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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PAKISTAN AND INDIA'S DEFENCE CAPABILITIES: STRATEGIC POSTURES, FORCE STRUCTURES, AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a multidimensional comparative analysis of the defence capabilities of Pakistan and India within the strategic environment of South Asia. Using balance of power theory, deterrence theory, and the security dilemma, the study examines economic capacity, conventional force structures, nuclear doctrines, and emerging military technologies. Drawing on a qualitative comparative design and secondary data from SIPRI, the World Bank, IISS, FAS, and official publications, it finds that India retains enduring structural advantages in economic resources, defence spending, and conventional modernization. Pakistan, however, offsets this asymmetry through nuclear parity, full-spectrum deterrence, and adaptive doctrinal choices. The study argues that regional stability rests on an asymmetry-based deterrence balance in which nuclear weapons reduce the likelihood of full-scale war but do not remove crisis instability, limited conflict risks, or escalation pressures generated by technological modernization.

Keywords: *defence capabilities; strategic stability; nuclear deterrence; conventional asymmetry; military modernization; South Asian security*

INTRODUCTION

The Pak-India military rivalry is one of the longest standing and structurally entrenched dyadic conflicts of the international system that began after the Second World War. Ever since the two nations became independent nations in 1947 following the division of British India, the two have warred on several conventional wars, experienced recurrent crises, and undergone relentless military modernization processes. The wars of 1947-48, 1965, 1971, and the Kargil conflict of 1999 demonstrate that the rivalry has never been sporadic but rather it is a security competition within identity, territory and also in the perception of the strategy. The most pressing matter in this rivalry has been the unresolved Jammu and Kashmir dispute but over time the rivalry has evolved becoming less territorial based and more of a multifaceted strategic conflict where the determinant is the nuclear deterrence, the expansion of the maritime forces, the innovation in doctrine and the change in technology. (Britannica, 2026)

In May 1998, the open nuclearization of South Asia signified a structural change of vital change in the competition. India followed up by a series of nuclear tests conducted at Pokhran and the tests were soon followed by a corresponding test by Pakistan at Chagai. These events have since given rise to what scholars term as a nuclear dyad under conventional asymmetry that has characterized the strategic environment. As of 2024, India and Pakistan are nearly equal in terms of strategic capabilities due to about 170-172 nuclear warheads each, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Nevertheless, this equality goes in par with broad differences in economic potential and traditional structure of force. (SIPRI, 1999)

The gross domestic product of India stood at USD 3.4 trillion in 2023, which is higher than the one of Pakistan, which is about USD 338-400 billion (World Bank, 2023). This economic disparity is translated to a perpetrated difference in military expenditure. According to SIPRI, India has reported its expenditure amounting to USD 83.6 billion in 2023 on the military, and Pakistan has reported its expenditure amounting to USD 10.3 billion on the military. This asymmetry implies what is conventional imbalance, but nuclear parity makes it difficult to make direct interpretations of military superiority. (VisionIAS, 2025), (A.P, 2025)

The South Asian strategic environment today cannot be narrowed down to the number of troops or the comparative budgets. It should rather be interpreted as a result of interplay in economic underpinnings, doctrinaire models, nuclear posture, traditional arrangements of forces, and the emerging technologies. Under the Atmanirbhar Bharat program, India has laid more emphasis on maritime power projection, ballistic missile defense and defense indigenization. Pakistan has focused on full spectrum deterrence, delivery system diversification and geographically concentrated conventional delivery, being an economically limited country, though strategically adaptive. (WBG, 2025),

This paper holds that the Pak-India military balance can be best determined as an asymmetry-based deterrent system. India has enduring structural and conventional competitive advantages based on the economic and industrial potential. Nuclear diversification and doctrinal flexibility are compensating factors that ensure that conventional imbalance does not convert into strategic domination in Pakistan. This equilibrium offers the strategic stability of the nuclear level and maintains the conventional competition and crisis instability at the lower levels of the escalation. (SIPRI, 2025)

