

Event Transcript

New Challenges to Strategic Stability in the China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Competition

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Featuring:

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Event Description

This panel explored the difficulties of sustaining strategic stability within the China-India-Pakistan triangle. Pertinent recent developments include the accidental Indian launch of a cruise missile into Pakistan, as arguably the first time that a state has fired a nuclear-capable missile into the territory of its nuclear rival. Meanwhile, naval nuclear force developments include Pakistan's acquisition of Chinese submarines for dual-use missions, generating inadvertent escalation risk. This panel also explored further deterrence stability challenges such as emerging drone and cyber technologies, evaluated how great power competition affects third-party crisis mediation, and discussed potential confidence-building measures to reduce dangers within this increasingly unpredictable strategic competition.

This event was originally hosted at the 2022 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference.

More information and event video available at <https://www.stimson.org/event/carnegie-nuclear-policy-conference-new-challenges-to-strategic-stability-in-the-china-india-pakistan-nuclear-competition/>

Event Transcript

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Welcome to everyone who's joining us in-person and those of you who are tuning in online. My name is Elizabeth Threlkeld and I am the Director of the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center here in Washington DC and it really is a pleasure to be joined up here on the stage by colleagues. I've been looking forward to this conversation for a while.

We'll get right to it because we have a lot of ground to cover and not much time. The title of our session this morning is 'New Challenges to Strategic Stability in the China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Competition.' This was something that obviously our program at Stimson works on quite closely in collaboration with colleagues from across the region. These challenges were brought home over the

course of the last several months in many ways, right? We're seeing, what I judge to be second order impacts of great power competition, that are playing out in perhaps unexpected ways across South Asia or Southern Asia, whichever terminology you prefer, which is a region itself that encapsulates two sets of nuclear armed rivals. We've seen disputed border tensions between China and India. We saw an accidental BrahMos missile launch on March 9th from India into Pakistan, which for my money at least, was the first time that one nuclear armed adversary had launched a cruise missile into the territory of its nuclear rival.

Fortunately, calm prevailed, there wasn't a response there. But I think it was a reminder of the risks of an inadvertent escalation, particularly in a context where misperceptions are acute. Combined to that, we've seen the expansion of China's nuclear arsenal and modernization efforts with all three states, including the incorporation of more dual use systems. We've seen a push to build out naval nuclear capabilities in a region that lacks some of the guardrails in place to manage those risks of misperception and miscalculations.

We hear concerns over emerging conventional asymmetries that are putting pressure on the nuclear threshold, particularly from Pakistan. And then more broadly, concerns over how US-China competition and the US's partnership with India and China's partnership with Pakistan might impact crisis decision making going forward, as well as management of future crises that could emerge in the region. So I'm really privileged to be joined by these colleagues on stage to unpack these questions.

Without further ado, I think we will get to our speaker comments. We're just going to go in line, so we'll start with Beenish and then Sylvia and then Tong. I'll introduce each of you and I'd like to ask you to focus on three questions, admittedly three big questions. Do your best in the seven minutes we have and then I'm sure our audience will help us fill in the blanks with Q&A.

The first question is how does either India, Pakistan, or China respectively assess the quality of deterrent stability within the strategic triangle? Is it improving? Is it declining? And why? Second question, what recent, say 2019 to present, development in the region is especially concerning for deterrence stability, but which has tended to be overlooked in DC policy circles? And then lastly, is there scope for confidence building measures, be it bilateral or trilateral, and if so, which are the most feasible to help us manage these challenges going forward?

So we'll start with Beenish Pervaiz, who is a third year PhD candidate in political science with a focus on international relations and security at Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs. Beenish's research interests include the study of nuclear strategy and decision making in an era of emerging and disruptive technologies, evolving strategic cultures and international norms with an eye towards regional nuclear powers, including issues of security and strategic stability in Southern Asia. Beenish holds a master's degree from Stanford University in international policy studies and completed her undergraduate studies in economics and political science from Lahore University of Management Sciences in Pakistan. Beenish, take it away.

Beenish Pervaiz:

Thank you so much, Elizabeth. Firstly, I would like to thank this conference, as well as Elizabeth and Frank for inviting all of us younger scholars to be a part of this conversation and giving us some very interesting prompts to respond to. My remarks, I will, like you mentioned, try to focus on the evolving dynamic within this strategic triangular deterrence relationship. I will also talk about some of the post-2019 developments that are significant, at least from the Pakistani perspective. And then lastly, talk about some of the confidence building measures or general risk reduction measures that can be fruitful to think about in this regional context.

