

Recriminations follow the collapse of the India-Pakistan summit

Sarath Kumara
30 July 2001

In the aftermath of the India-Pakistan summit held in Agra on July 14-16, there have been recriminations in both Islamabad and New Delhi over the meeting's failure to produce even what is usual for such events—a vaguely worded joint communiqué setting out the points of general agreement.

The inability of Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to reach a compromise at the most elementary level points to the bitterness of the disputes between the two countries. Throughout the exercise, the two leaders were looking over their shoulders to guard against criticism from communalist parties and groups to which they are beholden.

Both sides are blaming each other for the failure. In a provocative statement over the weekend, Vajpayee described his counterpart as “quite clueless” about “history, politics and the rules of international diplomacy”. He said he knew from the first day that the summit would not be successful. “It seemed that Musharraf had not come for peace talks. He was a soldier in uniform who had made his intentions clear and showed his inexperience.”

While blaming India for the breakdown, Musharraf has been more restrained in his remarks. He has invited the Indian prime minister to make a return visit to Islamabad. The military strongman delayed his departure from Agra for more than eight hours in the hope of a last-minute breakthrough but, after both sides had exchanged five drafts of the communiqué, the basic issues remained unresolved.

At the centre of the conflict is the disputed status of Kashmir, which has been divided between Indian- and Pakistan-controlled areas since 1948 and has sparked two of the three major wars between the two countries. Most recently, heavy fighting took place in 1999 when Pakistani-backed Kashmiri separatist fighters seized high

ground in the mountainous Kargil area, just inside the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Musharraf insisted at the summit that a Kashmir solution had to be found if tensions between India and Pakistan were to ease. Islamabad has never accepted the division of Kashmir and has repeatedly demanded a plebiscite on the region's future. To emphasise the point, the military strongman rhetorically asked the Indian media how “are confidence-building measures possible if you are shooting across the border, killing each other?”

Within Pakistan, a number of Islamic fundamentalist organisations have supported separatists fighting against the Indian army throughout the 1990s. Musharraf is well aware that any concession to India over Kashmir would provoke militant protests against his administration. He seized power in a military coup in 1999 shortly after the former Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif, under strong pressure from Washington, withdrew all backing for the separatist forces in the Kargil area and compelled them to withdraw.

For his part, Vajpayee declared that other issues—economic ties, the establishment of a protocol concerning the nuclear arsenals of the two countries, and cultural exchanges—were more important. One of the points of contention in the final communiqué was whether Kashmir should be regarded as “an issue” or “a dispute”. The Indian government regards Kashmir as an internal matter that has been settled. Moreover, in response to Musharraf's insistence that Kashmir be mentioned in the final communiqué, Vajpayee demanded that a reference be made to “cross-border terrorism,” which the Pakistani leader refused. Pakistan insists that the Kashmiri separatists are “indigenous freedom fighters”.

Vajpayee was under pressure not to make any compromise on Kashmir. His Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—the major party in the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—is facing elections in two key states,

Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, and cannot afford to alienate its various Hindu extremist allies. The BJP lost heavily in recent elections in five other states, including in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Just prior to the summit, on July 11, dozens of activists belonging to Siva Sena, one of the NDA partners, staged a protest in Agra and burnt an effigy of Musharraf.

The fact that the top-level talks, the first in two years, went ahead at all is a sign of pressure from the major powers, particularly the US, which regard the continuing conflict as a dangerous destabilising influence in a region of growing economic and strategic interest.

In the wake of the summit, the international media has been attempting to put the most optimistic face on the failure of Musharraf and Vajpayee to agree on anything. The British *Guardian*, for instance, commented: "It began with hopes running unrealistically high and ended amid exaggerated talk of catastrophic failure." What the meeting represented, it declared was "a modest advance, a footing for an edifice of peace and tolerance that may take years to build on."

Keen to keep negotiations going, US Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that Washington would do everything "to lend our good offices to the improvement of relations between India and Pakistan." A spate of visits by senior US officials has followed, including by the US Joint Chief of Staff, General Henry Shelton on July 18-20 and, more recently, by the new US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Christina Rocca.

Last weekend Rocca, who is in the region for a "familiarisation" trip, praised the failed talks in a speech to business leaders in New Delhi as "a good first step". "[T]he serious and constructive atmosphere of these talks tell me that both sides are committed to resolving their differences, even if this turns out to be a lengthy process," she said.

There are definite economic pressures, particularly on Pakistan, to reach some sort of resolution. One major venture, in which both sides have an interest, is the construction of a 2,500km oil pipeline from Iran to India through Pakistan at an estimated cost of \$4 billion. India needs access to the oil and Pakistan would benefit from transit fees.

But as one commentator in the Indian-based *Financial Express* put it: "The economic imperative for resolving Kashmir rests with Pakistan, not India... [T]here is no denying that India is a much stronger economy now, especially in the external sector. The moment we mention Kashmir, India and Pakistan become equal partners.

However, in the economic domain, the two aren't equal."

There is every sign that the Vajpayee government intends to use not only India's economic muscle but also closer ties that have developed with Washington since the Kargil conflict to set the terms for negotiations with Pakistan. The Indian Prime Minister has accepted Musharraf's invitation to visit Islamabad but he and the BJP leadership are already insisting that further talks hinge on Pakistan's stance on "terrorism" in Kashmir. A final decision on another meeting is expected after informal discussions on the sidelines of the UN general assembly session in September.

In Kashmir itself, the fighting between separatists and the Indian security forces is continuing. A Hizbul Mujahideen commander Sayed Salahuddin commented after the summit: "Our armed struggle will continue as long as Indian forces are in Kashmir." When the summit was initially announced Hizbul supported the decision as a "breakthrough" in resolving the conflict. Another separatist group Harkat-ul Mujahideen said in a statement that Kashmir would now only be liberated through jihad (holy war).

The intractable character of the dispute is bound up with its origins in the communal division of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The Hindu maharajah, who ruled the princely state of Kashmir under the British, prevaricated over its future then acceded to India in the face of growing opposition from the predominantly Muslim population. Just months after independence, the Indian army fought a war against Pakistan-backed fighters which left India in charge of the Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistani forces in control of Azad [free] Kashmir.

Half a century later, India keeps its hold on Jammu and Kashmir through outright military repression while separatist groups advocate either union with Pakistan on a communal basis or "independence" for the tiny, landlocked region. None of the parties to the conflict have any progressive solution for the vast majority of working people who have borne the brunt of the fighting and the continued economic backwardness of the region.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact