



**TEXAS
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POLICY ROUNDTABLE:

The Future of South Asia

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Table of Contents

1. “Introduction: A Changed Status Quo: Key Dynamics in the India-Pakistan Nuclear Relationship,” by Debak Das
2. “In Kashmir, An Uncertain Ending to a Contested Past,” by Myra MacDonald
3. “Will the United States and China Keep India and Pakistan from Going to War?” by Yelena Biberman
4. “U.S. Policy in South Asia: Short-Term and Long-Term Imperatives,” by Michael Kugelman
5. “Climbing the Escalation Ladder: India and the Balakot Crisis,” by Rohan Mukherjee

1. Introduction: A Changed Status Quo: Key Dynamics in the India-Pakistan Nuclear Relationship

By Debak Das

Political relations in South Asia have hit rough weather. In 2019 alone, the Line of Control in Kashmir has seen continuous ceasefire violations by both India and Pakistan; there have been two crises (one military and one political) between the two countries; both neighbors have reminded the other, using veiled threats, that they possess nuclear weapons; and each has implied that the threshold for using such weapons could change. So where does the nuclear relationship between India and Pakistan stand? Where do the key threats to peace in the region come from?

Three key dynamics currently mark the nuclear relationship between India and Pakistan. The first is a possible change to India's nuclear no-first-use policy — something the Indian government has signaled through political statements and actions in the last few years. The second is Pakistan's and India's development of new tactical and strategic nuclear delivery systems. And the third is the lowering of the threshold for conventional military engagement. Each of these dynamics points to a change in the erstwhile nuclear status quo in South Asia and represents serious challenges to the security and stability of the region.

The No-First-Use Debate

No first use — one of the pillars of Indian nuclear doctrine since 2003 — is in doubt and has been for some time.¹ Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh's statement in August 2019 that “[w]hat happens in the future depends on the circumstances” raised questions about whether the Indian government was about to change India's nuclear doctrine and abandon no first use.² Importantly, Pakistan's prime minister referred to this as a “not-so-veiled

¹ Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, “India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities,” *International Security* 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018/2019): 7–52, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00340.

² Elizabeth Roche, “Rajnath Singh Sparks Debate on No-First-Use Nuclear Doctrine,” *Livemint*, Aug. 16, 2019, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/rajnath-singh-sparks-debate-on-no-first-use-nuclear-doctrine-1565978545173.html>.

nuclear threat to Pakistan” in a recent *New York Times* op-ed.³ This was not the first time that such a statement had been made by an Indian defense minister. In 2016, then-Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar stated that India’s commitment to no first use was tantamount to “giving away your strength.”⁴ These statements, along with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party’s pledge to revise India’s nuclear weapons doctrine in its election manifesto prior to the 2014 elections (conspicuously absent in the 2019 manifesto) demonstrates that there has been for some time an interest in the party to revise India’s nuclear doctrine.⁵

These statements have also been accompanied by qualitative changes in India’s nuclear arsenal, raising further doubts about India’s commitment to its no-first-use policy. As Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang have argued, India’s development of counterforce capabilities — including multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles like the K-4 Sagarika, short-range tactical ballistic missiles (Prahaar), hypersonic missiles (Shourya), and cruise missiles (BrahMos and Nirbhay) — indicates that there may come a time when the ready availability of these capabilities will lead India to revisit its current countervalue targeting nuclear doctrine.⁶

It is no surprise that these developments have not been well received by Pakistan.⁷ While Prime Minister Imran Khan’s September 2019 statement that Pakistan would not be the first to start a war with India was briefly misinterpreted as indicating a Pakistani no-first-use policy, in actuality, Pakistan’s policy of “full spectrum deterrence” does not preclude the first

³ Imran Khan, “Imran Khan: The World Can’t Ignore Kashmir. We Are All in Danger,” *New York Times*, Aug. 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/30/opinion/imran-khan-kashmir-pakistan.html>.

⁴ Rama Lakshmi, “India’s Defense Minister Questions Its No First-Use Nuclear Policy — Then Says It’s His Personal Opinion,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 10, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/10/indias-defense-minister-questions-its-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-then-says-its-his-personal-opinion/>.

⁵ Jason Burke, “Indian Election Alarm as BJP Raises Prospect of Nuclear Weapons Rethink,” *The Guardian*, April 7, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/07/indian-election-bjp-manifesto-nuclear-weapons>.

⁶ Clary and Narang, “India’s Counterforce Temptations.”

⁷ Khan, “Imran Khan: The World Can’t Ignore Kashmir.”

use of nuclear weapons.⁸ This means that if India shifts away from no first use, it could further destabilize the nuclear status quo in South Asia with both states pledging, whether openly or tacitly, first-use nuclear doctrines.

New Tactical and Strategic Weapons Systems

Related to the no-first-use debate is the issue of each country's development of new tactical and strategic weapons systems. The last few years have seen considerable advances on this front by both sides. Pakistan's Hatf 9 Nasr, a short-range missile with a range of 70 kilometers; its ground- and air-launched cruise missiles, in the form of the Hatf 7 Babur and the Hatf 8 Ra'ad, which have "stealth capabilities"; and its development of sea-launched cruise missiles all represent a shift toward counterforce targeting under its doctrine of full-spectrum deterrence.⁹ Additionally, Pakistan's introduction of sea-based nuclear delivery platforms (the Babur 3 sea-launched cruise missile) is meant to give the country a secure second-strike capability against India and to operationalize its triad.¹⁰ Adding to these counterforce capabilities is the Ababeel medium-range ballistic missile with a range of 2,200 kilometers. This missile, which is currently being developed, is reported to be equipped with MIRV warheads.¹¹

On the Indian side, apart from the aforementioned counterforce technologies it is developing, New Delhi has also operationalized its nuclear triad with the first successful "deterrence patrol" of the nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine Indian Navy Ship *Arihant* in November 2018.¹² While this may have made India's nuclear forces more survivable, the submarine has little operational utility right now. The *Arihant* does not currently have the ability to strike a target beyond 750 kilometers, which is the range of the

⁸ Ankit Panda, "What Exactly Did Pakistan's Prime Minister Say About the Country's Nuclear Weapons?," *The Diplomat*, Sept. 3, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/what-exactly-did-pakistans-prime-minister-say-about-the-countrys-nuclear-weapons/>.

⁹ Hans M. Kristensen, Robert S. Norris, and Julia Diamond, "Pakistani Nuclear Forces, 2018," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 74, no. 5 (September 3, 2018): 348–58.

¹⁰ Kristensen, Norris, and Diamond, "Pakistani Nuclear Forces, 2018," 355.

¹¹ Kristensen, Norris, and Diamond, "Pakistani Nuclear Forces, 2018," 354.

¹² Franz-Stefan Gady, "Indian Navy Boomer Completes 'First Deterrent Patrol,'" *The Diplomat*, Nov. 6, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/indian-navy-boomer-completes-first-deterrent-patrol/>.

only operational missile on the submarine.¹³ It is expected that with the future Indian K-series missiles like the K-4 Sagarika, the sea leg of the Indian nuclear triad will become more robust. However, this may take some time to achieve.

Apart from the arms race that the introduction of these weapons has fostered, it is unclear how command-and-control mechanisms have been or will be modified to keep up with these systems. Short-range tactical nuclear weapons may require delegating launch authority to battlefield commanders. For its part, India fears that this may be the case with Pakistan's Hatf 9 Nasr. Likewise, it is unclear what India intends to do with its Prahaar missile system once it becomes operational. Additionally, there is little information on the command-and-control system for India's *Arihant* nuclear submarine. As Happymon Jacob points out, unlike the air- and land-based nuclear platforms in India, where the nuclear warheads are under the control of civilian organizations, the canisterized missiles in the *Arihant* would be under military control with the captain of the submarine possessing launch authority.¹⁴ This would represent a shift away from India's previous policy of de-mating its nuclear warheads and nuclear delivery systems.

In sum, each country's new tactical and strategic weapons systems pose serious challenges to regional stability. Not only has this new weaponry engendered an arms race, it also raises serious problems with regard to nuclear command and control.

Lower Threshold of Military Engagement

Another dynamic that marks the India-Pakistan nuclear relationship is the recently lowered threshold for military engagement.¹⁵ This could lead to an escalation that eventually reaches the nuclear red lines of one of the two states involved. The "surgical strike" conducted by

¹³ Manoj Joshi, "INS Arihant's Deterrence Patrol: More Hype than Necessary," Observer Research Foundation, Nov. 6, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/ins-arrogant-deterrence-patricks-more-hype-than-necessary-45427/>.

¹⁴ Happymon Jacob, "Aligning the Triad: On India's Nuclear Deterrence," *The Hindu*, Nov. 23, 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/aligning-the-triad/article25570465.ece>.

¹⁵ Moeed Yusuf, "The Pulwama Crisis: Flirting with War in a Nuclear Environment," *Arms Control Today*, May 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-05/features/pulwama-crisis-flirting-war-nuclear-environment>

India in September 2016 and the Balakot strike in February 2019 both demonstrated a new Indian policy of engaging in conventional retaliatory strikes against Pakistan in response to terror attacks emanating from its side of the Line of Control. While there was some ambiguity around the details of the “surgical strike” in 2016, with Pakistan denying its occurrence, the Balakot strike of 2019 led to a conventional escalation.¹⁶ Pakistan responded to the Indian air strikes on its soil, and in the ensuing air battle over Kashmir, an Indian Mig-21 fighter was shot down and the pilot captured. While the crisis de-escalated in the weeks following Pakistan’s release of the Indian pilot, the incident’s implications are nevertheless important.

India’s new policy of retaliatory strikes has led to a lower threshold for military engagement than was previously the case. This policy implies that in order to demonstrate resolve, India will now be under pressure to retaliate in some measure every time there is a terrorist attack on Indian territory. Such an aggressive policy runs two risks. The first is that the greater the number of conventional military strikes on an adversary, the higher the chance of escalation. The second is that at some point the pressure to show resolve may lead to baiting by India’s adversaries, leading to inadvertent escalation. Both India and Pakistan will have to be careful to avoid these outcomes.

Furthermore, the role of elections and public pressure in India’s militarily assertive response to Pakistan in February 2019 is important to consider.¹⁷ The Balakot airstrike became a major issue in the Indian elections that followed the crisis, making national security a salient issue in election campaigns.¹⁸ The consequent success of the Bharatiya Janata Party demonstrates

¹⁶ M. Ilyas Khan, “India’s ‘Surgical Strikes’: Truth or Illusion?,” *BBC News*, Oct. 23, 2016,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-37702790>.

¹⁷ Suchitra Vijayan and Vasundhara Sirnate Drennan, “After Pulwama, the Indian Media Proves It Is the BJP’s Propaganda Machine,” *Washington Post*, March 4, 2019,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/03/04/after-pulwama-indian-media-proves-it-is-bjps-propaganda-machine/>; Barkha Dutt, “India Has Made Its Point in Pakistan. Time to Let the Diplomats Do the Hard Talk,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 27, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/02/27/india-has-made-its-point-pakistan-time-let-diplomats-do-hard-talk/>.

¹⁸ Joanna Slater and Niha Masih, “India’s Modi Wins Resounding Election Victory with Potent Appeal to Nationalism,” *Washington Post*, May 23, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-election-results-modi-remains-favored-to-win-as-counting-starts/2019/05/22/830b9f60-7cb4-11e9-b1f3-b233fe5811ef_story.html.

that the tactic worked. This sets a dangerous precedent in South Asia whereby politicians use muscular foreign policy associated with conventional military strikes for electoral benefit — a strategy that could eventually lead to an uncontrollable escalation between two nuclear-armed neighbors.

Takeaways

Undoubtedly, the status quo in the India-Pakistan nuclear relationship has changed. Thus far, strategic stability has continued to hold. However, the potential for instability has increased greatly, owing to India's potential abandonment of its no-first-use policy, the modernization and introduction of tactical and strategic weapons systems, and the lowering of the threshold for conventional military engagement. Moreover, the rhetoric surrounding nuclear weapons and their potential use has not helped.

