

**A Tepid War under Nuclear Deterrence:
India-Pakistan Confrontation and Its Implication****Ren-Shan Jia,* Tung-Chieh Tsai******Abstract**

The nuclear peace thesis posits that the possession of nuclear capabilities deters full-scale war, thereby establishing a stable condition grounded in rational choice and mutual destructive balance. It has served as a foundational concept in deterrence theory, particularly within the Cold War context, to explain the restraint of great powers and the prevention of conflict escalation. However, since India and Pakistan joined the ranks of nuclear-armed states in 1998, the bilateral dynamic has not settled into strategic stability; rather, it has been marked by repeated crises and episodes of brinkmanship. This article contends that traditional nuclear deterrence theory fails to account for the persistence of localized conflicts under four structural conditions in the India-Pakistan case, including intractable sovereignty disputes, the role of third-party non-state actors, disparity in nuclear warhead stockpiles, and temporal

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asymmetry in the development of nuclear capabilities. The interaction between India and Pakistan under nuclear confrontation has evolved into a pattern of limited conflict which could be called the tepid war, wherein nuclear weapons have become instruments of escalation strategy rather than guarantees of structural stability.

Keywords: India-Pakistan relations, nuclear deterrence theory, tepid war, non-state proxy, temporal asymmetry

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I. Rethinking Nuclear Deterrence

Since the first use of atomic bomb at the end of World War II, conception of nuclear deterrence has become a core idea for regulating the interaction among great powers and preventing military conflict.¹ During the Cold War, the bipolar system formed by the United States and the Soviet Union gave rise to a structure of nuclear stability grounded in the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD),² and then for building a worldwide nonproliferation regime, which both gradually established a state of peace premised on a balance of destructive capabilities and, in turn, gave rise to the nuclear peace thesis in international relations theory.³ Scholars such as Schelling, Jervis, and Waltz have argued that nuclear weapons possess a structural balancing function that effectively reduces the risk of war and exerts a clear deterrent effect against conflict escalation.⁴ However, since India and Pakistan respectively conducted nuclear tests and formally became nuclear-armed states in 1998, this development not only threatened the existing nonproliferation regime which based on the Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) signed in

¹ Robert Powell, "Nuclear Deterrence Theory, Nuclear Proliferation, and National Missile Defense," *International Security*, 27, no. 4, (2003): 86-118.

² Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959).

³ Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 17-21.

⁴ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 35-40; Robert Jervis, "Deterrence Theory Revisited," *World Politics*, 31, no. 2, (1979): 303-304; Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better* (London: IISS Adelphi Papers, 1981), 1-12.

1968, their bilateral relationship has also failed to conform to the stable conditions posited by the *nuclear peace thesis*. Instead, it has been repeatedly punctuated by crisis of military confrontation, revealing the limitations of deterrence theory when applied to non-Western contexts.

The India-Pakistan confrontation offers not just a region-specific anomaly, but uncovers a fact that the deterrence theory developed through Cold War experience may not cover the broader structural deficiencies in contemporary situation, particularly its inability to account for variations in institutional conditions, actor composition, power distribution, and so on. For instance, after both India and Pakistan acquired nuclear capabilities since 1998, a series of crises which could be regarded as so-called *tepid war*—the situation between hot war and cold war—including the 1999 Kargil War, the 2001 Indian Parliament attack, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the 2019 Pulwama incident and the 2025 conflict following the Pahalgam attack, all events demonstrated that nuclear weapons failed to produce the expected stabilizing effect. Instead, these events exposed the contradiction between the hypothesis of deterrence and the empirical reality of repeated conflict in this regional bilateral relations.⁵

⁵ Recent data from SIPRI (2025) and regional assessments from Pakistani scholarship (ISSI) further suggest that nuclear competition in South Asia continues to intensify rather than stabilize, reinforcing the empirical divergence from classical deterrence expectations. *See, for example*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2025*:

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Theoretically speaking, though states in a condition of mutual assured destruction cannot credibly threaten to launch a massive nuclear attack deliberately, they may still be able to credibly make “threats that leave something to chance” which imply that the military crisis or limited war would be possible.⁶ It is worth to note that even though crises are often regarded as a kind of brinkmanship or a “risk-maximizing approach” in which a state “tends toward maximizing and accepting mutual military risk,⁷” not only most states as rational actor are very reluctant to press on and raise the crisis, but very cautious when using crisis as a diplomatic tool. Besides, the cases in Cold War period also point out that the nuclear powers often chose proxy warfare as an indirect way to deal with mutual competition but not confront each other directly, and that may be why most crises were under control finally.⁸

In sum, as one of the most institutionally influential strategic approaches in post-Cold War international relations, deterrence theory actually rests on the core logic of using certain punitive

Armaments, Disarmament and International Security; and Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, “Nuclear Year 2025 in Review,” Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), 2026.; Zafar Khan, *Pakistan’s Nuclear Policy: A Minimum Credible Deterrence* (London: Routledge, 2015), 42-48.

⁶ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 187.

⁷ Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1987), 10-11.

⁸ Seyom Brown, “Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 27, no. 2, (2016): 243-257.

threats to induce behavioral restraint. It intends to emphasize the catastrophic consequences, thereby compel the adversaries to anticipate unacceptable losses in the military escalation, and thus bring the deterrent effects.⁹ Basically, there are two types of nuclear deterrence: deterrence by punishment which threatens to inflict damage or retaliate if one launch attacked, and deterrence by denial which seeks to undermine the adversary's incentive to escalate by increasing the costs and reducing the likelihood of success.¹⁰ In the Cold War period, deterrence by punishment was dominant and given rise to some key concepts such as credible minimum deterrence and second-strike capability. Then until right now, the deterrence theories are largely predicated on following conditions: first, all actors possess clearly articulated and stable intentions along with coherent decision-making capacity; second, nuclear capabilities are symmetrical and reliable; and third, there are effective communication channels and enough escalation control mechanisms existing before and during crises.

This pattern of limited conflict under conditions of nuclear deterrence has been widely conceptualized in the literature as the stability-instability paradox. Originally articulated by Glenn Snyder, the paradox suggests that stability at the strategic nuclear level may generate instability at lower levels of conflict, as

⁹ Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 5-10.

¹⁰ Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 98-101.

