

BOOK REVIEWS

MARKA-E-HAQ

Deterrence, Provocation and Strategic Maturity in South Asia by Zafar Khan (Paramount Book Pakistan, 2026) 203

Bilal Zubair*

The book '*Marka-e-Haq: Deterrence, Provocation and Strategic Maturity in South Asia*' is a profound scholarly contribution to understanding the South Asian Strategic landscape. Written against the backdrop of the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis, Marak-e-Haq (the Battle of Truth), the book narrates the conflicting objectives in the way South Asian nuclear rivals Pakistan and India view the logic of war and peace in the region. Divided into ten chapters, the book offers a rare opportunity to the strategic community that includes both practitioners and academics from Pakistan to present Pakistan's view on the unfolding of Marak-e-Haq. The book is edited by Zafar Khan (PhD), who is Executive Director of the Balochistan Think Tank Network (BTTN) and a Professor of International Relations at the Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering, and Management Sciences (BUIITEMS), Quetta. He has published extensively in leading international journals and is the author of two books, i.e., *Pakistan's Nuclear Policy: A Minimum Credible Deterrence* (2015) and *Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: New Technologies and Challenges to Sustainable Peace* (2020).

The preface of this volume, written by General Zubair Mahmood Hayat, NI(M), HI(M), Retired Former Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, sets the tone for the chapters that follow. He encapsulates the South Asian strategic environment as an interplay between Indian Strategic drift and Pakistan's deterrence posture, as embedded in the doctrine of Full Spectrum Deterrence. In this context, Marka-e-Haq in May 2025 reinforced the notion that any Indian attempt to undermine strategic stability through the imposition of 'New Normal' in the region shall be answered with a proportional and measured response from Pakistan to preserve deterrence stability.

In the first chapter, 'India's Strategic Drift and South Asia Security Dilemma,' former Ambassador Zamir Akram (Retired) argues that India's

* Reviewed by Bilal Zubair (PhD), Director Research at the Center for International Strategic Studies (CISS), Islamabad.

‘New Normal’ policy towards Pakistan has historical roots dating back to the independence of Pakistan. Historically, the Indian approach toward Pakistan has been one of pursuing regional hegemony. These ambitions have fuelled a security dilemma in the region, further exacerbated by the rise of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). While New Delhi continues to view itself as an emerging great power, the author argues that its pursuit of strategic autonomy, the saffronization of state and society, and its increasingly reckless behavior toward Pakistan have raised international concerns. He further observes that the global ambitions of India have suffered a serious setback in the wake of the May 2025 crisis, motivating the United States (US) to question India’s delusional approach toward Pakistan.

The second chapter, ‘India’s Terror Industry: Threat to International Peace and Security,’ is authored by Professor Dr. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal and traces the intensifying belligerency in India’s posture towards Pakistan to the Doval Doctrine of 2014, introducing it as Prime Minister Modi’s broader political strategy, which resonates with the RSS’s ideological vision of India rooted in Kautilyan statecraft. He argues that Modi’s India combines the oppressions against minorities, especially Indian Muslims and Kashmiris, hostile relations with Pakistan, a strategic nexus with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and the use of non-state actors to carry out extrajudicial killings of dissidents globally. According to the author, this Indian terror industry has drawn criticism in world capitals, including Washington and Toronto, and the international community has a responsibility to hold India accountable for its irresponsible behavior that poses a serious threat to peace and stability in the region.

In the third chapter, ‘Kashmir and Water Resources: Nuclear Flashpoints in South Asia’, Dr. Rizwana Abbasi identifies the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K) and contestation over water resources as the two fault lines that make South Asia extremely prone to nuclear Armageddon. She highlights that India has undermined the Kashmiri freedom movement through a false narrative of terrorism, while challenging United Nations (UN)-led resolutions, the identity of the Kashmiri people, and the legal status of the Kashmir dispute. By scrapping the autonomous status of the IIOJ&K, India has only intensified the uprising, and revocation of its constitutional Articles 370 and 35-A will not alter the legal realities and will not serve to heal the arduous past and achieve peace. Meanwhile, by abandoning the IWT, India has aggravated mistrust and war-fighting trends with Pakistan, thereby narrowing the space for future confidence-

Marka-e-Haq

building measures (CBMs) and dialogue between the two states. Together, these moves destabilize regional deterrence, threaten strategic stability, and make lasting peace unlikely without resolving Kashmir and restoring the IWT.

In the fourth chapter, ‘Strategic Culture of Bharat and Offensive Doctrines: Pakistan’s Response: Cohesive Deterrence,’ Lieutenant General Mazhar Jamil (Retired) identifies strategic culture as the primary driver of Indian bellicosity in the region. The chapter inquires into the epistemological roots of the word ‘Bharat,’ a mythological construct that has permeated India’s strategic thinking, war doctrines, and state behavior. The author has referred to the Indian thinkers such as Savarkar, Mookerji, and J. Sai Deepak, who were the leading proponents of Bharat as a civilizational construct and Hindu nationalism based on a hegemonic identity. The author further argues that these ideational roots of the Indian constitution, polity, and society have led to an abnormal state pursuing offensive doctrines aimed at regional domination. The only obstacle to Indian grand designs is Pakistan’s logic of cohesive deterrence and a strong will to respond, as demonstrated during Bunyanum Marsoos in May 2025.

