

From Kargil to Pulwama: How Nuclear Crises Have Changed Over 20 Years

Twenty years ago, India and Pakistan fought the second-ever armed conflict between nuclear powers. Earlier this year, the two rivals engaged in the first-ever exchange of airstrikes between such states. With a few wars, half a dozen major crises as well as numerous minor ones between them, India and Pakistan are of central importance for anyone seeking to understand the uses and limits of statecraft and force among nuclear powers.

The two countries have been competing with one another since they gained independence in 1947. That competition has most often escalated to conflict in the historic region of Kashmir, an area now divided among India (Jammu and Kashmir), Pakistan (Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan), and China (Aksai Chin and the Shaksgam Valley)—all of it disputed. The Indian- and Pakistani-administered portions are divided by the Line of Control (LoC) and on India's side of the Line lies the Kashmir Valley, the most deeply-contested piece of a deeply-contested region. An indigenous insurgency erupted there in the late 1980s and Pakistan moved quickly to exert influence over its organization, aims, and tactics. Militants often receive training in Pakistan before crossing the LoC to stage attacks in India, regularly sparking crises between the two capitals.

So the stage was set for a “Pulwama Crisis” when a suicide attacker drove an explosives-laden vehicle into a paramilitary convoy this winter near a town by that name. The February 14, 2019 attack was the deadliest of the three-

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decades-long insurgency in the Kashmir Valley. At least 40 were killed and a Pakistan-based militant group quickly claimed responsibility. Unlike previous Indo-Pakistani crises in 2001-02, 2008, and 2016, this time the two sides engaged in significant, conspicuous conventional engagements against one another. For a brief period, the risk of another war between the two countries appeared uncomfortably high.

This article assesses the recent Pulwama crisis in light of the Kargil conflict 20 years earlier. The first section examines how the two cases began, focusing on the individual identities and organizational affiliations of the attackers, and how these likely affected India's ability to justify forceful responses. The second section looks at how Pulwama and Kargil each unfolded, detailing what types of escalation occurred, by what pathways, and with what levels of confidence about escalation control. The third section turns to how the two cases ended, examining the respective performances of the two sides' civilian leaders, the role of third-party mediators, and the results on the battlefield. The article concludes with what developments over the past 20 years suggest we might expect in future regional crises.

The initial Pulwama attack was by an Indian Kashmiri.

How the Crisis Began

The identity of the attacker in Pulwama was surprising. While most large-scale militant attacks in the Kashmir Valley have been conducted by Pakistani nationals, the February 2019 attack was conducted by an Indian Kashmiri. Twenty-year-old Adil Ahmad Dar was

from a village near where he struck the convoy, and according to his parents, he was initially radicalized after being stopped and beaten in 2016 on suspicion of throwing stones at Indian security personnel. He was detained on five more occasions before the attack.¹

While Pakistani support has been central to the Kashmiri insurgency from its earliest days, local anger and activity against Indian rule has seen a dramatic rise over recent years. This has particularly been the case since Indian security forces killed a popular local militant leader in a July 2016 gun battle.² Local alienation is nonetheless often channeled by and through Pakistan-based militant groups. One of them, *Jaish-e-Mohammed* (Army of Mohammed), claimed responsibility for the Pulwama attack and released a video Dar had made in which he stated his membership in the group and his plan for the upcoming attack.³

This represents a significant change from Kargil 20 years ago. The incursions that kicked off that conflict were conducted by members of Pakistan's then-

paramilitary Northern Light Infantry. Though administratively located under the Ministry of the Interior at the time, these forces were official personnel, recruited from the far north of the country, and commanded by Pakistan Army regulars. Following the conflict, in recognition of its impressive performance, the formation was inducted into the Pakistan Army and granted the status of an infantry regiment. When locals alerted Indian forces to the presence of these strangers in the area, Indian commanders mistakenly assumed the men were *mujahedin*, part of the regular ebb and flow of irregular fighters who move back and forth across the Line of Control. Pakistan in turn maintained that ruse for as long as possible, hoping to forestall international criticism for what was in fact an official operation conducted by official personnel. Several weeks into the conflict, however, Indian forces began finding evidence of the men's true identities and displayed it to the Indian and international press.

