

China, India, Pakistan Trilemma and the 2025 Crisis

ISODARCO

12 August 2025



**Dr. W. Pal Sidhu, Clinical Professor, Center for Global Affairs,
School of Professional Studies, New York University**

INTRODUCTION

Why should we care about China-India-Pakistan Trilemma?

Series of crises: Russia-Ukraine, Israel-US-Iran, India-Pakistan, India-China

Sub-conventional and conventional conflict (below nuclear threshold)

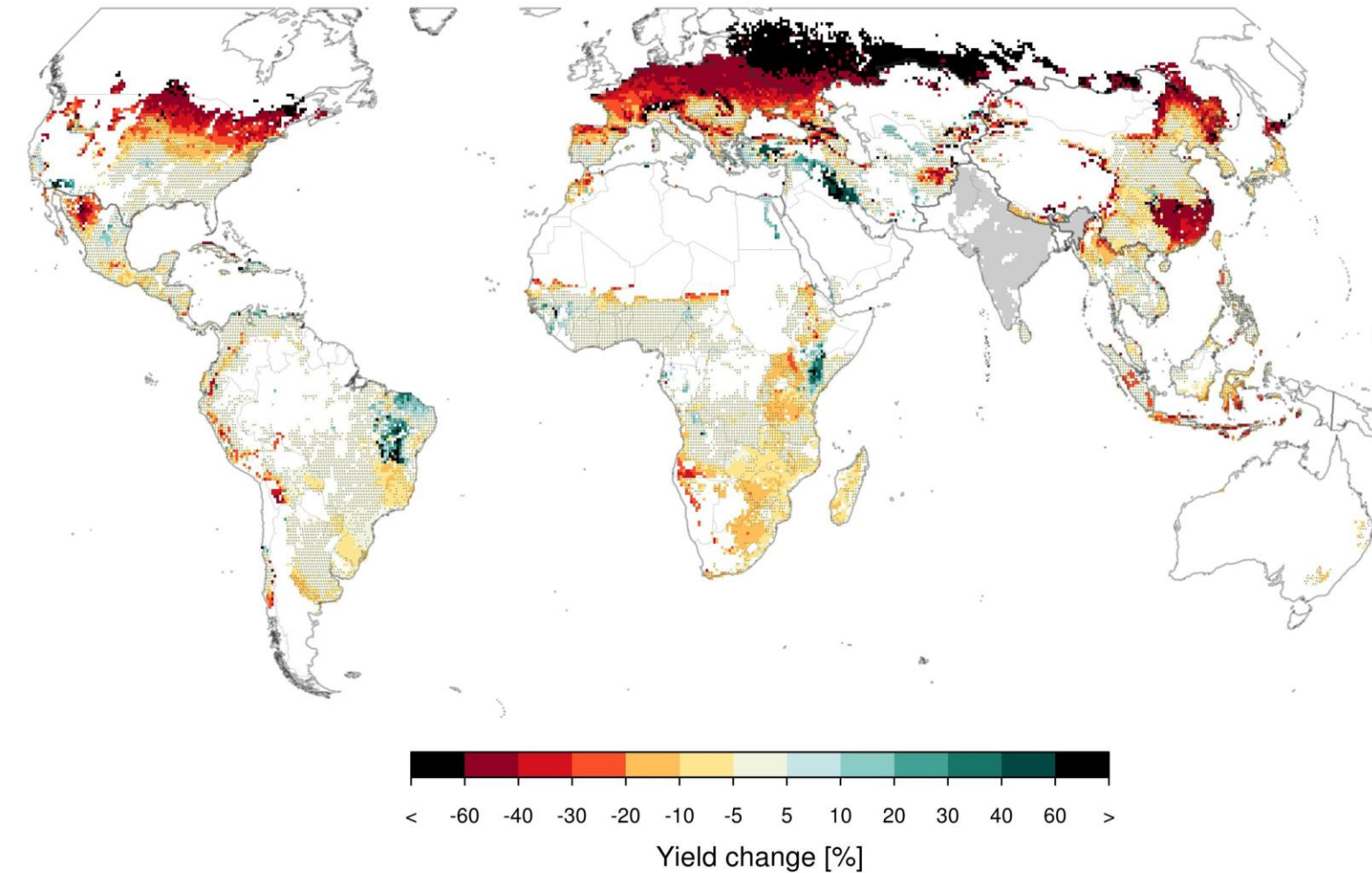
Role of 'nuclear terrorism' in series of India-Pakistan crises

Role of emerging technologies, AI and cyber in crises

Limited nuclear conflict & global nuclear winter

Strategic chain or Trilemma?

NUCLEAR WINTER



A 2020 study examined the potential effects if India & Pakistan used **50 Hiroshima-size bombs each**.

In addition to direct death and destruction, the study noted that firestorms following the bombings would cause production of the world's four main cereal crops—maize, wheat, soybeans and rice—to plummet an average 11 percent.

Crops would be hardest hit in the northerly breadbasket regions of the United States, Canada, Europe, Russia and China. But paradoxically, southerly regions would suffer much more hunger. Some **70 largely poor countries with a total population of 1.3 billion people would then see food supplies drop more than 20 percent**.

Average changes in maize yield in the five years following a nuclear war between Pakistan and India. Source: jonas Jägermeyr et al., "A regional nuclear conflict would compromise global food security," *PNAS* (2020).
www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1919049117

OUTLINE

History, Motives, Capabilities and Doctrines: China, India, Pakistan

India-Pakistan Nuclear crises:

- **1999: Kargil war**
- **2001-2002: Operation Parakaram**
- **2008: Mumbai terrorist attack**
- **2019: Pulwama-Balakot crisis**
- **2025: Operation Sindoor/ Operation Bunyanum Marsoos/ Four-day crisis**

Efforts to manage nuclear relationship: bilateral, regional, global

Strategic chain: US – China – India – Pakistan

China-India-Pakistan Trilemma

CHINA

- China's initial **motive** was primarily security driven, though it might have contributed to recognition as a major power
- Jan 1955: China sought nuclear weapons primarily to **counter threats** from the US; programme initially received **technical support** from Soviet Union
- China tested its **first nuclear weapon** on 16 Oct 1964 and carried out the first live missile-based detonation in 27 Oct 1966; declared 'no-first use' policy
- China reportedly gave the 1966 **bomb design to Pakistan** in 1984 as well as assisted in missile development of Shaheen missiles, supplied missiles to Saudi in 1988, and joined NPT in 1992
- China conducted its **last series of tests** in 1996 – during the final rounds of the CTBT negotiations – signed the CTBT but has not ratified it



CHINA'S BALLISTIC & CRUISE MISSILES



China has the most active and diverse missile development program in the world. China is modernizing its ICBMs, developing multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles and hypersonic boost-glide vehicles. China's navy is also deploying a new fleet of nuclear ballistic missile submarines. China's advances in ISR and maneuvering reentry vehicles have given it an emerging capability to attack large naval vessels with long-range ballistic missiles.



