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By Michael Shank & Noam Chomsky

Chomsky On India-Pakistan Relations

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Noam Chomsky is a noted linguist, author, and foreign policy expert. On April 26, Michael Shank interviewed him about relations between India and Pakistan. This is the second part of a two-part interview.


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Read Part I

Michael Shank: *Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri cites a sea change in India-Pakistan relations, agreements have been forged requiring a pre-notification of missile testing, and both countries will soon engage in a fourth round of composite dialogues. What else needs to happen to provide a positive tipping point in Indo-Pak relations?*

Noam Chomsky: There are a couple of major problems that need to be dealt with. One of them, of course, is Kashmir. The question is, can they figure out a joint solution to the Kashmir conflict?

There are other questions: about energy integration, for example, pipelines going from Iran to India. India and Pakistan are now joint observers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which, if it works, will tend to bring about closer integration of the Asian countries altogether. So is Iran, and the Central Asian states, China of course, and Russia too. So it's basically the whole region except for South Korea has joined. And Japan probably won't join.

It's an emerging structure of relationships. Meanwhile India-China relations are certainly improving. They're better than they were 20 or 30 years ago. There are now some joint energy projects.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was China-initiated but there's also an India-initiated program by the former [Petroleum and Natural Gas] minister Mani Shankar Aiyar. He had been initiating similar plans for Asian integration; he had arranged conferences in India, joint projects with China and so on. And China and Pakistan have pretty close relations so through that connection India and Pakistan may overcome some of their conflicts.

In general the conflicts in the region, the internal conflicts, most of them have been softened, so they're less sharp than they were in the recent past. This is partly because of economic integration, partly because of the danger of confrontation, partly because of outside enemies. All of them want to become integrated with the west Asian energy producing system. That brings them together as well through joint projects.

So I don't know if there's an actual tipping point. But I think there is a gradual improvement of relations and a willingness to put aside what could be major tensions, like a terrorist operation in Mumbai or something attributed to Pakistanis. There are attempts at reconciliation, which is a healthy development.

Now Kashmir is going to be a difficult one.

Shank: Do you think Kashmir is a territorial issue or an issue related to secular or religious identity? Pakistan sees

Kashmir as their Muslim brotherhood up north. For India, it's emblematic of their secular identity. Is it an identity issue or a territorial boundary issue?

Chomsky: Yes, obliviously that's a factor in it. The Muslim population and the Hindu population do separate on those lines. Does that mean they have to be broken up? Not necessarily. There are 160 million Muslims living in India. There has been tension and some serious atrocities but it has been over the centuries a reasonably integrated society. There are real dangers. The Hindu nationalist danger is certainly serious.

Shank: Should the UN step in to do for Kashmir what they're now doing for Kosovo?

Chomsky: I think what's needed is some kind of federal arrangement. Kosovo could have been a model. As it's now developing Kosovo will just be independent. The counterpart would be for Kashmir to be independent. And that doesn't seem to be in the cards. India and Pakistan both have interests. But some sort of federal arrangement, keeping the line of control, with semi-autonomous regions loosely federated with each other and with a broader South Asian federation, could be a direction in which things could move.

Shank: Do you think the Pakistan and Indian diaspora in the United States or the UK are doing anything to escalate tensions?

Chomsky: For some reason, which I don't entirely understand, that's a very general fact about diaspora communities. In fact, almost every one I know of. For example the Jewish community in the US, its organized part, is much more rabid and extreme than Israel. The Irish community in south Boston was much more extreme than Northern Ireland.

Take, say, the Armenian genocide. All Armenians want to have it recognized but the pressures for having national declarations is mostly coming from the diaspora. Within Armenia itself, people have other concerns. For example they would like friendly relations with Turkey. The diaspora doesn't care that much; they just want the recognition of this genocide.

Shank: Is it because the diaspora often leaves during a traumatic period and that's what fresh in their minds?

Chomsky: I don't think so. It varies. The Irish immigration has been coming since the 19th century. Take the Jewish immigration. They really became extremists - again, I'm not talking about the population, only the organized articulate part of it, which is a small part but it's the part you hear about â€” they really became extremists since 1967 but that's not when they left Eastern Europe. It had to do with internal developments.

