



Create a Channel for a U.S.-China Dialogue on South Asia

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Editor's note: This essay is part of an initiative launched by the Stimson Center's South Asia Program, which we call the [Off Ramps Initiative](#). The nuclear competition among China, India, and Pakistan is accelerating with the introduction of new ballistic and cruise missiles. Counterforce capabilities are growing. China has begun to place multiple warheads on some of its ballistic missiles, Pakistan has advertised its ability to do so, and India has demonstrated this capacity in its space program. Diplomacy is dormant as these and other nuclear capabilities expand. What to do? Stimson has asked rising talent in this field, as well as a few veterans, to offer creative ideas that can help ameliorate and decelerate this dangerous triangular nuclear competition.

Introduction

The real danger of an explosive conflict and potential nuclear war lingers in South Asia. Relations between India and Pakistan remain distrustful, confrontational, and highly volatile as the result of decades-long hostility. War plans are being refined on both sides – a war that could be triggered by terrorist attacks launched by Pakistan-based groups. Escalation control seems to be assumed by both sides, but miscalculation of intentions and reactions could ignite a catastrophic nuclear war.

Despite these risks, the United States and China do not regard crisis management in South Asia as a top priority in their bilateral foreign policy agendas. Cooperation on crisis management in the past has been ad hoc. The level of attention, dialogue, and preparation devoted to the proper management of a potential crisis between India and Pakistan is highly disproportionate to the risks and stakes at hand. Therefore, the United States and China might well consider the establishment of a routine dialogue at the sub-cabinet level that could become a crisis management mechanism to enhance preparedness for and effectiveness of crisis management to prevent a nuclear disaster in South Asia.

The Problem

The nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan has accelerated in recent years. Both countries possess well over 100 warheads and credible missile delivery systems.¹ Pakistan's rising nuclear stockpile is widely believed to be the fastest growing in the world.² Pakistan has continued to develop tactical nuclear weapons for use on the battlefield that it threatens to deploy in the event India implements its "Cold Start" doctrine.³ India has completed its nuclear triad by inducting a strategic nuclear submarine into service.⁴ India's aim is to reduce the gap between its nuclear capabilities and China's.⁵ The nuclear arms race in the region reflects the geopolitical competition between China and India and between India and Pakistan.

Generally, while there has been delicate strategic stability based on nuclear deterrence and mutual assured destruction between India and Pakistan, the most concerning triggers are speculated to be skirmishes in the disputed Kashmir region, such as the 1999 Kargil conflict, or miscalculation by Pakistani actors linked to militant groups launching terrorist attacks in India, such as the 2001 Indian Parliament attack or the 2008 Mumbai attack. In a similar future scenario, India could hold the Pakistani government responsible for such unconventional warfare and respond with a conventional attack. If Pakistan retaliates with nuclear weapons' use to defend its territory, as it has vowed to do, the conflict could rapidly escalate into nuclear exchanges.

As a part of China's immediate periphery, the peace and stability of the subcontinent constitutes a key area for China's national security. A potential crisis between India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed states, could have catastrophic implications for China's critical national interests. To prevent a security crisis involving conventional forces, China pursues a delicate and balanced approach between India and Pakistan. Beijing advocates for dialogue, de-escalation of tensions, and the resumption of diplomatic negotiations. However, China's ostensibly neutral position on the tactical level neither negates nor disguises a geostrategic instinct on Beijing's part to shield and protect Pakistan. This has created intrinsic inconsistencies in China's position when a crisis originates from Islamabad's tolerance or indulgence of anti-India Islamic militant groups.

There are disagreements inside the Chinese South Asia policy community regarding the appropriate role China could or should play in crisis management in South Asia. Options include playing the roles of mediator, arbitrator, and facilitator. Although China claims to be neutral in the event of a security crisis between India and Pakistan, its strategic conflicts with, and long-term concerns over India, along with its traditional alignment with and support of Pakistan, inevitably undermine Beijing's credibility as a neutral and honest broker in South Asia. Nevertheless, China has an innate interest in preventing a major conflict in South Asia with the potential of evolving into a nuclear disaster. This interest has prompted Beijing to resort to multilateral coordination, great power coordination, and bilateral engagement with both India and Pakistan to manage the crisis between the two.

Given the stakes involved in a major crisis on the subcontinent, the United States has consistently played a key crisis management and conflict prevention role between India and Pakistan. For example, during the 1999 Kargil crisis, President Bill Clinton directly threatened Pakistan with isolation unless it unilaterally withdrew its Northern Light Infantry forces and

jihadi proxies from the heights above Kargil.⁶ The U.S. attitude is critical to both India and Pakistan's strategic calculations regarding conflict escalation and modification of their actions. Indeed, besides the stabilizing effect of nuclear deterrence in a deep crisis, proactive U.S. crisis management has been indispensable in the dilution of tension and conflict prevention in each India-Pakistan crisis since they tested nuclear weapons in 1998. While there are concerns as to whether the Trump administration will remain as engaged and proactive in South Asia as previous U.S. administrations, there is a general expectation that the United States will be central and vital to the mediation of future crises that might arise between India and Pakistan.

