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## India and Pakistan: Managing Tensions

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Philip Y. Kao

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**ABSTRACT:** India and Pakistan, both nuclear powers, have averted crises through geopolitical weaponry rather than through the frameworks of conventional deterrence theory and mutually assured destruction. An analysis of three distinct conflicts between these two nations reveals the inadequacy of a bipolar systems-preserving model of deterrence theory to explain their responses. Future confidence-building measures must come from an emphasis on shared history and culture.

Controlling tensions and de-escalation take on distinct processes and meanings in the Indo-Pakistani context. Conventional deterrence, epitomized by a Cold War strategy of mutually assured destruction, does not fully explain the picture. The threat of mutual annihilation has never been genuine given the physical and cultural closeness of India and Pakistan; consequently, the existential bias in deterrence theory does not shape how India and Pakistan use nuclear weapons. Conventional deterrence theory flexes its analytical muscle more often in cases of immediate deterrence—during times of a pressing specific threat—than during times of general deterrence where the focus is on preventing military conflict between rival nuclear giants. As such, India and Pakistan manage (de)escalation as an exercise in geopolitical weaponry, engaging their nuclear capabilities as political tools to obtain economic and political goals within the wider international community.

As demonstrated by the early 2019 India-Pakistan military standoff, responsibility for crisis management falls on the shoulders of Indian and Pakistani leadership. They cannot count on external countries like the United States to intervene significantly and/or spearhead de-escalation.<sup>1</sup> In the future, India and Pakistan will have to learn, adapt, and script new bilateral forms of confidence-building measures, drawing more from their shared history and culture than some abstract sense of game theory. Moreover, trilateral negotiations including permutations of the big five nuclear states—the United States, Russia, China, India, and Pakistan—are still pertinent.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, such a reality will also

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1. Dan De Luce and Robert Windrem, “With Trump Silent, No ‘Sheriff’ in Town on Pakistan-India Crisis, Ex-Diplomats Say,” NBC News, March 5, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/trump-silent-no-sheriff-town-pakistan-india-crisis-ex-diplomats-n979406>.

2. William Walker, “International Nuclear Relations after the Indian and Pakistani Test Explosions,” *International Affairs* 74, no. 3 (July 1998): 505–28.

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have to take into account nonstate actors and various terrorist/militant groups that continue to take advantage of emergent situations.<sup>3</sup>

This article briefly discusses India's and Pakistan's nuclear weapons programs and stresses the strategic interrelationships in the region extend beyond a simple dyad. This operating framework will speak to the limitations of the bipolar systems-preserving model of deterrence theory when analyzing the South Asian security situation. The article then considers three distinct military conflicts between India and Pakistan that have occurred since 1998: the 1999 Kargil War, the 2001–2 India-Pakistan standoff, and the 2008 Mumbai attacks. The article uses these conflicts to investigate the nature of escalation and de-escalation—especially the role of external diplomacy in defusing various tensions.

Finally, the article considers the conflicts in early 2019 involving India and Pakistan, focusing on the immediate events following the 2019 Pulwama attack. This history will explain how tensions arose between India and Pakistan and how both countries not only ratcheted up their aggressive discourse toward one another, but more importantly how they eventually engaged in effective crisis management. Both countries did so in a new way that de-escalated the situation and altered their appreciation for the role of crafting stability themselves. The United States played a less interventionist role in early 2019; consequently, both India and Pakistan had to contend with a situation that did not rely on the diplomacy of external nation-states.<sup>4</sup> The 2019 standoff shows crisis management is a process, a set of dialogues, and an ongoing experiment necessitating limited military confrontations as operational-cum-heuristic opportunities.

### Conflict from the Beginning

Partition was the original sin. With the dissolution of the British Raj in 1947, millions of people were displaced during the formation of India and Pakistan as two sovereign nations. The resulting situation was not a political vacuum in the strict sense; instead, the violent partition ensured a complex set of relations and territorial disputes that would remain just as contentious as on the eve of India's independence.<sup>5</sup> Despite diverse ethnicities in their populations, India and Pakistan—secular nation-states—share kinship with respect to history and culture.

