

99 Seconds to Midnight: A Case for Institutionalising Nuclear Risk Reduction Measures in South Asia

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Abstract

South Asian nuclear tests in summer of 1998, heralded a new chapter in the pervasive & deeply rooted sub-continental cold war, bringing forth the sobering realisation that given geographical proximity and an inherent risk of tension escalation, there is a need to implement safeguards against incidental or accidental nuclear weapons usage, as well as avoidance of brinkmanship. Lahore MoU of 1999 and the comprehensive dialogue process (2004) were positive steps initiated to institutionalise nuclear restraint measures. However, after making initial progression, this critical track like other tracks of dialogue also faced a setback. Exacerbated further by populist ultra nationalist rhetoric and anti-Pakistan hate mongering of the Saffron regime in India under Narendra Modi. The March 2022 Indian missile incident, trivialised as a mere accident is latest in the series of such episodes, that breaches mutual nuclear restraint protocols. This paper revisits the often overlooked yet established nuclear restraint protocols between the two countries, seeking the fundamental question, whether the South Asian neighbours recognise the risks and consequence of using nuclear weapons as elements of political currency. Can this incident be used as a positive turning point in helping usher a viable risk reduction regime between the two adversaries or the region is destined to gradually slide up the escalation ladder to an eventual catastrophe.

Keywords: Brah Mos, Lahore Declaration, Nuclear Risk Reduction, CBMs, Kargil, Modi.

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Introduction

Signing of Lahore Declaration in February 1999 was a watershed event, as it brokered a substantial breakthrough between the traditional adversaries, India and Pakistan. With May 1998 nuclear tests less than a year old, it was mutually felt by both the states as well as pushed by the US¹ that the two neighbours realising the consequence of conflict escalation under a nuclear overhang should aim for reaching mutual grounds of trust and cooperation. However, this phase of congeniality proved short lived. Soon after signing of the agreement, conflict over Kargil heights broke out, turning the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir into a nuclear flashpoint. The next two decades were witness to several crises or near conflict situations, such as the 2001-02 military stand-off, post 9/11 terrorist attacks and lastly, the 2019 unlawful unilateral annexation of the Indian occupied territories of Jammu, Kashmir valley and Ladakh into union territories under direct New Delhi rule on August 5, 2019. Each of these occurrences resulted in upping the tension escalation as well as compromised the carefully balanced deterrence stability between the two. The February 2019 aerial strikes by India across the line of control into the Pakistani city of Balakot, were responded with utmost caution but severity by the Pakistan Air Force resulting in the downing of two of its fighter aircrafts, a MiG-21 and its pride the Russian top line multirole aircraft SU-30 downed, and one Indian pilot detained for 48 hours.² Thereby thwarting Modi's bravado of applying unilateral military to earn domestic mileage.

However, this reckless action by New Delhi was neither the first, as earlier in 2016, it claimed to have launched a ground offensive across the Line of Control³ nor would be the last. As in early March 2022, a Brah Mos cruise missile *accidentally* crossed into Pakistani territory while undergoing

¹ Feroz Hassan Khan, "The Talbott Mission," in *Eating Grass the Making of The Pakistani Bomb*, Stanford University Press, 274-289.

² Kaiser Tufail, "Pulwama: Two Years on," *Pakistan Politico*, February 18, 2021, <https://pakistanpolitico.com/pulwama-two-years-on/>. Also see Sameer Joshi, "How Pakistan Planned to Hit India Back for Balakot — the Mission, the Fighters, the Tactics," *The Print*, September 14, 2019, <https://theprint.in/defence/how-pakistan-planned-to-hit-india-back-for-balakot-the-mission-the-fighters-the-tactics/291522/>

³ Nitin A Gokhale, *Securing India the Modi Way, Pathankot, Surgical Strikes and More* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing, India, 2017), 32.

“routine maintenance.”⁴ During all three incidents, Pakistan showed utmost restraint and caution. In the latest cruise missile accident, according to media reports, Islamabad carefully monitored the missile trajectory and its crashing 124 kilometers into Pakistani territory after a flight of three minutes and 46 seconds. Though Pakistan had immediately prepped up for a counter strike, but it “held back because an initial assessment indicated something was amiss.”⁵

One more crisis averted. However, it brings home the realisation that irresponsible statements, stirring war hysteria, staging false flag operations, and resorting to signature victim narrative, may garner immense vote base at home amongst the saffronised constituencies. But at the domestic level, such actions are also gradually eroding the edifice of a secular civil society, which is becoming highly polarised along grid lines that has and will bear severe consequences for the state of India. At the bilateral level, it is enhancing distrust and animosity, and critically shrinking the space for dialogue as well as measures to ensure confidence and a viable restraint regime. If the Brahmos incident of March 9, 2022 was viewed in the context of anti-Pakistan rhetoric of the Indian policy makers, including Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh’s November 2021 statement at a domestic rally, “we can cross the border and carry out a surgical strike as well, and if needed carry out air strikes as well.”⁶ Islamabad would have been justified to react instinctively, thereby sliding the two neighbours into a nuclear midnight.⁷

⁴ Ministry of Defence, “Statement on Accidental Firing of Missile,” *Press Information Bureau*, Government of India, March 11, 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1805148>

⁵ Matt Korda, “Flying Under The Radar: A Missile Accident in South Asia,” *Federation of Atomic Scientists*, April 04, 2022, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2022/04/flying-under-the-radar-a-missile-accident-in-south-asia/>

⁶ Asad Hashim, “Pakistan Rejects India Defence Minister’s ‘Provocative’ Statement,” *Al Jazeera News*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/22/pakistan-rejects-india-defence-ministers-provocative-statement>

⁷ The concept of *Nuclear Midnight* is borrowed from the symbolic Doomsday Clock by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, which uses the “Imagery of Apocalypse (midnight) and the Contemporary Idiom of Nuclear Explosion (countdown to zero) to Convey Threats to Humanity and the Planet.” Mecklin, ed., *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, op. cit.

