

# South Asian Strategic Paradox: India-Pakistan Nuclear Flux

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## Abstract

*This article critically analyses the paradoxical flux situation in South Asia in view of both countries' possession of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs), strategic arsenals, substantial conventional potentials, and divergent war plans in a heightened state of stability-instability equation. Conceptually, this sets the stage for an interesting debate on whether or not the arrival of TNWs is a destabilising or stabilising factor in the existence of present-day volatile regional security environment. The risk of nuclear escalation is perennial and essentially at the core of the stability-instability paradox as well. It is observed that a possibility of a limited military acceleration to a nuclear level cannot be ruled out. Moreover, the arrival and integration of TNWs has too become a reality, which makes it imperative for them to do some diplomatic footwork to resolve their bilateral issues. Therefore, instead of pretending to negate the existence of TNWs in parallel with the asymmetric nature of their strategic relationship, the rational course of approach would be not to destabilise the structure of nuclear deterrence stability with the crafting of aggressive and faulty strategies under fanciful labels to coerce each other.*

**Keywords:** South Asia; stability-instability paradox; India; Pakistan; deterrence; TNWs; strategic stability

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## **Introduction**

Every region possesses its own distinct security characteristics, historically influenced ethos, strategic culture, and the divergent national interests of the regional state-actors, which influence the strategic landscape of that particular area. In essence, South Asian strategic equation between India and Pakistan is bipolar, with tentacles linking it with the regional security complex (RSC) and other neighbouring powers from the Middle East to Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> In the highly charged and mistrustful environment of the subcontinent, Bernard Brodie's famous aphorism holds a profound significance to fathom the strategic stability criticality, that, "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." He went on to elucidate that, "It can have almost no other useful purpose," in the dramatically transformed geo-strategic environment of world politics.<sup>2</sup> Since then, nuclear strategists have wrestled to refine the very concept of "deterrence" with a view to sustain the fine "balance of terror" between the nuclear-armed rivals.<sup>3</sup> The world moved from the concept of a "total war" to an enhanced significance of nuclear deterrence and the mutual balance of terror, which continues until today.<sup>4</sup> That the nuclear weapons create stability and deterrence both at micro and macro levels when the adversaries possess matching capabilities that resultantly generate a corollary of a nuclear deterrence theory premised on Glenn Snyder's "stability-instability paradox."<sup>5</sup> The realists agree that the states must take into account and focus on the military power of their adversaries, and proportionally develop their secure second-strike capabilities that would inevitably create deterrence stability and prevent conventional wars. Or does the ever-present fear of the nuclear escalation minimise the danger of conventional war as well? There is very little empirical evidence available to provide a rational basis to adequately answer this security dilemma, which has been aptly termed as the "the stability-instability paradox." Although Snyder coined the term in 1965, it was Liddell Hart who was one of the first post-Second World War strategists who had recognised this paradox that the number of nuclear weapons "reduces the likelihood of full-scale war," and "it increases the possibility of limited war pursued by widespread local aggression." He further elaborated that, "The enemy can exploit a choice of techniques, differing in pattern but all designed to make headway while causing

hesitancy about employing counteraction” by nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup> In this context, Robert Jervis has too very succinctly summarised this dilemma by stating that, “the extent that military balance is stable at the level of all-out nuclear war, it will become less stable at lower levels of violence.”<sup>7</sup>

It is the *availability* of this *strategic space* between low-intensity warfare and the threat of a nuclear holocaust that had resulted in conceptualisation of theories of a “limited war” and “escalation.”<sup>8</sup> The two major protagonists of the Cold War years, the United States (US) and the former Soviet Union (now Russia), neither had direct territorial disputes nor had their soldiers ever fortunately faced each other directly in a crisis, except for their ideological and brief tension during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. So, this stability-instability paradox model was not put to a *real* test during the Cold War. Even the Cuban Missile Crisis was not an exercise in exploiting this strategic space of a limited war; rather it was a clear demonstration that a “red-line” was crossed by one power, the Soviet Union, which led to the US demand for the reversal of actions under a threat of a punitive strike against the deployed missiles in Cuba.<sup>9</sup> This crisis establishes that the threshold of a nuclear war becomes considerably *higher* with increased volatility in comparison to a conventional war. Therefore, crafting of a calculated and rational approach would play a particularly important role in defusing tensions short of commencement of hostilities. Since the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence rests ultimately on the threat of tremendous damage, its capability of inflicting that outweighs any meaningful political gains. The most effective nuclear threats must need to take into account the cost-benefit analysis before *vertically* moving on escalatory policies that inherently possess the possibility of moving the nuclear-armed adversaries towards the brink.<sup>10</sup> The essence of stabilising nuclear use warrants the demonstration of willingness to begin mounting the inherently unpredictable nuclear escalation ladder leading towards a large-scale war, and simultaneously offering the opponent some opportunity to agree to terminate the escalation at a lower rung of the ladder. Moreover, the level of escalation also hinges on three areas: intensity, widening the area of conflict with the employment of long-range weapons, and compounding escalation in parallel with other acts of overt or covert violence.<sup>11</sup> Escalation is essentially linked to multiple

