BIISS JOURNAL, VOL. 46, NO. 4, OCTOBER 2025: 439-460
DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.56888/BIISSj2025V46n4a3
ISSN: 1010-9536 (Print)

Mohammad Aynul Islam
Rubel Molla

WITHER NUCLEAR DETERRENCE? A MINIMUM POSTURE IN SOUTH ASIA

Abstract

India and Pakistan, despite being nuclear weapon states, have frequently engaged in conventional military conflicts. Given the regional and domestic environment, nuclear deterrence has been in decay. Both countries are exploiting the stability-instability paradox and testing the nuclear threshold times and again, which further creates the threat of more conventional conflicts and nuclear escalation. This article argues that nuclear deterrence, though checked strategic level stability between India and Pakistan, failed to end frequent conventional escalation; rather, traditional diplomacy and non-nuclear deterrence are comparatively effective regarding the nature of the relationship between India and Pakistan. The paper also argues that multipolarity and nuclear capability, advanced technologies and AI, dilemma with stability-instability paradox, populist leadership and popular psychology, and weak communication, etc., are the key reasons behind the minimum deterrence posture. The paper discusses the effectiveness of non-nuclear deterrence to ensure stability and peace in South Asia.

Keywords: Deterrence, India, Pakistan, Escalation, Multipolarity, Technology

1. Introduction

The history of World War II depicts a terrible story of weapons ever invented by humans, obviously, that is the story of nuclear bombs and their brutal devastation on Japanese territory. Since then, a heinous competition has been started between the Cold War superpowers for acquiring more sophisticated nuclear weapons. However, though the realists were concerned over the possible obliteration of the earth due to nuclear armaments, there were some arguments in favour of nuclear weapons. For instance, the presence of nuclear arms between or among great powers would create deterrence, which could ultimately prevent conflicts and war between or among nuclear states. The latter position was based on the argument of reciprocal vulnerability and credible retaliation (zero-zero game). For example, what happened

Mohammad Aynul Islam is Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Dhaka, and Research Fellow, Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, Belgium. His e-mail address is: aynul.islam@du.ac.bd. **Rubel Molla** is Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Dhaka, and Postgraduate Student, Department of War Studies, King's College London. His e-mail address is: rubel@du.ac.bd

in the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis. After the early decade of the 21st century, the credibility of nuclear deterrence has been diminishing due to the engagement of a number of nuclear powers in conflicts and war quite recently. Several contributing factors make nuclear deterrence more fragile, less predictable, and increasingly unable to prevent limited war or coercion. For example, there are several key factors: firstly, the weakening of nuclear arms-control regimes; secondly, multipolar complexity in nuclear competition; thirdly, diffusion of disruptive technologies; fourthly, presence of non-nuclear deterrence; and fifthly, changes in national psyche (no-harm feelings) of the state, etc. destabilised the nuclear deterrence system. Therefore, previously, war-like situations and conflicts among nuclear states were controlled by deterrence, which has now been shifted to a response to the weapons. This study argues that nuclear deterrence has hardly succeeded in ending coercion and limited war, rather traditional way of diplomacy in reducing escalation between India and Pakistan has become prevalent in recent times. To supplement the argument, this study investigates three basic questions: Why has nuclear deterrence been strained in India-Pakistan relations? How far is non-nuclear deterrence relevant to de-escalating conventional conflicts? What will be the future of nuclear deterrence and peace in the region? In this paper, the term 'wither' has been used in the title synonymously with erosion, weakening, and decay of nuclear deterrence.

The Cold War drew repeated attention to the concept of deterrence, which is often used synonymously with nuclear deterrence. Although the nuclear dimension of deterrence is significant, it is a part of the overarching theory comprising economic, diplomatic, and military power.[1] India and Pakistan—the two colonies of the British Raj and South Asian neighbours—acquired their nuclear weapons in the 1970s and 1990s, respectively, and found placement in the nine-member club of global nuclear powers. They have developed their nuclear arsenals to counter the nuclear threats posed against each other. However, since the partition of India in 1947, the relationship has remained strained between them, what sometimes labelled as 'prisoner of partition'.[2] Despite being nuclear weapon holders, due to socio-cultural, religious, and political differences, they have engaged in several conventional conflicts, raising the fear of further escalation to nuclear warfare.

The rivalry between these two countries trickled down from sports to culture to media and politics. Moreover, regional geopolitical and strategic shifts have also made their relationships more tense and complex. Their confrontations are not viewed as bilateral theatre; rather, an evolving crisis sourced from shifting geostrategic architecture in the Indo-Pacific, where great power competition, bloc

[1] Peter Roberts and Andrew Hardie, *The Validity of Deterrence in the Twenty-First Century* (RUSI Occasional Paper, 2015), 01.
[2] Shyam Saran, *How India Sees the World: Kautilya to the 21st Century* (Juggernaut Publication, 2018), 81.

politics, and nuclear deterrence clash.[3] Moreover, both countries are involved not only in bilateral rivalry but also in competing geopolitical blocs. India has been maintaining good relations with the United States (US), including a defense agreement, partnering with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), etc. On the contrary, Pakistan, though once strongly tied with the US, has now navigated its move to China, having Chinese economic support through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project and military assistance. Therefore, military escalation and nuclear deterrence are involved in complex regional geopolitics. However, India and Pakistan have engaged in several conventional arms-conflict undermining the nuclear deterrence and strategic stability. Erosion of the deterrence poses a serious threat to the regional peace and stability in the South Asian region. Having this brief background, this study will explore the underlying factors behind the erosion and the future of deterrence and peace in South Asia.

The study is mainly qualitative in nature and is based on secondary sources such as newspapers, books, journals, official documents, websites, and reports etc. There are five sections in this paper. Following the introduction, the second section discusses the nuclear deterrence from theoretical perspectives, while the third section addresses the erosion of deterrence in the context of India-Pakistan relations; the fourth section discusses the future of deterrence and peace in South Asia, and finally, the last section concludes the paper.

2. Nuclear Deterrence: A Theoretical Perspective

The word 'deterrence', though very often used interchangeably as 'nuclear deterrence', has a long history of practice. Nevertheless, the terminology also accommodates military, economic, and diplomatic deterrence as well. This study focuses on only military deterrence, that is, more specifically, nuclear deterrence. Existing literature demonstrates multiple meanings and implications of the term. The idea of deterrence gained prominence during the Cold War and led to some of the earliest scholarly studies in the late 1940s. Thomas Schelling is frequently credited as the father of the deterrence theory, and his seminal publications titled "The Strategy of Conflict (1981)" and "Arms and Influence (1966)" have been very often cited as the foundational texts of coercion and deterrence theory.[4] Schelling, an economist, was aware of the use of bargaining for military strategists. Those with more military might could disregard those with less might because the latter were

[3] Aniello Iannoe, "From Deterrence to Display in the India–Pakistan Conflict," E-International Relations, Last modified May 08, 2025, https://www.e-ir.info/2025/05/08/opinion-from-deterrence-to-display-in-the-india-pakistan-conflict/.

