

Evaluating Deterrence and Strategic Stability in South Asia: The Precarious Equilibrium

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ABSTRACT: The strategic situation in South Asia is one of the most complex environment of modern international security scenario. The trilateral nuclear situation in the region between Pakistan, India, and China has become a trilateral dynamic of security and instability, known as the 'Stability- Instability Paradox'. This article revisits the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence theory in the context of changing counterforce doctrines, remarkable technological advances like Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicles (MIRVs), sea-based nuclear triads, Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), and the structural decay of bilateral crisis management mechanisms. The study examines militarised stand-offs in the period from 1999 to 2026, showing how bilateral episodes have always remained at lower intensities in the presence of nuclear deterrence even in the high-intensity phase of military conflict, such as Kargil (1999), the Twin Peaks Standoff (2001-2002), the Balakot crisis (2019), the BrahMos accidental missile launch incident (2022), and the May 2025 Military conflict. Yet as India has recently and is currently operationalising its nuclear sea-based-third-strike capability, through commissioning of its first nuclear submarine M04-missile-armed S3- INS Arighat (August 2024), sea trials of its second submarine-launched ballistic missile S4- INS Aridhaman (April 2026) and test-firings of the 3,500 km-range K-4 Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) (December 2025), second-strike conditions in the maritime domain have been tangible and first-strike temptations have grown. The answer is to close operational gaps at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels, which is the objective of Pakistan's Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD). Finally, the article suggests multi-level policy recommendations for Pakistan in the diplomatic, political, strategic and military spheres to maintain strategic balance.

KEYWORDS: Strategic Stability, Full Spectrum Deterrence, Counterforce, Stability-Instability Paradox, Naval Triad, K-4 SLBM, Crisis Management, South Asia

Introduction

The South Asian strategic context continues to give rise to a fragile security situation in modern international politics. The presence of a protracted security dilemma, a changing paradigm of war-fighting strategies, unresolved territorial issues, and systemized rivalry united by the cover of nuclearization has shaped the regional order since the initiation of India and Pakistan's nuclear testing in May, 1998. Classical nuclear deterrence theory assumes that nuclear deterrence is necessarily a matter of cost, but the South Asian experience reveals much more nuanced aspects of nuclear deterrence. The region's "Stability-Instability Paradox" is a structural dynamic in which nuclear parity lowers

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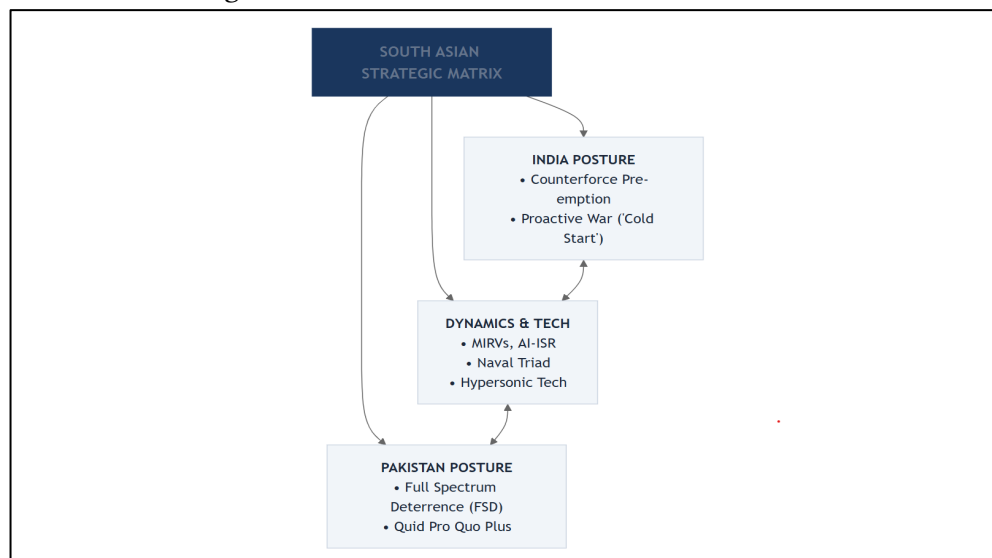
the risk of all-out conventional warfare, yet sustains a culture of low-intensity-political-fighting and sub-conventional “grey-zone warfare” and sharp damage escalation without crossing the strategic threshold.

