MARKA- E -HAQ

ONE YEAR ON:
STRATEGIC LESSONS AND EMERGING PATHWAYS

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CISS Strategic Forecast | MARKA- E -HAQ
One Year On: Strategic Lessons and Emerging Pathways

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The Center for International Strategic Studies (CISS) Islamabad conducts original policy research, analyses, and strategic outreach and aims to highlight evolving regional and global strategic issues to promote peace and stability. This report provides a quantitative and qualitative strategic forecast regarding South Asian strategic stability.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines the evolving dynamics of deterrence stability, crisis escalation, and strategic rivalry in South Asia one year after the May 2025 India–Pakistan crisis (Marka-e-Haq). Drawing on a structured expert survey from Pakistan's strategic community, quantitative analysis, supported by qualitative expert commentary and thematic analysis, the forecast analyzes how structural disputes, technological transformation, Indian domestic political dynamics, escalation mechanisms, and system-level modifiers are reshaping the regional security environment. The study argues that South Asia is transitioning from a relatively contained deterrence framework toward a technologically accelerated, politically amplified, and multi-domain escalation environment characterized by conditional rather than assured stability.

The Forecast frames its analysis against the aftermath of the May 2025 crisis triggered by the Pahalgam attack in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). Following the attack, India adopted a highly escalatory posture through Operation Sindoor, employing precision strikes, drone operations, missile attacks, and dual-capable systems against Pakistani territory. Pakistan responded through calibrated military operations named Operation Bunyanum Marsoos. The confrontation demonstrated important changes in South Asian deterrence dynamics: crises are becoming faster, technologically compressed, multi-domain in character, and increasingly shaped by ambiguity, real-time information flows, and political signaling pressures.

The survey analysis indicates that South Asia currently operates within a condition best described as "fluid instability." While deterrence remains functional, crisis risk is persistently embedded within the regional strategic environment. Nearly 60 percent of respondents assess the probability of a major India–Pakistan crisis within the next 12–24 months as medium to high, reflecting the widespread perception that crisis recurrence has become a structural feature of regional security rather than an exceptional occurrence.

The Jammu and Kashmir dispute continues to emerge as the foundational structural driver of instability in South Asia. More than three-quarters of respondents identify Kashmir as either the primary or a major driver of future escalation, rendering the region as a dangerous nuclear flashpoint.

Respondents who view Kashmir as the primary driver are significantly more likely to anticipate future escalation than those who perceive it as one factor among many. These findings reaffirm that territorial disputes continue to provide the structural baseline upon which contemporary escalation dynamics function. At the same time, the study demonstrates that structural rivalry

alone no longer sufficiently explains crisis behavior in South Asia.

A major finding of the study is the overwhelming perception that emerging technologies are fundamentally transforming deterrence stability in destabilizing ways. Over 83 percent of respondents assess technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), cyber operations, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) systems, autonomous platforms, and drones as either moderately or strongly destabilizing. Rather than viewing technological developments merely as capability enhancements, respondents consistently perceive them as altering the conditions under which crises occur. Technological integration is widely believed to compress decision-making timelines, increase operational uncertainty, complicate signaling, blur conventional and nuclear thresholds, and increase the risk of miscalculation.

The survey further identifies the hierarchy of escalation mechanisms through which technology reshapes crisis behavior. Escalation ambiguity and reduced decision-time emerge as the dominant pathways of technological destabilization. However, the findings demonstrate that these mechanisms do not operate equally. Reduced decision-time appears to exert the strongest influence on escalation risk, producing a significant shift away from low-risk perceptions toward medium and high-risk assessments. Respondents emphasized that advancements in ISR systems, automation, precision-guided capabilities, and real-time data processing reduce opportunities for political deliberation and strategic restraint during crises. By contrast, escalation ambiguity functions more as a background condition of uncertainty rather than a direct trigger of escalation. These findings indicate that future instability in South Asia is likely to be shaped less by traditional force balances and increasingly by the interaction between speed, ambiguity, and compressed decision-making environments.

The study also highlights the growing importance of political dynamics as escalation amplifiers within the regional strategic environment. Survey findings reveal a near-unanimous perception that the rise of populism and right-wing politics in India increases escalation risk in South Asia. Domestic audience pressures emerge as the dominant channel through which populist politics shapes crisis behavior. While populism may influence crisis initiation, the findings indicate that its most dangerous effects occur during crisis evolution, where escalation intensity and signaling rigidity become more pronounced.

The Forecast further contextualizes this evolving Indian crisis behavior through the lens of prospect theory and risk-prone strategic behavior. The findings suggest that sections of the Indian political and strategic elite increasingly appear to believe that limited military operations, precision strikes, and technologically enabled punitive actions can be conducted below the nuclear threshold without triggering

uncontrolled escalation. This belief in creating coercive space under the nuclear overhang reflects a broader shift toward risk-acceptant crisis behavior. However, the study argues that such assumptions become increasingly dangerous in an environment characterized by compressed decision-time, technological ambiguity, and multi-domain interaction. Under these conditions, confidence in escalation control may itself become a source of instability and miscalculation.

The survey analysis also demonstrates that escalation dynamics are increasingly multi-domain in nature. Emerging technologies, gray-zone operations, cyber activities, information warfare, drone campaigns, and Indian dual-capable missile systems collectively expand the operational space within which escalation can occur. The May 2025 crisis illustrated how technologically enabled operations below the threshold of full-scale war can nonetheless create substantial escalation risks. Respondents repeatedly highlighted concerns regarding AI-enabled ISR, autonomous systems, cyber vulnerabilities, and precision-guided capabilities that reduce transparency while increasing operational tempo.

Regarding Pakistan's response, the findings indicate broad support within Pakistan's strategic community for adapting deterrence posture and enhancing integrated warfare capabilities in response to the changing strategic environment. A large majority of respondents favor either incremental strengthening or significant recalibration of Pakistan's deterrence posture.

While respondents broadly acknowledge improvements in Pakistan's integrated warfare capabilities since the May 2025 crisis, many continue to perceive a gap between the pace of regional strategic transformation and the adequacy of existing deterrence frameworks. This positions deterrence posture as a reactive and adaptive variable within the broader escalation system.

At the system level, the Forecast identifies both stabilizing and destabilizing modifiers shaping crisis dynamics. External actors, particularly the United States and China, are viewed as partial stabilizers capable of moderating escalation through diplomatic engagement and crisis management. However, respondents consistently emphasize that third-party actors cannot eliminate the structural and technological drivers underlying regional instability. The findings further reveal that the effectiveness of external mediation declines under conditions of rapid escalation and compressed timelines.

The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) emerges as an additional non-military factor for escalation within the regional strategic environment. A majority of respondents assess the suspension or politicization of the treaty as a high-risk contributor to future crises. The findings indicate that water security is increasingly becoming integrated into the broader escalation framework, expanding strategic rivalry beyond conventional military domains. The interaction between IWT-related concerns and perceptions of external actor

effectiveness demonstrates that stabilizing mechanisms can moderate but not eliminate escalation pressures.

The open-ended strategic outlook portion of the study reveals an important transformation in how South Asian strategic stability is conceptualized by Pakistan's strategic community. More than half of all coded responses identify emerging technologies and military modernization as the primary factors likely to shape regional stability over the next three to five years. Political and ideological drivers constitute the second most significant category, followed by structural rivalry and systemic geopolitical pressures. Collectively, these responses indicate that experts increasingly perceive South Asia as operating within a layered and interconnected escalation environment where military, political, technological, informational, and non-military variables interact simultaneously.

The study's broader strategic synthesis supports a model of "conditional stability." Deterrence between India and Pakistan remains operational, but it functions under increasing strain generated by technological acceleration, political amplification, gray-zone competition, and expanding domains of contestation. Structural disputes continue to anchor the regional rivalry, yet future instability is expected to emerge primarily through the interaction between emerging technologies, compressed decision-making environments, domestic political incentives, operational ambiguity, and constrained stabilizing mechanisms.

Overall, the Forecast concludes that South Asia's deterrence environment is undergoing a significant transformation. The region is moving away from a relatively static and threshold-based deterrence system toward a dynamic, interaction-driven escalation framework characterized by speed, ambiguity, and multi-domain competition. Future crises are likely to escalate more rapidly, involve broader operational domains, and provide fewer opportunities for political restraint or diplomatic intervention. Managing escalation in this environment will therefore require an integrated strategic approach that moves beyond traditional military balances and incorporates technological, political, informational, and systemic dimensions of conflict simultaneously.

This Strategic Assessment is Based on Survey Conducted by CISS from the leading Academia, Researchers and Practioners of Pakistan's Strategic Community

2. BACKGROUND

On April 22, 2025, a terrorist attack in Pahalgam, IIOJK killed twenty-six civilians.[1] India attributed the attack to Pakistan without presenting verifiable evidence and responded with a series of unilateral measures: suspension of the IWT of 1960, expulsion of Pakistani diplomats, closure of the Wagah-Attari border crossing, and suspension of bilateral trade.[2] Pakistan rejected the accusations and responded with reciprocal diplomatic and economic measures while placing its forces on high alert.[3] Also, a heightened domestic rhetoric and war jingoism were visible in India owing mostly to the environment forged by the populist Government of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Indian media repeatedly called for strikes against Pakistan and for military action.

On May 7, 2025, India launched Operation Sindoor, conducting precision strikes across the Line of Control (LoC) and the international border, targeting sites that Pakistan maintained were civilian in nature, including mosques and residential areas.[4]

Pakistan Air Force (PAF) responded immediately and effectively. In the aerial engagement that followed, described as one of the largest beyond-visual-range air battles in aviation's history, the PAF downed multiple Indian aircraft, including a Rafale jets, using Chinese-origin air defense systems.[5]

The loss of the Rafales was particularly significant, drawing international attention to the performance gap between the proclaimed and actual capability of the Indian Air Force.

In the days that followed, the conflict expanded in scope and intensity before Operation Bunyanum Marsoos was formally launched. India escalated through sustained drone campaigns[6] and missile strikes targeting Pakistani airbases and military installations, including the use of BrahMos missiles, a dual-capable system inside Pakistani territory.[7] These strikes on military infrastructure marked a serious escalation and demonstrated India's intent to extend the conflict beyond its initial stated objectives. Pakistan responded across multiple domains, striking Indian military targets with precision and conducting counter-drone operations.[8]

Pakistan formally launched Operation Bunyanum Marsoos on May 10th, a calibrated conventional response confined strictly to military targets,[9] executed under Article 51 of the United Nations (UN) Charter. Pakistan's air defenses had by this point downed multiple Indian platforms, including the Rafale, several other aircraft, and an S-400 battery. Later on, a ceasefire was announced,[10] facilitated through American mediation.

From Pakistan's strategic perspective, the May 2025 crisis carried several defining features. India's cross-border strikes represented a continuation of its effort, visible since the Cold Start Doctrine of the early 2000s and the Balakot strikes of 2019, to carve out space for limited conventional war under the nuclear threshold.[11] This trajectory reflects India's broader doctrinal evolution, from the Sundarji Doctrine's emphasis on large-scale conventional mobilization to the more recent Dynamic Response Strategy (DRS), which seeks faster, more flexible offensive options designed to compress decision-making time and exploit space below the nuclear threshold.[12] Pakistan's response was a Quid Pro Quo Plus operation: proportionate, doctrinally grounded, and deliberately controlled to deny India the precedent it sought to establish. India's subsequent silence on the operational costs it incurred, rather than signaling restraint, broke the transparency that credible deterrence requires.[13]

The ceasefire resolved none of the structural conditions underlying the confrontation. The IWT is being held in abeyance by India, the diplomatic relationship remains severed, and the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, the primary accelerant of every major India-Pakistan crisis, remains unresolved . Moreover, South Asia's current security environment is one of tri-compression: space, time, and operational domains are all contracting simultaneously, driven by precision technologies, electronic warfare, cyber operations, and an accelerating information contest.[14] In this environment, escalation thresholds are harder to manage, misperception is more costly, and the margin for doctrinal error is narrower than at any prior point in the bilateral relationship.

2.1 What was Different in Deterrence Dynamics?

The May 2025 crisis highlights change in the nature of deterrence and escalation matrix in South Asia. In the traditional sense, deterrence stability between India and Pakistan has been conceptualized in the form of nuclear thresholds, and the limitations imposed by mutual vulnerability. As long as these restrictions are still in effect, recent events indicate that the dynamics of escalation below the nuclear threshold are increasingly complex and less predictable.

One of the key aspects of this shift is the increased importance of new technologies. The operational environment where crises take place is changing due to advances in AI, ISR systems, cyber capabilities, and autonomous platforms.[15] These technologies increase the speed, accuracy, and range of military actions, yet they also bring novel sources of uncertainty. Better targeting capabilities can enhance confidence in limited strikes, and the flow of real-time information can reduce the time available to make decisions and shorten the decision-making space.

Moreover, the merging of cyber domains and information operations, introduces a sense of ambiguity to the concept of crisis signaling, making it harder for actors in the domain of cyber and information operations to perceive the intent and assess the thresholds. Combined, these dynamics imply that escalation is no longer guided by a set of deliberate strategic decisions, but rather it is increasingly shaped by the conditions of operations that are characterized by speed and uncertainty.

The situation is complicated even more by domestic political dynamics. The emergence of populist and nationalist discourses, in India, has added further pressure on crisis behavior, in this case, relating internal political factors with external strategic signaling.[16] The dynamics may support incentives to escalate, decrease flexibility in decision-making, and increase the degree of rigidity in the signaling patterns during crises.

All these developments lead to the conclusion that the logic of deterrence in South Asia has changed. Although the nuclear deterrence continues to provide overriding constraints, the space between the nuclear thresholds is increasingly becoming contested, fast moving and increasingly influenced by technological as well as political influences.

2.2 Why One Year Later Matters?

A year following the May 2025 crisis, the root causes of instability are yet to be addressed.

There has not yet been a revival of the diplomatic engagement between India and Pakistan and the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, which many regard as a key factor behind repeated crises, is yet to be resolved. The development of military and dual-use technologies, the synthesis of multi-domain operations, and the increasing role of information dynamics are changing how crises can be experienced in the future. The changes are an indication that thenceforth crisis is unlikely to follow the pattern of the past. Rather, they will tend to be defined by increased pace, greater ambiguity, and more complex escalation pathways.

In this regard, this is not merely an exercise in retrospective analysis about revisiting the May 2025 crisis. Instead, it offers a critical point of reference on how escalation is changing and how future crisis may evolve. This paper takes a proactive stance in order to deal with this issue. It analyses the interplay between structural drivers, technological advancements, political processes, and mechanisms of operation to determine the routes through which escalation can take place.

The analysis will be able to offer a more integrated perception of strategic stability in South Asia and to make a contribution to informed policy thinking in the period ahead by focusing on both the drivers and the processes of escalation.

It is against this backdrop that the Center for International Strategic Studies (CISS) Islamabad presents this volume of Strategic Forecast. The analyses that follow draw on viewpoints from Pakistan's strategic community to examine the crisis and its consequences across five interlocking areas. These include the centrality of Jammu and Kashmir, the role of emerging technologies, domestic pressures in India, the role of third-party actors in escalation management, and the future of IWT.

3. STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

Currently, the strategic environment in South Asia can best be termed as a condition of fluid instability. Although there are no immediate escalation pressures in the region and deterrence continues to function, the underlying root causes of conflict continue to exist, and in some cases are intensifying. In this situation, the probability of crisis is neither negligible nor imminent, rather persistently present. This creates a fragile equilibrium characterized by recurring risks rather than sustained stability. In South Asian landscape, crisis has become a structural feature of the regional security landscape rather than an anomaly.

Territorial disputes between India and Pakistan continue to play the central role in the rivalry between the two states. Both states have fought several wars and have been involved in major crisis because of the outstanding Kashmir question. At the structural level, the Jammu and Kashmir dispute has been the geographic locus for escalation in the region and continues to ensure that crises are embedded within a broader continuum of contestation.[17] It is the core political dispute between the two states and has been accurately identified as one of the dangerous nuclear flashpoints in the world.[18] At the structural level, the unresolved territorial issues continue to provide a baseline level of hostility that periodically manifests in acute confrontations.

However, the enduring instability in the region would not be sufficiently explained through structural factors alone. The contemporary regional strategic outlook reflects the interaction of multiple, reinforcing layers of strategic pressure.

In the contemporary geostrategic landscape of the region besides structural drivers, contextual and technological factors are also increasingly shaping crisis behavior in the region. Rise of the BJP and the pre-eminence of nationalist narratives in the Indian political discourse are actively altering the incentives and constraints faced by decision-makers. Domestic political dynamics have evolved as a major factor in the region's strategic calculus and is actively manifested in the form of war jingoism during election rallies in India.[19]

Similarly, emerging technologies are also playing an important role in transforming crisis behavior by enhancing operational and tactical capabilities and providing novel means for inflicting damage on the adversary. The role of technologies is particularly important as it has transformed the character of warfare, actively reducing human cost during a confrontation.[20]

The interaction of structural, contextual and technological layers is amplifying uncertainty, compressing response timelines and complicating escalation control in the region.

