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Introduction

The risks of nuclear war today are as high as they have ever been, and in ways far more complex and diverse than those faced by the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War. Events, attacks, incidents and mistakes in multiple regions by state and non-state actors could quickly spiral into a conflict with catastrophic nuclear consequences. The [Nuclear Crisis Group \(NCG\)](#)—a team of seasoned diplomats, military leaders and national security experts from nuclear-armed and allied countries working to reduce global nuclear risk—identified [four nuclear flashpoints](#), including Europe, the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea and South Asia.

On February 14, a terrorist attack against Indian security forces brought the important work of the NCG into clear relief. Military action by both India and Pakistan in response to the events in Balakot could easily have led to a wider conflict between the two nuclear-armed states. Counter to some expectations, however, the conflict did not escalate and instead was successfully managed in a short period of time. Why this happened, or more accurately, why things did not get worse is not yet clear. The fog of “war” and statements and misstatements by both governments leave much room for interpretation. The Western media has all but forgotten the events of February, but there may be important lessons to learn from the Balakot attack. These lessons could help prevent similar events, and help put in place additional capabilities to prevent future conflicts from turning out even worse than the events on and after February 14.

To shed some light on the issue, the NCG asked six respected analysts from the region and the United States to assess what they saw, what they think happened, and what lessons they take away from the Balakot incident. Their short essays are included here. The NCG will continue to engage these experts and to develop a more fulsome set of proposals to share with the governments of India and Pakistan, and with other states that can have an influence in the outcome of future conflicts.

Jon Wofsthal
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Balakot: the Strike Across the Line

Vice Admiral (ret.) Vijay Shankar

A former Chief Minister of the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir in the immediate wake of the February 26, 2019 Balakot strike by the Indian Airforce [remarked](#): “Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) hit Indian forces and claimed the attack. In turn, Indian forces hit JeM and owned that air strike.” The problem with this credulous statement, on the one hand, is that it persists in viewing a string of terrorist acts as one-offs; and on the other hand, it fails to discern the victim from the villain.

In distinguishing between victim of an act of terror and the terrorist, United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) [Resolution 51/210](#) of 1996 makes clear what defines the act: “Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other nature that may be invoked to justify them.” Furthermore, the [UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy](#) of 2006 enjoins member states “to refrain from organizing, instigating, facilitating, participating in, financing, encouraging or tolerating terrorist activities and to take...measures to ensure that...respective territories are not used for terrorist installations or training camps, or for the preparation or organization of terrorist acts intended to be committed against other States or their citizens.” The right to respond, pre-emptive or reactive, to an act of terror is enshrined in the same document.

Additionally, the Pulwama terror attack of February 14 being perceived as a ‘one-off’ is far more hazardous as it distorts any concept of response while at the same time skewing mass perception of the character of that act of terror. The Pulwama vehicular bombing must be seen as one of a series of terror attacks beginning with the assault on the Indian Parliament in December 2001, the atrocity of killing soldier’s families at Kaluchak in 2002, the terror attacks on Mumbai in 2008, the strikes on Pathankot and Uri in 2016 and now Pulwama. Incidentally, all these attacks were (as evidence indicates) planned in coordination with Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and executed by the Pakistan-based internationally outlawed terror outfit, the JeM. Restraint-in-response, which characterized the Indian military rejoinder to the Uri terror assault, has been replaced by cross-Line of Control (LoC) punitive strikes that were undertaken to move on the offensive, surgically hit designated terror targets, and return to base; all with speed and precision. Retribution for Pulwama was delivered by airpower that blinded and then sliced through Pakistan air defenses to deliver their

precision payloads deep in Pakistani territory to the terror infrastructure of the JeM at Balakot where over 300 new jihadi recruits reportedly were undergoing fidayeen training in preparation for attacks in India. For Pakistan, the awkward reality was that its two major benefactors, China and Saudi Arabia, did not back it. Was this another nail in the coffin for the Pakistani strategy of nurturing Islamist terror groups and militants as instruments to bleed India? Is the myth of waging unconventional warfare against the Indian State with impunity under the umbrella of nuclear weapons now standing on thin ice?

The following day, the Pakistan Air Force mounted a retaliatory air strike, which was thwarted by Indian air defences. It was not clear what the Pakistani targets were since they were unable to either strike any installations or penetrate defenses. In the skirmish, one Indian Mig-21 was shot down and its pilot captured while the Indian Air Force claimed downing a Pakistani F-16. It is hypothetical to speculate what the Indian reaction may have been had the Pakistani force package reached their targets. Within 48 hours, the captured Indian pilot was returned. It is possible this act served to defuse the situation but it is not clear whether the return was achieved through internal decision-making or external pressure.