There is, however, a silver lining. Despite the rising tensions and increased hostility between India and Pakistan, some of the major nuclear confidence-building measures have endured and been in effect. The most prominent among these are the Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities (1988), the Agreement on Pre-Notification of Flight Testing of Ballistic Missiles (2005), and the Agreement on Reducing the Risks from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons (2007).¹⁹ In fact, the exchange of the list of nuclear installations as a part of the 1988 agreement has taken place every year since 1992.²⁰ This is evidence that institutionalized confidence-building measures, once negotiated, can work in South Asia. Of course, negotiating such measures in the first place is another matter.

¹⁹ Tanvi Kulkarni, "India-Pakistan Nuclear CBMs: A New Approach," *South Asian Voices*, May 19, 2016, <https://southasianvoices.org/india-pakistan-nuclear-cbms-a-new-approach/>.

²⁰ "India and Pakistan Exchanged List of Nuclear Installations," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Jan. 1, 2019, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/30858/India+and+Pakistan+exchanged+list+of+Nuclear+Installations>.

Introducing the Roundtable Contributions

As the other contributors to this roundtable — Myra MacDonald, Yelena Biberman, Michael Kugelman, and Rohan Mukherjee — highlight, beyond the nuclear relationship between India and Pakistan, there are a number of other important factors that affect relations between the two states and the future of security in Asia.

Perhaps the most significant issue in India-Pakistan relations is Kashmir. MacDonald argues that even if the recent abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution and the breaking up of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories is an irreversible move, the consequences will remain unpredictable for a long time. MacDonald writes that Pakistan's history suggests that it is likely to “exploit any renewed violence in the Kashmir Valley to weaken India.” Her historically rich piece also suggests that the Kashmir issue does not simply involve India and Pakistan — China could prove to be integral to how the current crisis plays out.

Indeed, international actors have played an important role in India-Pakistan crises. Biberman considers India-Pakistan relations from the angle of great power competition between the United States and China. Her article contends that the China-Pakistan relationship, and the more recent U.S.-Indian alignment, are not durable arrangements and come with their own sets of stresses. Biberman argues that, given Pakistan's unique position as an ally of both China and the United States, the latter needs to reconsider its own alignment toward India. If anything, she argues, “Pakistan is uniquely positioned to curtail China's global aspirations, both economically and from a security perspective.”

Continuing with the theme of international actors in South Asia, in his contribution, Kugelman argues that the United States could bring South Asia into its Indo-Pacific strategy by pursuing two goals in the region: boosting connectivity and tackling terror. Kugelman lays out a strategy for U.S. foreign policy that focuses on ending the Afghanistan war in the immediate future and emphasizes strengthening U.S.-Indian relations in the long term. In contrast to Biberman's argument, his article sees India as the United States' most important partner in the region and recommends deepening ties with it. Kugelman argues that by creating connectivity and tackling terrorism in South Asia, the United States can rival the

entrenched Chinese presence in the region and mobilize the South Asian states to advance its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Finally, in his discussion of the Balakot Crisis of February 2019, Mukherjee argues that, contrary to popular belief, the Indian airstrike was not a sudden or revolutionary decision. Instead, it was a product of the evolution of the India-Pakistan strategic dynamic over the previous two decades. Tracing strategic developments in this time period, the article argues that India's boldness in responding conventionally to cross-border terrorism gradually increased after the 1999 Kargil War when Pakistan failed to follow through on its nuclear threats. The puzzle, Mukherjee states, "is not so much why Modi chose this option but why previous prime ministers did not." Consequently, Mukherjee concludes that Balakot did *not* create a new normal that increases the risks of war.

Taken together, this roundtable seeks to understand the current crises in South Asia and the security situation in the region in general. It highlights some of the most important trends in the ongoing security dynamics between India and Pakistan: the changing nuclear relationship between the two countries, the crisis in Kashmir, the recent Balakot crisis, the role of international actors in mitigating and/or exacerbating tensions, and what policy measures members of the international community might take to attempt to manage the region better.

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2. In Kashmir, An Uncertain Ending to a Contested Past

Myra MacDonald

When the British civil servant Walter Lawrence was posted to Kashmir in the late 19th century to carry out a land revenue settlement, he was struck by the sheer volume of rumors, with a new one brought to his camp almost every hour. These rumors had their origin in an area of the old city of the Kashmiri capital Srinagar, around a bridge called the Habba Kadal. Lawrence called it the *Hawa Kadal*, translating it as the “Bridge of Air.” “The Kashmiris are called ‘Hawabin’, ‘those who see the air’ and they loved and lived on rumour,” he wrote in his memoirs, *The India We Served*.²¹ “To them nothing seems real or permanent, and the very idea of settlement was strange.”

In August, the Indian government unilaterally imposed such a settlement in the biggest constitutional change in India’s only Muslim-majority state in 70 years. It revoked the autonomy of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, split it into two by separating its Ladakh region, and announced both would become union territories directly ruled by New Delhi. To control the flow of information and stem rumors, it imposed a communications blackout and enforced an unofficial curfew. Several thousand Kashmiris, including mainstream pro-India politicians, were arrested without charge. Despite howls of outrage from Pakistan, which controls part of the state but claims it in full, India is not expected to reverse course. The government, led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, enjoys strong domestic support after winning a landslide election victory in May. Moreover, its actions on Jammu and Kashmir fit with a broader view in the country that the region is an integral part of India and that constitutional and administrative changes there are an internal matter. Domestic criticism has largely focused on the means used rather than the ends, while internationally, disapproval has been muted, except for from Pakistan’s traditional ally, China. India’s large and growing economy, combined with impatience with Pakistani support for Islamist militant proxies, has meant that it faced little pushback.

But if the move is irreversible, its consequences are unpredictable. This is not only because of the usual volatility in relations between India and Pakistan, which both tested nuclear

²¹ Walter Roper Lawrence, *The India We Served* (Cassel and Company, Ltd, 1928).

weapons in 1998. It is also because the conflict over what was once the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir actually comprises multiple overlapping conflicts. Among these is opposition to Indian rule in the Kashmir Valley, the most heavily populated part of Jammu and Kashmir and the heartland of a Pakistan-backed separatist insurgency that erupted in the late 1980s. The Kashmir Valley's reaction to the revocation of its autonomy has been delayed by the Indian clampdown, prompting worries about what will happen when restrictions are lifted. Kashmiri sentiment is in turn caught in the giant maw of the India-Pakistan rivalry. Both Pakistan and India see control of Kashmir as an affirmation of their national identities, with the former asserting its claim on the basis of a shared faith in Islam and India rejecting religion as a determinant of the region's fate. The two countries are not, however, limited to an ideological confrontation over the Kashmir Valley. Both also have strategic interests in the mountainous territories of the state that border Chinese Central Asia. On the Indian side, Ladakh — the region newly separated from Jammu and Kashmir — has contested frontiers with China's politically sensitive Xinjiang province and Tibet. A dispute over these frontiers led to a 1962 border war in which India was defeated by China. On the Pakistan side, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a billion-dollar infrastructure project meant to link Chinese Central Asia with Pakistani ports on the Arabian Sea and the Gulf, runs through the former princely state's Gilgit-Baltistan region. In addition to these competing interests in the region are violent Islamist groups eager to exploit any discontent. With so many elements in play — nuclear weapons, jihadist groups, Kashmiri anger, border disputes, trade, money, and the three-way strategic competition between India, Pakistan, and China — it would be reckless to forecast the outcome.

The best way to grasp the extent of the unpredictability is to imagine a giant piece of machinery with many moving parts, none of which interlock properly with each other. Each part is furthermore operated by different groups, none of which is in a position to know for sure how their actions will affect the overall process. The challenge will be in making sense of the different moving parts and how they interact with each other as the region enters a new phase of volatility.

A Contested Past

The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was created in the mid-19th century by a Hindu ruler who forged disparate fiefdoms in the northwest of India into a single entity about the size of Britain. Dominated by the Himalayan and Karakoram mountains, the state acquired its peculiar mix of emotional resonance and strategic importance long before India and Pakistan began fighting over it. The Kashmir Valley, romanticized by the Moghuls as paradise on earth, was celebrated worldwide for its beauty. But it represented barely more than 10 percent of the territory of the state. Of greater strategic importance were — and are — the large but sparsely populated regions to the north and east whose mountains and high cold deserts separate the Indian subcontinent from Chinese Central Asia.

When the Indian subcontinent was partitioned into Hindu-majority — but secular — India and Muslim Pakistan in 1947, Kashmir's Hindu maharajah hesitated about whether to join one or the other country, or try to remain independent. Facing an invasion by tribesmen from Pakistan, he signed an accession treaty with India in exchange for military support. In the war that followed between India and Pakistan, Jammu and Kashmir was torn in two. India ended up with the larger part, the area that now comprises the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. Pakistan held a stretch of land it renamed Azad Kashmir (Free Kashmir) along with Gilgit and Baltistan. The ceasefire line where both countries' armies stopped fighting in 1948 eventually formed the basis for a division of the state along what is today called the Line of Control. At the time, the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution calling for a plebiscite to allow the people to decide whether to join India or Pakistan. Only Pakistan continues to press for the implementation of this resolution although it is purely rhetorical. In reality, Pakistan has never been willing to meet a major condition of the resolution — that it first withdraw Pakistani nationals from its side of the state.²² India claims all of the state on the basis of the accession treaty and insists any arguments with Pakistan must be settled bilaterally.

²² "Resolutions Adopted by the Security Council in 1948," United Nations Security Council, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/resolutions-adopted-security-council-1948>.

With the region already a flashpoint for India and Pakistan, China became involved in the 1950s as its new communist rulers moved to occupy what they saw as the country's historic borders and sent troops to take over Tibet. To improve the movement of troops and supplies, the Chinese built a road between Xinjiang and Tibet that ran through the Aksai Chin, an uninhabited expanse of high cold desert on the fringes of Ladakh. The borders of Ladakh had never been agreed upon and India claimed the Aksai Chin as its own. The dispute, combined with tensions on the eastern end of the border, escalated into the 1962 war and a humiliating defeat for India. The Aksai Chin remains in Chinese hands, while India continues to claim it as part of Ladakh.

A year after that war, Pakistan reached a border agreement with Beijing covering its part of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, ceding to China territory to the north of the Karakoram mountains called the Trans-Karakoram Tract, known in shorthand as Shaskgam. India claims it as part of Jammu and Kashmir and argues that Pakistan had no right to give it up. Importantly, the border agreement smoothed the way for an alliance between Pakistan and China and the building of the Karakoram Highway between Xinjiang and Gilgit-Baltistan. It is this road that forms the basis of the transport and trade links of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Then in the late 1980s, the separatist insurgency erupted in the Kashmir Valley and was quickly backed by Pakistan, using Islamist militants it had initially trained to fight the 1979–1989 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. At least 50,000 people were killed in the insurgency, which spiraled into suicide bombings and “fedayeen” attacks by gunmen ready to fight to the death. Kashmir's minority Hindu population was attacked and forced to flee. Violence has decreased considerably since then. According to the Delhi-based South Asia Terrorism Portal, a total of 451 people, including civilians, security forces, and insurgents, died in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir in 2018, compared to 3,288 in 2000.²³ But discontent has festered, leading to sporadic protests by youths throwing stones and rocks at Indian security forces and prompting some young men to join small groups of armed militants.

²³ “Datasheet – Jammu and Kashmir,” South Asia Terrorism Portal, <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/india-jammukashmir#>.

Repeated efforts to reach a peace settlement between India and Pakistan have foundered. After the nuclear tests in 1998, then-Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee travelled to Pakistan in early 1999, hoping the presence of nuclear weapons would make war unthinkable and peace inevitable. Within months, however, the two countries were embroiled in the Kargil War, a border conflict that erupted after Pakistani troops crossed the Line of Control in the remote mountains between Baltistan and Ladakh. Under intense pressure from the United States, which feared the war could escalate and turn nuclear, Pakistan was forced to pull back its troops. Then, between 2003 and 2007, a draft peace plan was negotiated in behind-the-scenes talks. In essence, it would have given autonomy to the different parts of Jammu and Kashmir while Pakistan and India retained authority over foreign policy, defense, and communications on their respective sides of the Line of Control. There would be no exchange of territory, but India and Pakistan would work together to make borders irrelevant by encouraging trade, travel, and tourism across the Line of Control. Domestic politics in both countries prevented them from finalizing an agreement, and any hope of peace vanished after the November 2008 Mumbai attacks in which the Pakistan-backed Lashkar-e-Taiba militant group killed 166 people. With smaller-scale attacks launched by Pakistan-based militant groups continuing periodically, India has become convinced that Pakistan has no interest in a lasting peace.