Changing internal politics and bilateral relations among China, the United States, India, and Pakistan almost certainly will affect crisis management differently in the future than in the past. Washington and Beijing are more deeply invested in India and Pakistan, respectively, just as they are viewed with greater distrust in Pakistan and India, respectively. Much has changed in New Delhi. Prime Minister Narendra Modi might act very differently to provocations than Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh and A.B. Vajpayee. The strategic personalities of the American and Chinese presidents as well as the unpredictable results of their interaction could also foreseeably bring new dynamics and uncertainties over their perspectives and approaches toward India and Pakistan.

The Proposal

Both Washington and Beijing share critical interests in crisis management and conflict prevention in South Asia. In each crisis since 1998, both countries have used mediation and shuttle diplomacy to diffuse tension. However, there are no routine and regular policy consultations between Washington and Beijing on key developments and the potential of emerging crises between India and Pakistan. In May 2012, the United States and China had their first Director-General-level South Asian affairs consultation focused on regional development and Afghanistan, as a part of the fourth round of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED).⁷ According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry's statement, a similar South Asia consultation was held again in 2013 under the 5th round of S&ED.⁸ However, in the following three rounds of the S&ED, language specific to the South Asia consultation, especially on regional development, was missing from the list of deliverables. While the statements from all three rounds read that the United States and China would host the next South Asia consultation at a proper time, it remains unclear whether the consultation indeed took place.

What is more revealing about the lack of urgency and attention to crisis management is that the South Asia consultations were consistently listed under the category of "U.S.-China bilateral cooperation," along with counter-wildlife trafficking and maritime protection. In comparison, issues such as Afghanistan, North Korea, and Syria are put under a different category of "regional and global challenges," which have received much more attention and time in the bilateral dialogues between Beijing and Washington. The fact that Afghanistan has been singled out as an independent issue is not surprising and probably indicates that it is no longer treated as a part of the South Asia portfolio of the U.S.-China discussion. Indeed, as the issue that so far has generated the most concrete and productive deliverables on U.S.-China cooperation in regional security challenges, Afghanistan has received increased attention and positive reception in U.S.-China bilateral discussions.

The frequency, level, and regularity of U.S.-China dialogue on potential crisis management in South Asia is glaringly incompatible with the stakes involved in the event of an India-Pakistan conflict. This Off Ramps essay proposes a senior-level (subcabinet or vice-ministerial) routine dialogue between American and Chinese officials, either annually or bi-annually, dedicated to preventing a potential crisis and facilitating crisis management on the subcontinent. The contents of the dialogue might include:

- Changes to the nuclear stockpile, technologies, and doctrines of India and Pakistan;
- Movements and attacks by Jihadist organizations in Kashmir or elsewhere and their security/political impact;
- Changes to conventional troop deployments and postures of India and Pakistan;
- Coordination between Washington and Beijing on the strategy and tactics of crisis management, including the distribution of labor in the event of a crisis;
- Development of a set of crisis indicators between India and Pakistan that could serve to activate a crisis management mechanism between the United States and China.

Under the Trump Administration, the United States and China have reformed the previous S&ED, replacing it with a four-pillar construct including a Diplomatic and Security Dialogue; Comprehensive Economic Dialogue; Law Enforcement and Cyber-security Dialogue; and Social and Cultural Issues Dialogue. The first Diplomatic and Security Dialogue took place on June 21, 2017 and focused on pressing regional security challenges such as North Korea and the South China Sea. For subsequent regional consultations, adding an agenda item focused on South Asia is timely and imperative.

The Challenge

On the U.S. side, the biggest challenge to the development of a U.S.-China subcabinet level dialogue on crisis management in South Asia under the Trump administration lies in the limited bandwidth of U.S. foreign policy priorities. As Trump prioritizes hotspot issues such as North Korea, Syria, and Russia, preparation for collaborative crisis management simply may not be a U.S. priority. The unfortunate Catch-22 is that the administration's attention and engagement may not be devoted to crisis management in South Asia until there is an actual crisis, and by the time a crisis breaks out, and ad hoc response may be insufficient. In this context, it will be interesting to observe the results, priorities, and corresponding strategies generated by the South Asia policy review by the Trump administration. Afghanistan, unsurprisingly, will remain high on the agenda, yet the White House's encouragement for India and Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir dispute through direct dialogue could potentially open some space for U.S.-China dialogue on crisis management.

