

US secretary of state's visit to Pakistan and India fails to quell tensions

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US Secretary of State Colin Powell last week visited Pakistan and India in an effort to dampen down sharp tensions between the two nuclear-armed powers. Stepping gingerly through a diplomatic minefield, he attempted to appease both sides and as a result pleased no one. The net result has been that both New Delhi and Islamabad suspect Washington's motives and the political temperature on the subcontinent, particularly in Kashmir, has risen another few degrees.

As Powell arrived in Islamabad, New Delhi unleashed its biggest artillery barrage in months on Pakistani army positions along the Line of Control (LoC), which separates the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir from Pakistani-controlled Azad Kashmir. While Indian Defence Minister George Fernandez claimed the attack was a "punitive" action against Pakistani-backed "armed infiltrators," the shelling was meant to convey a blunt warning that India intended to defend its interests by whatever means necessary.

Following an October 1 suicide bomb attack on the legislature building in Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian government strongly hinted that its troops may in the future cross the LoC in "hot pursuit" of Kashmiri separatist fighters. In a letter to President Bush, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee warned Pakistan: "[T]here is a limit to the patience of the people of India". Any Indian incursion into Pakistani-controlled territory could trigger a fourth war between the two countries.

Powell was well aware of Indian sensitivities when he landed in Islamabad. But with the shaky Pakistani regime facing continuing protests against the US-led war on Afghanistan and the US use of Pakistani military bases, he was at pains to provide some support to the junta's leader General Pervez Musharraf. Powell praised the Pakistani dictator as a "bold and courageous" man who had taken a great political risk in doing what was morally right—that is, in backing Washington. No mention was made of any return to parliamentary democracy in Pakistan.

Powell also sought to assure Pakistan that it would have a say in the composition of any Afghani regime that replaced the Taliban. Having funded, armed and trained the Taliban as its proxy in Afghanistan, Pakistan fears that a replacement will be dominated by the Taliban's opponents—the Northern Alliance—which is backed by rival India, as well as Russia and Iran. Musharraf has called for the involvement of "moderate" Taliban in any new regime, along with leaders from Pashtun areas in southern Afghanistan. The Northern Alliance is mainly drawn from ethnic groups in the north of the country—Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras.

At a press conference in Islamabad, Powell endorsed Musharraf's call for a "broad based" and "multi-ethnic" government in Kabul. When asked by journalists whether he agreed with the inclusion of Taliban figures, Powell tried to fudge the issue. "We would have to listen to them or at least take them into account," he said, adding: "The term Taliban defines the current regime. But it also defines a group of individuals or group of people. If you got rid of the regime, there will still be those who are willing to participate in the development of the new Afghanistan."

While Powell said little on Kashmir, he did comment that the issue was "central to the relationship" between Pakistan and India. In the coded diplomatic language that governs discussion of Kashmir, Powell's remark was interpreted as a tilt towards Pakistan. Islamabad has sought to make any easing of tensions with India contingent on a settlement over the status of the disputed territory. For its part, India regards Kashmir as an internal issue, has consistently ruled out any international involvement, and insists that Pakistan halt "cross-border terrorism" before any talks on Kashmir's status can take place.

Powell's comments provoked a sharp reaction in India, forcing him to backtrack so as to appease Indian leaders. At a joint press conference with his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh in New Delhi, he said the Kashmir dispute was "a central issue" but not the "sole issue" in relations between India and Pakistan. He also extended an invitation from Bush for Prime Minister Vajpayee to visit Washington in

early November.

New Delhi, however, is after more than just assurances. For the last two years, Vajpayee has been attempting to develop a closer relationship with the US to reinforce its dominance within the region and to further marginalise Pakistan. His party—the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)—saw the September 11 attacks as an ideal opportunity to denounce Islamic extremism and pressure Washington into declaring Pakistan a “terrorist-sponsoring state”. India wanted Kashmir included in the US “global war against terrorism”.

Instead, Washington pressured Musharraf into supporting the US war against Afghanistan and providing the US military with access to Pakistani military bases. This abrupt turn provoked fears in Indian ruling circles that their interests on the subcontinent would be sacrificed by the Bush administration to its renewed alliance with Pakistan. Concerns were raised when the Bush administration included only one Kashmiri group on its list of terrorist organisations released after September 11.

Powell attempted to pacify Indian leaders by saying: “The US and India are united against terrorism, and that includes the terrorism that has been directed against India as well.” He condemned the October 1 bomb attack on the legislature building in Srinagar and, just prior to his visit, the US added Jaish-e-Mohammad, the group that initially claimed responsibility for the blast, to its list of terrorist groups. But Powell stopped well short of criticising Pakistan’s support for Kashmiri separatist groups.

India is also vehemently opposed to the inclusion of any Taliban representatives in a future Afghan regime. During a press briefing prior to Powell’s arrival in India, an Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson derided the idea of “a moderate Taliban” as “an oxymoron”—a contradiction in terms. He categorically stated: “There is no place for Taliban. What we envisage is a fully representative structure reflecting Afghanistan’s multi-ethnic mosaic.”

India has backed similar demands from Russia. On October 19 a “working group” of Indian and Russian officials led by Indian Foreign Secretary Chokila Iyer and Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Trubnikov called for exclusion of the Taliban from any new regime in Afghanistan. The statement proposed “a broad-based independent government, with equitable representation for all ethnic groups that do not radiate extremism and fundamentalism”. Vajpayee intends to visit Moscow to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin on his way to the US next month, reportedly to discuss Afghanistan.

Far from defusing the antagonisms in the region, Powell’s visit has heightened the tensions. Just as India bombarded

Pakistani positions in Kashmir when Powell arrived in Islamabad, so Pakistan announced on October 17 that it was placing its military on high alert—supposedly in response to an Indian redeployment—as the US Secretary of State met with Indian officials in New Delhi. The following day, Pakistani troops unleashed an artillery barrage across the Line of Control.

On October 19, in the wake of Powell’s visit, Home Minister L.K. Advani denied an Indian incursion into Pakistani-held Azad Kashmir is imminent but also maintained that India had the legal right to violate the LoC and might do so in the future. He went further the following day, saying: “Hot pursuit is accepted as a legitimate course of action in international law but at the moment we are confident we will be able to overcome terrorism without resort to that.”

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah, a political ally of the BJP, was even more bellicose in his statements last weekend. “I am sure we will go after these militant training camps across the border once the crisis in Afghanistan is over,” Abdullah told reporters in Srinagar. “The negotiation era has ended,” he said. Chillingly he added: “The fourth [India-Pakistan] war will settle the issue [of Kashmir] forever.”

Powell’s visit underscores the intractable character of the conflict that has its historical roots in the partition of India in 1947 into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India. The outcome in Kashmir—a predominantly Muslim state ruled by a Hindu maharajah—highlights the reactionary character of the entire communal division. The Hindu prince initially refrained from joining either state but in the face of a revolt, in part fuelled by Pakistan, he acceded to India, which immediately dispatched its troops.

Kashmir, which has remained divided since that time, has been exploited by communal extremists on both sides of the border to whip up chauvinist sentiment. Indian Home Minister Advani, who now warns of “hot pursuit” by Indian forces, is one of the chief culprits. He was the main leader of the Hindu chauvinist movement that culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, which unleashed a wave of communal violence throughout the Indian subcontinent and inflamed tensions in Kashmir.

Since September 11, the BJP-led government has further stirred up anti-Muslim bigotry in India—actions that will only fuel an already explosive situation.



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