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## DETERRENCE STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PULWAMA-PAHALGAM NUCLEAR CRISES

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### **Abstract**

*India and Pakistan lack a calculated approach for reliable control of violence and to prevent a nuclear crisis. To maintain a reliable peaceful, progressive environment and prevent from nuclear catastrophe, robust nuclear strategy is the requirement of sovereign states. The advancement of nuclear deterrence strategy in South Asia from non-weaponized deterrence to nuclearization phase is profoundly analyzed by a number of strategic scholars and high-level officials. In this era, both states developed nuclear force postures and upgrade its nuclear arsenals with modern technology. In Indo-Pak strategic environment, the modification in deterrence strategies is a reality. With the transformation in the politico-strategic situation, high responsible decision maker, alter nuclear outlook accordingly. India unstoppable strategic aims negate the stable situation that is constantly rethinking Pakistan to revolutionize its doctrine to Full Spectrum Deterrence. India is consistently revolutionizes its doctrines resultantly unstable the strategic environment. It signals Pakistan to adopt such alternate strategies with Waltz defined SELF-HELP phenomena to secure its territories affirm. It put sky-scraping responsibility on both states to make secure their territories from nuclear use and lead region towards strategic stability.*

**Keywords:** India, Pakistan, Deterrence, Nuclear Crises, Crises Stability

### **Introduction:**

The U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. developed the notion of deterrence to protect and maintain nuclear weapons during the Cold War. Deterrence works when adversary's signals with the credible threats. Threats of wars are as old as war itself, as they were an integral part of international conflict management.(Heng, 2006) During the Cold War, military planners' watchword was to use deterrence to maintain security and peace between rivals in order to prevent the terrible attack.(Snyder, 2015) The primary purpose of nuclear weapons is to pose a threat to potential

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enemies; few, if any, political ends can be gained through nuclear war, and their awesome destructive capacity has rendered the cost of their use prohibitive.(R. J. P. S. Q. Jervis, 1979) The conflicts and crises of Korea (1952), Vietnam (1956), and Cuba (1962) provide abundant evidence that the devastating potential of nuclear weapons.(Burr & Kimball, 2015)

Pakistan is working on developing nuclear weapons in the 1980s. Sahabzada Yaqub-Khan, Pakistan's foreign minister said on October 11, 1984, that Pakistan had taken "appropriate defensive measures" to safeguard its nuclear facilities from an Indian assault and the importance of nuclear capacity shown in the Brasstacks Crises of 1986–1987.(S. Y. J. Khan, 1986) In a landmark interview with Pakistani scientist Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, Mushahid Hussain Syed discloses Pakistan's nuclear weapons' ambiguity. According to Agha Shahi, Zulfiqar Ali Khan, and Abdul Sattar (1999), Pakistan's "recessed" nuclear weapons prevented hostilities with India in the mid-1980s, during the "Brasstacks" crisis of 1986–1987, and in a further crisis three years later.(Gill, 2008) After series of three wars, a tensed situation remained limit to a crisis. It is the time when the hypothesis of strategic thinker's is attested that it is the nuclear weapons power deterred a war. Pakistan vague nuclear weapons capability deters Indian aggression.(Shah, 2015, June 3) This phase proved a major turning point for Pakistan to emerge as strong first Muslim nuclear weapons developing state at the regional and global level.(S. J. I. S. Ahmed, 1999)

A significant milestone was reached in May 1998 when Pakistan tested its nuclear weapons and became a de jure-nuclear weapon state, and India conducted its subsequent nuclear test named operation Shakti.(Izuyama & Ogawa, 2003) Pakistan effectively established a deterrence equation with India after India conducted the first nuclear weapons test. Pakistan's strategic thinkers' danger assessment drives the country's development of nuclear weapons for self-defence. With the introduction of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War period, South Asia adopted the Mutual Deterrence theory of deterrence.(Hilali, 2002) A fresh discussion centred on the usefulness of nuclear weapons and whether they might reduce or eliminate innate rivalries and provide strategic stability in South Asia's always turbulent political-military environment. The two schools of thoughts Deterrent optimists and Deterrent pessimists generalized the theory. Their thesis is discussed that with intellectual contribution of strategic scholars and policy making that how nuclear weapons reserve security and bring fragile stability in South Asia. While Deterrent pessimists argue that these nuclear weapons failed to resolve deep-rooted issues and make it more complex?