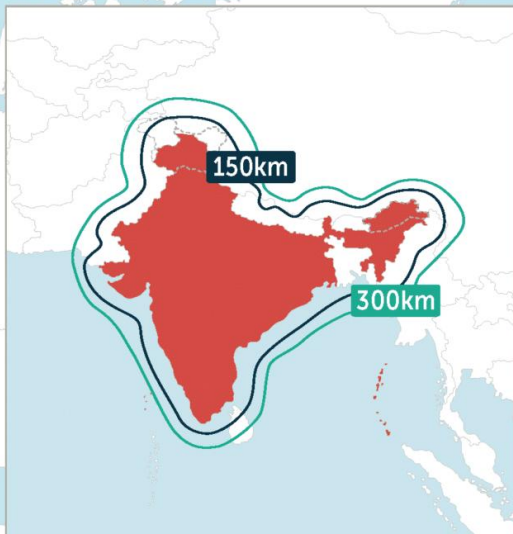


INDIA

- India's motives for going nuclear equally complex: partly to do with security threat from **China**, later **Pakistan**, but also quest for '**strategic autonomy**'
- India's program began in **mid-1960s** – after defeat by China in 1962 and China's nuclear test in 1964. India conducted its first nuclear test in 1974
- Four phases: weapon option (1948-1974); Un-weaponised (1974-1985~88); recessed deterrence (1988 – 1998); minimum credible deterrence (1998-)
- India conducted a series of **tests** on 11 and 13 May 1998 and declared itself to be a nuclear weapon state
- India has **never signed** the NPT or the CTBT, although it is a signatory to the PTBT. India has sought **membership of the UNSC** and the NSG. Became member of MTCT & HCoC in 2016. Indo-US nuclear deal of 2005: **Civil Nuclear Cooperation Initiative**. Similar agreements with France, Russia, UK



INDIA'S BALLISTIC & CRUISE MISSILES



India's missile forces largely support its nuclear deterrent posture against its main rivals China and Pakistan. To increase its nuclear forces' survivability, India has been diversifying its delivery platforms beyond land-based missiles and aircraft to include submarine-launched weapons. Although India primarily develops its ballistic missiles indigenously, New Delhi has collaborated with Russia on supersonic cruise missile development.





MIRAGE 2000N *



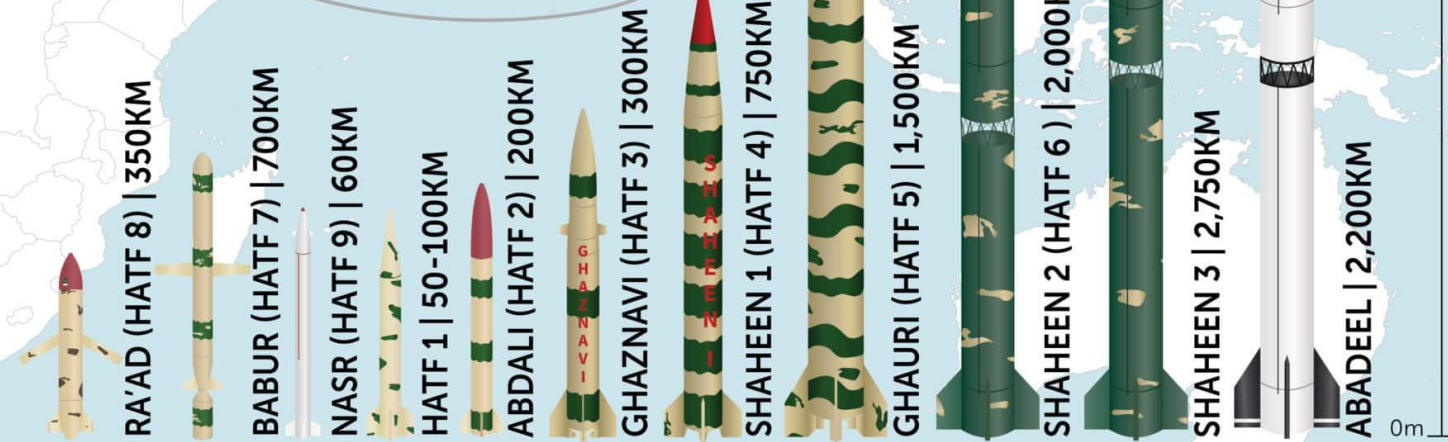
PAKISTAN

- Pakistan's initial motives related to **security threat** from India's conventional and nuclear superiority
- Pakistan's nuclear weapon programme **began in earnest in 1972** – after the 1971 Indo-Pak war – but accelerated after India's nuclear test of 1974
- Pakistan initially pursued the **Plutonium** path but soon shifted to the **Uranium** option. By 1986-87 Pakistan had built U-235 weapons
- Pakistan also conducted a series of **nuclear tests** in May 1998
- Pakistan too has **not signed** the NPT or the CTBT although it is a signatory to the PTBT. Pakistan is also seeking **membership** of the various export control regimes, especially the NSG
- A China-Pakistan nuclear deal to build additional reactors without safeguards has raised concerns. Proliferation implications of **China-Pakistan** nuclear deal

PAKISTAN'S BALLISTIC AND CRUISE MISSILES



Missile forces play a central role in Pakistan's defense strategy to offset the conventional military advantages of India, its main rival. Islamabad deploys primarily short and medium-range ballistic missiles, but it has also been making strides in cruise missiles. Pakistan's missile and nuclear programs have benefited from Chinese technical assistance, and evidence points to Pakistani co-operation with Iran and North Korea as well.



IRBM GHAURI
(RANGE 1500km)
SUCCESSFULLY TEST FIRED
ON MONDAY APRIL 6, 1998
AT 0723 HOURS



PAKISTAN
DR. A. Q. KHAN RESEARCH LABORATORIES
KH-11



DOCTRINES

Doctrines:

China:

Clearly articulated no-first-use doctrine amongst nuclear weapon states and non-use against non-nuclear weapon states. Notionally under civilian control.