Scholars have identified escalation as, “an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses thresholds considered significant by one or more of the participants.”[21] In the South Asian landscape, the logic of escalation is being actively redefined by the interacting structural, contextual, and technological factors. Historically, escalation dynamics in South Asia were primarily understood through the lens of capability and threshold management with nuclear deterrence limiting the intensity or scope of the conflict. However, dynamics related to speed, ambiguity and multi-domain interaction are actively overshadowing the existing ceilings, introducing new risks that can spiral the conflict rendering the escalation ladder in the region. Escalation in the region is no longer determined solely by the traditional ladder but rather by how quickly decisions are made, how signals are interpreted, and how actions unfold across domains.[22]

A central dimension of this shift is the emergence of the gray zone of warfare. [23] The May 2025 crisis has demonstrated the growing importance of non-contact, stand-off, and technologically enabled forms of conflict that operate below the threshold of large-scale war but carry significant escalation potential. The use of loitering munitions, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), and precision-guided munitions reflected an operational environment in which states were able to impose costs, probe defenses, and degrade critical capabilities without immediate force-on-force confrontation. [24]

For example, during the crisis, waves of drones were used to test and weaken air defense systems before precision strikes, illustrating how gray-zone tactics can shape the battlespace before conventional engagement begins.

Similarly, the employment of dual-capable systems – particularly cruise missiles such as BrahMos – introduces a qualitatively different dimension of risk. Dual-use systems blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear signaling by introducing payload uncertainty, creating conditions in which adversaries may be unable to determine whether an incoming strike is conventional or nuclear. This escalation ambiguity can generate “use-it-or-lose-it” pressures and increase the likelihood of misinterpretation during crises.[25]

The increasing conventional-nuclear entanglement is further complicating escalation dynamics in the region, as strikes on conventional assets may be perceived as attempts to degrade nuclear forces, thereby raising the risks of inadvertent escalation.[26]

This gray-zone domain of warfare represents a critical operational gap in which escalation can occur without clearly defined thresholds.

Actions within this space are often calibrated, limited, and deniable, yet cumulatively significant. They enable states to gradually alter the operational balance, test adversary responses, and shape escalation pathways without triggering immediate large-scale retaliation. However, the absence of clear boundaries increases the risk of misperception, particularly when combined with compressed decision-making timelines and ambiguous signaling.[27]

Another defining feature of the regional strategic environment is the compression of time largely because of the emerging technologies. Improvements in ISR systems, coupled with real-time data processing and networked command systems, are significantly reducing the time available for political and military deliberation. Decision-makers are increasingly required to operate under conditions of urgency, often with incomplete or contested information. This reduces the space for strategic calculation and increases the likelihood of reactive responses, thereby heightening the risk of rapid escalation.[28] Furthermore, ambiguity is increasingly shaping the escalation dynamics in South Asia. The integration of cyber operations, electronic warfare, and information campaigns alongside conventional and gray-zone activities blurs the boundaries between different forms of conflict. Attribution challenges, particularly in cyber and information domains, complicate efforts to accurately interpret adversary intent.[29]

As a result, escalation may be driven not only by deliberate signaling but also by misinterpretation and uncertainty.

The evolving crisis behavior of India is further adding a dimension of instability in the regional strategic matrix. Over the past two decades, and particularly since the 2019 Pulwama–Balakot crisis, India has demonstrated an increasing willingness to undertake cross-border military actions under the nuclear threshold.[30] This pattern of behavior reflects an effort on the Indian part to operationalize limited war doctrines and to expand the space for conventional engagement under the nuclear overhang.[31] The May 2025 crisis points towards a continuation – and possible intensification – of this trajectory.

This evolving Indian crisis behavior can be contextualized in terms of risk acceptance and brinkmanship.[32] During the May 2025 crisis, the early use of precision strikes and dual-capable systems by India signaled a shift toward initiating crises at a higher rung of the escalation ladder, thereby compressing the space for diplomatic intervention and crisis management. Such behavior reflects a form of brinkmanship in which escalation risks are deliberately manipulated to achieve strategic objectives[33] but in a context where technological and informational factors make outcomes increasingly uncertain.

Moreover, the evolving pattern of Indian crisis behavior can also be understood through the lens of prospect theory, which suggests that decision-makers are more likely to exhibit risk-acceptant behavior when they perceive themselves to be operating in a domain of losses.[34] In the context of South Asia, India being a revisionist power in the region, this may reflect a strategic assessment that maintaining the status quo is insufficient to achieve desired political and security outcomes, thereby incentivizing more assertive and risk-prone actions during crises.[35] The willingness on the Indian part to initiate cross-border strikes, employ stand-off precision capabilities, and escalate early in the crisis cycle indicates a growing belief that limited escalation can produce tangible strategic or political gains without triggering uncontrolled conflict.[36] However, when combined with compressed decision-making timelines, technological ambiguity, and multi-domain interaction, such risk-prone behavior increases the probability that escalation may exceed intended limits, thereby heightening the dangers of miscalculation. The combination of brinkmanship and technological change creates a particularly volatile dynamic. Risk-taking behavior that may have been manageable under earlier conditions of slower escalation and clearer signaling becomes significantly more dangerous in an environment characterized by speed, ambiguity, and multi-domain interaction.[37]

In response to these pressure, state responses and capabilities are evolving. The need to recalibrate deterrence posture and enhance integrated warfare capabilities reflects an awareness of changing escalation dynamics in the region. For example, in the maritime domain, Pakistan is shifting towards a sea-denial strategy centered on Anti-Access/Anti-Area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. This includes the recent testing of long-range SMASH Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASbM), Taimoor Air-Launched Anti-Ship Cruise Missile, and integration of layered air defense systems.[38]

Moreover, Pakistan has also formed Army Rocket Command Force (ARFC) to further strengthen its operational capabilities.[39] These and other developments points towards efforts by Pakistan to further enhance its capabilities across domains of warfare. System-level factors such as the role of third-party mediators continue to play an important but constrained role in the regional dynamics.

Traditionally, the external actors, especially the United States, so far have retained the ability to facilitate de-escalation. However, their influence may be reduced in fast-moving crises characterized by compressed timelines. in the future.[40]

Similarly, New Delhi's decision to hold the IWT in abeyance introduces an additional friction point that may act as a future trigger.[41] Taken together, these developments point to a strategic environment characterized by overlapping and mutually reinforcing pressures.

Structural disputes provide the foundation for conflict, technological change reshapes the conditions of escalation, political dynamics influence decision-making, and gray-zone operations create new pathways for confrontation. The result is a form of instability that is not only persistent, but also increasingly complex and difficult to manage. In this context, the central analytical challenge is not simply to assess whether another crisis will occur, but to understand how it will unfold. Future crises are likely to escalate more rapidly, involve a wider range of domains and be shaped by a combination of technological conditions and political pressures. Escalation pathways may therefore be less visible in their early stages, more ambiguous in their signaling, and more difficult to control once initiated.

This study proceeds from the premise that understanding these dynamics requires an integrated analytical framework that captures the interaction between drivers, mechanisms, and pathways of escalation. By examining how structural, technological, and political factors interact the analysis aims to provide a forward-looking assessment of strategic stability in South Asia and to identify the trajectories through which future crises may evolve.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design and Objective

This study employs a structured expert survey to analyze the evolving dynamics of crisis escalation in South Asia one year after the Marka-e-Haq. The objective is not to produce predictive forecasts in a statistical sense, but to identify consistent patterns in expert judgment that can inform strategic forecasting. The analysis is therefore designed to move beyond descriptive assessment and toward an integrated understanding of how crises are likely to unfold under changing structural, technological, and political conditions.

All quantitative analysis in this study is conducted using Stata, a statistical software widely used for data management and applied social science research. The use of Stata enables systematic organization of survey data, consistent coding of variables, and structured examination of relationships through cross-tabulation and interaction analysis. While the study does not rely on advanced statistical modeling, the software facilitates analytical rigor by ensuring transparency, reproducibility, and consistency in the treatment of data.

4.2 Analytical Framework

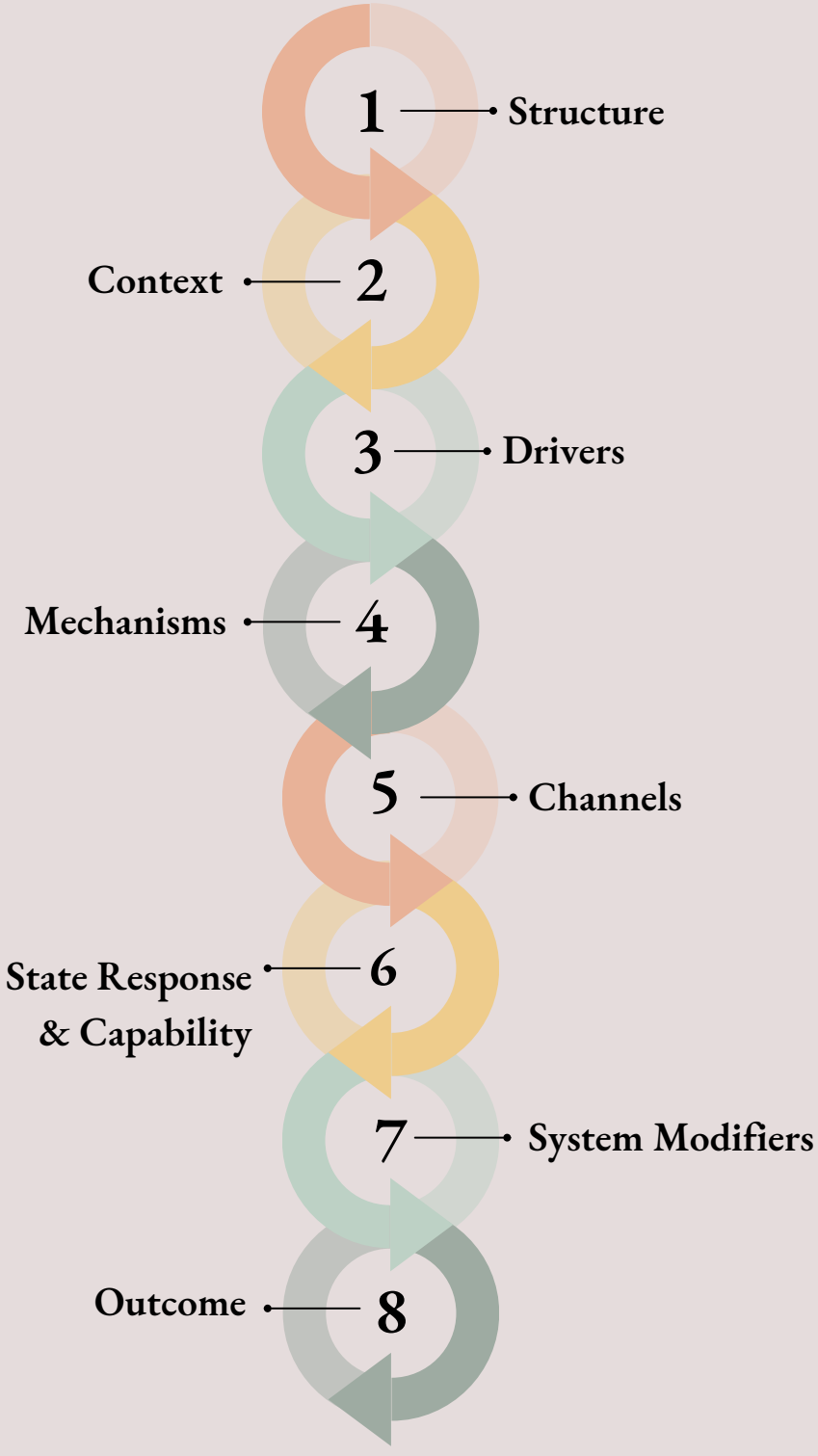
The study is built around a layered analytical model that conceptualizes strategic instability as the outcome of interacting variables rather than isolated factors.

At the structural level, enduring territorial disputes – most notably the Jammu and Kashmir issue – provides the foundational context for recurring crises. Contextual variables, particularly domestic political dynamics such as populism and nationalist pressures in India, shape the incentives, constraints, and signaling behavior of decision-makers.

Emerging technologies – including AI, ISR systems, cyber capabilities, autonomous platforms, and precision-guided munitions – are treated as transformational drivers that alter the operational environment of conflict. These technologies enable stand-off, non-contact, and gray-zone forms of warfare, expanding the space within which escalation can occur below traditional thresholds.

The effects of these drivers are mediated through two key layers: mechanisms and channels of escalation. Mechanisms refer to how escalation occurs and include processes such as decision-time compression, escalation ambiguity, ISR-enabled targeting, and risks associated with autonomous systems. Channels refer to where escalation manifests and capture the primary pathways through which crises unfold, including crisis initiation, escalation intensity, signaling rigidity, and domestic audience pressures.

ANALYTICAL MODEL



In addition, the model incorporates a distinct layer of state response and capability. Deterrence posture reflects strategic policy choices regarding escalation thresholds and signaling, while integrated warfare capability captures the extent to which states can operationalize multi-domain operations. These variables shape how states respond to emerging pressures, thereby influencing the trajectory and intensity of escalation.

Finally, system-level modifiers – such as the role of external actors and structural issues like the IWT – are included to capture broader contextual factors that may constrain or amplify crisis dynamics.

4.3 Respondent Profile

The survey draws on a purposive sample of 59 respondents with expertise across multiple domains relevant to South Asian strategic stability. The respondent pool includes specialists in nuclear strategy (26 respondents), diplomacy and policy analysis (16 respondents), emerging technologies such as AI, cyber, and space (10 respondents), and conventional military affairs (7 respondents). This distribution reflects a balanced representation of Pakistan's strategic community, combining perspectives from doctrinal, operational, technological, and policy-oriented domains. The inclusion of experts from diverse professional backgrounds enables the study to capture a range of viewpoints on crisis dynamics, particularly in relation to deterrence stability, technological transformation, and escalation behavior.

While the sample is not statistically representative, its composition is analytically significant, as it reflects informed judgment across key areas that shape contemporary strategic thinking in South Asia. The survey is designed as an elite-level assessment, comprising senior practitioners, analysts, and scholars within Pakistan's strategic and policy community. Respondents were selected on the basis of their professional experience and subject-matter expertise in areas directly related to South Asian security, including nuclear strategy, conventional military affairs, emerging technologies, and policy analysis.

The focus on Pakistan-based experts is intentional. The study does not seek to provide a generalized or cross-national perspective, but rather to capture how Pakistan's strategic community perceives evolving crisis dynamics, escalation pathways, and future risks. In this sense, the findings reflect a structured assessment of strategic thinking within Pakistan, offering insight into how key actors interpret and respond to changes in the regional security environment.

4.4 Data Collection

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire administered to a targeted group of experts, including policymakers, academics, military analysts, and practitioners in the field of strategic and security studies. The survey captures elite perspectives on key dimensions of crisis dynamics, including structural drivers, technological developments, political factors, escalation mechanisms, and potential pathways of conflict.

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4.5 Operationalization of Variables

Each component of the analytical framework is operationalized through survey responses.

Outcome Variable (Crisis Risk): Measured through respondent assessments of the probability of a major India–Pakistan crisis within the next 12–24 months. Responses are grouped into categorical levels (low, medium, high) to facilitate structured comparison

Structural Variable: The perceived centrality of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, capturing its role as a foundational driver of crisis escalation.

Contextual Variable: The perceived impact of populism and domestic political dynamics of India on escalation behavior.

Transformational Drivers: The perceived effect of emerging technologies on deterrence stability, capturing whether these technologies are stabilizing, neutral, or destabilizing.

Mechanisms of Escalation: Identified through multi-response selections, including escalation ambiguity, reduced decision-making time, improved targeting and ISR capabilities, cyber vulnerabilities, and risks associated with autonomous systems. These are coded as binary variables to enable structured analysis.

Channels of Escalation: Captured through a single-response question identifying the primary pathway of escalation, including crisis initiation, escalation intensity, signaling rigidity, and domestic audience pressures.

State Response and Capability: Operationalized through responses on deterrence posture and assessments of integrated warfare capability.

System-Level Modifiers: Captured through perceptions of the effectiveness of external actors and the potential role of structural issues such as the IWT in future crises.

Qualitative Inputs: Open-ended responses are used to identify recurring themes and validate quantitative findings.

4.6 Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds in three stages:
First, baseline distributions are established to assess overall perceptions of crisis risk and the relative importance of key variables. This provides an initial understanding of how experts assess the strategic environment.

Second, bivariate analysis is conducted using cross-tabulation to examine relationships between variables, particularly between drivers, mechanisms, channels, and the outcome variable. This stage identifies patterns of association that help explain how escalation dynamics are structured.

Third, interaction analysis is employed to trace how different variables combine to shape escalation pathways. In particular, the study examines how emerging technologies influence crisis risk through specific mechanisms (such as ambiguity and decision-time compression) and how these mechanisms operate through identifiable channels (such as domestic political pressure or crisis initiation). This layered approach allows for a more integrated understanding of escalation dynamics.

The analysis prioritizes interpretation of patterns over statistical inference, recognizing the exploratory nature of the dataset and the importance of strategic reasoning in understanding crisis behavior.

4.7 Treatment of Expert Commentary

In addition to structured survey responses, the study incorporates qualitative expert commentaries. These are presented separately to preserve their original analytical framing and to provide in-depth quantitative findings. The commentaries are not used as direct evidence in the analytical model but serve to contextualize and enrich the interpretation of results.

4.8 Limitations of the Study

The study is subject to several limitations. The sample size is relatively small and purposive, limiting the generalizability of findings. The reliance on expert judgment introduces subjective elements, although this is partially mitigated by the diversity of respondents. Additionally, complex strategic phenomena are necessarily simplified through survey-based operationalization.

Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as indicative patterns that inform strategic forecasting rather than definitive causal relationships.

4.9 Scope and Contribution

Despite these limitations, the study provides a structured framework for understanding how crises in South Asia are likely to evolve under changing conditions. By integrating structural, technological, political, and operational dimensions into a single analytical model, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of strategic stability.

