

# NUCLEAR THREAT IN SOUTH ASIA

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 Analysis

## Power Competition

Power competition seems an unending exercise. Because of the collapse of the INF Treaty there is a heightened enmity among the United States, China, and Russia. This enmity has led to the threatening acceleration of their nuclear-arms race. All of them are investing heavily in modernizing their nuclear arsenals and in new technologies such as hypersonic glide vehicles, which evade missile defenses; cyber weapons against command-and-control systems; and artificial intelligence to incorporate those systems.

In the 1960s, the decade in which the most new nuclear states emerged, US President John F. Kennedy predicted there would be "15 or 20" nuclear powers by 1975. Today there are nine, where about one to two countries enter into the nuclear club per decade, with the latest being North Korea in 2006. Since the 1990s, more states have given up on the concept of acquiring

nuclear weapons. The number of nuclear weapons in the world has dropped from more than 70,000 in 1986 to less than 14,000 today because of arms-control efforts. Most of the reductions in these weapons have occurred in the 1990s. The pace of cuts has slowed ever since. We are now living in a world where the barriers to acquiring nuclear weapons are lower. The past year may be remembered as the "turning point from an era of relative calm" to the "dawn of a dangerous new nuclear age". The consequences could be catastrophic. South Asia is a region that can never distant itself from turmoil, be it about disputed borders, acute resource shortages, and threats ranging from extremist violence to natural disasters. But in 2019, two significant crises stood out: an intensifying war in Afghanistan and deep tensions between India and Pakistan. 2019 was a seriously tense year for India and Pakistan. Both rivals are neighbors and nuclear states at the same time. South Asia right now is facing a lurking nuclear war threat.

## The Situation

The good news is that a US-Taliban deal has led to troop withdrawal. However, it seems that any US-Taliban deal will do little to lessen the violence in Afghanistan. Even with a total stop on attacks on U.S. troops, the war would most likely to continue. The only possibility the US-Taliban accord could create is pave the way for an intra-Afghan dialogue. A dialogue involving the Afghan government, other political stakeholders, and the Taliban that aims to produce a ceasefire and a process for political settlement might eventually lead to peace in the country.

On the other side, the underlying tensions between India and Pakistan remain sharp. The two nuclear-armed nations have entered 2020 with the fear that war is only one trigger away. That trigger could be pulled wither by India or Pakistan with respect to the security issues both nations are facing. Bilateral relations between the two states are much worse than they were during the February 2019 conflict. Ever since its election win, India's ruling party has pursued its Hindu nationalist agenda in an increasingly aggressive fashion—by scraping the special status (Article 370 and 35(A) of Indian constitution) of disputed Jammu and Kashmir, the Babri Mosque verdict and the Citizenship Amendment Act. This agenda of ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) gives it no incentive to go easy on Islamabad. On the other hand, Pakistan, not wanting to show weakness, will not give in easily.

The clock for the next India-Pakistan war is at one minute to midnight. Diplomatic interventions from Washington and other third parties may keep it from ticking further forward. But it's hard to see a path to sorting out such tightly intertwined tensions. The situation is not much different with Afghanistan's unending conflict.

## Bone of Contention

The main issue between India and Pakistan is the long pending Kashmir dispute. Kashmir dispute is a potential threat to the overall peace in South Asia. While there have been repeated

crises, and both states seem to be motivated by a fear of losing what is even bigger than the ambition to win, they also acknowledge that the present aggression on Kashmir is dangerous and damaging to their respective national interests. The possibility of a general settlement on Kashmir would affect the development of each country's nuclear program. Will a settlement on Kashmir lead to a reduction in weapons? Maybe. But it will surely slow down their development of new designs and arms distributions. However, peace might calm both countries' from rapidly improving their nuclear arms in particular, especially if international pressure against testing were to continue. Without new designs, and minimizing the tensions between India and Pakistan, both states might be willing to freeze their agendas.

## Relative Dimension

Recently the nuclear crisis reached its peak when both countries came face to face in February 2019. The situation mirrors that in the Cold War era. War scares and nuclear brinkmanship also fueled the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The world held its breath as leaders squared off over Berlin in 1961 and Cuba in 1962, and as relations collapsed into the War Scare of 1983. Historians still debate about how serious each of these crises really were. After all, while each side engaged in nuclear brinkmanship, the two superpowers always pulled back in time. There exists today a kind of confident perception that everything was destined to work out. This is a confidence that would surprise those who lived through the dark past. A similar confidence seems to exist that nuclear crises in South Asia, like their Cold War analogues, are not as frightening as they seem. Perhaps, people say, we exaggerated the threat over what happened in February, just as we exaggerated all the other dangers through which we have passed safely. But this time, things seem more serious than we had thought.

## How close is the edge?

One advantage that Kennedy and Khrushchev had was time. The Cuban Missile Crisis played out over thirteen days. We may take comfort

from the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union always pulled the break before they crashed – but they had the time to do so. Of course, they did not feel that they had time. Under the most demanding Cold War scenarios, the President had to be able to make a life-or-death decision about launching nuclear weapons in just a few minutes. This tight timeline was determined by the flight duration of U.S. and Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) – it would take about thirty minutes for a Soviet ICBM to reach the United States. In the most extreme scenario—in which a missile from a submarine is launched on a low or “depressed” trajectory—the missile would take about ten minutes to reach the United States.

In South Asia, Modi and Khan will have far less time to make such a decision. A nuclear-armed Shaheen missile fired from Pakistan would arrive in New Delhi in about seven minutes. India’s newest short-range ballistic missile Pralay could strike Islamabad in less than six minutes. Missiles fired on a depressed trajectory could reduce these flight times even further. It is extremely unlikely that warning of a missile launch would reach either Prime Minister before the missile did.

We cannot say the current leaders in South Asia will be as cautious while dealing with the critical situation in South Asia. Though, many past crises in South Asia have led to the development of confidence building measures between India and Pakistan. But these measures do not address the drift toward military strategies that emphasize offensive options. Many Indian

scholars and experts have rejected the idea that India is moving toward a preemptive strategy. The possibility of such a fundamental dispute over India’s basic approach of deterrence and defense illustrates the need to strengthen confidence-building measures.

There is little evidence, however, that Indian and Pakistani leaders understand the problem. Not only did Modi’s campaign on his handling of the crisis and his willingness to commit a “night of murder,” he also promised to strip Kashmir off its semi-autonomous status granted by Indian Constitution itself. By scraping Article 370 and 35(A), he has now taken that step, prompting what may begin yet another cycle of violence in South Asia. Modi and Khan probably believe that their handling of past crises has been smart, but we now know that even the best American and Soviet leaders during the Cold War made serious mistakes. Like Kennedy and Khrushchev, Modi and Khan may be confident they can approach the brink of nuclear catastrophe, but pull back in time. Their success may depend on whether they realize how close that edge really is.

Many of us remember the Cold War as a terrifying period. Same is case with the nuclear tensions between India and Pakistan. Kennedy and McNamara, Khrushchev and Castro, like all leaders, were fallible. They made mistakes. They believed things that later turned out to be false. In other words, they were human. So are Narendra Modi and Imran Khan of India and Pakistan. Let’s take a precaution. Let’s act wisely.