factors, including competitive risk-taking by adversaries with a strategy to maintain the fine balance between reacting and over-reacting to a crisis. Some states may deliberately initiate a crisis to achieve their objective below the nuclear redlines.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the “effectiveness of a threat depends,” in the viewpoint of Thomas Schelling, “not only on the severity of the punishment threatened but also its credibility.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, other three basic principles that would make deterrence effective and credible are: proportionate “military force” to bargain; strategy with adequate “power to hurt” the adversary to make threat convincing in order to “deter aggressor”; and, above all, the leadership’s determination to selectively reveal its intentions to adopt a certain course of action.<sup>14</sup>

The paper argues that the contemporary asymmetrical equation between India and Pakistan is not only *paradoxical* but is also in a state of *flux*, which makes adequate stabilisation efforts quite difficult to achieve. Lenses provided by Snyder’s stability-instability idea, and Herman Kahn’s escalation ladder metaphors are required to be cautiously employed by the leaderships of two countries. This creates a perennial fear of reactive escalation and competitive risk-taking to achieve divergent objectives below the nuclear redlines.<sup>15</sup> Most significantly, the fine balance of terror can only be sustained if there is no misconception between the adversaries over the cost-benefit analysis of goals and objectives to be achieved through a self-crafted version of “victory.”<sup>16</sup> According to William Martel, policymakers need to have a clear definition and understanding to fathom the consequences associated with the costs and risks of such a “victory.” He further states that the primary functions of the policymakers are to determine the consequences, and to determine the “relationship between the concept of victory and the responsibilities” with a view to manage the post-conflict reconstruction process.<sup>17</sup> In this context, Kenneth Waltz too has aptly stated that, “in wars there is no victory but only varying degrees of defeat.”<sup>18</sup> This indicates that the strategy should not only be realistic and rational, but pragmatic as well. Essentially, the strategy needs to be unambiguously identified,<sup>19</sup> which evolves from “a process, a constant adaptation to shifting conditions and circumstances in a world where chance, uncertainty, and ambiguity dominate.”<sup>20</sup> In essence, strategy “is nothing if not pragmatic,” as Brodie observes, where policymakers or the

strategic community of a state(s) endeavour to explore the truth with a view to find viable solutions for the problems.<sup>21</sup> “National security dilemmas,” writes Colin Gray, “are the product of existential challenges and opportunities, as well as errors in policy and strategy.”<sup>22</sup> The South Asian rivals, India and Pakistan, need to pragmatically review the prevalent challenges and opportunities in case of an error while pursuing conflicting policies and strategies against each other. Therefore, realistically speaking, the sustenance of deterrence cannot be wholly reliable due to a variety of factors, including human fallibility, leadership characters of two countries, organisational make-ups, bureaucratic pathologies, biases, and also what is achievable under certain *advantages* and *disadvantages* at a given time.<sup>23</sup> The varying degrees of fear, sense of honour, and national interests since time immemorial had led states to wars that they otherwise ostensibly did not desire.<sup>24</sup> All these factors then further aggravate the state of uncertainty between the rival states, when a powerful state’s strategy is based on a counterproductive and “fixed plan,” which would hardly leave sufficient flexibility to its adversary. Therefore, it is essential to recognise the limits of a plan or a strategy rationally and dispassionately.<sup>25</sup>

### **South Asian Landscape**

In line with the foregoing perspective, this study is intertwined with the theory of “stability-instability paradox,” which states that nuclear weapons create both stability and instability in an adversarial relationship between two nuclear-armed states. Knowledge of the physical consequences of nuclear weapons’ use serves as a deterrent that prompts states to ensure that an established threshold is not crossed. This creates a certain degree of stability in the relationship between the nuclear weapon states (NWS). Paradoxically, this stability occasionally destabilises the relationship. The debate of stability-instability paradox is incomplete without mentioning the work of Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz, the two renowned deterrence theorists whose famous nuclear pessimist and optimist perspectives, respectively focus on the effects of nuclear proliferation and the threat of nuclear war.<sup>26</sup> Concerning the South Asian nuclear equation, this dialogue triggered a debate whether nuclear weapons will prevent a major conflict or perpetuate frequent outbursts of risk escalations. The legacy of the Cold War political model is also

endemic to the stability and instability phased of the new nuclear weapon states of South Asia.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, the present-day South Asian strategic politics is premised on the axis of relative conventional and absolute nature of nuclear weapons that reduces the likelihood of any major wars between the two rivals.<sup>28</sup> The deterrence optimists saw a stable equation emerging after the overt nuclearisation of India and Pakistan. Moreover, the Kargil War of 1999 and the 2001-2002 military crisis had kept the escalating tensions just below the nuclear threshold due to an inherent fear of its spiralling into an all-out war that could possibly lead to a nuclear conflict. The 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack too was handled diplomatically.

