Failure of US diplomatic mission brings ...

India and Pakistan closer to all-out war

Keith Jones
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India and Pakistan have moved closed to all-out war, following the apparent failure of a US effort to broker an end to fighting between Indian troops and Pakistani-backed forces in the Kargil-Dass-Batalik region of Indian-held Kashmir.

On Friday, Indian Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee said India would not run away from war, and that if war does erupt, India would keep any territory it captures. The following day, in a speech in the west Indian city of Pune, Vajpayee suggested Indian troops may cross the Line of Control (LoC) that separates Indian and Pakistani Kashmir—a strategy he had ruled out just two days before.

Over the weekend, India intensified its efforts to dislodge the Pakistani-organized force that has taken up positions along mountain ridges overlooking the highway that links Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir, with the eastern Ladakh region, sending both planes and ground troops into action.

Security forces in both countries are on high alert and their respective armies, air forces and navies have taken up strategic positions along the length of their common border and in the Arabian Sea.

A US delegation led by the Commander-in-Chief of the US Central Command, General Anthony Zinni, visited Pakistan last Thursday and Friday and met with top military commanders and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. According to US State Department spokesman James Rubin, the US delegation told the Pakistani authorities they should bring about the "withdrawal of forces supported by Pakistan from the Indian side of control." Rubin's statement was the strongest public support the US has given to the Indian position that Pakistan has masterminded the current intrusion on the Indian-side of the LoC.

Pakistani political and military leaders have dismissed the appeal of their traditional ally and arms-supplier, insisting that an end to the current fighting must be tied to a definite timetable for Indo-Pakistani talks on sovereignty over Kashmir. Moreover, the Pakistanis are demanding that provision be made for United Nations or other outside intervention in the Kashmir dispute in the likely event bilateral talks fail.

"Situations like Kargil" will continue to erupt, affirmed Sharif, as long as the 52-year Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir remains unresolved. A Pakistani military spokesman, meanwhile, accused the US of taking "a narrow view" of the current conflict. The US "line of thinking," he declared, "encourages India to talk of war."

Indian military and political leaders were, for their part, quick to dismiss any suggestions that withdrawal of the Pakistani-supported forces to positions on the Pakistani-side of the LoC be tied to talks on Kashmir. Home Minister L.K. Advani flatly denied India was considering an offer of "free passage" for the "intruders."

On Sunday, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Gibson Lampher met in New Delhi with India's External Affairs Minister Jawant Singh and National Security Council Secretary Brajesh Mishra. Lampher, who had accompanied Zinni on his trip to Islamabad, denied he had brought an offer of a Pakistani withdrawal. In deference to India, which is extremely sensitive about any action that could be seen as "internationalizing" the Kashmir question, Lampher said he had come to India not to mediate, but only to brief Indian leaders on the US mission to Islamabad.

Nevertheless, the US is clearly actively seeking a means to defuse the crisis. According to a report in Sunday's *Washington Post*, Zinni was dispatched to Islamabad after President Clinton received a letter from Vajpayee warning that the heavy casualties India is taking in trying to recapture strategic positions on its side of the LoC may compel it to strike militarily inside Pakistan. Such action could well spark all-out war, and between states with proven nuclear missile capability.

The Indian press has noted that Washington has not tied

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its calls for Pakistan to adhere to the current LoC with any threats of sanctions or other reprisals. But the Pakistani daily *Dawn* reports Washington has indicated "things" may "get bad" for Pakistan if it does not bow to US wishes, and the *Washington Post* has said the US could hold up a $100 million loan from the International Monetary Fund that Pakistan is slated to receive next month. (Last year, the US and other Western countries relaxed the sanctions they had imposed on Pakistan after it responded to Indian nuclear tests with tests of its own, because they feared Pakistan would be unable to meet its debt payments and that this could provoke economic and political turmoil.)

Conflicts over how to respond to the US may account for the apparent differences that have surfaced between Sharif and Chief of Army Staff General Pervez Musharraf in the wake of Zinni's visit. On Saturday Musharraf said efforts were underway to arrange a meeting between Clinton and Sharif, but the state-run television, which is controlled by Sharif, made no mention of such an initiative. Earlier Musharraf had given Pakistan's first implicit acknowledgment that it controls the anti-Indian forces fighting in Kargil-Dass-Batalik, when he told reporters that it "is the Prime Minister's decision" as to whether they will be withdrawn. He then added pointedly, "we will not withdraw unilaterally." According to a London *Sunday Times* report, Pakistan's generals scuttled a government proposal for a phased withdrawal. It is widely suspected that the current incursion across the LoC was mounted by the Pakistani military, which provided the country's government for much of the past four decades, without the knowledge of civilian authorities.

Whatever the true nature of the differences between Pakistan's civilian and military leaders, both have engaged in saber-rattling, including implied threats of nuclear war. On Thursday, Sharif told Pakistani troops near the LoC in the Pakistani state of Azad Kashmir that, "nuclear and missile technology has given us great courage."

No less belligerent statements have come from India's political and military elite. On Friday, Kushabhau Thakre, president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the dominant party in India's caretaker coalition, all but dared Pakistan to launch a nuclear-first strike on India. "Let Pakistan do it," he said in answer to a question as to whether India should retaliate if Pakistan used nuclear weapons against India. "It will face the music." Earlier last week, *Organizer*, the newspaper of the Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh (RSS)—a Hindu chauvinist organization from which much of the BJP's cadre are drawn—published an editorial suggesting India should launch a nuclear strike against Pakistan.

In an apparent attempt to dampen the war fervor gripping much of India's elite, including many of his own ministers, Vajpayee declared Thursday that India had no plans to cross the LoC. But by Saturday, he was saying such action could not be ruled out. "The media," said Vajpayee, "keeps asking me this question and it is a difficult question to answer now. We will take the right decision at the right time."

Although Indian forces have been engaging the pro-Pakistani force in the Kargil-Dass-Batalik region for eight weeks and have subjected them to almost daily aerial bombardment for the past month, they have been unable to sever their opponent's supply lines. Shelling by Pakistani troops in Pakistani-held Azad Kashmir has hampered India's counter-offensive (both sides routinely shell the other's positions across the LoC.) And the rocky, barren terrain means any assault on the "intruders" mountain-top bunkers carries the risk of heavy casualties. According to Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes, India's military may require until September to complete the expulsion of the pro-Pakistani force.

The Indian military's difficulties in bringing operation "Vijay" (Victory) to a speedy conclusion have prompted intense speculation that India will either attack the bases in Azad Kashmir that are supplying the "intruders" or open a second front elsewhere. Adding to the volatility of the situation is the approach of the monsoon season. Heavy rains, which are expected to begin in three to four weeks, would make it difficult for Indian troops to mount a counter-strike in most border areas, thus increasing the pressure for a speedy decision on whether to continue adhering to the LoC.

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