USIP SENIOR STUDY GROUP
FINAL REPORT

Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia

United States Institute of Peace
Making Peace Possible

Beginning in June 2021, the United States Institute of Peace convened a group of senior experts to assess concerns that recent geopolitical and technological trends increasingly threaten the tenuous stability of Southern Asia. Heightened global strategic competition between China and the United States is increasingly reflected in the region through closer China-Pakistan alignment, elevated China-India tensions, and a deepening strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi. Furthermore, each of the region's militaries is investing in new capabilities, including nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Over seven virtual plenary sessions, the Senior Study Group assessed the changing capabilities, doctrines, threat perceptions, and crisis response behavior of the main regional nuclear actors. This report summarizes those findings, considers US policy options, and identifies priority recommendations for the resolution or mitigation of core disputes, the enhancement of regional strategic stability, and the management of potential future crises.

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United States Institute of Peace
2301 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20037

Phone: 202.457.1700
Fax: 202.429.6063
E-mail: usip_requests@usip.org
Web: www.usip.org

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Study Group Members

CO-CHAIRS

Daniel Markey, United States Institute of Peace
Andrew Scobell, United States Institute of Peace
Vikram J. Singh, United States Institute of Peace

SENIOR STUDY GROUP MEMBERS

Zack Cooper, American Enterprise Institute
Toby Dalton, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Robert Einhorn, Brookings Institution
M. Taylor Fravel, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Kyle Gardner, George Washington University
Jack Gill, National Defense University
Sameer Lalwani, Stimson Center
Antoine Levesques, International Institute for Strategic Studies
Shuja Nawaz, Atlantic Council
Ankit Panda, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Lynn Rusten, Nuclear Threat Initiative
Lora Saalman, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
Yun Sun, Stimson Center
Elizabeth Threlkeld, Stimson Center
Joshua White, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies
Diana Wueger, Naval Postgraduate School

PROJECT EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS

Tamanna Salikuddin, director of South Asia programs, United States Institute of Peace
Jennifer Staats, director of East and Southeast Asia programs, United States Institute of Peace

RESEARCH TEAM AND SECRETARIAT

Colin Cookman, Max Mellot, Asfandyar Mir, and Zaara Wakeel, United States Institute of Peace

Study group members express their support for the general findings and recommendations reached by the group, but do not necessarily endorse every statement or judgment in the report. They participate in the study group in their personal capacities; the views expressed are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of their institutions or employers.

Co-chairs' Note

Since India and Pakistan became nuclear-armed states in 1998, periodic conflicts between them have raised fears about nuclear use in South Asia. Fortunately, in the intervening two decades, Islamabad and New Delhi have avoided major war because one or both have always managed to find an off-ramp from escalating tensions. In each episode, the United States has played an important if discreet role in crisis management and diplomacy.

We are concerned that recent geopolitical and technological trends threaten the tenuous stability in Southern Asia (a term we use to include China as well as South Asia's longtime antagonists India and Pakistan). Heightened strategic competition between China and the United States is taking place alongside Beijing's ever closer alignment with Islamabad, elevated China-India tensions, and a deepening strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi. Each of the region's militaries is investing in new capabilities, including nuclear weapons and delivery systems.

To address this challenge, we assembled an impressive group of scholars and practitioners with deep expertise in South Asia, China, and nuclear stability. Beginning in June 2021, we held seven virtual plenary sessions over the course of the next eight months, many featuring visiting guest experts who shared their perspectives on the changing capabilities, doctrines, threat perceptions, and crisis response behavior of the main regional nuclear actors. With extensive input from the group, we produced this report. Given the complexity of the issue, our goal was to explore the nature of the problem in depth, consider policy options, and make broad recommendations for policymakers in Washington and other key capitals.

The group's deliberations concluded before Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Although we anticipate direct and indirect consequences of that conflict for our findings, we remain uncertain as to precisely how it will alter future geopolitical, economic, and security circumstances

in Southern Asia. However, given heightened frictions between the United States and Russia, we expect that some of the report's recommendations for multilateral dialogues to enhance strategic stability would be delayed if not obstructed. In addition, India's long-standing ties to Russia as a major defense supplier, including of sophisticated air defense systems and nuclear-capable submarines, will face greater scrutiny in the United States, but the long-term implications for US-India strategic partnership have yet to be determined. Finally, Moscow's blatant nuclear saber-rattling could encourage similar actions in Southern Asia, weakening norms of restraint and raising the frightening prospect of nuclear use. Although we are convinced that the Ukraine war will worsen the global geopolitical outlook in many ways, it is also conceivable that Russia's invasion will come to be perceived as a strategic blunder that highlights the costs of military aggression. We hope so.

In any event, our fundamental goal is to draw attention to a US policy challenge that is in our view worsening and badly in need of being addressed. 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. We believe that the United States can and should take steps to better address the motives, means, and processes that expose Southern Asia to a significant risk of nuclear war. We endorse the policy recommendations in this report.

We thank our USIP colleagues for their exceptional logistical and intellectual support. We also especially acknowledge the contributions of our study group members who generously volunteered their time and expertise to make this report possible.

— Daniel Markey, Andrew Scobell, and Vikram J. Singh

Executive Summary

Over the past decade, long-standing disputes between the nuclear-armed states of Southern Asia have repeatedly veered into deeper hostility and violence. These regional developments reflect and reinforce new and significant geopolitical shifts, starting with the global strategic competition between China and the United States. In Southern Asia, relations between the United States and Pakistan have frayed even as US-India and China-Pakistan ties have strengthened. The region now faces deepening and more multifaceted polarization. Global competition adds fuel to regional conflict and reduces options for crisis mediation.

This report reviews the challenges posed by changing strategic circumstances in Southern Asia, assesses a range of US policy options, and presents a set of priority recommendations for US policymakers.

Principal Findings

China, India, and Pakistan have developed nuclear capabilities as one way to deter conflict with more powerful adversaries: the United States, China, and India, respectively. Each of the states in Southern Asia is expanding its nuclear arsenal and investing in related delivery systems. All aspire to field nuclear triads with assured second-strike capabilities, but China, India, and Pakistan are at very different stages in this process. In making these investments in national security, each state also threatens its less powerful rivals. The result, a "cascading security dilemma," encourages arms racing, disrupts regional strategic stability, and heightens the risk that crises could cross the nuclear threshold.

In addition to general arms race dynamics, the introduction of new munitions, more capable delivery systems, and potentially more risk-acceptant doctrinal shifts tend, on balance, to

Members of India's Border Security Force, foreground, at the daily flag-lowering ceremony with their Pakistani counterparts, in black uniforms, at the Wagah-Attari border crossing on September 19, 2019. (Photo by Rebecca Conway/New York Times)

exacerbate strategic instability in Southern Asia. Sophisticated missile defense systems; hypersonic and multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) missiles; and tactical, sea-based (surface and submarine), and dual-capable nuclear systems all raise new challenges for crisis management and raise questions about how they might influence the nuclear strategies and doctrines of regional states.

The potential for conflict between India and Pakistan remains high following the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis. Subsequent diplomacy led to the resumption of a ceasefire along the Line of Control in 2021, but the underlying causes of hostility, including although not limited to the disputed territory of Kashmir, remain. Moreover, India and Pakistan appear to have drawn lessons from 2019 that increase the likelihood that future crises could escalate in dangerous ways, possibly even to the nuclear threshold. All told, 2019 showed important shifts in long-standing positions (by India and Pakistan, as well as China and the United States) and a new willingness by all parties to accept greater risk.

Over the past several years, India's relations with China have also deteriorated markedly. In the summer of 2020, their long-disputed land border saw the most violent clashes in more than four decades. India and China have since pulled forces away from hot conflict but have not found a way back to the pre-2020 status quo. Both are actively investing in new military capabilities and infrastructure along their inhospitable Himalayan frontier, raising the prospect that future disputes could escalate into even more significant conventional military exchanges. Nuclear use remains unlikely, but it cannot be ruled out, if only as the unintended consequence of conventional military escalation. India-China border tensions are certain to influence their broader bilateral relationship as well as military investments, both conventional and nuclear.

In addition to worrisome trends in bilateral India-Pakistan and India-China relations, India faces the thorny challenge of managing relations with two hostile neighbors (China and Pakistan) that are increasingly close partners. Other regional developments, including in Afghanistan, where Taliban rule is likely to create new opportunities for terrorist groups, further threaten strategic stability in Southern Asia. Ultimately, it is the unpredictable evolution of these dangerous dynamics in combination—India-Pakistan crises, China-India border violence, and resurgent terrorist threats—that should raise concern that inevitable flare-ups could spiral.

The United States has only a limited capacity to influence the behavior of other nuclear-armed states. The overlapping and interconnected rivalries and territorial disputes in Southern Asia further complicate the policy challenge facing Washington. In particular, US policymakers will need to balance competing strategic priorities as they deepen the strategic partnership with India and deter aggression while taking care to avoid actions that could contribute to a regional arms race, greater instability, or crisis escalation.

That said, the United States has in the past played a significant role in regional crisis prevention and mitigation and continues to have a wide range of policy tools at its disposal. This report systematically assesses a range of options for resolving, mitigating, or better managing regional disputes; enhancing regional strategic stability through deterrence, reassurance, and other diplomatic or technical means; and improving crisis management tools and practices to reduce the likelihood that any specific crisis escalates past the nuclear threshold. This assessment is not intended to be a one-time effort. As the United States faces new and evolving circumstances, it should continue to develop policies to address the motives, new capabilities, and processes that expose Southern Asia to a significant risk of nuclear war.

Priority Recommendations

To resolve or mitigate core disputes in Southern Asia that threaten regional peace, the United States should continue to pursue diplomatic initiatives to encourage reduced tensions between India and Pakistan. It should also prepare to seize opportunities for tactical progress, for instance, on ways to remove forces from specific points of friction, such as the Siachen Glacier, even if core

disputes prove intractable. The United States should support long-term regional economic development projects to build material incentives and more vocal constituencies favoring regional peace.

Additionally, the United States should look for new diplomatic opportunities to manage India and China's border dispute, including in US talks with China as well as coordination with US allies and partners to develop new economic and financial tools aimed at deterring Chinese territorial aggression. The United States should use its ongoing negotiations with the Taliban and economic and financial leverage with Pakistan to reduce threats to regional stability posed by terrorists based in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in particular by naming anti-Indian terrorists as priority US concerns and targets.

To enhance prospects for strategic stability in Southern Asia, the United States should devote renewed attention to nuclear risk reduction measures, starting with the establishment of a dedicated, secure, and redundant India-Pakistan nuclear hotline, supported by bilateral agreements and practices, and should urge both India and China to enter strategic stability talks with each other. Additionally, the United States should raise the idea of a new transregional forum on regional and global strategic stability that would include an "N-7" (China, France, India, Pakistan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) to discuss and strengthen stabilizing nuclear norms. Washington should also deepen its defense cooperation with New Delhi in ways that contribute to India's capacity for territorial defense and a stabilizing conventional and nuclear deterrent without exacerbating the regional arms race or increasing the likelihood of nuclear crises.

To better manage crises between the nuclear-armed states of Southern Asia, the United States should prepare its policymakers for complex nuclear crisis diplomacy in the region by conducting gaming exercises within the intelligence community; developing a generalized policy playbook for India-Pakistan, India-China, and overlapping India-Pakistan-China crises; and routinely sharing insights from these planning documents with all incoming senior officials in relevant US government agencies, embassies, and bases.

Additionally, Washington should work to improve its indicators and warning for regional crises and prepare to share information publicly and with regional actors to combat disinformation in instances where doing so could prevent or de-escalate a conflict. It should offer to help New Delhi enhance the resilience of its information and communications channels. It should also coordinate with trusted third parties to better prepare for crisis diplomacy so that they can serve as intermediaries and honest brokers in future crises.

