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INDIA AND PAKISTAN

Thinking about the Unthinkable

Paul D. Taylor

Developments in South Asia during 1999 reminded the world that the nuclear tests undertaken in 1998 by India and Pakistan had ominously increased the danger of nuclear conflict. Pakistani occupation of territory in the Kargil and Dras sectors on the Indian side of the Line of Control in the state of Jammu and Kashmir precipitated the fourth sustained engagement between the armed forces of India and Pakistan in the fifty years since independence and underscored the violent potential of incompatible claims in Kashmir by the two countries. The coup d'état in Pakistan in October 1999 raised questions about governance, stability, and democratic pluralism in a country that had spent about half of its political life since independence under military rule. Late in the year, the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight 814 by Pakistani militants introduced into the conflict the specter of state-supported terrorism. Together these events created the climate for the 28 percent increase in India's military budget that was announced early in 2000.

SIMULATIONS OF THE UNTHINKABLE

Early in this chain of events, shortly after the nuclear tests in May 1998, the U.S. Naval War College, in Newport, Rhode Island, undertook a series of simulations

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and "decision events" designed to examine the consequences of these developments. The project started from the premise that the tests had increased the possibility of weaponization, deployment, and use of nuclear weapons in South Asia. In the tradition of games that the Navy had conducted in Newport for more than a hundred years, the college's Decision Strategies Department organized a series

of events that gathered experts from the U.S. government, academia, foreign governments, business, private voluntary and nongovernmental organizations, and military commands to react to a prepared scenario set in the year 2003. Asking people from diverse backgrounds and organizations to interact with one another as they grappled with the issues posed by a hypothetical scenario was intended to produce insights that might have eluded an individual researcher or a group working within a single discipline. In addition to playing roles in simulations, participants were invited to develop their views in seminars employing a combination of anonymous commentary (using a networked array of computers) and ordinary discussions. The scenario depicted conflict in South Asia escalating from civic unrest and terrorism to an exchange of tactical nuclear weapons; the events ranged in length from four hours to six working days.

MAJOR ISSUES

In the interest of learning how the players representing the U.S. government, other governments, and other actors would respond to the hypothetical events, researchers acting as game controllers presented, in various simulation settings, successive segments of the event scenarios and then gave players free rein to react as they believed their “character” would in a real situation. In seminars, the questions posed were deliberately broad and open-ended, such as, “How do you think your organization or other organizations would respond to the events you have just heard described?” In this manner, the organizers tried to avoid constraining responses, as well as to encourage maximum interactions among participants.

In the exchanges that ensued, several questions emerged as salient in event after event. What could the United States or other actors in the international community do to discourage an escalation of hostilities between India and Pakistan? Could the United States or any other third country use military power to affect the outcome of a conflict in South Asia? Inasmuch as India and Pakistan account for only a minor share of international trade, would the impact on the world economy of a nuclear war on the Asian subcontinent be modest? If the United States and other countries wished to help ameliorate a disaster involving millions of casualties from a nuclear exchange, would they have the capacity to do so? Recognizing that the human and economic costs of a nuclear war in South Asia would likely be enormous, should the United States and other countries invest resources and effort now to reduce tensions between India and Pakistan, and also share with them the means of preventing an accidental disaster? Could such things be done while maintaining the arms-length posture the United States had assumed toward India and Pakistan in the name of nonproliferation? Finally and fundamentally, is a future scenario in which violence between India

and Pakistan that escalates to a substantial nuclear exchange plausible enough to justify worrying about the other questions?

THE GAME SCENARIO

In the tradition of military gaming, a difficult scenario—the overall “scripted” background and the situational framework within which role playing and discussion of important issues was to proceed during the successive events—was elaborated. Developed in consultation with experts on South Asia from the U.S. government and academia, the scenario was intended to stimulate planners to address tough challenges. The designers stressed to participants in all the events

Participants argued that in economic terms alone, the costs to the world of dealing with the consequences of a nuclear exchange would far exceed the cost of trying to prevent one.

that the scenario was to be considered as only one possible future and that it was not intended in any sense as a prediction of the most likely evolution of events.

The scenario was essentially the

same in each event, but it became more elaborate as the series evolved—especially after an event known as the International Game, when the actions of foreign players moved the narrative farther than had been envisioned.

