

Force of Habit

Whether one approves of General Pervez Musharraf or not, it must be admitted that he has won a victory by demonstrating to the world the limitations of US power. No other military ruler can claim that he could compel the US president to visit him for a handshake after he spurned Washington's publicly proffered advice not to interrupt the democratic process. Whatever dissimulation US officials may indulge in to justify President Clinton meeting the general, extremist circles in Pakistan are bound to hold it out as a great victory for Pakistani military. It is worth remembering that no US president has ever bothered to visit Pakistan under democratic rule. Previous visits constituted endorsements of Generals Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan and Mr Clinton's 'stopover' will be interpreted by the Pakistani people as an endorsement extracted by a skilful general from a reluctant US president. It should be obvious that the general who ignored the Clinton administration's advice against overthrowing a democratic government is unlikely to be persuaded in a four-hour stopover to pay any attention to platitudinous pleas to restore democracy. Long before President Clinton yielded to pressure to include Pakistan in his itinerary, General Musharraf had indicated that it will be years before democracy would be restored. No one can accuse him of bluffing on this count.

Instead of worrying about the Clinton stopover in Pakistan, the Indian foreign policy and intelligence establishment should focus on what compels the US president to behave in this way. In 1971, following Dr Kissinger's visit to Beijing via Islamabad, the Nixon administration justified the trip with the explanation that 800 million people armed with nuclear weapons could not be ignored. Pakistan drew the correct lessons from that. It extracted a commitment from US secretary of state General Alexander Haig in 1981 that as a quid pro quo for its help to fight the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, the US would not interfere with Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme and domestic politics, namely military rule. The army concluded that its nuclear weapon capability would deter the US from interfering in Pakistan's internal affairs. Nuclear weapons may not be usable in war but they help to compel the US to be engaged. The North Koreans understand it and probably the Iranians too, if we accept the US assessment of that country's motivations. When China transferred nuclear weapons to Pakistan, its aim was to use that country to countervail India on the one side and the US in West Asia on the other. Through its nuclear proliferation, China has made the point that the sole superpower and the only 'indispensable nation' can be defied by a general from a country on the verge of economic collapse. Nuclear Pakistan is a reality and so is its ability to threaten further proliferation. The US is helpless in countering the China-Pakistan nuclear and missile axis and the threats this poses to proliferation in West Asia. It is, therefore, no surprise that the US president does not dare to displease the military rulers of Pakistan.