

Indian government seizes on Kashmir attack to ratchet up tensions with Pakistan

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India has responded to a suicide-bombing Thursday in Indian-held Kashmir, which killed 40 Indian security personnel, with denunciations and blood-curdling threats—all but announcing an impending military strike on Pakistan.

Speaking yesterday, Narendra Modi, India's prime minister and the head of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), held Pakistan responsible for the attack. He then vowed that India will make “the terror outfits and those aiding and abetting them pay a heavy price.”

“Let me assure the nation,” Modi continued, “those behind this attack, the perpetrators of this attack will be punished.” He said his government has given India's security forces “complete freedom of action.”

Modi has repeatedly boasted that the cross-border military strikes he ordered on Pakistan in September 2016 in retaliation for a terror attack on an Indian army base in Jammu and Kashmir, have freed India from the shackles of “strategic restraint.”

Seeking to whip up war-fever, Modi declared yesterday: “The blood of the people is boiling... Our neighbouring country, which has been isolated internationally, is in a state of illusion, [and] thinks such terror attacks can destabilise us, but their plans will not materialise.”

At least 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) paramilitaries were killed and several more injured on Thursday afternoon when a suicide-bomber rammed an SUV packed with explosives into a CRPF bus traveling on the Srinagar-Jammu highway in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir. The bus was part of a convoy of 78 vehicles that was returning more than 2,500 soldiers, most of whom had been on holiday, to active duty in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir's largest city.

Indian authorities blamed the success of the attack—the single biggest loss of Indian security forces in three decades—on intelligence and security lapses.

Citing a claim of responsibility for the attack from the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), an Islamist pro-Kashmir separatist group, New Delhi immediately declared Pakistan was to blame.

Yesterday, New Delhi delivered Pakistan what was termed a sternly-worded diplomatic demarche, recalled its ambassador from Islamabad, and announced it was canceling Pakistan's most-favoured nation trade status. Everything suggests that Modi and his BJP intend to exploit Thursday's attack to the hilt to whip up bellicose nationalism with a view to deflecting mounting social anger, and mobilising its reactionary Hindu communalist base. All opposition will be branded as a threat to the “national unity” needed to confront arch-rival Pakistan.

In recent months, the Modi government has been shaken by growing worker and farmer protests—including a two-day nationwide general strike in January in which tens of millions participated.

Moreover, in December the BJP suffered electoral defeats in three Hindi-heartland states that hitherto were among its strongest bastions. This has placed a large question mark over whether the BJP will prevail in the national elections to be held in multiple phases this April and May.

Yesterday, the BJP and its Hindu extremist allies organised protests in several cities, including New Delhi, at which demands for military action against Pakistan were raised.

A crucial factor in the BJP's ability to exploit the Kashmir events to stoke communal reaction and to prepare aggressive military action against Pakistan is the role of the so-called opposition parties. Whatever their tactical differences and criticisms of the ruling BJP, they all support aggressively pursuing New Delhi's geo-political interests in the region against Pakistan.

Congress Party President Rahul Gandhi denounced the incident as “an attack on India's soul” and assured the BJP government that his party, as well as the entire opposition, is fully supportive of the government and the military. “I want to make it very clear,” said Gandhi, “that the aim of terrorism is to divide this country and we are not going to be divided for even one second, no matter how hard people try.”

The Congress and all the other opposition parties,

including the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, supported Modi's September 2016 "surgical strikes" and hailed the Indian army for carrying them out. In the southern India state of Kerala, the CPM Chief Minister and Politburo member Pianrayi Vijayan introduced a resolution in the state assembly lauding the "surgical strikes."

The Stalinists have issued only tepid criticisms of the BJP government's brutal crackdown on popular opposition in Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state, and its belligerent stand against Pakistan.

Continuing, albeit with an even harder edge, the policy of India's previous Congress-led government, Modi's BJP regime has rebuffed repeated Pakistani overtures and refuses all high-level discussions with Pakistan until Islamabad demonstrates it has ended all logistical support for insurgent groups in Indian-administered Kashmir.

The CPM Politburo immediately issued a statement that "strongly condemns the terrorist attack mounted on a CRPF convoy in Pulwama in Jammu & Kashmir." It reiterated its support for the Indian military, declaring: "The Politburo of the CPI (M) conveys its heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families of the personnel who laid down their lives in the line of duty."

Thursday's suicide bombing was reportedly carried out by 20-year-old Adil Ahmed Dar, a Kashmir labourer, who grew up only a few kilometres from the site of bomb blast. According to his parents, Dar was radicalised following the police arrest and torture of him and his friends three years ago while they were returning from school.

Pakistan's reaction to India's bellicose threats has thus far been subdued and limited to a denial that it had any role in the Pulwama suicide-bombing. In previous cases, Islamabad has made its own blood-curdling threats of military retaliation, including boasting of its readiness to use nuclear weapons, in response to any Indian attack. It appears that Pakistan has been shaken by statements issued by several countries, including the US, condemning the attack and voicing support for India's "struggle against terrorism."

Yesterday, US National Security Adviser John Bolton effectively gave Washington's green light to an Indian military strike on Pakistan. Bolton told the media that he had spoken with his Indian counterpart twice since Thursday's bomb blast. "I told Ajit Doval today that we support India's right to self-defence," he said. Bolton also reiterated the demand of an earlier White House statement that Pakistan eliminate all terrorist "safe-havens."

The Kashmir dispute and the broader Indo-Pakistani rivalry have their roots in the reactionary 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India through the joint actions of South

Asia's departing British colonial overlords and the rival communally-based wings of the bourgeoisie, led respectively by the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress.

While both independent India and Pakistan laid claim to all of Kashmir, it subsequently came to be divided, through intrigue and war, into the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan-held Azad Kashmir. In pursuit of their geo-political ambitions, the Indian and Pakistan ruling elites have both abused and ridden roughshod over the rights of the Kashmiri people.

For decades, New Delhi manipulated elections and arbitrarily unseated governments in Jammu and Kashmir. When faced with mass political unrest in the late 1980s, it resorted to violent repression. For its part, Pakistan has manipulated the opposition within Jammu and Kashmir and promoted Islamist insurgent groups in a bid to undermine rival India.

With the Modi government now seeking to extract a pound of flesh from Pakistan to "avenge" last Thursday's attack, there is a very real danger relations between South Asia's rival nuclear-armed states will cascade out of control. Following India's so-called surgical strikes on Pakistan in September 2016, the two countries teetered for months on the brink of all-out war. Shelling occurred on almost a daily basis, killing dozens of military personnel and civilians on both sides.

Adding to the explosiveness of the situation is the US drive to harness India to its military-strategic offensive against China. As a result, the Indo-Pakistan conflict has become increasingly enmeshed with rising US-China tensions, with New Delhi allied with Washington and Islamabad with Beijing.



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