

## Exit Kashmir, enter Iraq

17 December 2002

Younghusband, who became famous after his military expedition in Tibet in 1904, once wrote: *"We, who have dealt with Asiatics, can appreciate so well (the following tactic): Taking the opportunity, striking while the iron is hot, not letting the chance go by, knowing our mind, knowing what we want, and acting decisively when the exact occasion arises."* For decades, London scrupulously followed Younghusband's advice. In 1946- 47, although the British had decided to leave the subcontinent, they were not ready to renounce their influence in Asia.

In the 1940s, two new factors appeared on the strategic scene: Aviation and the need for petrol. London took note of the new changes. In a report on the strategic consequences of the subcontinent's independence, the British generals concluded that Pakistan was the more important than India for 2 reasons. First, Pakistan was a Muslim nation and friendship with Pakistan could facilitate the rapport with oil-rich Muslim states in the Gulf; second, Pakistan was ideal for installing air bases to control Russia and Central Asia. This explains why London systematically took Pakistan's side in the Kashmir issue.

The US has stepped into British shoes. The same basic principles remained: Control over the air bases to control the region. The sober French monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique* published recently an article arguing that the US, the last colonial empire, did not require allies, but only vassals. The US position vis-a-vis Kashmir, for the past 50 years, has to be seen in this perspective. Successive US administrations have been trying to find a pliable vassal in the region which will allow bases to keep a tab on Afghanistan, the Central Asian republics, Xinjiang and Tibet. The best bet for the US was, therefore, to have an independent Kashmir which they could fund and directly influence. Just a look at a map of Jammu & Kashmir makes one realise the extraordinary strategic importance of the state. The British knew it. Back in 1873, the Governor General of British India informed the Maharaja that London had decided to post a British Resident in Kashmir *"in view of the important position of Your Highness's territories on the north-western frontiers of British*

*India.*" The concept of an independent Kashmir continued to ripen with the US administration.

In May 1953, Adlai Stevenson came to Srinagar to discuss with Abdullah the creation of an independent Sheikdom. It suited perfectly the US interests: They could thus check Chinese advances in Xinjiang and Tibet and the Soviets' in Afghanistan. A 'non-aligned' Nehru could certainly not be considered as a reliable ally for the purpose. Unfortunately for them, Abdullah was arrested in August 1953 and the idea had to be temporarily abandoned. In the '80s, the US fell back on Pakistan as a palliative to dominate the region and get rid of the Soviets in Afghanistan. By the time the Soviet Union collapsed, the US had begun to realise the danger of the Islamic fundamentalism: The genie they had liberated was now out against them. On September 11, 2001, the US experienced the dimension of the problem. Supporting terrorism whether in overt or covert form was no longer in their interests. Hence the slow shift in their Kashmir policy. However, to assert their world supremacy, a new target had to be found. Iraq for several reasons became the ideal one. An American think-tank Stratfor.com published recently an in-depth analysis of the US motivations for a military take-over of Iraq. Their conclusion was similar to the one reached 55 years ago by the British: *"The primary reason is geography. If we look at a map, Iraq is the most strategic country between the Levant and the Persian Gulf. It shares borders with Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Kuwait and, most of all, Saudi Arabia... It would have ample room for deploying air power in the heart of the region... Within a matter of months, the US would become the most powerful military force native to the region."* After their timid Afghan campaign against the Taliban, an independent Kashmir lost its meaning. With a strong nuclear India, the idea of an 'autonomous' Kashmir receded further. The US also realised that the heart of Islamic fundamentalism was not a resourceless Pakistan, but the oil-rich Gulf countries which had the means to sustain it. Therefore, the shift towards Iraq. This change in US policy was noticed when Ambassador Blackwill visited the Valley.

For the first time, a US Ambassador did not meet the Hurriyat leaders. Instead, he lauded India for the peaceful conduct of the elections.