

India and Pakistan continue to trade threats of war

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Belligerent comments from both India and Pakistan have revealed just how close the two countries have been to war over the last month. Moreover, despite superficial moves to ease tensions, no moves are being made to withdraw the one million heavily-armed troops lined up along the border and no talks are planned. With both governments susceptible to pressure from communal extremists, any incident has the potential to catapult the region into military conflict between the two nuclear-armed nations.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee told *Dainik Jagran*, a Hindi-language newspaper, this week that India would have gone to war with Pakistan, if Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf had not promised to halt the infiltration of armed Islamic militants into Indian-controlled Kashmir. His remarks, reported in the *New York Times*, made clear that the Indian government was willing to plunge the region into a nuclear conflict. "India was prepared for nuclear war, but we were confident our neighbour would not resort to such madness," he said.

Musharraf, meanwhile, told a group of nuclear scientists and engineers that "Pakistan's conventional and nuclear capability together deter aggression". Referring to Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998 and missile tests last month, he declared: "We were compelled to show then, in May 1998, that we were not bluffing and in May 2002 again we were compelled to show that we do not bluff." His remarks were immediately denounced in New Delhi as further "manifestations of Pakistani irresponsibility, loose talk and undiluted hostility towards India".

These remarks reveal that neither side has stepped back an inch. While there is an element of bluster in both camps as they seek to appease chauvinist layers at home, the threats of nuclear war have a logic of their

own. Musharraf and Vajpayee are well aware of the maxim: don't make threats you are not prepared to carry out. With armies drawn up along the border in state of high alert, even a minor conflict has the potential to rapidly escalate into all-out war.

In his interview in the *Dainik Jagran*, Vajpayee admitted the Pakistani army had implemented India's demand to block the infiltration of Kashmiri separatists. But he added: "[T]here is no hurry to withdraw from the border. There is no possibility of dialogue between two countries." In a telephone conversation on Wednesday, Vajpayee reportedly told his Malaysian counterpart Mahathir Mohamad that India would wait to see if Musharraf kept his promise to stop terrorism through "concrete, visible and permanent" action on the ground.

The Indian government clearly feels that, by enlisting the US and Britain in its own "war on terrorism," it has been able to compel Musharraf to make concessions. By maintaining the pressure on Islamabad, New Delhi is hoping to make further gains against rival Pakistan and to strengthen its hold in the disputed region of Kashmir. Hard-line members of the ruling Hindu chauvinist Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) are already adding further demands. Last Sunday, Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani insisted that there would be no talks with Islamabad unless Musharraf "shut down terrorist camps" in Pakistan-held Kashmir.

New Delhi feels encouraged by Washington's support to take a tough stance. As Advani noted: "One major change in last 10 days has been that the US, Britain and other coalition members have said publicly and forcefully that Pakistan should stop cross-border terrorism." As well as political support, close military ties between India and the US have continued to develop throughout the latest crisis.

India's Chief of Air Staff S. Krishnaswamy left for Washington yesterday for high-level talks, which will include planning for a joint training exercise in Alaska later in the year. On Wednesday, Defence Minister George Fernandes announced that India would take up a US offer to place sophisticated electronic monitoring devices along the Line of Control separating the Indian- and Pakistani-controlled areas of Kashmir. An article in the *Hindu* last Friday revealed that the US and Britain were exploring closer intelligence sharing with India.

Spokesman for the Pakistani military regime, Rashid Qureshi, responded to Indian demands by declaring: "This talk of jihad inside Azad Kashmir (Pakistan-held Kashmir) is sheer propaganda by India." Islamabad has always denied giving anything more than political support to armed Kashmiri groups, which it has previously termed "freedom fighters". Musharraf now insists that he will halt all "terrorism" and, according to Pakistani spokesmen, the training camps for various Islamic extremist groups are being shut down. Islamabad has also announced measures to control madrassas (Islamic religious schools). Under the new laws, all schools will be registered and the teaching of "militancy and extremism" is prohibited. Any clergy found breaking the law faces stiff penalties.

Both Musharraf and Vajpayee face criticism from the communal extremists that form a base of support for their regimes. Islamic fundamentalist groups have condemned Musharraf's concessions to India as a betrayal of Kashmiri Muslims and threatened to defy the military and continue to infiltrate fighters into Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir. Others have called for Musharraf to go. [See: "Karachi bomb blast highlights Pakistani regime's political crisis"]

Vajpayee has been under fire from the Hindu extremist groups associated with his own BJP for failing to launch a war against Pakistan. Onkar Bhave, the International Joint Secretary of the World Hindu Congress (VHP), declared this week that India should have retaliated against Pakistan following the attack by Kashmiri separatists on the Indian parliament last December. He accused the Vajpayee government of backing down to the pressure of the big powers by recently withdrawing Indian warships from waters near Pakistan and opening up Indian airspace to commercial Pakistani overflights.

Speaking in Jammu, Kashmir's winter capital, BJP

national president Jana Krishnamurthi said India had faced "a proxy war" for the past 10 years. India was going to win this war and it would be the last war between the two countries.

A recent comment on the *Asia Times* website pointed out that the Hindu chauvinist organisations would not be content with control over Kashmir. "There are also those in leadership positions within the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) who want more. They genuinely believe that Pakistan must be dismembered and destroyed," it noted.

The preparations for war have continued despite the impact on the two countries' economies. In fact, an element of Vajpayee's calculations is that the smaller and weaker Pakistani economy could not withstand a prolonged military mobilisation. According to a report in the *Times of India*, New Delhi is seeking to increase economic pressure on Pakistan, which is facing a three-year drought, falling export orders, large debts and financial difficulties.

Pakistan's Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz has increased defence spending to 146 billion rupees (\$US2.4 billion) for the current financial year 2002-03—a rise of nearly Rs.15 billion over the budget allocation for 2001-2002. The military now accounts for about 18 percent of the total budget.

The Indian economy has also been affected. More than 60,000 foreign nationals have left India since mid-May, significantly hitting the tourist industry. The owner of one hotel complex lamented: "Twenty five percent of our bookings for June and July made by foreign visitors have been cancelled and our occupancy rate has come down from 80 percent to 50 percent in the last 10 days." Other businessmen pointed to an economic slowdown.

However, none of these economic considerations have deterred either Vajpayee or Musharraf from their massive military mobilisation over the past six months and moves towards all-out war.



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