MILITARIZED NATIONALISM AND ESCALATION RISKS IN SOUTH ASIA: RETHINKING DETERRENCE STABILITY IN THE INDIA–PAKISTAN CONFLICT OVER KASHMIR

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Abstract

This study examines how militarized nationalism and domestic political pressures in India and Pakistan disrupt classical deterrence theory and contribute to enduring strategic instability in the Kashmir conflict. By focusing on the interplay between ideological performance and crisis behavior, the research aims to critically reassess deterrence logic in a region marked by nuclear capabilities and political populism. The study employs qualitative content analysis and comparative case studies, using NVivo 14 software to analyze political speeches, military doctrines, and media narratives during high-intensity conflict episodes. Official documents, think tank reports, and peer-reviewed academic sources were reviewed to construct an integrated analytical framework grounded in international relations and political psychology. Findings indicate that both states routinely escalate conflict in pursuit of domestic legitimacy, often bypassing rational deterrence frameworks. Strategic signaling is distorted by ideological imperatives, and political leaders face internal constraints that limit their ability to de-escalate. As a result, the risk of miscalculation and uncontrolled escalation remains persistently high despite the presence of nuclear deterrents. This study is applicable to fields such as international relations, South Asian studies, strategic policy, and conflict resolution. It offers practical insight for policymakers, regional analysts, and scholars concerned with deterrence breakdown, nationalism, and inter-state rivalry under nuclear shadow. By integrating political ideology, institutional behavior, and public discourse into the study of deterrence, this research provides a new framework for understanding instability in South Asia. It advances existing scholarship by highlighting how domestic narratives of honor and identity can override strategic rationality and undermine peace-building efforts in nuclearized regional conflicts.

A. Introduction

The enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed neighbors in South Asia, remains one of the most dangerous and volatile conflicts in the contemporary international system (Thalpawila, 2022). Nowhere is this tension more palpable than in the contested region of Kashmir, where historical grievances, religious identity, and territorial ambitions converge. While traditional theories of deterrence have long been

used to explain the relative absence of full-scale war since both states acquired nuclear weapons, recent developments suggest that this framework may be increasingly inadequate. The rise of militarized nationalism on both sides introduces volatile variables into an already precarious strategic environment. Understanding how this ideological resurgence affects decision-making and risk tolerance is thus essential to rethinking the assumptions that have shaped security policy in South Asia for over two decades(Yaseen et al., 2016).

South Asia's deterrence stability has often been characterized by a paradox: despite repeated crises—including the Kargil War in 1999, the Mumbai attacks in 2008, and the Balakot airstrikes in 2019—India and Pakistan have managed to avoid full-scale war. This stability has been attributed to mutual nuclear deterrence, communication channels, and international pressure. However, beneath this seemingly rational equilibrium lies a more complex political reality. Domestic political dynamics, such as populism, ideological polarization, and nationalist fervor, increasingly influence strategic posturing in both capitals. The securitization of Kashmir, combined with hyper-nationalist rhetoric, poses growing challenges to crisis management and escalation control, thereby raising important questions about the durability of the so-called "nuclear peace" in South Asia (Qayyum et al., 2021).

The central problem this paper addresses is the growing disconnect between deterrence theory and the real-world behavior of India and Pakistan under conditions of militarized nationalism. Existing literature often treats the two states as unitary rational actors, focusing primarily on capabilities and strategic balances. However, such models neglect the influence of domestic politics, emotional narratives, and ideological commitments that increasingly shape security decisions. As nationalism becomes a political currency for legitimizing state action, there is a heightened risk that leaders may prioritize symbolic victories and political gain over strategic restraint. This shift not only undermines deterrence stability but also increases the probability of misperception, overreaction, and escalation during future crises (Rizki & Muquita, 2023).

While there exists a robust body of work on India–Pakistan deterrence dynamics, few studies incorporate the rising influence of domestic political ideology—particularly nationalism—into their analytical frameworks. Much of the deterrence literature draws from Cold War paradigms that emphasize rationality, cost-benefit calculations, and stable command structures. However, these assumptions appear increasingly tenuous in the current South Asian context, where mass media, political populism, and sectarian identity drive strategic discourse. There remains a significant gap in understanding how such internal pressures reshape the logic of deterrence and complicate escalation management, particularly during crises that unfold rapidly and under public scrutiny(Bashir, 2022).

Moreover, existing research has not adequately interrogated how militarized nationalism creates a feedback loop between domestic political incentives and regional security dynamics. For instance, while India's post-2016 "surgical strikes" and Pakistan's counter-narratives may serve short-term political objectives, they simultaneously alter deterrence signaling and reduce space for diplomatic resolution. The nationalist framing of Kashmir as an existential issue limits the ability of decision-makers to compromise or de-escalate without facing domestic backlash. This paper seeks to fill this gap by examining how ideological narratives, military posturing, and public sentiment interact to increase strategic instability in the region(Babar & Mirza, 2021).

