

India-Pakistan military imbalance

7-2-05
Pakistan
THE presence of a high-level American military delegation in Pakistan has coincided with a thought-provoking report by a US think-tank. Prepared by the US National Intelligence Council, which is affiliated with the CIA, the report warns of a possible nuclear conflict in the subcontinent if the current imbalance between Pakistan and India in conventional arms continues. Because of this imbalance and Pakistan's lack of strategic depth, the report warns, Islamabad was "pulling ahead in terms of nuclear-capable systems". The council, which reports directly to the CIA, claims that Pakistan could use its nuclear option if it ever felt it could lose a conventional war. In his Friday's meeting with the American delegation, led by Under-Secretary for Defence Douglas J. Feith, President Pervez Musharraf made no reference to the nuclear question; all he said was that the US arms aid to Pakistan was critical for maintaining military balance in the region.

At the Camp David summit meeting between Presidents Musharraf and George Bush, the US agreed to a three-billion-dollar economic and military package to Pakistan. Some military sales items — eight Orion surveillance planes, 2,000 anti-armour missiles and six systems for the navy — have been approved in principle. But a lot remains to be done given the yawning gaps in Pakistan's vital defence needs, especially those concerning air power. Pakistan feels concerned over the situation because, in spite of the current normalization process, India has made a massive increase in its military budget for the current year. Until 1997, its military spending generally had a single-digit growth. For instance, the 1996-97 budget provided for an increase of 9.68 per cent over that of the previous year. However, for the subsequent years up to 2001-2002, the annual increases were by 19.57; 13.10; 17.98; 15.70 and 13.84 per cent. The BJP-led government raised the defence budget for 2002-03 by Rs650,000 million as against

Rs620,000 million in the previous year. What is surprising, however, is the biggest-ever allocation of Rs770,000 million in India's defence outlay for 2004-05 by the present government headed by an economist like Mr Manmohan Singh. The increase of Rs117,000 million over the Rs653,000 million allocated by the Vajpayee government for the previous year mean a 27 per cent rise. This is reflected in India's military expansion programme, which includes purchasing 125 Mirage jets from France, 65 Hawks from Britain, an aircraft-carrier from Russia, three Phalcon airborne early warning systems from Israel, and six submarines from France, besides plans to purchase more tanks and increasing the infantry's fire power.

Pakistan is in no position to join this arms race. As against India's Rs770,000 million, Pakistan's defence budget for 2004-05 is Rs193,920 million. India also has the advantage of having a more varied source of arms purchases. Pakistan's defence establishment has always been American-oriented, besides modest purchases from China. Since all aid from America was cut off in 1990 because of the Pressler Amendment, Islamabad could not meet some of its vital defence needs. It is in the air force especially that there is a big gap, and there is no sign yet that the F-16s will be made available.

Against this background, it will be in the interest of peace and stability in the subcontinent if the imbalance in the conventional arms is at least partly reduced. Mercifully, Pakistan and India are engaged in a very promising peace dialogue. The confidence-building measures taken by the two sides have changed South Asia's geopolitical climate and infused a sense of optimism among its people for the future. America and the world at large have backed this detente. One hopes Washington realizes that meeting Pakistan's urgent and long over-due defence needs do not in any way detract it from the current peace process.