



NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION: ENGAGING THE NON-NPT NUCLEAR-ARMED STATES

NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION POLICY BRIEF NO. 5

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SUMMARY

- All States can bolster risk-reduction efforts by addressing the underlying regional security dilemmas that drive the possibility of escalation involving nuclear-armed States.
- There are feasible actions that each non-NPT nuclear-armed State could undertake to reduce the risk of nuclear weapon use in its respective context. In addition to action at the operational level, conflict avoidance and management activities can build trust and confidence, leading towards regularized strategic dialogue.
- Extending the risk-reduction dialogue beyond NPT-related processes, including by convening an international conference on the topic, could create space to engage all nuclear-armed States, to develop mutual understanding and to identify common priorities.

CONTEXT

Nuclear risk-reduction has emerged as a key issue in the current review cycle of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). There has been much consideration of the role of the five NPT nuclear weapon States (the P5) in this area. The P5 process has included strategic dialogue on the topic, with a view to enhancing mutual understanding of nuclear policies and doctrines. However, no similar platform for engagement exists with or among the four nuclear-armed states outside the NPT: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, India, Israel and Pakistan. What role is there for these States in the conversation on risk reduction? This policy brief outlines risk-of-use factors linked to the security contexts in which these States operate; it then suggests measures in support of nuclear risk reduction.

THE NON-NPT NUCLEAR-ARMED STATES

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Risk of nuclear weapon use in Northeast Asia is linked primarily to the advancing nuclear capabilities of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.¹ This risk has been exacerbated by Pyongyang's opaque deterrence strategy and poor strategic relations with some of its neighbours (see Policy Brief no. 4 for a full discussion of these risk drivers). In addition, the possibility of use linked to unauthorized access to its nuclear weapons or technology, including by internal political factions, cannot be discounted.²

A particular and related concern stems from the country's history of illicit arms and technology transfers to other States (some involving sensitive nuclear technology) and the recent increase in its activity in arms trading and military cooperation, some of it surreptitious.³



US Navy

India and Pakistan

In South Asia, India and Pakistan have a historically fraught bilateral relationship that has included a series of strategic crises.⁴ In recent years, India and China have clashed over territorial boundaries, raising the possibility of military conflict. While they have both declared “no first use” policies, other States and some independent experts have expressed scepticism as to their veracity.⁵ Additionally, China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean alongside its growing nuclear capabilities has affected the India-Pakistan rivalry.

As all sides continue to develop their capabilities, their deterrence postures could compress decision-making time frames in a crisis and even create new forms of “use-it-or-lose-it” dilemma. For example, India has moved to ensure the survivability of its nuclear force through the development of mobile land-based missiles and sea-launched ballistic missiles, while Pakistan continues its deployment of non-strategic (“tactical”) nuclear weapons.⁶ China's reliance on dual-use delivery platforms and comingling of some aspects of its nuclear and conventional missile forces creates additional room for misperception and inadvertent escalation (see Policy Brief no. 2).

¹ Discussion of Northeast Asia draws from T. Ogilvie-White, “Narrowing Nuclear Use Pathways in Northeast Asia”, in W. Wan (ed.), *Nuclear Risk Reduction: Closing Pathways to Use*, UNIDIR, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.37559/WMD/20/NRR/01>.

² For instance, see Open Nuclear Network, *Nuclear Risk Reduction Approach for the Korean Peninsula*, September 2020, <https://oneearthfuture.org/program/open-nuclear-network/publications/onns-nuclear-risk-reduction-approach-korean-peninsula>.

³ Security Council, Note by the President of the Security Council, S/2019/171, 5 March 2019, <http://undocs.org/S/2019/171>; and A. Berger, *Target Markets: North Korea's Military Customers in the Sanctions Era*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315178318>.

⁴ Discussion of Southern Asia draws from M. Sethi, “Nuclear Risks in Southern Asia: The Chain Conundrum”, in W. Wan (ed.), *Nuclear Risk Reduction: Closing Pathways to Use*, UNIDIR, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.37559/WMD/20/NRR/01>.

⁵ A. Panda, “If India Rethinks Nuclear No First Use, It Won't Surprise Pakistan or China”, *The Diplomat*, 26 August 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/if-india-rethinks-nuclear-no-first-use-it-wont-surprise-pakistan-or-china/>.

