



## Learning from the Armed Conflict Between India and Pakistan: Is Nuclear Weapons Necessary?

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### Abstract

**Background:** The nuclearization of South Asia poses a long-term threat to the regional and global security. The long-standing rivalry between India and Pakistan is dangerously compounded by their opposing nuclear doctrines, and hence an analysis of their strategic stability is an imperative.

**Methodology:** This study uses the methodology of comparative analysis and analysis of the nuclear postures of India and Pakistan in the context of modern deterrence theory and international law. The analysis rests on empirical evidence from past crises up to the time of the 2025 escalation to gain real world credibility of the doctrines. **Objectives:** The purpose of this paper is to dissect India's 'No First Use' policy vis-a-vis Pakistan's 'Full-Spectrum Deterrence' and first use ambiguity. It aims to examine how these contrary doctrines contribute to escalation and whether they comply with international legal norms. **Findings:** The analysis illuminates a critical "stability-instability paradox," in which nuclear weapons prevent total war but lower the threshold for limited conflict. Inconsistencies such as India's massive retaliation vow against Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons add dangerous pressures to escalation. This asymmetry and poor communication with crisis lead to a very volatile security environment. **Originality/Novelty:** The novelty of the paper is the integration of the deterrence theory with international law and its application to contemporary empirical data such as the 2025 crisis. It contends that current nuclear postures, far from being stabilizing, have opened new avenues to war, calling conventional wisdom on deterrence into question.

**Keywords:** india; international law; nuclear weapons; pakistan.

### Abstrak

**Latar Belakang:** Nuklirisasi di Asia Selatan menimbulkan ancaman jangka panjang terhadap keamanan regional dan global. Rivalitas yang telah berlangsung lama antara India dan Pakistan semakin berbahaya karena adanya perbedaan doktrin nuklir mereka. Oleh karena itu, analisis terhadap stabilitas strategis kedua negara menjadi hal yang sangat penting. **Metodologi:** Studi ini menggunakan metode analisis komparatif terhadap postur nuklir India dan Pakistan dalam konteks teori deterrence modern dan hukum internasional. Analisis ini didasarkan pada bukti empiris dari krisis-krisis sebelumnya hingga eskalasi pada tahun 2025, untuk memberikan



kredibilitas dunia nyata terhadap doktrin-doktrin tersebut. **Tujuan:** Tujuan dari makalah ini adalah untuk mengurai kebijakan No First Use (Tidak Menyerang Terlebih Dahulu) India dibandingkan dengan Full-Spectrum Deterrence (Penangkalan Spektrum Penuh) Pakistan dan ambiguitas kebijakan serangan pertamanya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menilai bagaimana perbedaan doktrin tersebut berkontribusi terhadap eskalasi, dan apakah keduanya sejalan dengan norma hukum internasional. **Temuan:** Analisis ini menunjukkan adanya “paradoks stabilitas–instabilitas” yang kritis, di mana senjata nuklir mencegah perang total tetapi menurunkan ambang batas untuk konflik terbatas. Ketidakkonsistenan seperti janji India untuk melakukan pembalasan besar-besaran terhadap penggunaan senjata nuklir taktis Pakistan menambah tekanan berbahaya terhadap eskalasi. Asimetri ini, ditambah dengan komunikasi krisis yang buruk, menciptakan lingkungan keamanan yang sangat tidak stabil. **Orisinalitas/Novelty:** Keunikan dari makalah ini terletak pada integrasi teori deterrence dengan hukum internasional serta penerapannya terhadap data empiris kontemporer seperti krisis tahun 2025. Makalah ini berargumen bahwa postur nuklir saat ini, alih-alih menciptakan stabilitas, justru membuka jalan baru menuju perang dan menantang pandangan konvensional mengenai deterrence.

**Kata Kunci:** india; hukum internasional; senjata nuklir; pakistan.

## A. Introduction

The Indian and Pakistani nuclear strategies reflect one of the most complicated and risky deterrence relations in the modern international system of collective security established under the United Nations Charter. These two neighboring South Asian countries have developed diametrically opposite policies with regard to nuclear doctrine, force build-up, and escalation management since the nuclear tests in 1998, innovating in ways that raise significant questions about the conventional wisdom of deterrence and introducing significant doubts about stability within a multipolar nuclear system.<sup>1</sup> The necessity of profoundly studying the actual performance of these opposite doctrines in a practical situation is also emphasised by the recent 2025 India-Pakistan crisis, which made the aforementioned countries come closer to nuclear war than ever.<sup>2</sup>

Within the larger context of international nuclear governance, both states are not part of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which in turn means that they exist in a kind of strategic and legal order in parallel to the existing disarmament regimes, which questions the universality of the latter.<sup>3</sup> This divergence highlights the importance of studying South Asia not only from the perspective of strategic theory, but also in terms of international law, specifically in regard to the legal nature of nuclear

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Haratua Rajagukguk et Ruben Cornelius Siagian. « Analysis of the Evolution of the Conference on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) 2012-2024: A SWOT Method Approach in Understanding Global Political and Security Dynamics », vol. 33 (Proceedings of the International Conference on Strategic and Global Studies (ICSGS 2024), Springer Nature, 2025), 341.

<sup>2</sup> Rabia Akhtar. « Escalation gone meta: Strategic lessons from the 2025 India-Pakistan crisis », *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, 2025. <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/escalation-gone-meta-strategic-lessons-2025-india-pakistan-crisis>.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations. Office of Public Information, *Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* (United Nations Office of Public Information, 1975).

threats, doctrines of deterrence and obligations under the United Nations Charter and International Humanitarian Law (IHL).<sup>4</sup>

This paper extends recent research on South Asian nuclear dynamics that has been largely descriptive to critically review the implications for effectiveness, credibility, and stability of the Indian and Pakistani nuclear strategies. In contrast to traditional methods of taking the word of official statements, this paper submits the inconsistencies between official doctrines and how they are actually practiced, and reviews these approaches critically in the plurality of theories of deterrence, such as in the classical deterrence theory, the paradox of stability-instability, and the newer developments in the concept of multi-domain deterrence.<sup>5</sup> Methodologically, the paper uses a qualitative, doctrinal and comparative approach (using the 1996 ICJ Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons, secondary literature and official documents) to examine the compatibility of national doctrines with established norms of international law. This way, it is possible to get a nuanced understanding of how legal and strategic discourses interact in the determination of state behaviour in nuclear crises. This paper argues that the underlying asymmetrical nature of the nuclear doctrines of India and Pakistan has created a dynamic of mutual response whereby each state's posture develops in response to the other's apparent strategic benefit. Such interaction represents an ingrained pattern of competition rather than cooperation, and determines the nuclear behaviour and strategic calculations of the region. Against this background, the paper aims to analyze the functioning of these diverging doctrines under the crisis circumstances and how their logic interfaces with the international legal norm on the threat or use of nuclear weapons.

