

Indo-Vietnam Pact and Pakistan's Look-East Policy

When President Clinton was visiting India, its Defence Minister George Fernandez was in Vietnam to sign a military pact for boosting co-operation in defence and security matters. **Mansoor Mamoon** looks at the far-reaching implications of the agreement in the entire region

THE strategic shift in Washington's policy in South Asia by courting India and sidelining long-time ally Pakistan as evidenced by President Clinton's recent visit to the subcontinent apparently made General Pervez Musharraf to embark on his first-ever trip to South-east Asian countries. He visited Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam and Thailand. This look-east policy of the military regime was largely designed to bring Pakistan closer to South-east Asia region. But the trip has proved to be lack-lustre as the redoubtable Pakistani General was advised to restore democracy and exercise restraint in his country's long-drawn quarrel with India over Kashmir by the leaders whom he met during his visit to the region. These countries have just begun to recover from the economic slump that hit them three years ago, and hence are not in a position to provide Pakistan with financial assistance.

One gain for General Musharraf, however, was that the ASEAN (the Association of South-east Asian Nations) agreed to accept Pakistan as its dialogue partner. India is enjoying this with the ASEAN for quite a long time. It has also a sizeable number of expatriates in these countries which wield enough influences at the state levels. India has strong commercial standing in South-east Asia.

From South East Asia the Pakistani General orchestrated the feeler of a dialogue with India "anywhere at any level", but it persistently refused to accept the olive branches extended by its arch enemy saying that Islamabad should first stop what

Delhi termed as its cross-border terrorism in Kashmir. In so doing General Musharraf wanted to show that he genuinely wanted rapprochement and peaceful co-existence with India. In Bangkok the Chief Executive of Pakistan admitted for the first time that his country was having problems in its relations with the United States and he would be trying to find avenues for their improvement. He, however, said he is not concerned with the increasing bonhomie between Washington and Delhi as India has the right to have its own international interests uppermost in its mind. He is more concerned with how to remove the impediments in his countries' ties with the US. Independent analysts are of the opinion that President Clinton's visit to South Asia has failed to diffuse and de-escalate tensions between India and Pakistan but has rather fuelled acrimony between them because of his open tilt towards New Delhi. As a fall-out of US Presidential visit, India is bursting with glee with the feeling that it has been able to score a clear diplomatic victory over Pakistan. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is setting up its office in India for joint action against and fact finding about militancy and terrorism. This is a new development in the sense that the US made the proposal to India several years ago. India was so long hesitating but after the visit of Clinton and with the menace of lurking terrorism, it has finally agreed to the proposal and the process of setting up of FBI office in India is now on.

This has naturally caused consternation in Pakistan. India is also spreading out its

wings in the blue waters as far as to the China Sea. When President Clinton was visiting India, its mercurial Defence Minister George Fernandez was in Vietnam to sign an unprecedented military pact for boosting co-operation in defence and security matters. Prior to that, the US defence secretary William Cohen also visited Vietnam. Though the two visits have no relation, yet China has every reason to feel disturbed at the development in its proximity. Indo-Vietnam military co-operation agreement, analysts maintain, will have far-reaching implications in the entire region. Vietnam is antagonistic towards China since long over many issues. The two countries even had some armed encounters over their dispute involving some islands in the China Sea. The islands are believed to be rich in oil and China is eyeing them for quite some time. India's entering into accord with Vietnam is thus likely to be viewed with suspicion by China.

Beijing also has territorial disputes with New Delhi over which the two countries fought a brief war in 1962. Though there was some euphoria in New Delhi over the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries the other day, the *People's Liberation Army Daily* suggested that both China and Russia should remain attentive to Washington's increasing presence in South Asia. The comment is significant as the mouthpiece of the People's Liberation Army is usually taken seriously by the observers. This indicated that China is not altogether happy with the new

shift in Indo-US relations. Cohen also visited Taiwan which is under threat from China to the effect that if its newly-elected leadership opts for independence, Beijing might be tempted to use force to annex it with the mainland. A classified US report on the combat readiness of Taiwanese military capability said that it is not strong enough to counter any possible Chinese attack on the island. Cohen, however, said he has trust and confidence in the combat preparedness of the island's troops.