Contemporary Strategic Environment

The basic tenets of South Asian deterrence have been subjected to a considerable amount of stress during the last decade in terms of changes in doctrine within and surrounding South Asia, as well as the technological developments in the world outside South Asia. Persistent attempts by India to create operational space for conventional warfare that lies below Pakistan's nuclear threshold, proactive warfighting ideas such as "Cold Start"/ "Pro Active Operations" Strategy, and the growing resort to counter-force pre-emption have directly impacted on the balance in the region.

Figure 1

South Asian Strategic Matrix



This trend has been further accelerated by India's rapid induction and operationalization of advanced strategic platforms, given at Figure 1:

Maiden Flight Test of MIRV-Capable Agni-V (Mission Divyastra). Successfully conducted in March 2024, introducing multi-warhead counterforce capabilities to India's land-based inventory (Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2024).

Maturation of the Naval Nuclear Triad. The commissioning of India's second nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), INS Arighat (S3), in August 2024, PIB (2024), and the third SSBN, INS Aridhaman (S4), in April 2026, expands India's continuous at-sea deterrence posture (Philip, 2026). In addition to the 4th SSBN, this is also being followed up by deep-sea trials and launches (December 2025) of the 3,500 km-range K-4 Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM).

Layered Anti-Ballistic Missile (BMD) Systems. The operational integration of Russian-supplied S-400 Triumf air defense systems alongside indigenous BMD shields erodes mutual vulnerability assumptions (Ahmed, 2022).

In response, Pakistan has calibrated its defensive posture from Minimum Credible Deterrence toward Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD). Designed to plug operational gaps across tactical, operational, and strategic tiers, FSD incorporates short-range, low-yield delivery platforms (e.g., Nasr) alongside longer-range ballistic and cruise missiles (e.g., Ababeel MIRV, Shaheen-III, Babur-3 SLCM, and Ra'ad-II ALCM) to deny the adversary any ladder of escalation dominance (ISPR, 2019).

Table 1*Comparative Strategic Posture Matrix*

Strategic Dimension	India's Posture & Force Trajectory	Pakistan's Retaliatory & Deterrent Posture	Impact on Strategic Stability
Primary Doctrine	Proactive War-fighting ("Cold Start"), Shift toward Counterforce Pre-emption.	Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD), "Quid Pro Quo Plus" Conventional Response.	High Instability: Lowering of conventional-nuclear operational thresholds.
Delivery Systems & Tech	Agni-V MIRV (<i>Mission Divyastra</i>), Hypersonic Platforms, S-400 BMD Integration.	Ababeel (MIRV), Shaheen-III, Ra'ad-II ALCM, Babur-3 SLCM.	Qualitative Arms Race: Competition in penetration mechanics and warhead maneuverability.
Naval Triad	SSBNs (INS <i>Arihant</i> , INS <i>Arighat</i> , INS <i>Aridhman</i>), K-15 (750 km) & K-4 (3,500 km) SLBMs.	Sub-surface Cruise Missiles (Babur-3 SLCM) integrated on Agosta-90B & Hangor-class SSKs.	Asymmetric Maritime Dynamic: Second-strike survivability offset by anti-submarine warfare (ASW) friction.
Disruptive Tech (AI/ISR)	Deep ISR integration, US-India Bilateral Agreements (BECA, INDUS-X, iCET).	Indigenous UAV networks, Electronic Warfare (EW), Cyber resilience, Partner integration.	Time Compression: Heightened "Use-it-or-Lose-it" dilemmas during acute crises.

In addition to this, bilateral "vacuum" is the only good approach to understanding South Asia is no longer a feasible option. The larger trilateral (China-India-Pakistan) dimension as well as key power relationships in the Indo-Pacific, includes systemic asymmetries. The developments of high-end ISR transfer and technology designed to beat China inevitably lead to aggravating Pakistan's security dilemma.

Theoretical Framework and Escalation Mechanics

Conceptual Foundations. Overall, deterrence implies a coercive strategy of remedial dissuasion that involves jumping one adversary's calculations via conditional threats. During the immediate post-war period after the atomic bombings were used by the Allies in 1945, Bernard Brodie stated the basic concept of nuclear strategy

Thus, at least, has been the primary function of our military establishment in the past, and it should be the same in the future—to avert war; it should have no other useful role.

