

India-Pakistan Tension Reduced, But Threat Of War Remains

by Ramtanu Maitra

Tension between India and Pakistan rose sharply following the Almaty Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), held on June 3-4 (see last week's issue). At Almaty, Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee met the Russian and Chinese heads of state, but refused to meet with each other. At that point, it seemed a war across the Line of Control (LOC) in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir was ready to break out. The status quo along the borders hinged on one thing: Islamabad's commitment to stop cross-border terrorism, which, then, could be verified by a suitable monitoring system placed along the LOC.

At Almaty, there was a search for a suitable monitoring system. President Musharraf suggested that U.S. troops be placed along the LOC to do the monitoring. Rejecting any foreign troop presence in the disputed territory, Prime Minister Vajpayee suggested joint patrolling by Indian and Pakistani personnel. President Musharraf rejected the Indian proposal, calling it "impractical."

On June 5, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage arrived in Islamabad. He claimed that during his talks with President Musharraf, he had received assurances from the President that Pakistan would stop the cross-border terrorism "permanently." Armitage, armed with such an assurance from the Pakistani side, went to India to discuss the monitoring system. It became evident that the LOC monitoring cannot be done by ground troops. It must be done from the sky, using radars, electronic eyes, satellites, and what-not. The response from New Delhi was positive, but not warm enough. All that that means, is that no solution has been found, but New Delhi is listening to proposals from Washington to solve the problem—the non-solution of which would otherwise lead to war against Pakistan. At this writing, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld is in Delhi, and is scheduled to meet President Musharraf in Pakistan on June 13.

'Very Small Beginning'

The Indian response has so far been confined to reopening its airspace to Pakistani overflights, removing five warships from its western fleet in the Arabian Sea and returning

them to its eastern fleet in the Bay of Bengal, and naming a new ambassador to Islamabad to replace the envoy it recalled six months ago. India had stopped Pakistani overflights following the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament on Dec. 13, and had moved the warships into the Arabian Sea about four weeks ago to threaten Pakistan's only port, Karachi.

The Indian responses have not impressed President Musharraf. "It is a very small beginning. I am looking for more action," President Musharraf told reporters prior to his departure for Abu Dhabi on June 10. It is unlikely that New Delhi will do much under the circumstances to ease war pressures.

What all this boils down to, is that there is little hope of de-escalation, while almost a million troops face each other along the LOC. Until the troops and the accessories they harbor are removed, the war potential will remain high. One salient point, however, is that the monsoons will arrive in the area within three weeks or so. When that occurs, all military activities will come to a virtual halt, till at least October.

While it is evident that the Indian Army is itching for a short and limited war, New Delhi is also interested to restore peace and stability in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir quickly. The state is getting ready for elections for its legislative assembly in September. Because of the tension, the elections will be watched carefully around the world, and particularly in Pakistan. Free and fair elections would enhance New Delhi's image, and there is little doubt that New Delhi will do its best to boost its image at this crucial juncture.

In Pakistan, President Musharraf is committed to holding general elections in October. A war with India may postpone the schedule, but that may not help the Pakistani President. There is a little doubt that the United States would lean heavily on him to carry out the general elections and make Washington look good.

On the other hand, if President Musharraf takes a "soft" position on Kashmir, his credibility among a large section of Pakistan will be in tatters. Since he gained power through a military coup in 1999, Musharraf has presented himself as a leader who would stabilize Pakistan's economy and bring back democratic government. Living up to all those promises, particularly following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan's role of playing second fiddle to the American troops seeking out the Taliban and al-Qaeda, is becoming increasingly difficult for President Musharraf.

Musharraf's Problems

Armitage's claim that President Musharraf has promised to stop cross-border terrorism "permanently" has added to the Pakistani President's woes domestically. A group of hard-line clerics, retired Army generals, and outlawed militants representing 23 Islamic groups, rallied against Presi-

dent Musharraf on June 11. They have urged him to withdraw logistical and intelligence support given to the United States. "Jihad in Kashmir will continue," said former Army chief Mirza Aslam Beg. General Beg, who was Pakistan's Army chief in 1989, when insurgency grew multifold in the Indian-held part of Kashmir, said, "No force on Earth can stop the freedom movement" in Kashmir.

