

ASSESSING MEDIA FRAMING OF INDIA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Shahwana Sohail^{*1}, Muhammad Hasnain²

^{*1}Research Assistant at the Centre for International Strategic Studies (CISS), Islamabad

²International Relations Scholar, With Research Interests in Pakistan's Foreign Policy, China-Pakistan Relations, Eurasian Politics, and Regional Security

Corresponding Author: *

Shahwana Sohail

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates how Indian and Western media portray India's nuclear ambitions. The study highlights how these portrayals legitimize India's exceptional position in the global non-proliferation regime and affect the strategic balance and crisis behaviour in South Asia. In the Indian media, the Indian nuclear program is framed as safe and progressive while ignoring the risks and challenges of the facilities, which are not under proper safeguards. Western media also portrays India as a "responsible nuclear state", whilst framing Pakistan through the narrative of instability and escalation. By applying Robert Entman's Media Framing Theory, the study suggests that this selective framing strengthens India's nuclear exceptionalism and influences strategic perceptions in South Asia. This dual narrative is supported by the 2008 NSG waiver and civil nuclear agreements legitimizing India's exceptionalism. In parallel, it erodes the effectiveness of global non-proliferation norms and increases the imbalance in the South Asian region. It shows how media narratives and biased Western media coverage play an important role in shaping strategic signalling and regional stability. The study finds that regional stability can be strengthened through equitable non-proliferation measures and strategic parity.

Keywords: Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), Nuclear Exceptionalism, Media Framing, Nuclear Non- Proliferation Treaty (NPT), South Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, South Asia has emerged as a highly volatile and strategically important nuclear region. The progression of India from its 1974 peaceful nuclear program to overt nuclear weapons development in 1988 reshaped the strategic balance in South Asia. The 1998 nuclear test formalized its status as a nuclear state. But it remained outside the structure of the Non -Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It also significantly affected deterrence equations in South Asia. India has expanded its nuclear arsenal and diversified its delivery system. It has developed a wider range of delivery platforms and progressed toward a credible triad structure. In addition, the

2008 waiver by the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) provided it with exceptional access to global civil nuclear trade.

This situation has sparked a debate about nuclear exceptionalism and the selective application of the global non-proliferation framework. Some of its nuclear facilities are placed under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). However, major parts of India's civilian programme are not under the IAEA, which makes it easier for India to utilize those unsafeguarded facilities for military purposes. Despite controversies over testing, doctrine, safeguards and proliferation, the Western media and policy

narratives characterize India as a “responsible” and “stabilizing” nuclear power in South Asia. Such narratives mostly focused on India’s claims to maintain credible minimum deterrence along with its No First Use (NFU) policy. The Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal and 2008 NSG waiver helped normalize India’s exceptional nuclear status. Doctrinal ambiguities, nuclear modernization efforts, counterforce strategies like MIRVs, sea-based deterrent, hypersonic systems got limited attention in these narratives.

At the same time, the Indian national media portrays these technological developments as national prestige and growing strategic competence. Indian Media coverage during a crisis often frames its offensive action as defensive and portrays the opposing party’s deterrent measures as escalatory actions. Western media discourse also framed India as a responsible stakeholder and a stabilizing nuclear country. The focus is on maintaining strong governance, ensuring strong civilian control and commitment to NFU policy over nuclear forces. At the same time, these narratives ignore significant concerns such as MIRV development, the expansion of the nuclear arsenal, unsafeguarded nuclear facilities and debate over nuclear exceptionalism. These narratives normalized India’s normative legitimacy within the world order.

This paper argues that such narratives go beyond discourse. These factors impact crisis decision-making by shaping public perception and constrain diplomatic options for de-escalation and affect international perceptions of normative legitimacy and strategic responsibility.

The study explores how India’s nuclear modernization is framed in national and international media. This research also explores how media portrayal normalizes India’s exceptional status in the global non-proliferation order, disregarding the security concerns of Pakistan in international discourse.

This study critically assesses the impact of these narratives on regional strategic stability, the credibility of non-proliferation norms, and India’s legitimacy on the global stage.

Theoretical Framework

The Media Framing Theory of Robert Entman provides a significant analytical framework for understanding how media narratives form strategic legitimacy, policy preferences and public perception. Entman defines framing as choosing certain aspects of reality and making them more prominent to perform four important functions: how a problem is defined, explained, evaluated and addressed. In nuclear discourse, framing affects the representation of the states in the international system, especially as “stabilising”, “destabilising” or “responsible” actors. Media narratives not only report strategic developments, but they also construct political meaning and influence normative legitimacy.

