

## INDIAN MILITARY DOCTRINE AND ITS IMPACT ON SOUTH ASIA'S STRATEGIC STABILITY

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### **Abstract**

*India's aggressive military doctrine exploits the questionable space for a limited war under a nuclear overhang. This doctrine is designed to dilute, if not fully compromise, the notion of nuclear deterrence. Indian military high command has often boasted about waging a conventional war against Pakistan. India's unilateral decision to repeal Kashmir's special constitutional status has further exacerbated the volatility of the hitherto conflict-prone environment in South Asia. India's doctrine manifests in the offensive deployment of S-400 missile systems along Pakistan's border, further supplemented by the positioning of Dassault Rafale fighter jets. While it might temporarily alter the region's strategic stability equation, Pakistan must rebalance this shift in its strategic stability. There is a need to review the notion of strategic stability as it applies to the region's nuclear balance of power. This paper analyses India's aggressive military doctrine fuelling its desire to wage a limited conventional war against Pakistan, examines the effects of growing military asymmetry, evaluates the impact of the short but swift military action in February 2019, and finally endeavours to determine the stabilizing impact of the nuclear deterrent on South Asia's strategic stability.*

**Keywords:** Strategic Stability, Nuclear Deterrence, Conventional Asymmetry, Escalation Control.

**S**ince 1947, Pakistan's progress and development have remained hostage to an unpredictable security situation which resulted in three conventional wars with India in 1948, 1965, and 1971; and military standoffs on several other occasions.<sup>1</sup> Even the remaining times were full of conflicts, thus forcing Pakistan to maintain vigilance all along its borders. It resulted in the need to maintain professional armed forces, which were required to be equipped and trained accordingly. Other elements of national power were also geared towards a cohesive national defence against an adversary that had grown up to become six times bigger than Pakistan.

In May 1998, India conducted its nuclear tests again (previously in 1974), which posed a severe threat to the sovereignty of regional states, especially Pakistan. Resultantly, Pakistan had to follow suit by conducting its nuclear tests for the first time, thus declaring a nuclear state. These developments alarmed the global community

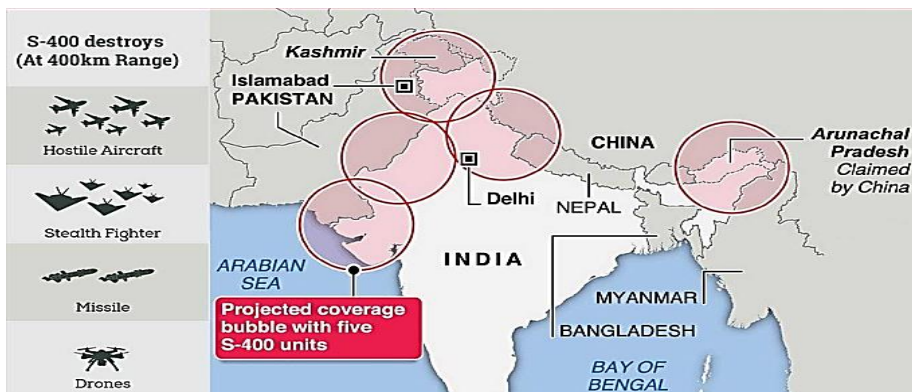
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because “any conflict between the two having a nuclear angle would have global ramifications.”<sup>2</sup> Immediately after going nuclear, Pakistan decided to base its nuclear strategy on the right to exercise the use of its nuclear weapons due to unconventional asymmetry in the region and therefore aimed at establishing a regional balance.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, according to Gurmeet Kanwal, India's No-First-Use (NFU) doctrine rests on deterrence by denial rather than punishment. Since any nuclear doctrine can only be tested in actual operations, India's first use of nuclear weapons does not make sense across the complete spectrum of conventional conflicts.<sup>4</sup> As the Indian nuclear doctrine threatened Pakistan's security in the strategic domain, Pakistan had to develop a robust nuclear deterrent system without competing in the regional arms race. In subsequent years, Pakistan upgraded its strategic capabilities decisively, whose safety and security standards were recognised by the international community.<sup>5</sup>

