

# The 2019 Pulwama Crisis and India-Pakistan Deterrence Stability in the New Era\*

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## Abstract

The 2019 Pulwama crisis received attention as the first outright military crisis between India and Pakistan in about two decades. It suggests several implications for the current status of overall deterrence stability between the two countries. While still exceptional, it is possible for serious terrorism originating from Pakistan that is sufficiently grave to trigger India's response against Pakistan to occur, even when Islamabad does not want that. With regard to Pulwama-style reciprocal use of limited military force, although it appears that both sides are inclined to avoid escalation, there are signs that India's initial response would become more significant with the recurrence of crises going forward. The groundwork is being laid for an exchange of calibrated military force in the form of a conventional missile attack, which could lead to the risk of an inadvertent use of nuclear weapons. The role of the United States as an impartial mediator to prevent crisis escalation is highly likely to wane further in the future. Generally speaking, the current status of overall deterrence between India and Pakistan is not as dangerous as the popular image of the Pulwama crisis would suggest; however, it is expected that the stability in their deterrence relationship will be eroded with the recurrence of a Pulwama-style crisis in the future.

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## Introduction

On February 25, 2021, the Directors General of Military Operations of India and Pakistan issued a joint statement in which they indicated that both sides agreed to observe a ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) separating their respective parts of Kashmir. The long-standing conflict between India and Pakistan, encompassing the dispute over sovereignty of Kashmir and Pakistan's support for various anti-India terror groups, has seen intensifying ceasefire violations (CFVs), including cross-border shelling across the LoC, in recent years. Nevertheless, the joint statement has largely succeeded in diminishing the CFVs.

Various reports are circulating as to why the two countries agreed to calm the situation after being unable to stop the deterioration in recent years prior. At the very least, it is certain that the violence along the LoC and the political tensions that accompanied it had become too severe,

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which was not beneficial to either side.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between the two nuclear-armed South Asian nations has seen a marked deterioration since the peace efforts attempted by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stalled in early 2016. However, the starting point of the most recent phase of tense relations, which made both countries recognize the need to ease tensions, was the Pulwama crisis of February to March 2019. The crisis was triggered by the worst-ever terrorist attack in the former Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). It accelerated the worsening of relations between the two capitals, which would be further strained by India's announcement of the reorganization of J&K only five months later.

Immediately after the outbreak of the Pulwama crisis, it attracted a great deal of attention because of the various novel aspects that had not been seen in previous crises between India and Pakistan. Nevertheless, after the immediate attention it received died down, very little research has attempted to examine the crisis in a systematic and academic manner. This shows a contrast between the latest crisis and past ones in the subcontinent, which have been thoroughly investigated by scholars.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Pulwama crisis has been the only outright military crisis between India and Pakistan in recent years, coming after the nearly 20-year lull following the 2001-2002 Twin Peaks crisis. This fact, combined with the aforementioned novelty, should make the study of the Pulwama crisis essential for understanding the current status of the India-Pakistan conflict.

As a result of the contradictory claims which Delhi and Islamabad have respectively raised, even understanding what actually happened in the crisis remains difficult to date. In addition, analysts in both countries tend to base their discourse on their own governments' narratives to a much larger extent than in past crises, necessitating an objective study by third-country researchers.

In light of the above, this paper addresses the Pulwama crisis with two objectives. The first objective is to describe the overall picture of the facts of the crisis, including matters that are disputed. The second objective is to examine what the experience of the Pulwama crisis suggests about the overall deterrence stability between India and Pakistan today; specifically, the likelihood of a military crisis there as well as the likelihood of such a crisis turning into a conventional or nuclear war.<sup>3</sup> That said, rather than comprehensively examining all aspects of the crisis, this paper will focus on four important points in terms of deterrence stability: (1) the nature of the terrorist attack that triggered the crisis, (2) the modality of the use of limited military force by the two countries, (3) the risk of nuclear escalation, and (4) the diplomatic intervention of the international

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<sup>1</sup> Suhasini Haidar, "India-Pakistan Ceasefire Had High-level Approval, Say Experts," *The Hindu*, February 28, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-pakistan-ceasefire-had-high-level-approval-say-experts/article33950788.ece>.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the relatively few examples are: Devin T. Hagerty, *Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); and Negeen Pegahi, "From Kargil to Pulwama: How Nuclear Crises Have Changed over 20 Years," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2019), pp. 149–161. However, the former is an exhaustive coverage of the past nuclear crises between India and Pakistan and is insufficient in terms of a detailed examination of the Pulwama crisis. The latter lacks consideration of the risk of nuclear escalation and the involvement of the international community, which are parts of the focus of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The Pulwama crisis fits the type of crisis between India and Pakistan that has been considered most likely to occur in recent years, in which India would mount a limited military response to a terrorist attack originating from Pakistan. That said, it is also true that it is only one example of a crisis that could occur between India and Pakistan today, and its experience does not provide insights into all the current issues surrounding deterrence and stability between India and Pakistan. This paper focuses on deriving the implications of the Pulwama crisis, and a comprehensive study of the deterrence stability between India and Pakistan today will be left for another paper.

community.

## 1. Overview of the Crisis

The Pulwama crisis was triggered by a vehicle-borne suicide attack targeting a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) convoy in Pulwama in southern J&K on February 14, 2019. The attack killed 40 CRPF personnel and was the worst ever in J&K, where violence has been smoldering without complete cessation since insurgency against Indian rule began at the end of the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after the attack, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), a terrorist organization believed to have ties to the Pakistani military's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), released a video claiming responsibility, and it was revealed that the perpetrator was a local youth.<sup>5</sup>

Within a fortnight, the situation developed into an interstate military crisis between India and Pakistan. On February 26, the Indian government announced that it had carried out an attack on a large JeM camp in Balakot, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan, killing a large number of JeM members. The Indian government's statement declared that JeM has been involved in several major terrorist attacks in India in the past, that Pakistan had failed to dismantle anti-India terrorism infrastructure on its soil despite repeated requests from India, and that it had received credible intelligence that JeM was planning another terrorist attack in India, which necessitated a preemptive strike. Additionally, the statement claimed that the attack on the camp was a "non-military preemptive action" designed to avoid collateral damage to civilians.<sup>6</sup> The Indian media reported that sources told them that several Mirage 2000 fighter jets from the Indian Air Force (IAF) had crossed the LoC and bombed the target.<sup>7</sup> The Pakistan military acknowledged the fact that multiple Indian aircraft had violated the LoC and dropped bombs, but claimed that the Indian attack was unsuccessful and caused no damage due to the response by the Pakistan Air Force (PAF). The Pakistan military also expressed the intention to respond, and announced that a meeting of the National Command Authority (NCA), Pakistan's highest decision-making body regarding nuclear policy, had been summoned.<sup>8</sup>

The next day, Pakistan announced that the PAF had conducted airstrikes from the Pakistani side of the LoC against six targets on the Indian side. However, it added that the PAF had deliberately missed military targets and caused no damage, because the attack was only intended to demonstrate Pakistan's capabilities without precipitating escalation. The military also stated that it had shot down two IAF aircraft, and had arrested an Indian pilot who landed on Pakistani

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<sup>4</sup> "Kashmir Attack: Bomb Kills 40 Indian Paramilitary Police in Convoy," *BBC*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47240660>.