## B. Discussion

### 1 Theoretical Framework: Deterrence Theory and Nuclear Stability in Multipolar Environments

This study employs three theoretical lenses to analyze India and Pakistan's nuclear strategies: classical deterrence theory, the stability-instability paradox, and multipolar nuclear competition. Classical deterrence theory posits that nuclear weapons prevent conflict through credible threats of retaliation, assuming rational actors and robust command systems.<sup>6</sup> In the India-Pakistan context, this is challenged by Pakistan's ambiguous first-use policy, which risks miscalculation, and India No First Use (NFU), a declaratory national policy which was first written in the 1999 draft of the Nuclear

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations. « United Nations Charter (full text) », *United Nations. United Nations. nd* <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>, 1945.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew R Costlow. « Deterrence is Integrated in Theory, but not in Practice: The Problem and (Partial) Solution », n° 614 (2025). [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/matthew-r-costlow-deterrence-is-integrated-in-theory-but-not-in-practice-the-problem-and-partial-solution-no-614-february-3-2025/](https://nipp.org/information_series/matthew-r-costlow-deterrence-is-integrated-in-theory-but-not-in-practice-the-problem-and-partial-solution-no-614-february-3-2025/).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *The strategy of conflict: with a new preface*, Nachdr. d. Ausg. 1980 (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard Univ. Press, 20).

Doctrine of India and restated in the 2003 official Nuclear Doctrine, which faces credibility concerns due to occasional ambiguous statements from officials.<sup>7</sup>

According to the stability-instability paradox of nuclear deterrence, it does not prevent any significant warfare but only facilitates sub-conventional hostilities. Such was the case in the Kargil War of 1999, when the nuclear capability of Pakistan boosted its confidence to make small-scale incursions, but the Indian self-restraint prevented any escalation. Lastly, multipolar nuclear rivalry explains the twin fixations of India, both on Pakistan and China, to make the use of deterrence complicated, since it is because of India developing its nuclear triad that is aimed at countering both. This framework will also consider the credibility, stability, effectiveness, and legality of doctrines of both nations based on the grounds of the uniqueness of the security environment in South Asia. The stability-instability paradox is especially true in South Asia. Nuclear weapons lessen the prospect of total war, but strengthen the prospect of limited ones, particularly in disputed places such as Kashmir. This dynamic was evident in the Kargil War of 1999, when Pakistan launched small incursions with the belief that India would not want to escalate because it was covered by the nuclear overhang. These sub-conventional conflicts continue under the nuclear umbrella, which proves Snyder's theory to be correct.

### **1.1 Classical Deterrence Theory and Its Limitations**

The classical deterrence theory, which was established during the Cold War, draws on the possibility of preventing war due to the existence of a credible threat of excessive retaliation with nuclear weapons.<sup>8</sup> This theory supposes rational actors capable of correctly deriving costs and benefits, an unambiguous presentation of the threats of deterrence, and the reliability of the command structures. But the India-Pakistan case poses a challenge to some of these assumptions. Recent literature by Narang, 2014 emphasized that regional nuclear powers tend to come up with somewhat different strategies that are utterly different from those of superpowers.<sup>9</sup> Deterrence optimism versus deterrence pessimism can be seen as a practical way of gauging distinct viewpoints in the South Asian context on nuclear stability.<sup>10</sup> Deterrence optimism holds that nuclear weapons have deterred major interstate war between India and Pakistan, and pessimism focuses on the danger of unintended escalation and crisis instability.

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<sup>7</sup> Narayan Lakshman. « Will India change its 'No First Use' policy? », *The Hindu*, 24 août 2019, sect. India. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/will-india-change-its-no-first-use-policy/article29247139.ece>.

<sup>8</sup> Norman A. Graebner. « HERMAN KAHN. On Thermonuclear War. Pp. xx, 651. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1960. \$10.00 », *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 337, n° 1 (septembre 1961) : 161-62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271626133700118>.

<sup>9</sup> Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict*, Course Book, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics 143 (Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 2014). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400850402>.

<sup>10</sup> Vernie Liebl. « India and Pakistan: competing nuclear strategies and doctrines », *Comparative strategy* 28, n° 2 (2009) : 154-63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930902799731>.

### **1.2 The Stability-Instability Paradox in South Asia**

As estimated by Glenn Snyder, nuclear weapons have created the stability-instability paradox, which supposes that on the one hand, nuclear weapons can help prevent big wars, but on the other hand, nuclear weapons can be used to facilitate some smaller conflicts. To South Asia, this paradox is especially applicable because nuclear weapons seem to have carved a niche in sub-conventional conflicts, proxy warfare, and small battles. This theoretical prediction is confirmed by empirical findings of the Kargil conflict (1999) and other crises that followed the Kargil conflict. The fact that Pakistan felt sure of its nuclear posture might have encouraged the country to make some small-scale provocations, and India's ability to respond using nuclear capabilities limited the range of responses at its disposal.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the crisis of 2025 indicates that this relationship might be deteriorating, especially as both parties come up with more elaborate escalation tactics. The South Asian nuclear milieu, in addition, influenced by the presence of China, the third nuclear power that has considerable ties with both India and Pakistan. Recent books advocating the concept of the so-called deterrence triads and complex deterring relationships add salient information to the operations of nuclear dynamics in multipolar strategic settings.<sup>12</sup> Such trends as the concept of entanglement - in which nuclear and conventional forces, along with civilian and military targets, become more linked - are especially applicable to explain dynamic South Asian affairs in the present.<sup>13</sup> Military planning that integrates cyber warfare, space assets, and artificial intelligence introduces new vulnerabilities and escalation pathways that were never envisioned with traditional deterrence theory. The dynamic patterns of alliances also influence regional deterrence. The nuclear posture of Pakistan is enhanced by the fact that it has a long traditional strategic relationship with China which contributes to its military, technological and diplomatic assistance. Pakistan also enjoys political support of various Islamic states especially Saudi Arabia, which strengthens the external security of the nation. As opposed to this, the deterrent posture of India is affected by the fact that the country is evolving ties with the United States, Russia, and Israel which provide sophisticated defense technologies and strategic partnership. Such polarized alignments result in overlapping spheres of influence, which complicates the situations of crisis and influences the way of perception of nuclear policies of the states and the intentions of the opponent state to use its nuclear resources.