Lately, India started signalling the reversal of its NFU policy. In August 2019, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh stated, “Till today, our nuclear policy is NFU. What happens in the future depends on the circumstances.” This statement, followed by similar remarks by other policymakers, has profound security implications for regional security.<sup>6</sup> Vipin Narang has opined that India is drifting towards an ambiguous nuclear policy that could result in the NFU concept becoming obsolete without having to change it officially. India's offensive orientation is validated by deploying S-400 missile systems along Pakistan's border in January 2022, further supplemented by the positioning of 36 Dassault Rafale fighter jets (delivery completed in February 2022). While it might temporarily alter the region's strategic stability equation, Pakistan has to “counter this perceived advantage and rebalance the shift in strategic stability.”<sup>7</sup> The induction of the S-400 defence system and its offensive deployment has perched India at a dominant position concerning Pakistan as it is capable of shooting down aircraft and missiles inside Pakistan; Figure 1 shows the coverage area of S-400 protruding inside the territory of Pakistan (and China).<sup>8</sup> The S-400 system has now assumed a central position in India's Cold Start doctrine envisaged against Pakistan.

Figure 1: S-400 Defence Range



(Source: <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/indo-russia-s-400-deal-implications-for-pakistan/>)

The significance of nuclear weapons remains linked to their perceived political value. “Nuclear weapons are not instruments for fighting wars, and their military value actually derives from the political effects of the existence of nuclear arsenals, including their ability to define and shape political stability between rival nations and blocs and signify power in relations between states.”<sup>9</sup> John J. Mearsheimer defined the concept of conventional deterrence as “denying the adversary battlefield objectives through conventional forces.”<sup>10</sup> Another’s particular aspect is that “conventional deterrence is not only about offensive or defensive weapons but also depends upon political considerations and military strategy.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, deterrence is likely to hold when a potential aggressor believes a victory cannot be achieved easily or quickly.

## Theoretical Construct

Under the realism theory and as prescribed by Thomas Hobbes in his magnum opus, *Leviathan*, “one of the earliest human instincts is to preserve peace by enhancing security.”<sup>12</sup> States pursue their defence needs by maintaining the balance of power in their favour. Therefore, the instinctive desire to equip security forces with state-of-the-art weapons becomes a primary function among states competing for dominance (offensive realism<sup>13</sup>) or self-preservation (defensive realism<sup>14</sup>). The security competition between Pakistan and India can be described as a typical action-reaction spiral, which is the actual description of a security dilemma, wherein a state’s actions cause insecurity for the other state, and the consequent reaction aimed at augmenting its security tends to make the first one more insecure.<sup>15</sup>

Although British historian Herbert Butterfield was the first to describe the term ‘security dilemma,’<sup>16</sup> John H. Herz originally coined it.<sup>17</sup> The concept equally fits well in the US-USSR competition during the Cold War and the Pakistan-India scenario. It mirrors the volatile nature of international security, i.e., states striving for peace but ending up in military conflicts by disturbing the regional or global balance of power. In short, it is evident that when India chose to go nuclear, Pakistan followed suit; when India developed advanced ballistic and cruise missiles, Pakistan also acquired the same technology; and when India resorted to the Cold Start doctrine, Pakistan responded with innovative tactical nuclear weapons. Currently, India is working on ballistic missile defence, and Pakistan is likely to alter its nuclear posture. It is, therefore, not a matter of a single weapons system but the overall security matrix that causes strategic instability in the highly volatile South Asian region.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, this paper determines how the nuclear deterrent has impacted South Asia’s strategic stability, especially considering rising conventional asymmetry.

