



# CHAGHAI:

— MARKA E HAQ —

— AND —

# DETERRENCE BY DESIGN:

— DENYING SPACE FOR WAR IN SOUTH ASIA —

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# Chaghai, Marka-e-Haq and Deterrence by Design: Denying Space for War in South Asia

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Twenty-eight years after Chaghai, Pakistan's nuclear programme remains one of the most consequential strategic decisions in the country's national history. It restored strategic balance in South Asia and gave Pakistan the means to preserve sovereignty under conditions of conventional asymmetry and coercive pressure. Pakistan did not acquire nuclear capability for prestige, symbolism or status. It did so because its security environment demanded a credible mechanism to prevent war, deny domination, and preserve sovereign decision-making. Its central purpose has remained consistent: deterrence, stability and peace through strength.

The regional environment, however, has changed considerably since 1998. The threat spectrum has widened. New technologies are compressing decision timelines. Precision weapons, drones, cyber operations, electronic warfare, satellite-enabled surveillance, artificial intelligence-enabled decision-support systems, quantum-enabled decryption risks and long-range conventional strike capabilities are changing the speed, visibility and texture of crises. At the same time, Bharat's limited-war concepts continue to seek exploitable space below the nuclear threshold. This contemporary challenge has been captured even in [recent commentary arguing that the modern battlefield has shifted from mass mobilisation and armoured thrusts toward missiles, drones, electronic warfare, surveillance and conventional precision strike systems.](#)

Yet the underlying logic of deterrence remains unchanged. Bharat continues to search for usable space for coercion under the nuclear overhang. Pakistan's deterrence posture is designed to make that space unusable. Fresh attempts are now being made to dilute the narrative on Pakistan's deterrence, including through externally driven propositions that have found some indigenous support. These propositions require careful examination because strategic narratives can shape perceptions, and distorted perceptions can encourage dangerous operational assumptions.

The first point is doctrinal. Credible Minimum Deterrence remains the guiding principle of Pakistan's doctrine, while Full Spectrum Deterrence gives it operational meaning across the full range of threats. There has been no doctrinal shift from Credible Minimum Deterrence to Full Spectrum Deterrence. From the outset, FSD has been anchored in CMD; its public articulation in 2011 did not mark its birth, but its formal expression in response to an evolving threat spectrum. This continuity has also been

recognised in [analyses noting that Pakistan has continued to describe FSD as remaining within the broader philosophy of credible minimum deterrence](#).

As Bharat widened the spectrum of coercion, Pakistan dynamically plugged deterrence gaps. Cold Start's limited-war thinking was met with an appropriate response. The Nasr short-range ballistic missile poured cold water on Cold Start. Pakistan never described Nasr as a tactical nuclear weapon because there is nothing tactical about nuclear weapons. Its strategic effect was clear: it denied India confidence in limited conventional aggression, complicated shallow-incursion planning, and shifted the burden of escalation back onto the aggressor. [External literature has long described Cold Start as a doctrine premised on rapid but limited incursions under the assumption that Pakistan would not escalate in response](#); that assumption is precisely what Pakistan's deterrence posture sought to defeat.

Recent commentary following the May 2025 crisis has suggested four propositions: that Pakistan's nuclear deterrence worked only partially; that Full Spectrum Deterrence belongs to an earlier threat environment; that conventional modernisation requires lowering the salience of the nuclear pillar; and that ambiguity has become a liability in the current environment. These four propositions are incorrect.

In May 2025, nuclear deterrence worked fully and without theatrical nuclear signalling. It prevented general war, imposed caution, shaped behaviour, and kept the crisis away from thresholds that responsible states must avoid testing. The absence of nuclear threats must never be mistaken for the absence of deterrence. The fact that escalation was avoided proves that deterrence operated. It does not prove that nuclear risk was marginal. Independent accounts of the May 2025 crisis describe it as the [most serious India-Pakistan military crisis in decades, involving missiles, drones and unprecedented military firsts between two nuclear-armed adversaries](#).

