

Pulwama (Kashmir): Another India-Pakistan crisis

Friday 15 March 2019, by [HOODBHOY Pervez](#) (Date first published: 7 March 2019).

The past few weeks have brought back the fear of war in South Asia. While the worst seems over for now, this crisis has been a reminder how close India and Pakistan are to the nuclear precipice. What is less clear is where we go from here. For Pakistan at least, more of the same may not be an option.

The current troubles began on February 14, when a one-man suicide [attack](#) on a military convoy near Pulwama, inside Indian-controlled Kashmir, killed dozens of soldiers. [Jaish-e-Muhammad](#) (JeM)—a radical Islamist Sunni group based in Pakistan—claimed responsibility for the attack and posted a video of the [attacker](#), Adil Ahmad, a 21-year old Kashmiri.

Pakistan vigorously denies complicity with JeM. Nevertheless, within days of the suicide attack, the Pakistan government took [control](#) of JeM's main madrassa, or seminary, in the city of Bahawalpur, which was allegedly its headquarters.

Twelve days later, on Tuesday February 26, India reported a pre-dawn [strike](#) that involved 12 Indian Mirage-2000 jets dropping 1000 kilograms of bombs upon a JeM training facility in Pakistan, near the town of Balakot. Indian national security adviser Ajit Doval [described](#) the site as "a virtual garrison" with "firing ranges, explosive test facilities, air-conditioned offices of trainers, and barracks." In an official statement, India's Foreign Minister said "a very large number of JeM terrorists, trainers, senior commanders and groups of jihadis... were eliminated."

Pakistan [dismissed](#) Indian claims of substantial damage and says the intruders were chased away by Pakistani fighter aircraft. Preliminary reports from Balakot [residents](#) and an independent [assessment](#) of the satellite imagery support the official Pakistani line of little damage from the Indian attack.

India has yet to supply proof of success.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is in the middle of a tougher-than-expected national election campaign after leading his hard-line right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party into power five years ago, condemned critics and his leading opponents, the Congress Party, for asking for proof of the claims of the Indian attack. At an election rally, Modi [declared](#) "Now they have even started asking for proof of the #AirStrike. Why are Congress and its allies demoralizing our forces? Why are they giving statements which are benefiting our enemies?"

A day later, Pakistan claimed its fighter jets carried out strikes in Indian Kashmir and then shot down two Indian aircraft that crossed the Line of Control in Kashmir into the Pakistani side, and captured an Indian pilot. India [admits](#) to the loss of one pilot and plane but says it shot down a Pakistani plane. Pakistan denies losing any aircraft.

Pakistan later [released](#) captured Indian fighter pilot Abhinandan Varthaman. Pakistan's gesture

showed it wants to de-escalate a crisis that put the world on edge. Equally, this act conveys confidence that Pakistan has had the upper hand in a conflict not of its own choosing. Pakistani war rhetoric, though disturbingly loud, was less shrill than that within India.

Throughout these days and weeks, Indian and Pakistani forces along the Line of Control in Kashmir fired away at each other. There has clearly been no return to the [ceasefire](#) agreed by the two sides in 2003.

At least for Pakistan's prime minister, the crisis has brought some caution. [Addressing](#) the country on television, he said "All wars are miscalculated, and no one knows where they lead to... I ask India: With the weapons you have and the weapons we have, can we really afford such a miscalculation? If this escalates, things will no longer be in my control or in Modi's." What he did not say was why Pakistan, and India, have gotten themselves into this disastrous situation of a conflict whose escalation they cannot control, and armed with weapons that mean misjudgments lead to the death of nations.

A core issue for Pakistan is Kashmir. Since 1947, Pakistan has turned again and again to insurgents and proxies to do battle against India in Kashmir to free it from Indian rule and make it part of Pakistan. JeM has been a key proxy for almost 20 years.

The organization's ranks have swelled in recent years. For this it can thank Indian repression in Kashmir. Since 2016, large numbers of Kashmiris have been [radicalized](#), frustrated at the absence of meaningful dialogue with Delhi, fed up with the use of force by Indian forces—including pellet guns that have [blinded](#) countless Kashmiri demonstrators—and angered by intrusive house searches and curfews. Last year saw the highest level of violence in Kashmir in a decade.

Kashmir journalist Bashrat Peer has [written](#) of the "ache of our painful history, a despair and rage about an oppressive present, and an uncertain future" and observed that "India and Pakistan blame each other, each country obsessed with proving itself better than the other, but they share the responsibility for reducing Kashmir to a ruin and destroying generations of Kashmiri lives." Some in Kashmir [despair](#) of the future, saying "Better than the last 30 years is to have a seven-day war and finish this issue for once and all."

