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In a surprise announcement, on the Kashmir Solidarity Day, Prime Minister Imran Khan offered option of independence to the people of Jammu and Kashmir, after they accede to Pakistan in a United Nations supervised referendum. This, however, is not the first time that Mr. Khan has alluded to it. In January, 2020, in an interview to *DW*, Prime Minister suggested giving people of Kashmir all the choices they wanted: India, Pakistan or independence. At that time, Mr. Khan's remark went unnoticed. This time has been a different story, however.

Within hours, political parties, electronic and social media went wild with supporters lauding the 'path-breaking statement', and critiques reminding the Prime Minister and the government of Pakistan's decade old stated position of seeking plebiscite as promised to the people of Kashmir in various resolutions of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). To clarify the position of the State of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated, via a press release, that Pakistan seeks a settlement in accordance with UNSC resolution, which only allows the people of Jammu and Kashmir the right to accede either to India or to Pakistan.

Since it was not the first time that the Prime Minister had talked about the option of independence, it warrants an in-depth examination. First, is the Kashmir conflict about accession or independence of state of Jammu and Kashmir? In 1947, on the eve of partition, rulers of over 560 princely states were given the choice of either acceding to India or Pakistan, while taking into account factors of geographic contiguity, religious make-up of the respective state's population and wishes of the people of state. No princely state was offered the option of independence. Now, will it be practical to offer option of independence after more than seven decades of conflict, and at a time when India has further tightened military control of the occupied Kashmir? Moreover, can Prime Minister Khan guarantee that years/decades down the road, Pakistani government of that time will stick to the offer if and when, plebiscite takes place and people of Kashmir actually accede to Pakistan?

Despite noble intentions of the Prime Minister, the announcement appears to be out of sync with realities of the Kashmir dispute and the current ground situation. As per Mr. Khan's idea, once people of Kashmir decide Pakistan over India, in an UN-sponsored plebiscite, then Pakistan will give them the choice of staying with Pakistan or being independent. This is in a way four-stage formula of independence. First,

India would have to reverse its illegal annexation of the occupied territory. Second, New Delhi would agree to implementing the UNSC resolutions on Kashmir, whereby, New Delhi and Islamabad will demilitarize the region, leaving small force for maintenance of law and order. Third, the UN would hold promised plebiscite, wherein, Pakistan believe over-whelming majority of people of Jammu and Kashmir will accede to Pakistan. Finally, after people of Kashmir accede to Pakistan, their dream for over 70 years, Pakistan will give them another choice: stay within Pakistan or be independent. While Mr. Khan has talked about the final stage, no ideas has been floated about how to actually reach that stage?

This offer appears to be a depiction of the state of highest-level decision-making on critical and sensitive issues, considering the fact, where Kashmir stands today. India has already, in its own view, absorbed the part under its control into the Union and split the region into two. From New Delhi's perspective Kashmir dispute is off-the-table now. With India unwilling to even lift draconian communication and security clampdown in occupied Kashmir, is it possible for people of Kashmir to imagine independence-via-accession? Relatedly, just months ago, Pakistan was embroiled in a domestic debate on future status of Gilgit-Baltistan territory, which is part of disputed Kashmir. The vacillation from absorbing Gilgit-Baltistan as a fifth province of the country to offering independence to people of Kashmir reflects poverty of imagination and lack of in-depth understanding of the Kashmir dispute.

Meanwhile, Article 257 of the Constitution has been cited by several commentators without actually reading the text of the Article 257 and knowing the history behind insertion of the specific Article. For starters, the said Article refers only to the nature of relationship between State of Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan, as a federation, when "people of the State of Jammu and Kashmir decide to accede to Pakistan". It mentions 'accede' instead of 'independence'. And 'the nature' means the types of arrangements such as full-province, autonomy, special administrative region etc, which Kashmir could potentially have within the federation after the settlement of the dispute. In the context of Kashmir dispute, this is an important distinction to make.

The erstwhile Article 370 of Indian Constitution had provided special status to the State of Jammu and Kashmir. It had, in fact, codified the illegal Instrument of Accession signed by Maharaja Hari Singh, whereby, New Delhi was only granted federal powers over subjects of foreign affairs, defence and communications, while State of Jammu and Kashmir retained its own Assembly, Constitution, Flag and a Prime Minister. Over the decades, several Indian governments through Presidential Orders eroded even the limited autonomy and finally in 2019, Modi government annexed Kashmir as a Union territory.

In this context, talk of independence only appears to be a half-baked scheme intended to divert attention away from Pakistan's failure to respond to Indian unilateral actions in a meaningful way. Instead of such ideas, national consensus on a meaningful Kashmir strategy with short-term, medium and long-term goals needs to be evolved. Instead of Prime Ministerial musings, Kashmir strategy should be debated in academia, Cabinet, and Parliament to chart practical pathways for ensuring that India reverses its actions and consents to holding of a plebiscite and people of Kashmir are able to exercise their fundamental right of self-determination.

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