

## Changing Dynamics of Deterrence in South Asia: Implications for Strategic Stability

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### Abstract

*Deterrence involves increasing the cost of aggression for the adversary, such that retaliation surpasses the perceived benefits of aggression. The nuclearisation of Pakistan and India constricted the space of conventional war; however, India's progressive enhancement in its nuclear force posture towards a counterforce targeting strategy undermines the credibility of Pakistan's nuclear deterrent forces. The introduction of offensive military doctrines and destabilising weapons systems seek to dominate escalation and destabilise deterrence equilibrium. This research paper aims to analyse how changing force postures and doctrinal positions define the dynamics of deterrence and then explore its correlation with strategic stability. To construct it, this study emphasises the episodic crisis that characterises the transitional dynamics of deterrence, viewed through the lens of strategic stability. The study is holistic in nature; it employs a process-tracing methodology to investigate India and Pakistan's nuclear doctrinal positions, which intrinsically elucidate the dynamics of deterrence in South Asia.*

**Keywords:** South Asia, Strategic Stability, Deterrence, Security Dilemma, Offensive Military Doctrines.

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## **Introduction**

Nuclear deterrence is a psychological phenomenon based on states' perceptions of strategic competition. Deterrence is about raising the cost of aggression that the adversary may contemplate, compelling it to retaliate in a way that would outweigh the presumed benefits of aggression.<sup>1</sup> In a South Asian strategic environment, the stable relationship between Pakistan and India also depends on deterrence stability. Particularly after the nuclearisation of South Asia in May 1998, nuclear deterrence, along with the fear of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), has prevented the two states from engaging in any all-out military conflict. However, frequent changes in doctrinal positions, nuclear force postures, and the acquisition and development of advanced weapons have exposed this relationship to transformations in the South Asian strategic environment.

These transformations have a direct bearing on regional peace and stability. This research paper analyses how changing force postures and doctrinal positions define dynamics of deterrence and then explores its correlation with strategic stability. For this purpose, it focuses on how deterrence equilibrium between Pakistan and India is implicated by changing doctrines, ambitious strategies pursued through offensive force postures, and technological modernization of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems. It proceeds with discussing the evolving concept of strategic stability, current state of security dilemma and deterrence equilibrium in South Asia, evaluating India's strategic interests in the region by taking into account its changing doctrines and evolving nuclear posture, Pakistan's response options, and implications for strategic stability.

## **Evolving Concept of Strategic Stability**

Despite its wide usage in strategic analysis, stability is a contested intellectual construct with no consensus on its precise meaning and its surrounding condition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shams uz Zaman, "Dynamics of Deterrence & Strategic Equilibrium in South Asia," *Journal of Security and Strategic Analyses*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (Summer 2016): 52.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Syed Riffat Hussain, "Analyzing Strategic Stability in South Asia," *Margalla Papers* 9, No. 1 (2005): 2.

Mearsheimer defined stability as “absence of war and major crisis”.<sup>3</sup> However, it entails a broader meaning that goes just beyond the absence of war. Strategic stability generally refers to a state in which major powers or actors in international system perceive that risks of conflict escalating into a large-scale, possibly nuclear war is minimized. It involves a condition where the strategic environment is predictable, and there is a mutual understanding and confidence among nations that discourages actions that could lead to dangerous and uncontrollable escalation of hostilities.

The use of Atomic weapons by US in World War II and subsequent emergence of Russia, UK, France and China as nuclear weapons states should have created a nuclear multi polarity. However, UK and France intertwined their policies with US, while China maintained a low key yet independent profile. Despite severe hostility, both Washington and Moscow committed to implementation of Article VI of NPT – “pursuit of nuclear disarmament in good faith” – and had a verbal attachment to what they called strategic stability.<sup>4</sup> The catch phrase between both powers was generally understood as a promise not to engage in nuclear brinksmanship and defined strategic stability as absence of incentives for any country to launch a first nuclear strike.

Since then, the geopolitical, technological, and psychological landscape that helped prevent war between the world’s nuclear powers has significantly changed. More recently, James Acton identifies three connotations to understanding the concept of strategic stability. These include: strategic stability as a function of arms race stability and crisis stability; secondly, it relates to absence of armed conflict between the rival states; and thirdly, it refers to harmonious and peaceful relations between two adversaries.<sup>5</sup> The concept and conditions for strategic stability have fundamentally changed as well, including the instruments for

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<sup>3</sup> Frank C. Zagare and D. Marc Kilgour, *Perfect Deterrence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Troitskiy, “What strategic stability? How to fix the concept for US-Russia relations,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 21 October 2021, <https://thebulletin.org/2021/10/what-strategic-stability-how-to-fix-the-concept-for-us-russia-relations/>.

