

India and Pakistan tobogganing toward a catastrophic war

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India and Pakistan, South Asia's rival nuclear-armed states, are teetering on the brink of a full-scale military conflict. Early Tuesday morning, Indian warplanes attacked Pakistan for the first time since the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War. Striking deep inside Pakistan, they destroyed what New Delhi claims was the principal "terror base" of the Jaish-e-Mohammed, an Islamist group involved in the separatist insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir.

After a brief period of confusion, as it assessed the damage and strategic implications of the Indian attack, Islamabad vowed a strong military response. Pakistan, it declared, would not allow India to "normalize" illegal US or Israeli-style attacks inside Pakistan, whether mounted in the name of retaliation for, or preemptive strikes against, Kashmiri insurgent attacks.

The next day, Indian and Pakistani war planes engaged in a dogfight over the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, after Islamabad launched what New Delhi claims was an unsuccessful strike on Indian military installations. Both sides are claiming to have shot down at least one enemy plane in Wednesday's encounter, with Islamabad presenting a captured Indian pilot as proof of its claim.

The US, China, Russia and other world powers are now publicly scrambling to avert the eruption of all-out war—a war they concede could quickly spiral into a catastrophic nuclear exchange, even were it to be "confined" to the subcontinent. Yet even as they counsel restraint and make offers of mediation, the great powers—themselves locked in, to use the Pentagon's term, "a new era of strategic competition"—are trying to use the South Asian war crisis to advance their own geostrategic interests.

Washington, in particular, has used the standoff to further its efforts to diplomatically and militarily encircle China. It publicly greenlighted India's attack on Pakistan as "self-defense," and is using the current crisis to underscore the strength of the Indo-US "global strategic partnership."

Adding to the explosiveness of the situation are the interconnected socio-economic and political crises buffeting the two states, headed respectively by Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP and the Islamic populist Imran Khan.

Elected Pakistan's Prime Minister just seven months ago on promises of jobs, development, and increased social spending, Khan has seen his popularity plummet as his government implements IMF-demanded austerity. Modi and his BJP are shamelessly using the war crisis to muster votes for India's multi-stage April-May general election. The BJP is accusing the opposition of imperiling "national unity," for not ceasing all criticism of the government and for not trumpeting its claims that the "strongman" Modi has thrown off the shackles of "strategic restraint" in India's relations with Pakistan.

With the full support of the military, the corporate media, and virtually the entire opposition, the Modi government has rejected Khan's offer of talks. New Delhi is insisting, as it has for years, that there will be no high-level interactions, let alone "peace negotiations," between India and Pakistan until Islamabad demonstratively capitulates to New Delhi's

demands by cutting off all logistical support from Pakistan for the Kashmir insurgency.

A nuclear catastrophe in the making?

No one should underestimate the danger of what would be the first-ever war between nuclear-armed states. Since the 2001-2002 war crisis, which saw a million Indian troops deployed on the Pakistan border for nine months, both countries have developed hair-trigger strategies, with a dynamic impelling rapid escalation. In response to India's Cold Start strategy, which calls for the rapid mobilization of Indian forces for a multi-front invasion of Pakistan, Islamabad has deployed tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons. India has, in return, signaled that any use by Pakistan of tactical nuclear weapons will break the "strategic threshold," freeing India from its "no first use" nuclear-weapon pledge, and be met with strategic nuclear retaliation.

All this would play out in a relatively small, densely populated area. The center of Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city with a population in excess of 11 million, lies little more than 20 kilometers (12.5 miles) from the Indian border. The distance from New Delhi to Islamabad is significantly less than that between Berlin and Paris or New York and Detroit and would be travelled by a nuclear-armed missile in a matter of minutes.

A nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan would not only kill tens of millions in South Asia. A 2008 simulation conducted by scientists who in the 1980s alerted the world to the threat of "nuclear winter" determined that the detonation of a hundred Hiroshima-scale nuclear weapons in an Indo-Pakistani war would, due to the destruction of large cities, inject so much smoke and ash into the upper atmosphere as to trigger a global agricultural collapse. This, they predicted, would lead to a billion deaths in the months that followed South Asia's "limited" nuclear war.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the latest war crisis—and events could easily spin out of control in the next days or weeks—it exemplifies how the breakdown of the postwar geopolitical order and the resulting surge in imperialist antagonisms and inter-state rivalry are inflaming all the unresolved conflicts and problems of the twentieth century: a century in which capitalism survived the challenge of socialist revolution, but only by dragging humanity through two world wars, fascism, and countless other horrors.

Partition and the historic failure of the national bourgeoisie

The Indo-Pakistan conflict is rooted in the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India—a crime perpetrated by South Asia’s departing British overlords and the political representatives of the rival factions of the native bourgeoisie, the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League.