Firstly, talking about assessing strategic stability in the region, it is my assessment that the challenges posed by the changing strategic environment, including the significant geopolitical shifts, like the US-China competition, as well as the arms racing and expanding nuclear arsenals, which include the incorporation of more sophisticated delivery systems, BMDs, MIRVing and dual-capable nuclear systems, which you noted, as well as other emerging technologies which we can maybe talk about a little bit later in more depth, have the potential to exacerbate strategic instability in Southern Asia.

These developments at the international system level, as well as these regional pressures paired with what I would see as a growing appetite for risk taking at the state level, do not only deepen regional polarization but also heighten the risks that crises could cross the nuclear threshold and reduce options for crisis mediation, which is another part I hope we can delve into in the later part of the discussion today. Before I delve into these dynamics further, two things I want to talk about, again, because I'm coming from a more academic background trying to understand how this deterrence model in a triangular relationship even works, is that yes, we are looking at it in a triangular, three-party kind of relationship, but this relationship is part of a broader strategic chain, which not only includes India, Pakistan, and China, but also the US.

We must think about this in terms of that strategic chain and the role that countries, like the US, can potentially play in this dynamic when it concerns nuclear competition. Secondly, I do want to mention that this triangular relationship is made up of two dyadic strategic rivalries, which yes, are rivalries but are very different and have their own unique characteristics. And that must be taken into account when we think about what bilateral and trilateral measures, we can take to try to reinforce strategic stability in the region.

When looking at this triangle or this strategic nuclear chain in the region, Pakistan finds itself at the tail end of it, which means that our nuclear arsenal developments and strategic nuclear doctrines are primarily aimed at deterring Indian aggression. As far as China is concerned, we see them as a reliable strategic partner who can help balance against India, especially having experienced several instances of abandonment by the US which has usually been the traditional ally for Pakistan. This balancing relationship vis-a-vis India and China becomes really, really important to think about. I think one factor that really complicates the stability of this relationship is the difficulty associated with doing tailored deterrence. India faces the strategic dilemma in the context where India's quest to pursue deterrence stability with China, which includes

development of a secure second-strike capability against them has created crisis instability with Pakistan. This is the inherent nature of that relationship, which means that what India is developing, what is credible against China, may not be minimum against Pakistan, and what is minimum for Pakistan may not be what India perceives to be credible against China.

So this is an inherent instability within this triangular relationship that unfortunately can create a lot of trilemmas and intensifies the prospects of arms buildup in South Asia, which is again what we are seeing right now in all these different developments that are happening, especially related to one I would like to mention is the Indian deployment to boost their sea-based nuclear deterrent, which might again help India ensure that they have a second strike capability option when it comes to China, but it can create a lot of strategic anxiety when it comes to Pakistan. This not only promotes an arms race in the region, which I've already mentioned, but can also put pressure on Pakistan to 'use it or lose it' - a kind of dilemma for Pakistan in which any contingency involving India might result in a higher level of escalation that we would have originally wanted.

In addition to this, obviously in the background, this is what is happening within the region and within the three nodes that we see of this triangular relationship. But of course, in the international environment we see that the great power rivalry is firing up. The recently released National Security Strategy by the Biden administration announces the US policy to double down on great power competition with China, which will obviously have knock-on effects in the region, which I would love to again unravel with my fellow panelists here.

On one end of this relationship, we see that India is getting closer to the US, even though they are maintaining other productive ties with many other countries including Russia. But we do see them edging closer to the US and its allies including the strong relationships that they've built in the Quad. And on the other end, we see that the China-Pakistan relationship is also growing stronger and stronger, including their strategic and economic relations, which is part of the geo-economic focus that has been a big part of the new strategy that has been introduced to move forward in Pakistan, but also thinking about the more defense ties that are bringing them closer to China.

So this is the kind of the nature of the growing rivalry in the India and Pakistan relationship, which is getting affected by these other actors in this equation. And post 2019, I do want to mention that following the Pulwama crisis as well as the China-India crisis in 2020, some concerning factors we see are the increasing role of social media and disinformation campaigns, changing roles and expectations around third party mediators, which hopefully we'll talk about more, rising concerns about nuclear accidents - again, I'm referring to the accidental launch of the Indian BrahMos and maybe we can unpack that a little bit more - increasing role of cyber espionage and general investments in cyber capabilities, and what that means for the region and cross domain deterrence. And lastly, talking about the future of trilateral arms control, I think there's a lot of good precedence in terms of bilateral CBMs that have been laid in both the India-China and the Pakistan-India context that we can build on. Maybe I can talk about it more later, but I do want to first focus on building upon the existing

frameworks that exist, including the India-Pakistan bilateral agreement on non-attacks on nuclear installations.