The US is believed to have a far-reaching perspective game plan. While it is favouring India at the cost of Pakistan, it, in its turn, also needs New Delhi's support in containing China from advancing towards former Formosa. India's military pact with Vietnam is certain to please Washington as this is likely to alert China and make it think twice before venturing against Taiwan. Vietnam is also a member of ASEAN in which Pakistan is trying to make some inroads.

Forging of new Indo-US axis will have its impact not only in South Asia, but its spill over is likely to be spread in the region of South-east Asia as well. Eventually there will be polarisation of relations among China, Pakistan and Russia on the one hand, and the US, India and Vietnam on the other. China, India and Pakistan have nuclear deterrents. Hence the polarisation might portend danger for both South Asia and the South-east Asia. The smaller states might, therefore, be required to maintain strict vigilance over their respective security and equi-distance from all the regional powers.

A Farewell to Arms!

M. Abdul Hafiz looks at Pakistan's all-pervasive gun culture and praises Islamabad's initiatives in curbing it

ON 15 February, 2000 Pakistan's military regime of General Pervez Musharraf announced a major 'de-weaponisation' plan for his country, now virtually awash with private fire arms than range from pistol to automatic machine gun. The immediate goal of the plan is to stop licensing new weapons and ban the public display of guns which gives an impression of lawlessness. Later, of course, the military would be rounding up the illegal weapons. If the guns are not turned in, the military says, they will be forcibly taken from the people after giving due warning. The state will also start a 'gun buying back' programme to reduce their number in private hands.

In the next phase the government plans to regulate the manufacture of weapons in the north-western tribal areas — the principal source of private fire arms and cancell thousands of licenses for automatic weapons issued by previous regimes. The overall intention seems to be to contain violence generated by those weapons and restore order in Pakistan that is fast turning ungovernable under the influence of a pervasive gun culture. The authorities tried to crack down on this monstrous problem also in the past but their efforts were blunted by its impregnable complexity. Can Musharraf make any headway on this utterly complex issue which would invariably bring him in clash with some of the country's vested interests that include Pakistan's gun-toting religious militants?

The fire arms had traditionally been a proud possession of an average Pakistani. But it's lure for them increased from the abundance of firearms since early 1980s when the United States sent huge supplies of weapons through Pakistan to the world.

Over the years all these sources of weapons fed and replenished, where required the private armories of the feudal land owners and tribal chiefs. The sectarian groups — the Shiites and Sunnis — also built up their sophisticated arsenals with weapons from the same sources. In rural Sindh, it is alleged, the bandits rob and kill people at random with their light machine guns. To match their opponents the criminals heavily arm themselves. Many businessmen, politicians and bureaucrats have their stock of private arms for protection. The ethnic groups like the MQM found weapons to be the sole instrument for their survival as evidenced from their bitter struggle with the opponents in Karachi and Sindh.

This unprecedented accumulation of weapons in private hand poses a direct challenge to country's lawful authority and a stable internal order. The inter-ethnic hatred and feuds, the greeds for the spoils and an instinct for revenge and survival together with the an easy access to the sources of armed produce a heady mix for crimes of bewildering variety. Not only have they disrupted the country's economic life — in Karachi above thousands of people died since mid-1980s. The country's overall crime rate also continued to rise. The fire arms related crimes like murder, sniper victim and bomb blast have also increased. Even during the rule of General Musharraf the criminal incidents from the rocket blasts in Islamabad to the assassination of Iqbal Khan, the defending lawyers of former prime minister in Karachi have been highly disturbing for the regime.