[4] Thomas C. Shelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Harvard University Press, 1981); Thomas C. Shelling, *Arms and Influence* (Yale University Press, 1966).

unable to cause serious harm. But in symmetric warfare, the focus has shifted from a contest of strength to a contest of endurance, risk-taking, and strategic decision-making.

The word "deterrence" comes from the Latin "*terrere*", which means "to frighten". Deterrence, as a term, relates to the psychological process. It denotes convincing a subject to refrain from acting. It is based on emotions such as 'fear of punishment' or 'will to suffer'. In this context, deterrence means "discouraging (someone) from doing something by instilling doubt or fear of the consequences".[5] As Freedman notes, "deterrence can be a technique, doctrine, and a state of mind".[6] In all cases, it is about setting boundaries for actions and establishing risks associated with crossing these boundaries. Again, Snyder called deterrence the "power to dissuade."[7] while George and Smoke outlined deterrence as, ''simply the persuasion of one's opponent that the costs and/or risks of a given course of action...outweigh its benefits.''[8] Furthermore, deterrence is described by Schelling as "a threat... intended to keep an adversary from doing something."[9] The broader objective of deterrence is to prevent certain actions by another actor, be it a state, a leader, a group, or any other entity. Therefore, deterrence can be defined as an act, or as a state, posture, or structure.[10] Overall, deterrence is a policy design intended to prevent an actor from executing a specific desired course of action.[11] The foundation of successful and effective deterrence is the knowledge that deterrence is centred on the adversary's (the subject of deterrence) mindset, and that the adversary must be persuaded that the other state's deterrence posture is adequate to prevent the adversary's action from succeeding.

The phrase "deterrence" has been used to describe the fundamental strategy of the nuclear powers and the key alliance systems since the invention of nuclear weapons. In international relations, nuclear deterrence is a principle in which states (having nuclear weapons) avoid launching attacks against each other due to possibility of retaliation and destructive force of nuclear weapons.[12] Scholars tried to determine necessary conditions to nuclear deterrence, for example, Kenneth Waltz argued for three requirements that must be met for nuclear deterrence to be effective[13]: firstly, a portion of a state's nuclear weapons must seem able to withstand an enemy attack and to be employed for a second strike in retaliation; secondly, the state must not respond to false warnings of an enemy

[5] Judy Pearsall (ed.), *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford University Press, 1998).
[6] Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Polity Press, 2004), 116.
[7] Glenn H. Snyder, ''Deterrence and Defense,'' in *The Use of Force: International Politics and Foreign Policy,* eds. Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz (University Press of America, 1983), 129.
[8] Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (Columbia University Press, 1974), 11.
[9] Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Yale University Press, 1966), 69.
[10] Roberts and Hardie, *The Validity of Deterrence in the Twenty-First Century*, 05.
[11] Roberts and Hardie, *The Validity of Deterrence in the Twenty-First Century,* 07.
[12] Probable retaliation and destructive forces are connected with the idea of MAD and second-strike capability.
[13] Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (W.W. Norton, 1995), 20.

strike; and thirdly, command and control over the arsenal must be maintained by the state. Above mentioned requirements underpin two basic conditions of nuclear deterrence: the ability to respond following a surprise assault must be seen as credible, and the desire to retaliate must be seen as a possibility, but not necessarily a guarantee.[14]

The renewed interest has grown in nuclear deterrence in international politics after the commencement of the Cold War, and the debates on the effectiveness of deterrence have remained a key issue in the domain of war and conflict studies. While the stability-instability paradox claims the decrease in probability of direct war between two nuclear states, the theory acknowledges the increase in indirect or lower intensity conflicts[15] and thus normalises minor conventional conflicts. With the advent of modern technologies, multipolarity of nuclear states, influence of non-nuclear deterrence, internationalisation of deterrence, etc., might affect the magnitude of nuclear deterrence as a strategy to stop coercion, conflict, limited war, or proxy wars. Again, populism and propaganda, command and control in the age of artificial intelligence (AI) and misinformation have also challenged the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence. Additionally, with the evolving nature of regional and global politics, the number of nuclear states has been on the rise, which has also created multi-pronged difficulties in effective deterrence.

Table 1: World Nuclear Forces (as of January 2025)[16]

Countries	**Deployed warheads**	**Stored warheads**	**Military stockpile**		**Retired warheads**		**Total inventory**	
	2025	**2025**	**2024**	**2025**	**2024**	**2025**	**2024**	**2025**
United States	1770	1930	3708	**3700**	1620	**1477**	5328	**5177**
Russia	1718	2591	4380	**4309**	1200	**1150**	5580	**5459**
United Kingdom	120	105	225	**225**	–	**–**	225	**225**
France	280	10	290	**290**	–	**–**	290	**290**
China	24	576	500	**600**	–	**–**	500	**600**
India	–	180	172	**180**	–	**–**	172	**180**
Pakistan	–	170	170	**170**	–	**–**	170	**170**
North Korea	–	50	50	**50**	–	**–**	50	**50**
Israel	–	90	90	**90**	–	**–**	90	**90**
Total	**3912**	**5702**	**9585**	**9614**	**2820**	**2627**		**12405**

[14] "Deterrence," Britannica, accessed October 10, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/mutual-assured-destruction.

[15] Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 04 (1979): 617–633.

[16] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and Inte*rnational Security (SIPRI, 2025), 09.

According to SIPRI, as of January 2025, there are an estimated 12405 warheads in the world's arsenal, of which 9614 are in military stocks for possible deployment. Besides, as the Arms Control Association estimated, 90 per cent of the total warheads are combinedly possessed by the US and Russia.[17] Although under the New START agreement, both countries agreed to cap their warhead deployment at 1550, the recent suspension of the agreement by Russia indicates the uncertainty of the renewal agreement after 2026.[18] Moreover, six countries are hosting another country's nuclear weapons, and 28 countries (plus hosting countries) (see Table 2) are endorsing the possession of nuclear weapons as a part of their defence alliance, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).[19] Therefore, concerns are looming around the future of the nuclear race, as Hans M. Kristensen, Associate Senior Fellow with SIPRI's Weapons of Mass Destruction Programme expressed:

> "The era of reductions in the number of nuclear weapons in the world, which had lasted since the end of the Cold War, is coming to an end. Instead, we see a clear trend of growing nuclear arsenals, sharpened nuclear rhetoric and the abandonment of arms control agreements."[20]

In addition, resilience to deterrence, both nuclear and non-nuclear, as appeared in the Russia-Ukraine War, is a major concern over the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence in different regions of the world. This complexity may encourage the horizontal escalation[21] of conflicts, as Bruno Tertrais expressed, "aggression in one area can be countered by retaliation in another".[22] Moreover, technological sophistication, such as missile defense systems and hypersonic weapons, etc., has made non-nuclear counterattacks more feasible, and the distinctions between conventional and nuclear conflict have become blurred. Besides, weaker command, control, and communication systems jeopardise deterrence and increase the risks of unintentional conflicts.

