

Fragmented Global Nuclear Order: Modi's Calculated Irrationality, and Nuclear Risk Reduction Measures Between India and Pakistan

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Abstract

The expiry of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) effectively ended the traditional global nuclear order. This fragmentation of the nuclear order is marked by new challenges in the form of artificial intelligence (AI), cyber capabilities, and autonomous systems in the global and regional nuclear landscape. The South Asian nuclear dyad is a prime example of this complexity as a region with a poor record of nuclear risk reduction and confidence-building measures (CBMs). Since 2014, India has been ruled by a Hindutva-motivated Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led regime that seems to demonstrate a tendency to use war and nuclear weapons to achieve political ends, posing a grave threat to Pakistan's national security. This paper aims to understand the history and historicity of the global nuclear order, thereby situating the South Asian nuclear dyad within it. It explores how India and Pakistan developed certain risk reduction measures and CBMs. The paper also addresses how the regime led by Narendra Modi is inclined to risk-taking behavior, which adversely affects strategic stability between India and Pakistan. The challenges posed by the emerging technologies, AI, and enhanced cyber capabilities have complicated the already troubled strategic stability in the region. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for

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a peace-oriented partnership between India and Pakistan on regional strategic stability.

Keywords: Strategic Arms Control, Disarmament, Strategic Stability, Arms Control Regime, Nonproliferation, Nuclear Weapons

Introduction

Charles Dickens opened his *A Tale of Two Cities* with by stating, ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.’¹ Unbeknownst to Dickens, more than a hundred and fifty years after he published his classic, these lines aptly explain the state of the global nuclear order and the challenges it faces.

Since the early period of the Cold War, the global nuclear order has been functioning through certain protocols, treaties, and regulations. Even the new entrants and the gatecrashers followed these conventions. However, with the renewed great power competition and the return to tribalism within the institution of the state, the process of erosion of the global nuclear order began. For several decades, Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), and START, etc., regulated the global nuclear order by placing transparency measures, legally binding limits, data exchanges, and verification measures. The expiry of the NEW START, the last of such agreements in February 2026, has practically left the global nuclear order rudderless, as the United States and Russia are no longer tied up in any constraint regarding their weapon systems. This, in all likelihood, would result in a renewed global arms race. China’s military modernization, including its nuclear advancement, is also to be taken into account. This strategic landscape is further complicated by the emergence of challenges to strategic stability in the shape of AI, cyber capabilities, and autonomous weapons systems.

These challenges would not only affect the global nuclear order but also raise several new challenges for regional nuclear dyads such as South Asia. Since 2014, India has been ruled by a Hindutva-motivated and driven Modi regime

¹ Charles Dickens, “A Tale of Two Cities,” (London: Penguin, 2004) p. 1

that has demonstrated the tendency to use war and nuclear weapons to achieve political ends.

This paper aims to understand the historical evolution of the global nuclear order and how it contributed to nuclear nonproliferation and ensuring strategic stability. Using this as a background, the paper then situates the South Asian nuclear dyad in the established nuclear norms and nuclear risk reduction measures, as well as practices, by looking at the existing CBMs between India and Pakistan and how they have fared historically. The paper also addresses how the Modi regime's risk-taking behavior has adversely affected strategic stability between India and Pakistan and how the challenges posed by the emerging technologies, AI, and enhanced cyber capabilities would further affect this dynamic. At the end, the paper argues for the adoption of *Adverse Partnership* on strategic stability issues by India and Pakistan.

Global Nuclear Order

Post American nuclear attack on Japan in 1945, Bernard Brodie famously stated: 'Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on, its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.'² This, in essence, is what the existing global order is all about. In the early years of the first nuclear age, especially after the Soviet nuclear test, it was feared that several more countries would soon acquire nuclear weapons of their own, fulfilling Brodie's divination of a multilateral possession of the bomb. President Kennedy voiced a similar concern during his presidential campaign, stating: 'There are indications, because of new inventions, that ten, fifteen, or twenty nations will have a nuclear capacity, including Red China by the end of the presidential office in 1964.'³ Therefore, in McGeorge Bundy's words, 'to cap the volcano,'⁴ and to address the emerging dangers of a nuclear war, arms race, and possible proliferation of nuclear weapons to additional states, certain measures were initiated by Washington that over the years turned into what is now known as the global nuclear order. An order that in its essence is

² Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946)

³ "Debate Transcript: The Third Kennedy–Nixon Presidential Debate," October 13, 1960, *Commission on Presidential Debates*, <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-13-1960-debate-transcript/>

