

ROCKY ROAD TO ASIAN PEACE

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By Mohammed Ayoob

I. Introduction

This essay is by Mohammed Ayoob, Distinguished Professor of International Relations at James Madison College, Michigan State University. Ayoob cautions against the current wooing of Pakistan by the US, as it threatens to undermine future relations between the US and India. While Pakistan may play a crucial role now in the US-led campaign against Afghanistan, India remains the long-term linchpin to US interests and regional stability in Asia-- particularly with regards to a rising China. Ayoob asserts that the US cannot afford to alienate India in its bid against terrorism, and must take advantage of opportunities to coordinate strategically.

II. Essay By Mohammed Ayoob

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by Mohammed Ayoob, Michigan State University

The Indian prime minister's visit to Washington this week provides an opportunity for President George Bush and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to exchange views on a whole host of issues that are likely to include coordinated responses to terrorism, but must go beyond that subject.

India has been a victim of intense cross-border terrorism, especially during the past decade. It has become increasingly clear that the sources of material support and training for terrorists infiltrated into the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir are the same that brought the Taliban to power in Afghanistan and patronized the activities of the Osama bin Laden network. Evidence from both the 1998 American bombings of terrorist bases and from current campaigns against the al Qaeda network in Afghanistan have clearly revealed the presence of recruits from Pakistani-sponsored groups that are routinely trained for infiltration into Kashmir.

In the context of the war against the Taliban, one may understand the compulsions that led Washington to enter into a marriage of convenience with Pakistan. However, one cannot justify

America's current wooing of Pakistan as anything but a very short-term strategy. The role of the Pakistani military in bringing the Taliban to power and using terrorist camps in both Pakistan and Afghanistan to train, arm and infiltrate elements into Kashmir ought to serve as a severe warning to those in Washington who contemplate a long-term relationship with Islamabad.

By contrast, American interests and objectives coincide with those of India both in South Asia and in the wider Asian region. America's stake in regional stability and in the promotion of liberal democracy cannot be achieved without Washington and New Delhi working closely together. As the pre-eminent regional power, India is the linchpin of a stable regional order in South Asia. India is also the beacon light as far as the democratic experiment in the Third World is concerned. It has been able over the past half-century not merely to preserve the formal trappings of democratic governance, but also infused it with genuine liberal and secular content.

India's secularism and liberalism is threatened today by the rise of Hindu nationalists who would like to give India's democracy a majoritarian twist that fundamentally contradicts the original intention of the republic's founding fathers. So far, this extremist agenda has been kept at bay because of the liberalism and secularism enshrined in the Indian constitution and the politics of coalition-building and compromise needed to govern such a diverse country.

Kashmir, as the only Muslim-majority state in India, becomes very important in this regard. Any change in the territorial status quo in Kashmir on the basis of religion is likely to play into the hands of Hindu extremists whose attempt to brand all Indian Muslims as fifth-columnists will carry greater credibility among the more gullible sections of the Indian public. This is the principal reason why India cannot accept a division of Kashmir on religious lines. There are 140 million Muslim citizens of India (only three percent of whom happen to live in Kashmir) whose security and well-being cannot be jeopardized for the sake of redrawing lines in a remote corner of the subcontinent to suit antediluvian religio-political agendas.

Washington must realize that Kashmir is not merely a territorial dispute, but goes to the heart of the inclusive definition of India's national identity and, therefore, to the core of stability in the South Asian region. Mr. Vajpayee must be assured, preferably in public, that the United States has no desire to meddle in this issue in any way that may give the impression of even the slightest support to redrawing the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir.

However, the most important reason for the United States and India to remain on the same strategic wavelength is the increasing convergence of their interests and objectives regarding China. Beijing's intentions about curbing Indian capacities to act beyond the subcontinent, or even within it, have been clear for the past four decades. Its relationship with Pakistan was fashioned with this end in view. Chinese policies of transferring nuclear design, nuclear material and missile components and technology to Pakistan were a part of this strategy. Repeated American protestations on this issue have gone unheeded by Beijing, and every "commitment" made by China has been observed in the breach.

At the same time it is becoming clear that China is truly America's strategic competitor in Asia and beyond. China's self-perception of its role in the international system assumes the revival of bipolarity (Beijing uses the term "multipolarity" as the code word for bipolarity), in which China would constitute the second pole of power. More specifically, Chinese and American visions of the regional order in Asia diverge dramatically. For China, East and Southeast Asia form its historical sphere of influence. However, East Asia is vital to American security and the United States cannot afford to have any other power dominate this region. This can be expected to bring the United States into clash with China in the not too distant future.

It is worth noting in this regard that Japan and Russia are also increasingly apprehensive of Chinese designs. However, their capacity to act is hobbled for psychological reasons in the case of Japan and economic ones in the case of Russia. India is not so constrained. Therefore, a clear recognition of the potential threat posed by China to both the United States and India can open up major possibilities for strategic coordination. Mr. Bush and Mr. Vajpayee will be well-advised to investigate the likelihood of such a threat and explore the possibility to meet it jointly, even if they do so only behind closed doors.

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