

India-Pakistan relations rapidly deteriorating

Deepal Jayasekera
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Relations between India and its historic rival Pakistan have deteriorated sharply in recent weeks, especially after India's government, now led by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), cancelled a much anticipated meeting between the countries' Foreign Secretaries.

Last month saw a dramatic rise in cross-border firing along the Line of Control (LoC) that separates the Indian- and Pakistani-held sections of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. The cross-border shelling has resulted in at least a half-dozen deaths and terrorized villagers on both sides of the LoC.

By the beginning of last week, Indian government and military officials were issuing a barrage of threats against Pakistan. On a trip to Kashmir, Amit Shah, the BJP President and a close confidant of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, pledged that India would give Pakistan a "befitting reply" if all cross-border firing did not cease.

Two "flag meetings" between locally-based Indian and Pakistani military officers were held at LoC checkpoints last week, the second of them on Friday. These meetings have done little to dampen tensions, as the two sides focused on trading accusations of responsibility for the surge in cross-border firing and incursions.

Speaking Saturday, Indian Defence Minister Arun Jaitley said Pakistani violations of a 2003 ceasefire agreement were "extremely serious and provocative."

On August 18, the Indian government announced that it was canceling the Foreign Secretaries' meeting planned for the following week. This was justified on the grounds that a meeting between the Pakistani High Commissioner to India, Abdul Basit, and leaders of the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), an alliance of legally-tolerated Indian Kashmir separatist groups, constituted "gross interference" in Indian affairs

Such meetings, however, have long been accepted

and even facilitated by India's government, including under the BJP-led governments that held power in New Delhi from 1998 to 2004.

That India's actions constitute an attempt to rewrite the "ground rules" for Indian-Pakistan relations is openly conceded by the Indian media and by government officials in off-the-record remarks.

"That there is a discontinuity in India's approach is exactly right," observed C. Raja Mohan, an Indian foreign policy expert, in his *Indian Express* column. "The Modi government is now saying there is no place for the Hurriyat in the peace process with Pakistan. Delhi's new approach is a bold gamble, to say the least."

A senior government official told *MailOnlineIndia* that the decision to cancel the Foreign Secretaries' meeting had been "made at the highest level" and was aimed at establishing "new ground rules" for India's relations with Pakistan. With a Modi-led BJP-government in power in New Delhi, it would not be "business as usual" between the two nuclear-armed states, said the official.

When in opposition, the BJP chastised the Congress Party-led government for "appeasing" Pakistan. But, in an unprecedented gesture that took most observers by surprise, Modi invited Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to his inauguration last May.

After Sharif and Modi met and agreed that their Foreign Secretaries would soon meet there was much press speculation about a revival of the countries' "comprehensive peace dialogue," which has effectively been stalled since 2008, and of Modi engineering an historic rapprochement with Pakistan.

These unwarranted hopes have now been dramatically dashed.

Modi himself set the stage for the scuttling of the Foreign Secretaries' meeting, when on August 12, during a visit to the Ladakh region of Jammu and

Kashmir, he accused Pakistan of waging a “proxy war” in India’s only Muslim-majority state.

Since taking the reins of power, Modi and the BJP have repeatedly signaled their intention to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy. This has included highlighting their conception of India as the natural leader and regional hegemon of South Asia and accelerating the Indian military’s “modernization” program.

In this the BJP government is taking encouragement from Washington’s courting of India. The Obama administration has responded to Modi’s election by intensifying its longstanding campaign to woo India, so as to harness New Delhi more tightly to its drive to isolate and strategically encircle China—the so-called “US Pivot to Asia.”

India’s new government is also manifestly trying to exploit the grave crisis currently rocking Nawaz Sharif’s government, calculating that concessions can be extracted from it when it is on the defensive. With the encouragement of Pakistan’s military-security establishment, which resents Sharif’s attempt to assert greater control over foreign and national-security policy, Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the rightwing Canadian-based Islamic cleric Tahir-ul Qadri and his Pakistan Awami Tehrik have mounted weeks of protests challenging the legitimacy of Sharif’s 15 month-old government. (See: “i military intervenes in political crisis”)

The Indian press has also noted that the BJP government’s aggressive stance against Pakistan falls in line with its plans to inflame communal tensions in Jammu and Kashmir in the run-up to state elections scheduled for October. Under conditions where the separatist, pro-Pakistani groups are expected to urge an election boycott, the BJP believes that it is well-positioned to secure a majority in the state legislature. This would then enable it to realize a longstanding goal of the Hindu-supremacist right and one repeated in the BJP election manifesto—abrogating Article 370 of the Indian constitution which gives Jammu and Kashmir special status within the Indian Union.

The US, which counts both India and Pakistan as important allies, has called the cancellation of the Foreign Secretaries’ talks “unfortunate.” But it has conspicuously refrained from criticizing India for seeking to change the diplomatic ground rules. US

State Department Deputy Spokesperson Marie Half urged New Delhi and Islamabad to “take steps to improve their bilateral relations ... irrespective of why either side says the talks were cancelled.”

Clearly, the Obama administration does not want to risk antagonizing Modi prior to his visiting New York and Washington later this month in what will be his maiden US visit as India’s Prime Minister.

The flare up in Indo-Pakistani tensions is, nevertheless, a most unwelcome development for Washington. It further complicates the US effort to strategically and politically reconfigure Afghanistan, so it can withdraw most of its troops from the country while maintaining Afghan military bases from which it can project US power across energy-rich Central Asia and threaten China and Russia.

To the consternation of Islamabad, the US has strongly supported India’s growing influence in Kabul, including India’s role in training Afghan security forces.

Some Indian foreign policy specialists are warning that the Modi government’s provocative stance could backfire, including by helping Islamabad to “internationalize” the Kashmir dispute. But most of the Indian media has welcomed the hardline stance against Pakistan—no matter that events could quickly spin out of control. Not only are Indo-Pakistani relations highly explosive, intertwined as they are with communal relations and internal power struggles in both countries. US imperialism’s push to reassert its strategic hegemony across Eurasia is dangerously destabilizing all inter-state relations.



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