Empirical evidence from the Balakot crisis in 2019 illustrates how nationalist pressures can influence escalation thresholds. Following a suicide bombing in Pulwama, Indian leadership launched an unprecedented airstrike into Pakistani territory, marking a departure from past strategic restraint. Pakistan's military responded with a calibrated counterattack, yet both sides simultaneously engaged in a public relations war aimed at domestic audiences. Nationalist media narratives framed the conflict in binary moral terms, leaving little room for nuanced diplomacy. This crisis, while ultimately contained, revealed the fragility of deterrence when ideological fervor overrides strategic calculation, and when leaders are constrained by the need to appear decisive and patriotic (Das & Cook, 2023).

Further, both Indian and Pakistani military doctrines have evolved in ways that reflect and reinforce nationalist ideologies. India's "Cold Start" doctrine, though officially unacknowledged, suggests a willingness to engage in rapid, limited warfare—an approach that risks triggering Pakistani nuclear thresholds. Conversely, Pakistan's development of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) aims to deter such incursions, but also lowers the threshold for nuclear use. These strategic shifts, embedded within nationalist discourse about defense and sovereignty, have rendered crisis stability more precarious. Nationalism, far from being a background factor, now operates as a strategic determinant with real implications for the escalation ladder (M. N. Khan, 2024).

This paper aims to analyze the interplay between militarized nationalism and deterrence stability in the context of the India–Pakistan conflict over Kashmir. Specifically, it explores how ideological narratives, political incentives, and public opinion shape strategic decision-making and affect the likelihood of escalation during crises. By situating domestic political dynamics within the broader framework of international security studies, the paper seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of deterrence in South Asia—one that goes beyond material capabilities and strategic doctrines to include cultural and ideological factors(Tarapore, 2023b).

Addressing this issue is urgent not only for academic reasons but also for policy formulation and conflict prevention. As both India and Pakistan

experience democratic backsliding and the rise of populist strongmen, the likelihood of politically motivated military action increases. In this volatile context, traditional crisis management mechanisms—such as hotlines, backchannel diplomacy, or third-party mediation—may prove insufficient. International actors and regional stakeholders must therefore reconsider how to promote strategic restraint in a climate where political survival and national honor often override rational deterrence logic. This paper seeks to rethink deterrence stability in South Asia by foregrounding the role of militarized nationalism in shaping strategic behavior between India and Pakistan. It contributes to the scholarly discourse by integrating insights from international relations, political psychology, and security studies. By doing so, it provides a critical reassessment of the viability of nuclear deterrence under conditions where domestic political pressures, ideological narratives, and symbolic politics increasingly dominate the calculus of war and peace in the region.

B. Deterrence Theory and Its Classical Assumptions in South Asia

The concept of deterrence, as developed during the early stages of the Cold War, was primarily designed to rationalize and manage the strategic relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union under the shadow of nuclear annihilation. At its essence, deterrence rests on a simple but powerful premise: adversaries can be dissuaded from initiating conflict if the expected costs of aggression clearly outweigh any potential benefits. This logic presupposes the existence of rational actors who are capable of calculating strategic risks and rewards based on the credible threat of retaliation. The presence of nuclear weapons, particularly those with assured second-strike capabilities, is thought to raise the stakes of conflict to such an extent that both parties would be compelled to avoid escalation. This model has served as the cornerstone of strategic thought in international relations, and has been widely adopted in other geopolitical contexts, including the South Asian subcontinent, where India and Pakistan have developed and maintained nuclear capabilities since the late 1990s(Tarapore, 2023a).

In South Asia, the application of classical deterrence theory gained renewed relevance following the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May 1998. These tests marked a pivotal moment in regional security, formalizing the nuclearization of the India–Pakistan rivalry and fundamentally altering the nature of their military posturing. Since then, analysts have frequently invoked the idea of a "stability–instability paradox" to explain the persistence of low-intensity conflict between the two countries in the absence of large-scale war. According to this framework, the mutual possession of nuclear weapons deters high-intensity conflict while simultaneously creating a permissive environment for limited conventional operations or sub-conventional actions, such as cross-border militant attacks or targeted airstrikes. For instance, Pakistan's alleged reliance on militant

proxies operating in Jammu and Kashmir is interpreted as a strategy designed to exploit this paradox, banking on India's reluctance to escalate for fear of triggering a nuclear response. Conversely, India's surgical strikes in 2016 and its airstrike in Balakot in 2019 signal an effort to redefine thresholds of response within the boundaries of conventional warfare (Mokhtar, 2020).

Despite its explanatory utility, classical deterrence theory exhibits several analytical limitations when transposed onto the political and strategic realities of South Asia. One of its most significant shortcomings is the assumption that states behave as rational and unitary actors. This assumption does not adequately reflect the complex domestic environments within which strategic decisions are made in both India and Pakistan. Political elites in both countries are subject to electoral pressures, media scrutiny, ideological commitments, and institutional rivalries that complicate rational decision-making. In democratic settings—particularly in India—the political calculus of retaliation or restraint is often influenced by public opinion and partisan narratives. Similarly, in Pakistan, the powerful military establishment operates with a significant degree of autonomy and often prioritizes institutional interests over broader national strategy. These domestic dynamics introduce significant deviations from the rational actor model that underpins traditional deterrence theory(Shah & Lala, 2021).

