Pakistan's Musharraf walks a fine line between war and internal revolt

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A key speech delivered on Saturday by Pakistan's General Pervez Musharraf has underscored the precarious character of his regime amid the ongoing tense military standoff with India. New Delhi has massed troops along the border in the country's largest-ever military mobilisation and threatened unspecified reprisals for the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament unless Islamabad stamps out "cross-border terrorism".

Under intense pressure from India and the US, Musharraf announced a series of measures aimed at meeting demands for action against Islamic fundamentalist groups in Pakistan. At the same time, however, he cautiously tried to avoid fueling domestic opposition, particularly among the military, by appearing to make concessions to rival India. The military strongman has already been denounced as a traitor by Islamic extremists for having bowed to US pressure to end support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

While Musharraf insisted that he was acting in the "national interest" not "under advice or pressure from anyone," the central elements of his speech were virtually dictated from Washington. As US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher baldly declared on Friday: "The Secretary [Colin Powell] has been talking to him about ... the steps he intends to take... So yes, we have some idea about what he intends to do and what he intends to say."

Central to the US demands was that Musharraf condemn armed anti-Indian groups fighting in Kashmir as "terrorists". The issue goes to the heart of the protracted conflict over Kashmir, which has sparked two of the three wars between the two countries since independence in 1947. Pakistan has never accepted Indian control over predominantly Muslim Kashmir. Islamabad has always referred to Kashmiri militants as "freedom fighters".

In his speech, Musharraf restated his "moral, political and diplomatic support" for Kashmiris, saying: "Kashmir runs in our blood." While he left open several semantic loopholes, the general's comments marked a break from past rhetoric. He made no reference to Kashmiri "freedom-fighters" and stated: "No organisation will be allowed to indulge in terrorism in the name of Kashmir... Anyone found involved in any terrorist act will be dealt with sternly."

The Pakistani president outlined a series of measures to put an end to the influence of what he described as "an extremist minority" responsible for violence and terrorism. These included:

* A ban on Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad—the two groups accused by India of carrying out the December 13 attack. Three other groups were also declared illegal—the Sunni-based Sipah-e-Sahaba and its Shiite rival Tehrik-e-Jafria, which have been blamed for hundreds of sectarian murders inside Pakistan, and Tehreek-i-Nifaz-e-Shariat Mohammmedi (TNSM), which recruited Pakistanis to fight with the Taliban.

Over the last three days, Pakistani police have been involved in a dragnet operation that has resulted in the arrest of nearly 1,500 people accused of belonging to the outlawed groups and the closure of around 390 offices. Musharraf had previously detained the leaders of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad and frozen the organisations' bank accounts.

* The state regulation of mosques and religious schools (madrassas), some of which have been centres for Islamic extremist agitation. The schools will be forced to teach a prescribed curriculum. Limitations will be placed on the use of loud speakers at mosques for political agitation and Musharraf warned of a crackdown on religious leaders who failed to "display responsibility".

Last week New Delhi presented Pakistan with a list of 20 individuals allegedly involved in terrorist acts against India and demanded their extradition. Musharraf emphatically ruled out handing over any Pakistani citizens to Indian courts but left the door open for India to apply for custody of any of its nationals. About half of the list are reportedly Indian citizens.

Facing a political backlash from Islamic fundamentalists, Musharraf was looking for a quid pro quo from Washington. He appealed to the US to play an active role in settling the Kashmir dispute and specifically to ask India to end "state terrorism and human rights violations" in Kashmir. He also called for human rights organisations, the international media and UN peacekeepers to be allowed into India's Jammu and Kashmir to monitor "Indian occupation forces".

New Delhi is unlikely to agree to any of these demands. Indeed, in a response to the Musharraf speech, Indian External Affairs Minister Jawant Singh again ruled out any mediation between the two countries by a third party. India insists that Kashmir is not an international issue but an internal one to be settled with Pakistan. Moreover, New Delhi has never acknowledged the systemic abuses, including torture, rape and extra-judicial murder, carried out by its security forces in Kashmir to intimidate and terrorise the population.

Singh's brief statement, issued after a top-level Indian cabinet meeting on Sunday, stopped short of dismissing Musharraf's speech out of hand but offered no concessions to Pakistan nor any let-up on the military pressure. The minister formally welcomed the Pakistani president's remarks but insisted that India wanted to see "concrete action" against "cross-border terrorism". He ruled out any military de-escalation, saying: "It would not be practical to expect that just with the delivery of a speech... We'll have to watch whether words are matched with action."

