

Prepared Testimony of

STEPHEN P. COPHEN

Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies,
The Brookings Institution

Before the

SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE

January 28, 2004

INDIA AND PAKISTAN: STEPS TOWARDS RAPPROCHEMENT

It is an honor to be invited to share my views on the prospects for rapprochement between India and Pakistan, and the steps that America might take to strengthen the fledgling peace process now underway. The United States can and should do more—it has mostly been a bystander—but in the final analysis it will be up to the Indians and Pakistanis to determine whether their debilitating rivalry will continue for another fifty years. This rivalry is costly to them, but it also places important American interests at risk.

Senator Lugar, you have asked me to address the internal dynamics in each country that may be driving the current thaw, and to suggest how U.S. policy might further encourage positive trends.

I am pleased to do so, but by way of background the following should be kept in mind.

The Historical Framework

On the face of it, the present thaw will not last. India-Pakistan relations have moved from crisis to détente and back again for many decades.

The most recent cycle began in 1987 with provocative Indian military exercises designed, in part, to pre-emptively attack Pakistan's fledgling nuclear program. Another crisis occurred in 1990, and a mini-war was fought in 1999 in the Kargil region of Kashmir. Two years ago, India again threatened a larger war, this time in response to terrorist attacks in Kashmir and on the Indian Parliament.

These crises have alternated with periods of normalization and even cordiality, marked by several summit meetings. After 1987 President Zia ul-Haq flew to India in a gesture of reconciliation; after 1990 Benazir Bhutto and Rajiv Gandhi crafted some confidence-building measures (a few of which were implemented); and both before and after the 1999 Kargil war India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee held summit meetings with Pakistani leaders (Nawaz Sharif in Lahore, Musharraf in Agra). Finally, Vajpayee and Musharraf met in Islamabad last month in connection with a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit.

Lessons Learned

What are we to make of this pattern? I would suggest six lessons:

- India and Pakistan can reach agreement on ancillary issues, including confidence-building measures, but not on Kashmir's final status;
- The introduction of nuclear weapons has been accompanied by a learning process in both states, and several of the crises were exacerbated by the nuclear factor;
- Negotiations take place at a moment when the two countries are in political and strategic balance; they find themselves momentarily agreeing that talks are worthwhile, but sooner or later one or the other side concludes that the risks of moving ahead are greater than the costs of breaking off discussions;
- In both countries there are powerful forces that oppose serious negotiations;
- Outside powers have played little, if any, role in advancing the dialogue;
- The United States has intervened several times in times of crisis, but never developed a strategy that might promote and sustain a real peace process

Domestic Dynamics: India

India has only two realistic choices in its relations with Pakistan. The first is a dialogue that might lead to a settlement over Kashmir and other issues (especially trade) without changing core Indian policies; the second is a long-term strategy of containment, which would attempt to promote change within Pakistan while resisting Pakistani military adventures. Two other strategies are now debated in India, but both seem unattractive: one is to completely ignore Pakistan, the other is to openly challenge Pakistan, forcing change and perhaps (as in 1971), its breakup.

There are senior Indian officers who advocate a "limited war" to teach Pakistan a lesson. The 2002 crisis was a turning point: Indian generals could not promise that a limited war against Pakistan would not "go nuclear," and the political leadership concluded that the risks of such a war were too great.

There is no doubt that Prime Minister Vajpayee is the leading Indian proponent of normalization with Pakistan, first demonstrating this when he was Foreign Minister in the Janata Dal government in the 1970s. No doubt, Vajpayee recognizes that India cannot emerge as a truly great Asian state if it is dragged down by the Kashmir conflict, and if Pakistan remains openly hostile to it. Vajpayee's views are shared by the centrist elements of the BJP, including the distinguished Foreign and Finance ministers, Yashwant Sinha and Jaswant Singh. Vajpayee's standing is such that even his party hardliners will not challenge him on foreign policy issues, although there are fringe groups that would attempt to end the Pakistan threat once and for all, by war if necessary. (Want to say something about a potential successor to Vajpayee?)

My assessment is that Vajpayee's initiative, which led to the Islamabad Summit, is serious, but that it is also convenient—burnishing his image as a statesman just before he leads his party into an important national election later this year.

Domestic Dynamics: Pakistan

Since 1947 Pakistan has sought to change Kashmir's status quo or to bring India to the negotiating table by appealing to international opinion, and through resolutions in the UN, a formidable legal effort, and the use of force—usually through proxies.. The Kashmir issue is embedded in the very idea of Pakistan, but it also has a strategic dimension: Pakistani generals are concerned that if India were not pressed in Kashmir, its conventional military superiority over Pakistan would be overwhelming.

Vajpayee's improbable dialogue partner, Gen. Musharraf, is something of a puzzle. Musharraf lacks strategic vision, he is a bad listener and he believes that ruling Pakistan is like running an army division: give the orders and they will be obeyed.