The scenario events began with a crisis postulated in the year 2003:* *The defeat of a new resolution in the United Nations Security Council calling for international involvement to resolve the status of Kashmir precipitated violent anti-Western and anti-Hindu demonstrations in India and Pakistan. This civic unrest was accompanied by a sharp increase in Islamic guerrilla activity in Kashmir. That activity culminated in the downing, by a shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile, of an Indian transport aircraft carrying the home minister, the minister of defense, and the army chief of staff, who were en route to Srinagar for an inspection visit. “Informed reports” implicated the government of Pakistan in the shoot-down. India responded by launching Operation RESOLUTE SWORD, air and artillery attacks against targets in Kashmir and northern Pakistan suspected of harboring and supporting perpetrators of violence in Kashmir and the rest of India. Simultaneously, the government of India declared that its intentions were limited in both scope and objective. Further, it issued an ultimatum demanding the immediate delivery of terrorist leaders who were sheltered in Pakistan, the dismantling of known terrorist headquarters and training facilities, and the removal of all Pakistani military forces from Kashmir. Initially, Pakistan offered little resistance to the Indian attacks, which inflicted heavy damage to the infrastructure targets against which they were delivered.*

* Throughout, descriptions of hypothetical situations, actions, and policies posited by the game scenario are set in italics.

When Indian forces suspended their attack and began to celebrate the success of RESOLUTE SWORD, the Pakistani high command seized the opportunity for a surprise attack against Indian forces east and south of Lahore. During a two-day battle, Pakistani units managed to push about fifty kilometers into Indian territory, inflicting heavy casualties on Indian civilians, before a counteroffensive repulsed the Pakistani thrust. India matched its defeat of Pakistani troops in the Indian Punjab with a rapid movement across the Thar Desert toward the Indus River. Fearing that India was about to cut Pakistan in two, severing Islamabad's economic lifeline to the south, the Pakistani high command ordered a barrage of tactical missile strikes. Four of these missiles carried nuclear warheads: three twenty-kiloton weapons were delivered against Indian forces to halt their advance toward the border, and the fourth was used against the supporting rail hub in Jodhpur. The strikes stalled the Indian movement and destroyed the rail hub but also caused widespread destruction among the civilian population of Jodhpur. Experts from the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency estimated the number of dead and seriously injured in the hundreds of thousands.

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

In January 1999, researchers organized a two-day international simulation to gauge reactions to these hypothetical events and the capacity of the international community to prevent, manage, and resolve such a conflict. The simulation brought together a multinational cross section of diplomats, academics, analysts, and military personnel. The countries represented were Australia, Canada, China, Finland, France, India, Iran, Japan, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Many of the diplomats present had reached the rank of ambassador in their countries' diplomatic services; one had served as foreign minister. In the game, they were given roles as their countries' principal representatives in the UN Security Council. In fact, they also had to replicate their governments' entire decision-making authorities, because they worked without the benefit of instructions from home, and—with the exception of India and Pakistan—their actions in the simulation were “free play,” based on their individual best judgment of what their respective governments would do in response to the hypothetical situation as it unfolded. The scenario prescribed most of the military actions of India and Pakistan; however, even those nations' representatives, who were experienced diplomats and scholars, devised their own diplomatic activities.

The International Game was unusual in having countries represented by their own nationals. This arrangement brought a greater degree of reality to the responses of foreign countries than is usual in U.S. government-sponsored simulations, which are generally played exclusively by American experts.

The participants were briefed on the scenario's assumptions about the underlying situation for 2003. It assumed that *unsatisfactory economic conditions had fomented significant unrest in both countries, leading to a rise in nationalist fervor and rhetoric. Both India and Pakistan had signed and ratified the Fissile Materials Cutoff Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.** India's real-world unilateral policy of "no first use" of nuclear weapons was incorporated in the scenario; *Pakistan* (reminiscent of the real-world posture of Nato during the Cold War) *had made no such commitment. Both India and Pakistan had nuclear warheads that could be delivered by either aircraft or missile.*

Move One of the simulation asked the players to react in the Security Council to early events in the scenario, *including the civic unrest and stepped-up guerrilla activity, the shoot-down of the aircraft carrying Indian officials, and the beginning of Operation RESOLUTE SWORD. The Security Council moved swiftly into action.*

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The Canadian delegate, in consultation with the belligerents, proposed a resolution calling upon India and Pakistan to cease hostilities and immediately disengage their troops on both the Line of Control and the international border. The resolution invited the UN