All these partly explain why the military government confronted with myriad other issues of the polity and exasperated with its own problem of le-

gitimacy decided to take on this particular menace. Even if the reactions to the steps taken in this regards are mixed so far they however seem to be performing miracle. Since March 1, the deadline for not displaying arms in public the Port City of Karachi has been unusually civic with no gun battle, no violence rippling through its normal life. Even the warning factories of the MQM seem to be taking a breather. Even if some of the political and tribal leaders are pessimistic, supports also have been powering in from various quarters. Many suggested tougher actions like cancelling all gun licenses and ordering every body to term in his guns immediately. They view the weapons to be destroying the country's pristine culture as well as its body politic and values.

But the government's real problem in its anti-gun drive lies elsewhere. The sceptics wonder how will it work if the government continues to support religious militants. Heavily armed radical Islamic groups whom Musharraf is himself believed to be patronising will be difficult to be disarmed. Because their cause is extremely popular within the army and if the government places arms restriction on the militants there could be serious consequence of it and even they (militants) might twin their guns on the military rulers. Equally difficult will be any attempt to disarm the gun-loving tribal areas of NWFP and Balochistan. Although the authorities insist that there will be no exception in the new laws it remains to be seen how do they proceed with regards to Islamic militants groups as well as the tribals in imposing their anti-gun rights.

The author is a Brigadier of Bangladesh Army.

Trouble for the Couple?

The surrender of Laloo Yadav and Rabri Devi in India may not be all sunshine for others, especially the NDA and the Congress party, writes **Navine Murshid**

IN a twist to the unfolding political drama in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, Laloo Prasad Yadav and his wife, Chief Minister Rabri Devi, surrendered before a special court on Wednesday after they were accused of amassing ill-gotten wealth.

The court granted bail to Rabri Devi but rejected the bail plea of Laloo, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief. Yadav is accused of having appropriated Rs. 4.2 million disproportionately to his known sources of income from 1990-96 when he was Chief Minister of the country's one of the poorest states. His wife is accused of aiding and abetting him in acquiring the wealth.

Laloo Prasad Yadav being taken away to jail may not be the right solution to curb vio-

lence and agitation in Bihar. There is no reason to undermine Laloo's popularity. Especially since they surrendered themselves, the idea of having a back-up may not be ruled out.

While he has a rather disgraced image with corruption cases lined up on his neck, he is also responsible for giving low-caste Indians in Bihar a voice they never had. And these low caste people are a rowdy bunch.

Laloo created sensation when he stepped down from his post as Chief Minister, for yet another money scandal, only to declare his illiterate wife to be his successor. This time around, when the duo is faced with another scandal, they have a lot of support. Rabri Devi's (Laloo's wife) status as Bihar's Chief Minister saved her from going

to jail. This gives her a lot of time to plan her next move.

Her not having any political background and education should not mislead people into thinking that she is incapable of running her party. We see such leaders in Bangladesh who are doing their job quite well. There is no reason to doubt her capabilities.

Earlier, when governor Vinod Pande asked Nitish to form government and Congress gave their support, Laloo was visibly angered and had demanded the governor's order be rescinded. The fervour may not be lost yet.

The opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) demanded that Rabri Devi resign immediately. It even asked Governor Vinod Pande to dismiss her government in case

she does not step down. "We will continue our agitation till Rabri Devi is in power because we will not let a formally charged person remain chief minister of the state," a senior NDA leader is quoted to have said.

Laloo Yadav's determination The NDA would try to take full advantage of Laloo being in jail.

The Congress too would look forward to Rabri Devi's resignation, thinking that a Congressman would become the next chief minister. But Laloo Yadav and Rabri Devi may not be willing to give up. They are up for yet another fight for power. There is not reason for the NDA or the Congress to be hopeful, unless they know what they are up against unless they have a plan number two as well.

This gives her a lot of time to plan her next move.

