

The Nuclear Chain Binding China, India and Pakistan in a Tight Embrace

Ramesh Thakur

Introduction

The Cold War-era weapons governance structures are no longer fit for purpose in contemporary equations where nuclear dyads have morphed into nuclear chains. The geostrategic environment of the strategic triangle under discussion, for example, had no parallel in the Cold War, with triangular shared borders among three nuclear-armed states, major territorial disputes and history of many wars since 1947. In an increasingly polycentric global order, the dyadic nuclear arms control structure can neither regulate nor constrain the choices of other nuclear-armed states. Yet growing risks point to the urgent need to institutionalise a nuclear restraint regime fit for purpose in the Asia–Pacific. In this Policy Brief, I explore the merits of adapting the Open Skies Treaty and the Incidents at Sea Agreement from the North Atlantic to the Asia–Pacific, and, in the reverse direction, of universalising a no-first-use of nuclear weapons policy from China and India to all nine nuclear-armed states.

Strategic Geography

At 5,099 metres (16,730 feet), [Daulat Beg Oldi](#) (DBO) is one of the world’s highest airfields, if not the highest. The Chinese border is a mere 8km north and the China–India Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Aksai Chin lies just 9km to the southeast. Plans to connect DBO with Leh, the capital of the new Union Territory of Ladakh, with an all-weather motorable road were announced in 2001 and the road was completed last year. The 255km long [Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road](#) runs at 4,000-5,000 metre elevation. The Leh-DBO travel time has been cut from two days to six hours.



The road may have been one of the triggers to the [clash between nuclear-armed China and India in Galwan](#) on 15 June that left 20 Indian and [40 Chinese](#) soldiers dead after an intense hand-to-hand battle with fists, rocks and rods. For it alters the strategic geography of the region. China abuts Pakistan to the west of DBO in the Gilgit-Baltistan area that once was part of the Kashmir principality. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, part of China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), runs through Pakistan-administered disputed Kashmir. In 1963, Pakistan ceded over 5,000km² territory in the disputed province to China, over India’s objections. India’s early and forceful opposition to the BRI was irksome to Beijing and has been reinforced by Australian, Japanese and US resistance to President Xi Jinping’s flagship project.

India’s military position has gradually improved over the past few years and part of China’s motivation may have been to check India’s modernisation of border troops and infrastructure. Yet Beijing has been doing the same for decades and this now “[dovetails with China’s Belt and Road Initiative](#).” Consequently, China enjoys some first mover advantages. With upgraded roads and the DBO airstrip, India can move reinforcements quickly as needed. China’s Highway 219 that links Buddhist-majority Tibet and Muslim-majority Xinjiang – China’s two ultra-sensitive “ethnic frontiers” – passes through India-claimed territory along the LAC. Indian troops at the DBO airfield can look down on the Karakoram Highway linking China and Pakistan. The transport connectivity to DBO shrinks China’s logistical superiority and the proximity to the Karakoram Pass opens up a vulnerability for the strategic highway linking Xinjiang with Pakistan. Conversely, at the tri-nation confluence in Ladakh, China and Pakistan can launch pincer movements to dislodge India from the Siachen Glacier. The 1,000km-long arc of pressure from DBO to Naku La to the

southeast may have been designed to test India's military preparedness and political resolve, and also send a message to India's regional neighbours and global partners about respective military-political strengths and weaknesses.

As this indicates, there were strategic as well as political and religious motivations behind India's decision in August last year to revoke Kashmir's autonomous status, abrogate its status as a province and bifurcate it into two Union Territories of Muslim-majority Kashmir and Buddhist-majority Ladakh. Kashmir will still have its own elected legislature but with limited powers; Ladakh will be administered directly from New Delhi. India's "internal" rearrangements of the [constitutional status of Kashmir](#) last August and assumption of [direct responsibility for Ladakh](#) connect China's strategic interests in controlling Aksai Chin to Pakistan's in retaining control of its share of Kashmir, without relinquishing the dream of gaining control over all of Kashmir. In other words, the 'internal' moves in Kashmir last year and the Galwan clashes this year demonstrate the intimate interconnections between events and developments in India, China and Pakistan. It's a knotty triangle from which not one of the three states can be disentangled.