Maybe this can be expanded to include China and also maybe thinking about how non-attacks on nuclear command and control communication systems can be part of this agreement. We can talk about other aspects of this as we move on. I think the second area I would like to mention that is right in my mind for a lot of good cooperation is CBMs in the maritime domain, whether it includes Incidents at Sea Agreement or other protocols that help maintain stability within that sea realm. The third is emerging technologies; this is one I would love to talk more about to help build rules of the road as we navigate this relatively new arena, these new technologies that are kind of diffusing into the region, we are not completely sure what the effects are going to be for these.

And lastly, thinking about putting in place more nuclear related restraints, slowing down the arms race, which is the most difficult topic to handle. But again, lots of good ideas there, but we need the political will to establish these. For that, I will end my comments and sorry if I went over but would love to unpack any of these comments with my fellow panelists and looking forward to your questions after this. Thank you.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thank you so much Beenish, really appreciate it. Hopefully, our audience will take you up on that offer and we can dive a little bit deeper. But next, let's go to Sylvia Mishra, who is a Senior Nuclear Policy Associate at the Institute for Security and Technology. Her research focuses on nuclear strategy in non-proliferation, Southern Asian security, emerging and disruptive technologies and military innovation. I'm also happy to say she is a Nonresident Fellow with us at the Stimson Center South Asia Program. She's also a consultant at the European Leadership Network and has held a number of fellowships both here in DC and in New Delhi. And in her spare time, she's currently a doctoral candidate at the Department of Defense at King's College London. So Sylvia, over to you.

Sylvia Mishra: Thanks Elizabeth. I must compliment Beenish for really providing a good backdrop and overview of some of the structural constraints with China, India, and Pakistan, and if we look at this security trilemma that is operating in the subcontinent, some of these challenges that has been exacerbated in the past decade or so. But thanks Beenish for laying a good framework of that.

It is increasingly evident that in Southern Asia, China, India, and Pakistan are pegging their nuclear capabilities and development of their strategic and conventional forces with respect to and vis-a-vis each other. In many ways, these countries are existing to some of these existing power asymmetries that lies at some of the structural level. The multipolar competition is once again accentuated by China-Pakistan collusion at several levels: on cooperation, on security issues, on economic and technical issues and also on the strategic domain that we are seeing.

There's a new impetus for arms racing and the engagement of great powers, having varied relationships bilaterally and multilaterally with several countries in the subcontinent, all shaping the ways that these countries view and perceive

their threat perceptions. Along with that, we are seeing a kind of doctrinal dissonance that exists as to how China, India, and Pakistan are developing and we see an evolution of their military doctrines.

I'll take a moment to explain what I mean by doctrinal dissonance. It means that as in how these countries develop their capabilities, the military strategies that guides these developments are not essentially commensurate with each other's threat perceptions. That all is to say that all these countries are really drawing different lessons from how the doctrinal and strategies of these countries evolve. Therefore, in this present context, maintaining and sustaining strategic stability the way we have seen deterrent stability operate has been changing. It really accentuates different complexities that the region is facing.

Essentially, a lot of Indian strategic developments are essentially seen vis-a-vis Pakistan, however, in the present circumstances, it really should be viewed in a more holistic manner, in terms of looking at it through a Southern Asian lens where India's primary strategic rival is China. Hence, that really guides a lot of the recent developments that we have been seeing in India. However, one issue that is important to flag that whilst there is a tendency to have a kind of instability in both the India-Pakistan and the China-India dyads, there is a sense of stability at the highest level. What these countries are doing are that they are essentially able to perfect a sense of what we in international relations know as the 'stability-instability paradox,' and we see that being operationalized in the Southern Asian context.

It is important to note that India has been a victim of cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan. And that has really shaped India's threat perception and also got it to devise strategies that helps it combat or what we know as 'deterrence by punishment.' This idea of being able to deter the threat of cross-border terrorism from Pakistan is something that India has been grappling with. In that context, it's important to take note of two doctrines. The first is the Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces in 2017 and then the second, the Land Warfare Doctrine of 2018. Both essentially talk about the role of a new retaliatory policy, which we more popularly has dubbed it as a 'surgical strike,' and how it is a way to essentially have a tailored deterrence, have a strategy for retribution in terms of combating cross-border terrorism from Pakistan.

