

Managing the China, India and Pakistan Nuclear Trilemma

**Policy Report based on Project Workshop
held on 18 and 21 February 2022**

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Executive Summary

In Southern Asia, three nuclear powers—China, India, and Pakistan—co-exist in dangerous geostrategic relationships characterised by shared borders, growing nuclear stockpiles, expanding and modernizing weapon platforms, irredentist territorial claims, and cross-conflict linkages. Unlike the Cold War practice of strategic nuclear policy dialogues between the two superpowers and among the United States (US) and its allies, no equivalent dialogue exists in Southern Asia. Nor are there overarching regional organisations and structures to regulate and moderate interstate relations across the continent that can act as shock absorbers and crisis stabilizers. Even a limited regional nuclear exchange in Southern Asia could have catastrophic human, environmental, and political consequences. The ‘nuclear trilemma’ involving China, India, and Pakistan in Southern Asia is a low-risk but high-impact—and still relatively understudied—geopolitical threat.

In 2021, the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) and the Toda Peace Institute launched a research project examining the nuclear and defence dynamics between China, India, and Pakistan. Building on previous APLN papers and the Brookings ‘Strategic Chain’ report, this project seeks to map the

contours of the China-India-Pakistan nuclear relationship, identifying the key drivers of conflict, as well as practical nuclear risk reduction, crisis stability, and confidence building measures. The project also aims to explore the possibility of a nuclear restraint regime that includes all three countries. At a workshop organised by the project in February 2022, experts from the Indo-Pacific region, including from China, India, and Pakistan, presented scholarly and policy analyses on the trilateral dynamics in Southern Asia. This report synthesises the analysis from those discussions.

Discussions underscore that the evolving nuclear trilemma in Southern Asia is rife with tensions and contradictions. Although a deliberate use of nuclear weapons by either China, India, or Pakistan is unlikely in Southern Asia, the risks of inadvertent and accidental nuclear use remains high. The expansion of nuclear capabilities, characterised by the induction of emergent disruptive technologies that compress the action-reaction time in actual conflict, along with the breakdown of dialogue and elevated political tensions, makes the China, India, and Pakistan nuclear trilemma ripe for misperceptions and misunderstandings. This report includes a series of policy recommendations for reducing risks and building greater confidence among the three nuclear powers in Southern Asia, primarily with the aim of preventing an accidental and inadvertent nuclear exchange.

Introduction

The nuclear policies of China, India, and Pakistan—and how they interact with one another—cannot be fully understood without understanding the countries' interests and constraints. There are three notable elements in China-India-Pakistan trilateral nuclear relations. First, all have a strong interest in nuclear peace as a nuclear war is seen to be unaffordable. Second, given the realities of geography and prevailing climate patterns—particularly in the India-Pakistan dyad—any temptation to use nuclear weapons is countered by self-deterrence as none can use nuclear weapons against the other and be safe from the radioactive fallout. And third is the cultural reality that India and Pakistan share common languages but not the same political vocabulary; and historically, China and India have used the same international political vernacular as champions of the global South even though they do not share a common language.

Therefore, a deliberate resort to war by any of these nuclear-armed states seems unlikely. However, given the vexed nature of India-China and India-Pakistan relations, any conflict can stoke nationalism and an unintended or accidental use of nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out. Accidental war in Southern Asia can arise from misperceptions over intentions, capabilities, and compressed timeframes over signals of incoming enemy weapons and nuclear retaliation.

Strategic risks in the two dyads are exacerbated by new disruptive technologies, including drones, hypersonic systems, anti-satellite capabilities, precision guided munitions, stand-off weapons systems, and cyber and space-based capabilities. These technologies can drive misperceptions about others' intentions and capabilities and increase the chances of accidental nuclear use, especially if they are used for risk manipulation. Improved military infrastructure in conflict zones is likely to accelerate mobilisation on Indian and Chinese

sides and lead to a misreading of the other's strategic orientation. Cross-domain signalling¹ was seen during the India-China border confrontation in 2020 and the India-Pakistan crisis in 2019, including the propensity of moving a land-based crisis to the seas.² Although a 'bolt from the blue' strike by either side is considered unlikely, the presence of sea-based nuclear and canisterised weapons³—being developed by both India and China—could make it harder for these states to retain a non-alert status in the future despite their current no first use (NFU) policies.

Against this background, experts at the February 2022 workshop discussed seven major themes that have serious implications for the nuclear dynamics in Southern Asia. Each of these is discussed below.

