



■ APRIL 2024

**BASIC**

# Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia:

Mutual Confidence, Risk, and Responsibility

Dr Chiara Cervasio, Dr Nicholas J. Wheeler, and Mhairi McClafferty

**The British American Security  
Information Council (BASIC)**

Work + Play  
111 Seven Sisters Rd  
Finsbury Park  
London  
N7 7FN  
United Kingdom

© The British American Security Information Council  
(BASIC), 2024

The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of BASIC.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.

Please direct all enquiries to the publishers.

## Acknowledgements

This report is part of the BASIC project: 'Strengthening Crisis Prevention, Management and De-escalation through a Responsibility-Based Regime to Reduce Nuclear Risks in Southern Asia', generously funded by the UK Government's Counter Proliferation and Arms Control Centre (CPACC). The report does not directly reflect the views of the British Government. BASIC is grateful for the financial support received for this project.

The authors would like to thank Alice Spilman and Eva-Nour Repussard for their important contributions in both helping develop the ideas in this report and organising the dialogues that underpin it. The authors would also like to thank Sebastian Brixey-Williams, Executive Director of BASIC, for his contributions to the dialogues and the overall project, and Lydia Cant for her assistance in the research for this report. Special thanks also to Dr Meenakshi Gopinath, who is a constant source of guidance and inspiration for our work. The authors would also like to extend a special thanks to the Asia-Pacific Nuclear Advisory Panel (APNAP) for their invaluable support and counsel in developing this report. But most of all, the authors would like to thank the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) in New Delhi (Muneer Ahmed, Kamal Madishetty, Ruhee Neog, and Prerana Priyadarshi) and the Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research (CSSPR) at the University of Lahore (Dr Rabia Akhtar and Abdul Waris Hameed). In particular, the authors are most grateful to Dr Rabia Akhtar and Ruhee Neog who are the Directors of CSSPR and IPCS respectively, and have made insightful comments on this report. They are also invaluable institutional partners in BASIC's work in South Asia and without them our dialogues - and therefore this report - would not have been possible.



Dr Chiara  
Cervasio

Dr Chiara Cervasio is a Policy Fellow at BASIC and Programme Manager of the BASIC-ICCS Programme on Nuclear Responsibilities. Chiara also collaborates with the BASIC's Programme on Risk Reduction in the Arctic.

Chiara's expertise is in nuclear diplomacy and trust-building, nuclear risk reduction, and crisis management and de-escalation practices, especially in Southern Asia. Chiara is also interested in investigating security dynamics between nuclear armed states in the Asia-Pacific, especially India-China and India-Pakistan, and Arctic security dynamics.

Chiara has published in high impact journals, such as *International Relations*, and regularly writes policy briefs and reports on nuclear risk reduction, China-India / India-Pakistan relations, and the Arctic. Chiara has provided talks at Wilton Park (UK FCDO) and at the MINDS briefing expert series for the Government of Canada (DND) and has presented her research at several conferences, such as ISODARCO, the British International Studies Association (BISA), the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP), and the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR). Chiara holds a PhD in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Birmingham. Her PhD focused on distrust reduction and crisis management in contemporary China-India relations. In addition, Chiara holds a first-class Master from the University of Bologna in International Security and a first-class degree in Politics and International Relations from the University of Pisa.



Dr Nicholas  
J. Wheeler

Dr Nicholas J. Wheeler is Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science and International Studies and Institute for Conflict, Cooperation, and Security at the University of Birmingham, and a Non-resident Senior Fellow at BASIC.

His publications include (with Ken Booth) *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford University Press, 2000); and *Trusting Enemies: Interpersonal Relationships in International Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2018). He is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in the United Kingdom, a Fellow of the Learned Society of Wales, and has had an entry in Who's Who since 2011.



Mhairi  
McClafferty

Mhairi McClafferty is Policy Fellow at BASIC and has worked on the Programme on Nuclear Responsibilities since 2022. She also works as part of BASIC's Programme on Risk Reduction in the Arctic. Her research interests include nuclear diplomacy, conflict resolution and crisis management, as well as exploring nuclear weapons from humanitarian and gender perspectives.

Mhairi holds a Master's degree in Diplomacy and International Security, as well as a Bachelor's degree in History from the University of Strathclyde. She also participated in the Erasmus Exchange Programme, attending the University of Groningen during her undergraduate studies.

## BASIC

BASIC is a London-based think tank that promotes meaningful dialogue amongst governments and experts in order to build international trust, reduce nuclear risks, and advance disarmament. We have a global reputation for convening distinctive and empathic dialogues that help states overcome complex strategic and political differences. Our established networks and expertise, developed since 1987, enable us to get the right people in the room and facilitate effective, meaningful exchange between siloed and often hostile political communities.

# Contents

---

<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b>	<b>5</b>
------------------------------	----------

---

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>6</b>
--------------------------	----------

---

<b>POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>7</b>
-------------------------------	----------

---

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>8</b>
---------------------	----------

---

<b>PART I</b>	<b>10</b>
The Rationality of Fear in South Asia's Nuclear Experience	

---

<b>PART II</b>	<b>14</b>
Exploring the Sources of Confidence in South Asia's Nuclear Restraint	
2.1 Intimate Enmity	
2.2 Face Saving Narratives	
2.3 Outsourcing Escalation Control (CBMs)	
2.4 Outsourcing Escalation Control	

---

<b>PART III</b>	<b>21</b>
Can India and Pakistan Rely on Mutual Confidence in Crisis? Towards a Responsibility-Based Crisis Management and Prevention Regime	
3.1 A Responsibility-Based Regime for Crisis Management and Prevention	

---

<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>29</b>
-------------------	-----------

# List of Abbreviations

BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BMD	Ballistic Missile Defense
CBM	Confidence-Building Measure
CSSPR	Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research
DGMO	Director General of Military Operations
IAF	Indian Air Force
IPCS	Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
ISPR	Inter-Service Public Relations
J&K	Jammu and Kashmir
JeM	Jaish-e-Mohammad
LoC	Line of Control
NFU	No First Use
NNRC	National and Nuclear Risk Reduction Center
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SASCS	The South Asian Standing Communication Secretariat
SDS	Security Dilemma Sensibility

# Executive Summary

This report emerges from a series of dialogues with the Indian and Pakistani nuclear policy communities at the Track 2 / 1.5 level held by BASIC in 2023-2024. The key argument of the report is that, in the India-Pakistan nuclear dyad, there is mutual confidence that the other can be relied upon to show restraint in times of crisis and not push their adversary into a choice between a humiliating defeat and escalating the crisis to the nuclear level. What is more, as the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis showed, Indian and Pakistani decision-makers appear to have become sufficiently confident in the “other’s restraint” that they believe even limited conventional hostilities between them will not challenge this. The shared fear of nuclear war clearly plays a pivotal role here, but the report identifies four additional sources that uphold this mutual confidence. These are (i) intimate enmity; (ii) face-saving narratives; (iii) confidence-building measures (CBMs); and (iv) the outsourcing of escalation control to third parties. At the same time, the report shows how these four sources of restraint are fragile ones, and that in the context of future challenges to South Asian crisis stability, there is a risk that (over)confidence may slip into complacency. This underlines the urgent and timely need for India and Pakistan to develop a robust crisis prevention and management regime that can avoid the danger that in a future crisis both sides miscalculate the other’s red lines and inadvertently cross them. To this end, the report develops five key responsibility-based policy recommendations, which are illustrated in Box 1 below.

# Policy Recommendations

---

## **Policy Recommendation 1: Shared Responsibility to Communicate and Reduce Distrust: The South Asian Standing Communication Secretariat (SASCS)**

Establish an India-Pakistan Track 2 forum called the South Asia Standing Communication Secretariat (SASCS). This Track 2 forum would explore how India and Pakistan might better communicate in times of crisis. Such a body could reflect on how signals were (mis)interpreted in past crises, and how signals might be better crafted in future that leverage security dilemma sensibility (SDS). The purpose of such a Track 2 body would be to develop new proposals that could contribute to reducing the risks of future crises and if they occur, ensure that decision-makers have available a menu of possible de-escalation options.

---

## **Policy Recommendation 2: Shared Responsibility to Develop a Trusted Track 1 Communication Channel**

Establish a leader-to-leader hotline that can serve as a trusted channel of communication at the highest levels of India-Pakistan diplomacy. While existing communication mechanisms, like the DGMO hotline, have played a role in crisis management, they are limited by deep-seated distrust and a lack of transparency. The absence of a direct channel between the top leaders exacerbates the difficulty of distinguishing credible signals from noise, particularly in the face of escalating social media rhetoric. Therefore, establishing a trusted Track 1 communication channel between Indian and Pakistan leaders is crucial for reducing anxiety, fostering confidence in each other's restraint, and adeptly managing crises.

---

## **Policy Recommendation 3: Shared Responsibility to Monitor and Update Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs): The CBMs Monitor**

Create a CBMs monitor, perhaps within SASCS, to oversee the implementation and update of CBMs between India and Pakistan. This Track 2 initiative would assess adherence to existing CBMs, recommend updates to address emerging challenges, such as incorporating notifications for cruise and hypersonic missile tests, expand existing

agreements to include accidents, cyber attacks, and attack on nuclear command-and-control systems, and enhance media guidelines to counter disinformation. This initiative would feed into policy recommendations at the Track 1 level and can be reinforced by unilateral political statements reaffirming leaders' commitment to upholding CBMs.

---

## **Policy Recommendation 4: Shared Responsibility to Cultivate Constituencies of Peace with the Next Generation of Experts and Policy-Makers**

To cultivate constituencies of peace, India and Pakistan should invest in initiatives aimed at next generation experts and policy-makers in both countries. These include investing in boot camps and training programmes focused on regional nuclear dynamics, and promoting joint studies on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons. Such initiatives will also foster meaningful interactions among younger generations in India and Pakistan to cultivate intimacy and cooperation, diminishing enmity and distrust between the two countries.

---

## **Policy Recommendation 5: Shared Responsibility for the Media not to Promote Violent Language and Nuclear Jingoism**

To combat the promotion of violent language and nuclear jingoism in the media in India and Pakistan, both countries should enforce guidelines for responsible reporting. These guidelines should prioritise accuracy and transparency while discouraging sensationalism and narratives that fuel tensions. Reinstating the 1950 Joint Press Code can serve as a foundational step to prevent the dissemination of misinformation, especially during times of crisis. Both countries should also reinstate visas for foreign correspondents and journalists from each other's countries to diversify viewpoints and challenge stereotypes and misperceptions. Moreover, investing in comprehensive media training programmes focused on responsible reporting and use of language can help reduce the spread of inflammatory narratives and promote constructive discourse.