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mutually deterred states perceive reduced risks in engaging in limited military actions. As Snyder noted, “the greater the stability of the ‘strategic’ balance of terror, the lower the stability at its lower levels of violence.”¹¹ Subsequent scholarship has further applied this concept to regional nuclear dyads, particularly in South Asia, where nuclear deterrence has not prevented recurring crises and limited wars. The 1999 Kargil conflict, for example, has been widely interpreted as a manifestation of the stability-instability paradox, in which nuclear deterrence constrained full-scale war while enabling sub-strategic military engagement.¹² Building on this literature, this study does not seek to propose an entirely new theoretical framework, but rather to examine how the India-Pakistan case reflects and adapts the logic of the stability-instability paradox under conditions of asymmetry, non-state actors, and limited crisis-management mechanisms.

While classical deterrence theory is largely derived from the bipolar stability observed during the Cold War, particularly in the context of the United States-Soviet Union rivalry, its assumptions are only partially applicable to the contemporary India-Pakistan nuclear dyad. During the Cold War, deterrence stability was

¹¹ Christopher J. Watterson, “Competing Interpretations of the Stability-Instability Paradox: The Case of the Kargil War,” *The Nonproliferation Review* (2017), pp. 2-3; Glenn Snyder, “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” in Paul Seabury (ed.), *The Balance of Power* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), pp. 198-199.

¹² Christopher J. Watterson, “Competing Interpretations of the Stability-Instability Paradox: The Case of the Kargil War,” *The Nonproliferation Review* (2017), pp. 2-8.

reinforced by relatively mature institutional mechanisms, including established communication channels such as the Washington-Moscow hotline, as well as arms control agreements that enhanced transparency and predictability. By contrast, the India-Pakistan relationship lacks similarly robust and institutionalized crisis-management frameworks. Although some confidence-building measures exist, they remain limited in scope and are often undermined during periods of heightened tension. The absence of reliable communication mechanisms, combined with recurring crises and short decision-making timelines, increases the risks of misperception and inadvertent escalation. Consequently, while deterrence may persist at a basic level in South Asia, its stability is more fragile and contingent compared to the Cold War model, highlighting the need to reassess the applicability of classical deterrence assumptions in this regional context. Yet, in regions characterized by asymmetric power structures, domestic governance failures, or deeply embedded proxy behavior, it is clear that the nuclear deterrence will face structural constraints such as indeterminate responsibility and uncontrollable escalation,¹³ which will underscore the applicability of nuclear deterrence.

Take South Asia for example, though many people claim that, due to India and Pakistan never happen war in narrow sense since

¹³ Nina Tannenwald, "The Vanishing Nuclear Taboo? How Disarmament Fell Apart," *Foreign Affairs*, 97, no. 6, (2018): 16-24.

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1998, it means the deterrence theory work indeed.¹⁴ This article still contends that the India-Pakistan confrontation cannot be adequately explained by conventional nuclear deterrence conception, because they caught in dispute too frequent and usually fight each other directly though all events never upgrade to large-scale conflict. Actually, the India-Pakistan case differs from the logic of deterrence which developed through the Cold War experiences in at least four structural conditions: first, the sovereignty debate and mobilization of national identity surrounding the Kashmir dispute, which obstructs strategic rationality from guiding decision-making; second, the active role of non-state actors entangled with state power structures, which undermines the clarity of deterrent boundaries and the logic of reciprocal accountability; third, asymmetries in nuclear deployment between India and Pakistan, which prevent to establish a stable balance of destructive capabilities, thereby destabilizing deterrent thresholds and producing divergent risk perceptions; and fourth, temporal disparities in the maturation of nuclear capabilities, which place the two states in an asynchronous deterrence posture, resulting in a misaligned structure of mutual deterrence.

¹⁴ Sharaq Hussain, "Nuclear Deterrence and the Prevention of War: The Case Study of India and Pakistan," *Journal of Peace and Diplomacy*, 1, no. 1, (2020): 47-56.

A. Intractable Sovereignty Dispute:

The basic assumption of nuclear deterrence theory is that decision-makers possess rational choice capabilities and are able to weigh risks against costs and benefits when choosing escalation and restraint. However, when a conflict refers to state legitimacy and national historical narratives, above assumption may be undermined fundamentally. For India and Pakistan, the Kashmir issue has long transcended just as territorial dispute, but a crucial symbol within each state's national mythology,¹⁵ and often perceived as a non-negotiable cornerstone of regime legitimacy and national identity. When sovereignty claims are regarded as the sacred and absolute values, compromise becomes tantamount to state's self-negation, and strategic choices are thereby severed from rational calculation. Under such conditions, nuclear weapons cease to function as instruments of risk suppression and even instead become means of asserting national will and political resolve. As a result, the deterrent mechanism loses its capacity to serve as an institutional stabilizer, and its normative assumptions collapse accordingly.

¹⁵ Sumit Ganguly and Kanti Bajpai, "Kashmir: A Strategic Crisis or Ethnic Nationalism?" in *Subnational Movements in South Asia*, eds. Subrata K. Mitra and R. Alison Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1996), 125-139.

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B. Third-Party Non-State Actors:

In India-Pakistan nuclear standoff, non-state armed actors are not merely external strategic variables, but have become institutionally embedded in the national security architectures. Organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, though nominally as independent units, in practice maintain strategically ambiguous ties with Pakistan's military and intelligence apparatus,¹⁶ and has produced an unaccountable yet effective influence. Within this structure, hostile actions tend to occur outside formal state command chains, making it difficult for India to identify responsible actors or legitimate targets for retaliation after an attack which in turn undermines the accountability framework upon which deterrence mechanisms rely. When strategic signals cannot be transmitted clearly, the very notion of deterrence as assumed by nuclear theory is disrupted, and the logic of standoff deteriorates into institutional disequilibrium.

C. Disparity in Nuclear Warhead Stockpiles:

The effectiveness of nuclear deterrence hinges on the credibility of retaliation—that is, the assurance that both states

¹⁶ S. Paul Kapur and Sumit Ganguly, "The Jihad Paradox: Pakistan and Islamist Militancy in South Asia," *International Security*, 37, no. 1, (2012): 111-141.

possess the capability to inflict unacceptable damage. Although India and Pakistan are both nuclear-armed, a significant asymmetry exists in the size of warhead stockpiles, redundancy of deployment, and reserve capacity.¹⁷ India's nuclear program is more mature technologically and maintains a stable and expansive nuclear posture, affording it greater capacity to absorb and delay crises. In contrast, Pakistan relies on a logic of limited quantity and rapid deployment, and this structural imbalance diminishes the credibility of its second-strike capability. As a result, deterrent signaling in this bilateral relations becomes fraught with operational fragility and diminished predictability.