<sup>5</sup> "Pulwama Terror Attack: Jaish-e-Mohammed Claims Responsibility with Video of Suicide Bomber Adil Dar," *India Today*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pulwama-terror-attack-kashmir-jaish-e-mohammad-adil-ahmad-dar-1456169-2019-02-14>.

<sup>6</sup> Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "Statement by Foreign Secretary on 26 February 2019 on the Strike on JeM Training Camp at Balakot," February 26, 2019, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31091/Statement\\_by\\_Foreign\\_Secretary\\_on\\_26\\_February\\_2019\\_on\\_the\\_Strike\\_on\\_JeM\\_training\\_camp\\_at\\_Balakot](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31091/Statement_by_Foreign_Secretary_on_26_February_2019_on_the_Strike_on_JeM_training_camp_at_Balakot).

<sup>7</sup> "All You Need to Know about Balakot that IAF Airstrike Destroyed," *India Today*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/all-you-need-to-know-about-balakot-that-iaf-airstrike-destroyed-1465235-2019-02-26>.

<sup>8</sup> "Time for India to Wait for Our Response': ISPR DG Debunks New Delhi's Claims on LoC Violation," *Dawn*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1466161>.

soil.<sup>9</sup> Delhi claimed that the IAF had intercepted the PAF aircraft attempting to target a military facility, but acknowledged that it had lost one aircraft in the process as the situation developed into aerial combat and that the pilot was missing.<sup>10</sup> The claims made by India and Pakistan about this dogfight are still at odds today, with Pakistan alleging that it had shot down two Indian aircraft, including a MiG-21 Bison, without incurring any damage, and India arguing that it lost a MiG-21 Bison but shot down a Pakistani F-16. However, third-country analysts believe that the only aircraft shot down was one Indian MiG-21 Bison.<sup>11</sup>

The detention of the Indian pilot aggravated tensions, yet also became an opportunity to de-escalate the situation.<sup>12</sup> On February 27, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan appealed to the Indian side to ease tensions in a televised speech after the PAF's counterattack. He also urged for de-escalation in a speech to the Parliament of Pakistan on February 28, and announced that he would release the pilot.<sup>13</sup> Although the meeting of the NCA of Pakistan was held on February 27, as announced the day before, no statement was issued after the meeting, for the first time in the NCA's 19-year history.<sup>14</sup> The pilot was released on March 1, placating India, and the crisis subsided.

## 2. The Nature of the Pulwama Terrorist Attack

The February 14 terrorist attack by JeM, which triggered the Pulwama crisis, was the most significant single terrorist attack in the history of J&K. It caused more casualties than any other major terrorist attacks in the state, including the September 2016 raid against an Indian Army base in Uri in which 19 soldiers were killed; the May 2002 attack on the Kaluchak Army Cantonment in which 36 people, including family members of military personnel, were killed; and the October 2001 bombing of the Legislative Assembly complex in Srinagar in which 38 people lost their lives.<sup>15</sup>

That said, the nature of the Pulwama attack is consistent with the change in Pakistan's proxy war strategy after the Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2008. During the Mumbai attacks, the Lashkar-

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<sup>9</sup> "2 Indian Aircraft Violating Pakistani Airspace Shot Down; Pilot Arrested," *Dawn*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1466347>.

<sup>10</sup> "MiG Lost, Pilot Missing in Action, MEA Says after Pakistan Shows Video of Captured IAF Wing Commander," *India Today*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/mig-lost-pilot-missing-in-action-mea-pakistan-video-captured-iaf-wing-commander-1466214-2019-02-27>.

<sup>11</sup> Sameer Lalwani, "Pakistan in 2019: Navigating Major Power Relations amid Economic Crisis," *Asian Survey*, vol. 60, no. 1 (2020), p. 182; Vipin Narang, "Pulwama and Its Aftermath: Four Observations," in *South Asia: Post-Crisis Brief*, ed. Nuclear Crisis Group (Nuclear Crisis Group, June 2019), p. 15, <https://www.globalzero.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/South-Asia-Post-Crisis-Brief.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Sameer P. Lalwani et al., *From Kargil to Balakot: Southern Asian Crisis Dynamics and Future Trajectories* (Stimson Center, February 2019), p. 22, <https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2020-2-SA-Crises-Consequence-PolPaper-1062.pdf>.

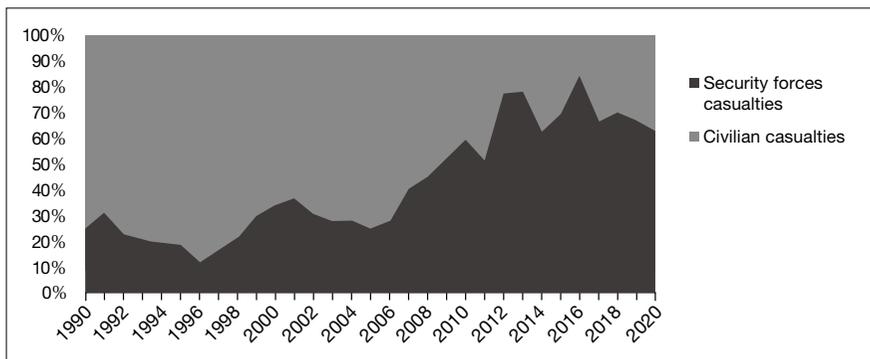
<sup>13</sup> "'All Wars Are Miscalculated, No One Knows Where They Lead: PM Khan,'" *Dawn*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1466364>; "'Do Not Escalate This Further': PM Khan Warns India during Joint Session of Parliament," *Dawn*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1466685>.

<sup>14</sup> "Two Indian Fighter Jets Downed, Pilot Captured," *Dawn*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1466565>; Naeem Salik, *Nuclear Signaling, Escalation and De-escalation in South Asia* (Islamabad: The Institute of Strategic Studies, 2019), p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> "Chronology of Major Terror Attacks on Security Forces in Jammu and Kashmir since 1999," *The Times of India*, February 14, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/chronology-of-major-terror-attacks-on-security-forces-in-jammu-and-kashmir-since-1999/articleshow/67996629.cms>.

e-Taiba (LeT), the most notorious Pakistan-backed anti-India militant group, massacred many civilians and triggered a flood of international condemnation against Pakistan. Since then, the modality of attacks by Pakistan-backed outfits have mostly shifted to the ones targeting security forces in J&K, which entail less risk of international condemnation.<sup>16</sup> Although Pakistan is unlikely to individually control all attacks perpetrated by these groups, it has been pointed out that Pakistan’s intention is behind the lack of another Mumbai-style attack aimed at symbolic Indian targets and killing civilians on a massive scale.<sup>17</sup> As shown in the figure below, even when looking only within the Indian-administered Kashmir, there is a clear trend of shifting the targets of terrorism from civilians to security forces.

**Figure 1. Casualty ratio of terrorist attacks in Indian-administered Kashmir**



(Source) Compiled based on data from the annual reports of the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs.

