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Nuclear Weapons Evolution and Strategic Deterrence Stability Between India and Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The nuclearization of South Asia has prompted a transformation in the strategic environment between two nuclear powers India and Pakistan, from mere rivalry to multi-dimensional nuclear deterrence. The strategic scenario of India and Pakistan has taken a turn since the nuclearization of South Asia, from rivalry to an intricate nuclear deterrence relationship. Nuclear weapons have become central to the national security and strategic signalling dialogues, in addition to being introduced as a means for projecting regional power, since the 1998 tests. The India's "credible minimum deterrence" and "No First Use" policy is perceived to have a different approach to crisis behaviour and escalation process as against Pakistan's flexibility of full-spectrum deterrence and strategic ambiguity. The purpose of this paper is to grasp the historical development of nuclear programmes, strategic thinking and the modernization of technology in detail such as missile defence, hypersonic, tactical nuclear arms and the nuclear triad. Human experience of Kargil conflict in 1999, a standoff in 2001-2002, the Mumbai attacks in 2008, and the Balakot crisis of 2019 and the post-2025 tensions serve as case studies of the region's fragile stability. Results suggest that nuclear deterrence has prevented the outbreak of war; however, it does create a stability – instability paradox highlighting the importance of continued communication, confidence building, arms control, and crisis management toward achieving long-term strategic stability in South Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Presence of nuclear weapons in South Asian region altogether altered the Indian and Pakistani strategic calculations. Geopolitical tensions have plagued both countries since their independence in 1947, where each state has had turf wars over territory, ideology, military strength, and region influence. Realizing that



their survival was at stake and they wanted strategic balance, both countries raced to nuclearize after the unresolvable Kashmir issue, frequent wars and mutual distrust. The imponderability of the Kashmir issue, a recurrence of war and mutual distrust brought both the countries to a step of nuclearization as a means of survival of their nation and maintaining strategic balance (Osman, 2026).

After gaining independence, under Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership India began its nuclear programme initially focusing on peaceful application. But the regional changes, mostly the nuclear test carried out by China in 1964, quickened India's nuclear effort. In 1974, India carried out the first nuclear test "Smiling Buddha". In 1974, the first atomic test was conducted by India, which was codenamed Smiling Buddha, making India the first South Asian country to prove itself as a nuclear power. Pakistan reacted quickly to this development by accelerating its nuclear programme under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who, famously claimed: "Pakistanis will eat grass to get nuclear weapons" (Meena 2026).

The program followed a bigger impetus after the performance of Pakistan's program during the Indo-Pak war in 1971 and the secession of the eastern region of Pakistan resulting in the formation of Bangladesh, as well as the success of the country's tests in 1974. Abdul Qadeer Khan among other scientists played a crucial role in the development of the uranium enrichment technologies of Pakistan. Both countries were ambivalent about weaponization, and by late 1980s Pakistan would have reached nuclear threshold (Surya & Aulia, 2026).

Nuclear tests by India at Pokhran in May 1998 and those by Pakistan at Chagai in Chittore, respectively transformed the strategic situation in a major way, turning South Asia into a region of nuclear weapons. The scenario shifted gears completely in May 1998, following India's nuclear testing at Pokhran and Pakistan's at Chagai. It is notable how the development of nuclear weapons has become incorporated into the national defense strategies and military doctrines since then. The actual situation suggests India is estimated to have 172–180 warheads and Pakistan some 170, with both almost equal in nuclear capability (Olsson & Tryggestad, 2026).

India has followed the doctrine of "credible minimum deterrence" and "No First Use" policy which reflects a policy of strategic restraint and retaliation. In contrast, Pakistan has a policy of full-spectrum deterrence which includes strategic, operational, and tactical nuclear arms to counter the Indian conventional superiority (Bukhari, Khan, & Haq, 2024).

The notion of 'deterrence stability' in South Asia is debated. Although nuclear weapons have perhaps saved the world from all-out wars since 1998, situations like Kargil (1999), the 2001-2002 stand-off, Balakot (2019) and the post-2025 standoff suggest that nuclear deterrence is not sufficient to exclude conflict. But instead, it gives rise to a stability–instability paradox, that the relatively less intensive interactions go on in spite of the threat of nuclear arms (Bukhari, 2025).

Technological modernization, therefore, further complicates strategic stability. Both countries are strengthening their missiles, their sea borne deterrents and their surveillance capabilities and delivery systems. India on the side of moving towards a nuclear Triad and Pakistan has evolved tactical arsenal like Nasr to counter India's 'Cold Start' doctrine (Gul, 2026). Recent developments like cyber warfare, missile defence and hypersonic weapons add to the uncertainty, shorten the time for decision-making and raise the threat of miscalculations (Ustiashvili, 2025).

This paper examines the evolution of the nuclear programmes, strategic doctrines of India and Pakistan and consequences for Deterrence stability in South Asia. The study highlighted the need for dialogue, confidence-building, arms control, and crisis management mechanisms to ensure future strategic stability in the region through evaluating different crises, modernization trends, and the existing nuclear balance. The study reinforced the leverage of dialogue, confidence-building measures, arms control, and crisis management mechanism in the future direction of the region's strategic stability against the backdrop of the various crises, modernization trends, and nuclear balance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The nuclearization of South Asia has been a key aspect of India's foreign policy and Pakistan's security policy and has received a great deal of scholarly interest related to the efficacy, stability and dangers of nuclear deterrence in the region. Respected scholars study the South Asian nuclear context in terms of realist theory, deterrence theory, strategic stability frameworks, and security dilemma; and different challenges of the asymmetric environment and geopolitical rivalries are outlined (Jamali & Hussain, 2026).