This theory is highly relevant to India’s nuclear program. Indian and Western media emphasized India’s democratic credentials, strategic restraint, and its No First Use doctrine. At the same time, they minimize concerns about unsafeguarded facilities, MIRV development, doctrinal ambiguities, and counterforce capabilities. This framing promotes the image of India as a “responsible nuclear state” and legitimize its exceptional status within the global non-proliferation regime. Simultaneously, Pakistan’s nuclear posture is commonly framed as a source of “nuclear brinkmanship”, “nuclear blackmail” and “instability”. This comparison shows how framing shapes global perceptions and strategic narratives. Media narratives first construct the problem by portraying India’s nuclear modernization as “credible minimum deterrence” and “strategic restraint” and a legitimate reaction to regional security concerns. However, this approach associates Pakistan’s nuclear posture with “nuclear brinkmanship”, “escalation risk” and “instability”. For instance, the Indian media framed the Agni Prime and K5-SLBM tests as important modernization milestones for strategic stability and national security. The media identifies the causes of regional insecurity by linking it mainly to Pakistan-based militancy and escalation risks. However, this perspective overlooks India’s doctrinal changes, counterforce posture, MIRV development and concerns over nuclear safety and security. During the 2019 Balakot crisis and May

2025 crisis, Western media often framed India's military actions as "measured retaliation" and "counterterrorism efforts", but framed Pakistan's response as escalatory behaviour. The moral evaluation is expressed in the framing of India as a "responsible stakeholder" and "responsible nuclear state", due to its democratic system, civilian oversight, civilian control over the military and strategic collaboration with the West, while Pakistan is framed as a destabilizing actor. For example, Western discourse on the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal and NSG waiver points up India's responsible behaviour but ignores its unsafeguarded facilities and expanding nuclear arsenal. Lastly, these narratives often propose deeper strategic cooperation, technology transfer with India, and civil nuclear engagement while calling for restraint, pressure and surveillance regarding Pakistan. India's membership in export control regimes, especially the MTCR and Wassenaar Arrangement as a stabilizing development and ignores the risk of escalation in the region.

The theory further highlights how omission and selective emphasis influence international legitimacy. Through repeated portrayals of India as a stabilizing and responsible actor, both Western and Indian media contribute to the normalization of India's exceptionalism despite not being a member of the NPT. It contributes to India's normative legitimacy within the global non-proliferation system and lowers global scrutiny of unsafeguarded facilities and strategic advancement. At the same time, Pakistan's deterrence posture is often framed as destabilizing and escalatory, which downplays its security concerns and undermines its global narratives.

The application of Entman's framing theory shows that the media coverage of South Asia is strategically constructed, not neutral. India's nuclear expansion is selectively framed as defensive, legitimate, and responsible, whereas Pakistan's deterrence signalling is escalatory in nature. Such asymmetrical framing shapes how India is perceived internationally and enhances India's global legitimacy and strengthens its position as a nuclear exceptionalist in the global non-proliferation framework. As a result, media

framing serves as an important strategic instrument that influences crisis behaviour, policy decisions, diplomatic space and wider balance of power in the region.

Evolution of India's Nuclear Program

The origins of India's nuclear program lie in its desire to achieve technological capability, gain recognition as a major power, and international prestige. In the early years after independence, India did not encounter an existential threat that would justify the pursuit of nuclear weapons, but still India initiated its nuclear program after gaining independence. This initiative was influenced by the vision of leading policymakers and scientists, especially Homi J. Bhabha. He viewed nuclear technology as a sign of modern technology. So, India established an important nuclear institution under Nehru's leadership. In 1948, India established its Atomic Energy Commission to upgrade its indigenous nuclear program and scientific expertise. India's nuclear structure was upgraded by the establishment of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre. At its inception, the program focused on developing strategic autonomy by developing an independent nuclear deterrent, indigenous technological development, and giving India the ability to develop nuclear weapons if needed. This technological development gradually allowed India to show its nuclear capabilities. It further helped India to secure international recognition as a nuclear-armed country despite remaining outside of the Non-Proliferation Treaty on nuclear weapons.

In May 1974, an important turning point came when India conducted its first nuclear explosion, named Smiling Buddha, at Pokhran. To conduct this test, India used fuel from its civilian CANDU reactors, which were supplied by the USA and Canada for peaceful uses, but India used it to make plutonium to produce weapons. India framed this test as a Peaceful Nuclear Explosion, but this test highlighted India's capability to develop nuclear weapons. serious concerns were raised in the international community due to the misuse of civilian nuclear program for military purposes. Following this development, major nuclear supplier countries formed the Nuclear

Supplier Group NSG to oversee nuclear trade and prevent the risk of nuclear technology being used for weapons development.

The 1974 test created new security concerns and initiated the process of nuclearization in the region. Although subjected to global criticism and technological constraints, India progressed with its nuclear infrastructure and invested in its indigenous technology. The Bhabha Atomic Research Centre and the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) played a significant role in the expansion of nuclear research. Their work supported progress in missile development, strategic delivery systems and reactor development. In May 1998, under the government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, India entered its second phase of nuclear development by conducting Pokhran Nuclear tests. These tests confirmed the status of India as a nuclear-weapon country. The tests had a transformative impact on the strategic balance of South Asia and led to strong international reaction, including economic sanctions by Western states. This helped India to project its position as a de facto nuclear power.