Indo-Pakistani relations have witnessed several violent conflicts over the past decades including the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 and countless other border skirmishes and limited military confrontations—some

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3. Robert S. Litwak, "Recalibrating Deterrence to Prevent Nuclear Terrorism," *Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2017): 55–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1302739>.

4. Lexington, "The Trump Administration and the Indo-Pakistan Crisis: How America First Works in Kashmir," *Economist*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2019/03/07/the-trump-administration-and-the-indo-pakistan-crisis>.

5. See Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

having to do with Kashmir.<sup>6</sup> Because of this history and the fact both countries possess nuclear weapons, their mutual hostilities have reached a level of concern. At first glance, such concern is somewhat moderated by the operating frameworks of conventional deterrence theory, or so it seems.

Yet India and Pakistan cannot be thought of as small-scale versions of larger nuclear states; their South Asian-styled path to the nuclear age was heavily influenced by external actors—the United States and China—who were inextricably part of the nuclear deterrence posture and strategy of both countries.<sup>7</sup> As a result, becoming a nuclear power did not mean India and Pakistan inherited a classical deterrence theory manual that would automatically apply to conflict between them.

### Nuclear Capabilities and Intentions

In the early 2000s pundits were debating whether India could maintain escalation dominance. India began to consider developing tactical nuclear weapons as a strategic way to pressure Pakistan to disband or dissuade anti-India terrorist groups. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) 2018 Yearbook, India and Pakistan have around 140 nuclear warheads in their respective arsenals.<sup>8</sup> India has been able to produce plutonium for use in nuclear weapons, while Pakistan is working on transitioning from the production of highly enriched uranium to plutonium.

The SIPRI report also states India and Pakistan are expanding their arsenals and testing capabilities. India has air-, land-, and sea-based missiles, securing a robust second-strike capability. Meanwhile, Pakistan is working toward narrowing the gap to match India's triad by developing a sea-based nuclear missile delivery system. Although India continues to claim a no-first-strike policy, it reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in a preemptive counterforce strike if it believes Pakistan is gearing up for a first-strike attack. Also under its current doctrine, India reserves the right to use nuclear forces first when they are attacked with biological or chemical weapons.<sup>9</sup>

Recent changes in Indian military doctrine, however, raise concerns for Pakistani leadership. The Indian Army developed the Cold Start Doctrine as a fix to what it saw as a slow mobilization of forces to halt attacks coming from Pakistan. During the 2001 attacks on the Indian Parliament, Indian forces were slow to mobilize along the Line

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6. G. W. Choudhury, "Bangladesh: Why It Happened," *International Affairs* 48, no. 2 (April 1972): 242–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2613440>.

7. Robert Einhorn and Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu, *The Strategic Chain: Linking Pakistan, India, China, and the United States*, Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Series (Washington, DC: Brookings, March 2, 2017), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-strategic-chain-linking-pakistan-india-china-and-the-united-states/>.

8. SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/SIPRIYB18c06.pdf>.

9. Kumar Sundaram, and M. V. Raman, "India and the Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 1 (2018): 152–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1438737>.

of Control, the de facto border between India and Pakistan. According to one source, the Cold Start Doctrine was developed to:

Facilitate smaller scale, rapid, and decisive conventional offensive operations into Pakistani territory in the event of a Pakistani-sponsored asymmetrical attack on Indian soil before the international community can actively intervene, and before Pakistan would feel compelled to launch nuclear retaliatory strikes to repel an Indian invasion. It is still unclear what CSD specifically entails, and senior Indian officers have on purpose remained ambiguous about it.<sup>10</sup>

On the Pakistan side, the first-strike policy is part of Pakistan's nuclear doctrine but is better understood in the context of its overall defense principles. The Pakistani military views its first-strike posture as purely deterrent. Pakistan reserves the right to use nuclear weapons first, but only after certain thresholds have been crossed—if an invasion is imminent. These thresholds could take the form of particular military strikes targeting more than just military assets or attacks that put the national security and sovereignty of Pakistan at severe existential risk.

