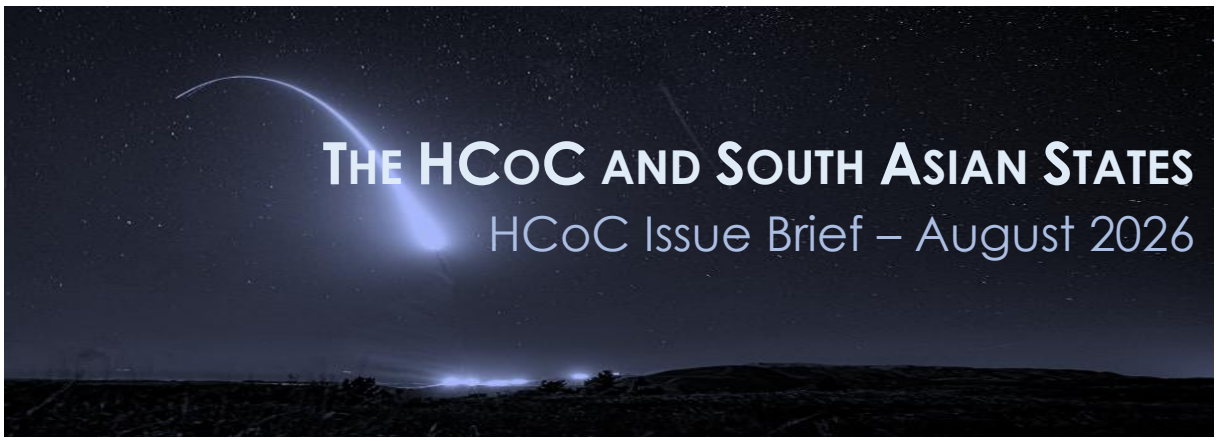

THE HCOC AND SOUTH ASIAN STATES

HCoC Issue Brief – August 2026

In brief

India's and Pakistan's ballistic missiles are mostly designed as delivery vehicles for their nuclear weapons. While intrinsically linked to their national security, ballistic **missiles also have regional security implications** for South Asia.

Non-proliferation and arms control **efforts have so far been aimed at the bilateral level**. **Subscription to other instruments including the HCoC remains low** in the region, although **India joined the HCoC in 2016**.

Given the high number of missile tests and SLV launches, the **HCoC could serve to increase transparency and avoid misunderstandings**. It demonstrates **responsibility on the part of states** sharing information and provides a **forum for regional states to voice their concerns**. The HCoC also offers a **framework for peaceful space development**.

About the Hague Code of Conduct

Adopted in 2002, the Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation (HCoC) is a politically binding instrument aiming to limit the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) delivery vehicles. Composed of a set of transparency and confidence-building measures, the HCoC is the only existing multilateral instrument to focus on WMD delivery vehicles. Totalling 93 subscribing states at its inception, the HCoC has now reached 145 subscribing states (2026).

When subscribing to the HCoC, states commit to **abide by a set of UN treaties and international conventions on space security**, to send an **annual declaration** regarding ballistic missile capacities and national policy on non-proliferation and disarmament treaties and instruments; and to send **pre-launch notifications** prior to any missile or space launch. Documents are uploaded onto a dedicated online platform managed by Austria, which acts as the HCoC Immediate Central Contact (Executive Secretariat). Subscription to the HCoC is free of charge.

While subscribing states are asked to exercise 'maximum restraint' in the development of ballistic capacities, it should be stressed that they are **proscribed neither from possessing ballistic missiles nor from pursuing space launch activities.** In return, subscribing to the HCoC enables states to **gain access to information** shared by other subscribing states, and to **show their political commitment** to non-proliferation and disarmament.

Drivers and impacts of ballistic missile developments in South Asia

Today, the South Asia region[i] has **two active ballistic missile possessors: India and Pakistan**.[ii] However, Bangladesh is now considering acquiring ballistic missiles, having approached Pakistan to obtain the Abdali missile in order to strengthen its deterrence against India[iii]. The reasons which drove them to acquire ballistic capabilities are multiple, including the desire for status, the search for a capability to inflict considerable damage (especially if coupled with WMD), as well as the psychological effect associated with a potential strike.[iv] In South Asia, **the regional security context has played a major role in ballistic developments**. For example, tensions between India and Pakistan largely have contributed to the arms build-up. India has also been concerned with the broader Asia-Pacific region, and notably China – hence its decision to develop intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capabilities. In turn,

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ballistic developments by both India and Pakistan play a role in the perception and definition by other regional states of their security and strategy. As a result, the **risks associated with ballistic missiles are not solely confined to India and Pakistan**; rather, these systems also have wider regional implications.[v]

India's and Pakistan's ballistic capabilities are, for a large part, linked to their nuclear deterrence strategies. From the 1960s onwards, alongside their acquisition of nuclear weapons (in 1974 for India and in 1998 for Pakistan), both countries began to work on ballistic technologies:

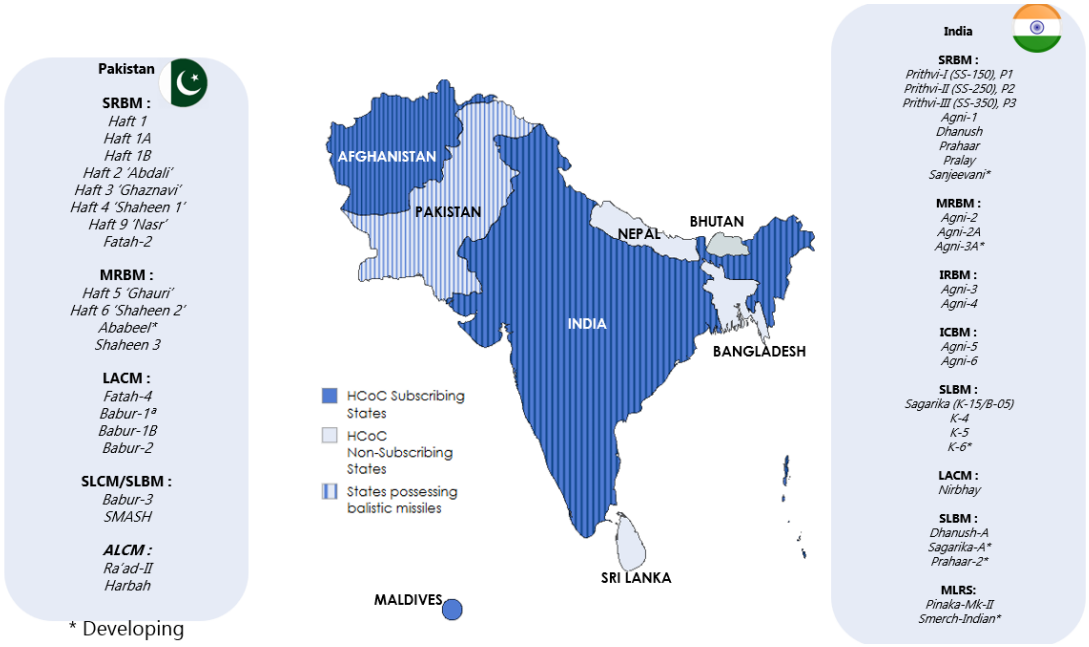

Figure 1. Ballistic capabilities and HCoC subscription in South Asia (created with MapChart.net)

India[vi] In parallel to space research and development, India pursued several missile programmes during the 1970s and the 1980s. It successfully tested the Prithvi short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) in 1988, while at the same time developing the longer-range Agni-1. Today, the country deploys several short- and medium-range systems and has advanced its ICBMs: the Agni-5 MIRV (tested in March 2024) and the Agni-6, which is under development. It has completed the SLBM K-5 (range 5,000–6,000 km) and is working on the hypersonic K-6 (~8,000 km). In November 2024, India tested a hypersonic missile with a range exceeding 1,500 km. Since joining the MTCR and the HCoC in 2016, its exports have increased, including a $200 million Akash contract with the Philippines in 2025.