Pakistan's proposal to India for talks may well be taken as a positive result from Clinton's trip. India remains unwilling. Has Islamabad suffered a diplomatic defeat? Does President Clinton's interests in Bangladesh arise from the inadequacies that India and Pakistan provide? As South Asia settles down to the aftermath of US President's visit, its impacts are beginning to unfold. Did President Clinton's visit indicate a significant policy shift in South Asia? **Ekram Kabir, A Maher and Navine Murshid** search for the answers

The Charade is Over, Long Live Ties



INDIA rejected Pakistan's first formal proposal for the resumption of peace talks last Friday. It said that Islamabad must first halt its alleged support for cross-border "terrorism" in Kashmir.

Referring to a meeting between Pakistani Foreign Secretary Inamul Huq and the Indian High Commissioner G. Parthasarathy, an Indian foreign ministry spokesman was quoted to have said: "During the meeting, the Pakistan foreign secretary conveyed his country's desire to renew dialogue with India and also raised concerns about India's so-called aggressive postures against Pakistan. But right conditions have to be created first for a dialogue."

The offer made by Islamabad on March 29 was the first formal proposal since the military takeover there on October 12 last year. Earlier Pakistan's Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf had made some public offers for talks, but New Delhi had decided to remain non-responsive.

Peace talks between India and Pakistan have remained frozen since the military conflict that took place last summer between the two nations. Ten weeks of fighting in the Kargil mountains of Kashmir, which began in May '99, followed a landmark bus journey by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to Lahore. The offer made by Islamabad on March 29 was the first formal proposal since the military takeover there on October 12 last year. Earlier Pakistan's Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf had made some public offers for talks, but New Delhi had decided to remain non-responsive.

Since Islamabad's offer came four days after US President Bill Clinton wrapped up his week-long tour of the subcontinent, the implications of the offer are more important than what is presumed in the two capitals, especially in New Delhi. In this respect, India's rejection of holding talks does not augur well for the South Asians region at large.

There are serious problems between these two countries, none more serious than the dispute over Kashmir, and if headway is to be made in resolving them, then the two countries must sit across the table and talk. There has to be some flexibility in attitudes, no matter how rigid the situation may seem. There must be the political will to move away from their respective dogmatic positions, if they want what is good for the region.

New Delhi, with the passage of time, appears to have hardened its earlier stand further of not doing business with the military ruler. India worked for the postponement of the Saarc summit, to be held in Kathmandu in November last year, because it did not want that platform used by the coup leader to get respectability. Moreover, India, along with some African countries, spearheaded the move for Pakistan's suspension from the Commonwealth.

India may have reasons to think that Pakistan is diplomatically on the losing side. New Delhi has become successful in isolating Islamabad during the US President's visit to the subcontinent. But did President Clinton's visit indicate changes in the US policies altogether?

