



Regional Rivalries and Nuclear Risk in South Asia: Deterrence, Strategic Stability, and the China–India–Pakistan Triangle

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Abstract

Nuclear politics in South Asia represent one of the most complex and unstable regional security environments in the contemporary international system. Despite the presence of nuclear deterrence, the region continues to experience recurring crises, persistent conventional tensions, and evolving nuclear doctrines, particularly between India and Pakistan. This study examines how regional rivalries and external power competition shape nuclear behavior, strategic stability, and escalation risks in South Asia. Moving beyond a narrow bilateral focus, the analysis situates the India–Pakistan rivalry within the broader China–India–Pakistan nuclear triangle, highlighting how overlapping threat perceptions and interdependent deterrence relationships complicate crisis management. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study relies on thematic analysis of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic literature, policy documents, and strategic assessments related to South Asian nuclear dynamics. The findings suggest that nuclear deterrence in South Asia has not produced enduring stability but has instead coexisted with risk-taking behavior, doctrinal ambiguity, and technological modernization that collectively heighten escalation risks. The involvement of external powers, particularly through strategic alignments and great-power competition, further intensifies regional security dilemmas and undermines crisis stability. The study contributes to the literature by framing South Asian nuclear politics as a regional security subsystem shaped by interconnected rivalries rather than isolated dyadic relationships. By emphasizing the systemic interaction among regional and extra-regional actors, the research offers a more comprehensive understanding of nuclear risk and strategic stability in South Asia and highlight the need for region-specific approaches to risk reduction and crisis management.

**Keywords:** Regional Rivalries, Nuclear Risk, Deterrence, Strategic Stability, China–India–Pakistan, South Asia

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## Introduction

The politics of the nuclear in Asia is becoming more determined by the long-term regional conflicts, where India-Pakistan rivalry has taken a very central and consistent position in determining the strategic stability in South Asia. Deterrence relations between India and Pakistan have been changing since the overt nuclearization of the two states in 1998, in a background of unresolved territorial issues, frequent military crises, and ingrained mistrust. Instead of creating a stable situation over the long term, nuclear arms have lived with the common cases of coercive diplomacy and low-level conventional violence, and this is a cause of concern regarding escalation and mismanagement of crises (Butt, 2025; Kazmi, 2024). Researchers are raising more and more concerns that South Asia is one of the most unsafe nuclear landscapes worldwide because of the short-term decision-making processes, unclear ideologies, and the lack of institutionalized risk-mitigation strategies (Akram et al., 2025; Khan, 2022).

The India-Pakistan rivalry is not a stand-alone event, but rather a part of the broader Asian nuclear environment that is being influenced by the developing strategic importance of China. The formation of a China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle has introduced the elements of further complexity to the concept of deterrence in the region because the actions of one actor are felt by the strategic decisions of the others (Bashir, 2022; Menon, 2022). The changing nuclear posture of India is both a consequence of its historical conflict with Pakistan and a result of its strategic rivalry with China, which forms the overlapping threat perceptions and interrelated deterrence relations (Basrur, 2019; Basrur, 2023). This three-sided dynamic makes the crisis stability more difficult as it creates indirect escalation routes and strengthens security dilemmas throughout the region (Lou, 2022; Yuan, 2022). These challenges have been further aggravated by technological changes and changes in doctrine. The emergence of more advanced missile technologies, diversification of delivery mechanisms, and changing arguments on counterforce have changed the conventional beliefs regarding minimum deterrence and control of escalation in South Asia (Akram et al., 2025; Ringvall, 2024). These developments in the India-Pakistan environment bring more risk of the traditional crises to become even more dangerous in the shadow of nuclear armaments, especially in cases of ambiguous or misunderstood signaling (Kazmi, 2024; Sridharan, 2020). Simultaneously, the growing strategic alliances and India, in particular, the United States, have repercussions on the perception of security and the development of nuclear strategies in Pakistan and strengthen the action-reaction dynamics in the region (Hanif and Muzaffar, 2025, p. 516, p. 527; Khan, Z., 2022).

