

Attack on Indian parliament heightens danger of Indo-Pakistan war

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Tensions between India and Pakistan are rapidly escalating in the wake of the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament in New Delhi. Five gunmen armed with automatic rifles, grenades and explosives killed nine people and wounded others before being killed themselves in a 45-minute battle with security forces outside the parliamentary building.

In a speech to parliament on Tuesday, Indian Home Minister L K Advani blamed the attack on two Kashmiri separatist groups—Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba—and accused Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of being involved. He described the incident as the “most alarming act of terrorism in the history of two decades of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in India,” accusing “the terrorists and their mentors” of trying “to wipe out the entire political leadership of India”.

Advani, a hard-line member of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), did not spell out India's response but his bellicose comments were certainly aimed at justifying military retaliation. In the immediate aftermath of the attack last week, Advani declared: “We will liquidate the terrorists and their sponsors whoever they are, wherever they are.”

An intense debate is underway in Indian ruling circles over a military strike against separatist training camps in Pakistan-held Kashmir. Such an Indian attack—the first of its kind—would certainly provoke a sharp reaction from Pakistan, posing the danger of war between the two nuclear-armed powers. India and Pakistan have already fought three wars since independence in 1947, two of them over the disputed territory of Kashmir. In 1998, both countries conducted nuclear tests and in 1999 went to the brink of war over the incursion of armed Kashmiri separatists in the Kargil area of Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir.

The head of Pakistan's military junta, General Pervez Musharraf, condemned the attack on the Indian parliament but warned “against any precipitous action by the Indian government against Pakistan. This would lead to very serious repercussions.” Pakistan denied any involvement in the attack and, at least initially, implied that India may have “stage-managed” the incident for its own political purposes.

India has formally demanded that Pakistan shut down the offices of the Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba groups, arrest their leaders and freeze their assets. Last weekend, Advani said India would “watch for a few days,” implying that retaliation against Pakistan would be swift if its demands were not met. Musharraf has insisted on India providing proof before Pakistan takes any action against the Kashmiri groups. Many of the armed Kashmiri organisations have close connections with the Pakistani military, but none have claimed responsibility for the attack.

At a meeting of the BJP's parliamentary group on Tuesday, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee warned that India would mete out punishment after investigating “the dastardly crime,” adding that “the punishment will be as big as the crime”. Speaking to parliament yesterday, he bluntly declared: “The topic of the discussion should be whether or not there should be war and under what circumstances.” India would use diplomacy as a weapon, “but other options are open”.

Vajpayee is under pressure to take swift action, which undoubtedly has

the support of significant sections of the military establishment. Over the past week, the BJP and associated Hindu extremist organisations have been clamouring for military strikes against Pakistan. BJP spokesman Vijay Kumar Malhotra met the prime minister last Friday and urged the government to take action similar to the US war on Afghanistan. “The government should think of pro-active hot pursuit and target the terrorist training camps in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir,” he said.

Bal Thackeray, leader of the fascistic Shiv Sena, which is part of the ruling National Democratic Alliance, said the Indian government should “strike with an iron hand on the evil designs of terrorists”. A spokesman for the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), which has previously called on the government to eliminate terrorists and their training camps in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, appealed to all parties to support “the fight against terrorism”. Both Vajpayee and Advani are longstanding RSS members.

Significantly, the main opposition party, Congress (I), has given a cautious green light for Indian military strikes across the Line of Control (LoC) that separates the Indian- and Pakistan-held areas of Kashmir. Congress spokesman Jaipal Reddy declared that the party would support “any well-considered step,” adding that it was up to the government to take a “strategic decision” on whether terrorist camps running across the LoC should be attacked.

Support for an aggressive military response is not unanimous within Indian ruling circles. An editorial in the *Hindu* newspaper, for instance, warned of the risk of all-out war: “[A]s the Vajpayee administration evaluates the strategic options before it, the people of India must not lose sight of their situational dilemma that a heightened terror-specific war with ‘hot pursuit’ and cross border attacks carries with it the danger of turning into a fullscope war with Pakistan.”

Doubts have also been raised about the evidence linking the two Kashmiri groups to the December 13 attack on parliament. An Indian intelligence officer told the *New York Times*: “I think they were too fast to identify Lashkar-e-Taiba.” He believed that Jaish-e-Muhammad was involved but explained that the evidence against Lashkar came from intercepted radio communications between various groups in the Kashmir Valley. On the basis that Lashkar networks were being told not to claim responsibility, Indian intelligence concluded that it was involved. None of the evidence has been made public.

According to a report in the *Hindu News Update Service*, former Indian Prime Minister V P Singh has accused Vajpayee of failing to act despite having prior information of an attack in the capital. “The Central government had specific information from Intelligence agencies and the Mumbai Police Commissioner had also given a special message. All this information goes to [the] Prime Minister. Even with [the] Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance, they could not do anything,” he said.

Despite the obvious dangers of a full-scale war between India and Pakistan, the Vajpayee government is beholden to Hindu extremist groups, such as Shiv Sena and the RSS, who are baying for military action

regardless of the consequences. In Pakistan, Musharraf, having already been pushed by the US to take action against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, is under pressure from Islamic fundamentalists to make no concessions to India. In both countries, communalist sentiment is being exploited to divert attention from growing economic problems and rising social tensions.

In this highly volatile political situation, the most destabilising factor is the Bush administration. In prosecuting its war against Afghanistan, the US has thrown the entire region into turmoil. Over the past three months, Washington has pursued its strategic and economic interests in Central Asia with reckless indifference to the consequences in Afghanistan or on the subcontinent. In the name of defeating “terrorism” and “terrorist-sponsoring states,” the so-called Bush doctrine has now established the precedent for countries such as India to take unilateral action and engage in their own military adventures.

