ATLAS OF
CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS:
NUCLEAR STATES

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This atlas is reflective of only publicly available information. If you think we have missed any publicly known hotline connections between states with nuclear weapons, please let us know.

INTRODUCTION A BRIEF HISTORY OF NUCLEAR "HOTLINES"

In the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to establish the world's first bilateral nuclear "hotline." The concept was simple: a reliable, direct connection between governments that could quickly transmit clear, trustworthy messages in times of tension. The idea of such a nuclear crisis communications link predated the 1962 crisis, and had been advocated for by *Parade* editor Jess Gorkin, seminal nuclear strategist Thomas Schelling, and others who were worried about nuclear escalation in the early years of the Cold War.[1]

The Direct Communication Line (DCL) or MOLINK was established in June 1963 with the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Washington and Moscow.[2] Similar hotlines connecting to Moscow were soon established in Paris and London.

As the number of nuclear-armed states increased from the 1960s on, so too did the number of hotline connections established between them. The latter part of the 20th century saw the addition of the first India-Pakistan hotline, the first U.S.-China hotline, and the first China-Russia hotline. In the early 21st century, the hotline ecosystem continued to expand, including the first India-China hotline.

Notably, the 21st century also saw the establishment of a hotline between the US and India, a rare dedicated nuclear hotline between allies.

Theater-specific "deescalation lines" between states also continue to be a feature of modern conflict. The U.S.-Russia deescalation line in Syria allowed for on-the-ground coordination between the two nuclear powers as troops operated in cotested environments. During the early part of the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war, the U.S. and Russia once again agreed to establish a dedicated deescalation line.[3] The early 21st century also featured the development of a network of hotline links between North Korea and South Korea, which have continued to showcase the value of hotlines for risk reduction across many levels of conflict.[4]

This atlas is part of IST's work efforts to reinvigorate broader nuclear crisis control through research and development aimed at identifying and solving practical nuclear risk reduction gaps. This version is focused on the unique nature of hotlines between states with nuclear weapons. A later atlas will examine hotlines between states with nuclear weapons and those without, a dataset which has its own points of interest.

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3   Walker, Leah. *The Role of Crisis Communications in the Russo-Ukrainian War.* Blog, Intitute for Security and Technology, May 2022.

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     Note that this connection is also not featured in this version of the Atlas since South Korea is not a nuclear-armed state

EUROPE & NORTH ATLANTIC

The transatlantic and European links are very much rooted in the Cold War experience, with most connections set up to help avoid the nightmare scenario of a full-scale nuclear exchange between the United States and Russia.

Washington–Moscow Direct Communications Link (DCL) / MOLINK

This foundational hotline was established in 1963 after the need for an instantaneous link between Moscow and Washington was made apparent during the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was updated in 1978, 1986, and 2007 and now operates on a secure form of email carred via satellite and fiber optics.[1]

U.S.-Russia Cyber; Space Hotlines

The cyber hotline between the U.S. and Russia was established to allow the two countries to speak on critical cyber issues. President Obama famously used it in the lead up to the 2016 presidential election to warn Moscow from interfering. The space hotline was established during the Cold War as a channel for coordination on space debris, accidents, and other events and risks.[2] [3]

Ukraine Deconfliction Line

In the early weeks of the war in Ukraine, the U.S. and Russia agreed to set up a tactical military deconfliction communications line, likely inspired by the success of a similar line used during the civil war in Syria, now discontinued.[4]

U.S.-U.K. Direct Connections

Given their over 75 years of military cooperation, it is very likely that the U.S. and the U.K. have hotlines or other direct abilities to communicate with each other. Sources in the U.K. have indicated that such links exist, and may involve specifically nuclear-focused hotlines.[5]

U.K.-Russia; France-Russia Direct Communications Links

The U.K. and France each signed dedicated MOLINK-style hotline agreements with the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis.[6]

NATO-Russia Military Hotline

Initially set up during the Cold War, emergency communications between Russia and NATO were revived in 2015 as both sides were increasingly concerned about military confrontation. As it stands today per what is available in the public domain, there is a hotline between the Russian Chief of General Staff and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe.[7]

