

“India seized an opportunity in December 2001. In escalating a crisis into a global drama, Prime Minister Vajpayee and his colleagues took a calculated risk. Has it worked?”

India, Pakistan, and the Prospect of War

ALEXANDER EVANS

On Thursday, December 13, 2001, five militants armed with automatic weapons and grenades stormed the Indian parliament building in New Delhi. Equipped with a false security pass and an official car of the kind often used by high-ranking politicians, they managed to make their way into the parliament courtyard. Once inside, they dashed out of the vehicle and moved toward the main parliament entrance, firing as they went. Security forces managed to restore order, but not before 14 people—including all five assailants—were killed. It was one of the most serious terrorist attacks to take place in the Indian capital. Although no group claimed responsibility, the Indians blamed two extremist militant organizations based in Pakistan, the Jaish-e-Muhammad (Army of the Prophet) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (Army of the Pure) for the attack. Within weeks it would become the critical event that could lead to war.

The Indian prime minister, Atal Vajpayee, spoke to the Indian nation live on television. “This was not just an attack on the building, it was a warning to the entire nation,” he said. The Indian media responded in kind. The next day’s newspapers were full of horror at the attack—and calls for Pakistan to end support to militants, once and for all. Pointed references were made to Israel and the United States. If these two countries could combat terrorism and take on the countries behind it, why couldn’t India? India’s hard-line home minister, L. K. Advani, set the tone when he said: “We will liquidate the terrorists and their sponsors whoever they are, wherever they are.”

Within hours Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf had condemned the attack. He added, “I would like to convey our sympathies to the government and people of India as well as our deep condolences to the bereaved families.” The attack on the Indian parliament was also condemned by United States

President George W. Bush, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, and many other world leaders.

As the days passed, the crisis deepened. To India, it was the final straw in a series of terrorist attacks—including a suicide attack on the local Kashmir State Assembly on October 1, 2001. By December 20 the atmosphere was heated. India turned down Pakistan’s request for evidence backing up New Delhi’s assertion that Pakistani-backed militants were responsible for the parliament attack. This was also a rebuff to the United States, which had suggested that releasing this evidence would help reduce tension. This suggestion was not taken well in New Delhi—with Indian officials pointing out (privately) that the Americans had been equally unforthcoming in their campaign against terror.

There were unconfirmed reports of Indian troop movements close to the Pakistan border in Rajasthan. Meanwhile, President Musharraf flew to China, where he held meetings with Chinese President Jiang Zemin. China has long had warm relations with Pakistan, but in two previous Indo-Pakistani wars—in 1965 and 1971—had chosen not to intervene. While there, Musharraf slipped into combative language, accusing India of “arrogance” and engaging in knee-jerk reactions.

On the border, tensions were growing. Two Indian border guards were killed on December 22, allegedly by Pakistani fire. In New Delhi, Mohammad Sharif Khan, a Pakistani diplomat, was allegedly detained and beaten by Indian security officials. Khan was accused of spying, but whether he was spying (or not) or was beaten (or not), this incident further undermined already weak diplomatic channels between India and Pakistan. The next two days saw moves by Pakistan to stave off Indian action. On December 24, the State Bank of Pakistan froze Lashkar-e-Taiba bank accounts (at the instruction of the Pakistani government). This was followed quickly the next day by the detention by Pakistani security forces of Jaish-e-Muhammad chief Maulana Masood Azhar.

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But by December 25 war looked inevitable. Heavy Indian troop deployments along the Pakistani border were now accompanied by mass evacuations of civilians from adjoining areas. Indian and Pakistani forces secured their positions, laying extensive minefields in recently vacated fields and villages. Accidents on both sides linked to the transport of mines and munitions began to claim military and civilian lives.

On December 26, the United States again tried to reduce the political temperature when Secretary of State Colin Powell announced that the two militant groups India blamed for the parliament attack had been formally placed on the United States list of banned terrorist organizations. At the same time, Pakistani intelligence suggested that India was now poised to invade Pakistan; most of its army, and almost all its air force, was deployed in an offensive formation aimed at Pakistan.