A risk to strategic stability may also occur as a result of unevenness in the development of regional nuclear forces and capabilities among China, India, and Pakistan. This disparate regional nuclear development means “redundancy is weak, flexibility is limited, and the security of the deterrent's primary arm is menaced.”<sup>11</sup> “Their [China, India, Pakistan] land-based ballistic missile systems (along with aircraft in the Indian and Pakistani cases) serve this core function, and, when limited in size and in fixed locations, they are vulnerable to first-strike destruction by an adversary with superior nuclear forces.”<sup>12</sup>

Another facet to be taken into account pertains to how external countries intervened early in the establishment of India's and Pakistan's growing nuclear weapons arsenals. According to a now-declassified 1981 US State Department report, “if the two South Asian states moved to develop nuclear weapons, both China and the USSR would have strong temptations to shape relations among the four countries.”<sup>13</sup> Another section from the same document reveals US officials trying to ascertain the Indian perspective: “From New Delhi's vantage point, the possible nuclear threat from China has been the underlying incentive for supporting the nuclear weapons option. India believes China's long-range goal is the domination of all of Asia.”<sup>14</sup>

10. Franz-Stefan Gady, “Is the Indian Military Capable of Executing the Cold Start Doctrine?,” *Diplomat*, January 29, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/is-the-indian-military-capable-of-executing-the-cold-start-doctrine/>.

11. Robert Legvold, “The Challenges of a Multipolar Nuclear World in a Shifting International Context,” in *Meeting the Challenges of the New Nuclear Age: Nuclear Weapons in a Changing Global Order*, ed. Steven E. Miller, Robert Legvold, and Lawrence Freedman (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2019), 47.

12. Legvold, “Multipolar Nuclear World,” 47–48.

13. US Department of State (DoS), Bureau of Intelligence and Research, *India-Pakistan Views on a Nuclear Weapons Option and Potential Repercussions*, FOIA release July 28, 2005, (Washington, DC: DoS, June 25, 1981), <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114242>.

14. US DoS, *India-Pakistan Views*.

Another recently declassified document confirms the United States, while not sanguine about supporting Pakistan's development of nuclear weapons, in fact turned a blind eye, much to India's chagrin.<sup>15</sup> The former Pakistani President Zia-ul-Haq and Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping convinced the United States to continue providing Pakistan economic and military aid. During this period, US Secretary of Defense Harold Brown said: "There are limits on our ability to aid Pakistan because of their nuclear explosive program. Although we still object to their doing so, we will now set that aside for the time being, to facilitate strengthening Pakistan against potential Soviet action."<sup>16</sup>

A 1983 State Department briefing document reveals the United States recognized a Pakistani had stolen European technology in aid of Pakistan's active uranium enrichment program.<sup>17</sup> Despite the theft and the fact the United States also knew China was assisting Pakistan in developing nuclear weapons, the then US President Ronald Reagan continued to allow aid to flow to Pakistan, citing national interest concerns.<sup>18</sup> Today China matters even more. An article published during the height of the February 2019 skirmish reinforces both US and Chinese interests in South Asia. "Washington has been wooing New Delhi for the past several years, going so far as to rename its Pacific Command to '*Indo-Pacific*' [emphasis in original] and signing weapons deals with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, hoping to use India as a regional counterweight to China."<sup>19</sup>

### Three Crises

Three recent conflicts between India and Pakistan reveal common themes and provide examples showing how escalation toward major military confrontation was avoided. The 1999 Kargil crisis was the first major conflict following the ascension of both countries to the status of nuclear powered nation-states. Pakistan provoked the crisis by sending troops across the Kargil border. According to one expert, the move by Pakistan was intended to signal to the international community Kashmir was a geopolitical issue that could merit nuclear escalation. "This aim would align with the broader perspective of India viewing Kashmir as a bilateral issue and Pakistan viewing it as one requiring the international community's participation. . . . The Pakistani offensive in the Kargil

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15. US DoS, *The Pakistani Nuclear Program*, declassified, (Washington, DC: US DoS, June 23, 1983), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB6/docs/doc22.pdf>.

16. US DoS, Office of the Historian, "Memorandum of Conversation: Meeting between Secretary of Defense Brown and Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping" in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XII, Afghanistan*, Document 150, ed. David Zierler and Adam M. Howard (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2018), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v12/d150>.

