

Mediating Kashmir: A Bridge Too Far

About a year ago, militants opposed to India's rule over a portion of the Kashmir territory carried out two deadly attacks on Indian targets, including the nation's parliament. Nearly one million Indian and Pakistani troops subsequently mobilized along the shared international border and the line of control (LOC) in Kashmir, reaching a peak in May–June 2002. U.S. officials shuttled back and forth from the subcontinent to avert war while U.S. soldiers, with Pakistani assistance, searched for Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists on the nearby Afghan-Pakistani border. Although tensions did not escalate any further, and both India and Pakistan have recently announced plans to scale back deployments along their international border, the momentarily quiescent crisis could still revive if militants strike again.

Ostensibly, the U.S. stake in the subcontinent's affairs, U.S. influence, and Pakistan's and India's willingness to accept U.S. mediation appear to be greater than ever. These factors have combined to spur calls in the United States and elsewhere for Washington to move from 50-odd years of episodic crisis management and to conduct sustained mediation to solve the subcontinent's conflict.¹ These calls, however well intentioned, are misguided.

Although greater now than in the past, the dangers and costs of the conflict's persistence, the extent of U.S. influence, and Indian and Pakistani receptivity to U.S. mediation are all largely overstated. U.S. interests in Kashmir and the prospect of achieving a compromise are at best debatable. Perhaps most problematic of all is the widespread misperception that Kashmir is the lone cause of hostilities between India and Pakistan when, in fact,

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settlement of the Kashmir dispute would not resolve the fundamental causes of enmity on the subcontinent. Irreconcilable nationalisms, the ever-increasing power asymmetry between India and Pakistan, and India's desire for preeminence on the subcontinent as well as Pakistan's determination to prevent it would still prevail. If nothing more is done to address these underlying, fundamental tensions, U.S. mediation in Kashmir will ultimately prove meaningless. In fact, attempts at mediation could even further exacerbate such animosities, particularly because it risks alienating Pakistan—the side that most seeks external intervention but that can least afford compromise because the structure of any reasonable compromise on Kashmir would favor India.

Rather than simply address the issue of Kashmir alone, the United States could alternatively move beyond Kashmir to ensure Pakistan's security while pursuing a transformed relationship with India. Such a policy, however, would require a massive U.S. commitment of diplomacy, cash, security guarantees, military equipment, and even possibly military presence. Neither the profound commitment necessary to ensure Pakistan's security nor the efforts required to help achieve a compromise in Kashmir is justified by U.S. interests in India or Pakistan or in their amity. Episodic crisis management and behind-the-scenes facilitation, however cumbersome and unsatisfying, are feasible, effective, and more commensurate with U.S. interests.

Estimating the Costs of Chronic Conflict

India and Pakistan have fought three wars, two of which were conducted because of Kashmir, since their independence in 1947. As far as wars go, they were short, restrained, and not terribly bloody. Since the Kashmiri insurgency started in the late 1980s, more than a decade of persistent conflict has been punctuated by recurrent crisis, including the 1999 Kargil incident and the 2002 conflict described earlier. On each occasion, the United States has been drawn in. Today, crises involving Kashmir seem more frequent, bloody, uncompromising, and potentially catastrophic because of India's and Pakistan's overt demonstrations of nuclear capabilities in May 1998 and their shared penchant for brinkmanship.

With chauvinism, generational change, and polarization on the rise in both societies, it is reasonable to wonder whether the relative restraints that characterized past conflict may continue to be observed. Understandably, the nuclear risks of a Kashmir crisis induce the most anxiety despite the widespread questioning of the likelihood of nuclear war. Although the United States and the West may possibly overstate the threat of nuclear war, South Asia might underestimate it. At a minimum, a large number of South

Asian citizens are uninformed about it. Divergent risk assessments about the likelihood of nuclear war do not, however, prevent publics or policymakers from considering the humanitarian costs and strategic implications of it, thus making the nuclear threat a top concern regardless.

