



An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

# India-Pakistan War 2025: Strategic Implications and Future Trajectories

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## Abstract

May 2025 Four-Day War between India and Pakistan, initiated by India's Operation Sindoora, marked a significant episode in South Asian security dynamics. Pakistan successfully repelled the Indian offensive, achieving both military and diplomatic victories. This conflict underscores the enduring relevance of nuclear deterrence, while simultaneously highlighting the persistent risk of limited conventional and sub-conventional engagements under the nuclear overhang. This study aims to analyze the strategic, operational, and diplomatic dimensions of the May 2025 conflict and explore potential future trajectories in India-Pakistan relations. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the study will rely on secondary sources, including official statements, policy documents, military reports, scholarly analyses, and theoretical frameworks such as Security Dilemma Theory, Nuclear Deterrence Theory, Stability-Instability Paradox, and Ripeness Theory will guide the investigation. Key research questions include: (i) What geopolitical and geostrategic factors contributed to the escalation of the May 2025 conflict? (ii) How has nuclear deterrence influenced the conduct and outcome of the conflict? (iii) Does the stability-instability paradox explain the limited nature of military engagements? (iv) What policy measures could facilitate conflict resolution and de-escalation in the post-2025 context? The study fills a crucial research gap by providing a timely analysis of Pakistan's strategic posture and the implications of India's military modernization, while offering insights for regional stability and future crisis management.

**Keywords:** Nuclear Deterrence; Stability-Instability Paradox; Security Dilemma; Nuclear Overhang; South Asian Security.

## 1. Introduction

The bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan has remained volatile since their independence in 1947, marked by multiple wars and recurring military standoffs. From the first Kashmir War

(1947–48) to the Second Kashmir War (1965) and the 1971 conflict leading to the creation of Bangladesh, both states have experienced cycles of confrontation and uneasy ceasefires. Nuclearization added a transformative dimension to this rivalry: India's nuclear test in 1974 triggered Pakistan's own pursuit of nuclear capabilities, culminating in reciprocal tests in May 1998. This established a framework of nuclear deterrence, preventing full-scale wars but enabling limited conventional and sub-conventional engagements.

The May 2025 Four-Day War, initiated by India's Operation Sindoor, represents the latest episode in this strategic continuum. During the May 2025 military standoff, the Pakistani military effectively repelled the Indian offensive, neutralizing its frontline advantages and securing victories both militarily and diplomatically. The conflict underscored Pakistan's strengthened regional and global standing, with international recognition of its defensive capabilities and strategic importance. Simultaneously, the war highlighted India's persistent aggressive posture, driven by ideologies such as Hindutva and Akhand Bharat, as well as accelerated military modernization, including missile development, nuclear expansion, and integration of artificial intelligence in its military hardware.

## 2. Intellectual Discourse

The proponents of nuclear deterrence claim that nuclear weapons have assisted in averting major crises and maintained durable peace during the Cold War era. The proponents of nuclear deterrence seem to make the same claim pertaining the role of nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan. In the debate regarding the deterrent capacity of nuclear weapons, two opposing views have been proposed; one view is by advocates such as Kenneth Waltz who argued that nuclear weapons provide states with security against their adversaries and avert conventional war among the nuclear weapon states, while the other view is by the opponents such as Scott D. Sagan who argued that nuclear deterrence is not the only determining factor for averting conventional war between nuclear weapon states.

