

India and Pakistan cascading toward war after New Delhi blames Islamabad for terrorist attack

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India and Pakistan, South Asia's rival nuclear-armed powers, are rapidly cascading towards war after India accused Pakistan of responsibility for a brutal terrorist attack in Indian-held Kashmir. Twenty-six tourists, all but one of them an Indian citizen, were killed Tuesday when they were targeted by a commando attack near Pahalgam in the scenic Baisaran Valley.

Little more than 24 hours later, India's government, led by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), announced a series of bellicose "retaliatory" measures targeting Pakistan. Moreover, it has given every indication that this is only an initial volley—that a military strike on Pakistan even larger than those in 2016 and 2019, which brought the subcontinent to the brink of all-out war, is under consideration, if not already in preparation.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, and especially under the would-be Hindu strongman Narendra Modi, India has integrated itself into US imperialism's ever-widening military-strategic offensive against China. New Delhi is no doubt counting on Trump to be at least as supportive of Indian action against Pakistan as he was in 2019, during his first term, when he lauded an illegal Indian strike deep inside Pakistan.

On Wednesday, in remarks clearly directed at Pakistan, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh declared, "We will not only reach those who have perpetrated this incident but also those who, sitting behind the scenes, have conspired to commit such acts on the soil of India."

Yet New Delhi has provided no evidence to back its claims of Pakistani state involvement in the Pahalgam attack. It has simply asserted that the Resistance Front, the terrorist group that has reportedly claimed responsibility for the atrocity, is tied to the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), an Islamist terrorist organization that previously received backing from sections of the Pakistani military-intelligence apparatus.

The measures announced Wednesday include: an order for all Pakistani nationals in India, except diplomatic personnel, to leave the country by April 29; the closing of the most important land crossing between India and Pakistan, that linking Amritsar and Lahore; the expulsion of all Pakistani military personnel attached to its embassy in India; and the withdrawal of all but a skeleton staff from India's embassy in Islamabad.

Most provocative of all is New Delhi's announcement that it is suspending its participation in the Indus Waters Treaty. In the 65 years since the treaty came into force, India and Pakistan have fought two declared wars, several undeclared wars, and countless border

skirmishes. Yet never before has India suspended the treaty, thereby arrogating the power to deny Pakistan the water supply on which its electricity grid and agriculture depend.

On Thursday, Modi followed this up with a provocative, war-mongering speech, in which one could hear the echoes of US President Donald Trump's threats to "obliterate" Iran and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speeches inciting genocide against the oppressed Palestinians of Gaza.

Addressing a BJP rally in Bihar, Modi vowed, "Those who carried out this terror attack and those who planned it will get a punishment beyond their imagination. ... It is time to render into dust the remaining land of terrorists. The resolve of 140-crore (1.4 billion) Indians will now break the backs of the masters of terror." The Indian government has long denounced its arch-rival Pakistan as the world's chief "terrorist state."

Pakistan has responded in kind. On Thursday, it announced that it was suspending the Simla Agreement, a treaty signed in July 1972 in the aftermath of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war. Among other things, the Simla Agreement commits the two countries to seek the peaceful bilateral resolution of disputes and established the Line of Control (LOC) that separates Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir from Pakistani-controlled Azad Kashmir, pending final resolution of their competing claims for sovereignty over the whole of Kashmir.

In a statement issued by Prime Minister Shebhaz Sharif on Thursday, Islamabad amplified its recent charges that India is seeking to destabilize the country, including by providing covert support to Balochi separatists and the Islamist Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban).

"Pakistan," the statement declared, "shall exercise the right to hold all bilateral agreements with India including but not limited to the Simla Agreement in abeyance, till India desists from its manifested behavior of fomenting terrorism inside Pakistan; transnational killings; and non-adherence to international law and UN Resolutions on Kashmir."

The statement charged that India's suspension of the Indus Water Treaty was illegal, with water constituting both "a vital national interest of Pakistan" and "a lifeline for its 240 million people."

It then went on to warn that if India should now act upon its threat to cut off Pakistan's water supply, it will trigger war: "Any attempt to stop or divert the flow of water belonging to Pakistan as per the Indus Waters Treaty... will be considered as an act of war and responded with full force across the complete spectrum of national power."

The Indo-Pakistani conflict is a reactionary conflict between rival

capitalist states, rooted in the 1947 communal partition of South Asia into an avowedly Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India. Out of fear of the growing anti-imperialist movement and, above all, the emergence of a combative working class, the bourgeois-led Indian National Congress abandoned its own program for a united, democratic, and secular India and made a sordid deal with London for a quick transfer of power, in which it assumed control over the colonial capitalist state erected by British Imperialism. This included working with its right-wing rival, the Muslim League, to communally partition the subcontinent, triggering mass communal violence in which as many as two million people died and the forced migration of some 20 million people, as Muslims fled India and Hindus and Sikhs, Pakistan.

