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Nuclear Deterrence and Crisis Stability in South Asia: The India-Pakistan Case Study

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Abstract
Amid ongoing global challenges, the potential escalation of the India–Pakistan conflict into a large-scale war poses a serious threat to both regional and global security. This study examines the security risks arising from the India–Pakistan conflict and the likelihood of future escalation. The paper aims to analyze the impact of this conflict on regional and global security, with particular emphasis on the role of nuclear weapons as a central and persistent challenge. The research finds that balance-of-power theory and nuclear deterrence policies play a significant role in maintaining strategic stability between India and Pakistan. The article concludes that while nuclear weapons reduce the probability of a large-scale conventional war, they simultaneously introduce substantial risks that continue to threaten regional and international security.

Keywords
India–Pakistan Conflict; Nuclear Weapons; Regional Security; Global Security; Nuclear Deterrence; Balance of Power; Strategic Stability

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the scale of global threats has increased due to the development of new technologies, ongoing military-political conflicts, asymmetric and hybrid threats, and information and economic wars. As a result, maintaining global security is becoming increasingly challenging. These developments provide both states and non-state actors with significant opportunities, which require states to implement substantial reforms in the military sphere to counter and neutralize these threats effectively.

The nature of war is evolving, and accordingly, states must develop more effective strategies and military tactics to address emerging threats and challenges. Achieving global security and maintaining stability are essential to prevent new conflicts from arising and to stop frozen conflicts from escalating into active hostilities, which could destabilize the existing security architecture and lead to widespread chaos.

The formation of a new world order has a profound impact on both regional and global security. In times of global disorder and systemic imbalance, asymmetric threats become more prominent, and frozen conflicts can quickly flare up into acute crises. Consequently, states must navigate a complex geopolitical environment, defending themselves against both internal and external threats.

Amid these political processes, a significant challenge to ongoing military confrontations worldwide is the risk of nuclear weapons use. To preserve strategic stability, it is crucial to

minimize the risks associated with nuclear weapons, particularly when they are held by authoritarian and aggressive states such as North Korea and Russia.

In light of ongoing global developments, it is important to study and analyze the Indo-Pakistani conflict, which, due to its unique characteristics, significantly affects regional security and, if escalated, could pose a global security threat. The India-Pakistan conflict is a multidimensional, deeply rooted geopolitical challenge with substantial implications for regional and international security, potentially leading to highly unmanageable situations in the future. Accordingly, studying this conflict is essential, given its complexity and its impact on multiple aspects of security. Understanding these interconnected issues is crucial for evaluating South Asian security policy and assessing prospects for regional stability.

The research problem addressed in this article is the threat posed by the Indo-Pakistani conflict at the regional and global levels, particularly the potential use of nuclear weapons. The main research question is: What role do nuclear weapons play in the Indo-Pakistani conflict? Given the current global environment, this article analyzes the impact of the Indo-Pakistani conflict on regional and international security, with a focus on nuclear security, which poses significant risks and challenges to global stability. This study is important for examining existing regional security policies in South Asia, understanding the role of nuclear weapons, and evaluating the extent to which regional developments may affect global security. The article also explores the dynamics of Indo-Pakistani relations in the context of nuclear policy and their implications for achieving regional stability.

The India-Pakistan conflict originates from the partition of India, which resulted in the formation of two sovereign states with ongoing territorial disputes, particularly over the Kashmir region. This dispute has caused multiple wars and remains a source of persistent tension, exacerbating distrust and hostility. The military capabilities of India and Pakistan reflect their struggle for strategic advantage, manifesting in a regional arms race. This dynamic creates a fragile balance that helps prevent a full-scale conventional conflict. Peace in the region and globally is increasingly at risk due to the modernization and expansion of nuclear arsenals in both India and Pakistan. Rising tensions over the contested territory of Kashmir have heightened the possibility of confrontation between these nuclear-armed states (CND UK 2025a).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of theoretical and empirical literature has addressed nuclear security since 1945. Within this context, the India-Pakistan conflict occupies a significant place. The standoff between India and Pakistan is strategically important for nuclear security, as it has a significant impact on the strategic stability of South Asia and regional security more broadly. Consequently, this issue warrants extensive academic research.