Now, one of the criticisms I have, where I feel that it is probably highly destabilizing to adopt this strategy, is because we are seeing a Quid Pro Quo Plus response from Pakistan, which means that there is going to be a tit-for-tat reaction. And we've already seen the action-reaction cycle operate in the subcontinent level. However, this new retaliatory strategy which India is trying to grapple with when it comes to cross-broader terrorism leads to and really creates this space for high levels of escalation. This is really destabilizing at a time when India and Pakistan do not have a composite dialogue with each other. We know that establishing deterrence is important, but in the absence of assuring strategies, this becomes a really alarming situation in the subcontinent.

An important development also, especially in terms of India bolstering its second-strike capabilities, is all the developments that we are seeing in the

maritime arena to have essentially establish a balance of power. Sea-based deterrence is also a critical enabler of India's No First Use policy, which is important to flag. All the developments that we are seeing, in terms of India fielding its K-4 submarine-launched ballistic missile and the deterrence patrols by INS Arihant, shows that India is going to rely on its second-strike capabilities and that provides a critical insurance for its No First Use policies.

It is important to quickly touch on some of the confidence building measures. Now, India and Pakistan have already established a couple of guard rails when it comes to greater confidence building measures. However, in the lack and in the absence of dialogue, it is important for both the countries to really come back at the negotiating tables trying to get a better sense of assessment in terms of the new maritime capabilities that both the countries are fielding. It should be a note of caution that India and China do not have, at the strategic level, dialogue which essentially buttresses greater misperception between the two countries. I'll stop here and I'll look forward to your questions.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Wonderful. Thank you so much Sylvia. To round things off, we have Tong Zhao, who is a Senior Fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, as well as a Visiting Research Scholar at Princeton University Science and Global Security Program. His research focuses on nuclear weapons policy, deterrence, arms control, non-proliferation, missile defense, hypersonic weapons, and China's security and foreign policy. He serves on the Board of Directors of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament and on the advisory board of the Missile Dialogue Initiative. Zhao is also an Associate Editor of Science and Global Security and is a member of the International Panel on Fissile Materials. He holds a PhD in science technology and international affairs from Georgia Institute of Technology and his most recent book is titled *Narrowing the U.S.-China Gap on Missile Defense: How to Help Forestall a Nuclear Arms Race*. Tong, over to you.

Tong Zhao: Thank you so much Elizabeth. I should have submitted a much shorter bio.

Apparently in the region, all three countries are building up their nuclear forces. It's good that US and international community are recognizing the so-called nuclear chain, which is widely discussed today. The US-China dyad is certainly becoming more intense, but it has big potential to further destabilize the China, India, Pakistan nuclear triangle relationship, but it doesn't have to. One thing I think, as per the policy community here and perhaps in New Delhi too, that people don't recognize yet is the political nature of China's recent nuclear buildup. I don't think China's recent nuclear buildup is driven by a military level intent to adopt a more ambitious, aggressive nuclear strategy to let new governments play a greater role in national security and somehow that was supported by the political leadership and becomes national policy.

Instead, I think it is a top-down process. It's the national political leadership wanting to have a greater nuclear arsenal to achieve geopolitical impact against the perceived political aggression and hostility from US and Western countries. They believe a greater arsenal could have this political leverage. With that

political mandate, then the military and the defense industry try to implement that vision of the leadership. So it's a top-down process driven mostly by internal political consideration. In that sense, the US and India don't have to react mostly at the military level. Instead, the political level engagement, perhaps, is more important. There is potential to disrupt, but it doesn't have to end there.

But at the military level, China has more resources and political blessings for building-up nuclear capability. Given the technologies China is developing, those put together could be viewed by leadership in New Delhi as China developing some counterforce preemptive, even disarming strike capabilities. In addition to the comprehensive development of nuclear triads and having more accurate missiles, China also has a very ambitious missile defense program, some of which can really be applied at the regional level. And China has rapid response capability, precision conventional weapons that can function as a conventional preemptive strike capability, et cetera. So, if India somehow sees that as a major threat to Indian second strike, it could have a really big impact. Of course, the growing terrorist threat in the region, especially after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan could start new concerns about terrorist attacks across the border and that could start this chain escalation dynamic.