1. Is it a Nuclear Chain, a Trilemma, or Two Asymmetric Dyads in Southern Asia?

Unlike the nuclear bipolarity of the Cold War, the current global nuclear order is composed of several linkages between the nuclear weapons powers. These linkages can be described as a nuclear 'strategic chain.'⁴ In the Indo-Pacific, these are observed in complex nuclear deterrence relations involving the four nuclear-armed states (China, India, North Korea, and Pakistan), with Russia and the US inextricably entangled in these relations on account of their significant regional footprints. Some of the linkages within this chain are tighter than others.

In Southern Asia, the nuclear relationship between India and Pakistan is historically, conceptually, politically, strategically, and operationally deeply intertwined with China as a nuclear power. The resultant formation of a 'nuclear trilemma'—between China, India, and Pakistan—is part of the larger nuclear strategic chain. Some, however, argue that in the absence of interdependency between the China-India and India-Pakistan conflict dyads, Southern Asia is characterised by two asymmetric nuclear dyads rather than a strategic nuclear trilemma. This has implications for how to address nuclear risks in Southern Asia.

Nuclear escalation risks in South Asia are generally understood to be more significant in the India-Pakistan dyad than in the China-India dyad. The India-Pakistan rivalry is deeper-

¹ Cross-domain signalling is the use of capabilities in one domain to signal/deter aggression in another domain. It is similar to cross-domain deterrence.

² During the 2019 India-Pakistan military crisis, India deployed the Arihant nuclear-powered ballistic missile carrying submarine (SSBN) on patrol while Pakistan signalled nuclear deterrence by convening its national command authority indicating nuclear signalling. See <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-deployed-nuclear-missile-armed-submarine-during-standoff-with-pakistan-2009178> and <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/world/neighbours/270219/paks-warns-india-of-surprise-calls-nuclear-authority-meeting.html>. During the 2020 India-China border standoff in Ladakh, China protested India's deployment of a warship in South China Sea and near Malacca straits. See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/post-galwan-clash-indian-navy-quietly-deployed-warship-in-south-china-sea/articleshow/77834259.cms>.

³ A canisterised system is one in which the weapon is stored and operated from specially designed compartments – canisters. Canisterisation makes it possible to store the weapons in a controlled environment improving their shelf-life, and easier to transport the weapon reducing the time required to launch the missile.

⁴ Robert Einhorn and WPS Sidhu, "The Strategic Chain: Linking Pakistan, India, China, and the United States," Brookings Institution, March 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/acnpi_201703_strategic_chain.pdf

rooted, given their longstanding territorial dispute over Kashmir and the risk of a low-intensity conflict escalating into a highly intense military confrontation. Even then, both India and Pakistan have so far ensured that their crises do not escalate to the nuclear level.

The China-India conflict is not considered a nuclear flashpoint. This is primarily because the two countries have similar nuclear policies and approaches towards nuclear weapons – in terms of defensive forces, the relatively small size of their nuclear arsenals, and nuclear NFU policies. Neither China nor India perceives the other as an existential threat. The projected spike in Chinese nuclear capabilities and its increasing use of dual capable systems, however, will have an impact on India's threat and risk perceptions vis-à-vis China, and may motivate an increase in India's own capabilities. For instance, India is likely to make greater investments in naval capabilities to counter China's growing naval power in the Indian Ocean.⁵ This raises an immediate nuclear trilemma. India's declared policy is to possess a "credible minimum deterrent." But can an Indian deterrent force and posture that is "credible" against China remain at the same time "minimum" against Pakistan?

China is part of the regional geopolitical dynamic in Southern Asia and globally with the US. According to the strategic chain argument, China responds strategically to the nuclear capabilities of the US and Russia, India responds to the nuclear capabilities of China, and Pakistan responds to India's strategic capabilities.⁶ China, therefore, becomes the link between Southern Asia and the nuclear equation including the major powers. The US-China strategic competition will affect relations between China, India and Pakistan.

Experts do not agree whether the Southern Asian nuclear dynamic should be characterised strictly as a chain, as a trilemma or as two separate dyads and all three analytical lenses have been used to explain the nuclear relations between China, India and Pakistan. Most experts agree, however, that China plays an important role. Feared as a potential rule-breaker in the liberal international order (which Beijing denies), China is emerging as a global leader and is expected to seek to become a rule-maker. If this transition were to happen, then for the first time in centuries the rule-maker and rule-enforcer would no longer be a Western, English speaking liberal democracy and capitalist state. This transition will require psychological readjustments on all sides of the geopolitical fault-lines.

