ISSUE BRIEF

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BALANCING THE SCALES: PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR STRATEGY IN THE FACE OF INDIA'S MILITARY MODERNIZATION

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India's critical military modernization and its position as a leading arms importer have introduced significant implications for regional stability, and this growing conventional asymmetry has introduced serious implications for South Asia's peace and strategic stability. The 2024 report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) underscores India's position as the world's largest importer of major arms between 2019 and 2023, spotlighting a substantial influx of advanced weaponry.[1] Pakistan has implemented necessary advancement measures to counteract India's headlong militarization, thereby enhancing its deterrence capabilities and maintaining strategic stability amidst India's escalating defence expenditure and aggressive posture. Pakistan has had several security issues since its independence in 1947, mostly because of the antagonistic relationship with India. These were primarily driven by the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir, especially after India's Illegal occupation and the denial of the Kashmiris' right to self-determination.[2] The regional power disparity, accentuated by India's

1 "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2023" (SIPRI, March 2024), https://www.sipri.org/publications/2024/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2023.

2 Gowher Rizvi, "Nehru and the Indo-Pakistan Rivalry Over Kashmir 1947–64," *Contemporary South Asia*, April 11, 2007, https://doi.org/10.1080/09584939508719749.

expanding military machine, compelled Pakistan to explore strategies to mitigate its opponent's conventional military dominance.

India's assertive military strategy has been evident throughout history, reflecting its ambitions to procure more conventional and modern weaponry. In 1974, India conducted its first so-called peaceful nuclear test, "Smiling Buddha," which further exacerbated the geopolitical situation. This advancement substantially altered the security dynamics of the region, prompting Pakistan to intensify its efforts to develop a nuclear deterrent to counterbalance India's consistently growing military and nuclear capabilities. Furthermore, in reaction to increased regional instability during the 1986-87 Brasstacks crisis, when India's large-scale military drills resulted in nuclear signals, Pakistan realized the necessity to establish a credible nuclear deterrent to prevent future crises from developing into war.[3] The nuclear policy of Pakistan underwent a significant transformation in May 1998 when India conducted a series of nuclear tests known as 'Pokhran-II', the so-called 'Operation Shakti.' Pakistan responded decisively by conducting a series of its own nuclear tests, "Chagai-I and Chagai-II," respectively on May 28 and 30, 1998, which marked its transition to a declared nuclear power as a direct response to India's tests.[4] On May 20, 1999, Pakistan officially articulated its policy of "Credible Minimum Deterrence," while simultaneously identifying the responsibilities and risks that are associated with nuclear weapons.[5]

Evolving Deterrence Dynamics and Technological Advancements

In recent years, the deterrence dynamics between India and Pakistan have been further complicated by significant advancements in emerging technologies within South Asia's strategic landscape. India's aggressive approach to becoming a military might and acquiring more lethal emerging weapons with advanced technologies has added further layers of complexity to regional peace and stability.[6] India's recent advances in hypersonic technology, notably the testing of the Hypersonic Technology Demonstrator Vehicle (HSTDV) and the development of the BrahMos-II missile, reflect its aggressive approach and its hegemonic ambitions. These aspirations of India are exemplified by the BrahMos-II, which is expected to attain an operational range of approximately 1,500 kilometers

3 Iram Khalid, "Brasstacks Crisis 1986-87," *South Asian Studies* 27, no. 01 (June 30, 2012): 35–62.

4 Piotr Balcerowicz, "The Harder the Pressure, the Looser the Bond," in *Kashmir in India and Pakistan Policies* (Routledge, 2022).

5 Sitara Noor, "Pakistan's Evolving Nuclear Doctrine | Arms Control Association," n.d., https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-10/features/pakistans-evolving-nuclear-doctrine.

6 Ajey Lele, "Defence and Disruptive Technologies," in *Disruptive Technologies for the Militaries and Security*, ed. Ajey Lele (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 29–42, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3384-2_2.

and velocities of up to Mach 8.[7] India is actively engaged in the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and missile defence to enhance the lethality of its weapons, to increase its targeting precision, as well as autonomous decision-making in military operations. India is currently aspiring to drastically transform the regional security environment and impact strategic stability in South Asia through new technologies such as AI-driven surveillance, unmanned systems, and enhanced missile defences.

