Pakistani elite rattled by “strategic isolation” following Indian attack

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The Pakistani elite has been rattled by its “strategic isolation” in the wake of India’s Sept. 28-29 military strikes inside Azad or Pakistan Occupied Kashmir.

The strikes were a flagrant violation of Pakistani sovereignty. They marked a major escalation in the strategic competition between India and Pakistan, pushing South Asia’s rival nuclear-armed states closer to the precipice of what would be the first-ever war between nuclear powers.

Especially provocative was the decision of India’s virulently right-wing, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to publicly announce the strikes and trumpet them as proof of India’s military prowess.

For more than four decades, India had not admitted to conducting military action inside Pakistan, for fear it would trigger a dynamic of strikes and counterstrikes that could spiral into all-out war. But the BJP government, supported by the military and much of the corporate media, is determined to “change the rules of the game.”

To the shock of Pakistan’s elite, its appeals for international condemnation of India’s aggression have fallen on deaf ears.

Washington, which has showered India with “strategic favours” for more than a decade with the aim of harnessing New Delhi to its drive to strategically encircle and prepare for war against China, has set the tone.

US State Department spokesmen have responded to questions about the strikes with pro forma calls for New Delhi and Islamabad to talk and with demands, akin to those being made by India, for Pakistan to take urgent action to prevent its territory being used to stage “terror” attacks.

In an even clearer demonstration of Washington’s attitude, a spate of former US government officials—not bound by the constraints of the Pentagon’s continuing reliance on Pakistan’s logistical support to wage war in Afghanistan—have rushed to endorse the Indian raids. Invariably they have qualified them as measured and observed, that in carrying out military action inside Pakistan, India is only doing something the US has itself done repeatedly.

Germany, the largest EU power, has been even more forthright than the Obama administration in its support for India’s aggression against Pakistan. In answer to a question about Germany’s attitude to the Indian strikes, the German Ambassador to India, Martin Ney, told a meeting in Hyderabad on Wednesday, that Germany supports them. “There is a clear international norm,” said Ney, “that every state has the right to defend its territory from international terrorism.”

“I can assure you,” he added, “standing with India side by side against terrorism are not empty political words but backed with concrete projects.”

Earlier this week, Russia’s Ambassador to India, Alexander Kadakin, amplified a previous Russian statement that depicted India’s strikes as a necessary response to terrorism. “We welcome the surgical strike,” Kadakin told an Indian television station. “Every country has the right to defend itself.”

Russia has a longstanding military-strategic partnership with India dating back to the Cold War. Relations, however, have grown tepid, as India under Narendra Modi’s BJP government has integrated itself ever more completely into the US’s anti-China “pivot to Asia. This has included opening India’s military bases to routine use by US warplanes and battleships and strengthening bilateral and trilateral ties with India’s principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

Russia’s unequivocal support for the Indian military action against Pakistan is all the more significant in that Moscow recently effected a rapprochement with Islamabad. This included a first-ever arms sale to Islamabad and, last month, a first-ever joint military exercise.

India has also been able to muster strong support within South Asia. Both Bangladesh and Afghanistan, whose troops have skirmished with Pakistani border forces repeatedly in recent months, have endorsed the Indian strikes. Earlier India had been able to mobilize Bangladesh, Bhutan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka in support of a boycott of the upcoming South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in Pakistan, forcing Islamabad to cancel the event.

According to the *Dawn*, Pakistan’s most influential and politically connected English-language daily, a meeting of top Pakistani government and military officials, chaired by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, this past Monday was told that “Pakistan faces diplomatic isolation.”

Summarizing the results of Pakistan’s attempts to rally opposition to the Indian aggression and win support for its stance on the Kashmir conflict, Foreign Secretary Aziz

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Chaudhry told the meeting, "The government's talking points have been met with indifference in major world capitals."

Chaudhry, reported the *Dawn*, said relations with Washington have deteriorated still further. But what "surprised the room" was that China is also pressuring Islamabad for a "change of course."

Beijing has long had an "all-weather" alliance with Pakistan. And in response to the burgeoning Indo-US "global strategic partnership, it has strengthened ties with Islamabad as exemplified by its $46 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor project.