As shown by the cases of Uri and Pulwama, targeting security forces in J&K does not necessarily rule out the possibility of India’s response against Pakistan. Nevertheless, if it is the case that Pakistan is deliberately trying to avoid the occurrence of terrorist attacks targeting civilians in mainland India similar to those in Mumbai, such an approach would relatively reduce the likelihood of an interstate crisis between India and Pakistan arising from a terror incident.

On the other hand, there is another point worth noting regarding the nature of the Pulwama attack. Unlike serious terrorist attacks in J&K in the past, which were usually carried out by Pakistanis, the perpetrator of the Pulwama attack was a local Kashmiri youth who had joined JeM, which has strong ties to the ISI.<sup>18</sup>

This is a reflection of the long-term trend of the separatist movement in Indian Kashmir. Although the law and order situation in J&K, which had been marred by the armed insurgency

<sup>16</sup> Akshat Upadhyay, *Coercive Diplomacy against Pakistan: Options and Effectiveness in Non-Nuclear Conflict Space in Current Times* (Delhi: Centre for Land Warfare Studies, 2019), p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> George Perkovich and Toby Dalton, *Not War, Not Peace?: Motivating Pakistan to Prevent Cross-Border Terrorism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 245–246; Michael Krepon, “New Challenges for Crisis Management,” in *Investigating Crises: South Asia’s Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, eds. Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2018), p. 257.

<sup>18</sup> Pegahi, “From Kargil to Pulwama,” pp. 151–152.

since the end of the 1980s, dramatically improved from 2002, it began to deteriorate again in the 2010s with the resurgence of indigenous militancy originating from the political alienation of the local population.<sup>19</sup> The deterioration after 2016 was particularly pronounced, and some even suggested that the situation was on the verge of becoming like the situation around 1990.<sup>20</sup> A mood of acceptance of militancy, which was believed to have been lost in the 2000s, spread among the locals, and the relatively well-educated local youth began to take up arms on a scale that exceeded the influx of foreign combatants.<sup>21</sup> This benefited the ISI-linked jihadist groups, such as JeM, LeT, and Harakat ul-Mujahidin (HuM), in terms of recruitment of local combatants.<sup>22</sup>

Some have pointed out that the Pulwama attack demonstrated that local militants had become able to stage attacks sufficiently grave to provoke an India-Pakistan crisis, even if this was unwanted by Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> This is suggested by the timing of the latest incident. While it is difficult to determine the extent of Pakistani state involvement in the Pulwama attack itself, it is clear that it occurred at a timing undesirable to Pakistan. At the time, Pakistan, which had been placed on the watch list (gray list) by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in June 2018 for inadequacies in countering terror financing, was seeking a way out of its worsening balance of payments problems. If Pakistan were to be blacklisted, it would lead to a freeze on various inflows of funds from outside the country, which effectively would mean financial suffocation for Islamabad. Delhi believed that this consideration constrained Pakistan, and led to the unusual situation in the first half of 2019 in which there was no militant infiltration across from Pakistan-administered Kashmir, as well as to the closure of terrorist camps located along the LoC.<sup>24</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is difficult to imagine that Pakistan would have wanted a high-profile terrorist incident to occur that would highlight its terror connection. Nonetheless, the worst-ever terrorist attack in J&K was perpetrated by a Kashmiri youth who had joined JeM.

In recent years, competition has intensified among jihadist groups to show their presence and acquire combatants. This is believed to have reduced the degree of control that the Pakistani military and the ISI have over terrorist outfits such as JeM and LeT, as well as the control of these organizations' leadership over their members, especially in terms of restraining terrorist attacks.<sup>25</sup> The nature of the Pulwama attack underscores the imperfections in Pakistan's control

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<sup>19</sup> N.K. Narayanan, "Addressing the 'New Normal' in Kashmir," *The Hindu*, November 3, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/Address-the-%E2%80%98new-normal%E2%80%99-in-Kashmir/article15479057.ece>.

<sup>20</sup> Happymon Jacob, "The Secessionist Movement in Jammu and Kashmir and India-Pakistan Relations," *International Studies*, vol. 51, nos. 1-4 (2017), p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Abdul Hameed Khan, *Changed Security Situation in Jammu and Kashmir: The Road Ahead* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2017), pp. 38, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Sudhi Ranjan Sen and Mir Ehsan, "Pulwama Recruiting Ground for LeT, JeM: Govt Report," *Hindustan Times*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pulwama-recruiting-ground-for-let-jem-govt-report/story-eJT3hQFyJ0zPJGwy6IBi6L.html>; Sameer Lalwani and Emily Tallo, "Drivers, Decisions, Dilemmas: Understanding the Kashmir Crisis and Its Implications," *War on the Rocks*, February 20, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/02/drivers-decisions-dilemmas-understanding-the-kashmir-crisis-and-its-implications/>.

<sup>23</sup> Pegahi, "From Kargil to Pulwama," pp. 151–152.

<sup>24</sup> Bashaarat Masood and Nirupama Subramanian "Jammu & Kashmir: 'Significant Drop' in Infiltrations This Year," *The Indian Express*, June 30, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/jammu-kashmir-significant-drop-in-infiltrations-this-year-5807055/>; Sushant Singh, "Blacklist Fear Forces Pakistan to Shut 20 Terror Camps in PoK," *The Indian Express*, July 20, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/pakistan-occupied-kashmir-pok-terror-camps-fatf-blacklist-5838732/>.

<sup>25</sup> Dalton and Perkovich, *Not War Not Peace?* pp. 41–42.

over its proxy militant organizations, which should be a concern in terms of the deterrence stability between India and Pakistan.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Uses of Limited Military Force by India and Pakistan

#### (1) Airstrikes by India

The most high-profile aspects of the Pulwama crisis was India's use of airpower to strike terror camps located in mainland Pakistan. The IAF were also employed in the 1999 Kargil conflict, in which Pakistani paramilitary forces disguised as insurgents crossed the LoC. However, operations were strictly limited to the Indian side of the LoC at that time.<sup>27</sup> For Kargil-II in the summer of 2002 which saw similar employment of the IAF, strikes were targeted at the Pakistani forces that had occupied positions on the Indian side of the LoC.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, a precedent for cross-LoC military operations was seen when Indian Army Special Forces conducted the surgical strikes on terrorist camps located right across the LoC, in response to the September 2016 attack on the Uri army base. Similar operations had reportedly been conducted covertly before that.<sup>29</sup> However, this was the first time since the end of the third Indo-Pakistani War in 1971 that India attacked targets, regardless of using its airpower or not, within the Pakistan mainland.

The reason for this choice of response by Delhi can partially be attributed to the fact that India would hold general elections in about two months. It was rational for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is known for a hardline stance against Pakistan, to undertake a strong response in order to solidify its domestic support.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, it can be inferred that the recent record of India's response to Pakistan-backed terrorism naturally facilitated Delhi to choose the option to strike targets within Pakistan proper. The cross-LoC surgical strikes of 2016 were the first of their kind to be announced, with the intention of showing Pakistan that India was prepared and willing to retaliate for Pakistan's proxy war.<sup>31</sup> Since then, the Modi administration has touted the 2016 raid as having curbed further terror attacks—which made it inevitable for Delhi to take

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<sup>26</sup> "Pakistan Begins Crackdown on Militant Groups amid Global Pressure," *Voice of America*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-begins-crackdown-on-militant-groups-amid-global-pressure/4814710.html>; "Pak Court Sentences JuD Chief Hafiz Saeed to Over 15 Years in Jail in One More Terror Financing Case," *Hindustan Times*, December 24, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/pak-court-sentences-jud-chief-hafiz-saeed-to-over-15-years-in-jail-in-one-more-terror-financing-case/story-FEJ3tQHZOIAS0s352ELbXP.html>. After the Pulwama crisis, Pakistan intensified its crackdown on terrorist organizations based in the country. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the measures taken after Pulwama were different from those taken after other crises between India and Pakistan under pressure from the international community in the past, only to be watered down after a relatively short period of time. Regardless of the difficulties involved in controlling the "proxy," it seems unlikely at this point that Pakistan will completely abandon its strategy of proxy war against India.

