

MODERNIZING INDIA-PAKISTAN NUCLEAR AND CONVENTIONAL CBMs

A Strategic Imperative



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C-21, 3rd Floor, Qutub Institutional Area, New Delhi, India - 110016.

Phone: 011-43104566 | Email: office@csdronline.org | Web: www.csdronline.org | Twitter: [@CSDR_India](https://twitter.com/CSDR_India)

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report examines the urgent need to update confidence-building measures (CBMs) between nuclear-armed neighbors India and Pakistan amidst increasing tensions and evolving security challenges. It analyzes the limitations of existing nuclear and conventional CBMs, evaluates the breakdown in diplomatic channels, and proposes actionable short, medium, and long-term recommendations—including enhanced crisis communication mechanisms, modernized agreements covering new technologies, and dedicated risk-reduction centers. These measures aim to prevent misperceptions, reduce escalation risks, and strengthen regional stability despite ongoing political constraints.

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RESEARCH DIRECTION

Dr Happymon Jacob
Lt Gen D S Hooda (retd)

AUTHOR

Hely Desai - Research Associate, CSDR

Executive Summary

- Recent incidents between India and Pakistan highlight the urgent need to update confidence-building measures (CBMs) between these nuclear-armed neighbors. These include the March 2024 interception of a ship with suspected dual-use equipment and Pakistan's concerns about India's second nuclear submarine.
- The BrahMos missile misfire incident in 2022 demonstrated the dangerous potential for miscalculation, yet no new risk reduction measures have been implemented since.
- Despite a history of expert working groups (2004-2012) that produced several agreements, formal dialogue has been suspended since 2012, with only brief attempts to revive talks in 2015.
- Current nuclear CBMs between India and Pakistan are limited in scope, with many lacking verification mechanisms. The 1988 Agreement on Prohibition of Attack Against Nuclear Installations, the 2005 Ballistic Missile Test notification agreement, and the 2007 agreement on nuclear accidents have critical gaps in coverage.
- Conventional CBMs including hotlines, advance military exercise notifications, and communication links between maritime agencies exist but require modernization to address emerging threats.
- Political narratives in both countries have become increasingly securitized, making diplomatic engagement challenging and eroding communication channels that are essential during crises.
- New geopolitical realities—including climate vulnerabilities, technological warfare, shifting regional alliances, and economic constraints—necessitate updated CBMs and new expert working groups.
- Proposed short-term measures (1-2 years) include enhancing DGMO hotlines, developing coordinated border security protocols, initiating informal bilateral discussions, and establishing crisis management backchannels.
- Medium-term recommendations (2-5 years) include creating dedicated nuclear risk-reduction centers, establishing an agreement on incidents at sea, conducting joint crisis simulations, and reviving Track 1 and 1.5 diplomacy.
- Long-term measures (5+ years) focus on updating existing frameworks to address emerging threats: revising missile testing pre-notification to include cruise missiles and hypersonic weapons, modernizing the 1988 agreement to prohibit cyber attacks on nuclear installations, updating the Indus Waters Treaty, and negotiating a cybersecurity non-aggression pact.
- While meaningful engagement remains challenging due to deep-seated mistrust, these recommendations provide a critical framework for managing risks and preventing escalation between these nuclear powers.

Introduction

The recurring instances of friction between India and Pakistan underscore the delicate nature of their regional security framework and the persistent challenges these nuclear neighbors encounter in maintaining strategic stability. Recently, in addition to the two primary issues—the Kashmir conflict and cross-border terrorism—occasional skirmishes have continued to arise. This highlights the importance of going beyond the expert working groups of the past and seek incentives for new confidence-building measures (CBMs) through innovative Track 1 dialogues, while also adapting and enhancing existing measures to address evolving bilateral security challenges.

Recent instances of miscommunication have fostered increasing distrust between the two neighbors, evident in several key developments. In March 2024, the interception of a Karachi-bound ship in Mumbai carrying suspected dual-use equipment raised Indian concerns about China’s strategic support for Pakistan’s nuclear activities, intensifying regional anxieties.[1] Meanwhile, in August 2024, Pakistan expressed worries about India’s commissioning of its second indigenous nuclear ballistic missile submarine, INS Arighaat.

