

South Asia in Transition: Strategic Landscape and Regional Order

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Abstract

The strategic landscape of South Asia is largely defined by the balance of power dynamics between two nuclear-weapon states, i.e., India and Pakistan. The historically contentious relationship between India and its neighboring states also influences the security dynamics of this region. Instead of focusing on peace through cooperative frameworks, South Asia often contends with a zero-sum security approach. Alongside, India's ambitions for regional hegemony and its aspirations for a great power status have further undermined the potential of this region. Under the current leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the emergence of a Hindutva-inspired ideology, along with the conceptualization of Bharat as a Hindu Rashtra, has significantly transformed the security landscape of South Asia, thereby making it more complex and volatile. India's ideological shifts, accompanied by a revisionist historical narrative, coupled with a false sense of conventional superiority and hegemony, have begun to undermine regional peace and stability in an unprecedented way. This paper aims to assess how India's evolving strategic thought is influencing the regional security environment, peace, and stability. Additionally, the paper explores how Pakistan can respond to these developments as a responsible nuclear-weapon state. It also offers possible avenues for mutual strategic restraint to maintain peace and stability in the region.

Keywords: South Asia, Indian Strategic Thought, Hindutva-inspired Ideology, False sense of Hegemony, Strategic Stability.

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Introduction

The strategic landscape of South Asia is mainly defined by the balance of power equation between two nuclear-weapon states, i.e., India and Pakistan. India's conflictual relationship with its other bordering states is also becoming a perpetual driver of the evolving security dynamics of South Asia. Instead of focusing on achieving peace through cooperative frameworks and regional integration, South Asia is plagued by the zero-sum security paradigm, which is fueled by Indian ambitions for regional hegemony and status-driven global aspirations. The foreign policy of India has been marked by efforts to achieve political and military supremacy over its neighbors, which has been inconsistent with the focus of other South Asian states on economic integration, regional connectivity, and peaceful coexistence.¹

In recent years, political transformation, led by the Hindutva doctrine of aggression in India, has introduced additional layers of complexity to the regional security environment. The rise of a Hindutva-inspired ideology under the present leadership of the BJP in New Delhi marks a significant shift towards a nationalism prejudiced by theological principles. This advancement has led to an acceptance of the identity of Bharat as a Hindu Rashtra, or Hindu nation. Such ideological transformations, coupled with its history driven by revisionist ambitions, have begun to shape India's broader strategic behavior. This evolution poses grave challenges to the peace and stability of South Asia.²

The security environment of South Asia is also complex due to its connection with the extended or extra-regional geopolitical theaters. The geographic proximity of the region to the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East implies that any activity of the great powers in these regions trickles down to South Asia.⁴ For example, the strategic rivalry between the US and China

¹ Sardar Jehanzaib Ghalib and Muhammad Ahmad Khan, "Dominance via Diplomacy: Analyzing India's Assertive Regional Strategy in South Asia," *Journal of Security & Strategic Analyses* 11, no. 1 (2025): 29–47, <https://doi.org/10.57169/jssa.0011.01.0352>

² Zahir Kazmi, "Sindoor to Strategic Folly: India's Risky Escalation Doctrine," *Center for International Strategic Studies (AJK)*, May 9, 2025, <https://cissajk.org.pk/2025/05/09/sindoor-to-strategic-folly-indias-risky-escalation-doctrine/>

in the Asia-Pacific region has provided India with an opportunity to project power in broader Asia, thereby positioning itself as a Net Security Provider aligned with US interests to offset China's growing wealth and power. In this process, this Western-sponsored label has cultivated in the Indian leadership an overconfidence and a false sense of hegemonic impunity in South Asia. This means New Delhi perceives its smaller neighbors in a center-periphery framework, with India being the central power and other countries compelled to conform to its demands. Any independent action of a neighboring state is construed in Indian strategic thought as disobedience and not a national interest.

Similarly, continued conflicts in the Middle East and instability in Afghanistan also spill over to South Asia, with India taking advantage of the unrest in Afghanistan by funding anti-Pakistan militant groups like the Tehrik-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA).³ These are the sources of strategic transformation in South Asia.

More so, global ongoing destabilization, such as war-fighting trends, the turbulent situation in Eastern Europe, the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East, developed states' growing reliance on modernization of military capabilities, fading arms control culture, and eroding non-proliferation norms, have emboldened India's false sense of superiority and a pathway to its own force modernization. The world trends hence confirm the Indian philosophy of the primacy of hard power as the means of security. Where global powers themselves defy rules or are too distracted by bigger crises, India finds a freer hand to pursue its revisionist hegemonic ambitions in the region. The strategic behavior of India, being patronized by great powers, is increasingly becoming an anomaly, contradicting rational statecraft and undermining the stability of this region.

Based on the above rationale, this paper examines the impact of India's Hindutva-driven ideology on the strategic landscape of South Asia. This paper discusses how India's false sense of hegemony and superiority towards its neighboring states and the country's growing abnormality, laced

³ "BLA and TTP Are Indian Proxies, Govt Will Prove India's Involvement in Khuzdar Bus Attack: Asif," *Dawn*, May 22, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1912572>

with its coercive actions in the region, have become a renewed challenge to regional stability. The paper subsequently offers guidelines on how Pakistan should respond to these growing regional developments as a responsible nuclear-weapon state. Finally, the paper proposes pathways to secure regional peace and maintain mutual strategic restraint.

Manifestation of Hindutva Ideology and Changing Regional Landscape

The ideology of governance in India is drastically changing to a Hindu nationalist system with spillover effects in its neighboring countries. India is now proudly practicing a Hindu nationalistic ideology under the BJP-led government, which aims to transform India into a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation).⁴ This is an exclusionary vision founded on the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) ideology of Savarkar and Golwalkar, which describes India as a Hindu cultural nation. This has, in practice, taken the form of a majoritarian, supremacist power that aspires to place religious minorities in a second-class position.⁵ The RSS, which is the ideological guiding tool of the BJP, enjoys an immense network and is now ruling the education, culture, and security policy of India.⁶ In short, current leadership in India is functioning, seeking spiritual guidance of a sectarian Hindutva vision that explicitly states that India is a Hindu Rashtra, which casts fundamental doubts on its ability to uphold regional plurality.

