

# The Mian Channu Incident and the Enduring Risk of Nuclear Escalation between India and Pakistan

by Manuel Herrera

In an international context characterised by increasing concern over the risk of nuclear war triggered by the conflict in Ukraine, it is worth noting that incidents in other regions could also lead to nuclear escalation, either by design or miscalculation. A recent incident involving India and Pakistan is a case in point, albeit the event did not receive ample coverage, overshadowed by the news of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

On 9 March, what authorities described as a "technical malfunction"<sup>1</sup> led India to accidentally fire a supersonic missile that fell in Pakistani territory. The missile struck near Mian Channu in Punjab, Khanewal District, Pakistan; fortunately, it did not cause civilian casualties, although it did cause damage to civilian property.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Technical Malfunction Led to Accidental Firing of Missile, India Tells Pakistan, in *The Hindu*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/article65214074.ece>.

<sup>2</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "Pakistan Seeks Joint Probe into Indian Missile Fiasco", in *The Express*

The risk of accidents between nuclear-armed neighbours has been raised in the past. The incident alarmed Pakistan over the possibility that India has missiles in position ready for launch without the necessary safeguards of a command-and-control system. This raises serious concern about the control of nuclear missiles and an increased risk of mistakes or accidents that could lead to a nuclear strike.

India and Pakistan are of particular concern due to a long history of military confrontation, lack of progress in resolving territorial disputes and the ongoing expansion of their respective nuclear arsenals. While nuclear conflict remains remote, the incident should encourage careful and calm reflection on the need to expand and strengthen weapon safeguards to prevent these accidents for reoccurring in the future.

*Tribune*, 12 March 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2347607/pakistan-seeks-joint-probe-into-indian-missile-fiasco>.

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### *A long history of war and nuclear threats*

India–Pakistan relations have long been characterised by recriminations, antagonism and military confrontations. The two countries have fought four wars (1947–48; 1965; 1971 and 1999), as well as hundreds of skirmishes and both sides recurrently express fears of a fifth full-scale war, which could be the last should either side resort to their nuclear arsenals.

At the same time, there is a fundamental link between political crises in South Asia and the development of the nuclear arsenal of both countries. For example, Pakistan was largely pushed to go nuclear because of the independence of Bangladesh and India's nuclear test of 1974.<sup>3</sup> Challenged again in May 1998 by a series of Indian nuclear tests, Pakistan saw nuclear weapons as the means to neutralise India's conventional ground, air and sea superiority, which led to Islamabad's own nuclear test days later.<sup>4</sup>

Since the May 1998 tests, relations between India and Pakistan have visibly deteriorated. Crises have ensued and nuclear weapons have played an increasingly prominent role. This military mobilisation highlights several important features of the dynamics shaping nuclear relations

<sup>3</sup> In this regard it is important to mention that India's decision to acquire nuclear weapons in the early 1970s was conditioned not by its conflict with Pakistan but rather by China's acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1964.

<sup>4</sup> See Michael Krepon, "Looking Back: The 1998 Indian and Pakistani Nuclear Tests", in *Arms Control Today*, June 2008, <https://www.armscontrol.org/node/2982>.

in South Asia, notably the repeated use of nuclear threats and consequent concern amongst public opinion at the prospect of nuclear war.

Nevertheless, both sides have relied on nuclear deterrence, thereby avoiding a full-scale conflict. However, the recent incident raises some important questions on the risks of the *status quo* and the sustainability of this nuclear posture.

### *The Mian Channu incident*

In the wake of the 9 March technical malfunction, Pakistan's military reported that an unarmed Indian supersonic missile violated its airspace in Punjab. The missile travelled at an altitude of 12,200 metres and flew 124 km in Pakistani airspace before crashing in Mian Channu, about 500 km from Islamabad.<sup>5</sup>

While not specifying the type of missile involved, Pakistani sources point to the possibility of it being a BrahMos missile, a nuclear-capable, ground-attack supersonic missile with a range of 300–500 km, making it capable of reaching Islamabad from northern India.<sup>6</sup> The March incident, the first of its kind, immediately raised questions about safety mechanisms in place on this type of weaponry. The event is also unusual because India normally conducts its missile tests in the Bay of

<sup>5</sup> Reuters, "India Says It Accidentally Fired a Missile into Pakistan", in *CNN*, 12 March 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/11/asia/india-pakistan-missile-intl-hnk>.

<sup>6</sup> "Pakistan Demands Joint Probe into 'Accidental' India Missile Fire", in *Al Jazeera*, 12 March 2022, <https://aje.io/5k6c9p>.