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Such incidents continue to fuel fears of an intensifying naval arms race and strategic imbalance. Similarly, the recent U.S. sanctions on Pakistan’s missile program in December 2024 have intensified Islamabad’s regional and economic insecurity, especially in light of the growing defense and space cooperation between India and the U.S.[2] This evolving dynamic may drive Pakistan to evade sanctions and bolster its missile capabilities, further straining bilateral relations. The apparent calm in India-Pakistan relations belies underlying instability, with the 2021 LoC ceasefire frequently tested by flare-ups and ongoing violence in J&K—each side accusing the other of interference. Meanwhile, recent terror attacks in Balochistan have led Pakistan’s military and provincial leadership to accuse India of orchestrating unrest, adding to the cycle of allegations and counter-allegations.[3] With both states grappling with internal political and economic challenges, the risk of conflict escalation—whether through miscalculation or strategic diversion—remains high. Given this volatile environment, the need for robust CBMs is more pressing than ever—not just to address historical risks but to prevent future crises fueled by security dilemmas at both conventional and sub-conventional levels.

The history of ongoing military confrontations, along with events like the accidental firing of a BrahMos missile into Pakistan in 2022, highlights the urgent need for effective CBMs to reduce risks and increase transparency.[4] Despite calls for CBMs after the missile misfire, no new agreements have been made, leading to a gap in crisis management mechanisms.

Challenges in Advancing CBMs: Historical Working Groups and Current Stalemate

For over sixty years, India and Pakistan have sought to negotiate and implement measures to prevent conflict, reduce military tensions, enhance economic ties, and build the confidence necessary to normalize their relationship. However, the lack of meaningful bilateral engagement in recent years has become a defining characteristic of the India-Pakistan relationship, limiting any chance of introducing new CBMs or agreements across various areas.[5]

While frameworks such as the Lahore Declaration and Composite Dialogue have historically established a foundation for expert-level discussions on nuclear and conventional security, resulting in some CBMs, their efficacy remains a point of contention—especially considering the absence of any subsequent progress.[6]

Initiated in 2004, the expert working groups, consisting of diplomats and foreign secretaries from both sides, aimed to reduce risks through mechanisms such as upgrading hotlines between Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs) and Foreign Secretaries, enhancing local-level interactions, military maneuvers, and exploring new CBMs along the International Boundary (IB) and Line of Control (LoC). The annual expert-level discussions on conventional and nuclear CBMs were typically followed by meetings of the Foreign Ministers to review and implement the findings from the working groups.

For example, during the expert-level meeting in August 2005, both sides reached an agreement on a structured framework for pre-notification of ballistic missile tests, aimed at fostering confidence, predictability, and transparency between the nations. In addition, the expert group suggested an agreement on measures to prevent the accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons in accordance with the 1999 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Another round of talks in January 2006 underscored ongoing consultations on security concepts to strengthen CBMs in both the conventional and nuclear fields, concentrating on conflict prevention.[7]

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It also laid the groundwork for an agreement to prevent incidents at sea and in the air, ensuring the safety of navigation for naval vessels and aircraft from both sides.[8]

Nuclear CBMs over the years

Year	Agreement	Verification Mechanism	Details
1988 (Ratified 1992)	Prohibition of Attack Against Nuclear Installations and Facilities	No mechanism	Annual exchange of nuclear sites, regularly implemented
Not specified	Hotline at Foreign Secretaries Level	-	Used irregularly, no recent activity
2005	Advance Notification of Ballistic Missile Tests	No mechanism	Requires 72-hour notice before tests, excludes Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs)
2007	Reducing the Risk from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons	—	To notify each other immediately in the event of any accident (which may result in an international, trans-boundary release) relating to nuclear weapons, under their respective jurisdiction or control