Of course, all three countries are nuclear-armed. The interconnectedness of regional nuclear relations is not simply a matter of dyads or triads. Rather there is a [strategic chain](#) linking Pakistan, India, China and the United States. For example, the nuclear relationship between India and Pakistan is historically, conceptually, politically, strategically and even operationally deeply intertwined with China.

Two Bilateral Disputes

The India–Pakistan dispute is at once territorial, religious and identitarian. This complexity explains the intractability of the dispute. The territorial dimension concerns ownership and control of the disputed former principality of Kashmir based on the principles that guided the division of areas between India and Pakistan as the two successor states to the British colony of India. The religious dispute is over the Pakistani belief that it is the home of all the subcontinent's Muslims but at the very least the people of Kashmir should have been asked, and should still be asked, for their preferences in a plebiscite. The identitarian part, usually not appreciated by foreign observers, arises from the clash of three different notions of national identity. Muslim-majority Kashmir in Indian hands violates Pakistan's core identity, rooted solely in religion, as the home for the subcontinent's Muslims. But the loss of India's only Muslim-majority state to Pakistan would negate India's founding identity as a secular republic in which followers of all faiths can coexist peacefully as free and equal Indian citizens. In contrast to both, Kashmiris historically have had their own ethnic nationalism that transcended religion.

The unresolved dispute has led to three and a half major wars and continual skirmishes since their twin independence in 1947: immediately after independence in 1947–48; in 1965; in 1971 which saw the break-up of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh as an independent Muslim-majority but Bengali-speaking state; and the 1999 Kargil war. In more recent times, Pakistan has taken to sponsoring cross-border terrorist attacks, the worst of which was the attack on Mumbai in 2008, as a low-risk, high impact and cost-effective

alternative to bleed the conventionally superior India. By now the international reputational costs and the demonstrated willingness of the Modi government to authorise military retaliations inside Pakistan have changed the cost-benefit calculus of terrorism as an instrument of state policy for Pakistan.

The territorial dispute between China and India is serious and caused a major war in 1962 in which India was soundly defeated. Its psychological scars have not yet faded just as the 1971 defeat has been internalised by Pakistan's security elite, and the dispute remains unresolved. Its historical roots too lie in British lines on the map to demarcate the border with China, and today the China-India border, at 3,488km long, is the world's longest undemarcated and contested boundary. In the western sector, India claims 38,000km² of territory in Aksai Chin that was once part of the independent princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. India also claims another 5,180km² of Kashmir ceded to China by Pakistan in 1963. In the eastern sector, Beijing claims around 90,000km² of territory comprising the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh which China calls "Southern Tibet." Although the China-India relationship is not scarred by frequent skirmishes like India and Pakistan, there are occasional flareups. In mid-2017 China and India faced each other in a tense military confrontation in the [Doklam plateau](#) at the tri-junction with Bhutan for over two months. However, the Galwan clash in June this year was the deadliest exchange of blows since 1967 when a few hundred soldiers were killed in two separate encounters in September and October. There was also a minor skirmish in 1975 with four fatalities.

Nuclearisation

Of the three countries, China was the first to acquire nuclear weapons. It tested in 1964 and thus meets the chronological definition of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) for a nuclear-weapon-state: a country that exploded a nuclear device prior to 1 January 1967 (Article IX). Although it was not until 1992 that China acceded to the NPT, since then Beijing has been a vigorous proponent of the NPT and its non-proliferation obligations. However, all three of China, India and Pakistan are among the eight holdouts of the 44 Annex 2 countries whose ratifications are required to bring the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) into force. China has signed but not ratified while India and Pakistan have so far refused to sign the CTBT.

