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## Reducing Collateral Damage to Indo-Pakistani Relations from the War on Terrorism

POLLY NAYAK

One of the major challenges facing Washington is how to limit unintended consequences of the war on terrorism in South Asia that could otherwise imperil both the U.S. counterterrorism strategy and the goal of preventing further conflict between India and Pakistan. Senior U.S. officials understandably hoped last fall that the war on terrorism would provide a new opportunity to draw in both India and Pakistan, to strengthen U.S. ties to each, and to nudge them to resolve their differences. Washington expected to expand cooperation with a rising India on a host of issues, while succoring a fragile Pakistan as a reward for abandoning an Afghan policy inimical to the war on terrorism.



Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (foreground), and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee attended a January 2002 summit in Nepal. Regional tensions were running high following terrorist attacks on the state legislature in Kashmir and the Indian Parliament in New Delhi.

In fact, the war on terrorism has provided the anticipated opportunities to expand ties to both India and Pakistan—but the new U.S. role in the region also has encouraged risky military brinkmanship and political one-upmanship, including the nose-to-nose deployment of troops since December 2001 along the common border and the Line of Control in Kashmir. Adroit U.S. and allied diplomatic intervention last spring reduced the imminence of conflict, but left an untenable dynamic between the two sides. The U.S. insistence that Pakistan halt the passage of anti-Indian militants into Kashmir gave India's leadership a public relations and diplomatic victory and a sense of license to use force if Pakistan failed to act,

while handing Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf a domestically unpalatable policy shift on Kashmir that is sparking questions at home about the price of his cooperation with the United States.

Without intervention, the current equation portends backpedaling by Islamabad on its commitment to halt the flow of anti-Indian militants into Kashmir and possible Indian military retaliation against Pakistan as early as this fall. U.S. officials are working hard to reduce the tensions between the two adversaries as the election planned by India for Kashmir in late September-early October begins. U.S. policymakers are seeking a formula that will prevent India from taking advantage of American



sympathy and will motivate Pakistan to remain engaged on tension reduction as well as counterterrorism. In doing so, Washington will want to reexamine how perceptions and expectations from the war on terrorism have helped fuel this Indo-Pakistani crisis, and how they might be modified to dampen it.

### HOW THE WAR ON TERRORISM FED TENSIONS

The deep-seated hostility between India and Pakistan, of course, long predated the war on terrorism. But the war placed the United States front and center in South Asia for the first time, prompting efforts by both adversaries to advance opposing national agendas with Washington. Each has misread its closer ties to the United States as evidence that Washington has embraced its perspective. Each has treated the intense engagement and military presence of the United States as insurance against escalation to war.

Soon after September 11, New Delhi began a campaign to depict Pakistan as more aptly a target of than a partner in the U.S.-led war on terrorism—charging Pakistan with sponsorship of both Taliban and Kashmiri “terrorists.” The October 2001 assault on the Kashmir state assembly building by Kashmiri militants and the December 2001 attack on India’s Parliament brought immediate recriminations against Islamabad. New Delhi invoked the U.S.-led military campaign against al Qaeda as the model for its massive deployment of Indian forces to its frontiers with Pakistan, although hardliners in New Delhi had long advocated military action to compel Pakistan to end its proxy war in Kashmir or face possible defeat by India’s conven-

tionally superior forces. The government’s tough line assured the use of force if General Musharraf failed to respond satisfactorily to New Delhi’s demands.

India’s military mobilization on the borders with Pakistan following the December attack appears to have reflected several assumptions about the United States. First, that the mobilization would convince the United States and its allies to step up their diplomatic involvement out of fear that any conflict could escalate to nuclear use; second, that the war on terrorism would dispose the West to accept India’s depiction of Kashmir as a terrorism problem, rather than Pakistan’s portrayal of the conflict as a self-determination issue; and third, that, if the United States was unable to persuade Islamabad to restrain the militants, Washington would view sympathetically an Indian attack across the Line of Control in Kashmir. After all, the United States had just supported Israel’s offensive against a Palestinian “terrorist infrastructure.” Indian officials may also have seen the U.S. military presence as diminishing the risk that Pakistan would resort to using nuclear weapons, in the event that any conflict widened.

Pakistan, too, believed that it was coming out ahead in the war on terrorism, based on very different perceptions. Islamabad was suddenly indispensable to the West, after years of friction over Pakistan’s weapons of mass destruction programs and then over Musharraf’s military coup. Moreover, its new alliance with the United States promised to dilute Washington’s growing bond with New Delhi. The welcome renewal of international aid flows to Pakistan promised to



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soften domestic discomfort with Musharraf's about-face on the Taliban under U.S. pressure; with Pakistan's central role in the war on terrorism; and with U.S. participation in counterterrorism operations there. Although Islamabad does not want American troops permanently stationed in Pakistan, senior officials doubtless viewed the U.S. military presence as a brake on retaliatory Indian attacks across the Line of Control—a presumption India worked hard to counter.

