

# Nuclear Proliferation on the Indian Subcontinent

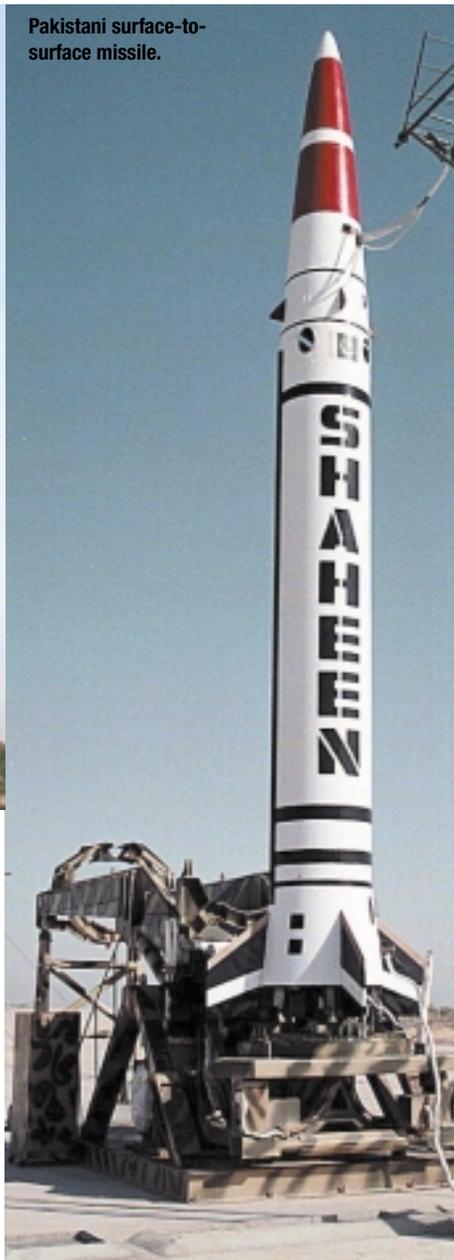
By KENNETH R. TOTTY

Indian short-range missile.



AP/Wide World Photos (John McCormico)

Pakistani surface-to-surface missile.



AP/Wide World Photos (Defense Ministry)

**T**he failure to force India to grant independence, or at least autonomy, to the northern state of Jammu-Kashmir has been an irritant to Pakistan since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Pakistan has gone to war twice over Kashmir, a reflection of its troubled relationship with India.

Islamabad is obsessed with its powerful neighbor. The average Pakistani is convinced that India is determined to destroy his country or annex it as a province, though such outcomes would hardly be in the security interest of New Delhi. Destroying or dismantling Pakistan would expose India to greater instability on its northwest border, and annexation would add 60 million Muslims to a country where Hindu-Muslim tension is already at the boiling point.

For its part India maintains a policy of nonalignment and regional dominance. Historically, that has translated into a strategy of keeping foreign powers out of the region while it pursues its objectives from a position of strength. Only Pakistan has thwarted India by seeking financial and military assistance from the United States and China. The end of the Cold War saw a decrease of foreign interest in the region. Nevertheless, tensions have escalated, especially since India and Pakistan became open members of the nuclear club. Understanding why confrontation between these two countries has evolved into the world's only ongoing nuclear arms race requires exploring the historical and geopolitical roots of this volatile region.

## The Indian Enigma

Many observers contend that the current situation in South Asia stems from ancient Hindu-Muslim hatred,

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## Midnight's Children

In July 1947 Parliament passed the Indian Independence Act which ordered the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan by midnight on August 14 of that same year. Under this decision the government, in less than a month, divided the largest possession in the Empire, and one that had been integrated for more than a century under the British Raj.

The debate over whether to create two separate states was one of the most divisive aspects of the Indian independence movement. The concept of a Muslim homeland was formally adopted by the All India Muslim League in 1940, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah. When negotiations for the creation of a federated Hindu-Muslim state broke down in 1946, Jinnah called on the so-called *Muslim Nation* to launch direct action, precipitating a bloody year of civil war. Hindu-Muslim communal violence rapidly spread to all corners of the subcontinent and increased as the prospects of independence arose. In the summer of 1947, racing the deadline, two boundary commissions worked desperately to partition Punjab and Bengal in such a way that a majority of the Muslims in these regions would comprise the separate state of Pakistan. As soon as the new borders became known, 10 million Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs fled their homes. In the course of this exodus, one million people were slaughtered in clashes between rival ethnic and religious factions.