Partition defied historical, cultural and economic logic and unleashed a firestorm of communal violence in which two million people were killed and another 18 million fled India to Pakistan or vice versa. But it served the cynical interests of the rival ruling elites of India and Pakistan, by bringing a bloody end to the mass anti-imperialist upsurge that had convulsed South Asia during the preceding three decades; and by giving them, as part of the independence-partition deal with London, control of the British-colonial capitalist state machine with which to meet the threat from an increasingly combative working class.

Unable to find any progressive solution to the problems of the masses, the Indian and Pakistani bourgeois have for the past seven decades used their strategic rivalry and communally-laced nationalist appeals as a mechanism for diverting social anger in reactionary directions.

The open wound that is Kashmir is testimony to their common bankruptcy. The Indian bourgeoisie has subjected the population of Jammu and Kashmir, India’s only Muslim majority state, to three decades of military occupation and expresses consternation at the continued mass popular disaffection with Indian rule there, even as it celebrates a party and prime minister implicated in anti-Muslim pogroms.

As for Pakistan’s venal ruling elite, it has run roughshod over the rights of the Kashmiris over whom it rules, and has manipulated the opposition in Jammu and Kashmir to bring forward the most reactionary Islamist elements.

For a working-class led movement against war and imperialism

Over the past two decades, the nature of the Indo-Pakistani conflict has been transformed. It has become enmeshed ever more inextricably with the US-China confrontation, giving it a massive new explosive charge, and raising the threat that an Indo-Pakistani conflict could draw in the world’s great powers.

Since the beginning of the current century, Washington, under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, has aggressively courted India, showering it with strategic favours, including access to advanced civilian nuclear fuel and technology and advanced US weaponry, with the aim of harnessing New Delhi to its strategic agenda.

The importance that US war-planners attach to South Asia and the Indian Ocean—the waterway that is the conduit for the oil and other resources that fuel China’s economy, as well as its exports to Europe, Africa, and the Middle East—is underscored by the recent renaming of the US Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command.

Under Modi, as attested by India’s opening of its bases to US warplanes and ships and its increasing bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral strategic cooperation with the US, and its principal regional allies (Japan and Australia), India has been transformed into a veritable “frontline state” in the US military-strategic offensive against China.

Islamabad, during the Cold War Washington’s principal South Asian ally, has warned in increasingly shrill tones that US actions have shattered the “balance of power” in the region and emboldened India, but to no avail.

Consequently, Pakistan has dramatically strengthened its longstanding military-strategic partnership with China, which similarly fears the burgeoning Indo-US alliance.

Even as the US seeks to cool the current Indo-Pakistani tensions, on the

calculation that an all-out South Asian war would at this point cut across its global objectives, it does so within the framework of its drive for world hegemony including ultimately subjugating China. As part of this drive, Washington has made clear that it is determined to thwart China’s efforts to make Pakistan an anchor of its Belt and Road Initiative, and in particular to use the China Pakistan Economic Corridor to counteract US plans to economically blockade China by seizing Indian Ocean and South China Sea “chokepoints.”

The workers and toilers of India and Pakistan must join forces in opposition to the criminal war preparations of the ruling elite.

In South Asia, as around the world, the struggle against war is inseparable from the struggle against capitalism—against the rival nationally-based capitalist cliques whose rapacious struggle for markets, profits and strategic advantage finds ultimate expression in the drive for the repartition of the world; and against the outmoded, and in the case of South Asia, communally-infused nation-state system, in which capitalism is historically rooted.

In opposition to the bourgeoisie’s program of war, austerity, and communal reaction, workers and socialist-minded youth in South Asia should fight for the building of a working-class led movement against war and imperialism, as part of a global antiwar movement.

Such a movement will only be built in political struggle against the Stalinist parliamentary parties in India, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI), and the myriad Maoist groupings. The CPM and CPI, as demonstrated yet again by their participation in the BJP’s “all party” war-crisis meetings, are chauvinist, pro-military parties that are helping blind the masses to the danger of a catastrophic war. For decades they have functioned as an integral part of the Indian political establishment, helping prop up governments, many of them Congress Party led, that have implemented neo-liberal restructuring, pursued the Indo-US alliance, and rapidly expanded India’s military prowess in pursuit of the bourgeoisie’s great-power ambitions. The Maoists are steeped in nationalism and hostile to the struggle for the political independence of the working class.

It is in the international socialism of Lenin and Trotsky, represented today by the International Committee of the Fourth International, and the fight to undo partition from below through the struggle for workers’ power and the establishment of the Socialist United States of South Asia that the workers of India and Pakistan will find the alternative to capitalist war and reaction.



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