<sup>5</sup> James M. Acton, “Reclaiming Strategic Stability,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 5 February 2013, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/02/05/reclaiming-strategic-stability-pub-51032>.

preventing a nuclear conflict.<sup>6</sup> US believes that the return of geopolitics whereby revisionist states like China and Russia intend to alter the status-quo is destabilizing for stability.<sup>7</sup> Russia believes that strategic stability is undermined due to US development and deployment of conventional precision guided munition and Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) systems and withdrawal from Anti-Ballistic-Missile Treaty.<sup>8</sup> China, on the other hand, believes that unilateralism and hegemonic designs of US along with its development of prompt global strike capabilities and BMD constrain strategic stability.<sup>9</sup>

Beijing proposes that strategic stability can only be enhanced if genuine security concerns of all stakeholders are taken into account.<sup>10</sup> These divergent views regarding the challenges to stability signify growing differences regarding the mutual understanding of this concept, hence leading to opposing strategies and force postures. The fallout of this worrying trend is also felt in South Asia where Pakistan and India, despite several threats to regional stability, have not engaged in meaningful dialogue to identify the mutual threats to stability and take remedial measures. The succeeding paras give a detailed account of current outlook of deterrence equilibrium between the two nuclear adversaries in South Asia.

### **Current State of Deterrence Equilibrium in South Asia**

The anarchic strategic environment of South Asia, marred by several unresolved disputes and divergent strategies of competing states, represents a case of classical security dilemma. While explaining the security dilemma, Robert Jervis stated that:

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<sup>6</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "Strategic Stability in the Changing World," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 March 2019, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2019/03/21/strategic-stability-in-changing-world-pub-78650>.

<sup>7</sup> Zeeshan Hayat and Tanzeela Khalil, "Great Power Competition and Global Strategic Stability," *CISS Insight* 8, No. 1 (2020): 7.

<sup>8</sup> Andrey Pavlov and Anastasia Malygina, "The Russian Approach to Strategic Stability: Preserving a Classic Formula in a Turbulent World," in Lawrence Rubin and Adam N. Stulberg, eds., *The End of Strategic Stability? Nuclear Weapons and the Challenges of Regional Rivalries* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 48.

<sup>9</sup> Zhong Jing & Pan Zhenqiang, "Redefining Strategic Stability in a Changing World: A Chinese View," *Contemporary Security Policy* 25, No. 1 (2004): 123-135.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



“Many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others... One state’s gain in security often inadvertently threatens others.”<sup>11</sup>

The persistent security dilemma in South Asia leads to complex challenges to deterrence stability. By dragging the two nuclear adversaries in a vicious action-reaction circle, the mutual mistrust and uncertainty traps them in arms competition.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the prevailing security dilemma in South Asia not only undermines the prospects of cooperation between the two states, but also exacerbates the risks of conflict escalation to a nuclear level. Experts observe that India is progressively enhancing its nuclear force posture towards a counterforce targeting strategy for pre-emptive counterforce strikes against Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

Such a scenario directly undermines the credibility of Pakistan’s nuclear deterrent forces, and therefore requires the latter to respond, as dictated by the concept of security dilemma. As Pakistan’s nuclear capability diluted India’s conventional advantage against Pakistan, India has consistently pursued an escalation dominance strategy that increases nuclear risk in South Asia.<sup>14</sup> Differing political motivations, dynamism in force postures and incongruent threat perceptions also drive deterrence instability between Pakistan and India. In recent years, India has introduced offensive military doctrines and destabilizing weapons systems to seek escalation dominance, compelling Pakistan to regain balance.

This classic security dilemma of action-reaction cycle consequently leads to destabilize deterrence equilibrium. India’s quest for nuclear weapons was driven by gaining international prestige<sup>15</sup> and revision of global order. George Perkovich notes that the decision

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 66.

