# Pakistan: Mitigating Nuclear Risks Through Crisis Communications

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The advent of disruptive technologies has merited a great deal of scholarship from across the world, as evidenced by a plethora of literature that assesses the impacts of these technologies on crisis and deterrence stability. Many scholars have expressed concerns about the escalatory risks associated with the additions of newer, more precise, and speedier military technologies.[1] For example, according to Keir A. Leiber and Daryl G. Press, the accuracy and remote-sensing revolutions brought about by more precise and penetrable technologies are increasing survivability concerns, and therefore challenging deterrence.[2] Other scholars like James Acton and Rebecca Hersman have written about the prospect of inadvertent and advertent escalation through increasing entanglement and gray-zone tactics.[3] These treatises, coupled with rising tensions between nuclear dyads, point to significant nuclear risks. This is one of the factors that have pushed global powers to outline the importance of nuclear risk reduction.

The United States, for its part, has stressed the need for establishing secure channels of communication between nuclear-weapon states.[4] Indeed, instituting crisis communications mechanisms between nuclear adversaries is a critical risk reduction measure, not least because their absence could increase misperceptions amidst the fog of information, disinformation, and misinformation.

The dyadic equation between India and Pakistan is the clearest example of the pitfalls of lackluster crisis communications. Since going overtly nuclear in 1998, India and Pakistan have been embroiled in dangerous nuclear-tinged crises, ones that had the potential to escalate further. India and Pakistan should transcend reliance solely on state-to-state hotlines. Effective communication is

1  Michael T. Claire, "A Strategy for Reducing the Escalatory Dangers of Emerging Technologies," Arms Control Association, December 2020, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-12/features/strategy-reducing-escalatory-dangers-emerging-technologies.

2  Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence," *International Security* 41, no. 4 (2017); 9–49, https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/new-era-counterforce-technological-change-and-future-nuclear-deterrence.

3  James M. Acton, "Inadvertent Escalation and the Entanglement of Nuclear Command-and- Control Capabilities," *International Security*, policy brief, October 2018, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/James%20Acton_Policy%20Brief_October%202018_0.pdf; Rebecca Hersman, "Wormhole Escalation in the New Nuclear Age," *Texas National Security Review*, July 9, 2020, https://tnsr.org/2020/07/wormhole-escalation-in-the-new-nuclear-age/.

4  "Secretary Antony J. Blinken's Remarks to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference," 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, August 1, 2022, https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2022/statements/1Aug_USA.pdf.

vital not only in peacetime but also during crises.[5]

As previous crises and near-misses between India and Pakistan make it abundantly clear, there is a conspicuous lack of will to use existing crisis communication streams. If anything, historically, both countries have increasingly relied on third parties, not least the United States, for the management of their crises.[6] However, despite their reliance on third parties, no formalized communication mechanisms were established between Islamabad, New Delhi, and Washington. All this contributed to a greater application of force during the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot Crisis, as well as the accidental launch of an Indian cruise missile 121 kilometers inside of Pakistan's territory in 2022.[7] Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the absence of crisis communications between India and Pakistan will increase the prospect of escalation, be it accidental, deliberate, or inadvertent. Hence, it is worth discussing how and when Pakistan might decide to use crisis communications mechanisms going forward.

Any crisis scenario between India and Pakistan must take into account the fact that actions at the sub-conventional, conventional, and strategic levels feed into each other. Therefore, one could term any period in which one or both sides whip up rhetoric as a pre-crisis phase. And if that is followed by unusual troop movements and build-up, one can anticipate the occurrence of a crisis. In fact, one of the crises between India and Pakistan, namely the Twin Peaks Crisis (2001/02), was all about India and Pakistan mobilizing for war. Therefore, Pakistan, in response to a violation of the 2003 ceasefire agreement in the Tatta Pani sector of the Line of Control (LoC), could decide to activate the Directors-General Military Operations (DGMO) hotline.[8] The said hotline could be used to deescalate localized tensions on the LoC, as well as to explain the simultaneous troops' mobilization on frontages along the Working Boundary (Sialkot) and the International Border (Lahore and Kasur).

