

Kashmir: Nuclear Flash Point?

India and Pakistan are locked in an escalating game of chicken.

Sialkot: Pakistan Army has repulsed two Indian attacks across the working boundary along Chirar sector, inflicting huge losses on the aggressor. The Indian Border Security Force launched an unprovoked offense against Pakistan on Saturday night. The attack was effectively repulsed by Chenab Rangers making the infiltrators to flee after inflicting heavy losses on them. Later the Indian army launched another offensive on Sunday afternoon, which was also repulsed.

— January report in a Pakistani newspaper

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Special to the Tribune

Recent episodes of the NBC television show "The West Wing" featured a fictional American president heading off a nuclear war between India and Pakistan when the Indian army crossed the Kashmir border.

During a recent trip to Pakistan, I encountered people who were impressed with the accuracy with which the situation was portrayed. That war is possible here is based on the fact that these countries have already gone to war with each other three times. This, of course, was before they developed nuclear weapons.

The flash point for the next use of nuclear weapons, if it comes, could be Kashmir, on the border between Pakistan and India

I was in Pakistan in January as part of a three-member team from the International Center for Psychosocial Trauma. Our director, Arshad Husain, a child psychiatrist at the University of Missouri School of Medicine, Venetta Whitaker of the MU College of Education and I were there to run training programs in trauma psychology. In Karachi, at Aga Khan University, 65 physicians and psychologists attended our workshop, and in Lahore we had 100 psychiatrists, psychologists and police administrators attend our program on serial killers. We also spent a few days in Islamabad, the country's capital, and met with professionals there.

The people we met were concerned with the traumatic effect of the situation in Kashmir on the people living there. Their concern was supported by the daily reports in the papers about armed conflict in the area.

Our team has been asked to return to run programs on trauma psychology for the mental health workers and teachers in the part of Kashmir held by Pakistan. There were also feelers for us to go to Indian-held Kashmir to work with traumatized children.

The Kashmir problem

Kashmir, often referred to as the Switzerland of the East, is a green-mountain area on the north of Pakistan. At the time of partition from India in 1947, all Muslim-majority areas were to become part of Pakistan. It was expected that Kashmir, with 12 million people and 70 percent Muslim majority, would become part of Pakistan. As the result of some political maneuvers, led by the Kashmir-born Pandit Nehru, the first prime minister of India, it did not become part of Pakistan. Now, one third of the area is administered by Pakistan and two thirds is under the control of what the majority of the inhabitants view as an occupying Indian army of 700,000 troops.

The U.S. Department of State and Amnesty International have recorded such human rights violations by the Indian army as suppression of freedom of speech and press, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, rape and political killings.

In Lahore, Pakistan, large banners in English hang over major roadways protesting the treatment of Muslims in Kashmir by the Indian army. They ask why the United Nations and the United States don't give that situation the same consideration they gave Bosnia and Kosovo. The daily papers emphasize the aggression of the Indian army and carry headlines such as "India suffers heavy losses: Two Pakistani soldiers embrace shahadat: Appropriate measures taken after repulsing enemy attack."

The main fear is that if these border attacks escalate into a battlefield war and one side takes a large toll in casualties, it might decide to use tactical nuclear weapons. At that point everything could spiral out of control.

Brinkmanship

If these were two small nations that didn't have atomic weapons, one could pass mutual aggression off as not important to U.S. welfare. But this happens to be two major countries each with nuclear arms and each convinced of the rightness of its stance. Pakistan, with 160 million people, and India, with 900 million, both have major support from other countries, which complicates the issue. Pakistan and India have China on their northern borders, and if open warfare erupts, China will likely side with Pakistan. India has been cozy with Russia in the past and could expect some support from that quarter.

Pakistanis see themselves as friends of the United States and believe they have stood behind us in the past and expect us to stand by them now. A recent front-page headline in an Islamabad paper reported, "Congressmen urge Clinton to declare war against India for Kashmir." This was a bit of wishful thinking on the editor's part since the actual request of the congressmen was for President Bill Clinton to declare a nonviolent and diplomatic war against India to internationalize the Kashmir dispute and to free the Kashmiri people from the clutches of the Indian regime.

The Indians, on the other hand, believe Kashmir is theirs by right of historical occupation, and they are unwilling to give away any more of their territory. In fact, they feel mistreated having had to give up a part of their country to create Pakistan in 1947.

After all, they say, Muslims were interlopers and invaders and not the original owners. Pakistan was artificially cut out of what was historically India.

No one I met believed that having both parties talk about the issues would do any good. Each party is convinced of the rightness of its position and that the basis of the conflict lies with the bad behavior of the other party. Pakistanis are incensed at the brutality shown by the Indians to the resident Muslims in India's part of Kashmir. The Indians are equally convinced that the problem lies with Pakistan's support of "terrorists and insurgents" on their territory. The Pakistanis call the same individuals "Freedom Fighters."

While I was there, I heard the accusations fly back and forth as to who is responsible for the problems. For example, representatives of each country accused the other of having done things to encourage or to help the hijackers in the recent situation where several jailed terrorists were released and the hijackers disappeared into the crowd.

Stephen Cohen, director of South Asia programs at the Brookings Institute, believes that both India and Pakistan are engaged in a childish game of chicken. One of the problems is that Pakistanis would like to see U.S. intervention, and this gives them an incentive to create a crisis.

Whatever the reason, it is clear that each country is willing to back up its position with the loss of blood. Although the statistics are a bit vague, between 30,000 and 50,000 people have lost their lives in the area in the past 10 years.

Pakistan's new leader

The tension of the situation in Kashmir is not relieved by the introduction of new leadership. On Oct. 12, 1999, Gen. Pervaiz Musharraf seized power in a coup that ousted the country's democratically elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Sharif had been working on the problem of Kashmir with Indian's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and, according to reports, had made substantial headway in reaching an accord. Musharraf's stand on how to handle the Kashmir question is not clear.

Regardless of what his stand turns out to be on Kashmir, most people I talked to actually approved of his taking over leadership of the country. Pakistan has been suffering under corrupt politicians for years, and nepotism is rife.

There was hope expressed that Musharraf might help pull Pakistan out of poverty and get rid of the most corrupt individuals. The country has defaulted on \$3.3 billion in loans from other governments and has the lowest Standard & Poor's credit rating. Because of corruption, the money loaned to the country has been badly handled, and the country is seen as having an unstable economy.

Solutions?

There is hope among Pakistanis that President Clinton will be able to help resolve the Kashmir issue. Clinton appears to be highly regarded by the leaders in Pakistan, and they feel he has the power to help correct the situation. He has plans to visit India, and it is hoped he will also visit Pakistan. Leaders in Pakistan believe this will ease tensions in the region. Their desire seems to be that he will call for an election where the people in the Kashmir area can decide their own fate.

My informants do not believe that any election on the part of the citizens of the disputed area to become part of Pakistan is going to be approved by India. One possibility, suggested by U.S. congressman Major Owens, is that the electorate will be able to choose between becoming a state within India or becoming an independent country.

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