In the wake of partition, Pakistan consisted of two wings separated by 1,600 kilometers of Indian territory, West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Instability in the political order and economic problems became prominent issues from the moment Pakistan was created. Today the country is comprised of four provinces (Punjab, Sindh, North West Frontier Province, and Baluchistan) as well as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Federal Capital Area (Islamabad).

The commonwealth dominion of India (reestablished as a constitutional republic in 1950) is made up of 25 states and 7 union territories with its capital in New Delhi. Despite migration of Muslims to West and East Pakistan, India's initial history was plagued by the legacy of partition. Refugee resettlement, economic disruption, inadequate resources, and communal violence (as over 10 percent of the population remained Muslim) threatened the fledgling nation.

Relations between these states quickly deteriorated. Within months of independence, India was engaged in an undeclared war with Pakistan over Kashmir, an unintended consequence of the hasty partition and a continuing source of friction.

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but this ignores socioeconomic developments in India and the shortsighted policies of its leaders over the past twenty years. Urbanization lured millions from traditional occupations and communities, but the economy could not provide jobs for them. Unemployment led many of these Indians into gangs, whose strong-arm tactics were used by politicians to intimidate and incite tension, particularly communal violence. Politicians played a numbers game by appealing to social caste and

religious sentiments to sow the seeds of discord and influence elections without regard to the long-term social consequences.

Political stability was provided by the prolonged rule of the Congress Party and the continuity of its leaders, Jawaharlal Nehru, his daughter Indira Gandhi, and her son Rajiv Gandhi. Monolithic as a political power, Congress supported distinctive rights for Muslims, leading Hindus to assume that the government stood for minority appeasement and pseudosecularism, and to lose confidence in it as a positive social force.

The 1980s brought internal violence. Indira Gandhi was shot by Sikhs and Rajiv Gandhi was killed by Tamils. There is little wonder that India treats secessionist movements with the utmost concern, especially in Kashmir, which it regards as intermingled with Pakistani geostrategic aims.

Domestic struggle has profoundly affected foreign relations. Any regional interference is viewed as endangering internal cohesion. The government was critical of both the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the American decision to build facilities on Diego Garcia and expand its naval presence in the Indian Ocean. It found Pakistani military and economic ties with China as well as the United States less forgivable. From its self image as the guardian of peace on the subcontinent, India interpreted these incursions and alliances as a treacherous threat to its security and position as the dominant regional power.

China remains a security concern. As early as 1954, India thought it could appease China by basically yielding its rights to Tibet. Hope for amicable Sino-Indian relations were dashed

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in 1962 when China seized border territory it felt had been stolen by the British and wrongfully ceded to India.

The Sino-Indian confrontation had a dramatic impact on the Indian military. Nehru, father of the state, was mistrustful of the armed forces. Carrying the banner of peaceful coexistence with neighbors, he provided scant resources to them. Ill-equipped and poorly led, the army suffered an embarrassing defeat in less than a month. China unilaterally withdrew, but not before gobbling up 104,000 square kilometers of Indian territory.

India learned that peaceful coexistence was unlikely without the military might to dissuade aggression. The nation remedied the situation through a buildup—first in conventional arms



Indian artillery firing on guerrilla positions in Kashmir.

AP/Wide World Photos (Saurabh Das)

and then covert nuclear weapons, along with a drive for ballistic missiles. The drive strained relations with China and the United States. Both powers shipped weapons to Pakistan against the ominous prospect of a militarized India. In the face of an unfriendly wind blowing from the north, India moved toward the Soviet camp. In sum, relations with Pakistan was not the only factor that drove confrontation between India and China. Both domestic politics and the relentless push for regional hegemony within India fueled the fire.

### A Peculiar State

Similar post-independence difficulties affected both India and Pakistan. From the outset Pakistan was in worse condition in terms of economic development, overpopulation, and poverty. It was beset by the added problem of being divided in two parts.

With a thousand miles of Indian territory between them, East and West Pakistan were even further split culturally and politically.

The Bengalis of East Pakistan shared a common religion but little else with diverse ethnic groups in the West, the largest being the Punjabis. Political and military power was concentrated in Islamabad despite the greater population density of the East. The whole of East Pakistan constituted one of five provinces and thus had just 20 percent of the seats in parliament. With only 35 percent of the budget, Bengalis felt that Punjabis treated them as a captive market for West Pakistan.

Tensions grew when a catastrophic cyclone struck, followed by an enormous tidal wave, leaving 200,000 dead and a million homeless in 1970.