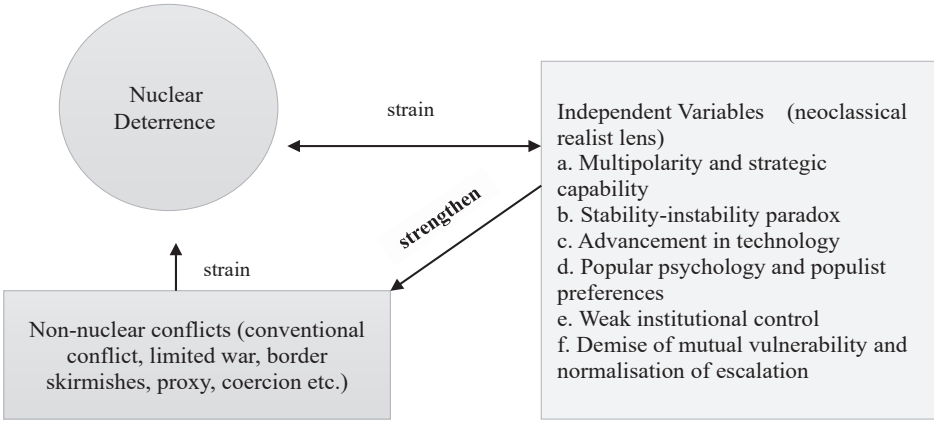
[17] "Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance," Arms Control Association, Last Modified January, 2025, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclear-weapons-who-has-what-glance.
[18] Arms Control Association, "Nuclear Weapons".
[19] "Which Countries have Nuclear Weapons?" International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), accessed October 02, 2025, https://www.icanw.org/nuclear_arsenals.
[20] "Nuclear Risks Grow as New Arms Race Looms," SIPRI, Last Modified June 16, 2025, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/nuclear-risks-grow-new-arms-race-looms-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now#:~:text=Nearly%20all%20of%20the%20nine,weapons%20and%20adding%20newer%20versions.
[21] Vertical escalation can take several forms: hitting more targets, a different type of target (moving from military to economic targets, for example), or in a different location (moving from a foreign theatre to the adversary's country). Horizontal escalation refers to the opening of a new theatre of conflict, even at the same level of applied violence.
[22] Bruno Tertrais, *What future for Nuclear Deterrence* (Foundation for Political Innovation, 2022), 26.

Table 2: Names of the Thirty-four Countries Endorsing Nuclear Weapon Usage[23]

Countries Hosting the US Nuclear Weapons	Countries Hosting Russian Nuclear Weapons	All Endorsers
Belgium, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Türkiye	Belarus	Albania, Armenia, Australia, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, The Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye

This paper is to reassess the nuclear deterrence in the context of evolving regional order in Asia and draw attention to the case study of India-Pakistan nuclear deterrence to understand the effectiveness of the deterrence and the potential of future peace means. The paper has examined multiple variables in the context of the South Asian case, particularly the India-Pakistan relations. In the next section, the paper has devised a neoclassical realist framework to understand the strains on nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan, focusing both on the domestic imperatives and evolving regional politics. Figure 1 will help to understand the framework of analysis to reflect on the dynamics of deterrence between India and Pakistan.

Figure 1: Neoclassical Realist Framework[24]



In the next section, the above variables are examined to measure the level of deterrence exists between India and Pakistan.

[23] "Which Countries have Nuclear Weapons?" ICAN, accessed October 10, 2025, https://www.icanw.org/nuclear_arsenals.
[24] Prepared by the Authors, 2025.

3. An Erosion of Deterrence? The Case of India-Pakistan Relationship

The colonial experience in the Indian sub-continent has facilitated strong religious rifts, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. Later, in 1947, India and Pakistan gained independence, which was the bitter result of the 'two-nation' theory. However, the partition did not follow a smooth transition; rather, the region was engulfed by communal violence and riots, which resulted in the deaths of millions of people. But the tension sprang up with the emergence of separatist movements and border disputes and claims over the Kashmir issue. Fighting over Kashmir continued until 1948, which ultimately ended in the division of Kashmir. Pakistan started to administer the western part of Kashmir, while China held control over a small portion in the north, and the entire of the rest of Kashmir went under Indian authority. However, from 1947 to the present time, both countries have been locked in multiple military exchanges and border disputes (see Table 3).

Table 3: Major Conflicts between India and Pakistan[25]

Year	Events
1947–1948	The First Indo-Pak War broke out over the Kashmir issue. Kashmir was divided.
1965	The Second Indo-Pak War broke out. Pakistan launched Operation Gibraltar in Jammu and Kashmir. It lasted 17 days. The war ended with the Tashkent Declaration.
1971	War broke out between East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan. Pakistan started Operation Chengiz Khan on 3 December 1971, and India officially started the war against Pakistan. Bangladesh achieved independence.
1999	The Kargil War started. Pakistan's troops seized Indian military posts in the Kargil mountains. The battle continued for 10 weeks, including a heavy battle in the Ladakh region.
2008	The Mumbai attack killed 166 people.
2016	The Uri attack killed 17 Indian soldiers. India conducted a surgical strike at the LoC.
2019	The Pulwama attack killed 40 Indian paramilitary forces. The Indian Air Force launched an aerial raid on Balakot in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. India revoked Article 370 of the special status for Kashmir.

[25] Compiled by the Authors, 2025.

2025	On 22 April 2025, a Pahalgam attack in Indian-administered Kashmir killed 26 people. India started Operation Sindoor, including missile strikes on multiple targets in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

India started its journey of nuclear weapons through its successful test of Smiling Buddha, the code name (Pukhran-1 was the official name) on 18 May 1974. On the other hand, Pakistan conducted its first test on 28 May 1998 called Chagai-I (the code name). At present, India and Pakistan combinedly possess around 350 warheads. However, both countries follow their own doctrines (official or unofficial) for the use of those nuclear weapons. The doctrinal position is critical since it demonstrates commitment to national security and works as a guide to the civil-military personnel who will be required to respond during any nuclear events. Moreover, doctrine also builds the way a state is perceived by other states, including those that do not possess any nuclear weapons.[26] India follows a No-First-Use (NFU) policy against nuclear-armed states. It also pledges to retaliate if nuclear, large-scale chemical, or biological weapons are used against its territory or its military forces anywhere. The country also vowed to maintain a defensive and cautious posture. As Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh V. Shringla opined:

> "India, as a responsible nuclear-weapon state, is committed as per its nuclear doctrine, to maintaining credible minimum deterrence with the posture of no-first use and non-use against non-nuclear-weapon States."[27]

However, Pakistan has not openly proclaimed an official nuclear doctrine since its first test in 1998.[28] Pakistan's policy of full-spectrum deterrence (FSD) has been designed to deter conventional confrontation at all levels by threatening to use nuclear weapons first in the case of aggression.[29] Therefore, the country follows a comparatively aggressive doctrine with early and tactical use.[30] As Lieutenant General (Retd) Khalid Kidwai, Advisor of the National Command Authority (NCA) of Pakistan, viewed:

> "Pakistan's nuclear capability operationalised under the well-articulated policy of FSD comprises a large variety of strategic, operational and tactical nuclear weapons, on land, air and sea, which are designed to comprehensively deter large-scale aggression against mainland Pakistan".[31]

