

South Asia After September 11, 2001
Talking points for the RIETI symposium

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The shadow of violence in South Asia has grown larger since the events of September 11 and the US-led “war on terrorism”. The shock of 9/11 and the US military presence in the region might have helped pacify this turbulent zone; it hasn’t. Indeed, relations have never been more strained and the probability of violence never higher. How did this happen? It happened because the Pakistani government, Kashmiri extremists, and the Indian government had an interest in violence—in threats of violence or the actual use of violence.

Three developments, which might have been predicted (but were not), occurred in South Asia, more or less simultaneously. These developments were related, and they culminated in the crises of December 2001 and May 2002 after terrorist attacks on the Indian Parliament and the Indian Army camp in Kaluchak, respectively.

The first development was somewhat unexpected but not altogether unpredictable. As a result of its new frontline status, this time in the fight against terrorism, Pakistan grew stronger and bolder in its confrontation with India. At least four factors contributed to the change in Pakistan. One, from almost “pariah” status in international society, it became internationally respectable. Two, with political rehabilitation came promises of economic aid to rescue Pakistan’s unravelling economy. Three, international recognition and aid shored up President Musharraf rule in Pakistan. Musharraf’s political consolidation was helped by the Pakistani peoples’ disillusionment with the major political parties and the palpable relief of civilian leaders after 9/11 that they were not at the helm in Pakistan. Four, ironically, the US war in Afghanistan at one stroke got rid of three strategic liabilities for Pakistan—Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and indeed Afghanistan itself (contrary to some Pakistani claims, Afghanistan was never added strategic depth for Pakistan). Overnight, Islamabad was free to focus all its attention and resources on the great satan, India.

The second development also went against the grain of what might have been expected. Kashmiri extremists, rather than be cowed by the US presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, became more provocative. The roll call of attacks in India says quite a lot: the Kashmir Assembly in October 2002 (as US forces began their operations in Afghanistan); the Indian Parliament two months later (just about the time that the Taliban had been destroyed); the Indian Army camp in May 2002 (with a quarter of a million Indian troops massed in forward strike positions); the massacre of the Amarnath pilgrims (just as the international community thought the summer crisis in South Asia had been surmounted); the Akshardham temple in Gujarat in August 2002; and the Hindu temples in Jammu in November 2002. A few general comments on the extremists. They have not been frightened either by the presence of US or the mobilization of Indian forces. The

numbers of militants operating in Kashmir and infiltrating from Pakistan have not come down in any significant measure. And they have expanded their attacks to highly-symbolic and vulnerable targets in a deliberate attempt to provoke India, precipitate an India-Pakistan conflict, and internationalize the situation in South Asia.

The third development was the Indian government's decision to resort to brinksmanship in order to bestir the international community, and the US in particular, against Pakistan. The growing political and economic rehabilitation of its old enemy, the resumption of strong US-Pakistan links, the consolidation of Musharraf's rule, and the unwillingness of Pakistan to do anything serious about infiltration and terrorism galled India. The increasingly provocative attacks by the Kashmiri extremists stirred Indian public opinion, but, even more importantly, gave the Indian government a chance to rouse public anger up to newer levels of intensity. With an angry public behind it, New Delhi sensed an opportunity. Its mobilization led to a counter-mobilization by Pakistani forces. With US troops on the ground in Pakistan and Afghanistan and with nuclear weapons about, a crisis that would catch the attention of the world community was quickly produced.

The crisis in South Asia in the summer of 2002 and the continuing tensions in the region are the product of Pakistani, Kashmiri terrorist, and Indian actions. All three parties have a stake in violence or the threat of violence as well as the catalytic power of violence. The Pakistani armed forces are strong and are not at all intimidated by Indian military power. In their view, a confrontation with India would serve to radicalize the situation in South Asia and could help bring the international community into the India-Pakistan quarrel as never before to achieve a historic Pakistani goal. For the Kashmiri terrorists, almost untouched by the US war on terrorism, it is business as usual—and more: more violence, more bilateral tensions, more international attention on Kashmir, and for some, more Islamic radicalism. For the Indian government, the threat to wage conventional war and even contemplate nuclear war, if it should come to that, was a risky but controllable venture, one that would dramatize Pakistan's role in Kashmir and India's unwillingness to accept the US' differentiation between "global" terrorism and mere "local" terrorism".

The US war on terrorism in Afghanistan has brought no respite for South Asia. Indeed, matters are worse than ever. Contrary to some estimations, India has gained little if anything by changes in Afghanistan or its own strategy of brinksmanship. Terrorism is not on the defensive or on the downswing. The international community's pressure on Pakistan has not worked, at least in respect of Kashmir. It has not worked because Islamabad knows that its weaknesses are its strength and because engaging Pakistan is a strategic necessity for the foreseeable future.

The Kashmir elections, the Pakistani elections, and the disengagement of Indian troops from the border areas in the wake of the elections are positive developments. However, the possibility that a terrorist strike in India will provoke an Indian attack on Pakistan cannot be ruled out. It seems certain that Pakistan will respond to such an attack. Whether escalation can be controlled thereafter is an open question.