⁶ H.M. Kristensen and M. Korda, “Indian Nuclear Forces, 2018”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 74, no. 6, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2018.1533162>; H.M. Kristensen, R.S. Norris and J. Diamond, “Pakistani Nuclear Forces, 2018”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 74, no. 5, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2018.1507796>; and M. Ahmed, “Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Their Impact on Stability”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 30 June 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/30/pakistan-s-tactical-nuclear-weapons-and-their-impact-on-stability-pub-63911>.

Israel

Compared to most other nuclear-armed States, Israel is opaque about its nuclear capabilities and doctrine as matter of policy.⁷ It does not even publicly admit to nuclear weapon possession, although it is widely thought to have had an arsenal since the 1960s. Scholars believe that Israel has three forms of nuclear-delivery capability, and a posture that requires some lead-time prior to launch readiness.⁸

Some believe that Israel's opacity may mitigate risk, as it is the only nuclear-armed State in the Middle East; changes to its policy could signal a more confrontational posture. Yet the absence of a formal doctrine arguably prevents clear signalling to adversaries in a crisis.

Risk of use from misunderstanding could emerge if Israel is threatened either in an existential conventional conflict or by other weapons of mass destruction (as during the 1991 Gulf War).⁹ This scenario may seem unlikely in the current landscape, but widespread military engagement in the region, including by external nuclear-armed States, could generate inadvertent possibilities for escalation. The emergence of another nuclear-armed State in the Middle East would also have an impact on risk; Israel has acted militarily in response to the nuclear ambitions of its neighbours in the past, and its policy of ambiguity could change should this possibility rematerialize.¹⁰

OPTIONS TO CONSIDER

For Non-NPT Nuclear-Armed States

Strengthen Communication Mechanisms. Measures to enhance information-exchange and communication can serve critical functions, lessening the possibility of an escalation that crosses the nuclear threshold. Some non-NPT nuclear-armed States have established political and military hotlines for crisis management in the past, yet these have atrophied or been cut off as relations worsened (as on the Korean Peninsula).¹¹ All nuclear-armed States should prioritize sustaining these dedicated communication links. At the strategic level, convening regular regional dialogues—including Track 1.5 or 2—could enhance mutual understanding of threat perceptions and security strategies.

Despite strained relations in their respective security environments, each of the four non-NPT nuclear-armed States may be able to build on recent processes to advance engagement with their neighbours. These include the range of Israeli normalization agreements with Gulf States, the United States–Democratic People's Republic of Korea Summit process and the 2018 inter-Korean Panmunjom Declaration, and the resumption of Track-2 dialogues between Indian and Pakistani experts. Through these and other forums, non-NPT nuclear-armed States should explore means of conflict avoidance and management that would improve transparency and confidence in their regional contexts, including by adopting or enhancing early-warning and notification procedures.

⁷ Discussion of the Middle East draws from H. Elbahtimy, "Understanding Risks of Nuclear Use in the Middle East", in W. Wan (ed.), Nuclear Risk Reduction: Closing Pathways to Use, UNIDIR, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.37559/WMD/20/NRR/01>.

⁸ H.M. Kristensen and R.S. Norris, "Israeli Nuclear Weapons, 2014", Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, vol. 70, no. 6, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340214555409>; and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Yearbook 2019: Armaments, Disarmament, and International Security, 2019, <https://www.sipriyearbook.org/view/9780198839996/sipri-9780198839996-chapter-6.xml>.

⁹ J. Pike, "Nuclear Threats During the Gulf War", Federation of American Scientists, 19 February 1998, <https://fas.org/irp/eprint/ds-threats.htm>.

¹⁰ O. Holmes, "Israel Confirms It Carried out 2007 Airstrike on Syrian Nuclear Reactor", The Guardian, 21 March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/israel-admits-it-carried-out-2007-airstrike-on-syrian-nuclear-reactor>.

¹¹ Hotlines connect the leadership of India and Pakistan and of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea, for instance. India and China agreed in 2015 to establish a hotline at the Director General of Military Operations level, but as of January 2020, the line was not yet operational.

Expand Risk-Reduction Cooperation. Non-NPT nuclear-armed States can draw on and adapt existing practices in the service of greater transparency. In turn, this can contribute to confidence building and regularized dialogue across States involved in complex nuclear chains. One example involves the formalization of existing low alert levels, as in India and Pakistan (and China, among the nuclear weapon States). An agreement—or coordinated statements—on this would constitute a useful step towards crisis stability, especially as new technologies compress response timelines.¹²

Additionally, these States should refocus attention on the topics of nuclear safety and security. India, Israel and Pakistan all participated in the Nuclear Security Summit series; Pakistan has reportedly engaged with the United States on stockpile security issues,¹³ and cooperation by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea with China on nuclear safety issues could be feasible (see Policy Brief no. 4). Collaboration between nuclear security Centres of Excellence could help foster a common security and safety culture. India and Pakistan can build upon an existing foundation of measures, including their 1988 Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities.