Given the complex dynamics in the region and the broader international security environment, scholarly attention has focused on nuclear policy and international security. Henry Kissinger (2015), for example, devotes significant attention to nuclear security policy and the threat of nuclear weapons proliferation in his book "World Order," where he examines in detail the implications of nuclear weapons for regional and global security. Similarly, Kenneth Waltz highlights the importance of nuclear security policy and the sustainability of nuclear deterrence,

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noting that they largely depend on the cooperation or confrontation among nuclear states, as well as the dynamics of their relationships within the current geopolitical context.

John Gill (2004) emphasizes the growing assertiveness of Indian policy and the resulting uncertainty, which compels Pakistan to enhance its military capabilities as part of balance-of-power dynamics. Two other important contributions by Jordan Seng and David J. Karl provide compelling arguments for the viability of nuclear deterrence, grounded in careful examinations of specific case studies (Ganguly and Kapur 2010a).

In their book "Nuclear Deterrence and Stability in South Asia: Perceptions and Realities" (2021), Antoine Levesques, Desmond Bowen, and John H. Gill analyze the Indo-Pakistani nuclear doctrine, strategic stability policies, nuclear weapons risks, and the threats posed by evolving military capabilities. The authors also examine deterrence strategies, the regional arms race, and associated risks, offering a significant contribution to the study of nuclear security policy in South Asia.

Another key source is "Versus: India vs Pakistan – The Line of Control Wars: A Modern Military History of South Asia's Deadliest Rivalry" (Blackbird House 2025), which examines recent developments in Indo-Pakistani relations. The book provides an in-depth analysis of the Kashmir conflict, highlighting the roles of nationalism, non-state actors, and the threat posed by nuclear weapons since 1947.

David Dravid (2025), in "Borders of Trust: Rethinking India–Pakistan Relations in the Nuclear Age," explores the Indo-Pakistani rivalry and the potential use of nuclear weapons in the event of war. He emphasizes that even a small spark could escalate into a global catastrophe, analyzing the historical rivalry, military capabilities, and nuclear-related security policies of both states.

Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur (2010), in "India, Pakistan, and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia," discuss the historical and theoretical context of nuclear proliferation in the region. They provide an overview of the origins of the India-Pakistan conflict and its role in shaping nuclear policy, highlighting political and academic debates on the impact of nuclear weapons. However, their work does not explicitly address the implications of the ongoing conflict for international nuclear security.

Akshat Upadhyay (2019), in "Coercive Diplomacy Against Pakistan: Options and Effectiveness in Non-Nuclear Conflict Space in Contemporary Times," examines the 1998 Kargil incident and the broader dynamics of the Indo-Pakistani conflict in Jammu and Kashmir. While insightful, his analysis requires updating to reflect the current geopolitical situation and the evolving threats posed by the conflict to regional and international security.

Bilal Zubair and Zain Rashid Tarar (2025) examine the political processes and trends shaping India's military modernization and their consequences for South Asian security. Their work analyzes the differing priorities and objectives of India and Pakistan, which often lead to confrontation. The authors focus on the security dilemma in South Asia, the military doctrines of both countries, and the role of nuclear weapons in shaping India-Pakistan relations. They highlight India's growing militarization as part of an ongoing arms race, which poses challenges to achieving strategic stability in the region. Consequently, their work makes a significant contribution to the research process, providing a basis for analytical discussion and informed conclusions.

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These studies are important for understanding the dynamics of political processes between India and Pakistan, how states respond in different political situations under the shadow of nuclear weapons, and the implications for domestic and foreign policy decision-making. They also shed light on the contours of regional and international security in the context of nuclear capabilities, using South Asia as a case study. Despite the extensive literature on the topic, the issue of nuclear security arising from the India-Pakistan confrontation remains underexplored at a scientific level, and empirical studies are limited. This work aims to outline better the role of nuclear weapons in the Indo-Pakistani conflict, assess the realism of their potential use, and analyze the threats this situation poses to regional and global security.

