

Growing American interest in Pakistan occupied Kashmir

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AS President Barack Obama rules out an "outside" solution to Kashmir, there are strong indications that the United States is fast developing interest in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). Pertinent in this regard was the five-day visit of a three member delegation from the US embassy in Islamabad to Gilgit Baltistan. The embassy delegation comprising Lisa Buezonos (Political/Economic officer), Kimberley Phelan (Political Officer) and Khalid Javed (Security Advisor) visited Gilgit Baltistan between 30 May and 3 June 2012. Their high profile visit to the region came as a surprise in view of the recent sectarian strife in the region. Prior to the visit, the US embassy officials approached the local administration in Gilgit Baltistan for security cover.

Subsequently, the US Ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, paid a visit to the so-called Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK) on 13 June 2012. Munter held meetings with AJK Prime Minister Chaudhury Abdul Majeed in Muzaffarabad and interacted with representatives from NGOs (those which benefited from US assisted projects). The press release from the US embassy noted that Munter's visit was mainly to reiterate US support for the education sector and local development in the so-called AJK. The US ambassador committed that USAID (United States Agency for International Development) will provide more than Rs. 450 million for AJK through social welfare schemes. Recalling US assistance to AJK in the aftermath of the 2005 earthquake, the ambassador noted that "the United States has an enduring partnership with this region." Reports say that the US has offered generous support and aid for efforts to raise living standards in AJK. Incidentally, a delegation from USAID visited the municipal library in Gilgit on 9 July 2012 and promised a sum of \$30,000 for modernizing it. This amount was earmarked from the Ambassador's Fund Programme.

The US has in the past funded the Satapra dam project, which is located a few kilometres from Skardu (the capital of Baltistan). It is a small dam with an approximate capacity of 17 Mw. Later, while Pakistan was facing a crunch in the ambitious and equally controversial Diamer Bhasha Dam, it approached the US for part of the funding. Although the US was initially reluctant to involve itself in the project, given Pakistan's continuous insistence and the overall deterioration in US-Pakistan ties, it relented and agreed to fund the project from the Kerry Lugar Berman Package (promised to Pakistan in 2009). Since the project is huge, Pakistan hopes to garner funds from various international agencies. US participation, Pakistan believes, would give the project some amount of

credibility and induce donor agencies and countries to participate in the consortium.

Here, it is useful to analyse the purpose and intent behind the US interest in a disputed region legally claimed by India. In August 2010, an article in the New York Times by Selig Harrison on the Chinese foray in Gilgit Baltistan created stirrings in the Western strategic circles. Harrison's reputation added to the credibility and acceptance of the revelation made therein. Similarly, some others reports published from US based think tanks indicated the extent and nature of Chinese presence in Gilgit Baltistan and how this could alter the regional strategic equations in South Asia. Thus, the newly found US interest and engagement in PoK has strong geopolitical underpinnings. The geopolitical angle is based on a set of existing equa-

influence in the region and PoK in particular. US diplomats during their visits have expressed willingness to assist the local government in PoK in improving basic amenities in the otherwise underdeveloped region. Apart from smaller projects, the US also tends to invest in big projects as evident in its recent nod to provide funds for the controversial Diamer Bhasha dam project. Keeping in view the disputed nature of the location of the dam project, the US had earlier said no to Pakistan's repeated requests. Eventually, however, the US rightly judged that if it refused to fund the project then the Chinese would come in most willingly.

Unlike the Chinese involvement in PoK, which is more economically oriented, the US seems to be heading to target the social sectors in a positive way. For instance, during its visit, the US embassy delegation held a meeting with a woman legislator to learn about the role of women in governance there. Another visit to a women's police station to enquire about its role and functioning also featured on the delegation's agenda.

Engaging counter forces against Pakistan

A large section of the Diaspora from PoK and Gilgit Baltistan in particular is based in the US. These people have founded think tanks and advocacy groups which have slowly and steadily created awareness about PoK in the western world. They have often raised pertinent issues, the most important being Pakistan's subjugation and unilateral policies towards PoK. These groups have held demonstrations and testified before the UN Human Rights Commission and the US Congress.

Pakistan has taken exception to such attempts at engaging nationalists and evoking responses on contentious issues such as the governance order. In fact, subsequent to the trip by US embassy officials, Pakistani security forces stopped a vehicle carrying American diplomats who on their way back from Swat and apprehended their Pakistani companions. They have also raised concerns about such 'unauthorised' trips. After the US Congress hearing on Balochistan in February 2012, Pakistan is particularly sensitive to such US moves.

Conclusion

The US involvement in PoK is driven purely by its strategic interests. It seems to be devising a multi-pronged agenda to deal with the growing Chinese influence in the region, to compel Pakistani acquiescence in the ongoing stabilising efforts in Afghanistan and ensure long term presence in the entire region.