India conducted what it termed a peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974 but maintained a recessed deterrence posture. The subcontinent became a much-touted region for nuclear-weapon proliferation in the 1980s. Both India and Pakistan were assumed to have nuclear-weapon capacity, but not nuclear-weapon power status. This changed when India conducted five tests on 11 and 13 May 1998 and declared itself to be a possessor state. The nuclear chain argument was implicit in Prime Minister Atal Bihari [Vajpayee's letter](#) of 13 May 1998 to President Bill Clinton justifying India's nuclear tests. China, "an overt nuclear weapon state" had "committed armed aggression against India in 1962," Vajpayee alleged. Moreover, China had "materially helped" Pakistan "to become a covert nuclear weapons state." And "for the last ten years we have been the victim of unremitting terrorism and militancy sponsored by" Pakistan.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had ordered the nuclear capability to begin in 1972. The decision flowed from India's role in the secession of East Pakistan in 1971; India's 1974 test merely confirmed Bhutto in the correctness of his decision. Pakistan assembled its first nuclear bomb around 1987 and followed with a set of six nuclear tests of its own on 28 and 30 May 1998. China was the primary enabler for Pakistan's nuclear weapons in violation of NPT obligations. The "[deliberate act of proliferation](#)" by China began in earnest in 1982 with the transfer of weapons-grade uranium and a blueprint for making a bomb that China had already tested. In 1983, a US [State Department report](#) concluded that there was "unambiguous evidence" that "China has provided assistance to Pakistan's program to develop a nuclear weapons capability." Pakistan had built 7-12 nuclear warheads "based on the Chinese design, assisted by Chinese scientists and Chinese technology." The Senate Governmental Affairs Committee noted "[multiple reports](#)" that Pakistan had obtained pre-tested atomic bomb design, bomb-grade enriched uranium and nuclear-capable M-11 missiles from China. Thomas Reed, Secretary of the Air Force under presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, has claimed that [Pakistan's first nuclear weapon test](#) was carried out for it by China on 26 May 1990.

[China does not view India as a threat](#), is dismissive of India's great power pretensions, holds India's possession of nuclear weapons to be illegitimate and should be rolled back because it was done outside the NPT, and expects the military-nuclear power gap to grow rather than widen. Beijing is more worried about the potential for instability and crisis escalation in India-Pakistan relations. A perusal of the literature and interviews with Chinese experts concluded that they expect China to continue to maintain a ten-year lead over India for the foreseeable future. The flip side of this is that "China's nuclear weapons are not directed at India." However, the perceptions gap between Indian and Chinese security elites could create difficulties. Despite clear evidence to the effect that China's policies and actions are the principal driver of India's nuclear policy, Chinese analysts reject such a contention. Consequently, Indian actions are below China's radar and do not affect its strategic choices, but Chinese behaviour does drive India's nuclear policy. Toby Dalton and Tong Zhao describe this as "[decoupled deterrence](#)" where "only the smaller or weaker power takes security-seeking steps in response to actions by the bigger power, which are motivated by a different threat."

For an example of operational linkages, let's look at India's central nuclear doctrine. India's National Security Advisory Board published its draft report on nuclear doctrine in 1999, and it was officially [adopted by the cabinet](#) on 4 January 2003. Its declared aim is to "pursue a doctrine of credible minimum nuclear deterrence." While "credibility" is defined by retaliatory capability, command-control-communications survivability, and political will on the part of the Nuclear Command Authority, "minimum" defines size, cost, posture, doctrine and use.

However, just what is a "credible minimum deterrent" that would dissuade nuclear blackmail and coercion, ensure survivability against a surprise attack, and permit second-strike nuclear retaliation? The requirements of numbers, deployment patterns and locations, distribution between land-based, air-launched and sea-borne assets, and reach, are mutually incompatible for India's posture between China and Pakistan. As [Vipin Narang noted](#), "what is credible toward China will likely not be minimum toward Pakistan; and what

is minimum toward Pakistan cannot be credible toward China.” Efforts to become credible with respect to China cannot but undermine claims of ‘minimality’ towards Pakistan with flow-on consequences for the subcontinent’s nuclear force postures.

