

ANALYSING CONVENTIONAL DETERRENCE IN A NUCLEARISED SOUTH ASIA

Nasir Mehmood and Syeda Zainab Asif*

Abstract

This article advances the debate on the dynamics and effectiveness of conventional deterrence in a nuclearised South Asia. Conventional deterrence is primarily based on the precept of dissuasion, playing an integral part in states' defence policies. It leverages conventional military capabilities and the adept use of military strategy to dissuade opponents from initiating major campaigns and escalations into full-blown war. The study validates the role of conventional deterrence by carefully examining two India-Pakistan sub-cases: the 1999 Limited Kargil War and the 2019 Balakot Aerial Confrontation. Through these two sub-cases, the research elucidates the complex relationship between numerical strength and intelligent military planning in denying opponents their military objectives and preventing the employment of nuclear weapons.

Keywords: Conventional Deterrence, Nuclear Deterrence, Kargil War, Balakot Confrontation, India, Pakistan.

Introduction

The India-Pakistan relations are characterised by mistrust, animosity, and violence. The two opponents are locked in a hostile power-politics contestation. The territorial dispute over Jammu and Kashmir lies at the heart of their contestation. Overall, India seeks security relations on the asymmetry principle, whereas Pakistan pursues security relations on the symmetry principle. India promotes preponderance, while Pakistan views it as a negation of its sovereign existence.

Despite India's rapid economic progress and growing strategic partnerships with major powers, Stephen Cohen reminded that its comprehensive and debilitating rivalry with Pakistan remains a lingering issue, hindering its potential to become a major Asian Power.¹ For Ashley Tellis, the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir, an important facet of the rivalry, can potentially escalate into a full-fledged war.²

While examining the India-Pakistan relations primarily from a territorial dispute lens, it is essential to note that the conflict is ongoing. The two opponents have fought multiple wars, military crises, and countless skirmishes along the Line of Control (LOC). The Jammu and Kashmir region is the most militarised region of the world. Since 1949, the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP)

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has been observing the LOC. The lingering Jammu and Kashmir issue has inflicted high political, diplomatic, economic, and military costs on both contestants.

The nuclear optimists held the belief that nuclear weapons would stabilise and transform the India-Pakistan security relationship. However, to their disappointment, nuclear weapons did not keep the two opponents from engaging in armed conflicts. Despite the possession of nuclear weapons, Pakistan and India engaged in a limited Kargil War for weeks in 1999. Neither did the nuclear capability deter Pakistan from traversing the disputed border, nor did it hinder India from intimidating a horizontal escalation across the international border.³ The Kargil War highlighted the limitation of nuclear weapons in maintaining peace and stability at the lower conventional level. It underscored the risks of inadvertent and deliberate failure of nuclear deterrence amid conventional war escalation.

The environment in post-nuclearised South Asia can be considered comparable to the initial nuclear deadlock between the two superpowers during the Cold War. Both sides realised the dire consequences of a confrontation involving nuclear weapons, which is why they decided to invest heavily in their conventional forces. Starting from the early 1960s, the US started relying on its conventional capabilities to prevent hostilities with the USSR.⁴ In South Asia, after overt nuclearisation, the concept of 'negative peace' took root, preventing the prospects of an all-out war. At the same time, the two opponents began engaging in limited confrontations under the nuclear conditions.⁵ However, on balance, the stability-instability paradox remained under-controlled. As part of the explanation, this research examines the role of conventional deterrence in preventing and containing military escalations in South Asia.

Limited Operational Utility Surrounding Nuclear Weapons

From the initial years of the nuclear era, consideration was given to the possibility of a war between the superpowers. However, it would not involve the use of nuclear weapons.⁶ For Thomas Schelling, this significance is based on the belief that once nuclear weapons are employed, the consequences are irreversible. He believed that a "dividing line" persists between the nuclear and conventional domains, but once the threshold is crossed, the employment of nuclear forces would only escalate.⁷

In the 1960s, the stance upheld by the USSR suggested that a non-nuclear war was improbable to occur in Europe.⁸ However, substantiation exists, supporting that the Soviets were preparing for a confrontation involving non-nuclear capabilities since the 1970s.⁹ Despite the repudiations, the excessive Soviet spending on conventional capabilities, particularly on aircraft with the ability to drop conventional bombs, implied indirect approval for a non-nuclear war between the two powers. Hence, both states signalled an implicit recognition of a non-nuclear confrontation by enhancing the non-nuclear potential.¹⁰

Over time, conventional balance gained importance, and not surprisingly, in the early 2000s, nuclear weapons lost a degree of salience in the Western strategy.

