

Bhutto sends a warning to Kabul, . . . and Moscow, and Washington

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

Responding to a series of verbal threats issued against Pakistan by both Moscow and Kabul—the firing of a Russian-made SCUD missile into Pakistani territory—Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, for the first time since assuming office last December, has sent a clear message to Afghanistan: “If Pakistan is dragged into this war, then we will retaliate with full force,” Bhutto declared on April 23 in Peshawar, a town close to the Afghan border, which is the center of Afghan resistance.

Bhutto’s sharp words belie the whisper campaign launched by Kremlin super-ambassador Count Yuli Vorontsov and tacitly endorsed by Washington, that Pakistan’s Afghan policy is a special-interest proprietary of the military, specifically the showy Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) under Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul, and that if only Bhutto had control over her military, Pakistan would have stopped backing the Mujahideen. But that is only part of the story.

There is every indication that Prime Minister Bhutto’s harsh rejoinder was addressed not only to Kabul, but more importantly to Moscow and Washington, and that it was a response to a calculated strategy of coercion by the superpowers, to force Pakistan into line on the deal they have worked out over Afghanistan. Significantly, this superpower squeeze play has increased dramatically just as Prime Minister Bhutto appears to be launching her independent policy to solve the Afghan fiasco.

Why now?

The most immediate provocation for Benazir Bhutto’s declaration was the April 23 threat from Afghan Defense Minister Shahnawaz Tanai, who said Kabul would attack Pakistan with rockets in retaliation for increasing rebel attacks on major Afghan towns. Tanai’s interview with the official Afghan news agency, Bakhtar, was the most blatant threat yet issued by Kabul against Pakistan since Soviet troops left Afghanistan in mid-February. Earlier, both Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and Soviet Ambassador to Kabul Vorontsov had threatened that the Afghan imbroglio might “spill over into Pakistan.”

The new, more shrill round of Moscow-Kabul propaganda and threats is meant to cash in on the loss of momentum

by the Mujahideen as a result of the failure to capture Jalalabad. The new thrust to break Pakistan’s insistence on a viable solution in Afghanistan is also boosted by the claimed success in reopening the Kabul-Jalalabad road and breaking the blockade along the Salang Highway connecting Kabul to the Soviet border, as well as Kabul’s vaunted “secret negotiations” with the Teheran-based Mujahideen and some rebel commanders inside Afghanistan.

Both Kabul and Moscow know that their present advantage may not last, and that given sufficient time, the Mujahideen will bring the Kabul regime to its knees. They are certainly aware of the growing tendency among the Mujahideen groups to shun the prospect of “instant success” in frontal assaults like the failed Jalalabad campaign, and settle in for a prolonged siege of major Afghan towns—a war of attrition that is arguably winnable. Both Moscow and Kabul are also aware that the surest way to deny the Mujahideen that victory is to “decouple” Pakistan from the Mujahideen.

The saber-rattling from Moscow and Kabul is patently designed to increase pressure on the Bhutto administration, already under great internal and external pressure from growing ethnic problems in Sind, an intransigent political opposition, a fundamentalist upsurge fueled by the Soviet Union’s cozying up to Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, and an acute economic crisis.

The ‘New Yalta’ game

It is common knowledge that with the signing of the Geneva Accords, heralded as opening a new era of “détente” between the superpowers rather than as a real settlement to the Afghan crisis, the United States abandoned the concept of a free and independent Afghanistan. Earlier, Washington had found Pakistan’s opposition to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan a handy vehicle for pursuing a “bleed the Soviets” gambit. But the lure of Mikhail Gorbachov’s “new Russia” proved irresistible. And once the Reagan administration had fallen headlong for Moscow’s changed image, the late Gen. Zia ul-Uaq—and, more to the point, Pakistan’s sovereign interest—became an obstacle to accommodation with Moscow.

Following General Zia’s mysterious death within four

months of the Geneva Accords' signing, the advent of a democratically elected regime in Pakistan gave Washington the chance to get the new, "progressive" regime on the "new détente" bandwagon. However, Mme. Bhutto had made it clear even before the polls that brought her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) to power in November, that she endorsed Islamabad's Afghan policy, and even hinted that the "forward Afghan policy" was in fact a brainchild of her father, the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

So far, Washington has not reacted directly to Bhutto's stubbornness, but the pattern of U.S. moves in recent weeks clearly echoes and reinforces the strategy of coercion pursued more openly by the Moscow-Kabul axis. First, the threats from Kabul and Moscow have gone virtually unanswered, and the firing of the SCUD missile into Pakistani territory evoked only the mildest protest. Second, without recognizing the Mujahideen's interim government, Washington has sent an envoy to that interim government—a clear move to sideline the American ambassador in Islamabad, Robert Oakley, who might be expected to bring the Pakistani viewpoint to bear on Afghan affairs. Third, there are complaints from the Mujahideen that Washington has substantially reduced the supply of heavy weaponry necessary for the type of conventional warfare into which the Mujahideen are now locked.