The leaderships of the two countries are aware of the consequences of waging a conflict that could escalate into a nuclear holocaust, which has induced a certain amount of caution and a sense of extra responsibility. On the periphery, it is also assumed by some experts that national socio-economic agendas would also continue to mitigate the prospects of a war.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, the spate of volatility in their bilateral relations, mistrust, sense of insecurity, and uncertainty are still consistently motivating them to prepare for a war as never witnessed before.<sup>30</sup> Besides, the profoundly destructive nature of the nuclear weapons is automatically making it apparent that “a war between two nuclear powers could be limited and escalation into a full-scale war prevented.” Robert Gilpin further elaborates that, “In the nuclear age, the primary purpose of nuclear forces should be to deter the use of nuclear weapons by one’s opponent and thereby prevent the outbreak of hegemonic warfare.”<sup>31</sup> In South Asia, however, the fragility and fluidity of bilateral relationship of India and Pakistan since the 2008 Mumbai attack is still pegged to a single agenda of terrorism, which India demands Pakistan must satisfy.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the Modi government is also reportedly involved in terrorist and destabilisation activities inside Pakistan’s northwestern tribal areas and Baluchistan province.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Modi’s aggressive and hostile behaviour is worrisome for Pakistan, and negates the very foundations of the traditional deterrence theory, which rest on the assumption of a unitary rational actor model. This has led some scholars to project that the prospect of war in South Asia loom larger than that of nuclear terrorism.<sup>34</sup>

This situation has stalled diplomatic efforts between the two nuclear-armed states, including foreign secretary level talks, intended to resume composite dialogue with a view to resolving all outstanding issues and normalising their relations. This, instead of laying down the foundation of a South Asian mutual nuclear deterrence regime in view of outstanding disputes between them, is somehow leading India towards a deliberate escalation along the Line of Control (LoC) and working boundary. India has also threatened to use punitive surgical strikes against Pakistan.<sup>35</sup> The rampant LOC violations by India make the environment even more fluid, thus enhancing the risk of a war.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, pessimists continue to identify the ways in which the instability part of the paradox persistently undermines the entire paradigm of their mutual relationship. The growing conventional imbalance exacerbates nuclear instability. Miscalculations result when the two sides are not aware about each other's capabilities or intentions, and in the absence of mutual trust and credible confidence building measures, the danger of miscalculated crises would continue to persist.<sup>37</sup> As far as the capability is concerned, both sides are acutely aware of each other's potential to inflict unacceptable damage. In fact, it is "by sheer strength, skill and ingenuity"<sup>38</sup> that provides states strategic logic and manoeuvrability to firmly adhere to their national interests without coming under the coercive sway of its opponent. However, under certain circumstances it would be quite difficult to correctly understand each other's conventional moves and the nuclear posturing due to the existence of a doubt-laden bilateral relationship. In the present situation, the conventional military strength is swiftly tipped in India's favour, thereby reinforcing instability paradoxes, short of a full-blown war under the nuclear umbrella. This is expected to bring into play frequent conventional tipping points in favour of conventional superiority of India in comparison with Pakistan. The latter would be induced to erect a full-spectrum strategic nuclear deterrence protective layer, and at the same time, like any rational actor, would keep its nuclear threshold ambiguous and hard to deconstruct, and this would consequently create nuclear escalation stages susceptible to crossing the proverbial Rubicon in an extremely precarious situation.<sup>39</sup> The full-spectrum deterrence, as elucidated by an official press release of the National Command Authority (NCA), envisaged that, "Pakistan would not remain oblivious

to evolving security dynamics in South Asia and would maintain a full-spectrum deterrence capability to deter all forms of aggression.”<sup>40</sup> This would make the stability hostage to effectiveness and reliability of nuclear deterrence postures of the two countries.

The South Asian security situation can be further analysed by co-relating it to the relevant concept of strategic stability, which is a dynamic phenomenon, focusing on the interactions and incentives of two (or more) parties. In the early years of the Cold War, the US and the then Soviet Union had faced the challenges of strategic stability by focusing on the vulnerability of nuclear forces to a surprise attack, which motivated them to develop a sufficient assured retaliation capability.<sup>41</sup> An historical empirical analysis approach linked to the Cold War paradigm assists in understanding the strategic stability challenges, and how changes in the military technology and strategy had encouraged a new way of thinking about the causes of war and the requirements of peace and security.<sup>42</sup> It is also important to relate these concepts to South Asian strategic landscape with a view to understand the dynamics associated with vulnerability, survivability, and dissuasion of pre-emptive doctrines in order to make nuclear deterrence more resilient and robust. Primarily, the logic is to stabilise the bipolar relationship by ensuring that each side possessed the ability to strike back effectively, even after an attempted disarming first strike by its opponent. This would give each party the confidence to pause even in the event of attack by the other party, while removing the obverse temptation to strike first to gain fundamental advantage. The concept of escalation-control and stable nuclear deterrence presumes rational decisions by the policymakers even in the deepest crisis.<sup>43</sup>