Or let’s consider a current international crisis of the arms control architecture as a second example of how, with simultaneous threat perceptions between three or more nuclear-armed states in the second nuclear age, changes in the nuclear posture of one can generate a cascading effect on several others. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty lapsed in August last year, six months after President Donald Trump suspended US participation and gave notice of withdrawal. Reflecting the dominant nuclear arms control architecture of the Cold War, the INF was bilateral. It was negotiated to counter the Soviet nuclear threat to Europe and underpinned three decades of European strategic stability.

Although Russia and the US traded charges on violations of the INF, the US exit was partly a response to China’s growing challenge to US dominance in the Asia-Pacific. China was not a signatory and about 95 percent of its missiles are in the INF range, enabling it to target US ships and bases from the mainland by relatively inexpensive conventional means. In testimony to the US Senate Armed Services Committee on 27 April 2017, US Pacific Commander Admiral Harry Harris (now the US ambassador to South Korea) noted that INF limited US “ability to counter Chinese and other countries’ cruise missiles, land-based missiles.” Having exited the INF, the US can develop ground-launched intermediate-range cruise missiles and could seek to station them in Guam, Japan, South Korea and northern Australia.

These could reach deep into China’s interior and force Beijing to divert significant military resources to defend its homeland. On 6 August 2019, Fu Cong, director of arms control in China’s foreign ministry, warned: “China will not stand by idly and will be forced to take countermeasures should the U.S. deploy intermediate-range ground-based missiles in this part of the world.” Beijing would feel compelled to institute countermeasures to protect vital security interests, including nuclear assets located deep in its interior. China’s response in turn will trigger readjustments to India’s doctrine of credible minimum deterrence and produce matching readjustments by Pakistan. In a worst-case scenario, all three of China, India and Pakistan could engage in a nuclear arms race with a rapid expansion of warhead numbers, missile delivery capabilities and diversified launch platforms. They could even move to keeping a stock of nuclear weapons on high alert just like Russia and the US, multiplying the risks of an accidental nuclear war.

Crisis Stability and Confidence Building Measures

Considering the broad sweep of the nuclear age, following the decades of essentially a bipolar nuclear landscape, we now face a much more complex era, focused on the Indo-Pacific, involving multiple balances and vastly varying degrees of competence – all of which entail potential for strategic surprises. The strategic environment includes major asymmetries, and the role of nuclear weapons in the overall security calculus has been changing. In addition, new technologies such as cyberwarfare, space-based dual use systems and autonomous weapons systems using artificial intelligence are introducing

fresh instabilities in power relationships; as are the roles of 'grey-zone' operations and those of non-state actors. All this is a challenge for arms control negotiators: simple, number-counting warhead reductions no longer work because it is necessary to look at the wider calculus of security imbalances.

Reflecting the Anglo-European dominance of global scholarship, the strategic studies literature has been preoccupied with Euro-Atlantic nuclear relations. Yet a prospective Russia-NATO/US war is only one of several potential nuclear flashpoints, albeit the one with the gravest consequences. Other possible flashpoints include India-Pakistan and India-China. A simple transposition of the dyadic North Atlantic frameworks and lessons to comprehend the multiplex Indo-Pacific nuclear relations is both analytically flawed and entails policy dangers for managing nuclear stability. The Cold War-era weapons governance structures are no longer fit for purpose in contemporary equations where nuclear dyads have morphed into nuclear chains. In an increasingly polycentric global order, the dyadic nuclear arms control structure can neither regulate nor constrain the choices of other nuclear-armed states.

The geostrategic environment of the strategic triangle under discussion, for example, had no parallel in the Cold War, with triangular shared borders among three nuclear-armed states, major territorial disputes and history of many wars since 1947. Propinquity and the pattern of population distribution leave both India and Pakistan vulnerable to fallout from any use by either of its own weapons against the other, producing a measure of self-deterrence. India and Pakistan share a long border; the US and USSR did not. The entire territory of Kashmir is in dispute; the US-USSR had no direct territorial dispute. Contiguity permits India and Pakistan to meddle inside each other's territory in numbers and on a scale that was not an option for the Cold War superpowers. It also dramatically shortens the time frame within which either country would have to decide, in the midst of a tense crisis or war, whether or not to use nuclear weapons. India and Pakistan have fought three and a half wars; Moscow and Washington fought none. India shares a long border with nuclear-armed China: this too is disputed, introducing a three-way territorial conflict into the strategic equation which was never the case during the Cold War. All these worries are exacerbated by periodic internal political volatility and instability.