These risks are supported by the larger Asian context. South Asian nuclear politics are intertwined with major power rivalry, especially between the United States and China, as they influence the behavior of alliances, modernizing their defense, and setting priorities in the region (Roberts, 2020; Murtaza Mushtaq and Kanth, 2024). Consequently, the impact of nuclear politics in South Asia is not limited to the region, since it impacts the global nonproliferation standards and the international systems of security (Cotta-Ramusino, 2020). The result is a security situation where deterrence stability is not guaranteed and the risks of escalation of a crisis are not diminished despite decades of nuclear experience.

## Research Gap

Despite the extensive study of nuclear politics in South Asia, the literature available shows that there are some critical gaps in the literature that restrict a full comprehension of nuclear stability in the region. A major part of the literature still analyzes the India-Pakistan nuclear rivalry as a bilateral phenomenon with episodes of crisis, deterrence signaling, or doctrinal

postures being analyzed in isolation. Although such studies offer a meaningful contribution, they tend to place the nuclear behavior in the context of the wider regional security framework where strategic choices are more and more influenced by a number of, overlapping rivalries (Sridharan, 2020; Kazmi, 2024).

The major disconnect is that little has been done to include the China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle in systematic analysis. Despite the fact that recent studies admit the relevance of the strategic role of China, this triangular relationship is often discussed in a descriptive manner instead of being incorporated into a consistent analytical framework that explains how indirect deterrence relationships affect the risks of escalation and risks of crisis stability (Bashir, 2022; Menon, 2022). Consequently, there is a gap in the theorization of interdependence of nuclear decision-making across these three states especially on how actions that apply to one of the rivals can produce unintended consequences to another.

Moreover, the current body of research is inclined to study technological modernization, the ambiguity of the doctrine, alliances politics, and the external power involvement as distinct areas of research. Literature on the subject is wanting that can unite these factors to evaluate the effect on the stability of nuclear in the region in South Asia. The changes in escalation dynamics due to the development of advanced missile systems, counterforce capabilities debate, and changing strategic partnerships have not been studied in detail, but their impact on crisis management and deterrence stability remains under-researched (Akram et al., 2025; Khan, 2022). The literature has a methodological deficiency, in which too much attention has been paid to event-specific or quantitative studies to the point that interpretive aspects of nuclear politics, such as perceptions of threat, historical legacies, and strategic narratives, are ignored. Such qualitative factors hold special relevance in South Asia, where the nuclear behavior is still influenced by the previous conflicts and mistrust. To fill these gaps, it is necessary to use a qualitative approach specific to the region and at the system level to understand how lasting rivalries and technological change and external strategic pressures interact. The proposed study aims at addressing these gaps by providing a combined analysis of nuclear politics in South Asia basing on regional security theory and perspectives on strategic risk.

## **Problem Statement**

South Asian nuclear politics is a region that is marked with continuous instability despite over twenty years of nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan. The region has been facing recurrent military crises, unsettled territorial issues and development of nuclear doctrines and this has serious concerns on escalation and management of crisis. In contrast to the classical deterrence environments, the situation in South Asia is marked by a coexistence of nuclear weapons and conventional conflict and coercive signaling instead of their prevention (Sridharan, 2020; Kazmi, 2024). This fact questions the conventional belief on deterrence stability and stresses the necessity of regional analysis.

The current body of literature has taken a bilateral approach to the dynamics of nuclear South Asia, with most emphasis on the India-Pakistan relationship. Although this literature has yielded valuable information, it tends to ignore the larger context of the region where the nuclear decision-making takes place. The increased strategic competition between India and China has changed South Asia into a broader nuclear security context, forming a three-way deterrence relationship between China, India, and Pakistan (Bashir, 2022; Menon, 2022). These cross-dependencies between these rivalries create indirect escalation channels and complex crisis management, but are not theorized and absent from mainstream analyses.

Furthermore, the strategic environment has been changing due to technological modernization, ambiguity in doctrine, and foreign influence that is not well analyzed in a single study to date. Advanced missile capabilities, discussion of counterforce strategies, and changing patterns of alliances have shortened the decision-making time and increased the chances of misperception in case of a crisis (Akram et al., 2025; Khan, 2022). These problems are further compounded by the lack of solid regional risk-reduction mechanisms. Consequently, a critical gap in knowledge on the collective influence of interdependent regional animosity and external pressures on nuclear steadiness and the threat of escalation in South Asia is present.

