

A socialist strategy to oppose war on the Indian subcontinent

WSWS Editorial Board
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The *World Socialist Web Site* unequivocally condemns the drive to war by India and Pakistan. The two nuclear-armed countries stand on the brink of military hostilities, with calamitous consequences for the masses of the sub-continent, the region and throughout the world.

More than one million troops, armed to the teeth with hundreds of tanks, heavy artillery, missiles and warplanes, confront each other along a 2,800-km border in a state of high alert. The military mobilisation is the largest since India and Pakistan were formed through the partition of British India in 1947. The two countries have already fought three wars—in 1947, 1965 and 1971. Now each has an arsenal of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them.

While a long-standing dispute over Kashmir is the immediate cause of the conflict, the chief destabilising factor has been the reckless actions of the Bush administration in the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks in the US. Washington's declaration of a "global war on terrorism," followed by its invasion of Afghanistan, has plunged existing relations in the region into disarray, stirring up deep-seated antagonisms and encouraging the ruling elites to take aggressive military initiatives to realise their long-held ambitions.

India immediately seized the opportunity to settle old scores with its rival, Pakistan. In early October, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called on the US to include Kashmir in its "global war on terrorism" and brand Pakistan as "a terrorist-sponsoring state". He used as the pretext for this the October 1 attack on the state legislative building in Indian-controlled Kashmir by Islamic militants. At the time, Washington prevailed on New Delhi to desist from military reprisals, fearing that a war over Kashmir would compromise its own preparations for invading Afghanistan, which depended upon active support from the Pakistani military.

However, both Vajpayee and Pakistan's military strongman General Pervez Musharraf have a stake in ratcheting up tensions over Kashmir—to deflect public attention from mounting social and political crises at home and shore up their dwindling bases of support. The Indian prime minister and his Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) have been desperate to arrest a series of electoral losses and strengthen their fractured ruling coalition. In Pakistan, Musharraf's lack of political legitimacy has been compounded by US insistence that he break all ties with the Taliban and crack down on Islamic extremist groups that form his military regime's key constituency. At the same time, Vajpayee and Musharraf each hope that provocative military action will compel the major powers to intervene in their favour. Neither side believes it has anything to lose by upping the military ante, even if the outcome is all-out war.

A key turning point came on December 13, when a group of armed Kashmiri militants attacked the Indian parliament in New Delhi. The Vajpayee government immediately utilised the attack to press home its own "war against terrorism"—with or without the express approval of the White House. Three quarters of the Indian armed forces were moved to

the frontier with Pakistan, compelling Musharraf to respond in kind. Since then the two armies have dug in along the border. The latest incident on May 14, in which Islamic militants attacked an Indian army base in Kashmir, killing 34 people including women and children, threatens to tip the two countries over the edge.

In the past two weeks, Vajpayee has repeatedly warned that his government's patience is running out and that India will exact revenge. In a televised speech on Monday, Musharraf insisted Pakistan would "respond with full might" to any Indian attack. In India's formal response, External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh branded the speech as "disappointing and dangerous... belligerent posturing," declaring that "the epicentre of international terrorism is located in Pakistan".

India has expelled the Pakistani ambassador, consolidated its military command and bolstered its navy in the Arabian Sea near Pakistan. Pakistan has called up reserves, put its cities on alert, withdrawn troops from the border with Afghanistan and provocatively test-fired missiles. Heavy mortar and artillery barrages across the Line of Control separating Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir have already destroyed homes, killed and wounded scores of people and sent more than 25,000 Kashmiri civilians fleeing.

It would be a dangerous folly for the working class to believe that the outbreak of a nuclear war is impossible. Indian defence analysts have sought to dampen public fears by speculating on the prospects of "a limited war," confined to attacks on alleged terrorist training camps in the Pakistani-controlled region of Kashmir. Any clash, however, would have a military and political dynamic of its own. Confronting superior conventional forces, Musharraf may be compelled to make good on his threat to use Pakistan's "full might"—including nuclear weapons—to stave off defeat.

In military thinktanks in India, Pakistan and the US, calculations have been made about who would "win" a nuclear war. Last December, as the huge military buildup was taking place, Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes warned Pakistan against a nuclear first strike, declaring: "We could take a strike, survive and then hit back. Pakistan would be finished."

The *New York Times*, citing Pentagon sources, made clear this week what "surviving" a nuclear exchange would mean. At a conservative estimate, up to 12 million people would die immediately and a further seven million would be severely injured. According to US officials, even a "more limited" nuclear war would have "cataclysmic results, overwhelming hospitals across Asia and requiring vast foreign assistance, particularly from the United States, to battle radioactive contamination, famine and disease".

The working class cannot place any faith in the current diplomatic manoeuvres by the major powers. Having fuelled the current tensions, the Bush administration is now seeking, at least in public, to restrain the two protagonists. But this can rapidly change. Washington's attitude will be determined, not by the disastrous impact of any military conflict on tens of millions of people, but by its own economic and strategic interests.

