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Indo-Pakistani conflict sharpens with New Delhi's assault on Kashmir

Pakistan has taken a raft of retaliatory measures and issued war threats in response to India's aggressive and patently illegal moves to tighten its control over disputed Kashmir.

These moves, which Islamabad has labeled an "annexation," have been accompanied by an unprecedented state of siege in Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). For the fourth day yesterday, J&K was cut off from the outside world, with all internet, cable television, and land and cell phone service suspended, schools shut, meetings of more the four people outlawed, and all civilian movement severally restricted under a curfew enforced by tens of thousands of Indian soldiers and other security forces.

State-run All-India Radio reported yesterday that more than 500 people have been detained as part of the "lockdown" ordered by India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. The arrested include two former J&K chief ministers and other leaders of the pro-Indian section of J&K's Muslim elite.

Islamabad announced the expulsion of Indian High Commissioner Ajay Bisaria, the suspension of all bilateral trade, and a review of all bilateral agreements with New Delhi following a meeting Wednesday of the country's National Security Council (NS). The NSC is dominated by Pakistan's military and headed by Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan.

The day before Khan, who heads a right-wing Islamic populist government that is currently implementing savage IMF-dictated austerity measures, had delivered an address

to an emergency joint session of Pakistan's parliament that was part warning and part threat. Khan painted a scenario of a rapid descent into all-out war between South Asia's rival nuclear powers, if India persists on its current course.

On Monday, the BJP government announced without forewarning, let alone any public debate or consultation, that it had stripped Jammu and Kashmir of its special status as a semi-autonomous part of the Indian Union. It then bifurcated India's only Muslim-majority state and designated the two successor entities as Union Territories, meaning that they will effectively be under central government control in perpetuity.

This constitutional coup, which was prepared and executed in secret with the top brass of India's army and intelligence agencies, has multiple aims. These include: forcing a quick and bloody end to the decades-long Pakistan-supported anti-Indian insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir; strengthening New Delhi's hand against Pakistan and China (which borders the now bifurcated Jammu and Kashmir to the east); and whipping up bellicose Indian nationalism and Hindu communalist reaction so as to push India's politics still further to the right.

Jammu and Kashmir's "full integration" into the Indian Union has long been one of the principal demands of the BJP and the Hindu supremacist right, going back to an agitation that former Hindu Mahasabha and Jana Sangh leader Syama Prasad Mukherjee initiated in the early 1950s in tandem with the RSS, and the region's traditionally dominant Hindu landlords.

Pakistan's president outlines how South Asia could cascade into nuclear war

In Tuesday's parliamentary address, Khan said India's attack on Kashmir means that "incidents like" the February 14 bomb blast that targeted Indian paramilitaries near Pulwama, J&K are "bound to happen again," and when they do India "may strike us again." This was a reference to the air strikes the Narendra Modi-led BJP government subsequently ordered deep inside Pakistan, and to which Khan and the Pakistani military responded with their own air raid on J&K, bringing South Asia to the brink of a catastrophic war.

"I can already predict this will happen," said Khan. "They will attempt to place the blame on us again. They strike us again, and we will strike back.

"What will happen then? They will attack us and we will respond and the war can both ways," potentially continuing "till we shed the last drop of our blood." Tacitly

acknowledging that Pakistan's military strategy calls for a rapid recourse to nuclear weapons in the face of any major Indian thrust inside Pakistan, Khan went on to claim his remarks were only a sober assessment of the military-strategic dynamics now in play. "This is not nuclear blackmail," affirmed Pakistan's prime minister.

Yesterday Khan reportedly told a meeting with Pakistan media representatives that the crisis precipitated by India's recent actions means there is "a 50/50 chance of either limited conventional war or a golden opportunity to solve the issue of Kashmir once and for all."

Khan further said that Pakistan will "actively galvanize Western governments and public opinion on the violations in Kashmir," and bring its case that India's actions are a violation of international law before the United Nations. However, Khan expressed concern that Washington and the other western powers may choose to appease "fascism in the garb of the BJP."