2. Commonalities, Similarities, and Differences Between the Pakistan-India and China-India Dyads

The main drivers of conflict between India, Pakistan, and China in Southern Asia include unresolved territorial disputes, use of terrorism by one nuclear state against another, perception of the other's relationship with third countries, and perception of the other's

⁵ Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, "Navy meet: Focus on China's presence in Indian Ocean Region," *The Telegraph*, 26 April 2022, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/naval-commanders-to-discuss-ways-to-counter-chinas-presence-in-indian-ocean-region/cid/1862278> Also see: "India should increase naval capabilities to counter Chinese threat in Indian Ocean: Expert," *The Print*, 19 May 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/india-should-increase-naval-capabilities-to-counter-chinese-threat-in-indian-ocean-expert/962116/>

⁶ Robert Einhorn and WPS Sidhu, "The Strategic Chain: Linking Pakistan, India, China, and the United States," Brookings Institution, March 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ac-npi_201703_strategic_chain.pdf

intent. Growing hyper-nationalism in all three countries adds to the risks of conflict escalation.

China does not accept India and Pakistan as legitimate nuclear states as they are not members of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Nor does it accept them as equal partners to discuss nuclear issues. It views itself as a leader in the region and globally and, as Asia's only permanent member of the UN Security Council with responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, a responsible member of the NPT regime. Yet, by the very presence of nuclear weapons in its neighbourhood, and the risks that this presence poses, China has reasons to engage with the other two countries in nuclear dialogue.

India and Pakistan have remained outside the NPT, but for different reasons, and the nuclear arsenals of both countries continue to grow. India considers itself to be in a different league from Pakistan. India believes that Pakistan pursues a strategy of bleeding India through state-sponsored cross-border militancy and extremism, and that Pakistan's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons increases the risk of war due to miscalculation or accident. Pakistan perceives an existential threat from India, but it wields the 'power of the weak'⁷ vis-à-vis India. Yet, despite the frequent breakdown in relations, India and Pakistan both see value in retaining their existing bilateral confidence-building measures (CBMs).

China and India consider nuclear weapons to be guarantees against nuclear blackmail and coercion from other nuclear weapons powers. Thus, they perceive nuclear weapons primarily as a political tool rather than militarily useable weapons. Both countries have adopted policies that refrain from using nuclear weapons in conventional conflicts and against non-nuclear weapons states. Both have accepted a deterrence by punishment⁸ policy, declared an NFU policy, and put emphasis on the survivability of their retaliatory nuclear forces. China and India also have a similar caution and scepticism towards nuclear arms control. Both have rejected the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) arguing that the treaty does not take the right approach towards global nuclear zero. Relations with two other states, specifically Pakistan and the US, are significant factors affecting Sino-Indian bilateral relations. Pakistan and China worry about India's closeness to the US, and India perceives a two-front threat from China and Pakistan.

China, India, and Pakistan project nuclear deterrence differently. China prefers to deploy dual-use systems and co-mingle conventional and nuclear systems given its threat perceptions from US ballistic missile defence and long-range strategic missiles. India has a nuclear doctrine which warns of a 'massive retaliation' to a nuclear, chemical, or biological

⁷ Power of the weak can be defined as the advantage leveraged by the weaker power in bargaining with major powers for economic investments and strategic balancing and in terms of room for manoeuvre through defence and offence postures. See: TV Paul, "When Balance of Power Meets Globalization: China, India and the small states of South Asia," *Politics*, Vo.39, Issue 1, 2019, 51 at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0263395718779930>

⁸ Deterrence-by-punishment policy involves a threat of retaliation (with nuclear weapons) that imposes greater costs on the attacker than any gains they may intend to accrue from the attack intended. See Glenn Snyder, *Deterrence by Punishment and Denial*, Princeton: Princeton University, Center of International Studies, 1959.

attack on India or its forces anywhere. Pakistan believes in first use, including of tactical nuclear weapons. The nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) systems of the three countries have notable differences. China has a highly centralised and networked NC3, controlled by the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Rocket Force.⁹ Over the years, the Rocket Force has gained stature in the Chinese NC3 system with the expansion of China's missile capabilities.¹⁰ India has assigned more political and less military control over its nuclear weapons. Pakistan claims to maintain a non-delegated command and control system but the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons suggests a pre-delegation of control to military field commanders.

The three nuclear-armed states in Southern Asia, disturbingly, do not appear to have a sense of shared risks. Pakistan aims to prevent all conventional conflict through a strategic restraint regime and no war pact with India. India perceives China as a bigger threat. China's focus is, however, on the US and it does not publicly consider India as a nuclear threat. On the other hand, all three countries face threats of extremism, separatism, and terrorism. A shared interest to fight these threats has brought them together in fora like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) so there is precedent in the three countries discussing non-nuclear security challenges. Despite commonalities and similarities between the nuclear dyads, the differences and absence of a sense of common interdependent threats makes it difficult to agree to trilateral measures to maintain strategic stability.