D. Temporal Asymmetry in Developing Nuclear Capabilities:

Although India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests almost simultaneously in 1998, their trajectories in nuclear capability development have diverged significantly over time.¹⁸ Since the 1970s, India has pursued the construction of triad nuclear power and a civilian-control system and emphasized the separation between conventional and nuclear force during crises. In contrast,

¹⁷ Christoph Bluth, "India and Pakistan: A Case of Asymmetric Nuclear Deterrence," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 22, no. 3, (2010): 387-406.

¹⁸ Rodney W. Jones, *Minimum Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: An Overview* (Reston: Policy Architects International, 2001).

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Pakistan's nuclear policy has been limited by technology and cost, favoring low thresholds and highly flexible deployment strategies. This institutional disparity and asynchronous development have obstructed the formation of symmetrical risk perceptions and escalation pacing between both sides. As result, strategic signals are often misinterpreted due to temporal misperceptions of intent, then led to undermine the institutional mutual trust which required for effective nuclear deterrence.

II. Kashmir Issue as Sovereignty Dispute

As the central point of contention between India and Pakistan, the Kashmir issue extends far beyond a territorial or geopolitical dispute, but embedded in sovereignty narrative and national myth deeply. The Kashmir conflict was a legacy of the partition of India in 1947. Both India and Pakistan claimed sovereignty over Kashmir leading to regional wars in 1947-48, 1965 and 1999. A UN resolution in 1948 has proposed the withdrawal of both Pakistani and Indian forces from Kashmir, however, it was refused by both countries.¹⁹ For India, Kashmir tests the viability of its secular federalism—whether a Muslim-majority region can be integrated into a unified national identity. Then for Pakistan, Kashmir is seen as the unfinished symbol of Partition and a historical extension of its identity as an

¹⁹ J. C. Aggarwal and S. P. Agrawal, *Modern History of Jammu and Kashmir* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1995), 107-112.

Islamic fortress and the embodiment of its religious legitimacy.²⁰ As a result, both states position Kashmir conflict as a core coordinate of national identity, regarding its political value as fundamentally non-negotiable. Once sovereignty claims become integrated into the politics of identity rather than confined to geostrategic competition, the nuclear deterrence theory—originally premised on risk aversion and rational cost-benefit calculation—fails to account for the underlying logic of decision-making and mobilization in such a context.²¹

Nuclear deterrence theory posits that nuclear-armed states will choose restraint under the shadow of mutual destruction, with strategic behavior oriented toward the avoidance of unacceptable damage. The deterrent mechanism operates through both *deterrence by punishment* and *deterrence by denial*, aiming to preserve adversarial predictability and risk aversion.²² Above concept rooted in the Cold War experience of U.S.-Soviet confrontation and maintains that as long as both states possess enough credible second-strike capabilities and stable

²⁰ Sumit Ganguly, "Explaining the Kashmir Insurgency: Political Mobilization and Institutional Decay," *International Security*, 21, no. 2, (1996): 76-107; C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 28-35.

²¹ Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity, Race, and Nationalism," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35, no. 1, (2009): 21-42.

²² Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 12-15; Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 112-115.

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command-and-control systems, any act of escalation would be interpreted as irrational.²³ However, policy behavior surrounding Kashmir—no matter India or Pakistan—does not conform to this logic. The impetus for conflict often stems from historical memory, religious division, and concern about regime legitimacy, rather than from conventional strategic and security thinking. Both India's internal discourse of unification nationalism and Pakistan's emphasis on Islamic authenticity render Kashmir as symbolic issue with no space for compromise.²⁴ Even with nuclear capabilities embedded in both states' strategic frameworks, these do not necessarily constrain the range of policy options. When state decision-making is rooted mainly in political identity and imagination of national will, the behavioral stability and institutional constraints assumed by nuclear deterrence would fail to exert its effective influence.

Moreover, threat perceptions are often used to justify policies which are adopted not because they address an external security threat, but because they suit the requirements of bureaucratic agencies and vested interests in society, and not to mention that it may be different for defining the threat in between the superpower and middle power. In contrast to two superpowers and the European medium-sized nuclear powers in the Cold War

²³ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 93-100; Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 276-281.

²⁴ Stephen P. Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 89-94.

period, small regional nuclear powers like India and Pakistan tended to adopt a policy of “minimum deterrence.”²⁵ It refers to the concept where a nation maintains a nuclear arsenal solely to deter from nuclear attack and claims the “no first use” (NFU) principle with an constrained second strike capability. Since the minimal deterrence mission is not to deter, for example, a conventional attack by an enemy, it means the military conflict is not avoidable, especially for a sensitive sovereignty issue such like Kashmir.²⁶

Except Kashmir as an issue with highly political sensitivity, more critically, India and Pakistan have failed to establish a stable and durable crisis management mechanism, rendering both states unable to engage in institutionalized de-escalation during episodes of sudden conflict. During the Cold War, instruments such as the hotline system, crisis notification protocols, and third-party mediation frameworks played pivotal roles in stabilizing confrontations between U.S. and Soviet Union, as evidenced by their effectiveness during the Cuban and the Berlin crises for example. These mechanisms served as stabilizing supplements to the deterrence regime.²⁷ By contrast, though India and Pakistan

²⁵ Christoph Bluth, “India and Pakistan: A Case of Asymmetric Nuclear Deterrence,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 22, no. 3, (2010): 387-406.

²⁶ Zafar Khan, “The Changing Contours of Minimum Deterrence in South Asia,” *Policy Perspectives*, 13, no. 1, (2016): 77-96.

²⁷ David Holloway, *The Soviet Union and the Arms Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 197-201; Michael Krepon et al., *Crisis Prevention*,

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have periodically proposed bilateral dialogue frameworks and conflict early-warning systems since 1998, such initiatives have largely remained symbolic declarations and have not been translated into functioning, routinized risk management institutions. The Kashmir issue is defined by a complex interplay between the internal political situation in the Kashmir Valley and the relationship between India and Pakistan, and the situation is further complicated by the fact that India, Pakistan, and Kashmiri political organizations hold what appear to be irreconcilable ideological positions regarding Kashmir.²⁸ Following the 2001 Indian Parliament attack, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and especially the 2025 crisis due to terrorist attack, both countries approached the brink of war, with escalation processes driven entirely by domestic political pressure and the tempo of military mobilization. Under such conditions, even when nuclear weapons possess latent deterrent power, their operational logic cannot be effectively activated through the existing institutional structure. Consequently, the efficacy of nuclear deterrence becomes subordinated to the absence of crisis management capacity and institutional strength.

