

# Kashmir crisis at the boil

## Amid preparations for a new military offensive, India puts off talks with Pakistan

**Keith Jones**  
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Over the weekend India rejected a Pakistani proposal that its Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz visit New Delhi today, June 7, to discuss the current Kashmir crisis. It also began barring all civilians, including journalists, from using the northern Kargil highway—the key artery in the mountainous region where Indian troops and a Pakistani-backed Kashmiri secessionist force have been engaged in heavy fighting since early May.

Both moves are seen as heralding a new Indian ground offensive aimed at dislodging the anti-Indian force that entered the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir from Pakistani-held “Azad” (Free) Kashmir and now occupies strategic heights in the Drass and Kargil sectors, several thousand meters beyond the Line of Control (LOC) demarcating Pakistani and Indian Kashmir. Indian troops were “consolidating the recent gains from where further operations will be launched soon,” Army spokesman Brigadier Mohan Bhandari told a press conference Saturday.

On May 31 India agreed in principle to a visit by Aziz, but the two sides have been unable to settle on a date. The only explanation given by India for rejecting June 7th was that it was “inconvenient.”

Speaking in Lahore shortly after India had announced the “postponement” of Aziz’s visit, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif warned events could easily spin out of control. “Chances of a war between Pakistan and India cannot be ruled out,” declared Sharif. Kashmir was the principal issue in two of the three wars India and Pakistan have fought in their 52 years as independent states.

Earlier last week, Pakistani Foreign Secretary Shamshad Ahmad made an implicit threat of a nuclear strike against India, when he declared that Pakistan would not refrain from using “any weapon” in its arsenal to uphold its territorial integrity.

India claims that it has killed some 200 “infiltrators” since May 9 and reports 54 of its own troops killed, 14 missing and 209 wounded.

Throughout the 1990s, Indian security forces have been engaged in a fierce struggle against Pakistani-supported, and in many cases Pakistani-armed, Kashmiri secessionists, some of who favor an “independent Kashmir” and others who seek a “united” Kashmir within Pakistan. Estimates on the numbers killed in the conflict vary widely, but 10,000-15,000 is considered a conservative figure. Nevertheless, the current Indo-Pakistani tensions over

Kashmir are the most acute since the early 1990s.

Whatever the exact composition of the Kashmiri secessionist force now fighting on the Himalayan ridges of the Kargil-Dass region, its size and the inhospitable locale of its operations are such that it had to have had Pakistani logistical support.

India claims it has incontrovertible proof that Pakistani troops are involved in the incursion in the form of the bodies of three Pakistani soldiers. It also alleges that an Indian pilot whose MIG fighter was shot down by Pakistani troops after allegedly entering Pakistani airspace was murdered on capture by Pakistani security forces, and that a second pilot whom the Pakistanis captured was harshly treated during more than a week of captivity.

India has taken great exception to a statement made by Aziz last week that the LOC is ill-defined, seeing it as a thinly-disguised justification for the intrusion and an indication Pakistani troops may overtly intervene to prevent the destruction of the anti-Indian force in the Kargil-Dass region. A Pakistani General on the LOC frontline, where Indian and Pakistani forces are regularly exchanging artillery fire, told journalists India and Pakistan are already at war. “There was a war in 1948, 1965, 1971 and now it is in 1999,” affirmed Brigadier Nusrat Khan Sial. “Let them attack and we will retaliate.”

Adding to the combustibility of the situation is the weakness and crisis of both the Indian and Pakistani governments. India’s coalition government, which is led by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party, is a caretaker regime that remains in power only until India goes to the polls next fall. Pakistan is in the throes of a wrenching economic crisis.

The Indian political opposition has seized on statements by Defence Minister George Fernandes to try to prove that they are more hawkish on the Kashmir conflict than the government. To the dismay of Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee and Home Minister L.K. Advani, Fernandes said Sharif may not have known about the incursion in Kashmir. (There have been suggestions the Pakistani military orchestrated the Kashmir intrusion as part of a powerplay against Sharif, who has sought to reduce the generals’ political power.) Then Fernandes indicated India might be willing to allow the “Pakistani intruders” safe passage back to the other side of the LOC. The main opposition party and India’s traditional governing party, the Congress, has accused Fernandes of “being more concerned about the well-being of the aggressors than the defence

of the nation.”