## Strategic Stability

Strategic stability<sup>19</sup> signifies a state’s absence or lack of incentives for initiating the nuclear first strike.<sup>20</sup> It aims to avoid the initiation of (nuclear) war and encourages the shaping of such an international environment to maintain peace.<sup>21</sup> In the broader context of the South Asian region, the strategic environment is determined by mutual

relations between nuclear-armed neighbours – Pakistan and India. Therefore, South Asia's regional strategic stability rests on the extent of deterrence, which depends on the survivability of strategic forces after the initiator's first strike. It is further augmented by the wherewithal of their conventional forces, which have assumed greater importance due to their geographical proximity, in contrast with other nuclear rivals worldwide.

## **Regional Security Environment**

Strategic stability in South Asia is facing tremendous challenges. The regional security environment, however, is determined mainly by Indian hegemonic design and military spending. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), India has gradually increased its defence spending to \$ 76.6 billion, becoming the world's 3rd-highest defence spender, overtaking the UK and Russia, thus signalling a critical shift in the military balance. India has decided to raise its defence budget due to growing tensions with China and Pakistan, especially over the last few years.<sup>22</sup> With every passing year, India's military advantage is increasing exponentially. Pakistan has not been able to match India's enormous military aspirations, primarily because of limited economic leverage. In the meantime, India is already contracting effective weapons deals with the US, Russia and Israel while increasing its indigenous wherewithal in arms production.<sup>23</sup> India has based its military build-up on projecting a military threat from China but has directed the energy and focus of its armed forces towards Pakistan. How India will employ its military potential remains yet to be answered, but it has undoubtedly posed numerous politico-military challenges through articulating its coercive instruments.

Had India not conducted nuclear tests in May 1998, Pakistan would not have followed it, thus maintaining its policy of nuclear ambiguity (possessing the weapons capability but not operationalising it). Therefore, Pakistan has followed only a security-driven nuclear programme designed to protect its national security and interests in the face of India's hegemonic plans. Pakistan has adopted a flexible approach of credible minimum deterrence, which could not be expressed in pure quantification.<sup>24</sup> As a result of the unending animosity between India and Pakistan, South Asia has been pushed into a perpetual arms race and conventional arms build-up, leading to the overt nuclearization of both countries. Although India and Pakistan did pledge some meaningful peace initiatives resulting in reasonable crisis stability, these measures did not endure for long.<sup>25</sup> If India resorts to applying the military instrument, the nuclear dynamics will significantly restrain the political and military leaders. India has pronounced NFU policy in the strategic domain; however, Pakistan retains the first strike option through an ambiguous nuclear threshold policy seeking strategic parity. Whereas India has been trying to capitalise on its economic clout, advanced media outreach and diplomatic superiority to build up an international concern about the safety of Pakistan's nuclear armament, thus spreading hypothetical fear about the presumable proliferation of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal to non-state actors. Similarly,

India's acquisition of a Ballistic Missile Defence System is likely to affect South Asia's nuclear stability.

During the last decade, South Asia has witnessed progress in various nuclear technologies, including developing tactical nuclear weapons and Ballistic Missile Defence Systems. These advanced technologies will likely influence the possibility of using nuclear weapons and the degree of resolve in a conflict. Therefore, such developments are bound to have broader implications for the region's strategic stability.<sup>26</sup>

## **Indian Military Doctrine**

India has been pursuing coercive measures for a long by trying to create the space for conducting a limited conventional war while remaining below the envisaged nuclear threshold. Moreover, India has tried to capitalize on its growing diplomatic outreach, economic weight and, more importantly, an ability to shape the international opinion against Pakistan, in addition to sustained build-up and modernization of its armed forces. Indian policymakers, however, do not want to cross the nuclear threshold of Pakistan, at least in the perception domain. In the words of Walter Ladwig of King's College London: "The goal of [India's] limited war doctrine is to establish the capacity to launch a retaliatory conventional strike against Pakistan that would inflict significant harm on the Pakistan Army before the international community could intercede and, at the same time, pursue narrow enough aims to deny Islamabad a justification to escalate the clash to the nuclear level."<sup>27</sup>