The expansion of India's nuclear program raised serious security concerns in South Asia. India now has 25 nuclear reactors in seven power plants. Together they generate about 8,880 MW and 3% of national electricity production. Additionally, 11 reactors are being built, which will add nearly 8,700 MW to India's nuclear capacity. Most of India's reactors are indigenous Pressurized Heavy Water Reactors (PHWRs), while Kudankulam uses VVER- type light water reactors supplied by Russia. The Fast Breeder Test Reactor (FBTR) and now operational Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR) at Kalpakkam are presented as a civilian initiative under its three- stage nuclear energy strategy. These developments are viewed with concern due to their dual-use implications and the possibility of indirectly augmenting India's broader strategic capabilities. Such reactors help to develop a thorium fuel cycle and produce more fissile material.

India remains outside of the Non- Proliferation Treaty (NPT) framework. India has placed 16 reactors (6380 WM), mostly using imported uranium, under IAEA safeguards. However, most

of its indigenous PHWRs and all fast breeder reactors remain outside of the IAEA safeguards. This setup enables India to expand missile material production for its nuclear weapons through the reactors, which are not under IAEA safeguards. The imbalance is strategic in nature. India's expanding stockpile, growing counterforce capabilities, and advanced delivery systems create pressure on deterrence stability in South Asia. This development is pushing Pakistan to maintain a credible strategic stability.

Reassessing Nuclear Exceptionalism: Civil Nuclear Cooperation and the NSG Waiver

India is becoming part of the international nuclear order without joining the Non- Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In 1970, the NPT entered into force and established a distinction between nuclear-weapon countries and non-nuclear- weapon countries. The treaty also limited access to nuclear technology for non- member states to prevent the expansion of nuclear weapons. India, without signing the NPT, conducted nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998. This led many states to limit their nuclear collaboration with India, thereby reducing access to both technology and nuclear materials.

An important turning point was the US- India Civil Nuclear Agreement (2005- 2008), commonly known as the 123 agreements. This deal is seen as a major exception to the global non-proliferation regime. India agreed to separate its military and civilian nuclear facilities and place its civilian reactor under the IAEA safeguards. As a part of this agreement, the US pledged full civilian collaboration with India, covering both fuel supplies and technology. This agreement was distinctive. India gained access to the world's nuclear market without formally joining the NPT. Moreover, some of its facilities remain outside of the IAEA safeguards. The finalization happened through sustained diplomatic negotiations between the US and India. It also included legal changes to US law and safeguard measures with the IAEA.

To participate fully in international civil nuclear trade, the key step for India was securing a waiver from the NSG. The NSG was established to ensure the export of nuclear materials and technology. It

banned trade with countries that were not under IAEA safeguards or members of the NPT. But the case of India was different from all others as it needed a special waiver from the standard rules. In August 2008, NSG member states discussed India's waiver in Vienna. Although some members raised objections over the non-proliferation framework, the agreement was finalized on 6 September 2008. Under this agreement, NSG states are allowed to trade civilian nuclear technology with India. Though India has not signed the NPT, important exporters like France and Russia have allowed India to engage in civil nuclear trade. This move weakened the world's non-proliferation framework by allowing nuclear collaboration with India despite its not being a member of the NPT.

The decision to grant the NSG waiver allowed India to access nuclear technology with limited safeguards, which challenged the NPT norms. It also acknowledged India's growing importance in international political and strategic matters. India's voluntary suspension of nuclear testing and its promise not to transfer sensitive technology as a sign of responsible management and rising energy demands. The waiver is often described as an example of strategic exceptionalism. Giving special treatment to India challenges the idea that all states should follow equal rules and could reduce confidence in the global non-proliferation system. Although, India did not gain full NSG membership, it led to India's access to nuclear trade. This created a precedent for the strict application of the non-proliferation rules.

The waiver also helped India to join other multilateral export control regimes (MECRs). It created opportunities for India to become part of the MTCR, Wassenaar Arrangement and Australian Group. In 2016, India formally joined the MTCR, in 2017, the Wassenaar Arrangement, and the Australian Group in 2018. India's entry into these regimes has transitioned from limited participation to a significant position in global nuclear and dual-use technologies. It raises concerns about regional strategic imbalance and its implications for regional nuclear stability.

Indian Media's Role in Nuclear Debate

The Indian media continuously plays a significant role in shaping and normalizing its narratives and its nuclear exceptionalism by emphasizing restraint and responsibility in India's nuclear policy. The media reinforces India's legitimacy and its exceptional status in global nuclear discussions. These framing portrays nuclear program of India as a technological development, global credibility and a source of national pride. While ignoring the discussion on transparency, lacks in IAEA safeguards and dangerous security threats for the region. Indian media is trying to normalize its unsafeguarded nuclear program and suppress the special NSG waiver received in 2008. The Times of India, NDTV, and The Hindu framed India as a responsible nuclear-armed state. However, they ignore the weaknesses in IAEA safeguards, the expansion of India's offensive capabilities, and failures in nuclear safety and security. This bias portrays India as a stabilizing nuclear state and frames Pakistan as a security-oriented, destabilizing actor.

