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Mar 05, 2019 by **Rob Asghar**

The India-Pakistan Dilemma: When the People Want a Fight, They Get a Fight ^[1]

When the people are crazy, a half-crazed politician can go to bed at night convinced he or she is a moderate.

Of course, because the world's oldest sport is mocking the political class, experts love to blame leaders for making their followers crazy—especially for exploiting their craziness for personal gain. But it's always more symbiotic than that. Most leaders choose, as a practical matter, to ride the high waves of public anger rather than to get swept away by them.

That brings us to Pakistan and India: two nations separated at birth and bred for conflict, as they once again moved toward fisticuffs position, albeit with some hope that last week's crisis may be passing. Observers inside and outside those countries like to assign blame for their multi-generational conflict on a variety of actors and events—on a Pakistani army that uses tensions with India to solidify its own domestic primacy, on Hindu nationalist politicians who

escalate those tensions to get more votes, on the bloody Pak-India partition in 1947 that resulted in vows of vengeance, and so on.

But before all that, there was the ongoing pressure-cooker of animosity among the Indian subcontinent's Hindus and Muslims that made partition inevitable in the first place, and which was enough to make a proud British empire flee the scene and leave the locals to sort things out for themselves.

More than 70 years later, the sorting proceeds in woeful fashion, now with the bonus of nuclear brinksmanship.

India: Opportunities Squandered

The two citizenries' undying thirst for the conflict damages each country's global aspirations.

The early part of this decade was India's global moment, a time when its public diplomacy bloomed on an international stage. In 2010 a researcher at a Washington, D.C. think tank told me: "People here all talk about how America has handed the mantle of leadership of the liberal democratic world to India." Everyone seemed to want a piece of the Indian miracle.

Both nations have citizens who long for victories in public diplomacy and nation-branding, but their worst instincts guide them to seek meaner victories.

Since then, religious nationalism has struck back with a vengeance, and *namaste* has been supplanted by nasty. As *The Economist* noted in a new cover story and related analysis, Prime Minister Narendra Modi faces an election at a moment when "the Hindu zealots who staff Mr. Modi's electoral machine complain that he has not done enough to advance the Hindu cause." *The Economist* used strong language in criticizing the Modi government's fomenting of religious intolerance and in describing "Mr. Modi's strident brand of Hindu nationalism, which pictures Pakistan less as a strategic opponent than a threat to civilization."

The fact that he's still viewed as soft by many voters says a bit about the level of animosity involved. And it underscores India's current limitations in embodying the model that it seeks to provide for a pluralistic 21st century democracy.

It Takes Two to Tango—or to Brawl

Vast numbers of people in both nations are constantly outraged, constantly feeling victimized by a world that doesn't appreciate their plight. You see it in the jarringly toxic and vicious battles in the comment sections of articles (skim the comments section of this *New York Times* article for a taste), in sensationalistic television news reports by jingoistic national media on both sides, in heated nightly conversations in living rooms. It's all nuclear warfare, all the time, in the proverbial sense. In the immediate future, the question is whether the proverbial becomes the literal.

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I spoke once to a Pakistani philanthropist, a builder of schools for poor children, who dreamed of an era of peace and understanding. In the next breath, he suggested that Pakistan launch a preemptive nuclear strike on India, “which is cutting off our water supply and which will kill us if we don’t hit them hard now.” (See [here](#) and [here](#) for details on whether the India-Pakistan water issue could be a genuine pathway to catastrophe.)

Pakistan: Opportunities Declined

That contradiction between a desire for peace and a thirst for war echoed the words and actions of the late Pakistani leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. On the one hand, the socialist populist fought to feed and clothe the poor of his nation. On the other hand, he spoke publicly as far back as 1965 about how Pakistanis would “eat grass, even go hungry” to get nuclear weapons if India managed to obtain them.

Pakistanis more or less did eat grass and go hungry, thanks to a sputtering economy and sanctions imposed by other nations, but they did go nuclear with surprisingly few regrets from the people. AQ Khan, the father of the Pakistani A-bomb, was an international pariah, but a folk hero to his fellow citizens, so much so that their leaders had to dance gingerly around the fact that he’d allowed dangerous amounts of nuclear know-how to leak out to rogue nations. And when Pakistan tested a nuclear weapon in 1998 (in direct response to an Indian test) tens of thousands of Pakistanis danced in the streets. U.S. President Bill Clinton had begged Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to avoid the path that India took, but Sharif felt he had no choice but to respect popular opinion.

While Westerners often idealize the late Benazir Bhutto (the daughter of Zulfikar) as an enlightened leader who could have guided the nation wisely, she in fact ridiculed Sharif at the time for waiting too long to respond to India.

An Opportunity for Public Diplomacy?

This is the dilemma of leadership. Too often the experts and journalists—the elites who stand outside politics—mock the political class for not being able to turn the masses’ swords into plowshares. The politicians respond, “You think this is easy? *You* try it sometime.”

Indeed, more leaders would sing to the better angels of their citizens if they felt there were any profit to it. The tragedy of Pakistan and India is that those angels too often seem willfully deaf.

As such, one of the most pressing issues facing our world is whether public diplomacy agents can meaningfully step into the breach. This may represent both nations’ best hope for the future.
