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An Indian soldier, left, facing off with a Pakistani soldier during the daily flag-lowering ceremony at the Wagah-Attari border crossing on the India-Pakistan frontier.

Showcasing border tension

INDIA-PAKISTAN DISPATCH
ALONG THE INDIA-PAKISTAN BORDER

Nationalistic fervor on display where India and Pakistan meet

BY JEFFREY GETTLEMAN

Long before the action starts, the crowd starts building, thousands of people, from all walks of life, inexorably pulled toward each other from two different directions — children riding their fathers' shoulders, young mothers walking briskly beside them, older folks struggling to keep up.

Up ahead the loudspeakers roar.

"Are . . . You . . . Ready?"

Legs move faster. People stream past the machine gun pits and the men selling fresh, fragrant popcorn. But business isn't so good. No one wants to stop, no one wants to miss a second of what's about to unfold.

Every evening at the Wagah-Attari border crossing on the extremely militarized India-Pakistan frontier, a raw and remarkable scene comes to life, a homage to one of the most powerful forces on the planet today: nationalism.

Thousands of people from two existentially opposed countries pour into stadiums built on the border, just a few feet



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Indian crowds at the ceremony. Guards have to physically hold back hundreds of young women who are so fired up that they push against the border barricades.

from each other, and hold enormous pep rallies, side by side. The crowds are mirror images — drawn to each other, fed by each other — gathering every day not to cross the border, but to stare each other down.

"Long Live Pakistan!" they yell out on one side. "Long Live India!" they shout on the other.

The slogans aren't terribly original but the atmosphere is electric and at least a little ominous.

Nationalism needs an enemy, an other, and the two governments have built these concrete sanctuaries to stoke it.

As India-Pakistan relations sink once again, these evening ceremonies, which

have been going on for decades, are taking on an extra edge.

The tension peaks as the Indian border guards march toward the gates that separate the countries, and the Pakistani soldiers do the same. The crowds jump up. It's time for the stomp-off.

At the same moment, the Indian and Pakistani forces throw open their gates. Their tallest, most imposing soldiers strut forward. They stomp closer and closer to each other. But just when they are about to touch, they suddenly stop.

Separated by only a few feet, the soldiers face off, kick their legs high in the air and pound them violently down, mimicking each other's movements. The soldiers are even wearing the same kind of fan-shaped hats.

It's all obviously choreographed, which is almost hard to fathom, given that these two nations don't like each other, don't trust each other and can't cooperate on much else. Even last year, as India and Pakistan nearly went to war, the show went on.

India and Pakistan have been in a state of near war, or real war, for more than 70 consecutive years, their enmity a product of a very bloody exercise in division.

In 1947, the British rulers chopped the Indian subcontinent into two — a predominantly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India, setting off INDIA-PAKISTAN, PAGE 2

Showcasing tension on the India-Pakistan border

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enormous waves of displacement, bloodshed and lingering bitterness.

Last February, as part of their chronic feud over the disputed region of Kashmir, their warplanes bombed each other's territory, the first time two nuclear-armed powers had ever done that.

Since then, trade ties have been shelved and the governments routinely insult each other. Even the Friendship Express, a train that used to run between the two countries, has stopped.

The roots of the border ceremony date to the late 1940s, when the border was demarcated by Indian and Pakistani officers who had served in the same regiment in the colonial army. The two sides decided that each evening they would lower their flags at the same time.

Apparently, those military manners aren't totally dead; officers today said that as they perform the drill, the soldiers speak to each other through the gates "down to the second" to get the performance just right.

"The idea behind this is," explained N.K. Singh, a retired Indian border officer, "is that I understand you and you understand me. It's not a confrontation. It's a display of the best from both sides.

"And," he conceded, "this border is becoming a tourist spot."

As the crowds grow, they get rowdier. They often scream vulgarities and signal certain things with certain fingers.

On the Indian side, people shout and dance wildly. The guards patrolling the crowds have to physically hold back the hundreds of young women so fired up by the pulsing patriotic songs that they push their bodies against the barricades.



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On the Pakistan side, people clap along dutifully to a one-legged man, possibly a war veteran, hopping around with a flag. Men wear white skullcaps. Some women wear black veils. None dance.

"It looks like they're having more fun," admitted Zeeshan Rajput, a software engineer from Lahore, as he gazed at the Indian women 50 feet away but distant as a mirage.

The Pakistani stands are smaller — picture a high school stadium stuck in the towering shadow of a football arena — and the spirit seems more canned, a



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Pakistanis watching the daily flag-lowering ceremony from their side of the border with India. The Pakistani stands are smaller than those on the Indian side.

sign, perhaps, of how the two countries feel about themselves at this moment.

India is in the throes of a nationalist and populist surge, carefully primed by its Hindu nationalist government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Mr. Modi travels the world promoting India as a rising superpower. Back home, his government pushes policies that favor India's Hindu majority.

But Pakistan is in trouble. The economy is teetering on life support. The disasters are stacking up. Dozens of Pakistanis recently burned to death on a moving train and a thousand children were infected with H.I.V. from a doctor using dirty needles.

"Look at those people," snickered Saroj Kumar Sethi, an Indian machine operator, pointing toward the Pakistanis. "It's like they are ashamed of themselves."

India has historically done a better job at creating a sense of national unity, even across a much bigger and more diverse space.

One reason is Gandhi, who united the poorest of the poor to repel the British and liberate India.

But lately, many people fear, India's national unity is not as solid as it used to be. Mr. Modi's policies have alienated minorities, especially Muslims, provoking deadly protests.

The ritual showdowns along this border end peacefully. On recent visits, the guards shook hands. Then the flags were lowered and gates closed. The show was over, but the tensions are not.

In February, after Indian and Pakistani warplanes clashed, the public of the two countries reacted very differently. In India, the country's flag popped up everywhere and many people seemed more than ready to support a war.

But in Pakistan, people were scared. They stocked up on canned goods and iodine, which helps combat the effects of radiation. Their minds were seized by nuclear war.

"During February, I was really struck by Indians calling for war and I didn't know any Pakistanis at all calling for war," said Mohsin Hamid, a Pakistani novelist and author of the acclaimed book "Exit West."

He said that many Pakistanis, having seen so much bloodshed in their own country, have grown more suspicious of nationalism.

Last winter, Mr. Hamid took his family and some friends to the border ceremony, thinking it would be an interesting spectacle, some harmless fun.

But he was unnerved by the intolerance, the hatred and the vilification of the other that was so flamboyantly displayed.

"My kids were wondering, 'What the hell is this?'" he said. "I felt really creeped out by the whole thing."

Salman Masood contributed reporting from Islamabad, Pakistan. Hari Kumar and Suhasini Raj contributed from New Delhi, India.