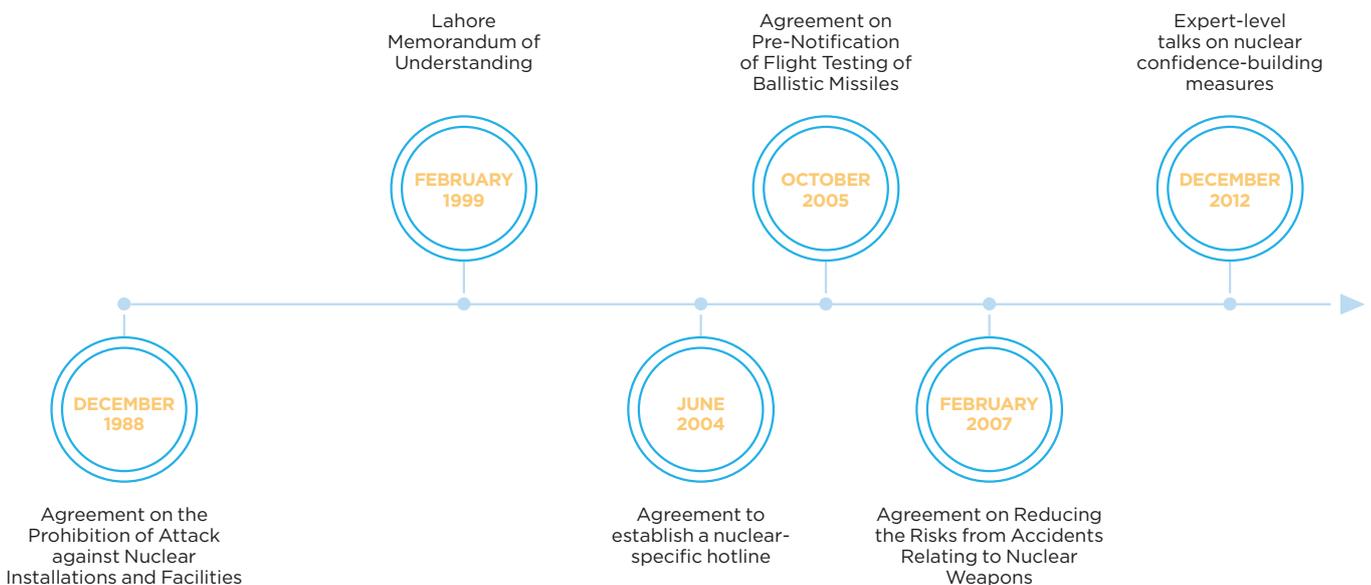
Engage in Risk-Reduction Dialogue at the Global Level.

Besides risk-reduction activities in their immediate security environments, the non-NPT nuclear-armed States could engage on risk reduction at the global level. This would extend beyond their current participation in standing multilateral forums such as the Conference on Disarmament and the United Nations Disarmament Commission.

India, for instance, could actively initiate a special thematic event or events on risk reduction. This would be consistent with the leadership on reducing nuclear dangers that it has shown by tabling an annual resolution in the United Nations General Assembly since 1998. Such an event could take the form, for example, of an international conference on risk reduction open to all States.



Select India-Pakistan Nuclear Confidence-Building Measures



¹² A Chinese official called upon all nuclear-armed States to abandon the launch-on-warning strategy as a way of reducing unnecessary risks. F. Cong, "Maintaining Global Strategic Stability, Reducing Risks of Nuclear Conflicts", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 16 October 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1708326.shtml.

¹³ P.K. Kerr and M.B. Nikitin, Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons, Congressional Research Service, 1 August 2016, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL34248>.

