

# The Complex and Increasingly Dangerous Nuclear Weapons Geometry of Asia

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*Analysis on Effective Policy Responses to Weapons-Related Security Threats*

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## The Complex and Increasingly Dangerous Nuclear Weapons Geometry of Asia

Asia is home to four of the world's nine nuclear-armed states, each of which is increasing the size and technological sophistication of its own nuclear arsenal. While much of the world's attention is focused on efforts to halt the nuclear and missile tests of North Korea,<sup>1</sup> the nuclear arsenals and ambitions of India, Pakistan, and China also pose significant dangers and deserve more attention.

Pakistan is believed to be increasing its stockpile of fissile material at the fastest rate of any nuclear-weapon state. The threat of a nuclear war originating from an interstate conflict between India and Pakistan, or from acquisition by terrorists of fissile material or nuclear weapons stored in these countries, remains dangerously high. The nuclear dynamics between India and Pakistan would be difficult to manage, even if the countries were part of a closed-loop system, but they are not. While Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is designed to counter India's conventional and nuclear forces, New Delhi measures its own nuclear weapons program against that of China. Beijing, in turn, judges the adequacy of its nuclear arsenal against the threat it perceives from the United States' strategic offensive and defensive capabilities. And in its efforts to mitigate the ballistic missile threat from North Korea, the United States and its allies in the region are expanding their strategic and theater missile defense capabilities.

The complicated nuclear weapons geometry of Asia thus extends from the subcontinent to the other side of the world. In order to fully understand how the pace and direction of nuclear proliferation can be influenced, the interconnections of these countries must be considered, along with the kinds of nuclear weapons they have at their disposal.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- A cross-border conflict between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan poses a serious threat of nuclear war.
- The presence of terrorist organizations in Pakistan raises significant concerns about the prospect of unauthorized access to Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.
- China plays a critical role in fueling South Asia's nuclear arms race:
  - as the outside country most responsible for Pakistan acquiring nuclear and missile technology; and
  - as the country against which India measures its own nuclear weapons profile.
- The United States has a significant impact on the South Asian nuclear threat as well, both direct and indirect:
  - as the foreign country that most influences the size and shape of China's nuclear arsenal; and
  - as a major player in efforts to halt global fissile material production and in managing the terms of global nuclear cooperation with India.

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