In particular, the inclusion of mechanisms and channels of escalation allows for a more granular analysis of how crises unfold, while the incorporation of gray-zone dynamics highlights the expanding space within which escalation can occur. This approach is intended to support forward-looking analysis and to inform policy thinking in an increasingly complex and uncertain strategic environment.

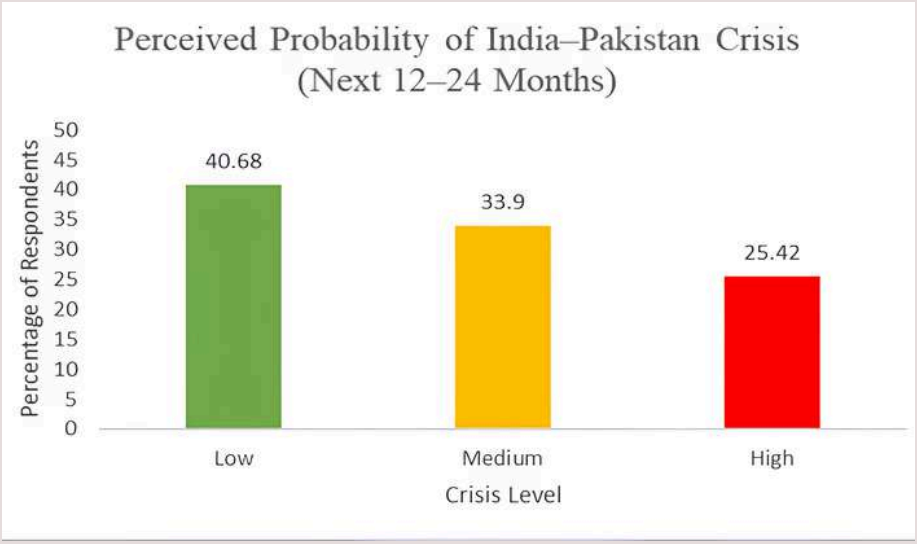
5. SURVEY ANALYSIS: DRIVERS, MECHANISMS, AND PATHWAYS OF ESCALATION

5.1 Crisis Risk Baseline

The distribution of responses indicates that the strategic environment in South Asia is characterized by a persistent and visible level of crisis risk. When asked to assess the probability of a major India–Pakistan crisis within the next 12–24 months, 40.68 percent of respondents placed the likelihood in the low range, while 33.90 percent assessed it as medium and 25.42 percent as high.

Risk is distributed across medium and high categories, not concentrated in low-risk perceptions.

While the largest single category falls within the low-risk range, a combined majority of nearly 60 percent of respondents place the probability in the medium-to-high spectrum. This suggests that crisis risk is not perceived as remote or exceptional, but rather as an enduring feature of the regional security environment. The absence of a dominant low-risk consensus indicates that existing deterrence dynamics are not viewed as fully stabilizing.



Crisis Risk and Background of Respondents

Cross-tabulated analysis of respondent backgrounds and crisis risk perceptions indicates notable variation across professional communities. Respondents from conventional military affairs exhibit the highest concentration of high-risk assessments (57.14 percent), suggesting that operationally oriented experts perceive the escalation environment as particularly volatile. By contrast, respondents from diplomacy and policy backgrounds display comparatively lower levels of high-risk perception, with half of this group categorizing crisis probability as low. Nuclear strategy respondents are more evenly distributed across categories, reflecting recognition of persistent instability without a dominant expectation of immediate escalation. Meanwhile, respondents specializing in emerging technologies exhibit a balanced distribution between low and medium-risk assessments, indicating concern regarding technological destabilization without a uniform expectation of acute crisis escalation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that perceptions of escalation risk are shaped not only by strategic developments themselves, but also by professional orientation and analytical perspective. Operational communities appear more sensitive to immediate escalation pathways, while policy-oriented respondents retain greater confidence in the system's capacity for crisis management and restraint.

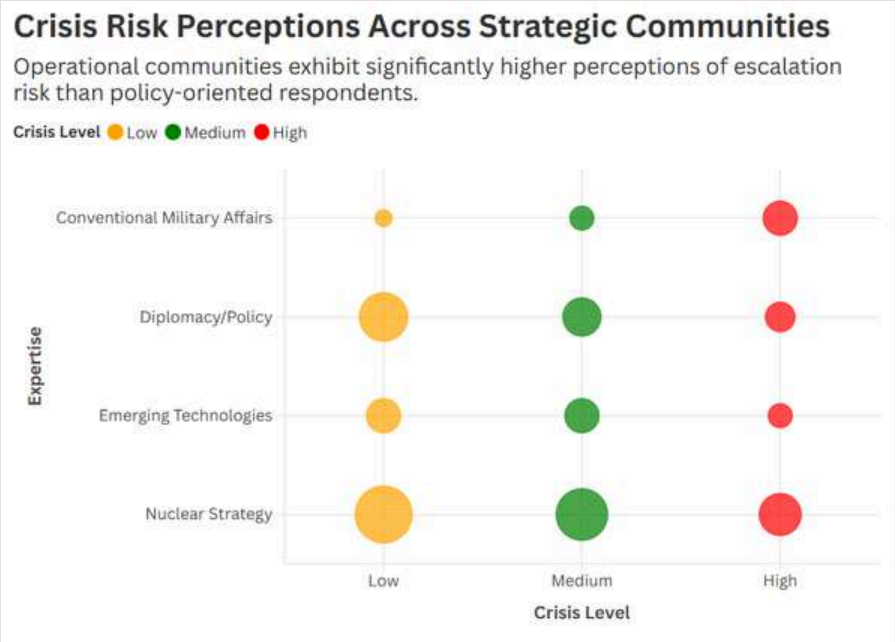
This pattern is reinforced by the numerical distribution of responses. The mean score of 2.73 on a five-point scale indicates that expert assessments lean toward a moderate level of crisis risk rather than a low-risk baseline. At the same time, a relatively high standard deviation (1.08) reflects considerable variation in perceptions, suggesting that while the overall tendency points toward moderate risk, there remains significant uncertainty regarding the likelihood and trajectory of future crises.

Taken together, the distribution and dispersion of responses point toward a condition of fluid instability. Crisis risk is structurally embedded within the regional security environment, but its manifestation is contingent on multiple interacting factors rather than a single dominant driver.

This baseline provides the foundation for subsequent analysis, which examines how structural drivers, technological developments, political dynamics, and escalation mechanisms shape perceptions of crisis risk and influence expectations of future instability.

Risk is distributed across medium and high categories, not concentrated in low-risk perceptions.

This study conceptualizes crisis dynamics in South Asia as a multi-domain system in which escalation is driven by the interaction of structural, technological, and political pressures, while stabilizing mechanisms operate only partially to constrain these dynamics.



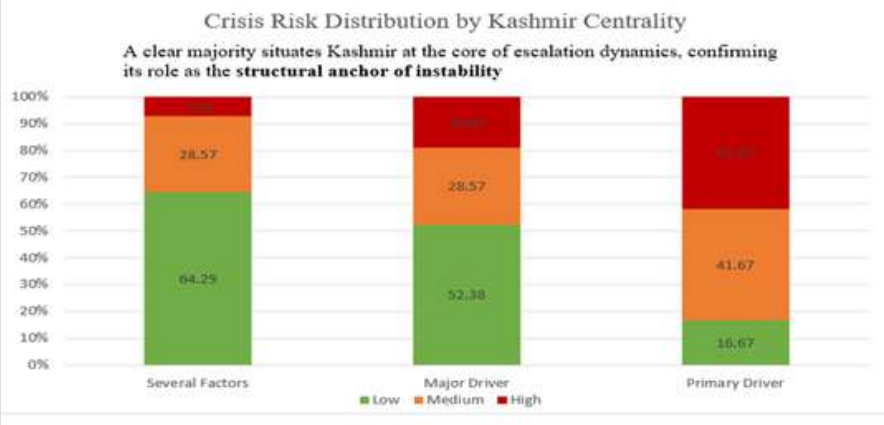
5.2 Structural Driver – Centrality of Jammu and Kashmir Conflict

The survey results strongly reaffirm the centrality of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute as the foundational driver of crisis dynamics between India and Pakistan. A substantial majority of respondents – over three-quarters – identify the dispute as either a primary or major driver of escalation, with 40.7 percent categorizing it as the primary driver and a further 35.6 percent as a major driver. Only a minority view it as one of several contributing factors, and none consider it marginal. This distribution underscores the continued salience of Kashmir as the structural anchor of instability in South Asia and a Nuclear Flashpoint.

However, the analytical significance of this variable becomes clearer when examined in relation to crisis risk perceptions. Cross-tabulated responses indicate a strong association between the perceived centrality of Kashmir and assessments of crisis probability. Among respondents who identify the dispute as the primary driver, 41.67 percent assess crisis risk as high, compared to 19.05 percent among those who consider it a major driver and only 7.14 percent among those who view it as one of several factors. At the same time, low-risk assessments decline sharply as the perceived importance of Kashmir increases, falling to just 16.67 percent among those who identify it as the primary driver. This pattern demonstrates that the more central Kashmir is perceived to be, the higher the expectation of future crisis escalation. In this sense, the dispute continues to function not only as a background condition of conflict, but as a key factor shaping forward-looking risk assessments.

At the same time, the variation across categories suggests that while Kashmir remains indispensable for understanding crisis recurrence, it does not operate in isolation. Instead, its impact is mediated by other drivers – particularly technological developments and political dynamics – that influence how escalation unfolds in practice.

Taken together, these findings confirm that the Jammu and Kashmir dispute remains the structural foundation of instability in South Asia, but also highlight the need to move beyond single-factor explanations toward a more integrated understanding of crisis dynamics.



5.3 Transformational Driver: Emerging Technologies and Deterrence Stability

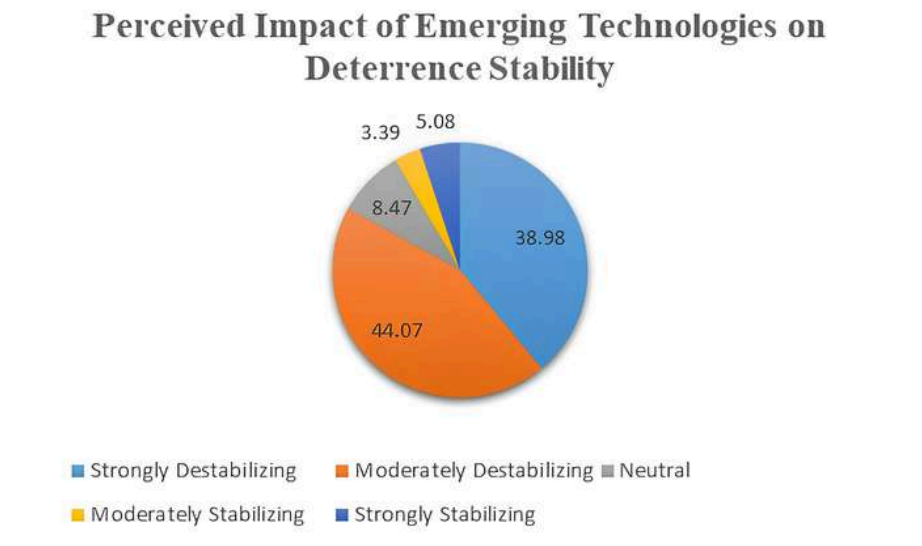
The survey results indicate a strong and near-consensus view that emerging technologies are reshaping deterrence dynamics in South Asia in destabilizing ways. A substantial majority of respondents – over 83 percent – assess the impact of technologies such as AI, cyber capabilities, ISR systems, and drones as either moderately or strongly destabilizing.

In contrast, only a small minority (approximately 8 percent) view these technologies as stabilizing, while an equally small proportion considers their effects neutral.

This distribution reflects a significant shift in expert perceptions of the strategic environment. Unlike traditional drivers of instability, which are rooted in enduring political disputes, emerging technologies are seen as actively transforming the conditions under which deterrence operates.

Risk Redistribution Pattern

- Strong destabilization → highest high-risk share (34.78%)
- Moderate destabilization → medium-risk concentration (46.15%)
- Stabilizing perceptions → zero high-risk responses



The overwhelming tilt toward destabilizing assessments suggests that technological change is not viewed as a marginal or ambiguous factor, but as a central driver of evolving escalation dynamics. Importantly, the limited presence of stabilizing or neutral responses indicates little confidence among experts that technological advancements will reinforce deterrence stability in the near term. Instead, the prevailing view is that these technologies introduce new risks, complicate signaling, and increase the likelihood of miscalculation, thereby contributing to a more volatile and uncertain strategic environment.

Critical Observations

- High-risk perception is conditional, not automatic
- Moderate destabilization → managed risk (medium-heavy)
- Strong destabilization → escalation-sensitive system

However, the relationship between technological perceptions and crisis risk is more nuanced than a simple linear association. Cross-tabulated analysis reveals that respondents who perceive emerging technologies as strongly destabilizing are more likely to assess crisis risk at higher levels, with 34.78 percent of this group categorizing the likelihood of crisis as high – the highest proportion across all categories. At the same time, a significant share of respondents within this group continue to assess risk as low or medium, indicating that even strong perceptions of technological disruption do not translate uniformly into expectations of imminent escalation.

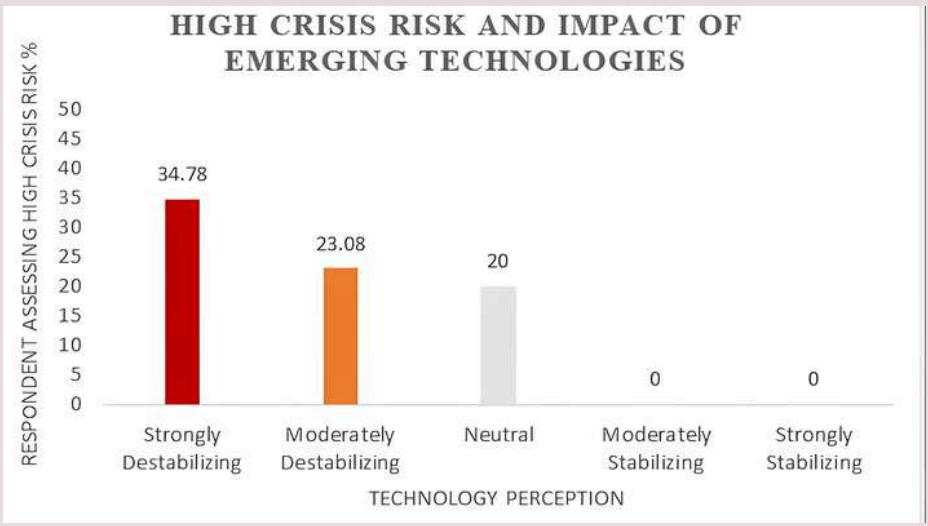
Among those who view technologies as moderately destabilizing, responses are concentrated in the medium-risk category, with 46.15 percent placing crisis probability in this range.

This suggests that technological change is widely seen as increasing volatility, but not necessarily producing immediate escalation. Instead, it contributes to a condition of elevated but managed risk.

By contrast, respondents who perceive emerging technologies as neutral or stabilizing are disproportionately associated with lower crisis risk assessments. Notably, none of the respondents who view technologies as stabilizing categorize crisis risk as high, reinforcing the link between technological perceptions and confidence in deterrence stability.

Taken together, these findings suggest that emerging technologies do not simply increase crisis risk in a uniform manner, but reshape how risk is distributed across different levels. Strong perceptions of destabilization are associated with higher expectations of escalation, while moderate perceptions tend to concentrate risk within a manageable range.

This indicates that technological change acts as a transformative driver that amplifies uncertainty and shifts the structure of escalation dynamics, rather than deterministically producing high-risk outcomes. In this sense, emerging technologies operate not as isolated triggers of conflict, but as force multipliers that interact with structural and political factors to shape crisis trajectories.

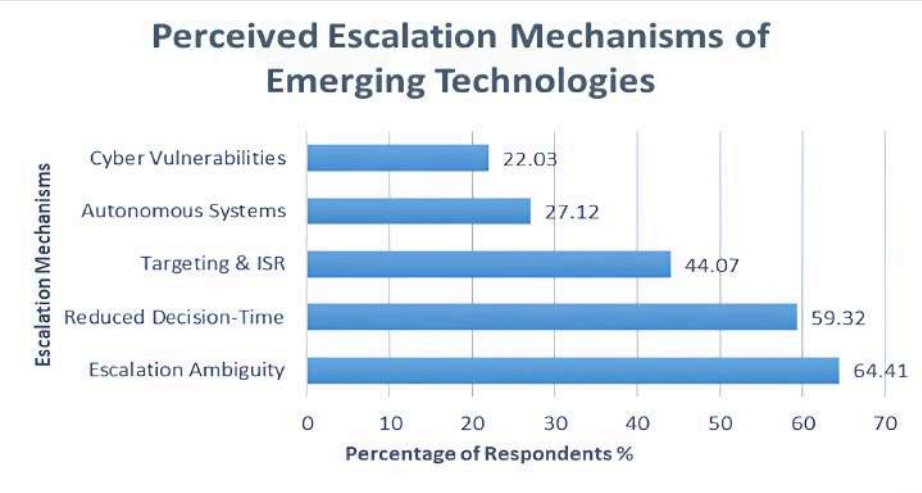


5.4 Escalation Mechanisms: Linking Technological Change to Crisis Dynamics

The survey identifies a set of key mechanisms through which emerging technologies shape escalation dynamics in South Asia. These mechanisms were elicited as a direct follow-up to respondents' assessments of the impact of emerging technologies on deterrence stability, enabling a structured linkage between technological perceptions and the pathways through which they influence crisis behavior. As such, this section provides the causal bridge between the widespread perception of technological destabilization identified earlier and the distribution of crisis risk across respondents.