A pointed leak

By far the most revealing move, however, was the recent *New York Times* "leak" attributing the futile Mujahideen assault on Jalalabad to Prime Minister Bhutto, who allegedly overrode ISI desires to stage an indefinite siege. That sources in Washington insist the Jalalabad campaign was directed by U.S. military advisers, only underscores the fact that U.S. Afghan policy is at best self-defeating, and at worst a deliberate con game.

This report from "high-level sources" is precisely targeted to activate a particular faction in Pakistan, that is led by Khan Abdul Wali Khan, head of the Awami National Party (ANP), a politician who spends most of his time in Kabul "on medical grounds." Wali Khan is the sole avid opponent of assistance to the Mujahideen in Pakistan. A favorite of the international media, Wali Khan has just made headlines with his open letter campaign to President Bush, U.N. Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, and others on Afghanistan. Wali Khan implored George Bush to stop arming the Mujahideen "for the sake of Pakistan," and recommended to Mikhail Gorbachov that the matter be brought into the United Nations.

Wali Khan's media blitz was timed to coincide with new Soviet demands for a U.S.-Pakistan split—namely, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze's "offers" of a deal in which Moscow and Washington will mutually disarm the Mujahideen and Kabul, and Kabul President Najibullah's proposal for a meeting with President Bush.

Though his party is minuscule—the North West Frontier

Province-based ANP could not win more than a grand total of 2 seats from more than 220 in the National Assembly of Pakistan—Wali Khan is in a pivotal position to blackmail the Bhutto administration: The PPP rules the troubled and strategic North West Frontier Province in a coalition setup with the ANP. Wali Khan can bring down the NWFP government at will.

A rift between Wali Khan and Prime Minister Bhutto over Afghanistan policy could be expected to raise that specter, thus qualitatively putting more pressure on the Bhutto government in terms of stability along the border and in terms of its own viability.

What is at stake

The squeeze play by the superpowers comes at a time when Prime Minister Bhutto has set into motion a number of initiatives showing that she is taking up the Afghan issue herself, to end the present drift.

In early April, Bhutto sent official emissaries, all personally close to her, to Moscow, New Delhi, and Beijing, ostensibly in connection with Pakistan's candidate for the International Court of Justice. Press reports make it evident that the emissaries, carrying personal messages from Bhutto to the various heads of state, did not restrict their discussions to such narrow confines. In each capital, the Afghan issue was discussed. For instance, Iqbal Akhund, Prime Minister Bhutto's adviser on foreign affairs and national security, went to Beijing, and from there flew to New York to successfully counter the Kabul-Moscow move to take the Afghan issue to the U.N. Security Council. The same Mr. Akhund moved on to Washington to meet with, among others, National Security Adviser Gen. Brent Scowcroft.

In a related development, Mme. Bhutto has appointed Air Chief Marshal Zulfikar Ali Khan (ret.), a friend of the Bhutto family, as ambassador to the United States, replacing Jamshed Marker. Air Chief Marshal Khan was chairman of the review committee set up by Bhutto to examine the functioning of the ISI following her assumption of power. It has also been announced that Prime Minister Bhutto will be making an official visit to Washington in early June.

Whether Prime Minister Bhutto assembles the wherewithal to defy the superpowers and carry forward an independent policy to solve the Afghan fiasco remains to be seen. What is not really at issue—in spite of self-serving disinformation from the superpowers' media outlets—is what the basic elements of such an independent policy will be.

A review of Benazir Bhutto's statements on the subject since she assumed office reveals her identification of two aspects of the Afghan problem that are of vital importance to Pakistan: 1) a tangible solution to the Afghan problem must involve the return to Afghanistan of the 3 million refugees encamped in Pakistan since the 1979 Soviet invasion of their country; and 2) a tangible solution to the Afghan problem must involve establishment of a government friendly to Pak-

istan in Kabul.

In a very recent interview with a Swiss journal, Prime Minister Bhutto reiterated her view that peace and stability in Afghanistan would be impossible as long as the present regime in Kabul remained in power.