Moreover, it was recognised that rationalising their utility was essentially challenging.¹¹ The reason surrounding the non-employment of nuclear weapons revolves around the concept of ‘escalation.’ How to exercise restraint and prevent a confrontation from escalating into mutual annihilation is uncertain. Therefore, with time, conventional forces are viewed as an apt and expedient tool for engaging in limited conflicts.¹² Furthermore, contexts involving the utilisation of states’ conventional or sub-conventional forces are marked as suitable instruments for sensible governments to contemplate the option of engaging in a conflict, as they expect either the outcome to be favourable or the costs to be tolerable.¹³

During Kennedy’s administration, an agenda against nuclear weapons as a first choice of weapon was seriously explored. The notion revolved around the realisation that nuclear capability would not be immediately considered if a war took place in Europe and, hence, recommended for conventional defences. In the early 1960s, Robert McNamara supported President Kennedy’s standpoint. He maintained a similar opinion that NATO should lessen its reliance on nuclear weapons for European defence by allocating and spending on advanced conventional force structures. Later, he maintained that nuclear weapons are not immediately “usable”, a notion considered by Eisenhower and Dulles.¹⁴

For Colin Gray, “Many leading academic arms controllers in the US today believe that strategic weapons have no useful diplomatic function, or that they are of the most marginal usefulness”.¹⁵ Hence, numerous critics of deterrence are convinced that nuclear war is “unthinkable” or “insane”.¹⁶ Even Brodie maintained that “the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars... now on its chief purpose must be to avert them”.¹⁷ With the threat of grave repercussions, the thought of using nuclear weapons for sensible governments has always been a sceptical notion. Therefore, deterrence using nuclear weapons is qualitatively contrasting to deterrence using conventional weapons.¹⁸

Conventional Deterrence

In the aftermath of developing nuclear capability, building a theory around the role of conventional deterrence in the presence of nuclear weapons proved to be an arduous endeavour. It was John Mearsheimer who made an assiduous attempt at articulating the notion. Conventional deterrence prevents a conventional attack from escalating into a full-blown war using the conventional military structure. In the case of states with nuclear prowess, the role of conventional deterrence is to prevent the use of nuclear weapons and offset the opponent’s war objectives using adequate conventional military means, encompassing a state’s numerical strength and a suitable military strategy.

Mearsheimer maintains that conventional deterrence is a “function” of the military capabilities of the concerned states.¹⁹ For states with nuclear capabilities, conventional deterrence acts as a crucial barrier throughout the conflict, making it

harder for them to cross the threshold and use the weapons. Conventional deterrence prevents a nuclear catastrophe by acting as a delineator between conventional and nuclear assets. Thomas Schelling presented the concept of “thresholds” as “finite” stages that alter the outcome of a confrontation and referred to the conventional forces as those dividing or stopping lines.²⁰

In his seminal work, Mearsheimer explains multiple theories around Conventional Deterrence. In one of the three theories, Mearsheimer elucidates the significance of symmetry between the conventional forces of the involved parties. In this theory, quantities of specific pointers, including tanks, aircraft, and soldiers, are evaluated, followed by analysts working on forming the “composite force ratios”. A comprehensive study would involve estimating and evaluating quality along with quantity. Quality is assessed by contrasting several values and evaluating variances within each type.²¹ The notion is that deterrence is anticipated to “fail” if one side is overwhelmingly superior in numbers.²²

In contrast, deterrence will likely succeed if a rough symmetry in the forces’ number is maintained. The Western viewpoint maintains that stability is a product of managing “essential” equality between the forces of the engaged parties.²³ Hence, the function of conventional deterrence can be understood by evaluating the numerical force structure of the participating states.

However, Mearsheimer underscores that deterrence is intricately linked to the strategy available to the potential aggressor. Policymakers are expected to encounter at least one of the three strategies: attrition, blitzkrieg, and limited aims strategies, each with its potential outcomes for deterrence. While focussing on achieving a decisive victory, the options available to the attacker are either attrition or the blitzkrieg. The attrition strategy is slow and costly, where the objective is to wear down the opponent by initiating set-piece battles until defiance is no longer feasible. Blitzkrieg utilises speed and surprise to defeat the opponent swiftly, and the attacker abstains from launching battles of annihilation. Based on achieving a quick victory, an attacker opting for the blitzkrieg might believe that prospects of winning decisively are apparent. Therefore, deterrence will likely fail since it guarantees a swift victory, not a prolonged war, at a relatively lower cost.²⁴ Mearsheimer maintains that deterrence succeeds when an aggressor acknowledges that a prolonged war is his only choice; “threat of a war of attrition is the bedrock of conventional deterrence”.²⁵ Conversely, in the context of limited goals, the attacker opts for the limited aims strategy.²⁶

An essential facet of the limited aims strategy is to seize a segment of the adversary’s domain while managing limited engagement with its forces. For success, it is crucial to strike when the opponent is unprepared while simultaneously attaining strategic surprise. The strategy’s rationale behind attaining surprise is linked to achieving a swift victory before the sides end up in a prolonged war of attrition. After accomplishing its goals, the attacker leaves it to the other side to decide whether to retaliate and prolong the war, and the general supposition revolves around the defender refraining from starting a war of attrition. However, if the attacking side fails to defeat

the other, conflict can advance into a protracted war. Therefore, states should opt for the strategy if the chances of achieving surprise are considerable and the forces on the other side lack readiness. A pertinent analysis of the function of strategy suggests that its efficacy in any conflict is optimal when there is symmetry in the overall force structures of the rival military organisations. In contrast, when a party is quantitatively superior, war objectives are attained through applying its advanced forces without relying on or employing strategy.²⁷

Symmetry or Superiority: The Dichotomy of Numbers

To strengthen deterrence, James Schlesinger, the Secretary of Defence, believed that the US should go for proportional retaliation in response to a limited offence by the USSR. The idea was that such a response would establish a perception of “equivalence.” He was amongst those who insisted that the US should strive for “essential equivalence” because, for him, equality was of significant importance for symbolic purposes,²⁸ and since “... lack of equality can become a source of serious ... military miscalculation...opponents may feel that they can exploit ... imbalance using political pressure”.²⁹ For Schlesinger, the US “...cannot exclude the possibility that future Soviet leaders might be misled into believing that ... asymmetries could...be exploited ... Pressure, confrontation, and crisis could easily follow from a miscalculation”.³⁰ As Patrick Morgan analyses using the case of the US and the USSR, having dominance obstructs states’ potential to make rational decisions while encouraging hostile conduct towards the weaker state.³¹

