

# Managed Stability to Competitive Deterrence: Structural Transformation of Nuclear Order and Strategic Stability of South Asia

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## ***Abstract***

*The nuclear order that emerged during the Cold War is undergoing a structural transformation. For decades, international security operated under a framework of managed nuclear stability, characterized by predictable deterrence relationships supported by arms control regimes, verification mechanisms, and tacit norms of restraint. Despite their limitations, the structured arrangements collectively reduced the probability of misperception and inadvertent escalation of conflict. During this period, second-strike survivability was robustly maintained, and offensive and defensive nuclear postures remained distinguishable to the degree necessary for rational deterrence calculations. The decision timelines under crisis were sufficient to support deliberative decision-making processes. This article posits that the emergence of multipolarity, the collapse of bilateral arms control between the United States (US) and Russia, and technological disruption have produced a distinct strategic environment, termed ‘competitive deterrence,’ which has severely impacted second-strike survivability, distinguishability of force postures, and deliberative decision timelines. This article uses South Asia as a case study to examine competitive deterrence dynamics in their most direct form. South Asia is a nuclear flashpoint due to recurring crises and the absence of a dialogue process between India and Pakistan. India’s build-up of destabilizing strategic capabilities, growing conventional asymmetries, and doctrinal modifications to seek space for war below the*

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*nuclear threshold constitute a critical case for testing competitive deterrence dynamics.*

**Keywords:** Managed Nuclear Stability; Competitive Deterrence; Structural Realism; Offense-Defense Balance; Waltz-Jervis Debate; Bipolarity; South Asian Strategic Stability; Arms Control Erosion.

## **Introduction**

On 5 February 2026, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) expired without a legally binding successor – a moment that closed decades of continuous treaty-based limits on US and Russian strategic forces.<sup>1</sup> The expiry of New START is an expression of the transition from a bipolar nuclear order, in which stability was structurally generated by the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) between two superpowers i.e., US and Soviet Union (Russia), to a multipolar nuclear environment, in which stability is politically constructed in absence of the structured frameworks.

This distinction between structurally generated stability and politically constructed stability is the central analytical contribution of this article. Drawing on Kenneth Waltz's structural realism<sup>2</sup> and Robert Jervis's offense-defense balance theory,<sup>3</sup> the article argues that managed nuclear stability was never primarily a product of concerted diplomatic efforts. It was a product of bipolarity; a structural condition in which two states, each possessing survivable second-strike capabilities, faced adversarial relationship, maintained a mutual interest in avoiding nuclear use, and had strong incentives to construct the institutional frameworks.

Waltz posits that nuclear deterrence remains robust regardless of the number of nuclear dyads – a concept called nuclear optimism. The logic of MAD applies whenever states possess survivable second-strike capabilities.<sup>4</sup> This article engages Jervis argument that stability under nuclear weapons is

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<sup>1</sup> Aiden Warren, "New START Expired. Now What for Global Nuclear Stability?" *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, February 17, 2026, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/new-start-expired-now-what-global-nuclear-stability>

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 79–101

<sup>3</sup> Robert Jervis, "Offense, Defense, and the Security Dilemma," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis, Global ed., 12th ed. (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2015), 93–112

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better," *The Adelphi Papers* 21, no. 171 (1981), <https://doi.org/10.1080/05679328108457394>

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contingent on certain conditions including second-strike survivability, posture distinguishability, and deliberative decision timelines. These conditions are not structurally guaranteed during bipolarity or multipolarity but should be used to stabilize deterrence.<sup>5</sup> The article argues that inherent complexities embedded in multipolarity coupled with deployment of emerging technologies are systematically challenging the conditions necessary for deterrence stability, as identified by Robert Jervis.

Three analytical arguments organize this article. First, managed stability was structurally contingent on bipolarity and the defense-dominant equilibrium<sup>6</sup> that bipolarity provided. Second, competitive deterrence<sup>7</sup> generates systemic risks that are more susceptible to inadvertent escalation.<sup>8</sup> Third, South Asia,

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 45

<sup>6</sup> Based on Robert Jervis's 1978 article 'Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,' the interaction between the Offense-Defense Balance and Differentiation (distinguishability) creates four distinct 'worlds' of stability: (1) Doubly Dangerous (offense advantage and not distinguishable from defense, where stability is very low. This is the worst-case scenario, since offensive and defensive postures look the same, states must assume the worst. Because the offense has the advantage, the 'incentive to strike first' is high. Arms races are intense and quick; (2) Security Dilemma (Defense Advantage and offense is not distinguishable). In this scenario stability is moderate since states still cannot tell if a neighbor is arming for protection or invasion. However, since defense is stronger, states can afford to wait and observe longer before reacting; (3) No security dilemma, but possible aggression (offense advantage but offense is distinguishable from defense). In this scenario stability is high because postures are distinguishable, a state can build a purely defensive force without threatening others. However, if a state does choose to build offensive weapons, its aggressive intent is clear. The danger here comes from deliberate aggression, not mutual misunderstanding; and (4) Doubly Stable (Defense Advantage and distinguishable from offense). In this scenario stability is high. It is the most peaceful scenario as states can easily signal, they are peaceful by buying defensive-only tech, and because defense is stronger than offense, there is no tactical incentive for anyone to start a war.