In response, Pakistan has reaffirmed its dedication to Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD), focusing on countermeasures and pursuing a balanced approach to address India's aggressive arms race. This commitment now includes a concentration on the development of countermeasures to hypersonic threats, like in 2021, Pakistan demonstrated its capability through the successful test of the Shaheen-III missile, which has a range of approximately 2,750 kilometers, which shows the enhancement of its second-strike capabilities to maintain strategic balance.[8] In addition, Pakistan's expanding focus on electronic warfare capabilities, cyber defence, and autonomous systems is indicative of its adaptation to these changing threats, which guarantees a credible response at all conflict levels.

Concept of Nuclear Deterrence and its Implications for Regional Security and Strategic Stability

The Table below outlines nuclear deterrence policy, including levels of deterrence, nuclear doctrines, and the influence of emerging technologies. It highlights how advancements in hypersonic weapons, missile defence, and AI are reshaping the strategic landscape in South Asia. Understanding these elements is crucial for assessing Pakistan's response to India's military advancements:

7 Gp Capt AK Sachdev, "Hypersonic Weapon Systems for India," Indian Defence Review, July 13, 2023, https://indiandefencereview.com/hypersonic-weapon-systems-for-india/.

8 *Dls | Celebrating Youme-E-Takbeer Evolution of Pakistan's Full Spectrum Deterrence Policy*, May 28, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUVNt2dvNNM.

Category	Concept	Area / Yield	Level / Targets	Strategic Implication / Responses
Concept of Nuclear Deterrence	Tactical	Short range (0-100 km), low yield	Battlefield	Designed to deter at limited tactical level.
	Operational	Medium range (up to 1000 km), intermediate yield	Theatre	Designed to deter at larger scale operations level.
	Strategic	Both short and long-range, high-yield	National	Designed to deter at larger scale national level.
Nuclear Policy	Weapon of last resort	When survival is at stake		Maintains ambiguity and deters conflict escalation.
	First Use	No declared stance on nuclear weapon usage		Allows for flexibility in response to conflict escalation.
Doctrinal Concepts	Credible Minimum Deterrence	Assured credible deterrence with required capability	Primarily strategic level	Ensures enough capability to deter existential threats
	Full Spectrum Deterrence	Deterrence across tactical, operational, and strategic levels	All levels of conflict	Addresses a wide range of threats, ensuring a credible response at all conflict levels.
Emerging Technologies	Hypersonic Weapons	Variable ranges, low to high-yield	All Levels	Enhances speed and unpredictability of strikes; challenges existing deterrence frameworks.
	Missile Defense Systems	Different levels of interception	All Levels	Mitigates incoming threats; and complicates adversarial responses.
	Artificial Intelligence (AI)	Variable ranges	All levels	Improves decision-making and response times
	Cyber Warfare	Variable ranges	All levels	Enables disruptive capabilities, crucial for national security and critical infrastructure protection.

Source: Data compiled by the author.

Implications for Regional Security and Strategic Stability

These Indian advancements in acquisitions of modern weaponization and developments in emerging technologies have further emphasized the necessity of diplomatic engagement and arms control mechanisms to prevent the risks of miscalculation and escalation to ensure strategic stability in South Asia. India's expanding conventional and advanced military capabilities are increasingly

influencing the strategic landscape in South Asia. The conventional asymmetry of India, which is exemplified by its position as one of the top global weapons importers, has serious implications for regional stability. Pakistan's nuclear deterrence framework functions as a critical equalizer by implementing a multilayered nuclear policy to ensure safeguarding territorial integrity and national sovereignty. Pakistan counters India's conventional supremacy and maintains credible deterrence at all levels and stages.

The Indian nuclear doctrine, which was published in 2003, contained provisions that authorized nuclear retaliation in response to any attack utilizing biological or chemical weapons. Consequently, the Indian nuclear posture was ambiguous and contradictory from the initial publication.[9] Furthermore, statements from Indian Defence Ministers including Rajnath Singh and Manohar Parrikar have further hinted at potential revision of India's stance on NFU.[10] These measures have raised concern regarding the commitment of India to NFU policy and its credibility. Pakistan, on the other hand, has maintained its policy of strategic ambiguity and emphasized that its nuclear weapons are mainly focused as a deterrent against any kind of nuclear or conventional threat. The 'CMD doctrine' of Pakistan seeks to achieve equilibrium by avoiding an arms race and sustaining a credible nuclear deterrent against India. This approach was made to ensure that Pakistan possessed enough nuclear weapons to prevent any attack, while simultaneously refraining from an unregulated stockpiling of nuclear buildup. Pakistan has not adopted the NFU policy, and this decision was made to maintain strategic ambiguity in its nuclear policy and was a calculated move to prevent India from escalating conventional conflicts below the nuclear threshold.[11]