## Scope of the Study

India and Pakistan nuclear rivalry has extended implications on the security of the region and the world at large. The localized cases could come out in a swift fashion as well due to the amount of crises, the physical proximity of forces, and the absence of warning time (Hussain, 2019; Kazmi, 2024). Weaknesses that undermine the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence and complicate the international strategies of risk mitigation and arms control are the recurring instability in South Asia (Cotta-Ramusino, 2020; Thakur et al., 2022). In addition to that, the nuclear tensions divert the political and economic resources out of the developmental priorities, which contribute to the further insecurity and distrust across the region (Parveen, 2023).

The erosion of the arms-control regimes on the international level and the intensification of the rivalry between the powerful states contribute to the growth of such fears. As the China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle intensifies, the absence of adequate regional dialogue mechanisms raises the level of urgency of the informed academic analysis (Menon, 2022; Yuan, 2022). A deeper understanding of how the regional rivalries interact with outside strategic forces is therefore paramount to the development of viable risk-reduction measures, strengthening of crisis response, and enabling long-term regional stability.

## Research Questions

How do regional rivalries and great-power competition shape nuclear politics and security dynamics in Asia?

- How do historical conflicts and unresolved territorial disputes influence threat perceptions and nuclear decision-making among South Asian nuclear actors?
- How do variations in nuclear capabilities and modernization across Asian states influence regional stability and escalation risks?
- How does the China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle affect crisis stability and escalation control during periods of heightened regional tension?

## Research Objectives

1. To examine how enduring regional rivalries and historical conflicts shape nuclear politics and security dynamics in South Asia.
2. To analyze the impact of the China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle on crisis stability, escalation control, and strategic interaction in the region.
3. To explore how variations in nuclear capabilities, technological modernization, and evolving doctrinal debates influence deterrence behavior and escalation risks in South Asia.
4. To assess the role of external power involvement and great-power competition in shaping nuclear postures, threat perceptions, and strategic decision-making among South Asian states.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical foundation

The theoretical background of this study is a regional security approach that focuses on the importance of long-standing rivalries, geographical closeness, and interdependent threat perceptions in influencing the behavior of the state. The regional security thinking presupposes that there are the most intensive security interactions between the neighboring states, especially in the context of the presence of the historical grievances, unresolved conflicts, and power imbalances. The India-Pakistan conflict in South Asia is an example of this logic where both countries view one another as a core threat to their security, which leads to a nuclear doctrine and crisis behavior being mutually embedded in each other (Sridharan, 2020; Khan, 2022). Such settings cannot afford nuclear decision-making in a vacuum because the strategic decisions of one actor are bound to have an impact on the calculations of others in the same regional environment.

The topicality of this point of view is also supported by the formation of a nuclear triangle between China, India, and Pakistan. This three-way structure presents counter-basic deterrence and escalation routes, in addition to intricate signaling, in contrast to a basic bilateral rivalry (Bashir, 2022; Menon, 2022). The nuclear posture of India is being conditioned both by its competition with Pakistan and its strategic rivalry with China, and the use of the deterrence strategy by Pakistan is conditioned by the changing capabilities of India and its external alliances (Basrur, 2023; Yuan, 2022). This network organization correlates with theoretical propositions that regional security processes are most likely to be perceived as systems and not dyads.

Theoretical scholarship also brings out the influence of historical experiences and traditional military legacies in the determination of nuclear behavior. India and Pakistan have the mark of the recurrence of war and crises and this legacies are still being felt in the perception of threats and the management of escalations in the nuclear environment (Basrur, 2019; Hussain, 2019). The legacies of these historical events give rise to what scholars have termed as a shadow of the traditional past in which nuclear weapons are juxtaposed with demands of minimal warfare instead of complete restraint (Basrur, 2023). Therefore, deterrence in South Asia is still disputed and unstable, and does not necessarily fit the assumptions based on the Cold War-era models of nuclear stability. The framework that has been used in this research also incorporates the knowledge of strategic risk and nuclear decision-making literature. Historians believe that the material potential is not the only factor influencing nuclear actions in such countries as South Asia, but also the uncertainties of the ideology, the internal political pressures, and the interference of foreign powers (Ringvall, 2024; Khan, 2022). The lack of formalized risk-minimizing procedures and an efficient crisis communication system also increases the level of uncertainty in times of increased tension (Sood, 2022; Thakur et al., 2022). This theoretical framework endorses that nuclear politics in South Asia should be viewed as a subset of a wider regional security system where the rivalries and alliances as well as transitions of power are all dynamically interacting. This regional and systemic point of view allows the study to go beyond the explanation in a more narrow and dyadic way and provides a framework which can be used to explain the cascading effects of nuclear modernization, strategic signaling and great-power involvement. This methodology gives the conceptual clarity needed to evaluate the relationship between interdependent rivalries in defining nuclear risk and stability in Asia with special focus on the centrality of South Asia in this changing security landscape.



