

India and Pakistan back off from war—temporarily

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Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee yesterday took a small step back from the brink of war with Pakistan, declaring to the media that he saw clear skies replacing war clouds—at least for the moment. He warned, however, that, “sometimes lightning can strike even when the sky is clear. I hope there will be no lightning.”

Vajpayee’s tone was in marked contrast to his comments the previous day when addressing an Indian army unit stationed near the Indo-Pakistan border. Then, he told the troops: “India is forced to fight a war thrust on it and we will emerge victorious. Let there be no doubt about it... Be ready for sacrifice. Your goal should be victory. It’s time to fight a decisive battle.”

The shift in emphasis followed a statement by Pakistani military strongman General Pervez Musharraf after a cabinet meeting on Wednesday. While repeating that Pakistan was ready for war, Musharraf added: “The meeting emphasised the government will not allow Pakistan’s territory or any territory whose defence is the responsibility of Pakistan to be used for any terrorist activity anywhere in the world.”

The comments contain a significant concession to India’s demand that Pakistan crack down on “cross-border terrorism”—that is, armed Islamic fundamentalist groups opposed to India’s control of Jammu and Kashmir. In January, following an armed attack on the Indian parliament building on December 13, Musharraf took a number of measures to appease New Delhi, including the banning of several organisations and the round-up of hundreds of their members. But he stopped short of taking similar steps in the parts of Kashmir ruled by Pakistan.

According to the Indian government, a number of the Islamic groups simply re-established themselves in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. By referring to “any territory whose defence is the responsibility of Pakistan,” Musharraf implied that Pakistan’s security forces would now move to shut down the new offices and camps in Kashmir and prevent armed fighters from crossing the border into Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir.

Top Indian cabinet ministers and military officials met yesterday in Kashmir to consider Musharraf’s statement. According to the *Hindustan Times*, the Unified Headquarters chaired by Vajpayee in Srinagar decided to give Pakistan two

months to halt “cross-border terrorism” ahead of state elections due in Jammu and Kashmir. While formally rejecting Musharraf’s comments, the Cabinet Committee on Security, which also met yesterday, endorsed the earlier decision to give Pakistan more time to comply.

The decision amounts to little more than a temporary respite, which could at any time be reversed. The onus is placed on Pakistan to crack down on the activities of various Islamic militia, with which the Pakistani military and intelligence bodies have close relations, but do not control. Any fresh attack inside India or on Indian forces, such as the one at Kaluchak last week in which 34 people were killed, could become the basis for New Delhi to renew its threats of war.

Behind the scenes, the major powers, particularly the US, have exerted considerable pressure on both countries to back off from a military confrontation—on Islamabad to make concessions and on New Delhi to give Pakistan more time. US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca visited the subcontinent last week and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage is due to arrive early next month. European Union External Affairs Commissioner Chris Patten was due to arrive in New Delhi yesterday, to be followed by British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw next week.

In seeking to prevent the outbreak of war between India and Pakistan, Washington is concerned that any conflict would not only undermine its military operations in Afghanistan but also destabilise the region and threaten broader US economic and strategic interests. At the same time, the Bush administration’s “war against terrorism,” and its own closer relations with New Delhi, have only encouraged the Vajpayee government to take a more belligerent stand against Pakistan.

The Pakistani regime has attempted to enlist international support for negotiations or the establishment of monitors along the Line of Control that divides Kashmir into Indian and Pakistani zones. Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shaukat Aziz stated: “We are willing to talk bilaterally, through third party mediation, or by any other acceptable mechanism to avert the war.” But India, which has traditionally insisted that Kashmir is an internal issue, has rejected any international involvement and indicated that it is not prepared to talk with Musharraf.

Tensions between the two nuclear-armed powers remain

extremely high. Neither side has pulled back from frantic military preparations over the last week. More than one million soldiers armed with tanks, heavy artillery, warplanes and missiles have faced each other across the border in a state of high alert since last December. Heavy exchanges of mortar and artillery fire have forced at least 25,000 villagers to flee the border areas and resulted in a number of deaths.

