

India, Pakistan exchange artillery-fire, threats over Kashmir

By Keith Jones
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Tensions between South Asia's rival nuclear-armed states have escalated in recent days, with India and Pakistan accusing each other of preparing to attack, and their military forces exchanging lethal artillery fire across the Line of Control (LoC) that separates the Indian and Pakistani-controlled portions of Kashmir.

On Saturday, New Delhi said one of its soldiers had been killed in what it called an unprovoked Pakistan-initiated, cross-border artillery exchange.

Two days earlier, Islamabad had reported that three of its soldiers and two civilians had been killed by Indian artillery-fire in two different sectors along the LoC. The Pakistani military also said that its forces had killed five Indian soldiers during Thursday's cross-border exchanges. New Delhi conceded that there had been heavy fire, but dismissed any claim of Indian fatalities that day as baseless.

In the two weeks since India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government illegally amended the country's constitution to assert its unbridled dominance over Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir and placed the region under an unprecedented state of siege, government and military leaders from both countries have made a spate of bellicose statements.

The Indian military has repeatedly charged that Pakistan is seeking to infiltrate anti-Indian Islamist insurgents across the LoC to carry out terrorist strikes. And in what was widely touted by the Indian press as an explicit warning to Pakistan, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said Friday that changed "circumstances" could cause India to abandon its "No First Use" nuclear-weapons pledge. So as to ensure that this comment, made at Pokhran, site of India's 1998 nuclear weapons test, got maximum media attention, Singh also tweeted it.

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, in a speech Wednesday in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-held Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), accused India of planning to invade the area, then threatened a massive military response. "The Pakistani army," said Khan, "has solid information that they [India] are planning to do something in Pakistani Kashmir. We have decided that if India commits any violation we will fight until the end... The time has arrived to teach [India] a lesson."

Speaking alongside Khan, AJK state Prime Minister Farooq

Haider said the LoC should be renamed the "ceasefire line" to emphasize the ongoing, unresolved character of the Kashmir dispute.

In February, India and Pakistan came to the brink of all-out war after New Delhi, with Washington's support, "punished" Pakistan for a terrorist attack in J&K by mounting illegal air strikes deep inside Pakistan. Islamabad responded by ordering a retaliatory strike that ended in a dogfight over Indian-held J&K and the downing of at least one Indian fighter.

Six months on, the situation is even more combustible, as the Narendra Modi-led BJP government seeks to assert New Delhi's untrammled domination over J&K and to "change the rules of the game" with India's arch-rival Pakistan.

A fourth Indo-Pakistani war would have catastrophic consequences for the people of South Asia and potentially the world. Seeking to offset the power of an adversary with a population more than six times larger, an economy eight times bigger, and a military budget five times greater, Pakistan has publicly threatened to counter any major Indian thrust across its border with tactical nuclear weapons. India's military, seeking to draw the lessons of its failed 2001-2002 "war crisis" mobilization against Pakistan, has developed a "cold start" strategy with the aim of being able to launch a sudden, massive attack on its western neighbour.

War would rapidly involve the great powers. South Asia and the Indian Ocean region have been sucked into the maelstrom of great-power conflict over the past decade and a half, with India playing an ever-greater role in Washington's plans to militarily confront China, and Beijing and Islamabad responding to the Indo-US "global strategic alliance" by strengthening their own military-security partnership.

China, acting on Pakistan's request, pressed for a "closed consultation" meeting of the UN Security Council Friday to discuss Islamabad's charges that New Delhi's actions in J&K contravene international law, by unilaterally changing the status of a disputed territory, and threaten regional peace.

The meeting broke up after 75 minutes. While closed sessions don't adopt resolutions, the meeting did not even reach a consensus about agreed upon "press elements."

The Indian press is gloating that Beijing was isolated on the Security Council, with all the other members accepting that

India's assault on Kashmir is an "internal affair." Some reports went so far as to trumpet it as "14-1" against China and Pakistan.

This is not simply Indian propaganda. Led by the US, the western powers are aggressively promoting India as a military-strategic counterweight to China, and toward that end are ready to give it a free hand in J&K. Modi and his government, backed by the dominant faction of India's ruling elite, have for their part integrated India ever more fully into Washington's strategic offensive against China.

The day after the UN Security Council meeting, the second-most senior US diplomat, Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan, met in New Delhi with Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar. According to the US State Department, they discussed the shared Indo-US "vision" for a "free and open Indo-Pacific," that is, continued US domination of Asia. Sullivan also briefed Jaishankar on his recent trip to tiny Bhutan, which like Kashmir borders China.

Russia, albeit for very different reasons, has also thrown its support behind India in Kashmir. For decades, stretching back to the early stages of the Cold War, New Delhi has been a key economic and military-security partner of Russia, and Moscow is determined to maintain and expand that partnership as it confronts escalating US-NATO military pressure and economic sanctions.

Buoyed by Pakistan's international isolation, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh reiterated Sunday New Delhi's provocative stance that there can be no substantive talks with Islamabad until it demonstratively bows to India's demand that it prevent all logistical support from Pakistan for the anti-Indian insurgency in J&K. Singh went on to declare that the only talks New Delhi will have with Islamabad over Kashmir "will be on the issue of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir"—i.e., India's claim that it is rightfully hers—"and no other issue."

Inside Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir the situation remains dire.

To suppress popular opposition to its abrogation of J&K's semi-autonomous constitutional status and effective imposition of permanent central government trusteeship over what was hitherto India's only Muslim-majority state, New Delhi has imposed an unprecedented security lockdown and communication blackout on the region since Aug. 5.

Two weeks after this state of siege began, cell phone service remains cut off across J&K, and landline and internet service remain suspended in much of the Kashmir Valley. Over the weekend, the authorities relaxed some of the sweeping restrictions on people's movements, but ordered them re-imposed, including in the largest city, Srinagar, after protest demonstrations erupted.

State-owned All-India Radio reported last week that more than 500 people have been detained since August 5. But yesterday AFP (Agence France-Presse), based on multiple

Indian government sources, said that New Delhi has in fact taken at least 4,000 people into custody.

The arrested comprise a wide array of BJP government opponents. They include students and others whom New Delhi derides as "potential stone-pelters," academics, two former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Ministers—Omar Abdullah, the head of the J&K National Conference, and People's Democratic Party President Mehbooba Mufti—and hundreds of other leaders and cadre of the non-BJP pro-Indian political parties in J&K.

They are being detained under the notorious Public Safety Act, which allows the state to hold persons deemed a threat to "public safety" for up to two years without charge.

AFP said the 4,000 figure was tabulated by a J&K based-magistrate who had been able to get round New Delhi's information blackout and contact colleagues using a cellphone given him because of his senior government position.

Most of the 4,000 "were flown out of Kashmir because prisons here have run out of capacity," said the magistrate. The claims of thousands of arrests have been supported by other Indian officials, speaking, like the magistrate, on condition of anonymity. A police official told AFP that "around 6,000 people were medically examined at a couple of places in Srinagar after they were detained."

"They are first sent to" Srinagar's main jail, he explained, "and later flown out of here in military aircraft."

In keeping with its draconian blackout, Indian authorities have refused to provide relatives with any information as to where their loved ones are being detained.

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