PAKISTAN'S DETERRENCE POSTURE AFTER MAY 2025 CONFLICT: RELEVANCE, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE TRAJECTORIES

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Abstract
The May 2025 standoff between Pakistan and India is arguably one of the most significant post-nuclear crises in South Asia. It revealed the effectiveness, as well as the limited nature of deterrence in a multi-domain security setting. This paper re-evaluates the applicability of nuclear deterrence following the May 2025 episode by using a Pakistan-oriented analytical lens. It integrates knowledge of the classical theory of deterrence, stability-instability paradox, and the latest research on technological transformation in the modern military strategy. The study proposes that nuclear deterrence ensured high strategic stability, yet it was washed away at the conventional and sub-conventional levels. The commitment of India to use graded punitive military response and the corresponding proportionate and technologically adaptive response of Pakistan indicates a deterrence environment in transition. This landscape is built on the basis of asymmetries in the abilities, shifts in the doctrinal preferences, and the rapidity of the crisis emergence. Sub-conventional triggers continue to be a source of persistent instability due to outstanding political differences, rival threat statements, and momentum in diplomatic interactions. The paper concludes that crisis behaviour between the two states is still framed on the issue of deterrence. However, its performance is becoming more contingent and circumstantial upon technological, doctrinal, and political factors. In the case of Pakistan, contemporary and multi-domain deterrence will need recalibration to maintain future stability, as well as to maintain credible nuclear capabilities.
Keywords: Deterrence; Crisis Stability; Pakistan–India Relations; Full-Spectrum Deterrence; Conventional Asymmetry; Subconventional Conflict; Multi-Domain Conflict; Escalation Management; Strategic Stability.

Introduction

The May 2025 crisis between India and Pakistan can be termed as one of the most heated flashpoints in the South Asian region involving the states towards the edge of massive confrontation. It started with provocative acts by Indians, especially selective attacks on strategic locations within Pakistan, as a part of Operation Sindoor. These attacks were directed to undermine the military strength of Pakistan and to establish an offensive posture of India. As retaliation, Pakistan has countered with a rapid, controlled response "Operation Bunyanum Marsoos", showing willingness and restraint. Combined, these operations demonstrate how repeated crises in South Asia can transform minor interventions into serious political and strategic consequences .The sequence of events highlights the balance between traditional war

and nuclear deterrence, which sees two nuclear adversaries in the face of the increased stakes in the case of nations wielding nuclear capabilities. The May Crisis demonstrates that localized armed confrontation can quickly escalate the tensions without the outbreak of the real war (Saleem, 2025).

The core of these dynamics is the stability-instability paradox, a strategic study concept, which demonstrates that nuclear weapons provide a deterrent but permits conventional instability. The paradox indicates that because of the availability of nuclear weapons, the probability of a full-scale war decreases, but it may lead to smaller or limited wars with the understanding that nuclear escalation will discourage them(Defence Journal, 2024). This is how India was able to carry out a restricted strike in the May Crisis, and Pakistan could respond without the nuclear countermeasure going out of control. Therefore, nuclear deterrence does not only constrain the prevalence of strategic armaments, but also has an influence on the magnitude, quality, and time of crisis response on the military side (Akram, 2025). The crisis underlines the two functions of deterrence: on the one hand, it prevents the advent of conventional or even nuclear war, and on the other, it limits the options of operation available to both parties, making sure that none of them approach devastating levels. India operated with aggressive posture in Operation Sindoor compared to the restrained reaction of Pakistan in Operation Bunyanum Marsoos as a realization of the nuclear realities and the perils of uncontrolled escalation.

Through a comparison of these happenings with a theoretical perspective, the study reveals the Multi-layered association amid nuclear weapons, restricted military activities, and crisis management in South Asia. The first part is a review of the history of Pakistan-India military conflicts, tracing the evolution of their strategic and nuclear capabilities. This background preconditions interpreting the interaction of the limited conflicts and the nuclear deterrence in the region. The second section is the theoretical framework which discusses the nuclear deterrence theory, stability-instability paradox, and their applicability to South Asia. The last part concludes with an evaluation of the general effectiveness of nuclear deterrence in controlling the crises, their escalation, and the necessity of long-term strategic stability, and it presents conclusions of practical lessons to policymakers and military strategists.

Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To analyse the stability-instability paradox in Pakistan-India Relations , particularly in the context of limited military engagement under nuclear deterrence.
- To examine the influence of nuclear weapons on crisis management, escalation, control and conflict.
- To explain the role of nuclear deterrence in preventing a full scale conventional or nuclear war during May 2025 crisis between India-Pakistan.

Significance

This study is significant because its provides a deeper understanding of the complex security dynamics between Pakistan and India , two nuclear-Armed states of South Asia whose interactions have global secuirty and strategic implications . Analyzing the May 2025 crisis, the Operation Sindoor conducted by India, and the retaliation Operation Bana-Ul-Marsos by Pakistan, the study sheds light on the role of nuclear deterrence in how both countries make decisions, cope with crises, and conduct themselves amidst escalating tension. These insights are

critical for understanding the mechanism that prevents localized conflicts from escalating into full-scale conventional or nuclear war. Theoretically, the study adds to the body of literature on nuclear strategy and international relations by using the stability–instability paradox in a real-life scenario. Although a significant part of the literature pertains to the Cold War cases or model, this paper shows how the nuclear deterrence functions in the current situation in South Asia. It emphasizes the duality of the nuclear weapons that restricts a macro conflict and allows limited military interventions and gives empirical evidence to substantiate theoretical assertions of restraint in strategic choices and managing crises.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is particularly appropriate in analyzing the complicated social, political, and strategic phenomena in the context of which the meanings, perceptions, and interpretations are major focuses. Qualitative research is concerned with the ways individuals and groups make sense of situations and form realities within certain circumstances (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative approaches in security research and international relations enable the study of the behavior of crises, approaches and processes to strategic decision-making, and the dynamics of deterrence in the line of analysis that cannot be properly considered with quantitative measurement alone (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). The study is explanatory and descriptive. A descriptive design narrates events, processes, and interactions in their natural form as they happen without controlling variables (Neuman, 2014). The explanatory design goes further to endeavor to explain why and how things occur (Babbie, 2020). This method can be used to rationalize causal factors like the role of nuclear deterrence in avoiding escalation, the strategy of stability-instability paradox, and the rationale in limited military involvement.

The focused group discussions were carried out in the form of international conferences, national workshops, and seminars to collect primary data. These discussions provided direct observations of professionals, workers, and policymakers, and allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of crisis management, crisis escalation, and crisis decision-making. The secondary data were obtained through a considerable variety of sources such as academic books, peer-reviewed articles, policy papers, and reliable news reports. The research uses thematic analysis of both primary and secondary data to establish various important themes including nuclear deterrence, containment of escalation, communication of crisis along with strategic restraint, and narrative construction. Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that thematic analysis is especially useful when exploring complex political and social problems due to its ability to provide a systematic interpretation without losing the input of data.

Contextualizing Deterrence in Contemporary South Asia

South Asia's security architecture has remained fundamentally shaped by the triangular relationships between nuclear weapons, unresolved political disputes and deep historical mistrust between India and Pakistan. Since their overt nuclear tests in 1998, the two states have managed to maintain an uneasy equilibrium in which nuclear weapons prevent major wars even as the region witnesses recurring crises and limited military engagements (Ganguly & Hagerty, 2005).This pattern has entrenched a paradox where peace is strategically preserved but tactically brittle, with periodic confrontations emerging from sub-conventional triggers, particularly in contested territory of Kashmir (Kapur, 2007). Deterrence in South Asia cannot be understood

through classical Cold War frameworks alone. The South Asian environment is characterised by overlapping historical, territorial and ideological layers that complicated traditional deterrence logic .Unlike the bipolar stability of the Cold War, Pakistan and India remain embroiled in persistent disputes, face asymmetric conventional force balances and operate within complex domestic political pressures that influence crises behaviour(Lavoy, 2009;Clary& Narang, 2019). Moreover, the interaction between nuclear, conventional, and subconventional levels is not linear but intertwined, producing crisis dynamics that deviate from textbook deterrence models (Ahmed, 2018).

