

India-Pakistan Relations - Rising Threats

A resurgence of violence in disputed Kashmir could put a brake on improving bilateral ties

Far Eastern Economic Review 02/10/2003

By Ahmed Rashid/Lahore

While the world's attention is focused on Iraq and Afghanistan, a resurgence of violence in Kashmir is souring the recent thaw in relations between long-time rivals India and Pakistan. The two countries relaunched peace moves after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in April offered a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan. Stepped-up violence in Indian-ruled areas of Kashmir, however, threatens to bring the rapprochement to a halt and the acrimony has been reflected at the annual meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, where the two countries took each other to task over Kashmir.

More than 350 people were killed in attacks on civilian and military targets in September by Islamic militants opposing New Delhi's rule as well as in operations by Indian security forces. The surge in violence came after Indian troops killed rebel commander Ghazi Baba during a raid in Srinagar on August 30. Meanwhile, Pakistani and Indian forces in September began resuming artillery duels across the Line of Control (LOC) that divides Kashmir.

The Indian government says Pakistan-based militants are behind the increased violence-Indian troops on September 29 killed 15 militants after they crossed the LOC. Pakistan, for its part, claims the uprising by Muslim Kashmiris is taking off again after a lull. But Western diplomats are concerned that Pakistan's army, frustrated at the lack of progress in talks with India, is once again turning a blind eye to militants crossing the de facto border. "Nobody is focusing on this very dangerous part of the world," says a senior Western diplomat in Islamabad. "Western intelligence points to militant groups having been reactivated inside Pakistan and Kashmir." Others downplay the dangers. "This is a seasonal kind of thing . . . Folks are trying to get across [the LOC] before the passes close from snow," says a U.S. official, adding: "We're not particularly concerned." American Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca are due to visit Islamabad on October 2 for talks on the region.

Teresita Schaffer, a South Asia expert at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, says that while the violence has escalated, "there isn't a war scare." She points out that recent bombings in Bombay did not lead to the mobilization of Indian troops. "Of course, the next outrage may get a different response," she adds. Last year, after the two nuclear-armed countries nearly went to war, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf buckled under U.S. pressure and pledged to stop militants from crossing into Indian-held Kashmir. India maintains that Musharraf didn't keep that promise, or earlier vows to crack down on extremist groups in Pakistan. Nevertheless, Vajpayee opened the door to potential talks earlier this year, resulting in a resumption of diplomatic ties and the restart of a bi-weekly bus service. But they have yet to restart train and air services and there has been no movement on Kashmir.

India's caution, Pakistan's frustration New Delhi, still not convinced of Musharraf's commitment to preventing border crossings, refuses to give a timetable for substantive talks. "India wants to move as slowly as possible without killing [rapprochement] off," says Schaffer.

But it's too slow for Pakistan, and the frustration spilled over into the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly. Musharraf on September 24 reiterated an offer for a truce on the LOC while accusing India of refusing to enter a dialogue over Kashmir. "Pakistan would also be prepared to encourage a general cessation of violence within Kashmir involving reciprocal obligations and restraints on Indian forces and the Kashmiri freedom movement," he added.

The ceasefire offer was seized on the following day by Vajpayee, during his address to the UN, as

a tacit admission that Islamabad sponsored the militants. But on returning home he said that while there were problems in bilateral relations, "these should be resolved through talks." Analysts say India has grounds for remaining suspicious of Musharraf's motives. At home he has eased up on the militants. Their leaders are no longer under house arrest, and banned parties are operating under new names and recruiting young men to fight in Kashmir. In turn, Pakistan has been infuriated by India's recent arms purchases from overseas and by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's mid-September visit to India. Islamabad is fearful that a new U.S.-India-Israel axis is emerging which will be anti-Pakistan.