

# Soviets up pressure on Afghan issue

*Recent moves in Afghanistan betray a sense of tactical urgency vis-à-vis the Subcontinent, writes Susan Maitra from New Delhi.*

The recent bombing of Pakistani villages by Soviet-controlled Afghan jets and the subsequent deadlock of the U.N.-sponsored indirect talks between Pakistan and Afghanistan in Geneva have thrown the Afghanistan issue to the forefront of the international scene once more. The increased propaganda activity of the Soviets justifying their position, however, suggests that a sense of urgency has developed in Moscow to resolve the issue—through further negotiations or, if necessary, by force.

Successive Afghan raids into Pakistan's border areas had sealed the fate of the third round of Geneva talks before it began. Pakistan was visibly rattled, but nonetheless refused to budge from its earlier demands. Most analysts have written off the possibility of holding another round of talks, at least not before the November U.S. presidential elections.

While it is no secret that the Soviets have hardened their attitude globally and would like to find an opportunity to draw out the Reagan administration, it is not clear what triggered the Afghan jet raids into Pakistan. It is particularly baffling since Pakistan had earlier sent clear signals indicating flexibility and a willingness to meet Soviet demands. The Zia administration is, furthermore, seeking Soviet economic assistance to build up some of the country's industrial plants, and in this the Soviets have themselves shown interest.

While the collapse of the Geneva talks and a step-up of physical pressure on Pakistan through Afghanistan could create a fundamental crisis in Pakistan, it is an extremely high-risk tactic which would not in any case guarantee Moscow the gains eluding it in the subcontinent. In the first place, a Soviet push toward actual hostilities with Pakistan would bring in the United States rather immediately—as Ambassador Deane Hinton indicated recently in Islamabad, to the official protest of Soviet diplomats there. It would also terminate permanently any hope of Soviet influence in Pakistan, and would tend to profoundly alienate those other nations of the region seeking a genuinely non-aligned relationship to both superpowers—India first among them.

On the other hand, there is little doubt that with patience and persistence, the Soviet Union could get a solution in Afghanistan, even from the Zia government, so why the rush?

The reckless urgency on the part of Moscow in the subcontinent is most likely a by-product of the crisis Moscow apprehends in its global policy, inasmuch as it has been

pivoted entirely on the removal of President Ronald Reagan and the defeat of his Strategic Defense Initiative centered on the development of beam-weapon defense systems. Now, with Mr. Reagan's re-election in the cards, as even Soviet sources are said to acknowledge, Moscow is compelled to "make a mark" now, staking new claims in a bid to beat the Reagan administration into a stance of withdrawal and retreat, as in the Lebanon debacle of February of this year.

A recent incident in New Delhi demonstrates the point. When Soviet Foreign Ministry Secretary General Yuri Fokin, here for consultations on issues before the coming U.N. General Assembly, met the press and explained the Soviet concern about the militarization of the Indian Ocean, he was challenged. An Indian journalist pointed out to Fokin that it was superpower rivalry that was responsible for the problem. Fokin snapped back: "You do not expect this notion to be introduced into our thinking and approach. We are not in the Indian Ocean to match the United States' increasing presence there. I wish the Non-Aligned countries would call a spade a spade. The Soviet Union does not like to be treated on an equal footing in this matter with the United States, which has a military base in the Ocean with definite designs."

Fokin's visit is part of the Soviet Union's courting of India as its long-time friend and, more specifically, as chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement. But it indicates the Soviet urgency to rally the Non-Aligned ranks behind it on the Afghanistan issue, the Iran-Iraq war, disarmament, nuclear freeze, nonproliferation, nuclear free zones, and other issues that will figure in the agenda of the United Nations General Assembly.

In the subcontinent, the Soviets view Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka as political allies of the United States where, if things do not change before President Reagan is re-elected, they will face an uphill battle for influence. Furthermore, General Zia and Bangladesh's General Ershad are liable to legitimize their rule in promised elections in the coming months, further consolidating their relations with Washington.

## The case of Pakistan

In Pakistan, the Soviets want the military to be removed and a populist regime installed. Besides the Pakistani military's U.S. ties, the Soviets are greatly concerned by the Zia

administration's increasingly substantive ties with a newly outward-oriented China. In mid-August, a 12-member Chinese Air Force delegation visited Pakistan, just one of many such high-level military exchanges that have taken place recently.