A Shifting and Dangerous Strategic Landscape

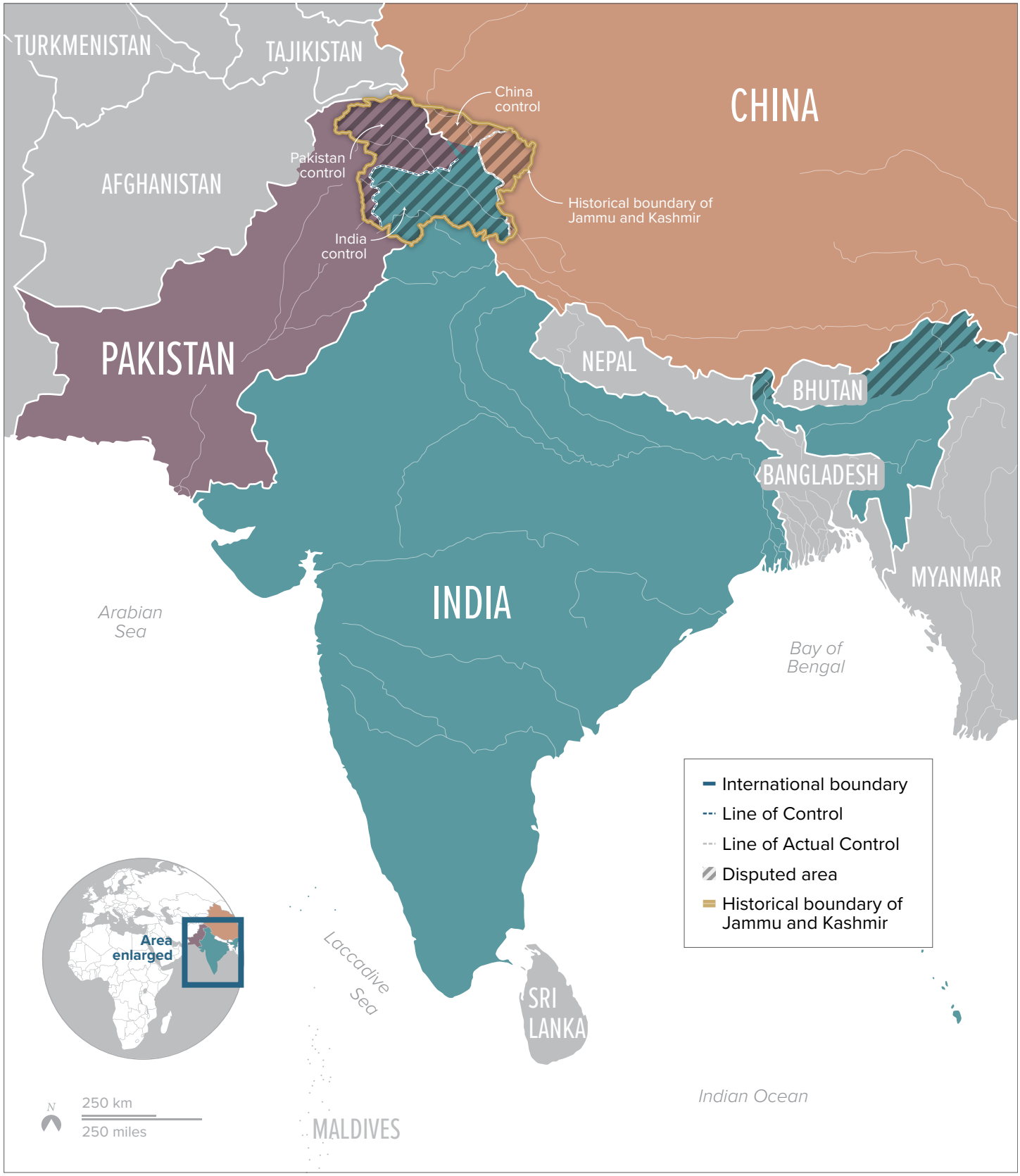
Southern Asia—a term used in this report as shorthand for the region that includes China, India, and Pakistan—is changing in ways that increase the likelihood of arms racing, crises, and militarized conflict with the potential to cross the nuclear threshold.[1] These changes include shifts in geopolitical relationships, nuclear and conventional capabilities, and doctrine and policy.

The United States has important and lasting interests in Southern Asia. As Washington shifts its gaze eastward to global strategic competition with Beijing, developments across the Indo-Pacific take on a wider geopolitical significance. In particular, now that Washington has spent years cultivating closer ties with New Delhi and supporting its rise as a consequential global partner, the United States has an ever-greater stake in India's successful development. Even as Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has prompted renewed focus on US alliances and security interests in Europe, Southern Asia remains a major strategic priority for the United States as well as a source of potential crises.

The material and human costs of war in Southern Asia would be borne, above all, by the region, but they would also be felt by the United States and the world. A nuclear conflict would shake the global economy, given that Southern Asia is an important engine of worldwide growth, and destroy American businesses and investments in the region. Even serious regional crises threaten to disrupt global markets. From a humanitarian perspective, the United States cannot ignore the potentially devastating consequences of a violent conflict between such vast countries and densely populated cities. A major war in Southern Asia could bring terrible suffering to hundreds of millions of people, and nuclear use could produce a global environmental catastrophe.[2]

MAP 1.

Southern Asia



Map adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski. The boundaries shown on this map are approximate and do not imply official endorsement or acceptance on the part of the study group or the United States Institute of Peace.

Geopolitics

In May 1998, India and Pakistan each tested nuclear weapons. Despite a strained relationship with Pakistan and a historically underdeveloped relationship with India, unrivaled post–Cold War American military power, economic predominance, and diplomatic influence allowed Washington to be a crisis manager (if never a successful peace mediator) during the subsequent India-Pakistan crises of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, including the 1999 Kargil War, the 2001–02 military standoff, the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, and numerous other times of cross-border tension through 2018. Apart from the United States, outside powers, including China, also sought de-escalation, sometimes supporting US efforts or independently urging de-escalatory measures.[3]

In the second decade of the 21st century, this relatively stable configuration began to shift as the rise of China transformed the rough balance of power in Southern Asia. Relative to the apex of the early post–Cold War era, US military, political, and especially economic influence in the region has waned. The relationship between the United States and China has shifted to one of global competition, with Southern Asia constituting an increasingly important but secondary theater. Global US-China competition makes cooperation in Southern Asia, including during major crises, substantially more difficult.[4]

China's relationship with Pakistan has been close since the 1960s but deepened considerably in 2013, when plans were initially unveiled for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, part of Xi Jinping's signature global Belt and Road Initiative. China became Pakistan's principal economic development partner, supplanting the United States and the United Kingdom and complementing its established role as Pakistan's chief arms supplier and diplomatic protector at the UN Security Council and other important multilateral venues.

Simultaneously, despite substantial US civilian and security assistance programs in Pakistan from 2001 to 2017, Washington's relationship with Islamabad became increasingly strained. The United States was frustrated by Pakistan's hedging strategy in Afghanistan and continued support for or tolerance of extremist and terrorist groups of concern to the United States; meanwhile, Pakistan perceived many US policies as contributing to regional insecurity. Today the bilateral relationship is severely frayed, and prospects for revitalizing cooperation in the near term look dim, whereas the China-Pakistan relationship is more comprehensive than ever.

China's relationship with India experienced a historic sea change in 2020. Cooperation was undone by border clashes along the Line of Actual Control (the disputed demarcation separating Indian-held and Chinese-held territory) in 2020, which both New Delhi and Beijing interpreted as reflecting an aggressive posture by the other to undo the stable, if persistently unresolved, status quo along the disputed frontier. Today, 2018's so-called Spirit of Wuhan, in which Beijing and New Delhi stressed their overriding mutual interest in economic cooperation in the aftermath of another border flare-up, seems hopelessly out of date. As of 2020–21, it seems to have been overtaken by what the People's Liberation Army called the Karakoram Spirit of tenacity.[5]

Even though Southern Asian nations are confident in their ability to manage escalation, this is the only place on earth where a nuclear power has conducted an airstrike on the territory of another nuclear power.

Meanwhile, Washington's long-term, bipartisan effort to strengthen its bilateral relationship with India, beginning during the Clinton administration and passing a major milestone with the Bush administration's 2005 agreement on civil nuclear issues, has borne fruit. During the Obama administration, several bilateral security agreements were signed, allowing for enhanced security cooperation and information sharing. Under the Trump administration, with the United States facing specific threats from Beijing and Moscow, Washington formally announced its Indo-Pacific strategy, which relies heavily on building a strategic partnership with India. The strategy has been reformulated by the Biden administration in a manner that retains a central role for India as a key US partner in strategic competition with China.[6]

The combination of India's perception of Chinese aggression and US interest in closer relations has led India to be more flexible in its traditional posture, characterized by nonalignment during the Cold War and strategic autonomy since then. New Delhi is now more receptive than ever to establishing closer political and security ties with Washington and traditional US allies in Asia and Europe.

From 2003 to 2007, India and Pakistan engaged in a series of at times intense bilateral negotiations, including over Kashmir.[7] After the 2008 Mumbai attacks, however, their relations suffered repeated setbacks and, especially under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, New Delhi has shown itself increasingly willing to take punitive military actions against Pakistan in response to terrorist attacks in India. The two prime ministers currently have no direct contact with one another, and back channels appear intermittently active at best. In early 2019, attacks on Indian forces by Pakistan-backed Kashmiri terrorist groups escalated to tit-for-tat airstrikes and nearly led to war. Modi's August 2019 abrogation of Article 370 altered Indian-administered Kashmir's constitutional status and, as a consequence, ruled out many of the compromise formulas previously debated in Islamabad and New Delhi. A February 2021 ceasefire agreement significantly reduced violence along the Line of Control dividing Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir, but infiltration attempts and occasional cross-border shelling persist. As in prior ceasefires, Islamabad and New Delhi have not translated reduced levels of border violence into diplomatic progress on underlying differences.

The departure of US forces from Afghanistan does little to resolve tensions between India and Pakistan. India sees Pakistan as having finally achieved the dominant political influence over Afghanistan it sought by supporting the Taliban; and it is concerned that Pakistan will refocus its proxies on the Kashmir dispute, as happened at the end of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. For Pakistan, however, Taliban rule in Kabul brings costs as well as benefits. Tensions with the Taliban raise the daunting prospect of hostile terrorist groups, such as the Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP), finding safe haven along Pakistan's western frontier. Pakistani officials have in the

past attributed the TTP's strength to Indian machinations and remain convinced of India's support to anti-state militants in its southern Balochistan Province as well. India has hedged by making cautious overtures to the Taliban, including the delivery of food aid to Afghanistan. In short, both India and Pakistan fear that a Taliban-run Afghanistan could be exploited by their adversaries.

Elevated tensions between India and Pakistan will take place against the backdrop of a region that appears increasingly divided into mutually hostile, nuclear-armed blocs, one in which Pakistan aligns more closely with China and another in which India aligns with the United States. As growing numbers of Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani forces are deployed in close proximity across long-disputed frontiers, bloc politics have the potential to turn once-manageable regional disputes into global conflicts. US-China rivalries also add fuel, including new technologies and resources, to local hostilities.

Even though Southern Asian nations are confident in their ability to manage escalation, this is the only place on earth where a nuclear power has conducted an airstrike on the territory of another nuclear power, as India did after the 2019 Pulwama terrorist attack. It is the only place where soldiers of two nuclear powers have attacked and killed one another at their disputed border, as Chinese and Indian soldiers did in 2020 in the Galwan Valley. It is also the only place where one nuclear power has accidentally launched a missile into the territory of another, as India did in 2022.[8] Any such incident has the potential to spark a wider crisis.

Capabilities and Doctrines

China, India, and Pakistan each perceive military threats from more powerful adversaries. Their nuclear forces and doctrines are intended to deter war and, in different ways, to compensate for conventional military asymmetries.