<sup>27</sup> John H. Gill, "Military Operations in the Kargil Conflict," in *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*, ed. Peter R. Lavoy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 105.

<sup>28</sup> Praveen Swami, "When Pakistan Took Loonda Post," *Frontline*, vol. 19, no. 18 (August 31, 2002), <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/article30245942.ece>, accessed September 30, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Happymon Jacob, *Line on Fire: Ceasefire Violations and India-Pakistan Escalation Dynamics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 230.

<sup>30</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, "A Smoldering Volcano: Pakistan and Terrorism after Balakot," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), March 14, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/14/smoldering-volcano-pakistan-and-terrorism-after-balakot-pub-78593>.

<sup>31</sup> Raj Chengappa, "Balakot: How India Planned IAF Airstrike in Pakistan," *India Today*, March 25, 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>.

more forceful responses after the occurrence of the more grave incident than Uri.<sup>32</sup> The selection of Balakot as a target was reportedly guided by the clear intention of the Indian leadership to take a response beyond the already-tried cross-LoC strikes.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the absence of a direct Pakistani counterattack in response to the 2016 cross-LoC raid gave India confidence that it could take punitive measures against Pakistan without setting off an escalatory spiral.<sup>34</sup>

The Indian government has sought to leverage the strikes on Balakot to give the impression that India's stance on Pakistan's proxy war changed fundamentally. After the crisis ended, Modi stated that Balakot would not be the last time India would retaliate against terrorist attacks, and on another occasion he touted a "new India" that would respond to terrorism with force.<sup>35</sup> India's Chief of Army Staff Bipin Rawat, who would later assume the newly established post of Chief of Defence Staff, suggested that India would respond more forcefully to future terrorist attacks.<sup>36</sup>

If these statements are taken at face value, it can be expected that Pulwama-style crises will continue to occur frequently. But there was a degree of exaggeration in the claim of a fundamental change in India's stance. The September 2016 attack on the Uri army base was the worst terrorist attack in J&K since the 2002 Kaluchak massacre. India responded with the cross-LoC raid to the incident; however, terrorist attacks continued, albeit in a less serious scale than the Uri attack individually. Subsequently, the security situation in J&K deteriorated, leading to the Pulwama attack in February 2019—the worst ever in the state. This prompted the Indian strike on Balakot, but, in its aftermath, the level of terrorism continued to be high until the Indian government enforced a lockdown in the state of J&K in August of that year.<sup>37</sup> In short, there is still a high threshold for India to resort to a military response to Pakistan's support for terrorism. As the precedent in 2016 prompted the Balakot strike, another terrorist attack as serious as Pulwama would provide a strong incentive for India to strike back. However, past history suggests that such a level of terrorism is exceptional, and therefore a Pulwama-style crisis would not be a frequent occurrence.

At the same time, another noteworthy aspect is India's level of tolerance for the escalation risk associated with retaliation against terrorist attacks. It is still difficult to derive implications on this point due to the ongoing dispute on how much damage the Balakot strike actually inflicted and whether it was at the level intended. Indian news reports initially stated, citing internal sources, that over 300 people at the targeted facility had been killed. However, Pakistan denied any casualties and the Indian government has not provided an official number.<sup>38</sup> Based on satellite imagery, some

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<sup>32</sup> Frank O'Donnell, "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/>.

<sup>33</sup> Chengappa, "Balakot."

<sup>34</sup> Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Lessons from Balakot: One Year On; A View from India," *The Diplomat*, March 1, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/lessons-from-balakot-one-year-on/>.

<sup>35</sup> "Amid Cross-border Tensions, PM Modi Hints at More Action Following Aerial Strike in Pakistan," *News18*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.news18.com/news/politics/amid-cross-border-tensions-pm-modi-hints-at-more-action-following-aerial-strike-in-pakistan-2055463.html>; "Sam Pitroda Raises Questions on Air Strike, PM Modi Hits Back," *The Economic Times*, March 23, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/pm-modi-takes-on-sam-pitroda-in-twitter-war-over-pulwama/articleshow/68518332.cms>.

<sup>36</sup> Dennis S. Jesudasan, "Rawat Hints at Stronger Action as Pak. Revives Balakot Camp," *The Hindu*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/terrorist-camp-at-balakot-reactivated-indias-response-may-be-beyond-surgical-strike-army-chief/article29487410.ece>.

<sup>37</sup> "2019 Monthly Fatalities," South Asia Terrorism Portal, <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/india-jammukashmir>.

<sup>38</sup> "'Government Counts Casualties, Not Us': Air Chief amid Row over Balakot," *NDTV*, March 4, 2019, <https://>

third-country analysts have questioned whether the strike hit the JeM facility as intended.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, looking at other aspects of the situation, it appears that India was careful to avoid further escalation in its initial response. The strike was conducted against a militant camp, rather than Pakistani military facilities, through a small strike package without offensive counter air operations, which was described in the official announcement as a “non-military preemptive action.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, even after the Pakistani counter-response, the Indian side refrained from conducting another counterattack.

However, there must be reservations about such restraint by India. There is a view that if a serious terrorist attack comparable to Uri or Pulwama were to occur in the future and prompt a military response by the Indian government, Delhi would be inclined toward “cumulative retribution,” a response which “may take into account pent up desires to inflict punishment for previous attacks in which Indian leaders displayed restraint.”<sup>41</sup> The implication is that if attacks by Pakistani-backed jihadist groups continue, and if exceptionally serious terrorist attacks among them provoke the occasional Pulwama-style crisis, India’s initial response will become more serious with each successive attack, and there will be increased risk of escalation.

## (2) Pakistan’s Counterattack

Pakistan’s counterattack against India’s initial response was also unprecedented. In the wake of India’s surgical strikes in 2016, Islamabad denied that any Indian military operation had occurred, claiming it was Indian propaganda, and avoided a direct military response. In the Pulwama crisis, Pakistan denied again that any damage had occurred in the Balakot strike; however, it responded with its own airstrike on targets within Indian-administered Kashmir. This was the first time since the third Indo-Pakistani War in 1971 that the PAF engaged in combat operations against India.

