

Diplomacy and Democracy Avert Indo-Pak Crisis 1986-87

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Abstract

After a long break of almost 15 years, the world witnessed another crisis in 1986-87 between two South Asian rivals but this time it was little bit different one. This crisis indicated a new dimension in Indo-Pak confrontations. The world embraced when the leaders of the two countries stated publicly that they are in a position to manufacture and use nuclear weapons. This article tries to look into 1986-87 crisis to know whether nuclear deterrence prevailed during the crisis or not. The article finds that 1986-87 crisis was having the conventional dimension and didn't have any nuclear dimension as India and Pakistan were not in a position to manufacture nuclear weapons at the times of crisis. Though the leaders of the two countries threatened each other with the use of nuclear weapons but these were only verbal threats but in fact both India and Pakistan knew that no one of them possessed nuclear weapons during the crisis. The article further finds that it was diplomacy and democracy which played a very important role in reducing the tension and averting crisis between India and Pakistan.

Introduction

India and Pakistan have been indulged into rivalry with each other since the first day of their independence. The disputed division of the two states in 1947 has resulted into one war after another and one crisis after another in their history of more than 65 years. They experienced their first war in 1947-48 which resulted in division of Kashmir into two parts. The most of the Kashmiri territory remained on the Indian side while the remaining thirty five percent went on Pakistan's side. Both states experienced another war on Kashmir in 1965 which also resulted in major losses on the two sides. The third war between the two states was fought in East Pakistan but it was having its roots in Kashmir dispute. The war started between the two states when India intervened in East Pakistan and facilitated its independence. The story didn't come to an end but the unresolved dispute of Kashmir was going to be the breeding ground of many other future crises. India and Pakistan faced its first crisis after 1971 war in 1986-87 when India started large military exercises named as Brasstacks near Pakistan's border in Rajasthan. Pakistan perceiving a threat of an Indian aggression immediately mobilized its soldiers on the border and prepared itself to face any situation. Both states perceived war like situation.

Two states started threatening each other of the use of the nuclear weapons. It seemed that some of Indian military generals were ready to start a new adventure against Pakistan. The conditions were worsening with the passage of the time. The nuclear deterrence seemed to be not workable in such a condition as both states were not clear about each other's nuclear capabilities and especially Indian scientists thought that Pakistan is not in a position to manufacture nuclear weapons. Thus, the international community played its role in reducing tension between the two countries. The United States played a very important role in reducing the tension between India and Pakistan.

Overview of Indo-Pak 1986-87 Crisis

The crisis between India and Pakistan started when India moved a large number of troops to border area of Rajasthan near Pakistan's province of Sindh and started military exercises named as Brasstacks at the end of the year 1986. Pakistan became anxious on Indian military buildup as it perceived a threat that Indians could cross into Pakistan's border and make an attempt to repeat the history of 1971. Pakistan made its move very fast by moving its forces on the border and especially put its focus on Indian weak point of Kashmir. The large number of Pakistani troops posted on the border near Indian Kashmir alarmed Indians. Indians made themselves ready to face Pakistan in case of any war. Some Indian military generals were willing to open a new front against Pakistan. They wanted to have new adventure against Pakistan. They were of the opinion that if India attacks Pakistan and gives it a major setback, it will end Pakistan supported insurgency in Kashmir and Punjab.

General Sundarji, Indian Chief of Army Staff was the person having support for the military action against Pakistan. It seemed that he had also convinced Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in the first step. But later on, he failed to get the support of Indian Prime Minister. In one of the high level meeting General Sundarji argued that India should attack Pakistan. He also stated that an Indian attack will also be focused on destroying Pakistan's nuclear installations. He also stated that Indian cities can be protected from Pakistani counter attack (probably nuclear one) when asked how? He couldn't justify. One the senior official from Indian ministry of defense argued that the two states have lost a lot in their previous wars and they can't afford to have another one. (Sagan, 1994/2001)

Indian journalist Kuldeep Nayar held an interview with Pakistan's nuclear scientist Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan during the crisis. Dr Qadeer Khan openly told the journalist that Pakistan has nuclear weapons and in case

of any Indian attack, it will retaliate and use F-16s to launch nuclear strikes on the enemy territory.

