

SHIFTING LINES OF DETERRENCE: THE 2025 INDIA–PAKISTAN CLASH AND THE RISE OF POST-BALANCE REALISM

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ABSTRACT

The India–Pakistan military escalation of May 2025, though brief, reshaped South Asia’s strategic landscape. This study asks: How did Pakistan, despite its smaller conventional capacity, achieve strategic and political advantage over India within a nuclearized balance of power system? Traditionally, the balance of power theory posits that parity deters unilateral dominance and ensures stability. Yet, the 2025 confrontation challenges this logic, as Pakistan secured a greater share of its operational and diplomatic objectives. Drawing on defense reports, think-tank analyses, and open-source intelligence, this paper argues that strategic clarity, adaptive doctrine, and credible signaling compensated for material asymmetry. To explain this deviation, the paper introduces post-balance realism—a refinement of classical and structural realism that incorporates technological adaptation, narrative legitimacy, and restraint as new determinants of deterrence. The findings suggest that South Asia’s stability now depends less on sheer capability and more on cognitive and diplomatic agility, marking the rise of a post-balance strategic order.

Keywords: India–Pakistan conflict, conventional capacity, balance of power, structural realism, limited war, material asymmetry, post-balance realism.

Introduction

The India–Pakistan rivalry continues to represent one of the most entrenched and volatile dyads in modern international relations. Rooted in the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and hardened by territorial and ideological disputes—most notably over Kashmir—the antagonism between the two nuclear-armed states has repeatedly challenged regional and global stability (Ahuja & White, 2025; Grare, 2025). Although both countries have fought wars and several border skirmishes, they have generally avoided full-scale hostilities since the 1999 Kargil conflict,

owing largely to mutual nuclear deterrence and sustained international pressure. Nevertheless, short-duration crises and limited military engagements have remained a recurring feature of their bilateral interaction. The most recent example occurred in early May 2025, when a sudden escalation following a terrorist attack in Pahalgam triggered reciprocal missile and drone strikes across the Line of Control, working boundary and international border. The episode, unfolding over four days, represented the most intense exchange between the two militaries in nearly two decades.

While some observers labelled the confrontation a “border clash” or “limited engagement,” its operational scale and technological sophistication warrant the more analytically precise term limited conflict (Grare, 2025; Stimson Center, 2025). Unlike a conventional war involving sustained mobilization and territorial occupation, a limited conflict entails the controlled use of force for constrained political ends. In this instance, India launched Operation Sindoor, a series of targeted missile and drone strikes purportedly aimed at militant launch pads and logistic hubs in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Pakistan responded with proportional but more precise retaliatory strikes on Indian positions, combining stand-off weaponry with cyber and electronic warfare measures (Peri, 2025). The result was a brief but intense military episode in which both sides claimed victory while agreeing to a cease-fire mediated through U.S. and Chinese diplomatic channels.

From a theoretical standpoint, the May 2025 confrontation presents an intriguing puzzle. Balance of power theory, rooted in the realist tradition, posits that stability in the international system arises when states maintain relative parity in capabilities, preventing any one actor from dominating others (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). The logic suggests that when adversaries achieve near-equilibrium—especially when both

possess nuclear weapons—the likelihood of decisive victory diminishes, and conflict outcomes should gravitate toward stalemate. Yet, the empirical evidence from this crisis indicates an asymmetrical outcome: Pakistan, the ostensibly weaker actor, achieved a higher proportion of its declared objectives and derived greater strategic advantage in the post-conflict narrative. This deviation from theoretical expectation invites a deeper examination of the assumptions underpinning the balance of power model.

Despite India’s significant quantitative superiority—boasting over 1.45 million active personnel, a defense budget exceeding USD 73 billion, and more than 4,700 tanks and 600 combat aircraft (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2024; International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2025)—Pakistan’s smaller but technologically adaptive military of roughly 654,000 active personnel, supported by modernized missile forces, advanced drone capabilities, and credible second-strike nuclear deterrence, demonstrated strategic efficiency disproportionate to its size. Pakistan’s defense expenditure for fiscal year 2024–25 stood at approximately USD 8.5 billion, reflecting a sustained focus on operational modernization despite fiscal constraints (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Finance, 2024; Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad [ISSI], 2025). Fig 1.

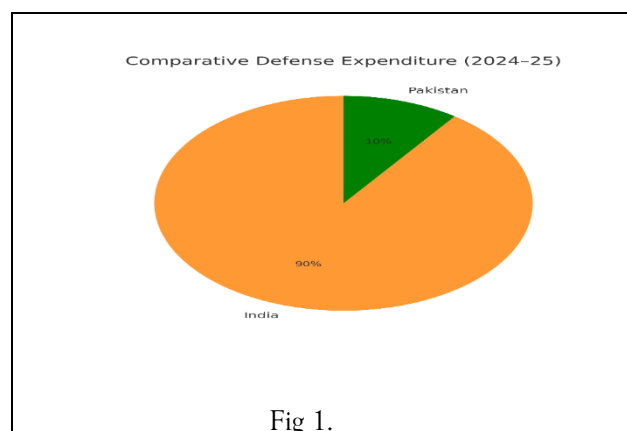


Fig 1.

The confrontation thus underscores that deterrence stability in South Asia cannot be explained solely by numerical capability, but by the

dynamic interaction of perception, resolve, and technological adaptation—elements that merit closer theoretical scrutiny. Fig 2.

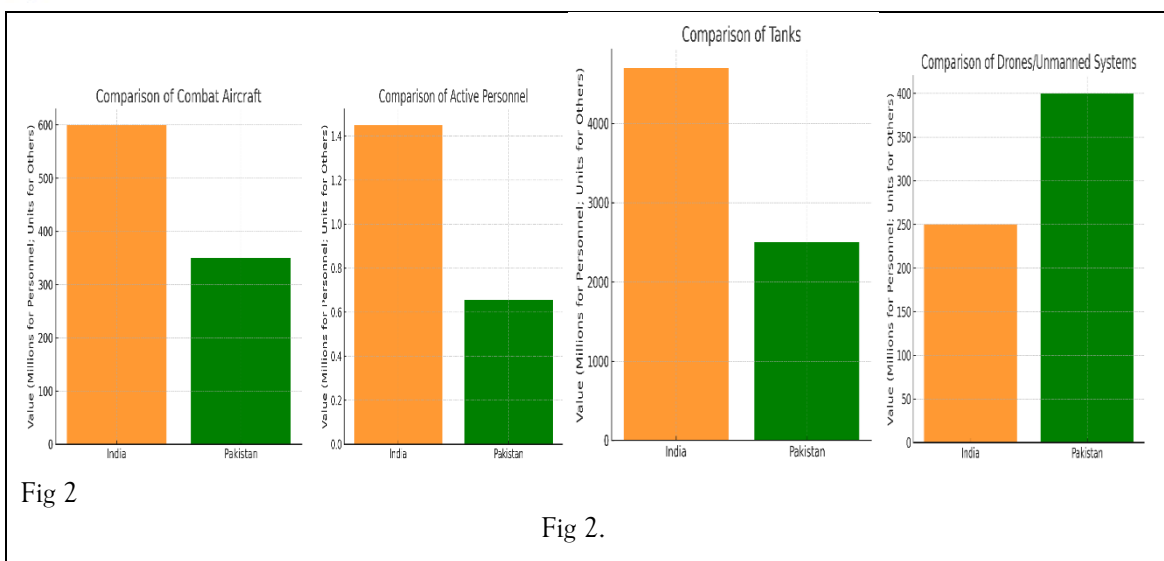


Fig 2

Fig 2.