Why the usage of rhetorical terms such as the nuclear midnight? And why does the March 9, 2022, Brahmos incident merit the Doomsday clock to be readjusted to 99, instead of the current 100 seconds? At the peak of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis American Nuclear Chemist Harrison Brown commented that, “Never in history have people and nations been so close to death and destruction on such a vast scale. Midnight is upon us.”⁸ He was alluding to *Bulletin’s* iconic ‘Doomsday Clock’ that is a symbol of “world’s vulnerability to catastrophe from nuclear weapons, climate change, and disruptive technologies in other domains.”⁹ The symbolic imagery was to convey the message that the clock is ticking away to *midnight* which depicts urgent and imminent danger, earlier associated to nuclear catastrophe alone.

Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and chair of “Elders” a select group of global leaders, termed climate change and nuclear weapons as the topmost existential threats to global peace and stability. But where public pressure and efforts offer a “sliver of hope” for mitigating the climate disaster, no such pressure has been exerted on world leaders to avert nuclear threats. She stated, “As long as nuclear weapons are available it is inevitable they will one day be used, by accident, miscalculation or design.”¹⁰ This inevitability associated with nuclear weapons is the main aspect, which makes the prospect of nuclear brinkmanship between the two South Asian neighbors a worst case scenario. With the shortest possible missile flight distance, there is hardly any time to notify the other side, in case of a launch.

Pakistan has time and again been spotlighted by the Western world over the safety of its nuclear assets, how then should the BrahMos incident by India be comprehended? A mere accident by an aspirant global power; a well disguised attempt by New Delhi to test Pakistan’s

⁸ Julian Borger, “Is Midnight Upon Us? Doomsday Clock Panel to Set Risk of Global Catastrophe,” *Guardian*, January 19, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/19/is-midnight-upon-us-doomsday-clock-panel-to-set-risk-of-global-catastrophe>

⁹ Mecklin, ed., *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

¹⁰ Emily Holden and Julian Borger, “Doomsday Clock Lurches to 100 Seconds to Midnight – Closest to Catastrophe Yet,” *Guardian*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/23/doomsday-clock-100-seconds-to-midnight-nuclear-climate>

level of readiness and response scenario and explore gaps in Islamabad's deterrence capability; or a dangerously acute failure of Command and Control by India, which is being courted by the West as its strategic proxy in the South Asian region?

The incident brings forth the need to revisit the fundamentals of the existing confidence building measures (CBMs) and nuclear restraint regime and make it viable enough for ensuring a safe and stable regional environment. Irresponsible political rhetoric and reckless actions are seriously eroding the deterrence stability between India and Pakistan. At a time, when there appears no appetite or desire for dialogue, can this incident bring forth the realisation that inadvertent or intentional nuclear brinkmanship, will lead to mutual annihilation? The paper examines the potential for a viable CBMs regime for the South Asian region, particularly in the nuclear arena. It dwells on the problems and impediments that hamper and delay the growth of such initiatives.

Question with regards to leaderships' comprehension of using nuclear weapons as a tool of populist politics is an important aspect that leads to slow erosion of deterrence stability. Specially, in the backdrop of hyper nationalism stroked by Modi. In the absence of a strong political will to make such efforts a success, the question to be sought is whether any of the already recommended nuclear safety nets is able to yield any positive results. Given this scenario, a set of recommendations is proposed to ensure a progressive and sustained cooperative regime that restores mutual trust and confidence, and works towards ensuring a safe, stable, and secure nuclear South Asia.

CBMs: Theoretical Overview

A viable and useful instrument of foreign and security policies, CBMs as a concept evolved during the Cold War, out of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) process.¹¹ These first generation CBMs effectively facilitated arms control and disarmament agreements and brokered a conflict resolution process between the United States of America (US) and Soviet Union. The main purpose of

¹¹ Kanti Bajpai, "CBMs – Contexts, Achievements, Functions," in Dipankar Banerjee ed., *Confidence Building Measures in South Asia*, (Colombo: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, 1999), 10.

these measures was to enhance transparency, help facilitate and open channels of communication, and minimise unpredictable and unexpected adversarial actions, which could help strengthen stability, and could eventually lead to promoting and encouraging adversaries in defining new models of security relations.¹²

However, the fundamental question that surfaced in successive decades was whether CBMs as a concept were as strong, and virtuous as projected. Despite their utility as icebreakers, countries often used them singularly as viable alternatives to a genuine and institutionalised peace process. Dependent on mutual good will and voluntary commitment, the state actors remain under no binding obligation to honor and implement them. Resultantly, in the successive decades, CBMs lost their relevance and appeal, and were somewhat relegated to oblivion. However, once adopted, they helped facilitate and usher in the right “environment to reduce and avoid tensions, enabling political and military leadership on rival sides to communicate with each other.”¹³

Yet the key to the success of these measures fundamentally hinges on necessary political will amongst the belligerents to us her effective communication, accommodation, and compromise to enable successful negotiations. But as mentioned previously, they have conveniently and selective been used as an alternative to lasting peace and solution, which they were never meant to be, rather than steps to facilitate and achieve larger goals. As stated by Bajpai, “clearly, CBMs are not intended to deal with the root causes of conflicts but ... are the first step in turning hostile relationship into more accommodating ones.”¹⁴

The process successfully paved the path for *initiation* of dialogue, increased *transparency*, and improved *communication* between the two superpowers, providing greater relief to Europe which was the perceived *ground zero* of any ensuing conflict. However, the same level of success was not meted out in other conflict regions, despite, serving the baseline

¹² Marie-France Desjardins, *Rethinking Confidence- Building Measure, Obstacles to Agreement & the Risks of Overselling the Process*, Adelphi Paper No. 307, (London: IISS, OUP, 1996), 4.

