

Tense military standoff continues between India and Pakistan

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Despite media efforts to downplay the continuing military standoff between India and Pakistan, the situation along the border remains precarious. The potential for a relatively minor incident to trigger broader conflict and an all-out war between the two nuclear armed powers was highlighted by the mutual recriminations over the death of a Pakistani soldier.

According to Pakistani spokesman General Rashid Qureshi, Corporal Maqsood had ventured into no man's land to retrieve some camels. He was captured, tortured and executed by Indian troops, Qureshi told a press conference last weekend. The general showed a video, allegedly of the mutilated body, and warned that such incidents could "snowball" because it would prove difficult to control the response of fellow Pakistani soldiers. An Indian defence spokesman vigorously denied the charges, claiming that the soldier was killed in an exchange of fire after he infiltrated Indian territory.

Whatever the truth of the matter, there is no shortage of pretexts on either side for rapidly escalating the tensions. After recent high-level visits to the subcontinent by US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, both sides made small conciliatory gestures. Armitage reported that Pakistani military strongman General Pervez Musharraf had pledged to put a "permanent end" to the infiltration of Islamic fighters opposed to Indian control over the disputed territory of Kashmir. In response, the Indian government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee pulled back Indian warships lying off Pakistani waters, opened up Indian airspace and reappointed an ambassador to Islamabad.

The superficial nature of these concessions has been underscored by interviews with the two leaders in the latest issue of the US magazine *Newsweek*. Both Musharraf and Vajpayee indicated that war had been imminent following an attack in mid-May by Kashmiri militants on an Indian army base in Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir. Asked by the interviewer how close the two countries were to war, Vajpayee declared: "It was a touch and go affair." In

response to a similar question, Musharraf simply said: "It was very close." Asked what would have happened if the Indian military had struck against so-called terrorist training camps inside Pakistan controlled Kashmir, Musharraf replied: "We would have taught them a lesson."

Both leaders backtracked on earlier statements. Musharraf refused to confirm his promise for a "permanent end" to cross-border infiltration, saying: "I've told President Bush nothing is happening across the Line of Control [separating Indian and Pakistani held Kashmir]. This is the assurance I've given. I'm not going to give you an assurance that for years nothing will happen." In line with Pakistani claims over Kashmir, he insisted that it was not a question of "cross-border terrorism," as alleged by India, but of a freedom struggle in Kashmir. So sensitive was Washington to the comments that US Secretary of State Colin Powell immediately rang Musharraf to extract a confirmation of the earlier promise to Armitage.

In his interview, Vajpayee ignored a series of recent Indian statements that acknowledged a marked decline in the number of Islamic fighters entering Jammu and Kashmir. Without explaining the earlier comments, he simply declared: "There has been no change in Pakistan's policy so far as cross-border infiltration is concerned. Every day we are getting reports that infiltration continues unabated." He accused Islamabad of supporting and directing "terrorist organisations operating in Kashmir ... closely linked to Al Qaeda and other *jihadi* organisations".

Accusations of Pakistan-sponsored "cross border terrorism" have been the pretext used by New Delhi to maintain the pressure on Islamabad. Following an attack by Kashmiri separatists on the Indian parliament building on December 13, India mounted its largest ever military mobilisation. Currently one million troops backed by tanks, artillery, missiles and warplanes confront each other along the border and are sporadically trading fire. Asked if any troops would be pulled back, Vajpayee told *Newsweek*: "It will take some time. Let us see what happens on the ground."

Last Monday a Pakistani Foreign Ministry spokesman issued an appeal for Indian troops to be removed from the border. “The most urgent thing required to be done is that the forces are withdrawn so that they are not in this forward position where a small incident can lead to a flare-up.... When a meaningful step is taken by India toward lowering of tension, I can assure you that Pakistan would not be wanting in giving an adequate response to that.” Islamabad, however, has made no withdrawals of its own and tensions remain extremely high.

Both Musharraf and Vajpayee have maintained aggressive stances to divert attention away from political problems at home and are beholden to communal extremist organisations. The Hindu chauvinist World Hindu Council (VHP), which has close connections with Vajpayee’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has just concluded a meeting with a call for the division of Kashmir on a communal basis through the establishment of separate territories for Kashmiri Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims.

Strategically placed Kashmir, which under the British was a princely state with a Muslim majority population and a Hindu ruler, has been a source of conflict ever since independence in 1947. A war between the two countries erupted after the Hindu maharaja faced with a Pakistani supported revolt of his subjects formally acceded to India. The result was the division of Kashmir along the Line of Control—a constant reminder of the reactionary character of the communal division of the Indian subcontinent into Muslim Pakistan and predominantly Hindu India.

The VHP proposal for a further fracturing of Kashmir would only exacerbate communal conflict and tensions between the two countries. The Hindu extremist organisation has also called for New Delhi to ban Islamic madrassas [religious schools] in India, claiming they promote “Islamic terrorism” and is once again agitating for the building of a temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of the Babri Masjid (mosque) destroyed by Hindu fanatics in 1992. All of these moves are aimed at fuelling Hindu chauvinist sentiment.

In Pakistan, Musharraf is under fire from Islamic fundamentalists groups that regard any concession over Kashmir as a betrayal. Under pressure from Washington, Musharraf broke off relations with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, banned a number of Islamic organisations and imprisoned hundreds of their members, and now has promised to block militants from crossing into Indian-held Kashmir. One fundamentalist organisation is Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Islami. Its leader Maulana Sami-ul-Haq recently denounced the Pakistani leader, saying: “Pakistan is becoming the lackey of imperialist Americans and Musharraf is their lap dog.”

The criticisms will only increase as Pakistani security

forces collaborate with US soldiers, CIA and FBI agents to hunt down Al Qaeda members in Pakistan. On Wednesday, 10 Pakistani soldiers were killed in western Pakistan in a battle with an alleged group of Al Qaeda fighters. One immediate reason for Washington’s attempts to moderate tensions on the India-Pakistan border is that Musharraf had been compelled to shift some of his troops operating with the US on the Afghanistan border.

The Bush administration is placing further demands on Musharraf for “cooperation” in its so-called war on terrorism. General Tommy Franks, the head of US Central command, was in Pakistan last weekend to discuss further measures to be taken by Islamabad. According to a report on the *Asia Times* web site: “[T]he US has offered to deploy its human resources (both marines and detectives) in monitoring suspected terrorists and militant organisations. The US has also offered to install monitoring equipment at borders, airports, and all other exit points from the country, including railway stations.”

The Pakistan army is now operating on three fronts: on the Afghanistan border; on the border with Kashmir; and inside the country against “Islamic extremists” who are often Pakistani nationals and have previously had close connections with the military and its powerful intelligence agency, Interservices Intelligence (ISI). Musharraf is in an increasingly isolated and desperate position.

Far from moderating tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad, the US interventions on the subcontinent, first in Afghanistan and now its growing presence in Pakistan, have further inflamed communal sentiment in the region, compounded the political instability and thereby heightened the dangers of war.



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