

Reports underscore how close India and Pakistan came to all-out war in late February

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A Reuters report and an Indian Navy press statement, both published Sunday, shed further light on just how close South Asia's rival nuclear powers, India and Pakistan, came to all-out war late last month.

According to Reuters, at the height of the war crisis—after Indian warplanes had bombed Pakistan, and Pakistan had retaliated by ordering its fighter jets to strafe Indian-controlled Kashmir, resulting in a dogfight and the downing of an Indian jet—New Delhi threatened to hit Pakistan with a volley of “at least six missiles.”

In reply, Islamabad vowed it would fire three missiles at India for every one launched against Pakistan. “We said if you will fire one missile, we will fire three,” an unnamed Pakistan cabinet minister told Reuters. “Whatever India will do, we will respond three times to that.”

Titled “India, Pakistan threatened to unleash missiles at each other: sources,” Reuters’ report is based on information from “Western diplomats and government sources in New Delhi, Islamabad and Washington.”

According to Reuters, “there was no suggestion that the missiles” India and Pakistan were threatening to hit each other with “were anything more than conventional weapons.” But the mutual threats “created consternation in official circles in Washington, Beijing and London.”

Only the intervention of the US, China and other powers, argues the Reuters article, prevented the situation from spiraling out of control. “Diplomatic experts said that the latest crisis underlined the chances of misread signals and unpredictability in the ties between the nuclear-armed rivals, and the huge dangers.”

The Indian Navy, meanwhile, has revealed that during the war crisis—which began with New Delhi declaring Islamabad responsible for a Feb. 14 suicide bombing in Jammu and Kashmir that killed 40 of its security personnel—much of India’s fleet assumed battle-mode positions in the north Arabian Sea, off Pakistan’s shore.

Because they were already participating in a two-month long “war game,” India, boasts an Indian Navy press release, was able to quickly redeploy its “major (naval) combat units,” including its only functional aircraft carrier, “nuclear submarines and scores of other ships, submarines and aircraft” to menace Pakistan.

“The Indian Navy’s overwhelming superiority in all three dimensions—surface, under the sea and in the air—forced the Pakistan Navy to remain deployed close to the Makran coast and

not venture out in the open ocean after” the Feb. 14 terror attack, claimed Indian Navy spokesperson Captain D.K. Sharma.

It was previously known that both sides had rushed troops to their common border after India, which has long demanded Islamabad prevent all logistical support from its territory for the Islamist separatist insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir, vowed to punish Pakistan for the suicide bombing.

As the war crisis reached its crescendo—between the night of Feb. 25, when Indian warplanes struck deep inside Pakistan, and March 1, when Islamabad signaled its eagerness to de-escalate by returning the pilot of the felled Indian fighter—public war threats from India and Pakistan’s foremost political and military leaders came thick and furious.

Although neither said so expressly, it was widely understood at the time that both countries had activated their war contingency plans.

That said, the information revealed Sunday constitutes a fresh salutary warning. It underscores that just three weeks ago India and Pakistan came closer to a catastrophic all-out war than at any time since 1971; and while the international media has largely moved on, the fact remains that for the first time in history rival nuclear-armed powers attacked each other with warplanes and threatened to escalate to missile volleys.

The speed with which the crisis escalated clearly rattled both sides.

Whilst Indian government and military officials are loathe to say so publicly, everything suggests that they were taken aback by the scale and daring of the retaliatory attack Pakistan mounted on Feb. 27, when it sent a dozen fighter jets to attack Indian-held Kashmir.

Then and since, Islamabad has justified this counterthrust, which could easily have and almost did precipitate all-out war, with the claim that it could not let go unanswered New Delhi’s attempt to assert a “right” to militarily strike Pakistan after every major terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir.

India claims that during the dogfight that erupted when its fighter jets engaged the invading Pakistani aircraft it also brought down an enemy warplane. However, this claim has been given little to no credence internationally. The Reuters report, like most on the recent conflict, makes no mention of it.

