

India temporarily tones down its sabre rattling against Pakistan

K. Ratnayake
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After a series of menacing threats against Pakistan beginning in late March, the Indian government carried out what appeared to be an abrupt about-face in mid-April, extending an offer for talks to its counterparts in Islamabad.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee visited Srinagar, the summer capital of the disputed Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, on April 19-20. Speaking from behind bulletproof glass at a political rally, Vajpayee declared that he extended “the hand of friendship” to Pakistan. “Both internal and external problems [between India and Pakistan] should be settled through talks,” he said.

At a press conference the following day, the Indian premier immediately qualified his remarks. He said that Pakistan had to “stop cross-border terrorism, end infiltration and wind up terrorist training camps” before an agenda for negotiations could be decided. In effect, these are the same preconditions that New Delhi has insisted upon in the past: Pakistan has to crack down on armed militias that have been fighting Indian rule for the last decade.

Speaking in parliament last week, Vajpayee reiterated his stance. When these conditions have been fulfilled, he said, “talks can take place on all issues, including Jammu and Kashmir.” India awaits “Pakistan’s response,” he declared with a flourish, neglecting to mention that he had made no formal request to Islamabad for discussions.

Vajpayee’s tone, however, was in marked contrast to the belligerent statements from New Delhi following a brutal massacre of 24 Hindus in the remote Kashmiri village of Nadimarg on the night of March 23. Who carried out the attack is not clear. Although it could have been an armed Islamic fundamentalist group, some evidence points to the involvement of Hindu extremists and the armed forces.

However, leaders of the ruling Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) seized upon the tragedy to intensify pressure on Pakistan. Indian Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani, a hardline Hindu chauvinist, immediately blamed Pakistan for the Nadimarg massacre, provocatively declaring that India’s “neighbour has a hand” in “every single terrorist act in Kashmir or elsewhere in the country.”

Having just launched its invasion of Iraq, Washington was concerned at the prospect of a second crisis on the Indian subcontinent. Meeting at Camp David on March 27, Bush and Blair issued a statement calling for “an immediate cease-fire,” demanded that Pakistan “stop cross-border infiltration” and called on India and Pakistan to begin a dialogue to settle the Kashmir dispute.

In a press interview on April 2, India’s Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha responded by rejecting talks with Pakistan and raising tensions even further. In a swipe at Washington, he belligerently declared: “We derive satisfaction ... because I think all those people in the international community ... realise that India has a much better case to go for pre-emptive action against Pakistan than the US has in Iraq.” He repeated his comments in the upper house of the Indian parliament on April 9.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell told Pakistani television on April 11 that he did not see any “parallel between the two situations (Iraq and Pakistan)”. “We do have a difficult and dangerous situation across the Line of Control [dividing Pakistan and Indian Kashmir],” he said. “But we don’t believe there is any need now for any military action of any kind.” Powell then stressed that the US, and Bush personally, would “stay engaged” in the situation.

While Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes supported Sinha’s remarks at a meeting of ex-soldiers in Jodhpur, Rajasthan several hours later, it appears that Powell’s pledge of continuing US engagement was what the Indian government had wanted to hear. Having firmly allied itself with Washington and backed the Bush administration’s “global war on terrorism,” Sinha’s comments reflected resentment in New Delhi that the US had not more firmly backed India against Pakistan.

Following Powell’s comments, the Bush administration announced a high level visit to the subcontinent by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, which will begin next week. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told the press that Armitage would take up “plenty of bilateral

issues” in India and Pakistan, including “looking for more steps ... to ease the tensions and ... towards a dialogue between the two.”

A spate of other visits has also been announced. Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca will go to South Asia at the end of May. The top Indian and US national security advisers—Brajesh Mishra and Condoleezza Rice—will meet on May 6. Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani will travel to Washington in June. The Indian Ambassador to Washington, Latif Mansingh and business leaders are also approaching the White House seeking reconstruction contracts in Iraq.

At the same time, Washington has begun to increase its pressure on Pakistan to crack down on armed Islamic extremists and any infiltration into Jammu and Kashmir.

Richard Haass, US State Department Director of Policy Planning, admitted on Indian television on April 18 that the US had “not succeeded” in making Pakistan “stop infiltrations during the past year as promised.” He warned Islamabad that its relationship with the US “will never be able to improve beyond a certain point unless ... [it] deals effectively and does everything in its power to stop all infiltration across the Line of Control.”

Last week CIA director George Tenet told the Senate Intelligence Committee that “Pakistan continues to support groups that resist India’s presence in Kashmir in an effort to bring India to the negotiating table.” Powell underscored the point in a telephone call to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, demanding that his administration stop continued “terrorism” in Kashmir.

In the diplomatic code that surrounds the protracted dispute over Kashmir, Powell’s comments represent support for New Delhi. Islamabad has always insisted that Kashmir, with its Muslim majority, should be part of Pakistan and has hailed anti-Indian militia in Jammu and Kashmir as “freedom fighters”. Powell’s remarks will only intensify the crisis for Musharraf, who is already facing heavy criticism from Islamic extremist groups for his support for the US invasion of Afghanistan and the presence of FBI and CIA personnel in Pakistan.

For India’s part, the US had provided the necessary reassurances. Vajpayee’s speech in Srinagar was part of a general toning down of his government’s belligerent rhetoric. Foreign Minister Sinha rapidly changed his stance in a statement to parliament on April 23, explaining that “sustained hostility cannot and should not be the basis” of India’s foreign policy. “This compulsive hostility towards the US is baggage that should be left behind,” he declared, adding that his comments about preemptive strikes on Pakistan had been “torn out of context”.

Washington’s willingness to appease Indian sensibilities is an indication of just how central the country has become to

US strategy. Closer military and economic ties between the US and India began under Clinton, but have accelerated under the Bush administration, which regards the country as a key link in its plans to dominate the Middle East and Central Asia and as a potential ally in any conflict with China.

Assistant Secretary of State Rocca underscored the point in comments to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March: “We will continue to transform our relationship with India, a rising global power.... We are deepening our partnership and are providing assistance on issues ranging from regional stability, non-proliferation and combating terrorism, to science and technology, economic reform, human rights and global issues.”

As far as any Pakistan-Indian talks are concerned, they are still up in the air. Pakistan’s Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali welcomed Vajpayee’s statement in Srinagar but pointed out that India had made no fundamental shift on its preconditions for talks. Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry announced on April 21 that the country was ready for dialogue “without preconditions”. This week Jamali phoned and spoke to Vajpayee, but no talks or even preparations for talks have been announced.

Tensions between the two countries remain high. Inside Jammu and Kashmir, fighting between the Indian security forces and separatist militias has continued and intensified. In the week after Vajpayee’s speech, 77 people were killed. Neither government can afford to make political concessions, as both rely on whipping up communal hostility to bolster their support. In such conditions, threats of “preemptive strikes” can rapidly escalate out of control.

Far from resolving the conflict, the Bush administration’s support for New Delhi adds a further destabilising factor into an already volatile situation. It can only embolden the Hindu chauvinists in the ruling BJP in their ambitions for greater Indian influence in the region and heighten the dangers of a clash between the two nuclear-armed powers.



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