

# 'US using Maoist conflict to gain foothold'

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The United States of America's interests in South Asia came into focus today at a two-day regional conference on last year's India-Pakistan confrontation, with participants suggesting that conflicts in the region were tools used by the lone superpower.

The two South Asian arch rivals nearly went to war during the 10-month stand-off at the Line of Control and the international border.

"Since September 11 (2001) the US is everywhere in the region," Sartaj Aziz, former finance and foreign minister of Pakistan, said during his presentation today. "One should not have any illusions about US' long-term strategic interests here." Aziz also suggested that the US would have found some other excuses had attacks on its soil not occurred on September 11. He cautioned that South Asia should be worried about the growing US interests in the region as "Russia and China already are".

His views were shared by Nepalese foreign policy experts who participated at the conference. Former foreign minister Chakra Prasad Bastola, while speaking to media persons, said that the "war on terror" was providing the US a roadmap to make its inroads in all those

places where it had strategic interests.

Ashok Mehta, Major Gen. (retired) from Indian army and military analyst and Sun-deep Waslekar, president of Strategic Foresight Group too held the same view. Speaking separately to *The Kathmandu Post* during one of the breaks, both Gen. Mehta and Waslekar said that the US has strategic interests in the region and was hence using the Maoist conflict as pretext to get foothold in Nepal.

Waslekar also added that the US would not try for any permanent base in the Hindu Kingdom as India would not like it. "And currently, the US will not go against India's wishes." But he added that US did not want to remain only a superpower. "It wants to be a global power; hence it is establishing its presence around the world."

Meanwhile, during the first day of the two-day regional conference "India-Pakistan Confrontation 2003 and Future Prospects" organised by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), New Delhi, there were some heated discussions by both the Indian and Pakistani delegates. Although this was part of Track II diplomacy between the two nations, some of the participants reiterated their charges and counter-charges on a host of issues, the chief of them being alleged Pakistan-sponsored

militancy in India and that of India browbeating its smaller neighbour.

But each time the tempers were cooled with the "realisation" that they were meeting at a neutral venue precisely to find ways to reduce tension and hostilities.

Hiranya Lal Shrestha, foreign policy expert from Nepal, remarked that the hostility between the two largest nations in South Asia was causing adverse impact on Nepal's economy as its tourism suffered and also said that in any military conflict, Nepalis also were killed. "Moreover, SAARC has been paralysed," he said later.

Officials from Nepal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistani Embassy, US Embassy and Japanese Embassy were present, no serving official from India was present, prompting a remark from senior Nepali journalist M R Josse who asked what message India was trying to convey. "The Government of India does not think much of Track II diplomacy," responded Dr C Raja Mohan, Strategic Affairs Editor, *The Hindu*.

The FES initiative comes at a time when both India and Pakistan have demonstrated willingness to ease tensions. The participants include former ministers, ex-army officers, ex-diplomats and journalists. The conference is concluding tomorrow.