---

# Introduction

Ever since India and Pakistan announced themselves as nuclear-armed states in May 1998, South Asia has been considered, especially in the West, a potential “nuclear flash point”.<sup>1</sup> On the eve of his visit to Delhi in March 2000, President Bill Clinton described the ceasefire line that divides Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) between India and Pakistan as “the most dangerous place in the world”.<sup>2</sup> Only a year earlier, Clinton had personally intervened with the then Pakistani leader Nawaz Sharif to pressurise him into ending Pakistan’s military incursion across the Line of Control (LoC) at Kargil that had triggered a conflict that risked escalation to the nuclear level. Although the Kargil crisis was defused, the then US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott wrote later that Clinton was “convinced . . . the world was closer [during Kargil] even than during the Cuban Missile Crisis to a nuclear war”.<sup>3</sup> What is more, Talbott himself believed that, “Unlike Kennedy and Khrushchev in 1962, Vajpayee and Sharif did not realize how close they were to the brink, so there was an even greater risk that they would blindly stumble across it”.<sup>4</sup> The “flashpoint” language and framing of South Asia remains embedded in the Western discourse. As a 2022 report by the United States Institute of Peace expressed it, “Southern Asia remains dangerously at risk of a nuclear exchange and the region’s many disputes show no sign of being resolved, yet fewer safeguards are in place to prevent nuclear war than at many of the world’s other potential flash points”.<sup>5</sup> This “flashpoint” language has been mostly rejected in South Asia, especially by Indian decision-makers, officials, and policy influencers. This is evident in India’s President K.R. Narayanan’s rebuttal of Clinton’s earlier remarks at their 2000 joint press conference in Delhi:

*“It has been suggested that the Indian subcontinent is the most dangerous place in the world today, and Kashmir is a nuclear flashpoint. These alarmist descriptions will only encourage those who want to break the peace and indulge in terrorism and violence. The danger is not from us who have declared solemnly that we will not be the first to use nuclear weapons, but rather it is from those who refuse to make any such commitment.”<sup>7</sup>*

Narayanan’s comments placed the blame for nuclear risks firmly on Pakistan and its rejection of a No First Use (NFU) nuclear doctrine. The key principle of BASIC’s Nuclear Responsibilities Programme is to reject a discourse of blaming and explore through a dialogical approach how far responsibilities for nuclear risk reduction might become a shared endeavour that can promote a shared conception of security. The Indian and Pakistani participants in the Track 2 and 1.5 dialogues on which this report is based shared this commitment to exploring new cooperative paths to security. Nevertheless, they were also united that the “nuclear flashpoint” framing is too alarmist and might lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of conflict. Without negating nuclear risks, and recognising that the relationship between the two states is likely to be a conflictual one for the foreseeable future, there was a strong consensus that South Asia is not primed for nuclear war. Instead, what emerged strongly from the dialogues was that there is mutual confidence on both sides that India and Pakistan can be relied upon to show restraint in times of crisis and not push the other into a choice between a humiliating defeat and escalating the crisis to the nuclear level.

At the same time, there was a recognition among those we engaged in our dialogues, that this confidence in mutual restraint should not be exaggerated, and that there was a need to avoid slipping into complacency. Indeed, as we argue in Part 1 of this report, there has been a steady increase in both sides’ willingness to use limited force in a crisis in the belief that this will not lead to escalation to the nuclear level. Here, our dialogues brought out well the differences between the beliefs of Indian and Pakistani “crisis managers”<sup>8</sup>

1. C. Uday Bhaskar, “Clinton’s Visit and the Nuclear Narrative”, *Strategic Analysis: A Monthly Journal of the IDSA XXIV(2)* (2000), [https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa\\_may00bhc01.html](https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_may00bhc01.html).
2. Bhaskar, “Clinton’s Visit”; see also Peter Popham, “The world’s most dangerous place’ is already at war”, *The Independent*, 18 March 2000, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/the-world-s-most-dangerous-place-is-already-at-war-282458.html>.
3. Strobe Talbott, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy and the Bomb* (Washington: Brookings, 2004), p. 167.
4. Talbott, *Engaging India*, p. 167.
5. USIP Senior Study Group on Strategic Stability in Southern Asia, *Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia* (United States Institute of Peace, 2022), p. 4, <https://www.usip.org/southern-asia-strategic-stability-report>.
6. Bhaskar, “Clinton Visit”; Subhash Kapila, “The Myth of Kashmir as a Nuclear Flashpoint” (Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies, 2000), [https://www.ipcs.org/comm\\_select.php?articleNo=327](https://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=327)
7. Remarks by President Clinton and President Narayanan of India of India in an Exchange of Toasts, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 21 March 2000, [https://clintonwhitehouse5.archives.gov/textonly/WH/New/SouthAsia/speeches/20000321\\_2.html](https://clintonwhitehouse5.archives.gov/textonly/WH/New/SouthAsia/speeches/20000321_2.html).
8. We are borrowing this term from Coral Bell in her book, *The Conventions of Crisis: A Study in Diplomatic Management* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).



and Cold War crisis management. It was a cardinal belief of US and Soviet decision-makers that any use of force would lead to a rapid ascent up the “ladder of escalation”<sup>9</sup> – all too easily leading to the use of nuclear weapons.

The key argument of this report is that the shared India-Pakistan understanding in mutual restraint is underpinned by more than the shared fear of nuclear war. There are additional sources of restraint that cannot be understood outside of the unique characteristics and features of this nuclear dyad. At the same time, the report shows how these sources of restraint are fragile ones, and that in the context of future challenges to South Asian crisis stability, there are growing risks that (over)confidence may slip into complacency. This underlines the urgent and timely need for India and Pakistan to develop a robust crisis prevention and management regime that can avoid the danger that in a future crisis both sides miscalculate the other’s red lines or inadvertently cross them.

***This “flashpoint” language has been mostly rejected in South Asia, especially by Indian decision-makers, officials, and policy influencers.***

The report has emerged from three dialogues held and facilitated by BASIC in 2023-2024. The dialogues comprised one roundtable with Indian nuclear policy experts and former officials, as well as diplomats and experts from the UK nuclear policy community, held in partnership with the Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies (IPCS) (‘Reducing Risk; Managing Crises: Lessons from Southern Asia’),<sup>10</sup> and one roundtable with Pakistani nuclear policy experts, as well as diplomats and experts from the UK nuclear policy community, held in partnership with the Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research (CSSPR) (‘Exploring Responsible Practices in Crisis Prevention and Management’). The bilateral dialogue (‘Exploring Responsible Practices in Crisis Prevention and Management Between India and Pakistan’) included Indian and Pakistani nuclear policy experts, as well as former officials on the Indian side. The goal of these dialogues was to explore three key questions: (i) what existing India-Pakistan crisis management mechanisms have proved effective in de-escalating past crises, and are there shared understandings about responsible crisis management and prevention practices; (ii) how far does the South Asian crisis management model differ from the Cold War model, and are there any lessons from South Asia that could be applied elsewhere; and (iii) how have Indian and Pakistani crisis managers responded to the shared risks of nuclear war.

***What emerged strongly from the dialogues was that there is mutual confidence on both sides that India and Pakistan can be relied upon to show restraint in times of crisis and not push the other into a choice between a humiliating defeat and escalating the crisis to the nuclear level.***

The report is structured as follows. Part 1 explores how the rationality of nuclear fear has imposed a level of restraint on India-Pakistan crisis behaviour that has ensured that the use of force has been employed in a very deliberate, controlled manner, mindful of the escalatory risks involved, and compares that with US-Soviet crisis managers who perceived much greater inhibitions on the use of force. Part 2 sets out that, in addition to the rationality of nuclear fear, there are additional factors that have contributed to India-Pakistan’s mutual confidence during bilateral crises. These are (i) intimate enmity; (ii) face-saving narratives; (iii) confidence-building measures (CBMs); and (iv) the outsourcing of escalation control to third parties. Part 3 explores how far Indian and Pakistani crisis managers will continue to have mutual confidence in each other’s restraint and elaborates on future challenges to crisis management and prevention in South Asia, including those posed by new technological developments. Crucially, it sets out five policy proposals aimed at strengthening the existing regime of crisis management and prevention in South Asia in the face of the increasing risks outlined in this report.

9. The metaphor of a “ladder” for understanding how escalation might operate in times of crisis was developed and set out at length in Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1965). See also Rohan Mukherjee, “Climbing the escalation ladder: India and the Balakot Crisis”, *War on the Rocks*, 2 October 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/climbing-the-escalation-ladder-india-and-the-balakot-crisis/>.

10. It is important to note here that this dialogue in particular has not only focused on India-Pakistan, but also on India-China, exploring convergences and divergences in crisis management and prevention practices amongst the two nuclear dyads, and discussing lessons from Southern Asia that could be applied to crisis prevention and management elsewhere.

# The Rationality of Fear in South Asia's Nuclear Experience

Fear of nuclear devastation has imposed a powerful restraint on the crisis decision making of both India and Pakistan as it did on the superpowers during the Cold War. Kenneth Waltz argues that “for convenience”, such restraint can be explained in terms of an “assumption of rationality.”<sup>11</sup> However, he maintains that, “Deterrence does not depend on rationality. It depends on fear. To create fear, nuclear weapons are the best possible means.”<sup>12</sup> There were fears during the Cold War that this restraint might be in danger of breaking down, and such fears were powerfully felt in the early 1980s when the United States and the Soviet Union feared that the other was seeking a disarming first-strike nuclear capability against it. This was the context in which Schelling wrote his 1984 article entitled “Confidence in Crisis”. He argued that the most important way to reduce the risks of nuclear conflict was for each side to increase the confidence of their adversary that they did not believe there was any advantage in a crisis to launching a preemptive nuclear strike. “Confidence-building”, the veteran strategist wrote, “is deadly serious business . . . because nothing is more threatening to the nuclear fate of the world than the loss of confidence on each side in the other’s restraint, patience, and security.”<sup>13</sup> It is the contention of this report that India and Pakistan share such a confidence in the restraint of the other.

However, there is a critical difference between the Cold War and South Asian nuclear dyads which is that where US-Soviet crisis managers believed that any use of force at the conventional level would rapidly lead to nuclear use,<sup>14</sup> Indian and Pakistani crisis managers have developed a confidence in each other’s restraint that appears to extend to the belief that their adversary will continue to show nuclear restraint even if limited conventional force is employed against them. As the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis showed, Indian and Pakistani decision-makers have become sufficiently confident in the “other’s restraint” that they believe even limited conventional hostilities between them will not challenge this.

To understand why India and Pakistan have found themselves resorting to force in the shadow of nuclear weapons, it is necessary to understand the conflict between the two sides over who controls the disputed territory of J&K.<sup>15</sup> Divided since partition into Indian administered and Pakistani administered jurisdictions, Pakistan believes that the Muslim-majority territory should be part of Pakistan. Conversely, India rejects this claim and there are those within the Sangh Parivar - the Hindu nationalist umbrella that includes the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - who believe in the concept of “Akhand Bharat” (translated as Greater India) that would include all of J&K.<sup>16</sup>

11. Quoted in Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), p. 50.

12. Kenneth Waltz’s formulation in Sagan and Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*, p. 154.

13. Schelling, “Confidence in Crisis”, p. 57.

14. For all the discussions in the strategic studies literature of the day of nuclear brinkmanship – manipulating the shared risks of nuclear conflict to win a “competition in risk taking” (a term made famous by Schelling in his book, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008 (1966), p. 91) – what guided US President John F. Kennedy and his Soviet counterpart Nikita Khrushchev in their Cold War confrontations over Berlin (1961) and Cuba (1962) was the risk that even the most limited use of conventional force could escalate all too easily to the nuclear level.

15. Although other nuclear dyads have experienced conventional conflict over territorial conflicts (e.g. the clashes in March 1969 between China and the Soviet Union) and the United States and Soviet Union disputed control over Berlin leading to crises in 1958 and 1961, the superpowers did not have the geographical contiguity that characterises the India-Pakistan dyad. The other distinguishing feature of the conflict over J&K compared to Berlin and Cuba is that Indians and Pakistanis feel deeply emotionally invested in the Kashmir conflict and have shed blood for this cause in a way that was never the case for Americans and Russians in the Cold War (see Section 2.1 of this report).