3. The Coherence of Deterrence Relations

A well-formed and coherent deterrence relationship is one where an actual threat is being deterred, as in the case of the US and USSR during the Cold War. One view is that a coherent nuclear deterrence equation in Southern Asia applies to the India and Pakistan dyad alone. On the one hand, it is argued that coherence in the India-Pakistan nuclear dyad comes from reciprocity, nuclear learning, and a mutual understanding about deterrence. This bilateral nuclear deterrence relationship has been developed over twenty-five years through successive crises and nuclear dialogues, parallel engagements between Indian and Pakistani analytical communities, and negotiated CBMs placing nuclear weapons in a well understood context. These experts also argue that nuclear developments in India and China, on the other hand, are tenuously related to each other even if there are linkages and reciprocal arming. India and China do not discuss nuclear issues through any official dialogue. Moreover, the absence of a nuclear crisis between these two countries has denied them the experience and mutual learning about deterring each other. Whereas India's nuclear developments are largely driven by China's capabilities, the vice-versa does not necessarily

⁹ Peter Hayes, "Nuclear Command, Control and Communications (NC3) in Asia Pacific," Special Report, Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, 10 September 2021, https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Peter-Hayes_NC3_APLN-Special-Report.pdf

¹⁰ Jeffrey Lewis, David Joel La Boon and ecker Eveleth, "China's Growing Missile Arsenal and the Risk of a "Taiwan Missile Crisis"; NTI report, 18 November 2020, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/chinas-growing-missile-arsenal-and-the-risk-of-a-taiwan-missile-crisis/>

hold. Therefore, the China-India nuclear dyad can be called a “decoupled deterrence”¹¹ equation.

Nonetheless, there is no absence of crises between India and China, as shown by recent border confrontations. Bilateral relations between China and India, including economically, have been deteriorating since the Doklam crisis of 2017 and have hit their lowest point since the 1970s. The 2020 Galwan valley clashes snowballed into a major border crisis. Some experts would argue that it is not the absence of nuclear dialogue or crises per se, but the low salience of nuclear weapons in their bilateral relations which characterises the Sino-Indian deterrence equation as less volatile as compared to the India-Pakistan equation. If, however, China and India move their nuclear weapons to higher alert levels, the current equilibrium would be disturbed. Moreover, the concept of ‘coherent’ dyadic nuclear deterrence ignores the role of new disruptive technologies and other entanglements¹² with the conventional systems. In the future, nuclear deterrence relationships could be more volatile. States may choose to lean towards opacity to strengthen deterrence but in the process erode stability. In that case, arms control as a means to manage nuclear deterrence relationships will be much harder to negotiate, implement, and enforce.

4. Nexus Between Domestic Factors and the Nuclear Trilemma

A nuclear trilemma is part of a larger system in which the nuclear equation is the product of political relations and political will. Political relations are affected by the thinking of the policymaking elites. Nuclear policymaking in China, India, and Pakistan is largely determined by their leadership elite.¹³ In Southern Asia, domestic political leverage is one of the important factors that drive policy and bilateral relations between the nuclear weapons powers. China’s relationships with India and Pakistan are mainly driven by the two priorities of internal stability and economic growth.¹⁴ This explains China’s carefully calibrated economic ties with India, including the invitation for India to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For China, Pakistan plays a key role in maintaining stability in its Xinjiang province. Pakistan’s prominence in India’s electoral politics has grown over the past decade. The forces of enmity and hatred can drive the escalation and de-escalation of conflict between the two states, especially in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. Political will in this region can become hostage to domestic politics, incentivizing political leaders to take

¹¹ Decoupled deterrence can be described as an security equation where only the smaller or weaker power takes steps to deter or in response to actions by the bigger power, which in turn is motivated by a different threat. See Toby Dalton and Tong Zhao, “At a Crossroads? China-India Nuclear Relations After the Border Clash,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 August 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/19/at-crossroads-china-india-nuclear-relations-after-border-clash-pub-82489>

¹² Entanglement takes place when nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities get intertwined in dangerous ways, increasing the risk of nuclear war. See: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Nuclear Entanglement,” <https://carnegieendowment.org/programs/npp/nuclear-entanglement>

¹³ Elites are those leaders or experts whose views and ideas have an overwhelming impact on decision-making related to nuclear weapons. Here, elites could be the political elites, military elites, scientific-technological elites and elite members from the strategic thinking community.

¹⁴ Although relations with India and Pakistan are significant in China’s popular political imagination, it is more concerned about the geopolitical relations with the US and East Asia.

risks and increase tensions or resist diplomatic engagement, ultimately shrinking the space for dialogue.

