

War tensions between India and Pakistan intensify

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Relations between India and Pakistan remain extremely taut, with South Asia's rival nuclear powers the closest to all-out war since a 10-month period in 2001-2002 when India mobilized nearly a million troops on Pakistan's eastern border.

The truce along the Line of Control (LoC) between Indian- and Pakistan-held Kashmir that was put in place in the aftermath of the 2001-2002 war crisis has manifestly broken down. Virtually every day for the past two months, Indian and Pakistani troops have unleashed intense barrages of artillery and gun fire across the LoC. And while continuing to disclaim wanting war, military and government leaders of both countries routinely make bloodcurdling threats.

To cite just one bellicose exchange from last week: On November 25, Pakistan Defence Minister Khawaja Asif told the country's parliament that Pakistan's military "will kill three Indian soldiers for every Pakistani soldier they neutralize," adding India would face "dire consequences ... if it went to war against Pakistan." The next day Asif's Indian counterpart, Manohar Parrikar, told a rally in Goa: "We don't itch for a fight, but if someone looks at the country with evil eye, we will gouge his eyes out and put them back in his hand. We have that much power."

Parrikar, who has repeatedly boasted that New Delhi has the military might and daring to force Islamabad to bend to its will, recently called for India to renounce its "no-first strike" nuclear pledge so as to increase its strategic leverage and spook its enemies.

On Tuesday, tensions heightened still further after Islamist, anti-Indian, Kashmiri secessionists attacked an Army post, killing seven Indian Army personnel, including two officers. The Nagrota Army post is near Jammu, the winter capital of Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state and the site of a quarter-century old, Pakistani-supported insurgency.

According to the *Hindu*, Tuesday's deaths raised to 27 the number of Indian security personnel killed in Kashmir, either by Pakistani cross-border firing or in encounters with insurgents, since Indian Special Forces carried out "surgical

strikes" inside Pakistan in late September, ostensibly in retaliation for an earlier insurgent attack on the Indian military base at Uri.

India claims to have killed a like number of Pakistani troops and at least 40 civilians on both sides of divided Kashmir have perished in cross-border firing.

Unnamed Indian military sources have told the media that evidence points to Pakistani involvement in Tuesday's attack. But thus far, India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has not accused Islamabad of responsibility for the Nagrota attack, in marked contrast from its reaction to the September 18 Uri incident.

This could all change rapidly, however.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP government are heavily invested, both strategically and politically, in securing a demonstrable advantage from the current confrontation with Pakistan.

Big business has vigorously applauded the BJP's much-trumpeted claims to have freed India from the shackles of the "strategic restraint" policy that previous governments reputedly pursued in regards to Pakistan.

Moreover, the BJP has shamelessly exploited the war crisis with Pakistan to deride its opponents as weak, even disloyal, and served notice that it intends to make its aggressive stand against Pakistan a key issue in the coming elections in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state.

Rattled by the world economic crisis, the Indian bourgeoisie brought Modi and his BJP to power two-and-a-half years ago to accelerate the pace of pro-investor socioeconomic "reform" and to more aggressively pursue its great power ambitions on the world stage.

In line with this, Modi has transformed India into a veritable "frontline state" in Washington's military-strategic offensive against China, calculating that the strategic favours the US is lavishing on India in return will enable it to change the "rules of the game" with Pakistan and impose itself as South Asia's regional hegemon.

In August, Modi unveiled a new hardline strategy against Pakistan, announcing New Delhi would mount a diplomatic

campaign to have it labelled a “state sponsor of terrorism” and signaling India’s support for the nationalist separatist insurgency in Balochistan—that is for Pakistan’s dismemberment.

Then in late September the BJP government repudiated India’s longstanding policy of not publicly revealing its military operations inside Pakistan, which was adopted out of fear that to do so could ignite a dynamic of strikes and counter-strikes that could quickly escalate to all-out war.

