



## **Houston Chronicle**

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### **India, Pakistan united with U.S. against terror**

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Outlook

FOR the first time in a long time, the national security interests of the United States, Pakistan and India are aligned to fight terrorism with a united front.

Two new elements make this alignment more hopeful and purposeful.

First, President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan has come to realize that Islamic extremists perpetrating violence in Kashmir and Afghanistan are a threat to his own position and Pakistan's stability.

Musharraf has now been the target of at least three assassination attempts. Two of the bloodiest attacks came last December. The danger to Musharraf and Pakistan had now become real and imminent, and Musharraf is ready to take on the terrorists.

Musharraf's recent fierce efforts to flush out the extremists and terrorists from the rugged and mountainous northwest frontier are unprecedented. As long as memory serves, successive Pakistan governments have had no control over this territory and had conceded the governance to the local Pashtun and other tribal leaders.

Second, both India and Pakistan have initiated fruitful and productive dialogue. The contentious Kashmir issue will be included in the agenda of these ongoing talks, but both parties will seek a bilateral resolution to the matter.

For a long time, Pakistan has insisted that the Kashmir issue be mediated or brokered by the United States and/or the United Nations, essentially seeking multilateral negotiations, and this was opposed by India. At the same time, India had been firm and had affirmed that there was nothing to discuss regarding Kashmir - that it was a settled matter.

However, there now appears to be a sincere compromise: The challenges of the Kashmir issue will be discussed in a bilateral forum.

The agreement to discuss Kashmir in a mutually acceptable framework, and the Pakistan government's discontinuation of the support for terrorism in Kashmir by Islamic extremists, has generated hope and reduced tensions.

If the tensions between Pakistan and India had continued unabated, Pakistan's military forces would have been preoccupied in the Pakistan-India borders and would not have been able to launch recent vigorous attacks on the extremists.

Nothing symbolizes this new spirit of reconciliation between Pakistan and India more than the current tour of Pakistan by the Indian cricket team - the first one since 1989 - and the hugely warm reception of the team by Pakistan citizens. Cricket in Pakistan and India is much like soccer in Europe - passionate, nationalistic and entertaining.

Finally, the U.S. national security interest of taking the fight to the terrorists is also now well-served. Till recently, Musharraf was reluctant to go after terrorists in the difficult northwest region for two reasons.

First, Musharraf did not want to further alienate Islamic fundamentalists at home. However, the bloody assassination attempts on Musharraf changed that.

Second, Musharraf was finally able to employ significant military resources to fight the terrorists because of the real reduction in tensions with India.

This is a unique and opportune moment for all - the United States, Pakistan and India - to build on the new strategic alignment of interests. However, this hope must be tempered with the sobering political realities in Pakistan and India. Since his commitment to help the United States to combat terrorism and fundamentalism after the 9/11 tragedy, Musharraf has come under blistering criticism and ridicule by the fundamentalists. Musharraf is also now seen as shortchanging Pakistan's national interests and security in his reconciliation efforts with India, and the betrayal of the nuclear scientists.

It has been a one-two-three punch for Islamic extremists and radicals, and a significant section of the army: betrayal of the Taliban, renegeing on the Kashmir issue and curbing the development of the Islamic nuclear bomb.

India is scheduled to hold national elections in April and May. Until the elections are completed, the government will be cautious. If the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, and its allies retain power, as it appears very likely, then we can expect even a bolder approach from the Indian government because BJP and its allies can argue that the Indian electorate has endorsed the government's policies.

In the meantime, the United States must thread the needle carefully. It cannot afford to appear to tilt toward India or Pakistan. That would poison the well.