In more than 70 years, the Pakistan-India rivalry has developed to be not only a traditional conflict but a multidomain rivalry conforming to the local geopolitics, international and internal politics economies. Kashmir conflict which burst right after independence has continued to be the epicenter of wars and localized crises. In addition to Kashmir, there are strategic concerns that have been caused by increased influence of India in South Asia and Indian Ocean Region, its developing alliance with the United States and Japan, and the Indian desire to become the leader in the region. Pakistan, which feels surrounded on both the geographical and diplomatic levels, has looked towards building strategic depths in terms of alliances, nuclear deterrence as well as asymmetric warfare capabilities. (Butt, 2025)

Another influence on the development of this rivalry has been based on the international non-proliferation regime, which entailed the status of India outside of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and parallel nuclear development by Pakistan, both of which have helped shape the global perceptions of the international strategy and policies of the region. Although the international arms markets have worked to their advantage, both states have worked around sanctions and export controls, which have affected indigenous development programs and strategic concerns. (A.P, 2025)

Besides, the interaction between economic capacity, the development of technology, and changing the doctrines has changed the face of deterrence. The industrial base and defense R&D infrastructure of India enhances its capacity to maintain long term modernization initiatives but Pakistan has focused on doctrinal ingenuity and focused deployment concepts so as to counter

material imbalance. These tendencies show that military rivalry in South Asia is a matter of perception, signaling and credibility as much as it is a matter of naked military strength. (SIPRI, 2024)

This paper includes a multidimensional analysis of the comparative defence capabilities by combining structural realism, deterrence theory and the theory of security dilemma. The studytries to explain economic indicators, nuclear arsenals, and force structures not as separate entities but as a combination and its effects on stability in the region over time in South Asia.

Problem Statement

Even centuries of analysis on South Asian security does not eliminate the analytical fragmentation in evaluating the Pakistan-India defence capability. Much of the literature to this day either stresses quantitative comparisons, e.g. defence budgets and manpower, or only discusses nuclear deterrence relationships. There are limited studies that combine traditional force structures, nuclear doctrine, economic sustainability, and new areas of technology in one comparative study. Besides, the rapid modernization, especially in the missile systems, air defence, unmanned systems, and maritime expansion have changed the strategic environment in some aspects that the older systems fail to fully account. Emerging blue water naval capabilities and ballistic missile defence programs in India and full spectrum deterrence postures and tactical nuclear systems in Pakistan have changed the calculation of escalation. (Raeesa & Akhtar, 2025)

None of the multidimensional comparative analysis restricts the comprehension of the interaction of structural asymmetry with nuclear parity and technological change to affect the regional stability. In the absence of such an integrated evaluation, policy prescriptions may simplify the balanced of military forces excessively and get the risks of escalation wrong. The study fills this particular gap of integrating all these areas in studying Pakistan and India's comparative studies.

Research Question

- What is the relationship between economic capability, strategic doctrine, force structure and technological modernization in determining the comparative defence capabilities of Pakistan and India?
- How do these differences have implications on the strategic stability of the regions?

Research Objectives

- Analyze military capability based on the economic basis of military capability in Pakistan and India using the data of defence expenditure and GDP to determine sustainability.
- Compare traditional land, air and maritime force structures.
- Examine nuclear capabilities and doctrinal postures in order to know the dynamics of deterrence.
- Measure the modernization paths and new technological areas which might affect the balance and future stability of crisis.
- Give an empirically based but theoretically-grounded evaluation of the Pakistan-India military balance.

Theoretical Framework

The discussion is rooted in three mutually supportive theoretical views, which are the balance of power theory, the deterrence theory, and the security dilemma framework.