<sup>7</sup> Competitive deterrence is a concept most closely associated with James R. Schlesinger, referring to a form of deterrence in which adversaries are not locked into a stable, mutually accepted balance, but instead actively compete to gain strategic advantage within the deterrence relationship. Competitive deterrence departs from the earlier Cold War idea of relatively stable mutual deterrence (where both sides rely on assured retaliation). Instead, it assumes that states continuously seek relative advantage, not just parity, deterrence is dynamic and interactive, shaped by technological innovation, force posture adjustments, and doctrinal shift, each side attempts to undermine the credibility or survivability of the other's deterrent (e.g., through counterforce capabilities, missile defenses, or improved ISR)

<sup>8</sup> Kyle Balzer, "Knowing Your Enemy": James Schlesinger and the Origins of Competitive, Tailored Deterrence Strategies, Information Series No. 596 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, August 8, 2024), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/kyle-balzer-knowing-your-enemy-james-schlesinger-and-the-origins-of-competitive-tailored-deterrence-strategies-no-596-august-8-2024/](https://nipp.org/information_series/kyle-balzer-knowing-your-enemy-james-schlesinger-and-the-origins-of-competitive-tailored-deterrence-strategies-no-596-august-8-2024/)

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characterized by recurring crises is sustaining deterrence through Pakistan's nuclear signalling in the absence of Cold War-like arms control structures.<sup>9</sup>

The study in the first section develops the theoretical foundations of managed stability and resolves the Waltz-Jervis tension, which is the article's central theoretical problem. The second section identifies the three structural drivers of competitive deterrence while the third section assesses systemic risks. The final section applies the framework to South Asia as a critical case, deriving and testing specific predictions.

### **Cold War Managed Stability: Theoretical Foundations and Structural Limits**

Kenneth Waltz defines that international system as anarchic structure within which state behaviour is driven not by unit-level attributes but by the systemic distribution of capabilities. Bipolarity is the most stable systemic configuration because it minimizes the number of adversarial relationships and eliminates miscalculation risks that multipolarity generates. Under bipolarity, each superpower bears the full cost of miscalculation, generating stronger structural incentives to invest in stability management.<sup>10</sup>

Once both superpowers possessed survivable second-strike capabilities, first-strike incentives were eliminated: no conceivable military advantage could be worth the devastating retaliation. During Cold War, treaties formalized the mutual understanding of second-strike survivability, verification mechanisms provided the information necessary for rational deterrence calculation, and hotlines ensured that miscommunication in crisis would not trigger inadvertent escalation.<sup>11</sup>

In *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better* (1981), Waltz extended his nuclear deterrence logic to argue that acquisition of nuclear weapons by more states is stabilizing rather than destabilizing – proliferation optimism; because the logic of MAD applies to any nuclear dyad in a condition of mutual second-strike vulnerability, regardless of the number of nuclear actors in the system.<sup>12</sup> The article does not adhere to Waltz's proliferation optimism logic and provides grounds for its selective dismissal.

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<sup>9</sup> Rajesh M. Basrur, *South Asia's Cold War: Nuclear Weapons and Conflict in Comparative Perspective* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008)

<sup>10</sup> Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons," 204–210

<sup>11</sup> Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, 45

<sup>12</sup> Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons," 204–210

Jervis identifies three conditions for deterrence stability that Waltz's proliferation optimism implicitly assumed but never explained: second-strike survivability is robustly maintained across all nuclear dyads; offensive and defensive nuclear postures remain distinguishable to the degree necessary for rational deterrence calculation; and that decision timelines under crisis remain sufficient for deliberative choice rather than forcing pre-delegation or launch-under-warning.<sup>13</sup> Maintaining these conditions in a multipolar environment is highly difficult between the dyads with different doctrinal approaches and no framework of verification or communication.<sup>14</sup>

Jervis offense-defense theory<sup>15</sup> identifies two key variables that determine the intensity of the security dilemma: whether the offense or the defense has the advantage, and whether offensive and defensive postures are distinguishable from one another. Jervis observed that nuclear deterrence resting on secure second-strike capabilities produces the functional equivalent of defensive dominance. In the Cold War nuclear order, second-strike survivability ensured defensive dominance; arms control transparency, data exchanges, verification regimes, and agreed counting rules-maintained posture distinguishability to a degree sufficient for rational deterrence calculation. Hence, managed stability during the Cold War was a 'defense-dominant equilibrium' sustained by institutional transparency.

Above analysis also incorporates Schelling's perspective on coercive signalling,<sup>16</sup> where he argues that nuclear deterrence operates through 'the threat that leaves something to chance' such as shared understanding between the nuclear dyad that any crisis risks uncontrolled escalation, which generates mutual caution even in the absence of explicit deterrent threats. When signals are ambiguous, conventional and nuclear preparations are indistinguishable, cyber operations mimic physical attack, this escalation management logic breaks down – that the shared understanding of escalation risks should generate caution instead of generating panic and pre-emption.

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<sup>13</sup> Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, 9; Scott D. Sagan, "The Perils of Proliferation: Organization Theory, Deterrence Theory, and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons," *International Security* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1994): 66–107, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539178>

<sup>14</sup> Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995)

<sup>15</sup> Jervis, 'Offense, Defense, and the Security Dilemma,' 45

<sup>16</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 45, <https://archive.org/details/armsinfluence0000sche>

This article posits that bipolarity contributed to managed stability because the bipolar structural environment offers strong incentives to invest in stability management that made arms control transparency achievable. Multipolarity undermines managed stability in which second-strike survivability, posture distinguishability, and deliberative decision timelines are systematically more difficult to maintain, which is further degraded by technological disruption.

## **Competitive Deterrence: Structural Drivers and Interaction**

### ***i. Causal Mechanism***

The article's central claim that managed stability is giving way to competitive deterrence is driven by a change in polarity, the collapse of arms control structures, and technological disruption. In this section, it is argued that the interaction of these drivers has a qualitative threshold effect in the contemporary environment.<sup>17</sup> This is so because these drivers are undermining necessary conditions for deterrence stability such as second-strike survivability, posture distinguishability, and compressed decision-making timelines.