[26] Antoine Levesques et. al., *Nuclear Deterrence and Stability in South Asia: Perceptions and Realities* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021), 09.
[27] "India Committed to Goal of Non-Discriminatory, Verifiable Nuclear Disarmament: Foreign Secretary," *Times of India*, February 22, 2021, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-committed-to-goal-of-non-discrimi natory-verifiable-nuclear-disarmament-foreign-secretary/articleshow/81154103.cms.
[28] Soutik Biswas, "How Real is the Risk of Nuclear War Between India and Pakistan?" *BBC*, May 14, 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2e373yzndro.
[29] Levesques et. al., *Nuclear Deterrence and Stability*, 18.
[30] Guillem Colom Piella, "Two Doctrines and One Destiny: India, Pakistan, and the Risk of Nuclear War," *Documento de Opinión IEEE* 34 no. 01 (2025): 606–618.
[31] "Keynote Address by Lieutenant General (Retd) Khalid Kidwai, Advisor, National Command Authority on

Despite the strained relationship between India and Pakistan, it was expected that the escalation of conflict would be checked broadly since both countries owned nuclear weapons, which would deter them from direct conflicts. However, the number of conflicts between the two countries since the early 21st century depicts different outcomes. They engaged in several occasional military exchanges, and the border skirmishes intensified further with the rise of proxies and separatist movements. Hence, the stability-instability paradox has struggled to define the behaviour of the two nuclear powers. Rather, the prevailing credible factors (domestic and regional) indicate an easy translation of low-scale indirect conflict into a major direct warfare, including intensive use of nuclear weapons. This can bring severe violation of the existing status quo and deterrent posture. In the following sub-sections, those prevailing factors will be discussed in detail.

3.1 *Multipolarity and Nuclear Capability*

During the Cold War, the deterrence was bipolar, between the two ideological blocs led by the US and the USSR, and they were only concerned about each other. With the shift of geostrategic balance after the Cold War, the number of nuclear-armed states increased to nine.[32] Therefore, dyadic confrontation is over, however, with internationalisation of nuclear weapons, new strategic chains of nuclear-armed states have been formed.[33] Moreover, more countries are willing to host nuclear weapons of other countries or endorse the possession of nuclear weapons across the world. This tendency has been further fostered by the extension of nuclear deterrence under the concept of 'nuclear umbrella'.[34] In this situation, nuclear crisis escalation potentially becomes far more difficult to handle, which ultimately undermines the key purposes of nuclear deterrence.[35] In South Asian regional politics, the key challenge is quadrilateral competition and conflict of interest. The Sino-US, Sino-Indian, Indo-Pak conflicts and competitions, as well as the US and Chinese nuclear assistance to India and Pakistan, aggravated the complexity further. China's military might affect India, while India's military capability affects Pakistan; this triangular situation worsens when the Sino-US conflict gets its way in it. As mentioned in the US threat assessment report, "India

6 February 2020 at IISS, London," International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), accessed November 15, 2025, https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/events/2020/transcript-of-lt-general-kidwais-keynote-address-as-delivered---iiss-ciss-workshop-6feb20.pdf.

[32] China, France, India, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US), along with Israel. Israel neither confirms nor denies having nuclear weapons. The US, the UK, France, China, and Russia are among the nine nations that have ratified the NPT; Israel, Pakistan, and India have not, and North Korea withdrew in 2003.

[33] R. Einhorn and W. P. S. Sidhu, *The Strategic Chain: Linking Pakistan, India, China, and the United States* (The Brookings Institution, 2017).

[34] The concept of nuclear umbrella denotes a guarantee to protect or defend a non-nuclear allied state by a nuclear-armed state.

[35] Michael Krepon, "Can Deterrence Ever Be Stable?" *Survival* 57, no. 03 (2015): 111–32.

views China as its primary adversary and Pakistan as more of an ancillary security problem to be managed".[36] The US's strategic competition with China has put India in a partnership position with the US, particularly in the QUAD alliance to counter China's influence in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean Region. On the other hand, China has extended its nuclear assistance to Pakistan for both military and civilian purposes, aiming at a strategic balance with India.[37] For example, on 14 March 2018, the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) declared that the Institute of Optics and Electronics had provided Pakistan a potent monitoring system that can expedite the building of multi-warhead missiles by the Pakistani military.[38] Since 1990, China has been the key arms supplier to Pakistan. In 2020–2024, 81 per cent of Pakistan's arms came from China. On the other hand, though Russia is the key supplier for India, it has shifted towards the US, Israel, and France in recent times.[39]

This kind of alliance and counter-alliance makes more confusion about whether deterrence would be vertical or horizontal, and it blurs the applicability of deterrence due to evolving regional and global issues and flashpoints. Again, there is an asymmetry in the strategic objectives of both countries. India considers nuclear weapons as a political deterrent against political coercion and resisting blackmail (punitive measures against any proxies and the government supporting and financing those proxies).[40] Pakistan considers its tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) as a war-fighting instrument to compensate itself against India's conventional military advantage. This asymmetry in objectives creates impetus between the countries to lust and rush for more nuclear arms and increase more nuclear capability. This kind of arms race undermines deterrence by weakening the sense of mutual vulnerability. According to the Worldwide Threat Assessment Report 2025, "Pakistan regards India as an existential threat and will continue to pursue its military modernisation effort, including the development of battlefield nuclear weapons".[41] According to the ICAN Report, in 2024, India spent US$ 2.6 billion (3 per cent higher than that of the previous year), and Pakistan spent US$ 1.1 billion (18 per cent higher than that of the previous year) for nuclear weapons. In 2020–2024, both countries increased their nuclear spending on average by 0.3 per cent every year.[42] The competition

[36] Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), *2025 Worldwide Threat Assessment* (DIA, 2025), 28.
37 Jonah Blank, "Pakistan and China's Almost Alliance," RAND Corporation, Last modified October 16, 2015, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2015/10/pakistan-and-chinas-almost-alliance.html.
[38] Simbal Khan, "Why did China Announce its Support for Pakistan's Missile Development Program? *Arab News*, April 10, 2018, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1282076.
[39] Alia Chughtai, "What are India and Pakistan's Military and Nuclear Capabilities?" *Aljazeera*, May 08, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/8/what-are-india-and-pakistans-military-and-nuclear-capabilities.
[40] "Not Going to Fall for ...: Jaishankar Says India Won't be Deterred by Nuclear Blackmail; Rebuts Trump," *Times of India*, July 01, 2025, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/not-going-to-fall-for-jaishankar-says-india-wont-be-deterred-by-nuclear-blackmail-rebuts-trump/articleshowprint/122171366.cms.
[41] Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), *2025 Worldwide Threat Assessment*, 29.
[42] ICAN Report, *Hidden Costs: Nuclear Weapons Spending in 2024* (ICAN, 2025), 5–6.

for increasing nuclear capability is also another dimension that has been labelling the idea of deterrence to be more fragile. India has strengthened its nuclear triad (ground, air, or sea-based forces) with the second nuclear-powered submarine (SSBN) (INS Arighat), and Pakistan is also seeking to complete its own triad.[43] Both countries have developed their own nuclear-capable missiles, such as Agni V (India's intercontinental-range missile with a range of 5000+ km) and Shaheen 3 (Pakistan's regional-range missile with a range up to 2750 km). Such a form of race combined with geopolitical rivalry potentially could facilitate further conflicts and more vicious race between the two rival neighbours.

