

Indian military raid in Myanmar escalates regional tensions

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The cross-border raid India's military's mounted in Myanmar (Burma) last week has exacerbated geo-political tensions in South Asia, especially after India's Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) government touted the operation as a warning to Pakistan

On June 9 India's Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, Rajayvardhan Singh Rathore, announced that the Indian military had mounted a successful cross-border raid early that morning in Myanmar, destroying two camps of anti-Indian, secessionist insurgents. Rathore said the operation had been personally approved by India's Prime Minister, the self-styled Hindu strongman Narendra Modi, and had killed some 15 separatist insurgents.

The Indian military's principal target was the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K). But members of several other ethno-nationalist secessionist groups, including the Peoples Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA), the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and the Manipur Naga Revolutionary Front (MNRF), are also believed to have been killed.

India has said the raid was in retaliation for a June 4 ambush by NSCN-K activists in the Chandel district of the north-east Indian state of Manipur that left at least 20 Indian Army personnel dead.

Myanmar's military-dominated government approved the Indian raid, quite possibly under heavy pressure from New Delhi. But it is now denying that the incursion into Myanmar ever happened.

On June 10, the Director of the Office of Myanmar President Thein Sein Zaw Htay confirmed the raid, saying the two countries had cooperated in the operation, but that the Myanmar military had not taken part.

However, the BJP government's jingoistic remarks about the raid quickly proved an embarrassment for Myanmar's military regime. Myanmar's constitution forbids the presence of foreign soldiers in Myanmar. Also, the Myanmar government has been negotiating with the NSCN-K to participate in the country's coming elections.

Subsequently, Myanmar President Thein Sein's office

placed a note on its Facebook page that denied the Indian military had crossed into Myanmar, claiming instead that the Indian military had conducted an operation along the Indo-Myanmar border. The Myanmar Foreign Ministry's website quoted the stipulation in the country's constitution that declares "no foreign troops shall be permitted to be deployed in the territory of the (Myanmar) Union." Later on June 10, the Myanmar government summoned the Indian Ambassador to Yangon, Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, and gave him a dressing-down for New Delhi's boasting about the military incursion.

In all likelihood India's military has previously carried out cross-border raids into both Myanmar and Bangladesh, as many of the separatist movements active in India's north-east have bases in one or both of these countries. However, this is the first such attack that New Delhi has chosen to publicly acknowledge. Its decision to do so is part of the Modi government's drive to more vigorously assert the Indian bourgeoisie's interests in the region and lay claim to the status of regional hegemon.

India's hands have been strengthened by Washington's aggressive campaign to woo New Delhi, so as to fully integrate it into the US's strategic drive to isolate and encircle China. This effort has intensified since Modi came to power last year, with the US proposing numerous joint projects for the development of advanced weapons systems and declaring its readiness to assist India in realizing its "Act East policy." Modi has reciprocated by tilting India ever closer to the US.

The broader implications of last week's cross-border "anti-terror" operation were emphasized by the Modi government itself. Rathore called it "a message to all countries and organizations who foster terrorism against India, including Pakistan." Another minister, Prakash Javadekar, said, "This is a lesson and a message to all the terror groups that India will not hesitate in going beyond its geographical borders to eliminate terrorists."

Over the past two decades, India's military-security establishment has frequently threatened to launch "hot

pursuit” operations across the Line of Control (LoC) that separates the Indian- and Pakistan-held parts of Kashmir, in order to attack anti-Indian Kashmiri insurgents based in Pakistan.

Pakistan, which has fought three declared wars against India since the two countries were created through the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent, has always warned that any Indian incursion into Pakistan would have devastating consequences.

True to form, Pakistan’s political and military were quick to respond in kind to the provocative statements emanating from New Delhi. This included brandishing the threat of a nuclear conflagration.

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif termed the Indian ministers’ statement “irresponsible and imprudent” and vowed to protect Pakistan’s “vital interests at all costs.”

“We are not Myanmar,” Pakistan’s Minister for Defence Production, Rana Tanveer Hussain, told the Indian English-language daily *Hindustan Times*. “Don’t you know our military strength? Pakistan is a nuclear nation. India should stop day dreaming.”

Highlighting the across-the-board support of Pakistan’s elite for an aggressive stance against India, the Pakistan Senate, the upper chamber of Pakistan’s parliament, unanimously passed a resolution that declared Pakistan would “never allow its territory to be violated by India under any pretext.” Pakistan’s military is “fully capable of giving a fitting response” to any incursion affirmed the resolution.

Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar responded with further provocative remarks. “Those afraid of India’s new posture are reacting,” claimed Parrikar. “A simple action against insurgents has changed the mindset of the full security scenario in the country.”

Like the US, New Delhi has in recent years developed much closer ties with Myanmar, whose regime it once shunned because it considered it too close to Beijing. For India, Burma is a crucial land-bridge to south-east Asia, a rapidly growing region with which it is anxious to develop closer economic and strategic ties.

Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval is expected to visit Yangon shortly for negotiations on increased military ties, including collaboration in operations against the ethno-nationalist separatist groups that challenge Indian and/or Myanmar state sovereignty.

In deference to the Myanmar government’s strong objections to its boasting about last week’s cross-border raid, Indian Defence Minister Parrikar is refusing to provide any further details about it. He has also taken to describing it as an operation carried out “along the India-Myanmar border.”

India’s principal opposition party, the Congress Party, was

quick to hail the cross-border raid. It even tried to claim some of the credit, saying the operation was facilitated by a military-security cooperation agreement that India’s Congress Party led United Progressive Alliance government signed with Myanmar in 2010.

India’s media has also warmly applauded the action. However, some prominent media voices have expressed concern that the BJP’s bellicose boasts could undermine ties with Myanmar and further enflame relations with Pakistan.

A *New Indian Express* editorial called the June 9 operation “a milestone in the history of the Indian state.” It continued, “The message it gives is loud and clear: India can no longer be considered a soft state.”

Continuing in this vein, the *New Indian Express* chortled, “The Modi government has ... proved that India is ready for disproportionate response to provocations. It has also given an unequivocal message to neighbours in particular and the world in general that it will demonstrate zero tolerance to terrorism and insurgency.”

The *Hindu*, a Chennai-based liberal daily, praised Modi for being ready “to bite the bullet and take tough action when it comes to the killing of Indian soldiers.” But it said that it was “unfortunate that the action in Myanmar has triggered a fresh slide in relations with Pakistan on account of breast-beating and credit-hunting by the Modi government,” and expressed concern New Delhi is alienating Myanmar. “Safeguarding the space to conduct such operations in the future,” declared the *Hindu*, is “critical for India’s long-term strategy.”

In a development that highlights the increasingly explosive geo-political tensions in the region, some sections of India’s press have accused China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of having relations with the anti-Indian NSCN-K. Beijing has officially ignored these provocative claims, but the state-owned *Global Times* published an article that dismissed the accusation as “absurd.”



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