

External Factors Impinging on Pakistan's Decision to Talk with India

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Domestic pressures remain an important reason for Pakistan's readiness to talk with India. But, more importantly, external factors have of late been instrumental in the recent change of Pakistan's attitude towards India. This analysis is focused mainly on the external factors impinging on Pakistan's thinking and decision-making. The single most visible external factor influencing Pakistan's stated desire to talk with India on all outstanding issues (as opposed to focusing mainly on Kashmir) is the United States. While China, Europe, and Japan are important to Pakistan for strategic or economic reasons, none of them can influence Pakistan's vital security or domestic policy as much as the US can. Post-September 11, 2001, Pakistan has re-emerged as a vital strategic ally for the US. However, the new US posture is different from that of the Cold War phase and has brought in many complications for Pakistan. The US determination to eliminate global terrorism, an aim which stands at the top of the US foreign and defence policy agenda, has forced Pakistan to cooperate with the US. All major foreign policy decisions of Pakistan flow from its involvement in 'counter-terrorism'.

US Focus on Indo-Pak talks and Stability in Pakistan

Pakistan has been under considerable pressure from the US to go in for talks. This pressure hinges on the American thinking that tensions between India and Pakistan could escalate to the nuclear level. In the last two decades there have been a number of instances where the US has involved itself in defusing military crises between the two countries. The latest US intervention, in the aftermath of Indian military mobilisation post-December 13, 2001 was apparently instrumental in ending the crisis situation by June 2002. The US effort was geared towards getting a commitment from Pakistan that it would

end cross-border infiltration permanently, which was amply evident in the much publicised speeches that General Musharraf was forced to give during this period. This was in turn expected to extract from India a resolve towards substantive dialogue with Pakistan on various bilateral issues, including the Kashmir issue. Pakistan faced increasing pressure as the US Administration was no longer willing to ignore Pakistan's sponsorship of cross-border terrorism, the underlying fear being that it could lead to a nuclear showdown. At the same time, it was slowly becoming evident that the Indian attitude towards US involvement in the Kashmir issue had changed. This was most apparent in the wake of the Kargil experience in 1999 and post-December 13, 2001. While India may not accept formal third-party mediation, it is obvious that a low-key, subtle US facilitation is already underway. This in any case, suits the Pakistani logic as they have been pressing for third-party mediation in Kashmir. Yet Richard Armitage, US Deputy Secretary of State, during his visit to the subcontinent in May 2003, was careful to stress that there was no intention of mediation on the part of the US.

The US has a deep, abiding interest in the stability of Pakistan. This could explain the US reliance on General Musharraf as he has successfully projected himself as a moderate Islamic leader with a stronghold over the most powerful and effectively functioning institution in Pakistan. According to Anatol Lieven of the Carnegie Endowment, "The survival of Pakistan in its existing form is a vital US security interest, one that trumps all other American interests in the country. A collapse of Pakistan, into internal anarchy or an Islamist revolution, would cripple the global campaign against Islamist terrorism."¹ He also refers to the importance of the Pakistani Army as Pakistan's "only effective modern institution and the backbone of the Pakistani state". He says that the Army will have to be treated as the US' 'key working partner.'² Stephen P. Cohen of the Brookings Institution has stressed the importance of rebuilding Pakistan's weak civilian institutions as an American policy goal. In this context he advocates paying attention to the Pakistani Army which he believes will continue to be 'the most important political force' in Pakistan in the foreseeable future.³ These sentiments are reflected in the recent visit of President Pervez Musharraf to the US where he was accorded red carpet treatment. However, it is apparent from the agreements signed during his visit that the US has stepped up pressure on President Musharraf to set his house in order. The US\$ 3 billion US aid package for Pakistan is contingent upon an annual review of Pakistan's cooperation or progress in the war on terrorism, control of the spread of nuclear weapons and steps taken towards democracy.