A Contested Present

By revoking Kashmir's autonomy and dismembering the state, the Indian government has set out to break the mold. In doing so, it is following the path taken by a previous government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party when it tested nuclear weapons. Despite international opprobrium and anxiety — President Bill Clinton called South Asia the most dangerous place in the world in 2000 — India survived the storm. Within a decade, India had won recognition from Washington for its nuclear-armed status and staked a claim to be treated as a serious global power. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has now crossed a similar Rubicon. A legal challenge to the changes in Kashmir is not expected to succeed. Moreover, the dismemberment of the state is popular in Buddhist-dominated Ladakh, which has long resented being overshadowed by the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley. The Jammu region has a Hindu majority and shares Ladakh's frustration. Since the three regions are unlikely

to make common cause to put the state back together again, its dismemberment carries the same finality as the nuclear tests.

The outside world, India reckons, will just have to get used to it. The government argues that greater central control will allow it to introduce better governance and tamp down simmering violence. India's dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir had reached a stalemate, punctuated by acts of terrorism by Pakistan-based Islamist militant groups. By breaking up the state and incorporating its constituent parts into India, the government has essentially declared that there is no longer a dispute. Many Indian commentators have also pointed to the possible departure of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and highlighted the need to insulate Kashmir from any spillover of renewed jihadi violence.²⁴ Of all the arguments for why the Indian government has made this decision, however, the most convincing — albeit ethically unpalatable — is simply because it can. How well this gamble will play out depends on the multiple players with a stake in the region.

Within the Kashmir Valley, it is fair to assume that the revocation of autonomy and the lockdown that accompanied it will consolidate resentment against India. That assumption is borne out by early reports by Indian journalists and researchers who have been allowed into Kashmir.²⁵ However, in an environment that is, somewhat ironically, more awash in rumors than ever, given restrictions on mobile and internet communications in the valley, it is as yet unclear what form that opposition will take. Substantively, the government's decision to revoke Kashmir's autonomy — carried out by gutting Article 370 of the Indian constitution that had granted it special status — changes little. India had been hollowing out Kashmir's autonomy for decades. But the perceived threat to Kashmiris' ethnic and religious identity will resonate emotionally, all the more so since the government also removed restrictions on outsiders buying land in Kashmir, leading to fears of demographic

²⁴ See for example Ashok Malik, "Jammu-Kashmir and Ladakh: Exploring a New Paradigm," Observer Research Foundation, Aug. 7, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/jammu-kashmir-and-ladakh-exploring-a-new-paradigm-54185/>.

²⁵ Khalid Shah. "Kashmir: the situation is abnormally 'normal'," Observer Research Foundation, Sept 17, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/kashmir-the-situation-is-abnormally-normal-55579/>

change. Whether this resentment dissipates into the sullen peace of the graveyard or coalesces into a revived insurgency remains to be seen.

The Kashmir Valley's exact response is all the harder to predict given that it has been vague about what it wants. Though Muslim majority, it has never expressed an outright desire to become part of Pakistan. The most frequently heard demand is for "azadi," or freedom, a rallying cry that can mean anything from independence to autonomy to the dignity that would come from improved living conditions and an end to human rights abuses by Indian security forces. An opinion poll published by Britain's Chatham House think tank in 2010, one of the few conducted in the region, showed a large majority of people in the valley were in favor of independence for the whole of the erstwhile princely state.²⁶ However, those demanding independence have never been required to explain how this would work. The chances of gaining independence for the whole of Jammu and Kashmir are just as unlikely as those for a plebiscite — neither India nor Pakistan would countenance it. Nor does it have support in different parts of the state beyond the Kashmir Valley. Independence for the valley alone would be economically untenable, even if it were not sandwiched between two hostile states.

Nor have those calling for independence been given the political space to make, or lose, their case. Those wanting to participate in mainstream politics had to pledge their commitment to India. The demand for "azadi" has, therefore, functioned more as a vehicle for anti-India grievances rather than a defined agenda.

Without a clear focus for independence or secession to Pakistan, Kashmiri politics, both official and unofficial, have historically been fraught by division. Those divisions may be lessened by the revocation of autonomy, but they will not disappear altogether. Some Kashmiris could limit their demands to a restoration of statehood. Islamists, for their part, will try to use the crisis to enforce a strict interpretation of Islam. Optimists hope Kashmiris will find a non-violent means of asserting their identity, encouraged by an older generation weary of conflict. Pessimists point to Kashmiri youth who have grown up traumatized by

²⁶ Robert Bradnock. "Kashmir: Paths to Peace," Chatham House, May 26, 2010, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/109338>.

conflict and are now angry and cynical about any prospect for improvement.²⁷ Moreover, cynicism among the youth can easily be channeled into the nihilistic ideology of international Islamist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which in recent years have been picking up small pockets of support in the valley.

As for Pakistan, history suggests it will exploit any renewed violence in the Kashmir Valley to weaken India. Kashmiri deaths at the hands of Indian armed forces suit the Pakistani security state apparatus, because they help cast India as an existential enemy while shoring up Pakistan's identity as a besieged, militarily dominated Muslim homeland. In the past, Pakistan has had no hesitation in stoking violence through funding militants and helping them infiltrate Kashmir, and through the use of propaganda, all the while claiming to champion human rights in Kashmir. Yet, India's decision to revoke Kashmir's autonomy comes at a difficult time for Pakistan. Its economy is flailing: It has just reached the latest in a series of bailout agreements with the International Monetary Fund, and it faces intense pressure from the international Financial Action Task Force over terrorism financing and money laundering. Balanced against those constraints are all the reasons why Pakistan has so far refused to disarm its Islamist militant proxies and has clung to its anti-India ideology. The Pakistani army derives its domestic dominance from enmity with India. It also genuinely sees the much larger India as an existential threat and its militant proxies as an insurance policy against Indian hegemony in South Asia. That Pakistan continued to cling to its militant groups even after its acquisition of nuclear weapons shielded it from an Indian invasion shows just how much they matter to it. And, of course, there is the need to divert the attention of Islamist militants toward India to keep them under control and prevent them from turning on the Pakistani state.

The Indian government, meanwhile, has used a hardline approach to Kashmir to please its main constituency in an increasingly assertive Hindu majority. Its ability to revoke Kashmir's autonomy without wider consultation also serves as a warning of the might of the state to those who might defy it. Underneath this strident nationalism, however, lies a

²⁷ Myra MacDonald, "Changing Young Minds in Kashmir: Youth Rage and the Prospects for Peace," *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 14, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/09/changing-young-minds-in-kashmir-youth-rage-and-the-prospects-for-peace/>.

more challenging outlook. Within the Kashmir Valley, India has so far prevented any big upsurge in violence through an influx of security forces and a clampdown on communications and political activity. But the longer it maintains the lockdown, the more it will stoke Kashmiri resentment and risk even greater violence when restrictions are lifted. And while the Indian government has the capacity to maintain the lockdown for months in the hope of wearing Kashmiris down, it may find it increasingly hard to fend off questions from the international community about its curtailment of civil liberties.

Should Pakistan launch militant attacks in response to Delhi's actions in Kashmir, India's response is also hard to predict. Modi has vowed to end Pakistani terrorism and in his previous term in office showed his readiness to retaliate after attacks by Pakistan-based militant groups. In 2016, India sent troops into Pakistani Kashmir to strike at militants based there after an attack on an Indian army camp. While such tactical raids had been going on for years, Modi's government was the first to announce one publicly and then celebrate it with much fanfare. Earlier this year, he went further, ordering airstrikes against a militant training camp in Pakistan proper following a suicide bombing against Indian security forces.²⁸ It was the first use of air power in history by one nuclear-armed nation against another and the first military action by India in Pakistan proper since their 1971 war. As a result, India and Pakistan have entered an unpredictable and dangerous phase in which assumptions that the presence of nuclear weapons would limit Indian retaliation no longer apply.

Nonetheless, the experience of previous Indian governments suggests there are limits to how far India can rely on military retaliation alone. During the 1999 Kargil War, it needed U.S. support to force Pakistan to pull back its troops. Another crisis in 2001–2002, triggered by an attack on the Indian Parliament, also highlighted the constraints on military action. Though India mobilized its army for all-out war, it did not invade Pakistan for fear of a conflict that might turn nuclear. Even without the presence of nuclear weapons, it is questionable whether India had the capacity in conventional warfare to deliver a quick

²⁸ Abu Arqam Naqash, Sanjeev Miglani, "India Launches Airstrike in Pakistan; Islamabad Denies Militant Camp Hit," *Reuters*, Feb. 26, 2019, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-india-kashmir-pakistan/india-launches-air-strike-in-pakistan-islamabad-denies-militant-camp-hit-idUKKCN1QF07P>.

knock-out blow to Pakistan.²⁹ Its large army was slow and cumbersome, and badly in need of modernization. The Indian government also had to contend with the fact that the risk of war was threatening foreign investment and economic growth. War was averted and India ultimately adopted a now-discarded policy of “strategic restraint,” eschewing military retaliation in order to focus on building its economy.

To be sure, much has changed in the balance of power between India and Pakistan since then. India’s economic growth has made it one of the world’s largest economies — in seventh place at the latest count — giving it far more clout on the international stage. Yet, it still needs to consider the risks any conflict would pose to its economy, all the more so since growth is slowing.³⁰ Its defense forces still require modernization, as highlighted in this year’s airstrikes on Pakistan, which appear to have had only limited impact on their intended target. Moreover, an Indian plane was subsequently shot down and its pilot captured. India also faces an expanding Pakistani nuclear arsenal, which now includes tactical nuclear weapons.

China is another wild card. Despite its contested borders with India and its alliance with Pakistan, it has been reluctant to see a full-blown war on its doorstep. In the past, it has frowned on Pakistani adventurism, refusing, for example, to support it during the Kargil War. In its initial reaction to India’s revocation of Kashmir’s autonomy, Beijing expressed alarm over the changes as well as over the altered status of Ladakh, and called for an informal discussion on the subject at the U.N. Security Council. But it described India as a friendly country, and one with which it intended to continue long-running talks to resolve their border dispute. The relationship between Asia’s two largest countries, which since 1962 have managed to contain their border dispute to occasional localized skirmishes, could worsen, however, if India’s ambitions for Kashmir go too far. Several Indian government minister and many Bharatiya Janata Party sympathizers have already talked about reclaiming the Pakistani side of Jammu and Kashmir, posing a threat to Gilgit-Baltistan, the

²⁹ Walter C. Ladwig, “A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army’s New Limited War Doctrine,” *International Security* 32, no. 3. (Winter, 2007/2008): 158–90, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30130521>.

³⁰ Eric Bellman, “India’s Economic Growth Slows to Six-Year Low,” *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 30, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/indias-economic-growth-slows-to-six-year-low-11567168382>.

only land bridge between Pakistan and China. The Indian government has also been vocally reasserting India's claim to the Aksai Chin, whose use as a link between Xinjiang and Tibet is crucial to China.

An Unsatisfactory Ending

The Indian decision to bring its side of Jammu and Kashmir under central control formalizes a division of the erstwhile princely state that began in 1947. This breaking up of the state, made all the starker by the separation of Ladakh, essentially means the conflict over Jammu and Kashmir is being addressed not by resolving its disputed status, but by erasing its existence altogether. It is not a satisfying ending to a conflict that has dragged on for 70 years. The Line of Control is not a natural border, either geographically or culturally. Its geographical anomalies have been a source of conflict between India and Pakistan for decades and it separates places and people who once had close family, trade, cultural, and religious ties. The Indian move puts paid to any hopes, however unrealistic, that the different parts of the former princely state could be reunited as an autonomous or independent entity.

However unsatisfying an outcome, it is nonetheless the reality. The outside world can, at best, quietly encourage talks between India and Pakistan, assert the importance of civil liberties in Kashmir and across the region, and continue to prod Pakistan to disarm its militant groups. Beyond that, however, the world will have to learn to live with the region's unpredictability in the short term and acknowledge there is no easy fix or forecast.

Walter Lawrence writes of meeting an old Kashmiri Hindu who was standing on his head among a crowd of petitioners. When Lawrence asked why, the old man replied that his affairs had been turned upside down by the land revenue settlement and he no longer knew whether he was standing on his feet or his head. It was meant to be a joke, and everyone including the elderly Hindu laughed. But the old man had a point about the lack of permanence in Kashmir. Now the entire region has been turned upside down.