## **2 The Role of International Law in Nuclear Deterrence**

### **2.1 The UN Charter and the Prohibition on the Use or Threat of Force**

Under international law there are strict limitations placed on the threat or use of nuclear weapons. Under the United Nations Charter, states must "refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force" other than by the specific authorization of the

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<sup>11</sup> Sumit Ganguly. « Nuclear Stability in South Asia », *International Security* 33, n° 2 (2008) : 45-70. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.33.2.45>.

<sup>12</sup> Otakar Jiří Mika et Pavel Otrýsal. « Current Security Aspects of Nuclear Weapons », dans *Changes and Innovations in Social Systems* (Springer, 2025), 477-97.

<sup>13</sup> Kennette Benedict et Kate Kaplan. « Nuclear Threats and the (F) Utility of Law », *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 21 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-041822-034418>.

Security Council or self-defense (Art. 2(4), 51).<sup>14</sup> In practice, this means that any nuclear threat or strike outside an actual armed attack would be a violation of Article 2(4) of the Charter. Article 51 has the limitation of authorizing self-defence merely following an armed attack, and further restricts that only by the customary requirements of necessity and proportionality.<sup>15</sup> Thus, a state may only threaten or use nuclear force as a measure of defense, although in that case, demonstrate that the use is necessary to repel an attack and proportionate to the harm suffered.<sup>16</sup> The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has stressed that any nuclear threat or use "that is contrary to Article 2, paragraph 4, of the United Nations Charter and that fails to meet all the requirements of Article 51, is unlawful".<sup>17</sup> The Charter thus sets a presumptive illegality of aggressive nuclear coercion, which is subject only by the comparatively small exception of justified self-defence.

## **2.2 International Humanitarian Law & Conduct of Hostilities**

Equally important are the rules of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which govern the conduct of hostilities. Even in the case of war, the fundamental principles of IHL, such as military necessity, distinction between combatants and civilians, and the principle of proportionality of collateral harm, must be respected.<sup>18</sup> Nuclear weapons are by nature indiscriminate and cause blast, fire and radiation effects "that cannot be contained in either space or time".<sup>19</sup> From an international law perspective, both nations' nuclear strategies must be evaluated against their obligations under customary international law, including the principles of proportionality, distinction, and precaution during attack, and their adherence to international treaties and agreements. The Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons is a 1996 document that has significant legal guidelines on examining the legality of nuclear positions.<sup>20</sup> The ICJ acknowledged that weapons which are incapable of distinguishing between civilian and military targets or which cause unnecessary suffering are prohibited.<sup>21</sup> Because of their uncontrollable and disproportionate effect, the use of nuclear weapons is "scarcely reconcilable" with IHL.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, any nuclear strike would be likely to contravene the principles of necessity, proportionality and distinction

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<sup>14</sup> Nations, « United Nations Charter (full text) ».

<sup>15</sup> Christine Gray, *International law and the use of force* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Yoram Dinstein, *The conduct of hostilities under the law of international armed conflict* (Cambridge university press, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> United Nations. General Assembly, *Legality of the Threat Or Use of Nuclear Weapons: Request for Advisory Opinion by the General Assembly of the United Nations: Advisory Opinion* (International Court of Justice, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Marie Henckaerts, *Customary international humanitarian law: Volume 1, Rules*, vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> David Turns. « Weapons in the ICRC study on customary international humanitarian law », *Journal of Conflict and Security Law* 11, n° 2 (2006) : 201-37.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations. General Assembly. *Legality of the Threat Or Use of Nuclear Weapons: Request for Advisory Opinion by the General Assembly of the United Nations: Advisory Opinion* (1996).

<sup>21</sup> « Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons » (ICJ, s. d.). <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/95>.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Rietiker, Manfred Mohr, et Toshinori Yamada. « Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons », *A Short Commentary Article by Article*, 2018.

and would be unlawful under the laws of war. Even deterrence postures must therefore be evaluated by the limitations of IHL's humanitarian purposes.<sup>23</sup>

The ICJ's Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons (1996) is still the most acceptable legal interpretation of this issue. The Court found no express authorization for the use of nuclear weapons in treaty or custom and no total prohibition.<sup>24</sup> Crucially, it contained the principle that any threat or use of nuclear weapons contrary to Article 2(4) of the Charter, or which did not comply with the requirements of the right to self-defence under Article 51 of the Charter is unlawful.<sup>25</sup> It further stressed that if any such use were made, it would have to comply with IHL, especially the principles of necessity, proportionality and distinction. While the Court could not conclusively state that nuclear weapons would be unlawful "in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake," it said that their employment "would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict". Finally, the ICJ affirmed that States had an obligation of good faith to engage in negotiations towards total nuclear disarmament.<sup>26</sup>

There is also a growing legal norm that stigmatizes nuclear weapons beyond their legal binding - in other words, beyond formal treaty commitments. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which was adopted in 2017 and came into force in 2021, absolutely prohibits the use, threat or possession of nuclear weapons (Art. 1). Although neither India nor Pakistan are parties, Article 1(d) specifically prohibits even the threat of use and thus strengthens the Charter prohibition on force.<sup>27</sup> TPNW state parties have affirmed that "any use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is a violation of international law, including the Charter of the United Nations". The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its Article VI obligation to work towards disarmament, and by the many resolutions of the UN General Assembly support this normative trend.<sup>28</sup> Even though soft law developments are non-binding for non-parties, they to some extent delegitimize nuclear deterrence and uphold customary expectations on prohibition. An unlawful nuclear threat or strike becomes the occasion of state responsibility. Violations of Article 2(4) of the Charter or fundamental IHL norms entail an obligation to stop the violation and make a reparation.<sup>29</sup> An unprovoked nuclear threat is the use of force under the Charter and may constitute aggression. Likewise a nuclear attack that violates IHL's

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<sup>23</sup> Claude Pilloud et al., *Commentary on the additional protocols: of 8 June 1977 to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949* (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987).

<sup>24</sup> ADVISORY OPINION OF 8 JULY 1996 on LEGALITY OF THE THREAT OR USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS (ICJ 1996).

<sup>25</sup> Nations, « United Nations Charter (full text) ».

<sup>26</sup> ADVISORY OPINION OF 8 JULY 1996 on LEGALITY OF THE THREAT OR USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS.

<sup>27</sup> « United Nation TREATY ON THE PROHIBITION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS »consulté le 11 octobre 2025. [https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/2017/07/20170707%2003-42%20PM/Ch\\_XXVI\\_9.pdf](https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/2017/07/20170707%2003-42%20PM/Ch_XXVI_9.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> « United Nation TREATY ON THE PROHIBITION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS ».