Conventional CBMs over the years

Year	Agreement	Details
1965	Hotline Between Director General Military Operations	Used for crisis communication, including post-26/11 Mumbai attacks.
1991	Agreement on Advance Notification on Military Exercises, Maneuvers, and Troop Movements	Requires prior notification of military exercises and troop movements to reduce tensions.
1991	Agreement on Prevention of Airspace Violations and Overflights	Permits overflights and landings, establishes redress mechanisms for violations.
1999 No longer operational	Delhi-Lahore Bus Service	Enhances people-to-people interaction, temporarily halted during conflicts.
2005	Samjhauta Express Resumption	Delhi-Lahore train service resumed, continued despite the 2007 blasts.
2005	Communication Link Between Pakistan Maritime Security Agency and Indian Coast Guard	Facilitates early exchange of information on fishermen straying into foreign waters.
2005	Humanitarian Aid	India provided aid after the Pakistan earthquake.
2006	Lahore-Amritsar & Nankana Sahib Bus Services	Expanded bus connectivity for religious tourism and trade.
2007	Wagah Border Truck Route	Opened for trade exchange between India and Pakistan.
2008	Expansion of Cross-LoC Travel Permits and Air Links	Increased weekly flights, introduced triple-entry permits.
2008	Joint Judicial Committee	Focuses on the welfare and release of prisoners in both countries.
2008	Kashmir-Specific CBMs	Facilitated LoC crossings and trade routes.

However, subsequent rounds of expert-level talks in 2011 and 2012, which resumed after a pause due to the Mumbai terror attacks, predictably failed to produce new agreements or any meaningful progress. With neither side willing to take significant risks, discussions have since remained confined to the existing framework, offering little hope for substantive de-escalation. Overall, the expert groups have been unable to achieve their goal of resolving core disputes or improving bilateral ties. Tangible outcomes have continued to elude them. The lack of progress reflects the current state of relations between the nuclear neighbors rather than serving as a catalyst for change.[9]

The last structured engagement between Pakistan and India occurred during the expert-level talks in 2012. [10] Although there were short attempts to revive discussions through a Comprehensive Bilateral dialogue in December 2015, these efforts ultimately failed to take hold.[11]

Shifting Dynamics and the Erosion of Communication Channels

The ties between the nuclear neighbors have evolved in recent years, marked by heightened political tensions, the revocation of Article 370, the Balakot airstrikes, and a near-total breakdown in diplomatic engagement. However, the main casualty in most of these skirmishes was the disruption of direct communication channels between India and Pakistan. As dialogue continues to decline, the risk of complacency vis-à-vis bilateral obligations increases, with potential threats of risking the abandonment of agreements.[12]

The securitization of political narratives in both countries has limited diplomatic engagement, reinforcing the view that structured dialogue is neither a priority nor a politically viable option. [13] Furthermore, the ongoing risk of crises escalating dramatically due to misperceptions remains a concern.

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While broader CBMs remain reliant on the overall political relationship, both countries have shown their ability to turn crises into conventional CBMs. Changing geopolitical realities—including economic challenges, shifting regional dynamics, and the potential for miscalculation amid growing military capabilities—require a reassessment of security CBMs. However, unlike in the past, when dialogue and crisis management efforts coexisted with periods of hostility, the current environment is characterized by limited diplomatic contact and the lack of structured engagement mechanisms. In this context, the hesitation to develop new CBMs arises from the belief that institutionalized change is not urgently needed and that the risk of escalation through conventional weapons remains minimal.

Historically, every significant treaty or CBM between the two countries has emerged as a response to crisis resolution.[14] Any new CBMs must align with contemporary challenges, addressing emerging threats while navigating the complex strategic imperatives that now define bilateral relations. However, states generally only agree to develop CBMs if the expected returns outweigh their political costs.[15] For New Delhi, acknowledging the need for new CBMs in response to incidents like the BrahMos misfire would be seen as validating Pakistan’s criticisms—an outcome inconsistent with a government that has, since 2019, maintained a policy of minimal diplomatic and economic engagement with Islamabad.[16]

On the other hand, Pakistan has shown mixed signals regarding CBMs. While it has occasionally called for risk-reduction measures, its security establishment remains wary of any initiative perceived as reinforcing India's strategic advantages. Additionally, with its focus on internal instability and economic distress, Islamabad may prioritize short-term crisis management over long-term CBM commitments, especially if it believes that India is uninterested in reciprocal engagement.

Adapting CBMs to Changing Geopolitical Realities

However, triggers such as miscommunication, climate vulnerabilities, increasing reliance on technological warfare, shifts in regional alliances, and economic constraints have altered strategic priorities. These factors should act as catalysts for updating older CBMs, forming new expert working groups, and establishing fresh CBMs.