Academic literature in nuclear politics in South Asia has always recognized the India-Pakistan rivalry as one of the longest and unstable nuclear relations in the world. Deterrence has not succeeded in eliminating conflict, but rather co-exists alongside widespread crises and military confrontations since the acquisition of nuclear weapons because both states have acquired them (Butt, 2025; Kazmi, 2024). Research into significant crises since Kargil to Pulwama has shown that nuclear armaments have not suppressed, but changed, the strategic behaviour, allowing risk-taking in the belief that the escalation can be managed (Kazmi, 2024; Hussain and Ali Naqvi, 2025). This trend puts a strain on the classical theory of deterrence and emphasizes on the instability of the nuclear environment in South Asia.

There is an accumulating body of literature on the importance of the technological and doctrinal development in increasing these dangers. New delivery systems, extended missile ranges, and discussions on counterforce capabilities have made the stability of crises more difficult and put more uncertainty on the face during confrontations (Akram et al., 2025; Ringvall, 2024). According to analysts, these developments are reducing decision-making periods and enhancing chances of misinterpretation, especially where there will not be any effective communication systems between India and Pakistan (Khan, 2022; Sood, 2022). Such results indicate that modernization tendencies do not soften the threats that nuclear deterrence poses to the region, instead, they strengthen them.

In addition to the bilateral aspect, the literature is currently more concerned with the concept of China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle to be viewed as a hallmark of Asian nuclear politics. According to scholars, the strategic association between China and India has a direct impact on the stability of South Asian countries because the deterrence policy of India has to consider two nuclear competitors at the same time (Bashir, 2022; Lou, 2022). The resulting triangular interaction creates the risks of indirect escalation, where actions toward one competitor have an impact on the perception and reaction of the third (Menon, 2022; Yuan, 2022). This kind of interdependence makes the conventional concept of deterrence which presumes distinct and isolated adversarial patterns difficult. These dynamics are further enhanced by the external power intervention. Studies emphasize the impact of the U.S. interest in India, especially the strategic and nuclear collaboration on the shifts in the powers in the region and the perception of threat by Pakistan (Hanif and Muzaffar, 2025; Khan, Z., 2022). All these developments enhance security dilemmas and become a part of an action-reaction cycle that is not limited to South Asia but extends to the rest of the Indo-Pacific region (Murtaza Mushtaq & Kanth, 2024; Roberts, 2020). Experts warn that the significant power competition, overlaid on top of the preexisting tensions in the region, makes the system more unstable and negatively affects the process of global nonproliferation (Cotta-Ramusino, 2020).

Irrespective of these merits, the literature is disjointed. Most of the research is based on a single crisis, dyadic relationships, or individual policy changes, and does not provide a systematic analysis regionally incorporating bilateral, triangular, and systemic relationships (Kulkarni, 2022; Thakur et al., 2022). Although it is accepted that these interrelated rivalries are important, there is scanty empirical and theoretical research that provides a systematic study of the collective influence of these interactions on the nuclear behavior in Asia. This loophole is what makes it necessary to conduct research that would place the India-Pakistan conflict in the context of a larger regional security system and evaluate the risks that it poses to nuclear threat and nuclear stability in the region as well as internationally.

## METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in this paper is a qualitative research design to focus on nuclear politics in South Asia, and specifically the India-Pakistan tussle within the greater China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle. A qualitative design is very effective in this question in that the perception, past experiences, and strategic interpretation determine nuclear decision-making, deterrence behavior, and escalation of crisis and not just the measurable variables. The legacies of conflict and doctrinal ambiguity, as well as strategic signaling, are long-lasting, and an interpretive framework fitting such phenomena has to be developed to embody a sense of meaning and context in security behavior. The study aims at understanding how regional actors construct and react to nuclear threats, by emphasizing on narratives, policy choices, and patterns of crises in an environment of uncertainty and interdependence (Sridharan, 2020; Basrur, 2023; Ringvall, 2024).

The qualitative thematic analysis is carried out based on the qualitative thematic interpretation of secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed scholarly literature, strategic analysis, official policy statements, and other reliable research reports on South Asian nuclear politics. These sources are explored to find out the common themes concerning the stability of deterrence, control of escalation, triangular competition, and the intervention of the third party. A comparative logic is used by comparing major India-Pakistan crises with the developments in India-China nuclear relations to demonstrate how the overlapping rivalries contribute to the strategic behavior in the region. In such a way, the study is able to go beyond dyadic explanations and emphasize the interrelatedness of nuclear decision-making in Asia (Bashir, 2022; Menon, 2022; Lou, 2022; Yuan, 2022). To leverage credibility and analytical rigor, the work is based on triangulation among several academic and policy-oriented references, and the interpretations are placed into the context of the existing theoretical discussions on the topics of regional security and strategic risk. Consistency in interpretation and close contextualization of events are addressed because overgeneralization should be avoided. The methodology facilitates a logical and consistent exploration of the interaction of enduring rivalries, technological change, and external strategic pressures in influencing nuclear behavior in South Asia because it bases the analysis on a regional security approach. This qualitative methodology offers a solid basis of theorized conclusions about nuclear risk and stability in the region (Khan, 2022; Cotta-Ramusino, 2020; Roberts, 2020).

## Findings and Discussion

The chapter provides the findings of the qualitative analysis of the interviews with experts that were carried out in this study. This chapter is meant to explain the interpretation of the role of regional rivalries, historical background, and technological changes and the role of outside power intervention in the politics of nuclear South Asia and how it influences strategic stability in South Asia. The analysis is structured in a thematic manner, which relates directly to the final interview questions as well as the objectives of the research. Thematic approach gives an opportunity to conduct a logical interpretation of perceptions, storytelling, and strategic thinking, which serves as the foundation of nuclear decision-making in the region. The results are addressed in terms of the available academic literature to show convergence, divergence and contribution. Instead of viewing nuclear politics as an entirely technical phenomenon, the chapter identifies the influence that history, perceptions, and regional interdependence all have on the creation of nuclear risk and crisis behavior.

## Historical Conflicts and Nuclear Decision-Making

The participants of the interview always focused on the idea that the past conflicts between India and Pakistan still have a powerful impact on the modern nuclear decision-making. The

respondents observed that the past of wars, crises, and repetitive military conflicts has left a strongly ingrained perception of threats that have informed the thinking of both parties on strategic issues. A number of the interviewees claimed that the nuclear doctrines in South Asia cannot be conceptualized without reference to the historical experience. The decision-makers perceive the adversary actions in the context of the previous confrontations, which results in worst case assumptions in case of crisis. The result of this historical conditioning is the continued feeling of insecurity and a tendency to have cautious but reactive nuclear postures. These results are consistent with the existing knowledge of regional security that indicates that nuclear behavior in South Asia is less influenced by abstract deterrence logic, but rather, accrued mistrust and conflict memory. The historical grievances still in place restrict the stabilizing capability of nuclear deterrence and make one more sensitive to perceived provocations.

### **Territorial Disputes, Threat Perceptions, and Strategic Stability**

There was a very high consensus among the participants that unresolved territorial differences are a major determinant of the perceptions of the threats and that the perceptions weaken the strategic stability in the region. Interviewees pointed out that disputed regions are always sources of escalation, despite a nuclearized setting. The respondents observed that territorial conflicts create ambiguity in the context of crisis situations because the use of conventional military actions around disputed areas is usually viewed as an indication of larger strategic interest. This uncertainty makes it harder to control the escalation and the chances of misinterpretation are greater. Some interviewees emphasized the fact that nuclear weapons have not diminished the salience of territorial disputes, but rather increased the stakes that are involved in such conflicts. The results support the thesis that the situation in South Asia regarding strategic stability is still weak due to the presence of both nuclear deterrence and the unresolved political issues. Such coexistence creates a paradox according to which nuclear weapons can discourage the full-scale war but cannot eliminate crises recurrently.

