



Analyzing The South Asian Strategic Stability in the Light of Game Theory

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the strategic, political and economic dynamics that frame Pakistan's evolving geo-strategic landscape in South Asia. It especially analyzes the implications of limited war theories, surgical strikes, conventional disparities and the resultant security conundrum in India-Pakistan relations. The paper asserts that India's military modernization and strategic doctrine shift affects Pakistan's evolving deterrence posture, which necessitates a greater reliance on tactical nuclear weapons and employment of asymmetric strategies. Furthermore, it examines the overall security implications of arms race for Pakistan's economy and development efforts. The paper also explores the risks of increased militarization under the nuclear umbrella, including misperceptions that could lead to unintended conflict in the light of Game Theory. Employing both theory and empirical evidence, the paper maps out the foreign and security strategies that guide Pakistan's state and military actors. It also offers insights and policy recommendations regarding stable deterrence, easing economic burdens and national security in a volatile region.

Keywords: Tactical nuclear weapons, TNWs, South Asia, Strategic Stability

INTRODUCTION

Being a developing country and a geopolitical crossroad, Pakistan is exposed to a wide range of socio-economic, political, and environmental issues that have very

crucial implications on its further course. These implications are paramount in understanding policy formulation by policy makers and researchers and availability of stakeholders to develop effective interventions that would enable the country to develop sustainably and remain stable. The complex nature of the interaction between the domestic factors, including political instability, economic vulnerability, and social inequalities, and the external ones, including the regional conflict and global economic changes, requires a complex analysis that would allow understanding the multifaceted effects of these factors on the growth and development of Pakistan (Khan, 2021; Malik and Hussain, 2019).

Pakistan has a high rate of debt, inflation and unemployment which is impeding its potential to achieve inclusive growth economically (Ahmed and Saleem, 2020). Such problems are also complicated by structural factors such as energy shortage and poor infrastructure, which have negative impacts on the productivity of industries and foreign investments. In addition, the changing nature of regional interaction and geopolitical tension particularly with Pakistan neighbors such as India and Afghanistan have some far-reaching consequences on both the national security of the country and its foreign relations (Rehman, 2022).

Pakistan has a young and fast-growing population, which has opportunities and challenges on the social front based on the demographic trends. Although the young population is a potential source of demographic dividend, the absence of proper education, healthcare, and job opportunities may cause more social instability and economic pressure (Javed and Saeed, 2018). Moreover, the environmental issues, including water shortage, climate change, and urbanization, are also significant threats to the sustainable development interests of Pakistan, so the policy should be addressed urgently and in collaboration with other countries (Qureshi et al., 2020).

Considering these complex issues, it is urgent to study the consequences of these socio-political, economic and environmental forces in a holistic way. This thesis will attempt to examine these implications at a finer level and will offer an empirical and theoretical context to help comprehend the direction that Pakistan could take in its mixed development environment. In so doing, the study aims to add to the existing body of literature as well as providing practical implications on national policy and strategy planning.

Limited War/Surgical Strikes

The principles of limited war and surgical attacks have been becoming more topical in the changing conditions of security in South Asia, especially in the relations between India and Pakistan. Limited war is a warfare whereby the belligerents do not intend to achieve complete or existential victory, but instead want to achieve limited, in many cases, tactical goals within controlled situations. Surgical strikes are further narrower in scope, meant to counter high-value targets, and usually operate across contested borders, without causing their more general escalation (Mehmood and Haider, 2022; Khattak and Kundi, 2020). To Pakistan, the ideas are a serious strategic, military, and political issue particularly due to the nature of nuclear deterrence, capability imbalance and regional diplomatic ties.