The result of a deterrent is to "convince the enemy that he must not pursue any action that he considers dangerous without making the demonstration too great for him to endorse"—a classic Beaufre characterization of deterrence. Lawrence Freedman also noted that his basic premise for deterrence is that an opponent can make rational decisions during a crisis.

Strategists stay divided into three main axes of nuclear deterrence:

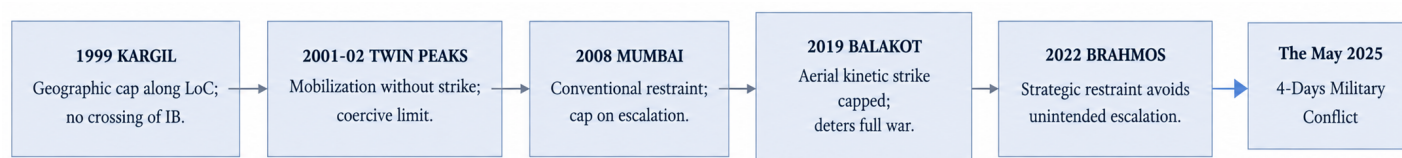
- ▶ **Deterrence vs. Defense.** Deterrence relies on the threat of severe punishment (counter-value) rather than operational denial on the battlefield.
- ▶ **Deterrence vs. Compellence.** Deterrence seeks to maintain the status quo by conditioning inaction, whereas compellence uses coercion to force a change in the adversary's behavior within a specified timeframe (Schelling 2020).
- ▶ **General vs. Immediate Deterrence.** Immediate deterrence only operates in scenarios when an attack is imminent, but between acts, general deterrence operates, which is a structural relationship between adversaries.

Empirical Evidence: Deterrence as a Conflict Cap Below the Nuclear Threshold

Despite the fact that no one has claimed to have won a security war with nuclear weapons, one can, in fact, find a consistent empirical trend in post-1998 security in South Asia, namely, Nuclear weapons have not replaced localized conflicts or grey-zone probes, but nuclear deterrence has ensured that every big security crisis stays short of a full-scale conventional war.

Figure 2

Crisis Escalation Thresholds & Conflict Cap [1999–2025]



Escalation Dynamics

The 1999 Kargil Conflict (Geographic Containment). The war was not an all-out assault or counter-assault, as both armies kept to their respective sides of the Line of Control (LoC) and resisted any notion of going beyond it. India, on the other hand, chose not to create a second front over the International Border (IB) or use its air force as far as in Pakistani airspace, which was influenced by the assumption of the implicit nuclear umbrella. The above fact indicates that Pakistan's strategic deterrence effectively limited the conflict, guarding it from blowing out into a general conventional war.

The Twin Peaks Standoff Strategic Restraint Under Mobilization (2001-2002). Around the time of the attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001, India launched Operation Parakram and mustered more than 500,000 troops on the border. Pakistan followed with complete 'forward deployment'. Not following this path, despite the political rhetoric and nuclear proxies warbling it, India never made a conventional strike. Despite this extreme provocation, India, even in the process of making an operational judgment, decided to de-escalate due to its own political calculation of the risks associated with a major conventional attack against Pakistan's 'grey line' nuclear limits.

The 2008 Mumbai Crisis and 2016 Surgical Strikes (Threshold Probing). In the aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, Indian military leadership evaluated limited strike options under the emerging "Cold Start" doctrine. However, the presence of Pakistan's strategic assets and credible retaliatory options deterred India from kinetic military action (Perkovich & Dalton 2016). When India claimed "surgical strikes" along the LoC in September 2016, it deliberately kept the operations localized, tactical, and covert to avoid triggering Pakistan's strategic response threshold, demonstrating how deterrence constrains the scope of military operations.