Pakistan[vii] Pakistan's ballistic missile programme derived from its space research programme and began in the early 1960s. This led to the testing of the Haft-1 and Haft-2 ballistic missiles in 1989, and to the subsequent development of several intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) with the assistance of both North Korea (Nodong technology) and China (the latter also sold M-11 missiles to Pakistan).[viii] Today, the country deploys a range of SRBMs (Hatf-I/II/Nasr) and MRBMs such as the Ghauri (Hatf-V) and the Shaheen-II (Hatf-VI), strengthened by the MIRV-capable MRBM Ababeel and the Shaheen-III. A recent amendment to a U.S. contract does not provide for the delivery of new missiles, limiting itself to the maintenance of its existing capabilities.

The **recent ballistic developments could further increase the mutual distrust** that has long characterised relations between the two regional powers. India is currently developing a ballistic missile defence programme (Mission Sudarshan Chakra), while Pakistan has, since 2017, deployed several batteries of the Chinese low- to medium-altitude air defense system (LOMADS) LY-80 and the HQ-16FE[ix], it tested in 2023 and 2025 its MRBM

Ababeel with multiple warheads (MIRV) in the final phase of qualification[x].India is also developing SLBMs (Sagarika, K-15/ K-4), which might lead to missiles and nuclear warheads being coupled for the first time in the region (the air and land-based components are normally kept in a disassembled state).[xi] Moreover, **safety, security and proliferation concerns are fuelled by the activity of non-state actors** present in the region. The fielding of very short-range ballistic systems such as the Nasr also poses questions over the ultimate control of nuclear weapons by the political authorities.

The issue of cruise missiles

Cruise missiles are currently being developed by both India (BrahMos and Nirbay) and Pakistan (Ra'ad and Babur). These systems are **inherently dual-use** and their **deployment could lead to dangerous misunderstandings**, and create **further instability** in the region. They can also be a major **source of proliferation**. Cruise missiles are not currently included in the HCoC's scope, and the issue of their inclusion has been an ongoing debate (see 'Why does the HCoC focus on ballistic missiles?').

Regional support for WMD disarmament and non-proliferation

WMD arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation efforts in the region have unsurprisingly been affected by regional tensions and the development of nuclear arsenals by India and Pakistan. In addition, **political factors** including a disagreement on the principles which underpin the global non-proliferation regime have also led some states to remain outside certain conventions. While South Asian states have overwhelmingly signed or ratified numerous key multilateral instruments (Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)), the two main regional powers, India and Pakistan, remain outside the NPT – the cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime – and are not ready to renounce their nuclear arsenals to join the regime.

	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Ratified the NPT	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y		Y
Ratified or acceded to the CWC	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Ratified or acceded to the BWC	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Ratified the CTBT	Y	Y			Y			Y
Ratified the TPNW		Y			Y			Y
Initial report to the 1540 Committee	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
National implementation plan to the 1540 Committee								
Nominated a point of contact for 1540 implementation	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Signed an Additional Protocol with the IAEA	Y	Y		Y				
Endorsed the Proliferation Security Initiative	Y							Y

Figure 2. South Asian states status with regard to multilateral disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control agreements

Aside from this, **the level of subscription to a number of instruments remains low**, including on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which only three South Asian states ratified. Regarding UNSCR 1540, none of the regional states have submitted their National Implementation Plans, nor have the majority nominated a Point of Contact. Similarly, only half of the states in the region have signed an Additional Protocol with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

With regards to the **HCoC, to date only 4 out of the 8 SAARC member states have subscribed**. This means that the region currently has one of the lowest HCoC subscription rates. However, the signature by India in 2016 was a very welcome development, as India is a key actor in the ballistic and space domains.

Moreover, (increasing) votes in favour of the biennial United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolutions endorsing the HCoC illustrate South Asian **support for its content and objectives** (see Figure 3). Amongst the five regional non-subscribing states, four have almost always voted in favour of the resolutions. **Pakistan**

remains the only state that systematically abstains in the votes, citing the ad-hoc negotiations of the HCoC – outside the UN framework – and the non-inclusion of cruise missiles as well as ongoing security concerns as reasons for this vote. Moreover, regional states involved in space exploration have joined the various treaties and conventions cited in the HCoC.