⁴ McGeorge Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. 1 (October 1969): 1–20

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based on organized hypocrisy⁵ is described by Lawrence Freedman as based on ‘twin pillars’: *nonproliferation to prevent or halt nuclear proliferation*, and *strategic stability between the USA and USSR* in the ensuing nuclear rivalry.⁶

First pillar of Global Nuclear Order: Nuclear Nonproliferation

The 1954 US Atomic Energy Act serves as the foundational document of this pillar. The Act established the American Atomic Energy for Peace program, which permits and facilitates the process of American support and help to willing global partners in using atomic energy for peaceful purposes. In 1957, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was created to promote the peaceful use of nuclear energy. To address the issue of proliferation, multilateral negotiations were conducted by the US and the erstwhile USSR (now Russia) in 1965 that culminated in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which came into effect in March 1970. The NPT is arguably the most important treaty of the global nuclear and nonproliferation order, with more than 191 members at present. Noted exceptions are India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel. New Delhi’s peaceful nuclear explosion (PNE) dubbed the Smiling Buddha in 1974 resulted in an understanding that stringent export control measures are required to ensure that nuclear technology transferred to countries to be used in civilian nuclear programs and peaceful purposes could not be used for any other purpose, including a peaceful nuclear explosion. For this, a series of meetings was held in London between the US, USSR (now Russia), United Kingdom (UK), France, Japan, Canada, and West Germany. This development resulted in the establishment of the London Club in 1975, which morphed into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in 1978 and the guidelines of the group were published by the IAEA as an Information Circular INFCIRC/254.⁷

⁵ Zeb, Rizwan. "International Non-proliferation Regime and Organised Hypocrisy." *Journal of Security & Strategic Analyses* 10, no. 1 (2024): 57–71. <https://doi.org/10.57169/jssa.0010.01.0310>

⁶ Lawrence Freedman, “The Interplay Between the International System and the Global Nuclear Order,” in *Meeting the Challenges of the New Nuclear Age: Nuclear Weapons in a Changing Global Order*, ed. Steven E. Miller, Robert Legvold, and Lawrence Freedman (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2019), 62–75, https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2019_New-Nuclear-Age_Changing-Global-Order.pdf

⁷ International Atomic Energy Agency, *Communication Received from the Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan to the International Atomic Energy Agency Regarding Certain Member States’ Guidelines for the Export of Nuclear Material, Equipment and Technology*,

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Despite several flaws, impediments, and failures, the NPT managed to achieve its main objective of keeping the number of nuclear-weapon states to a minimum, contrary to Brodie's projected multilateral ownership of nuclear weapons and President Kennedy's prediction of twenty nuclear states. In 2026, there are only nine nuclear states in the world. Five states that are recognized by the NPT as nuclear-weapon states are the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China. India and Pakistan tested their nuclear devices in 1998 while staying outside the NPT. North Korea acceded to the NPT in 1985, withdrew in 1993, and conducted its first nuclear test in 2006. Israel is believed to have possessed nuclear weapons since 1968 in opacity and has never joined the NPT. Although the five Nuclear Weapon States refused to disarm (one of the main pillars and agreements under the NPT), and continue to enhance their arsenals, which is one of the main reasons for the NPT failure despite having a broader consensus on the issue of non-proliferation. Due to its utility and significance, after the expiry of its mandated 25-year term, NPT was extended indefinitely in 1995. Along with NPT, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) that germinated out of the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) was also a significant step forward addressing this pillar of the global nuclear order. The CTBT would have, as the name entails, prohibited all types of nuclear tests. However, it was effectively killed by the US when its Senate refused to rectify it. At present, the progress on this pillar is practically stalled due to the continued deadlock on the NPT's progress and disagreement over the status of a treaty on fissile material. Furthermore, the US President Donald Trump recently openly contemplated and stated⁸ that Washington might resume nuclear testing.

Second Pillar of Global Nuclear Order: Strategic Stability

After the Soviet nuclear test of 1949 and several crises throughout the 1950s, such as the Berlin crises (1948-49 and 1958-61), Quemoy and Matsu crises (1954-55 and 1958), the Korean War (1950-53), the possibility of a nuclear exchange arose. During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the US and USSR came very close to a nuclear war. In the words of then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, pure and simple luck saved the world from a

INFCIRC/254/Rev.14/Part 1a (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, October 18, 2019), <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/infcircs/1978/infcirc254r14p1.pdf>