The 2019 Balakot Crisis and Operation Swift Retort (Deterrence Restoration). The Pulwama-Balakot standoff in February 2019 represented the first instance of aerial kinetic strikes inside sovereign territory between two nuclear-armed states. India's airstrike in Balakot attempted to establish a new operational norm above the sub-conventional level. However, Pakistan's swift, proportional counter-strike on February 27, 2019 (Operation Swift Retort)—which resulted in the downing of an Indian MiG-21 and the capture of its pilot—demonstrated the validity of "Quid Pro Quo Plus" (ISPR 2019). When subsequent Indian threats of missile strike emerged, Pakistan's explicit strategic counter-signaling forced rapid de-escalation and the release of the captured pilot. The 2019 crisis confirmed that nuclear deterrence successfully prevented aerial exchanges from spiraling into ground warfare or strategic escalation.

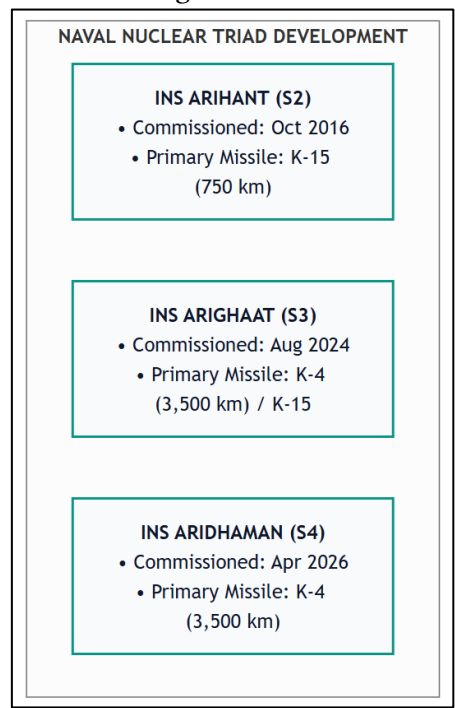
The March 2022 Accidental BrahMos Missile Incident (Structural Safety Under Stress). In March 2022, an unarmed Indian BrahMos supersonic cruise missile accidentally launched from Ambala, entering 124 km inside Pakistani territory before crashing near Mian Channu. Pakistan’s air defense systems tracked the missile throughout its high-speed flight path. Rather than initiating an immediate kinetic response, Pakistan exercised strategic restraint and demanded a joint investigation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2022). While the incident exposed critical gaps in India's missile handling protocols and command safety, the calm handling of the crisis illustrated how nuclear-related caution induces deliberate decision-making even during sudden technical anomalies.

The May 2025 4-Days Military Conflict. In the aftermath of the Pahalgam killing of 26 tourists in April 2025, to punish Pakistan for its alleged involvement in the terrorists’ attack, on night 6/7 May – code-named “Operation Sindoor” - employing 72 advanced fighter aircraft, IAF launched its BVR stand-off across Pakistan and Azad Kashmir, targeting several alleged “terrorist camps”, killing at least 26 civilians and injuring several. Pakistan’s swift response, using 42 PAF fighter jets equipped with BVR missiles, within forty minutes destroyed at least 6–7 IAF advanced fighter jets. This air battle, a devastating blow to Indian arrogance, is regarded as one of the “largest and longest in recent aviation history” (Clary, 2025). As the conflict ensued for another three days, both sides employed significant numbers of conventional missiles, a variety of drones, cyber-attacks, and media warfare, causing damage to each other’s facilities. Earlier, India had downgraded diplomatic ties with Pakistan and unilaterally suspended the Indus Waters Treaty – 1960. Pakistan’s measured and effective response to unprovoked Indian aggression deterred India from further escalating the conflict. However, by employing different types of offensive weapon systems inside Pakistan’s territory across four days, India significantly expanded the scope of limited military conflict between the two nuclear neighbors (Shafeeq, 2025). Consequent to the May 2025 military conflict, India and Pakistan have inducted additional conventional weapons and forces that will entail increased defense allocations. While these new inductions will reinforce conventional deterrence, they will also expand the space for conventional war. Thus, there is a concomitant need for comprehensive doctrinal proclamations and force structure reviews by Pakistan.