In some cases, like in Pakistan, the military exercises decisive influence over the country's nuclear weapons programme and is seen to have a stake in building more weapons as a means of exercising and preserving domestic power. All militaries are, however, not alike in their approach to nuclear weapons. Some militaries may not prefer the acquisition of more nuclear weapons because they eat into defence budgets.

Some studies¹⁵ suggest that democratic societies are less likely to resort to nuclear use, because they would be held accountable by their own people. A country's democratic credentials are, however, not a guarantee that nuclear weapons will not be used. Public opinion even in democracies can favour use of nuclear weapons against other countries. Hence, rather than the political system, it is the weight of norms around nuclear weapons that determines whether nuclear weapons will be used or not. India's nuclear doctrine currently reflects the belief that national security is dependent on international security. China, too, has a similar approach. But a lack of dialogue in Southern Asia threatens to spur misunderstandings about regional and international security.

Globally, Public engagement with weapons of mass destruction issues is much lower today than during the Cold War when the threat of nuclear war appeared much more real and immediate. Despite the prominent anti-nuclear movements in Southern Asia, conversations around nuclear disarmament in countries like India and Pakistan have now been relegated to a relatively smaller community of civil society and strategic elites. For the general public in these countries, the nuclear threat pales in the face of the overwhelming challenges of daily living. It was, therefore, unusual to see domestic public engagement (albeit in the form of criticism) in Pakistan on the recently announced national security policy – an example of civil society and academics holding their government accountable on national security matters.

5. Role of External Actors

The security linkages between the three countries, and their dynamics with external powers, have important consequences for the global normative nuclear order. Two of the three nuclear-armed states are not Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatories and none of them has signed the TPNW. Compared to the relatively well-developed nuclear arms control and crisis management mechanism of the Euro-Atlantic theatre, Southern Asia has no institutional architecture to govern and navigate the nuclear relations in the region.

External actors—specifically the United States and Russia—play an important role in the security dynamics of Southern Asia. The US is not geographically a part of Southern Asia but has influence, orientation, and interests in the region. The US has also been an important mediator in past India-Pakistan crises. One view is that the US influence is tertiary to

¹⁵ For instance Democratic Peace Theory. See: Bruce Russett, Carol Ember, Melvin Ember, and Zeev Maoz, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7rqf6>

developments, particularly nuclear developments, in Southern Asia. In the nuclear chain, however, the perceived threats from US strategic capabilities are an important factor behind the expansion and configuration of Chinese nuclear weapons capabilities. The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy additionally puts pressure on China to counter any perceived threats.

The US' supposed containment of China is expected to have deep implications on the Indo-Pacific region, especially as countries in Southern and Southeast Asia try to balance their economic and security interests in this major-power competition. US actions with regards to the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Iran nuclear deal, and the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) and Quadrilateral Dialogue (QUAD) partnerships could solidify the trilemma in Southern Asia. China believes that US strategic support emboldens India to take a more provocative stance against China and Pakistan, threatening regional stability in South Asia.

Russia, too, directly and indirectly influences the security dynamics in Southern Asia. Russia has traditionally been reluctant to connect its rivalry with the US to the Southern Asian security dynamics. It is likely to maintain this position. Attention will have to be paid, however, to how the Russia-China 'no-limits' partnership¹⁶ will evolve—as announced ahead of the Ukraine war in a historical joint statement—and what implications it might have on the trilateral relations in Southern Asia.

The rapidly changing international situation also impacts Southern Asia. New geopolitical alignments like the AUKUS and the QUAD, which has its origins in the four-way naval cooperation in humanitarian disaster relief assistance after the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, carry military implications for the region. The formation of the QUAD, of which India is a partner, and AUKUS indicate that the primary theatre of conflict in the Indo-Pacific region will be maritime. Promoted as a benign geo-economic arrangement, China's BRI also has the potential to turn into an instrument of dominance. Like the QUAD, the BRI talks about strategic and security issues, along with developmental and economic cooperation. These new entanglements have implications for global and regional peace as well as bilateral relations.

