

India, Pakistan Are Heading Toward War

by Ramtanu Maitra

A spurt in cross-border terrorism across the Line of Control (LoC) in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir has brought India and Pakistan within a hairbreadth of war. New Delhi seems no longer willing to trust Washington's expressed views that Pakistan, its coalition ally in its war against terrorism, will make sincere efforts to stop infiltration of terrorists into India. New Delhi's views have been hardened by high-profile terrorist attacks in mid-May inside the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir.

From available reports, it is evident that both sides are preparing for a war which, if not stopped, might begin this Fall. Heavy troop movements have been observed on both sides. Pakistan has deployed its short-range "Shaheen" missiles along the border, and India has moved its troops out of the state of Gujarat and placed them along the Rajasthan-Sindh border. India has placed its paramilitary forces operating along the LoC under its Army command and the Coast Guard under the Naval command. India has moved its five warships from under the Eastern Naval Command in the Indian Ocean to the Western Naval Command to bolster its presence in the Arabian Sea close to the Pakistani coast. India has also announced that its nuclear command-control will be activated in June.

Islamabad's Game Plan

These steps, by themselves, do not add up to a war. But, the circumstances are clearly pushing for one. A number of factors led up to this war-like situation, perhaps the most important of which were the U.S.-led coalition force's invasion of Afghanistan last October; the U.S. troop presence inside Pakistan, which undermined Pakistan's sovereignty; and the pressure exerted on Pakistan by the coalition forces to shift its troops from its eastern to its western sector to facilitate the U.S. effort to eliminate the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

These factors have created a very complex situation, and Islamabad believes a war against India may serve to relieve some of the pressure. Pakistan President Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who just won a "landslide victory" to extend his Presidency by five years through a nationwide referendum with the blessings of Washington, is under pressure to meet U.S. demands. Washington has made it clear that it needs more Pakistani soldiers to help ferret out the al-Qaeda and the Taliban in hiding on Pakistan's side of its border with Afghanistan.

It is widely acknowledged that President Musharraf has a problem meeting this demand. A large section of the Pakistani Army does not want to fight the Taliban, whom it had created, trained, and nurtured in the late-1990s. Pakistanis claim, and rightly so, that the Americans will leave the scene sooner or later, and then Pakistan will be left to deal with the hostile Pashtuns, who constitute most of the Taliban militia. Islamabad makes no bones of the fact that Pakistan's best friends in Afghanistan are the Pashtuns.

There is good reason why the Pakistani Army does not antagonize the Pashtuns to satisfy the Americans. In Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, as well as in the province of Baluchistan, the Pashtun population is large. Pashtuns also constitute 20% of Pakistan's army personnel. In addition, Afghanistan never formally recognized the British-drawn Durand Line, which now separates the two countries. The Afghans would have preferred the Indus River as the border, but that would mean Pakistan losing almost half of its territory, though less than 15% of its population. For obvious reasons, the Pakistani Army is eager not to re-open old wounds.

In addition, over the years the Pakistani Army has become a stronghold of Taliban-type orthodox Sunni Muslims. These religious elements within the army do not want to capture, nor to kill, fellow orthodox Sunni Muslims. President Musharraf, a non-orthodox Muslim who identifies himself with Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, has problems in dealing with these elements. In addition, Pakistani strategic observers point out that Afghanistan gives the country a strategic depth in its west, and the Taliban had provided that strategic depth.

Musharraf's Escape Hatch

President Musharraf, under the orders of his corps commanders, has told Washington that the Pakistani troops cannot be released from its eastern front unless the United States reins in the Indians. Islamabad points out that in its eastern front it faces its "mortal enemy," India, which has assembled 600,000 troops and 3,000 tanks threatening Pakistan.

President Musharraf is also driven by another compulsion. It seems he has no choice but to keep the fires burning in Jammu and Kashmir, in order to keep the jihadis at arms length in Pakistan. He earlier told Washington that he had taken measures to prevent cross-border terrorism. The problem with that, is that New Delhi has provided Washington with hard data which show that cross-border terrorism during March and April was on the rise compared to the same period in 2001. This was corroborated by Jim Hoagland in an op-ed, entitled "Misreading Musharraf," in the May 23 *Washington Post*. Hoagland pointed out that "after internal debate, the U.S. intelligence community now accepts that Musharraf allowed 50-60 guerrilla camps in Kashmir that harbor some 3,000 fighters to come back to life in mid-March after two months of quiescence."

New Delhi, in effect, goes a step further, accusing Islamabad of encouraging, recruiting, training, and sending terrorists from Pakistan into India across the LoC to commit violent acts.

Pakistan, after having promised the Americans that more troops will be deployed to help the coalition forces only if Washington forces India to give up its threatening posture, went about ensuring that cross-border terrorism increases. Islamabad has taken a number of measures, of which stepped up high-profile terrorism acts as the linchpin, to make sure that India cannot reduce its troops from the Pakistani borders.

New Delhi's Dilemmas

That Islamabad's policy is working according to its plan, became evident from New Delhi's reactions. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was in Jammu and Kashmir recently. Addressing the Indian troops at Kupwara, only 20 kilometers east of the LoC in Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian premier, without naming Pakistan, asked the Indian Army personnel to prepare for a "decisive battle" and for "supreme sacrifices." "My arrival here is indicative of something. Whether our neighbor understands it or not, whether the world takes note of it or not, but the history will record that we will write a new chapter of victory. . . . There is no doubt about it," he said.

