CRISNO 392

KASHMIR III-NUCLEAR CONFRONTATION

Background:

India and Pakistan were enmeshed in another crisis over Kashmir, compounded by a near-nuclear confrontation, from 14 January until late June 1990.

Background As noted, the India/Pakistan conflict over Jammu and Kashmir has persisted since the end of British rule on 15 August 1947, with a norm of high tension, a myriad of incidents, and two full-scale interstate crises (see Cases #119 and #216). There was also a Kashmir dimension to the crisis over Bangladesh (see Case #242).

All through the 1980s anti-India forces in the India-occupied part of Kashmir pressed their opposition to continued Indian rule by (often violent) acts of disobedience, including the taking of hostages, foreign and Indian.

Summary:

A fresh Kashmir crisis for India was triggered on 14 January 1990, when, after weeks of escalating sectarian violence in Kashmir, Pakistan's foreign office expressed "deep concern over the deteriorating situation in Indian-occupied Kashmir." As often in the past, India's external affairs ministry retorted the next day that Pakistan's statement was "an unacceptable interference in India's internal affairs," catalyzing a crisis for Pakistan. Many escalation points were to follow, including on 21 January 1990 when Indian police opened fire and killed 50 pro-independence demonstrators in the Vale of Kashmir (known as the Gawkadal massacre).

The two foreign ministers met in Delhi on 21-23 January, without any breakthrough. On the 30th India's army chief of staff declared that India's troops were prepared to protect Kashmir's borders "at any cost."

From January to April 1990 Indian Kashmir witnessed violent anti-India demonstrations and brutal suppression by an expanded Indian police and military presence: hundreds of Kashmiris were killed. Evidence that Pakistan was providing paramilitary training, weapons, and funds for Kashmiri militants in Pakistani-held Azad Kashmir and was organizing mass demonstrations in Srinagar against Indian rule only served to reinforce a near-universal conviction in India that Pakistan was responsible for the turmoil within Kashmir.

On 6 April the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front seized--and killed--three Indian hostages. On the 11th India's Prime Minister V. P. Singh publicly warned his neighbor: "Our message to Pakistan is that you cannot get away with taking Kashmir without a war." And, ominously in that context, he added that Pakistan would not be permitted to achieve nuclear superiority. On 13, 15, and 16 April the USSR, Iran, and the U.S. expressed concern over the escalating tension in the subcontinent. At the same time India rejected a Pakistani proposal for a fresh UN observer role in Kashmir--there had been a small UN Observer Group in the disputed area since 1949.

After a month of relative calm the crisis escalated on 21 May with the killing of Kashmir's leading Muslim cleric, Maulvi Muhammad Farooq, by unidentified gunmen. It escalated further when Indian security forces killed approximately 100 mourners in a vast throng of 100,000 attending the funeral. This incident, in turn, increased mutual suspicion and fear in both India and Pakistan, especially since, in the spring of 1990, both had deployed large numbers of troops in the desert borderlands of Rajasthan (India) and Sind (Pakistan).

This movement of forces on both sides seemed like another tit-for-tat conventional military confrontation that triggered or escalated an international crisis (see Cases #135 and #372--Punjab War Scare I, II, in 1951 and 1987). However, in the spring of 1990 a large body of U.S.-intelligence-gathered evidence indicated an ominous dual change in South Asia's balance of power: first, that Pakistan now had a few operational nuclear weapons and that orders had been given by Pakistan's Army Chief of Staff, General Beg, to assemble them at Pakistan's nuclear center, Kahuta; and, second, that in order to prevent a repetition of its humiliating defeat by India in the war over Bangladesh in 1971 (see Case #242), Pakistani leaders were prepared to respond with a nuclear strike in case of an (anticipated) Indian invasion of Sind that aimed to cut the rump of West Pakistan into two.

President Bush, alarmed by the growing risk of a miscalculated nuclear war in South Asia, sent Deputy Director of the CIA Robert Gates to Islamabad and Delhi on 20-21 May, along with Richard Haass (National Security Council aide for the region), and John Kelly (Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asian Affairs): the delegation warned President Khan and General Beg that Pakistan would suffer a grave defeat in a war with India and could not expect any U.S. assistance in the event of war; and it warned India's Prime Minister Singh and Army Chief, General Sundarji, that Pakistan, in desperation, might resort to a nuclear strike.

Both sides responded to the escalating crisis with important gestures. Pakistan's leaders agreed to close the training camps for Kashmiri militants. And India invited U.S. military attachés in Delhi to go to Kashmir and Rajasthan to see for themselves that an Indian invasion of Pakistan was not imminent. More important, on 3 June Pakistan began to withdraw its troops from the Indian border for use in reasserting law and order in Sind, where ethnic violence had erupted; and India responded by pulling its troops back from their forward deployment. The winding down of the crisis took several weeks. By late June 1990 the most dangerous India/Pakistan "war scare" had ended.

The UN was not involved in this crisis.

(Tension continued for several months. On 13 August, despite bilateral talks on confidence-building measures on 10-11 August, following an earlier round of talks on 18-19 July, Pakistan accused India of attacking a border post. There was an exchange of heavy artillery fire across the 1949 Kashmir cease-fire line on 20-21 August. By October 1990, with the formation of new governments in both states, India/Pakistan tension declined. The new prime ministers met on 22 November at the fifth summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC].)

References:

Ballard 1991; Hersh 1993; Hagerty 1995-96; Keesing's 1990; Malik 1993; Malik 1990; Zinkin 1987.

Last Updated: 1/5/2004