

India and Pakistan on threshold of war

Keith Jones
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India and Pakistan have rushed troops, tanks and missiles to their mutual border in anticipation of war. Meanwhile, diplomatic relations between the two nuclear-armed states continue to spiral downward. Despite pleas from the US, China and other major powers, India remains adamant that its Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, will not hold bilateral talks with Pakistani President General Musharraf during the January 4-6 SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) summit.

On Thursday, India ordered half of Pakistan's diplomatic staff to leave the country and said Pakistan International Airlines will be barred from using Indian airspace effective January 1. Less than an hour later, Pakistan announced like sanctions against India. Previously, India had recalled its High Commissioner [ambassador] to Pakistan and announced that bus and rail travel between the two countries will cease in the new year.

According to Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes, India's armed forces will be deployed along the border in battle-formation by the end of the week. Vajpayee, speaking December 25th at a party marking his 77th birthday, accused Pakistan of "thrusting war" on India. "We do not want war," said Vajpayee, the leader of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). "But war is being thrust on us and we will have to face it."

Pakistani government and military spokesmen have made equally belligerent statements. Yesterday, General Rashid Quereshi, spokesman for Pakistan's military government, signalled that Pakistan may be compelled to initiate hostilities to pre-empt an Indian invasion. "The Indian government is putting itself into a corner where it would be difficult for them to now back off," he said "Any deployment in excess of what is required ... will be seen as a threat by the other country."

India alleges that the December 13 assault on its parliament, in which 14 people, including the five attackers died, was carried out by two Pakistan-based groups with the support of Pakistan's intelligence service, the ISI. Reading from a script patterned on that followed by the Bush administration after the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, India is demanding that Pakistan outlaw the two organizations it has accused—Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad—and arrest their leaders. It also is demanding Pakistan shutdown the training camps that anti-Indian Kashmiri guerrilla groups

maintain in "Azad" or Pakistani-held Kashmir and suppress all organizations involved in "anti-Indian terrorism," by which it means any group involved in the decade-long insurgency in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan, for its part, has angrily rejected the Indian charges, saying New Delhi has offered no proof Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad were involved in the December 13 attack, let alone established any ties between the attackers and the Pakistani government. Again this week General Rashid Quereshi suggested that the Indian government or elements within India's security forces might have orchestrated the assault on India's parliament as a pretext for a more aggressive stand against Pakistan.

This week Pakistani authorities did freeze the assets of the Lashkar-e-Taiba and announced the arrest of Jaish-e-Mohammad head, Maulana Masood Azhar. But Islamabad has insisted these actions were not in response to Indian demands. Rather, they were taken for reasons of domestic security.

India's ruling elite is deeply divided over the BJP-led government's brinkmanship. Within the Hindu chauvinist-BJP there is a large irredentist faction, which, if it cannot realistically hope to forcibly reincorporate Pakistan into a Greater Hindu India, nonetheless holds Pakistan to be a huge weight on India's shoulders that must be thrown off. Important elements within the BJP also see a hardline approach toward Pakistan as their party's best bet to win upcoming elections in four states, including India's most populous, Uttar Pradesh.

Elements within India's top brass have also been militating for government sanction to cross the Line of Control that separates Indian and Pakistani-held Kashmir. According to press reports, the 1999 confrontation between Indian and Pakistani forces in the Kargil region of Indian-held Kashmir has convinced the Indian military that there is room for a limited or "calibrated" conventional war between India and Pakistan without threat of provoking a nuclear exchange.

The Congress and most other opposition parties have supported the actions taken by the government to date, while complaining about lack of consultation. When asked if the Congress would support military action against Pakistan, the senior party spokesman who announced that the Congress backed the sanctions New Delhi announced Thursday refused to answer, saying the question was hypothetical.

Much of the press, by contrast, has been quite scathing, accusing the BJP of endangering India's security with its war-

mongering. “The shrill and threatening campaign spearheaded by the Vajpayee administration which suggests an outbreak of war with Pakistan must end,” declared *The Hindu* in its lead editorial of December 27. “... By every reckoning, the political-diplomatic or the military-economic parameters, it is in India’s self-interest to explore ways of resolving the present crisis ...The sooner the Vajpayee administration recognises that neither Islamabad nor New Delhi can realistically force a decisive military victory at this time, the better it will be ... India’s future ... must not be trifled with.”

