

Indo-Pakistani relations fraught after months of border skirmishes

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The past three months have seen a surge in cross-border firing between Indian and Pakistani military forces along the Line of Control (LoC) that separates Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir. Indeed, the exchanges are the most frequent and protracted since the two countries signed a ceasefire in 2003 and, while there have been no new cross-border firing incidents this week, the ceasefire's survival has been called into question.

During the last two weeks of October there were daily exchanges of artillery fire that killed several people and injured dozens. Predictably each side has blamed the other for initiating and perpetuating the clashes, while vowing to meet fire with fire.

On October 27 Indian military officials said that fire from the other side had killed two of its soldiers and injured 32, including 18 civilians. Earlier on October 25 they had claimed Pakistani shelling on the previous night had wounded at least 12 people, including children. Pakistani military officials retorted that Indian troops had fired first, wounding two civilians on the Pakistani side of the LoC.

This summer's and fall's lengthy series of border skirmishes has unfolded under conditions where the US's plans to partially withdraw its forces from Afghanistan and recalibrate its client government in Kabul have exacerbated the historic rivalry between India and Pakistan.

India fears Pakistan, which once was the patron of the Taliban and whose military-intelligence apparatus continues to maintain back-channel links to its leadership-in-exile, will be able to expand its influence in Kabul, especially as the US is looking to Islamabad to help reconcile the Taliban, or at least sections of it, to the Afghan government.

Pakistan on the other hand is worried about the strategic partnership that New Delhi has struck with Kabul. India is training Afghan security forces and Pakistan has charged India is using its expanding presence in Afghanistan to provide support to the separatist insurgency in the Pakistani province of Balochistan.

Citing the border tensions, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh threatened not to meet with Pakistan's

new prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, on the sidelines of this year's UN General Assembly. Ultimately the two did meet in New York on September 29, but the talks produced almost nothing of substance. India again refused to restart the comprehensive peace dialogue the countries initiated a decade ago, but which has been essentially in limbo since the Nov. 2008 Mumbai terrorist atrocity, for which Delhi claimed Pakistan was responsible.

The refusal to resume the dialogue or otherwise outline "confidence-building steps" was all the more significant in that Sharif had won the election promising that he would make rapprochement with India a major priority.

The one significant announcement at the conclusion of the Singh-Sharif talks was that they agreed senior military leaders would soon meet to put an end to the border skirmishes. But the generals have never met and for the next four weeks after the Singh-Sharif meeting the skirmishes continued and even escalated.

Singh, whose Congress Party-led government has been roiled by the halving of economic growth and a 15 percent devaluation of the rupee, is under pressure from hawkish sections of the Indian elite, including the military and the main opposition party, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to take a hard line against Pakistan. Singh and his government have themselves ruthlessly pursued the geo-political interests of the Indian elite, especially seeking to exploit Washington's interest in building up India as a counterweight to China to pressure Islamabad.

Responding to media questions in mid-October, Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid emphasized that India would not quickly return to the comprehensive dialogue process.

"I must make it clear," said Khurshid, "that we have not reached a stage where we have done something like 'resumed talks'[with Pakistan]. More recently, on October 31, Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Syed Akbaruddin, in a press briefing, set "an improvement in the situation in the Line of Control" as "the pre-condition for a

forward movement in the relationship” between India and Pakistan, while confirming that Khurshid will meet Sharif’s Foreign Affairs Adviser Sartaj Aziz on the sidelines of the November 11-12 Asia-Europe Meeting of foreign ministers.

In the latest border clashes, as in January when several soldiers were killed in cross-border incursions, India’s military has played a prominent role in whipping up animosity against Pakistan. According to press reports based on findings of the Jammu and Kashmir state police, this has included filing false accounts of reputed Pakistani military-supported incursions by anti-Indian Kashmiri militants.

An October 20 Press Trust of India (PTI) report, titled “Army’s claims over Keran operations under cloud,” said that the army’s narrative about the late September and early October killing of “eight terrorists around the site of infiltration [Shalabatu village near the LoC] was nailed” as a lie in local police reports. “The casualties,” it said, were in fact “reported from three different places that are far off from the Shalabatu village” and then transported to Shalabatu so as to boost the army’s claims. Stretching credulity, the PTI report noted that one of the “militants” killed by the army was in his 60s or 70s. Indian security forces in Kashmir, it need be noted, have a long history of summarily executing suspected opponents of the Indian government, and even non-political villagers, so as to collect bounties or carry out robberies.

Sections of the Indian military and national-security apparatus have become increasingly vocal in recent years, frequently taking stances more bellicose than the government. This has led, although the government won’t publicly admit it, to growing concerns about the military’s subordination to the civilian government.

The *Hindu* recently published an op-ed piece written by a retired army officer that claimed the shutting down of the Technical Support Division (TSD)—a secret army unit set up by former Army Chief and BJP supporter V.K. Singh—“has led to consternation among senior Army officers, who confide that this action is the single major cause for the recent spurt in cross-border intrusions and ceasefire violations that have led to several deaths on the Pakistan border.”

In September, as the result of a leak from the top echelons of the military or government, it was learned that the TSD was shut down by Singh’s successor as army chief after a secret inquiry found that it had carried out anti-constitutional acts, including spying on the Ministry of Defence.

In Pakistan, the military has long justified its claim to a major share of the national budget and political power on the basis that it is the guardian of the state against archrival India. While in its public statements on the border clashes with India, the Pakistani military has not been more

bellicose than the norm, it is an open secret in Islamabad that sections of the officer corps do not look kindly on Sharif’s proposed reconciliation with India.

The Obama administration has responded to the latest crisis in Indo-Pakistani relations by appealing to its two “strategic partners” to defuse the border tensions and work for a rapprochement. But Washington’s aggressive intervention in South Asia since 2001 and Obama’s preparations for a military clash with China under the banner of a US “Pivot to Asia” have dangerously disrupted the balance of power in South Asia. Under the Indo-US nuclear accord, Washington gave India access to advanced civilian nuclear technology, thereby enabling it to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development and causing Pakistan to respond by accelerating its production of nuclear bombs and missiles.

During his meeting with the Indian Prime Minister in late September, US President Barack Obama agreed to further increase Washington’s military and strategic ties with New Delhi—including allowing India to purchase the most sophisticated weaponry that the US sells to its closest allies.

And, to Pakistan’s ire, the Obama administration continues to encourage India to take a larger role in Afghanistan, while—so as not to pique New Delhi—spurning Sharif’s entreaties for Washington to mediate the two countries’ dispute over Kashmir.

India is determined to expand its influence in Kabul, not only to deny the Pakistani military its long sought “strategic depth,” but because through Afghanistan it seeks to gain better access to the oil and natural gas reserves of Central Asia. Currently India imports more than three quarters of all the oil and a quarter of all the natural gas it consumes.



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