

War crisis continues

India rejects Pakistani pleas for talks

Keith Jones
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Tensions between India and Pakistan remain near the boiling point, with New Delhi rejecting repeated Pakistani pleas for talks and dismissing the actions that Islamabad has taken against anti-Indian, Islamic militias as “cosmetic”.

Following a meeting Monday of India’s Cabinet Committee on Security, External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh ruled out talks with Pakistan. There cannot be, Singh said, “any question of dialogue when there is no change in attitude”.

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes later scoffed at a plea from Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf for India to follow Islamabad’s lead and withdraw some of the million-strong army it has amassed on Pakistan’s eastern border. “Who is he to ask us to pull back,” declared Fernandes. “Our troops are on the frontline... They are in the bunkers... And they will remain where they are.”

An anti-Pakistani hardliner, Fernandes has dismissed popular fears that a war between India and Pakistan could result in a nuclear exchange. Pakistan, Fernandes insists, would never dare launch a nuclear strike for fear of Indian retaliation. “I can’t believe they [the Pakistanis] would ever use” their nuclear option, Fernandes said last week, “for the simple reason that they would be inviting a second strike. That could be devastating given Pakistan’s size.”

Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 military coup, and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee both attended last weekend’s SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) conference. Yet Vajpayee refused to meet officially with Musharraf to discuss the war crisis, which has resulted in the largest military mobilization in South Asia since the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War. The two did have a ten-minute discussion in the conference corridors. But their aides have provided radically different accounts of the import of their exchange. While Pakistani officials, including Musharraf, suggested that the encounter could lead to a “breakthrough” and formal negotiations, Indian government spokesmen flatly denied that the conversation represented any lessening of tensions. Vajpayee himself described the meeting as simply a “courtesy call,” then

added the kicker, “nothing significant was discussed.”

The two governments have taken similar divergent views of the 45-minute meeting that Indian External Affairs Minister Singh and Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar held during the SAARC summit. That meeting reportedly only took place at the personal request of US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Earlier, Musharraf had made a dramatic gesture aimed at convincing an international audience that he is eager to end the current brinkmanship between India and Pakistan. During the SAARC meeting’s opening ceremony, the general walked over to the Indian Prime Minister and shook his hand, an action whose significance he underlined in his opening speech with his declaration that Pakistan offers India a hand of friendship.

The Pakistani regime, which is reeling from the rout of its erstwhile Taliban ally, has repeatedly answered Indian government threats of war with boasts that India will be the loser in any military conflict. But it is clear that Musharraf fears an all-out war with India or even a prolonged military stand-off that forces Pakistan to spend large sums keeping its troops in a state of battle-readiness. Not only is India seven-times more populous, it has a stronger economy and a better-equipped military. Given Pakistan’s vulnerability it is generally assumed that its nuclear threshold—the point at which it would resort to nuclear weapons—is much lower than India’s. Indeed, unlike India, Pakistan has not publicly foresworn a first-strike nuclear strategy.

India’s National Democratic Alliance government, in which the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the dominant force, is anxious to press home the advantage.

Mimicking the actions of the Bush administration in the wake of September 11, it has labeled Pakistan a state that harbors terrorists and issued an escalating and open-ended series of ultimatums.

So provocative and bellicose have been the statements of Vajpayee, Home Minister L.K. Advani and other ministers that they have been roundly condemned by significant sections of the Indian press. Moreover, it is widely

acknowledged even by opposition politicians who have echoed the BJP's anti-Pakistan rhetoric, that the government is stoking the conflict with Pakistan for domestic political reasons: so as to overcome public opposition to an anti-terrorist law that would give security forces vast new powers and in the hopes of riding an Indian nationalist/Hindu chauvinist groundswell to victory in upcoming state elections.

Important sections of the military, whose top brass is rife with BJP sympathizers, are also said to be agitating for war. The *New York Times* reported: "There is a deep frustration ... with what some defense officials and strategic experts see as Pakistan's nuclear bluffing and the way it has turned India into a kind of paralyzed giant, unable to use its greater conventional military power against Pakistan for fear of a suicidal escalation of warfare."

In recent days, Indian government propaganda has focussed on the demand that Pakistan hand over to it 20 alleged terrorists. New Delhi's extradition list has been criticized even in India as a shoddy piece of legal work. According to the *Times of India*, it is "a loose and imprecise list with little or no corroborating legal documents ...," which suggests that New Delhi may be inviting a negative Pakistani response so as to justify a further escalation of the conflict.

In any event, the Indian government is making demands that would jeopardize Pakistan's claim to Kashmir, a cause on which the Pakistani elite has expended a significant share of the country's scant resources over the past five decades and which has become pivotal to Pakistani nationalist ideology. Under threat of war, India is demanding not only that the Pakistani government withdraw all support for the insurgency that has convulsed the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir since the late 1980s. It also wants Islamabad to in effect concede the claim of India's Hindu chauvinist right that the insurgency had no indigenous roots, that from the beginning it was simply a criminal terrorist enterprise.

In the past two weeks, Islamabad has taken a number of steps aimed at placating Indian demands for a crackdown on the Islamic guerrilla groups that New Delhi charges were responsible for the December 13 assault on India's Parliament. Islamabad claims to have arrested several hundred Islamic militia leaders.

The *New York Times* further reported that Musharraf has instructed Pakistani intelligence to cease all assistance to anti-Indian guerrilla groups that are not comprised of Kashmiris. However, so as not to lose face before a Pakistani public that has been bred by the military and Pakistani elite on anti-Indian animus, Islamabad has maintained that the arrests have nothing to do with India's demands and are solely motivated by internal security

concerns.

Responding to public calls from US President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair for Pakistan to take further action against terrorism, Musharraf told a press conference Monday at the conclusion of a meeting with Blair that Pakistan "rejects terrorism in all its forms and manifestations". He announced that he will soon deliver a nationally televised address outlining the steps his government will take to curb armed Islamic groups and "bring some degree of normality, balance and tolerance to our society".

At the same time, Musharraf has reportedly appealed to the US to recognize that Pakistan cannot be held responsible for any and ever action carried out by the armed groups fighting against the Indian government in Kashmir and that to do so is to give the Indian government a green light for military action.

The current war crisis in South Asia caught both Washington and Britain unawares, although the initial reaction of both India and Pakistan to September 11 made it clear that any precipitous US military action against Afghanistan would dangerously destabilize the region. Since the December 13 terrorist attack on India's Parliament, the Bush and Blair governments have been desperately trying to avert an all-out war on the Indian subcontinent, while militating for the escalation of their purported worldwide campaign against terrorism.

Thus initially the Bush administration appeared to give India support to take some form of military action in Pakistani territory, then when it realized the BJP-led government might embark on a much bigger war, Washington issued statements calling for calm and praising Musharraf. Now the US and Britain are tilting toward India again, promising New Delhi that they will lean on Musharraf to curb support for the Kashmir insurgency and deepen cooperation with India if it refrains from launching an all-out war. On his visit to India last weekend, Blair pledged to support India's campaign for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and Indian Home Minister Advani has gone to Washington to increase US-Indian intelligence and military cooperation.

Behind this tilt, sections of the Bush administration believe a partnership with India is pivotal to US economic and strategic interests in Central and South Asia.



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