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# Walk Softly in Nuclear South Asia

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## Recommended Citation

Zia Mian, "Walk Softly in Nuclear South Asia", Special Policy Forum 9/11, November 09, 2001, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/special-policy-forum-911/walk-softly-in-nuclear-south-asia/>

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November 9, 2001

By Zia Mian

## I. Introduction

This essay is by Dr. Zia Mian who currently researches South Asian security issues for the Program on Science and Global Security at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University. He has taught at Princeton, Yale, and Quaid-i-Azam University (Islamabad, Pakistan). In his Essay, Dr. Mian stresses the importance of US delicacy in its handling of the current campaign in Afghanistan and offers a set of broad policy recommendations aimed at protecting against the destabilization of Pakistan and the South Asia region.

## II. Essay By Zia Mian

"Walk Softly in Nuclear South Asia"

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Before September 11, South Asia's problems were legion: over a billion people, most of them desperately poor; a history of war and violent conflicts; rising religious militancy; hard-line Hindu nationalists in power in India, the army in charge in Pakistan; newly tested nuclear weapons and a get-tough mood. Now, it is also the frontline of the US war against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. South Asia may not be able to take the strain. The US needs to ensure it does nothing to worsen the many crises in South Asia and that it thinks long-term, not short term, about its policies in the region.

The greatest concern is Pakistan. General Pervez Musharraf justified the October 1999 coup that brought him to power by citing the prevailing sense that Pakistan's economy, government, and society were on the verge of collapse. The fall has been swift; about one in three Pakistanis now live below the poverty line, double what it was a decade ago. There have been eight governments in this time. All of them have become wary of setting-off the widespread public resentment and anger at the hopelessness of everyday life. They have struggled to not provide political opportunities to the radical Islamist groups that have emerged and feed off the misery. Too often, they chose to make concessions to radical Islam. The military is in the same fix.

The US bombing campaign against Afghanistan in response to the terrible attacks of September 11

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has opened wide the door for Islamist groups, with their history of anti-Americanism and strong ties to the Taliban. They have taken to the streets challenging Musharraf and his decision to support the U.S. The longer the U.S. bombs Afghanistan, the more civilians get killed, the greater the humanitarian and refugee crisis, and the more organized and angry the Islamists' challenge. Musharraf and the army may hold the line, but the Islamists will come out politically strengthened. Musharraf may win this battle but lose the war.

The US should heed the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and suspend its bombing campaign to allow relief supplies to reach the more than seven million Afghans in direst need. Calling in the UN Secretary-General and newest Nobel Peace Prize winner, Kofi Annan, showing him the evidence and asking him to mediate with the Taliban for a hand-over of Osama bin Laden for trial would acknowledge the vital role of the UN. Both would strengthen the hand of Pakistan's government against the militants.

Pakistan is also trapped by its conflict with India. Reflecting the intensity and depth of this battle, India and Pakistan have each sought to take advantage of the situation after September 11. India immediately offered political and military support to the United States in its conflict with the Taliban and urged it to include Pakistani-supported Islamic militants fighting in Kashmir as targets of the US assault on terrorism. Pakistan, under enormous pressure from the US, eventually decided to turn a liability into an asset and sought to cash in on its location and its leverage over the Taliban.

Seeing Pakistan win the US over to its side, and with the militants continuing their attacks in Kashmir, India is now trying another more dangerous gambit. It has threatened to follow the US example and attack militant training camps and bases in Pakistan. In an ominous development, India has ended a 10-month long effective cease-fire and started shelling Pakistani forces across the border that divides Kashmir.

The US must press Pakistan to end its support for the militants, restrain India from actions that may trigger a South Asian war, and get serious in working with the international community to resolve the more than fifty year old Kashmir dispute. For this effort to be taken seriously, the US must show by word and deed that unilateral military action is not the order of the day.

A longer term danger is that of nuclear weapons in South Asia. The May 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan put the world on watch. The US and the international community used sanctions to pressure both countries to exercise restraint, and to signal a refusal to accept new nuclear weapons states. But, in its search for support in the region, the Bush administration has let go the already waning US hopes to reverse the nuclearization of South Asia. The US is lifting all its sanctions against India, most if not (yet) all sanctions against Pakistan, and economic and military assistance is being offered to both.

India and Pakistan may return with renewed vigour to their conventional and nuclear arms race. India seeks US arms to add to its \$4 billion arms deal with Russia and \$2 billion deal with Israel. Pakistan's limited funds have stalled its military purchases. With the army in charge, any resources freed by a blanket lifting of sanctions may go to catching up with India. With political and economic pressures eased, both sides may speed deployment of their nuclear warheads. South Asia may escape the frying pan of terrorism only to fall into the nuclear fire.

Also long term is democracy. General Musharraf's new status as ally in the war against Afghanistan and the man most likely to hold Pakistan together may lead to the lifting of the US sanctions levied after his coup. But, concern about Pakistan's stability should not translate into abandoning democracy and Musharraf should not be allowed or encouraged to stay in power. The two previous Pakistani generals who seized power each kept it for the better part of a decade. Civil society

withered both times.

Musharraf should hold to his promise of elections and restoring democracy by next October. Elections may be just what it takes to mobilise the majority of Pakistanis in the battle against radical Islam. Whenever they have been allowed to choose who should govern them in the past, Pakistanis have decisively rejected Islamic political parties. They would do so again now. The small crowds on the streets supporting the Islamist groups are testament to that. Ten years without democracy may change their minds.

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