This implies that the dominant power may breed animosity towards the other side based on quantitative variables of parity and inferiority. Therefore, the effectiveness of deterrence is tied to quantity. The focus is on numbers whether a party has “more” or “less” rather than the weapons employed, or the devastation caused. Thus, deterrence hinges on the psychological effects of numerical equality or predominance, a concept that Patrick Morgan’s work on “unilateral” deterrence helps to illuminate.³²

Unilateral or one-way deterrence refers to a system where a lack of symmetry exists, as one of the two states possesses superior resources; having predominating resources would enable the possessor state to reinforce its deterrence and be aggressive, launching unilateral offensive operations if a need arises. In the specific context, a party without ample means for waging war would opt for options to change the relationship to one of parity. The options available to the inferior side include boosting relations with significant powers, attaining balancing forces, or lobbying against the dominant party.³³ The purpose of achieving parity is not solely linked to waging wars but also to impede the more substantial side from carrying out any irrational manoeuvre. Herman Kahn maintains that it is not just the sane leadership that is to be confronted; leaders can demonstrate irrational conduct, and he conveys that there are stages of insanity. For Kahn, the solution lies in acquiring adequate weapons to hinder those susceptible to making imprudent and incautious decisions.³⁴

Therefore, opposites such as dominance and subservience often lead policymakers to make nonsensical and imprudent conclusions. With the scale of devastation and the discourse around the functionality of nuclear weapons, the significance of numbers relatively decreases. Meanwhile, numerical parity is of substantial importance in conventional forces. As observed by Schlesinger, a numerically predominant state might consider itself allowable to strike an inferior opponent, leading to aggressiveness, while the weaker party may resort to agitation. Hence, it is parity that encourages tranquility.

The Limited War in Kargil

Following the overt nuclearisation in South Asia, the optimists expected more stability in the India-Pakistan security relationship. The notion was predicated on the assumption that the implications of a war involving nuclear weapons would considerably be disastrous, and therefore, no state would consider employing its nuclear forces.³⁵ Despite that, the Kargil War did take place in a nuclearised South Asia. Though the presence of nuclear weapons adds immediacy to limiting the confrontations, limiting is not equivalent to preventing the occurrence of conflicting events in their entirety, as underlined by many practitioners and scholars.

Before the Kargil War, General Musharraf expressed that “the acquisition of nuclear weapons had virtually eliminated the prospects of full-scale war between India and Pakistan; they had also increased the possibility of conventional conflicts.”³⁶ For George Fernandes, conventional wars are a reality despite the presence of nuclear weapons in South Asia. He stated: “Conventional war remained feasible, but with certain limitations if escalation across the nuclear threshold was to be avoided”.³⁷

For Wieninger, preserving peace should not depend on nuclear weapons in the aftermath of the Kargil war. He believed that the supporters' perspective of nuclear deterrence theory altered after seeing the 1999 event in South Asia.³⁸ Nevertheless, Naeem Salik emphasises that “Kargil happened too soon...the nuclear forces had not been operationalised on either side”.³⁹ The former President of Pakistan, General Musharraf, also lends credence to Salik's viewpoint that “a myth is that we came to the brink of nuclear war...I can also say with authority that in 1999, our nuclear capability was not yet operational...Any talk of preparing for nuclear strikes is preposterous”.⁴⁰ Moreover, it is worth recalling that the War did not aggravate to the extent where the employment of rudimentary nuclear capabilities would have become indispensable, given that the set parameters for their deployment were not infringed.

The Kargil War and Strategy

The Kargil confrontation was an important instance in nuclearised South Asia, which broadened the understanding of the varied theoretical dimensions of conventional deterrence within the context of limited military engagement. By applying the discussed theories of conventional deterrence, the War underlines the importance

of a sound military strategy, specifically through the adept application of the “limited aims strategy” and the imperative of surprise attack. Another facet of conventional deterrence in analysing the war revolves around the numerical force ratios, wherein the quantitative role of conventional deterrence is discussed for preventing and containing conflicts.

Pakistan’s military demonstrated commendable efficiency during the War, achieving its pre-established goals with defined parameters. On the other hand, India executed a military strategy to launch counteroffensives systematically. The practical application of military strategic principles in conventional defence aided in achieving the planned objectives. Despite India’s apparent numerical advantage, the war did not escalate to a broader scale, as it chose not to extend the conflict horizontally, which would have breached the thresholds.

The notion behind the War was to inflict a surprise attack, all while capturing the Kargil heights. For General Musharraf, the Kargil War was not a standalone occurrence but rather one ‘in a series of moves and countermoves’ between the two states at the tactical level along the Line of Control (LOC). Under Operation Meghdoot, India seized Siachen, taking advantage of a vulnerable zone where Pakistan’s presence was ‘non-existent under the Karachi Agreement 1949,’ in a series of tactical manoeuvres, Pakistan captured the Kargil Heights, where India’s presence was thin.⁴¹ The severe winters were the reason behind India’s thin Presence in the area presents Pakistan with an opportune time to execute the plan.

