The contents of Indo-Pak relations, though generally bilateral in nature, have been profoundly influenced by the actions and pronouncements of the external powers. The US is one of such powers which does influence to a great deal the bilateral relations of India and Pakistan. It is a fact that while the fundamental problems of both countries have domestic roots, the projection of the superpowers into South Asia severely complicated these problems by exacerbating tensions between India and Pakistan.

With the globalization of the containment policy, the US got seriously engaged in the affairs of South Asia. It has focussed on the objective of winning allies and friends for its anti-Soviet and anti-communist campaign, as well as of preventing the development of any regional power which could not be made an American satellite. The US South Asia policy has also been framed in accordance with the same line.

The US is not an Asian power. Its attention is only focussed on the region in times of crisis in the area, be it regional conflict or a heightened perception of the Soviet threat. Thus the relevance of the region has witnessed fluctuations with evolving American relations with the former Soviet Union and China. If the region has appeared to serve economic, geopolitical or strategic goals it has risen in American priorities. Similarly priorities accorded to various countries within the region has also varied with changes in international circumstances.

Since India was not prepared to be a satellite or a client of the US, the latter found in Pakistan a manageable ally. To offset the expansionist policies of the USSR and China, the US foresaw in the geographic location of Pakistan evident strategic advantages in meeting these supposed threats. Pakistan's geostrategic significance in the fulfilment of the US oil interests in the Persian Gulf and the extension of its political influence in Middle East, South
West Asia were other important considerations in the thinking of US policy-makers. Moreover, India's policy of nonalignment was perceived by the US as an obstacle to its aspirations in the region. It also presented the risk of creating an additional world force based on political mobilization of national elites in Asia and Africa.

The US, by making Pakistan its Cold War partner changed the whole context of Indo-Pak relations. Now it assumed a triangular character with the US as the third party. The US involvement barely helped in improving Indo-Pak relations rather it further widened the existing gap between the two neighbours. The US policy towards various issues of Indo-Pak relations have made the things even more complicated and prospects of a solution even more remote.

It is very strange to note that India and Pakistan have paid too much attention to improve their ties with the United States and too little to coming to terms with each other. Had the situation been reversed, the bilateral Indo-Pak relations would not have experienced such a bitter taste. It is thus advisable for both India and Pakistan to end their excessively deferential attitude to the US and a demeaning competition in Washington to pull the otherside down and concentrate on improving their bilateral relations.

Of the various factors which have influenced the course of international politics and diplomacy in the last five decades, the nuclear one occupies the most significant and crucial place. While it is true that the possibility of a nuclear holocaust has receded with the end of the Cold War and the US no longer apprehends a threat to its national security interests from Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the possibility of a threat emanating from nuclear proliferation by a number of third world countries, including the two South Asian neighbors-India and Pakistan is being taken seriously by the US.

It has become common place to think of the South Asia as the most likely region where a war could escalate to a nuclear exchange. The US appears to hold the view that
continuing regional tensions between India and Pakistan combined with the ongoing programme in the two countries to acquire nuclear capability and ballistic missile delivery system mean that the outbreak of armed conflict has the potential to escalate to nuclear exchange with devastating consequences for the region and global efforts to combat the spread and use of such weapons. This view fits in with the nuclear theology of western strategists that developing countries are more prone to go to war with each other and wars between two developing countries, armed with the nuclear weapons, are bound to escalate to a nuclear level.

The US has long laboured to stop the spread of nuclear weapons in South Asia and has made nonproliferation a central issue in bilateral relations with India and Pakistan. With the end of the Cold War it has further accelerated its non-proliferation diplomacy in South Asia. The US objective has been "first capping, then reducing and eventually eliminating the weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery". In the changed circumstances of the post Cold War period, the US believes that the spread of nuclear technology and weapon capability to an increasing number of countries would pose a grave threat not only to its own security but the world as well.

The US concern about the nuclear arms race in South Asia appears to be genuine although in resolving the tangle successive US administrations have been playing more to the gallery than playing fair. While Washington has always wanted India to concede on nonproliferation, it has adopted a soft and permissive approach towards Pakistan's nuclear development. To pursue a credible nonproliferation strategy in South Asia, the US will need to adopt a policy that does not appear discriminatory. Further attention must be drawn towards more substantial cuts in its own nuclear arsenal.

It is extremely unlikely that India and Pakistan will agree to roll back or cap their nuclear programmes, and should not be expected to do so. Their programmes are too
advanced to be disbanded. Outside pressure is unlikely to change this situation. The US, should thus focus its efforts instead on deterring the overt deployment of the nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, blocking a subcontinental arms race and prodding India and Pakistan to embrace confidence building measures.