This Pakistani response was influenced by the lessons of the precedent in 2016. Pakistan was concerned that if it again refrained from retaliating, this might give Delhi the perception that it could use military force to punish Islamabad for its proxy war without fearing Pakistan’s counter-response.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, it is also necessary to note the nature of the Pakistani counterattack. The bombs dropped by the PAF struck open space near Indian military facilities, and the Pakistani military explained that it had purposely missed the military targets to avoid unnecessary escalation.<sup>43</sup> The Indian side claimed that Pakistan had simply failed in its attacks on the military facilities.<sup>44</sup> However, the Indian Chief of the Air Staff later stated that Pakistan’s counterattack

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[www.ndtv.com/india-news/air-force-cant-count-how-many-people-died-says-air-force-chief-on-strike-on-jaish-terror-camp-2002276](http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/air-force-cant-count-how-many-people-died-says-air-force-chief-on-strike-on-jaish-terror-camp-2002276).

<sup>39</sup> Marcus Hellyer, Nathan Ruser, and Aakriti Bachhawat, “India’s Strike on Balakot: A Very Precise Miss?,” *The Strategist*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indias-strike-on-balakot-a-very-precise-miss/>; DFRLab, “Surgical Strike in Pakistan a Botched Operation?” *Medium*, March 1, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/surgical-strike-in-pakistan-a-botched-operation-7f6cda834b24>.

<sup>40</sup> Tellis, “A Smoldering Volcano.”

<sup>41</sup> Lalwani et al., *From Kargil to Balakot*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>42</sup> Moeed W. Yusuf, “The Pulwama Crisis: Flirting with War in a Nuclear Environment,” *Arms Control Today*, vol. 49, no. 4 (May 2019), p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> “2 Indian Aircraft Violating Pakistani Airspace Shot Down.”

<sup>44</sup> Shubhajit Roy, “Day After Balakot Strike,” *Financial Express*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/day-after-balakot-strike-iaf-pilot-in-pak-custody-india-says-stop-vulgar-display-send-him->

was fundamentally aimed at de-escalation.<sup>45</sup> Above all, while India crossed the LoC into Pakistan-administered Kashmir and from there struck targets within Pakistani proper, Pakistan only struck Indian-administered Kashmir from its own side of the LoC.<sup>46</sup> Given the clear difference in the strategic significance between attacks on the respective Kashmir territory and attacks on the mainland, Pakistan “moved a rung down the escalation ladder,” as Devin Hagerty points out.<sup>47</sup>

This stance of Pakistan can be seen as a continuation of the ones since before the Pulwama crisis. Apart from the reciprocal CFVs along the LoC, Pakistan has a record of avoiding moving up the escalation ladder to the same level as India in situations in which Delhi resorts to actual use of military force and thereby a military engagement occurs, or it becomes imminent. In addition to Pakistan refraining from staging a counterattack against India’s surgical strikes in 2016, this is exemplified by the Kargil conflict in 1999. At that time, the Northern Light Infantry Regiment (NLI), Pakistan’s paramilitary force, crossed the LoC into India, disguising themselves as local militants. To eliminate them, India deployed its army, as well as its air force for the first time since 1971. Even when it became clear that the NLI could not hold the territories it had captured in the face of India’s air and ground assault, Pakistan maintained its official position that the troops were militants and did not send any reinforcements, let alone its air force.<sup>48</sup> For Kargil-II in 2002 as well, there was no information that the Pakistani side used its air force in response to India’s induction of the IAF.

If it is the case that Pakistan is likely to be restrained in its counterattacks against initial responses by India, there will also be reduced incentive for India to stage a third move in response to Pakistan’s counterattack. Assuming that India also has the intention of avoiding escalation, it can be said that this stance by Pakistan will facilitate the containment of further escalation and resolution of confrontations.

#### 4. The Risk of Nuclear Escalation

Since the nuclearization of India and Pakistan, provocative nuclear signaling between the two capitals amidst the crises has declined over time, and the Pulwama crisis was another case with a lack of clear nuclear saber-rattling.<sup>49</sup> The sole move that can be regarded as nuclear signaling was the Pakistani military’s statement immediately after the Balakot strike, “I hope you know what the NCA means and what it constitutes,” upon announcing the meeting of the NCA, Pakistan’s top decision-making body on nuclear policies.<sup>50</sup> However, for the first time in 19 years, no official statement was issued after the announced NCA meeting, suggesting that Pakistan avoided sending

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back/1500848/.

<sup>45</sup> Dinakar Peri, “Balakot Strike Dispelled Taboo on Air Power Use: Air Chief,” *The Hindu*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/balakot-strike-has-dispelled-taboo-on-use-of-air-power-says-air-chief-marshal-bhadauria/article30940638.ece>.

<sup>46</sup> Amrita Nayak Dutta, “Pakistani Jets Did Not Cross LoC Day After Balakot Strikes, Says IAF Chief Dhanoa,” *The Print*, June 24, 2019, <https://theprint.in/defence/pakistani-jets-did-not-cross-loc-day-after-balakot-strikes-says-iaf-chief-dhanoa/253855/>.

<sup>47</sup> Hagerty, *Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia*, p. 83.

<sup>48</sup> Rajesh M. Basrur, “The Lessons of Kargil as Learned by India,” in *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia*, ed. Lavoy, p. 323.

<sup>49</sup> Yusuf, “The Pulwama Crisis,” p. 10.

<sup>50</sup> ““Time for India to Wait for Our Response.””

a clear and provocative message due to the seriousness of the situation.<sup>51</sup> In addition, the Indian Navy later revealed that during the crisis, its Carrier Battle Group, including nuclear submarines that had been participating in an exercise, moved to full operational readiness.<sup>52</sup> India had only two nuclear submarines, one of which was the Arihant strategic nuclear submarine (SSBN). It is unclear whether the Arihant SSBN was carrying nuclear weapons. That said, the announcement was made on March 17, when the crisis was well over.<sup>53</sup>

The Pulwama crisis demonstrated that Pakistan's nuclear threshold still remains high. It is readily understandable that resorting to the use of nuclear weapons as a direct counterattack to India's use of limited conventional forces, such as in the Balakot strike, would be irrational for Pakistan under the mutual nuclear deterrence. In fact, Islamabad has never explicitly threatened such a move. That said, there has always been ambiguity over the severity of India's use of conventional forces that would trigger nuclear retaliation from Pakistan—whose nuclear arms are intended to offset its conventional inferiority vis-a-vis India. In particular, since Pakistan's introduction of tactical nuclear weapons, it has been pointed out that there is a possibility of Pakistan using them at an early stage of a conventional conflict. It is against this backdrop that claims were rife on the Indian side that the Balakot strike had called Pakistan's "nuclear bluff."<sup>54</sup>

In contrast, Pakistan's post-crisis message was that deterrence of a limited conventional strike of this kind had nothing to do with nuclear weapons in the first place.<sup>55</sup> Khalid Kidwai, who currently serves as NCA Advisor and was formerly the longest-serving Director-General of the Strategic Plans Division (SPD) at the heart of Pakistan's nuclear policy, said that it would be foolish to consider Pakistan's nuclear deterrence to be a bluff based on a single and ineffective airstrike, and that the role of nuclear deterrence in the Pulwama crisis was to prevent India from expanding its operations beyond the initial strike. He also stated that Pakistan's "Full-Spectrum Deterrence," comprising strategic, operational, and tactical nuclear weapons, was designed to "comprehensively deter large-scale aggression against mainland Pakistan."