India continued to apply pressure and took a series of steps on December 27, including announcing that it would halve its diplomatic representation in Pakistan, forbid Pakistani planes to enter Indian airspace beginning January 1, and close down transport links between both countries. Pakistan reciprocated.

India also prepared a list of 20 people it accused of involvement in acts of terrorism on Indian soil—and believed to be in Pakistan. On December 31, Arun Kumar Singh, a senior Indian external affairs ministry official, called in Pakistan's deputy high commissioner, Jalil Abbas Jeelani, to present him with the list. Singh then demanded that Pakistan hand over to India for trial those named on the list.

A CRISIS SLOWLY DEFUSED

As the new year rolled in, feverish diplomatic activity was taking place in Washington D.C. and London. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, it was announced, would soon travel to South Asia to meet directly with Indian and Pakistani leaders. While Britain and the United States were worried about the threat of direct conflict, they were also keen to head off the impact the crisis was beginning to have on the American-led coalition against terrorism. With work still to be done in Afghanistan, and unconfirmed reports that senior Taliban and Al Qaeda members might be slipping away into Pakistan itself, keeping Pakistan focused on supporting the war on terror was an important foreign policy priority. Already Pakistan had moved forces to the border with India that could have been used to intercept and detain suspected terrorists entering from Afghanistan.

The onus was on Pakistan to make concessions. On January 4, 2002, the Pakistani police raided a number of locations, mainly in Punjab province, detaining militants from the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Muhammad. But Colin Powell continued to apply pressure from the American side, saying that he expected Musharraf to do more. American officials were worried that India was determined to see major Pakistani concessions, and that nothing less would assuage New Delhi's leaders.

The Indian and Pakistani leaders themselves had assembled in the Nepalese capital, Kathmandu. A long-planned regional summit of leaders from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the weak South Asian regional body established in 1985, had begun a few days before. Musharraf and Vajpayee arrived on January 4, and considerable discussion ensued as to whether they would exchange words—or even a glance—during the summit. Musharraf arrived late, leading to speculation in the Indian press that he had no intention of taking the summit seriously.

Musharraf seized the diplomatic high ground—and the photo opportunity—when he walked over to Vajpayee and offered the startled Indian prime minister his hand. Vajpayee took it, and the summit handshake added weight to Musharraf's offer, made a few hours before, of a Pakistan “hand of friendship” to India. When Vajpayee addressed the summit, however, he made it clear that India stood by its position that only concrete action from Pakistan would pave the way for normalization of relations. The only positive sign came, once more, from the media advisers, who ensured that Vajpayee reciprocated Musharraf's visual gesture at the close of the summit. Two handshakes—but no serious talks—later, both leaders headed for home.

In both cases their next international engagement was with the British prime minister. Blair had a difficult role to play. He needed to affirm British support for India in cracking down on terrorism and soothe Indian concerns about the links between Washington and Islamabad that had been renewed with the United States–led coalition attack on Afghanistan. Even before he touched down on Indian soil, Blair clarified that he would not be telling either country how to run its affairs. Blair told reporters that, while Britain had no magic formula for peace, both he and President Bush were determined to prevent war from breaking out.

Blair flew into New Delhi the following day and met with the Indian prime minister on January 6. They signed a joint declaration condemning terror-

INDIA AND PAKISTAN: ENEMIES SINCE BIRTH

INDIA AND PAKISTAN were the two independent states that emerged when the British decolonized South Asia in August 1947. The two states were established under very different ideologies. India was a secular state, inheriting most Indian Hindus and many Indian Muslims. Pakistan was a state created for the Muslims of South Asia. The partition of British India to form these two successor states was riven by communal violence: hundreds of thousands of civilians were murdered as they fled their homes to join India or Pakistan. Within months, India and Pakistan went to war over the disputed mountain state of Kashmir. It has been split between the two countries ever since, with war once again breaking out over the former principality in 1965 (India and Pakistan also went to war in 1971 when

East Pakistan seceded to become the new state of Bangladesh).

