

Washington presses India to send troops to Iraq

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India is under pressure from the Bush administration to make a substantial commitment of troops to assist in shoring up the US occupation of Iraq. As US troops come under hostile fire, Washington is eager for other countries to join the so-called stabilisation force in Iraq, both to bear the burden of suppressing the growing resistance and to provide a veneer of international support.

The US has requested that India send a full army brigade of more than 17,000 troops to take on the responsibility of administering the northern sector of Iraq—an area of sharp tensions between ethnic Kurds and Arabs. If New Delhi agrees, the Indian force will be larger than the present British contingent and second only to the US military force itself.

President Bush and top US officials first made the proposal in early May when India's National Security Advisor, Brajesh Mishra, visited Washington. The issue was subsequently discussed in the Cabinet Security Committee (CCS) twice in May but no decision was taken. Instead New Delhi sought further clarification about its proposed role in Iraq and the command structure under which its troops would operate.

The Indian government's reluctance to immediately agree did not stem from any opposition in principle to backing the US colonial-style occupation of Iraq. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has been seeking to cement a close political and strategic relationship with Bush administration ever since it came to office. The ruling Hindu chauvinist Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) openly supported Bush's "global war on terrorism" and the US military intervention in Afghanistan.

But the naked colonial character of the US plans to invade Iraq and seize control of the country and its oil generated widespread opposition in India. Even Vajpayee was compelled to make muted criticisms,

declaring that "the military action lacks justification". His statements carefully avoided any direct reference to the US but expressed "grave concern" at the lack of agreement in the UN Security Council.

Vajpayee's ability to drop his criticisms and consider sending troops to Iraq stems in large measure from the decision of France, Germany and Russia to make their own unprincipled peace with Washington. All three supported the UN Security Council resolution approving the US-led occupation of Iraq, which has provided the necessary political figleaf for India to consider the US request for troops.

The proposal gathered momentum when Indian Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani visited Washington in early June. Advani had wanted to consolidate US support for India's stance on Kashmir and seek US assistance in putting pressure on Pakistan. But as Advani conceded in his comments to the press, it was "the issue of Indian troops for Iraq [that] dominated talks"—in other words, Washington's agenda.

The Bush administration spared no effort to convince Advani to commit Indian troops. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld pushed him on the issue, as did President Bush when he met with Advani on June 9 for 30 minutes. After Advani indicated that the Indian government wanted further clarification, Bush immediately proposed sending a Pentagon team to New Delhi to answer any questions.

As a political pay-off, Bush promised to press Pakistani president General Pervez Musharraf to put a halt to "cross-border terrorism" into Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir. India routinely accuses Pakistan of aiding armed Islamic groups opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir—a charge that Islamabad denies. Bush also told Advani that he "feels" that India should get a

permanent seat in the UN Security Council—a longstanding ambition of the Indian ruling elites.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair reinforced the US push for Indian troops when Advani stopped in London on his way back to India. Washington also boosted the stature of the Pentagon team sent to New Delhi on June 16 by sending Assistant Secretary of Defence Peter Rodham to provide the necessary “clarifications”.

At the same time, US Ambassador Robert Blackwill has been waging a concerned campaign. In an interview in the *Hindu*, he held out the prospect that India would play “a major role” and serve on the “inner board of directors” managing security in Iraq. He dismissed suggestions that Indian troops would be bogged down in the conflict, saying they would not be used for combat operations.

But the Pentagon team has come and gone and still no decision has been made. According to the latest reports, nothing will be decided before Vajpayee returns from his current trip to China. Indian officials have raised further objections: the need for a joint military command and a firm timetable for the formation of an Iraqi government. “New Delhi has adopted a go-slow approach,” the *New York Times* commented.

Why then is the Vajpayee government dragging its feet and risking a negative reaction from Washington? When in Washington, Advani attempted to blame the opposition parties, declaring on an Indian TV station: “The opposition, without facts, gave their one-sided opinion that sending troops to Iraq is wrong.”

The Indian government’s real concern is not the opposition parties. Their criticism of the US war on Iraq was as muted as that of the government. The Congress Party along with the two Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)—only presented a resolution opposing the war in parliament on April 9—that is two days before Bush announced that the campaign was over.

Likewise, Congress has no major opposition to committing Indian troops to the US-led occupation of Iraq. Indeed Congress leader Sonia Gandhi and top party leaders met Vajpayee on June 15 to offer suggestions as to how to better disguise the plan. They indicated that the troops should somehow be sent under UN auspices, and that efforts should be made to assess what people in Iraq and neighbouring countries think.

Neither has Vajpayee encountered any significant opposition from within his ruling coalition. He met with National Democratic Alliance (NDA) leaders on June 21 and while reservations were expressed, all finally agreed to leave the decision in the hands of the prime minister. The Hindu extremist Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which is closely tied to the BJP, objected to the proposal, but only on the grounds that India should first extract greater support from Washington over Kashmir.

Sections of big business support India’s involvement in Iraq as a means of securing lucrative reconstruction contracts, gaining access to Middle East oil and giving India a bigger role on the world stage. C. Raja Mohan, a columnist for the *Hindu*, declared earlier this month: “An India that would take military responsibility to administer an entire section in Iraq, will signal to the world that New Delhi has finally broken out of the traditionally limiting political confines of the subcontinent.”

The Indian government’s real concern is that Indian troops will become bogged down in a brutal neo-colonial occupation that has the potential to generate widespread anti-government opposition. Anti-US protests in Iraq are certain to resonate with broad layers of the population across the subcontinent that recall the bitter struggle against British colonial rule. There was a long history of Britain using Indian troops to carry out its dirty work in India and elsewhere around the globe.

Two former prime ministers, V.P. Singh and Indar Gujral, hinted at the political dangers when they wrote in a letter opposing the deployment: “We believe that irreparable damage will be done to India’s reputation and good name if Indian troops were sent to prop up the occupation of Iraq.”

While Vajpayee is certainly aware of the risks, there is little doubt that he will acquiesce in the end to Washington’s demands: the central strategic orientation of his government has been to construct a close alliance with the US.



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