Vajpayee's speech was tough, and it was meant to be. The circumstances that led to his visit were surrounded by the most vicious violent acts. On May 14, a group of terrorists, dressed in Indian Army fatigues, hijacked a bus in Jammu. After killing a few passengers, they drove the bus to the campus where Army personnel live. They killed the guard at the gate and then went inside the campus spraying bullets, killing 30 wives and children of Army personnel.

On May 21, a day before Prime Minister Vajpayee was scheduled to arrive, a front-line Kashmiri leader, Abdul Ghani Lone, was shot at a public rally in Srinagar, the Summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir. Lone had reportedly told the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to stay away from Kashmir, and he was indicating that he would lend his support to the State Assembly elections scheduled in September. In Srinagar, there is growing recognition that Pakistan is bent on fighting its proxy war against India until the last Kashmiri. The brutal murder of Abdul Ghani Lone, who sought in the last couple of years to break the mold of separatist policies, perhaps reflected that determination.

These two high-profile terrorist acts within a week have put New Delhi under enormous internal pressure. The pressure is exerted at two levels. First, New Delhi is being criticized from within, for putting its "trust" in Washington on the latter's stated war against terrorism. These critics point out that Washington has its own agenda, in which the role of President Musharraf is close to indispensable, at least in the short term. Thus, Washington will do its best to launder President Musharraf and urge India to give the Pakistani President

more time. If India submits to American seduction, Jammu and Kashmir will be lost, critics say.

The second line of criticism is that the Vajpayee Administration has failed to counter the Pakistani game plan. Having put 600,000 troops along its borders at an exorbitant cost, India continues to act like a Gulliver strapped down and made immobile by the terrorists acting on behalf of Pakistan.

New Delhi, hurt by the recent terrorist acts and stung by the growing criticism from within, is making postures which suggest its preparedness to go to war. However, New Delhi is held back by its awareness that such a war would accomplish nothing. New Delhi is also aware that such an act will only help Islamabad to brand India as an aggressor and lower India's diplomatic stature worldwide. Taking recourse to war in the conventional sense, even of a limited scope, has tied India to narrow options. It has also exposed the Vajpayee government to choosing between war and loss of face.

Worldwide Concern

As the crisis between Indian and Pakistan drifts toward war, the international community has already been drawn into its vortex. The major concerns of the outside nations is that India and Pakistan would use nuclear weapons. Although such a view is pooh-poohed in India, the moment, if seized, could be an opportunity to set in motion a genuine peace process, the Indian daily *The Hindu* noted.

In New Delhi, the use of nuclear weapons by Pakistan is considered an "absurd" concept, although Pakistani officials, from time to time, have made it clear that Pakistan would use nuclear weapons if India endangers its sovereignty. It seems that New Delhi's view is based upon two assumptions. First, New Delhi cites intelligence reports which indicate that Pakistan's nuclear weapons were dismantled following the arrival of the Americans in the region, and are now under the control of the Chinese within Pakistan. Moreover, with a strong U.S. presence throughout the country, it is next to impossible for the Pakistanis to deploy the nuclear weapons, Indians say.

The second assumption is based on India's present war plan, which is to move into the Pakistan-held part of Jammu and Kashmir and dismantle the terrorist camps. New Delhi claims it has no intent to move across the international border that separates India and Pakistan, and, instead, would stay within the "disputed territory." However, India may have to abandon this plan if Pakistan moves forces across the Indian border, opening up new flanks to ease pressure on the Kashmir front.

It seems that the steady deterioration of the India-Pakistan border situation was left unattended by the world community. As India now threatens to go to war, the United States has once again begun active diplomatic efforts to defuse tensions. Thanks to Sept. 11 and Dec. 13—the day the Indian Parliament building came under attack by Pakistan-based terrorists—the world has focussed with unprecedented intensity on the sources of international terrorism inside Pakistan.

America's interest in retaining access to Pakistani territory and operational support from its armed forces, in its war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, has certainly dampened U.S. condemnation of Pakistani support for cross-border terrorism. But Washington is now under pressure to face up to the facts being placed on the table.

Following the emergence of the present crisis, the first to arrive on the scene was U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca. After New Delhi gave her short shrift, British Defense chief Adm. Michael Boyce landed in Delhi, for meetings with the service chiefs and Defense Minister George Fernandes. Meanwhile, India's External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, who is very friendly to the Americans, has told the European Commission's High Representative Javier Solana not to come to India. European Union diplomat for foreign affairs Chris Patten was scheduled to arrive in New Delhi on May 23-24, but he found no one willing to meet with him. Both Solana and Patten are in Islamabad cooling their heels. The reason that Solana has been told to stay out is because New Delhi is furious about the EC's criticism of India over the Gujarat riots.

U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters recently that U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage will travel to Islamabad and New Delhi in the first week of June. His visit will be an attempt to ease tensions between the "nuclear rivals."

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw is expected to visit both countries before Armitage makes his appearance. Straw is reportedly in touch with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell on the crisis. Meanwhile, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, describing the India-Pakistan crisis as "grave," has called for restraint. A similar statement has also been issued by U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Already in the area is Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi. He held talks with Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee for 45 minutes on general security in the region and on the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Tehran also reported that Minister Kharrazi made an unscheduled stopover in Islamabad on his way back home, because of the deteriorating relations between India and Pakistan.

Although neither Beijing nor Moscow have sent emissaries to either country, leaders from both nations have urged India and Pakistan to exercise maximum restraint.

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