The change in polarity primarily works by the multiplication of adversarial relationships among dyads and dilution of stability management incentives. Waltz in his work also posits that multipolarity creates miscalculation risks, which did not occur during the bipolarity.<sup>18</sup> The erosion of shared information environment leads to the arms control collapse. In the absence of data exchanges required by the treaties, states make decisions about their strategic planning based on intelligence estimates that are vulnerable to collection gaps, analytical biases, and enemy deception. The worst-case planning creates force expansion which the adversaries perceive as threatening and the action-reaction cycle that occurs is beyond interruption.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>A qualitative threshold effect describes a point in a complex system where a small, incremental change in a quantitative variable triggers a massive, fundamental shift in the nature or quality of the system itself. Jervis used this concept to warn policymakers that small, seemingly harmless actions can have catastrophic 'system effects' if they inadvertently push a situation past a threshold. It is his way of saying that 'the whole is not the sum of its parts' because the relationships between parts change fundamentally at certain levels of intensity.

<sup>18</sup> Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons"

<sup>19</sup> Steven E. Miller, "A Nuclear World Transformed: The Rise of Multilateral Disorder," *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 17–36; Linton F. Brooks, "The End of Arms Control?" *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 84–100, <https://direct.mit.edu/daed/article/149/2/84/27315>

Disruptive emerging technologies undermine nuclear stability by creating new vulnerabilities or possibilities for escalation.<sup>20</sup> Cyber capabilities are considered among the most disruptive and destructive emerging technologies, posing significant risks to strategic stability.<sup>21</sup> The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and cyber into Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications (NC3) systems introduces risks of disruption and compromise, potentially leading to unintended escalation or miscalculation.<sup>22</sup> Attacks on space-based assets could significantly impair a state's ability to deter or respond to threats, impacting overall stability.<sup>23</sup> The combination of emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) with advanced conventional weapons can have a revolutionary impact on future conflicts, potentially blurring the lines between conventional and nuclear deterrence and raising the risk of escalation.<sup>24</sup> Hypersonic glide vehicles (HGV) undermine the defensive advantage dimension of the equilibrium by reducing decision-making time to less than the level needed to make a deliberative choice and dual-use platforms strike posture differentiability by rendering conventional and nuclear preparations physically indistinguishable. In recent times, the technological advancements have increased at a rapid pace.<sup>25</sup>

## ***ii. The Multipolar Nuclear Landscape***

Multipolarity multiplies the dyadic relationships that may lead to crisis. In the Cold War, the superpower crisis was bilateral and could be managed

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<sup>20</sup> Hasan Suzen, "How Disruptive Technologies Affect Deterrence, Defense and Security," Beyond the Horizon ISSG, September 29, 2020, <https://behorizon.org/how-disruptive-technologies-affect-deterrence-defense-and-security/>

<sup>21</sup> Arms Control & Disarmament Centre (ACDC), "Emerging Technologies and their Impact on Strategic Stability in South Asia," seminar report, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, March 12, 2020, [https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Report\\_Seminar\\_Mar\\_12\\_2020.pdf](https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Report_Seminar_Mar_12_2020.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Ankit K, "Redefining Deterrence: The Impact of Emerging Technologies on Nuclear and Conventional Military Forces," *Nuclear Network*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 7, 2025, <https://nuclearnetwork.csis.org/redefining-deterrence-the-impact-of-emerging-technologies-on-nuclear-and-conventional-military-forces/>

<sup>23</sup> Brad Roberts, "Emerging and Disruptive Technologies, Multi-domain Complexity, and Strategic Stability: A Review and Assessment of the Literature" (Livermore, CA: Center for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, February 2021), [https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/EDT\\_ST2\\_BHR\\_2021.3.16.pdf](https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/EDT_ST2_BHR_2021.3.16.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Tom Sauer, "The Potentially Revolutionary Impact of Emerging and Disruptive Technologies and Strategic Conventional Weapons on the Nuclear Deterrence Debate," *EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Papers*, no. 91 (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, December 2024), [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/eunpdc\\_no\\_91.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/eunpdc_no_91.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Peter L. Hays, "Strategic Implications of Hypersonic Attacks from Space," *DIACC Journal*, November 6, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.82498/C59P-CY28>

bilaterally. In the current multipolar world, a crisis between India and Pakistan takes place within the context of great-power rivalry; a crisis on the Korean Peninsula is framed by US-China rivalry and Russian influence; nuclear dynamics in the Middle East are tied to Gulf state security concerns and great-power competition in the region. The interplay between crises cannot be managed bilaterally and it is virtually impossible to anticipate.

The period of prolonged nuclear weapons reductions has ended. US-Russia bilateral arms control has been in crisis in the past few years and has now functionally collapsed with the expiry of New START Treaty. The deterrence relationship between US-Russia and China has become more unstable. The new debates in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia regarding nuclear status, deterrence, and extended security assurances indicate that further states might reevaluate their nuclear policies.

A nuclear competition previously dominated by a bilateral dynamic of US and Russia has transformed into a more complex strategic framework, where Washington feels compelled to concurrently deterring two near-peer competitors that are increasingly demonstrating signs of coordination. The logic of integrated deterrence, which combines nuclear, conventional, cyber, space, and economic means of power to deter coercion and to control escalation in multiple arenas, has created new strategic environment.<sup>26</sup>

There are signs that a new qualitative arms race is emerging, with implications that are likely to be broader, more multidimensional, and possibly more dangerous than those of the previous century. The main spheres of conflict will not be limited to traditional force architectures but also encompass cyber capabilities, outer space resources, and the undersea domains. In this kind of environment, the assessment of relative advantage will become more obscured, and traditional arms control models will no longer be relevant.<sup>27</sup>

### ***iii. Institutional Collapse and the Erosion of Structured Transparency***

The sequential collapse of the arms control architecture eliminates the transparency mechanisms through which the defense-dominant equilibrium was maintained. New START's expiry on 5 February 2026 without a legally

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<sup>26</sup> Michèle Flournoy, "The Three-Body Problem: The US, China, and Russia," Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, July 14, 2021, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2869997/the-three-body-problem-the-us-china-and-russia/>

<sup>27</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2025>

binding successor removes the last formal mechanism for bilateral data exchange and verification, leaving the US and Russia without treaty-mandated limits on strategic forces for the first time since the early 1970s. The ‘handshake’ understanding reached in Abu Dhabi days before expiry to ‘observe the spirit’ of New START without legal obligation,<sup>28</sup> verification, or defined duration illustrates the degradation from institutionalized to behaviorally contingent stability that the competitive deterrence framework predicts.