The goal was to take control of India’s essential communication pathway to the troops stationed at the Siachen glacier. The strategy was to be executed by disrupting the use of the two-lane national highway, NH 1A, now part of NH 1 and NH 44 in Ladakh, stretched from Srinagar and traversed Kargil to Leh. The movement across the LOC took place in several phases, spanning numerous sections. Due to the rugged and perilous terrain, the advancement was gradual and slow,⁴² resulting in an extensive period before the troops traversed the LOC.

The infiltration process is a precarious mission; however, the dangers were exacerbated during the Kargil War due to the harsh terrain and high altitude. Despite all these impediments, the paramilitary troops (of the Northern Light Infantry, NLI) navigated arduous ridgelines and risky peaks by dodging the attention of the Indian patrols. The soldiers efficiently moved arms and weaponry across the LOC. It was an outcome of such movements that an Indian helicopter and two ground attack aircraft were shot down using the Man-Portable Air Defence Systems (MANPADS) during the initial stages of the war. Despite the difficult circumstances and the severe conditions, NLI established control over 130 posts, setting up a front of around 150 km.⁴³

While Pakistan was carrying out a series of limited-range tactical manoeuvres, India came across as somewhat oblivious to its nuclear neighbour effectuating its strategised objectives. The Kargil War was an episode that focused on India’s intelligence agencies and their shortcomings during the war. Despite its military

dominance, the Kargil War was a major setback to India's understanding of its security network.⁴⁴ Prominent security experts, politicians, and military strategists voiced their concerns regarding Pakistan's attainment of a "strategic and tactical surprise" in carrying out the penetrations.⁴⁵

Immediately upon comprehending and perceiving the string of intense happenings along the LOC, India instantaneously counteracted by relocating five of its infantry divisions, five independent brigades, and 44 battalions to the Kargil sector. The entire relocation led to a massive military deployment, with around 200,000 Indian Troops getting relocated to the Kargil-Drass Sector.⁴⁶ As per the estimates, almost 30,000 Indian and 5,000 Pakistani soldiers were part of the direct combat in the regions of Kargil and Drass.⁴⁷ Around eight to ten Pakistani paramilitary soldiers were deployed at the outposts, and to disperse them, India conducted brigade-size attacks.⁴⁸

Pakistan held the heights during the early stage of the war. However, later, they were forced to leave the heights due to a coordinated counter-offensive launched by the Indian Army with assistance from the Indian Air Force. India's synergised employment of its forces and weapons was a key factor behind its success. Moreover, because of nearly non-existent logistics, Pakistani soldiers could not reinforce defences against the advancing Indian soldiers. Even in the air domain, India enjoyed a significant numerical dominance during the conflict.⁴⁹

The Kargil War and Quantitative Dimension

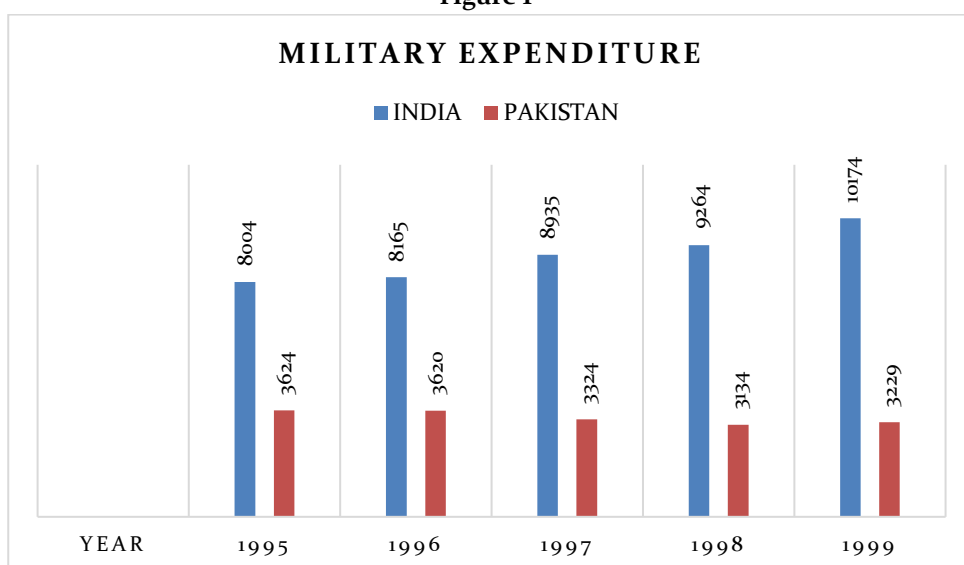
Kargil was a limited war with limited military goals; hence, the role of the limited aims military strategy was crucial. However, studying the war beyond the already applied theoretical framework is pivotal for a comprehensive analysis considering India's conventional force upgrade initiatives. One perspective suggests that the Kargil War was somewhat associated with Pakistan's increasing apprehension about India being "on the verge" of attaining regional dominance. Cohen's analysis can elucidate this perspective. He proposes five strategies for handling the conditions of entities identifying themselves as "threatened minorities". One strategy focuses on "changing the balance of power by war or other means".⁵⁰