⁸ "Trump says US Will Resume Nuclear Testing," *Arms Control Today*, November 2025, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-11/news-briefs/trump-says-us-will-resume-nuclear-testing>

possible nuclear holocaust.⁹ The back channel between Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin and President Kennedy's brother Robert Kennedy played a vital role in the resolution of the crisis. The crisis made both the Americans and the Soviets realize the significance of strategic stability, as any crisis instability could push either side to opt for the option of striking first to accrue maximum advantage. Thomas Schelling opined, 'Fear that the other may be about to strike in the mistaken belief that we are about to strike gives us a motive for striking, and so justifies the other's motive.'¹⁰ A positive impact of this crisis was that it started a process that culminated with several nuclear arms control and risk-reduction Measures between the US and USSR. The first was the establishment of a Direct Communications Link, also known as the Hotline, between the two in 1963.¹¹ This eventually transformed into Nuclear Risk-Reduction Centers. This was followed by a series of arms control agreements between the two.¹² As the Cold War was inching towards its end, in 1987, both sides signed the INF Treaty. As per the treaty, both sides agreed to destroy all land-based nuclear and conventional missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km.

Soon after the disintegration of the USSR, Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, through the Soviet Threat Reduction Act of 1991, initiated the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Program aimed at securing and dismantling weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the erstwhile USSR. It also denuclearized former Soviet states Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Ukraine. On 31 July 1991, START-I was signed. Two years later, on 3 January 1993, START -II was signed. However, the positive moment was lost in the coming years as the Helsinki framework never actually materialized, and START-III remained just an idea. President Bush's assumption of office in 2000 was a further setback in this regard as his administration viewed arms

⁹ Errol Morris, dir., *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Classics, 2004), film

¹⁰ Schelling, Thomas C., *The Reciprocal Fear of Surprise Attack*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1958. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P1342.html>

¹¹ "Memorandum of Understanding Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics Regarding the Establishment of a Direct Communications Link," June 20, 1963, *US Department of State*, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/4785.htm>

¹² Jozef Goldblat, *Arms Control: The New Guide to Negotiations and Agreements* (London: Sage Publications, 2002)

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control as a relic of the Cold War and wanted to get rid of these restraints.¹³ It became apparent in 2002, when on 14 June 2002, Washington withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty). As a consequence, Moscow withdrew from the START II agreement.

With President Obama taking the helm of affairs in Washington in 2009, the New START was negotiated. In this decade, the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) and the 2010 New START with Russia were reached. The New START came into force on 5 February 2011 with a term of 10 years and was eventually extended in February 2021¹⁴ despite Trump administration not pursuing it.¹⁵ The INF Treaty was terminated on August 2, 2019, due to the US withdrawal.



Figure 1; Major US-Soviet/Russian Arms Control Treaties¹⁶

¹³ Christopher A. Ford, "A New Paradigm: Shattering Obsolete Thinking on Arms Control and Nonproliferation," *Arms Control Today*, November 2008, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008-11/features/new-paradigm-shattering-obsolete-thinking-arms-control-and-nonproliferation>

¹⁴ Andrew C. Winner, "The Second Death of Arms Control," *Survival* 68, no. 2 (April-May 2026): 73–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2026.2647639>

¹⁵ Steven Pifer, "Don't Let New START Die," *Order from Chaos*, The Brookings Institution, February 6, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/dont-let-new-start-die/>

¹⁶ Ben Aris, "New START Missile Treaty Expires," *bne IntelliNews*, February 5, 2026, <https://www.intellinews.com/new-start-missile-treaty-expires-424313/?source=russia>

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With the return of the great power competition, the US, having a first-use doctrine, reiterated a role for its nuclear weapons that extends beyond deterring nuclear attacks.¹⁷ President Trump is on record as saying that Washington would retaliate to a large-scale cyber-attack with a nuclear strike. Moscow, on its part, is modernizing and improving its arsenal. While China continues to be an outlier from all such arrangements.

With the expiry of New START in February 2026, the future of global arms control is not only bleak but uncertain. For the first time since the Cold War, the regulations and limitations embodied in different arms control agreements that regulated the great power competition have ended. This end is marked with renewed, more complex, and multilayered distrust, arms race, and crisis instability. Furthermore, all this has happened when several new challenges have emerged, which are capable of transforming our understanding and conduct of war, diplomacy, and crisis communication.

With the advent of AI, Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDTs), advances in surveillance, accuracy, and lethality, coupled with enhanced capabilities, have made the survivability of deterrent forces into question.¹⁸ Advancements in cyber capabilities and modern weapon systems like the hypersonic glide vehicle have generated dilemmas for command and control (C2) systems and shrunk the time for the decision makers to determine whether an incoming strike is conventional or nuclear and to decide their response. At present, more than numbers, it is the impact of these capabilities that would not only compress the timeline but also blur the conventional-nuclear threshold.

