

# India and Pakistan exchange threats and accusations

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Relations between India and Pakistan remain heated, with South Asia's rival nuclear-armed powers accusing each other of promoting terrorism and exchanging bellicose threats.

Under conditions where the US has overturned the balance of power in the region through its aggressive campaign to harness India to its anti-China "Pivot," the danger of the India-Pakistan tensions climaxing in war, whether by design or miscalculation, is rapidly rising. Moreover, unlike their previous three declared wars and numerous war crises, a clash between Indian and Pakistan threatens to rapidly draw in the US and China on opposed sides.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi ratcheted up tensions still further last month with repeated denunciations of Islamabad for human rights abuses in Balochistan, where Pakistan's military is fighting a "dirty war" against an ethno-nationalist insurgency. Modi's remarks constituted an almost unprecedented intervention into Pakistan's internal affairs. They were widely understood in both India and Pakistan as constituting an implicit threat that New Delhi will press for the dismemberment of Pakistan if Islamabad does not curb its support for the separatist insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir and otherwise bend to New Delhi's demands that it accept Indian regional dominance.

Indian officials have made it known that they intend to continue raising the Balochistan issue, including possibly at this month's UN General Assembly. According to a report in the *Hindu*, India's Bharatiya Janata Party-led government is developing a "game plan" that could include giving Balochi separatist groups greater "political space" to operate in India.

For its part, Pakistan has repeatedly pointed to India's Balochistan campaign as corroboration of its charges that Indian intelligence is providing aid and arms to the Balochi insurgency. In response to Modi's remark, first made at the G-20 summit in China and then repeated later in the week at an ASEAN-India Summit, that "one single nation" in South Asia is spreading terrorism, the Pakistan Foreign Ministry issued a statement that declared: India is that "single nation"; "India is financing terrorism in Pakistan and open evidences are available on its involvement in subversive activities."

Balochistan is critical to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a massive infrastructure connectivity project,

which Beijing is supporting with \$46 billion in investments. At the heart of the CPEC is the building of a network of pipeline, rail, and road links connecting Balochistan's Arabian Sea port of Gwadar with western China.

New Delhi has repeatedly stated its opposition to the CPEC, citing the fact that the corridor will pass through Pakistan-held Kashmir—territory India claims is rightfully hers.

In recent weeks, this opposition has grown more strident. Indian government representatives, including Modi when he met privately with Chinese President Xi last weekend, have repeatedly told Beijing that they consider the CPEC a threat to India's core strategic interests.

China's response has been, at least to this point, measured. Under Modi, India has integrated itself ever more completely into the US strategic offensive against China. Nevertheless, Beijing still hopes India can be dissuaded from becoming the fourth partner in a NATO-type anti-China alliance that would be led by Washington and include its principal Asian-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

Pakistan, by contrast, has reacted to the Indian campaign against the CPEC with bellicose threats. Speaking last week at a seminar on the progress of the CPEC, Army chief General Raheel Sharif warned of "conspiracies" against Pakistan by its "enemies" and vowed "fool proof security to CPEC." The military, added Sharif, would soon form a special "security division" in Balochistan to protect the CPEC, just as it has already done in the country's north. "Whether it is Modi or RAW (India's premier intelligence agency) or anybody else," said Sharif, "we fully understand (the) tricks of the enemy."

On assuming office in May 2014, Modi made a show of seeking closer ties with Pakistan and relaunching the long-stalled India-Pakistan "comprehensive peace dialogue." But it quickly emerged that as part of his government's more assertive pursuit of India's great power ambitions Modi was intent on changing the "rules of the game" with Pakistan. Modi instructed Indian military commanders to take a more aggressive stance in cross-border firing incidents along the disputed Line of Control (LOC) in Kashmir, leading in 2015 to the most serious military clashes in a decade.