Premeditated nuclear strikes seem unlikely pathways to a nuclear exchange in the China-India-Pakistan triangle. But the subcontinental rivalry is not free of the risk of a nuclear exchange triggered by acts of terror committed on Indian territory by individuals and groups linked to networks across the border in Pakistan. After the terrorist attacks on India's parliament in December 2001 and on Mumbai in November 2008, national leaders, assisted by outsiders playing constructive roles, managed to contain and then deflate escalatory pressures and defuse India-Pakistan tensions. Few can feel confident that such intentionally spectacular incidents will not be repeated, or that the escalatory pressures will be successfully contained on every provocation. That is, the brittleness of deterrence stability is a function of fragile crisis stability mechanisms. Moreover, each party will feel more insecure with every increase in the other's nuclear weapons stockpiles and capabilities.

The world got a sharp reminder of the threat of events overwhelming premeditation after the suicide attack by a Kashmiri militant on an Indian paramilitary convoy in Kashmir on 14 February 2019 that killed 40 soldiers. The Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) claimed responsibility. India retaliated with missile strikes against an alleged JeM terrorist training camp in Balakot, deep inside Pakistan, on 26 February, followed the next day by an aerial dogfight between the two countries' air forces. Thus, for the first time in world history, one nuclear-armed state attacked a target inside another and the two fought an air battle. The risk of another flare-up remains real because of the unresolved territorial dispute, Pakistan-based jihadist groups that wage hybrid war in India, growing nuclear stockpiles and expanding nuclear platforms, the dominance of the army in controlling Pakistan's nuclear, security and Kashmir policies, the rise of militant Hindu nationalism in India, and a [strategic reset in India's default response matrix](#) against terrorist attacks.

Clearly the region suffers from trust deficits in key relations. The Indo-Pacific in general has little experience with confidence building measures, lacks the machinery which might support such measures and suffers from a lack of official and non-official, so called "Track 2" processes to act as idea generators. Whereas in the Cold War the US and Soviet Union developed channels for dialogue and confidence-building measures (CBMs) out of a common interest in survival, these models have yet to find fertile ground in Asia-Pacific, where there is only one successful model in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). With the China-India-Pakistan strategic entanglement constituting nuclear risk flash points, the adequacy of current regional security structures, the precursors to reducing nuclear tensions and the pathways for increasing trust including the potential for trilateral CBMs must be explored. Strategic policy dialogues among nuclear-armed states can promote transparency, reduce misperceptions, and eliminate ambiguities about their respective nuclear arsenals, weapon systems, doctrines and force postures. They can also enlighten participating countries of one another's respective threat perceptions.

India and Pakistan do have some CBMs in place – for example, on placement of forces away from the border; agreements not to attack each other's nuclear facilities; an annual exchange of lists of such facilities; advance notification of missile launches within a specified range of each other's territories; restrictions on use of helicopters near the border – but there are no restrictions on unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) (which neither side questions). While politics remains at the core of a solution to both border disputes, growing nuclear arsenals including tactical weapons demand action to create buffers against inadvertent use of nuclear weapons based on miscalculation, faulty information or accidental launch. China, India and Pakistan need to look at all options including technological solutions and other possible CBMs.

In a [study of China-India strategic postures](#) published by Harvard University's Belfer Center in March, Frank O'Donnell and Alexander K. Bollfrass suggest that "India has under-appreciated conventional advantages that reduce its vulnerability to Chinese threats and attacks." In turn, this gives India "an opportunity for leadership in international efforts toward nuclear transparency and restraint." A trilateral no-first-use (NFU), an open skies treaty and an incidents at sea agreement could be great confidence builders.