<sup>12</sup> Rizwana Abbasi and Zafar Khan, *Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: New Technologies and Challenges to Sustainable Peace* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Mubeen Ashraf and Syed Saif ul Haq, “Strategic Transformations: India’s Pursuit of Counterforce Targeting and Regional Stability,” *Margalla Papers* 27, No. 2 (2023): 14-26.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>15</sup> PR Chari, “India, Pakistan and the Nuclear Race: The Strategic Entanglement,” *Nuclear Asia* 4, no.3 (July–September 2013): 4.

to develop nuclear weapons was apparently a “shortcut to great power status.”<sup>16</sup> Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral reportedly stated that:

“I told President Clinton that when my third eye looks at the door of the Security Council Chamber it sees a little sign that says only those with economic power or nuclear weapons are allowed. I said to him it is very difficult to achieve economic wealth.”<sup>17</sup>

This motivation is prevalent even today and is evident from how India aspires to use nuclear and other military capabilities not only to dominate its immediate neighbourhood but also to exert influence beyond South Asia. Conversely, Pakistan’s nuclear program has been security driven as it felt threatened by the Indian nuclear capability<sup>18</sup> and was forced to develop its own nuclear deterrent.<sup>19</sup> Since then, both states have quantitatively and qualitatively enhanced nuclear force postures, which is one of the sources of deterrence instability.

The historical animosity of more than seven decades between the two adversaries has a profound impact on their bilateral strategic relationship. Unsettled disputes, like that of Jammu and Kashmir, along with the legacy of wars and frequent military skirmishes haunt prospects of achieving durable peace in the region. Post-independence Pakistan and India have remained intensely embroiled in frequent application of violence across spectrum from military instrument to sub conventional warfare. India’s so called peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974 enticed Pakistan in pursuing a similar capability.

Nuclearisation of India and Pakistan shook the foundation of strategic stability at global level in general and in South Asian region in particular. Notwithstanding, the beleaguered and disenfranchised relationship between Pakistan and India has relied on the

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<sup>16</sup> George Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb: Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 400.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> PR Chari, “India, Pakistan and the Nuclear Race: The Strategic Entanglement,” *Nuclear Asia* 4, no.3 (July–September 2013): 4.

<sup>19</sup> Scott D. Sagan, “Why do States Build Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb,” *International Security* 21, No. 3 (Winter 1996-1997): 59.

deterrence stability. Dr Zulfiqar Khan observes that the power asymmetries between Pakistan and India and the security culture based on their historical experiences compel them to heavily rely on nuclear deterrence.<sup>20</sup>

The mutual nuclear deterrence and the fear of mutually assured destruction (MAD) have prevented both states from engaging in any all-out military conflict and has withstood the test of escalations in Kargil, Mumbai attack and Balakot Strike. Thus, even in an unstable nuclear environment spanning more than two decades, deterrence has prevented the breakout of an all-out military conflict.<sup>21</sup> Nuclear deterrence has been a factor of stability, and both Pakistan and India recognized it in a joint statement in 2004.<sup>22</sup> However, in this unstable environment, both parties do not fully recognize mutual threats confronting deterrence equilibrium between them. The sections below explain how India's ambitious military strategies along with increasing offensive force posturing dilutes mutual vulnerability and undermines deterrence equilibrium between the two nuclear adversaries.

### **India's Quest for Strategic Supremacy**

Ideally, nuclear deterrence in South Asia should have effectively restrained the chances of any conventional misadventure and further minimize the bilateral strategic rivalry, however, that did not happen in the regional strategic scenario with Indian persistent attempts to exploit space for conventional war.<sup>23</sup> While such strategic thinking is largely driven by domestic political interests, the Indian attempt to engage in a limited conflict with nuclear armed adversary would be dangerously problematic.

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<sup>20</sup> Dr. Zulfiqar Khan, "Geostrategic Transformation: Pakistan's Options for Deterrence and Strategic Posturing," *IPRI Journal XVII*, No. 1 (Winter 2017): 72-94.

<sup>21</sup> Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapoor, *India, Pakistan, and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 34.

<sup>22</sup> Rajesh Kumar Mishra, "India-Pakistan: Nuclear Stability and Diplomacy", *Strategic Analysis* 29, No. 1 (Jan-Mar 2005): 121.

<sup>23</sup> Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, *India's 'Surgical Strike' Stratagem: Brinkmanship and Response* (Islamabad: Khursheed Printers Pvt Ltd, 2019).

