minorities, sidelining the efforts of Tamil moderate parties influenced by Buddhist and Sinhalese chauvinism and finally underestimating both the resolve and the strength of the Tamil militants, successive Sri Lankan governments have helped exacerbate a problem which could have been easily solved at much lower cost in the early years. Both, the Sri Lankan and the Palestinian conflicts, clearly indicate that use of overwhelming force to eliminate dissidence and militancy are rarely successful. Eventually all solutions follow from the negotiating table and involve a bit of give and take from both sides.

Another important lesson from all these conflicts is that outright secession is never the solution. In Northern Ireland the demand to secede from United Kingdom and join Eire has long been forgotten. The LTTE has toned down its demand for an independent Tamil state and is now only demanding autonomy within the Sri Lankan State. Israel, which not many years ago opposed a Palestinian State, has reconciled to such an entity along its border.

Koithara offers no easy solutions to the complex problem of Kashmir. He believes that 50 years of conflict and other events in the valley have

fossilised the views on both sides. Any solution to the Kashmir problem will necessarily have to involve dumping of this baggage and a serious effort in moulding public opinion in India and Pakistan. Intransigence, jingoism or a macho approach is hardly the required preparation in removing what has been a needle in both sides for many years. Koithara also believes that there is room for a low-key behind-the-scene role for outside powers, especially the US, in helping both countries arrive at a solution. Again, outside powers have played important roles in the three conflicts analysed in his book.

Koithara's core ideas are simple. On both sides there is a growing realisation that demarcation along the LOC or something very similar will have to be the final solution. Even the Pakistani Army, whose hold over power is weakening by the day, is believed to be veering around to this idea. But the success of this solution has to be accompanied by a large amount of autonomy on both sides, a porous border and continuous interaction between the two Kashmirs. What is now necessary is a serious effort in selling this to the public.

After a gap of two years negotiators on both sides are finally coming together in a series of meetings to make some progress in removing the many irritants which have existed for so long. Admiral Koithara's thought provoking, erudite and topical book would have served its purpose if the representatives glance through its pages and use the important lessons from previous conflicts in their negotiations.