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Bengal and not on its western borders.<sup>7</sup>

Thankfully the incident did not lead to further escalations. The Indian Ministry of Defence acknowledged a technical failure that led to the accidental firing of a missile, which it described as “deeply regrettable”,<sup>8</sup> but stopped short of apologising for the incident. Nevertheless, India has ordered a high-level Court of Inquiry to investigate the incident. So far Pakistan has not been invited to participate in the investigation.

The incident should spur both countries to resume dialogue on their missile arsenals within the framework of the mutual notification agreement that exists between the two countries. With this agreement, both countries undertook to give prior notification of any land- or sea-launched, surface-to-surface ballistic missile. The agreement was signed in 2005 and is renewed every five years.

### *Indo-Pakistani nuclear dynamics*

Concerns about such incidents are further heightened by the fact that India and Pakistan are actively expanding their nuclear arsenals. Both continue to produce and stockpile fissile material for weapons, while developing new delivery systems.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Indian Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) website: *Integrated Test Range (ITR)*, <https://www.drdo.gov.in/labs-and-establishments/integrated-test-range-itr>.

<sup>8</sup> “India Accidentally Fires Missile into Pakistan”, in *BBC News*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-60711653>.

<sup>9</sup> Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, “Nuclear Notebook: Indian Nuclear Forces 2020”, in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 1 July 2020,

These nuclear ambitions and capabilities should not be viewed in isolation. China is a particularly important factor in India’s military planning. To a large extent, India’s nuclear policy is motivated by regional threats in relation to India’s long-term goal of establishing a credible deterrent against China.<sup>10</sup> Thus, India has made great strides in developing a second-strike capability and a long-range ballistic missile programme that are more relevant to deterring Beijing than Islamabad.

The development of new nuclear capabilities over the next decade to counter China could potentially influence how India views the role of nuclear weapons in the context of its rivalry with Pakistan. This creates a complex nuclear geometry in Asia, in which developments intended to provide stability have often had the opposite effect.

For its part, Pakistan, seeking to compensate for India’s conventional superiority, seeks a credible minimum deterrence posture against New Delhi. However, what it considers minimum is guided by regional considerations. For example, in 2013, Pakistan’s National Command Authority stated that it “would not remain oblivious to the evolving security dynamics in South Asia and would maintain a full spectrum deterrence capability to deter all forms of aggression”.<sup>11</sup>

<https://thebulletin.org/premium/2020-07/nuclear-notebook-indian-nuclear-forces-2020>.

<sup>10</sup> It’s important to remind the fact that India and China have several territorial disputes and have fought in the past several skirmishes.

<sup>11</sup> Pakistan Inter Services Public Relations

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This implies that if India continues to expand its arsenal (against China) so will Pakistan even though it is supposedly not the object of India's build up. The statement can also be interpreted to include any conventional Indian incursion into Pakistani territory. There is thus concern that this posture dangerously lowers the nuclear threshold in the event of conflict. Adding to this is the fact that Pakistan maintains a first-use posture against India.<sup>12</sup>

The political and strategic uncertainties that currently threaten the stability of South Asia underline the importance of dialogue between India and Pakistan. With the US and NATO exit from Afghanistan, the evolution of a quasi-alliance system pitting India and the US against Pakistan and China, and evidence of a new regional arms race that could escalate to the nuclear level, the India–Pakistan rivalry has assumed great importance in both the regional and global security environment.

In this regard, one must also consider the impact of the current war in Ukraine and western sanctions on Russia may have on India–Pakistan relations, particularly given the growing role of Moscow and Beijing in the South and Central Asian security equilibrium. Both India and Pakistan have thus far converged in support for Russia, as evidenced by their abstention in

(ISPR), *Press Release No. PR-133/2013-ISPR* (5 September 2013), <https://www.ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=2361>.

<sup>12</sup> Alicia Sanders-Zakre and Kelsey Davenport, "Is India Shifting Nuclear Doctrine?", in *Arms Control Today*, May 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017-05/news/india-shifting-nuclear-doctrine>.

the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>13</sup>

In the case of India, this can be explained by New Delhi's dependence on Russian military equipment as well as the long partnership between the two countries that goes back to the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty. Pakistan faces a similar situation. Since 2019 Russia has invested more than 8 billion US dollars in various projects in the country,<sup>14</sup> and provided equipment and weaponry (e.g. Mi-35 attack helicopters).<sup>15</sup> Beyond the military dimension, both countries retain other important dependencies from Russia, including in the food sector.<sup>16</sup> For example, India is the world's largest importer of pulses (let's not forget that the country's population is largely vegetarian), with annual imports reaching 1.56 billion US dollars in 2020.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Sachin Parashar, "India, Pakistan, China among 35 Nations to Abstain from Voting on Anti-Russia Resolution", in *The Times of India*, 3 March 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/89955078.cms>.

