

Pakistan replies with belligerence to Indian threats

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Pakistan's government and military have responded belligerently to India's threats to "punish" Pakistan for the September 18 attack on the Uri military base in Indian-held Kashmir.

Pakistan has rejected any connection to the attack, which was mounted by Islamist Kashmiri insurgents and killed 18 Indian soldiers.

In the most public demonstration of Pakistan's war-readiness in recent years, the Pakistan Air Force conducted war exercises in several areas last Wednesday and Thursday, including over the skies of the national capital, Islamabad.

The exercises were meant to simulate the continued functioning of the air force in the aftermath of an attack that had destroyed airstrips. Fighter jets practiced landing and taking off from highways which were closed down on short notice. Numerous commercial flights were also cancelled so as to free air space for the exercises.

In addition to Islamabad, fighter jets took to the skies over Peshawar, the capital and largest city in Pakistan's northernmost province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. But the most obtrusive part of the exercises were the landings staged on the highway that connects Islamabad with Lahore. The country's second largest city, Lahore lies just 24 kilometers (15 miles) from the Indian border.

Pakistan called the exercises "routine." However, video footage of them was widely and repeatedly broadcast on Pakistani television, which would not have been happened without official sanction and encouragement. "Pakistani forces," said one clip that was repeatedly broadcast, "have accelerated their preparations to safeguard the motherland and give a befitting response to any attack by the enemy."

Following the exercises, on Friday Pakistan Army Chief General Raheel Sharif vowed that "each and every inch" of Pakistan will be defended, "no matter what the cost."

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Muslim League (Nawaz) government claimed "normalisation" of relations with India would be a priority when they came to power in May 2013. But under pressure from the military and facing an aggressive Indian government led by Narendra Modi and

his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Sharif's government has increasingly adopted the belligerent rhetoric of the Pakistan military—including repeatedly threatening to reply to an Indian attack by using "battlefield" or tactical nuclear weapons.

Even before the Uri attack, India and Pakistan had been planning to denounce each other from the floor of the UN General Assembly when it convened in New York last week.

In his UN address last Wednesday, Nawaz Sharif, who began his political career as a protégé of the Pakistani dictator General Zia-ul Haq, postured as a defender of the Kashmiri people, denouncing the gross human rights abuses by committed by Indian security forces in Kashmir. In a move calculated to raise India's ire, Sharif paid tribute to Burhan Wani, the young Islamist insurgent whose death at the hands of Indian security forces has sparked mass protests in the Indian-held Kashmir Valley, but said nothing about the Uri attack.

Invoking India's right under UN rules to rebut criticism by another state, Indian's UN envoy delivered a blistering attack in which she labelled Pakistan a "terrorist" state.

What separates the current crisis from previous Indo-Pakistani wars and war crises is that both countries now possess nuclear weapons, meaning a war between them would be the first-ever war between nuclear-armed states, and the increasing intersection of the intractable and highly combustible Indo-Pakistan conflict with US imperialism's reckless drive to maintain its hegemony over Eurasia.

In 1998 first India, then Pakistan blew up nuclear devices and proclaimed themselves nuclear-weapons states. Since then both countries have squandered tens of billions of dollars in expanding their militaries, including in perfecting and expanding their nuclear capabilities. India now boasts that it has a nuclear triad—i.e., the ability to deliver nuclear weapons by missiles launched from land, air and underwater. Pakistan, citing the growing strategic gap between India's and Pakistan's conventional military forces, has, for its part, developed and deployed tactical nuclear weapons.

Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, in an interview with Pakistan-based Geo TV the night before the Uri attack, boasted of Pakistan's superiority in tactical nuclear weapons and said it "will not hesitate" to use those weapons if Pakistan's "defence and survival is in danger."

Rebuffing international calls for Pakistan to scale back its nuclear program, Sharif declared in his UN speech, "We cannot ignore our neighbour's unprecedented arms build-up and will take whatever measures are necessary to maintain credible deterrence."

Commenting on the recent escalation of tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad, Stephen P. Cohen, a US-based expert on India-Pakistan relations, told the *New York Times* that a nuclear war "could happen, and it would be catastrophic for both countries." Hans Kristensen, the director of Federation of American Scientists' Nuclear Information Project, told the *Times of India* that "a conventional confrontation" would "potentially escalate to nuclear weapons use if Pakistan concluded that it couldn't push back the Indian attack."

The nuclear postures of the rival regimes demonstrate their reckless disregard for the lives of their own people as they pursue their reactionary geo-strategic rivalry.

The war-crisis in South Asia is rooted in the 1947 communal Partition of the Indian subcontinent into an explicitly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India. Partition built into the state-structure of South Asia the communal conflict British imperialism had incited and fashioned into an important instrument of colonial rule.

The principal factor behind the rapid escalation of tensions between Islamabad and New Delhi is the latter's drive to establish itself as the regional hegemon, leveraging its burgeoning military-strategic alliance with US imperialism.

For well over a decade, Washington has been seeking to build up India as a "counterweight" to China, lavishing it with strategic favours, including access to the most advanced US weapons systems. And in doing so, Washington has ignored repeated warnings from Islamabad that it is "disrupting" the regional balance of power.

With India under Modi integrating itself ever more deeply into the US's global strategy, including agreeing last month to allow US warplanes and battleships to make routine use of Indian bases, the Pakistani ruling elite is acutely aware that its Indian rivals have supplanted it as the US's principal strategic partner in South Asia.

Indeed, last April US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter made a pointed contrast between "the whole global agenda" that the US has with India, covering "all kinds of issues," and "the important business," mainly relating to terrorism, that it has to transact with Pakistan.

Fearing marginalization, Pakistan's elite has continued its

machinations in Afghanistan, with Pakistan's intelligence apparatus maintaining ties to elements in the Taliban so as to ensure that it has a major role in any "political settlement" of the 15-year-old Afghan War. Also in response to the burgeoning Indo-US alliance, Islamabad has sought to expand its longstanding economic military-security partnership with China.

These actions, however, have raised Washington's hackles.

In recent months, the US has repeatedly signalled its displeasure with Islamabad, providing further encouragement to New Delhi in pursuing a hardline against Pakistan. The US Congress scuttled a deal to sell Islamabad fighter jets and the Obama administration has withheld hundreds of millions in Afghan War support payments on the grounds that Pakistan has not pursued the "Haqqani Network" Taliban faction.

Washington, however, has not joined the Modi government in labelling Pakistan as responsible for the Uri attack and is urging talks between the two countries. To the chagrin of India's elite, Washington refuses to give India a free hand to deal with Pakistan, both because it continues to depend on Pakistan's logistical support to sustain the occupation of Afghanistan and because its fears a war between Pakistan and India could have catastrophic consequences, including precipitating a conflict with China at a time and place not of US imperialism's choosing.

Yet, there are elements in US political and national-security elites that are willing to jettison relations with Pakistan in pursuit of the main "strategic prize"—making India a "frontline" state in the US military-strategic offensive against China.

Last week two Republican legislators introduced a bill in the US Congress, the "Pakistan State Sponsor of Terrorism Designation Act," that dovetails with the diplomatic offensive the Modi government is mounting against Pakistan.



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