Moreover, classical deterrence places considerable emphasis on material capabilities—such as the size and sophistication of nuclear arsenals, delivery systems, and command and control infrastructure—while underplaying the symbolic, perceptual, and emotional factors that shape strategic behavior. In the context of South Asia, perceptions of threat, intention, and credibility are deeply embedded in historical grievances, national identity, and ideological worldviews. Events are rarely interpreted through a purely strategic lens; rather, they are filtered through nationalist narratives, sensationalist media, and public memory of past conflicts. For instance, military gestures that might be intended as signaling in a Western strategic context may be misread in South Asia as acts of aggression or humiliation, thereby intensifying the pressure on decision-makers to respond forcefully. These interpretive divergences can lead to misperceptions that escalate crises in unpredictable ways, despite the presence of deterrent capabilities on both sides(Prott, 2023).

Historical case studies further demonstrate the inadequacy of classical deterrence assumptions in explaining India–Pakistan crisis behavior. The Kargil War of 1999, which occurred just months after the two countries declared themselves nuclear powers, represents a direct challenge to the logic of nuclear deterrence. The Pakistani military's infiltration into Indian-controlled territory in the Kargil region was based on the belief that India would not risk a conventional military response under the nuclear overhang. However, India's reaction defied that expectation; it mobilized conventional forces, mounted an intense counter-offensive, and achieved a strategic victory

without triggering nuclear escalation. Likewise, the Pulwama–Balakot episode in 2019 revealed how rapidly a terrorist incident could escalate into open military confrontation, including aerial dogfights and the downing of fighter jets, all under the gaze of global media and nationalist publics. These episodes underscore the fragility of strategic stability when deterrence is divorced from its core assumptions about communication, perception, and restraint (Shoib & Yasir Arafat, 2020).

In addition to misperception, the growing influence of nationalism in both India and Pakistan has complicated the operation of deterrence mechanisms. Nationalism often functions as both a legitimizing ideology and a political resource, compelling leaders to adopt more aggressive rhetoric and symbolic postures. In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has increasingly framed military assertiveness as a patriotic imperative, using it to rally electoral support and marginalize dissenting voices(Dar & Deb, 2021). In Pakistan, the military establishment continues to present itself as the ultimate guardian of national sovereignty and Islamic identity, using India as a perpetual external threat to consolidate its political dominance. In such environments, de-escalation is politically costly and often equated with weakness or betrayal. Thus, rather than promoting stability, deterrence may paradoxically incentivize escalation when national honor or ideological identity is perceived to be at stake.

Complicating matters further is the role of media and public opinion in shaping strategic choices. In both countries, conflict coverage is often sensationalized, driven by nationalist fervor and partisan agendas. This creates a political atmosphere in which measured responses are viewed with suspicion, while aggressive posturing is rewarded with public acclaim. Such conditions limit the strategic flexibility of political leaders and increase the likelihood that military decisions will be influenced more by domestic optics than by calculated deterrence logic. As a result, deterrence becomes less about maintaining strategic balance and more about sustaining domestic political legitimacy (Kazi, 2023).

Non-state actors add another layer of complexity that classical deterrence theory is ill-equipped to address. Militant groups operating in and around Kashmir often function with varying degrees of state complicity and autonomy, blurring the line between state and non-state violence. These groups can provoke crises that compel state responses, even when governments may have little control over their actions. The ambiguity of sponsorship and the difficulty of attribution create strategic dilemmas that are not easily resolved within the binary logic of classical deterrence. Moreover, the presence of these actors increases the chances of inadvertent escalation, particularly when provocations are misinterpreted or when retaliatory options are limited by political constraints.

The introduction of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) by Pakistan further destabilizes the strategic balance. Designed to deter Indian

conventional incursions under the Cold Start doctrine, TNWs lower the threshold for nuclear use and introduce unprecedented risks to crisis stability. Their deployment raises critical questions about command and control, survivability, and escalation management in a real-time conflict scenario. India's doctrine of massive retaliation, in response, creates a credibility gap: it threatens overwhelming nuclear force in response to even a limited strike, which may not be politically or strategically feasible. This doctrinal mismatch adds to the ambiguity and volatility of crisis scenarios, rendering the deterrence framework increasingly brittle(Bhat, 2019).

Institutional weaknesses in both countries further erode the foundations of stable deterrence. In Pakistan, civil–military relations are imbalanced, with the military maintaining de facto control over national security and foreign policy. In India, intelligence assessments, decision-making processes, and inter-agency coordination have often been criticized for politicization or opacity. These institutional deficits limit the effectiveness of early warning systems, crisis communication mechanisms, and decision-making clarity—all of which are essential for deterrence to function credibly under pressure. Without reliable feedback loops and robust institutional protocols, the risk of miscalculation or unintended escalation increases dramatically .

