

## **Pak-India ties: The United States as hope?**

**Anit Mukherjee**

**Instability in either India and Pakistan or Afghanistan breeds instability in the region and, in turn, affects the United States. It is in the national interest of all four countries to work together or suffer the consequences**

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**I**n December 2007, after the assassination of Pakistan People's party leader Benazir Bhutto, some opinions in Pakistan and India seemed united in the belief that the tragedy would inspire the best in both to drown out the worst. Considering the 'return' of democracy in Pakistan, the emergence of a Pakistani civil society that could apparently challenge the worldview of the security establishment and a decrease in violence in Indian Kashmir, for a while, at least, the peacemakers were the winners.

However, true to form, India-Pakistan relations are sliding back to a familiar pattern, where fears triumph over hope, shadowy figures and organisations appear ubiquitous, and violence in both countries is blamed on the 'other'.

What has changed, however, is the role of the United States and, strangely, that may offer some hope for peace in the region.

The Kargil war, for the first time, displayed to the Indian elite that the United States could be an honest broker and could also be used to 'discipline' an adventurist Pakistan. The 9/11 attacks bought the United States, like never before, to South Asia and increased its regional footprint. Surprisingly, despite its post-independence security policy of keeping great powers away from its immediate neighbourhood, India was not particularly troubled by this development, and seemed to see US presence in the region as a force of stability in Afghanistan and beyond.

This was a function of dramatically improving relations with the world's only superpower. India's border mobilisation in 2001-02 also made it clear to the political class that there could be no military solution to the 'problem of Pakistan' or the problem of terrorism, and that the United States would not go beyond a point to help India attain its national objectives. India, then, made a conscious decision to engage Pakistan in a composite dialogue; the search for common ground began again. However, despite symbolically impressive gestures like increasing cross-border trade, deeper insecurities and structural issues remain, including institutional distrust, terrorism, and Kashmir.

So where is the India-Pakistan-US strategic triangle today?

On the positive side, there are elements in all three countries that share a common vision for the region, including its stability, economic development and enhanced trading links. This is based on distaste for the worldview of the Taliban and other intolerant ideologies or armed non-state actors.

On the other hand, traditional security paradigms of strategic depth, containment, regional proxies, aiding subversive elements in the 'other' and competition for power and influence limit the extent of cooperative engagement. It is in support of the former that India sees a role for the United States. Most Indian security analysts share the sentiments of Air Comdr Jasjit Singh that "Pakistan's stability, its integrity, its well being and even its strength is in our interest". India, contrary to popular perception in Pakistan, does not want to destroy Pakistan and is fearful of imagining, as Pervez Hoodbhoy said, "a nuclear armed Somalia as a neighbour". In fact, India sees Pakistan as an important front line state that protects it from the instability of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Towards that end, India feels that a normal, democratic Pakistan will be inclined to protect the rights of its citizens while rejecting the dangerous ideologies of the Taliban. A democratic Pakistan will emphasise economic wellbeing over narrow security paradigms of competition and conflict. The problem is that at least from the Indian perspective, Pakistani civil-military relations are far from normal and there is a disproportionate influence of the security community over policy matters. India, then, rightfully questions who benefits from increased India-Pakistan tensions in Kashmir and Afghanistan.

Another question that comes to mind is: when trade and peace with India contain so much promise in terms of improving Pakistan's economy, why would civilian officials ratchet up bilateral tensions? The Indian security elite conclude from this that at present there are too many players in Pakistan and the weaknesses of the civilian administration has given a fillip to jihadi elements. However, having run out of ways to influence Pakistani behaviour directly, India is now more open to an increasing US role in the region.

In some ways, the United States too shares this assessment. Its public rebuke of the ISI and criticism of the apparent inability of the Pakistani army, or unwillingness of the civilian government, to attain "monopoly over the use of violence" in the tribal areas indicates the US' increasing frustration at the Taliban resurgence. The re-generation of the Al Qaeda in the tribal belt, increasing US casualties in Afghanistan and the danger of another terrorist attack on US soil indicate a gathering storm. Pakistan is in the eye of this storm.

A seeming convergence of US and Indian interests with respect to stabilising Pakistan will achieve little unless supported by the people of Pakistan. It is a matter of supreme irony that the PPP, whose cadres suffered the most from jihadi attacks and whose leader was assassinated in one such attack, is hesitant to sell the war on terror to its people.

The threats to liberal Pakistan, whether to newspapers, TV stations or politicians like Sherry Rehman, should not be taken lightly. Indeed, significant sections of the Pakistani intelligentsia, if one was to read the English language press, while calling attention to the dangers emanating from jihadi groups, have called upon the state to do more. On the other hand, other sections of the Pakistani media, especially the Urdu language press and anchors on 'news' shows, condone, if not actively encourage, the politics of hatred.

This is not to say that all this is a uniquely Pakistani phenomenon; there are TV stations in Gujarat, Jammu and even the US guilty of such insidious reporting. The threat to Pakistan itself must now be recognised and unless the people of Pakistan own their internal wars, the Pakistan army, in turn, will continue to drift aimlessly, demonising India, America, Afghanistan, some

elements of the Taliban, the Baloch, liberal Pakistanis or all of them simultaneously.

The summer of 2008 has been quite tumultuous so far. There are already rumblings in India about reaching the limits of tolerance (some would call it weakness). The choice before India and Pakistan is clear: either go back to the future, confirming what Yeats wrote about the “best lack(ing) all conviction, while the worst, are full of passionate intensity”; or Pakistan should realise how isolated it is in the region, and indeed in the world today. This might just force the civilian leadership to take charge of the country, including its powerful security institutions.

It is a sobering realisation, but completely true, that instability in either India and Pakistan or Afghanistan breeds instability in the region and, in turn, affects the United States. It is in the national interest of all four countries to work together or suffer from the uncertain, and dangerous, consequences of not doing so.

*Anit Mukherjee, a former Indian army officer, is currently at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC*

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