In the absence of confirmed data regarding the strength of adversary forces, the states have to operate in a way that they prepare against maximum potential strength instead of actual strength. This worst-case planning incentivizes expansion in its forces which its enemies perceive as threatening and thus creates expansion in reaction. The action-reaction cycle is no longer structurally mediated. The Yearbook 2025 by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)<sup>29</sup> confirms that all the nine nuclear-armed states are concurrently undertaking modernization programs, a precedent never witnessed in the post-Cold War period.

#### **iv. *Technological Disruption***

Technology is the most consequential driver of competitive deterrence. The Cold War nuclear order defensive advantage, and the distinguishable postures (Doubly Stable) were due to second-strike survivability (defensive advantage) and arms control transparency (posture distinguishability), but new technologies are predictably driving the nuclear environment in the direction of offense advantage (Doubly Dangerous).

The Hypersonic glide vehicles under development by all the major nuclear weapon states (the US, Russia and China),<sup>30</sup> target the defensive advantage dimension. By compressing warning-to-decision timelines from the thirty minutes provided by traditional Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) trajectories to under ten minutes for some trajectories, they eliminate the deliberative space essential for escalation management; the time within which coercive signals can be interpreted, intentions queried, and alternatives to

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<sup>28</sup> Xiaodon Liang, “New START Expires as US Urges ‘Modernized’ Treaty,” *Arms Control Today* 56 (March 2026), <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2026-03/news/new-start-expires-us-urges-modernized-treaty>.

<sup>29</sup> SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2025*, 177-201

<sup>30</sup> Alex Carter, “Hypersonic Weapons Explained: Which Countries Have Them and Why They Matter,” *Military Machine*, February 26, 2026, updated April 9, 2026, <https://militarymachine.com/hypersonic-weapons-explained>.

escalation identified. A hypersonic system capable of striking command-and-control nodes before retaliatory authorization introduces first-strike incentives that second-strike survivability was designed to eliminate.<sup>31</sup> Launch-on-warning protocols, the institutional adaptation to compressed timelines, dramatically increase the probability of catastrophic response to false alarms of the kind that Petrov's 1983 restraint<sup>32</sup> barely prevented within the managed stability framework.

Dual-use delivery systems destroy the distinguishability of attack postures, making it impossible to know whether the incoming attack is conventional or nuclear, and necessitating a worst-case response. The security dilemma is tempered when states can communicate the defensive nature of their postures via their capabilities.<sup>33</sup> Dual-use delivery platforms undermine this dynamic; for example, India's BrahMos missile is a dual-capable system whose conventional and nuclear versions look identical. A country under attack cannot know if an incoming BrahMos is carrying a conventional or nuclear warhead. This turns a potentially deliberate conventional coercive signal (an attempt to create a threat, leave something to chance, but ultimately manageable) into an accidental nuclear trigger because the receiver cannot differentiate the signal from an attack.<sup>34</sup>

Cyber-attacks on nuclear command-and-control systems introduce nuclear-domain effects through ostensibly sub-nuclear means, they create a range of escalation options that fall short of deliberate nuclear use. A cyber operation that is meant as signalling for coercive purposes can damage early-warning systems such that they initiate launch-under-warning protocols designed for physical attack, turning a sub-nuclear event into an accidental nuclear confrontation.<sup>35</sup> The path from conventional cyber operations to inadvertent nuclear escalation is now technologically possible; a new type of escalation risk for which the existing crisis management models, designed for a world in which the conventional-nuclear divide was more apparent, are ill-adapted.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Pavel Aksenov, "Stanislav Petrov: The Man Who May Have Saved the World," *BBC News*, September 26, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24280831>

<sup>33</sup> Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*.

<sup>35</sup> James M. Acton, "Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War," *International Security* 43, no. 1 (Summer 2018): 56–99, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00320](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00320)

## **Systemic Risks: The Global Nuclear Order Under Competitive Deterrence**

### ***a) Misperception and Crisis Instability***

The most obvious systemic risk of competitive deterrence is increased risk of misperception and its dire consequences. Managed stability minimised this risk through institutional transparency – treaty-based data exchanges, crisis hotlines, and strategic communication to develop mutual understanding of capabilities, intent, and red lines. Without the arms control data exchanges that once provided baseline information on adversary force status, and in an environment with a decision window shortened by three times or more, it would not be possible to manage such an episode in the same way.<sup>36</sup>

Competitive deterrence does not simply accelerate Cold War crisis dynamics – it alters them fundamentally. Nuclear integration with conventional, cyber, and space creates escalation not because of a state's choice to use nuclear weapons but because the separate rational actions of different actors, each following their own logic, create cascading effects. A cyber-attack on command-and-control systems, a conventional attack on a dual-use satellite, a conventional precision attack on a facility with dual conventional and nuclear uses; none of these actions is nuclear in intent, but they may still be nuclear in effect if the adversary cannot differentiate between the conventional nature of the action and the preparation for nuclear use.<sup>37</sup>

### ***b) The NPT Legitimacy Crisis and Proliferation Cascades***

The nuclear non-proliferation treaty's (NPT) fundamental political bargain is in its most acute legitimacy crisis since 1970. Nuclear-armed states are aggravating their stockpiles but are not disarming in line with Article VI.<sup>38</sup> The SIPRI Yearbook 2026 shows the systemic outcome that all the NPT nuclear-weapon states are undertaking modernization programs.