The immature behaviour seemed to be clear from the statements of the leaders of India and Pakistan when they started threatening each other of the use of nuclear weapons. In March 1987, Pakistani President General Zia ul Haq admitted: *“Pakistan can build a (nuclear) bomb whenever it wishes. Once you have acquired the technology, which Pakistan has, you can do whatever you like.”* (Hagerty, 1995-1996)

In response, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said: *“We intend meeting President Zia’s threat. We will give an adequate response.”* (Hagerty, 1995-1996)

The purpose of these military exercises was to check Pakistan’s response. India also wanted to see the response of Pakistan’s allies Peoples Republic of China and the United States. After looking at these responses, India had to decide about launching an attack against Pakistan.

The situation between the two states started worsening as the two states brought their large number of troops to the border. The conditions between the two states were severe one by 23rd January, 1987. The eye to eye ball between Indian and Pakistan alarmed international community. The United States made special focus on reducing the tension between the two countries.

The United States President Reagon called Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Pakistan’s President General Zia on phone and asked them to take steps to normalize the situation between the two states. The United States assurances to the both states helped to diffuse tension between the two states. India and Pakistan started diplomatic process to discuss and resolve the issues and to bring their forces to the normalized position.

Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi also played a very important role in diffusing the tension as he declined the proposal of military generals to launch an attack against Pakistan. The sensible decision of Indian Prime Minister helped to avert war between India and Pakistan.

Critical Analysis

Indian Brasstacks military exercises were of greater importance because it highlighted the issue of nuclearization of India and Pakistan. Both states for the first time started threatening each other of the use of nuclear weapons. International community became conscious on the nuclear threats issued by India and Pakistan. But one thing seemed to be clear that Indian Scientists were not ready to accept that Pakistan has achieved the nuclear threshold. Though, Cheema (2004) states that the employment of a nuclear weapons capability figured first time between India and Pakistan in 1986-87, though various descriptions of it differ profoundly. It is believed that the regime of General Zia-Ul-Haq in Pakistan (1977-1988) feared a dilemma of two front wars at the climax of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan: one with the Soviet or Afghan forces in the west and other with India in the east. The perception of such a threat accentuated when India mobilized a quarter of a million troops just twenty miles from the border in the winter months of 1986-87, opposite Pakistan’s province of Sindh, in a military exercise code-named *Brasstacks*. This threat was blocked by Pakistan’s counter-deployment of its armed forces and issuance of veiled nuclear threats. To cope with the dilemma of two-front war, Zia regime relied on diplomacy, conventional force posture and nuclear weapons capability.

Chakma (2002) explains that the states pursued their nuclear programs to manufacture the nuclear weapons for the four major reasons: security concern, prestige factor, technological imperatives and domestic politics. He states that Indian nuclear program was more focused on the prestige factor than the security concern. While Pakistan’s nuclear program was solely based on security concerns. He further states that the development of Pakistan’s nuclear program can be divided into three phases which brought the country to have nuclear tests in May, 1998. First phase started from 1954 to 1971, the second one from December, 1971 to 1989 and the last one from 1989 to 1998. Ganguly (2013) states that Pakistan, while having a small nuclear power and research program embarked upon a dedicated nuclear weapons program shortly after its disastrous military defeat at the hands of its principal adversary, India in 1971. Pakistan’s policy makers, both civilian and military alike, had quickly come to the realization that in the wake of the breakup of their country, they were largely confined to a status of permanent conventional military inferiority. As much of the existing literature on the motivations for nuclear proliferation had demonstrated, coping with an overwhelming conventional threat can serve as a major impetus for obtaining a nuclear arsenal. We agree with the hypothesis of Chakma and Ganguly but not agreed with Cheema’s view point. It is fact that Pakistan’s defeat in 1971 war led it towards a nuclear weapon program. Pakistan also benefited from a cold war rivalry between the two major powers when Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and it brought it into direct confrontation with Pakistan and the United States. Pakistan was the immediate neighbor of Afghanistan so it perceived a threat from Soviet Union. Pakistan asked the United States to help it to get Soviet Union out of Afghanistan. The US agreed and helped Pakistan to get Soviet Union out of Afghanistan. Pakistan became successful to work with a major pace on its nuclear program during 1980s. India was also working on its nuclear program during 1980s decade. But these two states were not successful in getting the nuclear capability to manufacture nuclear weapons. It is also fact that the nuclear programs are so secret that no one knew about the exact facts but there are many evidences that the nuclear programs of India and

Pakistan were not so mature that they could produce nuclear weapons during 1986-87 crisis. The crisis in 1980s between India and Pakistan was so severe that the two states could lead to a conventional war. India seemed to be prepared for a conventional war against Pakistan. Indian military generals wanted to open a new front against Pakistan. It seemed that India wanted to give a major blow to Pakistan. On the other side, Pakistan which had suffered humiliating defeat at the hands of India in 1971 became very much conscious and prepared itself for a war in case India attacks its territory.