There are rising concerns about weakness in India's nuclear safety and security, particularly in the handling of radioactive material. Incidents of trafficking of radioactive material and illegal possession have highlighted weaknesses in regulation and material accountability. In 2010, in New Delhi, the Mayapuri radiation incident entailed cobalt -60 from discarded scrap, which exposed weakness in material trafficking and radiological safety and security. After an explosion, the civilian suffered exposure to harmful radiation due to the discarded radioactive exposure which highlights failures in monitoring and safety frameworks. There have been several reports of sensitive material, including Cesium- 137, pointing to gaps in inventory control and delayed detection systems. Both official and independent assessments underline repeated safety issues at nuclear facilities. The problems involve human error to system collapse, which undermines overall operational reliability. Notable advancements in nuclear capabilities have occurred, but vulnerabilities in safety and security practices and nuclear safety governance still exist. These persistent vulnerabilities could undermine

deterrence stability and elevate escalation risk in South Asia.

Indian media such as the Times of India and India Today frame India's No First Use (NFU) policy and conventional forces as proof of maturity and responsible nuclear behavior. Indian media also claimed that India has neutralized Pakistan's nuclear power, portraying Pakistan's nuclear program as dangerous and irresponsible. The claim that India is neutralizing Pakistan's nuclear threat is false. The purpose of Pakistan's nuclear program is primarily defensive and to protect its national security.

According to PM Narendra Modi, India will not tolerate any nuclear threats from Pakistan. This statement was widely reported by The Times of India, framed as India's firm but measured strategic posture. Reports on Chief of Defense Staff General Anil Chauhan's regarding Operation Sindoor portray India as unwilling to tolerate nuclear threats and reveal flaws in Pakistan's nuclear deterrent. These statements showed that Pakistan's nuclear program is unstable, and India has a more stable and careful nuclear program. This framing misrepresents Pakistan's nuclear program, which is primarily based on credible minimum deterrence and aims to counterbalance India's conventional and nuclear advantages. In comparison, India's expanding nuclear arsenal, MIRV development, frequent crisis signaling and counterforce debates destabilizes and increase the risk of escalation in the region.

In the May 2025 crisis, the Indian media intensified nationalist rhetoric. News channels like NDTV and The Times of India described the missile attacks as a restrained retaliation, supporting the government's claims of defensive action. In contrast, media reports mostly ignore the dangers of nuclear brinkmanship and India's transition towards counterforce doctrine. The coverage focused on India's defence power and credibility rather than the risks of its growing nuclear weapons.

Indian media framed the new missile tests and technological progress like Agni Prime and K5 SLBM as a "modernization milestone", portraying them as a part of India's credible minimum

deterrence policy. Yet, there was minimal discussion on how these technologies enhance India's strike capabilities and upset the strategic equilibrium of South Asia. The Indian media is showing great excitement over India's moves to advanced technologies such as MIRV-capable systems and hypersonic vehicles. However, this enthusiasm often lacks serious discussions about the proliferation risks which occur through these advancements.

Through thematic discourse analysis, the Indian media shows a steady and strategic portrayal of India's civil nuclear program, emphasizing global collaboration and energy policy. Major Indian media outlets like The Times of India, India Today and The Hindu often emphasize the significance of nuclear energy for green growth, energy goals, and energy dependence. Media headlines commonly highlight nuclear power as a means of combating climate change and expanding energy demand. It aligns India's nuclear development with global sustainability narratives.

An emerging theme from this discourse is that strategic legitimacy is achieved through international collaboration. The media often frames the uranium supply deals, particularly with Canada tend to frame them as evidence of global confidence in India's technological development. Reports indicate that uranium is important for sustaining India's civil nuclear energy program.

The findings also indicate an ongoing pattern of selective omission and narrative framing. Although civilian nuclear development is widely promoted, important facilities like PFBR remain outside of the full safeguards of the IAEA. The media highlights Fast Breeder technology as their energy potential, technological development and innovation. However, it rarely discusses its potential for plutonium generation and strategic use. Institutions such as the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre are often described in terms of development and research. However, their dual-use character in both military and civilian programs get minimum attention.

The analysis reveals that nuclear security risks are often understated, and there is limited reporting of safety-related incidents. Reports include the 2010 Mayapuri radiation accident, along with

other unauthorized possession of radioactive materials, instead of broader systematic weaknesses, are framed as isolated events. Broader issues of radioactive material theft and regulatory shortcomings have received minimal attention.

Finally, the discourse reflects comparative security framing. The media tends to normalize India's nuclear activities but frames Pakistan's nuclear program as unstable and risky. This disparity adds to a broader imbalance in national and global debates. These biased portrayals strengthen the wider imbalance in nuclear discourse both domestically and globally.

