

Shape of things to come

Dawn 28/12/04

By Shahid Javed Burki

Part - Foreign Relations

PAKISTAN's relations with the United States matter a great deal at this time. In fact, they matter more now than they ever did in the country's history. One important reason for this is that for the first time in Pakistan's long association with the United States, the two countries are pursuing common sets of objectives. Both are on the same side of the war on terrorism. Both are concerned by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism around the globe and how that is influencing the Muslim world.

For 55 years — from 1947 to 2002 — Islamabad remained preoccupied with India and that country's perceived intentions towards Pakistan. That has begun to change with the growing recognition that continued hostility towards India only serves the purpose of Islamic fundamentalist forces in Pakistan.

The United States and Pakistan may now be aiming at the same goals and there may be a fundamental change occurring in what Islamabad considers to be the main threat to its security. That notwithstanding, US-Pakistan relations will also be shaped by the way Washington is fighting the war against terrorism on several fronts — in particular in Iraq, Afghanistan and against the rapidly morphing Al Qaeda. They will

Pakistan's Shia community has recently come under attack by the Sunni fundamentalist groups. How would Sunni-Shia relations in Pakistan be affected by the possible rise of Shia Iraq that may work closely with Iran?

The question of pulling out of Iraq has come to be raised seriously in Washington's policy circles. No matter whether it was right or wrong for America to invade Iraq, withdrawing from the country without ensuring that it can protect itself from internal strife will have enormous consequences for the Muslim world. An unsettled Iraq would become a destabilizing factor for the entire Middle East, including Pakistan.

There are also many unanswered questions about Afghanistan, Pakistan's immediate neighbour to the north. Will President Hamid Karzai, the recently elected and installed president of Afghanistan, succeed in establishing the authority of Kabul over other parts of the country, or

America's military might bring them finally under control?

With this as the background, I will begin by looking at how Pakistan's relations with the United States have evolved over time, and at how they may take shape in the future. In the article today, I will make only passing references to the way India and Pakistan have looked at one another and why that relationship may also be on the verge of being transformed. A more detailed analysis of that subject will appear in this space a couple weeks from now.

Pakistan's association with the United States became close not too long after the country gained independence. The start of the relationship was not particularly propitious since Franklin Delano Roosevelt — the American president for the entire period that Mohammad Ali Jinnah campaigned for the establishment of

an independent Muslim state in British India — was not supportive of the idea of Pakistan. The American president admired Mohandas Gandhi, the principal leader of the Indian independence movement, who wished India to remain united once the British departed from the subcontinent. Roosevelt was of the view that it was imprudent for the Muslims in India to demand a separate state for themselves once the British left the scene.

A different president was in place in Washington when the British finally departed from India. Harry Truman, Roosevelt's successor, did not have strong views about succession to the British Indian Empire

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morphing Al Qaeda. They will also be influenced by the twists and turns in America's relations with Tehran. And, the way Washington looks at President Musharraf's Pakistan may change as President George W. Bush, at present distracted by the war in Iraq, returns to the subject of promoting democracy in the Muslim world.

There may be now, for the first time in nearly 60 years, lack of confusion in the overall objectives that Pakistan and America are pursuing. Nonetheless, this new relationship is being forged in a very uncertain world. It is not only the continuing war against terrorism that has produced this uncertainty for policymakers in Islamabad. There are a number of other things happening in Pakistan's immediate neighbourhood that would need to be factored in as President Pervez Musharraf and his colleagues attempt to redefine how the country he leads must deal with other parts of the world, not just America.

For the last three years — since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on America — Washington is totally preoccupied with its war on terrorism. However, there seems to be no end in sight to this effort; its conduct is becoming more complicated with every passing day.

On December 22, the United States suffered its heaviest one-day loss since it invaded Iraq in March 2003. A suicide bomber attacked an American base in Mosul, a northern Iraqi city, and caused the death of 19 American soldiers. Will America persevere in light of the increasing pressure being exerted on its forces by the insurgents in the Sunni areas of the country? Or, conversely, will it escalate its efforts by involving itself somehow with other Muslim countries in Iraq's neighbourhood? President Bush recently issued a clear warning to Iran and Syria not to create problems for his administration in Iraq. When President Bush issues a warning, the world has learnt to listen and take note.