India:

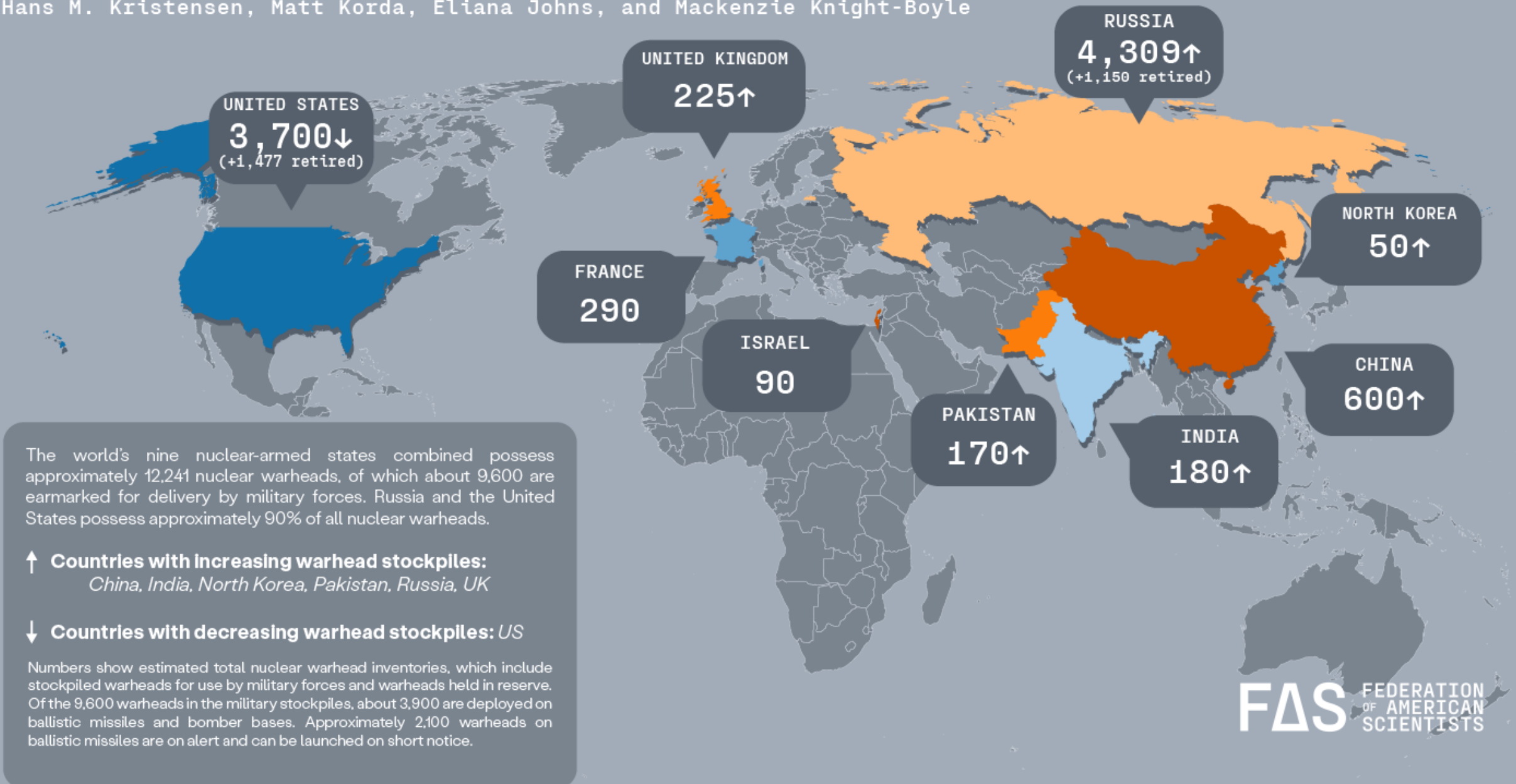
Clearly articulated doctrine since 2003 of no-first use and survivable second-strike arsenal with strong civilian control. Doctrine has not been revised.

Pakistan:

First and possibly, early use with a predominantly military command and control structure. No stated doctrine.

Estimated Global Nuclear Warhead Inventories, 2025

Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight-Boyle



CHINA, INDIA, PAKISTAN ADHERENCE

COUNTRIES	NPT	CTBT	NSG	MTCR	HCoC	NFU	DOCTRINE
CHINA	YES	NO	YES	ADHERES TO 1992 NORMS	NO	YES	YES (2019 WHITE PAPER)
INDIA	NO	NO	NO	2016	2016	YES	YES (2003)
PAKISTAN	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO

INDIA-CHINA CONTESTATION

- **Bilateral:** Tensions & confrontations along the Line of Actual Control: **Tawang/** Sum Dorong Chu (1986); **Depsang Valley** in Ladakh (2012 and 2013); **Doklam** (2017); and **Aksai Chin** (2020)
- Tensions despite 1993 and 1996 **CBM agreements**; 2005 Agreement on Settlement of **Boundary Question**; and **2013 Border Defence Cooperation Agreement**, the fifth version; also **trade deficit**
- **Regional:** **China-Pakistan alliance** since 1963; China's nuclear weapon and missile knowhow to Pakistan in 1980s; **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor**; China's growing **Indian Ocean** presence
- **Global:** China leads UNSC effort over India's **1998 nuclear tests**; China also seen to be blocking India's **UNSC bid** & **NSG bid**; contest for global South leadership and concern over **BRI**.

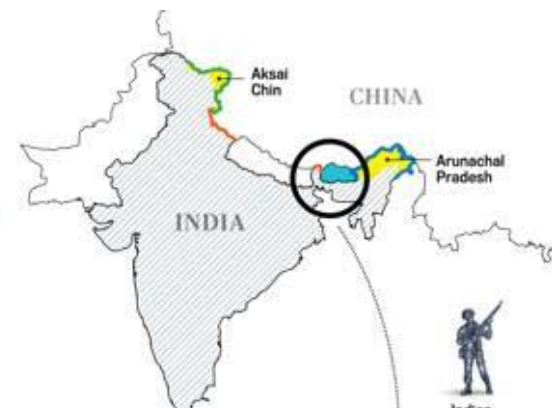
Current boundaries





CROSSED LINES

THE DOKLAM CONFRONTATION IS FOCUSED ON A SMALL PATCH OF REMOTE PASTURELAND IN BHUTAN, BUT ITS LOCATION IS PERCEIVED TO BE OF GREAT STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE FOR BOTH INDIA AND CHINA



SILIGURI CORRIDOR

A precariously narrow stretch of Indian territory connecting the country's northeast to its 'mainland'

DOKLAM

India and Bhutan see this as Bhutanese territory. China claims the trijunction of borders should be south of this plateau