President Musharraf has already come under attack from the Islamic clerics for allegedly "selling out" Kashmir. Speaking to a rally of almost 10,000 people, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, Emir of the Jamaat-e-Islami party, cautioned President Musharraf: "We will continue to cross the Line of Control as the struggle for Kashmir's freedom continues." Now that the Pakistani Army has been ordered by President Musharraf to stop the militants crossing over to the Indian part of Jammu and Kashmir, relations between President Musharraf and the pro-jihad faction within the Army will also become tense.

In addition, it is likely that the United States will intensify pressure on Pakistan to round up some of the al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders. Afghanistan is holding the *loya jirga* (Grand Council of Elders) convention in Kabul, and it is certain that Washington will stage-manage the appointment of Afghan interim chairman Hamid Karzai as the leader for the next 15 months, at the end of which elections are to be held. The United States does not want the al-Qaeda or Taliban leftovers to topple this arrangement. In order to ensure that, Washington will most certainly lean heavily on Musharraf.

Contradictory Views in Washington

The India-Pakistan confrontation has brought to the fore, more vividly than ever, the contradiction within the Bush Administration toward South Asia. One faction within the administration, most notably represented by Secretary of State Colin Powell, believes that it is essential to protect Musharraf. Without him, the al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives cannot be apprehended, they claim. In addition, President Musharraf, an Indian-born Muhajir, is not a fundamentalist. Although he made peace with the fundamentalists in his climb to the top, Musharraf is ready to work for U.S. interests in the region, they point out.

The same faction also points out that to drag Musharraf into the Kashmir issue to satisfy India's demands, is a sure prescription for weakening him. And, his weakening would lead to non-attainment of American interests in both Pakistan and Afghanistan—the immediate focus of attention of this faction.

The other group, most commonly identified under the leadership of Vice President Richard Cheney, has a different outlook. They view India as a long-term potential ally, one that can add to American muscle in its "quest for peace and stability" in Asia. They believe that by keeping India happy and being tough on Pakistan, New Delhi can be brought into the American way of looking at the vast continent of

Asia. In other words, India can be a bulwark against a "rising China" in the future, this group points out.

It seems that it is the second group that is now very much in charge of dealing with the India-Pakistan issue. While the objective of this group is to ensure that Pakistan stops cross-border terrorism, it has little interest in pressuring either side to resolve the Kashmir issue. While Secretary Powell had once mentioned Kashmir as the "core issue" of contention between India and Pakistan, the other group has not indicated that it believes the same way.

New Delhi's Objective

New Delhi is trying to reconfigure the crisis to its maximum advantage—politically and militarily. It has already achieved significant success by forcing Musharraf to admit to the Americans that he was involved, directly or indirectly, in running the cross-border terrorists, and that he would stop it. This also means that he is retreating from the age-old dictum that there exist no Kashmiri terrorists, but only Kashmiri freedom fighters.

New Delhi's other objective is to see to it that the cross-border terrorism is really stopped. To ensure that, requires surveillance technology which it does not own and cannot acquire. It seems that New Delhi is trying to convince Secretary Rumsfeld to part with the sophisticated surveillance equipment. In a recent op-ed in the *Washington Post*, longtime "Asia hand" Selig S. Harrison pointed out that "to have a decisive impact, U.S. surveillance help would also have to include sophisticated airborne radar scanners and night-vision video cameras, such as the Lynx and Skyball systems developed for the Predator aircraft that have proved so effective in Afghanistan." He said that the supply of Predator unmanned monitoring aircraft to India would require a waiver of U.S. export restrictions.

He later added that if the U.S. surveillance system does not deter the Pakistani-sponsored infiltration, the United States could then escalate its help by leasing the Predator aircraft to New Delhi and sharing the results of U.S. spy satellite monitoring along the LOC. It is likely that the United States would provide India the latest ground-based monitoring equipment, developed for use along the U.S.-Mexico border.

New Delhi is looking for more. New Delhi claims that about 70-75 guerrilla camps exist within the Pakistan-held part of Jammu and Kashmir, and insists that these should be dismantled. Washington does not quite agree with the numbers, but admits that a large number of terrorist training camps are in the area. But, what the United States has not agreed to, is the exigency of removing these camps. It would like to remove them, but such a step would have to follow the Indian de-escalation of troops from the border. Pakistan, on the other hand, claims that India is raising the bar and is not keen to lower tensions. This is why President Musharraf remains unimpressed with the gestures India has made so far.