

Danger of India-Pakistan war remains high despite peace gestures

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Over the past few days, India and Pakistan have taken several small steps to reduce the current state of extreme military tension a notch or two. The danger of war, however, remains high, with more than a million heavily-armed troops confronting each other along the border. The gestures towards peace have been in response to direct pressure from Washington, including visits to the Indian subcontinent by two top US officials over the last week.

Last Friday, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage informed the Indian government that he had extracted a promise from Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf that he would "permanently and immediately" put a stop to "cross-border terrorism". In return, Musharraf via Armitage urged India to take reciprocal steps to wind back the military confrontation.

In a phone conversation with US Secretary of State Colin Powell, Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh declared that Musharraf's statement was "a step forward in the right direction" and that India would respond appropriately and positively. Indian officials also stated for the first time that their intelligence reports indicated a decline in the number of militants crossing the Line of Control (LoC) between the Pakistani- and Indian-controlled areas of Kashmir.

New Delhi has repeatedly blamed Islamabad for instigating "terrorist attacks" by armed Islamic groups opposed to India's control of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. The present military build-up followed an attack on the Indian parliament building on December 13. After a further attack on an Indian army base inside Jammu and Kashmir on May 14, the Indian government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee threatened to strike at targets inside Pakistan-controlled Kashmir—a move that carries the danger of all-out war.

On Sunday, India announced the lifting of a ban on Pakistani flights over Indian air space, put in place after the December 13 attack. There is no resumption of air, bus or rail links between the two countries, however. The Indian navy has also pulled its warships back from areas adjoining Pakistani territorial waters to Bombay and other west coast naval bases. But it is yet to decide whether to return five extra warships that were transferred from bases on the east coast.

The Indian government also announced on Monday the

appointment of a new ambassador to Pakistan. The previous top diplomat was withdrawn last December and, following the May attack in Jammu and Kashmir, India expelled Pakistan's ambassador in New Delhi.

All of these measures are, however, largely cosmetic. In announcing the recall of Indian warships, a naval officer declared that the country's army and air force continue to maintain a "high state of operational readiness". Pakistan Brigadier Istikhar Ali Khan told the *New York Times* this week: "[S]o far, there is no change across the Line of Control. It's as volatile as it was two to three weeks ago. It remains highly explosive and dangerous."

New Delhi and Islamabad are both under pressure from hard-line religious communalists to maintain their aggressive military stance. Inside Vajpayee's own Hindu chauvinist Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP), Home Minister L. K. Advani has, according to the *Times of India*, ruled out any "bold moves" towards a diplomatic solution such as a high-level summit. A senior Home Ministry official said Advani "believed that Pakistan must stop infiltration, tear down the camps and stop the violence inside Kashmir before India reciprocates".

Musharraf is also under considerable pressure from Islamic extremists and the sections of the military who regard any concession to India as treason. Over the past decade Pakistan has politically supported the actions of anti-Indian militia groups as "freedom fighters" seeking to liberate Kashmir with its Muslim majority from Indian control. On Monday, three retired generals joined dozens of Islamic leaders and clerics in a meeting in Islamabad to condemn Musharraf's stance on Kashmir.

Hafiz Abdul Rahman Makki, a senior official of the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba group, attacked the Pakistani leader declaring: "This is a very critical time. It is our religious obligation to help the Kashmiri people. The government has taken a U-turn and a step back over the Kashmir policy... We should resist these steps." Significantly, General Hamid Gul, a former head of the Interservices Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's powerful military intelligence agency, was also present. "If the West really wants to crush the jihad, then they should just give the right of self-determination to the Kashmiri people and finish it," he said.

While it insists that it wants an end to the military

confrontation between India and Pakistan, the Bush administration has been instrumental in creating the tensions. The Vajpayee government seized on the US invasion of Afghanistan to call for Pakistan to be branded a “terrorist-sponsoring country” and for Kashmir to be included in Bush’s “global war on terrorism”. Washington is clearly concerned that a war would cut across its own plans in the region, but at the same time is using the situation to advance its interests.