The individual identities and organizational affiliations of the attackers affect how easy or difficult it is for India to hold Pakistan responsible for an action. The more directly and obviously Pakistan is involved in an attack, the simpler India's task. Overt efforts by official Pakistani forces make attribution simple; covert efforts that fail to stay covert are also relatively straightforward; attacks by Pakistani nationals, whether claimed or not by Pakistan-based militant groups, make neat attribution a bit harder; and most recently, attacks by Indian nationals claimed by a Pakistan-based group make it harder still. The more complicated the attribution process for an attack, the more complicated it is for India to justify a forceful response.

The trend has been moving away from easy attribution. Pakistani leaders have not launched an overt attack against India with official forces in almost 50 years, when the last such effort resulted in the dismemberment of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. And they have not tried a large-scale covert attack in 20 years, when the last such attempt resulted in the country's humiliating withdrawal from Kargil in 1999. Most efforts have been by Pakistani irregulars instead, with spectacular attacks typically claimed by one or more of the Pakistan-based groups. The attack at Pulwama was the first high-profile strike by an Indian national, and was promptly claimed by *Jaish*. While an Indian has yet to conduct a high-visibility attack independently, or at least without one of the groups claiming responsibility, that could change in the future.

A key takeaway from Pulwama is thus that local Kashmiris—not just cross-border militants—can spark conflicts, including those that neither state wants. Indian leaders have de-emphasized the importance of being able to attribute specific attacks to elements of the Pakistani state and have tried to focus attention instead on Pakistan's ongoing general sponsorship of militant groups. New Delhi will likely continue to blame Pakistan for any military attack on Indian territory, regardless of the identity of the perpetrator or the claimed involvement of

Pakistan-based militant organizations. This in turn limits Indian leaders' flexibility following attacks and could force them into taking destabilizing actions they may not otherwise be inclined to take.

A question remains why *Jaish* claimed responsibility for the Pulwama attack in the first place, and how the crisis would have unfolded if it had not done so—indeed, whether the crisis would have occurred at all. Militant groups have incentives to “outbid” one another to signal strength in the competition for recruits and funding, particularly as more extreme groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State establish themselves in the area.⁴ Claiming responsibility for high-profile attacks is one way for them to do so. But militant groups may nonetheless forgo claims of responsibility in the future should the strategic benefits of doing so outweigh the potential organizational costs. One of these strategic benefits could be complicating Indian leaders' ability to justify and thus select forceful responses, possibly pushing those leaders not to “select into” crises in the first place.⁵

How the Crisis Unfolded

Deliberate escalation played a large and increased role in the Pulwama crisis, with both India and Pakistan intentionally crossing new thresholds. Most obviously,

India's 2019 air strikes were the first against targets in Pakistan proper in almost 50 years.

Indian leaders opted to launch air strikes across the Line of Control against targets on Pakistani territory beyond Pakistan's state of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Previous crises saw India either not responding at all militarily (2008), mobilizing but not actually attacking (2001-02), counterattacking but staying within Indian territory and airspace (1999), or launching limited “surgical strikes” but only into Azad Jammu and Kashmir (2016).

The Indian strikes against alleged *Jaish* training facilities and fighters at Balakot thus constituted both “vertical escalation,” in that it was India's first use of offensive airpower against Pakistan in almost 50 years, and “horizontal escalation,” in that it was India's first strike against targets in Pakistan proper over the same time period.⁶

Much of the coverage of the crisis focused on the immediate justification and tactical effects of the initial Indian airstrikes. Indian officials claimed New Delhi had received credible intelligence that *Jaish* was preparing for additional attacks in India and that the group's largest training camp was located near Balakot, Pakistan. New Delhi characterized India's airstrikes in the area as “preemptive” and “non-military,” since they were designed to stop future attacks and targeted a

militant group rather than Pakistan's armed forces. Indian officials claimed the strikes were completed successfully and that "a very large number" of militants were killed.⁷ Pakistani officials instead claimed Pakistan scrambled its own fighter jets and drove off the Indian aircraft, forcing them to release their ordnance near Balakot causing "no casualties or damage."⁸

The truth is likely somewhere in the middle, but also likely not the most important aspect of the strikes. The Indian Air Force almost certainly intended to hit targets in or around the town of Balakot, but seems to have failed to generate the desired tactical effects. The mission likely accomplished something significant at the strategic level, however, as India demonstrated an ability to penetrate at least a portion of Pakistan's airspace and strike targets at will.⁹ This broader "political escalation" is likely one of the most important aspects of the crisis and the one of greatest significance to Pakistani leaders.¹⁰