It may be premature to analyze the lessons to be learned from the Balakot air strikes, particularly at the tactical or the operational level as there would be many. However, a macro evaluation suggests four salient takeaways:

First, there has been a strategic revisit of the Indian policy of restraint-in-response to terror attacks on India or its assets anywhere (remember the attack on the Indian consulate at Mazar-i-Sharif in 2016) by the JeM or any other Pakistan-sponsored jihadi groups. Hitherto, thinking at the highest levels of India's political leadership was influenced by the probability that any major trans-LoC strike using airpower would be deemed escalatory. Post-Balakot, the Indian military is less likely to be constrained by the Line or the border in conducting retaliatory precision strikes on non-military terror-related targets as long as it is clear that the Pakistan State is doctrinally, logistically, and materially behind these terror strikes.

Second, India is focused on targeting jihadi terror infrastructure. The dismantlement of those targets by Pakistan or by other means provides the first mechanism for negotiations between Delhi and Islamabad.

Third, the impact on other regional states and major international players not only set up a favourable environ for the furtherance of the campaign against terror but likewise energized Pakistan's immediate neighbours, who are also victims of state-sponsored terror, to take similar offensive action.

Four, the growing precision and briskness of intelligence—whether human, electronic, cyber, space-based, or through interstate cooperation—has enhanced the ability to plan and conduct surgical strikes against terror targets.

Addressing the issue of how best to manage a future occurrence begins with the understanding that India's pacific tolerance to terror attacks sponsored by Pakistan and emanating from their territory is not unlimited and will be rejoined by reactive or pre-emptive military action which may not be geographically restricted to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. In this perspective, that the Pakistan Army have backed jihadist groups and shielded wanted terrorists like Hafiz Sayyed, Dawood Ibrahim, and Masood Azar are well recognised facts. The real problem is that this duplicity, notoriously [dubbed](#) the strategy of a "thousand cuts," is part of the Pakistani establishment's policy. To dismantle the terror infrastructure in Pakistan that target India, and to bring to book jihadi terror groups, such as JeM or Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), would greatly serve the interest of averting the prospects of recurrence. In the long term, there is no getting away from the pressing need for civil control of the Pakistan deep state (ISI-military combine).

On the issue of the absence of escalation, two considerations may have played a part. First, the nature of the air strikes were [designated](#) by the Indian Government as "pre-emptive" air strikes directed against non-military terror infrastructure. The strikes were limited in scope, intensity, and time. Second, the terror averse international environment and the persuasive powers of the United States and Saudi Arabia appear to have been at play. Both states hold Pakistan's economic jugular at a time when the Pakistani economy is in a quagmire. The reluctance of China either to support Pakistan or to get involved must have been a dampener to any thought by Pakistan to further escalate. From the nuclear stand point, there was neither rhetoric nor any reported attempt to reach for the trigger by either side. This may be an indication of a developing balance and perspicacity as to where nuclear thresholds lie on both sides.

The Balakot air strikes are far too recent for all verified facts to have emerged and, therefore, to stitch together an exhaustive analysis may not be a practical proposition currently. Yet the significance of the incident is very apparent, for it revolves around one notable condition of the international milieu: how long can the global community endure the presence of a state that nurtures and sponsors terrorism so much so that it is today considered the epicentre of global terrorism?

India-Pakistan Conflict

Jehangir Karamat

The suicide attack on India's paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in Kashmir's Pulwama district exposed the sharp fault-lines between two nuclear weapon countries—India and Pakistan. The attack pushed the two states to the brink of war and raised the question of space under the nuclear umbrella for a limited conflict—an unthinkable option given the asymmetry in conventional capabilities.

India's retaliatory air strikes on alleged militant camps inside mainland Pakistan have redefined the conflict threshold. In 1999, even at the height of the Kargil crisis between the two states, the Indian Air Force did not cross the Line of Control. Indian air strikes now signal a qualitative shift in the Indian position from the strategy of deterrence by denial to deterrence by punishment—a dangerous development. Consequently, this will result in a new unstable equilibrium, lowering the threshold of a low-intensity, limited conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. The absence of any functional crisis management mechanism or a joint investigation structure increases the probability of conflict and its unpredictable escalation.

The United States' and the international community's response to the Pulwama attack and its aftermath is also pertinent. Instead of urging both India and Pakistan to desist from escalation, the U.S. and the international community [acknowledged](#) India's right of self-defense. De-escalation was urged only after Indian air strikes inside Pakistan and Pakistan's deadly response drove home the danger of spiraling unintended escalation between states with deliverable nuclear weapons. Barring China, no other country condemned India's violation of Pakistani sovereignty. This will have long-term implications on strategic stability and balance of power in South Asia.

