COMMENTARY

Drivers, Decisions, Dilemmas: Understanding the Kashmir Crisis and its Implications

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Nearly 20 years after India and Pakistan clashed in the heights of Kargil — only the second time in history nuclear-armed rivals fought a hot war — the two South Asian rivals have once again found themselves careening toward conflict over Kashmir.

Last Thursday, an explosive-laden SUV rammed into a bus carrying Indian paramilitary forces along the Jammu-Srinagar National Highway in India-administered Kashmir, killing more than 40 troops. Videos and images began to circulate of the driver, Adil Ahmad Dar, declaring himself part of the Pakistan-based terrorist organization Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). Predictably, India quickly condemned Pakistan for orchestrating the attack, demanded a dismantlement of terrorist infrastructure and a stop to Pakistan's support for terrorism, and began contemplating retaliatory action. Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared that he has "given security forces full freedom to respond" to the attack, prompting a televised response from Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan a few days later.

There is good reason for policymakers in India, Pakistan, the United States, and the rest of the international community to be concerned about the recent provocation in Kashmir. To help explain what to expect and how to develop potential contingency plans, this article attempts to outline the underlying *drivers* of the crisis, the critical *decision points* India and Pakistan will face in the coming days and weeks, and the *dilemmas* for third parties like the United States who may at some point consider trying to arrest crisis escalation. The familiarity of these structural drivers, political compulsions, and retaliatory options from previous crises suggests these episodes will recur, hamstringing the delicately balanced U.S. approach to Asia and forcing Washington to confront some hard tradeoffs.

Drivers: Why Are We Here?

The current predicament is the product of several factors driving violence in the Kashmir Valley, which periodically flares up into crises between India and Pakistan. Disentangling the drivers offers a more complete understanding of the current crisis, why it was inevitable, and why it is likely to repeat itself in the future.

The most well-recognized factor is that despite international pressure, Pakistan continues to provide support for internationally recognized terrorist organizations such as JeM, the perpetrators of the devastation in Pulwama. Indian officials (as well as much of the international community) charge that Pakistan provides support for terrorists in the form of money, arms, training, safe havens, and infiltration support. Though Pakistan is itself a victim of terrorism and has targeted several groups in its counter-terrorism campaigns over two decades, studies have shown that its government continues to selectively collaborate with militant groups. Masood Azhar, who founded JeM 20 years ago, continues to freely operate out of Pakistan, and is alleged to have masterminded several devastating attacks on Indian soil, including a recent attack on the Pathankot airbase in 2016.

Employing militant proxies offers Pakistan bargaining leverage and a cost-effective asymmetric strategy to counter India, its stronger and conventionally superior adversary. And despite the costs of blowback, these groups may have become so established that they make it difficult for Pakistan to comply with Indian demands. Pakistan faces prohibitive costs (real or perceived) to dismantling the groups, given their size, integration into the country's socio-economic fabric, independent funding sources, and substantial popular support.

While JeM is a known proxy of Pakistan, it has been known to sometimes act independently, and at cross-purposes with its patron. As some have hypothesized, in this case Pakistan may have been preoccupied with coercing the Taliban to engage in talks on Afghanistan, and allowed other militant groups like JeM some operational freedom. But the government may not have anticipated spectacular attacks like Pulwama and another attack on an Iranian paramilitary convoy in quick succession.

Two other, often discounted, factors motivate and enable violence in the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley: disaffection and organizational competition between militant groups.

Disaffection. The Kashmir Valley is bubbling with anger against the Indian state. As we have observed in the past, since 2012 the region has seen intensifying alienation, resentment, and radicalization, precipitating a rise in recruitment to militant organizations, quasi-violent tactics like stone-pelting, and major terrorist attacks. In 2015, one senior security official based in Kashmir remarked to one of us that but for the limited supply of weapons, the Kashmir Valley would be awash in a full-blown insurgency like that of the

early 1990s. Eight months later, his words proved prescient as hundreds of thousands of Kashmiris mobilized in reaction to the killing of a militant commander, Burhan Wani. The months after Wani's death saw over 15,000 injuries, suggesting that tens of thousands of people — mostly angry young men — risked retaliation by paramilitary forces to protest the state. In 2017, officials privately estimated to one of us that as much as 90 percent of the valley's population opposed the Indian state, and that despite there being only a few hundred militants, 50,000 sympathizers of the militancy provided active or tacit support.

Though Indian counter-insurgency has dramatically reduced violence in Kashmir since the early 2000s, India's overly militarized and coercive approach has intensified alienation and resistance. Many Kashmiris have eschewed participation in "normal" democratic politics (e.g. voting in elections) and instead gravitated towards quasi-violent resistance (including attending militant funerals, stone-pelting Indian police and paramilitary, and even interdicting counter-terrorist operations).

