

# The Evolved Security Dynamics of South Asia: Challenges to Pakistan's Nuclear Threshold

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**ABSTRACT** *The longstanding unresolved issue of Kashmir serves as a nuclear flashpoint between India and Pakistan. Since 2019, the prevalent security environment of the region has dominated the discourse surrounding the regional and global security architecture. India's policies during the Pulwama-Balakot crisis and the revocation of Kashmir's constitutional status demonstrate the country's intentions of dominating the escalation ladder in the region and marginalizing the muslim community of Kashmir. Because of the conventional disparity in South Asia where India is big in terms of size, economy and military build-up, Pakistan has been further threatened by India's aggressive policies and provocative military modernization. Consequently, Pakistan may be compelled to further revisit its nuclear threshold level to overcome India's aggression.*

**Keywords:** Nuclear Security, India, Pakistan, Nuclear Threshold, Pulwama-Balakot Crisis, Kashmir

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## Background

Soon after their nuclear-weapon status was announced in May 1998, the two South Asian rivals, India and Pakistan, witnessed a 1999 crisis (the Kargil conflict). Despite rapid escalation from both countries leading to a limited war, both sides were deterred from expanding the conflict, given the presence of nuclear weapons. The next big crisis was the military stand-off from 2001-2002, which went on for more than eight months and was seen as the region's first real nuclear deterrence test. Given its conventional military superiority, India remained deterred from conducting an international-border military offensive fearing a nuclear retaliation from Pakistan. The crisis ultimately dissipated after each side declared that its diplomatic and security goals had been achieved.<sup>1</sup>

Although India blamed Pakistan for sponsoring the 2008 Mumbai attacks, without any undeniable evidence, the incident did not result in a major military deployment from either side. Based on India's aggressive and offensive approach at that time, it might have resulted in an all-out war but it was the other way around. Pakistan's nuclear deterrence played an important role throughout the crisis by preventing the conflict from going beyond a certain point. Nevertheless, India exploited the emergent scenario in its favor on the political and diplomatic levels by shaping public opinion among the electorate and defaming Pakistan at various in-

ternational diplomatic forums. The whole episode became a blueprint for all future South Asian geostrategic discourse, where India seeks to be perceived as a 'victimized state' and portrays Pakistan as an 'irresponsible' nuclear state.<sup>2</sup>

The 'Pulwama-Balakot crisis' occurred almost a decade later as a result of a suicide attack by a local militant, an Indian citizen residing in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK). Contrary to foreign observers' expectations, India was vigilant and initiated 'mock' surgical strikes, whether intentionally or accidentally is yet to be ascertained due to contradictory statements made by the Indian military; finally, contrary to the widely-held view, Pakistan did not resort to nuclear signaling but made a suitable conventional response. The Pulwama crisis, which marks a paradigm shift in the nuclear doctrine of India, poses questions about India's doctrinal evolution. Pakistan's Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) was in effect stopping India from escalating all the way through the crisis.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike several previous attacks, the February 2019 Pulwama attack was a crucial event in re-shaping the prevailing notions of South Asian strategic stability. The subsequent short-lived military confrontation between South Asia's two nuclear-armed rivals proved to be a dangerous one. Moreover, the relevance of the deterrence factor in such a critical situation has been discussed at global and regional levels. Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons maintained the idea of

'massive retaliation' in Indian strategic thought and undoubtedly stopped the entire crisis from escalating further. Pakistan's nuclear doctrinal posture of 'full spectrum deterrence' in line with 'credible minimum deterrence' remains noteworthy on a broader level.

