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India-Pakistan relationship remains tense

By Deepal Jayasekera

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The relationship between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir border dispute remains tense and could suddenly flare up into a conflagration, despite claims by both sides about easing the tensions. Three Pakistani soldiers and two Indian soldiers have died in the current flare of clashes along the Line of Control (LoC) since January 6. The Indian and Pakistani governments have blamed each other for provoking the clashes. India has accused the Pakistani military of beheading one of its soldiers killed by them.

India has yet to formally respond to an offer for talks at the foreign ministers' level made by Pakistan foreign minister Hina Rabbani Khar in New York. Commenting on the offer, Indian external affairs minister Salman Khurshid said Friday: "There is a positive tone in some of the statements which have come [from Pakistan]... We welcome it and will make an appropriate response." The previous day, in an interview with the CNN-IBN news channel, Khurshid said: "We will await the prime minister's direction in this regard."

Given the explosive nature of the relationship between the two South Asian neighbours under mutual rivalry since creation of two states in 1947, due to conflicting geo-political interests and the currently destabilising effect of the aggressive US intervention into the region, the situation could escalate into bloody clashes at any given moment. US moves for courting India as a

strategic partner, with the aim of using it as a counterweight to the growing political, economic and military clout of China, have given a further explosive dimension to the toxic character of the India-Pakistan relationship.

Col. Jagdeep Dahiya, an Indian army spokesman, claimed Wednesday that the military commanders of India and Pakistan held a 10-minute telephone conversation and agreed to ease tensions along the LoC in the disputed Kashmir region by strictly observing the cease-fire between the two countries signed in 2003. However, earlier in the day, Pakistan accused the Indian military of killing one of its soldiers along the LoC the previous day, saying the shooting, which occurred in the Hot Spring and Jandot sectors of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), was unprovoked.

Indian army chief General Bikram Singh tacitly admitted to the shooting, but justified it as a retaliation for Pakistani action. He said: “If any of their people have died, it would have been in retaliation to their firing... When they fire, we also fire.” Lt. General K.T. Parnaik, an Indian commander in charge of the relevant area, reiterated the aims of the Indian army: “We want to ensure that we dominated the line of control and don’t let them [Pakistan] provoke us into making it a hot line of control.”

Kashmir was divided between India and Pakistan as a result of a war between them following the 1947 communal partition of then-British colony India into the so-called independent states of a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India. India and Pakistan have each claimed Kashmir, and two of the three wars between them have been over the Kashmir dispute. While there have been several occasions of clashes between the two armies along the LoC dividing Kashmir since the 2003 ceasefire, the current escalation is the bloodiest among them.

Both New Delhi and Islamabad have said that they want to contain tensions along the LoC from escalating into a broader conflagration, fearing it will undermine the “composite dialogue” process between them, which was just restarted last February after suspension for more than three years by New Delhi in response to the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, for which it blamed Islamabad. Each side calculates that bilateral ties, particularly in economic and trade sectors, developing between them will boost their economic interests, though they do not necessarily coincide.

However, under conditions of conflicting geo-political interests between India and Pakistan—especially in relation to their rival claims for Kashmir, growing socially explosive situations in both countries, and pressure from more hawkish sections within the political and military establishment on both sides—each government asserts the line of not giving in to the other. Despite their claims to a commitment to peace talks, the situation along the LoC could develop into another series of clashes, leading to stalling of the dialogue process. Even during the decade in which the peace process was active, very little progress had been made in relation to bilateral disputes.

On Monday, Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh, in his remarks in New Delhi to mark Army Day, said: “After this barbaric act [alleged beheading of an Indian soldier by the Pakistani military], there cannot be business as usual with Pakistan. What happened at LoC is unacceptable.” This indicates that India is going to use the tense situation to push Pakistan for more concessions, particularly measures to crack down on Pakistani-based Kashmir separatist groups fighting the Indian military, in return for economic and cultural ties.

From the Pakistani side, Foreign Minister Khar, in a speech in New York on Tuesday, accused India of “warmongering” and termed the remarks made by the Indian army chief the previous day, demanding his army to be “aggressive” in relation to Pakistan, as “very hostile”. At the same time, she expressed Islamabad’s desire to continue with the dialogue process and prevent the further escalation of tensions into a major flare-up. She said: “We will be open to a discussion, a dialogue, at the level of the foreign ministers to be able to resolve the issue of cross-LoC incidents and to re-commit ourselves to the respect for the ceasefire.”

Both sides have taken several tit-for-tat actions to pressure each other. A visa-on-arrival deal for Pakistani senior citizens at the Wagah crossing has been put on hold by India. As well, eight Pakistani hockey players who were due to participate in a tournament in India were sent back on Tuesday. Performances by a Pakistani theatre group were canceled in Jaipur in western India and in New Delhi.

Pakistan has suspended cross-border bus service and trade in return.

Right-wing Hindu forces in India have seized on the current escalation of tensions to demand New Delhi be tough on Islamabad. The leader of the opposition in the lower house of Indian parliament, Sushma Swaraj of the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), demanded on Monday that India get at least 10 heads from the Pakistani side if Pakistan fails to return the severed head of the killed Indian soldier.

Prime Minister Singh and his Congress Party have reached out to BJP leaders and are clearly seeking to appease them. Moves to suspend sport and cultural ties were taken by the government in response to BJP demands. Amidst mounting criticisms by the BJP of the Congress-led government being “weak” in dealing with Pakistan, Singh spoke over the phone on Monday to Swaraj and Arun Jaitley, BJP leader in the upper house of Indian parliament, to brief them on the LoC situation.

The Indian Stalinists have also joined the campaign demanding the Indian government be tough on Pakistan, seizing on the current escalation of tensions. On January 10, Prakash Karat, general secretary of the main Stalinist parliamentary party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, asked the Indian government to take up seriously with Islamabad the alleged killing of two Indian soldiers by Pakistani troops, saying that “incidents like the killing of soldiers can seriously affect the peaceful border we have had so far. We want relations to improve.”

The Stalinists back the dialogue process with Pakistan, sharing the calculations of those sections of the Indian bourgeoisie who think it better serves their national interests. At the same time, the CPM wants New Delhi to be tough on Islamabad to extract more concessions in its favour.

Sections of the ruling elite in both India and Pakistan have expressed their concerns that further escalation of tensions will provoke a major conflagration, breaking the bilateral peace process and thus undermining the interests of each ruling class.

Indian columnist Nirupama Subramanian wrote in an opinion piece in *The Hindu* titled “Beware of dogs of war”: “If our politicians cannot defend the ceasefire, the biggest gain of the India-Pakistan dialogue, they should stop claiming they represent Kashmir’s best interests.”

Raza Rumi from the Pakistani think tank The Jinnah Institute said: “This has been the historical trend: that whenever India and Pakistan move toward peace, one small incident reverses all progress made by the dialogue process.” Accusing “the sensationalism of the Indian media” for aggravation of the “blame game by the two countries,” he warned that “the Pakistani media could now follow suit”.

Although the situation along Kashmir border appears to be calming down, this is far from certain. Given the tense character of the relationship between India and Pakistan, and the extreme instability of geo-political situation of South Asia—particularly escalated by the US “pivot” to Asia with the aim of encircling China—it could develop into serious clashes at any moment.