This research asserts that the theory of Nuclear Deterrence would help us in better understanding India and Pakistan's security relationship after the nuclearisation of the two states. There has been a great discussion on the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence in the world. Waltz (1981) addressed the question, what will the spread of nuclear weapons do to the world? and reached the conclusion that the number of the nuclear weapon states are going to be increased in the coming years as the proliferation is going to take place horizontally. He concludes that the nuclear deterrence is going to work between the new nuclear weapon states as it has worked in the past between major nuclear powers. In response, Sagan (2001: 1065) criticizes proliferation optimists especially Walt's viewpoint and said that the proliferation is not going to create stability. Sagan (2001: 1066) further said that the nuclear deterrence was not so successful in averting wars between the nuclear weapon states in Cold War. The United States and Soviet Union were at the edge of a nuclear war in Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Sagan (2001: 1067-1068) further added that the soldiers are always being trained to have war with the enemy forces and military has a mindset of war and quotes the example of the United States that the U.S military wanted to attack and destroy the Soviet nuclear capabilities in 1950s. Sagan (2001: 1066) further states that the role of military is on the increase in policy making affairs in newly born nuclear weapon states especially in case of Pakistan. He opposes Waltz and argues that the nuclear deterrence is not going to work among the new nuclear weapon states especially India and Pakistan as their command-and-control system is not as strong as that was of the United States and Soviet Union. Sagan (2001: 1086) emphasizes the U.S role to help these smaller nuclear weapon states to strengthen their command-and-control system.

Ganguly and Biringer (2001: 907) said that India and Pakistan have fought four wars in 1947, 1948, 1965, 1971 and 1999 but though there was no declaration of war during Kargil conflict, but it fulfilled the criteria of war. Ganguly and Biringer (2001) further add that most of the time, these two states have been engaged into confrontation with each other. Kapur (2005: 135) argued: "Unlike in Cold War Europe, then, in contemporary South Asia a high degree of strategic stability does not encourage conventional violence. Rather, a significant degree of strategic instability 18 facilitates violence at the conventional level." Kapur (2008: 71-72) opposes Hagerty and Ganguly as the two claims that the danger of the use of nuclear weapons have averted war between India and Pakistan and considers nuclear weapons as a source of bringing instability in the region as it has given a shield to Pakistan against Indian all-out war and has encouraged aggressive Pakistani behavior whereas it resulted in Indian mobilization for a war against Pakistan. He also opposes the claims made by the proliferation pessimists as Scott D. Sagan that the military organizations are creating destabilization between the two nuclear weapon states. He said that the nuclearization of India and Pakistan has created a new wave of destabilization between the two states, but the militaries of the two states have nothing to do with it. He perceives nuclearization as the major cause for Indo-Pak crises. He further states that the nuclear weapons have given Pakistan a momentum to start adventurous policies to attract the attention of the international community to Kashmir dispute. He further states, "despite Pakistan's extensive military capabilities, it suffers from a significant degree of conventional insecurity vis-à-vis India – a fact of which Pakistani policymakers are keenly aware and that, in their view, makes nuclear deterrence essential to Pakistan's defensive policy." Pakistan thinks that the nuclear deterrence has averted the chances of any war in the region. But India has brought changes into its defensive policy and has decided to have strong reaction to any Pakistan's adventure. He finally argued that the danger of a conventional war leading to a nuclear exchange can only be averted through diplomacy and not with the nuclear deterrence.

### **3. Nuclear Deterrence between the US and USSR**

The United States used atomic bombs against Japan in 1945 causing heavy casualties in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Since then, it was the period of nuclear arms race and the world experienced major powers one after another testing their nuclear weapons. The Cold War started between the two most influential powers of the world. Winston Churchill once said: "It may be that we shall by a process of sublime irony have reached a stage in this story where safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation" (Rauchhaus, 2009).

The nuclear arms race started soon after the World War II between the United States and the Soviet Union which led to the increased number of nuclear weapons to almost fifty thousand enough to destroy the planet and the civilization for number of times (McCoy, 2009). The proponents of the nuclear deterrence claim that it averted wars and maintained peace during the cold war era. But that claim does not seem to be justified in case of historical perspectives as there have been about 120 proxy wars during the cold war era which claimed about two million casualties. Everyone said that the nuclear deterrence did not fail but no one is there to claim that it really worked (McCoy, 2009).