It is in this sea of public alienation and insurgency that terrorist groups like JeM have been able to swim, recruiting and conducting attacks like Pulwama. JeM, in particular, has rapidly expanded its presence in the Kashmir Valley in the last three years. Its resurgence has been made possible by local recruits, who have executed the majority of JeM's recent terror incidents in Kashmir, including the latest attack. While in previous crises, the perpetrators were of Pakistani origin, in this case the suicide bomber hailed from the Pulwama district of the Kashmir Valley and joined JeM only last year, reportedly after being harassed and abused by Indian security forces.

Organizational competition. The local resentment dovetails with competition between militant groups. In order to survive, these organizations have to attract money and manpower, and one way to do so is to outbid competing groups with spectacular attacks to signal strength, commitment, and resolve. The method of the Pulwama attack, a suicide attack from a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device, is a rarity in Kashmir because of the logistical difficulty. Having conducted such a difficult attack, JeM's stock in terrorist circles in Pakistan and Kashmir has likely risen tremendously.

JeM has always faced challenges in Kashmir. It is not as well-favored as Lashkar-e-Taiba, does not command the same local support as Hizbul Mujahideen, and it may be facing pressure on its extreme flank with the creeping emergence of al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Jammu and Kashmir in the Kashmir Valley. One theory of power distribution between armed groups in close proximity anticipates that a smaller group like JeM, which has comparatively fewer recruits, will employ spectacular violence to vie for influence in Pakistani and Kashmiri militant circles. Similarly, intra-group dynamics between JeM and emerging global jihadist groups may have incentivized the former to revive old tactics to signal its commitment to the Islamist cause.

None of these three factors — Pakistani support for the longstanding anti-India insurgency in Kashmir, pervasive alienation and resentment among the region's inhabitants, and violent competition between militant groups — is likely to shift meaningfully in the medium term. This status quo provides a foundation for a boom-and-bust cycle of violence that Indian policymakers have been unable or unwilling to resolve, sparking periodic crises with the potential to escalate.

Decisions: What Will India and Pakistan Do?

The word crisis stems from the word Greek word *krisis*, which some translate as a decisive moment or decision point. The dynamics unfolding on the India-Pakistan border hinge on several key decision points in the coming days and weeks, namely India's decision whether to treat the situation as a crisis, its decision about whether and how to retaliate, and Pakistan's decision about whether to acknowledge Indian action and respond in kind.

Crisis Onset. The first decision is whether to treat a provocation by another state as a "crisis" — that is, a point between peace and war in which a state at least contemplates retaliation by force due to heightened threat, uncertainty, and time pressures — or to downplay it. Our research suggests that Pakistan-backed terrorist attacks in India do not automatically thrust the state into crisis. Instead, New Delhi "selects" into an inter-state crisis with Pakistan when the right alignment of political incentives is in place. Such selection is often, though not always, a part of crisis decision-making. When National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy was asked about the crisis that triggered the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, he replied that crises were like streetcars: "one will come along eventually if you wait long enough." This interpretation explains why 2018 saw nearly one major terrorist incident per week in the Kashmir Valley — such as the highly provocative JeM attack on the Sunjwan Army camp that killed and injured soldiers and their families, including children and a pregnant woman — but no crisis situations in which India or Pakistan considered the use of force.

India's response to terrorist provocations is conditioned by political context. In this case, the provocation is especially sensitive for Modi given its timing with respect to upcoming Indian national elections scheduled to begin in April. Pakistani-backed terrorism is a politically salient issue in India, one that Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has often activated during election season to win seats. Following the terror attack on the Uri army base in 2016, India launched "surgical strikes" across the *de facto* border (the Line of Control) in Kashmir. These strikes achieved little in terms of strategic objectives, but figured heavily into the BJP's campaign for the assembly polls in Uttar Pradesh in 2017. Now, Modi again appears to be selecting into a crisis, issuing explicit demands, calling an emergency Cabinet Committee on Security meeting to consider retaliatory options, and promising that the "perpetrators of terror will pay a heavy price."

Indian Retaliation. India's next decision point is about how to respond. Most analysts believe some retaliation is inevitable, and have examined the same menu of tactical responses India has had at its disposal in previous crises: troop mobilization for the purposes of coercion, limited standoff air or missile strikes on targets in Pakistan-administered Kashmir believed to be terrorist training camps, rapid ground offensives (known as the limited war "Cold Start" option), massed artillery barrages or "surgical strikes" along the Line of Control (similar to the response to the Uri attack) to take out military bunkers, diplomatic measures to isolate Pakistan, and covert action such as targeted assassinations and ramping up support for anti-Pakistan insurgents.

