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Nuclear folly clouds India-Pakistan crisis

Prestige. Power. Security. The people of India and Pakistan were promised all that, plus freedom from fear, when their governments test-fired nuclear bombs three years ago. It hasn't turned out that way.

Both countries now stand at the brink of war following a Dec. 13 terror attack on India's parliament in which 14 died. India blames Kashmiri separatists backed by Pakistan's security services. Pakistan denies it.

Though the South Asian rivals have fought three wars since 1947, the next could prove far more ruinous.

By arming with nuclear weapons, then allowing themselves to be goaded into a crisis by terrorists, India and Pakistan have become an exponentially greater threat not only to each other but also to South Asia and the world. Dreadful as the Dec. 13 attack was, it does not legitimize war, much less nuclear war.

India's worrisome military buildup may be nothing more than a gambit to get Washington to press Islamabad to shut down the terrorists.

But Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee must give Pakistan's Gen. Pervez Musharraf some time to crack down, far harder than he has, on provocateurs like the Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba groups. Musharraf ended Pakistan's support for the Taliban and Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, and he should shut down anti-India groups.

Vajpayee, who implausibly claims that "war is being thrust on us," must know that bellicose threats will only provoke more tension, making it harder for Musharraf to crack down. Vajpayee is wrong to reject talks to resolve the dispute.

As this crisis sorts itself out India's 1 billion people and Pakistan's 140 million have an occasion to ponder where their endless rivalry is taking them.

Kashmir need not be an eternal irritant. Its people crave peace.

Moreover, nuclear weapons are a costly folly. At low numbers they are destabilizing, because each side has an incentive to strike with them, lest they be "taken out" by the other. And they give generals overmuch influence on politicians.

Having been seduced by nuclear weapons, there's no easy escape from the instability they occasion.

But Indians and Pakistanis must now see the need to improve the tone of their political discourse, and military communications. They need better safeguards against the use of these weapons. And they should share confidence-building information on military movements and weapons tests.

Better yet, moderates on both sides might draw wisdom from this latest near-death experience. Nuclear bombs do not offer security, only anxiety. They are weapons no one needs.

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