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Conference Brief

Strategic Studies Institute

*U.S. Army War College, and
the Asia/Pacific Research Center
Stanford University*



Asia/Pacific Research Center

Prospects for Peace in South Asia

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Key Insights:

- Serious prospects of nuclear war continue to exist in South Asia due to ongoing strategies of brinkmanship.
- U.S. effort and energy are vital to helping manage ongoing South Asian tensions. Appointing a special envoy to the region, along the lines of those appointed to the Middle East peace negotiations, may be useful.
- The Pakistani military considers the Kashmiri insurgent organizations to be a key asset, which they will not want to surrender.
- A major problem is that Pakistan may lose control over Kashmiri militant groups it supports.
- The United States has a number of key interests in South Asia, including the avoidance of a radicalized Pakistan.
- The United States may consider working more extensively with India as it emerges as a regional superpower.

On January 21-22, 2003, the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute and Stanford University's Asia Pacific Research Center cosponsored a conference on "Prospects for Peace in South Asia." This event brought together a number of well-known scholars, diplomats, and senior military officers with wide experience in the region. Panels considered a variety of topics related to the role of religion in conflict, the nature of past South Asian conflicts, Kashmir, the war on terrorism, and outsider policy interests.

The role of religion in South Asian politics was one of first topics the conference addressed. Several scholars on the first panel asserted that a hardline view of the Kashmir issue may be becoming ingrained increasingly in the religious as well as the political identity of Pakistani Muslims. The rise in "Hindu First" nationalism sometimes associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India also was considered. Although the Indian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the widespread Hindu view of Muslims as "the other" was commented upon. BJP willingness to advocate moderation in the aftermath of sectarian violence was noted. Indian Deputy Prime Minister Advani's statement that the BJP's Hindu nationalism is only cultural, and not political, was mentioned as a sign of moderation. It remains unclear if India is to be dominated by a "soft" Hindu nationalism focused on culture or a "hard" Hindu nationalism that is highly political.

Conference members commented about the Muslim community in India, noting that it is a huge group, which, for the most part, is not talking about explicitly religious issues. The Muslims are not a part of the international jihadi circuit. According to the analysis given at the conference, most Indian Muslims primarily are concerned with local issues rather than Islamic World issues.

Participants then turned to discussion of past conflicts in South Asia, with a special emphasis on the role of Kashmir in feeding Indo-Pakistani tensions. The question of how Indian-Pakistani tensions may be expressed in a nuclear age was particularly important. Scholars considering this issue were described as fitting into two broad categories—"deterrence optimists" or "deterrence pessimists." Deterrence optimists believe that conflict between the two states can exist at lower levels indefinitely without much danger that such tensions will escalate into nuclear war. Many deterrence optimists suggest that third party intervention will always occur during a crisis and is consequently a major factor that will prevent escalation from getting out of hand.

Deterrence pessimists fear that a variety of scenarios exist under which nuclear attack may appear as a serious policy option to either or both states. They have observed that brinkmanship is ongoing in South Asia and that every Indo-Pakistani war came as a surprise to one of the countries. Moreover, both sides have embraced some form of massive retaliation approach to nuclear warfare, suggesting that limited nuclear war will be difficult, if not impossible, to wage without prompting a cycle of escalation.

Conference members also discussed the role of the military in South Asia, noting that neither the Pakistani or Indian forces have conducted lessons learned studies based on the 2001-02 brink of war experience. Participants commented that during the Kargil crisis a very small number of Pakistani officers decided to move forward with operations in Kashmir. Pakistan's military, therefore, moved to escalate the conflict with India without informing the civilian leadership of the country.

Following a discussion of the South Asian militaries, the conference considered the history and current status of Kashmir. Pakistani President Musharraf is under pressure to show some progress on Kashmir, and the Pakistanis strongly maintain that it is unfair to pressure them twice on major issues (Afghanistan and Kashmir). The United States, conversely, strongly maintains that Pakistani support of insurgents in Kashmir is not compatible with a good relationship with the United States.

The conference participants further noted the fundamental differences between the Indians and Pakistanis over Kashmir. To India, Kashmir represents the secular identity of the Indians within a multi-party democracy. Some Indians have, in candid moments, expressed fears about the unraveling of India should Kashmir be abandoned on the grounds of religion. Conversely, Pakistan's existence is predicated on the need for a separate state for Muslims. If Kashmir is allowed to remain outside of Pakistan, this rationale rings hollow. Some Indians also maintain that the rationale for a separate Muslim state in the subcontinent was undermined by the secession of East Pakistan and the formation of Bangladesh.

Conference members also discussed the activities of the Kashmir Study Group. This organization is a private forum considering issues surrounding the current impasse in Kashmir. The latest accomplishment of the study group has been to generate the Livingston Proposal, "Kashmir: A Way Forward." This private set of proposals has been put before the representatives of both India and Pakistan and seeks to help establish a compromise solution for the problem of Kashmir based on a subnational form of Kashmiri sovereignty. The full proposal can be found on the internet at www.kashmirstudygroup.net.