The traditional deterrence paradigm, while useful in its time, appears increasingly ill-suited to capture the full spectrum of strategic realities in South Asia. The dynamics of the India–Pakistan rivalry are shaped not only by material capabilities and doctrinal postures, but also by political psychology, ideological contestation, and domestic legitimacy struggles. To understand deterrence in this region, one must move beyond abstract models and engage with the specific political, cultural, and institutional contexts that inform state behavior. A revised framework must incorporate the symbolic and perceptual dimensions of strategic interaction, as well as the mediating role of nationalism, identity, and media.

C. The Rise of Militarized Nationalism in India and Pakistan

Militarized nationalism has emerged as one of the most significant ideational forces shaping security policy and conflict behavior in contemporary South Asia. In both India and Pakistan, this phenomenon reflects a deeper fusion between military identity and nationalist ideology, wherein the armed forces are not only perceived as protectors of the territorial state, but as embodiments of cultural pride, religious legitimacy, and historical mission. Militarized nationalism transcends the traditional concept of national defense and becomes a framework through which political legitimacy, public identity, and strategic decision-making are filtered. In the context of the India–Pakistan rivalry, and particularly the Kashmir dispute, this ideological entrenchment has transformed the nature of escalation, distorted crisis signaling, and constricted the space for compromise and restraint. Understanding the

evolution and function of militarized nationalism in both countries is essential for any meaningful analysis of deterrence failure and strategic instability in the region (Koul & Bansal, 2023).

In the Indian context, the rise of militarized nationalism has been most vividly manifested in the political and rhetorical strategies of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its affiliated ideological ecosystem. Since 2014, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Indian government has consciously cultivated an image of a resolute, assertive, and militarily confident India. This image is not limited to foreign policy but extends deeply into the construction of national identity. Military achievements are celebrated not merely as matters of state security but as demonstrations of civilizational strength and moral superiority. The army is increasingly invoked in political speeches, election campaigns, and media narratives as the living symbol of national honor. Public holidays such as Independence Day and Republic Day are now more militarized in tone and presentation, with greater emphasis on weapon displays, army tributes, and references to external threats, especially Pakistan(Gabel et al., 2022).

This ideological orientation was strongly reinforced during and after the 2016 "surgical strikes" against alleged militant camps across the Line of Control following the Uri attack. The strikes were unprecedented in their public disclosure, as the Indian government and media swiftly framed them as proof of India's new doctrine of preemptive retaliation. What was strategically a limited military operation quickly became a symbolic act of political theater(Raja et al., 2023). Modi and BJP leaders repeatedly referenced the operation during state election campaigns, presenting it as a testament to strong leadership. Similarly, the 2019 Balakot airstrikes, conducted in response to the Pulwama suicide bombing, were projected as a bold and historic assertion of Indian military willpower. These operations were followed by an orchestrated media celebration, popular songs, social media campaigns, and commemorative merchandise. In both cases, military action was converted into a spectacle of nationalist validation, demonstrating the deep entanglement between state violence and political image-making .

Kashmir has occupied a central role in this militarized nationalist vision. Long viewed as a contentious territorial issue, Kashmir has increasingly been transformed into a symbol of national sovereignty and ideological completeness. The abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, which removed Jammu and Kashmir's special constitutional status, was justified not only on legal and administrative grounds, but also as a historical correction aligned with the BJP's majoritarian vision of national unity. The move was celebrated across much of India as the final integration of Kashmir into the Indian union, despite widespread dissent and the imposition of repressive security measures in the region. The act itself, and the public discourse that surrounded it, exemplified how Kashmir has been nationalized as a cause that requires military assertion, administrative force, and ideological certainty. In

this context, compromise or dialogue is no longer seen as pragmatic diplomacy, but as a betrayal of national pride(Chaudhuri, 2019).

In Pakistan, militarized nationalism is deeply embedded within the foundational narrative of the state and is sustained through the institutional dominance of the military in political, economic, and cultural life. Unlike India, where civilian supremacy is constitutionally institutionalized, Pakistan has experienced multiple military regimes and continues to operate under a hybrid civil–military arrangement. The military positions itself not only as the protector of national borders but also as the guardian of Pakistan's Islamic identity and ideological mission. From textbooks to television dramas, the image of the soldier is depicted as a devout, sacrificial figure standing against Hindu aggression and Western interference. This ideological positioning is not incidental but actively constructed and maintained through public institutions, religious education, and national holidays such as Defence Day, which commemorates the army's resistance against India in 1965 (Menon, 2022).

