



Kashmir, the War on Terrorism, and Nonproliferation in South Asia

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On October 1, 38 people were killed in a suicide car-bomb attack on the State Assembly in the India-controlled section of Kashmir. An Islamic extremist group with ties to Pakistan, Jaish-e- Mohammad, claimed responsibility for the attack, one of the deadliest in recent memory in the conflict-torn region.

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India moved quickly to accuse Pakistan of supporting terrorism in Kashmir and of protecting the leader of Jaish-e-Mohammad, tried to establish a link between the attack and Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization, and called on the U.S. to expand its war on terrorism to include action against terrorists in Kashmir and the states that support them (i.e. Pakistan). Pakistan condemned the attack and denied responsibility for it, although Vincent Cannistraro, a former CIA counterterrorism official, testified before Congress on October 3 that Kashmir militants train at Taliban-operated and Pakistan-backed camps in Afghanistan.

Secretary of State Colin Powell was also quick to condemn the attack, but was careful not to level any specific accusations against Pakistan, a politically volatile Muslim nation that has become the key U.S. ally in the fight against Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban. Powell said in a press conference on October 2, "We are going after terrorism in a comprehensive way, not just in the present instance of Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden, but terrorism as it affects all nations around the world, to include the kind of terrorism that affects India."

Meanwhile, officials in India have been dissatisfied with the U.S. response, and warned that India would not endure further attacks in Kashmir for much longer. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee wrote in a letter, "Pakistan must understand that there is a limit to the patience of the people of India." The chief minister in India-controlled Kashmir, Dr. Farooq Abdullah, tearfully called on India to take military action against Pakistan in retaliation for the attacks. "If the U.S. could not wait for a day after Black Tuesday (September 11), are not twelve years too much for testing our patience?" Abdullah asked. Militant groups have been waging a violent rebellion in Kashmir since 1989, trading fire with Indian security forces on almost a daily basis.

The attack illustrates the difficulties the U.S. faces in mounting a campaign against Afghanistan in a neighborhood where two nuclear-capable countries, India and Pakistan, have fought three wars and countless border skirmishes in the past 50 years.

Both India and Pakistan are trying to use the war on terrorism to stake their claim to Kashmir. India clearly groups Pakistan among the terrorists that the U.S. is trying to eliminate and in so doing hopes to gain the moral and diplomatic high ground in Kashmir. Pakistan recognizes that it is an important piece of the U.S. coalition against Bin Laden and the Taliban, and therefore has an incentive to get away with as much as it can in Kashmir for as long as the U.S. is willing to look the other way. Furthermore, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf may have an incentive to support increased militant activity in Kashmir in order to demonstrate to hard-liners in his country that, even though he is cooperating with the U.S., he has not given up on Pakistan's top cause.

Indeed, the violence in Kashmir, which happens on almost a daily basis, has taken on increased intensity since September 11. The ultimate result may be that another attack such as that which took place on Monday could spark wider fighting between Indian and Pakistani troops, fighting that could escalate into a new war and lead to possible operational deployment of nuclear weapons by both Pakistan and India. These are outcomes that must be avoided.

The U.S. must work to defuse tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir before they spill over into a conflict that could wreck the painstakingly-built coalition against terrorism and bring about a chain reaction of destabilizing events in South Asia.

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