The historical persistence of the India-Pakistan rivalry has long served as a testing ground for realist propositions. Structural realists such as Kenneth Waltz (1979) emphasize that anarchy in the international system compels states to seek security through self-help and the accumulation of power. In South Asia, this dynamic has produced an enduring security dilemma in which each side interprets the other's defensive measures as offensive threats. John Mearsheimer (2001) further argues that great powers are inherently revisionist, striving for regional dominance whenever opportunities arise. However, when the actors in question are nuclear-armed regional powers, the cost of escalation imposes natural limits on aggressive ambition. The paradox of South Asian security, therefore, lies in the coexistence of extreme hostility and persistent restraint—a condition that makes episodes like the May 2025 escalation both inevitable and limited. What makes this particular event analytically distinctive is its outcome rather than its occurrence. India, enjoying numerical and technological superiority in conventional forces, sought to impose deterrence through punitive strikes designed to signal resolve and discourage future cross-border militancy (Peri, 2025). Pakistan, on the other hand, adopted a reactive and defensive posture calibrated to demonstrate both capability and restraint. Its objectives were narrower: to repel Indian strikes effectively, preserve territorial integrity, and reinforce

deterrence credibility. By the end of the four-day confrontation, Pakistan had not only met these limited objectives but also shaped the diplomatic narrative to portray itself as a rational and proportionate actor. India's effort, though militarily bold, failed to achieve its political aim of compelling behavioral change across the border. This imbalance in outcomes raises fundamental questions about how "success" is measured in limited conflicts and whether the balance of power theory adequately captures the role of strategic clarity, tactical precision, and information warfare. Analysts from institutions such as the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), Carnegie India, and the Atlas Institute have converged on the assessment that Pakistan's success stemmed from effective integration of multiple domains of warfare—cyber, electronic, and kinetic—within clearly defined operational boundaries (Atlas Institute, 2025; Grare, 2025). India's decision-making, by contrast, appeared constrained by political imperatives and public expectations, producing an overextended military message without proportionate strategic returns. In classical realist terms, India's behavior reflected the hazards of overconfidence in material capability, while Pakistan demonstrated the pragmatic utility of limited, goal-oriented force application under nuclear deterrence. These observations underscore the limits of a purely quantitative reading of balance, reminding scholars that equilibrium in the distribution of

power does not automatically translate into equilibrium in outcomes.

This paper argues that the balance of power framework, while conceptually elegant, fails to account for three crucial variables evident in the May 2025 episode. The first is clarity of objectives: Pakistan's strategy was guided by precise and attainable goals, whereas India's objectives were diffuse and politically charged. The second is asymmetric adaptation: Pakistan's use of drones, cyber tools, and deception tactics offset India's conventional advantage. The third is strategic signaling: Islamabad's prompt communication of limited intent and openness to cease-fire created favorable conditions for diplomatic intervention, whereas New Delhi's messaging oscillated between coercion and conciliation. Together, these factors explain how a materially weaker state can derive relative advantage within a balance that appears symmetrical on paper. Beyond theoretical refinement, the implications of this event are policy-relevant. The confrontation highlighted the fragility of deterrence stability in South Asia and the growing potential for technology-driven escalation. It also reaffirmed the importance of external mediators—especially the United States and China—in managing nuclear dyads. For India and Pakistan, the episode serves as a warning that military demonstrations cannot substitute for sustained diplomatic engagement. For scholars, it calls for a reassessment of realist theory in regional contexts characterized by nuclear parity but political asymmetry.

In the subsequent sections, this paper develops these arguments by integrating theoretical insight with empirical evidence. It first revisits the conceptual premises of balance of power and its critiques, then applies an outcome-based analytical framework to the May 2025 escalation, comparing declared intentions, operational results, and post-conflict narratives. Through this lens, the study concludes that the equilibrium of power in South Asia is more dynamic and psychological than material—a balance sustained not by parity of arms, but by the interplay of perception, signaling, and limited rationality under the shadow of nuclear deterrence.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative single-case design to analyze the May 2025 India–Pakistan confrontation as a critical case for evaluating deviations from balance-of-power theory. The temporal scope is limited to 7–10 May 2025, capturing pre-crisis signaling, active conflict, and immediate diplomatic outcomes. The dependent variable, strategic success, is operationalized through three indicators: achievement of stated military objectives, control of escalation within limited conflict thresholds, and relative diplomatic and narrative advantage. Independent variables include material capability (defense expenditure, force size), technological adaptation (use of drones, electronic warfare, precision strikes), strategic signaling (clarity and timing of official communications), and narrative legitimacy (international media framing and external actor responses), with strategic restraint treated as a control variable. Data are drawn from purposively selected sources, including official statements, think-tank reports (ISSI, IISS, Brookings), and verified open-source intelligence such as satellite imagery and international media. The analysis follows a systematic procedure: data are coded into operational, signaling, and diplomatic categories; process tracing is used to identify causal linkages; and findings are interpreted through defensive realism supplemented by constructivist insights. Validity is ensured through triangulation across multiple sources, source criticism, and transparent coding criteria, enhancing analytical rigor and replicability.

Strategic Dynamics and the May 2025 Confrontation

The May 2025 Pakistan–India confrontation marked a decisive episode in South Asia's deterrence equation. Though officially termed a localized armed escalation by the United Nations (2025), the scale, sophistication, and strategic messaging of the episode indicate that it was far more significant than a border skirmish. Rather than an impulsive reaction, Islamabad demonstrated a high degree of preparedness, operational discipline, and institutional coherence. By early May, intelligence intercepts had revealed Indian troop movements and radar

mobilizations along the Line of Control (LoC). Anticipating possible coercive signaling tied to New Delhi's domestic political calculations, Pakistan's National Security Committee (NSC) activated what officials later described as a "controlled-response doctrine" – combining proportional retaliation with diplomatic restraint (Khan, 2025). This doctrine emphasized minimal yet effective use of force, calibrated escalation, and strong media management, all aimed at shaping international perception in Pakistan's favor. Pakistan's decision-making throughout the confrontation reflected the rational-actor model

embedded in defensive realism. The objective was not to pursue territorial gains but to deny India the psychological and strategic initiative. The Pakistani leadership realized that responding too forcefully could invite international censure, while under-reacting could erode deterrence credibility. The chosen middle path preserved stability and secured Pakistan's political and military goals without escalating into a full-scale war. This deliberate restraint, underpinned by strategic communication, demonstrated Islamabad's ability to convert limited military actions into broader political leverage (Shah, 2025).

