

# CSSPR REVIEW

Nuclear Responsibilities: A New Approach for Thinking and Talking About Nuclear Weapons

A View from Pakistan  
By Dr. Rabia Akhtar



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LAHORE

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The Center conducts research, publishes, and holds conferences on a broad range of regional and international security, strategic, peace and conflict issues. Through this Center, we aim to establish national, regional and international linkages and collaborate with universities, think tanks, research institutes and eminent scholars from around the world, enabling national and international scholars and our students to use CSSPR's platform to deliberate upon issues that carry a global impact.

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# Nuclear Responsibilities: A New Approach for Thinking and Talking About Nuclear Weapons

**AUTHORS:** Sebastian Brixey-Williams and Nicholas J. Wheeler



In his 1963 classic entitled *The Strategy of Conflict*, Thomas Schelling aptly delved into the need to dovetail the threat of destruction with the promise of non-destruction in order to effectively deter an adversary. Schelling's famous 'threats that leave something to chance' was about manipulating risks and uncertainties which, according to him, would be critical to surmounting the credibility problem, especially in relation to extended deterrence (although, that could just be taken as a deterrence-enhancement measure rather than one reflective of recklessness). However, cautioning against being overtly reckless, Schelling argued that, "we must consider whether too great a capacity to strike him (enemy) by surprise may induce him to strike first..." (Schelling, 1963, p.7). Schelling was, in effect, alluding to the need to navigate the dilemma of deterrence: by striking a balance between restraint, responsibility, and resolve.

Deterrence theory posits that a nuclear possessor must ensure that its prudence does not, in any manner, give the impression that it lacks the resolve to 'automatically' take on the adversary if and when it is needed. This predicament was thoroughly dissected by Peter Feaver in his 1992 [article](#). Feaver's introduction of the always/never dilemma to the strategic literature is an important contribution. Jeffery Lewis and Bruno Tertrais in their *War on the Rocks* [article](#) expand the dilemma further by stating that "these twin goals are in tension...the weapons should "always" be available for launch when ordered by a legitimate authority, but "never" if no legal order has been given." During peacetime and crises therefore, communications between warring parties revolve around



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conveying resolve, demonstrating one's own responsibility, and promoting reassurance, with each trying to inform the world that the ongoing escalation or near-crisis is a result of the irresponsible behavior of the other. Excessively manipulating risks could only go on to dampen the prospect of maintaining crisis and deterrence stability.

In 2019, two nuclear-armed antagonists, India and Pakistan, were embroiled in a serious military crisis that saw the use of airpower and the downing of aircraft, as well as the threat of missile strikes by the former. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan led the country's communications drive during and after the crisis. Addressing the nation after Pakistan retaliated against India's airstrikes, he categorically [said](#) that, "we took time to respond, for we wanted to assess the damage that India's strike caused so as to avoid giving a disproportionate response. Our aim was just to demonstrate our capability and resolve." He added that all wars are caused by miscalculations, including but not

limited to underestimating the adversary's capabilities and resolve. Without using the word 'nuclear', PM Khan stressed the need to show responsible behavior, something that he continues to emphasize. The crux of Pakistan's current enunciations on the fragile state of regional stability is that it is a responsible nuclear-possessor, and that India needs to act as one, too. All this points to Pakistan's understanding of its responsibilities as a nuclear possessor state.

This wrangling continues to be one of the causes of complex sets of nuclear risks in South Asia. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that festering disputes between the two countries lessen the prospect of meaningful engagements on arms control and nuclear risk reduction mechanisms. Apart from the case of these South Asian nuclear rivals, there is growing polarization over most of the issues that define and shape the global nuclear order, as exemplified by the tug of war between deterrence and disarmament advocates within and outside of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. The gulf has widened due to the constant evisceration of arms control frameworks, increasing reliance on nuclear weapons, the return of great-power acrimony, and the negotiation and entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

### **The Nuclear Responsibilities Approach**

With all this in mind, one could argue that the prospect of reducing nuclear risks, let alone eliminating nuclear weapons, is bleaker than ever. With a view to navigating these structural issues and bringing freshness to the discourse on nuclear weapons, Sebastian Brixey-Williams and Nicholas J. Wheeler have co-authored a [report](#) entitled "Nuclear Responsibilities: A New Approach for Thinking and Talking About Nuclear Weapons." The report is part of the Programme on Nuclear Responsibilities, a project launched by the British American Security Information Council (BASIC) and the Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security (ICCS) at the University of Birmingham.

