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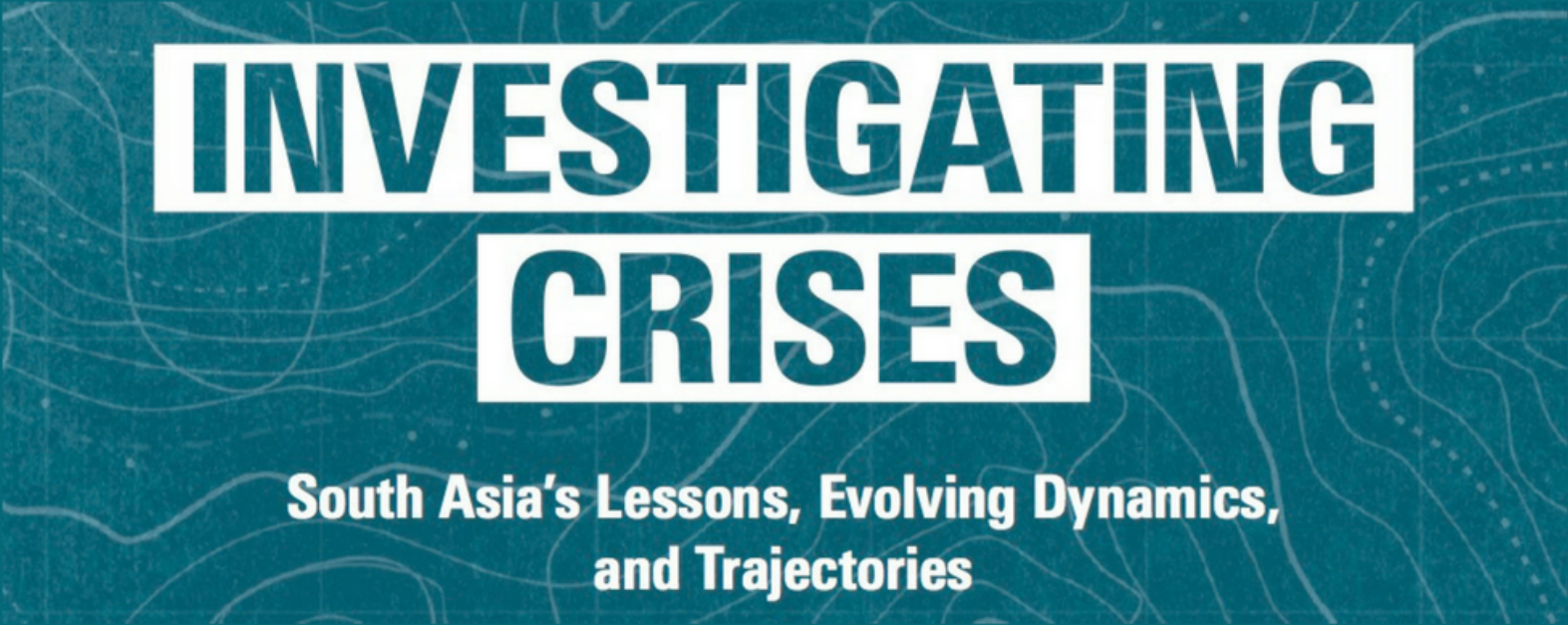


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Investigating Subcontinental Crises

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INVESTIGATING CRISES

**South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics,
and Trajectories**

Sameer Lalwani & Hannah Haegeland

Nearly two decades after the last bilateral conflict at Kargil, India-Pakistan tensions simmer amidst continued instability in Kashmir and ongoing terror attacks perceived by India as having cross-border roots. Historically, these conditions are often the backdrop for bilateral crises. The study of subcontinental crises remains necessary for two primary reasons. First, trends suggest future crises are likely. Dating back to partition, South Asian history is riddled with conventional and unconventional conflicts. Ongoing developments reinforce this historical trendline, from regular ceasefire violations (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/09/ceasefire-violations-jammu-and-kashmir-line-fire>) amidst the absence of sustained bilateral dialogue to growing fissile material stockpiles, evolving strategic doctrines, and developments in nuclear-capable delivery systems. Second, after India and Pakistan's 1998 nuclear tests, the escalation risks of subcontinental crises increased as incentives for brinkmanship grew amidst shrinking space for errors.

Both India and Pakistan have strong incentives to avoid another crisis. India's priorities include sustaining economic growth and buttressing its strategic relationships in the Indian Ocean amid Chinese challenges. Crises would stymie Pakistan's heavy investments in its domestic economy—especially in growing foreign investments—and its work with China to develop broader connectivity projects in Western Asia. Other unfolding dynamics to consider include the recent sharp decline in U.S.-Pakistan relations and China's deepening stakes in the region generally and in Pakistan specifically. Many expect the next India-Pakistan crisis to emerge after a spectacular, high-fatality terrorist attack amidst heightened instability in Kashmir. Yet some evidence suggests (<https://investigatingcrises.org/onset/>) the threshold for crisis onset may be lower, in part because what does and does not constitute a crisis is ultimately a political decision.

In a new Stimson Center ten-chapter edited volume (<https://investigatingcrises.org/>) authors from China, India, Pakistan, and the United States consider the past and possible futures of South Asian crises. Chapters offer (<https://investigatingcrises.org/introduction/>) historical lessons, assessments of evolving dynamics, and

considerations of how unfolding strategic trajectories could impact future India-Pakistan crises. Both India and Pakistan—together with key third parties like the United States and China—have a vested interest in learning management lessons from past crises as well as reviewing historical efforts at conflict resolution and confidence-building. For Pakistani analysts, understanding how and why crises emerge, nuclear signaling, shifting Chinese and U.S. interests, and failures in Indian intelligence, strategic assessment, and decision-making processes are particularly salient.

