

## South Asia: Faltering Steps Forward

Gujarat's tragedy has helped to ease tension between India and Pakistan, but there's still a way to go before they bury the hatchet.

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By Ahmed Rashid/Islamabad and Murray Hiebert/Washington

Sometimes, a simple phone call can help bury years of animosity. Pakistan Chief Executive Gen. Pervaiz Musharraf took a step in the right direction when he rang Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on February 2 and offered sympathy for the devastating earthquake in Gujarat state. The local and foreign media crowded about a breakthrough and thaw in relations, while even the U.S. State Department deemed the development "important."

It was the first direct contact between the enemies since Musharraf seized power in October 1999 and came as a flurry of diplomatic activity by their ambassadors raised hopes that the two leaders may soon meet. The call also followed concrete steps to ease tensions in predominantly Muslim Kashmir-including an Indian ceasefire and Pakistani military restraint-and to open talks on the disputed region.

Both countries have a keen interest in putting the lid on 54 years of simmering hostility, which has seen them go to war three times since 1947-twice over Kashmir. India's bid to become a global power is being cramped, while the conflict is helping to bleed Pakistan's economy dry. Nevertheless tension remains high, with both countries being nuclear-weapons capable since 1998 and both pushing ahead to develop new, longer-range missile systems.

The thaw presents an opportunity for the incoming administration of United States President George W. Bush to defuse tension in a region described by Bush's predecessor, Bill Clinton, as "the most dangerous place on earth."

But the missile race is a problem and any U.S. policy must take into account China, which is close to Pakistan and wary of India. "The Bush team is likely to continue Clinton's broad philosophy of engaging India, while not neglecting Pakistan," says Stephen Cohen of Washington's Brookings Institute.

That said, Bush is expected to downplay the cornerstone of Clinton's nonproliferation efforts in the Subcontinent-persuading both countries to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, or CTBT. The Republican-dominated U.S. Senate voted in 1999 against ratifying the treaty.

Bush's determination to develop a missile-defence system will undermine international and U.S. efforts to date at controlling the missile race in South Asia and elsewhere. And U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell signaled his opposition to sanctions-applied by the Clinton administration after both countries tested nuclear devices in 1998-by allowing India to import U.S.-made helicopter parts on February 2.

These policy guidelines mean Bush must devise a new strategic framework to deal with the arms race in South Asia. Teresita Shaeffer, a South Asia specialist at Washington's Centre for Strategic and International Studies, says Bush could tighten U.S. export policy for both countries as an expression of nonproliferation, but wonders if it will be enough. "Since India and Pakistan are not going to sign CTBT, the question is how to make them part of the system," she adds.

The missile race moved up a gear on January 17, when India test-fired its nuclear-capable Agni intermediate ballistic missile for the second time. The Agni-II, with a range of 2,500 kilometres, can hit targets throughout Pakistan and deep inside China and should be in production soon. The Agni-III, with a range of 3,500 kilometres, is likely to be tested by May.

Pakistan is even further ahead in missile development and miniaturization of nuclear warheads, according to Western intelligence experts. Pakistan's short-range Shaheen missile is in production, while its intermediate-range Ghauri-II was tested in April 1999 and another test is imminent. Pakistan's focus on its missile programme is not unexpected, given that it does not have the high-performance jets needed to deliver nuclear weapons.

India does have nuclear-capable aircraft while its ambitions are wider. It wants to produce intercontinental ballistic

missiles so it can compete with China and it wants a range of missiles-to be carried by the navy and air force-to give it a second-strike nuclear capability.

With only India as its target, Pakistan sees no need to produce long-range missiles. The shorter-range missiles it produces are based on Chinese and North Korean designs, making further development vulnerable to U.S. sanctions. U.S. experts reckon Pakistan now makes most of Shaheen's components itself, but ties with China still seem solid despite Beijing's pledges in December to end missile technology exports. "If we need something from China, we can still get it," says a senior Pakistani official.

discouraging paranoia

The China factor is going to be an important part of Bush's calculations for South Asia. Some Republican hardliners want to strengthen strategic relations with India as a foil to China, which could foul U.S. ties with both Islamabad and Beijing. "There will be an inherent recognition of the way that India is a counterweight to China," says a senior U.S. official in Washington. "We have no interest in encouraging that competition and making China feel paranoid."

But Islamabad is already feeling paranoid. "India would like to use the China card with the U.S. to further isolate Pakistan," says the Pakistani official. However with Beijing's influence in Islamabad, Washington is going to need China's help if it wants to get the two countries to talk on Kashmir.

Both countries are slowly moving toward a dialogue on Kashmir after 12 years of insurgency by Islamic militants. India helped trigger the change of heart when it launched a month-long ceasefire in November, which has been extended twice. Pakistan responded by cutting back its troops along the line of control between the forces, while press reports say New Delhi will gradually reduce its 400,000 troops in Kashmir. Artillery duels and armed clashes have virtually come to a halt.

Both sides have also made political concessions. New Delhi, for the first time, has said it is willing to talk to the All Party Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference, the main separatist alliance in the Indian-controlled part of Kashmir, and has said a Hurriyat group can visit Islamabad for talks.

Pakistan has welcomed the proposed visit and dropped its demand that direct talks between Islamabad and New Delhi must take place first. But the problem in the quest for peace is that the two sides are coming to the table from very different perspectives. India has big-power ambitions. It wants to become a global economic and military player and wants a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. The perennial conflict with Pakistan and the Kashmir insurgency are stymying these ambitions.

Ashutosh Varshney, a South Asia specialist at Notre Dame University in Indiana, says India wants to become a major economic power in the next 10 years and is becoming more conscious of the costs of a no-win separatist conflict. "Every military dollar saved is an investment made," he says. Pakistan's military regime, meanwhile, faces growing international heat for its support of the ruling Taliban in Afghanistan and needs a respite so that it can re-engage the world and solve social and economic crises at home. Moreover the military is becoming aware that its "bleed the Indians in Kashmir" policy is now bleeding Pakistan.

Both countries want to start the process by putting the Hurriyat on center stage-a move that could be quickly followed by a meeting between Vajpayee and Musharraf. But India is stalling on giving passports to the most militant pro-Pakistan Hurriyat leaders, while Islamabad has no clear-cut policy on reining in the Pakistan-based Islamic fundamentalist parties that are continuing their jihad, or holy war, against India.

Most Kashmiris are exhausted by the conflict and want a way out. "The Kashmiri leaders are deeply worried about the Pakistani jihadis trying to become their spokesmen," says I.A. Rehman, head of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. The situation is made more complicated by deep divisions within the Hurriyat.

Clearly, it's going to take more than one phone call to get the process rolling.