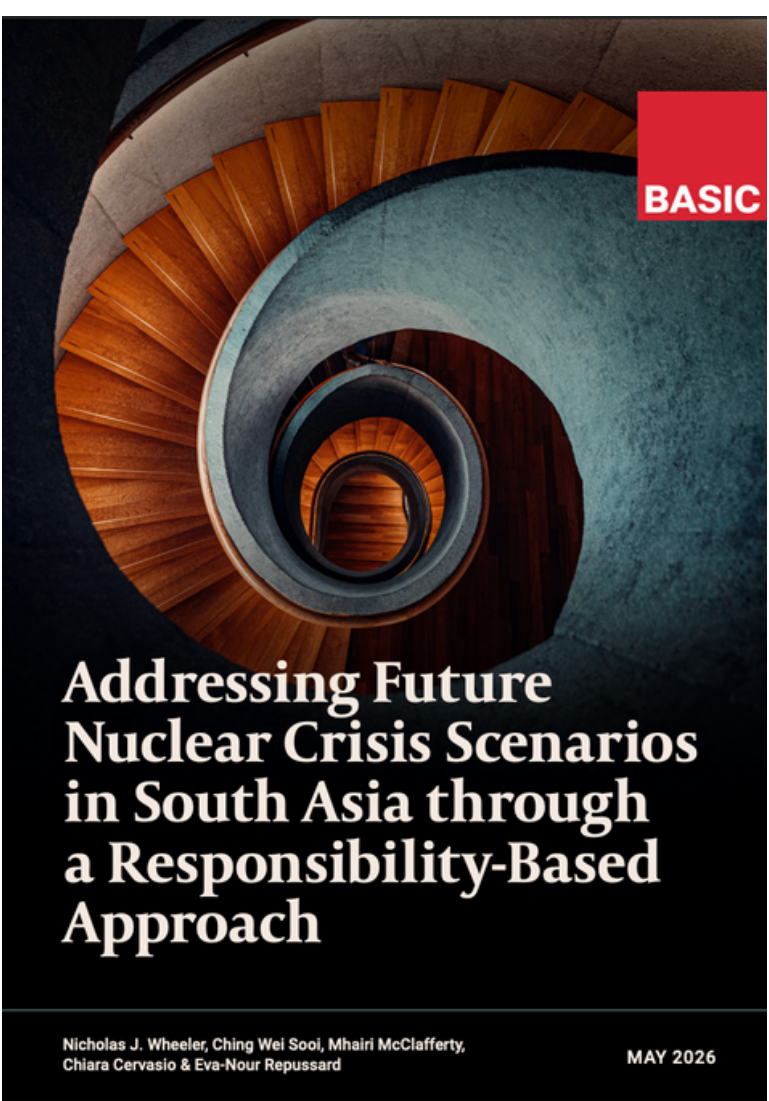
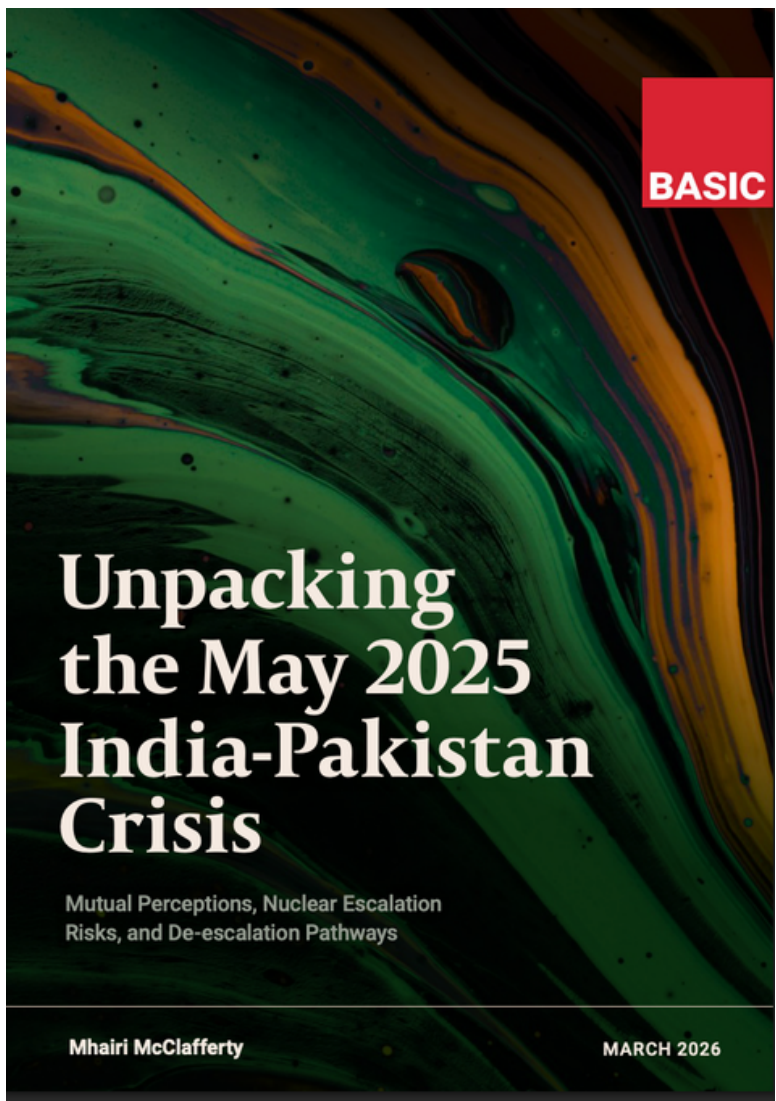