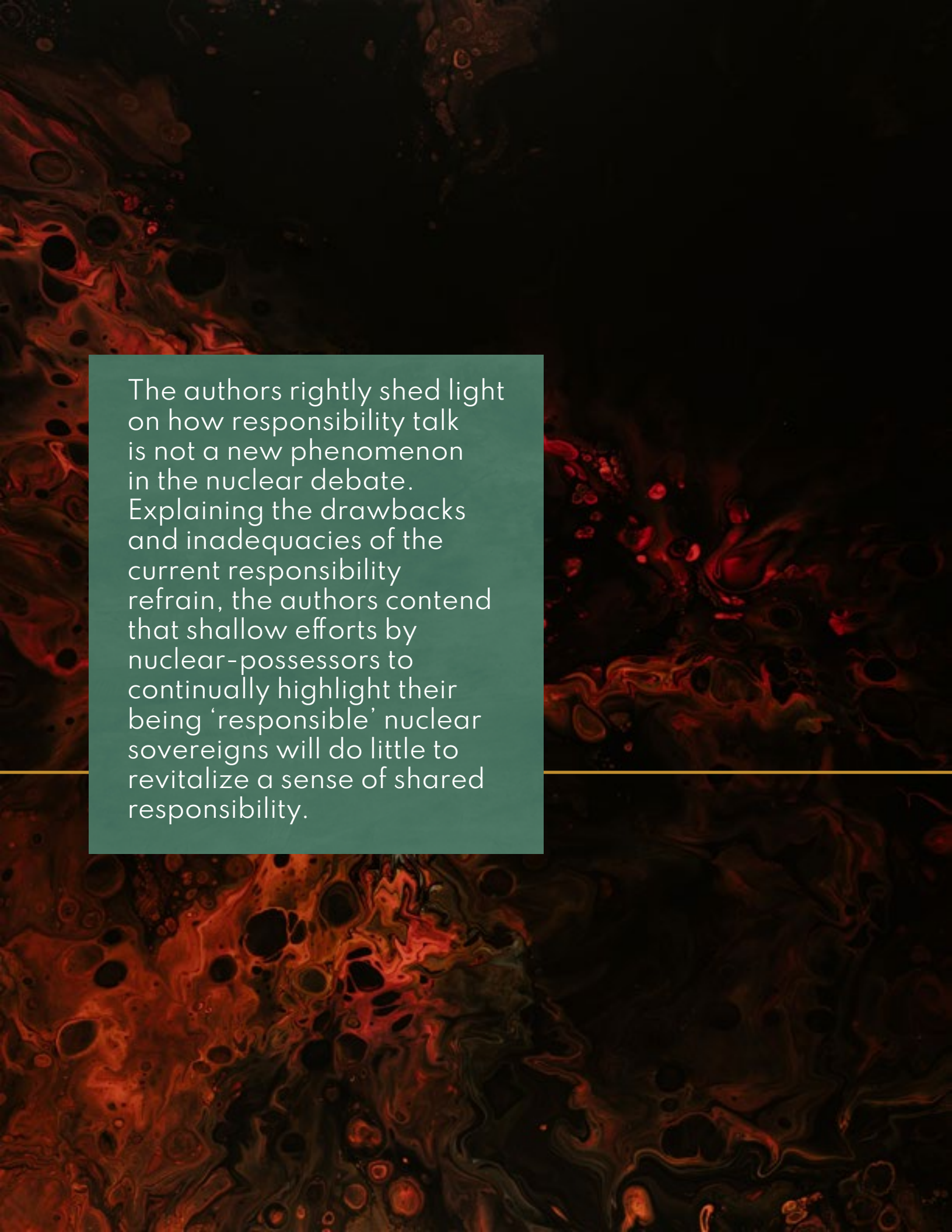
The project seeks to achieve three things.