India and Pakistan have also negotiated a series of bilateral confidence-building measures (**CBMs)** – thereby recognising their importance in the field of WMDs and their delivery vehicles. Faced with the **high risk of misunderstanding surrounding the development and testing of their respective ballistic capabilities**, they adopted the 2005 **agreement on advance notification of ballistic missile tests** (extended in 2011). The agreement calls for the provision of a 72-hour advance notice of ballistic missile flight tests, and sets clear geographic boundaries and trajectory limitations for such tests.

The HCoC as an additional tool for regional stability

Both India and Pakistan aspire to be treated as responsible nuclear powers – this led New Delhi to subscribe to the HCoC. Moreover, the transparency permitted by the annual declarations and pre-launch notifications brings clarity and **avoids potential miscalculations**. It also **demonstrates responsibility on the part of states developing these systems**, especially in light of past concerns regarding the transfer of sensitive technologies. **The HCoC is also useful for the region more broadly given the high number of missile tests and SLV launches taking place within South Asia**. For states that do not have ballistic capabilities, joining the HCoC enables them to **voice security concerns and demand accountability** from their missile-developing neighbours. As distrust still prevails in the region, CBMs could be an effective way to impose mutual constraints and concretely limit the risk of escalation. Finally, **CBMs can lead to efficient and verifiable arms control measures in the long term** – a welcome development to curb the regional arms race. Therefore, the HCoC – together with the other existing export control measures, UN regimes and existing bilateral initiatives – constitutes a valuable tool to enhance regional stability and to regulate deadly systems – especially when coupled with WMDs.

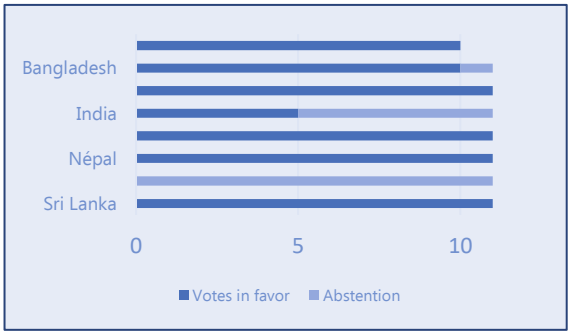

Figure 3. Votes by South Asian states at the biennial UNGA Resolutions in support of the HCoC

The HCoC and space developments

The HCoC also provides space development benefits. In addition to addressing ballistic missiles, the HCoC covers space launches, given that the same technologies can be used for both applications. It recognises 'that **states should not be excluded from utilising the benefits of space for peaceful purposes'** and offers a **set of principles and a framework for declaring space launches.** This is particularly relevant for South Asia, a region with burgeoning space capabilities. India has become one of the world's biggest space powers, Pakistan wields significant space capabilities, and **all states but one participate in at least one satellite operations**. India also launched the South Asia Satellite initiative, which aims to boost telecommunication and broadcasting services, and in which most regional states participate (excluding Pakistan).

Potential applications for satellites are widespread, including advances in telecommunications and education, crop monitoring, infrastructure management, or support in response to natural disasters. But space development can lead to controversial activities and generate insecurity. For instance, the successful anti-satellite (ASAT) test carried out by India in March 2019[xii] challenged the notion of peaceful uses of space and

triggered international concern because any further such testing could make space a dangerous environment for a number of commercial and civilian endeavours.

In addition, a **'New Space' trend** led by private entities and start-ups is emerging: it uses constellations of small satellites to develop commercial products. This growing demand for launches can become an **incentive for more countries and even private companies to develop small launch systems**. Such initiatives could create uncertainty as to the destination of the launches, which can be confused with missiles. In such a context, the HCoC has a key role to play in reducing uncertainties and confusion by providing international principles on transparency and confidence-building measures.