With advanced and improved capabilities, precision targeting, and conventional capabilities to target the strategic targets, including the C2 centers and conventional/nuclear interface, overlap is becoming a reality day by day, which gravely erodes strategic stability.¹⁹ Nowhere are these apprehensions more pronounced than in South Asia, a region broadly recognized and extensively documented as one of the world's most volatile

¹⁷ Rizwan Zeb, "Biden Administration's Nuclear Posture Review and American Nuclear Policy: A Critical Overview," *Margalla Papers* 27, no. 1 (2023): 53–66, <https://margallapapers.ndu.edu.pk/index.php/site/article/view/151>

¹⁸ 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

¹⁹Ibid

nuclear flashpoints. Since 2014, India has been ruled by a Hindutva-motivated and driven regime that has demonstrated more than once the tendency to use war and nuclear weapons for political purposes and that refuses not only to engage with Pakistan in a dialogue but is also unwilling to accept that there is any need for it.

Nuclear Risk Reduction Measures and CBMs between India and Pakistan

Since 1947, when India and Pakistan gained their independence, they have been engaged in an enduring rivalry and a paired minority conflict.²⁰ According to Stephen Philip Cohen, in such conflicts, both sides (in this case India and Pakistan) perceive themselves as a vulnerable minority and threatened by the other side. This perception makes any possibility of compromise difficult.²¹

The bilateral relationship is characterized by continued hostilities, distrust and both have engaged each other militarily. In 1998, the nuclear factor was included in this conflict when India gatecrashed into the nuclear club by testing its nuclear devices in May 1998 while staying outside the NPT. Within weeks, Pakistan followed suit due to its security compulsions. The uncertainty and unreliability of intentions, lack of proper communication mechanisms, ever-present hostility, and urge for a military confrontation were compounded by the nuclear capability. This resulted in a global concern that any future crisis between the two might escalate to a nuclear war.

With this realization, Pakistan's then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif invited Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Lahore in 1999. During this visit, New Delhi and Islamabad agreed on a framework for a nuclear dialogue and address the nuclear risks as well as the role of CBMs and arms control agreements in the nuclear environment. After a hiatus, when the Indo-Pak dialogue resumed in 2004, seven rounds of bilateral discussions on arms control and strategic issues were conducted as part of the India-

²⁰ TV Paul, "Causes of the India-Pakistan Enduring Rivalry," in *The India-Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry*, ed. T. V. Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3–26

²¹ Stephen P. Cohen, *India, Pakistan and Kashmir* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/cohens20011201.pdf>

Pakistan composite dialogue process. The last round was held in 2012. Since then, no dialogue has taken place.

CBMs between India and Pakistan

The following CBMs are in place between India and Pakistan:

- i) ***Director General of Military Operations (DGMOs) Hotline:*** After the 1971 war, a hotline was established between the Director General of Military Operations (DGMOs) of India and Pakistan. It was modelled on the 1963 Washington-Moscow hotline. The highest level of military contact between India and Pakistan, it is used both in times of peace and conflict. More recently, it was used during Operation Sindoor.²²
- ii) ***The Nuclear Non-Attack Agreement:*** In 1988, India and Pakistan reached an agreement on not attacking each other's nuclear installations. As part of this agreement, both sides share lists of nuclear facilities on January 1 each year. A practice that has survived crises and hostilities thus far and could be considered the most successful CBM between the two countries.
- iii) ***Prime Ministers' Hotline:*** In 1989, a hotline was established between the prime ministers of India and Pakistan. It was used by Prime Ministers Sharif and Vajpayee during the Kargil conflict. Since then, its usage during any crisis is not known.
- iv) ***Foreign Secretaries' Hotline:*** After the resumption of the dialogue between India and Pakistan in 2004, a hotline was established between the Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan. However, as per the available record, it has not been used in any of the crises between the two countries.²³

²² Moeed Yusuf and Rizwan Zeb, *A Quarter Century of Nuclear South Asia: Nuclear Noise, Signalling, and the Risk of Escalation in India-Pakistan Crises* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 3, 2026), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/01/a-quarter-century-of-nuclear-south-asia-nuclear-india-pakistan-crises>

²³ "Nuke Hotline for India, Pakistan: Nuclear Testing Ban Extended," *CNN International*, June 20, 2004, para. 8, <https://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/asiapcf/06/20/india.pakistan/>

