22ND ASIA SECURITY SUMMIT

THE SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE

SIMULTANEOUS SPECIAL SESSION 2

REGIONAL CRISIS-MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS

SATURDAY 31 MAY 2025

GENERAL SAHIR SHAMSHAD MIRZA

CHAIRMAN, JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF COMMITTEE,
PAKISTAN ARMED FORCES

General Sahir Shamshad Mirza, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, Pakistan Armed Forces

Thank you, Darshana. *Bismillahir rahmanir raheem, assalamu alaikum* and a very good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Let me begin by expressing gratitude to IISS for providing me an opportunity to join the panel of esteemed speakers to talk today. It is a privilege to speak on the critical subject of crisis-management mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific, a region of immense promise yet undeniable peril. The Asia-Pacific has become the geopolitical cockpit of the twenty-first century. Its trajectories will shape the security architecture, not only for this region, but of the world. Yet, if we are candid, we must admit that crisis-management mechanisms today remain somewhat fragile, reactive and unevenly institutionalised.

Ladies and gentlemen, to lay the foundation, let me offer eight salient observations from Pakistan's perspective as a stakeholder in regional and global stability. Firstly, strategic understanding must precede crisis management. Mechanisms cannot function in a vacuum of trust or amid systemic asymmetries. Durable crisis management requires a foundation of mutual restraint, recognition of red lines and equilibrium, not dominance.

Secondly, inclusion is not optional. No framework can succeed if key stakeholders are marginalised or if cooperative structures serve as instruments of containment. Stability must be participatory.

Thirdly, ad hoc responses are inadequate. We need institutionalised protocols, hotlines, pre-agreed de-confliction procedures and joint crisis-management exercises that remove ambiguity when the escalation threatens.

Fourthly, crisis prevention is better than crisis fighting. Suppressed disputes, whether territorial or ideological, cannot be indefinitely managed. Durable mechanisms must include pathways of fair and peaceful dispute resolution. I shall dwell on this a little later.

Fifthly, strategic communication matters. Misconception, narrative warfare and information distortion are the oxygen for escalation. We must disarm not only militarily, but rhetorically.

Sixthly, emerging technologies proliferate faster than our doctrines evolve. Artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled targeting, cyber disruptions, real-time battlefield surveillance compress the decision space. Our mechanisms should accommodate this new reality.

Seventhly, power and interests, not morality or principles, now reign supreme. Structures holding the modern state system are losing vitality. Use of force with impunity is pervasive. The custodians of the liberal world have themselves jettisoned the much-cherished values of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, human rights, international law and justice. Multilateralism is gradually giving way to a rather myopic minilateralism.

Lastly, South Asia must not be left out of the Asia-Pacific stability conversations. It is home to two geographically contiguous nuclear powers, an unresolved territorial dispute of Kashmir and the living memory of several crises that nearly spiralled out of control. Crisis-management debate in the Asia-Pacific is incomplete without a serious focus on South Asia.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me now talk about challenges in the Asia-Pacific and South Asia. Firstly, the Asia-Pacific. Like all other regions in the world, Asia-Pacific has had its share of security challenges, yet at the same time, I view Asia-Pacific as a role model of regional growth taking maximum advantage of globalisation and its spin-offs. The region is intricately connected in multiple domains, like politics, economics and people-to-people connection.

Here, I would like to proffer four observations. Firstly, Asia-Pacific today appears to be descending into an extended era of great-power contestation and strategic uncertainty. Increasing militarisation and juxtaposition of regionalised political issues into great-power play have increased the chances of the region being the next frontier of contestation.

Secondly, since the end of World War II, Asia-Pacific has largely been guided by extra-regional powers and consequently an institutional security architecture organic to the region itself, with crisis-oversight and -management structures, are missing exactly when they are direly needed.

Thirdly, it is inevitable to recognise the rise of all great nations of Asia-Pacific who rightfully claim their own share of strategic significance and an independent voice in institutional mechanisms meant to manage their region. This implies that mechanisms transplanted into this region from outside the region will not have local respect and recognition.

