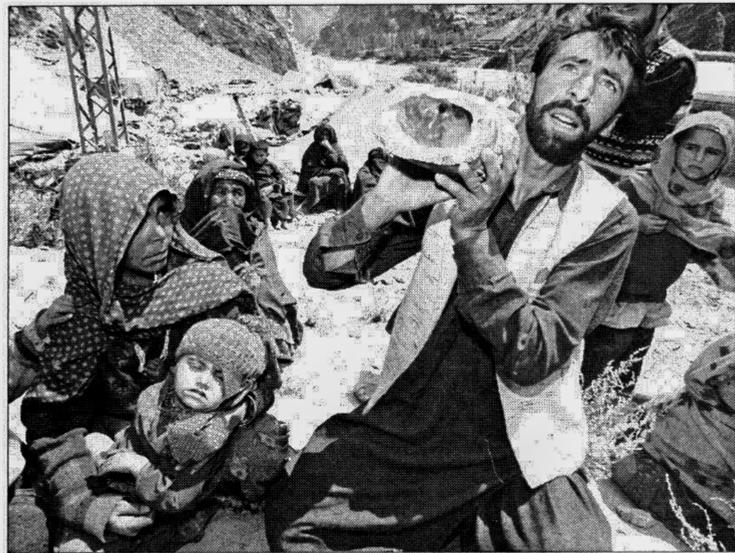


The Wheel of History?

Pakistan and India should think practically, and should opt for a solution, making the present Line of Control as the de jure boundary between them, says Tarun Basu



A Kashmiri resident shows a part of an exploded Indian shell that landed in Bresil, a border village near the northern town of Skardu near the Line of Control in disputed Kashmir, 13 June 1999. Continuous heavy Indian shelling forced thousands of villagers to move to safer places. The rival armies have been engaged in fierce artillery duels and clashes along the 720 kilometers (446-mile) demarcation line in Kashmir between the Indian and Pakistan controlled zones.

The tell-tale transcript of the conversation between military generals, Gen Pervez Musharraf, Chief of the Army Staff, and Lt Gen Mohammed Aziz, Chief of General Staff, bears out the Pakistani Army's overlordship of the state of affairs in the country and its writ to the government not to give away anything on the military front.

The release of the tapes is nothing short of an intelligence coup. Tapping of satellite telephone conversation through transponder channels is not an unusual practice for intelligence agencies worldwide and the Indians are also adept at it. But where the Pakistanis have bungled is in their indecision in carrying on such sensitive long-distance conversation through such an open telephone link-up.

His public release must have required sanction from the very top but it was nicely timed to embarrass the Pakistanis on the eve of the talks. This was the first time that any Indian government has gone on the offensive in the media to communicate its point of view to the world, instead of the usually mealy-mouthed, defensive reactions which evoke more contempt than credibility.

The Pakistani Army evidently did not reckon the strong military reaction from India to the provocations. That is why Sartaj Aziz has been termed the Indian air strikes as an "overreaction" and has sought "partial de-escalation," with the stopping of airstrikes being the

first step.

The objective of the Pakistani military planners was simple: one, choke the artery that links Kashmir with Leh in Buddhist-dominated Ladakh region of the state; two, invest Kargil and Drass to leverage the entire Kashmir question before the political leadership attempts any giveaway; three, use the intrusions in strategic areas like Shoruk valley, Batalik and Turtuk to leverage Indian positions in the Siachen glacier and four, launch incursions in other sectors as a diversion to infiltrate through a familiar infiltration route along the Mushkoh canal.

Having failed in their strategic objectives and also getting no international sup-

port in their persistent bid to internationalise the Kashmir issue, Pakistan is now looking for a face-saving solution. The transcript of the May 26 conversation between the two generals shows Pakistan's objective where Aziz is quoted as saying "as far as internationalisation is concerned, this is the fastest this has happened". He referred to the BBC reports on Indian airstrikes and U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan's appeal to both countries.

The proof of Pakistani Army involvement was further compounded by remarks of Aziz to Musharraf that there was no fear of escalation "as the scruff of their (militants) neck is in our hands. Whenever you want, we could regulate it." This is why perhaps Aziz confidently felt that the chances of the fighting escalating were not very strong.