During the 1990s, hostility between India and Pakistan deepened. Pakistan covertly supported a guerrilla war in Kashmir and, as it faltered, imported Islamist extremists to replace Kashmiri fighters. And India, increasingly confident, felt angry that it could not strike back directly against Pakistan. In 1999 a crisis developed as Pakistan unilaterally occupied strategically important mountaintops in Kashmir, with major fighting breaking out between troops from the two countries in these mountains. By 2001 India had grown increasingly impatient with what it saw as Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in Kashmir. Pakistan disagreed, arguing that Kashmiris were simply fighting for their right to self-determination. Then came the terror attacks on the Indian parliament building in December 2001. A. E.

ism and those who support it. And in a joint press conference the following day, Blair was careful not to endorse the specifics of Indian demands on Pakistan—although he again used language that endeared him to his Indian hosts. “The terrorist attacks of eleventh September, first October, and thirteenth December were deliberate attempts to shatter the peace of our peoples and to undermine democratic values. The attack on the Indian parliament was an attack on democracy worldwide” read the joint declaration. India’s wounded national pride was given its due by the visiting British prime minister.

On January 7, Blair turned to playing to a Pakistani audience. His meeting with President Musharraf was private, and officials unofficially suggested that Blair had been blunt about what Pakistan needed to do—although warm in his gratitude for Pakistan’s support in the war in Afghanistan. The press conference afterward said it all. A quiet Musharraf and a tired Blair fielded questions from the world’s media. Musharraf condemned terrorism, but avoided commenting on Indian demands. He said that he had stressed to Blair Pakistan’s “policy of restraint and responsibility.” Blair made his views clear. There was, he said, no likelihood of international intervention to solve the Kashmir dispute—a blunt remark that did not appear on either the official Pakistani- or British-edited transcripts. And the same day India and Pakistan were again trading diplomatic brickbats, with India claiming it had shot down a Pakistani drone in Indian airspace (Pakistan denied the charge).

What did the Blair mission achieve? The British press was critical, perhaps following accusations by

the opposition Conservative Party that Blair was neglecting domestic priorities. One or two commentators acerbically noted that Blair was also encouraging India to buy British-manufactured Hawk jets, a role that sat uneasily with his mission for peace. But Blair helped convey an important message from New Delhi (and Washington) to Pakistan—that the regime in Islamabad needed to respond substantively to Indian demands—while keeping India informed. Both the United States and Britain tilted toward India throughout the crisis to keep India from military action (Indian action could have provoked a nuclear exchange between the two recently declared nuclear powers, especially if Pakistan felt close to collapse following an Indian assault).

Following Blair’s departure from Pakistan, the Pakistani administration again was keen to keep the United States involved. On January 8 it became public knowledge that the government of Pakistan would allow American forces to enter Pakistani territory in “hot pursuit” of escaping terrorist suspects. Pakistan also formally detained the Lashkar-e-Taiba’s supreme leader, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed (although he had already been seized by security forces a week or so before). India expected more—but would Pakistan make any further concessions?

MUSHARRAF’S NEW PAKISTAN?

On Saturday January 12, 2002, newsrooms across the world waited for President Musharraf to speak to his nation—and India—in a live televised broadcast. Nobody quite knew what he might say,

although Pakistani diplomats had been at pains to indicate that it would be a major speech. And whatever it contained, they said in a series of hurried briefings with commentators in the United States and Britain, no further concessions would be made.