The use of a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) to hit a military convoy in a highly militarized zone like Kashmir shows enhanced operational capabilities in the Kashmiris struggling for freedom. Accumulating 80 kilograms of highly explosive 'RDX' and preparing a VBIED indicates considerable new expertise. The suicide bomber was a local Kashmiri, and had probably been recruited by exploiting his anger and quest for revenge against the Indian state to serve the agenda of 'liberating' Kashmir. Violence has risen in Kashmir making it a dangerous flashpoint. Pakistan has taken kinetic and nonkinetic measures against militant groups but the root cause of the conflict in Kashmir needs to be addressed by India. The realization

should dawn on all nuclear weapon countries that you cannot have unresolved issues between nuclear weapon countries and an absence of dialogue—a situation that can trigger conflict. The attack in Sri Lanka on April 21 has highlighted how external forces can exploit local resources to trigger events.

A structured unconditional dialogue between India and Pakistan, beyond proxy warfare, will have to dispassionately discuss the security challenges arising out of various terrorist groups operating in the region. India and Pakistan should work to create joint counterterrorism and counterextremism frameworks to overcome the challenge of militancy beyond the blame game of who did what to whom. A joint investigative mechanism triggered immediately after an incident could prevent dangerous escalation and exploitation for political purposes.

The Pulwama attack and its aftermath put the Kashmir issue center stage as a core dispute between India and Pakistan and a nuclear flashpoint that needs serious international attention. It also highlighted the critical importance of a robust crisis management structure between India and Pakistan and perhaps discussion on a future strategic restraint regime.

Lessons from the Indo-Pak Crisis Triggered by Pulwama

Manpreet Sethi

Pakistan's continued use of terrorists nurtured and supported in camps situated within its territory and equipped and trained by its military and intelligence is no secret. Terrorist cadres are available in plenty and serve as a low cost tool for Rawalpindi in its strategy of bleeding India. They require minimum training—as little as two to eight weeks, depending on the operation they are tasked with. Since its acquisition of nuclear weapons, Pakistan has been further emboldened to use this instrument with immunity premised on the belief that nuclear weapons blunt India's conventional superiority due to fear of escalation to the nuclear level. So, Pakistani thinking goes, a nuclear strategy that projects a low nuclear threshold at a high decibel level serves to deter India and attract external action, thereby freeing Pakistan from risk of retaliation.

Indeed, this is how the situation panned out for most of the last two decades. India's response to terrorism was largely through defensive measures such as better intelligence, improved border fencing, interdiction, or through eco-diplomatic actions to name, shame and isolate Pakistan. Offensive military action was avoided. While Pakistan assumed this was for fear of escalation, India explained it as avoiding digression from economic growth, though the predominant use of soft measures did lead to buildup of frustration and anger within the country.

When the terrorist strike took place in Pulwama in February 2019 causing over 40 fatalities, India chose a more offensive line of action. Indian Air Force (IAF) fighters struck terrorist bases inside Pakistan—beyond Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. This was a bold action, but it was also carefully calibrated with precise intelligence to hit only the terrorists—not the Pakistani military or civilian population. Pakistan responded with an air attack of its own on Indian military targets. It is unclear whether they actually hit their targets or were deliberately made to be off-target. The situation thereafter was dominated by the capture and return of an IAF pilot who ejected over Pakistani territory while engaged in a dogfight with intruding Pakistan Air Force (PAF) aircraft.

Since the return of the Indian pilot, the crisis has stabilized for now. But there are several lessons to be learned from this episode by India, Pakistan, and the international community since such situations will continue to arise while terrorism and its support structure remain intact in Pakistan.

An Indian surgical strike (as in [2016](#)) or air strike (as in 2019) can never suffice to change Pakistani behavior. Therefore, the import of these actions does not lie in the number of casualties or extent of debris that they create. Rather, their significance is in demonstrating a menu of military options that India can calibrate to inflict punishment while minimizing risk of crisis intensification. Of course, escalation will remain a function of the Pakistani response. But Pakistan can make a choice (as it seems to have done in both cases) to exercise restraint and not expand the scope of conflict.

Balakot exposed the limits of a nuclear brinkmanship strategy. Not only did India demonstrate there was room for conventional response, it also rather uncharacteristically, did not shy away from manipulating the risk of war. Equally uncharacteristically, Pakistan refrained from overt nuclear signaling (notwithstanding the meeting of the National Command Authority or the Pakistani Prime Minister's reminder of possession of certain weapons by both). Wanting to appear responsible and to deflect the negative attention it was already getting for Pulwama, Pakistan chose not to overplay its nuclear card, even as the Indian Navy [announced](#) "The major combat units of the Indian Navy including the Carrier Battle Group with INS Vikramaditya, nuclear submarines and scores of other ships, submarines and aircraft swiftly transited from exercise to operational deployment mode..." (The term "nuclear submarines" here refers to the INS Chakra, the nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN); and the INS Arihant, the strategic strike ballistic missile submarine (SSBN).) India's military action was clearly meant to put pressure on Pakistan and to expose the nonusability of nuclear weapons. India was signaling to Pakistan that it could not exploit the risk of escalation after having created a crisis, but that it must take accountability for having done so in the first place, and share responsibility for its de-escalation. Therefore, India refused to bear the burden of reduction in tensions alone and chose not to blink at the threat of further escalation.

