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The Pink Flamingo on the Subcontinent: Nuclear War between India and Pakistan



A “[pink flamingo](#)” is the term recently coined by Frank Hoffman to describe predictable but ignored events that can yield disastrous results. Hoffman argues that these situations are fully visible, but almost entirely ignored by policymakers. Pink flamingos stand in stark contrast to “[black swans](#)” — the unpredictable, even unforeseeable shocks whose outcomes may be entirely unknown.

The tense nuclear standoff between India and Pakistan may be the most dangerous pink flamingo in today’s world.

The Indian subcontinent — home to both India and Pakistan — remains among the most dangerous corners of the world, and continues to pose a deep threat to global stability and the current world order. Their 1,800-mile border is the only place in the world where two hostile, nuclear-armed states face off every day. And the risk of nuclear conflict has only continued to rise in the past few years, to the point that it is now a very real possibility.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since they gained independence in 1947, including one that ended in 1971 with Pakistan losing approximately half its territory (present-day Bangladesh). Today, the disputed Line of Control that divides the disputed Kashmir region remains a particularly tense flash point. Both the [Kargil crisis](#) of 1999 and the 2001 [attack on the Indian Parliament](#) by Pakistan-supported militants brought both nations once again to the brink of war. Yet unlike earlier major wars, these two crises occurred after both India and Pakistan became nuclear-armed states. Quick and forceful diplomatic intervention played a pivotal role in preventing a larger conflict from erupting during each crisis.

These stakes are even higher, and more dangerous, today.

Since 2004, India has been developing a new military doctrine called [Cold Start](#), a limited war option designed largely to deter Islamabad from sponsoring irregular attacks against New Delhi. It involves rapid conventional retaliation after any such attack, launching a number of quick armored assaults into Pakistan and [rapidly securing limited objectives](#) that hypothetically remain below Pakistan's nuclear threshold. In accordance with this doctrine, the Indian military is meant to [mobilize half a million troops in less than 72 hours](#).

The problem is, unlike its neighbors India and China, Pakistan has not renounced the first use of nuclear weapons. Instead, Pakistani leaders have [stated](#) that they [may have to use nuclear weapons](#) first in order to defend against a conventional attack from India. Therefore, both to [counter Cold Start](#) and help to [offset](#) India's growing conventional superiority, Pakistan has accelerated its nuclear weapons program — and begun to field short-range, low yield tactical nuclear weapons (TNW). Some observers now judge this nuclear program to be the [fastest growing](#) in the world. Pakistan will reportedly have enough fissile material by 2020 to build [more than 200 nuclear warheads](#) — more than the United Kingdom plans to have by that time.

It is not simply the pace of the buildup that should cause concern. Pakistan's arsenal of short-range [tactical nuclear weapons](#) is a game-changer in other ways. Pakistan clearly intends to use these weapons — on its own soil if necessary — [to counter Cold Start's plan](#) for sudden Indian armored thrusts into Pakistan. The introduction of these weapons has altered the long-standing geometry between the two nuclear powers, and increases risk of escalation to a nuclear exchange in a crisis.

Beyond the risks of runaway nuclear escalation, Pakistan's growing tactical nuclear weapons program also brings a wide array of other [destabilizing characteristics](#) to this already unstable mix: the necessity to position these short-range weapons close to the border with India, making them more vulnerable to interdiction; the need to move and disperse these weapons during a crisis, thereby signaling a nuclear threat; and the prospects of local commanders being given decentralized control of the weapons — a “use it or lose it” danger if facing an Indian armored offensive. Furthermore, large numbers of small nuclear weapons scattered at different locations increases the risk that some will fall into the hands of violent extremists. A terrorist group gaining control of a nuclear weapon remains one of the most frightening potential spinoffs of the current arms race.

Perhaps the most dangerous scenario that could lead to catastrophe is a replay of the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. In November 2008, 10 terrorists launched attacks that left 166 people dead before the last of attackers were finally killed by Indian security forces almost 60 hours after the attacks began. By that time, there was strong evidence that the attackers were Pakistani and belonged to a Pakistan-supported militant group. Indian public outrage and humiliation were overwhelming. Only through the combination of diplomatic pressure from the United States and immense restraint exerted by then-Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was an Indian retaliatory strike averted.

The chances of such Indian government restraint in a similarly deadly future scenario are unlikely. Experts such as Stephen Cohen of the Brookings Institution and former U.S. Ambassador to India Robert Blackwill [agree](#) that if there were another Mumbai, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi would not step back from using military force in response, unlike his predecessors. Indian public opinion would demand retaliation, especially after the unpopular degree of restraint exercised by the Singh government after the Mumbai attacks. But there remains no meaningful senior-level dialogue between the two states — last August's planned meeting between the two national security

advisers was [cancelled](#) after disagreements about Kashmiri separatists.

There may be little the United States or the world can do to forestall this conflict still looming just over the horizon. Nevertheless, the tremendous dangers of this situation require U.S. policymakers to devote more time and energy in trying to do so, and some small steps may help. The United States should work hard to catalyze confidence-building measures between the two sides, seeking to open more peacetime channels to create dialog and potential conflict mediation options for the future. Neither nation's military currently has any direct communications. Quiet, off-the-record meetings between senior military leaders would help lessen tensions and establish some degree of mutual dialog and understanding before a crisis erupts. The United States should also sponsor unofficial tabletop exercises involving representatives of each side to explore how escalation in a nuclear conflict could unfold.

The United States should also reach out to current (and former) civil and military [decision-makers on both sides](#) to develop and grow bilateral relationships that could prove vital in the next crisis. Both the United States and NATO should also [limited battlefield utility of TNW](#), as well as their well-researched estimates of the damage that would have been wrought by using them to defend Western Europe from a Soviet armored invasion. And the United States should continue to encourage Pakistan to slow its fielding of tactical nuclear weapons, and keep them under tight central control well away from vulnerable forward-deployed positions. The lack of any tangible results from the [U.S. government's recent outreach](#) to Pakistan on this topic should only encourage renewed efforts.

A nuclear war between India and Pakistan would dramatically alter the world as we know it. The damage from fallout and blast, the deaths of potentially millions, and the environmental devastation of even a few weapons detonations would suddenly dwarf any other global problem. There are no shortage of conflicts and crises around the world demanding the attention of policymakers in Washington and other capitals. But the stakes of a war between two of the world's most hostile nuclear powers deserves attention before the next inevitable flare-up. Taking a series of modest steps now to try to avert the worst outcomes from this dangerous pink flamingo hiding in plain sight is an investment well worth making.

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