A stability-instability paradox is a strategic stability concept. It indicates that the attainment of stability at the strategic level may be actually a cause of instability in the lower levels, sub-strategic, and the other way around. The possession of nuclear weapons may stabilize the macro or strategic level and destabilize the micro or sub-strategic level. This paradox produces the incentive of two nuclear-capable states to enter into less lethal conflicts or provocations even below the levels needed to prompt a full-scale nuclear war once they understand that they share the same fate of both mutual assured destruction and competitive second-strike capability. Both states can be emboldened by the assurance that regional wars can be won or that the other can be provoked and that a nuclear war will never erupt due to the understanding that an all-out nuclear battle will incinerate both. Application of nuclear weapons in this kind of conflict would thus be suicidal and insane. The theoretical basis of this concept is the deterrence theory which states that states will not attack each other due to the risk of attack being retaliated by a nuclear war which will destroy both parties due to the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (Jervis, 1984). The neo-realism (structural realism) theory is the foundation of the stability/ instability paradox, where the international system is considered anarchic due to the lack of a higher authority. States in such a world are rational actors and depend on self-help to survive, and therefore, they either attempt to prove their survival through maximum security, or diminish their security to survive (Waltz, 1979). Structural realism can be divided into two strands, which are offensive and defensive realism. Offensive realism is based on the idea that states pursue the maximization of power and dominance to maintain the status quo (Mearsheimer, 2001). Defensive realism contends however that states are security maximisers; they are preoccupied with deterrence and relative positions as opposed to accumulating irresistible power (Herz, 1951). Glenn Snyder was the first to define the paradox in Deterrence and Defence (1961), and he claimed that this additional stability at the nuclear format may cause instability at other levels of violence. Robert Jervis extended on this by saying that in fact nuclear stability enhances taking of risks at a lower level of conflict (Jervis, 1984). Paul Kapur subsequently made the observation that nuclear weapons could play the role of encouraging weaker nations to explore the boundaries of deterrence so that they could get involved in low-level wars (Kapur, 2008). Even though the theory was devised at the time of the Cold War in order to describe the U.S. and the Soviet rivalry, it is still very applicable in the current day. As an example, in South Asia, when India, armed with nuclear weapons, and Pakistan engage in a small-scale clash of the sub-conventional nature, they carefully avoid a full-blown war (Paul, 2005; Krepon, 2003).

A defining feature of the regional deterrence architecture is the stability–instability paradox, wherein mutual possession of nuclear weapons reduces the likelihood of large-scale war while inadvertently lowering the threshold for limited conflict or subconventional violence (Sagan &

Waltz, 2002). India and Pakistan both view nuclear weapons as essential for national security, yet differ fundamentally in their doctrines and perceptions of each other's intentions. India's posture has evolved from a declaratory No First Use (NFU) stance toward greater ambiguity about counterforce capabilities (Menon, 2016; Clary & Narang, 2019). Pakistan, in contrast, rejects NFU and employs a full-spectrum deterrence framework designed to deter aggression across a range of conflict scenarios (Khan, 2012).

Deterrence in South Asia has been complicated by the increased application of advanced technologies, including drones, long-range precision missiles, expanded ISR networks, cyber tools, and hypersonic (Mazarr, 2018). Such capabilities reduce the time of decision making, expose the command and control systems to novel vulnerabilities and establish cross-domain escalation pathways that complicate prediction of crisis. The May 2025 battle, in this respect, is no longer to be viewed as an isolated event but as the natural result of the changing ideologies, technology, and growing suspicion. This confrontation is an important case study to gauge current deterring needs and to provide a description of future strategic imperatives in Pakistan.

1. **Evolution of Strategic Behaviour Between Pakistan and India (1998–2025)**

   In 1998, the nuclearization of South Asia altered strategic calculations on both sides. India developed its doctrine based on a credible minimum deterrence and it vowed to have no-first-use policy but subsequently it cast doubt on its sustainability (Perkovich, 1999). The counter measure taken by Pakistan involved the purchase of nuclear weapons to counter the conventional superiority of India (Cheema, 2010). Both powers rapidly installed crude command and control systems, ballistic and cruise missiles, and institutionalised nuclear decision-making bodies (Khan, 2012). Although nuclearization stopped the full-scale war, but it enabled the small conflicts and higher frequency of the crisis. At the very beginning, nuclear weapons were not to eliminate conflict but will influence its magnitude and time characteristics.

   ➢ **Testing the Boundaries of Limited War (Kargil conflict)**

   The Kargil war turned out to be the first test of limited war with nuclear provisions. The decision by India to retaliate against the Pakistan nuclear posture demonstrated that nuclear weapons are not effective in eliminating strategic risk (Ganguly and Hagerty, 2005). The crisis explained the persistent applicability of political and territorial conflicts, the pivotal role of Kashmir, and how crises can occur due to implicit or vague triggers (Abbasi, 2021). Kargil, in the case of Pakistan, was a revelation of both the utility as well as limitation of nuclear deterrence, which accelerated change in doctrine.