### **Nuclear Deterrence and Crisis Escalation**

Interview responses showed a subtle viewpoint when questioned on whether the nuclear deterrence is effective in eliminating escalation. Majority of the participants admitted that it is most probable that nuclear weapons have deterred big scale conventional war. Yet, at the same time they also stressed that the threat of escalation has not been eradicated through deterrence. Some of the interviewees claimed that nuclear deterrence in South Asia has promoted the behavior of risk taking at the lower stages of conflict. There seems to be a perception that nuclear escalation is containable and this emboldens limited military measures and coercive signaling. The respondents termed this as a sort of instability on one end of the conflict spectrum. These results are against the classical deterrence assumptions and they are in line with the arguments by scholars that South Asian deterrence is typified by crisis instability as opposed to sustainable peace.

### **Stabilizing or Destabilizing Effects of Nuclear Weapons**

There was disagreement among the interviewees on whether nuclear weapons have stabilized or destabilized South Asian security dynamics. One of the prevailing opinions held that nuclear weapons have created some kind of conditional stability. Although they discourage the occurrence of the total war, they are also the ones that intensify the frequency and severity of crisis. Respondents pointed out that nuclear armaments have changed, but not ended, security competition. The existence of nuclear arsenals alters conflict behavior into limited engagements, which are signaling strategies and psychological warfare. This poses an



ongoing threat situation where misjudgment can still occur. The implications of the findings are that the nuclear stability in South Asia is frail, contingent and largely reliant on crisis management as opposed to structural deterrence.

## The China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Triangle

There was a great deal of agreement among the participants that the China-India-Pakistan relationship is actually a nuclear triangle and not individual dyadic rivalries. Interviewees emphasized that the abilities and intentions of the other two actors are becoming increasingly considered in nuclear decision-making by one actor. According to the participants, the nuclear posture of India is informed by its strategic competition with China, whereas the deterrence policy of Pakistan is consciously informed by the changing competencies of India. The result of this interdependence is indirect escalation routes, which are those actions intended to influence one opponent and inadvertently the views of another. This observation is one of the main contributions of the study because it supports empirically the arguments that the South Asian nuclear politics is a regional subsystem, and not bilateral relationships.

