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Indo–Pakistani Tension: Pakistan Should Crack Down on Militant Infiltration

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Tensions between India and Pakistan are heating up along the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Kashmir. A series of border incidents in early January left three Pakistani and two Indian soldiers dead. One of the Indian soldiers was beheaded and another severely mutilated, provoking Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to say that India’s ties with Pakistan would not be “business as usual” until those responsible for the mutilation of the bodies were punished.

While the U.S. needs to urge restraint on both sides to prevent escalation between the nuclear-armed neighbors, the onus is on Pakistan to demonstrate that it is cracking down on militants on its side of the border. The U.S. should pay close attention to developments along the Indo–Pakistani border in order to help prevent a breakout of hostilities, but it should resist any

temptation to try to directly mediate between the historical foes.

Background. Media reporting indicates that a Pakistani soldier was killed in a cross-border exchange between the Indian and Pakistani militaries on January 6. The Indian side claims that it was seeking to thwart an infiltration bid by Pakistan-based militants. On January 8, in another sector of the LoC, two Indian soldiers on routine patrol duty were killed and their bodies brutally mutilated. One week later, the Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs) of both countries held a brief phone discussion in which they agreed to strictly observe the cease-fire between the two countries that was established in 2003.

The latest spark in tensions follows reporting from India that militant infiltration and cease-fire violations from Pakistan rose in 2012. The Pakistani army regularly provides covering fire for militants to help them cross the frontier into India. The details of this month’s border incidents are still murky, but India’s response shows that its patience with Islamabad is wearing thin. Indian army leaders are likely growing weary of the Indian government’s policy of forbearance toward Pakistan in the face of what

they view as increasingly provocative actions by the Pakistani army.

Pakistan has been fomenting guerilla warfare and terrorism in Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir for the past 20 years. A Pakistan-based terrorist group, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, demonstrated that its ambitions went beyond Kashmir in November 2008 when it conducted simultaneous gun attacks at multiple locations in the city of Mumbai, killing nearly 170. India exercised restraint in the face of those attacks and agreed to resume bilateral talks with Islamabad in March 2011—despite Pakistan’s failure to try and prosecute Lashkar-e-Tayyiba leaders suspected of involvement in the 2008 attacks.

The Nuclear Factor. In what could be the Indian government sending a signal to the Pakistani army about its waning patience, a state government directive was issued this week in Jammu and Kashmir instructing residents to construct bunkers in case of nuclear war. In past Indo–Pakistani crises, it was Islamabad that played the nuclear card in order to bring international attention to the Kashmir dispute and remind conventionally superior India about its nuclear deterrent.

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Pakistani civilian leaders have issued helpful statements over the past few days in an apparent effort to dampen tensions. The Pakistani minister of state for commerce, Abbas Khan Afridi, told the Pakistani senate yesterday that Islamabad will likely grant most-favored-nation trading status to India next month, a move that would boost peace talks and significantly increase bilateral trade.

Despite the growing frustration among Indian military leaders about provocations at the border, Indian political leaders are likely to keep Indo–Pakistani dialogue on track. They calculate that staying engaged with Pakistan’s civilian leadership—even when the Pakistani military might seek to derail the peace process—helps strengthen the hands of civilian leaders, who have demonstrated a commitment to building better relations with India.

Minimal U.S. Role Required.

The U.S. should pay close attention to developments along the Indo–Pakistani border in order to help prevent another border conflict like that which occurred between the nuclear rivals in 1999. That conflict broke out when thousands of Pakistani soldiers seized over 130 Indian posts in the heights of Kargil that had been vacated by Indian forces for the winter. The Pakistani army sought to portray the intruders as local jihadists. The U.S. played a helpful role in ending the conflict by calling Pakistan’s

bluff and demanding that it pull back its forces to its side of the LoC.

While this current border flare-up already appears to be dying down, there are a few guiding principles that U.S. policymakers can follow to hold Pakistan and India back from the brink of conflict:

The U.S. should encourage the two sides to use the bilateral confidence-building measures that are already in place to deal with such flare-ups. The DGMO hotline is one such measure. Journalists and civil society leaders who have been part of ongoing Track II peace efforts can also play a helpful role by highlighting the accomplishments of the peace process and the logic behind improved bilateral relations.

U.S. officials should resist the temptation to try to directly mediate between India and Pakistan. The specter of a visible, high-profile U.S. role in the dispute over Kashmir risks exacerbating tensions by fueling unrealistic expectations in Pakistan and its support for Kashmiri militants to push an agenda that it believed was within reach. As history teaches and the Kargil adventure illustrates, the prospect of U.S. involvement in resolving the dispute over Kashmir seems only to encourage Pakistani risk-taking.

The U.S. should exercise quiet diplomacy that spurs New Delhi to address Kashmiri grievances on its own and insists that Islamabad crack

down on terrorist groups that seek to stir the pot in Kashmir and ultimately provoke another Indo–Pakistani war. Convincing the Pakistani military to give up its policies of relying on extremist groups to achieve its foreign policy objectives is essential to establishing long-lasting peace in South Asia.

U.S. policymakers should acknowledge the potential implications of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan on prospects for broader conflict in South Asia. It would be a major blunder to allow Pakistan to control the reconciliation process with the Taliban. U.S. and Pakistani interests diverge on Afghanistan: Pakistan’s goals are to bolster its own proxies and deny New Delhi a foothold in the country. A precipitous U.S. withdrawal and clumsy reconciliation effort would benefit terrorists in the region and give them greater opportunity to dictate events in South Asia.

Potential for Conflict. While the recent Indo–Pakistani border tensions are likely to remain in check, they are a reminder of the potential for military conflict between the two large nuclear powers. Washington should recognize that a precipitous troop withdrawal from Afghanistan would increase the odds of another Indo–Pakistani conflict.

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