¹³ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, in Banerjee ed., “CBMs and South Asia,” 27.

¹⁴ Cheema, “CBMs and South Asia,” 4.

purpose of initiating dialogue and breaking ice when needed, there appeared little hope given the specific nuances and strategic environment.

History of CBMs in South Asia

With deeply entrenched conflict fault lines, which have hardened through the decades, a meaningful confidence building or risk reduction regime has been of limited benefit for India and Pakistan. For the region, CBMs, usually have been adopted as a consequence of external actors' push or owing a crisis that has had a potential to explode into a full-fledged conflict. Desjardins statement that in conflict case studies where, "the enemy image is a prominent feature, the main usefulness of CBMs is seen in reverse,"¹⁵ holds true for India and Pakistan. These potential flash points in contemporary timeframe also incorporate hybrid form of conflict, ranging from subversive actions that have contributed to an ugly stability,¹⁶ to adventurism in the shape of surgical strikes, false flag operations, low intensity conflict, creating hate constituencies at domestic level, and India's perpetual quest for power maximisation leaves little space for dialogue and peaceful engagement.

Feeding this disconnect are the Western powers, primarily the US, which in its quest for a regional proxy, has helped empower India in all domains — conventional, strategic as well as diplomatic, thus contributing to major conventional as well as strategic imbalance in the region. New Delhi remains under no pressure especially from the Western quarters, to address the human rights' atrocities, or reverse its unlawful unilateralist actions in the occupied Jammu and Kashmir, nor any questions with regards impunity against minorities mainly Muslims are ever asked. It openly seeks the destruction of Pakistan, which to the ruling Saffron brigade is *an icon of hope for the Muslims*, creating a belligerent mindset that according to Tanham, "Indians consider the whole of the South Asian region as one political and strategic entity and that they intend to deny Pakistan the potential to challenge this claim. Most Indians strategists assume that Pakistan is the main hurdle in the Indian way for becoming the regional

¹⁵ Desjardins, 20.

¹⁶ This state has also been described as one of 'ugly stability' on account of the 'inability of both India and Pakistan to attain what may be desired political objectives through war.' See Ashley J. Tellis, *Stability in South Asia*, RAND Documented Briefing (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1997), 5.

power in South Asia.”¹⁷ Yet, it would be a misnomer to assume that there has been no breakthrough between the two neighbours. From earlier accords on division of combined assets, population exchange, to river water sharing and signing a series of measures to enhance transparency communication linkages and crisis stability — India and Pakistan have brokered important decisions that prevented conflict.

The 1999 Lahore declaration was a monumental breakthrough, that can be termed as the second generation of trust and confidence building measures between the two neighbours who had by then mutually acquired a nuclear status. Though the bonhomie surrounding the event was short lived, as soon after the entire spirit eroded because of the Kargil conflict.¹⁸ Most importantly, where the pre-existing CBMs were reaffirmed, it was successful in the signing of nuclear restraint regime, which to a greater extent still exists between the two. The realisation with regards the safety and security of nuclear assets, and the need for bilaterally adopting measures to ensure deterrence stability was further strengthened under the 2004 Composite Dialogue Process.¹⁹ A spirit, which given New Delhi’s

¹⁷ George K. Tanham, *Interpretive Essay on Indian Strategic Thought*, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, 1992, 31.

¹⁸ In the *Brasstacks 1986-87 crisis* and then that of May 1990, there is ample research conducted which leads to the conclusion that Pakistan on both occasions gave India a clear signal of its nuclear weapon capability and its intentions of using this option if the need arises. For discussion of the “Brasstacks” exercises. See Kanti Bajpai, P. R. Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, Stephen P. Cohen, and Sumit Ganguly, *Brasstacks and Beyond: Perception and Management of Crisis in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995).

¹⁹ In year 2004, Pakistan and India revived the dialogue process after a five years’ breach which witnessed the brief Kargil war, failed Agra summit, Indian Airlines hijacking, terror strikes in India leading to the 2001-02 military impasse. In the sidelines of the 12th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee accepted the then Pakistani President Pervez Musharaf’s invitation to visit Pakistan for the next summit being hosted by the latter. As a result of Premier Vajpayee’s visit the 2004 Composite Dialogue Process was initiated, with eight agenda items to be discussed and deliberated namely: Peace and Security, including confidence-building measures (CBMs); Jammu and Kashmir; Siachen Glacier; Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation project; Sir Creek; Economic and Commercial Cooperation; Terrorism and Drug trafficking; and lastly the promotion of friendly exchanges in various fields. Under the 2004 CDP, at least seven rounds of dialogue on strategic and nuclear issues and six rounds of discussion on conventional security issues were successfully conducted. These are author’s own views. Also see: Nabih

adventurism, seems to be slowly eroding. Since the inconclusive Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue (2016),²⁰ due to the failure or absence of official dialogue process, non-official or alternate tracks provided a viable alternative and relief from rigid posturing. But in the last one decade, these tracks have also become ineffective as they mimic state posturing only.

Trauma memorialisation resulting from the 1947 partition re-enforced over the decades by distrust, a supporting hyper-nationalist and ideological narrative which in later years becomes louder and stronger, has created, and deeply embedded a strong “enemy image,”²¹ that feeds a burgeoning conflict rather than peace constituency. Besides these domestic and bilateral irritants, de-hyphenation of India and Pakistan in international community’s security calculus, where India is being courted and strengthened to play a proxy against rising China, further weakens the desire for engagement and dialogue between the traditional regional adversaries. New Delhi, despite a growing inventory of Pakistan specific weaponry, delinks its military preparedness as being China specific. Where the latter notion helps India develop a stronger military muscle, it contributes to a growing instability dilemma that has severe debilitating impact on bilateral security regime.

