India-Pakistan cross-border barrages heighten South Asia's war crisis

Keith Jones
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India and Pakistan have intensified cross-border artillery and gunfire in recent days, causing mounting casualties among soldiers and villagers on both sides and bringing South Asia's rival nuclear-armed states still closer to all-out war.

Indian authorities said that an Indian soldier and a female civilian were killed yesterday afternoon when Pakistani troops fired waves of mortar shells across the Line of Control (LoC) that separates Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir.

According to Indian sources, the latest deaths bring to seven the number of Indian security personnel killed in Kashmir during the past 10 days. Most of the deaths were due to cross-border firing, but two were the result of confrontations with anti-Indian Islamist insurgents whom New Delhi charges were infiltrating across the LoC under cover of Pakistani artillery barrages.

Several dozen other Indians, most of them civilians, have been injured in the repeated bursts of intense cross-border artillery and machine-gun fire.

The Indian military, meanwhile, is boasting that it has killed and bloodied large numbers of Pakistani security forces.

On Sunday, its Northern Command issued a statement claiming it had inflicted "heavy casualties" the previous evening when it destroyed four Pakistani army posts in the "Keran sector" in Pakistan-held Kashmir in "a massive fire assault."

The statement said Saturday's mortar, rocket and machine-gun barrage was in retaliation for Friday's beheading of an Indian soldier by terrorist infiltrators. India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, the military, and corporate media have been trumpeting lurid descriptions of the alleged beheading in order to further incite animosity toward Pakistan.

Earlier last week, India's Border Security Forces boasted that they had killed at least 15 Pakistan Rangers in recent days in cross-border firing.

The Pakistani military has denied this claim. But the *Dawn*, the country's most influential English-language daily, did carry a report that "at least two people" had been killed Thursday and eleven injured by Indian firing into Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

In a statement issued Friday, Pakistan's top brass called India's boasts of "any" fatalities in its ranks "absolutely baseless and untrue." "India's claim," declared the Inter-Services Public Relations bureau, was aimed at hiding its own losses at the Line of Control and diverting "world attention from the Kashmir issue."

Both sides are lying systematically about the more than 60 separate incidents of sustained cross-border firing in the past month—lying about which side initiated which exchange and lying about their deadly impact.

What is incontrovertible is that the two countries continue to teeter on the precipice of war. India's BJP government calculates that by increasing pressure on Pakistan it can strengthen its hand with an increasingly diplomatically isolated Islamabad, while exploiting the war crisis to stoke reaction and rally popular support at home.

Indian government and military officials have repeatedly vowed that they are intent on forcing Pakistan to end any and all support to the anti-Indian insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, and that if needed they will order further military strikes inside Pakistan, even if the ultimate result is all-out war.

Late last month the BJP government revealed that Indian Special Forces troops had conducted raids, so-called "surgical strikes," inside Pakistan inflicting "heavy casualties" on Islamist terrorists and their "protectors."

For more than four decades, India had not publicly acknowledged carrying out military action inside Pakistan for fear that it would precipitate a dynamic of strikes and counter-strikes that could rapidly result in all-out war. Yet the government, opposition, and corporate media have all celebrated the strikes as the throwing off of India's purported policy of "strategic restraint" vis a vis Pakistan.

New Delhi has taken several steps in recent days to demonstrate it is actively preparing for war. These include

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ordering the fast-tracking of the acquisition of munitions, including artillery shells, rockets, and tank ammunition and rifles, so as to ensure that India's military has sufficient reserves for 40 days of "intense fighting."

India has also greatly expanded a Navy drill in the Arabian Sea south of Pakistan that is set to begin today and last through November 14. Over 40 warships and submarines, as well as maritime fighter jets and patrol aircraft, are slated to take part in the exercise.

New Delhi is also continuing its campaign of diplomatic pressure on Pakistan. Having rallied other South Asian states to boycott the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) conference that was to be held in Pakistan later this month, New Delhi is now openly exploring the possibility of developing a rival association of regional states from which Islamabad would be excluded.

Last Thursday New Delhi announced that it was expelling a Pakistani diplomat whom it accused of running a spy ring. Islamabad immediately responded by ordering an Indian diplomat out of the country, saying he had violated "the Vienna Convention" on diplomatic relations and "established diplomatic norms."

The BJP government has been greatly encouraged in its belligerence by the endorsement of its "surgical strikes" by the major powers, especially the US.

For decades Pakistan was Washington's principal ally in South Asia. But over the past decade the US has forged a "global strategic partnership" with India, with the aim of transforming it into a "frontline" state in its military-strategic offensive against China. After the BJP's Narendra Modi became prime minister, India has greatly increased its integration into the US' anti-China "pivot to Asia," including throwing open Indian military bases to routine use by US warplanes and battleships for resupply, repair and relaxation. Washington has reciprocated by declaring India a "Major Defense Partner," giving it access to the most advanced Pentagon weaponry.

Islamabad has repeatedly objected to Washington's lavishing of strategic favours on New Delhi, warning that they have overturned the balance of power in South Asia and encouraged India to be more aggressive in its dealings with Pakistan. But all to no avail.

Aided and abetted by the media, Modi and his BJP government are also using the war fever they have whipped up against Pakistan and the triumphalism over the "surgical strikes" to drown out, and channel in a reactionary direction, mounting anger over mass joblessness, deprivation and social inequality.

The BJP has served notice it intends to place the "surgical strikes" and its hardline stance against Pakistan at the center of its campaign for the coming state election in the country's largest state, Uttar Pradesh. It has also intensified its campaign to label critics of the government, even from the right-wing bourgeois opposition parties, as disloyal and "anti-national."

The BJP's stance has caused even some supporters of India's aggressive posture to issue worried warnings.

Bruce Riedel, a longtime CIA operative and former Obama administration adviser was among those in the US military-strategic establishment who rushed to endorse India's Sept. 29 strikes inside Pakistan. But last week he told the *New York Times*, "We're not at the point of no return, but we are in very dangerous waters. When we get to the next terror attack, which is probably only a matter of time, the prime minster has boxed himself in … (H)e can't … choose to use solely diplomatic alternatives without some loss of face."

Pakistan meanwhile is beset by crisis. One expression of this is the military establishment's reaction to a *Dawn* report that claimed a meeting of top government and military officials had discussed the country's acute diplomatic isolation and the need, therefore, for it to ratchet back its support for anti-Indian Islamist groups. Not only did the military force the *Dawn* to retract the story, but it has prevailed on the government to sack the Information Minister and order an inquiry into how the story came to be printed.

Meanwhile, the leader of the country's third-largest party, Imran Khan, is to launch a mass protest today in Islamabad with the aim of forcing Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to agree to an inquiry into his family's massive offshore investments as revealed in the Panama papers.

Khan, who heads the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), has repeatedly accused Sharif of cowardice for supposedly failing to stand up to India. He has also indicated that he would not be averse to the military pushing the Sharif government aside. On Sunday he said Sharif would be responsible if a "third power" steps in as a result of the PTI's Tuesday "lockdown" of Islamabad.

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