On the conventional plane, India's military doctrine envisaged "reorganizing strike corps into at least eight smaller division-sized Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) that combine armour, mechanized infantry and artillery."<sup>28</sup> These IBGs will be able to mobilize swiftly to make shallow manoeuvres inside Pakistan's territory within a compressed time frame of 72-96 hours. Pakistan has long felt the need to dominate the escalation ladder by staying at least one step ahead in the action-reaction spiral. Therefore, Pakistan tested its new short-range missile system, Nasr, in April 2011, to restore deterrence against the developing Indian threat at various levels of the threat spectrum. This evolving nuclear strategy should be interpreted as a proportionate response aimed at re-establishing deterrence instead of the notion of massive retaliation against India.<sup>29</sup>

The Nasr missile system appears to have consolidated Pakistan's strategic deterrence capability through the entire spectrum of the conflict, which can deter at tactical, operational and strategic levels. Pakistan is evolving its nuclear capabilities to ensure the viability of its nuclear doctrine of credible minimum deterrence. With India's growing capabilities and developing strategies, it became imperative for Pakistan to maintain deterrence through dynamic means.<sup>30</sup> India's aggressive military doctrine fuelling its desire to wage a limited conventional war has compelled Pakistan to take minimum necessary defensive measures. On the other hand, since the commencement

of its nuclear programme, Pakistan has retained the option to use nuclear weapons at the time of its choosing during the war. Pakistan also tested a submarine-launched cruise missile, Babur 3, in January 2017. Immediately after the test, Pakistan announced the fulfilment of its objectives and disclosed its desire to attain a second-strike capability.<sup>31</sup>

“India’s growing conventional military doctrine and capabilities are seen as serious threats to deterrence stability in South Asia and even to Pakistan’s nuclear deterrent.”<sup>32</sup> Over the last decade, India’s arms import increased manifold. According to SIPRI, “India’s tensions with Pakistan and China are fuelling India’s growing demand for major weapons, which it remains unable to produce itself.”<sup>33</sup> That is why the question of how India may exploit its growing capabilities keeps Pakistan’s security wizards deeply concerned.<sup>34</sup>

While India and Pakistan deal with each other with a fair degree of restraint, the recent rise in India’s diplomatic prowess and economic clout has emboldened it to intimidate Pakistan. Consequently, Indian political and military leadership has made consistent efforts to explore space for a limited war against Pakistan while remaining under the nuclear umbrella. The misadventure of the Indian Air Force’s fighter aircraft to bomb imaginary targets at Balakot constituted India’s endeavour to engage Pakistan in a limited conventional war.<sup>35</sup> In Armed Forces Joint Doctrine (2017), India adopted the strategy of waging a limited war through surgical strikes under the full-spectrum response option, stating: “India has moved to a pro-active and practical philosophy to counter conflict situations. The response to terror provocations could be in the form of surgical strikes, and these would be subsumed in the sub-conventional portion of the spectrum of armed conflict.”<sup>36</sup> This incident thus “added one more item to the *carte du jour* of non-nuclear options available to India, thus expanding the variety of forms of aggression short of major conventional war.”<sup>37</sup> At the strategic level, this effort was also aimed at raising Pakistan’s nuclear threshold while expanding the possibility and extent of punitive action.<sup>38</sup> It brought South Asia to the verge of a potentially devastating armed conflict. However, things started to calm down instantly after Pakistan’s measured and calculated response.

### **Conventional and Sub-conventional Threats under Nuclear Overhang**

A limited war, if waged by India, could transform quickly into a full-fledged war, leading to unimaginable consequences. Unfortunately, India’s blatant arrogance is built around the idea that being a regional power, it must opt for surgical strikes against its neighbouring states to establish its assertiveness. This thinking led to the Balakot crisis and ended only after the downing of two Indian jets along with the capture of pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan.