### **Limited War Below the Nuclear Threshold**

Since nuclearisation, Pakistan and India have experienced an era of relative peace in terms of absence of all-out war between the two. As propagated by the theory of nuclear revolution the concept of MAD prevented both states from engaging into in an all-out conflict.<sup>24</sup> Soon after realizing that the nuclear capability had established a stable environment at higher strategic level that diluted India's conventional superiority over Islamabad, gave way for idea of launching deeper strikes within Pakistani territory on the lines of Sundar Ji Doctrine.<sup>25</sup>

This is reflected through contemplation of concepts like Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) or Pro-Active Operation Strategy and now Dynamic Response Strategy (DRS) with an aim to carry out limited conventional strikes against Pakistan without triggering a nuclear response.<sup>26</sup> Air Cdre Dr. Adil Sultan (Retd) asserts that India's aspirations to fight a limited war under nuclear overhang is also a reflection of stability-instability paradox.<sup>27</sup> Introduction of CSD created a dent in deterrence stability of South Asia by enhancing Pakistan's vulnerability against Indian conventional attack.

This compelled Pakistan to introduce the concept of Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) in line with the dictates of Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD). This response option fine-tuned the nuclear deterrence of Pakistan against any possible Indian military aggression.<sup>28</sup> Critics argue that Pakistan has deviated from its traditional policy of CMD and to support its first-use posture, it intends to develop new category of weapons including miniaturized

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<sup>24</sup> Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Ms. Kokab Al-Saba and Dr. Noor Fatima, "Doctrinal Shift in the Indian Army after 2018: Implications for Pakistan," *NDU Journal* 37 (2023): 17.

<sup>26</sup> Harsh V. Pant, ed., *Handbook of Indian Defence Policy: Themes, Structures and Doctrines* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Sultan, 'South Asian Stability-Instability Paradox,' pp. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Zafar Khan, *Pakistan's Nuclear Policy: A Minimum Credible Deterrence* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 138.

nuclear warheads.<sup>29</sup> However, contrary to this belief, FSD does not oppose the dictates of CMD and remains in line with it. On the other hand, Islamabad's adoption of this doctrinal posture should be seen as a consequence of New Delhi's offensive military strategies.

The possible deployment of CSD signifies that limited war constitutes one of the key features of India's escalation dominance strategy. Though the Indian leadership continued to deny the existence of this doctrine, the recent acknowledgement of CSD by New Delhi's military command and several military exercises in this regard are the dangerous indicators. The belief that an aggressor could potentially control a crisis to a limited level without provoking the nuclear armed adversary to deploy nuclear weapons is inherently destabilizing and subjected to strategic miscalculation.

This mindset prevails in the backdrop of Indian military's plans to integrate theatre commands with a view to integrate three services under a single unified command structure, in which a single commander, having control over all resources is responsible for the military operations.<sup>30</sup> This idea is similar to contemporary structures followed by leading military powers including the US and China to ensure seamless coordination among the three services. The adoption of integrated theatre commands in India has been propelled by two primary factors.<sup>31</sup> First, the Indian armed forces have prioritized interoperability, particularly after becoming part of Quad and establishing foundational agreements with the US, including BECA, COMCASA, and LEMOA.<sup>32</sup>

These arrangements necessitate collaboration in intelligence-sharing, cyberspace defence, logistics cooperation, and joint operations as required. Secondly, India's desire to find space for conventional warfare is another motivating factor behind this development as

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<sup>29</sup> Susan Turner Hayness, *Chinese Nuclear Proliferation: How Global How is Transforming China's Weapons Buildup and Modernization* (London: Nebraska Press, 2016), 54.

<sup>30</sup> Gunjan Singh, "India's Military Modernization in the Shadow of the China Threat," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 10, No. 3 (2023): 280.

<sup>31</sup> A.B. Shivane, "Restructuring for India's Disputed Borders: An Appraisal," *CLAWS Journal* 14, No. 2 (2021): 46-61.

<sup>32</sup> Rear Admiral Raja Menon, "Reorienting Indian Military Grand Strategy: Defensive Territoriality to Offensive Oceanic in the Indo-Pacific," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 5, No. 2 (2022): 54.

the theatre commands would confer the advantage of operationalizing Cold Start Doctrine.