These are not the only questions being raised by those who are watching the developments in Iraq and their impact on America. There are a number of other unanswered questions as well. Will Iraq be pacified eventually and also gradually democratized? Will elections be held at the end of January, and if they are held what kind of political order will they produce? Will the inevitable victory of the majority Shia community in the planned elections produce another nation ruled — or at least heavily influenced — by the clergy that subscribes to that particular interpretation of Islam? Will a Shia Iraq align itself closely or become a rival of Iran, the largest Shia country in the Muslim world? That will undoubtedly have consequences for Pakistan since it has the world's second largest Shia population. There are more Shias in Pakistan — estimated at some 35 to 40 million — than Iraq's 15 million. Unfortunately,

will the warlords continue to hold sway over large swathes of Afghan territory? President Pervez Musharraf suggested recently that the most important initiative Kabul and its allies must take is to create a viable Afghan army that can provide internal security in the country and bring the warlords and the remnants of the Taliban under the government's control. Will this happen, or will the Afghan experience in creating a military force loyal to Kabul face the same kind of difficulties being encountered by the Americans in Iraq, engaged in a similar enterprise? How will the increasingly important role of poppy cultivation and opium production influence the evolution of the fledgling Afghani political system? Will the growing importance of Afghanistan's drug economy spill over into the restive tribal areas of Pakistan as happened in the 1980s?

Another set of issues for Islamabad's evolving relations with Washington concerns Iran, one more northern Muslim neighbour of Pakistan. One of the more important of these is related to Tehran's nuclear ambitions. It is not entirely certain that the European negotiators have finally succeeded in persuading Iran to give up its attempt to acquire nuclear weapons. Tehran may believe that America's continuing problems in Iraq have provided it with a narrow window of opportunity for developing its own nuclear arsenal. If Tehran persists, how would America react, and what will be the consequences of those actions for Pakistan whose scientists have been accused of aiding Tehran in achieving this objective?

And then, there are some speculations among terrorism experts that Osama bin Laden may be changing the tactics of his organization and also his overall political objectives. His latest pronouncements seem to suggest that he is now much more interested in bringing about regime changes in many parts of the Muslim world than in inflicting heavy damage on the Americans and their country's assets. He seems now more focused than before on Saudi Arabia, his native country. He may be able to foment more trouble there in the coming months. If that happens, what will be the impact on other Muslim countries that also have weak political institutions?

Then there are questions related to the strength of the Al Qaeda and associated groups. Has the American campaign against them, which is fully supported by Pakistan, succeed in weakening the organization or would it result in drawing more support for it? Will the stateless groups of terrorists continue to draw sustenance and recruits from many parts of the Muslim world — not just from Iraq and Afghanistan but also from the northern areas of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the countries in the Maghreb, Thailand and Indonesia — or will

about succession to the British Indian Empire and South Asia did not figure prominently in his thinking about America's world interests. South Asia — in particular Pakistan — remained a distant place for policymakers in Washington. If there was any interest in South Asia it was because of India's exotic past rather than the region's future and its economic potential.

It was only after the full meaning of Winston Churchill's warning that an iron curtain had descended in Europe that Washington began to look with some interest at the countries that lay on the periphery of the new empire Moscow was still in the process of creating. The United States became increasingly concerned that an assertive Soviet Union had begun to influence not only the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia but was taking an active interest in South Asia.

Under Dwight Eisenhower, the first Republican president of the post Second World War period, America developed an interest in the South Asian region because of the fear that the Soviet Union might have ambitions of extending its influence over it. After all, for several decades in the latter part of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century, the Russians had played the "great game" with Great Britain over creating spheres of influence in the countries bordering India. With Britain having departed from the scene after 1947, and with the United States without any experience in the area, there was apprehension that Moscow might try to fill the vacuum by creating its own presence in the region. President Eisenhower, prompted by the Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, began to build a structure of relationships between the United States and the newly emergent countries of South Asia.

India, however, had ambitions of its own. Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister, was not prepared to play second fiddle in the diplomatic orchestra conducted by Washington. New Delhi regarded the growing conflict between Moscow and Washington as a distraction for the developing world. These countries, the Indian prime minister maintained, were neither capitalist nor communist; they were simply "developing" and belonged to the part of the globe that he and those who shared his thinking began to call the Third World. There was no reason for these countries to align themselves with either of the two blocs — the blocs led respectively by Washington and Moscow. Thus was born the Non-Aligned Movement. Nehru, along with President Soekarno of Indonesia, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Gamal Nasser of Egypt were some of the principal players in this movement.

I will pick up the rest of this story in the article next week.