### **The Concept of Deterrence**

Deterrence is strategy, force, and policy of state to persuade the enemy not to attack. With deterrence, even a weak state can deter strong enemy.(C. S. Gray, 2003) It makes believe enemy that if it attack its benefit will be larger than benefits. Deterrence is a function of capability (competence), credibility, will with effective communication.(Williams, 2021) States sets strategic policy to secure their national interest to enhance its national power. The concept of nuclear deterrence revolutionizes the military strategy. Bernard Brodie concept of Absolute Weapons in

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1946, German used the terminology of winning war.(Brodie, 2015) The deterrence approach anticipates that as new technology advances, nuclear weapons will not be used to fight war but rather to develop less terrible options than the nuclear inferno.(Mazarr, 2018) The use of force in conflict resolution was limited when the opponent was informed of the nuclear weapons capability's credible deterrent impact. The first step in starting a real war is deterrence. The goal of deterrence is to make a certain course of action seem expensive and undesirable rather than to physically obstruct or prevent it.(R. J. I. s. Jervis, 1982)

Herman Kahn is an eminent philosopher of Deterrence Theory. The western strategic academics Andre Beaufre, Kenneth Waltz, Bernard Brodie, Phil Williams, J.M. Collins, Lawrence Freedman, and Thomas Schelling all added to the development of deterrence. The nuclear strategist has a consensus on an argument that nuclear weapons can play vital role for establishing peace and security.(Freedman, 2018) Nuclear strategist scholars Robert Jervis and Patrick Morgan vision regarding deterrence are important in changing the strategic environment.(R. J. P. S. Q. Jervis, 1986) The main essence of theory is that if there is nuclear war between adversaries that resulted not as "overkill" but "mutual kill."(R. J. I. S. Jervis, 1988)

Bernard Brodie define that "Thus far the chief purpose of a military establishment has been to win the war. From now on, its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have no other useful purpose."(Paul, Harknett, & Wirtz, 2000) Andre Beaufre defined it that "it is just the show of force in order not to use it".(Beaufre, 1962) In the post-cold war phase, even nuclear deterrence worked as the second force for peace and stability.(Waltz, 2013) Indian academicians debate that nuclear deterrence to prevent the outburst of high or level of hostility.(Rajain, 2005) The success of deterrence required balance equations which based on capability, credibility and effective communication.(R. J. I. S. Jervis, 1988) The other important factor is that each side communicates timely with counterparts.(Waltz, 2015) The phenomenon will ensure to sustain stability between states either fragile or subtle. With the profound understanding of the theory of Deterrence, we will emphasize at this point one of type of Deterrence that is Minimum deterrence theory. It is the foundation of Pakistan and India Nuclear Strategy, Policy and became force. Professor Ken Booth and John Baylis, explain it as "an attempt to prevent enemy attack through reliance on a small nuclear retaliatory force capable of destroying a limited number of key targets."(Ayson, 2020) Peter Gizewski, define "minimum deterrence threatens the lowest level of damage necessary to prevent an attack with the fewest number of nuclear weapons possible."(P. Gizewski, 1990)

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South Asia is a region that has developing state. Among all, India and Pakistan developed nuclear weapons capability.(Rajain, 2005) To become nuclear armed state is not a rational step that instead of ignoring economic challenges they utilized their resources in Arms race. Minimum deterrence is suited Doctrine which is working towards but it's not mean that India start competition with Pakistan in Nuclear Arsenals by numbers. Deterrence deep objective must not be negated due to emergence of new strategic environment.(Joshi & O'Donnell, 2018) The work of deterrence is to avert full scale war. In addition, it is also to check in on the proliferation of high-tech weapons in South Asian security landscape. Deterrence leads the state to establish stability. It is vital element for stability of key areas like Politics, Strategy, and in any war-like situation.(Rajain, 2005) It is important to debate that what is essence of stability and how it can balance relations between states. Both India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons and strong armies. They have enough power to cause "unacceptable damage" to each other. If one attacks, the other can hit back just as hard, or harder.(Abid, 2023) For deterrence to work, each side must believe the other isn't bluffing. Pakistan has a "Full Spectrum Deterrence" policy, suggesting it might use small nuclear weapons even in a smaller, conventional fight to stop a larger Indian invasion.(Joshi & O'Donnell, 2018) India follows a "No First Use" policy but warns of "massive retaliation". Because both countries know that a full war could lead to total destruction, they generally avoid crossing each other's "red lines". They believe the big nuclear weapons will prevent these small fights from ever turning into a world-ending disaster.(A. Ahmed, Hashmi, & Kausar, 2019)

### **The Conceptualization of Stability**

Stability is a not a static but a dynamic concept. It undergoes modifications over time. Stability directly deals with the balance of power. The study of deterrence is not sufficient to provide the final solutions to peace and security. It is first pertinent to analyze the stability and its dimensions and what role it plays to enhance the role of deterrence. How can it make the situation more robust between two or more states? Deterrence functions when there is a balance of terror. Machiavelli and Morgenthau emphasized on Neorealism, which stresses on balance of power. If there is disharmony in interests and power, then war is imminent, as in international relations there is no permanent friend, just interests are permanent. The international system has anarchy, as no central authority exists to manage conflict. Each and every state work to set balance of power. It aims is to secure themselves and can achieve whatever national interests they have. In addition, it is improtant for states to sustain prestige in the international system.

