Top level US visit strengthens strategic ties with India

Vilani Peiris, K. Ratnayake
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The recent visit by US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and nine other senior US officials to the Indian subcontinent coincided with a flurry of diplomatic activity aimed at strengthening US involvement in the region and Washington's ties with New Delhi in particular.

At the same time as Armitage was in South Asia, India's national security adviser, Brajesh Mishra, travelled to Washington for a week of high-level talks with his US counterpart, Condoleezza Rice. Emphasising India's importance to the US, President Bush also met with Mishra. Indian Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani is due to visit Washington next month.

While Washington counts both rivals Pakistan and India as allies, the Bush administration's diplomacy is strongly weighted towards establishing a strategic relationship with the latter. The emphasis was evident in the different messages delivered by Armitage, particularly over the key issue of Kashmir. In Islamabad, the deputy secretary used strong-arm tactics to extract concessions from Pakistan. In New Delhi, notwithstanding recent Indian threats of preemptive action against its rival, he praised Prime Minister Atal Behari Vaypayee for his "statesmanship" for offering to hold talks with Pakistan.

Armitage arrived in Pakistan for discussions with President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali on May 8. At a press conference in Islamabad, the US official announced that Musharraf had given an "absolute assurance" that Pakistan would shut down any training camps in Pakistan-held Kashmir used by Islamic militia opposed to Indian rule in neighbouring Jammu and Kashmir. Previously, the Pakistani president has denied Indian claims that "terrorist camps" in Pakistani territory were being used to train and infiltrate fighters into Indian-controlled Kashmir.

The Pakistani-based newspaper, the *Nation*, quoting a senior military officer, claimed that Musharraf had made a further concession during Armitage's visit—that Pakistan would not continue to seek to have applied the existing UN resolutions on Kashmir. If true, the move represents a major Pakistani backdown which goes to the heart of the dispute over Kashmir dating to the communal partition of the subcontinent in 1947 into Muslim Pakistan and predominantly Hindu India.

The first war between the two countries erupted in 1948 over Kashmir where a Hindu maharaja ruled over a majority Muslim population. As part of efforts to end the fighting, a UN resolution in 1949 called for a plebiscite throughout divided Kashmir to decide the territory's future. Successive Pakistani regimes have insisted that a UN plebiscite be held, while their Indian counterparts have rejected any international involvement, fearing that Kashmir's Muslim majority would vote for separation.

Pakistan has not publicly confirmed the dropping of its demand for a plebiscite. But Pakistan's UN envoy made no reference to the 1949 resolution last week when his country took over the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council. Instead, he spoke of the need for "bilateral talks" with India to resolve the Kashmir issue. Washington, which previously supported the application of UN resolutions on Kashmir, has shifted its stance in line with its closer ties with India.

As a sign to Washington that it intends to crack down on armed Islamic groups, the Musharraf regime last week prevented the leader of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Mazood Azhar, from attending a rally in Pakistan-held Kashmir. Indian deputy prime minister Advani and the India media immediately praised the move. JeM is one of two groups accused by New Delhi of organising an attack on the Indian parliament building in December 2001.

In return for making concessions to India, the US has promised to consider writing off part of Pakistan's $1.8 billion in bilateral debts. Despite political opposition at home, Musharraf, who collaborated with Washington over the US invasion of Afghanistan, has few alternatives but to bow to US pressure and accept the money to prop up his cash-strapped regime. A US financial package is expected to be announced during Musharraf's scheduled trip to Washington in June.

Having extracted guarantees from Musharraf, Armitage flew to New Delhi for talks with Advani, Vajpayee and Foreign Minister Yaswant Sinha. In early April, Sinha sharply raised tensions by suggesting that India had a much better case for preemptive action against Pakistan than the US had for invading Iraq. He rapidly altered his stance after US officials began to exert pressure on Pakistan to halt "terrorist infiltration" in Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir.

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New Delhi's sabre rattling appears to have been aimed at gaining firm US backing over Kashmir. Having drawn Washington's attention, Vajpayee announced his offer of talks with Pakistan—on India's terms, that is provided Islamabad halts "cross border terrorism". Pakistan has repeatedly denied that it offers more than moral and political support to the armed separatists, which it regards as "freedom fighters" for the liberation of Kashmir from Indian rule.

Armitage confirmed US support for New Dehli. Speaking at a press conference at the end of his tour, he not only praised Vajpayee's "statesmanship" but also stressed the importance that the Bush administration places on India. He told the media that President Bush had sent him to South Asia "to make a point that although United States was heavily engaged in Iraq" it wants "to promote relations with India."

A similar message was spelled out to India's national security adviser Mishra in Washington. After meeting with Bush on May 7, Mishra said the president had emphasised the importance of continuous dialogue "between India and the US and [the] deepening of friendship". The talks covered US-Indian trade, US technology transfers to Indian and the sensitive issue of "civil nuclear cooperation"—all of which were subject to bans and restrictions following India's nuclear tests in 1998.

In return for its backing on Kashmir and economic cooperation, the Bush administration is seeking to establish India as a close military ally as part of plans for US intervention in the region. In a speech to the American Jewish Committee, Mishra signalled India's willingness to collaborate with Washington by proposing an alliance of US, India and Israel as part of the "war on terrorism".

A Pentagon document leaked on the Indian web site *rediff.com* last month indicated the extent of US military plans for links with India. Entitled *India US military relations: Expectations and Perceptions*, the study stated: "India's strategic location in the centre of Asia, astride the frequently travelled sea lanes of communications linking the Middle East and East Asia makes India particularly attractive to the US military."

The document cited an US military source as saying: "The US navy wants a relatively neutral territory on the opposite side of the world that can provide ports and support for operations in the Middle East. India not only has a good infrastructure, the Indian Navy has proved it can fix and fuel US ships.... In the same vein, the US Air Force would like the Indian bases and landing rights during operations, such as counter terrorism and heavy air lift support."

A US alliance with India is aimed at broadly securing US interests in the Middle East and Central Asia as well as acting as a counterweight to China, which Bush has branded as a "strategic competitor" of the United States. A recent article published in *Foreign Policy In Focus* pointed to rapidly developing defence ties between the US and India, including joint naval patrols in the Malacca Strait, workshops on ballistic missile defence and cooperation in defence technology.

The article, entitled *US and India—a dangerous alliance*, cited the remarks of Lloyd Richardson from the right-wing Hudson Institute who declared that India has the "economic and military strength to counter the adverse effects of China's rise as a regional and world power. India is the most over looked of our potential allies in strategy to contain China." It also quoted a leaked US Defence Department document which argued that "China represents the most significant threat to both countries' [India and US] security in the future as an economic and military competitor."

More immediately, Washington has requested India supply a substantial military force to assist in the US occupation of Iraq. New Delhi is yet to give a formal reply. In response to widespread opposition in India to the US invasion of Iraq, the Vajpayee government made rather muted criticisms of the US attack. Now it appears that New Delhi is considering doing Washington's bidding and joining a US-led "stabilisation force" in Iraq.

Deputy Prime Minister Advani hinted this week at the favour that India may be asking in return—more US pressure on Pakistan. He noted that Pakistan had transferred more than 500 Al Qaeda suspects to American authorities over the last year but refused to hand over 20 suspects on India's wanted list for terrorist attacks. He said that he intended to discuss the matter during his Washington trip next month.

Just as the Bush administration regards India as a useful tool to further its global ambitions, so the Hindu chauvinists of India's ruling Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) view an alliance with the US as the means for aggressively asserting their interests, particularly against rival Pakistan. Far from lessening tensions, such actions lay the basis for potentially explosive conflict in the region.

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