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India, Pakistan Pressed To Hold Kashmir Talks

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In an unexpected move, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, while visiting the India-held part of Kashmir in mid-April, said that India would send a top Foreign Ministry official to Pakistan to draw up a schedule for negotiations, if Pakistan announces an end to its support for the anti-India terrorists, and closes training camps for Islamic guerrillas on its territory. India had for months rejected any dialogue with Pakistan, accusing Islamabad of continuing with cross-border terrorism in that disputed state.

At first reading, Vajpayee's statement does not look as if India had shifted its position on talks, but subsequent moves do indicate that New Delhi is now ready to hold talks with Islamabad. These talks, if all goes well, may take place as early as June. India's Minister of State for External Affairs Digvijay Singh told the official Press Trust of India, on April 21, that the Prime Minister has already made clear that "if Pakistan responds favorably and stops cross-border terrorism, we are willing to send a Foreign Ministry official to Islamabad to discuss the agenda for talks." Although the operative phrase "if Pakistan responds favorably and stops cross-border terrorism" sounds very much like a precondition, senior analysts in both India and Pakistan claim that there are signs in it of an incipient initiative.

The Indian Foreign Ministry said on April 28 that it was awaiting a response from Pakistan to the offer of a "hand of friendship" that Vajpayee made in Kashmir. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri replied to a reporter's question, that Islamabad's response would come in "two, three days." A spokesman for Pakistan's Foreign Ministry made it clear that New Delhi would have to "wait" for the response.

Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali telephoned Vajpayee and the two had a ten-minute discussion on April 28. Although the content of their discussion has not been made public, it is said that the Pakistani Premier has invited Vajpayee to visit. The Indian response came through the leadership of Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party. On April 29, a spokesman for the BJP, the leading party in Vajpayee's coalition government, told reporters that the Prime MInister will only make such a trip once Islamabad stops supporting Islamic militants from their cross-border infiltration into Indian-administered Kashmir.

Meanwhile, militants have stepped up violence in the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir, as they often do whenever the possibility of a talk between New Delhi and Islamabad appears on the horizon. Even as both sides were ready to make conciliatory moves, 11 militants and 6 Indian Army soldiers were killed in a four-hour gun battle in Indian-administered Kashmir on April 28.

What Triggered Talks

Almost a year ago, Washington, positioning itself as an arbitrator committed to resolving the Kashmir imbroglio, assured New Delhi that Islamabad had promised to stop cross-border terrorism. India has always claimed that the 14-year-long violence inside the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir was triggered by the anti-India terrorists, bred and nurtured within Pakistan by the Pakistani Army and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). New Delhi pointed out that dozens of terrorist-training camps exist within Azad Kashmir—the Pakistan-held part of Jammu and Kashmir—even today; and until these camps are dismantled, Pakistan would continue to push the terrorists inside India to commit violent acts. Although Islamabad denies that it infiltrates terrorists inside the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir, very few believe that, even within Pakistan.

Last year, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage made a grand pronouncement, saying that during his talks with the Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf, he made the Pakistani President agree to stop cross-border infiltration. Subsequently, New Delhi did report a drop in infiltration during the Winter months. Recent reports indicate, however, that infiltration is back in full swing, and enough violence has been created in recent weeks in the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir to assure that the militants are once again most active. In fact, U.S. Ambassador to India Robert Blackwill, in announcing his departure from India next June, said "the fight against international terrorism will not be won, until terrorism against India ends permanently." Blackwill added, "There can be no other legitimate stance by the United States, no American compromise whatever on this elemental and moral truth."

Enhanced cross-border terrorism, and occurrence of violent terrorist acts in the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir in recent weeks, also created a situation for New Delhi to exert pressure on Washington. New Delhi, which remained mostly neutral on the Iraq War, but had strongly opposed the U.S. unilateral decision to attack Iraq in opposition to the United Nations, claimed that the United States' action provides enough justification for India to initiate a pre-emptive attack on Pakistan, considered by many in India a client-state of the United States. The purpose would be, New Delhi made clear, to dismantle the terrorist camps based in Azad Kashmir and make life safer for Indians living inside Jammu and Kashmir. The argument was fair enough to cause flutter within the American establishment. Torrents of anti-Pakistan statements were issued and telephone calls were made to smooth out the ruffled Indian feathers, and Washington began moving

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to get Islamabad to make yet another formal commitment to stop cross-border terrorism.