Balance of Power

According to structural realism, interstate behavior is determined by the allocation of material capabilities. In South Asia, India has the structural power in the form of demographic, economic and industrial advantages. The World Bank (2023) reports that the GDP of India is more than USD 3.4 trillion in comparison to USD 400 billion in Pakistan. This inequality supports long-term variations in defence spending. (Waltz, 1979), (World Bank, 2023)

According to SIPRI, India spent 3.4 per cent of the world military spending in 2023, and Pakistan only spent a much less amount. This kind of asymmetry is an indication of traditional

dominance. But balancing of behavior is also expected in structural realism. The nuclear build-up by Pakistan can be seen as a way of strategically balancing with the conventional superiority of India. (SIPRI, 2024)

Deterrence Theory

According to the deterrence theory, the nuclear weapons essentially change the nature of interstate competition by increasing the war cost (Schelling, 1996). After 1998, the states were in the state of open mutual deterrence, after nuclear tests. The nuclear policy of India stresses on credible minimum deterrence and traditionally incorporates a no-first-use posture (P.R, 2014). Pakistan does not endorse no-first-use but rather explains full spectrum deterrence, which aims to deter the conventional and nuclear threats on various levels. (Noor, 2023)

This difference of doctrine creates complexity of escalation. India wants to have the credibility of retaliating without decreasing the nuclear thresholds; Pakistan deliberately demonstrates the flexibility of early-use in opposition to conventional imbalance. Nuclear deterrence, therefore, makes the full scale war stable and hard to manage limited conflict. (Noor, 2023)

The Security Dilemma

Security dilemma is the reason why security steps of one state seem to be offensive to the other (Jervis, 1978). The purchase of modern air defence equipment and the growth of the naval strength of India can be back home as a sign of modernization, but these actions can be viewed as changing the strategic equilibrium. On the other hand, the use of tactical nuclear systems by Pakistan is seen by India to be destabilizing. (Tang, 2010)

Such an up-down modernization trend promotes arms competition, and it makes it harder to achieve strategic stability even at the conditions of nuclear deterrence. A combination of these theoretical lenses can be used to have a combined evaluation of traditional asymmetry, nuclear parity and technological adaptation.

Research Methodology

It is a qualitative comparative research design that this study takes, as it will examine the defence capacities of Pakistan and India in conventional, nuclear and emerging technology levels. The study is based on an organized, theoretically informed comparative system that incorporates the balance of power theory, the deterrence theory and the security dilemma model. The methodological strategy is mostly analytic and interpretive with a few yet well integrated quantitative data. The study is based on secondary data instead of primary data via conducting a primary data collection, as now the secondary data is based on credible and open-source institutional reports, including the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the World Bank, the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) and official government publications. The choice of these sources is explained by the transparency of methodology, international reputation and standardized data collection practices.

The study uses comparative case study research approach. The two countries, Pakistan and India are handled as a pair within a sub system of the region security. This design allows systematic comparison on existing dimensions: economic capability, military spending, make-up of forces structure, size of nuclear armament, posture on doctrine, and modernization pathways. Dyadic rivalries are inappropriate in the methodology of comparative case study as both actors are interplaying in the same strategic environment (Ojeda, 2005).

To give an empirical basis, quantitative measures like GDP, defence spending, size of the force, and estimated number of nuclear warheads are included. These figures, however, are not considered as power deterministic measures. Rather, they are contextually interpreted analytically in the context of doctrines and strategies. As an illustration, traditional power imbalance is analyzed against the context of nuclear disposition and deterrence policy, and not as an unilateral dominance. Process-tracing logic is also used in the study to analyze major turning points in the rivalry especially the war in 1971, the

nuclear tests in 1998 and development of the doctrine after 2000. Process tracing enables the causal processes between structural asymmetry and strategic adaptation to be identified (Ojeda, 2005) Triangulation of data improves reliability. Data on military spending are cross tabulated between the SIPRI and the world bank data. The estimates of nuclear arsenal are based on SIPRI Yearbook and FAS evaluation. The study of doctrines is based on the official statements and the scholarly interpretation. The triangulation of independent institutions helps the research eliminate the chance of bias that could be posed by the reliance on one source of information.

