

India continues to stoke conflict with Pakistan

K. Ratnayake
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Despite international pressure to defuse the sharp tensions between India and Pakistan, New Delhi has continued to pursue a hard line following the December 13 assault on the Indian parliament building. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has blamed two Kashmiri separatist groups for the attack and insisted that Pakistan meet a growing list of demands, including the hand-over of 20 terrorist suspects and an “end to cross-border terrorism,” before any military de-escalation occurs. At present, around one million heavily-armed Indian and Pakistani troops face each other along the border, threatening to trigger another war between the two rivals.

A string of high-powered figures, including British Prime Minister Tony Blair, US Secretary of State Colin Powell and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan have visited the Indian subcontinent over the past few weeks appealing for the two countries to engage in talks. While Washington, for its own immediate purposes, is seeking to prevent an armed conflict, the US intervention in Afghanistan and its “global war on terrorism” has only encouraged the Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led government to ratchet up the pressure on Pakistan at every opportunity.

New Delhi immediately blamed Islamabad for an attack on the American Centre in Calcutta on January 22, in which four Indian police were killed and about 50 people injured. Home Minister L.K. Advani alleged that the Pakistani military intelligence agency, the ISI, was responsible, saying it had connections with the assailants. Even though US FBI director Robert Muller, who was in India at the time, played down the incident, the Indian government continued to press the issue.

Home Ministry Secretary Kamal Pande said last week that two Pakistanis had been killed in a police raid in the state of Jharkhand. He claimed that one had confessed to police—just before he died—that the two were members of the Lakshar-e-Taiba, a militant Islamic fundamentalist group opposed to India’s control of Jammu and Kashmir, and had carried out the Calcutta attack.

In the midst of the highly charged atmosphere on the

subcontinent, the Vajpayee government has provocatively ordered a series of missile tests. The first took place on January 25 when the Indian military tested its intermediate range Agni missile, which is capable of being fired from a railway car, making it difficult to detect, and can carry a 10-tonne nuclear warhead. Vajpayee dismissed Pakistani criticisms that the test was “destabilising and ill timed,” saying it was necessary for “national security” and gave the go-ahead for further trials. India carried out three more missile tests last week—a further trial of the Agni and two involving the naval version of its surface-to-air missile.

At the same time, New Delhi has toughened its stance on Kashmir. On January 28, Vajpayee effectively stymied any talks with Pakistan. He told a meeting in Raipur: “If Kashmir is the central issue, then one-third of Kashmir is occupied by Pakistan illegally. Therefore, they should return that to India first and then start talks.” He said Kashmir was an integral part of India and “no one can separate that”.

The statement was not an offer of talks but an ultimatum. The Indian prime minister is well aware that Pakistani dictator General Parvez Musharraf could not withdraw his troops from areas in disputed Kashmir that have been under Pakistan’s control for more than 50 years, prior to any negotiations. Yet to emphasise that it was not a slip of the tongue, External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nirupama Roy brushed aside Pakistani criticism and said Vajpayee’s comment was “a well considered and principled one”.

Pakistani Foreign Ministry spokesman Ahamed Khan described India’s position as “unfortunate” and made a counterproposal—talks on the phased withdrawal of troops from both sides of the border to their peacetime locations. Vajpayee flatly rejected the offer, using the opportunity to repeat India’s demand for the extradition of 20 suspects. If Islamabad did not accede, he said, the government’s “ideas are being transformed into well-knit plans and action is being taken on the basis of these plans”. It was a none-too-veiled threat that India would take military

action against Pakistan.

On February 3, Vajpayee made a further press statement in which he appeared to modify his position slightly. He said he had not put placed new preconditions on Pakistan, but the return of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir would be top of agenda whenever the two sides resumed talks. There would not be any “compromise over the Line of Control (LoC)”—the current semi-official line between Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir—nor would the LoC be converted into an international border between the two countries. India was in an “undeclared emergency situation” with “confrontation on the border”.

India and Pakistan have fought two of their three wars since independence over the disputed territory of Kashmir—in 1947 and 1964. The two nuclear-armed powers nearly came to blows again in 1999 when Pakistani-backed militants seized key strategic mountaintops in the Kargil area of Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir.

The intractability of the dispute is a product of the partition of the Indian subcontinent along communal lines by the British with the backing of the representatives of the local ruling class—Indian Congress and the Muslim League. Within the framework of a Muslim Pakistan and a largely Hindu India there was no amicable solution to the status of Kashmir—a predominantly Muslim princely state. The Hindu maharaja initially equivocated then sought to accede to India, provoking an uprising that was encouraged and backed by Pakistan. The war that followed led to the current division of the state.

For more than a decade, armed groups such as Lakshar-e-Taiba have battled the Indian military in an undeclared war that has cost the lives of at least 30,000 people. Pakistan insists that it only provides moral and political support to these militants which it terms “freedom fighters” and condemns heavy-handed repression carried out by Indian security forces. India points to evidence of Pakistani military involvement with such groups, which it brands as “terrorist”.

Vajpayee seized on the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament to put intense pressure on Pakistan for several reasons. Firstly his BJP is seeking to play the card of Hindu chauvinism in its campaign in key state elections on February 18. These include the populous northern state of Uttar Pradesh—a BJP stronghold and the only state where it still holds power. The party lost badly in elections for other states held last year. The BJP has accused its opponents of being “soft on terrorism”. An Uttar Pradesh BJP leader told an election meeting that if

Pakistan did not change its attitude there will be “no sign of Pakistan left”.

Uttar Pradesh was the first state where the BJP took office in 1990, as a result of a provocative campaign of anti-Muslim communalism. Vajpayee himself holds the seat of Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, in the national parliament. A spokesman for a BJP ally, the World Hindu Congress (VHP) underscored the significance of the poll by saying, if the BJP “loses its stronghold in Uttar Pradesh the government in Delhi will beginning to crack.” The BJP faces voter opposition over a host of issues, from low prices for farmers’ crops to the high cost of health care and uncertain electricity supplies.

But the Indian government’s stance toward Pakistan is not simply for electoral purposes. Vajpayee’s aggressive attitude reflects the thinking of a layer of the Indian political establishment that regards Bush’s “war against terrorism” as an opportunity too good to miss. Musharraf was compelled by Washington to end Islamabad’s support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and to crack down on Islamic extremist groups in Pakistan. As a result, the Pakistani strongman faces opposition from Islamic fundamentalists, including in the military and, at the same time, escalating demands from New Delhi for action against “cross-border terrorists”.

The Vajpayee government appears to be intent on exploiting the situation to resolve the Kashmir issue, once and for all, in India’s favour—even if it means war. The two armies maintain an uneasy standoff along the border, marked by a series of small clashes—any one of which could be seized upon as the pretext for all-out conflict. On February 1, troops exchanged mortar and heavy machine gun fire at several points along the LoC. India claimed three civilians died in the Poonch district, while Pakistan alleged that a soldier was killed by Indian heavy machine gun fire near Sialkot. Two days before, India accused Pakistan of attempting a major military infiltration.



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