

WAR ON THE ROCKS

**When the world's at stake,
go beyond the headlines.**

National security. For insiders. By insiders.

Join War on the Rocks and gain access to content trusted by policymakers, military leaders, and strategic thinkers worldwide.

BECOME A MEMBER

COMMENTARY

America Can't Ignore the Next Indo-Pakistani Crisis

February 26, 2021



Two years ago this week, I touched down in New Delhi, groggy from my intercontinental flight from Washington, D.C. I looked forward to a quiet two-day layover en route to a South Asian crisis wargame that I was hosting in Sri Lanka. The next morning I awoke to the news that India had just conducted the first cross-border airstrike on Pakistan's mainland in five decades, and found myself in the midst of a serious, real-life crisis.

Over the next 48 hours, India and Pakistan would exchange airstrikes resulting in the shooting down of two aircraft and the capture of a pilot against the backdrop of reported [missile threats](#) and readied [nuclear forces](#). Privately, many American officials expressed alarm that events would spin out of control, and some later acknowledged that senior U.S. officials basically [ignored the crisis](#). Escalation was controlled, mostly by luck.

BECOME A MEMBER

While yesterday's announcement of a [ceasefire](#) by India and Pakistan offers a welcome development after almost two years of dangerously [escalating violence](#) and fraught tensions, this does not warrant complacency. Those who work on South Asian security issues expect another crisis is inevitable – one that will test the Biden administration.

While Washington has made a [strategic wager](#) on India to reap dividends for U.S. competition with China, it still retains a significant interest in ensuring future South Asian crises do not spiral out of control and risk even a limited nuclear exchange. Such a course of events would jeopardize fundamental U.S. interests, including the non-use of nuclear weapons, the lives of U.S. citizens, and that very strategic bet on India itself. If the 2019 crisis has taught us anything, it is that being an impartial bystander is not an option.

Plus ça Change ...

U.S. official strategy documents identify India as a [vital and critical](#) node in Washington's strategy in the Indo-Pacific to balance China's rise. But the region within which it resides remains one of the most risk-prone. The nuclear-armed Indian-Pakistani rivalry has produced several crises testing the last five presidents, and since the end of the Cold War, this rivalry composes the most commonly recurring pair in the [International Crisis Behavior database](#). Thirty years ago, the intelligence community judged this region the "[most probable](#)" location for a nuclear exchange, a judgment that was [reinforced](#) after the 2019 near miss.

[Several studies over](#) the [past decade](#) have assessed that South Asia is acutely prone to false optimism, miscalculation, and conflict escalation, even to the nuclear level. The close geography of both countries compresses time for decision-making in crises and incentivizes quick reactions. Conventional, precision-strike capabilities at standoff distances are at the ready and lure officials into thinking punitive or retaliatory strikes can be easy and clean. Both countries also appear to be embracing more aggressive [nuclear doctrines](#). Another feature of the subcontinent is intensified nationalism. South Asian leaders may be more sensitive to [public pressure](#) for escalation even as [Indian](#) and [Pakistani](#) publics may be increasingly supportive of nuclear weapons use.

Much has changed since the last crisis in 2019. Washington and New Delhi have drawn even closer strategically as cooperative prospects with Beijing have diminished for both since the COVID-19 pandemic and the Sino-Indian border crisis. America is also on a trajectory to exit Afghanistan – even if there is a [six-month extension](#) of the timeline for U.S. troop withdrawal – allowing it to [reassess and reset](#) its relationship with Pakistan, because it would no longer need to rely on Islamabad for air and ground lines of communication to support deployed U.S. troops. Most importantly, the Biden administration has prioritized [competition with China](#), which appears to pick up on the last administration's efforts but with greater competence, coherence, and strategy.