CHUMBI VALLEY

The historic highway between Lhasa and Bengal—and a vulnerably narrow strip of territory that China would like to expand



Indian Army

Chinese Army

WESTERN SECTOR

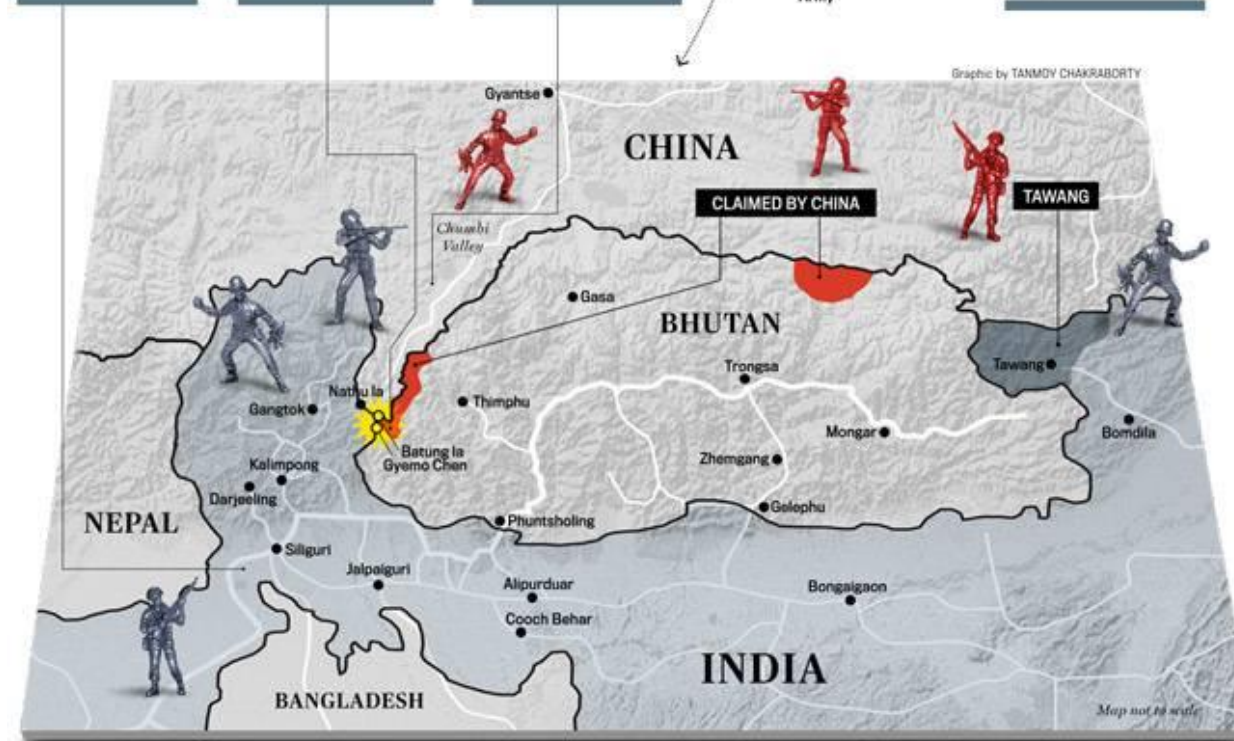
China holds 38,000 sq. km in Aksai Chin that is claimed by India

MIDDLE SECTOR

Basis of alignment largely agreed along watershed but some areas of difference, including Bhutan trijunction and Barahoti pastures in Uttarakhand

EASTERN SECTOR

China claims 90,000 sq. km in Arunachal, especially Tawang, over links to Tibet



Map not to scale

INDO SINO TENSIONS MAY 2020

GREY AREA - NOT MAJORLY FENCED & PERIODICALLY SEES PATROLS ACROSS HOTSPOTS IN THE REGION
NOTE - HAS MORE CHINESE INFRA THAN INDIAN

twitter.com/detresfa

OPEN SOURCE DATA - WIKI, GOOGLE & OSM

INDIA CLAIM LINE 1865

CHINA CLAIM LINE 1962

twitter.com/detresfa

CHINA TROOP BUILD UP (GREY ZONE)

GALWAN AREA

HOT SPRINGS

PANGONG TSO

NOTE - CHINA IN THIS SECTOR CLAIMS MORE AREA FURTHER WEST THAN SHOWN
LACK OF PUBLIC DATA RESTRICT PLOTTING

twitter.com/detresfa

** Lines are hand drawn, not to scale

Current Issues

- Indian claims of new Chinese development/infra impeding patrols
- Indian claims of Chinese troop crossover beyond China claim line
- Chinese claims of India infra/roads developing close to China claim line

INDIA - PAKISTAN BILATERAL AGREEMENTS

Have undertaken **not to test**, though neither has signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)

