

War talk in the Asian subcontinent

by Susan Maitra

On or around April 20, Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto reportedly conveyed unofficially that Pakistan does not want a war with India, and sought an opportunity for informal talks to prevent hostilities from breaking out between the two countries. At the instance of Pakistan, Foreign Minister Yaqub Khan and Indian Foreign Minister I.K. Gujral plan to meet in New York during the special session of the United Nations General Assembly starting April 21, for "an exchange of views on Indo-Pakistan relations, in the context of recent developments," according to the Indian Foreign Office.

The "recent developments" at issue pertain to the heightened tension around India's Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir, now in the grip of a new and escalating round of secessionist violence. The disputed province of Kashmir—Pakistan occupies a part of it, called Azad Kashmir—is a legacy of Britain's partition of the subcontinent, and is at the core of the adversarial relationship between India and Pakistan that has already led to three wars since then.

Singh warns of pre-emptive strike

On April 11, Indian Prime Minister V.P. Singh intervened in the parliamentary debate on India's defense budget and told the Indian people to be prepared for war. Pakistan had moved up its radar system to the border, and had made operational its advanced airfields, he said. Since Pakistan lacked geographical depth, it could go for a preemptive strike against India: "This has happened in the past, and cannot be ruled out in the future," V.P. Singh stated.

In his remarks, which sent the financial markets into a tizzy, Singh referred to the political scene in Pakistan, and to Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's recent call to wage a thousand-year war with India for possession of Kashmir. The Pakistani army, Singh observed, has shifted its stance from an anti-communist to an Islamic force, and the government itself was joining in the mass hysteria in Pakistan over events in Kashmir. The government in Islamabad had provoked civilians to cross the border into Jammu and Kashmir, he said, referring to the "little invasion" from Azad Kashmir in early March. Pakistan was using insurgency as a weapon to

achieve territorial aims, the Indian prime minister charged.

Pakistan was quick to react. Pakistani armed forces were put on high alert, with all leaves canceled, following what Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg described as "serious threats" from India. Defensive measures had become imperative, Beg stated, in the face of massing of special troops by India on a section of the Rajasthan border. Pakistan's claims that India has deployed its strike force within 80 kilometers of the border adjacent to Pakistan's troubled Sind province is disputed by Indian officials.

The danger behind the words

The informed view in Delhi is that when all is said and done, it is still very difficult to predict that a war is imminent—at least not until the "war season," the months of September through December when the temperature comes back down out of the 100s. The danger is that the Kashmir crisis, as complex and highly charged as it is, could be the setting for a slide into war from which nothing can be gained.

At the moment, there is no war hysteria in Pakistan, as there was before the 1965 and 1971 wars, Indian correspondents based in Islamabad report. Not even the extreme chauvinists have raised war slogans, and the media has played down the war stories. Bhutto's government has used the tension with India to slap \$350 million worth of additional taxes on petroleum and fertilizer, but that is seen as an opportune financial move, not a military one. Yet, as Anwar Iqbal of the India Abroad News Service does note, Pakistani officials believe that if tension persists over the Kashmir issue for several more months, war could become a real possibility.

"We are still a long way from war, but we can circumstantially be pushed into it," is the way Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, director of India's Institute of Defense Studies and Analysis (IDSA), puts it. A joint seminar in Delhi between the IDSA and its Pakistani counterpart set for April was recently postponed indefinitely. "War is dependent on the degree of control which the government can establish in Kashmir," Singh states.

Indeed: Hours before V.P. Singh's intervention in parliament, it had been confirmed that hostages held by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), including a university vice chancellor and head of a public sector industrial complex in the province, had been executed. A day earlier, JKLF chief Amanullah Khan, who is based in Pakistan's capital Islamabad, had held a press conference at the United Nations to announce the murders. During the following days, bomb blasts in Delhi and Bombay took scores of lives, and were claimed by the JKLF.

The latest news from Jammu and Kashmir indicates that the government headed by Governor Jagmohan is steadily regaining control. The ambiguity around New Delhi's policy, that hobbled the governor's efforts for two months, has been removed, and Jagmohan has been given a free hand for priority law enforcement measures that might hopefully

create conditions for future political initiatives. The JKLF and a dozen other secessionist sects have been banned, and newspapers printing anti-national propaganda have been shut down. A strict curfew, combined with house-to-house combing operations, has reportedly begun to put the extremists in a box.

From the Indian standpoint, dealing a critical blow to the Pakistani military must be a tempting proposition. Pakistani strategy in the Jammu and Kashmir insurgency this round is by all accounts more effective than that which led to the 1965 war, and there is no doubt that the situation there is very difficult for India. Indian diplomacy on the Kashmir issue had made clear that there is no international support for Pakistani aggression, and it is conceivable that a weakening of the Pakistani military would take the steam out of not just the Kashmiri militants, but the Khalistani terrorists as well.

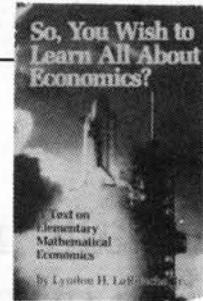
Pakistan's troubles

But it is the political dynamics in Pakistan that are perhaps more worrisome. The fact that the Pakistani military under General Beg would like to establish itself as a crusader for Islam is not necessarily problematic by itself. Beg, like the majority of military men in Pakistan today, represents the post-British, post-Sandhurst generation of nationalists. He is an open critic of Pakistan's 1965 and 1971 military debacles. But, all things being equal, the stakes are probably too high for a military move over Kashmir; failure would unleash a new wave of anti-military sentiment which neither Beg nor the political hawks would like.

The trouble is that the shift in the character of the military is taking place in the context of a political situation where a strident opposition is using the Kashmir issue to bait the relatively weak, newly elected Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government. So far, the opposition alliance of mullahs and the late President Zia ul-Haq's men appears to be succeeding quite well, since Bhutto has been at pains to out-shout them to maintain her Islamic credentials.

Adding to the pressure on the Bhutto government is the fact that the situation in Sind is fast slipping out of control. Polarization is complete between the ruling PPP and its erstwhile coalition partner, the ethnic-based Mohajir Quam Movement (MQM) that dominates Karachi. A near-complete breakdown of law and order, and escalating internecine warfare, have become the order of the day. The proliferation of private militias makes Karachi—Sind's capital and the prime minister's home town—look like Beirut.

The crisis in Sind is a much more grave and compelling problem for the government of Pakistan than the Jammu and Kashmir crisis is for India. Sind is the second most important province of Pakistan, and the ruling party has its base there. Karachi, a port city, is *the* commercial center of the country. Thus, one may surmise, the temptation to consider a war over Kashmir as a viable diversionary option must be rather strong in Islamabad, however unrealistic.



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