   ➢ **Nuclear Signalling and Coercive Diplomacy**

   In December 2001, India launched its largest military mobilisation after the attack on the Indian Parliament. The crisis was marked by clear nuclear signalling, use of missiles, and high stakes political speech. Although war never erupted out, the extended confrontation revealed the risks of coercive mobilisation and the instability of the situation in nuclear circumstances (Lavoy, 2009). Perceived retaliation caused frustration in India that compelled it to formulate more immediate offensive solutions. The 2008 attacks in Mumbai had stunned domestic politics in India but it did not engage in a military backlash because of the risk of escalation, lack of clarity, and international pressure. This restraint heightened the confidence of Pakistan in the ability of nuclear deterrence. To Indian leaders, Mumbai brought forth the

political price of announcing inaction as well as rising interest in transparent, convincing punishments (Menon, 2016).

➢ **The Articulation of Limited Military Response and Normalisation of Deep Strikes**

The announced surgical strikes in India following the Uri attack represented a change in deterrence thinking and made Pakistan think again about how India tolerated and behaved. Although the scale might be a point of dispute, the political influence could not be ignored. India had a readiness to take revenge over the hull and quell along the LoC and the act was politically messaged in India (Kanwal, 2014). Uri, India became more liberal in the application of public messaging in the face of deterrence. The Balakot airstrike marked the biggest crisis prior to 2025. India employed stand-off air power against deep targets in Pakistan and Pakistan retaliated with disciplined force and showed ability and restraint. The downing of a plane and the seizure of an Indian pilot were indications of escalation. Balakot legitimised aerial retaliation and demonstrated the joint influence of political leadership, media discourses, and technology on forming crisis behaviour (Yusuf, 2018). In the case of Pakistan, Balakot stressed the necessity to make quick, corresponding reactions and effective information strategies.

The Indian and Pakistani path to military modernisation was changing at high rates and moving in different directions between 2020 and 2025. India focused a lot on air defence, integrated theatre commands, increased ISR coverage, and precision weapons. The same time was also characterized by the expansion of Indian drone fleet, development of missiles, and domain awareness in the maritime realm (Shukla, 2021). Pakistan, in its turn, reinforced full-spectrum deterrence, increased the range of UCAV and added some MIRV platforms, extending the scope of joint operational planning (Ahmed, 2021). This break in technology changed the way the escalation was perceived and the credibility of deterrence preparation the ground work towards the May, 2025 confrontation.

2. Operational Overview of the May 2025 Confrontation

The May 2025 crisis originated from a deadly attack on tourist in Phalgam, Indian administrative Kashmir. India rapidly attributed responsibility to Pakistan-based groups, generating domestic pressure for a decisive response. Despite Pakistan's call for evidence and proposal for investigation, India's political environment favoured visible, punitive action while mirroring patterns from previous crises but unfolding under a more technologically advanced military landscape. India imitated a set of stand-of air and missile strikes aimed at what it characterised as militant-linked infrastructure. The deployment of precision –guided weapons, electronic warfare support and coordinated theatre-level ISR suggested higher operational integration than in 2019. Simultaneously, India launched limited missile strikes on pakistan military logistics nodes, signalling punitive intent while attempting to avoid broader escalation.

Official statements highlighted:

- calibrated retaliation,
- counter-terror justification,
- avoidance of Pakistani civilian targets,
- non-escalatory framing.

Pakistan responded using a combination of stand-off strikes and drone swarms targeting Indian military facilities. The use of drone swarms, which were intended to test and saturate Indian air

defences represented a qualitative shift in crisis conduct. Pakistan's messaging focused on proportionality and deterrence restoration, conveying that further escalation would be met with equivalent or greater force. After approximately three days of exchanges, diplomatic interventions from the United States, China, Saudi Arabia and the UAE became decisive in shaping the termination of hostilities. India maintained that its punitive objectives had been met, while Pakistan asserted that its retaliatory actions had restored deterrence. Both sides adopted face-saving rhetoric, enabling de-escalation without significant political cost.