Balance of power exists when there is stability between competing forces such as India and Pakistan. Stability not only means the absence of war or major crisis but also means to avert miscalculations/misperception; accidents and unauthorized use of nukes. The threats of punishment make the situation stable as it averts war.(Robertson, 1987) The presence of a crisis is often contrary to stability. Stability is affected during a national crisis, terrorism, asymmetrical economic developments, and the provocative arms race. For example the Military standoff 2001-02 in Indo-

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Pak, 9/11 attack on USA and USA invasion in Iraq and Afghanistan, 2016 Uri and Pathankot incidents, 2019 Pulwama crises and May 2025 Nuclear crises.

Stability is the “permanence of arrangement of power for resisting change of structure and immunity from destruction or essential change.”(Steinbruner, 1978) Stability essentially is a condition, which refers to the state of equilibrium of a system”.(C. S. J. D. Gray, 1980) Within the military context then, it can be understood in a way that it is a condition when states agree to maintain deterrence capability to certain level and no further technological development shake the deterrence equation to further lower the nuclear threshold.(Chyba, 2020) The key dimension of stability in the field of strategic studies is strategic stability which further has significant categories like crisis stability, arms race stability, political stability and deterrence stability.

### **Through correlation between Deterrence and Stability**

Deterrence means to avert war while stability is to keep that level sustainable to establish peace. India and Pakistan worked to set a level of equilibrium regarding deterrence capability between India and Pakistan so that it supports strategic stability in the region. Deterrence stability cooperatively is an academic model. It provides a preminent structure to understand the global political nuclear scenario. Deterrence Stability is the mutually perceived resolve to maintain and use credible nuclear forces if necessitated.(Sechser, Narang, Talmadge, & Stability, 2021) With its essential pre-requisite i.e. political stability, arms race stability and crisis stability, it sustains a balance strategic environment between rivalries.(Istomin, 2023) It insists nuclear intimidation and to avoid moving towards the brink of war. The classic understanding vis-à-vis India-Pakistan relationships holds that the procurement of nuclear weapons by the two rivals fail to lead a full-scale war, but the eruption of different conflict, crisis and terrorist activity have been seen.(Hussain, Malik, & Analyses, 2023)

“Deterrence mechanism grounded on state capability, credibility and will.”(Robertson, 1987) It does not only restrain the enemy physically but also “effective threats” (communication).(Robertson, 1987) To effectively combat nuclear threats, a nuclear reaction is necessary. Strategic stability, on the other hand, refers to a situation where nations are certain that their enemies cannot compromise their capacity to use nuclear weapons.(Podvig, 2012) Hence, Stability is the reliability, dependability of Pakistan and India on its nuclear weapons capability with effective communication of nuclear threats to control each other dangerous confrontation.

Deterrence stability means as rivalries that are credibly deterred (in relation to threats to basic norms, values, and interests) and in which neither party has any doubts about the "pillars" (means to deter, ability to carry out deterrence threats, readiness to carry out deterrent threats, guaranteed the democratic governance of deterrence forces, and rational adversary making cost-benefit analysis calculus) upon which deterrence rests.(Hagerty, Hagerty, & Pusca, 2020)

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Does nuclear weapons play impact full role and guarantee peace. It is ongoing debate. The facts and figures revealed that the deterrence stability in the South Asian region remains perilous. It has an alarming impact on the strategic balance. The change in geopolitics-strategic situation leads towards modernization of nuclear developments and alter deterrence strategies.(Fetter & Sankaran, 2025) It is necessary to reassess the dynamics of the strategic developments. Future directions of the Indo-Pak nuclear conflict are still being discussed.

Pakistan Government officials and strategists have consistently emphasised that nuclear deterrence is intended to maintain a balance, safeguarding its sovereignty and ensuring peace in the region.(Gregory & Sultan, 2005) The purpose for which Pakistan continues to focus on developing nuclear weapons is so that it will never be attacked again.(Hagerty et al., 2020) In 1987, President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq reportedly threatened Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi that, "If your armies penetrate our borders by an inch, we will obliterate your cities.

### **Contemporary Transformation**

From the Realist paradigm, every sovereign state has the right to follow a policy to maintain its national interest, power and prestige.(Morgenthau, 2014) The change in threat perception, security dynamics instigates decision makers to manipulate their policies with contemporary transformation.(Mearsheimer & Development, 2019) With the shifting of political government as well as in modernization of new weapons technology in Indo-Pak politico, strategic environment alters military doctrines and strategies.(Shah, 2015, June 3)