The fifth chapter, ‘Marka-e-Haq and the New Discipline of Deterrence,’ by Brigadier Dr. Zahir Kazmi (Retired), provides one of the book’s central arguments. It moves the discussion beyond battlefield narration and reads Operation Bunyanum Marsoos as a case of disciplined deterrence in response to provocation. The author argues that Pakistan’s success lay not merely in responding to Indian coercion, but in doing so with proportion, timing, restraint, joint-force cohesion, and escalation control intact. Whereas India, through its ‘New Normal’ posture, sought to normalise compellence under the nuclear shadow, Pakistan demonstrated that the space for limited war remains, in practice, unusable.

The sixth chapter, ‘The Perils of Self-Deception in Nuclear South Asia,’ by Dr. Rabia Akhtar, questions India’s assumptions regarding nuclear signalling and cautions against the dangers of strategic overconfidence, misperception, and the illusion of controllable escalation in a nuclearized region where miscalculation can carry grave consequences. The May 2025 crisis, she argues, reinforced an uncomfortable reality, i.e., escalation in South Asia is rarely linear, predictable, or fully controllable. Through charting a historical account of how Indian military doctrines, galvanized in self-deception, have drawn the region into a spiral of conflict, the author warns of the perils associated with such behaviour by India.

Marka-e-Haq

In the seventh chapter, 'Escalation ladder and Future Crisis Blueprint', Brigadier Dr. Naeem Salik (Retired) introduces a theoretical debate on the escalation dynamics. The author encapsulated the South Asian crisis through the lens of Herman Kahn's 'escalation ladder' and Rebecca Hersman's 'Wormhole Model', suggesting that the dynamics of escalation review are owing to rapid changes in the traditional variables impacting crisis behaviour. He argues that South Asia carries a unique security dynamic distinct from its own and must not be equated with the security dilemma in other regions. He warns that while India will continue to challenge Pakistan's deterrent capability, Pakistan must correspondingly continue to review and update its deterrent posture aimed at maintaining strategic stability in the region.

The eighth chapter, 'Re-assessing Deterrence Stability in South Asia: Lessons from the May 2025 Conflict,' by Lieutenant General Khalid Ahmed Kidwai (Retired), argues that the 87-hour conflict of May 2025 validated Pakistan's Quid Pro Quo Plus (QPQ+) strategy as an effective framework for conventional retaliation. He further contends that this framework should evolve into a 'QPQ++' strategy to address emerging security challenges. The chapter also characterizes Prime Minister Modi's 'new normal' policy as a strategic miscalculation that failed to achieve its intended objectives. In contrast, the author maintains that Pakistan's nuclear deterrent is a credible constraint rather than a bluff, one that effectively limits India's freedom to undertake kinetic military actions.

The ninth chapter, 'Lessons from Marka-e-Haq in view of Indian Strategic Culture', by Lieutenant General Sarfaraz Sattar (Retired), argues that India aspires to be a regional hegemon since the partition of the subcontinent, an orientation derived from Indian strategic culture embedded in Vedic traditions that continues to influence Indian political choices and military doctrines. As a result, the South Asian region faces recurrent crisis instability. The author does not see India dissuading from its crisis escalation behavior; therefore, Pakistan must prepare to meet it with matching resolve and response vis-à-vis India.

The Chapter ten, 'Strategic Stability in South Asia-A Difficult Journey Ahead', authored by Lieutenant General Aamer Riaz (Retired), argues that strategic stability remains an illusion in South Asia and can only be sustained by perilous restraint. Among many other factors, the author termed Western, especially the US, continuous support to India's ambitions for regional hegemony as the largest contributor to regional instability and a threat to deterrence stability.

To conclude, this book is an important and timely contribution to the growing scholarship on South Asian security and deterrence. One of the book's greatest strengths is the breadth of expertise it brings together, combining the insights of senior military leaders, diplomats, and scholars, including three former Directors General of the Strategic Plans Division. Rather than simply recounting the events of the May 2025 crisis, the contributors use the episode to examine broader questions of deterrence, escalation, and crisis management in a nuclearized region.

A recurring thread across the chapters is the argument that Pakistan's calibrated, proportionate, and politically controlled response prevented India from establishing a 'new normal' of limited coercion under the nuclear shadow. Whether or not readers agree with every conclusion, the volume succeeds in stimulating serious debate and encouraging a deeper understanding of the strategic dynamics that continue to shape South Asia. Also, it reminds readers that in a nuclear environment, strategic success is ultimately defined not by the amount of destruction inflicted, but by the ability to restore deterrence, maintain escalation control, and prevent a bigger war.