For the NPT Nuclear Weapon States

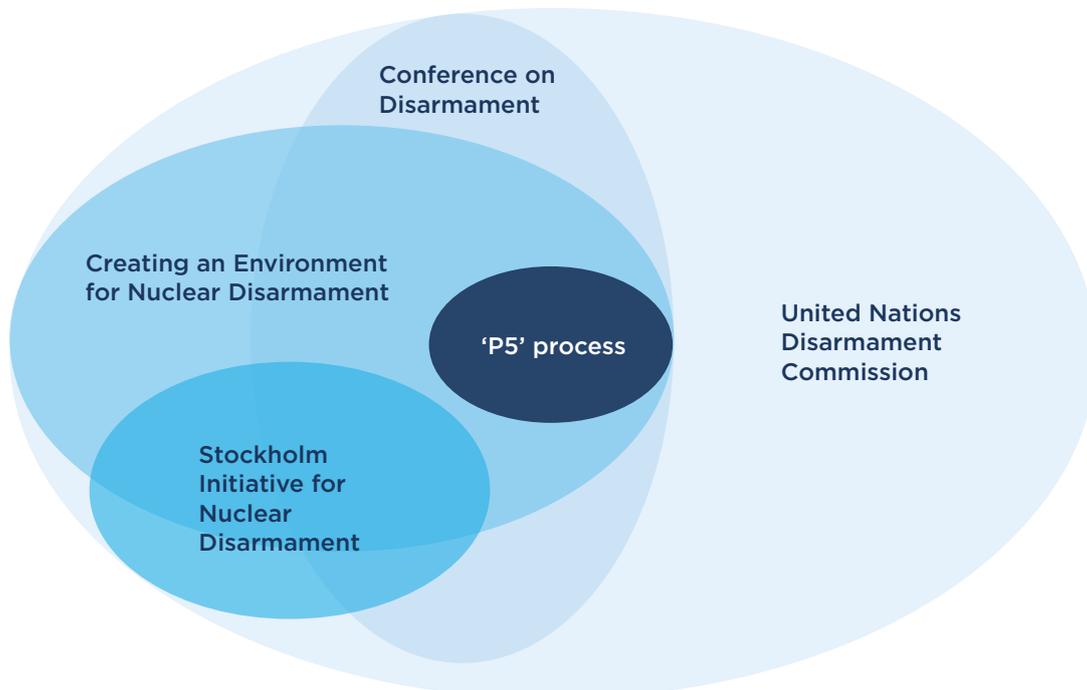
Engage in Expanded Risk-Reduction Dialogue. Recent dialogue among the NPT nuclear weapon States in the P5 process has focused on the exchange of nuclear doctrines and the concept of strategic risk reduction. This is a welcome development in its own right. The format and process could also be used as the basis for wider engagement across all nuclear-armed States on matters of transparency and information-sharing, with a view to reducing preventable risks due to misunderstanding or miscalculation.

As part of this wider engagement, the nuclear weapon States should extend the risk-reduction conversation to venues outside NPT-related processes. One such venue might be the United States-instigated Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative, in which India, Israel and Pakistan have participated, as it has already begun to focus attention on the topic. In addition, the NPT nuclear weapon States could engage other stakeholders through the above-mentioned international conference.

Expand the Risk-Reduction Agenda. Practical challenges to multilateral nuclear risk-reduction efforts abound given the differences between the five NPT nuclear weapon States alone. Accordingly, a reframed, more expansive approach could focus on exploring practical measures to reduce risk. This could prove fruitful, including in promoting dialogue, without prejudicing existing international instruments or forums. Shared concerns about developments in strategic technologies suggests a potential path forward for engagement (see Policy Brief no. 2).

In addition, the NPT nuclear weapon States should increase their focus on developing confidence- and security-building measures that improve regional security dynamics. Such measures could include information exchange and communication, consultation and observation, and policies of restraint around specified military activities or training and other exercises. They could also include the adoption of behavioural norms in and around the cyber and space domains. In the longer run, such efforts could contribute momentum towards reaching broader agreements that reduce the salience of nuclear weapons to all States possessing them, whether members of the NPT or not.

Situating Multilateral Discussions of Risk Reduction



For All States

Limit the Role of Nuclear Weapons. In line with their commitments on progress towards the goal of a nuclear weapon-free world as well as practical concerns about the risk of nuclear weapon use, non-nuclear-armed States allied with nuclear weapon States should seek to limit the salience of nuclear weapons in their alliance relations, and ultimately roll it back when this is feasible. For instance, the possibility of renewed nuclear deployments by the United States on the territories of its East Asian allies in response to the growing strategic capabilities of and perceptions about China has been raised recently in some circles, including domestically in the Republic of Korea.¹⁴ Yet steps in this direction could have the opposite of the intended effect for East Asian States—they could create new escalation risks involving the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or intensify an action–reaction arms race cycle between China and the United States. Meanwhile, member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) could consider subregional confidence- and security-building measures that limit pathways to accidental use. They could also consider steps to address concerns about specific capabilities (see Policy Brief no. 3), including a proposal to ensure that all non-strategic nuclear weapons are removed from deployment.¹⁵