The most powerful lever the Soviets have against Zia is Afghanistan. While Pakistan has internationalized the refugee issue and received a significant amount of arms and financial aid from Washington on this account, the refugees remain a crushing burden on Pakistan's fragile economy. In point of fact, the efforts to unite the rival rebel leaders for effective counteraction against the Soviet occupation have failed. More importantly, the increased unemployment among Pakistanis as refugees flooded into the job market, the enhanced heroin and other drug trafficking and consumption, and the general social chaos prevailing in Peshawar and neighboring areas in the Northwest Frontier Province have not helped the government one bit.

The United States has neither put any real pressure on the Kremlin nor helped Islamabad reach a settlement in its own right with the Babrak Karmal regime. Recently, the Karachi-based *Defense Journal* complained that the United States was only interested in "bleeding the Soviet Union to the last Afghan." The *Defense Journal* stated that the United States and Saudi Arabia had threatened an aid cut-off should Pakistan fail to cooperate.

The Indian press indicates that a group of Pakistani intellectuals—largely associates of the Bhutto group when Bhutto was using the socialists to gain power—are now openly attacking the Zia administration's handling of Afghanistan. Cited is an article in the Pakistani *Muslim* by Sajjad Hyder, Pakistan's one-time envoy to Moscow and New Delhi. Hyder ridicules the government's policy, stating that its response to the Afghanistan problem was to play the role of a "drumbeater" for the rights of the Afghan people both at the U.N. and the Islamic Conference. "The more Pakistan beats the drum, the more the refugees pour in," Hyder said.

Developments over the past nine months in the Pakistani exile community centered around the Pakistani People's Party (PPP) give a clue to other shifts in the country. Soon after Benazir Bhutto's departure from Pakistan and her visit to Washington and London, where she remains, the radical pro-Soviet wing of the PPP engineered a split in the overseas party against Benazir and her mother, the head of the party. The issues were Benazir's support for U.S. aid to Pakistan and her refusal to include recognition of the Karmal regime in the party platform.

It is significant that the radicals felt confident enough to move against the Bhutto women, whose name has been synonymous with the party. But now it is the pro-Soviet, ideological wing of the party that controls the grass-roots base and party apparatus in Pakistan. This, and the trump card of the two Bhutto sons, self-proclaimed revolutionaries harbored in Kabul and Tripoli, is the most likely basis for the radicals' strength.

The PPP base, and related organized networks among the provincial separatist movements in Sind and Baluchistan, orchestrated the mass movement that rocked Zia one year ago, and the Soviets would like to put these forces into action again. It may already have started. Recently two publishers, the heads of the Soviet-backed Peoples' Publishing House and Vanguard Publishers, were arrested, reports AFP, as part of an effort to abort a growing leftist propaganda drive.

## The India angle

The most cynical aspect of the Soviet game is Moscow's open incitement of India to move into Pakistan and do its dirty work, in that way obviating direct confrontation with the United States. Moscow is trying to capitalize on India's very real difficulties with Pakistan, prompting India to teach Pakistan a lesson, install a government in Islamabad that will negotiate with the Soviets without discussions beforehand with Washington, and eventually bow to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Although only Indian intelligence can document the facts, it is apparent that Pakistan was involved in some way with the Sikh insurgency in Punjab. In Kashmir also, there is a nest of Pakistani saboteurs who had become extremely active during the regime of Dr. Farooq Abdullah, the chief minister recently removed by Delhi.

Moreover, in recent weeks, a number of clashes between Pakistani and Indian troops have been reported in the Kargil and Nubra valley sectors in the Indian part of Kashmir. During the clashes a number of Pakistani soldiers were killed when the Indian army opened fire to prevent the troops from sneaking into Indian territory.

A phalanx of high Soviet officials and commentators have meanwhile been supplying *Pravda* and Tass with statements about Pakistan's alleged destabilization of the subcontinent and Pakistan's design in collusion with the United States to cut India into pieces. It is not that the Soviets want to stop the Brzezinski crowd's dirty fundamentalist separatist game on the subcontinent; they merely want to use it for their own ends, a la Iran.

The pro-Soviet mouthpieces in India are echoing everything dished out by Moscow on these matters, in an effort to garner popular support for New Delhi to take "strong measures" against Pakistan. Some of these Soviet lobby members privately confide that India should be done with it and annex Pakistan.

In the case of Bangladesh, the Soviets have a hand in the trouble fomented to dislodge General Ershad by the two bordering Indian state governments ruled by the CPI-M, the Maoist communist party. Within India, the pro-Soviet propaganda mill is churning out accusations about a Bangladesh-Chinese plot to destabilize northeast India. The Chinese angle cannot be ignored, but there is little or no evidence of any Bangladesh involvement. General Ershad himself has stated recently that Congress governments in the two border states would solve the problem.