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South Asian Stability---A Pakistan Perspective

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South Asia has been, and remains, a tension- ridden region. Within the region there are historical conflicts rooted in political, religious and ethnic divides that generate violence and defy attempts at stabilisation. The insurgency by Maoist rebels in Nepal has undermined the country for years and has now led to political instability. The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka after years of violence and colossal expenditures has finally moved towards resolution. The civil strife in Bangladesh has subsided and democracy is getting established even though undercurrents remain—the Army has just been involved in crime control. India has simmering separatist movements in its North Eastern regions and there is the linkage between the Tamils in India's south and northern Sri Lanka. Pakistan has had urban violence in Karachi, the secession of its eastern part and a history of political instability and military intervention. It is, however, the India –Pakistan hostility that has dominated the South Asian subcontinent for the last half century and has given it a track record of using force to settle disputes. The violence in Indian Held Kashmir and the nuclear dimension make the region dangerously volatile and a source of serious concern for the world.

There is, of course, no need to rehearse history but the impact of events in South Asia's 'near abroad' must at least be flagged. The Islamic Revolution in Iran and its lingering effects on the Muslim world, and the US backed Resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan followed by the internal strife in that country with the inevitable external linkages are events that have influenced the South Asian scenario. The blow back from these has had a destabilising effect particularly on Pakistan and has raised the level of violence with a collateral effect on the freedom struggle in Indian Held Kashmir. The long drawn out Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War indirectly influenced Iran-Pakistan relations and Pakistan's relations with the rest of the Muslim world. After the Cold War and with the Taliban regime established in Afghanistan with Pakistan's support, the US sought to improve ties with India. The nuclear tests by India and then by Pakistan slowed the strategic shift in US policy but the Kargil conflict gave it impetus. 911, however, overshadowed everything and post 911 the war on terror made Pakistan a key US ally in the region in spite of its military government. The US now seeks strategic relationships with both India and Pakistan and has been accepted as a facilitator of stability in the region. From this standpoint US policy in the region and around it will be very significant for stability especially the evolving relations with India and Pakistan.

A mention must also be made of the very latest developments in the region. State elections have been held in Indian Held Kashmir. Though marred by violence and a

low turnout, and denounced as a farce by Pakistan, these have changed the political landscape in Kashmir. The ten-month long military stand off on the borders initiated by India following an attack on its Parliament last December is coming to an end with both sides withdrawing their forces. General elections have been held in Pakistan and the country has started a move back to democracy after three years of military government. Pakistan continues to have sporadic incidents of terrorism after the break up of the epicentre of terrorism in Afghanistan. Afghanistan though still unstable has an interim government and is getting external support for pacification and stabilisation. Much will depend on how the governments in India and Pakistan interact and evolve policies for the future. Unfortunately they have a history of missed opportunities. In this context we might just remember that the recent long military stand off did trigger missile tests and led to an up-gradation of all types of military capabilities and readiness standards. India has long-term plans for nuclear and military force build up and modernisation, and Pakistan has concerns about the growing conventional force imbalance with India. Nuclear weapons in South Asia though not being brandished remain a matter of serious concern for the world.

It is against this backdrop that Pakistan develops its perspective on stability in South Asia. I have listed and briefly explained the main points that constitute the contours of this perspective but I must stress that these are my views and not those of any official agency in Pakistan:

△ Whatever may have been the determinants of Pakistan's national security policies in the past the focus now is on political stability, economic viability and internal defence. This is in line with the changing concept of security in the post 9/11 and the globalised world. Military power will remain important but the orchestration of power will be much more comprehensive.

△ Pakistan will continue to emphasise dialogue to resolve disputes and manage volatile situations till these are resolved. Pakistan has already proposed a comprehensive 'strategic restraint regime' to India. It will actively seek a reduction of the threat to its security through progressive and reciprocal measures. In my view a broad range of confidence building measures would be a part of this overall policy once dialogue is initiated. Pakistan has repeatedly offered unconditional dialogue.

△ Pakistan accepts the imbalance inherent in the equation with India and will not seek to match capabilities. Pakistan will, therefore, modernise and upgrade its military power in carefully selected areas so that its deterrent and defence capability is not degraded and it never faces a scenario of overwhelming strategic superiority from India. This deterrence is the best guarantee of stability because an unacceptable imbalance can have serious implications.

△ Pakistan understands the vital importance of a stable and friendly Afghanistan. This understanding has always been the basis of Pakistan's policy for Afghanistan and this is what drove Pakistan into an alliance with the US against Soviet occupation. This was also the consideration behind Pakistan's

initial support of the Taliban regime because after the US pulled out after the Cold War there were six or seven countries in support of the Northern Alliance and Pakistan's only option was support of the southern faction in pursuit of its interests. Contrary to popular opinion Pakistan's change of policy in Afghanistan post 9/11 was not as sharp a U-turn as it is made out to be—it was a long curve because Pakistan was aware of the fact that the Taliban were being financed and controlled by external actors with their own agenda from 1995 onwards. Pakistan will, therefore, continue to co-operate with the US and all other countries in Afghanistan because it does not want to return to a conflict of interest situation with Iran, the CAS and Russia. Pakistan also does not want a return to the north-south divide that led to the civil war in Afghanistan with disastrous consequences for the region and the world. In the post 9/11 war on terror stability in Afghanistan is vital for the stability of Pakistan's provinces bordering Afghanistan and its domestic environment. This consideration should drive Pakistan's policy in the future in the interest of stability in the entire region.