On the second day of the conference, a panel examined factors influencing current South Asian tensions. Indian domestic issues were discussed, including remaining debates from India's formation. While freedom of religion is guaranteed in India, freedom to propagate Islam and Christianity remains subject to bitter debate. The panel then

considered Pakistani political and constitutional problems, with one individual noting that the military over time has developed a comprehensive strategy for undermining civilian leadership and consolidating power once a coup takes place. This involves a multistage paradigm of coopting a variety of Pakistani institutions whose acquiescence is necessary to administer the country.

Participants also discussed Islamic extremism as a factor contributing to current tensions. In the early 1980s, Iran and Saudi Arabia competed fiercely for influence among South Asian Muslims, prompting the Saudis to sponsor a number of Pakistani madrassas where hardline Wahabi values were taught. One scholar commented that the rise of militant Islam in Pakistan and Afghanistan occurred with U.S. support because this was the form of Islam that could withstand a Soviet assault. The need to resist the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan could not be addressed by supporting moderate Islam.

Participants observed that large numbers of secular Pakistani officers work with Kashmiri militants because they can be a useful tool, but not because they consider them to be ideological soul mates with whom they identify. These officers use the militants without becoming infected by their Islamic extremism. Having created this tool for pressuring the Indians, Pakistanis are loath to destroy it due to its ongoing utility. Nevertheless, the danger of a loss of military control over militants remains serious.

The conference then moved to the issues of U.S. military perspectives on the War on Terrorism in South and Central Asia. Participants noted that a number of positive signs exist about future stability in Afghanistan, including the return of refugees, the development of secular schools, and a possible general war-wariness. Some suggested that the United States must engage in nation-building in Afghanistan, and that, with U.S. support, Afghanistan has a chance of developing into a stable and secure country.

The importance for the United States of development and democracy issues through-

out South Asia has expanded since September 11, 2001. These changes have influenced the U.S. military with regard to such efforts as military-to-military contacts and joint efforts at counterterrorism. The United States has also become interested in insurgency problems in places such as Nepal and Sri Lanka, which were previously of little interest.

The role of outside nations in influencing the prospects for peace in South Asia was then addressed. Nations that were reviewed included the United States, Russia, China, and the Islamic states outside the region. When considering U.S. interests in the region, several factors were mentioned as being key. One of the most important was avoiding the conditions under which a militant Islamic regime could take over Pakistan.

Both Russia and China view the region as important to their national interests. Russia has great experience interacting with South Asian states, China less so. South Asia is a logical place for the Russians to assert their interest in a great power role. Putin seeks more trade and investment with South Asia and a special relationship with India. He has paid much more attention to South Asia than his predecessors.

China views itself as the rightful hegemon since this area constitutes its "backyard." Concerned about terrorist separatism and Islamic extremism in South Asia, China seeks to continue its strong relations with Pakistan. Another worry is possible Indian efforts to undermine Chinese control of Tibet. China, like Russia, would like to see a decrease in tensions between India and Pakistan.

Both Russia and China saw serious limits to their influence in South Asia when the United States became interested in South Asia after September 11. The U.S. relationship with Pakistan improved dramatically, and the United States appeared to replace China as Pakistan's most important ally. The U.S. ability to become the predominant outside power in South Asia, almost at will, was a "reality check" for Moscow and Beijing.

A number of states in the Islamic World also have concerns about South Asia. While South Asia is not the heart of Islam, it has at times been something of an ideological battlefield for different versions of political Islam such as those forms advocated by the Iranians and the Saudi Arabians.

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Conclusion.

At the end of the conference, participants agreed that South Asia is an area of great importance to the United States, but it remains uncertain if it will be treated as such. The strong terrorist presence in Pakistan presents the possibility that terrorists could seize a nuclear weapon, especially at a time of crisis, while the weapons were being deployed or relocated. The possibility of a coup in Pakistan leading to a Taliban-type regime with nuclear weapons is especially ominous.

Considering the importance of current South Asian problems, it may be helpful for the United States to appoint a special envoy to South Asia along the lines of those appointed to the Middle East Peace negotiations. This appointment would be an improvement over the more ad hoc form of involvement where the United States only pays serious attention to the area when a crisis is under way. In addition, continuing and expanding U.S.-South Asian military-to-military contacts and informal U.S.-sponsored "Track 2" meetings of Indians, Pakistanis, and other South Asians would be valuable.

The conference members agreed that the Livingston proposal of the Kashmir Study Group displayed some potential that was worth consideration. Some asserted that dialogue is not appeasement and that the Livingston Proposals were at least a basis for dialogue.

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