

## SABRES RATTLE AGAIN

Beena Sarwar

The pattern is all too familiar. Every time India and Pakistan head towards dialogue and detente, something explosive happens that pushes peace to the backburner and drags them back to the familiar old tense relationship, worsened by sabre-rattling war cries from both sides.

The relationship between the two nuclear-armed South Asian neighbours has been marked by tentative ups and plunging downs, particularly over the past decade. This decade is also marked by increasingly vocal voices for peace on both sides of the border who openly criticise their countries' political and security establishments.

The fallout from the Mumbai mayhem is no different, if all the more ominous for having taken place in the midst of the global 'war on terror' with its 'us versus them' rhetoric that has contributed to escalated violence around the world and pushed fence-sitters onto one or other side.

Pakistan and India are part of the Indian sub-continent. They share a landmass, mountain ranges, rivers and seas, ancient cultures, history, languages and religions. Yet they have fought three wars since gaining independence from the British in 1947, after the bloody partition of the sub-continent into two countries—largely Hindu India and Islamic Pakistan.

The fourth major conflict between the two countries was the Kargil conflict of 1999 that the political leadership on both sides referred to as a 'war-like situation'. The nuclear threat that underlined this situation drew the world's attention to India-Pakistan relations, and the festering issue of the disputed state of Kashmir, as never before.

A year earlier, India and Pakistan's nuclear tests of May 1998 had plunged the region into an unprecedented state of tension. The governments celebrated their nuclear capability, feeding rivalry, jingoism and nationalism on both sides that the media played up. There was far less coverage of those who condemned the tests and the governments' encouragement of reactionary forces that equated religion with nationhood.

Those who protested were swimming against the tide, labelled as traitors and anti-nationals, and 'agents' of the other country, like Islamabad-based physicist A H Nayyar who has been active in the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy since the organisation was launched in 1995.

As Nayyar and pro-peace activists addressed a press conference condemning the nuclearisation of the region, charged-up young men who supported Pakistan's nuclear tests physically attacked them with chairs.

Now, expressing his shock at the "mindless, horrible event" in Mumbai, he told IPS: "There are people in both countries who don't like efforts towards rapprochement. They take the first opportunity to start blowing the bugles of war and instigate hostility."

The nuclear tests were followed by the historic Lahore Declaration of Feb. 1999, when Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif invited his Indian counterpart A B Vajpayee to Lahore.

Two months later, the Kargil conflict dashed all hopes for rapprochement as it transpired that while the governments talked peace, infiltrators from Pakistan were busy grabbing positions in Kargil on the Indian-administered side of the disputed state of Kashmir.

Sharif denied knowledge of the operation, but his army chief Pervez Musharraf insisted that Sharif had been briefed. It took the intervention of then US president Bill Clinton to de-escalate the tension and compel the Pakistani army into making the infiltrators withdraw by July 1999, pulling the countries back from the brink of a nuclear war.

In October, Musharraf ousted Sharif in a military coup. The present composite dialogue process began in 2004 during the Musharraf regime, but India is now dealing with a democratically elected government for the first time in a decade. They also point out that it is for the first time that a Pakistani government appears to be genuinely attempting to undo the damage done by past policies.

These policies, linked to Washington's need to pull down the former Soviet Union and drive the Soviet army out of Afghanistan, nurtured religious extremism and armed militancy. Later, these armed, indoctrinated forces, supported by the Pakistani establishment, fuelled the insurgency in Indian-administered Kashmir and led to the worst sectarian violence in Pakistan.

The third phase came after '9/11' when Pakistan officially rejected these 'Islamic warriors'.

As the Pakistan government now tries to formulate new security paradigms while also combating the terror menace at home, it needs support, say observers. "For the first time, it feels like we are at war," says a Karachi-based analyst asking not to be named. "Under Musharraf, it was a game to show the Americans that we are taking action but actually continuing to nurture some militant elements against India."

"With the threat of global communism gone, and the need for Middle East energy primary, America suddenly recognises India as an ally against Islamism, and Pakistan becomes a buffer to be squeezed relentlessly," commented Vithal Rajan in Hyderabad, India who works with several civil society organisations. "The Indian government in relief at winning American friendship has fallen in with this ploy, further distancing itself from the fledgling democracy of Pakistan, and leaving no real solution in sight."

Mumbai was still burning when Rajan wrote to civil society activists in Pakistan and India on Nov. 28 urging them not to "just be reactive like the popular press" but take a more thoughtful view of the situation.

Angry condemnations "lead us nowhere; political demands (may) make vote-catching politicians rethink strategies, but these might remain ineffectual. (We) should create space... to think things out in the long term..."

"...[Lal Krishna] Advani has called this attack in Mumbai by a few terrorists as 'a war.' This is dangerous stuff and nonsense. A war is fought between sovereign countries, not between the police and criminals. It is in India's interest and in Pakistan's interest to have stable, progressive governments."

Advani, who is opposition leader in Indian parliament and represents the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has repeatedly accused the ruling Congress party, which professes to be secular, of allowing India to turn into a 'soft state' in the face of a series of deadly bombings in Indian cities, this year, that have been attributed to Islamist groups.

Pakistan's new civilian government has, however, been making attempts to step out of the familiar well-worn grooves. President Asif Ali Zardari, for example, has signalled major policy shifts by terming the militants in Kashmir as "terrorists", stating that India is not Pakistan's enemy, and then declaring that Pakistan had adopted a "no first use" policy on nuclear weapons.

Participating via satellite link in the prestigious 'Leadership Summit' conducted by India's prestigious 'Hindustan Times' newspaper, on Nov. 22, four days before the attack on Mumbai, Zardari quoted his late wife Benazir Bhutto to say that there is a "little bit of India in every Pakistani and a little bit of Pakistan in every Indian". Bhutto was assassinated by suicide bombers, last year, while on election campaign.

The religious right in Pakistan—and its supporters within the establishment—is clearly unhappy at Zardari's peace overtures towards India. Militants involved in fighting the state on Pakistan's north-west border have announced a stepping up of efforts to assassinate Pakistan's political leadership.

Pakistan and India's fights against extremism "will founder if fought alone," noted the young Britain-based Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid in a recent op-ed in the *Guardian*, London, warning that India's rush to implicate Pakistan is a "dangerous mistake". "The impulse to implicate Pakistan is of course understandable: the past is replete with examples of Pakistani and Indian intelligence agencies working to destabilise the historical enemy across the border."

Beyond India and Pakistan, the global activist group Avaaz.org is launching a message calling for unity following the attacks in Mumbai, to be published in newspapers across India and Pakistan and delivered to political leaders within one week.

"The message is that these tactics have failed and we are more united than ever. And we are determined to work together to stop violent extremism, and call on our political and religious leaders to do the same. If these attacks cause us to turn on each other in hatred and conflict, the terrorists will have won."

□□□

[source : <http://www.countercurrents.org/sarwar011208.htm>]