The strategic thinking in India has taken the form of an assertive and structurally destabilizing regional posture. This is not an impulsive aberration, but the rational outlook of a strategic culture based on a hegemonic notion. The policy espoused by India views South Asia as a hierarchy that should be managed, rather than a cooperative security region that fosters progressive peace leading to prosperity. India aspires to achieve

⁴ Mayank Kumar, "India a 'Hindu Rashtra', 'Akhand Bharat' Will Come True, Says Yogi Adityanath," *The Hindu*, February 16, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/india-a-hindu-rashtra-akhand-bharat-will-come-true-says-yogi-adityanath/article66512640.ece>

⁵ Muhammad Ahmad Khan, *Rewriting History: India in Pursuance of Hindu Rashtra*, Issue Brief (Islamabad: India Study Centre, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, June 20, 2023), https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/IB_Ahmad_June_20_2023.pdf.

⁶ Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, "The RSS at 100: The Pan-Hindutva Force Behind Modi's BJP," *The Diplomat*, September 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/09/the-rss-at-100-the-pan-hindutva-force-behind-modis-bjp/>.

a dominant position in line with its self-image of a great power. In this pursuit, India attempts to manipulate or undermine other states in the region so that its regional dominance is preserved and sustained. This kind of posture is bound to jeopardize the security of the neighbors, which will cause instability and undermine prospects of cooperation among other regional states.

In conceptual terms, the Indian strategic thought appears to struggle to internalize the notion of sovereign equality in the region. New Delhi tends to view its smaller neighbors through a center-periphery lens, positioning itself as the dominant player in the region, while regarding the other countries as subservient to its policy directives. Any independent act of a neighboring state is construed in Indian strategic thought as defiance and not a national interest. Notably, this is the reason why India favors unilateralism, denies bilateralism, and disregards multilateralism.

Counting on the manifestation of Hindutva doctrine, it is pertinent to refer to four interwoven strands that have become the strategic guiding posts for New Delhi to operate in the region. First is the revisionist Hindu Ideology. This means the ruling elite in India has turned to an alternative form of historical revisionism that envisages a Greater Bharat.⁷ It openly aims at redefining India as a Hindu Rashtra, disregarding the interests of minorities, based on its secular, pluralist heritage. Intellectuals belonging to the Hindutva school of thought have always believed that India is a unitary nation of a single culture, i.e., Hinduism. This worldview supports irredentist ambitions like the unification of all of Hindustan under a single religion. Indeed, RSS ideology explicitly presents India as a Hindu society that is on the verge of decline and demands to restore its alleged ancient glory. Strategically, it translates to overcoming historical losses (between medieval and colonial rule) and dominating weaker neighbors, an attitude that is occasionally likened to the Matsya Nyaya (big fish) law of the Arthashastra of Kautilya.⁸ Kautilya himself advised that violence should be

⁷ Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2021.

⁸ Prerana Thakur, "The Hindu Philosophy of Matsya Nyaya and its Contemporary Relevance," *Pratha: The Indian School of Cultural Studies* (blog), July 20, 2023,

used as a last resort when diplomatic efforts are depleted. Such caution is, however, sidelined by the current Hindutva-led policy makers.⁹ The current government intensifies civilizational exceptionalism, the notion that India must be at the forefront by gaining primacy in South Asia.

Second is militarized aggression. This ideology is associated with aggressive strategic positioning. The world witnesses the deployment of the Indian military force and coercion in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJ&K).¹⁰ India's use of force, its illegitimate actions there, and violation of human rights in the disputed territory of IIOJ&K are reported worldwide. For example, UN-based human rights experts have written reports¹¹ on the Indian human rights violations,¹² including arbitrary arrests, detentions, and disproportionate restrictions on free expression¹³ in IIOJ&K. With Pakistan, on many occasions, India disregarded nuclear deterrence as no obstacle to strategic coercion and brinkmanship. India's aggressive strategic position has been validated by its war-waging behavior as well as its war-fighting and offensive doctrine of limited war, i.e., Cold Start (also known as Proactive Operations - initiated in 2004),¹⁴ as demonstrated in recent events such as the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis and the May 2025 conflict with Pakistan¹⁵ after the Pahalgam incident (discussed below). This indicates that India's abnormality as an irresponsible nuclear state will continue to intensify.

<https://www.prathaculturalschool.com/post/the-hindu-philosophy-of-matsya-nyaya-and-its-contemporary-relevance>

⁹ Vinay Vittal, *Kautilya's Arthashastra: A Timeless Grand Strategy* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air Command and Staff College, Air University, 2016),

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1019423.pdf>

¹⁰ "UN Experts' Findings on Human Rights Violations in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan*, November 26, 2025, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/un-experts-findings-on-human-rights-violations-in-indian-illegally-occupied-jammu-and-kashmir>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Jaweria Faisal, 'Calibrated Escalation: India's Doctrinal Evolution and the Stability–Instability Paradox,' *Issue Brief* (Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, October 3, 2025), <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-calibrated-escalation-indias-doctrinal-evolution-and-the-stability-instability-paradox/>.

