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Helping to Bring Peace to Kashmir

By Stanley A. Weiss

LONDON--It may be the most infamous stomach ache in diplomatic history. In 1947, the United Kingdom partitioned British India, directing the rulers of its 565 "princely states" to choose between the newly-independent nations of India and Pakistan. The last holdout was the Hindu Maharaja of Muslim-majority Kashmir, Hari Singh, who hoped to establish a neutral, independent nation on his state's vast frontier. Sixty-five years ago this month, Lord Louis Mountbatten--the last Viceroy of British India--accompanied his friend, the Maharaja, on a three-day fishing trip, where he tried to tease out a decision, making it clear that if Singh chose Pakistan, India would understand and raise no objection. But when the Viceroy instead heard his friend make the case for independence, as recounted in the fantastic "Freedom at Midnight," by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, he exploded:

"I'm sorry," said Mountbatten, "you just can't be independent. You're a land-locked country. You're over-sized and under-populated . . . your attitude is bound to lead to strife between India and Pakistan. You're going to have two rival countries at daggers drawn for neighbors. You'll be the cause of the tug-of-war between them. You'll end up being a battlefield."

Seeking to avoid Mountbatten on the trip's final day, Singh begged off a meeting by claiming he had a stomach ache. Three months later, upon hearing that Singh wouldn't allow him to vacation in Kashmir, Pakistan founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah--who meant for the "k" in "Pakistan" to stand for "Kashmir"--covertly sent ethnic Pathan tribesman to take it by force. Alerted to the conquering hordes by British intelligence, delivered through India, a panicked Singh abandoned the capital city for his winter palace in Jammu, in the Hindu south. In exchange for Indian military assistance, the Maharaja ceded Kashmir to New Delhi. Airlifted Indian troops won the race to the capital city for one reason: Pathan tribesman stopped 30 miles outside city limits to rape and pillage their way through a Franciscan convent.

True to Mountbatten's warning, the Maharaja's stomach ache gave way to a 65-year headache between India and Pakistan, that would see their battle over Kashmir take more than 100,000 lives--even as both sides acknowledge that Kashmir's resolution would create, as one Indian official put it, "the freedom to remake Indo-Pakistani relations."

That time is now. With violence in Kashmir at a 20-year low, a new Pakistani Prime Minister who has pursued peace in the past, an Indian government eager to move beyond local conflicts, and new Chinese leadership ready to act as arbiter, there has never been a better time to bring peace to Kashmir. In fact, at a time when Washington and Beijing are engaged in a quiet Cold War--from cyber-hacking to the South China Sea--Kashmir might be the one place where China and the U.S. can work together to help bring peace to one of the world's most destabilizing conflicts.

Of course, resolving the conflict won't be easy. Pakistan believes it exists to provide a safe haven for the region's Muslims. India, by contrast, prides itself on being a secular, multi-ethnic nation. Losing its only Muslim-majority state--the birthplace of India's beloved first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru--would shake that faith.

Today, at least half a million Indian troops are stationed in Kashmir, where their frequent curfews and crackdowns have alienated local Kashmiris.

Along the way, Kashmir has earned its reputation as "the most

dangerous place on earth." In 1965, India and Pakistan fought a second war over Kashmir, ending with a United Nations brokered ceasefire. In 1998, India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons within a month of each other, and then battled a year later in the Indian-controlled territory of Kargil. Meanwhile, Islamic militants in Kashmir--supported by Pakistani's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI)--have supplied the foot soldiers for global terror.

Twice in recent decades, India and Pakistan nearly reached a resolution. In 1998, Nawaz Sharif--elected this spring to his third term as Pakistan's Prime Minister, but then completing his second--initiated a series of back-channel discussions over Kashmir. Talks came to a halt when Pakistani Army Chief of Staff Pervez Musharraf overthrew Sharif in a coup.

By 2007--after two attempts on his life by Kashmiri separatists--Musharraf concluded that only negotiation could settle the Kashmir dispute. He reopened the discussions, resulting in a deniable "non-paper" laying out a resolution to the Kashmir question. In the words of Pakistan's then-foreign minister, Khurshid Kasuri, negotiations had become "so advanced that we'd come to semicolons."

But by 2008, the unpopular Musharraf resigned, derailing talks. A deadly Pakistani terror attack in Mumbai--linked to the ISI--took 175 lives and re-ignited tensions.

While the "non-paper" has floated in limbo since then, there have been other steps toward peace. In 2010, India announced amnesty for fighters from Indian-administered Kashmir. In 2012, Islamabad cut by half its administrative funds to Kashmir, and offered cash to fighters who move beyond militancy.

As in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the broad outlines of a solution are understood. In this case, the Line of Control--which, since 1972, has divided the Indian-controlled south and east from the Pakistani-controlled north and west--would be recognized as the international border. Separated today by a double-walled 340 mile fence along the LOC, Kashmiris would be allowed to move freely across the border and be political autonomous on both sides.

Kashmir was front and center in May during back-to-back visits to India and Pakistan by Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang. Li pledged that China would work to build trust between India and Pakistan, while China's Ambassador to Pakistan expressed China's willingness to act as an arbiter in Kashmir, "subject to India's acquiescence"--a natural role, since China has held an area of northeastern Kashmir, along the long-disputed China-India border, since the Sino-Indian war of 1962.

In the months ahead, Beijing and Washington should use their significant diplomatic power to bring both sides to the bargaining table--with the U.S. leveraging its strong relationship with India, while China leverages its own ties to prompt Pakistan. Both should be prepared to provide political cover for their allies should a deal be announced.

It is springtime in Kashmir right now. A conflict born of rashness demands a deliberate resolution. Only then can Kashmir transcend Mountbatten's prediction and live up to the image invoked by the 17th-century Mughal emperor Jahangir, when he declared of the Kashmir Valley, "If there is ever a heaven on earth, it's here, it's here, it's here."

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