

Fighting escalates in Kashmir

A dangerous confrontation between India and Pakistan

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A major escalation of the conflict between Pakistan and India is looming following the use of fighter aircraft by the Indian Air Force over the last two days to strafe groups of anti-Indian insurgents entrenched in the inhospitable mountain region of Kargil-Batalik-Drass in the disputed areas of Kashmir.

The danger of a military confrontation between the two nuclear powers was ratcheted up another notch on Thursday after the downing of two Indian warplanes—one through mechanical failure and the other shot down by a Pakistani surface-to-air missile. Both aircraft crashed in Pakistani-held territory: one pilot was killed and the other is being kept as a “prisoner-of-war”.

The incident provoked a fresh round of belligerent accusation and counteraccusation. Indian Air Vice-Marshal S.K. Malik described the downing of the aircraft as a “provocative and hostile act” by Pakistan, insisting that the planes were operating on its side of the Line of Control (LoC) demarcating the Indian state of Kashmir and Jammu from the Pakistani-held Azad-Kashmir.

A senior Pakistani military spokesman, Major-General Anis Bajwa, claimed that the Indian aircraft had “rocketed” Pakistani positions in the Indus sub-sector on Wednesday, and were shot down when they returned to the area on the following day. He described the violation of Pakistani airspace as an “act of war” and said the captured pilot would be held “under the regulations” though neither side has declared war.

The air strikes that began on Wednesday, involving MiG-27 and MiG-23 fighters as well as attack helicopters and British-made Jaguar jets, are part of India's military operations against Kashmiri separatists dug in on a series of high ridges between 4,500 and 5,000 metres inside Indian territory. Key targets have been positions that overlook a strategic highway connecting Srinagar,

Kashmir's summer capital, with the eastern city of Leh.

For many years spring has brought incursions from Pakistani-held Kashmir, where several pro-Pakistani and pro-Kashmiri independence guerrilla groups have bases. But India claims the current incursion is different and involves regular Pakistani troops. The force of around 600 is well provisioned and equipped with snowmobiles and heavy artillery. According to Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes, it would have taken at least a month to establish the positions in the Kargil area, where they were discovered in early May.

Despite the loss of the military aircraft, the Indian government of Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee has vowed to continue “Operation Vijay” which was launched on May 14 to drive out the Kashmiri separatist force. The Indian military claims to have killed more than 200 of the insurgents and recaptured key positions.

On Wednesday, Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani stated: “We will deal with it as swiftly as possible, but I cannot say how long it will take to smash the Pakistani designs.” A high-level meeting on Thursday involving Vajpayee, Advani, the defence minister and military chiefs decided to increase the intensity and scale of the air strikes, and to adopt “extraordinary measures” to provide air cover for Indian warplanes.

The confrontation in Kashmir has rekindled the political tensions on the Indian subcontinent that erupted in May 1998 when the two powers carried out rival nuclear tests. Only last February, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif were claiming that their Lahore declaration, which increased bilateral cooperation, constituted a new era in Indian-Pakistani relations.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu chauvinist party that dominates India's caretaker coalition

government, has described the situation in Kashmir as “war-like.” India alleges that Pakistan has staged the incursion to draw international attention to its half-century long conflict with India over Kashmir. Pakistan has long-favored an “international” solution to the Kashmir question, that is the direct involvement of the US, Britain or other major powers—a move that India has adamantly opposed.

In Pakistan, opposition parties are urging the government to take tough measures against India. The Pakistan People's Party of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto has branded the Indian air strikes “a brutal exercise against innocent civilians”. The fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami party has urged Pakistan to sever diplomatic, economic and cultural relations with India.

Both the Indian and Pakistani governments are in deep crisis and have an interest in manipulating tensions in Kashmir to whip up nationalist and religious sentiment to deflect public attention from the turmoil within their own borders. The BJP-led coalition, which lost a non-confidence motion in April, is a caretaker regime until India goes to the polls later in the year. As the incumbent, the BJP has an added reason to turn the focus away from India's severe social problems and waning economic growth.

While Sharif's parliamentary majority is not immediately threatened, Pakistan's economy is mired in recession and has been teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. His Muslim League government has had to increasingly attack press freedoms and resort to other forms of repression to stifle opposition.

Kashmir is adjacent to the key strategic area of Central Asia, near the former Soviet republic of Tadzhikistan to the north and China to the east. The protracted and bitter dispute over the area is one of the fruits of the partition of the Indian subcontinent sponsored by British imperialism in 1947.

In pre-independence British India, the Indian National Congress was a close ally of Kashmir's main political party, the Kashmiri National Conference, which fought for democratic reforms in opposition to the British-backed princely ruler or Maharaja. But having accepted the partition of India along communal lines, the Congress secured the accession of the majority-Muslim Kashmir to India through a deal with the Maharaja. Two of the three Indian-Pakistani wars have been fought directly over the Kashmir question.

Under the constitution, Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, enjoys a special status with greater

autonomy than any other state. The BJP and its forerunner the Jana Sangh have long raised the abolition of Kashmir's special status as one of their key demands. Nevertheless, the Kashmiri National Conference backed the BJP government for over a year, although it did not formally join the BJP-led coalition.

In the late 1980s, Kashmiri secessionist agitation developed. This agitation was, as with similar movements elsewhere in India, fueled by poverty and unemployment, especially the economic frustrations of an enlarged literate, urban population. It drew strength from the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which was encouraged by the CIA after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, as well as from the concern among Kashmiri Muslims over the development of Hindu communalism in India.

For seven years, from 1990 until mid-1996, Jammu and Kashmir was ruled by India's central government. More recently, agitation either for an independent Indian Kashmir or its merger with Pakistan has waned as a result of severe and often brutal repression by Indian security forces, growing popular distrust of Pakistan, and increasing alienation with the rabid communalism and violent tactics of the Kashmiri militants.

While Indian politicians falsely blame the “hidden hand” of Pakistan for various economic and social problems, there is no question that Pakistan has promoted the Kashmiri separatist agitation, as a means of countering its much larger Indian rival, and increasingly, as a means of holding in check centrifugal tensions within the Pakistani state itself.

The dispute over Kashmir is once again threatening not only to drag Pakistan and India into military confrontation but to embroil the neighbouring states and major powers in a wider conflict.



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