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THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

# BULLETIN

No. 32 (972), 30 March 2017 © PISM

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## Mounting Tensions in India-Pakistan Relations: International Consequences

**Patryk Kugiel**

*A series of attacks reportedly by Pakistani militants in India across 2016 has led to a deepening crisis in Indo-Pakistani relations. The exchange of accusations and continuing threat of new attacks pose the risk of further escalation of the conflict. The rivalry negatively impacts regional cooperation and the stabilisation of Afghanistan. It also has contributed to the proliferation of nuclear weapons and growing menace of terrorism. Peace in the region and normalisation of ties depend on Pakistan taking on a stronger antiterrorism policy. More probable, however, is the continuation of the period of manageable tension.*

An invitation to Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to attend the swearing-in of Narendra Modi as the prime minister of India in May 2014 was a goodwill gesture that could have led to betterment of bilateral relations. However, the terrorist attacks on Indian targets by Pakistan-based militants in 2016 and Pakistan's support for massive anti-India protests in Kashmir again reignited tensions. After the extremists attacked the Indian military base in Uri on 18 September 2016, India for the first time conducted surgical strikes on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir. It also intensified an international diplomatic campaign to isolate Pakistan, accusing it of sponsoring terrorism. Pakistan responded with its own diplomatic offensive, exposing what it called India's "violations of human rights" in Kashmir and by supporting the pro-independence struggle of the Kashmiri. Contact in international forums was put on hold and a regular exchange of fire along the LOC continues to cause casualties among soldiers and civilians on both sides. The heightened tensions between the two, which already have fought four wars and have atomic weapons, is a major challenge to world peace.

**Contentious Issues.** Relations between India and Pakistan have remained problematic since the creation of both countries in the partition of British colonies in India in 1947. The initial source of the conflict was the status of the formerly princely state of Kashmir, inhabited by a majority Muslim population that fell partly under the control of both countries as a result of their first war. The secession of territory from Pakistan and emergence of independent Bangladesh in 1971—with the help of India—further aggravated fear in Pakistan of an existential threat. Its elites have long tried to balance the country's strategic disparity with its larger neighbour through a three-pronged strategy: alliances with world powers (the U.S. during the Cold War and China recently), the pursuit and harnessing of an atomic arsenal, and by using non-state actors (such as separatists) as an instrument of foreign policy. Apart from Kashmir, other pressing issues include delimitation of the border in the Sir Creek area, demilitarisation of the Siachen glacier, the usage of Indus river water, and economic cooperation.

Yet, for India the single most important problem is trans-regional terrorism. It accuses Pakistan of supporting terrorist and separatist groups, which have bases on Pakistani territory and launch attacks on Indian targets in Kashmir and elsewhere. It points out that since Pakistan joined the global war on terror in 2001, it has fought against Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban ("bad terrorists") but has tolerated, if not nurtured, forces targeting India and Afghanistan ("good terrorists"). India calls Pakistan to bring to the dock perpetrators of previous attacks, eliminate organisations considered terrorist (such as Lashkar-e-Toiba, or LeT, and Jaish-e-Mohammad, or JeM) and dismantle their training camps in Pakistan.

**Significance of the Rivalry.** The conflict between the two biggest countries in South Asia has far-reaching consequences. It hampers regional cooperation, rendering the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) ineffective. Following the recent attacks in Uri, the Indian prime minister (along with the leaders of Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Nepal) cancelled their attendance at the SAARC summit in Islamabad in November 2016. India has pushed for regional isolation of Pakistan and started promoting other forums where it is not a member. For instance, it invited the leaders of BIMSTEC—a forum composed of India’s eastern neighbours—to the BRICS summit in Goa in October last year.