Much of the literature points to the positive argument that nuclear weapons have helped to bring some stability to South Asia by averting major conventional wars. Supporters say that neither India nor Pakistan has been inclined to full-scale war since the 1998 nuclear tests because of the well-known fear of mutual annihilation that keeps each side from going to war. This idea resonates with classical deterrence theory and the nuclear doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD); however, the nuclearization of South Asia has many characteristics that set it apart from the Cold War paradigm, including the geographical proximity of the two adversaries, the differential nature of their conventional military forces and the frequent nature of mutual crises between the two nation-states (Jahanzaib, 2026a).

The stability–instability paradox is closely related to deterrence theory, and suggests that the risk of conventional war is increased during times of peace by the presence of nuclear weapons. The Kargil War (1999) is a remarkable case of this paradox — Pakistan military establishment believed that with the development of nuclear weapons, it would be impossible for India and Pakistan to go beyond the point of nuclear weapons, but India exercised strategic restraint not to start a nuclear war (Chen, 2026). In like manner, the Balakot crisis of 2019 and the military stand off in 2001–2002 exemplifies that in the face of such restricted military interventions, restraint on the part of nuclear weapons might enhance the likelihood of large-scale wars taking place while proportionality will be sacrificed for narrow ends. Similarly, in the era of nuclear weapons, there is a persistent instability under the umbrella of these weapons, where elevated military and strategic operations might be deterred, but limited engagements go ahead on the grounds of their constrained uses, and proportionality gets sacrificed for narrow interests (Ahsan et. al., 2026).

Military doctrines have a crucial influence on regional deterrence. The doctrine adopted in India is that of credible minimum deterrence and a No First Use (NFU) policy, which focuses on survivability, retaliation and second-strike capability, and presents the image of the responsible nuclear power (Adil, 2026). Contingency plans suggest that India's modernization, with rising precision in its missiles, the development of the ballistic missile defence and also the acquisition of a triad capability, may indicate the country is moving away from the perception of deterrence stability in the direction of 'counterforce' measures, scholars write. In contrast, Pakistan has pursued an end-to-end policy of dissuasion, marrying strategic, operational and tactical nuclear weapons and specifically building ones to combat what it sees as a superior conventional military capability, such as the Nasr short range missile system aimed at its “Cold Start doctrine” enigma. All this developments, it is argued by scholars, reduce the nuclear threshold, i.e., the probability of the use of nuclear weapon on the battlefield, which, properly speaking, increase.

Another dimension is technological evolution that affects strategic stability. Both the countries are developing SLBMs, sea-based deterrents, advanced delivery systems, command and control network to enhance their capability of submarine deterrence, which could have a potential threat to survivability and credibility of the deterrents (Rehan, 2026). New technologies such as cyber warfare, Artificial Intelligence (AI), hypersonic weapons, etc. further compound the uncertainty by bringing up speedier decision-making cycles and scope for mistakes and miscalculations, or even unintended escalation (Shabbir & Duong, 2026). Some analysts believe these solutions can lead to undermining the credibility of measures used for deterrence, which will lead to reconsideration of doctrines and operational protocols.

The crisis-induced behavior between India and Pakistan have always been at the forefront of the scientific discussion of nuclear stability. The investigation of events like Mumbai attacks (2008), Balakot airstrikes (2005) and post 2025 tensions / fear points, highlight the limitations of the conventional military response and the tendency to take risks on the basis that such a response is nuclear contained. Propositions related to limited incursions mainly focus on Pakistan's responses while the Indian military strategies are calculated and planned. When it comes to deterrence and coercion, the eloquent examples consist of Pakistan's responses to the limited incursions and Indian military strategies. Responding to limited incursions and calibrated military moves on the Indian side is governed by the principle of deterrence and coercion (as understood in Pakistan).

The external dimension of the South Asian nuclear dimension also plays a very important part in determining its effect. The strategic partnership between India and the USA, and Pakistan's Concord with China mold the larger strategic framework by shaping doctrines, military modernizations, and deterrent calculations in the field. The importance of examining regional nuclear dynamics in the context of global power relations, arms transfers and diplomacy cannot be overstated, as these elements all have significant impact on stability, the management of escalation and even on crisis prevention.

There has been some scholarly attention in this paper to the significance of the conjunction of ideas of the stability–instability paradox, security dilemma theory, and complex interdependence in a new perspective on the behaviour of nuclear-armed states in South Asia. The frameworks highlight that nuclear weapons can have two faces; they can secure complete peace and non-use, but they can also be a driver of limited or proxy wars and strategic brinkmanship. While no single factor has proven enough to explain the paradox of nuclear deterrence in South Asia, it is consistently visible in the literature in all three – asymmetry in conventional forces, changing military doctrines, and the interplay of crises that is unpredictable.

While historical experiences show that South Asia has successfully averted full-scale wars, there is still potential for escalatory crises, miscalculations, and instability stemming from the geographic, decision time and limited communication gaps of the region during crisis. For instance, the Kargil conflict (2001-2002) stand-off, Mumbai attacks and Balakot crisis show that nuclear weapons in some ways curtail escalation, but they do not eradicate the chances of conventional skirmishing or proxy warfare (Chen, 2026; Ahsan et al., 2026).

The calculus of stability gets more complicated with modernization trends. India's efforts for developing a nuclear triad, advanced missiles and hypersonic missiles, have led Pakistan to look at improving their tactical nuclear program, inventories, and developing sea based deterrence that enables them to survive and make a credible response. There are also plans to enhance command and control (C2) systems, surveillance networks and early-warning systems, which represents a first-strike survivability and second-strike capability strategy (Rehan, 2026; Gul, 2026).

There are also studies on the uses of the doctrines in communication and gamesmanship. Uncertainty and tactical flexibility are added by the notion of "strategic ambiguity" in Pakistan's policy and "full-spectrum deterrence" while India has a policy of "NFU" which shows responsibility and restraint. The theory of deterrence stability through nuclear doctrines is noted by the analysts because in reality periodic standoffs and limited military conflicts cause instability in a crisis (Bukhari et al., 2024).

