

Indian-Pakistani clashes in Kashmir put South Asia on knife's edge

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Exchanges of cross-border fire by Indian and Pakistani forces manning the disputed Kashmir border have intensified since the beginning of the year.

While cross-border artillery barrages have been frequent, often occurring daily ever since India mounted “surgical strikes” inside Pakistan in September 2016, recent weeks indicate tensions are mounting, raising the prospect of a catastrophic war between South Asia’s nuclear-armed rivals.

At least five civilians and a soldier were killed on the Indian side on January 19, while two civilians were killed in Pakistan. During the preceding three days, six more Indian civilians and three soldiers and six Pakistani civilians had lost their lives. While there are discrepancies in the Indian and Pakistani casualty figures, it can be said with assurance that at least four Pakistani soldiers have been killed in cross-border exchanges since the beginning of 2018.

The customary exchange of mutual accusations of “unprovoked firing” across the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir cannot disguise the fact that the situation is on a knife’s edge.

The India-Pakistan rivalry is rooted in the reactionary communal partition of the subcontinent implemented in 1947 by South Asia’s departing British imperial overlords in connivance with the colonial bourgeoisie. Independent India and Pakistan have fought four wars, the last in 1999, and numerous skirmishes.

However, it is US imperialism’s accelerating drive to make India a frontline state in its military-strategic offensive against China that has overturned the balance of power in South Asia. With the US providing numerous strategic favours to Indian, including access to its most advanced weapon systems, Pakistan has moved to strengthen its longstanding strategic ties with China. Increasingly, the region has been polarized into rival Indo-US and Pakistani-China blocs, adding an explosive new element to both the India-Pakistan and US-China conflicts, and raising the danger that a war between India and Pakistan could draw in the world’s great powers.

A further consequence of Washington’s downgrading of

relations with Pakistan, its principal regional ally during the Cold War, in favour of India, is that it has emboldened the Indian ruling elite in its dealings with Pakistan.

The India-Pakistan “comprehensive peace dialogue” has been in limbo since late 2008. But under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP, India has frozen virtually all high-level contacts with Pakistan and vowed to continue doing so until Islamabad demonstrably ceases all logistical support for the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir.

The Indian government’s provocative stance has been encouraged by Washington. The US endorsed India’s Sept. 2016 “surgical strikes” inside Pakistan. New Delhi, for its part, has welcomed the Trump administration’s new Afghan war strategy, which calls for Washington to ratchet up pressure on Pakistan to eliminate Taliban “safe-havens” in its Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

On January 4, Washington suspended up to \$2 billion in military-security assistance to Pakistan to back its demand that Islamabad break off all ties with the Haqqani Network, a Taliban-aligned group that was closely allied with the CIA in the 1980s, but which in recent years has carried out some of the most devastating attacks on US forces in Afghanistan.

Pakistan’s military-security apparatus has maintained ties to elements of the Taliban insurgency as a means of ensuring the Pakistani ruling elite has a significant say in any “political settlement” of the Afghan War, under conditions where Washington has increasingly sidelined Islamabad and encouraged India to expand its role in the impoverished Central Asian country.

Pakistan has long viewed Afghanistan as vital to giving it “strategic depth” in its rivalry with India.

At a press conference called to respond to Trump’s charge that the US has “foolishly” given tens of billion in aid to Pakistan and gotten “nothing but lies and deceit” in return, Pakistan Army spokesman Major General Asif Ghafoor warned that Washington’s promotion of India as a major player in Afghanistan is exacerbating tensions in the region. Pointing to Islamabad’s “unresolved issues” with India,

Ghafoor said, “It would be impossible to establish peace in the region without resolving” them.

Washington’s reckless encouragement of India has helped expand the Indo-Pakistan strategic conflict onto Afghan soil. At the same time, Afghanistan, emboldened by the deepening tensions in US-Pakistan relations and India’s belligerence against Pakistan, has adopted an increasingly hostile and aggressive policy towards Islamabad. Islamabad frequently accuses Indian intelligence of working in tandem with Afghan intelligence to foment terrorist attacks inside Pakistani territory, including by supporting the separatist insurgency in Balochistan.

Indian Army chief, General Bipin Rawat, seized on the further deterioration in US-Pakistani relations at the beginning of the year to send a bellicose warning to Islamabad. On January 12, he said that India’s military stands ready to mount further military strikes inside Pakistan if the situation along the Line of Control in Kashmir continues to deteriorate. “If a task is given to us,” said Rawat, “we cannot say we will not cross the border because they [Pakistan] have nuclear weapons. We have to call their bluff.”

Pakistan Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif responded the next day, with his own bellicose message. Rawat’s remarks, he said, “Amount to (an) invitation for (a) nuclear encounter. If that is what they desire, they are welcome to test our resolve. The general’s doubt would swiftly be removed, inshallah [God willing].”

Apart from stockpiling strategic nuclear weapons, Pakistan has recently deployed tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons and repeatedly touted them as its first line of defence against any large-scale Indian invasion or impending invasion, the kind of operation that India is actively planning for under its “Cold Start” strategy.

The Pakistani government has justified its deployment of tactical nuclear weapons and expansion of its military-strategic ties with Beijing by pointing to Washington’s failure to heed its warnings against upsetting the “balance of power” in the region.

Bolstered by its burgeoning alliance with Washington, India has vowed to face down both Pakistan and China. Last summer, amid a 10-week military standoff with China over a remote Himalayan ridge, the Doklam Plateau, Rawat boasted that India is ready to fight a “two-front war”—i.e., a simultaneous war against both China and Pakistan. He first raised this prospect when he was elevated to head the Indian army in January 2017.

India has taken exception to the \$50 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) infrastructure project, on the grounds that parts of the proposed highway and pipeline network would run through “Indian territory,” that is, parts

of Pakistan-held Kashmir.

For the Pakistani ruling elite, the CPEC is a much needed economic shot in the arm. For Beijing, the CPEC is an important element in its broader One Belt One Road economic strategy, which is aimed at opening up new markets in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, but one with especially large strategic significance. The CPEC will link the Pakistani Arabian Sea port of Gwadar with western China, thus providing Beijing with a means of at least partially offsetting Washington’s plans to impose an economic blockade on China by seizing the Straits of Malacca and other maritime chokepoints.

These intractable conflicts, pitting US imperialism and its Indian partner against the rising economic power of China in alliance with Pakistan, underscore the potentially explosive ramifications of the bubbling border tensions between South Asia’s nuclear rivals.

Earlier this month, the Press Trust of India (PTI) cited a report from Indian intelligence sources that claimed 138 Pakistan military personnel were killed in the preceding year in “tactical operations and retaliatory cross-border firings” along the LoC. The same sources put the death toll of soldiers on the Indian side at 28. Both militaries are known for boasting of enemy fatalities, while downplaying casualties on their own side.

Indian intelligence sources also blamed Pakistan for violating the 2003 ceasefire agreement 860 times in 2017, i.e., more than twice per day. For its part, the Pakistani Foreign Ministry accused New Delhi January 20 of violating the ceasefire agreement 150 times already in 2018, and 1,900 times in 2017.

The PTI report shed some light on the nature of the “tactical operations” conducted by India. On December 25, 2017, a group of five Indian “commandos” crossed the LoC and killed three Pakistani soldiers, the report said. India employs a strategy called “hot pursuit”, under which it claims the right to cross into Pakistani-held territory, to disrupt the Pakistani military’s support for “terrorist groups” attacking India.

Given the combustible character of Indo-Pakistani relations, any such incursion runs the risk of triggering an all-out war or even a global conflict that would imperil the lives of tens, if not hundreds of millions of people.



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