All of India's options face some conundrums. High-end, complex operations like limited ground offensives are constrained by Indian military deficiencies (e.g. jointness, supplies) as well as escalation risks, while less sophisticated options like surgical strikes have to choose between unsatisfying targets (military bunkers or terrorist safe houses) in safe theaters like Pakistan-administered Kashmir and more satisfying ones that risk escalation (JeM headquarters) in the Pakistani heartland.

More important, though, are the political effects India seeks. Regardless of tactics, India can essentially seek to achieve three strategic outcomes: to compel a change in Pakistani behavior through punishment, to re-establish general deterrence by imposing heavy costs, or to degrade terrorist infrastructure through brute force (these are distinct strategic intents in theory, but in practice the operations and strategic effects may overlap significantly). All three paths are fraught. Compelling a change in behavior is inherently difficult, coercive diplomacy has historically low rates of success, and re-establishing general deterrence is difficult against asymmetric threats like terrorists, who may have nothing of value to hold at risk. Degrading terrorist infrastructure (e.g. camps, equipment, personnel) might temporarily constrain terrorists' capabilities and delay future operations ("mowing the grass"), but the costs of destroying such infrastructure is higher than the costs of replacing it.

We expect India will likely split the difference between the second and third options as it did with the post-Uri surgical strikes, though these had a limited impact on terrorist violence in Kashmir. With all three approaches, India runs into Pakistan's "full-spectrum deterrence" doctrine, which is the smaller country's attempt to deter Indian retaliation lowering its own threshold for nuclear use. The more India imposes costs on Pakistan, the closer it inches towards crossing Pakistan's nuclear red lines through deliberate or inadvertent escalation, a risk simply not worth the candle.

After satiating public demands for revenge through some military retaliation, India will likely supplement that response with a longer-term campaign to condemn and isolate Pakistan globally, raising reputational costs and economic pressures (i.e. blacklisting on the Financial Action Task Force or dissuading foreign investment). While Pakistan will be cushioned by some all-weather allies like China

and Saudi Arabia, its options and bargaining power will be circumscribed. This extended non-military approach actually suits the BJP well, giving it an easy way to keep the issue alive in the minds of voters through Indian elections in the spring, while crowding out other issues hampering its electoral prospects like jobless growth.

Pakistani Counters. As the adage goes, the adversary gets a vote. Pakistan can choose to either complicate or simplify New Delhi's retaliatory options. For instance, it might be able reinforce potential targets in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir with additional personnel to heighten the ramifications of any Indian strikes, or it could vacate these positions to make them easier targets, tacitly permitting India to satisfy its domestic compulsions for retaliation.

In addition to whatever it does in advance of Indian action, Pakistan can also make a decision about how to react. After the 2016 surgical strikes, it managed to sidestep escalation pressures by denying that the strikes had ever taken place. It is unlikely that Pakistan will be able to credibly deny another round of strikes without looking craven, especially if India employs more conspicuous means like air or missile strikes. Ultimately, if India retaliates militarily, Pakistani leaders may have high incentives to escalate and a hard time backing down. This could be due to fear of public disapproval, but it could also be a result of an effort to rally the Pakistani public around the flag, potentially to distract from an unimpressive six months since the new government came to power.

In sum, India seems to have entered an inter-state crisis with limited options that incentivize a more symbolic militarized exchange followed by an extended punitive diplomatic campaign. Nevertheless, risks abound because India's 2016 surgical strikes precedent creates escalatory pressure on its next move, Pakistan's domestic learning incentives to retaliate, an expectation for India's third move, and, as always, the fog and friction of any militarized engagement.

Dilemmas: How Should Third Parties Respond?

Though Washington has been relatively silent about the unfolding crisis, it has interests in the region that will undoubtedly be affected by any outcome. U.S. policy options are constrained by many of the same dilemmas and tradeoffs — immediate, functional, and geopolitical — that Washington has been wrestling with for two decades.

Immediate. Washington's first dilemma is the tension between its immediate need to work with Pakistan to responsibly draw down U.S. troops from Afghanistan, and its long-term need to enlist India's strategic support and defense cooperation to maintain the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

In previous South Asian crises, the United States played the role of neutral broker and crisis manager between the two nuclear-armed rivals, but that role has been changing over the past decade. Not only is the current administration less predictable and committed to engagement and crisis prevention; there is also a sizeable camp in Washington that wants to cement the U.S. tilt towards India.

