

India-Pakistan Standoff: Recalling October 1962

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The eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between India and Pakistan following the December 13 attack on the Indian Parliament continues, making this one of the longest warlike situations between two countries possessing nuclear weapons. The state of affairs is reminiscent of the Cuban missile crisis, arguably the closest the world came to nuclear war. It is worth recalling some lessons from that crisis for South Asia.

Much has been written about the Cuban missile crisis and it suffices to recall the events briefly. On October 15, 1962, US reconnaissance photographs revealed missile sites being constructed in Cuba. After seven days of intense debate within the upper echelons of the US government, President Kennedy imposed a naval quarantine around Cuba. He also warned that any nuclear missile launched from Cuba would result in massive nuclear retaliation on the Soviet Union. On October 24, the US Strategic Air Command (SAC) moved to DEFCON 2, the highest military alert short of all-out war. Tensions finally began to ease on October 28 when Soviet Premier Khrushchev announced that he would dismantle the installations and return the missiles to the Soviet Union. During the peak period, 1479 bombers, 182 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and 112 Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles were on alert.

Many analysts argue that nuclear deterrence worked since the Cuban missile crisis did not result in war. But what this view misses out is the high risk that the two superpowers could have gone to war not by design but by accident. In his masterful study *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton University Press, 1993), Scott Sagan identifies several incidents involving errors, safety issues, accidents, false warnings and so on that *could* have led to nuclear war. At many stages during the crisis, low-level personnel had effective control over nuclear weapons that they possessed; in principle, they could have used their weapons without being authorized by the political leaders, and with disastrous consequences.

One serious error that Sagan described involved a B-52 bomber that got lost and headed directly towards the Soviet Union and was only about 300 miles from Soviet airspace when its mistake was noticed; at this point, it was almost certainly within range of Soviet interceptors. An example of a safety violation that opened up the possibility of unauthorized launch involved new Minuteman ICBMs that were jerry-rigged leaving military officers with the physical capability though not the authority to launch these missiles.

More serious were the many false alarms during the crisis. One bizarre incident occurred on October 25 when an air force guard saw a “person” climbing the security fence at a base and set off the alarm at all nearby air bases. At one of these, the alarm system was

faulty and the signal was interpreted to be an enemy attack; pilots started taxiing down the runways on nuclear-equipped F-106 aircraft assuming that nuclear war had started. Just before takeoff further communication revealed that no attack was underway and the aircraft stopped. The “person” climbing the fence turned out to be a bear.

Similarly on October 28, a radar picked up what appeared to be a missile launch from Cuba against the US and reported it over the voice hotline to the command center. Even after rechecking the data was unambiguous. Since the missile was short range, there was nothing to do but wait for the detonation. Only a few minutes after the expected detonation did not occur it became clear that someone had inserted a software test tape at the same time as when the radar had detected a satellite, resulting in confusion.

Perhaps the incidents that have the most direct relevance to South Asia are the two missile tests that were conducted during the crisis. On October 26, an Atlas ICBM was launched on a “routine” test from Vandenberg Air Force Base in Southern California *without orders* from political authorities in Washington. Since in 1962 the Soviet Union did not have reconnaissance satellites to provide early warning, the launch did not have serious consequences. More serious was a Titan II ICBM test launch towards the South Atlantic. Radar operators who were looking for launches from Cuba and who had not been expecting this launch were shocked when the missile showed up on their screens. But after a few tense minutes, it became clear that the missile was heading away from the US and the operators relaxed. Had the missile been launched on a slightly different trajectory, such prompt identification would have been difficult and an alarm set off.

The parallel event in the case of South Asia is the test of the Agni missile by India on January 25. Indian leaders evidently would like to follow the US not only in acquiring nuclear weapons but also in taking the kinds of risks that the US did during the Cuban missile crisis. Fortunately, the missile was launched well away from Pakistan, and one assumes that authorities in Pakistan were notified about the launch. But, at the very least, the launch was highly provocative and avoidable.

The next time may not be so safe. The big firebreak that protected India and Pakistan this time was non-deployment of nuclear weapons. But ever since the tests of May 1998, India has been taking steps towards deployment. Pakistan is almost sure to follow. Deployment could well lead to the kinds of safety problems, near accidents, and false warnings witnessed during the Cuban missile crisis. All of these could potentially escalate into a nuclear war. Then we may be in the same state as the US and USSR. They, as General Lee Butler, head of the US Strategic Air Command from 1992 to 1994 (during which period he was in charge of the US nuclear arsenal), put it, “survived the Cuban missile crisis no thanks to deterrence, but only by the grace of God.”

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