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tions between the US, Pakistan and China within the overall ambit of US interests in the Asia Pacific region. Presently, Chinese presence in the PoK region is a reality and so is the purported global Sino-US rivalry. Pakistan, a close ally of both the US and China, lies at the centre of this rivalry and so does the strategically placed PoK. At the same time, relations between the US and Pakistan are at an all time low and fat aid packages have failed in reversing the tide in the US's favour. Concurrently, relations between China and Pakistan have flourished with enhanced levels of political and economic engagement. The Chinese are investing heavily in PoK, even though their aid and investments are much less publicized than those of the Americans.

In the given context, a preliminary assessment of US objectives in this part of Kashmir can be done under three broad heads.

Containing Chinese influence in PoK

In the emergent scenario, the US feels that it is essential to bag any opportunity to curtail Chinese

India-Pakistan: Moving beyond CBMs

ALI AHMED

IN wake of the Abu Jindal revelations, not much could be expected from the Joint Statement at the end of the recently held meeting between the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan. For that reason perhaps the 'one small step' that has potential of being 'a giant leap' for the region has been missed. This article recommends a direction for taking the refreshing initiative forward. The nugget in question reads: "It was decided that separate meetings of the Expert Level Groups on Nuclear and Conventional CBMs will be held to discuss implementation and strengthening of the existing CBMs and suggest additional mutually acceptable steps that could build greater trust and confidence between the two countries, thereby contributing to peace and security."

This reflects an intention on part of the two security establishments to discuss CBMs in the two fields nuclear and conventional separately. While five rounds of talks had taken place between the Lahore Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), in which such meets were envisaged, and 26/11, the resumption of the joint working group meets was only in December 2011. This meeting was reviewed during the recent foreign secretary talks and the decision to separate the discussion on CBMs, which will enable a more detailed look at each domain, was the happy outcome.

A separate expert level dialogue on nuclear CBMs is in order since vertical proliferation and a diversification in the arsenal and defensive measures, such as ballistic missile defences, are speedily underway in the subcontinent. The separation suggests that the two governments sensibly see the nuclear domain as a stand alone one. This is in keeping with India's stand that nuclear weapons have no military value. Pakistan, on the other hand, believes in the military utility of nuclear weapons, hence its first use doctrine.

The intention to form an independent expert group for discussing conventional CBMs is heartening. The significance of this forum derives from the devastation that terrorism has wrought in the

region. India's answer to sub conventional provocation, the Cold Start doctrine, has shortened the window for crisis resolution. The expert group can be put to good use to discuss threat perceptions and war game reactions in such instances so as to build in firewalls between terror attacks and conventional fisticuffs.

Further, the notion of a conventional working group suggests a more visible military presence. The working group will be a useful forum for the two militaries to have representatives directly



across the table, even if one is sprinkled with defence bureaucrats. For a start, it can take up the lone pending issue of the Lahore MOU - the absence of CBMs on the seas. It can help narrow down the differences over Siachen by preparing a demilitarization document for the two states to sign. It can explore the expansion of the ceasefire on the Line of Control to include joint patrolling. With time, habits of cooperation may form (as is the intent behind the concept of CBMs) to enable a more ambitious agenda, such as resurrecting the environment damaged by the million plus land mines there.

The levels of trust necessary for ensuring that the promises made in the Lahore MOU for discussing the doctrines are fulfilled can be built up in the more focused group. This can be envisioned

only in case there is a meeting of minds in the conventional experts group. India can use the conventional experts group to persuade Pakistan that the conventional military balance is not skewed in India's favour. Arriving at a shared understanding on the strategic balance can serve as a forerunner to doctrinal change towards No First Use in the nuclear sphere. Together it will make both states secure.

Lastly, to withstand the test of the next terrorist-instigated crisis, the experts groups must either be standing forums in continuous session or capable of being called into session at the time of a crisis outbreak. They can then serve as crisis defusing mechanisms, helping to execute and monitor policies and decisions mutually arrived at through exchanges over the multiple hotlines in play. In effect, they can be 'camouflaged' Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers.

The understanding that undergirds this recommendation is that the two states share a mutual interest in crisis management and de-escalation. Therefore, mechanisms to bring this about have to already be in place. The two forums can supplement the hotlines currently available. Such direct interface of experts, acquainted with each other, would be in addition to existing diplomatic channels actively addressing the crisis, thereby enabling early and easier resolution.

The separation enables the requirement under Article 6 of the Lahore MOU, which caters to the setting up of 'appropriate consultative mechanisms'. Whether these fulfill the promise of Article 1 'bilateral consultations on security concepts, and nuclear doctrines...' will be their true test. If these two separate experts groups can in time be combined to become a forum for a strategic dialogue, going beyond CBMs to mutual and balanced forces reduction, including nuclear stockpiles, then peace would truly be at hand.