¹⁵ Shams uz Zaman, India's Limited War Fighting Doctrines and the May 2025 Provocation: Challenges to Deterrence and Stability in South Asia. (2025). *Strategic Thought*, 7(1), 55-0. <https://strategithought.ndu.edu.pk/index.php/site/article/view/118>

The third strand is Disinformation, Deceit, and Deception. This encompasses the use of propaganda, deception, and cyber warfare tools systematically to cause Pakistan reputational damage. Indian state and its media houses have launched synchronized information campaigns to influence the domestic and international perceptions by aligning Pakistan with the phenomenon of terrorism. Staging false-flag terrorist attacks and subsequently, abruptly externalizing the blame to Pakistan has become a new abnormality in India. Indian major television channels¹⁶ have been observed to air unverified claims, and social media influencers associated with the government have been running online platforms¹⁷ to spread misinformation about Pakistan.¹⁸ These maneuvers are reminiscent of the old school of strategic thought and refer to the principle of Maya (deception)¹⁹ taught by Kautilya to justify covert action.

The fourth strand is evading multilateralism and defying international law. India's Hindutva-driven ideology has started undermining the efficacy of multilateralism, international law, and universal norms. In August 2019, India unilaterally revoked its constitutional articles 370 and 35A, altering the identity of the people of Kashmir, undermining the legal status of Kashmir, and violating the United Nations (UN) mandate.²⁰ Similarly, on many occasions, it has used war as an instrument to violate Pakistan's territorial sovereignty. Moreover, India has established a pattern of violating and unilaterally revoking bilateral regional agreements, often without consequence. A World Bank-brokered Indus Water Treaty (IWT), which allocated the waters of the Indus River system between India and Pakistan, giving India exclusive rights to the eastern rivers (Ravi, Sutlej,

¹⁶ Wasim Qadri, Research: Indian Media Used 90% Fake News to Flare up Nuclear war, *Think Tank Journal*, May 14, 2025, <https://thinktank.pk/2025/05/14/indian-media-used-90-fake-news-to-flare-up-indo-pak-nuclear-war/>

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Muskan Moazzam, 'The Battle of Perceptions: India's Information Warfare against Pakistan,' *Issue Brief* (Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, June 5, 2025), https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/IB_Muskan_Moazzam_June_5_2025.pdf

¹⁹ Deepsikha Mohapatra and Abhisek Dash, "Beyond the Battlefield: The Arthashastra Paradigm for Hybrid Warfare," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research* 11, no. 4 (2025): 60–63, <https://www.socialsciencejournal.in/assets/archives/2025/vol11issue4/11082.pdf>

²⁰ Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the United Nations, Geneva, 'UN Resolutions on Jammu & Kashmir,' Pakistan Mission to the UN, Geneva, UN Resolutions On Jammu & Kashmir – Pakistan Mission to the UN | Geneva

Beas) and Pakistan rights over the western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab). In April 2025, the Government of India put this treaty in “abeyance.” Pakistan rejects the unilateral suspension of the agreement and considers diversion of water, which is its lifeline, as an act of war.

The hegemonic posture of India is not only extended to Pakistan but to all its neighbors, including those who have a long history of friendly relations, such as Bangladesh.²¹ Indicatively, the case of Dhaka is an example of how coercion is integrated as a matter of regional policy in India.²² However, in spite of rhetorically cordial relations and extensive economic interdependence, India has been continually lagging or evading fair deals with Bangladesh on water sharing and other important matters. One of such cases is the Teesta River accord, which has been pending for a long time. Bangladesh has been demanding a reasonable sharing of the waters of the Teesta over a period of more than ten years, but Indian politics killed a 2011 deal, and since then, New Delhi has not been able to finalize a treaty.²³ The Nepal case is another vivid example of how the coercive leverage of India can be counterproductive and turn the balance of power in the region. The Indian strategic culture had long regarded Nepal not as an equal sovereign state, but as a buffer state in the natural sphere of influence of India. This attitude was reflected in constant political meddling and economic blackmail in Indo-Nepal relations. Its lowest moment was reached in 2015 as India was widely accused of a silent blockade of fuel and other necessities into Nepal, which appeared to be a way of punishing Kathmandu over its new constitution that was not satisfactory to New Delhi. These two are only a few instances of how India, guided by a Hindutva-based strategic worldview, is increasingly becoming a self-declared regional policeman, forcing its neighboring states to adopt Indian preferences as regional rules and Indian interests as the default position in their foreign and security

²¹ Samran Ali, “India in Its Neighborhood: Hegemonic Behaviour,” *CISS Insight Journal* 4, no. 2 (2016), <https://journal.ciss.org.pk/index.php/ciss-insight/article/view/14/13>

²² Ibid.

²³ Md. Mizanur Rahman, ‘Water Sharing Geopolitics between India and Bangladesh: Recent Trends’ *International Journal of Applied and Advanced Multidisciplinary Research*, 2 (8), (2024). 569–592. <https://doi.org/10.59890/ijaamr.v2i8.2418>

policies. Such actions reflect Kautilya's Danda principle (Coercion as Statecraft).²⁴

Global Instability and Indian Mounting False Sense of Hegemony

The Indian mindset highlighted above is further emboldened in the backdrop of the evolving global power dynamics. With the current multipolar international system, India is aiming to take advantage of the great-power rivalry so as to retain its position as a regional hegemon and a preferred Western partner. The US and its partners have been quick to identify India as a Net Security Provider in the Asia-Pacific, without necessarily undertaking a stringent evaluation of the capacity and motives of New Delhi.²⁵ This western-sponsored label has cultivated in the Indian leadership an overconfidence and a sense of hegemonic impunity in South Asia. However, this perception has not been translated into prudent governance; instead, the strategic behavior of India, being patronized by great powers, is increasingly becoming an anomaly, contradicting rational statecraft and undermining the stability of the region.

The governing BJP has brought an extremist ideology into the state policy that glorifies ethnic majoritarianism and is not hesitant to use force. This has led to the rise of a strategic culture whereby violence is actively justified and used to achieve a false victory. As an example, the Indian leadership is becoming increasingly entrenched in the idea of exercising military power with impunity to threaten neighbours, an idea that Prime Minister Narendra Modi seems keen to normalize in South Asia. The political and ideological self-interest of this kind are often sought in the short term, at the domestic level, and are not connected with the restraint that a responsible state should possess. The rhetoric and brinkmanship of New Delhi, aimed at mobilizing the electorate domestically, violate the standards of responsible nuclear behaviour.