This success, however, does not create space for limited conflict or normalise coercive military action below imagined thresholds. Any attempt to treat nuclear restraint as permissive space carries grave risk of deterrence breakdown. The major lesson from the South Asian nuclear dyad is that it is gravely reckless to initiate coercion, test thresholds, and assume that escalation can be choreographed at will. A crisis may begin with a limited action, but once escalation starts, it rarely obeys the script written in war rooms.

Pakistan's conventional response in May 2025 restored balance below the nuclear ceiling. Operation Bunyanum Marsoos demonstrated that Pakistan can act firmly without becoming captive to provocation; respond credibly while preserving escalation discipline; and deny imagined space for war without rushing toward the nuclear threshold. That is the new discipline of deterrence under provocation. May 2025

validated Pakistan's integrated deterrence architecture: nuclear deterrence held the strategic ceiling; conventional deterrence restored balance below it; and political control preserved escalation discipline.

This is why Full Spectrum Deterrence remains indispensable. Any call for externally scripted "re-imagination" of Pakistan's deterrence must therefore be treated with great caution. Pakistan does need adaptation, modernisation, sharper conventional options, stronger resilience, faster decision-support and better crisis communication. But these requirements cannot become a pretext for creating doctrinal doubt. Pakistan does not need to dilute the nuclear pillar, surrender ambiguity for the convenience of hostile planners, or reinterpret deterrence success as deterrence failure.

Deterrence does face new challenges, and these must be understood with clarity. The battlefield has changed, but the logic of deterrence has not. Modern escalation can move through a rapid chain: drone probes, cyber disruption, information warfare, political pressure, and shrinking decision time. A drone near a critical facility, a cyber intrusion into a communication network, interference with command links, future quantum-enabled intrusions, or a precision attack on dual-use infrastructure can create effects that military planners may not fully control once the crisis begins. This is why, in a nuclear flashpoint like South Asia, technological capability must remain subordinate to political judgement. Geography compresses time; mistrust compresses judgement; the absence of sustained dialogue compresses intent; and technology compresses escalation. An assessment of the 2025 crisis similarly noted the [emergence of multidomain conflict involving airstrikes, drones, cyber operations and naval manoeuvres under the nuclear umbrella.](#)

Bharat continues to seek escalation dominance and has clung to this illusion from Cold Start thinking to the May 2025 crisis. Seeking coercive space under the nuclear threshold carries consequences far beyond the opening move. The assumption of escalation dominance is one of the most dangerous illusions in nuclear strategy. Pakistan has repeatedly demonstrated the central reality of South Asia: war between neighbouring nuclear powers cannot be kept inside an artificial box designed by one side.

The so-called stability-instability paradox describes a risk; it does not provide a licence for controlled war. It does not confer immunity on the initiator, nor does it offer a safe corridor for aggression, compellence or political theatre. The recently projected "nuclear bluff" thesis similarly misreads Pakistan's prudent restraint and recasts it as permissive space. It recasts calculated ambiguity as incoherence and disciplined crisis behaviour as lack of resolve. If left uncontested, such arguments can migrate into policy thinking, shape operational assumptions, encourage threshold testing, and lower the perceived cost of risk-taking. In a nuclearised environment, [this is not](#)

[analysis; it is an escalation hazard](#). This is precisely why recent claims that the May 2025 conflict demonstrated limited war as a “practical reality” under the nuclear shadow require a firm corrective.

Full Spectrum Deterrence has a stabilising logic: aggression will not remain cost-free; limited war has no guaranteed limits; coercion under the nuclear shadow is neither safe nor controllable; and Pakistan’s restraint is anchored in strength. That is why FSD remains as relevant today as when it was first publicly articulated. It is not a departure from Credible Minimum Deterrence; it is firmly anchored in it. This position is consistent with the view, [publicly reaffirmed in Pakistani strategic discourse, that Full Spectrum Deterrence under Credible Minimum Deterrence ensures no space for aggression below the nuclear threshold](#).