This was the first such behavior by India since 1998. But it would be erroneous to draw the lesson that the dangers inherent in the possibility of escalation were taken casually. In fact, it is evident that both countries understood the significance of geographical contiguity and nuclear weapons. India's intelligent choice of target, and Pakistan's prudent drop of ordnance demonstrated action and yet restraint. However, one challenge that revealed itself in both countries was the presence of a voluble media and expression of high emotions on social platforms. Governments will have to find ways of controlling these so as not to be sucked into a commitment trap engineered by media articulations.

Lastly, the role of the United States and China cannot be underestimated. Contrary to the earlier more visible interventions of the United States, this time the Trump administration adopted a less public mode of diplomacy. India's "right to self-defense" was [acknowledged](#) after Pulwama by U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton but pressure on Pakistan was wielded more silently. Given the U.S.-Pakistan relationship is not what it used to be, this was perhaps just as well to allow Islamabad to save face. China too, though this may never become public, would have counseled restraint to Pakistan. Its increased investments in Pakistan have surely increased its vulnerabilities too and it certainly has a lot more leverage on Islamabad/Rawalpindi today than

any other nation. In the absence of any direct crisis management mechanisms between India and Pakistan, the use of external players will continue to be important during times of high tension. But, in periods of cold peace too, it would be useful for the international community to use positive and negative tools to get Pakistan to drop its support for terrorism. Only then can both countries, as also others, live without the fear of another Pulwama and Balakot.

Understanding De-escalation After Balakot Strikes

Sadia Tasleem

The post-Pulwama crisis between India and Pakistan is the most serious in the collective memory of an entire generation of young Indians and Pakistanis. In the week that followed India's air strike on February 26, 2019 inside Pakistani territory, the fear of war between India and Pakistan seemed real and proximate. The closing down of airspace on both sides, fighter jets hovering around in wee hours, motorways converted into runways for fighter planes, circulation of what-to-do text messages containing information about civil defense, troops mobilized and officers on leave called back to duty only accentuated the ugly possibility of war. What then accounts for the de-escalation that followed, and what lessons need to be learned in order to prevent a future crisis are important questions to be addressed.

Some serving and former officials in Pakistan have identified luck as an important factor behind de-escalation. This assertion appears close to reality. The aerial bombing in Jabba near Balakot by the Indian Air Force (IAF) was a clear violation of Pakistan's airspace and therefore its territorial sovereignty. The fact that the strikes failed to claim any lives and damage to the infrastructure provided Pakistan sufficient leverage to downplay the impact of the Indian military action at home. What if the Indian bombs had hit the intended target? What if a large number of people, civilian or military, had died in that strike? The bombs missed the target and landed in a forest. What if the bombs had landed in the heavily populated town of Balakot?

Pakistan's limited, calculated response—that [called](#) for bombing empty spaces near the supply depots—only satisfied the masses as well as the distressed troops manning the Line of Control because there were neither casualties nor any significant damage caused by the IAF inside Pakistani territory. Likewise, hitting the empty spaces didn't trouble many on the Indian side. But what if the Pakistani bombs had fallen on an ammunition depot or a military camp?

These and many other "ifs" help establish how luck became instrumental in de-escalation. What if the Indian pilot chasing Pakistan's fighter jets had died during the dogfight or was murdered by a mob with video footage of the killing released on social media?

With luck favoring peace, few other factors helped in de-escalation, including India's domestic political

considerations, Pakistan's financial and foreign policy compulsions, and the fog in the information domain. The domestic political imperatives that motivated the Indian Prime Minister to pursue aggressive action against Pakistan also in some ways constrained his response in the aftermath of losing a fighter jet, and a fighter pilot ending up in Pakistan's possession. The likely political cost of further escalation dampened the willingness to take risk.

In Pakistan, the concerns regarding the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) [review](#) of Pakistan's performance on terror financing and Pakistan's economic challenges, in all likelihood, convinced the Pakistani military and political leadership to pursue conciliatory steps after winning a tactical victory in the dogfight between the IAF and the Pakistan Air Force (PAF). In that victory, Pakistan released the IAF pilot without even waiting for the Indian government to put up a formal request. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan made public commitments to take action against all the militant outfits using Pakistani soil. He also reiterated his willingness to talk to India on every outstanding issue between the two states, including terrorism.

Will Pakistan's compulsions always have a restraining effect on Pakistan's crisis behavior? Not necessarily. Also, the fog in the information domain, with both sides making claims and counterclaims about their actions and the damage inflicted on the adversary with dubious evidence, made it possible to shape domestic narratives in their favor. Information control is a tricky business, particularly in the contemporary world. In a future crisis, it might have a contrary effect.