One of the most fundamental strategic issues is the impact of the India decision to adopt or perfect the limited war doctrine, e.g., Cold Start, and its growing reliance on surgical strikes (or the threat of them) on the deterrence decision-making of Pakistan. The modernization of the military in India and the changes in its doctrine imply the development of the belief in the existence of a window within which sub-conventional or limited military action can be used to accomplish political or even military goals without the risk of a full-scale war and the escalation of nuclear conflicts (Strategic Perspectives, 2023). This poses strain on Pakistan to respond to its deterrence and military response to this, such as, but not limited to, low-yield nuclear weapons, tactical nuclear weapon (TNW) programmes, or other force posture changes (Pakistan Journal of International Affairs, 2024; ISSI, 2022). These adaptations, in turn, pose a threat to become the source of instability, command-and-control problems, and escalation dilemmas (Kabir and Shahbaz Khan, 2022; ISSI, "Tactical nuclear weapons and Deterrence Stability, 2022).

Surgical strikes or limited war have significant political implications. On the one hand, Pakistan is under the pressure of its domestic population to make a credible response to the perceived acts of sovereignty violation or transgressions of cross-border. Conversely, excessive response or not estimating the response poses the danger of international criticism, diplomatic isolation or economic consequences. The vagueness of the question of what qualifies as an adequate reaction to a surgical strike or limited intrusion contributes to the complexity of the process of policy making (Mehmood & Haider, 2022). Moreover, the nuclear doctrine as it is, on the part of Pakistan, is ambiguous. The posture that Pakistan maintains is commonly referred to as full-spectrum deterrence and is supposed to prevent aggression of any type, including conventional war, sub-conventional war below the nuclear threshold, and without a clear declaration of no first use or sole first strike policies (Narejo, Khan, and Khan, 2024; ISSI, 2022).

Crisis stability and escalation control is another dimension. Limited wars or surgical strikes can easily escalate quickly, especially when there is contention of attribution, or when cross-operations are made with counterstrikes. The nuclear overhang implies that the dangers of misunderstandings or unintentional intensification are enhanced under any circumstances of using the force (Satakzai and Alamgir, 2024). Western and Indian authors believe the development of low-yield nuclear weapons by Pakistan is frequently seen as a deterrent to the limited conventional aggression as well as an insurance against what is seen as expanding conventional asymmetries (Bhatti, 2023). However, there are dilemmas associated with such weapons too: how to ensure a high level of control, avoid inadvertent use, and indicate a solution without triggering escalatory reactions due to fear.

This paper will discuss the consequences of limited war and surgical strike doctrines to Pakistan considering the strategic, doctrinal and political interests. It will examine the evolving doctrines in India and Pakistan; examine how Pakistan views and copes with limited war threat; examine the efficacy of nuclear deterrence and conventional deterrence in maintaining crisis stability and review policy choices

available to handle such challenges. Thus, the paper will not only be useful in the context of academic knowledge of South Asian strategic stability, but also policy discussions of how Pakistan could develop measured, plausible reactions to limited threats in the context of nuclear overhang.

Conventional Asymmetries / Imbalance

In the South Asian strategic environment, conventional asymmetry indicates differences among states in terms of military potentials e.g., the size of the force, weaponry systems, technology, mobility, and support infrastructure but not nuclear weapons but could still determine deterrence, coercion and the likelihood of limited warfare or escalation. In the case of Pakistan, the traditional asymmetries when it comes to India are to be observed in a variety of dimensions: budgetary polarization, modernization rate, platforms qualitative (e.g., fifth generation airplanes, long range air defence systems) and surveillance/ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) capabilities. These asymmetries are not only in terms of numbers but also in terms of qualitative and doctrinal divergence such as the focus of military doctrines in rapid mobilization, precision strike, high tech weapon systems and combination of conventional and non-conventional alternatives. Articles like *Conventional Asymmetries between India and Pakistan: A threat to the Deterrence Stability of South Asia* highlight that due to the above mentioned, India is increasingly modernizing its conventional deterrence capability in air defence, sophisticated aircraft, spy satellites, and long-range capability.

