

Death toll mounts, as India-Pakistan tensions seethe

Sampath Perera and Keith Jones**24 November 2016**

Indian artillery- and gun-fire across the Line of Control (LoC) that separates Indian- and Pakistan-administered Kashmir killed 10 Pakistani civilians and 3 soldiers yesterday and left a further 18 persons wounded.

Nine of the civilians died when the bus on which they were travelling in Lawat, in the Neelum Valley, was hit by what a local official described as “small and big arms.” Islamabad has accused the Indian military of having deliberately targeted the bus and an ambulance that rushed to the scene.

New Delhi has rejected the charge it is targeting civilians. But yesterday, the Indian Army did carry out intense firing along the LoC, making good on its threat to exact “heavy retribution” for the deaths of three Indian soldiers the day before. The three, one of whose bodies India charges was “mutilated,” were killed by anti-Indian Islamist insurgents whom New Delhi claims are armed and supported by Pakistan.

Describing Wednesday’s cross-border barrage, an Indian defence spokesman told the *Hindu*, “We have carried out fire assaults” on Pakistani military positions. “Most parts of the LoC witnessed exchange of fire all day.”

South Asia’s rival nuclear-armed states have been locked in an escalating confrontation for the past two months—ever since India’s Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government declared Pakistan responsible for the September 18 attack that Islamist, Kashmiri separatists mounted on the Indian army base at Uri, just across the LoC.

It is now widely conceded in both the Indian and Pakistani press that the 2003 cease-fire between India and Pakistan in disputed Kashmir has collapsed and that the “new normal” is diplomatic sparring, cross-border barrages, mounting fatalities, and bellicose threats. This is, to say the least, a highly combustible dynamic, one that whether by accident or design could trigger an escalation to all-out war.

According to an *Indian Express* report from last week, there have been more than 200 separate incidents of cross-border artillery and gunfire exchanges since late September. While India and Pakistan have issued conflicting fatality

claims, the death toll from these exchanges is now estimated to be nearing a hundred.

“Both armies are known,” continued the *Express* report, “to have mounted harsh retaliatory actions against the killings of soldiers, in some cases even carrying out retaliatory beheadings.” India, it added, has massed up to 225,000 troops along the LoC, while Pakistan is said to have mobilised 125,000.

To boost its war preparedness, India has placed emergency orders for munitions and weaponry. According to *IHS Jane’s*, New Delhi has fast-tracked the procurement of \$750 million worth of ammunition and Special Forces equipment from Israel and Russia for delivery by the end of 2016.

The many belligerent statements issued by Pakistani military and government leaders notwithstanding, Islamabad has clearly been rattled by India’s renunciation of its reputed policy of “strategic restraint” vis-à-vis Pakistan and the failure of the US and the world’s other major powers to criticise India’s late-September cross-border raids inside Pakistan. By trumpeting these raids as proof of India’s military prowess and new-found readiness to impose its will, the BJP government jettisoned a four-decades-old Indian policy of refraining from publicising its military operations inside Pakistan, so as to avoid precipitating a dynamic of escalating strikes and counter-strikes that could rapidly lead to all-out war.

In an attempt to defuse tensions, Pakistan continues to publicly claim India’s “surgical strikes” never happened. This claim is belied by its own bitter complaints over world leaders’ failure to condemn them. Similarly, through weeks of intense cross-border firing stretching from late September until last week, the Pakistan Army denied that any of its soldiers had been killed.

This changed abruptly November 14, when the Pakistani military announced that seven of its soldiers had been killed by Indian firing in a single night.

In an attempt to initiate some sort of dialogue with India, Islamabad has announced that Sartaj Aziz, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s top foreign policy advisor, will

travel to New Delhi at the beginning of next week to attend the annual “Heart of Asia” regional conference on Afghanistan. However, India has indicated no enthusiasm for Aziz’s visit.

Yesterday, Sharif denounced India for “continuing naked aggression...resulting in the death of innocent civilians” and, in a thinly veiled warning that New Delhi is pushing the region ever closer to the precipice of all-out war, said that India “has failed to comprehend the gravity of the situation.”

Sharif also repeated Pakistan’s oft-repeated charge that New Delhi is ratcheting up war tensions with Islamabad to divert international attention from “the grave human rights violations and atrocities being committed by the Indian security forces in Kashmir.”

The reality is that the ruling elites of both Indian and Pakistani have manipulated and abused the people of Kashmir as part of their seven-decade-old military-strategic rivalry. Rooted in the communal Partition of the subcontinent into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India, this rivalry, which today threatens to plunge the masses of South Asia into nuclear war, epitomises the reactionary character of the native bourgeoisies of India and Pakistan and the utter failure of independence under their rule.

Staggered by the world economic crisis and fearful that India was falling still further behind China in the race for power in Asia, the Indian bourgeoisie brought Narendra Modi to power two-and-a-half years ago to pursue a more aggressive policy against the working class and more boldly assert their interests on the world stage.

Modi quickly moved to signal that India is intent on changing the “rule of the game” with Pakistan. Within weeks of taking the reins of power, he authorised a more aggressive military posture along the LoC. Even more significantly, with a view to leveraging US support for India’s ambitions to be the dominant regional power in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, Modi has integrated India into Washington’s anti-China “Pivot to Asia.”

The BJP government further escalated tensions with Islamabad this past summer, in response to the outbreak of mass unrest in Jammu and Kashmir, India’s only Muslim-majority state, and the rapid expansion of the Sino-Pakistani alliance, as exemplified by the \$50 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Under the leadership of the self-styled strongman and virulent Hindu communalist Modi, the Indian bourgeoisie is seeking to use the current crisis with Pakistan to compel Islamabad to forgo any material support to the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir and accept Indian regional dominance.

It has been hugely encouraged in pursuing this

confrontational and high-risk course—one that Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar has conceded could result in all-out war—by Washington. Not only has the US showered strategic favours on India, spiking profound fear in Islamabad of an ever-widening military-strategic gap with its arch-rival, the US publicly endorsed India’s illegal and provocative late-September “surgical strikes” inside Pakistan.

India’s war crisis with Pakistan has been accompanied by an escalation of tensions with China, underscoring that the Indo-Pakistani strategic rivalry has become enmeshed with the confrontation between US imperialism and China and that a major South Asian war could rapidly draw in the world’s first- and fourth-largest powers with incalculable consequences for all humanity.

The Indian government, military, and especially the corporate media have all bitterly attacked China for indicating, even as it counsels Islamabad to show “restraint,” that it opposes Indian efforts to isolate Islamabad and label Pakistan a “terrorist state.” With open encouragement from the BJP government, the Hindu right and other ultra-nationalist groups have launched a boycott of Chinese-made goods.

Earlier this month, Modi travelled to Japan to strengthen India’s military-strategic cooperation with the US’s most important Asian ally and Beijing’s most powerful strategic rival in Asia. The summit meeting between Modi and Japanese Prime Minister Abe concluded with their issuing a communiqué that parroted the US’s provocative anti-China stance on the South China Sea dispute.

Meanwhile, in a development aimed at unsettling both Beijing and Islamabad, Indian Defence Minister Parrikar announced that he favours jettisoning India’s “No First Use” nuclear weapons policy. Ambiguity as to India’s intentions, claimed Parrikar, will give New Delhi greater leverage in dealing with its adversaries.

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