

Washington signals policy shift in India

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

The May visit to India of U.S. Deputy Undersecretary of State for South Asian Affairs John Malott, has sparked indignation in official circles in Delhi.

The concern centers around remarks by Malott, a low-level bureaucrat, at a public event in New Delhi. Speaking at the India International Center, Malott, following cues from Amnesty International and Asia Watch, strongly criticized India for human rights violations and said, "India must take steps to curb the abuses of the security forces" in Kashmir. During a luncheon with Indian journalists earlier in the day, Malott highlighted the "negative impact" Indo-U.S. relations would suffer if India did not check alleged excesses carried out by its security forces now stationed in Kashmir. Following these remarks, the Indian government warned the Clinton administration that its ability to play a "constructive role" would solely depend on Washington's faith in the Indian political process.

Although Malott acknowledged U.S. support for the 1972 Shimla agreement signed by then-Prime Ministers Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan and Indira Gandhi of India on Kashmir, he made clear that Washington considers Kashmir a disputed area, a designation rejected by India and Pakistan. Malott came close to offering U.S. mediation, saying, "Our role is to be a helpful one—to encourage the process—but not to stand between the two countries in any sort of formal mediation role." He played down Pakistani interference in the Indian part of Kashmir and instead emphasized involving the people of Kashmir as a third party in the Indian-Pakistani negotiations.

In total, Malott's pronouncements represent a change of stance in Washington on Kashmir, now placing the blame for the Kashmir conflict squarely on India. Earlier this year, Washington was mooted labeling Pakistan a "terrorist state" for its interference in Kashmir.

Aggravating old irritants

Malott also expressed impatience over India and Pakistan's failure to pursue any of the near-term confidence-building and non-proliferation measures suggested earlier by the United States. These include a unilateral or regional cut-off of fissile material production, placing safeguards on new

and existing nuclear facilities, or an Indian-Pakistani dialogue on Kashmir, or the demilitarization of the Siachen Glacier.

Before Malott's arrival, the White House had prepared a report on nuclear proliferation in South Asia which emphasized that there is a real danger that South Asia could be the next nuclear flashpoint. Although the report mentioned the "China factor" as a hindrance to regional non-proliferation in South Asia, the report voiced no concern that the vertical proliferation of nuclear weapons in China and China's signing of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has increased the security threat to the region, and to India in particular.

Nor did the report have any solution to the threats posed to the region by the emergence of new nuclear-weapons states in Central Asia.

Hopes dashed?

Despite the fact that he is soon to be replaced by Clinton appointee Robin Rafael, Malott's visit drew attention in India. Some Indian officials had believed Washington would label Pakistan a "terrorist state," and would thus help India curb the militancy in the Kashmir Valley. However, it appears that Washington's threat to put Pakistan on the terrorist list was centered around satisfying some of Washington's friends in West Asia and also gaining some leverage in Pakistan itself.

In general, India has much higher expectations for U.S. relations. Joint Indo-U.S. naval exercises in June 1992, high-level military exchanges, U.S. approval of India's economic liberalization and increasing U.S. multinational interest in India, led Delhi to believe that relations between the two had turned the corner. In certain areas, besides joint cooperation to secure maritime trade, Washington has shown interest in discussing and sorting out issues. These include the issue of seed patenting as demanded by farmers of both countries and also the implementation of some of the trade-related intellectual property rights.

Thus, Malott's visit came as a shocker. In reality, Washington's South Asia policy, although blurred to the point of haziness, is still driven by geopolitical and economic interests. Among the interests which can be more clearly observed are: the promotion of human rights as the West defines it; countering terrorism and narco-trafficking—decidedly a fallout from Washington's own Afghanistan policy carried out by Pakistan in the 1980s; gaining access to the reformed Indian economic scene, particularly in the service sectors, such as insurance; pushing nuclear non-proliferation in order to maintain nuclear weapons supremacy, along with a handful of nations; and preserving unhampered maritime and naval traffic rights.

It will be useful for Delhi to realize that in order to achieve these objectives, the powers-that-be in the United States will cajole, coax, or threaten India as and when necessary.