It does have inherent limitations though. First, defence data are partially opaque because of the national security restrictions. Formal records might not be essential in reflecting top-secret abilities. Second, the estimates of nuclear warheads are rough numbers relying on open-source data as opposed to official revelations. Third, new areas like cyber war and electronic capabilities do not have transparent quantitative data and therefore make them less precise.

In spite of these limitations, methodology yields analytical rigor with the help of systematic comparison, theoretical basis, and the application of internationally accepted data. It is thus a suitable research design to determine the multidimensional military balance between both Pakistan and India.

Literature Review

Literature on the defence capabilities of Pakistan and India is long but analytically disjointed. The traditional development of research has been based on three major axes, which encompass structural evaluation of traditional military balance, nuclear deterrence and escalation studies, and technological modernization and new areas. Nevertheless elaborate frameworks that incorporate these strands are still minimal.

The structural realist scholarship gives the basic insight on the material asymmetry interpretation. The theory of international politics developed by Kenneth Waltz assumes that systemic structure is determined by the distribution of material capabilities that determine the behavior of states (Waltz, 1979). In South Asia, the Indian demographic size, industry potential, and the economy are structurally above Pakistan. According to World Bank data, the GDP of India is close to ten times greater than that of Pakistan (World Bank, 2023). According to the views of structural realist, this disparity ought to allow India to have long term military hegemony. However realism also foreshadows balancing behavior especially when smaller states are threatened by existential danger. The development of nuclear weapons in Pakistan can thus be viewed as a balancing strategy of compensation with the aim of counter-balancing the conventional Indian superiority.

The second important body of scholarship is the deterrence theory. Thomas Schelling theorized nuclear weapons as the instruments of coercion and bargaining in the risky situation rather than as warfighting (Schelling, 1996). Mutual vulnerability and a reconsideration of the calculations of escalation were brought about by open nuclearization in the South Asian scenario in 1998. According to the scholars like Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, the nuclear weapons led to the creation of the strategic stability and allowed the limitation of the conventional crises-a fact what is commonly referred to as the stability-instability paradox (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010).

Michael Krepon also stresses that nuclear deterrence does not reduce sub-conventional war or unstable situation on the verge of the full-scale conflict, but only keeps it at bay. This paradox is demonstrated in the Kargil war of 1999 and Pulwama-Balakot crisis of 2019 where the limited conflicts have taken place in the nuclear shadow without the development into a conventional war. (Krepon et al., 2015). The issue of doctrinal divergence also makes deterrence stability more complex. The officially stated nuclear policy of India implies the credible minimum deterrence and No First Use (P.R, 2014). Pakistan does not support the concept of No First Use and, in its place, presents Full Spectrum Deterrence, which is explicitly targeted at deterring the conventional incursions on a variety of levels of escalation (Noor, 2023). Feroz Khan believes that the nuclear policy of Pakistan is compensatory by its very

nature, which aims at correcting conventional asymmetry and maintaining the deterrence credibility (Khan, 2003).

The third line of research touches on the subject of modernization and technological change. The idea of escalation through entanglement presented by James Acton cautions against the fact that the combination of traditional and nuclear command-and-control systems (especially missile defence and precision strike systems) may increase crisis instability (Acton, 2025). In South Asia, the development of India in ballistic missile defense and sea-based deterrents can affect the perception by Pakistani people on the survivability of second strike. According to maritime research, the Indian naval build is an indication of the wider Indo-Pacific goals that are not based on perceptions of Pakistan threats (Chauhan & Khan, 2024). The modernization in the Pakistani naval power is based on denying the seas and deterring submarines as opposed to blue-water projection. The overlap of economic capability and the sustainability of defense has also been highlighted as a part of recent scholarship. Research by Mian et al. (2021) points out that the higher defense-to-GDP ratio of Pakistan offsets to some extent the absolute economic weakness, and allows it to be operationally prepared in the short term in spite of long-term fiscal limitations. On the other hand, the economy of India encourages diversification of the main defense spending and technological exploration, including the design of advanced missile systems and the local aircraft initiative. These divergent economies are not only influencing the tendency of procurement but also the calculus of strategy of deterrence, signals, and the management of escalation.