Confidence-Building, and Reconciliation in South Asia (Washington, D.C.: Henry L. Stimson Center, 1995), 5-12.

²⁸ Chitralekha Zutshi, "India, Pakistan, and the Kashmir Issue: 1947 and Beyond," *Education about Asia*, 14, no. 2, (2009): 13.

III. How Non-State Actors Undermine Deterrence Mechanisms

In contrast to the rigidity due to sovereign symbolism, another critical factor in the India-Pakistan standoff lies in the role of non-state armed actors. In fact, the functional premise of deterrence theory rests on the clear identification of responsible actors and deterrent targets, along with the establishment of a predictable logic of retaliation. In the India-Pakistan context, however, Pakistan has long relied on armed units such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed to exert indirect pressure.²⁹ These actors maintain ambivalent ties with Pakistan's military agencies such as the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) while nominally external to the state apparatus.³⁰ The character of ambiguous agency enables their actions outside the conventional responsibility, leaving India unable to determine whether Pakistan was stakeholder in such attacks. Once the chain of accountability disrupted, the deterrence regime will be shaken and give rise to what may be termed institutionally fractured deterrence.

²⁹ Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) is an Islamist militant organization driven by Salafi jihadist ideology which was founded in 1985-86 with funding from Osama bin Laden. Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) is a Deobandi jihadist Islamist militant group active in Kashmir since 2000 and devote to separate Jammu and Kashmir from India then integrate into Pakistan.

³⁰ C. Christine Fair, *In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 47-66.

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Since the Cold War, deterrence theory has rested on the fundamental assumptions that actors are identifiable, accountable, and subject to retaliation. Only when actors are clearly defined and singular can deterrent signals be effectively directed toward specific targets; conversely, if the threat lies outside the formal state system, the legitimacy and precision of retaliatory actions will become compromised.³¹ The nuclear deterrence mechanism depends on delineated escalation thresholds, it allows the adversaries to evaluate the consequences and thereby exercise self-restraint.³² However, in the India-Pakistan case, non-state armed actors have repeatedly intervened to escalate bilateral tensions. Their actions are neither formally ordered by the state nor entirely independent of official support, but rather occupy the grey zone between strategic ambiguity and plausible deniability,³³ and result to undermine the clarity of deterrent signaling and the responsiveness of retaliatory options. Moreover, Pakistan has gradually developed a highly institutionalized logic for the use of proxies since the 1990s, leveraging non-state units to launch low-intensity attacks aiming to exert pressure on India, divert military deployments, and elevate international attention to the

³¹ Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security*, 4-9.

³² Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 109-116.

³³ Michael Krepon and Julia Thompson, *Deterrence Stability and Escalation Control in South Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Stimson Center, 2013), 27-31.

Kashmir issue.³⁴ These proxies—including Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Hizbul Mujahideen—present themselves as religious militant groups, but in practice maintain long-standing relationships with Pakistan’s military institutions like ISI.³⁵ For India, this strategic ambiguity not only weakens the legitimacy of deterrent responses, but also constitutes obstacle to formulating proportional retaliation. Proxy behavior, therefore, is not merely a geostrategic tactic but a structural disruptor of deterrence stability.

In December 2001, five armed assailants attacked the Indian Parliament, resulting in nine deaths. The Indian government immediately accused Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed of orchestrating the assault and the instigation behind the scenes by Pakistan. This incident triggered the largest military mobilization between two states since the 1971 war, with over one million troops deployed along the border.³⁶ Despite the nuclearized environment, the Indian government faced a strategic dilemma over whether to retaliate. Because the attackers did not belong to Pakistan’s regular armed forces and their actions were marked by

³⁴ Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, *India, Pakistan, and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 72-75.

³⁵ Daniel Byman, “Passive Sponsors of Terrorism,” *Survival*, 47, no. 4, (2005): 117-144; C. Christine Fair, *In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 48-73.

³⁶ P. R. Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, and Stephen P. Cohen, *Perception, Politics and Security in South Asia: The Compound Crisis of 2001-2002* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5-9.

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a high degree of plausible deniability, India struggled to justify a retaliatory response that would not be seen by the international community as a disproportionate escalation. Meanwhile, President Pervez Musharraf swiftly denied Pakistan's involvement and called for restraint.³⁷ In this case, non-state actors not only served as instruments of strategic escalation but, by operating outside the boundaries of international accountability, also rendered the retaliatory chain required for deterrence inoperative. Although nuclear weapons provide the material basis for retaliatory deterrence, they fail to deliver strategic punishment against actors operating in ambiguity, thus eroding the institutional foundations upon which deterrence theory relies.

The November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks exposed the institutional dislocation within the deterrence logic of the India-Pakistan standoff. The four-day assault which orchestrated by Lashkar-e-Taiba and supported by Pakistan financially claimed over 170 lives, with attackers infiltrating via sea routes and targeting multiple civilian sites, drawing global media attention and provoking widespread outrage within India.³⁸ Yet, as in the 2001 Parliament attack, India did not choose to launch military retaliation against Pakistan, but instead for diplomatic protest and international exposure. This constrained escalation decision

³⁷ Ashley J. Tellis, *The Lessons of the 2001-2002 Crisis for Indian Military Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006), 4-6.

³⁸ Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, *The Siege: The Attack on the Taj* (London: Penguin, 2013), 101-129.

illustrates that, even when retaliation is both motivated and strategically viable, India remains constrained when responding to proxy attacks. In the same time, the potential restraint exerted by the United States also intensified the strategic pressure in India's decision-making,³⁹ which let the non-state actors able to repeatedly initiate high-intensity provocations without bearing proportional retaliatory costs. As a result, the effectiveness of the strategic deterrence mechanism is eroded, weakening both nuclear stability and the predictability of state behavior.

From the perspective of strategic signaling, the inherent ambiguity of proxy actors poses a structural threat to the integrity of deterrence mechanisms. Basically speaking, deterrence logic depends on the discernibility of signals, the responsiveness of actors, and the predictability of escalation. However, in conflict patterns dominated by proxies, the origin of attacks is often difficult to identify in real time, and responsibility remains blurred, leaving decision-makers trapped in a dilemma of signal interpretation. For deterrence to occur, the consequences of hostile action must be attributable to a specific actor, without that, deterrence cannot be activated.⁴⁰ In the India-Pakistan standoff, incidents such as the 2001 Parliament attack and the 2008

³⁹ Moeed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 123-130.