Similarly, the costs of the Kashmir conflict are said to be increasingly unbearable for all involved. Some 40,000 lives have been lost since the insurgency began in 1989. The governments have spent hundreds of millions of rupees on feeding and fighting the conflict rather than on alleviating poverty and improving literacy and health programs for the staggering number of poor in India and Pakistan. As for wider geopolitical costs, the Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir complicates U.S. efforts to pursue productive relations simultaneously with both countries, diverts energies to managing crises, and impinges on U.S. cooperation with India and Pakistan on broader U.S. objectives, especially the war on terrorism. The Kashmiri albatross thwarts India's global ambitions while it undermines Pakistan's state and society as the proliferation of guns, violence, and radicalism escalates over time. The Kashmiris, of course, bear the brunt of the pain.

The dangers and costs of the Kashmir conflict's persistence are clearly sobering, but at the same time, they should not be overdrawn, especially by the United States as it configures its role on the subcontinent. Additional factors must be considered. First, Pakistan's and India's brinkmanship is not wild-eyed but designed to meet policy objectives. Pakistan, as the weaker state in the bilateral relationship, ratchets up tensions over Kashmir to garner external (mainly U.S.) pressure on India to come to the bargaining table. India uses coercive diplomacy to bring U.S. pressure to bear on Pakistan to halt support for militants and their infiltration into Kashmir. Both states seek to achieve their ends without war: Pakistan because it might lose, India because it might not win. Neither country has the capabilities or foreign support necessary to engage in a long, drawn-out, formal conflict. In using brinkmanship, both India and Pakistan ultimately want to be held back while having the United States push their interests forward.

Furthermore, certain additional parties find tensions useful as well. Militants use attacks not only to try to loosen India's grip on Kashmir but also to warn Pakistan against diminishing its commitment to their cause. Heightened tensions help outside parties, including the United States, to leverage economic and diplomatic influence and to lay claims to the attention, energy, and resources of bureaucracies and leaders. In other words, India and

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Pakistan can and often do manipulate tensions carefully and creatively, and the United States should not be guided by vanity into thinking that it is the only—or even the most important—bulwark against war between them.

In the past year's crisis, the militants' attacks on the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly in Srinagar and on India's national parliament complicated Indo-Pakistani relations. India seized the opportunity to emphasize terrorism in the Kashmir dispute (minimizing its own contributing

political lapses), link the militants operating in Kashmir to Al Qaeda and the Taliban, and isolate and punish Pakistan as the common nexus of terrorism in Kashmir and Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorism against the United States. Pakistan sought to insulate its support for Kashmiri militants from its support for the United States against Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists, minimizing linkages between the two. Had the militants not carried

Attempts at mediation could even further exacerbate regional animosities.

out their attacks or had India and Pakistan not tried to capitalize on the new situation, the Kashmir dispute might be percolating along today as it has for the past decade, with the United States periodically responding to regional flare-ups.

Although nuclear war on the subcontinent would tragically result in millions of casualties, U.S. policymakers must be careful not to exaggerate negative implications. The prospect of nuclear war cannot be the sole basis of U.S. policy amongst other competing interests, values, and costs for two reasons. First, South Asia presents a staggering series of ongoing, large-scale humanitarian challenges that also demand attention. Hundreds of millions of people live below an already low poverty line. Thousands die prematurely due to pollution alone. Second, subcontinental nuclear war will not necessarily undermine global stability. The world feared India's and Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998 because they could set off a chain reaction of nuclear acquisition and testing elsewhere. They did not.

The lessons drawn by other countries involved in territorial, historical, and nationalist disputes need not be that they too should acquire, threaten, or use nuclear weapons to solve problems with their neighbors. Moreover, a nuclear exchange on the subcontinent is at least as likely to convince countries of the futility of nuclear weapons and thereby give a renewed impetus to nonproliferation efforts. In any event, resolution of the Kashmir issue will not eliminate the possibility of nuclear war on the subcontinent. It would certainly remove a flash point where calculated or inadvertent use of nuclear weapons could occur, but while extant the underlying antagonisms,

asymmetries, and nuclear capabilities on the subcontinent sustain the possibility of nuclear war between the two states.

Resolution of conflict in Kashmir is increasingly regarded as the magic formula to remedying all of the subcontinent's ills, as well as enabling the United States to engage the region more productively. No doubt the lives, money, energy, and reputation lost in Kashmir undermine India's and Pakistan's governance, constrain their full potential, and complicate U.S. relations with the region. But pressing for resolution in Kashmir as a necessary precursor to addressing these challenges erroneously identifies Kashmir as their root or dominant cause and provides a ready excuse to both countries, allowing them to believe that their myriad problems derive only from each other and not from themselves.