If NPT norms do not protect against nuclear infrastructure attacks - and if the NPT's implicit security guarantee to non-nuclear-armed states is inoperative -

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<sup>36</sup> Douglas Barrie, "Unstable at Speed: Hypersonics and Arms Control," *The Military Balance* (blog), International Institute for Strategic Studies, October 18, 2019, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2019/10/hypersonics-arms-control/>

<sup>37</sup> Acton, 'Escalation through Entanglement.'

<sup>38</sup> Manuel Herrera, "What Future for the NPT?: Scenarios for the Treaty Going Forward," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 9, suppl. 1 (2026): 63–76, published online February 26, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2026.2639044>

then states in conflict-prone settings have a structural incentive to pursue independent nuclear weapon programs. The lessons of Ukraine, whose 1994 Budapest Memorandum security assurances were ineffective against Russian invasion, further point in this direction across a range of potential proliferant states.<sup>39</sup> Iran's consideration of NPT withdrawal in response to US-Israel attacks on its nuclear infrastructure presents the most direct threat to the treaty since the North Korean withdrawal in 2003.<sup>40</sup> The proliferation risk generated by competitive deterrence is not theoretical; it is structural and materially reinforced by recent precedent.

*c) Extended Deterrence Under Stress*

Competitive deterrence creates specific challenges for extended deterrence. The credibility of a patron's nuclear deterrence posture rests on allies' perception that it is credible enough to address their threats. The US threats to abandon its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) commitments have had a strategic impact on US allies. Even when there is no withdrawal, doubts about alliance commitments undermine the credibility of deterrence. In Europe, trust has been eroded because deterrence is not only a military function, but also a political one. Criticism of NATO by Washington during the recent Iran war, combined with suggestions that allies should provide support for US operations or risk reduced commitment or even US abandonment, again raised suspicions that Washington might view alliance commitments as conditional rather than binding.<sup>41</sup>

The fallout is not just in Europe. In the Indo-Pacific, the US redeployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery from South Korea to the Middle East during the recent Iran war disconcerted South Korea and Japan. This demonstrated that US military resources allocated to the so-called Indo-Pacific deterrence can be diverted swiftly to another conflict zone.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Brian Haughton, "Memorandum Mori: How the Budapest Memorandum Failed to Protect Ukraine," *CONCEPT*48(2025), <https://concept.journals.villanova.edu/index.php/concept/article/view/3093>

<sup>40</sup> Maziar Motamedi, "As War Rages, Iranian Politicians Push for Exit from Nuclear Weapons Treaty," *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/28/lawmakers-push-npt-exit-as-us-israel-hit-irans-nuclear-sites-steel-plants>

<sup>41</sup> Michael Birnbaum and Ellen Francis, "Trump vents at NATO but avoids rupture after meeting with alliance's leader," April 8, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2026/04/08/trump-nato-withdrawal-rutte/>

<sup>42</sup> Robert Tait, "Why the Nato Alliance Is Not as Likely to Dissolve as Trump Makes It Seem," *Guardian*, April 11, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/apr/11/nato-alliance-trump-threats>

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Similarly, Japan saw the move as a sign that the US may have commitments to multiple theatres. If resources can be shifted away from Northeast Asia in a conflict elsewhere, then extended deterrence might not be as automatic as once thought. As a result, both Japan and South Korea have redoubled debate on indigenous strike capabilities, missile defense, increased defense spending and enhanced security co-operation with regional and European allies.<sup>43</sup>

Strategically, uncertainty has not led to the dissolution of alliances, but it casts doubts about their stability. Doubt about the US leads allies to hedge: Europe seeks independent deterrence, while Asian allies seek better self-defense. The lasting effect is steady shift from unquestioned security towards more localized and nationally oriented security arrangements.

## **South Asia and Competitive Deterrence**

South Asia is selected as a test case because its institutional setting is most dissimilar to the Cold War nuclear environment. It is in South Asia that the dynamics of competitive deterrence are exhibited in their purest form in the contemporary nuclear order. The India-Pakistan nuclear relationship has been defined by historical rivalry, crises and military asymmetries. While tensions persist, nuclear deterrence has so far prevented large-scale war by instilling caution on both sides, however, it has not led to sustained stability. South Asia remains a nuclear flashpoint owing to India's ultra-nationalist tendencies, hegemonic ambitions, destabilizing build-up of strategic capabilities, growing conventional asymmetries and doctrinal dichotomies to seek space for war below nuclear threshold. This section seeks to unfold the agency and limits of nuclear deterrence in South Asia and analyze triggers of instability through the prism of Jervisian offense-defense balance.

## ***Nuclear Deterrence at Work***

Nuclear deterrence has constrained major crises in South Asia even before India and Pakistan fielded operational arsenals. The 1986–87, Indian military exercise Brasstacks marked the first significant crisis in which the perceived nuclear capabilities have helped avert escalation.<sup>44</sup> Although neither state

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<sup>43</sup> Philippe Mesmer and Philippe Pons, "Macron Visits Japan and South Korea, Both Worried about War in Iran," *Le Monde*, March 31, 2026, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2026/03/31/macron-visits-japan-and-south-korea-both-worried-about-war-in-iran\\_6751980\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2026/03/31/macron-visits-japan-and-south-korea-both-worried-about-war-in-iran_6751980_4.html)

<sup>44</sup> Iram Khalid, "Brasstacks Crisis 1986–87," *South Asian Studies* 27, no. 1 (January–June 2012): 35–62, [https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/csas/PDF/3.%20Iram%20Khalid\\_January-June%202012.pdf](https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/csas/PDF/3.%20Iram%20Khalid_January-June%202012.pdf)

possessed a deployable capability at the time, Pakistan's implicit signaling is widely believed as influential in crisis management.<sup>45</sup> A decade later, during the 1999 Kargil conflict, India's decision to confine military operations to the Kargil sector underscored the deterrent effect of Pakistan's newly demonstrated nuclear capability in May 1998.<sup>46</sup>

