

Renewed clashes between India and Pakistan in disputed Kashmir

Sampath Perera
16 August 2013

Relations between India and Pakistan have again been plunged into crisis, with intensifying tensions along the Line of Control (LoC), which divides disputed Kashmir between Indian and Pakistani-controlled sectors, following the killing of five Indian soldiers last week.

The renewed tensions place in jeopardy proposed talks between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, slated to be held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York next month.

Sharif, in a statement Wednesday, said that he is seeking UN mediation to resolve the Kashmir dispute, although India has long expressed vehement opposition to any third-party intervention. India and Pakistan have fought three wars over Kashmir, including in the immediate aftermath of the communal division of the subcontinent in 1947, in 1965, and an undeclared war in 1999.

Taking an aggressive stance, the Indian military issued its own statement Wednesday accusing the Pakistani army of violating the 2003 ceasefire agreement nine times in the preceding four days. It charged that the Pakistani military fired at 16 Indian army posts and also into civilian areas. Pakistan has rejected these charges, accusing India of initiating any cross-border firing and charging that the Indian military killed one civilian and badly injured another in shelling Tuesday.

India's two houses of parliament, for their part, unanimously passed identical resolutions Wednesday rejecting a Pakistan National Assembly motion that accused India of "unprovoked aggression" and pledged "diplomatic, political and moral support for the just and legitimate struggle of the Kashmiri people for the realisation of their right to self-determination."

The Pakistani military and intelligence apparatus long

provided pivotal assistance to an anti-Indian insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, but sharply curtailed such aid under the 2003 ceasefire agreement and the now stalled "comprehensive peace process." India, however, has demanded Pakistan go much further, including actively suppressing Kashmiri insurgent groups. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reiterated this in his Independence Day address to the nation Thursday. "For relations with Pakistan to improve," declared Singh, "it is essential they prevent the use of their territory and territory under their control for any anti-India activity."

The Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's initial reaction to the deaths of five Indian soldiers ambushed near the Line of Control on August 7 was cautious, with Defence Minister Antony refraining from accusing the Pakistani military of participating in or directly organizing the attack. But under pressure from the military, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, the official opposition), and a bellicose corporate media, the Congress led-government quickly changed its tune.

Antony told parliament, "It is now clear that Specialist Forces of the Pakistan Army were involved in the [August 7] attack." He then warned, "Our restraint should not be taken for granted," adding, "We all know that nothing happens from the Pakistan side of the LoC without the support, assistance, facilitation and often, direct involvement of the Pakistan Army."

Under conditions where the Indian and Pakistani governments confront grave economic problems—both countries face an imminent threat of a current accounts crisis—and the balance of power in the region has been destabilized by the U.S.'s aggressive courting of India as part of its anti-China "pivot to Asia," tensions between the rival nuclear-armed states have the

potential to spin out of control, triggering a major conflagration.

India has been involved in three border clashes in the past eight months. For two weeks in January its military was involved in cross-border exchanges with Pakistan, after it accused Pakistani forces of mounting a raid in Indian-held Kashmir. And for three weeks in the spring there was a standoff with China, after India accused Chinese troops of setting up a camp on the Indian side of the “Line of Actual Control.” Longtime close allies, China and Pakistan both accused India of precipitating these earlier border clashes, by establishing new fortifications along their respective disputed borders.

Predictably, the BJP has seized on the most recent border dispute with Pakistan to intensify its attacks on a Congress-led government that has been seriously weakened by the rapidly deteriorating economic situation. In a major address last weekend, Narendra Modi, the Gujarat Chief Minister and BJP’s presumptive prime ministerial candidate for the 2014 national elections, denounced the Congress government for “appeasing” both Islamabad and Beijing.

The National Conference, a UPA ally and the governing party in Jammu and Kashmir, has accused the BJP of inciting the communal rioting that erupted in Kishtwar last week in the wake of the border clash. The communal fighting left three people dead and more than a score injured. To restore order, authorities placed much of the Jammu region under curfew and deployed Indian army troops in Kishtwar.

A significant section of India’s military-intelligence establishment has also seized upon the border clashes to pressure the UPA government not to respond favourably to Sharif’s appeals for a renewed push to normalize Indo-Pakistani relations.

A group of about 40 retired senior retired military, intelligence and civilian officials held a press conference in New Delhi on August 9 and issued the following hawkish statement:

“At a time when Pakistan is day in and day out using terrorism against us, it would be ill-advised for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to meet with Nawaz Sharif as it would signal that relations between the two countries are in a business-as-usual mode.

“We, therefore, strongly recommend that we do not rush into a dialogue with Pakistan, and the proposed

meeting between the Prime Ministers of the two countries be cancelled.”

While the geopolitical rivalry between India and Pakistan is rooted in the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent, the U.S.’s promotion of India as a “counter-weight” to China has disrupted the balance of power in South Asia. Pakistan, which served as a U.S. Cold War proxy, now finds itself reduced to playing second fiddle to the Indo-U.S. strategic partnership. This is taking place even as the Pakistani regime provides pivotal assistance to Washington in securing its interests in Afghanistan--at the cost of turning much of Pakistan’s tribal regions into a killing field.

Indeed, a major complaint of the Pakistani elite is that the U.S. has encouraged India to play a major and growing role in Afghanistan, including in the training of Afghan security forces.

Questioned by an Indian journalist about the latest crisis in Indo-Pakistani relations, an Obama administration spokesman urged both sides to ratchet down tensions and to work toward resolving the Kashmir dispute through bilateral talks, blithely ignoring how Washington’s predatory foreign policy makes this ever more an empty, pious hope.



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