

India and Pakistan again escalate tensions

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Just months after India and Pakistan withdrew troops massed along their mutual border, tensions between the two countries are again rising. What began as a war of words over nuclear threats has escalated into missile sabre-rattling, tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions and the renewal of shelling exchanges in Kashmir.

Pakistan's military strongman General Pervez Musharraf sparked the original row by declaring on December 30: "If Indian troops move a single step across the international border, or the Line of Control, they should not expect a conventional war from Pakistan."

While Pakistani officials insisted the Musharraf had not meant a nuclear war when he referred to an unconventional war, India replied in kind. Defence Minister George Fernandes denounced the statement, warning: "We will suffer a little [in a nuclear exchange] but there will be no Pakistan when we respond."

On January 8, Pakistan commissioned its medium-range Ghauri missile system which was formally handed over to the army's newly created Strategic Command Force. The country's information minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed used the opportunity to attack Fernandes' comments as "the ravings of a crazy man". "We do not want war but if war is imposed on Pakistan, we have the will to give a crushing reply," he said.

The following day, the Indian military test fired its Agni-1 missile, which has a range of 800 kilometres and is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead to most areas of Pakistan. Fernandes pointedly attended the test which Indian officials declared to be "a textbook launch". Pakistani minister Ahmed condemned the exercise, saying: "This reflects India's obsession with war... We do not want to join the arms race."

To keep up the pressure on Pakistan, India carried out two further tests of smaller surface-to-air Akash missiles on January 18 and 21.

Tensions rapidly worsened as a dispute broke out over the treatment of diplomats. On January 20, India lodged a formal complaint that its acting ambassador to Islamabad had been harassed by Pakistani intelligence agents. Pakistan replied in kind with charges that its diplomats in India had been subject to harassment.

Tailing, intimidation and even physical beatings of each other's diplomats are not uncommon in either country. But on this occasion, both governments decided to make it an issue. On January 22, India expelled two senior Pakistani diplomats and two other officials for improper activities. The following day, Pakistan followed suit by ordering three Indian diplomats to leave for "behaviour unbecoming of a diplomat".

In an interview with the BBC last weekend, Fernandes berated

Pakistan for "talking about using dangerous weapons including the nukes". He went to say: "Well, I would reply by saying that if Pakistan has decided that it wants to get itself destroyed and erased from the world map, then it may take this step of madness." Pakistani military spokesman General Rashid Qureshi denounced the comments as "typical Indian irresponsibility".

If the consequences were not so serious, these antics would be absurd. But for most of last year, India and Pakistan had more than a million heavily armed soldiers backed by tanks, artillery, missiles, warplanes and nuclear weapons poised to strike at each other. Last October, under pressure from the major powers, the two countries pulled their troops back from the forward positions. Nothing, however, has been resolved.

On Tuesday, the two sides reported exchanges of mortar fire in Punch, a border district on the Line of Control that separates Indian- and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. No casualties were reported. On the same day, Pakistan claimed to have shot down an unmanned surveillance drone used by the Indian security forces to monitor the alleged movement of anti-Indian Kashmiri separatists into Jammu and Kashmir. India denied the claim.

Washington has appealed for calm, in part to prevent a crisis on the subcontinent from distracting from its plans to invade Iraq. At the Davos economic summit last weekend, US Secretary of State Colin Powell self-righteously declared that the US was prepared to extend a helping hand to both countries. He appealed to the two rivals to "take risks for peace on the subcontinent and work to normalise their relations."

But the Bush administration's actions, including the invasion of Afghanistan, have had a profoundly destabilising influence. Its rapidly developing political and military ties with New Delhi have only encouraged the Hindu chauvinists of the ruling Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) to adopt a more aggressive stance toward Pakistan.

Islamabad recently protested to Washington over plans to hold a joint US-Indian military exercise involving the latest fighter aircraft. The Pentagon is keen to practice dog-fighting techniques against the latest Russian SU-30 warplane. Pakistan, however, is concerned that the training will assist the Indian airforce to counter its American-built fighters.

Fueling the tensions is the deepening political and social crisis in both India and Pakistan. The stirring up of anti-Pakistan sentiment in India takes place as the BJP is campaigning for four state elections due to take place this month.

