

India and Pakistan exchange threats in Kashmir border dispute

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15 January 2013

Tensions between India and Pakistan along the Line of Control (LoC) in the disputed Kashmir region remain acute, with New Delhi and Islamabad charging one another with initiating the past eight days of intermittent border clashes.

A “flag meeting” yesterday between Indian and Pakistani military officers at the LoC reportedly ended in failure after just 15 minutes. According to a report in the Indian-based *Hindu*, the leader of the Indian delegation, Brigadier T.S. Sandhu, said India reserves the “right to retaliate” until Pakistan issues a public apology for an alleged cross-border raid on January 8 in which two Indian soldiers were reportedly killed, with one of them subsequently beheaded.

The Pakistani military delegation rejected all the Indian charges. It accused India of systematically violating the 2003 ceasefire agreement by building additional bunkers in recent months, then on January 6 crossing into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, killing one Pakistani soldier and critically injuring another.

Earlier Monday, the head of the Indian Army, General Bickram Singh, gave a belligerent speech in which he leveled new charges against Pakistan and urged his subordinate officers in Kashmir “to be aggressive and offensive in face of provocation and fire... No passivity is expected of them.”

Speaking at a press conference at the annual India Army day ceremony, General Singh charged that Pakistan’s alleged January 8 cross-border raid had been a “premeditated and pre-planned” action. He amplified previous inflammatory Indian charges about the beheading of one its soldiers, calling it a “gruesome, most unpardonable act.” He then warned that the Indian Army reserved “the right to retaliate at a time and place of its choosing.”

In an article entitled, “Fight Pakistan fire with fire, Army chief orders commanders on LoC,” the *Times of India* reported: “Although Gen. Singh emphasized the current tension would not escalate into a conflagration, holding that several stages have to be crossed before the countries go to a full-scale war, he did admit that the first stage of the spiral

has been reached.”

In other words, New Delhi is actively considering punitive military action, gambling that any subsequent escalation between the nuclear-armed states can be controlled and contained.

On Saturday, Indian Air Force head Air Chief Marshal N.K. Browne implicitly raised the possibility of military action against Pakistan beyond the current daily exchanges of artillery and gun fire. “We are monitoring the situation very carefully,” Browne said, “because if these things continue the way they are and the violations continue to take place, then perhaps we may have to look at some other options for compliance.”

On the same day, Indian Foreign Minister Salman Kurshid indicated that the Congress Party-led government was under huge pressure to strike at Pakistan diplomatically and militarily. Though he named no one, Kurshid was clearly pointing to sections of India’s military-national security apparatus and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party. “We’re not going to be pressurized by wild calls for revenge and reaction,” said Kurshid.

Speaking Monday, Kurshid reaffirmed the government’s support for continuing the comprehensive peace process that India and Pakistan initiated in 2003, but which has made little progress. “When you make an enormous investment in the peace process,” said Kurshid, “you don’t just do it because it sounds good.”

Pakistan’s government has also repeatedly reaffirmed its support for the peace process, which only resumed last February after an effective three-year suspension. But these affirmations have been coupled, as in the case of India, with threatening statements from Pakistan’s military leaders.

An article in the *Hindu* last Thursday based on Indian government and military sources contradicted official Indian claims that Pakistan initiated the border clashes out of the blue. According to the *Hindu*, last September the Indian army began building bunkers in the Charonda area of the LoC so as to improve their surveillance, after an elderly woman living in Indian-held Kashmir slipped across the

LoC to be reunited with her sons in Pakistan held-Kashmir. The sons had reportedly fled into Azad Kashmir because Indian security forces, who are notorious for their use of torture and disappearances in suppressing the Pakistan-supported insurgency against Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir, thought they were involved in cross-border smuggling.

Tensions in Charonda had escalated for more than three months prior to the January 6 firefight. The Pakistani military insisted that the bunkers be removed because they violated the 2003 truce and the two sides exchanged intermittent artillery and gun fire. In one incident in October, three villagers on the Indian side were killed by Pakistani firing.

The article also reported that last year both Indian and Pakistani soldiers had beheaded enemy soldiers killed in border skirmishes. This revelation underscores that the Indian military and government have made a very deliberate decision to highlight the claim of a Pakistani atrocity for propaganda purposes.

While the *Hindu*'s account is credible, even if not wholly correct, it hardly constitutes an explanation for why India and Pakistan are once again exchanging bellicose threats or why a peace process supposedly supported by the ruling elites of both countries staggers from crisis to crisis. A miscalculation by either government or military could become the tripwire for a rapid escalation of the border skirmishes into a limited or even all-out war.

The geo-political rivalry between Indian and Pakistan is rooted in the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent—into a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan—a bloody division carried out by the national bourgeoisies of India and Pakistan in connivance with British imperialism and which has served to frustrate economic development, stoke communalism, and facilitate imperialist oppression.

In the ensuing six-and-half decades, the ruling elites of both countries have developed vast material and political interests in the perpetuation of their inter-state rivalry and animosity. Not least is its use as a mechanism for channeling the social anger and frustration born of mass poverty and economic insecurity away from the native bourgeoisie and along reactionary nationalist and communal lines.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, a powerful new destabilizing factor has been added to this toxic mix—US imperialism's drive to assert its hegemony in Asia.

The US drive to make India a key linchpin in its efforts to contain and thwart China's rise has radically altered the strategic balance in South Asia, enmeshing the India-Pakistan rivalry with that between the US and China, and thereby adding an explosive new dimension to each.

Since the mid-1960s, geo-politically the Pakistani state has

rested on the twin pillars of the US and China. While this served US interests during the Cold War, when India was aligned with the Soviet Union, the US "pivot" to Asia is doubly undermining Pakistan. Not only is the US lavishing support on India, thereby strengthening New Delhi's hand against Pakistan, Islamabad's close ties to China increasingly cut across its relations with Washington, on which the Pakistani bourgeoisie has always looked as the bulwark of its class rule.

The US has openly proclaimed its readiness to "help" India become a "world power," beginning with the projection of Indian naval power across the Indian Ocean. It has negotiated a special status for India in the world nuclear regulatory regime as a nuclear weapons state and non-signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This status, which has been denied Pakistan, allows India access to nuclear fuel and advanced civilian technology, and thereby to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development. Pakistan has reportedly responded by embarking on a crash program to expand its nuclear arsenal.

The US also encouraged India to develop a strategic partnership with Pakistan's northern neighbour, Afghanistan, after it occupied the country so as to project US power into Central Asia. With the US now planning to draw down its troop strength in Afghanistan and reorganize the puppet government in Kabul, both New Delhi and Islamabad are anxiously jockeying for influence.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the current Indo-Pakistani border clashes, the workers of South Asia and internationally must draw fundamental political conclusions: US imperialism's efforts to offset its economic decline through the assertion of its military power are exacerbating geo-political conflicts and tensions around the world and sowing the seeds for ever-widening military conflict. If the systemic crisis of world capitalism is not to result in military conflagrations of the scale of the last century, the working class must be united and mobilized on a socialist internationalist program against US and world imperialism.



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