Another area of recent interest in scholarship is along the lines of emerging technologies. New technologies such as cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence in command control and hypersonic weapons shorten decision-making timelines and make the risk of unintended escalation greater, making traditional deterrence models more challenging (Shabbir & Duong, 2026). These technological innovations reveal the criticality of crisis communication, verification and confidence building measures to ensure stability. The literature as a whole demonstrates the presence of a series of paradoxes, asymmetries and changing South Asian nuclear doctrines. Reducing the risk of 'total war' nuclear weapons have not stopped crises or regional instability. The need for ongoing dialogue, arms reduction, confidence building measures, and

crisis management arrangements for mitigating the risks of escalation and achieving a long-term strategic balance in the region is always reaffirmed by scholars (Adhikary, 2025; Bukhari, 2025). Overall, the nuclear deterrence literature produced in the field of India-Pakistan nuclear deterrence shows a mix of stabilizing and destabilizing doctrines, doctrine modernization, crisis behaviours and external influences. The South Asian scenario illustrates how such efforts, while assisting military restraint, also contribute to the containment of conflict, and that neither strategic attention, the use of new technologies, nor institutional and policy mechanisms for crisis management are enough, and will need ongoing vigilance if situations are to be avoided where nuclear weapons are wrongly used. (Jamali & Hussain, 2026; Bukhari, 2025; Shabbir & Duong, 2026).

NUCLEAR WEAPONS EVOLUTION AND STRATEGIC DETERRENCE STABILITY BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN

1947 INDEPENDENCE & PARTITION

India and Pakistan gain independence from British rule. Seeds of rivalry and the Kashmir dispute are sown.

1964 CHINA'S NUCLEAR TEST

China's nuclear test on October 16, 1964 alters regional security perceptions and motivates India to accelerate its nuclear research.

1974 INDIA'S FIRST NUCLEAR TEST

India conducts its first nuclear test on May 18, 1974 at Pokhran (Smiling Buddha). India maintains strategic ambiguity.

1971-1980s PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM ACCELERATES

1971 war and India's 1974 test push Pakistan to pursue nuclear weapons. Under A.Q. Khan, uranium enrichment program takes shape in the 1980s.

1998 NUCLEAR TESTS BY BOTH STATES

- May 11 & 13, 1998: India conducts five tests (Operation Shakti)
- May 28 & 30, 1998: Pakistan conducts six tests at Chagai.

South Asia becomes a nuclearized region.

1999 KARGIL CONFLICT

Limited war between India and Pakistan under the nuclear shadow. Demonstrates the stability-instability paradox in South Asia.

2001-2002 MILITARY STANDOFF

After the 2001 Indian Parliament attack, both countries mobilize large forces. Nuclear signaling and international diplomacy help de-escalate tensions.

2008 MUMBAI ATTACKS

Terrorist attacks in Mumbai heighten India-Pakistan tensions. India responds with diplomatic and strategic pressure but avoids military escalation due to nuclear risks.

2013-2016 NUCLEAR MODERNIZATION ACCELERATES

Both states invest in missile development, command-and-control systems, and delivery platforms including sea-based capabilities.

2019 BALAKOT CRISIS

- Feb 14: Pulwama attack
- Feb 26: India conducts airstrikes at Balakot
- Feb 27: Pakistan retaliates; aerial engagement occurs.

Despite escalation, both sides step back.

2020-2024 EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES & DOCTRINAL EVOLUTION

Development of hypersonic missiles, tactical nuclear weapons, missile defense systems, cyber capabilities and space-based assets intensify strategic competition.

2025 AND BEYOND POST-2025 TENSIONS & NEW REALITIES

Rising border tensions, drone warfare, precision strikes and information warfare increase risks of miscalculation and accidental escalation.

THE WAY FORWARD: TOWARD STRATEGIC STABILITY

<p>1. STRENGTHEN DIALOGUE Enhance bilateral dialogue on nuclear risk reduction and strategic stability through regular communication.</p>	<p>2. EXPAND CBMs Update and expand confidence-building measures such as advance notification of tests, exercises and troop movements.</p>	<p>3. CRISIS COMMUNICATION Establish a dedicated nuclear crisis communication hotline to prevent misperception and accidental conflict.</p>	<p>4. RESPONSIBLE DOCTRINE Maintain clarity and restraint in doctrines; ensure secure control over tactical nuclear weapons.</p>	<p>5. ARMS CONTROL Pursue negotiations on missile development, tactical nuclear weapons and BMD systems to improve regional stability.</p>
<p>6. INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT Major powers and international organizations should support diplomatic engagement and crisis mediation.</p>	<p>7. CYBER SECURITY Invest in cyber security and command-and-control protection to counter emerging technological threats.</p>	<p>8. REGIONAL COOPERATION Promote economic cooperation and regional integration to reduce hostility and build interdependence.</p>	<p>9. TRACK-II DIPLOMACY Encourage academic exchanges and dialogue among scholars, experts and retired officials to build mutual understanding.</p>	<p>10. LONG-TERM VISION Prioritize peace, stability and coexistence for a safe and prosperous South Asia.</p>

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE HAS PREVENTED TOTAL WAR, BUT STABILITY REMAINS FRAGILE.

