

## NEW HORIZONS, NEW RISKS

### A Scenario-based Approach to Thinking about the Future of Crisis Stability in South Asia

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A “tinderbox,” “flashpoint,” or “nuclear nightmare,” no region — barring, perhaps, the Korean Peninsula — has garnered quite as many grim headlines as South Asia.<sup>1</sup> In 2000, President Bill Clinton famously described the Indian subcontinent as “the most dangerous place in the world today.”<sup>2</sup> Over a decade later, *New York Times* reporter David Sanger recounted the Obama administration’s frequent anxiety over the security of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal.<sup>3</sup> More recently, President Donald Trump described Pakistan as being a “very, very vital problem...because they have nuclear weapons and they have to get a hold of the situation.”<sup>4</sup> Many of these concerns are tied to the “stability-instability paradox,” or “ugly stability” that has characterized Indo-Pakistani strategic interactions in the 21st century.<sup>5</sup> To borrow a metaphor from the British strategist Sir James Cable, the nuclearization of the subcontinent may have forestalled the risks of large-scale conventional war, but it has also “provided a kind of greenhouse in which lesser conflicts...can flourish,” and in which spurts of subconventional violence continue to present severe escalatory risks.<sup>6</sup> This judgement has been borne out over the past two decades as a number of nonstate cross-border incidents precipitated nuclear-tinged crises on the subcontinent.

Rather than a more common method of examining past crises on the subcontinent, this essay models and probes two potential future types of South Asian crises. The opening section of each scenario offers some of the motives and methods for crisis modeling by teasing out a plausible trigger event, establishing

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1. For a sampling of such commentary over the years, see Jessica Matthews, “Tinderbox in South Asia,” *The Washington Post*, March 25, 1996; “Nuclear Fears in South Asia,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2015; Dan Twining, “Pakistan and the Nuclear Nightmare,” *Foreign Policy*, September 4, 2013; and Pakistan and India: A Rivalry that Threatens the World,” *The Economist*, May 19, 2011.

2. Clinton made these remarks during a visit to the region in March 2000. See Ramesh Chandran, “Clinton Finds LoC Most Dangerous Place in World,” *The Times of India*, March 11, 2000, 1.

3. David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama’s Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2012), chap. 3.

4. See “Nuclear Pakistan is a Very, Very Vital Problem,” *The Indian Express*, March 30, 2016.

5. Glenn Snyder first grappled with the concept of the stability-instability paradox, whereby the Soviets could engage in a range of potentially destabilizing “minor ventures with impunity,” under the protective shield of their retaliatory nuclear capabilities. See Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961). Describing essentially the same phenomenon, Ashley Tellis coined the term “ugly stability” in reference to South Asia. See Ashley J. Tellis, *Stability in South Asia* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1997).

6. James Cable, “Surprise and the Single Scenario,” *RUSI Journal* 128, no. 1 (1983): 33-38.

background conditions and trends, reviewing moves and countermoves within the scenario, and considering the crisis aftermath. The essay concludes by distilling some implications and lessons drawn from the crisis modeling.

## Scenario Modeling and Methods

Many studies or games exploring crisis instability in South Asia follow a familiar trajectory. A major act of urban terrorism leading to mass casualties and widespread chaos is committed within Indian territory.<sup>7</sup> The attack is subsequently traced back to patrons nested within Pakistan's byzantine security apparatus, and New Delhi finds itself obliged — in the face of rising domestic pressure — to respond in a visible fashion.<sup>8</sup> In most cases, the hypothesized response is largely terrestrial and conventional and involves a “proactive” Indian military response in the form of a limited mechanized thrust across the Line of Control (LoC). Pakistan then engages in nuclear signaling and/or coercion in order to offset India's alleged conventional superiority.<sup>9</sup> There is good reason to concoct and play out such scenarios. After all, considering recent patterns of Indian and Pakistani behavior, they remain some of the most likely “screenplays” for confrontation.<sup>10</sup>

Scenarios, however, should not only examine the most likely futures.<sup>11</sup> As one famed business strategist observed,

[s]cenarios serve two purposes. The first is protective — anticipating and understanding risk. The second is entrepreneurial — discovering strategic options of which one was previously unaware.<sup>12</sup>

If done properly, scenario building can help states and organizations refine their anticipative thinking, manage risk, and hedge against uncertainty.<sup>13</sup> Regularly engaging in such mental exercises can fulfill a vital function by providing a form of mental “wind tunneling” or “stress testing” for overly cautious and reactive

7. An exception would be the work conducted by the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, which has conducted a series of games in partnership with the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency. These workshops have drawn on a wide variety of crisis scenarios and trigger events. For a detailed summary of the most recent game, see Feroz Hassan Khan et al., *South Asian Stability Workshop 2.0: A Crisis Simulation Report* (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, 2016).

8. For an excellent recent overview of these dynamics, see George Perkovich and Toby Dalton, *Not War, Not Peace? Motivating Pakistan to Prevent Cross-Border Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

9. For a good discussion of these dynamics, see 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.

10. See, for example, the useful study, Daniel Markey, *Terrorism and Indo-Pakistani Escalation* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2010). For a discussion of the role of “scripts” in the concoction of strategy see Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 607-31.

11. For an overview of the utility of scenario-based planning, see P. H. Liotta and Timothy E. Somes, “The Art of Reperceiving Scenarios and the Future,” *Naval War College Review* 56, no. 4 (2003): 121-32. See also Gill Ringland, *Scenario Planning: Managing for the Future* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998); Kees van der Heijde, *Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1996); and Peter Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

12. Pierre Wack, “Scenarios: Shooting the Rapids: How Medium-term Analysis Illuminated the Power of Scenarios for Shell Management,” *Harvard Business Review*, November 1985, 34.

13. The management of uncertainty remains at the heart of defense planning. As Stephen Fruhling notes, “[u]ncertainty and threat are integral components of the concept of the risk, and it is in reaction to strategic risks—risks that arise from, or could be reduced by, the use of armed force—that most countries maintain a defense force.” See Stephen Fruhling, *Defense Planning and Uncertainty: Preparing for the Next Asia-Pacific War* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1. For a broader discussion on the management of uncertainty in defense planning, see Colin Gray, “Coping with Uncertainty: Dilemmas of Defense Planning,” *Comparative Strategy* 27, no. 4 (2008): 324-31.

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bureaucracies.<sup>14</sup> The challenge lies in devising scenarios that are both *creative* and *plausible*.<sup>15</sup> As two defense analysts recently noted, scenarios are not meant to be prescriptive so much as diagnostic,

...assisting decision-makers to better understand the security environment by enabling them to examine a set of plausible but different futures that capture the inherent uncertainty in planning efforts, while incorporating predetermined elements.<sup>16</sup>

This essay aims to provide such a diagnostic assessment by briefly laying out two hypothetical crisis scenarios. The first scenario involves an armed confrontation between India and Pakistan that subsequently expands to include China. The (accidental) death of a dozen People's Armed Police (PAP) personnel in an Indian cross-border artillery barrage into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK) triggers Beijing's direct military involvement following a bloody terrorist attack on the shores of Dal Lake at the height of the tourist season.<sup>17</sup>

The second scenario unfolds in the Arabian Sea and describes Pakistan's decision to engage in nuclear first use against an Indian carrier strike group steaming toward Karachi. This action — framed by Pakistan as an attempt to “escalate to de-escalate” — occurs amid a state of conflict, with India having conducted a series of standoff airstrikes on Pakistani military positions. New Delhi's offensive occurs following months of tension during which both nations mass mobilize forces along the LoC. The *trigger event* for this particular crisis becomes the grisly televised execution of ten Indian Para-SF commandos in a village near the Pakistani border town of Kathai.

14. See Paul de Ruijter and Henk Alkema, *Scenario-Based Strategy: Navigate the Future* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

15. As one military historian has noted, “[t]oday as well as in the past, wargame scenario developers draw a fine line to achieve a proper balance of realism and educational relevance. Their conundrum is that the most realistic and detailed scenarios produce results and lessons that are only narrowly applicable. But the broader and more high-level a scenario, the less concrete information can be drawn from it to guide player actions.” See John M. Lillard, *Playing War: Wargaming and U.S. Navy Preparations for WWII* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 8.

16. Andrew Krepinevich and Jacob Cohn, *Rethinking Armageddon: Scenario Planning in the Second Nuclear Age* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016).

17. For more analysis on Chinese perspectives on and historical role in South Asian crises, see Yun Sun and Hannah Haegeland, “China and Crisis Management in South Asia” in this volume.

A tripartite methodology has been utilized as a means of injecting both inner coherence and a certain degree of plausibility. Both scenarios are thus set in the near future (circa 2019/2020) and are grounded in what scenario designers call *predetermined elements*, i.e., preexisting strategic realities that are deemed likely to endure. They also incorporate *ongoing disruptive trends* and detail the various *potential implications* of these evolutions for crisis stability. An overview of the respective structures and assumptions undergirding both scenarios can be found in the two following tables.

**Table 1: The Two-Front Threat Merges into an Extended One-Front Threat**

PREDETERMINED ELEMENTS	ONGOING DISRUPTIVE TRENDS	POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS
A tense Sino-Indian relationship.	Increased Chinese assertiveness leads to heightened tensions. Meanwhile, India's growing proximity to the United States and various Asian democracies becomes a major irritant for Beijing.	A relationship that becomes more openly rivalrous along the Line of Actual Control and in the Indian Ocean.
Pakistan is China's closest military partner.	China invests ever more human and economic capital into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.	The Sino-Pakistani axis becomes more overtly militarized, with China deploying military and paramilitary units within Pakistan to help protect its investments and trade routes.
China enacts repressive policies in its western border regions.	Beijing adopts an ever more iron-fisted mode of governance in Xinjiang, the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and Tibetan ethnic regions in Sichuan and Yunnan.	This exacerbates public hostility toward China in India, where the plight of Tibetans remains an emotive issue. China deploys a growing number of People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police units along its Western borders and intensifies its joint counterterrorism activities with Pakistan.
The Indian Army retains a "two-front" planning construct.	With the growing presence of Chinese forces in Pakistan, this two-front threat is progressively merging into a more unified theater of operations.	With the co-location of Pakistani and Chinese military personnel in certain border regions, it may be harder for India to distinguish between actors when conducting cross-border artillery or stand-off strikes.
China plays an important role as a third party in South Asian crises.	Due to its heightened physical and economic presence in Pakistan, there is a greater degree of Chinese diplomatic involvement than ever before.	This could have both positive and negative externalities for India.