The most significant step is a proposal to send US and British troops to Kashmir in the guise of “peace-keepers” to conduct joint patrols with Indian and Pakistani troops and to monitor activity along the Line of Control. The British-based *Independent* reported last week that Rumsfeld would propose “a joint US-British military monitoring force” of about 500 troops during meetings with Indian and Pakistani leaders.

Rumsfeld was deliberately vague about discussions with Vajpayee and senior Indian ministers including Defence Minister George Fernandes, Foreign Minister Singh, Home Minister Advani and chief security advisor, Brajesh Mishra. But he did concede in response to questions: “Yes that subject (joint patrolling) did come up. We reached no conclusions. It is a subject that needs to be discussed and thought about.”

US officials are proposing not only soldiers but the possibility of putting hi-tech electronic and other surveillance in place to monitor activity along the Line of Control. Rumsfeld indicated that meetings of experts from the US, UK, India and Pakistan had been mooted to work out the protocols for the installation and use of ground sensors in border areas.

A comment in the *Washington Post* on June 11 indicated the extent of what is being discussed in the US political and military establishment. “To show that it is serious about stabilising the Line of Control, the United States should provide India with state-of-the-art ground based and airborne surveillance equipment to enable New Delhi to detect infiltration and stop it... To have a decisive impact, US surveillance help would also have to include sophisticated airborne radar scanners and night-vision video cameras...”

The article proposed a further step. “If US surveillance assistance to India did not deter Pakistan-sponsored infiltration, the United States could then escalate its help by leasing the Predator aircraft to New Delhi and sharing the results of US spy satellite monitoring along the Line of Control.” It should be noted that the unmanned Predator drones used in Afghanistan are not just used for passive surveillance. Armed with anti-tank missiles, they can be used for assassinations and attacks.

Previously India has opposed any international intervention in Kashmir, insisting it was an internal matter. But the current US proposals are being quietly welcomed in New Delhi. Neither Vajpayee nor any of his top ministers have ruled out the plan. An editorial in the *Times of India* on June 12 pointed out that Indian defence analysts were increasingly talking about “US intervention in Kashmir” with approval, saying “India can only gain from this”.

There were some signs, as Rumsfeld departed for Pakistan yesterday, that the US may have plans for a more far-reaching intervention in Kashmir. The US Defence Secretary repeated claims by other US officials that Al Qaeda guerrillas driven out of Afghanistan had moved into Kashmir. “I have seen indications that Al Qaeda is operating near the Line of Control,” Rumsfeld said, then admitting: “I have no hard evidence of who, how many and where.”

Rumsfeld’s unsubstantiated allegation could provide the pretext for US troops, which are already operating in western Pakistan, to demand access to the eastern areas of the country and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. India has already called for the US troops to ensure that “terrorist training camps” inside Pakistan are shut down. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* recently quoted the US army’s vice-chief of staff, General John Keane, as saying that the US would go after Al Qaeda in Pakistan.

The US is proposing to put troops and advanced surveillance equipment in Kashmir in the name of “peacekeeping”. But the establishment of a military foothold in a key area of the Indian subcontinent offers Washington broad possibilities for electronic spying on neighbouring China and to link up with US military bases recently established in neighbouring Central Asia.

An article in the *New York Times* on June 10 noted that the US intervention on the Indian subcontinent, particularly its developing military alliance with India, was part of a far broader strategy. In particular, it noted that discussions were taking place in Washington over the possible use of India as a counterweight to China.

“Some senior officials saw a close American military relationship with India, a developing, democratic nation of a billion people with a million-member army, as a factor that would give pause to a rising, autocratic China, if not now, then a decade or two down the road when India has become richer and more powerful, American officials say,” the *New York Times* explained.

Far from bringing long-term peace to the region, the placement of US troops and surveillance equipment in highly sensitive Kashmir would only sow the seeds for a broader and more devastating conflict that has the potential to drag in not only India and Pakistan but China and other major regional powers.



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