



## Review Essay: Stabilizing Nuclear Southern Asia

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## Review Essay: Stabilizing Nuclear Southern Asia

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### ABSTRACT

This review article considers three significant volumes recently published in the field of Southern Asian security studies. These consist of *Not War, Not Peace? Motivating Pakistan to Prevent Cross-Border Terrorism*, by Toby Dalton and George Perkovich; Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland (eds.), *Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*; and Mooed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia*. In the wake of the 2019 India–Pakistan Pulwama militarized crisis, each book focuses on a distinct element of the Southern Asian security milieu that is crucial to understanding drivers of regional insecurity and potential pathways toward greater stability. However, collectively, they leave room for greater exploration for the effects of emerging trends in this regional strategic competition. These include the evolving regional preferences and actions of China, the potential for Pakistan-based terrorist groups to become independent actors throughout a Southern Asian crisis, and the growing prominence of precision-strike standoff weapons in the strategic planning of China, India, and Pakistan. Still, these three volumes prove indispensable for understanding the contemporary political and security dynamics of Southern Asia.

### Introduction

On February 14, 2019, a Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) suicide car bomber attacked an Indian para-military Central Reserve Police Force convoy in the Pulwama area of India-governed Kashmir. Over 40 Indian personnel died in the assault, making it one of the deadliest attacks on Indian forces in decades.<sup>1</sup> Following public promises that India would retaliate, Modi ordered a dramatic military response. In the early hours of February 26, an Indian formation of 12 Mirage-2000 bombers entered Pakistan-governed Kashmir territory and reportedly struck JeM facilities with SPICE-2000 precision-strike conventional missiles inside Pakistan, killing around 300 militants.<sup>2</sup>

India's response constituted its first air strike in Pakistani territory since the 1971 war.<sup>3</sup> As Pakistan investigated its air defense and intelligence gaps that enabled the Indian operation, its National Security Council vowed that "Pakistan will respond at the time and place of its choosing."<sup>4</sup> That response came on February 27, with retaliatory strikes in India-governed Kashmir, and at least one Indian plane being shot down in the ensuing hostilities.<sup>5</sup>

An Indian pilot, Abhinandan Varthaman, was captured alive by Pakistani armed forces inside Pakistan-governed Kashmir. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan returned the pilot to India 48 hours later, as an ostensibly voluntary "peace gesture," although more recent reporting has illuminated heavy US diplomatic pressure upon Pakistan to return the pilot.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the contrast between Khan releasing the pilot and publicly calling for crisis de-escalation and peace talks, while Modi continued to threaten that New Delhi "will return the damage done by terrorists with interest," was notable. Indeed, this threatened to blur the international public images of India and

Pakistan at the outset of the crisis, in which India was the victim and Pakistan was the revisionist aggressor.<sup>7</sup>

Shelling along the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border separating the territories of Kashmir administered by India and Pakistan respectively, continued after the pilot's return. While no further air strikes or larger military operations took place, Modi authorized India's first destructive anti-satellite (ASAT) test, which was successfully conducted against an Indian satellite on March 27. The low altitude of this test, at a range more common for missile than satellite interception, also signaled India's improving ballistic missile defense capabilities to Rawalpindi. As such, the test served as a way to underscore Modi's national security strengths as the Pulwama crisis wound down, without directly reopening major hostilities against Pakistan.<sup>8</sup>

The degree of escalation in this episode took many Southern Asia strategic experts, this author included, by surprise. Still, the three volumes reviewed here prove indispensable for the experienced scholar or policy expert, as well as the relative newcomer to this topic, to understand the underlying political and security dynamics of Southern Asia.<sup>9</sup> Each of these three volumes offers new policy prescriptions to resolve or ameliorate regional dilemmas. Moreover, each focuses on a distinct element of the Southern Asian security milieu that is crucial to understanding drivers of regional insecurity and potential pathways toward greater stability.

## Navigating India's Options

Dalton and Perkovich's book, *Not War, Not Peace?*, starts from the premise that the most likely road toward an India–Pakistan conflict approaching nuclear dimensions begins with a Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack inside Indian or Indian-administered Kashmir. With the exception of the 1999 Kargil war, each of the post-1998 major bilateral crises, consisting of the 2001–2002 “Twin Peaks,” 2008 Mumbai, 2016 Uri, and 2019 Pulwama episodes, has indeed initiated with such a strike. The calculus of Pakistan's military and intelligence services is that such operations grant them a low-investment, high-yield option of delaying India's global rise by distracting New Delhi's focus, while provoking Indian internal dissension through an expected domestic blowback against Indian Muslims, including those living in Indian-administered Kashmir. Despite the continually growing threat of such groups to Pakistan's own internal integrity, Rawalpindi's military-intelligence complex still maintains that it can draw a distinction, in political support and conversely coercive pressure, between groups aligned with and hostile to Pakistan's strategic interests vis-à-vis India.<sup>10</sup>

From India's perspective, the conduct of attacks by terrorist actors, as opposed to the Pakistani state, presents substantial challenges to New Delhi in developing potential responses to dissuade Pakistan from these tactics. Rawalpindi's ambiguous nuclear threshold further limits India's military options. As such, the real risk of progressively uncontrollable escalation toward the nuclear level must be factored into any potential Indian military riposte to a Pakistan-sponsored attack. *Not War, Not Peace?* by Dalton and Perkovich, as the first volume reviewed here, is organized around evaluating different answers to a central puzzle for New Delhi: how to discern and execute “the type and level of action that would most effectively motivate Pakistani authorities to act decisively against anti-India terrorist groups and to eschew escalation in response to India's action.”<sup>11</sup>