**Table 2: Nuclear First Use and the Quest for Escalation Dominance at Sea**

PREDETERMINED ELEMENTS	ONGOING DISRUPTIVE TRENDS	IMPLICATIONS
There is a conventional power asymmetry between India and Pakistan	This asymmetry will continue to grow and will become particularly stark in the naval domain.	India will increasingly rely on its superior naval power and standoff capabilities for purposes of compellence and/or coercion.
Pakistan relies on battlefield nuclear weapons to offset India's conventional superiority	Pakistan is moving toward the nuclearization of its navy.	Naval interactions between both South Asian neighbors will take place under a nuclear shadow.
Doctrinally, Pakistan favors ambiguity as a means of enhancing its deterrence.	For both practical and deterrence-related reasons, Pakistan puts a growing emphasis on commingling.	This will pose major challenges in terms of target discrimination, and could lead to inadvertent escalation.
Some Indian security managers dismiss Pakistan's threat of first use as a "mere bluff."	Doubts are growing over the sanctity of India's no-first-use pledge, which Pakistan never really believed to begin with. Certain statements by former high-ranking Indian officials suggest India may in the future be moving toward a launch-on-warning posture, raising the possibility in Pakistani minds of Indian nuclear preemption.	Nuclear demonstration strikes at sea may increasingly seem appealing to Pakistani security managers in the event of a crisis, due to the relative absence of collateral civilian and infrastructural damage.
Pakistan seeks what it calls "full-spectrum deterrence," with the ability to range all of India's territories, and conduct a "third strike."	Pakistan's concerns over the second- or third-strike survivability of its arsenal have been amplified by (perceived) Indian strides in ballistic missile defense and space technology, as well as by its intensified cooperation with the United States.	Sea-based vectors of attack and low-flying submarine-launched cruise missiles will appear increasingly attractive to Pakistani nuclear planners.

## Scenario One: The Two-Front Threat Merges into a One-Front Threat

### *The Trigger Event*

On a balmy summer evening in Srinagar, columns of vacationers slowly thread their way around Dal Lake. It is the height of tourist season, and crowds of middle-class Indians seek — like their former British colonial overseers — to escape the scorching heat of the plains for the crisp mountain air. The state of Jammu and Kashmir, with its famed natural beauty and short flight distance from New Delhi, provides a natural holiday destination for thousands of overworked Delhiites and their families. Although the growing influx of tourists has somewhat dented the valley's pre-independence image as a Himalayan Shangri-La, it has also proved to be a stabilizing factor and a major boon to the local economy.<sup>18</sup> Despite spurts of unrest pitting stone-throwing Kashmiri youth against Indian paramilitary and police forces, summer tourism has continued to thrive, particularly in the vicinity of Dal Lake. Dense clusters of city dwellers amble along its shores while packs of local street food and handicraft salesmen jockey for their attention.

18. Over 130,000 tourists visited the state of Jammu & Kashmir in 2016—and this despite an extended period of unrest. See "Nearly 13 Lakh Tourists Visited JK in 2016: Govt," *Kashmir Observer*, April 14, 2017.

Shortly after the call for evening prayer, a detonation echoes across the lake. In some areas, the cries of the hawkers are so loud that survivors later report having not heard the first explosion or having mistaken it for a firework. However, it is soon followed by a second loud explosion and a fiery conflagration, and the grim reality of the situation sets in. A tide of panic washes over onlookers, leading to a frenzied stampede. Meanwhile, four men armed with assault rifles start firing with a cold, methodical precision into the crowds. By the time local police forces succeed in neutralizing the terrorists, over 50 civilians, including 8 young children, are dead. An additional dozen bystanders are wounded, some grievously, in the resulting stampede.

Night falls over Srinagar, and television crews descend like swarms of locusts on the location of the attack. As guttering flames reflect off the inky blackness of the lake, endless scenes of carnage — along with lingering shots of small bodies being carried away on stretchers — play out on Indian television sets.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Indian police and Intelligence Bureau officers comb through the meager possessions of the terrorists. They find a scorched smartphone in a shredded rucksack near one of the bombsites. The following morning, a National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO) team dispatched from Delhi discovers that the assailants had been communicating via an encrypted messaging system with an individual they trace back to a Pakistani military facility in Rawalpindi.<sup>20</sup> After demanding that the NTRO specialists reconfirm this information by running another forensic test, India's Cabinet Committee on Security sanctions — as a preliminary retaliatory step — an immediate artillery barrage against a Pakistani military outpost located thirty kilometers across the border. The standoff strike buys India's leadership some precious time as it determines its next course of action.

*The targeted location, assures Research and Analysis Wing officials, is a hidden Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) launchpad. Recent satellite imagery may show the construction of what appears to be a logging camp in the forest nearby, but this is a traditional deception method employed by the ISI — notes one veteran Indian intelligence official — which is simply trying to hide terror camps under the guise of civilian installations.*<sup>21</sup> At dawn, five howitzers and two multiple launch rocket systems open fire in a deafening barrage. Before the smoke has even cleared, a high-altitude Indian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) confirms that three barracks-like structures have been leveled and that several fading human heat signatures have been detected among the ruins. India's leadership

19. For a discussion of how South Asia's rapidly morphing media landscape could affect crisis dynamics, see Ruhee Neog, "Self-Referencing the News: Media, Policymaking, and Public Opinion in India-Pakistan Crises" in this volume, as well as the panel discussion, Toby Dalton, Shashank Joshi, Smita Sharma, Huma Yusuf, "Wars of Words? Media and Conflict in South Asia" (panel held at the Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference, Washington, D.C., March 20, 2017), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/20/concurrent-session-ii-wars-of-words-media-and-conflict-in-south-asia-pub-67989>.

20. The National Technical Research Organization is an Indian intelligence agency formed in 2004 and charged primarily with technical and signals intelligence.

21. On the Lashkar-e-Taiba's extensive network of facilities within Pakistan, as well as a discussion of its transnational connections, see Stephen Tankel, *Storming the World Stage: The Story of Lashkar-e-Taiba* (London: Hurst & Co., 2011).

is in a self-congratulatory mood — the LeT camp has been almost completely destroyed, and a strong message had been sent to its patrons in Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Moreover, the UAV video footage of the strike provides visual proof to the Indian people that their elected representatives are not sitting idle in the wake of yet another act of subconventional aggression.

This sense of satisfaction is short-lived, however. Only an hour or so after the retaliatory strike, a nervous aide enters the Indian prime minister's office clutching a laptop. Opening the device on the prime minister's desk, the aide proceeds to play a segment from a Pakistani cable news show. The video shows a young reporter gingerly stepping through the smoking wreckage of the encampment. Her accompanying cameraman suddenly swivels to focus on a twisted cadaver, zooming in on its Asiatic features. As the camera pans out, the Indian prime minister realizes to his horror that the victim is wearing what appears to be a Chinese PAP uniform. Chyrons flash across the screen in Urdu claiming that *in an act of unprovoked savagery, India has killed 12 of Pakistan's Chinese brothers engaged in peaceful construction activities*. For the first time since a bloody border skirmish in 1967, Indian troops have opened fire on their Chinese counterparts. This time, however, it is wholly accidental.

### *Background and Context: China's Growing Presence in Pakistan*

This scenario occurs against the backdrop of a growing Chinese presence in Pakistan and under the aegis of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative. With CPEC constituting the flagship project of its grand design for Eurasian connectivity — the Belt and Road Initiative — Beijing has poured ever more resources into Pakistan.<sup>22</sup> These resources are both financial — in the form of vast loans — and physical, via the detachment of large contingents of Chinese workers and paramilitary forces. While Chinese state-owned enterprises operate somewhat differently than they do in Africa, agreeing to employ large numbers of Pakistani workers, they still overwhelmingly prefer to hire their own countrymen for skilled labor and mid-level managerial positions.<sup>23</sup>

This preferential treatment had already generated racial tensions on construction sites and anti-Chinese sentiment in certain regions of Pakistan, where hopes that CPEC infrastructure projects would more directly benefit rural communities have been cruelly dashed. In addition to importing waves of Chinese civilian expatriates, Beijing has decided to increase its paramilitary presence,

22. For a recent analysis of China's Belt And Road Initiative, see Nadège Rolland, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Underwhelming or Game-Changer?" *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2017): 127-42.

23. It is estimated that there are approximately one million Chinese citizens in Africa, of which perhaps one-third or more are temporary labor migrants working for and sponsored by Chinese (and in some cases, African) companies on fixed-term contracts of usually one to three years. African labor unions have repeatedly raised concerns over Chinese companies' preference toward importing large numbers of low-skilled Chinese workers in Africa. When African workers are employed by Chinese state-owned enterprises, they are often poorly treated by their foreign overseers. For a recent and nuanced discussion of China's economic presence in Africa, see Yoong Jung Park, "One Million Chinese in Africa," Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), SAIS Perspectives, May 12, 2016, <http://www.saisperspectives.com/2016issue/2016/5/12/n947s9csa0ik6krmkm0bzb0hy584sfo>.

dispatching hundreds of PAP troops to assist in construction efforts and provide better security along key transport and communication lines. These units, often composed of recently decommissioned People's Liberation Army (PLA) servicemen, are principally drawn from the PAP's dedicated capital constructional units or the Hydropower, Communications, and Forestry Corps.<sup>24</sup> Although Islamabad had repeatedly pledged that it will do its utmost to protect Chinese equities in Pakistan — dedicating thousands of armed personnel and raising new formations such as the Special Security Division — Beijing has grown increasingly frustrated with its junior partner following a series of particularly brutal attacks against Chinese engineers and workers in Baluchistan.<sup>25</sup>

After one such incident, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Hua Chunying issues the following statement,

Although our Pakistani friends have made tremendous efforts in the fight against terrorism and extremism, they will require greater assistance from China in order to eradicate this scourge and move more decisively toward a China-Pakistan Community of Shared Destiny.<sup>26</sup> Following extensive bilateral discussions, we have decided to bring our counterterrorism cooperation to a new level. Under Article 71 of the Counter-Terrorism Law of the People's Republic of China, the Central Military Commission has assigned additional Chinese personnel to assist their Pakistani counterparts in the pursuit of antiterrorism endeavors.<sup>27</sup>

Although the statement is purposely vague, it soon becomes apparent that China has sizably increased its military presence within Pakistan. In addition to the aforementioned paramilitary presence, rapid-reaction units of Snow Leopard commandos are now also stationed in areas deemed insecure for Chinese workers.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, rumors persist that Chinese unmanned systems based in Xinjiang and Aksai Chin have begun to engage in kinetic strikes against nonstate actors located within Pakistan. While such targeted assassinations remain relatively rare, there have been some disquieting instances when seemingly “nonmilitant” members of Pakistan's Uighur community have

24. On the role and composition of the People's Armed Police, see Xuezhi Guo, *China's Security State: Philosophy, Evolution and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Zi Yan, “The Chinese People's Armed Police in a Time of Armed Forces Restructuring,” *China Brief* 16, no. 6 (2016).

25. In May 2015, the Pakistani Parliament announced that a special budgetary allocation was being devoted to the raising of a new “special security division” of nine battalions protecting routes and facilities along the CPEC. This was followed in June 2016 by an announcement that recruitment was underway to raise a force of up to 17,820 personnel to ensure better security. See “Pakistan-Army,” *Jane's World Armies*, April 7, 2017; and “Special Security Division Established to Secure CPEC,” *The Express Tribune*, January 22, 2017.

26. This is a formulation often employed by Chinese officials when discussing CPEC. See, for example, “Congratulatory Messages from H.E. Xi Jinping, President of People's Republic of China to H.E. Mamnoon Hussain, President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on the Occasion of the 78th Pakistan Day,” Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, March 23, 2017, <http://pk.chineseembassy.org/eng1zbgx/t1448456.htm>.

