

# Pakistan reiterates its nuclear option

by Ramtanu Maitra

In an interview with CNN released on Jan. 4, Pakistan's Chief Executive Gen. Pervez Musharraf made clear that Pakistan would use its nuclear option, if the country's security were threatened. Although such statements have been made by other subcontinental political leaders before, the latest statement has angered not only those who point fingers at Pakistan as the major source of terrorism in the region, but also those non-proliferation bureaucrats who preach selective denuclearization. The statement has worried others who are keen to see India and Pakistan resolve their differences peacefully and not resort to the use of nuclear weapons to settle the Kashmir dispute.

General Musharraf's statement actually underlines the helpless situation in which Islamabad now finds itself. Long before the Dec. 24 hijacking of the Indian Airlines plane—which New Delhi says was masterminded by Pakistan, and Islamabad categorically denies—Pakistan's domestic security situation had gone haywire. A number of militant groups, some with distinct links to international terrorist organizations, the international narcotics cartel, and dirty intelligence networks, were functioning almost freely within Pakistan, corrupting whatever is left of the once-stable Pakistani establishment. Most, if not all, of these militants are mercenaries, who, for convenience's sake, use *jihad* to do what they do.

As a result, Pakistan is under pressure from the West. Washington wants it to give up the nuclear option and its nuclear linkages with China, sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), curb terrorism, and "fix" the nation's economy in the way that the International Monetary Fund prescribes. Europeans chant the same mantra. It is obvious to General Musharraf that these demands cannot be met, or even approached directly. But, the pressure is on. As of Jan. 12, British Chief of Defence Charles Guthrie and a four-member U.S. Congressional delegation led by Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D) were in Islamabad. The IMF team were to arrive two days later.

In addition, international organizations headquartered in London are pushing to establish an independent Kashmir— independent of both Pakistan and India. Using the easier route through Pakistan, mercenaries are sent to aggravate, hurt, and drain India. Since Pakistan is being used by these terrorists for training camps and launching bases, India, for good reasons, puts the blame on Islamabad. Neither New Delhi nor

Islamabad has gone beyond blaming each other. Neither has really shown interest in exposing the "great game" that is weakening both and steadily prodding the two countries to a full-fledged war.

## Indian military power

General Musharraf's statement, badly timed no doubt, was ostensibly intended to avert such a war. He is using the old theory, propagated by Henry Kissinger et al. during the Cold War days, that nuclear weapons act as deterrents. What Pakistan's strongman knows, is that in case of a conventional war, India has overwhelming supremacy. The Indian Air Force, well-endowed with MiGs, SUs, and Mirages, could lay Pakistan's major cities to ruins within hours. This is not because Pakistan does not have a modern Air Force, but because Pakistan is a small country; and the Indian Air Force, at a cost, could bomb most major cities, military cantonments, cut off the supply lines, and even get the Pakistani nuclear installations. All this could be achieved effectively and quickly.

By contrast, the Pakistani Air Force, as good as it is, would have to make deep inroads into India, a vast country geographically, before it could damage important targets. India's superior air defense system will make such sorties highly ineffective. The 1965 and the 1972 wars between India and Pakistan brought to the fore the efficacy of the Indian Air Force and its ability to control the skies over the battle arena.

After exhibiting its superiority in the air, India would move in to choke Pakistan's oil supply line by blockading Pakistan's only major port, Karachi. Again, India's naval strength is vastly superior to Pakistan's, for obvious reasons. India has a long coast line—facing at least seven neighbors at close range—that requires protection. India is becoming more and more concerned about this, and has begun a serious dialogue to develop a closer relationship with the U.S. Navy.

In other words, except for making some inroads in the border areas using its land-based army, Pakistan would be fighting for survival in an all-out conventional war against India. This is not a new development, but recent shifts in geo-strategic alignments have highlighted the situation. During the Cold War, Pakistan was a "useful" ally of the West. Such is not the case now. Washington is concerned about narcotics and terrorism—so-called Islamic terrorism, in particular—and Pakistan cannot meet the U.S. demands on that. As a result, Islamabad has reason to believe that Washington has removed its protective umbrella, making the nation vulnerable to India's conventional war machine.

In announcing that Pakistan has nuclear weapons and will use them if he feels the country's sovereignty is endangered, General Musharraf has told Washington, and its allies, that Pakistan cannot give up its nuclear options under the prevailing conditions, and that it needs Washington's help to get out of the logjam with India created because of the Kashmir dispute.