1.	UNITED STATES	RUSSIA	1964	WASHINGTON–MOSCOW DIRECT COMMUNICATIONS LINK
			1980s	SPACE HOTLINE
			2010s	CYBER HOTLINE
			2014	SYRIA DECONFLICTION LINE
			2022	UKRAINE DECONFLICTION LINE
2.	UNITED STATES	UNITED KINGDOM	1947	(MULTIPLE SECURE CHANNELS)
3.	RUSSIA	UNITED KINGDOM	1996	U.K.–RUSSIA DIRECT COMMUNICATIONS LINK
4.	RUSSIA	FRANCE	1966	FRANCE–RUSSIA DIRECT COMMUNICATIONS LINK
5.	NATO	RUSSIA	1966	RUSSIA–NATO MILITARY HOTLINE

Active Links

Inactive Links

PACIFIC & NORTH ASIA

Crisis communications links across Asia and the Pacific connect some of the largest countries on Earth, and provide important channels for key nuclear weapons states. Of note are the various levels of connection between the U.S. and China, and the ally-to-ally link between Washington and New Delhi.

Head of State Hotline

President Clinton and General Secretary Jiang agreed to establish a hotline in 1997, but it has seemingly not been used. Notably, it was not used when NATO forces accidentally bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999.[8]

U.S.-China Cyber; Space Hotlines

Washington and Beijing have a space hotline to speak on space launches, debris, and other risks, as well as a cyber hotline to communicate critical cyber issues.[9, 10]

Defense Telephone Link; Audio/Video Links

The Pentagon and the Chinese Ministry of Defense agreed to establish a crisis link, but the hotline has been rarely used. Secretary of Defense Austin has expressed frustrations with being unable to contact his Chinese counterparts.[11] In 2014, Presidents Obama and Xi agreed to a memorandum of understanding on the rules of behavior in maritime and aerial encounters. In a following annex to that agreement, the two countries said they would establish a "military crisis notification mechanism" with audio and video connections.[12]

Head of State Hotline

The hotline was agreed to in April 1996, when Russian President Boris Yeltsin attended a summit meeting in Beijing. The agreement bound both sides to maintaining regular dialogues at various levels and through multiple channels, including a governmental telephone hotline.[13]

China-Russia Defense Ministry Hotline

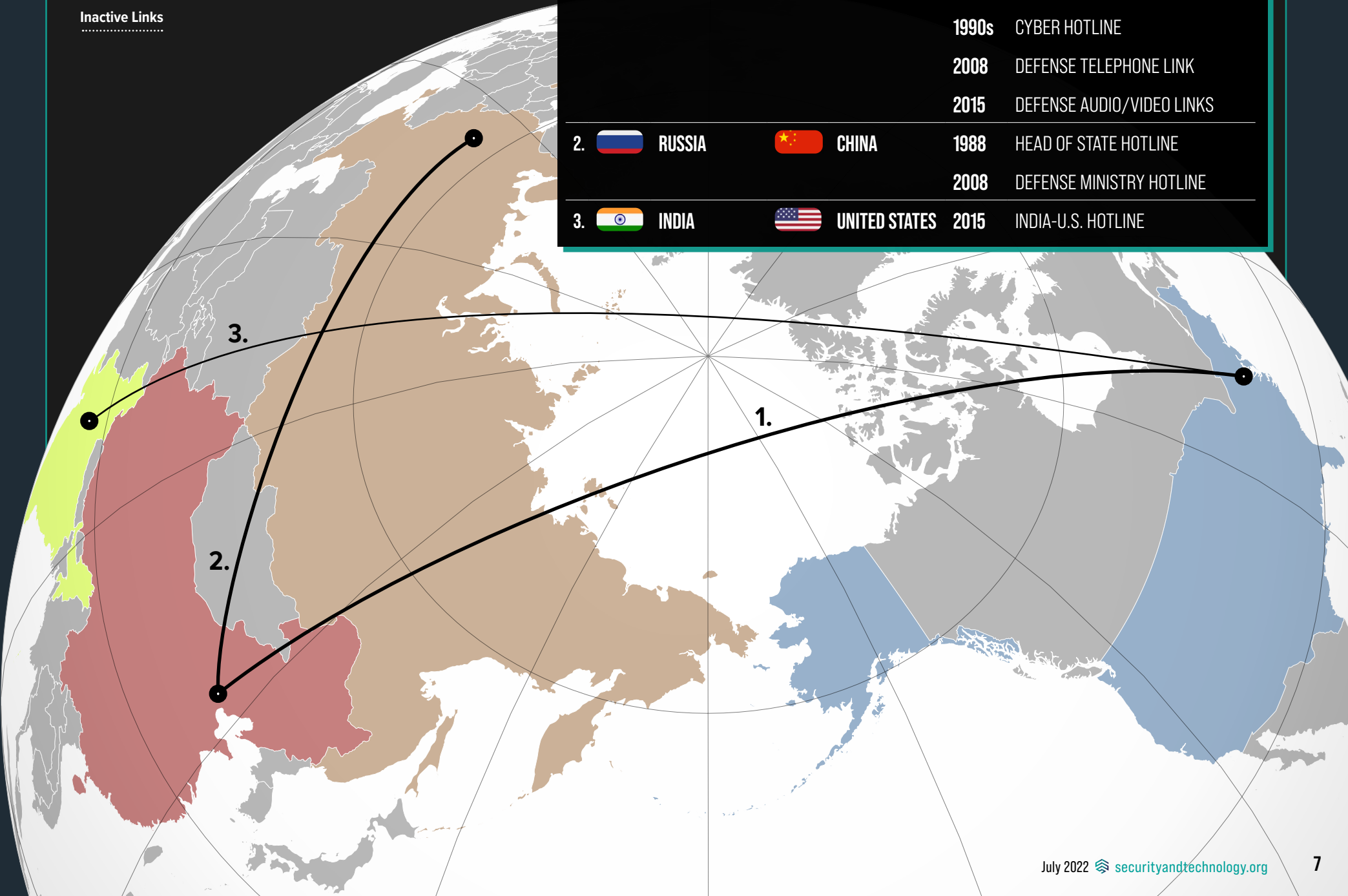The hotline links the Chinese and Russian Defense Ministries, and has reportedly been used.[14]

