

Indian government seizes on Kashmir attack to ratchet up tensions with Pakistan

By Deepal Jayasekera
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India has responded to a suicide-bombing Thursday in Indian-held Kashmir, which killed 40 Indian security personnel, with denunciations and blood-curdling threats—all but announcing an impending military strike on Pakistan.

Speaking yesterday, Narendra Modi, India's prime minister and the head of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), held Pakistan responsible for the attack. He then vowed that India will make “the terror outfits and those aiding and abetting them pay a heavy price.”

“Let me assure the nation,” Modi continued, “those behind this attack, the perpetrators of this attack will be punished.” He said his government has given India's security forces “complete freedom of action.”

Modi has repeatedly boasted that the cross-border military strikes he ordered on Pakistan in September 2016 in retaliation for a terror attack on an Indian army camp in Jammu and Kashmir, had freed India from the shackles of “strategic restraint.”

Seeking to whip up war-fever, Modi declared: “The blood of the people is boiling... Our neighbouring country, which has been isolated internationally, is in a state of illusion, [and] thinks such terror attacks can destabilise us, but their plans will not materialise.”

At least 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) para-militaries were killed and several more injured on Thursday afternoon when a suicide-bomber rammed an SUV packed with explosives into a CRPF bus traveling on the Srinagar-Jammu highway in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir. The bus was part of a convoy of 78 vehicles that was returning more than 2,500 soldiers, most of whom had been on holiday, to active duty in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir's largest city.

Indian authorities blamed the success of the

attack—the single biggest loss of Indian security forces in three decades—on intelligence and security lapses.

Citing a claim of responsibility for the attack from the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), an Islamist pro-Kashmir separatist group, New Delhi immediately declared Pakistan was to blame.

Yesterday, New Delhi delivered Pakistan what was termed a sternly-worded diplomatic demarche, recalled its ambassador from Islamabad, and announced it was canceling Pakistan's most-favoured nation trade status .

Everything suggests that Modi and his BJP intend to exploit Thursday's attack to the hilt to whip up bellicose nationalism with a view to deflecting mounting social anger, and mobilising its reactionary Hindu communalist base. All opposition will be branded as a threat to the “national unity” needed to confront arch-rival Pakistan.

In recent months, the Modi government has been shaken by growing worker and farmer protests—including a two-day nationwide general strike in January in which tens of millions participated.

Moreover, the BJP has suffered electoral defeats in December in three Hindi-heartland states that hitherto were among its strongest bastions. This has placed a large question mark over whether the BJP will prevail in the national elections to be held in multiple phases this April and May.

The BJP and its Hindu extremist allies have organised protests in several cities, including New Delhi, at which demands for military action against Pakistan were raised.

A crucial factor in the BJP's ability to exploit the Kashmir events to stoke reactionary communalism is the role of the so-called opposition parties. Whatever their tactical differences and criticisms of the ruling BJP, they all support aggressively pursuing New

Delhi's geo-political interests in the region against Pakistan.

Congress president Rahul Gandhi, the dynastic head of the party, denounced the incident as "an attack on India's soul" and assured the BJP government that his party, as well as the entire opposition, was fully supportive of the government and the military. "I want to make it very clear that the aim of terrorism is to divide this country and we are not going to be divided for even one second, no matter how hard people try," he said.

All the opposition parties led by Congress supported Modi's "surgical strikes" in September 2016 and hailed the Indian army for carrying them out. On behalf of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, chief minister of southern Indian state of Kerala, Pinarayi Vijayan, then passed a resolution in the state assembly praising "surgical strikes."

The Stalinists have issued only tepid criticisms of the BJP government's brutal crackdown on opposition in Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state, and its refusal to enter into high-level discussions with Pakistan, until it demonstrates it has ended all logistical support for insurgent groups in Indian-administered Kashmir.

The CPM Polit Bureau has immediately issued a statement that "strongly condemns the terrorist attack mounted on a CRPF convoy in Pulwama in Jammu & Kashmir." It reiterated its support for the Indian military, declaring: "The Polit Bureau of the CPI (M) conveys its heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families of the personnel who laid down their lives in the line of duty."

Thursday's suicide bombing was reportedly carried out by 20-year-old Adil Ahmed Dar, a Kashmir labourer, who apparently lived a few kilometres from the site of bomb blast. According to his parents, Dar was radicalised following the police arrest and torture of him and his friends three years ago while they were returning from school.

Pakistan's reaction to Thursday's attack and India's bellicose reaction has been so far subdued and limited to a denial that it had any role in the incident. In previous cases, Islamabad has made its own blood-curdling threats of military retaliation in response to any Indian attack. It appears that Pakistan has been shaken by statements issued by several

countries, including the US, condemning the attack and in support of India.

The Kashmir dispute and broader Indo-Pakistani rivalry have their roots in the reactionary communal partition of the subcontinent in 1947 into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India by the British colonial rulers with the assistance of both sections of Indian national bourgeoisie.

Kashmir was also divided into the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir and the Pakistani province of Kashmir, called Azad Kashmir. In pursuit of their geo-political ambitions, the Indian and Pakistan ruling elites have both abused and ridden roughshod over the rights of the Kashmiri people.

For decades, New Delhi manipulated elections and arbitrarily unseated governments in Jammu and Kashmir. When faced with mass political unrest in the late 1980s, it resorted to widespread violence. For its part, Pakistan manipulated the opposition within Jammu and Kashmir and promoted Islamist insurgent groups in a bid to undermine rival India.

The danger is that events could spin out of control between the rival nuclear-armed powers after last Thursday's attack. Following India's so-called surgical strikes on Pakistan in September 2016, the two countries teetered for months on the brink of all-out war. Shelling occurred on almost a daily basis, killing dozens of military personnel and civilians on both sides.

Adding to the explosiveness of the situation is the US drive to harness India in its strategic confrontation. As a result, the Indo-Pakistan conflict has become increasingly enmeshed with rising US-China tensions, with New Delhi allied with Washington and Beijing with Islamabad.

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