Over the past month, India has carried out an unprecedented military buildup. According to defence officials, about half of the country's million strong army is concentrated along the border with Pakistan and the Line of Control (LoC) that separates the Indian- and Pakistan-controlled areas of Kashmiri. Troops have been transported aboard requisitioned trains from central and southern India as well as from the sensitive border with China in the north east.

The Indian military now has three offensive "strike corps" aimed at Pakistan, backed by more than 1,000 tanks and armoured vehicles. Its warplanes have been moved to forward positions along with short-range

ballistic missiles, which have the capacity to carry nuclear weapons. Pakistan has responded in kind, rapidly moving its military forces to the border areas and hastily constructing trenches and earthworks—in some areas to a depth of five miles—to slow any Indian tank assault. On both sides of the border, thousands of villagers have either fled or been forcibly evacuated in anticipation of fighting.

Sections of the Indian ruling elite are itching to exploit the situation created by the US war on Afghanistan to settle the score with Pakistan once and for all. In a provocative press conference last Friday, India's army chief General S Padmanabhan declared that the military was "fully ready" for a large scale conventional war against Pakistan. "I have not gone to do an exercise. I have gone to be ready for war," he said. Questioned about the use of nuclear weapons, Padmanabhan said that India would respond to any nuclear strike by punishing the perpetrator "so severely that their continuation thereafter in any form of fray will be doubtful." While Indian officials claimed that Padmanabhan's comments had not been approved, he has not been disciplined or reprimanded in any way. It is highly likely that the general was given the official nod to ratchet up the pressure on Pakistan on the eve of Musharraf's speech.

While the official Indian response was somewhat muted, Hindu extremist organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayayamsewak Sangh (RSS) have been clamouring for war. RSS chief K C Sudarshan dismissed Musharraf's statement, saying it "smacked of hatred" towards India and warned the government "not to be lured by it". Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and other senior government figures such as Home Minister L K Advani are long-time RSS members. Their Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—the main component of the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—played a central role in stoking up the communalist sentiments that erupted in Kashmir into armed conflict in the late 1980s. Like their Islamic counterparts in Pakistan, the Hindu fundamentalist fanatics will accept nothing less than the complete incorporation of Kashmir—in their case as part of a greater Hindu India.

For its part, the US welcomed Musharraf's speech and urged both sides to step back from the brink. Secretary of State Powell issued a statement, describing Musharraf's comments as "a bold and principled stand" that set the basis "for the resolution of the tensions between India and Pakistan through diplomatic and peaceful means". He is due in New Delhi and Islamabad this week for talks with his Indian and Pakistani counterparts.

Washington has immediate concerns about the flare-up of war on the Indian subcontinent. Having bullied Islamabad into supporting its war against Afghanistan, the Bush administration is relying on Pakistani security forces to assist in the hunt for Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders. According to one report, Pakistan has already moved at least 60,000 regular troops from the Afghan border to the frontline with India. Moreover, the four Pakistani military airfields currently used by the US to stage its operations inside Afghanistan are likely to be among the first targets hit by any Indian strike.

While Powell may be trying to put the brake on the conflict, Washington's one-sided insistence that Musharraf stamp out anti-Indian "terrorist" groups has only encouraged Hindu supremacist elements in the Indian ruling elite to press home their advantage, even if it results in all-out war. The Bush administration has been quietly strengthening US ties with the Indian military and security apparatus as well as with the rightwing Vajpayee government, continuing the strategic tilt towards India begun under the Clinton administration. Moreover, Washington's military aggression in Afghanistan has only emboldened New Delhi to feel that it can follow the same path with impunity.

As in the case of Afghanistan, Washington's denunciations of Islamic extremism in Pakistan are utterly hypocritical. The US bears a direct responsibility for the growth of Islamic fundamentalist groups in the 1980s through its support of the military dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq. In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979, first Carter then Reagan turned to the Zia regime as a partner in the huge CIA operation to finance, train and arm anti-Soviet Mujaheddin groups inside Afghanistan.

Zia, who had been an international pariah after seizing power in 1977, suddenly enjoyed US political support and financial largesse to the tune of $3.2 billion. Because it was supporting armed Islamic fanatics against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul, the US had little choice but to turn a blind eye to Zia's program of Islamisation that greatly strengthened fundamentalist trends inside Pakistan over the subsequent two decades.