Finally, it is encouraging to see that the region is alive to its challenges, and there are many ongoing efforts for expanding cooperation and increasing communication. I am very optimistic that with a constructive, cooperative and accommodative approach, the region will be able to emerge taller out of the impending crisis.

Ladies and gentlemen, now I shall talk about South Asia, where a looming threat of a global scale resides. South Asian strategic outlook is shaped by competing interests of the global-power play, complicated Iran–West relations, perpetual instability in Afghanistan, India–Pakistan–China equation and the unresolved Kashmir dispute that remains at the core of India–Pakistan dyad, leading to regional instability.

In the geostrategic realm, nuclearised South Asia presents a risk of strategic miscalculation of global consequence. Nuclearisation of South Asia was a watershed event, beyond which third-party mediation has emerged as a permanent feature of crisis management.

Emboldening of India as a net security provider by the West and its ambition to become regional hegemon is disincentivising it to engage in conflict-management options. Conflicts in South Asia therefore remain unaddressed due to weakened capacity and ineffectiveness of the multilateral frameworks, both international and regional.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me briefly add that the recent escalation between India and Pakistan has once again underscored how regional crisis-management frameworks remain hostage to countries' belligerence. As far as crisis management is concerned, the only functional bilateral communication that exists between the two countries is the Directors General of Military Operations' hotline, whereas the recent stand-off amply underlines significance of maintaining open channel of communications to avert crises as and when they erupt.

In this context, I want to make four assertions. Firstly, post-Pahalgam, the threshold of an escalatory war has come dangerously low, implying greater risk on both sides, just not in the disputed territory, but all of India and all of Pakistan. This is extremely detrimental to investments, trading and development needs of 1.5 billion people of both countries.

Secondly, in future, given the Indian policies and polity's extremist mindset, absence of a crisis-management mechanism may not give enough time to the global powers to intervene and effect cessation of hostilities. They will be probably too late to avoid damage and destruction.

Thirdly, the weaponisation of water by holding Indus Water Treaty in abeyance is in total defiance of the international laws, since it is an existential threat for the people of Pakistan. If there is any effort to stop, divert or delay Pakistan's share of water, as clearly spelt out by our national-security committee, it could be considered as an act of war.

India, in violation of the United Nations Charter, carried out illegal and unjustified air and missile strikes targeting civilian infrastructure, including the places of worship, resulting into the loss of innocent civilian lives, including women and children. The assumption that Pakistan would not react to the violation of its sovereignty or territorial integrity actually lacks elementary strategic sense.

Ladies and gentlemen, loss of innocent lives in Pahalgam, as well as India's aggression against Pakistan, which also killed innocent men, women and children, are both equally condemnable. Pakistan has always proffered negotiated and diplomatic solutions and repeatedly offered full cooperation to India to work on all contentious issues.

I will just take two minutes going to the recommendations. Pakistan desires a peaceful coexistence with India based on mutual respect, sovereign equality and, most importantly, dignity and honour. Moving forward, four recommendations. In both Asia-Pacific and South Asia, we need not have new mechanisms. We need to re-energise and strengthen existing bi lateral, regional and multilateral frameworks. Both Asia-Pacific and South Asia need to take up the mantle of keeping global institutions relevant and effective. States need to communicate more and more often and more effectively.

Finally, it has become imperative to move beyond conflict management towards conflict resolution. This will ensure sustainable peace and an assured crisis management.

Finally, for an enduring peace in South Asia, an early resolution of Kashmir, in line with the UN Security Council resolutions, and as per the aspirations of people, is essential. I believe that institutions have a solemn responsibility to promote strategic discipline, to preserve communication, even amidst crises. And then I would finally say that we seek a principled order, an order anchored in sovereign equality and restraint. In this, crisis management is not merely a set of tools, but a strategic ethic. I thank you.