It did prove to be a remarkable speech. Musharraf spoke for over an hour, mainly in Urdu, but switching into English for the crucial section that dealt with India. It began as a vibrant defense of Pakistan's founding principles, but quickly turned to why Pakistan is foundering today. Topping his list was sectarianism and education. Pakistanis are sick of a "Kalashnikov culture," Musharraf said, where sectarian violence rules. He spoke of how Islam, the foundation stone of Pakistan, had been manipulated for sectarian ends. An "extremist minority," he said, was engaging in fratricidal killings.

In education, he explained, the traditions of Islam—which include achievements in the fields of mathematics, science, medicine, and astronomy—had been replaced by the current woeful state of affairs. Again, he accused extremists of responsibility for this, putting sectarianism before Islam. They had abused the concept of jihad. What Pakistan needed, Musharraf suggested, was a jihad against "illiteracy, poverty, backwardness, and hunger."

Pakistan's education system would be reformed. The madrassa (religious schooling) system could no longer be abused by sectarian interests. All mosques and madrassas would be regulated in the future.

It took the president over 30 minutes to mention the critical subject of Kashmir. Kashmir, he said, "runs in our blood." He promised that Pakistan would never budge an inch from its support for the Kashmir cause. And after warning the Indian leader that the Pakistani armed forces were ready for anything, he asked the international community to intervene to protect Kashmiris from human rights abuses.

In an important move, Musharraf said he had banned two radical sectarian groups held responsible for violence within Pakistan itself. Then he said he had banned the Jaish-e-Muhammad and the Lashkar-e-Taiba—the two groups India holds responsible for the December 13 attack on parliament. He cloaked the ban as an action against sectarianism.

Next, he announced new regulations for Pakistani madrassas, mosques, and foreign students (some of whom have been linked to militancy). The new regulations would include compulsory regis-

tration of all religious institutions, as well as individual registration of foreign students. He also promised that no terrorism would be conducted from Pakistani soil. As he made these announcements, the camera slowly panned in to his face, somberly filling the screen.

But he also drew a line in the sand. India, he explained, had provided a list of 20 people it wanted Pakistan to hand over. Pakistan would never extradite Pakistani citizens to India—although non-Pakistani nationals would have their cases investigated. On this demand, at least, Musharraf was unwilling to compromise.

Musharraf closed with a vision of a stronger Pakistan: a country that could take its place in the international community with honor—and act as a beacon for Islam.

Musharraf's January 12 speech was groundbreaking, but not unexpected. The government had alerted observers to expect a significant statement—in this case the key concession to India (the banning of the Jaish-e-Muhammad and the Lashkar-e-Taiba). And it also established a vision for Pakistan's future—one in which extremist rhetoric and violence would be curtailed.

The United States welcomed Musharraf's position, with warm statements from both President Bush and Secretary of State Powell. Tony Blair also endorsed his stand. And the government of India, while cautious about what Pakistan would do in practice, slowly welcomed Musharraf's commitments in the days that followed. The doubters persisted, however, in asking whether Musharraf would really crack down on Pakistani support for militancy. In February 2002, there were reports that Musharraf had closed down the ISI's Kashmir directorate. Whether this is cosmetic surgery, a specific move to delink extremist groups from former ISI sponsors, or a sweeping reform continues to be unknown.

INDIA'S GAMBLE

India seized an opportunity in December 2001. In escalating a crisis into a global drama, Prime Minister Vajpayee and his colleagues took a calculated risk. A sharp deterioration in Indo-Pakistani relations was to be expected, but the massive military buildup that followed was optional. Indian officials sensed a brief window of opportunity, and put

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together a strategy to make the most of it. The Indian public came on board, not least because the direct nature of the attack on the Indian parliament resonated with American shock at the September 11 terror attacks. Yet the policy was not driven by Indian public opinion; differences between elements in the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party-led coalition were more important.

Has it worked? The jury is still out. Musharraf did ban the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Muhammad, but his carefully phrased speech on January 12 did not mention Kashmiri terrorism and studiously avoided any mention of the Hezb-ul Mujahedeen, the main Kashmiri militant group. For Pakistan, the Hezb-ul Mujahedeen are freedom fighters, not terrorists. The Hezb-ul Mujahedeen do not engage in suicide attacks and have strong political links with Kashmiri separatist politicians.

