

Powell's Visit To Asia Clarifies Some Issues

by Ramtanu Maitra

The purpose of the Oct. 16-17 visit of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell to the Asian subcontinent was *not*—as India had hoped—to consolidate forces to eradicate terrorism, not only in Afghanistan, but in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka as well; but rather to explain why such consolidation is not America's policy at this time. It was also pointed out, that what does not correspond to immediate administration policy, can be dealt with only later.

Powell's main destination was Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. The India leg, on the other hand, was an add-on to massage New Delhi's ego. The objective of the trip was to convey to Pakistan's President Gen. Pervez Musharraf that the Afghan campaign may be longer than Islamabad would like. Powell's second point, was that Washington, like Islamabad, does not believe that Afghanistan's Northern Alliance—the force opposing the Taliban composed of ethnic Afghan minority groups backed by Russia, India, and Iran—has a legitimate right to control Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan.

Secretary Powell also made President Musharraf aware of how important it is to have Pakistan on the American side as it launches the upcoming ground action against the Taliban, to ferret out the terrorist, Osama bin Laden. President Musharraf, a trained commando who came to power with the help of three other fellow “commando generals” in October 1999, is knowledgeable about Afghanistan and the terrain where American and British commandos are expected to soon be operating. Powell also told President Musharraf about the work-in-progress to get Pakistan some more financial help and ease its foreign debt burden.

Caution In Islamabad

In Islamabad, Powell liked what he saw, although that may not be the real picture. He found a cooperating Pakistani President, who expressed his concern about a long-drawn-out American involvement in Afghanistan. President Musharraf brought to the Secretary of State's notice the social impact—the Muslim unrest and the Afghan refugee factor—if the bombing of Afghanistan were to continue for long. Although there were very few political demonstrations targeted against either Secretary Powell or the United States, President Mu-

sharraf made it abundantly clear that such demonstrations would occur, and they may even turn violently anti-government and anti-United States.

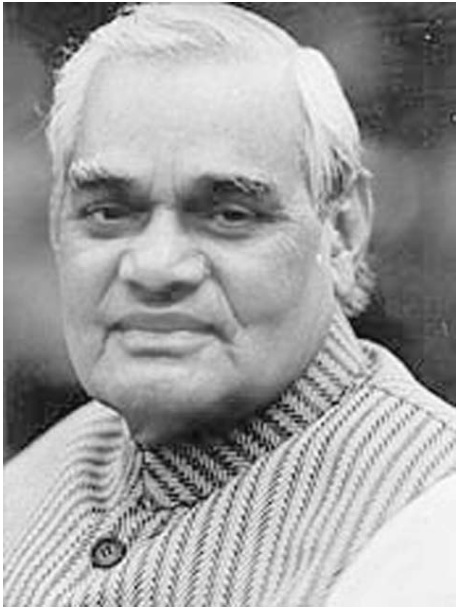
That was the crux of the trip. But, since it is not possible for any American diplomat, working at a high level or low level, to come out of the subcontinent without making a formal announcement of some sort on Kashmir, Powell climbed the podium with President Musharraf and declared that the Kashmir issue is “central” to Indo-Pakistan relations. He also said that the Kashmir problem could be resolved if all parties engage with a willingness to address concerns in a mutually acceptable way. Secretary Powell made it clear, first to President Musharraf, and later to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, that Washington would not like to see relations between India and Pakistan heat up at a time when the United States is engaged in the region curbing terrorism.

The statement brought cheers within the Pakistani power structure, but drew gloomy faces in New Delhi. Whether the Secretary of State was not adequately briefed about the Indian sensitivity to hearing anyone of his stature addressing the Kashmir issue as “central” to Indo-Pakistani relations, or had made his statement deliberately to rile the Indians, is moot. India's recently re-appointed Defense Minister, George Fernandes, organized a fresh round of heavy shelling across the Line of Control, which separates the Indian- and Pakistani-held parts of Kashmir. India's Ministry of External Affairs, which has received a lot of flak in recent days for rendering wholehearted support to the Americans, fervently began working to pressure Secretary Powell to remove the word “central,” in describing the Kashmir issue.