India-U.S. Hotline

The India-U.S. hotline agreement in 2015 marked an era of deepening ties between both countries, and is one of few dedicated ally-to-ally hotline links. It connects both the top executives of each country and their National Security Advisors.[15]

Active Links

Inactive Links

1.	UNITED STATES	CHINA	1997	HEAD OF STATE HOTLINE
			1990s	SPACE HOTLINE
			1990s	CYBER HOTLINE
			2008	DEFENSE TELEPHONE LINK
			2015	DEFENSE AUDIO/VIDEO LINKS
2.	RUSSIA	CHINA	1988	HEAD OF STATE HOTLINE
			2008	DEFENSE MINISTRY HOTLINE
3.	INDIA	UNITED STATES	2015	INDIA-U.S. HOTLINE

SOUTH ASIA

While crisis communications links between states in South Asia are some of the hardest to identify and verify, they are arguably the world's most necessary ones. Though much of the information here is India-Pakistan-centric, the connections between India and China are also critical.

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Head of Militaries; LOC Sector Commanders Hotlines
This hotline has historically been considered unreliable and "noisy," but recent reporting suggests that it was upgraded to a more modern fiber-optic line in an effort to make it more usable. The current status of the LOC Sector Commanders hotline is unknown.[16]

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Prime Ministers Hotline
The hotline goes through the Directors General of Military Operation (DGMO) of both countries and has been shut on and off several times. Its current status is unclear.[17]

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Foreign Ministry Link
This hotline is fiber-optic based and is "specifically for the purpose of prompt exchange of information in the event of a nuclear incident or to clarify any misunderstandings particularly during crises." It is assumed by experts to be obsolete or no longer in use.[18]

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Terrorism Hotline
The hotline was agreed to after the 2008 Lashkar-e-Taiba terror attack in Mumbai, but its implementation was stalled and it remains unclear whether this hotline ever came online, much less whether it has been used.[19]