16. The influence of these voices can be seen in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s decision in August 2019 to revoke Article 370 of the Indian constitution which accorded special status to Indian administered J&K. This decision upheld by the Indian Supreme Court curtails the autonomy of the only Muslim-majority region in India.

India believes that Pakistan has pursued its revisionist ambition to control all of J&K through the use of militant groups that are committed to ending what these groups perceive as the Indian occupation. It is believed in India that these groups have been supported financially and militarily by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), as well as being provided with safe havens inside Pakistan itself. These militant groups have engaged in sub-conventional violence against Indian security forces in J&K and it is held in Indian expert and practitioner circles that Pakistan sees its nuclear capability as providing cover for this.<sup>17</sup> What is more, it is also believed in Indian circles that Pakistan perceives its nuclear weapons as deterring India from full-scale conventional war, and that this has emboldened Pakistan into believing it can safely support those groups using armed force against Indian security forces and civilians, not only in Indian administered Kashmir, but in India itself.

Support for this proposition comes from the attacks against the Indian Parliament in December 2001 and the Mumbai attack in 2008. The Parliament attack killed 7 people and led to the 2001-2002 Twin Peaks crisis, the biggest military stand-off between the two sides to date. After 164 civilians were killed in an attack by Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) at Mumbai, there was mounting pressure on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to use force against the bases of the LeT inside Pakistan administered Kashmir and inside Pakistan itself. However, Singh rejected this option, believing the path of restraint would yield greater results in terms of stopping the terrorist threat in the longer term. By contrast, his successor Narendra Modi was prepared to cross the Rubicon and became in February 2019 the first Indian leader since the two states became nuclear-armed to employ air power against a target inside Pakistan since the 1971 War. Modi's decision was in response to the attack on 14 February against Indian paramilitary forces at Pulwama which left 40 dead and dozens more injured. It was the most devastating attack in decades and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), an Islamist group committed to bringing all of Kashmir under Pakistani control, claimed responsibility for the attack.

***As the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis showed, Indian and Pakistani decision-makers have become sufficiently confident in the “other’s restraint” that they believe even limited conventional hostilities between them will not challenge this.***

Although Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan denied any responsibility for the attack, and offered to work with India to bring the perpetrators to justice,<sup>18</sup> such denials fell on deaf ears among Indian political and military leaders who believe that the same group was responsible for the attacks against the Indian Parliament and later attacks against an airbase in Pathankot and an army base in Uri in 2016. In response to the 2016 attacks at Pathankot and Uri, the Indian military had launched a physical raid - so called “surgical strikes” - across the LoC against the training camps where it was alleged by India the attack had emanated from. The Pakistani Government never accepted that any attack had taken place. But according to one former senior Pakistani military official, the lack of an effective Pakistani response was interpreted in Delhi – and some Western capitals – as confirmation of Pakistan's inability to respond to this kind of attack.<sup>19</sup>

Modi told the Indian people two days after the attack at Pulwama, “We will give a befitting reply, our neighbour will not be allowed to de-stabilise us”.<sup>20</sup> Twelve days after the attack at Pulwama, the Indian Air Force (IAF) attacked a JeM training base near the town of Balakot in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan.

17. S. Paul Kapur, “Ten Years of Instability in a Nuclear South Asia”, *International Security* 33(2) (2008): pp. 74-6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40207132>.

18. Asif Shahzad and Fayaz Bukhari, “Pakistani PM warns India against attack, urges talks on Kashmir blast”, *Reuters*, 19 February 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN1Q80DZ/>; Ajay Bisaria, *Anger Management: The Troubled Diplomatic Relationship between India and Pakistan*, (Aleph Book Company, 2024), Kindle, p. 408.

19. According to Naeem Salik (a former senior Pakistani military officer), Pakistani decision-makers believed that Modi's willingness to respond to Pulwama with such a dramatic escalation (compared to previous Indian responses) stemmed from a perception of Pakistani weakness as a result of Pakistan not responding forcefully to the Indian physical attacks across the LoC in 2016. Drawing on the game of chicken, he ventures that “if one of the players appears to have shown weak resolve in the previous encounter the opponent is encouraged to take greater risks the next time around since it believes that the other side will back off again, thereby setting a dangerous precedent” (“Dangers of Inadvertent Escalation in South Asia” in Paolo Cotta-Ramusino, Micah Lowenthal, Luciano Maiani, and Enza Pellecchia (eds.), *Nuclear Risks and Arms Control-Problems and Progresses in the Time of Pandemics and War: Proceedings of the XXII Edoardo Amaldi Conference, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rome, Italy, April 6–8* (2022): p. 97, [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-29708-3\\_12](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-29708-3_12)).

20. Fayaz Bukhari and Sanjeev Miglani, “Indian PM Modi warns Pakistan of strong response for Kashmir attack”, *Reuters*, 15 February 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL3N20A2DI/>.

21. See, for example, Raj Chengappa, “The inside story of India's Balakot airstrikes”, *India Today*, 25 March 2019, [www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/from-the-india-today-archives-2019-the-inside-story-of-indias-balakot-airstrikes-2326329-2023-01-25](http://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/from-the-india-today-archives-2019-the-inside-story-of-indias-balakot-airstrikes-2326329-2023-01-25).

However, according to some sources, Modi was emphatic that in striking Pakistan, Modi was emphatic that there must be no civilians or military personnel killed. Instead, the Indian Prime Minister wanted to strike a blow at the militant groups by attacking their sanctuaries inside Pakistan. The selection of a training camp as a target was a deliberate attempt to send a signal to these groups – and those who it was believed controlled them in the Pakistani deep state – that they would no longer be immune from such attacks.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, by avoiding any civilian deaths or killing of military personnel, Indian political and military decision-makers sought a calibrated use of force that would not push Pakistani decision-makers into making an escalatory response.<sup>23</sup>

One reading of Modi's decision to attack Balakot in 2019 is that, unlike Singh in 2008, he was prepared to engage – however tentatively – in a “competition in risk taking” with his Pakistani adversary. Indian decision-makers and officials expected Pakistan to respond to any Indian strike,<sup>24</sup> and this had been signalled by Pakistan four days before India's attack.<sup>25</sup> The next day after India's attack at Balakot, Pakistan retaliated with an air attack against military targets (Krishna Ghati, Hamirpur, Gambhir, and the Narayan ammunition dump) in Indian administered Kashmir. But in responding to the Indian attack at Balakot in this way, Pakistani decision-makers also sought to signal their commitment to de-escalating the crisis. Pakistani pilots were instructed not to attack Indian forces directly and discharged their weapons harmlessly close by.<sup>27</sup> Defending the Pakistani action to a joint session of Parliament, Khan said, “The only purpose of our strike was to demonstrate our capability and will . . . We did not want to inflict any casualty on India as we wanted to act in a responsible manner”.<sup>28</sup>

Indian jets scrambled to meet their Pakistani intruders and in the ensuing dogfight, an Indian MiG-21 Bison was shot down on the Pakistani side of the LoC and the Indian pilot was captured. The Pakistani Government released the pilot two days later in what Khan called a “gesture of peace”.<sup>29</sup> The release of the pilot led to the end of the crisis by providing a critical offramp for both sides.<sup>30</sup> However, it took two days from when Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman was shot down to him being handed back to India.

According to an account by the then Indian High Commissioner in Pakistan, Khan's decision to release the pilot was made in response to India's threat to escalate the conflict conventionally if he was not immediately handed over to Indian authorities. According to Ajay Bisaria, India had readied nine missiles for launching against Pakistan and the Indian Navy had taken on “an aggressive, threatening posture”.<sup>31</sup> It is reported that there were two backchannel communications operating during the crisis, though just how the missile threat was communicated to Pakistan remains unclear. The first was between the two spy chiefs, the Head of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) Anil Dhasmana and his counterpart Asim Munir, Director-General of the ISI.<sup>32</sup> The second also involved Munir but was with India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. The latter reportedly told Munir that India's fight was with the militant groups that freely operated from Pakistani soil, but that India was prepared to escalate the conflict if the pilot was not safely returned.<sup>33</sup> According to

22. Bisaria, *Anger Management*, pp. 409-410.

23. Chengappa, “The inside story of India's Balakot airstrikes”. See also Salik, “Dangers of Inadvertent Escalation in South Asia”, p. 97.

24. Bisaria, *Anger Management*, p. 414.

25. Maj Gen Asif Gafoor, Director-General Inter-Service Public Relations (ISPR) said at a press conference four days before the Balakot attack that, “We do not wish to go into war, but please rest assured that should you initiate any aggression first, you will never be able to surprise us. Pakistan armed forces will never be surprised by you. But let me assure you, we shall surprise you . . . Because you initiate, we shall also escalate the domination ladder. We shall have a superior force ratio at decisive points” (quoted in “DG ISPR reiterates ‘talks, not War’ proposal to India, distances Pakistan from Pulwama”, Dawn, 22 February 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1465382/dg-ispr-reiterates-talks-not-war-proposal-to-india-distances-pakistan-from-pulwama>).

26. Bisaria, *Anger Management*, p. 415.

27. This seems to have been a deliberate decision given that India's air strikes, despite Indian claims to the contrary, appear to have missed its target. Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale claimed on the day of the strike that “a very large number of Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorists, trainers, senior commanders, and groups of jihadis who were being trained for Fidayeen action were eliminated”. However, a later investigation by *Reuters*, using satellite imagery of the area, failed to substantiate these claims (Martin Howell, Gery Doyle and Simon Scarr, “Satellite images show madrasa buildings still standing at scene of Indian bombing”, *Reuters*, 6 March 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/03/06/satellite-images-show-madrasa-buildings-still-standing-at-scene-of-indian-bombing>). See also Salik, “Dangers of Inadvertent Escalation in South Asia”, p.97.

28. “Do Not Escalate This Further”: PM Khan warns India during joint session of Parliament”, *Dawn*, 28 February 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1466685>.

29. Ashok Sharma and Zaheer Babar, “Pakistan frees captured Indian Pilot in ‘gesture of peace’”, *AP News*, 1 March 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/7d5f1af002d44534af60dc242edf4fac>.

30. USIP, *Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia*, p. 22.

31. Bisaria's account is based on a meeting he did not attend between the US, UK, and French Ambassadors in the US embassy in Islamabad with the Pakistani Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua. A diplomat from the P5 later briefed him on this (see Bisaria, *Anger Management*, p. 417).

32. Shishir Gupta, Rezaul H Laskar and Yashwant Raj, “India, Pakistan came close to firing missiles at each other on February 27”, *Hindustan Times*, 23 March 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-pakistan-came-close-to-firing-missiles-at-each-other-on-february-27/story-rVsBjZ5qmxXMprktzDNqcM.html>.

33. Sanjeev Miglani and Drazen Jorgic, “India, Pakistan threatened to unleash missiles at each other”, *Reuters*, 18 March 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-crisis-insight/india-pakistan-threatened-to-unleash-missiles-at-each-other-sources-idUSKCN1QY03T/>

reports, Pakistani officials responded to the threat by saying that they would respond to any such attacks with an even greater number of missile attacks against Indian cities.<sup>34</sup> If true, the reciprocal missile threats between the two sides – for which there is no precedent in other nuclear dyads – may have been the most dangerous moment in the crisis.<sup>35</sup> Khan’s decision, then, to hand the pilot back provided both sides a safe path to de-escalation.

