

Navigating the Thucydides Trap: U.S.-China Competition, South Asian Rivalry, and Shifting Alliances in Asia

Dr. Rabia Akhtar

rabia.akhtar@csspr.uol.edu.pk

Professor, Director, Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research (CSSPR), University of Lahore

Syed Ali Zia Jaffery

aliziajaffery1992@gmail.com

Deputy Director, Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research (CSSPR), University of Lahore

Corresponding Author: * Dr. Rabia Akhtar (rabia.akhtar@csspr.uol.edu.pk)

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing strategic rivalry between the United States and China is significantly reconfiguring alliances and antagonisms across Asia. This article applies the Thucydides Trap framework, the idea that a rising power challenging an established hegemon often risks war, to assess how U.S.-China competition is shaping new strategic alignments and exacerbating regional flashpoints. In South Asia, India's growing defence partnership with the U.S. and Pakistan's all-weather alliance with China have heightened tensions, as evidenced by the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict, a four-day war that nearly spiraled into a broader great-power standoff. In this article, we examine how these evolving alignments, ranging from enhanced U.S.-India military cooperation to expanded China-Pakistan defense ties, are contributing to regional instability and escalation risks under a Thucydidean dynamic. Drawing on historical parallels and recent developments (including advanced military-technological deployments, crises, and nuclear doctrines), the discussion illustrates how the U.S.-China rivalry enhances India-Pakistan instability and accelerates the risks of uncontrolled escalation and nuclear use in South Asia. The article concludes with a policy-oriented exploration of the pathways for strengthening strategic stability, arguing for confidence-building measures, improved crisis communications, and adoption of a 'nuclear responsibilities' framework to mitigate the dangers of great-power entrapment in local conflicts. Notwithstanding the structural stresses of an ongoing power transition, deft diplomacy and robust regional mechanisms can help avoid following historical precedents and maintain peace in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Alliances, Strategic Stability, Nuclear Doctrines, Confidence-Building Measures

INTRODUCTION

China's rise as a strategic competitor to the United States has engendered one of the most significant power shifts in the 21st century. As China's economic and military might grows to challenge U.S. primacy in Asia, the region's geopolitical landscape is being reshaped by new alliances, strategic partnerships, and rivalries. This phenomenon can be examined through the lens of the Thucydides Trap,¹ a concept developed and popularized by prominent political scientist Graham Allison to describe the historical pattern in which an emerging power threatens to supplant an established one, often leading to war. Allison's study of sixteen such cases found that twelve ended in conflict. Today, many analysts and scholars worry that Washington and Beijing may fall into this Trap, with Asia as the central theater of competition. The structural dynamic

¹ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

of a rising China confronting an established U.S. hegemony has invited comparisons to past power transitions (from Athens vs. Sparta to the pre-World War I Anglo-German rivalry²), even as important restraining factors, not least nuclear weapons, economic interdependence, and global institutions, make this era distinct.

The U.S.-China rivalry is more pronounced in the network of alignments forming across Asia. As Beijing asserts itself, Washington has augmented its Indo-Pacific alliances, building stronger ties with partners like India. In response, China has solidified its own partnerships, most notably with Pakistan in South Asia, while also seeking to undercut U.S. influence over other regional actors. This intensifying competition is reshaping South Asia, a region already marred by historical grievances and unresolved territorial disputes. It is also pulling smaller South Asian states into the orbit of one or the other great power. Therefore, observers have raised concerns about a new Cold War dynamic or even a localized conflict that can drag in the United States and China, given the polarized bloc-like structures emerging in these sub-regions. This dynamic is seen in South Asia. The longstanding India-Pakistan acrimony has acquired a veritable external dimension: India's strategic tilt toward the U.S. and Pakistan's reliance on China run the risk of turning a future South Asian crisis into a U.S.-China confrontation. Indeed, the intense May 2025 Indo-Pakistan war,³ the most serious military escalation between New Delhi and Islamabad in decades, demonstrated how precipitously a local conflict could elicit superpower involvement.

Against this complex and dangerous backdrop, this article critically and thoroughly assesses how evolving alliances and rivalries in Asia, with a particular emphasis on South Asia, are shaped by the U.S.-China strategic competition, using the Thucydides Trap as an analytical framework. The discussion begins with a historical and theoretical overview of the Thucydides Trap and its relevance for understanding the current U.S.-China dynamic. It then delves into the regional strategic alignments in South Asia, focusing on the India-U.S. partnership and the China-Pakistan alliance. Next, the article analyzes major flashpoints and escalatory risks, including the recent India-Pakistan conflict, and enduring border tensions and nuclear risks in South Asia to illustrate how these hotspots could draw in the United States and China. Finally, the article explores pathways to strategic stability, offering policy recommendations to manage alliance commitments, prevent inadvertent and accidental escalation, and elude the Thucydides Trap. The article aims to outline how the U.S., China, and regional states can manage this fraught power transition responsibly, learning from historical precedents to avert a great-power war in the Indo-Pacific.

