

# First tentative talks between India and Pakistan in two years

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For the first time in more than two years, talks have been scheduled in July between India and Pakistan. While no formal agenda has been announced, the main item of discussion will undoubtedly be the long-running conflict between the two countries over the status of Kashmir.

The Indian government announced in late May that it had made an invitation to the Pakistani military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, to visit to India for direct talks on “bilateral issues”. The decision was taken at a meeting of the high-level Indian Cabinet Committee on Security chaired by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and attended by top defence and security ministers.

In a letter to Musharraf, Vajpayee appealed for mutual goodwill. “Our common enemy is poverty,” he wrote. “For the welfare of our peoples, there is no recourse but a pursuit of the path of reconciliation.” The words, however, were belied by the fact that the same ministerial meeting called an end to a unilateral Indian ceasefire in the province of Jammu and Kashmir in place since last December.

Musharraf wrote to Vajpayee accepting the invitation “with great pleasure,” saying that Pakistan “has always sought to establish tension-free and cooperative relations with India.” At the same time, however, the Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar told a press conference that by ending the ceasefire the Indian government had “given the Indian forces a carte blanche to continue state terrorism against the Kashmiri people.”

The meeting will be the first since February 1999 when Vajpayee went to Lahore to meet prime minister Nawaz Sharif. Any prospect for further talks collapsed when later in the same year Pakistani-backed separatist guerrillas crossed over into Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir and seized strategic high points in the Kargil area. Bitter fighting with Indian troops left more than 1,000 combatants dead on both sides.

Under pressure from the US administration, Sharif

withdrew support from the separatists forcing their withdrawal from the area. Sharif's backdown was one of the reasons for his ouster by Musharraf and the army in October 1999. Since then the Indian government has repeatedly ruled out any negotiations with Pakistan unless it stops “cross border terrorism” by the Pakistan-based groups.

During the six-month ceasefire, some of the Kashmiri separatist groups had called for tri-partite talks involving India, Pakistan and their own leaders but India categorically ruled out the possibility. Others such as Lashkar-e-Taiba denounced the Indian ceasefire as a ruse and continued their attacks on Indian security forces.

India's ceasefire, which coincided with the usual lull in fighting during winter, was calculated to appease the demands of the major powers, the US in particular, for steps towards a negotiated solution to the decades-long conflict. Pakistan responded by indicating that it would avoid clashes along the Line of Control that separates Jammu and Kashmir from Pakistani-held areas of Kashmir.

Both Pakistan and India are under pressure to negotiate from the US and Europe, which regard the rivalry over Kashmir by the subcontinent's two nuclear-armed powers as a dangerously destabilising factor in the region. Since the Kargil fighting, Washington has markedly shifted away from its Cold War ally, Pakistan, in favour of closer economic and strategic ties with New Delhi.

In making his invitation to Musharraf, Vajpayee no doubt calculates that growing US support for India will put his government in a strong bargaining position to extract concessions from Islamabad, including the reining in of separatist groups that operate from Pakistani-controlled territory.

The Indian security forces maintain a huge military presence in Jammu and Kashmir and routinely utilise repressive measures against separatist guerrillas and

anyone thought to sympathise with their demands. According to police, more than 120 people including guerrillas, Indian soldiers and civilians have died since the end of the ceasefire on May 23. An *Asia Times* report indicates that seven young Kashmiri detainees either died or sustained serious injuries while detained in police custody in May.

At least 30,000 people have died in the conflict since 1989. Dr Naseer Ahmad Shah told the *Kashmir.co.uk* website that “people definitely want a change, they are tired of uncertainty they want peace.” The article noted that an estimated 100,000 children have been orphaned by the crisis. Many have been traumatised by their experience. Others are forced to work as child labourers in order to survive.

The US and Europe have welcomed India's invitation to Musharraf. In his first major statement on South Asia before the Senate Appropriations Committee on May 25, US Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that the Bush administration intended to take a more “proactive” stance on Kashmir, encouraging both India and Pakistan to “find a peaceful and just” solution.

While India has previously ruled out an international intervention in the Kashmir dispute, its closer relations with Washington may compel New Delhi to accept greater US involvement.

The US State Department held a high-level strategy conference on Kashmir in early May. Organised by its Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the meeting called to thrash out US tactics was presided over by former US ambassador to India Frank Weisner and was attended by US officials and diplomats.

In early May, President Bush also invited Musharraf to visit the US for discussions on “political, economic and security issues pertaining to the South Asian region”. The timing of the trip—in July, in the same month as the India-Pakistan talks—indicates that the US intends to use the opportunity to exert pressure on Musharraf.

Pakistan is not in a strong position. Not only is it increasingly isolated internationally but its economy is in a shambles. The country has seen a huge 74 percent decline in foreign direct investment since June 2000. Pakistani Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz bluntly told a recent economic conference: “A lot of political and geopolitics issues impact on economics. A peaceful environment will help the economy grow.”

Kashmiri separatist groups have been divided over the India-Pakistan talks. The militant Pakistani-based Hizbul-Mujahdeen has hailed the decision to hold negotiations

as a “breakthrough” in resolving the conflict. The All Parties Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella organisation of separatist groups, has also tentatively welcomed India's initiative. Both groups, however, have insisted that they must be involved in discussions if there is to be any solution.

A number of Islamic fundamentalist groups have denounced the talks. Lashkar-e-Taiba, which carried out many of the attacks during the ceasefire, rejected the Indian offer as “an attempt to weaken Jihad (holy war) in occupied Kashmir.” The group also warned Musharraf not to “fall into the trap of soft diplomacy”—an indication of the sharp pressures on the Pakistani junta from Islamic extremists not to make any concessions to India.

Vajpayee faces opposition from his own Hindu chauvinist Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) and other Hindu communalist organisations. Shiv Sena, Rastriya Swayamsevak Sang (RSS) and Vishva Hindu Parshad (VHP), all of which have connections to the government, vehemently criticised the prime minister for declaring the ceasefire in the first place and oppose any compromise on Kashmir.

On May 29, a group of Hindu extremist protesters gathered in New Delhi with an effigy of Musharraf with a noose around his head, demanding he be “arrested and hanged as the murderer...the moment he comes to India”. On the same day, Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh signalled that India would be taking a tough stance in any negotiations, telling a press conference that “Kashmir remains an integral part of India”.

Any negotiations in July will remain highly tentative. Having stirred up communal sentiment for decades, neither India nor Pakistan can afford to make any overt concessions during the meeting.



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