The results reveal a clear hierarchy of mechanisms. Escalation ambiguity (64.41 percent) and reduced decision-time (59.32 percent) emerge as the most prominent pathways through which technology is perceived to influence escalation. These are followed by improved targeting and ISR capabilities (44.07 percent), while autonomous system risks (27.12 percent) and cyber vulnerabilities (22.03 percent) are identified less frequently.

This distribution indicates that respondents view the destabilizing effects of emerging technologies less in terms of raw capability and more in terms of how these capabilities alter perception, timing, and decision-making under crisis conditions.



These findings directly reinforce the patterns observed in the preceding section. The dominant perception that emerging technologies are destabilizing is grounded in concerns about the mechanisms through which these technologies operate. In particular, respondents who assess technologies as destabilizing implicitly identify escalation ambiguity and reduced decision-time as the primary pathways through which instability is produced. This suggests that technological disruption is understood not simply as an increase in military capability, but as a transformation of the informational and temporal environment within which deterrence operates.

Escalation ambiguity reflects the increasing difficulty of interpreting intent, thresholds, and signaling in a technologically complex operational environment. Precision strike systems, dual-use delivery platforms, cyber operations, and unmanned systems blur the distinction between conventional and strategic actions, increasing the likelihood that actions undertaken below traditional thresholds may be misinterpreted as escalatory.

However, cross-tabulated analysis indicates that the effect of ambiguity on crisis risk is relatively diffuse. Among respondents who identify ambiguity as a key mechanism, 26.32 percent assess crisis risk as high, compared to 23.81 percent among those who do not – a modest increase. The distribution of responses remains broadly similar across both groups, suggesting that ambiguity contributes to a general condition of uncertainty rather than directly driving higher escalation expectations.

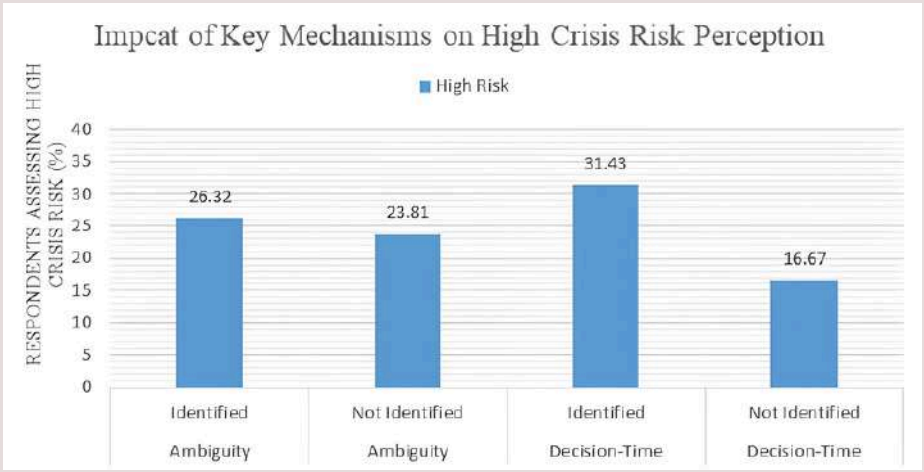
Additional analysis indicates that ambiguity is widely identified across respondents regardless of whether they view technologies as destabilizing or not, reinforcing its role as a background feature of the evolving technological environment.

Mechanism Hierarchy

- Ambiguity (64.4%) and decision-time (59.3%) dominate
- Capability-based mechanisms rank lower

By contrast, reduced decision-time emerges as a more decisive mechanism linking technological change to crisis risk. Advances in ISR, automation, and high-speed strike capabilities compress the temporal dimension of crisis decision-making, reducing response windows and increasing pressure on decision-makers to act rapidly under conditions of uncertainty. This dynamic significantly alters escalation pathways by limiting opportunities for deliberation and de-escalation.

Cross-tabulated results reinforce this finding: among respondents who identify reduced decision-time as a key mechanism, 31.43 percent assess crisis risk as high, compared to only 16.67 percent among those who do not. At the same time, the proportion of low-risk assessments declines from 50 percent to 34.29 percent. This represents a clear shift toward higher perceived escalation risk when decision-time compression is present, highlighting its role as the primary escalation driver among the mechanisms identified.



Improved targeting and ISR capabilities constitute an additional, though secondary, mechanism through which emerging technologies influence escalation dynamics. Identified by 44.07 percent of respondents, these capabilities enhance precision and real-time situational awareness, enabling more effective targeting of military assets.

While this may increase operational efficiency, it also raises the stakes of initial engagements by making early strikes more consequential. In this sense, improved targeting does not necessarily increase the likelihood of conflict initiation, but it intensifies escalation once a crisis is underway by increasing the effectiveness and potential impact of military actions.

Autonomous system risks and cyber vulnerabilities, although less frequently cited, introduce additional layers of complexity into the escalation environment. Autonomous systems raise concerns regarding reduced human control and the potential for unintended or rapid escalation, particularly in high-tempo operational settings. Cyber vulnerabilities complicate attribution and create the possibility of covert or deniable actions that may be misinterpreted during crises. However, their comparatively lower frequency suggests that respondents view these factors as secondary contributors to instability, reinforcing rather than driving the primary mechanisms of ambiguity and time compression.

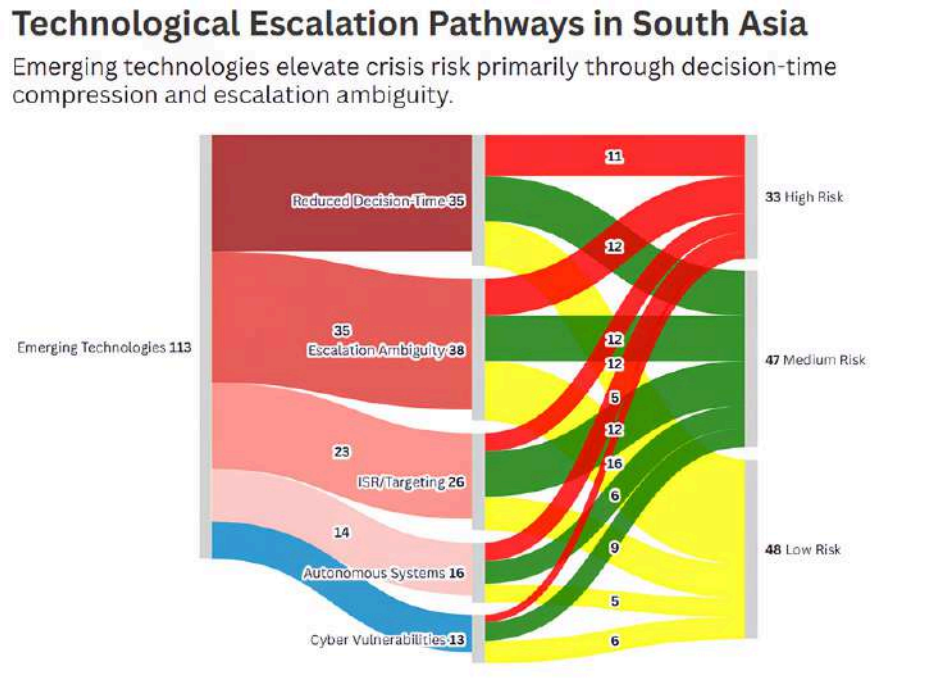
Transmission Strength

Decision-time: +15 percentage point increase in high risk

Ambiguity: ~2.5 point increase

Insight:

Decision-time compression is the primary escalation driver.



Taken together, these findings establish a structured causal pathway linking emerging technologies to crisis risk. Technologies are not perceived as destabilizing merely because they enhance military capability, but because they alter the conditions under which crises unfold – by obscuring signaling, compressing decision timelines, and increasing the potential for miscalculation. Importantly, the analysis demonstrates that these mechanisms do not operate with equal intensity. Escalation ambiguity functions as a background condition of uncertainty, while reduced decision-time is the most influential mechanism identified in the dataset that converts this uncertainty into escalation. Improved targeting amplifies the intensity of conflict once initiated, while autonomous systems and cyber vulnerabilities add additional layers of risk.

This layered mechanism-based framework provides a more precise understanding of how emerging technologies reshape deterrence dynamics in South Asia. Rather than producing instability through a single pathway, technological change operates through a set of interrelated mechanisms that collectively transform the informational, temporal, and operational dimensions of crisis behavior. This integrated explanation accounts for the observed relationship between technological perceptions and crisis risk, and provides a foundation for anticipating how future technological developments may further influence escalation dynamics in the region.

Conditional analysis of mechanism-level effects provides further insight into how emerging technologies translate into crisis risk. The results indicate that not all mechanisms operate with equal intensity. Reduced decision-time appears to have a particularly strong impact: among respondents who view emerging technologies as moderately destabilizing, those identifying compressed decision-making timelines as a key mechanism exhibit a marked shift away from low-risk assessments toward medium and high-risk categories. This suggests that time pressure significantly heightens escalation sensitivity by limiting opportunities for deliberation and control.

By contrast, the effect of ambiguity – examined under conditions where technologies are perceived as strongly destabilizing – is more modest. While respondents identifying ambiguity as a key mechanism show a higher proportion of high-risk assessments compared to those who do not, the overall distribution remains more balanced, indicating a weaker and less consistent transmission effect.

Taken together, these findings suggest that technological destabilization operates through differentiated pathways. Mechanisms that directly compress decision-making timelines appear to exert a stronger influence on crisis risk perceptions than those related to ambiguity or uncertainty.

5.5 Political Context and Escalation Channels: Populism, Domestic Pressures, and Crisis Behavior

The survey results indicate a strong and unanimous perception that the rise of populism and right-wing politics in India contributes to increased escalation risk in South Asia. All respondents assess this factor as either moderately or strongly increasing the likelihood of escalation, with a substantial majority indicating that it strongly increases risk. The absence of neutral or stabilizing responses suggests a high degree of consensus within Pakistan's strategic community regarding the destabilizing impact of Indian domestic political dynamics on crisis behavior.

Cross-tabulated analysis further indicates that stronger perceptions of populism in India are associated with a measurable, though moderate, shift toward higher crisis risk. Among respondents who assess populism as moderately increasing escalation risk, 20 percent categorize crisis probability as high; this figure rises to 27.27 percent among those who view it as strongly increasing risk. At the same time, the proportion of low-risk assessments declines from 46.67 percent to 38.64 percent, indicating a directional movement toward higher escalation expectations. However, the magnitude of this shift remains less pronounced than that observed for certain technological mechanisms – particularly reduced decision-time – suggesting that populism in India functions as a contextual amplifier rather than a primary driver of escalation.

To understand how these political dynamics translate into crisis behavior, respondents were asked to identify the primary channel through which populism influences escalation. The results reveal a clear hierarchy of escalation channels. Domestic audience pressures in India emerge as the dominant pathway, identified by 47.46 percent of respondents. This reflects the central role of domestic political incentives in shaping Indian leadership behavior, where the need to maintain political legitimacy and demonstrate resolve constrains decision-making flexibility. Under such conditions, leaders are less likely to exercise restraint and more inclined toward visible, assertive actions during crises

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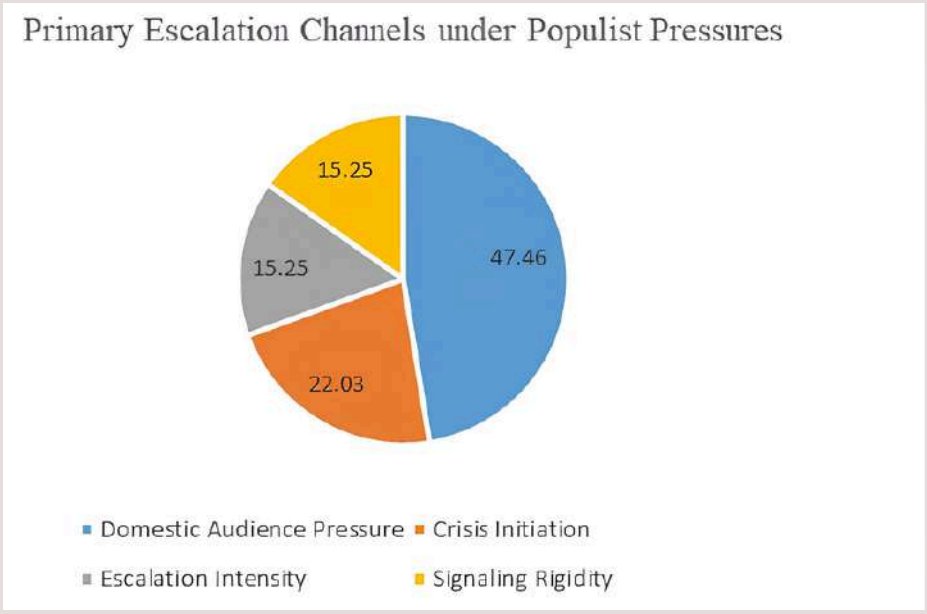
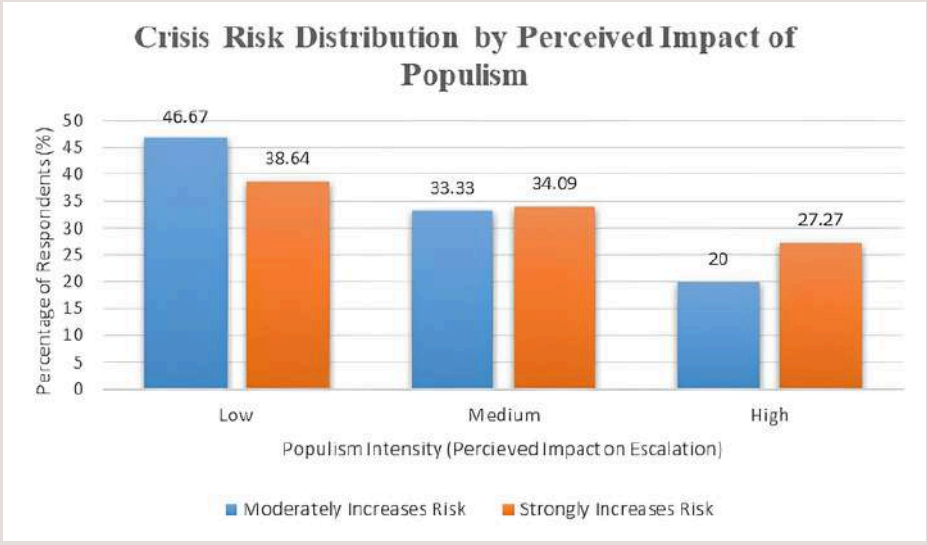

Primary Escalation Channels under Populist Pressures
15.25
47.46
15.25
22.03
Domestic Audience Pressure
Crisis Initiation
Escalation Intensity
Signaling Rigidity


Crisis Risk Distribution by Perceived Impact of Populism
Percentage of Responders (%)
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
46.67
38.64
33.33
34.09
20
27.27
Low
Medium
High
Populism Intensity (Percieved Impact on Escalation)
Moderately Increases Risk
Strongly Increases Risk

Crisis initiation constitutes the second most significant channel (22.03 percent), indicating that domestic political considerations may influence the decision Indian undertake military actions or cross-border operations. However, its association with escalation risk remains comparatively limited. Only 7.69 percent of respondents in this category assess crisis probability as high, suggesting that while populism in India may shape the timing and occurrence of initial actions, it does not necessarily determine whether such actions escalate into broader crises

By contrast, escalation intensity and signaling rigidity, though identified less frequently (15.25 percent each), exhibit the strongest association with high-risk outcomes. In both categories, 33.33 percent of respondents assess crisis risk as high – the highest proportion among all identified channels. This indicates that the most consequential effects of populism manifest not at the point of crisis initiation, but during the conduct of crises. Political pressures can amplify escalation by increasing the intensity of military actions and reducing flexibility in signaling, thereby limiting opportunities for de-escalation and increasing the likelihood of crisis expansion.

Strategic Takeaway

Populism increases the likelihood of escalation, but its effect is conditional and moderate compared to technological drivers.

Risk Shift

High risk: 20% → 27.27%

Low risk: 46.67% → 38.64%

Insight:

Populism produces a directional increase in escalation risk, but not a structural shift.

Taken together, these findings indicate that populism operates as an escalation amplifier within the broader strategic environment. Rather than directly triggering conflict, it shapes how crises unfold by reinforcing domestic pressures, intensifying responses, and constraining signaling flexibility. When combined with the technological and operational mechanisms identified in previous sections – particularly escalation ambiguity and reduced decision-time – these political dynamics contribute to a more volatile escalation environment in which crises are more likely to intensify and become difficult to control.

Channel Distribution Effect

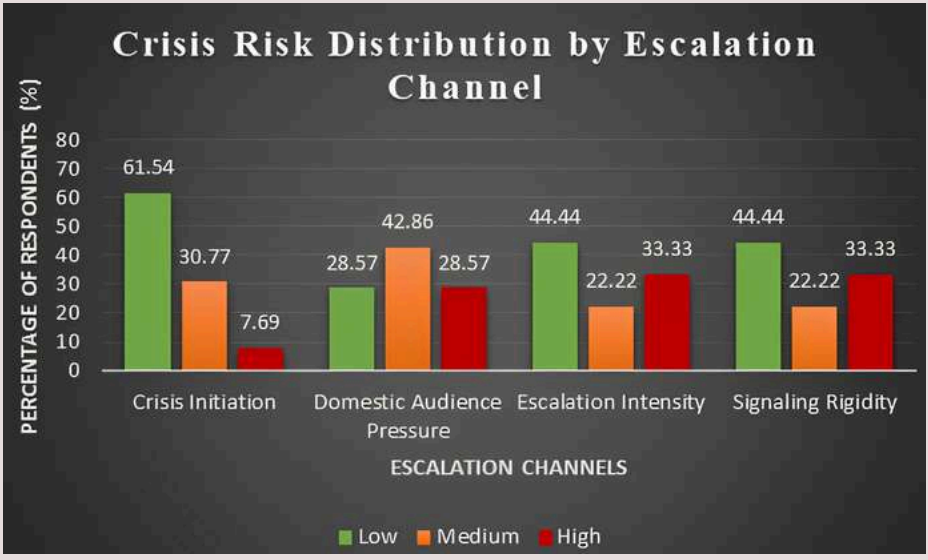
Crisis initiation: 7.69% high risk

Domestic pressure: 28.57%

Intensity & signaling: 33.33%

Insight:

Escalation risk is lowest at initiation and highest during crisis conduct.