Confusion In New Delhi

The New Delhi leg of Powell's trip, as it is, was expected to be fraught with differences. New Delhi, following the Sept. 11 attack on the United States, had pledged total backing to Washington, including willingness to provide full logistical support to the American Army. At the time, New Delhi's hope, which turned out to be illusory, was that Washington would step in with authority, and tell Pakistan to stop training the Kashmiri terrorists and thus prevent future cross-border terrorism. Pakistan has never admitted that it encourages cross-border terrorism, or even training of the terrorists. To Islamabad, Kashmiri militants are “freedom-fighters,” and they cannot be lumped together with the kind of terrorists that have targetted the United States.

India's other bone of contention is the Northern Alliance. Despite the group's meager capabilities, India wants the Northern Alliance to have a power-sharing role in Kabul. The reason why India backs this rag-tag group of warriors, who do not control even 10% of the country, is that it is also backed by Russia and Iran—two of India's allies. The other reason is that the Northern Alliance is simply not acceptable to Islamabad and, hence, is acceptable to New Delhi.



Secretary of State Powell's trip to Pakistan and India left Indian President Vajpayee (left) with concerns over what the U.S. is doing to attempt to deploy Pakistan in the "war against terrorism." Vajpayee will discuss those concerns in Moscow in early November.

As it turned out, Powell had little to offer to the Indians on these two issues. Washington is not in a position to antagonize Pakistan on Kashmir and rev up the dormant Kashmir *jihadis* against Islamabad. This, however, antagonized India. Prime Minister Vajpayee went on record, apparently referring to Powell's comments, saying, "We decide on our own as to what is good for the country, and that is why we are respected, and we have a place in the comity of nations, and our views are sought on the future of Afghanistan."

One country that will give more weight to India, is Russia. Vajpayee is scheduled to meet President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on a Nov. 4-7 trip, after which he flies to Washington on Nov. 9 for a meeting with President George W. Bush, prior to addressing the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

Tension Prevails

Sensing the tension that prevailed in New Delhi, Powell did what he could do best. He resorted to semantics and retracted his earlier position on Kashmir. Powell rephrased the formulation attributed to him — that Kashmir was "a central" issue in the India-Pakistan equation. Referring to his Islamabad press conference, Powell said, "I didn't say 'a central.' If you look at it carefully, I said 'central' in the sense that I believe it is an important issue, and to suggest it isn't, wouldn't have been accurate."

India appears to have persuaded the United States that it needs to reassess the merit of accommodating a "moderate" wing of the Taliban in the future government of Afghanistan,

our sources have said. While the two countries agreed on resurrecting a broad-based, multi-ethnic post-Taliban dispensation, they differed with respect to the details.

In conclusion, the Powell trip has straightened out some kinks, but not much more. President Musharraf has been made to understand that while money and support will be forthcoming, he, in turn, must refrain from criticizing the U.S. operation in Afghanistan and must keep the *jihadis* under control till the campaign is over. President Musharraf has also been assured that the United States fully recognizes his difficulties vis-à-vis India on Kashmir; and in due course, that, too, will be discussed.

For India, the trip has been a wake-up call. India now feels that it cannot, and should not, depend on Washington to resolve the terrorist problems in Kashmir. Washington has a different set of priorities in dealing with the terrorists, and that set is quite independent of India's. Second, the Northern Alliance is nothing more than what it is, and the United States is not going to project it as what it is not. It is almost a certainty that the Northern Alliance will have a minor role to play in the present Afghan campaign. Its role, for the Americans, is to prevent the Afghans and hardcore Taliban militia from crossing over to Central Asia and escaping the U.S. dragnet.

The new awakening may allow India to chart its own path on the issues discussed. It may also weaken the desire of some in India's bureaucracy to develop a lasting strategic partnership with the United States. It may, as well, raise the temperature in Kashmir.