

India, Pakistan May Go to War Over East Bengal--and Add to the Suffering

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LONDON—It is a truism established beyond any reasonable doubt that war never really solves international problems, but usually creates greater problems. War can, however, solve personal and political problems of statesmen who have blundered into a blind alley from which they can escape only by force. At least, the new problems of war are different from the old, insoluble problems.

It is more than likely that India and Pakistan will go to war in that spirit of desperation. The festering enmity between the two nations created when British India was divided in 1947 has, once again, come to a head over heavily populated East Bengal, Pakistan's eastern "wing," separated by 1,100 miles of Indian territory from West Pakistan. It is also likely that India, which has the much better moral and practical case, will feel compelled to start the war.

The historical roots of the present low-level conflict, which could erupt into conventional war, go back 500 years to the Moslem conquest of predominantly Hindu India. Antipathy between Moslems and Hindus much later made expedient the partition of the subcontinent into two nations. But the direct causes of the likely war are much more immediate.

The Winner of Pakistan's Election Favored the East Bengalis

Earlier this year, Pakistan held a general election. It was a fair election, and it produced an overwhelming majority in Pakistan's parliament for East Bengal. But the man who should have become prime minister of Pakistan through the democratic process, Sheik Mujibur Rahman, was committed to virtual autonomy for East Bengal. The most populous area of Pakistan has been systematically exploited, economically and politically, by the West Pakistanis, who hold decisive military power.

The West Pakistanis were absolutely opposed to a virtual secession which could have destroyed their Islamic republic. They, therefore, declared the election null and void and began brutally suppressing East Bengali nationalism.

In the name of Bengla Desh, Free Bengal, a powerful resistance movement sprang up among East Bengalis, who are radically different from West Pakistanis in race, culture, language and way of life.

The two "wings" are actually united only by the common adherence of their peoples to Islam. But the casual Islam of East Bengal is quite different from the Orthodox Islam of West Pakistan, which maintains the austere traditions of the religion's Middle Eastern origins.

The nonmartial, artistically inclined East Bengalis have mounted surprisingly effective resistance to "pacification" by their traditionally warlike West Pakistani overlords. Initially, India enjoyed the discomfiture of

her enemy. But, as suppression and resistance became more intense, East Bengalis began fleeing civil war, disease and famine. Between 9 million and 10 million refugees have settled under miserable conditions among their cultural and racial brothers in India's Bengal province.

India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is deeply disturbed by the folk-migration into a poor and dissident province of her own nation. She has unsuccessfully sought U.N. condemnation of West Pakistan's brutality. The U.N. Convention on Genocide almost certainly applies to the East Bengal situation. But the United Nations proved as unwilling to act as it was incapable of effective action.

India, therefore, faces an apparently insoluble problem. The refugees will not return to East Bengal until West Pakistan guarantees the region substantial autonomy. They reckon, quite correctly, that returning to the present turmoil would mean accepting total insecurity—and, probably, death or extreme hardship amid continuing fighting. But India cannot indefinitely support nearly 10 million East Bengalis. Her own economic and political problems would threaten the existence of a united India even if the East Bengal imbroglia did not exist.

The only way out could be war to force West Pakistan to change its attitude. Their past actions indicate that the Indians are likely to start the fighting. Although India has consistently preached peace to others, she has, as consistently, proved ready to use force to attain national objectives or to solve otherwise insoluble problems on her borders.

India Is No Stranger to Using Force of Arms

The fabulously rich Moslem Nizam of Hyderabad in central India was thwarted by Indian troops when he asserted his legal right to join Pakistan—rather than India, as his predominantly Hindu subjects wished. India marched into Kashmir when the Hindu Maharajah opted to join India—and both his predominantly Moslem subjects and Pakistan objected. India took the Portuguese enclave of Goa by force, and Indian troops were as much responsible as China's People Liberation Army for fighting in the Himalayas in 1962.

Given that record and Mrs. Gandhi's recent strong statements, war is an imminent possibility. War could solve—or, at least, alter—the politician's predicament. War could not benefit either East Bengal in general or the Bengali refugees in particular.

The consequent desolation, disease and famine are, rather, certain to make all East Bengalis' plight worse. No one stands to gain from war between India and Pakistan. But the East Bengalis, for whose benefit the war would presumably be fought, stand to lose most.