#### **First, it wants to enable stakeholders to develop new insights about their responsibilities vis-à-vis nuclear weapons.**

Indeed, it is essential for everyone, directly and indirectly concerned with nuclear weapons, to know of their responsibilities. For example, the room for military leaders, responsible for their fighting formations, to engage in jingoism and chest-thumping greatly reduces when nuclear weapons are added to the mix. A responsible behavior by the country's nuclear establishment could be questioned if other actors do not recognize the importance of restraint. So, if the Indian military leadership, fully conversant with the ramifications of the nuclear factor, gives provocative threats to Pakistan, India's quest to be deemed as a responsible nuclear state will be undermined. The same would, of course, be true were the roles reversed. This can only happen through a broad-based, consistent dialogue on apprising states of their sets of responsibilities and the avenues available for fulfilling them.

#### **Second, it aims to introduce a new model that paves the way for a collaborative, respectful dialogue that, in turn, allows stakeholders to discuss their conceptions of responsibilities and identify differences and commonalities in their approach.**

The project's focus on developing a new model to facilitate dialogue is much-needed, especially because the established channels of dialogue are not helping generate a substantive narrative on nuclear weapons. The RevCons of the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) often end without or with only limited results, widening the schism between the nuclear haves and the have-nots. Bilaterally, too, states are often unwilling to even talk, let alone conclude arms control agreements or other risk reduction measures. Further, exploring new approaches to parse nuclear issues is all the more critical given that the environment is seemingly rigged against nuclear restraint. Not only have key treaties and agreements (e.g. the INF Treaty and



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the JCPOA) been abandoned by essential parties, the 'legitimate' nuclear powers have also clearly enhanced the role of nuclear weapons in their security policies.

**Third, it hopes to fundamentally change “the nature of the contemporary global conversation on nuclear weapons away from one characterised by rights, blame, suspicion, and varying degrees of distrust towards one built on responsibility, cooperation, empathy, and even trust.”** While this lies at the heart of instituting successful processes of dialogue between various stakeholders, it is also the most challenging one. It is noteworthy that, when pressured to adhere to Article VI of the NPT, the United States conveniently shifted the onus of disarmament to the Non-Nuclear-Weapon States under the “Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament” (CEND) initiative. This will be one of the biggest hurdles this project will face going forward. Mindful of this challenge, the authors rightly note that, “a key obstacle standing in the way of achieving new risk-reduction practices – unilateral or multilateral – is a chronic culture of blame within the global nuclear order.” They go a step further, arguing that the culture of recrimination germinates from both sides of the divide, each of which vociferously defends what they consider as their rightful positions.

Cognizant of these seemingly insurmountable, sets of concerns, **the authors articulate that their focus is not to identify who is failing to live up to their responsibilities, but rather to “draw attention to the chronic culture of blame that fuels distrust and contracts the potential for empathy between those who hold different perceptions of their nuclear responsibilities.”**

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drawbacks and inadequacies of the current responsibility refrain, the authors contend that shallow efforts by nuclear-possessors to continually highlight their being 'responsible' nuclear sovereigns will do little to revitalize a sense of shared responsibility. Indeed, **the authors are rightly hesitant about making too many claims about what is or is not 'responsible', and circumspect in establishing a linkage between a nuclear state acting responsibly and the prospect of promoting a culture of responsibility.** This is primarily because, as lucidly explained by the authors, competing claims of being 'responsible nuclear weapon states' – linked to William Walker's Responsible Nuclear Sovereignty concept – can become just another form of mud-slinging. States are all but likely to extol their responsible behaviors, while reminding their adversaries of the need to act more responsibly or even accusing them of gross irresponsibility, but this alone is unlikely to promote – and may even prevent – the more meaningful kind of culture shift the authors would like to see.