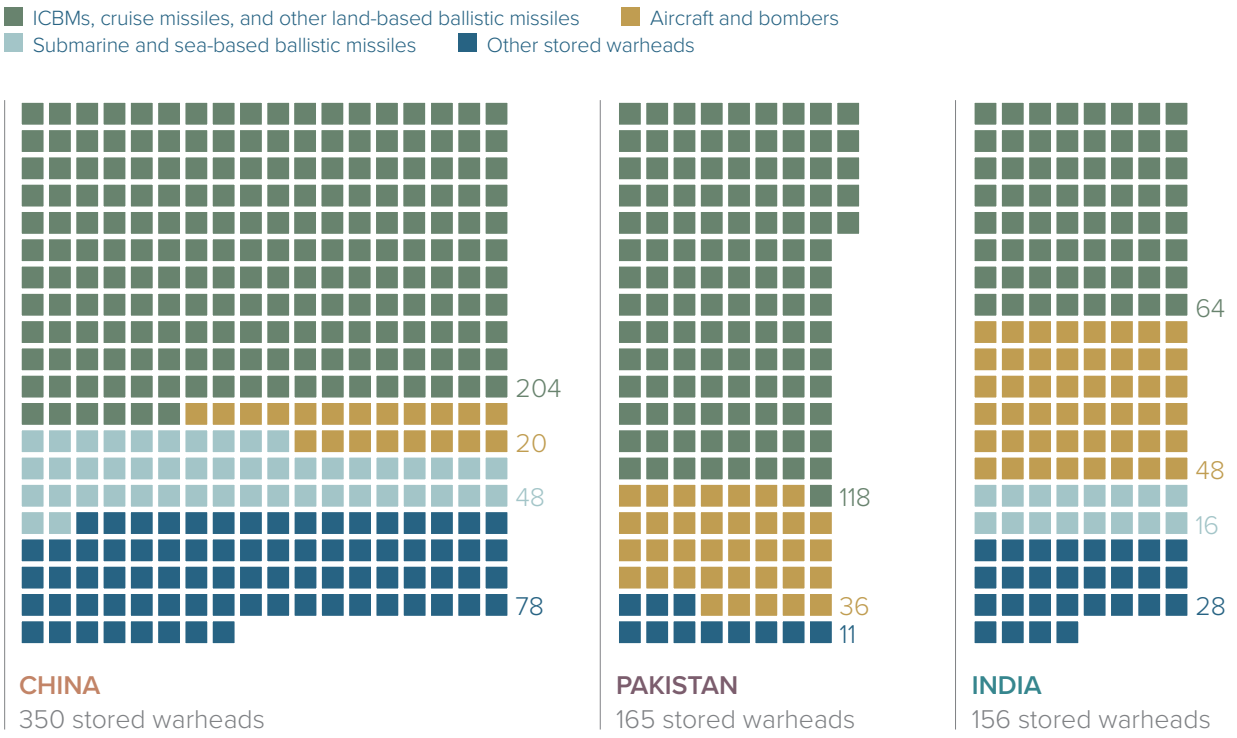
Pakistan's strategic planners look east and seek to balance neighboring India, which spends seven times as much on its military forces and has the world's second-largest army. India looks northeast to China, which spends three times what India invests in defense and boasts significant technological and capability advantages. China's intermediate-range missiles, advanced hypersonic missile program, and quickly modernizing land, air, and naval forces all drive Indian ambitions for conventional and nuclear modernization. China also looks beyond the regional triangle across the Pacific to balance the United States, which in turn spends three times what China spends on defense. (Figures 1 and 2 on the following page provide recent data on military expenditures and nuclear arsenals.)

PAKISTAN'S CAPABILITIES AND DOCTRINE

Although considerably smaller than India, Pakistan maintains one of the world's largest militaries and commits roughly 4 percent of its gross domestic product to defense. Despite roughly 650,000 active-duty military personnel and significant investments in intelligence and proxy capabilities, Pakistan views nuclear weapons as critical to limiting the threat of Indian conventional military escalation. Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs have both benefited from decades of Chinese technological cooperation.

FIGURE 1.

Estimated Nuclear Arsenals by Delivery Platform, 2021



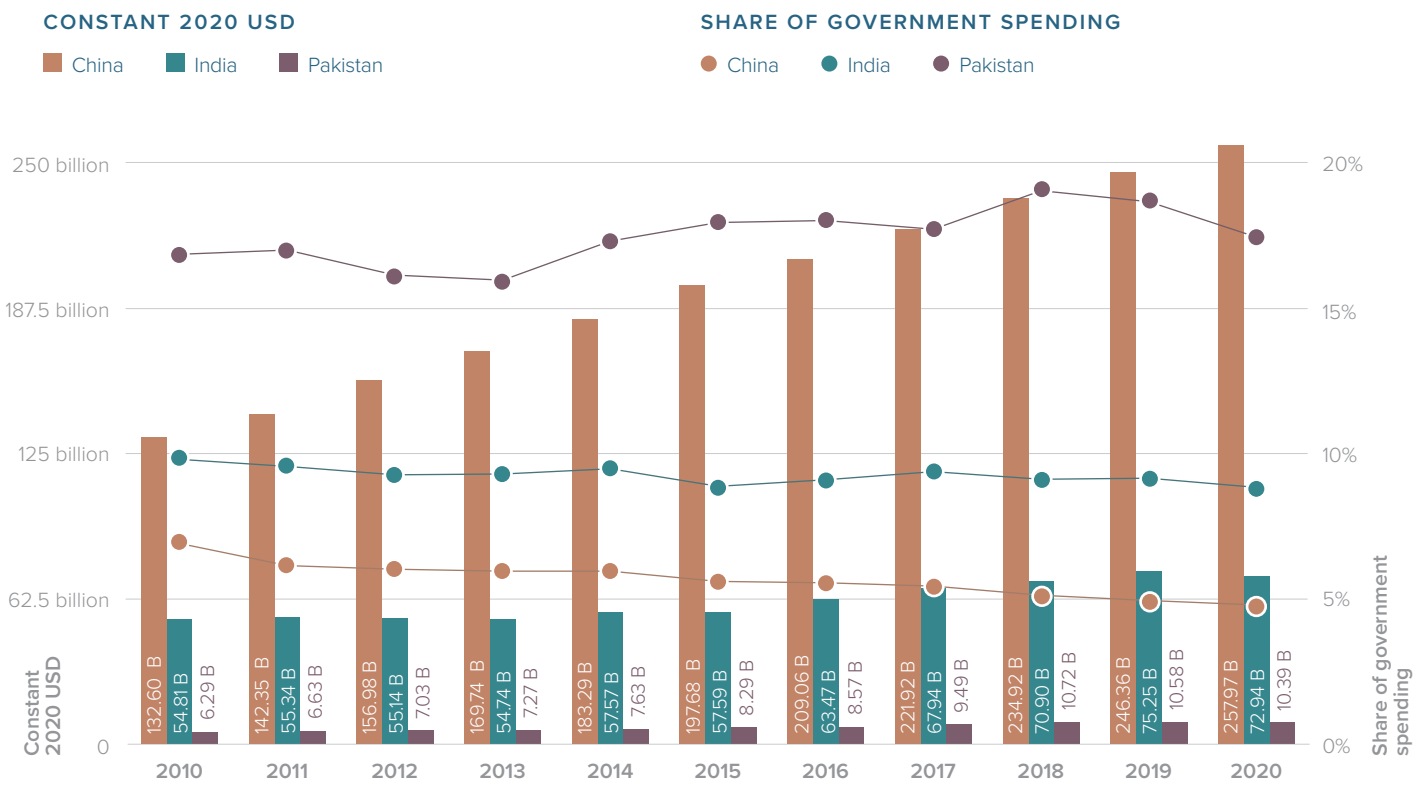
Source: Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "World Nuclear Forces," in *SIPRI Yearbook 2021: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press). In many cases, the figures are based on estimates, and warheads may be transferrable between platforms.

Pakistan's primary delivery methods for nuclear weapons are land-based ballistic and cruise missiles and aircraft-borne gravity bombs. In introducing sea-based ballistic missiles, Islamabad seeks to build a viable nuclear triad.[9] As a part of its response to the threat posed by Indian plans for conventional military retaliation to punish Pakistan for terrorist attacks inside India (sometimes described as a Cold Start doctrine), Islamabad has introduced tactical nuclear weapons in the form of the Nasr (Hatf-9) missile. Adding to the threat that Pakistan could use tactical nuclear weapons at an early phase in a conventional war with India, these weapons could be dispersed on the battlefield in ways that would make them difficult to differentiate from conventional munitions and mobile enough to increase the chances of unauthorized use or theft.

In terms of doctrine, Pakistan relies on the potential use of nuclear weapons as a core element of deterrence. Pakistan rejects any no-first-use commitment in favor of "full-spectrum deterrence" that keeps a wide variety of nuclear weapons and a wide range of Indian targets on the table in response to any Indian attack. At the "low" end, Pakistan aims to deter "conventional aggression at any level by threatening, at a minimum, nuclear use of limited yield both as a signal and for tactical effect."[10] Pakistani leaders have outlined military, geographic (occupation of territory), political (internal destabilization or insurgency), and even economic strangulation as possible justifications for a nuclear response.[11]

FIGURE 2.

Annual Military Expenditures, 2010–20



Source: Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Military Expenditure Database.

In response to the 2019 conflict with India, however, Pakistan embraced a doctrine of limited conventional escalation, so-called Quid Pro Quo Plus, meaning that it would seek to match and outdo India's conventional strikes.[12] Although the "plus" aspect is intended to deter India, it also raises concerns about how a future series of tit-for-tat exchanges could escalate.

INDIA'S CAPABILITIES AND DOCTRINE

India has twice as many submarines and twice as many fighter jets as Pakistan. Yet some of these quantitative measures tend to overstate India's advantage, not least because a large and growing portion of the Indian defense budget goes to pensions rather than capital expenditures.[13] India's advantage in conventional forces evaporates relative to China, though that disparity can also be misleading because China deploys only a small fraction of its overall forces against India.

To address perceived threats from China and Pakistan, India seeks to modernize its conventional forces by acquiring foreign-made systems, indigenous production, and reorganization. It continues to invest in new capabilities, such as armed drones and hypersonic missiles, and is on course to achieve a minimally redundant submarine-based second-strike capability by 2030. India's nuclear submarines, air defense systems, and hypersonic missiles all rely heavily on Russian technologies and supply relationships.

Given the close China-Pakistan relationship, Indian leaders are also increasingly concerned that they must plan for a worst-case scenario of a two-front war with Pakistan and China.

In addition, India has advanced satellite capabilities for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and has over the past several years cemented defense agreements with the United States that provide real-time access to substantial American geospatial information.[14]

Despite all these moves, at present, China's own modernization continues to outpace India's. Given the close China-Pakistan relationship, Indian leaders are also increasingly concerned that they must plan for a worst-case scenario of a two-front war with Pakistan and China, something that would stress even a much better resourced military force. Thus far, neither Pakistan nor China has taken immediate or tactical advantage of India's crises with the other, and it is conceivable that India overestimates this threat. It is difficult to determine precisely which factors, including but not limited to the threat of Indian military escalation, have deterred more opportunistic moves by China or Pakistan in past flare-ups with the other neighbor.

Officially, India's nuclear doctrine remains defined by minimum credible deterrence and no first use. However, recent statements by senior Indian officials, including Prime Minister Modi, have raised questions about precisely how India interprets that commitment.[15] New Delhi has also adopted a negative assurance policy of nonuse against nonnuclear powers.[16] It seeks to deter both Pakistan and China from nuclear strikes by maintaining a credible second-strike capability and a stated policy of massive retaliation (striking civilian targets, like cities, not just military ones) in the event of nuclear use.

However, Indian planning is complicated by Pakistan's claim that it would consider using tactical nuclear weapons on its own territory to stop advancing Indian forces. In that scenario, India's commitment to massive retaliation would not seem credible. As a consequence, some analysts have suggested India should adopt a more conditional no-first-use policy or explore more limited counterforce options against Pakistan (to retaliate against land- and sea-based nuclear forces rather than civilians). Although at first glance such shifts could appear to reduce the nightmare prospect of targeting cities, they have the potentially counterproductive consequence of incentivizing Pakistan to adopt a use-it-or-lose-it strategy for its land- and air-delivered nuclear weapons. In short, a new Indian counterforce doctrine could introduce greater instability by increasing the likelihood that Pakistan would launch its weapons early in an escalating conflict.[17]

In addition, the Modi government has altered its conventional military responses to terrorism attributed to Pakistan-based groups. Whereas India slowly mobilized its conventional forces along the border with Pakistan during the 2001–02 crisis period and refrained from direct attacks against Pakistan following the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, New Delhi announced in 2016 that it had conducted "surgical strikes" across the Line of Control in response to an attack in Uri. It also, in 2019, launched

an airstrike against what it claimed was a Pakistani terrorist training camp in Balakot. This was the first direct airstrike by one nuclear power on the soil of another. Pakistan discounted these strikes, perhaps because they did not hit sensitive targets. They did, however, signal a shift in India's conventional doctrine, and they raise the prospect of even more ambitious Indian reprisals against future terrorist attacks.[18]

CHINA'S CAPABILITIES AND DOCTRINE

China's standing military forces are estimated to include more than 2 million active-duty personnel, 355 ships and submarines, and more than 2,200 combat aircraft. Its current arsenal of nuclear weapons exists primarily to deter the United States. Like India, China claims to adhere to a long-standing no-first-use policy, which envisions nuclear weapons as deterring nuclear attacks and limiting nuclear escalation with an assured second-strike retaliatory capability. Beijing seeks to add a sea-based second-strike nuclear capability but continues to rely heavily on land-based (road- and rail-mobile) missiles and is adding substantially more fixed-site nuclear missile silos. The US Department of Defense projects that China intends to expand its nuclear arsenal to as many as 700 deliverable nuclear warheads by 2027 and that it "likely intends to have at least 1,000 warheads by 2030."[19]

China's close alignment with Pakistan extends into the nuclear domain. In the 1970s, China provided crucial support to Pakistan's original nuclear program. It continues to sell Pakistan nuclear-capable weapon delivery systems. Despite these vital connections, Chinese experts (who may not reflect the views of decision-makers) tend to downplay Beijing's relevance to India-Pakistan strategic stability.

