

Rethinking Crisis Management in a World of Multiple Nuclear Adversaries: New Thinking for a Dangerous Century

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The contemporary global order is characterised by overlapping and interconnected adversarial nuclear relationships. This multiple adversary world poses challenges and complexities that did not exist in the bipolar international system of the Cold War. A key question posed by the new complexity of nuclear relations is the viability of the concept of nuclear crisis management, one of the core ideas in strategic studies. Are the tools developed during the Cold War to reduce nuclear risks in moments of acute danger fit for a world of multiple nuclear players and intertwined theatres of competition?

Reflecting on the Cuban Missile Crisis decades later, former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara remarked that “managing crises is the wrong term: you don’t manage them because you can’t manage them” (McNamara in Blight 1991, 192). This panel asks whether McNamara’s stark warning is even more compelling in today’s nuclear era—one shaped by rapid technological developments in AI, cyber, and quantum systems, and the growing interconnectedness of escalation pathways across domains and regions.

The panel brings together scholars and practitioner-researchers to examine nuclear crisis management with particular focus on South Asia and U.S.–China dynamics. We explore innovations including security dilemma sensibility and strategic empathy, crisis communication and trust-building, AI-augmented decision-making, Track 1.5 dialogues, and the value of crisis simulations and wargaming as tools for de-escalation. Contributions draw on interdisciplinary approaches—from psychology and diplomatic studies to wargaming and futures analysis—to reimagine escalation control and crisis prevention in a fragmented nuclear order.

By foregrounding diverse perspectives and engaging both policy and academic communities, the panel directly answers BISA’s call to consider what the discipline must become to meet future global challenges. It demonstrates how renewed thinking, methods, and pedagogies can ensure that international studies remains relevant, normatively grounded, and practically capable of reducing nuclear risk in a dangerous century.

Track Classification: Global Nuclear Order Working Group