The proponents of nuclear deterrence argued that nuclear deterrence averted wars between the major powers while they face criticism from the opposite camp which views that nuclear deterrence was not the only determining factor in averting wars between the United States and Soviet Union. Deterrence Pessimists give different examples in this regard. The history is witness that the US nuclear capabilities failed to deter USSR to stop its adventurous policies in the world and especially in the Eastern Europe. And on the other side, the nuclear deterrence failed to deter the US to decide for nuclear strikes against Soviet Union in Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. In this connection, Munton and

David (2007: 7) said that the United States and Soviet Union were indulged into cold war for more than four decades and did not fight a „hot war“ but came closest to fight a nuclear war in Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The two nuclear weapon states were almost at the edge of a nuclear war in 1962, and it was only the rational decision making which contributed at the eleventh hour in averting war between the two nuclear weapon states.

The United States and the Soviet Union remained in continuous rivalry with each during the cold war era. These two states were having confrontation on many issues and having interventions in Europe, Asia and Africa. These two major powers were trying hard to damage each other's interests all over the world and the nuclear deterrence could do nothing to stop them from pursuing war-oriented policies.

In the Berlin Crisis, President Kennedy discussed the possibility of war, including the feasibility of a nuclear first strike, but drew back because there was no certainty that it could be controlled and prevented from escalating to a nuclear exchange (Basrur, 2014: 5). Furthermore, Kaplan (2001) said that Berlin crisis led the US and Soviet Union towards the edge of nuclear war. He further added that newly available documents state that the United States seriously considered the option of nuclear strikes on Soviet Union and in this regard, the US President Kennedy seriously discussed the option of nuclear strikes against Soviet Union with its top national-security aides, and this was not a theoretical chat.

Though the nuclear deterrence has played its role in averting wars in the world, but it was not the only factor which contributed to bringing restraint on nuclear weapon states, the diplomacy made the two states continue the dialogue throughout the process of confrontation. The role of diplomacy can be seen visible during the United States and Soviet Union rivalry during Cold War era. Though the two military alliances North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Warsaw Pact confronted each other on many places in the world but the dialogue between the United States and Soviet Union did not stop and they were continuously negotiating on different matters. Therefore, giving whole credit to nuclear deterrence for averting war will not be justified as the role of international diplomacy was also there which played its role in defusing the crises and averting war between the major powers during Cold War era.

#### 4. Deterrence Theory and Its Prevalence in South Asia

The debate regarding the deterrence capacity of nuclear weapons suggests two opposing views, the proliferation and deterrence optimists on the one side and proliferation and deterrence pessimists on the other. Kenneth Waltz, the main proponent from the camp of proliferation and deterrence optimists, has argued that the world is anarchic in nature and countries therefore need to search for security. He is of the view that states opt for conventional war to obtain gains through victory, but they will avoid going for the option of a war if they have nuclear weapons. He claimed that the relationship of ‘balance of terror’ is stopping the nuclear weapon states from adopting the option of war. In contrast, Scott D Sagan, a prominent proliferation and deterrence pessimist, opposed Waltz and argued that proliferation of the nuclear weapons will bring more instability in the world. He further added that nuclear deterrence is not the determining factor for averting war and maintaining durable peace between nuclear weapon states. This debate is further joined other scholars in the field such as Hagerty, Ganguly, Kapur, Wieninger, Narang, Cheema, Chari, Zafar Iqbal Cheema, Hoodbhoy and Zia Mian and many more.

Deterrence community suggested following assumptions to develop deterrence as a comprehensive theory. First, deterrence convinces the adversary of the more damage than the adversary. Second, the US viewed Soviet Union's will to dominate the whole world. Third, the

weapons need to be evaluated in terms of their usefulness. Fourth, the US could survive a major nuclear attack (Raser 1966: 300). The agreed principles of the deterrence on the two sides can be as follows.