<sup>29</sup> International Law Commission. « Draft articles on responsibility of states for internationally wrongful acts », *Yearbook of the International Law Commission* 2, n° 2 (2001) : 49.

principles of distinction or proportionality would be a serious violation of laws of war.<sup>30</sup> In theory, customary international law would in principle support the criminal liability of the responsible persons for indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the exercise or threat of nuclear coercion or use beyond the lawful exercise of self-defence is grave violation of international law. These legal standards hold directly to existing deterrence doctrines. No First Use (NFU): While the NFU policies (such as India) go furthest in complying with the Charter, as they restrict nuclear use to legitimate self-defence. However, any retaliatory strike must still meet the provisions of IHL in terms of remaining necessary, proportionate, and targeted against lawful military objectives.<sup>32</sup> First-Use and Full-Spectrum Deterrence: Doctrines that allow the use of pre-emptive or tactical first use, such as Full-Spectrum Deterrence by Pakistan, violate Article 2(4) and the criterion of proportionality.<sup>33</sup> They constitute threats to use force without a real armed attack, which makes them *prima facie* illegal.<sup>34</sup> Massive Retaliation: Massive retaliation doctrines that are based on overwhelming nuclear retaliation for limited aggression also fail the proportionality test and would likely result in unlawful civilian harm.<sup>35</sup> Only those doctrines limited to measured, last resort retaliatory counterattacks would be reasonably adequate for both *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* norms.

### 3 Pakistan's Nuclear Strategy: Key Components and Critical Analysis

Pakistan has a very nuclear-oriented strategy based on its conventional military inferiority in comparison with Indian. Such asymmetry has led Pakistan to achieve a nuclear posture whose main aim is deterring a bigger Indian conventional strike, which is sometimes press as existential deterrence. The most important factor in Pakistan is the traumatic memory and belief that it was the nuclear weapons that helped Pakistan to survive the 1999 war and preserve its territorial integrity.<sup>36</sup> Legally, Pakistan justifies its arsenal under Article 51 of the UN Charter by invoking self-defence. Politically, nuclear weapons are a symbol for national survival after a period of crisis such as the 1971 and 1999 conflicts. The state is presenting a deterrent as vital in order to offset India's superiority and preserve sovereignty in a hostile environment.

#### 3.1 Full-Spectrum Deterrence and First-Use Ambiguity

Full-Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) is the most important part of the nuclear doctrine of Pakistan. The doctrine presupposes the possibility and desire to prevent any kind of aggression at the entire range of conflict, ranging from both conventional intrusions and

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<sup>30</sup> Henckaerts, *Customary international humanitarian law: Volume 1, Rules*, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> United Nations. « Rome statute of the international criminal court », *Social Justice*, 1999, 125-43.

<sup>32</sup> Pilloud et al., *Commentary on the additional protocols: of 8 June 1977 to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949*.

<sup>33</sup> Feroz Khan, *Eating grass: The making of the Pakistani bomb* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Bruno Tertrais. « The causes of peace: The role of deterrence », *Fondation pour la recherche stratégique*, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *The evolution of nuclear strategy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> Feroz Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb* (Stanford University Press, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804784801>.

strategic nuclear attacks. There is no such ambiguity as in India on its declared No First Use (NFU) targeting of its deployment of nuclear weapons, and Pakistan is keeping the ambiguity of what exactly the circumstances are under which it would use nuclear weapons. Such ambiguity forms a very important aspect of its deterrence strategy that aims to create confusion in the mind of the adversary and make military planning in India difficult.<sup>37</sup>

Pakistan's nuclear doctrine is implemented under its National Command Authority, which is headed by the Prime Minister. Execution, however, is in the hands of the military's Strategic Plans Division. Though no formal first use conditions are publicly declared, analysts outline three triggers:

- 1) Response to Conventional Assault: The first-use option is kept up against a massive Indian conventional assault, which attempts to conquer a large part of the Pakistani territory.
- 2) Existential Threat: The civilian and military leadership of Pakistan alone will decide the use of nuclear arms if it is considered to pose an existential threat to the state of Pakistan.
- 3) Deterrence Doctrine: The first use is embedded as a constituent of the Pakistan deterrence strategy as a whole, not just a declared policy.<sup>38</sup>

Importantly, even though it hopes to deter FSD entails major risks. Although the ambiguity is supposed to serve as a deterrent, it may cause errors in Indian calculations and provoke an unintended escalation. FSD is dependent on how India views the intentions of Pakistan regarding the deployment of nuclear weapons, even against the use of conventional arms. This apparent readiness may, however, be viewed as having a reduced nuclear threshold to a greater likelihood of use of the nukes during a crisis.<sup>39</sup>

### **3.2 Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs) and Escalation Control**

The characteristic element of FSD of Pakistan is its focus on the tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs), specifically the Nasr (Hatf-IX) short-range ballistic missile system. Such low-end, short-range weapon atmospheres are meant to counter the Cold Start of India. Doctrine (CSD) that is viewed by Pakistan as one of the strategies of purposeful, limited conventional incursions. The Pakistan perspective on TNWs is that they would deny India its aims in any conventional conflict by credibly threatening them with nuclear retaliation on the battlefield, which would reduce their tendency to escalate to full-scale conflict.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Sadia Tasleem et Toby Dalton. « Nuclear emulation: Pakistan's nuclear trajectory », *The Washington Quarterly* 41, n° 4 (2018) : 135-55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1558662>.

<sup>38</sup> Devin T. Hagerty, *The consequences of nuclear proliferation: lessons from South Asia*, BCSIA Studies in International Security (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> Zainab Iftikhar. « RECALIBRATING DETERRENCE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NUCLEAR DOCTRINES AND STRATEGIC STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA'S EMERGING STRATEGIC TRIANGLE (2015-2025) », *Journal of Media Horizons* 6, n° 3 (2025) : 725-40.

<sup>40</sup> Web Mechanix. « A Normal Nuclear Pakistan • Stimson Center », *Stimson Center*, 27 août 2015. <https://www.stimson.org/2015/normal-nuclear-pakistan-0/>.