17. DoS, *Pakistani Nuclear Program*.

18. "Escalating India-Pakistan Conflict a Major Headache for China & US," *RT*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/452627-india-pakistan-conflict-spillover/>.

19. "Escalating India-Pakistan Conflict."

district of Kashmir reflected a strategy of ‘preemptive defense,’ with Pakistan responding in anticipation of presumed Indian offensives.”<sup>20</sup>

If nuclear weapons enabled and emboldened such political moves, options were dwindling in the face of fear, enlarging the scope of the Kargil incident and restraint. Consequently, the United States stepped in and the then US President Bill Clinton and United States Central Command leadership spoke to Indian and Pakistani leadership, providing political cover and an exit to withdraw from the tensions along the Line of Control. The end of the Kargil War represented a watershed moment in Indo-American dialogue. American foreign policy in India shifted focus from nonproliferation in South Asia to conflict prevention. More importantly, the United States started publicly siding with India against Pakistan’s sheltering of al-Qaida, even before the attacks of 9/11.<sup>21</sup>

The 2001–2 “Twin Peaks” crisis brought India and Pakistan closer to the brink of major war. The first peak occurred when Islamic militants attacked the Indian Parliament in December 2001. India opted for compellence to convince Islamabad to stop militant/terrorist groups from infiltrating and attacking. In order to carry this out, India launched Operation Parakam, mobilizing military forces along the international Pakistan-India border. In response, Pakistan mobilized its forces along the Line of Control and the international border.

The second peak arose five months later when terrorists attacked an Indian army base located at the international border. The tension and possible threat of military conflict in the aftermath of the first peak led the international community to put pressure on the then President Pervez Musharraf to announce formally he would not let his country be the launching pad for terrorist attacks. The war in Afghanistan post-9/11 committed the United States to the region, so much so that de-escalating what might have initially been a bilateral situation became multidimensional. “The U.S. war in Afghanistan played an important role restraining India from striking Pakistan, a key U.S. ally in Afghanistan and the broader war on terrorism. This motivation was especially important because the United States did not want Pakistani troops redirected from counterterrorism operations to the Indian border.”<sup>22</sup>

On November 26, 2008, 10 gunmen—thought to be associated with Pakistani-based terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba—killed 170 people in Mumbai. India blamed Pakistan for allowing the gunmen to operate from its territory. Unlike the two previous crises, India did not rush to mobilize forces along the border, and as a result Pakistan resisted

20. Zafar Khan, “Crisis Management in Nuclear South Asia: A Pakistani Perspective,” in *Investigating Crises: South Asia’s Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, ed. Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2018), 146, <http://crises.stimson.org/nuclear/>.

21. Bruce Riedel, “How the 1999 Kargil Conflict Redefined US-India Ties,” *Order From Chaos* (blog) Brookings, July 24, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/07/24/how-the-1999-kargil-conflict-redefined-us-india-ties/>.

22. Khan, “Crisis Management.”

the urge to match India's provocation. The United States stepped in again, but this time swiftly ahead of any major mobilization. The exact reasons for India's restraint in the face of the mass killing are still unknown, but the countries ultimately avoided a military standoff.

The United States was committed to defuse the situation. "Pakistan remained a critical frontline state for cooperation. Washington needed Islamabad to not only play an effective role in the Afghanistan peace process but also to support the withdrawal of its forces and war equipment from the region through Pakistan."<sup>23</sup> According to one observer, there were other reasons why the United States was an effective if not de facto broker and why the then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice engaged directly with both Indian and Pakistani leadership. "The United States' intervention was considered benign by both New Delhi and Islamabad, and thereby welcomed by both despite having different expectations from the mediator and diverse outcomes of the settlement."<sup>24</sup>

### Consequences of 1999–2008

A few observations can be made regarding India's and Pakistan's experience with the aforementioned military conflicts and their mutual avoidance of nuclear escalation. To begin with, both countries were relatively new to the nuclear club while testing the limits of brinkmanship. They were also learning how to balance various strategic actions. For example, even though both countries could and did extend the scopes of particular crises, they did so with opportunistic pathways for improving communication and generating mutually accepted restraint mechanisms.