27. On the implications of China's new Counter-Terrorism Law, which entered into effect in 2016, see Mathieu Duchatel, “Terror Overseas: Understanding China's Evolving Counter-terror Strategy,” European Council on Foreign Relations, Policy Brief, October 26, 2016, [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/terror\\_overseas\\_understanding\\_chinas\\_evolving\\_counter\\_terror\\_strategy7160](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/terror_overseas_understanding_chinas_evolving_counter_terror_strategy7160).

28. The Snow Leopard Commando Unit is an elite counterterrorism unit of the People's Armed Police. They have been assigned to embassy protection in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq and are increasingly slated to engage in cross border or overseas operations. See Ojavi Goel, “China Seeks to Counter Militancy in Central Asia,” *Jane's Intelligence Review*, November 22, 2016.

been rounded up in raids jointly conducted by Pakistani and Chinese Special Operations Forces (SOF).<sup>29</sup> In late 2018, a Chinese drone strike against an alleged Turkistan Islamic Party cell located in the Federal Administered Tribal Areas kills two high-ranking members of the Haqqani network that had been riding in the same pick-up convoy.<sup>30</sup> In this case, rumors indicate the operation was conducted on China's own initiative with the Pakistanis only informed two minutes before the strike. The growing frequency of such incidents begins to generate friction between Chinese intelligence agencies and certain wings of the Pakistani security establishment.

These tensions rise to the fore following a mass religious rally in Lahore in early 2019. Back in 2016, Hafiz Saeed, the former head of Jamaat-ud-Dawa — an outlawed organization affiliated with LeT — had already begun vocally criticizing Chinese government policies in Xinjiang.<sup>31</sup> Three years later, the Islamist leader, freshly released from house arrest, goes a step further, haranguing the crowd and declaring it *high time for Pakistan to teach our Chinese friends to respect our Muslim brothers and sisters, here and in China and in East Turkistan*. Beijing reacts with cold fury to Saeed's tirade. Over the course of a tense meeting, the Ministry of State Security station chief in Islamabad quietly tells his ISI counterparts to *rein in their barking dog*. Chinese officials appear particularly incensed by the cleric's decision to comment on developments in Xinjiang, along with his choice of wording (East Turkistan). For Pakistan, the confrontation is a reminder that its growing proximity with China presents certain challenges as well as opportunities. As analysts such as Daniel Markey have noted, Islamabad's end goal has never been to become a "junior partner in a tighter Sino-Pakistani alliance" but rather "to enjoy the generous affections of both Beijing and Washington for as long as possible."<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately for Islamabad, its ties with Washington — whether political, military, or financial — have frayed over the past decade, rendering any attempt at equidistance between the two great powers increasingly untenable.<sup>33</sup> As a result, there is a sense in some quarters that Pakistan has become excessively beholden and/or deferential to Chinese interests, particularly in the counterterrorism domain. Chinese operations against Uighurs based in Pakistan, often — but not always — with the cooperation of Pakistani security forces, are already generating domestic

29. Over the past few years, Pakistan and China have intensified cooperation between their respective special operations forces units, with a particular focus on counterterrorism-related activities. See Fahren Bokhari, "China, Pakistan Complete Seven-Week Special Forces Drills," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, September 18, 2015.

30. On the Turkistan Islamic Party and its ties to South Asia terrorist groups, see Uran Butabekov, "China's Nightmare: Xinjiang Jihadists Go Global," *The Diplomat*, August 17, 2016. On China's approach to the issue, see Martin Purbrick, "Maintaining a Unitary State: Counter-terrorism, Separatists and Extremism in Xinjiang and China," *Asian Affairs* 43, no. 2 (2017): 236-56.

31. For Hafiz Saeed's critiques on Chinese government practices in Xinjiang, see "Hafiz Saeed Slams China after President Xi Jinping Asks His People to Shun Islam," *India Today*, May 31, 2016.

32. Daniel Markey, "The Strange Tale of Sino-Pakistani Friendship," *Asia Policy*, no. 21 (2016).

33. See Ismail Dilawar, "China, Not US, Is Pakistan's New Best Friend If You Go by These Investment Numbers," *The Economic Times*, April 13, 2017; and Pamela Constable, "Pakistan Pivots to China Amid Fresh Concerns over U.S. Ties with India," *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2017.

backlash.<sup>34</sup> In August 2019, an open letter is published in *Dawn*, a prominent English-language newspaper. Signed by a dozen (anonymous) Pakistani military officers, it expresses their collective concern over the *increasingly unbalanced nature of the Sino-Pakistani relationship*.<sup>35</sup>

This mindset, however, is not universally shared within Pakistan's security community. In a much-discussed interview with *The New York Times* in late 2018, a recently retired director-general of the ISI, Lt. Gen. Naveed Mukhtar, berates the *eternal fickleness of Washington* before declaring that *the sooner people here realize that China is the only game in town, the better it will be*. These remarks come a few days after a meeting between President Trump and Narendra Modi and a joint Indo-U.S. statement which calls for *a new era in the struggle against radical Islamic extremism, both in South Asia and beyond*.

Many of Mukhtar's colleagues are also of the opinion that a permanent Chinese military presence, particularly if stationed in relative proximity to the LoC, could act as a powerful deterrent to Indian military action in the event of a crisis. For these strategic planners, CPEC represents more than the promise of Pakistani economic rejuvenation. It is also an effective binding strategy that could permanently ensnare Chinese troops within the region.<sup>36</sup> Decision-makers in Beijing are hardly blind to the risks posed by this Pakistani line of thinking. At the same time, many Chinese thinkers take a somewhat different tack, suggesting for example that a deeper Sino-Pakistani relationship might enable Beijing to exert greater control over every aspect of their troublesome ally's security policy — including its relationship with India. Joint Sino-Pakistani patrols along the LoC, for example, could allow China to monitor and deter Pakistani provocative actions against India in real time.<sup>37</sup>

### *A Downturn in Sino-Indian Relations*

Even as China strengthens its security ties with Pakistan, its relations with India steadily deteriorate. The downward plunge in Sino-Indian relations can be explained by a variety of factors. First, certain broader geopolitical evolutions draw attention to widening fault lines in the Indo-Pacific region and exacerbate tensions between both rising Asian powers. India's growing military proximity to fellow Asian democracies has become a major source of irritation to Beijing, as has its increasingly vocal public stances on freedom of navigation. The revival

34. For concerns amongst Pakistan's Uighur community that such policies might materialize in the near-future, see Yuji Kuronuma, "Uighurs Wary as China's Vast Aid Influences Pakistan," *Nikkei Asian Review*, November 16, 2016.

35. For a masterful overview of the various strains Uighur-related issues have put on the Sino-Pakistani relationship, see Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 170-79. For a sense of the scope of China's CPEC-related ambitions, see Khurram Hussain, "Exclusive: CPEC Master Plan Revealed," *Dawn*, June 21, 2017.

36. For an academic discussion of some of these dynamics within asymmetric alliances, see James Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (1991): 904-33; and Patricia A. Weitsman, "Intimate Enemies: The Politics of Peacetime Alliances," *Security Studies* 7, no. 1 (1997): 156-92.

37. This counterintuitive point was raised by Indian military officers during conversations with the author. Pointing to the possibility of such patrols becoming a matter of routine, one colonel told the author that, "while it would certainly be of concern for us, it could also have a positive effect. The Pakistanis may behave better if the Chinese are watching." Author's interaction with Indian Army officers at the Center for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi, April 4, 2017.

of the so-called “quad,” or quadrilateral security dialogue, between Australia, Japan, India, and the United States has been greeted with seething hostility by the Chinese state-owned press, which denounces it as *little more than a blueprint for China's containment*.<sup>38</sup> Tensions reach a head in early 2019 when all four nations decide to engage in extended antisubmarine warfare exercises in the South China Sea. Beijing reacts by dispatching a surface task group from its South Sea Fleet base on Hainan island. The Chinese flotilla aggressively shadows the quad's naval assets for the duration of the exercise. At one point, a PLA Navy destroyer trains its fire-control radar on an Indian frigate, triggering an official protest from India's Ministry of External Affairs.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, India's government grows increasingly frustrated with China's sustained campaign to deny India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, as well as its refusal to label certain Pakistani jihadi groups as terrorist organizations.<sup>40</sup> The most sensitive bilateral issue, however, remains that of the Sino-Indian border, or Line of Actual Control (LAC). As relations with China become more openly confrontational, Indian security managers point to a marked recrudescence of PLA incursions along certain portions of the LAC, in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh in particular. These incursions, which have occasionally led to protracted standoffs involving hundreds of troops on each side, seem to follow a certain pattern and are timed during diplomatically charged moments. For example, one standoff in the Chumar district, which almost devolves into a minor skirmish, occurs during Prime Minister Modi's trip to Japan in October 2018. Another large-scale incursion occurs in the middle of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to New Delhi in early 2019. These staged confrontations appear, according to one observer, designed to *impress upon the Indians China's dominance along the border*.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, China's growing military strength along the LAC has become a major source of anxiety for Indian defense planners.<sup>42</sup> Concerns were already voiced in 2016 following Beijing's decision to fold the former Chengdu and Lanzhou military regions into a unified Western Theater Command, with observers noting that these sweeping organizational reforms could enhance the

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38. On the “quad” and prospects for its revival, see Prashanth Parameswaran, “Return of Asia's Quad Natural: US Defense Chief,” *The Diplomat*, April 9, 2016.

39. It is worth noting that such incidents involving Chinese and Japanese vessels have occurred in the past. See Martin Fackler, “Japan Says China Aimed Military Radar at Ship,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 2013.

40. For recent Sino-Indian tensions over India's bid for Nuclear Suppliers Group membership, see “India, China Trade Barbs over NSG,” *The Wire*, January 19, 2017. On China's refusal to blacklist certain Pakistan-based militant groups, see “Why Is China ‘Protecting’ the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad Militant Group?” *DeutscheWelle*, February 8, 2017.

41. Former Indian National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon has hypothesized that the seemingly deliberate timing of past large-scale incursions (in September 2014 and April 2015) could be explained by China's desire to establish “psychological dominance” over a new Indian government. See Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 25-26.

42. On the evolving Sino-Indian military dynamic along the Line of Actual Control, see Iskander Rehman, “A Himalayan Challenge: India's Conventional Deterrent and the Role of Special Operations Forces Along the Sino-Indian Border,” *Naval War College Review* 70, no. 1 (2017): 104-42.

PLA's combat performance in the event of a border conflict.<sup>43</sup> Retired Indian intelligence officials remarked that these evolutions could not be viewed in isolation from CPEC and from China's heightened military presence in Pakistan.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, many of the highest-ranking military officials stationed in the Western Theater Command have jointly trained or exercised with their Pakistani counterparts.