*Secretary-General to strengthen the military observer group already in place and deploy it on both sides of the border to witness the called-for disengagement. However, since the resolution would have committed troops without putting in place any new confidence-building measures, several representatives of the Permanent Five members** expressed reservations, and it was not adopted. Some of the delegates suggested that the presence of nuclear weapons made a traditional peacekeeping operation inappropriate.*

At this point, the game-control cell advanced the players to Move Two, in which *the Pakistani authorities ordered a nuclear attack against Indian troops advancing toward the international border. The Pakistani delegate justified his country's attack as purely defensive and stressed that it had been directed at strictly military targets. The Indian delegation withdrew from the Security Council, declaring that the time for diplomacy had passed. The U.S. delegate and several others condemned Pakistan for its use of nuclear weapons, while China insisted that the international community bore a degree of responsibility for the Pakistani action, in that it had neglected to ensure that a military balance existed in the region.*

* The game series ended before the U.S. Senate declined to ratify the CTBT.

** China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The Permanent Five considered putting sanctions in place against Pakistan but declined to intervene militarily to stop the crisis, fearing that such intervention would only raise the stakes, perhaps even lead to World War III. The Pakistani representative reacted to this decision with a mixture of disbelief and dismay, asserting that this conflict was World War III.

While the Security Council cell debated, the Indian player let it be known that *his government had responded to the Pakistani strike by launching twelve nuclear weapons of its own, in an attempt to destroy Pakistan's entire nuclear research, production, storage, and delivery capability.* The game controllers assessed that it was unclear whether this objective had been fully realized, but inasmuch as many of Pakistan's nuclear-related facilities postulated by the scenario were near populated areas, expert analysis by the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency estimated some fifteen million casualties from the attack, including one to two million dead.

The Permanent Five, after separate consultations with India and Pakistan, now developed a proposal for ending the crisis: immediate cessation of military activities, renunciation and elimination of nuclear activities by both countries, a return to the status quo ante in Kashmir, and international security guarantees for both India and Pakistan. Several delegates opined that the security guarantees would be "difficult to sell" to their governments.

In a seminar discussion after the simulation, the senior Pakistani delegate explained that his government had been cognizant throughout the event of Pakistan's unfavorable military balance with India. In an unscripted simulation, it would have sued for a cease-fire during Move One. The Pakistani players had been motivated in the game crisis, they explained, by eagerness to engage outside powers, especially China, Iran, and the United States, in forging a solution. The Indian delegate argued that his government would have worked very hard to reach a peaceful settlement but that once Pakistan fired nuclear weapons, only one response would have been acceptable to India. The Russian player, a scholar with strong ties to the Boris Yeltsin government (then still in power), explained that his country might see a nuclear crisis in South Asia as an opportunity to expand the Russian role in a system in which Russia was frustrated by its lack of clout. If breaking down the current nuclear proliferation regime could restore Russia's proper voice in the international system, he believed, a Russian government might be willing for that purpose to renounce the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

In March 1999, a group of eighteen Americans—senior officials responsible for U.S. economic policy, business executives, academics, and military

officers—met for an evening and the following workday to examine the possible economic and commercial consequences of a conflict in South Asia. The participants either occupied or had recently left offices ranking from under secretary to deputy assistant secretary in the Departments of Commerce, State, and the Treasury. They were not asked to play roles per se but to offer their considered judgments about how the world would and should react to the events posed by the scenario.

As the scenario was introduced, and even before the downing of the Indian transport aircraft triggered a major escalation in the crisis, participants thought that an increase in tensions between countries with nuclear arsenals would

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cause investors and markets to jump to worst-case conclusions and precipitate an international financial crisis. Firms with economic interests in India and Pakistan would begin to hedge, checking on the security of their

local employees and expatriates, evaluating financial exposure, and reviewing policy options. (The “real world” was to produce something of a reality check later, during the 1999 Kargil crisis, which would exhibit an eerie similarity to the scenario up to this point. Markets were to seem more relaxed in that actual event than the discussants had been, however, suggesting that participants in simulations may tend to anticipate escalation.)

When in the scenario military forces engaged in conventional exchanges, the discussants judged that international markets were likely to go into a tailspin, driving capital out of emerging markets to seek safe haven in the United States. Leading governments and international financial institutions would be pressed to resolve the resulting financial crisis. When the conflict widened, the participants judged, the humanitarian crisis within the subcontinent would increase the pressure on foreign governments for action. Business representatives strongly suggested that the most helpful way that governments could address the economic and commercial crisis would be to use every means available to defuse the underlying military and political crises before they deteriorated into a nuclear exchange.

