

India and Pakistan exchange war threats

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India and Pakistan exchanged war threats last week dangerously escalating tensions between South Asia's two nuclear-armed states.

Speaking at a symposium on the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, Indian Army Chief General Dalbir Singh accused Pakistan of "frequent ceasefire violations and infiltration bids" and of using "new methods" to "create unrest" in Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir. General Singh then boasted about the Indian military's capability to wage "swift short" wars and to do so with little warning. "This," he added, "calls for maintaining very high levels of operational preparedness at all times."

Pakistan's military chief, General Raheel Sharif, gave his retort on Defence of Pakistan Day, September 6. He vowed that "the enemy" will "pay an unbearable cost" should it resort "to any misadventure, regardless of its size and scale."

"Peace in the region," insisted Sharif, "is not possible" without resolving the Kashmir dispute—that is, the rival claims of India and Pakistan to the territories of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Indian and Pakistani forces have been exchanging artillery and gunfire across the Line of Control that separates Indian and Pakistan-held Kashmir on virtually a daily basis for months. Just in August, cross-border shelling cost the lives of at least 20 Indian and Pakistani civilians and injured scores more.

Relations between India and Pakistan were further frayed after an August 23-24 meeting between the two countries' national security advisors was cancelled at the last minute. The meeting had been supposed to lay the groundwork for resuming the long-stalled India-Pakistan comprehensive peace process, but Islamabad withdrew after New Delhi insisted that the Kashmir issue could not figure on the meeting's agenda.

On Thursday, the Director General (DG) of India's

Border Security Force, D.K. Pathak, began three days of talks in New Delhi with Major-General Umar Farooq Burki, the Director-General of the Pakistani Rangers. According to a press release, the talks have been cordial and an agreement has been reached that when future cross-border firings occur the attacked party will delay retaliating for an hour so as to enable contact to be made with the DG of the other country's border forces.

Such an agreement is highly unlikely to have more than a brief shelf life, let alone any lasting impact on Indo-Pakistani relations.

Even while the talks were continuing in New Delhi, India accused Pakistan of carrying out new unprovoked cross-border firing.

Born of the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent, the reactionary geo-political conflict between India and Pakistan is central to the interests, ideology and ambitions of both countries' bourgeois ruling elites.

Moreover, the balance of power in South Asia has been thrown askew by the full-court press Washington has mounted over the course of the past decade to make India a frontline state in its drive to strategically isolate, encircle and, if need be, wage war on China.

With the aim of harnessing New Delhi to its predatory strategic agenda, the US has made India "a global strategic partner," supported its ambitions to be an Indian Ocean and South-East Asian power and offered it a slew of deals to buy and, in some cases, co-produce advanced weapon-systems. Washington also negotiated a special status for India within the world nuclear regulatory regime that gives New Delhi access to advanced civilian nuclear technology and fuel, so that it can concentrate the resources of its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development.

Islamabad has responded to its ever-widening strategic gap with India by expanding its nuclear weapons program, including the development of

tactical, or battlefield nuclear weapons, and by seeking to strengthen its strategic alliance with China.

Under Narendra Modi, the head of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India has tilted still closer to Washington, while developing military-strategic ties with the US's principal Asian-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia. (See: India invites Japan for naval exercises with US) At the same time, and clearly with the expectation that India can exploit Washington's strategic embrace, Modi has adopted an aggressive stance against Pakistan. In effect, he is seeking to "change the rules" of the game with Islamabad, so as to stake India's claim to be South Asia's regional hegemon. According to Indian news reports, Indian border forces have been instructed to respond much more aggressively to cross-border firing or incursions of anti-Indian insurgents from Pakistan. Indian officials, including Defence Minister Monohar Parrikar, have also publicly suggested that India is supporting anti-government forces within Pakistan, including Balochi separatist insurgents.

Over the past year, Islamabad has repeatedly accused RAW, the Indian intelligence agency, of "sponsoring terrorists" within Pakistan. It had promised its national security adviser would bring a dossier substantiating these allegations to last month's cancelled meeting.

China has long sought to avoid taking any step that might further push India into the US's strategic embrace. In accordance with this stratagem, it welcomed Modi's election, made New Delhi very public offers of closer ties and urged Islamabad to seek rapprochement with India.

Nevertheless, India's elite has taken great exception to China's announcement, made by President Xi during a visit to Islamabad last April, that it will invest \$46 billion in Pakistan to build an economic corridor linking Gwadar, Pakistan's newly-built Arabian Sea port, with western China. For China, the corridor would provide a land route to access oil and other resources from the Middle East and Africa thereby bypassing the US-dominated Indian Ocean and South China Sea and circumventing the Pentagon's plans to blockade China via maritime choke points.

While officially India's opposition to the corridor project is based on the fact it will traverse territory in Pakistan that India claims as its own, the underlying reason is that the corridor will provide a huge economic

boost to its arch-rival.

The India-Pakistan conflict is thus increasingly interwoven with that between US imperialism and China, adding a new and highly combustible charge to each.

A September 5 *Times of India* report cited an unnamed "high level" Indian official as saying New Delhi is in no rush to resume talks with Islamabad. While the article did not explicitly say so, it very much implied that Modi has no intention of meeting his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, later this month on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

The *Times* report provides an indication of the extent to which the Modi government is seeking to leverage India's ties with the US to bully Pakistan. The report noted that Washington is threatening to withhold Afghanistan Coalition support payments from Pakistan's military so as to pressure Islamabad to do more to disrupt the Taliban-allied Haqqani Network. "The recognition that Pakistan is in an uncomfortable place," said the *Times*, paraphrasing its government source, "is just one of the reasons why India would not rush into any fresh talks."

Another is that tensions with Pakistan can serve as a means of diverting mounting popular anger over the BJP government's pro-investor reforms and manifest failure to make good on its promise to create millions of new jobs. Last week, Modi and his cabinet held a three-day meeting with the leaders of the RSS, the shadowy Hindu supremacist volunteer organization that provides the BJP with much of its cadre, to assess the government's performance and discuss its agenda.



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