Until May, Musharraf appeared convinced that his alliance with the United States against al Qaeda also bought him maneuvering room on Pakistan's Kashmir policy. In his January speech to the nation, he announced a ban on five radical Islamist groups variously linked to domestic terrorism and to the attack on India's Parliament, and vowed to prevent terrorism in the name of Kashmir. Musharraf, however, also somewhat ambiguously underlined Islamabad's commitment to Kashmir. Many Pakistanis still view the goal of liberating Muslim-majority Kashmir from Indian control as sacrosanct, and accept Pakistan's support for separatists there since 1990 as a legitimate means to force India to negotiate the issue. Pakistan still officially denies that it has trained and armed militants to fight in Kashmir. Although Musharraf was distressed at the ability of militants long associated with Pakistan to mount operations damaging to his government—including the December attack in New Delhi and multiple attacks on Westerners in Pakistan—he appeared confident that the United States understood his problem. Moreover, Pakistan's warnings to the United States that Pakistani forces

on the border with Afghanistan would have to be diverted to respond to the Indian mobilization seemed effective in getting the United States to restrain India.

Musharraf was therefore slow to see that India actually had succeeded in painting the Kashmiri militants as an extension of the al Qaeda problem, and Pakistan as the source of the problem. Pakistan's confidence was shaken in mid-May, when India upped its threat of retaliation in response to attacks on dependents at an Indian military base in Kashmir, prompting the United States to strong-arm Islamabad to halt the infiltration of militants across the Line of Control. Since then, Pakistan has continued to contend that “nothing is happening” on the Line of Control, while India rejects Islamabad's contention.

#### WHY THE CURRENT TREND IS UNTENABLE

Driven by their opposing expectations of the United States from the war on terrorism, India and Pakistan are on a collision course, with this fall a likely crunch point:

##### *India*

New Delhi has made clear that its litmus test for Pakistani compliance with India's demand for a halt in militant activity will be the fall election in Kashmir; Indian leaders have also identified October as a decision point for possible unspecified military action. For years, India has treated Kashmir as a security problem, while Islamabad has focused international attention on India's oppression of the Kashmiri people and refusal to hold a UN-mandated plebiscite that would give them the option of union with Pakistan.

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Now India appears determined to use the recent spotlight on South Asia to portray Kashmir as a functioning Indian state, and Pakistan’s role in and claim to Kashmir as illegitimate. To defuse thirteen years of disaffection among Kashmiris and criticism from the international community over abortive or rigged contests, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee needs a credible election this fall with participation by Kashmiri separatist parties and high voter turnout. That would require an end to militant violence and to Pakistani pressure on Kashmiris to boycott elections.

Vajpayee’s inclination to compromise on India’s demands regarding Kashmir has decreased since his party’s poor showing in several key state elections in February. His recent cabinet shuffle reflected the party’s need and ability to give more prominence in the coalition government to hard-line Hindu nationalist constituents, who are demanding a tougher stand on Pakistan and on Muslims at home. Since early July, India’s new foreign secretary has stepped up criticism of Islamabad and accused the United States of catering to Pakistan. In recent months, some Hindu hardliners have publicly advocated “eradicating” Pakistan if it fails to respond to Indian demands. Others have speculated—without apparent basis—that Pakistan is inciting Muslim Indians to attack Hindus and have questioned the loyalty of Muslims to India. Thus, some Indians interpreted as a bow to Hindu nationalists Vajpayee’s statement in April, in which he blamed India’s Muslims for the riots in Gujarat (in which as many as 2,000 Muslims reportedly died) and rejected calls for the removal of the state’s chief minister.

### *Pakistan*

The onus is on Pakistan to make the first moves to defuse the current crisis, but Musharraf faces considerable domestic pressure not to buckle to the United States and India on Kashmir. However conditional, his agreement to halt militant infiltrations into Kashmir has already cost him far more at home than did the reversal of his policy on Afghanistan. First, Musharraf’s about-face on Afghanistan has made further concessions to U.S. pressure on any issue politically more difficult by raising concerns about national sovereignty, which have deepened as U.S. counterterrorism operations have continued in Pakistan. Second, the prospect of concessions to India on Kashmir, a core issue for fifty-five years and the object of two wars between the neighbors, appears to touch a strong nationalist chord even among Pakistanis who are lukewarm to the Kashmir cause. Consequently, Musharraf is under fire from across the political spectrum for selling out Pakistan’s interests to curry favor with the United States. Anti-American sentiment in Pakistan is intensifying. What average Pakistanis think is unclear, in a country with neither fully functioning political mechanisms nor reliable polling data, but the vocal “establishment” has raised a number of concerns.