The concept of theatre commands was proposed in 2016 to overcome lack of jointness within Indian military. India has planned to setup three theatre level commands in West, North, and South. The first integrated theatre command will be established in Jaipur in Northern India to address security challenges along the Pakistan border. The second integrated command will be based in Lucknow to counter China along the borders of IIOJK, LOC with Pakistan, and LAC with China. The third integrated theatre command will be the Maritime command based in Karwar to protect India's economic and security interests in the Indian Ocean.<sup>33</sup>

Integration of theatre commands serves several advantages for Indian military. First, it enables the three services to improve coordination and integration for smooth exchange of information and resources. It also provides for efficient resource utilization without any limitations of service boundaries. Secondly, it is a way to remove bureaucratic hurdles by enabling swift response to dynamic situation, thus leading to flexibility in decision-making processes.<sup>34</sup> Further, having resources from three services at their disposal, it enables the operational commanders to execute prompt actions in dynamic situations. This is to be ensured through effective command and control in which theatre commanders will directly report to Chief of Defence Staff, instead of respective services chiefs.

Lastly, it offers rapidly deployable, survivable and manoeuvrable joint forces with sufficient combat effectiveness, particularly stand-off strike capabilities and precision-guided munitions. By representing a cohesive force, theaterisation of commands strengthens deterrence and warfighting capabilities. Lately India under Modi has been trying to add a new dimension to warfighting strategies in South Asia. Through the so-called 'surgical

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<sup>33</sup> Usman Haider, "India's Military Turns Toward Integrated Theater Commands: A Rising Challenge for Pakistan," *The Diplomat*, 08 August 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/indias-military-turns-toward-integrated-theater-commands-a-rising-challenge-for-pakistan/>.

<sup>34</sup> Amit Gupta, "Preparing for a Two-Front Conflict: The Role of the Indian Air Force and the Indian Navy," in Anit Mukherji, Rajeswari P. Rajagopalan, and Nishat Rajeev, eds., *Momentous Changes: Defence Reforms, Military Transformation, and India's New Strategic Posture* (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2023), 65.

strikes,' BJP intends to appease the electorate by launching limited conventional operations inside Pakistan. Dr. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal argues that India uses surgical strikes as an offensive and preventive measure to meet political objectives. Experts argue that India does not have the capability or the will to launch such an attack and it must realize that it neither possesses adequate capability to materialize this nor such an action would go un-responded by Pakistan.<sup>35</sup>

While Pakistan's restrained conventional response in Operation Swift Retort ensured that an all-out war did not occur, such a risky manoeuvre by India may severely implicate crisis stability and contribute to escalation of conflict to a nuclear level. Keeping in view the fragile deterrence stability between Pakistan and India, the continuous pursuit of escalation dominance strategy by India, either in the form of CSD or a phantom surgical strike, may not necessarily be met with de-escalatory response by Pakistan and thus have serious ramifications for deterrence.

Indian experts believe that New Delhi's surgical strikes in 2016 and 2019 signify that Pakistan's nuclear threshold is not as low as it has been traditionally seen and it allows India to carry out limited offensive under the nuclear shadow. This belief implies that there is a space for limited action at operational and tactical level and India needed not follow "military restraint" just out of fear of a conventional military crisis escalating into a nuclear one. India's declared nuclear doctrine calls that any nuclear attack on India and its forces shall result in punitive retaliation with nuclear weapons to inflict unacceptable damage.

Pakistan's nuclear deterrent capability has denied any space for all-out war in South Asia leading to strategic frustration in New Delhi. Consequently, India has moved away from this position of punitive response and adopted the posture of engaging in limited warfare against Pakistan. Indian analysts assert that "India's single most probable military contingency remains a limited war with Pakistan." The surgical strikes in Uri and Balakot in

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<sup>35</sup> Jaspal, *India's 'Surgical Strike' Stratagem*, 124.

2016 and 2019 respectively diluted India's strategic limits of engaging in a conflict.<sup>36</sup> The provocative statements of Indian officials like taking AJK and Gilgit Baltistan further signified New Delhi's frustration with the status-quo. Given such threats, India may consider launching aerial strikes against Pakistan's posts across the LoC, capture some part of its territory across LoC and then declare unilateral cease-fire just short of Pakistan responding with its retaliatory options.

### **India's Ambiguous Nuclear Doctrine and Offensive Posture**

Another trend affecting deterrence stability in South Asia is possible shifts in the Indian nuclear doctrine. While New Delhi has been fast developing destabilizing weapons, the political and strategic leadership has hinted at revision of significant features of its nuclear doctrine. One of those issues is the commitment on No-First-Use (NFU) of nuclear weapons. While Pakistan seemingly has never believed in the credibility of India's NFU commitment, recently signaling by Indian officials about possible revision of this policy holds significant implications for the deterrence stability.