Ultimately, one measure of the burden of costs is the extent of popular resistance to bearing them. Despite what Americans might think, the costs of the Kashmir conflict register weakly in India and Pakistan. The subcontinent has no anti-Vietnam War-like peace demonstrations or Indian and Pakistani equivalents of Russian mothers demanding their sons be brought home from Chechnya. Alas, even if the costs of conflict grow, Indians and Pakistanis appear willing to bear any burden and pay any price for their positions on Kashmir.

Measuring U.S. Mediation Potential

A beguiling but illusory notion is that increased U.S. engagement with the subcontinent after September 11 makes sustained U.S. mediation to resolve the dispute in Kashmir more feasible. The supposed opportunity for this mediation comes not only from enhanced U.S. leverage but also heightened receptivity from Pakistan and—departing from the past—India. Signs of U.S. influence and centrality are manifold. The United States, which has troops on the subcontinent for the first time since World War II, is reviving relations with Pakistan while simultaneously working to improve its relationship with India. Islamabad and New Delhi deal with each other through Washington, as Pakistan's promises to Washington (not India) to curb Kashmir infiltration and India's move to de-escalate after discussions with Washington (not Pakistan) demonstrated.

But it is precisely the pivotal role of the United States that ironically inhibits its successful mediation even as it perfectly positions it to do so. Even a powerful mediator must have malleable, receptive parties. In India and Pakistan, the United States does not. While Pakistan, as the weaker state on the subcontinent, has long sought external mediation to help resolve the Kashmir conflict, India, as the strongest state, has traditionally resisted any external involvement, reflecting its ability to tolerate the status quo.

Two particular aspects of current Indian policy, however, deviate from previous stances toward U.S. mediation. First, India has essentially recently relied on the United States to wring commitments from Pakistan to end infiltration permanently and then to verify its termination. Second, New Delhi's heightened desire to build a deeper relationship with the United States might imply that India would accommodate an even greater U.S. role in Kashmir and in Indo-Pakistani relations than in the past. Reading too much into these changes, however, is overly optimistic. India is also recently troubled by the closer U.S. relationship with Pakistan; peeved at U.S. calls for international observation of Kashmir's elections and the release of Kashmiri politicians from prison; resentful at having to pressure Washington to recognize Kashmiri groups as terrorists; and suspicious that Washington will not hold President Pervez Musharraf to his pledge to end infiltration permanently.

Historically more enthusiastic about third-party intervention, Pakistani receptivity has limits as well. Both the continuous U.S. pressure for a Pakistani pledge to end infiltration permanently and its increasingly frequent identification of Pakistan's "freedom fighters" as militants or even terrorists have largely undercut Pakistan's faith in the United States, as has the widespread suspicion in Pakistan that the United States has been complicit in India's coercive diplomacy since December 2001. Even worse, Pakistanis in and out of government feel that the Kashmir dispute has been cast as part of the global war on terrorism rather than as its own freedom struggle. In recent months, Pakistan's position on Kashmir has hardened as it realizes that any U.S.-led solution would mean that Islamabad would have to compromise, which it is just currently unable to do.

India's and Pakistan's equally shared grievances over the U.S. role in the Kashmir dispute are a good sign that the United States is well placed to mediate between the two. But these grievances convey even more clearly that neither Islamabad nor New Delhi is ready to receive U.S. mediation.

Debunking the Kashmir Myth

The precise contours of a compromise solution to conflict in Kashmir are, of course, uncertain. There are many proposed resolutions from which to choose; new ones could still be devised, but the present status of respectively held territory, the sanctity of the LOC, and autonomy likely must be essential components. These three issues are at the heart of the Kashmir dispute. India has long been amenable to sanctifying the status quo legally by establishing the LOC as an internationally recognized border between India and Pakistan, thereby ending mutual claims on their respectively