The bottom line for Pakistan

Prime Minister Bhutto has indicated that the two points mentioned above are primary requirements for Pakistan's own security. The Afghan refugee issue, it should be noted, is almost never addressed by either Moscow or Kabul (with the exception, that is, of Dr. Najibullah's 1987 "national reconciliation" plan inviting refugees home to be stocked up as hostages in the major towns to deter Muhajideen attacks, a plan which failed miserably). Yet, besides the financial burden on Pakistan at a time when the Pakistani economy is, as Bhutto herself has acknowledged, bankrupt and under the austerity *diktat* of the IMF, the refugees have created the social chaos that has taken violent proportions during the last three years.

Growing violence in the NWFP between the refugees and locals; intense competition for a few jobs between the same two groups in a country where unemployment runs as high as 30%; the devastation of scant forest lands in the NWFP, causing increased land erosion and filling up of irrigation canals; the large-scale infiltration into Pakistan of the Afghan Secret Service KHAD personnel with the purpose of stoking trouble; and the emergence of an ever-widening network of narcotics traffickers who, backed by hired assassins equipped with Kalashnikov assault rifles, rule the roost and control the law and order functionaries in Pakistan's major cosmopolitan port city, Karachi, are only a few of the more prominent types of fallout from the establishment of "people's democracy" in Kabul and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to shore up the Kabul regime.

The Karachi scene is particularly threatening. Unless the administration intervenes quickly enough to prevent further deterioration of the situation, Karachi may soon become another Beirut, where various ethnic groups huddle in ghettos and seek protection from their own militia and snipers.

Installation of a government that is genuinely friendly to Islamabad in Kabul is no less important for Pakistan. No country, not even the strongest, desires an unfriendly neighbor, but in this case, the argument is even more compelling. In the past, armed secessionist forces, such as the Paktoon and Baluchi secessionists along the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders, have drawn support, both moral and military, from Kabul to break up Pakistan. There are two more specific areas where Pakistan requires the assistance of the friendly regime in Kabul.

First, Afghanistan is expected to harvest about 1,000 tons of opium this year, and based upon previous years' patterns; most of it will find its way into Pakistan for conversion into heroin and shipment westward, leaving a trail of death and

social destruction within Pakistan. Pakistan already has a large number of addicts—their number shot up from a few thousand in the early 1980s to 2 million in 1988—and it is recognized that only a concerted regionwide effort can stop this growing rot. The present Kabul regime, whose writ does not extend beyond the major Afghan towns in any case, is neither capable nor has shown willingness to pay any attention to this growing menace. In fact, Dr. Najibullah has on at least one occasion indicated that it would continue, as a price of resistance to his rule.

Second, a friendly Afghan regime is a prerequisite for meaningfully resolving the refugee problem. Refugees who left their homes almost a decade ago will not be interested in returning to risk their lives again. Their return only becomes a possibility if the Afghan and Pakistan governments jointly take measures to secure their lives and help them rebuild their future. Any sign of hostility between Afghanistan's government and Pakistan would instantly undermine the refugees' will to return.

The Salam expedition

The problem of the refugees' return is further complicated by the widespread devastation wreaked on Afghanistan during the decade-long warfare. Recently, the United Nations sent six missions—known as Salam 1 through 6—to evaluate the extent of destruction on the ground caused by the Soviet occupation. Although the published report is incomplete, because many teams could not reach areas where they were assigned to go, the picture that emerges is one of devastation.

According to the U.N. expedition's report, the infrastructure in the Panjshir Valley has been totally destroyed. Of the 1,300 villages in the province of Herat, as many as 600 have been destroyed or seriously damaged. The landscape is strewn with makeshift graves, the hospitals are full of limbless children, and so forth. The scene was so bleak, that it prompted a Frenchman on one of the expeditions to comment: "Visiting western Herat is like a visit to Verdun in 1919. For 20 kilometers, there is nothing but ruins; the roads and fields are overgrown with weeds."

In the midst of this, some 10-11 million Afghans, except those living virtually as prisoners inside the fortified towns, are trying to stay alive, foraging through the countryside. Some are trying to rebuild homes destroyed earlier by rockets and bombs. But, the expedition members pointed out, the land is peppered with mines placed by the Soviets and the Kabul regime, inviting death at every step. The report indicates that unless the roads and basic infrastructure are rebuilt before the refugees start moving back, it will be impossible to keep them alive. The food situation will get worse, and unless roadways are built, emergency food supplies cannot come through. Moreover, returning farmers will need seeds, equipment, and livestock to resume their lives, and there must be roads to bring in these essentials.