The presence of traditional imbalance is having various implications on the strategic posture and national security doctrine of Pakistan. First, it exerts pressure on Pakistan to make the compensation through asymmetric means that can be the greater reliance on nuclear deterrence, development of tactical nuclear weapons, the use of proxy warfare or sub conventional warfare, or greater focus on deterrence by denial instead of persuasion. The possible response to the build-up in offensive power of its neighbor by Pakistan is to integrate its conventional and nuclear forces more closely, invest in qualitative improvements, and resort to diplomacy as proposed in *Prospects of Integrated Deterrence for Pakistan Amid Conventional Asymmetry in South Asia*. In the absence of such reactions, the limited war will be cheaper on the other side, which may reduce the bar to war (e.g., surgical attack or probing operation) since the balance is traditionally in favor of Pakistan.

Second, the traditional asymmetries create a security dilemma: any actions undertaken by Pakistan to seal the gaps like force modernization, the acquisition of sophisticated weapon systems, or the reinforcement of the ISR capabilities can be seen by India as threatening, leading to the renewed arms buildup, the change in doctrines, or even the preemptive strike or the retaliatory strike of limited nature. There is a limited economic capability of procurement cycles in Pakistan; therefore, the traditional asymmetry puts the country in a reactive position, limiting its strategies and exposing it to greater risks during crisis situations. According to the research on *India Pakistan arms race*, causal relationship of increases in military expenditures is asymmetrical with the larger economy of India allowing it to have more sustained

investments and thus increases the imbalance.

Third, it has political, diplomatic and economic implications. When Pakistan has other competing non-military needs (development, infrastructure, health, education), it is a waste of the already limited economic resources that are used to bridge the conventional gap. These trades off may result in pressures at home, budget strain, and may influence the foreign policy choices. It also affects the diplomatic leverage: Pakistan can be less influential on the negotiation table on the region or the international arena at large in case its conventional capabilities are considered inferior. As an illustration, the calls by Pakistan to have the strategic restraint regime in South Asia, including the conventional force equilibrium is an indication that the conventional asymmetry in status quo is a weakness to its ability to exercise its interests or discourage limited aggression.

Lastly, the traditional asymmetry increases the chances of escalation in the nuclear overhang. As one party feels that its traditional means of countering provocations or restraining strikes are not adequate, it tends to rely more on the nuclear doctrine, which adds to the instability of the crisis. Mistakes in perceiving skills, predispositions, or determination are even more threatening. These conventional imbalances have helped to influence the nuclear posture of Pakistan particularly asymmetric escalation options. Researchers have posited that India is increasingly becoming modernized, coupled with its policy of rapid response and possibility of limited war, Pakistan is under pressure to keep its first use credible, or its nuclear options flexible.

Security Dilemma

Security dilemma is a situation where other states are threatened by the actions taken by a state to maximize its own security like bolstering its military forces, making alliances or practicing more aggressive military ideologies, thus leading its counterparts to retaliate against the state. It results in the spiral of escalation even though none of the parties might be interested in conflict (Qazi & Khalid, 2021; Kumar, 2020). The India-Pakistan relationship is a classic study on security dilemma: one state tries to prevent or protect, but to the other, the other is offensive, and it causes the other to resort to measures to counterattack. In the case of Pakistan, the dilemma has been entrenched in the strategic culture, historical tensions as well as the geographical location of a powerful and militarily equipped neighbor.

The security dilemma has one of the key implications on Pakistan; the burden on the military and strategic resources of the country increases. Not only does Pakistan have to spend significant resources on maintaining conventional forces, but also in enhancing nuclear capabilities and doctrines to counter what it considers the conventional superiority of India (Khan, 2024; Nisa, Zahra and Bokhari, 2020). This is particularly so, considering the acquisition of sophisticated weapons systems in India, upgrading of multi-domain capabilities (air, naval, missile, space), and increasing defence budget. The larger these asymmetries, the greater the incentives of Pakistan to be able to catch up or even have credible deterrence by being able to respond asymmetrically. Nonetheless, such endeavors tend to tax financial resources,

divert funding to social progress, and create the threat of overreliance on nuclear deterrence, such as the escalation process and the lack of clarity in doctrines (Khan, 2024; Qazi and Khalid, 2021).