Kashmir, within this framework, is not simply a political dispute or a humanitarian concern. It is portrayed as the incomplete promise of Pakistan's independence, the unfinished business of partition, and the crucible of national honor. The slogan "Kashmir banega Pakistan" (Kashmir will become Pakistan) has been a staple of official rhetoric for decades and is echoed in school curricula, public speeches, and religious sermons. The Pakistani military's strategic calculus is deeply intertwined with this ideological commitment. Even when civilian governments have shown willingness to explore diplomatic avenues with India, the military establishment has often acted to preserve the adversarial status quo (Prott, 2023). The 1999 Kargil conflict, initiated during a period of formal dialogue between Prime Ministers Nawaz Sharif and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, is illustrative of how military objectives driven by nationalist ideology can sabotage peace efforts. More recently, Pakistan's military response to the Balakot airstrikes was framed domestically as a demonstration of resolve and parity, reinforcing the military's claim to moral and strategic leadership.

Both countries have therefore institutionalized a form of strategic culture in which military action is not merely a tool of statecraft, but a test of national resolve and identity. This has significant implications for crisis behavior and decision-making. During moments of tension, leaders are no longer solely calculating risks and benefits in strategic terms. They are also managing nationalist expectations, media narratives, and ideological legacies. This results in what scholars of political psychology might term "audience cost inflation"—a situation in which any perceived sign of restraint or concession becomes politically dangerous. In such contexts, even de-escalatory gestures can be framed as weakness, thereby limiting the maneuverability of policymakers and increasing the probability of escalation spirals(Das & Cook, 2023).

The role of mass media and digital platforms has further intensified this dynamic. In India, mainstream television news channels have become vocal platforms for nationalist rhetoric, often equating criticism of military policy with disloyalty to the nation. Military operations are covered with dramatic graphics, aggressive language, and constant references to revenge and heroism. In Pakistan, state-controlled media and religious commentators routinely glorify the military while depicting India as a hostile, expansionist force. Social media has magnified these trends, with viral hashtags, nationalist memes, and coordinated online campaigns reinforcing binary thinking and emotional polarization. These media ecologies not only reflect but also shape public sentiment, creating an echo chamber in which escalation is applauded and compromise is derided (Sisson & Rose, 2023).

The influence of militarized nationalism on military doctrine is particularly troubling. In India, there is ongoing debate over the operational viability of the Cold Start doctrine, a strategy that envisions rapid and limited strikes into Pakistani territory in response to provocation. Although never officially adopted, the perception that India might implement such a strategy has led Pakistan to adjust its own posture, including the development and potential deployment of tactical nuclear weapons. In Pakistan, military doctrine increasingly incorporates the notion of flexible response, which seeks to deter Indian incursions through early and decisive reaction, potentially including the use of battlefield nuclear arms. These doctrinal shifts are not simply products of strategic innovation; they are deeply shaped by the political imperative to appear uncompromising and ideologically resolute (Nurhidayat nurhidayat, 2023).

The cumulative effect of these developments is a crisis environment in which signaling is distorted, escalation thresholds are lowered, and institutional flexibility is constrained. Deterrence, in its classical sense, relies on the ability of actors to convey clear intentions, calculate consequences, and adjust behavior in response to evolving threats. However, in a political landscape dominated by militarized nationalism, these rational processes are increasingly subverted by emotional imperatives and ideological rigidity. Decisions are no longer evaluated solely through the lens of security and survival, but also through the optics of national honor, political loyalty, and symbolic power.

As the strategic behavior of both India and Pakistan becomes increasingly entangled with ideological performance, the risks of misperception, overreaction, and inadvertent escalation multiply. The next section will analyze how these risks materialize in crisis scenarios, and how the logic of deterrence breaks down in a hyper-politicized environment shaped by the pressures of militarized nationalism, institutional rivalries, and domestic political urgency.

D. Humanitarian Diplomacy, Identity Politics, and Soft Power Projection

Escalation in the India–Pakistan conflict is no longer solely determined by calculations of strategic balance or military advantage. Rather, it is increasingly shaped by a dense interplay of domestic political urgency, ideological constraints, institutional path dependencies, and real-time media amplification (Babar & Mirza, 2021). This complex web of factors creates a highly volatile strategic environment in which decision-makers face immense pressure to act swiftly, assertively, and publicly, often at the expense of nuance, deliberation, or long-term planning. In such a hyper-political context, the risk of misperception, unintended escalation, and failed deterrence grows exponentially. The conventional safeguards of crisis stability—rational signaling, backchannel communication, and strategic restraint—are weakened, if not altogether overridden, by political considerations rooted in nationalism, populism, and performative leadership (Bhat, 2019).

One of the most dangerous elements in this environment is the distortion of strategic communication. Deterrence stability relies fundamentally on the ability of each side to credibly signal its intentions, capabilities, and red lines. However, when these signals are shaped primarily for domestic audiences rather than for the adversary, they lose clarity and may be misinterpreted as escalatory or insincere. For instance, a government might take a bold military action to reinforce its domestic political image without intending to provoke further escalation. Yet the adversary, receiving that signal outside the context of domestic politics, may interpret it as a shift in doctrine or a prelude to broader conflict. In this way, actions intended to demonstrate strength at home can provoke dangerous miscalculations abroad (Kazi, 2023).