First, Credibility requires consistent behavior. Second, the gradual deterrence is more effective than a massive retaliation policy. Third, the national objective should be persuaded in such a way that war is not necessary to achieve them. Fourth, counterforce strategies lead to situational instability and intensified arms race. Fifth, announcing its capabilities and strategies is advantageous to the nation which is in a superior position. Sixth, opponents can tell each other what they can do to reduce other's fears and should try to reduce those fears. Seven, weapons parity is stabilizing element in international relations. Eighth, weapons postures should be sought which maximize flexibility (Raser 1966: 300).

Morgan (2003) says while highlighting dereference that one state prevents another state from doing something which first state does not want to occur by threatening of bitter consequences. Morgan (2003: 1) further adds "deterrence is a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction". Deterrence theory has the following factors to persuade the enemy. "First, you had an effective military capability. Second, it could impose unacceptable costs on the enemy. Third, you would use your weapons if attacked" (Morgan 2003: 224). While writing on the essence of deterrence theory Morgan (2003) discussed following elements which describe deterrence as a theory.

The key elements of the theory are well known: the assumption of a severe conflict, the assumption of rationality, the concept of a retaliatory threat, the concept of unacceptable damage, the notion of credibility, and the notion of deterrence stability Morgan (2003: 8).

The key elements discussed above by Morgan (2003) are further clarified here.

#### *a. Severe Conflict*

Deterrence theory was developed to cope with Cold War threats (Morgan 2003). The conflict during the cold between the United States was full of intensity and it was total and ultimate to both sides and the world seemed to be at stake (Morgan 2003).

#### *b. Assumption of Rationality*

This assumption of deterrence theory means to take the decisions effectively during the times of crises between the two nuclear weapon states. According to Morgan (2003: 11): For purposes of the theory, "Effectively" was initially equated with "rationally," and this became the point of departure. The aim was to help decision makers understand what a relational actor would do in immediate deterrence situations or in preparing to best handle those situations; the initial assumption was that both parties would be rational.

#### *c. Concept of a Retaliatory Threat*

The concept of retaliatory threat is being used in theory of deterrence to deter the enemy that if you start an attack then you will suffer with massive retaliation. The retaliatory threat also used to threaten the enemy that if you start the war, we will win. Furthermore, the retaliatory threat is also used to tell the enemy that if you prepare for the war, we can opt for the pre-emptive strike.

#### *d. Concept of Unacceptable Damage*

The unacceptable in the deterrence theory can be clarified by identifying how much punishment needs to be given to the enemy and how much losses will be enough for the enemy. "If the opponent

was rational then prospective punishment needed was that the total costs outweighed the total benefits because an alternative course of action” offered a better payoff” (Morgan 2003: 14). The best way was to threaten the enemy with unacceptable damage with strong defense and retaliation.

*e. Idea of Credibility*

The idea of credibility has an important place in the theory of deterrence. Deterrence theorists think that threat of one state to another is not as important as the perception of the other state about the credibility of the threat. If the adversary believes that you can prove to be harmful for him then the threat works.

*f. Notion of Deterrence Stability*

The problem of stability lies when one state is trying to threaten the other state’s preparation for a war with a preparing for preemptive strike. Sometimes, this type of situation leads to the start of war between the two states. In a mutual deterrence relationship, states need to take care of deterrence stability that they could avoid war.

According to (Morgan 2003: 20): Analysis of the stability problem started with the most severe test of stability, the crisis where an attack is primed and ready to go and deterrence is used to bar a final decision to carry it out. In such situations, the deterrence might take steps that looked to the opponent like plans not to retaliate but to attack and, concluding that war was unavoidable; the opponent could conclude it had better launch the planned attack. The steps taken to deter would further incite the attack, in terms of preventing war, deterrence would be unstable.