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3. Will the United States and China Keep India and Pakistan from Going to War?

By Yelena Biberman

South Asia is experiencing substantial structural shocks. The United States has abandoned its prolonged partnership with Pakistan while courting India to counterbalance China. Simultaneously, China and Pakistan are forging unprecedented economic ties. Are these changes helping to stabilize South Asia? Or do they raise serious risks of conflict in the region, with the possibility that China and the United States could be dragged into a future crisis directly?

These questions are all the more pressing given that India and Pakistan are once again standing on the brink of war, following India's revoking of Kashmir's special status as an autonomous state and corresponding crackdown.³² Meanwhile, intense great power

³¹ Myra MacDonald, *Defeat is an Orphan: How Pakistan Lost the Great South Asian War* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2016).

³² Imran Khan, "Imran Khan: The World Can't Ignore Kashmir. We Are All in Danger," *New York Times*, Aug. 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/30/opinion/imran-khan-kashmir-pakistan.html>.

competition between China and the United States is on the horizon.³³ Whether India and Pakistan will go to war depends not only on the domestic dynamics within each state, but also on international factors. Key among the latter is the nature and durability of the alliances between China and Pakistan, as well as between the United States and India. These alliances are based on pragmatism and a “balance of interests.” And while these ostensible allies do not necessarily share each other’s interests, they do satisfy them.³⁴

How (Un)Stable Is South Asia?

Views diverge sharply on how close Pakistan and India are to war. One influential line of reasoning argues that the two countries’ possession of nuclear weapons alone will prevent any full-fledged conflict from erupting.³⁵ Accordingly, the involvement of great powers — with their own nuclear weapons — adds another layer of protection by amplifying the mechanism of nuclear deterrence.

Others see nuclearization as having encouraged more provocative Pakistani behavior and aggressive Indian responses, with the outbreak of full-scale war, consequently, seeming to be only a matter of time.³⁶ The cover provided by China and the United States further encourages the two regional rivals to take greater risks. Even an attack by a non-state actor, such as in the recent Pulwama incident,³⁷ increases the chances of a situation escalating dangerously.

Where both of these logics fall short, however, is in their assumption that the current U.S.-India and China-Pakistan relationships are durable. They are not. One is fickle; the other, a

³³ David M. Edelstein, “The Persistence of Great Power Politics,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 2 (February 2019): 117, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/1940>.

³⁴ For the concept of “balance of interests,” see Yelena Biberman, *Gambling with Violence: State Outsourcing of War in Pakistan and India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 28.

³⁵ Sumit Ganguly, “Nuclear Stability in South Asia,” *International Security* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 45-70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40207131>.

³⁶ S. Paul Kapur, “Ten Years of Instability in a Nuclear South Asia,” *International Security* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 71-94, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40207132>.

³⁷ Yelena Biberman, “Ending Terror in Kashmir,” *Political Violence @ a Glance*, Feb. 22, 2019, <http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2019/02/22/ending-terror-in-kashmir/>.

gamble. South Asia is no more stable — or unstable — than it has been since it openly went nuclear in 1998. The recent “trade war” between the United States and India,³⁸ and India’s subsequent turn to China and Russia,³⁹ is the latest manifestation of India’s pragmatism and America’s unpredictability — hardly a recipe for a stable alliance.⁴⁰

The question of whether the unprecedented economic cooperation between China and Pakistan — in the form of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor infrastructure projects — could morph into a security alliance so durable that it emboldens Pakistan regionally and China internationally is more complicated.

All-Weather Friends?

Never before have Pakistan and China collaborated so intensely. The former was known as “America’s most allied ally in Asia” during the early Cold War years,⁴¹ a time when it had only limited engagement with China. The 1962 Sino-Indian War turned Pakistan’s attention toward China as a potential counterforce to its main foe, India. But, during its subsequent two wars with India (in 1965 and 1971), Pakistan received little assistance from China.

Still, following the breakaway of the country’s eastern wing in 1971, Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto expanded economic cooperation between the two countries. China began assisting in Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program, while Pakistan played a key role in the U.S.-China rapprochement. With the United States pulling back its military, political, and economic support for Pakistan in recent years, China has stepped in to provide vital financial support for massive infrastructure projects across the country.

³⁸ Ana Swanson and Vindu Goel, “Trump Administration Strips India of Special Trade Status,” *New York Times*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/31/business/trump-india-trade.html>.

³⁹ Atul Aneja, “China, India, Russia Consider Joint Front to Counter Trump’s Trade War,” *The Hindu*, June 24, 2019.

⁴⁰ Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, “The Myth of Indian Strategic Restraint,” *National Interest*, June 18, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/myth-indian-strategic-restraint-63232>. For more on the present state of U.S.-India relations, see Sameer Lalwani and Heather Byrne, “The Elephant in the Room: Auditing the Past and Future of the U.S.-India Partnership,” *War on the Rocks*, June 26, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/06/the-elephant-in-the-room-auditing-the-past-and-future-of-the-u-s-india-partnership/>.

⁴¹ Mohammed Ayub Khan, “The Pakistan-American Alliance,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 1964, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1964-01-01/pakistan-american-alliance>.

In January 2015, Pakistan’s army chief went to China to open “new doors of cooperation” between the two countries. The Chinese leadership responded by designating Pakistan the “most reliable friend” and an “irreplaceable all-weather friend.”⁴² Less than four months later, Chinese President Xi Jinping arrived in Pakistan to unveil the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor — an investment that is now valued at around \$60 billion⁴³ — to build a network of roads, railways, and pipelines between the two countries.

Questions about whether China was taking advantage of Pakistan like it did Sri Lanka — through big loans with long strings attached — began to mount,⁴⁴ as did concerns that the project might potentially destabilize a politically-strained country by “widening social divides and generating new sources of conflict.”⁴⁵ Few mainstream Pakistani politicians, however, challenged the investments, except to demand that their respective regions receive a larger share.⁴⁶ A major reason for this was the military establishment’s view that a partnership with China had an important security purpose. It functioned as “a counterpoint to rising U.S. diplomatic and economic pressure to end support to Afghanistan- and India-oriented militant proxies.”⁴⁷

A Joint Gamble

The China-Pakistan partnership is held together by a peculiar force: a joint gamble. Pakistan has made a credible commitment to China by gambling with its own economy and security.

⁴² “China Says Pakistan ‘Most Reliable Friend’, Vows to ‘Help in All Respects,’” *Dawn*, Jan. 26, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1159585>.

⁴³ Sabrina Toppa, “Why Young Pakistanis Are Learning Chinese,” *The Atlantic*, Nov. 14, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/11/pakistan-china-cooperation-cpec/568750/>.

⁴⁴ Maria Abi-Habib, “How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port,” *New York Times*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html>.

⁴⁵ “China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks,” Crisis Group Asia, no. 297, June 29, 2018, i, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/297-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-opportunities-and-risks>.

⁴⁶ Patrick Wintour, “‘All-Weather Friendship’: But Is Pakistan Relying Too Heavily on China?” *The Guardian*, Aug. 3, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/aug/03/all-weather-friendship-but-is-pakistan-relying-too-heavily-on-china>.

⁴⁷ “China-Pakistan Economic Corridor,” ii.

China credibly committed to Pakistan by risking the security of its nationals (and its investments) in Pakistan and exacerbating the conflict in Xinjiang. The stakes for both countries are very high. And they are the glue that keeps the partnership together.

Among the most serious threats to China's economic activities in Pakistan are militant Uyghur organizations, such as the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement, as well as Baloch and Sindhi separatist outfits, such the Baluchistan Liberation Army and Sindhudesh Liberation Army.⁴⁸ Chinese officials deem Uyghur militants a serious threat to the over \$1 trillion Belt and Road Initiative (of which the Pakistan corridor is a "crown jewel"). After all, its overland portion originates in the Uyghur-populated western region of Xinjiang. Uyghur militants have received safe haven in Pakistan in the past,⁴⁹ but they no longer do. There are now stricter border controls and crackdowns. Meanwhile, Pakistani officials have kept silent about China's harsh treatment of the Uyghur Muslim minority.⁵⁰

The Baloch insurgents have demanded adequate compensation for resource extraction in Balochistan, claiming that the Baloch have long been oppressed by the Pakistani central government through a lack of adequate infrastructure construction and investment in the needs of the people. Militant organizations, such as the Baluchistan Liberation Army and Lashkar-e-Baluchistan, claim that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is not bringing in additional development for the Baloch people. They view China as complicit with the Pakistani government in denying their people needed development assistance and have killed dozens of Chinese workers and numerous Pakistani military personnel since the beginning of the infrastructure agreement. Despite the deployment of over 17,000 additional Pakistani troops to the region, Baloch insurgents have been able to carry out high-profile attacks. In May 2019, the Majeed Fidayeen Brigade, the Baluchistan Liberation Army's suicide

⁴⁸ "Sindhi Nationalists' Target Chinese Engineer in Karachi Bombing," *Pakistan Today*, May 30, 2016, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2016/05/30/remote-control-explosion-injures-three-including-chinese-national/>.

⁴⁹ Veena Ramachandran, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: The Uyghur Challenge and the Chinese Security Model," *The Diplomat*, March 30, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/china-pakistan-economic-corridor-the-uyghur-challenge-and-the-chinese-security-model/>.

⁵⁰ Matt Rivers and Lily Lee, "Former Xinjiang Teacher Claims Brainwashing and Abuse Inside Mass Detention Centers," *CNN*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/09/asia/xinjiang-china-kazakhstan-detention-intl/index.html>.

squad, attacked a luxury hotel in Gwadar. In 2018, it attacked the Chinese consulate in Karachi and a bus carrying Chinese engineers in Balochistan's Dalbandin district.⁵¹

China does not have a formal security strategy for the Pakistani arm of the Belt and Road Initiative, but it is very concerned about the safety of its projects and its citizens in Pakistan. It has used a variety of methods to address these concerns. These have included quietly holding talks with select Baloch militants;⁵² providing diplomatic cover to powerful Islamist organizations, such as Jaish-e-Mohammed, so as to avoid becoming a target of their ire;⁵³ supporting Pakistan's efforts to stabilize Afghanistan; and even operating its own army and private military contractors inside Pakistan.⁵⁴ There have also been sightings of Chinese troops along the Line of Control that runs through Kashmir, much to the alarm of the Indian security establishment.⁵⁵

Pakistan has also significantly strengthened its own security apparatuses. It formed the army-led Special Security Division and the Special Protection Units — the latter was raised by each province from their police departments. The Pakistani Navy created a special wing to protect the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor's sea lanes. Gwadar, a previously isolated port city in Balochistan province that is now the heart of the network of infrastructure projects, was turned into "something of a military cantonment" with the local population facing "routine harassment at security checkpoints."⁵⁶

⁵¹ Farhan Zahid, "BLA's Suicide Squad: Majeed Fidayeen Brigade," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 17, no. 2 (Jan. 25, 2019): 3-4, <https://jamestown.org/program/blas-suicide-squad-majeed-fidayeen-brigade/>.

⁵² Farhan Bokhari and Kiran Stacey, "China Woos Pakistan Militants to Secure Belt and Road Projects," *Financial Times*, Feb. 19, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/063ce350-1099-11e8-8cb6-b9ccc4c4dbbb>.

⁵³ Yelena Biberman and Jared Schwartz, "China and Pakistan Have Struck a Devil's Bargain with Militants," *Foreign Policy*, April 5, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/05/china-and-pakistan-have-struck-a-devils-bargain-with-militants/>.

⁵⁴ Selig S. Harrison, "China's Discreet Hold on Pakistan's Northern Borderlands," *New York Times*, Aug. 26, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/27/opinion/27iht-edharrison.html>.

⁵⁵ "Chinese Army Troops Spotted Along Line of Control in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir," *Economic Times of India*, July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/chinese-army-troops-spotted-along-line-of-control-in-pakistan-occupied-kashmir/articleshow/51380320.cms>.

⁵⁶ Muhammad Akbar Notezai, "Will Balochistan Blow Up China's Belt and Road?" *Foreign Policy*, May 30, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/30/will-balochistan-blow-up-chinas-belt-and-road/>.