Responsible behavior, communication, and cooperation are vital for a secure and peaceful South Asia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research is of qualitative and analytical nature as it is explored through secondary sources including strategic studies, research papers, reports from defense departments, documents and security databases pertaining to the evolution of nuclear weapons and stability of deterrence between India and Pakistan. A historical method refers to the highlights of events thrown up by India's 1974 nuclear testing, Pakistan's program during the 1980s, the 1998 nuclear tests, and the post-1998 crises. Comparative analysis looks at the doctrine, numbers, missile capabilities, command and control structures, modernization programs and crisis behaviour of the two nuclear powers. Currently, India has 172-180 warheads, and Pakistan has ~170. The use of qualitative descriptive and analytical methods over quantitative modelling allows the study to explain strategic restraint and limited conflict within the context of deterrence theory and the stability–instability paradox, as well as identifying policy implications and analysing the trends and implications of regional security.

DISCUSSIONS

Deterrence Theory and the Stability–Instability Paradox in South Asia

The South Asia nuclear scenario and specifically, India and Pakistan's relation with one another, has turned strategic calculations around in the region. With the coming of nuclear weapons new non-conventional conflict concepts came from the introduction of deterrence dynamics. These dynamics have been explored via deterrence theory, stability–instability models, and strategic stability models to analyse how nuclear arms influence the behaviour of crises, crisis management and regional security (Jamali & Hussain, 2026; Bukhari, 2025).

All of these background factors underscore the multifaceted nature of South Asian nuclear relations: technological modernization, doctrinal changes, and periodic crises. Although nuclear weapons have arguably averted full scale wars, they have also created a stability – instability paradox: even if in the nuclear era, small scale wars or proxy wars are possible (Liu et al., 2026; Foradori & Rosa, 2026). This literature review aims at exploring the development of the nuclear programmes, strategic conceptions, crisis behavior and technological developments of the two countries, and to critically evaluate these developments, their consequences and their relevance for the question of deterrence stability.

Evolution of India's Nuclear Program. The development of the Nuclear Programme in India. India's nuclear journey shifted from peaceful nuclear energy dreams to a strategic arms development driven by the security concerns in the region. After the first Chinese nuclear test in 1964 and the growing security concerns in the region, India started ramp up its missiles development journey and finally in 1974, it conducted its first nuclear test called Smiling Buddha (Bukhari, Khan, Noreen, et al., 2024), which made India nuclear armed, but it took decades between then and the next nuclear test to even determine the use of nuclear weapons.

India went on to test five nuclear warheads as a part of Operation Shakti in May 1998, and officially became a nuclear weapons state. The tests had been opted for in order to make a strategic claim vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. Since 1998, India has not only introduced a doctrine of credible minimum deterrence but also the concept of strategic restraint, or what is known as No First Use (NFU) or No First Use of Nuclear Weapons (NFU NW), in which retaliatory capability is prioritized and the Indian response to the crisis will be measured with great prudence. Since then, India has also declared a doctrine of retaliatory capability and strategic restraint, also called No First Use (NFU) or No First Use of Nuclear Weapons (NFU NW).

The theme of Indian nuclear modernization India is survival and second strike. In addition, the country has created a nuclear triad including land based missiles, aircraft delivered missiles, and submarine launched ballistic missiles with the commissioning of ballistic missile submarines greatly improving China's nuclear deterrence credibility (Jahanzaib, 2026b). The development of the missile programs from

Agni-I to Agni-V and Agni-P have increased India's operational range from short range to inter-continental and boost the credibility of India's strategic nuclear posture (Shabbir and Duong 2026).

Evolution of Pakistan's Nuclear Program

Pakistan's nuclear policy came into existence in a reactive manner after India's breakthrough in nuclear development and greater nuclear dominance. The Indo-Pak War of 1971 and 1974 nuclear test in India spurred Pakistan's sense of urgency to develop nuclear weapons, which were seen as a vital component of national security (Nasution & Sabila, 2025).

Abdul Qadeer Khan led the development of uranium enrichment technology in the 1980s, when Pakistan was able to reach the nuclear threshold. There was a level of strategic ambiguity until India conducted its first nuclear testing in 1998, which led Pakistan to follow suit with its own tests at Chagai and it effectively became a nuclear power (Schäfferle & Schmid, 2026).

While India's response to the nuclear attacks is NFU, Pakistan's nuclear doctrine differs from it. Rather, Pakistan deliberately leaves ambivalent about nuclear use with a policy of full-spectrum deterrence, countering India's conventional superiority, and a policy of doctrines like Cold Start. It is reported that limited military operations by India have led to the introduction of "tactical nuclear weapons," such as the Nasr missile to deter them (Yu et al., 2026; Van De Haar, 2026). According to Hasan, Pakistan has 170 nuclear warheads and the government is continuously working on development and modernization in the future years.

Strategic Deterrence Stability in South Asia

Three reasons make South Asian strategic stability particularly fragile: historical antagonism, geographical proximity and doctrinal imbalance. Unlike Cold War superpowers, India and Pakistan are closer to one another than what is the case for the superpowers and this leads to a reduction in the decision-making time in crisis, further heightening the risk of accidental or unintentional escalation (Fu, 2026).

The above vulnerabilities are highlighted by historical crises. Owning a nuclear arsenal has proven to be a viable means of limiting the effects of war in the event of conflict. limited war under nuclear deterrence was test while fighting the Kargil conflict in the year 1999, Pakistan believed owning a nuclear weapon would not lead to its rise to its third dimension, while India was practicing conventional restraint (Han & Jiang, 2026). Also, the use of almost a million troops on the border during the 2001–2002 standoff revealed the power of nuclear signaling to limit escalation. A major reason why there was not a full-scale war was because of international mediation, especially that offered by the United States.

In 2019, the crisis in Balakot was another watershed moment since India launched airstrikes along the Line of Control after the Pulwama attack and Pakistan retaliated with airstrikes. Even with the intensity, neither of the two states used nuclear weapons for the first time, providing a demonstration of how nuclear deterrence creates balance (Miller & Cardaun, 2025). The pre-existing difficulties with deterrence, amplified by precision weapons, precision strikes, drones, and stand-off weapons, suggest a greater degree of uncertainty and complications in the future post-2025.