The notion of strategic deterrence does not fail altogether or suddenly. There may be an occasion when deterrence is diluted, e.g., during the Balakot crisis, especially after Pakistan Air Force’s retaliatory missions against Indian Army installations and engagement of Indian Air Force assets. It was the most sensitive occasion between the

nuclear-armed neighbours when the re-establishment of nuclear deterrence successfully thwarted further military escalation. Security experts Feroz Hasan Khan and Ryan Jacobs state that “during a war, nuclear deployment would become a necessity to re-establish deterrence.”<sup>39</sup>

Historically, India and Pakistan have shown restraint during the wars of 1965 and 1971 in not targeting each other’s industrial complexes, sensitive installations, powerhouses, and irrigation dams; however, this may change in any future conflict.<sup>40</sup> Notwithstanding the details of India’s operational plans and rendition on the ground, Pakistan would like to use these weapons under the axiom of Michael Quinlan, defining NATO’s concept that “Nuclear weapons would be used as late as possible; and as early as necessary.”<sup>41</sup> Pakistan may consider using nuclear weapons based on certain battlefield contingencies; for example, in the worst-case scenario, India’s expanding military capabilities may fail Pakistan’s conventional deterrence, and the outcome could result in an inadvertent or compulsive nuclear conflagration and an eventual disaster.

India’s existing nuclear doctrine is based on three key elements: “deterrence, reassurance and non-proliferation, a combination designed to discourage adversaries.”<sup>42</sup> At the same time, this doctrine endeavours to calm down concerns of the international community about the size of India’s nuclear armoury. To this end, “successive Indian governments have committed themselves to build and maintaining a credible minimum deterrent and have promised massive retaliation in the event of a nuclear attack.”<sup>43</sup> Conversely, Pakistan’s nuclear posture is based on credible minimum deterrence, operationalized by adding nuclear weapons having shorter ranges to establish strong deterrence against Indian military threats. It serves a dual purpose of responding to nuclear attacks and countering an Indian conventional military incursion into Pakistan.<sup>44</sup> Out of Pakistan’s entire nuclear armament, Nasr (Hatf-9) has received the most attention at the global level. “Nasr carries nuclear warheads of appropriate yield with high accuracy, shoot and scoot attributes, and was developed as a quick response system to add deterrence value to Pakistan’s strategic weapons development program at shorter ranges to deter India’s evolving threats.”<sup>45</sup>

## **Dynamics of Escalation Control**

After the Pulwama incident, Indian decision-makers made outrageous allegations against Pakistan and pledged to take revenge. India’s misadventure on February 26, 2019, could blow up into a much more severe conflagration had it not been for the assured deterrence of nuclear weapons. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s empty rhetoric during pre-election rallies held no ground in which he claimed to have “called Pakistan’s nuclear bluff because India had the mother of nuclear bombs.”<sup>46</sup> The risks involved in India’s use of force against Pakistan, howsoever limited, would either “stalemate into a war of attrition or spiral into a larger conflict bolstering confidence in Pakistan’s deterrent capability.”<sup>47</sup> The combined Indian military capability that can be practically fielded in a future war against Pakistan will likely remain well short of the minimum requirement for seeking Pakistan’s capitulation. Therefore, “structural and

environmental factors such as the terrain, lack of strategic surprise, and the relative military prowess of the two sides will conspire to prevent India from achieving a quick, costless victory.”<sup>48</sup>

It must be understood that “nuclear weapons are not meant to deter violations and skirmishes at the tactical level; however, full spectrum deterrence carried the day for Pakistan because nothing significant happened at the tactical level to put pressure on overall deterrence. Pakistan’s conventional riposte foiled Indian efforts to establish a new normal.”<sup>49</sup> That is why it can be safely assumed that “Pakistan's armed forces are confident about their ability and capability to check India’s aggressive behaviour, with its current capacity and professional training of the military personnel.”<sup>50</sup>

India’s effort to alter strategic balance after the offensive positioning of S-400 Air Defence missiles and acquisition of Dassault Rafale fighter jets must be balanced. Pakistan may exploit the vulnerabilities of these air defence systems earlier exposed during the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict,<sup>51</sup> where Turkish drones destroyed several batteries of Armenia’s S-300 Air Defence systems.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, Pakistan is upgrading its conventional air defence systems over a phased programme, relying on upgrading JF-17 fighters with block III and acquiring J-10C fighter jets from China. J-10C has emerged as one of the most capable single-engine fifth-generation fighters equipped with highly reliable aerodynamic characteristics, aviation, and weapon systems. As aforementioned, it can also be assumed that while overall nuclear deterrence will remain in place, ensuring strategic escalation control, Pakistan’s conventional forces should be strong enough to impose conventional deterrence. This suitable combination of strategic and tactical deterrence will eventually strengthen overall regional deterrence.

