

Merchants of devastation - Pulwama and the danger of war in South Asia

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Ever since the bloody partition of the South Asian sub-continent in 1947, the endless history of hostility between India and Pakistan has been a curse for the oppressed masses. Periodically, either one of the two regimes turns this mutual hostility into episodes of acute confrontation — mainly in the interests of continuing domestic politics by other means. The latest incursion into mainland Pakistan and the bombing at Balakot by IAF fighter bombers after the Pulwama terrorist attack, and the subsequent shooting down of two Indian jetfighters by the Pakistan Air force, have heightened the danger of a full-scale war between the subcontinent's two nuclear-armed states. This military escalation has exacerbated a mad rush by the belligerent media on both sides of the Radcliff Line to bring about a scenario described by some as 'MAD' - the "Mutually Assured Destruction" syndrome. However there is some method in this madness.

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Sidhart Bhatia wrote on the role of the Indian media in *The Wire*, "When the history of these times is finally written, the media's reprehensible role in creating a climate of hate will merit a special mention...the nightly screaming about the nation, patriotism and Pakistan and the constant hate mongering against 'traitors' was done with an eye on the numbers. In a difficult environment, where channels found it difficult to make money, every trick in the book was legitimate. The audiences were manipulated into wanting it and the channels gave it to them, ensuring viewer sickness - it made business sense." In the Pakistani media the modus operandi was perhaps a little different, but the intent was just the same.

According to Vipin Narang, professor of political science at MIT, "neither side seems to want a war. They have had their 'Cuban Missile Crisis' moment and recognise how a couple of wrong turns could set off uncontrollable escalation". In this gimmickry of war and peace negotiations, the Modi regime's prime concern is the vulnerability of the BJP at the coming elections. In sheer desperation, it is trying to arouse the hysteria of Hindutva chauvinism, exacerbating anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistani hatred to inflame mass bigotry and thus secure electoral victory. Despite the pressures from imperialism, international finance capital and the Indian bourgeoisie, Modi wants to keep a sub-threshold state of near-war to linger on. For instance, just moments after the announcement of the release of the captured Indian pilot, Modi responded with a sarcastic broadside against Pakistan, saying: "A pilot project has been completed; now we have to make it real." While his supporters applauded, most observers found the comment arrogant and crude. Modi is acutely keen to keep militaristic jingoism simmering as a means of luring voters into the BJP camp. Perhaps Modi seems to harbour the misconception that he can continue toying with xenophobia without risking a full-fledged war.

The 'moderate' reaction of the ruling circles in Pakistan has been somewhat more restrained. Imran Khan's gestures of peace and his warnings of the danger of Armageddon have more to do with Pakistan's crumbling economy and the instability that ravages the state. He is desperate to avoid letting the conflict go beyond the brink, something that could bring down his short-lived government and bring Pakistan's mounting crisis to disaster.

For long years now, the spymasters of Pakistan and India have maintained the pretence that they don't really sponsor terror groups carrying out subversive activities in each other's vulnerable regions. In fact, the Indian deep state wants to destabilise Pakistan by interfering in Baluchistan and other vulnerable regions where the Pakistani state has been rocked by chronic dissent and at times episodes of armed struggle by local nationalist movements. Likewise, Pakistan's deep state has the long-term aim of wrenching Muslim-majority Kashmir from India. In the past three decades jihadist groups based in Pakistan have struck targets in India, but the Pakistani state has been conveniently ambivalent in punishing them. In this conflict between the subcontinental rivals as in many others around the world, war by proxy has become a new norm.

The irony is that both states pose to end the plight and bring prosperity for the Kashmiri masses; it's the oppressed Kashmiris that suffer most on both sides of the LoC. In the Indian-occupied Kashmir, the viciously oppressed population has risen up against its oppression at the hands of India's army, the largest deployment of military personnel against a civilian population in the world. The deprivation, religious discrimination and brutality of BJP rule have provoked a revolt that has rocked the might of the Indian state. One of the main causes of the revolt since 2016 has been the unemployment and deprivation under the Indian occupation. Yet across the LoC in the Pakistan administered Kashmir, according to a government's Bureau of Statistics report released on March 02, 2019, unemployment rate in 2017-18 was 10.3 percent almost double to that of 5.8 percent in rest of Pakistan.

It's a shocking fact that the Indian and Pakistani governments are the world's top spenders on armaments and among its lowest spenders on health, education and social welfare. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), in 2018 India allocated four trillion rupees (\$58bn) - 2.1 per cent of its gross domestic product - to finance its 1.4 million active troops. Similarly, last year Pakistan spent 1.26 trillion Pakistani rupees (\$11bn) - about 3.6 per cent of its GDP - on its 653,800 troops. The two nuclear adversaries have ballistic missiles capable of delivering these weapons of mass destruction. Achin Viniak in his epic work *After The Bomb* estimates that the costs of the two countries' nuclear programmes would, if spent on social development, have largely eradicated women's deaths during obstetrics, infant mortality and child illiteracy.

