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India and Pakistan Aren't Ready for Another Terrorist Crisis

Neither state has fixed the problems behind the Mumbai attacks a decade ago.

By [Sameer Lalwani](#) and [Emily Tallo](#)

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Mumbai police pay respects at the Police Memorial during an event to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the 2008 Mumbai militant attacks in Mumbai on November 26, 2018. (INDRANIL MUKHERJEE/AFP/Getty Images)

NOVEMBER 30, 2018, 11:01 AM

On the week of t
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week, India awoke to the horrific three-day assault on its financial capital of Mumbai by Pakistani-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorists, much of it broadcast live, in which at least 170 people were killed, hundreds more were wounded, and South Asian rivals raised fears of a major conflict and nuclear crisis. Today, the impromptu corridor of free passage between decades-long adversaries might signal the triumph of back-channel diplomacy and pragmatic confidence-building.

Unfortunately, this thaw in what has been an otherwise tense year in India-Pakistan bilateral relations is unlikely to endure. The risk of another nuclear-tinged crisis remains high, because the conditions precipitating the Mumbai crisis persist or have worsened after a decade. Pakistan continues to strategically support proxies that conduct cross-border terrorism. A revitalized Kashmir insurgency intensifies India-Pakistan tensions. India still lacks sufficient deterrence or defense options, and third parties are less able or inclined to mediate a crisis.

Despite international condemnation and pressure, Pakistan continues to at least tolerate and harbor internationally recognized terrorist organizations like LeT. These groups periodically perpetrate attacks on Indian targets, some of which have triggered major crises between India and Pakistan.

Some scholars have explained this support for militant proxies as a product of the Pakistan Army's strategic culture of "emboldenment" from a nuclear deterrent that offers a shield behind which to pursue aggressive policies. Part of the logic, however, is undoubtedly str
because it confe

uses militant proxies as an asymmetric tool to project influence in difficult regions such as Afghanistan and counter India's conventional military superiority.

Despite Pakistan's claims that it has ditched previous distinctions between "good" and "bad" militants in its recent counterterrorism campaigns, research suggests Pakistan still engages in selective repression and colludes with some groups depending on their ideological affinity and operational utility.

While Pakistan's strategic rationale holds steady, the domestic barriers to dismantling militant infrastructure—such as popular support, its utility in electoral politics, and uncertainty about the loss of control—are also quite powerful.

At the same time, the intensification of insurgency within the Kashmir Valley fuels instability between India and Pakistan, creating the conditions for another crisis and a flashpoint for conflict. The Indian and Pakistani militaries have fought four wars over the disputed Kashmir region, and they routinely exchange fire across the border.

After 25 years of counterinsurgency against a separatist insurgency backed by Pakistan, India believed it had achieved "normalcy," but the past six years have seen a sharp uptick in militant recruitment, violence, and public support for the insurgency.

The re-escalation of the Kashmir insurgency fuels India-Pakistan tensions for several reasons. So long as India fails to consolidate control over the region, Pakistan rhetorical, and s insurgency, ever

driver, after overselling the Kashmiri separatist cause to its public for decades. The restive environment both motivates Pakistani meddling and provides a genuine indigenous separatist movement that acts as cover.

Organization competition also motivates Pakistan-based militant groups such as LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammed to outbid each other with attacks on Indian targets in the Kashmir Valley and elsewhere to vie for legitimacy and dominance over the anti-India movement.

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India also finds it convenient to blame Pakistan for the failings of a repressive approach that generates widespread resentment. Preliminary evidence suggests that Kashmiris are now choosing quasi-violent resistance over “normal” democratic politics. Rising Hindu nationalism throughout India also channels the mounting frustrations over the Kashmir Valley into added animus toward Pakistan, inhibiting diplomatic efforts at conflict resolution.

India has also failed to build a credible deterrent against Pakistan-backed attacks. Despite having one of the world's largest militaries and defense budgets, India has struggled to deny, dissuade, or deter continued cross-border terrorist attacks due to a mix of credibility and capability challenges.

India lacks effective kinetic options to deter terrorist attacks by Pakistani militants or to punish Pakistan after a cross-border attack. Despite more than a decade of efforts to develop a limited war “Cold Start” option, the Indian military still faces organizational and budgetary challenges as well as formidable Pakistani defenses, including a risky yet effective nuclear posture of asymmetric escalation involving the early use of tactical nuclear weapons.

Indian attempts
developed “surg

challenges. Some reports suggest that the 2016 surgical strikes had a limited or even negative effect on terrorist activity in the region, but they might increase the risk of intentional or inadvertent escalation in the future.

India has also inadequately invested in the denial and resilience capabilities necessary to reduce terrorist attacks, including improvements to border and coastal security, security of key infrastructure, and the training and equipment of local law enforcement. Despite several investigatory task forces that have diagnosed the problems of intelligence and organizational response failures, Indian political leadership has failed to implement the reforms needed to redress these vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, South Asian crisis behavior continues to be shaped by perverse incentives with both parties driving recklessly, relying on external actors to draw them back from the brink. Third parties, principally the United States, played an active role mediating and de-escalating several nuclear-tinged South Asian crises from 1990 to 2008 through a mix of deft diplomacy, assurances, and threats to get both sides to back down. While the United States was essential in the past, today Washington may be reluctant to intervene as a crisis manager given its declining footprint and exposure in Afghanistan, as well as an “America First” ideology driving U.S. foreign-policy decision-making.

China, which generally followed the U.S. lead, possesses substantially more influence over Pakistan than in previous decades. While Beijing has incrementally increased its role in crisis management, it remains reluctant to seriously pressure Pakistan the way Washington has.

The diminution

war games suggest, both India and Pakistan cannot de-escalate a crisis or conflict on their own.

Not all interstate provocations necessarily result in crises. There is a degree to which countries can “select into” and escalate crises. When U.S. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy was asked about the crisis that triggered the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, he replied that crisis events are like streetcars: One will come along eventually if you wait long enough. Some research suggests there is a degree of selectivity at work in South Asian crises as well, built on a political calculus, particularly if provocations are complex, protracted, and amplified by the media during a period of strained relations and limited dialogue.

To reduce the risk of another nuclear-tinged crisis like that which followed the Mumbai attacks, each party could be doing much more, though it seems to defy short-term self-interest. Pakistan could extend its efforts against terrorism to anti-India militant groups if it comes to appreciate that the long-term blowback and corrosion of its society outstrips the cost-effective tying down of Indian forces. India could revise its repressive counterinsurgency strategy to deny the proverbial “sea” that foreign and domestic terrorist “fish” swim in if punitive measures against Muslims didn’t make for such satisfying and effective electoral politics in large swathes of the heartland. India might also develop more credible, less escalatory, but effective denial and resilience capabilities to deter terrorist attacks if militaries didn’t generally prefer offensive strategies over defense. Given the unlikelihood of all these moves, it may fall to influential third crises before the unclear whether

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