

# General Beg touches a political nerve

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

Pakistan's Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg shocked local geopoliticians in an exchange with Pakistani journalists at a seminar in Islamabad on Jan. 29, when he invited India to get involved in a united initiative with the Soviet Union, China, Iran, and Pakistan to seek an end to the Gulf war. Earlier, Beg had startled those in the subcontinent, and elsewhere, who routinely propagate the view that yet another India-Pakistan war is necessary to resolve the disputed Kashmir issue. The Kashmir issue needs to be solved, Beg said on that occasion, and he described the three wars fought over it as "futile." Such statements by the head of a powerful faction within the Pakistani establishment provide an opportunity to set India-Pakistan relations on an even keel and to work jointly toward providing security for the region.

Beg's statements have already made an impact in Pakistan, where the Gulf war has left the politicians in total disarray. The official government position, articulated by both President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, had initially been to support U.N. Resolution 678. Long ago, Pakistan sent 12,000 troops to Saudi Arabia, ostensibly to protect the holy shrines of Mecca and Medina. Since the war began, the policy has come under severe popular attack. Under pressure, the government has now restated its position: It is not in favor of a war; it does not want Iraq to be destroyed or occupied; it is not playing second fiddle to the U.S. postwar regional plans; and, it is totally opposed to Israeli involvement in the war.

The softening of the government's rigid anti-Iraq position came through a political process in which General Beg's earlier statements, which verged on showing admiration for the Iraqi President's "defiance" against the "mightiest of the mighty," played a key role. On Jan. 29, the Pakistani Senate passed a resolution calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities, simultaneous withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and "coalition" forces from Saudi Arabia, and placing the Gulf under U.N. supervision. Pakistani senators, the majority of whom had been handpicked by the late President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, also made it clear that the withdrawal of Iraqi forces must be secured through peaceful political and diplomatic means.

Moreover, in a highly significant political coup, on Feb. 3, the whole spectrum of political forces—including the pro-Saudi Jamaat-e-Islami and National People's Party, both of

which are part of the ruling Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI)—held a convention in Lahore. A unanimous resolution was adopted which sharply deviated from the government's initial policy. In summary, it called for an immediate unconditional ceasefire and evacuation of foreign troops from the Gulf area. The most significant part read: "The restoration of Kuwait's sovereignty and pullout of Iraqi troops should be left to the Muslim Ummah," a far cry from Security Council Resolution 678.

Pakistani political analysts point out the importance of the fact that the issue of the Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait was decoupled from the ending of hostilities in the Gulf, particularly since the Saudi-financed Jamaat had to submit to pressure to endorse it. The Saudis, however, did succeed in stopping a condemnation of the Pakistani government, for sending troops to Saudi soil, from getting into the resolution.

## General Beg's strength

General Beg's open criticism, albeit *sotto voce*, of the official government position, stems from the fact that, unlike his earlier colleagues, such as President Ayub Khan, President Yahya Khan, and President Zia, he has shown little inclination so far to grab power. Beg has concentrated on establishing himself as an independent strategist. His disillusionment with the U.S. goes back to 1965, when Washington had embargoed arms supplies to Pakistan following the outbreak of the Indo-Pakistan war. His views have been further substantiated by Washington's recent policies, such as toward Afghanistan since the Soviet troop withdrawal; the use of economic and military aid to manipulate Pakistan; and U.S. insistence that Pakistan abandon its nuclear program.

Washington's ability to manipulate Beg has been checked by his apparent lack of interest in grabbing state power. In the two years that he has been Army chief of staff, Beg has enunciated a future strategic doctrine, which would tie together Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan. Such an Islamic bloc, the general surmises, will not only provide Pakistan the necessary security, but will put it in a position to wield regional influence—namely in the Gulf. Beg has also made it clear that nuclear weapons are deterrents necessary for Pakistan's security.

There is no doubt that Beg does not want, nor foresee, a total victory for the Gulf "coalition" forces. Addressing officers recently, Beg pointed out that the "coalition" strategy was linked to Israeli interests, as its war objective was essentially the reduction of the military and economic potential of Iraq, a major Islamic power. Condemning the incessant bombing of Iraq, Beg said that in the case of a ground assault, the U.S. would at best be able to capture a wedge on the Kuwait border, but this would be insufficient to reduce Iraqi forces. Under such circumstances, Beg said, the U.S. inability to enforce its will must reduce its influence, to Pakistan's advantage. The U.S. might also find the Iraqi conflict much as the Soviets found Afghanistan.