



Topic: **Security** Tags: **India**, **Pakistan**, and **Terrorism**



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Pakistan is often characterized as a belligerent, unyielding, and destabilizing force in international affairs. But despite longstanding and widespread negative [perceptions](#), Pakistani behavior and strategic culture is changing for the better in important respects, as recently exemplified by anti-Taliban operations in the country's North Waziristan region and thawing relations with the United States and Afghanistan.

The reorientation of Pakistan's national security policies remains little noticed because media coverage of Pakistan is crisis-driven and narrowly focused, often overlooking longer-term trends. Pakistan is still routinely chastised for [inadequately](#) demobilizing militant groups, overspending on its military (both [conventional](#) and [nuclear](#) forces) relative to its social needs, and [trading](#) accusations with India without initiatives to improve relations.

Though there is merit to these negative critiques, at the same time Pakistan's security policies have experienced striking but underappreciated shifts since 2001 along three dimensions—**aggressive behavior, strategic orientation, and self-examination**. These shifts warrant a reexamination by international security analysts of their of assumptions about Pakistan and their theories of strategic stability and instability in South Asia.

Aggressive or “belligerent” Pakistani behavior toward India has been significantly reduced.



Overall violence on the Indo-Pakistan border has declined due to substantial reductions in militant activity and cross-border firings, based on open-source data, including that of the government of India. While some Indians primarily [credit](#) stability in the disputed Kashmir region to India's counterinsurgency campaign, much of it is due to Pakistan's strategic shifts over the past decade. Pakistan still supports Kashmiri separatists, but [infiltration attempts](#) , [violent incidents](#) , and [fatalities](#) have all steadily [decreased](#) by over 90 percent since 2001.

Observers also rightly credit the Indian-constructed fence along the Line of Control (LoC)—as the *de facto* border is known—for the precipitous drop in infiltration and violence in Kashmir. But many analysts acknowledge Pakistan tacitly [abetted](#) fence construction with restraint for years after signing a 2003 ceasefire agreement. Moreover, as much as 30 percent of the fence [deteriorates](#) every winter, and rebuilding requires further Pakistani tacit cooperation. To put the importance of the ceasefire into perspective, cross-border firing dropped from a peak of [5,767 incidents](#) in 2002 to zero in 2004 and remained [below](#) 100 annual incidents through 2011. Although cross border violence has been on the uptick over the past [three years](#), it remains at less than [one tenth](#) of 2002

The exceptions to this trend—the 2001-02 “Twin Peaks” crises and the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks—are often cited as evidence of increasing Pakistani bellicosity. While these events were dangerous, tragic, and justifiably condemned, they need to be understood in broader historical context. Focusing on these high-profile events apart from decades of Pakistani-sponsored militancy in Punjab and Kashmir, overlooks the fact that they occurred during a general decline in violence. Pakistan’s support for violent separatists on Indian territory stretches back to the 1950s Naga insurgency. Violence perpetrated by Pakistani-backed Khalistani and Kashmiri militants in the 1980s and 1990s—potentially retribution for [East Pakistan](#) —was also far more intense than militancy over the past 15 years.

Some [Indian analysts](#) even grudgingly acknowledge the [difficulty](#) of Pakistan’s internal militant challenges and that the absence of *major* attacks since Mumbai suggests militant groups like Lashkar-e-Toiba have been temporarily [leashed](#) . Though hardly a solution, curtailing these militant groups’ activity may be the best near-term option, as disarming and excising all militant groups will be a long, difficult, dangerous process, since many have embedded deep within the fabric civil society.

Pakistan is gradually pivoting away from competing conventionally with India to turn inward and seriously tackle domestic threats.

A strategic reorientation is evident in Pakistani defense resourcing, procurement, deployment, and operational choices since 2001. Based on [open-source data](#), defense allocations declined substantially over three decades. While India always held advantages in personnel and resources, Pakistan historically sought to compete with inordinately high defense budgets. In the 1980s—when subsidized by U.S. military assistance—Pakistan spent an average of 6.5 percent of gross domestic product on defense. When U.S. assistance dropped sharply in the 1990s, military spending reduced to 5.5 percent of GDP, but when U.S. assistance spiked again in the 2000s, defense spending still fell to average 3.3 percent of GDP. Even if [partially](#) supplemented by U.S. military assistance, this decline is meaningful because the military's operational demands on its Western borders grew considerably over the past 15 years.

Though Pakistan continues to invest in conventional defense, the *rate* of major weapons procurement and replacement has slowed considerably. From the 1950s through the 1990s, Pakistan's offensive arsenal (tanks and combat aircraft) grew roughly 50 percent per decade, but in the 2000s, this growth slowed to roughly 7 percent. With [the lion's share](#) of the defense budget being consumed by salary, rations, and increasing operational costs, only [22 percent](#) is left for procurement. In contrast, Indian procurement spending constitutes [41 percent](#) of a defense budget that is as much as five times larger. Pakistan leveraged its partnership with the United States to also acquire sophisticated weaponry, like F-16s, combat helicopters, and armored personnel carriers. But while these platforms proved essential for Pakistan's counterinsurgency operations in rugged tribal area terrain, they did not confer [conventional parity](#) with India.