On the other hand, another noteworthy development in relation to the risk of nuclear escalation was the rumor circulating at the end of the crisis that an Indian conventional missile strike against Pakistan was imminent. On February 28, an Indian newspaper reported that Pakistan had warned the permanent members of the UN Security Council that India was preparing a missile attack.<sup>56</sup> A Reuters report on March 17 offered even more details. It stated that at some point

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<sup>51</sup> "Two Indian Fighter Jets Downed, Pilot Captured."

<sup>52</sup> Vishnu Som, "India Deployed Nuclear Missile-Armed Submarine During Standoff with Pak," *NDTV*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-deployed-nuclear-missile-armed-submarine-during-standoff-with-pakistan-2009178>.

<sup>53</sup> Narang, "Pulwama and Its Aftermath," p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Roche, "With Balakot Strike, India Has Called Pakistan's Nuclear Bluff: Kanwal Sibal," *Mint*, March 4, 2019, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/with-balakot-strike-india-has-called-pakistan-s-nuclear-bluff-kanwal-sibal-1551632825174.html>; Sandeep Unnithan, "We Have Called Pakistan's Nuclear Bluff: Army Chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane," *India Today*, January 4, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/we-have-called-nuclear-bluff-of-pakistan-army-chief-general-manoj-mukund-naravane-1633816-2020-01-04>.

<sup>55</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Seventh IISS-Center for International Strategic Studies (CISS) (Pakistan) Workshop on 'South Asian Strategic Stability: Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control'*, February 6, 2020, pp. 5–6, <https://www.iiss.org/-/media/files/events/2020/transcript-of-lt-general-kidwais-keynote-address-as-delivered---iiss-ciss-workshop-6feb20.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Anirban Bhaumik, "India Rejects Imran Khan's Offer for Talks," *Deccan Herald*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/india-rejects-imran-khans-720901.html>.

during the crisis, India threatened, possibly through intelligence channels, to launch an attack of six conventional missiles on Pakistan. Pakistan replied that it would respond with its own strikes three times over. The international community, including the United States, intervened to help contain the crisis, working to achieve the rapid release of the Indian fighter pilot and to urge India to withdraw its missile attack threat.<sup>57</sup> Prior to this on March 5, a Pakistani newspaper reported that the Pakistani government believed that Karachi and Bahawalpur were likely Indian targets, and that Pakistan had selected 12 cities as targets for a conventional missile counterattack at the NCA meeting on February 27.<sup>58</sup>

It is difficult to determine the veracity of this series of information. The content of the reports varied, and the possibility cannot be ruled out that the information was disseminated by either or both sides for the purpose of encouraging the international community to intervene. According to an Indian newspaper, the Indian government denied that it was preparing such an action.<sup>59</sup> Prime Minister Modi mentioned the matter at an election rally in April 2019, but with a subtle reference that a “U.S. person said Modi had kept 12 missiles ready if Abhinandan was not released by Pakistan and the situation would have worsened.”<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, on the Pakistani side, Prime Minister Khan mentioned that India threatened a missile strike on February 27. An Indian newspaper reported that the Pakistan military had ordered blackouts in some areas of cities with defense installations and military residential colonies, including Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad.<sup>61</sup>

In previous crises between India and Pakistan, India sometimes indicated, implicitly or explicitly, that it would carry out conventional aggression, against which the Pakistan side occasionally suggested, also implicitly or explicitly, that it would possibly respond with nuclear retaliation. However, a conventional missile attack on the hinterland of the other country was never threatened, or even seriously rumored to be possible, in isolation from—and actually in advance of—the threat of a conventional war involving a ground invasion.

The fact that serious rumors of this type of missile attack, whether true or false, were circulated reflects the emerging reality of India now being poised to resort to precision-guided strikes with conventionally-tipped missiles. When the 2001-2002 Twin Peaks crisis occurred, Delhi did not have any operational missiles to be used in a nuclear countervalue strike, which generally does not require high accuracy, on Pakistani cities. Since then, along with improving its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, India has been developing highly accurate missiles that are expected to operate mainly with conventional warheads: the BrahMos

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<sup>57</sup> Sanjeev Miglani and Drazen Jorgic, “India, Pakistan Threatened to Unleash Missiles at Each Other: Sources,” *Reuters*, March 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-crisis-insight/india-pakistan-threatened-to-unleash-missiles-at-each-other-sources-idUSKCN1QY03T>.

<sup>58</sup> Aamir Ghauri, “US Pulled Back India after Pak Threat to Hit Back,” *The News*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/439844-us-pulled-backindia-after-pak-threat-to-hit-back>.

<sup>59</sup> Shubhajit Roy, “Explained: How Pakistan Was Nudged to Yield in India’s Favour,” *The Indian Express*, March 3, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/india-pakistan-tension-diplomacy-iaf-abhinandan-geneva-convention-5605821/>.

<sup>60</sup> Mahesh Langa, “My Warning Forced Pakistan to Free Wing Commander Abhinandan: Narendra Modi,” *The Hindu*, April 21, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/my-warning-forced-pakistan-to-free-wing-commander-abhinandan-narendra-modi/article26905660.ece>.

<sup>61</sup> Shishir Gupta, Rezaul H Laskar, and Yashwant Raj, “India, Pakistan Came Close to Firing Missiles at Each Other on February 27,” *Hindustan Times*, March 23, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-pakistan-came-close-to-firing-missiles-at-each-other-on-february-27/story-rV5BjZ5qmxXMprktzDNqcM.html>.

supersonic cruise missile, the Nirbhay long-range cruise missile, and the Prahaar short-range ballistic missile. This trend has been further encouraged by the Pulwama crisis. The integration of the air-launched variant of the BrahMos to the Su-30MKI was completed in December 2019,<sup>62</sup> and an Indian official said that the combination could be used to strike terrorist camps in Pakistan.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, in February 2020, Pakistan announced the successful first test launch of a 600 km range Ra'ad II cruise missile from a Mirage III fighter aircraft.<sup>64</sup> In terms of the platforms, the groundwork is being laid for an exchange of calibrated military options to be played out with standoff conventional missile strikes.

How dangerous, in terms of the risks of nuclear escalation, is the emerging reality that now an exchange of highly precise conventional missile strikes is a serious possibility? In fact, the degree of the risk would depend on the trajectory of the crisis. The first scenario that comes to mind is one in which India's initial response to a serious terrorist attack takes the form of a conventional missile strike, with Pakistan responding in a similar manner. In this scenario, the visibility of missile strikes would be expected to create pressure for the side being attacked to move further up the conventional escalation ladder, especially should a missile strike aimed at targets in densely populated areas inadvertently inflict collateral damage.

However, the likelihood of this scenario immediately leading to nuclear escalation is not high. Firstly, both India and Pakistan would have little incentive to resort to the deliberate use of nuclear weapons in the early stage of a confrontation of this kind, and thus, neither would consider that the other side would feel it rational to use nuclear weapons at this stage. Therefore, there would be only limited risk of misidentifying a conventional missile attack by the adversary as a nuclear attack and launching a hasty nuclear counterattack before the other side's missile landed.

