

World Strategy

By MK Bhadrakumar

*In diplomatic parlance, Musharraf's meeting with Barak has been a timely CBM*

**G**EOPOLITICS around Pakistan are taking dramatic turns. Details are emerging of a meeting between Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf and Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak.

A spin has been given that Musharraf and Barak had a "chance encounter" in a hotel lobby in Paris. It stretches credulity. Israeli media since revealed that Musharraf placed his hand on Barak's shoulder as the latter praised the Pakistani leader for his role in the "war on terror". The following day, Barak had an hour-long meeting with Musharraf at the latter's invitation.

In all probability, Israel's close ally on Capitol Hill in Washington DC, the resourceful US Senator Joseph Lieberman, who visited Pakistan as a state guest in early January, put together the Musharraf-Barak meeting.

Lieberman's native ingenuity is legion. Recently, the conservative Democratic Connecticut senator explained to the Jerusalem Post newspaper his unorthodox decision to endorse the Republican presidential candidate John McCain. By using a very orthodox metaphor, the one-time Democratic vice presidential nominee apparently explained: "The rabbis say in the Talmud that a lot of rabbinic law is to put a fence around the Torah so you don't get near to violating it".

**Pakistan's threat perceptions:** Both Pakistan and Israel have reason to upgrade the level of their interaction. A good clue is available from Lieberman's itinerary in Islamabad, which included two unusual appointments for a visiting US senator

Following these meetings on January 9, Lieberman paid handsome compliment to the SPD's professional capability in managing the command and control system for the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. "I am deeply impressed by the professionalism of the team headed by the general (Kidwai) to secure the nuclear assets of Pakistan", he

# US plays matchm

said. The SPD went out of the way to give a detailed briefing to Lieberman.

The Pakistani intention was clear - Lieberman would transmit the impressions of his visit to Israel. Islamabad has been visibly edgy about the orchestrated media campaign in recent weeks that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal might fall into the hands of jihadi elements. Anyone could tell from a mile that the campaign stank. Pakistan was being threatened that it was about to be stripped of its crown jewels. It was hardly justified and was manifestly an attempt at blackmail.

First of all, as a BBC analyst put it in a commentary on this theater of the absurd, "Few believe Islamists could take power in Pakistan". Second, Pakistan's nuclear potential poses no more serious risks than the nuclear potentials of India or Israel or Russia or the US. Besides, Pakistan hasn't been tardy at all in constantly improving

previously served in key positions in the government, as admitting that Delhi closely worked with Israel on more than one occasion over plans to attack Pakistan's nuclear installations.

Of course, an apocalyptic conflagration of such a kind is simply unthinkable in today's circumstances when all three - Israel, Pakistan and India - are full nuclear powers, but like any military establishment would do, Rawalpindi, the site of the headquarters of the Pakistan Armed forces, is bound to plan against a worst-case scenario. Furthermore, there is always a new angle in a future context - Israel could harbour misgivings that fissile materials out of Pakistan's nuclear facilities might find their way to Iran.

Evidently, Islamabad decided it was useful to level with Israel so that misconceptions did not arise. In diplomatic parlance, Musharraf's meeting with Barak has been a timely CBM (confidence-building measure).

**India-Pakistan strategic parity:** But that is only the tip of the iceberg. It underscores the geopolitical turbulence that is steadily enveloping the South Asian region. Much of the turbulence is being commonly attributed to the concerns of the international community over radical Islam and terrorism in the region or over the safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons or of the specter of the Pakistani state withering away into anarchy under the sheer weight of its current political difficulties. But the factors underlying the volatility go deeper than that.

What is becoming apparent is that a series of maneuvers by regional powers is gradually building up in the coming period. Arguably, the heightened tensions around Pakistan are as much a symptom of these geopolitical maneuvers as of an intrinsic nature. Democracy deficit, political assassination, ruling elites, misgovernance, corruption, popular alienation, poverty and economic disparity, religious fanaticism - these are common to almost all countries of the South Asian region. Pakistan is certainly not an exception.

At the epicenter of the geopolitical turbulence in the region lies the rapidly expanding strategic partnership between the United States and India. The developing US-India strategic axis is triggering a large-scale realignment among regional powers, especially involving Pakistan.

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the security of its nuclear weapons. Finally, unless some superior foreign power succeeds in systematically degrading the Pakistani Army, its capacity to be the custodian of the country's national security is never in doubt.

But Islamabad has felt the need to factor in what has come to be known as the "Osirak contingency". In their masterly work *Deception: Pakistan, the United States and the Global Nuclear Weapons Conspiracy*, authors Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark have named top-level Indian sources, who

# maker to Pakistan, Israel

As a leading commentator of the official Russian news agency put it recently, "Not without help from the great powers, India has gone so far ahead in the sphere of arms that it is pursuing its national interests from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca archipelago. Islamabad justifiably believes that the United States is ready to support India's claims to the status of a world power in exchange for its efforts to deter China and Iran ... (while) Pakistan still remains the main partner of the United States and Western Europe in the region's anti-terrorist coalition".

That a Moscow commentator should have made such a sharp, pithy observation becomes extraordinary by itself. He adds, "What should Pakistan do in this situation? ... Pakistan is using its potentialities to the utmost. In the past, its nuclear potential was a major deterrent, but today it is no longer playing this role. A

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contribution to the change was made by the United States - its nuclear romance with India is more than obvious".