At the diplomatic level, Pakistan could use the near-defunct foreign ministries' hotline so as to directly deliver diplomatic and political messages to each other.[9] For Pakistan, de-escalation would be the outcome it wants to achieve because of a variety of political and economic reasons. That being said, it is unlikely that, in the absence of trust, the foreign ministries' hotline will be effective. Additionally, Islamabad will most likely directly speak to Beijing at the Foreign Ministers' level, not least because the latter will stand to lose if tensions were to escalate. At this stage, Islamabad might also try establishing direct contact with Washington at the National Security Advisors (NSA) level. However, this might not be a priority for Pakistan given the United States' reduced credibility as a non-partisan crisis manager. If NSA level hotlines do nothing to reduce tensions,

5  Rabia Akhtar, Chiara Cervasio, Ruhee Neog, Alice Spilman, and Nicholas J. Wheeler, eds, "Compendium: Crisis Communications: Indian And Pakistani Perspectives On Responsible Practices," BASIC, June 1, 2023, https://basicint.org/compendium-crisis-communications-indian-and-pakistani-perspectives/.

6  Rabia Akhtar, "Outsourcing Escalation Control," South Asian Voices, September 23, 2013, https://southasianvoices.org/outsourcing-escalation-control/.

7  Matt Korda, "Flying Under The Radar: A Missile Accident In South Asia," Federation of American Scientists, April 4, 2022, https://fas.org/publication/flying-under-the-radar-a-missile-accident-in-south-asia/.

8  D. S. Hooda, T. C. A. Raghavan, Indrani Bagchi, Rudra Chaudhuri, and Srinath Raghavan, "India-Pakistan Ceasefire Agreement: What's Next?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 3, 2021, accessed January 10, 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/03/03/india-pakistan-ceasefire-agreement-what-s-next-event-7558.

9  John Lancaster, "India, Pakistan to Set Up Hotline," *The Washington Post*, June 21, 2004, accessed January 10, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2004/06/21/india-pakistan-to-set-up-hotline/37d9f17f-58ec-4696-96b3-9462a4ff2bea/.

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and India launches an attack across the Hussainiwala-Ganda Singh Wala border into Kasur, Pakistan would retaliate in kind with a calibrated attack on the nearest Indian city of Firozpur. This brazen horizontal and vertical escalation would militate against the use of DGMO and foreign ministries' hotlines. Assuming that civil-military imbalances have increased in Pakistan, the country's all-powerful army and spy chiefs would then speak to the U.S. Secretary of Defense and India's National Security Advisor over telephone. These channels would be complemented by parleys between Pakistan's Prime Minister and China's President. Even if more rounds of escalation take place, Pakistan might decide to adopt a two-pronged approach entailing kinetic retaliation and communications with Chinese and U.S. interlocutors. Such an approach would be driven by both the desire to show resolve to India and eke out ways to terminate a costly, dangerous crisis, one that has the potential to escalate to the strategic level.

Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that despite the fact that there are many triggers that could cause another nuclear-tinged crisis between India and Pakistan, there are only a handful of crisis communications avenues available to both India and Pakistan. Hence, efforts must be made to induct new, more resilient crisis communications tools so that they can be employed in response to various events before and during crises. But the question remains: can India and Pakistan break free from relying on third parties to handle their crises in the future? If not, is there room to consider establishing a formal third-party mechanism?

A multilateral crisis mechanism in South Asia could significantly enhance regional stability and security, especially when bilateral approaches falter due to deep-seated mistrust between India and Pakistan. This mechanism could bring together multiple countries like the United States and China to provide a platform for dialogue and negotiation that transcends bilateral limitations. Given their historical roles in mediating crises in the region, the involvement of these major powers would bring strategic leverage and international influence, which is crucial for de-escalation. However, a multilateral crisis mechanism involving the United States and China, due to their respective alliances with India and Pakistan, could complicate the trust equation within a multilateral crisis mechanism. Each side might perceive the involvement of the other's ally as potentially biased. To deal with this problem, the mechanism could incorporate additional neutral parties or international organizations to dilute the influence of major powers and foster a more balanced environment. Regular, structured engagement in this framework can help build trust over time as parties witness fair and consistent behavior from all involved. In this way, the focus shifts from individual national alliances to collective regional stability and the benefits it brings to all stakeholders.