Kroeing (2013: 144) further added that nuclear deterrence theorists have written a lot on Mutual Assured Destruction or “MAD” in which two nuclear weapon states with second strike capabilities deter each other with unaffordable destruction because the two states can absorb first strike and respond to enemy with nuclear attack. He asserted that in this environment, neither state can protect itself against a nuclear attack. He elaborated that this situation motivates them to rely on nuclear deterrence for their security. He explained: “Because the threat of nuclear exchange raises the cost of conflict, scholars have argued that nuclear weapons deter international war and may have contributed to an unprecedented period of great power strategic stability” (Kroeing 2013: 144).

Morgan (2003), Waltz (1981) and Zagare and Kilgour (1993) divide deterrence into General Deterrence, Immediate Deterrence, Asymmetric Nuclear Deterrence, Extended Nuclear Deterrence and Minimum Nuclear Deterrence. These types of deterrence are discussed briefly over here.

*i. General Deterrence*

In ‘General Deterrence’, a state maintains a large military capability and threatens its enemy that if it attacks, it will suffer from the major losses with the retaliation. “In General Deterrence, an actor maintains a broad military capability and issues broad threats of a punitive response to an attack to keep any one from seriously thinking about attacking” (Morgan 2003: 9).

*ii. Immediate Deterrence*

Immediate deterrence is the situation when one state releases threats to the selected opponent in a situation when it comes to know that the adversary is preparing for an attack. “In Immediate Deterrence, the actor has a military capability and issues threats to the specific opponent when the opponent is already contemplating and preparing an attack” (Morgan 2003: 9).

*iii. Asymmetric Nuclear Deterrence*

Zagare and Kilgour (1993: 2) referred to Morgan's (1977) definition of "Immediate Deterrence" while discussing asymmetric deterrence which is a situation where one side is considering attacking while the other side is mounting a threat to stop the adversary from doing so. Morgan calls such a situation as part of asymmetric deterrence.

#### *iv. Extended Nuclear Deterrence*

Waltz (1981) mentioned that major powers possessing nuclear weapons give nuclear guarantees to non-nuclear weapon states. He gave the example of the United States who gave nuclear guarantees to Europe in case of Soviet's nuclear threat. The states that fail to search for external security guarantees would try to opt for nuclear weapons, and this could be seen in the case of India and Pakistan.

#### *v. Minimum Nuclear Deterrence*

States opt for the required number of nuclear weapons as a response to enemy's first strike. Force of minimum nuclear deterrence stops states from pursuing the path of arms race. During the Cold War era, when the United States and Soviet Union were busy in increasing the number of their nuclear weapons, China opted for minimum nuclear deterrence. India and Pakistan too have opted for the same strategy of minimum nuclear deterrence.

### **5. Analysis**

The India-Pakistan rivalry has been marked by recurring military conflicts since 1947, including the First Kashmir War (1947–48), the Second Kashmir War (1965), and the 1971 war that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh (Ganguly, 1995). These historical conflicts have shaped the strategic calculus of both states and have directly influenced their military doctrines and nuclear policies (Ganguly & Biringer, 2001).

The nuclearization of South Asia began with India's nuclear test in May 1974, codenamed Operation Smiling Buddha, conducted at the Pokhran Test Range in Rajasthan. This event created a security dilemma for Pakistan, which accelerated its own nuclear weapons program to ensure national security and territorial integrity (Siddiqui, 2015; Akram, 2024). Pakistan's nuclear capability was demonstrated in May 1998 through the Chagai-I and Chagai-II tests, establishing the framework for Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) and strategic stability in South Asia (Rizvi, 2001; Akram, 2024). While nuclear deterrence has prevented full-scale war, India has continued to pursue limited military operations, exemplified by the 1999 Kargil Conflict and other sub-conventional engagements (Choen, 2002; Shakoor, 1999). Pakistan's Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) doctrine has been developed to counter India's conventional superiority and doctrinal ambitions, including the Cold Start Doctrine, thereby maintaining a credible deterrent across strategic, operational, and tactical levels (Kidwai, 2024; Hashim, 2019).