⁴⁰ Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 39-42.

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Mumbai attacks exemplify phenomena of signal distortion and deterrence dislocation: although the threat of nuclear retaliation exists, it lacks a corresponding target, resulting in a structural rupture between signal sender and receiver.⁴¹ Over time, when deterrence mechanisms are deprived of clearly identifiable response targets, their stability gradually deteriorates, and their institutional function as a safeguard against escalation becomes increasingly untenable.

For India, the difficult choice is that, in the face of proxy attacks, if opts to retaliate against targets within Pakistani territory, it risks crossing the nuclear threshold and triggering full-scale conflict; if exercises restraint, it risks encouraging an adversarial expectation of tolerance and institutionalization of low-intensity provocations. This creates a strategic dilemma in which retaliation lacks appeal while restraint proves ineffective, paralyzing India's capacity for action within the deterrence framework.⁴² Since 2001, the Indian military has proposed limited escalation strategies such as the Cold Start Doctrine, aimed at enabling rapid punitive strikes against proxy actors without breaching the nuclear threshold. However, such doctrines have struggled in

⁴¹ Rod Lyon and Christine Leah, "Deterrence and Non-State Actors: Theory and Practice," *Security Challenges*, 5, no. 4, (2009): 49-60.

⁴² Walter Ladwig III, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine," *International Security*, 32, no. 3, (2007): 158-190.

implementation due to the ambiguous nature of escalation risks and the pressure of international scrutiny.⁴³

IV. Deterrence Instability under Nuclear Asymmetry

In recent years, global nuclear developments have exhibited a paradoxical trend: although the total number of nuclear warheads has slightly declined due to the dismantlement of retired weapons by the United States and Russia, the number of operational and deployable warheads continues to increase, reflecting the acceleration of nuclear modernization and renewed arms competition. Until 2025, the global nuclear inventory stands at approximately 12,241 warheads, of which around 9,614 are maintained in military stockpiles for potential operational use.⁴⁴

In South Asia, the nuclear balance between India and Pakistan reflects a dynamic of mutual competition rather than unilateral dominance. India possesses approximately 180 nuclear warheads and continues to advance its nuclear triad capabilities, while Pakistan maintains around 170 warheads and is actively developing diversified delivery systems, including ballistic and cruise missiles as well as sea-based platforms.⁴⁵ From a Pakistani

⁴³ Muhammad Tehsin, "Nuclear Doctrine and Deterrence Stability in South Asia," *Global Social Sciences Review*, 6, no. 6, (2019): 525-530.

⁴⁴ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), 177.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 181-182.

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perspective, India's expanding nuclear arsenal and military modernization are widely regarded as destabilizing factors that intensify the regional security dilemma and undermine strategic stability.⁴⁶ These regional assessments further highlight the persistent risk of escalation under conditions of nuclear competition.

Another institutional challenge in the India-Pakistan nuclear standoff arises from the asymmetric reality of nuclear capabilities. Stable deterrence, as assumed by nuclear theory, presupposes a balanced structure in which both sides possess a minimum credible deterrent, particularly in the form of second-strike capability. However, India maintains a significantly larger and more stable reserve of warheads and delivery systems. Its nuclear triad has reached a mature state since being formalized in 2003. In contrast, Pakistan still centered on tactical weapons which emphasizing low thresholds, high mobility and forward deployment.⁴⁷ This asymmetry in capability has resulted in divergent perceptions of nuclear thresholds, retaliatory costs, and strategic stability. For India, nuclear weapons function as a last-resort symbol; for Pakistan, they potentially serve as tactical instruments of preemption in the face of conventional military inferiority. As a result, deterrent signals fall into a

⁴⁶ Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "Nuclear Year 2025 in Review" (Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, 2026), 4.

⁴⁷ Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 95-103.

dual-interpretation dilemma, eroding both their credibility and strategic coherence.⁴⁸

Deterrence theory has long assumed that once nuclear-armed adversaries in the international system attain a certain level of destructive capability, they will enter a stable balance of power. This logic, grounded in the concept of minimum credible deterrence (MCD), holds that as long as one side possesses the capacity to inflict unacceptable retaliation on the other, strategic deterrence can be achieved.⁴⁹ However, this simplified model often neglects the institutional conditions underpinning deterrence in practice—particularly when disparities exist in actual deployment capabilities, crisis command-and-control systems, and the transparency of nuclear policy. In such cases, parity exists in form but not in substance.⁵⁰ Although India and Pakistan both conducted nuclear tests in 1998 and are formally categorized as nuclear states, a closer examination of their material capabilities and institutional structures reveals a pronounced asymmetry in their capacity to sustain deterrence stability. If nuclear parity is not grounded in institutional maturity and shared risk perception, its stabilizing logic cannot be maintained. On the contrary, it may

⁴⁸ Zulfqar Khan, "The Changing Dynamics of India-Pakistan Deterrence," *Pakistan Horizon*, 66, no. 4, (2013): 1-19.

⁴⁹ Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 42-47.

⁵⁰ Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 19-26.

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become a source of escalation risk due to strategic miscalculation and misjudgment of adversarial intent.⁵¹

The core differences in India and Pakistan's nuclear postures are most evident in the disparities in warhead reserves, delivery capabilities, and underlying strategic intent. According to estimates by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), India has consistently maintained a greater number of nuclear warheads and a larger array of delivery platforms than Pakistan. India's deployment model is oriented toward strategic deterrence, characterized by stability and deliberate delay capabilities.⁵² In contrast, Pakistan's nuclear posture is shaped by a logic of compensation for India's strategic superiority, emphasizing high mobility, low thresholds, and rapid-response tactical nuclear deployments. The two states also diverge significantly in their interpretations of the MCD concept: India tends to view it as a form of political deterrence and a last resort, while Pakistan treats it as a strategic substitute for conventional military shortfalls. This conceptual divergence means that although both states may nominally possess retaliatory capabilities, they have failed to

⁵¹ Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security*, 21, no. 3, (1997): 54-86.

⁵² Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Nuclear Notebook," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Accessed June 6, 2025.

