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Now that fuse is lit, dousing it will be difficult India, Pakistan teetering on nuclear 'slippery slope'

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WASHINGTON -- Now that the other shoe has dropped, is it possible to cap a frightening new arms race on the Indian subcontinent? Or will India and Pakistan take the next step and deploy nuclear warheads on missiles that can reach each other's cities?

With both countries having tested nuclear weapons and now threatening to deploy them, concerns are mounting that a region that has seen four wars in 50 years could be lurching toward a cataclysm.

"Both nations are on a slippery slope," says Paul **Leventhal**, president of the Nuclear Control Institute. "We could see a replay of 1962, when the U.S. and Soviet Union came within a hair's breadth of nuclear war. Kashmir (contested by India and Pakistan) is today's Cuba."

"We need immediate concrete steps by India and Pakistan to turn down the heat," says Michael Krepon, president of the Stimson Center, which also focuses on proliferation issues. "We need pledges not to deploy nuclear weapons and to keep these weapons safely stored."

Whether the United States and the rest of the world can exact such pledges is in doubt.

India, which has fought three wars with Pakistan and one with China since its independence from Britain in 1947, was not dissuaded by mandatory U.S. economic sanctions from carrying out its own tests two weeks ago. Pakistan, in the words of its prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, "jumped into the flames" Thursday even though its heavily indebted economy and small population are far less equipped than India's to deal with economic penalties.

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President Clinton, who called Sharif at midnight Wednesday in a last attempt to prevent a test, urged both countries to renounce further tests and sign a 1996 test ban treaty.

"We will be very imaginative in looking for every possible way we can to help the two parties defuse the -- literally as well as figuratively -- explosive situation that has now developed between them," Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott said.

But the U.S. position is undercut by the fact that the United States, which conducted thousands of tests before signing the test ban in 1996, has not yet ratified it because of opposition in the Senate.

Pakistan's tests caused Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., who heads a subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, to retract the one carrot the administration had publicly offered Pakistan: repealing sanctions already in place against U.S. military sales.

"My concern is how the United States manages to re-engage both India and Pakistan without rewarding them," former CIA director John Deutch says. He says the United States must "encourage a dialogue" that might bring some transparency to their strategic rivalry, much as the United States and Soviet Union in the 1970s began a process of arms control and ultimately reduction.

Despite much saber-rattling and table-thumping during the Cold War, Americans and Soviets never fought a hot war. But the United States and Soviet Union were not divided by religious passions.

Created as homelands for Hindus and Muslims out of British colonial India, India and Pakistan share a nearly 2,000-mile border and enduring hatred. India set off its first nuclear test in 1974. Until Thursday, Pakistan had not responded in kind. But it amassed nuclear materials with Canadian and French help and acquired weapons technology from China and North Korea.

Dan Goure, deputy director of political and military studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, says either country is capable of putting a crude nuclear weapon on an airplane. Both are perfecting missiles that have ranges of 900 miles and can be equipped with nuclear warheads. Pakistan, Goure says, could be ready in a year; India could be ready in three years.

With uncertainty surrounding the success of both countries' tests, some analysts say only the strictest and widest sanctions can dissuade them from further testing. "The U.S. really has to lean on its allies here," **Leventhal** says.

Others worry that sanctions, particularly against Pakistan, would have unintended consequences, perhaps pushing that poor nation to sell nuclear or missile technology to Libya or another rogue

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state.

"We need the president and Congress to set aside their partisan differences and quickly give the president the authority to reward good behavior as well as punish bad behavior," Krepon says.

Sen. John Glenn, D-Ohio, author of the law that mandated sanctions against countries that have not joined nonproliferation agreements and test nuclear weapons, urges the administration to convene a South Asia security conference as part of a planned trip by Clinton to the region this fall.

Leventhal has another suggestion: "We should send films of (the atomic blasts at) Hiroshima and Nagasaki to both sides to remind them what they have in store if things get out of hand."

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