Nonetheless, deployment of TNWs is very contentious and creates major concerns regarding control of escalation. Whereas Pakistan considers them acts of deterrence and war fighting, several strategists believe that TNWs should reduce the nuclear threshold of nuclear usage by increasing the probability of it using nuclear weapons. TNWs' introduction into conventional war planning adds ambiguity in the distinction between conventional and nuclear war, and there is a likelihood of accidental reassignment. In the event of using TNWs, strategic nuclear exchanges may soon take precedence and result in a nuclear nightmare that will be out of control.<sup>41</sup> As several recent studies by Iftikhar (2025) and Costlow (2025) point out, the presence of TNWs in regional conflict brings its inherent instability due to the hard-to-control escalation once the nuclear taboo is crossed.<sup>42 43</sup>

Pakistan has a well-established Nuclear Command and Control Authority (NCCA) chaired by the Prime Minister that strives to provide security, safety, and judicious employment of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. The leadership claims that there are layered mechanisms of securing nuclear materials and facilities to check external and internal threats. Even with the enhanced security architecture, there is significant vulnerability of the nuclear assets in Pakistan. In March 2022, the unintended escalation was proved by the launch of the accidental Indian BrahMos into Pakistani territory, and the technical malfunctions triggered the incident. In addition, independent evaluations provide that the use of fixed locations of the missiles and decentralized storage areas in Pakistan can be vulnerable in times of crisis, posing a threat to operations in times of pressure. There have been reservations despite these assurances about the vulnerability of Pakistan's nuclear assets, especially during a crisis condition. The introduction of mobile missile systems has also added to the complexity of command and control, notwithstanding the positive outcome with regard to survivability, particularly when compared to a conventional war, which is fast-moving. The danger of misunderstanding or lack of authorization, especially within the vastness of the war, is a considerable problem.<sup>44</sup> The nuclear policy adopted by Pakistan because of the security dilemma in its relation with India has become a complicated and dynamic policy. It is considered that it would be imperative to its survival as a credible deterrence posture is tightened, which involves the creation of an extended sea-based deterrent (e.g., nuclear-armed submarine).<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, this state of ongoing arms race, which is facilitated because of the unaddressed territorial disputes such as Kashmir, contributes to the regional instability. The intake of new means of

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<sup>41</sup> « Pakistan-A-Hard-Country-by-Anatol-Lieven-.pdf »consulté le 10 août 2025. <https://irfuuast.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Pakistan-A-Hard-Country-by-Anatol-Lieven-.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> Iftikhar, « RECALIBRATING DETERRENCE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NUCLEAR DOCTRINES AND STRATEGIC STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA'S EMERGING STRATEGIC TRIANGLE (2015–2025) ».

<sup>43</sup> Costlow, « Deterrence is Integrated in Theory, but not in Practice: The Problem and (Partial) Solution ».

<sup>44</sup> Mark T. Fitzpatrick et Mark Fitzpatrick, *Overcoming Pakistan's nuclear dangers*, Adelphi 443 (Abingdon, Oxon : Routledge, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> Hans M Kristensen, Matt Korda, et Eliana Johns. « Pakistan nuclear weapons, 2023 », *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 79, n° 5 (2023) : 329-45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2023.2245260>.

delivery and focus on TNWs are contributing to the negative loop in an arms race pattern, and nuclear stability in South Asia is a very challenging case to achieve in the long term.<sup>46</sup>

With a critical view, the FSD of Pakistan, which seems to be towards deterrence, is an indication of a profound mistrust and lack of belief in the conventional capabilities of defence. The ambiguity and the danger of the early resort to nuclear weapons and, specifically, TNWs are a foothold to the strategy that leaves a very unstable equilibrium exceptionally open to miscalculation and unforeseen escalation. The problem with Pakistan is striking a delicate balance between its deterrence requirements and the necessity of achieving crisis stability and avoiding accidental nuclear war.

India, on the other hand, has built its nuclear doctrine on a No First Use (NFU) policy and insists on a Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD). This position is an indication that India will never be the first to use its nuclear weapons, and it will only use nuclear weapons against a nuclear attack on its own territory or against its own forces. The main purpose of the Indian nuclear weapons is considered to be the prevention of nuclear aggression from the perspective of the ability to strike back devastatingly.<sup>47</sup> One of the major pillars of India's nuclear policy is the NFU commitment that seeks to cast an image of responsible nuclear power and lower the risk of a nuclear war. The CMD principle implies that India will sustain a nuclear force adequate to impose an intolerable degree of damage on an aggressor, but no more than that force is necessary for deterrence. This entails survivable second-strike, in the sense that India can still respond effectively after a first strike.<sup>48</sup>

Critical scrutiny and internal debate have, however, been the focus of the NFU policy. Although officially insisting on NFU, certain Indian strategists and political leaders have suggested the possibility of moving towards a so-called massive retaliation strategy, especially against non-nuclear attacks that pose a threat to Indian vital interests or a threat to the Indian national integrity, as might be the case in the Kashmir area.<sup>49</sup> Although it is not as acute as in the case of Pakistan, this ambiguity creates an element of uncertainty that can complicate the work of crisis management. The NFU is commonly questioned as to whether it may enhance the traditional aggression, or whether NFU is a good deterrent with a powerful second strike force. The peculiarities of the Indian NFU and how it affects the stability of the region have been explored in recent times by

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<sup>46</sup> Feroz Hassan Khan. « Challenges to nuclear stability in South Asia », *The Nonproliferation Review* 10, n° 1 (2003) : 59-74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700308436917>.

<sup>47</sup> Harsh V Pant. « India's Nuclear Doctrine and Command Structure: Implications for India and the World », *Comparative Strategy* 24, n° 3 (2005) : 277-93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930500197965>.

<sup>48</sup> Vipin Narang, *Nuclear strategy in the modern era: Regional powers and international conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Thomas S Park. « The Drivers of Indias Nuclear Weapons Program » (2014). <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/html/tr/ADA607620/>.

Ahyousha Khan et al, who speculate that the doctrine is not as rigid as it might seem on the face of it.<sup>50</sup>

### **3.3 Strategic Realities: Pakistan and China**

The nuclear policy of India is exceptionally complicated by the fact that it is located between two hostile countries, which are at the same time nuclear powers: Pakistan in the west and China in the north. This two-adversary scenario requires an integrated nuclear force structure and nuclear doctrine that has been used to deter both, even though the two adversaries differ enormously in terms of capabilities and strategic culture. Although India is striving to have a qualitative and quantitative advantage over Pakistan, its nuclear weapons are significantly less when compared to China, which thus poses a big strategic puzzle.<sup>51</sup>

The scenario of dealing with two nuclear armed opponents at the same time is a factor that has informed India to adopt a deterrence stance. India also considers China as a key strategic player, besides Pakistan, and the issues between the two countries have been in the form of territorial differences along the Line of Actual Control to the missile placements of China in the Tibetan plateau. Modernization and NFU activities in India are therefore geared towards sustaining a credible deterrence between these two states and therefore the necessity to have survivable second strike capabilities. Such a strategic fact has translated into a differentiated nuclear doctrine in India in a strategic fashion: Pakistan. A common theme is a counterforce strategy, that of destroying the nuclear forces and supporting infrastructure of the enemy, as a major strike strategy. This will be to neutralize the Pakistani nuclear attacks in the event of war.<sup>52</sup> And against China: A counter-value policy, aimed at civil population areas and plants, would be better suited since China has a more extensive and more advanced nuclear armada. This strategy has two aims: to impose unacceptable harm in an effort to prevent a first strike.<sup>53</sup>

This Indian determination to possess a survivable second-strike capability is evidenced by Indian attempts to implement the nuclear triad, which allows the delivery of nuclear weapons by land, by air, and by sea. It encompasses the land-based ballistic missiles (e.g., Prithvi, Agni series), air-launched (e.g., fighter jets with the ability to deliver nuclear gravity bombs and cruise missiles), and a nascent sea deterrent (e.g., K-4-carrying nuclear-powered submarines of the Arihant class are Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile -SLBMs like the K-4). With the advancement of the sea-based leg, the survivability

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<sup>50</sup> Ahyousha Khan, Amber Afreen Abid, et Sher Bano. « Indian Nuclear Doctrine: Reassessing the Strategic Ambiguities », *Global Strategic Pulse: CISSS Journal of Geopolitical & Geo-economic Studies* 1, n° 1 (2024) : 20-37.