Conclusion

Alliance patterns in South Asia are changing. The U.S.-India alliance is relatively weak, with both sides willing to partner with the other's rivals when it fits their interests. The emerging Pakistan-China alliance rests on a firmer foundation, one that is literally being built across Pakistan with billions of dollars' worth of infrastructure investment. It may prove more durable than the pragmatic cooperation between India and the United States.

Despite the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor's dual-use potential, its immediate purpose is to provide China with greater access to global trade and to stimulate growth in its western provinces. Whatever Beijing's long-term plans for South Asia, it is currently focused on consolidating its position in the Asia-Pacific and, ultimately, globally. Pakistan and India will continue to clash over their disputed territories regardless of any great power presence. Preventing such skirmishes from escalating is something that is, for now, in China's interest. Provoking or failing to prevent open conflict in the region would be a step backwards for China's regional efforts that support its larger global strategy to ensure unparalleled access to trade and continued economic growth at home.

If containing China is the name of the game for the United States, then it would benefit from reinvesting in its relationship with Pakistan. India will "balance" China only if it deems it to be in its own interests, not because the United States wants it to do so. When and if that time comes, India will itself turn to the United States for assistance and may even be willing to compromise on knotty issues, such as Kashmir. Pakistan is uniquely positioned to curtail China's global aspirations, both economically and from a security perspective. It is not an easy ally, but neither is the United States. Still, there is enough shared history — with Pakistan playing a prominent role not just in helping the United States defeat the Soviet Union through covert action in Afghanistan, but also in the historic rapprochement with China and, more recently, negotiations with the Afghan Taliban⁵⁷ — to provide a solid

⁵⁷ Yelena Biberman and Jared Schwartz, "Pakistan Is Ready for Stability in Afghanistan," *East Asia Forum*, March 29, 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/03/29/pakistan-is-ready-for-stability-in-afghanistan/>.

foundation for cooperation and lessons for how best to move the relationship forward in a “mutually beneficial” way.⁵⁸

At the same time, the United States should not try to force Pakistan to terminate its partnership with China. Pakistan is unlikely to honor such a request and instead would be forced to play yet another “double game.”⁵⁹

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Acknowledgements: The author thanks Farhan Zahid and Thomas Rodems for their assistance with this article.



⁵⁸ Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, U.S. Department of Defense, January 2018, 8, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001– 2014* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

4. U.S. Policy in South Asia: Short-Term and Long-Term Imperatives

By Michael Kugelman

It's hard to overstate the strategic significance of South Asia.

The region sits astride the Indian Ocean region — one of the world's busiest sea trade routes — and serves as a gateway to the Middle East and East Asia. It houses a quarter of the world's population. It is home to threats that range from terrorism, insurgency, and nuclear weapons to poverty, natural resource shortages, and climate change. And it is ground zero for the sharpening strategic competition between the two Asian giants, India and China.

And yet, South Asia is a region where the U.S. footprint is not nearly as deep as that of its Chinese rival. Washington has traditionally viewed South Asia through a narrow lens, with an emphasis on three separate silos: Afghanistan, where U.S. forces have been fighting a war for nearly two decades; India, where Washington is pursuing a fast-growing partnership; and Pakistan, where the United States manages a difficult but longstanding relationship. The smaller states of South Asia, on the other hand, tend to receive short shrift from Washington, in sharp contrast to Beijing's plentiful investments and influence.

The Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy aims to widen U.S. engagement in South Asia by building deeper ties with America's longstanding friend, India, but also by developing new partnerships with other South Asian states that make up the Indo-Pacific region's western reaches.⁶⁰ However, to establish substantive and lasting region-wide engagement, Washington will need to go beyond mere lip service and put some substantive meat on the rhetorical bones of its regional engagement plan.

⁶⁰ "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region," U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 2019, https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/31/2002139210/-1/-1/1/DOD_INDO_PACIFIC_STRATEGY_REPORT_JUNE_2019.PDF. For a broader articulation of the Indo-Pacific strategy, see Mike Pompeo, "Remarks on America's Indo-Pacific Economic Vision," Indo-Pacific Business Forum, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, July 30, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/remarks-on-americas-indo-pacific-economic-vision/>.

U.S. policy can achieve its goal of bringing South Asia into its Indo-Pacific strategy through the pursuit of two region-wide goals: boosting connectivity and tackling terrorism. However, U.S. policy should first address two more immediate goals: negotiating an end to the war in Afghanistan and making more headway in its partnership with India. The positive consequences of achieving these short-term goals — more stability in a volatile region and a deeper relationship with a country that Washington regards as a key partner in its Indo-Pacific strategy — will facilitate the longer-term U.S. objective of more robust regional engagement in South Asia. And by extension, this will enable Washington to make real progress with its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Short-Term Policy Priorities

For nearly two decades, the conflict in Afghanistan and America's partnership with India have been front-burner U.S. policy priorities in South Asia. Negotiating an end to America's longest-ever foreign war and strengthening a deep but flawed relationship with New Delhi should constitute Washington's two main short-term goals in South Asia.

Ending the Unending War in Afghanistan

President Donald Trump's eagerness to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan has led to a promising but risky effort to negotiate an end to the conflict. Just how challenging this effort will be was underscored on September 7, when Trump abruptly called off talks between the U.S. government and the Taliban — even though the two sides were on the cusp of a troop withdrawal deal following multiple rounds of negotiations. Trump stated that his government could not continue conducting talks with the Taliban because of the group's refusal to stop staging attacks during negotiations. However, even though Trump declared that talks are dead, the administration has signaled — including, perhaps, through Trump's move on September 10 to fire National Security Adviser John Bolton, a vocal opponent of talking to the Taliban — that it may be willing to resume talks.⁶¹ If negotiations

⁶¹ Sarah Westwood, Kevin Liptak, and Devan Cole, "US Still Interested in Taliban Peace Deal, Pompeo Says," *CNN*, Sept. 8, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/08/politics/mike-pompeo-taliban-peace-talks-cnntv/index.html>.

do resume, reaching an agreement will be all the more challenging. Nevertheless, pushing to restart them is the right thing to do.⁶²

In recent months, lead U.S. negotiator and special adviser to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad held nine rounds of talks with senior Taliban representatives. Washington identified several key agenda points: an agreement on a U.S. troop withdrawal deal, a commitment from the Taliban to deny space to international terrorists, a Taliban ceasefire, and an intra-Afghan dialogue — comprising the Taliban, the Afghan government, and other key Afghan political stakeholders — that hashes out a postwar political settlement.

Khalilzad's job has always been a tall order. The Taliban, not the U.S. government, is negotiating from a position of strength. The insurgents have arguably never been stronger. They control and contest more territory now than at any time since U.S. forces entered Afghanistan in 2001. And, unlike Washington, they are in no hurry to get a deal. Not surprisingly, the sequencing of the talks that produced the now-suspended U.S.-Taliban deal went in the Taliban's favor. Negotiations largely focused on the first two agenda points. The first, a troop withdrawal plan, is the Taliban's core goal in talks. The second, a Taliban promise to deny space to international terrorists, is an easy sell to the insurgents given that al-Qaeda is a shadow of its former self and the Islamic State is a Taliban enemy. These were the two points that comprised the U.S.-Taliban deal. There was little progress with the other agenda points — a Taliban ceasefire and an intra-Afghan dialogue. The insurgents refused even to implement a brief truce to coincide with this year's Eid holiday (they had agreed to one in 2018). And they have consistently refused to let Kabul join their talks with Washington, which has led to tensions between the U.S. and Afghan governments. Not surprisingly, the emerging U.S.-Taliban deal did not commit the Taliban to a ceasefire or to launching intra-Afghan talks. This is one reason why many in Washington were unhappy about the deal, and was one factor that accounts for Trump's decision to call off talks.⁶³

⁶² See Michael Kugelman, "Getting to 'Yes' Has Just Gotten a Lot Harder in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 12, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/12/getting-to-yes-has-just-gotten-a-lot-harder-in-afghanistan-taliban/>.

⁶³ Jessica Donati, Michael C. Bender, and Craig Nelson, "Divided White House Promoted Trump to Call Off Taliban Talks," *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 8, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghan-government-praises-trump-suspension-of-u-s-taliban-negotiations-11567956075>.

Had the deal been finalized, there would have been risks galore for Washington. The United States could have ended up agreeing to a troop withdrawal deal before the Taliban had stopped fighting and started talking to Kabul about a post-war settlement. And even if the Taliban had stopped fighting and started talking to Kabul, it could have taken up arms again if it didn't like what it was offered in negotiations — or if there was a deal that it ended up not liking.

Looming over all this is the possibility that an impatient Trump, even if he decides to try to get negotiations back on the rails, could give up on talks entirely and pull troops unilaterally in the absence of a deal. Such a move could cause rapid destabilization in Afghanistan, thereby imperiling the stability that constitutes America's chief interest in South Asia.

Still, despite these risks, negotiating with the Taliban is the right thing to do, simply because there is no alternative. U.S. officials have now wisely recognized that the war can't be won militarily. Accordingly, Washington should stay the course on talks — even with the added complication of the Afghan presidential elections currently scheduled for September 28. Given the likelihood of election rigging and fraud, the election outcome will probably be contested, leading to a long period of political uncertainty and extended delays before the new government is installed. This means that even if Washington chooses to pursue new talks, election-related distractions in Afghanistan will delay their resumption.

If the United States does eventually reach a troop withdrawal deal, it should refuse to remove any troops until the Taliban has laid down its arms and begun an intra-Afghan dialogue. It should push for the establishment of a monitoring mechanism, ideally overseen by the United Nations, to ensure that the Taliban abides by any commitments it makes in an agreement. Additionally, U.S. negotiators should insist that any agreement allow America to maintain access to several bases in Afghanistan in order to maintain a small presence of troops to serve as trainers and advisers to the Afghan security forces, and to offer counter-terrorism assistance amid the threat from the Islamic State that U.S. officials warn is rapidly worsening.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Kathy Gannon, "Islamic State Expands Reach in Afghanistan, Threatening West," *Associated Press*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/0a4f38coead84ecba2e0102c8b3bob40>.

A sad irony of U.S. policy is that Afghanistan's key neighbors share Washington's desire for a negotiated end to the war, but poor U.S. relations with these nations — China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia — hamper prospects for cooperation between Washington and key regional actors on achieving this goal. The good news is that Islamabad has helped bring the Taliban to the table for the current talks with the United States. For this reason, if talks do resume, Washington should refrain from applying excessive bilateral pressure — much less imposing punitive measures — on Pakistan as part of its longstanding effort to get Islamabad to crack down on the terrorists operating on its soil. However, this should not preclude Washington from continuing to work in multilateral settings — such as the United Nations and the Financial Action Task Force, which monitors terrorist financing — to keep the pressure on Islamabad. Judging by Islamabad's recent decision to arrest dozens of militants and shutter their facilities, such multilateral pressure appears to be bearing fruit.⁶⁵

Meanwhile, Washington should actively encourage any efforts by China, Russia, and Iran — three nations that have already sought to take on a greater role in Afghanistan and to cultivate ties with the Taliban — to push the Taliban toward reconciliation, particularly if the Taliban were to agree to a deal with the United States on a troop withdrawal plan. It would be at that critical moment, when the impending departure of U.S. forces presents a tantalizing battlefield advantage for the insurgents and may tempt them to take up the fight again, that pressure from multiple quarters to lay down arms would be most essential.

To be sure, given the Taliban's leverage in talks, not to mention its categorical rejection of the Afghan political system, getting the insurgents to agree to a peace deal will be difficult. Still, given the lack of alternatives, Washington should pursue negotiations so long as the Taliban continues to be amenable to them. In a worst-case scenario, where there is no deal or there is another deal that falls through, U.S. officials could at least say they tried their best, and that they exhausted both the military and the diplomatic options in their efforts to end the war. And in a best-case scenario, there would be some type of deal that would

⁶⁵ Manu Pubby, "Action on LeT, Jaish-e-Mohd, Hizbul: Pakistan Shuts 13 Camps Across LoC Ahead of Anti-Terror Body's Plenary," *Economic Times*, June 10, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/action-on-let-jaish-e-mohd-hizbul-pakistan-shuts-13-camps-across-loc-ahead-of-anti-terror-bodys-plenary/articleshow/69718715.cms>.

produce a modicum of stability in Afghanistan and enable America to focus more on its broader goals in South Asia tied to the Indo-Pacific strategy.

