[**New normal?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1741588/new-normal)

[Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry](https://www.dawn.com/authors/9600/aizaz-ahmad-chaudhry) Published March 11, 2023

The writer is a former foreign secretary and author of Diplomatic Footprints.

Listen to article

IN September 2016, India [announced](https://www.dawn.com/news/1286881/army-rubbishes-indian-surgical-strikes-claim-as-two-pakistani-soldiers-killed-at-loc) that it had carried out a surgical strike against Pakistan. The strike had not happened in reality, and, at that point, most analysts concluded that India was essentially testing the waters for a ‘new normal’ in bilateral relations, whereby it could strike Pakistan without provoking a nuclear response.

A few years later, in February 2019, India did carry out a [surgical strike in Balakot](https://www.dawn.com/news/1466149) on the grounds that it was targeting a militant training camp. Although there was no such camp there and the only [some trees were hit](https://www.dawn.com/news/1468072), such strikes by one nuclear state against another represented a precarious situation unique to South Asia. All other nuclear weapon states have avoided direct military confrontation and relied more on diplomacy to avert conflict escalation.

Having witnessed the colossal destruction caused by the US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the world community resolved that atomic weapons must never be used again.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968 recognised the right of the five nuclear weapon states then — the US, Soviet Union, UK, France, China — to retain their nuclear weapons on the condition that in due course, they would disarm their nuclear arsenal. Non-nuclear weapon states that joined the NPT agreed to not acquire nuclear weapons against the promise they would have enhanced opportunities for peaceful uses of atomic energy.

This bargain was short-lived, as none of the five nuclear weapon states made efforts to disarm. Instead, a nuclear arms race erupted between the US and the Soviet Union.

There were fears that the Cold War between the two could morph into a direct war, but that never happened because they recognised that the outcome would be mutually assured destruction. Their rivalry played out on all continents, but mostly through espionage, propaganda, arms build-up and proxy wars.

The only time they came close to a kinetic confrontation was during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. All along, diplomacy was used to manage their conflicts. The concept of détente, from 1967 to 1979, helped reduce tensions, and diplomatic parleys led to the signing of treaties on limiting strategic arms.

Why has South Asia’s nuclear experience been different?

Even during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the US did not confront the Soviets with its own troops, and instead, used proxies through the mujahideen. After the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a US-led globalised world, several conflicts erupted in various parts of the world.

The US invaded Iraq despite stiff international condemnation, sanctioned Iran on concerns about its nuclear programme, and attacked Afghanistan to fight terrorism. During this phase, too, no direct confrontation took place between nuclear weapon states, again with the exception of Pakistan and India.

Today, the world is witnessing intensifying US-China competition, and the US has made alliances with India, Australia, Japan and others to contain China’s rise.

However, the two have so far refrained from engaging in direct warfare. Likewise, in the Russia-Ukraine war, Nato and the US have avoided fielding their own troops, leaving it to the Ukrainians to fight, with the West’s military and economic support.

The question arises, why has South Asia’s experience been so different from the rest of the nuclear world? Ever since the nuclearisation of our region in 1998, India and Pakistan, both nuclear-armed, have intermittently engaged in conventional confrontations, including the [1999 clash in Kargil](https://www.dawn.com/news/480266/revisiting-the-kargil-conflict) and the 10-month long military stand-off in 2002. Behind-the-scenes diplomacy and often the help of third parties helped cool off tensions and avert an all-out war.

One major reason for instability in South Asia is the continuous cultivation of mistrust between the two countries. Some attempts were made to build mutual confidence, but they were never enough to help the countries establish a normal, good-neighbourly relationship.

The absence of a sustained dialogue, the unresolved Kashmir dispute, and failure to deal with the menace of terrorism cooperatively have kept South Asia unstable.

Presently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears to be striving for a Hindu rashtra in India, and has been persistently aiming at marginalising and isolating Pakistan. These efforts continue to hamper prospects of peace and are making South Asia a high-risk zone of strategic instability.

India and Pakistan would need to learn from the practices of other nuclear weapon states, which realised early on that trying to ‘win’ in a nuclear environment has more costs than benefits. If diplomacy is given an uninterrupted chance, South Asia, like other parts of the world, could also achieve strategic stability that can allow the region to prosper. That is the ‘new normal’ that both countries should aspire to.

*The writer is a former foreign secretary and author of Diplomatic Footprints.*

*Published in Dawn, March 11th, 2023*