Pakistani leaders also opted to launch air strikes across the Line of Control, though within the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir instead of into India proper. Pakistani officials claimed the country "had no option but to respond" to India's strikes, and that the "sole purpose" of Pakistan's response was to demonstrate the country's "right, will and capability for self defence."¹¹ The official spokesperson for the armed forces claimed Pakistan decided against hitting Indian targets since Pakistan did not want to threaten regional peace or escalate the situation. As such, he claimed the Pakistan Air Force "locked" targets but then engaged an open area instead with no military or civilian presence.¹² An Indian spokesperson in turn claimed Pakistan had intended to strike military targets but that its efforts had been "foiled."¹³

So, Pakistan also chose to increase the intensity and scope of the crisis relative to what it had done in the past. This was Pakistan's first use of airpower in a combat role against India since 1971, as well as Pakistan's first response to Indian strikes on its territory in the context of the Kashmir insurgency. In 2016, when India claims to have conducted "surgical strikes" across the Line of Control into Pakistan's Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan simply denied that anything had happened, removing the need for any "retaliatory" action. The overtness of the Indian strikes at Balakot, however, prevented such an approach in the most recent crisis. The vertical and horizontal escalation of sending the air force across the Line of Control in 2019 thus represented a clear break from past behavior for Pakistan, too.

Comparing the two sides' behavior during the Pulwama crisis, Pakistan's choices appear to have been the relatively de-escalatory ones. While India opted to strike undisputed Pakistani territory—beyond Pakistan's portion of historic Kashmir—Pakistan limited its airstrikes to India's portion of the disputed region. Likewise, while India claimed to have deliberately targeted *Jaish* fighters and to have caused substantial casualties, Pakistan claimed to have deliberately

engaged empty areas in order to avoid causing any casualties. Following the reciprocal airstrikes, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan called for talks, highlighting the risk of miscalculation, while Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stayed fairly quiet throughout.¹⁴ While both sides escalated further in ways than they had in previous rounds, it was nevertheless Pakistan during the most recent crisis that made the less escalatory choices and sought to manage escalation.

Again, this is all very different from what happened during the Kargil conflict. Then, the dominant features were Pakistan's inadvertent escalation and India's attempts at escalation management. The operation's Pakistani planners appear to have believed that Indian leaders would accept the incursions as yet another *fait accompli* along the Line of Control as the two sides had been capturing small pieces of disputed territory for decades.¹⁵ But between the risk Pakistani infiltrators posed to India's primary supply line in the region and the increased scope of the infiltration as Pakistani forces met with little resistance, Indian leaders saw the incursions as considerably more than merely the latest in a series of "nibbles" along the disputed border. Indian leaders thus felt obligated to re-establish the *status quo ante*, contrary to expectations of the operation's Pakistani planners. At Kargil, then, Pakistan's escalation was inadvertent, not deliberate.

India, on the other hand, quite consciously sought to manage escalation during the Kargil conflict. The military was instructed not to cross the Line of Control either on the ground or in the air, and no additional fronts were opened either along the disputed border or further south along the recognized international border. While scholars debate whether Indian leaders were motivated by fear of Pakistan's nuclear weapons or by desire for international support, what is striking about Indian decision making during Kargil, particularly when compared to its decision making during Pulwama, is how moderate it was.¹⁶ At Kargil, it was India that opted against equivalent escalation and focused on trying to limit escalation instead.

The risk of crises and conflicts escalating via deliberate choices is very real in South Asia.

A key takeaway from Pulwama is thus that the risk of crises and conflicts escalating via deliberate choices is very real in South Asia. Unlike with Kargil, which saw Pakistan inadvertently initiating a conflict and India responding in as de-escalatory a manner as possible, short of making concessions, Pulwama saw both sides quite intentionally taking actions they knew the other side would perceive as escalatory. Such deliberate escalation should,

in theory, be rare among nuclear powers. Nuclear weapons are believed to produce a "crystal ball effect," making the terrible consequences that would result from any nuclear use so obvious that states are chastened before them.¹⁷ India and Pakistan appear, however, to be knowingly testing how and how

much they can fight without risking a conflict spiraling out of control. In such circumstances, simply trying to limit the risks of inadvertent, unauthorized, and accidental escalation will not be enough to maintain stability in the region; drivers of deliberate escalation will have to be addressed as well.