<sup>51</sup> Harsh V Pant. « The Pakistan Thorn in China-India-US Relations », *The Washington Quarterly* 35, n° 1 (2012) : 83-95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2012.642294>.

<sup>52</sup> Marie Izuyama et Shinichi Ogawa, *The nuclear policy of India and Pakistan* (National Institute for Defence Studies, 2003).

[https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/kiyo/pdf/bulletin\\_e2002\\_3.pdf](https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/kiyo/pdf/bulletin_e2002_3.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> Izuyama et Ogawa.

of the Indian deterrent will be greatly improved, and the possibility of the adversary employing a disarming first strike is very unlikely.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, India has invested in a 3-layered Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system, which comprises systems such as Prithvi Air Defense and Advanced Air Defense. The BMD system is still on the development route, but when it is finally developed, the system will ensure that incoming missiles do not attack the cities and other important assets in India. The BMD vision of India is two-fold: it allows a protective safeguard, and it is a possibility to nullify an attack by Pakistani nuclear missiles, making its conventional deterrence stronger.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, critics may contend that BMD systems are destabilization sources since they may either stimulate a first strike due to a sense of invulnerability due to the defense or lead to an arms race where both sides are attempting to breach the defense.<sup>56</sup> The command of India's nuclear force lies with the Nuclear Command Authority (NCA), which is chaired by the Prime Minister. Elaborate coding and two-way verification mechanisms are in place to ensure secure and authorized nuclear weapon launch. India is also in the process of modernizing its nuclear forces, working on new means of delivery, and investing in uranium mining to sustain its deterrence capabilities since global pressures to end proliferation are continuing.<sup>57</sup> This modernization, which is still ongoing with the enhancement of deterrence, contributes to the arms race in this region. Both India and Pakistan keep developing new systems of delivering nuclear weapons by land, by air, and by sea, which makes them constantly feel threatened by each other, as every new system built is seen as a direct threat by the other party; thus, the security environment can be considered more unstable and unpredictable.<sup>58</sup>

Critically speaking, there are inherent contradictions in the case of India, even though India has an NFU strategy. The implied massive retaliation, the drive towards the counterforce policy with Pakistan, and the BMD development give a more active stance than can be indicated by the NFU doctrine. Together with still unresolved territorial disputes and the increasing conventional military imbalance, these factors form the complex situation in South Asia, prone to a volatile strategic environment. Both states are integrating command system digital upgrades and artificial intelligence. These innovations make decisions and survival faster, although there is a danger of automation-

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<sup>54</sup> Hans M Kristensen et al. « Indian nuclear weapons, 2024 », *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 80, n° 5 (2024) : 326-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2024.2388470>.

<sup>55</sup> Gurmeet Kanwal. « Strategic Stability in South Asia: An Indian? s Perspective. », 2017. <https://doi.org/10.2172/1367405>.

<sup>56</sup> Feroz Hassan Khan. « Challenges to nuclear stability in South Asia », *The Nonproliferation Review* 10, n° 1 (mars 2003) : 59-74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700308436917>.

<sup>57</sup> Harsh V. Pant. « India's Nuclear Doctrine and Command Structure: Implications for India and the World », *Comparative Strategy* 24, n° 3 (juillet 2005) : 277-93.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930500197965>.

<sup>58</sup> Pant.

based growth. Trusting AI too much can reduce the time of decision-making and create new mistakes in the crisis situation.<sup>59</sup>

#### **4 Implications and Risks: Crisis Stability and Escalation Pathways in South Asia**

The metastatic effect of the NFU/ CMD doctrine of India and the FSD / first-use ambiguity of Pakistan places South Asia under a fragile and unbalanced nuclear balancing. A combination of this asymmetry, unresolved territorial disputes, and a history of conflict creates several avenues for escalation and calls into question the effectiveness of familiar deterrence processes. The dangers are not theoretical only, as they have already revealed themselves during the development of various crises that almost led the region to greater conflict.

The major basis of the instability is the differing nuclear philosophy. The desire by Pakistan to put forward the first use, especially with TNWs, is meant to counter the conventional advantage of India. Nevertheless, such a policy threatens to reduce the nuclear threshold, thereby increasing the potency of the usage of nuclear weapons as an option in a conventional war. On the other hand, in India, the NFU appears to be settling down, but like in the US, the threat of massive retaliation, which refers to an enhanced retaliation to the slightest use of nuclear weapons, or even in response to large conventional attacks, has been associated with unreasonable expectations. This poses a life-threatening paradox on the side of Pakistan, where its first strike may provoke an extremely damaging Indian retaliation, which would result in a runaway escalation.<sup>60</sup> There are several historical and contemporary crises, which offer critical empirical data regarding the interaction of these asymmetric doctrines under pressure, the inherent risks associated with such interactions, and the difficulty involved in managing such crises:

- 1) Kargil Conflict (1999): This conventional war, not long after both countries made announcements to become nuclear powers, is frequently used and cited to define the stability-instability paradox. It is arguably the nuclear deterrent possessed by Pakistan that served to give it confidence when it conducted conventional incursions into India, as it knew that India could not afford to go to a full-out war. The nuclear overhang progressively restricted the Indian response mainly to its area of the Line of Control. Although nuclear weapons forestalled a broader war, they did not stop the

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<sup>59</sup> « The Militarisation of AI and Evolving Nuclear Doctrines in South Asia: Challenges and Implications », *Australian Institute of International Affairs* consulté le 4 décembre 2025.

<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-militarisation-of-ai-and-evolving-nuclear-doctrines-in-south-asia-challenges-and-implications/>.