Framing of India's Nuclear Program in Western Media

Western media outlets and analyses always portrayed India's nuclear program through the lens that frames New Delhi as a responsible nuclear power, especially in the coverage of the 2008 NSG waiver granted. Reports by BBC and Reuters underscore India's "exceptional status" by framing its integration into the global nuclear system as a sign of restrained, strategic responsibility and civilian governance. Framing its strategic ambitions as stabilizing rather than destabilizing in the broader Asian context. This narrative highlights India's democratic standing, positioning it as a key actor to counterbalance China and, as a responsible actor within global nuclear and advanced technology regimes such as the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement. However, such framing often ignores the controversial aspects of India's nuclear policy, such as its refusal to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), its military nuclear program that is not properly under the safeguards, and advancing and expanding its arsenal that upsets the deterrence balance in the region.

a. Framing India as a "Responsible Nuclear State"

In pursuit of geopolitical and geoeconomic interests, the West has ignored actions that would likely have faced sanctions or strong condemnation if carried out by other states. Such double standards and country-specific approach are clear in both the Indo-US nuclear deal and the

2008 NSG waiver. The US also created an exception for India despite its refusal to join the NPT, which is normally required for NSG membership. In 2005, the US shifted from its long-standing policy of linking nuclear cooperation to the NPT by recognizing India as a country with advanced nuclear capabilities deserving equal benefits. At the same time, it ignored the actions that would likely have drawn criticism, if done by other countries. Along with the NSG waiver, the West has consistently failed to acknowledge India's actions that have a destabilizing effect on regional peace and stability. This approach reflects their tendency to use India's geopolitical and geostrategic importance to limit China's expanding influence. This approach is visible in several cases, including the international community's limited response to India's ASAT weapon test in March 2019. Rather than condemning the test, the US acknowledged the test and highlighted the importance of cooperation in space activities.

This exceptional treatment is also evident in export control regimes, and high-technology trade is managed. Even without being a signatory to the NPT, India has gained membership in high-level regimes, including the Wassenaar and the MTCR. This inclusion allows New Delhi to acquire advanced weapons and dual-use technologies. The West also ignored India's violations of restraint norms and their impact on deterrence stability. This led several Western powers to enter into intelligence-sharing agreements and large defence contracts with India. These deals enabled the transfer of modern naval assets and advanced fighter jets to India. These developments directly affected the region's overall security and stability. Western Media and policy dialogues often portray India as a responsible and lawful nuclear power. This perspective is based on repeated ideas that the country supports the democratic government and keeps the military under civilian control. Portray that it follows a limited and careful military approach and always works to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. The Indian identity of "world's largest democracy" is completely linked with the presumption of strategic maturity and normative reliability.

The central part of this representation is India's declared nuclear doctrine, the No First Use (NFU) Doctrine and its stated policy of maintaining credible minimum deterrence. Western media commonly portray these aspects as indicators of restraint and a defensive posture. For instance, the Indian nuclear program is described as a commitment to deterrence. When discussions in India emerged about revisiting the NFU pledge as a doctrinal refinement rather than destabilizing shift.

Selective Emphasis during Crises

During crises between Pakistan and India, Western media coverage shows selective emphasis in line with Entman's moral evolution function, where events are assessed through normative labels such as "responsibility" and "irresponsibility", shaping perception of escalation and legitimacy. This framing influences global perceptions about responsibility, escalation and normative legitimacy by framing India as a "restrained" and "responsible" nuclear country and associating Pakistan with instability and militancy, especially in coverage of the incidents, such as Balakot air strikes and 2019 Pulwama attack, reported by BBC and Reuters. This selective framing enhances India's global legitimacy and sustains unequal perception within the global non-proliferation and security discourse.

This pattern was evident during the 2019 Balakot crisis. Indian strikes were described as responses to militant violence, whilst Pakistan's response was framed as a risk of escalation instead of reciprocal military action. International media discourse sidelined Pakistan's domestic security concerns and strategic rationale.

The May 2025 crisis between India and Pakistan further highlights this trend. India blamed Pakistan for the April 22, 2025, terrorist attack in Illegally Indian Occupied Kashmir, which led to four days of cross-border exchange of missiles, drones and artillery between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. India launched an operation "Sindoor" on May 7, 2025, and falsely portrayed it as an attack on militant infrastructure in Pakistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Western outlets highlight the India attack as a legitimate

counterterror action, reflecting India's perspective. Pakistan's military response was framed as a risk of escalation and regional instability.

During the 2025 crisis, international media emphasized Pakistan's strategic stability and nuclear risk. In comparison, India's evolving military capabilities and strategic approach received limited scrutiny. India's explanations, like the need for defence, suspension of the Indus Water Treaty, and diplomatic reassurance to international partners was widely discussed in the media and policy discourse. In some Western analyses, measures like ceasefire agreements and calls for restraint were framed as India's responsible role. This occurred even as tensions approached full-scale conflict.

