

Days after coming to the brink of all-out war

India and Pakistan stoke chauvinism, exchange threats

By Deepal Jayasekera
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Cross-border shelling across the Line of Control (LOC) that separates Indian- and Pakistan-held Kashmir has reportedly declined over the past 48 hours. However, tensions between South Asia's rival nuclear-armed powers remain extremely high, leaving the region teetering on the brink of a catastrophic war.

Both sides continue to exchange bellicose threats and to accuse each other of preparing further military strikes, including "terrorist" attacks and covert operations.

Yesterday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi threatened further military action against Pakistan if Islamabad does not cut off all logistical support from its territory for the anti-Indian insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. "We have told [Pakistan]," said Modi, "if they don't improve, they know what will happen to them."

Earlier Tuesday, Pakistan military spokesman Major General Asif Ghafoor told the country's leading English-language newspaper, *Dawn*, that India's apparent "strategic restraint over the past 24 hours" is no reason for Islamabad to reduce its threat level. "[W]e cannot lower our state of vigilance and readiness. We have to stay prepared against any misadventure."

Ghafoor added that Islamabad has seen nothing to convince it that New Delhi wants to ease tensions. India at this point is "emotionally" "not prepared" to de-escalate, charged Ghafoor. Indian forces, he claimed, spent the weekend "luring" and "provoking" Pakistan.

Later yesterday, Islamabad claimed its forces had chased off an Indian submarine when it tried to enter Pakistani waters. New Delhi rejected the claim, saying the video footage Pakistan had released as proof of the submarine incursion actually dated from 2016.

Last week, India and Pakistan came closer to all-out war than at any time since the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War. Early on the morning of Tuesday, Feb. 26, Indian warplanes struck deep inside Pakistan, destroying what New Delhi claims was the principal base of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), an Islamist

Kashmiri separatist group which had claimed responsibility for a suicide-bombing that killed 40 Indian security personnel in Jammu and Kashmir on Feb. 14.

In hailing the air-strike, Indian government and military forces boasted that New Delhi had changed the "rules of the game" and signaled that henceforth Pakistan should expect India will mount Israeli-style retaliatory and preemptive raids in answer to all major terrorist attacks or threatened attacks in Kashmir.

Little more than 24 hours after the Indian airstrike on Balakot, a dozen Pakistani fighter jets crossed into Jammu and Kashmir, in what New Delhi insists was a failed attempt to attack Indian military bases. In the ensuing dogfight, Pakistan shot down at least one Indian plane.

Ever since the Feb. 14 suicide-bombing, Modi and his BJP have placed strident anti-Pakistan chauvinism and bellicose vows to bring Islamabad to heel at the center of their campaign for India's multi-stage, April-May general election.

This has continued in recent days with Modi boasting that his government was the first to order airstrikes on Pakistan since 1971, and railing against the opposition for purportedly failing to stand up to Pakistan and depriving India's military of Rafale fighter jets and other advanced weaponry.

Speaking in Allahabad yesterday, Modi denounced the opposition for demanding the government substantiate its claim that well over 200 "terrorists" were killed in the Balakot airstrikes. "They're busy with strikes on Modi," he declared, while "Modi is launching strikes on terror."

Two days before, Modi told a rally in Patna, "The country is aware of the attitude shown by the Congress Party and its allies towards national security in the past." He then went on to vow that the "New India" led by his Hindu supremacist BJP will give "a befitting reply" "for every sacrifice" of Indian soldiers' blood.

Modi is shamelessly exploiting the escalation of tensions

with Pakistan, for which his government is responsible, to divert growing popular opposition among workers, the urban poor and rural toilers against his government's austerity and pro-investor policies. Recent months have seen a wave of strikes, including the participation of tens of millions in a two-day strike in January directly challenging the government's neo-liberal agenda, and widespread protests among impoverished farmers.

Yesterday, the *Indian Express*, a paper strongly supportive of the BJP's big business economic agenda and its strengthening of India's military-strategic partnership with Washington, published an editorial voicing alarm over the extent to which Modi and his BJP have "politicized" the war crisis and their attempts to depict any criticism of the government or request for information about the military's actions as disloyal, if not treasonous.

This, the editorial suggested, could ultimately undermine popular support for the military and impede bipartisanship within the political establishment in the conduct of India's foreign policy.

No less significantly, the *Indian Express* noted that the opposition has largely covered before the BJP, giving every indication that it intends to "play dead" just as "on cow vigilantism"—i.e., attacks on Muslims and Dalits for eating beef—the Congress Party "has either retreated or caved in to" the Hindu right.

The reality is the entire opposition—and this goes for the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India—are vociferous supporters of India's military-strategic rivalry with Pakistan, which is rooted in the reactionary 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent; defend India's bloody repression of the Kashmiri people; and support India's rapid expansion of its military and the great-power ambitions of the Indian bourgeoisie that it is meant to advance.

As for Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, he is similarly using the war crisis to whip up nationalism with the aim of diverting attention away from the devastating impact of the austerity measures his government is enforcing at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and in flagrant breach of his election promises.

The flare up of tensions with India will also no doubt be used to silence any criticism of the fact that Khan has chosen to hike military spending, while slashing the meager sums Islamabad spends on social services and development.

For decades Pakistan has cynically exploited Indian atrocities in Jammu and Kashmir to advance its own reactionary geostrategic interests, including through the promotion of Islamist forces that have waged communal attacks on Kashmir's non-Muslim minorities.

Washington reportedly joined Russia, China and the other major European Union powers in urging Indian and Pakistan not to escalate further after the Feb. 27 dogfight.

But it greenlighted Indian's attack on Pakistan, with Trump's National Security Adviser John Bolton announcing shortly after the Feb. 14 suicide-bombing in Pulwama that the US recognizes India's "right" to "self-defense."

Moreover, New Delhi has been emboldened by Washington's drive, under Republican and Democratic administrations alike, to forge an Indo-US "global-strategic partnership."

A March 3 *New York Times* article, entitled "After India Loses Dogfight to Pakistan, Questions Arise About Its 'Vintage' Military," expressed concern that despite the sale of more than \$15 billion in US arms to India, much of its military equipment is antiquated.

The article went on to insist, based on the statements of US officials and publications of various Washington think tanks, that India is central to US war plans against China and that the weaknesses revealed by the recent confrontation with Pakistan should serve as an impetus to provide additional US support for the modernization of India's military. "Whatever the problems," declared the *Times*, "the United States is determined to make the country a key ally in the coming years to hedge against China's growing regional ambition."

In South Asia, as around the world, US imperialism's drive for global hegemony is having an incendiary impact. Its strategic embrace of New Delhi has upended the regional balance of power, emboldening India, and added an explosive new charge to the Indo-Pakistan rivalry, increasingly the danger that a flare-up of tensions, like the ongoing war crisis, could rapidly escalate into a global conflagration that drags in the major powers on opposing sides of a catastrophic conflict fought with nuclear weapons.

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