

A political choice

What sparks an India-Pakistan crisis?

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Gearing up: Securitymen at the Sunjwan Military Station in Jammu. File

The “surgical operation” earlier this month killing the mastermind of the **Sunjuwan Army camp attack** (Jammu) was lauded as a major victory for Indian security forces, but for some observers, it is surprising that such a seemingly provocative episode closed with such a measured response.

Details of the February 10 Sunjuwan attack fit a familiar pattern. Indian authorities were quick to attribute to Pakistan a terrorist attack facilitated by security lapses that killed five soldiers and one family civilian as well as injured six women and children. Commenters noted the attack was the deadliest since Uri in September 2016 and closely mirrored the Kaluchak attack in May 2002.

The comparison was worrisome. Uri sparked Indian retaliation that could have easily escalated and Kaluchak triggered the second “peak” of the 2001-02 crisis that brought India and Pakistan to the brink of all-out war. Whenever such an audacious attack occurs, analysts hold their breath anticipating a major military confrontation between two nuclear powers, something the world has not witnessed in almost 20 years.

So this begs the question, why didn’t Sunjuwan spark the same crisis atmosphere and foreboding over escalation risks? The simple answer is that crisis onset is largely a political choice, and New Delhi opted not to select into a crisis this time.

The crisis onset

While every war or near-war began as a crisis, and each crisis involves a provocation, not all provocations precipitate crises. The question of crisis onset is generally overlooked. Casual explanations that account for crisis onset default to large numbers of civilian fatalities, the symbolism or importance of the target, or vitriolic public demands for retribution. However, these explanations fall short in explaining why some cross-border provocations spin up into crises while others remain inert.

Sunjuwan is not the first episode of a dormant crisis. Before Uri, the relatively similar Pathankot attack received a qualitatively different treatment. And before the November 2008 Mumbai attack, the July 2006 Mumbai attack on commuter trains that claimed nearly 200 lives did not provoke an interstate crises. In our book *Investigating Crises: South Asia’s Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, we test implicit explanations of crisis onset on a dataset of provocations occurring from 1998 to 2016. Of 51 provocations — mostly involving alleged, cross-border militant attacks

on Indian targets — only 12 were treated as crises, prompting India's national security principals to convene an unplanned Cabinet Committee on Security meeting within a week of the event. This suggests that India and Pakistan exercise a degree of agency in selecting into a crisis after a provocation.

How and when do leaders treat a provocation as the beginning of an interstate crisis? By studying provocations that did not escalate — crises that didn't happen — alongside those that prompted episodes of India-Pakistan crises, we sought to isolate elements of provocations most closely correlated with escalation to crisis.

A crisis involves three properties — acute threat, significant abnormality, and temporal pressure — and factors that shape perceptions of these can increase or decrease the risk of crisis onset. In our analysis, we found that features of a provocation typically assumed to precipitate escalation — high fatalities, civilian or iconic targets, critical geography, or government leaderships — do not appear to be correlated with the onset of crisis. Instead, provocations correlated with crises exhibit intensified abnormality, like attacks involving complex assaults over an extended duration. Furthermore, high-volume media coverage and cumulative, successive attacks intensify perceived time constraint pressures on leaders' decision making, increasing the risk of a crisis. However, meaningful ongoing bilateral dialogue may reduce those pressures by offering an alternative venue for compellence strategies.

Returning to the Sunjuwan non-crisis

Sunjuwan involved an extended duration complex attack to draw attention and provoke Indian overreaction. Nevertheless, the attack was missing some important correlates of a crisis. It did not follow after cumulating cross-border attacks and occurred amidst the backdrop of National Security Adviser dialogue. More telling, the media coverage — a key indicator of crisis atmosphere — in the week following Sunjuwan was relatively subdued. Part of this may owe to a deliberate government decision to keep the focus on Assembly polls in Tripura, Meghalaya and Nagaland. Escalated tensions with Pakistan make good politics in the Hindi belt, but not the Northeast.

While not foolproof, these probabilistic indicators suggest that even under pressure, the government exercises some agency in “selecting into” a crisis. In this case, the government chose not to.