

India and Pakistan teeter on the brink of war

By Keith Jones
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Four days after India conducted “surgical” military strikes inside Pakistan-held Kashmir, South Asia’s rival nuclear-armed states continue to teeter on the brink of war.

There have been hours-long artillery and gun-fire exchanges across the Line of Control (LoC) that separates Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir each night since India sent troops and helicopters into Pakistan and inflicted “double-digit” casualties.

Late Sunday evening, India claimed that an army camp in Barmulla in the Kashmir Valley had come under terrorist attack and that at least one Indian soldier had been killed and one injured.

India has repeatedly held Pakistan responsible for terrorist acts on its soil, most recently for the September 18 attack that anti-Indian Islamist militants mounted on the Uri military base in Jammu and Kashmir.

In anticipation of a possible Pakistani army counter-strike, or so as to facilitate their own war preparations, Indian authorities have ordered the evacuation of tens of thousands of people living near the border with Pakistan in the Indian states of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. According to Indian press reports, soldiers at garrisons near the border have also been instructed to send their families home.

On Saturday, as Indian Army Chief General Dalbir Singh visited its Northern Command headquarters in Jammu and Kashmir to review the military’s “operational preparedness,” the army ordered its troops to be “prepared for any eventuality.”

Wednesday night’s punitive raids were the first military action that India has publicly admitted to carrying out inside Pakistan in more than four decades.

In their wake, India’s political elite and media are boasting that New Delhi has thrown off the supposed shackles of “strategic restraint,” successfully neutered Pakistani “nuclear blackmail,” and demonstrated India’s prowess as an emerging great power.

Comparing India’s military to the Hindu monkey-god Hanuman who bounded across an ocean in a single stride after being reminded of his powers, Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar said, “The surgical strikes gave our forces an idea of what they were capable of doing.” Pakistan, he

claimed, had been left “bewildered,” “not quite knowing how to react.”

India has claimed it has no immediate plans for further military action. But, referring to the Uri attack, Parrikar said, “If Pakistan continues with such conspiracies, we will give them a befitting reply again.”

India’s bellicose stance is being encouraged by Washington, which has forged an ever-closer military-security alliance with New Delhi as part of its drive to strategically encircle and prepare for war against China.

The strikes that India carried out on the evening of September 28-29 were illegal, highly provocative, and justified on a patently trumped-up claim that they were aimed at “terrorist launch pads” from which squads of Islamist gunmen were about to be sent into India.

Yet Washington has signaled its support for the Indian attacks. Obama administration spokesmen have studiously avoided criticizing the strikes and have invariably linked their calls for New Delhi and Islamabad to dampen down tensions to demands Pakistan take urgent action to prevent its territory being used as a “safe haven” by terrorists.

No mention is ever made of India’s concerted push under the 28-month old Hindu supremacist BJP government to “change the rules of the game” with Pakistan. This has included: instructing the military to take a more aggressive posture at the border, which led in 2015 to months of cross-border shelling; vehemently opposing the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, on the grounds it will pass through parts of the former British Empire princely state of Kashmir that New Delhi claims are hers; and backing the Balochi ethno-nationalist insurgency, effectively threatening Pakistan with dismemberment.

Speaking Friday, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter emphasized that the Indian-US military relationship is the “closest it has been ever.”

Pakistan continues to publicly deny that Indian Special Forces penetrated beyond the LoC, claiming instead that two of its soldiers were killed and nine injured by Indian cross-border shelling. This stance is belied by the hurried series of high-level military and government meetings and the shrill statements being made by Pakistani military and

political leaders.

Pakistan Chief of Armed Services General Sharif has vowed, "Any misadventure by our adversary will meet the most befitting response from Pakistan."

Bellicose statements have also been made by Defence Minister Khawaja Asif. In recent weeks as tensions with India have mounted, Asif repeatedly warned that Pakistan will use its recently deployed "battlefield" or tactical nuclear weapons should India launch a large-scale attack. Just hours before last Wednesday's Indian strikes, he declared in a television interview, "We will destroy India if it dares to impose war on us ... We have not made [an] atomic device to display in a showcase. If such a situation arises we will use it [a nuclear weapon] and eliminate India."

Pakistan has appealed to the United Nations to intervene. Pakistani envoy Malleha Lodhi met with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon late last week to appeal for action. While maintaining that India's claim of strikes inside Pakistan was "false," Lodhi said that India by its own admission has "committed aggression."

Ban Ki-Moon issued a statement Saturday offering UN mediation, calling on both countries to take "immediate steps to de-escalate the situation," and urging them to address their differences, including over Kashmir, through dialogue.

It is highly unlikely the UN's mediation offer will be taken up, both because New Delhi believes it has succeeded in isolating Pakistan diplomatically and because it wants to keep the door bolted to any third-party involvement in Kashmir.

On Friday, Pakistan was forced to cancel the summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which was due to be held in November in Islamabad, after Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Bhutan and Sri Lanka joined India in announcing they were going to boycott it.

Bangladesh and Afghanistan have also supported India's military raid on Pakistan, with Kabul, which has been involved in its own border skirmishes with Pakistan in recent months, terming it an act of self-defence.

The Indian strikes have also been applauded by the Balochi separatists inside Pakistan. Some have even provocatively called for the Indian attacks to be continued, action that could easily plunge South Asia headlong into the abyss of the first-ever war between nuclear-armed states.

The growing Indo-US alliance has led China and Pakistan to tighten their longstanding close ties. But Beijing has been very cautious in the face of the escalating crisis, repeatedly urging both India and Pakistan to draw back from confrontation.

In an editorial, the Pakistan *Express Tribune* expressed alarm about Islamabad's isolation. "Of immediate concern," it wrote, "is that there has been a ringing silence in terms of the rest of the world, which has failed to condemn what India is admitting it has done which if true is a violation of sovereignty at least."

In both countries, a foul chauvinist atmosphere is being whipped up which will be used not only to pursue the reactionary geo-political interests of the rival bourgeois cliques, but to suppress dissent and attack the working class.

In India, the Stalinist parliamentary parties have joined with the rest of the political establishment in supporting the Indian military attack on Pakistan. T. Sitaram Yechury, the general-secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, participated with the other main party leaders in an "all-party meeting" convened by the government last Thursday to show that India was united against Pakistan.

Speaking to reporters Saturday, Yechury again extended the Stalinists' support to the military strikes, declaring, "It is our and the central government's responsibility to ensure that our people are protected." He added, "We urge upon the Government of India, from its position of strength, to continue with the diplomatic and political moves to defuse tension and eliminate the scorch of cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan."

For its part, the Communist Party of India (CPI) issued a statement applauding the military strikes and saying the government had had no choice but to bring South Asia to the brink of all-out war. "The [September 18] Uri incident," said the CPI, had "made inevitable ... action on cross border terrorism by the Indian Army. We appreciate the well-planned action of the Indian Army."

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