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A Piece of land and our Mannan Bhai

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR, BIR PROTIK

THE sun beat down fiercely as I walked down the track leading to the primary school of Khargor. Khargor is a small village under Nabinagar upazilla under Brahmanbaria district. It is located at a distance of 15 kilometer west of Brahmanbaria. The students of the primary school assembled under the trees next to the school to participate in the discussion on Liberation War. I am following up the project of participating in the discussion on Liberation War of Bangladesh mainly with the student community in the rural areas. Braving the hit, the students were attentive and engrossed when I was discussing with them on the various incidents of Liberation War.

At the end of the discussion, I asked the students if any of their family members were killed by Pakistan army and their collaborators during Liberation War. To my surprise, a large number of students, teachers and even the Headmaster raised their hands. The Headmaster told me during Liberation War a large number of people of Khargor were killed by Pakistan army. He requested me to accompany him to the killing field where the brutality took place. I readily agreed to his proposal and followed him to the site. Behind me the students followed.

We walked through dried grass. The dirt tracks lead us to the bank of Pagolini River. The villagers who were taking shelter from the sweltering summer heat were watching us with almost lazy curiosity. Slowly they started to come around and the crowd started to grow.

I was offered a mat to sit under a tree near the river bank. The village elders and others sat in front of me. I wanted to know from the village elders about the incident of 1971 in the village which caused the loss of so many lives. They started by telling that on the night of October 9, 1971 Pakistan army column attacked Barail



village adjacent to Khargor. 17 freedom fighters were camped inside the village. The fire fight started and continued for about one hour. The freedom fighters appeared to be out numbered and out gunned. So they retreated through adjacent Khargor village in the cover of the night.

On the October 10, 1971, early in the morning the villagers were awakened by the sound of launches coming through the Pagolini River. To their horror, they found two large steel bodied launches carrying Pakistan army soldiers along with their collaborators approaching their village. Within minutes, the soldiers jumped out of the launches and landed on the river bank and started firing and running inside the village. They began indiscriminate killing of villagers. The poor villagers screamed and begged but no one listened, no one cared. They were left abandoned to their fate. At first they shot the elderly peasant, Ful Miah, who was tall and strong looking. They shot him to death and the wireless operator shouted in the set that the Mukti Bahini Commander has been killed. Ful Miah was just a village peasant. The gruesome killing continued and within nearly two hours forty-nine dead bodies were lying in a pool of blood and there were 173 wounded villagers. The village was totally burnt down.

The army left in their launches after which the villagers who were hiding came back to see the horrific scene. The wounded were screaming for help. Some help came from nearby villages. The wounded were carried by boat to the nearby medical centers. It was almost evening time. The villagers had to bury their dead. Due to delayed monsoon in the area, the small graveyard of the village located in the low land near the river was submerged under water. Only the houses were above the water level. There was no place to bury the dead. The villagers started preparing rafts made of banana trees on which they would lay the dead and let the river carry them. It was a pathetic decision but they had no choice. The 49 dead villagers would not get a resting place even after death on the land they were born.

Abdul Mannan was watching the situation quietly. He owned a piece of high land near the river bank. He came up and told the villagers not to let their dead be left into the river. "Take my land. Bury my brothers and sisters in my land." Some village people reminded Mannan that was the only land he has. He should make a logical judgment. Mannan replied, "This is not the time to think about the future." Mannan along with madrasa students of the village Abdul Kalam and Abdul Qader with the help of other villagers buried the dead by night fall.

War was over, the country was liberated. Mannan had no land so he started working to process the paddy in other's houses. I saw Mannan wearing a torn lungi, a gamcha hung around his neck and in poor health. I asked him what the valuation of the land would be today. Mannan replied that he is not sure but it could be around 8 lakh Taka and the villagers agreed with it. I asked him if he repented for giving his only property for burial of his fellow dead villagers while, at present, he is working in others' homes. Mannan casually smiled and told me he feels satisfied that his friends and family were buried there and were not carried away by the waters of the Pagolini River.

When I was returning from the village that night, I was remembering people who fight for possession of land, money and wealth but Mannan Bhai has set such a glorious example for us all to follow. When I walked further away I prayed silently, "Please God, open the golden gate of heaven for dear Mannan Bhai."

Mannan Bhai's sacrifice is a fascinating tale. An unnoticed common man of the village had set an example for creating the future of a good nation. Mannan Bhai tried to show us where to start from but we have largely ignored his example.

This is the story of a man, a fine human being and a hero. His balled of sacrifice should go down to generations. His is the spirit of the strong dutiful patriot of our country. Let us remember the sacrifice of Mannan Bhai who still struggles for survival on the bank of Pagolini River.

The writer is Freedom Fighter.