With the failure of the talks between the foreign ministers, the situation nevertheless remains unpredictable and could spin out of diplomatic control. That India is in for a long haul, there is no doubt about. Air pounding against deeply entrenched fighters, armed with deadly Stinger missiles, may achieve only limited objective, at high cost. The other alternative is hand-to-hand combat which again can be long-drawn and highly self-inflicting. There is the danger of the conflict turning into another Siachen, a low-intensity conflict which slowly disappears from the front pages — and even from the nation's consciousness — but keeping bleeding human and material resources on a steady basis.

The only hope is Pakistan realises it has been forced into a military and diplomatic cul-de-sac and initiates quietly a retreat operation without fanfare. The term "safe passage," which unwarrantedly landed Defence Minister George Fernandes in so much controversy, may be a euphemism for a withdrawal, but if the two countries were not to be drawn into further escalation with unpredictable consequences, this is the best and most pragmatic way out. Thereafter the two countries can sit and thrash out the most practical solution — one that is privately accepted but publicly is anathema — that of making the present Line of Control as the de jure boundary between the two.

— India Abroad News Service

Himalayan Hopes

Nepali Congress is more than mere a political party. Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz writes on Nepal's past, present and future

THE parliamentary election of Nepal, the strategic Himalayan Kingdom, conducted in two phases on May 3 and 17 was peacefully over. Neither the country's election commission nor the international observer groups reported gross irregularity. Maoist extremists who boycotted the poll and wanted to disrupt it remained under control. The turnout of the electorate was reported to be well over 60 per cent.

In contrast to the results of the mid-term poll in 1994 which gave the nation a hung parliament the people this time made choices from two main political parties — Nepali Congress (NC) and United Marxists Leninists (UML). In a lower house of 205 the NC captured 110 seats — a clear majority and good though for a stable government, a public cry in Nepal for several years. Already a 16-member cabinet headed by Krishna Prasad Bhattarai as Prime Minister was recently sworn in by the king.

The election of 1999 in Nepal is the fourth parliamentary election in the history of the country and the third one in a row after the popular movements of 1990 which reinstated democracy in the country. Nepal, as a result, became a constitutional monarchy with a multi-party parliament. Since then there has at least been half-a-dozen governments in the country. Not only the first elected government in 1990 was formed by the NC under Girija Prasad Koirala, the NC was partner or instrumental in some way or other also in the subsequent governments after 1994 mid-term election most of which were coalition in nature. But for an internal bickering within the NC its government could not complete its term.

The NC is in fact, much more than a political party. It had been the catalyst of the events and changes that shaped the political history of the country. The NC spearheaded the anti-Rana revolution in 1950-51 which terminated more than a century of autocratic rule by a class of hereditary Prime Ministers. From 1846 to 1951 Nepal was in effect ruled by the Ranas who pursued the policy of cooperation with the British.

The NC revolution of the late 40s also led to the restoration of monarchy. It brought back to throne King Tribhuvan who was earlier deposed by the Ranas. India which binds Nepal with treaty obligations since 1950 had also been curiously enamoured of monarchy in Nepal perhaps because the king in a traditional society like that of Nepal was seen as a pillar of stability. And the stability was the first thing India wanted to ensure in the strategically sensitive area of the Himalaya. So in 1951 India also was instrumental in restoring to his throne King Tribhuvan who fled to India after he had been deposed by the Rana in favour of his two years old grandson.

The Indian rulers were also peculiarly supportive of the populist elements in Nepal like the NC which enjoyed following at least initially among about 3 million settlers of Indian origin in the Terai region of the south. Although India sustained Nepali monarchy she also gave tacit support to politicians and parties which were India-oriented in their outlook and opposed to the absolutism of the king.

The monarchy which was looked upon as the symbol of Nepal's nationalism started to wield considerable influence over the polity when King Tribhuvan was succeeded in 1955 by Mahendra, an ultra-nationalist. As the NC stepped up agitation for representative democracy in the country, King Mahendra grudgingly held Nepal's first ever general election in 1959 which delivered over-whelming victory to the NC headed by BP Koirala.

The clash between the monarchy and the politicians continued. However, in December 1960, Mahendra felt strong enough to engineer what later came to be known as a royal coup. The first popularly elected government of the NC Leader BP Koirala was dismissed, party-based democracy was abolished and the king introduced a pyramidical panchayat raj — based on local self-government units — with himself at its apex.

