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Pakistan, India and Kashmir: Will Nature force an Aceh Effect?

By Rajesh Basrur and Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

A recent seismic study has raised questions about the possibility of a “big earthquake” in the Kashmir region, “anytime”. Should one occur with the magnitude that caused the massive Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, could it lead to the end of the Kashmir conflict, a la Aceh?

Commentary

IN LATE September 2011, Afroz Ahmad Shah, a scientist with the Earth Observatory of Singapore who has worked extensively on fault mapping of the earth, affirmed that “a big earthquake” could occur in the Kashmir region of South Asia “anytime”. While Shah observed that it is too early to anticipate the location and size of such an event, the effects of a “megaquake” in the region could be horrendous. In October 2005, a 7.6 magnitude earthquake with its epicentre 19 km from Muzaffarabad in the Pakistani portion of Kashmir resulted in over 80,000 deaths. Fatalities on a lower scale occurred in India and Afghanistan as well.

A megaquake could well be worse. From a strategic standpoint, we know that such an event can produce a significant political fallout -- as was seen in Indonesia in 2004. In the event of a megaquake in the Kashmir region, will we see what some have come to call an “Aceh effect” on the conflict over Kashmir between India and Pakistan?

Lessons from Aceh 2004

On 26 December 2004, a megaquake on a 9.1 magnitude shook the Indian Ocean just to the west of Aceh in northern Sumatra, Indonesia. The tsunami that followed was so devastating that it led to the deaths of 100,000 people in Aceh and a total loss of 230,000 lives across 14 countries in the Indian Ocean rim. Both the megaquake and the tsunami were unprecedented in scale. The impact was so severely shocking that it precipitated the end of the long-running political conflict in Aceh.

The Acehese struggle for independence that stretched from the Dutch colonial period and into the Sukarno and Suharto eras, was entering its endgame after the fall of Suharto in 1998. International parties brokered a fragile peace deal between the Indonesian central government and Acehese separatists. The peace initiative could not come to a conclusion due to mutual intransigence – until the 2004 tsunami.

The devastation forced the Acehese separatists into a ceasefire while humanitarian pressure compelled the central government, under President Yudhoyono, to reciprocate with a political solution to the Aceh crisis, leading to a final peace agreement in 2005. Aceh gave up its quest for independence and was eventually

allowed autonomy. In the provincial elections that followed, a former separatist commander successfully contested the governorship and has since been running the province of Aceh. In a nutshell, one of the most intractable separatist problems in Southeast Asia was finally resolved when Nature “intervened”.

Aceh and Kashmir

Conceivably, a megaquake in Kashmir could bring a dramatic change of perception in both Pakistan and India and dissipate the long-standing bitterness between them – as in Aceh. The 2005 earthquake in Kashmir did bring some positive changes in the relationship. India quickly offered disaster relief and Pakistan accepted. Indian soldiers crossed the Line of Control (LoC) to assist Pakistani counterparts in their mitigation efforts, and India agreed to allow Pakistani helicopters to cross the LoC to hasten assistance to the quake affected.

But there were limits imposed by inter-state rivalry. For example, Indian helicopters were not permitted to fly into Pakistani territory for fear that they might engage in reconnaissance and India was unwilling to allow free movement across the LoC because it feared terrorists would take advantage. Clearly, the long-standing bitterness between the two countries was not about to ease even in the shadow of a great humanitarian catastrophe.

Still, the first hesitant moves did facilitate some sort of a fresh beginning. In months to follow, Islamabad and New Delhi began negotiations that led to unprecedented cooperation. Trade links across the LoC were enhanced; people’s movements by bus and train were made easier, and both sides agreed that a “soft border” was a viable proposition. But the approaching detente crumbled as Pakistan’s President Pervez Musharraf slid into a domestic political crisis from which he was never to emerge. Tensions over their competition in Afghanistan rose and the commando-style attack on Mumbai by Pakistan-based terrorists that killed 160 people led to a fresh chill in the relationship.

No two events alike

No two events are exactly alike, so it is still possible that a megaquake of the type predicted by Shah might have more positive long-term effects. But it may not be necessary for an earthquake to bring a turning point in the Pakistan-India relationship. There are a number of reasons to be optimistic, though not unreservedly so.

Most fundamentally, the advent of nuclear weapons has brought to the forefront the stark reality that the struggle over Kashmir could bring a much bigger disaster than an earthquake if war were to break out. Secondly, terrorist groups have exploited the widening scope available to them and gained substantial ground within Pakistan, which has been rocked by political instability, economic crisis and escalating daily violence. Thirdly, the Pakistan Army, which has long claimed to be the nation’s chief stabilising force, has clearly been unable to offer daily security to its people, which raises the hope that it will retreat into the barracks and that a civilian-led entente with India is on the cards.

Fourthly, for all its own failings – such as endemic corruption and an inability to deal effectively with a still-growing Maoist insurgency– India is widening its economic and strategic gap with Pakistan. This makes it less and less amenable to pressure on territorial disputes. Sixthly, with China a somewhat reluctant ally as far as financial backing is concerned, and the US holding back on the dispensing of aid, Pakistan’s economic choices are limited and the pressure for enhancing trade with India is increasing.

As a result, there is a growing sense that a turning point is close at hand. The two sides are in a position to focus on common gains, mainly from an improved economic relationship and a renewed effort to create a “soft border” in Kashmir. On the military side, confidence building to minimise the risk of inadvertent war, already an established process, can move forward with talks on restraining the risks associated with short-range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles.

It should not take an earthquake to finally resolve the long-running conflict in Kashmir.

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