It is worrisome to note that all the factors that contributed to de-escalation in this crisis have an equally compelling escalatory potential—be it luck, domestic politics, foreign policy calculations, or the control over information or lack of it. Things could have easily gotten worse instead of better, with unpredictable results. More disconcerting is the fact that the post-crisis conversations in both India and Pakistan have drifted from critical issues to tactical concerns like the bomb [damage assessments](#) in the Balakot strikes and veracity of Indian [claims](#) about destroying a Pakistani F-16.

The conversations that move beyond these questions also reflect a deep disconnect between the crisis time realities and the retrospective reading of the crisis. In Pakistan, the euphoria of Pakistan's 'strong military response' is giving birth to contestable assumptions of Pakistan's ability to dominate escalation. This overconfidence can generate incentives for costly adventures in the future.

In India, the notion of a '[new military normal](#)' along with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's loud [rhetoric](#) about nuclear weapons in his election campaign is pushing him into a commitment trap.

A sober analysis of the new reality is urgent but missing. The assumption, now shared by both sides, that escalation can be managed, dominated, and controlled would tremendously increase the incentives for arms buildup as well as the risk of war in South Asia.

Can the future of the two South Asian nations and the rest of the world be left to luck, the whims of the domestic politics, or poor post-crisis analysis? What can be done to prevent escalation in the future?

Promoting a realistic appraisal of the recent crisis that moves beyond narrow military calculations to a broader discussion on all aspects of crisis escalation as well as de-escalation is essential. It will help the leadership on both sides understand the fragility of control that decision-makers can exercise during a crisis.

It is also important to institute means that could help promote civilized discourse on militarism and nuclear weapons. Brandishing nuclear weapons or war for domestic political gains should be condemned widely by the international community. An awareness campaign in this regard would help brand such practices as taboo. Civil society has a role to play here, contributing in a way that more and more states with nuclear weapons seem reluctant to do.

Also, the international community needs to work with India and Pakistan to address all the challenges that cause recurring crisis between the two states.

Will these steps prevent a future crisis? There is no guarantee. But these steps, if taken, may discourage the leadership in India and Pakistan to contemplate military adventures.

Signaling and Catalysis in Future Nuclear Crises in South Asia: Two Questions after the Balakot Episode

Toby Dalton

The February 2019 Balakot episode in South Asia started with a familiar predicate: an attack in Indian Kashmir, [purportedly claimed](#) by the Pakistan-based militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), that killed scores of Indian security personnel. In the following days, amidst the typical overheated political rhetoric compounded by proximity to Indian general elections, India conducted a limited cross-border air strike on what it called a JeM training facility. Pakistan then carried out its own cross-border air strikes “in open space,” which began an aerial duel that downed an Indian jet and led to Pakistan’s capture of the pilot. And, in the heat of the moment, Pakistan convened a meeting of its nuclear commanders amidst rumors of Indian threats to escalate with a missile attack. As the dust has settled in the weeks since, analysts are debating whether the limited escalations witnessed during the Balakot episode have meaning for future crises and the risk that they may, as Balakot did not, escalate to use of nuclear weapons. This analysis focuses narrowly on two relevant questions: First, does the Balakot episode change views in Delhi and Islamabad about what is required to generate deterrence and about thresholds for conflict escalation? And second, what does the limited nuclear dimension of the episode indicate about catalytic signaling?

The regularity of Pakistan-sourced or abetted attacks on Indian military and police forces in Indian Kashmir over decades demonstrates clearly that India is not able to exercise deterrence by denial at a sub-conventional level of conflict. Partly this reflects certain geographic challenges that limit the effectiveness of border management. But in the last five years in particular, the Indian government’s repressive policies against the Kashmiri population and the increased indigenization of Kashmiri militancy also contributed to this problem. It is also clear from numerous episodes since the 2008 attacks in Mumbai that [coercive threats](#) by India do not have a decisive effect on Pakistan’s tolerance or support of non-state groups that carry out attacks in India. Neither Indian military actions, such as the Balakot air attack or the 2016 “surgical strikes,” nor economic pressure or other measures such as withholding water from the Indus River, have led Pakistan to change behavior.

India has not lacked for rhetorical effort to compel Pakistani leaders to restrain cross-border terrorism. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi threatened “a fitting response” for the Pulwama attack, [stating](#) “This is an India of new convention and policy,” a posture which Indian analysts subsequently [branded](#) the

“new normal.” Previously, following the 2016 terror attack in Uri, Modi had [declared](#), “blood and water cannot flow together” in relation to Pakistan’s share of water from the Indus River. Former Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar even [suggested](#) in 2018 that India should “remove a thorn with a thorn,” widely interpreted as a threat to sponsor terrorism in Pakistan. But such statements, to the extent they were intended for external signaling, have not really changed Pakistani’s calculus regarding India. Until Balakot, Pakistanis tended to believe both that India would not engage in diplomatic compromise over Kashmir or risk military escalation from the sub-conventional level because the potential costs outweigh the stakes involved. Modi and his Army Chief, General Bipin Rawat, are seeking to change this image of India, but can increasingly [cavalier threats](#) shift the needle on Pakistani perceptions of India’s propensity to escalate? Robert Jervis once [observed](#) of this predicament, “More important in politics is the belief that the other’s signals ... have no value in predicting his later behavior. His signals cannot change his image.” In sum, Modi’s threats are not universally interpreted in Pakistan as signals of fundamentally different behavior either in diplomacy or in a future crisis.