India's and Pakistan's nuclear weapons were not born from an existential Cold War framework—they were not seeking to annihilate one another from the start due to an ideological clash. For India and Pakistan, nuclear weapons' advancement coevolved with their changing security and political interests. The notion of proxy wars and extended deterrence in the case of India and Pakistan also do not accurately capture the nature of their conflict.

For instance, given the United States is not fighting a proxy war against China on the border of India and Pakistan, nonstate actors such as terrorist organizations are able to conduct limited attacks under the nuclear cover. In other words, terrorist groups not officially sponsored by the state and that operate transnationally can carry out some attacks without being subject to the consequences of symmetric deterrence between nation-states. Such terrorist groups do not often follow the political unity and governance structures of the nation-state or even rational chains of command. As a result, retaliating against a nation-state in response to the actions of rogue terrorist groups would be hard to justify internationally.

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23. Khan, "Crisis Management," 152.

24. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, "Paradox of Deterrence: India-Pakistan Strategic Relations," *Strategic Studies* 29, no. 4 (2009).



Nonetheless, although terrorist attacks do not warrant nuclear escalation at least in the three historical cases discussed, the threat of nuclear escalation, even if deployed politically and purposively, only realizes itself in Indo-Pakistani relations when conventional forces take positions along borders such as the Line of Control. In this sense, it is conventional war and major military conflict that act as critical thresholds, opening the door to escalation.

### 2019 Crisis

On February 14, 2019, a suicide bomber with links to the Pakistani terrorist organization Jaish-e-Mohammed attacked a military convoy in Pulwama—a district in India’s northern region of Jammu and Kashmir—killing over 40 Indian soldiers. In response, India conducted air strikes supposedly targeting a terrorist base camp in Balakot in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. While India claimed it had killed scores of Jaish-e-Mohammed terrorists, Pakistan and later third-party satellite imagery revealed no damage was done to any of the targeted buildings.<sup>25</sup>

Whether Pakistan was able to intercept the Indian Mirage 2000 jets is still uncertain. Nonetheless India launched air strikes in a calculated strategy of compellence. Conscious of not escalating tensions too close to the brink of nuclear war, and definitely with the April 11–May 23 Lok Sabha general elections in mind, Indian leadership ordered air strikes on Pakistan land, but instead of hitting real targets, India bombed wooded areas as a warning measure. A day later, Pakistan retaliated by sending in air strikes, and according to one report, Pakistani F-16s targeted Indian army positions near the Line of Control. The report noted: “A Pakistani major general said that the jets locked on to Indian targets to demonstrate capability, but then purposefully avoided causing damage. . . . The response appears to be a sort of minimum required reaction to demonstrate its resolve against the Indian military entering its territory without doing anything that would warrant a serious response.”<sup>26</sup>

Both countries claimed their fighters shot down the other’s aircraft, but the only concrete evidence was an uploaded video confirming Pakistan shot down and captured an Indian pilot who was subsequently released.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, Pakistan arrested several dozen terrorist organization members as a sign to India and the international

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25. Martin Howell, Gerry Doyle, and Simon Scarr, “Satellite Images Show Buildings Still Standing at Indian Bombing Site, Reuters, March 5, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-pakistan-airstrike-insi/satellite-images-show-buildings-still-standing-at-indian-bombing-site-idUSKCN1QN00V>.

26. Phillip Orchard and Xander Snyder, “Why India and Pakistan Avoided Nuclear War,” *Real Clear World*, March 7, 2019, [https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2019/03/07/why\\_india\\_and\\_pakistan\\_avoided\\_nuclear\\_war\\_112984.html](https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2019/03/07/why_india_and_pakistan_avoided_nuclear_war_112984.html).

27. “IAF Pilot Abhinandan: Wing Commander Returns Home, Received by BSF Officials,” *Business Today India*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/india-pakistan-tension-live-updates-iaf-pilot-wing-commander-abhinandan-iaf-to-release/story/323483.html>.

community that it was doing its part to curb terrorist activities within Pakistan's borders.<sup>28</sup> The Indian air strikes are notable for being the first time since 1971 that India struck a target within Pakistan, even if it was just an empty field. This attack was also the first time any nuclear power conducted air strikes in the territory of another nuclear power.

