THE DIPLOMAT

THE DEBATE

The Risk of a Nuclear-Tinged South Asian Crisis Is Rising

The odds of another serious South Asian crisis remain high.

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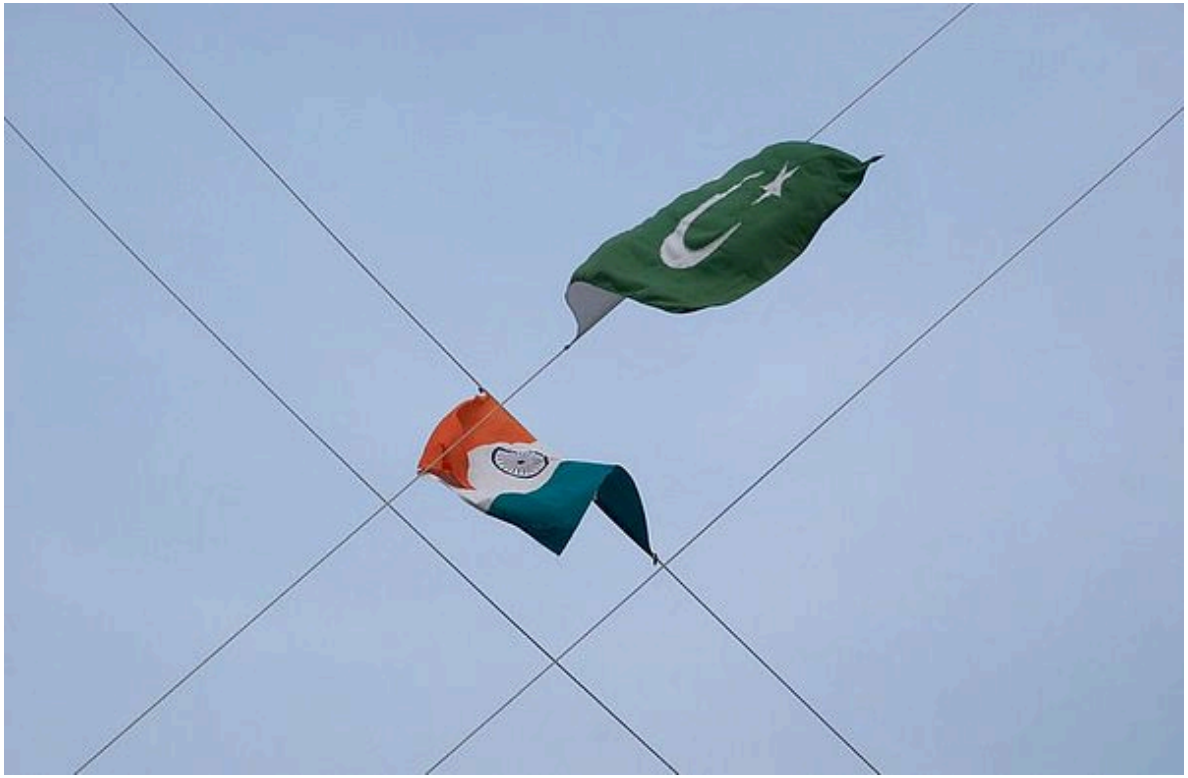

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The latest U.S. spat with Pakistan, initiated by President Donald Trump's inaugural tweet of 2018, suggests that the recently revamped U.S. South Asia strategy may already be in jeopardy.

The South Asia strategy was in some ways a test run for the National Security Strategy (NSS). As the first major strategy review conducted by the Trump administration, it began as a review of U.S. policy in Afghanistan, but eventually expanded

over nearly six months into a U.S. strategy for the region. Both reflect that the risks of South Asian crises are high on the list of U.S. concerns.

Trump's speech announcing the new South Asia strategy on August 21, 2017, stated that "Pakistan and India are two nuclear-armed states whose tense relations threaten to spiral into conflict. And that could happen." The subsequent NSS released in December described India and Pakistan as "two nuclear-armed states…present[ing] some of the most complicated national security challenges." The implication of course is that conflict between India and Pakistan — which have fought four wars, numerous skirmishes, and regularly exchange fire across their disputed border — could potentially result in a mushroom cloud.

The United States has longstanding interests in South Asia and stands to lose a lot in the event of uncontrolled escalation. There are U.S. troops deployed in Afghanistan that could easily be affected by escalation to the east. U.S. stakes in global stability ensure that preventing any regional war from escalating to a nuclear war remains a key interest. Finally, U.S. policies centered on South Asia — from the Indo-Pacific strategy to efforts to get Pakistan to help broker a peace deal

in Afghanistan — would be upturned by a war between India and Pakistan that leaves both parties too battered and distracted to cooperate on U.S. objectives. The fact that the present downturn in U.S.-Pakistan relations is evolving concurrently with tense India-Pakistan relations poses new crisis management challenges for the future.

