

India and Pakistan prepare for a wider war

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Tensions between India and Pakistan have escalated sharply, with both countries mobilizing troops along their common border outside of the disputed Kashmir region and political and military leaders openly talking of a fourth Indo-Pakistani war.

On Tuesday, Pakistan began evacuating border villages in several districts of its Punjab Province. India, meanwhile, continues to pour men and weaponry into the Kargil-Dass-Batalik region of Indian Kashmir, where a Pakistani-backed force has entrenched itself on strategic heights over a hundred kilometer bandwidth of territory several kilometers beyond the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Indian and Pakistani Kashmir.

Each side is accusing the other of perpetuating the crisis and risking inciting, if not deliberately provoking, a full-scale war. Addressing Indian troops in Kargil on Sunday, Indian Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee said India seeks peace, but is prepared for war. Pakistani Foreign Office spokesman Tariq Altaf responded by claiming India has “closed all doors to dialogue” and is “focusing on military action.”

On Tuesday, Indian and Pakistani military leaders traded charges as to who had initiated troop mobilizations along the Punjab border. Pakistani Brigadier Rashid Qureshi said Indian troops and planes have been deployed in “a threatening pose.” “Whatever Pakistan has done is only a minimum defensive move.” An Indian army spokesman confirmed Indian troops have taken up new positions, but insisted the deployments were “precautionary” and in response to “movement being carried on by the enemy.”

Sultan Mehmood, prime minister of the Pakistani province of Azad [“Free”] Kashmir, is urging the United Nation's Security Council to immediately intervene in the crisis so as to prevent all-out war, which he warns could well involve nuclear weapons. “If nuclear devices are used in the fourth Pakistan-India war then this war could spill over to other parts of the

world as well,” said Mehmood. Pakistan has long sought to “internationalize” its 52-year-old dispute with India over Kashmir, citing India's failure to comply with UN resolutions from the late 1940s that called for Kashmir's status to be the subject of a plebiscite.

In recent days, US President Bill Clinton has telephoned both Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif in an attempt to defuse the crisis. According to White House and Indian government spokesmen, Clinton has urged the US's longtime ally Pakistan to withdraw its troops from the Indian side of the LoC—a more or less open endorsement of India's charges that the current “intrusion” across the LoC is a Pakistani-organized operation and includes Pakistani troops, not just Pakistani-supported Kashmiri secessionists and former Taliban fighters from Afghanistan..

Pakistani Army spokesman Qureshi has responded to the US position on the LoC by accusing the US of ignorance and bias. “Has the United States ever asked India to respect the LoC? I feel there is a bias and prejudice against Pakistan.”

The US, however, has taken exception to the Indian government's position that there shall be no further talks between India and Pakistan until the pro-Pakistani forces retreat across the LoC or are routed.

Soon after India's May 26 launching of air strikes against the Kashmir “intruders,” Pakistan's Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz proposed that he come to New Delhi for talks, but the Indian government repeatedly delayed his visit. Last Saturday, Aziz was finally accorded an interview with his Indian counterpart, External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh. But the Indian government, bolstered by the US position and increasingly live to the possibilities of exploiting the Kashmir crisis for both domestic and international advantage, ratcheted up its anti-Pakistani rhetoric in the days preceding the visit. Within hours of the “peace

talks” inevitable “failure,” Vajpayee convened an all-party meeting of top political leaders, at which he secured the support of the opposition, including the Congress and the Stalinist parliamentary parties, for intensifying the Indian counteroffensive in Kashmir.

If Indian military spokesmen are to be believed, Indian forces are on the verge of driving back the pro-Pakistani force from threatening the national highway that links Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, with the Ladakh region bordering China. That objective achieved, there will be little if any strategic significance in recapturing the inhospitable hilltop positions that remain in the “intruders” hands. For years, Indian forces have routinely abandoned them with the approach of winter. But India's political elite, has made it a point of honor that the entire area must be “liberated”, whatever the military and political cost.

The Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party, the dominant force in India's current caretaker government, has historically used the Kashmir issue to project a militarist image and to accuse its political opponents in the Congress and on the left of appeasing Pakistan and coddling India's Muslim minority. (Shyma Prasad Mookerjee, the founder of the BJP's predecessor [the Jana Sangh], died while under detention for supporting a 1952-53 agitation against the special status accorded Jammu and Kashmir under India's constitution.)

Coming as India prepares for a fall election, the outbreak of fighting in Kashmir presents the BJP with—for those shortsighted enough to trifle with the threat of nuclear war—an apparently choice opportunity to play the nationalist card and divert popular attention from its reactionary socioeconomic agenda. The opposition, for its part, is trying to counter this prospect by competing with the BJP as to who is the most intransigent enemy of Pakistan.

According to the latest Indian military assessments, it will take eight to ten weeks to dislodge the “intruders” from their strongholds in the forbidding terrain of the Kargil-Dass-Batalik region. If the Indian forces are able to proclaim victory by early August, the BJP will undoubtedly make this “triumph” pivotal to the launch of its election campaign.

Crass calculations of electoral advantage aside, there are also geopolitical reasons India's elite may see considerable benefit in drawing out the current Kashmir crisis. India is far better positioned to weather a low-

scale military confrontation than is Pakistan. On Monday Indian Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha boasted that whereas India's economy is “strong,” “Pakistan is not in a position to sustain the Kargil misadventure.... Pakistan is dependent on the International Monetary Fund.” Sinha then observed that Pakistan has foreign exchange reserves of \$1.8 billion (as compared with India's \$30 billion) and a foreign debt burden amounting to more than half (53.3 percent) of its national income, as compared to India's debt load of 23 percent GDP.

Pakistan apparently launched its Kargil operation believing that India would be loathe to court a wider war now that both countries have a proven nuclear weapons capability. India has responded in kind, and so South Asia has been drawn into a game of brinkmanship. As one commentator observed in the Indian newsmagazine *Frontline*, “Kargil totally undermines the assumption that nuclearisation has imparted stability or maturity to India-Pakistan relations, or reduced the danger of conventional conflict.” Similarly, the belief that such conventional conflicts will inevitably be contained adds a new, incendiary factor to Indo-Pakistani relations. Who can say the dogs of war once unleashed will be quickly satiated?



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