



SOUTH ASIA'S STRATEGIC STABILITY **UNDER SYSTEMIC OVERLOAD**

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A Region on the Edge

South Asia's fragile deterrence equilibrium is entering an era of systemic overload. Once sustained by a bilateral nuclear balance and the discipline of restraint, the region now sits at the intersection of great-power rivalry, alliance politics, and technological disruption.

For Pakistan, strategic stability has always meant a state of deterrence equilibrium in which neither side perceives an advantage in initiating conflict—whether conventional, sub-conventional, or nuclear. That equilibrium depends on three interlocking pillars: the ability of deterrence to hold under crisis stress, the avoidance of arms races driven by insecurity, and the maintenance of credible communication channels even in confrontation. Each of these pillars is now under strain.

The result is an increasingly compressed decision-making environment in which escalation can occur faster than diplomacy can respond. The United States' Indo-Pacific strategy, India's evolving doctrinal preferences, and the rapid spread of disruptive military technologies have together transformed the South Asian deterrence problem from a bilateral puzzle into a regional system under external stress.

External Architectures, Internal Dilemmas

At the geopolitical level, the Indo-Pacific architecture has redefined the region's security calculus. Washington's effort to build a lattice of partnerships (the Quad, AUKUS, and related mini-laterals) aims to constrain China's strategic reach. Yet by extension, this design also constrains Pakistan, China's mainstream partner through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Within this architecture, India has been elevated to the role of “Net Security Provider,” a regional policeman and the principal conduit for Western technology transfers. Publicly available U.S. policy documents, such as the Integrated Country Strategies for India, Pakistan, and China, make the hierarchy explicit: India is described as a “like-minded partner,” Pakistan as a state to be “stabilised and influenced,” and China as a systemic rival to be contained.

The resulting asymmetry in external endorsement has created what can only be called a structural security dilemma. Pakistan's defensive adjustments are read as obstruction; its restraint is interpreted as weakness. In such an environment, strategic stability ceases to be a durable state. It becomes a contested process managed from crisis to crisis.

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The Indo-Pacific's Geo-economic Layer

The Indo-Pacific is not merely a military construct; it merges economic and strategic domains in ways that magnify power disparities. India, despite maintaining close energy and defence ties with Russia, enjoys deep integration into Western supply chains, technology corridors, and maritime security arrangements. It benefits simultaneously from Washington's strategic indulgence and Moscow's defence cooperation, which is a unique dual alignment that few other states enjoy.

Pakistan, in contrast, remains cast primarily through a security lens. Yet the CPEC, linking Gwadar to western China, is not just infrastructure; it is a strategic artery that underpins regional connectivity. Efforts to undermine its credibility through financial coercion, ratings manipulation, and lawfare are therefore not economic acts alone; they are instruments of strategic containment. In today's landscape, geo-economics has become the first line of geopolitics.

Doctrinal Drift in New Delhi

Since the 2019 Pulwama–Balakot crisis, India's nuclear doctrine has exhibited a pronounced drift toward counterforce and compellence. Once anchored in "credible minimum deterrence," Indian strategic thought now openly entertains concepts of preemption, precision counter-value signaling, and rapid escalation cycles, which framed as limited war.

The Balakot episode marked a pivotal test. Assuming that Pakistan's nuclear deterrent would not respond to conventional provocation, New Delhi violated the frontiers in February 2019. Islamabad's proportionate response, culminating in the downing of Indian aircraft and the measured return of a captured pilot, restored deterrence through restraint rather than panic. It demonstrated that disciplined retaliation could preserve both credibility and stability, which is a lesson later reinforced during the May 2025 war.

Alliances and Asymmetry

India's partnerships with major powers have deepened its qualitative edge. Through the Quad, it receives advanced intelligence-sharing and logistics access under agreements such as LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA. Through AUKUS, it benefits indirectly from joint research on propulsion and undersea warfare technologies. Meanwhile, enduring cooperation with Russia—the so-called RUIN nexus, referring to Russia–India nuclear and naval ties—provides critical undersea and SSBN-related expertise.

Pakistan, by choice and necessity, remains outside formal military blocs. Yet this independence comes at a cost: asymmetric enabling. India's modernisation programs are legitimised as contributions to a free and open Indo-Pacific, while Pakistan's strategic responses are scrutinised as anomalies. To preserve balance under these conditions, Islamabad's Full-Spectrum Deterrence (FSD)—nested within Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD)—must remain dynamic and adaptive, absorbing asymmetries without mimicking them.

