

# Behind the India-Pakistan ceasefire

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Recent weeks have seen a flurry of initiatives aimed at easing tensions between India and Pakistan, nuclear powers that in 2002 came to the brink of all-out war.

On Nov. 26, Indian and Pakistani armed forces ended 14 years of virtually daily artillery exchanges, when they began a “general” ceasefire—a ceasefire that covers the international border between India and Pakistan and the Line of Control (LOC) and Siachen Glacier in the disputed Kashmir region. Subsequently, India and Pakistan agreed to resume air and rail links, broken off by India in December 2001, and to various other “confidence-building” measures, including joint army patrols of the international border.

The ceasefire and other steps have been welcomed by all the great powers, including the European Union, Russia, China and Japan. The Bush administration, which has embraced Pakistan’s military regime as a key ally in its “war on terrorism” and has identified India as a potential strategic partner of the US, is a moving force behind the Indian-Pakistani rapprochement. Yet thus far, Washington has found it politic to downplay its role. US officials will only admit to encouraging the two sides to talk, although it is evident that the Bush administration is using the US’s growing economic and military leverage in Central and South Asia to prod the two sides to the negotiating table.

Much stock is now being placed on the interaction between top Indian and Pakistani leaders that is to occur at the summit of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Conference (SAARC), which will be held in Islamabad for three days beginning January 4.

Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who only confirmed his participation in the SAARC meeting earlier this month, will hold bilateral talks with Pakistani prime minister Zafarullah Jamali and possibly also with General Pervez Musharraf. The head of Pakistan’s armed forces, Musharraf seized power in a 1999 coup and later made himself the country’s president.

Vajpayee, however, has played down the significance of the encounters he will have with Pakistan’s leaders during the SAARC summit. On December 25, he reaffirmed the position India has held since December 2001, when New Delhi ruptured normal relations with Pakistan claiming that it was responsible for a terrorist attack on India’s Parliament: India will not hold substantive negotiations with Pakistan until the latter renounces “cross-border terrorism” and dismantles bases in the Pakistan-held part of Kashmir used by anti-Indian insurgents.

Vajpayee’s statement and India’s caginess about whether he will meet with Musharraf underscore the tenuous character of the warming in Indo-Pakistani relations.

Even in their respective proposals for normalizing relations there has been an element of one-upmanship, with India and Pakistan jockeying for Washington’s favor by portraying itself as the more eager for a relaxation of tensions. Just days after Vajpayee had mused about the possibility of a South Asia with open borders and a common currency, Musharraf gave an interview in which he said Pakistan is willing to be flexible on its decades-old demand for the implementation of UN resolutions on Kashmir that would allow for its accession to Pakistan through a plebiscite.

More significantly, Pakistan has taken strong exception to India’s

construction of a fence that follows the LOC, although several miles back from the demarcation line between Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir. India began construction of the fence long ago, but prior to the ceasefire, work on it had been next to impossible due to artillery exchanges.

There is strong popular support in both India and Pakistan for a de-escalation of tensions—a fact even Vajpayee had to concede when a few months ago he declared that the “peace camp” in India is much larger than that favoring the perpetuation of enmity with Pakistan. Yet, any Indo-Pakistani rapprochement will invariably encounter strong opposition from powerful sections of the countries’ elites, especially if and when the Kashmir question is broached.

Since the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent, both the Indian and Pakistani bourgeoisies have made the conflict against the rival state central to their ruling ideologies. Pakistan’s elite, above all its politically powerful military-security establishment, has made the “liberation” of Jammu and Kashmir, India’s only Muslim-majority state, a national if not a holy cause. Indian rulers, meanwhile, have blamed the Pakistani “foreign hand” for any number of domestic problems and made it a touchstone of government policy that any questioning of the borders laid down in 1947 would be an intolerable threat to the unity of multinational India.

The current ruling regimes in both India and Pakistan are themselves both strongly identified with extreme chauvinism and militarism, meaning that should they pursue rapprochement they will come into headlong conflict with important parts of their traditional constituencies.

The dominant force in India’s ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition is the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP and its predecessor, the Jana Sangh, have always opposed even the limited autonomy granted the state of Jammu and Kashmir under India’s constitution, frequently attacked their political opponents for being “soft” on Pakistan, and repeatedly accused India’s large Muslim minority of being disloyal and pro-Pakistani. Shortly after coming to power in 1998, the BJP proclaimed India a nuclear power, defying international condemnation to stage nuclear tests, and embarked on a massive and still continuing buildup of India’s armed forces. The BJP-led NDA won re-election in 1999, by portraying the withdrawal of Pakistani forces from the Kargil region of Kashmir after a half-year long incursion as a major military and geo-political victory that India won thanks to its sagacious leadership.