Over the past two to three years, “mass incidents” — a Chinese euphemism for widespread unrest — became ubiquitous throughout China's western border regions. By mid-2019, the few Western journalists with access to Xinjiang describe the climate in ominous terms and as moving toward a *Chechnya-like situation*.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, China's repression in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) grows ever more severe, and smuggled videos of self-immolating monks inundate Indian social media networks.<sup>46</sup> These videos, along with a steady stream of reporting on the deteriorating human rights conditions throughout ethnic minority regions in China, cause widespread outrage in India, where many retain a deep attachment to the Tibetan cause. The Indian media's increasingly vociferous coverage of the situation in the TAR is deemed deeply offensive by the Chinese, however. During one cocktail reception held at the Chinese Embassy, the Chinese ambassador pulls India's foreign secretary aside and quietly exhorts him to *crack down on the Tibetan splittist elements in Dharamsala influencing the Indian media and perturbing the harmony of the India-China relationship*. When the foreign secretary, somewhat startled, explains that the Indian government has little control over the nation's media, the ambassador walks off in a huff, muttering that India is *playing dangerous games*.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the Chinese have become increasingly convinced that New Delhi is being duplicitous in its dealings with Beijing over Tibet and that it wishes to exploit the uncertainties surrounding the 14th Dalai Lama's succession in order to weaken Chinese control in the Himalayan border regions.<sup>48</sup> These suspicions grow as the octogenarian monk's health falters in late 2018. They reach a crescendo following his decision to dispatch envoys to several monasteries in India — including Tawang Monastery in the contested state of Arunachal Pradesh — in order to begin the

43. On the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) most recent reforms, see Dennis Blasko, “Integrating the Services and Harnessing the Military Area Commands,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 5-6 (2016): 685-708. For a sampling of Indian concerns, see Monika Chansoria, “There's a Military Fallout of China-Pak Corridor,” *The Sunday Guardian*, March 11, 2017.

44. Author's interview with Jayadeva Ranade, New Delhi, April 3, 2017.

45. On China's ironfisted policies in its western border regions, see “China's Far West: A Chechnya in the Making,” *The Economist*, August 9, 2014; and Ben Hillman and Gray Tuttle, *Ethnic Conflict and Protest in Tibet and Xinjiang: Unrest in China's West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

46. These videos are often sent clandestinely from Tibet via WeChat, the Chinese social messaging system. Tibetans caught sharing such videos with family members or friends located outside of Chinese-controlled territory are severely punished by local authorities. Author's conversations with Tibetan refugees, Darjeeling and Ghoom, April 7 and 8, 2017.

47. China frequently relays its distaste of India's vibrant media in the course of bilateral discussions with New Delhi.

48. For a good recent analysis, see Ranjit S. Kalha, “The Politics of Reincarnation Will Be the Next Crisis in Sino-Indian Relations,” *The Wire*, April 14, 2017. Following a recent visit by the Dalai Lama to Arunachal Pradesh, China's Foreign Ministry castigated New Delhi for “obstinately arranging” the visit, warning that it had caused “serious damage” to bilateral ties. See Ellen Barry, “Dalai Lama's Journey Provokes China, and Hints at His Heir,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2017.

complex process of identifying his successor.<sup>49</sup> In a tersely worded statement, China's Foreign Ministry reiterates that

[t]he Dalai Lama's reincarnation has never been purely a religious matter or to do with the Dalai Lama's individual rights; it is first and foremost an important political matter in Tibet and an important manifestation of the Chinese central government's sovereignty over Tibet. For this reason, since historical times, the central government has never given up, and will never give up, the right to decide the reincarnation affairs of the Dalai Lama.<sup>50</sup>

A follow-up statement warns *foreign and domestic hostile forces...not to meddle in mass incidents in order to intensify contradictions*.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, Indian intelligence reports point to a growing influx of heliborne and mechanized PAP units in Tibet and to a series of "shock and awe" demonstrations of strength in and around Lhasa.<sup>52</sup> These displays of paramilitary strength, while aimed primarily at domestic audiences, raise eyebrows within India's security establishment. Indeed, these heavily armed and mobile units could easily be tasked elsewhere in the event of a cross-border conflict. In April 2019 during the 22nd round of Sino-Indian boundary talks, India's representatives tentatively broach the topic, along with the issue of Chinese paramilitary troop deployments in Pakistan. An Indian proposal to *exchange better information on the deployment of each nation's respective paramilitary forces, including in border regions outside the LAC*, is politely rebuffed by the Chinese, who nevertheless concede that such a proposal *might provide a good additional building block in future negotiations*.

### *The Crisis Unfolds*

Beijing's first reaction to the death of a dozen of its servicemen occurs half an hour after the footage of the incident hits international cable news channels. In a short one-paragraph statement, China announces that it is recalling its ambassador in New Delhi and convening the Politburo Standing Committee in order to *devise a suitable response* based on the recommendations provided by the newly revamped Central National Security Committee.<sup>53</sup> Indian officials' feverish attempts to reach their counterparts in Beijing prove unsuccessful, and their concerns grow when the recently established hotline between the Indian director-general of military operations and his PLA equivalent is

49. On the complexities surrounding reincarnation politics, and its implications for future Sino-Indian relations, see Iskander Rehman, *Reincarnation Politics and the Tibetan Issue in Sino-Indian Relations* (forthcoming, 2017).

50. This quote is drawn verbatim from a statement made by a Chinese official on the issue in 2015. See, "China Sticks to Right to Decide Reincarnation of Dalai Lama," *Reuters*, November 30, 2015.

51. For a discussion of China's tendency to link ethnic tensions with foreign attempts at subversion, see Jonathan Walton, "China Plans for Internal Unrest: People's Armed Police and Public Security Approaches to Mass Incidents," in *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, ed. Andrew Scobell et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015), 55-85.

52. For one such "shock and awe" demonstration, see "China Stages Another Mass Show of Military Force in Restive Xinjiang," *South China Morning Post*, February 19, 2017.

53. On the potential role of the newly formed Central National Security Committee, and on China's approach to crisis management in general, see Alastair Iain Johnston, "The Evolution of Interstate Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice in China," *Naval War College Review* 69, no. 1 (2016): 29-71.

abruptly disconnected.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, the Chinese media and blogosphere go into nationalistic overdrive. As images of the 12 PAP members, along with their bereaved families, play in a continuous loop on China Central Television, a growing number of angry netizens call on their government *to teach India a lesson*. The young men had been part of the PAP's Hydropower Corps, assigned to provide protection on a hydroelectric power station construction site of the China Gezhouba Group Co. Ltd.<sup>55</sup> One hour after the artillery strike goes public, India's Ministry of External Affairs issues a formal apology for the *Chinese loss of life in this regrettable incident*, assuring the international community that New Delhi had intended to strike *at a group of state-backed mujahedeen* and had *no prior knowledge* of the PAP troops' presence in the area.

Within the Zhongnanhai compound, however, it is determined that such an action — even if unintended — cannot go unpunished. The Chinese people have reacted with intense anger, and Beijing police begin to report a crowd of nationalist protesters streaming into Liangmao Road, overturning some of the barriers the police had placed near the Indian Embassy.<sup>56</sup> Over the past few years, mass protests have grown ever more frequent in China, especially following a series of corruption scandals involving high-ranking party officials.<sup>57</sup> The Politburo Standing Committee is eager to see some of that seething frustration redirected elsewhere. Meanwhile, a new crop of hardliners within the party's ruling elite argue that even though China's response should be *just, advantageous, and restrained*, India's recent actions should not be viewed in isolation from its *hegemonic tendencies in South Asia* or from its recent *playing of games* with China's core interests, especially in places such as Tibet. This crisis, they argue, provides China with an opportunity to enhance the strength of its *overall situation vis-à-vis* its trans-Himalayan neighbor. Once certain punitive actions have been undertaken, high-level contacts could be reinitiated with New Delhi, with the aim of defusing the crisis *from a situation of strength*.<sup>58</sup>

Chinese security managers are confronted with some additional challenges pertaining to the management of their proto-alliance with Pakistan. Chinese intelligence officers have already begun to question why Rawalpindi had seemed so eager to host the PAP detachment in such a sensitive area and in such close proximity to the LoC. Some have even ventured that the ISI voluntarily put Chinese lives at risk in the hope of drawing China into an Indo-Pakistani border conflict. Moreover, Beijing has been made aware that shortly before the terrorist

54. See "China Positive on India Military Hotline Proposal," *Reuters*, April 18, 2016.

55. China Gezhouba Group Co. Ltd is already involved in a number of CPEC-related infrastructure projects. See "Pakistan Taps Chinese Firm for Dam Construction on Indus," *Business Standard*, March 9, 2017.

56. On the role of nationalism and popular protests in Chinese foreign policy, see Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

57. On the pervasive nature of corruption in contemporary China, see Minxin Pei, *China's Crony Capitalism: The Dynamics of Regime Decay* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

58. China has often proven reluctant to initiate high-level communication in the early stages of a crisis, particularly when it pertains to perceived territorial issues. See Michael Swaine and Zhang Tuosheng, *Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analyses* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006).

attack in Srinagar the Pakistan Army's X Corps in Rawalpindi discreetly issued orders to heighten the military forces under its command.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, a battalion of SOF from the Special Services Group is forward-deployed to a forested area in POK abutting India's Poonch District. While it is common practice for Pakistan to strengthen its military presence along the LoC in the event of a terrorist attack on Indian soil, the timing of these movements raises Beijing's suspicions over the Pakistan military's complicity in the Srinagar killings.<sup>60</sup> In private, Chinese officials had previously begun to more forcefully urge Pakistan to abandon its "policy of a thousand cuts" against India, partly out of a fear that the People's Republic of China (PRC) could get sucked into a conflict not of its choosing.<sup>61</sup> Now that these fears have finally materialized, China is intent on asserting itself as the senior partner in the Sino-Pakistani axis and on exerting a great degree of control over the mechanics of the crisis. Pakistani military leaders are told in no uncertain terms that their troops — including the SOF positioned outside Poonch — are not to engage in cross-border operations *unless the situation so warrants it*. Military pressure could and should be applied by moving troops closer to the LoC, but now is not the time to jeopardize the future of the CPEC by turning it into a warzone. Furthermore, China wishes this crisis to remain *nuclear free* — a not-so-subtle means of dissuading Pakistan from engaging in potentially destabilizing nuclear signaling. When the Pakistanis point to the fact that India had also begun to move a strike corps out of Mathura, China assures them that their *deterrence would be buttressed by other additional conventional means*.

In the early morning hours of the following day, units from the PLA's 52nd and 53rd Mountain Infantry Brigades enter Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>62</sup> Accompanied by small heliborne detachments of SOF from the Tibet Military District, they attack several lightly defended Indian forward outposts, rapidly overcoming their small garrisons.<sup>63</sup> After razing the structures to the ground, Chinese forces continue to advance an additional 15 kilometers into Indian territory before setting up a series of makeshift fortifications. The images of PLA troops — some of whom have affixed GoPro cameras onto their helmets — advancing triumphantly into "Southern Tibet" are immediately broadcast on Chinese cable news channels. Set

59. The X Corps headquarters in Rawalpindi commands units along the Line of Control (LoC) and in Siachen. An elite rapid reaction formation, the 111 Brigade, is placed under its direct command and tasked with countering internal threats or reinforcing frontline units.

60. Since 2012, the Pakistani Army has mandated that 25 percent of its reserves mobilize along the LoC in the event of a large-scale terror attack on Indian soil. See Pranab Dhal Samanta, "New Pak Doctrine: Deploy at Border If Terror Attack in India," *The Indian Express*, January 8, 2012.

61. According to some press reports, China has "indicated a preference for a change of course by Pakistan" in its handling of anti-India jihadi groups. See Tom Hussain, "Has Chinese Pressure Forced Pakistan U-turn on Anti-India Terror Groups?" *South China Morning Post*, October 16, 2016.