The military aid diplomacy of the great powers has not only fomented existing disputes between many neighbouring countries in many cases, it even yielded in new problems and disputes. The US military aid diplomacy in South Asia is a case in point. The massive influx of US arms into Pakistan embittered the already sullen relations between India and Pakistan. It prevented the normalization of their relations because it not only posed a great security problem for India, it even made Pakistan more adamant towards the outstanding bilateral issues. The US-Pak military alliance sharpened Indo-pak tensions. It became a constant factor in the reaction and counteraction which characterized subsequent relations between the suspicious neighbours. The cost of this blundering American decision, which had only a marginal and doubtful military advantage was very heavy in political and diplomatic terms to all the three parties involved – the US, India and Pakistan.

If during the Cold War era the US found in Pakistan a trusted ally to counter communism, in the post Cold War era Pakistan, for the US, has emerged as an important state to counter Islamic fundamentalism and to ensure its access to the republics of the Central Asia. Thus even in the promising scenario of the post Cold War era the US continued to follow the Cold War strategy of military alliance, though for achieving different sets of objectives. The US still considers Pakistan an important partner in safeguarding its interests in the region.

Nothing has bedevilled Indo-Pak relations more than the dispute over the beautiful mountainous state of Jammu and Kashmir. As a matter of fact Kashmir is the root cause of Indo-Pak conflict. Till now India and Pakistan have fought three major wars over Kashmir but its fate is still undecided. The Kashmir problem, though it concerns mainly India and
Pakistan, has attracted worldwide attention since it arose in 1947. The failure on the part of India and Pakistan to come to a negotiated settlement over the Kashmir has opened the issue for interference and intervention of outside powers and states. One of the most important states, external to the dispute, which has thrown its interest in Kashmir, has been the United States. The Kashmir issue has been one of the focal points of the US foreign policy in India and Pakistan.

The US stance on Kashmir was more influenced by its Cold War strategies than the merits of the dispute. The US found a golden opportunity in Kashmir dispute and its reference to the UN to establish its strategic interests in the region. The role of the US in the Kashmir conflict was part of an overall design in the Third World and in particular South Asia. As one senior US official has admitted: "Kashmir is only one aspect, of course, of our larger interests in the subcontinent of South Asia."

Any objective analysis of the US Kashmir policy is bound to conclude that the US has always taken a pro-Pakistani stand and never appreciated India's stand on the question. This fact was even acknowledged by the US Secretary Rusk, who said: "broadly speaking we have supported the Pakistani view." The US was also keen on a pro-Pakistani solution to the dispute. It put forward several suggestions favourable to Pakistan in the name of conflict resolution. It championed the cause of plebiscite and evoked the liberal concept of national self-determination.

The reasons behind the US pro-Pakistani stand over Kashmir are not too difficult to reveal. Given the strategic importance of Kashmir in the context of the Cold War. Washington's decision making elite understood that a friendly Pakistan offered an anchor for the implementation of the US strategic goals in Asia. The US support to Pakistan did not derive either from an ideological commitment to the Kashmiri people's right of self-determination or from a compulsion to be on the side of equity and justice in an international
dispute; rather it was in response to Pakistan's support to the US in the Cold War. It was in fact a matter of reciprocity.

The US involvement in the Kashmir dispute will hinder, not promote a settlement. Continued provocative statements by the US have doomed whatever little prospects of resolution of the Kashmir tangle. One should not forget that the more the issue is internationalised the less are the chances of finding a lasting solution to the problem. American pro-Pakistani stance encourages Pakistan to harp on the issue more vigorously. The more America shows its concern for Kashmir the greater Pakistan will feel emboldened to queer the pitch. If the US does not lend its support to Pakistan, the latter will be left with no other option but to settle the matter bilaterally.

The Kashmir problem, in fact, requires not outside crutches but political will from India and Pakistan. A mutually satisfactory resolution of the Kashmir issue will leave the US with no alibi to intervene and this is where India and Pakistan must focus. A bilateral determination to resist outside intervention and a sustained dialogue, with small confidence building measures is the best antidote to the US activism.

It will be in the interest of India and Pakistan and outside powers like the US to follow a policy of least provocation and try and build mutual trust. This trend has to be consolidated in the interest of regional and global peace. An unstable India or unstable Pakistan could be mutually damaging to both. In the long run and in the interest of maintaining peace in the subcontinent, it is of paramount importance that India and Pakistan should learn to co-exist. The only alternative to co-existence is co-destruction. Thus all real or imaginary apprehensions, fears, suspicions, mistrust and irritants should be removed through diplomacy, cooperation, negotiations and an attitude of give and take. It is only then and then alone that lasting peaceful relations can be ensured.