

South Asia on knife's edge after Indo-Pakistani clash

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India and Pakistan, South Asia's rival nuclear-armed powers, are teetering on the precipice of all-out war after their largest military clash in decades left dozens of civilians dead.

Pakistan announced Wednesday that its National Security Council has "fully authorized" the country's military to respond to India's Tuesday night (May 6-7) aerial assault "at a time, place and manner of its choosing."

Soon after, New Delhi let it be known that any Pakistani military action would cause India to respond in kind, underscoring the likelihood of escalating tit-for-tat attacks, which could rapidly spin out of control and into all-out war. Summarizing what India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval had communicated to China, the US, Britain and other foreign governments, an Indian official said India "is well-prepared to retaliate resolutely should Pakistan decide to escalate."

Amid the growing din of threats and counter-threats emanating from political and military leaders on both sides, Pakistan Defence Minister Khawaja Asif raised the spectre of a nuclear conflict. If India "imposes an all-out war on the region," Asif told *Geo News*, "and if such dangers arise in which there is a stand-off, then at any time a nuclear war can break out."

Early Wednesday morning, India attacked multiple targets deep inside Pakistan, in what New Delhi claimed was retribution for an April 22 terrorist attack near Pahalgam in Indian-held Kashmir that killed 26 tourists. Within hours of the Pahalgam attack, India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government charged Pakistan with masterminding it, yet to this day it has provided no evidence to support its claim.

Conflicting claims

India and Pakistan are now making conflicting claims about the fighting on the night of May 6-7, with each side boasting about its military prowess.

What can be said with certainty at this point is that India mounted a large-scale attack involving, according to Islamabad, upwards of 75 warplanes, and struck targets in at least six and possibly as many as nine different towns and villages—three of them in Pakistan's Punjab province and the remainder in Azad or Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

India's bloody attack immediately triggered artillery and mortar barrages across the Line of Control that divides Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) from Pakistani-held Azad Kashmir, resulting in the deaths of at least 12 people in J&K, according to Indian news reports.

Pakistan has accused India of targeting civilian areas for its airplane and drone missile strikes in the name of attacking "terrorist camps." It says 31 civilians, including a seven-year-old, were killed and 57 others injured in

India's Tuesday night attacks.

Islamabad is also claiming to have felled three Indian warplanes and two drones.

New Delhi has to this point remained silent on the Pakistani claims of Indian military losses, but various news organizations, including the *Hindu* and the *New York Times*, have confirmed evidence of felled aircraft and cite unnamed Indian officials as admitting to losses including of an advanced French-made Rafale fighter jet.

India is boasting that its attack on Pakistan—which it dubbed Operation Sindoor—was much larger, more potent and far more militarily sophisticated than the cross-border strikes it mounted in 2016 and 2019, both of which brought the subcontinent perilously close to all-out war.

For the first time in decades, India struck at targets near major cities in Punjab, rather than restricting its attacks to Pakistan-held Kashmir, that is, to territory which New Delhi claims, as part of its reactionary dispute with Islamabad over Kashmir, to be rightfully its own. And it did so without crossing over into Pakistani air space using fighter jets and hover drones.

Writing in the *Indian Express*, Pankaj Saran, a former ambassador and Deputy National Security Advisor, claimed that with its latest attack on Pakistan, the Narendra Modi-led BJP government had changed the rules of the game in respect to India's strategic conflict with its historic rival.

Saran wrote:

India is no longer impressed by Pakistan's threat of an all-out war, uncontrolled escalation and massive retaliation, or more importantly, its brandishing of the nuclear threat. ... Operation Sindoor, and before it, the responses in 2016 and 2019, have shown that there are military and other choices available to India.

India has claimed that its attack was "focused, measured and non-escalatory in nature," but it is clearly readying for a larger war.

On Wednesday, for the first time since the 1971 India-Pakistani war, India staged civil defence drills across the country. Drills were held in some 250 of India's 780 districts—those that are deemed most susceptible to attack, either because of their proximity to the border or because they house major military bases, nuclear plants or other critical infrastructure. As part of the drills, 15-minute power cuts were instituted in major Indian cities, including Delhi, to practice protection from air raids.

There has been no suggestion from anyone in India's government that it is prepared to enter talks with Islamabad, let alone roll back any of the other "retaliatory" measures it has taken against Pakistan. These include suspending all trade and closing the principal land-crossing with Pakistan, and most provocatively of all, suspending India's participation in the 1960 Indus Water Treaty.