62. The 52nd and 53rd Mountain Infantry Divisions are based in Nyingchi in close proximity to Arunachal Pradesh. For a good overview of Chinese forces currently placed under the Western Theater Command, see Kevin McCauley, "Snapshot: China's Western Theater Command," *Chinafile* 17, no. 1 (2017).

63. Although India deploys a large number of troops along the "forward edge" of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), they are dispersed across a vast area, often in small "penny packet" units that cannot easily be reinforced in a timely manner due to the continued paucity of all-weather infrastructure. For "penny packets" and Indian defense officials' concerns over this "LoC approach" to "LAC defense," see Sushant Singh, "China Border Roads Hobbling, 12 Years Later, 21 of 73 Ready," *The Indian Express*, June 11, 2017.

against stirring Maoist anthems with Chinese flags fluttering on dawn-lit mountain ridges in the background, the footage engenders mass enthusiasm in China, with citizens applauding their government's decisive actions.

In the sandstone buildings of Lutyens' Delhi, officials are still reeling under the impact of the past day's events. In the space of a few hours, they have gone from deliberating how best to calibrate their response to an act of terrorism to planning for a full-fledged war against two highly capable adversaries.<sup>64</sup> Early reports suggest that up to 30 Indo-Tibetan Border Police *jawans* had been killed in the early morning assault.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, India's satellite imagery reveals that Pakistan has begun enhancing its border defenses and fueling an armored division in Multan. Even more alarming is the news that the PLA's Hotan-based mechanized infantry division is speeding along the expanded Karakorum highway into northwestern Pakistan. It is followed by Chinese S-300 air-defense batteries, which are being strategically positioned around Pakistani airfields and military installations. On the eastern front, the first troops from the PLA Air Force's 15th Airborne Corps have already landed via Y-20 heavy airlifters at the Lhasa Gonggar Airport, and Indian military planners project that an additional four divisions of ground forces could surge into the theater via high-speed rail within the next few days.<sup>66</sup>

Confronted with such a grim and rapidly evolving security situation, India orders its 17 Mountain Strike Corps, which recently moved its headquarters from Ranchi to Panagarh, to prepare its troops for *immediate hostilities*. Pointing to the large influx of PLA forces expected to soon arrive in theater, India's Air Force chief urges India's civilian authorities to conduct *targeted standoff strikes as soon as possible on select Chinese transportation nodes within the TAR*. India's leadership, however, hesitates to sanction early cross-border air or missile strikes for fear of irredeemably expanding the geographic scope of the conflict. Attention focuses, first and foremost, on how to prevent further enemy advances within Indian territory. In past wars, India had managed to swivel a portion of its forces from one theater to reinforce the other. In 1971, for example, the Soviets had pledged to initiate diversionary attacks against China if Mao decided to intervene directly in support of West Pakistan. This, along with the time of year and weather conditions (India initiated its large-scale military operations in East Pakistan when certain key mountain passes were still snowbound) had led New Delhi to — correctly — assess that the PLA was unlikely to come to

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64. On the tendency by some analysts to underestimate Pakistan's conventional capabilities, see Walter Ladwig, "Indian Military Modernization and Conventional Deterrence in South Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 5 (2015): 729-72.

65. The Indo-Tibetan Border Police, which has a total sanctioned strength of 89,340, currently mans 169 border outpost all along the LAC. *Ministry Of Home Affairs Annual Report* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2016), 175.

66. The Y-20, China's indigenous heavy airlifter, entered service in 2016. See Charles Clover, "China's Chubby Girl Transport Aircraft Enters PLA Service," *Financial Times*, July 6, 2016. On the potential role of the PLA Air Force's 15th Airborne Corps in a Sino-Indian conflict, see Iskander Rehman, "A Himalayan Challenge: India's Conventional Deterrent and the Role of Special Operations Forces along the Sino-Indian Border," *Naval War College Review* 70, no. 1 (2017): 111.

West Pakistan's aid.<sup>67</sup> The situation presently faced by India's decision-makers, however, is wholly unprecedented. Troops cannot be swung from one sector to buttress forces in another — the Indian military is facing what appears to be a unified, one-front threat spanning hundreds of miles. Moreover, it cannot rely on an external security guarantor in the vein of the Soviet Union in 1971. Although it has grown closer in recent years to the United States, the relationship remains far short of a formal alliance. The U.S. ambassador has made clear that while Washington would do *its utmost to help defuse the crisis by engaging vigorously with all parties involved*, its assistance to India — for the time being at least — would be limited to intelligence sharing.

Several factors explain the Trump administration's reluctance to come out in stronger support for New Delhi. Unlike in 1962 when President Kennedy had not hesitated to provide military aid to a country he viewed as a democratic counterweight to Chinese communism, it is not immediately apparent that Beijing is the aggressor.<sup>68</sup> For many in Washington, the situation appears a tad murky. After all, this particular crisis has been triggered by India's attack (albeit inadvertent) on a Chinese paramilitary installation. Although a bipartisan grouping of U.S. Senators led by John McCain issue a statement urging that the United States *stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our great democratic partner in Asia* and provide immediate logistical support, the White House remains reluctant to more overtly side with India. Having adopted a somewhat transactional and value-neutral approach to the conduct of statecraft, the Trump administration is less inclined to view the U.S.-India partnership as something that should be valued and nurtured for its own sake.<sup>69</sup> Progress had certainly been made on key issues — ranging from counterterrorism to naval cooperation — but there is a sense that the bilateral relationship has lost some of its former momentum. Meanwhile, rumors persist that the 45th president is frustrated by India's reluctance to rapidly commit to several multibillion-dollar arms deals and by New Delhi's decision to purchase additional French (rather than U.S.) fighter jets. Certain senior foreign policy advisors in the White House also hold out the hope that Beijing could be persuaded to more actively cooperate with Washington on thorny regional issues such as North Korea. They are reluctant to durably jeopardize the Sino-U.S. relationship in favor of some hypothetical grand strategic alignment they never placed much stock in to begin with.<sup>70</sup>

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67. See Anwar Hussain Syed, *China and Pakistan: Diplomacy of an Entente Cordiale* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 152; and Richard Sisson and Leo Rose, *War and Secession: India, Pakistan and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 233-34.

68. On the Kennedy administration's actions during and immediately after the 1962 India-China War, see Bruce Riedel, *JFK's Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA, and the Sino-Indian War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015).

69. On the 45th U.S. President's transactional approach to statecraft, see Thomas Wright, "Trump's 19th Century Foreign Policy," *Politico Magazine*, January 20, 2016. On the recent de-emphasis of human rights and value promotion in U.S. foreign policy, see Ted Piccone, "Tillerson Says Goodbye to Human Rights Diplomacy," Brookings Institution, Order from Chaos, May 5, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/05/05/tillerson-says-goodbye-to-human-rights-diplomacy>.

70. On the uncertainties surrounding the U.S.-India relationship in the Trump era, see Dhruva Jaishankar, "Making Sense of Uncertain India-U.S. Relations," in "The Advent of the New Administration in the USA: Global and Bilateral Ramifications," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 12, no. 1 (2017): 1-41; and Kanti Bajpai, "Redraw the Triangle," *The Indian Express*, June 30, 2017.

Meanwhile, in New Delhi, stress levels are rising. As India's service chiefs — looking increasingly nervous and haggard — struggle to formulate a list of viable military options, the phone rings. India's ambassador in Beijing reports that he just had a conversation with Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi. In the course of the conversation, Councilor Yang relayed the PRC's terms for an immediate ceasefire. First, India must issue another apology for the deaths of the PAP soldiers. Second, its leaders must pledge to restate India's support of the one-China policy at each bilateral meeting. Third, India should never again allow *leading Tibetan splittists* like the Dalai Lama to visit *contested territory such as Southern Tibet*. Last but not least, India should cancel its projected export of BrahMos cruise missiles to Vietnam.<sup>71</sup> Provided New Delhi accedes to all these conditions, Beijing is willing to withdraw all its forces from the occupied ridges in Arunachal Pradesh. In addition to this, Beijing pledges to increase private pressure on Pakistan and to exhort it to crack down on the various groups within Pakistan *that continue to perturb harmonious regional ties and socioeconomic stability*. Following brief deliberations amongst the members of the Indian Cabinet Committee on Security, India's ambassador is instructed to inform Yang Jiechi that New Delhi accepts China's demands on the sole condition that its details are never made public.

### *Aftermath of the Crisis*

Although a major conflict involving three nuclear-armed powers has been averted, India views its leadership's acceptance of China's ceasefire terms as a humiliating display of weakness. Indeed, despite the Indian government's best efforts to conceal the agreement from the broader Indian public, its details are revealed barely six months later in a sensationalistic and best-selling memoir. Penned by the recently retired Indian Air Force chief and entitled *Kowtow — The Day Our Great Nation Bowed to China*, the book savages India's civilian leadership for its alleged *cravenness in the face of Chinese aggression*. This lingering sense of humiliation, along with the feeling of powerlessness experienced by the beleaguered democracy during the two-day crisis, have a significant effect on New Delhi's security policy. In response to the accusations levied by the air force chief, India's national security advisor reveals that *the consensus view* within the Cabinet Committee on Security had been that *waging a protracted two-front war was an untenable proposition in light of India's circumstances*. Army generals point to critical ammunition shortages and to the parlous state of Indian air defenses. It is rumored that the most recent annual report on Indian military readiness estimates that the Indian Army only has enough ammunition for a week of high-intensity conflict.<sup>72</sup>

71. Both countries reportedly recently held talks on the possibility of New Delhi supplying Akash surface-to-air and Brahmos supersonic cruise missiles to Hanoi. See "India, Vietnam Hold Talks on Sale of Akash, Brahmos Missiles," *The Economic Times*, February 3, 2017.

72. On India's severe ammunition shortages see Surya Gangadharan, "Indian Army Fraught with Shortage of Arms, Ailing Fighter Planes," *The Quint*, September 23, 2016; and Vivek Raghuvanshi, "India Looks to Fast-Track Ammo Purchases Worth \$1 Billion," *Defense News*, November 10, 2016.

Meanwhile, Indian Air Force officers take issue with their former chief's bluster, arguing that due to chronic delays preceding the signing of a new medium multi-role combat aircraft deal, India's *remaining active fighter squadrons are simply not up to the task of prosecuting a two-front air campaign*.<sup>73</sup>

In the months following the crisis, leading Indian foreign policy pundits question certain traditional tenets of India's post-Cold War foreign policy, arguing in the columns of the *Indian Express* that the pursuit of strategic autonomy should not be equated with a *dangerous form of strategic solitude*. Although India continues to reject formalized alliance structures, it begins to draw much closer to Japan, Australia, France, and the United States and to entertain the notion of informal security guarantees. Meanwhile, certain aspects of India's nuclear doctrine are questioned.<sup>74</sup> In 2022, an *updated summary* of India's nuclear doctrine is issued to the public. The document makes a few amendments to the 2003 press release, the most noticeable of which regards India's no-first-use policy, which is now qualified in the following terms:

India's Nuclear Doctrine is characterized by a posture of "no first use." Nuclear weapons will be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces elsewhere...However, in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces elsewhere, by biological or chemical weapons, or in the event of a major attack deep within Indian sovereign territory, India will retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons.