<https://thebulletin.org/nuclear-risk/nuclear-weapons/nuclear-notebook/>.

establish a stable structure of risk symmetry and policy restraint.⁵³ The effectiveness of deterrence relies not solely on destructive capacity but also on shared perceptions of what constitutes nuclear escalation. When deployment logics are misaligned, deterrence expectations become distorted in tandem.

Since the end of the Cold War, India has progressively developed a nuclear strategy characterized by institutionalization, delayed escalation, and stable deterrence. Its policy framework explicitly separates conventional military operations from nuclear deterrence and emphasizes the principle of *No First Use* (NFU), thereby establishing a stable threshold for use and clear signaling expectations.⁵⁴ Moreover, following the release of the Draft Nuclear Doctrine, India has advanced its deployment of a nuclear triad—comprising land-based missiles, air-launched cruise missiles, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles—to ensure the credibility and survivability for second-strike capability,⁵⁵ and constructed a decision-execution chain Institutionally composed of the Cabinet Committee on Security and the Strategic Forces Command, with the National Security Advisor responsible for the final consultative process on nuclear use which reflects a clear

⁵³ Ashley J. Tellis, *Pakistan's Nuclear Posture: Conflicts with India's Strategic Restraint* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 17-21.

⁵⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. *Draft Report of National Security Advisory Board on Indian Nuclear Doctrine*. August 17, 1999. <http://www.legal-tools.org/doc/70efe4/pdf/>.

⁵⁵ Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict*, 104-115.

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civilian-command nuclear control system.⁵⁶ Above designs embody India's conception of minimum credible deterrence, which is not aimed at achieving nuclear superiority or threatening preemption, but rather at maintaining a credible yet restrained posture that minimizes the risks of miscalculation and escalation.

By contrast, since acquiring nuclear capability, Pakistan has consistently adopted a highly compensatory deployment and policy logic, treating nuclear weapons as an institutional countermeasure to India's conventional military superiority. Its nuclear strategy not only refrains from committing to a *No First Use* (NFU) pledge, but instead emphasizes early use and low-threshold retaliation through tactical deployment. Since 2011, Pakistan has openly developed tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs), such as the short-range Nasr missile, explicitly designed to achieve strategic deterrent effects at the battlefield level, thereby offsetting its spatial disadvantages in conventional military deployments.⁵⁷ Moreover, Pakistan's nuclear decision-making process remain highly concentrated within a narrow military elite, with weak civilian oversight and a lack of transparent regulatory frameworks. Its command system remains opaque and insulated from public scrutiny.⁵⁸ In this institutional environment, decisions regarding nuclear escalation are more likely to be driven

⁵⁶ Basrur, *Minimum Deterrence and India's Nuclear Security*, 28-35.

⁵⁷ Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb*, 365-371.

⁵⁸ Cheema, *Indian Nuclear Deterrence: Its Evolution, Development and Implications for South Asian Security*, 270-275.

by battlefield pressures and expectations of escalation than by institutionalized risk assessments or political restraint. This reliance on nuclear weapons as instruments of forward escalation and tactical utility transforms deterrence from a stability-oriented mechanism into a compensatory tool for military disadvantage, thereby magnifying structural asymmetries in threat perception and complicating India's response calculus.⁵⁹

The asymmetry between India and Pakistan is not limited to disparities in quantity and deployment logic, but fundamentally rooted in the obvious historical time lag. India conducted its first nuclear test in 1974 and began formulating a triad deployment as early as the 1980s, gradually establishing its nuclear governance centered on civilian control, strategic decentralization, and command-and-control mechanisms.⁶⁰ By contrast, Pakistan's nuclear development was reactive and compensatory with first nuclear tests swiftly in 1998 for response to India. The process was heavily dominated by the military and lacked sustained institutional accumulation. This first-mover versus latecomer developmental trajectory has resulted in divergent understandings of nuclear capability, differing perceptions of risk, and asynchronous escalation pacing. India's institutional structure

⁵⁹ Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security*, 43, no. 3, (2019): 7-52.

⁶⁰ George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 321-329.

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incorporates mechanisms for crisis delay and escalation restraint, whereas Pakistan relies more on mobile deployment and strategic ambiguity to maintain initiative. Thus, despite both states possessing nuclear weapons, they are engaged in a standoff marked by differing levels of institutional maturity and operational tempo. This temporal asymmetry not only complicates the interpretation of deterrent signals but also amplifies institutional friction and escalation uncertainty, making it one of the most critical structural sources of instability in the India-Pakistan nuclear confrontation.

Under conditions of institutional asymmetry, both countries frequently experience misalignment in their interpretation of strategic signals and perceptions of escalation risk. India is more likely to view nuclear weapons as a last-resort option, expecting its adversary to respond in a similarly rational and restrained tempo. However, Pakistan may regard tactical nuclear weapons as necessary and usable tool for conventional escalation. This cognitive rupture prevents the formation of shared escalation thresholds and mutually understood risk tolerance zones, resulting in either over-interpretation or underestimation. More critically, in the absence of institutional conditions capable of synchronizing escalation pacing and behavioral expectations, acts of escalation cease to be exceptional and instead risk becoming normalized within the strategic structure. As a result, the India-Pakistan nuclear standoff enters a structural paradox in which escalation

becomes acceptable, yet its outcomes remain uncontrollable.⁶¹ It means that the deterrence mechanisms not only fail to stabilize the potential conflict, but may serve as institutional triggers for escalation paradoxically.

V. Temporal Asymmetry: The Risk of Miscalculation from Asynchronous Nuclear Development

Although both India and Pakistan conducted formal nuclear tests in 1998, their trajectories in nuclear technological development and strategic institutionalization exhibit significant temporal gaps. Since the “Smiling Buddha” test in 1974, India has progressively developed its nuclear command structure that distinguishes between conventional and nuclear force applications, and institutional mechanisms such as the National Security Advisor and the Strategic Forces Command. In contrast, Pakistan's nuclear decision-making has long been dominated by a small military elite, lacking institutionalized command, transparent strategic planning, and a clearly articulated nuclear use policy.⁶² When the timeline of nuclear development and the maturity of strategic institutions are misaligned, the two states develop divergent perceptions of escalation thresholds and risk

⁶¹ Michael Krepon, “The Stability-Instability Paradox in South Asia,” in *US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis*, eds. Polly Nayak and Michael Krepon (Washington, D.C.: Stimson Center, 2006), 10-13.