The May 2025 Four-Day War, according to Pakistan's official narrative, represents the latest demonstration of this dynamic. India's Operation Sindoor aimed to achieve limited territorial gains, but Pakistan successfully repelled the offensive, achieving military and diplomatic victories. The conflict illustrates the persistence of the Stability-Instability Paradox, wherein nuclear deterrence constrains full-scale war but permits limited conventional or sub-conventional engagements under the nuclear umbrella (Chelling, 1960; Akram, 2024).

Additionally, India's accelerated military modernization, including missile development, nuclear expansion, and the integration of AI and other advanced technologies in its armed forces, signals a potential escalation in the strategic competition (Abdullah, 2024). Pakistan's successful response demonstrates the role of credible deterrence and strategic signaling in safeguarding national

security and regional stability. While nuclear deterrence mitigates the risk of large-scale conflict, limited conventional and sub-conventional wars remain possible, driven by historical rivalry, ideological motivations, and evolving military capabilities.

Four days war fought between India and Pakistan brought a greater impact on the future warfare of the two countries. The defeat imposed on India by Pakistan will have an impact on the future of the two countries. In my opinion, India with its over confidence based on 1971 war fought with Pakistan underestimated Pakistan's military capabilities in 2025. Indian air strikes in Azad Kashmir and Pakistan's territories led to the start of one of the biggest standoffs between the Air Forces of India and Pakistan after World War 2. With more than eighty Air Force Aircrafts in air from the countries were involved in dog fight. Pakistan's J 10 C Air Force Aircrafts with PL 15 missiles hit Indian most advanced Rafale Aircrafts and became successful to destroy three to four of it. Therefore, Pakistan got the upper age at the start of war in air combat on first day.

On the second and third day, we witnessed India involved in drone warfare with Pakistan. Hundreds of drones were flown from India to bring maximum damage on Pakistan's side. We witnessed countered Indian drones with flying hundreds of drones from Pakistan's side. There this dogfight continued till the end of the second day of war with losses on the two sides with no one getting victory on the second day.

Third day of war witnessed drone fight but also include the use of BrahMos missiles from Indian side. Pakistan became successful to divert one or two missiles to Indian mainland but other struck inside Pakistan's territory and brought some losses. Pakistan became successful to relocate to its resources to avoid losses from the reach of BrahMos missiles.

The situation worsened when India attacked Pakistan on the night of 9th and 10th May 2025. This time India targeted Pakistan's Airbases. Although, Pakistan did not have many losses as it relocated its Aircrafts from those Airbases, but it led Pakistan to start the military operation Bonyan ul Marsoos in the morning of 10th May 2025. Pakistan hit India hard with Fateh 1 and Fateh 2 missiles and JF 17 Aircrafts. In this military operation, Pakistan became successful to bring major losses on Indian side as its various locations were hit hard. Therefore, Pakistan's military operation forced India to accept the ceasefire calls coming from all over the world especially the United States on 10th May 2025.

## 6. Conclusion

India's start of four-day war against Pakistan led it to feel ashamed in the international community as it lost the war on the one hand, feeling humiliated on the other. Furthermore, its insistence on not accepting the international community especially the United States' role in averting war further deteriorates its stance. The United States, China and various other states have stated clearly that they played an important role in bringing ceasefire between India and Pakistan. If India does not accept the role of international community in ceasefire, then it means Indian defeat in war led it to accept the ceasefire. Therefore, Indo-Pak May, 2025 war will be remembered in history as it has brought a lasting impact in South Asia as it has witnessed the emergence of Pakistan as Super Power of South Asia after it imposed a humiliated defeat on India and the credit goes to one of the brave person of Pakistan's side and that is Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Field Marshal General Asim Munir. And the recent world history since 1945 has not witnessed any other brave military General than General Asim Munir. It is because how he controlled the warfare in May 2025 war and furthermore how he controlled the nerves till the end of the war. General Asim Munir's role in imposing defeat on India is worth mentioning and whole world is witness to it.

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