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Head of State; Foreign Ministry; Army Hotlines
These hotlines connect the Prime Minister of India to the President of China as well as each government's Foreign Ministries. Another dedicated hotline links the Indian Army in North Sikkim and the People's Liberation Army in Tibet. The Indian DGMO and Chinese Western Theatre Command agreed to an additional hotline in 2020 but it is unclear whether that hotline was ever established [20, 21, 22, 23]
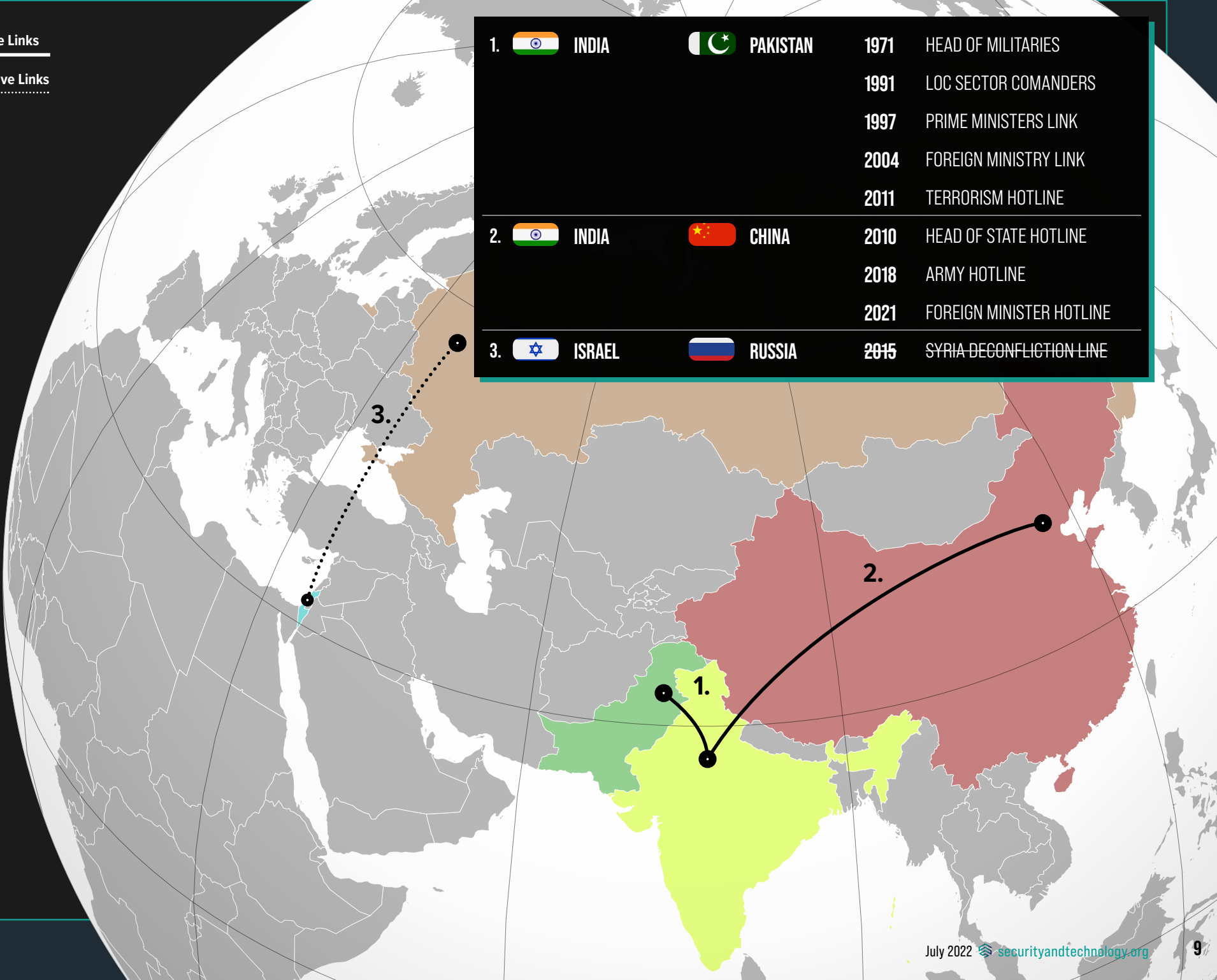
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Syria Deconfliction Line
A dedicated Israel-Russia line was set up during the Syrian Civil war to improve communication about incoming airstrikes and deescalate any incidents. However, communication has now "effectively ceased."[24]

Active Links

Inactive Links

1. 🇮🇳 INDIA	🇵🇰 PAKISTAN	1971	HEAD OF MILITARIES
		1991	LOC SECTOR COMANDERS
		1997	PRIME MINISTERS LINK
		2004	FOREIGN MINISTRY LINK
		2011	TERRORISM HOTLINE
2. 🇮🇳 INDIA	🇨🇳 CHINA	2010	HEAD OF STATE HOTLINE
		2018	ARMY HOTLINE
		2021	FOREIGN MINISTER HOTLINE
3. 🇮🇱 ISRAEL	🇷🇺 RUSSIA	2015	SYRIA DECONFLICTION LINE

NOTES & FURTHER READING

EUROPE & NORTH ATLANTIC

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