Stability–Instability Paradox

The paradox of stability–instability is key to understanding South Asian nuclear interactions. Nuclear weapons offer strategic stability by helping to deter total war, but foster low-intensity war and proxy competition. The use of tactical nuclear weapons like Nasr reduces the escalation ladder required to use nuclear weapons, whereas India's capability development with new doctrines puts due pressure on the security of the nuclear balance (Liu et al., 2026; Foradori & Rosa, 2026).

This paradox is seen in the periodic crises ranging from the Kargil conflict, 2001-2002 stand-off, Mumbai attacks (2008), Balakot crisis where proportionate confrontation was limited yet yetgary was enough to keep escalation at bay. Offensive doctrines combined with defensive posture cognition can magnify the volatility of a crisis, especially with a short decision making timeline, says analysts.

Emerging Technologies and Strategic Risks



Technological developments are changing the face of deterrence stability. Turning win-win into a lose-lose game and arms races are possible possibilities. Due to their hypersonic speeds, the reaction times are shorter and the ballistic lift is smaller, which makes interception very difficult and makes there risk of miscalculations. (Salameh & Alotaibi, 2026).

Vulnerabilities in command-and-control systems possibly due to cyberattacks, and smart sensors and AI systems leading to a potential escalation (whether intentional or not) (Chaudhuri, 2026). There is further strategic uncertainty arising from the militarization of space and EW capabilities, with both India and Pakistan incorporating these technologies into their military strategic planning (Liontiris & Ruano, 2026). The fact that these developments continue to occur demonstrates the importance of building confidence through verifiers and establishing effective and solid confidence-building measures and communications to ensure that deterrence stability remains. Without them, new technologies might make the region even more insecure even if there are already nuclear arms in the region, scholars point out.

Doctrinal Implications and Comparative Analysis

In the context of NFU policy, what is the IA or IAF meant by credible minimum deterrence and what is Pakistan hinting at by full-spectrum deterrence? Escalation behavior and strategic signaling are shaped by these conflicting principles, as is crisis behavior. In terms of conventional crises, analysts have observed that despite the value of nuclear weapons in preventing general war, the level of asymmetry, and doctrinal differences in conventional crises, contribute to instability (Bukhari, Khan, & Haq, 2024).

With the advancement in technology and doctrines, Pakistan now prioritises counter force and battlefield deterrence with survivable second-strike assets such as submarine-launched ballistic missiles in the case of India. This continues to exist as a balance but also enhances the potential for a 'prevariables war' (Rehan, 2026, Gul, 2026).

Crisis Behavior and Risk Management

The historical evidence of crisis behaviors shows that nuclear deterrence affects whether the military takes action, and tends to promote "calculated" risk-taking. In the Balakot crisis, India has employed limited military power, while Pakistan has done so by way of a counterstrike that has not gone into the nuclear-weapon state's possession. (Ahsan et al., 2026). The near-constant crises in South Asia highlight the potential vulnerability of the deterrence strategy and the need for early warning, signals and communication mechanisms related to the possibility of crises, analysts argue.

Transnational Movements and External Actors and Geopolitical Influence

South Asian nuclear relations are heavily influenced by the external factor, such as China and the United States. Doctrinal choices, military modernizations, and crisis management approaches are impacted by strategic cooperation between U.S. and India, and between India and Pakistan, and by Pakistan's ties with China (Adhikary, 2025). Such is the case with the interactions between the two, as it is clear from the interaction that South Asian nuclear stability is not just South Asian but global stability as well.

As demonstrated in the literature, nuclear deterrence in South Asia is subject to paradoxes, asymmetrically and changing doctrines. Large-scale conventional warfare has been a thing of the past due to nuclear weapons, but crises, proxy conflicts, and strategic instability still exist. The stability–instability paradox, technology modernization and evolutions of doctrines result in an intricate and delicate deterrence landscape. The long-term strategic stability of the region is always paramount and scholars have consistently called for dialogue, arms control and confidence-building measures along with robust crisis communication as means of mitigating risks and in achieving peace and stability in the region (Jamali & Hussain, 2026; Bukhari, 2025; Shabbir & Duong, 2026).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This paper offers a complete examination of the strategic stability of nuclear evolution between India and Pakistan from 2008 to 2013. This book undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the nuclear evolution strategic stability of India and Pakistan during 2008-2013.