Another element is the lack of clarity in some country's nuclear postures, including China and India; I think for all three countries. In the case of India, there is this talk about sizing India's nuclear arsenal so it doesn't appear too small to China, but too large for Pakistan. The fact that India might worry about some collusion or coordination between China and Pakistan, especially during a crisis that can further exacerbate this two-front dilemma, which is similar to what is being discussed today here, in this town.

How does US deal simultaneously with two nuclear peer competitors? I don't think US has a good analytical framework and I don't think India has demonstrated good analytical framework on what it means for the capability posture, et cetera. To the broader US-China competition, the impact of external powers, at least from Beijing's perspective - Beijing might have suspicion - does the US want to have a stable China-India nuclear relationship given the second front on the western part of China. Could that help distract China, making China less able to invest resources on the east over Taiwan and the first island chain? Some instability could be beneficial to the United States, at least China would have that suspicion.

Lastly, very briefly, I think after the Ukraine war and the international community watching Russian nuclear sabre-rattling, it will make it hard for policies like No First Use to be incredibly reassuring. Because what Russia demonstrated is it can change its new nuclear declaratory posture during a crisis, which if you look at the rapidly authoritative military writings in some other countries including China, that's exactly what the military is prepared to do. They will readjust the so-called nuclear coordinating threshold during crisis if necessary. So, if people know actually countries prepare to do that, how does No First Use appear credible?

We also see that a country, in this case, Russia could achieve coercive benefit from nuclear weapons without having to explicitly issuing a specific nuclear threat, right? Simply mentioning, even hinting at nuclear weapons could have beneficial effects at the conventional level, even deterring economic sanctions, political isolation et cetera. So that might encourage all nuclear states to want to maximize the coercive leverage of their nuclear arsenal going forward. That makes the line between nuclear threat and nuclear non threats become even blurrier. So, that I think doesn't help with the maintenance of strategic stability. I'll stop here.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thank you so much Tong. I would ask our audience both in-person and online to think about any questions you want to ask. I will take moderator's prerogative and ask maybe a couple depending on how much time we have, but please do get those ready and we'll look forward to putting those to our panelists. Maybe if I can ask you all to just reflect briefly, I will say in the interest of time, we touched on this a bit, but from your perspective, which emerging technologies appear the most concerning for efforts to reduce the threat of inadvertent escalation and manage crisis stability in this dynamic of the nuclear trilemma where perceptions as we've heard this morning, vary quite significantly across the triad? So, Beenish.

Beenish Pervaiz: Sure. So how I see it, I'll be brief, they're broadly, from the Pakistani perspective, four buckets of technologies that can have destabilizing effects. Some of them can be more stabilizing as well but again, I do want to preface this by saying that there is no one singular effect that a specific technology can have. We need to take into account other factors like how they're operationalized, how they're deployed, and also the organizational capacity of these different militaries to make sure that risks associated with these technologies are reduced and it doesn't go into the negative direction. So they can also be leveraged for good, but I'm just mentioning the ones that to me seem like more concerning than others.

The first category would be the developments in the sea-based deterrent that we've seen. Again, these are technologies that all three countries are at very different levels of developing and that creates an instability inherent to this pursuit of sea-based deterrent. This includes nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines as well as submarine-launched ballistic missiles. It's not only opening up a new avenue of confrontation, but again, lots of questions being raised about the survivability and invulnerability of these submarines and what that means for stability in the region. Again, there's also a lot of questions about whether the nuclear missiles deployed on these submarines are going to be mated: What questions does it have for command-and-control procedures in place? Does it bring more challenges in terms of communication? Those are all factors that introduce more instability into these systems.

I think the second category that I would like to mention is in the increasingly sophisticated missile defense and air defense systems, which upset the concept of mutual vulnerability by making the efficacy of the first strike uncertain. This is again, inherently trying to target the deterrence stability logic and we've seen developments on both the India and Chinese end which are really concerning from the Pakistani perspective in this sphere.

The third category I would like to mention is the non-nuclear and dual use weapon technologies that can create issues of entanglement. Again, some of the ones that stand out in my head are hypersonic technologies, drones, UAVs, that can not only create ambiguity over the warheads, a distinction between the war fighting and deterrence. It becomes further blurred, which is really, really concerning for this commingling or entangling. I think it not only complicates the logic of deterrence, but also increases the speed of warfare overall, which reduces decision making times. And given the geographical proximity of these three actors, these dynamics become much more perverse in this specific region.