3.2 *Advanced Technology and Artificial Intelligence*

Advanced and sophisticated technology is a concern for nuclear deterrence and stability. Emerging technologies of concern include precise low-yield nuclear weapons, autonomous weapons, and AI-enhanced decision systems, hypersonic glide vehicles, anti-satellite weapons, etc. Experts argue that for nuclear deterrence, there must be the absence of incentives to use nuclear weapons first.[44] But the rush for advanced technologies created more incentives for weapons (engendering an arms race further) and generated ambiguity between conventional and nuclear weapons. In recent times, both India and Pakistan have been seeking new technologies and capabilities that might jeopardise one another's nuclear threshold defences.[45] For example, India has developed an unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) (Rustom-2) and is working on a Multi-Agent Robotics Framework (MARF) surveillance system and unmanned underwater vehicles (Matsya). Besides, in November 2024, India tested hypersonic missiles and its BrahMos-II programme, based on hypersonic scramjet technology, which can bypass air defence systems. These weapons can carry both conventional weapons and nuclear warheads.[46] Moreover, India tested anti-satellite (ASAT) missile technology in March 2019.[47] Also, India has developed AI-based surveillance systems and deployed 140 of them along its northwestern border with Pakistan.[48] On the other hand, Pakistan is also adopting advanced technologies; it has established the Centre for Artificial Intelligence

[43] Claire Mills, *Nuclear weapons at a glance: India and Pakistan* (Research Briefing No. 9070, House of Commons Library, 2022), 4–5.
[44] Acton, J. M., "Reclaiming Strategic Stability," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Last modified February 05, 2013, https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/02/05/reclaiming-strategic-stability-pub-51032.
[45] Antoine Levesques et. al., *Nuclear Deterrence and Stability in South Asia: Perceptions and Realities*, 04.
[46] "India Successfully Tests Long-Range Hypersonic Missile," *The Express Tribune*, November 17, 2024, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2510155/india-successfully-tests-long-range-hypersonic-missile.
[47] Ashley J. Tellis, "India's ASAT Test: An Incomplete Success," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Last modiied April 15, 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/04/indias-asat-test-an-incomplete-success?lang=en.
[48] Zohaib Altaf and Nimrah Javed, "The Militarization of AI in South Asia," *South Asian Voices*, January 16, 2024, https://southasianvoices.org/sec-c-pk-r-militarization-of-ai-01-16-2024/.

and Computing (CENTAIC) to facilitate military AI development.[49] The concern is that both of them tried to use those technologies in recent conflict. During the conflicts from 7 –10 May 2025, both countries used supersonic missiles and drones for attacks.[50]

Now, how are those technologies straining the nuclear stability and deterrence in the region? First, those technologies are often termed as 'disruptive technologies' because they pose challenges to offensive strategic forces, nuclear command and control, and communications and intelligence systems, which result in escalation of crisis and uncertainty.[51] Second, use of those weapons and response to their usage could blur the boundary line between the use of conventional and nuclear weapons. Such usage can remove the distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear warfare, which leads to ambiguity during the crisis, for example, a cyber offensive operation cannot be dealt with traditional way.[52] Third, cyber warfare (sometimes may be controlled from outer space) can lead to attacks on critical infrastructure, including nuclear power plants and command and control systems, which can easily destabilise and break the status quo.[53] Fourth, the AI-powered drones increase the chance of unintentional conflicts between the two nuclear-armed states, India and Pakistan. This conflict may go beyond human control because of swift and autonomous responses and trigger a full-fledged conflict, including nuclear exchange. Finally, in today's nuclear age, signaling nuclear crises becomes more sensitive and complex, particularly due to transformative AI systems and augmentation technology. For example, AI-augmented cyber tools can hack and corrupt an adversary's cyber plan, get access to a nuclear weapon system, misguide the command-and-control mechanism, and get access to communication channels. Therefore, undesirable and unintended algorithms could influence the nuclear perceptions and decisions and escalate the situation.[54] In the case of India-Pakistan, there is a 'fog of war' with the rise of AI. Therefore, the existence of AI surveillance tools on the India-Pakistan border creates more ambiguity and fear of escalation.

[49] Zamzam Channa, "Indian Acquisition of Emerging Technologies: Exploring Response Options for Pakistan," *The Defence Horizon Journal*, March 08, 2025, https://tdhj.org/blog/post/india-pakistan-edt/.

[50] Samaan Lateef, "Pakistan Upgrading Nukes with Chinese Support, US Warns," *The Telegraph*, May 26, 2025, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/05/26/pakistan-upgrading-nukes-with-chinese-support-us-warns/?ICID=continue_without_subscribing_reg_first.

[51] Channa, "Indian Acquisition of Emerging Technologies".

[52] N. Tannenwald, "The Great Unravelling: The Future of the Nuclear Normative Order," in *Meeting the Challenges of the New Nuclear Age: Emerging Risks and Declining Norms in the Age of Technological Innovation and Changing Nuclear Doctrines,* eds. N. Tannenwald, and J. M. Acton, (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2018), 13.

[53] Channa, "Indian Acquisition of Emerging Technologies".

[54] Hanzla Hussain, "South Asia: Nuclear Deterrence in the Age of AI," *Stratheia*, May 04, 2025, https://stratheia.com/south-asia-nuclear-deterrence-in-the-age-ofai/#:~:text=In%20India%2DPakistan%20case%2C%20rise,high %20levels%20of%20generative%20AI.

3.3 *Dilemma with Stability-Instability Paradox*

Stability-Instability paradox[55] is a theory of international relations proposed by Glenn Snyder, which suggests that nuclear weapons prevent full-scale nuclear war (strategic stability) at the strategic level, but encourage low-scale conflict (instability) at the conventional level. Because both sides assume that it is unlikely to escalate the conventional conflict into nuclear war, therefore, making conventional conflict more likely. In a simple sense, neither side is worried about a dangerous escalation of conflicts; they are more likely to fight a limited war.[56] For example, during the Cold War, the US and USSR were not involved in direct warfare, but through the proxy war in Afghanistan, Korea, and Vietnam, etc.[57] However, critics argue that the assumption of 'not allowing high intensity conflict or war' may not always work, as the behaviour of the states has been evolving with the changes in the regional and global political and geostrategic order.