In the Middle East, the withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed with the Islamic Republic of Iran has sparked fears of regional conventional conflict. While US President Joe Biden has expressed a desire to re-join the JCPOA, domestic politics in both the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran will provide obstacles to a swift return; factors complicating this include the growing stockpiles of enriched uranium of the Islamic Republic of Iran, its regional military activities and its ballistic missile programme, which Biden has identified as areas of concern.¹⁶ In the absence of the JCPOA, any movement by States in the region to develop nuclear weapon programmes—as Saudi Arabia has threatened in response to a hypothetical Iranian bomb¹⁷—would be likely to drive changes to Israel’s opacity policy, creating an open deterrence relationship and introducing new risk sources.

Across contexts, political commitments to reducing the role of nuclear weapons in security strategies can thus help to prevent arms races and close pathways to potential nuclear weapon use.



Prime Minister’s Office (GODL-India), GODL-India

¹⁴ J. Soble and Choe S., “North Korea’s Alarmed Neighbors Consider Deploying Deadlier Weapons”, New York Times, 8 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/08/world/asia/north-korea-japan-missile-south.html>.

¹⁵ P. Podvig and J. Serrat, Lock Them Up: Zero-Deployed Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Europe, UNIDIR, 2017, <https://unidir.org/files/publications/pdfs/lock-them-up-zero-deployed-non-strategic-nuclear-weapons-in-europe-en-675.pdf>.

¹⁶ G. Motevalli and D. Wainer, “Biden’s Path Back to Iran Nuclear Deal Won’t Be Easy or Fast”, Bloomberg, 12 November 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-12/biden-s-path-back-to-the-iran-nuclear-deal-won-t-be-easy-or-fast>; and J. Biden, “There’s a Smarter Way to be Tough on Iran”, CNN, 13 September 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/13/opinions/smarter-way-to-be-tough-on-iran-joe-biden/index.html>.

¹⁷ “Saudi Arabia Pledges to Create a Nuclear Bomb if Iran Does”, BBC News, 15 March 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43419673>.

Promote Risk-Reduction Dialogue in a Committed Way. Ongoing cooperative work in other nuclear spaces—including nuclear security and nuclear disarmament verification—underline the power of expanded capacity and expertise, including from non-nuclear-armed States. Forums such as the CEND working groups and undertakings driven by non-nuclear weapon States such as the Stockholm Initiative have helped to focus attention on the topic of risk reduction; other relevant groupings include the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative and the New Agenda Coalition, which can also call on the nuclear-armed States to engage on nuclear risk reduction. For example (and as mentioned above), broad support for the convening of an international conference on nuclear risk reduction would ensure high-level attention on the topic; securing concrete commitments in such a dedicated venue—in the manner of the Nuclear Security Summit series—would constitute a key step in nuclear risk reduction and would further integrate non-NPT nuclear-armed States in difficult but necessary discussions.

As outlined in previous briefs in this series, taking forward risk reduction requires the development of measures that cater to different security environments, and which to some extent must be bespoke. Engagement on nuclear risk reduction, including with the non-NPT nuclear-armed States, would help to identify possible measures and develop means of comparison for what works in these differing contexts. These risk-reduction efforts would be consistent with other kinds of effort to address underlying regional security dilemmas that drive escalatory possibilities involving nuclear-armed States. These include reducing risky behaviour by non-nuclear-armed States that could serve to contribute to the risk of nuclear escalation.

About this brief

This policy brief draws from W. Wan (ed), *Closing Pathways to Use*, UNIDIR, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.37559/WMD/20/NRR/01>, in particular the contributions from Hassan Elbahtimy, Tanya Ogilvie-White and Manpreet Sethi. Full references are contained in the volume. Thanks also to the external reviewers and the UNIDIR team for their inputs.

Citation

Wan, Wilfred (2021). *Nuclear Risk Reduction: Engaging non-NPT Nuclear Armed States (Nuclear Risk Reduction Policy Brief No. 5)*. Geneva, Switzerland: UNIDIR. <https://doi.org/10.37559/WMD/21/NRR/01>

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