3. Evaluating the Performance of Deterrence Across Multiple Levels

The clash in May 2025 provides a unique opportunity to review the operation of deterrence and certain failures in a nuclear-armed pair of South Asian countries that are quickly modernizing and highly suspicious of each other. There are three layers of deterrence interwoven in this region and these are the strategic (nuclear), operational (conventional) and the sub-conventional layers. The 2025 occurrence allows every layer to be put to the test, with high pace of escalation and action across various fields.

I. Strategic Deterrence

On the top, the cooling effect of nuclear deterrence was maintained. Both parties did not stimulate nuclear signals, did not deploy forces of strategy or nuclear dialogue. There are numerous reinforcing factors that lead to this restraint:

• Symmetrical vulnerability implies that both parties cannot neutralize one another easily.

• Strategic doctrine remains transparent, despite the ambiguity on the NFU (No First Use) position of India.

• Rapid international responses demonstrate that nuclear escalation would be disastrous politically and diplomatically.

• Established institutions, such as the Strategic Plans Division of Pakistan and the Nuclear Command Authority of India, minimize unintended nuclear actions (Khan, 2012).

There is strong deterrence at the strategic level that does not imply large-scale stability. It provides a small safety margin which prevents great wars but fails to regulate lower-level actions (Sagan and Waltz, 2002). Nuclear weapons serve as a deterrent more than a restraint.

II. Conventional Deterrence

The confrontation of 2025 demonstrated the accelerating degradation of traditional deterrence. The capacity and desire by India to initiate limited strikes as well as its faith in a restrained escalation demonstrates a doctrinal and material change. The major factors contributing to erosion are:

• Technology mismatch: The investments of India in S-400 air defence, long-range accuracy fire, increased reconnaissance with satellites, and theatre command provide it with a serious operational advantage (Shukla, 2021).

• Doctrinal change: India is abandoning rigid NFU rhetoric and showing interest in counterforce negotiations, which puts Pakistan in new doubts (Clary and Narang, 2019).

• Domestic political usefulness: Limited strikes are highly domestic arena in India which promotes repetition of such strikes.

• Economic limitations in Pakistan: Low resources prevent Pakistan to lag behind in expensive modernization (Ahmed, 2021).

India feels that it can accomplish small targets without creating massive retaliation. The possibility of proportional response by the Pakistan has been eroded and its ability to deter the first attack is turned into its inability to respond to the attack. This increases the probability of confrontations in the future.

III. Sub-conventional Deterrence

The problem with sub conventional deterrence has been a persistent element in South Asia since 1999. The crisis in 2025 restated the idea that low intensity triggers, particularly in Kashmir, can easily escalate. Key sources of instability:

• Divergent threat counter-narratives: India accuses Pakistan-based organizations of attacks; Pakistan denies the accusations without evidence (Ganguly and Hagerty, 2005).

• Lack of institutional mechanisms: There is no formal institution structure of intelligence sharing or incident-management.

• Domestic politics: The leaders in both nations have internal motives to escalate as opposed to appeasing the situation.

The 2025 episode proved that the sub-conventional triggers are mostly not regulated, which allows rapid crises and makes this layer the most volatile one.

IV. Multi-Domain Dynamics

The remarkable aspect of May confrontation was the multi-domain character of the confrontation. Air, missile, drone, cyber, and information space were activated simultaneously, significantly reducing the time to make decisions and making it hard to evaluate the threat. Messages to the communications, ISR feed, and general messages are struck by cyber-attacks which elevate uncertainty and chances of making a wrong calculation. The two sides were conducting information operations to create domestic narratives and demonstrate will. As opposed to the crises of the past, May attacked multiple areas at once:

• Drones and UAV swarms caused air defences.

• Cyber-attacks were directed towards communications and early-warning systems.

Space-based ISR informed targeting and provided real time information.

• Domestic stories and global messages were driven by information operations.

• Accurate missiles exchanges strained down the ramps of escalation.

The operations across multiple domains challenge the traditional assumptions of deterrence by rendering the escalation less predictable and reducing the time to make decisions (Mazarr, 2018). The context of deterrence in South Asia can no longer be considered through nuclear or conventional contexts; a complex, integrated model is now necessary.

4. Reassessing Pakistan's Strategic Posture After 2025

The development of deterrence behavior in South Asia, particularly the lessons of the 2025 crisis requires Pakistan to re-analyze its strategic posture. The problem of nuclear stability is no longer paramount; the necessity to increase the credibility of deterrence in both conventional and multi-domain contexts as well as the continuity of political and doctrine principles have become the focus. The recent crises present the evidence that the effectiveness of deterrence is interdependent on the manner in which strategic survivability, conventional denial, cross-domain resilience, and sub-war escalation management interact. These components are highly

interconnected, and failure in one these aspects is likely to accelerate instability in the entire spectrum of deterrence.