## Nuclear Deterrence and South Asia

Nuclear deterrence may be described as the threat of using nuclear weapons to prevent an opponent state from taking several actions that could be considered harmful to its security interests. Deterrence can be divided into two sub-categories: deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial. The first is offensive rhetoric and may threaten a nuclear war; the second is a defensive and more realistic tactic that seeks to highlight the adversary's cost-benefit analysis in a way that undermines the adversary's willingness to take an undesirable course of action.<sup>4</sup>

A brief analysis of all previous crises between India and Pakistan reveals that with the exception of 2001-2002, when Pakistan may have used the strategy of 'deterrence by punishment' to avoid a major conflict along the international border, most of the crises, like the current one, were deterred by denying the adversary's ability to escalate beyond a specific limit. In the background of Pakistan and India, whose direct air confrontation seriously violated the fundamental principles of nuclear deter-

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rence, the deterrent role of nuclear weapons has been profoundly undermined. To place the floundering nuclear deterrence in South Asia in perspective, it is important to revisit the core principles of the nuclear deterrence concept. Deterrence implies intimidating the aggressor with the threat of disastrous consequences. This tacit, reciprocal understanding guarantee mutually assures survival maintained by the fear of mutually assured destruction in the event of a nuclear exchange between two nuclear belligerents.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of the recent tensions between the two nuclear neighbors, revisiting some of the lessons learned from the Cold War era that remain important to South Asia could be helpful. First, no nuclear weapon state or non-nuclear-weapon state can initiate a military campaign against another nuclear power aiming to achieve complete victory, according to Colin Gray.<sup>6</sup> Second, political and military campaigns against a nuclear power must be undertaken with great caution because of the very

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high cost of nuclear war; finally, nuclear-weapon states do not go to war with each other out of fear of endless consequences.<sup>7</sup> The United States and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War developed and amassed nuclear weapons numbering in the thousands. The weapons were aimed at acquiring a credible preemptive strike capability. However, neither state ever used those weapons against the other, primarily because of the fear of retaliation. In this sense, the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962 was undeniable evidence of the applicability of the concept of 'Mutual Assured Destruction' (MAD). This concept in particular holds possible insights for the nuclear rivals in South Asia.<sup>8</sup>

MAD has become relevant in South Asia since the evolution of both India and Pakistan's nuclear doctrines. MAD creates shared vulnerabilities when it comes to counter-force nuclear-weapon states policy targeting. India's post-Pulwama airstrikes have enabled India to adopt counterforce targeting strategies, but India cannot be assured whether or not its actions

would stay below Pakistan's nuclear threshold.<sup>9</sup>

### The Pulwama-Balakot Crisis and Escalation Dynamics

The Pulwama-Balakot crisis that occurred in February 2019 has profoundly called into question South Asia's traditional notion of conflict escalation.<sup>10</sup> On the night of February 26, 2019, India claimed to have conducted an airstrike in Balakot over a 'non-military' target. This strike was carried out by Mirage 2000 fighters which dropped Israeli-origin spice 2000 bombs. India claimed that the attack was successful and that more than 350 terrorists were killed. However, later on, independent satellite images negated this Indian claim as there was no considerable damage on the ground other than a destroyed tree. At that stage, India withdrew its initial claim and a new narrative came into the spotlight that the strike was meant to show the Indian resolve to resort by not attacking and killing people. The air incursion emerged as a significant challenge to Pakistan's sovereignty and integrity that required a response.

As an appropriate response to India's air aggression, Pakistan chose to respond in kind. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) retaliated wisely and only military installations were targeted across the Line of Control (LOC). Precision strikes were not carried out inside Indian occupied territory with the aim of avoiding further escalation. Showing its professional capabilities,



A satellite image of the Khushab Reactor in Pakistan taken on February 6, 2013. The image features the completed Reactors 2 and 3 with steam rising from the site, as well as Reactor 4, which was under construction at the time.

DigitalGlobe via Getty Images

the PAF managed to shoot down two MIG 21s of the Indian Air Force (IAF) and one pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan, was captured. As a goodwill gesture, the pilot was later released unconditionally.

India's continued assertion of preemptive strike under its notion of waging a limited war against Pakistan is evident in various crises in the past including the Pulwama-Balakot Crisis of 2019. However, Pakistan's nuclear capability has continued to play a decisive role in preventing a war between the nuclear-armed rivals in South Asia.<sup>11</sup>

As per various international reports, India is the biggest importer of arms in the world. At the same time, India is enhancing its strategic collaboration with great powers, especially with the U.S.<sup>12</sup> This demonstrates that India wants to pursue a policy of projecting its influence and hegemony

in the region and beyond. With such a notion, India seems to be deliberately undermining Pakistan's nuclear threshold. This further increases Pakistan's threat perception vis-à-vis India.