Another new field of literature is cybersecurity and space capabilities. South Asian analysts continue to appreciate the fact that conflict in the 21 st century is no longer a traditional area but rather a computer-based intrusion, a satellite interference, and a computer-controlled command system enabled by artificial intelligence. According to multiple studies both states explore the use of cyber and space tools in terms of intelligence, early-warning, and force- multiplication, but the transparency and open-access data is still insufficient. Such innovations have direct effects on stability of crises, especially at the point of intersection of the dual use technologies with the nuclear command-and-control infrastructure. (Matamis, 2025), (Hussain et al., 2025)

Lastly, there are very few comparative studies, which combine historical analysis of conflicts with quantitative analysis on forces. Although case studies about the 1965, 1971, and Kargil wars offer information about the operational doctrines and crisis management, not many of them synthesize the obtained information with the current technological and economic information. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the historical patterns of conflict, an evolution of the doctrines, the economic capacity and technological modernization in a holistic analysis. Nevertheless, in the context of the abundance of theoretical and empirical findings, the majority of the studies, which already exist, single out separate aspects of the rivalry. Few of them combine economic sustainability, traditional force balance, nuclear doctrine, and technological modernization into one comparative framework. This research fills this gap by combining structural, doctrinal, and technological approaches in order to assess multidimensional military balance between Pakistan and India.

Research Analysis

Economic Bases and Military spending

It is the economic capacity that eventually forms the basis of military capability. Structural realism asserts that the long term strategic competition is based on sustainable resources mobilization (Waltz, 1979). Pakistan and India are economically lopsided. The World Bank (2023), has shown that India had a GDP of around USD 3.4 trillion in 2023 with Pakistan having a GDP of around USD 338 billion. This almost ten times gap stifles the conventional expansion potential of Pakistan in the long term (World Bank, 2023). The SIPRI documents that in 2023 the military spending of India had amounted to USD 83.6 billion, which is about 2.4 percent of its GDP. The military spending in Pakistan was estimated at USD 10.3 billion which is almost 3.6-4% of GDP. Although Pakistan spends more percentage of

GDP in defence, the absolute purchasing power of India gives much more purchasing flexibility, researcher power, and sustainability of modernization. (SIPRI, 2024)

In the last ten years, the defence spending of India has increased continuously in absolute terms due to modernization efforts, localised production and due to strategic rivalry with its neighbours, Pakistan and China. Pakistan has had limited growth in its expenditures which has been more reactionary to crisis environments. Such asymmetry in economy is the structural cause of conventional imbalance. The economic advantage of India is not only allowing bigger procurement budgets; it allows making new investments in research and development, national defense production, and reorganization of forces over the long term. The Government of India has also focused more on indigenous production as part of the Atmanirbhar Bharat defense program with the aim to decrease foreign-dependent suppliers and establish a military-industrial complex at home. This kind of industrial richness leads to strategic autonomy and sustainability in the long run. Although Pakistan has had established defense production industry, it is more reliant on external alliances especially with China in regards to advanced systems. This imbalance gives an indication that in the long run, the structural advantage of India can be enlarged unless balanced by new doctrinal or asymmetric approaches. (WB, 2024)