The rationality of nuclear fear has clearly imposed a level of restraint on India-Pakistan crisis behaviour that has ensured that the use of force has been employed in a very deliberate, controlled manner, mindful of the escalatory risks involved. Throughout the crises they have encountered as nuclear-armed states, neither has wavered in their confidence regarding the other’s commitment to exercising restraint and displaying responsible behaviour. Yet as Pulwama-Balakot also shows, each was not intimidated by the fear of nuclear escalation from taking – for the first time since Kargil – conventional steps up the ladder of escalation. But these steps were taken with great caution, and always with a view to recognising that nothing must be done to threaten the other’s confidence in one’s own restraint when it comes to the use of nuclear weapons.

India and Pakistan’s willingness to act in this way differs fundamentally from US-Soviet crisis managers who perceived much greater inhibitions on the use of force, believing that it was too risky to rely on controlling escalation once the threshold of any use of force had been crossed. One reading of this difference in behaviour is that Indian and Pakistani crisis managers believe that the threshold for nuclear use is higher than it was perceived to be by US-Soviet decision-makers during the Cold War. But as we set out below, this report is predicated on the contention that there are additional factors that are specific to the India-Pakistan dyad that explain why India and Pakistan have developed this mutual confidence in the restraint of the other.

*This report is predicated on the contention that there are additional factors that are specific to the India-Pakistan dyad that explain why India and Pakistan have developed this mutual confidence in the restraint of the other.*

34. Miglani and Jorgic, “India, Pakistan threatened to unleash missiles at each other”.

35. Ejaz Haider, “Lessons From The Brink”, *Dawn*, 10 March 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1468744>.

# Exploring the Sources of Confidence in South Asia's Nuclear Restraint

During our dialogues, we explored four specific sources of confidence that, in addition to the “rationality of nuclear fear”, might explain why Indian and Pakistani decision-makers believe in the other’s restraint such that limited conventional force can be employed without this escalating to the nuclear level. These are (i) intimate enmity; (ii) face-saving narratives; (iii) confidence-building measures (CBMs); and (iv) the outsourcing of escalation control to third parties. Our argument is that none of these factors have worked in isolation to generate the confidence in each other’s restraint in times of crisis; rather, it is the combination that has so far made the South Asian crisis management experience a successful one. However, as explained below, these sources of confidence cannot be taken for granted in future crises and each of them may be eroding, highlighting the need for Indian and Pakistani decision-makers to consider whether greater energy and resources should be invested in crisis prevention and management.

*These sources of confidence cannot be taken for granted in future crises and each of them may be eroding, highlighting the need for Indian and Pakistani decision-makers to consider whether greater energy and resources should be invested in crisis prevention and management.*

## 2.1 Intimate Enmity

The relationship between India and Pakistan has been described as one of “intimate enmity”<sup>36</sup> (this term was also widely used by Indian participants during our dialogues). This paradoxical term reflects the close ties forged by a shared history, common cultural heritage, and geographical proximity, juxtaposed against the deep-rooted enmity that stems from the 1947 bloody partition of British India and the consequent territorial dispute over J&K. The entanglement of “envy, resentment, wrath and yet, nostalgia and longing for greater togetherness of the India-Pakistan encounter belongs to a different genre altogether”.<sup>37</sup> As one dialogue participant expressively put it, “it is a fight between two brothers rooted in intimate enmity . . . but there is harmony in this dance of death”.<sup>38</sup>

The idea of “intimate enmity” as a source of mutual confidence in India-Pakistan nuclear restraint was discussed at length during our dialogues. Participants emphasised that geographical proximity contributes to “intimate enmity” in many ways. First, as covered in Part 1 of this report, geographical proximity creates a shared understanding of the risks and devastating consequences that both countries would face as a result of escalating to the nuclear level. Put differently, the high stakes of war in South Asia encourage more restrained policies and leaders on both sides “face the threat of violence on their own borders, not in distant proxy conflicts”.<sup>39</sup> Geographical proximity also entails military-to-military interactions at the border that contribute to fostering a degree of intimacy and confidence between India and Pakistan. Some dialogue participants suggested that these daily interactions, like the Wagah-Attari Border Ceremony, offer opportunities for military personnel from both sides to engage in informal exchanges and build personal relationships.

36. Subrata Mitra, “Intimate enemies: Trauma, violence and longing in India-Pakistan relations: A review article”, *India Review* 16(2) (2017): pp. 266-276, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2017.1314138>.

37. Mitra, “Intimate enemies”, p. 266.

38. Dr Ali Khan Mahmudabad at IPCS-BASIC-ICCS dialogue ‘Reducing Risk; Managing Crises: Lessons from Southern Asia’, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 28th - 29th November 2023.

39. USIP, *Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia*, p. 27.

## The Wagah-Attari Border Ceremony



The Wagah-Attari border captures the complexity and uniqueness of India-Pakistan “intimate enmity”. Dating back to 1959, the daily ‘Beating Retreat’ ceremony involves a ritualistic reaffirmation of national pride and involves aggressive posturing on both sides. However, the Ceremony is also meant to be a symbol of amity and brotherhood between the two peoples.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps more telling than the Ceremony in this regard is the spirit of cooperation that is enacted daily at the border crossing. Happymon Jacob in his book, *Line of Control: Travelling with the Indian and Pakistani Armies*, surfaces well these often private moments of intimacy and togetherness. He writes, “bilateral cooperation takes on a different hue at the Wagah-Attari border — where good nature passes seamlessly from one side to the other. Look closely when you visit the Wagah-Attari border next time: you would find handshakes between soldiers on both sides, handshakes between porters and a general sense of friendliness”.<sup>41</sup>

*As one dialogue participant expressively put it, “it is a fight between two brothers rooted in intimate enmity . . . but there is harmony in this dance of death”.*

Moreover, due to geographical proximity India and Pakistan can closely monitor each other’s military activity, as well as observe diplomatic initiatives and official statements. Monitoring each other’s activities allows both countries to gain insights into the other’s strategic intentions, capabilities and redlines, creating a sense of intimacy and knowing the other, and thereby fostering confidence. This, however, can prove dangerous as each side can miscalculate the other’s red lines, resolve, and behaviour, leading to a sense of misplaced

40. F.D. Sheikh “Wagah-Attari Border Ceremony - gesture of love or hate?”, *The News*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/magazine/us/823760-wagah-attari-border-ceremony-gesture-of-love-or-hate>.

41. Happymon Jacob, *The Line of Control: Travelling with the Indian and Pakistani Armies* (Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2018), Kindle, p. 24.

confidence.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, despite historical ties, dialogue participants recognised that generational shifts and political tensions are leading to the gradual erosion of intimacy between India and Pakistan. As older generations pass away, ties based on cultural heritage, shared experiences, and historical memories are eroding. The lack of cross-cultural exchanges diminishes the sense of interconnectedness amongst new generations in both countries and hinders their ability to foster mutual understanding and shared experiences. These efforts are further exacerbated by entrenched narratives of hostility and mistrust, fuelled by historical tensions and nationalist rhetoric, that are perpetuated by the political elite and media.<sup>43</sup> Such narratives undermine confidence between the two nations by fostering misunderstandings and misperceptions.

***Generational shifts and political tensions are leading to the gradual erosion of intimacy between India and Pakistan. As older generations pass away, ties based on cultural heritage, shared experiences, and historical memories are eroding.***

## 2.2 Face-Saving Narratives

The idea of mutual confidence between two (or more) nuclear-armed adversaries that the other can be relied upon to show restraint in times of crisis, especially in relation to the use of nuclear weapons, rests on a key aspect. This is ensuring that neither is in a position where they face a choice between a humiliating exit from a crisis or escalating to either full-scale conventional war - or even worse, the use of nuclear weapons. Put differently, it is essential that both sides have a narrative of the crisis that provides a face-saving way out. Kennedy and Khrushchev, for example, were both able to produce a narrative of “victory” to explain their actions that ended the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy pointed to Khrushchev’s decision to withdraw the medium range nuclear missiles from Cuba whilst his Soviet counterpart could point to the US public promise not to invade Cuba; the defence of which had been a key motivation of Khrushchev’s bold gamble.

Face-saving narratives of this kind also appear to have played an important role in de-escalating the Pulwama-Balakot crisis. Participants at our bilateral dialogue argued that each side was able to build a domestic narrative of success and that this opened up a space for swift de-escalation, as leaders saved face by getting out of the crisis as victorious. A comprehensive report from the Stimson Center, based on an India-Pakistan crisis simulation held soon after Pulwama-Balakot, articulates this view:

*“De-escalation ensued as a result of deliberate calibration by both nations, recognizing that each had achieved its objectives. India conducted military operations to retaliate against Pakistan and reaffirm deterrence, while Pakistan demonstrated its military capability and benefited from a gesture of magnanimity.”<sup>44</sup>*

However, relying on Pulwama-Balakot to claim that narratives of victory can successfully contribute to de-escalation in future India-Pakistan crises is potentially dangerous as it could fuel a belief on both sides that they can emerge victorious in the eyes of their domestic audiences by successfully manipulating risk and controlling escalation.<sup>45</sup> Put differently, as Indian and Pakistani leaders emerged from Pulwama-Balakot

42. See also Sameer P. Lalwani, Elizabeth Threlkeld, Sunaina Danziger, Grace Easterly, Zeba Fazli, Gillian Gayner, Tyler Sagerstrom, Brigitta Schuchert, Chloe Stein, and Akriti Vasudeva, (Stimson Center, 2020), p. 6, <https://www.stimson.org/2020/from-kargil-to-balakot-southern-asian-crisis-dynamics-and-future-trajectories/>.

43. See Rabia Akhtar, Chiara Cervasio, Ruhee Neog, Alice Spilma, and Nicholas J. Wheeler (eds), *Crisis Communications: Indian and Pakistani Perspectives on Responsible Practices* (BASIC, June 2023), <https://basicint.org/compendium-crisis-communications-indian-and-pakistani-perspectives/>.

44. Lalwani et al., *From Kargil to Balakot*, p. 22. See also Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), “Three Years After Balakot: Reckoning with Two Claims of Victory” (Stimson Center, February 2022). <https://www.stimson.org/2022/three-years-after-balakot-reckoning-with-two-claims-of-victory/>; Lawrence Freedman and Heather Williams, ‘India-Pakistan, 2019’, *Aldephi Series* 61 (493-495) (2021): p. 55, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19445571.2021.2260267?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

45. Lalwani et al., *From Kargil to Balakot*, p. 22. A report from a conference held between CSSPR and the Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies (CASS) held at the University of Lahore in November 2019 noted that participants “opined that India appears to be overconfident that it will be able to control escalation” in a crisis and that “this misplaced Indian confidence borders on reckless adventurism and risk-taking which is detrimental to South Asian strategic stability.” (“Deconstructing Balakot Strikes: Pakistan’s Conventional War-fighting Doctrine & the Way Forward”, Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research and Center for Aerospace & Security Studies, *Deconstructing Balakot Strikes: Pakistan’s Conventional War-fighting Doctrine & Way Forward*, University of Lahore, 11 November 2019, p.4, <https://csspr.uol.edu.pk/csspr-cass-conference-report-on-bakabot-strikes/>).



“relatively unscathed and convinced that their strategy “worked,”” they are likely to face similar incentives to match or outdo their earlier actions in future crises, leaving less space for restrained and conciliatory approaches.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, narratives of victory based on risk manipulation can create dangerous ‘commitment traps’ with escalatory potential for Indian and Pakistan leaders, which might be difficult to escape as the crisis unfolds.<sup>47</sup> International Relations scholars frame this as the problem of ‘audience costs’, or costs that can potentially arise for leaders when they make public threats in a crisis and fail to live up to these. In such a situation, leaders who back down risk a backlash domestically, imposing costs on them that they may find unacceptable.<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, while narratives of victory may have contributed to de-escalation in past crises like Pulwama-Balakot, reliance on such narratives in future India-Pakistan crises could prove more dangerous. A more robust and secure South Asian crisis prevention and management regime necessitates a shift towards new shared narratives that emphasise how both sides can ‘win’ through more restrained and conciliatory approaches.