## India's Nuclear Doctrinal Posture

India upheld the 'No First Use' (NFU) policy in its 1999 Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND). However, the DND was first revisited in January 2003 by India's Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). An amendment was made at that time according to which India reserves the right to respond with nuclear weapons if it fears that its armed forces and citizens are under chemical or biological attack. This assessment may, therefore, be considered a rejection of the NFU strategy. On that basis, it can be assumed that since 2003 India has been striving

to step away from its NFU strategy. The amendment further states that India's retaliation would be 'massive and inadmissible damage.' Moreover, since the years 2016-2017, the idea of a 'splendid first strike'<sup>13</sup> has been frequently argued within Indian and International strategic circles. Splendid First Strike states that, as per India's assessment, if India feared that Pakistan might use nuclear weapons, India would respond to such an act with a splendid first strike. This preemptive nuclear deterrent posture by India seems to be an overt attempt to undermine Pakistan's credible nuclear deterrent posture. In the same vein, quite recently, on August 16, 2019, when Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh was on a visit to the Pokhran site, he announced that India would revise its NFU policy. Such an apparent change from its declared NFU policy would be in the light of future circumstances where India might again try to violate Pakistani air space or carry out an attack across the LOC. This assertion by the statement given by Singh would likely have implications for Pakistan to raise its 'nuclear threshold' level even further.<sup>14</sup> These changes in India's policies have brought about a similar shift in Pakistan, which now maintains a credible nuclear deterrence strategy under its FSD. Pakistan's FSD vis-à-vis India was approved back in 2013, but there remains a space for a credible sea-based deterrent as an assured second-strike capability. India's completion of a nuclear triad that includes land, air and sea-based nuclear-capable delivery systems compels Pakistan to complete its triad aimed

at strengthening its conventional naval capabilities.<sup>15</sup>

## Pakistan's Nuclear Threshold

The term 'nuclear threshold' refers to certain 'red lines' (declared or undeclared) that a state has drawn, violation of which might result in nuclear retaliation. In the South Asian context, it is widely perceived that both India and Pakistan have maintained such red lines and that the response to crossing them would be nuclear. However, Pakistan's nuclear threshold is believed to be lower compared to India's because of the conventional asymmetry in the region in favor of India. India's quantitative advantage has compelled Pakistan to make its nuclear threshold more considerable as a retaliatory gesture vis-à-vis India.

After the overt nuclearization of South Asia in 1998, the nuclear doctrines of both countries became the key component of their nuclear policies. In this regard, Pakistan's credible minimum deterrence is significant and forms the very basis of the country's overall doctrinal posture. Nuclear weapons have tremendous destructive power and have an equalization impact on deterrent equations since a small number of nuclear warheads can inflict significant destruction. The achievement of a quantitative nuclear arms balance is therefore both excessive and unwanted, unlike the conventional military balance.<sup>16</sup>

Pakistan's full-spectrum deterrent strategy is in response to the evol-

ing strategic landscape in South Asia, where India attempts to upgrade its conventional and nuclear arms, as well as to purchase and improve its systems of Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) and devise offensive warfare strategies. Pakistan's National Command Authority (NCA) declared in September 2013 that it had adopted a credible minimum of full-spectrum destructive capacity and capability to disengage its traditional military equation with India by increasing its deployment of the nuclear arsenal. The change from strategic to full-spectrum deterrence in Pakistan's nuclear posture is meant to deter and challenge India's military upgrading and its limited warfare policy: the Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) as India's aggressive strategic policy is also known. Without passing the nuclear borderline of the country, up to eight independent blinded brigades are required to penetrate up to 50 kilometers. Pakistan introduced and deployed Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNW) in response to this threat. Pakistan's quality response to India's policy objectives was the development of these missiles. The TNWs seek to restore the credibility of deterrence at the tactical level, which was believed to have been weakened in the subcontinent with the implementation of CSD.<sup>17</sup>

Since India's CSD takes advantage of Pakistan's tactical levels of nuclear arsenal, Pakistan has therefore been forced to build TNWs to fill holes on the tactical level of war and to deny India room for a limited war. In crisis times, TNWs provide Pakistan with