- **Deterrence Effectiveness.** The study suggest that ever since 1998, nuclear arms have been effective in averting full-scale conventional wars between the two countries. Within the backdrop of various crises that found themselves upon the Indian forces, such as the Kargil incident (1999), the 2001-2002 military standoff and the Balakot crisis (2019) nothing came near the war posture for either of the two countries. At the macro level, this has proved strategic deterrence effective and has created a peaceful environment in the region, which otherwise had a high risk of big wars occurring (Bukhari, 2025; Jahanzaib, 2026b).
- **Fragility of Deterrence Stability.** Strategic restraint is maintained by nuclear deterrence but stability is fragile. Regular skirmishes, border violations, attempted border incidents and periodic crises have made it clear that there is always a likelihood of the possibility of conflict despite the use of nuclear weapons. These short missile flight durations and high tensions in the region help to narrow down decision-making windows, which increases the risk of escalations (Han & Jiang, 2026; Fu, 2026).
- **Doctrinal Asymmetry.** Strategic calculations are considerably affected by doctrinal difference between the states. India has the policy of 'No first use' of nuclear weapons while Pakistan does not have a policy on it. Its full-spectrum deterrence with tactical nuclear weapons like Nasr missile reduces the nuclear threshold of Pakistan and creates uncertainty in times of crisis, which in turn impacts tactical and strategic decision making process (Bukhari, Khan, & Haq, 2024; Arslan, 2026).
- **Technological Modernization.** The evolution of technology has increased the strategic competitiveness. The development of the Indian nuclear triad, the growing precision of their missiles and the exports of nuclear-powered submarines increase the strategic range and, at the same time, complicate their operational deployment. Pakistan's tactical arsenal and sea-based nuclear arsenal create further operational complexities to the Indian deterrent as well. The modernization of the surveillance systems, command orders and control systems and delivery technologies is still continuing to influence the actual processes of crisis behaviour and deterrence stability (Rehan et al. 2026; Gul et al. 2026; Shabbir & Duong 2026).
- **Stability–Instability Paradox.** The stability–instability paradox provides a good explanation of South Asian nuclear dynamics. Nuclear weapons offer strategic stability through the reflected fear of total war but also offer the possibility for limited conventional and sub-conventional wars. The Kargil offence, the stand-off of 2001–2002 and Balakot are examples of such events where the nuclear deterrence made it more difficult to escalate the crisis but did not deter war breaking out between wars. (Liu et al., 2026; Foradori & Rosa, 2026).
- **Role of External Actors.** The United States and China are among the external factors with a big impact on regional stability. There are strategies to defuse crises through diplomatic ad political involvement. Desperate to quell the threats of terror groups and reduce their dependence on Pakistan's backing, New Delhi resorts to a form of strategic mistrust with Islamabad (Adhikary, 2025; Culp, 2026).
- **Crisis Communication and Confidence-Building.** Even with measures to boost the level of trust, a crisis communication system still underperforms. Lack of transparency, lack of institutional trust and inadequate dialogue exacerbate negative impact on strategic stability, and this is especially true in the wake of a rapidly evolving crisis (Ahsan et al. 2026).
- **Emerging Technologies and Strategic Risks.** New technologies, and the resulting changes, introduce new challenges to deterrence stability. Decision times are shortened, uncertainty is heightened and inadvertent escalation is possible through cyber warfare, the use of artificial intelligence and hypersonic capability and improved surveillance. These technologies not only have the potential to disrupt conventional nuclear concepts but could also require shifting of strategic concepts to retain the credibility of deterrence (Chaudhuri, 2026; Salameh & Alotaibi, 2026; Liontiris & Ruano, 2026).

Critical Analysis: Nuclear Deterrence and Strategic Stability in South Asia



- **Evolutionary Dynamics of Nuclear Programs.** The results indicate that nuclear deterrence has proven to be effective in preventing general war conflicts but it is sensitive, as it is none-symmetric and technologically dependent. For South Asia the mix of doctrinal differences, modernization, low intensity conflicts, developing technologies and outside interventions all help to define the complex nature of South Asian deterrence. For long-term strategic stability in the region, it is essential that dialogue, crisis communication, arms control and confidence-building measures continue to play their role (Bukhari, 2025; Jahanzaib, 2026b; Liu et al., 2026). India's and Pakistan's nuclear developments were a result of historical conflicts, their security dilemmas and regional asymmetries. The direction of India's nuclear program shifted from peaceful research to strategic weaponry following China's 1964 nuclear test, which culminated in the 1974 Pokhan test and India's formal declaration of nuclear capability in 1998, under Operation Shakti (Bukhari, Khan, Noreen, et al., 2024; Adil, 2026). Pakistan's was a reactive move, based on India's traditional strength and nuclear progress, with acquiring threshold capability in the 1980s and reacting with the 1998 Chagai tests (Nasution & Sabila, 2025; Schäfferle & Schmid, 2026). This development follows the typical form of the security dilemma, as the development of deterrent capabilities would increase other states' perceptions of threats, thus fueling nuclear competition and not decreasing insecurity (Jamali & Hussain, 2026). The nuclearization has given strategic leverage, but it has also led to a technologically-fueled arms race, forcing both to invest in delivery systems, command and control facilities and second-strike survivability. The missile programs of India (Agni series) and Pakistan (Nasr) and tactical systems are the examples of this interplay and how it can both stabilise and destabilise states' relationship (Shabbir & Duong, 2026; Van De Haar, 2026).
- **Doctrinal Divergence and Strategic Implications.** A difference in the nuclear standoff between India and Pakistan greatly affects the stability of South Asia. To reduce the use of nuclear weapons while retaining strategic responsibility, India's minimum credible deterrence and (NFU) policy aims to confine the use of the nuclear weapons. By contrast, the full-spectrum deterrence policy and deliberate ambiguity, coupled with the country's tactical nuclear weapons reduce the nuclear threshold and heighten uncertainty in the escalation scenarios for Pakistan (Bukhari, Khan & Haq, 2024; Arslan, 2026). This doctrine imbalance can make it difficult to calculate a crisis accurately, particularly in small-scale conventional wars. This shows that despite historical crises like Kargil (1999) and stand-off 2001-2002, nuclear deterrence acts as a moderation force in restraining escalation at the strategic level, while enabling limited conventional or sub-conventional skirmishes, known as the stability–instability paradox (Liu et al., 2026) or Foradori & Rosa (2026). The study shows that this doctrinal divergence enables both strategic restraint and uncertainty over operations and these must be managed carefully when a crisis emerges.
- **Doctrinal Clarity and Stability.** Key paradox in the nuclear interactions of tomorrow's South Asian strategic equations still remains stable-instability. High level deterrence of nuclear weapons helps to prevent full-scale wars, but at the same time gives rise to low level wars and proxy wars. This is seen in instances such as the Balakot crisis (2019) and the post 2025 encounters that nuclear deterrence kept to a manageable level, but also prevented total exclusion of limited military action (Ahsan et al., 2026; Miller and Cardaun, 2025). This is the operationalisation of the paradox seen in Pakistan that they have developed tactical nuclear weapons such as Nasr system which allows them to have limited conventional deterrence yet can be accidentally escalated. India's strategic modernization of its missile systems, such as hypersonic delivery platforms and sea-based deterrents, has a similar impact on the calculus of strategic restraint (Rehan, 2026; Gul, 2026).
- **Arms Control and Limited Agreements.** The dynamics of crisis management between Pakistan and India are indicative of aspects of the multi-dimensionality of nuclear deterrence. The analyses of the 2001-2002 stand-off, Mumbai attacks (2008) and Balakot (2019) illustrate that while surrogate attributes to a nuclear capability limit large-scale operations, they can motivate risk-taking within the