The next major crisis between South Asia's nuclear-armed rivals was the 2001-02 'Twin Peaks' standoff, which persisted for nearly eight months without escalating to a full-scale war.<sup>47</sup> Widely regarded as the first classic case of nuclear deterrence in the region, the episode illustrated how the prospect of nuclear use reinforced by missile tests and high-level leadership statements constrained Indian military options despite its conventional advantage.<sup>48</sup>

The 2019 Balakot crisis has shown the impact of nuclear deterrents on conventional escalation. India's airstrikes in Pakistan after the false-flag Pulwama attack provoked Pakistan's Operation Swift Retort. Pakistan's nuclear deterrent capped escalation, forestalling the conflict's ascent up the escalation ladder.<sup>49</sup>

The May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict is the latest example of deterrence in action in South Asia. India failed to achieve its stated politico-military goals during the conflict and suffered air and land operational losses. India then sought US help for a ceasefire. The threat of nuclear conflict played a significant role in Washington's decision-making, a point that President Donald Trump later alluded to.<sup>50</sup> In fact, on 7 May 2025, Prime Minister Modi ordered the Indian military to limit its campaign to alleged civilian targets linked to so-called terrorism and to refrain from targeting Pakistani military infrastructure. This indicates that Pakistan's deterrence strategy was working,

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Krepon and Liv Dowling, "Crisis Intensity and Nuclear Signaling in South Asia," in *Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, ed. Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2018), 197, <https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/InvestigatingCrisesIntensity.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Rabia Akhtar, ed., *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post-Pahalgam – May 2025* (Islamabad: CSSPR-IRS, 2025), 4

<sup>47</sup> Alex Stolar, "To the Brink: Indian Decision-Making and the 2001–2002 Standoff," Stimson, March 11, 2008, <https://www.stimson.org/2008/brink-indian-decision-making-and-2001-2002-standoff-0/>

<sup>48</sup> Krepon and Dowling, "Crisis Intensity and Nuclear Signaling in South Asia," 203–205

<sup>49</sup> Rabia Akhtar, ed., *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post-Pahalgam* (Islamabad: CSSPR-IRS, 2025), 5

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

constraining India's military options by limiting escalation. This limited India's military action to a level short of full-fledged conventional war.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Triggers of Instability in South Asia***

Despite the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence, South Asia still experiences crises, military standoffs and coercive signaling by India. The dynamics of competitive deterrence that result in instability in South Asia are explained through the prism of Jervasian framework. This theory suggests that the conditions for a stable deterrence relationship comprise posture distinguishability, second-strike survivability and deliberative decision timelines. The absence or weakness of these conditions results in the destabilization of deterrence through misperception, crisis escalation and instability. The Pakistan-India nuclear relationship exhibits these risks.

- *Lack of Posture Distinguishability and Misperception:* The first condition of nuclear stability is posture distinguishability – distinguishing between offensive and defensive postures. Distinguishable postures enable better understanding of adversary intentions and prevent overreaction. India's ambiguous No First Use (NFU) policy, dual-capable missiles, and overlapping conventional and nuclear platforms create posture indistinguishability – fueling misperception. In a crisis, policymakers will be more likely to interpret ambiguity as hostile intentions leading to action-reaction dynamics.
- *Ambiguity Surrounding India's NFU Nuclear Doctrine and Its Consequences:* India's NFU nuclear doctrine, while seemingly designed to enhance strategic stability in South Asia, is plagued with ambiguities that affect deterrence stability. It not only erodes confidence in India's deterrent policy but also contributes to posture indistinguishability – a clear and coherent nuclear doctrine allows other states to interpret when a nuclear-armed state might use its weapons.

India's NFU doctrine seems more like a declaratory posture than an operational constraint and is used to achieve international legitimacy as a 'responsible' nuclear weapon state.<sup>52</sup> Over the years, there has been a deliberate blurring of the NFU doctrine through public

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<sup>51</sup> Akhtar, *Strategic Reckoning*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Kumar Sundaram and M. V. Ramana, "India and the Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 1 (February 22, 2018): 152–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1438737>.

statements by senior Indian officials that depart from the official NFU posture, undermining its credibility.

In 2016, then Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar expressed doubts about the value of doctrinal restraint. Further evidence of doctrinal variation is found in former National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon's claim that India 'might consider pre-emptive first strikes' if it felt an adversary was about to launch a nuclear attack.<sup>53</sup> This was reinforced in 2019, by Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, who stated that India had been following NFU, but 'what happens in future depends on circumstances.'<sup>54</sup> These statements collectively suggest India's NFU doctrine is now more ambiguous, caveated and permissive of first use than ever before.

Moreover, the disconnect between India's declaratory policy and operational force posture add to Pakistan's security challenges - India possesses the Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle (MIRVed) Agni-V (7,000+ km, MIRV-tested March 2024)<sup>55</sup> and the Arihant-class, Nuclear-Powered Ballistic Missile Submarines (SSBNs) - the third SSBN commissioned in April 2026.<sup>56</sup> The integration of precision delivery, active S-400 ballistic missile defense systems since 2022 and MIRV technology contribute to posture ambiguity – the means needed for assured retaliation can be used for counterforce targeting if sufficient intelligence and accuracy is present. This is the unit level 'indistinguishability problem.'<sup>57</sup>

In absence of trust between the two countries, any level of ambiguity may result in escalation during crisis. This forms a vicious cycle of insecurity, where perceptions of the other's intentions may result in

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<sup>53</sup> Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (Penguin Random House India, 2016), <https://www.puradsimedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CHOICES.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy Depends on Circumstances: Rajnath Singh,' *The Hindu*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/no-first-use-nuclear-policy-depends-on-circumstances-rajnath-singh/article29109149.ece>

<sup>55</sup> Maryyum Masood, "India's MIRV Development: A Latent Counter-space Capability," *Global Security Review*, September 16, 2024, <https://globalsecurityreview.com/indias-mirv-development-a-latent-counter-space-capability/>

<sup>56</sup> "INS Aridhaman: India's Third SSBN and the Dawn of Credible Sea-Based Deterrence," *CSDR Blind Spot*, Centre for Strategic and Defense Research, April 2026, <https://csdronline.com/blind-spot/ins-aridhaman-indias-third-ssbn-and-the-dawn-of-credible-sea-based-deterrence/>

<sup>57</sup> Cassandra Peterson, "The Second Coming of MIRVs," Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, May 27, 2016, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/the-second-coming-of-mirvs/>.

accidental escalation. In South Asia, such misreadings are especially dangerous because of the legacy of historical enmities and the brittle security situation. Both countries have a fragile balance of power and misperception can easily result in crisis instability or even a nuclear conflict.