The addition of a *major attack deep within Indian sovereign territory* is immediately seized upon by both Indian and foreign analysts and portrayed as a major dilution of India's no-first-use pledge. When pressed on the matter a few years later at an international nuclear policy conference in Washington, D.C., a retired Indian Strategic Forces commander grudgingly concedes that *while India remained committed to no first use, such a change had been deemed necessary due to the transforming nature of the two-front threat*.<sup>75</sup>

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73. On the current challenges facing the Indian Air Force, see Ashley J. Tellis, *Troubles, They Come in Battalions: The Manifold Travails of the Indian Air Force* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016); and Rahul Bedi, "IAF's Depleting Assets Preclude Two-Front War Option," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, March 17, 2016.

74. For a detailed analysis of India's current nuclear doctrine, see Shashank Joshi, "An Evolving Indian Nuclear Doctrine?" in *Deterrence Instability and Nuclear Weapons in South Asia*, ed. Michael Krepon, Joshua T. White, Julia Thompson, and Shane Mason (Washington, D.C.: Stimson Center, 2015), 69-95.

75. As S. Paul Kapur has provocatively noted, "India's NFU policy is well suited to a conventionally strong party that can deter, and if necessary defeat, its adversary without resort to nuclear weapons. It may, however, be less well suited to a conventionally weaker party that might need nuclear weapons to blunt a stronger opponent's conventional attack." S. Paul Kapur, "Possible Indian Nuclear Options in 2030," in *Defense Primer 2017*, ed. Pushan Das and Sushant Singh (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2017).

## Scenario Two: Nuclear First Use at Sea

### *The Trigger Event*<sup>76</sup>

The online video is slickly edited and excruciatingly long. Bloodied, seemingly dazed, and with their hands bound behind their backs, eight Indian Para-SF commandos are forced to their knees. An equal number of masked and black-garbed executioners line up behind them and read out a long diatribe in Urdu accusing the *infidels* of having *desecrated the sacred soil of the land of the pure*. Brandishing long knives, they then proceed to decapitate their captives. The ghoulish production — which clearly draws inspiration from the “torture porn” produced by the Islamic State — hits the Indian public like a sledgehammer. Despite New Delhi’s best efforts to scrub it from India’s most trafficked social media websites, the gory footage continues to resurface. Meanwhile, many Indian news channels, refusing to abide by government instructions or the pleas of the victims’ families, continue to show unedited segments of the execution, arguing that such troubling images need to be *shown in the interest of truth*.

This cross-border incident occurs amid an already volatile climate. Over the past three years, relations with Pakistan have reached their lowest ebb in almost two decades. Although this downward plunge could be attributed to a variety of factors, its principal driver has been the dismal state of affairs in Jammu and Kashmir. Indeed, after months of mass demonstrations and unrest, things begin to spiral out of control, with some commentators warning that the situation is sliding back into *late 1980s and early 1990s levels of violence*.<sup>77</sup> With a growing number of young Kashmiris trading stones for AK-47s, New Delhi has repeatedly lambasted Pakistan, accusing it of fomenting chaos, infiltrating militants, and providing arms to the young insurgents. Pakistan, on the other hand, has systematically rejected all responsibility, arguing that New Delhi *brought the situation on itself* through its heavy-handed treatment of the local population and repeated human rights violations. This war of words is accompanied by ever-more-frequent artillery exchanges across the LoC. After one particularly intense shelling kills 10 Indian Army soldiers, a platoon of men from the 9th Para-SF battalion is sent across the border and charged with destroying the Pakistani artillery unit that *martyred* their fellow servicemen. Their operation proves a resounding success. Photos of Indian special forces standing over the smoking debris of three Pakistani howitzers are displayed the following day by India’s director-general of military operations, who proudly states that *these images provide indubitable proof that India has, once again, carried out a*

76. For more analysis on triggers and patterns of crisis onset, see Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland, “The Anatomy of a Crisis: Explaining Crisis Onset in India-Pakistan Relations” in this volume.

77. At the time of writing, even retired Indian Army generals recognize that the situation in Kashmir is cause for grave concern. See, for example, former Northern Army Commander Lt. Gen. Panag’s commentary in H.S. Panag “Criticism is Needed in Order to Reform the Army,” *The Quint*, April 18, 2017; and Bhanu Mehta, “Sinking Valley,” *The Indian Express*, April 15, 2017. For an early warning of the risks of major unrest, see Sameer Lalwani, “Valley of the Brawls: Tensions Rise in Kashmir,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 11, 2016.

*successful strike against the enemy: a Mandhol 2.0.*<sup>78</sup> Although both countries had long used their SOF to engage in cross-border raids, the Indian government has grown particularly fond of publicizing such operations — provided they are successful — following the post-Uri “surgical raid” of 2016.<sup>79</sup> Despite some analysts’ warnings over of the perils of leveraging sensitive operations for political gain, India’s civilian leadership has come to view such public communication campaigns as an effective and low-cost means of satisfying their electorate’s rawest retributive impulses.<sup>80</sup> The staging of the eight Para-SF commandos’ public execution, barely two weeks after *Mandhol 2.0*, provides a stark and humiliating reminder of the perils of excessively relying on SOF for punitive thrusts across the LoC. Moreover, suspicions have already begun to grow over the identity of the soldiers’ killers after an intense examination of the footage reveals a small patch of colored cloth peering out from under one of the executioner’s black robes. The pattern of the fabric — in mottled green and light brown — appears almost identical to that of a Pakistan Special Services Group uniform. Panels of discussants and alleged “imagery analysis experts” materialize on Indian news shows, with many shouting that the Pakistani Army should be directly punished for what amounted to a serious war crime. A spokesperson for the Pakistani Army dismisses these accusations, claiming that *second-hand army uniforms can be purchased in almost every bazaar from Gilgit to the Kyber Pass* and that *Indian soldiers should not have been violating Pakistani territory in the first place*. Some Pakistani journalists even go as far as to claim that the entire video production is an elaborate false-flag operation by India’s intelligence agencies, which supposedly staged the executions in order to justify its *cycle of aggression against Pakistan and the people of Kashmir*.<sup>81</sup>

For the Indian government, it is clear that something needed to be done. Reluctant to send in any more SOF — for fear of another public relations debacle — the Cabinet Committee on Security approves a series of standoff airstrikes on “terror launchpads” in POK. An additional option of strikes against targets located deeper within the Pakistani heartland is presented to the Indian leadership and briefly considered before being rejected.<sup>82</sup> As night falls over Srinagar, three Su-30MKI aircraft take off from Halwara airfield in the Punjab.<sup>83</sup>

78. Operation Mandhol was a successful Indian commando raid on a Pakistani artillery unit during the 1971 war. See Ajay Sural, “Operation Mandhol Forced Pakistan to Change War Plan,” *The Times of India*, December 16, 2013. On the 2016 “surgical” strike, see Sushant Singh, “Inside the Surgical Strike: Choppers on Standby, 70-80 Soldiers,” *The Indian Express*, October 1, 2016.

79. On the long and often brutal history of special operations forces cross-border raids, see Shashank Joshi, “Everything That We Know about India’s Cross-LOC Strikes before Uri,” *Scroll.in*, October 5, 2016. For a firsthand account of one such raid, see H.S. Panag “The Lost Operation Against Pakistan in Chorbat LA,” *Newslandry*, September 14, 2016.

80. For one such warning, see Abhijit Singh, “Why ‘Surgical Strikes’ Are a Slippery Slope for India,” *The Diplomat*, September 30, 2016. For an example of the enthusiasm expressed in some quarters for surgical strikes, see Arka Biswas, *Surgical Strikes and Deterrence Stability in South Asia* (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2017).

81. South Asia has long been a fertile ground for all sorts of conspiracy theories. On their prevalence in the Pakistani media, see Huma Yusuf, “Conspiracy Fever: The U.S., Pakistan and Its Media,” *Survival* 53, no. 4 (2011): 95-118.

82. On the differences between how Indian Air Force strikes against targets in the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and in the heartland might be perceived, see Perkovich and Dalton, *Not War, Not Peace*, 104-34.

83. The Su-30MKI remains the Indian Air Force’s prime “deep strike” asset. A portion of India’s Su-30MKI are slated to be fitted with air-launched variants of the BrahMos missile for standoff strike missions. See Rahul Udoshi, “Indian Su-30MKI Makes Maiden Flight with BrahMos Missile,” *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, June 27, 2016.

Fitted with the air-launched variant of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, they are instructed to conduct standoff strikes on two positions in Pakistan's Bagh district from the edges of Indian airspace. Cruising at high altitude above the range of many of Pakistan's shorter-range air defense missile systems, the three aircraft unleash a volley of missiles at their targets before turning to head back south. Suddenly, one of the Su-30MKI experiences a mid-air engine failure, obliging it to begin a precipitous descent in an attempt to land at Srinagar airport on its one remaining engine.<sup>84</sup> As it descends to an altitude of 18,000 feet, it is hit by a surface-to-air missile (SAM), and its two pilots eject from the aircraft. Drifting with the wind currents, they are blown a few hundred meters into POK, where they are promptly shot by Pakistani Rangers. The SAM fires from a SPADA 2000 battery located one kilometer within Pakistani territory.<sup>85</sup> Even though an aircraft and two ground targets are destroyed and accompanied by the loss of several additional human lives, neither country has yet violated its neighbor's airspace. Although both countries begin mass mobilizing their armored forces along portions of the LoC, neither wishes to trigger actions that could lead to a full-scale ground conflict. Shortly after India begins moving its strike corps from the Indian interior toward its western border, Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations department issues a statement warning India that *any armored columns crossing the border will be immediately incinerated* and that Pakistan will not hesitate to use *all the means at its disposal* — both conventional and strategic — to prevent India from *fulfilling any hegemonic designs on our country*.<sup>86</sup> The heightened, nuclear-tinged rhetoric alarms the international community, and both Washington and Beijing dispatch high-ranking envoys to the region. In their conversations with their Chinese and U.S. counterparts, Pakistan's military leaders indicate a willingness to explore the terms of a ceasefire.

For Indian security managers, however, it is still too early to call it quits. The nation is still up in arms over the execution of the eight special operatives. And with the loss of an aircraft and two pilots, the airstrikes can hardly be framed as a success.<sup>87</sup> While the Indian Army Chief has thundered that it is time to *call Pakistan's bluff* and cross the LoC, there remains another, seemingly more limited, punitive option. Both during the 1999 Kargil War and during Operation Parakram in 2001-2, the Indian Navy had engaged in coercive maneuvering

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84. See "Sukhoi Fighter Jets Have Faced Mid Air Engine Trouble, Says Parrikar in Lok Sabha," *The Indian Express*, May 6, 2016.

85. The SPADA 2000, developed by Italy's Alenia Marconi Systems, has a range of approximately 24,000 meters. The Pakistani Air Force selected the MBDA Spada 2000 for its medium air-defense requirements in 2007. See "SPADA," *Jane's Land Warfare Platforms: Artillery and Air Defense*, March 1, 2017.

86. For recent, similarly worded, warnings from the Pakistanis, see Kiran Stacey and Farhan Bokhari, "Pakistan Vows Nuclear Retaliation if India Attacks," *Financial Times*, January 19, 2017.

