

War danger surges as India blames Pakistan for attack on Kashmir base

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Seventeen Indian soldiers were killed and at least 20 critically injured Sunday when fighters assaulted an Indian military base at Uri, near the Line of Control, the de facto border between India and Pakistan in the disputed Kashmir region

The fighting lasted from approximately 5:30 to 8:30 AM and all four of the assailants were reportedly killed in the engagement. Indian authorities responded by “heightening” the already massive security presence in the Kashmir Valley.

Coming amid escalating tensions in South Asia fueled by the US drive to make India a frontline state in its war drive against China, as well as escalating social and political unrest in Kashmir itself, yesterday’s attack heightens the danger of a major war breaking out in Asia.

Currently, no organization has claimed responsibility for the Uri attack. However, India immediately accused Pakistan of being responsible and vowed that the deaths of its soldiers will be avenged.

Tensions between India and Pakistan have been on the boil for weeks. New Delhi has responded to the mass unrest in Jammu and Kashmir, its only Muslim-majority state, and the strengthening of Pakistan’s already close ties with China by launching a diplomatic offensive targeting Pakistan for its brutal repression of an ethno-nationalist insurgency in Balochistan. Implicit in this campaign, which Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to take to the floor of the United Nations General Assembly this week, is that India is ready to support the dismemberment of Pakistan.

The Indian Army has accused the deceased Uri base assailants of belonging to the pro-Pakistan Kashmiri Islamist group Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM). They claimed the JeM fighters had crossed over from the part of the disputed Kashmir region that is controlled by Pakistan and launched their attack on the military base from the side furthest from the Line of Control (LoC) and presumably least well-guarded.

“Initial reports indicate that the slain terrorists belong to Jaish-e-Muhammad tanzeem,” said the Indian Army’s Director General of Military Operations, Lt.-General Ranbir Singh. “Four AK-47 rifles and four under barrel grenade launchers, along with a large number of war-like stores, were recovered from them.”

Indian government officials, active and retired military leaders, and the press have responded to the Uri attack with bellicose threats.

“I assure the nation that those behind this despicable attack will not go unpunished,” vowed Prime Minister Modi, while his Home

Minister Rajnath Singh, tweeted, “Pakistan is a terrorist state and should be identified and isolated as such.”

Numerous statements from establishment figures stressed that a turning point has been reached.

While Modi and his top security officials conferred on their next steps, the General-Secretary of the ruling Hindu chauvinist BJP, Ram Madhav, said the “Days of so-called strategic restraint are over. If terrorism is the instrument of the weak and coward, restraint in the face of repeated terror attacks betrays inefficiency and incompetence.”

His comments were echoed by Shekar Gupta, the former editor of the *Indian Express*: “If Pakistan thinks [the] Uri attack will have the usual Indian non-response, it’s delusional. This India has moved on from old strategic restraint.”

Powerful elements within India’s military-security establishment, as well as the Hindu supremacist groups that constitute a key base of support for the BJP, have long advocated that India answer a Pakistan-based attack with a cross-border strike. Islamabad has signaled it will consider any such action as tantamount to an act of war, raising the prospect that Indian “retaliation” could quickly lead to all-out war between the rival nuclear-armed states.

Amid the chorus of bellicose statements, Lt.-General Ranbir Singh said the military was prepared to give “a befitting reply” to “any evil designs of the adversary.”

Though covert ties have long existed between Islamist anti-Indian Kashmiri groups, including the JeM, and factions of Pakistani intelligence, Pakistan rejected Indian charges that it was involved. “India immediately puts blame on Pakistan without doing any investigation. We reject this,” said Foreign Ministry spokesman Nafees Zakaria.

A Pakistan army statement said that the allegations were “unfounded and premature,” reiterating Islamabad’s stance that Pakistan no longer allows anti-Indian Kashmiri insurgents to infiltrate India-controlled Kashmir from its side of the LoC.

Washington issued a statement condemning the Uri attack and reaffirming its strategic partnership with India, while avoiding comment on New Delhi’s charge that the Pakistan was responsible. US State Department spokesman John Kirby said that Washington “strongly” condemned the attack. “We extend our condolences to the victims and their families.” “The United States,” added Kirby, “is committed to our strong partnership with the Indian government to combat terrorism.”