When such an exchange occurred in the scenario, the participants concluded that a nuclear exchange of the magnitude postulated would create a humanitarian catastrophe. The situation would be hard for the government of the United States and other major countries to ignore, even though some people might say the governments of South Asia had caused the calamity and that it was up to them to deal with the damage. Relief efforts would also be complicated by

residual contamination and the possibility of further conflict. Other questions would center on the capacity of the government of Pakistan to manage assistance and the willingness of the government of India to accept it.

Depending on weather conditions, the discussants predicted, severe shortages of food and potable water could exceed the capacity of relief organizations to respond and might even stress international markets. A conference of international donors would be required to mobilize the billions of dollars needed for relief. The prices of certain commodities, especially foods, could skyrocket and could trigger a global recession. Countless Indian and Pakistani citizens might seek refuge abroad; large numbers of refugees could cause other countries to create barriers to immigration. The most mobile people would carry away with them skills needed at home; the flight of elites might be matched by decisions of foreign investors in the region to take their chips off the table, resulting in profound and lasting damage to the economies of India and Pakistan.

OPERATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

More than fifty flag and field-grade American military officers, middle-grade and ambassadorial-level diplomats, civilian executives, and representatives of non-governmental relief and developmental organizations participated in a six-day simulation as part of Global 1999—the major annual simulation at the Naval War College. Military officers from Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom joined them. Drawn from, inter alia, the U.S. Central Command, the U.S. Pacific Command, the Departments of State and Defense, the Agency for International Development, and the U.S. embassies in Islamabad and New Delhi, participants reacted to the unfolding scenario in ways that they believed their organizations would in a real crisis.

As the South Asian crisis began to develop in Global 1999, *players pressed diplomatic measures to keep it from escalating. At the same time, nations effected voluntary withdrawals of their citizens from India and Pakistan. The eventual non-combatant evacuation operation was complicated physically by the distance of Islamabad and New Delhi from naval support ships at the outset, as well as by the dangers to military units inserted to conduct the evacuation. There was also a sense that the evacuation was sending a pessimistic signal as Washington was urging restraint on the local governments.* The players did not anticipate that a nuclear exchange would occur as rapidly as the scenario dictated—only eight days after the downing of the Indian transport—*so the evacuation was not completed before the nuclear strikes. Therefore, substantial numbers of Americans were presumed among the casualties, including many U.S. citizens of Indian origin, particularly those residing in the Punjab, from which they had been reluctant to depart.*

While participants did not perceive a direct intervention or deterrent role for U.S. military forces in the crisis, they felt certain that in the aftermath of such a nuclear exchange any U.S. administration would look to the U.S. military, with its personnel, logistical, and technical resources, to carry heavy responsibilities in conducting decontamination, disaster relief, and early reconstruction efforts. Questions arose as to whether U.S. troops would be welcomed by the governments and the populations of the two countries, and whether the requirements of short-term crisis management might conflict with the longer-term interests of the United States in fostering constructive relations with both India and Pakistan. Military planners in the game sought to minimize the presence of U.S. forces on the ground and to define in advance the exit strategies by which responsibility would pass to civilian and nongovernmental leadership.

In the Global 1999 simulation, the physical requirements of disaster relief were found greatly to exceed current real-world preparations, which typically envision disasters on the magnitude of the bombing of the World Trade Center or the nuclear accident in Chernobyl. After the game, participants favored creation of a standing consequence-management force, an organization that could be deployed to alleviate disasters anywhere in the world. This force would be a ready and efficient alternative to current arrangements, under which regional commanders in chief are responsible for planning and organizing efforts, theater by theater. In its contingency planning, such a force would anticipate issues of coordination with other countries and determine how its activities would be directed on the ground.

Global 1999 players also concluded that although nongovernmental organizations were well equipped to assess local needs and deliver relief, they typically did not plan for major emergencies and certainly would not have the resources in personnel or materiel to contribute meaningfully in the aftermath of a nuclear exchange without enormous transfers from governments. Nongovernmental organizations would most likely have to perform “triage”—that is, explicitly identify the relatively small portion of victims they would be able to help, deliberately but unavoidably leaving many hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, without aid. Participants recommended more aggressive contingency planning and early integration of nongovernmental organizations into planning.

IMPORTANT INSIGHTS

This overall project examined a hypothetical problem from the perspectives of fifteen countries and specialties ranging from warrior to diplomat, missionary, and investor. Its most compelling result was that while participants differed on the details of their assessments and their remedies, and while some participants

in each event commented that the scenario pushed events more relentlessly toward nuclear war than they would expect in a real situation, no one argued that the scenario could not happen. In fact, they frequently expressed fears that it was a worrisome and consequential possibility.