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- v) **Advance Notification of Ballistic Missile Tests:** In 2005, both countries reached an agreement to provide advance notice before testing their ballistic missiles.
- vi) **Reducing the Risk from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons:** In 2007, India and Pakistan signed an agreement to notify each other of any accident relating to their nuclear weapons so that a response mechanism can be worked out and executed in time.
- vii) **Terror Hotline:** On 28 March 2011, a hotline was established between the Interior and home secretaries of India and Pakistan. It was aimed at facilitating the counter-terror activities by sharing real-time information. This is why it was dubbed as the terror hotline.²⁴



Figure 2; CBMS in South Asia ²⁵

²⁴ "India, Pakistan Agree to 'Terror Hotline'," *The Express Tribune*, March 29, 2011, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/139313/india-pakistan-agree-to-terror-hotline>

²⁵ Betzalel Newman, "Five Key Concepts to Understand the India-Pakistan Crisis," *Stimson Center*, May 19, 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2025/five-key-concepts-to-understand-the-india-pakistan-crisis/>

CBMs between India and Pakistan: Problems and Challenges

How have these agreements and measures fared thus far? Have these served their purpose and produced the desired outcome? The scorecard is mixed. As regards the agreement of non-attack, it has survived thus far, and both sides share the lists on January 1 each year regardless of the situation. How regularly these lists are updated is not known. The symbolism is commendable. Unfortunately, this cannot be said about the other CBMs. In most of the crises, the communications channels between the two are the first casualty. Apart from the DGMOs hotline, the PM hotline was only used in one conflict, while there is nothing available in open sources about the hotlines between the foreign secretaries and interior secretaries ever being used. Furthermore, the pre-test notification agreement needs to be updated as it does not include cruise missiles. More so, there is no mechanism existing for review and audit of the functioning of these CBMs and how to further improve them. All this, however, became totally irrelevant with the change of guard in New Delhi in 2014.

Self-proclaimed Vishwaguru: Modi, Risk Reduction and Nuclear CBMs with Pakistan

The BJP won the 16th Lok Sabha elections held in May 2014. Narendra Modi, rising from Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) ranks, who, as Chief Minister of Gujarat, put his full support behind the rioters during the Gujarat massacre, earning him notoriety as the butcher of Gujarat, became the prime minister. He projected himself as the strongman who stands as a muscular defender of the Hindu majority. After becoming the prime minister of India, he continued his politics of hatred centered around Hindutva, Anti-Indian Muslim, and Anti-Pakistan and India under him as Vishwaguru (global teacher).

Modi's View of Pakistan

For Modi and his cronies, Pakistan is a failed state and an unviable project, contending that it would collapse, fragment, turn into a failed state, be reabsorbed into India, or another such failed scenario, and that India ought to encourage it.²⁶ According to Satish Kumar: ‘...Islamic extremism and militancy have become an important reality in Pakistan... There is a

²⁶ Neil Padukone, *Beyond South Asia: India's Strategic Evolution and the Reintegration of the Subcontinent* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014)

symbolic relationship between them that cannot be wished away. Both of them are hostile to India and acting in unison; their hostility will remain formidable.²⁷ He further states: ‘...Pakistan poses a long-term security threat to India, which is inherent in the Pakistani state, its ideology, its power structure, and the imperatives that determine the behavior of the ruling establishment. These factors are not likely to change in the next couple of decades. India has to cope with this kind of adversary and its strategic capabilities and thinking, its national will and character must respond to the situation accordingly.’²⁸ Whereas according to Karnad, ‘A nuclear Pakistan, however much it huffs and it puffs, can still only end up imitating Thackeray’s frog trying to blow itself up to ox-size.’²⁹ He is of the view that Pakistan has to accept the fact that India is a global player. As Pakistan, according to Karnad: ‘...is fated by geography and, as an appendage of the mainstream sub-continental culture, to always remain in India’s shadow, strategically and otherwise. Even its role as a sub-regional spoiler and mischief-maker depends wholly on India’s continued unwillingness to act its size, exercise the full range of policy options open to it, and single-mindedly and uncompromisingly pursue its legitimately expansive national interests and objectives.’³⁰ His recipe for dealing with Pakistan is: ‘The absolute irrelevance of nuclear weapons to deal with Pakistan, a lower riparian State, in the most extreme way is contained in the fact that its granary, the Punjab province, can be turned into an arid wasteland by India’s withdrawing from the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty, and diverting and damming the waters flowing from the headwaters of the Indus River on the Indian side.’³¹ The above political views very clearly suggest India’s hatred-led and violence-prone political mindset towards the Pakistani state.