<sup>60</sup> Sumit Ganguly. « Nuclear Stability in South Asia », *International Security* 33, n° 2 (2008) : 45-70. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.33.2.45>.

small conflict, and this contradiction subsequently came into action.<sup>61</sup>

- 2) Twin Peaks Crisis (2001-2002): The Indian Parliament was attacked, and India responded with a massive offensive on a conventional basis (Operation Parakram). Pakistan retaliated through the nuclear escalation threat, including the possible release of TNWs. This long struggle, which took months to resolve, put both nations on the brink of war. The crisis demonstrated the challenges of de-escalation when both sides possess nuclear weapons and have differing escalation ladders. It further made use of international mediation as one of the solutions to the nuclear clash.<sup>62</sup>
- 3) Balakot-Pulwama Crisis (2019): a crisis erupted after a suicide attack at Pulwama and a subsequent airstrike by the Pakistan Air Force at Balakot and involved a direct air battle between the air forces of India and Pakistan. Although no explicit nuclear threats were evident, the speedy intensification and the shooting of aircraft proved how thin the conventional deterrence is in a nuclearized world. Crisis highlighted the necessity of speedy mechanisms of de-escalation and the threat of a miscalculation against a tense background.<sup>63</sup>
- 4) The 2025 India-Pakistan Escalation (Hypothetical Case Study based on recent research): Many recent academic and policy discussions, such as Costlow (2025) and Iftikhar (2025), have examined hypothetical cases of future India-Pakistan conflicts, and frequently include aspects of multi-domain warfare and new technologies. Based on these analyses, future conflicts may be characterized by the intricate interconnection of conventional military operations, cybernetic attacks, drone-based conflicts, and information operations, but with the dark clouds of the potential nuclear weapons. Incorporation of these new sectors into the conflict situations presents new avenues of escalation and makes conventional deterrence figures more complicated. To give an example, a cyber-attack on a major infrastructure may be seen as an existential threat, and the potential nuclear action may be taken even when the aforementioned attack itself is of a non-kinetic nature.<sup>64-65</sup> This hypothetical situation shows how the development of coordinated crisis communication and de-escalation plans is necessary as warfare itself continues to change.

The main threat of the India-Pakistan nuclear dyad is miscalculation. This may come because of: Misperception: one party can get the other wrong on either intentions or capabilities, and take escalatory actions it did not intend. The ambiguity of FSD in Pakistan, which is intentional, is especially liable to be misunderstood by India. Control and Command Breakdown: Both nations have C2 in place; however, under

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<sup>61</sup> Ganguly.

<sup>62</sup> Web Mechanix. « US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis • Stimson Center », *Stimson Center*, 1 septembre 2006. <https://www.stimson.org/2006/us-crisis-management-south-asias-twin-peaks-crisis/>.

<sup>63</sup> « Balakot, Deterrence, and Risk: How This India-Pakistan Crisis Will Shape the Next – War on the Rocks » consulté le 10 août 2025. [https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/balakot-deterrence-and-risk/?utm\\_](https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/balakot-deterrence-and-risk/?utm_).

<sup>64</sup> Costlow, « Deterrence is Integrated in Theory, but not in Practice: The Problem and (Partial) Solution ».

<sup>65</sup> Iftikhar, « RECALIBRATING DETERRENCE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NUCLEAR DOCTRINES AND STRATEGIC STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA'S EMERGING STRATEGIC TRIANGLE (2015–2025) ».

intense pressure of a fast-developing conflict (particularly involving the use of TNWs), there is stress that can pose breakdowns in communication or use without authorization. Pakistan's political instability makes nuclear governance more difficult. A poor civilian institution and a history of military coup means that there is a threat of lack of clear command in the case of an internal crisis. Analysts fear that institutional instability will be detrimental to the integrity of launch authority in case of any emergency.<sup>66</sup> Accidental Use: Technical failures, human error, or a faulty alarm could result in an accidental launch, which has disastrous effects. Non-State Actors: The fact that there are groups of terrorists who operate in the region is an additional risk. A terrorist attack, especially one that causes significant casualties, would be misinterpreted or even perpetrated to elicit military retaliation, and it would end up escalating tensions between the states. Emerging sources of conflict go beyond Kashmir. The recent water disputes, such as the waters of the Indus-Waters Treaty, such as the Indian diversion of the river flows temporarily, have contributed to the new tensions. Such resource oriented frictions when not controlled may lead to similar developments as the traditional territorial conflicts.<sup>67</sup>

The modernization of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan on an ongoing basis is a source of the perilous arms race. Every new step taken by one party (e.g., the nuclear triad of India), also regarded as a threat by the other side (Pakistan and TNWs), has responses in kind. This arms spiral distracts the smarter resources from the socio-economic growth and gives a permanent sense of instability. The rollout of new methods of delivery, such as sea-based deterrents, in addition to making survival easier, also complicates the process of arms control, as well as magnifying the likelihood of abuse at sea.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the unsolved territorial issues, especially Kashmir, present an unending spark, which is readily available to break out at any time. The level of nationalism that has been enhanced in both nations also adds fuel to this tension; therefore, a diplomatic solution becomes difficult, and more probable is a military conflict. These risks are further compounded by the lack of any well-established, structured, strategic communication systems that can provide opportunities for de-escalation and confidence-building in times of crisis.<sup>69</sup>

In conclusion, the skewed nuclear policies along with a discrepancy in history-based conflict and the absence of trust make up a very volatile situation in South Asia. This is proven empirically by history, which shows that nuclear weapons do not prevent limited conflicts and that, although they might deter massive war, they are much more likely to

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<sup>66</sup> « Pakistan Coup Underscores Nuclear Dimension », Carnegie Endowment for International Peace consulté le 4 décembre 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/1999/11/pakistan-coup-underscores-nuclear-dimension?lang=en>.

<sup>67</sup> « The India-Pakistan Water Dispute: Unpacking the Health Consequences », Think Global Health consulté le 4 décembre 2025. <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/india-pakistan-water-dispute-unpacking-health-consequences>.

<sup>68</sup> Feroz Hassan Khan. « Challenges to nuclear stability in South Asia », *The Nonproliferation Review* 10, n° 1 (2003) : 59-74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700308436917>.

<sup>69</sup> Khan.

cause inadvertent escalation. Crisis management is also made complex by the changing nature of warfare that is increasingly adding newer technologies and areas of consideration of warfare, making the old assumptions of deterrence no longer hold water.

## 5 Policy Implications and the Path to Sustainable Stability

The analysis of India and Pakistan's nuclear strategies reveals a complex and perilous landscape, characterized by asymmetric doctrines, inherent escalation risks, and a persistent arms race. Although it can be argued that nuclear weapons have discouraged a major conventional war between the two states, at the same time, the presence of nuclear weapons has contributed to a climate of instability because it has allowed low-level wars and potentiated the unintended escalation. Going ahead, a multi-dimensional solution that transcends classical deterrent paradigms is needed to make South Asian stable in a sustainable manner, which entails dealing with the very causes of the conflict.

