

India and Pakistan move to the brink of war

Vilani Peiris, Sarath Kumara
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The danger of war between India and Pakistan has rapidly escalated following a terrorist attack in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir on May 14. At least 34 people died and another 50 were wounded when three armed men opened fire, first on a bus and then inside the residential quarters of an army camp at Kaluchak near Jammu, the state's winter capital. Ten children and 12 women—mainly the families of soldiers—were among the dead. The three attackers were shot dead by troops.

Two Islamic fundamentalist militia—Al Mansooran and Jamiat-ul-Mujahideen—have claimed responsibility. However, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee immediately blamed Pakistan for aiding and abetting the anti-Indian groups and threatened to retaliate. Defence Minister George Fernandes who visited the site of attack declared: "It is a situation which calls for punishment." Blaming Pakistani leader General Pervez Musharraf, he said: "It is his trained armed terrorists who have brutally killed children and women, particularly minors."

Pakistan has condemned the attack and denied any connection with the assailants. But pressure in Indian ruling circles for a military response has continued to mount. Last Friday Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani insisted "Our reply should be decisive." Army chief General S. Padmanabhan told the media: "The time for action has come." Air Chief Marshal A.Y. Tipnis was even more open, declaring: "There's a limit to our patience. We have to hit their locations either by air, artillery, or surgical strike. We have to be prepared for collateral damage and accept it."

Vajpayee has held several meetings of the top level Cabinet Security Council (CSC) to weigh up the options. Over the weekend, India expelled Pakistan's High Commissioner to India, Ashraf Jehangir Qasi, and announced that India's paramilitary border forces and coast guard would be placed under direct military command. Heavy exchanges of mortar and artillery fire have been reported over the last four days across the Line of Control (LoC) separating Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir from the Pakistani-held areas of Kashmir. At least 15 people have been killed so far and around 50 injured. Thousands of people have been forced to flee from border villages.

The situation along the 2,000-km border between the two nuclear-armed powers was already extremely tense after an attack by Kashmiri separatists on the Indian parliament complex in New Delhi on December 13. In response, India mounted its largest ever military build-up, moving more than half a million troops backed by tanks, war planes, missiles and heavy artillery to the borders areas. Pakistan responded in kind. For the last five months, the

armies have confronted each other in a high state of alert, posing the danger that a relatively small incident could rapidly escalate to all-out war.

The Hindu chauvinist BJP was rattling the sabre even before the Kaluchak attack in order to deflect attention from mounting political problems at home. The party was badly defeated in recent state elections as opposition has mounted to the impact of its free market policies. Over past weeks, Indian leaders have accused Pakistan of failing to prevent "terrorists" from infiltrating into Jammu and Kashmir. On the day before the raid, the Defence Ministry published its annual report that branded Pakistan as the "epicentre" of Islamic fundamentalism. "The continued terrorist violence underscores the fact that Pakistan remains unwilling to give up its strategy of confrontation, violence and deception towards India," it stated.

On the same day, Home Minister Advani blurted out one of the government's underlying motives. Gujarat, he declared, must not divert the country's attention from "cross-border terrorism" which is the "ever present, paramount danger to India's internal security and unity." Two months of communal killings in the state of Gujarat, openly fuelled by BJP leaders and allied Hindu extremist groups, had threatened to tear the coalition government apart. Vajpayee survived a parliamentary censure motion in early May but several ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners abstained and two ministers resigned over the handling of mob violence that claimed the lives of at least 900 people, mainly Muslims.

The London-based *Financial Times* published an article on May 13 entitled "Back to the Brink" which noted that Vajpayee was "unusually vulnerable to populist impulses" in the wake of the Gujarat riots. The article pointed out that senior Indian officials "have been openly speculating about the merits of a 'punitive' strike on Pakistan. Both sides are probably bluffing. But with both armies on a state of full alert, the risks of misunderstanding are rising."

By threatening military action against Pakistan, Vajpayee is hoping to rally his coalition partners and shore up the government, even at the risk of war. He is under pressure from Hindu extremist groups to strike at anti-Indian groups inside Pakistani territory. Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader Ashok Singhal declared: "It would be a heinous crime to force the security forces deployed along the Indo-Pak border to remain mute spectators in spite of such incidents... The government should direct the armed forces to attack Pok [Pakistan occupied Kashmir] to fulfil the much-awaited desire of the people."