<sup>14</sup> Zafar Bhutta, "Pakistan Settles Soviet-Era Trade Dispute with Russia", in *The Express Tribune*, 7 November 2019, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2095099/pakistan-settles-decades-old-trade-dispute-russia>.

<sup>15</sup> Jayanta Kalita, "Imran Khan Meets Putin at the 'Worst Possible Time'; Why Is Pakistan So Important for Russia?", in *The Eurasian Times*, 25 February 2022, <https://eurasianimes.com/?p=90002>.

<sup>16</sup> Trading Economics, *India Imports from Russia*, last updated on April 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/india/imports/russia>; Pallavi Nahata, "Russia-Ukraine Conflict Could Disrupt Supply of Fertilisers in India", in *BloombergQuint*, 14 March 2022, <https://www.bloombergquint.com/business/russia-ukraine-conflict-could-disrupt-supply-of-fertilisers-in-india>.

<sup>17</sup> US International Trade Administration,

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Much of the same applies to Pakistan. For example, in 2021 Pakistan imported 150.12 million and 129.36 million US dollars' worth of cereals and vegetables respectively from Russia,<sup>18</sup> something never seen until that year. The picture is clear: both countries are dependent or quasi-dependent on Russian investments and exports of key supplies, and this may also raise the prospect of a greater Russian political or diplomatic role in the India–Pakistan rivalry looking to the future.

### *A way forward*

Despite this bleak track record, India and Pakistan have regularly engaged in negotiations aimed at reducing tensions and resolving contentious issues. While there have been some notable successes, progress has been uneven because the two sides have never reached agreement on their most pressing security needs.

The March incident underscores the need for urgent measures to reduce nuclear risks and seek a path towards arms control, and ideally gradual nuclear disarmament. In the short-term it would be useful to strengthen information sharing and establishing timely reporting mechanisms to avoid the recurrence of such incidents and to prevent miscalculation.

*India - Country Commercial Guide: Food and Agriculture Value Chain*, 22 October 2021, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/india-food-and-agriculture-value-chain>.

<sup>18</sup> Trading Economics, *Pakistan Imports from Russia*, last updated on April 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/pakistan/imports/russia>.

There are other technical steps that can be taken, such as ensuring that nuclear weapons do not remain assembled or attached to their delivery systems, ending the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons and closing nuclear test sites. There are also confidence building measures that could be pursued such as establishing nuclear risk reduction dialogues; commissioning studies on the use of nuclear weapons and their consequences; reaching a mutual understanding that neither state will target and destroy the other; and keeping nuclear weapon command centres away from urban centres or declaring a formal policy of not targeting cities.

Although movement towards détente in South Asia is fraught with obstacles, there are reasons to be cautiously optimistic as neither side wants to break off dialogue altogether. Moreover, both sides recognise that the continuation of the old rivalry risks escalating into a nuclear race that neither side can win. Indeed, the idea that the India–Pakistan confrontation can be kept within manageable limits is not backed by history. While nuclear deterrence has prevented the outbreak of open warfare, the current situation is extremely fragile and open to sudden shocks or errors.

Even if a non-aggression pact is reached between India and Pakistan (a remote possibility), there is no guarantee that it would eliminate the causes of war, which basically revolve around longstanding border disputes over Kashmir and the cross-border support for armed groups. Such a pact

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would have little more than symbolic value unless the two sides also address the specific security problems that created the tensions in the first place, which certainly extend well beyond the nuclear domain. Any arms control initiative should therefore be linked to a process of dialogue and negotiation with respect to these imperatives. In this sense, there has been a call by both parties, particularly Pakistan, for a major involvement of external actors in the resolution of the Kashmir issue. Such efforts have traditionally come from the UN, but the results have been limited since Great Powers have traditionally used the conflict as a way to exercise influence in South Asia, and now in the Indo-Pacific, rather than seeking a solution to the conflict.

As western influence declines in South and Central Asia and the fallout from the Ukraine war consumes the foreign policy agendas of the US and Europe, diplomats should not lose sight of the India–Pakistan rivalry, directing political capital towards seeking to promote talks and de-escalation between these two nuclear-armed neighbours. Ultimately, while it is true that nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan has prevented the worst-case scenario, such dynamics are fragile and require careful diplomacy to defuse the potential for new escalations.

In this regard, the March incident should serve as a wake-up call for both sides to proceed with serious dialogue on expanding safeguards on their missile arsenals, as well as the control of their expansion, while opening negotiations on broader confidence

building measures in the political, economic and military domains. That said, any such initiative will be difficult to pursue particularly given the fallout from the Ukrainian war. This is likely to delay or complicate any of the above proposals, leaving India and Pakistan relatively alone, at least for the foreseeable future, in resolving their disputes against the backdrop of profound mutations to the strategic environment in South and Central Asia.

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