## The Clausewitzian Trinity



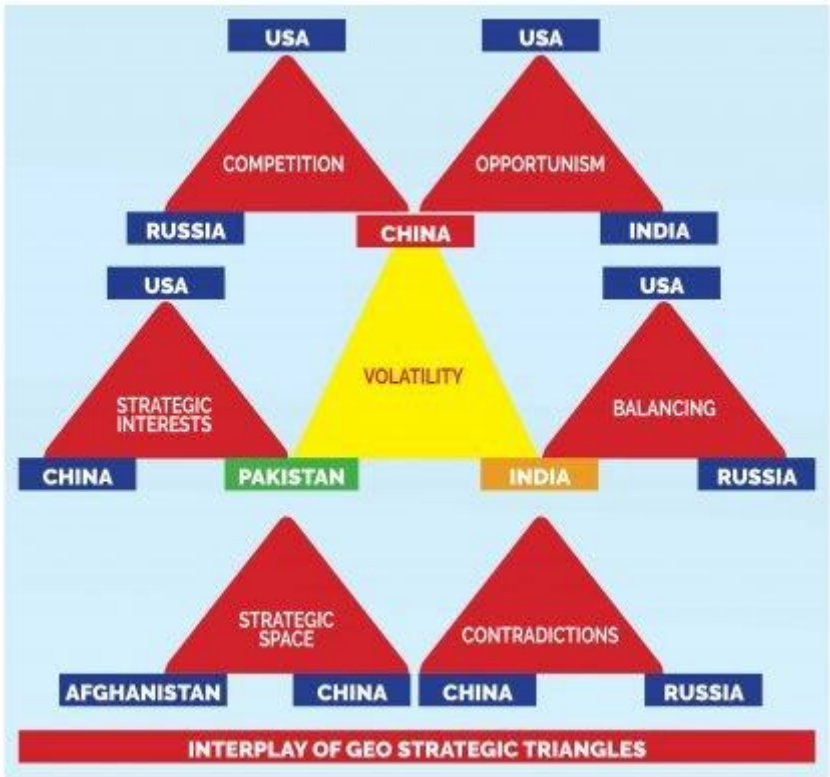
Created by Prasanna Naidu

## Missile Developments and Nuclear Stability

The respondents always noted the existence of missile development and diversified delivery systems as significant instability factors. Interviewees claimed that technological development shortens the time of decision-making and puts more pressure in the times of crisis. Some of the respondents raised the issue of the possible change toward counterforce thinking where any perception of this change can lead to a loss in confidence of the stability of deterrence. The technological ambiguity was considered to be especially threatening in the area where the crisis communication mechanisms were not very developed. Such results corroborate the existing literature that postulates that modernization may not always contribute to the stability of deterrence but may in fact increase the risk of escalation.

Great-Power Competition and Nuclear Risk

According to the participants of the interviews, there was a unanimous agreement that great-power competition poses more risks of nuclear in South Asia. The strategic alignments, defense cooperation, and geopolitical rivalries were cited by the respondents as the cause of increasing security dilemma in the region. A number of interviewees also mentioned that outside interference complicates perceptions of threats and solidifies action-reaction processes. Instead of being the stabilizers, the major powers tend to intensify the fears of the region by changing the balances of power and indicating priorities. The results show that the nuclear stability of South Asia cannot be isolated outside the international strategic competition.



Confidence-Building and Communication Mechanisms

Speaking about confidence-building and the communication mechanisms, the participants were skeptical about their power. Although they admitted that there are hotlines and agreements, interviewees claimed that these processes are ineffective in case of crises of high intensity. Respondents stressed that such actions are usually restricted by lack of trust, political instability, and internal pressures which restrict the practical use of such actions. Some of the interviewees proposed that confidence-building mechanisms are not proactive but reactive. These results indicate that region-specific risk mitigation strategies are required, which would deal with the underlying mistrust of politics and strategies.

Summary of Key Themes

Theme	Key Insight
Historical Legacies	Past conflicts continue to shape nuclear perceptions
Territorial Disputes	Persistent source of instability and escalation
Nuclear Deterrence	Prevents war but enables lower-level risk-taking
Nuclear Triangle	Interdependent China–India–Pakistan dynamics
Technological Change	Increases uncertainty and escalation risk



External Powers

Intensify security dilemmas

Risk Reduction

Existing mechanisms remain weak

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that nuclear politics in South Asia are shaped by a complex interaction of historical legacies, unresolved disputes, technological change, and external power involvement. The findings confirm that nuclear deterrence has not produced enduring stability but has instead generated a fragile security environment characterized by recurrent crises and persistent escalation risks. By framing South Asian nuclear dynamics within a regional and triangular context, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of nuclear risk and strategic stability.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore nuclear politics in South Asia by not just looking at the issue of a bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan but also putting their rivalry into the context of regional security. The study made use of a qualitative, thematic methodology in examining the influence of historical conflicts, unsettled territorial claims, technological advancements and great-power competition on the region in how nuclear decision-making, strategic stability, and the risk of escalation are drawn together. The results show that nuclear deterrence in South Asia has not resulted in stable and automatic stability. Rather, deterrence exists in coexistence with continuous instability, repetitive crisis and the risky behavior at the lower level of conflict. The historical legacies still have a strong effect on the perceptions of threats, which contribute to strengthening the mistrust and the formation of the strategic interpretations in the time of tension. The nuclear teachings and signaling traditions are still entrenched in the recollection of the past wars instead of being based on pure rationality of the credibility of deterrence. The research also ascertains the fact that outstanding territorial issues are still at the heart of the instability in the region. Instead of being neutralized through the nuclear arms, such conflicts remain as hot spots that accelerate the threat of escalation. Nuclear weapons have increased the stakes of confrontation without addressing the underlying political causes of confrontation. Consequently, the stability of the crisis in South Asia is still weak and relies more on the short-term management, instead of the long-term solving of the conflicts. One of the most important contributions of this research is the fact that it empirically supports the idea of conceptualizing South Asian nuclear politics as a three-facet system that includes China, India, and Pakistan. The results indicate that the process of nuclear decision-making has become more and more interdependent, and the strategy of each actor is adjusted to the capabilities and intentions of the other two. This triadic interaction makes the relationships of deterrence more complex and it puts forward the existence of indirect routes of escalation that are not well-represented by dyadic nuclear stability models. These risks are increased by technological modernization. Innovations in missile systems, delivery systems, and surveillance make the process of making decisions shorter and the pressure on the political and military leaders during crisis situations higher. The perceived change towards greater flexibility or counterforce oriented capabilities, even when not stated directly, erodes confidence over the stability of deterrence and increases the probability of miscalculation.

