

India-Pakistan war tensions escalate

Deepal Jayasekera
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War tensions between India and Pakistan continue to escalate, posing the danger of an all-out military conflict involving nuclear weapons.

At least six civilians and two Pakistani soldiers were killed on Friday and Saturday as a result of cross-border shelling from both sides along the Line of Control (LoC), which separates the two parts of Kashmir ruled by India and Pakistan. Indian and Pakistani troops have attacked each other's military posts and villages.

The Pakistani military said that two of its soldiers were killed by Indian firing over the LoC on Friday. The next day, two civilians were killed and two others injured by the resumption of shelling from the Indian side.

Umar Azam, a Pakistani government official, accused Indian troops of "indiscriminately targeting border villagers" using heavy weaponry along the LoC. Indian police said that Pakistani shelling on Friday killed a mother and two children, and critically wounded the father, in the Poonch region near the LoC.

Thousands of villagers on both sides of the LoC have fled to government-run shelters or relatives' homes. Denouncing the cross-border fighting between the Pakistani and Indian militaries, a resident from Mendhar in Indian Kashmir told the media: "These battles are being fought on our bodies, in our homes and fields, and we still don't have anything in our hands."

The current fighting erupted after 40 Indian soldiers were killed in a suicide attack by Kashmir separatists on February 14. The Indian government immediately seized on the attack, which was carried out by the Pakistani-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), to launch a war-mongering campaign against Pakistan. Islamabad insisted it had no hand in the incident.

Last Tuesday morning Indian war planes launched a bombing raid deep inside Pakistan, the first such attack since the end of the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war. New Delhi claimed the raid destroyed a major JeM camp, killing hundreds of "terrorists." Islamabad, however, declared that its air force had chased away the Indian planes, which dropped explosives in a forest area, and that there were no

casualties.

On Wednesday, Pakistan retaliated sending its warplanes into airspace over the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. In the resulting dogfight the Pakistan air force shot down at least one Indian plane, which fell inside Pakistan territory. The pilot was captured.

On Friday night, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan released the Indian pilot as a "peace gesture" and called for talks with India. The Indian government declared that there would not be any talks with Pakistan until it ended all support for Kashmir separatists. Having dismissed Islamabad's show of good will, it proceeded to parade the pilot as a national hero.

Indian Air Marshal C. Hari Kumar, who oversaw last Tuesday's air strike against Pakistan, told the *Hindu* on Saturday: "Nobody wants war [but] ... We cannot tolerate cross border terrorism. The message has to be sent that we cannot lose citizens, in uniform or otherwise. Our IAF [Indian Air Force] has the capability to hit anywhere."

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi told the BBC on Saturday that although Islamabad never wanted a crisis it was ready to cooperate with India, but insisted, "We are on high alert."

The seven-decade geo-political rivalry between India and Pakistan and the conflict over Kashmir is a product of the 1947 communal partition of British India into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India. Both India and Pakistan claim the whole of Kashmir. The competing claims provoked a conflict shortly after partition that led to a divided state and continuing tensions that have repeatedly flared.

Both ruling elites use national chauvinism as a means of dividing the working class and oppressed masses between and within their countries. India has maintained its rule over Jammu and Kashmir through a brutal military occupation, which has led to the formation of various armed separatist groups.

While suppressing the basic democratic rights of the masses in the part of Kashmir that it rules, Islamabad cynically uses the Indian military repression in Jammu

and Kashmir to promote separatism in Indian Kashmir and pursue its own reactionary geo-political interests in the region.

The decades-long rivalry between India and Pakistan, however, is now being intensified and fuelled by global geo-political tensions between the US and China.

Washington's support for India as a key partner of its military-strategic offensive against China has encouraged New Delhi to adopt a more hawkish posture against Islamabad. India's air strike inside Pakistan territory was given the green light by Washington, when it said that New Delhi had "the right to self-defence."

Last Thursday US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters that he had been talking to his Indian counterpart Sushma Swaraj, Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, and Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi to "encourage each country not to take any action that would escalate and create increased risk."

Washington's claims that it wants to prevent an all-out war between India and Pakistan is not out of concern for the fate of millions of people, the victims of such a military conflict on the subcontinent, but flows from its geo-political and military agenda.

The US values its growing military-strategic partnership with India as a major component of its war drive against China. At the same time, it has enlisted Pakistan to pursue its strategic interests in Afghanistan, particularly to broker a negotiated settlement with the Taliban.

The US is therefore concerned that an open military conflict between India and Pakistan will cut across its geo-strategic interests. Irrespective of its intentions, US aggression in Asia against China have added further fuel to decades-long rivalry between India and Pakistan.



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