Secondly, the same can be said about the risk of a conventional warhead missile attack being mistaken for a disarming counterforce first strike, which would lead to hasty nuclear use by the side being attacked, prompted by the "use it or lose it" dilemma. It has been pointed out that there is a possibility of Delhi launching such a counterforce strike, but it does not currently have the capability to fully and reliably neutralize Pakistan's nuclear forces and is unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future.<sup>65</sup> It would be too irrational for India to nonetheless launch a counterforce strike that would unnecessarily escalate the situation at an early stage of a crisis that could end without escalation. Therefore, Pakistan has little likelihood of misinterpreting an initial missile salvo from India as a systematic move to undermine its nuclear deterrent. A former senior Pakistani military official also pointed out that there would be no chance for India to resort to a counterforce option

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<sup>62</sup> Franz-Stefan Gady, "India Test Fires 2 BrahMos Supersonic Missiles from Air and Land Platforms," *The Diplomat*, December 18, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/india-test-fires-2-brahmos-supersonic-missiles-from-air-and-land-platforms/>; "Integration of Brahmos Missiles into Sukhoi Jets Fast-tracked," *The Economic Times*, June 9, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/integration-of-brahmos-missiles-into-sukhoi-jets-fast-tracked/articleshow/69713326.cms>.

<sup>63</sup> Rajat Pandit, "Eye on China, South Gets 1st Sukhoi Squad with BrahMos," *The Times of India*, January 20, 2020, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/73400569.cms>.

<sup>64</sup> Gabriel Dominguez, "Pakistan Test-launches Longer-range Variant of Ra'ad II ALCM," *Janes*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/pakistan-test-launches-longer-range-variant-of-raad-ii-alcml>.

<sup>65</sup> Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security*, vol. 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018/19), pp. 7–52.

before the start of conventional warfare involving ground combat.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the risk remains that India's initial response could target Pakistani military facilities and unintentionally damage nuclear assets located there; however, the priority target for India's initial response would naturally be terrorist camps similar to Balakot, and the Indian side would try to avoid attacking a military base where nuclear assets are likely to be stored as much as possible.

That said, what entails more serious risk of nuclear escalation is a scenario where India would opt for an initial response involving a ground invasion, even if limited. In this scenario, the risk of nuclear escalation could be high regardless of whether a conventional missile strike is actually launched. Rather, the risk would originate from the fact that a conventional missile strike is now a realistic possibility due to both sides', especially India's, increased missile capabilities.

The possibility of Pakistan resorting to the early use of tactical nuclear weapons in response to a limited Indian ground invasion has long been raised, and retired Indian military officers have mentioned the options to preemptively strike Pakistani nuclear assets with conventional missiles.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, if an Indian ground invasion were to occur, Pakistan would more or less fear such a preemptive strike and could resort to hasty nuclear use. Even if it did not actually use nuclear weapons, it is highly likely that Pakistan would take defensive measures to protect its nuclear assets. However, as was the case in the Kargil conflict, such defensive measures are easily mistaken as preparations for a nuclear attack.<sup>68</sup> Then, what arises on the Indian side would be a strong incentive to actually launch a preemptive counterforce strike with conventionally-tipped missiles. If India were to implement this option, Pakistan would find itself in a "use it or lose it" situation. In short, a serious risk of inadvertent nuclear use would arise.

## 5. The Role of the International Community

It is difficult to assess the role of the international community in the Pulwama crisis. In the past crises in nuclear South Asia, the international community, especially the United States, has played an important diplomatic role for preventing escalation. However, the U.S. moves during the Pulwama crisis lacked the kind of visible involvement that was seen in past crises, such as shuttle diplomacy by senior government officials and top-level telephone conversations. Besides the United States, some reports point to the role of Saudi Arabia, whose foreign minister visited both India and Pakistan during the crisis, and the United Arab Emirates, whose deputy prime minister held telephone meetings with both sides, but details of these moves are also unclear.<sup>69</sup>

Since the conclusion of the 2001-2002 Twin Peaks crisis, concerns have been raised that the international community could play a lesser role in preventing escalation in future crises between

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<sup>66</sup> Toby Dalton and George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Options and Escalation Dominance* (CEIP, 2016), p. 21, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_273\\_India\\_Nuclear\\_Final.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_273_India_Nuclear_Final.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> Gaurav Kampani, "Is the Indian Nuclear Tiger Changing Its Stripes? Data, Interpretation, and Fact," *The Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 21, nos. 3-4 (2014), p. 391.

<sup>68</sup> Khurshid Khan, *Limited War under the Nuclear Umbrella and its Implications for South Asia* (Stimson Center, June 14, 2012), p. 19, <http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/khurshidkhan.pdf>.

<sup>69</sup> Suhasini Haidar and Kallol Bhattacharjee, "Abhinandan Varthaman Release: World Leaders Work behind the Scenes to Avert India-Pakistan Conflict," *The Hindu*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/abhinandan-varthaman-release-world-leaders-work-behind-the-scenes-to-avert-india-pakistan-conflict/article26400389.ece>.

India and Pakistan.<sup>70</sup> Two reasons are cited for this. The first is that, rather than the coercive diplomacy involving massive military mobilization that effectively failed during the 2001-2002 crisis, Delhi is supposed to opt for a limited conventional operation to punish Islamabad that can be exercised immediately upon the occurrence of a terrorist attack perpetrated by Pakistan-backed jihadists. This would narrow the time-window for the international community to intervene. The second reason raised is that the United States would no longer be able to act as an impartial mediator in a crisis between India and Pakistan, as U.S.-Pakistan relations have deteriorated due to the friction over the war on terror and Washington and Delhi have developed an increasingly closer partnership.

The Pulwama crisis, which emerged as the first outright military crisis between India and Pakistan after the Twin Peaks crisis, demonstrated the validity of these concerns. The confrontation lasted only four days from the Balakot strike to the release of the Indian pilot, and 16 days from the Pulwama attack to the release. Either way, it was much shorter than the 2001-2002 crisis which lasted about 10 months. This is probably related to the meager visible international engagement.

The transformation of the U.S. position also became a reality. There were actually signs of this even before Pulwama. After the Uri terrorist attack in 2016, U.S. National Security Advisor Susan Rice demanded that Pakistan implement a serious crackdown on anti-India terrorist outfits. After India's surgical strikes, a senior White House official professed empathy for India's perception that a military response was necessary.<sup>71</sup> Subsequently, when the Pulwama attack occurred, the United States gave the equivalent of the green light for the Indian strikes, with U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton conveying his support for India's right to self-defense to Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, President Donald Trump stating that "India is looking at something very strong" in terms of its response, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressing support for India's fight against terrorism.<sup>72</sup> It was not until after the Balakot strike that Pompeo urged restraint by both sides.<sup>73</sup>

Some point out that these moves represented a new strategy for Washington to deal with a crisis in the subcontinent and that it actually worked in Pulwama. According to this view, the new strategy is not focused on crisis management from a neutral standpoint, which was often exploited by Islamabad to avert India's conventional attack and coerce Delhi through Washington. Rather, in the case of Pulwama, the U.S. strategy was to make that approach of Pakistan untenable.<sup>74</sup> It is true that using U.S. intervention as a shield has been an important tool in Pakistan's crisis management against India. Hence, if Washington credibly signals to Islamabad that it no longer facilitates such

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<sup>70</sup> Polly Nayak and Michael Krepon, *The Unfinished Crisis: US Crisis Management after the 2008 Mumbai Attacks* (Stimson Center, February 2012), pp. 64, 68, [https://stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Mumbai-Final\\_1\\_1.pdf](https://stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Mumbai-Final_1_1.pdf).