Last weekend, India integrated its paramilitary border guards and coast guard with the Indian military for the first time since its war with Pakistan in 1971. On Wednesday, five warships from India's eastern fleet were moved to the western coast to strength its naval presence near Pakistan's waters. Warplanes, tanks and missile batteries are already in place in what has been India's largest-ever military mobilisation. Millions of landmines have been planted along the border.

As well as military threats, some Indian officials have warned that India could tear up the Indus Water Treaty, signed with Pakistan in 1960. The agreement regulates the use of water in three rivers, including the Indus, which flows through Pakistan but has its headwaters in India. The general secretary of the Pakistan Labor Party, Farooq Tariq, commented: "If this treaty were scrapped, it would not only starve the Punjab and Sind provinces of Pakistan, but Pakistan as a whole and Afghanistan."

Pakistan has responded in kind. The military has moved Haft missiles, with an estimated range of 75 to 100 km, as well as the longer range Haft-2 to the border with India. Islamabad has indicated that it will pull its troops out of UN-sponsored operations in Sierra Leone. The army has begun to transfer troops from the western border with Afghanistan to the Indian border in the east. Islamabad has been put on a war footing, all army reserves and retired officers have been recalled to active duty and government hospital beds emptied in preparation for casualties.

Within India, there have been repeated calls for strikes across the Line of Control against anti-Indian militia groups. The Indian military establishment has been speculating on the possibility of a "limited war," involving raids by groups of elite soldiers on militia training camps. But, as several defence analysts have pointed out, any military confrontation has its own dynamic and its own momentum. Even a limited attack by the Indian army in a confined area could spread rapidly along the border, and, if conventional weapons proved inadequate, lead to the unleashing of nuclear-tipped missiles with tragic consequences for millions of people.

The long-running conflict over Kashmir stems from the reactionary character of the partition of the Indian continent into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India in 1947. Within that communal framework, strategically-placed Kashmir, with a Muslim-majority and ruled by a Hindu maharaja, immediately became a focus of sharp rivalry and war—in 1948 and 1965. The two countries again moved to the brink of war in 1999, when Pakistani-backed forces seized key

mountaintops in the Kargil region of Jammu and Kashmir.

The volatility of the present standoff is fueled by the deep political crisis in both countries. Vajpayee has seized on the opportunity to divert public attention from communal rioting in the state of Gujarat where hundreds of Muslims were killed. Criticisms of the actions of his Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) threatened to lead to a break-up of the ruling coalition.

Within Pakistan, Musharraf, who took power in a military coup in 1999, is increasingly coming under fire. Most political parties refused to attend a meeting called by the Pakistani leader to gather support for war. Instead the All Party Conference—a coalition of 29 opposition parties, including the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)—demanded Musharraf resign and hand over power to a neutral caretaker government. The opposition resolution stated: "[Musharraf] stands discredited and lacks the stature and moral authority to deal with the current threat to national security and territorial integrity of Pakistan."

PPP leader and former prime minister Benazir Bhutto blamed Musharraf for creating a "war-like situation," saying: "The latest tensions on the border and the threat of a potentially nuclear war emphasise the need for a political change in Pakistan ..." Increasingly isolated, Musharraf responded on Wednesday: "In fact, I now want to shed power. I wish there was an elected prime minister to take the crucial decisions that need to be taken at this juncture."

Pakistan faces a serious economic crisis. The chairman of the Central Board of Revenue, Raiz Malik, stated recently that the country had lost 42 billion rupees (\$US0.8 billion) in revenue following September 11. Over the last week, the Karachi stock exchange has slumped by 1,527 points or 14.5 percent. The Bombay stock exchange in India has lost 9 percent since May 14.

In these highly charged conditions, any incident could quickly become the pretext for an escalation of hostilities.



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