

As US prepares for war in Iraq

India and Pakistan begin to demobilise troops

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After 10 months of tense confrontation, the Indian and Pakistani governments have begun a partial withdrawal of hundreds of thousands of troops, heavy armour, artillery and rockets from forward positions along the border. The buildup, involving more than a million soldiers, was the largest military mobilisation on the subcontinent in the past 50 years.

However, none of the issues that brought the two countries to the brink of war have been resolved. Neither side has withdrawn troops from along the Line of Control separating the Indian and Pakistani held areas of Kashmir, which is at the heart of the conflict between the two countries. Moreover, the Indian government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has explicitly rejected any negotiations, declaring that the withdrawal was not the prologue to talks with Pakistan.

A major impetus for the military withdrawal came from Washington, which is keen to ensure that a confrontation does not erupt between the two nuclear-armed powers as the US prepares to invade Iraq. US Secretary of State Colin Powell rang his Indian counterpart Yaswant Sinha and praised the decision as “a positive development”. US Ambassador to India Robert Blackwill told the Indian press that Washington had been hoping for months for a “substantial de-escalatory step” in order to end the potential for “a major conventional conflict between India and Pakistan”.

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes announced the pullback on October 16 after a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security chaired by Vajpayee. Underscoring the continuing tensions, he declared that the troops would be redeployed “without impairing their capacity to respond decisively to any emergency” or “lowering the vigil in [Indian-

controlled] Jammu and Kashmir”. He said last week that the process, including de-mining and the removal of military hardware, would take two months to complete.

India initiated the huge mobilisation last December after Islamic fundamentalists opposed to Indian rule of Kashmir attacked the Indian parliament building in New Delhi. Hoping to capitalise on the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism,” Vajpayee immediately seized on the opportunity to order the military buildup, blaming Pakistan for promoting “cross-border terrorism”. Tensions threatened to escalate into all-out war following an attack by Kashmiri separatists near an Indian army base on May 14.

Concerned that a war between India and Pakistan would compromise its interests in the region—particularly in Afghanistan and Central Asia—the US intervened to defuse the crisis. Under intense pressure from Washington, Pakistan’s military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, pledged to crack down on Islamic fundamentalist militia based in Pakistan and to “permanently” curb their activities in Jammu and Kashmir. India responded by pulling its warships back from positions near Pakistani ports in the Arabian Sea and lifting a ban on Pakistani commercial flights over Indian territory.

The Bush administration, however, remained concerned at the potential for a war, particularly as the US prepares to invade Iraq. As Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage explained recently, while “fighting terror,” the US is “also engaged in cooling hot spots all over the world where US interests are at stake—from Israel to Palestine to India and Pakistan and from North Korea to Colombia to Kosovo.”

In an interview with the *Indian Express* on October

18, US Ambassador Blackwill underscored Washington's reliance on both governments. "We have major equities in the transformation of the India-US relationship with respect to our relationship with Pakistan, as well as with Pakistan's assistance in the war against terrorism, Al Qaeda, Afghanistan, and those are not going to go away."

US pressure is focussed primarily on compelling Pakistan to rein in Islamic fundamentalists to prevent their operations not only in Kashmir but also in Afghanistan. In return, Washington calls on India to do little more than agree to talks with Pakistan. As Blackwill explained, the US and other Western powers would "continue to work very hard in Islamabad to promote the objective of no more terrorism emanating from Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied territory" so that the two countries could resume "a serious discussion about their differences".

Vajpayee's Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) and its Hindu extremist allies have sought to use the tensions to whip up chauvinist sentiment and bolster their own flagging electoral support. As a result, sections of the BJP have accused the government of bowing to American demands in announcing the pull back of troops. Defence Minister Fernandes baldly denied the accusation, declaring: "The United States has never been a factor in our taking decisions."

Fernandes was reluctant to discuss the other significant factor behind the decision—the escalating costs of maintaining around 700,000 soldiers in a high state of military alert along the border with Pakistan. According to the Indian press, retired chief of army staff V.P. Malik made "a major presentation" involving "a cost-benefit analysis" to the cabinet security committee.

Even though the Vajpayee government calculated that the standoff would put economic as well as military pressure on Pakistan, the costs to the Indian economy have been substantial. While Fernandes refused to comment, saying the figures were still being tabulated, estimates put the cost at between 20 and 50 billion rupees (\$US400-1,000 million).

According to Malik, there was a total consensus on the National Security Advisory Board against keeping the troops on a state of permanent alert as it was impairing their fighting ability. "The army was in favour [of the withdrawal]," Rahul Bedi of *Jane's*

Defence Weekly told the BBC. "It was leading to a severe toll on men and machines." *India Today* reported there had been an increasing number of cases of distress among soldiers over their long separation from families.

Reflecting the sentiment in the military top brass, opposition Congress Party spokesman J.N. Dixit commented that the government "should not have done this massive deployment which led to tremendous expenditure and strain on our soldiers" and "did not achieve anything". The criticism is rather belated, however. Congress fully supported the confrontation with Pakistan for 10 months, competing with the BJP to foment anti-Pakistan chauvinism.

Despite the pullback of troops, tensions in Kashmir remain high. Indian and Pakistani troops continue to conduct artillery and mortar exchanges along the Line of Control. Pakistani police announced that a civilian was killed and a soldier was wounded on October 18 by Indian mortar fire and shells. India responded by accusing Pakistan of using a mortar barrage to cover the infiltration of Islamic militants into Indian territory. The security forces claimed to have killed three guerillas.

These incidents demonstrate that the underlying conflicts remain and could easily erupt again. The regimes in both countries rely on enflaming communalist and nationalist sentiment to divert from the political tensions at home created by mounting economic problems and growing levels of unemployment and social polarisation.



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