Therefore, nuclear deterrence didn't really work in averting the crisis because it didn't really exist during that crisis. India didn't perceive Pakistan as a nuclear weapon state. The democracy and diplomacy played its role in diffusing the tension between the two states. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi played its role in diffusing the tension between the two countries when he refused to authorize any military action against Pakistan. The diplomacy also played a very important role in diffusing the tension between Pakistan and India. The United States' role is very important one in diffusing tension. The US President Roosevelt convinced the leaders of the two states to take their forces to the normal positions.

The trust deficit between the two states has contributed to the crisis one after another. There is need on the two sides to take confidence building measures that they could develop trust deficit and work to together to resolve the disputes which have been lingering on since their independence. These two states need to depend on bilateral dialogue that they could bring up with some solutions to resolve their long standing disputes.

After 1986-87 crisis, we have seen four more crises in 1990, 1999, 2001-02 and 2008 in the coming days but all with nuclear dimensions. The situation of South Asia in the 20th century is more dangerous than the past century. The world needs to give more attention to these two immature South Asian nuclear powers to avert any war in this region. Any conventional war between India and Pakistan can lead to a nuclear exchange at any moment and the nuclear war will result in millions of casualties. We stress the United States to play its role in resolution of the disputes between India and Pakistan. The resolution of the dispute of Kashmir should be on the top priority. The cause for the most of the confrontations between India and Pakistan has been Kashmir dispute. If the international community and especially the United States become successful to resolve the dispute of Kashmir, it will bring peace to the region. India and Pakistan could also move forward on the new directions which would take two states to the way of development and prosperity. More than 1.5 billion people of India and Pakistan can have a sigh of relief and the psychological pressure which they are facing due to continued confrontation between the two nuclear powers will be no more. This is the time for the two states to show maturity and take confidence building measures and it can only be achieved when these two states will take following steps. First, India and Pakistan should increase trade ties with each other. Second, they need to bring an end to trust deficit and try to take confidence building measures. Third, the two states need to depend on bilateral diplomacy to resolve their disputes. Fourth, India and Pakistan need to encourage people to people contact. Finally, the two South Asian nuclear weapon states should encourage culture ties among their people.

Conclusion

India and Pakistan seemed to be at the edge of a conventional war in 1986-87 conflict. The situation was very critical because Indian military generals wanted to initiate a new adventure against Pakistan. Indian military exercises were based on the notion to check Pakistan and its allies the United States and Chinese response. Pakistan responded Indian military exercises and brought its forces on the border. Pakistan focused its forces near Indian occupied Kashmir. The crisis reached at its height by 23rd January, 1987.

There were two factors which restrained the two states to opt for the path of war. The first one was democracy which averted this crisis. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi rejected Indian military general's proposal to initiate attack against Pakistan. Therefore, the democracy succeeded to avert the crisis between the two states. The second factor is diplomacy. It helped to reduce the tension between the two states. The international community played a very important role in reducing tension between the two countries. The United States played a very vital role in reducing tension between India and Pakistan. The US President Reagan's phone calls to Rajiv Gandhi and General Zia melted the ice between the two states. Both states took steps to normalize the relations. Both states agreed to return their forces to normal positions and with the passage of time things started to come to normalcy. Therefore, the democracy and diplomacy played a very important role in reducing the tension between India and Pakistan. The nuclear deterrence was not so effective to diffuse the tension between the two states as India was not ready to consider Pakistan as a nuclear weapon state and in fact India and Pakistan have not achieved the nuclear threshold during 1986-87 crisis.

Chari, Cohen and Cheema, (2007) state that the previous four crises three of which were having the nuclear dimension from 1986-87 to 2002 have many global implications. First, South Asia became the nuclear flash point. Second, the crises between India and Pakistan contradicted several important theories of the field of International Relations. Third, Indian intention to become a world power and Pakistan's intention to have a strong defense are going to have importance in their future relationship with each other. Finally, these crises gave some important doctrinal and strategic lessons not only to these South Asian nuclear powers but also to

other states of the world.

The crisis between India and Pakistan in 1986-87 clearly stated that there is greater need for the role of the international community specially the role of the United States in reducing the tensions between the two South Asian major powers.

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