To perpetuate their rule, the subcontinent's elites have used the Kashmir time-bomb that was left behind by the British imperialists to keep the region unstable. And yet successive wars between India and Pakistan have miserably failed to resolve the conflict. All negotiations have failed. Individual armed attacks, sans movements, have only furnished the occupying army with an alibi to perpetuate its tyranny and oppression.

For the last seventy years, the world's superpowers and their subservient institutions such as the United Nations have failed to grant the Kashmiri masses any respite. In a startling confession, the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres publicly washed his hands of any responsibility to promote a dialogue between India and Pakistan that would pave the way for the resolution of the Kashmir conflict. On January 18th he said: "I've been offering my good offices in relation to the dialogue between the two countries that, until now, had no conditions of success." It's only mass uprisings by the Kashmiri people that have shaken the occupation forces. The militant movement that started in 2016 defied India's 750,000 troops and even won support from Indian students,

workers, academics and left political activists.

Most world powers have their economic and diplomatic interests aligned to a larger India, in terms of markets and potential for exploitation. Even Pakistan's dearest friend China has partially supported the Indian narrative. On 27th February, without referring to the Indian Air Force's cross-border strikes in Balakot on the previous day, China's foreign minister Wang Yi said that it was "especially important to eradicate the breeding grounds of terrorism and extremism".

Arundhati Roy wrote on the recent escalation of the conflict: "The country might be poised on the edge of a war with Pakistan or more likely against the people of Kashmir...the Modi government was making moves to push the country into a war-like situation to make the people forget the myriad oppressions the current regime had inflicted on them. The Modi government had promised to create two crore jobs every year. But unemployment was skyrocketing. One per cent of rich Indians had wealth equivalent to the combined wealth of 71% of the population."

By exacerbating the economic and social onslaught by India's coercive capitalism upon the masses, the Modi regime has aggravated a greater mass resentment. The world's so-called "largest democracy" has the largest concentration of poverty in the world. Wars and conflicts are systematically used to obscure the working people's revulsion and their growing revolt against the system. In such frenzied periods of aggravated hostility the bosses inflict further attacks on the living standards of the working class.

If the rulers of India have exploited the tension of this military confrontation to attack the ordinary people, so too their Pakistani counterparts have also not been lagging. Just during these two weeks of these sharpened hostilities, they have drastically increased the prices of petroleum products, gas and electricity. The inflation rate has shot up to a record 8.2 per cent. Once again the economic costs of this war hysteria will be laid upon the shoulders of the ordinary people of the two countries.

Despite his Hindutva chauvinist hysteria, Modi might still end up losing the election. But the threat of war and devastation for the almost two billion inhabitants of south Asia will linger on. Without this state of enmity and hatred, the rule of the elites would be precarious. There would be no justification for the massive military arsenals and expenditures of both sides. Hence the region's elite and the top brass have a vital stake in maintaining this mutual hostility. At the same time, the imperialists and their military-industrial complexes extort huge profits from their arms sales to India and Pakistan. However, their heavy investments in these countries that extract billions from the sweat and blood of the region's workers and resources are also put at risk by the threat of an actual all-out war. It's one thing to start a war, but something totally different to contain once it unravels.

History is witness to the fact that from the wombs of wars often arise revolutions. The First World War was brought to an end by a chain of mutinies and uprisings culminating in the Russian revolution. The aftermath of the Second World War saw the revolutionary uprisings throughout Asia, Europe and beyond. The Chinese revolution of 1949 was perhaps the second greatest event in history. In the united India of that time, the revolution of 1946 spearheaded by the sailors of the Royal Indian Navy could easily have changed the course of world history. The Indo-Pak war of 1965 was followed by the eruption of the 1968-69 revolution in Pakistan, and even after her victory in the 1971 war Indira Gandhi was later overthrown by an upsurge of the Indian masses.

Serious experts of the ruling classes are worried at the prospect of such outcomes; hence they try to avoid wars. But the social and economic turbulence that arises from the crisis of their rotting capitalist system forces the ruling class to maintain warlike conditions to divert the class struggle and forestall the danger of revolution. This dilemma of the ruling classes is an inevitable outcome of their obsolete system. Hence, to expect any profound or lasting peace within the confines of the

present system would be a delusion and its propagation a deception.

Lenin wrote on May 14, 1917: "All wars are inseparable from the political systems that engender them. The policy which a given state, a given class within that state, pursued for a long time before the war is inevitably continued by that same class during the war, the form of action alone being changed... Nothing but a workers' revolution in several countries can defeat this war. The war is not a game, it is an appalling thing taking toll of millions of lives, and it is not to be ended easily."

The current hysteria can backfire sooner rather than later. The misery, deprivation, bloodshed and poverty perpetuated by this system after seventy years of so-called independence has left the masses in agony and rage. There is a seething revolt against this system below the surface. The ruling classes cannot crush the working classes under this millstone of bigoted frenzy, loathing and wars. Paradoxically these could boomerang into the eruption of a mass movement with the class war coming to the forefront throughout the subcontinent. In such conditions the nationalistic and religious hatreds will be swept asunder once the masses arise in revolt on the basis of class unity. A victorious socialist revolution will not only change the socio-economic system and the character of the state; it will also transform geographical impositions and the course of history— uniting the oppressed of the whole region into a socialist federation of South Asia.

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