

Indo-Pakistan tensions escalate

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Geo-political tensions between India and Pakistan surged over the weekend as cross-border firing continued in both directions along the Line of Control (LoC), the de-facto border between the Indian- and Pakistani-held portions of disputed Kashmir. More than two dozen people, mostly civilians, have been killed in military exchanges over the past two weeks.

According to an Indian defence spokesperson, in the latest incident on Sunday, two Indian soldiers were killed and two more soldiers and three civilians were injured in the Krishna Ghati sector of Poonch district by Pakistani fire. Lt. Col. Manish Mehta boasted: “Indian troops [are] responding befittingly and have caused heavy damage to Pakistani army posts.”

An Indian intelligence sources cited by the media declared, “While Pakistan targeted Victor post of the Indian Army, their Copra post caught fire in retaliatory fire by the Indian troops. Pakistan has also suffered some casualties in retaliatory fire. However, their exact number could not be known.”

The artillery exchange on Sunday took place after a lull of four days. On the previous Sunday, the Indian military said it inflicted “heavy casualties,” destroying four Pakistani army posts in the “Keran sector” of Pakistani-held Kashmir. The “massive fire assault” was supposedly in retaliation for the beheading of an Indian soldier by “terrorist” infiltrators on October 28.

The ongoing clashes along the LoC highlight the dangerous standoff that has brought the nuclear-armed rivals to the brink of war. The Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is waging an aggressive military campaign against Pakistan, blaming it for Islamic separatist attacks on an Indian army base in Uri in Jammu and Kashmir on September 18.

The governments of both India and Pakistan are whipping up reactionary chauvinism and militarism, creating explosive tensions on the subcontinent. Accusations of spying have led to diplomatic

expulsions and withdrawals from each other’s capital. The *Pakistan Express Tribune* reported on November 4 that both countries “may temporarily recall high commissioners.”

Last Thursday, in an unprecedented move, the Pakistani Foreign Office named eight Indian diplomats in Islamabad as agents of India’s intelligence agencies—the notorious Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and Indian Intelligence Bureau (IB). Spokesperson Nafees Zakaria told the media: “As you are aware, a number of Indian diplomats and staff belonging to the Indian intelligence agencies RAW and IB have been found involved in coordinating terrorist and subversive activities in Pakistan under the garb of diplomatic assignments.”

Pakistani authorities outlined a long list of charges: “espionage, subversion and supporting of terrorist activities in Balochistan and Sindh,” “sabotaging the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC),” “creating unrest in Gilgit-Balistan,” “damaging Pakistan-Afghanistan relations,” “fabricating evidence to portray Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism,” “fueling sectarianism and maligning Pakistan with propaganda on human rights issues,” “carrying out activities in AJK [Pakistani-held Kashmir] detrimental to the Kashmir cause and misleading the international community about indigenous movement for self-determination in IOK [Indian-held Kashmir].”

Indian Prime Minister Modi has made no secret of his government’s backing for separatist movements in the Balochistan province of Pakistan. He has cited Islamabad’s alleged atrocities in that province to counter Pakistan’s accusations of human rights abuses by the Indian military in Indian-held Kashmir. Modi has exploited the Balochistan issue in international forums like the UN as part of a diplomatic campaign to isolate Pakistan.

India is opposed to the CPEC, a network of rail links,

highways and pipelines connecting western China with the Pakistani port city of Gwadar. New Delhi cites the fact that the CPEC runs through Gilgit-Balistan and Pakistani-held Kashmir—areas claimed by India—but its real concern is that the corridor could give a boost to both Pakistan and its other regional rival, China.

Under Modi, India has forged even closer ties with the US as it seeks to encircle China with allies and strategic partners. The CPEC offers China an alternate means of importing energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. The Pentagon's war planners have foreshadowed the imposition of a naval blockade of China using key "choke points" such as the Malacca Strait in the event of conflict with China.

The diplomatic feud was triggered on October 27 when India declared Pakistani High Commission staffer Mehmood Akhtar as persona non-gratia for alleged espionage activities. Akhtar was arrested by Delhi police allegedly with "sensitive defence documents" for the Pakistani military spy agency, the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). He was expelled from India.

The Indian government has been backed by the US in its bellicose campaign against Pakistan following the Uri attack. Washington regards New Delhi as an important partner in its "pivot to Asia"—a comprehensive strategy aimed at undermining the influence of, and preparing for war with China. The US has showered India with important concessions, including a civilian nuclear deal that gives India access to global nuclear market, an offer of advanced defence technology and support for New Delhi's strategic outreach into South East Asia and Africa.

Despite its formal calls for "restraint" on both sides and appeals for a "negotiated settlement," the US has supported India's moves to isolate Pakistan internationally by branding it a "terrorism sponsoring" state. It has blamed Islamabad for the terrorist activities of separatist groups in Indian-held Kashmir and backed the Modi government's military aggression, including its so-called "surgical strikes" inside Pakistan's territory on September 28-29.

The escalating geo-political tensions between India and Pakistan underscore the utterly reactionary nature of nation-state structure in South Asia, created through communal partition of British India into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India in 1947. The

decades-long geo-political rivalry in South Asia has already led to three declared wars and countless war crises between India and Pakistan. Now an all-out war between India and Pakistan could become the trigger for a catastrophic global conflict that would draw in the US, China and all the nuclear-armed powers.

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