held portions. Pakistan has not. Just this past September, Musharraf reiterated Pakistan's position that the LOC is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Pakistan's dilemma has many causes. First, Kashmir is central to Pakistan's national identity as the home of the subcontinent's Muslims as well as the country's most powerful institution, the army. Accepting a compromise in Kashmir would weaken both. The separation of Muslim East Pakistan (today Bangladesh) in 1971 undermined Pakistan's national identity and made Kashmir's resonance to Pakistani nationalism even more crucial than earlier. For India, on the other hand, Kashmir has been an important but not central part of its identity. India's socialist, secularist, democratic, and nonaligned aspirations—the so-called Nehruvian consensus—have made for a more malleable and broad national identity. India's secularist and democratic aspirations could be met by retaining the portion of Kashmir it currently holds, including the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley. As India's only Muslim-majority state, the Indian government uses Kashmir to demonstrate that Muslims can be part of a Hindu-majority India within a secular and democratic framework. Retaining all of Kashmir is less of a priority for India than for Pakistan although, as India's Nehruvian consensus frays and the tide of Hindu nationalist politics continues to rise, India may become less willing to compromise than it has been in the past.

Second, the ongoing crisis in Kashmir allows Pakistan to assert a symbolic kind of parity with India, even greater than that afforded by possession of nuclear weapons. Kashmir is essentially the hyphen in the Indo-Pakistani relationship; so long as the dispute remains, it provides Islamabad with a means to pressure New Delhi and presents a kind of physical limit to India's quest for regional preeminence. Settlement, therefore, would only further compound Pakistan's fear of the growing power asymmetry on the subcontinent and erode its claim on external attention.

Finally, the Kashmiri freedom struggle is crucial to Musharraf's campaign to win domestic support for his government's cooperation with the United States on counterterrorism issues. Already called "Busharraf" by Pakistanis who feel he has worked too closely with U.S. leaders, the Kashmir conflict provides the Pakistani president with an arena where he can fight for the freedom of Muslims against a great power—more closely resembling Yasser Arafat's role than that of George W. Bush. U.S. pressure on Pakistan to

Reducing the prospect of nuclear war cannot be the sole basis of U.S. policy.

abandon the fight for Kashmir permanently—distinct from prior U.S. calls for Pakistan to end infiltration into the territory permanently—would further undermine Pakistani support for the United States among moderate secularists as well as extremists. The bottom line is that compromise in Kashmir is not in Pakistan's interests because Pakistan has more at stake. Unless the parties do something greater and more comprehensive to address the power asymmetry on the subcontinent, any kind of compromise—U.S.-led or not—will remain insufficient from Pakistan's point of view.

Defining U.S. Interests in Mediation

U.S. interests in the Kashmir dispute per se are limited. Compared to other flash points, Kashmir's resonance for the United States is faint at this stage. Although various groups seek to influence the U.S. government's stance and Americans' perceptions on the issue, Kashmir's future is not the cause of any unified, powerful lobby in U.S. politics nor is Kashmir's fate the subject of U.S. law. The dispute is largely unfamiliar to most Americans and to all but a few specialists in the government. Kashmir contains no resources that the United States or its allies need. Resolution of the conflict does not involve clear ideological values dear to the United States. U.S. allies and close friends are not clamoring for its end. The prospect of another power displacing U.S. centrality on the subcontinent and dealing with the dispute to the detriment of U.S. interests is negligible. The dispute occasionally detracts from other U.S. priorities but not unsustainably so. U.S. credibility depends far more heavily on the outcome of other flash points, and long-standing U.S. commitments are not at stake. The Kashmir dispute is not equivalent to the cross-strait quandary of Taiwan nor is Kashmir's LOC the Korean DMZ. Simply put, the United States does not have a dog in the Kashmir fight.

But if Kashmir specifically is not in U.S. interests, might the dispute's effects on U.S. relations with India and Pakistan or on wider U.S. strategic objectives be significant? Again, the relevance of resolving the Kashmir dispute, as opposed to managing it, should not be overplayed. The current, critical U.S. strategic imperative influenced by the Kashmir dispute is the capture of Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists. As Indo-Pakistani war tensions heightened this past summer, for example, Pakistan threatened to redeploy its forces working with the United States from the Afghan-Pakistani border in the west to the border with India in the east. Whether the redeployment, if actually carried out, would have threatened U.S. goals in the war on terror is questionable. Moreover, Pakistan and its leadership is realistically dependent upon the United States and does not have much room to maneuver in

its relations with Washington, especially when all sources of terrorism became potential U.S. targets after September 11. Throughout the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the Cold War, the United States pursued a core strategic interest—getting the Soviets to withdraw—with relative success while navigating and managing, rather than resolving, Indo-Pakistani tensions or the Kashmir dispute. The global war on terrorism need not be different.