Historical and Theoretical Framework: The Thucydides Trap

The Thucydides Trap is rooted in an insight from an ancient historical episode. The Greek historian and general Thucydides⁴ observed that the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE)⁵ became inevitable because of Sparta's fear of a rising Athens. In modern international relations, this idea has been generalized: when a rising power threatens to displace or uproot an established hegemon, their rivalry often escalates toward

² Christopher Layne, "The Sound of Distant Thunder: The Pre-World War I Anglo-German Rivalry as a Model for Sino-American Relations in the Early Twenty-First Century," in *Will China's Rise Be Peaceful?: The Rise of a Great Power in Theory, History, Politics, and the Future*, ed. Asle Toje (Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190675387.003.0007>.

³ Christopher Clary, "Four Days in May: The India-Pakistan Crisis of 2025," Stimson Center, May 28, 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2025/four-days-in-may-the-india-pakistan-crisis-of-2025/>

⁴ Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Richard Crawley. Project Gutenberg eBook #7142. Accessed October 28, 2025. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7142/7142-h/7142-h.htm>

⁵ "Peloponnesian War," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed October 28, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Peloponnesian-War>

war due to mutual fear, insecurity, and miscalculation. Allison's seminal work on this topic identified sixteen historical cases of such power contestations over the past five hundred years, of which twelve led to large-scale conflict. These range from the rivalry between Habsburg Spain and Bourbon France in the 16th century, to the rise of Germany challenging Britain (culminating in World War I), to the tensions between Imperial Japan and the United States (leading to World War II). Notably, there are also cases where war was averted, such as the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, and the power transition between the British Empire and an ascendant United States in the mid-20th century. These exceptions suggest that, while the Thucydides Trap is dangerous, it can be escaped. Evidence suggests that wise statecraft and favorable milieus can allow great powers to circumvent war even amid power shifts.

When applied to U.S.-China ties, the Thucydides Trap acts as both a warning and a strong analytic lens. Arguably, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been the dominant global power (the status quo hegemon), while the People's Republic of China, especially in the past two decades, has rapidly accumulated economic, technological, and military power. All of this has made China the most formidable challenger to U.S. primacy. This dynamic clearly fits the broad pattern Allison describes, raising this question: Are Washington and Beijing destined for conflict? The Thucydidean lens highlights several structural drivers of tension: China's expanding interests and assertiveness increasingly clash with U.S. alliances and influence in Asia, with each side harboring fears and misgivings about the other's strategic intentions. This will result in increasing security dilemmas, precipitating smaller conflicts at the behest of these two arch-rivals.

It is important, however, to approach the Thucydides Trap in a nuanced manner. Not all scholars agree that a U.S.-China war is likely, or that the ancient Greek analogy is particularly useful or relevant. Critics and skeptics note that China, though rising, may not seek outright global preponderance or an internecine war. According to Lawrence Freedman, China's focus remains primarily regional, and patience might serve Beijing's interests better than reckless aggression.⁶ Furthermore, the existence of nuclear weapons (which induce caution through mutually assured destruction), growing economic interdependence between the U.S. and China, and multilateral institutions, however weak, and norms absent in Thucydides' time reduce the prospect of war. Additionally, the specific choices of leaders and perceptions of intent also play an important role.

Apropos this article, the Thucydides Trap is used as a framework to evaluate the risk factors in U.S.-China competition, rather than as a deterministic prophecy. It not only points to structural factors, including power transitions, but also to the role of fear, alliances, and miscalculation in triggering war. The U.S. and China are far from predestined to fight. If anything, both powers have shown a proclivity to iron out their differences through negotiations.⁷ Yet the framework stresses the need for vigilance: as China's capabilities reach parity with America's, the potential for dangerous and unremitting escalation may increase, particularly if aggressive alliance commitments or flashpoint incidents militate against restraint. In essence, the Thucydides Trap reminds policymakers that, apart from the bilateral rivalry itself, it is often third-party conflicts and alliance obligations that can push the superpowers into a conflagration. With this theoretical grounding established, we turn to the concrete and substantive alignments taking shape in Asia, and how they are feeding into potential Thucydidean traps at the regional level.

⁶ "What the Thucydides Trap Gets Wrong about China," *New Statesman*, January 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/international-politics/geopolitics/2022/01/what-the-thucydides-trap-gets-wrong-about-china>

⁷ Michael Race and Osmond Chia, "US and China Agree Framework of Trade Deal Ahead of Trump-Xi Meeting," October 27, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1lqj5lz4geo>.

South Asia: India and Pakistan in Opposing Camps

South Asia is witnessing a significant realignment. During the Cold War, India championed non-alignment⁸ (albeit tilting toward the Soviet Union in practice), while Pakistan was a U.S. treaty ally (as a member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO)).⁹ Now, those roles have nearly reversed. India has become much closer to the United States with a view to countering China's rise, while Pakistan has solidified a quasi-alliance with China, one that is driven by its rivalry with India and its estrangement from the West. These patterns have created a de facto bloc structure in South Asia: India and the U.S. (alongside other Indo-Pacific partners) versus Pakistan and China. The implications of all this for regional security are profound, as these divergences risk turning local conflicts into theaters of Sino-U.S. competition.