In such a heightened state of tension and uncertainty, Wheeler’s concept of “more trust may be better” holds a lot of relevance for the two rival states.<sup>44</sup> In this context, the important case of reference for nuclear trust building was the rapprochement that took place between Argentina and Brazil in the 1980’s. From a trust-building perspective, three factors were decisive in fostering cooperation between Argentina and Brazil in relation to their nuclear issue. First was the mutual sensitivity to the dangers of spiraling mistrust. Secondly, the recognition that moves to promote trust entailed an acceptance of both uncertainty and

vulnerability. Lastly, an important factor in trust building was the evolution and sustained development of common interests and shared values at an inter-societal level by their respective policymakers for mutual benefit.<sup>45</sup> This concept can be employed in the case study of India and Pakistan as well. No doubt, it seems to be more theoretical than practical at the moment, but for socio-economic development and the resolution of their numerous issues, including territorial disputes, this appears to be the only way out of the present impasse.

### **Perennial Security Volatility**

India and Pakistan are not as secure as the US and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War period, because the proponents of these two power blocs did not have geographical proximity, thus possessing some reaction time in case of any crisis. In South Asia, much to the disappointment of deterrent optimists - who believe that possession of nuclear weapons is enough to deter the outbreak of hostilities - both India and Pakistan have indulged in frequent crises initiation even after their nuclear tests in 1998, as demonstrated by the 1999 Kargil War and the 2001-2002 military stand-off. These two crises can be taken as a yardstick to determine the limits of their tolerance level and the probability of crossing of a redline in similar scenarios in the future. However, it is important to take into account every country's propensity to behave in a divergent way in different crises, because each would tend to view the looming threats from their narrow security lens. The security conceptualisation and the structural notions are thus disparate, "regardless of intention to lead to rising insecurity for others as each interprets its own measures as defensive and the measures of others as potentially threatening."<sup>46</sup> According to Alexander Wendt, different threat perceptions and social notions would motivate and lead people to behave and react differently to a situation or to an object.<sup>47</sup> For one country, measuring the "degree of escalation" to a certain object, and commitment to demonstrate its resolve might lead to a "reckless" behavior by an adversary or it may lead to an "all-out war." Therefore, in a situation like the present-day South Asia, any increase in the intensity or widening of escalation orbit could lead to a compounding escalation, or probably to the threat of use of nuclear weapons.<sup>48</sup>

The 1999 Kargil operation was based on the plan evolved during the mid-1980's in a conventional backdrop, in response to the Indian incursion in 1984 into the Siachin Glacier region. Kargil was a badly envisaged operation that apparently seems to have over-looked some primary strategic implications of this action, which obviously had propensity to escalate into a full-fledged war.<sup>49</sup> In August 1999, soon after the termination of Kargil crisis, India revealed its ambitious "Draft Nuclear Doctrine" that incorporated a nuclear triad into its strategic planning. This was followed by an official adoption of a limited war doctrine that was outlined by the then Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes on January 24, 2000:

...the issue was not that war had been made obsolete by nuclear weapons, and that covert war by proxy was the only option, but that conventional war remained feasible though with definite limitations if escalation across the nuclear threshold was to be avoided... India has demonstrated in Kargil that its forces can fight and win a limited war, at a time and place chosen by the aggressor.<sup>50</sup>

After the Kargil War, Indian strategic community and defence planners started to argue that there is plenty of strategic space available between a low-intensity war and a nuclear threshold. Hence, it could be utilised by the Indian conventional superiority to its advantage by exercising a limited war operation plan without worrying about an all-out war or crossing of the nuclear threshold. In fact, it is only possible if the fluid dynamics of escalation could only be controlled. But there are important caveats: it takes one to start a war, but it takes two parties to manage escalation below the nuclear threshold. That is what makes the Indian limited war doctrine extremely dangerous and flawed. The Indian conventional forces' advantage and its envisaged plan of a nuclear triad had supposedly motivated it towards the crafting of a "Cold Start Doctrine" (CSD) in 2004, which further complicated the volatility of South Asian strategic landscape that was already in a flux due to growing conventional asymmetry. Actually, any country's military doctrine-reflects the sum of its military power, which makes "successful execution of military operations ... a clearly understood and widely accepted doctrine" for its armed forces.<sup>51</sup> This Indian doctrine shows its true

national character that obviously has evolved through its ethos and strategic culture.<sup>52</sup>

The risk of a nuclear escalation is also at the core of stability-instability concept, which seems to have stimulated Paul Kapur to argue that,

Strategic stability, meaning a low likelihood that conventional war will escalate to the nuclear level, reduces the danger of launching a conventional war. But in lowering the potential costs of conventional conflict, strategic stability also makes the outbreak of such violence more likely.<sup>53</sup>