Notwithstanding the usual finger-pointing as to who was the aggressor, certain realities, old and new, emerged in the wake of the air strikes. Indian and Pakistani intelligence agencies were communicating constantly throughout the crisis and afterwards, even if the messages were mutual threats of nonnuclear conventional missile exchanges. (Ironically, hostilities between India and Pakistan were heating up at the same time US President Donald Trump was in Hanoi hoping to strike a deal with North Korea on its nuclear weapons program.) According to the Pakistani Foreign Minister, China and the UAE intervened and expressed their concerns regarding escalating tensions.

But if the United States was not actively involved and committed to crisis management to the same extent as it had been before, how was this tense moment defused? Are we to agree with Joshua White, a former White House official, who asserted, "Indian and Pakistani leaders have long evinced confidence that they can understand each other's deterrence signals and can de-escalate at will"?<sup>29</sup> Evidently so, as the Indian government rejected the Trump administration's offer to mediate, citing the tension with Pakistan over Kashmir would be strictly bilateral.<sup>30</sup>

During this time, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan stated: "History tells us that wars are full of miscalculation. My question is that given the weapons we have can we afford miscalculation. . . . We should sit down and talk."<sup>31</sup> Several weeks after the return of India's captured pilot, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi at an election rally responded regarding the purpose of nuclear weapons. "What do we have then? Have we kept our nuclear bomb for Diwali?"<sup>32</sup> Since Diwali is the Hindu festival of lights, equating nuclear weapons with fireworks is a Hindutva-arousing and politically effective, yet crass evocation.

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28. Barnini Chakraborty, "Several Dozen Arrested in Pakistan over Attack in Indian Kashmir," Fox News, March 5, 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/several-dozen-arrested-in-pakistan-over-attack-in-indian-kashmir>.

29. Sanjeev Miglani and Drazen Jorgic, "INSIGHT-India, Pakistan Threatened to Unleash Missiles at Each Other-Sources," Reuters, March 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/india-kashmir-crisis/insight-india-pakistan-threatened-to-unleash-missiles-at-each-other-sources-idINL3N2150XD>.

30. Matthew Lee, "India Again Rejects Trump's Kashmir Mediation Offer," ABC News, August 2, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/india-rejects-trumps-kashmir-mediation-offer-64726009>.

31. Drazen Jorgic, "Pakistan PM Urges Talks with India to End Crisis, Avoid Miscalculation," Reuters, February 27, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-pakistan-primeminister/pakistan-pm-urges-talks-with-india-to-end-crisis-avoid-miscalculation-idUSKCN1Q1C2>.

32. "Have We Kept Our Nuclear Bomb for Diwali, Asks Narendra Modi," *Hindu*, April 21, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/have-we-kept-our-nuclear-bomb-for-diwali-asks-narendra-modi/article26905408.ece>.

On February 14, 2019, the then US National Security Adviser John Bolton remarked that the United States “support[s] India’s right to self defense.”<sup>33</sup> The timing and delivery of such diplomatic pronouncements did more damage than good; the statement not only condoned India’s reaction but emboldened India to continue pressing for a more-aggressive strategy. *The Hill* newspaper noted: “We should all remember this statement as the moment Bolton reset India-Pakistan relations as we’ve known them since 1947. Once a deliberate and cautious back channel intermediary on security flare-ups between the nuclear-armed rivals, the United States has taken yet another step back from Pakistan and one closer to India.”<sup>34</sup> By failing to mediate either willingly or not, the United States paved the way for India’s encroachment into Kashmir and Jammu just a few months later.

### Strategic Findings

The 1999 Kargil crisis proved Pakistan could still provoke and engage in limited conflict below the threat of nuclear war. This is often known as the stability-instability paradox; “Strategic stability creates instability by making lower levels of violence relatively safe and undermining ‘extended deterrence.’”<sup>35</sup> The handling of the early 2019 crisis, however, demonstrated to India and Pakistan they could no longer depend on the United States to step in as a mediator and distributor of political favors to both sides.

