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India and Pakistan trade barbs over Kashmir

Amy Kazmin in New Delhi



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Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, during his independence day speech

Narendra Modi lashed out at Pakistan on Monday for “glorifying violence” and expressed support for disgruntled residents of troubled Pakistani regions, amid a spike in tensions between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

The Indian prime minister’s comments are the latest salvo in a fierce war of words between New Delhi and Islamabad over Kashmir. Tension erupted last month along with violent protests in the Muslim-majority Indian province where 44,000 civilians, insurgents and troops have been killed since a separatist insurgency started in 1988.

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The mention of restive Pakistani regions also reflects New Delhi's growing unease over Chinese plans for \$46bn worth of infrastructure projects in Pakistan, including in disputed parts of Kashmir now held by Islamabad but which India claims as its own.

Indian-administered Kashmir has been under a protracted curfew for weeks, as security forces respond to violent clashes that have killed 58 people and left scores of young Kashmiris blinded by Indian pellet guns.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif declared last month that he was waiting for the day when all of Kashmir — over which India and Pakistan have fought four wars, most recently in 1999 — would be part of Pakistan. Sushma Swaraj, India's foreign minister, slammed the comment, insisting the "dream of 'Kashmir becoming Pakistan' will not be realised even at the end of eternity".

As India and Pakistan — born when Britain ended its rule of the subcontinent 69 years ago — marked their respective independence days, Kashmiri unrest overshadowed the proceedings.

Mamnoon Hussain, Pakistan's president, said in a speech that "Pakistan cannot forget the Kashmiris on this occasion, and will continue supporting them for their just struggle to self-determination".

But speaking at New Delhi's Red Fort afterwards, Mr Modi issued a thinly veiled warning to Islamabad not to meddle in Kashmir and referred to popular discontent in Pakistan's own troubled Baluchistan and Gilgit-Baltistan provinces.

These regions are all due to host huge infrastructure projects as part of China's ambitious "One Belt, One Road" project, which aims to give China direct access to the Arabian Sea. But Baluchistan, where the Chinese-built Gwadar Port is located, has a long-running separatist movement, while in Gilgit there have been large protests recently against Pakistan's security forces.

Ashutosh Varshney, director of the Centre for Contemporary South Asian Studies at Brown University, said Mr Modi's public citation of the troubled Pakistani regions was "a huge stiffening of rhetoric against Pakistan — entirely novel".

At an all-party meeting to discuss Kashmir last week, Mr Modi warned that Pakistan — which India accuses of fomenting the violence in Kashmir — would be forced to answer human rights violations in its own troubled territories if it tried to make political capital out of the Kashmir crisis.

In the presence of New Delhi's assembled foreign diplomatic corps on Monday, the Indian prime minister claimed he had received an overwhelming response to his words from disgruntled Pakistanis.

"The people of Baluchistan, the people of Gilgit, the people of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir have thanked me in such a manner, from places that I have never been and never had a chance to meet,

they have sent wishes to the people of India and thanked us,” Mr Modi said. “I am grateful to them.”

Ashok Malik, a fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, said the comments suggest New Delhi was preparing for protracted difficulties in Kashmir. But he said the words were also likely to reverberate to Beijing. “It’s also a bit of a message to China that we aren’t going to take [Chinese infrastructure plans] lying down,” he said.

Additional reporting by Farhan Bokhari in Islamabad and Jyotsna Singh in Delhi

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