If Indian deterrent threats are bluster not backed by military commitment, then the established pattern of past crises is likely to continue, with neither side prepared to escalate much beyond limited retaliatory strikes that meet minimal political objectives to demonstrate resolve. But if Pakistan has misinterpreted Indian signals—if India were actually willing to, for instance, put boots on Pakistani soil in response to a future large-scale terror attack—then military escalation approaching the threshold that might see use of nuclear weapons is possible. There is real risk that, in a future crisis, signals intended to generate deterrence will be misinterpreted or downplayed, ensnaring civilian and military leaders in both states into commitment traps from which they will have a difficult time extricating themselves.

In this regard, media reporting after the Balakot episode about possible India missile threats is highly relevant. The [missile claims](#) appear to originate with intelligence from Pakistan and shared with the P-5, purporting that Indian officials had threatened to launch missiles at a half-dozen or more sites in Pakistan. (Indian government officials [rejected](#) this reporting at the time, though on the [campaign trail](#) Prime Minister Modi has given it some credence. The reporting [remains](#) incomplete at best.) As a potential signal of military commitment for deterrence purposes, unleashing missiles would be a major deviation from the pattern of past crises. Notwithstanding the facts of the case, however, there seems to be a shared view among some prominent thinkers in both countries that neither should cross the missile threshold because of dangers deriving from conventional/nuclear ambiguity. For instance, the Pakistani strategic affairs analyst Ejaz Haider [argues](#) an exchange of missiles would have “remarkable escalation potential.” “Missilery between nuclear powers is a big no,” he concludes. Indian journalist Shekhar Gupta [agrees](#), contending that, “Both sides know the implications of launching even one ballistic missile.... That is why all ballistic missiles, in both countries, have been taken away from conventional forces and put under the charge of their respective strategic forces commands.”

Aside from the purported missile threats, one other signal during the Balakot episode deserves scrutiny. On February 27, the day it carried out retaliatory air strikes across the Line of Control resulting in the aerial dogfight and downing of the Indian MiG-21, Pakistan convened a meeting of the National Command Authority (NCA), its nuclear decision-making body. Pakistani media reported that the meeting would take place, but as [noted](#) in a Dawn article, this was the first publicly announced meeting of the NCA in its 19-year history to conclude without a corresponding press release. The only official [statement](#) about the meeting came from the Director General of Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations, who alluded to the nuclear angle with the not-so-cryptic suggestion, "I hope you know what the National Command Authority means..." The signaling effect of publicizing the fact of the meeting but not releasing any statement of conclusions is unclear. The Dawn report speculated, presumably based on whispers from official sources, "It is believed that the silence after the NCA meeting was also a signal to the Western audience that time is running out for an intervention for de-escalation of the situation."

Do Pakistani nuclear signals still serve catalytic purposes during crises to increase concern and draw attention from external powers? Clearly some in Pakistan believe so, notwithstanding a broad sentiment in the international community that India is in its right to retaliate against terrorist groups. In the past, Pakistan used nuclear signals to encourage Washington to intervene, perhaps also to rehyphenate Indo-Pak as a policy problem in important capitals. But with the United States more clearly siding with India in recent years, such nuclear signaling seems unlikely to produce the same result. Here, too, evidence of effective catalysis during the Balakot episode is lacking, though more information may yet emerge. In the end, de-escalation after the events on February 27 looks to have occurred less because of outside intervention, and more due to a political calculus that left both Indian and Pakistani leaderships sufficiently satisfied with the status quo.

Will the next South Asia episode follow a similar arc? On the basis of current evidence, probably. Yet changing politics and attitudes in India in favor of more muscular regional policies, and evolving military technologies in both India and Pakistan mean the South Asian conflict space is far from static. The propensity is high for signals to be misinterpreted and risks miscalculated. Before the next crisis, policy analysts, scholars, and officials from the region and beyond should assess in particular how signals were conveyed during this episode, what the senders intended, how the receivers interpreted them, and what that implies for escalation management. Leaders in India and Pakistan must also evaluate critically the potential for their rhetoric during this episode to exacerbate commitment traps. Neither Delhi nor Islamabad should count on accurate signaling or outside intervention to arrest a future crisis that escalates beyond existing thresholds.