From the perspective of major power politics, Washington may not want to cede strategic space to Beijing in South Asia by pairing up with China as a co-crisis manager in relations between India and Pakistan. As China expands its economic and political influence in the region with campaigns such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the national interests of India and America are naturally aligned in many aspects. For Washington to join with Beijing as the "adult" supervisors and crisis managers between India and Pakistan inevitably would affect this long-term India-U.S. alignment. It is almost inevitable that any U.S. attempt to engage China as the peer co-manager

of India and Pakistan will be met with fierce opposition by India. Such opposition could be well justified, not only as a co-crisis management arrangement would diminish India's role and image to that of a secondary player, but also because of China's close ties to Pakistan.

On the Chinese side, Beijing may be unwilling to bog itself down in a South Asia crisis management mechanism with Washington. China's balancing diplomacy between India and Pakistan is neither objective nor neutral. China is interested in strengthening cooperation with India as the two largest developing countries and as members of the global South vis-à-vis the developed countries. However, such alignments on low-level political issues cannot override the conflicts and disagreements between China and India on high-level issues, including their territorial disputes, Tibet, and the strategic competition in the region. Beijing views India as the only regional power in South Asia with the potential capacity and ambition to compete with China for regional dominance. Washington's support of India to counterbalance China's emerging regional leadership role further antagonizes Beijing, convincing it of a shared aspiration and plan between Washington and New Delhi to contain China in South Asia and in the Indian Ocean.

In this context, Pakistan, rather than India, is the cornerstone of China's South Asia policy. Regardless of its internal fragility, Pakistan remains China's main instrument of "check and balance" against India. Beijing holds that as long as India is tied to the competition and confrontation with Pakistan as India's primary national security threat and to the Kashmir dispute, India will not be free to target China or pursue its regional strategic ambitions. Given that a genuinely peaceful and stable relationship between India and Pakistan is desirable but improbable, and given that China's long-term interest in South Asia is not altruistic, Beijing views an equilibrium between India and Pakistan as serving its interests. In this view, the more the balance of power tilts against Pakistan's favor, the more unstable South Asia will become. This is not only because India might exploit Pakistan's weakened position to its own advantage, but also because a weak Pakistan is more likely to provoke India out of its sense of vulnerability, prompting a crisis to divert its population's attention away from domestic problems.

Beijing has a mixed attitude toward the U.S. role in security crises in South Asia. On the one hand, Beijing acknowledges that the United States and China share a common interest in the prevention of escalation and armed conflict between the two nuclear powers. On the other hand, Beijing believes that the U.S. position is biased toward India and fails to accommodate Pakistan's legitimate concerns. Furthermore, when a security crisis arises, Beijing has a natural tendency to see Washington as the primary responsible party, due to its complicated ties with both India and Pakistan. Therefore, Beijing has so far been content and eager to cede the primary crisis manager role to Washington. China's special relationship with Pakistan can help in crisis management, but in the absence of a crisis, Washington's requests for China to put more pressure on Pakistan are often deflected because Beijing views Washington as having an even more biased relationship with New Delhi than the one China has with Islamabad.

A high-level dialogue with China on crisis management in South Asia may not be welcomed by Beijing due to uncertainties about the Trump administration and, more importantly, on the nature of U.S.-China relations. The transactional mentality on the Chinese side would make Beijing

appreciate the peer status such a dialogue would confer, but not at such a high cost that Beijing would be responsible for “delivering” Pakistan in a deep crisis or conflict scenario.

Conclusion

Given the volatility of India-Pakistan relations and the stakes at hand, a subcabinet level U.S.-China dialogue on crisis management in South Asia is not only desirable but also potentially critical to mitigating tensions arising from a serious crisis between India and Pakistan. Both powers and the entire world have major stakes in the peace and stability in South Asia. Setting up a subcabinet level channel would not imply a co-crisis management role, which neither Beijing nor New Delhi would welcome. Instead, such a dialogue would help diplomats and technocrats to be better informed, better prepared and better coordinated in the event of a crisis. This channel could prove to be highly valuable in preparing for potential cooperation, including the development of procedures and a coordinated strategy in the event of another serious crisis in South Asia.

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¹ "Global nuclear weapons: downsizing but modernizing," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, last modified June 13, 2016, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2016/global-nuclear-weapons-downsizing-modernizing>.

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³ Zachary Keck, “Pakistan Wants ‘Battlefield’ Nukes to Use against Indian Troops,” *The National Interest*, February 6, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/pakistan-wants-battlefield-nukes-use-against-indian-troops-12200>.

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⁵ “Overcoming Pakistan's Nuclear Dangers,” Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, April 28, 2014, <http://vcdnp.org/overcoming-pakistans-nuclear-dangers/>.

⁶ Moeed Yusuf and Jason Kirk, “Preventing Nuclear Disaster in South Asia: The Role of the United States,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, May 10, 2016, <http://contemporarysecuritypolicy.org/preventing-nuclear-disaster-in-south-asia-the-role-of-the-united-states/>.

⁷ “China and the United States hold South Asian counterparts consultations (中美举行南亚事务对口磋商),” Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China, May 4, 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/sjxw_674887/t928759.shtml.

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