***A more robust and secure South Asian crisis prevention and management regime necessitates a shift towards new shared narratives that emphasise how both sides can ‘win’ through more restrained and conciliatory approaches.***

### 2.3 Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)

The role of existing bilateral CBMs in fostering mutual confidence in India-Pakistan crises was debated by dialogue participants. There was general agreement that the India-Pakistan CBMs architecture, composed of a plethora of bilateral agreements, is unique and can serve as a model for nuclear dyads elsewhere. In particular, it was pointed out that the continuation of some CBMs in times of crisis has been an important de-escalatory mechanism in past crises.

The key agreement singled out here is the 1988 ‘Agreement Between India and Pakistan On The Prohibition of Attack Against Nuclear Installations and Facilities’ which states that India and Pakistan will not attack or assist foreign powers to attack each other’s nuclear installations and facilities, and requires them to share a list of the coordinates of their facilities every year in January with the other party.<sup>49</sup> Although, beyond the sharing of lists by both countries, the agreement does not include specific verification measures.<sup>50</sup> Throughout the years, India and Pakistan have continued to share the lists with each other, irrespective of whether they were locked in a crisis.<sup>51</sup> One participant suggested that, both during the 2001-2002 and the 2008 India-Pakistan standoffs, the annual exchange of lists in the midst of the crisis contributed to de-escalation.<sup>52</sup>

46. USIP, *Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia*, p. 22.

47. See Ejaz Haider, “The Perils of (Not) Communicating in the Absence of Trust in a Dangerous Nuclear Dyad” in Akhtar, Cervasio, Neog, Spilman and Wheeler (eds), *Crisis Communications*, pp. 9-15; Nirupama Subramanian, “Media Coverage for Mutual Understanding: What Way Forward for Indian and Pakistani Journalists?” in Akhtar, Cervasio, Neog, Spilman and Wheeler (eds), *Crisis Communications*, pp. 16-22.

48. See James D. Fearon, ‘Rationalist Explanations for War’, *International Organization* 49(3) (1995): pp. 379-414, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706903>; James D. Fearon, ‘Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41(1) (1997): pp. 68-90, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/174487>.

49. Agreement Between India And Pakistan On The Prohibition of Attack Against Nuclear Installations and Facilities, signed on 31 December 1988, [https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/india\\_pakistan\\_non\\_attack\\_agreement.pdf](https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/india_pakistan_non_attack_agreement.pdf).

50. Toby Dalton, “Modernize the South Asia Nuclear Facility “Non-Attack” Agreement” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2017), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/06/28/modernize-south-asia-nuclear-facility-non-attack-agreement-pub-71382>.

51. Alice Spilman, Chiara Cervasio, and Eva-Nour Repussard, *Exploring Nuclear Risk Reduction Pathways in Southern Asia through Nuclear Responsibilities* (BASIC, 2023), p. 11.

52. This claim finds support in Rahul Roy-Chaudhury’s study of the 2001-2002 crisis. He writes, “Neither Delhi nor Islamabad apparently felt it prudent to discontinue existing practice on this Confidence Building Measure [the Non-Attack Agreement] notwithstanding tense bilateral relations” (“*Nuclear Doctrine, Declaratory Policy, and Escalation Control*”, (Stimson Center, April 2004), <https://www.stimson.org/2004/nuclear-doctrine-declaratory-policy-and-escalation-control/>). See also Sasikumar, “India-Pakistan Crises under the Nuclear Shadow”, p. 158.

**Throughout the years, India and Pakistan have continued to share the lists with each other, irrespective of whether they were locked in a crisis.**

Schelling makes an important distinction between “measures that may legitimately strengthen confidence, and reduce anxiety, in a crisis [and] measures that cumulatively and progressively build confidence over time”,<sup>53</sup> recognising that the two are closely related. The 1988 Non-Attack Agreement, for example, belongs in the latter category, but has also served an important role in reinforcing perceptions of mutual restraint as in the 2001-2002 crisis. It is important to realise that the 1988 Agreement and the comprehensive set of nuclear CBMs agreed in the 1999 Lahore Memorandum were established when there was a trusting relationship between Indian and Pakistani leaders, and robust CBMs of this kind are unlikely to be possible in the absence of trust.<sup>54</sup>

Despite some CBMs such as the Non-Attack Agreement reinforcing perceptions of mutual restraint, dialogue participants pointed out that India and Pakistan are currently capitalising on the CBMs architecture built in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Apart from the 2021 ceasefire agreement on the LoC, South Asia has not progressed further on CBMs in recent years. In Part 3 of this report (in particular under Policy Recommendation 2 and 3), we suggest ways to make further progress on CBMs to strengthen the existing India-Pakistan regime of crisis management and prevention.

## 2.4 Outsourcing Escalation Control<sup>55</sup>

In explaining the differences between India and Pakistan’s perceptions, and those of the Cold War superpowers, as to what levels of conventional force can confidently be used without triggering nuclear escalation, the role of third parties in providing mutual confidence that a crisis can be contained has been an important one. A 2022 report by the Stimson Center contended that “both sides’ implicit theories of de-escalation hold that their adversary will remain relatively restrained or back down, perhaps with the mediation of a third party”.<sup>56</sup> The United States and Soviet Union had no such third party safe net and perhaps this is a factor in explaining why US-Soviet crisis managers were less confident than their Indian and Pakistani counterparts have been in believing that even if limited conventional force is employed, it is possible to limit the process of escalation below the nuclear level.

Historically, the United States has played an important role in persuading both sides during their periodic crises that the other will pursue a path of restraint. Indian and Pakistani decision-makers know, in Rabia Akhtar’s words, that “every time a bilateral crisis with nuclear overtones has developed, the United States has been asked to broker peace and practice crisis management”.<sup>57</sup> Each side knows that third parties, especially the United States, will not allow a conflict to escalate into a full-blown conventional war that could go nuclear. Yet, in providing this confidence to the two adversaries, it also creates a space where the risk of escalation can be manipulated to secure each side’s core interests in a crisis.

Moeed Yusuf, who served as Pakistan’s National Security Advisor in 2021-2022, elevated this proposition to a theory in his 2018 book, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments*. Based on case studies of US intervention in the 1999 Kargil crisis, the 2001-2002 Twin Peaks crisis, and the 2008 Mumbai crisis, Yusuf argues that US intervention has often been unsolicited as Washington has scrambled to reduce nuclear

52. This claim finds support in Rahul Roy-Chaudhury’s study of the 2001-2002 crisis. He writes, “Neither Delhi nor Islamabad apparently felt it prudent to discontinue existing practice on this Confidence Building Measure [the Non-Attack Agreement] notwithstanding tense bilateral relations” (“Nuclear Doctrine, Declaratory Policy, and Escalation Control”, (Stimson Center, April 2004), <https://www.stimson.org/2004/nuclear-doctrine-declaratory-policy-and-escalation-control/>). See also Sasikumar, “India-Pakistan Crises under the Nuclear Shadow”, p. 158.

53. Schelling, “Confidence in Crisis”, p. 58.

54. Nicholas J. Wheeler, Chiara Cervasio and Alice Spilman, “Introduction: Communicating in Crises Amidst Nuclear Distrust” in Akhtar, Cervasio, Neog, Spilman and Wheeler (eds), *Crisis Communications: Indian and Pakistani Perspectives*, pp. 3-8; Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Trusting Enemies: Interpersonal Relationships in International Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Compare with the claim that CBMs are needed to build trust in Antoine Levesques, Desmond Bowen, and John H. Gill, *Nuclear Deterrence and Stability in South Asia: Perceptions and Realities* (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 2021), p. 4. <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper//2021/05/nuclear-deterrence-south-asia>.

55. This title is borrowed from Rabia Akhtar, “Outsourcing Escalation Control”, *South Asian Voices* (Stimson Center, September 2013), <https://southasianvoices.org/outsourcing-escalation-control/>.

56. Lalwani et al., *From Kargil to Balakot*, p. 6.

57. Rabia Akhtar, “Managing Nuclear Risks in South Asia: A Pakistani response”, *Bulletin of Atomic Scientist* 73(1) (2017): pp. 62-3, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00963402.2016.1264217?needAccess=true>.

risks whilst ensuring that neither side profited from attempts to overturn the territorial status quo in J&K. “In each episode”, he writes, “the concerns about escalation forced the United States to . . . use a mix of rewards and punishment with the regional rivals to achieve de-escalation”. At the same time, “India and Pakistan”, he argues, “eagerly engaged the United States and oscillated between manipulating the risk of war and deferring to American preferences in a bid to gain support for their crisis objectives”.<sup>58</sup> Yusuf argued, in drawing conclusions from his study, that “India’s space to use force remains circumscribed despite the world’s sympathetic view of its position vis-à-vis Pakistan and the fact that US policy makers are increasingly invested in protecting their country’s equities in the Indo-US partnership”.<sup>59</sup>

***Each side knows that third parties, especially the United States, will not allow a conflict to escalate into a full-blown conventional war that could go nuclear. Yet, in providing this confidence to the two adversaries, it also creates a space where the risk of escalation can be manipulated to secure each side’s core interests in a crisis.***

Yusuf argued that his model of ‘brokered bargaining’ might break down if India engaged in escalations beyond its 2016 “surgical strikes” in response to the attack at Uri. This is because the third party’s ability to persuade Pakistan to hold back responding decreases as the Indian level of force increases. He argued that because of this dynamic, “third-party actors ought to be reluctant to back serious Indian use of force in the first place”.<sup>60</sup> However, a year after the publication of the book, this was exactly what the Trump Administration did after the Pulwama attack. In a telephone conversation on 16 February between Doval and his US counterpart John Bolton, the latter, according to the Readout provided by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), “supported India’s right to self-defence against cross-border terrorism”.<sup>61</sup> It is highly unlikely that Modi would have refrained from attacking at Balakot had the United States not given this support, but Bolton’s encouragement marked a dramatic break with past US policy and was perceived in India as having given a “green light”<sup>62</sup> for military action.

As the Pakistani military response to Balakot showed, third parties were not able to restrain Pakistan from responding conventionally to the Indian attack. However, third parties, especially the United States, do appear to have played a key role in convincing Pakistani decision-makers that the pilot should be handed back. India communicated to the US and UK Governments that any further escalation by Pakistan or harm to Varthaman would lead to escalation, and this was communicated clearly to Islamabad. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia also played a key role in communicating this message to Pakistani decision-makers.<sup>63</sup>

While the involvement of third parties, particularly the United States, has perhaps contributed to the belief of India-Pakistan crisis managers that limited conventional force can be used without this triggering nuclear escalation, it has also created a space where each side can manipulate the risk of escalation to secure their core interests in a crisis. This dynamic can prove dangerous in future crises, especially since – as some analysts argued – Modi’s government is following a path of ‘cumulative retribution’, by inflicting greater

58. Moeed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia* (Stanford University Press, 2018), Kindle, p. 176.

59. Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments*, p. 176.

60. Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments*, p. 176.