Moreover, given the United States is trying to diminish its footprint in the Middle East, it will have less leverage and ability to provide politically expedient off-ramps and face-saving channels. In future crises, both countries will exercise brinkmanship in an effort to dominate escalation, but the real question is how confident India and Pakistan are regarding their ability to carry out de-escalation. “Neither India nor Pakistan would want uncontrolled escalation, but . . . on whose terms will the conflict end? For India, an extra shot would have to be fired, so to speak, for it to walk away satisfied. Pakistan, on the other hand, would want to exit immediately after it has responded to India’s initial aggression.”<sup>36</sup>

Conventional realist deterrence theory provides limited analytical purchase in understanding how India and Pakistan conceive of and leverage the threat of using nuclear weapons. Because one cannot discount the presence and role of the United States, Russia, and China in

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33. “U.S. Adviser Bolton Promises India Support after Kashmir Attack,” Reuters, February 15, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-usa/u-s-adviser-bolton-promises-india-support-after-kashmir-attack-idUSKCN1Q504T>.

34. Shamila N. Chaudhary, “Better Late Than Never: US Comes to Its Senses on India-Pakistan Conflict,” *Hill*, February 28, 2019, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/432031-better-late-than-never-us-comes-to-its-senses-on-india-pakistan>.

35. Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 19–20.

36. Moeed Yusuf, “Banking on an Outsider: Implications for Escalation Control in South Asia,” *Arms Control Today* 41 (June 2011): 20–27.

the region, India and Pakistan are not just aiming their nuclear strategies at one another—multiple potential adversaries are in the offing.

One expert argues even though the political actors in the region are the same, shifting trends on the ground induce new realities. Pakistan will become increasingly anxious about its immediate security because (1) India's economy is growing stronger, (2) the United States is enhancing its partnership with India as a counterweight to China, and (3) China's security concerns will outstrip any sense of unwavering receptiveness to relieving Pakistan's distresses. In this new environment, regional nuclearization will not be checked by the United States alone. Such sentiment seems to be calling for a pivot in thinking away from a post-Cold War unipolar world, one which makes room for a postcolonial theory of nuclear deterrence.<sup>37</sup>

An important corrective to any working theory must contain empirical data and/or observations. For some, such a corrective entails treating the critical unit of analysis not in terms of nuclear weapons capability but rather nuclear posture. "Nuclear posture is the incorporation of some number and type of nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles into a state's overall military structure, the rules and procedures governing how those weapons are deployed, when and under what conditions they might be used, against what targets, and who has the authority to make those decisions."<sup>38</sup>

Posture and not simply the category of abstract capabilities dictate just how one country might deter another. "This focus on postures as a variable . . . is preferable because it maintains the focus on *observable* [emphasis in original] capabilities, organizational procedures and interests, and patterns of behavior that are measurable both to adversaries and analysts."<sup>39</sup>

## Recommendations

Just months after the February 2019 attack, India revoked Articles 370 and 35-A of its constitution.<sup>40</sup> On August 5, 2019, the ruling political party in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party, changed legislation ensuring the Indian-controlled portion of Kashmir would no longer hold its semiautonomous status. Needless to say, placing Jammu and Kashmir under greater Indian control will certainly cause a humanitarian and security crisis for Muslim residents living in that state, which may very well engulf India and Pakistan in yet another round of military conflict. The United States should be prepared to mediate diplomatically and proactively from the start of any such conflict.

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37. See also Bharat Karnad, "South Asia: The Irrelevance of Classical Nuclear Deterrence Theory," *India Review* 4, no. 2 (2005): 173–213, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736480500225640>.

38. Vipin Narang, "Deterring Unequally: Regional Power Nuclear Postures and International Conflict," International Security Colloquium (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2011), 10.

39. Narang, "Deterring Unequally."

40. Sriha Srivastava, "India Revokes Special Status for Kashmir. Here's What It Means," CNBC, August 5, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/05/article-370-what-is-happening-in-kashmir-india-revokes-special-status.html>.

Some experts believe India and Pakistan should create constant lines of communication and bilateral crisis management institutions in order to manage future crises better. “Adopting proposals such as regular communication and meetings between local commanders, coordinated patrolling . . . would improve the LoC situation, serving as a major confidence-building measure to transform the political nature of the relationship.”<sup>41</sup> Communication when deterrence fails also needs to be addressed and applied to cooperative military exercises and/or war gaming. Here the United States could supply command, control, and communication assets and training. The failure of deterrence may be quite different in both form and function for India than for Pakistan. Avoiding miscalculation by communicating intent and doctrinal shifts will help manage escalation should a nuclear weapon ever be launched.