India has sought to procure advanced weaponry since partition to modernise its conventional force structure. Based on SIPRI's data, a few states contribute substantially to international military expenditure, and in 1999, India was within that group, encompassing two-thirds of South Asia's military spending.⁵¹ India's expenditure on its armed forces has increased since the 1990s, but the progression has been expedited after gaining nuclear potential. The numerals in the table are in US\$m, at constant 1995 prices and exchange rates. The graph in Figure 1 represents the substantial differences in total military spending between both sides from 1995 to 1999. Following 1996, Pakistan's military expenditure consistently decreased, whereas India's spending steadily increased.⁵²

Military Expenditure: India and Pakistan

Year	India	Pakistan
US\$m (1995 Prices/Exchange Rates)		
1995	8004	3624
1996	8165	3620
1997	8935	3324
1998	9264	3134
1999	10174	3229

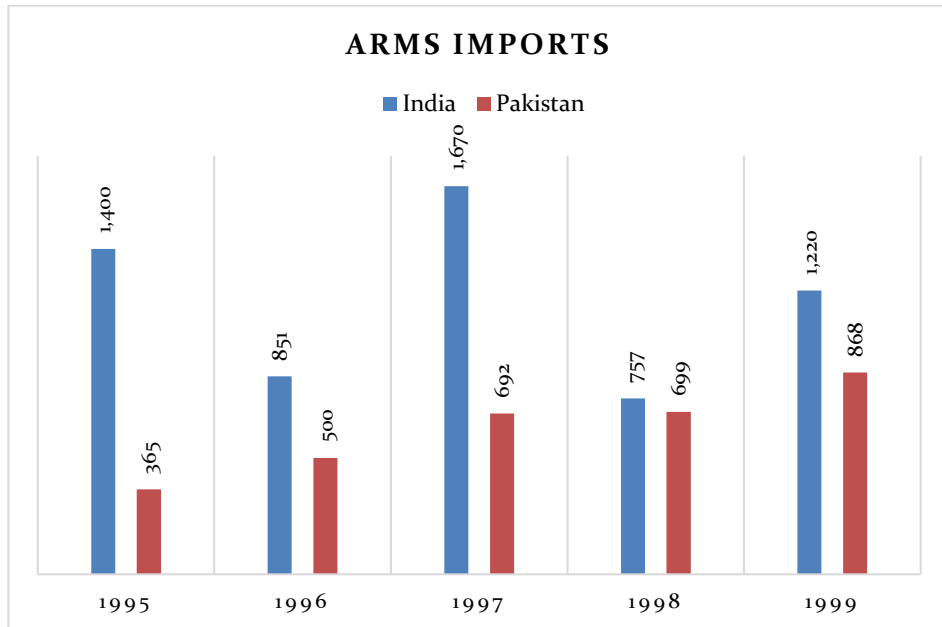
Figure 1



Arms Imports: India and Pakistan

Year	India	Pakistan
US\$m		
1995	1,400	365
1996	851	500
1997	1,670	692
1998	757	699
1999	1,220	868

Figure 2



The values for Figure 2 are from the World Bank data,⁵³ suggesting a difference between the sum spent on importing major arms by the two states. To an extent, India's stronghold in the region is attributed to its excessive spending on modernising its armed forces. As per SIPRI estimates, India's imports of conventional arms reached US\$4.637 billion from 1995 to 1999, with Russia being its crucial exporter. Meanwhile, Pakistan imported conventional weaponry worth US\$2.873 billion during the corresponding timeframe.⁵⁴ Drawing on statistics from the 1990s up to the time of the Kargil War, it appears that the confrontation might have resulted from India's growing dominance, coupled with its increasing pace towards modernising the force structure. Pakistan, on the other hand, did not wield an equal level of influence and ascendancy as India, a position India has persisted in managing.

Conventional Deterrence and Balakot Aerial Confrontation

Following the operationalisation of nuclear deterrence, the strategic landscape of South Asia significantly transformed, as the concept of "negative peace" was introduced in the region. This concept deterred the likelihood of a nuclear war while potentially allowing prospects for limited confrontations under the nuclear shadow.⁵⁵ India emphasises Kargil as a reference point for constrained military engagements in the region.

Like the Kargil War, the Balakot skirmish demonstrates a conventional military confrontation centred around implementing a military strategy to achieve limited goals by employing a state's air power. Understanding the aerial confrontation through the

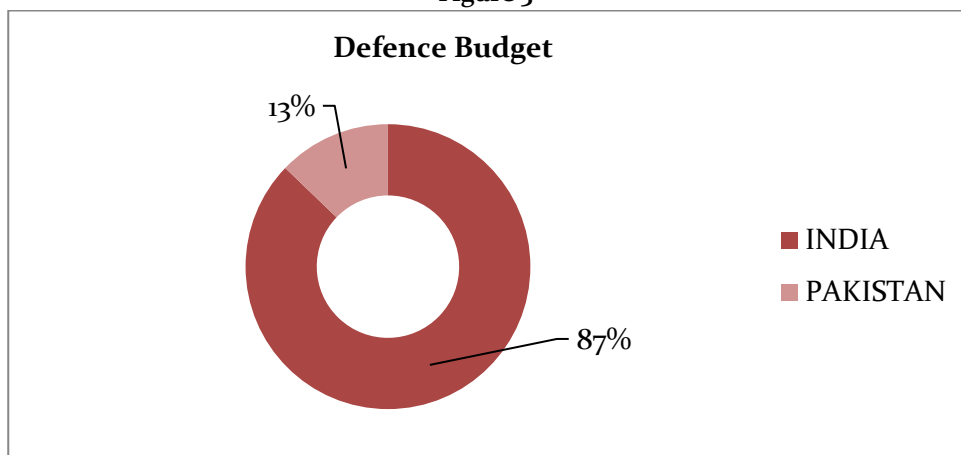
theoretical lenses of conventional deterrence underscores the significance of strategy - apparent in India's aerial tactical offence and Pakistan's tactically sound counteroffensive, but also the imperative part of conventional ascendancy. Therefore, the execution of aerial strikes can be attributed to India's conventional dominance, as elucidated by Patrick Morgan in the concept of one-way deterrence. This theoretical construct refers to a scenario lacking parity between the two states, with one possessing enough capabilities to cause "serious harm".⁵⁶