The other significant implication is associated with the risk of stability and escalation of the crisis. When there is a misperception, a miscalculation, or surprise, the escalation may shoot up very fast in security dilemma situations. To Pakistan, any small operation by the military (or other secret operations by the Indian side) may be construed as an attack, and this may result in disproportionate or retaliatory action. Nuclear overhang the situation where both parties have nuclear arms raises the stakes: what once could be a conventional or a limited conflict may turn into a nuclear brinkmanship in case one of the parties believes that their security is under cutting attack (Khalid, 2015; Nisa et al., 2020). Thereby, uncertainty about doctrine, command-and-control, and escalation points will be a two-sided sword: it will allow flexibility in the strategy but will also create a chance of misinterpretation.

The security dilemma has limited the choices of the foreign policy of Pakistan diplomatically and politically. On the one hand, Pakistan needs to constantly project an image of determination and credibility to prevent aggression; on the other hand, open militarization or aggressive behavior is a threat to international criticism, the economic boycott, or diplomatic isolation. The necessity of deterrence and diplomacy is more precise in multilateral and international platforms where Pakistan must address the view on its security policies and defend its reactions (Raeesa & Akhtar, 2025; Javaid & Kamal, 2014). Moreover, the process of strategic restraint or arms control is complicated by the lack of trust: to be involved in the conventional force limiting or transparency arrangements, Pakistan must be assured of some gestures by India; the element of reciprocity is, however, usually questionable without mutual trust.

Lastly, security dilemma affects the internal security and the socio-economic stability of Pakistan. The allocation of huge sums of money and manpower in the military, nuclear and strategic forces can take the place of education, health, infrastructure and development. Arms races and deterrence maintenance may lead to a strain on the budget of the general population, which may contribute to increasing domestic inequalities and inhibiting long term growth (Nisa et al., 2020). In addition, non-state actors, insurgency, or sectarian conflict can be a cause and effect of external security issues on their own. To take an example, the policies of the Pakistani government towards Afghanistan, or the emergence of insurgent organizations are in many ways entangled by the external security discourse; the image of external danger may lead to changes in internal policing, intelligence, and civil military relations (Uddin, 2016).

Arms Race

The strategic environment of South Asia has always been characterized by the arms race between India and Pakistan. The spiral of action between the two states due to military build-up in the reactions to the perceived threat by the other increases the costs of security and the risk of miscalculation (Amir ud Din, Sajjad, and Aziz,

2019). Empirical evidence indicates that Pakistan utilizes a rather long proportion of its GDP in defense due to the increasing conventional and strategic modernization of India. This unequal weight puts Pakistan in a reactive position, where it is pursuing cost effective ways of remaining credible and deterring against the size, economy and international access of arms advantages that India holds.

The economic cost of this arms race is one of the most prominent implications of this arms race on Pakistan. An increase in defense spending causes a diversion of resources to the areas of the social sector such as education, health, infrastructure, and alleviating poverty. The studies have found that the arms race has a stifling effect on the socio-economic development of the two countries, however the situation is more acute in the case of Pakistan as it has a weak fiscal base and is also faced by competing developmental demands. According to the study, *Arms Race and Socio-economic development of South Asia: A Case study of Armament between India and Pakistan*, the hostility between India and Pakistan which is induced by military spending has served to solidify the underdevelopment and hamper the prosperity of the region.

There is also a great influence on strategic stability and deterrence. As India is modernizing its strategic forces including modernizing missile technology, surveillance technology and enhancing conventional forces, Pakistan is under growing pressure to retaliate not merely on an equal playing field but also hedge through asymmetric technology as in the case of tactical nuclear weapons. As observed by scholars, conventional asymmetry also contributes to the changing of the nuclear weapons of low yield by Pakistan and its nuclear doctrine in general to increase the cost of aggression and deterrence credibility in limited war situations. This creates issues on command control, escalation and possibility of nuclear miscalculation.