Within Pakistan there is dismay over the lack of international reaction to the BJP's constitutional coup, which runs roughshod over the basic rights of the Kashmiri people, willfully enflames relations with Pakistan, and represents a significant step toward authoritarian forms of rule.

Khan's bourgeois political opponents have joined the government in vowing to uphold the "rights of the Kashmiri people," while denouncing him for having previously made peace overtures to Modi and his government.

As in India, the Indo-Pakistani conflict has long been a pivotal mechanism of bourgeois rule, used to divert social tensions and channel them behind bellicose nationalism and communalism, as well as a means for competing ruling class factions to wage their internecine struggles for power.

Pakistan's military, which traditionally has served as the chief pillar of the now badly frayed US-Pakistani military-strategic partnership, lays claims to a large share of political and economic power on the basis that it is the country's "sword arm," protecting it from Indian aggression.

The Indo-Pakistani strategic rivalry and the plight of the Kashmiri people

The Kashmir conflict and the broader Indo-Pakistani strategic rivalry are rooted in the 1947-48 communal Partition of South Asia into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India.

Both the Indian and Pakistan bourgeoisie have systematically manipulated and trampled on the rights and democratic aspirations of the Kashmiri people, who as result of Partition came to be divided between Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistani-held Azad Kashmir.

India, under successive governments, whether led by the Congress Party, the BJP, or a “Third Front” coalition of regional and caste-based parties, has for decades waged a “dirty war” to crush the insurgency that erupted after New Delhi ignored and suppressed mass protests over its rigging of the 1987 J&K state elections.

Pakistan, meanwhile, has sought to manipulate the opposition to the Indian state in J&K and harness it to its own predatory aims, by promoting Islamist Kashmiri separatist groups that have repeatedly carried out communalist attacks on J&K’s Hindu and Sikh minorities.

Although conceding that the BJP government’s assault on Kashmir is a high-risk gamble, India’s ruling elite has embraced as it a necessary step. Fueling this support for “exceptional measures” is its fear that due to mounting global and domestic economic crisis and intensifying global geopolitical conflict India’s “window of opportunity” to assert itself as a rising world power is rapidly closing.

In defending the BJP’s Kashmir powerplay, many Indian press commentators are claiming that it was a response to the recent rapprochement between Islamabad and Washington, including Khan’s White House audience with Trump last month, and to India’s exclusion from the Pakistan-facilitated, US-Taliban negotiations over a “political settlement” to the 18 year-long Afghan War.

This is nonsense. Monday’s coup is not just the fulfillment of longstanding BJP policy. It emerges out of the failure of the “hardline strategy” the Modi government has pursued vis a vis both Kashmir and Pakistan since it came to office in 2014.

At the very most, concerns about the impact of the very tentative warming of US-Pakistani ties and Trump’s suggestion he could help mediate or even arbitrate a solution to the Kashmir conflict may have impacted the timing of New Delhi’s assault on Jammu and Kashmir.

In any event, the Modi government’s actions have been predicated on the calculation that Washington will allow India a free hand in Kashmir as the quid pro quo for New Delhi’s ever deeper integration into the US military-strategic offensive against China.

On Wednesday, the US State Department's Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs issued a statement denying that Washington had any foreknowledge of New Delhi's plans to strip J&K of its special status and place it under the permanent trusteeship of the central Indian government.

“Contrary to press reporting, the Indian government did not consult or inform the US government before moving to revoke IOK (Indian Occupied Kashmir)'s special constitutional status,” read the statement.

Indian media has claimed External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar informed US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo about the impending action when they met August 1. Indian press reports have also claimed that New Delhi had told Washington it was planning such a move on multiple occasions, including when National Security Adviser Ajit Doval spoke with his US counterpart John Bolton after the Pulwama attack.

Following that conversation, Bolton publicly greenlighted the subsequent Indian attack air strike on Pakistan, declaring that Washington supported “India's right to self-defence against cross-border terrorism.”

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