No First Use

Of the world's current nine nuclear-armed states, China and India are the only two with the stated commitment to NFU and matching force postures. For both, the NFU posture underlines the importance of survivability of existing forces and reduces the salience of developing offensive nuclear capabilities. Both countries envisage the role of nuclear weapons primarily as political: preventing nuclear blackmail; not military: fighting a nuclear war. Accordingly, in declared nuclear doctrines of both, the weapon is meant for safeguarding the nation against nuclear blackmail and coercion. Neither supports the idea of war-fighting with nuclear weapons. Both deter the adversary's use of nuclear weapons by assured second-strike retaliatory capability to cause unacceptable damage. To this end, both China and India have been investing in ensuring the survivability of their respective nuclear arsenals and command and control infrastructure. They face different threats and China neither acknowledges nor accepts India as a nuclear-armed state. Nevertheless, the similarity of their nuclear philosophy adds ballast to strategic stability between the two countries.

China's NFU policy is a logical corollary of its concept of "limited deterrence." As per its official doctrine, reiterated in the 2019 defence white paper, China will never be the first to use nuclear weapons: "China is always committed to a nuclear policy of no first use of nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances, and not using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones unconditionally." China's operational plans do not call for the first use of nuclear weapons, nor even the threat of first use and, as a safeguard against inadvertent or unauthorised use, warheads are kept off alert and stored separately from delivery systems in peacetime.

For India the most pressing diplomatic challenge after the 1998 tests was to reconcile its security imperatives with international concerns on nuclear proliferation. It tried to do so with a stress on responsibility and restraint. The core elements of India's nuclear doctrine, in place since 1999, include a credible minimum deterrent and unilateral promises of no use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states, and no first use against nuclear adversaries.

The NFU policy is under strain in both countries. The transformation of the bilateral China-US relationship, from strategic engagement to confrontation, could erode the foundations of China's policy of nuclear restraint that has held numbers of warheads to a very low level. In India's case, on the one hand, in the context of military clashes with Pakistan – which explicitly subscribes to a first use policy to deter attack by the conventionally more powerful India – and in the immediate aftermath of fully integrating Kashmir into the Indian union, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh tweeted in 2019 that the no first use policy could be shelved in unspecified future circumstances. He was speaking days after India annulled Kashmir's special status and provoked a flurry of apocalyptic warnings from Pakistan, which rejects NFU, about a nuclear conflagration. However, giving credence to these calls for change rests on a fallacious interpretation of the politics of India's NFU.

In addition to its profound symbolic value, NFU has significant practical implications. It encourages a shift away from high-risk doctrines with flow-on requirements for nuclear force posture and deployment. De-alerting, de-mating and de-targeting, which significantly lower the prospects of accidental and unauthorised use, would be far more challenging to maintain with a first-use commitment. NFU also militates against the development and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons that are highly vulnerable to enemy attack. They are weapons of first-use and too risky for second-use. The removal of tactical weapons from the nuclear arsenal also removes the need for deployment on the forward edge of the battlefield, launch-on-warning postures, and pre-delegation of authority to battlefield commanders. NFU, on the other hand, allows for greater response time for cross-checking the incoming threat information, and hence one can afford to maintain a relaxed deterrence posture that is conducive to strategic stability.

It's striking that, despite casualties on both sides in the [China-India clash in June 2020](#), both countries refrained from the use of nuclear rhetoric. [Manpreet Sethi and I argued recently](#) in *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* that their reticence is attributable in part to the two countries' NFU policy. This first demonstration of the practical utility of the NFU-centric nuclear restraint merits wider international study for injecting much needed strategic sanity in the world. Deterrence stability is fragile, reliant on the presence of rational decision makers with fingers on every nuclear button and the total-cum-indefinite absence of rogue launches, human-error incidents or system malfunction.

The manner in which nuclear policies and postures of China and India contributed to strategic stability even in the midst of a tense military situation is worthy of broader international study. Almost all current nuclear relationships suffer from substantial trust deficits. These are exacerbated by the prevalence of offensive nuclear doctrines that project first use. Important lessons from the China-India experience on no-first-use, embedded in a global NFU convention, would be particularly pertinent for other nuclear theatres that dot the globe today.