perceived safe and secure dimensions of nuclear cover (Ahsan et al., 2026). Research finds that timescale around decision-making are shortened by missile short flight time and close proximity, and therefore there is little time for de-escalation. International mediation—including by the United States and other global actors—has proven a stabilizing force in crises, underscoring the value of third-party diplomacy to mitigate unintentionally escalating dynamics (Adhikary, 2025; Culp, 2026).

- **Technological Modernisation and Strategic Complexity.** Technological progress has increased ins stabilizing and destabilizing aspects of the South Asian deterrence. India's efforts to become a full-fledged nuclear triad and increase the accuracy of missiles with cutting-edge intelligence systems boost their second strike survivability (Jahanzaib, 2026b). Pakistan's express sea-based deterrents and tactical nuclear arsenal make it strategically balance, but make it more complex to operate (Van De Haar, 2026). New technologies, such as cyber warfare, AI, hypersonic missiles, and sophisticated surveillance systems, shorten response time and increase the chances of the error. Adding to the complication of crisis management and escalatory dynamics would be the militarization of space and electronic warfare (Chaudhuri, 2026; Salameh & Alotaibi, 2026; Liontiris & Ruano, 2026). All of this makes it more important than ever to have effective command and control protection measures, communication and disaster risk reduction systems.
- **Influence of External Powers.** The outside influences on South Asian nuclear dynamics have been discussed heavily, particularly those of China and the USA. Strategic cooperation between India and the United States and cooperation between Pakistan and China brings a significant impact on doctrines, modernization agendas, and crisis management practices (Adhikary, 2025). External presence and diplomacy helps defuse escalation risks, stressing that regional nuclear stability is not just a bilateral affair between India and Pakistan, but also a global strategic affair.
- **Limitations of Current Deterrence Mechanisms.** While overall, nuclear deterrent works as intended, there are several reasons why it fails:
 - ✓ During crises, doctrinal ambiguity leads people to become uncertain. The risk perception may be further exacerbated by Pakistan's tactical nuclear posture and the doctrines and guidelines that keep changing in India.
 - ✓ Fewer channels of communication during a crisis make signaling more difficult and more likely to cause things to escalate to a detrimental level.
 - ✓ The integration of new technologies, such as vulnerability in the cybersphere, systems of decision making based on AI and hypersonics, adds uncertainty into strategic calculations.
 - ✓ Short missile flight times increase the possibility for a misperception or accidental escalation (Ustiashvili, 2025).

Such restrictions point to the fragility of nuclear deterrence in South Asia.

- **Strategic and Policy Implications**

- ✓ Analysis shows that there are a number of policy implications:
- ✓ While preventing big wars, nuclear weapons can't stop wars altogether, so too is the need to have crisis management procedure.
- ✓ Toying with technological modernization requires new command and control systems, cyber defense, and artificial intelligence management.
- ✓ To decrease instability linked to tactical nuclear weapons, doctrinal transparency and bilateral agreements are vital.
- ✓ External involvement and interactions with international bodies continue to be important in supporting communication and mediation in crisis situations.
- ✓ The escalation level can be lowered by confidence-insuring policies and risk mitigation procedures such as early warning systems and operational restraint agreements, while still maintaining deterrent credibility (Bukhari, 2025; Shabbir & Duong, 2026).

- **Findings on Critical Analysis.** The study shows that the deterrence processes among the South Asian countries are at the same time stabilizing and destabilizing. Nuclear weapons have stopped full-scale wars but facilitated limited wars, low-level skirmishing and proxy wars. Crisis behaviour and escalation management is complex, with strategic asymmetry, and doctrinal and technological variation, alongside new military capabilities. There is need for a layered approach, with the elements of doctrinal clarity, technological protection, crisis communication, external diplomatic mediation and confidence building measures. Given the ongoing developments of nuclear doctrines and new technologies, it becomes apparent that deterrence in South Asia is an evolving, volatile and tenuous situation. Poor bilateral dialogue, lower levels of domestic risk reduction and insufficient multilateral engagement will continue to pose challenges to maintaining long-term strategic stability, compounded by institutionalized arrangements for crisis management and technologies to help curb accidental escalation (Jamali & Hussain, 2026; Liu et al., 2026; Foradori & Rosa, 2026). The literature review indicates that nuclear deterrence in South Asian is beset with paradoxes, asymmetries, and changing dogmas. While they have kept the large-scale conventional wars at bay, nuclear weapons are not a solution to crises, proxy wars or strategic instability. A dynamic and fragile deterrence environment is maintained by the stability–instability paradox, the modernization of technology and the doctrinal changes. Preservation of dialogue, confidence-building measures, arms control, and strong crisis communication practices are clear and continuous recommendations from scholars to reduce risks and promote strategic stability in the region (Jamali & Hussain 2026; Bukhari 2025; Shabbir & Duong 2026).

