

# Amid rising tensions, Pakistan moves troops to Indian border

K. Ratnayake  
29 December 2008

Tensions between India and Pakistan intensified last Friday after the Pakistani military began shifting troops from its western border with Afghanistan to bolster positions along the border with India. While both countries are playing down the danger of war, neither government has indicated any willingness to compromise or has ruled out the possibility of military action.

New Delhi has continued to pressure Islamabad to act against Islamist organisations based in Pakistan that were allegedly responsible for last month's terrorist atrocity in Mumbai, which resulted in more than 170 deaths. Earlier this month, Pakistani authorities detained several leaders of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and cracked down on the Islamist charity Jamaat-ud-Dawa.

Amid continuing calls in the press and from opposition parties for strikes on "terrorist training camps" inside Pakistan, the Indian government has repeatedly affirmed that all options—that is, including the military one—are open.

Details of the Pakistani troop redeployment are limited. Associated Press reported that up to 20,000 troops may have been pulled out of the Afghanistan border areas, but an unnamed Pakistani official told the *Washington Post* that no more than 5,000 troops were involved. "We are taking the minimum required steps for our security in the face of Indian troops' escalation at the border," he said.

The *New York Times* reported Pakistani officials as saying the "redeployment was partly a response to new intelligence that suggested India could launch an attack inside Pakistan by early next week". One official told the newspaper that the Pakistani air force had been on the highest state of alert to defend specific defence

installations and cities. Pilots were sleeping in uniform with their boots on, he claimed.

President Asif Ali Zardari told a gathering to mark the first anniversary of the assassination of his wife Benazir Bhutto that Pakistan wanted dialogue, not war. He blamed "non-state actors" for terrorist attacks inside both countries. At the same time, however, Islamabad insists that it will not tolerate any Indian strike on its territory. "We will be compelled to respond if it happens," Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi told the state news agency.

India's External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee declared on Saturday that it was unfortunate that a "sort of war hysteria" was being created in Pakistan. "Instead of diverting from the real issue, they should concentrate on how to fight against terrorism and bring to book the perpetrators of the Mumbai attack," he said. Over the past week, however, the Indian government has been ratchetting up the pressure on Pakistan.

Last Monday, the Indian foreign ministry handed over a letter written by Ajmal Kasab, the only surviving Mumbai attacker, requesting Pakistan's legal help. The move was designed to prove that Kasab was a Pakistani national and legitimise Indian demands for a broader crackdown on Pakistani Islamist organisations. To date, Islamabad has denied that any evidence existed that Kasab was a Pakistani citizen.

Instructing Indian diplomats on the same day, Mukherjee declared: "If there will be any military conflict, nobody declares it in media. We have kept all our options open... [W]e are not closing any options, because our people have died."

Last Friday, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met with the heads of the Indian defence forces to review the situation. The *Times of India* reported on Saturday that India's 2nd Corps and 10th Corps were being moved into the Punjab. Indian military spokesman Sitanshu Kar insisted that the movements were not in response to the Pakistani build-up, but were routine annual exercises. However, in the current political standoff, any troop movements will inevitably add to suspicions and increase tensions.

Also on Saturday, the *Guardian* reported Air Marshal P.K. Barbora, chief of India's western air command, as saying that the air force had identified 5,000 "terrorist" targets inside Pakistani territory. Diplomacy should be given a chance, he said, but if that failed, "war is the last resort".

The US, Britain, Iran and China have publicly called for an easing of tensions between the two nuclear-armed powers. India and Pakistan have already fought three wars since independence in 1947, and came to the brink of a fourth war in 2001-02 after an armed attack on the Indian parliament building in New Delhi.

White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe called on Friday for both sides to avoid steps that would unnecessarily raise tensions. As well as wanting to avert a conflict between two of its allies, the US is demanding that Pakistan intensify military operations against anti-US insurgents operating from bases inside Pakistan. At the same time, Washington is pressing Islamabad to accede to India's demands for tougher action against Islamist groups.

India and Pakistan, however, are confronting a worsening economic crisis and mounting social discontent. The ruling elites in both countries have habitually played the communal card and rattled the sabre at each other as a means of diverting attention from the failure of their own policies at home.

Last week the Indian government announced that gross domestic product growth had slowed to 7 percent, down from 9 percent over the previous three years. A government survey report noted that companies had laid off 65,500 workers during the three months from August to October alone. In rural areas, the economic devastation is reflected in continuing high levels of suicide among

farmers—16,662 last year.

The Congress-led government has responded to the Mumbai terrorist attack by implementing draconian new anti-terror laws and intensifying the pressure on Pakistan. With national elections due next year, Prime Minister Singh is seeking to fend off any potential criticism from the Hindu supremacist Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP). While the BJP backed the government's moves against Pakistan last week, it again demanded that India send a "strong message" to Islamabad—a barely veiled call for military action.

Pakistan is in worse economic shape than India. The government was recently forced to seek an IMF loan to head off a potential default. The IMF's austerity measures will only heighten an already profound social crisis affecting millions.

Pakistani President Zardari is increasingly in a corner. Dependent on Washington politically and economically, he has acceded to US pressure for military action in the border areas with Afghanistan. As a result, Zardari is desperate to deflect criticism that he is an American stooge by not immediately bowing to demands from rival India for a tougher crack down on Islamist groups.

At this stage, the two countries are still proclaiming their peaceful intentions. But as the tensions continue to mount, any incident—another terrorist attack inside India, a border clash or an Indian air strike inside Pakistan—has the potential to trigger a rapid escalation toward war.



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