When the Kashmir incursion first emerged as a major issue, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) demanded to know how the government had allowed such a situation to develop, suggesting the government might have ignored early warnings in the belief that it could reap political gains out of a confrontation with Pakistan. But the CPI (M) and the other major Stalinist parliamentary party, the Communist Party of India (CPI), have quickly fallen into line. The CPI (M) has strongly criticized Fernandes for his "irresponsible" statements, saying they serve only to divide Indians at a time when the entire country and all political parties are behind the government in resisting Pakistan.

An important factor in India's decision to delay opening negotiations with Pakistan may well be the position the US has taken on the latest Kashmir crisis. For decades Pakistan has been a close ally of the US. But with the end of the Cold War and India's repudiation of its longstanding national economic strategy, the geopolitical dynamics of South Asia are in flux.

The US Ambassador to India, Richard Celeste, has made several statements which, in light of traditional US views on South Asia, are highly favorable to India. "The US," Celeste told the Sunday Observer, "will never interfere (in Kashmir). Never. Kashmir is an issue which can only be settled by peaceful talks between the two countries, without any intervention. The US realizes this."

For decades the US supported Pakistan's demand that a plebiscite be held to determine Kashmir's future, but in 1990 the then-US Ambassador to Pakistan said that the US government "no longer urges a plebiscite on Kashmir as contained in UN resolutions of 1948 and 1949."

India is also claiming that letters US President Clinton sent to both the Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers Saturday support India's position. The text of the letters have not been made public, but Indian spokesmen claim that in calling for a peaceful resolution to the Kashmir dispute, Clinton urged Pakistan to respect the LOC.

As is the case with other regional conflicts, the Western media present the Kashmir dispute as rooted in primordial communal and national-ethnic identities. In fact, the Kashmir conflict is a legacy of India's colonial domination and has endured largely part because it has become enmeshed in imperialist power politics.

In seeking to combat the rise of Indian nationalism, the British over many decades promoted a separate Muslim political consciousness and ultimately partitioned the subcontinent along communal lines, thus creating antagonistic states—a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India. The British also sought to maintain their rule by sustaining some 600 princely states that were subordinate to British interests, but constitutionally had a semi-feudal, vassal-type relation to the British Raj. Jammu and Kashmir, whose pre-independence borders were the product of British colonial brigandry and diplomacy, was the largest territorially of these princely states. As today, the princely state of Kashmir united several geographically and ethnically distinct regions.

Up until weeks before the August 1947 transfer of power, the British maintained that the princely states would revert to their "natural state" of independence, when British (as opposed to

Princely) India became independent. Encouraged by the British stance, the Maharaja of Kashmir maneuvered in the hopes of transforming his principality into an independent state. But when Pakistan fomented a rebellion against him, the Hindu ruler agreed to Kashmir's accession to India.

In the decade prior to India's independence and partition, the Indian National Congress enjoyed close relations with the Kashmir's largest political organization, the Kashmiri National Conference. It had begun as an exclusively Muslim organization—Kashmir's royal family and the landowning elite on which it rested were predominantly Hindu—but, under the influence of the Congress, the National Conference evolved a non-communal program of democratic and social reform. Yet Kashmir's accession to India was ultimately realized not through a mass mobilization from below, but rather through a deal with the Maharaja which was predicated on the Congress having become the successor—or at least the principal inheritor—of the state machinery of the British Raj.

Subsequently, the Kashmir conflict became embroiled in the Cold War, with the US emerging as the primary military and economic backer of Pakistan. A significant factor in the rise of an armed secessionist movement in Kashmir over the last decade was the political and military support the US gave to the Muslim fundamentalist opposition to the Soviet intervention in nearby Afghanistan.

Bordering China and the former Soviet Union, Kashmir is of great strategic value. But the Kashmir question is also bound up with the political-ideological foundations of bourgeois rule in both Pakistan and India.

Unlike Bangladesh (the former East Pakistan), Kashmir, the only majority Muslim state in the current Indian Union, was considered an integral part of the Pakistan project from its inception in the early 1930s. In recent years, the Kashmiri conflict has become a vital means for Pakistani rulers to counterbalance mounting national-ethnic tensions within Pakistan as privileged layers among the Pathans, Baluchis, Sindis, and the Urdu-speakers who moved to Pakistan from north India following partition challenge Pakistan's predominantly Punjabi elite for greater power.

Having proven incapable of providing a progressive solution to India's myriad problems, the Indian ruling class has increasingly turned to Hindu communalism. This retrograde ideology serves to deflect social tensions and provides an alternative "national" ideology to discredited Congress "socialism" with which to resist a growing number of national-ethnic and communal insurgencies that, because of endemic poverty and gross social inequality, have been able to gain popular support.



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