Operationalization of India's Sea-Based Triad and Risks to Equilibrium

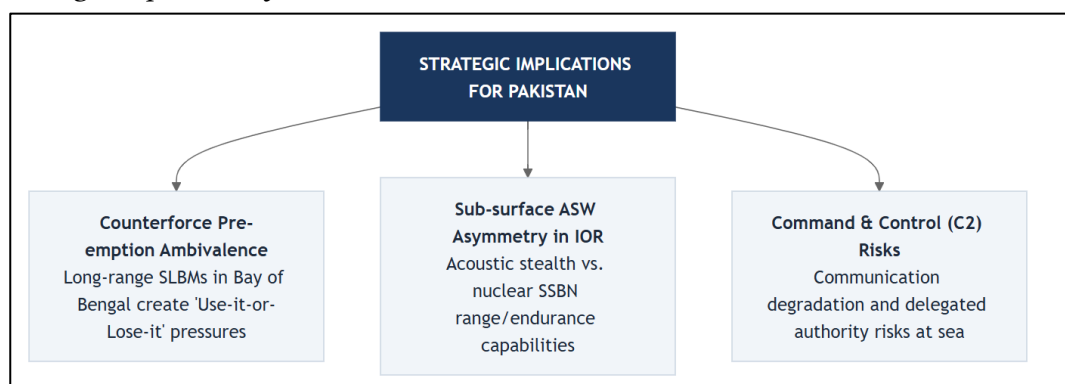
Figure 3

India's Evolving Naval Nuclear Triad



- ▶ **INS Arihant (S2).** Commissioned in 2016, primarily equipped with short-range K-15 SLBMs (750 km range), restricting its operational patrols to coastal waters.
- ▶ **INS Arighat (S3).** Commissioned in August 2024, featuring improved stealth characteristics, higher indigenous content, and capability to carry four 3,500 km-range K-4 SLBMs (The Hindu, 2024). Successful test-firings of the K-4 SLBM demonstrate an operational sea-based second-strike capability (Aroor, 2025).
- ▶ **INS Aridhaman (S4).** With INS Aridhaman entering active service, India's naval nuclear capabilities feature expanded missile payload capacity (up to 8 VLS tubes for K-4 SLBMs), enabling continuous at-sea deterrence patrols deep in the Bay of Bengal and the broader Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Gupta 2025).

Figure 4

Strategic Implications for Pakistan**Unpacking the Precarious Equilibrium and Risks**

Despite the historic role of nuclear weapons as a conflict cap, the current balance between India and Pakistan is characterized by a precarious equilibrium. The risks pushing South Asia toward crisis instability stem from four main drivers:

Counterforce Pre-emption Temptations. Long-range SLBMs (K-4) fired from protected bastion zones in the Bay of Bengal allow India to target Pakistan's entire landmass without exposing submarines to coastal Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) assets. When coupled with MIRVed Agni-V capabilities, satellite-based real-time ISR, and BMD systems, Indian strategists may face "use-it-or-lose-it" incentives, assuming they can execute a disarming first strike against Pakistan's land-based nuclear inventory.

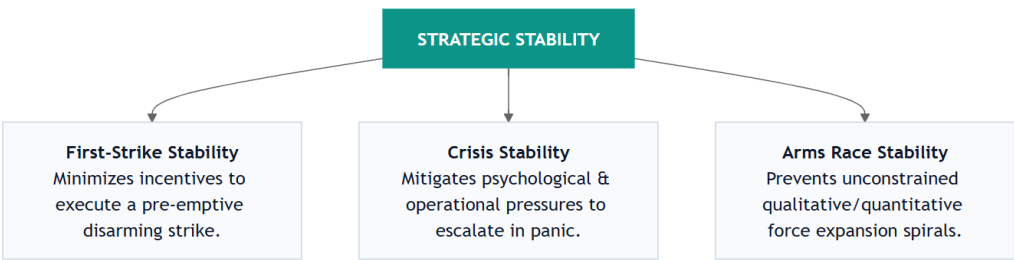
Maritime Second-Strike Asymmetry. Pakistan's sea-based retaliatory capability relies on the Babur-3 Submarine-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM), deployed on Agosta-90B and upcoming Hangor-class AIP-equipped diesel-electric submarines (Missile Threat 2017). The deal for eight Chinese conventional submarines, concluded in 2015 at an estimated cost of US\$5 billion, includes four boats built in China and four built in Pakistan under technology transfer (Pasricha, 2026). While AIP-based diesel-electric submarines (SSKs) offer exceptional acoustic stealth in shallow littoral waters, they lack the submerged endurance and speed of nuclear SSBNs, creating an operational asymmetry in the Indian Ocean Region.