61. Readout of Telephonic Conversation between National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and US NSA Amb John Bolton, MEA, India, 16 February 2019, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31058/Readout+of+Telephonic+Conversation+between+National+Security+Advisor+Ajit+Doval+and+US+NSA+Amb+John+Bolton>. Salik reflected that, “The February 2019 crisis has for all practical purposes turned the conception of ‘Third Party Brokering’ in Indo-Pakistani crises as a thing of the past” (“Dangers of Inadvertent Escalation”, p. 102).

62. The phrase “green light” was used by Lisa Curtis (Deputy Assistant to the President and NSC Senior Director for South and Central Asia from 2017-2021) in an interview with *South Asian Voices* reflecting on the US role in the Pulwama-Balakot crisis (“SAV Q&A with Lisa Curtis: U.S. Lessons from Balakot” (Stimson Center, February 2022), <https://www.stimson.org/2022/sav-qa-with-lisa-curtis-u-s-lessons-from-balakot/>).

63. Bisaria, *Anger Management*, p. 416.

punishment for previous attacks in which India displayed a more restrained stance.<sup>64</sup> This, coupled with the increased back-up of Indian military responses on the part of the United States, might embolden India to believe it can expand its use of conventional force without this pushing Pakistan into a nuclear response in response to any future attacks on the scale of Pulwama or Mumbai.<sup>65</sup> Our dialogue participants highlighted that, as a result of Pulwama-Balakot, the US role as a relatively impartial mediator to both sides is eroding, and that Indian and Pakistani decision-makers should therefore develop their own trusted communication channels to be used during a crisis rather than be as reliant as they have been on the past on “outsourcing escalation control”.

*Our dialogue participants highlighted that, as a result of Pulwama-Balakot, the US role as a relatively impartial mediator to both sides is eroding, and that Indian and Pakistani decision-makers should therefore develop their own trusted communication channels to be used during a crisis rather than be as reliant as they have been on the past on “outsourcing escalation control”.*

64. Lalwani et al., *From Kargil to Balakot*; USIP, *Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia*; Mukherjee, “Climbing the escalation ladder”.

65. Lalwani et al., *From Kargil to Balakot*; USIP, *Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia*; Mukherjee, “Climbing the escalation ladder”.

# Can India and Pakistan rely on Mutual Confidence in Crisis? Towards a New Responsibility-Based Crisis Management and Prevention regime

India-Pakistan crisis management dynamics have become grounded in a mutual expectation that whilst limited force is usable, this must always be calibrated in ways that do not threaten each other's red lines to avoid escalation to the nuclear level. This feeling of reciprocated confidence has been driven by a combination of factors, namely, intimate enmity, face-saving narratives, CBMs, and outsourcing of escalation control to third parties.

However, reciprocated confidence in the restraint of the other is not the only explanation of crisis de-escalation in the region. "Luck" has also played a role, being portrayed by some as a necessary but not sufficient condition for de-escalation.<sup>66</sup> Circling back to Pulwama-Balakot, de-escalation would have been considerably more challenging without a certain amount of luck. This was evident in the fact that there were no civilian casualties in the Balakot attack, leading Pakistan to calibrate its military response to achieve the same result, and the shot down Indian pilot was unharmed by the time the Pakistani Army found him. Indeed, his safe return to India within two days provided a "fortuitous off-ramp" to end the crisis.<sup>67</sup>

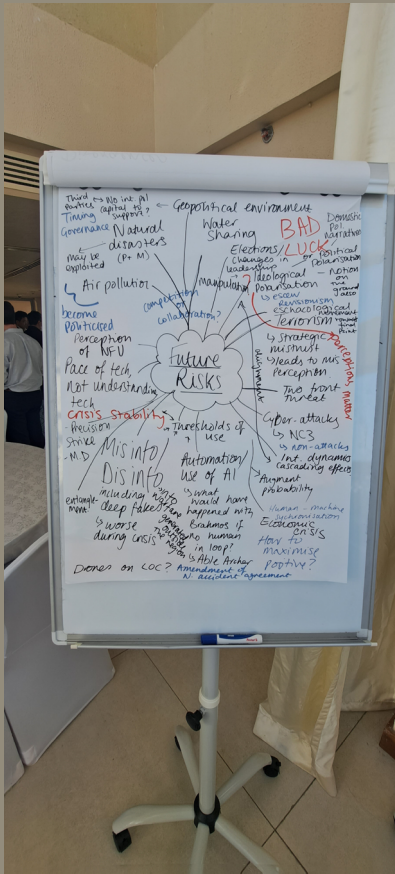
As this report has shown, the mutual confidence that has been established between India and Pakistan could prove a fragile foundation for managing and de-escalating future crises. Indeed, there is always the danger that this confidence could slip into complacency, making inadvertent escalation more likely in future India-Pakistan military exchanges, especially as Pulwama-Balakot has set new military thresholds on both sides. As Box 3 below shows, future crisis management efforts in South Asia will be further challenged by technological developments, which will increase the chances of misperceptions and miscalculations amongst Indian and Pakistani decision-makers. By introducing new challenges to crisis stability, such developments will also pose significant risks to bilateral crisis prevention efforts.

***Reciprocated confidence in the restraint of the other is not the only explanation of crisis de-escalation in the region. "Luck" has also played a role, being portrayed by some as a necessary but not sufficient condition for de-escalation.***

66. Lalwani et al., *From Kargil to Balakot*, p. 22. As our dialogues showed, this is contested with some former officials arguing that the "luck narrative" downplays too much the agency of responsible leaders in crisis de-escalation.

67. Lalwani et al., *From Kargil to Balakot*, p. 22.

# Future Risks to India-Pakistan Crisis Management and Prevention



During our bilateral dialogue held in Dubai in 2024, Indian and Pakistani participants highlighted several future risks to crisis prevention and management, some of which are depicted in the mind map above. In particular, five main risks were identified:

- Deterrence and strategic stability between India and Pakistan would face grave challenges if one or both sides introduce Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) systems. The latter would impact the mutual vulnerability equations in the region, challenging crisis stability. Pakistani participants suggested potential arms control initiatives in this area, for example, an agreement on non-deployment of BMD systems along the India-Pakistan border.
- The use of AI technologies will increase risks of misperceptions and misunderstanding, for example, through cyber attacks on nuclear command and control systems, or through the development of disinformation campaigns including deep fakes which might create chaos in the absence of reliable and trusted official channels of communication. These technological challenges can be expected to increase the risks of crisis in the relationship as well as challenge existing mechanisms of crisis management.
- Dual-capable systems in South Asia increase the likelihood of ‘false positives’ (conventional forces being mistaken for nuclear forces), as it is difficult to know whether munitions are conventional or nuclear if delivery systems are dual capable.<sup>68</sup>
- As discussed earlier in this report, the diminishing trust on the part of Pakistan in the United States acting as an impartial intermediary during bilateral crises will erode a significant foundation of assurance that has thus far supported the successful de-escalation of crises.
- The entrenched narratives of conflict traps outlined in the previous section will continue to hold Indian and Pakistani leaders hostage of their domestic audiences during crises.

## 3.1 A Responsibility-Based Regime for Crisis Management and Prevention

The unpredictability of luck coupled with the uncertainties surrounding how far Indian and Pakistani crisis managers will continue to be able to rely on the other’s restraint given the erosion of the sources of confidence outlined in Part Two of the report puts a premium on the two states developing a more robust regime, not only of crisis management, but also of crisis prevention. To this end, the report identifies five policy proposals aimed at reducing the risks of crises occurring, and if they do occur, ensuring they are peacefully de-escalated.

In the past few years, BASIC and the Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security (ICCS) have run several national-level, multilateral, and bilateral facilitated dialogues to explore responsibility-based policy proposals to reduce nuclear risks in South Asia.<sup>69</sup> Some of the policy proposals put forward during the latest rounds of dialogue and discussed below expand upon and refine our previous work in this area. It is important to note that the policy recommendations mostly focus on Track 2 initiatives, which can potentially influence and shape practitioner thinking, practices, and policy at the Track 1 level.

68. On this, see USIP, *Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia*, p. 18.

69. See, amongst others, Chiara Cervasio and Rishi Paul, *Different Perceptions, Shared Understandings: Towards a Responsibility-Based Regime to Reduce Nuclear Risks in the Asia-Pacific* (BASIC, 2022). <https://basicint.org/report-different-perceptions-shared-understandings/>; Spilman, Cervasio, and Repussard, *Exploring Nuclear Risk Reduction Pathways*; Akhtar, Cervasio, Neog, Spilman, and Wheeler (eds), *Crisis Communications: Indian and Pakistani Perspectives*.

**The report identifies five policy proposals aimed at reducing the risks of crises occurring, and if they do occur, ensuring they are peacefully de-escalated**

## BASIC-ICCS Nuclear Responsibilities Approach

The BASIC-ICCS Nuclear Responsibilities Approach is a way of reframing how we think, talk and write about nuclear weapons: one that puts stakeholders' responsibilities in relation to nuclear weapons at its centre. We call these 'nuclear responsibilities' for short. The Nuclear Responsibilities Approach was developed by the Programme on Nuclear Responsibilities, an initiative co-founded by BASIC and the Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security (ICCS) at the University of Birmingham in 2016.<sup>70</sup>

Adopting the Approach means reflecting on and adapting the mindsets and conceptual models we use to assess nuclear weapons policies and practices, as well as the language we use to explain and justify these policies and practices in our dialogues and our publications. This means shifting the focal question away from how certain policies and practices might fulfil a particular stakeholder's rights in relation to nuclear weapons, towards asking what a stakeholder's responsibilities are in relation to nuclear weapons, how these are being fulfilled, and how these interact with the responsibilities of others.

BASIC and the ICCS have developed a specific dialogue process and methodology focused around exploration of states' nuclear responsibilities and their related policies and practices, that can guide national-level or multilateral third-party facilitated dialogues. Nuclear responsibilities third-party facilitated dialogues are designed to enable participants to better understand one another's perceptions of their responsibilities, generate opportunities to clarify misperceptions and miscalculations, and create a space to reduce distrust and potentially build trust. Such third-party facilitated dialogues are designed to foster new or more effective, and implementable policy proposals in relation to specific dialogue themes (in this case, crisis management and prevention in South Asia) through conversations focused on nuclear responsibilities.

### Policy Recommendation 1

#### The Shared Responsibility to Communicate and Reduce Distrust: The South Asian Standing Communication Secretariat (SASCS)

As one dialogue participant put it, "the trust deficit in India-Pakistan relations has become a norm". A key question is whether such a norm can be challenged by India and Pakistan communicating, at least at the Track 2 level, in new empathic ways that avoid misperceptions and contribute to reducing distrust. Dialogue participants emphasised the importance of creating a bilateral Track 2 forum to explore how India and Pakistan might better communicate in times of crisis.<sup>71</sup> Such a body could reflect on how signals were (mis)interpreted in past crises, and how signals might be better crafted in future that leverage "security dilemma sensibility". SDS is an appreciation that an adversary might be motivated by fear and insecurity rather than aggressive intention, and that they might potentially be trustworthy.<sup>72</sup> As such, the development of SDS on the part of policy communities is critical to ensuring that signals and messages are interpreted as intended, without being filtered through cognitive biases. This is a fundamental step towards reducing distrust and misunderstandings, at least at the Track 2 level.

70. Sebastian Brixey-Williams and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Nuclear Responsibilities: A New Approach for Thinking and Talking about Nuclear Weapons* (BASIC, 2020), <https://basicint.org/report-nuclear-responsibilities-a-new-approach-for-thinking-and-talking-about-nuclear-weapons/>; Sebastien Brixey-Williams, Alice Spilman and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Nuclear Responsibilities Toolkit: A Practical Guide for Thinking, Talking and Writing* (BASIC, 2021), <https://basicint.org/the-nuclear-responsibilities-toolkit-a-practical-guide-for-thinking-talking-and-writing/>.