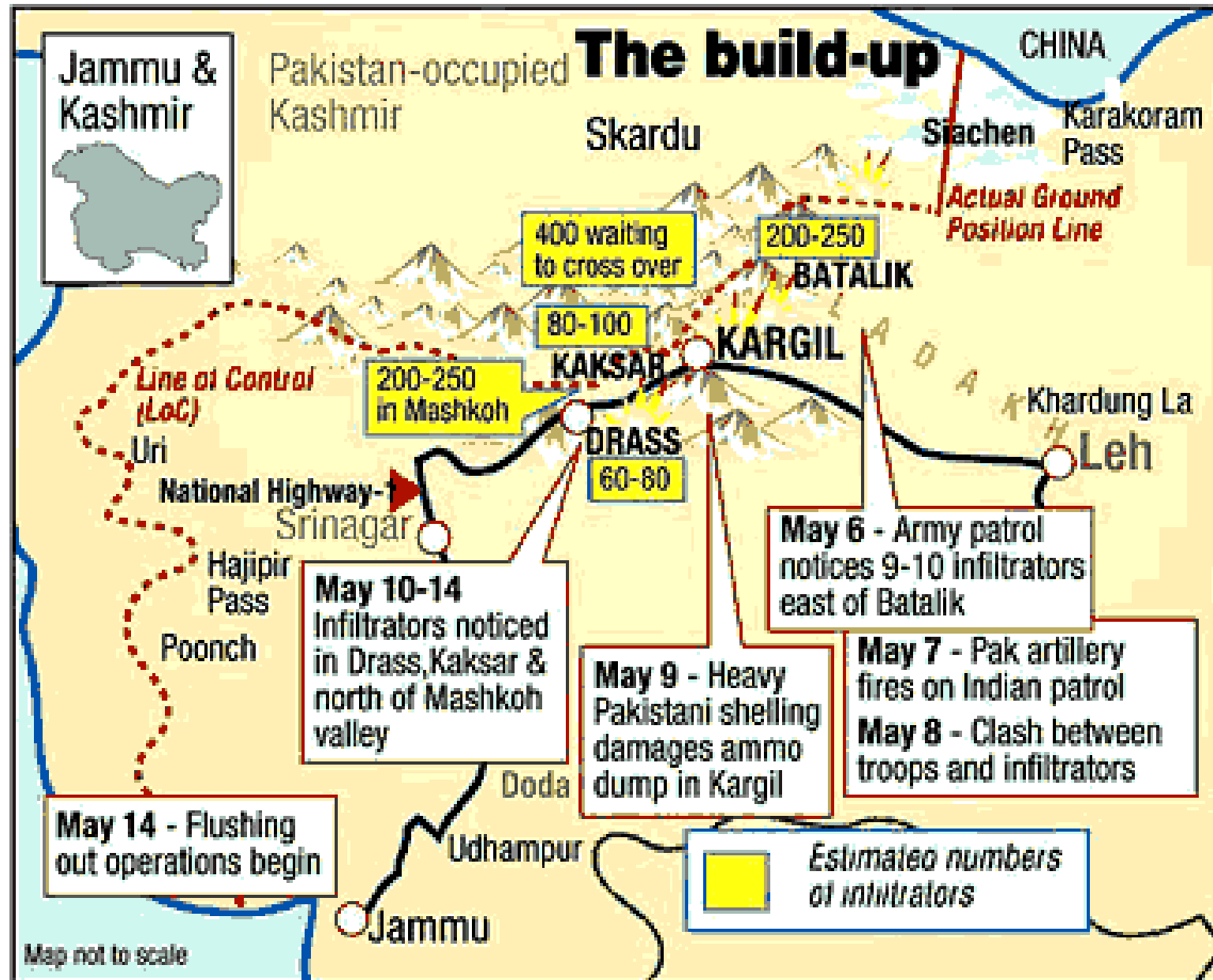
They are **unlikely to roll-back** and sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)

Three agreements in particular are noteworthy:

- Non-attack on nuclear facilities (1991)
- Pre-notification of ballistic missile tests (1999 & 2005)
- Agreement on Reducing the Risk from Nuclear Weapon Accidents (2007)

1999 KARGIL CRISIS

- **Intrusions** spotted in May 1999. India suffers heavy losses and contemplates crossing the Line of Control.
- Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif threatens to use '**ultimate weapon**'.
- Sharif visits Beijing and Washington and agrees to withdraw.
- **4th July 1999** agreement with US President Clinton



2001-2002 OPERATION PARAKRAM



A terrorist attack on the Indian parliament on 13 December 2001 prompted the 2001-2002 Operation Parakram crisis. It led to the 'cold start' doctrine.



2001-2002 NUCLEAR CRISIS

- In the 2001-2002 crisis both India and Pakistan **tested nuclear capable missiles** (India tested the *Agni I* in January 2002 and Pakistan tested the *Ghauri* and the *Ghaznavi* in May 2002) and are also reported to have deployed nuclear weapons.
- Both Indian and Pakistan leaders made **belligerent statements** while the world looked on in growing concern. The crisis was compared in its intensity to the Cuban missile crisis.
- The **international community** sought to defuse the crisis and some countries (US-UK) withdrew citizens from the region, thus indicating that it perceives the prospects of nuclear war as being very real. However, an element of political signalling cannot be ruled out.
- Although this **crisis was defused**, after the Indian demobilisation after the October 2002 elections in Kashmir, there is a distinct possibility that a similar crisis might recur in the future.

NUCLEAR TERRORISM

Direct threat:

Building and using nuclear weapons (less likely)

Building and using a radiological weapon – dirty bomb – (more likely)

Indirect threat:

Potential of actions by non-state actors prompting the two nuclear neighbours – India and Pakistan – into an inadvertent nuclear confrontation is most likely

2008 NUCLEAR TERRORISM



**26 November
2008 (26/11)
terrorist attack
on Mumbai,
which
originated from
Pakistan,
raised
tensions.**

**The attack
killed 175 and
injured 300,
including large
number of
foreigners.**

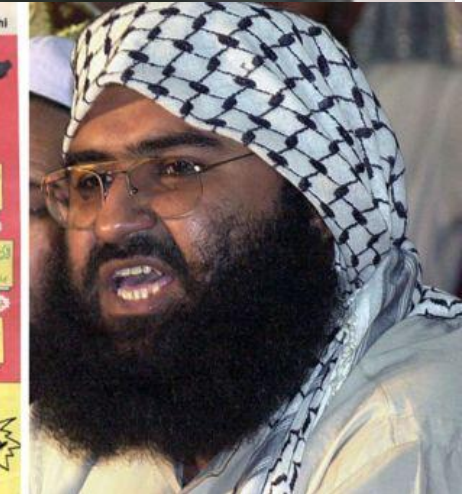
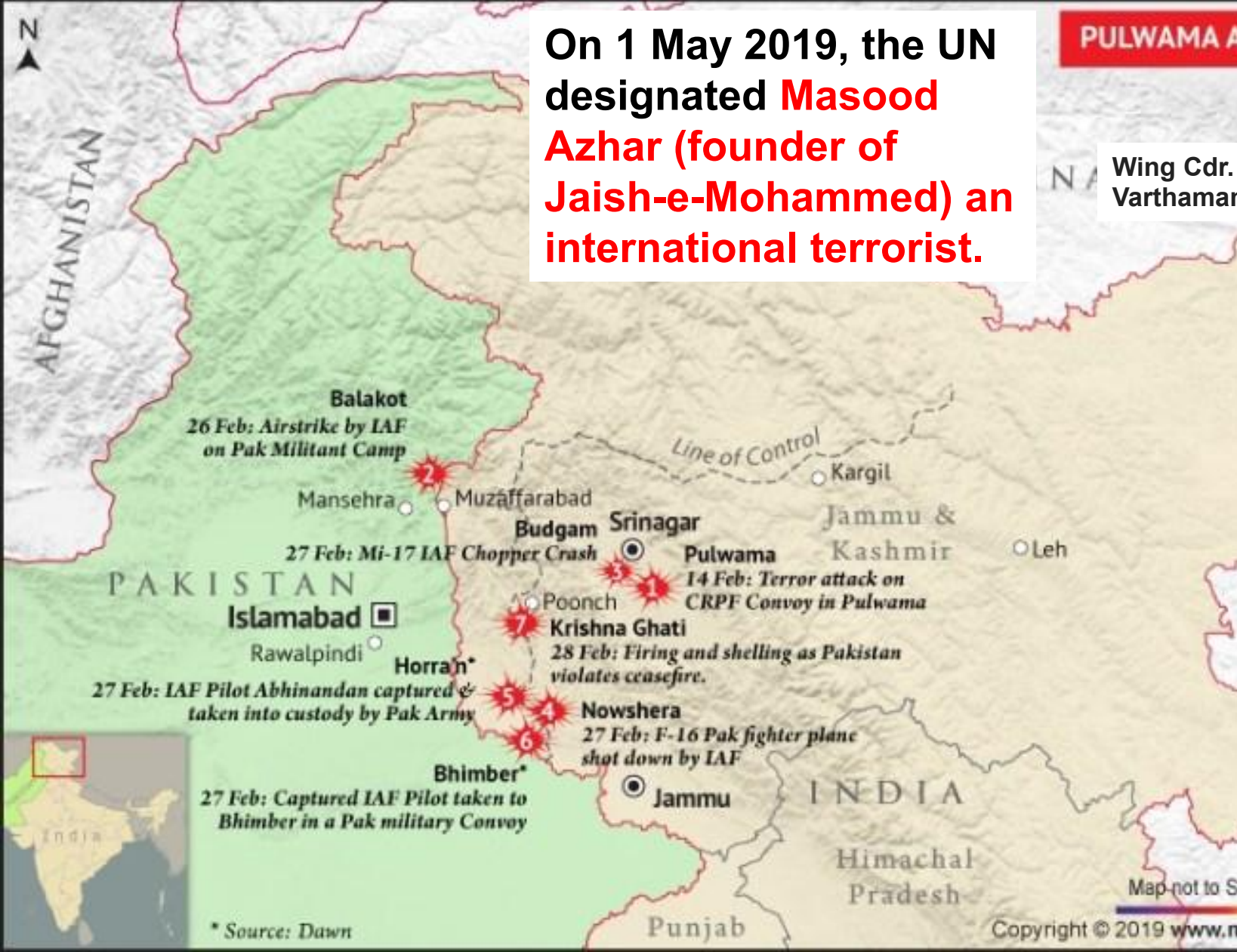