6. Legitimacy, Strategic Stability, and Mutual Vulnerability

For China, India and Pakistan have been illegitimate nuclear armed states as they are not part of the NPT regime. From China's perspective, it can live peacefully with a nuclear Pakistan because Pakistan has no intent to harm China. But Pakistan's assistance to other states to develop nuclear weapons can become a threat. Like China, India sees itself as a special case in the global nuclear order. This sense of exceptionalism, some would argue, comes from India's understanding that the global nuclear order cannot be an absolutist one

¹⁶ Tony Munroe, Andrew Osborn and Humeysa Pamuk, "China, Russia partner up against West at Olympics summit," Reuters, 5 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-china-tell-nato-stop-expansion-moscow-backs-beijing-taiwan-2022-02-04/>

based only on NPT-based compliance and hierarchy, and should instead be more accommodating of non-Western ideas and discourses.¹⁷

To better understand the nuclear trilemma in Southern Asia, the prism of the Cold War normative order must be set aside. This is because current security challenges are fundamentally different from those of the Cold War – proxy wars and ideological issues have given way to territorial and sovereignty-related disputes, threats from non-state actors, and disruptive technologies. During the Cold War, strategic stability was defined in the context of bilateral nuclear stability, and the latter was based on parity and mutual vulnerability. This understanding informed arms control treaties, such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty.

In the new global nuclear order, two elements are redefining strategic stability: nuclear and conventional ‘entanglement’ and the chain character of warfare. Strategic stability is more than simply nuclear stability – it covers more sources of insecurity and actors. In Southern Asia, new military technologies like armed drones, cyber weapons, precision guided munitions, and space developments impact strategic stability. The NPT’s definition of nuclear weapons states is also outdated. The distinction today is between countries that rely on nuclear weapons and those that do not rely on nuclear weapons for their security. Some argue, that those that do are *de facto* nuclear weapons countries. To come to terms with current realities, we need to frame the questions related to nuclear weapons states and strategic stability differently from the formulations of the Cold War.

In the new nuclear order, nuclear deterrence stability is, arguably, no longer based on parity and mutual vulnerability. The foundations of mutual vulnerability were strained in 1983 by US President Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defence Initiative. By the time the US discarded the ABM treaty in 2002, it had moved beyond the notion of mutual vulnerability and towards the policy of guaranteed security. This may explain why there is absence of dialogue between the US and China in the post-Cold War era. Guaranteeing security is, however, always a challenge because technologies will always be able to penetrate defences, incentivizing escalation and nuclear use and driving arms races.

7. Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)

Nuclear equations are today more complex than the dyadic bipolar relations of the Cold War, particularly when factoring in disruptive technologies and dual-use systems. Therefore, a numerical bean-counting approach of the US-Soviet arms control era may no longer be useful, especially in Southern Asia. New confidence and trustbuilding approaches should then address threat perceptions in the context of changing political realities, actual threats, emerging technologies, and new actors, including non-state actors.¹⁸ Expanding existing

¹⁷ Priya Chacko and Alexander Davis write that, India links the idea of a responsible nuclear power with “India’s civilizational exceptionalism—its supposedly innate inclination toward moral behaviour.” See: Priya Chacko and Alexander E Davis, “Resignifying ‘responsibility’: India, exceptionalism and nuclear non-proliferation,” *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 26, no.3 (2018), pp:352-370, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2018.1486218>

¹⁸ Rakesh Sood, “India-Pakistan Nuclear Dynamics,” APLN Special Report, September 2021, <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Rakesh-Sood-India-Pakistan-APLN-Special->

CBMs and established standard operating procedures should be considered to include these factors.

CBMs are difficult to negotiate if the stronger power offers no concessions to the weaker power. Pakistan relies on nuclear weapons to offset conventional threats. It will not spell out its nuclear redlines but its full spectrum deterrence doctrine is meant to deter aggression and prevent all war. In a major speech at the Islamabad Security Dialogue in March 2021, army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa indicated that Islamabad would be willing to engage with India on CBMs.¹⁹

Many of the nuclear CBMs in Southern Asia have been in the form of declaratory statements or bilateral agreements between India and Pakistan. No verification measures exist between India and Pakistan.²⁰ Declaratory agreements, however, do signal a thawing in political relations. A holistic approach is needed, one that addresses the range of nuclear, conventional, and new technology-related CBMs. This is especially because technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and cyber weapons will make the transition from peacetime to war easier. The UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) has been working on nuclear risk reduction measures and looking at how disruptive technologies introduce uncertainties in the India, China, and Pakistan equation.²¹

The dearth of dialogue and communication on nuclear issues is a serious challenge in Southern Asia. Especially against the background of the recent crises in Southern Asia (India-Pakistan 2019 and India-China 2020), the absence of communication will increase the possibility of misreading the others' intentions. A maritime dimension of conflict in the future will pose problems for conceptualizing security approaches in the wider region. This calls for a serious consideration of maritime communication links in Southern Asia, as none are presently operational between China, India, and Pakistan.

