

# Pakistan — the natural leader

By Maroof Raza

*Instead of pondering the offerings of a liberal pro-western Turkish model and Iran's rigid Ayatollah, Central Asian states should hedge their bets on a democratic Pakistan*

THE chances of progress in India - Pakistan relations - more specifically over Kashmir - if not of a resolution, look better now than they have done for years. But India and Pakistan have both been here before. Agreeing to talk, moreover, is no more than that. Old habits of thought will be hard to change. And the hope of peace is held hostage to the possibility of another major cross-border terrorist attack anywhere in India, the increase in infiltration when the snows melt over the Pir Panjal ranges; or worse still, if an assassination, or an infirmity removes General Musharraf from the scene, we'll be back to square one. While many in India believe that, once the eyes of the world (read America) are off their backs, Pakistan's men in khaki could initiate another 'war by proxy'; many Pakistanis also believe Indians want nothing short of Pakistan's destruction.

To an Indian, a solution to the Kashmir tangle is straightforward: India would drop its claim

to Pakistani-occupied Kashmir; Pakistan would do the same for the Indian part; the Line of Control would gradually become an international border; and then India would grant Kashmir greater autonomy. This would deny self-determination to Kashmiris, as many of them want independence from both Pakistan and India, but it would meet India's requirement that a separatist precedent must not be set that could encourage other restive regions, and that as a Muslim majority state, Kashmir remains with India.

But such a deal, is unlikely to get Pakistani acceptance. This is because since its creation, the elite of Pakistan has found anti-Indianism - and the Kashmir issue - as their best bonding adhesive. The answer therefore lies in giving Pakistan's establishment another strategic alternative to contesting India. And this is where the 'Great Game' can be revisited. If Pakistan were anywhere else on the globe, it would have been a regional power. It is the seventh largest country in the world, is a nuclear power and has immense potential. But placed as it is between China and India, it appears smaller than it actually is. What it therefore needs is a re-definition of its regional role. And that could be done by allowing Pakistan to lead the strategic bloc,

called Central Asia.

In the mid-1990's, Pakistan, on the encouragement of the US, became involved in the affairs of Afghanistan (that led to the creation of the Taliban, with disastrous consequences) and Islamabad-funded mujahideen began knocking on the doors of the Central Asian Republics. But

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now, as then, the American obsession to portray Pakistan as a "moderate Islamic state" - in glaring contradiction to the Indian establishment's view of Pakistan - is part of the American strategic containment design for Central and Southern Asia. The mid-1995 American approval of the Hank Brown military package to Pakistan, by

side-stepping the Pressler amendment, was a means to that end. And the post 9/11 aid package for Pakistan is a reaffirmation of Washington's faith in Pakistan. With the newly independent Central Asian states searching for a role model and as they deliberate upon a choice between the liberal pro-western model of

Turkey and the rigid Ayatollah regime in Iran or perhaps, an eventually democratic Pakistan. For the West, Pakistan could become the bridge to the region if they are to emerge from the shadow of Russia.

If that happens then it appears that a classical reversal of history might now be taking place,

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wherein instead of Russia approaching the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, Pakistan could be prepared by the US as a maritime power, to overwhelm the Asian heartland! But, by doing this, Pakistan runs the risk of inviting external intervention in its own fragile polity. With Pakistan searching for an Islamic identity - devoid of its earlier Indian heritage - its quest in the future might appear to be served by aligning itself to the new Central Asian republics, with an attempt to take on the leadership role of this Islamic bloc. This is, however, likely to bring about a new conflict of interests between India and Pakistan, since post 9/11, the interests of India in the Central Asian region has also increased.

Should Pakistan decide to make good this opportunity and adopt a new leadership role towards Central Asia, it will in all probability find a rival in India. This could then lead to a new politico-strategic regional equation: one with Pakistan playing the Islamic card amongst the Muslim nations of Central Asia; and the other, of India's growing interests in Central Asia (and its oil reserves).

Instead, if Pakistan is allowed to lead the Central Asia countries, Islamabad might then shed its obsession of contesting India over Kashmir at

every international forum, and shift its focus to increasing its influence over the oil and mineral rich Central Asian countries. Herein Pakistan would find for itself a larger strategic role than its traditional rivalry with India, of which Kashmir has for so long been the symbol. If so, then the Indo-Pak border might in due course become the dividing line between these two separate strategic blocs of Southern Asia, focussing their goals further north of the Kashmir Valley, into Central Asia. It was perhaps, a similar strategic logic that led Washington to traditionally couple Pakistan with the West Asian countries within the scope of its Central Military Command; and to place India in the scope of the US Asia - Pacific Command. Even now, the US State Department has separate officials dealing with India and Pakistan.

This suggestion might catch some Indian hawks by surprise, who do not favour any role for Pakistan other than the acceptance of the current regional status quo, which is distinctly Indo-centric. But if implemented, it could be one of the possible solutions to the Kashmir imbroglio. **COURTESY INDIAN EXPRESS**

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