Modi’s New Delhi has taken the position that if Islamabad wants to have a meaningful dialogue for a lasting peace between India and Pakistan, it must first stop the alleged cross-border terrorism, dismantle the alleged terror infrastructure, and agree to several preconditions set by New Delhi. In other

²⁷ Satish Kumar, “Reassessing Pakistan as a Long-Term Security Threat,” in Veena Kukreja and M. P. Singh, eds., *Pakistan Democracy, Development and Security Issues*, (New Delhi: Sage, 2005)

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Bharat Karnad, *Nuclear Weapons and Indian Security: The Realist Foundations of Strategy* (New Delhi: Macmillan India, 2002)

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

words, Islamabad has to accept India's dominant position in the region before it can engage with Islamabad.³²

Built upon the above terrorism-centric blame narrative, India aims to underpin its regional hegemonic ambitions through force modernization, doctrinal transformation, and the employment of coercive military strategies, while simultaneously depicting Pakistan as a source of regional instability. This narrative has, in turn, provided strategic justification for India's conduct of its so-called surgical strikes against Pakistan in 2019 and subsequently in 2025, as is discussed below.

Pulwama 2019, Mian Chuno 2022 and Sindoor 2025

Modi's perception and attitude towards Pakistan are visible in how he handled the three most recent crises between India and Pakistan. On 14 February 2019, a young Kashmiri boy rammed an explosive-laden car into a military convey killing 44 Indian paramilitary personnel and wounding more than 70. On 26 February 2019, India, instead of focusing on internal security breaches, externalized the event, claiming that the Indian Air Force had attacked, targeted, and destroyed an alleged Jaish-e-Mohammed training camp in Balakot in Pakistan, resulting in a huge number of deaths. However, it was soon proven to be incorrect. The next day, Islamabad responded by locking on a key military installation and then targeting an empty area to signal its capability, but opting not to escalate. In the ensuing air battle, the PAF jammed the communication link of the IAF MiG and shot it down. The Indian pilot was arrested. In the fog of the war, the IAF panicked, and Indian ground air defence shot down one of its own Russian Mi-17V5 'Hip' medium lift helicopters, killing six service officials and one civilian.³³ India also mobilized its Navy and deployed an Indian Navy task force, including INS Vikramaditya, in the north Arabian Sea. Ironically, the Indian Navy could not locate the Pakistan Navy's Agosta-90-B submarine throughout the crisis. Whereas Pakistan Navy's P-3C Orion aircraft compelled the Indian Navy's most advanced Scorpene-class submarine to surface.

³² Rizwan Zeb, Shahbaz Ahmed Shahzad, and Muhammad Alam, "New Delhi's Pakistan Dilemma and the Indo-Pakistan Peace Process," *Global Legal Studies Review* 6, no. 1 (2021): 17–26, [https://doi.org/10.31703/glsr.2021\(VI-I\).03](https://doi.org/10.31703/glsr.2021(VI-I).03)

³³ Abhishek Bhalla, "Budgam Mi-17 Crash: IAF Chief Admits Big Mistake, Says Our Own Missile Hit Chopper," *India Today*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/budgam-mi-17-crash-iaf-chief-admits-big-mistake-1606217-2019-10-04>

Then Indian High Commissioner to Islamabad, Ajay Bisaria, reported that at one point during the crisis, Imran Khan, then Prime Minister, attempted to speak directly to Modi, but the Indian side refused, instead suggesting that if there was an urgent message, it should be conveyed through Bisaria.³⁴ This reflects how Indian leadership (particularly in this case, Modi), amid such a crisis, deals with a nuclear adversary. Just imagine if a similar approach had been adopted by Khrushchev or Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis.³⁵

Another event occurred in 2022. According to several Pakistani media sources, on the evening of 9 March 2022, Pakistan Air Force (PAF) picked up and began tracking a high-speed flying object launched from the Indian town of Sirsa. After a while, it sharply changed course and maneuvered towards Pakistani territory and fell near Mian Channu, a city within Pakistani Punjab's Khanewal district.³⁶ The next day, the Director-General of Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) held a press briefing about the incident. According to a media report:

PAF continuously monitored the complete flying path of the object, from its point of origin near Sirsa in India to its point of impact, near Mian Channu. It initiated requisite tactical actions,' ... It is important to highlight that the flight path of this object endangered many international and domestic passenger flights both in Indian and Pakistani airspace, as well as human life and property on the ground. Whatever caused this incident to happen, it is