Several principles will help the United States understand and contend with security in the region. For the US military, it is important to realize terrorist groups operating within Pakistan, whether or not officially endorsed by Pakistani civilian leadership, will retaliate for the recent accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India. Pakistan interprets this emboldened move by India as more than just a territorial grab; it is a provocation exacerbating the clash of identities that underlies how India and Pakistan regard the relationship between (fundamentalist) religion and nationhood. Consequently India and Pakistan will have claims to both offensive and defensive deterrence for the foreseeable future.

To make matters worse, India will see more jihadist-inspired attacks and will continue to cross into Pakistani territory to deter and punish such unconventional attacks. The US military must be cognizant of the cultural and politically contingent logics driving the escalation and de-escalation of tensions in the region. The possession of nuclear weapons has not been the sole cause or even instigator of Indo-Pakistani conflict over the past few decades. Rather, nuclear weapons have opened and closed particular options.

Next, efforts should be taken to emphasize conflict resolution rather than short-term actions geared toward de-escalation. In this regard, the United States should avoid conveying the impression it is choosing sides. Instead, it should help both India and Pakistan develop better crisis management mechanisms while “continu[ing] to de-hyphenate Pakistan and India by addressing both countries on issues beyond their mutual antagonism.”<sup>42</sup> Both nations engage in bilateral relations with the United States; they are not part of any formal defense alliance.

Another possible course of action, and one the United States should champion, is potential nonproliferation treaties India and Pakistan could construct and enter bilaterally. Some experts have made the interesting case that: “India has sought to resignify the Western discourse of

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41. Fahad Nabeel, “3 Scenarios for India-Pakistan Relations under Modi 2.0: Can India and Pakistan Shift the Balance from Confrontation to Cooperation?” *Diplomat*, June 25, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/three-scenarios-for-india-pakistan-relations-under-modi-2-0/>.

42. Richard Weitz, *Promoting US-Indian Defense Cooperation: Opportunities and Obstacles* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2017).

nuclear responsibility such that it is linked to nuclear disarmament and equality rather than nuclear nonproliferation and hierarchy. . . . India's status as a responsible nuclear power is based, not on its compliance with international regimes or norms, but on its 'civilizational exceptionalism'.<sup>43</sup> If India and Pakistan could decolonize the discourse and hegemony of Western nuclear arms control by taking the higher moral ground, both sides would learn from each other directly without having to risk the breakdown in communications and trust resulting from the involvement of middlemen.

The US Indo-Pacific Command should invest in strategies for integrating Pakistani military officers into its operations. Foreign exchange officer programs are fruitful. Additionally, holding important regional exercises featuring both Pakistani and Indian military leadership at the helm would clearly show the United States is not picking sides. The United States could also let China play a more prominent leadership role by endorsing particular conferences and security forums inviting Pakistan and India to the table, even if they take place in Beijing. The United States could also partner with China in establishing better security and economic outcomes for South Asia more broadly.

Lastly, by providing command, control, and communication technology and training support, the United States would help India and Pakistan underscore and strengthen their crisis management systems. Empowering India and Pakistan to strengthen their respective intelligence systems will allow the two nation-states to navigate disruptions emerging from a future that will inevitably involve hybrid conflicts. These gray-zone conflicts include campaigns such as (dis) information operations, troop movements, cyberattacks, and more. Providing technology and training would require the United States to engage in constant communication with India and Pakistan and transmit clear and consistent foreign policy goals.

Finally, the United States should increase strategic planning in the region with both India and Pakistan, without playing one side against the other. Developing common and relevant training relationships during peacetime with India and Pakistan together is critical. Ultimately the United States has an opportunity to fulfill its commitment to the region, not as an adversary but as a geopolitical power with well-defined priorities for peace.

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43. Priya Chacko and Alexander E. Davis, "Resignifying 'Responsibility': India, Exceptionalism and Nuclear Non-Proliferation," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 3 (2018): 352–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2018.1486218>.

