

Pakistan army chief sends U.S. a message

by Ramtanu Maitra

Addressing officers at the Command and Staff College at Quetta on Dec. 6, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg said the country should be grateful to those who had instilled the belief that Pakistan could swiftly integrate the prepared components of a nuclear bomb and deliver it, because such a belief tended to deter aggression. Four days earlier, at a seminar at Wah Cantonment, General Beg had complimented Iraq for its heroic defiance against "the mighty of the mightiest."

Beg's remarks will surely be read carefully in Washington. The United States has held up \$576 million in economic and military aid to Pakistan because of alleged evidence that the country is in the process of making nuclear weapons. Washington is also in the midst of a massive troop deployment in the Persian Gulf ostensibly to crush Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and has been diplomatically attempting to maneuver the Islamic states in the region to support the U.S. plan. It would be naive, however, to interpret these remarks of General Beg as a knee-jerk reaction to the latest developments in U.S.-Pakistan relations and the Gulf situation. Beg has long been a strong advocate of seeking a new strategic alliance for Pakistan, one in which the dependency on the U.S. would be significantly downgraded and the regional Islamic states would play a greater role.

Talking more than two years ago to student officers of Quetta's Command and Staff College, the premier staff college in Pakistan, Beg had pointed to the "new realities" emerging around Pakistan's northwestern borders. Pakistan has a strong historical and cultural linkage with Iran and Turkey, he said, and a new kind of relationship had emerged between the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan, which Beg described as "two countries, one people." He pointed out that these similarities call for a strategic consensus which would be a source of great strength. These and other statements over time make it clear that General Beg considers that such a consensus will not only provide Pakistan the necessary security, but will also enable it to play a role in keeping the Gulf region secure from outside forces. At the Wah Cantonment seminar, Beg reiterated his earlier belief and extolled China for sharing defense technologies with Pakistan.

Beg's disillusionment with the United States goes back to the "sad experience," as he put it, of the 1965 war with India, when the U.S. had summarily suspended all aid to Pakistan and "left us high and dry." It is this disillusionment

that led him to focus his attention on strengthening the indigenous defense industry. Beg had earlier categorically ruled out the possibility of acquiring expensive M1A1 "Abrams" tanks from the United States. With Chinese cooperation, Pakistan rolled out its first rebuilt T69-11 MP tank last March; now on the drawing boards is the ambitious Main Battle Tank project MBT-200 (P-90) Khalid. "The new tank of the Pakistani Army," General Beg has stated, invoking the deity, "would *Insha Allah*, be one of the best in the world," incorporating the most modern and sophisticated technology that any tank in the world could possibly have.

General Beg has not hidden his unhappiness over the U.S. policy of appeasing the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, particularly following the Soviet troop withdrawal. He was critical of the American embargo of arms to the Afghan Mujahideen, and laid the blame squarely on the United States for the rebels' failure to capture Jalalabad last year, in which the Mujahideen were practically finished. Beg had earlier called for direct talks among the Mujahideen, the Russians, and the Kabul government after the removal of President Najibullah. The formula was rejected out of hand by Washington.

General Beg's compliment to those who had helped to develop Pakistan's nuclear capabilities—though he maintains that the program is for peaceful purposes only—is also a part of a non-U.S.-based deterrence doctrine for Pakistan. Mobilizing the support of other countries, such as Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan, to set up a common platform of defense would maximize Pakistan's defense, he argues.

The much-publicized Blow of the Faithful exercise last winter, which involved some 200,000 troops, was Beg's demonstration of the "doctrine of offensive-defensive," in his own words, and was meant to "convey a message to our adversaries that casting an evil eye on Pakistan would be a grave mistake." General Beg expressed his pride in the manifestation of the Army's resolve, strength, and capability to guarantee an "invincible defense of the country." In building such a defense, there is no doubt that nuclear capability at short notice will be crucial.

In a larger sense, in his recent pronouncements, Beg has also been laying down the basic parameters of Pakistan's foreign policy for the coming days. There is no doubt in his mind that India is the main adversary. It is important to note that following an apparently constructive two-hour meeting between the Indian and Pakistan prime ministers in the Maldives during the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit on Nov. 21, Beg visited the forward lines along the India-Pakistan borders and told the troops to "remain on high alert." This move was generally understood as his way of putting India's new Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif on notice that India will continue as Pakistan's chief adversary in principle (if not in an actual shooting war, which Beg is known not to prefer at the present time).