Despite these shifts and calls for the United States to [stop playing referee](#) between India and Pakistan, U.S. policymakers understand that the rivalry in South Asia is an extraordinary one because of the nuclear dynamics at work. Though U.S. leaders have to calibrate carefully about how they signal these interests to avoid creating perverse incentives – e.g., "[too nuclear to fail](#)" – the United States continues to hold a major stake in how crises unfold in South Asia. Not only would the global precedent-setting of nuclear use or the humanitarian and environmental consequences be devastating generally, such use would directly threaten U.S. "[critical interest\[s\]](#)," including the safety of its citizens and partners.

The Balakot Crisis

The most recent crisis is instructive. On Feb. 14, 2019, a Kashmiri suicide bomber killed 40 Indian paramilitary troops, an attack for which the Pakistan-based terrorist organization [Jaish-e-Mohammad claimed credit](#). The Indian military retaliated against Pakistan 12 days later with an [airstrike](#) on what it claimed was a terrorist training camp within undisputed Pakistani territory. The next day

Pakistani jets [dropped munitions](#) on empty fields near an Indian brigade headquarters close to the Line of Control and an aerial skirmish ensued, resulting in the downing of an Indian MiG-21 and Pakistan's [capture of the Indian pilot](#). In the fog and friction of war, an Indian Mi-17 helicopter with six soldiers aboard was also [accidentally shot down](#) by an Indian air defense unit. Tensions escalated as India [reportedly](#) threatened missile strikes and demanded the immediate return of the pilot, while Pakistan threatened retaliation "[three times over](#)." Indian [naval nuclear assets](#) may have also been activated.

Since the end of the Cold War, Washington has served as the indispensable crisis manager on the subcontinent. But during the last crisis, it was [luck](#), not U.S. crisis management, that saved the day. The Trump administration was [mostly missing](#) in action until events nearly spun out of control. Luckily, the downed Indian pilot survived and his capture seemed to pause the cycle of escalation. His prompt return and ambiguity over the exchange of damage that had unfolded allowed for a face-saving de-escalation by both sides.

Both India and Pakistan were able to declare victory during the last crisis, but that may [tie leaders' hands](#) in the future. The next crisis is poised to involve airpower duels and deep strikes the way the rivals have employed artillery barrages, not just within but beyond the disputed territory of Kashmir. Both sides have internalized some [dangerously optimistic lessons](#) about the last crisis. The "[new normal](#)" is not risk averse. The assumption that escalation is "[easy to control](#)" has taken hold.

Meanwhile, incentives for conflict and escalation may be growing. Soon after the 2019 crisis, the Indian prime minister was politically rewarded in an electoral landslide, largely attributed to his [national security choices](#). New Delhi also enjoyed the geopolitical rewards of [international diplomatic support](#) in international fora while political pressure ratcheted up on its adversary. Pakistan too feels deeply aggrieved because of what it perceives as India's August 2019 unilateral annexation of disputed territory of Kashmir and the abrogation of its autonomy. Pakistan may also sense a window of opportunity as the United States is once again reliant on Islamabad to help deliver the Afghan peace process while India appears embattled and stretched with a much hotter [second front](#) since the summer 2020 border crisis with China.

Certainly the recent ceasefire is a welcome pause, but its durability remains uncertain and crises can still flare up. The rivals have renewed commitments to a ceasefire agreement many times only to lapse back to fighting. The [last ceasefire declaration](#) in May 2018 portended a tempering of border hostilities but was followed months later by the Balakot crisis.

U.S. Crisis Management Stakes

Will the Biden administration, like Trump's "America First" approach, adopt a [hands-off](#) strategy in the next South Asian crisis? That would be a mistake, even if doing so risks some friction with India, which is jealous of its sovereignty and prefers to deal with Pakistan bilaterally. When the next flare-up in South Asia inevitably occurs, Joe Biden and his team will need to dust off the crisis management "[playbook](#)." Someone with experience, expertise, and relationships in the region will need to be the designated point person to coordinate the flow of high-level visits and phone calls. U.S. interests and expectations need to be communicated well in advance. Travel advisories, evacuation plans, intelligence sharing options, and penalties need to be prepared to shape incentives for restraint and de-escalation. Not to do so invites uncontrolled escalation and jeopardizes U.S. interests in preventing a mushroom cloud.