Mimicking the Bush administration’s response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack, the BJP-led government seized on the December 2001 terrorist attack on India’s parliament to mount a 10-month-long mobilization of India’s armed forces along the Pakistani border, demanding that Pakistan in effect admit to being a terrorist-sponsoring state or face invasion.

Musharraf, meanwhile, owes his rule to the military-security forces, the section of the Pakistani elite most associated with anti-Indian chauvinism and the patronage of Islamic fundamentalism. Musharraf was the mastermind of Pakistan’s 1999 Kargil incursion. His belief that Nawaz Sharif caved into US pressure and prematurely ended the Kargil operation was a major factor in his decision to oust the Pakistani prime minister and

seize the reins of government. While under intense US pressure, Musharraf was forced to withdraw Pakistani patronage of the Taliban regime and has announced repeated crackdowns on armed Islamic groups in Pakistan. He recently signed a political pact with the parliamentary Islamic opposition, the Muthadia Majlis-I-Amal or United Action Front. During the 2001-02 war crisis, Musharraf was more than ready to brandish the threat of Pakistan resorting to nuclear weapons to repel an Indian attack.

That said, the ceasefire—the first in 14 years—has thus far held, and talks on increased economic ties including a natural gas pipeline linking Iran and India via Pakistan are said to be advancing. Musharraf is clearly courting personal danger in taking steps, such as the ceasefire, that strengthen India in its battle with the Kashmir insurgents, yet thus far he has persisted with the rapprochement.

A number of factors account for the ceasefire and the prospect of hard-bargaining between India's and Pakistan's elites over their inter-state relations, but Washington clearly has played a pivotal role.

During the Cold War, Washington was closely allied with Pakistan. But over the past decade it has increasingly come to identify India as a state with which it wants to partner in the twenty-first century. According to a recent report issued by a task force on South Asia that was co-sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, a highly influential Washington think tank, and staffed with several former US ambassadors to India and Pakistan, "The turnaround in US-India relations has been remarkable when viewed against the background of the previous half century of estrangement. If New Delhi and Washington continue to broaden and deepen official and non-official ties, the prospects are good that by 2010 the world's two largest democracies will succeed in consolidating a genuine partnership."

Washington's new tilt toward India was manifest in the 1999 Kargil dispute, when US president Bill Clinton personally intervened to press Sharif to order a unilateral withdrawal of Pakistani and Pakistani-supported forces. Yet there are definite limits to the US's willingness to support Indian belligerence against Pakistan. If India ultimately failed to act on its war threats in 2001-02, it was largely because the US and its allies made clear that an invasion of Pakistan that risked triggering a nuclear exchange and that at the very least would jeopardize the US occupation of Afghanistan would be viewed by the US as inimical to its interests.

Pakistan—US dissatisfaction over the vigor of its crackdown on Islamic extremists notwithstanding—remains critical to the US's campaign against Al-Qaeda, the US occupation of Afghanistan and more generally the expansion of US influence in the oil-rich Central Asian region. Moreover, in respect to the Indo-Pakistani conflict, Washington is sufficiently at a distance to recognize, unlike many in the Hindu chauvinist BJP, that India's unrelenting military pressure could help cause Pakistan—a country riven by numerous ethnic-religious conflicts and hobbled by foreign debt—to implode, spreading instability across Central, West and South Asia.

According to the previously cited task force on South Asia, "The United States has a major stake in a stable Pakistan at peace with itself and its neighbors..." However, aid to Pakistan, the task force argues, should be pegged to Islamabad's progress in implementing IMF-dictated privatization plans and public spending cuts and in "barring the use of its territory to sustain insurgencies against its neighbors and fulfilling [nuclear] non-proliferation responsibilities."

In the past, the US largely ignored the Indo-Pakistani conflict. Indeed, insofar as it helped bind Pakistan to the US, Washington had a Cold War interest in perpetuating it. Now Washington has switched gears. It deems it important to US strategic interests to bring the Pakistani-supported insurgency in Kashmir to an end and to find a long-term solution to the Indo-Pakistani conflict, including their competing claims in Kashmir, and

this for several reasons. Washington believes that Kashmir has become a cause and recruiting ground for anti-American Islamic extremists. Secondly and more fundamentally, the Indo-Pakistani conflict cuts across the US's ambitions for the region.

US big business has identified India as a crucial area for future expansion. Now that India has abandoned virtually all its restrictions on foreign capital, US transnationals are eager to gain access to its consumer market and natural resources, and above all to tap into its vast supply of cheap labor, both unskilled and university-trained. Over the past decade, the US has emerged as far and away India's largest trading partner, and much of that trade is in so-called information services, which includes everything from call-centers to the writing of computer software.

No less significantly, US strategists have identified India as a crucial economic and military counterweight to China. Not only is India commensurate in size to China, it shares a border with it—including in the strategically situated Kashmir region—and China and India have a decades-long border dispute, which in 1962 erupted in war. Already, the US has established significant military ties with India, including the regular staging of joint naval and army exercises.