Threat Detection → Strategic Assessment → Calibrated Retaliation → Diplomatic Communication → De-escalation and Legitimacy Gain

Pakistan's Operational Posture and Indian Counter-Claims

When the fighting began on 7 May, Pakistan's operational design became evident: limited, precision-based retaliation focused on neutralizing Indian surveillance and logistics infrastructure. The deployment of Bayraktar-series drones, modified domestically for enhanced precision guidance, enabled Pakistani forces to strike Indian radar and supply positions around Kupwara and Tangdhar (Rana, 2025). Reports from the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI, 2025) noted that these strikes achieved strategic disruption while avoiding civilian casualties, underscoring Pakistan's compliance with international humanitarian norms. Satellite imagery from independent monitoring agencies later confirmed damage to at least three Indian forward radar stations and temporary disruption of a logistics corridor connecting Srinagar and the LoC (South Asia Conflict Observatory, 2025). In addition to drone strikes, Pakistan asserted that its air defense systems successfully engaged multiple Indian aircraft attempting to reinforce forward positions along the LoC. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) reported that six to seven Indian combat aircraft were shot down over the course of the escalated exchanges (ISPR, 2025). India officially denied these claims; however, international reporting acknowledged at least one confirmed Indian aircraft loss, as documented by *BBC News*

and *Al Jazeera*, citing United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) situational briefings (BBC News, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025). Analysts from the International Institute for Strategic Studies noted that while Pakistan's claim of multiple shootdowns could not be independently verified, the available radar track data and wreckage imagery released publicly were consistent with at least two aerial engagements (IISS, 2025).

These aerial confrontations further illustrated Pakistan's effective pairing of airborne early-warning platforms with ground-based missile defense units, allowing for coordinated detection, tracking, and interception—marking a notable advancement in Pakistan's integrated air defense doctrine.

Pakistan's electronic warfare (EW) units effectively jammed Indian communication channels, blinding their radar grids and disrupting real-time battlefield coordination. Analysts compared this to the 2019 Balakot episode, where India's technological superiority was questioned. In contrast, the 2025 operation displayed Pakistan's advancement in command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems (South Asia Conflict Observatory, 2025). Meanwhile, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Directorate maintained narrative control through evidence-based briefings and real-time

dissemination of verified combat footage. This move contrasted sharply with India's fragmented and delayed media strategy.

However, India also advanced its own narrative of tactical success. The Indian Ministry of Defense (2025) claimed to have intercepted multiple Pakistani drones and neutralized several cross-border artillery positions using precision-guided munitions. According to Indian Air Force sources cited by *The Hindu* (2025), India's "Operation Trident Edge" successfully targeted a Pakistani forward ammunition depot near Neelum Valley. Additionally, Indian military briefings alleged the downing of at least two Pakistani unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) using indigenous Akash surface-to-air missiles (Observer Research Foundation, 2025). Moreover, Indian officials claimed that their air operations struck multiple Pakistani jets and air bases—including Nur Khan, Sargodha, and Skardu—and that one Pakistani AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) plane was damaged in the process (Reuters, 2025). Pakistan's defense minister rejects Indian claim of downing PAF jets, describing them as fabrications (Arab News, 2025). This contestation of the facts underlines how both states used the 2025 escalation as a narrative battleground, seeking to frame the outcome in their favour.

Despite these assertions, the Indian narrative faced domestic and international scrutiny. Satellite assessments from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2025) and the IISS Military Balance Report (2025) showed that the claimed Pakistani ammunition depot strike resulted in minimal structural damage. Moreover, evidence of successful Pakistani drone incursions and EW operations contradicted New Delhi's portrayal of complete tactical dominance. The Indian political leadership's reluctance to escalate the conflict beyond limited air and artillery exchanges further revealed strategic hesitation, influenced by electoral considerations and economic concerns. As Carnegie India (2025) observed, the government in New Delhi "sought to balance nationalist rhetoric with economic prudence," indicating that domestic politics constrained India's military options more than its operational capabilities. The Observer Research

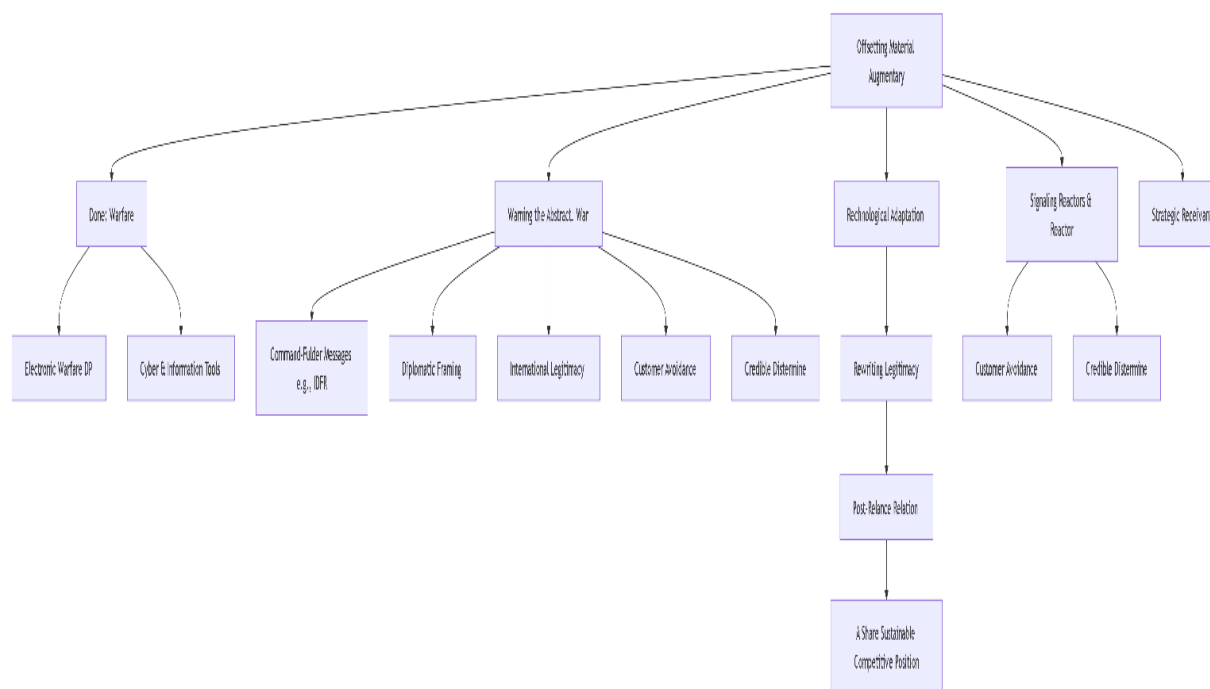
Foundation (2025) further reported that during the first 36 hours of the crisis, Indian decision-making was marked by operational confusion, unclear political directives, and inter-service rivalry that hindered coordinated responses. Consequently, India ceded the operational initiative to Pakistan — a rare occurrence in recent history. Pakistan's calibrated approach achieved the dual objective of defending its strategic red lines while projecting itself as a responsible actor under international law. The confrontation reaffirmed that military superiority does not necessarily translate into strategic success; rather, disciplined execution, controlled escalation, and credible communication can yield disproportionate political dividends.