This type of signalling is a direct indication of New Delhi's frustration with the status-quo whereby Pakistan's CMD denies it any space to engage in misadventures. However, through the revision of NFU commitment, India may justify its burgeoning nuclear capabilities that only aim to seek hegemony at least at the regional level. Dr. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal notes that within India, the debate on NFU policy has three different streams.<sup>37</sup> The first stream belongs to the Indian officials in favour of upholding the NFU commitment.

The NFU commitment has seemingly helped India portray itself as a responsible nuclear power for more than last two decades. The second group is frustrated with this stance and presses for altering this policy. This group has put Indian aggressive mindset at full display. For instance, Defence Minister George Fernandes argued in a media talk that India

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<sup>36</sup> Masood Ur Rehman Khattak, "The Indian Army's Land Warfare Doctrine 2018: A Critical Analysis," *IPRI Journal* XX, No. I (2020): 124.

<sup>37</sup> Jaspal, *India's 'Surgical Strike' Stratagem*.



can survive a nuclear attack, but Pakistan cannot.<sup>38</sup> Defence Secretary Yogindra Narain also made threatening remarks while talking to Outlook Magazine. He argued that if surgical strike fails to resolve things, we must be ready for mutual destruction.<sup>39</sup> Brahma Chellaney went to an even further extent by arguing that India should call Pakistan's nuclear bluff and Indian military has the capability to target every nook and corner of Pakistan.<sup>40</sup>

These statements indicate growing calls within India to publicly give-up its NFU policy. Third group advocates two-fold policy, i.e. continue following NFU policy for diplomatic consumption while simultaneously develop pre-emptive nuclear strike capability. Indian strategic community frequently accuses Pakistan of nuclear brinkmanship and points out China's military capabilities as being the drivers behind India's growing nuclear arsenal.<sup>41</sup> Using these notions as cover, India attempts to justify its burgeoning nuclear as well as conventional capabilities that exceed the requirements to ensure security against claimed rival states including Pakistan and China and have grave global implications.

This strategic behaviour puts a direct constraint on the South Asian deterrence stability and has been one of the defining elements of the changing dynamics of deterrence in the region. Over the years, New Delhi has actively pursued the development of capabilities based on triad of nuclear forces, complimented by BMDs and Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), that contribute to offensive posturing. India's growing military buildup also includes procurement of advanced missile technologies and related systems. Given the ongoing trends in non-proliferation regime, such collaboration is carried out under the garb of peaceful uses of technology.

The membership of India into Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) has helped it to get access to most advanced weapons in the global market. These weapons not only provide it with a competitive edge in the battlefield, but may also entice India into using

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Dr Suresh Chandra, *China-Pakistan Relations: Implications for India* (New Delhi: Vij Books Pvt Limited, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

nuclear weapons first in a pre-emptive strike against Pakistan. Along with the development of MIRVs and ABMs, developing precision strike missiles like Agni-V, nuclear-capable guided cruise missiles like BrahMos and Dhanush, and rapidly advancing technologies used for remote sensing reflect India's enhancing capability to specifically target retaliatory capabilities of rival state. In addition to this, technological improvements in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) challenge the ability of adversarial state to ensure survivability of nuclear deterrent.

These trends give a confidence to aggressive power to initiate in conflict with impunity due to perceived invulnerability against the adversary and consequently increases the temptation to attempt launching first strike in pre-emptive role. Salient among these technologies include latest satellites that provide high resolution imagery and advanced antisubmarine warfare capabilities.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, India's short-range ballistic missile that may also be used in materializing the CSD could also support the first strike. Rizwana Abbasi and Zafar Khan observe that India's short-range delivery systems including Nirbhay, Prahaar, Nirbhay and BrahMos may be employed in tactical role if and when Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) decides to develop miniaturized version of its warheads.<sup>43</sup>

Acquisition of these technologies raise concerns that New Delhi may be seriously considering counterforce targeting as a viable strategy, thus having serious ramifications for defender's ability to preserve deterrence. Such changes in nuclear force posture that go contrary to declared commitments in official nuclear doctrine only lead to ambiguity and further exacerbate security dilemma. Pakistan, in such a situation, feels compelled to take counter measures to augment the credibility of its nuclear deterrent. There is a need to realize that even if there is a possibility of a limited conventional war between two nuclear

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<sup>42</sup> Sufian Ullah, "SAV Review: The New Era of Counterforce in South Asia," *South Asian Voices*, 4 September 2018, retrieved from <https://southasianvoices.org/review-the-new-era-of-counterforce-in-south-asia/>, accessed on 4 December 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Rizwana Abbasi and Zafar Khan, *Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia*, 11.

adversaries, there will always be the risks of conflict escalating into an all-out war that may involve the exchange of nuclear weapons. In its attempt to shift strategic equilibrium in its own favor, there have been visible indications of aggression in India's force posture.