However, the history of Beijing's political, economic, and military commitment to Islamabad has clearly influenced Pakistan's strategic decision-making in the past, above all by accelerating its ability to deploy a credible nuclear deterrent. Questions loom about how ongoing China-Pakistan military cooperation will affect developments in Pakistan's nuclear capabilities and doctrine, such as its investments in sea-based nuclear delivery platforms. In addition, the presence of more Chinese workers and projects in Pakistan—starting with civilian infrastructure but potentially including dual-use (military-civilian) facilities—could also throw China into the middle of future India-Pakistan conflicts.

China's military aspires to field a robust sea-based second-strike capability and a reliable nuclear triad. In the short term, however, Beijing will continue to rely on land-based missiles and is working to modernize its delivery systems, including by introducing multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) capabilities to its intercontinental ballistic missiles. Eventually, Chinese investments in nuclear delivery platforms, such as the deployment and apparently successful testing of the DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle, could also pay off. China's commitment to nuclear and conventional modernization builds on its successes in the sphere of intermediate-range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles, some of which are dual capable.

CROSS-CUTTING CONCERNS

Southern Asia faces different versions of the "discrimination challenge," whereby adversaries can find it difficult to know whether they are facing conventional or nuclear munitions because delivery systems are dual capable. A number of Pakistani and Indian aircraft and missile systems (tactical, ballistic, and cruise) and some of China's aircraft (H-6K) and intermediate-range missiles (DF-26) could be considered dual capable. As India and Pakistan develop sea-based nuclear forces, they appear likely to rely on dual-capable platforms such as patrol vessels (India) and diesel-electric submarines (Pakistan). The discrimination challenge can lead to two types of dangerous misperceptions. First, an incoming conventional attack could be mistaken for a nuclear strike (a false positive). Second, nuclear forces could be mistaken for conventional forces (a false negative). In either case, the consequence of that initial misperception could be nuclear escalation. Geographic proximity and short warning times further increase the likelihood of such mistakes.[20]

Other elements of the modernization programs of all three countries could conceivably contribute to overall stability. For example, some analysts believe that if India and Pakistan had reliable sea-based second-strike capabilities, the overall effect would be to deter escalation.[21] But this could be decades away, and in the meantime many trends in regional military modernization—particularly nuclear modernization—are destabilizing and contribute to arms racing.

India and China have made increasingly heavy investments in sophisticated air and missile defenses (including Russian-made S-400s), and Pakistan has purchased Chinese-made air defense systems. This has contributed to a short- and medium-range missile race in the region, with all three nations developing and testing an expanding array of ballistic and cruise missiles intended to overcome or defeat their neighbors' missile defenses. New developments in hypersonic and MIRV missiles further complicate regional prospects for effective missile defense. In addition, Pakistan fears that new Indian missile defense systems will be focused westward, toward it, not China, and could tilt the balance in future air combat scenarios.

Beyond traditional military technology, developments in artificial intelligence and machine learning as well as offensive cyber and space capabilities have the potential to undermine strategic stability in the future. Cyberattacks could affect nuclear command-and-control and warning systems or confidence in them. India and China have demonstrated anti-satellite capabilities, and Pakistan seeks to "strengthen and enhance space-based technology."[22] Information warfare and manipulation could increase the pressure on leaders in Pakistan and India to ratchet up rather than de-escalate. The application of artificial intelligence and machine learning tools to ever-growing collections of data from sensors and other sources might eventually negate the security of undersea and mobile missile systems.[23]

New Challenges in Crisis Prevention and Management

Nuclear war remains an unlikely prospect in Southern Asia, especially between India and China, because leaders in all three countries (China, India, and Pakistan) appreciate the vast destructive power of these weapons and have developed nuclear arms with deterrence as a foremost aim. That said, militarized disputes between nuclear-armed states cannot be taken lightly, if only because series of miscalculations and conventional escalation could lead to nuclear use.

The risk potential was underscored by an apparent errant Indian missile launch in March 2022, after the conclusion of this study group's plenary sessions, which struck inside Pakistan.[24] The missile was unarmed, caused no casualties, and came during a period of comparative diplomatic calm between the two sides, but still underscores the potential for surprise-onset crises in the region.

Two capsule case studies of other major recent India-Pakistan and India-China disputes offer lessons for US policymakers.

Case 1: Pulwama-Balakot

On February 14, 2019, a suicide car bomber from Indian-administered Kashmir killed 44 Indian paramilitary personnel traveling in a convoy near the town of Pulwama. The perpetrator was a local man from the Kashmir Valley, but the Pakistan-based terrorist organization Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) claimed responsibility for the attack, the latest in a decades-long string by Pakistan-based groups against Indian targets.[25] This time, however, the escalatory cycle accelerated rapidly and threatened to get out of control. On February 15, the US national security adviser called his Indian counterpart and then publicly announced US support for "India's right to self-defense."[26]

On February 26, India launched airstrikes against what it claimed was a JeM camp in Balakot, Pakistan. Although the bombs reportedly missed their intended target, the operation was significant for taking place deep inside mainland Pakistani territory, not along the border or in contested parts of Pakistan-administered Kashmir. India had also reportedly mobilized naval assets, including a nuclear submarine, to counter any moves at sea; several days after the crisis de-escalated, Pakistan's navy claimed to have detected and thwarted an attempt by an Indian submarine to enter its territorial waters.[27] Pakistan announced it would convene a meeting of its nuclear National Command Authority the following day.[28]

On February 27, Pakistan responded with airstrikes near an Indian Army brigade headquarters in Indian-administered Kashmir, which senior Indian Army generals had just departed.[29] The Indian Air Force attempted to intercept Pakistan's fighters; and during an ensuing dogfight, Pakistan downed an Indian MiG-21 and captured its pilot. India claimed to have shot down a Pakistani F-16 fighter, despite substantial evidence to the contrary.[30] During the skirmish, an Indian air defense unit also errantly shot down an Indian Mi-17 helicopter in its own airspace, killing all six military personnel on board.[31]

The evening after the air battle, India and Pakistan reportedly exchanged threats of missile strikes; more than a month afterward, during a campaign rally leading up to India's 2019 parliamentary elections, Prime Minister Modi boasted of having conveyed threats of a *qatal ki raat* (night of bloodshed).[32] Subsequent accounts suggest the Indian military had raised its alert status and Indian leadership was prepared to escalate if the pilot were not quickly released.

Following the missile threat exchanges, US senior officials along with other foreign diplomats reportedly engaged in vigorous diplomacy to defuse the crisis by brokering the return of the Indian pilot. Western accounts suggest China did not help de-escalate the crisis. On February 28, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced that Pakistan would release the captured pilot. The following day, he was handed over to Indian authorities at the Wagah border.

This crisis showed important shifts in long-standing positions and a new willingness to accept risk. It thus marked a new chapter in the long history of Indo-Pakistani hostilities in the following ways:

- India signaled that it was prepared to attack Pakistani territory in response to terrorism, even attacks attributed to local Kashmiri militants, raising questions about how far India might go in future crises.

- Although the United States attempted to play its usual behind-the-scenes role urging de-escalation with both India and Pakistan, it initially provided very public, senior-level support to India's right to self-defense.

- China's public statements did not place significant pressure on Pakistan to address Indian concerns about terrorism, and the timing of its message urging restraint on both sides effectively backed its de facto ally Pakistan.

People protest India's decision to revoke the special status of Jammu and Kashmir in Peshawar, Pakistan, on August 15, 2019. (Photo by Fayaz Aziz/Reuters)

- Last, and most alarming, the off-ramp from the crisis was the direct result of a chance event—a surviving pilot who could be returned—that allowed the tit-for-tat cycle to be broken.

LESSONS LEARNED

This episode suggests that it will be increasingly difficult to de-escalate and contain conflicts between Pakistan and India for many reasons.

First, hostility between India and Pakistan remains undiminished. As noted above, diplomacy between the two countries is frozen, with virtually no serious discussion between the capitals. India's 2019 change to Indian-administered Kashmir's constitutional status has not resolved the matter; to the contrary, Pakistan continues to regard the territory as disputed. Worse, India's repression of Kashmiri political opposition to the move could prompt more violence by Pakistani-backed terrorist groups and indigenous Kashmiri militants in the future. Moreover, Pakistan perceives Prime Minister Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government as more violently anti-Muslim than its predecessors. For its part, although Pakistan has enacted a limited crackdown on terrorist

groups (especially anti-Pakistan groups)—in part under pressure from its continued gray-listing by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)—Islamabad is unlikely to fully dismantle these groups, which enjoy a degree of public support and—as India clearly fears—could start to enjoy greater operating space in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan as they did in the 1980s and 1990s.

Second, the Pulwama-Balakot crisis demonstrated that both India and Pakistan perceive a variety of domestic political as well as strategic advantages to not backing down publicly. By claiming to hit a terror camp deep inside Pakistani territory, the BJP reinforced a message to Indian voters that it would punish Pakistan more forcefully than previous governments had done. At the same time, India's airstrikes coupled with the mobilization of naval and missile forces were intended to signal to Pakistan the costly consequences of terrorism in India. For its part, Islamabad attempted to signal resolve to its own domestic audiences, both public and within the military, and to signal to New Delhi its will and capacity to match or outdo each of India's military moves. Although neither side appears to have sought a war, the pace and scope of military reprisals increased, creating new risks of accidental escalation. Moreover, because both India and Pakistan emerged from the crisis relatively unscathed and convinced that their strategy "worked," neither is likely to adopt a more conciliatory or restrained approach to the next conflict. In fact, each will face similar incentives to match or outdo their earlier actions.

Third, China's increasingly close partnership with Pakistan strengthens its pro-Islamabad stance. As Pakistan's principal supplier of arms, diplomatic backer at the UN Security Council, and economic benefactor, Beijing could play a vital role in convincing Pakistan to end support to anti-Indian terrorist groups and could, as it has before, work tacitly with Washington to de-escalate India-Pakistan crises.[33] However, in 2019 Beijing framed the conflict as equally the responsibility of New Delhi and Islamabad, called for restraint by both sides, and in effect dodged the question of what had started the crisis. Washington, whether rightly or wrongly, perceived India as the aggrieved victim of Pakistan-based terrorist groups. US-China diplomatic coordination was hindered by their fundamental difference of perspective, and the two lack any formal dialogue on strategic stability in Southern Asia.

Since that time, China has adopted an even more hostile posture toward India. Moreover, China perceives the Indian government's constitutional changes in Ladakh (another part of the former princely state of Kashmir, which India now administers as a Union Territory) as directly affecting its positions on the disputed territories of Aksai Chin and Ladakh.[34] China has, so far, supported the consensus position in FATF urging Pakistan to dismantle terrorist networks and acceded to UN sanctions on JeM founder Masood Azhar, but its support has not translated into an active role in crisis management.