2019 PULWAMA-BALAKOT

On 1 May 2019, the UN designated **Masood Azhar** (founder of **Jaish-e-Mohammed**) an international terrorist.

PULWAMA AFTERMATH

Wing Cdr. Abhinandan Varthaman, IAF



2025 CRISIS

22 April 2025: Tourist [in the Pahalgam region](#) of Indian-administered Kashmir were targeted by gunmen allegedly from Pakistan-backed **The Resistance Front**. 26 men were killed after segregating them from women. Worst civilian casualties since 26/11.

Indian PM, Narendra Modi vowed to retaliate, and India suspended its participation in the [Indus Waters Treaty](#).

7 May 2025: India launched precision attacks on nine different locations, including LeT & JeM headquarters in Punjab. Strikes used drones and missiles.

INDIA-PAKISTAN

India strikes Pakistan

The Pakistani military says Indian missile attacks hit six cities in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir early on May 7. India said it struck nine sites. The attacks killed at least eight people and wounded more than 35, according to Pakistan.

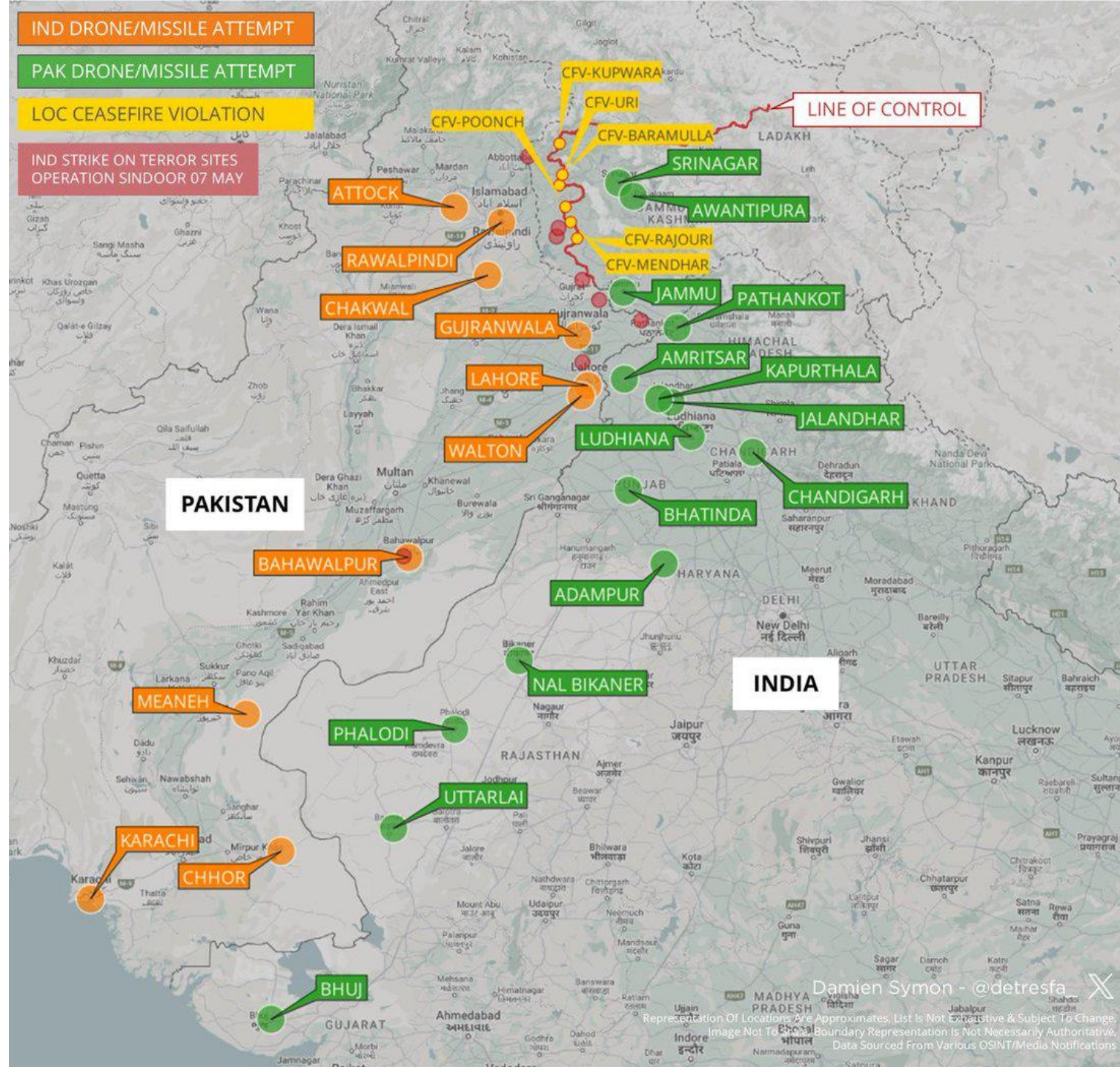


8 - 10 May 2025:

Over the next three days

Pakistan retaliated by stepping up cross-LoC artillery firing as well as attacks on Indian air and military bases.