The recent military acquisitions and development of sophisticated weapons prior to formal abrogation or revision of its nuclear doctrine demonstrate that India has already started preparing itself for aggressive designs, as frequently projected by the Indian strategic leadership. The prevailing trends in New Delhi's evolving force posture signify the evolving dynamics of nuclear deterrence in the region. The evolving force posture hint at India's contemplation of counter-force targeting and employing nuclear capability in a pre-emptive role with a possible motive to disarm Pakistan's nuclear deterrent capability.

In an attempt to search a way-out of its perceived strategic paralysis with Islamabad, as argued by Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, India has recently acquired or developed several capabilities that make counterforce targeting possible.<sup>44</sup> This flirtation with preemptive counterforce targeting strategy would have serious ramifications for the South Asian deterrence stability. Experts argue that the prevailing belief among high-profile commentators in India that it could initiate a conflict with a confidence to assert 'escalation control' while preventing escalation from going out of hand is misleading.<sup>45</sup> In addition to this, the extra-regional powers and ongoing power play at international level also impinge upon the deterrence dynamics in South Asia.

The exceptional NSG waiver accorded to India by the Western powers after Washington signed civil nuclear cooperation agreement with New Delhi in 2008, has been proving detrimental to strategic stability in the region. Pakistan believes that India's discriminatory access to global nuclear market would allow it to fulfil requirements for peaceful uses of nuclear technology, while freeing up the domestic reserves to be used for

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<sup>44</sup> Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Winter 2018/19): 7-52.

<sup>45</sup> Ryan French, "Deterrence Adrift? Mapping Conflict and Escalation in South Asia," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 10, No. (2016): 108.

the production of weapons. This only adds to military imbalance in the region, reduces Pakistan's reliance on external players as being the mediators in any conflict situation, and further enhances its reliance on nuclear deterrence for the security and survival of the country.<sup>46</sup> While India continues to pursue escalation dominance by retaining strategic advantage either in the form of technological edge or through operational manoeuvres, Pakistan is likely to keep developing its response options to cater for newly emerging threats to its security.<sup>47</sup>

Given the nature of inter-state relationships in South Asia, the changing trends in the revision of nuclear doctrines and development of counterforce capabilities have profound implications for deterrence in the region. These changes indicate that the concept of deterrence, just like the nature of threats, is not static. Rather, it is a dynamic process that is correlated with doctrinal positions, force postures, and strategic behaviours. Thus, any changes in any of these aspects would have a direct bearing on adversary's threat perception and would continue to implicate deterrence stability.

### **Pakistan's Nuclear Threshold in the Wake of India's Escalation Dominance Strategy**

Volatile relationship between Pakistan and India regularly brings the subject of Pakistan's nuclear threshold under discussion. Considering the fragility of deterrence equilibrium, any risky approach in military domain carrying risks of escalation can potentially lead to nuclear Armageddon in South Asia.<sup>48</sup> In a situation where Pakistan and India does not enjoy a nuclear relationship based on perfect stalemate, one state continues to explore the space for limited misadventure under the shadow of deterrence stability at higher level. This constant pursuit of an escalation dominance strategy paves way to an exacerbated security dilemma between the two rivals that consequently fuels not only arms race but also

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<sup>46</sup> Madhur Singh, "US-India Nuclear Deal goes through," *Time World*, October 2, 2008, accessed December 4, 2019, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1846460,00.html>

<sup>47</sup> Sultan, "Pakistan's Emerging Nuclear Posture" (2011).

<sup>48</sup> French, "Deterrence A Drift?: 110.

directly implicates the deterrence equilibrium. At the same time, this has direct implications for Pakistan's perceived nuclear threshold as it does not officially subscribe to NFU policy. Given the asymmetric nature of nuclear deterrence and conventional imbalance, Pakistan may feel better-off to continue with ambiguous nuclear threshold.

