

## Walk Softly in Nuclear South Asia

By Zia Mian

Contents:

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay By Zia Mian](#)

[III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses](#)

[Return to Special Forum Main Page](#)

---

### I. Introduction

This essay is by Dr. Zia Mian who currently researches South Asian security issues for the Program on Science and Global Security at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University. He has taught at Princeton, Yale, and Quaid-i-Azam University (Islamabad, Pakistan). In his Essay, Dr. Mian stresses the importance of US delicacy in its handling of the current campaign in Afghanistan and offers a set of broad policy recommendations aimed at protecting against the destabilization of Pakistan and the South Asia region.

### II. Essay By Zia Mian

"Walk Softly in Nuclear South Asia"  
by Zia Mian, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University

Before September 11, South Asia's problems were legion: over a billion people, most of them desperately poor; a history of war and violent conflicts; rising religious militancy; hard-line Hindu nationalists in power in India, the army in charge in Pakistan; newly tested nuclear weapons and a get-tough mood. Now, it is also the frontline of the US war against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. South Asia may not be able to take the strain. The US needs to ensure it does nothing to worsen the many crises in South Asia and that it thinks long-term, not short term, about its policies in the region.

The greatest concern is Pakistan. General Pervez Musharraf justified the October 1999 coup that brought him to power by citing the prevailing sense that Pakistan's economy, government, and society were on the verge of collapse. The fall has been swift; about one in three Pakistanis now live below the poverty line, double what it was a decade ago. There have been eight governments in this time. All of them have become wary of setting-off the

resources

publications

digital library

policy forum

research kiosk

email services

related links

nautilus home

security

energy

environment

youth

search site

widespread public resentment and anger at the hopelessness of everyday life. They have struggled to not provide political opportunities to the radical Islamist groups that have emerged and feed off the misery. Too often, they chose to make concessions to radical Islam. The military is in the same fix.

The US bombing campaign against Afghanistan in response to the terrible attacks of September 11 has opened wide the door for Islamist groups, with their history of anti-Americanism and strong ties to the Taliban. They have taken to the streets challenging Musharraf and his decision to support the U.S. The longer the U.S. bombs Afghanistan, the more civilians get killed, the greater the humanitarian and refugee crisis, and the more organized and angry the Islamists' challenge. Musharraf and the army may hold the line, but the Islamists will come out politically strengthened. Musharraf may win this battle but lose the war.

The US should heed the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and suspend its bombing campaign to allow relief supplies to reach the more than seven million Afghans in direst need. Calling in the UN Secretary-General and newest Nobel Peace Prize winner, Kofi Annan, showing him the evidence and asking him to mediate with the Taliban for a hand-over of Osama bin Laden for trial would acknowledge the vital role of the UN. Both would strengthen the hand of Pakistan's government against the militants.

Pakistan is also trapped by its conflict with India. Reflecting the intensity and depth of this battle, India and Pakistan have each sought to take advantage of the situation after September 11. India immediately offered political and military support to the United States in its conflict with the Taliban and urged it to include Pakistani-supported Islamic militants fighting in Kashmir as targets of the US assault on terrorism. Pakistan, under enormous pressure from the US, eventually decided to turn a liability into an asset and sought to cash in on its location and its leverage over the Taliban.

Seeing Pakistan win the US over to its side, and with the militants continuing their attacks in Kashmir, India is now trying another more dangerous gambit. It has threatened to follow the US example and attack militant training camps and bases in Pakistan. In an ominous development, India has ended a 10-month long effective cease-fire and started shelling Pakistani forces across the border that divides Kashmir.

The US must press Pakistan to end its support for the militants, restrain India from actions that may trigger a South Asian war, and get serious in working with the international community to resolve the more than fifty year old Kashmir dispute. For this effort to be taken seriously, the US must show by word and deed that unilateral military action is not the order of the day.



