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How India and Pakistan arrived at a nuclear standoff

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INDIA AND PAKISTAN STAND ONCE AGAIN ON THE BRINK of war. The moment is a precarious one and the stakes are high, not just for the region but potentially for the world. The United States has burgeoning interests in the subcontinent since the war in Afghanistan, and renewed Indo-Pakistani conflict could divert needed resources from the effort to stamp out terrorism. Incautious statements from both Indian and Pakistani leaders have also raised fears that a nuclear exchange may be in the offing. The consequences would be far-reaching and devastating. Nonetheless, only three years after their last confrontation prompted frantic U.S. diplomatic overtures and direct personal intervention by President Bill Clinton, these two nuclear-armed adversaries have, since the beginning of this year, been staring each other down across their shared border.

The trigger for the current crisis was an incident last December, when operatives of two Pakistan-based insurgent groups attacked the Indian parliament. Security guards managed to keep the terrorists away from legislators, but in the shootout that followed, six Indians were killed along with the five attackers. Pakistan's president, General Pervez Musharraf, condemned the attack, but his principal military spokesman suggested that India had assaulted its own parliament in an effort to implicate Pakistan. Under intense pressure from India and the United States, Musharraf banned the two groups responsible for the attacks and promised to squelch the activities of other terrorists operating from inside Pakistan. He refused, however, to hand over 20 individuals whom the Indian government accuses of involvement in a range of terrorist activities on Indian soil. In the intervening months, it turns out, Musharraf has also failed to end his country's support for terrorism in Kashmir, even while he has supported the U.S. effort to root out al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters along his western border with Afghanistan.

Indeed, although he initially cracked down on several of Pakistan's militant Islamic organizations, Musharraf looked the other way when the groups' members resumed activities under new Dames. In response, India has adopted a strategy of coercive diplomacy, massing close to half a million troops along the India-Pakistan border and the so-called Line of Control that divides the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. India's leaders have made clear that for New Delhi to reverse the military build-up, the infiltration of terrorists from Pakistan into India must end.

Indo-Pakistani relations have a long and troubled history, of which the current crisis is merely the latest chapter. Since both independent states emerged from the detritus of the British empire in 1947, they have fought four wars (1947-48, 1965, 1971, and 1999). Their

most intractable conflict is the one over Kashmir, the mostly Muslim state whose Hindu ruler chose to join his lands to India in 1947. Pakistan contested that arrangement and invaded the territory, touching off the first Indo-Pakistani war. By the end, Pakistan controlled about one-third of Kashmir. The status of the state has remained unresolved ever since.

The Indo-Pakistani conflict lay mostly dormant for several decades. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Indian government sought to win the hearts and minds of the Kashmiris by investing in education, mass media, and social welfare. Yet at the same time, the authorities engaged in considerable political chicanery, as they attempted to prevent a secessionist elite from taking power through the electoral process. By 1989, these policies, combined with fundamental social changes within Indian controlled Kashmir, had helped spark an ethno-religious insurgency in the fabled Kashmir Valley.

Pakistan's political and military leadership saw a vital opportunity in Kashmir's brimming reservoir of discontent with Indian misrule. Over the next several years, Pakistan's military intelligence organization, the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency, provided Kashmiri rebels with military training, logistical support, and physical sanctuaries. The Pakistani authorities also brought in disaffected Afghans, radical Arabs, and Pakistani jihadists, support and extend the uprising. By the Mid-1990s, a spontaneous and largely disorganized uprising had been transformed into a well-orchestrated insurgency. The principal local insurgent organization, the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), found itself caught in a vicious vise: It faced relentless military pressure from the Indian security forces at the same time as it suffered routine depredations at the hands of Pakistan-sponsored militant Islamic organizations. By the mid-1990s, the JKLF had eschewed violence as a political strategy for fear of being destroyed on the battlefield.

As Pakistan-sponsored, non-indigenous groups came to dominate the insurgency, Kashmiri support for it subsided. That moment was not lost on New Delhi, which conducted a successful election for the state's legislature in 1996. An unprecedented number of Kashmiris turned out to vote, and foreign and domestic observers concluded that the election was mostly free of fraud. Many Kashmiris greeted the emergence of a popularly elected government with considerable optimism: After more than half a decade of political turmoil and civil violence, perhaps some modicum of law and order might soon return to their disputed state. Indeed, by the late 1990s, the insurgency was clearly fading.