The recent conflict in May 2025 between India and Pakistan can be an example of such a paradox. If Pakistan would not reply with nuclear weapons, India extended its attack in May 2025, reaching deep into the Punjab area. Similarly, Pakistan responded with conventional methods and covert nuclear signals, considering it a limited conflict rather than an existential fight.[58] Thus, under the shadow of nuclear threshold, the limited military conflict has been normalised. However, a full-scale conventional conflict between India and Pakistan would weaken nuclear deterrence and increase the risk of nuclear escalation.[59] Moreover, the socio-economic and political dynamics of India and Pakistan relate to the 'paradox' dilemma. The frequent concentration of conflicts, a long history of fighting proxies, particularly major flashpoints in Kashmir, etc., shows the greater destabilising effects on strategic stability between the two countries.[60] Moreover, disruptive technologies and AI-enabled warfare, combined with protracted proxy conflicts, further deteriorate the deterrence. In AI-enabled warfare, low-level military aggression/conflict between nuclear-armed states increases the risk of unintentional nuclear detonation and miscalculation of lower-level conflicts.[61]

[55] Glenn H. Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror," in *The Balance of Power*, ed. Paul Seabury (CA: Chandler, 1965), 184–201.

[56] "Five Key Concepts to Understand the India-Pakistan Crisis," South Asian Voices, Last modified May 30, 2025, https://southasianvoices.org/sec-c-oth-r-5-key-india-pak-crisis-5-30-2025/.

[57] Michael Krepon, *The Stability-Instability Paradox, Misperception, and Escalation Control in South Asia* (Stimson Center, 2017), https://theasiadialogue.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/stability-instability-paradox-south-asia.pdf.

[58] "Nuclear Stability, Conventional Instability: Rethinking Deterrence After the 2025 India–Pakistan," International Affairs Forum, accessed October 11, 2025, https://www.iaforum.org/Content/ViewInternal_Document .cfm?contenttype_id=1&ContentID=18148.

[59] S. Paul Kapur, "India and Pakistan's Unstable Peace: Why Nuclear South Asia Is Not Like Cold War Europe," *International Security* 30, no. 02 (2005): 127–152.

[60] Ahmad Khan and Ali Ahsan, "Deterrence in Indo-Pak Context: A Critical Appraisal," *Policy Perspectives* 13, no. 01 (2016): 56.

[61] James Johnson, "Revisiting the 'Stability–Instability Paradox' in AI-enabled Warfare: A Modern-day Promethean Tragedy under the Nuclear shadow?" *Review of International Studies* (2024): 01–19.

Also, the crisis in intensity indicators foreshadows nuclear readiness and potential escalation under the nuclear shadow. The experiences in the previous crises between India and Pakistan predict comparatively higher nuclear signaling, particularly the level of nuclear intensity was extreme in most of the cases. In the following table, the crisis intensity indicators expounded by Michael Krepon and Liv Dowling (2018) are employed to see to what extent the recent crises allowed nuclear signaling.

Table 5: India-Pakistan Crisis Intensity Indicators[62]

		Crises							
	Indicators	**Brasstacks (1986-87)**	**Compound (1990)**	**Kargil (1999)**	**Twin Peaks (2001-2)**	**Mumbai (2008)**	**Uri (2016)**	**Pulwama (2019)**	**Pahalgam (2025)**
Extreme intensity	**Limited warfare**			■			■	■	■
	Missiles, warheads mated			■					■
	Nuclear weapons or dual-use missiles deployed to field/ fighting corridors			■	■		■		
	Nuclear-capable aircraft moved to satellite bases/ positioned on runways		■	■	■				
	Preparing aircraft, frontline equipment for combat		■	■				■	■
	Mobilization of offensive/ defensive units to fight corridors with ammunition	■	■	■	■	■	■		■
	Cancellation of leaves	■		■	■	■	■		■

[62] Michael Krepon and Liv Dowling, "Crisis Intensity and Nuclear Signaling in Asia," in *Investigating Crisis: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, eds. Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland, (Simson Center, 2018), 208; Compiled by the authors (Uri, Pulwama, Pahalgam).

3.4 *Popular Psychology and Populist Preferences*

National psyche of the mass people, media framing and popular perception of each other, populist agenda in domestic politics, etc., impact significantly (particularly in deteriorating credibility) in both deterrence and escalation. During the British Raj, people of this region joined the anti-colonial movement hand in hand. But after the India-divide, a strong political and religious rift developed, which shaped the nature of domestic politics and bilateral relations between the two countries. Popular psychology sometimes has been engineered in line with right-wing media hype and propaganda and populist vote-bank politics. Media from both sides have always sensitised the common people regarding bilateral issues, with much hyperbole and ultra-nationalist rhetoric. For example, according to a research report conducted by the Pew Research Center in June 2011, 75 per cent of Pakistanis are unfavourable to India, while 65 percent of Indians are unfavourable to Pakistan. Most interestingly, 74 per cent of Pakistanis consider India as a serious threat other than the Taliban or Al Qaida. Again, three-in-four Indians (76 per cent) consider Pakistan as the biggest threat compared to Lashkar-e-Taiba and Naxalites.[63] Moreover, ultra-nationalists portray the nuclear bomb as a prestige[64] and national pride, which strongly mobilise domestic politics. Media framing of nuclear discourse in both countries centered on national pride and technological supremacy,[65] particularly during the conflict/crisis time, the hype reaches its peak when television screen drives into frenzy with fake news, doctored videos, or hysterical hashtags.[66] For example, during the Pulwama crisis, news outlets and social media produced lies and false information, and created a sphere of hatred, and thus, war hysteria was fostered. Such popular perceptions, media framing, and rhetoric can easily be monopolised by the right-wing and military populist leaders. Populist leaders, including populist media, use nuclear signaling to showcase a 'tough guy' posture during crises and elections to achieve domestic legitimacy. Such situations can undermine deterrence by encouraging emotional decision making. They can demonise each other and dehumanise the 'other' identity and escalate frequent conventional conflicts, which in turn can be changed into a nuclear confrontation.[67] Thus, politicisation of nuclear posture could decay the 'rational actor' behaviour in both rivals and encourage nuclear confrontation.

[63] "Global Attitude Project," Pew Research Center, accessed November 29, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2011/06/21/chapter-6-how-pakistanis-and-indians-view-each-other/.
[64] Parvez Hoodbhoy, *Nuclear Issues between India and Pakistan: Myths and Realities* (Stimson Center, 1994): 05.
[65] Sitakanta Mishra and Hely Desai, "The Media Framing of India's Nuclear Weapons Discourse," *International Journal of Nuclear Security* 9, no. 01 (2025): 01–19.
[66] Saba Naqvi, "The War was Televised, but the Truth did not Make the Cut," *Frontline*, May 25, 2025, https://frontline.thehindu.com/columns/india-pakistan-war-media-propaganda-fake-news-nuclear-crisis/article69593521.ece.
[67] Muhammad Sadiq and Iftikhar Ali, "Challenges of Nuclear Deterrence Stability in South Asia," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 08 (2023): 1523.