At the strategic level, the deterrence of Pakistan is still pegged at a survivable second-striking capability. This is critical to leave India questioning the possibility of a counter strike and to preserve the escalation advantage. The shift to sea-based deterrence by Pakistan, which is featured by the Babur-3 submarine-launched cruise missile, is used to minimize the probability of the pre-emptive attack and to enhance the confidence in the retaliation. Road-mobile launchers also complicate the task of an opponent and increase the chances of survival. Nevertheless, such systems have become extremely dependent on the strength of command, control, and communications against electronic and cyber-attacks. The more the deterrence takes a network configuration, the more the reliability as well as redundancy of C2 infrastructure is decisive regarding strategic stability. The fact that full spectrum deterrence of Pakistan remains ambiguous intentionally, particularly the lack of clear nuclear thresholds, is a contribution towards stabilizing the situation in the region, by ensuring that there is uncertainty and they are not locked in with definite commitments that may lead to a proxy conflict (Khan, 2012).

Table 1: Strategic Deterrence Stability Logic

Decision Stage	Indian Assessment	Pakistani Capability Signal	Deterrence Outcome
Pre-crisis evaluation	Feasibility of counterforce strike	Survivable second-strike forces (sea-based and mobile systems)	Increased uncertainty
Crisis escalation	Vulnerability of C2 infrastructure	Hardened and redundant C2 networks	Reduced confidence in escalation control
Strategic calculation	Risk of escalation dominance	Ambiguous thresholds under full-spectrum deterrence	Strategic restraint

Source: Author's compilation based on Schelling (1966), Jervis (1989), and Narang (2014).

Pakistan is vulnerable at the conventional level, yet strategic deterrence has mostly prevented full-scale war. Punishment alone is no deterrent to limited military action under the nuclear shield, as demonstrated in the 2019 Balakot incident, where India conducted a limited air strike and thought it could escape without escalation. That episode demonstrates the necessity to concentrate on deterrence through denial-making sure that the enemy avoids reaching any operational or political objectives. Denial-oriented resources, including integrated air defence, hardened and dispersed airbases, and survivable ISR, are more likely to ensure that few strikes are ineffective, high operating expenses, and unattractive coercion. Pakistan can move Indian decision-making further down an escalation ladder by refusing success rather than threatening retaliation.

Table 2: Conventional Deterrence-by-Denial Framework

Phase of Conflict	Indian Limited War Objective	Pakistani Denial Capability	Effect on Escalation
Strike initiation	Demonstrate resolve without escalation	Integrated air defense and early warning	Reduced strike effectiveness

Operational execution	Achieve symbolic or military gain	Base dispersal and infrastructure hardening	Increased operational risk
Post-strike signaling	Control escalation	Precision and proportional response options	Constrained escalation space

Source: Author's compilation drawing on deterrence-by-denial literature and South Asian conflict analyses (Snyder, 1961; Ladwig, 2018; Tellis, 2020).

Beyond the traditional scope, the sub conventional triggers form one of the most disruptive aspects of the India-Pakistan rivalry. The majority of the major crises were initiated by militant attacks or cross-border events that then overflown into domestic political mobilization and cross-signaling. The Pulwama crisis of 2019 demonstrates the potential to trigger a rapid escalation of its sub conventional processes despite the presence of nuclear deterrence. This trend marks the necessity of mechanisms that will reduce escalation schedules and trim down misperceptions in a crisis at an early stage. It is the institutionalized channels of communication, verifications, and ceasefire-management schemes, which render a head start to crises before they develop into a standard confrontation. A decline in ceasefire violations following the 2021 re-establishment of a ceasefire agreement signed in 2003 proves that even small confidence-building activities can put the situation under control. Framed in political sensitivity, third-party-mediated systems of de-escalation can contribute to crisis-containment by providing neutral communication to indicate restraint (Yusuf, 2018).