⁶² Cheema, *Indian Nuclear Deterrence: Its Evolution, Development and Implications for South Asian Security*, 244-250.

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expectations, preventing the establishment of a stable signaling loop. Although both owned nuclear weapons, the asymmetry in institutional foundations impedes the formation of effective deterrent structures and instead magnifies the risk of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation.

The core logic of nuclear deterrence theory is founded on the principle of equivalence: only when rival states possess comparable nuclear capabilities, command-and-control structures, and escalation pacing can deterrent threats operate in a stable manner. Equivalence refers not only to the mutual assurance of physical destruction, but to the transparent transmission of escalation intent, credible signaling of retaliatory will, and similar perceptions of risk.⁶³ Under this premise, the effectiveness of deterrence depends on a shared understanding regarding escalation thresholds and the tempo of response. If the target of deterrence lacks institutional stability, deployment transparency, and clearly defined rules of use, even formal possession of nuclear capability may be insufficient to prevent misinterpretation thus triggering an escalation spiral. The central problem in the India-Pakistan nuclear standoff lies in the fact that, despite both being nuclear-armed, they are separated by a temporal gap in strategic institutional development, which prevents deterrence from operating as a closed and stable loop. The structural foundation that enabled deterrence theory to function during the

⁶³ Freedman, *Deterrence*, 42-47.

Cold War is fundamentally challenged in South Asia, with the core driver being nuclear asymmetry over time.⁶⁴

The developmental trajectories of India and Pakistan's nuclear capabilities reveal a clear first-mover versus latecomer structure. After conducting its first nuclear test in 1974, India advanced its nuclear triad in the 1980s and gradually constructing a control system with an emphasis on escalation pacing and institutional restraint.⁶⁵ Its nuclear policy centers on the principle of No First Use, with a deployment posture oriented around long-range strategic missiles, supported by the development of submarine-based launch capabilities—collectively forming a stable, delayed, and predictable deterrence structure. In contrast, Pakistan began rapid retaliatory development only after India's 1998 tests, with much of its technical capacity reportedly supported by China and North Korea. Its deployments focus on short-range tactical missiles with an explicit policy of retaining the option for first use, and a nuclear command structure long dominated by the military.⁶⁶ This asymmetric trajectory has resulted in divergent perceptions of pacing, risk expectations, and response speed during nuclear crises: India emphasizes delayed escalation and second-strike capability, while Pakistan tends to

⁶⁴ Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict*, 78-83.

⁶⁵ Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation*, 267-281.

⁶⁶ Feroz H. Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 362-369.

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treat nuclear capability as a frontline escalation and coercive tool. The temporal gap in institutional maturity constitutes a structural foundation for strategic misjudgment and uncontrolled escalation.

Pakistan's nuclear development trajectory and institutional arrangements reveal a strategic orientation marked by high compensatory logic and operational prioritization. Following the 1998 test, Pakistan's deployment rapidly shifted toward short-range tactical nuclear missiles with low thresholds and high mobility as core design features. These systems are intended to deter Indian conventional incursions through battlefield-level deterrence. For instance, the Nasr missile has been positioned as a countermeasure to India's Cold Start Doctrine, aiming to generate uncertainty at the frontlines by raising expectations of rapid escalation.⁶⁷ However, in terms of command-and-control systems, Pakistan continues to rely on a military-dominated structure without civilian oversight. It has persistently refrained from providing clear external signals.⁶⁸ Although enhances flexibility and rapid responsiveness, it severely undermines the predictability and credibility of deterrent signals. Consequently, the adversary struggles to accurately interpret Pakistan's escalation intent and its boundaries for risk control. When one side deploys nuclear capabilities to manufacture tactical uncertainty, while the other relies on institutional delay and

⁶⁷ Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb*, 386-391.

⁶⁸ Cheema, *Indian Nuclear Deterrence: Its Evolution, Development and Implications for South Asian Security*, 274-278.

escalation suppression, deterrent signals and policy tempos become mutually unintelligible. Strategic misperception and escalation miscalculation thus emerge as inevitable products of structural asymmetry.

The India-Pakistan nuclear confrontation reveals that this temporal asymmetry exists not only at the level of deployment, but also in the pacing of risk perception and decision-making behavior. India tends to view nuclear weapons as a last-resort option and has developed multilayered crisis management and delayed-response mechanisms. But Pakistan intends to incorporate nuclear weapons into its conventional strategic framework, rendering them potentially usable options in deteriorating battlefield conditions. The temporal gap between the two states means that even when confronted with the same escalatory event, their perceptions of risk and escalation pacing are likely to be misaligned. For instance, following the 2019 Pulwama incident, India promptly launched the Balakot airstrikes as a signal of limited retaliation aimed at maintaining escalation boundaries. However, Pakistan interpreted the strikes as a severe escalation and responded with its own air sorties, pushing the crisis dangerously close to full-scale escalation.⁶⁹ In this context, nuclear deterrence seems not only fail to serve a stabilizing function, but accelerated conflict escalation.

⁶⁹ Najimdeen Bakare and Muhammad Zubair Iqbal, "Efficacy of Personality Traits, Religious Ideology and Political Capital of Event: The Case of Pulwama Attack," *Strategic Studies*, 40, no. 4, (2020): 22-23.

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Successive nuclear crises demonstrate how asynchronous nuclear development trajectories translate into risks of strategic miscalculation. When the Kargil War erupted in 1999, both states had already conducted nuclear tests, yet the crisis escalated rapidly into large-scale conventional conflict. Pakistan viewed its limited infiltration as a controllable engagement, whereas India interpreted it as a grave challenge to the existing Line of Control, prompting conventional retaliation and military mobilization that swiftly expanded the conflict.⁷⁰ Following the 2001 Indian Parliament attack, India undertook a ten-month-long military mobilization, while Pakistan entered nuclear alert status and issued multiple ambiguous signals. The result was an unpredictable escalation trajectory that undermined the stabilizing logic of deterrence.⁷¹ The 2008 Mumbai attacks and the 2019 Pulwama incident further underscore the institutionalized pattern of tempo misalignment: India attempted limited retaliation, yet Pakistan's rapid strategic responses and ambiguous nuclear posture introduced an escalation potential that was difficult to contain. These cases all point to a persistent reality that, although nominally nuclear rivals, both sides have remained in a condition of institutional asynchrony, with no substantive alignment in

⁷⁰ Bruce Riedel, *American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Center for the Advanced Study of India, 2002), 4-6.