For India, limited war presents it with an array of four alternatives. The first option involves attacking across the international boundary or LOC while limiting military objectives. The second choice is to target predetermined locations alongside the LOC. The third option focuses on capturing and retaining a strategic area across the LOC. The fourth choice consists of carrying out surgical strikes across the border and then withdrawing.⁵⁷ For the last two decades, India has shown a greater inclination toward the first, second, and fourth choices. During the 2019 aerial confrontation, India conducted the surgical strikes as delineated in the last point, wherein it crossed the border, carried out the strikes, which failed, and, in haste, left Pakistan's air space.

After the military standoff codenamed Operation Parakram in 2001-2002, India initiated work on a limited offensive war doctrine. Consequently, in 2004, the Indian army introduced the Cold Start posture to address the limitations of its previous "conventional war-fighting doctrine".⁵⁸ The doctrine held that Pakistan was to be confronted through limited conventional confrontations, consequently avoiding escalation to nuclear war. India is swiftly enhancing its conventional military structure to attain the desired status and achieve its hegemonic ambitions. The significance of the context under discussion can be discerned by understanding and evaluating the forces, particularly quantitatively.

Defence Budgets⁵⁹: India and Pakistan

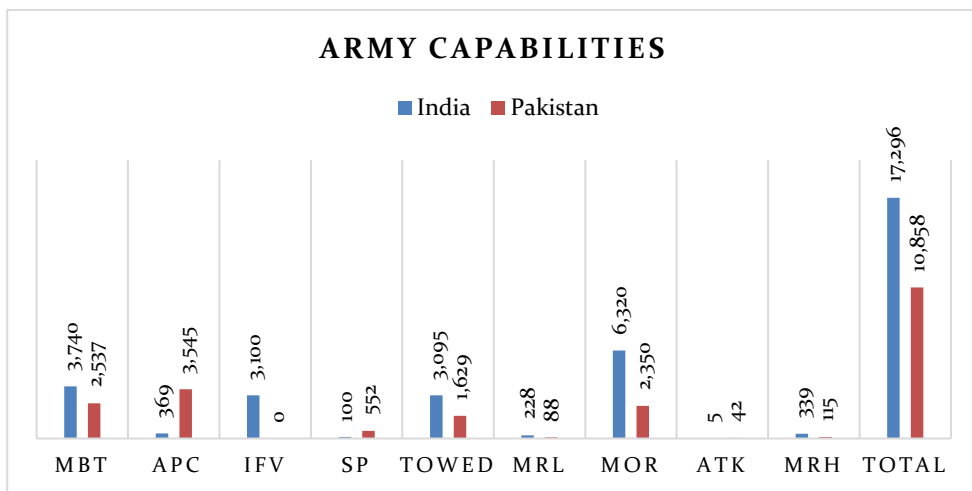
Figure 3



As a regionally dominating power, India perpetually advances its conventional military strength while coordinating its strategic pursuits amidst the shifting geopolitical environment in South Asia. Hence, it devotes considerable resources, especially to acquiring advanced conventional weapon systems.⁶⁰ Based on statistics, India’s military is ranked among the top four globally,⁶¹ and figures from SIPRI suggest that from 2013–17, India was the world’s leading importer of sophisticated weaponry.⁶² Additionally, it has spent billions of dollars on multiple endeavours for its conventional defence forces.