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an additional option, at the strategic level, to respond appropriately to India. Pakistan could establish a triad of nuclear forces under its full-spectrum nuclear deterrence posture against the backdrop of India's enhanced nuclear capabilities at sea. Pakistan's nuclear weapon program is a strong instrument to counter India's vast military dominance in foreign and security policy. Under these conditions, Pakistan's deployment of short-range nuclear delivery mechanisms and TNWs to counter India's offensive strategy is a strategic imperative. It also helps to successfully resolve evolving, multi-dimensional threats to its security and challenges to its sovereignty.<sup>18</sup>

The February 2019 military escalation between India and Pakistan is evidence of India's approach to challenging Pakistan's nuclear threshold. India has threatened Pakistan with a 'preemptive splendid first strike' under the notion of limited war and via its provocative strategy. India breached Pakistan's airspace with fighter jets, resulting in a dangerous escalation of political and military

hostilities between both countries. As such, the Pulwama-Balakot episode posed concerns about the prevalence of Pakistan's nuclear deterrence and resulted in an ongoing debate on nuclear deterrence and its applicability in such a sensitive situation at the national and international levels. Pakistan successfully confronted India's sub-conventional hostility on the same level the very next day on February 27, 2019. However, Pakistan's nuclear threshold remained imperative throughout the whole episode due to the well-known perception that the situation could become an all-out nuclear war if both countries were to escalate further.<sup>19</sup>

### **India's Negative Nuclear Signaling in the Aftermath of the Pulwama Crisis**

The existence of nuclear weapons in South Asia has made the region's security dynamics more complex. Almost every crisis since the testing of nuclear bombs in 1998 has been directly or indirectly linked to the nuclear button. In this regard, the understanding of nuclear signaling is significant. In simple words, nuclear signaling refers to the communication of the threat of use of nuclear weapons in a crisis environment. In the contemporary South Asian security environment, nuclear signaling is quite evident from India's aggressive behavior after crises that involved the threat of the use of nuclear weapons.

During the Pulwama-Balakot crisis, India reportedly deployed missiles



India successfully launches its longest range nuclear weapon capable inter-continental ballistic missile, the Agni-5 from Wheeler Island, Odisha on April 19, 2012.

PALLAVA BAGLA / Corbis via Getty Images

along Pakistan's border. It was speculated that India might select six targets across various cities of Pakistan. Consequently, Pakistan maintained credible deterrence by asserting that it would retaliate three times more than India. Indian leadership in the past has referred to the use of the first strike option against Pakistan aimed at neutralizing Pakistan's resort to retaliate. Based on the level of hostility between the two countries it is quite possible that the strategic objectives might have been wrongly perceived. With such signaling, India wanted to project itself as a powerful country capable of using nuclear weapons in crisis situations. This was significant for India since Pakistan's response

had already created embarrassment for India at the international level.<sup>20</sup>

Pakistan on the other hand behaved sensibly at the political, diplomatic and military levels without involvement in any provocative nuclear signaling. Since the start of the crisis, Pakistan achieved its political, diplomatic, and military goals in a much better position, as there was no nuclear signaling from Pakistan. In fact, the nuclear signaling that was felt during the crisis was initiated by India. In this regard, it is quite noteworthy that there were clear reports of the deployment of India's naval fleet to the Arabian Sea. India's nuclear-capable submarine the *Arihant* was part of this fleet. The submarine is one of the advanced pieces of equipment in the Indian naval inventory, capable of delivering ballistic missiles at a range of up to 750 kilometers. Such nuclear signaling by India during the crisis serves as a dangerous precedent for regional peace.

### The Debate of a 'New Normal' in South Asia

India's assertion of preemptive surgical strikes against Pakistan has been projected by India as a 'new normal' in South Asia. Yet such a 'normal' would result in even more disastrous consequences for peace, security and stability in the region. It is quite evident from how India, in its desire for a limited conflict, claims that it reserves the right to strike inside Pakistan. Although aspiring to such a notion of new normal, however, re-

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cent crises have only further proved to be an embarrassment for India at the political and military levels.

