India and Pakistan involved in fatal border clash

Keith Jones
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India and Pakistan are trading accusations after a bloody clash over the Line of Control (LoC) in disputed Kashmir early yesterday morning.

Pakistan's military claims that one of its soldiers was killed and another gravely wounded while repelling Indian troops who had "physically raided" an army outpost in the Bagh District of Azad Kashmir—the part of Kashmir now held by Pakistan. It also claims that a Pakistani civilian was killed in exchanges of cross-border shelling after the incursion was repelled.

India has rejected the Pakistani account. It accuses Pakistani forces of launching an unprovoked artillery barrage on Indian troops on the Indian side of the Line of Control. It claims Indian troops responded in self-defense, but did not cross the LoC.

"None of our troops crossed the Line of Control," Indian Colonel Brijesh Pandey told Associated Press. "We have no casualties or injuries."

Pakistani and Indian troops frequently exchange artillery and gunfire across the LoC, but deaths are rare, as are claims that troops from one country invaded the other's territory.

India and Pakistan have been bitter rivals since they were founded in 1947, in the communal partition of the subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India. They have fought three declared wars and passed through numerous war crises. For nine months in 2001-2, Indian troops were on a war footing, after New Delhi claimed that Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus was implicated in a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament.

Both New Delhi and Islamabad appear to be downplaying yesterday's clash. Neither side has made any threats of withdrawing from bilateral talks or exchanges

For almost a decade, India and Pakistan have been engaged in a "comprehensive peace process." Virtually no progress has been made on the major issues in dispute, however, including their rival claims to all of Kashmir, and they continue to engage in a broad geopolitical rivalry and arms race. They also continue to trade accusations of inciting internal unrest, with India accusing Islamabad of sponsoring "terrorism" in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only majority-Muslim state, and Pakistan charging New Delhi of supporting nationalist insurgents in Balochistan.

India effectively froze the peace process for more than three years after the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist atrocity, which was carried out by a team of commandos that arrived in Mumbai from Pakistan by sea.

Although bilateral negotiations resumed last February, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recently rebuffed a Pakistani offer to visit. New Delhi insists that better relations with Islamabad depend upon Pakistan obliging Indian demands on the Mumbai attack. These include the right to interrogate and have access to all evidence Pakistan has collected on seven persons now on trial in Pakistan for their involvement in the Mumbai events.

Pakistan Interior Minister Rehman Malik visited India for three days last month in part to discuss the countries' respective investigations into the Mumbai attack, which killed more than 160 people. But in a clear sign of continuing discord, plans for the issuing of a joint communiqué were shelved at the last minute. India's political elite responded with outrage when Malik mentioned the razing of the Babri Majid mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, which triggered the biggest anti-Muslim pogrom in India since Partition, in the same sentence as the Mumbai attack.

Malik said, "I bring a message of peace from the

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people of Pakistan. We do not want 9/11, Bombay blast, Samjhauta blast or Babri Majid. Let us forget the past and move ahead."

In an interview published Sunday, Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid again insisted on the importance of Pakistan responding positively to India's "wish-list" on the Mumbai attack. "Unless that is done," said Kurshid, "we will not have substantive movement."

Over the past two years, the two sides have agreed to some "confidence-building" measures, but their implementation has often proven difficult. Pakistan recently failed to live up to an agreement to give most-favored-nation status to Indian imports, although it claims that such status will soon be granted.

The two sides are reportedly close to an agreement over the demarcation of the border in the Sir Creek, which lies between the Indian state of Gujarat and the Pakistani province of Sindh. But no agreement has been announced. Instead, India, to protestations from Pakistan, has begun building a fence through the Sir Creek, so as to bolster its territorial claims.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the latest border clash, relations between the two countries are fraught and threaten to become even more explosive because they have become intertwined with the U.S.'s drive to lay claim to the energy riches of Central Asia and to contain China.

While Washington, under Obama and before him George W. Bush, has urged Islamabad and New Delhi to pursue rapprochement, its actions have disrupted the balance of power between the two nuclear-armed states.

To Pakistan's chagrin, the United States has encouraged India to play a major role in Afghanistan, including providing training to Afghan security forces. With the United States now moving to reduce its troop commitment in Afghanistan and reconfigure the puppet government in Kabul, New Delhi and Islamabad are frantically competing for influence in Afghanistan.

Even more significant is the impact of the U.S. drive to encircle China—a development that doubly threatens Islamabad. First it undercuts Pakistan's entire geopolitical strategy, which since the 1960s has rested on the twin pillars of a close partnership with the U.S. and China. Second, the U.S. has identified India, which fought a border war with China in 1962 and views it as a rival for influence in Asia and on world oil markets, as central to its strategy of blocking China.

The United States government has declared that it wants to assist India in becoming a "world power" and as proof of this intent negotiated a special status for India within the world nuclear regulatory regime that allows it access to advanced civilian nuclear technology and fuel. While the agreement is ostensibly only about civilian nuclear energy, it has enormous military strategic implications, as it allows India to focus its indigenous nuclear program on developing its nuclear weapons capacity. Pakistan has reportedly responded by embarking on a crash program to expand its own nuclear weapons arsenal.

The Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" has further increased apprehensions in Islamabad, as it sees its longstanding rival being wooed with offers of military equipment and support for its ambitions in the Indian Ocean. Washington clearly views India as crucial to its increasingly belligerent stance against China and its aim is to draw India into a military alliance with allies across the Asian-Pacific region, principally Japan and Australia.

Although India's Congress Party-led government has repeatedly declared that it aspires to friendly relations with China, it has rapidly expanded military ties with the US. It has also repeatedly acquiesced to pressure from Washington for support on the world arena, particularly in its relentless campaign of war threats against Iran.

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