The increase in India defence spending in recent decade is more than just indicative of an increase in operational scale, but it is also reflective of the transition to long-term capability investment, such as missile defence, naval modernisation and domestic production schemes. The spending by Pakistan is more in response to crisis than proactive modernization although it is greater compared to GDP. This structural difference will determine how both countries will signal their strategies and their conduct during crises. In addition currency fluctuations, inflation and foreign debt do have a serious impact on the procurement capacity and the Pakistan proving to be a source of further long term uncertainty of the traditional force sustainability. (APDR, 2026)

Traditional Structures of Force

Land Forces

India has a standing army of one of the largest in the world. As IISS (2023) states, India has an active force of about 1.4 million as compared to the active force of about 654, 000 of Pakistan. The armored corps in India consists of more than 4,000 main battle tanks and the armored corps in Pakistan has around 2,600 main battle tanks. The sustainability of operational depth and redundancy depends on scale which is not solely dependent on numbers to determine effectiveness at the battlefield. Modernization of artillery by India such as the introduction of M777 howitzers, rocket systems, etc. increases the long range fire power. The land forces in Pakistan focus on mobility and quick concentration in the Line of Control and international border. The conventional imbalance is relative but gives India an advantage in terms of aggregate mass and diversity of its equipment whilst the operational focus of the Pakistan is concentrated geographically. (Alarabiya, 2025)

Although the conventional dominance between India and the desired nations relies on the numerical advantage in armored platforms and the number of personnel, the geographical area of deployment, speed in ready moments, and coordination of intelligence and surveillance. The force posture of Pakistan corresponds to the defensive orientation with the ability to mobilize quickly on main directions. In addition, the landscape of Kashmir and the Punjab plains also provide operational limitations, which restrict the large-scale armored operations. This makes the traditional imbalance not necessarily a decisive advantage on the battlefield especially when the situation is characterized by nuclear overhang where escalation becomes limited. Outside quantitative scale, combat efficacy is influenced by operational dogmas and maneuverability aspects. The mechanized and armored corps of India focuses on depth and long-range offensive but London and critical borders whereas the focus of the army of Pakistan lies in the rapid concentration along the Line of Control and key borders. The results of historical examinations of the 1971 war and 1990 Kargil conflict show that

terrain, local logistics and information coordination can offset the numerical disadvantage and that the doctrine of operations is more important than raw figures. (DSA, 2025)

Air Power

In the modern warfare, air superiority is very essential. The IISS (2023) reported that India has a fleet of over 2,200 aircraft of different classes and Pakistan has 1,400. The purchase of Rafale multirole fighter and incorporation of modern air defence systems like the S-400 would improve the defences as well as the offensive capabilities. Air force Pakistan does not have a large air force; however, in terms of qualitative forces, it has F-16 on its arsenal and JF-17 that it is co-producing with China. The aerial interaction of the Pulwama-Balakot crisis of 2019 demonstrated that airpower is the core of situations of limited escalation. The greater fleet of India and its sourcing diversifications offers resilience but the doctrine of Pakistan focuses on response and concentrated deployment. (Patel & Misra, 2025)

South Africa Air superiority is now becoming associated with network-centric warfare capability, electronic warfare, and integration of beyond-visual-range missiles. The purchase of the Rafale aircraft by India which is armed with the advanced meteor missiles is an improvement as it increases the long range engagement capability. The adoption of modern avionics by Pakistan into the JF-17 system is a manifestation of adaptive modernization taking into account limited budgetary constraints. The aerial engagements of 2019 highlighted the fact that the air operations have become the cornerstone of the notion of calibrated escalation, that acts as both signalling as well as limited strikes within the nuclear shadow. (Ahmed, 2025), (Patel & Misra, 2025)

The increasing number of multirole fighters in India such as Rafael and Sukhoi upgrades are incorporating sensor fusion, network centric warfare and precision strike capability. The use of the F-16s and JF-17s in Pakistan shows a qualitative response to the superior numbers, especially in the airspace control in the region and during tactical confrontations. The 2019 Balakot-Pulwama aerial strikes serve as the illustration of how air power is both a tactical and strategic weapon, which can drive the escalation without reaching the nuclear boundaries. (Patel & Misra, 2025), (Ahmed, 2025)