Lessons from Past Crises

Two chapters by retired foreign secretaries Riaz Mohammad Khan (Pakistan) and Shyam Saran (India), together with two chapters by veteran nuclear South Asia scholar Michael Krepon (United States), offer policy lessons extracted from decades of previous crises. Their analyses outline possible Indian (<https://investigatingcrises.org/organizing/>), Pakistani (<https://investigatingcrises.org/conflictresolution/>), and U.S. (<https://investigatingcrises.org/cmchallenges/>) policy solutions for crisis prevention and management, as well as for dialogue and conflict resolution.

A chapter (<https://investigatingcrises.org/onset/>) examining how and when crises are triggered found that intense media coverage of a crisis provocation or candidate trigger event (typically a terror attack in India with presumed connections to Pakistan) is associated with escalation to a full-blown crisis. Two variables of provocations themselves that are associated with escalation include the duration and complexity of an attack. Further, candidate triggers were less likely to escalate to crises when they occurred during periods of high-level bilateral dialogue (e.g. the 2003-2008 Composite Dialogue). Ultimately, however, we found that the decision to treat a provocation as a crisis or not seems to be a political decision for Indian authorities. Understanding the dangers—and opportunities—

presented by crises therefore requires deeper study of how bilateral crises begin to unfold in India. This leads us to the chapters in this study that focus on the fraught history of Indian information management, strategic assessment, and decision-making during crises.

The flow of information during periods of crisis is a central factor in crisis management and escalation control. Stakeholders in the cycle of information acquisition and dissemination include government and military entities, the public, and the media. One chapter finds that vibrant media (<https://investigatingcrises.org/media/>) complicates government's task of information control in periods of heightened tension, but also serves as a tool for message control. In past crises, the Indian media has contributed to framing policy decisions by informing the public about an unfolding crisis and government responses. Newspapers and television talk shows have at times inflamed public opinion and prematurely spread (dis)information. These effects can result in galvanizing domestic audience pressure for government action and thus shorten the decision-making window. It can also indirectly affect future crisis management by shaping public opinion in a democratic society.

As media information comes from civilian and military authorities, organizational pathologies among the Indian intelligence and national security establishment can exacerbate the media's potential to play a harmful information-dissemination role in crises. In 2008, for example, one chapter highlights that poor coordination of information dissemination included (<https://investigatingcrises.org/intelligence/>) the Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil compromising a tactical advantage of surprise by announcing in TV interviews during the three-day 26/11 attacks that 250 National Security Guard commandos were en route to Mumbai. Indian crisis management successes and failures have largely been a result of personality-driven decision-making processes. Studies (<https://investigatingcrises.org/intelligence/>) suggest that more process-driven intelligence, assessment, and communication could remedy the failures resulting from past Indian ad hoc crisis management (<https://investigatingcrises.org/organizing/>).

Evolving Dynamics & Trajectories: Possible Futures of South Asian Crises

Shifting dynamics and regional roles suggest that future India-Pakistan crises may play out very differently. One such evolving trajectory is the role of and receptivity towards third-party interventions. U.S.-Pakistan relations have steadily worsened under the Trump administration, while U.S.-India relations, particularly through shared interests in the Indian Ocean Region, are on the rise. In a future India-Pakistan crisis, the United States may not be willing or well positioned to play the neutral, third-party crisis manager role it has played in the past. Meanwhile, a chapter on China (<https://investigatingcrises.org/china/>) finds that though it maintains distinctly different views on the role of third-parties in crises, the historical trajectory of China's increasing involvement in India-Pakistan standoffs suggest that Beijing has a growing stake in ensuring crises do not escalate. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and broader Belt and Road Initiative, together with China's longstanding policy of using Pakistan to balance India's growing geopolitical power, indicate growing Chinese stakes in South Asian affairs.

Another key trajectory is that of military modernization and development. A dynamic new typology (<https://investigatingcrises.org/intensity/>) for assessing the severity of nuclear crises suggests that nuclear risk-taking—measured by states' nuclear signaling—has decreased since the 1999 Kargil and the 2001-2 Twin Peaks crises. However, modernization and development of India and Pakistan's nuclear enterprises may result in more intense and risk-inducing nuclear signaling in a future crisis, very likely on a more compressed decision-making timeline. Conversely, new capabilities and the uncertainties they facilitate about evolving nuclear postures could deepen what some assess (<https://investigatingcrises.org/nuclear/>) as the stabilizing effect of nuclear weapons on South Asia.

Future crises (<https://investigatingcrises.org/scenarios/>) may unfold in developing spaces (e.g., in a nuclearized Indian Ocean) with evolving capabilities and new players. Unfolding nuclear dynamics underline the need for creative new policy ideas (<https://www.stimson.org/content/off-ramps>) to minimize the risks of nuclear escalation between nuclear-armed rivals around the world. For example, one Pakistani scholar's chapter proposes (<https://investigatingcrises.org/nuclear/>) a South Asian arms control regime.

For three decades the Stimson Center has published analysis (<https://investigatingcrises.org/#readmore>) on the threat of conflict in South Asia. This volume continues that tradition by offering close empirical study of crisis behavior to illuminate causal processes, patterns, and lessons extracted from previous crises. We are hopeful that it will encourage and supplement further research on crisis dynamics, both on the subcontinent and beyond. Three critical gaps in research on crises in South Asia that merit new studies in particular include: the economic costs of crises, the role and trajectories of domestic audience pressure in foreign policy, and the impacts of new disruptive technologies on crisis dynamics.

Ultimately, the lack of clear “red lines” on both the Indian and Pakistani sides underlines the fluid and political nature of crisis onset. Understanding the settings in which major bilateral standoffs are triggered can help reveal the inherent risks—and possible opportunities—of crises.

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