After the Failure of Indian Sundarji Doctrine in the 2001/02 crisis, in 2004 India Army declared a new doctrine named a Cold Start doctrine.(Babar, Mirza, & Analyses, 2021; Iqbal, 2016) The focus of Cold Start is on Indian integrated battle groups.(Gregory & Sultan, 2005) The Indian IBGs include the army, navy, and IAF collaboration. It can carry out deep, punishing attacks on Pakistan while remaining small enough to prevent nuclear retaliation. Lt. Gen (Retd.) Satish Nambiar of Indian Army affirmed that "we safely saying Indian Army has Cold Start Military based on the objectives of political government over the years".(Cheema, 2010) Pakistani Nuclear Scholar Brig. Naeem Ahmed Salik analyzed that "Frustrated by 2001/02 experience, the Indians came up with a different notion but same old thinking process. They termed it as the Cold Start Strategy." This military doctrine is intended to explore the strategic space between a nuclear war and a low-intensity conflict known as a "limited war under a nuclear overhang" in order to accomplish restricted military and political goals.(Cheema, 2010) Indian decision makers anticipate a fully automated blitzkrieg strike with the full support of integrated battle forces. They developed capability that can launch a swift land invasion lasting 72-96 hours.(Abdullah, 2012)

India has embarked upon an offensive deterrence posture to become a leading power in South Asia. Indian aims to destabilize and pressurize Pakistan by degrading its military capabilities.(Babar et al., 2021) The swift fast and surprise military action into Pakistan territory leaves no time for Pakistan



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military establishment to retaliate with its nuclear weapons capabilities.(Abdullah, 2012)Their aim was to curtail Pakistan Army counter-mobilization period. Moreover, inflict harm on Pakistan before any International powers put pressure on India to withdraw. In recent Indian Military Exercises such as in 2011 Operation Bramahish, Operation Vijay Bhava and Operation Sudarshan Shaki their agenda is obvious to boost drive between various branches of armed forces.(Cheema, 2010)

India's strategy is to weaken Pakistan's defences, undermine its diplomatic flexibility, and normalise limited war. By conducting conventional operations that do not need escalation to strategic levels, the LWD seeks to undermine Pakistan's nuclear deterrence and suggests future multifaceted actions.(Ladwig III, 2007) India Land Warfare Doctrine, in 2018, emphasizes on coercion in the nuclear background of South Asia.(Babar, Khattak, & Sargana, 2018) It reflects a significant shift. The Indian Army demonstrated a dramatic change to a more aggressive military approach, specifically targeting Pakistan.(Mehmood & Haider, 2025) While staying below the nuclear threshold, this strategy emphasizes limited warfare and aims to establish operational preparedness for punitive operations.(Ladwig III, 2007)

The policy upholds a networked and precision-centric approach to combat by integrating EW, cyber and high tech ISR. It focuses on collaborative operations across the tri-services.(Rehan & Stability, 2026) This concept was first put into practice during the Balakot airstrikes in February 2019, which exposed serious shortcomings in India's military coordination and capability.(R. J. N. Z. I. R. Akhtar, 2026) Through Operation Sindoor, which used cutting-edge military technology like Rafale fighters and the S-400 air defence system, India attempted to address these shortcomings by May 2025?(Vice & Golani, 2025) The operation's goal was to gain air dominance while attacking Pakistan, with the assumption that a country with few resources would be able to withstand these assaults with little to no reaction.(Rehan & Stability, 2026) But Pakistan's swift and forceful reaction included attacking many Indian military installations, revealing weaknesses in India's multi-layered defence system, and reaffirming Pakistan's conventional deterrent.(W. Ali, Bibi, Alam, & Policy, 2025)

### **Pakistan's Response**

From the past obnoxious the mindset of Indian authorities, credible tactics to counter such aggressive military doctrine for Pakistan Military planners is significant. The government reportedly declared in a statement issued after the National Command Authority meeting, which top leaders chairs, that "Pakistan would not remain oblivious to evolving security dynamics in South Asia and would maintain a full-spectrum deterrence capability to deter all forms of aggression."(Syed, Sept 6, 2013.) Pakistan is capable of and understands well how to deter and defend against such military adventurism.(Bluth, 2010) Pakistan rational decision makers Khalid Kidwai articulated strategic options in the volatile region with their pragmatic approaches.(Z. Khan,

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2005) Because all three levels of nuclear weapons—strategic, operational, and tactical—have been addressed, we have, in our opinion, also prevented tactical level activities under the Cold Start Doctrine.(Lavoy, 2009) However, Pakistani troops would still be able to advance and counter these offensive activities long before the Indian offensive formations arrive on the scene, indicating significant faults in the Indian notion of the Cold Start Strategy.(Z. Khan, 2005)

After 2019 Pulwama Balakot crises, Pakistan has announced the Quid Pro Quo Plus strategy to deter Indian aggression.(I. Ali, Sidhu, & Studies, 2022) It signals update in Pakistan's nuclear deterrence posture. It is Pakistan proactive approach to manage future crises.(Noor, 2023) The quid pro Quo Plus is link with Full Spectrum Deterrence.(W. Ali et al., 2025) The Plus in the strategy interpret as Pakistan is clear to target key targeting Indian military installations.(Feroz Hassan Khan, Lavoy, & Asia, 2008) Under the context of new emerging threats and patterns of Indian militray, Pakistan is all set to cause damage limited so escalation ladder can be managed under nuclear umbrella.(Syed, Sept 6, 2013.)