[Report.pdf](#)

¹⁹ "Read: Full text of Gen Bajwa's speech at the Islamabad Security Dialogue," Dawn, 18 March 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1613207/read-full-text-of-gen-bajwas-speech-at-the-islamabad-security-dialogue>

²⁰ Verification can be a major challenge for two reasons: deep distrust of one another and mutual suspicion, and lack of technical expertise.

²¹ See: Wilfred Wan, "Nuclear Risk Reduction: Engaging the Non-NPT Nuclear-armed States" Nuclear Risk Reduction Policy Brief 5, UNIDIR, <https://www.unidir.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/NRR%20Policy%20Brief-non-NPT.pdf>

Policy Recommendations

Risk reduction and confidence-building measures in Southern Asia must first and foremost address the impulses for conflict escalation, the dearth of communication, and the dangers of accidental and inadvertent nuclear exchange.

Experts from the region have proposed policy recommendations for the leaderships of China, India, and Pakistan with the aim of exploring practical nuclear risk reduction, crisis stability and confidence-building measures, and identifying mechanisms and opportunities for tension reduction and conflict resolution to normalise relations. These recommendations also offer an opportunity to explore the possibility of multilateral nuclear weapons reduction and a nuclear restraint regime in Southern Asia.

Bilateral/multilateral dialogue: The absence of dialogue on nuclear issues between China, India, and Pakistan is a serious impediment to deterrence stability in the region. The establishment of bilateral dialogue between India and China and the resumption of dialogue between India and Pakistan are critical to better understanding threat perceptions, doctrines, and nuclear behaviours. Dialogue should include direct meetings of military chiefs (in the form of joint working groups) to work through common problems and evaluate the impact of disruptive technologies. Information exchanges can address confusion about command locations or unexplained radiological incidents. Existing institutional political and military hotlines should also be leveraged to address misperceptions and possibilities of inadvertent escalation. Naval dialogues are critical to understanding how navies operate in peace and war time.

Strategic risk reduction measures in Southern Asia: Risk reduction measures that cover both conventional and nuclear military capabilities of China, India, and Pakistan can be designed to first address the less sensitive but urgent issues at the official level. This includes multilateral engagement to reduce risks of outbreak of nuclear war (similar to the Reagan-Gorbachev agreement between US-USSR/Russia and the more recent agreement between the five nuclear weapon states). These issues should be addressed at both the political and military levels. Bilateral risk reduction measures between India and Pakistan should be consistent with the spirit of the 1999 Lahore memorandum of understanding between the two countries. Bilateral and multilateral risk reduction measures should also address common-pool resources like water and fishing, which have the potential to become catalysts of future conflict and territorial disputes. The US could play a more active role in facilitating some of these risk reduction measures. But to be effective, it would be necessary for the US to work out an agreement with Beijing that clearly states that facilitating stability in this region is in all countries' interests.

Updating existing bilateral agreements: The India-Pakistan agreement on notification of nuclear accidents should be updated by establishing formal mechanisms and institutional practices to better operationalise the notification requirements. The mutual non-attack agreement of 1988 between India and Pakistan has been an important bilateral CBM and it can be updated to include new facilities in both countries. A similar mutual de-targeting agreement can be considered between India and China too. Such an agreement can be eventually expanded to include other countries as well.

Naval CBMs: Naval CBMs like maritime communication links and naval dialogues are crucial for understanding how navies operate in peace and war time, and for data exchanges about water and climate threats. Without a dialogue process, maritime incidents are highly likely. There has been interest in incidents-at-sea agreements and maritime communication links at Track II levels between India-Pakistan and India-China, but these have not yet been considered formally. With all three countries set to expand their naval capabilities in the near future, a trilateral incidents-at-sea agreement should be considered to prevent clashes and conflict escalation at sea.

Formalisation of a non-alert or low-alert status: India and Pakistan weapons systems are currently not deployed; the alert status will only change in the case of a conventional build-up. Similarly, Chinese nuclear weapons systems are also considered to be at a lower status of alert. Any potential shift to higher alert status necessitated by political or technological developments will, however, increase the risk of accidental and inadvertent nuclear exchange. The formalisation of a non-alert or low-alert status in Southern Asia should be the first agreement that should be negotiated between the nuclear armed states, because of its linkages with perception of intent. This is a meaningful step to improving trilateral crisis stability.

