

Tense standoff between India and Pakistan along their disputed Kashmir border continues

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After more than three weeks of daily artillery exchanges, tensions between India and Pakistan across the Line of Control in the disputed Kashmir region appear to have subsided.

It remains, however, an open question as to whether Indian Prime Minister Manmoham Singh and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will meet, as previously announced, on the sidelines of next month's UN General Assembly meeting in New York.

Nor can it be excluded that the border tensions will soon erupt anew. The US's promotion of India as a strategic counterweight to China has destabilized the balance of power in South Asia. New Delhi and Islamabad are locked in a fierce struggle for influence in Afghanistan, where the US is in the process of drawing down its occupation forces and reorganizing the Kabul government. Furthermore, in Indian-held Kashmir, where the Pakistan military-intelligence apparatus long provided logistical support to a separatist insurgency, the mass of the population remains disaffected, causing great anxiety in Indian ruling circles.

No publicly announced interaction between Indian and Pakistani government or military officials proceeded this week's tapering off of cross-border firing. But as a "goodwill gesture," Islamabad last weekend released 362 Indian fishermen whom it had detained during the past two years for straying into Pakistani waters.

The Indian government, for its part, has been preoccupied in recent days with stopping the plummet of the rupee, arresting the slide into the morass of "stagflation," and forestalling a current accounts crisis.

This month's border clashes quickly escalated after

the Indian military blamed Pakistani Special Forces for the killing of five Indian soldiers by ambush within Indian-held Kashmir on August 6. Denying any involvement of their military in the incident, Pakistan instead accused India of violating the shaky 2003 ceasefire unprovoked and of having killed one of its soldiers in late July.

Thereafter, the two sides engaged in daily cross-border shelling, with both sides accusing the other of initiating each day's fresh exchanges and of targeting civilians, while issuing bellicose threats. Last week Pakistan said Indian forces had killed two of its soldiers.

Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony, who had been accused by the opposition parties of having given Pakistan "an out" by not immediately declaring the Pakistani military responsible for the August 6 ambush, vowed India "will take all possible steps—sometimes strong action—to effectively retaliate against every violation of the Line of Control," that separates Indian- and Pakistan-held Kashmir. Antony suggested such retaliation could include a cross border raid, action that could easily provoke a rapid escalation.

As was the case in the two other border crises involving India this year, one with Pakistan last January and the other with China for three weeks in April-May, Indian political and especially Indian military leaders adopted the more bellicose public stance.

India's military has become more assertive in recent years, frequently issuing provocative public statements directed against Pakistan and China. This new assertiveness has been fed by the increasing money and attention Indian governments have lavished on the military, which the Indian elite views as critical to

realizing its ambitions of becoming a major Indian Ocean and Asian power.

The Official Opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and a raft of geopolitical and military-security experts, many of them retired military officers, seized on the cross border clashes to demand that the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government scuttle next month's meeting with Sharif, which is a prerequisite for relaunching the two countries' long-stalled "comprehensive peace dialogue".

The BJP's stance is clearly bound up with the calculation that it can score political gains by making a reactionary communalist appeal that couples accusations the Congress-led government is "soft" on Pakistan and "terrorism" with claims that it "appeases" India's Muslim minority.

But its position also gives voice to the views of wide sections of the military-security apparatus that calculate India's strategic alliance with the U.S. and economic expansion of the last decade have given it the geopolitical and economic leverage to force significant concessions from Islamabad. In particular they want to force Pakistan to distance itself still further from the Kashmir insurgency.

Ceding to the pressure for a stronger stance against Pakistan, the UPA government has indicated it is considering cancelling the meeting with Sharif. Speaking with the *Hindustan Times* August 16, an unnamed government official said, "The meeting between the PMs [Singh and Sharif] depends on what happens in the coming days. We expect Pakistan to address our concerns on terrorism, bringing the 26/11 attackers to justice and unprovoked action by its army along the LoC."

During his campaign for last May's Pakistan election and since, Sharif has repeatedly expressed his desire for better ties with India, saying they would give an urgently needed boost to Pakistan's economy. But he has also come under increasing pressure from Pakistan's military, which has justified its exalted political and economic position on the basis of its being the bulwark against Indian "aggression," to take a tougher attitude towards India. Quoting "a senior official at the PM [prime minister] office", the *Express Tribune* said that Pakistan's Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, in his meeting with Sharif [last] Monday, had "conveyed the

military's reservations over the LoC and border violation by India." Kayani has warned that the recurrence of such incidents was forcing "Pakistan's military to respond even harder."

The rivalry between India and Pakistan is rooted in the 1947 communal partition of the Indian subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India. The countries have fought three declared wars and several undeclared ones, with their rival claims to Kashmir remaining at the core of their dispute.

However, the US's "pivot to Asia" and in particular its courting of India, which it has identified as pivotal to its plans to thwart the rise of China, have destabilized the region and enormously aggravated Indo-Pakistani tensions. China, it must be noted, is also a pivotal ally and arms supplier of Pakistan

In a further indication about the importance the US attaches to developing a military partnership with India, a top US Air Force General has said that Washington aims to station military aircraft in India.

Last week after the Indian military had complained that Chinese troops had stayed several days in an eastern border area that India claims falls within its Line of Actual Control, the Indian air force dispatched a C-130J "Super Hercules" tactical airlift to the remote and mountainous area. This action, which was hailed by the Indian media, was meant to showcase the Indian military's new capabilities to rapidly deploy men and material in the event of a border clash with China.



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