This was evident in the 2019 Pulwama–Balakot crisis, where domestic political incentives in both India and Pakistan played a central role in shaping each country's response. Following the suicide bombing in Pulwama, which killed over forty Indian paramilitary personnel, public outrage in India reached a fever pitch. Nationalist media outlets demanded immediate retaliation, and opposition parties dared the government to prove its strength. In the midst of a heated election campaign, Prime Minister Modi responded with a publicly acknowledged airstrike on Balakot, targeting what India claimed was a terrorist training camp. While India presented the action as a limited and precise counterterrorism measure, the public framing of the operation as a demonstration of military supremacy conveyed a far more aggressive message to external observers, particularly the Pakistani military.

Pakistan's response was similarly shaped by public image considerations. The Pakistan Air Force's retaliatory operation, which included the downing of an Indian fighter jet and the capture of its pilot, was presented not only as a tactical success but as a moral and symbolic victory. The pilot was later returned to India as a gesture of de-escalation, but only after Pakistan had successfully asserted its ability to respond proportionately. Throughout

this exchange, strategic decisions were tightly coupled with the need to manage public expectations and affirm state legitimacy. Neither side could afford to appear weak, yet neither side wanted a full-scale war. This balancing act—between escalation for domestic credibility and restraint for strategic stability—is inherently unstable, especially when mediated through emotional public discourse and rapid information cycles (Hassan, 2023).

The growing personalization of leadership in both India and Pakistan has further heightened escalation risks. In India, Prime Minister Modi's image as a decisive and muscular leader is closely tied to his handling of national security. Any act of restraint in the face of provocation is vulnerable to being portrayed by political rivals and media pundits as appeasement. In Pakistan, although civilian leaders are less dominant in security matters, the military's institutional identity depends on the perpetuation of an adversarial relationship with India. In both cases, political or institutional legitimacy is staked upon projecting strength. This dynamic generates an incentive structure in which measured responses may be politically untenable, and escalatory moves are often rewarded with public approval and political capital.

In this political context, even traditional crisis management tools are rendered less effective. Backchannel diplomacy, third-party mediation, and hotline communication depend on a degree of trust, confidentiality, and willingness to compromise—all of which are eroded in a climate of nationalist polarization. When leaders are accountable not only to bureaucratic advisors or military strategists, but also to emotionally mobilized publics, their freedom to de-escalate is significantly constrained. This problem is compounded by the speed of modern information flows. In previous eras, crisis actors had hours or even days to assess intentions and respond. Today, social media and satellite coverage make crises visible in real time, requiring immediate action and public explanation. Strategic patience has become a political liability(Ahmad Dar et al., 2023).

The presence of non-state actors operating in the gray zone between state control and autonomous violence adds yet another layer of risk. Groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba or Jaish-e-Mohammed are capable of initiating attacks that provoke state-level retaliation, yet their affiliation with the Pakistani state remains ambiguous enough to create deniability. This ambiguity can lead to dangerous cycles of assumption and overreaction. India, perceiving inaction as complicity, may retaliate against Pakistani territory, prompting Islamabad to respond with force in defense of sovereignty. The escalation pathway becomes even more unstable when neither side can credibly separate itself from the provocations that initiated the crisis, nor concede ground without losing political legitimacy (Bharti, 2023).

Institutional dynamics within the civil–military frameworks of both states also contribute to escalation risk. In Pakistan, the military retains substantial autonomy over security policy and maintains direct control over

nuclear doctrine, command structures, and crisis messaging. Civilian oversight is minimal, and decision-making processes are often opaque. In India, while the military remains subordinate to civilian authority, bureaucratic silos and political pressure can lead to hasty decision-making, fragmented assessments, and inconsistent communication (Mukti & Puspitasari, 2020). These institutional asymmetries limit the effectiveness of reciprocal signaling and increase the chance of unintended consequences during a fast-moving crisis.

Another dimension of strategic instability is the doctrinal ambiguity surrounding nuclear thresholds and escalation ladders. Pakistan's development of tactical nuclear weapons has introduced a lower threshold for nuclear use, designed to deter Indian incursions under its Cold Start doctrine. India, on the other hand, maintains a declared policy of massive retaliation in response to any nuclear use. This doctrinal mismatch creates uncertainty and raises questions about credibility and proportionality. In a real-world crisis, India may hesitate to carry out massive retaliation in response to a battlefield nuclear strike, fearing global condemnation or further escalation. Pakistan, anticipating this hesitation, may perceive space to use tactical weapons without triggering total war. Such dynamics destabilize deterrence by making escalation more unpredictable and less controllable (Mukherjee, 2014).

Escalation risks are also magnified by the symbolic meaning attached to military action. In both countries, military success or failure is not assessed purely in operational terms, but through its emotional resonance with national identity. The downing of a fighter jet, the crossing of a border, or the death of a soldier are imbued with disproportionate political and psychological significance. These symbols become rallying points for nationalist mobilization, turning strategic incidents into ideological confrontations. This symbolic inflation of military gestures erodes the distinction between tactical actions and strategic consequences, making even small-scale operations potential triggers for broader conflict (Z. Khan, 2022).