If talks resume and once again collapse or a deal appears unachievable, Trump should not pull all troops and head for the exits. Instead, he should sharply reduce but not eliminate the U.S. troop presence and authorize the remaining American forces to focus exclusively on training, advising, and counter-terrorism. This would enable Trump to tell his political base — particularly with next year’s presidential election in mind — that he is bringing troops home, while also continuing to fight the terrorists that threaten America.

Pushing for Deeper Partnership with India

Since the early 1990s, and especially since the early 2000s, U.S.-India relations have enjoyed rapid growth. Impelled by shared democratic values, convergent interests related to shared concerns about terrorism and China, and the advocacy of a large and active Indian-American community, the bilateral relationship has arguably never been stronger. And yet, today, largely because of the Indo-Pacific strategy, the imperatives for deepening that partnership have arguably never been more compelling.

When discussing this policy, Trump administration officials — more so than when Obama administration officials spoke about their Asia rebalance policy — explicitly link India to the strategy’s success. “The United States will work with like-minded nations — from India to the Pacific Islands — to advance our shared interests,” Vice President Mike Pence wrote in a *Washington Post* op-ed about the strategy in 2018.⁶⁶ In private briefings, senior administration officials describe India as a central pillar of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

New Delhi is on board with the strategy’s overall goals. It has its own comparable policy, called Act East, which like the Indo-Pacific strategy intends to ramp up investments and activities in East and Southeast Asia. Indian officials trumpet the same themes and terms — free, open, inclusive, and rules-based — as their U.S. counterparts when describing their

⁶⁶ Mike Pence, “The United States Seeks Collaboration, Not Control, in the Indo-Pacific,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 9, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/mike-pence-the-united-states-seeks-collaboration-not-control-in-the-indo-pacific/2018/11/09/1a0c330a-e45a-11e8-b759-3d88a5ce9e19_story.html.

vision for the region. Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself, in a speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2018, described the Indo-Pacific as a “free, open, and inclusive region” that needs a “common, rules-based order” and should feature a “rules-based, open, balanced and stable trade environment.”⁶⁷

In both Washington and New Delhi, there is a strong consensus in favor of deep partnership — but the current partnership is far from perfect. Defense ties are warmer than economic relations, and recent months have brought some serious bilateral trade tensions. Accordingly, Washington should prioritize efforts to ease commercial tensions. New Delhi has been strikingly restrained, both in rhetoric and in action, as the Trump administration — as part of its broader hardline position on global trade — has imposed tariffs on Indian steel and aluminum products and revoked trade privileges on \$6 billion worth of Indian exports. New Delhi’s public reactions have been muted, and it has not taken retaliatory steps.

Accordingly, Washington can do its part to help ease economic tensions by taking some conciliatory steps. Given Trump’s strident hard line on trade, it is unlikely he will ease up on his tariff measures. Instead, the White House should give New Delhi more flexibility to import oil from Iran, one of India’s top suppliers of foreign hydrocarbons. Washington has refused to extend short-term waivers to several countries, including India, which had enabled them to keep doing business with Tehran after the reimposition of tough White House sanctions. A new waiver for India — which has often reduced, at considerable risk to its energy security, oil imports from Iran after previous U.S. sanctions — would be a welcome step. Washington can also avert a crisis with New Delhi by not penalizing India for deciding to acquire a new missile defense system from Russia in defiance of U.S. sanctions against Moscow.

At the same time, Washington should continue moving forward on the defense side — not just to pursue common goals, but to build more overall goodwill to help the two sides work through their troubles on the economic front. In recent years, the United States and India

⁶⁷ “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue,” Media Center, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 1, 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>

have concluded several foundational agreements that enable their militaries to work closer together. A chief objective now should be reaching agreement on the only foundational accord yet to be finalized — the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement, which would allow India to access U.S. geospatial technology to improve the accuracy and effectiveness of its advanced weaponry.⁶⁸

Finally, Washington should pursue greater cooperation with New Delhi in Afghanistan. To be sure, the options are limited. Pakistan's role in the U.S.-Taliban talks has effectively shut its Indian rival out, and Washington's determination to negotiate with the Taliban despite Kabul's absence has not sat well in New Delhi, which has a close partnership with the Afghan government. Still, if negotiations are resumed, Washington can work with New Delhi outside the talks, particularly by sharing intelligence on the location and movements of terrorists in Afghanistan — including Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad, India-focused Pakistani groups that have had a presence in Afghanistan.

The Long View: Toward a Truly Regional South Asia Policy

The Trump administration envisions South Asia playing a major role in its Indo-Pacific strategy. In an August 2018 briefing, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Alice Wells stated that the administration “will build our commitment” to the Indo-Pacific by allocating \$100 million to South Asia — including \$39 million to Bangladesh, \$40 million to Sri Lanka, and \$17 million to Nepal. That funding, she said, would focus on maritime security, humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping capabilities, and countering transnational crime, “all of which are key to ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific.”⁶⁹ Similarly, a Department of Defense strategy report on the Indo-Pacific published in June 2019 lays out plans to develop new partnerships with these countries — along with the Maldives — to combat illicit drugs, human trafficking, transnational crime, and terrorism.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Shishir Gupta, “India, US to Take Forward Talks for Key Military Pact,” *Hindustan Times*, April 3, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-us-to-take-forward-talks-for-key-military-pact/story-bizIfgMjKtKsfA2wjTqQzM.html>.

⁶⁹ Alice Wells, “U.S. Policy in the Indian Ocean Region,” Washington Foreign Press Center, Aug. 20, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-policy-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>.

⁷⁰ “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report,” U.S. Department of Defense.

These investments, while promising, are numerous and diffuse, suggesting the difficulties of making real and substantive progress with all of them. To truly deepen its engagement with South Asia within the Indo-Pacific strategy purview, Washington should narrow the scope and focus on two areas with considerable potential for cooperation: connectivity and counter-terrorism.

Creating Connectivity

South Asia is notoriously disconnected, thanks to poor infrastructure, poverty, conflict, tense interstate relations, and an ineffective regional organization known as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. Both the Obama and the Trump administrations have offered plenty of rhetoric about the imperatives of supporting cross-border connectivity projects. But they have rarely followed through. Beijing, meanwhile, has expanded its Belt and Road Initiative deep into South Asia. Washington should move beyond rhetoric and focus on concrete efforts to build greater connectivity in the broader region — not in an effort to catch up to Beijing, which is impossible, but rather to achieve its goal, articulated by the last two U.S. administrations, of reducing barriers between South, Central, and East Asia.

For example, the Trump administration should focus on the New Silk Road initiative, an idea Hillary Clinton originally articulated as secretary of state in 2011 that aims to better connect South and Central Asia.⁷¹ Aside from backing several projects, including the construction of a natural gas pipeline involving Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, the Obama administration didn't act on this vision. Trump's first budget, released in 2017, identified the New Silk Road initiative as part of its funding request for activities in South and Central Asia.⁷² However, little has been done since then.

⁷¹ Hillary Clinton, "Remarks on India and the United States: A Vision for the 21st Century," Anna Centenary Library, Chennai, India, July 20, 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168840.htm>.

⁷² "U.S., India to Revive 'New Silk Road' Seen as Counter to China's Belt and Road Project," Press Trust of India, May 24, 2017, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/us-india-to-revive-new-silk-road-to-counter-chinas-belt-and-road-obor-project-1697632>.

Beyond the New Silk Road, the Trump administration need not reinvent the wheel and develop new connectivity projects — particularly given that Belt and Road leaves little space for new U.S.-supported projects. Instead, Washington should throw its support behind existing, and particularly India-led, endeavors.

One of the most important is the Chabahar project, an Afghanistan-India-Iran collaboration that entails India's development of the Chabahar port in southern Iran and infrastructure projects up into Afghanistan. This project's advantages go beyond connectivity. If completed, it would bring major benefits to Afghanistan and India, arguably Washington's two closest friends in South Asia. Afghanistan would enjoy greater access to markets in the Middle East and beyond. India would gain access to new routes to Afghanistan and the vast gas riches of Central Asia — routes it cannot use closer to home because Islamabad denies it transit trade rights. To its credit, Washington has exempted India's Chabahar activities from the Iran sanctions regime — a big win for New Delhi, given the Trump administration's unrelenting hostility toward Iran. To be sure, Washington's toxic relations with Tehran preclude American financial support to Chabahar. But the decision to allow India to push forward on this Iran-focused project highlights Washington's willingness to support connectivity projects even if they involve American rivals.

Another example is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the Pakistan component of the Belt and Road Initiative. While Washington has expressed its concerns about Belt and Road, it hasn't pressured Pakistan to rein in this economic corridor. Moreover, several U.S. private companies, including General Electric, have provided assistance to these projects.⁷³

There are also initiatives worthy of U.S. support that involve nations friendlier to Washington. These include the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, which comprises Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Prime Minister Modi signaled the importance he accords to this initiative by inviting the leaders of its seven member states to his second inauguration. It

⁷³ "GE Equips New 1,320 MW CPHGC Power Plan to Help Pakistan Meet Growing Energy Needs," GE Newsroom, March 16, 2017, <https://www.genewsroom.com/press-releases/ge-equips-new-1320-mw-cphgc-power-plant-help-pakistan-meet-growing-energy-needs>.

involves cooperation in a number of areas germane to the Indo-Pacific strategy — from trade and technology to energy and counter-terrorism. To increase its engagement with this initiative, Washington should consider seeking an observer status in the organization, a status it already enjoys in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

Additionally, several newly emerging South Asian connectivity projects could benefit from U.S. assistance. These include a plan for India and Bangladesh to cooperate on the provision of electricity and Internet bandwidth, and a potential electricity-sharing arrangement between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal.⁷⁴

Tackling Terror

In South Asia, Islamist terrorism is no longer a largely Afghanistan- and Pakistan-focused phenomenon, as it was until relatively recently. The emergence of the Islamic State in the region — the organization formally announced its presence with the establishment of Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) in 2015 — has led to a new and geographically widening terrorist threat.

Initially, IS-K mainly operated out of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Today, Afghanistan remains the nation where it is most present and potent. Initially boasting fighters numbering only in the hundreds — most of them disaffected former Taliban members — the group has now expanded its membership in Afghanistan to the thousands, according to U.S. officials.⁷⁵ IS-K has survived several years of U.S. and Afghan airstrikes in eastern Afghanistan, home to the group's main bastion. Even though IS-K is not widely welcomed within Afghanistan's militant milieu — most of the country's jihadists are aligned with the Islamic State's al-

⁷⁴ Md Fazlur Rahman, "Power Import Gets Easier: Bangladesh Can Import Electricity from Nepal, Bhutan Thru Indian Territory," *Daily Star*, Dec. 27, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/electricity-import-from-nepal-bhutan-gets-easier-1679245>.

⁷⁵ Gannon, "Islamic State Expands Reach in Afghanistan."

Qaeda rival — it has managed to increase its resources and networks thanks to collaborations with local militant splinter groups.⁷⁶

And yet, the Islamic State's South Asian footprint now expands well beyond Afghanistan. Over the last few years, it has claimed a series of attacks in Bangladesh.⁷⁷ The Easter Sunday massacre in Sri Lanka in 2019 revealed, in tragic fashion, the small but dangerous Islamic State presence in that country. India, a nation where Islamist militancy has generally failed to catch on, was where some of the Islamic State members linked to the Sri Lanka attacks had reportedly been based.⁷⁸ Finally, the island nation of Maldives — known more for its climate change vulnerability than Islamist terror — is an unlikely source of Islamic State recruits, with about 200 Maldivians (in a nation of just 400,000) having gone to fight with the group in the Middle East.⁷⁹

With the Islamic State on the defensive following the loss of its “caliphate” in the Middle East, it is searching for ways to demonstrate its continued clout and relevance. Carrying out more catastrophic attacks across South Asia could help achieve that goal, and particularly with assistance from all the Islamic State fighters returning home from the Middle East. These include not just the 200 from Maldives, but also more than 30 from Sri Lanka, 60 from India, and up to 650 from Pakistan.⁸⁰ The group's increasing regional spread, coupled

⁷⁶ Amira Jadoon, “Allied and Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/12/Allied-Lethal.pdf>.