However, after four years he may have learned that this approach does not quite work. One suspects he is tired of water issues, sectarian rivalries and diplomatic double-talk. Even the strategy of using militants to force the Indians to the negotiating table has failed. Now that the militants are more interested in his death than victory in Kashmir, he may have second thoughts.

Such doubts are not peculiar to Gen. Musharraf. He represents a large civil-military oligarchy, dubbed the "Establishment" by Pakistanis. This 800-1,000 strong group includes senior army commanders, bureaucrats, media leaders, politicians and even some Islamists. They know Pakistan is failing, that an economic and military race with an expanding India is a losing proposition and that Pakistan's friends are unreliable. They believe that once Afghanistan is stabilized and al-Qaeda mopped up, the Americans will disappear, leaving Pakistan without a major ally. The once-reliable China, alarmed at Pakistan's support for Islamic radicals, is moving towards an understanding with India over their border dispute even as India-China trade soars.

Prospects for Detente

Will Prime Minister Vajpayee's "third and last chance" succeed? This time, concessions by both sides (more in language than in deed) have started a new peace process. What will it take to bring it to the point where it is easier for the two sides to move forward rather than backward? In six months, we will know whether the forces in both India and Pakistan opposed to a South Asian peace initiative are able to sabotage the process. By then it will be feasible for militants to infiltrate into Indian-administered Kashmir from the Pakistani side of the Line of Control, and the Indian election (scheduled for later this year) will have been concluded, probably with a fresh mandate for Vajpayee. If the forthcoming talks between government officials do not show sign of progress then we may see a new crisis some time later this year.

Will India be able to provide Pakistan with the one thing its army desperately needs, a reason to accept a border drawn through Kashmir? In the words of one Pakistani officer,

the army understands it cannot wrest Kashmir from India, but it cannot turn its back on a 55-year struggle. At stake is its pride, and it literally calls the shots. Indians understand this, but many still observe "Chicago rules": the best time to kick a man is when he is down. But that only postpones the problem. India cannot afford a radical Pakistan as a neighbor and Gen. Musharraf, for all his shortcomings and bravado, represents the Pakistani establishment.

American Policy

While Secretary Powell has claimed credit for the present dialogue, the American role has been officially downplayed by India's Ministry of External Affairs. If there was an important U.S. role, it should not have been the subject of a public boast so soon after the Islamabad Summit. However, a somewhat more active role is welcome, and long-overdue. While American officials have, since 1990, tried to play a role in bringing regional crises to a peaceful conclusion, there is no evidence that they have moved beyond this to a more pro-active role. As the recent Council on Foreign Relations Task Force advocates, the United States should have a more "forward leaning" posture on the Kashmir conflict.

There are other ways in which Washington can be of help. In summary form, these are the six things that the United States can do:

- We should not be over-concerned about the stability of the Pakistani regime. Musharraf's death would not bring chaos in Pakistan; Pakistan's overall policies are not likely to change, they are rooted in the interests of the Establishment, especially the corps commanders who form an inner circle of power in the government.
- The United States can enrich and influence the internal Pakistani debate on Kashmir's future, but only if it has a presence on the ground. We have abandoned the field to the radical Islamists and those who purport to see a "Christian-Jewish-Hindu" axis directed against Pakistan and the Muslim world. We need to dramatically increase our information activities in Pakistan, and our exchange programs with key Pakistan institutions, especially the universities and colleges where anti-Americanism is deeply rooted.
- India itself needs to be encouraged to continue its policies of normalization with Pakistan, and with its Kashmiri citizens. India's greatest asset is its own rich and vibrant society. The United States should urge India to unilaterally expand access for Pakistan scholars, politicians, and media persons.
- Washington should strengthen the fledgling peace process by increasing its funding for regional dialogues that now take place in various SAARC institutions and the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies in Colombo.
- Washington should also consult closely with its most important allies. Besides providing technical expertise in border monitoring and other confidence-building mechanisms, America and its allies should use their aid programs to reward India, Pakistan, and various Kashmiri groups for progress in negotiations; they should also

encourage Western and Japanese firms to invest in plants and companies that do business in both countries, further strengthening regional economic ties.

- Finally, the United States should not take a position on the shape of a final settlement of the Kashmir dispute, but let such a settlement emerge after dialogue among the parties, including Kashmiris on both sides of the LOC. However, it should support the view that Kashmir is a human rights issue, not merely one of territory or international law. This position maximizes the interests of all parties and would make a final settlement easier: Pakistanis can claim their struggle resulted in more humane treatment of the Kashmiri people, even if they do not join Pakistan or become independent; Indians will remove a blot on their democracy and the Kashmiris, of course, will recover a semblance of normal life.