

US scheme to end fighting in Kashmir in doubt

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Five days after the US government claimed it had prevailed on Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to withdraw the Pakistani-organized force that has penetrated Indian held-Kashmir, it remains unclear if the Pakistani pledge to restore the existing Line of Control (LoC) will be fulfilled.

India, meanwhile, has intensified its military campaign in the remote Kargil-Das-Batalik region of Kashmir, even though, if its own reports are to be believed, the Pakistani force no longer poses a threat to the highway that links the main part of Kashmir with the eastern Ladakh region. Thursday, the Indian military reported that in the preceding 48 hours it had killed 92 “intruders,” all of them Pakistani regular troops, in the bloodiest battles since fighting erupted two months ago. India has made immediate restoration of its hold over all territory on its side of the LoC a matter of national honor; yet so inhospitable are the mountain ridges occupied by the “intruders,” they will, in any event, have to abandon them when the climate changes in the early fall.

Last Sunday (July 4), Sharif made a sudden visit to the White House and at the conclusion of a three-hour meeting with President Bill Clinton apparently bowed to US pressure for Pakistan to take the first step in de-escalating tensions with India. “Our understanding is that there will be a withdrawal of the (Pakistani) forces,” said a US official, who briefed reporters on condition of anonymity.

Clinton and Sharif issued a joint statement in which the US President, echoing the Indian government position, “urged an immediate cessation of hostilities” only after the LoC was re-established. The statement, however, also committed Clinton to “take a personal interest” in reviving Indo-Pakistani bilateral negotiations over Kashmir and other disputed issues

“once the sanctity” of the LoC is restored.

Surprisingly, Sharif did not immediately return to Pakistan to press for implementation of his agreement with Clinton, which suggests his support for it is less than enthusiastic. Instead Sharif traveled to Britain, where after two days he was able to obtain an audience with Prime Minister Tony Blair. The delay in Sharif's return provided those who oppose any tempering of Pakistan's dispute with India, whether out of ideological conviction or because they hope to use the Kashmir issue to undermine Sharif's Muslim League regime, ample time to whip up opposition. Kashmiri secessionist groups and Islamic fundamentalists have vowed to thwart any “sellout” of Kashmir.

Only on Friday did Sharif brief his top ministers (Foreign, Defence, Interior and Finance) and Pakistan's military chiefs on his talks with Clinton. This meeting of the Cabinet's Committee on Defence (DCC) issued an appeal to the “Kashmiri militants”—Pakistan maintains it has no control over the forces fighting the Indian army in Kargil-Das-Batalik—to “provide an opportunity to the international community to play its role for the resolution of the Kashmir conflict.” It is unclear whether this statement was merely meant to assuage domestic political opposition or whether the Pakistani government is intent on tying restitution of the LoC with “internationalization” of its 52-year dispute with India over Kashmir.

For decades India has vigorously opposed any foreign intervention in the Kashmir dispute. On Thursday, US Congressman Frank Pallone, who frequently parrots the Indian government line in the US House of Representatives, wrote to Clinton, urging that the US not be drawn into the role of a mediator on Kashmir. “It's clear,” declared Pallone, “that Pakistan has long sought to drag the United States into this conflict as an

international mediator, as a strategic ploy to enhance its position in the conflict..”

On Friday the Indian government refused comment on the Pakistani DCC statement. Sharif is to make a televised “address to the nation” today, July 10.

For decades the US has been a strong ally and military supplier of Pakistan. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union, with which India had a special trading and diplomatic relationship, and the Indian bourgeoisie's abandonment of its historic nationalist economic policy, set geo-political relations in South Asia in flux. There is no question that in the current conflict, which was triggered by the Pakistanis at least in part because of fears they are rapidly falling militarily and economically behind their larger South Asia rival, the US has tilted sharply in favor of India.

In a recent newspaper interview, Lieutenant General Hameed Gul, a former top Pakistani intelligence officer, argued that the shift in the US's stand on South Asia is tied to concerns about containing China's influence in Asia—India and China have been at loggerheads since they fought a border war in 1962—and fears that Islamic fundamentalism could become a check to US ambitions to dominate the oil resources of Central Asia.

To the consternation of the US, Pakistan has been the most prominent international supporter of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In this regard, it is important to note that in the days following Sharif's meeting with Clinton, the US announced new sanctions against Afghanistan on the grounds that it is harboring terrorist suspect Osama bin Laden. Did the US offer to assist Sharif in extricating his regime from the current Kashmir crisis in exchange for a lessening of Pakistani support for the Taliban?

Needless to say, the US tilt toward India has caused much anger and bitterness in Pakistan's ruling elite. In a recent editorial, the Pakistani English-language daily *The Nation* complained that when it comes to human rights the US has a double standard. While the US intervened militarily in Kosovo, it opposes Pakistan intervening in Kashmir; yet “India's treatment of the Kashmiri Muslims is hardly any different from the treatment that Kosovo Muslims received at the hands of Milosevic.” The editorial concluded by charging that the US has chosen to anoint India as “a regional policeman.” Thus, “longstanding friends get dumped

by the US and new favorites are adopted.”

In India, meanwhile, the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), are denouncing India's caretaker coalition government for using the Kashmir crisis to forge a new relationship with US imperialism. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the right-wing Hindu chauvinist party that dominates the ruling coalition, has long favored closer ties to the US. But the CPI and CPI (M) have themselves played a critical role in creating conditions in which the Indian bourgeoisie can effect a more open alliance with Wall Street and Washington against the Indian masses. The Stalinist parties have joined the rest of the opposition in appealing for “national unity” against the Pakistani “aggressors,” ignoring the fact that the India-Pakistan dispute is rooted in the sabotage, by the Indian National Congress's bourgeois leadership, of the mass anti-imperialist struggle that convulsed the subcontinent during the first half of the century. Moreover, the Stalinists have supported the Indian bourgeoisie's “new economic policy,” which is aimed at making India a low-wage haven for foreign investors and for aspiring Indian-owned transnationals.



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