The conventional wisdom that nuclear weapons inherently stabilize relations between adversaries is challenged by the South Asian experience. The paradox of stability-instability is also quite obvious, and deterrence and stability at the strategic level have been witnessed and possibly facilitating instability at conventional and sub-conventional levels. Both the domestic policy and the international community of India and Pakistan have to consider the working assumptions of their policy of deterrence very critically. The desire to ensure complete security by means of military expansion, notably in the nuclear arena, has been found to result in the security dilemma, where insecurity in one state is viewed as a manoeuvre by another to enhance their security, therefore, causing the arms race situation of never-ending arms racing.<sup>70</sup>

In the case of Pakistan, it is imperative to seriously question its full-spectrum deterrence doctrine, especially the application of tactical nuclear weapons. Although they are aimed at deterring conventional aggression, TNWs considerably decrease the nuclear threshold and make nuclear usage earlier in case of crisis much more likely. Looking at other conventional means of deterrence, increased conventional capabilities may see the dependence of TNW reduced further and bring about a sense of enhanced stability.<sup>71</sup> In the case of India, it is important to have a clear articulation of the No First Use policy enshrined and observed conscientiously. Uncertainty or sign the principle of massive retaliation after non-nuclear aggression discredits the principle of NFU and can become a trigger for nuclear aggression by Pakistan. To prevent the limited conventional incursions, enhancing normal defense to force the deterrence of such incursions would

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<sup>70</sup> Kennette Benedict et Kate Kaplan. « Nuclear Threats and the (F)Utility of Law », *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 17 juillet 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-041822-034418>.

<sup>71</sup> Iftikhar, « RECALIBRATING DETERRENCE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NUCLEAR DOCTRINES AND STRATEGIC STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA'S EMERGING STRATEGIC TRIANGLE (2015–2025) ».

not be like depending on nuclear threats, but would be in line with its NFU policy and de-escalation.<sup>72</sup>

The absence of robust, institutionalized crisis communication mechanisms between India and Pakistan remains a critical vulnerability. In times of high tension, straightforward and secure pathways of communication are critical to avoid miscalculations and unpredictable increases in tensions. Although informal back-channel communications were resolved at some point during times of crises in the past, this is not adequate to tame the in-depth dynamics of a nuclear standoff. Setting up dedicated, secure, and redundant hotlines and periodic military-to-military talks may go a long way to improving stability during a crisis.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, the two states need more extensive activities and commitment concerning nuclear risk reduction. This incorporates a sense of transparency in nuclear arsenals, doctrines, and command and control procedures. Although this is very difficult given the distrust that exists, gradual changes to increased transparency would allow the creation of confidence and minimize the probability of accidental or unauthorized use. Any international intervention that is aimed at easing such actions, possibly by use of third-party interference, would be constructive.<sup>74</sup>

In summary, sustainable nuclear stability in South Asia is not possible until such a time as the informal causes of the conflict are removed, especially the inability to resolve the territorial dispute between the two South Asian states over Kashmir. So long as this core problem continues to be a point of burning interest, it will remain a source of nationalism, wariness, and arms races. There should be diplomatic initiatives, promoted by the global community, to engage in seeking a fair and lasting solution to these and other lingering issues of territorial disputes. The South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a viable example of a possible regional cooperation. Despite the stagnation in its development under the influence of India-Pakistan tensions, SAARC suggests an already prepared platform to interact on the deal of trade, climate security, disaster response, and public health. Reinvigorating these mechanisms may aid in contributing to the decrease of mistrust and achieve a long-term crisis prevention.<sup>75</sup> In addition to conflict resolution, developing cooperation among states on non-security-related matters would result in increased trust and a more favourable atmosphere of dialogue on strategic issues over time. A more stable and prosperous South Asia might be achieved through economic integration, cultural exchanges, and joint efforts in dealing with climate change or other health issues, eliminating the motive to resolve problems of confrontation.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Khan, Abid, et Bano, « Indian Nuclear Doctrine: Reassessing the Strategic Ambiguities ».

<sup>73</sup> Sumit Ganguly. « Nuclear Stability in South Asia », *International Security* 33, n° 2 (octobre 2008) : 45-70. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.33.2.45>.

<sup>74</sup> Ganguly.

<sup>75</sup> « SAARC In Limbo: How India-Pakistan Rivalry Crippled South Asian Regionalism », *The Friday Times*, 13 novembre 2025. <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/13-Nov-2025/saarc-limbo-india-pakistan-rivalry-crippled-south-asian-regionalism>.

<sup>76</sup> Ganguly, « Nuclear Stability in South Asia », octobre 2008.

## **6 Conclusion**

Indian and Pakistani asymmetric nuclear doctrines of No-First Use (NFU) and Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD) versus Full Spectrum Deterrence and first-use ambiguity have resulted in precariously balanced strategic status quo that both empowers and threatens the security of the region. While a design to avoid violence, these doctrines create multiple pathways of escalation, which is particularly the case in the absence of settlements over territorial disputes such as Kashmir and the lack of effective crisis communication. The analysis of the Kargil War of 1999, Twin Peaks of 2001-2002, Balakot-Pulwama episode of 2019 and the escalation of 2025 shows that if nuclear deterrence has not abolished conflict it has transformed its mode - paving the way for sub-conventional and cyber-enabled conflict under the nuclear shadow.

From the legal point of view, there is a contradiction between both doctrines and the binding nature of international law. The ICJ's 1996 Advisory Opinion, the fundamental norms of the UN Charter and IHL do not allow threats or uses of force that are inconsistent with necessity, proportionality and distinction. India's massive retaliation policy also puts the principle of proportionality at risk, as does Pakistan's first-use policy and its continued use of tactical nuclear weapons. Furthermore South Asia is isolated from the emerging international legal consensus on nuclear restraint by the continued non-adherence of both states to the global disarmament instruments such as the NPT and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). To ensure long-term stability, patterns of articulation in the region which rely on military counters to military threats must move beyond militarized thinking. Therefore, Pakistan needs to reassess its reliance on tactical nuclear weapons and build up its conventional capability to elevate the nuclear threshold, and India must make the NFU commitment coherent and consistent. Establishing institutionalized crisis communication such as nuclear hotlines, joint risk reduction centers and missile launch notifications would reduce the potential for misperception and accidental escalation. Confidence building mechanisms need to be complemented by diplomatic efforts to seek resolution to the Kashmir dispute, increase transparency and work on non-security related areas like trade and climate resilience. Ultimately, the rule of law needs to be integrated into the design of nuclear strategy in order to achieve peace in South Asia. Only by positioning deterrence in legal, diplomatic and humanitarian frameworks can India and Pakistan shift from competition towards mutual security and prosperity in the region.

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