

Tense India-Pakistan standoff continues

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The Bush administration is exerting intense pressure on Pakistan to take action against Islamist groups allegedly responsible for last month's terrorist attacks on Mumbai. Rather than easing tensions between Pakistan and India, Washington's backing for New Delhi threatens to further destabilise Pakistan and trigger an escalating confrontation between the regional rivals.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who flew to New Delhi then Islamabad last week, told ABC News yesterday that Pakistan had to follow through on commitments to "root out terrorism and terrorists". She said she had dismissed the argument that "non-state actors" carried out the Mumbai attacks as "not acceptable," telling Pakistani officials it was "still your responsibility".

Rice emphasised that "this is a time when Pakistan must act. They must act in concert with India, with the United States". Asked whether India had the right to take military action, she said she understood the anger and frustration in India, adding: "But in this case, there are actions India could take that would make the situation worse. And we don't need a crisis in South Asia."

An article in the Pakistan-based *Dawn* on Saturday stated that Rice had threatened Pakistan with international reprisals if it failed to take action. During a meeting that included the Pakistani prime minister, president and army chief, the US secretary of state reportedly "pushed the Pakistani leaders to take care of the perpetrators, otherwise the US will act". She stressed the "urgency in getting to the bottom of it" and the need for an "effective and focused" response.

In a report later denied by US and Pakistani officials, the *Washington Post* cited a high-ranking Pakistani official saying that Islamabad had agreed to a 48-hour deadline demanded by India and the US to formulate a

plan to take action against the Kashmiri separatist outfit, Lashkar-e-Taiba, accused of carrying out the Mumbai attacks. The official said that Rice had also insisted on the arrest of at least three Pakistanis allegedly linked to the assaults.

Washington is clearly using the threat of Indian military action as well as unspecified American punitive actions to force the Pakistani government to bow US and Indian demands. For its part, India is exploiting the Mumbai atrocity to press for action against armed Islamist and Kashmiri separatist groups operating from camps inside Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. For the past two decades, the Indian military has waged a ruthless and often brutal counterinsurgency war against Kashmiri militants opposed to India's presence in Kashmir.

As for the US, it certainly wants to avoid "a crisis" involving two nuclear-armed powers that would in any way threaten its economic and strategic interests in the region and, in particular, undermine efforts to stabilise its occupation of Afghanistan. Rice no doubt took the opportunity to insist that the Pakistani military step up its operations against anti-US insurgents operating along the border with Afghanistan. The US wants to avoid the diversion of Pakistani troops from the Afghan to the Indian border in response to a military threat from India.

Just how tense relations are between New Delhi and Islamabad was underscored by reports last weekend that the Pakistani air force was placed on the highest state of alert for 24 hours following a threatening phone call to Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari on November 28. The *Dawn* newspaper reported on Saturday that the call from someone purporting to be Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee provoked crisis meetings in Islamabad and a threat to shift troops to the Indian border.

The phone conversation, which has since been acknowledged by both sides as a hoax, has itself provoked

a barrage of accusations and counter-accusations. Mukherjee has denied making the call and dismissed Pakistani claims that it was made from the Indian external affairs ministry. Indian officials have accused Pakistani military intelligence—the Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI)—of making the call to divert attention from the Mumbai attacks. It is not clear who made the phone call, but the involvement of hard-line elements of the state apparatus—in India or Pakistan—intent on provoking military conflict cannot be excluded.

The danger of clashes between India and Pakistan is far from over. The Indian government, which faces national elections next year, is under pressure from the Hindu extremist parties and groups to retaliate against Pakistan. Indian officials claim to have identified the Lashkar-e-Taiba operatives that planned the Mumbai attacks and to have proof of the ISI's involvement. New Delhi has already frozen talks with Islamabad and has not ruled out military strikes against "terrorist training camps".

The Pakistani-based *Daily Times* reported yesterday on the comments of US Senator John McCain, a member of a Senate delegation that met with Pakistani leaders on Friday. McCain, who had just been in New Delhi, told the newspaper that if Pakistan did not act, and act fast, India would conduct air attacks inside Pakistan, "The democratic government of India is under pressure and it will be a matter of days after they have given evidence to Pakistan to use the option of force if Islamabad fails to act against the terrorists," he said.

An article on the *Asia Times* web site on Saturday cited a senior official in India's Home Ministry as saying that a decision had been made at the highest levels that India would be directly involved in "annihilating" some of the terrorist infrastructure and personnel based in Pakistan. The official referred to covert strikes using elite units backed by intelligence agencies in a bid to prevent Pakistani retaliation and all-out war. Operations would be extensive, covering not only Pakistani-controlled Kashmir but border areas in the province of Punjab as well as surveillance of Pakistan's coastal belt.

What will happen next is not clear. When asked how the US would react to Indian strikes on Pakistan, McCain told the *Daily Times* that Washington would not be able to do much. Referring to the US invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11 attacks, he said: "We cannot

tell India not to act when that is what we did." While McCain does not speak for the Bush administration, he undoubtedly echoes the sentiments in the White House, which in turn are only encouraging India to take a more bellicose stance.

After an attack by Kashmiri separatists on the Indian parliament building in December 2001, India moved up to half a million heavily-armed troops to the border with Pakistan, bringing the subcontinent to the brink of a fourth Indo-Pakistan war since 1947. An article in yesterday's *Hindu* noted that an obvious and expensive build-up was no longer necessary for Indian forces to mobilise. In the wake of the 2001-2002 confrontation, the Indian military adopted a new doctrine of "Cold Start" to react far more rapidly without warning.

US pressure on Pakistan could easily backfire. There is already widespread hostility and anger among Pakistanis over the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, now compounded by repeated US strikes inside Pakistan's tribal border areas. After decades of tensions with India, many Pakistanis are deeply suspicious about the barrage of Indian allegations over the Mumbai bombings. Forcing the Pakistani government to bow to Indian and US demands will only further undermine its fragile base of support and threaten a political crisis.

For more than 60 years since independence, the political establishments in India and Pakistan have repeatedly resorted to communalism and militarism to divert attention from their inability to resolve the profound social and economic problems confronting the vast majority of the population. Amid the current global economic crisis, the governments in both countries are exploiting the tense situation in the wake of the Mumbai terrorist attacks for the same purposes. Far from easing tensions, the intervention of Washington only heightens the danger of military conflict.



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