Pakistan's internal threat from domestic militants—due in part to blowback for past Afghan policy choices—has caused Pakistan's military to add or redeploy roughly 155,000 troops to its western border since 2001, intensify its counterinsurgency operational tempo, and consequently diminish its appetite for conventional competition with

The price to tackle Taliban militancy has been high: 60,000 [civilian casualties](#) , \$100 billion in estimated direct and indirect [economic losses](#) , and over 4,000 military fatalities (out of an estimated 10,000 total [security force fatalities](#)). Additionally, in 2011, Pakistani officials acknowledged that the Army had lost [two brigades](#) ' worth of personnel to fatalities or permanent disability and temporarily lost the operational capacity equivalent to [two Army divisions](#) .

A fundamental evolution in Pakistani strategic culture appears to be underway.

Pakistan's officer corps and national security experts have engaged in significant self-examination in their strategic literature over the past 15 years. Perceptions of—and concern about—India's hostile intentions and expanding conventional capabilities have not substantially changed. Yet a vibrant debate is being waged over Pakistan's fluid security environment, the foundations of national security, how to respond to a rising India, and the relative priority of its internal threats.

energy resources as prerequisites for national power; and warned against an “economically destructive” conventional competition with India. Worried about the mounting costs and tradeoffs of Pakistan’s current national security posture, some officers have proposed heavier reliance on a more “cost effective” nuclear deterrent to “cover the gap” or openly considered rapprochement and normalization of relations with India. Some very [senior Army leaders](#) have also expressed openness to the latter approach.

The Pakistan Army’s strategic culture is likely being reshaped by the [changing threat environment](#) and is expressed in strategic writings. A generational divide may be emerging between senior and midlevel officers over the relative priority of internal versus external threats, triggered by rising officers’ decade-long operational experience with counterinsurgency deployments. Evidence of shifting priorities is found in the biennial *Pakistan Army Green Book*, which [reveals](#) how the Army understands and operates in the world. Recent essays—mostly written by Pakistani Colonels and Brigadiers, some of whom have ascended to the highest ranks of Corps Commanders—have concentrated on unconventional internal threats as much or more than the traditional rivalry with India. The 2006

formidable threat faced by Pakistan in the near future.” In a 2006 article in [The Citadel](#) , published by the Command and Staff College, one Colonel suggested that “Pakistan does not face [an] external threat as much as it does from within.”

Pakistan’s strategic shift may have positive implications for stability in the region.

What is puzzling is that this evidence of declining aggressiveness toward India, a reduced budgetary share for military spending, and a reorientation of perceived threats facing Pakistan has come during a period when leading theories of international security least predicted it. Many scholars anticipated Pakistan’s “nuclear shield,” acquired in 1998, would embolden it to intensify aggression, at least at the sub-conventional level. (Similar fears, citing Pakistan as a precedent, have also been invoked to justify [preventive actions](#) against nuclear aspirants like Iran). Nevertheless, Pakistan’s strategic behavior over the past 15 years challenges this [conventional wisdom](#) .

After Pakistan’s development of a nuclear deterrent—instead of increased conflict and competition—a relatively stable border can be seen following a brief period of tensions amidst [nuclear learning](#) . One explanation is that Pakistan has had to rely less on conventional balancing and sub-conventional provocations and [more](#) on its nuclear assets to guarantee its territorial integrity. Leaders from both sides also acknowledge that under the nuclear shadow—and with the support of the Pakistan Army—they came very close to a “[non-border, non-territorial solution](#) ” to Kashmir in 2007, which many regard as the basis for any [future settlement](#) .

Strategic reorientations have many fathers. Focusing on Afghanistan and internal threats has helped spur Pakistan's adjustment on its eastern border, but this "distraction" explanation cannot sufficiently account for the shift. Pakistan demonstrated it was capable of sub-conventional conflict on two fronts—backing the Mujahideen and later the Taliban in Afghanistan alongside Khalistani and Kashmiri militants in India—during the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, changes in strategic behavior began years before the internal threat was appreciated, suggesting the nuclear factor may bear partial responsibility. The scale and intensity of recent internal operations also would not have been possible without Pakistani confidence that redeployments westward would not jeopardize eastern border security. It is difficult to draw strong conclusions from limited trend lines, but it seems plausible that Pakistan's national security, reassured by its nuclear assets, is depending less on non-state actors, conventional competition, or frequent aggressive posturing.

To be sure, Pakistan will continue to contest the status of Kashmir, spend significant resources on conventional deterrence, and posit India as a major threat, but it does all of this with far less intensity and singular focus than it did three decades ago. Though it has also helped disrupt American goals in Afghanistan, recent events suggest Pakistan can even adapt and play a more [constructive](#) role. Still, reversing longstanding, deeply ingrained policies is contested and vulnerable to some backsliding, as the recent [Gurdaspur](#) attack might suggest, even if the overall trend line is improving.

A note of caution is warranted as a nuclear South Asia, even while mitigating pressures for conventional competition, introduces new dangers. Technological developments like [tactical nuclear weapons](#) deployed for war-fighting purposes, or [missile defenses and multiple independent targetable re-entry vehicles](#) presaging counterforce strategies, could lower the nuclear threshold and exacerbate fears about [nuclear safety](#), weapons security, and [escalation control](#).

South Asia rather than undermining it, and while fraught with risks, it may also continue to spur adaptations in state behavior, planning, and national security thinking. As international actors begin to acknowledge this, they can pivot their focus from criticism to constructive engagement on mutual security interests.

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