

New flare-up of Indo-Pakistani tensions in disputed Kashmir

By Deepal Jayasekera
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India has claimed that a junior Indian army officer was killed late last week when Pakistan's military shelled Indian positions across the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Indian- and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. Pakistan has denied the Indian charge that it violated a 2003 ceasefire without provocation.

However, in contrast with last January, when New Delhi responded to an alleged Pakistani incursion across the LoC with repeated cross-border firing and provocative public statements, its response to the latest border fatality has been cautious and subdued.

Indian army spokesman S.N. Acharya told the media that Naib Subedar Bachchan Singh had been hit last Friday by "unprovoked firing from across the LoC" and succumbed to his injuries before he could be evacuated to a hospital. The incident reportedly took place in the Poonch sector, about 180 kilometers southwest of Srinagar, the summer capital of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Acharya added that firing continued for about an hour with what he called "calibrated retaliation" from the Indian side. After the shelling ended, Indian troops carried out a cordon-and-search operation in the area. Acharya claimed this incident was the "third successive violation" of the November 2003 ceasefire by Pakistani troops in a fortnight.

Pakistan's military has denied that any such incident took place. Pakistan military spokesman Mohammad Atique told *NBC News*, "No Pakistani troops carried out any firing across the LoC on Indian positions."

Taking its lead from the government and the military, India's corporate media has said little about this incident. By contrast, last January it trumpeted lurid Indian army claims that Pakistani troops had violated the corpse of an Indian soldier.

The Indian government's subdued response to the

latest flare-up of tensions along the Line of Control indicates that for the moment at least it doesn't want to jeopardize the prospect of improved relations with Pakistan's new government. Nawaz Sharif, who was sworn in as Pakistan's Prime Minister two days before last Friday's border clash, has repeatedly said he favours a rapprochement with India. Although Sharif no doubt knew that his offer would be declined, he invited Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to attend his swearing-in ceremony.

India has twice been embroiled in protracted border spats in the past five months. Repeated clashes across the LoC in January left three Pakistani and two Indian soldiers dead. There was also a tense three-week stand-off beginning in mid-April between India and China over the Line of Actual Control along the contested border between the Ladakh region in India-held Kashmir and China's Aksai Chin region.

Both of these previous border conflicts were triggered at least in part by recent Indian moves to strengthen its military presence and infrastructure along its northern border.

Prior to last Friday's border clash, India had welcomed Sharif's overtures, but only very cautiously. External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid said there would be no rapid improvement in Indo-Pakistani ties. Noting that some of the two countries' limited ties had been frozen following last January's border clashes, Khurshid said, "There are some serious concerns that have piled up over the past few months and obviously some of those concerns will have to be addressed ... It is important to have people supporting any initiative that is taken further."

Defence Minister A.K. Antony, expressing the views of the military-security establishment, has repeatedly said Islamabad must "translate its promises into sincere

action” if it wants any improvement in bilateral ties.

New Delhi has long been demanding that Pakistan suppress anti-Indian Kashmiri separatist insurgents based in Pakistan.

The rivalry between the nuclear-armed states of India and Pakistan is rooted in the 1947 communal partition of British India into twin “independent” states, a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India. Kashmir, a key source of water for both states, has been at the center of the India-Pakistan rivalry and the direct trigger of two of the three declared wars they have fought.

In 2003, in the wake of a protracted war crisis in 2001-2 that saw India mobilize close to a million troops on Pakistan’s borders, the two countries entered into a comprehensive peace dialogue. This dialogue has been effectively stalled since India charged the Pakistani government with complicity in the November 2008 terrorist atrocity in Mumbai.

Geo-political tensions between India and Pakistan have been greatly intensified by the aggressive US intervention into the region. Washington’s moves to build up India as a strategic counterweight to China, including by negotiating a special status for it in the world nuclear regulatory regime, have encouraged India to take an aggressive stance in its dealings with Pakistan and triggered a South Asian arms race.

New Delhi and Islamabad are also competing for influence in Afghanistan and this competition will only intensify in the coming period as the U.S. seeks to draw down its troop presence in the country and refashion its puppet regime in Kabul. To Islamabad’s dismay, the U.S. has encouraged India’s growing presence in Afghanistan even as it relies on Pakistan for pivotal logistical support in fighting the Taliban insurgency. Islamabad has charged that through its presence in Afghanistan, New Delhi is providing support to Balochi ethnic separatist insurgents in Balochistan, Pakistan’s poorest province.

A major factor in India’s dispute with China is the latter’s decades-long strategic alliance and arms trade with Pakistan.

While India and Pakistan vie for influence across South Asia, big business in both countries is eager to profit from the economic boost that would be provided by a lessening of bi-lateral tensions. Currently the volume of trade between the two countries, respectively the second and sixth most populous

countries in the world, is derisory. India accounts for just 1.2 percent of Pakistan’s exports and Pakistan represents a 0.9 percent share of India’s exports.

Both governments admit that closer economic ties would be very beneficial. But conflicting geo-political interests, especially in relation to their rival claims for Kashmir, and pressure from more hawkish elements within the political and military establishment in both countries have repeatedly blocked significant progress in reducing tariff and other trade barriers.

While New Delhi and Islamabad have sought to play down the most recent border clash in Kashmir, their relations are fraught with political landmines and both governments face mounting social unrest due to falling economic growth and ever-increasing social inequality. For decades the Indian and Pakistani ruling elites have used the Indo-Pakistani conflict as a means of whipping up chauvinism, so as to divert social anger over chronic poverty and economic insecurity.

Moreover, as a result of Washington’s reckless drive to shore up its hegemony in Asia, the Indo-Pakistani rivalry has become intertwined with the U.S.-China conflict adding a new and explosive dimension to both.

On Tuesday, Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry registered its “serious concern” with the Indian High Commission in Islamabad, after the Pakistani Air Force had to scramble two fighter jets to chase away two “high speed” Indian aircraft that had penetrated three miles into Pakistani airspace.

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