A few weeks ago the opposition parties were denouncing the

government over the communal violence in Gujarat. But, in the name of “fighting terrorism,” all of them, including the Congress Party and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) have rallied behind the Hindu chauvinist BJP. Congress leader Sonia Gandhi, who met with Vajpayee on Sunday, stated: “We will continue to stand by the government on such vital issues.” She called for “action” rather than “rhetoric”.

CPI-M parliamentary leader Somnath Chatterjee insisted that his party had always stood by the government in the fight against “terrorism”. Communist Party of India (CPI) spokesman Ajay Chakravorty made similar remarks, demanding that Pakistan should be punished. Thoroughly mired in Indian nationalism, both of these parties have repeatedly lined up to defend the Indian state and the interests of the ruling class. During the most recent confrontation with Pakistan in 1999, when Kashmiri separatists seized key strategic positions in the Kargil region of Jammu and Kashmir, the CPI-M attacked the Vajpayee government from the right—for failing to take adequate security measures.

Fearing that any conflict between India and Pakistan will impact on US military operations in Afghanistan, the Bush administration has intervened to try to defuse tensions. US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca arrived on the Indian subcontinent on May 14 for a two-day visit to both New Delhi and Islamabad but left declaring “this is not the work of one trip.” Top-level phone calls between Washington and New Delhi have also produced no results. The Bush administration plans to send US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to the region for further discussions.

Despite its utterances of concern, the US has been a major destabilising factor in the region. The Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” has only encouraged the Vajpayee government to aggressively push its own agenda on the subcontinent, particularly against Pakistan. Since 1999, the US has been rapidly shifting from its Cold War alliance with Pakistan towards an economic and strategic alliance with India. US troops are currently in India for joint training exercises for the first time in four decades.

New Delhi has called on Washington to more fully back its campaign to crack down on armed Islamic groups opposed to Indian rule in predominantly Muslim Kashmir. Home Minister Advani expressed “disappointment” over the failure of the US to openly support New Delhi against Islamabad. In an interview with the *New York Times* on Saturday, he demanded that Washington warn Musharraf it would declare Pakistan a terrorist state if it failed to stop “cross-border terrorism.” When asked whether India was bluffing about military actions in order to pressure the US, Advani stated that India might take actions the US “would not like.”

The US has, however, already put considerable pressure on Pakistan. In preparation for the invasion of Afghanistan, Washington forced Musharraf to end Pakistan’s support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Following the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament, Washington pushed Islamabad to crack down on Islamic extremist organisations operating in Pakistan and round up hundreds of alleged militants. Both of these moves have undermined Musharraf’s base of support in the military and among Islamic fundamentalist groups, destabilising the regime and

making its response more unpredictable.

Behind the scenes, the US is applying further arm-twisting to Musharraf. In the wake of Rocca’s visit, the Pakistani government arrested Hafeez Mohammed Saeed, leader of the Lakshkar-e-Taiba, one of the groups accused of carrying out the December 13 attack, and deployed a 1,000-strong army force in the tribal areas to crack down on unrest. The *Guardian* quoted a US official as saying: “We are trying to encourage, wheedle, coerce, urge the Pakistanis to move more aggressively [against Islamic fundamentalist groups]. We’ve had some success but the movement is slow.”

Every step by Musharraf to fulfill US demands only fuels political instability inside Pakistan. Information Minister Nisar Memon pleaded with the US to ease the pressure. “Pakistan stood with the international community in the fight against terrorism,” he said, adding: “Pakistan is a victim of terrorism... We will not allow any group or organisation to use the Pakistani soil against any country.” Both Memon and Musharraf have insisted, however, that Pakistan would retaliate against any Indian military action.

As a result, two nuclear armed powers, both confronting sharp internal difficulties, have marshalled more than one million troops and raised the tensions along the border to fever pitch. India and Pakistan have fought three wars since independence in 1947—two of them over the disputed territory of Kashmir. The inability of the ruling elites in New Delhi and Islamabad to defuse the issue stems from the reactionary character of the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and predominantly Hindu India. Within that context, there was no peaceful resolution to the dispute over the princely state of Kashmir—with its Muslim majority ruled by a Hindu maharaja. The inability of the ruling classes to resolve the issue now threatens to drag the region into another calamity.



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