The Koirala ministry was dubbed pro-Indian and the coup acquired legitimacy as a nationalistic enterprise. This followed a long period for the NC to go into hibernation. The only exception to the monarchy's unchallenged primary during the period was, perhaps, the referendum on political system in May 1980. The referendum gave a narrow mandate for the panchayat to continue. It was thus clear that the monarchy's influence was waning. And there were writings on the wall.

And again in 1990 when the winds of changes were blowing both across the world and the South Asian region — the NC, in its true tradition, took the lead and together with the left mounted pressure on the king for democratic reforms. After a 49-day struggle in which 500 people were killed the king gave in. Much of what Nepal is today politically owes a great deal to the sustained struggle carried out by the NC. Its own particular proclivity notwithstanding, the NC is a movement, reform and political outfit — all rolled in one.

The NC's triumphant records of the decades dim however in significance before what it could achieve in governance. As elsewhere in South Asia the party tended to thrive on rhetorics rather than addressing the hard issues of the polity. As a result, the people were euphoric in 1990 when the democracy ushered in; after nine years they are disappointed as the interests of the commonmen are repeatedly ignored.

According to Sher Bahadur Deuba, an NC prime minister in one of the coalitions it was wrong to expect miracles in a short span of 10 years. But at the same time there are widespread disenchantment and apathy among the Nepalese public caused by the failures of the political parties to deliver during the last nine years.

The NC is once again destined to steer the course of Himalayan Kingdom — this time into the next millennium. The party is duly mandated for it. Either the slogans of "save the democracy" and "democracy is in danger" or invoking the ghost of erstwhile party-less system will not ensure its place in the history. The changes in politics brought about by NC once endeared the party to its numerous followers. Now it is the change of the people's fate which awaits some adept handling by the hands strengthened by the election.

Passions and Paranoia

Both India and Pakistan have pretended to be greatly concerned about the fate of the Kashmiris, but in reality all they have ever cared for is the land, says Irfan Hussain

Kashmiri civilians on both sides of the Line of Control separating the two armies. Day in and day out, we are told about the devastation shelling is producing among civilians. Obviously, PTV makes no mention of the casualties our shells are causing while Doordarshan and Zee TV are equally silent on the mayhem the Indian Bofor guns are dealing out to the villagers on our side of the LoC.

This approach is the one constant factor in this conflict since interrupted over a half century ago: both sides have pretended to be greatly concerned about the fate of the Kashmiris, while in reality all they have ever cared for is the land. As a consequence, they are both prepared to fight until the last Kashmiri. Had they an iota of genuine feeling for the people caught up in this debilitating and draining conflict, they would have asked them what they wanted. Instead, both India and Pakistan cling stubbornly and blindly to their respective positions, repeating their like mantras that have lost all their original meaning, but continue to be mumbled like incantations against evil spirits.

Having mortgaged our past, present and future to the Kashmir conflict, generations of leaders and successive governments in New Delhi and Islamabad are now locked rigidly

into their respective positions. Powerful vested interests militate against any flexibility. Instead of moulding public opinion to accept change in South Asia where the world is in flux, opportunistic politicians in both countries have used Kashmir as a stick to beat their opponents with. The result is that whenever there is a crisis, leaders respond with a series of knee-jerk reactions that are as unimaginative as they are predictable.

Whoever planned the current escalation apparently forgot that India is currently (and, it seems in recent years, perpetually) in election mode. This puts the caretaker BJP government under pressure not to appear soft on Kashmir. As it is, Mr Vajpayee is taking flak for his famous bus ride to Lahore, and his Defence Minister has not helped the BJP cause by his conflicting signals. Congress is in the enviable position of criticising the government from the sidelines for not having been aware of the 'intrusion' initially, and then not responding effectively enough. The danger is that in order to limit the political damage it has suffered, the BJP might choose to escalate further.

In Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif's government is apparently in the comfortable position of denying any complicity while offering to have sent Sartaj

Aziz to New Delhi.