71. It was suggested that such a channel could be a Track 2 version of the US-USSR Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers established in 1987, to exchange information on actions that could be misinterpreted, as well as to maintain close contact during nuclear accidents or bilateral crises. See Rose Gottenmoeller and Daniil Zhukov, *Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers: A Stable Channel in Unstable Times* (RUSI and the Stanley Center for Peace and Security, 2023). For a detailed discussion of the NRRC concept in the India-Pakistan context, see also Rafi uz Zaman Khan, "Nuclear Risk-Reduction Centers" in Michael Krepon (ed), *Nuclear Risk Reduction in South Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 171-183.

## ***Dialogue participants emphasised the importance of creating a bilateral Track 2 forum to explore how India and Pakistan might better communicate in times of crisis.***

The purpose of such a Track 2 body would be to develop new proposals that could contribute to reducing the risks of future crises and if they occur, ensure that decision-makers have available a menu of possible de-escalation options. The problem is that developing SDS in distrustful interstate relationships such as the India-Pakistan one is extremely challenging, but in the absence of this, genuine conciliatory signals can be expected to be filtered through the cognitive bias of an enemy image of an adversary.<sup>73</sup> The challenge of how to ensure that genuine signals of de-escalation are not misinterpreted as a trick or a sign of weakness is one that a Track 2 forum of this kind could explore.<sup>74</sup>

In our previous work, we put forward the idea of a 'South Asian Standing Communication Secretariat' (SASCS).<sup>75</sup> The purpose of the Secretariat would be:

*(i) to provide the member states with a forum where they could routinely discuss issues of concern to the other(s) in terms of military movements, exercises etc.; (ii) discuss the viability of existing CBMs and how these might be extended to promote increased confidence in each other's peaceful intentions; and (iii) drawing from past experiences, discuss how to ensure that actors effectively utilise existing channels of communication in times of crisis.*<sup>76</sup>

We previously suggested that SASCS could include both expert staff and rotating national representatives from foreign ministry, defence ministry, and intelligence communities from both countries. However, in the latest rounds of dialogue, participants emphasised that SASCS has greater potential to be established and sustained as a Track 2 initiative, including experts and former officials with experience of crisis management on both sides, leading to the development of policy recommendations that could potentially be implemented at the Track 1 level.

## ***SASCS has greater potential to be established and sustained as a Track 2 initiative, including experts and former officials with experience of crisis management on both sides, leading to the development of policy recommendations that could potentially be implemented at the Track 1 level.***

71. It was suggested that such a channel could be a Track 2 version of the US-USSR Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers established in 1987, to exchange information on actions that could be misinterpreted, as well as to maintain close contact during nuclear accidents or bilateral crises. See Rose Gottenmoeller and Daniil Zhukov, *Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers: A Stable Channel in Unstable Times* (RUSI and the Stanley Center for Peace and Security, 2023). For a detailed discussion of the NRRC concept in the India-Pakistan context, see also Rafi uz Zaman Khan, "Nuclear Risk-Reduction Centers" in Michael Krepon (ed), *Nuclear Risk Reduction in South Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 171-183.

72. The full definition of security dilemma sensibility is: 'an actor's intention and capacity to perceive the motives behind, and to show responsiveness towards, the potential complexity of the military intentions of others. In particular, it refers to the ability to understand the role that fear might play in their attitudes and behaviour, including, crucially, the role that one's own actions may play in provoking that fear' (Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 7, their emphasis).

73. Ole Holsti coined this term to refer how decision-makers can impute malign intent to others by virtue of a polity's inherent characteristics, such as its political values or ideology (in David J. Finlay, Ole R. Holsti, and Richard R. Fagen, *Enemies in Politics* (Chicago: Rand McNall, 1967). See also Robert Jervis, *Perceptions and Misperceptions in International Politics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 145-6; Wheeler, *Trusting Enemies*, pp. 75-99.

74. Robert Jervis, *Perceptions and Misperceptions*; Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Wheeler, *Trusting Enemies*; Chiara Cervasio, "Reassurance through Special Envoys: the Empathic De-escalation of security and status dilemma dynamics in China-India Relations, 1986-2000" (PhD Thesis, the University of Birmingham, 2022).

75. Spilman, Cervasio, and Repussard, *Exploring Nuclear Risk Reduction Pathways*, pp. 6-8.

76. Spilman, Cervasio, and Repussard, *Exploring Nuclear Risk Reduction Pathways*, pp. 6-8.



## Policy Recommendation 2

### Shared Responsibility to Develop a Trusted Track 1 Communication Channel

Another key responsibility for India and Pakistan in enhancing their crisis management and prevention capacities and mechanisms would be for the two countries to establish a leader-to-leader hotline that can serve as a trusted channel of communication at the highest levels of India-Pakistan diplomacy.

Crises are by definition spaces where trust between leaders can be expected to be low or non-existent. The challenge in such a context is to ensure that confidence remains high on both sides in the other's continuing restraint. This is where reliable and trusted channels of communication become so important. "The best single example", Schelling writes in the Cold War context, of a single mechanism that promoted confidence on both sides in the nuclear restraint of the other was "the Soviet-American hotline". This is because it "demonstrated to each other and to themselves an appreciation of the importance of prompt and intimate communication between heads of government for the event of an emergency".<sup>77</sup>

India and Pakistan have two main formal communication mechanisms at the military and political level respectively. A dedicated military communication link was established following the 1971 War between the Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs) of India and Pakistan, which has become known as the 'DGMO hotline'. The DGMO hotline is currently the highest level of military contact between India and Pakistan and has been used in times of crisis to exchange information as well as more routinely. The DGMOs communicate on a weekly basis, and this has been an important factor in managing incidents concerning the LoC. However, as explained elsewhere, a key limitation of the DGMO hotline is that due to the deep distrust, both sides have not always been as transparent in crises as they could be in sharing information.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, there have been fears that the other might be using the DGMO channel for deceptive purposes.<sup>79</sup> At the civilian level, a hotline was established in 2004 between the respective foreign ministries aimed at preventing misunderstandings that might lead to nuclear escalation.

*Crises are by definition spaces where trust between leaders can be expected to be low or non-existent. The challenge in such a context is to ensure that confidence remains high on both sides in the other's continuing restraint. This is where reliable and trusted channels of communication become so important.*

The critical missing piece in the India-Pakistan CBM architecture is the absence of a formal leader-to-leader hotline. During the Pulwama-Balakot crisis, each side confronted a plethora of voices internally - especially on social media - calling for more escalatory action,<sup>80</sup> and as two of the authors wrote elsewhere, "the problem in a crisis, especially one where nuclear jingoism is rife in social media communications, is to distinguish the noise created by this proliferation of information from credible signals of each other's intent".<sup>81</sup> This is where a trusted channel of communication at the highest level becomes so important, and yet this was missing in action during the Pulwama-Balakot crisis.

*The critical missing piece in the India-Pakistan CBM architecture is the absence of a formal leader-to-leader hotline.*

On the evening of 27 February 2019, the highpoint of the crisis with both sides reportedly exchanging missile threats that day, the Pakistani High Commissioner in Delhi, Sohail Mahmood, reached out to his Indian counterpart Ajay Bisaria to say that Khan wanted to talk to Modi. According to Bisaria's own recollection, the Indian Prime Minister's office replied to say that Modi "was not available at this hour" but if Khan had "any urgent message to convey", he should convey it through Bisaria.<sup>82</sup>

77. Schelling, "Confidence in Crisis", p. 58.

78. Wheeler, Cervasio and Spilman, "Introduction: Communicating in Crises Amidst Nuclear Distrust", p. 4.

79. Wheeler, Cervasio and Spilman, "Introduction: Communicating in Crises Amidst Nuclear Distrust".

80. Haider, "The Perils of (Not) Communication"; Salma Malik, "Restoring Responsible Communication as a Key to Trust Building Between India and Pakistan" in Akhtar, Cervasio, Ruhee Neog, Spilman, and Wheeler (eds), *Crisis Communications: Indian and Pakistan Perspectives*, pp. 23-27; Kamal Madishetty, "The Shared Responsibility of Reading the 'Other' Right", in Akhtar, Cervasio, Neog, Spilman, and Wheeler (eds), *Crisis Communications: Indian and Pakistani Perspectives*, pp. 28-33.

81. Wheeler, Cervasio and Spilman, "Introduction: Communicating in Crises Amidst Nuclear Distrust", p. 6.

82. Bisaria, *Anger Management*, p. 417.

The failure of the two leaders to develop a trusted channel of communication during the crisis demonstrates a key paradox of CBMs that has been highlighted elsewhere: not only do they depend on trust for their effective functioning, but also they require trust to be established in the first place.<sup>83</sup> As the historical record suggests, breakthroughs in the development of major CBMs have depended on the prior existence of trust between Indian and Pakistani leaders.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, the conundrum is: how to establish a leader-to-leader hotline that can be a trusted channel of communication at the highest level of Indian and Pakistani diplomacy when there is deep distrust in the relationship.

Not all incidents that risk a crisis will necessarily require activation of a leader-to-leader hotline but it is vital that all existing hotlines are used in situations where there is a risk of a crisis developing. A worrying example of the failure to do this was India's response to what it claimed was an accidental malfunction of its BrahMos missile in March 2022. The missile – unarmed during this incident – was fired from a testing range in Sirsa, India but unexpectedly changed its flight path and entered Pakistani airspace before landing harmlessly in Mian Channu, Khanewal District, Punjab. Despite later sacking three officers of the Indian Air Force (IAF) for not following standard operating procedures, neither the DGMO or Foreign Secretary hotlines were reportedly used to share information about the incident.

Not all incidents that risk a crisis will necessarily require activation of a leader-to-leader hotline but it is vital that all existing hotlines are used in situations where there is a risk of a crisis developing. A worrying example of the failure to do this was India's response to what it claimed was an accidental malfunction of its BrahMos missile in March 2022. The missile – unarmed during this incident – was fired from a testing range in Sirsa, India but unexpectedly changed its flight path and entered Pakistani airspace before landing harmlessly in Mian Channu, Khanewal District, Punjab. Despite later sacking three officers of the Indian Air Force (IAF) for not following standard operating procedures, neither the DGMO or Foreign Secretary hotlines were reportedly used to share information about the incident.<sup>85</sup>

The establishment of a leader-to-leader hotline stands as a critical responsibility for India and Pakistan in bolstering their crisis management and prevention capabilities. Such a hotline would provide a trusted channel of communication at the highest diplomatic levels, essential for maintaining confidence and preventing misunderstandings, particularly during times of heightened tension. As demonstrated by past incidents and crises, the absence of such direct communication channels can exacerbate risks and escalate tensions.



*The failure of the two leaders to develop a trusted channel of communication during the crisis demonstrates a key paradox of CBMs that has been highlighted elsewhere: not only do they depend on trust for their effective functioning, but also they require trust to be established in the first place*

### Policy Recommendation 3

#### Shared Responsibility to Monitor and Update Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs): The CBMs Monitor

As noted earlier in this report, dialogue participants agreed that there has been limited progress on bilateral CBMs in recent years, and that India and Pakistan are too heavily reliant on the CBMs architecture built in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The creation of a CBMs monitor, perhaps as part of the SASCS, could oversee the implementation of existing

83. Wheeler, Cervasio and Spilman, "Introduction: Communicating in Crises Amidst Nuclear Distrust", p. 5.

84. For example, the significant nuclear CBMs agreed in the 1999 Lahore Declaration, which continue to this day, only became possible because of the interpersonal trust that developed between prime ministers Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan and his Indian counterpart, Atal Bihari Vajpayee (see Wheeler, *Trusting Enemies*, pp. 192-238 for a full discussion of this case).