⁷⁷ Iftekhharul Bashar, “Islamic State Ideology Continues to Resonate in Bangladesh,” Middle East Institute, Sept. 3, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/islamic-state-ideology-continues-resonate-bangladesh>.

⁷⁸ Devjyot Ghoshal, “Indian Police Raid Islamic State Cell with Links to Sri Lanka Bombing Mastermind,” *Reuters*, June 12, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-india-security/indian-police-raid-islamic-state-cell-with-links-to-sri-lanka-bombing-mastermind-idUKKCN1TD1UY>.

⁷⁹ “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq,” Soufan Group, December 2015, <http://www.soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters/>.

⁸⁰ Richard Barrett, “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees,” Soufan Center, October 2017, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017>.

with Trump’s strong interest in tackling terror worldwide, gives the administration a compelling incentive to make counter-terrorism a centerpiece of a South Asia regional engagement strategy. Given the goals of the Indo-Pacific strategy, U.S. support for South Asian counter-terrorism measures should ideally be oriented around maritime security in order to help the navies of the littoral states of the eastern Indian Ocean Region and western Indo-Pacific — Bangladesh, India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka — fortify their coastal areas against the threat of sea-based Islamic State attacks. After all, terrorism — not just piracy or the aggressive actions of China — poses a threat to the “free, open, and inclusive” principles that Washington, along with key partners like India and Japan, so often tout when discussing their vision of the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion

In the immediate term, Washington should focus its South Asia policy around two key priorities: negotiating an end to the war in Afghanistan, and further strengthening its relationship with India, Washington’s most critical partner in South Asia. However, beyond these short-term, narrowly defined goals, U.S. officials should focus on applying a wider lens to a region that Washington envisions playing a major role in its Indo-Pacific strategy. Scaling up support to, and cooperation with, more South Asian states — specifically when it comes to connectivity and counter-terrorism — can help Washington advance its Indo-Pacific strategy. And it can help push back, even if only modestly, against America’s Chinese rival in a South Asia region where Beijing is much more present and popular than Washington.

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5. Climbing the Escalation Ladder: India and the Balakot Crisis

By Rohan Mukherjee

On February 14 of this year, a suicide bomber drove a car loaded with explosives into a convoy of paramilitary personnel in the Pulwama district of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.⁸¹ The attack left 44 soldiers dead and around 70 injured.⁸² Jaish-e-Mohammad, a terrorist group operating out of Pakistan with the support of the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment, claimed responsibility for the attack. Founded in 2000, Jaish is responsible for some of the deadliest terrorist attacks in Kashmir and elsewhere in India, including attacks on Jammu and Kashmir's legislative assembly and the Indian national parliament in 2001, and, more recently, attacks on an airbase in Pathankot and an army base in Uri in 2016.

On Feb. 26, 2019, the Indian Air Force launched a retaliatory strike on a location identified as a Jaish training complex near the town of Balakot in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. While India had restricted previous reprisals to parts of Pakistani Kashmir, i.e., to disputed territories, this airstrike was the first to take place on Pakistani soil since the India-Pakistan War of 1971. The following day, Pakistan retaliated with an airstrike in Indian Kashmir that led to an air battle and the downing of an Indian Air Force MiG-21 on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control, the de facto border between the two countries in Kashmir. The government of Pakistan released the pilot of the downed aircraft two days later, thus officially beginning the process of defusing the crisis.

This sequence of events is remarkable for a number of reasons, two of which matter from a strategic perspective. First, in launching airstrikes on Pakistani soil, India deviated from its

⁸¹ As of Aug. 9, 2019, Jammu and Kashmir is no longer a state of the Indian Union. The Parliament of India passed a law dissolving the state and dividing the region into two federally administered territories: Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh.

⁸² Shaswati Das, "44 CRPF jawans killed, 70 injured in Pulwama terror attack in J&K," *LiveMint*, Feb. 18, 2019, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/pulwama-terror-attack-death-toll-rises-to-40-jem-claims-responsibility-1550143395449.html>.

traditional restraint in the face of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, visible most prominently in its lack of a military response to the 2008 Mumbai attack by another Pakistan-backed group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, that claimed 164 lives.⁸³ Second, in seeking to defuse tensions following the air battle over Kashmir by releasing the Indian pilot, Pakistan deviated from its traditional policy of publicly manipulating the risk of nuclear confrontation to induce Indian restraint and external great power involvement, typically by the United States. As one analyst, drawing an analogy to the Cuban Missile Crisis, put it, “Pakistan may have just blinked.”⁸⁴

How significant are these departures and what are their strategic implications? Pakistan’s efforts at de-escalation are more easily explained than India’s actions. As Ashley Tellis argues, over the years successive U.S. presidents have grown increasingly worried that Islamabad’s inability (and unwillingness) to dismantle the terrorist groups operating from its soil threatens not just India but also American interests in Afghanistan. Washington’s disaffection culminated in the Trump administration’s unprecedented response in the aftermath of the Pulwama attack, which was to publicly support India’s right to self-defense while intensely pressuring Pakistan behind the scenes to de-escalate.⁸⁵ China, consistent with its stance toward such crises over the last two decades, and additionally concerned about the fate of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, maintained its distance and urged both sides to exercise restraint.⁸⁶ Even compared to the 1999 Kargil War, when Pakistan

⁸³ “Mumbai Terror Attacks Fast Facts,” *CNN*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/18/world/asia/mumbai-terror-attacks/index.html>.

⁸⁴ Zack Brown, “Did Pakistan Just Blink?” *National Interest*, Feb. 28, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/did-pakistan-just-blink-45792>.

⁸⁵ Ashley J. Tellis, “A Smoldering Volcano: Pakistan and Terrorism after Balakot,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 14, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/14/smoldering-volcano-pakistan-and-terrorism-after-balakot-pub-78593>.

⁸⁶ Ananth Krishnan, “For China, 62 Billion Reasons to Be Cautious in India-Pakistan Crisis,” *South China Morning Post*, March 2, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2188313/china-62-billion-reasons-be-cautious-india-pakistan-crisis>.

was shocked by the combination of U.S. pressure and Chinese aloofness, Islamabad's diplomatic options after Pulwama were severely limited.⁸⁷

In contrast to Pakistan, India's behavior in the crisis requires some unpacking in order to draw out its strategic implications. Seen as an isolated incident, the Balakot strike might seem *revolutionary*. In the context of the India-Pakistan strategic dynamic over the last two decades, however, it appears more *evolutionary*.

The India-Pakistan Strategic Dynamic

Although India enjoys unambiguous conventional military superiority over Pakistan, this superiority is diminished by tactical considerations on the India-Pakistan border, as well as by India's need to defend against a potential attack from China.⁸⁸ Moreover, since the nuclearization of the subcontinent in the late 1980s, Pakistan has repeatedly threatened the deployment of nuclear weapons in crises with India as part of its "catalytic" nuclear posture, designed both to deter a major conventional attack by India and to draw the United States and other great powers into any military crisis on the subcontinent.⁸⁹ This catalytic posture has allowed Pakistan to sponsor the insurgency in Indian Kashmir and terrorism in India more broadly with virtual impunity.

India's tradition of restraint toward Pakistan is therefore not the result of a cultural predisposition, as some scholars have claimed,⁹⁰ but rather a function of environmental

⁸⁷ See Ashley J. Tellis, C. Christine Fair, and Jamison Jo Medby, "Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani Lessons from the Kargil Crisis," RAND Monograph Report, 2001, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1450.html.

⁸⁸ Walter C. Ladwig III, "Indian Military Modernization and Conventional Deterrence in South Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 5 (2015): 729–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1014473>.

⁸⁹ Vipin Narang, "Posturing for Peace? Pakistan's Nuclear Postures and South Asian Stability," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (Winter 2010): 38–78, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2010.34.3.38>.

⁹⁰ Stephen P. Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming without Aiming: India's Military Modernization* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2010), 147.

and geopolitical factors, coupled with Pakistan's manipulation of the risk of nuclear war.⁹¹ When this risk has seemed to ebb, Indian leaders have sought ways to punish Pakistan for its sponsorship of cross-border terrorism. As S. Paul Kapur notes, in the aftermath of the Kargil War, when Pakistan failed to make good on its nuclear threats, Indian civilian and military leaders began to realize that restraint was not their only option.⁹² The terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in 2001 thus led to a massive military mobilization on the border with Pakistan. Lessons learned from the incredibly slow pace of this mobilization led to further reforms in Indian military thought and practice, resulting in a limited war doctrine known as "Cold Start," which envisioned rapid mobilization to capture and hold small amounts of Pakistani territory in retaliation for a major terrorist attack.⁹³ Meanwhile, India developed an explicit nuclear doctrine resting on three pillars: credible minimum deterrence, no first use, and massive retaliation. Thus, in the event of a major terrorist attack, Cold Start would allow a limited land grab as retaliation, while India's nuclear doctrine would deter Pakistan from escalating to the nuclear level. Unfortunately, when the time came to deploy the doctrine after the 2008 Mumbai attack, "India froze ... and Pakistan took note."⁹⁴

Pakistan's own strategy evolved in response to India's limited war doctrine. In 2011, Islamabad unveiled a solid-fueled, short-range ballistic missile, the Nasr, capable of carrying a tactical nuclear warhead and deployed explicitly to counter Indian armored thrusts into Pakistani territory.⁹⁵ This development creates a credibility problem for India's nuclear strategy — namely, if Pakistan were to attack Indian troops on Pakistani soil with a tactical nuclear weapon, would India actually retaliate by targeting Pakistani cities? Similar

⁹¹ For a pre-nuclear version of this argument, see Rudra Chaudhuri, "Indian 'Strategic Restraint' Revisited: The Case of the 1965 India-Pakistan War," *India Review* 17, no. 1 (2018): 55–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2018.1415277>.

⁹² S. Paul Kapur, "India and Pakistan's Unstable Peace: Why Nuclear South Asia Is Not like Cold War Europe," *International Security* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 147, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137597>.

⁹³ Walter C. Ladwig III, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/2008): 158–90, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30130521>.

⁹⁴ Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security* 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018/19): 14, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00340.

⁹⁵ Ankit Panda, "Pakistan Conducts Test of Nuclear-Capable Nasr Missile," *The Diplomat*, Jan. 26, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/pakistan-conducts-test-of-nuclear-capable-nasr-missile/>.

to the logic underlying the presumption of Pakistani non-escalation in response to a limited land grab by India, a strategic nuclear response to a tactical battlefield outcome appears disproportionate and not worth the material and reputational costs.

Consequently, in this post-Nasr world, India has two options in the nuclear domain. The first is to develop tactical nuclear weapons of its own, thus creating an appropriately calibrated response to Pakistan's use of battlefield nuclear weapons.⁹⁶ However, India faces significant resource constraints in developing the required number of tactical weapons and significant organizational constraints in developing the command and control mechanisms required to effectively deploy them militarily.⁹⁷ The latter constraint, which Pakistan does not face, originates at least in part from India's history of strong and dysfunctional civilian control of the military and nuclear weapons development.⁹⁸ Moreover, an exchange of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield may still escalate to the strategic level, allowing Pakistan to retain the threat of nuclear war that has paralyzed Indian decision-makers in the past.

Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang highlight India's second option, which is to shift the focus of massive retaliation from civilian to military targets.⁹⁹ It would seem far more credible for India to threaten to wipe out Pakistan's nuclear capabilities in response to the use of battlefield nuclear weapons than to hit Pakistani cities. The problem here is that complete success in a counterforce attack is virtually impossible, even in the case of a geographically smaller state such as Pakistan (which has additionally taken steps to disperse its nuclear arsenal and make it mobile). Moreover, if Pakistan is expecting such a response to its use of battlefield nuclear weapons, then it has an incentive to conduct a massive first strike instead. One way for India to address this challenge is to weaken its no-

⁹⁶ Evan Braden Montgomery and Eric S. Edelman, "Rethinking Stability in South Asia: India, Pakistan, and the Competition for Escalation Dominance," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1-2 (2015): 159-82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2014.901215>.

⁹⁷ Toby Dalton and George Perkovich, "India's Nuclear Options and Escalation Dominance," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 19, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/05/19/india-s-nuclear-options-and-escalation-dominance-pub-63609>.