The existing nuclear Confidence-Building Measures (NCBMs) between India and Pakistan, for instance, are relatively limited in scope. One example is the annual exchange of nuclear facility lists, which does not always consider newly constructed sites.[17] Since these lists rarely change and are believed to omit certain sensitive locations—particularly those linked to nuclear weapons—they render the agreement largely symbolic.[18] While its significance lies in the consistent adherence by both sides, regardless of the state of bilateral relations, this practice requires updates to address broader issues of transparency, including the potential introduction of Small Modular Reactors in this context.

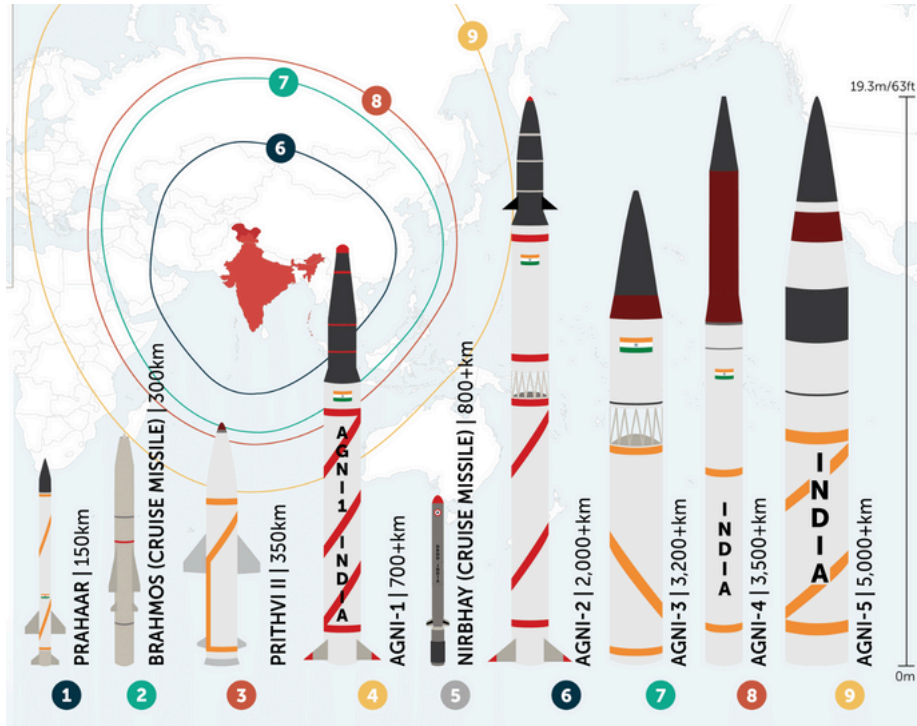
Similarly, the 2005 agreement is confined solely to ballistic missiles, excluding cruise missiles—an omission that fails to address the risks of misinterpretation regarding cruise missile launches and deployments. Additionally, the lack of a structured review process for NCBM implementation prevents both states from identifying weaknesses and making necessary adjustments. This gap also limits the potential to expand or refine existing measures in response to emerging concerns.

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Furthermore, the ongoing diplomatic stalemate between these nuclear-armed rivals amplifies the risk of misinterpretations and misperceptions. In such an environment, entrenched suspicions and hostilities continue to persist, reinforcing cognitive biases and undermining the willingness to pursue confidence-building or conciliatory actions. To address these issues, new expert working groups should reassess the current conditions and propose revisions and updates to the existing CBMs.