Moreover, arms race increases the risk of security dilemma: the intention of Pakistan to improve its defense level to guarantee its security can be interpreted as the threat or even an offensive by India (and other external witnesses) and provoke other reactions. Peacetime instability even due to mismanagement of the crisis, border skirmishes or false alarms are possible. Moreover, the arms race makes diplomacy more difficult such as arms deals, arms control or trust building actions are more difficult to make and sustain as each party questions the good faith or adequacy of the other side of their compromise.

Lastly, the arms race applies to the foreign policy of Pakistan, its regional position and the international relations. Pakistan tends to justify its military spending on weapons in terms of deterrence and sovereignty, and resorts to international standards or agreements (where it finds them favourable) to condemn what it regards as unbalanced arms sales to India (or to others). Nevertheless, compared to the states with bigger economies or supply chain, Pakistan can less influence the global arms trade, non-proliferation regimes or conventional restraint. The weapons in the possession of the international actors to both parties can be a source of catalysts to the race itself, which weakens the Pakistani discourse of security needs versus aggression. Meanwhile, Pakistan must plan wisely: excessive spending on weapons may hurt the

international legitimacy or cause foreign debt liabilities, whereas insufficient preparation may lead to the loss of credibility in deterring.

Economic Pressure/Strain

The unabating security threats, arms projections and defence demands put Pakistan under heavy economic burden and many of the important tradeoffs affect its macroeconomic stability and development agenda. The apparent impact of this strain is the portion of defence budgetary allocations in national fiscal budget and its opportunity cost. Recent reports indicate that defence expenditure in Pakistan has been associated with taking precedence of or encroaching on expenditure on social domains like education, health and infrastructure (Pakistan's Dilemma of Guns Vs Butter., 2024). As an illustration, the defence spending in the fiscal year 2023 24 was approximately 17.5% of the total national budget, which is much higher than the spending on health and education, which were less than 5 each. This distribution trend increases the problems of poor human development and broad inequality. (Eurasia Review)

The nominal size of the defense budget has grown; however, its proportion concerning the GDP has decreased in the past years. According to the Pakistan Economic Survey, defence expenditure declined to approximately 1.7% of the GDP in 2024 after declining to 2.6% in 2020, but forecasts show that it will continue to be 1.7% in 2025 26 projections. Nevertheless, the ratio is not necessarily decreasing, in real terms, the figures are high, and defence funding is always costly procurement and maintenance of state-of-the-art equipment. In addition, it has various aspects of military spending that are either opaque or hidden by other non-transparent budgetary lines which make it even more difficult to determine real economic cost.

The economic stress is more acute in the debt and fiscal space dynamics in Pakistan. Pakistan is extremely indebted estimates its public debt is at least 80 per cent of GDP in 2024 but this is inclusive of domestic and external debts. The large burden on debt servicing puts a limit on the ability of the government to increase revenue without jeopardizing macro stability or increasing inflation. Here, any rise in defence spending (such as an 1820% increment in 2025 26 announced) will further constrain the space of manoeuvre in other urgent expenditures. These increases are often made in cases where there is a need to limit the total expenditure, hence hard budgetary decisions or reduction in social and developmental activities.

The other implication is the impact on social development and growth. Military spending has been reported in academic literature to have a negative impact on the economic growth and social welfare in South Asia due to arms race. Indicatively, other research such as Arms races and socio-economic Development of South Asia: A Case Study of Armament between India and Pakistan hold the view that growing arms race slows down growth, lowers investment in human capital and increases poverty. Also, the crowding out effect of the military expenditure by investment in education and health has direct adverse externalities in the form of a low human capital formation, inadequate infrastructure and a low future level of non-military spending on other areas that could contribute to long run growth.