Pakistan, on the other hand, has realised that it must change its military posture in a proactive manner. To offset India's technical advantages, Pakistan has invested in electronic warfare, improved precision strike capabilities, and strengthened air defence capabilities against stand-off strikes. Furthermore, Pakistan's military drills need to change to counter the many dangers that India's doctrine poses.(Lavoy, 2009) Pakistan is urged to improve its strategy, including both conventional and strategic components to successfully deter enemies, in order to adjust to this shifting military environment.(Z. Khan, 2005) In order to avoid misunderstandings of any escalation, it must also intensify its diplomatic efforts to contextualize India's ideological change in international forums.(Feroz Hassan Khan et al., 2008) In the end, the LWD, which emphasizes coercion and possible intimidation in the nuclear setting of South Asia, reflects a significant shift in India's military policy.(I. Ali et al., 2022)

### **New Developments in Deterrence Capabilities**

Introduction of coercive strategies from Indian defence thinkers makes the region more volatile. Indian's strategic ambitions induce threat to Pakistan's national sovereignty. To address such security issues, Pakistani decision-makers have adopted Full Spectrum Deterrence as their defence strategy. Lt Gen. (Retd) Khalid Kidwai, gave a convincing explanation of what Pakistan has been referring to as "full spectrum deterrence.(Noor, 2023)

Pakistan has a well-defined deterrence strategy and credible capabilities to operate well in a tensed situation with well-equipped arsenals, modern tanks and aircraft (for conventional response) and short-range, long-range missiles to neutralize distant missile attack (nuclear response). "Pakistan took the concept seriously since it directly affected our security and prevented destabilisation in a climate of conventional imbalance. It was we who were impacted.(Kristensen, Korda, Johns, & Knight-Boyle, 2025) The ideology was intended to be used against us. The consequences of the

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aggressive ideology could not be disregarded. Pakistan thus decided to develop a spectrum of short-range, low-yield nuclear weapons, often known as tactical nuclear weapons, in order to prevent actions under the doctrine from occurring.(Kristensen et al., 2025)

The western scholars Rolf Mowatt said that full-spectrum deterrence have the potential to deal with all new threats. Under the doctrine, Pakistan developed "small nuclear weapons capability." Pakistan strategic thinkers motivated to work on plutonium production which further develop its deterrent capabilities, will enable her to 'build miniaturized warheads for ballistic and cruise missiles.(Abbasi & Khan, 2019) It enables Pakistan to mature its second-strike capability. Pakistan also developed its battlefield or non-strategic nuclear weapons capability. Pakistan is thus able to respond to conventional threats with tactical nuclear weapons like Nasr thanks to its Full Spectrum Deterrence. It is a 'qualitative' reaction to new warfighting principles of 'cold start' and Proactive Operations (PAO), proposed by India.(Clary & Narang, 2018)

Pakistan have a deterrent nuclear force posture of 250-300 triad-based warheads and have sufficient plutonium to make 200 nuclear (and some thermonuclear) weapons of 20-200 kilotons. Due to India aggressive aims and BMD plans, it is essential for Pakistan to upgrade the ballistic and cruise missiles, multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRV) missiles is need of time. (Feroz Hassan Khan, Jacobs, & Burke, 2014)

In 2026, Pakistan maintains a robust and growing nuclear force posture designed for "Full Spectrum Deterrence" to counter perceived conventional and strategic threats from India. Official data is highly classified, but 2025–2026 reports from the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists and SIPRI estimate Pakistan's stockpile at approximately 170 nuclear warheads, with projections suggesting it could grow toward 200 by the late 2020s. The arsenal consists of low-yield tactical weapons and higher-yield warheads (roughly 20–150 kt range) designed for land, air, and sea delivery. The arsenal consists of low-yield tactical weapons and higher-yield warheads (roughly 20–150 kt range) designed for land, air, and sea delivery.(Z. Khan, 2005)

Based on reports and assessments for 2025-2026, India is modernizing and expanding its nuclear arsenal, which is increasingly focused on developing a mature nuclear triad and enhancing second-strike capabilities.(Khalid, Kassi, & Abbas, 2025) India's estimated nuclear warhead inventory is approximately 180–190. India added approximately 8–10 warheads between 2024 and 2026.(Institute., 2025, June 16) While India's arsenal is growing faster than Pakistan's, the total number is still below the 250-300 range mentioned in your prompt. India is in advanced stages of a two-tiered Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system (phase 1 and phase 2) designed to intercept incoming missiles. Both nations are pursuing Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV) technology to ensure that their missiles can defeat BMD shields.(Khalid et al., 2025)

### **Dynamics in Deterrence Stability Strategies**

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Pakistani, Indian and Western strategic scholars, political and military decision makers discussed from different frames of references the model of deterrence stability from non-weaponized era to weaponized era.(Zubair, 2017) In these eras, both are still developing nuclear force structure, conventional and military doctrines, update credible minimum deterrence strategies, robust nuclear command and control infrastructure; focus on nuclear security, bilateral nuclear and conventional agreements and robust political/military institutions.