India's strategic pivot toward the United States has been most discernible in the defense domain. Once avowedly wary of wading into alliances, New Delhi now engages in regular joint military exercises with U.S. forces (from the annual *Yudh Abhyas* army drills to the naval Exercise Malabar that also includes Japan and Australia) and has signed key defense agreements enabling logistics-sharing and interoperability with the U.S. military.¹⁰ American defense sales to India have surged over the past decade, demonstrating a new level of trust and cooperation. India has acquired U.S.-made transport aircraft (C-130J *Super Hercules* and C-17 *Globemaster* heavylifters), maritime patrol planes (P-8I *Poseidons*), attack helicopters (AH-64E *Apaches*), and other advanced systems from the United States in recent years.¹¹ In 2025, Washington and New Delhi took bigger, more substantive strides, moving to institutionalize their defense ties: a comprehensive U.S.-India defense partnership framework¹² was negotiated to catapult India to near-ally status. This framework envisages joint development of advanced weapons (such as guided missiles and armored platforms), enhanced intelligence sharing, and coordinated planning across domains, essentially buttressing a long-term security partnership. From India's standpoint, closer strategic cooperation with the U.S. provides greater access to cutting-edge technology and high-end military hardware, as well as diplomatic support for India's own regional ambitions, including bolstering its position versus China along the Himalayan border and in the Indian Ocean. All of this has pushed India to expand strategic ties with U.S. allies like Japan and Australia through the *Quad* (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue),¹³ further integrating itself into a U.S.-led strategic grouping in the Indo-Pacific.

⁸ Lorenz M. Lüthi, "The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War, 1961–1973," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 4 (2016): 98–147, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26925642>

⁹ U.S. Department of State, "The Baghdad Pact (1955) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO)," January 20, 2009, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/98683.htm>; also see, U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), 1954," *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/seato>

¹⁰ Manoj Joshi, "A Survey of India-US Defence Cooperation," Observer Research Foundation, March 15, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/a-survey-of-india-us-defence-cooperation>

¹¹ "India Has Bought American Weapons Worth \$20 Billion Since 2008," *Amritt — The India Expert Blog*, February 14, 2025, <https://amritt.com/the-india-expert-blog/india-has-bought-american-weapons-worth-20-billion-since-2008/>

¹² "United States–India Joint Leaders Statement," The White House, February 13, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/02/united-states-india-joint-leaders-statement/>

¹³ K. Alan Kronstadt, "The 'Quad': Cooperation Among the United States, Japan, India, and Australia," Congressional Research Service Report No. IF11678 (January 30, 2023), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11678>

On the other hand, Islamabad has gravitated conspicuously into Beijing's strategic embrace. The China-Pakistan partnership, often characterized by leaders in Islamabad and Beijing as "higher than the Himalayas, deeper than the oceans," has traditionally been anchored in their mutual enmity toward India.¹⁴ In recent years, it has grown beyond symbolism into a solid economic, political, and military cooperative architecture. The flagship initiative, which symbolizes this bonhomie, is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a collection of infrastructure and energy projects, as well as industrialization, worth tens of billions of dollars that has knit Pakistan's economy with China's broader Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁵ CPEC encompasses highways, energy plants, special economic zones, and the development of Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea, giving China a potential strategic foothold near the Persian Gulf.

In addition to these growing economic ties, defense collaboration has deepened as well: Pakistan is now by far the largest client for Chinese arms exports. Chinese weaponry constitutes most of the Pakistani arsenals, from fighter jets to tanks, naval vessels, and air defense systems. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's data, Chinese arms made up about 81% of Pakistan's total weapons imports from 2020-24, and Pakistan alone accounted for 63% of China's global arms exports in that period, illustrating the symbiotic nature of this defense partnership.¹⁶ These statistics speak to Islamabad's dependence on Beijing for military hardware.¹⁷ This influx includes modern systems such as Chengdu J-10C multirole fighter jets (dubbed "Vigorous Dragons") inducted into the Pakistan Air Force, as well as the newly delivered Type 054A frigates for the Pakistan Navy. Joint defense industrial ventures like the co-production of the JF-17 *Thunder* fighter aircraft¹⁸ and collaborative projects on tanks, missiles, and submarines, further connect the two countries' militaries and defense industries.¹⁹ High-level military exchanges and joint exercises (for example, the *Shaheen* series of air drills and *Sea Guardians* naval exercises) underscore a concerted effort to enhance interoperability aimed at countering common adversaries and security threats. These advancements in defense ties not only enhance Pakistan's military posture vis-à-vis India but also serve China's strategic objective of counterbalancing India's rise and extending Chinese influence in the region and beyond.