How the Crisis Ended

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan handled the Pulwama crisis deftly. He played an active public role, chose a firm but conciliatory approach, and secured widespread domestic support, including from Pakistan's powerful armed forces. Though the military backed Khan in the 2018 elections, its organizational interests have historically been closely intertwined with continued hostility toward India and the use of proxies against it. It was thus not at all certain that the armed forces would support Khan's choice to quickly release a captured Indian pilot and de-escalate the situation. That decision nonetheless appeared to inspire a rare moment of national unity in Pakistan with the public, Khan's political opposition, and the military all outwardly supportive. While the country's economic problems and need to secure external relief may have forced his hand, Khan's performance during the crisis ensured he emerged with his image as a statesman burnished.¹⁸

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi took a very different approach. Following some early bellicose statements after the attack in Pulwama, Modi's presence was "remarkably muted" in the crisis, particularly once the airstrikes began.¹⁹ He maintained focus instead on campaigning for his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the upcoming parliamentary elections. When Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman was released from Pakistani custody to great fanfare in India, Modi opted not to greet the pilot in person, welcoming him home by tweet instead from the south of the country where Modi was speaking at a campaign rally. While the public seemed broadly supportive of the Prime Minister's approach to the crisis, opposition parties sharply criticized him, including for politicizing the country's armed forces.²⁰ Modi's performance during the crisis further burnished his nationalist credentials while showing none of the peacemaking skills Khan's did.

The United States played a less significant and less impartial role in the Pulwama crisis than it traditionally has in Indo-Pakistani skirmishes. National Security Advisor John Bolton handled the initial U.S. response, calling his Indian counterpart the day after

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the attack to assure him the United States recognized India's right to "self-defense."²¹ A week later, President Donald Trump said he gathered India was "looking at something very strong" by way of a response. These comments have been interpreted as effectively greenlighting the Indian airstrikes that soon followed.²² Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in turn waited until after those strikes to issue the standard request for restraint.²³ While a number of U.S. officials phoned their counterparts in the region, none visited India or Pakistan as they had in earlier crises. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, was able to capitalize on an already-scheduled trip to the region by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and follow-on visits from Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir, publicly encouraging the two sides to de-escalate the crisis while cutting valuable deals with each.²⁴

Turning from diplomacy to the battlefield, Pulwama concluded with little clarity about either the balance of power or the balance of resolve between India and Pakistan. Ambiguity about what really happened with each side's airstrikes means both sides might think they got the better of the exchange, encouraging similar or even riskier efforts the next time. India's leaders will likely conclude

Pulwama's uncertain outcome will likely complicate deterrence for both sides moving forward.

they can launch strikes into Pakistan without tripping that country's nuclear red lines, while Pakistan's leaders will likely gather they can launch their own strikes into India without prompting retaliation. Pulwama's uncertain outcome will likely complicate deterrence for both sides moving forward.

Again, Kargil concluded very differently. Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan's Prime Minister at the time, urgently requested a meeting with President Clinton in Washington, D.C., hoping for a face-saving way out of the conflict.

The Pakistan Army maintained it could hold on to at least some of the captured territory, and when Sharif agreed to withdraw Pakistani forces instead, in return for a vague promise from Clinton to take an interest in the Kashmir dispute, the stage was set for Pakistan's own "stab in the back" myth. Likely fearing some immediate threat, Sharif took his family with him to the United States. Three months after returning to Pakistan, he was deposed in a military coup fueled by lingering issues from Kargil.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee, India's Prime Minister during Kargil, handled the conflict deftly. He set clear objectives (vacating all Indian territory of outside forces) and clear limits on how the Indian armed forces were to achieve them (by staying on the Indian side of the Line of Control, limiting both vertical and horizontal escalation). Vajpayee had widespread support from the public and from across the

political spectrum during what became India's first televised war. Unlike Modi, his future BJP colleague, Vajpayee managed to signal both strength and nationalist credentials while nonetheless appearing attentive to the risks of escalation and international concern.