After the Kargil conflict and the 2002 military standoff, India recognized that it may be impossible to engage in a protracted conventional conflict with Pakistan due to third-party involvement. This recognition led to the development of the so-called 'Cold Start' doctrine which envisions rapid military mobilization to capture Pakistani territory within 48 to 72 hours, before reaching the nuclear threshold or third-party involvement.[12] The idea was to capture as much territory as possible at the onset of the war and then use the captured territory for negotiations. It was inspired by German Blitzkrieg and threatened to undermine Pakistan's conventional defences, which presented a serious challenge to the country's strategic deterrence. Additionally, India's deployment of INS Arihant, Ship,

9 Joshi Shashank, "India's Nuclear Anxieties: The Debate Over Doctrine | Arms Control Association," May 2015, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2015-05/features/indias-nuclear-anxieties-debate-over-doctrine.

10 Dr. Lora Saalman, "India's No-First-Use Dilemma: Strategic Consistency or Ambiguity Towards China and Pakistan | Sipri," December 2, 2020, https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2020/indias-no-first-use-dilemma-strategic-consistency-or-ambiguity-towards-china-and-pakistan.

11 Zafar Khan, "Pakistan's Nuclear First-Use Doctrine: Obsessions and Obstacles," *Contemporary Security Policy* 36, no. 1 (February 19, 2015): 149–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2015.1012349.

12 Sannia Abdullah, "Cold Start in Strategic Calculus," *IPRI Journal* XII, no. 1 (Winter 2012) (n.d.).

Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear (SSBN) submarine in 2009, which entailed significant advancement in its strategic nuclear deterrence[13] although the submarine was non-operational until 2014.

The security dynamics in South Asia are now further shaped by new technological developments and emerging technologies with significant implications for regional deterrence dynamics. Pakistan's approach has evolved to counter these developments, adopting an FSD policy under the Credible Minimum Deterrence framework to address various levels of potential conflict. The successful test of the Short-Range Ballistic Missile (SRBM) 'NASR' in 2011 served as an impetus for doctrinal shift, aiming to deter any form of conventional attack.[14] The ISPR announced this through a press release, driven by the need to counterbalance India's conventional military buildup and ensure a robust response to any potential aggression.

Pakistan has also concentrated on enhancing its maritime security and increasing its sea-based buildup. On January 09, 2017, Pakistan successfully tested the submarine-launched cruise missile (SLCM) 'Babur,'[15] which further strengthened Pakistan's FSD under the umbrella of CMD across all conflict levels. The National Security Policy (NSP) of Pakistan for 2022-2026 affirmed its adherence to FSD within the framework of CMD by "deterring war through comprehensive deterrence within the framework of credible minimum nuclear deterrence, in conjunction with our conventional military capabilities and all facets of national power."[16] It highlighted the significance of balancing conventional and nuclear weapons to deter confrontation and safeguard territorial integrity. In a statement issued on May 28, 2024, the former Director General, Strategic Plans Division, Lieutenant General (Retired) Khalid Ahmed Kidwai noted that "Pakistan's nuclear triad, which consists of land-based, sea-based, and air-based delivery systems that can serve as a strong deterrent against any form of aggression."[17] He underscored that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal encompassed a broad spectrum of destructive yields and ranges, which guaranteed that it could respond to any external threat across all three levels.

In conclusion, Pakistan's strategic defence strategy has undergone notable evolution over the last several decades owing to increasingly complex regional security dynamics. Pakistan's commitment

13 "India Submarine Capabilities," *The Nuclear Threat Initiative* (blog), September 4, 2024, https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/india-submarine-capabilities/.

14 "Inter Services Public Relations Pakistan," April 19, 2011, https://www.ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=1721.

15 The Newspaper's Staff Reporter, "Pakistan Test-Fires Nuclear-Capable Submarine-Launched Cruise Missile," *Dawn*, January 10, 2017, http://www.dawn.com/news/1307531.

16 Inam Ul Haque, "National Security Policy of Pakistan 2022-2026 - an Appraisal," *The Express Tribune*, January 15, 2022, sec. News, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2338864/national-security-policy-of-pakistan-2022-2026-an-appraisal.

17 *Dls | Celebrating Youme-E-Takbeer Evolution of Pakistan's Full Spectrum Deterrence Policy*.

to doctrinal principles highlights its dedication to stability and the prevention of escalation. Pakistan is committed to preserving South Asian strategic stability and safeguarding its national security in an intricate geopolitical landscape.