The next question to address, then, is whether resolution in Kashmir would advance U.S. interests with Pakistan and India. Would an end to the Kashmir dispute enable Pakistan to emerge as a stable, moderate, democratic partner of the United States? Would peace in Kashmir help transform U.S. relations with India? Would settlement of the Kashmir problem end age-old enmity between India and Pakistan, increasing stability on the subcontinent as a whole?

Not likely. Kashmir's bearing on U.S. bilateral relations with India and with Pakistan is not great. In fact, pushing for a Kashmir settlement in the current context could make relations worse. The Bush administration's initial determination to transform U.S. relations with India upon entering office was not contingent on resolution in Kashmir, and after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Kashmir conflict was not linked to counterterrorism efforts.

If the United States should choose to favor one country's position on the dispute, relations with the other country would be tainted, and the decision would undermine original peace-building intentions by further exacerbating regional rivalry. Favoring one country over another would also prove insufficient for improving relations with the favored country. In the highly improbable likelihood that the United States should decide that all of Kashmir should belong to Pakistan, for example, it would not necessarily follow that anti-American sentiment in Pakistan would dissipate or that non-aid dependent economic ties would flourish.

In the equally improbable possibility that the United States decides that India should have total claim to Kashmir, the expectation that Washington and New Delhi would share strategic objectives (e.g., India would jettison strategic autonomy and join a U.S. alliance) and expand economic ties beyond their current paltry level is unreasonable. In either case, India and Pakistan will continue to possess nuclear weapons, which will continue to inhibit U.S. relations with the two countries. Believing that resolution of the Kashmir conflict in either country's favor would fix U.S. problems or help achieve U.S. ambitions vis-à-vis the two countries falls prey to the Kashmir myth.

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Sticking with Episodic Crisis Management

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If the United States wanted to fashion a Kashmir compromise palatable to Pakistan by providing Islamabad with generous economic aid, as well as conventional military assistance or even a security guarantee, would it work? Such an approach would not only address Kashmir but also the broader power asymmetry on the subcontinent. India might be amenable to such an arrangement if U.S. support helped Pakistan feel secure while the United States pushed Islamabad to end its support for the Kashmiri militancy completely, marginalize its domestic extremists, stabilize its economy, and establish a sustainable democracy. In essence, U.S. protection of Pakistan would also serve as a restraint, allowing for the development of a new and improved U.S. relationship with India, including military sales, technology transfers, and economic cooperation.

Even if feasible—and with no assurance of that—would such a massive commitment of U.S. government energy, diplomacy, funds, and attention be worthwhile? Not now. Although U.S. interests vis-à-vis India and Pakistan are greater than U.S. interests in Kashmir, they are still not great enough to offset the costs of addressing the subcontinent's underlying problems. Initiating U.S. protection of Pakistan would lock the United States into an extremely expensive and relentless commitment to managing relations between two countries whose economic, political, and strategic significance to the United States is limited.

In an era when Washington strives to find solutions to international challenges rather than merely manage them, episodic crisis management might seem an unsatisfying sop—even an abdication of bold leadership. Yet, crisis management, as cumbersome as it might seem, saves the United States from making promises it cannot keep, from making a commitment whose costs outweigh the benefits, and ultimately from getting hitched to a region with a deeply troubled outlook and leadership who cannot and do not really wish to deliver the kinds of relationships the United States wants and needs. Calibrating levels and types of engagement with interests is a tricky and dynamic challenge. Currently, U.S. interests do not call for and will not be served by sorting out the subcontinent's most basic problems.

U.S. mediation toward resolution of the conflict in Kashmir would be an insufficient solution to subcontinental conflict between India and Pakistan, and the United States has good reasons not to go that far, much less move

to address the power asymmetry and manage the subcontinent's competing interests. As recently as August 2002, U.S. deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage declared, "We cannot impose the solution, would not impose the solution, could not impose the solution."² Nor should we.

Notes

1. See Edward Luce, "An Indian summer: The Bush administration now believes that the spectre of a nuclear war in South Asia outweighs the risks of playing a broker to India and Pakistan over Kashmir," *Financial Times*, July 2, 2002.
2. "USA's Armitage says his country not trying to impose Pakistan-India solution," *BBC Monitoring South Asia*, August 25, 2002.

