Tense military standoff between India and Pakistan continues

Vilani Peiris, Sarath Kumara
5 June 2002

The Indian and Pakistani armies remain poised along the border in a high state of alert following a regional security summit sponsored by Russian President Vladimir Putin over the past two days. Artillery exchanges occurred between the two sides even as Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf attended the 12-nation conference in the Kazakhstan capital of Almaty.

No talks took place at the summit between the Indian and Pakistani leaders. Vajpayee had ruled out any discussions in advance, insisting that negotiations would only take place after "cross-border terrorism" in Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir halted. India blames Pakistan for a decade of guerrilla warfare by various armed Islamic groups opposed to Indian control over Kashmir—a majority Muslim state. Vajpayee told the conference that Pakistan had failed to halt "cross-border infiltration" and "violence has continued unabated in Kashmir".

Musharraf responded by repeating a promise not to allow Pakistani territory "to be used for any terrorist acts". He then bitterly criticised Indian rule in Kashmir, declaring: "Similarly we cannot condone for any reason the rapacious policies of certain states that forcibly occupy territories or deny freedom to peoples for decades on end." While saying that Pakistan would not start war, Musharraf declared: "We will defend ourselves with the utmost resolution and determination."

The latest escalation of tensions followed an attack by Kashmiri separatists on an Indian army base in Jammu and Kashmir on May 14, in which 34 people including women and children were killed. New Delhi has warned that its military will retaliate against "terrorist bases" inside Pakistani-controlled Kashmir—a move that could rapidly escalate into an all-out war between the two nuclear-armed powers. More than one millions troops backed by heavy armour, warplanes and missiles have confronted each other along the border since December 13, when a group of Islamic militants attacked the Indian parliament building in New Delhi.

Vajpayee declared in a television broadcast last week that India should have responded militarily following the December 13 attack. He said the only reason holding India back at the time was the pressure of "world leaders". But Vajpayee added: "India won't follow the same advice now."

According to an article in the *Washington Post* last weekend: "An Indian military strike into Pakistani-held Kashmir is being planned in New Delhi in the spirit of the new ethos of 'hot preemption'." While the newspaper did not spell it out explicitly, the "new ethos" in New Delhi derives from the Bush administration and its military invasion of Afghanistan on the pretext of "fighting terrorism". While seeking to restrain New Delhi, in public at least, Washington's "global war on terrorism" has only encouraged India to take a more aggressive stance against rival Pakistan.

Both sides are openly discussing the possibility of a nuclear conflagration. In an interview in the Indian magazine *Outlook*, Defence Secretary Yogendra Narain warned that in the event of a Pakistani nuclear strike, India would retaliate with its nuclear arsenal, ensuring widespread destruction on both sides. Pakistan, which has far weaker conventional military forces, has not ruled out the possibility of a first strike. Pakistan's ambassador to US, Maleeha Lodhi, responded to Narain by declaring that India's promises not to use nuclear weapons in a first strike were mere oratory and propaganda with "no meaning in an operational sense".

The two countries have more than enough conventional weaponry to cause massive destruction and loss of life. The Indian armed forces have 1,263,000 personnel as compared to Pakistan's 620,000. India has 730 combat aircraft, 27 surface warships and 16 submarines while

© World Socialist Web Site

Pakistan has 353, eight and 10 respectively. The number and type of nuclear weapons held by each are closely guarded secrets. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, however, India has between 25 and 40 nuclear weapons and Pakistan between 15 and 20.

The drive to war is being fuelled by the deep-going political and social crisis in both countries. The two sides are exploiting the conflict over Kashmir to shore up their weak political position at home. Vajpayee's chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) has lost a series of state elections and recently faced a censure motion of its role in anti-Muslim violence in the state of Gujarat.

The *Asian Times* website commented on May 31: "If the BJP is to come back to power in the next general elections with an enhanced showing, then one of its best chances of doing so is to try and cash in on anti-Pakistani jingoism, whose attraction is potentially much wider than the double-edged appeal of the nakedly anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic hatred it has shown in Gujarat."

The aggressive Indian stance has been encouraged by the Bush administration's pressure on Pakistan to halt "cross-border terrorism". Last week Bush bluntly told Musharraf that he must "live up to his word" and "show results on the ground." US Secretary of State Colin Powell told the media: "We are pressing President Musharraf very hard to cease all infiltration activities." Washington's stance has been reinforced by a statement from G-8 leaders urging Pakistan to take "urgent action" to stop anti-Indian fighters crossing into Jammu and Kashmir.

Reports on US government planning for the possible evacuation of 1,100 US troops and around 63,000 of its citizens from both countries confirms that Washington has calculated the possibility of war breaking out. The US has asked its non-essential embassy staff to leave both countries and warned its citizens not to travel there. Canada and Britain have advised their citizens to leave India and Pakistan while the UN has issued the same instructions to families of its staff in Pakistan and India. Japan and other Western countries have warned their citizens not to visit India and Pakistan.

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage is currently on the subcontinent for talks in both New Delhi and Islamabad. He will be followed on June 9 by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld who will meet with both Musharraf and Vajpayee. At the same time as these diplomatic manoeuvres are taking place, however, the US, Britain and other countries are warning of the danger of war and preparing for an evacuation of their nationals from the region.

Since the military build-up last December, the Bush administration has attempted to rein in Pakistan and India, concerned that a war could upset its own operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the region. But already there are elements in ruling circles in Washington who are calling on the Bush administration to exploit the situation to pursue US interests.

Jed Babbin, a former Deputy Undersecretary of Defence under Bush senior, wrote in the rightwing *Washington Times* on May 30 that one of the Kashmir separatist groups, Lashkar-e-Omar, has links to the Taliban in Afghanistan. "If their [Al Qaeda and Taliban] presence can be confirmed, we and our allies should ask Mr. Musharraf's permission to attack, and make clear that we will not take 'no' for an answer," he declared.

Unilateral US action would further destabilise Musharraf's military dictatorship in Pakistan, which since September 11 has been forced to break its links with the Taliban regime and to crack down on Islamic extremist groups. These measures have created deep rifts in the military and among Islamic fundamentalists who previously constituted Musharraf's main bases of support. The *Guardian* reported recently that "despite the purges, several hundred in the core of 2,500 ISI [Pakistan's military intelligence service] officers remain opposed to General Musharraf's alliance with America."

Both sides have a great deal to lose politically if they back away from the present military confrontation, which is why over a million soldiers face each other along the Indo-Pakistan border.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site