³⁴ Moeed Yusuf and Rizwan Zeb, *A Quarter Century of Nuclear South Asia: Nuclear Noise, Signalling, and the Risk of Escalation in India-Pakistan Crises* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 3, 2026), 25, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/01/a-quarter-century-of-nuclear-south-asia-nuclear-india-pakistan-crises>, Rafique Mangat, "Imran Tried to Talk to Modi After Balakot Airstrikes: Ex-Envoy," *The News International*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1146400-imran-tried-to-talk-to-modi-after-balakot-airstrikes-ex-envoy>

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Asif Shahzad, Krishna N. Das, and Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam, "India Says It Accidentally Fired Missile into Pakistan," *Reuters*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-seeks-answers-india-after-crash-mystery-flying-object-2022-03-10/>, Rahul Bedi, "A Military Whodunnit: India's Inquiry into the Missile Launch Calamity Needs to Be Swift," *The Wire*, March 13, 2022, <https://thewire.in/security/indias-missile-pakistan-iaf-security-diplomacy>, Nirupama Subramanian, "Pakistan Seeks Joint Probe After India Misfires Missile," *The Indian Express*, March 13, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/day-after-india-cites-technical-malfunction-for-missile-firing-pakistan-joint-probe-7816730/>

for the Indians to explain. It, nevertheless, shows their disregard for aviation safety and reflects very poorly on their technological prowess and procedural efficiency, he said, adding that this could have resulted in a major aviation disaster.³⁷

While this was happening or even afterwards, New Delhi made no effort or attempt to inform Islamabad through the use of the formal DGMO and/ or foreign secretary hotlines, or any other regular or backchannels. New Delhi stayed mum for two days as if nothing had happened, or it was of no importance or consequence. The Indian Ministry of Defence finally woke up and admitted that an Indian missile was accidentally launched during routine maintenance and crossed into Pakistan. Six days after the incident, on 15 March, during his address in the parliament, the Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh acknowledged the inadvertent release of a missile into the house, claiming that it was later known that the missile fell in Pakistan's territory.³⁸

Indian Defence Minister's speech to the Indian Parliament brings to the fore several worrisome and alarming points about communication between the two nuclear adversaries and the Modi regime's approach and policy of dealing with such incidents. His statement confirms that New Delhi made no attempt to inform Islamabad of this so-called accident while the nuclear-capable missile was in flight, and went off course. Was it because New Delhi decided not to inform Islamabad and withhold this information, or because it failed to monitor the missile's flight? The former implies New Delhi's inability to handle sensitive technology, while the latter points to an alarming gap in communication in the South Asian nuclear dyad. Either way, this bodes negatively for strategic stability between India and Pakistan. Furthermore, the incident highlights serious trepidations about New Delhi's fail-safe mechanism as well as the command-and-control functioning of its missiles.

The subsequent event between India and Pakistan erupted in May 2025. The Pahalgam crisis led to a four-day war between the two nuclear rivals,

³⁷ "India to Explain What Happened in Mian Channu, says DG ISPR After Indian Projectile Falls in Pakistan," *Dawn*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1679289>

³⁸ "Rajnath Singh Addresses Rajya Sabha on Accidentally-Fired Missile That Landed in Pakistan," *NDTV*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/budget-session-live-updates-2022-rajnath-singh-to-address-parliament-on-accidentally-fired-missile-that-landed-in-pakistan-2823197>

culminating in one of the most serious escalations in nuclearized South Asia. On the night of May 6-7, 2025, India, in disregard of international law, deployed its strategic superiority by launching attacks on Pakistani territory, claiming once again that it had targeted alleged terrorist camps in eight different locations across Pakistan under its so-called operation 'Sindoor.' Contrarily, the neutral reports clearly suggest that only civilians, women, and children came under the Indian attack. Pakistan, in turn, promptly retaliated in a measured and calculated manner. Pakistan swiftly gained escalation dominance as confrontation resulted between the two air forces, during which Pakistan shot down five Indian jets, including two French-made Rafale fighters, without entering the Indian airspaces. India reacted again by targeting various locations within Pakistani territory, including the Nur Khan Air Base in Rawalpindi, but failed to inflict any substantial damage. Pakistan, in response, successfully shot down hundreds of Indian drones flying deep into its mainland. Pakistan, in turn, launched 'Operation Bunyanum Marsoo' (Iron Wall), striking critical Indian military targets, i.e., Brahmos missile sites, several Indian air bases, and even reportedly damaging the Russian-made S-400 air defense system. On the land surface, Pakistani land forces also reportedly captured multiple Indian military posts across the Line of Control (LoC) in the Illegally Occupied Indian Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K).