The last one I would like to mention is more enabling technologies that are associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which include advances in both the cyber and AI realm. Again, these are not specific weapon systems. They're intermingling with, for example, the UAVs that are more autonomous. These are enabling technologies in a way which they cannot only cast doubt on the survivability of nuclear arsenals, but also the confidence in the state's ability to retaliate more meaningfully. They have a lot of consequences for the overall decision-making apparatus for your own arsenal as well as your adversaries' arsenal. I think these impacts on the nuclear command communication and control infrastructure networks is something really concerning for strategic stability in the region.

Like I mentioned, they can also be used for good, they can also introduce stability into this system and I don't think that we should ignore those effects. The alarmism associated with these developments might be too premature. A lot of these technologies are not as developed in the region for us to make a judgment call as yet. But again, this is what makes these technologies ripe for talks about mutual risks and vulnerabilities that are shared and we can think about how do we reduce the risks of going into the negative realm versus introducing more stability into the region. So those are some of my thoughts. Thank you.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thank you, Beenish. I think you've made the job easier for your co-panelists. You've covered a lot of ground. So Sylvia, maybe reflecting on what Beenish just shared, anything you would add, any points that you might quibble with? Especially if you can pick up on where Beenish left off in terms of whether this is a moment of opportunity. While these emerging technologies are still under development, they haven't necessarily been fully inducted, is this a time where it might be possible to set some mutual expectations and how could that proceed?

Sylvia Mishra: I think that's a great question and Elizabeth, my sense is that because all the three countries - China, India, and Pakistan - are developing these emerging technologies, there's a sense of understanding that some of these technologies can also have a stabilizing effect, For example, we know better intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technologies are able to understand and clarify what our adversaries' intentions could be. So development of some of those technologies could be really useful, especially thinking of artificial intelligence and some of their integration with strategic systems, which provides a more clarifying effect.

But why this entire question is a really challenging one and why there needs to be more work on this is essentially three pronged. First, is the shorter flight times in the region. Second is because of the advent of a lot of these emerging technologies, the decision-making timeline for leaders is shrinking, which complicates leaders' decision making. And third is the congestion in this space. We did know that the government, only had the mandate for some of these technologies, but now we see the spaces expanding to also incorporate a lot of industry players, which again kind of really throws us into this unknown territory.

But to your question about if there are any specific technologies that I would think that merits more attention is the co-mingling of nuclear and conventional assets; this blurring of lines, the lack of firewalls between conventional and strategic. We see a lot of these technologies are being deployed in the Indian Ocean region. We've seen the Pakistanis test of the Babur-3 submarine launch cruise missile, which is to be launched from the Agosta 90B submarine diesel class, which is again a clear instance of co-mingling of different assets.

With regards to Chinese attempts at intelligentized warfare, we see the integration of AI applications with NC3 and the lack of clear guardrails when it comes to some of those technologies, which can also be destabilizing. So I think the ledger on both stability and instability and issues that it accentuates is probably straddling both sides. But as late Former Defense Secretary, Ash Carter said, the arc of technology is not inherently good or bad, but it is for us to shape. What really would guide us is how these technologies are being deployed and operationalized.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thank you so much. Tong, I'll come to you, welcome your thoughts on this emerging technology question, but also in the context of how they're employed, as Sylvia was just saying, it's neither good nor bad necessarily. I think given the history of the region; this is likely to be seen most acutely in crisis scenarios. One of the second-order impacts of this broader US-China rivalry is the question of the role that third parties play in the region. Who is the third party in South Asia or Southern Asia these days? I wonder if I could also ask you to share your thoughts on how those changing dynamics, that rivalry could impact the role of third-party crisis management going forward in Southern Asia and particularly from Beijing's perspective.

Tong Zhao: Well, thank you. On the new technologies, I agree, missile defense, MIRVed missiles, dual-capable missiles are all concerning. But I think at a broader level, what I mostly worry about is the potential for countries to be more interested in acquiring escalation management capabilities. They no longer want to rely simply on massive retaliation posture. They want to enhance deterrence by being able to respond properly at every rung of the nuclear escalation ladder. We know in Pakistan; nuclear weapons play a role in deterring non-nuclear threats and India must be already thinking about how to respond at lower levels of nuclear aggression. In the US-China dyads, I think China's also becoming increasingly interested in acquiring the capacity to respond in kind to different scales and types of nuclear threats or attack.

