Kashmir's Nuclear Shadow

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Over a million soldiers stand across each other along the 1000-mile long border between India and Pakistan; "eye-ball to eye-ball" as the South Asian press calls it. Thousands of villagers in border areas have fled their home; others are suffering periodic mortar and artillery fire. Pakistan has reportedly mobilized its nuclear capable surface-to-surface missiles; India is moving its troops around in a threatening manner. There is obsessive talk of war in India and endless repetition that "we will respond with full force" in Pakistan. Kashmir, once again, is at the center stage of the current war dance. India accuses Pakistan of sending terrorists into Kashmir; Pakistan, predictably, denies the charges. Another day in messy South Asia? No, it is far worse.

Two factors make the current crisis in South Asia much more dangerous than previous tense stand-offs between the two countries. First, the religious fundamentalists on both sides of the border would, as always, like to see a war. They now, unfortunately, may have the chance to fulfill their desire. For more than twenty years successive Pakistani governments, including the current one, created, cultivated, recruited and supported extreme, violent and armed Islamic fundamentalist forces that includes both the Taliban and a variety of jihadi (holy warriors) groups. The idea was to add 'strategic depth' to Pakistan's borders by installing the Taliban in Kabul while bleeding India by sending in armed jihadis to conduct military operations in Kashmir. The Kargil war of 1999 between India and Pakistan and the rout of the Taliban from Afghanistan shows the spectacular bankruptcy of both policies.

Since September 11th, 2001, under pressure from the United States, Pakistan's President Musharraf has been trying, with questionable success, to control these jihadi groups. Abandoned by their mentors, experiencing the shrinking of political space to propagate their vision of a theocratic state, these groups need a war to survive and flourish. An India-Pakistan war translates easily into a war between Hindus and Muslims. These groups have the organization and the capacity to create great trouble in Kashmir even without support from Pakistan. The recent killing of over 30 civilian family members of Indian army personnel indicates that these groups are trying hard to ignite a war.

The situation in India is no better. Prime Minister Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) recently suffered significant political set backs in state elections. The Indian government has also been under intense criticism for it's handling of the killing of hundreds, if not thousands, of Muslims by Hindu fundamentalists. The BJP and the Hindu fundamentalist groups like Vishwa Hindu

Parishad (VHP) have close links. It is unlikely that the BJP led government can satisfy the loud demands made by both the Indian media and opposition parties that the people responsible for the massacres in Gujarat, including the Chief Minister of Gujarat Mr. Modi, be brought to justice. A war with Pakistan will help relieve some of the political pressure on the BJP. A war will also expand the political space for Hindu fundamentalists to promote their visions of a Hindu India.

Second, the U.S.-led war on terrorism has created an international environment in which many countries feel emboldened to pursue their agendas through violent, military means. Ironically, the war on terrorism has both undercut the United States' authority and limited its foreign policy options. The ever-present refrain from Indian political leaders and sections of the Indian media is that the United States must support, not stop, India from waging its war against terrorism, even if it involves Indian military excursions into Pakistan. The presence of U.S. forces in Pakistan has made anti-American sentiments in the country stronger, making it more difficult and dangerous for Musharraf to control or confront militant Islamic groups without appearing to be the U.S. lackey.

It is likely that saner voices in South Asia coupled with significant international pressure will prevent India and Pakistan from sliding into a full-scale war. But there will always be a next time until the Kashmir dispute is resolved.

Left to their own devices, India and Pakistan will continue to engage in a now-slow now-fast war dance. India will continue to claim that Kashmir is India's "internal affair", and Pakistan will keep stating that whether Kashmir belongs to India or Pakistan must be decided by a plebiscite originally envisaged by a UN Security Council resolution of 53 years ago. Kashmir and Kashmiris will continue to suffer. After half a decade of oppressive Indian administration and cynical manipulations by the Pakistan government there is a strong Kashmiri aspiration for azadi - freedom. The world must make a collective commitment to finding a just and durable resolution of the dispute that fulfills the legitimate concerns of both India and Pakistan, while also satisfying the aspirations of the Kashmiri people. Only a resolution that flows from one simple principle- that the ultimate arbiters of the Kashmiri dispute are the 13 million people of Kashmir- will have a chance of success.

The price for ignoring the Kashmir dispute will be high. In every 'war-game' conducted by the US government, a war between India and Pakistan has always ended in a nuclear holocaust.

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