²⁴ "The Coercive Power of the State in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*," *Indian Political Thought-I*, August 22, 2025, <https://polsci.institute/indian-political-thought-i/coercive-power-state-kautilya-arthashastra/>.

²⁵ Zahir Kazmi 'Challenges of Strategic Stability Amongst Littoral Powers of the Indian Ocean Region,' *CISS Insight Journal*, 11(2), (2024), pp. 109-141, <https://journal.ciss.org.pk/index.php/ciss-insight/article/view/345>

This aberrant strategic reasoning is further supported by an ideology of civilizational exceptionalism. The RSS-BJP vision of “Akhand Bharat” (Greater India) promotes revisionism, seeking to reshape borders and dominate South Asia in accordance with a mythologized destiny. Falsehood and misinformation have been made a part of statecraft, and Indian strategists invented false histories to justify aggression. These practices that are ideologically intense weaken the mechanisms of rational policymaking. As a result, India is no longer behaving as a restrained, doctrine-bound, rational actor, but is now emerging as a revisionist power with extremist tendencies. The strategic behaviour of India can therefore be described as abnormal and destabilizing, driven by aggressive Hindutva revisionism and normalization of violence in policy.²⁶ This is compounded by the enabling environment that the Western allies of India are creating.

Another destabilizing trend boosting India’s confidence is the intensifying US-China rivalry. As the West reorients to counter China’s rise, India finds itself in an enviable position, courted as a pivotal ally in the Asia-Pacific strategy. The formation of groupings like the Quad (with the US, Japan, and Australia) and stronger defense ties with Europe are seen in India as evidence that the winds of international politics are shifting in its favor. Consequently, India has grown more confident in taking bold steps, whether it’s fortifying its disputed border with China or abrogating Kashmir’s autonomous status domestically, amid minimal international pushback. Notably, in the context of US-China rivalry, India has positioned itself as a counterweight to China, which earned it the informal Western designation of a regional “Net Security Provider.”²⁷ India is playing deception here by adhering to a dual approach, engaging with both the US and China. While the US leverages China’s rise as a potential threat to consolidate its own position and foster international alliances, India continues to maintain

²⁶ Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Pakistan Categorically Rejects the Statement by Senior BJP Leader and Chief Minister of Assam Calling for Hindutva’s Expansionist Idea of So-Called ‘Akhand Bharat,’” press release, <https://mofa.gov.pk/pakistan-categorically-rejects-the-statement-by-senior-bjp-leader-and-chief-minister-of-assam-calling-for-hindutvas-expansionist-idea-of-so-called-akhand-bharat/>

²⁷ Maheera Munir and Aiysha Safdar, “Sino–U.S. Strategic Competition in the Asia-Pacific: Omnidirectional Hedging of Traditional Middle Powers,” *Strategic Studies* 43, no. 2 (Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, 2023), https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Maheera_Munir_and_Aiysha_Safdar_SS_No_2_2023.pdf

substantial bilateral trade with China and sustain energy and defense ties with Russia.

This foreign assurance serves as a blank cheque awarded by Washington and other allies, thus strengthening the Indian grandiose self-image. The Western powers rushed to extend this status of a regional enforcer to India, pursuant to their own geopolitical interests. The notion of India as a Net Security Provider, though, is only a pretense to legitimize New Delhi's ambitious, hegemonic ambitions, considering that India cannot plausibly promise security at the same time that it has conflictual relations with most of its neighbours and destabilizes them.

The sense of security created by Western patronage has led India to engage in a greater military build-up and coercion without the fear of consequences. Western profligacy has enabled a quick build-up of Indian military equipment, and it has now the fastest-growing nuclear and missile program²⁸ without a corresponding focus on arms control or regional stability. In line with this, New Delhi is increasingly willing to push the boundaries of escalation with the assumption that the West will back unilateralism. In fact, the US reactions towards the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis and May 2025 Conflict have been an indication of support to India in its right to self-defence, thus emboldening the Indian government to use limited military power against Pakistan. The net result of this kind of encouragement is an India that feels secure behind the great-power association, a false feeling of impunity that reinforces its distorted strategic attitude. Interestingly, even those commentators who were inclined towards the Indian cause at the time wonder whether the so-called Net Security Provider status of India can be held any longer after the recent confrontations, which revealed the limitations of Indian dominance and the dangers of Indian overreach.

India's reckless posture as a nuclear-armed country is the most alarming aspect of its abnormal state behaviour. Through an extremist political

²⁸ Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "Issue Brief on India's Nuclear Program: How Come It Is Not Seen as the 'Fastest Growing'?" *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI)*, October 6, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-indias-nuclear-program-how-come-it-is-not-seen-as-the-fastest-growing/>

leadership, India has been playing with nuclear brinkmanship and scowling moves that are practically inconceivable for a responsible nuclear power. The world has seen a preview of this in the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot conflict²⁹ and the May 2025 Conflict. In the midst of the mounting tensions, Indian leaders made provocative nuclear-tainted warnings rather than advice and calm. Prime Minister Modi bragged at an election rally that India was not storing its nuclear weapons for Diwali,³⁰ openly ridiculing the Pakistani deterrent. This rhetoric was extremely irresponsible, and this nuclear saber-rattling in pursuit of domestic political advantage violates the standards of responsible state conduct and endangers the South Asian strategic stability. Moreover, Modi outrageously called the night of 27 February 2019,³¹ in the midst of the confrontation, Qatal Ki Raat (the night of murder), basically boasting about India could have struck Pakistan with missiles.³² This confession went against previous Indian denials of any intended use of missiles, exposing the Indian leadership to the brink of the nuclear threshold.