The May 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis and Future Nuclear Crisis Scenarios in South Asia: Mutual Perceptions, Escalation Risks, and De-escalation Pathways

Mhairi McClafferty, BASIC Policy Fellow, mmclafferty@basicint.org
Ching Wei Sooi, BASIC Policy Fellow, csooi@basicint.org



Context

The **May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis** was the **most serious military confrontation** between the nuclear-armed neighbours since 1971.

Following a terrorist attack in Pahalgam on 22 April, tensions escalated after India launched precision strikes in Pakistan on 7 May. **Missile, drone, artillery**, and **cross-border exchanges** raised fears of nuclear escalation before a ceasefire was reached on 10 May.

Understanding the escalation and eventual de-escalation of the crisis is crucial for **managing the risks of future crises** and identifying pathways towards **de-escalation**.

Methodologies

Unpacking the May 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis

- 30 semi-structured interviews
- Triangulation with official statements, speeches, media reporting, and post-crisis publications

Addressing Future Nuclear Crisis Scenarios

- Two crisis simulations
- Facilitated dialogues using BASIC's in-house Nuclear Responsibilities Approach

Findings

- Both sides generally **did not distinguish between deliberate, inadvertent, and accidental escalation**.
- Both sides maintained sharply **divergent perceptions** on the crisis onset, dynamics, and outcomes.
- Escalation was driven by **reciprocal misperceptions**, with each side viewing its own actions as restrained and defensive, while viewing the other's behaviour as offensive.
- **“Escalation Cascades”**: The simultaneous interaction of different escalation pathways – deliberate, inadvertent and accidental – that drive escalation in ways unintended by those making the decisions that drive it.
- **Cognitive Biases**:
 - Peaceful/defensive self images
 - Inherent bad-faith model of the adversary
- **The role of fear**:
 - Fear of the adversary
 - “Fear of nuclear inadvertence”



Policy Recommendations

1. Empathically Grounded Communication
2. Improving and Creating Trusted Channels of Communication
3. Fostering Responsible Communication with the Public
4. Creating a Shared Narrative of Past Crises and Cooperative De-Escalation
5. Strengthening Track 2 Initiative and Next Generation Involvement
6. Maintaining, Improving, and Creating Confidence Building Measures