Finally, the influence of the United States in India-Pakistan crisis management could be waning. China and Pakistan widely perceive the United States to be a declining power. Even if the diminishment of US power is exaggerated or relative, Washington's ability to convene global efforts at crisis mitigation is likely reduced compared to the past. Moreover, as Washington emphasizes its strategic partnership with New Delhi as a key component of its Indo-Pacific strategy, and as its overall relationship with Islamabad deteriorates, US influence and access in Islamabad's power circles could also ebb. That could make it more difficult to encourage de-escalation in future crises. Yet Washington's strategic

MAP 2.

China-India-Pakistan Border Areas

Map adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski. The boundaries shown on this map are approximate and do not imply official endorsement or acceptance on the part of the study group or the United States Institute of Peace.

partnership with New Delhi has not necessarily translated into significantly greater ability to restrain Indian actions that risk conflict escalation. On the contrary, New Delhi could perceive its closer ties to Washington as license to take more aggressive action, confident that the United States will support India's position, perhaps believing that the United States can still play its historic role in preventing hostilities from spiraling out of control despite having less leverage on the Pakistani side.

Case 2: India-China at Galwan

Newly independent India in 1947 and the People's Republic of China in 1949 inherited ambiguous and ill-defined common frontiers. In the decades that followed, these boundaries were never clearly defined or demarcated to mutual satisfaction.[35] The simmering territorial dispute has led the two sides to confrontations, clashes, and, in 1962, a border war. In the decades that followed, however, Beijing and New Delhi were remarkably successful in limiting horizontal and vertical escalation, even if they failed to resolve the boundary disputes. Border clashes were localized and contained, and both sides observed a ban on the use of firearms by frontier troops.[36] From 1993 to 2013, a series of agreements established principles for managing the border region and mechanisms for meetings and communications.[37] Even as confrontations and skirmishes became more frequent after 2013, casualties remained limited.

In June 2020, a brutal melee broke out between hundreds of Chinese and Indian border troops along the Line of Actual Control in the Galwan Valley area of Ladakh (see map on page 23), resulting in the first conflict fatalities in 45 years. Despite the absence of gunfire, intense hand-to-hand combat ensued as military personnel used wooden clubs and metal bars to bludgeon each other, resulting in at least two dozen deaths.[38] Although Chinese and Indian forces broke contact, in subsequent months they also moved additional military forces to the frontier region, at one point bringing Indian and Chinese tanks to within mere yards of each other. Although the United States was not directly involved in the conflict, it did provide a measure of assistance to India in the form of intelligence, cold weather gear, and the expedited delivery of two leased unarmed MQ-9B surveillance drones. To date, numerous rounds of India-China military talks have de-escalated the worst points of tension. Underlying territorial disputes remain unresolved, however. If anything, both sides have hardened their positions, not just at the Line of Actual Control but at many other points along their full 3,488-kilometer (2,167-mile) disputed border as well.[39]

LESSONS LEARNED

The prospect of a full-blown war between China and India remains low, but the threat of unintended escalation from a small skirmish to larger conventional battle or wider war is growing. Mutual mistrust and suspicion over an expanding set of contentious issues, coupled with significant enhancements of Chinese and Indian conventional and nuclear military capabilities, also mean that though the use of nuclear weapons in the context of a rapidly escalating China-India military conflict is extremely unlikely, it cannot be ruled out.

China, particularly since Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012, has become more active in asserting its territorial claims, both continental and maritime. Along its contested border with India, China has not attempted large overt seizures of territories achieved in major military operations. Instead, Beijing has incrementally absorbed and fortified ("nibbled") bits of disputed territory, such as by constructing new roads and outposts and then occupying them. From India's perspective, these small-scale efforts are aimed at deliberately consolidating China's hold at multiple locations along the disputed border.

The prospect of a full-blown war between China and India remains low, but the threat of unintended escalation from a small skirmish to larger conventional battle or wider war is growing.

From China's perspective, however, it is India that has asserted its control over disputed territory by its construction of bunkers and other structures as well as New Delhi's August 2019 unilateral change to the autonomous constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir. Both steps are perceived in China as part of an overall change in India's behavior, manifested through greater ambitions, growing hard power, claims to major power status, a rhetorical shift toward bellicosity, and a forceful defense of its borders.

On balance, both sides have engaged in an "infrastructure arms race" along their contested border, gradually altering the status quo without ever aiming to spark a major confrontation or conflict.[40] Nevertheless, they contribute to a gradual escalation of tensions in which each side perceives the other to be at fault.

Many experts in Beijing and New Delhi tend to consider their contentious relationship to be manageable and dismiss the prospects of a conventional shooting war, in part because they have managed to avoid most violence and prevent escalation for so long already. They consider a nuclear war all but unthinkable. Yet new developments in the region offer at least five broad reasons to reconsider the assumptions and logic behind such sanguine conclusions.

First, both militaries have invested in border infrastructure and greatly improved their capacity to project significant military power to remote locations, making it easier for small skirmishes to escalate quickly. Second, each side could underestimate the challenge of managing rapid conventional escalation in the context of large numbers of increasingly accurate conventional missiles as well as missile defenses. Third, both China and India continue to expand and upgrade their nuclear arsenals, and, although their no-first-use doctrines provide some reassurance, statements from Indian and Chinese government officials have recently raised new questions about those commitments.[41] Fourth, recent patterns of China-India crisis communication and crisis management mechanisms at the strategic level suggest some potentially worrisome gaps, including at the leader-to-leader level. The China-India land-border dispute is but one of a number of areas of increasingly heated bilateral friction that could, in combination, make crisis management considerably more complicated.[42] Fifth, because both Modi and Xi have adopted increasingly nationalistic stances at the core of their political platforms, they could be less willing to make concessions or back away from conflict.

These factors combine to produce a mix of uncertainty and volatility that could threaten strategic stability in Southern Asia. The United States has multiple aims in the region that are difficult to juggle. On the one hand, it seeks restraint, crisis prevention and mitigation, and avoidance of war (especially nuclear). On the other, the United States seeks ways to demonstrate to India its reliability as a strategic partner and is increasingly committed to deterring Chinese aggression whether in the Himalayas, the South China Sea, or elsewhere. The more Washington takes steps to address this latter aim, the more it risks a new point of friction with Beijing.

Persistent Terrorist Threats to Strategic Stability in Southern Asia

Nuclear security and stability in Southern Asia continues to face a threat from terrorist and militant groups seeking to acquire chemical, radiological, biological, and nuclear (CRBN) capabilities. These groups include Islamic State-Khorasan Province, al-Qaeda and its South Asian affiliate (al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent), and the anti-Pakistan Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. However, intent alone is not enough. Terrorists would need to overcome major technical barriers, political challenges, and continued counterterrorism pressure to gain CRBN capabilities.

Terrorists could threaten nuclear security and stability in four ways. First, they could build a device using the black market of CRBN materials. In the late 1990s, al-Qaeda sought enriched uranium in the nuclear black market.[a] The US government's recent reporting and the International Atomic Energy Agency's system on incidents of illicit trafficking indicate that similar efforts persist.[b] The Taliban's return to power creates new space for terrorist groups to operate and adds to the risk of trafficking. Left unaddressed, regional black markets with CRBN materials are likely to grow.

Second, the Taliban could pursue CRBN capabilities of its own. In the late 1990s, it permitted CRBN activities, including a low-tech chemical weapons facility that al-Qaeda had established.[c] Although a new head of atomic energy has been named, the regime faces severe resource and capability constraints, and nothing suggests a revival of pre-9/11 CRBN activities.[d]

Third, regional terrorists could attempt to recruit sympathetic personnel within Pakistan's military and nuclear establishment. Although Pakistan's military places a high priority on its nuclear security regime, concerns persist about personnel reliability and insider threats.[e] In addition, India's nuclear program has proven vulnerable to cyber threats; and key global nuclear security assessments such as the Nuclear Threat Initiative have raised questions about the control and accounting measures of nuclear and radioactive materials.[f]

Finally, anti-Pakistan terrorist groups could mount a more serious threat if they were to gain strength and confidence from the Taliban victory in Afghanistan. One potential vulnerability could arise during a major India-Pakistan military standoff, when the altered command-and-control and deployment patterns of Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons would make them less secure.[g]

Notes

a. See partially declassified US archives, "Terrorism: Usama bin Ladin's Attempts to Acquire Uranium," C0537664, March 1997; and "Terrorism: Usama Bin Ladin Trying to Develop WMD Capability?," C0537665, January 6, 1997.

b. US Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2020," July 2021.

c. Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, "Al Qaeda Weapons of Mass Destruction Threat: Hype or Reality?," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, January 2010.

d. Tom O'Connor, "With Naming of New Atomic Chief, Is a Nuclear Taliban Possible?," *Newsweek*, September 29, 2021.

e. See NTI Nuclear Security Index, "The NTI Index for Pakistan."

f. Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited, press release, October 30, 2019. See also NTI Nuclear Security Index, "The NTI Index for India."

g. Shashank Joshi, "Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Nightmare: Déjà Vu?," *Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 166; and Rose Gottemoeller, "Reviewing the Administration's Nuclear Agenda," US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, March 16, 2016, 16–17.

Other Escalatory Scenarios

A major terrorist attack on Indian security forces or civilians traced to Pakistan or a bilateral border clash between India and Pakistan or China remain the most likely sparks of another regional crisis. Other scenarios, however, could also threaten dangerous escalation in Southern Asia, such as maritime clashes, loss of control or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons, two-front wars along India's borders, or clashes in or involving third countries such as Afghanistan.

At sea, India has long enjoyed naval superiority over Pakistan and would likely seek to interdict access to the port of Karachi in the event of a major war, as it did in 1971. However, the maritime story is increasingly complicated by new Indian and Pakistani (and possibly in the near future Chinese) capabilities. The introduction of India's nuclear submarines brought new risk factors that could be compounded as Pakistan develops its own anti-access/area denial capabilities and, in time, nuclear-armed submarines. A variety of scenarios in the Arabian Sea, including inadvertent accidents and loss of communications, as well as missile strikes and port blockades, could independently provoke nuclear escalation or compound ongoing crises on land. Here, too, the possible introduction of Chinese forces or capabilities operated by Pakistan could create new complications for crisis management.

Considering its past wars, India has long worried about a two-front conflict with China and Pakistan. As China-Pakistan ties deepen, this concern has grown from a worry about opportunism by one of their neighbors to include apprehension about active collaboration between the two countries. The Galwan crisis did not spark a move by Pakistan, however, and was actually followed in February 2021 with a revival of the India-Pakistan ceasefire along the Line of Control in Kashmir. Some in Pakistan claimed it had exercised restraint in not taking advantage of India's distraction, which both helped set the tone for the ceasefire and confirmed that Pakistan sees potential in a two-front opportunity.[43] Yet such restraint is not guaranteed in the future, especially if India-Pakistan hostilities happen to mount at the same time that China and India spar over their disputed border. Moreover, because India views the loss of territory to China or Pakistan as unacceptable and members of the Modi government have even expressed ambitions to integrate Pakistan-held territories, Indian political leaders could resort to nuclear threats to deter simultaneous or coordinated attacks by China and Pakistan.[44]

Challenges Across Scenarios

The next crisis in Southern Asia could unfold along the lines of Pulwama-Balakot or Galwan, in one of the more unexpected ways discussed, or in a simultaneous outbreak of multiple, overlapping hostilities that overwhelm regional decision-makers. The challenge of maintaining strategic stability in this theater is difficult.

Fortunately, several factors could encourage restraint by China, India, and Pakistan. All three countries share an assumption that nuclear weapons and claims of survivable second-strike capabilities contribute to strategic stability. The high stakes of war in Southern Asia could indeed encourage more responsible and restrained policies. Leaders in Beijing, Islamabad, and New Delhi each face the threat of violence on their own borders, not in distant proxy conflicts. Also, to the extent that the

The dominant regional trends . . . are likely to make these crises more difficult to manage than in the past; and inadequate attention has been devoted to improving strategic stability and reducing the prospects for nuclear escalation.

region has avoided major wars, the general appreciation of these stakes is at least a partial cause.

However, history suggests that nuclear weapons and the pure logic of deterrence do not guarantee strategic stability. A closer review of Cold War nuclear dynamics shows that engagement and dialogue between Washington and Moscow were required to achieve risk reduction.[45] There is little reason to anticipate that strategic stability in Southern Asia would require anything less.