The Prime Minister was not alone. The high-profile members of the Modi cabinet have also announced a disturbing rejection of nuclear restraint. In August 2019, the Indian Defence Minister speculated that the long-standing Indian nuclear policy of No First Use (NFU) could be conditional, depending upon the situation, placing a cloud over one of the foundations of nuclear policy.³³ This kind of rhetoric by the leadership of a nuclear-armed country undermines the delicate trust that prevents nuclear miscalculation. In addition, Modi and his senior officials have openly

²⁹ Center for International Strategic Studies, Islamabad, *Pulwama–Balakot Crisis*, CISS Special Issue, Islamabad, <https://ciss.org.pk/PDFs/CISS-Special-Issue-Pulwama-Balakot-Crisis.pdf>

³⁰ “Our Nuclear Weapons Are Not for Diwali, Modi Threatens Pakistan,” *The Express Tribune*, April 21, 2019, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1956023/nuclear-weapons-not-diwali-modi-threatens-pakistan>

³¹ Zahir Kazmi, “Pulwama-Balakot Crisis Redux,” *Strategic Vision Institute*, February 15, 2025, <https://thesvi.org/pulwama-balakot-crisis-redux/>

³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, “Spokesperson’s Remarks in Response to a Media Question Regarding Prime Minister Modi’s Remarks on Indian Nuclear Capability,” press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, <https://mofa.gov.pk/spokespersons-remarks-in-response-to-a-media-question-regarding-prime-minister-modis-remarks-on-indian-nuclear-capability/>

³³ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, “Shri Rajnath Singh Assumes Office as Defence Minister,” press release, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, September 3, 2019, <https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1573089®=3&lang=2>

disregarded the nuclear capability of Pakistan, referring to it as a nuclear bluff, even threatening to disintegrate Pakistan into pieces, an outstandingly irresponsible display in a nuclearized standoff.

The posture of India indicates the unwillingness to accept strategic realities. Indian military planners have publicly speculated about waging and winning a conventional conflict with Pakistan under the nuclear threshold, encouraged by doctrines such as Cold Start. This belief is very destabilizing, with an inherent risk of uncontrolled escalation. The geographic proximity, short decision-time, and emotive conflicts (such as Kashmir) imply that any conflict, however small at its onset, threatens to turn into a full-scale crisis. The indisposition of India to abandon this coercive fantasy, which is basically an attempt to probe the limits of Pakistan in a nuclearized setting, remains a constant threat to the stability of the crisis in South Asia. South Asia is perhaps the most likely region in the world where the breakdown of deterrence would result in the use of nuclear weapons. It would be a direct consequence of the Indian hegemonic mentality that did not pay attention to the constraints of force in a nuclear environment.³⁴

Eroding Non-proliferation Norms and Growing India's Abnormality

International treaties like the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) have been trying to contain the proliferation and use of nuclear weapons for decades. Those norms are quickly eroding. Major nuclear powers are modernizing or growing their arsenals, and unlike during the Cold War, the world's arsenal of nuclear warheads is increasing at a fast pace. The classical pillars of arms control between the US and Russia are crumbling, as demonstrated by the impending end of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with no alternative on the horizon, thus diminishing confidence in the rules-based order. As US-Russia arms control agreements unravel, an atmosphere of strategic uncertainty prevails. The collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019, for instance, eliminated normative

³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Statement by the Spokesperson Regarding Pakistan-Specific Reference in the India-US Joint Statement of 13 February 2025," press release, February 13, 2025, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/statement-by-the-spokesperson-regarding-pakistan-specific-reference-in-the-india-us-joint-statement-of-13-february-2025/>

limits on ground-launched missiles of the class India has been developing. The looming expiry of New START in 2026 with no alternative will remove the last cap on superpower arsenals. In this climate, global nuclear moderation norms are fading.³⁵

India has been swift to gain confidence under these global trends. New Delhi has remained an outlier to the NPT and CTBT, but has been gradually broadening its strategic capacity and capabilities far beyond the previous claim of credible minimum deterrence (CMD). India no longer feels bound by the old non-proliferation taboos; it sees itself as an emerging great power that has the right to break traditional rules. This faith is seen in its rhetoric and behavior.³⁶ In September 2025, the Chief of Defence Staff of India candidly announced that India will not be nuclear blackmailed and that nuclear and radiological preparedness should be implemented as a part of national security.³⁷ These declarations are not part of normal deterrence signalling, but they are indications of a more aggressive attitude in which nuclear capabilities are seen not as weapons of last resort but as policy tools.

The inability of forums like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to act multilaterally has proved that might usually prevails. It is against this background that Indian leadership seems to believe that the old rules may no longer apply to the emerging powers like itself. The growing permissiveness of power politics in the world, whether through annexations or weaponization, encourages the belief of New Delhi that it can pursue maximalist strategic objectives - nuclear, conventional, or territorial - in the name of its own national interest. The increasing assertiveness of India, however, is not happening in a vacuum; it reflects a world where normative

³⁵ Naeem Salik, *Emerging Global Nuclear Dis-Order?* (Islamabad: Strategic Vision Institute (SVI), August 2023), SVI Monograph Series, no. 2, <https://thesvi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/SVI-Monograph-Series-No.-2.pdf>

³⁶ Komal Khan, "Is Non-Proliferation a Regime of the Equals?" *Strategic Vision Institute*, August 18, 2025, accessed December 23, 2025, <https://thesvi.org/is-non-proliferation-a-regime-of-the-equals/>

³⁷ "India Will Not Be Deterred: CDS General Rejects Nuclear Blackmail, Calls for Bio-Threat Preparedness Post Op Sindoor," *Times of India*, September 30, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-will-not-be-deterred-cds-general-rejects-nuclear-blackmail-calls-for-bio-threat-preparedness-post-op-sindoor/articleshow/124226704.cms>

consensus is rapidly dissolving, and projection of power is once again being used as a currency in international relations.

