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Beware the Kashmir Volcano

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The divided south Asian mountain state of Kashmir is like a volcano: forgotten when quiescent, but terrifying when it comes alive.

After the first India-Pakistan War in 1947, in which the British Indian Raj was divided into Hindu and Muslim-dominated states, India ended up with two-thirds of the formerly independent mountain state of Kashmir, and the new state of Pakistan with a scrubby, poor third known as Azad Kashmir.

Rebellion and attempts at secession have flared ever since in Indian-ruled Kashmir which has a restive Muslim majority, and minorities of Sikhs and Hindus. In fact, the Kashmir conflict is now the world's oldest major crisis. The UN's calls for a plebiscite to determine Kashmir's future have been ignored by India.

A week ago, Kashmiri militants attacked an Indian Army brigade base at Uri that sits near the 1948-49 cease-fire line known as the Line Of Control (LOC). Seventeen Indian regular soldiers died along with four militants. New Delhi rushed 10,000 soldiers to Kashmir, boosting Indian military strength in the mountain state to over 500,000 men.

It is a grave mistake for the world to ignore Kashmir. My first book, “War at the Top of the World,” explored the Kashmir crisis and Indian-Pakistani-Chinese-Tibetan rivalries in the Karakoram and Himalaya mountain ranges (a work inspired by my talks with the Dalai Lama). A decade ago I called Kashmir the ‘world’s most dangerous crisis.’ It remains so today.

India and Pakistan, both nuclear-armed states with powerful armed forces and medium-ranged missiles, remain at scimitar’s drawn over Kashmir for which they’ve fought two big wars and innumerable clashes.

I’ve been under fire twice along the Kashmir Line of Control and another time further north on the ill-demarcated border leading to the 5,000 meter high Siachin Glacier, the world’s highest war.

Most Azad Kashmiris want union with Pakistan (though a minority favor total independence of historic Kashmir, which is roughly the size of England.) India insists Kashmir is an integral part of the Indian Union and not open to any discussion. Making matters even more complex, Pakistan gave a strategic chunk of vertiginous northern Kashmir called Aksai Chin to neighboring China. India claims it back. China claims Indian-ruled Ladakh, also known as ‘Little Tibet.’

India calls Kashmiri Muslim militants “terrorists” and accuses Pakistan of waging “cross-border terrorism.” Pakistan accuses India of savage oppression in Kashmir that includes extra-judicial killings, kidnapping, reprisals on civilians and widespread torture, charges supported by Indian human rights groups.

This dispute was not of international consequence until India, then Pakistan, developed nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them by missiles and aircraft. Both states are estimated to have around 100 nuclear devices deployed.

Over the past 20 years, India’s growing economy has allowed it to greatly expand its large military forces, now the world’s third largest. They now outnumber Pakistan by at least 2.5 to 1 in manpower, warplanes, artillery and armor. Granted, a portion of India’s military forces are deployed to watch the long Himalayan border with China. In my book, I suggested that the two Asian superpowers would eventually go to war in the Himalayas and over control of Burma (Mynmar).

Even so India could use its potent armored corps to cut narrow Pakistan in half within days. As a result, Pakistan developed tactical and strategic weapons to offset India’s crushing conventional superiority. So far, Islamabad’s nuclear strategy has worked. India’s government has repeatedly rejected the army’s requests to charge into Azad Kashmir and northern Pakistan Punjab after brazen Pakistani border incursions.

However, another border clash in Kashmir, such as last week’s attack at Uri, could ignite serious fighting between old enemies India and Pakistan, raising the risk of full-scale war and even intervention by China to rescue its old ally, Pakistan. This week, China conducted a small-scale training exercise in Pakistan, a clear warning to India.

For the rest of the world, the most frightening aspect of this tinderbox border, the world's most militarized along with the Korean DMZ, is that both sides have only three minutes warning time of enemy air and missile attack.

That's at best. Electronic systems in India and Pakistan are often unreliable and fault-ridden. A false alarm of incoming warplanes and missiles would force a 'use it or lose it' response. Risks of accidents are very high.

A nuclear exchange between Pakistan and India would kill or seriously injure tens of millions in South Asia, pollute its ground water for decades or longer, and release clouds of radioactive dust around the globe.

This is not some Hollywood apocalypse. Shooting is a daily event on the Line of Control. Fanatical hatred between India and Pakistan remains a constant. Nuclear war is more likely to start between India and Pakistan than anywhere else. Preventing one