▲ The conflict in Kashmir remains unresolved. Pakistan calls it a freedom struggle with indigenous moorings but does not deny its support. India calls it cross border terrorism and points to the random acts of violence that confirm this classification. Pakistan agrees that such incidents are terrorist acts but denies its involvement and its point of view is that these acts should be jointly investigated and should not automatically lead to a crisis situation. Apparently there is no change in the declared positions of the two sides and a brick wall type of no dialogue situation exists. Sensing the disruptive potential of non-state actors Pakistan acted to stop cross Line of Control(LOC) infiltration from its side and offered joint investigation of terrorist acts and unconditional dialogue to resolve the issue. After the elections in Indian Held Kashmir(IHK), the elections in Pakistan and the end of the border confrontation there is hope that dialogue will resume and that its immediate effect will be an end to the idea of resorting to the military option. A progressive and sequential development towards crisis management and confidence building is possible if governments act responsibly. There will eventually have to be a move towards resolution of the Kashmir dispute because without this there cannot be stability.

▲ Pakistan looks to its new relationship with the US as being qualitatively different from the past. It hopes that the US –India relationship will be a balancing factor for South Asia and not an imbalancing one. It sees consistent US engagement in the region, unlike the previous on and off interest, and supports the US role as a facilitator of conflict resolution given the bitter experience and poor track record of bilateral negotiations in the region. Pakistan will seek US help in maintaining an acceptable conventional force balance with India and will continue, in its own interest, to co-operate with the US in the war on terror and in the ongoing stabilisation of Afghanistan with all its implications.

▲ For quite some time now Pakistan has been concentrating on the dynamics of

its internal environment. Past misrule had led to political instability, economic decline, imbalance in the civil-military relationship and an overall internal environment in which the application of state power was hampered by various constraints. The fact that the elected governments in the 1988 to 1999 period were under severe US pressure through sanctions did not help. In the post 9/11 situation Pakistan understands that it cannot be a 'soft state', and that in the interest of safe guarding its sovereignty, it must be seen as a responsible and cohesive state with a structure that will not permit its territory or resources to be misused by outside interests and non state actors. Various reforms have been implemented to strengthen the economic structure and financial institutions. An overall climate is being created in which a political government can function and that will ensure good civil-military interaction in the national interest. It is from this angle that Pakistan's move towards democracy should be seen even if it looks different from what others would like it to be. Pakistan would continue to seek US and international help for strengthening and improving its internal situation and its external policies would also be influenced by the demands of internal defence particularly against the inroads of terror. The development projects, the privatisation policy, the strengthening of institutions, the shift to local government, controls over resources and many other steps taken are all aimed at improving the internal environment. India's decision to pull back forces from the borders and perhaps move towards a thaw in relations that will lead to dialogue is well timed as a signal of reassurance and Pakistan's hope will be that it carries forward in the interest of South Asian stability. Internal stability and strong governance in both Pakistan and India will contribute to stability in the region. Government policies dictated by political and domestic pressures can create crisis situations that may be expedient politically but can undermine stability.

▲ Besides the centrality of Sino-Pakistan relations, US-Pakistan relations, Pakistan-India relations and Pakistan-Afghanistan relations the thrust of Pakistan's policy will be to improve relations with the international community particularly the Islamic countries, Britain, Japan, the European Union and Russia. Pakistan will continue to stress the importance of SAARC and the need to enhance its role as a South Asian forum besides actively supporting the SCO and will continue to be an active participant in regional and extra regional groupings.

As a conclusion let me stress the aspects or situations that Pakistan will actively seek to avoid in its own interest and in the interest of South Asian stability---the two being inextricably linked. These are obviously areas in which events have the potential of spinning out of control for various reasons:

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A return to the externally sponsored and supported north-south divide and conflict in Afghanistan. External interference, slow economic rehabilitation and internal divides can lead to such a situation.

⤴ A deterioration of the relationship with India and the possibility of conflict. Continued zero dialogue or a failure of resumed dialogue or actions by elements outside state control and with their own agendas could lead to such an eventuality if one or both governments fail to pursue the dialogue option and look beyond the immediate events.

⤴ Any disruption in the strategic relationship with the US. Domestic situations and pressures could cause events that challenge the relations.

⤴ Any deviation from the road map towards democracy, political stability and economic uplift. Much depends on the political events after the elections in Pakistan. Enough safeguards have been put in place but there is concern, largely, unfounded, on the shape of future political developments.

⤴ Deterioration in its internal environment and its exploitation by others. This could happen if external elements exploit the internal environment to destabilise. This would be a short-sighted policy and will eventually hamper regional stability.

⤴ A weapons race that seriously hampers the plans for human and infrastructure development. The economic factor is extremely important and psycho-social cohesion and stability depends on an economy that is growing. Distractions like threats of war and deployments can undermine economies.

⤴ An extremist presence that threatens the state from within. Though listed last this aspect is important in the post 911 environment. There are reports of Al Qaeda elements and supporters seeking sanctuaries in Bangla Desh and Pakistan and else where in the world. Recent operations in Pakistan have been successful but this is a threat against which the response has to be continuous and it has to be through co-operative arrangements. The rise of the religious right as a political force should not be confused with this phenomenon. There are many examples of countries where such forces were suppressed and denied a political role—the result was confrontation and violence.

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