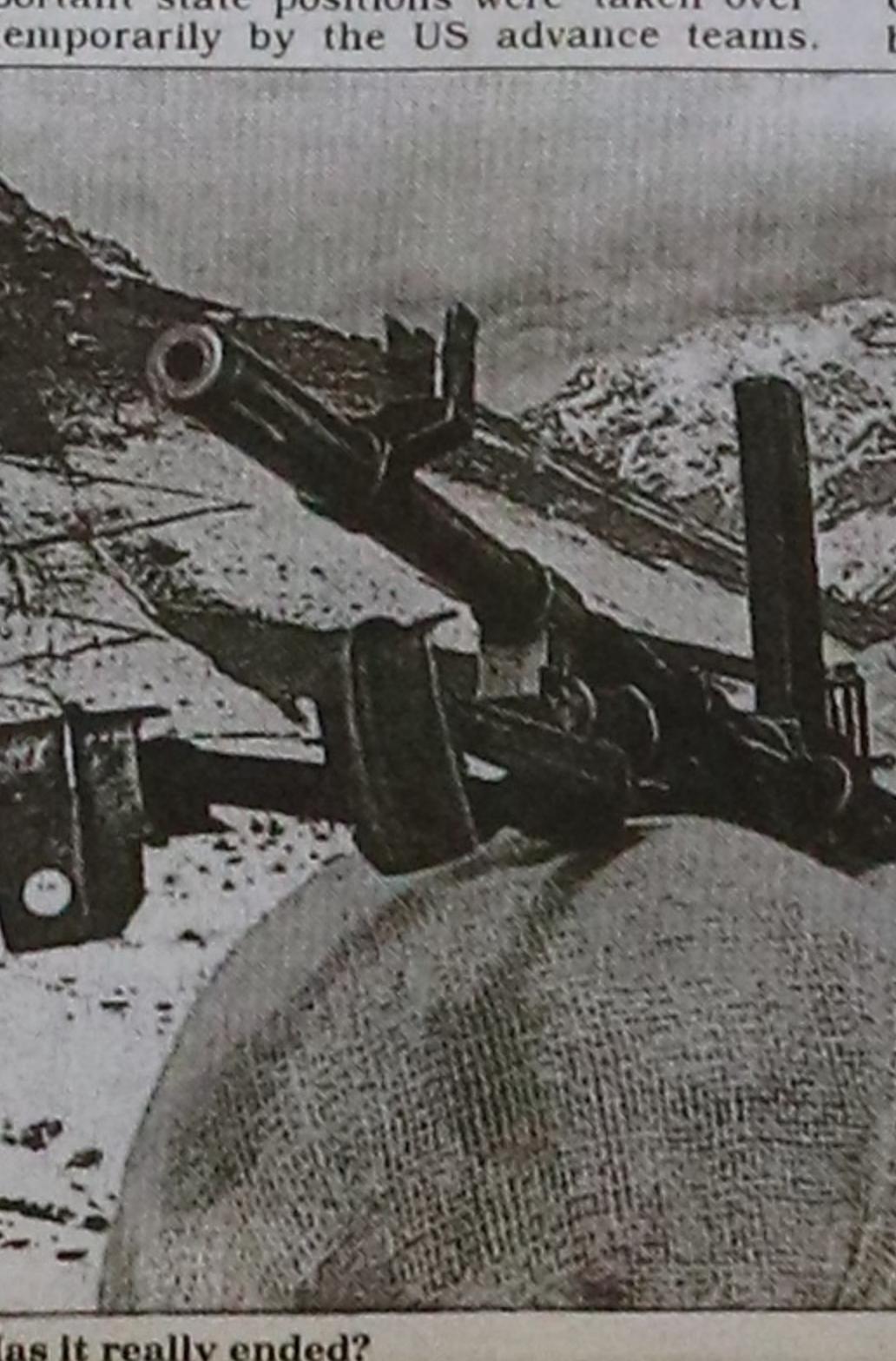
Clinton's trip may have signalled a clear preference for democratic India over military-ruled Pakistan as a future US partner in South Asia, but the old allies certainly kept their relationship going. India, basking in the afterglow of the visit, should not feel that it has diplomatically defeated Pakistan, by creating divisions in US-Pakistan relations. Although the Chief Executive of Pakistan admitted for the first time that his country was having problems in its relations with America and he would be trying to find avenues to improve them, yet it would be inappropriate to assess that Pakistan has been internationally sidelined.

According to Pakistani defence analyst M H Askari: "Americans heads of state have had very close relations with military rulers in the past. It would be naive to believe that any amount of sermonising would either hasten the process of restoration of democracy or restore status quo ante as on October 12, 1999. That is one issue best left to the ongoing judicial process to determine."

Many like him in Pakistan think, as the US government has said time to time, that America still has high stakes in Pakistan, no matter how much the former rebukes the latter in public. What does the US really want from Pakistan? The US fears religious fundamentalism and the Taliban. Then there is Osama bin Laden who poses a serious threat to the US both in terms of global terrorism and interest in the Middle East. It will need Pakistan to prevent nuclear technology transfer to Iran, and for that matter to any Arab country. Moreover, Pervez Musharraf's recently-concluded visit to Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam and Thailand is an ample proof that Pakistan is not going to sit idle. There are reasons to believe that Pakistan's participation in post-cold war power axis is still necessary and may increase after a brief setback. And this is all the reason why India should agree to resume peace talks with Islamabad.