The government was unable or unwilling to provide effective relief, and separatist tendencies in East Pakistan came to the surface. Repression followed natural disaster in the form of a bloody assault on the Bengali people. Three million East Pakistanis died at the hands of a Pakistani army numbering 70,000 troops. Bengalis resisted with guerrilla warfare, and the conflict took on the proportions of civil war. India intervened on the side of East Pakistan in 1971. After fierce fighting and a half million casualties on both sides, Pakistan surrendered and the independent nation of Bangladesh was born out of East Pakistan. The victory for India was more decisive than the 1965 war with Pakistan, and its national security and regional influence were vastly upgraded.

The 1970–71 clash had Cold War repercussions. Washington continued its economic and military assistance to

Islamabad despite reports of brutality. American leaders denounced Indian intervention and curtailed aid, which drove New Delhi further toward Moscow. But that was not enough to satisfy Pakistan, which had expected direct military intervention. The United States had dispatched a naval force to the Bay of Bengal, which Pakistan characterized as token support in its hour of need. In fact, this naval presence greatly alarmed India, and would invigorate Indo-Soviet relations. Pakistan's craving for support and the limited American response exacerbated fears of continued internal challenges and external pressure from India.

Pakistan, chagrined by the loss of yet another war and its eastern wing, was also disturbed by what it considered repudiation by its allies. The U.S. response to the 1970 war was the last in a long line of disappointments. In 1954 Pakistan aligned itself with the United States for economic and military assistance and became a member of the Central Treaty Organization and the Southeast Asian Treaty Organizations. Islamabad presumed that its alliances with Washington and resulting access to American arms would help to subdue India and institute Islamic rule in South Asia.

That assumption became a nightmare when the United States rushed military aid to India in response to the

### **the main issue is whether Kashmiris should be allowed self-determination**

Chinese invasion in 1962. Subsequently, Pakistan also aligned with China, an odd association given the hostile state of Chinese-American relations. During the 1965 war with India over Kashmir, neither China nor the United States lent assistance because Pakistan was perceived as the aggressor. Washington later reinstated aid. Then, during the 1970–71 Indo-Pakistani war in the former East Pakistan, it again discontinued military aid to both India and Pakistan.

The United States described the termination of arms transfers as even-handed. In fact, though it was not a



Indian destroyer  
*INS Mysore* going on  
alert in Bombay.

AP/Wide World Photos (Sherwin Castro)

major concern to India, it was devastating to Pakistan, which was 100 percent dependent on American equipment while that figure for India was only 10 percent. The Soviet Union continued to supply India. Faced with dwindling provisions, Pakistan had no choice but to accept a cease-fire. India reveled in victory and was pleased that Pakistani military pacts had proven hollow.

The events of 1971 have influenced the foreign policy of Pakistan ever since. Suspicious and aggrieved, defeated once more and abandoned by its allies, Islamabad accepted U.S. aid when it was offered in the seventies and eighties while seeking elsewhere for “genuine” friends to counter Indian regional power. Then, when India exploded an underground nuclear device in a “friendly” test in 1974, the subcontinental nuclear arms race was on.

### **Conflict in Kashmir**

One Western observer likened Indo-Pakistani confrontation in the highlands of Kashmir to two bald men fighting over a comb. That remark reveals a misunderstanding of the nature of the conflict and strategic relationship between the two countries. Only a grasp of the Indian worldview and Pakistani skepticism of Indian security

policy enables one to make sense of nuclear proliferation in South Asia.

When Pakistan achieved independence in 1947, it claimed Kashmir with its predominantly Muslim population. India objected, seeking a buffer to the north against an unstable China, then in the midst of civil war. The Indian government put the question to the provincial ruler of Kashmir, a Muslim, who elected to remain a part of India.

Today the main issue is whether Kashmiris—who live on both sides of the Indo-Pakistani line of control—should be allowed self-determination with regard to forming an independent state. As an initial step, Islamabad favors conducting a plebiscite administered by the United Nations that was originally provided for in a resolution passed in the late 1940s, and that New Delhi agreed to but never honored. If an independent Kashmir were created, Pakistan would exert a strong influence over the Muslim state. For this reason if for no other, India maintains that Kashmiri affairs are an internal matter and will brook no interference.

