

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

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**HYDRO-POLITICS AND INDIA:  
A UNITED STATES RESPONSE TO THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
NATIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGE**

by

Matthew J. Zamiska, Major, USAF

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Advisor: LTC Thomas M. Weaver

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Asian continent provides one of the greatest challenges to the United States (US) government and its foreign policy makers. It is home to two countries, China and India, which currently rank first and second in population and will continue to experience rapid population growth for the foreseeable future. Pakistan, a focal point for the US-led global war on terror, is not far behind and will rank fifth in the world (roughly 250 million) by 2050.<sup>1</sup> These three countries are in a fight for the survival of their people, with hydro-resources at the center of much of the tensions that exist within the region. Adding fuel to the fire, all three of these countries are nuclear-equipped and have large conventional military forces as well. As the world's only superpower, the US must establish strong relationships with the countries of South Asia. In this role, the US can provide the support and guidance to help maintain regional peace while ensuring the hydro-resources are utilized properly and are accessible to all.

This paper is a continuation of the Fall semester paper entitled, "Hydro-politics and India: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century National Security Challenge." Although the scope of both papers covers only India and Pakistan, the issues presented are relevant to all of South Asia. This paper provides a brief history of the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) and the on-going tumultuous relationship between India and Pakistan over their hydro-resources. It then delves into past and current US government interactions with these nations. Finally, this paper offers possible US responses to the three likely scenarios presented in the first paper and provides a recommended course of action for the US government to best confront this 21<sup>st</sup> century national security challenge.

## **BACKGROUND**

In 1947, the British territory, Punjab, was divided into two independent states: India and Pakistan. This land partition gave India the upstream control of five of the six rivers in the Indus

River Basin.<sup>2</sup> Less than one year after the creation of these two nations, India cutoff the downstream flow of water to Pakistan in order to exert influence in an on-going territorial dispute. India's denial of resources sparked the first of three armed conflicts between these nations over the Kashmir region and the Indus River Basin. From 1948 to 1960, international mediators unsuccessfully attempted to establish a common ground for both India and Pakistan to work from regarding hydro-resources. Finally, the World Bank brokered a tenuous agreement and both sides signed the IWT in 1960. This treaty is still in effect today.

Historically, relations between these two nuclear-equipped nations have been tumultuous. The continued disputes over Kashmir resulted in armed conflicts in 1965 and 1999.<sup>3</sup> Hydro-related tensions persisted despite the apparent success of the IWT. In 2005, the Baglihar hydropower plant, an Indian project on the Pakistani-controlled Chenab River, required World Bank intervention to avoid the escalation of strong political rhetoric into a fourth armed conflict. In this instance, the IWT maintained the peace.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century brings significant challenges for India's energy security. Specifically, demographic changes in South Asia will test the already fragile peace. Both India and Pakistan are predicted to experience population explosions that will increase demand on their shared hydro-resources for both energy production and food stuffs (irrigation). This increase ensures that hydro-politics between these two nations will remain at the forefront of their civil and military operations for the foreseeable future. The Fall research paper presented three possible solutions to these hydro-security issues. The first path involved both India and Pakistan fully implementing the IWT and *actually* cooperating on hydro-power generation, flood control, water storage, and irrigation projects to address their severe water and foodstuff shortages. The second path is similar but encourages a multilateral agreement with India, Pakistan, China, and

Bangladesh to overcome the economic shortfalls they face in undertaking these projects. The final and most realistic course of action was the nullification of the IWT by India. India will rely on its conventional military advantage over Pakistan to shut off water downstream and redirect the water flow to meet its own needs. This option will likely ignite the powder keg and lead to direct military action and regional instability. The US must use its instruments of power to avoid this last option and encourage a peaceful end to the dire situation at hand.

### **US INTERACTION - HISTORICAL**

US foreign policy towards India and Pakistan has historically treated the two countries as one unit, India-Pakistan. Understanding the hyphenation is important. Traditional US foreign policy towards either of these countries could not be implemented without consideration for the ramifications of that policy towards the other. Generally speaking, if US relations with India were strong during a period of time, then relations with Pakistan were weak during that same period. This US interaction resulted for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the continued British relations with India after it gained its independence in 1947. The US wanted to avoid stepping on the toes of its great ally and therefore played only a financial and advisory role in World Bank's mediation of the IWT.<sup>4</sup> This lukewarm treatment of India turned cold during the 1970s when India decided not to participate in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). "The United States and other NPT countries...sanctioned India for developing a nuclear weapons program outside the NPT regime. The result was India's isolation from the rest of the world on all nuclear issues."<sup>5</sup>

Not much changed during the Reagan years. However, US-India economic relations heated up during the 1990s and 2000s. Based on economic reforms in India and US private-sector engagement with them, trade between the two countries increased six-fold to \$32 billion

from 1991 to 2006.<sup>6</sup> During this same period, India invested heavily in the exportation of its greatest resource, its people. “By 2002-03, India was the largest national contributor of overseas students in the USA, with 74,603 (up 12% on the previous year, and some 10,000 more than China).”<sup>7</sup> President George W. Bush’s administration continued to encourage and develop healthy relations with India. In 2002, the US-India Political Action Committee (USINPAC) was established in Washington, DC, as a means for India to directly work with US legislators.<sup>8</sup> India and the US teamed up in 2004 to provide humanitarian assistance for tsunami relief via their navies and air forces.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the Bush administration ended thirty years of nuclear-related sanctions in 2006 through the US-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Initiative, helping India construct nuclear power plants and providing them with the latest technologies.<sup>10</sup>