Western media coverage of India-Pakistan escalations reflects a selective narrative. Pakistan is often portrayed as a primary destabilizing actor. The wider historical and strategic dynamics of South Asia received less attention. Pakistan's nuclear posture is designed as a calibrated deterrent. It responds directly to India's conventional military superiority. It is further influenced by India's expanding and modernizing nuclear capabilities. In addition, India retains unsafeguarded nuclear facilities. These combined elements reinforced a structural imbalance in the regional security environment. Discourses framed by Western media as "escalatory" are in reality a part of credible deterrence signaling. Their purpose is to prevent miscalculations and maintain strategic stability. Much of the coverage focuses on immediate crises and diplomatic exchanges. At the same time, it gives less attention to India's expanding arsenal and evolving doctrine. This selective emphasis risks deeper security realities. This framing normalizes India's nuclear buildup whilst sidelining Pakistan's security concerns.

Pakistan Concerns and Media Response

The growth of India's nuclear program is viewed as a factor that undermines stability in South Asia. A primary concern is that India is not a party to the NPT, which results in limited global oversight of key parts of its nuclear program. Although some

civilian facilities are under the IAEA, much of India's missile material remains outside of the safeguards.

India's nuclear program is slowly growing. The 2025 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook places India's arsenal at 172 to 180 warheads. The report underscores sea-based capabilities and long-range delivery capabilities. The expansionism and debates over India's NFU policy make the deterrence situation in South Asia more unstable.

A further source of concern is India's privileged access to global nuclear trade. Although India is not a member of the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG), the 2008 NSG waiver allowed India to engage in civil nuclear cooperation. This accommodation is widely viewed as an example of unequal non-proliferation enforcement. It weakens trust in global norms and incentivizes modernization race, instead of balanced deterrence.

This narrative has also been strengthened through diplomatic exchanges. In May 2025, Rajnath Singh, the Defence Minister of India, suggested that Pakistan's nuclear weapons should be placed under international monitoring mechanisms. These statements were clearly deflating, especially considering India's own nuclear vulnerabilities and reported instances of unauthorized handling of radioactive materials. It highlighted the unequal scrutiny and questioned the credibility of the country, calling for oversight while operating its military nuclear facilities outside of the IAEA safeguards.

During the period of heightened tensions, India's Ministry of External Affairs and sections of the Indian media portrayed Pakistan's deterrence signalling as "nuclear blackmail". This rhetoric is a part of a wider strategic framing that represents Pakistan as an escalatory actor and portrays India as a restrained and responsible nuclear state. Pakistan's strategic nuclear program is grounded in credible minimum deterrence, strong command and control, and controlled strategic management. In contrast, India's growing nuclear program lacks transparency.

These concerns highlight a key argument in strategic and media discussions. Strategic

equilibrium cannot be achieved without applying non-proliferation norms equitably. It also requires mutual restraints and clear, transparent measures to manage risks. Without these safeguards, India's nuclear expansion outside international safeguards contributes to structural imbalance and long-term instability across South Asia.

Implications for Regional and Global Security

India's expanding nuclear program and its implications beyond technical considerations. It changes the interpretation of deterrence in South Asia, reshaping the crisis response methods and altering perceptions of world non-proliferation norms. The issue is not about increasing capability. It is about how these growing capabilities alter incentives, public discourse, and affect decision-making time in a region where escalation has historically been swift.

First of all, deterrence stability is becoming strained because of a transformation in "deterrence-by-punishment" to a sense of "damage-limiting" potential. With the maturation of a triad and modernization of delivery systems, especially via more survivable and mobile-based systems, regional competitors are forced into the worst-case intent, not a declared doctrine. This is how the arms modernization becomes crisis destabilizing: not because war is desired, but because either party fears losing the capacity to respond first. This is a classic Security Dilemma dynamic, sharpened by opaque force positions and structural imbalance formed by the asymmetrical international scrutiny. Along with that, NFU creates interpretive ambiguities during a crisis. Indian No-First Use has co-existed with some of the most dramatic elite discussions of the conditionality and unquenchable comments on the subject, suggesting that doctrines could be altered with changing "circumstances", and this created a pressure to demonstrate signaling. When the ambiguity of the environment is high, and trust levels are high, then the ambiguity can stabilize. In South Asia, where there is little trust and where the crisis is a recurrent phenomenon, it is the ambiguity that serves as an accelerant.

Furthermore, modernization of sophisticated technologies, particularly MIRV incorporation,

exacerbates the competition and makes control over escalation more difficult. The fact that India has demonstrated MIRV capability (Mission Divy Astra) indicates a significant qualitative shift with strategic implications to both Pakistan and wider Asian deterrence relationship. Despite India trying to frame MIRVs as a technical accomplishment, the technology can be interpreted regionally as a way of offering more flexible targeting capability and creating uncertainty over where the warheads were deployed and their survivability. The most sensible result is expected. There are more incentives to countermeasures, dispersal, and, probably, increased readiness levels during crises.