Open Skies Treaty

Thus, the North Atlantic could learn from China's and India's example of a NFU policy. In turn, these three Asian nuclear-armed countries should explore the possible relevance to their nuclear chain of two mechanisms developed for the North Atlantic: the Treaty on Open Skies and the Incidents at Sea Agreement.

With the INF dead and buried, on 21 May 2020 the [US withdrew from the 1992 Open Skies Treaty](#). Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister [Alexander Grushko criticised the US exit](#) as "very regrettable" and said the Trump administration was working to "derail all agreements on arms control." The treaty had its origins in a bold proposal from President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1955. He feared that, absent accurate independent information about each other's capabilities, both sides would base decisions on worst-case assumptions that would create a self-perpetuating escalation spiral. He called for a reciprocal agreement to permit each country's aircraft to make unlimited surveillance flights over the other side's territory. Moscow rejected the idea but with the end of the Cold War, President George H. W. Bush revived it as an effective way to verify the limits on military forces under the Conventional

Forces in Europe agreement (1990). The post-Soviet government was amenable and the Open Skies Treaty was signed in Helsinki on 24 March 1992 and entered into force on 1 January 2002. By 2020 it had 35 states parties.

The treaty authorised around 1,500 missions over its lifespan, including more than 500 flights over Russia as the most overflowed and best-monitored country under the treaty. Scheduled on short notice, the flights provided photographic evidence of major military equipment and movements across Europe. Overflights were closely monitored in terms of numbers, conditions and timing of flights, and the technical capabilities of the surveillance equipment. Mission aircraft could be equipped only with specified sensors limited to an agreed resolution. All imagery collected from the flights was made available to any signatory. The treaty was from the outset a successful symbol of political engagement, without specific stated goals as to what the overflights were to achieve. It was a profoundly practical contribution to confidence building and risk reduction, with every flight helping to allay worries about surprise attack and reducing uncertainty.

A regional [APLN meeting held in New Delhi](#) in January 2017 considered the India–Pakistan border as one scenario where aerial surveillance under an ‘open skies’ arrangement could help reduce the risk of unintended conflict. There is no reason in principle why there could not be two mutually reinforcing bilateral agreements between India and Pakistan, and China and India; or even a trilateral agreement among all three. Aerial observation of the border on the two lines of control, from Arunachal Pradesh via Aksai Chin, Ladakh and Kashmir, to the Arabian Sea, could help secure the boundaries, detect incursions and prevent infiltration. Early detection of a security incursion, as would have occurred in the Galwan region in the spring and early summer of 2020, could raise the threshold for any military-nuclear response and give diplomacy more of a pre-emptive head start. In any such arrangement the needs of each party would differ, for example with respect to the image resolution most helpful in the Himalayas, and would be part of the negotiation.

Three key questions deserve further analysis. The arrangements developed in Europe during the Cold War and later were unique in that they evolved between two blocs – rather than the nuclear triad and multi-centred environment of Asia. How can we translate the lessons of the one to that of the other? Will/should Asia–Pacific focus on bilateral or regional approaches (or both simultaneously)? While Asia–Pacific regional structures are often depicted dismissively as mere “talk shops,” they do perform an essential role in encouraging the habit of information sharing and problem solving. They are easier to initiate when the political atmosphere is favourable but the need for them is even more critical when the political atmosphere is tense.

Incidents at Sea Agreement

Strategic submarines (SSBNs) armed with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) are the most stabilising platform for nuclear weapons deployment for assured destruction through second-strike capability. But for this to be credible, strategic submarines must be exempted from the usual practice of de-mating weapons from missiles and storing them in physically dispersed locations. In the Russia–US strategic rivalry, submarine-based nuclear weapons deepen strategic stability by enhancing survivability and reducing successful first-

strike possibilities. By contrast the race to attain continuous at-sea deterrence capability through nuclear-armed submarines is [potentially destabilising in the Indo-Pacific](#) because the regional powers lack well-developed operational concepts, robust and redundant command-and-control systems, and secure communications over submarines at sea.