Compounding the difficulties of solving this puzzle is the fact that this ultimately involves New Delhi selecting a strategy of compellence against Pakistan. Compellence joins deterrence as the two main strategies within the overarching approach of coercion. Coercion is defined by Freedman and Raghavan as “the deliberate and purposive use of overt threats of force to influence another's strategic choices.”<sup>12</sup> Within coercive approaches, successful compellence strategies tend to be more difficult to execute than deterrence strategies, as “compliance will be blatant, and will carry with it the added reputational significance of humiliation.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, for the coercer, failure of the target to comply with its clear demand of a certain positive policy action can lead to similar international humiliation. The scale of India's challenge of compelling Pakistan to undertake visible, positive

actions to dismantle anti-India terrorist groups hosted there is therefore recognized in general strategic theory as well as the aforementioned policy realities.

Given the complexity of this challenge, theoretical and policy creativity is therefore required to evolve feasible solutions. Accordingly, the authors modify the concept of compellence to produce a new variant, termed “non-violent compellence,” that omits the threat or use of force. This new concept entails employing a wide range of international diplomatic and economic measures that generate global pressure on Pakistan to motivate it to end support for terrorist groups operating from its territory.<sup>14</sup> Against this strategy, the authors systematically detail and compare India’s existing conventional ground force, air, naval, and covert activities options, as well as potential shifts in Indian nuclear doctrine and posture, in their feasibility toward the desired Indian end-state of “leaving Pakistan’s civilian and military leaders and institutions with the *motivation and sufficient capabilities* (original italics) necessary to control anti-Indian terror organizations.”<sup>15</sup>

While undertaking this broader comparison, the authors carefully evaluate each likely calibration of operation within that specific domain. A common theme in the chapters exploring military options is, firstly, the unlikelihood for escalation-sensitive, highly limited Indian punitive attacks to have a substantial effect in permanently altering Rawalpindi’s view of the utility of hosting anti-India terror groups on its soil. The few terrorists or soldiers killed will likely be dismissed by the Pakistani military-intelligence establishment as merely the acceptable cost of this business. Some Indian strategists, recognizing this likely outcome, recommend more ambitious military operations. Some examples include a “Cold Start”-type rapid crossborder ground force attack across either the LoC or the international border. This offensive would be limited to seizing and holding tracts of Pakistani territory to force Rawalpindi’s humiliating concession that it will act against terror groups if the territory is returned.<sup>16</sup> The authors also consider the utility of air strikes against the main terror group bases, and close and distant naval blockades.

Dalton and Perkovich illuminate the significant escalatory risks inherent in each of these actions. With regard to a ground force attack, it is difficult for India to continue to portray itself internationally as the victim of Pakistani aggression if New Delhi is ordering the invasion of Pakistan. The depth and direction of the Indian advance will be nigh-impossible for Pakistani decision-makers to determine, likely forcing rapid and dangerous escalation. If they achieve their initial objective of capturing the targeted territory, the Indian forces within Pakistan will then face an unending, morale-sapping onslaught of regular, guerilla, and potentially terrorist attacks, which will require India to either escalate its force commitment or abandon the territory without achieving the initial political objective.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as the authors point out, it is difficult to envision how such an adventure will compel Pakistan to realize the error of its ways in hosting terror groups on its territory. Instead, a likelier result is to unite the Pakistani population behind its military in resisting the Indian invasion, with the military perhaps even welcoming the terrorists into the theater to assist in evicting the Indian forces.<sup>18</sup>

Air strikes and naval blockades are similarly problematic, in the similar triple challenge of general escalation control, ensuring target discrimination of terrorist from regular military actors, and ensuring that such operations deliver an outcome of a Pakistan that is self-motivated and still militarily capable to eliminate terrorist actors from its territory. This point on the desired outcome is especially significant, as a likely alternative impact of Indian military attacks will be to inspire mass anti-India sentiments that only reinforce the rationale for the Pakistan military’s overwatch role over the state polity and sponsorship, both explicit and implicit, of terrorist actors.<sup>19</sup> A former editor of Pakistan’s leading *Dawn* newspaper indeed noted a near-universal post-Balakot public wave to “vocally back the armed forces efforts to ensure the defence of the motherland.”<sup>20</sup>

The other force options examined in this book – aggressive revisions to nuclear doctrine and force posture, and expanding covert and special operations forces activities within Pakistan – enter the same dichotomous trap. They are either, in the case of nuclear policy adjustments, too ambitious to avoid both uncontrollable escalation and cultivating the aforementioned nationalistic Pakistani

sentiments, or, in the case of covert and special operations forces, too small-scale to have meaningful effect in motivating Pakistan to dismantle terror groups hosted on its soil.