The players in the simulations and seminars identified no significant military role for the United States or its allies in a military crisis between India and Pakistan. They asserted that though the United States and others might wish to help ameliorate a disaster involving millions of casualties from a nuclear exchange, the magnitude of resources and efforts required would be well beyond those envisioned in current contingency planning. The U.S. government, they suggested, should start now to create a standing, deployable “consequence management” force that could provide skills and material aid to help relieve the effects of major catastrophes anywhere in the world.

Participants argued that in economic terms alone, the costs to the world of dealing with the consequences of a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan would far exceed the cost of trying to prevent one. On the other hand, they

The project started from the premise that the tests had increased the possibility of weaponization, deployment, and use of nuclear weapons in South Asia.

noted that the influence of the United States was limited and, in the simulations, only became more so as the crisis escalated. Still, time after time participants asked whether the international

community was doing all it could to prevent terrorism over Kashmir and, indeed, whether more could be done to encourage India and Pakistan to reach a settlement in the Kashmir dispute itself.

An understanding of the problem needs to take account of the fact that India and Pakistan see different threats emanating from each other. Simply put, Pakistanis stress the injustice of India’s occupation of a large portion of a state in which Moslems are a majority, while fearing India’s stronger conventional forces; they accordingly seek international help to redress a wrong. Indians recall the accession of Kashmir by the governing maharaja at the time of partition—a legitimate procedure under international law, in their view—and reject any outside interference that could upset the status quo. Their main fear with respect to Pakistan is that its successful support of Kashmiri secession could cause groups elsewhere in India to seek new status for themselves—a prospect made worse by the specter of a fundamentalist Islamic government coming to power in Islamabad and mounting a *jihad* to free Kashmir. Any long-term solution will somehow have to give to Pakistanis a greater sense of security vis-à-vis their more powerful neighbor, and to Indians confidence that their pluralistic society can be protected against exploitation by outside agitators. The disagreement

over Kashmir, which has provided the flash point for the series of conflicts since independence, might best be resolved as a secondary problem addressed in a context of broader concerns. That approach might also offer a way around the inherent conflict between attempting to apply outside pressure for resolution and simultaneously arguing that a solution has to be forged between the Indians and Pakistanis themselves.

Participants in the project's simulations wondered if the United States and others could facilitate a solution in the same way U.S. diplomacy has contributed on several occasions to ameliorating conflicts in the Middle East and Northern Ireland, where conflicting claims have often appeared at least as intractable as those in South Asia. Some results had been achieved in those cases even though the governments of two close allies of the United States—Israel and the United Kingdom—had argued for years that for the United States even to talk to the groups that had terrorized their countries would be wrong and counterproductive.

Finally, many players throughout the simulation underscored the need to re-examine policies that weaken U.S. leverage in defusing potential crises. At present, as punishment for their proliferation, American policy denies military sales to India and Pakistan and the use of International Military Education and Training funds for attendance by their personnel in U.S. military schools and training courses. Additionally, military-to-military contacts with Pakistan are proscribed as a consequence of the coup d'état. American unhappiness with the nuclear tests and the coup needed to be expressed, but avoiding interactions with Indians and Pakistanis even on nonsensitive subjects has the effect of minimizing American influence on the very people who might push their countries into a military escalation, and it prevents the United States from getting to know the next generation of military leaders. In addition, current policy prevents the United States from engaging with the two governments on just the kind of confidence-building measures needed now on both sides to decrease the chance of a nuclear exchange: reliable nuclear command and control systems, for example, and nuclear threat reduction centers of the type the United States and the Soviet Union established, as well as cooperative threat reduction measures to reduce tensions between conventional forces along the border.

American policy, these simulations suggest, has stressed the laudable objective of discouraging nuclear proliferation to the point of dangerously reducing its own ability to discourage the *use* of the nuclear technology that India and Pakistan now possess. The United States would wield more influence over India and Pakistan if it accepted the fact of their nuclear status and attempted to establish safeguards and counter-use regimes, even while working to dissuade other countries from gaining a nuclear capability. In the last analysis, the Newport games warn, a policy based on the hope that either India or Pakistan is going to

abandon its nuclear arsenal is almost certainly wishful thinking and provides no basis for exerting U.S. influence in the urgent and difficult work of keeping those weapons from being employed.