The leaders of China, India, and Pakistan are engaged in "risk manipulation" as a way to secure strategic as well as domestic political ends. The costs of backing away from conflict are keenly felt in strategic terms by leaders worried about establishing the credibility of their deterrent capabilities and avoiding any appearance of weakness. In addition, highly polarized traditional and social media tend to intensify appeals to nationalism and may compel leaders to take more escalatory steps or to miss opportunities for de-escalation. Although all three states have invested to different degrees in capabilities for media management, censorship, and propaganda, popular outrage can be more difficult to placate than to provoke. Particularly in the context of India's frequent and fraught state and national elections, domestic politics can feed dangerous wag-the-dog incentives for political leaders that cannot always be put off until after a crisis has passed.

The clashes and flash points in the region to date have also been rapid, dynamic conflicts rife with uncertainty about facts on the ground. China's infrastructure upgrades—including high-speed rail and the permanent stationing of ground, air, and missile forces near its border with India—enable far more rapid escalation than in previous decades. Pakistan's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons and a doctrine that does not forswear first use is a significant and still relatively new accelerant to crises. The development and deployment of other dual-capable systems on land and sea will exacerbate these challenges.

In sum, Southern Asia is primed for future crises. The dominant regional trends—military, political, and technological—are likely to make these crises more difficult to manage than in the past; and inadequate attention has been devoted to improving strategic stability and reducing the prospects for nuclear escalation.

Policy Tools and Options

Reducing tensions and improving strategic stability in Southern Asia are vital but also exceedingly difficult aims. US influence over nuclear-armed China, India, and Pakistan is limited. Washington is not the main cause of regional hostilities and will not be able to resolve them on its own. Indeed, they may not be resolvable. Furthermore, although US geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian interests in the region are considerable, they often pale in comparison with the strategic, even existential, concerns of China, India, or Pakistan.

That said, US diplomatic, economic, and military tools offer Washington a degree of influence in preventing regional crises and arms races. US influence has the potential to be more or less stabilizing. In the heat of Southern Asia's previous crises and hostilities, US policymakers have often played an important role, and (for better or worse) regional actors have grown to expect US involvement. The region's dynamism, as discussed earlier in this report, suggests the need for regular, systematic reviews of US policy options for reducing the region's overall propensity for nuclear use and preparing to avert nuclear escalation in specific scenarios. Washington's intensified geopolitical competition with China and its strategic partnership with India could also make it more difficult for US policymakers to consider, much less to prioritize, issues of strategic stability in the region. At the very least, the United States should avoid policies that needlessly contribute to regional instability or encourage greater risk-taking by the Southern Asian nations.

US policy options can thus be grouped into three interrelated categories. First are policies intended to resolve, mitigate, or better manage the geopolitical and other regional disputes that could plausibly lead to war. Second are those aimed at preventing regional conflicts from escalating to nuclear war through deterrence, reassurance, and other diplomatic or technical methods related

From the White House, President Joe Biden meets virtually with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on April 11, 2022. In the room with the US president are India's defense minister, Rajnath Singh (center), and minister of external affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (right). (Photo by Carolyn Kaster/AP)

to the development, deployment, and potential use of nuclear weapons. Third are those meant to improve crisis response, reducing the likelihood that any specific conflict escalates past the nuclear threshold. All told, a comprehensive package of US policies would aim to address the motives, ways, and processes that currently expose Southern Asia to a significant risk of nuclear war.

Not all policy options discussed below were endorsed by the study group, so care has been taken to introduce them as possible steps Washington could take and to consider their merits as well as their deficits. The goal of this discussion is to begin a systematic process of policy review and to support future debates. The region's dynamic geopolitics, capabilities, and doctrines all provide good reasons to consider such options, even if their costs and risks currently outweigh their benefits, and to reconsider them in the future. After considering these policy options, the study group identified a subset of policies the United States should prioritize. These are enumerated in the "Priority Recommendations" section of this report.

Resolving or Mitigating Regional Conflict

As described earlier, the interstate dispute between India and Pakistan poses the greatest threat of nuclear escalation in Southern Asia. China-India clashes are worrisome because of their escalation in recent years and because they bring Asia's most populous states into violent confrontation. A third set of threats with possible nuclear implications is raised by the region's numerous terrorist and militant groups, primarily based in Afghanistan and Pakistan. That all of these challenges have persisted for decades is an indicator of their intractability; US policymakers should be circumspect about their ability to resolve or even mitigate regional conflict in the near term. Even so, the United States has diplomatic and economic policy options worth exploring and reconsidering given the region's troubled and fast-changing realities.

DIPLOMATIC OPTIONS

On the diplomatic track, generations of US policymakers have struggled to play an effective role in improving relations between India and Pakistan. Pakistan has repeatedly sought greater US diplomatic involvement, whereas India has rebuffed such overtures, preferring to manage its relations with Pakistan without third-party interference. The combination of US interest in cultivating a closer strategic partnership with India (mainly in the context of geopolitical competition with China) and US frustration with Pakistan (mainly related to its support of terrorists and militant groups operating against the United States and its partners) has led most US policymakers and analysts to accept the practicality of a hands-off approach to the underlying India-Pakistan dispute.

Yet the United States could choose to reconsider its current strategy for two reasons. First, in 2019 the Modi government changed its policies on Indian-administered Kashmir, a core area of disagreement with Pakistan (and to a lesser extent with China as well). By altering Kashmir's constitutional status, restricting access and activities within the region, and introducing a heavier security presence, New Delhi shifted the terms of its territorial disputes and created new facts on the ground in Kashmir itself. At the same time, new Indian concerns about recent regional developments—especially in Afghanistan, where Pakistan holds considerable influence and where anti-India terrorist groups are likely to expand their operations—could create greater urgency and different bargaining terms for talks between Islamabad and New Delhi.

Second, the fact that the United States and India now enjoy warmer relations than at any point in history could change New Delhi's calculations about the merits of more energetic US diplomacy in Southern Asia. India's leaders could, far more than in the past, perceive US initiatives as friendly and constructively aligned with New Delhi's own priorities.

However, no evidence currently indicates such Indian receptivity. To the contrary, US diplomats have good reasons to fear that attempts to facilitate India-Pakistan dialogue would be rebuffed and would come at some cost to US-India relations. In addition, India-Pakistan differences do not appear ripe for resolution of any sort, and the United States does not have any obvious point of leverage that could be exploited to convince or coerce Islamabad and New Delhi to engage in sustained and constructive dialogue. The combination of India's policies in Kashmir, Pakistan's activities in Afghanistan, and the mutual distrust exacerbated by geopolitical competition between Washington and Beijing raises serious doubts about the viability of any significant India-Pakistan dispute resolution initiatives in the near term.

In the face of limited prospects for peace, US diplomats could still try to find slivers of common ground between India and Pakistan, if primarily as a tactic to manage tensions and create space for more substantive talks in the future. In the process, US officials would be better situated to pursue and encourage opportunities for creative diplomacy whenever they happen to arise, such as tentative Indian proposals to demilitarize the Siachen Glacier.[46] In addition, the United States could continue to support a range of track 1.5 and track 2 dialogues to generate new ideas, such as possibilities for cross-border water management challenges, and to share lessons from the past with current and future policymakers. All such initiatives would need to be weighed against likely costs and risks, including opportunity costs for busy US policymakers, as well as the potential for irritating Indian counterparts and raising unrealistic expectations in Pakistan.

US diplomatic options are even more constrained in the India-China dispute, for which direct US involvement has no recent precedent.[47] Here too, however, the violence along the China-India border and the broader deterioration in China-India relations raise new questions about whether the United States could play a role in facilitating constructive China-India dialogue through bilateral initiatives, small multilateral forums, or international organizations, including the United Nations. Russia used several venues to encourage restraint between China and India during the summer and fall of 2020. That said, whereas Russia enjoys close relations with both countries, the United States already has a strained relationship and lengthy list of disputes with China. In addition, Moscow's diplomatic ambitions did not appear to stray beyond crisis management into conflict resolution.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan left tremendous uncertainties about how best to address regional terrorist threats. Yet the United States is not without leverage. Washington could, for instance, use ongoing negotiations with the Taliban-led regime to pursue a more expansive agenda for countering regional as well as global terrorist threats and limiting the likelihood that Afghanistan will once again become a host to anti-Indian terrorist groups. At issue is the priority the United States should place on different aims in Afghanistan. Over the past two decades, US officials found Pakistani officials and the Taliban far more likely to cooperate against global terrorists (Islamic State-Khorasan Province and even al-Qaeda) than against anti-Indian groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed or Lashkar-e-Taiba. US demands for targeting the former could jeopardize cooperation against the latter. Then again, the new Taliban regime may not see its interests as entirely aligned with Pakistan's and could prefer to run fewer risks in its dealings with global and anti-Indian terrorists than it did before 9/11.

ECONOMIC OPTIONS

In addition to diplomatic instruments, the United States has a range of economic and military tools that could be directed toward helping resolve regional disputes. However, decades of assistance to Pakistan, including military assistance, billions of dollars in aid, and at least $6 billion for support of US military operations, have demonstrated the difficulties associated with harnessing aid to specific political or strategic aims. Reason to expect that US material incentives would induce China, India, or Pakistan to resolve their differences or encourage strategic restraint is scant at best. Nevertheless, the United States could provide political, technical, and financial support to long-term regional economic integration projects, particularly involving Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan, as a way of building grassroots political and economic incentives for the peaceful resolution of national

disputes and confidence-building measures. Although some past US regional economic integration initiatives (such as the Obama administration's New Silk Road for Afghanistan) saw little success, future US efforts could adopt longer timelines, run through multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, and be less freighted with the pressing expectations of a US military intervention. Even economic development projects within India, such as along its northeast border with China, could indirectly foster greater security and stability over the long run.

The United States, whether acting alone or through multilateral institutions, could make greater use of punitive financial instruments, including sanctions, to prevent or deter cross-border terrorism, a core threat to peace between India and Pakistan. The gray-listing of Pakistan by the Financial Action Task Force demonstrates the utility (and limits) of such criteria-based tools. Although Pakistan has taken steps to comply with FATF standards and may have been restrained or deterred by the threat of blacklisting, it is clear that financial sanctions are not enough to force a broader strategic shift by Islamabad on terrorism and support to militant proxy groups.

Similarly, the United States could seek ways to coordinate with Australia and Japan (its partners, with India, in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and others to deter China from cross-border aggression against India by threatening targeted financial sanctions, critical supply cutoffs, curtailed market access, or boycotts. The success of these collective deterrence ventures would require the United States and India and their partners to develop a shared understanding of what constitutes Chinese aggression and what would represent a proportionate, suitably threatening collective response that would likely be supported by widespread participation by other like-minded states.

Just as financial sanctions have shown their limits with Pakistan, similar threats against China should not be considered a panacea. They may prove insufficient in deterring military action and could invite in-kind retaliation. The overuse of financial sanctions risks accelerating the construction of alternatives to US-dominated banking systems and dollar-denominated commerce. Relying too heavily on coercive threats also undercuts prospects for cooperation or trust building, which would undermine US efforts at crisis management.

Preventing Nuclear Escalation

Second-best to resolving Southern Asia's regional conflicts would be preventing them from escalating to nuclear war. To this end, the United States could pursue two main lines of effort, intended on the one hand to introduce greater restraint and reassurance, and on the other to enhance the credibility and stability of nuclear deterrence. These lines are, at best, uncomfortably interrelated, especially in a region of several nuclear-armed adversaries.

RESTRAINT AND REASSURANCE

India and Pakistan have a long history of negotiating nuclear risk reduction measures intended to encourage restraint in nuclear deployments, prevent miscalculations and accidents, and offer greater transparency to avoid nuclear escalation. The resulting formal and informal agreements include some noteworthy successes, such as the 1988 Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack

Against Nuclear Installations and Facilities, as well as widely recognized gaps, such as the exclusion of cruise missiles from the 2005 missile test prenotification agreement and the lack of a regional agreement on managing incidents at sea.[48] No analogous nuclear agreements are in place between India and China, not even a nuclear dialogue, although the two have negotiated confidence-building measures (CBMs) and extensive mechanisms for communication related to management of their land-border dispute.