3.5 *Weak Institutional Communication*

Credible communication, continuous nuclear dialogue, and hotline communication are critical for countering the misinformation and misperception. It reduces the chances of inadvertent escalation.[68] After the Balakot attack, such a situation was created between India and Pakistan. India unintentionally launched a nuclear-capable cruise missile into Pakistani territory in March 2022; the missile flew 124 kilometres (km) before crashing, allegedly causing damage to civilian property. Pakistan accused India of not making a public statement or calling the military hotline for two days. It is argued that the incident might have degenerated into a major clash if it had happened during a time of elevated tension. In that incident, three air force officers were fired by the Indian government for 'accidentally firing a missile' a few months later.[69] Critics argue that the confidence building measures (CBMs),[70] particularly nuclear risk-reduction measures (NRRMs), are sufficiently invisible in the case of India and Pakistan. Because of their distrust and hesitant, antagonistic attitudes, they were unable to implement CBMs successfully.[71] Moreover, the chronic communication gap worsened the miscalculations and trust. For instance, Pakistan's perception of 'India's expansion intent' grew when India repealed Articles 35A and 370. Therefore, poor communication taints decision-making and creates unfavourable impressions. Instead of using their respective hotlines in an emergency, they rely more on political and verbal cues.[72] Lack of renewed political dialogue, regional arms control measures, and external restraints created a perpetuating cycle of confrontation, which time and again, tested the nuclear thresholds.[73] Hotline communication between the military operations level (DGMO) was established in 1971, re-established in 1990 and 1999. Diplomatic hotlines were also established at the prime ministerial and foreign ministers' level; however, the hotline is highly dependent on the willingness of the political decision-makers of both countries to diffuse tension (see Table 4). The issues discussed above

[68] Inadvertent escalation means when a state intentionally takes an action that it does not know crosses a threshold considered critical by other state.

[69] Biswas, "How Real is the Risk of Nuclear War between India and Pakistan?".

[70] Swati Pandey and Teresita C. Schaffer, "Building Confidence in India and Pakistan," South Asia Monitor, Last modified August 01, 2002, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/pbei/csis/sam/sam49/; Haleema Saadia, "Nuclear Risk Reduction Between India and Pakistan: Improving the Implementation of Nuclear Confidence-Building Measures," Stimson Center, Last modified May 22, 2024, https://www.stimson.org/2024/nuclear-risk-reduction-between-india-and-pakistan/.

[71] Areeja Syed and Asfandiyar Khan, "Confidence Building Measures: A tool for India-Pakistan Peace," Modern Diplomacy, Last modified April 21, 2020, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/04/21/confidence-building-measures-a-tool-for-india-pakistan-peace/.

[72] Anam Khan, "After Pahalgam: Charting the Dangers of Miscalculation in South Asia," International Affairs Forum, Last modified October 12, 2025, https://ia-forum.org/Content/ViewInternal_Document.cfm?contenttype_id= 1&ContentID=15079.

[73] Brig. Imran Hassan, "Testing Deterrence: South Asia's Strategic Stability After May 2025," South Asian Voices, Last modified October 10, 2025, https://southasianvoices.org/sec-m-pk-r-may-strategic-stability-10-10-2025/.

have created concerns about nuclear deterrence and the future stability in the South Asian region. Therefore, alternative options for functional cooperation and deterrence became a critical search for the major and emerging powers of this region. In the following section, the future of deterrence and peace in this region has been discussed.

Table 4: Assessing Implementation of India-Pakistan NCBMs[74]

NCBM	Scope	Regularity	Transparency	Communication
Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities	narrow	regularly implemented	somewhat	regular
Hotline at Foreign Secretaries Level	not specified	irregular	-	none – in recent times
Advance Notification of Ballistic Missile Tests	narrow	regular implementation (with some caveats)	somewhat	regular; not on TNWs
Reducing the Risk from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons	narrow	-	-	-

4. Future of Deterrence and Peace in South Asia

With frequent military exchanges and conflicts despite having the status of nuclear-armed states, both India and Pakistan have normalised military escalation and conventional conflicts under the auspices of stability-instability paradox, which is a serious threat to bilateral strategic stability and lasting peace in the South Asian region. It is assumed that nuclear deterrence would dissuade conflicts both at the conventional and sub-conventional level, particularly the military conflicts and proxies, where peace would autonomously exist. However, most of the time, India and Pakistan engaged in conflicts, a third party appeared to mediate and stop the escalation. Instead, traditional diplomacy (brokered bargaining) gained more relevance. Brokered bargaining means positioning a nuclear crisis within a three-way bargaining framework involving two regional nuclear adversaries and influential third-party brokers.[75] For example, the Pahalgam attack in April 2025 drove both India and Pakistan to the brink of major war from 07 to 10 May 2025. The spread and scale of attacks and the use of new technologies by the rivals were

[74] Haleema Saadia, "Nuclear Risk Reduction Between India and Pakistan," Stimson Center, Last modified May 22, 2024, https://www.stimson.org/2024/nuclear-risk-reduction-between-india-and-pakistan/.
[75] Moeed W. Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia* (Stanford University Press, 2018).

unprecedented.[76] However, the US broke the deal, and the conflict was de-escalated. Similarly, the second India-Pakistan war in 1965 and the Kargil War in 1999 were brokered by the Soviet Union and the US, respectively. During the 1965 War, the Soviet Union facilitated the signing of the Tashkent Declaration in January 1966. Again, during the Kargil war, the then US administration pressured Pakistan using the threat of international isolation. Moreover, the US has been instrumental in defusing tensions between India and Pakistan, such as the standoff in 2001–2002, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and, to a lesser degree, the Pulwama–Balakot Crisis in 2019.[77] Thus, third-party mediation played a critical role in ending the escalation. India and Pakistan, both countries, lack an effective bilateral crisis management mechanism; therefore, they have to outsource a third party for escalation control.[78] There is also a persisting debate that such a kind of diplomacy works because third-party states are also nuclear power states. However, the purpose of this study is to see how far conventional diplomacy is relevant to stop conflicts between India and Pakistan despite the presence of nuclear deterrence. In these circumstances, nuclear deterrence may not be instrumental in stopping conflicts and bringing peace because of the socio-political background of the countries and the presence of non-state actors in conventional conflicts. Therefore, bolstering non-nuclear deterrence, particularly socio-economic and diplomatic, could bring a significant breakthrough for lasting peace.

Political dialogues, diplomacy, and enhanced bilateral economic relations can strengthen the CBMs and vice versa. First, political tensions and disputes need to be reduced, particularly regarding border issues. Second, economic and trade interdependence could stop escalation by increasing the mutual costs of conflict. Suspension of trade ties following conflicts reduced the trade interdependency significantly. For instance, bilateral trade between India and Pakistan plummeted to US$ 1.2 billion in 2024, which reached nearly US$ 3 billion in 2018.[79] Third, cooperation and partnering with regional and global multilateral platforms is crucial for facilitating further trust and confidence. Therefore, political dialogue and norm-setting could help to remove barriers from the path of cooperation in regional multilateral platforms. Fourth, effective and regular non-military hotline communication could reduce

[76] Christopher Clary, "Four Days in May: The India-Pakistan Crisis of 2025," Stimson Center Last modified May 28, 2025, https://www.stimson.org/2025/four-days-in-may-the-india-pakistan-crisis-of-2025/.