The American role during Kargil was also quite different. The conflict took place before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 drove the United States to ally with Pakistan, and before the more recent concern over a rising China pushed the United States to strengthen relations with India. Instead, the Clinton administration was focused on proliferation issues and wanted to ensure nuclear weapons could not be seen as facilitating conquest. As such, the United States played a significant and relatively evenhanded role in the Kargil conflict, insisting the two sides return, and recommit, to the *status quo ante*. President Clinton ultimately spent his July Fourth holiday hosting Pakistan's prime minister at Blair House in Washington, D.C., personally pressing Sharif to withdraw his country's forces.²⁵

Kargil concluded with clear demonstrations of the balance of power and the balance of resolve. Despite impressive feats early on in the conflict, Pakistani forces were steadily beaten back once the Indian military engaged. By the time President Clinton forced the Pakistani Prime Minister's hand, Pakistan had opted not to escalate the conflict, such as by bringing in the air force, and Indian forces had turned the tide on the ground despite the extraordinarily challenging operating conditions they faced. American diplomacy only hastened what the Indian armed forces were already achieving on their own. This decisive Indian performance at Kargil seems to have deterred any comparable Pakistani attack for two decades.

A key takeaway from Pulwama is thus that evolving relationships among key domestic actors and with external powers can have real impacts on crisis management and termination. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's ability to take a conciliatory approach toward India suggests the country's powerful military was supportive of such an effort, possibly opening up diplomatic possibilities moving forward. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's narrow focus on generating and maintaining domestic support, however, suggests he may fall victim to a "commitment trap," pressed by public sentiment to take harsher actions against Pakistan than might otherwise be in the country's interests.²⁶

Meanwhile, the United States' relatively limited involvement and tilt toward India opened the way for other external actors to play greater roles in the region. With a variety of ties to Pakistan and increasing investments in India, Saudi Arabia in particular may be assuming the mantle of "neutral arbiter" between the two rivals.²⁷ Military developments appear similarly in flux, with outcomes that are murkier and subject to competing interpretations likely to

undermine deterrence. All these developments will almost certainly make for more complex crises in the future.

What We Can Expect

Developments over the 20 years between the Kargil conflict and the Pulwama crisis suggest several lessons moving forward. First, crises will likely continue to occur. Pakistan is unlikely to engage in a large-scale, long-lasting crackdown on militant groups, meaning they will almost certainly continue to stage attacks against Indian forces and civilians in the Kashmir Valley. Even in the unlikely event that Pakistan did engage in such a crackdown, rising alienation among Indian Kashmiris and the example set by Adil Ahmad Dar suggest attacks would continue regardless, though likely of smaller scale and with decreased frequency. While continuing to press Pakistan to curb its support of militant groups is a worthy goal, the Pulwama attack serves as an important reminder that externally-sponsored militancy is only one source of violence in the Kashmir Valley; local grievances caused by India's heavy-handed policies are another.

Second, crises will likely continue to escalate into conflicts. India and Pakistan likely each learned that escalation carries lower risks than might have been expected. As such, it is likely that neither country emerged from Pulwama deterred from engaging in similar, and possibly more escalatory, behavior in the future. Following a militant attack on an Indian army camp in Uri in 2016, India departed from its longstanding policy of strategic restraint and launched what it called “surgical strikes” across the Line of Control into the Pakistani-administered Azad Jammu and Kashmir. India's response to the 2019 attack in Pulwama suggests this departure may now be a permanent break, at least as long as the BJP remains in power. Shortly before his recent election to a second five-year term, Prime Minister Modi announced, “This is a New India—we will answer terrorists in a language they understand and with interest!”²⁸

Finally, conflicts are more likely to follow unpredictable trajectories and be more difficult to end. Even the most detailed analyses of the recent crisis downplay the role of chance in the conduct and conclusion of Pulwama.²⁹ What if the Indian airstrikes on Balakot had, in fact, caused large numbers of casualties? What if the Indian pilot had been killed, whether by Pakistani forces in the engagement or, worse still, by Pakistani civilians on the ground? What if the Pakistani airstrikes had been in populated areas and caused Indian casualties? There are a number of ways the crisis could have escalated still further and possibly spiraled out of control. And a less engaged and impartial United States means a traditional crisis manager is less available, further complicating crisis or conflict termination.

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