In the late 1960s, the [US and Soviet navies were involved in several incidents](#) that could have escalated out of control: US and Soviet planes passed too close to one another, their ships bumped one another, and both ships and planes “buzzed” one another with threatening movements. Two rounds of talks were held in Moscow in October 1971 and Washington in May 1972, and the [Incidents at Sea Agreement](#) was signed in Moscow on 25 May 1972. Among other things, it calls on both sides to take steps to avoid collision, refrain from interfering in each other’s “formations,” avoid manoeuvres in areas of heavy sea traffic, conduct surveillance from a safe distance in order to avoid “embarrassing or endangering the ships under surveillance,” inform vessels when submarines are exercising near them, and avoid simulated attacks against aircraft or ships of the other side or dropping hazardous objects near them. The agreement also provided for annual meetings to review implementation.

In 1985, US Secretary of the Navy John Lehman observed that the [frequency of incidents was “way down](#) from what it was in the 1960s and early 1970s.” Like other CBMs, the agreement did not directly affect the size, weaponry or force structure of the parties. Rather, the intention of the functional navy-to-navy process was to enhance mutual knowledge and understanding of military activities; reduce the possibility of conflict by accident, miscalculation or lack of communication; and increase stability in times of both calm and crisis. These general principles, not the specific provisions of the agreement, are the key considerations in adapting them to the China–India–Pakistan strategic triangle.

Institutionalising a Nuclear Restraint Regime

The dominant normative framework of the global nuclear orders remains the NPT. Of the three nuclear-armed countries under discussion, only China is an NPT state party. None of the three is a CTBT state party, although China is a signatory. Not one of the three has indicated the slightest interest in signing the 2017 UN Nuclear Ban Treaty. Nor are their nuclear relations immune to global nuclear cross-currents. Five global trends have contributed to the deepening unease about the steadily increasing nuclearisation of world affairs over the past decade. A tense international security environment amidst heightened geopolitical tensions, irresponsible statements from the leaders of some nuclear-armed countries, proliferation of nuclear weapons and expansion of roles envisaged for them in updated nuclear doctrines, emergence of new technologies, and a crumbling arms control architecture have increased the risk of accidental or deliberate use of nuclear weapons.

Accordingly, however desirable it might be as a goal and however compelling the logic in its favour, nuclear disarmament remains an over-the-horizon prospect. In the meantime, there is an urgent need to institute additional safeguards against the intensified risks of accidental, unauthorised or threshold-crossing armed skirmishes tipping Asia and the world into the launch of nuclear weapons. This Policy Brief has indicated three sets of confidence building

measures and risk reduction agreements that could be institutionalised to shape relations between nuclear-armed China, India and Pakistan. In turn the institutionalisation of these arrangements and practices in a nuclear restraint regime underpinning China–India–Pakistan relations could help to consolidate both crisis and arms race stability measures at the global level.

The Author

Ramesh Thakur is emeritus professor in the Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University; Senior Fellow, Toda Peace Institute; and a member of the APLN Board of Directors. He was formerly a United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Co-Convenor of the APLN.

The Asia Pacific Leadership Network (APLN)

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is an advocacy group that aims to inform and energize public opinion, especially high-level policymakers, to take seriously the very real threat posed by nuclear weapons, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which they are contained, diminished and eventually eliminated.

Contact Us

APLN Secretariat
Room 302, Sindonga Belua Bldg.
102 Sajik-ro, Jongno-gu, Seoul, South Korea
Email: apl@apl.network

Toda Peace Institute

The **Toda Peace Institute** is an independent, nonpartisan institute committed to advancing a more just and peaceful world through policy-oriented peace research and practice. The Institute commissions evidence-based research, convenes multi-track and multi-disciplinary problem-solving workshops and seminars, and promotes dialogue across ethnic, cultural, religious and political divides. It catalyses practical, policy-oriented conversations between theoretical experts, practitioners, policymakers and civil society leaders in order to discern innovative and creative solutions to the major problems confronting the world in the twenty-first century (see www.toda.org for more information).

Contact Us

Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan
Email: contact@toda.org