All of this shows that the strategic alignment in South Asia feeds into the larger U.S.-China competition. India, perturbed about China's growing power, especially after episodes like the Doklam standoff in 2017

¹⁴ Li Qingyan, "China-Pakistan 'Iron Brotherhood': 70 Years Hand in Hand," China Institute of International Studies Commentary, September 8 2021,

https://www.ciis.org.cn/english/COMMENTARIES/202109/t20210908_8122.html

¹⁵ Muhammad Zahid Ullah Khan and Minhas Majeed Khan, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Challenges," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad Strategic Studies* No. 2 (2019): 67-82,

[https://www.issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/5-](https://www.issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/5-SS-Muhammad-Zahid-Ullah-Khan-and-Minhas-Majeed-Khan-No-2-2019.pdf)

[SS Muhammad Zahid Ullah Khan and Minhas Majeed Khan No-2 2019.pdf](https://www.issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/5-SS-Muhammad-Zahid-Ullah-Khan-and-Minhas-Majeed-Khan-No-2-2019.pdf)

¹⁶ Pieter D. Wezeman, Katarina Djokic, Mathew George, Zain Hussain, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2024," Fact Sheet (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2025), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/fs_2503_at_2024_0.pdf

¹⁷ "China Supplied 81 % of Pakistan's Arms Imports in the Past 5 Years, SIPRI Says," *South China Morning Post*, March 16, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3302515/china-supplied-81-pakistans-arms-imports-past-5-years-sipri-says>

¹⁸ "PAF, Chinese firm sign deal to build JF-17 aircraft," *Dawn*, March 8 2009,

<https://www.dawn.com/news/850745/paf-chinese-firm-sign-deal-to-build-jf-17-aircraft>

¹⁹ "Pakistan's May 2025 Victory Over India Validates Chinese Weapons: New US Congressional Report Reveals Strategic Turning Point - Defence Security Asia," accessed November 22, 2025,

<https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/pakistan-india-2025-chinese-weapons-uscc-report-analysis/>

and the bloody clash in Ladakh in 2020,²⁰ finds the U.S. an ideal strategic partner, which, consequently, sees India as a key ally to help reduce Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific. Disenchanted with Washington in the post-9/11 era, not least due to issues ranging from the Afghan war to concerns about terrorism and democracy, Islamabad has found in Beijing a reliable partner that provides investment, weapons, and diplomatic succor without Western-style political, economic, and diplomatic strings and pulls. The result is a polarized security structure in which every conflict in South Asia has a U.S.-China dimension attached to it.

While Washington is not directly involved in border skirmishes between New Delhi and Beijing, its support for India, under the aegis of the Indo-U.S. partnership, has a bearing on events in the Himalayas.²¹ Conversely, Pakistan's resolve and assertiveness in its military competition with India, as evidenced by its deployment of new types of armed drones, as well as the introduction of more capable missile systems, are enabled by Chinese technology transfers and the expectation of Chinese diplomatic espousal during a crisis. The May 2025 Indo-Pakistani war typified this dynamic: Pakistan's Chinese-supplied J-10C²² aircraft and PL-15 air-to-air missiles²³ were up against India's French-supplied Rafale jets and jointly developed BrahMos cruise missiles, marking the first conflict where high-end Chinese and Western (and Russian) weapons were directly used in combat. Analysts noted that this was effectively a proxy test of U.S./Western vs. Chinese military technology²⁴ on South Asian soil.²⁵ Such developments highlight how South Asia's perennial inter-state rivalry has become deeply enmeshed in the broader great-power contestation.

South Asian Powder Keg: India-Pakistan Crises Under a Nuclear Shadow

India and Pakistan have long constituted one of the world's most perilous dyads, having fought four wars since independence and being in possession of sizable nuclear arsenals. For decades, their conflict was confined to the Subcontinent and involved limited objectives. However, the evolving U.S.-China alignments have increasingly internationalized their rivalry. The May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis²⁶ showcased how rapidly a local incident can escalate under these new conditions, and how the U.S. and China might be drawn in, even if indirectly, raising the specter of both great-power entrapment and unbridled violence.

²⁰ Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Pangong Pickle: New Delhi's Options After Its Clash With China," *War on the Rocks*, July 2, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/indias-pangong-pickle-new-delhis-options-after-its-clash-with-china/>

²¹ "U.S. Security Cooperation With India," U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india>

²² "Pakistan's use of J-10C jets and missiles exposes potency of Chinese weaponry," *The Guardian*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/14/pakistans-use-of-j-10c-jets-and-missiles-exposes-potency-of-chinese-arms>

²³ "Exclusive Report: How Did Pakistan's J-10C Fighter Jet Using China's PL-15 Missile Destroy India's Rafale?" *Army Recognition*, August 8, 2025, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/?view=article&id=357417%3Aexclusive-report-how-did-pakistans-j10c-fighter-jet-using-chinas-pl15-missile-destroy-indias-rafale&catid=318>

²⁴ Josh Xiao and Yian Lee, "Chinese Weapons Gain Credibility After Pakistan-India Conflict," *Bloomberg News*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-05-13/success-of-chinese-jets-against-india-raises-alarm-in-asia>

²⁵ Sannan Pervaiz, "China's Role in the May 2025 India-Pakistan Conflict: Strategic and Global Implications," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, August 1, 2025, <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/chinas-role-may-2025-india-pakistan-conflict-strategic-and-global-implications>

²⁶ Rabia Akhtar, ed., *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post-Pahalgam – May 2025* (Islamabad: CSSPR-IRS, 2025) <https://csspr.uol.edu.pk/cssprebook/>