As the conflict intensified, global apprehension also mounted. On the fourth day of aggression, on May 10, 2025, the US President Donald Trump intervened, at India's request, and brokered a cease-fire after wide-ranging consultations with both the rival states. The night of May 7 was a glaring example of India's false sense of superiority in its airpower and modern technologies. Despite fielding 72 Indian fighter jets, as compared to Pakistan's 42 aircraft, India could not establish aerial dominance and failed to achieve escalation dominance against a comparatively smaller force. The aerial battle undermined India's technological superiority and its overrated political confidence for the second time since 2014 under the ruling government of the BJP.

Operation Sindoor demonstrated the Modi-led trimurti's reckless and risk-prone behavior, in which not engaging its nuclear adversary is the key element. This approach is alarming and bodes negatively for strategic stability between India and Pakistan. Despite having the privilege of hindsight and knowing well from the Cold War experience what could be the consequences of not implementing arms control and risk reduction

measures, Modi, it appears, is intentionally pushing the region towards strategic instability.

New Challenges

As discussed in an early section of the paper, for the first time since the Cold War, there is no arrangement in existence or in place to regulate nuclear weapons globally. At present, the global geostrategic landscape is marked by unstable rivalries and minimal restraint. The emergence and integration of AI and emerging technologies in systems such as hypersonic weapons and missile defense have further complicated the strategic landscape. Cyber operations and AI-enabled command systems have further compressed the time for decision-making, increasing the risk of miscalculation.

South Asia is no alien to the fact that cyber and AI would generate a new complex set of risks to an already intrinsically complex strategic environment. As early as 2008, India and Pakistan narrowly escaped escalation due to a hoax call allegedly by the Indian defence minister to the president of Pakistan in the wake of the Mumbai terror incident. We have witnessed the induction and demonstration of (some of the) emerging technologies during the Pahalgam conflict. At present, both India and Pakistan are investing in such technologies, especially unmanned technologies to further augment their war-fighting capabilities. As there is a well-documented absence of communication between India and Pakistan, primarily due to Modi's policy, the induction of more effective and lethal cyber capabilities, any cyber-attack on the C2 system in South Asia would result in miscalculation and inadvertent escalation. More so, AI-led tools, hypersonic missiles, autonomous drones, and precision-strike systems could lead to the entanglement of conventional and nuclear domains that would have catastrophic consequences for both states.

Furthermore, the geographical position increases such risks multifold as there are limited early-warning capabilities and very little missile flight time, leaving the leaders with no option but to take instant decision. All this is compounded by the fact that communication measures between the two have historically been the first victim of crises, and since Modi took the helm of affairs, his indifference to CBMs, risk-reduction measures, including avoiding dialogue with Pakistan, has made the situation even more complex.

Conclusion

Is there a way forward? In such a situation, the most realistic course of action for India and Pakistan is to develop an understanding of the threat of disruptive and dual-use technologies and work out new nuclear confidence-building measures (NCBMs), as well as revise and augment the existing but dormant CBMs. The best and practical course of action would be establishing a Nuclear Risk Reduction Center for coordinating crisis management, promoting communication, and minimizing the risk of inadvertent and/ or accidental escalation. However, whether the Modi regime would agree to it is everybody's guess. During the height of the Cold War, Schelling and Halperin pointed out that the essential feature of arms control is the recognition of the common interest and the possibility of cooperation between rivals.³⁹ This is what the Modi regime needs to understand, learn, and accept. What this paper proposes is that New Delhi and Islamabad should develop an *Adverse Partnership*⁴⁰ on strategic stability issues and the potential threat associated with AI and emerging technologies. By doing this, Modi would not be doing any favor to Islamabad but would be avoiding what is otherwise written on the wall. The Modi regime should realize that there might not be a Colonel *Stanislav Petrov* in the case of India and Pakistan. As Thomas Schelling once stated, accidents do not cause war. Decisions cause war.⁴¹ It is high time that correct decisions are taken in South Asia.

³⁹ Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1961), xi, 1–3, quoted in Andrew C. Winner, “The Second Death of Arms Control,” *Survival* 68, no. 2 (April–May 2026): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2026.2647639>

⁴⁰ Rizwan Zeb, “Pakistan and Afghanistan, 2014 and Beyond: Not Friends, Not Yet Enemies?,” *Journal of South Asian Development* 8, no. 2 (2013): 165–183, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973174113494599>

⁴¹ Thomas C. Schelling, “Meteors, Mischief, and War,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 16, no. 7 (September 1960): 293.