

The way forward for India and Pakistan over Kashmir

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The bellicosity between India and Pakistan has subsided for now but the issues that have caused the trouble remain, keeping alive the fear of war between the two nuclear powers.

Both countries are in trouble. While there is mounting criticism of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his failure to address the unrest in Kashmir, Pakistan is isolated in the region. This was highlighted by the cancellation of the summit of South Asian leaders due to be hosted by Islamabad in November. The meeting had promised to be a rarity in a region that sees little internal trade or economic co-operation.

But India refused to attend the summit after militants in Kashmir – which has its territory split between Pakistan and India – last month killed 18 Indian soldiers at a military [base in Indian Kashmir](#), an attack for which it blamed Pakistan. Then everyone else also pulled out – Nepal, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. What shocked Pakistanis was that they all cited the country's harbouring of militant groups as a reason for cancelling.

Pakistan's opposition political parties and the liberal media are concerned at the damage being caused to the country's status internationally, but the government and army insist on spending their energy confronting India and claim China as an ally to repudiate allegations of isolation.

In India, Mr Modi is under fire for allowing religious and political polarisation to escalate and for refusing to talk to the Kashmiris, whose country has seen big demonstrations [against Indian rule](#) since July. More than 80 people have been killed and hundreds arrested by security forces.

Ten days after the attack on the military base and amid a warlike clamour from some parts of the media, New Delhi retaliated with what it claimed were "surgical strikes" across the border into Pakistan, hitting at Kashmiri groups. [Pakistan denied](#) there were any such strikes and humiliated its neighbour by taking journalists to the border and showing them that there had been only cross-border firing.

Perhaps remembering how war with Pakistan was narrowly averted in 2002 when New Delhi backed down after the US threatened to pull its citizens and businessmen from the country within 24 hours, India did not hit back again. It also fears an escalation of the friction could harm the economy, with its 7 per cent GDP growth rate and huge flow of foreign investment.

Pakistan is in a precarious situation on two fronts. On its western border the Afghan Taliban – whose leadership and logistics are based in Pakistan – are making huge advances in capturing Afghan territory. They have at least four provincial capitals and Pakistan [has been rebuked](#) not just by the Afghans and Indians, but by the international community for continuing to give them sanctuary.

The Pakistan army fears India making inroads into Afghanistan, fuelling the insurgency in Baluchistan province and leaving Pakistan trapped between Indian pincers. Last year, Islamabad promised to bring the Taliban to the table with the Afghan government but the talks collapsed. A peaceful Afghanistan would suit everyone, but Pakistan's leaders have yet to realise that.

On its eastern front in Punjab, Pakistan still harbours many militant groups that target India. Since a 2003 Islamabad pledge to contain these militants, the spate of attacks has decreased dramatically but some groups still breach the border. However, that does not mean Pakistan has prompted them to do so, despite India's belief.

There are many issues to be solved between the two neighbours but the main dispute is over Kashmir. On this, there is little meeting ground.

For Islamabad, it is an ideological issue – part of the two-nation theory that India should be divided along Hindu-Muslim lines and that Muslim-majority Kashmir is a legacy from partition in 1947 that needs to be solved for Pakistani nationhood to be complete.

For Indians, the Kashmir issue is also ideological but it is mainly territorial. Many feel their country has already been dismembered by partition and are determined to cede no more. India refuses to give up territory to its enemy, and nor will it grant autonomy or independence to the Kashmiris.

The danger of war between the India and Pakistan is prompted primarily by the threat of terrorism and militants. Islamabad needs

to quell this by dealing with all its militants – not just the domestic ones who attack the country’s army.

India should respond positively to any such Pakistani gesture, and engage in talks with its Kashmiris. This is the first Indian government to refuse dialogue with its Kashmiri population.

If the Kashmiris see enough hope in such an opening to quieten the unrest – even if real concessions are remote – that will do much to reduce tensions between the two states. With the heat taken out of the Kashmir situation, other issues could be resolved and maybe a live-and-let-live attitude could replace violence and threats.

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