

India and Pakistan vie for US's favor

Keith Jones
1 October 1999

India and Pakistan took their rivalry for the favor of the United States to Washington's Capitol Hill this week, marshaling the support of congressmen for their respective diplomatic positions. One Indian newspaper termed the maneuvering "a letter war" and "Kargil II," a reference to the recent Pakistani-organized military incursion into Indian-held Kashmir.

On Tuesday, 62 congressmen, including 16 senators, sent an open letter to the White House urging President Clinton to appoint a special envoy to mediate the Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir. Pakistan, a US Cold War ally, has repeatedly called for third-party, above all US, intervention in the Kashmir dispute.

The letter's release was timed to coincide with a visit to the US by the Pakistani foreign minister. Sartaj Aziz sought to make the Kashmir dispute the focus of a meeting Monday with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

Within hours of the letter's release, a Pakistani government spokesman in Islamabad was lauding it as an "overdue" and "positive" development. He noted that in the past decade the US had played a key role in a number of disputes, including the Middle East, Northern Ireland, the Balkans and East Timor, and said that if India is not ready to enter into a genuine dialog with Pakistan over Kashmir "there will be international involvement."

The letter, which was sponsored by Republican Dan Burton and Democrat David Bonior, motivates the call for the appointment of a special envoy by arguing that the Kashmir dispute goes to the heart of "the most dangerous nuclear flashpoint in the world today."

"The United States," it says, "should help break the stalemate over Kashmir to reduce the risk of nuclear war in the Asian subcontinent." The letter also urges Clinton to prevail on the UN to bolster its monitoring of the Line of Control (LoC) that separates Indian-held and Pakistani-held Kashmir.

The letter's most high-profile signatory is Jesse Helms, the arch right-wing Republican senator from North Carolina who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The name of Democratic Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, a former ambassador to India, was also included among the signatories, but Moynihan subsequently withdrew his endorsement, attributing it to a "misunderstanding" among his staff.

The breadth of the Congressional support for the letter apparently took the Indian government by surprise. One Indian newspaper described it as "a stunning setback to Indian lobbying efforts at the Hill."

Anxious to forge a new strategic partnership with the United States, India's political elite has been stoking US fears about the strength of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan and Pakistan's support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, while suggesting that a strong India can serve US interests by acting as a counterbalance to China.

India is now seeking to orchestrate a campaign to get the endorsement of more than 100 US legislators for a letter opposing any attempt by Washington to overtly intervene in the Kashmir dispute. Within hours of the release of the Burton-Bonior letter, Benjamin Gilman, chairman of the International Relations Committee in the House of Representatives, and his Democratic counterpart, Sam Gejdenson, published a counter-letter urging Clinton to spurn any call for the US to appoint a special envoy for Kashmir.

"Taking these steps, as well-intentioned as they may appear on the surface, would be a severe setback to the cause of regional security in South Asia," they wrote. Echoing the Indian government stance, they said appointment of an envoy "would act as a major, unnecessary and counter-productive attempt to substitute a US presence for bilateral dialogue" between India and Pakistan. "Instead of appointing a special envoy we should be urging Pakistan to stop sending

infiltrators across the LoC into India."

On Wednesday, Gary Ackerman, cochairman of the Congressional caucus on India and Indian Americans, said he had received assurances from "both the White House and the State Department" that there is "no question of the United States appointing a 'special envoy' to resolve the Kashmir issue."

India has always opposed third-party involvement in the Kashmir dispute because it insists, on the basis of a treaty of accession signed by the princely ruler of Kashmir under the British Raj, that all of Kashmir is Indian territory. It bitterly resents the traditional foreign policy stance of the US, which has treated India and Pakistan as geopolitical equals, rather than recognizing India as the regional superpower of South Asia and an equal of China.

While the "letter war" has not succeeded in changing US policy toward South Asia, the clash of pro-Indian and pro-Pakistani factions in the US Congress underscores that even though the current US administration and much of the security establishment are now orientating to a new strategic alliance with India, it will not be easily consummated. How to square India's ambitions to be recognized as a nuclear weapons state with the US policy of upholding the monopoly of the five traditional nuclear states is only one problem. Another major concern is that too strong a US tilt toward India will destabilize Pakistan, a state that is financially insolvent and riven by national-ethnic divisions and secessionist movements.

Last week, the State Department issued a statement opposing any attempt by the military to seize power in Pakistan, a message widely interpreted as a sign of support for the Muslim League regime of Nawaz Sharif. This week, with Sharif intensifying repression against his political opponents, the State Department issued a statement expressing concern over the mass arrests of anti-Sharif protesters in Karachi. It called on Islamabad "to carry out" its "responsibility to preserve the rights of free speech and press and peaceful assembly."

Meanwhile, Albright has reportedly told Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, who like Aziz was in New York this week to attend the opening of the UN General Assembly, that for Clinton a presidential visit to India "is a missing piece in his life." She also indicated that India's refusal to adhere to the

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty on nuclear weapons testing is no longer an impediment to Clinton visiting New Delhi early in the new year. No US president has visited India in more than two decades.



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