Command, Control, and Communications (C2) Vulnerabilities. For submarine operations, authorisation must have been pre-delegated or Very Low Frequency (VLF) communications used. When an acute crisis, it is time for sea-level communications to be degraded, and miscalculations, early launch or unintended escalation run their course.

Business: Time compression and disruptive technologies. The addition of hypersonic glide vehicles, AI-targeting algorithms, and an automated ISR network significantly lowers decision-making time from hours to minutes. During extremely stressed situations, commanders lack the time to validate false alarms, thereby running a much greater risk of escalation due to panic.

We don't yet know exactly what these core areas of strategic stability are. Strategic stability means an attainable situation in which first-strike incentives are minimized and strategic balance is stable to a degree that shocks are not likely to impact it. It is made up of three main elements:

Figure 5
Three Pillars of Strategic Stability

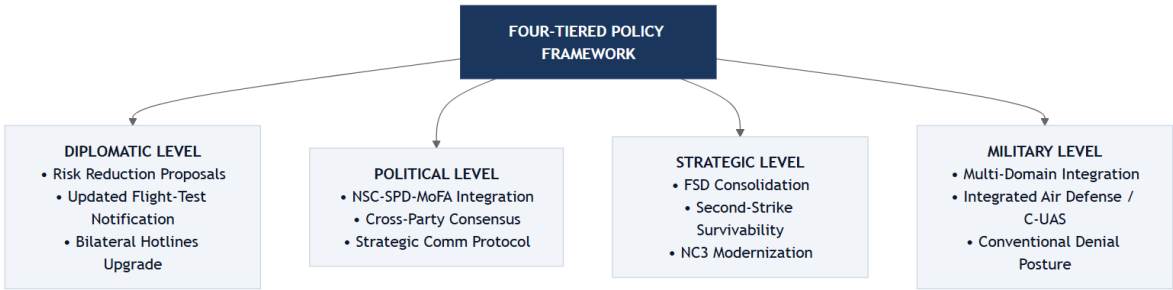


- ▶ **First-Strike Stability.** When 'no one' feels they have any such edge or has any positive outcome to start a crisis. The Indian pivot towards counterforce targeting, using MIRV missiles and platforms, high-precision conventional missiles, and space-based ISR, poses serious threats to this balance as it generates “use it or lose it” pressure for Pakistan's land-based assets.
- ▶ **Crisis Stability.** Defers psychological and operational pressures which may precipitate quick escalation in high-tension stand-off situations. Thinning the tolerance of decision making time (because of hypersonic platforms and AI target selection) increases panic possibilities during the crises.
- ▶ **Arms Race Stability.** Prevails when both parties feel no need to increase their strategic threat in either qualitative or quantitative terms because of strategic disadvantage. Indian S-400 BMD deployment contravenes arms race stability, which requires Pakistan to accommodate MIRVs (Ababeel) and hypersonics/penetration mechanics to maintain its second-strike credibility.

Multi-Level Strategic Policy Recommendations for Pakistan

Pakistan should be developing a multi-faceted policy response at the diplomatic, political and strategic levels as well as military levels to maintain strategic balance, prevent miscalculation and safeguard the national interest in a changing conflict dynamic.

Figure 6
Four-Tiered Strategic Policy Framework for Pakistan



Diplomatic Level

- ▶ **Proactive Strategic Risk Reduction Proposals.** Proactive Strategic Risk Reduction Proposals are proposals that are made to reduce risk in advance. Make new bilateral risk-reduction proposals to India. The key next steps should be the extension of the agreement created in 2005 on pre-notification of ballistic missile flight testing to incorporate supersonic and hypersonic cruise missiles, as well as joint measures in the event that a missile is accidentally launched or experiences some technical anomaly.
- ▶ **Make bilateral communications available institutionalized.** Call for reinstatement and effective upgrading of linked secure hotlines for direct communication between the Directors General of Military Operations (DGMO), the Foreign Secretaries, and Strategic Command Centers for handling crisis situations in real time, and for avoiding the distortion of communication in the formation of narratives.
- ▶ **Multilateral Non-Proliferation Engagement.** Interact actively with international multilateral bodies such as the UN First Committee and Conference on Disarmament and export control regimes like the NSG, MTCR norms so as to highlight the destabilizing effect of asymmetric technology transfer, space weaponisation, and counterforce development trends in the South Asian region.
- ▶ **Show vulnerabilities of Counterforce & Grey-Zone.** Ensure India's adoption of counterforce pre-emption, non-kinetic warfare and sub-conventional operations as primary instruments that cause instability in the region is evident to Indian voices in international forums.