But the United States continues to be constrained by its dependence on Pakistan in Afghanistan for ongoing logistics, intelligence, and counterterrorism cooperation; Pakistani support for a negotiated settlement; and, now, a U.S. withdrawal. If Indian policymakers feel emboldened by U.S. backing to undertake aggressive retaliatory moves, this could threaten Pakistani support and resources for negotiations in Afghanistan, where the U.S. envoy has offered cautious praise of Pakistan's constructive role. This scenario could play out similarly to the events of December 2001, when Indian mobilization after a JeM attack on the Indian Parliament led Pakistan to withdraw blocking forces away from its western border just as the United States was ramping up operations in Tora Bora to close in on al-Qaeda. And there remains the constant threat that if the U.S. support for India in the crisis is too full-throated, Rawalpindi could harness its ties with the Taliban to play spoiler to the negotiations on Afghanistan.

As long as the United States is in Afghanistan, it will be forced to delicately maneuver India-Pakistan crises, weighing the tradeoffs of its "bad marriage" with Pakistan with the long-term strategic interests tethered to its partnership with India. U.S. policymakers will likely point to their recent attempts to get tough on Pakistan's selective targeting of terror groups while extending just enough moral support to India to secure its near-term interests in Afghanistan.

Functional. The second, related dilemma is a functional one about how the United States can advance two of its goals for the region — counter-terrorism and nuclear stability — that are often in tension with each other. In addition to the Asian balance of power, U.S. interests in the region for the past two decades have focused on preventing a terrorist threat to the territorial United States, reducing the risk of a conflict between the two nuclear-armed rivals, and ensuring that the region's nuclear weapons do not fall into the wrong hands.

In the wake of Pulwama, the United States wants to affirm its zero-tolerance for terrorism, as National Security Advisor John Bolton did in a phone call to his Indian counterpart. At the same time, the United States will likely to balance this priority with the need to manage crisis and conflict escalation (since neither India nor Pakistan possess viable strategies for escalation control, war termination, or face-saving exits), as well as the risks of Pakistan learning from this episode that it needs to even further lower its threshold for nuclear use.

Geopolitical. The third dilemma is how the United States should maneuver with China and India within the broader Asian balance of power. Even while the United States is actively competing against China in East Asia and the South China Sea in what is being constructed as an ideological struggle and "new Cold War," it has sought China's cooperation to the west on Afghanistan, South Asian crisis management, and pressuring Pakistan on counterterrorism (despite China's reluctance). Should the current crisis escalate and the United States seek to manage or de-escalate it, it may need to bridge its shortcomings as a neutral third-party broker by coordinating with China, which commands substantial influence over Pakistan.

Simultaneously, backing India on its western front might encourage it to neglect its efforts to reorient eastward to confront the greater challenge of a more powerful and assertive China. The United States would like to see India shift its military and foreign policy priorities away from its western border to fulfill its "Act East" potential and serve as a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean, consistent with America's Indo-Pacific Strategy. This requires that India shift from an army-centric military strategy targeting its continental threats towards a strategy of power projection through air and naval forces directed at China. The more the United States encourages India to lean into boom-bust cycles of military standoffs and proxy conflicts with Pakistan — which consume and shape its political headspace, foreign policy resourcing, intelligence assets, and force structure — the less likely India is to fulfill America's high long-term expectations as a "major defense partner" and balancer to China.

How one makes sense of the current South Asia crisis depends on where one sits. Observers and policymakers can expect some repetition, some dangerous evolutions, and plenty of continued hedging around competing priorities. The drivers — Pakistan's asymmetric strategy, simmering Kashmiri resentment and antipathy for the Indian government, and militant competition — border on structural factors and are likely to trigger repeats of this crisis. The decision points are familiar, but anticipating choices and consequences are complicated by evolutions in doctrine and military modernization, greater geopolitical uncertainty, intensifying domestic nationalist pressures, and learning and adaptation from previous episodes.

While Pulwama is unlikely to represent a paradigm shift in India-Pakistan relations like the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the cumulative weight of these nuclear-tinged crisis cycles will have ripple effects, structuring or constraining other strategic choices throughout Asia. At present, U.S. policymakers do not yet face any zero-sum choices on Afghanistan drawdowns, South Asian nuclear stability, cooperation with China, or Indian balancing. But they are starting to be forced to set priorities and sequencing, reconcile the choices and tradeoffs of those decisions across its vast bureaucratic machinery, and develop mitigation strategies for second- and third-order consequences of India-Pakistan crises for the region and broader U.S. Asia policy.

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