

Hot spot with a history starts to heat up again

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India and Pakistan clash after suicide attack in disputed Kashmir region

BY JEFFREY GETTLEMAN

The Kashmir Valley, a disputed territory that has led to war between India and Pakistan in the past, is once again bringing the two archrivals to the brink.

Indian warplanes conducted airstrikes in Pakistan on Tuesday, Indian and Pakistani officials said, in an escalation of tensions between the nuclear-armed nations after a suicide bombing against Indian troops in the disputed region of Kashmir this month. It was the first time in five decades that Indian aircraft had crossed the Kashmir "Line of Control" to strike.

In the past few days, hundreds of Kashmiris have been arrested, accused of fueling the insurgency against Indian rule. India has moved thousands of new troops into the valley, where they have taken up positions in towns, along the highways and in snow-dusted apple orchards.

Families are fleeing border areas. Fuel and food supplies are running out. Pakistan and India are firing artillery shells. An Indian government directive ordered doctors to "gear up their Rapid Response Teams" for "any untoward eventuality." In Pakistan, the military has shifted to high alert.

What are the chances of war?

Still thankfully low, most analysts say, because neither country really wants it. But both India and Pakistan are nuclear

armed, and any escalation between them sends jitters around the world.

India believes it "can afford brinkmanship given its growing global influence," said Zahid Hussain, a senior fellow at the Jinnah Institute, a Pakistani research organization. But, he warned, "reckless action could easily spiral out of control."

It was unclear what, if anything, the attack jets hit on the Pakistani side, raising the possibility that India was making a calculated bet to assuage public anger but minimize the risk of a major Pakistani military response.

Only a few months ago it seemed as if India and Pakistan, who would otherwise be natural trade partners, were searching for détente, with Pakistani military officers quietly reaching out to their Indian counterparts.

But that changed in an instant on Feb. 14, when a Kashmiri suicide bomber rammed a car packed with explosives into a convoy of Indian troops crossing the Kashmir Valley near the town of Pulwama, ripping apart a bus and killing at least 40 paramilitary police officers.

India, which has 1.3 billion people to Pakistan's 200 million, has blamed Pakistan for the attack, one of the deadliest in Kashmir in decades. Tensions between the two countries are now reaching a level that analysts say is the most dangerous in years.

Western nations, including the United States, have urged the two sides to back away from conflict.

But the rivalry between India and Pakistan is so bitter and deep that such incidents quickly take on a volatile energy of their own that may be difficult to contain.

The risk is compounded by election-year maneuvering in India, where



AMIRUDDIN MUGHAL/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK

Residents left their villages near the so-called Line of Control between India and Pakistan in the Kashmir region as the two countries exchanged gunfire this month.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party is appealing to Hindu nationalism and trying to avoid appearing weak.

"We should break Pakistan into three pieces," said Baba Ramdev, a powerful Indian yoga guru who is known to be close to the government.

Mr. Modi has promised a "befitting reply," and while his generals have been calculating possible military reprisals, his government has searched for other ways to respond. Last week, Mr. Modi's transport minister threatened to reduce the flow of water through some of its rivers to Pakistan, an arid, agriculture-dependent country.

Pakistan seems to be getting the message. Diplomatically, the momentum is

behind India. The United Nations passed a resolution sympathetic to India, and Imran Khan, Pakistan's relatively new prime minister, has begun to soften his stance.

Right after the suicide bombing, though he condemned terrorism, he warned India that if it attacked Pakistan, "we will not just think about retaliation, we will retaliate. There will be no other way."

On Sunday, Mr. Khan modulated his tone, vowing to "immediately act" if India provided evidence of a Pakistani hand in the bombing. He asked Mr. Modi to "give peace a chance."

Jaish-e-Mohammed, the militant group that claimed responsibility for the

suicide bombing, has operated in Pakistan for years, and Western security officials say that Pakistani organizations continue to supply money and expertise to militants inside the Indian-controlled areas of Kashmir.

The suicide bomber was a young Kashmiri man who had spent his life inside those areas, bitter about India's often heavy-handed displays of force. But he probably received some help.

Two Western security officials, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence analyses, said that an experienced bomb maker from Pakistan most likely traveled across the border and built an unusually powerful bomb for the young Kashmiri to detonate.

Pakistan has denied involvement. But the country's powerful military and intelligence services, often referred to simply as "the establishment," have a long history of supporting Kashmiri militant groups — and others, like the Afghan Taliban — as proxies.

Many Indians point to the Mumbai attacks in 2008, in which militants who were widely linked to Pakistan killed more than 150 people. Few Indians are pushing for a full-scale war, but they are also tired of the violence.

"Indians have never really been so angry, and social media is fanning it even more," said Syed Ata Hasnain, a retired Indian Army general.

Adding to the unpredictability is Pakistan's shakiness as a state, and the fact that its secretive security services appear to have lost control of some of the militant groups they once nurtured.

"It's a very, very bad situation and a very dangerous situation," President Trump said Friday. He indicated that the United States was talking to both sides.

Caught in the middle are 12 million

people living in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, which includes the Kashmir Valley, a gorgeous, fertile landscape nestled in the Himalayas.

The first war between India and Pakistan, right after their independence from Britain and partition, was fought over Kashmir. After the cease-fire in 1948, India was left in control of roughly two-thirds of the region, including much of the Kashmir Valley, while Pakistan administered the rest.

That agreement came with many caveats, and the Indian government at the time promised Kashmir special status and substantial autonomy.

Over the years, much of that autonomy has been stripped away. Pakistan, meanwhile, has never recognized India's claims on Kashmir.

This week, India's Supreme Court is scheduled to hold a hearing on part of the law that gives Kashmir special status. Some of Mr. Modi's political allies have been eager to take away the last of the special measures, such as rules that prohibit outsiders from owning land in Jammu and Kashmir, and a case has been brewing in court.

On Sunday, Karim-ud-Din Khan, an older herder, abandoned his home near the border after Indian and Pakistani troops began pounding each other's posts. An artillery shell exploded in his courtyard and Mr. Khan ordered his family of six to pack up.

The reason he left was simple: "It looked like a war might break out soon," he said.

Reporting was contributed by Hari Kumar and Suhasini Raj from New Delhi; Sameer Yasir from Srinagar, Kashmir; and Salman Masood from Islamabad, Pakistan.