This leaves the option of non-violent compellence. As a classic example of this approach in practice, Dalton and Perkovich carefully recount the Indian response to the 2008 Mumbai attacks, integrating the perspectives of Indian and Pakistani officials close to the policy discussions. Instead of selecting a military operation, New Delhi undertook a dedicated international diplomatic campaign to persuade world capitals of the culpability of Pakistan for the attacks. By staying its hand, India ensured that it retained the status of victim, and the critical gaze of the international community remained unyieldingly on Pakistan. This wrought long-term damage on Pakistan's international image in ensuring the sole spotlight and narrative of the crisis concerned its sponsorship of terrorist actors. Indeed, a quoted junior Pakistani military officer recognized the adeptness of India's non-violent compellent response to Mumbai, remarking that "Terrorism emanating from Pakistan does not pay. If India can make Pakistan appear to be the source of terror, Pakistan appears to be the laughing stock, the one the world condemns. This is a better result for India than they would get from a war!"<sup>21</sup>

As the authors detail, a creative portfolio of non-violent compellence options are open to India. New Delhi can utilize its rising global influence to persuade world capitals, in their diplomatic engagements with Pakistan, to prioritize demanding full Pakistani compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001), under which all states must "refrain from providing any form of support to entities or persons involved in terrorist acts, including by suppressing recruitment of members of terrorist groups and eliminating the supply of weapons to terrorists," and "deny safe haven to those who finance, plan, support, or commit terrorist acts."<sup>22</sup> As the authors highlight, Indian diplomacy could even carefully tailor its economic pressure in the form of requesting that the IMF review Pakistan's high level of domestic and anti-India terrorist activity, with the latent risk of a terrorist attack upon India that could trigger nuclear conflict. These interrelated domestic security and regional war risks could lead the IMF to conclude that there is not a "high probability" of Pakistan's ability to repay a financial assistance package and, as such, it cannot lend to Pakistan until it demonstrates progress in pacifying terrorist groups on its territory.<sup>23</sup>

The identification and analysis of each potential military option, their inability to satisfy the dual objectives inherent in the puzzle of the book – "leaving Pakistan's civilian and military leaders and institutions with the *motivation and sufficient capabilities* (original italics) necessary to control anti-Indian terror organizations" – and the advantages of such non-violence compellence approaches are indeed brought into closer focus by the Pulwama episode. Modi's selection of a limited air strikes option, the rapid escalation and mass Pakistani public support for the military that followed, and the unsatisfactory effect in terms of success in altering Pakistan's motivation to roll up terrorist actors on its territory have all followed what the authors forecast.

Shifting to non-violent compellence measures will be politically difficult for Modi, not least as he has presented these as being "helpless against the face of barbaric terror" in his foreword to the 2019 BJP electoral manifesto.<sup>24</sup> Still, his current course threatens to resurrect the old 1990s image of India and Pakistan as mutually reckless and irresponsible. This should inform his consideration of his future options to combat Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. In addition, he could observe that throughout the crisis, Pakistani official anxieties were not seriously raised by any military action that India may take but instead by the threat of non-violent options. A Pakistan treasury official publicly worried about the prospect of successful multilateral diplomacy to place Pakistan on the Financial Action Task Force blacklist, marking severe failures to address domestic terrorist financing. Such an outcome would "seriously hit (investor) confidence .... Any businessman looking at Pakistan will think many times over."<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, the extent and success of non-violent compellence effects will necessarily attempt to be limited by China, as Pakistan's UN Security Council veto-wielding diplomatic protector. For these initiatives to have the most success, India, and the US, will likely have to elevate the international political and financial costs to China of its diplomatic protection and economic investments in

Pakistan. The financial and strategic wisdom of Beijing's China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) investments in Pakistan, and of continuing to bear the reputational costs of shielding it from adverse UN Security Council resolutions and other international actions against Pakistan, is one of the most actively debated topics in Chinese official circles.<sup>26</sup> One option, not discussed by the authors, could be for India and the US to impose secondary sanctions on Chinese banks and firms doing business in Pakistan, meaning they have to choose between access to the Pakistani financial system or those of the U.S. and India.<sup>27</sup> These sanctions could be extended to other close financial partners of Pakistan, such as Saudi official and financial institutions.

This would certainly be a major shift in Indian and US diplomacy, but is the kind of action most likely to incentivize the kind of long-term shift within Pakistan away from permitting terrorist groups to operate on its soil. Such a policy would also similarly incentivize its protectors through the economic threat posed to a Saudi Arabia that is currently desperate for international investment and by altering Beijing's calculus and related debates about the true cost-benefit ratio of its partnership with Pakistan.<sup>28</sup> The lack of such an exclusively China-targeted set of non-violent compellence options is the only real weakness in this excellent volume.

### **Crisis Bargaining and the Role of Third-Party Actors**

This evolving international context, and the support by Dalton and Perkovich for India to build global diplomatic leverage against Pakistan, calls for a broader analysis of how recent South Asian crises have been viewed and affected by external states. This is provided by the second volume reviewed in this article, Moeed Yusuf's *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: US Crisis Management in South Asia*. This book theorizes and explores the process of third-party mediation in militarized crisis resolution between regional nuclear-armed states. Yusuf analytically focuses on the US as the third party, justifying this preference over a multi-party model by arguing that the US remains the only mediatory actor able to credibly deliver on its varied threats and inducements to India and Pakistan, and that New Delhi and Rawalpindi indeed view Washington in the same way.<sup>29</sup>

Yusuf's work distinguishes itself from the other two volumes by focusing on the *process* of crisis dynamics and resolution, as opposed to investigating to various degrees the *causes of crisis initiation*. Yusuf argues that the existing literature on crisis dynamics between nuclear rivals tends to focus upon dyads. He develops the work of Crawford on pivotal deterrence, which explores the effects of third-party actors in crisis intervention to limit hostilities but largely focuses upon crises between non-nuclear rivals.<sup>30</sup> This volume instead provides a general model for explaining crises between regional nuclear actors with third-party mediation; includes in the model an explicit unipolar global context; and, for Southern Asian specialists, offers among the most extensively researched and detailed reconstructions and analyses of the 1999 Kargil war, Twin Peaks, and Mumbai 2008 crises.