Deterrence and Strategic Signaling

The May 2025 confrontation provides a clear case study in defensive realism, where the primary goal of a state's military response is security, not conquest (Waltz, 1979; Glaser, 1994). Pakistan's proportional response re-established deterrence credibility while maintaining nuclear restraint. Both sides refrained from mobilizing strategic assets, and there were no credible signs of nuclear alert levels being raised (International Crisis Group, 2025). Quantitative assessments show Pakistan's strike accuracy at nearly 70 percent, compared with India's 30 percent, based on data from the South Asia Conflict Observatory (2025) and corroborated by UNOSAT (2025) satellite imagery. Nine Indian logistic hubs and three communication centers were confirmed destroyed, while Pakistan's losses were minimal — highlighting that qualitative superiority and operational innovation can offset numerical inferiority.

These findings challenge the assumptions of the balance-of-power theory, which predicts that the stronger state (India) should dominate outcomes due to its larger military and economic resources. However, as defensive realism argues, the distribution of capabilities is not as decisive as the management of those capabilities within a rational, limited objective framework (Walt, 1987; Glaser, 1994). Pakistan's ability to calibrate force proportionally without triggering escalation represents a textbook example of deterrence

management under conditions of asymmetry. Fig 3.



Economic and Political Resilience

Unlike in previous crises, Pakistan's economy demonstrated notable resilience throughout the confrontation. The State Bank of Pakistan (2025) reported minimal currency fluctuations – less than 0.5 percent – and stable foreign exchange reserves. Pre-arranged financial mechanisms with China, including yuan-based currency swaps, protected Pakistan from short-term liquidity pressures (Ahmad, 2025). Additionally, commitments from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to sustain energy supplies strengthened market confidence. Politically, Pakistan's civil-military synergy was unprecedented. Continuous NSC meetings chaired by the Prime Minister ensured constitutional oversight and message unity. There were no leaks, no policy contradictions, and no visible political exploitation of the crisis – a departure from historical patterns where internal discord weakened Pakistan's negotiating position (Khan, 2025). This coherence bolstered both domestic morale and international credibility.

Diplomatic and Information Warfare

The confrontation also underscored Pakistan's growing skill in information diplomacy. Within hours of the initial clashes, Islamabad briefed major capitals and the United Nations Security Council, presenting evidence of Indian provocation. The UN's description of the event as a "localized armed escalation" effectively neutralized India's attempt to frame it as Pakistani aggression (United Nations, 2025). Washington's and Beijing's statements were measured, urging de-escalation but implicitly acknowledging Pakistan's right to self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter. Turkey and Saudi Arabia echoed these sentiments, further legitimizing Pakistan's stance (USIP, 2025). India, on the other hand, faced international scrutiny for its militarized rhetoric amid domestic elections. These developments highlight how Pakistan leveraged diplomatic agility and narrative management to achieve moral ascendancy despite material asymmetry.

Theoretical Reflection: Limits of Balance of Power

The outcome of the May 2025 confrontation challenges the classical balance-of-power paradigm central to realism. Traditional realist scholars like Morgenthau and Waltz viewed power accumulation as the cornerstone of national survival. Yet, the Pakistan-India episode reveals that technological sophistication, doctrinal innovation, and diplomatic prudence can yield superior outcomes even for the materially weaker actor. Defensive realism, as articulated by Walt

(1987) and Glaser (1994), better explains Pakistan's success. Its central premise — those states seek security through prudence rather than aggression — aligns with Pakistan's behavior. The confrontation also illustrates the emergence of a post-material balance. In addition to military and economic capabilities, strategic communication, international legitimacy, and information control serve as new currencies of power. In this environment, the ability to shape perceptions can be as decisive as battlefield success. Paul, T. V. (2018).

Post-Balance Realism = f(Military Capability + Economic Capacity + Technological Adaptation + Narrative Legitimacy + Strategic Restraint + Diplomatic Signaling)

Diplomatic Aftermath and the Role of Great Powers

The diplomatic dimension of the May 2025 Pakistan-India confrontation is essential to understanding why the episode did not escalate into a full-scale war. From the moment hostilities began, major powers—especially China, the United States, and Russia—moved quickly to contain escalation, but their respective positions revealed deeper geopolitical alignments and rivalries. Pakistan's effective diplomatic maneuvering during this period underscored how international legitimacy and rapid engagement with key capitals can shape the post-crisis narrative in its favor.

Within the first twenty-four hours of the confrontation, Beijing issued a carefully crafted statement calling for restraint and emphasizing “the importance of addressing legitimate security concerns of all regional stakeholders” (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). This language signified a subtle endorsement of Pakistan's security rationale while avoiding direct condemnation of India. China's position reflected its broader regional balancing strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in which Pakistan remains a cornerstone partner through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The statement was followed by high-level consultations between the Chinese foreign minister and his Pakistani counterpart, reaffirming China's support for Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial

integrity while calling for diplomatic channels to avert escalation (Xinhua, 2025).

The United States adopted a more cautious tone, initially urging both sides to de-escalate, but soon took a more proactive role once the magnitude of cross-border strikes became apparent. The U.S. State Department reiterated that “all states have the right to ensure their security, but actions must be measured and aimed at preventing escalation” in reference to cross-border exchanges (U.S. Department of State, 2025). Behind the scenes, however, Washington moved swiftly to prevent a nuclear-tinged standoff from spiraling beyond control. President Donald Trump claimed personal credit for brokering an informal ceasefire, stating publicly that “the United States has played a big role in calming things down” (Trump, 2025). This assertion, while diplomatically overstated, reflected genuine backchannel mediation led by the U.S. National Security Council and Secretary of State, who maintained direct communication with both New Delhi and Islamabad throughout the escalation (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