Naval Capabilities

The asymmetry of the navy is greater. India has aircraft carriers, nuclear operated submarines and an expanding blue-water fleet. India operates two aircraft carriers and a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) which is part of the Indian nuclear triad (Room, 2026). The navy of Pakistan is concerned with coastal defence and submarine deterrence. Although numerically less, submarine modernization especially the diesel-electric type of submarines with air-independent propulsion enhances sea denial ability. The Indian maritime expansion is an indication of other Indian ambitions of the sea besides the Pakistan-centric threat model, such as the Indian Ocean security and Indo-Pacific presence. But on the side of Pakistan, the superiority of the Indian navy brings vulnerability of the sea lines of communication.(Maan, 2025)

The third dimension of deterrence is brought in through the maritime dimension and creates both visible and invisible layers. The Indian deployment of INS Arihant can be seen as an important step in the development of a survivable second-striking capability with nuclear triad. Sea-based deterrence helps increase strategic stability by minimising exposure to first-strike conditions. The development of the capability of submarine-launched cruise missile by Pakistan aims to reproduce this survivability rationale though in a smaller scale. With the wider spread of maritime rivalry into the wider Indian Ocean, the issue of naval asymmetry could become more and more extra-regional, especially between China and the United States. (Ali, 2024)

Blue-water operations, deterrence and strategic signaling in the Indo-Pacific are achieved through the naval development of aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines of India. The modernization of Pakistan navy with the emphasis on submarines and anti-access/area-denial systems is intended to restrict the projection of powers of adversaries along its shores in the immediate

regions. Moreover, the emergence of anti-ship cruise missiles, as well as submarine-based potentials, adds to the concept of layered deterrence making the balance calculation in the maritime domain in the region more challenging. (DSA, 2025)

Nuclear Capabilities and Doctrinal Posture

According to SIPRI in India there are possibly 172 nuclear warheads, whereas in Pakistan there are possibly 170. The almost identical equality of warheads is the opposite of the classical asymmetry. India has retained land-based ballistic missiles (Agni series), airborne platforms and sea-based systems, which create an upcoming triad. Pakistan has land-based ballistic and cruise missiles, air-delivered platforms, and emerging sea-based platforms based on submarine-delivered cruise missiles. The no-first-use policy of India (Government of India, 2003) is in contrast to the denial of NFU policy in Pakistan. The tactical nuclear weapons are explicitly addressed in the full spectrum deterrence doctrine of Pakistan that will counter a limited conventional war (Kidwai, 2015). This religious dissimilarity makes it difficult to manage the escalation. India would like to have retaliatory dominance without going nuclear. Pakistan is trying to restrain constrained conventional offensive by reducing the nuclear threshold. The joint presence of traditional asymmetry and nuclear parity creates a vulnerability to each other at the strategic level but asymmetry at the conventional level-a stratified deterrence system. (SIPRI, 2025)

The asymmetry on doctrines on No First Use and flexible first-use options creates uncertainty in escalation of crisis. Declaratory doctrine in India has focused on retaliation on a grand scale but there are discussions in the Indian strategic circles on its validity and whether this can be revised. The low nuclear threshold in Pakistan presents deterrence at different levels of escalation but also makes the command and control more complicated. This coexistence of conventional asymmetry and nuclear parity therefore creates layered deterrence outlay where it is stable at the strategic level and volatile at the operational level. The strategic uncertainty is caused by the doctrinal divergence. The lowering of the threshold of nuclear engagement in the development of tactical nuclear weapons by Pakistan and the usage of NFU policy by India aiming at restraint and retaliatory stability. The literature of analysis stresses the point that this asymmetric deterrence produces the multi-tiered escalation terrain where few conflicts can be fought in the nuclear envelope without a full-scale war. This is where the key role of crisis communication, command-control integration, and doctrinal transparency comes into place. (Noor, 2023), (P.R, 2014)