In such a climate, de-escalation becomes a fragile and often temporary achievement. Even when diplomatic channels succeed in halting immediate violence, the underlying pressures that fuel escalation remain unresolved. Political leaders return to electorates that demand vindication, media narratives resume their cycle of blame and glorification, and institutional actors reinforce adversarial doctrines(Thalpawila, 2022). Without a structural change in the political, ideological, and institutional logics that drive escalation, any period of calm is likely to be followed by renewed confrontation. The region thus finds itself locked in a cycle of provocation, retaliation, and rhetorical escalation, punctuated by fragile truces and superficial dialogue.

Understanding escalation in South Asia today therefore requires more than analysis of military capabilities or strategic intent. It requires a deep engagement with the political cultures, institutional dynamics, and ideological

environments that shape how conflict is framed, experienced, and acted upon. The next section will address how external actors and international norms interact with these domestic pressures, and whether there remains any viable pathway to stability in a region increasingly defined by symbolic politics and strategic fragility.

E. Exploring Pathways to Conflict Resolution

Efforts to resolve the longstanding India–Pakistan conflict, particularly over the Kashmir issue, must begin by recognizing the entrenched structural and ideological obstacles that have obstructed diplomatic progress for decades. These obstacles are not merely the result of divergent territorial claims or isolated acts of aggression, but are deeply embedded within the strategic cultures, political ideologies, and institutional dynamics of both states. Nonetheless, despite the hardened nature of this rivalry, there remain openings for constructive engagement. While a comprehensive peace agreement may remain elusive in the near term, it is possible to identify and develop incremental pathways that could reduce the intensity of hostilities, build trust over time, and create space for more substantive negotiations in the future. Conflict resolution in this context must therefore be understood not as a single event, but as a process of deconstruction and reorientation that requires sustained political will and societal transformation (Dar & Deb, 2021).

A critical starting point lies in the institutionalization of bilateral crisis communication mechanisms. Although both India and Pakistan have previously established hotlines between military leaderships and maintained limited diplomatic channels during periods of crisis, these mechanisms are often temporary, informal, and vulnerable to political disruption. To improve strategic stability, both governments could agree to formalize these communication structures under a mutually endorsed protocol, ensuring that they remain active and insulated from partisan interference. These channels should include predefined thresholds for activation during incidents involving military deployments, airspace violations, or border engagements. In addition, establishing regular, technical-level meetings between military and intelligence officials could serve to normalize dialogue and reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation or hasty retaliation during times of heightened tension(Ahmad Dar et al., 2023).

Beyond the technical domain, the public and political framing of dialogue in both countries requires significant transformation. In the prevailing nationalist discourse, particularly within Indian and Pakistani media, any form of engagement with the adversary is often depicted as an act of capitulation or appeasement. This perception has severely limited the space for political leadership to explore diplomatic options without incurring domestic criticism. A gradual reframing of dialogue is needed, beginning with issue-specific cooperation that is unlikely to provoke ideological backlash. For instance, environmental challenges, transboundary water management under

the Indus Waters Treaty, and joint disaster response initiatives represent relatively non-politicized areas of mutual interest. Demonstrating success in such domains could help rebuild confidence and generate practical outcomes that benefit local populations, thereby shifting the perception of dialogue from a symbolic concession to a functional necessity(Shinta, 2020).

The reconstruction of a more balanced public discourse is equally important. Both India and Pakistan have permitted, and at times promoted, the militarization of national identity through state-sanctioned education, public holidays, and media narratives. The glorification of the military and the demonization of the adversary have contributed to a zero-sum mindset that perceives conflict not as a problem to be managed, but as a righteous duty to be fulfilled. Reversing this trend will require long-term investment in civic education, media literacy, and independent journalism. Academic and cultural exchanges between the two countries, although currently limited, can play an important role in humanizing the conflict and highlighting shared histories and cultural commonalities. Promoting a generation of citizens who can think beyond nationalist binaries may not deliver immediate diplomatic dividends, but it is essential for any sustainable peace process in the future (Thalpawila, 2022).

The international community, while often reluctant to intervene in what is perceived as a bilateral conflict, still holds considerable influence in shaping the environment in which India and Pakistan operate. External actors such as the United States, China, and the European Union can act as facilitators, not necessarily by mediating core territorial issues, but by encouraging transparency, supporting confidence-building measures, and providing platforms for informal dialogue. Additionally, regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, though limited in their present capacities, could be revitalized to support technical cooperation, promote economic integration, and offer third-party monitoring for arms control discussions. Crucially, any such initiative must be context-sensitive and avoid replicating Western-centric models of conflict resolution that may not align with local political and cultural realities.