The author's main argument is that "crises between regional nuclear powers will be heavily influenced by the overbearing interest of the unipole (and other strong powers) in preventing a nuclear catastrophe." The model is termed "brokered bargaining," forming "a three-way bargaining framework where the regional rivals and the 'third party' seek to influence each other to behave in line with their crisis objectives and in so doing, affect each other's crisis choices." This bargaining interplay, Yusuf holds, explains state actions in crises fitting this context.<sup>31</sup>

The importance of Washington to Southern Asian crisis resolution is such that, during the Mumbai 2008 crisis, US offices formed the "principal communication conduit" for New Delhi and Islamabad.<sup>32</sup> The unipolar context of these three crises is underlined not least by the fact that Pakistan in particular has unsuccessfully tried to escape it. In each crisis, Islamabad has hurriedly arranged multiple meetings with high-ranking Chinese officials, clearly in search of an alternative, more pro-Pakistan broker. Each time, Beijing has aligned with US diplomacy in similarly urging de-escalation and refusing to support Pakistani behavior not in line with this outcome. Despite the close Sino-Pakistani strategic partnership, Beijing's "concern about nuclear escalation suspended this foreign policy leaning during each crisis."<sup>33</sup>



The fact of unipolarity is a core condition for the model's explanatory power, as Yusuf recognizes. While the model is highly persuasive for understanding the progress and outcomes of the three crises selected, the convergence of US and Chinese preferences and diplomatic messaging regarding South Asian crises, and with it the effects of unipolarity, may dissipate in future episodes. Unlike in 2008, Beijing is now heavily economically and militarily invested in Pakistan, with \$60bn committed to infrastructure development and reports of PLA troops in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and Pakistan.<sup>34</sup> This new condition could affect Beijing's crisis interests in a myriad of ways, each of which run counter to the condition of unipolarity, with the unipole's prime interest of de-escalation, upon which Yusuf's model is constructed.

As the US and India draw politically and militarily closer, Beijing may assess allowing future conflicts to run for a certain duration would embarrass India and elevate Pakistan's status. It could also enter future crises as a military antagonist, either in response to a misdirected Indian attack on Chinese nationals in Pakistan, or again to embarrass and deter India from further "surgical strikes."<sup>35</sup> Given the changing nature of their involvements in Southern Asia, even if the US and China still remain roughly aligned on the priority of crisis de-escalation, it is also far from certain that they will continue to have the same views as what moves are necessary, from which actors and in which sequence, for de-escalation to occur.

Yusuf does address this point, highlighting that "the growing debate about the longevity points to the need for a study examining the impact on regional nuclear crisis management in a more multipolar global setting."<sup>36</sup> However, the foundational condition of the model of a unipolar world means that its explanatory salience may decline with the relative power of the United States, and indeed with potential shifts in the convergence of the US and China upon the importance and then the form of immediate crisis de-escalation as their shared mutual interest.

## **Broadening the Context: Crisis Experiences in Southern Asia**

Complementing Dalton and Perkovich's analysis of India's options to motivate Pakistan to cease supporting terrorist groups on its own soil is Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland's edited volume, *Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*. This convenes experts from China, India, Pakistan, and the US to analyze the available data we have from each episode, determine long-term commonalities and emerging trends, and highlight how the shifting geopolitical context may in turn alter the trajectory and (potential) resolution of future crises in Southern Asia.

Given the natural tendency of policy audiences and scholars to focus on Southern Asian militarized incidents that escalated into major crises or wars, the opening chapter by Lalwani and Haegeland usefully reminds us of several incidents in which the dog didn't bark, in which New Delhi did not "select into" a crisis, and instead implicitly chose not to treat the incident as a major provocation demanding an escalatory response. For example, Lashkar-e-Taiba conducted both the 2006 coordinated Mumbai train bombings and the 2008 Mumbai attack. Despite the 2006 incident producing more casualties than in 2008, and both being organized by the same terrorist actor, New Delhi only treated the latter attack as a "crisis" and acted accordingly, convening the Cabinet Committee on Security (India's most senior national security decisionmaking body) to review military options and issuing ultimatums to Pakistan.<sup>37</sup>

As not every major Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack automatically triggers an Indian escalatory response, the authors compare several incidents to outline which factors correlate with Indian perception of the incident as instigating a crisis. They find that these are limited to "duration (of the trigger incident), domestic political leader, media coverage, and the shadow of the future shaped by the presence/absence of ongoing dialogue."<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, the authors find that "lethality, target type, geography, adversary control (meaning Pakistani government control of the terrorist actor/attack), adversary regime type, and government/party type do not appear to have a correlation with India-Pakistan crises."<sup>39</sup> This places significant analytical weight on the personality of the Indian

Prime Minister in explaining Indian selection into crisis mode. As what Modi and his advisers personally perceive to be a crisis-triggering incident outweighs factors such as the specific nature of the target and casualty toll, this only underlines the importance for Modi and his advisers to review the success of their forceful responses to Pakistan-sponsored terrorist incidents to date, as opposed to exploring non-violent options. Indeed, these findings suggest that the Prime Minister has greater discretion to “select into” a crisis than may be commonly appreciated, further augmenting his or her real policy flexibility in the wake of a major terrorist incident.