### **The Two-step Nuclear Responsibilities Method**

In a bid to traverse these sets of snags, the two-step Nuclear Responsibilities Method aims to facilitate and support officials and publics, in thinking and talking about nuclear weapons. Differentiating between “responsible” and “responsibilities”, the project aims to move the whole question from which states are responsible/irresponsible, towards asking what each state's responsibilities are. If a state does want to keep describing itself as responsible, what is most important is that it is willing to publicly tie this to specific policies/practices/behaviors, with lots of detail, but also demonstrate an openness to hearing and perhaps even adapting to alternative points of view.

While one could argue that the use of the term 'nuclear responsible state' could be divisive, it is also reasonable to expect that nuclear states want to be seen as responsible actors. The certificate of responsibility is of great import for states that want, among other things, to enter into the global nuclear commerce architecture. Moreover, they have to mollify allies and adversaries alike when it comes to handling nuclear weapons. Thus, selling this recommendation to nuclear haves may be a tall order, to say the least.

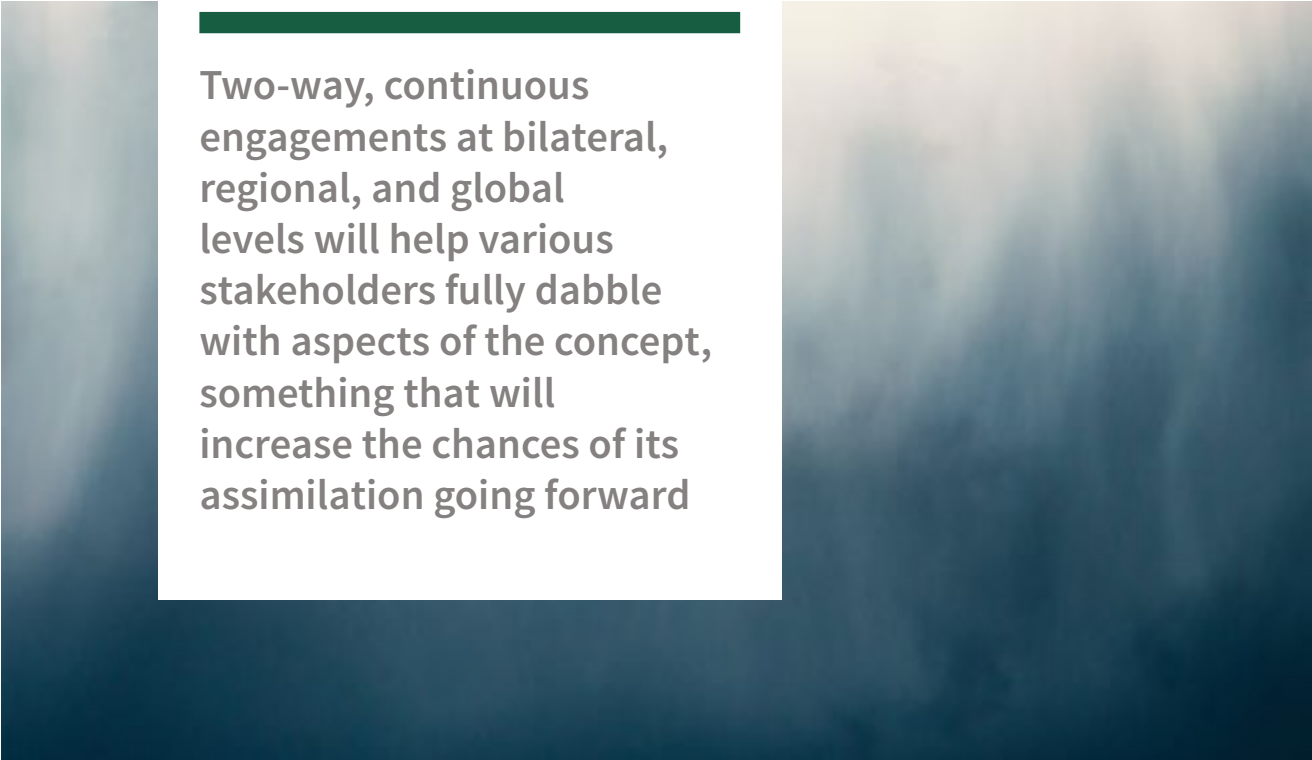
The report fittingly notes that focusing solely on states, while ignoring the roles and responsibilities of all other stakeholders, limits our understanding of the intricacies involved in the full spectrum of responsibilities and produces incomplete assessments. The authors point out that, "any stakeholder with the capacity to influence nuclear weapons futures has responsibilities around nuclear weapons and is therefore important to engage." The project's bid to add a diverse group of people to the mix is all the more imperative in a fraught environment. At a time when gray zone tactics, coupled with disruptive technologies, are upsetting the hierarchy of escalation and challenging traditional notions of strategic stability, engaging a diverse range of individuals and organizations is of the essence.