Strategic stability is a dynamic phenomenon that focuses on the interactions and incentives of two (or more) parties. In this context, methodical and controlled nuclear capabilities would play an important and logically terminal role in a crisis. The point of these specifically discriminate options would be to give each side the ability to impose a limited, but very real harm, while simultaneously increasing the number and type of discrete steps one could take between inaction and total nuclear attack.<sup>54</sup> In spite of the persistence of a tension-ridden relationship and frequent spate of dire warnings, observes Sumit Ganguly, it is unlikely that India and Pakistan would opt for another all-out war, as their nuclear weapons capabilities have induced an element of caution amongst the strategic elites and policymakers.<sup>55</sup> However, it is pertinent to note that the strategies cannot be conceived and implemented in a systemic and controlled way, and there always would be a prospect of something going wrong at a critical juncture.<sup>56</sup> Because, in real life, especially in the subcontinent's conflict-prone environment, where the situation is already complex and fluid, the "chains of causation" of events would tend to fall apart.<sup>57</sup> As Lawrence Freedman has rightly pointed out that, "Strategies were not so much means of asserting control over situations but ways of coping with situations in which nobody was in total control."<sup>58</sup> This sums up the uncertainty of a situation that evolves differently, especially in the contentious setting of South Asia. He dilates further that the strategy and plan has to be imaginative, flexible, and by taking into account the evolving conditions, has to consistently re-evaluate all the risks and opportunities associated with different

contingencies.<sup>59</sup> Rationally speaking, the strategy has to recognise the fine line of state(s)' limits vis-à-vis its adversary.<sup>60</sup> India and Pakistan, being rational NWS, need to exercise more restraint and to take decisions in a calculated manner by giving due consideration to the delicate nature of the existing conventional and strategic balance between them. In addition, such a policy would fortify the potency of the overall threat spectrum and prevent escalation to a total war fueled by visceral, punctuated notifications by the parties as they descend into a catastrophic mode. If the two adversaries are tied together next to a cliff, then one's threat to take both over the precipice would also be tantamount to collective disaster or, conversely, to the induction of caution and deterrent effect. Therefore, essentially, stabilising their nuclear posturing and not routinely disturbing the strategic fabric of the region can create opportunity for them to sustain peace in their larger national interests.

### **Impact of 'Cold Start Doctrine'**

The apparent Indian conception of brinkmanship, involving war at the conventional or sub-conventional level, will introduce completely unpredictable dynamics in the crisis-situation decision-making processes in the two countries. These dynamics will seriously impinge on decision-making, and may even overtake it by sidestepping control and rationality of the entire process. On April 28, 2004, the Indian policymakers had envisaged a novel concept of Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) for its tri-service, which proposed to rearrange its forces into three large strike corps into eight smaller division-sized integrated battle groups (IBGs) that would combine mechanised infantry, artillery, and armour, for a quick and focused incursion into Pakistani territory.<sup>61</sup> This punitive policy's intent to operationalise its limited war plan, under swiftly mobilised and mechanised forces into offensive battlefield formations, to strike with decisive precision into the Pakistani territory in a limited geographical - and time - space falls well under the rubric of nuclear redline. Fundamentally, this would clearly nullify the very concept of a stable deterrence, and deliberately move towards escalatory brinkmanship with a strong possibility of vaporising deterrence.<sup>62</sup> Naturally, such crisis would be extremely perilous for regional peace and stability, which possesses an inherent propensity to dilute the very foundation of the pre-requisite of stable nuclear deterrence that is in

vogue since the dawn of the nuclear age.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, it would push the conventional escalatory ladder first, and mobilise later, thereby increasing the further possibility of a sudden spiral of escalation into full-blown hostilities. The application of military power in a nuclear environment gives a very limited space to the policymakers for any error of judgement, which would lay the onus of responsibility upon the initiator.<sup>64</sup> On account of the lack of territorial depth of Pakistan, and the concentration of population centres closer to its border with India, it is at an obvious disadvantage vis-à-vis the latter. Ostensibly, Pakistan would have little flexibility in the case of Indian Integrated Battle Groups' (IBG) incursions into its strategically important territories along the border areas.<sup>65</sup> Emergence of such type of a strategic impasse would be dangerous for peace and stability, especially for the weaker state, Pakistan, which could be constrained to explore all options, including nuclear, in order to secure its territorial integrity and sovereignty in an eventuality of the stronger state's punitive strikes.

In this context, Michael Krepon is of the view that CSD can lead to proactive military operation with a tendency to trigger a nuclear response, or drive Pakistan towards the utility of non-strategic battlefield nuclear weapons (commonly called tactical nuclear weapons or TNWs).<sup>66</sup> Whether deterrence works or not depends upon the level of complexity of structural conditions that are heavily influenced by symmetry or asymmetry of strategic interactions between the two states, which "may not only be unable to prevent violence but may also help foment it."<sup>67</sup> Therefore, it would be premature and rather naive to take the prospective prevalence of effective deterrence for granted, because the probability of dangerous escalation would always be there due to both countries' unrelenting hostility towards each other.