Last Friday, Pakistan test-launched its medium-range Shaheen-1 rail-based solid fuel ballistic missile, which can deliver nuclear warheads at a distance of up to 700 kilometers. Indian experts say it is a modification of the Chinese M9 solid fuel tactical missile. They allege China may have helped Pakistan develop Shaheen-1 missiles.

This has been Pakistan's second test of tactical missiles in the past month and a half. On December 11, it test-launched its

Babur cruise missile, a land-based liquid fuel missile with a range of up to 700km. Indeed, Pakistan is strictly observing the schedule of tests it has agreed with India within the framework of a bilateral agreement, and there has been no deviation in the type or range of missiles.

India is aware that Pakistan's nuclear weapons are aimed against it, but it doesn't make any ruckus about it, as that might needlessly draw international attention to the region as a "nuclear flashpoint", which it isn't. On the contrary, both India and Pakistan are equally busy developing their missile potentials and have in place bilateral agreement preventing the risk of accidents with nuclear weapons.

Curiously, at times it even seems there is an almost tacit bilateral commitment between the two countries to the principle of parallel testing. But, having said that, there is no doubt that India is pulling incrementally ahead of Pakistan in regard of the missile systems' characteristics.

**US-India military ties:** India is embarking on a massive armament programme in cooperation with the US. The Times of India newspaper reported on Tuesday, "After joint combat exercises to develop 'interoperability', the Indo-US military tango is now firmly waltzing into the arms purchase arena as well". India has just concluded a billion-dollar deal for the purchase of six C-130J Super Hercules aircraft from the US. Negotiations are reportedly in an advanced stage with Boeing company for a US\$2 billion deal for the purchase of eight P-8i long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft with anti-submarine warfare capabilities.

On the horizon, as the Indian daily put it, "The US is obviously desperate to grab a big piece of action" out of India's projected \$30 billion worth arms purchases in the 2007-2012 period. Actually, there is no need for Washington to be so "desperate". Delhi is more than willing to play its designated role as a pivotal country in the US's global strategy.

It has scheduled "at least five joint combat exercises" with the US for 2008. For the first time, India will also be jointly exercising with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates is scheduled to visit India on February 25-26. The American ambassador in India publicly reaffirmed on Monday that there is a "definite desire" in Washington to conclude the nuclear cooperation agreement with India on

George W Bush's watch.

It is symptomatic of the strategic equations shaping up in the region that Gates will be skipping Pakistan during his tour of the region. Yet, it was only last week that Gates devoted an entire press conference, lasting over an hour, to "the emergence of this fairly considerable security challenge" in Pakistan, while offering, "We (US) remain ready, willing and capable to assist the Pakistanis and to partner with them, to provide additional training, to conduct joint operations, should they desire to do so".

From Islamabad's perspective, the "de-hyphenated" policy on the part of the US towards Pakistan and India has virtually come to mean that Washington is focusing on the Pakistani Military role as an efficient, well-trained and well-equipped border militia in the tribal tracts with Afghanistan. On top of it, despite

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robust refusal by Islamabad, Washington is pressing hard for the deployment of US troops on Pakistani soil and for beefing up the American intelligence presence within Pakistan.

On any single day, Pakistani media reflect a bitter sense of betrayal. Ahmed Quraishi, a top TV commentator, wrote recently in The News: "After 9/11, Pakistan's crucial assistance helped the United States secure a huge American footprint in Central Asia. That was a dream come true for American strategic planners. In return, Pakistan got nothing but instability, derision and broken

promises. A feasible Pakistan-American cooperation in the region has to work both ways, securing the interests of both parties. Yet it never did after 9/11 despite every reason it should have".

In this situation, we may expect Pakistan will begin to seek support in its relations with India from other countries with modern weapons, apart from China or the US. It may happen that Pakistan may turn to Russia for this purpose. In fact, a strong likelihood is that Pakistan-Russia relations may be getting ready for an historic makeover. The desperate US efforts to kiss and make up with Uzbekistan suggest that Washington apprehends a Russian thrust toward Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Moscow will also be watching with uneasiness that India in its zest to consolidate an elevated status in the US's regional policy has shown readiness to calibrate its traditional policies with regard to Russia and Central Asia.

As India gives formal shape to its contacts with NATO and openly participates in the US's missile Defence programme, the trajectory of US-India strategic cooperation will begin to impact on Russian interests, unless, of course, Delhi takes corrective measures, for which, however, political will becomes necessary. Washington is, in any case, resolute in steering its strategic cooperation with India precisely in such a direction that it leads to an all-round rollback of Russian influence in South Asia.

All this adds up to mean that the US-India strategic partnership need not be the end of the world for Pakistan. An altogether new strategic equation may develop in the region between Russia, China and Pakistan. With the regional security environment in such a flux, Musharraf's message to Barak would have been direct: Pakistan is in no way threatening Israel's security directly or in league with a third country, and Pakistan expects Israel to reciprocate. Coming from one soldier-turned-politician to another, that is not too much to ask. Barak would have understood.

COURTESY ASIA TIMES

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