Musharraf has accepted Indian demands that he act against extremist militant groups operating from Pakistan. His country has been portrayed as a safe harbor for terrorists, and one in which action is only belatedly being taken. Even so, Musharraf has managed to take back much of the presentational territory lost in the December 13 suicide attack on the Indian parliament. By boldly setting out a fresh path for Pakistan—with support from his fellow generals—he may achieve more than many of his elected, civilian predecessors. Ironically, Musharraf may have seized a series of small victories from an apparent diplomatic defeat in January. He has earned United States praise for responding to Indian demands. He has traded in extremist groups (who opposed him anyway), but has kept open lines with the Hezb-ul Mujahedeen. In Pakistan itself, he has renewed a national vision. It is not enough, though, for him to attempt to eliminate sectarianism and regulate foreign students (who are sometimes militant) resident in Pakistan. He faces several major challenges, all of which will need sustained action, not just words, to overcome.

Pakistan's economy and institutions are in a poor state. The additional aid, both bilateral and multilateral, that has flowed into the country since it joined the international coalition against terror—\$1 billion from the United States alone—is only a stop-gap. The country's creditors agreed to restructure \$12.5 billion of the country's external debt in December, and fresh loans have been promised.

But funds alone cannot solve Pakistan's crisis of governance; only a strengthening of Pakistan's insti-

tutions, action against corruption, and a collective commitment from the nation's elite will alter the trend of previous decades. If Pakistan is to prosper, Musharraf must offer more than words. And democracy, barely mentioned since Pakistan recovered its position as a significant United States ally, must form a part of the equation. To be fair, Musharraf has not been an old-school dictator, replete with dubious dress-sense and an insatiable appetite for power. Instead, he took on the reins of government almost reluctantly in October 1999, displacing former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's disintegrating and corrupt administration. Musharraf says he will return Pakistan to democracy—and it looks as if he means it, unlike Pakistan's last military dictator, General Zia ul-Haq, whose rule only ended with his death in 1988. Pakistan's new friendship with the United States—assuming it can last—can help steer it into safe waters as it pursues a return to democracy.

AMERICA'S ROLE

The December 2001 crisis showed how critical the American role is in South Asia. United Nations efforts to forge a peaceful settlement foundered; while India welcomes functional UN bodies (like UNCTAD and UNESCO), it is directly opposed to a UN role in settling South Asian disputes. Direct intervention by the United States or Britain is also rejected—but Washington can use good offices to help tamp down tensions.

How did the United States intervene during this latest crisis? Washington conducted an open and a private campaign to encourage India to back down from open conflict, all the time encouraging Pakistan to take steps against its own militants. President Bush also personally announced the banning of the Lashkar-e-Taiba on December 21, 2001, calling it a "stateless sponsor of terrorism." His statement signaled America's commitment to take a stand against groups determined to exacerbate Indo-Pakistani hostility. And when Musharraf finally conceded to some of India's demands, American leaders were quick to praise him.

America has intensified its efforts to reduce regional tension by restraining India and encouraging concessions from Pakistan. In the future it needs to focus on Kashmir, which is the proximate cause of Indo-Pakistani tension. The Kashmir issue must be solved—or at least salvaged. The United States has tried to do so before, each time failing to

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ever be removed from Indo-Pakistani relations?*

deliver a peaceful compromise acceptable to India and Pakistan. In the 1950s, American efforts were largely directed through the UN, failing mainly due to the Indians. In the early 1960s, an intensive bilateral effort involving six rounds of Indo-Pakistani talks yielded little, largely in the face of Pakistani obstruction. Since the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war the United States has shied away from active attempts to solve the Kashmir dispute, while keeping open the offer of its good offices should India and Pakistan jointly seek to call on them.