The United States could encourage India-Pakistan and India-China talks on improving existing risk reduction measures and devising new ones. A top priority in this area could be addressing the lack of dedicated, secure, and redundant 24/7 communications links (hotlines) between the national command authorities of the region.[49] Alternatively, Washington could encourage and offer technical support for establishing regional nuclear risk reduction centers similar to those used by the United States and Russia to facilitate communication and information sharing about missile tests and military exercises.

The United States could also encourage India and Pakistan to undertake restraint measures unilaterally and to negotiate bilateral agreements or bans, such as on nuclear depth charges or torpedoes. At present, however, Washington would likely confront significant CBM fatigue and deep skepticism regarding nearly any arms control proposals.[50] Moreover, some of the thorniest challenges in Southern Asia, such as the discrimination problem posed by the increasing (and intentional) use of dual-capable missile systems and platforms, are not unique to the region. If the United States were to propose a new set of voluntary declaratory policies and information sharing to make nuclear, conventional, and dual-use systems more easily recognizable, and thus less likely to be targeted inadvertently or otherwise confused, the initiative would likely find greater traction in a multilateral setting.[51]

Indeed, none of Southern Asia's nuclear powers sees its programs in a vacuum. As noted earlier, the nuclear-armed states of Southern Asia perceive their strategic imperatives as linked to the nuclear programs of other powers, especially the United States and Russia. This problem has been described as a cascading security dilemma of nuclear states. It indirectly links the United States and its allies France and the United Kingdom with China, India, Pakistan, and Russia. Thus, questions of strategic stability would not be discussed in a purely regional context, such as in a trilateral of China, India, and Pakistan. Instead, the cascade provides a logical rationale for a more inclusive multilateral forum, such as an "N-7," in which the seven nuclear-armed nations (not including outliers Israel and North Korea) could discuss CBMs and nuclear norms outside generally stalemated mechanisms such as the UN Conference on Disarmament.[52]

Washington could make itself a champion of an N-7, but the political, logistical, and other barriers to establishing that forum would be considerable, certainly in the near term. In particular, China and the other permanent UN Security Council members (P-5) would need to perceive advantages to a new forum that includes India and Pakistan, both of whom are currently excluded from the UN's P-5 structure, are perceived by Beijing as lesser regional powers, and are unrecognized nuclear weapon states under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Beijing would likely perceive India's inclusion as an unwelcome stepping-stone for New Delhi's aspirations to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group and secure a permanent seat on the Security Council.

Overcoming Chinese reservations to an N-7 could be slow and challenging and would need to be managed within the context of Washington's efforts to start a bilateral strategic stability dialogue with Beijing.[53] That said, China would not wish to be excluded from any high-profile nuclear group and is also concerned about strategic stability between India and Pakistan. Washington could raise the N-7 concept in bilateral dialogues with Beijing, appealing to China's desire for enhanced major power status and stressing China's need to assume greater responsibility for global peace and stability.

China would not be the only nuclear-armed state with reservations about the N-7 concept. India, Pakistan, and Russia would all need to be convinced that their interests would be better served through participation than by abstention. As a possible interim step, the United States could suggest that initial informal discussions between the seven states take place on the sidelines of a multilateral gathering.

If an N-7 were established, however, the United States could use it as a platform for facilitating bilateral talks, such as between India and China, as well as for discussion of concerns related to new developments in nuclear capabilities and doctrine and the impact of nonnuclear technologies, including cyber. The forum could be an ideal venue for the United States to discuss its own nuclear doctrine and to encourage greater doctrinal transparency among all participants.[54]

In the near term, the United States could explore and develop the N-7 concept through a series of track 1.5 and track 2 dialogues that could also include other activities, such as generic scenario-based threat assessment exercises, to build a shared base of understanding and improve communication across expert communities. In the longer term, were it to materialize, an N-7 could be a basis for negotiating new arms control agreements. It might also help breathe life into old ones, such as the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty or the proposed Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, sustaining dialogue on strategic stability and nuclear risk reduction and possibly providing a useful channel for crisis communication.

DETERRENCE

Simultaneously, the United States could also attempt to improve the credibility and stability of regional conventional and nuclear deterrence in Southern Asia and in doing so reduce the likelihood of nuclear war by offering various forms of bilateral assistance. For now, India would be the most likely beneficiary of any direct US assistance.

The United States is already assisting India with conventional arms sales, such as MQ-9B drones and other technologies intended to improve India's border intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities.[55] Over the past decade, a series of foundational US-India defense agreements have set the stage for greater US-India interoperability, training and advising, and information and real-time intelligence sharing in future crises. The United States could iteratively accelerate these efforts and expand into other related areas, such as it has done in cybersecurity, primarily to enhance India's confidence and the resilience of its C4ISR systems (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) in future regional crises and thereby reduce the likelihood of misperception, blinding, or other confusion that could prompt New Delhi into a rash escalation.

More ambitious but controversial possibilities for expanded US cooperation with India could include sharing highly sensitive technologies, such as stealth, counter-stealth, anti-submarine warfare, or nonnuclear submarine propulsion in response to rapidly evolving Chinese (and to a lesser extent Pakistani) military capabilities in similar areas. However, direct US support to any part of India's nuclear arsenal would be exceptionally difficult, owing to legal and political limits on US nuclear cooperation with a nonsignatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, India's close military-industrial ties to Russia, and deeply entrenched Indian sensitivities about cooperation on nuclear-related issues. US defense ties to India are already viewed with deep suspicion by both China and Pakistan, so extending cooperation into nuclear arms would be perceived as especially provocative and could drive Beijing and Islamabad to take similarly provocative countermeasures beyond their planned investments in new nuclear capabilities.

Instead, the United States could take indirect steps to enable India's steady but not accelerated acquisition of nuclear capabilities through domestic development and procurement of related nonnuclear capabilities or enablers from other suppliers. Washington could, for instance, provide New Delhi a comprehensive waiver to the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) to remove the prospect of punitive US sanctions for India's acquisition of Russian-made nuclear submarines and S-400 air defense systems, among other capabilities. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine spurred new multilateral sanctions and sharpened US-Russia tensions, and Washington's frustration with India grew as New Delhi abstained from resolutions condemning Moscow. A blanket carve-out from CAATSA is even more unlikely now. Even a one-time waiver is far from assured.

Other Indian defense suppliers, such as France and Israel, are less encumbered than Russia by such constraints. Washington could actively encourage them to fill some of India's military supply gaps left by Moscow's global isolation. Realistically, India would not find quick or complete alternatives to major weapon systems developed by or with the Russian defense industry but could still find these partners helpful in the context of an accelerated indigenization campaign. US officials could attempt to use the trust built by not opposing Indian arms deals with these suppliers to start more sensitive bilateral conversations about how India could field its new capabilities in less destabilizing ways.[56]

The United States has in the past assisted Pakistan's military with arms sales and transfers (including F-16 fighter aircraft), financial support, training, and education. The United States has quietly funded programs to improve the safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear enterprise.[57] US officials have in the past argued that bilateral defense ties (including military assistance, arms sales, military education, and joint training) offered greater access to and at least marginally greater influence with Pakistan's top army officers, typically the state's most powerful decision-makers in times of crisis with India. The US partnership may have helped with Pakistan's nuclear security, but US critics note that Pakistani national security policies of concern to Washington have never been swayed by US largesse.

At present, Washington's patience with Pakistan and its willingness to offer military assistance is vanishingly thin. Meanwhile, US sensitivity to Indian concerns has grown. Simultaneously, Islamabad's distrust of US intentions and increasingly tight strategic alignment with Beijing pose additional barriers to cooperating with Washington. Only a dramatic and unlikely turnaround in US-Pakistan relations would reopen the door to significant new flows of US military assistance.

However, even in a strained bilateral relationship, US diplomats could seek to maintain a regular strategic stability dialogue with their Pakistani counterparts to discuss nuclear doctrine and the safety, security, and trajectory of Pakistan's nuclear program. A successful dialogue would provide a channel for US officials and their Pakistani counterparts to share analytical perspectives and concerns, raise questions, and compare ideas about the risks associated with accidental or unauthorized use, the dynamics of the nuclear arms race in Southern Asia, and potential triggers for nuclear war. In addition, the United States could conduct a systematic internal review of its prior efforts to improve the safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear assets, both to inform future priorities with Pakistan and to consider whether lessons from those initiatives would be relevant elsewhere, including India.

Improved Crisis Response

To prepare to respond to future crises and violent conflicts in Southern Asia, the United States could develop new plans and capabilities for unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral initiatives intended to prevent escalation, particularly to the point of nuclear use. Overall, prospects for US cooperative ventures in the region will reflect geopolitical realities: Washington is likely to find it increasingly difficult to work cooperatively on crisis response with Beijing and Islamabad if relations remain tense, though certain types of cooperation with New Delhi are likely to be eased.

Unilateral policy options for the United States could include new investments in interagency gaming, training, and analysis of crisis scenarios in Southern Asia, with the aim of developing and updating a comprehensive playbook or checklist of actions—diplomatic, economic, and military—that would be a timely resource for senior US policymakers and staff. As in other high-pressure situations, such checklists never capture every nuance but can lead decision-makers to consider policy options that might otherwise be overlooked. US officials could schedule routine reviews of these checklists to prompt careful consideration of how the regional security environment and US policy tools have changed. Especially with New Delhi, now Washington's closest partner in the region, US policymakers could find it useful to discuss how best to strike a balance between signaling support for India's defense and urging restraint to avoid dangerous escalation. US officials could consider whether and how public messaging, including debunking disinformation propagated by regional actors or exposing potentially provocative military moves, could or should be used as a tool to prevent crises or avoid escalation. Washington's extensive efforts to debunk Moscow's claims in the lead-up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine could offer relevant lessons about the utility—and the limits—of such instruments.

In addition, the United States could review, and if necessary expand, its capital investments in regional intelligence collection capabilities to better assess regional militant and military actions in real time, especially along India's contested land borders with Pakistan and China but also in the Indian Ocean. A less costly alternative would entail two tactics. First, the US intelligence community could continue its practice of reprioritizing existing collection capabilities in times of crisis. Second, it could focus greater attention on improving its warning indicators for regional crises and its preparations for sharing information publicly and with regional actors, as that would better enable US policymakers to combat disinformation, encourage restraint, or reassure counterparts in the face of uncertainty.

Improved warning indicators could also give Washington additional time to shift military assets to the region, including those dedicated to preventing (possibly using cyber technologies), delaying (by jamming communications), or deterring China or Pakistan from escalating a conflict with India.

Washington could consider direct US military involvement in regional contingencies. Although such threats could encourage greater restraint and deter regional aggression, they would also come with considerable costs and risks. US forces would face hostile, complicated circumstances without the clear obligations and understandings associated with formal alliances. Even US threats of military action would risk raising India's expectations of US intervention in ways that could lead New Delhi to assume overconfident policies, especially with respect to Pakistan. They could convince India and Pakistan that US involvement would relieve them of their primary responsibility to de-escalate their crises. They could worsen already difficult US relations with China and Pakistan, who would perceive Washington as taking New Delhi's side. Unintentionally, the United States could inject additional confusion into already complex crises.

To better manage bilateral communications and information sharing in future crises, the United States could work to expand India's access to interoperable intelligence and warning data systems, for example, by transferring additional Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange System terminals to the Indian military at various echelons and departments and on deployed vessels and platforms. The United States could also assist India in its efforts to build more resilient C4ISR, space, and cyber systems by sharing existing relevant US technologies, advising and training, and pursuing joint research and development projects in these areas.

Washington could also work to establish multiple secure, reliable communications and information sharing protocols with Beijing and Islamabad to reduce the likelihood of miscommunication. India's increasing concerns about a two-front conflict could lead New Delhi to anticipate coordinated or opportunistic hostilities by both China and Pakistan. Thus, improving capacity for timely, secure communications and information sharing will be essential in encouraging restraint by all three nations and for credibly reassuring New Delhi if, as in the recent past, Washington sees no evidence of opportunistic collusion between China and Pakistan.

