

India Appears to Be Arguing for Military Strike on Pakistan

By MUJIB MASHAL

NEW DELHI — Since the horrific terrorist attack in Kashmir last week, the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, has spoken on the phone with more than a dozen world leaders. Diplomats from 100 missions in India's capital have filed into the foreign ministry for briefings, officials said.

But the effort is largely not about rallying help to de-escalate India's dangerous face-off with Pakistan, which India accuses of having "linkages" to the attack. Instead, according to four diplomatic officials aware of the discussions, New Delhi appears to be building a case for military action against its neighbor and arch-enemy. Without naming Pakistan, Mr. Modi in a speech on Thursday promised severe punishment and the razing of terrorist safe havens.

In an indication of how volatile the situation remains, the security forces of the two sides have exchanged intermittent small-arms fire across the border, Indian officials said on Sunday. One official said the exchange of fire had happened two of the past three nights, while a second official said it was three consecutive nights.

In Kashmir, Indian forces have also begun a sweeping clampdown, arresting hundreds, as they continue their hunt for the perpetrators.

Earlier, India declared its intention to disrupt the flow of water to Pakistan, whose irrigation system depends largely on upstream rivers. It also ordered the immediate departure of some staff members at Pakistan's diplomatic mission as well as of Pakistani citizens visiting India.

Pakistan, for its part, has said it will suspend participation in bilateral treaties, including one that affects the "line of control" demarcating the frontier between the two countries in the disputed areas where a cease-fire had held for several years.

Anti-Muslim sentiment in India is also intensifying, with Kashmiri students studying in other Indian cities facing harassment and many of them feeling compelled to return home.

Five days after the terrorist assault, in which gunmen killed 26 civilians, India has not officially identified any group as responsible, and it has publicly presented little evidence to support its claim that Pakistan was behind it. The Pakistani government has denied involvement.

In the briefings to diplomats at the foreign ministry, Indian officials have described Pakistan's

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An Indian paramilitary soldier patrolling on the bank of Dal Lake in Srinagar, in the southern part of Indian-administered Kashmir.

past patterns of support for terrorist groups targeting India, diplomatic officials said. The Indian officials have said their investigation is continuing and have made brief references to technical intelligence tying the perpetrators of last week's attack to Pakistan, including facial recognition data.

The lack of strong evidence offered so far, analysts and diplomats said, pointed to one of two possibilities: that India needs more time to gather information about the terrorist attack before striking Pakistan, or that — in a time of particular chaos on the world stage — it feels little need to justify to anyone the actions it plans to take.

A military confrontation between India and Pakistan, both armed with nuclear weapons, runs the risk of rapid escalation. India is largely unrestrained by any global pressure to limit its response.

The governments of Iran and Saudi Arabia have spoken to the two sides, and Iran's foreign minister has publicly offered to mediate. The United Nations and the European Union have called for restraint and dialogue. But major powers, including the United States, are distracted by other cri-

ses, and analysts say India is interpreting the expressions of support by many countries for its pursuit of justice as a green light for any measures it takes.

Trump administration officials have voiced strong backing of India's fight against terrorism. President Trump has said he is friendly with both India and Pakistan, while noting that they have long been at odds. But it is unclear how involved Washington will get. Mr. Trump has still not named an ambassador to India.

Even if the United States or other powers did try to insert themselves into the conflict, they may have limited influence. India and Pakistan have fought several wars over Kashmir, a region that they share but both claim in whole, and New Delhi views the dispute solely as a bilateral issue with Pakistan.

The response from Washington has been similar to how the first Trump administration dealt with the last major flare-up over Kashmir, in 2019, said Daniel Markey, a senior fellow at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

That confrontation was set off by an attack that killed dozens of Indian security forces. The affili-

ation of the attackers — a militant group called Jaish-e-Muhammad — was more clear.

At that time, the Trump White House signaled support for India. The administration increased its diplomatic pressure for restraint only after India carried out a cross-border airstrike.

The strike's damage was disputed. Afterward, as Pakistan moved to retaliate, its air force shot down an Indian jet. The pilot was taken prisoner.

To make up for that fumbled response, all signs this time indicate a desire by India to do "something spectacular," Mr. Markey said. Pakistan has vowed to match and exceed any strike by India.

"The tit-for-tat cycle could move rapidly, and the Indians and Pakistanis have inflated assessments of their own ability to manage escalation," Mr. Markey said.

Unlike with the 2019 terrorist attack, the claims of responsibility for last week's slaughter have been murky, with information even on the exact number of attackers less than concrete. A little-known group calling itself the Resistance Front emerged on social media to say it was behind the massacre, according to Indian news outlets. Indian officials, in

private, say the group is a proxy for Lashkar-e-Taiba, a terrorist organization based in Pakistan.

The lack of clarity may help explain why India has pointed largely to Pakistan's past support of terrorism in Kashmir to make its case for a military reprisal now. But that approach, before India has laid out its evidence even in private diplomatic discussions, has raised some eyebrows considering the gravity of the escalation. One diplomat privately wondered: Do you want to go to war with a nuclear-armed neighbor based just on past patterns?

Shiv Shankar Menon, a former national security adviser in India, said Mr. Modi had little choice but to take military action after responding with strikes against Pakistan both in 2019 and in 2016, after another terrorist attack in Kashmir. The Indian government is under pressure to respond to a major security lapse in a troubled area where it has been encouraging tourism.

But Mr. Menon said the tit-for-tat between the two adversaries was unlikely to get out of hand.

"I'm not hugely worried," he said, "because they're both quite happy in a state of managed hostility."