In the prevailing security environment, deterrence must continue to cover the full spectrum of coercion and doctrinal adventurism. Pakistan has no interest in escalation and every interest in preventing war. But war prevention requires the adversary to believe that aggression will invite consequences. Peace does not rest on goodwill alone. It rests on balance, resolve, and the adversary’s recognition that coercion will fail.

Narrative distortion is also a challenge. If perceptions of capability are distorted, the adversary may miscalculate. If doctrine is misinterpreted, deterrence signalling may lose coherence. If restraint is repeatedly misread, a future crisis may begin from false confidence. That is why narrative is part of deterrence, not an accessory to it. Serious scholarship, professional critique and responsible debate are welcome. Distortion is not. Distortion converts restraint into bluff, presents ambiguity as manipulation only when Pakistan uses it, portrays conventional modernisation as evidence that the nuclear pillar has declined, and reads May 2025 as proof of usable war space rather than deterrence in operation.

Conventional capability and nuclear deterrence are mutually reinforcing layers of one integrated architecture. Conventional capability gives Pakistan credible options below the nuclear ceiling. Nuclear deterrence prevents safe space for war and existential coercion. Crisis communication reduces misperception. Political control keeps force aligned with national purpose. Calculated ambiguity preserves uncertainty in the adversary’s mind. Together, these elements deny Bharat the confidence to initiate, manage or terminate conflict on its own terms.

The Army Rocket Force Command fits squarely within this logic. It strengthens Pakistan’s conventional deterrence, improves the ability to impose cost, gives decision-makers sharper options under crisis conditions, and reinforces the active shield below the strategic ceiling. Recent public discussion has also presented the [Army Rocket Force Command as evidence of a stronger conventional deterrent layer](#),

while noting reported statements that it is a conventional force separate from Pakistan's nuclear forces. The same logic applies to maritime readiness, air power, integrated air defence, electronic warfare, cyber resilience, and precision conventional capabilities. Each layer adds credibility and control; each strengthens deterrence by denying the adversary confidence.

The professional reading is clear: Pakistan is strengthening integrated deterrence. That distinction must be protected because Bharat will exploit every sign of confusion. External analysts will seize every careless formulation. Public confidence in the nuclear programme remains a strategic asset. National doctrine is shaped by the National Command Authority, not by imported vocabulary or selective commentary. Pakistan has no requirement to overexplain its thresholds, reassure hostile planners, or translate ambiguity into predictability. Deterrence requires enough clarity to communicate resolve and enough uncertainty to prevent adventurism. Pakistan has maintained that balance with discipline, and its narrative should do the same.

Pakistan's strategic capabilities are designed to defend sovereignty and maintain regional stability, not to threaten states beyond its security environment. This has also been [Pakistan's official response to recent external claims about its missile programme](#). That point is central: Pakistan's deterrence is defensive, stabilising and rooted in the realities of South Asia.

Twenty-eight years after Chaghai, Pakistan's nuclear programme remains the guarantor of peace and stability in South Asia. Its success lies in the wars it has prevented, the caution it continues to impose, the restraint it enables, and the sovereignty it preserves. The May 2025 crisis reaffirmed that Pakistan can absorb pressure, respond firmly, and punish without losing control. The next crisis may move faster and unfold before diplomacy gathers momentum. Pakistan must therefore ensure that deterrence is credible before the crisis begins, disciplined once the crisis starts, and communicative before the crisis becomes uncontrollable.

Peace in South Asia will hold through credible deterrence. There is no viable space for war. Coercion will be resisted. Testing Pakistan's restraint can be consequential. Youm-e-Takbeer gave Pakistan strategic autonomy. Full Spectrum Deterrence preserved that autonomy against evolving threats. Marka-e-Haq demonstrated it under pressure. Instead of "reimagining deterrence architecture," Pakistan must sustain the structure, sharpen the message, and ensure that deterrence holds by design.