Table 3: Sub-conventional Escalation Management Model

Trigger Event	Escalatory Pressure	Mitigating Mechanism	Outcome
Militant attack or border incident	Domestic political mobilization	Incident verification channels	Reduced misperception
Media and elite signaling	Demand for retaliation	Ceasefire protocols and hotlines	Slowed escalation
Crisis peak	Risk of military response	Third-party facilitation	De-escalation or containment

Source: Author's compilation based on escalation theory and crisis-management literature (Kahn, 1965; Jervis, 1976; Yusuf, 2018)

Lastly, the deterrence of Pakistan becomes less and less credible with failures in the fusion of multiple field of actions, such as cyber, electronic warfare, unmanned systems and space-enabled capabilities. Innovative deterrence is being established not only on kinetic capabilities, but also resilience, information dominance, and ability to operate in digital/electromagnetic disruption. The concentration on network-centric warfare and space-based ISR in India makes the strategy of single-domain strategies more dangerous. The increasing utilization of unmanned aerial systems in Pakistan and quest to acquire counter-drone technology and electronic war implements demonstrates that the country is appreciating the need to be resilient across all domains. Having stronger cyber defenses, building smaller offensive cyber platforms, undermining Indian ISR by using electronic warfare and reducing reliance on susceptible satellite communications by creating backup all enhance credibility of deterrence in a competitive space.

Table 4: Multi-Domain Deterrence Integration Matrix

Domain	Adversary Advantage	Pakistani Response	Deterrence Effect
Cyber	Network disruption and information warfare	Hardened cyber defenses and limited offensive tools	System resilience
Air and drones	Precision and persistence	Indigenous UAVs and counter-swarm measures	Denial of airspace dominance
Electronic warfare	ISR dependence	EW systems targeting sensors and links	Degraded adversary awareness
Space	Satellite-enabled ISR and C2	Redundancy and alternative communication channels	Reduced vulnerability

Source: Author's compilation informed by cross-domain deterrence and cyber-security literature (Nye, 2017; Morgan et al., 2018; Acton, 2020).

Combined, the components demonstrate that the stability of deterrence in South Asia depends on the consistency of the overall architecture of Pakistan and not a single ability. Multi-domain integration, strategic survivability, conventional denial, sub-conventional escalation management and multi-domain integration serve as mutually reinforcing layers. An inability of any levels poses a threat of cascading instability throughout the spectrum of deterrence. Graded investment and theological consistency, however, lead to stability without arousing the explosion. What the past crises have taught us is thus an indirect observation to uphold an appearance of resilience, denial, and integration rather than a means of dependence on nuclear signaling.

5. Prospective Pathways and Policy Directions

As a follow-up to the above analysis, this section identifies policy paths Pakistan can use to enhance deterrence credibility beyond 2025.

⇨ **Institutionalize Crisis Communication**: Establish military hotlines with transparent response procedures, mutually respected systems of rapid verification of cross-border incidents, back-channel diplomacy in crisis situations, and frequent communication between the advisers of the national security organs to avoid incidental intensification.

⇨ **Prioritize Strategic Communication:** Excel in domestic and international communications, employ restrained public diplomacy, and keep the credibility of signals within acceptable ranges to shape the perceptions of the enemies, increase the credibility of deterrence, and reduce the possibility of miscalculation.

⇨ **Seek Technological Parity:** Deploy ISR resilience, air -denial systems, counter-drone swarm protection, precision attack and targeting, and cyber -defence to restrict a competitor's confidence in retaliatory operations.

⇨ **Enhance Diplomatic Engagement:** Establish diplomatic relationships, broaden the economic interrelationship and achieve strategic communication between key powers in order to enhance stability in the crisis and exhibit proper responsibility in the handling of nuclear material.

Conclusion

The confrontation in May 2025 reinforced one long-standing truth that nuclear arms prevents large-scale warfare but not small-scale conflicts, and it does not exclude the risk of miscalculation. Strategic deterrence is always there, but it is not as stabilizing as the entire spectrum of the conflict. Traditional deterrence is undermined, and sub-conventional relationship remains in an unstable condition. The quick evolution of multi-domain warfare-drones, cyber, AI-anabolized ISR, precision missiles- has forced decision timelines to be shorter, which increases risks even with small fires. In the case of Pakistan, deterrence credibility does not just depend on the nuclear threshold. It requires greater denial skills, combined emerging technologies, powerful crisis-communication networks, and diplomatic connections that are useful in stabilizing future crisis. Post-2025 South Asian deterrence is therefore no longer outdated and more contingent on an advanced combination of political, technological and doctrinal factors. The flexibility of Pakistan will define strategic stability over the next decade.

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