<sup>71</sup> Joshua T. White, "The Other Nuclear Threat," *The Atlantic*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/03/americas-role-india-pakistan-nuclear-flashpoint/584113/>.

<sup>72</sup> "'We Support India's Right to Self-defense': US NSA John Bolton to Ajit Doval on Pulwama Attack," *Hindustan Times*, February 16, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/we-support-india-s-right-to-self-defense-us-nsa-john-bolton-to-ajit-doval/story-uuvWwXJLRm51B4Px4xU0gK.html>; "Lexington: America First in Kashmir," *The Economist*, no. 9133 (March 9, 2019), p. 38.

<sup>73</sup> U.S. Embassy and Consulates in India, "Statement by Secretary Pompeo: Concern Regarding India-Pakistan Tensions," February 27, 2019, <https://in.usembassy.gov/statement-by-secretary-pompeo-concern-regarding-india-pakistan-tensions/>.

<sup>74</sup> Tellis, "A Smoldering Volcano."

an approach by Pakistan, it can create an incentive for Pakistan to back down without deepening a crisis.

However, this approach is fraught with serious problems from a medium- to long-term standpoint. The more the United States takes India's side and exerts pressure on Pakistan during crises between the two countries, as it did in the case of Pulwama, the higher the erosion of the effectiveness of U.S. intervention in preventing escalation as the impartial mediator that Washington used to be. Meanwhile, as the record of Pakistan being forced to make concessions due to such a U.S. approach accumulates, it can be expected that there will be smaller leeway for Pakistan to back down in its confrontation with India, mainly due to domestic public opinion. Eventually, an Indo-Pakistan crisis, which is too serious to be defused without neutral third-party diplomatic intervention, may arise. However, by that time, the credibility of the United States as a neutral mediator between the two capitals will have already been undermined significantly.

Meanwhile, although China is often named as an actor that could play a role of crisis manager between India and Pakistan, it is hard to say that Beijing had a major presence during the Pulwama crisis. As China is averse to the risk of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan, it has been urging restraint from a neutral standpoint in crises between the two countries since their nuclearization, rather than supporting its ally Pakistan.<sup>75</sup> China followed this course during the Pulwama crisis as well. Beijing urged avoidance of worsening tensions during the China-Pakistan foreign ministers' telephone meeting on February 25th, and the Chinese Foreign Ministry urged both sides to exercise restraint at a press conference after India's strike on Balakot the following day.<sup>76</sup> Another China-Pakistan foreign ministers' telephone meeting was held on February 27, in which the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that the Chinese side stressed the importance of respecting sovereignty and implicitly criticized India's attack, but did not directly condemn India.<sup>77</sup> In addition, the Joint Communique of the China-Russia-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting, which was also held on February 27, included the phrase "terrorist groups cannot be supported and used in political and geopolitical goals."<sup>78</sup> Such a stance would contribute to preventing the crisis from worsening in that it would not give Pakistan room to take a hardline stance with China's support. However, there was no indication that China was actively engaged in diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis beyond that level.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Moeed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), pp. 60–61, 144–145; Polly Nayak and Michael Krepon, "U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis," in *The India-Pakistan Military Standoff: Crisis and Escalation in South Asia*, ed. Zachary S. Davis (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), p. 158.

<sup>76</sup> Keegan Elmer, "China Offers Support for Pakistan Counterterrorism Efforts after Pulwama Attack," *South China Morning Post*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2187697/china-pakistan-discuss-pulwama-terror-attack-ahead-summit-india>; Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Regular Press Conference on February 26, 2019," February 26, 2019, [http://pk.chineseembassy.org/eng/fyrth/201902/t20190227\\_1209454.htm](http://pk.chineseembassy.org/eng/fyrth/201902/t20190227_1209454.htm).

<sup>77</sup> Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Regular Press Conference on February 28, 2019," February 28, 2019, [http://pk.chineseembassy.org/eng/fyrth/201902/t20190228\\_1209461.htm](http://pk.chineseembassy.org/eng/fyrth/201902/t20190228_1209461.htm).

<sup>78</sup> Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "Joint Communique of the 16th Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Russian Federation, the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China," February 27, 2019, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31097/Joint\\_Communique\\_of\\_the\\_16th\\_Meeting\\_of\\_the\\_Foreign\\_Ministers\\_of\\_the\\_Russian\\_Federation\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_India\\_and\\_the\\_Peoples\\_Republic\\_of\\_China](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31097/Joint_Communique_of_the_16th_Meeting_of_the_Foreign_Ministers_of_the_Russian_Federation_the_Republic_of_India_and_the_Peoples_Republic_of_China).

<sup>79</sup> Lalwani et al., *From Kargil to Balakot*, pp. 4, 24–26.

## Conclusion

The Pulwama crisis caused strong international concern because it was the first time in history that two nuclear powers have conducted airstrikes on one another's territory. However, based on the above discussion, it can be said that the current status of overall deterrence between India and Pakistan is not as dangerous as the popular image of the Pulwama crisis would suggest. Although it is of course impossible to take an optimistic view, terrorist attacks that could provoke an Indian counterattack are still unusual, and even if they do occur, the resolution of such a crisis could be attained due to both countries' orientation toward avoiding further escalation in the use of limited military force.

However, another implication shown by this paper is that in the long run, the deterrence stability between India and Pakistan will be eroded, especially as crises similar to Pulwama recur in the future. As was demonstrated by Pulwama, there will continue to be serious, albeit unusual, terrorist attacks that even Pakistan does not want. The more that such terrorist attacks and ensuing crises recur, the more India will be forced to move toward cumulative retaliation and take more serious options in its initial responses. If this happens, even assuming a Pakistani stance that does not move up the ladder to the same level as India, the resulting military engagement between the two countries will be serious in absolute terms, and there will be higher risk that the situation will become uncontrollable. This risk would be more pronounced if India's initial response were to take an option involving a ground invasion, even a limited one, rather than a standoff strike such as an air or missile strike, and in that case the risk of an inadvertent use of nuclear weapons would also arise. Of concern in this regard is India's renewed pursuit in recent years of a limited conventional war option, which was once considered to be abandoned. Moreover, if the United States continues to adopt the same pro-India position as Pulwama in future crises, it will gradually undermine its capacity to act as an impartial mediator. If India and Pakistan eventually reach a crisis so severe that it cannot be resolved without diplomatic intervention from a neutral position, Washington will probably no longer be able to play that role.

Tensions have temporarily eased in India-Pakistan relations today, as both countries have largely committed to a ceasefire since February 2021. However, unless both countries take steps for a full-fledged peace process with strong political will, as they did from 2004 to 2008, this state of affairs is extremely vulnerable to serious terrorist attacks, even if unwanted by both countries, and there is a substantial risk that it will fall into a cycle of repeated crises again. This risk is even more pronounced as the Taliban took control of Afghanistan and momentum has been gained by anti-India armed groups in Kashmir, which have developed close ties with the Taliban. The question is whether India and Pakistan can turn the current ceasefire into true peace.

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