Defence commitments can put an economic strain on the nation which may in turn make Pakistan more dependant on external financing and foreign aid which makes its economy more susceptible to the global financial cycles, donor conditionalities, and interest rate changes. The high defence expenditure usually involves importation of weapons, technology, fuel, and spares of which many have to be converted into foreign exchange. Such obligations can result in balance of payments crisis or depreciation of the currency when foreign currency reserves are low, or export earnings fall. Further, through funding defence through borrowings, fiscal deficits are generated, and this might also lead to inflationary pressures, which consequently impact on the ordinary citizen especially those in the vulnerable socio-economic group.

Reliance on Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Implications for Pakistan

According to western and Indian authors this has been one of the most important changes in the nuclear doctrine of Pakistan in recent decades. Pakistan has allegedly introduced Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs) or battlefield / short-range nuclear weapons, as part of its wider policy of full spectrum deterrence. The Nasr (Hatf IX) missile system becomes the icon of this change: this was created in direct response to what Pakistan considers conventional military dominance of India and the danger of such doctrines like Cold Start. Pakistan allegedly perceives TNWs as a means of reducing the standard of retaliation and complicating any Indian conventional aggression, by rendering the effects unknown even in small wars.

Due to the rising conventional asymmetries between Pakistan and India, which are in the size of the force and technological modernization level, there is a pressure on Pakistan to make sure that its deterrence will be credible. The alleged TNWs, provides Pakistan, some form of a flexible deterrent alternative which bridges the balance void created by traditional imbalance. TNWs are in a way a transient between the strictly conventional functionality and strategic nuclear weapons: TNWs are to be utilized to deter conventional aggression prior to the occurrence of the necessity of escalating to strategic nuclear functionality. These types of weapons enable signaling at a lesser level of conflict and offer more escalation gradations to Pakistan. (Foreign Affairs Forum). Nevertheless, the authors believe the introduction of TNWs is a dangerous idea. Further use of TNWs has significant risks and expenses for Pakistani and deem use of TNWs as an inappropriate idea. To start with, there is the risk of escalation: the introduction or even the threat of introducing battlefield nuclear weapons may blur the boundaries between conventional and strategic warfare. Any wrong calculations or wrong perceptions concerning the use thresholds in crisis may quickly lead to strategic nuclear exchange. The lesser production of TNWs can cause enemies to make wrong decisions or inadequate actions to result in instability.

Second, command and control / command, control, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) issues: Authors believe the requirements of TNWs are very high standards of safety, security, and control. Decentralized deployment (near battlefronts) or forward deployment exposes the danger of the loss

of control, possible accidental or unauthorized usage, damage to weapons, or even theft. The operationalization of TNWs under the fog of war puts some strain on communication, decision making, and positive control and risk mitigation. Western and India propaganda is aimed at bringing Pakistan under international pressure.

Third, economic and political cost: The introduction of TNWs requires periodic maintenance and potentially an expansion of TNW capability. It does not only need resources so that the hardware (missiles, warheads, delivery systems) can be available but also storage, security, command infrastructure, training, redundancy, etc. Keeping in view current economic crisis Pakistan is faced with dependence on TNWs can enhance trade-offs in budgetary allocations, external debt and economic stability.

Fourth, diplomatic and strategic posture: Pakistani policymakers posit the use of TNWs would have implications on the relations of Pakistan both regionally and internationally. It could intensify tensions with India, induce countermeasures (such as nuclear or conventional build-up) by India, raise the level of suspicion by international actors about nuclear safety and proliferation and make arms control or confidence building efforts harder. Pakistan is a responsible nuclear weapon state. It will neither increase its dependency nor use battlefield nuclear weapons in crisis like situations or war.