The Indo-Pakistani conflict took on global dimensions in the sixties and early seventies as both sides lined

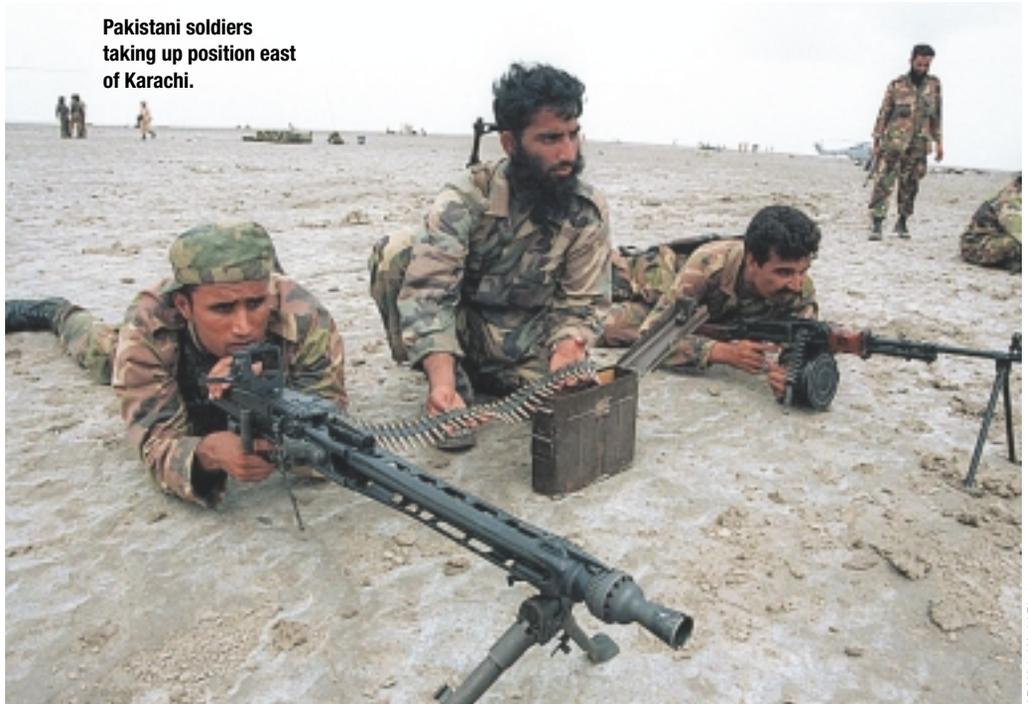
up superpower support. Neither was satisfied with foreign involvement, Pakistan because it lost the wars and India because its goals of nonalignment were derailed. The area continues to attract worldwide concern now that nuclear arms are involved.

After China detonated a nuclear device in 1964, India immediately sought the protection of a nuclear umbrella from the United States and Britain as well as the Soviet Union. Discussions by all parties were conditioned on India signing the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. India declined since it felt the treaty discriminated against non-nuclear states by prohibiting development while having no provision to decrease or even cap the number of nuclear weapons among countries that already possessed them. From the Indian perspective, the treaty was a transparent attempt to block it from a rightful place as a regional leader and participant in world affairs. Vulnerable and ten years behind Beijing, New Delhi defied Western economic and military sanctions and worked feverishly to develop a nuclear capability, culminating in its first nuclear test in 1974.

Indian actions in response to the China factor have led to a more volatile Pakistan factor. Until 1965 Islamabad had not conducted nuclear research or development. But by 1972 it built the first atomic power plant. In 1975, after Indian tests, it began to pursue nuclear arms in earnest. The Pakistanis make no bones today about the fact that they bought everything needed to make the bomb through clandestine acquisition, with 100 percent of materials coming from the West.

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Washington provided \$500 million annually in military and economic assistance to Islamabad. Although aid was contingent on certification of Pakistan's nuclear energy program, verification was little more

**Pakistani soldiers taking up position east of Karachi.**



AP/Wide World Photo

than perfunctory, and the country's geostrategic importance in this period left the United States reluctant to antagonize its most vital ally in the region. Washington downgraded the relationship when the Soviets withdrew and suspended \$564 million in relief in 1991 because of mounting evidence that Islamabad was developing nuclear weapons.

This loss of aid was a blow to Pakistan's economy. Coming prior to the national elections following removal of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto by the military, the termination was perceived as a means to punish her enemies and interfere with internal affairs. The Persian Gulf War further eroded U.S.-Pakistani relations. While the civil government condemned Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and sent troops to Saudi Arabia to protect Islamic holy sites, there was strong popular support for Saddam Hussein, mirrored in the military, due to the widespread perception that the United States had exceeded its U.N. mandate to liberate Kuwait.

Once again feeling betrayed by Washington, and suspecting New Delhi of expanding its regional influence, Islamabad increased military spending. Despite a severely strapped

economy, it spent over a third of national revenues on defense in the 1990s. Moreover, it continued its nuclear program. From 1987 to 1998, its official policy was to defer nuclear readiness, but when India tested, Pakistan felt forced to do the same.