Political Level

- ▶ **National Security Decision Making, Institutional Practices.** Improve operational linkages between the National Security Committee (NSC), the newly established National Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) Office, the Commander National Strategic Command (CNSC), Strategic Plans Division (SPD) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) for timely and common-sense strategic decision-making in peacetime and during acute crises.
- ▶ **The OPAC Session on Strategic Deterrence** has been organised to achieve Cross-Party consensus on Strategic Deterrence. Ensure a strong political consensus, independent of domestic and political turbulence, on key aspects of national security policies and spending levels for Pakistan's defense sector.
- ▶ **Public and Strategic Communication Management.** Develop a single, top-level communication strategy (and its actors) for managing expectations, countering foreign rumors, information tampering, and leaking a narrative during militarized stand-offs while avoiding a narrative escalation.

Strategic Level

- ▶ **Two years of consolidation activities in the area of Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD).** Smoothen out FSD (stand for posture) to focus on survivability and penetration of second-strike assets, rather than unconstrained growth in numbers. Emphasize hardened, mobile, and sea-based retaliatory systems (including Babur-3 SLCM on AIP submarines).
- ▶ **Countering Counterforce Threats.** Improve counter-counterforce: Develop operationalization of MIRV technology (Ababeel) in order to circumvent missile defense systems; make Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) infrastructure harder to compromise by cyber, electronic warfare (EW) and space-based means.
- ▶ **The next development is aptly titled NC3 Modernization & Quantum-Safe Encryption.** Proceed with investments in Nuclear Command, Control and Communications (NC3) architectures to prevent the

potential failures of counter-command and adversarial challenges by new AI tools, cyber attacks, and electronic warfare.

Military Level

- ▶ Multi Domain Operations (MDO) Integration. Implementing joint air doctrine across the Army, Navy, Air Force and SPD, and moving towards operate, fight, deliver, kill doctrine to achieve accelerate jointness; create an integrated operational doctrine for land, air, sea, nuclear, cybers, electronic, and space domains, which will be effective against the use of grey-zone tactics and stand-off precision weapons.
- ▶ Modernization of Air Defence and Anti-Drone Warfare. Enlarge and field advanced integrated air defense systems (e.g. HQ-9/HQ-16 variants) and counter-attack deep-reconnaissance drones, loitering munitions and standoff strike platforms with advanced unmanned aerial systems (UAS).
- ▶ Development of refinement in Sub-Conventional and Denial Postures. Enhance the existing state of readiness in the atmosphere along the Line of Control (LoC)/Working Boundary to discourage and neutralise localised incursions by the enemy which would otherwise have unleashed rapid kinetic movement deep within Pakistan's strategic limits.

Conclusion

In the last 30 years, nuclear weapons have radically reshaped the dimensions and contours of South Asian security. It is clear from the empirical data from 1999 to 2026 that the strategy of nuclear deterrence always acted as a brake, thus hindering the escalation of military crises into conventional and/or strategic wars. But added to this is the operationalization of India's sea-based nuclear triad with the commissioning of INS Arihant, testing of INS Arihant, and India's first long-range K-4 SLBM deployments, coupled with the counterforce objectives and artificial intelligence-powered ISR, which makes regional stability extremely vulnerable.

Pakistan needs a mix of defensive Full Spectrum Deterrence and proactive strategic risk-reducing efforts to avoid misjudgments and to achieve lasting deterrence. To ensure the survival of second-strike capabilities at sea, securing NC3 architectures, building a sense of unity around the national domestic consensus, and engaging in proactive diplomacy of risk reduction would be the best means by which Pakistan can succeed in addressing current security challenges and maintain strategic balance in South Asia.

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