Technology, Time, and the Compression of Crisis

Perhaps the most dangerous transformation is technological. India's cooperation with the United States, France, and Israel has yielded capabilities in emerging disruptive technologies (EDTs)—hypersonic and extended-range nuclear BrahMos variants, Agni-V ICBM's non-nuclear precision systems, drone swarms, and early work on quantum-assisted decryption.

The May 2025 "Operation Sindoor" confrontation illustrated how some of these capabilities compress decision cycles. Over four days of air, cyber, and maritime exchanges, India integrated space-based intelligence and long-range precision systems in a multi-domain offensive. Pakistan restored conventional deterrence through readiness, calculated responses and composure, but the crisis revealed a sobering truth: if technological advantage becomes sharper; nuclear thresholds will be lower. As technology accelerates, the window for miscalculation narrows.

If current trends persist, South Asia may enter an era in which the pressure to early nuclear-use grows as decision timelines shrink—a paradox where modernisation increases insecurity rather than reducing it.

Hybrid Warfare and the Politics of Lawfare

India's strategy now seeks victory below the nuclear threshold. It employs a mix of disinformation, economic coercion, and legal narratives to weaken Pakistan's international standing. From orchestrated media campaigns portraying Pakistan as a source of instability to the manipulation of financial instruments and multilateral pressure mechanisms, hybrid warfare has become a permanent feature of the subcontinental contest.

Pakistan has little interest in responding kinetically to every provocation. Instead, the response must be proportionate, domain-specific, and information-centric. That means contesting falsehoods in real time, reinforcing economic resilience, and signalling that hybrid warfare carries reciprocal costs. As experience shows, deterrence begins not in missile silos but in the information domain; when a state loses control of its narrative, it risks losing control of its deterrence.

Arms Control as Manoeuvre, Not Muzzle

Global arms-control regimes are fraying, and emerging technologies have outpaced international regulation. Under these conditions, Pakistan cannot accept discriminatory treaties—such as a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty that freezes asymmetries while others modernize.

Arms control, in this environment, should be a strategic manoeuvre, not a muzzle. By engaging in the language of restraint, Pakistan can slow destabilising transfers, expose double standards, and buy the most valuable strategic commodity of all: time. In diplomacy, as in deterrence, time is capability.

Restoring Stability: A Responsible Stakeholder

Preserving equilibrium amid systemic overload demands clarity rather than confrontation. Pakistan's approach should be guided by several principles.

First, credible balance: Islamabad should seek parity of effect, not parity of numbers. Deterrence credibility lies in assured response and disciplined control, not in stockpile size.

Second, technological balancing: instead of matching platforms, Pakistan should continue to focus on creating mutual vulnerability through deception, electronic warfare, and hardening of command networks.

Third, modernised confidence-building measures: existing CBMs must evolve to include cyber non-interference pledges, long-range armed drone pre-notifications, and incident-at-sea protocols, especially as India's naval ambitions expand into the Indian Ocean.

Finally, narrative discipline: the crises of 2019 and 2025 showed that restraint, if poorly communicated, appears as weakness. Responsible transparency and factual communication can reinforce stability more effectively than triumphalism.

Toward an Indigenous Grammar of Stability

For too long, South Asia's deterrence debates have borrowed frameworks from distant contexts—the Cold War, the Middle East, or the Pacific Rim. Yet the region's geography, timelines, and domestic politics render those models only partially relevant. South Asia's scholars and practitioners must now articulate an indigenous grammar of strategic stability, one that recognizes both nuclear maturity and persistent volatility.

This requires empirical research, academic collaboration, and intellectual confidence: an understanding that stability in this region will not mirror that of others. It will be managed, not achieved; balanced, not frozen.

The Equilibrium Ahead

Two crises—2019 and 2025—offered painful lessons. In each, deterrence held because Pakistan combined capability with composure. Restraint under provocation restored stability when impulsive escalation could have undone decades of equilibrium.

The next challenge may emerge at sea, where India's external partnerships and naval modernization intersect. The lesson remains constant: deterrence works only when discipline sustains it; technological parity must be qualitative, not quantitative; and narratives decide crises before weapons do.

South Asia's choice is stark but simple: security through equilibrium, not escalation.

Pakistan remains committed to that equilibrium: firm in capability, disciplined in conduct, and transparent in communication.