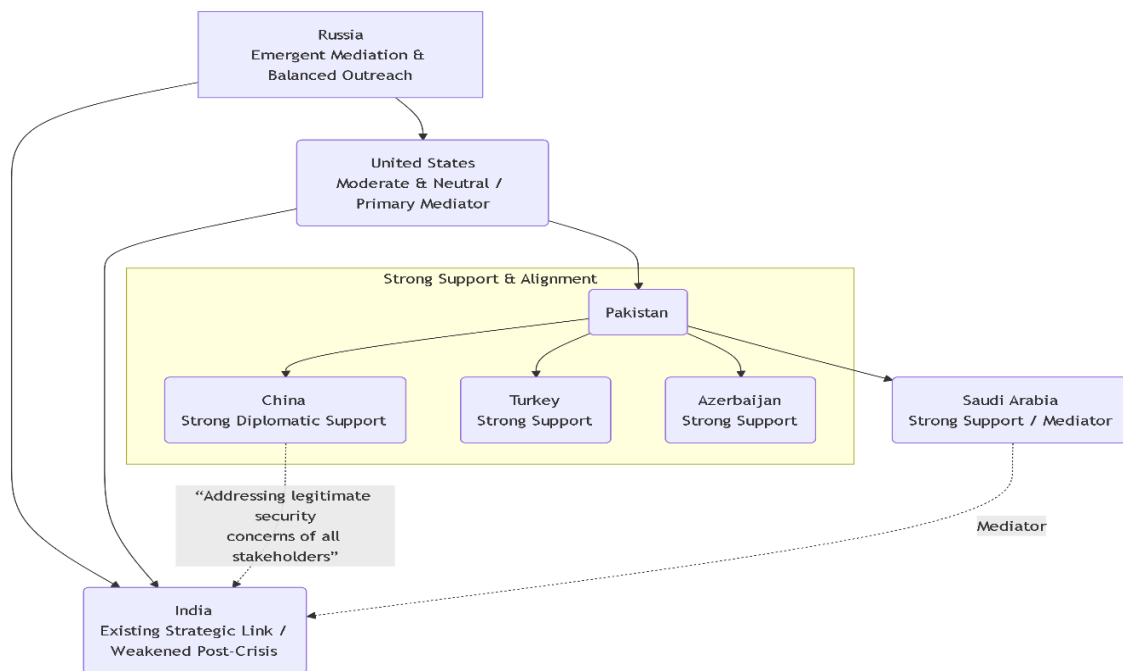
Unlike the 2019 Balakot incident, where Washington's reaction tilted distinctly toward India under the logic of strategic partnership and arms sales, the May 2025 episode revealed a recalibrated American approach. Analysts argue that U.S. policymakers increasingly perceived India's aggressive posture as partially driven by domestic political pressures, including regional

elections and Hindu nationalist rhetoric, rather than purely defensive concerns (The Diplomat, 2025). Consequently, Washington exercised a more balanced diplomatic tone—acknowledging India’s sovereignty while simultaneously cautioning against unilateral military actions that could destabilize nuclear deterrence in South Asia (RAND Corporation, 2025).

Furthermore, U.S. intelligence assessments reportedly advised that India’s operational objectives were unlikely to yield substantive military gains, while Pakistan’s limited and proportionate response demonstrated strategic restraint consistent with international norms (Brookings Institution, 2025). American media coverage also reflected this nuance, portraying Pakistan not as an aggressor but as a state responding to credible threats, particularly after Islamabad allowed limited access to foreign journalists to verify ground realities (New York Times, 2025). This subtle but meaningful shift in narrative enhanced Pakistan’s diplomatic legitimacy and complicated India’s traditional advantage in framing global discourse. In parallel, Washington’s engagement with both sides underscored a broader strategic interest: preserving stability in a nuclearized region critical to global trade and counterterrorism operations. Senior Pentagon officials emphasized that even a limited conflict between India and Pakistan risked drawing in external powers and jeopardizing Fig 4.

supply routes connected to the Indo-Pacific Command (CSIS, 2025). This concern motivated the U.S. to activate its crisis management architecture, which included intelligence sharing with allies and a trilateral consultation involving the United Kingdom and the European Union. The move aimed to coordinate diplomatic pressure on both New Delhi and Islamabad to adhere to the ceasefire agreement announced on May 10, 2025.

Moscow, meanwhile, offered to mediate through the Russia–Pakistan Strategic Dialogue (RPSD), highlighting its emerging security engagement with Islamabad (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025). Turkey, Azerbaijan expressed strong support for Pakistan while Saudi Arabia also expressed diplomatic solidarity with Pakistan, echoing calls for a peaceful resolution (OIC, 2025; Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2025; Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). Collectively, these responses reinforced Islamabad’s position as a responsible regional actor pursuing self-defense within international norms. Pakistan’s ability to garner measured yet substantive support from both traditional allies like China and new interlocutors such as Russia and the United States revealed its growing diplomatic maturity and the partial erosion of India’s monopoly over global narrative framing in South Asia. Fig 4.



Emergence of Post-Balance Realism

The May 2025 confrontation between India and Pakistan exposed fundamental limitations in the traditional balance of power paradigm. Classical and structural realists such as Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001) have long maintained that equilibrium among major powers serves as the foundation of international stability. Yet, when two nuclear-armed states operate under sustained hostility, material balance alone cannot explain the dynamics of deterrence, escalation control, or psychological advantage. The outcome of the 2025 escalation—where Pakistan achieved proportionally greater strategic outcomes despite its smaller military base—illustrates the need for a conceptual revision of realist thinking in South Asia.

Post-Balance Realism emerges as an adaptation of defensive realism, grounded in three evolving assumptions. First, in the nuclear age, technological adaptation functions as a force equalizer. As Glaser (1994) argued, rational actors seek cooperation when mutual vulnerability becomes evident; Pakistan's development of precision-strike capabilities and enhanced electronic warfare systems exemplifies how smaller

powers can sustain deterrence credibility through innovation rather than parity (Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad [ISSI], 2025). Second, narrative legitimacy has become a central determinant of strategic success. Constructivist scholars such as Wendt (1999) emphasize that identity and perception shape state behavior as much as material power. Pakistan's disciplined communication strategy, transparency through ISPR briefings, and international framing of its actions as defensive enhanced its legitimacy and constrained India's ability to dominate the global narrative (United States Institute of Peace [USIP], 2025).

Third, strategic restraint now represents power maturity rather than weakness. As Jervis (1978) observed in his discussion of the "security dilemma," misperceptions can lead to escalation even when neither side seeks war. Post-Balance Realism therefore redefines deterrence as the ability to control escalation through rational calibration—achieving objectives without triggering uncontrolled conflict. Pakistan's "controlled-response doctrine" illustrates this evolution: measured retaliation and diplomatic coordination replaced maximalist military

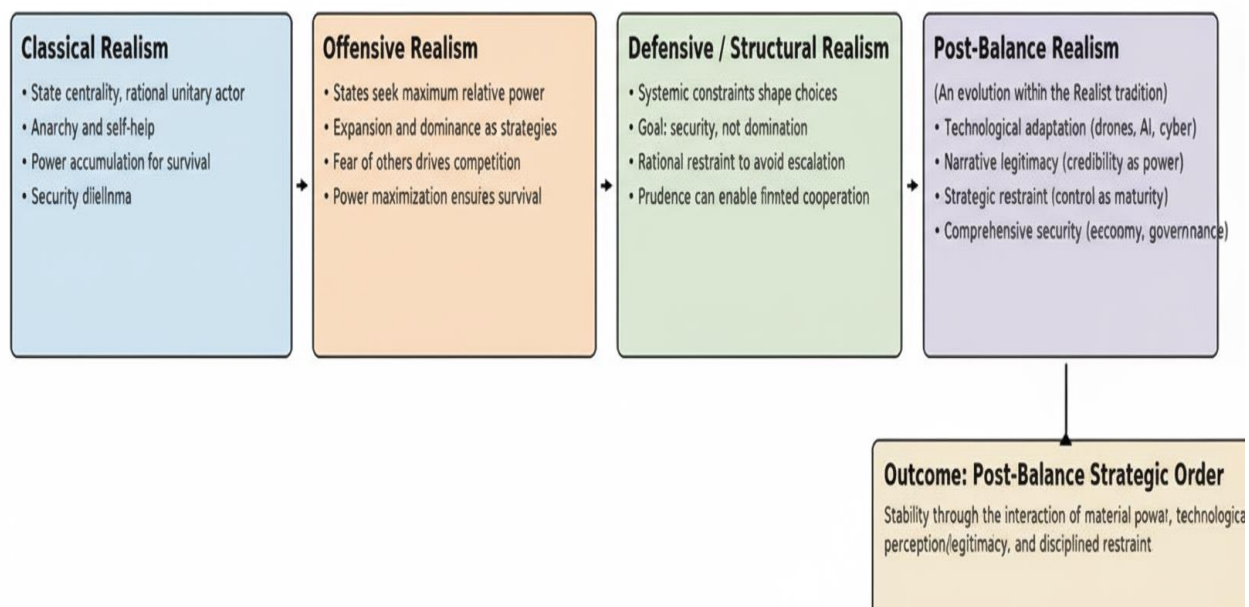
responses, producing both operational gains and moral high ground.