Crisis management efforts are critical, not orthogonal, to U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific. Some have proposed the United States simply pick a side and [criticized](#) U.S. efforts to play a "neutral arbiter" role in a future crisis. Washington is no longer a neutral arbiter between India and Pakistan, as it has [placed a big "strategic bet"](#) on New Delhi. Nevertheless, the United States is still essential as a crisis manager when border and air clashes threaten to spiral out of control. Beijing might help, but Washington [can't count on](#) nor bargain for it. A proactive U.S. crisis management approach is needed to prevent the use of nuclear weapons on the subcontinent.

Even a [small nuclear exchange](#) risks unfathomable loss of life in a densely populated region. After the immediate blast effects, firestorms, emissions, and radiation would persist, all with devastating environmental and humanitarian impacts. The breaking of the "[nuclear taboo](#)" would have profound consequences for U.S. national security interests and for other nuclear-armed rivals.

Over 750,000 American citizens live in [India](#) and [Pakistan](#). Most are concentrated in urban centers that would be the most likely targets of nuclear strikes. The United States has numerous foreign policy priorities in Asia but foremost among them is protecting American citizens abroad. Even the recently [declassified 2018 memo](#) on the "Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific" that laid out the logic of great-power competition in the region identified the highest interest was defending "the homeland and American citizens abroad," followed by nuclear risks in the region.

A forward diplomatic approach is also consistent with an Indo-Pacific strategy that counter-balances China. Beyond the staggering loss of life, a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan would devastate the Indian economy and its military capacity. Any nuclear detonation would trigger a humanitarian catastrophe, damage drinking water and the food supply, and have a chilling effect on foreign investment and trade that would decommission India from great-power competition for at least a decade. An India

significantly weakened by even a limited nuclear exchange would be in no position to help balance China or play the anchoring role in the Indo-Pacific that U.S. strategy has envisioned. Moreover, not rising to the occasion of crisis management would confirm concerns about the shrinking ambit of U.S. diplomacy and diminish confidence that the United States could promote peace and prosperity.

Qualifications

Undoubtedly there is a [moral hazard problem](#) where India and Pakistan run risks while counting on the United States or the international community to bail them out as they have in the past. This is a real concern that U.S. policymakers have to weigh carefully, but there are creative methods to both defuse a crisis while also disincentivizing parties from instigating or escalating one again in the future.

There are [several pathways](#) by which another crisis on the subcontinent could occur. However, if triggered once again by Pakistan-based terrorists, there are ways to hold the sponsoring parties accountable short of greenlighting conflict escalation. Washington has many tools at its disposal to help de-escalate the next crisis and deter future ones. These include diplomatic pressures and financial sanctions. The United States could wield the prospect of enhancement or withdrawal of intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism cooperation, or even direct and tailored military assistance.

The United States has much to lose by letting an escalatory nuclear spiral run its course in the heart of Asia and much to gain from arresting such a chain of events. Much is at stake here, beginning with the norm against the use of nuclear weapons in warfare, the well-being of U.S. citizens, and the future of Asian geopolitics. For that reason the Biden administration would do well to expunge hesitations and prepare its crisis management playbook.

BECOME A MEMBER

[Sameer Lalwani](#) is a senior fellow and South Asia director at the Stimson Center, a Washington-based policy research institute, and the editor of [Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories](#).

Image: [U.S. Army \(Photo by Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod\)](#)

Get the Briefing from Those Who've Been There

Subscribe for sharp analysis and grounded insights from warriors, diplomats, and scholars.

SIGN UP

WAR ON THE ROCKS



About

[About](#)

[Account](#)

[Contact](#)

[Events and Sponsorships](#)

[People](#)

[Submissions](#)

Members

[Membership](#)

Get More War
On The Rocks

Support Our
Mission And Get
Exclusive Content

Subscribe to our newsletter

BECOME A MEMBER

SUBSCRIBE

By signing up you agree to our data policy