Rumbles in Washington

The first blast was issued by Richard Haass, director of Policy Planning for the U.S. State Department. Wringing his hands in frustration, he told Associated Press, that "the United States has for some time urged the Pakistani government to stop infiltration across the Line of Control [separating India and Pakistan in Kashmir and Jammu]. To be honest, we have not succeeded, and we are disappointed and frustrated with the reality." He failed to mention that Washington, having sold the phony Pakistani "commitment" to New Delhi, is feeling guilty of killing a few hundred innocent citizens of Jammu and Kashmir.

Subsequently, U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said on April 26 that Secretary of State Gen. Colin Powell had spoken to Pakistan President Musharraf, expressing concern over growing violence in Kashmir. Boucher also said that Powell is staying in touch with Vajpayee and External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha, and that Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage will visit both India and Pakistan in early May. On March 31, Powell had told a *New York Times* interviewer, that "India, Pakistan and the whole of the subcontinent problem" was part of the broader agenda that the United States must attend to following the Iraq War. It is a foregone conclusion what message Armitage would deliver to the Indians and Pakistanis.

Former Indian Ambassador to Washington, Kiran Shankar Bajpai, writing in the New York Council on Foreign Relations publication, *Foreign Affairs,* has urged the United States to "nudge" India and Pakistan into a joint search for positive relations, rather than trying to invent, much less enforce, a Kashmir solution. It is likely, though, that Armitage will go beyond what Ambassador Bajpai has suggested, and call upon both sides to soothe their frayed nerves and sit down for a talk to resolve the Kashmir dispute. It is also expected that such a call would have almost a zero effect on the overall situation.

The reason the United States is no longer a valid arbitrator becomes clear from what Ambassador Blackwill had referred to earlier. No matter how difficult it is for the State Department to accept Pakistan's Kashmir policy, it is left with no choice. Pakistan is part and parcel of the U.S. policy to eradicate terrorism from Afghanistan. It is said every day, by almost every analyst who follows Afghanistan, that without Pakistan's help, the U.S. campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda will come to naught and the Bush Administration will look silly. It is also common knowledge to those who know anything about Pakistan, that if the United States tries to punish the Pakistani Army for its anti-India activities along the Line of Control, power in Pakistan will shift over to a virulent anti-United States Islamic orthodox political grouping. It should be noted that the six-party Islamic party, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) emerged in the last general elections as the largest single political grouping in the National Assembly, Pakistan's parliament. For the record, MMA opposes the American invasion of Afghanistan and openly backs the Taliban and the al-Qaeda.

The Indian Half-Step

On April 21, New Delhi's newly appointed interlocutor on Kashmir, N.N. Vohra was sent to the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir by Prime Minister Vajpayee on a six-day mission to initiate talks with all political parties and important individuals. The objective was to get a response from all and sundry and find a common stance on the Kashmir issue. Vohra's arrival was met with stony silence from the more militant Kashmiris, who are seeking an independent state. It soon became evident that, while Vohra would be talking to all mainstream political parties, the separatists will stay away from any negotiation with Vohra. It is clear that New Delhi has not yet succeeded in conveying how far it is willing to accommodate the aspiration of the local Kashmiris.

In contrast to what Vohra faced, Vajpayee's latest statement was welcomed in certain sections of Pakistan. The MMA has hailed Vajpayee's move, and a senior Indian analyst, with many friends at a very high level in Pakistan, pointed out that the leader of Azad Kashmir, Abdul Qayuum Khan, has called on Pakistani Premier Zafarullah Jamali to agree to talks, "even if one of the conditions put by India were to be to make the Line of Control the international border."

It is evident at this point, that while Washington's interest to resolve the Kashmir crisis is important, it is not a sufficient condition. Pakistan is dependent on the United States on many matters, but it has little reason to trust it. On the other hand, Pakistan looks up to China for very many reasons and considers China as its best friend. It is widely acknowledged that China wants both Pakistan and India to be friendly nations and is concerned about the potential of an all-out war in the subcontinent.

During an hour-long meeting with the Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes, who just completed a week-long visit to China, former Chinese President Jiang Zemin, who heads the army, underlined the need for enhancing Sino-Indian bilateral ties, including military ones, which he said was in the "fundamental interest" of the two countries. Earlier, China's Foreign Ministry had welcomed a British proposal urging China to intervene in the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir and help to work out a peaceful solution.

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