

For South Asia, the Cuban Missile Crisis was a non-event

By Pervez Hoodbhoy

From any resolved crisis you can take one of two messages: Getting to the brink of disaster was so scary that you want to avoid a repeat at all costs. Or, because disaster didn't actually result, you needn't pay too much attention to the preceding weeks or months of tension. For Pakistan and India -- at the other end of the world from Cuba and non-nuclear at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis -- the crisis may as well have not happened. And since then, they have walked the same path to the nuclear brink (and then back) four increasingly dangerous times.

When primal passions drove them to war in 1947, 1965, and 1971, neither India nor Pakistan had the capacity to annihilate the other. This changed after India tested its first nuclear device in 1974 and Pakistan followed with its own nuclear weapons development program. In 1987, and then in May of 1990, during periods of high tension over Kashmir, Pakistan sent thinly veiled warnings to India that its newly acquired nuclear capability could be pressed into service. Tensions spiralled upwards in 1999 after Pakistani troops secretly crossed into Kashmir, and then again in 2001 when Pakistan-based jihadists attacked the Indian Parliament. As shrill nuclear rhetoric poured from both sides, the world watched with bated breath. But each time, the two countries emerged unscathed. This strengthened their belief that nuclear crises are no different from any other.

A relatively quiet six-year period of subcontinental relations crashed to a close when a Pakistan-based group attacked Mumbai in November 2008. Although this time the two governments worked overtime to maintain calm, war talk thickened the air. Now it was the national media that worked hard to whip up frenzy. Seeing political opportunity, some popular Indian leaders, such as K.S. Sudarshan of the Hindu supremacist RSS party, announced that nuclear war between India and Pakistan may be necessary to destroy terrorist camps across the border.

In Pakistan, the willingness to go to war was even more apparent. Television programs frequently featured Pakistan's celebrated bomb-makers, A.Q. Khan and Samar Mubarakmand. They emphasized Pakistan's readiness and the scale of casualties to be expected on both sides, and they casually remarked that even after a nuclear exchange, there would still be millions left over in Pakistan to continue future wars against India. On a personal note: In a widely watched TV program, I was involved in a verbal battle with retired Gen. Hamid Nawaz, a former secretary of defence, who said that Pakistan should not bother using conventional weapons and must immediately launch a nuclear strike if India were to attack Pakistan-based jihadist groups.

Pakistan and India are learning the delicate art of living comfortably at the razor's edge. But this comfort is illusory because it comes from ignoring dangers rather than dealing with them. Surely, one must be grateful for every month and year that passes safely in a region that has hosted so many nuclear crises.