

India shoots down Pakistani plane

New crisis in Indo-Pakistani relations

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Tensions between India and Pakistan have intensified dramatically since the Indian Air Force shot down an unarmed Pakistani naval surveillance aircraft Tuesday. The entire crew of 16—6 Pakistani navy officers and 10 sailors—died when their rapidly disintegrating plane crashed in southern Pakistan.

Pakistan's military retaliated the next day, opening fire on Indian planes also over the Rann of Kutch. India claims Pakistani ground-to-air missiles targeted Indian helicopters that were carrying journalists to look at debris from the felled Pakistani plane, which is apparently strewn on both sides of the international border. Pakistan angrily denies the Indian charge. It claims the missile attack was aimed at Indian fighter jets that accompanied the helicopters and which it alleges violated Pakistani airspace.

Both countries have put their militaries on a heightened state of combat readiness, raising anew fears of a fourth Indo-Pakistani war just a month after Pakistan, fearing a military showdown with its larger neighbour and under pressure from the US and other traditional allies, ordered an end to the military intrusion it had mounted in the Kargil-Das-Batalik region of Kashmir.

“The nation and the armed forces are fully prepared for any aggression by India,” declared Pakistani Foreign Minister Surtaj Aziz in a speech Wednesday evening in the country's Senate. Since Tuesday, Pakistan has installed missiles and deployed at least one additional battalion in its part of the Rann of Kutch. A marshy area that straddles the border between India's Gujarat state and Pakistan's Sind province, the Rann of Kutch has been an important battlefield in previous Indo-Pakistani wars and is the site of a lengthy estuary, Sir Creek, that is potentially oil-rich and over which India and Pakistan have competing territorial claims.

While expressing concern about the escalation of tensions in South Asia, the Clinton administration, which played a leading role in bringing about the retreat of

Pakistani forces from Kargil, has said it has no plans to mount a high-level intervention to defuse the current crisis.

India claims it was justified in downing the Pakistani plane because it violated Indian airspace and, when intercepted, rejected requests to surrender. “It was obviously on a spying mission,” declared Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes in a television interview. “What else could it have been doing?”

Responding to reports that Pakistani planes had repeatedly entered Indian air space in recent months, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh said, “It is our expectation that Pakistan would not be so unwise as to assume that India will not act in protecting its territorial integrity—land, sea or air—simply because the Indian Armed Forces, under instructions from the Government, acted with exemplary restraint during the Kargil confrontation.”

Pakistani spokesmen, for their part, are claiming that their French-made reconnaissance and anti-submarine plane never entered Indian airspace and that the deaths of the 16 constitute murder and a grave violation of international law.

This new escalation of tensions must be placed within the context of the crisis of both regimes. Pakistan's Muslim League government of Nawaz Sharif has come under sharp attack from the political opposition for the failure of the Kargil intrusion. The Islamic fundamentalists are denouncing Sharif for capitulating to US pressure and abandoning the Kashmir “liberation struggle,” while the largest opposition party, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, is accusing Sharif of both bowing to Washington and a failure of judgement in launching the Kargil “adventure” in the first place.

India, meanwhile, is in the throes of a mid-term election. The Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party, the dominant force in the outgoing coalition, and its allies in the National Democratic Alliance are giving India's

Kargil “victory” pride of place in their re-election campaign. The Congress, the BJP's main rival, has responded by accusing the government of incompetence, saying that if it had been more vigilant there would never have been a Kargil intrusion in the first place.

Believing that the US tilt in favour of India in the recent Kargil crisis is the beginning of a new US-Indian strategic partnership, the BJP, which has long been known for its bellicose rhetoric and militarism, has become increasingly brazen in its dealings with Pakistan. Last February, Indian Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee and Sharif signed an agreement (the Lahore Declaration) that established a framework for addressing the many bilateral disputes between India and Pakistan. While not officially renouncing the Lahore Declaration, Vajpayee and his government are, in the wake of Kargil, insisting on a series of new Pakistani concessions before Indo-Pakistani talks can resume.

Speaking in Lucknow on August 10—the day the Pakistani plane was shot down—Vajpayee said talks with Pakistan will be resumed only if Islamabad stops supporting “terrorism,” a reference to Pakistan's political and military support to the decade-long insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir. Then, ominously, Vajpayee added that India is committed to peace and that he would “not hesitate to use force in establishing it”.

Three days before, in an interview with the editors of several newspapers in the Indian border state of the Punjab, Vajpayee urged the United States to declare Pakistan a “terrorist state”. He added that India was striving to educate and mobilise international public opinion to the point where Washington would take such action. Vajpayee ruled out any resumption of talks with Pakistan as long as it does not respect the Line of Control (LoC) between Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir that was established in 1972.

Although the Kargil crisis clearly represented a dramatic escalation of overt Pakistani intervention in Indian-held Kashmir, it is no secret that Pakistani-supported Kashmir guerrillas and even Pakistani troops have repeatedly crossed the LoC for the past decade. In seeking to make respect for the LoC a precondition for talks, India is both imposing conditions it knows that any Pakistani government would find it difficult to accept and laying the groundwork for a diplomatic drive to transform the LoC into a permanent boundary.

Needless to say, Sharif and his aides have rejected India's new hard-line negotiating stance. Last week Sharif reiterated his call for a resumption of talks without “pre-

conditions”, warning that “Kashmir is on fire”. His Foreign Minister Aziz reiterated the Pakistani position that the LoC is only a temporary line in a disputed territory.

India's opposition parties have rallied, as they did at time of the Kargil incursion, behind the BJP-led government and have supported its claims that the Indian air force had no choice but to down the Pakistani plane. On Wednesday opposition leaders including Congress (I) President Sonia Gandhi, Indrajit Gupta of the Communist Party of India and Ramachandra Pillai of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) were given a briefing by Vajpayee, Defence Minister Fernandes, Home Minister L.K. Advani, and the heads of the three Indian military services. Later a senior Congress leader, K. Natwar Singh, declared, “When it comes to unity and integrity of the nation, all hundred crores [1 billion] Indians are one. Let Pakistan have no illusions.”

It was left to the liberal daily the *Hindu* to voice any misgivings over the increasing belligerence of the Indian government and military. It warned that actions such as last Tuesday's could cause events to spin out of control, omitting to add with potentially horrific consequences. Wrote the *Hindu*, “The shooting down of the Pakistani reconnaissance plane, in the prevailing post-Kargil atmosphere of mistrust and extremely fragile bilateral relations, is an unwarranted escalation of the confrontation.... Such intrusions, quite often innocuous, are not deemed a provocation except in times of extreme emergencies, and the BJP-led caretaker Government must explain to the people of this country whether the shooting down and the escalation was warranted and why the Pakistani plane could not have been forced to land on Indian territory.”



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