The once strong culture of the global non-proliferation regime is suffering, partly because of selectiveness in enforcement and expediency in geopolitics. A glaring example was the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) waiver granted to India in 2008. Despite India not meeting core non-proliferation norms (it never joined the NPT or accepted full-scope safeguards of the IAEA), the NSG approved a country-specific exemption to allow nuclear trade with India. This exceptional NSG waiver, indeed directed by the political aspirations of great powers, mainly the US, created a double standard. India was offered the incentives reserved for NPT members, but without conforming to any corresponding obligations. It sent a message that adherence to global rules is negotiable. India's deal undermined the integrity of the non-proliferation regime and set a dangerous precedent for others seeking similar exceptions. Indeed, Pakistan pointed to the NSG's "exceptional treatment" of India as eroding global norms and immediately demanded equal recognition. From the US-India civil nuclear agreement onward, the world saw that non-proliferation principles could be bent for strategic considerations, a shift that diluted the once-strong culture of universal compliance.

India has aggressively modernized its nuclear and conventional forces, having been relieved of many external constraints. It has exploited its privileged position to bring in state-of-the-art technology and fuel to support its civilian reactors, which has, in turn, indirectly increased weapons potential by releasing its domestic resources to its arsenal. India is also not a signatory of the CTBT, only having a voluntary test moratorium, and therefore has no legally binding constraints about reinstating nuclear explosive testing at its will. At the Conference on Disarmament, work on the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) has been stalled, due in part to the continued production of weapons-grade material by states like India to construct increasingly large stockpiles.

Meanwhile, India's force modernization is proceeding at a fast pace. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

(SIPRI),³⁸ India is one of the few states currently expanding its nuclear arsenal and developing new delivery systems. It has operationalized a nuclear triad of land, air, and sea-based capabilities and is investing in more advanced systems. Strikingly, recent data indicate that India has surpassed neighboring Pakistan in warhead count, possessing 180 warheads to Pakistan's 170 as of 2025.³⁹ This marks a significant shift in South Asia's strategic balance and highlights India's unabated buildup. New Delhi insists it still abides by "credible minimum deterrence," yet its current trajectory, qualitatively and quantitatively, far exceeds any reasonable definition of minimum deterrence.

The increasing chaos and distraction in the international arena have also given confidence to India. The Russia-Ukraine war, turmoil and turbulence in the Middle East, and the ensuing East-West conflict, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the preoccupation of global powers with multiple simultaneous crises mean India faces a diluted international scrutiny. The world trends hence confirm the Indian philosophy of the primacy of hard power as the means of security. Where global powers themselves defy rules or are too distracted by bigger crises, India finds a freer hand to pursue its ambitions in the region by gaining a false sense of superiority.

False Sense of Conventional Superiority: The Pahalgam Incident

In April–May 2025, India leveraged the Pahalgam incident as a pretext to initiate escalation against Pakistan, aiming to create space for a limited war under the nuclear overhang.⁴⁰ Indian leaders immediately blamed Pakistan for the April 22 attack in Pahalgam⁴¹ without presenting evidence or awaiting investigation, and they launched military operations breaching Pakistani sovereignty in unprovoked aggression. Within two weeks, India

³⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security. Summary* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2025), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/yb25_summary_en.pdf

³⁹ Ibid; Hans Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, Mackenzie Knight-Boyle, and Kate Kohn, "Status of World Nuclear Forces," Federation of American Scientists, March 26, 2025, <https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

⁴⁰ "Pahalgam Tensions: Army Leadership Warns of Decisive Response against Any Indian Attempt to Impose War," *Dawn*, May 2, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1907995>

⁴¹ "India Shifted Entire Blame of Pahalgam Attack on Pakistan Without Evidence: PM," *Dawn*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1909135>

carried out cross-border strikes (codenamed Operation Sindoor) deep into Pakistan,⁴² ostensibly targeting alleged “terrorist infrastructure” but in reality, hitting Pakistani territory and even civilian areas. By circumventing independent inquiry and opting for force, India deliberately provoked a nuclear neighbor, displaying what Pakistan called irresponsible and abnormal strategic behavior.

Indian authorities simultaneously opened other fronts to pressurize Pakistan. New Delhi exploited proxies to foment violence inside Pakistan during the crisis. Indeed, a substantial part of the Pakistani military remained tied down fighting India-backed insurgencies in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), a result of India’s covert support for terrorism on Pakistani soil. Such actions meant India was provoking Pakistan in both the conventional arena and the sub-conventional (insurgency) domain, an extraordinarily reckless approach between two nuclear powers.

Rather than seeking to defuse the situation, Indian leadership whipped up war hysteria and pursued escalation. Escalatory media and hawkish officials in New Delhi talked of teaching Pakistan a lesson.⁴³ India’s military was given carte blanche to strike across the Line of Control (LoC). This strategy aimed for escalation domination, whereby India would intimidate Pakistan by sheer force and dictate the tempo of conflict. India’s newly formulated Dynamic Response Strategy (DRS) underpinned this approach. DRS is an evolution of India’s limited-war doctrine, a shift from Cold Start’s proactive offensives to multi-domain strikes below the nuclear threshold, focused on seizing the initiative and controlling escalation. In theory, such a doctrine seeks to retain the upper hand at every rung of the conflict ladder. In practice, during the Pahalgam crisis, this overconfidence proved misplaced, as Indian planners grossly underestimated Pakistan’s resolve and capability.