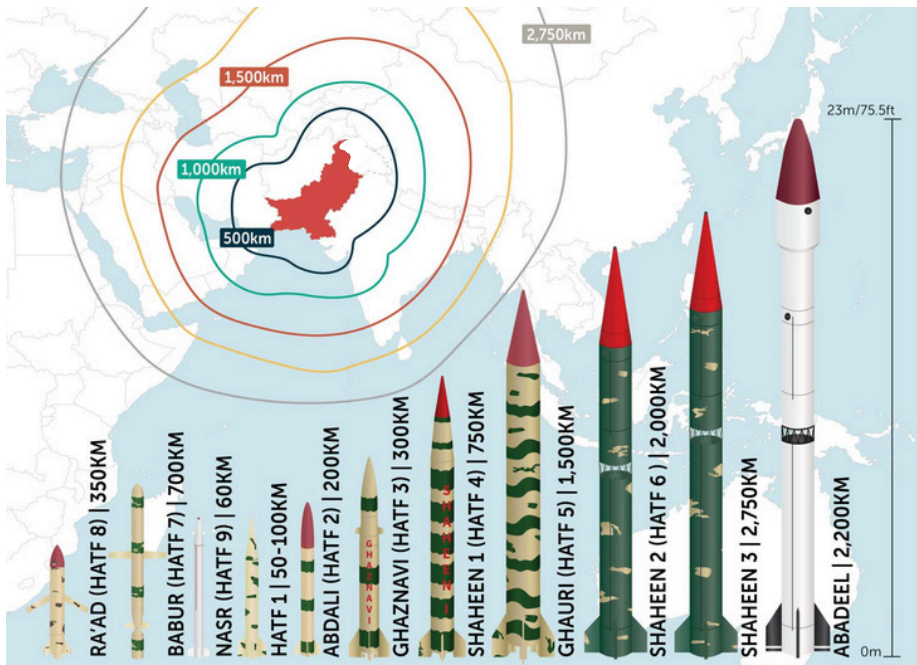
While conventional CBMs have long addressed issues such as water management, climate vulnerabilities, and regional alliances, these challenges have become more urgent and require updated measures. The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), a cornerstone of India-Pakistan water-sharing cooperation, has remained intact despite conflicts. However, growing concerns like climate change, groundwater depletion, and disputes over water use have revealed its limitations. With India seeking a review to address the hydropower project controversy and Pakistan preferring discussions through the Permanent Indus Commission, the treaty's rigidity risks escalating tensions.[19] These escalating challenges underscore the need to update existing

India's Ballistic and Cruise Missiles



Source: CSIS Missile Defense Project

Pakistan's Ballistic and Cruise Missiles



Source: CSIS Missile Defense Project

CBMs, including the IWT, to respond more effectively to current environmental and geopolitical realities and ensure their continued relevance and stability in bilateral relations.

Negotiation Pathways: Opportunities and Challenges

Besides updating existing CBMs, new measures must be implemented to address the persistent security triggers that continue to fuel tensions, including military miscalculations, maritime incidents, and emerging technological threats. Within the context of the India-Pakistan relationship, various paths for negotiation could be explored to tackle critical issues without directly challenging political sensitivities. New issue-based expert groups, concentrating on contemporary challenges and non-contentious areas like nuclear risk reduction, climate vulnerabilities, and cross-border water management, should be established to develop new CBMs.

These groups could facilitate dialogue free from political pressures, allowing both sides to address urgent concerns in a pragmatic and technical manner. Another potential avenue is the resumption of Track 1 and Track 1.5 diplomacy, where informal dialogues involving both government officials and external experts could cultivate trust and lay the groundwork for more formal agreements. Additionally, backchannel communications can serve as a valuable tool, providing practical, low-risk entry points for renewed engagement, especially during times of crisis or heightened tension. This approach enables both sides to de-escalate conflicts or negotiate temporary resolutions discreetly.

However, the chances of these avenues being successfully pursued are low. The deep mistrust between India and Pakistan, stemming from historical conflicts and ongoing security concerns make meaningful engagement difficult. To navigate these hurdles, CBMs should be structured into short, medium, and long-term initiatives, ensuring that even limited progress can lay the groundwork for broader cooperation. The key to success will be sustained engagement—even if it starts with just a single working group—gradually fostering trust and demonstrating the value of dialogue. Political leadership in both countries is often reluctant to take risks, fearing domestic backlash or being perceived as conceding on key issues.

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Furthermore, the complex security environment, particularly the ongoing nuclear threats and tensions in Kashmir, complicates efforts for genuine negotiation. These factors contribute to a general sense of inertia, where any attempt at dialogue or engagement is viewed with skepticism.

Given this, the broader wariness in the India-Pakistan bilateral relationship and its consequences for regional stability should prompt both nations to pursue more frequent and focused bilateral contacts, particularly on tactical issues that do not directly involve political disputes. Establishing dialogue channels on

non-contentious issues could pave the way for rebuilding some level of trust and enhancing communication, which might, over time, provide a foundation for tackling more complex and sensitive matters. While the recommendations in this report are not unprecedented, the increasing volatility in the subcontinent's security environment makes it essential to implement these and emphasize their significance.