India's increased aggressiveness towards Islamabad is being fuelled by the military-strategic boost it is receiving from

Washington. The US has elevated India to the status of “Major Defense Partner,” has begun co-developing weapons-systems with India, is actively supporting India in increasing economic and strategic ties with East Asia and Africa, and is trying to gain it admittance to the Nuclear Suppliers Group in defiance of the current rules.

Of course, all this comes with a price. Washington is harnessing India to its predatory global agenda and transforming it into a “frontline state” in its confrontation with China. Last month, New Delhi signed an India-US Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) that gives US combat planes and warships and their personnel routine access to Indian military bases for resupply, repairs and rest.

Pakistan’s ruling elite, however, is alarmed at the dramatic downgrading of its strategic partnership with US imperialism. For decades, it was Washington’s principal partner in South Asia, playing a significant role in the US’s Cold War intrigues against the Soviet Union, and in return receiving substantial military aid. Now, Washington cavalierly dismisses Islamabad’s warnings that the US’s patronage of India has destabilized South Asia and is fuelling a nuclear-arms race.

Further heightening Islamabad’s strategic anxiety is the relentless pressure from Washington for Pakistan to bear still more of the burden in the Afghan War, although large parts of the country have already been transformed into killing fields. Angered that Pakistan has not moved aggressively to shut down bases of the Haqqani network—an Islamist group allied with the Taliban and with which both US and Pakistani intelligence worked closely during the Afghan civil war of the 1980s—the US has in recent months curtailed both economic and military aid to Pakistan. The US Congress also scuttled a deal to sell Pakistan F-16 fighter jets.

All of this has made the Modi government more confident in pursuing a hard line against Islamabad. Demonstrating that it has no interests in lessening tensions, New Delhi sent a letter to Islamabad on August 24 in which it said that if there were to be any talks between India and Pakistan they should be limited to discussing “an end to cross-border terrorism and incitement to violence from Pakistan” and when Pakistan will end “its illegal occupation” of Kashmir.

The conflict between the Indian and Pakistani bourgeoisies, including their rival claims to Kashmir, is utterly reactionary. It is the outcome of the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent. The division of South Asia into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India has served as a mechanism for maintaining imperialist domination of the whole region. The rival ruling elites, meanwhile, have used the conflict as an instrument of their class rule; to incite communalism and nationalism so as to deflect social anger over the failure of bourgeois rule in both countries to provide the masses with the rudiments of a decent life and split the working class.

Now this explosive conflict is becoming ever more inextricably intertwined with the confrontation between US and

China, adding to each a massive new incendiary charge.

The tensions between Washington and Islamabad notwithstanding, the US has longstanding ties to Pakistan’s ruling elite, especially the military, and it has not abandoned its efforts to keep Pakistan within its stable of client states. But the logic of its relentless campaign to isolate, strategically encircle, and prepare for war against China and of its push to make India its main strategic partner in South Asia and a frontline state in its anti-China offensive is to push Islamabad and Beijing into each other’s strategic embrace.

Beijing’s decision to proceed with the CPEC was clearly bound up with the Modi government’s twin decision to ally India more closely with Washington, including in the South China Sea dispute, and its refusal to participate in China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative of which the CPEC is a part.

Washington, it should be noted, albeit for different reasons and as of yet not publicly, is as bitterly opposed to the CPEC as is India. This is because the CPEC would have major strategic value for Beijing, providing it with a means of partially circumventing the economic blockade that the Pentagon plans to impose on China in the event of a war or war crisis by seizing Indian Ocean and South China Sea “chokepoints.”

Significantly, Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry responded to last month’s agreement opening Indian bases to the US military by expressing concern that it would contribute to “polarising the region by disturbing the strategic balance in South Asia and escalating the arms build-up.” The term “polarizing the region” was clearly a reference to the hardening of a US-Indian alliance on the one side and a China-Pakistan alliance on the other.

Last Sunday, a Pakistani daily, the *Express Tribune*, reported that it had seen Pakistan cabinet documents dating from July that authorize the negotiation of a “long-term strategic framework agreement” between Beijing and Islamabad “for enhancing defence and security cooperation.”



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