Those within the Indian elite who favor military action against Pakistan argue that the Musharraf regime has been militarily and politically weakened by the loss of a friendly government in Kabul. But it is precisely because his government and Pakistan’s geo-political position have been weakened that Musharraf will be under intense pressure to counter any Indian action with a show of force. The greater cause of thwarting India was the principal reason Musharraf gave in his national address for his decision to support the US against the Taliban.

In the immediate aftermath of the December 13 attack, US government officials appeared to give a greenlight for India to take reprisals against Pakistan, at least to attack the guerrilla bases in Azad Kashmir. Then US Secretary of State Colin Powell waved a red flag, by calling for a joint Indian-Pakistani investigation into the events of December 13. In recent days, Washington has become ever more emphatic in its opposition to any Indian military action, with US President George Bush and his officials issuing repeated calls for restraint and lauding Pakistani dictator Pervez Musharraf.

At a press conference Friday, Bush said Musharraf had responded “forcefully and actively” to Indian demands for action and urged India to take note of the announced arrest by Pakistani security forces of fifty terrorist suspects. The day before, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld praised Musharraf for not redeploying his troops from the Pakistani-Afghan border, where they are assisting the US in the hunt for al-Qaeda fighters, so as to meet the Indian threat. Said Rumsfeld, “This is something we’re keeping our eye on very carefully and have clearly made the interest we have in this subject known to both sides.” The Defence Secretary expressed fears that should Indo-Pakistani tensions escalate further, Pakistan might have to limit or deny US access to its airspace.

A far bigger concern, if not for Rumsfeld at least for the strategists at the State Department, is that events in South Asia could spin out of control, with a supposedly measured Indian military response, giving rise to an all-out war and the risk of a nuclear exchange. Their bluster aside, both the Indian and Pakistani governments are weak regimes, that are beholden to extreme chauvinist and fundamentalist forces and that uphold the privileges of corrupt and venal ruling elites.

In calling for India to show restraint in the “war against terrorism,” the Bush administration finds itself enmeshed in a

series of contradictions—contradictions to which the Hindu chauvinist right in India are quick to point. If the US can run roughshod over the established principles of inter-state relations to wage war on terrorism, why not India? If the US would not even deign to show its evidence of Bin Laden’s responsibility for the September 11 attacks to the Taliban regime, let alone negotiate with Kabul, why should India have to collaborate with Islamabad? After all, the Pakistani regime helped bring the Taliban regime to power and has supported the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir.

Some US policy analysts have suggested Washington may be forced to assume a more active role in South Asia—joining the search for a settlement to the half century-long territorial dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir and ultimately acting as the guarantor of peace in South Asia. But there are numerous obstacles to the US assuming such a role, which would bring with it major and open-ended military and economic burdens. India, which conceives of itself as the regional superpower, has long opposed any such outside intervention and Russia and China would be loathe to see the US assuming a much larger presence in a part of the world where they have longstanding geo-political interests.

Just as importantly, the Bush administration has no such ambitions. While it was most anxious to secure Pakistan’s support so as to facilitate military action against Afghanistan, it plunged into Central Asia with little if any thought or care as to the impact of its actions on the surrounding region. Of one thing, however, we can be sure: The Bush administration did not unleash the US military might against Afghanistan so as to sink in the quagmire that is India-Pakistan dispute. Its sights are firmly fixed on the oil and gas reserves of the Middle East and Central Asia.

The roots of the Indo-Pakistani conflict are to be found in the communal partition of the subcontinent that was imposed by British imperialism and the emerging Indian and Pakistani bourgeoisies in 1947. But it is the actions taken by the Bush administration since September 11 that have played the pivotal role in bringing this long-simmering conflict to the point of boiling over, with potentially catastrophic consequences for the people of South Asia.



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