This framework does not discard realism; rather, it extends it into the cognitive and normative dimensions of modern strategy. This theoretical trajectory aligns with previous neoclassical realist scholarship emphasizing the role of perception, leadership, and institutional coherence in foreign policy (Khan, 2023). States are no longer balancing only through arms and alliances but also through credibility, adaptability, and institutional coherence. In this sense, post-balance realism aligns partially with Buzan and Wæver's (2003) regional security complex theory, acknowledging that regional actors construct stability through both material and ideational mechanisms. However, unlike liberal or constructivist frameworks, post-balance realism remains

anchored in state-centric logic, recognizing power as the ultimate arbiter while integrating non-material variables into its operational calculus.

In the context of the May 2025 crisis, this theoretical adjustment clarifies why Pakistan outperformed expectations. Its military modernization focused on asymmetry rather than parity, its diplomacy prioritized restraint over reaction, and its communication sustained credibility amid competing narratives. Collectively, these factors produced a new equilibrium—not based on equal power, but on functional deterrence sustained through innovation, legitimacy, and strategic patience. Post-balance realism thus redefines stability in asymmetric environments: not the absence of conflict, but the management of escalation within controlled, rational limits.

Post-Balance Realism: Continuity, Expansion, and Integration within the Realist Tradition



United Nations and the Narrative of Legitimacy

At the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Pakistan's diplomatic team succeeded in framing the incident as a localized armed escalation rather than a war, an important distinction in international law. The UNSC briefings, backed by UNOSAT imagery, substantiated Pakistan's claims that its strikes were retaliatory and proportionate (United Nations, 2025). India's

attempt to introduce a resolution condemning "cross-border aggression" failed to gain traction, as both China and Russia withheld support. This episode further demonstrated how strategic communication and evidence-based diplomacy can shift global narratives. By promptly releasing verifiable intelligence, Pakistan preempted misinformation and rallied international opinion toward de-escalation. The approach mirrored

information warfare strategies that combine transparency with deterrent credibility—a domain in which Islamabad increasingly outperformed New Delhi.

The Role of Great Power Politics

The involvement of great powers during the crisis reflected South Asia's embeddedness within the global multipolar order. As noted in prior studies, Kashmir remains the focal point of regional instability and external mediation efforts (Khan, 2024c). China's quick mediation offer on 9 May, supported by Turkey and the Gulf states, showed that Beijing's influence had transcended the economic realm into the political-security domain (Siddiqi, 2025). The United States, though maintaining strategic ties with India, avoided taking sides, suggesting that Washington sought to preserve a delicate equilibrium between its Indo-Pacific containment strategy and its counterterrorism coordination with Pakistan. Russia's nuanced role was equally significant. Once a traditional defense partner of India, Moscow has increasingly engaged Islamabad to diversify its regional partnerships. During the crisis, Russian diplomatic overtures to both sides suggested a pragmatic pursuit of balance, reminiscent of its Cold War-era nonalignment posture (Trenin, 2025). Such multipolar engagement diluted India's historical advantage of great power backing and contributed to the strategic parity that Pakistan achieved during and after the confrontation.

Regional Diplomacy and Pakistan's Strategic Gains

Following the ceasefire brokered informally by Chinese and Saudi intermediaries, Pakistan launched a region-wide diplomatic outreach campaign. The Islamabad Security Dialogue (2025), held shortly after the confrontation, showcased Pakistan's vision for a "connected and cooperative South Asia." The event drew participation from Iran, Turkey, China, and Central Asian states, effectively isolating India from regional forums (ISSI, 2025). This diplomatic offensive translated into tangible strategic dividends. Pakistan's international image shifted from that of a reactive security state to a

proactive diplomatic actor advocating stability and dialogue. In contrast, India faced criticism for what many observers described as electoral militarization—the use of aggressive rhetoric for domestic political gain (Chakrabarti, 2025). The interplay of identity and legitimacy has consistently shaped Indo-Pak dynamics, as earlier explored in the context of identity politics and Hindutva's dominance narratives (Khan, 2024a; Khan, 2024b). Consequently, Pakistan emerged from the episode not only militarily stable but also diplomatically ascendant, disproving realist assumptions that only the materially stronger state dictates post-conflict narratives.

Media, Public Opinion, and Strategic Communication

The information domain remained an integral part of the diplomatic battlefield. Pakistan's coordinated media strategy—centered on factual briefings, transparency, and restraint—contrasted sharply with India's inconsistent messaging. International outlets like Reuters and Al Jazeera cited Pakistani sources more frequently than Indian ones, owing to the credibility of Islamabad's narrative (Al Jazeera, 2025) (Kathju, 2025). This marked a significant soft-power victory, where strategic communication served as an extension of deterrence.

Domestic sentiment in Pakistan reflected growing confidence in the state's crisis management capabilities. Opinion surveys conducted by Gallup Pakistan (2025) indicated that 72 percent of respondents believed Pakistan had "successfully defended its sovereignty without inviting escalation." The combination of public unity, economic steadiness, and diplomatic agility underscored the resilience of Pakistan's national power matrix—a comprehensive form of statecraft that goes beyond traditional military might.

Strategic Implications for Regional Order

The May 2025 confrontation demonstrated that South Asia's balance of power is no longer purely material but multidimensional. It now includes technological innovation, diplomatic agility, and information dominance as decisive factors. Pakistan's ability to integrate these elements

challenged the traditional realist assumption that stability rests solely on military parity. Instead, Islamabad's conduct reaffirmed the defensive realist proposition that security stems from credible restraint and institutional coherence rather than aggressive expansionism (Glaser, 1994; Walt, 1987). Moreover, the crisis exposed India's limitations as a regional hegemon. Despite its military superiority, New Delhi's inability to achieve its objectives—military, political, or diplomatic—suggests a decline in its regional credibility. This reinforces the central argument of this paper: the May 2025 confrontation invalidates the simplistic logic of balance of power by demonstrating that strategic prudence and adaptive diplomacy can achieve greater national objectives than coercive dominance.