Pakistan was beset with political contradictions from the outset. While the country was carved out of British India on a communalist basis as a nation for Muslims, it was not established as an Islamic state. Its founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah was an admirer of the Turkish nationalist leader Kemal Ataturk and imparted a secular orientation to Pakistan's constitution and laws. The turn to Zia only came after the failure of the populist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to contain a rising movement of the working class and oppressed masses. Significant sections of the ruling elite backed his program of Islamisation as a means of deflecting demands for improved living conditions and democratic rights.

Under Zia, Islamic or Sharia law was imposed, strengthening the hand of religious leaders, encouraging Islamic fanaticism and stripping women, non-Muslims and unorthodox Islamic groups of basic rights. Far from welding Muslims together, the legal changes opened up increasingly violent sectarian feuds as Shiites and Sunnis sought to impose their version of Islamic law and heightened rivalries between various ethnic groups. Zia also fostered the growth of religious schools to make up for the gross deficiencies of the country's public education and welfare services and to combat the spread of secular and socialist ideas.

In consolidating his rule, Zia cloaked ever-greater restrictions on civil liberties in claims that he was building an Islamic social order. Historian Ian Talbot writes: "[T]he ulama [Islamic scholars] whose influence had been marginal in the creation of Pakistan were elevated to a vanguard role" and Zia sought to contend with the centrifugal forces wracking Pakistan by making "a hegemonic Islamic ideology the pillar of the state".

The combination of Zia and his role in the CIA-backed war in Afghanistan consolidated a nexus between the Islamic fundamentalist groups, the military and its powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency that continued after his death in 1988. In Kashmir, the Pakistani elites shamelessly manipulated the hostility to Indian rule and promoted the most reactionary Islamic groups in order to advance their own narrow interests in the region. Neither of Zia's successors, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, were prepared to move against the religious right for fear of alienating the military establishment.

In his recent speech, Musharraf inveighed against the hatred, violence and terrorism of extremists "who try to monopolise and attempt to propagate their own brand of religion." He even sought to strike a populist pose, demanding to know "how they justify their Pajeros and expensive vehicles" and asking: "Have we ever thought of waging jihad [holy war] against illiteracy, poverty, backwardness and hunger?" As an alternative to a theocratic Islamic state, he called for the creation of "a progressive and dynamic Islamic welfare state".

Of course, Musharraf cannot explain how "the extremist minority" came into being, let alone his own role in supporting and promoting Islamisation. As head of the Pakistani armed forces, he was intimately involved in supporting the Taliban and various Kashmiri militant groups. Musharraf's coup in 1999 was in part motivated by a sense of betrayal felt in the military establishment following Nawaz Sharif's decision to accede to US demands to end support for Islamic militants entrenched in the Kargil region of Jammu and Kashmir.

If Musharraf feels he can make a populist appeal at the expense of Islamic extremists, it is an indication of just how narrow the social base of the Islamic fundamentalists actually is. After two decades of semi-state

sponsorship as well as considerable financial support from the elites of oil-rich countries such as Saudi Arabia, their reach remains quite limited.

Musharraf's position is anything but secure, however. In effect, he has been forced to move against his own base of support in the military and their allies among the religious rightwing. It is a precarious manoeuvre for which he has, at present, the backing of sections of the ruling class, who have come to view the Islamic fundamentalists as an obstacle to their ambitions to attract investment and integrate Pakistan in the global economy. But the Pakistani president is no more able than his predecessors to solve the country's underlying ethnic and communal tensions.

In return for ending his support for the Taliban, Washington offered a limited aid package and support for the rescheduling of the country's huge debt burden. But the economic assistance comes at a price—the implementation of IMF demands for the wholesale privatisation of state-owned enterprises, increased taxes and strict limits on government spending. The measures currently being used to crack down on "terrorist" organisations will in the future be used against sections of workers and anyone else who protests against the resulting job losses, rising prices and deteriorating living standards. The police have already been used to break up several peace demonstrations, viciously beating up and arresting participants.

Both Musharraf and his Indian counterpart Vajpayee are beset at home with similar economic, political and social problems for which neither has any solutions. All of this adds to the danger of an uncontrolled slide into political adventurism, military provocation and war between the two nuclear-armed powers.