I suspect that the tendency towards a kind of extremism in diaspora communities may have something to do with keeping them unified. Otherwise they would tend to assimilate. In the home country they're not going to assimilate, you don't have to prove you're an Armenian or Israeli or Irish. But if you're in the United States and you want to maintain some kind of cultural identity as a group it's going to have some relation to the home country. And often more extreme positions are taken than in the home country because of the need to maintain identity. The one that I know best is the Jewish community but, as far as I know, others are much like it.

In the Jewish community there's a lot of concern over the disappearance of the community, through inter-marriage, assimilation, and so on. Those who want to make sure that the community stays together tend to be very

Israel-oriented, much more so than the general population is. And then they tend to become extreme. So you have to defend Israel against every charge. Israelis don't feel that need, they can raise the charges themselves.

If you were an American abroad, let's say, forced to defend America against the French, you might take a more extreme position than you would here. I think that kind of dynamic works, in some fashion, with diaspora communities. There is a notable tendency for them to be more fervent, nationalist, extremist, and defensive than the home country is.

So yes, going back to your question, what I've seen of the Indian diaspora â€" I don't know much about the Pakistani diaspora â€" is that it tends to be more extreme, more pro-BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] than the native population would. At least that's what I've seen.

Shank: India is attempting to renegotiate their nuclear agreement with the United States, specifically to remove a U.S. legal requirement that it halt nuclear cooperation if India tests another nuclear weapon. If India is successful in renegotiating that agreement, what are the implications for Indo-Pak relations?

Chomsky: As soon as the United States made the agreement with India, that had immediate and predictable implications. The agreement with India was in serious violation of U.S. law, the export law from the early 1970s that was passed after the Indian test ["Smiling Buddha" in 1974]. It was also in violation of the rules of the two major international organizations, one that controls, or tries to control, nuclear material exports, the other that tries to control missile technology exports.

There are two nuclear missile control regimes, and they both require notification before anybody's going to do anything that would be inconsistent with their rules. And the United States did neither, didn't even notify them.

It's a sharp blow against two of the elements of the international system that's trying to prevent proliferation of nuclear technology, weapons technology, and missile technology. It was predictable that as soon as the United States broke it someone else would break it too. And shortly after, China approached Pakistan with sort of a similar agreement. I don't know exactly where it stands now but it's clear that's what they would do.

Russia will probably do the same and others will do the same. Once you open the door others are going to follow. And that is a serious blow to the whole non-proliferation system. So anything that India does, Pakistan is going to try and balance. I guess that's the way to disaster.

That's why there's a very serious critique of the U.S. agreement with India within the disarmament community. People like Gary Milhollin, for example, very sharply criticized it. Michael Krepon who's the founder of the Stimson Center and a major specialist, has an article in a recent issue of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists warning that this could very well lead to the breakdown of all nonproliferation systems. I think he ends up his article by saying that Bush wants this agreement to be his legacy and Krepon says, "Yeah, maybe it will be his legacy, but it may mean the end of the species when you think of the way it could develop."

Milhollin was also very bitter. He said for the United States it is being done partly just for commercial reasons. It opens exports markets in India. In fact, Condoleezza Rice testified in Congress to that effect: that it would have commercial value to the United States, it would open Indian markets for exports. Milhollin suggests, if I'm remembering correctly, that the main exports might be military jets. That's exactly what we don't want because that's

going to again be a trigger for escalation. India gets more advanced offensive military forces, Pakistan will want the same, and China will want the same.

Shank: And Japan will come to the United States asking for a stealth fighter jet...

Chomsky: And then it spreads over East Asia and beyond and you're off and running. The world needs control of these exports, not escalation. India is playing a complex game. It's apparently trying to maintain something of its traditional non-aligned role. So it's agreeing to closer relations with the United States, but it's also at the same time developing closer relations with China and insisting on its own independence as in the effort to renegotiate this deal.

Shank: You mentioned the existence of extremism in the diaspora, but looking internally within South Asia, how much has the U.S.-Pakistan alliance in the so-called war on terror been responsible for the rise of extremism in Pakistan? How is it fostering extremism, if it has at all?