Nor can any reliance be placed on politicians or their parties in either country. All of them, deeply mired in nationalism and chauvinism, have squarely lined up behind their “own” regime in its preparations for war.

In India, the Congress Party, which only weeks ago was seeking to censure the BJP-led government over its role in communal violence in Gujarat, has backed Vajpayee’s bellicose stance against Pakistan. The Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India-Marxist have followed suit, once again demonstrating that they are nothing more than adjuncts to the official political establishment.

In Pakistan, Musharraf faces criticism, but only over whether he can successfully prosecute a war. The major alliance of 29 opposition parties recently issued a statement calling on the military dictator to step aside, pronouncing that he lacked “the moral authority to deal with the current threat to national security and territorial integrity of Pakistan”.

At the heart of the present conflict lie all the unresolved contradictions upon which the separate nation states of India and Pakistan were founded. That the two countries are once again coming to blows over Kashmir underlines the inherently reactionary character of the 1947 partition of British India into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India. The carve-up divided the subcontinent along completely artificial boundaries that cut across national, ethnic and language groupings, laying the groundwork for future conflicts and wars. Violence was part of the division from the outset: hundreds of thousands were killed in the riots that followed and millions were uprooted and forced to flee their homes.

Every section of the Indian bourgeoisie—including Indian Congress led by Gandhi and Nehru, who claimed to be democratic and secular—bears responsibility for the tragedy. Neither leader was prepared to challenge the plans of the British colonial rulers or the Muslim League, which was demanding a separate Pakistan, because they feared that, in spurring on the mass anti-colonial movement, the class interests of the ruling establishment as a whole would be endangered.

Colvin R de Silva, then a prominent leader of the Trotskyist Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India (BLPI), explained in a speech in Calcutta in 1948: “The partition of India, so readily attributable to the Muslim League alone, was fundamentally due not to League politics but to Congress politics. The politics of Congress in relation to British imperialism was not the politics of struggle but the politics of settlement. And the politics of settlement inevitably fed the politics of partition in as much as it also left the initiative to British imperialism. The partition of India was the outcome of the surrender-settlement of the Indian bourgeoisie with British imperialism over the heads of and against the insurgent masses.”

The festering sore of Kashmir was a product of that settlement. It stands as stark testimony to the anti-democratic character of all sections of the national bourgeoisie and their inability to resolve any of the outstanding social and political problems plaguing the subcontinent. Both Pakistan and India had ambitions to control the strategically situated princely state of Kashmir. But within the framework of partition, there was simply no peaceful or democratic solution to its status.

Pakistan claimed Kashmir on a purely communal basis: that Kashmir’s Muslim majority should prevail, regardless of the consequences for the sizeable Hindu and Buddhist minorities. Kashmir’s ruler, however, was a Hindu maharaja who was initially inclined to declare a separate, independent Kashmir. Confronted with a rebellion of his Muslim subjects, supported by the Pakistani military, the prince formally acceded to India. Nehru seized the Instrument of Accession with both hands and, within days, had flown Indian troops into Srinagar to take control of the state and forcibly put down any opposition. Thus, the claims of the “democratic” and “secular” Indian leaders to Kashmir rest on a piece of paper signed by a despotic British-sponsored maharaja and violent military occupation.

For more than five decades, Kashmir has been a dangerous potential flashpoint on the Indian subcontinent. The outcome of the 1947 war was the Line of Control dividing Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir from

Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. Successive Indian governments proved totally incapable of meeting the aspirations of Kashmiri Muslims for genuine democratic rights and decent living standards. In general, New Delhi responded to discontent with repression, creating a deep reservoir of hostility and hatred that was tapped by various Islamic extremist groups in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Tensions between India and Pakistan were controlled, to a certain extent, by the framework of the Cold War. At crucial points, Washington and Moscow restrained their respective allies—Pakistan and India—to prevent any local war from snowballing into a broader conflict involving the two superpowers. During the past 30 years, as the post-war order has progressively unraveled, American imperialism’s role in the region has become increasingly assertive.

Pakistan’s military apparatus owes its power and influence largely to Washington. Musharraf is just the latest of a long line of rightwing military dictators who have enjoyed either tacit or open US patronage. From the 1950s, the US supported the Pakistani military as a bulwark in the region, particularly directed against India and its developing alliance with the Soviet Union. In 1971, Washington backed Pakistani military strongman Yahya Khan in his suppression of the mass movement for independence in what was then East Pakistan [now Bangladesh], and in Pakistan’s subsequent war with India.

Responsibility for the rise of Islamic extremism throughout the region can also be directly attributed to the US. In late 1979, in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Washington enlisted Pakistan’s military dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq, as a partner in a huge CIA operation. Billions of dollars were spent to finance, train and arm anti-Soviet Mujaheddin groups inside Afghanistan as a means of undermining the Soviet Union. Many of the militant anti-Indian groups now operating in Kashmir, as well as Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda, the Taliban leaders and other Islamic extremist outfits inside Pakistan, trace their origins to this period.