Key Analytical Finding

Most common channel: Domestic pressure (47.46%)

Most dangerous channels: Intensity & signaling

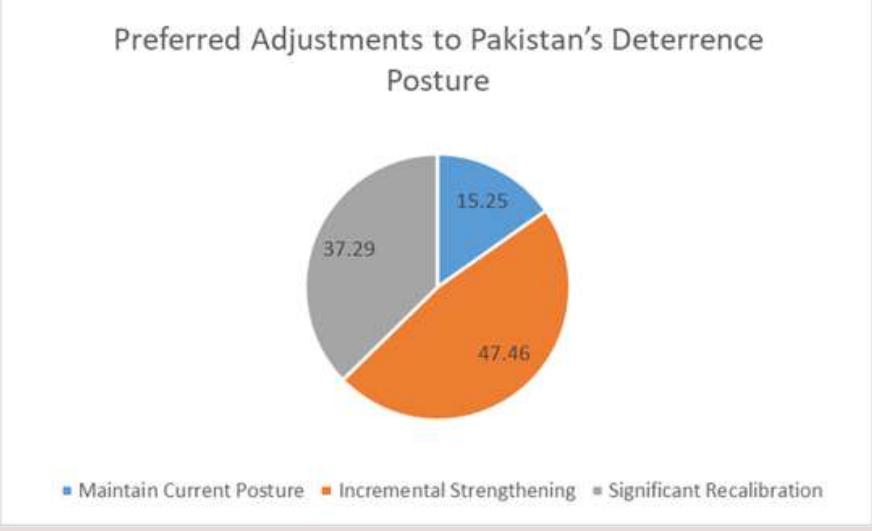
Conclusion:

The most frequent pathway is not the most escalatory.

5.6 State Response and Capability

The survey results indicate a strong preference within Pakistan's strategic community for adapting its deterrence posture in response to the evolving security environment. A clear majority of respondents (84.75 percent) support some form of change, while only 15.25 percent favor maintaining the current posture. However, this preference for adaptation is not uniform in its intensity. The largest proportion of respondents (47.46 percent) advocate incremental strengthening, suggesting a preference for calibrated adjustments rather than wholesale transformation. A substantial minority (37.29 percent), however, supports significant recalibration, indicating concerns that existing deterrence frameworks may no longer be fully aligned with emerging strategic realities.

This distribution suggests that while there is broad agreement on the need for adaptation, there is no consensus on the scale of change required. The predominance of incremental strengthening points to a perception that deterrence remains fundamentally viable but requires refinement to address new challenges. At the same time, the sizable proportion favoring recalibration reflects underlying concerns about shifts in the regional balance, particularly in light of technological developments and evolving crisis behavior. Overall, the findings indicate a system under pressure to adapt, but not one that is perceived to be in immediate strategic breakdown.



Cross-tabulated analysis indicates that preferences regarding deterrence posture are closely aligned with perceptions of crisis risk. Among respondents who favor significant recalibration, 36.36 percent assess crisis probability as high – the highest proportion across all categories. By contrast, those who support maintaining the current posture are predominantly associated with low-risk assessments, with 55.56 percent categorizing crisis probability as low. Incremental strengthening occupies an intermediate position, with a more balanced distribution across risk categories but a comparatively lower proportion of high-risk assessments (17.86 percent).

High-Risk Gradient

Recalibration: 36.36%

Maintain: 22.22%

Incremental: 17.86%

Insight:

Incremental strengthening is associated with the lowest escalation expectations.

Key Takeaways

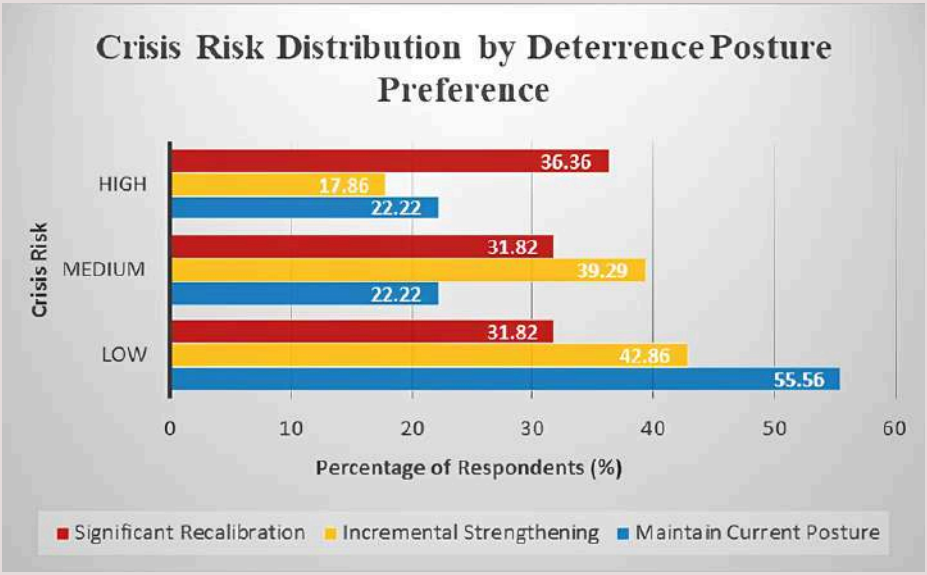
Incremental strengthening has lower high-risk perception than maintaining status quo

Deterrence posture preferences reflect underlying threat perceptions, not independent strategic choices.

Policy preferences in Pakistan's strategic community are risk-responsive:

greater perceived instability leads to support for more substantial deterrence adjustment.

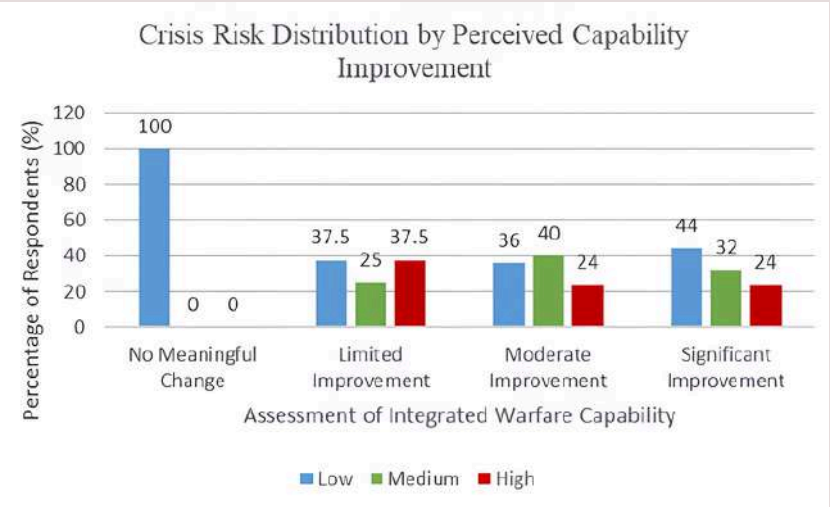
These findings suggest that preferences for deterrence adaptation are strongly shaped by underlying threat perceptions. Significant recalibration is primarily supported by respondents who anticipate higher levels of escalation, indicating a perceived need for more substantial adjustments to Pakistan's deterrence framework. In contrast, those who perceive the environment as relatively stable are more inclined to favor continuity or limited adjustments. This reinforces the interpretation that deterrence posture functions as a response variable within the broader escalation system, rather than as an independent driver of crisis dynamics.



Perceptions of Pakistan's integrated warfare capabilities indicate a strong consensus that the country has made meaningful progress since the May 2025 crisis. A large majority of respondents (84.74 percent) assess that capabilities have improved, with equal proportions identifying this improvement as either moderate or significant, while only a small minority report limited or no meaningful change. This suggests that Pakistan is widely perceived to be adapting its operational capabilities in response to the evolving strategic environment, particularly in areas related to multi-domain integration and crisis response.

However, when considered alongside preferences regarding deterrence posture, a more complex picture emerges. Despite widespread recognition of capability improvements, a similarly large proportion of respondents advocate changes to Pakistan's deterrence posture.

This indicates that while operational adaptation is acknowledged, it is not perceived as sufficient in itself to address emerging strategic challenges. Rather than implying a capability deficit, the findings point to a perceived gap between the pace of strategic change in the environment and the adequacy of existing deterrence frameworks. Cross-tabulated analysis of integrated warfare capabilities and crisis risk further refines this picture. Respondents who assess capability improvement as limited exhibit the highest proportion of high-risk assessments (37.5 percent), indicating a strong association between perceived capability shortfalls and elevated escalation expectations. As assessments shift toward moderate and significant improvement, the proportion of high-risk responses declines to approximately 24 percent, while low-risk assessments increase, suggesting a partial stabilizing effect.



However, even among respondents who perceive significant improvements in capability, a substantial proportion continues to assess crisis risk as high. This indicates that while capability development contributes to reducing escalation concerns, it does not fully offset the broader dynamics driving instability. When considered alongside the strong preference for deterrence recalibration these findings suggest that capability improvements are viewed as necessary but not sufficient.

The interaction between deterrence posture preferences and assessments of integrated warfare capabilities provides further clarity on the internal dynamics of Pakistan's strategic response. Respondents who favor maintaining the current posture exhibit the highest levels of confidence in capability improvement, with a majority assessing progress as significant. Similarly, those supporting incremental strengthening are overwhelmingly concentrated in the moderate to significant improvement categories, indicating a broad perception that existing capabilities are evolving in line with strategic requirements.

Analytical Interpretation

Capability confidence increases low-risk assessments

- **But structural and technological pressures continue to sustain elevated risk**
- **Integrated warfare capability acts as a partial stabilizer, not a decisive solution to regional instability.**

In contrast, respondents advocating significant recalibration display a more varied distribution of capability assessments, including the highest proportion of respondents reporting limited improvement. Notably, only 31.82 percent of this group assesses capability gains as significant, compared to 55.56 percent among those favoring the status quo. This suggests that support for more substantial changes in deterrence posture is closely linked to lower levels of confidence in the adequacy of current capabilities.

Strategic Interpretation

1. Capability improvements encourage:
2. continuity
3. incremental adjustment
4. Lower confidence encourages:
5. stronger policy revision
6. Deterrence posture preferences are shaped not only by threat perception, but by confidence in Pakistan's ability to adapt operationally.

Taken together, these findings indicate that perceptions of capability development play a central role in shaping policy preferences. Where capability improvements are viewed as sufficient, respondents tend to favor continuity or incremental adjustment. Where such improvements are perceived as incomplete or uneven, there is a stronger inclination toward recalibration. This reinforces the interpretation of deterrence posture as a responsive variable, shaped by both perceived threat levels and assessments of Pakistan's capacity to operate effectively within an evolving escalation environment. While the preceding sections identify the drivers and transmission mechanisms of escalation, the overall trajectory of crises is also shaped by system-level factors that can either constrain or amplify these dynamics.

5.7 System Modifiers: Stabilizers and Destabilizers

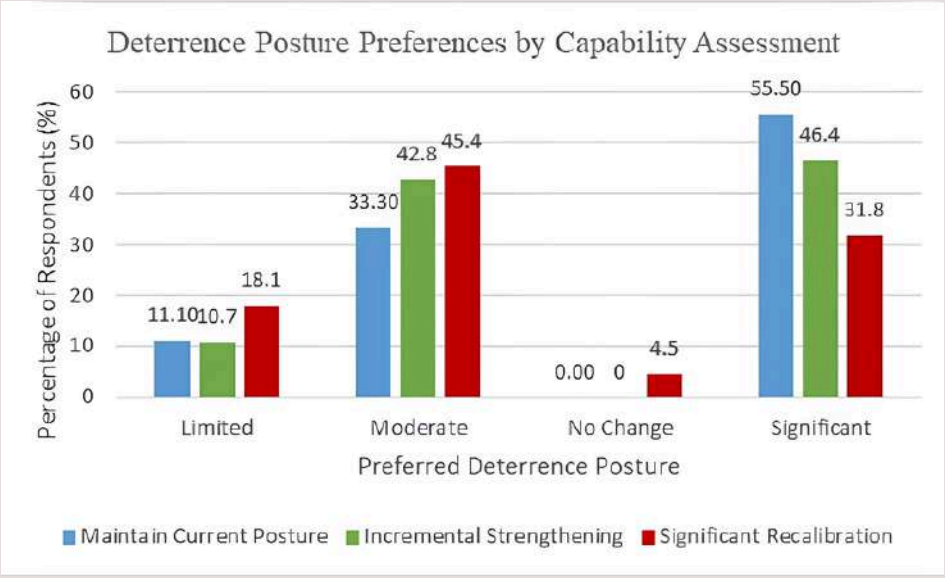
Perceptions of the role of external actors indicate that third-party mediation is viewed as a relevant, though not decisive, factor in shaping crisis outcomes. A clear majority of respondents (88.13 percent) assess external actors as either moderately or highly effective in preventing escalation, with the largest proportion (55.93 percent) identifying their role as moderate. This suggests that external actors are widely seen as capable of influencing crisis dynamics, particularly through diplomatic engagement and de-escalatory signaling.

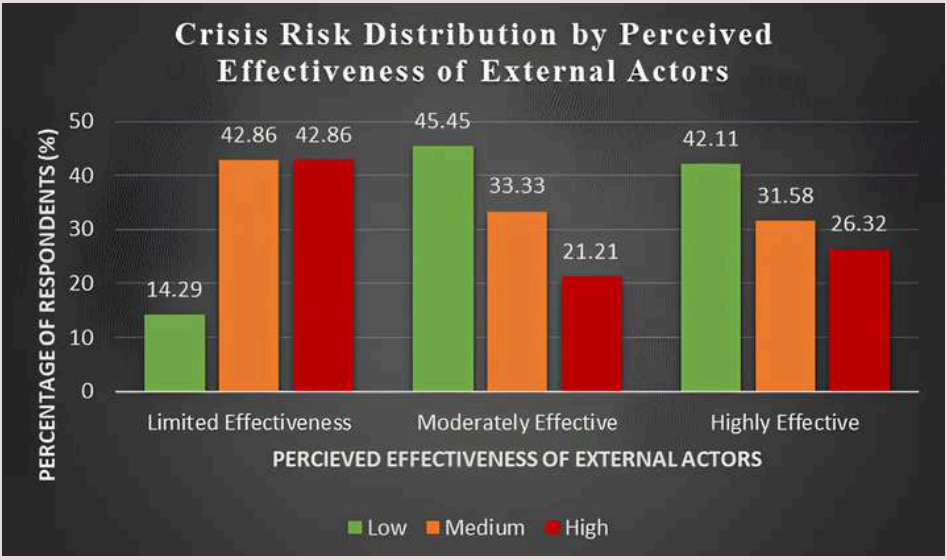
However, the relatively smaller proportion of respondents who consider external actors to be highly effective (32.20 percent) indicates that such influence is not viewed as sufficient to fully control or prevent escalation. Instead, external intervention is understood as a constraining factor that can moderate the intensity or trajectory of crises, rather than eliminate underlying drivers of conflict. The presence of a small but notable minority (11.86 percent) who view external actors as having limited effectiveness further reinforces the perception that third-party influence is contingent and context-dependent.

Taken together, these findings position external actors as partial stabilizers within the escalation system. While they can play an important role in crisis management, their effectiveness is bound by the underlying structural, technological, and political dynamics that drive escalation in South Asia.

Cross-tabulated analysis provides further clarity on the stabilizing role of external actors. Respondents who assess third-party mediators as having limited effectiveness exhibit the highest proportion of high-risk assessments (42.86 percent) and the lowest proportion of low-risk assessments (14.29 percent).

In contrast, those who view external actors as moderately or highly effective are significantly more likely to assess crisis risk as low, with the moderately effective category showing the highest concentration of low-risk responses (45.45 percent) and the lowest proportion of high-risk assessments (21.21 percent).


Deterrence Posture Preferences by Capability Assessment
Percentage of Respondents (%)
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
11.10
10.7
18.1
33.30
42.8
45.4
0.00
0
4.5
55.50
46.4
31.8
Limited
Moderate
No Change
Significant
Preferred Deterrence Posture
Maintain Current Posture
Incremental Strengthening
Significant Recalibration


Crisis Risk Distribution by Perceived Effectiveness of External Actors
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS (%)
50
40
30
20
10
0
14.29
42.86
42.86
45.45
33.33
21.21
42.11
31.58
26.32
Limited Effectiveness
Moderately Effective
Highly Effective
PERCIEVED EFFECTIVENESS OF EXTERNAL ACTORS
Low
Medium
High

This pattern indicates a clear relationship between perceptions of external actor effectiveness and crisis risk. Where third-party mediation is viewed as weak or ineffective, escalation risks are perceived to be substantially higher. Conversely, stronger confidence in external actors is associated with lower escalation expectations, suggesting that such actors play a meaningful role in moderating crisis dynamics.