Army Capabilities: India⁶³ and Pakistan⁶⁴

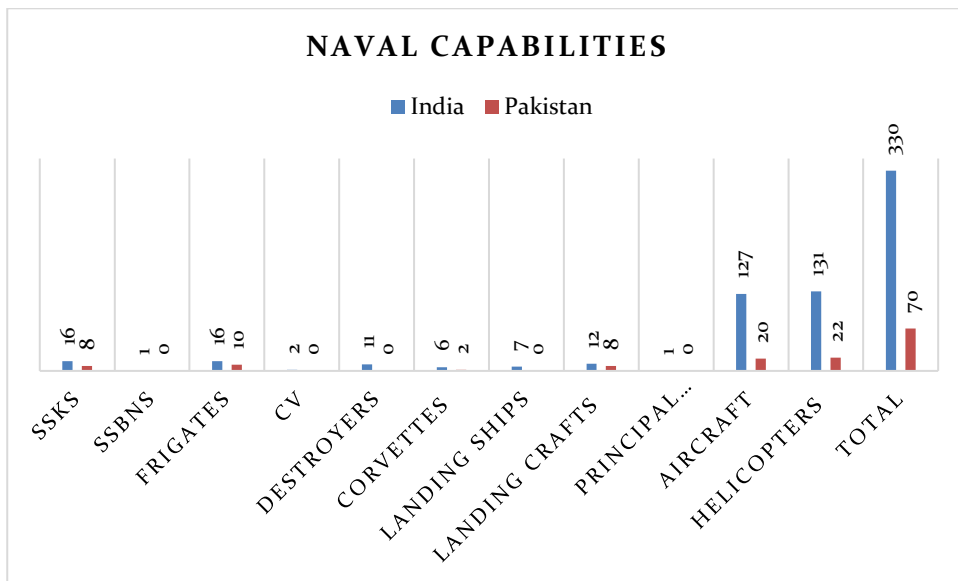
Figure 4



Capability	India	Pakistan
Main Battle Tank	3,740	2,537
Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC)	369	3,545
Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV)	3,100	0
Self-Propelled Guns	100	552
Towed Artillery Guns	3,095	1,629
Multiple Rocket Launcher	228	88
Mortars	6,320	2,350
Attack Helicopters	5	42
Multi-Role Helicopters	339	115
Total	17,296	10,858

Naval Capabilities: India⁶⁵ and Pakistan⁶⁶

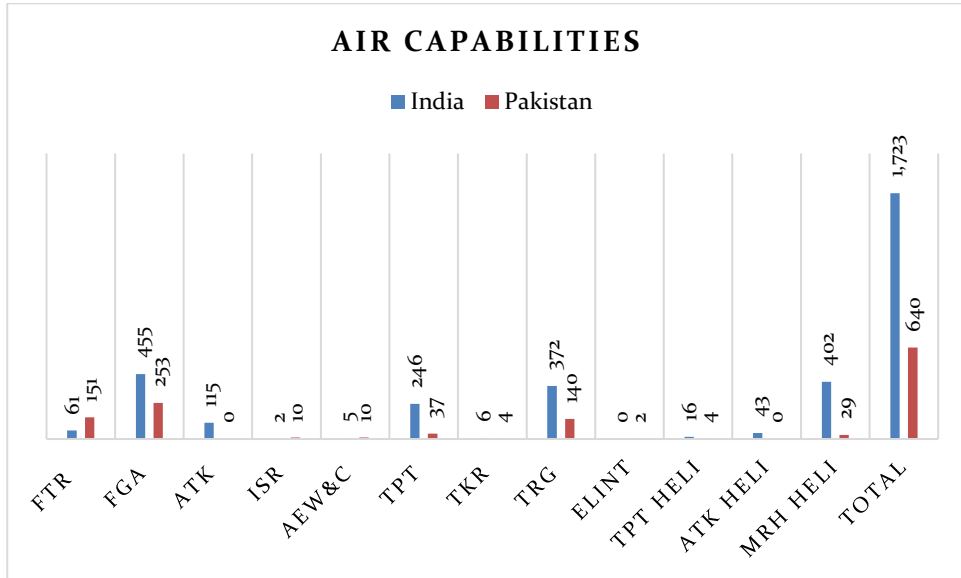
Figure 5



Capability	India	Pakistan
Conventional Attack Submarines (SSKs)	16	8
Ballistic Missile Nuclear Submarines (SSBNs)	01	0
Frigates	16	10
Aircraft carriers (CV)	2	0
Destroyers	11	0
Corvettes	06	02
Landing ships	7	0
Landing crafts	12	8
Principal Amphibious Vessels	1	0
Aircraft	127	20
Helicopters	131	22
Total	330	70

Air Capabilities: Pakistan⁶⁷ and India⁶⁸

Figure 6



Capability	India	Pakistan
FTR	61	151
FGA	455	253
ATK	115	0
ISR	02	10
AEW&C	05	10
TPT	246	37
TKR	06	4
TRG	372	140
ELINT	0	2
TPT Heli	16	4
ATK Heli	43	0
MRH Heli	402	29
TOTAL	1,723	640

The graphs presented above are indicators of India’s conventional superiority vis-à-vis its neighbouring Pakistan. The possession of advanced main battle tanks,

Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFVs), submarines armed with long-range land attack missiles, and advanced combat aircraft by India implies its swift measures to gain conventional ascendancy, consequently posing an imminent danger for Pakistan, which cannot vie and compete in an arms race with India. The aerial confrontation of 2019 is an example of India's increasing attention towards bolstering its aerial warfighting capabilities.

Air power was a significant component of nuclear deterrence throughout the Cold War, potentially averting conflict situations. As its relevance persists, air power is poised to perform a crucial function in conventional deterrence, specifically amid constrained conventional confrontations. Accordingly, states, including India, are bolstering air capabilities.⁶⁹

Encounter of Air Strikes

As asserted by Robert Jervis, “both overestimates and underestimates of hostility have led to war in the past...(even today), but perceptual dynamics could cause statesmen to see policies as safe when they actually were very dangerous or, in the final stages of deep conflict, to see war as inevitable and therefore to see striking first as the only way to limit destruction”.⁷⁰ Jervis' proposition is pertinent to the South Asian context, where India might overrate its potential as a predominant entity equipped with advanced weapons systems and considerable conventional weaponry. It may attempt to coerce Pakistan into submission without requiring it to traverse its threshold.

