

# Shooting for a Century: The India-Pakistan Conundrum

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Over the past decade, the South Asian security complex has expanded in four directions. To the north, China has reasserted itself as a major player in Nepal. To the east, Beijing and New Delhi compete for influence in Myanmar. In the south, a major race is under way to dominate the Indian Ocean. And we see in the west the renewed geopolitical importance of Afghanistan. This last trend was confirmed in 2007, when Afghanistan became the eighth member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

However, the core strategic conundrum that permeates all regional issues, from security to cross-border trade and cooperation, remains the tension between India and Pakistan. For example, SAARC summits (if they are held at all) mainly serve as an occasion for informal consultations between Indian and Pakistani diplomats. Smaller countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka know well that proposals for a South Asian free trade zone or an economic union will not get past the drawing board until the two “big brothers” solve their issues. The centrality of the India-Pakistan dispute plays out in occasional wars, crises, and persistent attempts by the two countries to undercut each other throughout the region.

India and Pakistan were rivals even before they were created as independent states. The ideas that guided the new Pakistan and India were formulated during the first half of the twentieth century, and reached a climax in 1947, when partition led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and turned millions into refugees. The two countries subsequently acquired extra-regional, mutually exclusive allies, became ideological rivals, and came to

be shaped by quite different organizing principles. All this happened despite a common history and geography, very similar cultural roots and economic systems, and a strategic environment that had been shared for centuries.

## BEYOND KASHMIR

Almost 65 years after the partition, India and Pakistan have been through four wars and numerous crises. Now that their dispute has “gone nuclear,” the threat of escalation lurks behind any minor tension. During an extended trip I recently took to both countries, during which I held conversations with strategic and military elites, I found little evidence that the process of normalization is moving forward. In fact, relations are worse now than they were 10 years ago, and a new crisis could arise at any moment.

Strategic normalization is long overdue in the region, but it is important to understand that the India-Pakistan rivalry is not rooted in a single cause; therefore a singular approach, such as is normally adopted in classical diplomacy, can not move things very far beyond their present stalemate. For example, the India-Pakistan conflict is widely but incorrectly seen as centering on Kashmir. A nearly analogous explanation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would maintain that that dispute primarily concerns Jerusalem.

So what are the deeper roots of this seemingly intractable conflict? Answering this question requires closer examination of six possible explanations. First is the classic civilizational argument, in which the two countries are characterized as “Muslim” and “Hindu,” and hence culturally quite different and incompatible. Subcontinental history offers examples that falsify this argument: Muslim rulers have presided peacefully over largely Hindu populations (Hyderabad state), and Muslim populations have lived peacefully under Hindu rulers (Kashmir and some other princely states). Even so, the civilizational argument must be taken into

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account because it still carries weight in both India and Pakistan, especially in resurgent narratives of Islamic and Hindu nationalism.

A second argument contends that the two countries exhibit fundamentally different state identities, that secular India stands in contrast to professedly Muslim Pakistan. This argument can be easily falsified as well. The Indian state is not entirely secular and has often accommodated religious demands, while Pakistan retains many of the secular foundations of the British-Indian political and judicial systems.

Third, it is fairly popular to see the India-Pakistan relationship in terms of pure power politics—in this case, a dominant state facing a smaller challenger. From this perspective, neither side can achieve dominance through military or political means, and both are inhibited by outside allies or a lack of political will, or both. Various back-channel dialogues attempting to resolve the countries' differences have proved fruitless because the larger strategic conditions for normalization have not been achieved. According to this “big-picture” view, Kashmir is only the symptom of a more serious malaise involving power asymmetry.

A fourth possible root of the conflict may be India and Pakistan's nature as geo-military and nuclear rivals. The argument here is that military technology, both conventional and nuclear, coupled with geographical proximity, produces a stalemate; peaceful resolution and military victory are both impossible. India and Pakistan are like two gladiators locked together, each wielding a weapon that cannot be used at close quarters. While engaged they cannot deliver a death blow, but they cannot disengage either.

A fifth, psycho-political viewpoint attempts to explain the India-Pakistan conundrum in terms of individual and group identity. Relevant to the conflict from this perspective are the works of Nobel Prize-winning author Elias Canetti on crowds, of the education policy analyst Krishna Kumar on education in India and Pakistan, and of the psychologist Ashis Nandy on sporting and cultural pathologies in the India-Pakistan relationship (for example, “cricket nationalism”). However, the psycho-political viewpoint rarely offers policy makers advice beyond the banal on how to accelerate the normalization process.

Finally, returning to the level of grand strategy, it is also necessary to consider how outside pow-

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ers, notably the United States, have tried—and usually failed—to influence the dispute. At times, foreign powers may even have made normalization more difficult, if only because they held out the promise of support for one side or the other and thus reduced incentives to compromise. This argument used to be made by Indians, who pointed to the US-Pakistan alliance during the cold war. Now it is made by Pakistanis who are persuaded that the United States has sided with India.

### CLOSER TO NORMAL

Given today's heightened threat of nuclear proliferation, the rise of terrorist groups, and the prospect of a failing Pakistan—even as India performs better economically—the international community must move beyond popular, single-paradigm explanations of the conflict. It must assess whether the India-Pakistan conflict is “ripe” for resolution and decide what role, if any, it should play in bringing resolution about. And even if a consensus takes hold regarding the roots of the conflict, any external effort must tackle several challenges.

First there is the issue of sequencing. In his recent book *How Enemies Become Friends*, Georgetown University's Charles Kupchan argues that, in order for a dispute such as India and Pakistan's to be resolved, the rival strategic elites must first develop a shared understanding of the problem between them and a shared commitment to address it. Only after that, he writes, may the normalization process be *strengthened* by people-to-people exchanges, increased trade, external pressure or encouragement, and other factors.

If Kupchan's view of sequencing is correct—begin at the *hard* top and leave the lower, *softer* initiatives for later—this theory carries important implications for potential external peacemakers in

South Asia. For example, both private foundations and the US and European governments have made a huge effort to encourage confidence-building measures and to fund informal “track two” dialogues between India and Pakistan. Could such efforts be misguided, misplaced, or just premature?

A second challenge is to assess the possibility that different models of normalization may apply. For example, a common threat might arise that draws the two states together. One of the rivals might collapse (the Soviet Union is the model for Pakistan, as far as many Indians are concerned). Or the persuasive or coercive power of outsiders might prove decisive. If the conflict is ripe for resolution, is it because India and Pakistan now share the same incentives—such as reducing the threat of nuclear annihilation or enjoying the benefits of economic and political cooperation?

Finally, policy makers will have to consider the fact that incentives can be asymmetrical. In this case,

Indian and Pakistani leaders might find *different* reasons to normalize. Outside approaches that have hitherto treated the two countries alike may be based on a false understanding of a shared payoff structure. (Increased trade between the two, for example, would benefit economically strapped Pakistan more than India.)

Unless the six drivers of the conflict discussed above, and the challenges facing effective intervention, are all taken into account, foreign policy makers will have a hard time designing an adequate structure of incentives for normalization in South Asia. The only possible solution, therefore, for both regional and extra-regional powers, seems to be a mixed strategy. Focusing on single causes and ignoring sequencing issues will only delay normalization and keep Pakistan and India shooting at each other for another century. ■

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