Nuclear Restraint Regime — Brief Overview

According to K. Subrahmanyam “nuclear weapons are not military weapons. Their logic is that of international politics and it is a logic of global nuclear order. ...India wants to be a player in and not an object of this global nuclear order.”²² Whether India acquired nuclear weapons technology as a protection against China or symbol of prestige and

Gul, “Pakistan-India Composite Dialogue,” *Pakistan Horizon*, vol. 61, no. 3 (July 2008): 11-17.

²⁰ Post Mumbai attacks 2008, India and Pakistan attempted at reinitiating the dialogue process in 2016. This time under the banner of *Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue*, ten issue areas were outlined, that had counterterrorism, narcotics control, humanitarian issues and religious tourism besides the previous ones. Unfortunately, the process could not bring about any positive outcomes and soon died down.

Shamsa Nawaaz, “Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue: Risks and Opportunities for Pakistan and India,” *Strategic Studies*, vol. 36, no 4, (2016): 77-99.

²¹ Rasul Bux Rias, “South Asia and the Global System: Continuity & Change,” in Shelton U. Kodikara ed., *External Compulsions of South Asian Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993), 24.

²² Strobe Talbott, “Dealing with Bomb in South Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 78, no. 2 (March/ April 1999): 116.

political currency to fulfill its aspirations for great power status,²³ which gradually became integral to the ultra-nationalists' vision of *Greater India*. Commenting on the Indian nuclear tests of 1998, Stephen Cohen stated, "India's 1998 nuclear weapons tests seemed to be the act of a rising power. They were coupled with a sharp political attack on the weakest of the great powers (China) and an appeal for strategic cooperation with the biggest, America."²⁴ Besides using the nuclear card for external power play, it was happily embraced at home, with BJP led by Atal Bahari Vajpayee placing nuclear tests as an important agenda item in its manifesto. Although, overt nuclearisation was desired by all the political parties, whether secular or right wing, according to George Perkovich "it was the Jan Sangh, political precursor of BJP, which was the most vocal pro-bomb party. [as it considered that] India's prestige and national security depended on nuclear weapons."²⁵

For Pakistan, the widening conventional imbalance, and the need to protect itself against India's belligerent posturing and designs were amongst the foremost reasons in seeking the nuclear route.²⁶ Despite questions raised about the ability to handle and comprehend the dynamics of such a strategic arsenal, the two neighbors to maintain stability through effective nuclear deterrence bilaterally signed the 1999 nuclear risk reduction agreement. However, twenty-three years since the *Buddha smiled again*,²⁷ there have been repeated attempts to test the limits of deterrence as well as restraint that included Kargil, hybrid warfare, including terrorism and subversive activities, arming of proxy actors, false flag operations and surgical strikes. This reckless brinksmanship carries the inherent danger of breakdown in deterrence and spiraling out of control that carries dire consequences.

²³ T. V Paul & Baldev Raj Nayar, *India in the World Order: Searching for Major Power Status* (Foundation Books : New Delhi, 2004), 17.

²⁴ Stephen P. Cohen, "India and the Region," in C. R. David Malone, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy* (Croydon: Oxford University Press), 346.

²⁵ George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: Impact on Global Proliferation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 151.

²⁶ Khan, *Eating Grass*, 86-88.

²⁷ Code name for the second round of nuclear tests carried out by India on May 11, 1998.

Tracing the nuclear trajectory, both India and Pakistan have covered sufficient ground, where India packaged its nuclear weapons program as a peace offering, by using terms as — Peaceful nuclear explosion, *Buddha smiles*²⁸ or *Buddha smiles again*, taking the *No-First Use* option, and coming up with a nuclear doctrine. Pakistan without a deliberately declared nuclear doctrine, maintains a robust and well-defined nuclear command structure, and declared *nuclear red lines*.²⁹ With an immaculate record of safety and security which has been acknowledged and appreciated by the Western world.³⁰

However, more than two decades since going nuclear, instead of showing restraint, New Delhi has repeatedly indulged in adventurism, as well as indicated preemptive action (contradictory to the No First Use policy) while reappraising its strategic doctrines into offensive settings. Sumit Ganguly stated that India “has been grappling with an effort to forge a new military doctrine and strategy to enable it to respond to Pakistani needling while containing the possibilities of conflict escalation, especially to the nuclear level.”³¹ This transformation occurs also as a result of India becoming more relevant to the Western world,

²⁸ India’s first nuclear test in year 1974 was termed as a *Peaceful Nuclear Explosion*, as India termed it a test device and secondly to deflect world’s attention from India manifesting any aggressive designs and was commonly referred to as the *Smiling Buddha*. However, one of the architects of India’s nuclear program, Raj Ramanna, Former Director of India’s Nuclear Program speaking to the Press Trust of India on October 10, 1997, said, “The Pokhran test was a bomb, I can tell you now... An explosion is an explosion, a gun is a gun, whether you shoot at someone or shoot at the ground... I just want to make clear that the test was not all that peaceful.” See: “India’s Nuclear Weapons Program, Smiling Buddha: 1974,” *Nuclear Weapons Archives*, November 8, 2001, <http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/India/IndiaSmiling.html>

²⁹ Transcript of the keynote Address and Discussion Session with Lieutenant General (Retd) Khalid Kidwai, Advisor, National Command Authority; and former Director-General, Strategic Plans Division, Pakistan at the Seventh IISS-Centre for International Strategic Studies (CISS) (Pakistan) Workshop on ‘South Asian Strategic Stability: Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control’ Thursday, February 6, 2020.