In the meantime, Pakistan has shown a remarkable gesture of goodwill by allowing a gas pipeline to India from Iran through Pakistani territory. This may well be the context against which New Delhi should start communicating with its important neighbour. If the spirit of the Lahore bus ride can be put in place even partially, the existing gap between the two countries is bound to narrow down. Indeed, history was made in Lahore when a beaming Vajpayee descended from the bus as the then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was waiting anxiously to greet his counterpart in the historic city.

It would be doing injustice to the region if India thinks there's no need to engage Pakistan. Kashmir is not problem that will disappear from inattention. India should not be settled on the point that it would not talk to a military ruler. It also needs to think about other neighbours in the region. After Pakistan's offer for talks,



Has it really ended?

There were reports of FBI men moving in and out of Minto Road area buildings, a sign of infringement upon state security areas. Could Clinton's coming possibly been interrupted if some of our 'sensitive' locations were not allowed to be rummaged by US advance teams?

Business and commerce were important agendas even before the President's visit. There were some last-minute hassles that threatened to spoil the atmosphere. The Dhaka team's performance with the oil and gas companies regarding signing of PSCs (Production-Sharing Contracts) with three major US companies was outright reproachable. The Petrobangla bungle miserably exposed the typical state of bureaucracy in the country. Thought provoking to ponder why this notorious sport was not for their intelligence departments to discover for themselves! Maybe they had done so discreetly earlier, as Commerce Secretary William Daley frowned on some artfully termed 'red-tape' snags that tied up US companies here. His comments furthered upon support for 'critical structure' in Bangladesh would do to American interests with India and Pakistan. For Bangladesh though, it would mean careful scrutiny of the sectors left out (a very unfair term in the context of BD-USA relations) for development, with sound foresight and intelligence. To an extent we were overwhelmed by the visit with respect to the business conference arranged with our local community and the American delegation. As one of our Chamber chiefs put it, the conference was a bit out of focus and many serious issues could have been discussed.

Back in the sun, the Clinton visit would no doubt promote American investment in Bangladesh whether immediate or some time in the future. The local business community seem to have a better understanding, now, of what their American, or any other foreign investors, would expect from Bangladeshi business environment.

Bangladesh, a nation of 120 million, half below the poverty curve, has been the recipient of many a comment fitting the needy. So it is embarrassing, if not downright infuriating, to see approaches that drag our hopeful pangs of the public offices. Asking for debt relief on a 10-hour official visit (and that too the first one) is arguably, incredulous when it could be inflicted at subsequent talks when the US President was not in Dhaka.

A lesson worth learning from Clinton: his sweet repertoire on how standing debts could be turned into grants for use in infrastructure had many charmed into solvency. Another important opportunity arising from this visit is to comment on the role of the opposition parties in the last decade, linked to foreign debts.

The US should note how much Bangladesh could have paid through the negative 'pay-offs' from the *halal* or strikes called in the last ten years by all in the political arena. Could that money not have been used for paying off national stakes? Or are we acquiring much too easily and materialising the shackles of financial slavery?

On a positive note the telecommunications sector received a boost in the form of WorldTel's investment to install over 300,000 digital telephones. Better communications would mean more commerce and faster Internet processing, in whole a rapidly changing industrial and economic landscape. This is again a wake-up call for the BTB and concerned authorities to take advantage of the superior technological know-how it is being exposed to. Privatisation will further strengthen Bangladesh's telecom base. The national regulators must be pressed to redraft their policies and, in the face of resistance, even be broken up to check monopolistic attitudes and ensure this opportunity is exploited to the full. The impact on Internet facilities must be taken seriously, as the sorry state of the present facilities prevents us from doing basic tasks and keep abreast of the rest of the world.

President Clinton had a motivating effect on South Asia as a whole. Taking from Clinton, when East meets West there is bound to be much ado about a lot of things.