85. Salik, "Dangers of Inadvertent Escalation in South Asia", p.100. One of our Indian participants in an earlier dialogue suggested that there were backchannel communications with Pakistani officials to reassure them about the incident, but there has been no evidence provided by Indian officials to support this claim.

CBMs and assess whether and how existing CBMs should be updated over time. For example, a CBMs monitor could check and report on the frequency of India-Pakistan DGMOs calls and in-person meetings. Such a monitor would be a Track 2 initiative, but would feed into policy recommendations at the Track 1 level. Unilateral political statements at the Track 1 level re-emphasising leaders' commitment to upholding CBMs would also serve the purpose of reviving the spirit of India-Pakistan CBMs.

***The creation of a CBMs monitor, perhaps as part of the SASCS, could oversee the implementation of existing CBMs and assess whether and how existing CBMs should be updated over time.***

The monitor could also explore ways to update existing CBMs to include new challenges posed by emerging technologies. For example, as discussed elsewhere,<sup>86</sup> the Agreement 'On Pre-Notification of Flight Testing of Ballistic Missiles'<sup>87</sup> could be extended to include notification of cruise and hypersonic cruise missile tests. Such tests can be particularly dangerous in provoking unnecessary escalatory responses by increasing ambiguity as to the intentions of one side, and raising the prospects for misperceptions around conventional and/or nuclear attacks – mainly as cruise missiles flight paths are much more unpredictable than ballistic missiles.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, it was suggested that the 1988 Non-Attack Agreement could be expanded to include accidents and cyber attacks on nuclear command and control systems and critical infrastructure. CBMs in the media domain could also be updated – a case in point is the 1950 Joint Press Code, discussed at length in Policy Recommendation 5.

Another crucial role that the monitor can play would be to encourage routine discussions on whether new CBMs, for example in new domains, would be needed. Here, dialogue participants highlighted that new CBMs could be discussed to regulate incidents at sea<sup>89</sup> and to promote cybersecurity norms in South Asia. For instance, establishing a regional information sharing centre for maritime incidents<sup>90</sup> between India and Pakistan which would reduce the risk of potential escalation by enhancing transparency and communication. The absence of such a mechanism for regulating incidents at sea between India and Pakistan is concerning due to the potential for escalation caused by miscalculations and misperceptions.

## **Policy Recommendation 4**

### **Shared Responsibility to Cultivate Constituencies of Peace with the Next Generation of Experts and Policy-Makers**

Dialogue participants stressed that new generations in both countries are becoming more and more detached from one another as a result of eroding "intimacy" based on the decline of long-standing ties and restricted cultural exchanges. India and Pakistan should invest in initiatives, such as boot camps for young/early career professionals to discuss regional nuclear dynamics, which will provide opportunities for new generations in both countries to meet with one another, and foster mutual understanding and empathy based on an appreciation of shared vulnerabilities in relation to both nuclear and other treats, such as those posed by climate change.

The normalisation of nuclear language in domestic discourse in both countries has increased mutual threat perceptions and insecurity.<sup>91</sup> There is a worry that some of the narratives on both sides, especially on social media, may be engaging in what has been called a "glorification"<sup>92</sup> of nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan's discourse and public narrative, leading to an inadequate recognition of the risks associated with their potential use. In this context, participants suggested that these new constituencies of peace could helpfully promote a new joint India-Pakistan study on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons. By collaboratively examining the consequences and risks associated with nuclear weapons, nextgen experts in India and Pakistan could develop a shared awareness of such risks and promote initiatives and publications aimed at countering narratives that glorify nuclear weapons.

Initiatives, such as training programmes and joint projects, would present a platform for fostering meaningful interactions and shared experiences, as well as developing personal connection amongst younger generations in both

86. Spilman, Cervasio, and Repussard, *Exploring Nuclear Risk Reduction Pathways*, p. 11.

87. Agreement Between India And Pakistan On Pre-Notification Of Flight Testing Of Ballistic Missiles, signed on 3 October 2005, <http://mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/PA05B0591.pdf>.

88. Spilman, Cervasio, and Repussard, *Exploring Nuclear Risk Reduction Pathways*, p. 11.

89. Eva-Nour Repussard, *Nuclear Responsibilities at Sea: Bridging the Maritime-Security Nexus in the Asia-Pacific* (BASIC, 2023), <https://basicint.org/report-nuclear-responsibilities-at-sea/>.

90. Tanvi Kulkarni, Frank O'Donnell, Shatabhisha Shetty, and Angela Woodward, *Crisis Avoidance: Preventing Dangerous Maritime Incidents and Untended Escalation in the Asia-Pacific* (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, 2023), p. 9, <https://www.apln.network/analysis/special-report/feasibility-study-report>.

91. See Malik, "Restoring Responsible Communication", pp. 23-27.

92. On this, see Malik, "Restoring Responsible Communications", p. 25.

countries, thereby nurturing intimacy and cooperation. Reinvigorating such intimacy is critical to counterbalancing the current dangerous feelings of enmity and distrust between India and Pakistan.

*By collaboratively examining the consequences and risks associated with nuclear weapons, nextgen experts in India and Pakistan could develop a shared awareness of such risks and promote initiatives and publications aimed at countering narratives that glorify nuclear weapons.*

## Policy Recommendation 5

### Shared Responsibility for the Media not to Promote Violent Language and Nuclear Jingoism

As outlined in our previous work, media outlets in both countries tend to frame stories in ways that align with their respective nationalist narratives.<sup>93</sup> Dialogue participants recognised that such narratives can shape perceptions, attitudes and beliefs of the public by reinforcing nationalist sentiments. Moreover, media narratives in both countries can deliberately misrepresent the other side through misleading or misinformed rhetoric which further exacerbate tensions.<sup>94</sup> For instance, following the Pulwama attack in 2019, media outlets in India and Pakistan initially reported using escalatory language that mirrored the nationalist rhetoric of their respective governments.<sup>95</sup> Dialogue participants suggested that media outlets in both India and Pakistan should establish guidelines for responsible reporting by prioritising accuracy, fact-checking and transparency, while avoiding sensationalism, particularly in nuclear issues, and avoid promoting narratives that exacerbate tensions. Adhering to such guidance can contribute to mitigating the spread of misinformation and reduce misperceptions between the two countries. India and Pakistan should also reinstate the 1950 Joint Press Code, to prevent both sides from disseminating news and mischievous opinions, especially at times of crisis. This was adopted following the Nehru-Liaquat Pact by the All India Newspaper Editors' Conference and the Pakistan Newspaper Editors' Conference, to prevent both sides from disseminating news and mischievous opinion calculated to rouse communal passion or against the territorial integrity of the other or warmongering.

As recommended in our previous work, India and Pakistan should also reinstate visas for each other's foreign correspondents and journalists.<sup>96</sup> By allowing journalists to report in each other's countries, a more comprehensive range of viewpoints can be presented. This exchange of narratives would help to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions by promoting a deeper understanding of complex issues. This in turn would help to foster mutual understanding and empathy among domestic audiences, contributing towards a more nuanced and constructive discourse. To further address this, dialogue participants suggested that India and Pakistan should invest in comprehensive media training programmes focused on responsible reporting and the use of responsible language. Educating journalists and media professionals on accurate and ethical reporting practices, and using language that avoids sensationalism and misinformation would reduce the spread of inflammatory narratives that can fuel tensions.

*Media outlets in both India and Pakistan should establish guidelines for responsible reporting by prioritising accuracy, fact-checking and transparency, while avoiding sensationalism, particularly in nuclear issues, and avoid promoting narratives that exacerbate tensions.*

93. Subramanian, "Media Coverage for Mutual Understanding", p. 16.

94. Madishetty, "The Shared Responsibility of Reading the 'Other' Right", p. 30

95. See, for example, Aditi Malhotra, "Toeing the Line: Media Behaviour and Public Messaging During the Pulwama/Balakot Crisis" (Stimson Center, April 2020), <https://www.stimson.org/2020/toeing-the-line-media-behavior-and-public-messaging-during-the-pulwama-balakot-crisis/#:~:text=The%20media%20did%20not%20rally,the%20captured%20pilot%20to%20India>.

96. On this, see Subramanian, "Media Coverage for Mutual Understanding", p.22.

# Conclusion

Our Track 2 / 1.5 dialogues, out of which this report has emerged, sought to explore Indian and Pakistani perceptions on responsible crisis management and prevention practices in South Asia. Our objective has been twofold: to uncover similarities and differences in such perceptions, and to explore whether there are enough shared characteristics to define a distinct South Asia model of crisis management.

One key finding of our dialogues is that there was a notable convergence of perspectives between Indian and Pakistani participants on these questions.<sup>97</sup> In particular, participants from the two adversarial countries were united in the belief – outlined in this report – that there is mutual confidence on both sides that the other can be relied upon to show nuclear restraint in times of crisis. What is more, it appears from Pulwama-Balakot that Indian and Pakistani decision-makers believe this mutual confidence is strong enough that it will continue to exert a restraining influence even when limited force is being used on both sides. The shared belief in this mutual confidence among the Indian and Pakistani participants in our dialogues led them not surprisingly to reject the “nuclear flashpoint” framing as too alarmist and there was a strong consensus that South Asia is not primed for nuclear war. At the same time, as the report shows, Indian and Pakistani participants were conscious that it was important not to negate nuclear dangers and allow confidence to slip into complacency about these risks. This led to a collective discussion of the responsible practices and related policy proposals that can contribute to a more robust regime, not only of crisis management, but also of crisis prevention in South Asia.

This report has focused on five key policy proposals which, despite mostly focusing on Track 2 initiatives, are intended to potentially influence and shape practitioner thinking, practices, and policy at the Track 1 level in India and Pakistan. But the policy proposals, and more generally the lessons extrapolated from the India-Pakistan experience of crisis management and prevention, distilled in this report, might be helpful in thinking about how to prevent and manage crises in other adversarial nuclear relationships. This applies in particular to the India-China nuclear dyad, where policies like the CBMs monitor and the development of trusted communication channels both at Track 1 and 2 might prove particularly useful in reducing misunderstandings and misperceptions, especially in times of crisis.

Our dialogues have not only identified a distinct and unique model of crisis management in South Asia – predicated on confidence in reciprocated restraint – they have also drawn attention to the growing challenges to the continuation of this restraint in the future. The urgent need, as Indian and Pakistani dialogue participants appreciated and contributed importantly towards, is to put in place new guardrails that not only bolster this mutual confidence, but also go beyond it by creating a lasting regime of crisis prevention. In this regard, the South Asia experience might have important learning for crisis managers in other nuclear dyads.

97. In contrast, it was the European participants (BASIC, but also the British diplomats at the national dialogues) who held a different perspective on South Asia, one that at the outset of the dialogues was perhaps more drawn to the risks of the South Asian nuclear experience and the role of luck in the successful de-escalation of past crises. In this respect, the dialogues have been an invaluable learning experience for the BASIC team as we have encountered the reasons why India and Pakistan share this mutual confidence that the other can be relied upon not to behave in ways that will push the other into hasty, preemptive nuclear actions.