FUTURE TENSIONS, FUTURE HOPES

Another South Asian crisis has apparently subsided. But with no clear sign of improved relations between India and Pakistan, tensions are bound to bubble to the surface once more.

Three facts give cause for optimism. First, the crisis has not become a war—as it easily could have on December 29. Second, in late February 2002 the border between India and Pakistan was remarkably quiet. After a surfeit of cross-border shelling and occasional displays of machismo, the message on both sides appears to be restraint. Third, Pakistan has reviewed its Kashmir policy by banning the two major militant groups, the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Muhammad, and by showing a willingness to address sectarian strife—and international militants. Pakistan thus appears to have prevented Indian military action.

There are also three reasons for pessimism. First, India and Pakistan have not resolved their differences—which remain vast. The organizing principles of Pakistan's Kashmir policy continue to challenge Indian claims to sovereignty in Kashmir. And, on a regular basis, senior Indians continue to use strong language—for example, talking of an “axis of terror” (to echo President Bush's State of the Union address regarding Iraq, Iran, and North Korea) based in Pakistan. Reduced diplomatic links make misperception and renewed sources of tension likely.

Second, both countries remain at a high level of military mobilization—an expensive and possibly dangerous state of affairs. High concentrations of military forces, mines, and borders do not mix well. The lack of significant demobilization points to continuing concerns in New Delhi that Indian diplomatic objectives have not yet been met. And third, there is a wildcard. Most militants have fallen into line behind Musharraf, but a radical tail retains the capacity to strike at Indian targets—and lacks the constraint of Pakistani support to hold them back from attacks like that on the Indian parliament. For example, militants from the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba have reformed themselves, mounting a campaign to disprove their terrorist status and stat-

ing that they will not target Westerners in an attempt to gain Islamabad's favor, but elements in the Jaish-e-Muhammad have vowed to continue their war—with or without Pakistani support.

One member of this radical tail is surely the suspected terrorist Ahmed Sheikh. A one-time student at the London School of Economics, he has already been involved in one kidnapping (of American and British backpackers in India in 1994). Although he was arrested by India in connection with that case, he was then released as part of a deal with the hijackers of an Indian Airlines flight in December 1999. Slipping back into Pakistan, he went deep underground.

On January 23, 2002 Daniel Pearl, an American journalist with the *Wall Street Journal*, disappeared while pursuing a story in Karachi, Pakistan. He was kidnapped by unknown militants, probably connected to Ahmed Sheikh. Although Sheikh was arrested by Pakistani authorities on February 12, at some stage Pearl was murdered—and his videotaped death was confirmed on February 21, 2002. Pearl was a victim of the same sectarianism that has ripped apart Pakistan since the early 1980s—a sectarianism that makes simplistic assertions about religion and politics (one of the putative reasons given for Pearl's kidnap was that he was a Jew).

An equally deformed politics shapes relations between India and Pakistan. When thinking about each other, both nations are obsessed with the past and blind to their own current domestic problems. In his January speech, President Musharraf made a start by promising to take on Pakistan's extremists. He will be judged by his actions. In India, the festering problem of Kashmir requires political as well as military attention—and it is not clear whether the Indian government has the will or the desire to rectify past wrongs and engage with ordinary Kashmiris. As one sign of progress, India has appointed a new representative to advance a process of dialogue in Kashmir. The official, Wajahat Habibullah, a Muslim Indian bureaucrat, is well respected on all sides and could make headway, despite expectations to the contrary.

There continues to be ample scope for tension between these two hostile neighbors. India still harbors doubts about Pakistan's commitment to peace, and Pakistani policymakers remain anxious about Indian policies, wondering whether the threat of war may be used again. Unfortunately, the precedent suggests that a measure of military threat helped deliver Indian diplomatic objectives. Fortunately, Pakistan's response to the crisis suggests that its covert war on India in Kashmir may soon be reined in. Can violence—and the threat of violence—ever be removed from Indo-Pakistani relations? ■