
The enduring hostility between India and Pakistan, which centres on the disputed status of Kashmir and is amplified by a sometimes virulent rhetoric of hatred on both sides, has given rise to recurrent crises. For a long time, however, South Asia remained a backwater in international affairs and the outside world paid little attention to the region. But all this has changed since the two countries became declared nuclear states, following the tests that each carried out in 1998. President Clinton argued famously that “the Indian subcontinent and the Line of Control on Kashmir” might be “the most dangerous place in the world today,” and subsequent events have served to confirm that judgment. The prospects for permanent peace between India and Pakistan are of the utmost concern, therefore, and this book, by three of the leading security specialists from the two countries and from the United States, will be quarried for insights.

The book brings together the three authors’ studies (independently published) of four crises: the “Brasstacks crisis” of 1986-1987 that followed from Indian military manoeuvres; the “compound crisis” of 1990 that came about as result of turmoil in Kashmir; the limited war that took place around Kargil in 1999, as a result of Pakistani incursions; and the border confrontation of 2001-2002 that followed a terrorist attack on the Indian parliament. The last was treated so seriously that a large number of diplomats were withdrawn from Delhi for several months. These four crisis events provide the material for a sustained analysis of the security relations of India and Pakistan, and then of the peace process that got underway in 2003, when Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee extended “a hand of friendship” to Pakistan.

The text is extremely cautious, weighing arguments on the one hand and on the other, to the point that at times the reader is left feeling baffled as to quite what the authors are concluding. They pronounce themselves, finally, “optimistic” even though they say that “recent events do not bode well for the future” (221). The book was sent to the press late in 2007, and much, of course, has happened since then. The two essential conclusions are that “strategically, the Kargil crisis and the border confrontation crisis have taught both countries that they cannot gain their political objectives—including a resolution of the long-enduring Kashmir dispute—by force of arms. The state of nuclear deterrence now existing between them as a result of their nuclear tests effectively foreclosed the military option”; and “on the pessimistic side, the current peace process is arguably brittle and ephemeral, if the past history of India–Pakistan relations is any guide. A single dramatic act of violence on a high-value economic or political target, especially if it evokes
strong emotional sentiments, could derail the process” (212). With regard to the latter conclusion, we might perhaps take heart from the measured response of the Indian government to the terrorist attack on Mumbai in November 2008—which was certainly directed at a target of enormous symbolic significance—and from the failure of the opposition BJP to gain any electoral advantage by playing the “Congress government is soft on security” card. But I have found continuing pessimism in recent conversations with senior diplomats serving in Delhi.

The reason for the sometimes tortuous arguments of the book, and for diplomatic pessimism about the present situation, has to do with what Chari, Cheema and Cohen conclude about the process of decision making on security matters on both sides. “The reassuring thesis that nuclear weapons bring an era of stability is partly offset,” they say, “by the readiness of leaders in both countries to indulge in rhetoric, by the concentration of power in the area of national security and foreign policy, and by the absence of checks and balances in the decision-making processes of both states” (216). They comment, too, that “the military and political leaderships of both countries have learned little from past crises and nothing from the crises of other states” (215). Both are “still learning to be nuclear states.” Thus the authors conclude that “the lack of institutional structures and the narrowness of the present arrangements in both countries for decisions related to nuclear security do not bode well for crisis stability if the present dialogue should falter” (217). Perhaps there is a glimmer of hope in the fact that in spite of the stresses to which it has been subject as a result of the Mumbai attack, and the inconsistent Pakistani response, a dialogue has been kept going. The intensity of media coverage and the continuing activity of civil society groups in both India and Pakistan contribute significantly to continuing engagement, while there are also indications in the approaches of the Obama administration of the development of a strategic focus on South Asia on the part of the United States, in place of what these authors see as having been only a “tactical” involvement in the past.

This is an important book, worthy of a wide readership.

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