³⁰ Riyaz ul Khaliq, “Nuclear Safety Index: Pakistan Ranking ‘Most Improved’ South Asian country,” *Anadolu Agency*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/nuclear-safety-index-pakistan-ranking-most-improved/1920106>

³¹ Sumit Ganguly, “Nuclear Stability in South Asia,” *International Security*, vol. 33, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 45-70.

there is a certain belligerence, and aggression in its nuclear posture as well as military doctrine.³²

To ensure an institutionalised regime, the first major agreement between India and Pakistan was the 1991 Agreement on the Non-Attack on Nuclear Installations.³³ By virtue of this agreement, India and Pakistan would not only refrain from launching attacks against respective civilian as well as defence related nuclear facilities but would also exchange a list of these installations on annual basis. Given the advancement in satellite technology, although, such an exchange in the contemporary environment may seem unnecessary, plus over the last three decades, it has been routinised and relegated to relative insignificance, but it holds immense currency as a transparency measure. Given the level of distrust, even this simple exercise took the two neighbours several years to sign and implement this measure, with several caveats left.³⁴

February 1999 Lahore Agreement³⁵ is an historic document that in its ambit spelled out for, “the two sides, based on the objectives of universal nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation were convinced of the importance of mutually agreed confidence building measures for improving the security environment; and would work together to build and promote a stable regional environment of peace and security.”³⁶

The issues mutually decided covered, seeking bilateral “consultations on security concepts,” nuclear doctrines, avoiding conflict and working

³² Biswas, 50.

³³ India and Pakistan signed an agreement on December 31, 1988, which was entered into force on January 1, 1991, to refrain from undertaking, encouraging, or participating in actions aimed at causing destruction or damage to nuclear installations or facilities in each country. The text of the treaty stated, “Works or installations containing dangerous forces, namely dams, dykes and nuclear electrical generating stations, shall not be made the object of attack, even where these objects are military objectives, if such attack may cause the release of dangerous forces and consequent severe losses among the civilian population.” See: “India-Pakistan Non-Attack Agreement,” *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/india_pakistan_non_attack_agreement.pdf

³⁴ Salma Malik, “Nuclear CBMs in South Asia: A View from Islamabad,” in *The Challenge of Confidence – Building in South Asia*, (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications 2001), 215-238.

³⁵ “Text of Document signed at Lahore,” *Dawn*, February 22, 1999.

³⁶ “Text of Document signed at Lahore,” *Dawn*.

towards developing confidence building measures in the conventional as well as strategic arena. Provision of advance notification for testing of ballistic missile test flights. Undertakings to reduce and avoid unauthorised or accidental usage of nuclear weapons, as well as immediate notification, in case of an inadvertent or unauthorised launch or usage. Given the evolving nature of nuclear delivery systems, this measure was important, as an inadvertent incident could lead to crisis escalation. Furthermore, establishing and reaffirming new as well as already functional communication linkages, unilateral moratorium on further tests besides periodic engagement and review at bilateral as well as multilateral fora for consultations and review of issues related to security, non-proliferation and disarmament were agreed upon.

The Lahore process became the baseline for the several rounds of strategic parleys that took place under the *2004 Composite dialogue process (CPD)*. Amongst the eight sub-tracks outlined in the CPD, the expert level meetings on strategic issues remained the most productive. There was also an attempt to frame a permanent mechanism with regards *incidents at sea (INCSEA)* around year 2006, as both countries stretch their sea legs and the Arabian sea extending into the Indian ocean appears to be the future conflict point, but unfortunately it remained inconclusive.³⁷ Post Mumbai terrorist strikes, the *2016 Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue*, was too short lived and weak to take the dialogue process any further. However, between the Kargil incident to February 2019 Balakot strikes, the US role as an honest peace broker has also transformed sufficiently.³⁸ An equation which since the signing of India-US strategic Partnership, has tilted favorably towards India, has proved highly detrimental for bilateral relations. With US supporting New Delhi on political grounds as well as providing strategic assistance in shape of advance weaponry, intelligence, and data sharing, partnering in multilateral fora such as the QUAD, Washington has inadvertently contributed to a major conventional as well as strategic imbalance in the region.

³⁷ Nathan Cohn, "An Incidents at Sea Agreement for South Asia," *Stimson Centre*, June 14, 2012, <https://www.stimson.org/2012/an-incidents-at-sea-agreement-for-south-asia/>

³⁸ Moeed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia* (Stanford University Press, 2018).

Through these years, several other proposals have been suggested such as expanding the scope of the *1991 agreement of non-attack on nuclear installations* to include population centers as well. Enhancing the measure seeking advance notification of missile tests to include categories other than ballistic weapons such as cruise missiles as well, specifying the direction of tests conducted. Furthermore, exchange of seismic data as well as establishing of nuclear risk reduction centers, that could work as a,

central message center for all CBM and NRRM[Nuclear Risk Reduction Measures]notifications. The proper utilisation of NRRCs could prevent unintended signals from leading to a crisis or inadvertent nuclear escalation. The centers may also facilitate the identification, negotiation, and implementation of additional institutional and procedural arrangements, as well as technical measures intended to reduce nuclear risks.³⁹

However, despite an initial commitment and realisation of the severity of living with the bomb, several factors have contributed to the failure of a permanent fail proof mechanism. Ranging from the classic security dilemma, that has contributed to arms racing⁴⁰ and to populist adventurism. India now rationalises its aggressive military build up to its own problems with China.⁴¹ New Delhi's whimsical insistence on bilateralism, whenever a third party could play an honestly neutral role yet using the latter as and when suitable leaves little space for a meaningful intervention and dialogue. Modi regime has specifically trivialised these weapons as symbol of political jingoism, popularising them with religious iconography through its ultra-nationalist rhetoric, thereby reducing the space for meaningful conversation to negligible. The danger associated with such domestic narrative is that it reduces the threshold of deterrence significantly.