In addition to that, maritime deterrence can enhance second-strike capability but also introduces a new wave of maritime escalation. It is this maturation of submarine-based deterrence which brings about a more silent yet substantive change: deterrence is no longer primarily dealt with on land boundaries and the airspace, but in the sub-sea phase, where signaling ambiguities are uncontrollable or accidental, and incidents of encounters are harder to contain politically than to admit publicly.

Also, civil nuclear exceptionalism institutions formalize normative asymmetry and lack credibility of the non-proliferation regime. The NSG waiver allowing civil nuclear co-operation, even though India was not a part of the NPT framework, institutionalized some form of selective enforcement that still forms the perception of threats in the region. The local implication is that restraint politics is more difficult to maintain, with access and legitimacy now discretionary, and the incentive structure changes to the competitive hedging form. The waiver, in effect, is not only a diplomatic breakthrough but a source of perceived injustice over the long term.

At the same time, it makes crisis management performative as the media accounts strengthen the red lines of the people. As domestic and foreign media normalize milestones of modernization and reduce avenues of escalation, leaders have less domestic room for de-escalation. It is reflected in the narration of recent India-Pakistan crises as punitive strikes, as controlled counterterror

operations, and retaliation, as the risk of escalation. The May 2025 crisis is didactic in this respect: it demonstrates how easily conventional operations can turn into multi-domain (air, missiles, drones, artillery) and how the rivalry between competing versions of victory can undermine de-escalation diplomacy.

Moreover, the inadvertent escalation risk is more common when conventional and strategic assets are entangled. Dual-use command, control, communications, intelligence and space-linked systems are becoming increasingly vulnerable to modern conflicts. As conventional operations threaten the assets that an adversary relates to nuclear survivability, the escalation may happen due to a misinterpreted warning instead of a calculated decision. It is particularly applicable to the South Asian region since the time limits of crisis are limited, and initial actions are interpreted on the basis of preemption. The suggestion is obvious: even the partial conflict can cause strategic panic in case the wrong nodes are seen as in danger.

It is also worth noting that the stability-instability paradox is still the center of focus, and a changing mechanism is being developed. What is new, however, is that due to technological modernization (mobility, MIRVs, better surveillance, and more varied delivery systems), signaling is becoming more complicated and escalatory ladders increasingly clogged. The paradox continues to exist, and it is more difficult to control due to the increased opportunities to use to climb it faster.

Lastly, there is a global implication that South Asia will be used as a pilot project to determine whether the international system can be consistent in its strategic partnerships and normative consistency. When significant powers enhance selective accounts, which see one arsenal as stabilizing and the other as destabilizing in nature, then regional actors will internalize that asymmetry, and efforts to reduce risks will be perceived as coercive instead of cooperative. It will create a weaker global non-proliferation politics environment and a less cohesive regional deterrence order. All this adds up to a developing trend of controlled instability: the repetition of crises, the use of more advanced

forces, the demand of the media to stop the crisis, and the international system, which, in most cases, acts to prevent the further development of the crisis without fixing the structural causes that led to its creation. Within this environment, stability is not so much a product of enduring restraint as a product of crisis firefighting, which is inherently dangerous where nuclear-armed enemies are continually pushing the limits of controlled escalation.

Way Forward

The long-term outlook of achieving deterrence stability in South Asian affairs requires the extension of episodic management of crisis to include the structural factors that continually tighten the decision-making timespan and increase worst-case scenarios. This, in practice, involves not seeing the increasing capabilities, partial coverage of safeguards and shifting doctrinal clues in India, but as part of a political-security ecosystem where the sense of perception, media framing and the international permissiveness are co-constructing escalation processes. In this regard, the nuclear threats in the region are not likely to be alleviated by simple declaratory restraint; rather, it requires credible measures that will decrease the incentives to pre-emptive action, ambiguity, as well as institutionalization of restraint both during times of crisis and when there is peace.

To begin with, risk mitigation in the occurrence of crisis scenarios ought to become a norm and not something extraordinary. Islamabad and New Delhi must go beyond symbolic hotlines to an operationalized architecture of crisis: (a) the establishment of reliable channels of leader-to-leader and military-to-military communications that are trained regularly; (b) protocols on responding to cross-border incidents (including drones and missiles) to avoid the escalation of the narrative in minutes; and (c) the structured mechanism of notification of major military movements and missile tests. These actions do not address fundamental disagreements, but they may decrease the likelihood that traditional operations pose a risk to assets that are viewed as connected to nuclear survivability, a direction that has been found in modern literature to be particularly

dangerous in an environment characterized by command-and-control weaknesses and entanglement.

Second, the ambiguity in the doctrine should be reduced and not staged. The NFU debate in India, the frequent public proposal that circumstances might change in the future, is causing interpretive ambiguity on the part of an opponent whose own plans are planned around capabilities, not promises. A stabilizing measure would involve the two states developing parallel agreements, formal or informal, regarding counterforce temptation shuns and restraint in nuclear signaling in conventional crises. In the situation where formal arms control might continue to be politically challenging, there is still the possibility of promoting the idea of bound restraint in arrangements, such as Track-II/Track-1.5, that feed into official planning and crisis playbooks.