The ongoing presence of a bilateral dialogue at the time of the incident also potentially serves to diminish the chances of the incident being seen by New Delhi as a crisis, while also building greater stability into the India–Pakistan relationship.<sup>40</sup> If the dialogue can survive repeated terrorist incidents, then the capability of Pakistan-based terrorist groups to alter the foreign and defense policy trajectories of both states will have been proven to be receding. This suggests that New Delhi should pursue unconditional dialogue with Islamabad, and politically prepare for the requirement to defend sustaining the dialogue against domestic political criticism stemming from attempted dialogue-spoiling incidents conducted by Pakistan-based groups.

These form difficult challenges for any Indian Prime Minister, given the tendency of the major opposition party to attempt to reap political capital by condemning any perceived Indian “weakness” toward Pakistan. Moreover, surrounding the Indian decision-making process is the deafening and largely hawkish tone struck by Indian newspapers, television news, and social media in the wake of a Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack. In an important chapter exploring the role of such media in potentially influencing Indian crisis decision making, Ruhee Neog notes that this media tends to actually follow the lead of Indian crisis decisions, rather than shaping the decision-making process through ruling out certain options and promoting others. The government then works to ensure the supporting narrative for the selected policy approach is reflected in media coverage.<sup>41</sup>

This is not to argue that government influence on the media is absolute, and Neog highlights that there still remains a diversity of policy recommendations issued by Indian media. Indeed, the omnipresence, volume, and apparent influence of hawkish Indian media in a crisis somewhat obscures the reality that a prime minister with a skilled media team need not be driven to war by it. The 2008 Mumbai response, in which a different prime minister faced the same media war-mongering as Modi encountered in the wake of the Pulwama attack, reflects the greater discretion available to the prime minister to select non-violent responses than a first look at India’s crisis media environment might imply.

Moving into the corridors of power and the process of crisis policy formulation and execution itself, the volume includes two chapters on India’s intelligence and crisis management capabilities, authored by Indian intelligence and defense expert Saikat Datta and former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, respectively. As Datta points out, intelligence failures enabled the sophisticated 2008 Mumbai attacks to be planned and initiated undetected, as well as incidents such as the 2016 Nagrota attack in which Indian security agencies had prior partial knowledge but were still unable to interdict the initial attack.<sup>42</sup>

Datta carefully traces institutional pathologies that include an unclear internal division of labor both in intelligence collation and decisionmaking authority. This structure, combined with analytic weaknesses, can produce a torrent of potentially conflicting “noise” to intelligence consumers, within which the consumer may struggle to identify and prioritize equally conflicting “signals.” Datta cites the experience of Shivshankar Menon, Foreign Secretary at the time of the Mumbai attacks, that “no one managed to decipher the intelligence signals that were pouring in.”<sup>43</sup> This has been further compounded by the recent tendency of the Modi administration to take national security decisions, such as the 2016 post-Uri “surgical strike,” with a very small group consisting of himself, the National Security Advisor, the Defense Minister, and the relevant service chiefs and senior military personnel.<sup>44</sup> This poor or incorrect intelligence information that they may be receiving further elevates the risk of groupthink inherent in such a small group. This could be partly ameliorated by



returning to convening the full Cabinet Committee on Security as the apex national security decisionmaking body, and encouraging its members to robustly question intelligence producers.<sup>45</sup>

In his chapter, Saran similarly argues that, given intelligence agencies and local law enforcement serve as the first line of defense against terrorist activities, improving their staffing levels, caliber, and organization should receive greater attention from New Delhi and Indian states. He observes that India's national policing shortfall is to the extent that nearly a quarter of vacancies remain unfilled.<sup>46</sup> It is worth adding here that the Intelligence Bureau (domestic) and Research & Analysis Wing (external) intelligence agencies are also both operating with significant personnel shortages.<sup>47</sup>

Despite these structural policymaking weaknesses, Saran highlights that senior Indian policymakers have in the past still been able to evolve and refine a crisis "protocol." He outlines the role of a Crisis Management Group, headed by the Cabinet Secretary, the apolitical apex civil servant in the Indian government. The group executes political crisis decisions made by the Cabinet Committee on Security and feeds back on its activities to its members. When the group and these resources are fully employed, the effect is to ensure that "most operational issues do not require ad hoc decisions when an emergency arises. The NSA and the political leadership are then free to deal with larger issues that go beyond the handling of the crisis itself."<sup>48</sup>