The apprehensions surrounding the March 2022 *BrahMos* missile incidence point towards the inherent dilemma of nuclear deterrence which is reflective in the classic stability/instability paradox. As India links and normalises hyper nationalist and ideological rhetoric with sub-conventional

³⁹ Rafi uz Zaman Khan, "Nuclear Risk-Reduction Centers," in Michael Krepon, eds., *Nuclear Risk Reduction in South Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York), 171-181.

⁴⁰ Hilary Synott, *The Causes and Consequences of South Asia's Nuclear Tests*, *Adelphi paper No. 332* (London: IISS, OUP, December 1999), 43-44.

⁴¹ Shekhar Gupta, "Nuclear Weapons in the Sub-Continent," in *Occasional Paper No. 21, The Henry L. Stimson Centre* (Washington, 1995), 34.

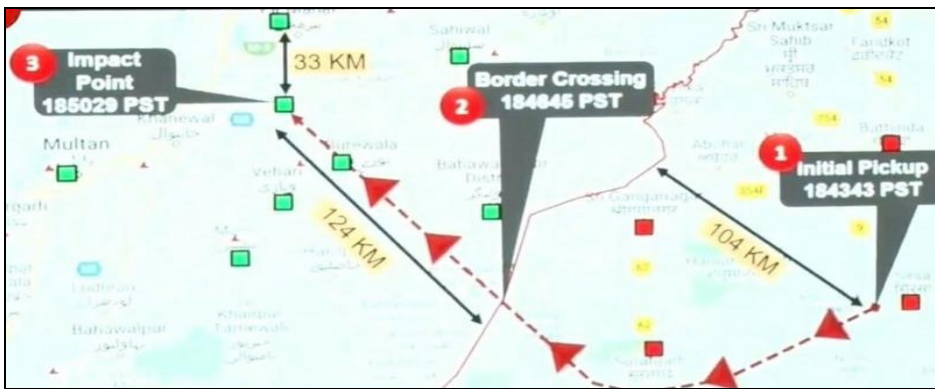
military operations, such as surgical strikes — incorporating such notions in its military doctrines,⁴² it will not only erode deterrence stability but could result in a spiraling conflict escalation.

Missile Misfire — 99 Seconds to Midnight

The prospect of conflict escalation resulting in catastrophic consequences being genuine and dynamic could not be felt more acutely, than on March 9, 2022, when the Pakistan Air Force radars picked up and started to monitor a “high-speed object” flying for 104 kilometers inside India in the state of Haryana, at a speed of Mach 2.5 and 3, *turned rogue* after 3 minutes and crossed into the Pakistani territory, cruised for another 3 minutes and 46 seconds eventually crashing at a populated area near the city of Mian Channu, Punjab.⁴³ What appears like a scene out of high speed thriller drama, this incident is being considered by nuclear watch dogs as a “historical first — a nuclear-armed state accidentally launching a missile at another nuclear-armed state.”⁴⁴

Map No. 1

Trajectory of Indian Supersonic BrahMos Missile Crashed in Pakistan



⁴² “Spectrum of Conflict,” *Joint Doctrine, Indian Armed Forces*, Head Quarters Integrated Defence Staff Ministry of Defence (April 2017),13-14.

⁴³ Matt Korda, “Flying Under The Radar: A Missile Accident in South Asia,” April 4, 2022, *Federation of American Scientists (FAS)*, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2022/04/flying-under-the-radar-a-missile-accident-in-south-asia/>

⁴⁴ Korda, “Flying Under The Radar: A Missile Accident in South Asia.”

Source: Inter Service Public Relations, Pakistan.⁴⁵

Had Pakistan not acted with prudence and restrain, given Modi regime's irresponsible and emotive anti-Pakistan rhetoric, this *technical malfunction* could easily have been perceived as a blatant act of provocation by Islamabad. The latter would have been justified in responding in kind. With the world focused on the Ukrainian conflict, not much attention was given to this grave occurrence. Alternatively, had this act been done by Pakistan and not India, would the world still be so nonchalant about the entire episode? Where the concern is as much about what happened, it also brings to light the atmospherics surrounding this incident. Ever since the Modi government has been voted into power, it has made no qualms about its belligerent and aggressive posturing with regards to Pakistan. Statements by key policy makers, the unveiling of *Doval doctrine*,⁴⁶ which in the words of Shishir Gupta, "at one level, it puts the Pakistanis on the defensive; at another level, it makes them chase ghosts and prevents them or distracts them from fixing the things that are actually responsible for the 'million mutinies' erupting in several parts of the country or are on the verge of exploding in Pakistan."⁴⁷ Minister for Defence Rajnath Singh's November 2021 speech in which he openly expressed the intent to repeat surgical as well as ariel strikes within Pakistan stating, "Now we have given them the message that ... not just at the border, we can cross the border and carry out a surgical strike as well, and if needed carry out air strikes as well,"⁴⁸ and even the prime minister time and again referring to nuclear weapons real time usage, has drastically lowered the threshold of nuclear deterrence.

⁴⁵ "India to Explain What Happened in Mian Channu, Says DG ISPR after Indian Projectile Falls in Pakistan," *Dawn*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1679289>

⁴⁶ Shishir Gupta, "National Security Adviser Ajit Doval Ready with India's New Military Doctrine," *Hindustan Times*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/new-military-doctrine-to-be-submitted-in-october/story-S0payhw9CgFs5FfeMqAMyI.html>. Also See: Ejaz Haider, "Doval Doctrine Is Recent, But India Has Been Living The Lie For Decades," *Friday Times*, November 25, 2021.