But when both India and Pakistan tested nuclear devices in May 1998, Kashmir would feel the aftershocks. The hawkish Indian home minister, L. K. Advani, cavalierly announced that Pakistan's ability to foment mischief in Kashmir was now effectively constrained. That statement, designed to instill fear in the minds of risk-prone Pakistani decision makers, revealed Advani's myopic understanding of the strategic significance—as well as the military

limitations-of nuclear weapons. For although nuclear weapons could dramatically reduce the likelihood of full-scale war, they could also create permissive conditions for more low-level conflict a situation that political science scholars refer to as the "stability-instability paradox."

Between May and June of 1999, the subcontinent saw the first test of this paradox. During the preceding winter, units of Pakistan's Northern Light Infantry had penetrated Indian territory in a successful surprise attack at three points along the Line of Control. The waning of Kashmir's insurgency had led India's military circles to grow complacent and vulnerable. On the Pakistani side, tensions between the civilian regime of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the military had made reviving the flagging insurgency politically attractive. Moreover, Pakistani decision makers surmised that given the nuclear risks, their Indian counterparts would be loath to punish Pakistan by expanding the scope of the conflict. They were right: Out of fear of nuclear escalation, India kept the conflict confined to the areas of incursion. Ultimately, significant Indian military pressure, combined with forceful U.S. intercession, persuaded Sharif to withdraw his troops in late July 1999.

That debacle proved fatal for Sharif Three months later, Musharraf, the chief of army staff and the architect of the incursion, seized power in a bloodless coup. A renewed burst of Pakistani support for the Islamic militants soon followed, Terrorist attacks increasingly expanded outside the Kashmir Valley to neighboring regions of India, as the December attack on the parliament building in New Delhi so brazenly demonstrated.

Last month, India's frustrations with Musharraf's regime reached their apex after a May 14 terrorist attack killed 34 Indians, including a number of wives and children of military personnel in the Kashmiri city of Jammu. Within days, militants also killed Abdul Ghani Lone, a 70-year-old moderate Kashmiri separatist leader who had indicated a willingness to begin talks with New Delhi. Musharraf publicly condemned these attacks while also insinuating that both episodes were the handiwork of al-Qaeda forces. But despite the strong urging of the United States and other Western powers, the Pakistani military leadership has evinced little willingness to curb the terror emanating from its lands. India's prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, has consequently assumed a more bellicose posture.

Pakistan's persistent dissembling on the question of military support to territories, and India's growing impatience and belligerence, have stoked fears of a conventional war between these two long-standing foes. Concern that any war between India and Pakistan could escalate to the nuclear level has prompted calls for restraint from all corners of the world. Rightly so: A nuclear war in South Asia would produce horrific human loss and a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented magnitude. It would also breach the unspoken post-Nagasaki taboo on the use of nuclear weapons. The rupture of this fire wall would make the world a fat, far more dangerous place.

War between India and Pakistan would also hobble the U.S.-led effort to eviscerate the remnants of al-Qaeda and Taliban forces, many of whom have taken refuge in the poorly administered, trackless reaches of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. As Pakistan's army gets increasingly drawn into a conflict with India, its ability to cooperate with the United States will inevitably dissipate. Meanwhile, the United States may find itself in the singularly unenviable position of having to choose between an uncertain but necessary ally, Pakistan, and a long-term potential strategic partner and democracy, India.

The most immediate interest of the United States, clearly, is to forestall and ideally prevent another war between India and Pakistan. In all likelihood, U.S. pressure on both capitals will lead the two states to step away from the brink. Then the United States must do two things: It must forcefully persuade Pakistan to eschew support for the Islamic militants in Kashmir and simultaneously convince India that a lasting peace can emerge only if the genuine grievances of the Muslim population in the Kashmir Valley are adequately addressed. Adopting these two negotiating principles will be neither easy nor painless. But for India and Pakistan, there is no other path away from the precipice.

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