Regrettably, as Saran notes, the group and its well-honed crisis-specific operational playbooks are often overlooked in favor of the kind of "ad hoc-ism" that severely undermined the city, state, and national crisis responses to the Mumbai 2008 attacks.<sup>49</sup> Following this pattern, the Modi administration has preferred to convene ad hoc smaller crisis decision-making groups. In planning the Balakot air strike, Modi organized the attack with just the NSA and intelligence and military service chiefs, and only informed the CCS – including the Minister of Defense – of the operation after it had taken place.<sup>50</sup>

Other valuable chapters include two Pakistani perspectives of crisis experiences, and an evaluation of nuclear signaling within Southern Asian crises. Zafar Khan undertakes a careful recounting of the crisis outbreak and resolution of case studies spanning the 1999 Kargil war to the separate 2016 Pathankot, Uri, and Nagrota incidents.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, former Foreign Secretary Riaz Mohammad Khan, reflecting on ways out of the crisis cycle, suggests the resumption of the 2005–2006 dialogue on developing Kashmiri self-governance, cross-LoC trade, and mutual military drawdowns, as well as Indian movement on its occupation of the Siachen glacier, as pathways toward reducing tension. The rejuvenation of an ongoing dialogue, and with it potential adoption of new confidence-building measures, could lead to an overall reduction in bilateral tensions.<sup>52</sup> This reflects the presence of an active dialogue process as one of the few factors in a Pakistan-sponsored attack in which Indian policymakers did not escalate by "selecting into" a crisis in the opening chapter by Lalwani and Haegeland.

In the absence of these processes, nuclear signaling seems destined to continue to play a significant role in future crises. Exploring episodes spanning the 1986–1987 Brasstacks crisis to the 2008 Mumbai crisis, Michael Krepon and Liv Dowling identify various forms of nuclear and nuclear-relevant signaling during these crises, including public statements of nuclear resolve, mating warheads to delivery vehicles, and moving nuclear and dual-use delivery vehicles toward the crisis theater. They caution that the growing diversification of nuclear and dual-use delivery vehicles within both states threatens new options for nuclear signaling, and with it the danger of signals that may be important but missed by the adversary, conversely unintentional but influential on the adversary, and intended as a warning but interpreted by the adversary as preparations for imminent attack.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, the Pulwama episode featured a number of nuclear signals, each of which could have been missed or misread in these ways. The flight of 12 Indian bombers, of a specific platform that is assigned nuclear missions, into Pakistan-governed Kashmir to strike Pakistani targets could have been interpreted by Rawalpindi as either an imminent nuclear strike or a blunt warning of India's capabilities to do so. In response, Prime Minister Imran Khan publicized his convening of Pakistan's distinct nuclear National Command Authority leadership, as opposed to the Cabinet Committee on National Security that is the closer equivalent to India's CCS.<sup>54</sup> During the crisis, India flushed its Arihant nuclear-armed

submarine.<sup>55</sup> These are only the examples that have come to public light at the time of writing, a few months after the incident.

While this volume shares the same recommendation as the other two reviewed here as invaluable for scholarly and policy experts in Southern Asian security studies, the reality of China's inevitable inclusion as a full regional actor could be expressed somewhat more effectively. The volume has a highly impressive stand-alone chapter of Chinese diplomacy in recent South Asian crises, and a fascinating chapter projecting future potential crisis scenarios, one of which entails direct Chinese military intervention into an India–Pakistan conflict.<sup>56</sup> However, Chinese interactions and influences could be more skillfully interwoven through more of the chapters. If the 2017 Doklam crisis occurred too soon before publication to be fully evaluated as a regional crisis, the 1967 Sino-Indian border conflict could also have served as an additional candidate for full evaluation and comparison.<sup>57</sup> Envisioning potential Chinese involvement in establishing regional CBMs, along the lines of the Stimson Center's separate "Off Ramps" project (to which this author has contributed), could also have featured in those relevant chapters.<sup>58</sup> Again, this is a minor criticism.

### Conclusion: New Complexities in a Dangerous Region

Indeed, China's future activities, influence, and perceptions as a nuclear rival, potential crisis mediator, or alternately full crisis antagonist remain the shadow over each of these volumes. Indeed, this forms the largest question facing scholars and analysts of Southern Asia as a whole. While China is investing significant political, economic, and military resources in Pakistan, it is also in the midst of the largest military reorganization in human history. The new tripartite Chinese military structure facing India, consisting of the joint Western Theater Command and Army-led Tibet and Xinjiang Military Districts, poses a more complex challenge for New Delhi in terms of determining level of authorization and intent behind Chinese actions. This challenge compounded by the fact that these Chinese structures are still being built and tested, presenting significant opportunities for Chinese internal miscommunication and misperception in a crisis.<sup>59</sup>

Simultaneously, toward the conclusion of the Pulwama crisis, China agreed with Pakistan to deepen their bilateral counterterrorism cooperation.<sup>60</sup> This raises questions regarding the extent to which China could be held partly culpable by India for Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attacks, or, alternately, whether China will become more sympathetic to Indian perspectives on Pakistan as it encounters increasing blowback from terrorist groups itself.