### **The Role of Tactical Nuclear Weapons**

Since the development of Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs) by the former Soviet Union and US in the 1950s, they continued to play a crucial role in the strategic calculus of both power blocs. In fact, even today they are heavily entwined into the strategic contingency planning of US and Russia. However, actually the strategic communities occasionally downplay the significance of TNWs and argue that they

only exist for deterrence objectives or maybe as military instruments of war.<sup>68</sup> Even the *2010 Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) of the US ambivalently stated that it preferred to employ the nuclear weapons as a tool for deterrence, and elucidated that the time had not come for the US to use nuclear weapons (nukes) primarily for deterrence purposes.<sup>69</sup> This ambiguity concerning the actual utility of nuclear weapons persists in the evident war planning of the US and its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to date.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, there seem to be multiple variables associated with the TNWs equation in the western alliance, which persist to the present day, in spite of the end of Cold War and demise of the former Soviet Union.<sup>71</sup> In the South Asian context, like NATO, TNWs are likely to have an important role in the strategic equation of adversarial triangular relationship between the regional rivals - Pakistan versus India, and India versus China. Therefore, the strategic community and experts in the two countries need to explain to their respective policymakers the significance and perennial principles of war. Such principles cannot be outlined with a mathematical precision or in accordance with the standard operating procedures (SOPs) alone for different events; and therefore, it will be imperative to understand the possibility of errors. In such a blurred geopolitical heightened and fluctuating situation, the significance of articulation of correct and calculated statements cannot be over-emphasised.<sup>72</sup> The tension-ridden environment demands that the doctrinal foundations of both countries rationally take into consideration the relevance of “reflexivity, complexity, controversy, and extremity.” The reflexivity is inclusive of a military strategy premised on the ethos of social sciences. On the other hand, complexity indicates the distinct difference between the social and physical sciences, which generates further controversies on theoretical grounds. Finally, the extremity of war denotes the complexity that makes knowledge about conflict “extremely suspect.”<sup>73</sup> In the given backdrop, the South Asian strategic state of affairs requires sustenance of a proportionate balance between the strategic-TNWs-conventional forces in view of the prevalent neurological rivalry, mistrust, complexity, controversies, reflective ethos, and the extremities of conflict dynamics between them.

The development of Pakistan’s short-range (60 km) cruise Nasr missile on April 19, 2011 enhanced its deterrence capability at all levels

of the conflict spectrum.<sup>74</sup> This, in fact, is in reaction to India's flawed military posturing under the plan of CSD, which had constrained Pakistan to develop Nasr-type ballistic missile systems for its non-strategic battlefield nuclear weapons.<sup>75</sup> The induction of short-range delivery system commenced a debate amongst the strategic analysts. One side is arguing that it is a dangerous development, while the other one is emphasising the significance of this development for strengthening of deterrence. Interestingly, in July 2011, India also announced the test firing of a mobile short-range (150 km) solid-fuel missile system Prahara.<sup>76</sup> Prahara's 150 km range accords India a sufficient strategic outreach to tactically strike almost all of Pakistan's major population centres on the eastern flank of its geography. This visibly indicates that the CSD would be well integrated into its overall strategy in conjunction with the supposed full backing of its nuclear and conventional assets. Obviously, such strategic contingency plans along with its simultaneous military expansion programme forebodes perilous journey ahead.<sup>77</sup> As a consequence to these developments, Pakistan's response has to be flexible – moving on a bottom-up trajectory - counter-force to counter-value strategies in conjunction with its sufficient conventional strength to hold a CSD-type plan from taking-off. This is important, as the take-off of CSD or a proactive strategy by India in line with the quantitative and qualitative expansion of its armed forces would further undermine the fine balance of deterrence. In this context, some Indian scholars are projecting that Pakistan's contingencies to reinforce its full-spectrum deterrence from tactical to strategic levels would weaken its deterrent.<sup>78</sup> As it was earlier argued that from 1945 to date, all the major nuclear weapon states, including US and Russia, had elaborately integrated their TNWs assets in their various military contingency plans.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, the assertion that such measures of Pakistan would be counter-productive seems to be devoid of ground realities and far-stretched from the South Asian strategic landscape, which is swiftly shifting in India's advantage due to a variety of factors, including its emergence as a potent economic and military powerhouse with an expanding orbit of its strategic outreach and partnerships with the US and its other allies. On the contrary, any strategic inaction on the part of Pakistan in the wake of growing Indian relative clout in the international politics would further evaporate its nuclear deterrent and significantly erode its position regionally and internationally. Obviously, in such a volatile asymmetrical environment,

Pakistan has to neutralise the ostensible aggressive posturing of Indian forces at all levels, from a theatre to a strategic plane. In this context, an independent scholar observes that:

If this system is actually nuclear and if it is actually deployed in crises near the Indian border, it is bound to have its own deterrent effect on unilateral Indian employment of limited conventional war actions across the border, especially offensive operations with ground forces.<sup>80</sup>

