

War clouds over South Asia

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While the attention of the Western press has been focused on Trump's visit to the Middle East, which he used to threaten Iran, and the NATO summit, where he attacked Germany, relations between India and Pakistan, South Asia's rival nuclear-armed powers, have gone from bad to worse.

New Delhi and Islamabad made rival boasts this week of provocative military action. On Tuesday, the Indian Army released video to support its claim that it had destroyed forward positions of the Pakistani military in the disputed Kashmir region with "punitive fire assaults." Pakistan denied the claim, then posted its own video, saying that it showed it had inflicted even greater damage with its own artillery barrage across the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Indian- and Pakistan-held Kashmir.

On Friday, India said its military had killed two Pakistani soldiers trying to infiltrate across the LoC. Islamabad denied there was any such incident.

Amid the claims and counter-claims, both countries are increasingly on a war footing. Pakistan has "operationalized" all its forward air bases, reputedly in response to a letter from the Indian military high command instructing 12,000 Indian Air Force officers to be ready for operations at "very short notice."

Yesterday, the Pakistan-based *Daily Times* published an editorial titled "Looming Nuclear War?" It warned that were New Delhi to implement its Cold Start military strategy, which calls for India to mount a massive lightning strike on Pakistan's heartland, Islamabad, due to its more limited conventional forces, "would appear" to have just one option—"use of nuclear weapons." Pakistan's defense minister has repeatedly vowed that an Indian invasion would be met with tactical nuclear weapons.

India's relations with its northern neighbor, China, are also fraught. Both countries are building up military forces and infrastructure along their disputed border, and they are locked in an increasingly bitter strategic competition for resources, markets and geopolitical influence across South and South-East Asia, Africa and

the Middle East.

India's ruling elite bitterly resents Beijing's military and economic support for its arch-rival Pakistan.

Cognizant that US imperialism was intent on harnessing India to its efforts to contain and, if need be, militarily thwart China's rise, Beijing long sought to foster improved relations with New Delhi. While it fired back at what it considered Japanese affronts and provocations, it downplayed differences with India.

But with India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government incorporating the country ever-more completely into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China, Beijing's attitude has undergone a pronounced change.

Over the past two years, India and China have engaged in one diplomatic spat after another, and they have begun to publicly exchange military threats, both implicit and explicit. Beijing responded angrily to India's most recent test of its "Agni V" ballistic missile, which, with a range of 5,500–8,000 kilometers, would be capable of delivering nuclear warheads to any Chinese population center. On becoming head of India's Army last January, General Bipin Rawat boasted of India's readiness to fight a "two-front war" against China and Pakistan simultaneously.

The Sino-Indian and Indo-Pakistani rivalries go back decades. But US imperialism, in its drive to escape the consequences of its economic decline and reassert hegemony over Eurasia through aggression and war, has fueled the growth of geopolitical tensions in South Asia.

Fifteen years ago, while the United States was using the so-called "war on terror" to pursue regime-change in the Middle East and establish a strategic foothold in Afghanistan, the Pentagon and CIA were already promoting India as a "strategic prize." India was uniquely placed, they claimed, to bolster US power in Asia and Africa because of its large military, growing economic heft and potential to serve as a vantage point for dominating the Indian Ocean, the world's most important commercial waterway.

Since then, Washington has spared no effort to transform India into a “frontline” state in its military-strategic offensive against China. Under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, it has showered strategic favors on India. To cement an “Indo-US global strategic partnership,” the Bush administration carved out a unique status for India in world nuclear trade. Under Obama, India was declared a “major defense partner,” giving it access to the advanced weaponry the US provides its closest allies.

The Indo-US alliance has overturned the “balance of terror” between New Delhi and Islamabad. During the Cold War, Pakistan was Washington’s principal regional ally. But over the past decade, it has been reduced to a poor cousin.

Under Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP, India is seeking to leverage its growing strategic advantage and Washington’s eagerness to expand their anti-China alliance to pursue a belligerent policy toward Pakistan. Last September, after ordering Indian Special Forces to mount an illegal cross-border raid, Modi declared that the days of Indian “strategic restraint” toward Pakistan were over.

The Indo-US alliance has also become an increasingly pronounced threat to China. Modi has aligned India evermore completely with the US drive against China, diplomatically and militarily. India now parrots the US line on the South China Sea; it has greatly expanded bilateral and trilateral strategic ties with America’s chief regional allies, Japan and Australia; and it has thrown open its ports and air bases for use by the Pentagon to resupply and repair its warplanes and battleships. Recently, the head of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, revealed that the US and Indian militaries are sharing intelligence on Chinese ship and submarine movements.

Facing a common threat from the Indo-US alliance, Pakistan and China have moved to strengthen their own longstanding military-strategic and economic ties. This is exemplified by the \$50 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor, which will link western China with the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar and thereby provide Beijing a means of partially circumventing the Pentagon’s strategy to impose an economic blockade on China by seizing various Indian Ocean and South China Sea chokepoints.

South Asia is thus becoming more and more geopolitically polarized between an India allied with US imperialism and a Pakistan backed by Beijing.

The enmeshing of the Indo-Pakistani and Sino-Indian

strategic rivalries with the confrontation between American imperialism and China adds highly volatile new charges to what are already explosive conflicts between nuclear powers.

In the past, Washington intervened to defuse tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad, but its ability and willingness to do so are increasingly in doubt.

Anxious not to jeopardize their anti-China alliance, the US supported India’s “surgical strikes” inside Pakistan last September, first tacitly and then explicitly. Moreover, there is growing animosity toward Pakistan in the Washington establishment over Pakistan’s maintenance of ties with sections of the Taliban as an “insurance policy” against the growing Indo-US partnership, and over Pakistan’s burgeoning ties to Beijing.

The US ruling elite confronts numerous geopolitical crises and mounting social tensions at home. The Trump administration, the product of a quarter-century of war and decades of social reaction, epitomizes its recklessness, violence and loss of historical perspective. Whether Trump and his aides are even aware of the explosive and interconnected conflicts that are roiling South Asia and how quickly the low-level fighting between India and Pakistan could spiral into war—a war that could quickly involve other great powers, including the US—is a real question.

What is incontestable is that the US drive for global hegemony is stoking conflict around the world and forcing the other imperialist powers, including Germany and Japan, to aggressively assert their own interests.

If the imperialist pyromaniacs are to be prevented from consuming the world in a conflagration that will dwarf the world wars of the last century, the international working class must be mobilized to impose its own solution to the capitalist crisis—socialist revolution. The development of a working class-led anti-war movement in opposition to all the rival bourgeois cliques and their nationalist and chauvinist appeals is the cutting edge of the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force in the fight for all its social and democratic rights.



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