And as China develops such capabilities, theater-range, very accurate missiles that could be used in a counter force manner, would India also want to acquire the capacity to respond in kind to different types and scales of Chinese threats and nuclear threats and aggression? I don't know. But I do think we need to be aware of this potential trend which, if it happens, would make the maintenance of stability and prevention of nuclear arms competition much harder to achieve.

Regarding the second question, that very much relates to the geopolitical environment, which can go both ways in terms of its implication for perhaps China's role in moderating or mediating future South Asian crises. On the positive side, I think China still has a strategic interest in reassuring India, in maintaining a stable relationship with India to avoid this two front competition simultaneously, which means China does not want to appear standing too closely to Pakistan and wants to be seen as a balanced player, a neutral player. In this case, I think in a crisis that would make China perhaps being more able to help mediate and wanting to use the opportunity to further increase its regional influence.

On the other hand, I worry that in reality, it would be very hard for China to actually achieve that given the very strong and deepening suspicion in China towards the US and other Western countries. It may very well end up in a situation that in a crisis between India and Pakistan, China has a strong dismissal and suspicion about Indian narrative and worries that the US is behind India in one way or another and the US tries to draw or pull India closer to the US-dominated framework. So China naturally wants to better, more strongly support Pakistan. So it ends up with China backing Pakistan more, the US backing India more and becomes even stronger and uglier confrontation. So it can go both ways. The fact that China's domestic decision-making system is even more centralized and around one person after the 20th Party Congress, makes the prediction of how China would behave in future have that crisis much harder. It will be much more dependent on the domestic environment and regional environment at the moment of the crisis.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thank you so much, Tong. I think all the more reason to talk through these issues in advance and try to identify ways of preventing the next crisis from happening, not just managing it. All right, we have a few minutes left for Q&A. If there are any questions from the audience, I think there's a mic coming around, ask you all to introduce yourselves and direct your question to one of our speakers.

Sebastian Brixey-Williams:

I'm Sebastian Brixey-Williams. I'm the Executive Director of BASIC. And thank you to all three panelists. This has been a really interesting conversation. I wanted to pull on a thread that Beenish you raised near the beginning on maritime CBMs and how to reduce risks in that domain. You talked a little bit about Incidents at Sea agreements and I just wondered if you might have any more thoughts, and this is for the whole panel, on what could be done in the Indian Ocean in order to reduce the risks of accidental or unintended risks of conflict in that space? Thank you.

Beenish Pervaiz: I think that's a really great question. I think this is one area where there is a lot of precedents from the US-Soviet Union experience that we can derive from. Obviously, it's a different context, there is different players involved, the asymmetries between the three players are very large, so we have to be a little bit cognizant of that. Because it's a more initial phase for some of the countries in developing these technologies, it creates more room for more creative thinking in terms of what can be done. So like I mentioned, considering an Incidents at Sea Agreement, which can help prevent collisions and other accidents is really, really important. It goes into the umbrella of promoting security and safety, which I think can be less controversial perspective.

I also think delineating these maritime boundaries and preventing incursions by fishermen, we've seen a lot of those incidents coming up. I think that this is one thing that we can really, really work on as the three countries to develop better maritime cooperation. In other areas also like piracy, that's another one. I think trying to agree on protocols, just rules of engagement within the maritime region. The other thing that I want to talk about is communication. So using a maritime hotline that looks at better communication when these incidents are happening, specifically focused at sea, is another great way to reduce any sort of crisis or inadvertent escalation at sea. But I'm sure other panelists might have other thoughts on this. So that's where I see a lot of potential.

Sylvia Mishra: I think there's a lot of benefit deriving from the US-USSR context in terms of the INCSEA agreement. One of the things that probably needs to be more tailored to the Indian Ocean region is the inclusion of China. So definitely a tri-party talk amongst China, India, and Pakistan to bolster naval dialogue. It is important to have these confidence building measures, but even at the foremost, we do not engage. India and Pakistan do not engage in focused dialogue and so neither do the Chinese and the Indian Navies. Getting the three parties to the negotiating tables is a good starting point. But why I feel that an Incidents at Sea-kind of agreement is even more a necessity is for two reasons. The co-mingling issue that I mentioned really injects a lot of ambiguities in a space where there are existence of several Navies, not just the three countries, but we are also talking about the UK, United States, and the French these days. Therefore, this really opens up the room for inadvertent escalation, which has been discussed.