While China's future in Southern Asia is thus the most prominent topic for future research, the collected authors raise other salient questions to be investigated. Yusuf's model notes that non-state actors such as LeT and JeM can exhibit autonomy in crisis *initiation*, but still posits Pakistan as a unitary state actor once a crisis develops.<sup>61</sup> As Yusuf highlights, prospect of one or more of these non-state actors continuing their autonomy *through* a crisis, and in open defiance of Pakistani crisis objectives – such as these groups conducting repeated intra-crisis strikes upon India, or public announcements that they remain undeterred, at a time when Pakistani leaders are seeking to de-escalate – may not remain theoretical. Indeed, a recent article has evidenced that the LeT and Tehrik-e-Taliban are entering mainstream Pakistani nuclear discourse, while Pakistani bases hosting nuclear weapons still remain high-value targets for militant groups.<sup>62</sup>

Another issue is the potential emergence of future crises in which one or more of the protagonists refuse to de-escalate and instead pursue an outcome that they would view as an unambiguous military victory. As Krepon highlights in the concluding chapter to *Investigating Crises*, a core condition for the success of previous US-led crisis mediation and de-escalation efforts was that India – but also Pakistan – wanted to de-escalate.<sup>63</sup> This did not appear to be the case for much of the 2017 Doklam crisis, nor was it until the chance Pakistani capture of a live Indian pilot in the Pulwama episode.

To this more escalation-prone regional context must be added the rising prominence of precision-strike technologies, such as the SPICE bombs utilized in the Indian Balakot strike, to the potentially dual-use Pakistani Ra'ad and Indian Brahmos cruise missiles, as well as China's vast arsenal of conventional

and dual-use missiles. The reduction of decision timeframes forced by such rapid-strike technologies, plus the escalatory risks inherent in the adversary's uncertain abilities to discriminate between an incoming nuclear and non-nuclear missile barrage, further complicates future crisis resolution and escalation avoidance.<sup>64</sup> The recent literature on Indian interest in counterforce technologies and strategizing has begun to investigate this issue, but more research is needed on how this trend is playing out in China and Pakistan as well with regard to Southern Asian crisis scenarios.<sup>65</sup>

This is not to criticize the three superb works reviewed here, but more to elaborate upon just how complex the Southern Asian security environment is becoming. In a period when the Trump administration remains focused on countering China in both the economic and military domains, neither policymakers nor scholars should lose analytic focus on an area that President Clinton called “the most dangerous place in the world today” in 2000.<sup>66</sup> Looking back at that time, the regional challenges faced then appear almost modest by comparison to today.

## Notes

1. This account of the Pulwama episode partly borrows from Frank O'Donnell and Debalina Ghoshal, “Commitment Traps Make Kashmir De-escalation Tricky,” *East Asia Forum*, March 3, 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/03/03/commitment-traps-make-kashmir-de-escalation-tricky/>.
2. The formation was also escorted by four Sukhoi-30MKI multirole fighters, two intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) Phalcon Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) and Netra Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft, and two IL-76 mid-air refueling planes. Shaurya Karanbir Gurung, “All About IAF’s SPICE-2000 Bomb Used in Balakot Attack,” *Economic Times*, February 27, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/all-about-iafs-spice-2000-missile-used-in-balakot-attack/spicy-hot/slideshow/68181991.cms>; “India Air Strike in Pakistan Territory Killed 300 Militants – Government Source,” *Reuters*, February 26, 2019, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-india-kashmir-casualties/india-air-strike-in-pakistan-territory-killed-300-militants-government-source-idUKKCN1QF0NR>; Raj Chengappa, “Balakot: How India Planned IAF Airstrike in Pakistan | An Inside Story,” *India Today*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20190325-balakot-airstrikes-pulwama-terror-attack-abhinandan-varthaman-narendra-modi-masood-azhar-1478511-2019-03-15>.
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6. Pranab Dhal Samanta, “US Played Key Role in Release of Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman,” *Economic Times*, March 13, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-played-key-role-in-release-of-wing-commander-abhinandan-varthaman/articleshow/68367092.cms?from=mdr>.
7. Jeffrey Gettleman, Maria Abi-Habib and Salman Masood, “Imran Khan Says Pakistan Will Release Indian Pilot, Seizing Publicity in Showdown,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/world/asia/pakistan-india-pilot-kashmir.html>.
8. “‘Mission Shakti’ and ASAT Missile Test: All You Need to Know,” *Times of India*, March 27, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/mission-shakti-and-a-sat-missile-test-all-you-need-to-know/articleshow/68594586.cms>.
9. As an analytic framework, “South Asia” is being gradually replaced in scholarly works, and especially policy literature, by “Southern Asia.” This descriptive difference refers to the fact that regional political, economic, and security developments can no longer be satisfactorily explained without the full inclusion of China as a South Asian actor in its own right. See, for example, Sameer Lalwani and Travis Wheeler, “Southern Asia’s Escalating Strategic Competition,” *War on the Rocks*, August 7, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/southern-asias-escalating-strategic-competition/>; and the joint Stimson Center and *War on the Rocks* “Southern (Dis)comfort” series of articles, available at <https://warontherocks.com/category/special-series/southern-discomfort/>.
10. Christopher Clary and Ankit Panda, “Safer at Sea? Pakistan’s Sea-Based Deterrent and Nuclear Weapons Security,” *Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 150, 158–161, 163.
11. Toby Dalton and George Perkovich, *Not War, Not Peace? Motivating Pakistan to Prevent Cross-Border Terrorism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 13.
12. Lawrence Freedman and Srinath Raghavan, “Coercion,” in *Security Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Paul D. Williams (New York: Routledge, 2008), 217.