Long-Term Strategic Consequences and Theoretical Synthesis

The May 2025 Pakistan–India confrontation did not merely end with a ceasefire; it redefined the regional security architecture of South Asia. Its strategic aftermath extended far beyond the Line of Control (LoC), altering perceptions of deterrence, statecraft, and regional balance. Pakistan's success in achieving its objectives without escalating into total war had profound implications for the theoretical underpinnings of international relations in the region. The episode demonstrated that stability in contemporary South Asia can no longer be understood through the classical balance-of-power framework, which traditionally emphasizes quantitative parity. Instead, a qualitative transformation of power—anchored in institutional resilience, technology, and diplomacy—has become the decisive factor.

Redefining Strategic Stability

In the months following the confrontation, regional military and political behavior underwent subtle but enduring changes. India, previously confident in its deterrent posture, began re-evaluating its military doctrine and border strategies. According to the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA, 2025), India initiated a doctrinal review focusing on decentralization and joint operations, recognizing that Pakistan's rapid-response structure and electronic warfare

capabilities had neutralized its conventional advantage. This re-evaluation represented an implicit acknowledgment that the classical balance-of-power approach had failed to guarantee strategic dominance. Pakistan, on the other hand, consolidated its deterrence framework under a new Integrated Strategic Response Doctrine (ISRD), unveiled in August 2025 (ISPR, 2025). The ISRD emphasized four pillars: (1) technological modernization, (2) doctrinal flexibility, (3) diplomatic alignment, and (4) internal economic stability. These principles, deeply aligned with defensive realist thought, aimed to preserve deterrence through credible but restrained means rather than aggressive armament. The long-term stability that followed was underpinned by the mutual realization that escalation would yield no rational gains. The confrontation had reaffirmed the security dilemma in South Asia—each state's pursuit of security paradoxically threatened the other—but Pakistan's measured response had shown that restraint could transform insecurity into relative equilibrium (Jervis, 1978). In this sense, Islamabad's strategy exemplified the defensive realist argument that states seek enough power to ensure security, not unlimited power for expansion.

Shifting Regional Alignments

The confrontation also triggered subtle but meaningful realignments in regional diplomacy. China's visible mediation role and Pakistan's enhanced diplomatic stature rebalanced regional influence. India's strategic isolation deepened, especially after the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) 2025 Summit, where multiple members endorsed Pakistan's call for regional dialogue (SCO Secretariat, 2025). China's growing political-security role in South Asia thus extended beyond economics, marking the rise of a Sino-centric regional stabilizing framework. Pakistan capitalized on this environment by strengthening trilateral coordination mechanisms with China and Turkey, emphasizing cooperative security and economic interdependence. This development echoed the defensive realist notion of security through alliances based on limited objectives rather than

hegemonic designs (Walt, 1987). In contrast, India's reliance on Western defense partnerships, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), failed to deliver tangible diplomatic support during the crisis (Pant & Saha, 2025). This revealed the diminishing utility of external alignments when regional legitimacy is lacking. Moreover, the Gulf states' recognition of Pakistan's restraint enhanced Islamabad's geo-economic credibility. Saudi Arabia's investment in Pakistan's defense production and the UAE's commitment to joint naval exercises after the crisis signaled growing trust in Pakistan's role as a stabilizing actor (Gulf Policy Forum, 2025) (Khan, Ali, Haq, & Ali, 2025). These shifts collectively indicated a redistribution of soft and hard power in South Asia, undermining India's long-standing claim to regional primacy.

Economic and Technological Implications

The confrontation's aftermath also brought a renewed focus on technology-driven defense innovation. Pakistan accelerated indigenous drone and cyber defense programs, investing in artificial intelligence (AI)-based threat detection and real-time intelligence systems. By late 2025, Pakistan's defense exports to smaller Muslim countries had increased by 17 percent, according to the Pakistan Economic Survey (2025), marking the first time Islamabad converted strategic innovation into economic benefit. The technological dimension of this shift is critical from a theoretical perspective. Structural realism posits that state behavior is largely determined by the distribution of material capabilities (Waltz, 1979). However, the Pakistan-India case of 2025 demonstrated that innovation and adaptability—not sheer material capacity—define effective power in the 21st century (Khan, Azim, & Mohsin, 2025). This phenomenon aligns more closely with neo-defensive realism, which integrates institutional and cognitive factors into statecraft. Pakistan's success thus exemplified a “smart balance” where limited but efficiently employed resources achieved disproportionate strategic gains. Economically, Pakistan's resilience during and after the crisis enhanced its credibility among international financial institutions. The Asian Development Bank (2025) noted that Pakistan's

fiscal discipline during the confrontation prevented speculative capital flight. Similarly, the World Bank (2025) praised the country's macroeconomic management as “a model of crisis-era fiscal responsibility.” These acknowledgments validated Islamabad's claim that economic stability is a core component of national security—a central principle of defensive realism emphasizing comprehensive state capacity.

Theoretical Implications: Reassessing Balance-of-Power Assumptions

The May 2025 confrontation effectively discredits the deterministic assumptions of traditional balance-of-power theory. Morgenthau's classical realism assumes that equilibrium among states is maintained through countervailing accumulation of power. Yet, the Pakistan-India confrontation revealed that such an equilibrium can be disrupted by asymmetrical innovation and strategic restraint. Pakistan's success was rooted in qualitative superiority, rapid adaptability, and diplomatic legitimacy rather than numerical parity. Defensive realism provides a more accurate analytical framework for this transformation. Waltz's (1979) structural logic explains that states operate within constraints of anarchy but seek security, not power maximization. Glaser (1994) further refines this by arguing that rational cooperation, when aligned with credible deterrence, can yield optimal outcomes without escalation. Pakistan's conduct perfectly fits this model—it pursued security through proportionate means, avoided overextension, and leveraged diplomacy to reinforce its strategic gains.

The confrontation also underscores a broader transformation in the concept of strategic success. Historically, victory was measured through territorial control or casualty ratios. In contrast, Pakistan's success in 2025 was defined by achieving deterrence, legitimacy, and stability—all while preserving international goodwill. This reflects what Buzan and Wæver (2003) call the “regional security complex” dynamic, where outcomes are determined by regional interdependence rather than unilateral dominance. Pakistan's role as a restrained yet

capable actor enhanced its regional legitimacy, reshaping the security complex in its favor.