The Uri attack underscores the reactionary role both of the various pro-Pakistani Islamist militias that exploit mass social anger in Kashmir with the Indian government, and the bellicose response of the Indian government. The resulting conflicts deepen communal-sectarian and regional tensions in the Indian subcontinent, and raise the danger of a war between nuclear-armed Pakistan and India.

Such a war could have cataclysmic consequences. Because of the growing military-strategic disparity between India and Pakistan, Islamabad has deployed tactical nuclear weapons. This has prompted New Delhi to signal that if Pakistan employs “battlefield” nuclear weapons it will consider the nuclear threshold to have been breached, i.e. India is prepared to reply with thermonuclear weapons.

India and Pakistan first clashed over Kashmir in 1947-48 in the immediate aftermath of the communal Partition of the former British Indian Empire into a Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India. Kashmir was also the central issue in the second of the three declared wars India and Pakistan fought and in their 1999 undeclared Kargil war.

In recent years the region has been dubbed a “nuclear flashpoint” and even the “world’s most dangerous nuclear flashpoint” because of the toxic and explosive character of the rivalry between the Indian and Pakistan bourgeoisies, who have managed to equip themselves with nuclear weapons even as they fail to provide the vast majority of the people of South Asia with the basic necessities of life.

Adding to the explosiveness of the Kashmir conflict is the region’s growing importance to China. Beijing is building a pipeline and transportation corridor from western China through Pakistan-controlled Kashmir to the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar, Balochistan. For Beijing the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has great strategic significance as it would allow it to partially circumvent US plans to impose an economic blockade against it in the event of a war or war crisis by seizing Indian Ocean and South China Sea chokepoints.

Mass unrest in Kashmir

The assault on the base in Uri came as Indian security forces violently repress mass protests against the Indian administration of Kashmir.

Indian-administered Kashmir has been in the grip of deadly unrest for more than two months. There have been almost daily protests and clashes with security forces, in the region’s worst violence since 2010. More than 85 people have been killed in almost daily anti-Indian protests and rolling curfews prompted by the July 8 killing by Indian security forces of Burhan Wani, a leader of the Islamist, pro-Pakistan Hizbul Mujahideen militia.

On Saturday, thousands defied the curfew to attend the funeral of a schoolboy, eleven-year-old Nasir Shafi, whose body was found riddled with pellet wounds. Police reportedly fired tear gas at mourners.

The Central Reserve Police Force, an Indian paramilitary unit, told the Jammu and Kashmir High Court that it had fired 1.3 million pellets in 32 days.

“It is the first time I have seen so many pellet-injured people. Pellets were also used during the 2010 unrest, but this time they [government forces] are using them on a large scale,” a Kashmiri doctor, who did not want to be named, told *Al Jazeera*. “We get, almost every day, people injured with pellets and many of the patients lose their eyesight.”

Another doctor at a hospital in Indian-administered Kashmir’s capital, Srinagar, said 756 people have been hit in the eyes by pellets over the past 72 days.

In this fraught context, the attack on the base at Uri heightens military tensions in the region and internationally. As Washington aggressively confronts the Chinese regime in the South and East China Seas, it is also building up India as a counterweight against China in the Indian Ocean region.

When Modi met US President Barack Obama in June they issued a joint statement promising to increase military cooperation across the Indian Ocean and Asian Pacific regions and in all “domains...land, maritime, air, space and cyber space.”

Last month, India signed an agreement giving the US military routine access to its ports and military bases for resupply, repairs and rest. Washington, for its part, has recognized India as a “Major Defense Partner,” meaning it can now buy the advanced US weaponry made available to the Pentagon’s closest allies.

Pakistan, in increasingly shrill language, has warned that the ever-burgeoning Indo-US alliance has overturned the balance of power in South Asia, thereby fueling an arms and nuclear weapons race and encouraging New Delhi to act more aggressively.

But Washington has blithely ignored these concerns, while demanding that Pakistan do more to support the US occupation of Afghanistan and encouraging India, behind the scenes, to make the CPEC a major issue in its relations with Beijing on the grounds that the corridor project violates Indian sovereignty. New Delhi, like Islamabad, claims that all of Kashmir rightfully belongs to it.

Confronted by the burgeoning Indo-US strategic alliance, Pakistan and China are drawing ever closer.

The India-Pakistan conflict has thus become enmeshed with the US-China confrontation, adding to each a massive and highly explosive new charge.



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