Recommendations

Short Term Measures: (1-2 Years)

- Enhance the DGMO hotline – Revive and expand the existing hotline to include direct communication links between nuclear command authorities, coast guards, and naval forces. This would facilitate immediate de-escalation of maritime incidents and enhance crisis stability. Given recent naval tensions, ensuring a rapid response mechanism is critical to preventing misunderstandings at sea.
- Develop coordinated border security measures – Strengthen intelligence-sharing and establish joint protocols to prevent the smuggling of nuclear materials across borders. Given the potential for non-state actors to exploit security gaps, coordinated efforts between the two countries are crucial. This measure would also help in preventing nuclear proliferation risks and improving regional security.
- Initiate informal bilateral discussions on national defense risks – These engagements can help identify potential areas of cooperation and establish an informal channel to address emerging risks. Such dialogues allow both sides to engage without immediate political commitments.
- Establish and maintain a backchannel for crisis management – A confidential line of communication between senior security officials and policymakers can help in de-escalating tensions before they escalate into a full-blown crisis. Backchannels have historically played a key role in conflict resolution, particularly during times of heightened tensions. Institutionalizing such a mechanism would ensure swift communication in times of uncertainty.

Medium-Term Measures (2-5 Years)

- Create dedicated nuclear risk-reduction centers – Establish bilateral institutions tasked with monitoring nuclear risks, facilitating dialogue, and overlooking the implementation of nuclear confidence-building measures (NCBMs). These centers would act as platforms for risk assessment, crisis prevention, and transparency measures. Regular engagement through these institutions can help in diffusing tensions before they escalate.
- An agreement on incidents at sea – Formulate a formal agreement to address confrontations involving naval forces, particularly nuclear-armed submarines, in contested waters. As both countries expand their maritime capabilities, the risk of naval miscalculations increases. Clear protocols for engagement and incident resolution would mitigate the risk of unintended escalation at sea.
- Annual Crisis Simulation and Joint Tabletop Exercises – Conduct structured simulation exercises to test crisis response mechanisms and evaluate de-escalation strategies.
- Revive Track 1 and 1.5 diplomacy – Reactivate high-level and diplomatic channels to explore avenues for strategic stability. Involving senior security officials, former policymakers, and academic intermediaries can facilitate practical security cooperation outside the constraints of official politics. These dialogues can serve as stepping stones toward formal negotiations on crisis management.

Long-Term Measures (5+ Years)

- Revise missile testing pre-notification framework – Extend the current pre-notification agreement to include cruise missiles, hypersonic weapons, and emerging technologies. As both sides develop advanced missile capabilities, such transparency measures can reduce the risk of misinterpretation and inadvertent escalation. Strengthening the notification process would also reinforce regional arms control mechanisms.
- Modernize the 1988 Agreement on the Prohibition of Attacks Against Nuclear Installations – Update the agreement to explicitly prohibit cyber and drone attacks on nuclear installations, ensuring protections extend beyond physical strikes. Given the potential increase in digitization of nuclear command and control systems, cyber intrusions could disrupt operations or escalate conflicts. Expanding the agreement to cover these threats would strengthen nuclear security and reinforce mutual commitments to non-aggression.
- Modernize the Indus Waters Treaty – Update the treaty to address contemporary challenges such as climate change, increasing water scarcity, and infrastructure development. Establishing improved dispute-resolution mechanisms and enhancing data-sharing protocols would help prevent water-related tensions from escalating into diplomatic or security crises.
- Cybersecurity Non-Aggression Pact – Negotiate a potential agreement prohibiting cyberattacks on nuclear command and control systems, financial institutions, and other critical infrastructure. By fostering cooperation in cyber threat intelligence, both nations can reduce the risks of miscalculated cyber escalation.

While immediate avenues for engagement between India and Pakistan remain limited due to deep-seated mistrust and political constraints, these recommendations provide a critical framework for managing risks and preventing escalation. By focusing on actionable measures—such as enhanced crisis communication, nuclear risk-reduction, and cybersecurity agreements—there is room to potentially mitigate these pressing security challenges. Even in the absence of broad diplomatic engagement, these measures can create mechanisms for managing crises and reducing the likelihood of conflict. This structured approach is crucial for ensuring stability in an otherwise volatile region.

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