Chomsky: I'm not sure it has. These are very complex problems internal to Pakistan. For example, is the United States concerned about Baloochi terror inside Iran, based in Pakistan? It's probably fostering it. We don't have any direct evidence but there have been clearly terrorist acts in Iran, which are based in the Baloochi areas in Pakistan. And it's very likely that it's part of the general U.S. program to disrupt Iran.

Shank: Actually the last time you and I talked, you speculated that United States was in Iran fostering ethnic division...

Chomsky: I would assume so. One has to be a little cautious when talking about terrorism. From the U.S. point of view, there's good terrorism and bad terrorism. And Pakistan has its own problems. The Baloochi areas are very antagonistic to central rule for good reasons. Pakistan also has complex relations with the Northwest Territories and the tribal areas. It's held together in a very fragile fashion, Pakistan. The United States supports the central government and is claiming that it's not acting as militantly as the United States would like to control its sub-populations. And if it tried to, the country might blow up. Musharraf has to walk a very delicate line, also with regard to allowing some democratic opening in the country, which is not easy.

Shank: If extremism is on the rise in South Asia, which a lot of people say it is, how does one go about undermining extremism, in this case religious extremism?

Chomsky: In India and Pakistan there is a very dangerous development. One of the roots of the BJP is a quasi-fascist Hindu extremist movement. And for India that is extremely dangerous, as is Muslim extremism, as is Christian extremism in the United States. These are very dangerous movements. They are not inherently destructive. They could take a constructive path but that's not the way they usually develop.

How do you combat them? The same way you combat any other dangerous movement: education, organization, looking at the issues that make them arise. Often they arise out of real or perceived oppression, as a reaction to it. So, for example, take Islamic radicalism. A large measure of it was a reaction to the fact that secular nationalism was destroyed â€” partly because of its own internal corruption, partly because of external force.

When you destroy the opportunities for secular alternatives to develop, people aren't going to give up. They may turn to religious movements for identity. That's one standard reaction to oppression and a loss of opportunity.

You can see it happening very clearly in the Islamic world, the Muslim world. In fact, the United States and Israel both fostered religious extremist movements in an effort to undermine secular nationalism. Hamas, for example, is an outgrowth of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was supported by Israel as an attempt to undermine the secular Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Hezbollah was the direct result of the Israeli conquest of part of Lebanon, in an effort to destroy the secular PLO â€" and ended up with Hezbollah on their hands.

The United States has almost always tended to support the most extreme religious fundamentalist group in the region. Take Saudi Arabia, the oldest and most valued ally of the United States and also the most extreme Islamic fundamentalist state. By comparison, Iran looks like a flourishing democracy. And there are good reasons for it. I don't mean good in a moral sense. There are understandable reasons.

The United States supported Saudi Arabia against the threat of secular nationalism, symbolized mainly by Nasser. They were very much concerned that Nasser might move to direct the resources of the region to the population of the region, for development and so on. And that's not how it's supposed to work. The wealth of the region is supposed to flow to the west with a kind of payoff to the local managers. That didn't seem to be Nasser's program. He was a pretty harsh tyrant himself but secular and possibly with the thread of a populist aspect.

The same happened when the Qasim coup took place in Iraq in 1958. U.S. and British intelligence assumed that it was Nasserite in origin. They thought this might be the spread of a secular, nationalist development that would try to appropriate and gain control of the resources in the region and use them for internal development and growth. It's always been a danger.

One of the barriers to that has been religious fanaticism. Similarly, inside Pakistan, the Zia-ul-Haq regime, which did drive the country towards religious extremism, was very strongly supported by the United States and its Saudi ally. During those years, the Reagan years, that's when Saudi Arabia was developing its network of Madrassas, religious extremist schools. Zia-ul-Haq was introducing Islamic extremism in the higher educational system, in social life, and so on, fully supported by the United States because this was part of their global policies.

Post-scriptum :

*Michael Shank is a doctoral student at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University and a frequent contributor to Foreign Policy In Focus (*www.fpif.org). The interview was conducted on behalf of the Satyagraha Centenary, a student-organized symposium held from April 20-30, 2007, at Middlebury College, which celebrated the 100th anniversary of Mohandas Gandhi's Satyagraha "Non-Violence" Movement.

