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Any mistake can trigger a nuclear war

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 27 (UPI) -- India and Pakistan are not ready to fight another war. At least not yet. Leaders on both sides want to take their nations as close to a war as possible without actually fighting it. By doing so, they hope to force the other to capitulate.

The objectives are obvious. India wants to settle the Kashmir issue. Pakistan does not want to settle this 53-year old dispute at this stage when India is in a better position to influence the outcome. Instead it wants to weather the storm and seek a solution when it is in a position to negotiate a more favorable deal with India.

However, such eyeball-to-eyeball situation is always fraught with dangers. Indian and Pakistani leaders may not want a war yet but such excitement and tensions always increase the chance of an accidental war. In a situation like this even a minor incident can lead to, what both governments call the "unthinkable," a nuclear catastrophe.

The current crisis in the Subcontinent is linked to the Sept. 11 terror attacks in the United States. The Indians believe that the 9/11 tragedy has created a strong dislike in the world for guerrilla wars and armed struggles. They want to take advantage of this atmosphere to end insurgency in Kashmir where, according to one estimate, more than 30,000 people have been killed in clashes between Pakistan-backed militants and Indian security forces during the last 10 years.

This is why India responded so quickly and strongly against the Sept. 11 terror attacks, offering logistical support and even military bases to U.S. forces for operations into Afghanistan.

By doing so, India hoped to isolate Pakistan, a nation that helped the Taliban militia capture Kabul and remain in power for more than five years. Since several Kashmiri militant groups were trained by the Taliban and al Qaida network of Osama bin Laden, the Indians hoped that with some efforts they could turn the war against the Afghan and Arab terrorists into a war against the Kashmiri militants too.

The Indians were further encouraged when a U.S. bomb hit a building in Kabul, killing 16 fighters of Lashkar-i-Toiba, one of the two groups New Delhi blames for attacking the Indian parliament on Dec. 13.

But they were surprised and annoyed when Pakistan changed its Afghan policy overnight, dumped its Taliban allies and offered military bases to the United States for operations against the Taliban.

To India's dismay, Washington not only accepted Pakistan's offer but also removed economic and military sanctions imposed after the May 1998 nuclear tests by the two South Asian neighbors. Washington further annoyed India by also removing the so-called democracy sanctions imposed on Pakistan when President Gen. Pervez Musharraf toppled former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in October 1999.

Disappointed that Pakistan was so easily able to walk out of a situation that India hoped to exploit for its benefit, New Delhi continued to remind the world that "militants in Kashmir are also terrorists."

"We refuse to accept this distinction between terrorists on Pakistan's western border (Afghanistan) and those on

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its eastern border (Kashmir). Terrorists are terrorists," says India's Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh.

As the Americans crushed the Taliban and al Qaida and installed a new government in Kabul, the Indians felt that the U.S.-led forces may pull out of the region without helping them crush "the Kashmiri terrorists," as India's former foreign secretary, S. K. Singh said.

The Dec. 13 suicide attack on the Indian parliament rekindled India's hopes. India's parliament is recognized as a symbol of democracy around the world. As the legislative body of the world's largest democracy, it enjoys a universal respect. An attack on this symbol of political stability was condemned across the globe.

Aware of its symbolic importance, the Indians decide to use the attack on their parliament to portray Kashmiri militants and their Pakistani backers as terrorists.

Demanding that Pakistan ban Lashkar and Jaish-i-Mohammed, the other group allegedly involved in the Dec. 13 attack, and arrest their leaders, India recalled its ambassador from Islamabad. It also decided to sever rail and road links with Pakistan and later banned Pakistani airlines from flying over its territory.

India also decided to halve its diplomatic staff in Islamabad and asked Pakistan also to do the same. It also banned Pakistani diplomats from traveling outside New Delhi.

Combining its diplomatic offensive with military maneuvers, India's Defense Minister George Fernandes reported moving tens of thousands of troops and "strategic missiles" along its border with Pakistan. "Strategic missiles" are capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

India's military and diplomatic offensive put Pakistan on the defensive. It took away the initiative from Pakistan and forced it to merely react to Indian moves.

Pakistan copied India in slapping similar restrictions on the Indian mission in Islamabad. It also imitated India in banning Indian airlines from flying over Pakistan.

Pakistan also was forced to move thousands of troops and "strategic weapons" to the Indian border. In doing so, it informed the United States that it may no longer be able to keep its troops along the Afghan border deployed there to catch al Qaida and Taliban fugitives.

Most of these measures will hurt Pakistan more than they will hurt India. Indian airlines do not fly over Pakistan but the Pakistan International flies over India. Now it will have to fly hundreds of extra miles for destinations in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

The Indian restriction was so effective that Pakistan had to seek exemption from India to allow its president to fly over to Nepal next month for attending a regional summit conference.

Similarly, travel restrictions hurt the Muslims of the Subcontinent more than they hurt India's majority Hindus. India has almost 200 million Muslims. Many of them have relations in Pakistan. Travel restrictions will prevent them from visiting each other.

India also has another card to play. It has already said that it is reconsidering the Sindh Basin Agreement that allows unrestricted flow of Indus and one of its tributaries to Pakistan. If India decides to cancel this agreement and stops the rivers from flowing into Pakistan it will play havoc with Pakistan's agriculture-based economy.

Seen against this backdrop, it seems that Pakistan has few options against India and fewer sympathizers around the world.

India has made it obvious that it will continue to increase its pressure on Pakistan unless Islamabad, 1) bans Kashmiri militant groups, 2) arrests their leaders, and 3) puts an end to armed struggle in Kashmir.

Pakistan can either accept this demand or go for the obvious, i.e. a war. Many in Pakistan realize that this time a war with India will not be as "civilized" as the wars of 1965 and 1971 when both sides avoided civilian targets.