The negative impact of the Indo-Pakistani rivalry is felt especially in Afghanistan. Fears of encirclement by India and the concept of “strategic depth” to the west in case of an Indian invasion explains in part why the Pakistani establishment has strived for years to have a friendly government in Kabul. Pakistan supported the Taliban regime in the 1990s and became a safe haven for their leaders and allies after 2001. As a result, today mutual accusations of tolerating and supporting terrorists complicate the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Another effect of regional competition is the militarisation and nuclearisation of South Asia. In 1998, both countries tested atomic weapons and have since assembled around 100 nuclear warheads each. They continue to work on ballistic missile technologies. Pakistan has not declared a “no-first-use” nuclear policy, which substantially raises the risk of escalation of a conventional war to a nuclear conflict. This is even more likely since India has superiority in terms of conventional weapons, including imported arms. In 2016, India was ranked first in the world amongst the largest arms importers, with a 13% share of the global market between 2012-2016. Pakistan was ninth, with 3.2% of global purchases of military equipment.

**Terrorism as a Common Threat.** The main threat for world and regional peace and bilateral relations alike is terrorism. It is remarkable that major attacks by Pakistan-based extremists have happened at moments when both countries tried to normalise relations. This was the case with the strikes on Delhi’s parliament in 2001 and Mumbai in 2008, which derailed the peace process and drew both countries to the verge of war. It seems recent attacks in 2016 had similar aims. It shows there are powerful forces in Pakistan not interested in better cooperation with India. Pakistan’s army is one such entity, depicting India as an external threat to justify its privileged position and special influence in the country’s politics and economy.

Yet, Pakistan’s selective fight with terrorism makes it a major victim. Although there were more than 11,000 civilian deaths in terrorist incidents in India since 2001 (most of local origin and not connected with Islamists), there were twice as many—almost 22,000—in Pakistan. In just February, around 130 people were killed. Responsibility for the largest attack—on the Sufi shrine in Sehwan—was claimed by the Islamic State, which points to its growing influence and operational capabilities. The threat of terrorism also scares away foreign investors and hampers the economic development of Pakistan. Years of tolerance of extremists has created a conducive atmosphere for them to grow and to radicalise parts of the country’s almost 200 million people.

A turning point in Pakistan’s approach to terrorism was the attack on a school in the city of Peshawar in December 2014, in which over 130 children were killed. The army has intensified its counterterrorism operation along the Afghanistan border and the government adopted a 20-point National Action Plan, a comprehensive strategy to eliminate extremism. The attacks in February have resulted in a boost in counterterrorism activities. The security forces have since killed 100 or so terrorists, arrested hundreds more and launched a new CT campaign across the whole country. At the end of January, Hafiz Saeed, the alleged head of LeT and mastermind of the attacks in Mumbai, was put under house arrest. Although the move was in line with India’s expectations, it must be remembered that Hafiz has been arrested many times, only to be released soon after. Pakistan’s future approach to terrorism will depend to a large extent on a new Army chief of staff, Q.J. Bajwa, who replaced Gen. Raheel Sharif in November 2016.

**Conclusions.** Normalisation of India-Pakistan relations seems improbable in the near term. While Pakistan will demand it solve the Kashmir issue, India will condition the resumption of talks and cooperation on the elimination of terrorist infrastructure on Pakistani territory. Hence, one can expect the continuation of tensions, exchanges of accusations in international forums, sporadic clashes along the border, and more ballistic missile tests. The main threat under this circumstances would be a large terrorist attack in India by extremists traced back to Pakistan, which would lead to a further escalation of the conflict. The tense situation may further hinder economic development in both states as well as regional cooperation and efforts towards the stabilisation of Afghanistan. It can also complicate relations for third countries to India and Pakistan, as the rivals would expect support for their positions.

The scenario of better bilateral ties is possible if Pakistan takes on the fight against all extremist organisations and stops distinguishing them as “good” or “bad.” The recent arrests of jihadist leaders, provided they end in prosecution, may suggest a change in the Pakistani approach. This may be driven by the widening realisation that Pakistan itself is the major victim of its selective fight against terrorism. Moreover, Pakistan may face rising pressure from the new U.S. administration, which prioritises the fight against international terrorism and which also has announced closer cooperation with India in this field. Similar expectations may come from China, which is increasingly worried that extremists pose a threat to its strategic investments in Pakistan and its own neighbouring Xinjiang province.