Central to the continuing Indo-Pakistani conflict is control over Kashmir, which is an ethnic-linguistic and geographic region, as well as the name of a princely or vassal state of Britain's former Indian empire. Kashmir was bifurcated through war in 1947-48 into rival Indian- and Pakistani-held "Kashmirs."

Both the Indian and Pakistani bourgeoisies have run roughshod over the democratic rights of the Kashmiri people. New Delhi brutally suppressed mass protests that erupted in 1989 in response to its rigging of elections in Jammu and Kashmir, India's lone Muslim-majority state. This triggered an insurgency, which Pakistan manipulated to further its own reactionary interests, by redeploying and expanding the network of Islamist militia it had developed at American imperialism's behest to fight the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan.

For decades, the LOC has been one of the world's most dangerous conflict zones, with massive concentrations of Indian and Pakistani troops and artillery arrayed against each other; and Indian-occupied Kashmir among the most militarized regions in the world. More than half a million Indian security personnel are deployed in a region of 14 million people.

The conflict over Kashmir and world geopolitics

Since the turn of the century, the Indo-Pakistani conflict has become ever more enmeshed with India's rivalry with China and the conflict between US imperialism and China.

Washington has massively downgraded its relations with Pakistan, which during the Cold War was its principal regional ally, to pursue a "global strategic partnership" with India. Its aim is to build up India as a counterweight to China, while ensuring, in partnership with it, US dominance over the Indian Ocean, whose sea lanes are critical to China's access to resources and exports to the world.

Successive US presidents, Democratic and Republican alike, stretching back to George W. Bush, have lionized the US-India "partnership," on occasion going so far as to describe it as America's "most important" for maintaining dominance throughout the century.

As the US lavished strategic favors on India, including advanced weapons and access to civilian nuclear technology, Pakistan warned that Washington was dangerously disrupting the "balance of power" in the region. But its increasingly shrill warnings were blithely ignored. In response, Pakistan has doubled down on its "all-weather" strategic partnership with China, further antagonizing Washington and New Delhi.

Emboldened by US support, the Modi government has sought to "change the rules" in the relationship between India and Pakistan, as part of a drive to establish itself as the regional hegemon. While the cross-border "surgical strikes" Modi mounted inside Pakistan were far from the first ever undertaken by India, never before had New Delhi boasted about it and asserted, in the style of the imperialist gangsters

in Washington and Tel Aviv, a "right" to violate international law at will.

The ever-increasing antagonism between the US and China has given new global strategic importance to the Kashmir region. India has stridently reasserted its claim to all of Kashmir as part of its "legal-diplomatic" justification for its staunch opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is itself a key element in China's Belt and Road initiative. Through the CPEC, China aims to link Pakistan's Gwadar Arabian Sea port via rail and pipeline with western China, and thereby circumvent US plans to use ocean chokepoints to strangle the Chinese economy.

In August 2019, shortly after winning his second term as prime minister, Modi abolished Jammu and Kashmir's special, autonomous status within India, in flagrant violation of the constitution. This was a longstanding goal of the BJP and the Hindu right. But Modi's coup against Kashmir, which included bifurcating it and reducing it to a Union Territory so as to place it still more directly under the control of the central government, was also aimed at strengthening its hand against China and Pakistan. One element in this was the carving off of the remote Ladakh region, which borders China, and its transformation into a separate Union Territory, thereby giving the military, which is engaged in massive military infrastructure projects along the border, a freer hand.

In May-June 2020, Indian and Chinese troops clashed on the disputed border between Indian-held Ladakh and China's Aksai Chin. A tense border standoff ensued, with both India and China maintaining massive forward deployments of tens of thousands of troops, artillery and warplanes in one of the world's most inhospitable terrains and climates. The US, under both Trump and Biden, egged India on in this conflict, using it to further integrate India into its web of anti-China alliances. Washington publicly tied the India-China border dispute to the US-instigated territorial disputes between China and its South China Sea neighbors, labeling China as the aggressor, and for the first time took a position on the Sino-Indian border dispute, declaring New Delhi to be in the right.

How far India is ready to go and risk in securing its predatory ambitions and Washington in bolstering its anti-China alliance will play out in the coming days. Given the multiple crises roiling the Pakistani state and bourgeoisie, the far-right Modi government may calculate that it can deliver its rivals a major blow.

What is certain is that any military clash between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan could quickly spin out of control and into catastrophe, potentially drawing in other powers.

It is also certain that the capitalist ruling elites of both India and Pakistan will seize on the war crisis to whip up communalism, attack the social and democratic rights of the workers and toilers and advance reactionary policies and plans that were previously deemed too explosive. In this regard, it is important to note that India has for some time been indicating its dissatisfaction with the Indus Waters Treaty, claiming it is frustrating India's economic development.



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