The 2025 crisis began with a familiar trigger: a large terrorist attack on April 22, 2025, in Indian-Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK), which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based militant groups. In a departure from past practice, India's response was unprecedented in both scope and scale. On May 7, 2025 after days of heated rhetoric, the Indian military launched Operation *Sindoor*, marked by punitive strikes deep inside of Pakistan's territory. India fired BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles (co-developed with Russia) and European-made *SCALP* air-launched cruise missiles at sites across the international border.²⁷ This marked the first time India employed cruise missiles against Pakistan, crossing a significant, hitherto inviolable threshold of escalation. Within hours, Pakistan retaliated speedily and resolutely. The Pakistan Air Force engaged in aerial combat operations with the Indian Air Force, and on the same day (May 7) scored significant successes. Pakistani fighter jets shot down six Indian fighter planes. Most importantly, these aerial engagements showcased the direct clash between Chinese and Western-supplied platforms. Pakistan ascribed its air successes to recently acquired Chinese J-10C fighters firing Chinese PL-15 long-range air-to-air missiles, evidence of which (fragments of a PL-15) was reportedly recovered on the Indian side of the border.²⁸ Therefore, day one of the crisis set a troubling, dangerous precedent. High-end Chinese and Western military systems were at loggerheads in the skies over South Asia. Strategically, it was tantamount to a proxy confrontation between U.S.-origin (and European) technology and Chinese technology, via their South Asian allies, underlining how far great-power rivalry had permeated this conflict.

Over the next three days (May 8–10, 2025), the fighting escalated further and spread beyond anything seen in previous post-nuclearization Indo-Pak crises, even as Pakistan exercised restraint to avoid total war.²⁹ Both sides deployed swarms of armed drones, striking deep into each other's territory, marking the first extensive use of unmanned systems in the South Asian theater. These attacks signified a kind of boldness that was absent in earlier crises: India demonstrated a willingness to strike deep into Pakistan's strategic nerve center: Punjab, effectively dismantling previous focal points that kept hostilities restricted along the Line of Control,³⁰ with the exception of the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis when India struck mainland Pakistan for the first time since 1971. Both sides, however, avoided crossing certain red lines. For example, neither air force sent manned fighter jets to bomb the other's major cities (likely fearing robust air defenses), and more crucially, neither side resorted to nuclear weapons or overt nuclear threats during the four days of combat. India showcased that it could devastate targets across Pakistan (leveraging its cruise missiles), while Pakistan proved it could offset India's advantage by superior air combat tactics, including but not limited to electronic warfare.

What prevented this intense, seemingly uncontrollable crisis from escalating further was a timely, robust bout of crisis diplomacy behind the scenes. The U.S., yet again, took the lead in brokering a ceasefire, bringing an end to hostilities. As the conflict raged, Washington urged both New Delhi and Islamabad to stand down and de-escalate. By May 9, 2025 the U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio was in constant

²⁷ Rabia Akhtar, "Escalation Gone Meta: Strategic Lessons from the 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis | The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs," May 14, 2025, <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/escalation-gone-meta-strategic-lessons-2025-india-pakistan-crisis>.

²⁸ "Pakistan's First Combat Use of Chinese PL-15E Air-to-Air Missiles Confirmed after Debris Found in India," accessed October 29, 2025, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/aerospace-news/2025/pakistans-first-combat-use-of-chinese-pl-15e-air-to-air-missiles-confirmed-after-debris-found-in-india>.

²⁹ Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, "Signaling Stability: Crisis Communication and the Grammar of Deterrence in South Asia," in *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post-Pahalgam – May 2025*, ed. Rabia Akhtar (Islamabad: CSSPR-IRS, 2025) <https://csspr.uol.edu.pk/cssprebook/>

³⁰ Abhijnan Rej, "(S)c(h)elling in Kashmir: Bargaining under the Nuclear Shadow," *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 163-86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1627157>.

contact with Pakistani and Indian leaders, offering economic inducements for restraint and warning of dire consequences if escalation continued.³¹ In one notable intervention, the U.S. emissary reportedly phoned Pakistan's Army Chief General Asim Munir on May 9 and offered American assistance in convening talks to address Pakistan's security concerns once fighting ceased. Simultaneously, the U.S. President Donald Trump directly called India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, urging him to refrain from carrying out further strikes that might force Pakistan into a corner. This relentless U.S. pressure, coupled with behind-the-scenes coordination with other influential countries, helped produce a ceasefire by May 10, 2025.³²

By contrast, China's role in ending the crisis was limited and ambiguous. Beijing issued public statements calling for restraint and respect for sovereignty, but there was little evidence that China exerted strong direct pressure on its ally Pakistan to back down. In either case, the external great-power involvement was asymmetrical: the United States acted as a firefighter to put out fires, while China, despite its deep ties to Pakistan, did not or could not act as an active crisis manager. This asymmetry raises a worrisome question for the future: if another, perhaps even worse Indo-Pak war erupts, will Washington and Beijing cooperate to contain it, or will they back their respective partners in ways that encourage them to prolong or exacerbate the conflict? The 2025 war ended with both India and Pakistan claiming victory and none of the core disputes resolved. This, in and of itself, could prove to be a trigger for future crises, potentially under even more dangerous circumstances.

