

Pakistan regime in crisis over climbdown in Kashmir

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The Pakistani government pullback of its troops and allied Kashmiri secessionist and Taliban fighters from the Kargil-Dass-Batalik region of Indian-held Kashmir is causing outrage, gloom and soul-searching among Pakistan's political elite. "The people of Pakistan are not asking," declared an editorial in the English-language daily *Dawn*, "why Kashmir has not been liberated. All they are saying is that if this had to be the consequence of this adventure, what was the need to start it in the first place?"

Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, the country's largest opposition group, is terming the Kargil crisis the "greatest foreign policy debacle" in Pakistan's half-century of existence. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Muslim League regime are being accused of betraying the struggle to "liberate" Kashmir by various nationalist and Islamic fundamentalist groups. These include the United Jihad Council, which represents 15 anti-Indian Kashmiri groups, and the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), which is based among the Urdu-speaking population that migrated to Karachi following the 1947 British-sponsored communal partition of the subcontinent and is now the most powerful political force in Pakistan's largest city.

In a nationwide televised address Monday evening, Sharif claimed that the Kargil crisis had succeeded in "internationalizing" the Kashmir conflict. As his chief exhibit, Sharif pointed to the declaration he and US President Bill Clinton signed after an impromptu meeting at the White House July 4. It commits Clinton to "take a personal interest" in reviving Indo-Pakistani bilateral negotiations over Kashmir and other disputed issues "once the sanctity" of the 1972 Line of Control (LoC) dividing Indian and Pakistani held Kashmir is restored. Sharif's claims notwithstanding, it is common knowledge that the US, in a major policy shift, has

tilted heavily toward India in the current Kashmir crisis. Even when the Clinton administration dispatched officials to Islamabad and New Delhi, it insisted the US was not trying to mediate, so as not to ruffle Indian sensitivities about outside involvement in the Kashmir dispute. Tuesday an unnamed "senior US official" told a leading Indian daily, "There is much 'greater recognition' now in the U.S. of 'the need to be sensitive to India's security problems'."

Sharif's other tack was to paint himself as a man of peace. "More courage," he affirmed, "is required to avoid war than to start one. Only people who believe in collective suicide can start nuclear war." In trying to put the best face on what clearly is a major blow to his government, Sharif appealed to anti-militarist sentiment among Pakistan's impoverished masses, asking "how long will we continue to buy cannons by snatching morsels of bread from the mouths of the people?"

In his speech, Sharif maintained the pretense that the Kargil operation was the work of Kashmiri groups opposed to India. But the pullout, which is taking place despite the stated opposition of the guerrillas, proves, if even a shadow of doubt remained, that the force which for the past two months has engaged Indian troops along Himalayan ridges on the Indian side of the LoC was organized and controlled by Pakistani security forces.

In Indian ruling circles, meanwhile, there is a mood of exaltation. No matter that India's "triumph" has come against a country that is teetering on the edge of state bankruptcy, is riven by ethnic and communal divisions, has little more than one-tenth of India's population, and found itself all but completely isolated internationally. No matter that in "liberating" the remote and inhospitable Himalayan ridges of Kargil, India became embroiled in a game of brinkmanship that saw both

India and Pakistan mobilize for all-out war and trade threats of nuclear annihilation. Even the anti-government, liberal newspaper *The Hindu* has termed the Pakistani pullout "a dramatic victory for India." The Bombay stock exchange shattered records on successive days Tuesday and Wednesday.

Increased Indian aggressiveness could yet cause the collapse of the shaky agreement reached between Indian and Pakistani military leaders Sunday to allow the evacuation of the remaining pro-Pakistani forces. Indian government and military leaders are adamant that they have not agreed to a truce or to "safe passage" for the Pakistani forces on the Indian side of the LoC, and that the limited disengagement pact (the Indians have pledged not to bombard the Pakistani forces in Indian Kashmir from the air or with some types of heavy artillery) is only confirming the position on the ground. The Pakistanis, they claim, are, for all intents and purposes, being driven out. The Indians have threatened to resume full-scale fighting if Pakistani forces don't complete their evacuation from the Indian side of the LoC this Friday.

Responding to Sharif's call for bilateral talks, Indian spokesmen have upped the ante, insisting not only that Pakistan must withdraw all its forces from Indian Kashmir and pledge to uphold the existing LoC, but also that it must take steps to suppress "cross-border terrorism." While India has not spelled out what these steps are, the implication is that Pakistan must take action to suppress the Kashmiri secessionist groups that use its territory as a base for their political and guerrilla operations.

The Kargil crisis is now expected to figure largely in the campaign for India's coming general election, with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coalition trying to drum up votes by claiming to have withstood Pakistani "aggression" and the opposition responding by charging that if the government had not been weak-kneed and incompetent the Pakistani force would never have been able to infiltrate Indian Kashmir. In what will probably prove to be a taste of things to come, the Maharashtran units of the Congress, India's traditional governing party, and the Nationalist Congress Party, a recent Congress split-off, have supported the agitation being mounted by the fascistic Shiva Sena, a BJP ally, to force a well-known Indian Muslim actor to return an award he received from Pakistan.



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