- *Offensive, War Fighting Cold Start Doctrine*: Pakistan's Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) is a logical and defensive response, in line with the theory of realism, whereby the growing counterforce capabilities of the materially stronger opponent threaten the survivability of strategic capabilities of the other. The Cold Start Doctrine of India and its subsequent evolution into the Doctrine of Rapid and Short (DRS) punitive strikes are examples of limited, low-intensity, sub-threshold military engagements aimed at imposing costs while avoiding all-out conflict. Pakistan has made a sound strategic choice; it has evolved its deterrence posture to maintain strategic equilibrium and prevent coercion by its adversary.

Pakistan has continued to pursue the FSD through the logic of Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD). This strategy is designed to address existential asymmetry through opacity, centralized command and control, and signalling. FSD aims to prevent aggression along the entire spectrum of conflict - tactical, operational, and strategic - rather than pursuing escalation dominance or nuclear adventurism.<sup>58</sup> Pakistan has retained the interconnection between conventional and nuclear responses in its FSD strategy while retaining ambiguity regarding specific nuclear thresholds.<sup>59</sup> Opacity is vital to countering India's conventional superiority and threats from India's emerging limited-war doctrines.<sup>60</sup> Pakistan's opacity regarding declaratory nuclear thresholds is an example of prudent decision-making in conditions of vulnerability. The conventional asymmetry with India precludes

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<sup>58</sup> Khalid Kidwai, "Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control - Keynote Address," keynote address at the Seventh IISS-CISS Workshop on South Asian Strategic Stability, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, February 6, 2020, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bInVdvk39e0>

<sup>59</sup> Sitara Noor, "Strategic Stability in South Asia: The Evolving Challenges and Potential Opportunities for India and Pakistan," *Strategic Studies* 43, no. 1 (Summer 2023): 72, [https://strategicstudies.org.pk/index.php/strategic\\_studies/article/view/272/156](https://strategicstudies.org.pk/index.php/strategic_studies/article/view/272/156)

<sup>60</sup> "India's Cold Start Doctrine: Not So Ambiguous," *South Asian Voices*, February 6, 2018, <https://southasianvoices.org/indias-cold-start-doctrine-not-so-ambiguous/>.

Pakistan from adopting inflexible declaratory red lines that could be exploited via limited conventional warfare.<sup>61</sup>

- *Compressed Decision Timelines and Escalatory Pressures:* The second condition of stable deterrence is sufficient time for deliberations. Stable deterrence relies not just on weapons but also time for deliberations. It takes time to verify information, conduct deliberations and consider alternatives before making irreversible choices. In a region characterized by compressed decision cycles, Pakistan's threat perception evolves in the context of ambiguity of India's declaratory strategy and dichotomy in its developmental posture. Recent South Asian crises suggest that persistent ambiguity under these conditions heightens the risk of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation rather than sustaining stable deterrence.<sup>62</sup>
- *Geographical Proximity:* Pakistan and India's geographical proximity allows missiles to reach the other side in minutes. The 2022 launch of a BrahMos missile highlights the risks of inadvertent escalation due to uncertainty and time constraints.<sup>63</sup> During crises, this warning time is likely to further shrink by political pressures and media hype.

Canisterization of missile systems has shortened the preparation for launch from hours to minutes, enabling higher levels of readiness. Agni-V readiness and canisterization significantly shorten launch times from hours to minutes. These are generally more suitable to the launch-on-warning and high-alert postures of nuclear forces. In addition, Agni-V's MIRV-capable design improves strike effectiveness, allows for multiple target options, and increases its counterforce capabilities.<sup>64</sup> The introduction and deployment of the BrahMos missile system on land, sea and air platforms highlight India's quest for rapid, precision-strike weapon systems that have potential strategic implications. BrahMos constitutes a blurring of

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<sup>61</sup> Akhtar, *Strategic Reckoning*, 178

<sup>62</sup> Akhtar, *Strategic Reckoning*, 170

<sup>63</sup> Atia Ali Kazmi, "Crisis Escalation and De-escalation in South Asia: Lessons from BrahMos Incident," *CISS Strategic View III* (Center for International Strategic Studies, March 16, 2024), <https://ciss.org.pk/crisis-escalation-and-de-escalation-in-south-asia-lessons-from-brahmos-incident-ciss-strategic-view-iii-march-2024/>

<sup>64</sup> Asma Khalid, "Agni-V Canister Launch: Facts and Implications," *Modern Diplomacy*, July 16, 2018, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2018/07/16/agni-v-canister-launch-facts-and-implications/>; Missile Defense Project, 'Agni-V,' *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 11, 2016, last modified April 23, 2024, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/agni-5/>

conventional escalation thresholds, and introduces an element of uncertainty to an adversary's strategic calculus.<sup>65</sup> India's ready-to-use ballistic missiles onboard SSBNs significantly strains decision timelines.