### **The Nuclear Club**

While officially China's ascension as an Asiatic power has driven India's nuclear policy, relations between the two nations have stabilized and led to considerable progress in solving border problems diplomatically. New Delhi seems to have larger strategic goals in mind. Arguably, India believes nuclear weapons are a qualifying instrument for great power status. If the nations of the world are determined to exert international power using nuclear stockpiles, India is determined not to be left out of the club.

China seeks to use economic power to provide punch to its political and military objectives, a strategy solidified with more than \$200 billion in foreign reserves, second only to Japan and more than the United States and Germany combined. By contrast, India



Pakistani-made ballistic missile.

AP/Wide World Photos (Pakistan Army Information Bureau)

treated as an equal partner by the West, in particular by the United States. Islamabad has always felt slighted by American foreign policy as compared to its rival. Finally, as a rejoinder to India, Pakistan will challenge any discussions of Indian veto power on the Security Council unless it is given the same power.

### Prospects for the Future

New Delhi considers global disarmament as the only way of curbing the spread of nuclear weapons. Yet in light of China's emergence as a potential nuclear superpower, return to a nuclear free South Asia is unlikely. Furthermore, China's announced intention to develop the naval power to dominate the South China Sea is further incentive for India to retain a policy of naval expansion in the Indian Ocean and of research and development on nuclear weapons. Pakistan also will not consider denuclearization as long as its neighbor possesses such arms.

India regards pressure exerted by nuclear powers for it to sign the non-proliferation treaty and renounce nuclear weapons development as the height of hypocrisy. Until other powers desist, New Delhi will continue to develop its own arsenal. Nuclear retaliation remains the cornerstone of its strategy to prevent an attack with weapons of mass destruction, including chemical and biological arms. India points out that the United States is an illustration of the benefits of retaining nuclear weapons for defense. For New Delhi, only a colonial and even racist mentality can explain the expectation that other states should forego the influence that is derived from weapons of mass destruction.

Pakistan's nuclear commitment is equally strong. It does not have a policy of no first use to limit employment of nuclear weapons. Taking its lead from the Cold War example, it embraced the opposite strategy. NATO was unwilling to declare no first use in order to deter a conventional attack when the Warsaw Pact had numerical superiority. Pakistan also faces hostile

conventional forces many times larger than its own. The threat of nuclear weapons is therefore an equalizer. The efficacy of this strategy, as Pakistan points out, is proven by the fact that Western Europe was never invaded. Likewise, Islamabad is convinced its nuclear threat averted war with India during the 1990–91 Kashmir uprising.

Although Pakistan's approach imitates NATO strategy, its implementation of strategy does not. Allied nuclear assets were under civilian control during the Cold War. By contrast Islamabad has authorized field commanders to use nuclear weapons against Indian forces in the event of war. This doctrine has a basis in the inability of Islamabad to develop a system sufficiently sophisticated to achieve central command and control of nuclear weapons. Since soldiers in combat are expected to fight as long as they have the means to resist, a commander is more likely than a civilian far removed from the battlefield to use a weapon of last resort. Primitive command and control assets on both sides vastly increase the potential for rapid escalation.

In South Asia, nuclear arms have value beyond their use as weapons or political bargaining chips. Nuclear research and development are seen as symbols of national sovereignty and prestige and a rite of passage from Third World to developed nation status. Both New Delhi and Islamabad find it difficult to make concessions on nuclear arms even if inclined to do so.

But neither nation is so inclined. They have been unwilling to accept limits on their military capabilities or discuss restrictions for the future. Treaties and confidence-building efforts have not seriously altered military rivalry, stabilized nuclear competition, or curbed aggressiveness between India and Pakistan. The concept of arms control plays no significant role in shaping defense policy in South Asia. Absent radical shifts in the domestic or external conditions of these two countries, the nuclear standoff on the subcontinent will be with us for a long time to come.

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lacks the economic muscle to influence global events; but the East-West political dynamics of the Cold War have not been lost. Indian leaders realize that while the Soviet Union had a much weaker economy than Western

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countries, it commanded international leverage with the nuclear trump card.

Indian strategic ambitions have not advanced beyond the traditional goals of nonalignment, regional cooperation, and global disarmament. However, it does expect political advantages from its nuclear status. New Delhi will no longer accept being excluded from equal membership in the nonproliferation structure.

Islamabad, disappointed with the tepid support of its military alliances in the past, does not trust any power to provide it with a nuclear deterrent. So when India tested, it was inevitable that Pakistan would follow suit. Since then, its foreign policy, like India's, has reflected greater scope. As an emergent nuclear power, Pakistan demands to be