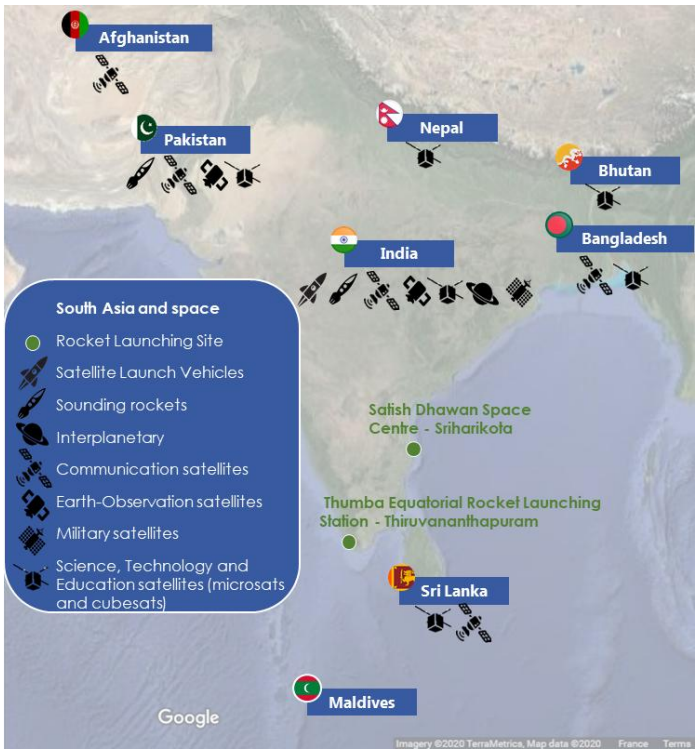

Figure 4. Satellites and rocket launching sites in South Asia

[i] South Asia is here understood within the perimeter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
[ii] Afghanistan acquired Scud-B missiles from the Soviet Union in the 1980s. However, the majority of systems is no longer possessed by Afghanistan, and it is likely that the few remaining systems are no longer operational.
[iii] 'Bangladesh seeks Abdali SRBM from Pakistan for defense', South Asia Times, 2025, https://southasiatimes.org/bangladesh-seeks-abdali-srbm-from-pakistan-for-defense/
[iv] Emmanuelle Maitre and Lauriane Héau, 'Current trends in ballistic missile proliferation', HCoC Issue Brief, September 2020.
[v] Natasha Fernando, 'Ballistic missile proliferation: what should be the role of a small state,' *Institute of National Security Studies Sri Lanka*, January 2019.
[vi] Dr. Anum Riaz, « India's Missile Program: A Threat to Regional and Global Peace and Stability », Global Security Review, 2025, https://globalsecurityreview.com/indias-missile-program-a-threat-to-regional-and-global-peace-and-stability/; « India – Profile », NTI, 2025, https://www.nti.org/countries/india/.
[vii] 'Pakistan – Profile », NTI, last update: 2025, https://www.nti.org/countries/pakistan/. « No upgrade to Islamabad's current defence capabilities: US denies reports of supplying new AMRAAM missiles to Pakistan,' The Economic Times, last update: 2025, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/no-upgrade-to-pakistans-current-capabilities-us-clarifies-media-reports-on-missile-sales-to-pakistan/articleshow/124443252.cms?from=mdr.
[viii] 'Pakistan and North Korea, Dangerous Counter-trades, *IISS Strategic Comments*, vol. 8, Issue 9, November 2002.
[ix] 'Pakistan Leverages Its Alliance with China to Counter India's Air Power,' Army Recognition, last update: 2025, https://www.armyrecognition.com/focus-analysis-conflicts/army/analysis-defense-and-security-industry/pakistan-leverages-its-alliance-with-china-to-counter-indias-air-power.
[x] 'Pakistan missile test confirms its MIRV ambitions,' IISS Missile Dialogue Initiative, last update: 2023, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/missile-dialogue-initiative/2023/10/pakistan-missile-test-confirms-its-mirv-ambitions.
[xi] Aqeel Akhtar, 'Nuclear submarines shift strategic balance of Indian Ocean,' *Analysis*, IISS, 29 January 2019.
[xii] Shounak Set, 'India's Space Power: Revisiting the Anti-Satellite Test,' *Carnegie India*, 6 September 2019.

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