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Lavoy, Peter; Rana, Surinder

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

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Standoff Between India and Pakistan

by Peter Lavoy and Surinder Rana

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On December 13, 2001 the Indian parliament was attacked by terrorists who India claimed belonged to two Pakistan-based militant outfits: Lashkar-e- Taiba (LeT), and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). [1] Pakistan's government denied that any groups based in its country carried out the attacks. Despite this denial, a number of Indian political leaders urged their government to take strong action against Pakistan. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpai's administration ordered mobilization of the military and demanded that Pakistan eliminate militant groups operating against India from Pakistani territory, and in Kashmir. Prime Minister Vajpai further announced that India will respond to this act of terrorism, and that the use of military force will be one possible option. [2] Pakistan in turn mobilized its army. At present the two armies are facing each other across the Line of Control in Kashmir and along the 2,200 mile international border in Punjab, Rajsthan, and Gujarat.

This is the first time since 1971 that both countries are actually poised for war with one another. Earlier mobilizations of the two armies -- in 1987 and 1990 -- were different in scale, because the strike elements of each force were not fully activated, and no landmines were deployed. Reports suggest that in the current situation both countries have activated their strategic nuclear assets. [3]

With a view to increasing pressure on Pakistan's President Parvez Musharraf to act against the terrorist groups operating from Pakistani territory, India has recalled its high commission from Islamabad and reduced its diplomatic staff by 50 percent. India also stopped bus and train service between the two countries, and banned use of its air space by Pakistani air assets. Trade between India and Pakistan also has been stopped. Though Pakistan has not recalled its high commission from New Delhi, it has otherwise responded to India's actions by cutting its diplomatic staff in New Delhi, and denying its airspace to Indian air assets. There has been a perceptible increase in firing across the Line of Control from both sides. [4]

Prime Minister Vajpai and President Musharraf attended a meeting among heads of state of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), held in Kathmandu, Nepal, on 4-6 January 2002. Foreign ministers of the two countries also met on the side during the SAARC summit. Although these meetings did not result in a substantive dialogue between the two governments, statements made to the media by both leaders indicated a mutual desire for reconciliation and a defusing of the crisis. Pakistan has asked for a resumption of dialogue with India. The Vajpai government, however, has set conditions for the resumption of talks that include: 1) the arrest and extradition of 20 individuals, many of whom are Indian nationals residing in Pakistan, named as terrorists on a list provided by India to the Musharraf government; 2) closure of facilities, training camps, arms supply routes, funding channels, and all direct and indirect assistance to terrorists operating from Pakistan's soil; 3) an end to the infiltration of arms and men from Pakistan into Jammu and Kashmir; and 4) a "categorical and unambiguous renunciation" of terrorism in all its manifestations.[5]

In response, Pakistan's leaders have arrested the leaders of LeT, and JeM, the two organizations named by India as responsible for the 13 December attack; frozen the financial assets and made large-scale arrests among members of these organizations; and closed down ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) offices on the Pakistani side of Kashmir.[6] While Indian officials have acknowledged the steps taken by Pakistan's government as positive, most remain skeptical about Pakistan's commitment to curb anti-India activities. Pakistani leaders continue to maintain that terrorism in other parts of the world cannot be equated with the violence in Kashmir, which they characterize as part of an ongoing struggle for freedom by the Kashmiri people against the Indian government. The Indian position, by contrast, is that the insurgency in Kashmir and other parts of India is a direct result of cross-border terrorism perpetrated by Pakistan. Indian officials insist that it is up to Pakistan to halt all manifestations of terrorism as a precondition to peace between the two countries, failing which the current military impasse will continue, and may lead to war.

The United States and other members of the international community have urged both India and Pakistan to exercise restraint. U.S. Secretary of State Gen. Collin Powell has been in touch regularly with the leaders of both countries, and planned to convey U.S. concerns about the current security situation during his visit to the region on January 18. The Bush administration has recognized the right of the Indian government to resort to force for self-defense if diplomatic measures should fail. [7] At the same time, the U.S. government included Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed on its list of foreign terrorist organizations, and asked Pakistan's leaders to take tough measures against terrorist groups operating from their territory.[8] When British Prime Minister Tony Blair visited India and Pakistan in early January, he too urged President Musharraf to act against terrorists operating from Pakistan.

Assessment

The present build-up of military forces on both sides of the India-Pakistan border is unprecedented. Pakistan's leaders have indicated that a serious threat to Pakistan's national security by India's conventional forces could instigate use of nuclear weapons, which India says will prompt massive retaliation.

Both countries have continued exploring diplomatic means to diffuse the crisis. International efforts so far have been partially successful in putting pressure on Pakistan to act against those terrorist groups named by India. Reports suggest, however, that these Jehadi cells enjoy support from elements of Pakistan's security forces and political establishment.[9] Dismantling them will demand a great deal of commitment and courage on the part of Pakistan's government. While President Musharraf is clearly in control of his country, renouncing support for Kashmiri militants will require a major shift in government policy, which in the long run could have repercussions for Pakistan's internal stability. Such a policy change, however, also would open up the possibility for renewed dialogue between the two countries, thereby defusing a potentially catastrophic situation.

During the last two decades, terrorism has played an increasingly disruptive role in South Asia. Some of the reasons postulated for this are the United States' abandonment of Pakistan and Afghanistan at the end of the Cold War, the failure to resolve regional conflicts, the influence of religious radicalism on underdeveloped societies, and the negative aspects of globalization. Whatever the cause, terrorists from South Asia have affected the lives of millions of people all over the world, especially through the events of 9/11, and their aftermath. The current crisis between India and Pakistan has been caused by terrorist elements who are believed to get sustenance from institutions within Pakistan. In furtherance of their efforts to root out terrorism, the international community should encourage the Pakistan government in its efforts to cooperate with India. India for its part must reciprocate Pakistan's actions and create avenues for a meaningful bilateral dialogue.

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