Those in the Indian parliament and media pushing for military action all justify their demands by pointing to the US-led “global war on terrorism” and Washington’s support for the Sharon government’s attacks on Palestinians. BJP MP Srichand Kripalani declared last week: “The government should do what America has done in Afghanistan and what Israel is doing in Palestine. The government should not shy away from attacking Pakistan, if involvement is proved.”

The initial US responses to the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament were viewed in New Delhi as giving tacit backing for Indian military strikes inside Pakistan. The Bush administration stated last Friday that it expected India to take “appropriate action” after determining responsibility for the “horrible acts”. As the *Times of India* noted, the statement did not contain “the call for restraint that accompanied previous terrorist attacks on India”.

Significantly the US ambassador to India, Robert Blackwill, drew a direct comparison between the attacks in India and the US: “The tragic event that occurred yesterday and that was perpetrated by terrorists was no different in its objective from the terror attacks in the US on September 11.” From these comments, New Delhi could only conclude that Washington was giving the green light for actions along the lines of the US war against Afghanistan.

In later comments, US Secretary of State Colin Powell pulled back somewhat, urging India to exercise restraint and warning that the “situation could spiral out of control”. In similar vein, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer yesterday appealed for India and Pakistan to step back. “This is not a reason for India and Pakistan to take action against each other,” he said. “This is a time for India and Pakistan to take action against the terrorists.”

But the very manner in which the Bush administration frames the issue places the onus on Pakistan to act against groups which up until now it has defended as “freedom fighters”. As in the case of the Middle East or Afghanistan, Washington willfully ignores the history of Kashmir and the subcontinent as well as the political and social conditions that have given rise to armed separatist groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba.

The bitter dispute over Kashmir has its roots in the reactionary division of the Indian subcontinent along communal lines in 1947. The partition virtually guaranteed conflict over the status of Kashmir—a princely state with a Hindu ruler and a Muslim majority. The first war between India and Pakistan was fought shortly after independence when the Hindu Maharaja adhered to India amid a Pakistan-backed revolt against his rule. The present division of Kashmir along the Line of Control stems from that time. Militant Kashmiri groups demanding either independence or adherence to Pakistan began to emerge in the late 1980s, in response to India’s chronic underdevelopment of Kashmir and the rise of communal organisations in both India and Pakistan.

By insisting that Pakistan take action against Kashmiri “terrorist”

organisations, without addressing any of the outstanding political issues, the Bush administration is tacitly strengthening the hand of the right-wing Vajpayee government, which in turn will only encourage it to undertake reckless military adventures.

Washington’s backing for India is part of a wider shift away from its Cold War ally, Pakistan, that began under the Clinton administration and strengthened with the installation of Bush. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, the Bush administration did, however, require Pakistan’s assistance. Washington forced the Musharraf regime to abandon the Taliban regime and provide military support for the US war against Afghanistan.

The abrupt US turn back towards Islamabad raised concerns in New Delhi that Washington was retreating from closer ties with India. Those fears were heightened when, in the aftermath of a bomb attack on the Kashmir Assembly building on October 1, Washington insisted India take no retaliatory action. At the time, Vajpayee took the unusual step of writing directly to Bush, warning that, “Pakistan must understand that there is a limit to the patience of the people of India.”

Now that the Taliban regime has collapsed, US interest in propping up the Musharraf regime appears to be waning. The Bush administration seems more intent on extracting as much as possible from Pakistan, while strengthening its ties with rival India. Even as the US is backing away from some of its promises of financial assistance to Pakistan, Musharraf is intent on ingratiating himself to Washington. Last week the Pakistani leader approved the turning over of the Jacobabad military air base to the US on a long-term basis and with reduced Pakistani supervision.

Over the last month, however, the US has been quietly extending its military and intelligence cooperation with India through a series of high level visits and meetings. In late November, Admiral Dennis Blair, head of the US Pacific Command, stated in New Delhi that Washington was seeking “a robust US-India defence relationship of a kind unprecedented in our bilateral history.” He indicated that military cooperation could include combined special operations, joint military training, small unit ground and air exercises, and navy personnel exchanges.

In early December, Richard Haass, the US official coordinating policy on Afghanistan, met with all the senior Indian officials involved in security matters and concluded “that there is no daylight between the positions held by the US and Indian governments when it comes to Afghanistan”. Last week, the India-US defence cooperation group concluded that the two countries “share strategic interests in Asia” and would engage in joint counter-terrorism initiatives.

An article in the Indian-based *Frontline* magazine noted: “Home Ministry sources have confirmed that the US and India have agreed to upgrade their intelligence sharing arrangement to include the ‘exchange of military intelligence.’... According to reports in the US media, India is among the 50 countries that provide intelligence to the US at the behest of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).”

There is no doubt that the developing alliance between India and the US is encouraging Vajpayee to take a more belligerent stance towards Pakistan. Moreover, the fall of the Taliban regime—Pakistan’s proxy in Afghanistan—and its replacement by an interim government dominated by the Northern Alliance, which has received backing from New Delhi, also strengthens India’s position. The Vajpayee government was obviously delighted that three top Afghani ministers have chosen to make their first visits to India.

India may not have “stage-managed” the attack on the parliament building, as Pakistan contended. But the right-wing Vajpayee government clearly calculates that the time is opportune to press home its advantage against rival Pakistan—with or without the explicit approval of the Bush administration, and regardless of the potentially catastrophic consequences of its actions.



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