Policy Implications

The implications of the results of this research on policy implications on the regional actors, external forces and international organizations in the area that are interested in the risk reduction of nuclear and strategic stability of South Asia are a few. Among the direct policy consequences, the necessity to reinforce and institutionalize regional nuclear risk reduction

is the first thing to be mentioned. The current confidence-building efforts must also be developed into more than symbolic pacts, to encompass routine crisis communication, military-to-military interaction, and open notification channels. Such measures need to be made so that they will work in crises of high intensity as opposed to the relative calm periods. Doctrinal ambiguity should also be subject to risk reduction measures through more signaling practices being promoted. Although complete transparency is not a politically viable solution, minimizing the ambiguity in the issue of red lines and escalation levels can significantly decrease the threat of misinterpretation. The policy frameworks should acknowledge the fact that the South Asian nuclear stability is informed by a China-India-Pakistan triangle, but not bilateral rivalries in isolation. The initiatives of arms control, confidence-building and strategic dialogue that solely emphasize the dynamics between India and Pakistan are becoming inadequate. The effects of the competition between China and India on the security calculations of Pakistan and vice versa should be considered as indirect impacts of the regional stability efforts. Even informal or track-two dialogue platforms on multilateral or trilateral levels might serve to clear the air on the misperceptions and explain the strategic intentions on all sides of the triangle. These interdependencies must not be overlooked as doing so will only destabilize the regional security environment further. The results imply that there is an urgent policy response to the disruptive nature of technological modernization. The voluntary restraint measures to be considered by the regional actors should be associated with missile testing, deployment patterns, and force postures that decrease the incentives of rapid escalation. There are also confidence-building measures concerning the new technologies, which may mitigate the worst-case assumptions, which are missile defense and advanced surveillance systems. Although eroded in the global context, international arms control norms are still applicable as the points of reference in promoting restraint and predictability in South Asia. The external powers play a major role in determining the South Asian nuclear stability. Defense collaboration and strategic alliances need to be sought more attentively to how the region sees it and how it escalates. Any policies that change the power balance of the region in a large scale without the accompanying risk mitigation policies are bound to contribute to escalation of insecurity as opposed to stability. The major powers need to focus on offering support in managing crises and promote dialogue and not send signals that perpetuate zero-sum competitions between regional actors.

## Directions for Future Research

Further study might follow this investigation by taking into account elite interviews in a broader context of strategic communities, such as policymakers, military men, and regional analysts. Comparative research of other nuclearized areas would aid in determining whether the same trend in triangular deterrence and instability of crisis is present in other areas. Besides, more focus on new technologies and their interdependence with regional security processes would be also more beneficial in terms of comprehending nuclear risk in South Asia.

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## **Thematic Structure of the Interview Guide**

- How do historical conflicts between India and Pakistan continue to influence nuclear decision-making today?
- In your view, how do unresolved territorial disputes affect threat perceptions and strategic stability in the region?
- How would you assess the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence in preventing escalation during India-Pakistan crises?
- Do you believe nuclear weapons have stabilized or destabilized South Asian security dynamics? Why?
- How does China's nuclear posture influence India's nuclear strategy?
- Do you see the China-India-Pakistan relationship as a true nuclear triangle rather than separate dyadic rivalries?
- How have missile developments and delivery systems changed nuclear stability in South Asia?
- Do you think great-power competition increases nuclear risks in South Asia?
- How effective are existing confidence-building and communication mechanisms in South Asia?