Modernization and Emerging Technology

Strategic stability can be changed because of technological modernization. The Indian expenditure on ballistic missile defence system, space-based reconnaissance, and precision strike systems adds to the strategic depth of India but can erode the confidence of the adversary in the second-strike survivability. According to Acton, intertwining is a danger that enhances escalation between traditional and nuclear systems. The reaction taken by Pakistan involves the diversification of missile systems and acquisition of sea based deterrence as a way of survival. (Acton, 2025)

On both sides, the integration of unmanned systems and cyber capabilities into operational planning is increasingly becoming a part of operational planning. Nevertheless, there is little transparency in such areas. The new technologies like cyber operations, anti-satellite capabilities, artificial intelligence-capable targeting systems, and unity of aerial vehicles create further unpredictability in the strategic environment. These areas are also not very transparent which makes it harder to build confidence. Because of these collateralization, as Acton (2018) cautions, there are always potential pathways of escalation between conventional and nuclear assets, especially when the early-warning systems or dual-use systems are poorly understood in case of crisis. (Acton, 2025)

Cyber and AI and unmanned systems impact more on the operation and strategy. These technologies are being incorporated into reconnaissance, early warning, and precision strike

frameworks by south Asian militaries, but the information on this is generally sparse and open-source. Pakistan and India have different strategies of strategic adaptation that are demonstrated by asymmetric technological adaptation of Pakistan and scale-driven modernization of India: innovation-based adaptation and mass-based development of capabilities. These tendencies bring new factors to the crisis management, escalation risk and deterrence stability.

Conclusion

A structurally asymmetric but constrained rivalry can be seen in terms of the comparative defence capabilities of both Pakistan and India. The size of the Indian economy and traditional superiority in the use of force give it permanent structural benefits in modernizing military and projecting power. Nevertheless, such benefits cannot be converted into strategic superiority since Pakistan has created nuclear equality and offsetting doctrine policy. Combining the traditional asymmetry with the nuclear equivalence creates what could be termed as an asymmetry based deterrence balance. The nuclear weapons provide constraints on the escalation, large-scale war is avoided, but conventional and sub-conventional rivalry continues under this ceiling. There is technological modernization, especially the missile defense, sea-based deterrence, and emerging areas, which complicate the dynamics of crisis management.

Regional stability in South Asia in the long term will not be based only on quantitative balance of the military but on certainty, agencies of crisis communications, package of technological rivalry and confidence-building measures. With the economic growth of structural asymmetry the sustainability of nuclear parity will continue to be at the forefront of going ahead to avoid dominance based instability. Pakistan-India military balance should not therefore be a one to one comparison of numbers but a dynamic interaction in one of structure, doctrine, technology, and perception. This interaction should be understood in order to assess the future strategic stability of South Asia.

Looking forward, the South Asian strategic landscape is likely to be shaped by three main trends. First, India's conventional superiority will remain sustainable due to economic and industrial scale. Second, Pakistan's adaptive doctrine and nuclear parity will continue to function as a stabilizing mechanism at the strategic level while enabling limited tactical and sub-conventional engagements. Third, emerging technologies, including cyber capabilities, space-based surveillance, AI-enabled targeting, and precision strike systems, will introduce new escalation dynamics and uncertainty. Long-term regional stability will thus depend not only on quantitative balances but also on doctrinal transparency, confidence-building measures, crisis communication, and restraint in technological competition.

Scenario-based analyses indicate that inadvertent crises could emerge from misperceptions, especially with dual-use missile or cyber systems. Consequently, future policy and academic analysis must integrate historical lessons, doctrinal evolution, economic sustainability, and technological trends to assess strategic stability comprehensively. South Asia's military balance is a dynamic interplay of structure, perception, and adaptation, rather than a simple arithmetic of forces.

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