*“The nuclear weapon programs in these three countries are worthy of attention because they are active, expanding, and diversifying at a time when the overall global trend remains a continuing contraction of nuclear inventories.”(Umar, 2016)*

At state and organizational level, being a responsible nuclear weapon state, Pakistan has been pursuing a policy of nuclear restraint with a Credible Minimum Deterrence. Since the inception of its nuclear programs, it has achieved excellence in its prudent nuclear strategy, subtle command and control structure, nuclear weapons storage and deployments in safe and secure hands. "The nuclear weapon programs in these three countries are worthy of attention because they are active, expanding, and diversifying at a time when the overall global trend remains a continuing contraction of nuclear inventories." Pakistan, as a responsible nuclear weapon state, has pursued a nuclear restraint policy based on a Credible Minimum Deterrence. Since the beginning of its nuclear programs, it has excelled in its cautious nuclear strategy, nuanced command and control structure, and safe and secure storage and deployment of nuclear weapons.

The Full Spectrum Doctrine fundamentally alters Pakistan's nuclear policy; it no longer waits for a nuclear strike to respond with nuclear weapons; instead, it will deter conventional force with nuclear deterrence.(A. Ahmed et al., 2019) Because of its comparatively deficit of economic, industrial, and technological resources, Pakistan has found it more convenient to invest in developing a modest nuclear force that can match India's large conventional military capabilities and restore a strategic balance. (Ashraf, 2025)Pakistan's nuclear weapons program started nearly 20 years after India but it more rapidly developed various dynamics of a minimum credible deterrence capability: nuclear fuel cycle including adequate fissile material stockpile, aircraft-based delivery systems, and miniaturization of warheads. It includes wide range of ballistic and cruise missiles. The test-firing of Hatf-III (Ghaznavi), Hatf-IV (Shaheen-IA), and Hatf-V (Ghauri), including later versions, and their integration with the respective Strategic Force Commands has been a remarkable accomplishment to meet the imperatives of national security under threat from a hostile neighbour who did not reconcile to the creation of Pakistan.

Pakistan's ballistic missile development trajectory represents a significant change in technical priority, operational doctrine, and strategic deterrent postures. First, Pakistan moved away from liquid-fueled weapons like the Ghauri missile and toward more modern solid-fueled platforms like the Shaheen missile series.(Feroz H Khan & Ahmed, 2016) It is motivated by the operational benefits of solid fuel, such as shorter launch preparation time, increased survivability under

preemptive attack scenarios, and greater mobility via transporter erector launcher (TEL) systems. Pakistan's strategic and tactical missile forces rely heavily on solid-fueled missiles. Pakistan has additionally put a strong emphasis on qualitative aspects. It involves both enhancements and an increase in the amount of the arsenal. Multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) capability was created in Pakistan. The Ababeel missile program is included. Pakistan improved its guiding systems in an effort to increase accuracy and dependability.(Feroz H Khan & Ahmed, 2016) Decision makers also considered mobility and survival in addition to accuracy factors. It ensures second-strike capabilities, strengthens deterrent stability, and integrates with road-mobile launch platforms.(Krepon, Jones, & Haider, 2004) In essence, this kind of modernisation creates deterrence stability and adds effective capacity. These changes point to a change in strategy toward maintaining credible minimum deterrence while adjusting to changing regional security conditions.

*India all set to create strategic space for crises scenario that culminated to apply Cold Start Doctrine in blitzkrieg style simultaneous operations through brigade size battle groups supported by airstrikes and naval manoeuvres by ostensibly remaining below Pakistan's nuclear threshold. However, Pakistan swiftly responded by developing and test-fired Hatf-IX, Nasr-tactical nuclear weapon and successfully blocked the implementation of the CSD from which India felt compelled to retreat by stating that it was not an officially proclaimed strategy.(Z. J. C. S. P. Khan, 2012)*

In such a volatile environment to postulate an aggressive and flawed concept of initiating a limited war under various rationales and self-assigned labels, like the CSD, is a naive and highly provocative policy that would merely generate nuclear risks and instability. India and Pakistan are pursuing nuclear strategies that are practically similar yet ambiguous.(Hardeman, 2020) That is Credible minimum deterrence is a strategy. Both nations retain a de-mated but ready-to-deploy nuclear posture for crisis stability, and both are hesitant to restrict the growth of their nuclear weapons programs due to the clarity of their assessments of the threat: China and Pakistan for India, and Pakistan for India.(R. Akhtar & Das, 2015) In recent years, the global nuclear order has changed. It is the Third Nuclear Age which makes majors changes. The consistent multipolar nuclear competition (not just dyads), the advent of Emerging technologies (cyber, AI, hypersonics), along with that blurring of conventional–nuclear thresholds and rapid arms racing without formal arms control is the nuclear order.(Klare, 2023)

Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema identified a structural symmetry in Indian and Pakistani nuclear postures—grounded in credible minimum deterrence, recessed deployments, and strategic ambiguity. The convergence has become increasingly strained in the evolving Third Nuclear Age. India's expanding threat perception, particularly vis-à-vis China, has pushed it toward a more dynamic and technologically sophisticated deterrent posture.(James, Klein, & Medvedev, 2020) In contrast, Pakistan's doctrine has shifted toward full-spectrum deterrence, including the development of



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tactical nuclear weapons to offset conventional asymmetries. These developments suggest that while historical similarities persist, the bilateral nuclear relationship is now shaped as much by asymmetry and external drivers as by doctrinal convergence. India and Pakistan began with similar nuclear logics—but are now diverging under Third Nuclear Age pressures.

The "absence of shared concepts of risks and reality," It might compromise the stability of deterrence in South Asia. Asymmetric warfare with jihadi groups may pose a threat to the area. Pakistan is a responsible nuclear weapons state. Regarding nuclear matters, Pakistan has participated in a number of global agreements. Together with legislative and administrative effort, SPD has built itself into a one window solution to all strategic and space matters as per its mandate, consistent with the NCA Act 2010. Positive learning seems to have occurred "to handle the peculiarities of this capability, beyond the conventional weapons realm," based on almost 15 years of experience."

A noteworthy recent development is the formation of the Army Rocket Force Command (ARFC) in August 2025, which aims to consolidate conventional missile capabilities and improve precision-strike options below the nuclear threshold. The ARFC is advancement in incorporating cutting-edge missile technology, including systems like the Fatah-series, into Pakistan's larger deterrent structure, even while nuclear weapons are still under SPD control. This breakthrough is often seen as a step toward bolstering both nuclear and non-nuclear deterrence. Furthermore, Pakistan is still working toward a credible second-strike capability, with a growing focus on the survivability of its soldiers and a complete nuclear triad. In order to guarantee retaliation capacity in any situation, this involves advancements in sea-based deterrent and dispersion tactics.

Deterrence strategy is not a stated concept. It evolves with time, "The quantity of weapons defined by the phrase minimum deterrent level may vary. India may claim to be Pakistan's equal, but the way the world treats India contradicts this claim. India uses a bloodletting tactic. India and Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons capability for credible deterrence threats. However, nuclear deterrence does not stop intentional military adventurism at a lower level to change the status quo, but it does preclude global conflict.

Dr. Sultan proposed that Pakistan think about creating a second strike nuclear capabilities plan in order to combat growing threats. Her thesis of "Integrated Strategic Equivalency" provides insightful commentary. By strengthening the second-strike capabilities and altering military posture, the idea mainly maintains the minimum credible deterrent. Ensuring that the element of surprise, technical superiority, or battlefield integration of systems does not tip the scales in favour of the offensive or war is the fundamental premise of the idea. Pakistan was forced to create a weapon system that could guarantee Pakistan's territorial integrity as a consequence of India's military modernisation, purchase of a ballistic missile defence system, and significant conventional difference. Today, it operates less as a static theory and more as a dynamic framework for multi-domain deterrence, where Pakistan seeks to balance India not by matching strength, but by

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integrating nuclear, conventional, and emerging capabilities to maintain credible deterrence and strategic stability. Future wars will not be decided by superiority in one domain, but by the ability to integrate multiple domains effectively. That's exactly what multi-domain warfare is about. Dr. Maria Sultan's theory of Integrated Strategic Equivalence has gained renewed relevance in the contemporary era of multi-domain warfare, where deterrence is no longer confined to nuclear parity but extends across cyber, space, conventional, and informational domains. The theory's emphasis on cross-domain integration rather than numerical equivalence aligns closely with emerging military doctrines, making it a practical framework for maintaining strategic stability under conditions of asymmetry.

Therefore, the basic criteria to maintain the tactical and strategic weapons are equivalent. Both deterrence capabilities must have the ability to infiltrate into the enemy's defence. It is able to survive the strategic and other assets with the capability to strike the enemy. Regarding the credibility of deterrence measures, it is credible if undoubtedly communicate to foes. Pakistan has the capability of retaliation.

Pakistan's nuclear first use policies are bluff which inspires India to review their NFU doctrine and moved towards aggressive strategies against Pakistan.