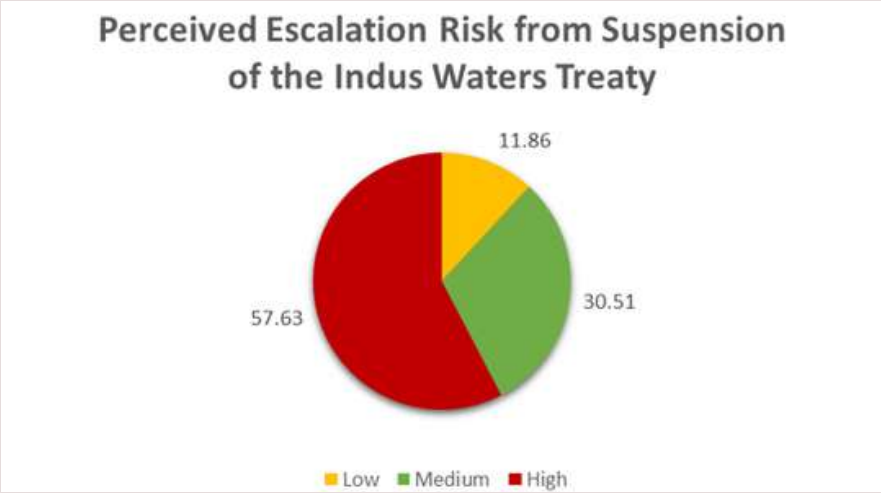
However, the persistence of a notable proportion of high-risk assessments even among respondents who view external actors as highly effective underscores the limits of third-party influence. External actors are therefore best understood as partial stabilizers within the escalation system. While they can reduce the likelihood or intensity of escalation, they do not override the structural, technological, and political factors that drive crisis dynamics in South Asia.

Strategic Takeaway

The IWT functions as an emerging non-military escalation pathway that broadens crisis dynamics beyond conventional security competition.

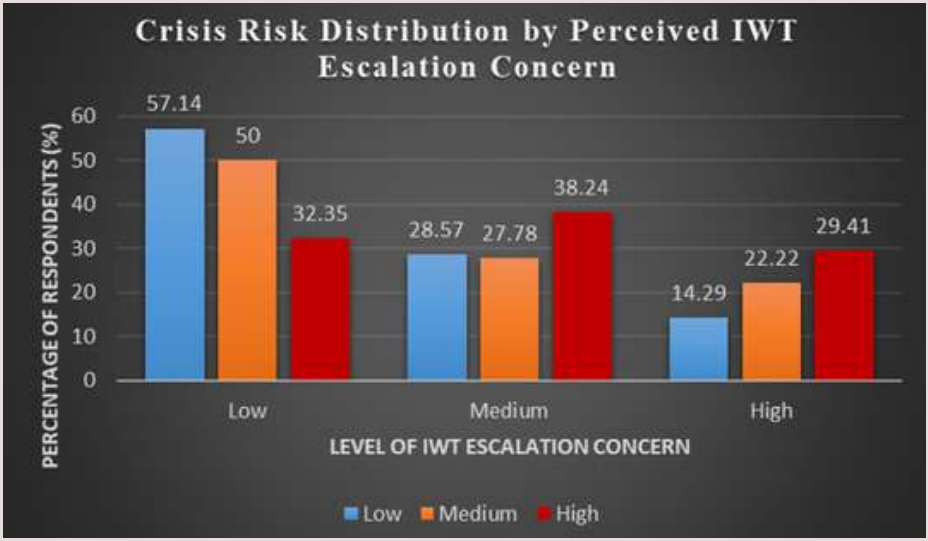
Perceptions regarding the IWT indicate that it is increasingly viewed as a significant factor in shaping future crisis dynamics between Pakistan and India. A majority of respondents (57.63 percent) assess the likelihood of the treaty's suspension contributing to crisis escalation as high, while only a small minority (11.86 percent) considers it a low-probability factor. This distribution suggests that the IWT is no longer seen solely as a background issue, but rather as an emerging domain of strategic contestation with the potential to influence crisis behavior.

This assessment is further reinforced by the distribution's central tendency. The mean response value of 3.63 (on a 2–5 scale) indicates that perceptions are clustered toward the higher end of the scale, reflecting an overall inclination to view the IWT as a meaningful contributor to escalation risk rather than a marginal factor.



Cross-tabulated analysis further demonstrates a clear relationship between perceptions of the IWT and overall crisis risk. Among respondents who assess the IWT factor as low, only 14.29 percent categorize crisis probability as high. This proportion increases to 22.22 percent among those with a medium assessment and rises further to 29.41 percent among respondents who view the IWT as a high-probability contributor to escalation. At the same time, the proportion of low-risk assessments declines as concern about the IWT increases, indicating a consistent shift toward higher escalation expectations.

This pattern suggests that the IWT functions as an emerging escalation pathway within the broader strategic environment. Unlike traditional military drivers, the treaty introduces a non-military domain – water security – into the escalation framework, thereby expanding the range of potential triggers for crisis. However, the persistence of low-risk assessments even among respondents with high concern indicates that the IWT does not independently determine crisis outcomes. Rather, it interacts with existing structural, technological, and political factors to increase the likelihood of escalation.



Taken together, these findings position the IWT operates as an emerging non-military driver within the system modifier layer that expands the domain of conflict beyond conventional military considerations. Its significance lies not in directly causing escalation, but in introducing additional pathways through which crises may emerge or intensify, thereby contributing to a more complex and multi-domain escalation environment in South Asia.

The interaction between system modifiers provides a more granular understanding of how stabilizing and destabilizing forces operate within the escalation framework. At the distributional level, perceptions of external actor effectiveness remain relatively stable across different levels of concern regarding the IWT.

A majority of respondents in each IWT category – low (57.14 percent), medium (61.11 percent), and high (52.94 percent) – assess external actors as moderately effective, while roughly one-third in each group consider them highly effective. This consistency indicates that respondents do not view the effectiveness of third-party mediators as reliant upon the severity of IWT-related risks. In other words, stabilizing and destabilizing system modifiers are perceived as analytically independent at the level of baseline assessment.

However, this independence does not persist when examining their combined effect on crisis risk. Conditional analysis reveals that the impact of IWT-related concerns on escalation is significantly shaped by the perceived effectiveness of external actors.

Among respondents who view external actors as having limited effectiveness, the relationship between IWT concern and crisis risk is particularly pronounced. Within this group, 60 percent of respondents in the high IWT category assess crisis probability as high, representing the most acute escalation scenario in the dataset. This suggests that when stabilizing mechanisms are weak, the destabilizing potential of non-military drivers such as water disputes can translate directly into heightened crisis expectations.

By contrast, among respondents who assess external actors as moderately effective, the escalation impact of IWT concerns is noticeably attenuated. In the high IWT category, the proportion of high-risk assessments declines to 22.22 percent, while medium-risk assessments increase, indicating a shift from acute escalation expectations toward more managed or controlled crisis scenarios. This pattern suggests that external actors can meaningfully dampen the transmission of destabilizing pressures into full-scale escalation risk, effectively acting as a buffering mechanism within the system.

A similar, though slightly less consistent, pattern is observed among respondents who view external actors as highly effective. While the proportion of high-risk assessments in the high IWT category (27.27 percent) remains lower than in the limited-effectiveness scenario, it does not decline as sharply as in the moderately effective category. This variation is likely influenced by the smaller sample size within this group, but it nonetheless reinforces the broader conclusion that even strong stabilizing perceptions do not eliminate escalation risk entirely.

Conditional Mitigation

- Weak external actors + high IWT concern: 60% high risk
- Moderate external actors: 22.22%

Insight:
External actors significantly dampen escalation pressures under conditions of heightened IWT concern.

Taken together, these findings indicate that system modifiers interact asymmetrically within the escalation framework. Destabilizing factors such as the IWT introduce additional pathways for crisis emergence by expanding the domain of conflict beyond conventional military issues. External actors, in contrast, operate as conditional stabilizers that can moderate the intensity and trajectory of escalation but cannot fully neutralize underlying drivers. The relationship between these variables is therefore best understood as one of constrained mitigation: external actors reduce the probability and severity of escalation, but their effectiveness is bounded by the structural and emerging drivers that generate conflict pressures in the first place.

System Interaction

Destabilizer:

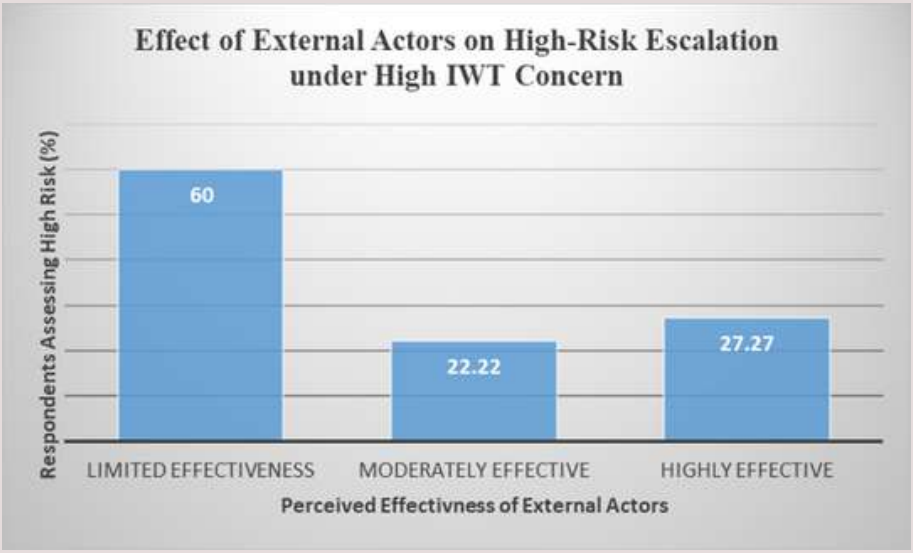
IWT escalation concern

Stabilizer:

External mediation

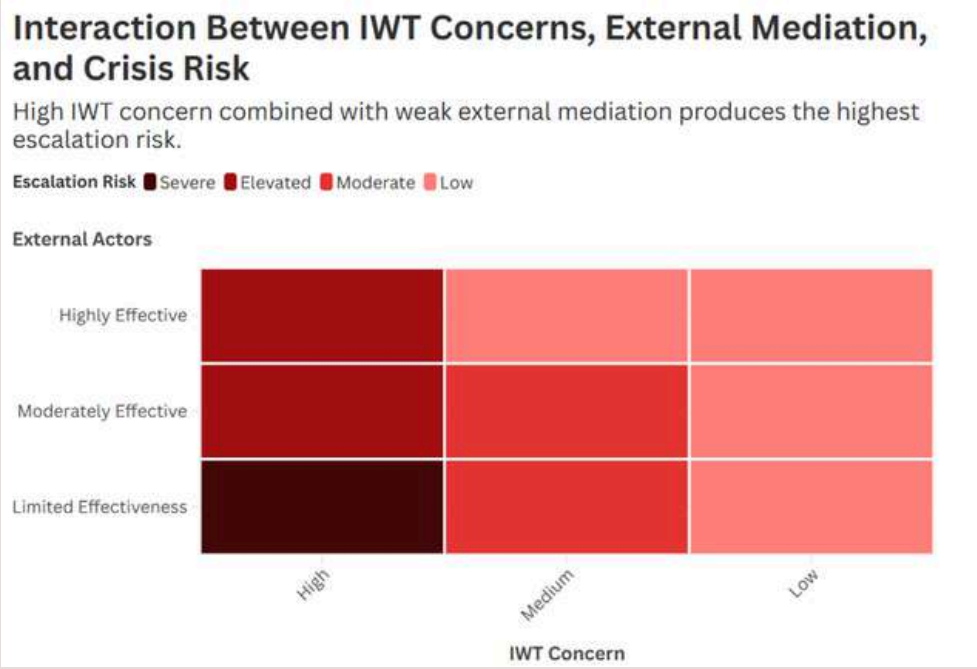
Interpretation:

Crisis outcomes depend on the balance between competing systemic pressures.



This interaction highlights a broader systemic dynamic in South Asia, where crisis stability is not determined by the presence of stabilizing mechanisms alone, but by the balance between competing pressures.

As new domains of contestation such as water security gain prominence, the capacity of traditional stabilizers to manage escalation may become increasingly limited, reinforcing the need to view deterrence and crisis management as components of a multi-domain strategic system rather than as isolated processes.



5.8 Strategic Outlook: Future Drivers of Stability and Instability in South Asia

To assess how experts conceptualize the future trajectory of strategic stability in South Asia, respondents were asked an open-ended question regarding the single most important factor likely to shape the regional strategic environment over the next three to five years. The responses were analyzed through thematic coding and grouped into broader analytical categories reflecting recurring strategic concerns. This qualitative assessment complements the preceding quantitative findings by identifying not only the dominant drivers of instability, but also how the strategic community interprets the interaction between emerging pressures shaping future crisis dynamics.

The results reveal a strong concentration around emerging technologies and military modernization as the principal factors expected to shape strategic stability in the near term. More than half of all coded responses (50.85 percent) identified developments related to AI, cyber capabilities, ISR systems, autonomous platforms, drones, missile defense systems, and broader military-technological integration as the primary drivers of future instability.

Respondents repeatedly emphasized that the integration of these technologies into conventional and nuclear force postures is compressing decision-making timelines, increasing escalation ambiguity, and complicating deterrence management in ways that differ fundamentally from earlier phases of India-Pakistan rivalry.

Importantly, the responses did not portray technological change as an isolated variable. Rather, experts consistently linked emerging technologies with operational uncertainty, doctrinal shifts, and difficulties in crisis signaling. Several respondents highlighted concerns regarding AI-enabled ISR, autonomous systems, cyber vulnerabilities, and real-time surveillance capabilities that reduce leaders' time to interpret events and respond during crises. Others emphasized that the growing overlap between conventional and nuclear domains is making escalation pathways increasingly ambiguous, thereby increasing the risk of miscalculation under conditions of heightened political tension.

Political and ideological factors emerged as the second most significant category, accounting for 18.64 percent of responses. These responses primarily focused on the rise of populism, right-wing nationalism, ideological radicalization, and increasingly risk-prone political behavior in India.

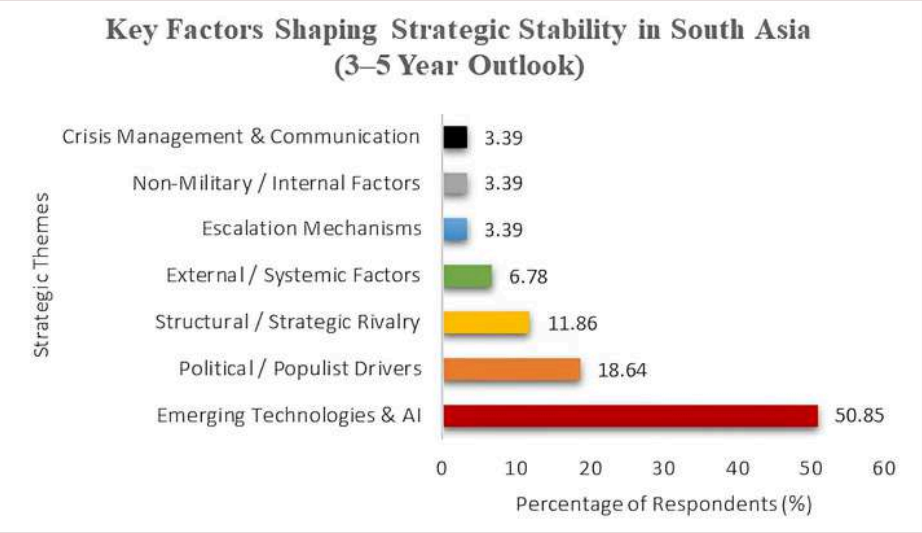
Respondents viewed domestic political pressures not merely as background conditions, but as active escalation amplifiers capable of encouraging more assertive military postures, reducing signaling flexibility, and increasing the likelihood of coercive crisis behavior. In this sense, political dynamics were perceived as interacting with technological developments to create a more volatile strategic environment.

Traditional structural drivers – including the Kashmir dispute, deterrence rivalry, and the broader India-Pakistan strategic

rivalry – accounted for 11.86 percent of coded responses. While respondents continued to recognize these factors as foundational sources of instability, their comparatively lower frequency suggests an important shift in expert perceptions.

The findings indicate that strategic stability is no longer viewed primarily through the lens of static nuclear deterrence or territorial rivalry alone. Instead, enduring structural disputes are increasingly understood as operating within a wider ecosystem shaped by technological acceleration, political volatility, and multi-domain competition.

A smaller but analytically important set of responses highlighted external and systemic factors, including the role of major powers, changing alliance structures, and broader geopolitical competition involving China and the United States. Other responses pointed toward non-military drivers such as climate change, water security, economic instability, and hybrid warfare. Although these categories appeared less frequently, they reinforce the broader finding that respondents increasingly perceive instability as extending beyond conventional military domains into wider systemic and non-traditional areas of competition.



Taken together, the open-ended responses reveal a significant evolution in how strategic stability is conceptualized within the regional strategic community. Rather than viewing stability as a relatively fixed balance maintained through traditional deterrence mechanisms, respondents increasingly describe South Asia as a technologically accelerated, politically amplified, and multi-domain escalation environment. The dominant concern is not simply the existence of military competition, but the interaction between emerging technologies, ideological polarization, compressed crisis timelines, and ambiguous escalation pathways that collectively reduce predictability and complicate crisis management.

