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Reputation on the line

By Deepanshu Bagchee and Matthew C J Rudolph

The United States' intervention has helped de-escalate the eight-month-old Indo-Pak. crisis. Both locals and outsiders now breathe a bit easier. India's reputation as a responsible international player has been enhanced. But the opportunity afforded by this calmer interlude must be seized to consolidate a more stable and secure path toward resolution.

The equivalence drawn by some Indians between the terror of Al Qaeda and that of Pakistani-backed militants in Kashmir is incomplete, for it serves to gloss over the failure of Indian governance in the Valley dating back, first to the late 1950s, and again more recently to the 1980s. Indian compliance with the letter but not the spirit of Article 370 is the heart of the matter. Given the importance of Kashmir to the "idea of India" the Center has done too little to solve the problems of poor governance and alienation in the State. Successive Central Governments have addressed the J&K issue with an imbalanced emphasis on security, scanting the more complicated tasks of development and representation.

Today, New Delhi's biggest priority must be to ensure a free and fair poll in J&K in the coming months. It would be unrealistic to expect an election in J&K to be more stable and peaceful than one in other troubled States such as Bihar and Tripura. In the post September 11 environment such an expectation would be quixotic, or worse, cynical. For Indian hawks, any disruption during this period will be cited as sufficient justification to end India's current policy of self-restraint. This impulse must be resisted.

There is still a reasonable scepticism about Pervez Musharraf's recent U.S.-inspired commitments to fully seal the Pakistani side of the Line-of-Control. Today's tenuous peace may easily be broken by a new terrorist attack. Those who feel they were robbed in the last round—and are still spoiling for a fight—will maintain pressure on the Government, encouraging the military to jump at any provocation. They will argue that a limited military strike has value in compelling future good behaviour from the Pakistani generals. Such a policy recommendation is certainly fraught with risks and may even be self-defeating. Why?

First, it misdiagnoses the reason for cross-border terrorism. Pakistani cross-border terrorism and its support for it (explicit or implicit) is the result of weakness in the Pakistan Government both in terms of its legitimacy and in terms of its institutional capacity to govern. For almost two decades now, weak Governments in Islamabad have derived their legitimacy from a narrow political base. Even elected Governments have relied on patronage networks, the Kashmir issue and flirtations with Islamic chauvinists. Having cultivated these issues and supporters, the Pakistani leaders have demonstrated scant will and capability to control them.

The Musharraf administration today faces the same problem, only magnified. What legitimacy it

had is fast draining away as domestic opinion increasingly regards the Chief Executive as an American stooge. This does not help the Indian cause. Under such circumstances, any Indian use of force is likely to further weaken the Government in Islamabad while providing a fillip to extremist forces.

Second, extensive Indian military operation across the LoC will likely invite vociferous international criticism. Together these conditions suggest that India has a single limited military opportunity, and that after an initial set of attacks any subsequent use of force will very likely be construed by world opinion as an irresponsible and gratuitous step further up the ladder of escalation.

Islamabad, can therefore, safely bet that New Delhi would not risk widening the conflict to a point where Pakistan, the weaker power, could reasonably resort to desperate measures in its own defence, including a nuclear response. These delicate circumstances throw into stark relief the tension between the credibility of arms and the credibility of the ballot box. The angels of the Indian democracy have for 50 years prevailed over the scourge of militarism both internally, and externally, vis-a-vis Pakistan.

In the 1948, 1965, 1971 wars and in the 1999 Kargil conflict, resort to Indian arms had not just reasonable *causus belli*, but overwhelming justification, and was used to pursue specific political objectives determined to have a high probability of success. Tragically, the fruits of those successes have been incompletely exploited by failing to solve the Kashmir problem from the ground up and from the inside out. The lull in the current crisis and the coming elections in J&K present yet another opportunity to correct this.

India's current hesitation in use of force should, therefore, not be construed as weakness. Rather it should be seen as prudent concern for the preservation of a hard earned reputation for the justifiable and successful use of force. This reputation is crucial to the long-term credibility and esteem of Indian foreign policy.

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