Benazir Bhutto is advocating prudence from her self-imposed exile; while she was in power, she made the most bellicose noises over Kashmir and has repeatedly accused this government (wrongly, alas) of wanting to reduce the defence budget. While abroad, she talks of peace and co-operation in South Asia because that is what her Western audiences want to hear. At home, the opposition is wily-nilly supporting the government.

But this endless domestic point scoring obscures the real dangers posed by this posturing and muscle flexing. Given the potential the current crisis has of spiralling into the unknown territory of nuclear conflict, one would have expected a little more sense of responsibility in New Delhi and Islamabad. But alas, it is politics as usual. Judging from the macho talk emanating from both capitals, one would imagine that the nuclear tests simply did not take place last year. Do we really want such immature people to have their itchy fingers on the atomic trigger?

However, we cannot afford to say "a plague on both their houses", and wash our hands of the whole affair. The people of the two countries share a sub-continent; ultimately, it is their lives, their land and their destinies on the line here. Already,

Alternative Form of Government

Will cyclical change of guard in India help? ask Pulak Mishra and Ramakanta Prusty

THE collapse of the BJP-led dispensation at the Centre puts a question mark over the very viability of coalition governments. The irresponsible attitude of the coalition partners and the attempts of the Opposition to pull down a government which had just begun moving towards bringing about economic and social stability, have been criticised severely. Given that the economy has slowed down, spending a huge sum on elections (taking into account both official and unofficial expenditure) is certainly going to push it deeper into a crisis, from which recovery may take years.

Looking at the present political milieu of numerous (mostly small) political parties with diverse regional- and party-specific interests, will elections be a solution to instability for most, probably, there will be another hung Lok Sabha, which means a coalition. Frequent elections, with no party getting a clear majority, and an Opposition sans a constructive approach leave the ruling coalition little time and scope to think about the nation and its future. Worse, an unstable political atmosphere discourages investors (both domestic and foreign) and makes them reluctant to invest.

Many economists think that the election expenditure will be demand-creating and, thereby, help the economy through a Keynesian system. But this does not seem pragmatic. No doubt a sudden rise in the purchasing power raises the short-term demand for goods and services, or that the huge sums to be injected into the economy as election expenditure are likely to lead to an increase in demand. But if there is no matching supply, inflation could be fuelled which, at such a juncture, will do no good.

Anyway, if indeed elections really help the economy grow, there would be no need for policies or planners. Stability of government is what leads to economic growth, though there is, of course, the contrarian view also. While one political party or a small coalition forming the government does end the problem of frequent elections, they have their own problems. For instance, many political pundits point to West Bengal, which has had a stable single-coalition government, led by the CPI(M) for a record 23 years. But, except for land reforms (resulting in significant agricultural development), the Left Front Government has not been able to significantly improve the State's economy in general, and the industrial sector in particular.

Part of the problem is also because of the negligible role played by the Opposition in putting pressure on the Government to implement the policies announced. The industrial situation can also be blamed on the "irresponsible trade unionism". This, along with the inadequate infrastructure facilities, led to a low level of factor productivities and, thereby, low profitability of the manufacturing units, especially when compared to the industrialised States. All this has affected the ability and willingness of major entrepreneurs to invest in the State, and slowed down the investment flow from outside the country.

The stability of the West Bengal Government has really not helped. What, then, is the answer? A simple and perhaps more effective suggestion would be to call for a cyclical change in government, that would offer stable regimes for a single tenure or two. But cyclical government can work only if the party that comes to power

has absolute majority, and there is the fear of losing in the next term, which makes the party in power concentrate more on developmental activities, and leaving them little room for complacency. The biggest problem in the country's political environment is the multi-party system that has been giving rise to one weak coalition government after another.

The past experience and the recent political drama at the Centre are proof enough of the unsustainable and unpredictable future of coalition government. There is no reason why a two-party or three-party system should not be preferred to the chaotic set-up now. Though this suggestion may seem difficult to implement in a vast democracy like India, where many political parties exist, with diverse interests, it is not entirely impossible either.

What is needed is an amendment in the Constitution that would restrict the number of political parties to a maximum of two three. Once this idea takes concrete shape, there can be a regular cycle of government. It would perhaps be far more productive than the highly unstable coalitions and/or regimes that rule for more than two terms without much results. It is, therefore, neither instability nor stability, but only a cycle that can save the government and the country.