In this sense, the findings suggest that the future of strategic stability in South Asia will depend less on numerical force balances alone and more on the ability of regional actors to manage escalation under conditions of growing technological complexity, operational ambiguity, and political volatility.

Technological Dominance

Key Finding

50.85% of respondents identified:

1. AI
2. Cyber capabilities
3. ISR systems
4. Autonomous technologies
5. Military modernization
6. As the primary future drivers of instability.

Insight:

Technological acceleration now dominates strategic perceptions regarding future crisis instability in South Asia.

Strategic Synthesis

Core Interpretation

Respondents increasingly conceptualize South Asian strategic stability as a:
Technologically accelerated,
Politically amplified,
And multi-domain escalation environment.

Conclusion:

Future instability is expected to emerge from the interaction of technological, political, strategic, and non-military pressures rather than from any single isolated factor.

6. STRATEGIC SYNTHESIS: STRUCTURAL BASELINE, TECHNOLOGICAL ACCELERATION, AND CONDITIONAL STABILITY

The findings of this study support a model of crisis dynamics in South Asia defined by a structural baseline of instability combined with multi-domain drivers and asymmetrically effective stabilizers. At its core, the Jammu and Kashmir dispute remains the enduring structural driver of conflict. It sustains a persistent level of tension, embeds crisis recurrence in the bilateral relationship, and defines the geographic and political locus within which escalation unfolds. This structural condition does not by itself determine when or how crises escalate, but it ensures that escalation remains a latent and recurring possibility.

At the same time, the findings indicate an important shift in how strategic instability is increasingly conceptualized by Pakistan's strategic community. While traditional deterrence rivalry and unresolved territorial disputes remain foundational, respondents no longer perceive strategic stability primarily through the lens of static military balances or conventional nuclear deterrence alone. Instead, open-ended responses overwhelmingly emphasize the growing importance of emerging technologies, escalation ambiguity, political radicalization, and multi-domain competition as the defining pressures likely to shape future crisis dynamics. More than half of all coded responses identified technological factors – including AI, ISR systems, cyber capabili-

-ties, autonomous platforms, missile defense systems, and broader military modernization – as the most important determinants of strategic stability over the next three to five yearsThis reflects a broader perception that instability in South Asia is increasingly driven by the interaction between technological acceleration and compressed crisis decision-making environments.

Superimposed on the structural baseline are contemporary drivers, most notably emerging technologies. These technologies introduce new pressures into the system by altering decision-making environments, operational tempos, and informational clarity. Crucially, their effects are not uniform; they are transmitted through specific mechanisms. Among these, reduced decision-time emerges as the most influential pathway, systematically shifting perceptions away from low-risk scenarios toward medium and high-risk outcomes. By contrast, escalation ambiguity exerts a weaker and less consistent effect.

The open-ended responses further reinforce this finding by repeatedly linking ETs to Indian operational ambiguity, signaling difficulties, India's doctrinal instability, and the erosion of clear conventional-nuclear boundaries. Respondents consistently emphasized that technological integration is not destabil-

-izing merely because of capability enhancement, but because it increases the speed, opacity, and complexity of crisis interaction. In this sense, future instability is increasingly viewed as an interaction problem shaped by how technological systems affect escalation management under conditions of uncertainty and political pressure.

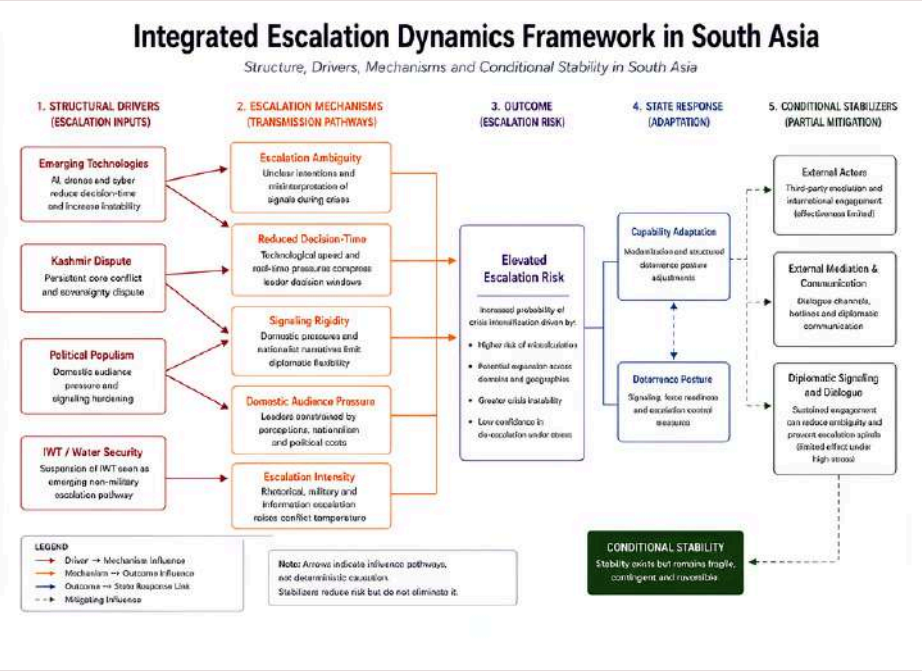
Political context operates as an amplifier within this system. The rise of populism and right-wing politics in India is widely perceived to increase escalation risk, not by directly triggering conflict, but by constraining leadership flexibility and incentivizing assertive behavior. These pressures are transmitted through identifiable escalation channels, with domestic audience pressures constituting the dominant pathway. While political considerations can influence crisis initiation, their most consequential effects occur during crisis evolution, where escalation intensity and signaling rigidity exhibit the strongest association with high-risk outcomes. This indicates that the trajectory of crises is shaped less by their onset than by how they are conducted under conditions of political constraint.

Importantly, the qualitative responses demonstrate that respondents increasingly perceive political and technological pressures as mutually reinforcing rather than independent variables. Populism, ideological rigidity, and risk-prone leadership behavior of India are repeatedly associated with the dangers posed by compressed decision-making timelines, AI-enabled ISR, and escalation ambiguity. This suggests that technological destabilization is viewed as particularly dangerous when operating within politically constrained and ideologically charged environments.

State response and capability form a reactive layer within the system. Respondents broadly recognize improvements in Pakistan's integrated warfare capabilities and support adjustments in deterrence posture. However, these improvements do not eliminate escalation concerns. Instead, perceptions of capability adequacy shape the degree of policy adjustment, with greater support for recalibration emerging where capabilities are viewed as uneven. This positions deterrence posture as a responsive variable, conditioned by both perceived threats and assessments of operational capacity, rather than as an independent driver of stability.

At the system level, the interaction between stabilizing and destabilizing modifiers further defines crisis outcomes. External actors are perceived as capable of moderating escalation, and higher confidence in their effectiveness is associated with lower perceived risk. However, this influence is limited. In parallel, the IWT emerges as an additional non-military driver operating within the system modifier layer, expanding the domain of contestation into water security. Higher levels of concern regarding the IWT are consistently associated with higher perceived crisis risk,

indicating that escalation dynamics are no longer confined to conventional military domains. The qualitative findings reinforce this broader expansion of instability into non-traditional and systemic domains. Although less dominant than technological concerns, respondents identified climate change, water insecurity, economic fragility, external geopolitical competition, and changing major-power alignments as additional pressures likely to shape future strategic stability in the region. These responses suggest that the strategic environment is increasingly viewed as a layered and interconnected system in which military, political, technological, and non-military variables interact simultaneously.



The interaction between these modifiers reveals a clear asymmetry. Destabilizing pressures – particularly technological change and the expansion of conflict domains such as water – outpace the mitigating capacity of stabilizing mechanisms. External actors can dampen escalation pressures, but they do not eliminate them. Even under conditions of perceived high effectiveness of third-party mediation, escalation risks remain elevated. This indicates that stabilizers operate under structural and systemic constraints, limiting their ability to fully contain escalation dynamics.

Taken together, these findings support a model of conditional stability. Deterrence in South Asia remains intact, but it operates within a more complex and volatile environment characterized by interacting domains and differentiated pathways to escalation.

The system is anchored in a persistent structural dispute, accelerated by technological change, amplified by political dynamics, and only partially constrained by stabilizing mechanisms.

The strategic implication is that managing escalation in South Asia requires a shift from single-domain, capability-centric approaches toward a multi-domain framework that accounts for how different pressures interact. Policies focused solely on military balance are unlikely to be sufficient in an environment where escalation can be driven by decision-time compression, domestic political incentives, and non-military domains such as water security. While external actors can play a role in crisis management, their influence should be understood as supplementary rather than decisive.

In sum, the South Asian strategic environment is transitioning from a relatively contained deterrence system to one defined by structural persistence, technological acceleration, political amplification, and constrained stabilization. Understanding and managing escalation within this system requires an integrated analytical approach that recognizes both the hierarchy of drivers and the interaction between technological, political, strategic, and non-military pressures shaping future crisis dynamics.

7. KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Enduring structural instability:**
- The Jammu & Kashmir dispute continues to anchor crisis dynamics amd function as a nuclear flashpoint, ensuring that escalation risk remains persistent rather than episodic.

2. Shift to multi-domain escalation:
- Crisis dynamics are no longer confined to conventional military interactions; technological and non-military domains are now integral to escalation pathways.

3. Technology as the primary driver:
- Emerging technologies (AI, cyber, ISR, autonomy) are widely perceived as destabilizing, fundamentally altering deterrence dynamics.

4. Decision-time compression as the critical mechanism:
- The most significant destabilizing effect of technology is reduced decision-making time, increasing the likelihood of rapid and uncontrolled escalation.

5. Uneven impact of mechanisms:
- Time compression exerts a stronger influence on escalation risk than ambiguity, indicating differentiated pathways of technological destabilization.

6. Political context as an escalation amplifier:
- Populism and domestic political pressures do not initiate crises but significantly intensify escalation once crises begin.

7. Dominance of domestic audience pressures:
- Political incentives constrain leadership flexibility, pushing decision-makers toward assertive and less reversible actions during crises.

8. Escalation driven during crisis evolution:
- The highest escalation risks emerge during crisis conduct – particularly through increased intensity and signaling rigidity – rather than at initiation.

9. Adaptive but insufficient state response:
- While deterrence posture and integrated capabilities are evolving, they are not fully aligned with emerging multi-domain threats.

10. Capability perceptions shape policy preferences:
- Confidence in capabilities leads to incremental adjustments, while perceived gaps drive support for more substantial recalibration.

11. Limited stabilizing role of external actors:

- Third-party mediation can reduce escalation risk but cannot eliminate it, operating under structural and systemic constraints.

12. Emergence of water as an escalation domain:

- The IWT introduces a new non-military pathway for conflict, expanding the escalation framework.

13. Asymmetry between drivers and stabilizers:

- Destabilizing pressures – technological, political, and environmental – consistently outweigh stabilizing mechanisms.

14. Interaction-driven escalation dynamics:

- Crisis outcomes are shaped by the interaction of multiple variables rather than any single factor.

15. Conditional nature of stability:

- Deterrence remains intact but operates under increasing strain, producing a system of conditional rather than assured stability.

South Asia's deterrence environment is transitioning from a relatively stable system to a multi-domain, interaction-driven framework in which escalation risks are increasing and stabilizing mechanisms are only partially effective.

8. EXPERT COMMENTARY SECTION

To complement the quantitative findings of the survey, a series of expert commentaries were incorporated to provide deeper strategic, operational, and policy-oriented perspectives on the evolving deterrence environment in South Asia. The contributors – comprising scholars, practitioners, diplomats, and strategic analysts – offer qualitative insights into the interaction between technological change, political dynamics, deterrence stability, and crisis management mechanisms in the aftermath of the May 2025 crisis. While the survey findings identify broader patterns and perceptions within the strategic community, the expert commentaries provide interpretive depth by contextualizing these trends within operational realities and evolving geopolitical dynamics.

Question 1: How does the Jammu and Kashmir dispute continue to shape crisis-driven interactions between India and Pakistan, and what are its implications for peace and stability in South Asia?

Ambassador Ali Sarwar Naqvi
ED CISS, Islamabad

The Jammu and Kashmir dispute has bedeviled Pakistan-India relations ever since the formation of the two states. It pertains to the ascertaining of the aspirations of the nearly one million Kashmiris regarding the accession of their state to either of the two countries. While India claims that the Maharaja of Kashmir signed the Instrument of Accession and the State has already acceded to India. Pakistan maintains that this act is not in accordance with the provision of United Nations Security Council Resolutions in this regard. There have been three wars between Pakistan and India, in 1948, 1965, and 1971, and numerous crisis situations due to Indian refusal to hold a plebiscite to determine the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

This problem has, resultantly, shaped the bilateral relations between the two states. In subsequent years, the problem developed a nuclear dimension, as India, followed by Pakistan, went nuclear in 1998.

The implications for peace and stability in South Asia are very worrisome. Unless the Kashmir issue is resolved in a manner that is in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmiri people, and India continues to maintain its intransigence, Pakistan is bound to reserve the right to demand the settlement of the Kashmir issue in a fair and equitable manner. This makes the situation of the region very precarious and likely to be disturbed in a manner that peace and stability is severely jeopardized.

Dr. Iftikhar Ali
Chairperson, KIU

The Jammu and Kashmir dispute remains the central fault line shaping crisis-driven interactions between India and Pakistan, sustaining a pattern of recurrent escalation challenging deterrence in South Asia. Rooted in the contested legacy of the Partition of British India, the dispute has produced multiple wars and persistent militarization along the Line of Control. Crises such as the Kargil War (1999), Twin-Peak Crisis (2001-02), the Pulwama-Balakot Crisis (2019) and Pahalgam Crisis (2025) illustrate how localized incidents, whether militant attacks or border skirmishes, can rapidly escalate into broader military confrontations.

Kashmir's salience is amplified by its linkage to national identity, domestic politics, and competing sovereignty claims. For India, it is framed as an issue of territorial integrity and counterterrorism; for Pakistan, as a question of self-determination and international legitimacy. This divergence entrenches zero-sum perceptions, limiting diplomatic flexibility and sustaining a security dilemma. The presence of nuclear weapons with acquisition of emerging technologies on both sides adds a paradoxical layer: while nuclear deterrence reduces the likelihood of full-scale war, it arguably enables lower-intensity conflicts under a perceived "nuclear umbrella" adds to stability-instability paradox.

The implications for regional peace and stability are significant. Recurrent crises erode trust, disrupt economic cooperation, and divert resources from development. They also heighten risks of miscalculation, especially in an environment of compressed decision-making and media-driven nationalism. Without sustained dialogue, confidence-building measures, and progress on the political status of Kashmir, the dispute will continue to act as a catalyst for instability in South Asia, constraining prospects for durable peace.

Dr. Bilal Zubair
Director Research, CISS

At the center of South Asia Crisis Instability lies the unresolved Jammu and Kashmir dispute. Pakistan has an objective and clear position that peace and stability in South Asia is not possible until the resolution of the unresolved political disputes, with Kashmir being the central issue. The recurring pattern of conflict began with the Indian-Pakistani War of 1948; the 1965 war was fought on the Kashmir front. India-Pakistan standoff of 2001-02, the 2016 crisis, and the 2019 Balakot Crisis, followed by four days conflict in May 2025, show a crisis-driven interaction which reinforces the centrality of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute. India's intent to use false flag operations to undermine the indigenous Kashmiri struggle against Indian occupation would neither deter Pakistan from responding to any Indian offense, nor it would normalize the use of force, to destabilize the delicate strategic stability in South Asia. The just resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir issue enshrined in the UN resolution is the only way forward to attain lasting peace and stability in the region.

Mobeen Jafar Mir
Research Officer, CISS

The Jammu and Kashmir dispute is a primary cause of tensions between Pakistan and India. The issue continues to generate never-ending political tensions, military standoffs, and escalation risks between two nuclear-armed states. In this complex environment, even small incidents like cross-border firing, militant actions, or unilateral policy moves can quickly turn into bigger crises because of deep mistrust and conflicting national views on the dispute, where Pakistan sees Kashmir as an issue of the Kashmiri people's right to self-determination under UN resolutions, while India rejects this position and maintains its illegal control over the region with force. India's evolving military concepts, often associated with the "Cold Start" doctrine, are an attempt to enable limited conventional warfare under a nuclear overhang. Combined with assertive nationalist rhetoric under the leadership of Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party, particularly after the 2019

unilateral constitutional changes in Kashmir, this approach is seen as lowering the threshold for conflict and increasing escalation risks. There should be no space for conventional warfare under a nuclear umbrella, as such thinking is inherently destabilizing and heightens the danger of rapid escalation between nuclear-armed states.

Emerging technologies further aggravate these dangers. Precision-strike systems, drones, satellite surveillance, and cyber capabilities significantly reduce decision-making time and compress space for diplomatic de-escalation. During crises, this accelerates pressure for rapid responses, increasing the risk of misinterpretation, miscalculation, and unintended escalation, including potential nuclear pathways if deterrence stability is undermined.

India's post-2019 legal and constitutional measures have undermined Kashmiri autonomy and the principle of self-determination, weakening internationally recognized legal commitments associated with the Kashmir dispute, making it an enduring and highly dangerous nuclear flashpoint in South Asia.

Question 2: How might the rise of populism and right-wing politics in India influence crisis escalation dynamics in South Asia?

Asma Shakir Khawaja
ED CISS, AJK

The ascendancy of right-wing populism in India has fundamentally altered regional security, shifting South Asian crisis management from traditional institutional de-escalation toward an emotionally charged, leader-centric model. The intersection of populism and foreign policy is best understood through the lens of "mediated populism," where political leaders utilize digital platforms to bypass traditional diplomatic channels and directly mobilize public sentiment. The Indian government frames regional conflicts not merely as territorial or strategic disputes, but as existential, moral crusades by employing the "thick ideology," of Hindutva. Indian foreign policy is no longer an autonomous state function but an extension of the "permanent campaign trail."