I'm also concerned about maritime choke points because the Indian Ocean is a region which has several significant maritime choke points. I'm concerned about the blockage of those choke points. Not only utilizing some of the naval assets, but as in how we are seeing the introduction of unmanned underwater vehicles. China has been expanding its underwater drone inventories and docking them around India's periphery, really raising the chances of friction and miscalculation. Therefore, starting with a code of conduct in terms of maritime use of some of these platforms and deployments amongst these three countries is essential.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thanks Sylvia. Tong, anything to add?

Tong Zhao: Well, I think this is already answered very thoroughly, so just add a very small element, which is perhaps as a confidence building measure, the three countries want to talk about a maritime rescue agreement or some common understanding.

There will be increasing military maritime presence in Indian Ocean from all three countries, especially in the nuclear field, nuclear armed submarines, submarines armed with nuclear weapon systems or, in the Chinese case, nuclear armed attack submarines they will operate. All three countries have less experience and technical capacity compared with more mature nuclear powers. In this regard, incidents will happen, mishaps will happen, and if that happens, how to ensure that other countries actions will be seen as trying to help not to take advantage of incidents and make the situation even more volatile and that may require some conversations beforehand and common understandings.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thank you so much. I'm going to come to my partner in crime down here, Dr. Frank O'Donnell, who is manning our virtual questions so we can make sure and get a question from our virtual audience. I should say many thanks to Frank who is very helpful in organizing this panel. So really appreciate those efforts, Frank.

Dr. Frank O'Donnell: Thank you. This comes in from Madison Essex and she asks, "As the US prepares for a future with two near-peers with Russia and China, do the panelists see any lessons from the historical tripolar competition between India, Pakistan, and China that they think will be critical for the US to understand in this unprecedented competition?"

Elizabeth Threlkeld: So lessons from Southern Asia for the US as it thinks about near-peer competitors, China, and Russia today. Anyone on the panel have thoughts on that want to take that one on?

Tong Zhao: I can try. For a long time, at least in the China-India nuclear dyad, some people called it a decoupled deterrence relationship. Two sides have both No First Use policies, they don't really see a serious threat from each other's nuclear arsenal. So, somehow for a long time China's nuclear development didn't directly affect or strongly affect India's nuclear response. Maybe there is some positive lessons we can learn.

Despite the theoretical possibility, we haven't seen really substantive nuclear coordination between China and Pakistan in terms of crisis response or joint operational employment of nuclear assets in a crisis. Yet maybe that's a lesson that US also shouldn't overthink, the nuclear coordination collusion between China-Russia. China-Russia also have complex security relationship. I don't think they would have the capacity to really collude and deeply coordinate. There might be some peacetime joint patrols, heavy bombers. There might even be further sharing of important military facilities, intel, peacetime capability building, but does the US really have to be able to simultaneously deal with two crises in which China-Russia are colluding deeply? Maybe that's overthinking a bit.

Beenish Pervaiz: The one I would like to offer is, a lot of the CBMs in the region, especially pertaining to India and Pakistan, have actually developed out of crises. So looking at the Lahore Memorandum or the Tashkent Declaration, even the agreement to not attack nuclear facilities came after some sort of a situation or crisis that happened. I think there is a silver lining here to think about ways to go beyond these crises and manage these crises better. A lot of these CBMs in some

ways have sustained over time. So I think that the resilience of CBMs does sustain and believing in that is important lesson that I think from our region that can be maybe useful in some ways for the coming years.

Sylvia Mishra:

I believe that it is important for the United States to adopt some of the lessons that India and Pakistan or China and India have undertaken in terms of effective crisis communication, especially post crisis. But I want to open up this idea of being creative because we are entering an uncharted territory and therefore, I think China, India and Pakistan should actually take steps in the backdrop of waning arms control that we see, especially in the US-Russia dyad. It would be helpful if both the United States and Russia are able to adopt lessons in terms of looking at China, India, and Pakistan when it comes to crisis communication. Also the three countries in the subcontinent should lay a framework of engaging newer technologies and how that relates to strategic stability. And all of this is happening when New START, which is going to expire, is the last remaining arms control treaty. So looking at the two countries US should be adopting, there are some probably lessons for the United States to adopt there.

Elizabeth Threlkeld:

All right, well I want to thank our panelists. This has been a really rich conversation. I wish we had another hour to delve deeper. I would be remiss if I didn't thank the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace for hosting us this morning. Really glad to have made space for these conversations and look forward to continuing the discussions. With those of you who are in here in-person, feel free to follow up with our panelists, but also going forward as well. So thank you very much.