Continued economic assistance from the US and its allies—Europe and Japan, remains an important factor in shaping Pakistan’s foreign policy thinking. Pakistan is heavily indebted, and it needs strong backing from both multilateral agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank, and bilateral aid from Japan to sustain its economic vitals. Pakistan’s external debt was estimated to be US\$ 32.09 billion according to the World Bank Report of 2003. That the US is willing to cater to the Pakistan’s need for economic sustenance was amply evident in the statement of Ms Christina Rocca, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, while addressing the Pak-American Friendship Summit in June end, during President Musharraf’s visit to the US. She stated, “At the centre of our efforts to build a strong, long term, re-invigorated relationship is a substantial programme of economic and security assistance.”⁴

Countering Terrorism

The US coalition campaign in Iraq and the consequent defeat of the Saddam regime cannot but have had an impact on Pakistan’s decision-making. Since February 2003, there were various media reports about the possibility of Pakistan being the next target of American attack. However, these fears were dismissed off and on by both Pakistani officials as well as the US authorities. While Pakistan has received a fair amount of appreciation from the US for its assistance in capturing those having links with the Al Qaida, it has also faced brickbats for its role in supporting terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. The US emphasis on peace in other conflict areas, after the intervention in Iraq, is highlighted by the negotiations on the Palestine-Israel conflict, as well as US involvement in Nepal and Sri Lanka. Pakistan cannot fail to take cognizance of this definitive trend in US thinking.

As part of General Musharraf’s strategy of projecting himself as a reasonable person to the international community, a hardliner like Maulana Fazlur Rehman was allowed to visit India in July 2003. While the Maulana made a reference to the Simla Agreement, things are not as simple as they appear. He also talked about no third party mediation which is in line with India’s stand but his eagerness to promote relations with India has also been ascribed to politics within Pakistan, where he might be trying to enlarge his own political space by demonstrating his acceptability in India. Fundamental contradictions inherent in Pakistan’s policy towards Kashmir have also surfaced, an example being occasional outbursts of Kashmir being a core issue in Indo-Pak relations. This makes one doubt whether we will move away from General Musharraf’s formulation that hostility between India and Pakistan

is bound to exist even if the Kashmir problem is resolved⁵. This is furthered by the statement of General Aziz Khan in Rawalkot, on June 23, 2003 that, "India's religious and economic values are such that Muslims cannot adhere to these. So even if the Kashmir issue is resolved we cannot become intimate friends."⁶ Hence, one assumes that the Kashmir issue will not go away easily as the interests of the Army will not allow things to move in a positive direction beyond a point. However, at the moment, Pakistan seems to be using talks with India as way of gaining legitimacy at home and abroad. Not only the US, but other countries like UK, France, Germany and others are happy that Indo-Pak relations are on the mend. This was evident during General Musharraf's four-nation visit to the UK, US, Germany and France during June-July 2003.

US Presence in the Region

US presence in the region seems likely to continue for quite some time. It covers the arc from Central Asia to the Gulf. This will have implications for powers like China. As far as China is concerned, it has supported discussions between India and Pakistan as it is interested in stability in the region. Its relationship with Pakistan is in any case one of an all-weather friendship. In the short run, American presence does not affect it negatively, and anyway it can hardly prevent the evolving US-Pak engagement. In the long run, China would probably evolve a strategy to deal with US presence in the region. However, China would like to see India-Pakistan relations move towards rapprochement as it could lessen the need for US involvement in the region. China would then be able to promote its interests—including economic—in the region, without undue worry that the strategic situation will worsen in its backyard. In the long run, China is likely to gain greater influence on Pakistan, given the growing Chinese influence in terms of arms transfers, plus the kind of support it is likely to give Pakistan in view of America's increasing engagement of India.

References/End Notes

- 1 Lieven, Anatol, The Pressures on Pakistan. *Foreign Affairs*. January-February 2002, **81** (1) 106.
- 2 Ibid. p.108.
- 3 Cohen, Stephen Philip, South Asia. In Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg, *Ed. Asian Aftershocks: Strategic Asia 2002-03*. 2002. National Bureau of Asian Research; Seattle. p.43. See <http://www.brookings.edu/views/articles/cohens/20021201.pdf>

- 4 *News*, June 29, 2003, cited in *Public Opinion Trends (Pakistan Series)*, July 8, 2003, **31** (161) 3223.
- 5 General Musharraf in a speech on Pakistan's Security Environment in Karachi in 1999 is said to have stated that, an amicable resolution (if, when and if ever at all) of the Kashmir problem would not be the end of the Indo-Pak imbroglio. See article by Brig. (retd) A. R. Siddiqi, *Nation*. April 29, 1999.
- 6 *Jasarat*. June 25, 2003, cited in *Public Opinion Trends (Pakistan Series)*, July 1, 2003, **31** (155) 3139.