Involving a host of disparate groups, the "Critical Introspection" part of the Method invites each party to critically analyze their own understanding of their responsibilities. The facilitated discussion aims to enable parties to fathom their responsibilities, their sources, and their beneficiaries while bringing to light conflicting responsibilities. Certainly, all this, coupled with the idea of self-accountability, will strengthen the policymaking of a nuclear-possessor. Also, being open to the idea of self-analysis could contribute towards enhancing transparency.

Hence, this part of the Method could act as a confidence-building measure (CBM). That said, the results of this process may not necessarily do away with the proclivities to hurl accusations. In addition, regardless of the intrusiveness of their appraisals, conflicting parties are least likely to bend over backwards to accommodate others, if and when their security interests dictate their deference to nuclear deterrence. Here, it is important to note that deterrence cannot be achieved without mixing responsibility with a degree of risk. It is important to note that an element of nuclear risk is not antithetical to this Method, for fear of a catastrophe could spring states into taking actions, individually and collectively, **with a view to enhancing shared responsibilities when it comes to nuclear weapons.**

The "Empathic Dialogue" stage of the Method lies at the heart of the project, and rightly so. Erecting a framework of talks that allows parties to share their conceptions of responsibilities, ideas of nuclear strategy and doctrine, and ascertain areas of convergence and divergence, inspires confidence. **Dialogue stands** a better chance of eventually doing away with some of the most incendiary misperceptions. So, the inclusion of this component in the Method will placate some critics. That the two stages are slated to begin sequentially is significant and reflective of a realization that groundwork has to be laid before parties can interact meaningfully to elicit mutual, strategic advantages.

It is fair to argue that the Method is a tad ambitious. Bringing together nations across the deterrence-disarmament binary is a tough ask, especially if the parties are committed to maintaining their maximalist positions on all matters nuclear. One could also predict that phase two could become yet another fighting club, just like the RevCons. However, the report duly acknowledges the



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pitfalls while informing readers that the project is still work in progress.

Through critical feedback on this report, previous dialogues have been conducted with a set of five countries (detailed in the Report). The project's findings will be presented at the Tenth RevCon. Using this forum will open the Method to receiving accolade and opprobrium from the proponents of deterrence and disarmament, respectively. This will only help the project team tease out more conduits of cooperation. Though it will run the risk of making the Method a victim of something it seeks to avoid: passing the buck **to others**. Nonetheless, the report will add a new dimension to the interactions in the upcoming RevCon, a process that has been marred by obduracy and inflexibility. Furthermore, the project is right in devising an engagement strategy across formats and levels. Two-way, continuous engagements at bilateral, regional, and global levels will help various stakeholders fully dabble with aspects of the concept, something that will

increase the chances of its assimilation going forward. This will only add substance to the overall program that aims to create a considerable space for 'Nuclear Responsibilities' in the wider debate on nuclear weapons.

In sum, it would be reasonable to underscore that the success of the project will hinge upon a buy-in from deterrence aficionados. A feedback-driven mechanism of this project may actually enable it to harmonize its approach with the structure of global and nuclear politics. Preaching to the choir doesn't cut it. Thus, the authors of the report should, for starters, hypothesize as to how they will sell the Method to South Asian leaders, especially given how the overall acrimony between the two regional nuclear states, India and Pakistan, percolates in their nuclear relations.