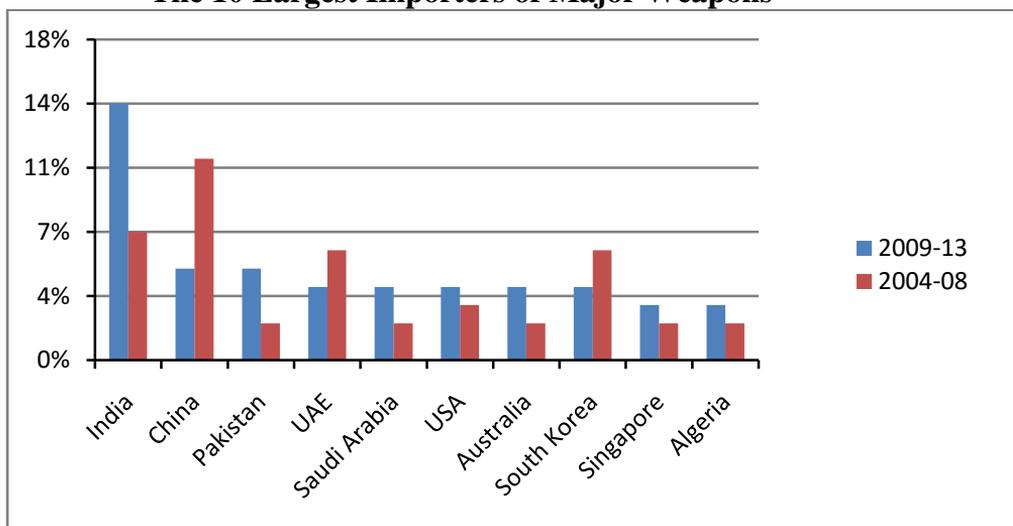
The point of nuclear use under this conception of strategic stability continues to haunt the strategic community, and the only logical solution prescribed was an assured capability to “retaliate in kind.”<sup>81</sup> Apparently, it would not be an endeavour to break out of a situation of mutual vulnerability with sufficiently large prospects of dramatic escalatory impetus. On the other hand, it would signal to the adversary the imminent perils of any transgression from a mutual strategic stability fabric that diverges from both parties’ interests. Therefore, demonstration of one’s resolve to inflict pain onto the opponent is the very essence of deterrence and strategic stability, with a clear intent to dissuade it from any misadventure.<sup>82</sup>

### **Volatile Deterrence**

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) projected that the Indian imports of major weapon systems rose by 111 percent between 2009 and 2013 (see Table-1) in comparison to the previous five-year period.<sup>83</sup> The qualitative and quantitative development of its nuclear arsenal by India amply demonstrate its desire to develop a whole spectrum of strategic and tactical nuclear weapon delivery systems in order to strength the credibility and outreach of its deterrent capability. The existence of short-range delivery vehicles indicates that both countries would be in possession of a whole array of TNWs along with employment, deployment, SOPs, and doctrines. Interestingly, the existence of Indian and Pakistani cities within the strike-range of their short-range delivery systems vividly implies that their TNWs in parallel with strategic weapons would serve the purpose of both counter-force and counter-value objectives. Therefore, any intrusion into the adversary’s territories would open up a Pandora’s box with activation of

diverse probabilities and contingencies, including that of escalation to a tactical level, especially by a weaker state in a case of aggressive occupation game plan by the powerful state. Actually, both parties have accelerated their efforts to develop different ballistic missile systems for their particular strategic requirements. India seems to be poised to develop, deploy, and employ full-spectrum delivery systems as well, which range from short-range to intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) along with sea-based platforms to sustain its ambitious plan to play a prominent role in world affairs.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, Pakistan's primary objective appears to be to safeguard its critical national security interests by preventing India from operationalising its offensive military doctrine. All these developments suggest that India is persistently boosting its conventional capabilities with a view to enhancing its strategic outreach, both regionally and extra-regionally in the coming years. Consequently, for a country like Pakistan, it would be a huge challenge and a burden for its struggling economy to compete. Therefore, the only rational approach left for Pakistan is to strengthen its strategic as well as tactical arsenal on an offensive-defence trajectory so as to face the emerging challenges to its security.<sup>85</sup> India needs to understand that harbouring of excessive military capabilities in parallel with a highly faulty and aggressive limited war plan is dangerous and can lead to more conflicts.<sup>86</sup> The dramatic military modernisation and expansion programme of India leaves a limited breathing space for Pakistan, thereby constraining it to resort to more offensive-deterrence strategy vis-à-vis India.<sup>87</sup> India's obvious urge to expand well beyond the geographical confinements of South Asia without resolving its serious disputes with Pakistan would keep the regional concept of strategic stability marginalised. Some scholars conjecture that the concept of strategic stability and balance of nuclear forces is a distorted view in the prevalent world affairs. They argue that, essentially it is the economic and cultural values, interests, ideologies, and not necessarily the nuclear balance that stabilises states' relations.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, the strategic stability matrix is not the lone factor or sufficient explanation to coherently outline the intricate complexity dynamics of this phenomenon.<sup>89</sup>

