

Tensions between India and Pakistan escalate despite Modi-Sharif meeting

By Sampath Perera
1 August 2015

A July 10 meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, has manifestly failed to contain the dangerously escalating tensions between South Asia's two nuclear-armed powers.

Modi and Sharif met on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Ufa, Russia, amid mutual recriminations over covert interventions and border violence in the disputed Kashmir region. While the two issued a joint statement at the conclusion of their meeting, it contained no more than a few vaguely-worded commitments for further talks.

No dates or timeframe were set for the several high-level government and military meetings promised in the Modi-Sharif statement. And it failed to even mention the conflict over Kashmir, the direct cause of two of the three declared wars between India and Pakistan since 1947, along with numerous undeclared wars and war crises.

Within a week of the meeting, at least five people died and scores of others were injured as a result of clashes involving small arms, rockets, mortars and heavy machine guns across the border dividing Indian and Pakistani occupied Kashmir.

Tensions between the two countries have been exacerbated by the recent announcement of a Chinese-sponsored \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, which will give Beijing land access to Pakistan's Arabian Sea port of Gwadar. The corridor will connect Gwadar to western China, providing Beijing with an alternate supply route bypassing the potential choke points in the Indian Ocean that the US, in league with its allies in the region, intend to use to enforce an economic blockade with China in the event of war.

The corridor project represents a huge shot in the arm for Pakistan's economy, cutting across New Delhi's campaign to assert itself as South Asia's dominant power. In the little more than a year Modi and his Hindu chauvinist BJP have been in power, they have aggressively sought to politically isolate Pakistan in the region and alter the dynamic of Indo-Pakistan relations. When in opposition, the BJP had railed against the previous Congress Party-led government

for failing to take a more aggressive stance against Pakistan.

There is mounting nervousness in relation to the corridor project in both India and Pakistan. Within hours of Sharif's meeting with Modi, Pakistan Finance Minister Ishaq Dar condemned India in parliament for its inability to "digest" Pakistan's "economic stability" and threatened, "We would give a befitting response to any Indian aggression [both on economic and war fronts]."

Pakistan army chief General Raheel Sharif said last Saturday that he is "acutely aware" of the opposition of Pakistan's "rivals" to the project, then vowed that the military is prepared to "pay any price to turn this long cherished dream into a reality." While the "rivals" were not named, there is no doubt India was his main target.

While China initially proposed the corridor in 2013, Beijing only committed to the project in April this year, after it had become clear that under Modi New Delhi is integrating itself ever more completely into Obama's "Pivot to Asia"—that is the US drive to strategically encircle and prepare for war against China. As part of this, New Delhi has enhanced its military-security ties with the US's principal allies in the region, Japan and Australia, and recently invited Japan to join it and the US in a tri-lateral naval exercise.

The conflict between India and Pakistan, which is rooted in the communal partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947, is being intensified by US imperialism's anti-China pivot.

Since the turn of the century, the US has been seeking to promote India as a regional power at China's expense. This was the reason for the adoption of the India-US civil nuclear cooperation pact, which provides New Delhi with access to uranium and advanced nuclear technology, allowing it to focus its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development.

In a demonstration of the deepening ties between Washington and New Delhi, President Obama participated in India's Republic Day celebrations earlier this year.

Last year's election of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya

Janata Party (BJP) and self-styled Hindu strongman Modi, has strengthened the hawkish elements within the Indian ruling elite, especially within the military. This section of the ruling class is directing its sights not only at Pakistan, but also China, which enjoys both economic and military superiority over India.

India played an important role in the US-led regime change operation in Sri Lanka that ensured the defeat in January of President Mahinda Rajapakse, whose regime fell out of favour with Washington after it began developing close economic ties with China. New Delhi has also signed up to a “Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean” with Washington that parrots Washington’s position on the conflict in the South China Sea.

Bruce Riedel, a specialist on South Asia for the Brookings Institution and former high-level CIA strategist, recently pointed to the growing intersection of the US-China conflict with that between India and Pakistan. Analyzing the Modi government’s first year in office, he said, “the bipolar alliance system in South Asia has hardened. While the alliance system remains completely informal, the United States and India are closer to each other, and China and Pakistan have come much closer together.”

Riedel noted the massive Chinese investment in the Economic Corridor and Islamabad’s commitment to establish a 10,000-strong force, mainly drawn from elite commandos, to provide security to Chinese workers in Pakistan.

However, Pakistan—whose military has been for decades a close Pentagon partner—remains vital for Washington in its attempt to stabilize Afghanistan, which the US covets because of its strategic location. Afghanistan is located in energy-rich Central Asia and lies proximate to Russia and China, countries that the US considers the main obstacles to its domination of Eurasia.

At Washington’s urging, Pakistan has for the past year mounted a massive military campaign along the border with Afghanistan against Islamic fundamentalist militant groups allied with the Afghan Taliban.

Islamabad was instrumental in the forming of the new US puppet regime of President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul in the wake of last year’s drawdown of US troops. Pakistan is also assisting in the effort to conclude a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. This week, Islamabad received \$336 million from the US as part of the Coalition Support Fund set up in 2001 following the US invasion of Afghanistan.

New Delhi is miffed that it was excluded from the maneuvering around the setting up of Kabul’s new government. Previously, Washington had encouraged an expanded Indian role in Afghanistan, especially in military-security matters. This alarmed Pakistan, which has

long considered influence in Afghanistan as providing it “strategic depth” against India.

Washington will not be prepared to tolerate the integration of Islamabad into Beijing’s sphere of influence. It has also made clear that it views the current intensification of Indo-Pakistan tensions as counterproductive to its interests. The US State Department reiterated this week that the situation must be contained. “We want to see the conflict and the tension reduced,” said State Department spokesperson John Kirby.

It was mainly as a result of US pressure that Modi, who abruptly cancelled an Indo-Pakistani foreign secretary-level meeting in August and flatly refused to meet Sharif on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly last September, agreed to meet with Pakistan’s prime minister while they both attended the SCO summit in Ufa.

Complicating matters further is the decision of India to defy Washington’s opposition to the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and become a founding AIIB member with an 8.5 percent share, second only to that of Beijing.

The Ufa summit also decided that both India and Pakistan will be inducted as full SCO members by the time of its next meeting in 2016. The SCO was set up by Russia and China along with several former Soviet republics in Central Asia with the goal of restricting US involvement in the region.

Washington, which has repeatedly demonstrated its readiness to respond ruthlessly to any attempt to challenge its global geopolitical and economic interests, will not take kindly to either India or Pakistan joining the SCO.

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