

India bombs Pakistan, Islamabad vows military retaliation

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India carried out an air strike deep inside Pakistan early Tuesday morning, its first since the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war, raising tensions between South Asia's rival nuclear-armed states to a boil.

With Islamabad asserting it has a right to retaliate and the spokesman for Pakistan's army vowing it will "surprise" India, there is a grave danger that escalating tit-for-tat retaliatory actions will spiral out of control into a catastrophic war.

Reports of heavy shelling across the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Indian- and Pakistan-administered Kashmir were appearing as this article was filed for publication.

The Indian government is claiming that 12 Indian Air Force Mirage fighter jets destroyed the main base of Jaish-e Mohammed (JeM), an Islamist group active in the insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir, by striking it with 1,000 kilogram (2,000 pound) "precision" bombs. The reputed base was located in Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, some 60 kilometres from the LoC.

"In this operation," Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale told a celebratory press conference Tuesday, "a very large number of JeM terrorists, trainers, senior commanders and groups of jihadists who were being trained for fidayeen action were eliminated."

The Indian government has officially refused to be more precise in its death count. But Indian media, based on sources inside the Hindu supremacist BJP government, are speaking of between 200 and 300 dead.

While the precise form of India's attack on Pakistan was not known in advance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other senior government and military officials had repeatedly vowed Pakistan would be punished militarily for a suicide bombing that killed 40 soldiers in the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) near Pulwama, in Indian-held Kashmir, on February 14.

No sooner had the JeM claimed responsibility for the bombing than Modi declared Pakistan responsible and said India's military had a "free hand" in exacting retribution.

As preparations for yesterday's strike proceeded, the BJP government announced a slew of retaliatory measures. These include cancelling Pakistan's Most Favoured Nation trade status and vowing to maximize India's "rights" under the Indus Valley Water Treaty, effectively threatening to roil Pakistan's economy by denying it the water it needs for irrigation and electricity generation.

Nevertheless, in an implicit admission that its planned retaliatory attack on Pakistan was a wanton violation of international law,

New Delhi did not seek to justify yesterday's strike by referring to the Pulwama attack. Rather, Gokhale claimed that it was a "non-military pre-emptive action," exclusively targeting the JeM, because "credible intelligence" showed the Islamist group was on the verge of launching another terrorist attack.

Islamabad has disputed India's account of the raid it mounted inside Pakistan under cover of darkness early Tuesday. A statement issued from a meeting of Pakistan's National Security Committee, chaired by Prime Minister Imran Khan, accused India of making "self-serving, reckless and fictitious" claims. According to Islamabad, the Indian fighter jets were chased off by Pakistani warplanes and their precision bombs fell in forested areas, with one injured civilian the lone casualty.

The wild divergence in the claims emanating from New Delhi and Islamabad underscores the explosiveness of the situation. The reactionary ruling elites of both countries have for decades used their strategic rivalry as a mechanism for diverting social tensions and stoking reaction, and made central to their rule the notion that any compromise with, slight from, or reversal at the hands of the arch-enemy is impermissible.

Even as they dismissed the impact of Tuesday's attack, Pakistan's military and government gave every indication they intend to respond in kind.

"Pakistan," declared army spokesman Major General Asif Ghafoor, "will retaliate on diplomatic, political and military fronts to India's action."

He then added ominously, "Prime Minister Imran Khan told the army and people [to] get ready for any eventuality. Now it is time for India to wait for our response. We have decided. Wait for It."

In ordering yesterday's strike, Modi and his BJP government had a double objective.

First, to intensify India's escalating campaign of diplomatic, economic and military pressure on Pakistan, and "normalize" India's resort to illegal military action inside Pakistan in response to insurgent attacks in Indian-held Kashmir.

Shortly after it was propelled to power in 2014 by the Ambanis and India's other newly-minted billionaires, the Modi-led BJP government signalled that it was determined to change the "rules of the game" with Pakistan, so as to force it to submit to India's regional dominance and demonstratively cease all logistical support for the Kashmir insurgency.