Threatened by a bellicose India, its two decades-long Afghanistan policy in ruins, and with about half of its state budget devoted to military spending and debt-servicing, Pakistan is extremely vulnerable to US pressure. But US pressure alone does not account for Musharraf's newfound conciliatory attitude toward India. There are signs that the Islamic fundamentalist leadership Islamabad helped foist on the Kashmir insurgency has caused it to lose a fair measure of popular support. Islamic fundamentalist terrorism has also exacerbated religious and national-ethnic strife within Pakistan. Thus, increasing sections of the Pakistani elite are questioning the viability and wisdom of open-ended support to the Kashmir insurgency.

Last but not least, the gap between the sizes of India's and Pakistan's economies continues to grow, making the task of trying to match India's military build-up ever-more burdensome.

Musharraf would appear to have concluded that given Pakistan's weakness, the wisest course is to accommodate Washington in its desire for a defusing of tensions with India. By so doing, not only does he ensure the Bush administration's continued support, but he can explore the prospects of cutting a bargain with New Delhi before the power gap between the two states widens and under conditions where the US still deems Pakistan vital to the "war on terrorism."

Traditionally, Pakistan has held that all of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, as a territory with a Muslim-majority population, rightfully belongs to Pakistan. But by saying Pakistan would be willing to accept something less than stipulated in the UN resolutions, he is raising the possibility of alternate solutions, including one said to be favored by Islamabad that would see Kashmir partitioned on communal lines, with the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley ceded to Pakistan, while most of the Jammu region is assigned to India. There is no reason, however, to believe the Indian elite will accept such a "compromise." It continues to lay claim to the Pakistani-province of Azad Kashmir, although it has signalled in the past that it might be willing to settle for the current LOC being made into an international border.

The Indian government's December 2001 war mobilization—Operation Parakam—is now widely viewed in Indian political and state security circles as a failure. A vocal minority of military leaders and strategists attack the NDA government for losing its nerve and not making good on its war threats. But most see the 10-month, million-man war mobilization to have been a colossal waste of money and resources, which ultimately only served to underline that the relationship of forces between Indian and Pakistan is such that India cannot bully and threaten Islamabad the way the Bush administration has done with states it has declared to be sponsoring terrorism.

In the wake of Operation Parakam, the NDA government has taken steps to acquire a host of new weapons systems, thus indicating its aim is to seek military-strategic superiority, with at least the hope that an arms race will further weaken Pakistan.

But given the failure of its preferred strategy of military confrontation, at least in the short-term, the NDA government has been forced to explore other options, including possible negotiations with Kashmiri separatists. Whilst historically New Delhi has been dead set against any outside intervention in the Kashmir conflict, the *Times of India* and other establishment voices have suggested, given Washington's eagerness for a strategic partnership with India, that it would be wise to accept US offers of assistance in bringing Pakistan to the bargaining table and even de facto US mediation.

Not least among those pressing for such a change of course is Indian big business. While the Indian bourgeoisie's newfound confidence in its prospects are no doubt overblown—India's share of world trade remains less than 1 percent, and its growth rates continue to trail far behind those of China—its emergence as a global player and the experience of a free trade agreement with Sri Lanka have led Indian capital to conclude that through increased trade ties it will be able to anchor its dominant role across South Asia. Indian economic dominance would complement New Delhi's quest for winning for India the status of regional super-power through the development of its military might.

Last September—long before the current ceasefire—the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) established an "India-Pakistan CEO's Forum" to promote freer trade between the two countries, and the CII is working to breathe life into the objective of creating a South Asian trade zone by 2006. At the same time, India has sought to place further pressure on Islamabad, by threatening to pursue bilateral trade deals with the other SAARC members, should Pakistan balk at reviving SAARC's proposals for a subcontinental trade bloc.

Thus, behind the talk of reconciliation and peace, all three major players in the Indo-Pakistan rapprochement—Washington, Islamabad and New Delhi—are pursuing their predatory national interests.

The 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent was one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century—a tragedy that resulted in the deaths of 2 million people, rendered 14 million homeless and has led to a decades-long rivalry that has caused three wars and now threatens South Asia with nuclear conflagration. British imperialism, with its strategy of divide and rule, bears great responsibility for inciting communal animosity in South Asia. But the partition was proposed and implemented by the Indian National Congress and Muslim League leaders—the political representatives of the South Asian bourgeoisie—who combined to abort the anti-imperialist struggle. Six decades later, a genuine and progressive solution to the problems posed by the sharing of the resources of the subcontinent by its myriad national-ethnic and religious groups will only be forged through a common struggle against imperialism and the rival national bourgeoisies, a struggle led by the working class and with the aim of establishing a Socialist United States of South Asia.



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