An alternative path has already been charted. A decade ago, India and Pakistan came close to agreeing to a peace plan for Kashmir. Chief among its principles, reported [The New Yorker](#), was the idea that "Kashmiris would be given special rights to move and trade freely on both sides of the Line of Control. Each of the former princely state's distinct regions would receive a measure of autonomy—details be negotiated later. Providing that violence declined, each side would gradually withdraw its troops from the region. At some point, the Line of Control might be acknowledged by both governments as an international border." If the Kashmiris are allowed to have their say, it is not a bad place to start.

Looking at the bigger picture and long-term implications of this crisis, the omens are not good for Pakistan.

Fact: During the current crisis, Pakistan received little support internationally. The 57-nation Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, a group Pakistan has been a member of since it was founded 50 years ago, [condemned](#) the Indian incursion into sovereign Pakistani territory but urged both countries to "exercise restraint and avoid any steps that could endanger peace and security in the region." Despite Pakistan's objections, Indian foreign minister Sushma Swaraj came to [speak](#) at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation meeting as a "guest of honor," the first time India has been invited to a meeting of the group. Pakistan's Foreign Minister refused to attend.

China—the economic, military and political ally on which Pakistan increasingly pins its hopes—has remained studiously cautious, issuing little more than homilies urging peace. One should not expect otherwise. China is making large, long-term investments in Pakistan, but annual trade between the two countries is only about \$15 billion. China competes strategically with India, but it also trades much more heavily with it (about \$90 billion a year). Whether China will oppose a UN Security Council [resolution](#) introduced by the United States, Britain and France to declare JeM's leader Masood Azhar a terrorist is worth watching out for.

Saudi Arabia, whose munificence Pakistan counts upon, has refrained from substantive comment as it builds better ties with India. Just before the crisis broke, Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman came to Pakistan, and received one of the most extravagant welcome in Islamabad, accorded to any foreign ruler in recent history. The crown prince's next tour stop was New Delhi, where he was warmly [received](#) by Indian prime minister Narendra Modi had received Saudi Arabia's highest civilian [award](#) just under three years ago.)

And the United States seems to have taken India's side. A statement on February 26 by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [characterized](#) India's incursion into Pakistan as mere "counter terrorism actions." US trust in Pakistan, already thin after the September 2001 attacks and subsequent evidence of Pakistani ties to the Taliban and other jihadist groups, evaporated after the 2011 discovery of Osama bin Laden in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad and the US raid that killed him. In 2018, the US cut off [security aid](#) to Pakistan, accusing it of continuing to support the Taliban in Afghanistan.

As for Pakistan's neighbors, Iran and Afghanistan have grievances with Pakistan, and are more focused on improving relations with India. Both have repeatedly accused Pakistan of harboring insurgents. An Iranian general explicitly blamed Pakistani attackers after a suicide bomber killed 27 of Iran's Revolutionary Guards in early February.

At home, Pakistan is in an [economic crisis](#), growth is slowing, the currency is falling, and debt rising. In the months since his election, Prime Minister Imran Khan has visited country after country seeking loans and aid. Pakistan is already cutting spending, except on its military. Even if the level of hostilities with India does not rise beyond the current level, it is unclear where the money for maintaining a constant high level of defense preparedness will come from. One cost will likely be even fewer resources for sustaining and improving the well-being of its people.

Pakistan has sought a bailout from the International Monetary Fund, but there is a hitch: The fund will require what Imran Khan has called "painful" economic reforms. It also seeks removal from the ["gray list"](#) of countries with what it calls "structural deficiencies" in addressing money laundering and the financing of terrorism, as determined by the inter-governmental Financial Action Task Force (FATF). Pakistan was added to the list in June 2018 after US [pressure](#), which included specific concerns about JeM fund-raising.

The FATF has given Pakistan until May 2019 to carry out recommended measures to achieve de-listing. Failure to do so could lead to measures that could potentially isolate Pakistan from the global banking system and cripple its economy.

Pakistan can ill-afford another crisis with India. Against a backdrop that includes the threat of war and the catastrophe of nuclear war—plus angry neighbors, isolation and possible financial ruin on the horizon—Pakistan faces hard choices. Pursuing all initiatives for peace is clearly urgent.

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P.S.

- “Another India-Pakistan crisis”. Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, March 7, 2019:
<https://thebulletin.org/2019/03/another-india-pakistan-crisis/>
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