India too stepped-up attacks on Pakistani military bases using drones and missiles. Evidence suggests that these attacks did damage some airfields and bases.



Pakistan's use of Fatah I & II missiles on Sirsa and Indian attack on Nur Khan base in Chaklala, near Islamabad raised serious concerns of escalation, including in Washington DC.

Subsequently, with some prodding from Washington, both Islamabad and New Delhi agreed on a ceasefire on 10 May bringing this conflict to an end.

WEAPONS DEPLOYED

INDIA:

Aircraft: Rafale, Mirage 2000, Sukhoi M30

Missiles: Brahmos, Scalp-EG, HAMMER (glide bombs)

Air Defense: S-400, Akash

PAKISTAN:

Aircraft: J-10, F-16, Mirage III/IV

Missiles: Fatah I & II, PL-15

Air Defense: HQ-9

2025 CRISIS

However, 2025 Crisis raises several concerns related to nuclear crises:

While the operation clearly challenged the activities conducted by non-state actors at the sub-conventional level, it also raised the prospect of conventional conflict below the nuclear threshold.

However, the dual-use nature of some of the weaponry also reflects the danger of nuclear escalation through accident or misperception.

Additionally, there was increasing role of cyber and some AI capabilities.

Both sides learnt lessons from Russia-Ukraine and Armenia-Azerbaijan wars.

Both sides sought to calibrate escalation but were surprised by other's decisions.

Role of third-party in off-ramping the crisis is also problematic.

SOUTHERN ASIAN CHARACTERISTICS

- Potential **major powers** (China and India) as well as **weak or fragile states** (Pakistan) possess nuclear weapons.
- There are very **few or weak** bilateral or regional **norms and institutions** that allow nuclear-armed states to manage their relations (no OSCE or NATO/Warsaw Pact). All these states are also not part of all the global institutions to manage their relations (such as the UNSC) and prevent proliferation (such as the NPT) either by design or choice.
- **None** of the Southern Asian states have undertaken **nuclear arms control**. Instead, weapons arsenals are improving quantitatively and qualitatively.

SOUTHERN ASIAN CHARACTERISTICS

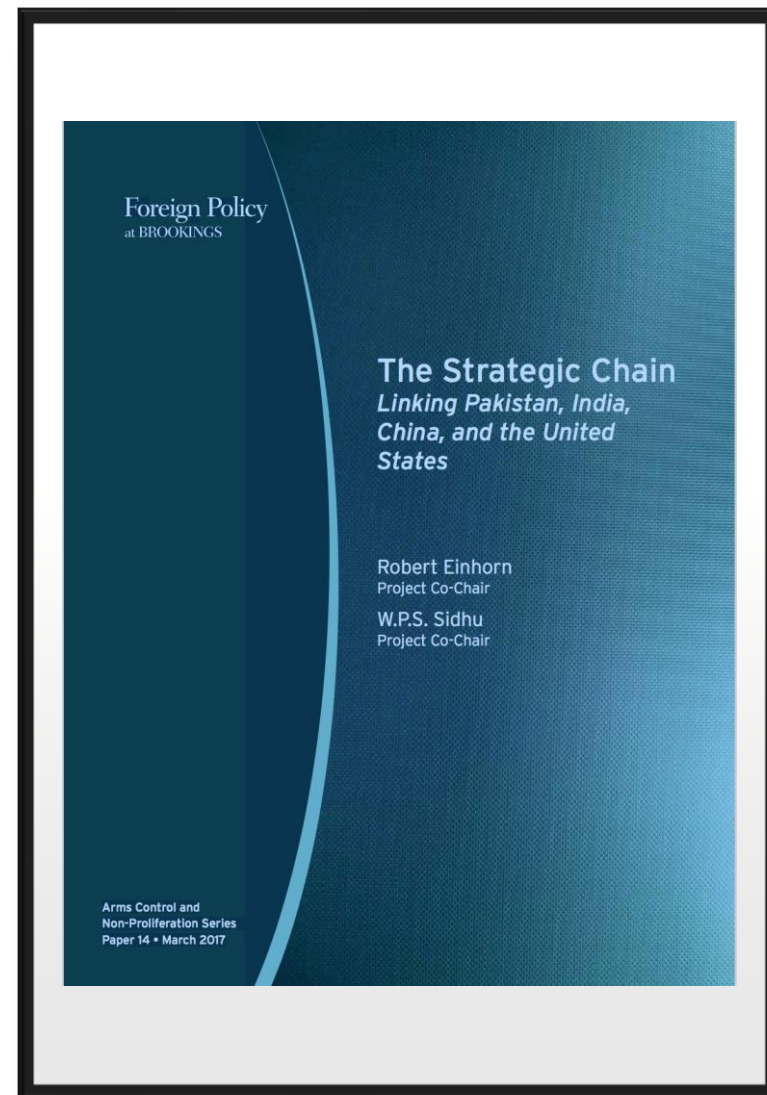
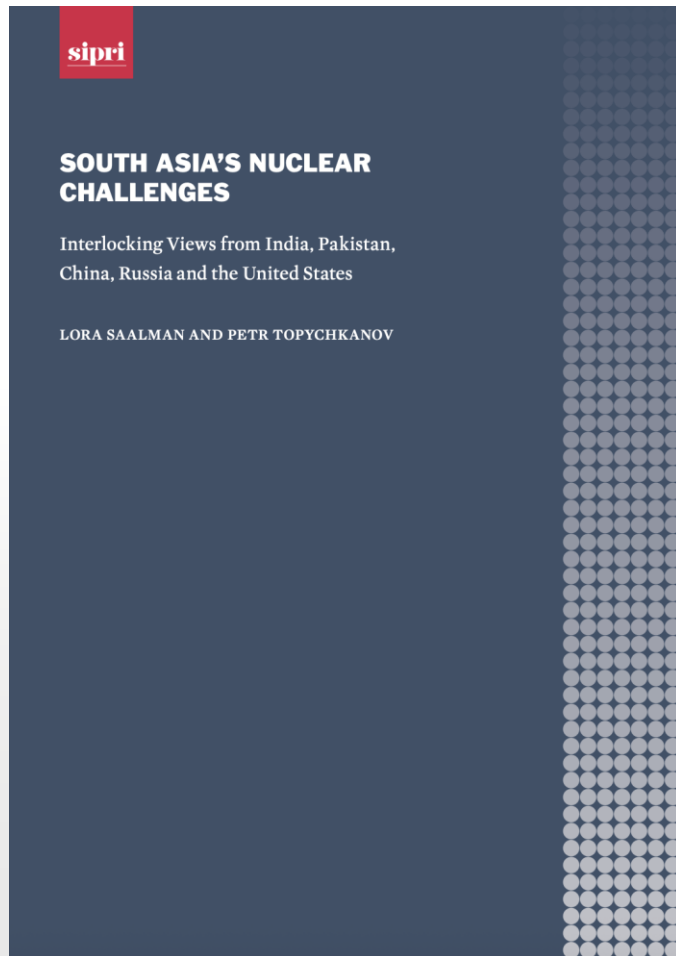
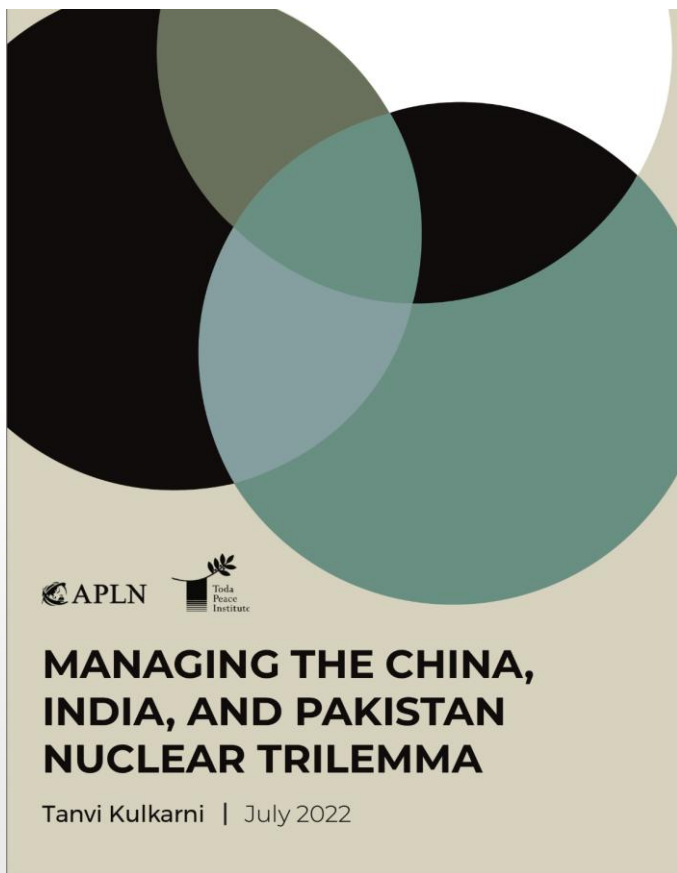
- US-China **global rivalry** gives Beijing cover to modernize and expand its nuclear arsenal with regional implications (eg. 3,000 km range DF-25)
- Nuclear and conventional **asymmetry** and **blurring** nuclear-conventional capabilities both between India and Pakistan and India and China. Also, role of new technology
- Nascent BMD and ASAT capabilities further **weaken** classic nuclear deterrence stability
- Role of '**nuclear terrorism**' particularly in the India-Pakistan deterrence relationship is problematic
- Growing **border and territorial claims** increasing tensions