(Pulak Mishra is with the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. Ramakanta Prusty is with the S. K. Patel Institute of Management and Computer Studies, Gandhinagar.)

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Once Bitten, Twice Shy

Was Vajpayee 'taken for a ride' by Pakistan? P. Jayaram has a possible answer

however, reject any criticism of the Lahore Declaration, saying it was signed for a strategic purpose of improving relations between the two countries, reflecting the desire of the people of the two nations at that time. They compared it to the Shimla Agreement signed by the two countries in December 1972 which demarcated the Line of Control (LoC) and sought to improve bilateral understanding. But Pakistan had since consistently tried to internationalise the Kashmir problem and aided and abetted insurgency there in violation of the agreement, they said.

"That does not invalidate the purpose for which it was signed. If one side infringes on the agreement, that does not mean one should lose sight of the strategic purpose for which it was signed," said one source.

Vajpayee's famous bus journey across the border to meet his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, in February had been hailed internationally for its symbolism in attempting to break down barriers of a hostile relationship. But with Kargil erupting into hostilities, Vajpayee's bus diplomacy has come under heavy fire from the oppo-

sition and drawn cynical comments from hawks in the Indian establishment for whom Pakistan is a country that could never be trusted.

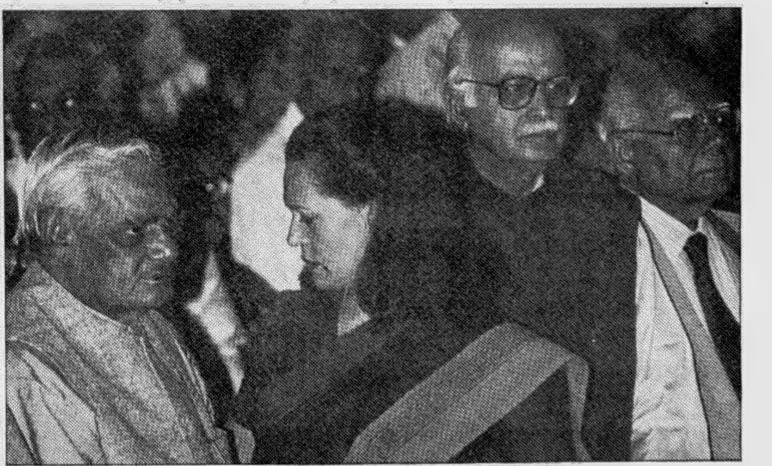
"It was hyped as a historic bus ride to Lahore. Actually he (Vajpayee) was taken for a ride," sneered Congress party leader K. Natwar Singh during a television debate that brought out the dilemma of how to deal with a "hostile neighbour." The mood of the participants, cutting across political lines, was that you cannot make friends with a distrustful neighbour like Pakistan.

Natwar Singh, who is the foreign policy adviser to Congress party president Sonia Gandhi, said he knew the psyche of the Pakistani establishment, having served as envoy to Islamabad in the late seventies and early eighties. There was no doubting the antagonism of the Pakistani establishment towards India, he said. He scoffed at suggestions, made first by Defence Minister George Fernandes, that Sharif probably was not aware of the border incursions into India as the Pakistani Army acted independently "Make no mistake about it,"

not interfere in the internal affairs of each other, shall respect each other's territorial integrity and the LoC as existed on December 17, 1971 and that neither shall seek to alter it unilaterally.

"Does it mean that the Congress was naive in signing the Shimla Agreement?" Shourie asked and noted that the purpose of the agreement was to make it the benchmark against which the conduct of each side was judged. To Singh's response that the Congress never let its guard down vis-a-vis Pakistan even after signing the Shimla Agreement, Shourie asked him to explain the insurgency in Punjab that left 21,000 people dead and the secessionist movement in Jammu and Kashmir which had claimed over 20,000 lives, both of which New Delhi had attributed to Pakistan's aiding and abetting of separatist insurgency, a charge of course denied by Islamabad. Writing in the Asian Age, M.J. Akbar, former Congress lawmaker and editor in chief of the paper, said just Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's enormous goodwill for India, before launching aggression against India in 1962. "Pakistan has fooled Vajpayee in the manner that China fooled Nehru," he said.

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In the meantime: No lack of courteousness