The escalatory risks in South Asia remain high and are magnified by the shifting sands of the U.S.-China strategic rivalry. First and foremost is the danger of nuclear weapons use. During the 2025 conflict, both governments avoided crossing the nuclear threshold or resorting to explicit nuclear signalling. Still, the fact that India and Pakistan fought an intense, multi-domain war for several days without nuclear use may lower the perceived barrier to future conventional strikes, a phenomenon that Cold War theorists dubbed the Stability-Instability Paradox.³³ It is centered on the idea that nuclear deterrence emboldens rivals to engage in large conventional attacks under the nuclear overhang. Had the fighting continued or one side faced a decisive defeat, the temptation to consider nuclear options would have grown. A miscalculation or desperation in a future war could therefore lead to the unthinkable. Even absent nuclear use, the 2025 episode showed that each passing crisis is testing new limits, fast erasing firebreaks, and eroding restraint as a preferred policy. Military and technological developments, such as the introduction of precise missiles, anti-satellite weapons, cyber warfare, and air defenses, inject additional uncertainty into crisis stability. The war saw both sides employ novel capabilities (e.g. armed drones, precision strikes) that could, in a future scenario, provoke preemptive instincts, especially if either side feels its strategic assets (like second-strike nuclear forces or leadership bunkers) are threatened.

Analysts and scholars have warned that each major India-Pakistan confrontation since the 1999 Kargil conflict has escalated a step further than the last, a dangerous trajectory.³⁴ The 2001-02 standoff involved

³¹ Moeed Yusuf, "Brokered Bargaining in Nuclear South Asia: U.S. Mediation in the India-Pakistan Pahalgam Crisis | Arms Control Association," accessed October 29, 2025, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-07/features/brokered-bargaining-nuclear-south-asia-us-mediation-india-pakistan-pahalgam>.

³² Ibid.

³³ S. Paul Kapur, "India and Pakistan's Unstable Peace: Why Nuclear South Asia Is Not Like Cold War Europe | The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs," accessed October 29, 2025, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/india-and-pakistans-unstable-peace-why-nuclear-south-asia-not-cold-war-europe>.

³⁴ Sunaina Danziger et al., "From Kargil to Balakot: Southern Asian Crisis Dynamics and Future Trajectories," Henry L. Stimson Center Policy Paper, February 2020, <https://www.stimson.org/2020/from-kargil-to-balakot-southern-asian-crisis-dynamics-and-future-trajectories/>

a massive border mobilization, 2008 saw urban terrorism in Mumbai testing restraint, the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis saw the first Indian airstrike on Pakistani soil since 1971, and the 2025 war crossed multiple unprecedented thresholds (geographic span of strikes, advanced weapon types used, intensity and duration of combat). If this trend continues, a future Indo-Pak crisis could threaten to breach the nuclear threshold or drag outside powers into active involvement. In essence, South Asia represents a classic powder keg that could spill over into great-power conflict, thus validating the Thucydidean fear that a local spark, in the context of a larger rivalry, might trigger a conflagration far beyond the subcontinent. For the U.S. and China, the India-Pakistan theater is both a proxy battleground testing their influence and arms, and a potential ignition point for direct confrontation should their allies and partners call for help. This sobering reality makes South Asia an epicenter for anyone seeking to prevent a U.S.-China war.

Escaping the Trap: Pathways to Strategic Stability

The foregoing analysis explains how power-transition rivalry between the U.S. and China can inflame regional conflicts, especially in South Asia, raising the risk of a colossal conflagration. However, history also offers hope that such outcomes can be averted by wise policy choices. To avoid falling into the Thucydides Trap, both the great powers and regional actors must take proactive steps to build and bolster stability, communicate clearly, and restrain escalatory behaviors. This section outlines several pathways and policy measures for enhancing strategic stability in an era of U.S.-China competition. These include strengthening crisis communications mechanisms, responsible alliance management, enhancing confidence through arms control and risk-reduction measures on the front lines, and embracing the concept of *nuclear responsibilities* to foster mutual restraint. We lay emphasis on practical steps that can mitigate misperceptions, avoid accidental escalation, and reduce nuclear risks by encouraging and promoting responsible state behavior, an approach advocated by the emerging Nuclear Responsibilities framework.³⁵

U.S.-China Crisis Communications and Guardrails

At the core of any stability strategy must lie direct engagement between Washington and Beijing about military maneuvers, red lines, and crisis protocols. Currently, communication is inadequate, existing military hotlines are often dormant, and diplomatic dialogues have been sporadic. A top priority should be for the U.S. and China to establish reliable, continuously open channels for crisis communication and to use them in real-time if and when incidents occur. This could involve reinvigorating the defense telephone link between the Pentagon and the People's Liberation Army, setting up direct lines between theater commanders in the Indo-Pacific, or even creating a three-way hotline that includes a key regional ally (for instance, including India for South Asian contingencies or Japan for East China Sea contingencies). In addition, the two sides should quietly negotiate certain basic *guardrails* for their military competition, understandings about destabilizing actions to avoid. A useful historical model is the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA) between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, which laid out rules of behaviour to avert naval collisions and misunderstandings. The U.S. and China signed a non-binding memorandum in 2014 on rules for air and maritime encounters, but it has not prevented dangerously close intercepts in practice. Updating and expanding such accords, perhaps extending them to coast guard and civilian vessels, and including advance notification of major exercises or missile tests, could help prevent tactical incidents from