By leveraging the "post-truth" digital ecosystem, contemporary Indian leadership mobilizes public sentiment through ethno nationalist narratives, framing geopolitical disputes as "civilizational restorations." This aligns with Carl Schmitt's political theology, where the definition of the "enemy" is essential to consolidating internal unity.

This leads to the commitment trap through creating a domestic audience that expects aggressive, decisive military action, thereby narrowing the policy space for leaders to pursue de-escalation however, not to forget that the same leadership is seeking political advantages through aggressive policy postures.

This dynamic fosters what "Power Transition Theory," warns is a recipe for regional volatility. As majoritarian preferences are institutionalized, the "thick ideology" of Hyper Hindu nationalism renders any rational choice increasingly difficult, as they are framed not as strategic adjustments but as existential surrenders. In this environment, social media serves as a force multiplier for nationalistic fervor, forcing leaders into rapid, aggressive postures to satisfy a public mobilized by fear for domestic political gains in first place.

When foreign policy is hostage to the performative demands of a mass base, crisis escalation becomes a rational, albeit dangerous, tool for maintaining domestic hegemony. The result is a more brittle for South Asian security architecture, where the logic of deterrence is frequently superseded by the India's political imperatives of mass mobilization, narrative control, miscalculated escalation choices, exaggerated image of the strength of Indian military, flawed understandings of the geopolitical realities, and epistemological blunders while estimating Pakistan's capabilities and political will.

Abdul Moiz Khan
Research Officer, CISS

The rise of populism and right-wing politics in India has significantly altered the dynamics of crisis behavior in South Asia by increasing the likelihood of risk-prone decision-making under conditions of political and strategic competition. Drawing from Prospect Theory, leaders operating within highly nationalistic political environments are more likely to adopt aggressive and escalatory policies when they perceive themselves to be confronting political, reputational, or strategic losses. In the Indian context, the growing dominance of majoritarian nationalism and populist political narratives has increasingly tied domestic political legitimacy to demonstrations of resolve, military assertiveness, and coercive signaling against Pakistan. This environment encourages crisis behavior in which escalation is viewed not solely through strategic calculations, but also through domestic political incentives.

The belief that India can create coercive space below the nuclear threshold through limited strikes, punitive actions, or technological superiority reinforces risk acceptance within segments of the Indian strategic and political elite. Such thinking is particularly dangerous because it may produce confidence in escalation control while underestimating Pakistan's deterrence posture and response thresholds.

As a result, crises become more vulnerable to rapid escalation driven by misperception, signaling rigidity, and political pressure to sustain assertive postures. In a technologically compressed environment, these dynamics reduce opportunities for restraint and increase the danger of miscalculation between two nuclear-armed states.

Question 3: How should Pakistan calibrate its long-term deterrence policy in response to India's limited war doctrine after the May 2025 crisis, and what implications does this have for future crisis behavior and escalation dynamics in the region?

Dr. Zafar Khan
ED, BTTN

Since India has been deepening strategic partnerships with leading powers, such as the United States, Russia, France, and Israel, it has incentivized India to develop advanced conventional and nuclear forces, bolstered by sophisticated delivery systems to a greater extent than ever before. This, in turn, provides India with the dangerous confidence for preventive limited strikes, aggression, and escalation dominance without even realizing how such hubris with escalation dominance may turn India into an escalation trap, especially when it confronts a nuclear Pakistan that possesses credible nuclear forces with reliable delivery systems, inflicting a great amount of damage to India. India is a target-rich country for Pakistan, which can hit those targets with speed and pinpoint accuracy.

That being noted, Pakistan should continue to maintain Full-Spectrum Deterrence, which primarily falls within the ambit of Credible Minimum Deterrence, to keep deterring India at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. With such a flexible response and a graduated deterrence strategy, Pakistan should continue to fill the deterrence gaps that India has sought to exploit.

It should continue to deliver deterrence signals from time to time so that the adversary is convinced that Pakistan would retaliate effectively should India attempt to preempt Pakistan under any false pretext. Having credible deterrent forces in the multi-prong domains, India would think many times before striking a nuclear Pakistan. Pakistan's credible nuclear deterrence is working in the background of every crisis between the South Asian rivals, thereby preventing and deterring India from both large-scale and limited strikes against Pakistan.

Dr. Rabia Akhtar
Dean Social Sciences, UOL

Pakistan should calibrate its long-term deterrence policy by preserving credible full-spectrum deterrence while avoiding reactive, arms-race driven choices that India wants Pakistan to make. The May 2025 crisis reaffirmed that India's limited war doctrine seeks to create space for calibrated military action under the nuclear overhang. Pakistan's response, therefore, must deny that space without lowering its own nuclear thresholds or allowing deterrence to become hostage to crisis-time signaling.

The priority, therefore, should be a balanced mix of conventional readiness, resilient command and control, integrated air and missile defense, credible second-strike capability, and tighter control over how signals are generated, conveyed, and consumed during crises. Deterrence today is not only about capability; it is also about clarity, survivability, and controlled communication. Pakistan must ensure that India does not misread restraint as weakness, but also that resolve is not conveyed in ways that generate unnecessary escalation pressure.

For future crises, the central risk is compression of decision-making time, amplified by emerging technologies, disinformation, and domestic political incentives in India. This may produce faster escalation cycles and fewer opportunities for diplomatic off-ramps. Pakistan's deterrence policy should therefore combine firmness with crisis-management mechanisms, backchannel communication, and international signaling that reinforces strategic stability. The objective should be simple: deny India the illusion of a cost-free limited war while keeping escalation control firmly in view.

Prof Dr Syed Shahid Hussain Bukhari
Professor, BZU Multan

Let's start with Abraham Maslow's concept of human needs where 'Security' is known as the first and foremost human need. Survival has been the major objective of every human conduct; therefore, human created the institution of state that may provide them security and ensure their survival. The Westphalian framework for international relations acknowledges the sovereign right of states to exist, survive, and remain integrated. However, Pakistan's right to exist was violated by India against the established rules of international law on May 07, 2025 through unlawful intervention in Pakistan when India launched unprovoked attacks on Pakistan through the so-called 'Operation Sindoor'.

The civil-military cohesion was the corner-stone of Pakistan's strategic planning where cohesion on all levels of strategic planning from total strategy to operational strategy out-smarted the adversary. Indian offensive was based on miscalculated superiority complex against Pakistan where Indians thought themselves as the deserved regional hegemon and considered themselves as regional sheriffs. The self-proclaimed sense of superiority by Indian political and strategic elite required such a response which may dilute the false sense of superiority in Indian minds.

Simultaneously, Pakistan secured its economic-security by successfully concluding the required economic-negotiations with IMF. Moreover, security arrangements at intra-state level were beefed-up to avoid any subversion by non-state actors backed by India. Strategically, Pakistan moved its strategic assets at operational level and ensured preparation for a disproportionate response for restoring deterrence. Given the strategic shock to India on May 07, it was predictable that India will try more offensives to restore its politico-strategic prestige. In this pursuit, India launched missile attacks on May 10, 2025 on Pakistan's air bases in search for destroying Pakistan's air-defense assets as trophy. As Pakistan was already expecting such aggression by India, Pakistan had already created and won justification to respond disproportionately against Indian aggression. Pakistan launched 'Operation Bunyanum Marsoos' using a combination of its missile force and fighter jets that successfully caused severe damage to Indian military assets including S-400 defense shields. While responding to Indian aggression, Pakistan maintained respect for International Law of War and did not attack any civilian instance and focused only on counter-force targeting.

Preferring counter-force targeting over counter-value targets enhanced the legitimacy of its operations against India and helped cater international support. Pakistan's patience coupled with diplomatic efforts and simultaneous preparation for counter-offensive strategy compelled international community to agree with Pakistan's perspective. In this context, Marka-e-Haq proved to be an apt strategy for ensuring Pakistan's security against Indian obsession of superiority and limited war doctrines.

Question 4: In the aftermath of May 2025 crisis, how do emerging technologies affect deterrence stability in South Asia, and how well did Pakistan's integrated warfare capabilities have evolved since the crisis?

Brig. Dr. Zahir Haider Kazmi
Advisor Arms Control, SPD

The May 2025 crisis confirmed that emerging and disruptive technologies in South Asia are no longer merely force multipliers; they are escalation multipliers. AI-enabled ISR, precision strike systems, cyber-electronic effects, autonomous platforms, and dual-capable delivery systems compress decision-time, blur conventional-nuclear thresholds, and intensify what I have elsewhere described as "crisis by confusion." The BrahMos cruise missile problem remains the clearest warning: in South Asia's compressed geography, an incoming dual-capable missile is judged less by declared intent than by worst-case possibility.

Yet Operation Bunyanum Marsoos also demonstrated that technology need not make crises uncontrollable. Pakistan's response reflected growing proficiency in integrated multi-domain warfare: ISR fusion, precision engagement, electronic warfare, cyber support, calibrated targeting, and strategic communication were employed in a manner that combined operational effectiveness with escalation management. Besides achieving effect, the significance of Pakistan's response lay in controlling the meaning, scope, and tempo of conflict under the nuclear shadow.

The principal lesson since May 2025 is that deterrence stability depends less on the possession of advanced systems alone than on their disciplined integration under political control.

Pakistan's capability evolution has therefore been most consequential where multi-domain tools are tied to survivable command-and-control, meaningful human judgment, responsible innovation, Full Spectrum Deterrence, and strategic restraint.

In South Asia, the decisive advantage will not belong to the side that automates escalation fastest, but to the side that integrates speed with restraint, technology with signaling clarity, and military capability with unyielding political control.

Dr Rubina Waseem
Associate Professor, CIPS

The May 2025 crisis brought to light the rate at which new technologies are changing deterrence in South Asia. These categories of tools as AI enabled decision support, cyber capabilities, space-based surveillance, and open-source intelligence have contributed to real-time awareness and responsiveness. Simultaneously, they too have made the crises more vulnerable, by reducing the time of making decisions and increasing the chances of misinterpretation, especially in the cyber and information space where intent can be easily misconstrued.

Pakistan's reaction has continued to refine its integrated warfare concept that integrates conventional military capabilities with cyber, electronic and information capabilities in a more coordinated fashion. A very noticeable shift towards network-based operation where the pace of data integration, precision in targeting and efficiency in controlling the narrative can be utilized to alter the results both in the information space and battlefield. This is an attempt to work efficiently below the nuclear threshold and keeping the escalation at check.

Regardless of these changes, the posture of Pakistan is still informed by credible minimum deterrence and there is an explicit focus on stability with 'Quid Pro Quo Plus' response, as opposed to competition. The embrace of new technologies is thus calculated and defensive in kind. Their increased presence however, points out the necessity to provide realistic confidence-building options and communication means in the region to reduce the risks and to create a strategic level of balance.

According to the post-crisis pathway, the stability of deterrence in South Asia is increasingly becoming subject to the manner in which the technological asymmetries are addressed and how the normative structures governing the emergent areas are designed. They have the potential to overcome traditional deterrence logics due to their potential to cause fear combined with their speed, threat of cross-domain escalation and their ability to instill strategic signaling. Therefore, restraint emphasis, doctrinal definition, and institutionalized discourse will be an important factor in achieving strategic stability in a more technology-driven security environment.

Dr Tahir Mahmood Azad
ED, London Dialogue

The May 2025 crisis, though testing, proved to be a crucible from which Pakistan emerged with a markedly strengthened and more coherent military posture. Rather than exposing vulnerabilities, the episode validated years of deliberate investment in integrated warfare capabilities and accelerated the institutionalization of Pakistan's multi-domain defense architecture across all three services.

Pakistan’s ground forces demonstrated an enhanced capacity for precision fires, networked battlefield management, and rapid force projection. The integration of Chinese-origin Beidou satellite navigation into Pakistan's weapons guidance architecture has been particularly consequential, affording its missile and drone systems a level of precision independence no longer contingent on systems vulnerable to adversarial interference. This marks a strategic maturation: Pakistan now operates within a reliable, sovereign-aligned navigation ecosystem that meaningfully enhances the credibility of its deterrence posture.

The Pakistan Air Force has similarly consolidated its capabilities. The JF-17 Thunder programme, developed jointly with China, continues to deliver operationally mature platforms that have been progressively upgraded with advanced avionics, beyond-visual-range engagement systems, and electronic warfare suites.Post-crisis, the PAF demonstrated an ability to operate across contested electromagnetic environments with a degree of operational effectiveness that surprised external observers.

Complementing this, Pakistan's expanding drone inventory, incorporating both surveillance and strike-capable systems, has extended the reach and resilience of its air campaign options well beyond what traditional airpower geometry would suggest.

At sea, the Pakistan Navy has made quiet but substantive strides. Enhanced maritime domain awareness, anti-ship missile capabilities, and the integration of unmanned underwater and surface systems have positioned the Navy as a credible deterrent actor in its own right, capable of complicating Indian naval planning in the Arabian Sea and beyond. Crucially, what May 2025 revealed was not merely the sum of these capabilities but their integration. Pakistan's command and control architecture demonstrated improved coordination across the three services, with electronic warfare, kinetic strikes, cyber operations, and strategic communication functioning with a coherence that reflects institutional learning at the highest level of operational planning.

For deterrence stability in South Asia, this evolution is broadly positive. A Pakistan that is capable, integrated, and confident in its defensive sufficiency is a Pakistan less susceptible to miscalculation and more capable of measured, proportionate signaling. Deterrence functions most reliably when both sides possess credible, survivable capabilities. Pakistan's post-May 2025 trajectory suggests it is consolidating precisely that foundation, contributing to a more stable, if still competitive, strategic equilibrium in the region.

Question 5: How do you assess the role of third-party actors, particularly the United States and China, in preventing escalation between Pakistan and India in the post-May 2025 crisis environment?

Syed Ali Abbas
Research Officer, CISS

The May 2025 crisis demonstrated that South Asia's nuclear dyad lacks the bilateral mechanisms to manage serious escalation independently. Both the United States and China engaged diplomatically during the confrontation, though their approaches and alignment differed in important ways.

Washington's response during the early phase of the crisis was inconsistent. Before the strikes, the Trump administration sent mixed signals, Secretary of State Marco Rubio called for de-escalation, while Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth stated the United States “stood in solidarity” with India and "supports its right to defend itself.” Following Operation Sindoor, the administration issued no condemnation of India’s strikes, and House Speaker Mike Johnson publicly stated that the United States supports India in its fight against terrorism. These positions effectively accepted India’s counterterrorism framing without engaging the broader question of cross-border precision strikes against a nuclear-armed state. It was only as military exchanges escalated that Secretary Rubio intensified diplomatic engagement, eventually brokering the May 10 ceasefire.

China’s engagement was earlier, more sustained, and more consistent with Pakistan’s position. Beijing publicly called for restraint, opposed unilateral military action, and used established diplomatic channels to communicate escalation risks. China’s role during the crisis reflected the depth of its strategic partnership with Pakistan and added meaningful diplomatic weight at a critical moment.

Pakistan's decision to exercise restraint and accept the ceasefire was its own, taken on its own terms, not under external compulsion. Third-party actors filled a structural vacuum, one that exists because no institutionalized crisis communication mechanism between India and Pakistan currently functions. Going forward, Pakistan should work toward formalized multilateral crisis management frameworks, ensuring that future escalation is managed more effectively rather than improvised external intervention.

9. STRATEGIC OUTLOOK: THE FUTURE OF ESCALATION IN SOUTH ASIA

The analysis presented in this study suggests that the trajectory of crisis dynamics in South Asia is shifting toward a more complex and less predictable escalation environment. While the structural foundations of conflict – most notably the Jammu and Kashmir dispute – remain unchanged, the mechanisms through which crises emerge and evolve are undergoing significant transformation. The system is no longer characterized by relatively contained escalation cycles, but by the interaction of multiple pressures operating across technological, political, and non-military domains.

Future crises are likely to be shaped by compressed decision timelines, heightened domestic political pressures in India, and the increasing integration of non-traditional domains such as cyber operations and water disputes. These factors reduce the scope for controlled escalation and increase the probability that localized incidents may expand more rapidly than in the past. As a result, crisis management will become more difficult, and the margin for strategic error will narrow.

A critical shift identified in this study is the transition from a deterrence system that relied on relative predictability to one characterized by interaction-driven instability. Escalation will increasingly depend not on single triggers, but on how multiple variables – technology, political incentives, and systemic pressures – converge in real time.

This creates a more volatile environment in which even limited actions can generate disproportionate consequences. At the same time, existing stabilizing mechanisms appear insufficient to fully counterbalance these emerging pressures. While external actors can play a role in moderating crises, their influence remains constrained, and improvements in military capability do not fully offset the risks introduced by new escalation pathways. This suggests that the burden of crisis management will increasingly fall on internal decision-making processes operating under more demanding conditions.

The central implication for policymakers is that the risk of escalation in South Asia is not necessarily increasing in frequency, but in intensity and unpredictability. The region is entering a phase in which crises are more likely to escalate rapidly and become harder to control once initiated. Managing this environment will require a shift from reactive crisis response toward proactive management of the mechanisms and pathways that drive escalation.

In this context, strategic stability can no longer be understood as the absence of crisis, but as the capacity to manage escalation within a system defined by persistent pressure and multiple interacting risks. The challenge ahead is not to eliminate instability – which remains structurally embedded – but to adapt to a strategic environment in which escalation is faster, broader, and increasingly difficult to contain.

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