One of the most significant challenges to conflict resolution is the domestic political structure in both countries, particularly the extent to which confrontation with the other is used as a tool for domestic legitimacy. In India, political parties have increasingly instrumentalized anti-Pakistan rhetoric to mobilize electoral support and consolidate nationalist identity. In Pakistan, the military's dominance in national security policy has ensured that India remains the principal external threat, justifying its disproportionate share of the national budget and influence. Transforming this dynamic requires the creation of political incentives for de-escalation. Civil society, independent media, and academic institutions can play a role in this regard by constructing alternative narratives of national strength that prioritize restraint, regional

cooperation, and international reputation over performative aggression. Over time, shifting the metric of political success from confrontation to stability could open space for meaningful policy shifts (M. N. Khan, 2024).

Perhaps the most critical and overlooked component of any future resolution is the need to incorporate the voices, needs, and aspirations of the Kashmiri population. Too often, Kashmiris have been treated as passive subjects in a strategic contest between two states, rather than as political agents with legitimate demands and lived experiences. A conflict resolution process that ignores the human dimension of the Kashmir issue is likely to reproduce the very dynamics that have fueled unrest for decades. Although the current political environment may not permit the full inclusion of Kashmiri representatives in official negotiations, there are still measures that can be taken to restore civic space and basic rights in the region. Investments in education, health care, and infrastructure, along with the reopening of local media outlets and support for nonviolent civil society movements, could help rebuild trust between the state and the population. Empowering local institutions to manage day-to-day governance may not solve the conflict, but it can significantly reduce the grievances that often escalate into violence.

Taken together, these strategies do not constitute a final peace plan, but rather a roadmap for transforming the political and strategic conditions that currently prevent peace. They acknowledge the asymmetries of power, ideology, and institutional structure between the two states, while also recognizing the shared vulnerabilities that bind them. They avoid the false promise of immediate resolution, instead focusing on achievable, incremental steps that can reverse the logic of confrontation and lay the groundwork for long-term transformation. In the following section, this paper will return to the broader argument about deterrence and militarized nationalism, reflecting on how these proposed pathways intersect with the challenges previously outlined and whether a recalibration of regional security thinking is indeed possible in the current historical moment.

F.   Conclusion

This paper has examined the evolving dynamics of deterrence and strategic instability in South Asia through the lens of militarized nationalism and its entanglement with domestic politics in India and Pakistan. Traditional deterrence theory, grounded in assumptions of rationality, clear signaling, and cost-benefit calculations, fails to adequately explain how ideological polarization, political populism, and symbolic performance increasingly shape state behavior in the region. While nuclear weapons have introduced a measure of caution in preventing large-scale war, they have not deterred lower-intensity conflicts, nor have they prevented cycles of provocation, retaliation, and escalation driven by domestic imperatives. The logic of classical deterrence is fundamentally undermined when decision-makers

operate within emotional, politicized, and ideologically constrained environments.

Both India and Pakistan have undergone a significant transformation in how military power is positioned within their respective national identities. In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism has reframed Kashmir as a site of ideological fulfillment and military assertion, while in Pakistan, the military has institutionalized its role as the defender of national and Islamic identity against a hostile neighbor. These narratives reinforce a culture of permanent confrontation, in which any sign of compromise is framed as betrayal, and strategic restraint is equated with weakness. As a result, crisis behavior in South Asia is no longer governed solely by deterrence logic, but increasingly by the need for political legitimacy and symbolic dominance. This shift has narrowed the space for de-escalation and introduced significant unpredictability into a region already marked by high levels of hostility. The risks posed by this environment are amplified by structural and institutional weaknesses, including opaque decision-making processes, the ambiguous role of non-state actors, and the absence of effective crisis communication frameworks. Furthermore, both states operate within public spheres that reward aggressive posturing and punish diplomatic flexibility.

These dynamics produce a volatile security architecture where minor incidents can rapidly escalate into broader confrontations. More troublingly, the lack of consistent political incentives for peace means that even when de-escalation occurs, it is often short-lived and fragile, easily reversed by the next political cycle or symbolic provocation. In light of these findings, this paper has argued for a rethinking of both deterrence theory and policy in South Asia. It calls for a more context-sensitive framework that accounts for the role of ideology, domestic politics, and performative nationalism in shaping state behavior. Conflict resolution efforts must move beyond technical solutions and engage with the deeper socio-political logics that sustain enmity. This includes promoting depoliticized discourse, restoring institutional trust, and creating transnational platforms for cooperation. Most importantly, any credible peace process must center the voices of Kashmiris themselves, whose exclusion from decades of diplomacy has only deepened alienation and fueled resistance.

While the road to strategic stability and lasting peace in South Asia remains arduous, it is not entirely closed. The challenge is not merely to manage hostility, but to transform the conditions that make hostility politically profitable and ideologically necessary. This transformation requires courage from political leadership, innovation in policy design, and a willingness from civil societies on both sides to imagine a future that is not beholden to the violence of the past. Only by addressing the ideological and institutional foundations of insecurity can India and Pakistan hope to move beyond deterrence, toward a more stable and humane regional order.

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