Overall, these trends weaken India's NFU policies. They progressively diminish NFU credibility by facilitating flexible retaliation options, and latent first-use or first-strike capabilities under a 'time-compressed' environment.<sup>66</sup> This developmental shift is being complemented by India's growing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities and increasing use of AI in its military strategy. Improved access to near real-time satellite imagery and sensor data enhances target identification, and shortens the decision-to-launch window.<sup>67</sup>

- *Counterforce targeting*: The development of precision strike capabilities makes little sense for minimum deterrent countervalue missions. India's growing trend to develop accurate and ready-use missile systems demonstrates India's eroding doctrinal commitment to minimum deterrence and a shift towards counterforce posture.<sup>68</sup> In nuclear dyads such as India-Pakistan, such systems risk lowering the threshold for counterforce strategies by offering decision-makers a potentially false sense of protection.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, these developments intensify insecurity and undermine the stability of deterrence in South Asia and forcing Pakistan to ensure nuclear survivability.<sup>70</sup>

India's evolving modernization of nuclear and dual-capable capabilities should be assessed in relation to the signals it sends

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<sup>65</sup> Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014)

<sup>66</sup> Akhtar, *Strategic Reckoning*, 169

<sup>67</sup> Safia Mansoor, "India's AI Militarization: Security Repercussions for Pakistan," January 24, 2024, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analitics-and-comments/columns/military-and-security/india-s-ai-militarization-security-repercussions-for-pakistan/>

<sup>68</sup> Iftikhar Ali and Jatswan S. Sidhu, "India's Doctrinal Modifications: Counterforce Temptations in South Asia," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 57, no. 3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211019075>.

<sup>69</sup> Kazmi, "Crisis Escalation and De-escalation in South Asia."

<sup>70</sup> Aqeel Akhtar and Sufian Ullah, "India's Sea-Based Nuclear Forces and Strategic Stability in South Asia," *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs* 15, no. 1 (2023): 54–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2021.1961352>

regarding nuclear employment options. India is steadily developing capabilities to go beyond the requirements of counter-value targeting against Pakistan and also exploring options to target Pakistan's strategic forces.<sup>71</sup> Advances in ballistic and cruise missile systems, combined with AI-enabled ISR integration, point to a shift from assured retaliation toward counterforce targeting.

Such developments indicate growing flexibility for pre-emptive strikes and escalation, in crisis situations. India's missile posture enhances readiness and responsiveness.<sup>72</sup> BrahMos, and the new hardened-target strike variants of the Agni missile series, naval and mobile launchers indicate first-strike flexibility. The canisterization of missiles like Agni-V, Agni-P and Pralay enhances readiness, enabling pre-emptive options.<sup>73</sup>

In context of above-stated facts, it can be summarized that in South Asia deterrence is at work, however, stable peace remains a distant possibility. India's ambiguous doctrine, dual-capable delivery systems, overlapping conventional and nuclear platforms, and evolving missile capabilities make it increasingly difficult to infer the intentions during a crisis. India's declared NFU doctrine with inbuilt caveats, technological developments, and force postures creates defense-offense ambiguity. Precision strike systems, MIRV-capable missiles, ballistic missile defense, canisterized launchers, and sea-based assets increasingly hint at India's counterforce strategy. India is also reported to be developing bunker-busting munition. Notwithstanding the development timeframe and technical hurdles, this intent accentuates instability.

South Asia is characterized by compressed decision timelines. Geography alone creates short missile flight times measured in minutes. When combined with intense media pressure, domestic political nationalism, cyber vulnerabilities, disinformation risks, and rapid military signaling, leaders may be forced to make consequential decisions under severe time stress. Modern surveillance systems, real-time targeting data, AI-assisted processing, and canisterized missile readiness further compress the interval between warning

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<sup>71</sup> Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security* 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018/19): 7–52, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00340](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00340).

<sup>72</sup> Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*

<sup>73</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, "India's Missile Modernization Beyond Minimum Deterrence," *Federation of American Scientists*, October 4, 2013, <https://fas.org/publication/indianmirv/>

### *Managed Stability to Competitive Deterrence*

and response. Such conditions reduce opportunities for verification, diplomacy, hotline use, or third-party intervention. Stable deterrence requires time for judgment; South Asia increasingly reduces it.

Concerns over second-strike survivability continue to drive competitive force development. If either state comes to believe that its retaliatory capability is vulnerable to pre-emption, incentives for early use, dispersal, launch readiness, or rapid escalation increase. Ballistic missile defense, precision strike systems, ISR integration, sea-based deterrents, hardened silos, mobile launchers, and counterforce discourse all affect perceptions of survivability. Whether or not these systems can technically neutralize an adversary's arsenal is less important than whether leaders believe they might. Deterrence is psychological as much as material. Perceived vulnerability can be as destabilizing as actual vulnerability.

### **Conclusion**

The world is witnessing a structural reorganization of the nuclear order from managed stability, where the structural conditions enabled by bipolarity sustained deterrence relationships, towards competitive deterrence, where stability must be politically constructed. South Asia is the test case for the competitive deterrence framework. In a nuclear environment characterized by short geographical timelines, the India-Pakistan nuclear dyad maintains deterrence through Pakistan's unilateral restraint and improvised crisis management. Facing conventional asymmetry and concerns over limited-war concepts such as Cold Start and related rapid punitive doctrines, Pakistan's response through FSD reflects the logic of structural adaptation that strengthens deterrence across tactical, operational, and strategic levels. South Asia illustrates that nuclear deterrence can effectively prevent total war, yet it does not achieve lasting strategic stability due to India's delusional grandeur, hegemonic ambitions, its foreign policy imbued with religious dogma, and military modernization beyond its actual security needs. Since overt nuclearization, India and Pakistan have repeatedly reached dangerous levels of confrontation. The historical record indicates that nuclear weapons have imposed caution on decision-makers, constrained conventional military options, and created incentives for de-escalation once crises intensify. While nuclear weapons are likely to continue preventing all-out war, India's offensive policies, the absence of bilateral dialogue, and lack of trust may still lead to dangerous crises, inadvertent escalations, and miscalculations.