The fomenting of communalism by the ruling elites in both India and Pakistan stemmed from their inability to address the needs and aspirations of ordinary people. Hindu fanaticism in India and Islamic extremism in Pakistan became useful political tools to channel the discontent of the masses and divert attention from the enormous and ever-growing divide between rich and poor. These processes accelerated in the 1990s, as both countries implemented the IMF’s agenda of privatisation, restructuring and economic deregulation. The emergence of an Indian government led by the Hindu-supremacist BJP and a Pakistani military dictatorship linked to Islamic fundamentalist groups was simply the most advanced political expression of the dead-end to which the national bourgeoisie had brought the subcontinent.

The demise of the Soviet Union profoundly altered the strategic equation throughout the region. For the major powers, vast new possibilities opened up for the control and exploitation of reserves of oil and gas that had previously been inaccessible. Those areas of the Indian subcontinent immediately adjacent to former Soviet Central Asia, such as Afghanistan and Kashmir, began to assume critical importance as a potential base of operations.

Imperialist meddling in Central Asia, internal instability and the rise of fundamentalism all exacerbated tensions between India and Pakistan. In 1998 both countries conducted rival nuclear tests and in 1999 a “mini-war” erupted over Kashmir’s strategic Kargil heights, threatening an all-out confrontation. Washington exploited the crisis to forge a closer alliance with India, compelling Pakistan to withdraw its support for the Islamic militants entrenched in Kargil. The embarrassing retreat by Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was a major factor in provoking the army coup that brought Musharraf to power in October 1999.

Over the past three years, the US has cultivated its relationship with India. What began with US President Bill Clinton has been strengthened

under the Bush administration, which regards India as an important counterpoint to China—its declared “strategic competitor”. For the first time in decades, the US and India are sharing high-level intelligence, conducting joint military exercises and naval patrols, and developing significant economic links. With the Hindu chauvinist BJP in government, Washington has been building India up to play the role of regional superpower and policeman, with callous indifference to the political consequences.

The media has dutifully fallen into step with Washington’s new orientation. No questions are raised about the terrible social conditions and repressive Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir that have led young Kashmiri Muslims to take up arms. While editorialists and commentators denounce Islamic extremism, they embrace as “democrats” the Hindu fanatics in power in New Delhi, turning a blind eye to their connections with fascistic Hindu groups, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and World Hindu Council (VHP), which regard Muslims as ninth century invaders to be subjugated or driven from a “Greater Hindustan”.

Even before September 11, the economic, political and social crises on the Indian subcontinent formed a highly combustible mixture. By plunging into its “global war on terrorism,” the Bush administration has effectively lit the fuse for nuclear war.

In its editorial statement of October 9, 2001, the World Socialist Web Site warned: “At each stage in the eruption of American militarism, the scale of the resulting disasters becomes greater and greater. Now the US has embarked on an adventure in a region that has long been the focus of intrigue between the Great Powers, a part of the world, moreover, that is bristling with nuclear weapons and riven by social, political, ethnic and religious tensions that are compounded by abject poverty.”

Masses of ordinary working people are rightly fearful of the terrible consequences that an all-out war between the two nuclear-armed powers would bring. Protests have already taken place, despite the relentless chauvinist campaign by the media in both India and Pakistan.

To combat the growing war threat, however, the working masses of both countries must turn to a new strategic perspective, at the heart of which must be the complete rejection of all forms of nationalism, chauvinism and communalism. Workers in Pakistan and India—as well as Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma and Sri Lanka—share common class interests and common class enemies. The appalling poverty that blights the lives of hundreds of millions is the tragic legacy of the 1947 partition and the failure of the national bourgeoisie, over more than 50 years, to carry forward any of the fundamental democratic tasks bound up with genuine social and economic development.

The national boundaries dividing the working class are nothing but a poisoned chalice, gratefully accepted by the Indian and Pakistani leaders from their British colonial masters. Arbitrary lines drawn on a map have become borders dividing the Bengali people in India and Bangladesh, the Tamils in India and Sri Lanka, and the Kashmiris and Punjabis in India and Pakistan.

The answer to these seemingly irresolvable problems, and the many others that stem from the myriad of ethnic, language and religious groupings on the subcontinent, does not lie in the Balkanisation of the region into a series of independent nation states. Such a project would only trigger further violence and conflict, with each ruling clique manoeuvring against its rivals for the patronage of one or other of the major powers.

Rather, the solution lies in the abolition of all existing borders and the rational use of the subcontinent’s vast resources for the benefit of all. This task falls to the working class, the only social force capable of mobilising the oppressed masses throughout the region in a common, unified struggle to end the oppressive rule of capital and rebuild society on socialist lines. The forging of a new revolutionary political movement to establish the Socialist United States of the Indian Subcontinent: that is the socialist and

internationalist perspective advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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