In the ensuing two months, New Delhi has insisted that it will resume regular high-level contacts with Islamabad only if it agrees that “cross-border terrorism” is the core problem in Indo-Pakistani relations and acts to prevent the Kashmir insurgency receiving any logistical support from Pakistani territory.

In pursuing this hardline stance, Modi and his BJP have been buoyed by Washington’s endorsement of India’s illegal and highly provocative Sept. 28-29 attack inside Pakistan. While the Obama administration has counseled caution, it is anxious to show New Delhi that it recognizes there will be *quid pro quos* for India’s integration into Washington’s anti-China “Pivot to Asia” and in that vein is prepared to cede India more latitude in dealing with Pakistan.

India is also mindful that US president-elect Donald Trump has repeatedly lauded India as among Washington’s most valued strategic partners while attacking Pakistan for not acting like a US ally. It eagerly anticipates gaining even greater leverage over Islamabad when Trump takes office.

Pakistan, meanwhile, has been shaken by its strategic isolation. After the Uri attack, India was able to enlist most of the region’s other states in a boycott of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) meeting that was to be held in Pakistan last month. Islamabad’s calls for international condemnation of India’s illegal “surgical strikes” were met by a thunderous silence.

In an attempt to defuse the war crisis, Islamabad has announced that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s top foreign policy advisor, Sartaj Aziz, will travel to India for the Dec. 3-4 Heart of Asia (HoA) conference on Afghanistan and that he will be available for “comprehensive and unconditional dialogue” with Indian officials on its sidelines.

India, however, has not shown any enthusiasm for Aziz’s participation in the HoA meeting in Amritsar, just 20 kilometers (12.5 miles) from the Pakistani border, let alone Islamabad’s offer of talks. Yesterday the *Times of India* cited unnamed Indian officials as saying Pakistan’s offer of dialogue “was meaningless in the light of continuing terror strikes from across the border.”

The protracted violent cross-border standoff and the Modi government’s bellicose rhetoric, including Defence Minister

Parrikar’s calls for India to abandon its no-first strike nuclear pledge are, however, giving pause to some sections of the corporate media.

On November 24, the Chennai-based *Hindu* published an editorial titled “Restore the ceasefire” in which it said both India and Pakistan must be “alert ... to the danger of the retaliatory cycle spinning out of control” and “must guard against adventurism.” It went on to call on New Delhi to take immediate steps to reopen dialogue with Pakistan. “Given India’s regional status and Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s unchallenged hold over political power,” declared the *Hindu*, “it is incumbent on him to initiate steps to restore the ceasefire that worked well for over a decade.”

The *Economic Times* in a November 25 editorial titled “Do not slide into a war no one wants” explicitly raised the prospect of the “high risk strategy” of “limited confrontation” aimed at whipping up “jingoistic fervor” for political gain ending in war between the “two nuclear powers in South Asia.”

“Even,” continued the *Economic Times*, “if that does not entail use of nuclear weapons—an eventuality no longer to be ruled out as absurd, given the line of thinking favoured by the political leadership both in India and in Pakistan—a war would be very costly in terms of both life and treasure.”

While in striking contrast with the bellicose mood being whipped up by much of the India, the two editorials grossly understated the extent to which South Asia is now enveloped in war clouds. Coincident with the Indo-Pakistan war crisis there has been a major escalation of Indo-China tensions.

Beijing is disconcerted by the extent of India’s strategic realignment with Washington, as exemplified by New Delhi’s ratification in late August of an agreement allowing US warplanes and battleships to make routine use of Indian military bases and ports. India is incensed that Beijing, while urging Islamabad to show restraint, has stood by its longstanding ally in the current crisis, and, in response to the burgeoning Indo-US alliance, has strengthened its partnership with Pakistan.

These developments underscore that the intractable Indo-Pakistani conflict has now become enmeshed with the growing confrontation between US imperialism and China adding to each a massive new explosive charge and raising the prospect that a war between India and Pakistan could rapidly involve the world’s great powers.



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