Pulwama and its Aftermath: Four Observations

Vipin Narang

On February 14, 2019, a young Kashmir boy Adil Ahmad Dar drove a minivan laden with RDX explosives into a bus carrying forces from India's Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), killing over 40 security personnel. It was the costliest attack in India's Jammu and Kashmir in decades. A militant organization based in Pakistan, the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), immediately took credit for the attack, touching off a debate in India about how to retaliate. The fact of retaliation against Pakistan was a foregone conclusion, the question was what form it would take this time under a Prime Minister Narendra Modi who had [promised](#) to hit back against terrorists "with interest." Following previous attacks against security personnel, India had responded with a variety of options across the Line of Control (LoC) such as increased shelling of Pakistani positions or insertion of special forces just across the line.

On February 26, Modi deviated from that blueprint and authorized the Indian Air Force (IAF) to hit a purported JeM camp outside Balakot, a village in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in mainland Pakistan. India framed the retaliation as preemptive and calibrated—a precision strike that did not target or kill Pakistani civilians or military personnel. Lingering questions about whether the IAF in fact successfully hit the structures remain. Nevertheless, it was the first time since the 1971 war that India had used airpower against mainland Pakistan, representing a significant escalation in the menu of options India may select for retaliation. The next day, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) retaliated by crossing the LoC itself and dropping munitions just short of Indian military installations. The IAF scrambled a package of aircraft to engage the PAF retaliation, but lost a MiG-21 Bison in the process and killed one of its own Mi-17 helicopters in a tragic friendly fire incident. The IAF [claims](#) it killed a PAF F-16 in the engagement, based on circumstantial evidence, but doubts [remain](#) about this claim following a U.S. Department of Defense audit that accounted for all Pakistani F-16s. The crisis was on the precipice of escalating, but the captured IAF pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman—who luckily survived ejection and capture—was expeditiously returned to India and both sides refrained from kinetic escalation after that.

What are the lessons of Pulwama and its aftermath? Here, I identify four main observations that complicate the prevailing narrative that both sides were able to get their shot in during their retaliations and successfully de-escalate without risking nuclear escalation.

First, the Pulwama attack was not only a one-off, as all the ingredients for such attacks in Kashmir to continue and to intensify are present. Dar was a Kashmiri boy, an Indian citizen. The fact that he was susceptible to radicalization and capable of driving a minivan full of military grade explosives into a bus carrying his country's own security forces in a suicide attack should be very troubling to Indian intelligence and security services. The widespread disaffection of Kashmiri youth against the Indian government is both a tragic and longstanding political failure. This disaffection is one that Pakistan-based militant groups such as JeM, or its cousin organization the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), are more than happy to exploit for their own purposes and agenda. There is a vexing question about why JeM so quickly took credit for the attack, immediately switching attention away from the fact that Dar was an Indian citizen to the attack being Pakistan-backed. Was JeM trying to announce its return as a formidable force, compete with the LeT for recruits and attention from the Pakistani security services, or start a war between India and Pakistan? Whatever the answer, it does not bode well for preventing future attacks in Kashmir given the growing disaffection amongst the local population coupled with opportunistic and highly capable Pakistani militant organizations across the border. Attacks like these will almost certainly occur again.

Second, India's retaliation represented a significant escalation in its response options. As noted above, the IAF strike on the purported JeM camp at Balakot was the first time in almost half a century that India used force on mainland Pakistan, as opposed to Pakistan-held Kashmir. Although doubts [remain](#) about how [successful](#) the strike was, India demonstrated a resolve—even if there were questionable results—to up the ante in its retaliation. The aim of this escalated response was to try to impose greater costs on Pakistan and militant organizations for sponsoring attacks against India. The risk is that future attacks may force Modi or subsequent Indian Prime Ministers to go even bigger on the theory that even this cost was not enough. Next time, the retaliation may be in Pakistan's Punjab rather than the hills of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Injecting that uncertainty into the Pakistani calculation appears to be a major aim of this retaliation, and, to a large extent, demonstrating India is willing to cross lines it previously refrained from—hitting mainland Pakistan but in a calibrated way: not targeting an urban center and firing from the LoC theater rather than across the formal international border—shows India is probing more escalatory response options.

Third, the problem for the IAF is that in attempting to raise the ante for Pakistan, resolve without results may not have quite established the deterrent it was aiming for. Although the Indian armed forces could likely overwhelm Pakistan in a long war, in short engagements Pakistan is very capable of imposing costs on India as well. Pakistan did not allow India to hit its mainland without retaliation and on the very next day, in broad daylight, a PAF strike package composed of Mirage and F-16 aircraft crossed the LoC and dropped munitions just short of Indian military installations. Whether this was intentionally short or not is unclear. The IAF was forced to engage the PAF strike package with some Su-30s but also ancient (though upgraded) MiG-21 Bisons, which is ultimately a 1970s-vintage aircraft. The IAF lost one Bison, and shot down one of its own Mi-17 helicopters in a friendly fire incident. In this short engagement, the IAF paid the price for having to rely on old equipment and equipment from multiple foreign sources. The IAF's strike at Balakot appears to have been, at

best, a limited success but resulted in significant Indian losses in the subsequent PAF retaliation without India being able to impose any collateral costs. Thus, this attack appears to amount to resolve without results, something that may embolden Pakistan in the future, or at least limit the deterrent value of India's decision to escalate at Balakot.