⁴² Zahir Kazmi, “Seeing the Whole Board: Rethinking Strategic Signalling in the South Asian 2025 Crisis,” *Strategic Vision Institute*, May 23, 2025, <https://thesvi.org/seeing-the-whole-board-rethinking-strategic-signalling-in-the-south-asian-2025-crisis/>

⁴³ “Time to Teach Pakistan a Lesson: Congress Adopts Pahalgam Attack Resolution,” *The Tribune (India)*, May 2, 2025, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/india/time-to-teach-pakistan-a-lesson-congress-adopts-pahalgam-attack-resolution/>

Bolstered by a false sense of impunity, India also engaged in unprecedented political coercion. Modi's government unilaterally suspended the IWT, threatening Pakistan's water lifeline in an act Pakistan likened to a declaration of war.⁴⁴ This attempt at hydro-political coercion flagrantly violated a decades-old international treaty and showed New Delhi's willingness to flout norms for strategic gain. Indian officials further inflamed tensions with belligerent rhetoric. During the crisis, India's leadership openly dismissed Pakistan's nuclear deterrent as a mere "nuclear bluff" and even boasted about the ability to break Pakistan apart. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh went so far as to claim⁴⁵ that fully deploying India's navy "could have fragmented Pakistan further," while Modi exulted that India's strikes have burst Pakistan's bubble of nuclear blackmail.⁴⁶ Such cavalier statements, implying India could neutralize Pakistan's atomic arsenal and dismember its state, were shockingly irresponsible coming from the helm of a nuclear nation. They signaled an abnormal strategic mindset rooted in hubris and a dangerous disregard for nuclear realities.

On the other side, Pakistan responded to the crisis with strong resolve, adhering to its doctrine of restraint plus requisite force. Islamabad strenuously denied involvement in the Pahalgam attack and immediately offered to cooperate with a neutral international investigation,⁴⁷ a stance reinforcing that Pakistan sought de-escalation and truth-finding. However, when India violated Pakistan's sovereignty with missile and air strikes on May 6–7, Pakistan exercised its right to self-defense under the UN Charter, launching a calibrated military riposte. Codenamed Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos,⁴⁸ Pakistan's response was precisely targeted at Indian military assets and kept carefully limited in scope. The Pakistani armed forces struck

⁴⁴ "Pahalgam attack: India suspends Indus Waters Treaty with immediate effect, closes Attari border crossing," Dawn News, April 23, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1906075>.

⁴⁵ Rajat Sharma, "Why Rajnath Singh Said Navy Could Have Broken Pakistan into Four," *RajatSharma.in*, May 31, 2025, <https://rajatsharma.in/why-rajnath-singh-said-navy-could-have-broken-pakistan-into-four/>

⁴⁶ Narendra Modi, "PM Modi Lok Sabha Speech" (speech, Lok Sabha, India), YouTube video, July 29, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sza52VZPmPk>

⁴⁷ "PM Shehbaz Says Pakistan Open to 'Neutral, Transparent' Probe into Pahalgam Attack," *Dawn*, April 26, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1906694>

⁴⁸ Abid Hussain, "Pakistan launches Operation Bunyan Marsoos: What we know so far," 10 May 2025, *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/10/pakistan-launches-operation-bunyan-marsoos-what-we-know-so-far>

Indian military installations across multiple frontiers (from Kashmir to Punjab and Rajasthan) but scrupulously avoided civilian targets. This reflects Pakistan's professed operational policy of "Quid Pro Quo Plus (QPQ+),"⁴⁹ an operational strategy based on answering any Indian attack with a proportionate-plus conventional response, enough to punish the aggressor and deny victory, but calibrated to prevent uncontrollable escalation. By demonstrating a potent conventional reply (as it did in the 2019 'Swift Retort' and now in 2025 under Bunyan-um-Marsoos), Pakistan aims to deny India any space for military adventurism below the nuclear threshold.

The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and air defenses swiftly downed six Indian fighter jets and drones during India's attacks,⁵⁰ underscoring a robust "kill chain" that caught India by surprise. By May 9–10, Pakistani forces had blunted India's attempted escalation dominance, retaliating in kind and holding their own in conventional exchanges. This reality exposed weaknesses in India's much-touted conventional superiority. Facing mounting losses and the inability to secure a quick win, New Delhi was ultimately forced to seek an exit from the conflict.

The outcome of the four-day conflict yielded important strategic lessons favoring Pakistan's position. India's myth and a false sense of conventional supremacy were shattered, as Pakistan's smaller but all-inclusive and fully equipped military proved more than capable of retaliating forcefully. Indian ambitions to unilaterally impose its will, militarily or through treaties like the IWT, were checked by Pakistan's preparedness and national unity. The crisis fully unmasked India's irrational decision-making and false sense of conventional superiority, revealing New Delhi's deception to the world.

⁴⁹ Lt. General Khalid Ahmed Kidwai, "Keynote Address at the Seminar on 'Strategic Stability in South Asia: Is India a Responsible Nuclear State?'" Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, <https://issi.org.pk/remarks-by-lt-general-khalid-ahmed-kidwai-seminar-on-strategic-stability-in-south-asia-is-india-a-responsible-nuclear-state/>

⁵⁰ Aamir Latif, "Pakistan shot down 6 Indian jets, including 4 French-made Rafale during conflict: Premier Sharif," 28 May 2025, Anadolu Ajansi, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-shot-down-6-indian-jets-including-4-french-made-rafale-during-conflict-premier-sharif/3582409>

West Turning a Blind Eye to India

The permissive attitude of Western powers, particularly the US, towards India's strategic program as well as its destabilizing actions in the region has further emboldened New Delhi's confidence. The West, in pursuance of its geopolitical and geoeconomic interests, has clearly turned a blind eye to actions that could have provoked sanctions or broader condemnation if they were undertaken by any other state. This double standard and country-specific approach is evident in the Indo-US nuclear deal and the 2008 NSG waiver.⁵¹ In addition, the US created an exception for India despite its refusal to join the NPT, which is a prerequisite for NSG membership. In 2005, despite decades-long US policy linking nuclear cooperation to NPT adherence, Washington publicly recognized India as a country possessing advanced nuclear technology that deserves the same benefits and advantages as any other state. In addition to the NSG waiver, the West has consistently ignored India's provocative actions that are destabilizing for the regional peace and stability. It is largely due to their preference to leverage India's geopolitical and geostrategic significance to contain China's peaceful rise and growing influence. This preference is manifested in many ways, for example, the international community's muted response to India's anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon test in March 2019. Instead of condemning the test, the US stated⁵² that it has taken note of this development and emphasized continued cooperation in the space arena.