Since the treaty came into force 65 years ago, India has fought two declared wars with Pakistan, several undeclared wars and countless border

skirmishes. However, never before has it suspended the treaty, which allocates the resources of the headwaters of the Indus, which run through India, so vital is it to Pakistan's agriculture and power supply. Last weekend, India began adjusting the water flow through dams on two of the Indus' tributaries, with the stated aim of cutting off 90 percent of the water reaching Pakistan, which would severely disrupt the current planting season downstream in Pakistan.

Amplifying threats from BJP ministers to cut off Pakistan's water supply, Modi declared Tuesday, just hours before India's cross-border attack on Pakistan, that henceforth India's water will be used solely in the "national interest" and "will no longer flow outside."

The India-Pakistan conflict is a reactionary dispute between rival capitalist powers. Its roots lie in the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India, which was itself part of the process whereby Stalinism connived with imperialism and the national bourgeoisie in the colonial countries to suppress social revolution and restabilize capitalism in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Over the past eight decades, the rival bourgeois regimes have squandered countless lives and resources in pursuing their predatory conflict for power and advantage in South Asia. At the same time they have used the conflict to fan communal reaction and divert the social tensions born of mass poverty and acute social inequality outward.

Washington's incendiary role

During the past two decades, the Indo-Pakistani conflict has become ever more enmeshed with the strategic-conflict between US imperialism and China, adding to it a new explosive dimension, including the possibility it could trigger a global conflict. Under both Democratic and Republican presidents from George W. Bush to Trump today, Washington has aggressively courted India to harness it to US imperialism's drive for global hegemony and build it up as a counterweight to China.

Consequently, the US has dramatically downgraded its ties with Pakistan, once its principal South Asian ally, compelling the latter to double down on its "all-weather" partnership with China, leading to increased frictions with both Washington and New Delhi.

In recent days, and especially since Tuesday night's clash between India and Pakistan, there have been alarmed calls from all the great powers and from governments in the broader region, including Iran, Bangladesh and the Gulf States, for immediate de-escalation.

As always these calls are shot through with hypocrisy, as each state pursues its own self-interest and seeks to maintain its freedom of action.

Thus none of the imperialist powers have denounced the Modi government's patently illegal cross-border attack on Pakistan or its provocative suspension of the Indus Water Treaty or criticized it for its virulent opposition to Islamabad's proposal for an international investigation into the Pahalgam terrorist attack.

In 2016 and 2019, first under Obama and then Trump, the US emphatically declared its support for New Delhi's cross-border attacks on Pakistan, claiming its ally had the same "right" to abrogate international law in the name of "self-defence" and "fighting terrorism" as it and its Israeli attack-dog have.

To date, US officials have limited themselves to belated calls for "de-escalation," with the bulk of the onus for doing so placed on Pakistan.

"It's so terrible," said US President Donald Trump Wednesday. "I want to see them stop. And hopefully they can stop now."

Echoing to a large degree New Delhi's narrative of the conflict, he then continued. "They've got a tit-for-tat, so hopefully they can stop now,"

before suggesting in the vaguest of terms that he would "help," "if I can do anything."

The fascist president's attempt to pass himself off as a man of peace is a sham in the South Asian theatre as in every other.

The actions Washington has taken to secure its anti-China "global strategic partnership" with New Delhi have enormously emboldened India in its pursuit to become the regional hegemon.

In addition to the aforementioned greenlighting of India's 2016 and 2019 strikes, these include:

- arming of India with high-tech US weapons;
- securing for it access to trade in civilian nuclear technology, enabling it to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development;
- supporting its development of a blue water navy;
- integrating it into an ever-wider web of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral military-security exchanges with its most important Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia;
- and endorsing the Modi government's 2019 constitutional coup in disputed Kashmir, which stripped J&K, India's lone Muslim-majority region, of its special autonomous status, and reduced it to a central government-controlled Union Territory.

Workers in India and Pakistan must oppose the reactionary war-mongering of their respective governments and ruling classes and the transformation of South Asia and the India Ocean region into a central arena in the US-led imperialist struggle to repartition the world.

An Indo-Pakistani war would be a catastrophe for the masses of South Asia and indeed the entire planet, as underscored by the cavalier fashion with which ruling class spokespersons on both sides speak of the possibility of it leading to a nuclear conflict.

Moreover, external aggression goes hand in hand with the intensification of class war. By whipping up jingoism and the communalism with which it is inextricably entwined in South Asia, the governments of India and Pakistan are seeking to intimidate and silence all opposition to their drive to intensify workers exploitation to attract global capital.

The critical question in South Asia, as around the world, is the building of a global working class-led anti-war movement that links opposition to war to the fight for social equality and the defence of democratic rights—that is, a political offensive for socialism.



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