⁷¹ P. R. Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, and Stephen P. Cohen, *Perception, Politics and Security in South Asia: The Compound Crisis of 2001-2002* (London: Routledge, 2003), 20-27.

escalation pacing or risk perception. As a result, nuclear deterrence becomes a structurally unstable illusion.

Institutional asymmetry not only amplifies the risk of escalation, but undermines the possibility of risk containment. Within the bilateral framework, India has committed to building an institutionalized command structure and crisis-delay mechanisms which require political consultation and risk assessment and result in a relatively prolonged decision-making cycle. In contrast, Pakistan's military-dominated system enables more immediate strategic responses and lacks the p institutional constraints necessary to ensure consistency and restraint. The consequence is a structural disconnect: one side prioritizes institutional stability and predictability, while the other operates through rapid escalation and strategic ambiguity. As a result, escalation responses between the two states cannot be synchronized or institutionally linked. When one side is still engaged in deliberation and risk evaluation, the other may have already entered the stage of tactical deployment and escalation. The nuclear standoff thus shifts from a relationship of mutual deterrence to a crisis cycle devoid of convergence and mutual trust.⁷² This imbalance in institutional tempo also diminishes the effectiveness of third-party intervention, as mediators often miss critical escalation points, rendering crisis momentum increasingly

⁷² Michael Krepon, *Crisis Stability in South Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Stimson Center, 2020), 15-19.

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difficult to restrain. Consequently, miscalculation and loss of control become structural constants within the confrontation system.

**VI. Conclusion: The India-Pakistan Experience and Its
Dialogue with Nuclear Deterrence Theory**

The Cold War context has established three core assumptions underlying nuclear deterrence theory: first, that actors must possess stable and unitary strategic intentions; second, the symmetrical capabilities for devastating retaliation will help to ensure mutual deterrence stability; and third, the institutionalized communication mechanisms effectively manage escalation risks. However, the empirical trajectory of the India-Pakistan confrontation seems repeatedly demonstrate that the above assumptions are historically contingent, applicable only primarily to the institutional environments of Western powers under specific external conditions. When transplanted into postcolonial contexts characterized by asymmetric institutional structures and the infiltration of ambiguous actors, these assumptions quickly face challenge. Rather than validating the nuclear peace thesis, the India-Pakistan case provides a compelling empirical refutation, revealing the limits of nuclear deterrence theory. It brings a paradigmatic shift to the existing theoretical framework and underscores the need for a revised model.

At the level of actor assumptions, the India-Pakistan conflict reveals dynamics that fall outside the scope of Western rationalist decision-making models. The long-term Kashmir sovereignty claim has become highly symbolic, transformed into an extension of national mythology, wherein the intractability of sovereignty assertions shapes a collective decision thinking that departs from strategic rationality. When sovereignty symbols are bound to state legitimacy and regime authority, nuclear weapons cease to function as instruments of cost-calculated restraint, and instead become signifiers of political will and national resolve. As result, the deterrence theory's foundational assumption—that actors act to maximize utility—is rendered inoperative. The India-Pakistan experience thus demonstrates that in conflicts of high symbolic intensity, the operational foundations of rational response mechanisms embedded in deterrence theory are fundamentally undermined.

In terms of power structure and actor boundaries, the institutional infiltration of non-state actors and proxy networks has rendered deterrence mechanisms devoid of identifiability and accountability. The proxy organizations operating within Pakistan—often controlled by its military and intelligence apparatus—are not external anomalies but structural components embedded within the state's strategic practice. When conflict behavior is decoupled from formal decision-making chains, the essential conditions for nuclear deterrence—clearly identifiable

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adversaries and a coherent logic of escalation response—cease to exist. Under a framework of blurred responsibility and misaligned intent, deterrent signaling collapses into institutional dislocation, and nuclear weapons fail to perform their stabilizing function as thresholds of escalation. In other words, when the state actor is neither unitary nor transparent but instead highly ambiguous, nuclear deterrence will lose the basic institutional preconditions.

At the institutional level, the chronic absence of formalized crisis management mechanisms between India and Pakistan has left each episode of conflict escalation on a high-risk trajectory—devoid of dialogue, early warning, or restraint. The avoidance of full-scale war during the Cold-War nuclear standoff was made possible by series of institutional safeguards such as hotline systems, risk-reduction agreements, and third-party mediation. In contrast, the India-Pakistan case has repeatedly showed that, in the absence of such institutional frameworks, nuclear confrontations lead to unrestrained escalation and unclarified signaling. The consequence is not merely deterrence failure but the formation of a confrontation structure in which escalation becomes normalized. Institutional disjuncture is not a peripheral issue; it is foundational to the logic of nuclear stability. When institutional mechanisms are lacking and cannot ensure risk control or consistency in escalation expectations, the stability of nuclear deterrence loses its very foundation.

In terms of temporal structure and institutional maturity, the development trajectories and strategic planning of India and Pakistan's nuclear capabilities exhibit pronounced asynchrony. India has established a comprehensive nuclear system since 1974, but Pakistan owned its nuclear capability until 1998 and prioritized rapid escalation and low-threshold deterrence which aiming to catch up, while persistently lacking institutionalized command structures and policy transparency. This divergence in developmental pacing has produced mismatched risk perceptions and distorted signal interpretation, transforming nuclear confrontation from a condition of stable balance into a paradoxical structure—one in which escalation is increasingly predictable, yet its outcomes remain uncontrollable. Temporal asynchrony not only undermines the effectiveness of deterrence but also amplifies the risks of miscalculation and predictive failure, rendering it one of the most intractable sources of institutional vulnerability in nuclear security.

Even never break up a full-scale nuclear conflict till now—though existing some kind of tepid war, the India-Pakistan confrontation is no longer merely illustrative of operational challenges to deterrence mechanisms; it has offered a paradigmatic challenge to the traditional theoretical basis of nuclear deterrence. If deterrence theory continues to rely on Cold War-era structural assumptions without incorporating the realities of postcolonial contexts, limited global proliferation, asymmetric

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strategic interaction, and ambiguous power actors, it will not only fail to explain but may also distort our understanding of nuclear stability in non-Western regions. In the sense, the India-Pakistan experience should be recognized as a critical impetus for reconstituting nuclear deterrence theory from a model premised on stability expectations to one that accounts for risk structures under conditions of institutional heterogeneity and behavioral ambiguity.

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