³⁵ Sebastian Brixey-Williams, Alice Spilman, and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Nuclear Responsibilities Toolkit: A Practical Guide for Thinking, Talking and Writing* (London: British American Security Information Council, Sept. 2021), https://basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/21_049_BASIC_Nuclear-Responsibilities-Toolkit_7_FULL.pdf

spiraling into major crises with nuclear undertones. Another potential “guardrail” via reciprocal assurance might address each side’s core fears, for example, the U.S. could privately assure China that it will not base offensive strike missiles in Taiwan or deploy forces permanently on Indian soil, while China might assure the U.S. that it will refrain from establishing military bases in Pakistan or the Western Pacific islands. Even informal understandings of this sort, if credible, can dampen worst-case assumptions and reduce the likelihood of miscalculations. The broader point is that, while U.S. and Chinese objectives will continue to clash in many areas, they share a common interest in *managing* their rivalry so that it does not jump the guardrails into open hostilities.

Responsible Alliance Management to Prevent Entrapment

Alliances are a double-edged sword; while they deter adversaries through collective defense, they can also immerse patrons in conflicts driven by smaller allies. Therefore, both the U.S. and China, as the security backers of various regional partners, need to practice restraint and clarity in managing their alliance commitments. On the U.S. side, this means providing clear assurances and reassurances to allies about what scenarios do (and do not) invoke American defence obligations, in order to deter adversaries without encouraging reckless behaviour by their partners and allies. In the context of South Asia, although the U.S. is not a formal ally of India, the burgeoning strategic partnership has its own peculiar dynamics. While Washington can support New Delhi legitimate defense needs and regional security role, it should also encourage India-Pakistan dialogue and discourage any temptation in India to destabilize Pakistan during peacetimes and crises (which could trigger unpredictable escalation).

Conversely, China, as Pakistan’s close partner, should ensure that Pakistan is not encouraged to provoke India, a preventative responsibility that serves Chinese interests by helping to avert wars that could derail China’s gargantuan Belt and Road investments and force the country into making difficult choices. Simply put, alignments should not mean indulgence: messages of, and calls for, restraint from patrons to their clients can prevent local conflicts from getting out of hand. The U.S., for instance, could make it clear to India that, while it will assist diplomatically in a crisis, it expects India to avoid strikes on Pakistani strategic targets that would risk nuclear retaliation. Similarly, China could signal to Pakistan that nuclear saber-rattling will risk upending Chinese support. By managing alliances responsibly, these great powers can reduce the risk of entrapment in an ally’s war. This also involves developing joint crisis-management protocols with and among allies.

Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) in Regional Flashpoints

Building mutual confidence, particularly in restraint, and reducing the chance of accidental war in flashpoint areas will require tailored measures by the local adversaries themselves, often with encouragement or facilitation by outside powers. In South Asia, India and Pakistan already have some rudimentary CBMs, for instance, a hotline between their Directors General of Military Operations, and an agreement to notify each other of ballistic missile tests. These need to be maintained and expanded. Both countries could renew their commitment to the ceasefire along the Line of Control in Kashmir (a 2003 accord that was reaffirmed in 2021³⁶ and sharply reduced cross-border firing). They could also implement an incidents-at-sea

³⁶ “The 2021 India-Pakistan Ceasefire: Origins, Prospects, and Lessons Learned,” United States Institute of Peace, accessed November 22, 2025, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/02/2021-india-pakistan-ceasefire-origins-prospects-and-lessons-learned>.

agreement between their navies to prevent confrontations in the Arabian Sea. On the nuclear front, reinforcing nuclear risk-reduction measures is critical: for example, reaffirming their 1988 agreement not to attack each other's nuclear facilities, and perhaps extending it to cover a pledge not to deploy certain highly destabilizing weapons. (India could formally reiterate its moratorium on testing and consider limiting development of short-range dual-use missiles that blur the line between conventional and nuclear forces; Pakistan could pledge not to mate nuclear warheads to tactical missile systems during peacetime, or not to disperse them during crises without notification, steps that would lower nuclear accident risks.) The Nuclear Responsibilities approach provides a useful framework here: it suggests that nuclear-armed states acknowledge their duty to behave in ways that do not increase nuclear risks, emphasizing a shared obligation to safeguard humanity. In practice, this could mean India and Pakistan engaging in a structured dialogue (perhaps facilitated by neutral third parties or Track-2 processes) about what each side sees as its responsibilities in preventing nuclear war. Such a dialogue, pioneered by initiatives like the UK-funded programme by the British American Security Information Council (BASIC), has helped Indian and Pakistani experts explore concepts of restraint and trust-building, especially amid the advent of emerging and disruptive technologies. By moving beyond mutual recriminations and instead focusing on each side's self-defined responsibilities (e.g. Pakistan's responsibility to secure its arsenal and prevent unauthorized use; India's responsibility to maintain a credible second-strike without spooking Pakistan into a hair-trigger posture), the two could identify unilateral or bilateral steps to reduce risks.