⁹⁸ Anit Mukherjee, *The Absent Dialogue: Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Military in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁹⁹ Clary and Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations," 7-52.

first-use principle and make room for a preemptive strike on Pakistan. Although Clary and Narang argue that top Indian decision-makers are flirting with this idea — and India’s defense minister recently seemed to publicly confirm this argument¹⁰⁰ — it still raises the critical issues of whether Indian leaders can credibly commit to striking first (even with counterforce targeting), and if they can be completely successful in doing so.

Climbing the Escalation Ladder

India’s nuclear options are, thus, far from ideal, and risk courting even greater strategic instability than currently exists in South Asia. However, thinking of nuclear responses to Pakistan’s development of tactical nuclear weapons may be jumping a few steps too far ahead. Herman Kahn’s classic work on escalation, which details a 44-rung “ladder” of increasingly escalatory moves that countries in a crisis can undertake to demonstrate resolve, suggests that there are numerous non-nuclear steps that a country in India’s position may take before reaching the threshold where nuclear war is thinkable.¹⁰¹ This threshold is approximately one-fifth of the way up the ladder, whose uppermost rungs involve a nuclear war targeting civilian population centers. In between are actions grouped under categories of increasing severity such as intense crises, limited nuclear wars, exemplary nuclear attacks, and nuclear wars involving military targets. The history of India-Pakistan crises shows that both countries have consistently stayed below the threshold where nuclear war becomes thinkable, i.e., before crises become “intense.” Their repertoire of escalatory tactics — increased shelling on the Line of Control, covert operations across the Line of Control, diplomatic maneuvering, significant military mobilization, missile tests as shows of force — falls well within the range of what Kahn calls “subcrisis maneuvering” and “traditional crises.”

The escalation ladder is neither an ironclad framework nor a blueprint for crisis management. Rather, it is a heuristic device that can help one think through the options available to countries and, in particular, gauge escalation and de-escalation behaviors in a

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Roche, “India’s ‘No First Use Nuclear Policy’ May Change: Rajnath Singh,” *LiveMint*, Aug. 16, 2019, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/india-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-may-change-rajnath-singh-1565946292515.html>.

¹⁰¹ Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965).

crisis or over multiple crises. In the India-Pakistan context, it suggests three important lessons. First, there are numerous escalatory steps available to both countries that have never been taken. Their words to each other and to external great powers notwithstanding, both countries' actions have displayed considerable caution to keep escalation within the non-nuclear realm. Second, and relatedly, Islamabad's rhetoric and fearmongering about nuclear war remains in the realm of cheap talk, as New Delhi discovered during the Kargil War and during the Balakot episode. While one need not assume this as a rule of thumb, it does suggest that there is room for India to operate without bringing nuclear war into the picture.

Third, and most importantly, it is precisely this room to maneuver that the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi exploited for the first time in the Balakot episode. In Kahn's framework, the airstrike and ensuing air battle can be categorized as a "dramatic military confrontation," or "a direct ('eyeball to eyeball') confrontation that appears to be a stark test of nerves, committal, resolve, or recklessness."¹⁰² What's important about this step is that it is the highest rung on Kahn's ladder before nuclear war becomes thinkable. Until Balakot, neither India nor Pakistan had gone beyond "harassing acts of violence," or illegal acts of violence carried out through clandestine channels. Balakot moved both countries one rung up the escalation ladder, which is both closer to making nuclear war possible but also very far from nuclear war itself.

It is in this sense that Balakot is more *evolutionary* than *revolutionary*. In finding greater room for non-nuclear escalation through precision airstrikes that New Delhi was careful to label as "non-military preemptive action," India behaved exactly as a nuclear state demonstrating resolve to a nuclear adversary without courting nuclear war would. The puzzle is not so much why Modi chose this option but why previous prime ministers did not. Long before Balakot, various analysts and practitioners had listed precision strikes on terrorist camps as one of the few viable military options available to India in the event of a Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack.¹⁰³ For example, former Foreign Secretary and National

¹⁰² Kahn, *On Escalation*, 43.

¹⁰³ George Perkovich and Toby Dalton, *Not War, Not Peace: Motivating Pakistan to Prevent Cross-Border Terrorism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon went on the record as advocating precisely this action in the aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai attack.¹⁰⁴

Menon himself offers a reason why previous Indian leaders may not have considered airstrikes a viable option. In 2008, the Indian leadership calculated that airstrikes would do little to diminish the organizational capabilities of terrorist groups in Pakistan, and would cause the international community to default to their standard response to an India-Pakistan crisis: “split the blame and credit 50:50 in the name of fairness or even-handedness.”¹⁰⁵ The difference during Balakot was that world opinion — especially U.S. official opinion — had shifted. In 2016, when Indian special forces carried out a surgical strike on terrorist launchpads in Pakistani Kashmir in retaliation for a terrorist attack at Uri, various countries called for restraint but also exhorted Pakistan to curb terrorist activities originating in territories under its control. By February 2019, two years into the Trump presidency, the geopolitical space for greater escalatory action against Pakistan had further increased. The Balakot airstrike thus represents the conjunction of propitious international circumstances and imaginative coercive diplomacy by the Modi government.

Isolating Pakistan

Aside from military options, much of the policy analysis on India’s approach to Pakistan has emphasized the value of diplomatically isolating Pakistan or economically squeezing it through the international Financial Action Task Force. It is worth pausing for a moment to consider whether isolating Pakistan is possible and desirable. If India’s goal is to somehow induce Pakistan into giving up cross-border terrorism, the evidence since the late 1980s suggests that both military and non-military coercive measures have short-term effects at best. Pakistan’s geopolitical importance to major powers such as the United States, China, Saudi Arabia, and now even Russia has ensured a steady supply of financial and military resources that is unlikely to abate in the near future. While world opinion may be marshalled against Pakistan as an exporter of global jihad, the major powers are unlikely to

¹⁰⁴ Shivshankar Menon, “Insider Account: Why India Didn’t Attack Pakistan After 26/11,” *Scroll.in*, March 13, 2019, <https://scroll.in/article/916259/insider-account-why-india-didnt-attack-pakistan-after-26-11>.

¹⁰⁵ Menon, “Insider Account.”

push a nuclear weapons state with Islamist domestic political factions and numerous terrorist groups operating in its territory too far.

Indeed India's own security interests are unlikely to be served by a Pakistan that has been economically and diplomatically weakened to the point where the government's domestic legitimacy is threatened. As research on partial democracies has shown, these types of situations are ripe for external conflict, as competing elite groups vie for power through increasingly nationalist appeals.¹⁰⁶ A longstanding and bitter rival next door might serve as a convenient and tempting target for diversionary conflict in these circumstances. India's challenge, therefore is to use economic punishment and diplomatic isolation in specific and targeted ways — not as a general long-term strategy for dealing with Pakistan, but as short-term components of coercive crisis diplomacy.

What Happens Next?

Has Balakot created a new normal, one that increases the risks of war — nuclear or conventional — on the subcontinent? The short answer is no.

Given that India's airstrikes targeted “non-military” targets, and that numerous independent reports suggest they failed to hit them,¹⁰⁷ the response is unlikely to deter terrorist groups and their paymasters in Pakistan. Pakistan's fundamental incentive to rely on cross-border terrorism as a strategy to keep the Indian military tied down in Kashmir — both tactically and in terms of the military's fraught relations with Kashmiri society — remains unchanged. Although India did move up the escalatory ladder by conducting the airstrikes, there is limited room for further action without entering the realm of “intense

¹⁰⁶ Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” *International Security* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 5–38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539213>; Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and Brandon C. Prins, “Rivalry and Diversionary Uses of Force,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 6 (2004): 937–61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4149801>; Jaroslav Tir, “Territorial Diversion: Diversionary Theory of War and Territorial Conflict,” *Journal of Politics* 72, no. 2 (April 2010): 413–25, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1017/s0022381609990879>.

¹⁰⁷ Simon Scarr, Chris Inton, and Han Huang, “An Air Strike and Its Aftermath,” *Reuters*, March 6, 2019, <https://graphics.reuters.com/INDIA-KASHMIR/010090XM162/index.html>.

crises,” to use Kahn’s term. What Balakot has done is add one more item to the menu of non-nuclear options available to India when contemplating retaliation for a Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack. The menu otherwise remains the same and will inform decision-making when the next major terrorist attack occurs. India and Pakistan are therefore no closer to nuclear war — an outcome both sides would strenuously wish to avoid — than they were before Balakot. They do, however, now live in a world where more forms of escalation short of major conventional war may be possible.

India for its part has crossed a psychological threshold.¹⁰⁸ Whereas previous governments flirted with the idea of escalation or conducted it covertly, the Modi government, in its first term, publicly demonstrated greater resolve than its predecessors on at least three important occasions: the surgical strikes of 2016, the military standoff against China at Doklam in 2017, and at Balakot in 2019. In each case, the Indian military acted with unexpected boldness, taking the adversary by surprise and courting risk in a controlled manner. The evidence is mounting that Modi’s approach, at least in this realm of security policy, has overturned long-held Indian beliefs about the prudence of restraint and not pushing the limits of competitive risk-taking. The importance of Modi, and by corollary Trump’s policy toward Pakistan, also highlights the somewhat contingent set of circumstances that permitted the Balakot strikes. Given that the basic terms of the strategic interaction between India and Pakistan are unchanged, a different set of circumstances involving, for example, a less adventurous Indian prime minister and/or warmer relations between the United States and Pakistan would likely dampen any Indian desire to move up the escalation ladder in a future crisis.

Lessons from Balakot

Ultimately, any response to a future terrorist attack sponsored by Pakistan on Indian soil will have to include the careful weighing of the costs and benefits of coercion. In this regard, the actual circumstances of the Balakot strike offer important lessons for India. The strike did little to alter Pakistan’s fundamental strategic calculus about the utility of cross-border terrorism. While it succeeded in demonstrating Indian resolve, India was unable to

¹⁰⁸ Tellis, “A Smoldering Volcano.”

dominate the escalation ladder at this level, as Pakistan launched its own airstrikes on “non-military targets” the very next day. India’s execution of the entire confrontation left much to be desired: Not only did the Indian Air Force lose an aircraft and have a pilot taken prisoner, it also inadvertently shot down a helicopter of its own in the midst of the air battle, killing six personnel and a civilian.¹⁰⁹ After the airstrikes, Pakistan sought to inflict costs on India by closing down its airspace, an act that cost airlines around the world millions of dollars and hit India’s national carrier, Air India, especially hard.¹¹⁰

Set against these costs, the airstrike had one major upside, which was to give Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party a boost in the run-up to India’s national elections that began six weeks after the crisis.¹¹¹ It is unlikely that the airstrike was decisive in the election, and it is certainly not logically tenable that Modi ordered the strike with electoral gain in mind (it could have easily backfired). Yet, the political success of the decision opens up the domestic space necessary for Modi, or a future prime minister, to make a similar decision in a crisis. Pakistan, for its part, also enjoyed a domestic political win with the capture of an Indian pilot and the conciliatory move of returning him to India.

In this sense, Balakot followed in the path of the 2016 surgical strike — in both cases, the two governments had opposite accounts of events and yet were able to use the confrontation to either save face or increase domestic political support. This might be the closest approximation to a new normal in India-Pakistan relations, a change in what Kahn called the “agreed battle” or ongoing conflict between the two countries. Balakot certainly represents a change in the degree to which India is willing to escalate a crisis with Pakistan, but it does not signal a deeper shift in the South Asian strategic environment.

¹⁰⁹ Manjeet Singh Negi, “Indian Air Force Probe Finds Friendly Fire Caused February 27 Budgam Chopper Crash, 5 Officers in Dock,” *India Today*, Aug. 23, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/indian-air-force-budgam-chopper-crash-friendly-fire-officers-guilty-1590764-2019-08-23>.

¹¹⁰ “Air India Loses Rs 300 Crore in 2 Months Due to Pakistan’s Airspace Restrictions,” *Business Today*, April 29, 2019, <https://www.businesstoday.in/sectors/aviation/air-india-loses-rs-300-crore-in-2-months-due-to-pakistan-airspace-restrictions/story/341498.html>.

¹¹¹ Tamanna Inamdar, “Six Charts Explain How Balakot Strikes Helped Boost Modi’s Popularity,” *Bloomberg Quint*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.bloombergquint.com/elections/six-charts-explain-how-balakot-strikes-helped-boost-modis-popularity>.

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