

Walk Softly and Look Ahead in Nuclear South Asia

By Zia Mian

Before September 11, South Asia's problems loomed large. The region, with over a billion people, a history of war, rising religious militancy, newly tested nuclear weapons, and a get-tough mood, was on the brink of instability. Adding to South Asia's long list of troubles is the U.S. war against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. Hasty U.S. actions could deepen the problems facing South Asia. Over the long term, the U.S. has the opportunity to foster regional stability—but only if it pursues a different set of policies in the region.

The risks are highest in Pakistan, where the U.S. bombing campaign opened the door for Pakistan's radical Islamist groups, with their history of anti-Americanism and ties to the Taliban. Raising the political stakes internally, radical Islamists have taken to the streets of Pakistan in ever greater numbers. On the border with Afghanistan, Pakistan's Pashtun ethnic group, which is sympathetic to the Taliban, has added fuel to the fire for tens of thousands who have massed on the border to join the Taliban. These repercussions of the U.S. bombing seriously challenge the decision of Pakistan's leader, General Musharraf, to support the United States.

Radical Islamists have not yet been able to mobilize widespread public action despite gaining some support after the bombing began. However, time is on their side. The longer the U.S. keeps bombing, the more civilians will be killed, the worse the humanitarian and refugee crisis will become, and the more support they gain. Musharraf and the army may hold the line in Pakistan, using force if they have to, but the radical Islamists will come out politically strengthened. Musharraf could win the political battle in the short term but lose the war.

There is another pressing danger with one of Afghanistan's other neighbors: India. After

September 11, India rushed to offer political and military support to the U.S., urging it to target Pakistani-supported Islamic militants fighting in Kashmir as part of the war against terrorism. With the U.S. courting Pakistan, and with the Pakistani militants continuing their attacks in Kashmir, India is now trying a more dangerous gambit. It recently ended a 10-month-long effective ceasefire and started shelling Pakistani forces across the border that divides Kashmir. There are demands and threats to attack militant training camps and bases in Pakistan. Any such attack could trigger a South Asian war.

A related danger concerns the presence of nuclear weapons in South Asia. The May 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan put the world on watch. The international community used sanctions to pressure both countries to exercise restraint, and to signal a refusal to accept new nuclear weapons states. But, in its search for support in the region, the Bush administration has let go the already waning U.S. hopes to reverse the nuclearization of South Asia. The U.S. is lifting sanctions and offering economic and military assistance for both India and Pakistan.

India and Pakistan may return with renewed vigor to their conventional and nuclear arms race. India seeks U.S. weapons to add to its recent \$4 billion Russian arms deal and \$2 billion Israeli deal. Pakistan's limited funds have stalled its purchases. With political and economic pressures eased, both sides may speed deployment of their nuclear warheads. South Asia may escape the frying pan of terrorism only to fall into the nuclear fire. Along with a ban on arms sales to the region, the U.S. must return with renewed commitment to nuclear disarmament efforts.

These threats require urgent action. The U.S. should stop bombing and strengthen humanitarian relief efforts in Afghanistan. Calling in UN Secretary General and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Kofi Annan, showing him the evidence, and asking him to mediate with the Taliban for a hand-over of Osama bin Laden for trial would do more than acknowledge the vital role of the United Nations. It

would strengthen the hand of Pakistan's government against the militants. With unilateral force no longer the order of the day, the U.S. could then forcefully press Pakistan to end its support for the militants fighting in Kashmir, to restrain India, and begin working with the international community to resolve the long-running Kashmir dispute.

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