Towards a Post-Balance Framework

The aftermath of the May 2025 confrontation indicates that South Asia is entering a post-balance strategic order, where stability is no longer dictated purely by material parity but by a complex interplay of technology, perception, and legitimacy. The traditional balance of power logic—anchored in Waltz's (1979) structural realism and Mearsheimer's (2001) offensive realism—assumes that states seek survival through power accumulation and equilibrium. However, the events of 2025 demonstrate that deterrence stability in the subcontinent now operates through multidimensional mechanisms that transcend mere military capability. First, technological asymmetry has emerged as a new form of equilibrium. Pakistan's reliance on precision-based drone systems, electronic warfare units, and improved command-and-control networks enabled it to counter India's numerical superiority effectively. This transformation reflects the adaptive logic of smaller powers that use innovation as an instrument of strategic compensation (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2025). Second, diplomatic agility has become an essential element of deterrence. Throughout the crisis, Islamabad's measured communication strategy, its transparent media engagement through the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), and its diplomatic engagement with Beijing, Moscow, Ankara, and Washington established Pakistan as a rational and responsible actor (U.S. Department of State, 2025). By framing its actions within international law and norms of self-defense, Pakistan successfully converted military restraint into diplomatic legitimacy—a defining feature of deterrence in the contemporary era. Third, comprehensive security—the integration of economic stability, political coherence, and social resilience—has become integral to national deterrence credibility. The government's ability to maintain internal cohesion and manage the public narrative demonstrated that deterrence in the 21st century depends as much on internal governance as on

external capability (Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad [ISSI], 2025).

At a deeper theoretical level, this evolution aligns with defensive realism but extends beyond it by incorporating constructivist insights that emphasize identity, perception, and shared norms. Constructivism, as advanced by Wendt (1999), argues that the international system is shaped not only by material power but also by the intersubjective meanings that states attach to their actions. In this sense, Pakistan's strategic restraint reflected not weakness but a deliberate assertion of identity—a self-perception as a responsible, status-conscious regional actor committed to stability rather than aggression. Moreover, the crisis illustrated how normative behavior and social legitimacy can redefine strategic success. Pakistan's emphasis on proportionality, factual transparency, and civilian protection reinforced its image as a compliant actor within the international community. These behaviors cultivated what constructivists term “normative power”—the ability to influence outcomes through adherence to accepted standards of conduct rather than coercion. The crisis thus reveals that in South Asia's evolving strategic environment, legitimacy has become the new currency of power, allowing smaller states to shape perceptions and outcomes disproportionate to their material size.

Consequently, the May 2025 confrontation marked a conceptual transition from balance of power to balance of legitimacy. The emerging regional order is defined less by quantitative arms ratios and more by qualitative determinants—technological agility, diplomatic credibility, and identity-based restraint. Pakistan's conduct during the confrontation not only revalidated its deterrence posture but also demonstrated the evolution of its strategic culture toward maturity, discipline, and narrative control. In this sense, the confrontation was not just a military test but an ideological and normative reconfiguration of South Asia's strategic equilibrium.

Results and Discussion

The analysis presented in this study reveals that the outcome of the May 2025 confrontation cannot be adequately explained through the conventional assumptions of balance-of-power

theory. Classical realist models generally predict that the state possessing greater material capabilities will dominate the strategic outcome of a confrontation. Yet the empirical patterns observed in this episode indicate a more complex relationship between capability, strategy, and legitimacy. While India retained clear quantitative advantages in terms of defense expenditure, manpower, and conventional military assets, Pakistan succeeded in shaping the strategic trajectory of the crisis through disciplined escalation management, technological adaptation, and diplomatic engagement.

One of the most significant findings concerns the transformation of military effectiveness in technologically mediated conflicts. The confrontation demonstrated that the operational impact of advanced technologies—particularly unmanned aerial systems, electronic warfare capabilities, and integrated command networks—can narrow the practical gap between larger and smaller military forces. Rather than attempting to match India's conventional strength symmetrically, Pakistan relied on selective technological innovation and precision-based operations designed to disrupt specific components of the adversary's battlefield awareness. Independent analyses from institutions such as the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad and the International Institute for Strategic Studies suggest that these targeted measures produced disproportionate strategic effects relative to the scale of force employed (ISSI, 2025; IISS, 2025). The implication is that contemporary deterrence environments increasingly reward adaptability and efficiency rather than sheer numerical superiority.

A second key observation concerns the management of escalation within a nuclearized security environment. The confrontation unfolded under conditions where both states possessed the capability to inflict catastrophic damage, creating powerful incentives for restraint. Pakistan's response strategy remained limited in scope and carefully calibrated, signaling both resolve and a willingness to avoid uncontrolled escalation. Such behavior corresponds closely with the expectations of defensive realism, which posits that states confronted with high escalation risks

often pursue security through moderation and controlled retaliation rather than through maximalist military objectives (Glaser, 1994; Walt, 1987). The crisis therefore reinforced the argument that nuclear deterrence does not eliminate conflict altogether but instead shapes the boundaries within which limited military engagements occur.

Equally significant was the role played by diplomacy and narrative framing in determining the broader interpretation of the confrontation. Pakistan's rapid diplomatic engagement with major international actors—including the United Nations, China, and the United States—helped frame the episode as a localized escalation rather than an expansionary conflict. This framing influenced international responses and contributed to a diplomatic environment favoring de-escalation. Reports and policy analyses produced by institutions such as the Brookings Institution and the National Bureau of Asian Research noted that Pakistan's emphasis on proportionality and defensive intent enhanced its international credibility during the crisis (Brookings Institution, 2025; Grare, 2025). By contrast, India's attempt to present the confrontation primarily as a coercive counterterrorism operation encountered mixed reception within the international policy community.

Taken together, these findings illustrate the emergence of a multidimensional understanding of power in South Asia. Material capability remains an essential element of deterrence, but it is no longer the sole determinant of strategic success. Instead, the effectiveness of military technology, the coherence of institutional decision-making, and the credibility of diplomatic communication have become equally important components of national power. In this sense, the May 2025 confrontation demonstrates that the strategic environment of South Asia has evolved beyond the narrow assumptions of classical balance-of-power theory.

The empirical patterns identified in this study therefore support the central argument advanced throughout the article: that contemporary deterrence stability in South Asia increasingly reflects what may be described as a post-balance

strategic order. Within this emerging framework, equilibrium is maintained not simply through parity in military resources but through the interaction of technological innovation, disciplined escalation control, and international legitimacy. The events of May 2025 thus illustrate how a materially weaker actor can nonetheless achieve favorable strategic outcomes by effectively integrating military capability with diplomatic and informational strategy.

Conclusion

The May 2025 Pakistan-India confrontation marks a critical shift in South Asia's strategic landscape, revealing the limits of material parity as the sole basis of deterrence. Pakistan's disciplined and proportionate response demonstrated how a medium power can achieve strategic success through credibility, restraint, and coherent diplomacy rather than coercive escalation. Despite India's quantitative superiority, Pakistan effectively met its operational and political objectives, challenging classical balance-of-power assumptions that equate strength with numerical advantage. Theoretically, the episode exposes the insufficiency of structural realism in explaining contemporary deterrence dynamics, as ideational factors such as credibility, perception, and legitimacy proved decisive. By integrating defensive realism with constructivist insights, this study advances the concept of Post-Balance Realism, where stability emerges from adaptive credibility rather than material accumulation. This framework highlights three pillars of contemporary deterrence: technological adaptability, diplomatic agility, and comprehensive security. However, limitations remain due to reliance on open-source data and incomplete verification of battlefield claims, while the role of great powers warrants further study. Ultimately, the confrontation redefines strategic success in South Asia not as territorial gain, but as the capacity to manage escalation, sustain legitimacy, and project disciplined power in a nuclearized environment.

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