

India and Pakistan issue fresh war threats

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After direct clashes between their air forces Wednesday, tensions between India and Pakistan remain on the boil, threatening the eruption of all-out war between South Asia's two nuclear-armed powers.

Addressing a joint session of parliament yesterday, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan declared that his government had decided to release captured Indian Air Force Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman today as a "peace gesture." However, Khan warned that "Pakistan will have to retaliate" should the situation "get out of hand."

Varthaman was captured during Wednesday's clash between Indian and Pakistan Air Force jets, which erupted when Pakistani jets crossed into Indian-administered Kashmir in an apparent attempt to strike Indian military facilities. Although India thwarted the attack, Pakistani forces shot down an Indian MiG-21 and captured its pilot.

The commanders of India's three armed forces held a press conference late yesterday afternoon. While welcoming the release of the wing commander, they vowed to continue military strikes inside Pakistan. "As long as Pakistan continues to harbour terrorists, we will continue to target the terror camps," declared Major General Surendra Singh Mahal. He denounced Pakistan for targeting Indian military installations, adding: "[I]f they provoke us any further, we are prepared for exigencies."

Pakistan's military spokesman, Major General Asif Ghafoor, was no less belligerent, warning earlier in the day: "Pakistan Army troops are at high alert along the Line of Control (LoC) to thwart any Indian aggression." The LoC separates Indian- and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

These threats demonstrate that the stand-off will not be resolved by Islamabad releasing a pilot and New Delhi welcoming the gesture.

Locked in a reactionary military-strategic rivalry since the 1947 communal partition of South Asia, the capitalist elites of India and Pakistan have fought three declared wars and numerous border skirmishes, as they have jostled for advantage and used their antagonism as a means of diverting domestic social discontent.

The latest conflict is bound up with mounting political crises in both countries, and Washington's drive to transform India into a "global strategic partner" and frontline state in its confrontation with China.

India's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seized on a February 14 attack at Pulwama in Kashmir by Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), an Islamist terrorist group with bases in Pakistan, to ratchet up tensions with Islamabad. The attack claimed the lives of more than 40 Indian soldiers.

New Delhi retaliated on Tuesday via an attack at Balakot, deep inside Pakistan—New Delhi's first air strike inside Pakistan since the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war. Based on information provided by a top government official, the Indian media is asserting that the Balakot attack claimed between 200 and 300 lives.

Modi's government prepared the attack by imposing punishing economic measures on Pakistan, including cancelling its most-favoured nation trading status, and vowing to exercise its rights under the Indus Valley Water Treaty to reduce water flows into Pakistan that are needed for irrigation and power generation.

Modi's attempt to politically exploit the military conflict was underscored yesterday when he organised a meeting of BJP activists in 15,000 locations, dubbed the "world's largest video conference." Reports claimed that Modi interacted with 10 million people during the meeting.

Modi vowed: "India will fight, live, work and win as one and nobody can create hurdles in its march towards development." He added that the BJP's 2014 election victory was a "mandate for fulfilling people's necessities" and "the 2019 polls will be about fulfilling people's aspirations."

Seeking to incite war fever, Modi stated: "We have complete faith in the capabilities of our defence forces. Hence, it is very crucial that nothing which affects their determination happens."

In a thinly-veiled threat to India's opposition parties, he denounced those who rejected "a strong government."

After coming to power in 2014, Modi, with the full backing of India's super-rich elite, deepened New Delhi's strategic partnership with US imperialism so as to advance India's great power ambitions, above all at the expense of China and Pakistan. He is determined to hold onto power in the upcoming elections in April and May, after which he hopes to strengthen his autocratic rule to pursue India's foreign policy interests more aggressively and enforce the ruling elite's economic dictates by suppressing social opposition.

Opposition party leaders, including Congress Party president

Rahul Gandhi, accused Modi of politicising the crisis to boost his reelection campaign. However, they rushed to join an all-party meeting Tuesday called by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, and endorsed the government's war drive against Pakistan "in one voice."

More generally, they have long backed the Modi government's position—repeated by the prime minister again yesterday—that New Delhi will not resume high-level contacts with Pakistan, let alone negotiations on a peace settlement, until it suppresses all logistical support from Pakistan for the separatist insurgency in Indian-administered Kashmir.

Many Indian media commentators are vociferously backing India's anti-Pakistan campaign.

The *Times of India* published an article Wednesday comparing the military arsenals of both sides, including the nuclear stockpiles. Although the article's ostensible purpose was to underline India's military superiority, it confirmed that the ruling elites of both countries could unleash a nuclear holocaust that would exterminate millions of people in the region and beyond.

According to the *Times*, India possesses between 140 and 150 nuclear warheads, while Pakistan has 130 to 140. Both countries have ballistic missiles capable of carrying the warheads, with India's Agni-V able to travel 5,000 kilometres, compared to a 2,000-kilometre limit for Pakistan's Shaheen missiles.

India's army of 1.2 million soldiers controls 336 armoured personnel carriers, 3,565 tanks, and 9,719 military guns, while Pakistan has 1,605 personnel carriers, 2,496 tanks, and 4,472 artillery pieces. The list goes on.

Both New Delhi and Islamabad have spent lavishly to acquire such deadly military firepower, leaving millions of workers and poor peasants to go hungry and without access to basic social provisions. India's 2018 defence budget was a massive \$58.1 billion, or 2.1 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), while Pakistan spent \$11 billion, or 3.6 percent of its GDP.

Media reports confirm that in the lead-up to the Balakot air strike, the Indian government began preparations for all-out war. State-run oil companies were asked to increase their stores of jet fuel at northern airfields six days before the strike.

In another expression of the virulently anti-Pakistan campaign whipped up by the media, right-wing geostrategist Brahma Chellaney wrote: "Peace with Pakistan is a mirage, and the Indian Air Force (IAF) aptly employed its Mirage 2000 aircraft to bomb terrorists there."

Chellaney also referred to the December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament, allegedly carried out by JeM, and criticised then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee for not having "quickly responded with punitive airstrikes." He continued: "Balakot represents the first time a nuclear power carried out an airstrike inside another nuclear-armed state." India was "busting Western academic theories about the inevitability of

tit-for-tat actions rapidly triggering a serious nuclear crisis."

In plain language, Chellaney urged New Delhi to use its firepower to eliminate "terrorists" in Pakistan, while dismissing the possibility that events could spiral out of control into a potential nuclear exchange. This underscores the recklessness of India's ruling elite.

In an editorial board statement entitled "A socialist strategy to oppose war on the Indian subcontinent" published on May 31, 2002, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned: "It would be a dangerous folly for the working class to believe that the outbreak of a nuclear war is impossible. Indian defence analysts have sought to dampen public fears by speculating on the prospects of 'a limited war,' confined to attacks on alleged terrorist training camps in the Pakistani-controlled region of Kashmir. Any clash, however, would have a military and political dynamic of its own."

The balance of power in the region has shifted dramatically during the intervening 17 years. The India-Pakistan rivalry has become enmeshed with US imperialism's confrontation with China. In its determination to consolidate its hegemony in the Asia-Pacific, Washington has deepened its military ties with New Delhi. In response, Beijing has expanded its military and economic ties with Islamabad.

Any war between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan therefore has the real potential of precipitating US and Chinese intervention, triggering the eruption of a catastrophic third world war.

The Trump administration, which publicly declared in advance its support for India "punishing" Pakistan for the February 14 Pulwama bombing, has called on both sides to exercise restraint and forego further military action. But even as it did so, Washington emphasised its partnership with India and demanded Islamabad dismantle "terrorist" havens—the better to strengthen its anti-China alliance with New Delhi.



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