⁴⁷ Shishir Gupta, "Pak's Million Mutinies, Ghosts and Doval's Doctrine of 'Defensive Offence,'" *Hindustan Times*, November 25, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pak-s-million-mutinies-ghosts-and-doval-s-doctrine-of-defensive-offence/story-PWGAPieG3xu21s7z7D4NaN.html>

⁴⁸ Asad Hashim, "Pakistan Rejects India Defence Minister's 'Provocative' Statement," *Al Jazeera*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/22/pakistan-rejects-india-defence-ministers-provocative-statement>

Accentuating the application of nuclear weapons to theatre or sub-conventional level as an actual possibility, the Indian premier is famous for giving mythological symbolism to missiles and nuclear assets to enhance their appeal for the ordinary people. Randomly using terms such as *Brahmastra*, which means “single projectile that is able to destroy the Universe,” in the Hindu epic Mahabharata, was used by lord Rama in his final battle against the evil Ravana.⁴⁹ Modi’s 2019 speech at an election rally in Rajasthan of equating nuclear missiles to *Diwali firecrackers* is also an example.⁵⁰ Modi also promised to unleash missile strikes against Pakistan, and make it a *Qatal ki Raat* (The night of murder) if Islamabad did not return the pilot of downed Indian fighter jet, without giving any thought to what the Pakistan’s reaction and its resulting repercussions would be.⁵¹ This populist trivializing drew instant support and applause from the audience, who relying under the euphoria of aerial strikes earlier in February, intense war mongering and a renewed sense of hyper-nationalism firmly wanted to teach *belligerent* Pakistan a lesson.

A.G. Noorani aptly explains this Indian mindset in the backdrop of the *Doval doctrine* that for the Modi regime, the only strategy is to ensure that “Pakistan cannot possibly accept what are but surrender terms.”⁵² The irrelevance of morality, unbridled extremism and absolute reliance on military might, that Noorani aptly refers to as a “policy prescription [that] is marked by irrelevance of morality, extremism freed from calculation or calibration, and reliance on military might.”⁵³ Is extremely damaging and dangerous for the neighboring states, especially

⁴⁹ Raghav Bahl, “PM Modi Worships Lord Brahma, But Is Unable To Use His Policy Brahmastra,” *BQ Prime*, October 20, 2018, <https://www.bqprime.com/opinion/pm-modi-worships-lord-brahma-but-is-unable-to-use-his-policy-brahmastra>

⁵⁰ “Our Nuclear Weapons Are not for Diwali: PM Modi on Pak’s Nuclear Button Threat,” *India Today*, April 21, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/story/our-nuclear-weapons-are-not-for-diwali-pm-modi-on-pak-nuclear-button-threat-1506893-2019-04-21>

⁵¹ Jeffery Lewis, “Night of Murder: On the Brink of Nuclear War in South Asia,” *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, November 6, 2021, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/night-murder-brink-nuclear-war-south-asia/>

⁵² A.G. Noorani, “The Doval Doctrine,” *Frontline*, November 13, 2015, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/the-doval-doctrine/article23593361.ece>

⁵³ Noorani, “The Doval Doctrine.”

Pakistan, which to the Modi regime is a convenient target. This is reminiscent of the situation, when the US General Mike Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff secretly fearing that the then US President Trump could “go rogue” in the last few days before elections, with no definite guarantee as to what the “president’s trigger point is,”⁵⁴ called and assured Chinese leadership that the American government was stable and it was not going to attack or conduct any kinetic operations against Beijing. However, in India’s case, intoxicated by power play, there may not be sane voices to prevent the breakdown of this precariously maintained *peace*.

Irresponsible and jingoistic attitude, coupled with New Delhi’s unbridled power quest that is fully supported by the Western world led by the US, seriously undermines deterrence stability in South Asia. As stated earlier, questions and doubts have repeatedly been raised by the West with regards safety, security as well as personnel reliability of Pakistan’s nuclear assets. However, whether this should be taken as a technical malfunction, human error or a mala fide intent, the western world deliberately and hypocritically chose to remain silent over an issue that placed the region and beyond on a knife-edge of disaster. It is important to note, that the *2020 Nuclear Safety Index* ranked Pakistan as “the most improved country in the ranking for countries with weapons-usable nuclear materials,” faring better than India.⁵⁵ As one of the youngest nuclear weapons states, in the last twenty-five years since the May 1998 tests, Islamabad has developed a robust *nuclear security culture* that incorporates best practices as well as safety and security measures not only at state level, but also a part of key multilateral instruments that define the global nuclear security regime.⁵⁶

The questions that arise are, should India now and in future be considered a responsible and reliable nuclear weapons’ state? Had Pakistan not exercised restraint, this could have resulted in a nuclear

⁵⁴ Bob Woodward and Robert Costa, *Peril* (Simon & Schuster, September 2021), 08-12.

⁵⁵ Riyaz ul Khaliq, “Nuclear Safety Index: Pakistan Ranking ‘Most Improved,’” *Anadolu Agency*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/nuclear-safety-index-pakistan-ranking-most-improved/1920106>

⁵⁶ Tahir Mahmood Azad, “Pakistan’s Evolving Nuclear Security Culture,” *South Asian Voices*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.stimson.org/2021/pakistans-evolving-nuclear-security-culture/>

exchange, as response and reaction scenario between the two neighbors is almost absent, given the geographical proximity. The ideological divided and parochial sentiments that Saffron brigade led by Modi has deeply instilled in the Indian society, would *if* counter efforts be made, take decades to purge. Ironically, Pakistan's restraint in this near crisis is being projected by Indian influenced media brigade as gaps in the former's air defence systems⁵⁷ that failed to detect the incoming projectile. Pakistan military officials clearly stated in a press conference held the day next to the incidence that not only did they timely detect but followed the missile path but restrained from shooting it down due to peace time protocols.⁵⁸