The bottom line is that local flashpoint stability is the first line of defense against a Thucydidean chain reaction, and therefore, investing in CBMs is an investment in regional and global peace.

Embracing a Nuclear Responsibilities Framework: A promising emerging approach to mitigating the dangers discussed is the *Nuclear Responsibilities* framework³⁷. This normative framework urges nuclear-armed states to move beyond traditional recrimination and instead reflect on their own responsibilities toward an array of stakeholders. Rather than "deterrence optimism" (relying on nuclear weapons to prevent war) or fatalism, it promotes a culture of restraint and accountability: each nuclear state should acknowledge a duty to humanity to ensure nuclear weapons are never used again. In concrete terms, this can shape policies such as de-alerting nuclear forces, improving command-and-control safety, and pursuing doctrinal clarifications that reduce ambiguity.

For India and Pakistan, adopting a Nuclear Responsibilities mindset could mean institutionalizing annual bilateral discussions on nuclear risk reduction, regardless of the political climate. These talks would not require one side to accept the other's stated position on disputes, but would only focus on practical steps to avoid nuclear use (e.g. sharing best practices on nuclear security, or agreeing on notification and verification measures for certain high-risk activities). For the U.S. and China, Nuclear Responsibilities entail maintaining strategic stability even as both modernize their arsenals – avoiding an arms race in offensive or defensive systems that could heighten first-strike instability. The U.S. still possesses a much larger nuclear arsenal than China's, but China's nuclear stockpile is growing and becoming more sophisticated. Both have a responsibility to engage in dialogue on nuclear doctrines and to manage the introduction of new technologies (such as hypersonic weapons, missile defenses, or space-based systems) that could erode deterrence stability. They could, for example, explore agreements or tacit understandings on limiting certain destabilizing deployments (akin to Cold War arms control, but updated for new tech), or at least improve

³⁷ Report: *Nuclear Responsibilities – A New Approach For Thinking And Talking About Nuclear Weapons* - BASIC, Report, November 1, 2020, <https://basicint.org/report-nuclear-responsibilities-a-new-approach-for-thinking-and-talking-about-nuclear-weapons/>.

transparency about their nuclear postures to reduce worst-case assumptions and, by extension, miscalculations.

Importantly, a Nuclear Responsibilities approach accentuates inclusivity, bringing all relevant nuclear and other stakeholders into a conversation. In an Asian context, this would mean creating a forum that includes not just the U.S. and China, but also India, Pakistan, North Korea, and even Russia (given its Pacific presence and ties to China, Pakistan, and India). Such a multilateral dialogue on nuclear risk in the Indo-Pacific could complement traditional bilateral arms control by acknowledging the interconnected nature of regional deterrence relationships. It would establish a common language of restraint: for instance, all parties could affirm that nuclear weapons are solely for deterrence, not for warfighting, and commit to certain principles like never targeting each other's nuclear command-and-control in a crisis. This may seem idealistic, but the act of articulating shared responsibilities can build mutual confidence over time. In South Asia, initiatives led by the civil society and think tanks have already applied the Responsibilities framework to India-Pakistan discussions, reportedly finding that participants can agree on many risk-reduction duties when the focus is shifted away from blaming the other side. Expanding this approach region-wide could create a greater sense of collective responsibility among the U.S., China, and regional nuclear powers to prevent a nuclear catastrophe. Ultimately, embedding the principle of nuclear responsibilities into regional security dialogues can help reframe the challenge not as *us versus them*, but as a shared interest in survival, creating political space for cooperative measures that might previously have been dismissed due to both mistrust and distrust.

CONCLUSION

The brewing U.S.-China rivalry has undoubtedly made Asia's security landscape more precarious. In South Asia, it has added a perilous layer to the India-Pakistan conflict, aggravating each side's sense of backing and potentially lowering the threshold for escalation. Recognizing these dangers is the first step toward managing them. The Thucydides Trap is not an inescapable fate. It serves as a warning. Both great powers and the regional actors have sufficient agency to avoid the worst outcomes. By implementing the measures outlined above, ranging from keeping communication channels open and honest to exercising restraint in alliance commitments to actively pursuing confidence-building and adopting a framework of nuclear responsibility, the involved states can significantly reduce the risk of inadvertent war. History shows that even intense rivalries (such as the Cold War) can be navigated without open conflict if prudent diplomacy, clear-headed leadership, and stabilizing agreements are in place. Avoiding a war born of miscalculation in Asia is not only possible; it is an urgent responsibility of our era's policymakers. Indeed, future historians might well record how the United States and China, in tandem with their allies and partners, stepped back from the brink and managed the perilous power transition peacefully, thereby circumventing the Thucydides Trap before it could spring. In doing so, they would not only spare the region and the world a devastating conflict but also set a positive precedent for how rising and established powers can coexist in a stable yet competitive international environment. The stakes, regional peace, economic prosperity, and the prevention of nuclear calamity, demand nothing less than concerted efforts to chart a new course away from the Trap and toward a shared peace in the Indo-Pacific. For that, taking steps to reduce the prospect of another incendiary Indo-Pak crisis and its entanglement with the Sino-U.S. rivalry is absolutely paramount.

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