

Talbott makes foray to South Asia

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott's five-day (April 6-10) trip through India and Pakistan signalled the first serious effort by the Clinton administration since it came to power in January 1993 to develop a clearer understanding of the unresolved issues in the area. Although long before it started, Talbott's mission was labelled an attempt to coax, lure, or bully the two major South Asian nations to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, in reality, the trip turned out to be different. It was evident that the Clinton administration, while fully committed to such liberal democratic ideologies as non-proliferation and human rights, as defined by the western nations, was willing to listen carefully, and at the same time was probing to locate the weak links in the chain of arguments presented by the officials of both India and Pakistan.

Talbott's trip was considered highly significant in India primarily because of the confusion that had reigned in Indo-U.S. relations since President Clinton came to power. The situation became worse during the last nine months or so, when a number of wild and erratic statements came out of Washington on such issues as human rights and Kashmir. Such statements, which confused Delhi to no end and created an environment in which Clinton-bashing became the bread and butter of some news analysts here, emanated from the seat of executive power as well as from low- and middle-level State Department officials, whose arrogance matches that of the feudals of the subcontinent. The Clinton administration for over a year had left the U.S. Embassy without an ambassador, and the situation became more muddled for Delhi. This failure of the White House further fueled the misunderstanding in India about the true motives of the Clinton administration.

In Pakistan, on the other hand, the situation was even more tense. Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's government had come to power last November, apparently through a compromise arrangement which saw the Army, President, and Washington combining to help the ruling party. There was much speculation on the compromises made and what Bhutto could actually deliver when in power. It was generally acknowledged that she had assured Washington that she would help to "cap" Pakistan's nuclear armament program, a subject of much concern in Washington since the withdraw-

al of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989. However, it never became clear what the Pakistani Army would demand in order to agree to Washington's proposal, nor why it would go along with Bhutto's assurances to Washington on nuclear matters.

Hectic preparations

That the Talbott visit is important for Washington became evident from the hectic activities almost two weeks before Talbott actually left U.S. shores. First, the U.S. assistant secretary in charge of South Asia, Robin Raphel, came traipsing through both countries. Raphel, whose contribution to the prevailing confusion about the Clinton administration in Delhi was immense, was more circumspect and less of a loudmouth this time around. Apparently, Washington did not want Talbott to walk into a minefield and accomplish nothing. Hence, Raphel was kept on a short leash.

Pakistan Army Chief Gen. Abdul Waheed Kakkar arrived in Washington a week before Talbott's departure, to discuss "strategic matters" with his American hosts. The outcome was somewhat different. Washington offered General Kakkar the one-time lifting of the Pressler Amendment, which has held up American economic and military aid and sale of American military equipment to Pakistan since 1990, to allow Pakistan to get delivery of 38 F-16 aircraft, along with a few P3 Orions, all of which have been paid for in advance by Islamabad. In return, Washington asked General Kakkar to support the "capping" of Pakistan's nuclear armament program.

Talbott, along with former World Bank president Robert McNamara, reportedly met with General Kakkar to promote the case of Moeen Qureshi, former caretaker prime minister of Pakistan, put into power by Washington after the fall of the Nawaz Sharif government last year, to push through some of the privatization programs to suit the International Monetary Fund-World Bank policies. Reports indicate that Qureshi was promoted as a potential prime minister, President, finance minister, or foreign minister.

New paradoxes

These preparatory moves had mixed results. While Raphel did succeed in soothing Indian nerves to some extent, General Kakkar categorically rejected the lure for "capping." Bhutto, sensing the mood, made similar noises. On the other hand, the proposal for one-time lifting of the Pressler Amendment and allowing Pakistan to pick up the paid-for 38 F-16s did not make the Indians happy, either. In Delhi, strategists began to question Washington's wisdom in allowing Pakistan to have F-16 fighter aircraft which can carry nuclear warheads over a short distance. They complained that such a deal would enhance instability in the area and hence was unacceptable to India. In the verbal duel, it was forgotten that Pakistan already has one squadron of F-16s, and that those F-16s are as capable of carrying nuclear warheads as

the new ones.

The new discontent in Delhi posed fresh problems to Talbott and the Clinton administration. A good deal of time during the trip was spent in convincing the Indians that the successful "capping" of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, in return for 38 F-16s, will enhance India's security. It is not clear that Talbott succeeded in making Delhi accept this argument. However, the issue may have little bearing on the events that may unravel in the coming days. What is certain at this point, is that Pakistan is not willing to make the swap of F-16s for nuclear "capping" in any case, and Washington will have to do more to make Pakistan swallow this bitter pill. Some Pakistani analysts demanded that the only *quid pro quo* which will work vis-à-vis the "capping" of the nuclear program is the one that involves Kashmir. However, it is evident that the Clinton administration is not keen to link these two volatile issues into one single package, at least not as of now.

Despite these paradoxes that acted as counterpoint throughout Talbott's visit, some policy directions have emerged from various statements that Talbott made. The most important is the refusal of the Clinton administration to link the non-proliferation issue with the disputes in Kashmir. Talbott made it clear that non-proliferation is an important enough issue for Washington to be discussed and resolved as a key item on the agenda in its own right.

On Kashmir, Talbott laid out the U.S. position which, he said, had been consistent all along—a claim few in the subcontinent will accept as true. "The United States hopes that India and Pakistan will be able to solve the matter themselves in accordance with the Shimla Agreement," Talbott told newsmen in Delhi. He also made it clear that Washington is not interested in looking at the past on the Kashmir affair and is concerned only about the present.

Talbott also came with a proposal to hold a regional security conference which will be attended by five nuclear weapons states, Japan and Germany, and, of course, India and Pakistan. The 5+2+2 formula, which is a broadening of the earlier Pakistani proposal for a conference on regional denuclearization, has been accepted by Pakistan and not rejected by India. As Talbott pointed out, all these issues need a lot of discussion and a lot of work.

From the Indian point of view, perhaps the biggest positive outcome from Talbott's visit is the tacit acceptance by Washington that India's nuclear weapons program must be dealt with separately from the Pakistani nuclear program. In "de-linking" the programs, the Clinton administration has paid attention to the Indian argument that the Indian nuclear program must be considered in light of the presence of other nuclear weapons states in the region. Pakistan, on the other hand, had always linked its entire nuclear weapons development with the Indian program.



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