Ambiguous nuclear threshold allows weaker military powers to compensate for conventional asymmetries and deter relatively stronger adversaries. In a strategic situation between adversaries with disproportionate conventional military capabilities, ambiguous nuclear threshold contributes to strategic stability. The conventional military superiority of one state can be as destabilizing as an ambiguous first-use policy. Pakistan's ambiguous nuclear threshold contributes to crisis stability because of nuclear weapons' inherent deterrent value that keeps the adversary guessing and thus prevents it from any potential aggression. Hence, ambiguity is a product of military asymmetries.

The calculated ambiguity is a rational policy choice to enhance deterrent value of weaker state's nuclear capability. Pakistan's ambiguous nuclear threshold constrains India's operational plans to pursue strategic supremacy. This approach does not bind Pakistan to selected or limited response options like massive retaliation and flexible or proportionate response strategies. Hence, it adds to deterrent value of Pakistan's nuclear capability and thus strengthens deterrence stability vis-à-vis India. Such environment also leads to lesser distinction between offensive and defensive capabilities. It encourages aggressive state to equip and strengthen border forces and defensive corps to conduct offensive operations or engage in limited skirmishes to achieve limited political objectives.

The growing ambiguity in India's doctrinal thinking and offensive nuclear signaling, accentuates Pakistan's doubts on New Delhi's NFU policy and Pakistan also remains cognizant of the threat posed in the domain of limited warfare.<sup>49</sup> Hence, it feels compelled to forcefully project its policy of 'Quid Pro Quo Plus' (QPQ-Plus) as a manifestation of its FSD to thwart potential aggression at all levels of conflict. The manifestation of this policy in the

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<sup>49</sup> Sufian Ullah, "Conceptual Assessment of NFU – Case Study of India," *JSSA* 6, No. 1 (2020): 2.

aftermath of February 2019 crisis showed Pakistan's strong resolve to shrug off surgical strikes as a new normal in the region.<sup>50</sup>

While the advantage of initiating a conflict remains with India, due to being a relatively stronger state with revisionist ambitions, it may not be allowed to dominate the escalation ladder with the belief that it could control to achieve desired objectives. The 'notion of victory' no more lies in decisive battles and rather focuses more in the domain of narratives. This situation has altered the character of warfare in South Asia by making Grey-Zone warfare more probable in the region. Given India's frustration to establish strategic supremacy over Pakistan solely through kinetic means, the former has resolved to employ hybrid tools to subdue Pakistan, hence opening new theatres of warfare in domains like cyber, information operations and so on.

## **Conclusion**

The adversarial relationship between Pakistan and India is based on historic animosity and mutual mistrust. In last one decade, this relationship has only worsened. The lingering unresolved political disputes, legacy of three all-out wars, and absence of any concrete mechanism to initiate result oriented comprehensive dialogue mar the prospect of durable peace and stability. The nuclear deterrence stability has somehow ensured a stable relationship between Pakistan and India by preventing the two states from engaging into an all-out war. The fear of MAD, owing to destructive consequence of nuclear weapons, as ensured by the credible nuclear deterrents of both states has encouraged them to observe restraint at least at the higher strategic level.

However, the deterrence stability has been confronted by multiple challenges and is constantly being tested by Indian actions based on hegemonic aspirations. This research work postulates that despite recognizing deterrence stability as a factor of overall stability in South Asia, why Pakistan and India continue to engage in military competition that consequently

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<sup>50</sup> Al-Saba and Fatima, "Doctrinal Shift in the Indian Army after 2018," 22.

leads to an instable deterrent relationship. The evolving nuclear doctrines and force postures are indicative of prevalent security dilemma and reliance on military means to pursue vested strategic interests are the principal factors that drive Indian aspirations to pursue escalation dominance strategy.

While Pakistan strives to retain strategic balance, India is determined to achieve regional hegemony, eventually leading to global ambitions of becoming a major power. In this pursuit, India has exhibited its frustration on multiple occasions whereby its inability to strategically dominate Pakistan compels it to explore new means of dominance. The two most glaring examples of this approach are India's CSD and the conducted surgical strikes as new normal. While there is a need to augment deterrence stability in South Asia by resorting to peaceful means of conflict resolution and arms control agreement, Indian dismissive attitude signifies lack of interest in peace with Pakistan. Any Indian attempt to strategically dominate Pakistan is logically expected to be met with remedial measures.

#### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.