Third, nuclearization of the maritime environment requires special incident-prevention facilities. The transition of sea-based deterrence to the zone of stability management, where false images are even more challenging to fix publicly and politically. This creates a strong rationale for bilateral agreements in avoiding naval incidents, safe distances, and communication protocols, particularly around patrol zones and chokepoints, without ideological convergence.

Fourth, non-proliferation practice should be rebalanced by international actors to non-proliferation consistency and verifiability. The underlying regional resentment reflected in the argument is not merely that India is modernizing, but rather that its modernization happens in a framework that is viewed as selectively permissive, specifically in the era when exceptional accommodations have made possible civil nuclear cooperation with no comprehensive safeguards. Over time, the incentive structures of the region change to favour less defensible restraint and competitive hedging more defensible, domestically. An expedient remedy is not punishment politics, but conditional transparency, supplier states and export controls regimes need to conditional advanced nuclear and dual-use cooperation to further segregation of civil and military fuel cycles, greater reporting and

greater protection wherever practicable. In line with this, the IAEA safeguards reporting and auditing priorities must continue to play the key role in risk assessment, as opposed to being more based on reputational accounts of being responsible.

Fifth, media responsibility should not be considered as a side variable, but as a security variable. Although nationalist framing, especially in times of crisis, limits the space available to leaders to de-escalate, institutionalized fact-checking alliances in times of crisis, voluntary codes of conduct to discourage nuclear saber-rattling, and incentive mechanisms encouraging editors to anticipate risks and the cost of war on civilians, but not triumphalist indexes, all can be implemented now.. It is also the responsibility of Western outlets and policy communities to ensure that they apply consistent standards of analysis to the coverage of crises. This would help to reduce the impression that coercive signaling on the part of one state is seen as inherently “responsible”, and signaling on the part of another is seen as inherently “escalatory”, a framing pattern which can only serve to become destabilizing by reinforcing the perception that risk-taking is inherently desirable.

Lastly, measured transparency and restraint signaling can be used to strengthen the strategic communications of Pakistan. Since narratives are the determinant of external pressure and crisis diplomacy, disciplined messaging is most helpful in the case of Pakistan: emphasizing verifiable safety, command-and-control maturity, and the deterrence logic of conventional imbalance, without the rhetorical outbursts that allow outside observers to revert to stereotypical responses. Legitimacy, constructed through constant signaling, not only stabilizes outcomes with capabilities, but also with credibility in the communication of restraint and resolve.

Combined, these measures put this issue into a new light: stability in South Asia is not manufactured through the presence of nuclear weapons themselves, but the character of institutions, stories and verification practices that encircle them. Unless the modernization and media-driven nationalism explicitly invest in these

stabilizers, the region will be set to enter the cycle of managed crises that erode the strategic predictability progressively, with the accumulating consequences.

Conclusion

The most significant aspect of the Indian nuclear track has not been the fact that proliferation has been quantitative, but the politicalization of that proliferation by media discourses and an empowering international culture. The post-1998 development of India, coupled with debates over the doctrines, the maturing deterrent triad, and high-quality delivery technologies, has been overlaid on a discourse of the world that is very often practiced towards presenting India as a naturally responsible nuclear actor, even though much of its military nuclear infrastructure falls out of the coverage of broad-scale protective measures. The analysis also implies that these narrative forms are not innocent; they influence crisis behavior by encouraging biased views of restraint and reducing the room to de-escalate. In South Asia, the compressed escalation generates uncertainty about NFU. They also intensify worries about command-and-control vulnerabilities and unintended escalation. Modernization contributes to this uncertainty, not only by creating more areas (undersea deterrence) but also by heightening the concerns over command-and-control vulnerability and accidental escalation by entanglement. In the eyes of Pakistan, the issue is then structural and not episodic, a deterrence relationship controlled by recurrent crisis firefighting wherein the underlying causes of the problem, the capacity to be unsafeguarded, exceptionalism in civil nuclear trade and media frames that justify coercive signaling are still in place. When non-proliferation norms seem purely discretionary, the restraint will be more difficult to maintain politically, and competitive modernization will be more readily excusable. This dynamic does not make conflict inevitable, but it heightens the likelihood that future crises will be more rapid, more intricate and more difficult to manage. The policy implication is obvious: the reduction of risks in South Asia cannot be based on reputational assumptions of responsibility. It demands that non-proliferation

practice be verified regularly, bilateral institutions of crisis management, and that media and policy discourse should be changed, wherein narrative escalation can be viewed as a physical security threat. The international community must move from fragile truces to sustainable stability. This requires addressing the risks of selective permissiveness and promoting transparency and restraint as shared responsibilities. Without meaningful changes, the region remains trapped in recurring instability. These may be contained, but over time, they will continue to erode deterrence.

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