Repudiation of Musharraf’s concessions on both Afghanistan and Kashmir by Islamists was predictable, but even moderate Pakistanis who acquiesced in the policy shift on Afghanistan have questioned the wisdom of caving on Kashmir. Many Pakistanis see the election as an Indian subterfuge to take the

Kashmir issue off the table without addressing Kashmiri grievances, while key separatist leaders are in Indian jails and India rejects international election monitoring. Some concede that Pakistan's twelve-year-old policy of supporting the militants has become a liability since September 11, but argue that the United States has been snookered by Indian military blackmail into supporting an illegitimate political process and holding Pakistan hostage to its success. They note that India has threatened to punish Pakistan if violence mars the election, even though some militants clearly are acting autonomously and to the detriment of Islamabad's interests.

Many Pakistanis also are indignant at what they see as India's changing goalposts—from a requirement that Islamabad halt the infiltration of militants across the Line of Control, to the current demand that the “infrastructure of terrorism” be dismantled. They suspect India simply wants to force Pakistan into a war, and they hope India will back down when nuclear-armed Pakistan calls its bluff.

Many Pakistanis distrust the United States as a facilitator for peace with India, believing the current American commitment to Pakistan to be as tactical as the 1979-1989 alliance against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Some note that Washington did not suggest lifting its comprehensive “democracy sanctions” (imposed after Musharraf's 1999 coup) until the United States needed Pakistani cooperation in the war on terrorism. Many also suspect the United States of bias against Muslims. They cite

Washington's statements of support for a “secular” Pakistan, as well as its low-key response to anti-Muslim riots in the Indian state of Gujarat last spring and to reports that local officials had been complicit in the attacks. Some see current U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a warning that Pakistan might be sacrificed to U.S.-Indian ties.

Most critical but less clear are the views of the military, Musharraf's ultimate support base. The Army leadership certainly shares most of the concerns articulated by other Pakistanis. The military has relied on the militants as a force multiplier in Kashmir and to keep Indian forces pinned down. Army leaders are doubtless pondering what alternatives to the militants Pakistan would have in the short term to apply pressure on its large neighbor. The reported arrest of a Pakistani paramilitary officer for plotting against Musharraf in April is a reminder of the potential for fissures in the Army over the Kashmir issue.

Two recent statements by Musharraf suggest that Pakistani frustration with recent events is making Islamabad less flexible on Kashmir. First, Musharraf has reasserted Pakistan's longtime demand that India hold a promised plebiscite to let Kashmiris choose between affiliation with India or Pakistan. This marked a step back from more flexible-sounding statements four months ago that Pakistan would accept any solution that satisfied the Kashmiri people, presumably including some form of autonomy. Second, reflecting Pakistani concerns about a U.S. tilt toward India on Kashmir, Musharraf told the media in late June that Islamabad



would reject any proposal to make the Line of Control an international boundary because that would negate the cause for which it has fought two wars with India. Such a solution has been discussed in some Washington circles as one way to reduce Indo-Pakistani tensions over Kashmir. From a Pakistani vantage point, this would leave India holding the prize—the populous, Muslim-majority Vale of Kashmir.

Musharraf's next decisions on Kashmir will be made in the politically charged run-up to an October national legislative election and the months following it. The election, mandated by Pakistan's Supreme Court after Musharraf's coup three years ago, may also focus attention on the controversy about Musharraf's role in "America's war on terrorism." Many Pakistanis reportedly are outraged by the extra-constitutional referendum that Musharraf held in March to bless his self-appointment as president a year ago. While the presidency is not at stake in this contest, there is widespread consternation over the constitutional changes enacted by Musharraf in August to ensure the Army's and the president's ability to either second-guess any decisions by an elected government in the coming years or to remove the government. Pakistan's restive political parties, whose hands the military has tied before the election, have protested the constitutional changes but may also attack any compromises Musharraf makes on Kashmir as unpatriotic. The debate could well focus also on the costs to Pakistan of involvement in the war on terrorism. It is unclear how Musharraf's supporters will fare in this election and what challenges

to his policies will emerge afterwards in the new legislature. In these circumstances, the military may be tempted to try to manipulate this election to avoid surprise outcomes. In any case, widespread suspicions that the election has been fixed will likely further diminish Musharraf's popularity.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Breaking the current Indo-Pakistani dynamic will require re-balancing U.S. policy toward both countries—countering Pakistan's fear that the United States is indifferent to its national interests, and India's conviction that it need make no concessions. The escalating one-upmanship between the two countries since the start of the war on terrorism underlines two hard facts that must be taken into account: First, an increased U.S. presence in South Asia is not intrinsically stabilizing. Second, however much the United States might want to de-link U.S.-Indian relations from U.S.-Pakistani ties, the parties' own zero-sum perceptions and responses still require constant calibration of one relationship against the other. The increased U.S. engagement with both governments in recent months opens several routes for U.S. diplomacy, all of them difficult.