The new wave of popular opposition to Indian rule that, since 2016, has convulsed Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-

majority state, has only made Modi, the BJP and the RSS-led Hindu right more determined to lash out against Pakistan.

The second, and no less important aim of yesterday's air strikes, is to incite a bellicose and communalist political atmosphere in the run-up to India's April-May, multi-stage general election.

With its promises of jobs and development having proven to be a cruel hoax for India's workers and toilers, the Modi government is facing mounting social opposition. Tens of millions of workers joined a two-day, nationwide general strike last month to oppose the BJP government's austerity measures and "pro-investor reforms." There have also been widespread farmer protests.

The BJP is seeking to use the war crisis with Pakistan to mobilize its Hindu right political base, project Modi as a strongman uniquely able to tame India's enemies, and paint any criticism of him and his government as disloyal, if not treasonous.

Because of the foul atmosphere whipped up by the Hindu right in the wake of the Pulwama attack, thousands of Kashmiri students who were attending colleges in other states have already had to flee for home in fear for their lives.

The ability of the BJP to seize on the Pulwama attack to mount this vile and transparent political ruse is entirely bound up with the reactionary politics of the opposition parties.

Whilst they may voice the occasional criticism of the BJP government's brutal repression in Kashmir, they all stand four-square behind the Indian bourgeoisie's drive to bring Pakistan to heel and realize its great-power ambitions.

In 2016 the entire opposition—and this includes the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist, or CPM)—hailed the "surgical strike" or commando raid that the BJP ordered on Pakistan—an action Modi boasted had thrown off the shackles of "strategic restraint" on India's Pakistan policy.

Yesterday, Congress Party President Rahul Gandhi kicked off the parade of opposition leaders hailing the Indian air strikes, by tweeting, "I salute the pilots of the IAF (Indian Air Force)."

CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury praised the military for "an effective strike" and rushed to attend a government-convened all-party meeting. At the meeting's conclusion, Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj boasted that "all parties in one voice praised the security forces and supported the government's anti-terror operations."

The Pakistani government and elite are seeking to cast themselves as victims of Indian aggression. But they are no less responsible than New Delhi for the reactionary strategic conflict that has riven South Asia since the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India, and which today threatens to culminate in a nuclear holocaust. Especially cynical is Islamabad's attempt to portray itself as the protector of the Kashmiri people. Pakistan has run roughshod over the rights of the Kashmiris in Azad, or Pakistan-held Kashmir, and it has manipulated the popular opposition in Jammu and Kashmir, using its political influence and logistical muscle to promote anti-working class Islamist militia groups.

The Indo-Pakistan conflict is rooted in Partition, but it has been enormously exacerbated by the predatory actions of Washington. Determined to use India as a frontline state in its military-strategic

offensive with China, successive administrations, Democrat and Republican alike, have showered strategic favours on India, while blithely ignoring Islamabad's warnings that its actions have overturned the regional balance of power.

So as to further cement the Indo-US "global strategic partnership," US National Security Adviser John Bolton gave the Modi government a green light to strike Pakistan. Less than 24 hours after the Pulwama attack and after hurried consultations with his Indian counterpart, Ajit Doyal, Bolton declared that Washington supports "India's right to self-defense against cross-border terrorism." Except for the name of the country, Bolton's words were exactly those that US governments have for decades used to bless Israeli attacks on the Palestinians.

Fear of the burgeoning Indo-US alliance—which now includes a US right to use Indian military bases for refuelling and resupply—has led China and Pakistan to forge ever-closer strategic ties. Consequently the Indo-Pakistani and US-China conflicts have become enmeshed. A war between India and Pakistan would from the get-go risk drawing in the world's great powers and igniting a global conflagration.

The latest Indo-Pakistani war crisis underscores the urgency of developing a working-class led movement against war and imperialism in South Asia and around the world. In opposition to Modi and Imran Khan, who pursue like policies of austerity and capitalist restructuring even as they toss bloodcurdling threats at one another, Indian and Pakistani workers must unite their struggles and rally the oppressed toilers behind them in the fight to overthrow capitalist rule, tear down the subcontinent's reactionary communally-infused state system, and establish the United Socialist States of South Asia.



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