No first use (NFU) agreement: A NFU posture can be the best first guarantee of preventing nuclear exchange. China and India are the only states among the nine nuclear powers to have a NFU posture as their nuclear policy. The NFU is, therefore, often suggested as a potential element for mutual nuclear confidence building between China and India. Through specific working groups China and India can discuss a bilateral NFU agreement as a measure for strategic stability in the region. This will however require both countries to clarify and unequivocally reaffirm their NFU policies, and for China to accept India's nuclear weapons status. Pakistan does not support an NFU policy, given its reliance on nuclear deterrence against conventional military attacks. A China-India NFU agreement together with an India-Pakistan agreement on non-attack on nuclear facilities could perhaps pave the way for three-way discussions between China, India, and Pakistan on the scope and possibility of a trilateral NFU agreement in Southern Asia. As a key strategic partner of Pakistan, China can play an important role in convincing Pakistan to participate in these discussions.

Crisis and emergency management mechanisms: Region-wide crisis and emergency management mechanisms can be developed to coordinate action in contingencies like natural disasters, public health emergencies, and trans-border crimes. These mechanisms can include setting up an official dialogue between the civilian and military law enforcement authorities from the three countries. There are existing practices on which to build – but they are bilateral and can be expanded to multilateral mechanisms. These measures might not prevent the emergence of a nuclear trilemma, but it could help predict and avoid worst-case outcomes.

Sharing best practices: The three countries should share best practices on nuclear safety and security of civilian nuclear facilities through their respective centres of excellence.²²

²² China's Nuclear Security Technology Centre, India's Global Centre for Nuclear Energy Partnership, and Paki-

Lessons and learnings from the Nuclear Security Summits and other multilateral fora like the Conference on Disarmament, where all three countries participate, can be discussed trilaterally. Besides weapons of mass destruction, the three countries should also explore guidelines pertaining to other military and non-military strategic technologies like space-based systems and space debris, cyber-weapons, lethal autonomous weapons, hypersonic, and dual-use platforms. Official trilateral meetings could be initiated and regularised on the side-lines of multilateral events.

Political and Public Education: Political leaders need to be educated and frequently reminded of the real risks of nuclear weapons and risks of deterrence breakdown. Popular culture, like art, movies, and literature, can be leveraged to make leaders and publics aware of these risks. Credible studies and reliable information should be available to decision-makers to make informed decisions.

Nexus of nuclear weapons and other existential threats: Scientific evidence suggests that even a limited use of nuclear weapons between India and Pakistan is likely to have global impact, including on the rate of climate change. Current nuclear strategy does not consider this cross-sectionality with climate change as compatible and governments are not interested in addressing it. It is, therefore, important to trigger public imagination on the risks and connections between multiple existential threats. Civil society and media can play a key role in highlighting the dangers of nuclear weapons use and its effects on climate change.

ANNEXURE 1: List of Workshop Participants

Managing the China, India, and Pakistan Nuclear Trilemma

A joint project of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament and the Toda Peace Institute

Friday 18 and Monday 21 February 2022

Ambassador Nobuyasu ABE

former UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs and former Director-General for Arms Control and Science Affairs at the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Ambassador Salman BASHIR

former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan and former High Commissioner of Pakistan to India.

Dr Toby DALTON

Co-director and Senior Fellow of the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC.

Dawoom JUNG

Communications Officer at the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN).

Brigadier Feroz KHAN

Retired Brigadier of Pakistan Army, and Research Professor in the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey.

Dr Tanvi KULKARNI

Policy Fellow at the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN).

Dr LOU Chunhao

Deputy Director and Associate Research Professor of the Institute of South Asian Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR).

Lt General (Dr) Prakash MENON

Retired Lieutenant General of Indian Army, and Director of the Strategic Studies Programme at Takshashila Institution and Former Military Advisor to Government of India.

Dr Manpreet SETHI

Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS), New Delhi and APLN Board Member

Professor SHEN Dingli

Professor at Fudan University's Institute of International Studies and Honorary Visiting Professor at Washington University in St. Louis.

Shatabhisha SHETTY (Project Co-director)

Executive Director at the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN).

Ambassador Rakesh SOOD

former Ambassador of India to the Conference on Disarmament and Special Envoy of the Prime Minister for Nuclear Non-Proliferation; Distinguished Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi

Sadia TASLEEM

Lecturer, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University

Professor Ramesh THAKUR (Project Co-director)

Senior Research Fellow at the Toda Peace Institute, Emeritus Professor in the Crawford School of Public Policy, Canberra, and former Assistant Secretary-General of the UN and Senior Vice Rector of the UN University, Tokyo.

Dr WPS Sidhu (Project Co-director)

Clinical Associate Professor at the Center for Global Affairs, School of Professional Studies, New York University

Dr Jingdon YUAN

Associate Senior Fellow at Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and Associate Professor of International Security at the Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney.

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Asia Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament** (APLN) is a network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders from countries across the Asia-Pacific tackling security and defence challenges with a particular focus on addressing and eliminating nuclear weapon risks (see <https://www.apln.network/> for more information)

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