SOUTHERN ASIAN CHARACTERISTICS

- Southern Asia is witnessing top-down and bottom-up **proliferation** challenges
- The **top-down** relationship will be determined by the US and China while the **bottom-up** will be driven by Pakistan, India and China
- In addition to ensuring **India-Pakistan** strategic stability, similar efforts need to be made on the **India-China** front. So far, such efforts have been missing at the bilateral, regional and global level
- In the absence of formal institutions to manage relations, the prospects of rising tensions leading to **conflict is a real concern**
- However, were Southern Asia to establish a **regional nuclear order** it would also transform the outdated global nuclear order

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Was this an old operation fought with new weapons?**
- **Was it an entirely new kind of operation determined by change in strategy and weapons?**
- **To what extent did AI and cyber increase the speed and ferocity of operations?**
- **To what extent did it cause or prevent escalation and surprised the adversary?**
- **To what extent did mis- and dis-information play a role and what role did the media play in this effort?**
- **Who won the conflict?**



QUESTIONS?



Waheguru Pal S Sidhu

Clinical Professor

CENTER FOR GLOBAL AFFAIRS

EDUCATION

BA, Delhi University, India

MAS, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

PHD, University of Cambridge

CONTACT INFO

wps2@nyu.edu



ABOUT

COURSES

Dr. Waheguru Pal Singh (W.P.S.) Sidhu is Clinical Professor and directs the United Nations (UN) Specialization at the Center for Global Affairs, School of Professional Studies (SPS), New York University. He teaches graduate-level courses on International Relations, the UN & global governance, weapons of mass destruction, and emerging powers & world order. He was bestowed with the SPS Teaching Excellence Award in 2021. Dr. Sidhu has over 30 years of pedagogical and research experience in some of the leading teaching and policy-research institutions in Asia, Europe, and North America. He is also Senior Research Associate, South African Institute of International Affairs, Johannesburg; Associate Fellow, Geneva Center for Security Policy, Switzerland; Member, International Advisory Council of the International Luxembourg Forum on Preventing Nuclear Catastrophe; and Member, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. He has also served as a consultant to UN agencies, including three UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Missiles. He is the author of multiple books, chapters, monographs, and reports, and has published in Arms Control Today, International Peacekeeping, Jane's Intelligence Review, Politique Etrangere, and the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. His recent publications include Shaping the Emerging World: India and the Multilateral Order (Brookings, 2012) and The Future of Global Affairs: Managing Discontinuity, Disruption and Destruction (Palgrave, 2021). Dr. Sidhu earned his Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge. He holds a Master's in International Relations from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and a Bachelor's in History (Honours) from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University, India

SOCIAL MEDIA:

- **Twitter:** @wpssidhu
- **LinkedIn:** [linkedin.com/in/w-pal-sidhu-b2922523](https://www.linkedin.com/in/w-pal-sidhu-b2922523)