[77] "Five Key Concepts to Understand the India-Pakistan Crisis: Unpacking Five Strategic Concepts behind the Recent India-Pakistan Military Crisis," Stimson Center, Last modified May 19, 2025, https://www.stimson.org/2025/ five-key-concepts-to-understand-the-india-pakistan-crisis/.

[78] Usaid Siddiqui, "India-Pakistan: Can other Countries Pull Them from the Brink Of Conflict?" *Aljazeera*, May 07, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/7/india-pakistan-can-other-countries-pull-them-from-the-brink-of-conflict.

[79] Manoj Kumar and Ariba Shahid, "India-Pakistan Trade Faces New Blow after Kashmir Attack, Diplomatic Rift," *Reuters*, April 25, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-pakistan-trade-faces-new-blow-after-kashmir-attack-diplomatic-rift-2025-04-25/.

what Saran mentioned as the 'dialogue-disruption-dialogue' cycle.[80] Fourth, cyber cooperation is critical to prevent misunderstanding and real-time decision-making during conflict escalation. Fifth, the most important way of strengthening non-nuclear deterrence is people-to-people connectivity and cultural cooperation to change popular psychology between each other. For example, incessant sporting ties (damaged due to recent attacks), cultural exchanges, and track II dialogues curtail brinkmanship in media and public discourse.[81] Greater understanding and appreciation of the people of the 'enemy state' would press military and politicians to engage, which would remove underlying rifts from the bilateral relationships.[82] Sixth, bilateral negotiations and diplomatic engagement are necessary because third-party crisis management can assuage the crisis for the time being, but it could encourage greater risk-taking in future if alternative psychology develops in one or both states, the external party will step in to stop the conflict.[83] Therefore, besides strengthening nuclear deterrence, non-nuclear deterrence should be focused in the case of the India-Pakistan relationship. Non-nuclear deterrence is not necessarily an alternative; rather, it could facilitate peace through ending conventional conflicts, which are the major concerns both for bilateral and regional peace in the South Asian region.

Beyond India-Pakistan relationship, the non-nuclear deterrence could have trickle-down impacts on the bilateral relations of other countries. Since Bangladesh has been driving towards civilian nuclear capability, a nuclear status quo between the two nuclear neighbours would help in more stable nuclear usage in the region. Emphasis on achieving non-nuclear deterrence has particular significance for Bangladesh because, under this idea, the powerful neighbours would feel urges for cooperation and diplomacy instead of coercion and fear. This could make regional multilateral platforms more relevant and active and make them a way out for non-nuclear deterrence. It will help Bangladesh to raise its voice further with meaningful approaches on those platforms. Again, non-nuclear deterrence has special implications for Bangladesh-Myanmar relations as well. Both countries have stressful relations, particularly regarding the presence of non-state actors on the borders and Rohingya issue. Therefore, those strains are pushing both the states back, and functional diplomatic, economic, and people-to-people connections are suffocating. Bangladesh needs to build up on non-nuclear deterrence with both Myanmar and India, which could help the country to achieve its developmental priorities in the region and beyond.

[80] Saran, *How India Sees the World*, 81.
[81] Saran, *How India Sees the World*, 105.
[82] Aman Nair and Arindrajit Basu, "Confidence-Building Measures and Norm Diffusion in South Asia," Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Last modified July 02, 2021, https://www.orfonline.org/research/confidence-building-measures-and-norm-diffusion-in-south-asia.
[83] Stimson Center, "Five Key Concepts to Understand the India-Pakistan Crisis".

5. Conclusion

The end of the Cold War generated new momentum, a race for nuclear weapons, a notorious weapon ever invented in human history. Now, there are nine members in the nuclear club, and more than thirty four countries are endorsing the possession of nuclear weapons. The idea of nuclear deterrence has been developed to bar nuclear warfare between two nuclear powers. The idea is based on the principle of mutual vulnerability and credible retaliation. It means a nuclear weapon state would not engage in direct war with another nuclear state, assuming that the retaliation would bring similar costs to it, along with collateral damage. However, the theory of the stability-instability paradox allows low-scale conventional conflicts between the two nuclear states. Since the birth of the two countries based on the two-nation theory, India and Pakistan have remained in constant enmity both militarily and politically. In the meantime, both of the neighbouring states have their own nuclear arsenals. Though it is assumed that under the theory of nuclear deterrence, they will refrain from conflicts, in reality, they have clashed in several conventional wars. There are multiple reasons behind the erosion of the relationship between India and Pakistan relationships such as multipolarity and nuclear capability, the use of advanced technology and AI, the dilemma of the stability-instability paradox, popular psychology and populist preferences, and weak institutional communication.

The multipolar nature of regional politics, geopolitical shifts, and modernisation of arms to enhance capabilities have blurred the vertical and horizontal surface of deterrence. Moreover, asymmetric objectives of deterrence between the two states also generate confusion in strategic stability. The development of nuclear-capable missiles has also created a grey area for further conventional conflicts. Advanced and sophisticated technology, such as highly precise low-yield nuclear weapons, autonomous weapons, and AI-enhanced decision systems, hypersonic glide vehicles, anti-satellite weapons, etc., created more incentives for acquiring weapons (creating an arms race) and generated ambiguity between conventional and nuclear weapons. Allowing low-scale conflicts to remain unabated, the stability-instability paradox indirectly promotes further escalation when it is between India and Pakistan, with historic enmity, and frequent clashes in conventional warfare may escalate into nuclear war. Moreover, AI-enabled warfare, protracted proxy conflicts, and other disruptive technologies raise concerns of accidental nuclear detonation and miscalculation of sub-conventional battles. Popular psychology of Indians and Pakistanis against each other, media rhetoric, military and right-wing populist leaders who try to pose toughness to garner domestic legitimacy and win over elections, could facilitate emotional decision making, ultimately aiding nuclear escalation. Absence of effective confidence building measures, communication gaps producing miscalculation, and lack of political dialogues have worsened the credibility of

communication to counter misinformation and misperception. Therefore, it creates the whims of escalation and challenges the existing deterrence and status quo.

In South Asia, nuclear deterrence rather encouraged (inbuilt) conventional conflicts, which pose a serious threat to regional security and peace. However, traditional diplomacy, including third-party brokered bargaining, has helped end several escalations between India and Pakistan. Two powerful nuclear states, the US and the Soviet Union, negotiated all those deals. Such success enhances the appeal of achieving non-nuclear deterrence, besides nuclear deterrence. The non-nuclear deterrence comprises economic interdependence, diplomatic engagement, people-to-people connectivity, and cultural exchanges. Diplomatic negotiation is still instrumental in ending conventional escalation and ensuring stability between India and Pakistan, as well as lasting peace in the South Asian region. Besides the reduction of escalation, non-nuclear deterrence pushes to strengthen functional bilateral relations. Non-nuclear deterrence would have trickle-down impacts on Bangladesh's relations with Myanmar and India. Since two major nuclear weapon states drive themselves for diplomatic and economic engagement, it could inspire the other countries to cement their bilateral relations and play a more constructive role in the regional multilateral platforms to achieve individual goals and the common priority of mutual peace in the region.