
India and Pakistan

Psychological warfare and the 'no-war' talks

by Daniel Sneider, in New Delhi

Amidst much diplomatic fanfare, Pakistani Foreign Minister Agha Shahi and his Indian counterpart Narasimha Rao conducted talks in the Indian capital during the weekend of Jan. 30 centered on a proposed non-aggression or "no-war" pact between the two countries. They agreed in essence to keep talking, with another round scheduled for later this month.

In the midst of the conclusion of a giant arms deal with the United States, including the possible use of Pakistan as a staging base for the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force, the Pakistanis made a nebulous offer last September of a "no-war" pact. The Indians, caught off guard, took some time to respond, pointing out that Pakistan had refused numerous Indian offers of a non-aggression pact over the previous 30 years and questioning the *bona fides* of this sudden change of heart. After the talks, certain things became clear, particularly from the remarks of Agha Shahi at the concluding joint press conference.

First, the Pakistani concept of the pact excludes any common view of the security situation in the region, because, as Shahi admitted, no such agreement can be reached. Further, Shahi stated that the pact will have "no bearing" on the U.S. arms deal or Pakistan's overall security ties with Washington. The Pakistani refusal to link a "common security perception" to the pact reflects India's distaste for the Pakistani move to line up anti-Soviet policy in the United States, in South Asia and in the Persian Gulf. The Indians insist that any pact must contain an assurance that Pakistan will not grant the Pentagon base facilities in any form. The Pakistanis are refusing any such assurances. One view in India circles is that the Pakistanis' desire for the pact is genuine and is backed by the United States, but only for the objective of cooling down the Indian front, so as to have a freer hand to use Pakistan as a base for operations in the Gulf region, including possible operations into Iran.

Second, the Pakistanis insist on separating the talk of a pact from advances on bilateral issues such as trade, economic relations, and travel. The Indians, in contrast, seek to emphasize "confidence-building" bilateral measures which would have a concrete effect and to base such efforts on the 1972 Simla Agreement, which ended the

Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 and included an agreement to settle disputes without the use of force.

Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, intervened twice by means of an interview with a group of Pakistani journalists and a half-hour meeting with Shahi. In the interview, Mrs. Gandhi dramatically offered to sign a "friendship treaty" with Pakistan, an offer which garnered headlines and put the Pakistanis on the spot. During the meeting with Shahi, she proposed the formation of a joint commission like the ones India has established with other countries to pursue an improvement of bilateral relations, a proposal Shahi accepted.

Mrs. Gandhi was sharp and aggressive in her interview. She did not miss the opportunity to point out to a journalist who asked why India, with so much more territory, population, and resources than Pakistan, should fear attack, that these disparities have always existed and nevertheless it is Pakistan which committed "aggression," which "invaded India," and which occupies Indian territory in Kashmir today.

Mrs. Gandhi's role

Mrs. Gandhi also took care to make the point that India is not concerned with Pakistan's military buildup in itself, but sees the danger of war emanating principally from the global "heating up of the Cold War" and the efforts to make South Asia a battleground in that conflict. It is precisely such differences on "perceptions of security" in the region, she made clear, that is at the root of Indo-Pakistan tensions today. Z. A. Suleri, chief editor of the government-controlled *Pakistan Times*, termed the meeting he and his colleagues had with Mrs. Gandhi a "disillusioning experience." Observers of Pakistan say that Suleri represents hard-line circles in the military who are opposed to any sort of concession to India. There are thought to be some differences between these circles and a circle around Zia over how far to play out the diplomacy with India.

The unstated factor in these talks is the status of the Zia regime itself, a dictatorship which cannot claim the support of even a tiny minority of its population. One Indian journalist asked Agha Shahi if he represented the sentiment of his government alone, or also the Pakistani people. Shahi could only reply by citing the support given by the newly formed puppet parliament, the Majlis-e-Shooras, made up of the regime's appointees. In her interview Mrs. Gandhi made the point in her own way by pointedly referring to her talks with "the previous Pakistani leader," a reference to the popularly elected Z. A. Bhutto, hanged by the Zia regime.

I asked one of the Pakistani journalists privately whether he thought the talk of a "no-war" pact was serious. He quickly answered, "No, of course not. Both sides are just marking time. We are just waiting till we get the U.S. arms."