Fourth, and most worryingly, the prevailing narrative in South Asia is that escalation is easy, and easy to control. It appears that both sides believe they can now get significant kinetic shots in and walk away relatively unscathed. This is a dangerous misreading of Pulwama and its aftermath. This crisis was a hop, a skip and a couple bad breaks away from serious escalation. What if Abhinandan had been killed while he ejected, or died in Pakistani custody? What if the PAF had accidentally hit a civilian target as it was dropping its munitions? Modi himself later [confirmed](#) that India was preparing a package of surface-to-surface missile strikes if Abhinandan had not been expeditiously returned. That would have represented an unprecedented escalation and forced Pakistan to respond in kind, and who knows where that would have ended. Just hinting at this raises the stakes for the next conflict.

India and Pakistan were some distance away from nuclear weapons being salient, since only when ground forces get mobilized or moving would the risk really rise sharply. But it is not difficult to imagine how the crisis could have ended up there—one wrong move by either state could have certainly escalated the crisis. And even then, there was loose nuclear talk on both sides. Pakistan's military spokesperson [noted](#) after the Balakot strike that Pakistan was convening the National Command Authority (NCA) saying, "you know what that means," clearly reminding India and the world that the NCA is responsible for Pakistan's nuclear weapons. India was also intentionally ambiguous about claiming that it deployed India's nuclear-armed submarine, the INS Arihant, during the crisis, with the Indian Navy officially [stating](#) that India's "nuclear submarines" were deployed as the crisis intensified. India has only two nuclear submarines, the conventional INS Chakra and the nuclear-armed INS Arihant. It would neither confirm nor deny that the Arihant was specifically deployed and exploited the ambiguity for deterrence purposes but also for plausible deniability. If the Arihant was in fact deployed, with nuclear weapons aboard, it would possibly represent the first time in Indian history that a fully ready nuclear system was assembled and deployed during a crisis with Pakistan. On the campaign trail, Modi [amplified](#) the nuclear threat by claiming that India also has a nuclear button: "Have we kept our nuclear bomb for Diwali?" Such loose talk about nuclear weapons on both sides is dangerous for future crises because both may now anticipate the other readying or deploying nuclear forces far earlier than previously anticipated in South Asia crises.

In sum, crises such as Pulwama and its aftermath are almost certainly going to occur again for purely domestic political reasons—continued disaffection in the local Kashmiri population, exploited by opportunistic militant organizations in Pakistan. India's expansion of its retaliatory portfolio with standoff strikes into mainland Pakistan is aimed to re-establish deterrence against such attacks. But resolve without clear results may have the dangerous effect of emboldening Pakistan instead of deterring it. Finally, contrary to the lessons

that seem to be internalized in both Delhi and Islamabad, this crisis showed how rounds of escalation have the potential to precariously spiral out of control, where nuclear weapons may end up being salient. Neither side was chastened by this crisis. Both sides seem to have walked away optimistic about how they performed—and both cling to the evidence that supports that optimism. This has the perverse effect of potentially incentivizing both to raise the ante the next time there is a similar crisis, a very scary prospect.

The Way Forward

The Balakot incident briefly brought international focus to one of the dangers of escalation in one of the hottest nuclear flashpoints. The analysis and lessons provided in this brief can help to understand how internal and external factors contribute to conflict escalation and de-escalation, providing insight essential to decreasing the already unacceptably high risk that a nuclear weapon will be used in a conflict.

It is important for India and Pakistan to resume sustained senior-level strategic and regional stability talks to increase transparency, build trust and confidence between the two countries, and institute crisis management mechanisms to prevent future crises from spiralling to direct military conflict or war.

In June 2017, the Nuclear Crisis Group released [Urgent Steps to De-Escalate Nuclear Flashpoints](#) -- a set of timely recommendations to increase stability and reduce the risk that nuclear weapons will be used by accident, miscalculation or intent.

Immediate Steps:

- Joint declaration that both states seek to avoid the use of nuclear weapons;
- Full implementation and enhancing of hotline agreements between national and military leadership;
- Establishment of bilateral norms of nuclear weapons safety and security and discuss exchanges of verifying information;
- Discussions on modalities and function of nuclear risk reduction centers, possibly using commercially available satellite photography provided by both or third parties;
- Discussions on a broader bilateral or multilateral nuclear test moratorium;
- Enhancement of existing agreements on notification of nuclear theft or loss of control; and
- Expansion of the non-attack agreement to cover all nuclear facilities, military and civilian.

Lastly, India and Pakistan must both urgently reduce the risk of miscalculation and guard against accidental nuclear detonation or unauthorized access by committing to the non-deployment and non-assembly of land- and air-based nuclear weapons.