87. Research in the field of psychology has demonstrated the tendency of decision-makers to escalate commitment to previously decided courses of action even when this may prove unwise and/or irrational. This is commonly referred to as the "theory of sunk costs" in psychology or "escalation commitment" in management theory. See Hal R. Arkes and Catherine Blumer, "The Psychology of Sunk Cost," in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 35 (1985): 124-40; and Theresa F. Kelly and Katherine L. Milkman, "Escalation of Commitment," in *Encyclopedia of Management Theory*, ed. Eric H. Kessler (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2013), 257-59.

in the Arabian Sea, surging elements from its Eastern and Western fleets in a show of force outside Pakistan's portuary hub of Karachi. The Indian Navy had subsequently argued that its "silent role" during the Kargil War demonstrated that it could translate its conventional superiority into coercive power and had provided it with the following precious insights:

Firstly, there will be space and scope to conduct conventional maritime operations below the nuclear threshold. Secondly, a window of opportunity would exist to influence the land battle.<sup>88</sup>

For Pakistani planners, on the other hand, India's blunt naval signaling is a grim reminder of their resource-starved nation's vulnerability to blockade and strategies of commodity denial.<sup>89</sup> Pakistan's growing energy shortages in particular have led to mass protests and widespread concern within the nation's leadership.<sup>90</sup> An unseasonably warm spring has already triggered riots in both Karachi and Islamabad. Only one month prior, angry mobs surrounded the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Resources, decrying incessant power cuts in the middle of a major heat wave. On the Indian side, there is an underappreciation of the gravity with which Pakistan views these issues. In 2013, a crisis simulation exercise involving both Indian and Pakistani participants was held in Colombo. Following a mass terrorist attack in India, subsequently traced back to Pakistan, the Indian players decided to implement a maritime exclusion zone (MEZ) off Pakistan's Makran coast. They considered this action to be "limited" and "restrained and justified." The Pakistanis, on the other hand, perceived the enforcement of the MEZ as being tantamount to an "act of war."<sup>91</sup> In order, perhaps, to address this lingering perceptual mismatch, Pakistan made a point of reemphasizing the red-line first drawn by Lt. Gen. Khalid Kidwai — then director of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division — when he had declared in 2002 that "economic strangulation of Pakistan" would constitute one of the conditions under which the nation would consider nuclear use.<sup>92</sup> In 2018, following the designation of two Agosta-90B submarines as *strategic assets*, a Pakistan Inter-Services Public Relations press release thus described the diesel-electric submarines — both equipped with nuclear-tipped cruise missiles — as being the *maritime guarantors of Pakistan's full-spectrum deterrence policy* and *as the protectors of its most vital economic*

88. See *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy* (New Delhi: Integrated Headquarters, Indian Navy, 2007), 23.

89. See, for example, Moeed Yusuf, "Pakistan's View of Security in the Indian Ocean," in *Deep Currents and Rising Tides: The Indian Ocean and International Security*, ed. John Garafano and Andrea J. Dew (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 142.

90. See, for example, Aamir Yasin, "PPP to Launch Countrywide Protest Against Energy Crisis," Dawn, April 19, 2017; and Michael Kugelman, *Pakistan's Interminable Energy Crisis: Is There Any Way Out?* (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2015).

91. See the summary of the game in Ferroz H. Khan and Ryan W. French, *South Asian Stability Workshop: A Crisis Simulation Exercise* (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, 2013).

92. The conditions under which Pakistan would envisage first use were presented by Khidwai in the following terms: "Nuclear weapons are aimed solely at India. In case that deterrence fails, they will be used if a) India attacks Pakistan and conquers a large part of its territory, b) India destroys a large part of either its land or air forces, c) India proceeds to the economic strangling of Pakistan, or d) India pushes Pakistan into political destabilization or creates a large-scale internal subversion in Pakistan." Quoted in Paolo Cotta-Ramusino and Maurizio Martellini, *Nuclear Safety, Nuclear Stability, and Nuclear Strategy in Pakistan: A Concise Report of a Visit by Landau Network Centro Volto* (Como: Landau Network Centro Volto, 2002).

*interests.*<sup>93</sup> For many Indian observers, however, Pakistan's first use threats were only deemed credible in the event of a large-scale land war. A former Indian naval chief writing in *The Times of India* scoffs over the possibility that Islamabad *would be willing to break the nuclear taboo simply in order to break a blockade.*

### *Nuclear First Use at Sea*

There are a number of drivers behind Pakistan's establishment of a sea-based deterrent centered around the "Israeli model" of air-independent propulsion diesel-electric submarines (SSKs) equipped with nuclearized Babur cruise missiles.<sup>94</sup>

First, it provides a means of offsetting India's growing conventional superiority at sea. Indeed, according to some metrics, India's Navy now possesses a five to one quantitative advantage over its smaller South Asian neighbor.<sup>95</sup> With its historic focus on sea denial and anti-access, the Pakistan Navy still possesses the ability to blunt its Indian adversary's capacity to project naval power in certain limited quadrants of the Arabian Sea.<sup>96</sup> This ability, however, is rapidly diminishing over time. The threats posed by Pakistan's *maritime nuclear threat in being* along with the strategic ambiguity induced by the systematic commingling of nuclear weaponry with conventional naval platforms could help remedy this situation by eroding the Indian Navy's coercive edge.<sup>97</sup> Forced to operate under a constant nuclear shadow, India's mariners might thus find themselves less inclined toward aggressive action in the event of a crisis.

Second, it buttresses Pakistan's doctrine of "full-spectrum deterrence" by providing additional "second- or third- strike" platforms at sea.<sup>98</sup> Finally, Pakistan's concerns have grown over certain aspects of India's nuclear doctrine (with some former Indian officials seeming to have intimated that India might be moving toward a launch-on-warning posture) and over purported

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93. A number of Pakistani strategists have directly established a linkage in-between Pakistan's embrace of nuclearized naval platforms and their larger neighbor's exercises in naval coercion. For one recent example, see Feroz H. Khan, "The India-Pakistan Nuclear Rivalry at Sea," University of Nottingham, Institute of Asia & Pacific Studies (IAPS), IAPS Dialogue, June 16, 2017, <https://iapdialogue.org/2017/06/16/india-pakistan-nuclear-rivalry-at-sea>.

94. Pakistan recently conducted a successful test of the Babur-3 SLCM. For a succinct overview of some of its implications, see Ankit Panda and Vipin Narang, "Pakistan Tests New Sub-Launched Nuclear-Capable Cruise Missile. What Now?" *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2017.

95. The 5:1 comparison is made in "Pakistan — Navy," *Jane's World Navies*, March 24, 2017.

96. On the Pakistan Navy's sea denial and anti-access capabilities, see Iskander Rehman, "Tomorrow or Yesterday's Fleet? The Indian Navy's Emerging Operational Challenges," in *India's Naval Strategy and Asian Security*, ed. Anit Mukherjee and C. Raja Mohan (New York: Routledge, 2016), 40-45.

97. For more on the commingling challenges posed by Pakistan's quest for a sea-based deterrent, see Iskander Rehman, *Murky Waters: Naval Nuclear Dynamics in the Indian Ocean* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015); and Rory Medcalf and Brendan Thomas-Noone, *Nuclear-Armed Submarines in Indo-Pacific Asia: Stabilizer or Menace?* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2015), 8-10.

98. Diesel-electric submarines could prove difficult for the Indian Navy to detect and prosecute, particularly if they loitered within Pakistan's cluttered littoral waters. For more on the difficulties innate to antisubmarine warfare in India's underwater environment, see Iskander Rehman, "The Subsurface Dimension of Sino-Indian Maritime Rivalry," in *India and China at Sea: Strategic Competition in the Maritime Domain*, ed. David Brewster (forthcoming, 2017).

Indian advances in ballistic missile defense.<sup>99</sup> New Delhi's growing closeness with Washington has also generated anxiety in Rawalpindi's Strategic Plans Division, where some are convinced that the United States is providing India with geospatial intelligence on the location of its nuclear assets. Sea-based vectors of attack — in the form of low flying, submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) — thus began to appear increasingly appealing to Pakistani nuclear planners.<sup>100</sup>

By the time India steams the vanguard of its naval armada, composed of one aircraft carrier, the INS *Vikramaditya*, six destroyers, two frigates, and one nuclear attack submarine, into the waters surrounding Karachi, two Agosta 90B SSKs and one newly acquired Chinese-designed Yuan class SSK are lying in wait. All three undersea platforms have been recently fitted with Babur SLCMs by Pakistan's Naval Strategic Forces Command. Pakistani decision-makers grow increasingly concerned that India is moving toward escalation dominance. The Indian Army chief's statements on the need to *call Pakistan's bluff* cause anxiety, as does China's decision to begin evacuating its forces from Pakistan. Despite Islamabad's entreaties, China refuses to commit military forces to any large-scale confrontation with India and limits its aid to supplies in weaponry and ammunition. Meanwhile, Pakistan's nuclear-veiled threats are not met with any reduction in Indian troop presence along the border. To the contrary, India continues to mass its heavily armored strike corps along the areas of the LoC most conducive for mechanized assault.

A consensus emerges within Pakistan's National Command Authority. India needs to be sent a strong signal — one that will restore the *preexisting deterrence equation* and eternally dissuade India from any attempt at *dismembering Pakistan*. A nuclear *demonstration shot* at sea, argues the Pakistani army chief, would be *a form of localized escalation enabling a more generalized de-escalation of the situation*. He is staunchly supported by the head of the Pakistan Navy, who is eager to see his traditionally overlooked service take on a greater role.<sup>101</sup> Both men argue that such a move will revive the credibility of Pakistan's nuclear posture while avoiding some of the terrible collateral and fratricidal effects of nuclear

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99. These concerns were first mooted in the wake of a heated controversy surrounding passages of a book written by a former Indian National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon. On said controversy, see the remarks made by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Vipin Narang at the 2017 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference, video footage available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/20/pleinary-beyond-nuclear-threshold-causes-and-consequences-of-first-use-pub-64779>; the debate and prepared remarks on SAV, "#NukeFest2017 Hot Takes: Potential Indian Nuclear First Use?" *South Asian Voices*, March 20, 2017; and Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland, "The Debate Over Indian Nuclear Strategy Is Heating Up," *War on the Rocks*, April 5, 2017. For a different perspective on the issue, see Dhruva Jaishankar, "Decoding India's Nuclear Status," *The Wire*, April 3, 2017. On recent purported advances in India's tiered ballistic missile defense shields, see Rahul Bedi, "Indian Interceptors Complete Latest Trials," *Jane's Missiles and Rockets*, March 7, 2017.

100. High-speed cruise missiles may succeed in penetrating missile defense systems designed to counter more conventional ballistic missile threats. Low-flying cruise missiles pose a greater challenge for radar detection and can rapidly maneuver in order to dodge interception. For a good overview, see Thomas G. Manken, *The Cruise Missile Challenge* (Washington, D.C., Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2005).