The *New York Times*, for its part, ran a prominent article, “After India Loses Dogfight to Pakistan, Questions Arise About Its ‘Vintage’ Military,” that pointed to the importance the Indo-US military strategic alliance plays in the Pentagon’s plans to contain

and if need be militarily thwart China, and to Washington's determination, therefore, to help India augment its military firepower.

Pakistan's elite, meanwhile, was roiled by its manifest isolation following India's bombing raid, which struck targets deep-inside Pakistan, beyond the part of the former British princely state of Kashmir held by Pakistan but claimed by India. The Indian air strike was tantamount to an act of war, but most of the world's major powers unreservedly backed it, and even China, Islamabad's "all-weather friend" failed to condemn or even criticize it.

India and Pakistan remain at loggerheads

Three weeks on the situation remains fraught.

Early Monday morning, an Indian soldier was killed and two others injured in shelling across the Line of Control (LoC) that separates Indian and Pakistan-held Kashmir. Cross-bordering firing has occurred daily since the Feb. 14 Pulwama suicide-bombing attack. But this is only a further escalation. Since the fall of 2016, when the shaky truce between India and Pakistan forces at the LoC collapsed, there have been thousands of reported ceasefire violations and scores of civilian and security personnel deaths on both sides.

New Delhi—and this position is widely supported by the opposition parties—remains adamant that there be no high-level talks with Pakistan, let alone a resumption of the long stalled "peace process," unless and until Islamabad demonstratively bends to its demands and ceases support for "terrorism."

Adding to the explosiveness of the situation is the deep crisis of both governments.

India's Narendra Modi-led BJP government seized on the Pulwama attack to stoke confrontation with Pakistan. It did so to divert popular attention from mass unemployment and the rapacious growth of social inequality and to mobilize its Hindu right political base, hoping thereby to boost its prospects in the April–May general election.

Central to the government's political branding is its claim that Modi, by ordering a cross-border Special Forces raid against Pakistan in September 2016 and now air strikes, has freed India from the shackles of "strategic restraint" in its dealings with Pakistan.

With most of India's corporate media and military-strategic think tanks likewise trumpeting the claim New Delhi has rewritten the "rules of the game" in its confrontation with Islamabad, there will be enormous pressure on New Delhi to militarily strike Pakistan when the next major terrorist attack occurs in Kashmir, even if it concludes that it would be perilous to further fan the flames of war.

In Jammu and Kashmir, where decades of political manipulation and brutal state repression have alienated the Muslim majority, both popular anger against the Hindu supremacist BJP government and fears of war remain palpable.

Pakistan's nine-month Islamist populist government is, for its part, beset by crisis. In the hopes of forestalling an imminent balance of payments crisis, it is wooing investors by imposing brutal IMF-mandated austerity measures. Moreover, Imran Khan's government is beholden to the military, whose claim to vast economic privileges and a determining say in the country's foreign and national security policy is bound up with the strategic rivalry with India and its claim to be the "sword arm" that protects Pakistan from destruction.

Washington's incendiary role

A key claim of the recent Reuters article is that Washington played the leading role in arresting the cascade towards war, prevailing on Islamabad and New Delhi to de-escalate.

What this account ignores and covers up is the incendiary role that US imperialism played in helping precipitate last month's war crisis and has and continues to play more generally in the intensification of the Indo-Pakistan strategic rivalry.

Eager to demonstrate to New Delhi the strength of the anti-China Indo-US strategic partnership, the Trump administration publicly greenlighted India's reckless and patently illegal attack on Pakistan days in advance. And while US National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo did pressure both sides to de-escalate after the Feb. 27 dogfight, they continued to uphold the legitimacy of the Indian air strikes and echoed New Delhi's demands that the onus lies on Pakistan to improve bilateral relations by dismantling "terrorist safe-havens."

Even more fundamentally, in its drive to transform India into a frontline state in its military-strategic offensive against China, Washington has overturned the "balance of terror" in South Asia, showering New Delhi with advanced weaponry and other strategic favours. In response, Pakistan and China have strengthened their own strategic ties.

As result, the Indo-Pakistan and US-China conflicts have become ever more enmeshed, adding to each a massive new explosive charge.



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