US relations with Pakistan started strong early in Pakistan’s existence. Pakistan joined the Baghdad Pact alliance of 1955, “thus ensuring both economic and military assistance from the US and others. For the US, the relationship meant a new ally against the Soviet Union; Pakistan saw the tie more in terms of strengthening itself against India.”<sup>11</sup> The US withdrew its military support in 1965 at the outset of the first Indo-Pakistan war and did not begin it again until the great Soviet threat re-emerged through the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.<sup>12</sup> The Reagan administration continued its support by providing F-16s to Pakistan from 1983 into the early 1990s.<sup>13</sup> President George W. Bush continued the F-16 legacy by selling Pakistan its newest lot of fighters in 2005.<sup>14</sup> The event that had the largest impact on US-Pakistan relations was 9/11 and the subsequent war in Afghanistan. “The war on terrorism had inadvertently ended up displacing...prewar emphasis on India and had provided an opportunity for Pakistan to take center stage in US policy once again.”<sup>15</sup> The Bush administration anointed Pakistan as “a major

non-NATO ally”<sup>16</sup> in 2004, increasing the amount of American aid that flowed into that country by billions of dollars.

The opening paragraph of this section discussed the importance of the hyphenation of India-Pakistan in US foreign policy. The Clinton administration was the first to begin the shift towards de-hyphenation in the aftermath of the India-Pakistan conflict of 1998.<sup>17</sup> The definition of de-hyphenation explains this shift in policy: “US relations with each state would be governed by an objective assessment of the intrinsic value of each country to US interest rather than by fears about how US relations with one would affect relations with the other.”<sup>18</sup> During the 1998 conflict, US relations were warmer with Pakistan; however, President Clinton signaled the changing policy when he exerted pressure on Pakistan, rather than India, to stop their aggression and come to the peace table. President Bush expanded upon President Clinton’s policy, using the State Department to launch a major diplomatic effort against both India and Pakistan to prevent the escalation of hostilities in 2002.<sup>19</sup> The US was no longer pitting one country against another. Rather, the US demanded concessions from both sides that were in the best interests of all players.

## **US INTERACTION - CURRENT**

President Obama’s administration appears to be continuing the strategic engagement plan with India that was started under the Clinton administration and fully embraced by the Bush administration. In November of 2009, “Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was accorded the only state visit hosted by President Obama during his first year in office.”<sup>20</sup> During his press conference, President Obama referred to the US-India relationship as “one of the defining partnerships of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>21</sup> The change to strategic engagement separate from Pakistan has paid dividends for the US in India. As of 2009, pro-American sentiment among Indians

reached 76 percent, up from 56 percent in 2006.<sup>22</sup> This relationship is not without its problems or issues, though. There are two major areas of concern: Afghanistan and competing interests by the US, Pakistan, and India; and the continued US military support of both countries and its impact on the strategic relationships for the US.

The first area of concern is India's and Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan and its impact on the United States' efforts there. Both countries have lengthy historical ties to the Afghan government and people, and as is the case with the US, their involvement in Afghanistan has varied throughout the years. India supported the Northern Alliance and attempted to bring them to power in 1996. That same year, the Pakistan-supported (financial and military) Taliban became the ruling government, establishing an alliance for Pakistan that provided "strategic depth against India."<sup>23</sup> India withdrew from Afghanistan but continued its Northern Alliance ties, backing Hamid Karzai before and after the events of 9/11. With the Karzai government in place, India has reestablished itself as a strong ally to Afghanistan. Their foreign assistance includes: \$750 million for development projects; three Airbus 300 aircraft to revitalize the Afghan civilian fleet and the pilots to train on them; 400 buses and 200 minibuses for transportation needs, and 388 Indo-Tibetan Border Police commandos to bolster security on an on-going Indian dam project in Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> Pakistan, in the mean time, has allowed the US military supply routes that are vital to US operations. The Pakistan government continues to face political and media scrutiny for allowing terrorist safe havens along their shared border. The US political machine must remain fully engaged with both Pakistan and India to avoid deleterious effects in Afghanistan.

The second area of concern is the continued US military support for both India and Pakistan. India is looking to spend \$10 billion on 126 multirole combat aircraft within the next

two years.<sup>25</sup> They have already secured a \$647 million deal for 145 US-made howitzers, spent \$2.1 billion on eight Boeing Poseidon reconnaissance aircraft (2009), and are negotiating a \$2 billion purchase of 10 cargo transport aircraft from Boeing.<sup>26</sup> Pakistan is slated to receive \$700 million in 2010 and \$1.2 billion in 2011 for their counterinsurgency assistance fund.<sup>27</sup> They are also positioned to receive surveillance drones in the very near future. These aspects of the US strategic engagement plan have caused consternation from both sides. A deep-seated and realistic concern exists within both governments that the US military aid is being used to amass forces for a future India-Pakistan confrontation, which is not the underlying intent.

## **ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION**

### **CONCLUSION**

The creation of India and Pakistan in 1947 marked the beginning of a tumultuous cross-border relationship. This relationship is rife with disputes over the Kashmir region and the Indus River Basin. Amazingly enough, the Indus Water Treaty of 1960 has remained a model for tenuous peace. Despite its success over the last 50 years, the IWT cannot survive the dramatic demographic changes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. India and Pakistan are facing a battle against both water scarcity and energy security. The likelihood of these nations coming together to achieve a cooperative strategy and long-term peace is extremely low. Therefore, they will have to face each other down once again for control of the water resources. This is a zero-sum game, where the winner attains national survival. Advantage – India.

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