India's post-2008 political rhetoric after the Mumbai attacks seems to be more inclined toward non-state actors. In a future crisis, this would compel India to take punitive surgical strikes against such actors across the border. Pakistan, on the other hand, due to its conventional position of disadvantage, would be compelled to use the nuclear option. Such assumptions proved to be invalid during the Balakot crisis, however, as Pakistan's response was appropriate at the conventional level. Therefore, the notion of conventional retaliation under the broader posture of full-spectrum deterrence remains applicable during a crisis without engagement in any nuclear signaling.

The Pulwama-Balakot crisis has some important lessons for the future. The suicide bombing was committed by a young individual from Kashmir and was a direct result of Kashmir's suppression by the occupied forces. Furthermore, the violent persecu-

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tion of the Kashmiri people who had protested against Indian oppression compelled the young person to take such an act.

There remains no space for a waging limited or low-intensity conflict by India as long as Pakistan maintains a credible and reliable nuclear deterrence. Similarly, if India were to follow its self-proclaimed notion of new normal and undertake a preemptive strike (land or air), such a contingency would have severe political, diplomatic and military implications for Pakistan and would further impact the security and stability of the South Asian region. Furthermore, the notion of new normal would likely add to the volatility in South Asia and increase the prospects of turning a small conflict into a full-fledged war.<sup>21</sup>

India is more interested in clearly projecting military hegemony vis-à-vis Pakistan than in achieving it, as expressed in the statements of its political and military leadership. In this regard, India has tried to project its military prowess against Pakistan as evident from the recent crises. This

Indian interest has challenged the threshold of Pakistan's nuclear capabilities, and at the same time, it reflects India's aspirations of becoming a regional hegemon. However, Pakistan's appropriate response, coupled with its credible nuclear deterrence posture in the midst of this so-called 'new normal,' seems to have worked out by preventing the crisis from escalating further. As India's aggressive posture seems to be breaking down with its self-proclaimed 'new normal,' Pakistan's strategic posture is unlikely to face significant challenges, at least for now.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

After the nuclearization of South Asia in 1998, the security patterns of the region changed significantly. Nuclearization has had a drastic and permanent effect on regional and extra-regional politics, the security architecture of South Asia and the international security order. In today's dynamic South Asian security landscape, Pakistan's FSD has recently been verified. South Asia's current security architecture revolves around India's reckless actions as a nuclear state. Pakistan, because of India's desire to achieve regional dominance, must preserve a certain balance of power in order to maintain its security. Through the years, the 'minimum credible deterrence' that forms the basic foundation of Pakistan's deterrence posture has grown into the guarantee of a full-spectrum deterrent posture. Nevertheless, this stance signals that, since Pakistan's

nuclear weapons are, in theory, defensive, they ought to dissuade India from all forms of hostilities. Even now, Pakistan could still be opening its options and giving scope for a 'first strike' to be a feasible deterrent against India if any of its specified red lines are crossed. Pakistan's nuclear policy is focused primarily on maintaining its stability, protecting its sovereignty and blocking India either by 'minimum credible deterrence' or 'full spectrum deterrence.'

India's desire to gradually project itself as a global hegemon and future superpower seems likely to grow; its policies seek to destabilize Pakistan's current nuclear threshold. Under these circumstances, Pakistan's view of the threat will probably continue to be more inclined to its eastern borderline. Pakistan does not want to fight India with its military ambitions and hegemonic designs based on its principled position as a responsible nuclear weapons state. Pakistan must maintain its deterrence symmetry vis-à-vis India and preserve the 'balance of power' in the South Asian region, based on undeniable threats to its existence from India. The only way for Pakistan to maintain a precise power-balance and the validity of its nuclear threshold is through its nuclear deterrence and conventional enhancements. Recent examples show that India has been trying to challenge Pakistan's nuclear threshold. These challenges have mostly been carried out at the sub-conventional level. In this regard, Pakistan needs to further expand its nuclear threshold level to address the conventional and

sub-conventional threats from India. Such a re-assessment of its threshold level would serve as a decisive factor for Pakistan's nuclear threshold in the foreseeable future. ■

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