101. The Pakistan Navy has historically been the most neglected of Pakistan's armed services. Although its financial allocation has marginally increased over the past few years, it still only captured 10.8 percent of the overall defense budget in 2017. Author's calculations derived from the data compiled in Craig Caffrie, "Pakistan: Defense Budget," *Jane's Defense Budgets*, June 20, 2017.

weapons use on Pakistan's own soil.<sup>102</sup> This strike, the army chief adds, could be both *devastating* and *tailored to prevent the mass loss of civilian life*.<sup>103</sup>

At 10:30 a.m. the following day, the Pakistan Navy issues a final ultimatum to the Indian armada, demanding that it lift its blockade within half an hour or *face the consequences*. At 11:01 a.m., a multi-azimuth cruise missile saturation strike, cued by Uqab II UAVs, is directed at the INS *Vikramaditya* and its two closest Rajput destroyer escorts. The *Vikramaditya's* Barak-I missile defense system is rapidly overwhelmed by the flurry of missiles and within five minutes the flagship suffers its first hit from a shore-based C-802 missile.<sup>104</sup> Then, at 11:07 a.m., amid a dense cluster of Harpoon missiles launched from two Pakistani frigates, the nuclear warhead of a Babur class SLCM detonates above the *Vikramaditya's* prow in a blinding flash of light.<sup>105</sup>

### *Aftermath*

The effects of Pakistan's nuclear strike are devastating. Although Indian defense planners have long recognized that a continental struggle could escalate beyond the nuclear threshold, they only had just begun to ponder the battlefield ramifications of Pakistan's naval nuclear program. Much of their planning for maritime combat was still predicated on the notion that a future naval conflict would remain conventional in its application. As a result, the Indian Navy had insufficiently exercised in simulated chemical, radiological, biological, and nuclear environments, and their capital ships — in many cases not fitted with any radiation-hardened electronic circuitry — failed to engage in the levels of “battlespacing” deemed suitable for operations against an opponent armed with tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>106</sup>

In a fraction of an instant, the nucleus of the densely concentrated Indian fleet formation is neutralized — with its ships either directly destroyed or

102. For a discussion over whether the potential collateral effects of Pakistan's reliance on tactical nuclear weapons renders their use less likely in a conflict, see Christopher Clary, Gaurav Kampani, and Jaganath Sankaran, “Battling Over Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons,” *International Security* 40, no. 4 (2016): 166-77.

103. Both Soviet and U.S. strategists frequently made this argument during the Cold War, assessing that limited nuclear war was more likely to occur at sea. See, for example, Henry Kissinger, “Limited War: Conventional or Nuclear? A Reappraisal,” *Daedalus* 89, no. 4 (1960): 800-17, and Desmond Ball, “Nuclear War at Sea,” *International Security* 10, no. 3 (1983): 3-31.

104. At the time of writing, the INS *Vikramaditya* has only been fitted with the Barak-1, a short-range, point defense system that most Indian naval officers deem highly inadequate to protect such a high-value target. See Rahul Bedi, “Indian Navy Launches Barak-1 From Carrier,” *Jane's Missiles and Rockets*, March 30, 2017.

105. Military operations analysts have referred to such saturation strikes as “haystack attacks,” whereby an adversary with relatively few nuclear weapons but a robust missile inventory could threaten even well-defended targets with nuclear strikes. By mixing nuclear-tipped weapons among a salvo of conventionally armed missiles of similar design, the adversary complicates the defender's ability to prioritize targets for interception. See Ryan Boone “Appendix A: Haystack Attack,” in Krepinevich and Cohn, eds., *Rethinking Armageddon*. For a detailed and still relevant overview of the effects of tactical nuclear weapon use, including at sea, see Samuel Glasstone and Philip J. Dolan, *The Effects of Nuclear Weapons* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of Energy, 1977), available at <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a087568.pdf>.

106. For a good overview of the complexities of naval combat in the nuclear age, see Gordon H. McCormick, *Problems of Sea Control in Theater Nuclear War* (Arlington: System Planning Corporation, 1980), available at <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a090489.pdf>. For a discussion of these issues within a South Asian context, see Rehman, *Murky Waters*, 25-33.

rendered combat incapable through the irradiation of their electronics.<sup>107</sup> Only the Akula class attack submarine loitering outside of the Pakistani submarine base of Ormara further along the Makran coast remains operational. The INS *Vikramaditya*, the pride of the Indian Navy, is at the bottom of the ocean along with its wing of Mig-29K fighters and its crew of over 1,000 men. India's shell-shocked leaders begin to debate their nuclear options. After much deliberation and handwringing, New Delhi realizes that it has no good options. India's nuclear doctrine calls for massive retaliation and for counter-value strikes on enemy metropolises in the event of Pakistani first use. India's leadership cannot countenance responding to limited — albeit devastating — nuclear use against purely military targets with the mass slaughter of Pakistani civilians. Moreover, such an action immediately opens its own population to an equally apocalyptic Pakistani counterstrike. The infirmities built into the nation's nuclear doctrine have already been scrutinized by Indian thinkers such as the late P.R. Chari, who had argued a few years prior that,

The current nuclear doctrine dictates that nuclear retaliation against a first strike would be “massive” and designed to inflict “unacceptable damage upon the attacker.” This is an unrealistic certitude because, ethically, punishing large numbers of noncombatants contravenes the laws of war. Besides, threatening massive retaliation against any level of nuclear attack, which would inevitably trigger assured nuclear annihilation in a binary adversarial situation, is hardly a credible option. No doubt, it raises a ticklish question: would India then favor a counterforce or counter-city strategy? India's stated adherence to an assured and massive second strike suggests the latter.<sup>108</sup>

If India had built greater flexibility into its nuclear posture and force structure, it could have chosen to engage in a somewhat proportionate and equally “limited” strike against a set of Pakistani military targets in a geographically circumscribed area (maybe in a mountainous region so as to limit the blast effects and radioactive fallout or at sea). Its arsenal, however — whether in terms of delivery platforms or low-yield nuclear ordnance — is not configured for such a response. India is in effect stuck in a strategic impasse, teetering precariously on the highest rung of the escalation ladder.<sup>109</sup>

Meanwhile, the international community, appalled by the first use of nuclear weaponry since World War II, exhorts India to back down before the

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107. For a summary of the various chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear survivability levels levied on U.S. surface combatants, see Department of the Navy, “OPNAV Instruction 9070. 1A: Survivability Policy and Standards for Surface Ships and Craft of the U.S. Navy,” 2012, <https://doni.daps.dla.mil/Directives/09000%20General%20Ship%20Design%20and%20Support/09-00%20General%20Ship%20Design%20Support/9070.1A.pdf>.

108. See P.R. Chari, “India's Nuclear Doctrine: Stirrings of Change,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 4, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/06/04/india-s-nuclear-doctrine-stirrings-of-change-pub-55789>.

109. During the Cold War, strategists famously dubbed this quandary the “suicide or surrender” dilemma. For more on this issue, see Stephen D. Biddle and Peter D. Feaver, eds., *Battlefield Nuclear Weapons: Issues and Options* (Boston: Harvard Center for Science and International Affairs, 1985).

subcontinent is vitrified and turned into a radioactive wasteland. Washington, Moscow, and even Beijing all privately promise New Delhi that Pakistan will be “hit with crippling sanctions” for having broken the nuclear taboo. Islamabad, they insist, will be the eternal pariah and India the responsible power. Short of options and fearful of the terrible consequences of what few choices remained, New Delhi reluctantly agrees to enter a negotiated ceasefire.

## Conclusion

It is this author’s hope that both of these scenarios will provide policymakers — whether in South Asia or beyond — with food for thought and hopefully not too many nuclear nightmares. Due to a desire for concision and limitations of space, they are both naturally somewhat circumscribed in their depictions of potential escalation dynamics. Furthermore — and to paraphrase Shakespeare — man cannot look into the seeds of time and determine which particular grain may grow and which may not.<sup>110</sup>

This exercise should therefore be viewed first and foremost as a point of departure for further reflection and as an attempt to grapple with two major evolutions in South Asia’s security architecture. The first is China’s rapidly enhanced presence and involvement in Pakistan via the implementation of CPEC. The second is the advent of rudimentary sea-based nuclear forces. As seen here, these two trends will have major ramifications for China’s management of its complex ties with Pakistan, Pakistan’s relationship with certain nonstate actors, India’s own relationship with China, and last but not least, regional nuclear doctrines and force postures.

Scenarios and wargames are used to develop insights rather than provide ready-made answers, and as a manner to escape the “intellectual tyranny of the present.”<sup>111</sup> The future is a river with an almost endless flow of tributaries, and one could naturally conceive of a number of “minority reports” in which one of the state actors depicted in this essay chooses to behave differently. One could certainly argue that if something approaching one of these scenarios were to materialize, India’s political leadership may well prove to be a lot less conservative in its decision-making and much more willing to incur escalatory risks. As specified in the introduction, the vignettes presented here are intended to be diagnostic rather than prescriptive and as forming a set of equally plausible yet different futures.

And indeed, the two futures presented in this essay were markedly different in many ways. One scenario presented a Kashmir that was still afflicted by terrorism but that remained stable enough to accommodate mass tourism, another depicted a state that had fallen into an endless spiral of violence and unrest. At the time of writing, both futures, sadly, seemed equally likely. The first scenario depicted a Sino-Pakistani axis that had morphed into a military proto-alliance,

110. See Act I, Scene 3 of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

111. Woody Wade, *Scenario Planning: A Field Guide to the Future* (Hoboken: Wiley and Sons, 2012).

**Scenarios and wargames are used to develop insights rather than provide readymade answers, and as a manner to escape the 'intellectual tyranny of the present.'**

while its successor portrayed a Beijing somewhat less ensnared in the daily dysfunction of the Indo-Pakistani relationship. Both narrative efforts, however, point to a set of wider questions: will greater third-party security commitments in the form of an enhanced Chinese military presence reduce Pakistan's incentives for relying on the threat of nuclear first use, intensify Sino-Indian rivalry, or both? And what of the role of nonstate actors and proxies within this rapidly morphing regional security environment? As one Asia hand recently noted in an insightful study, the use of traditional militaries,

activates instrumental logics of either deterrence or battlefield efficiency between competitors. Intermediaries (in the form of proxies) by contrast, do not activate such logics as readily, which...is one of the reasons their presence can both "stack the deck" of interaction in favor of defender restraint and can generate distinct risks of miscalculation and blowback.<sup>112</sup>

As Beijing becomes increasingly enmeshed — both economically and militarily — within India's near-abroad, will it still be willing to tolerate such risks of miscalculation and/or blowback? Or will it add greater pressure on the Pakistani security establishment and more vigorously urge it to abandon its support of various malevolent nonstate actors? Will Pakistan's pursuit of sea-based deterrence lower its threshold for nuclear first use even further? Will it deter the Indian Navy from pursuing coercive strategies in times of conflict and/or crisis? How will naval friction play out in a newly nuclearized domain? How would another humiliating defeat against China along the LAC affect India's future conventional and nuclear force posture and planning? In each of these cases, it is impossible to provide any definitive answer. At best, one can aim to carefully think through some of the more likely — and in some cases troubling — possibilities.

In the course of the essay, different forms of escalation were thus explored — inadvertent, intentional, horizontal, and vertical. In one scenario, the nuclear-conventional firebreak was preserved, in the other it crumbled. In this author's mind, none of these differences render either of these potential futures somehow less likely or less worthy of examination.

At the end of the day, though, Yogi Berra had it right. It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future.

112. Van Jackson, "Tactics of Strategic Competition: Gray Zones, Redlines, and Conflicts Before War," *Naval War College Review* 70, no. 3 (2017): 39-62.

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