Last December, the party won the state poll in Gujarat, dramatically reversing a string of previous electoral defeats, by openly appealing to anti-Muslim chauvinism. The BJP and

associated Hindu extremist groups were central to the wave of communal violence that rocked the state earlier in the year and claimed hundreds of mainly Muslim lives. Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi seized on the opportunity to call early elections and whip up communal sentiment to divert from his government's failure to deal with the mounting social problems.

The BJP now faces elections in four states—Himachal Pradesh in the north and Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura in the northeast—on February 26. On the same day, there will be by-elections in seven constituencies, including two in the key state of Uttar Pradesh. Within the next few months, elections are also due in six major states in the lead up to national elections next year.

Sections of the BJP have concluded that the “Gujarat formula” is the means for boosting its electoral fortunes. Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani, a BJP hardliner, declared on January 20 that the party would “continue to adhere to its ideology on issues like the construction of the Ram temple”. He called on party leaders to defend this ideology with “pride”. The following day, he insisted that the BJP won Gujarat because “we were not apologetic about [the Hindu supremacist agenda of] Hindutva”.

Advani played a key role in inciting the Hindu chauvinist mob that razed the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, triggering communal rioting across the subcontinent. The provocative campaign by Hindu extremist groups to build a Hindu temple to the god Ram on the Ayodhya site was one of the BJP's key campaign planks when it came to power in 1998. The issue was only put on hold as part of a coalition agreement reached with other parties to form the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government.

Now the BJP is preparing to take a more overtly communal stand. Following the example set by Gujarat chief minister Modi, BJP leaders are stepping up their denunciations of Pakistan for its alleged support of “cross-border terrorism”. As the February elections approach, Prime Minister Vajpayee has accused Pakistan of becoming “a centre for terrorist activities”. Reinforcing the message, Advani declared on January 18: “Pakistan must abandon the use of terrorism as an instrument of policy. It must dismantle the structure of terrorism it has created within its own country.”

Pakistan's Musharraf is in no position to make concessions to India. Despite the rigidly controlled character of national elections last year, the military-backed Pakistani Muslim League Quaid e Azam (PML-Q) failed to win an outright majority and was forced to form a coalition with the Islamic fundamentalist alliance, Muttahida Majlis I Amal (MMA). The MMA, which significantly increased its vote by opposing the growing US presence in Pakistan, also secured power in two state assemblies.

As a result, Musharraf is treading a very fine line. Under pressure from Washington in 2001, he abruptly ended Pakistan's support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and allowed the US military to operate from bases inside Pakistan. He has bowed to demands from Washington to crack down on Islamic extremists, including those engaged in attacks inside India's Jammu and Kashmir.

The US is making further demands. Following a clash on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Pentagon is calling on Islamabad to allow its forces the right of “hot pursuit” of

suspected Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters fleeing into Pakistan. Washington is also backing India's demands. US Ambassador to Pakistan, Nancy Powell, recently declared that Islamabad must ensure there is no infiltration into Indian Kashmir and “end the use of Pakistan as a platform for terrorism”.

At the same time, Musharraf is compelled to appease the Islamic fundamentalists. Pakistani courts have recently released two prominent fundamentalist leaders—Maulana Masood Azhar, head of Jaish-e-Muhammad, and Hafiz Saeed Butt, the leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba. Both militia groups have previously claimed responsibility for attacks inside India.

The tense situation inside Pakistan will be compounded by a US war against Iraq. Already there have been significant anti-war protests. A series of demonstrations took place on January 18 in Rawalpindi near Islamabad, as well as Lahore and Karachi. Thousands also took part in protests on January 3. While the rallies organised by Islamic fundamentalists have been relatively small, there is broad opposition to any US attack on Iraq.

Musharraf is acutely aware of the tight corner he is in. In what amounted to a desperate appeal for support, he recently warned a meeting of businessmen and industrialists in Lahore that there was “an impending danger” that “Pakistan could become the target of Western forces after the Iraq crisis”. In that event, he said, “nobody will come to our rescue, not even the Islamic world”.

Like Vajpayee, Musharraf cannot afford to be seen as being “weak” in the face of the country's rival. Amid rising tensions between the two countries, the danger is that any incident can rapidly precipitate a fresh military crisis.



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