After the Kargil limited confrontation, India has incessantly taken on a confronting demeanour toward Pakistan, with friction heightening in the post-nuclear era. After Kargil “and the 2001/2002 military standoff,” the Balakot aerial aggression in 2019 indicated India's confidence stemming from its conventional dominance. The contrasting quantitative figures reflect India's advantageous position. For Feroz Khan, the “transfer of conventional military technology to India has bolstered Indian conventional strike capabilities and could embolden India to undertake a conventional strike primarily using air power... (and) when compared to less developed Pakistani capabilities; the imbalance creates a temptation to strike vulnerable targets...”.⁷¹

A policy paper on 2019's confrontation effectively contends that possessing advanced capabilities may foster a misleading notion of “optimism”. In contrast, a conflict would be sensed as manageable via “escalation controllability”, directing the leaders to opt for precarious choices. India's persistent upgradation endeavours and a conventional ascendancy regarding Pakistan might result in “overconfidence in escalation controllability in the event of a crisis”.⁷² The paper scrutinises the view based on “cumulative emboldenment”. Over the years, India's response spectrum has grown substantially assertive, from the reported alleged strikes conducted in 2016 to those executed in 2019.

The possible explanation leads to the concept of cumulative emboldenment: the perspective that India would not have to confront any consequences for trespassing

Pakistan's boundaries. The conviction stems from constraints in a forceful reply by the international community. Even after India transgressed the delineated sovereign boundaries, the international responses varied "from neutral to congratulatory".⁷³ The notion implies that a synthesis of cumulative emboldenment and force enhancement has imbued the Indian leadership with certainty, encouraging them to adopt offensive strategies. This entails initiatives that signify India's proclivity towards undertaking assertive measures regarding Pakistan.

The critical insight India gleaned from the episode is that the likelihood of inadvertent intensification during constrained engagements is marginal due to a strategic gap.⁷⁴ India also presumed that employing air capabilities does not inherently lead to an aggravation of tensions. In 2020, following the Balakot episode, Indian Air Chief RKS Bhaduria upheld that it "was a clear demonstration that there exists a space within the sub-conventional conflict boundary wherein the Air Force can be used for targeting and yet have escalation control".⁷⁵ Since 1971, Balakot was the first occurrence when India transgressed into Pakistan's international boundary without constricting the strikes to the Azad Kashmir.⁷⁶ Trespassing and the "lack of US involvement" aggravated the crisis's intricacy. However, a meticulous assessment of the environment led to de-escalation.⁷⁷ Governments on either side exhibited rational decision-making skills and practised self-restraint.

The absence of self-restraint could make any future conflict more complicated. As India continues to upgrade its existing force structure, situations could evolve where, compelled by its understanding of "escalation dominance", India might consider itself obligated to inflict considerable costs on Pakistan. Conversely, Pakistan, because of its conventionally weaker standing, would strive to bring the crisis to a halt before it dangerously intensifies.⁷⁸

Hence, in the case of two states possessing nuclear capabilities, relying entirely on their leadership to exercise self-restraint and prevent the conflict from spiralling into an all-out war proves to be an arduous challenge. This is particularly apparent in the post-1999 period, as it is noticed that "Indian leaders of the first nuclear decade prized a more restrained approach...the new era has seen a stronger focus on retaliation and score-settling".⁷⁹

Conclusion

After examining the mentioned sub-case studies, the theoretical facets of conventional deterrence, the role of "military strategy" and "numerical force ratios," remained crucial during the India-Pakistan case.

During the Kargil War, Pakistan's military exhibited commendable proficiency in catching India unprepared and achieving its limited predetermined aims—capturing the strategic heights within defined parameters. As a result, India effectively implemented a military strategy to launch counteroffensives systematically. However, despite India's apparent numerical advantage, the war did not escalate to a broader

scale, as it chose not to extend the conflict horizontally, which would have led to breaching the thresholds.

Like the Kargil War, conventional military goals during the Balakot confrontation were also limited in scope. For India, the focus was primarily on aerial tactical manoeuvres, while Pakistan soundly deployed its military resources and carried out a tactically effective counteroffensive. In this context, Pakistan was able to exacerbate the confrontation. However, it intentionally refrained from doing so in a way that could have led to a horizontal escalation of the skirmish, eventually involving the nuclear capabilities of either side.

The crises mentioned indicate that conventional deterrence was ineffective in preventing them. However, the interplay between conventional capabilities and soundly executed limited military strategies was critical in containing these engagements. Despite the potential for India in 1999 and Pakistan in 2019 to escalate conflicts into full-blown wars through their nuclear potential, conventional deterrence helped prevent such escalation.

Other than preventing the introduction of nuclear weapons, the role of conventional deterrence is also to deny the opponent's battlefield objectives. During the Kargil War, Pakistan's military goal was to bring the Kashmir dispute to the forefront by capturing a part of the disputed territory, expecting a non-aggressive response from India and swift action by the international community. Similarly, in 2019, India's military aimed to establish air dominance and exert regional hegemony, anticipating that Pakistan would not respond to the aerial offensives. However, the practical application of military strategic principles in conventional defence contributed to the success of conventional deterrence.

In continuation, General Musharraf offered his insight into the efficacy of conventional deterrence following the 2001/2002 military standoff between India and Pakistan: "It was the conventional deterrence of Islamabad that averted a war between the two countries... because our conventional deterrence is very much in place. That has prevented the war... I do not want to even talk about nuclear (war) because it is too serious a matter to be sitting and discussing".⁸⁰

These carefully handled crises signalled the value of sustaining extensive, conventional force structures and the imperative of integrating impactful conventional deterrence strategies to contain and prevent military attacks.

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