Kashmir, the most tangible symptom of Indo-Pakistani tensions, must be the immediate focus of American efforts. U.S. officials may well be able to entice Islamabad to clamp down harder on the militants during and after the Kashmir election. To do so, Washington would need to convince Musharraf privately that the United States cannot otherwise

restrain India, to address Pakistanis' concerns about being scapegoated for the current tensions, and to underline publicly that India, too, is accountable for keeping the peace. Attacks by militants bent on damaging Musharraf's reputation and blocking compromise on Kashmir will remain a wild card. Overcoming Islamabad's sense that it will be punished even for militant violence it cannot control will require the United States to elicit India's assurances that it will not retaliate on the basis of Pakistan's presumed complicity.

Getting Pakistan to do its part to avoid conflict in the coming months also will require addressing the country's doubts about U.S. goodwill and respect. Assurances that the United States wants a strong Pakistan are helpful, but Pakistanis will be looking for signs that their country is being treated as a full partner, not a subordinate in a U.S.-India-Pakistan triangle; that Pakistan's sovereignty will be fully honored; and that U.S. ties to Pakistan will be broader and more durable than the war on terrorism. Washington's failure to roll back textile quotas aimed at Pakistan was a blow to Islamabad's confidence in U.S. intentions; Islamabad needs reassurance that international assistance now in progress will continue to flow with no new strings attached. Particularly in the context of the war on terrorism, any hint that the United States has a blueprint for a "good Pakistan" risks feeding nationalist concerns that the country is being subordinated to a U.S. agenda. U.S. statements of respect for a moderate Islamic Pakistan would help dispel concerns about religious bias, as would clarification of U.S. views on the Gujarat riots.

Inducing Pakistan to end its call for an election boycott by Kashmiris would require public assurances from the United States that the voting does not constitute a final resolution of Kashmir's future. Such assurances would run counter to India's view of elections there as effectively obviating Pakistan's demand for a plebiscite. Pakistan probably would also insist on international monitoring of the election, which India rejects on sovereignty grounds. Beyond the election in Kashmir, Pakistan is likely to move away from the "militant option" only to the extent that India commits to a formula for addressing Kashmir's future, perhaps initially through U.S. interlocutors.

Inducing India to soften its stance will be a tall order, but the United States and its allies still have considerable leverage with New Delhi. Despite its recent criticism of Washington, Indian ties to the United States and Europe remain crucial to India's economic and diplomatic aspirations as an emerging major power, as well as to its self-image. When U.S. diplomatic dependents and nonessential personnel were evacuated from New Delhi several months ago amidst U.S. concerns about potential Indo-Pakistani conflict, Indian financial indicators plunged—a sobering reminder to all parties that domestic confidence is influenced by outside perceptions. In India's current political climate, however, persuading New Delhi to respond to any Pakistani restraint this summer by pulling back the troops mobilized last December may require an implicit U.S. threat to cast India as the new "bad guy." Going the next step on Kashmir would require sustained, quiet U.S. diplomacy backed by European

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allies, Russia, and China. Pegging Pakistani concessions to Indian agreements would require Pakistan to acknowledge the magnitude of its involvement with the militants.

The U.S. stake in the war on terrorism and its presence in the region have thrust Washington into a central diplomatic role in easing Indo-Pakistani tensions—but India and Pakistan still need to be weaned from their growing reliance on the United States as a front-line “circuit-breaker” for conflict and escalation. The United States must carefully craft its approach to assistance with this objective in mind. On confidence-building steps such as monitoring the Line of Control, for example, day-to-day U.S. involvement would be more apt to reinforce such dependence than the provision of equipment or technical advice to the parties.

Just as U.S. actions in the war on terrorism have produced unsought consequences, so would re-balancing U.S. relations with

India and Pakistan and pressing for a new accommodation in Kashmir. One immediate risk would be a rise in nationalistic anti-Americanism in both countries, as Indians and Pakistanis become aware of the U.S. role on Kashmir. Another would be growing strains between India and the United States.

Over the longer term, unless India and Pakistan can be persuaded to address their tensions more broadly, their mutual hostility may play out in arenas other than Kashmir. In the 1970s and 1980s, each country stirred separatist movements in the other, driven by a desire for leverage—Pakistan, in India’s Punjab state and its Northeast; India, in Pakistan’s Sindh Province. In the early twenty-first century, both countries are vulnerable to—and fearful of—outside meddling in domestic sectarian strife, which could become the next flash point for conflict. For example, any evidence of Pakistani instigation in future “Gujarat-like” rioting in India could ratchet up tensions between the two countries in short order. B

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