Restoring India's deterrence capability against China is the main goal of the country's current nuclear modernisation program, which is focused on developing and inducting mobile, solid-fueled intermediate-range ballistic missiles, deploying ballistic missile submarines, creating a ballistic missile defence system, constructing weapon storage and integration sites, and finishing its command and control network. Although Pakistan poses serious risks, Indian leaders believe that their present deterrence against Islamabad is typically sufficient. However, there remains a significant deterrent gap with China, and it won't be closed until India is ready to use missiles with sufficient range to strike the Chinese heartland.(Tellis, 2025)

The posture is based on the need for a "minimum" deterrent (whose numerical size is unknown) and a strict "no first use" policy (which is likely to last because of India's general conventional military superiority over Pakistan and it's still significant, albeit fading, operational military superiority over China along their disputed border). India has little reason to breach its "no first use" policy, which is primarily focused on preventing a nuclear strike, as long as certain circumstances are met. US government policymaker's and academia propagate the nuclear threats emerging from Pakistan. There is need for nuclear weapon-related initiatives to Pakistan and India decision maker

*To commit to a recessed deterrent posture, change declaratory policy from "full spectrum" to "strategic" deterrence, and restrict the development of tactical nuclear weapons and short-range delivery vehicles. Additionally, Pakistan and India should*

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*join the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, restrict or cease the manufacturing of fissile materials, and separate military and civilian nuclear facilities.(Kurita, 2025)*

Western two-faced policy confirmed with the reality that the US government has continued to sustain Strategic Partnership with India. USA blind supports to India, is lifting India's strategic ambitions.(Greitens, 2025) It disturbs balance of power. It put a heavy burden on Pakistan to counter it and Pakistan is more attributed towards nuclear restraint. Western think tanks criticism on Pakistan Nuclear arsenals lacks objectivity as well as academic dishonesty. Pakistan Nuclear posture is a reality now. There is dire need to understand regional dynamics as constant arms race strategies are compelling from India side and keep Pakistan security under constant pressure.

On the other hand, George Perkovich stated that deterrence stability by conceptualizing the Northeast and South Asian nuclear system by two strategic triangles. China, India, and Pakistan make up the second triangle, whereas the US, Russia, and China make up the first.(Perkovich, 2008) To fend against possible threats, every state aspires to strategic capabilities. Risks derive from unusual dynamics of India-Pak competition.(H. Ali et al., 2025) He said that there are no ideas on strategies and methods to discourage and fight terrorism in the current international literature or in other nations. It hasn't addressed scenarios in which the main adversaries have nuclear weapons.(Naylor, 2019)

*In the foreseeable future, South Asia is the most probable location for nuclear weapons to explode. The next big terrorist assault in India, originating in Pakistan, may elicit an Indian conventional military response, prompting Pakistan to utilise battlefield nuclear weapons to fight an Indian invasion. India, on the other hand, has said that it will respond to any nuclear use on its soldiers or territory with overwhelming vengeance. Obviously, this frightening dynamic, in which terrorism may trigger conventional combat, which can lead to nuclear war, is a problem to Indian and Pakistani policymakers. Although both India and Pakistan have a tendency to minimise or ignore the possibility of escalation, U.S. policymakers should be more aware of these risks given our own history of near-nuclear confrontations. The only external force capable of both diplomatic and military intervention to defuse a situation is the United States.”(Perkovich, 2020)*

## **Conclusion**

Recent nuclear crises can be categorized as a great failure of the classical deterrence formula between the two nuclear nations, and India has adopted the policy of limited military response to attacks that it considers as emanating from Pakistan (like Balakot).The Indian and Pakistani narratives on the incident have differed markedly, with Indian media highlighting the issues of



"retaliation" against Pakistan, while Pakistani media have instead been more inclined towards describing the incident as a response to the Kashmiri unrest within the country against the Indian rule. Some analysts and politicians questioned the security lapses that gave rise to the incident, describing it as a "sham victimhood" narrative by the Indian leadership. Escalation Risks: This crisis was viewed as a potential for both countries to go to war, and military force was employed and language was assertive in both standoffs that had not occurred before.

Indian government officials described their action as "focused, measured and non-escalatory". It was successful airstrike against terror infrastructure. Critics view it as a "dangerous departure" from the jus ad bellum principles. Pakistan case is of "unprovoked aggression,". Pakistan response was "proportional and restrained". It is also first time Pakistan hit the Indian military and airbases in Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos. Pakistan restore the deterrence with tactical precision, cyber disruption and drones. Pakistan's response had been a "new art of war," involving not just military preparedness, but cyber warfare and strategic communication as well. It challenges Indian narratives. The war led to a quick response from various countries around the world to defuse the conflict; a ceasefire agreement was reached after mediation by the United States, Saudi Arabia and China. Assessing from Strategic outlook, both have their own realist's logic to gain minimum deterrence. Nuclear Policies and Decision Makers should apply diplomatic and political energy to prevent crises. The rationale of deterrence strategies should be aimed just not to avert war but also arranged such management to minimize the lower instability.

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