Aside from these bilateral communications and messages, the United States could work to improve communications and information sharing with other diplomatic partners. For instance, it could reach out to the United Arab Emirates (a recent host to India-Pakistan back-channel diplomacy efforts) to discuss prospects for its diplomats to play roles as trusted intermediaries and honest brokers in a future crisis. It could also coordinate in advance with allies, such as France or the United Kingdom, to prepare a range of diplomatic initiatives to deploy collectively and through multilateral forums like the UN Security Council, intended to create incentives for military restraint or to delay escalation by China, India, or Pakistan. Together, they could discuss considerations and tactics for raising national travel warnings, sending envoys, conducting investigations, and proposing nonmilitary approaches, such as economic sanctions, that India could use rather than resorting to violent retaliation. To avoid confusion associated with multiple voices and lines of communication, US diplomats could establish points of contact and protocols with each of these partners in advance.

Priority Recommendations

To help keep the peace in Southern Asia, the United States should undertake efforts in three domains: core regional disputes, strategic regional stability, and potential crises involving nuclear-armed actors in the region.

Core Disputes

Consistent with long-standing US policy, Washington should encourage diplomacy between the governments of India and Pakistan to resolve their bilateral disputes nonviolently. In addition, recognizing that regional circumstances have changed, especially in Afghanistan and Kashmir, and that the February 2021 ceasefire holds, if tenuously, the United States should also seek senior-level discussions with New Delhi to consider prospects for new India-Pakistan diplomatic initiatives. This would include encouraging even minor opportunities to reduce India-Pakistan tensions, and when possible supporting them with technical assistance or advice. Examples include demilitarizing the Siachen Glacier, reinforcing water-sharing agreements, and enhancing channels for communication between India and Pakistan, even if core bilateral disputes continue to prove intractable. Washington should also pursue bilateral consultations with New Delhi on India's border dispute with China to discuss strategies for returning to nonviolent management of differences without territorial concessions.

US diplomats should clarify to Beijing that the primary consequence of its provocative actions in disputed territories is stronger US-India strategic cooperation. In US negotiations with the Taliban-led regime in Afghanistan, Washington should explicitly name anti-Indian terrorist organizations among the groups of serious, if not topmost, concern to the United States. This would be a first step in gauging prospects for cooperation with the Taliban in limiting Afghanistan's role as a base for anti-Indian training and operations. Relatedly, as Washington attempts to build over-the-horizon counter-terror capabilities inside Afghanistan, it should consider anti-Indian terrorist organizations high priority

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue foreign ministers, from left, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Marise Payne, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, India's Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar, and Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs Hayashi Yoshimasa meet in Melbourne, Australia, on February 11, 2022. (Photo by Darrian Traynor/Pool via AP)

targets, just below terrorists with global or chemical, radiological, biological, and nuclear ambitions. (See page 26 for a discussion of persistent terrorist threats to strategic stability in the region.)

The United States should develop, in partnership with the widest possible coalition of allies and partners (starting with Quad members Australia, India, and Japan), new economic and financial tools intended to deter Chinese territorial aggression against India and elsewhere, along with coordinated implementation strategies. That coordinated effort should begin by identifying a range of economic and financial measures (including targeted market or supply cutoffs) and by anticipating likely Chinese policy responses to minimize the potential costs of retaliation.

The United States should also increase economic and financial costs to Pakistan for continuing or expanding support to anti-Indian and other terrorist organizations, including by working with allies and partners to maintain the conditions-based financial instrument of the Financial Action Task Force. Other policy tools merit serious consideration as well, such as closing market access or denying Pakistani officials visas to Europe and the United States.

Washington should support regional economic development projects through the World Bank and other partners specifically intended to improve interstate commerce, especially between India and Pakistan, and to build material incentives and more vocal constituencies favoring peace. Last, Washington should support creative track 1.5 and track 2 initiatives to promote interaction, new ideas, and dissemination of previous lessons among current and future policymakers in the United States and Southern Asia.

Strategic Stability

To enhance prospects for strategic stability in Southern Asia, Washington should devote renewed attention to nuclear risk reduction measures in the region. Specifically, it should offer US diplomatic, technical, and analytical support to improve the region's capacity for nuclear information sharing and communications in future crises. This would start with establishing a dedicated, secure, and redundant India-Pakistan nuclear hotline with supporting bilateral agreements and practices, followed by nuclear risk reduction centers that would facilitate information collection and sharing as they have in the US-Russia context.

The United States should also encourage India and Pakistan to consider unilateral or bilateral steps, such as renouncing specific technologies like nuclear depth charges and adding cruise missiles to the 2005 missile test prenotification agreement. Such moves would both help to reduce the use of especially destabilizing technologies and build confidence for more significant arms control discussions.

Washington should urge New Delhi to open a bilateral strategic stability dialogue with Beijing, backed by quiet US-India information sharing about Chinese nuclear developments to support Indian dialogue participants. Equally, US diplomats should urge China, perhaps in the context of proposed US-China strategic stability talks, both to be a voice for restraint in Pakistan and to pursue a bilateral strategic stability dialogue with India as a tangible demonstration of responsible leadership.

The United States should discuss with partners and allies the concept of a new transregional forum on regional and global strategic stability that would convene an N-7 group (China, France, India, Pakistan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) in discussions to increase mutual understanding, strengthen stabilizing nuclear norms (such as new declaratory policies and practices intended to distinguish nuclear from conventional weapons and thereby address the discrimination challenge), and over time encourage restraint.

Washington should raise the N-7 concept with Beijing in the context of bilateral dialogues, appealing to Beijing's desire to play a greater role in international leadership and citing the need for China to assume greater responsibility on issues of global peace and security. US policymakers should lay the groundwork for their official diplomatic initiatives by providing support to track 2 discussions in the N-7 to encourage participation by other member states, seek work-arounds to likely objections and obstacles, and identify topics and ideas that could eventually be fed into official channels.

To better manage crises between nuclear-armed regional states, the United States should take concrete steps to prepare its policymakers for complex nuclear crisis diplomacy in Southern Asia.

Relatedly, the United States should deepen defense cooperation with India in ways that contribute to India's capacity for territorial defense and a stabilizing conventional and nuclear deterrent. At the same time, Washington should be careful to avoid exacerbating the regional arms race or increasing the likelihood of nuclear crises. Accordingly, US efforts should prioritize defense cooperation and sales in areas that contribute to the resilience of India's civilian and military communications infrastructure in future crises, such as cyber-attacks, and otherwise enhance prospects for crisis stability.

When US-India defense cooperation and sales are not possible, and especially in areas that have been central to India-Russia defense cooperation, Washington should encourage New Delhi to consider purchases from US allies and partners, such as France and Israel, as smart and reliable alternatives. It should pair these defense initiatives with an enhanced strategic stability dialogue with New Delhi, specifically to discuss ways in which newly acquired systems could be deployed to enhance rather than diminish prospects for regional peace and security.

Last, the United States should restart a regular dialogue with Pakistan on strategic stability. Washington should also conduct a systematic review of lessons learned from past US initiatives to help Pakistan improve the security and safety of its nuclear assets, then should consider whether related lessons could be applied to future cooperative activities with India or Pakistan.

Crises Between Nuclear-Armed States

To better manage crises between nuclear-armed regional states, the United States should take concrete steps to prepare its policymakers for complex nuclear crisis diplomacy in Southern Asia. Preparations should include conducting gaming exercises within the intelligence community; developing a generalized policy playbook for India-China, India-Pakistan, and overlapping India-China-Pakistan crises; and routinely sharing insights from these planning documents with all incoming senior officials in relevant US government agencies, embassies, and bases.

Although any new crisis will be unique, Washington should use these briefing sessions to consider policy challenges that run through many crisis scenarios in Southern Asia, such as the need to balance two potentially competing US aims: supporting India as a strategic partner and simultaneously avoiding actions that could inadvertently escalate crises with nuclear-armed adversaries in China or Pakistan. The United States should also consider whether and how public messaging, including sharing US information, should be used to debunk disinformation propagated by regional actors to prevent crises and avoid escalation.

Other measures Washington should undertake to manage crises include improving US indicators and warning for regional crises and preparing capabilities for sharing information publicly and with regional actors. In addition, the United States should improve its technical channels for real-time intelligence sharing with India, especially related to indications and warning of increased threats posed by China along the China-India border and at sea. Relatedly, the United States should offer technical assistance to India to enhance the resilience of its information and communications systems in a regional crisis. Washington should also establish, maintain, and routinely test multiple secure and reliable channels for information sharing with China, Pakistan, and Russia, even if official bilateral relations with or among these countries continue to deteriorate.

US preparation for crisis diplomacy should include working with trusted third parties, such as the United Arab Emirates, to serve as intermediaries and honest brokers in future crises. Part of such preparation would be to preestablish points of contact and secure communication protocols to avoid confusion in crisis. Similarly, the United States should work with close allies such as France and the United Kingdom to prepare a menu of diplomatic initiatives intended to introduce delays and to offer off-ramps from possible nuclear escalation.

Conclusion

Southern Asia presents a complex set of security challenges that are shifting in ways that affect US national interests and global security. The region's nuclear powers routinely engage in direct military confrontation. It is conceivable that nuclear risk could engender caution among Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani leaders who hope to avoid dangerous escalation. We hope that will be the case. Yet the inevitable flare-ups along the disputed India-Pakistan Line of Control and China-India Line of Actual Control carry risks of miscalculation and escalation that could be devastating. Among the many challenges that confront US leaders, the volatility of these contested borders among nuclear states requires attention.

Changing geopolitical dynamics and rapidly evolving technology are making the region more dangerous rather than less. As China and Pakistan draw closer, India takes the threat of a two-front war more seriously. As India outpaces Pakistan in conventional military power and deepens cooperation with the United States in the face of a powerful China, leaders in Islamabad may make more high-risk investments in militant proxies and tactical nuclear weapons. Over the next five to ten years, advances in cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, new missile defense systems, and new delivery systems such as hypersonic missiles will present additional challenges to military planners and political leaders in all three countries. Their long borders provide many opportunities to clash, and the short distances and tight timelines for military strikes pose exceptional difficulties for decision-makers operating on imperfect information. Choices made in a hurry could have catastrophic global consequences.

The human toll of deliberate or accidental use of nuclear weapons and the economic impact of a major war in the region make strategic stability a critical interest for the United States and its allies and partners. US efforts can help to reduce and perhaps, over time, even resolve regional hostilities. The United States can contribute to regional strategic stability, and US officials can take steps to prepare to manage the risk of escalation when situations flare. The members of the Strategic Stability Study

Group explored a range of options and agreed on priority efforts they believe US leaders should undertake with a wide assortment of diplomatic, economic, military, and intelligence tools.

In 1962, China attacked India. The United States airlifted weapons to outmatched Indian forces. At that time, Pakistan considered opening another front to seize more of Kashmir. With a two-front scenario looming, the United States threatened war to deter Pakistan. Washington might have sent aircraft and troops to help India had China not declared a unilateral ceasefire. At the time, only the United States was a nuclear power, yet even then a regional border dispute could have spawned a much wider war.

It is now 60 years later and the borders of Southern Asia remain unsettled. Today the region's chief antagonists are nuclear armed, and the limits of American power are more keenly felt. Across the region and the world, norms of nuclear restraint are being tested. Despite these daunting challenges, the best course for US national security is to actively work to reduce the risk of nuclear war in Southern Asia.

Notes

1. *Southern Asia* is preferred to *South Asia* because the former connotes a more expansive geopolitical construct. China, although not located in South Asia, is a central strategic player in Southern Asia.
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4. See China-South Asia Senior Study Group, "China's Influence on Conflict Dynamics in South Asia," United States Institute of Peace, December 2020, 6, www.usip.org/publications/2020/12/chinas-influence-conflict-dynamics-south-asia.
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FINAL REPORT

Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia

Beginning in June 2021, the United States Institute of Peace convened a group of senior experts to assess concerns that recent geopolitical and technological trends increasingly threaten the tenuous stability of Southern Asia. Heightened global strategic competition between China and the United States is increasingly reflected in the region through closer China-Pakistan alignment, elevated China-India tensions, and a deepening strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi. Furthermore, each of the region's militaries is investing in new capabilities, including nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Over seven virtual plenary sessions, the Senior Study Group assessed the changing capabilities, doctrines, threat perceptions, and crisis response behavior of the main regional nuclear actors. This report summarizes those findings, considers US policy options, and identifies priority recommendations for the resolution or mitigation of core disputes, the enhancement of regional strategic stability, and the management of potential future crises.

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2301 Constitution Avenue NW
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202.457.1700
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