**Table-1**  
**The 10 Largest Importers of Major Weapons**



**Source:** “The 10 Largest Importers of Major Weapons”, *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, March 2013, <http://books.sipri.org/files/FS/SIPRIFS1403.pdf> (accessed on October10, 2013)

In addition to India’s military expansion programme, it is also projecting its soft power beyond the confines of South Asia to West Asia and South-west Asia.<sup>90</sup> This indicates that India considers itself as a rising regional power with evident motives to expand to an extra-regional level. Therefore, it seems quite obvious that it would continue to play its cards astutely in West Asia, especially Afghanistan as never before, thereby creating a two-front security dilemma for Pakistan. It is highly unlikely that India would relinquish this strategic advantage. As one Indian expert has clearly stated, India has core strategic interests to protect, and therefore it will continue to play an important role in Afghanistan with or without US approval.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, “the Indian government has embarked on a major rethink of its Afghanistan-Pakistan policy; and while this process has yet to be completed, it might eventually culminate in a new regional alignment,” writes Harsh Pan, “between India, Iran, and Russia, that will only complicate Washington’s exit strategy from Afghanistan.”<sup>92</sup> This Indian policy is expected to motivate Pakistan to critically review and recalibrate its strategic plan regarding Afghanistan in order to pre-empt the Indian game-plan to

entangle Pakistan in a two-front situation. In addition, there are two other significant factors that are pushing Pakistan to the margins of regional strategic fringes, especially when India-Iran have a burgeoning strategic relationship with the geo-economic corridor stretching from Chabahar to Afghanistan, and then onwards to Central Asian states. Secondly, the growing lethality and spread of radical forces in the form of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria),<sup>93</sup> drawn on narrow sectarian fault lines in the contemporary Middle East, needs to be watched very cautiously and vigilantly. Within the afore-mentioned context, it is essential to view the South Asian situation holistically, especially from Pakistan's security dilemma lens. Pakistan believes in a policy of peaceful co-existence, but if its existence is threatened or its territorial integrity is breached, it needs to be equipped to retain the option to reply with full might, as categorically articulated by National Command Authority's statement on September 2013 stating that "Pakistan would not remain oblivious to evolving security dynamics in South Asia and would maintain a full-spectrum deterrence capability to deter all forms of aggression."<sup>94</sup> The solution to this problem can be deduced from Wheeler's argument that "India and Pakistan have crossed the nuclear threshold and both store warheads separately from delivery vehicles." He, however, elaborates that "fear and suspicion of each other's nuclear intentions has been magnified in a situation where missile flight-times are as short as 5-10 minutes and both sides know each other's capability to rapidly assemble and deploy nuclear forces."<sup>95</sup> This proves that "more trust may be better" as an alternative approach to move towards stabilisation of their nuclear deterrence posturing. However, it is imperative to resolve all bilateral territorial, water, and other issues in order to bridge the dwindling trust level with a realistic starting point. Strategic stability would be hard to sustain without the two states climbing down from their respective stances as a prelude to confidence- and security-enhancing measures.

## **Conclusion**

The perilous strategic paradox of South Asia and the conflicting foreign and security policies of two rivals would perennially keep their deterrence stability on a sharp edge. Reliance on one's ability to effectively control escalation with certainty is simply not possible, as decision-making is not concentrated in one country alone. This volatility

is logically expected to take away the element of certainty from the situation, thereby making the rationality and strategic stability as the foremost casualties in the escalatory contours of their bilateral relationship. In fact, when both countries' policymakers are unaware about each other's unpredictable behaviour in a crisis situation due to a heightened state of their neurological mistrust and divergent threat perceptions, their aspirations and behaviour would perpetually continue to be influenced by different interpretations and constructions of threat scenarios, thereby automatically impelling them to react diversely to emerging objects and rivals.<sup>96</sup> Such unpredictability and volatility inherently possesses the seeds of inadvertent escalation dynamics, resultantly forcing them to react to a situation in a diametrically opposite way. Clearly, it would generate more stand-offs and crises prone to uncontrollable escalation due to an already fragile and fluid environment prevalent in contemporary South Asia. Therefore, to wish negation of TNWs in the two countries' doctrines in face of an asymmetric strategic equation is not realistic. A rational approach would be not to destabilise the fabric of nuclear deterrence stability with aggressive and faultily conceived strategies under fanciful labels like CSD or proactive strategy. Essentially, policymakers need to understand and appreciate the significance of a rational approach towards the other's apprehensions, security dilemmas, strategic unpredictability of the regional landscape, and the persistence of divergence of their foreign and security policy goal-posts, thereby making it imperative for them to act with a calculated harmony towards each other instead of acting irrationally and provocatively. Coexisting irrationally and acting provocatively with frequent diplomatic impasses would only enhance the prospects of escalations and inadvertent crises with inherent dynamics to go out of control due to the prevalence of a high degree of historical and religious misperceptions and mistrust.

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