The effect on the stability of deterrence: Increased dependence and deployment of TNWs near Pak-India border can complicate the crisis by creating use it or lose it dilemma. Keeping in view the propaganda targeted against alleged development of Pakistan's TNWs such weapons could not deter a small-scale conventional military action or surgical strikes during 2019 and 2025. TNWs may subvert instead of reinforcing deterrence. Moreover, the presence of TNWs may result in lowering the escalation ladder, which may allow both parties to have less space to de-escalate during crises. The inference drawn from the above passages is systemic propaganda is launched by the Indian and Western authors against Pakistani nuclear weapons program to declare it a pariah state.

Escalation

The concept of escalation in India Pakistan context is a process where the minor conflict, provocation, or crisis turns into more violent, widespread, or destructive, which can range between the conventional skirmishes to the nuclear confrontation. Ambiguous doctrines, overlapping thresholds, misperceptions, and fast mobilizing are some of the risk factors that may lead to escalation. The strategic environment in Pakistan is quite delicate due to its doctrine of full spectrum deterrence, the availability of conventional nuclear weapons of tactical characteristics, and the changing policies of India like Cold Start which presupposes rapid conventional operations that can lead to the development of Pakistan with serious existential threat (Deterrence (In)stability Between India and Pakistan, 2020; Salik, 2022). The above conditions render escalation management a significant problem to the security strategy in Pakistan.

One of the implications of escalation to Pakistan is the problem of unwanted or uncontrolled escalation. The repetitive nature of the crises like Pulwama Balakot (2019) or newer border conflicts- have demonstrated that despite the intention of both parties to avoid excessive damage, minor mistakes or unforeseen technical issues (e.g. missiles mis launches, misidentification, or failure in communication) might significantly escalate the situation (Salik, 2022; “Dangers of Inadvertent Escalation in Pakistan therefore needs to ensure credible yet restrained signaling, effective command and control, and demarcations on response in order to ensure that limited incidents do not get out of control. This does not ease the danger because there are no formalized restraint regimes or agreed mechanisms of crisis management of escalation (Strategic Thought, 2020; Deterrence (In)stability Between India and Pakistan, 2020).

The second implication is that escalation pressures cause changes in the deterrence doctrine and posture of force in Pakistan. Due to the conventional inferiority in some areas as compared to India, Pakistan might find the need to resort to depending more on nuclear alternatives; both tactical and strategic to enhance the credibility of deterrence. This enhances the salience of those doctrines permitting first use or short range/tactical nuclear retaliation, even to limited conventional aggression. Nonetheless, the use of nuclear escalation possibilities also brings risks: it can decrease the bargaining room, become more susceptible to the fear of preemption, and become more complicated to control escalation in a crisis (Deterrence (In)stability Between India and Pakistan, 2020; Pakistan’s Nuclear Posture: Implications to South Asian Stability, Belfer Center, 2009/10).

The other important implication is associated with the diplomatic, political and economic expenses of Pakistan. Escalation does not just have strategic but also societal burdens. An example is in cases of crisis, tensions may result in capital flight, breaking of trade, investment disruption and foreign exchange exertion. In addition, the rhetoric of the media and social opinion shifts to being more hawkish, and room to restrain is reduced (Escalation Gone Meta: Strategic Lessons in the 2025 India Pakistan Crisis, 2025). The Pakistani government therefore must make a tradeoff between demonstrating a desire to maintain deterrence credibility on one hand and, on the other hand, risking to ruin the economic and relations stability with third party actors.

CONCLUSION

The dynamism of escalation renders crisis management systems and confidence building to unprecedented importance. The literature further highlights that the formal or informal mechanisms like hotlines, third party mediation, agreement not to target nuclear installations, and CBMs (Confidence Building Measures) are significant in preventing the escalation or de-escalation of the crisis once it starts (Akhtar, 2025; Strategic Thought, 2020). In the case of Pakistan, it must intensify these mechanisms (both bilateral with India and including other states or international organizations) in case it wants to avoid the possibility of being sucked

into the conflicts that are out of its control. Since most of the previous crises were merely defused with the help of the outside intervention or just by coincidence, and not powerful institutionalized restraint, such a strategy cannot be maintained through reliance on chance.

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