Rising Risks, Absent Third-Parties

The administration's words may prove more prescient than most realize. Based on our recently published edited volume, *Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, we find that the risks of a South Asian crisis are higher than in the past ten years due to domestic political and geopolitical trends. Furthermore, the sources for crisis onset may be less predictable than otherwise thought. Finally, the consequences of a crisis are greater due to South Asia's advancing modernization of conventional and nuclear forces.

The book identifies a number of reasons for this heightened risk of an India-Pakistan conflict, including declines in bilateral relations, unstable domestic politics combined with impending elections, rising religious majoritarianism and nationalism, a spike in ceasefire violations, greater instability in the disputed Kashmir region, continued cross-border

terrorism, and more dangerous and aggressive military doctrines inclusive of nuclear first use.

Most analysts expect the next crisis to be triggered by a spectacular, high-fatality terrorist attack on a civilian target. Some evidence suggests that the risk threshold may be lower. Contrary to conventional wisdom, a crisis can spark even from lesser incidents because the choice to treat any incident as a crisis is ultimately a political decision.

Several factors account for why the usual third-party brakes may not be applied in the event of crisis onset: the Trump administration's hands-off approach to numerous

international challenges, the generally reduced U.S. presence and stakes in Afghanistan (despite a slight uptick in troops), the U.S. geopolitical tilt toward India, and declining U.S. influence over Pakistan. Trump's New Year's Day tweet underscored this last point, that the United States — the traditional third-party intervener — may be both abdicating leadership, but also no longer willing or able to play the role of a credible third-party mediator between India and Pakistan.

Shortcomings in Information, Organization, and Communication

There has been a dangerous dearth of learning from past crises over three decades. Domestic strategic assessment failures, organizational pathologies, and deficiencies in bilateral dialogue persist. Little course correction combined with the false optimism from military modernization makes for a dangerous cauldron.

One chapter of the volume concludes that despite frequent diagnoses of intelligence and strategic assessment failures, the Indian state has not really "learned" from past mistakes and has failed to implement meaningful national security reforms. This has allowed it to be routinely "surprised" and

for minor cross-border transgressions to escalate into major inter-state crises placing political reputations on the line. Retired Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran points out in another chapter that reforms on paper are still no panacea absent a culture of adherence and the respect of political principals. He argues from experience that even the best laid organizational planning for crisis management on paper tends to break down and give way to *ad hoc* procedures in serious, politically-charged crises.

While both studies concentrate on Indian decision making, they undoubtedly apply to Pakistan as well. In other venues, Pakistan's civilian and military elder statesmen have reflected on the need for the reassessment of Pakistan's strategic portfolio and decision making, particularly with respect to Afghanistan and the tactical use of violent non-state actors.

Compounding the risks of information and organization problems are gaps in communication. The increasing risk of error, miscalculation, and escalation owes itself to hazardously low levels of institutionalized bilateral communication between India and Pakistan. This inability to transmit and receive signals compounds the fog and friction

of crisis. Retired Foreign Secretary of Pakistan Riaz Khan argues that one lesson drawn from past crises is to institutionalize conflict management mechanisms for communication through hotlines, confidence building, arms control, and conflict resolution dialogues.

An unruly media that occasionally crosses ethical and professional boundaries can seize upon the shortage of institutionalized bilateral communication channels that can weather nationalist pressures. One chapter finds media amplification of hawkish narratives can intensify crises and spread disinformation, thereby increasing pressure on leaders.

On top of this all, ten years of conventional military and nuclear force modernization as well as changes in doctrine can enhance false optimism on both sides, intensify crises, trigger miscalculations and inadvertent escalation, and increase the probability of a war.

Some Silver Lining?

Despite the age of increasing uncertainty and risk, we do see two silver linings that have the potential to facilitate stability on the subcontinent.

First, increased exposure to risk indicates that China will play a greater role than in the past. Indeed, strategic South Asia can no longer be discussed in the absence of China. Its alliance-like relationships, economic footprint, forward military presence, and present or looming political influence effectively makes it an essential part of Southern Asian. Even as the United States competes with China in East Asia, it may see its presence in western Asia as positive and a net stabilizer, with a role to play in crisis management. And there is sporadic evidence that China does periodically and subtly apply pressure on Pakistan to reduce the instability caused by non-state actors. Alternately, some analysts consider that

in a future crisis China may not play a third-party stabilizer role but could become an active participant to large-scale South Asian war. The 2017 spike in China-India hostilities, particularly during the Doklam standoff, makes this scenario more plausible.

Second, should the United States choose to employ it, history offers a tried and tested U.S. crisis management "playbook" with mechanisms to dampen a crisis from spiraling out of control. These include: early warning of an impending terror attack, intelligence sharing to clarify to both states their intentions and capabilities, frequent high-level visits to both countries, private security or punitive commitments, public statements or evacuation calls that could impose economic pressure on both sides, and publicly encouraging confidence building measures after the de-escalation of a crisis.

Whether or not the United States is still willing to pull the brakes or China is willing to share the burdens of crisis management, the biggest challenges lie with India and Pakistan. Absent major reforms to redress deficiencies in intelligence, strategy, national security architecture, and bilateral communications, the risk — and associated costs — of another South Asian crisis will continue to rise.

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