

# Pakistan's Zia takes to the diplomatic road

by Paul Zykofsky from New Delhi

When Pakistan's military strongman, Gen. Zia ul-Haq made a brief stopover here on Nov. 3 en route to Southeast Asia where he is visiting Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia, he held a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, then sought out journalists to characterize the exchange as "excellent."

Mrs. Gandhi's description of the discussions was far more subdued. They reflected her efforts, both as India's leader and as the upcoming chairman of the Non-aligned movement, to prevent Pakistan from becoming an instrument for escalated NATO involvement in South Asia.

Analysts here, watching Zia's busy tour schedule since mid-October, suggest that a good part of his diplomacy, particularly his stopover in India, is an image-cleaning effort before he reaches Washington in December. In the past month alone he has visited six Asian countries, in each case carefully cultivating an image as an "international peacemaker" with important cards to play in the crucial gulf region as well as in the arena of East-West relations—even though in his own country Zia is passionately hated as an unelected, undemocratic ruler.

## The RDF angle

Zia's travels to Southeast Asia take place almost simultaneously with U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's trip there. While Weinberger reassured Southeast Asian heads of state, who fear the United States has ceded the area to China, that the United States indeed had a military defense scheme in mind, the Pakistani military were advertising their mercenary role in Weinberger's scheme. Pakistani military spokesmen told visiting journalists that, given the where-withal, Pakistan could deliver the forces called for in Weinberger's scheme to advance NATO via "out-of-area" deployments.

The Pakistani role is a throwback to the way the British Joint Indian Army intervened during the days of the British Empire as a mercenary force. This time the framework is the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF), and several reports have indicated that the Islamabad Institute for Strategic Studies, an affiliate of the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London, is being built up by Washington and the British

as "a bridge between Western strategic thinking and Middle East military problems."

In a recent interview with *Asia* magazine, a senior Pakistani strategist openly stated as much: "If we face no threat from Afghanistan or India, and were given the necessary airlift capacity, of course we would act in the Middle East. . . . We could, for example, reinforce Oman, or occupy Char Bahar in Iran, or capture the islands in the Straits of Hormuz. We could aid Kuwait against an Iraqi invasion, or fly troops into Yemen to support it against Democratic Yemen."

Brigadier Noor Hussein, the director at the Islamabad Institute for Strategic Studies, posed the out-of-area deployment as an historic role for Pakistan. "Pakistan lies at a crossroads among superpowers—the Soviet Union and China—and a major power, India. It also lies near the Arabian Gulf, the center of gravity of the Muslim world since the 7th century. You can only project strategic power into the Gulf area from outside it, much as the Allies did into southern Europe from North Africa during World War II, and as the Americans did from Okinawa into Korea during the Korean War. If you are faced with a conflagration in the Gulf, the only places where you can realistically plug in the hose of your fire brigade is in Pakistan, and specifically from the coast of Baluchistan. That is hard military reality."

## Issues of New Delhi meeting

On the bilateral level, the Gandhi-Zia talks established a Joint Commission, an Indian proposal made earlier this year. Talks are to continue on both India's offer of a "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation" and Zia's "no-war pact."

That differing perceptions on both regional matters and international affairs continue to exist is evident from Mrs. Gandhi's repeated warnings that she opposes the creation of an expensive arms race at the expense of economic development priorities. Her view has been that the U.S. sale of F-16s last year to Pakistan triggered a regional military buildup in South Asia, and Zia is party to it. Since Pakistan is a member of the Non-aligned movement, the Indian government has been seeking assurances that foreign bases will not be established on Pakistani territory—a point that has been the major stumbling block in the bilateral talks so far.

Another issue that came up in the meeting was Mrs. Gandhi's concern for the life of Nusrat Bhutto, wife of the late Pakistani Prime Minister Z. A. Bhutto and the leader of the Pakistan People's Party. Mrs. Gandhi had written to Zia urging that Mrs. Bhutto be permitted to go abroad for treatment of suspected lung cancer. The junta has refused, and many Pakistanis believe that just as Zia had the late Bhutto hanged after a phony trial, he is using the martial-law machinery to delay treatment of Mrs. Bhutto until it is too late. The Bhutto family, particularly Mrs. Bhutto and her daughter Benazir, are at the center of political opposition to Zia's rule and have been under arrest for close to three years. In Bangkok, after leaving India, Zia told the press that he would not accede to Mrs. Gandhi's plea to save Mrs. Bhutto's life.