The West's exceptionalism is further evident in export control regimes and high-technology trade. Despite not being a signatory to the NPT, India has been included in the elite clubs such as the Wassenaar Arrangement and Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). This inclusion enabled New Delhi to acquire advanced weapons as well as dual-use technologies. Moreover, the West did not take into account India's violations of norms of restraint and their consequences on regional stability. Hence, several

⁵¹ Nazia Sheikh, "India's Nuclear Waiver: A Strategic Blunder with Global Consequences," CISS AJK, July 28, 2025, <https://cissajk.org.pk/2025/07/28/indias-nuclear-waiver-a-strategic-blunder-with-global-consequences>

⁵² "US Takes Note of India's Statements on Space Debris Created by ASAT Test," *NDTV*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/us-takes-note-of-indias-statements-on-space-debris-created-by-asat-test-2016966>

Western powers signed intelligence-sharing agreements⁵³ as well as massive defense deals with India. Through these deals, they transferred sophisticated naval hardware, advanced fighter jets. These transfers directly impacted the security and stability paradigm of the region.

Way Forward

Pakistan should continue to reinforce its full-spectrum deterrence policy. Pakistan's operational policy of QPQ+ should be reinforced by robust conventional capabilities with cohesive national response, as future conflicts may be more intense and compressed in time. The message to India should be very clear that Pakistan stands ready to meet any aggression at every escalation level with a strong response and resolve.

Indian leadership needs to recognize that escalation dynamics are unpredictable and that the notion of escalation domination is a perilous proposition in a military conflict between two nuclear-weapon states. Advances in weapon systems and technologies are blurring the rungs of escalation, making escalation dynamics unpredictable. Therefore, Indian policymakers need to abandon their violence-driven strategy and consider a way forward toward the political resolution of the conflict.

The Indian narrative of terrorism by alleging Pakistan for any anti-India violence should be systematically revealed to international scrutiny, and Pakistan should now convince the international community to investigate Indian state-sponsored terrorism in Pakistan and around the world. Indian policy of deception should be revealed through political, diplomatic, and rational academic efforts before India ventures into another abnormal strategic madness that endangers this region and beyond.

Pakistan, as a responsible nuclear state, should continue to project strategic restraints, keep space open for Confidence Building Measures (CBMs),

⁵³ Ariel Stenek, "Toward a Quadrilateral Intelligence Sharing Network? Is the Time Ripe for the U.S. to Formalize an Intelligence-Sharing Network with Quad Partners Australia, Japan, and India?" *The Diplomat*, January 7, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/toward-a-quadrilateral-intelligence-sharing-network/#:~:text=A%20Patchwork%20of%20Quadrilateral%20Intelligence%20Capabilities&text=Beyond%20this%2C%20Japan%20signed%20the,enabling%20interoperability%20among%20Quad%20states.>

which are halted, and reopen the proposal of a Strategic Restraint Regime (SRR) to India. Without imposing a restraint, India will continue to build up military capabilities, coupled with Hindutva-driven abnormality, which will not only challenge South Asia but also the US' long-term footprint in Asia.

Lasting peace could only be achieved through dialogue, political maturity, and the concept of equality and shared prosperity. For this, India has to shed its Hindutva-driven mindset enveloped with a false sense of superiority and hegemony, which will even become a great obstruction to its self-growth and rise.

India should uphold the principles of multilateralism, respect the rules-based international order and international law, while committing to the political resolution of all outstanding disputes, including the Kashmir Issue, in accordance with UNSC resolutions. To achieve this, India needs to move away from a strategic discourse influenced by Hindutva ideologies. Unilateral alterations to binding agreements could jeopardize India's standing in the region, potentially compromising the welfare of over two billion people in South Asia in favor of hegemonic and extremist aspirations.

Conclusion

The regional security landscape in South Asia is in transition, implicating the regional peace and strategic stability. India, driven by its Hindutva ideology, continues to threaten regional peace and stability due to its coercive actions, irrational nuclear state behavior and destabilizing conduct. Despite India's abnormal state behavior, the West has turned a blind eye towards its actions. In fact, the West, particularly the US, emboldened India's strategic confidence and a false sense of hegemony by giving it the role of the Net Security Provider in the region.⁵⁴ Moreover, the strategic confidence is further amplified by the global destabilizing trends. The erosion of global norms and non-proliferation culture is also a contributing factor in India's strategic confidence. This confidence has led India to

⁵⁴ Sufian Ullah and Zeeshan Hayat, "India as a Net Security Provider in Indo-Pacific and Implications for the Region," *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability* 4, no. 1 (2021): 30, <https://doi.org/10.37540/njips.v4i1.77>

believe that it can escape accountability and consequences of its destabilizing actions, which was evident in the May 2025 Pahalgam conflict. The post-Pahalgam strategic environment validates a bitter fact. The stability of South Asia is operating on a thin margin of error, and this margin is getting narrower. The conflict proved that in a nuclearized space, with condensed geography and unresolved conflicts, there is no linear process of escalation that can be adjusted at any time. It is a construct that is unstable due to misperception, domestic political imperatives, and the rate at which traditional behavior can have strategic repercussions. In such an environment, India's aim to create a space for limited war is merely strategic adventurism, rather than an innovation. Pakistan's swift, proportionate, and calibrated response through its QPQ+ operational strategy denied India the space it aimed to create under the thresholds of nuclear use. Nevertheless, the conflict revealed a recurring pattern in India's crisis behavior: accusation first, investigation later, using it as a pretext for coercive action. The conflict also revealed that there is no space for war between two nuclear-armed adversaries; otherwise, the world would come close to seeing a nuclear catastrophe. The way forward lies in dialogue, political maturity, the concept of equality and shared prosperity, and respect for multilateralism and the international rules-based order.