Although, both the nuclear neighbours do not have an agreement on the notification of cruise missiles, which has been suggested at different times, there do exist protocols with regards informing each other in case there is an accidental misfire. There also exist dedicated and functional communication linkages, established specially for such scenario. Ironically, not until the next day, when Pakistan held a press briefing and announced the incidence, did India acknowledge that an accident had occurred, with an explanation that ranged from technical malfunction to human error. Downplaying Pakistan's claims with regards the missile's trajectory and destination, Indian defence sources confidently suggested that "the missile indeed was "follow[ing] the trajectory that it would have in case of a conflict, but 'certain factors' played a role in ensuring that any pre-fed target was out of danger."⁵⁹

Should Islamabad then seriously consider that this was an intentional strike, in the backdrop of Indian policy makers hate speeches, that embarrassingly for India failed, owing to their inferior command and control mechanisms or remain wary of more such *accidents* given the rising great power's dismal personnel reliability. (Indeed, an extremely dangerous prospect for a country that is being courted by the Western world and perceives itself to be a leading world power, a future accident landing in some strategic location within China, or even Pakistan, which

⁵⁷ Nitin J Ticku, "Pakistan's 'Supersonic Woes': Not Only BrahMos, How India's Other Lightning-Fast 'Weapon' Created Havoc In & Over Islamabad," *Eurasian Times*, March 15, 2022.

⁵⁸ Korda, "Flying Under The Radar: A Missile Accident in South Asia."

⁵⁹ Korda, "Flying Under The Radar: A Missile Accident in South Asia."

ends up costing human lives, would not so easily be brushed under the carpet, and conveniently ignored by the US.

It was sheer luck that there was no human loss or danger to civilian flights — yet another failure on New Delhi's part, as it did not issue the statutory pretest *Notice to Airmen (NOTAM)*. As India's strategic forces command moves towards increased readiness and canisterisation of their missile systems, Pakistan remains vulnerable not only to its mighty neighbour's poor nuclear safety and security measures, but also to the irresponsible trigger alerts issued routinely without any forethought by a frenzied leadership. This compels Islamabad to seek, prepare and adjust its deterrence capability to correspond with these threats and provocations.

Lastly, New Delhi did not have any plausible response to offer until seventy-two hours of the incidence, which further erodes its credibility and standing as a responsible nuclear power, and raises questions as to who were the elements responsible for this accident? Was it genuinely an accident, or as aptly questioned by Pakistan's National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf it was "something more intentional."⁶⁰ Indian policy maker's assurance of an inquiry and placing the blame conveniently on a mid-rank officer in charge, is again an arrogant dismissal of the big picture. This action brought the region and correspondingly the world closer to a nuclear midnight. Especially when New Delhi not only plans revising its *No First Use* option, which in any case is very ambiguously framed, but also has a portion of its nuclear force, particularly those systems that are "designed for use against Pakistan, now kept at a high state of readiness, capable of being operationalised and released within seconds or minutes in a crisis."⁶¹ Should Pakistan then consider this as a test run by India to gauge the threshold of its deterrence response scenario as well as explore gaps in its operational readiness.

Steps Towards Nuclear Restraint and CBMS

To ensure avoidance of such accidents in future, and build a viable restraint mechanism, both the nuclear neighbours need to not only

⁶⁰ Moeed W Yusuf, *Twitter*, March 11, 2022.

⁶¹ Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security*, vol. 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018/19): 37.

remain committed to the existing process, but also work to build it further. The tendency to ink protocols and either not abiding by them or willfully violating them, in the absence of any binding constraints, is least affordable in a nuclear scenario, where the two adversaries enjoy negligible warning time. A holistic nuclear or strategic restraint regime can work only if the adversaries realise the stakes involved and honor their commitments fully, and remain cognizant of the dangers of crisis escalation and the cost of adventurism under the nuclear shadow. The missile incidence also provides the much-needed impetus to revive the strategic dialogue stream, where the agreements signed during the Lahore process, or after are reaffirmed and new measures keeping in mind the changed strategic milieu are considered and adopted. In the last two plus decades since the 1998 tests, there have been a plethora of confidence and restraint measures suggested, both in the conventional as well as nuclear realm. Despite some of these suggested measures being doable and necessary distrust, coupled with a widening gap between India and Pakistan's strategic positioning has negatively impacted the overall environment.

There appears to be very little faith and confidence in a risk reduction regime, especially at a time when the incumbent regime in India uses missiles and nuclear weapons as vote gaining gimmick. A conversation on nuclear restraint regime, cannot be holistic if it takes place in isolation. Issues including conventional asymmetry, India's military empowerment by the US and its allies, the China factor and a domestic environment which does not comprehend the dangers of nuclear war mongering is gradually shifting the seconds to a nuclear midnight. A precarious and dangerous slide, that only means destruction and annihilation of quarter of the world's population.

If there was an opportunity to turn back the clock, where there remains a possibility of inadvertent accidents such as the March 9, BrahMos crash, the best scenario would have been an immediate communication and alert of the missile misfire to Pakistan, to avoid any misperception as well as a counter strike, for which Pakistan had in the limited timeframe fully prepared itself. The need at such times, is for a more transparent and mature handling of the entire episode than finding fault in and defying Islamabad's disclosure. As both India and Pakistan move beyond the initial decades of nuclearization, with strategic

postures, doctrines and cultures becoming better defined and stronger, the need of the hour is to avoid jingoism, hate mongering and trivialising this deadly arsenal and re-initiating a serious result-oriented discourse on nuclear risk reduction and restraint measures, in order to make South Asia, home to one fourth of world's population, a safe and secure place. The measures suggested in the above lines may not be entirely successful in ushering in complete peace. However, they may be instrumental in preventing the process of escalation and lead to a better regional security.