

# India and Pakistan trade warnings over escalating border clashes

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India and Pakistan have exchanged bellicose warnings over what are being described as the most serious border skirmishes in more than a decade.

Adopting rhetoric similar to that Israel routinely employs before launching some new aggression, Defence Minister Arun Jaitley declared Thursday that India is “a responsible state,” and “never an aggressor.” Then, invoking the “paramount duty of defending” the Indian people and its territory, Jaitley vowed that, “if Pakistan persists with this adventurism, our forces will continue to fight” and “make the cost of this adventurism unaffordable.”

New Delhi is refusing to have any talks with Pakistan until it is satisfied that all cross-border firing has ended. This includes, at least for the moment, ruling out “flag talks” between frontline military officers. Such talks have been commonly employed to reduce border tensions between the two nuclear-armed states.

Islamabad, for its part, is pledging to meet fire with fire. “We do not want the situation on the borders of nuclear neighbours to escalate into confrontation,” said a Pakistan Ministry of Defence statement. “India must demonstrate caution and behave with responsibility.”

Every night since Sunday, artillery shelling and machine gun-fire have erupted across the Line of Control that divides Pakistan’s Punjab province and Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir. The firing has killed at least twenty-two people, ten Pakistani and twelve Indian civilians, and wounded scores on both sides of the border. With both Indian and Pakistani military-security forces willfully targeting civilians with indiscriminate firing, some 30,000 poor villagers have been forced to flee, transforming them into internal refugees.

According to press reports, just on Tuesday night, Pakistani troops shelled 63 Indian Border Security Force outposts, while the Indian side “retaliated” by firing a thousand mortar shells at 70 Pakistani army posts.

As is almost always the case in such clashes, it is impossible to say who first violated the ceasefire agreement the two countries signed in 2003. What is incontrovertible is that India’s new Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has ratcheted up tensions with Pakistan in recent weeks and is now seeking to use the border clashes to impose new “rules of the game.”

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his top ministers have repeatedly declared that they are intent on demonstrating to Islamabad that things have “changed.”

Speaking Thursday at a rally for the October 15 Maharashtra state election, Modi lauded India’s military for “giving a fitting response to aggression.” “I don’t need to talk,” continued Modi, who when in opposition repeatedly denounced the previous Congress Party-led government for “appeasing” Pakistan. “My *jawans* (infantrymen) are doing all the talking with their fingers always on the trigger. The enemy has to know that things have changed now, that their old habits can’t continue.”

Earlier this week, Home Minister Rajnath Singh similarly proclaimed that Pakistan must recognize that the “situation in India has changed.”

Clearly New Delhi calculates that Pakistan—which is riven by political and economic crisis and in the midst of a major military operation targeting the Pakistani Taliban—is susceptible to bullying. India has also been buoyed by the US and Japanese drive to make it a pillar of their efforts to strategically isolate and encircle China. This development has further tilted the military-strategic balance of power in South Asia sharply in India’s favour and caused a worried Beijing, long a close ally of Pakistan, to launch its own campaign to court India. To the consternation of Pakistan’s ruling elite, Chinese President Xi Jinping, citing security concerns over Pakistan’s ongoing political crisis, canceled a trip to Islamabad, when he visited South Asia, including India, last month.

The *Times of India* reported on Wednesday the government and Indian military are prepared for a protracted confrontation with Pakistan. It quoted an unnamed Indian military source as saying, “We are prepared for the long haul... Our massive and targeted retaliation is not going to stop. If talks or flag meetings are held, it will be on our terms and only after Pakistan stops firing.”

Given the Indian government’s aggressive policy and the multiple crises enveloping Pakistan, there is a grave danger the current low-level military conflict could spin out of control with untold consequences for the Indian and Pakistani masses.

In the weeks preceding the current border skirmishes, Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP made clear that they were intent on pursuing a new hard line against Pakistan.

In mid-August it abruptly cancelled a meeting between the two countries’ foreign secretaries scheduled for August 25. The ostensible reason given by the Indian government for this move was that Pakistan’s ambassador to India had met leaders of anti-Indian Kashmiri separatist groups that are officially tolerated by New Delhi. Previous Indian governments, including the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government, had allowed such meetings to take place and never made ongoing “peace-talks” between the two countries hostage to a demand that Pakistan cease such meetings.

When Modi travelled to the US late last month to participate in deliberations of the UN General Assembly and meet with President Obama and other American political and business leaders, he continued to ratchet up pressure on Islamabad. He flatly refused to meet with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif while meeting with the heads of government of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, told the UN General Assembly that the resumption of India’s long-stalled “peace dialogue” with Pakistan was conditional on Islamabad changing its behavior, and made a provocative speech to the US’s premier foreign relations think-tank.

India has long sought to isolate Pakistan by labelling it the “epicenter” of world terrorism. In an address to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, Modi asserted that all terrorism in India is “exported” terrorism, with the inescapable implication Pakistan was the culprit.

He conveniently ignored the Indian state’s long-record—stretching back to the communal partition of the subcontinent in 1947, out of which the reactionary strategic conflict between a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu emerged—of conniving with violent

BJP Hindu extremists, to say nothing of the pogroms and other acts of terror perpetrated by the Hindu supremacist RSS and its allied organizations, the BJP among them.

As relations between New Delhi and Islamabad have deteriorated in recent weeks, Washington has repeatedly wrung its hands. Heightened tensions, let alone border clashes and the threat of all-out war, cut across Washington’s efforts to strategically reconfigure Afghanistan, as it draws down US troop levels. But the Obama administration has thus far confined itself to issuing pious statements about how it hopes New Delhi and Islamabad can work to resolve their differences. Washington’s principal concern is harnessing India to its strategic drive against China and toward that end it appears to be giving Modi a long leash in his dealings with Pakistan.

Visiting US Senators Timothy Kaine and Angus King told a New Delhi press conference Thursday that they are “concerned” by the border clashes. Their ensuing suggestion that the UN could perhaps play a role—UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon had earlier issued a statement calling for a diplomatic solution to the border clashes—was a non-starter. For decades, New Delhi has angrily rebuffed any and all suggestions for the UN, the US or any other third-party to play a mediating role in its relations with Pakistan.

The BJP government’s hardline stance against Pakistan is aimed at asserting India’s claim to be the dominant regional power. But the “humbling” of Pakistan is also aimed at strengthening Modi’s hand politically at home so that he can push through the unpopular neo-liberal “reform” measures demanded by big business to kick-start India’s flagging economy.

Modi is being egged on in his aggressive campaign against Pakistan by the Congress Party. Trying to outflank the BJP from the right, Congress Party Vice-President Rahul Gandhi has accused the BJP government of having done “nothing” to stop “repeated provocations” from Pakistan. Speaking at an election rally this week, Gandhi said Modi “used to speak of adopting an aggressive approach towards China and Pakistan. Now, despite so many provocations, the PM is not doing anything.”



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