13. Freedman and Raghavan, "Coercion," 218.
14. Dalton and Perkovich, *Not War, Not Peace?* 5–6, 226–265.
15. Dalton and Perkovich, *Not War, Not Peace?* 14–15.
16. Dalton and Perkovich, *Not War, Not Peace?* 73–103. For further background on the Indian Army's "Cold Start"/"proactive" limited war concept, see Ali Ahmed, *India's Doctrine Puzzle: Limiting War in South Asia* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014); and Walter C. Ladwig III, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/8): 158–190.
17. Dalton and Perkovich, *Not War, Not Peace?* 83–90.
18. Dalton and Perkovich, *Not War, Not Peace?* 85–86.
19. For background on the historical self-conception of the Pakistan military as providing an overwatch, or "tutelary," role over Pakistan's political development, see Aqil Shah, *The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). Such an Indian crossborder attack would also provide external validation and win greater public support for the Pakistan military's narrative that India has never accepted the creation of Pakistan, and that the expansive defense budget and role of the military in Pakistan's polity are necessary to prevent India's plans to forcibly absorb Pakistan. See C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
20. Abbas Nasir, "Balakot and Beyond," *Dawn*, March 2, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1467114>.
21. Dalton and Perkovich, *Not War, Not Peace?* 169.
22. United Nations Security Council. *Resolution 1373* (2001), 2. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1373\(2001\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1373(2001)); Dalton and Perkovich, *Not War, Not Peace?* 227.
23. Dalton and Perkovich, *Not War, Not Peace?* 236.
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30. Timothy W. Crawford, *Pivotal Deterrence: Third-Party Statecraft and the Pursuit of Peace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 5, 171–172; Yusuf, *Brokering Peace*, 18–22.
31. Yusuf, *Brokering Peace*, 3.
32. Yusuf, *Brokering Peace*, 148.
33. Yusuf, *Brokering Peace*, 161.
34. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "China 'Deploys' Troops Closer to Indian Border: Russian Media," *Economic Times*, March 24, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/china-deploys-troops-closer-to-indian-border-russian-media/articleshow/68543713.cms>; "China Says Will Provide Economic Aid to Pakistan but More Talks Needed," *Reuters*, November 3, 2018, <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKCN1N804S>.
35. Experts have noted that the presence of Chinese personnel in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, and their potential to be casualties of an India–Pakistan militarized crisis, could have a "tripwire" effect to motivate Chinese military intervention in this crisis. See the model crisis scenario described in Iskander Rehman, "New Horizons, New Risks: A Scenario-based Approach to Thinking about the Future of Crisis Stability in South Asia," in *Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, ed. Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2018), 223, 225–239. See also Stimson Center, "Strategic Competition in Southern Asia: Arms Racing or Modernization? (Panel 2: Boomers, Baburs, and Bastions: Competitive Maritime Developments – Transcript)," May 17, 2017, 17, <https://www.stimson.org/sites/default/files/Transcript%20-%20Panel%20-%20Competitive%20Maritime%20Development%20-%20Stimson%20-%2017%20May%202017.pdf>.
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44. Nitin A. Gokhale, *Securing India the Modi Way: Pathankot, Surgical Strikes and More* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2017), 35–36.
45. The Cabinet Committee on Security consists of the Prime Minister, Minister of Home Affairs, Minister of External Affairs, Minister of Finance, and Minister of Defence as permanent members. Other officials, prominently the National Security Advisor, can be invited to brief the committee. Government of India, Cabinet Secretariat, "Composition of the Cabinet Committees (as on 19.11.2018)," 2, [https://cabsec.gov.in/writereaddata/cabinetcommittees/english/1\\_Upload\\_1734.pdf](https://cabsec.gov.in/writereaddata/cabinetcommittees/english/1_Upload_1734.pdf).
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48. Saran, "Organizing for Crisis Management," 59.
49. Saran, "Organizing for Crisis Management," 60, 63–65.
50. Chengappa, "Balakot: How India Planned IAF Airstrike in Pakistan."
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62. Sharad Joshi, "How Terrorist Actors in Pakistan Use Nuclear Weapons for Political Influence," *Asian Security* 15, no. 2 (2019): 1–22; Clary and Panda, "Safer at Sea?" 150, 158–161, 163.
63. Michael Krepon, "New Challenges for Crisis Management," in *Investigating Crises*, ed. Lalwani and Haegeland, 2018, 262.
64. Yusuf, *Brokering Peace*, 178–180.
65. See, for example, Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security* 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018/19): 7–52; Frank O'Donnell and Debalina Ghoshal, "Managing Indian Deterrence: Pressures upon Credible Minimum Deterrence and Nuclear Policy Options," *Nonproliferation Review* 26, Nos. 1–2 (2019): 1–18; B.S. Nagal, "India's Nuclear Doctrine and Strategy," in *Military Strategy for India in the 21st Century*, ed. A.K. Singh and B.S. Nagal (New Delhi: Centre for Land Warfare Studies, 2019), 195–224; and Rajesh Rajagopalan, "India's Nuclear Strategy: A Shift to Counterforce?" *Observer Research Foundation*, March 30, 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-nuclear-strategy-shift-counterforce/>.

66. Rehman, “New Horizons, New Risks,” 221.

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