CONCLUSION

The development of nuclear weapons in South Asia has drastically changed the Security nature in India-Pakistan relationship. Both nations have built up complex nuclear forces, advanced missile programs and developed sophisticated national doctrines since the tests in 1998 making nuclear weapons a key tool of national defence and power projection in the region. The policy of credible minimum deterrence and No First Use (NFU) is different from what Pakistan adopts, which is full-spectrum deterrence and strategic ambiguity, resulting in a complex deterrence scenario for India. There are significant doctrinal differences that affect the behaviour in crisis, bring about strategic uncertainty. Moreover, the study shows how the nuclear deterrence has succeeded in preventing full-scale war, without producing full stability in the region. Under the shadow of nuclear weapons, this paradox of stability–instability persists and small skirmishes, border skirmishes, and military crises can happen. In addition, technological modernization, whether in the form of tactical nuclear weapons, missile defense, cyber or emerging technologies, further complicates the dynamics of stability by creating a need for shorter decision making timelines and the possibility for accidental escalation. However, with these difficulties, a strategic stability can be accomplished. Risk can be reduced through sustained dialogue, high levels of confidence building, effective crisis communication and responsible nuclear behaviour. Political leadership, diplomatic engagement and focus on region peace will play a key role in the future success of deterrence stability efforts, and while nuclear arms may deter war, confidence-building, cooperation and effective mechanisms to manage conflict are essential to ensuring stability (Bukhari, 2025; Shabbir and Duong, 2026).

Recommendations

- **Bilateral Dialogue and Risk Reduction.** There is a need for enhancing the normal communication between India and Pakistan to effectively deal with the nuclear risks. This includes institutionalised mechanisms to communicate between the political leadership and military commands to ensure understanding, to alert to pending crises and to mitigate ambiguity in crisis response. Dialogue can foster trust, prevent misunderstandings and enable coordination of restraint tools in times of stress between the two states. Practical experiences like the events of Kargil (1999),

stand-off period from 2001–2002 demonstrate the role of communication failures in the possibility of miscalculation and escalation (Bukhari, 2025; Culp, 2026).

- **Expand Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs).** CBMs contribute to lessening the strategic uncertainty through providing greater transparency in military or nuclear activities. Suggestions include early warnings about missile tests, troop or military movement exercises. Putting these measures in place and keeping them up-to-date is essential, allowing each side to accurately understand what is happening in the strategic field and minimizing the likelihood of unintentionally sparking an escalation sequence as new technology comes to the forefront, such as precision strikes, drones and hypersonic weaponry. In addition, the enhanced CBMs contribute to meeting international standards and to regional peace and stability (Adhikary, 2025).
- **Dedicated Nuclear Crisis Communication Channels.** The creation of hotlines and quick communication lines to nuclear command authorities are very important. These pathways enable on-the-spot action coordination during emergency situations, which helps to avoid miscommunications, misinterpretations, and avoid any inadvertent/preemptive strikes. One can also build a dedicated nuclear hotline with various other features such as digital communication, a secure satellite link, and encrypted messaging, providing continuity during conflict. Crisis intensity, such as has been seen in the Balakot incident in 2019, increases when there are no such mechanisms in place (Miller & Cardaun, 2025).
- **Doctrinal clarity and Stability.** Ambiguity and misperceptions are avoided by having clear nuclear doctrines. India has said that it would retain the No First Use (NFU) policy for its defensive approach to the issue. As for tactical nuclear weapons, Pakistan needs to make sure that its usage is tactical command and control, otherwise there is a risk of local use adding to the situation in an unfortunate manner. Continuous adherence to the conservative approach in doctrinal adjustments helps to keep the nuclear postures credible and measured and help in sustaining long-term deterrence stability (Bukhari, Khan, & Haq, 2024; Arslan, 2026).
- **Arms Control and Limited Agreements.** Armament reductions are not likely to be comprehensive, but reduced armaments can at least diminish strategic tension. These arrangements can be related to limits on the development of missiles, ballistic missile defence, and tactical nuclear weapons. Some of those can mitigate the arms race risk and will lead to transparency, mechanisms of verification and compliance. Small scale bilateral or multilateral instruments can also help in improving the sense of confidence and predictability, which contributes towards the stability of a crisis in South Asia (Shabbir & Duong, 2026).
- **International Mediation and Diplomatic Engagement.** It focuses on international mediation and diplomatic efforts., centered on international mediation and diplomacy. The role of 'outside forces' and international organisations in the prevention of escalation in times of crisis is significant. Its diplomatic efforts can be coordinated by other entities such as the United States, China and The United Nations, who can assist in negotiation, conflict resolution and offer technical and strategic advice. In the past, constructive intervention has kept conflicts from turning into large-scale war and it is currently even more essential in coping with new important threats in the strategic arena (Adhikary, 2025; Culp, 2026).
- **Investment in Emerging Technology Security.** New emerging technologies, such as cyber, artificial intelligence, hypersonics and new surveillance systems, introduce new challenges to nuclear command, control and communications. Both states should enhance cyber security, better secure command-and-control networks, and put in place strong protection mechanisms against the unauthorized access or system malfunction. With effective management, the use of these technologies will make their use as a deterrent credible without risking unintentionally escalating (Chaudhuri, 2026; Liontiris & Ruano, 2026).

- **Promote Economic Cooperation and Regional Integration.** Hostilities can be diminished and motivational factors introduced for strategic restraint because of economic interdependence. Trust can be fostered through bilateral and regional cooperation, including trade pacts, investments in infrastructure and energy projects across the board. Connecting economic development with strategic stability provides both sides with real motivation against further escalation, which helps to maintain strategic stability for long-term purposes (Bukhari, 2025; Fu, 2026).
- **Track-II Diplomacy and Academic Exchanges.** Shared understanding of nuclear risks can be enhanced through the implementation of Track-II exchanges, workshops and dialogue forums. Scholars, retired officials and technical experts can engage to explore strategies for risk reduction, crisis communication, and doctrinal alignment outside of politics. These activities, although not formal diplomatic pursuits, can help promote a strategic culture and mutual understanding that can mitigate misunderstandings in times of crisis (Shabbir & Duong, 2026; Liu et al., 2026).

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