### **Action-Reaction Relationship between Doctrinal Shifts of India and Pakistan**

There has been a near-perfect action-reaction relationship between India’s aggressive regional hegemonic designs and Pakistan’s defensive moves to prevent India from either damaging Pakistan’s legitimate national interests or to emerge as an uncontested hegemon in the region. As expected, Pakistan was compelled to respond in the doctrinal domain despite its heavy military commitment due to the fight against terrorism. Subsequently, Pakistan evolved new warfighting concepts in conventional and strategic domains. These new concepts sought to defeat Indian plans with a superior game plan to overwhelm Indian strategy of aggression not only in the land, air and sea battles (in the conventional plane); but, more importantly, also developed such nuclear weapon systems with which to trounce India’s local military superiority. It led to the development of low-yield nuclear weapons using its state-of-the-art technology along with a matching delivery system of Nasr, against which India has not been able to respond so far.

This intense process of envisioning and articulating new strategies comprised conceiving and developing hardware, technological expertise and superior strategic



dexterity to visualize how best it could be utilized to turn Indian plans on their head. The environment envisaged for its employment has further reduced India's options for waging an aggressive conventional war against Pakistan, truncating India's options to carve out the space for a limited conventional war against Pakistan while taking refuge under the nuclear threshold. This flawed strategic mindset of Indian policymakers was also responsible for introducing its surgical strike stratagem grounded on the concept of pre-emptive counterforce options against Pakistan, reflected formally in India's Joint Armed Forces Doctrine (2017). The surgical strike stratagem and pre-emptive counterforce doctrine give Indian armed forces the choice of time, targets, and scale to launch, but it creates a risky strategic environment in which military planners feel compelled to use nuclear weapons against an adversary.<sup>53</sup>

Indian hawkish policymakers soon realized that their concept of luring Pakistan into a limited war was not free of major risks, so they introduced the notion of fighting sub-conventional warfare as enshrined in India's Joint Armed Forces Doctrine (2017). "Indian military planners have further perceived that there is a possibility of [so-called] surgical strikes or limited war in South Asia."<sup>54</sup> However, Pakistan's armed forces are geared up to retaliate fully and immediately to any violation of its sovereignty, including so-called surgical strikes. After seeing Pakistan's resolve and evaluating the cost-benefit analysis associated with direct military engagement, Indian planners have decided to focus on a hybrid warfare strategy to indirectly capitalize on Pakistan's socio-economic, ethno-religious, and political vulnerabilities of Pakistan.<sup>55</sup> The fear of Pakistan's retaliation and pressure from major powers has guaranteed the continuation of deterrence, preventing India from perpetrating any major adventure against Pakistan. Various factors have bolstered strategic stability and facilitated tensions between India and Pakistan well below the nuclear threshold.<sup>56</sup>

## **Conclusion**

India's doctrinal shifts have dangerous implications for South Asia's strategic stability. India's perception of being able to wage a limited conventional war under nuclear overhang poses serious hazards and entails grave implications for the region's overall security. On the other hand, Pakistan has followed a sharp learning curve along various aspects of managing nuclear assets, including adapting to politico-military advancements in the regional geo-political security environment. It is also evident that Pakistan's response in the nuclear and conventional domains against India's doctrinal innovation had forced it to topple over its head. It has been established that Pakistan will not back out of its pledge to use all available assets to maintain its sovereignty and territorial integrity in future conflicts. Due to India's continuous shift in strategic military thinking, Pakistan has to upgrade its doctrine and concepts in an action-reaction sequence.

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