But its comments in the wake of last week's Indian strikes have been circumspect. With Pakistan having chosen to call the claim that Indian troops entered its territory a "fabrication," Beijing has limited itself to urging the two sides to reduce tensions.

To New Delhi's consternation, China last week put on "technical hold" India's attempt to add to the UN international terrorism "blacklist" Masood Azhar, the chief of the Jaish-e-Mohammed, an Islamist insurgent group active in Indian Kashmir. In doing so, China was acting at Pakistan's request. But Chaudhry told the meeting that Beijing questioned the "logic" of protecting Azhar.

Under conditions where the US has ratcheted up tensions with China over the South China Sea and India is in danger of being transformed into a "frontline state" in the US's anti-China drive, Beijing is apparently reticent about Pakistan's continuing support for Islamist terror groups to advance its reactionary strategic rivalry with India—a stratagem Islamabad learned from the CIA in Afghanistan.

In any event, according to the *Dawn* report, a tense discussion followed Chaudhry's report. At one point the prime minister's brother and Punjab Chief Minister, Shabhaz Sharif, took the head of Pakistan's principal intelligence agency, the ISI, to task for the frequent release of Islamist terrorists whom the government had had arrested.

The *Dawn* claims the meeting ended with a decision that some action had to be taken to rein in the Islamist terror groups and to meet Indian demands for cooperation in investigating the January attack on the Indian military base in Pathankot and for the prosecution of Pakistanis allegedly involved in the 2008 terror attack on Mumbai.

The *Dawn* report, although very detailed and supposedly based on multiple sources who attended the meeting, has been vigorously and categorically denied by the Pakistan government.

Be that as it may, there is no question that Pakistan's elite is in deep crisis.

Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) government has come under bitter attack this week from its parliamentary opponents for its response to the Indian military strikes. Imran Khan, who has developed increasingly close ties to the military since his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) became the country's third largest party, has accused Sharif of being a "coward" and denounced him for failing to strike back against India, although he has notably failed to say how or what should be done.

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has denounced Sharif for Pakistan's diplomatic isolation. In an emergency parliamentary debate, PPP representatives attributed Pakistan's predicament to the government having allowed freedom to "non-state actors" and failing to expose internationally India's aggression including its threats to dismember Pakistan via support for the Balochistan separatist insurgency and its violations of the Indus Water Treaty. They also denounced the government for mismanaging relations with Washington.

"The US is already their [India's] ally" complained PPP Senator Sherry Rehman, a former Pakistani ambassador to Washington. "They have already started making bases there. Afghanistan is already blaming us. You have no interests in common with the superpowers."

For decades Pakistan rested geopolitically on the twin pillars of Washington and Beijing. But the US has dramatically downgraded its relations with Islamabad in pursuit of a strategic partnership with India, which because of its size, large military, and dominant geostrategic position in the Indian Ocean, US war-planners view as pivotal counterweight to China.

Washington's strategic favours to India, including giving New Delhi access to its most advanced weaponry, have only increased the already large military-strategic gap between India and Pakistan.

And the steps Islamabad has taken in response—strengthening it ties with China and maintaining ties with the Taliban so as to ensure it has a major say in any Afghan "peace settlement"—have only exacerbated tensions with Washington.

The Indian bourgeoisie, meanwhile, calculates that by aligning itself with US imperialism it can bolster its ambitions to be the regional hegemon of South Asia, at the expense of Pakistan, but also of China, which has developed significant economic ties in the region and is seeking to incorporate it into its One Belt One Road initiative.

The strategic crisis of Pakistan's venal bourgeois elite increases the dangers of a catastrophic war. First, because it will only whet the predatory appetites of the Indian ruling elite, and second, because it can drive the Pakistani ruling class and its politically powerful military to desperate measures. Fearing the ever-widening strategic gap with India, Pakistan recently developed and deployed "battlefield" or tactical nuclear weapons—weapons it has in recent weeks repeatedly vowed that it will use in the event of a large-scale Indian invasion.

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