METHODOLOGY

The paper employs a qualitative research design that integrates policy analysis, content analysis, comparative analysis, and SWOT analysis. These methods are applied within the framework of four interconnected theoretical approaches: securitization theory, deterrence theory, regional security complexes theory, and balance-of-power theory. The study seeks to answer two central questions:

1. What role do nuclear weapons play in the India-Pakistan conflict?
2. Are nuclear weapons an effective deterrent against a large-scale military war between India and Pakistan?

The research focuses on critical events that have significantly influenced security dynamics between India and Pakistan. Both primary sources (including political documents, official government statements, and agreements) and secondary sources (such as scholarly articles, books, and expert interviews) are analyzed.

This paper systematically examines the risks and threats to nuclear security arising from the Indo-Pakistani confrontation through the lens of security studies. Using political analysis, the study investigates the causes, dynamics, and roles of the parties involved in the conflict. To assess the role of nuclear weapons in political relations, the political strategies and actions of the conflicting parties are analyzed, providing insights into how each might respond in a crisis. The analysis also considers regional security factors, the dynamics of political processes, and the prevailing conditions during specific historical periods.

Using the content analysis method, recent events were examined, and the reactions and actions of the Indian and Pakistani governments during the conflict were analyzed. Political statements made by decision-makers and the circumstances surrounding the conflict were assessed, revealing its deep-rooted nature. The decision-making processes and official statements regarding the potential use of nuclear weapons were also examined, raising significant concerns.

The comparative analysis method was employed, which enabled the military potential and capabilities of India and Pakistan to be evaluated. The current balance of power in military terms was assessed, as significant disruption could corner either side. This factor may influence decisions regarding the use of nuclear weapons when no alternative exists in the face of an existential threat.

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The SWOT analysis was applied to identify and assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to nuclear security in the context of the Indo-Pakistani conflict. Overall, this approach allowed for a more thorough assessment of the current security situation and informed the study's conclusions. Notably, the study focused on analyzing the threats posed by nuclear weapons at the national, regional, international, and global levels, with both comparative and SWOT analyses playing a critical role.

The research process of this paper applies securitization theory, deterrence theory, regional security complexes theory, and balance of power theory to analyze the existing security environment between India and Pakistan and emerging nuclear security threats.

In the modern era, the world faces a multitude of constantly evolving threats and challenges, ranging from terrorism, pandemics, and wars to cyberattacks, climate change, and economic instability. Traditional approaches to security studies often fall short in capturing the complexity of this instability, as they primarily focus on military threats and nation-states. Accordingly, securitization theory provides a dynamic and critical framework for studying security issues in this changing landscape (Otukoya 2024, 1747).

The Copenhagen School developed the concept of "securitization" to examine how governments and other influential actors perceive certain events as existential threats and justify taking extraordinary measures to counter them. Members of the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, particularly Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, often referred to as the "Copenhagen School", developed the concept in response to debates in the 1990s over the meaning of "security" (Flohr 2025). This study employs securitization theory to analyze how India and Pakistan frame terrorist attacks as existential threats to justify military responses.

In international relations, deterrence theory is a fundamental concept, particularly in security and conflict studies. Deterrence, rooted in the idea that threats can prevent adversaries from taking undesirable actions, seeks to maintain stability by convincing opponents that the costs of aggression outweigh any potential benefits. Deterrence theory was initially developed during the Cold War to manage nuclear conflicts but has since been expanded to address a variety of threats in international relations, including terrorism, cybercrime, and conventional military aggression (CIRIS 2025a). Nuclear deterrence focuses explicitly on the use of nuclear weapons to prevent aggression. The "Mutually Assured Destruction" (MAD) doctrine exemplifies this approach, asserting that a nuclear attack would provoke guaranteed, devastating retaliation by the targeted state, thereby deterring first strikes (CIRIS 2025b). This study applies nuclear deterrence theory to analyze the role of nuclear weapons in the Indo-Pakistan conflict and the factors that prevent the outbreak of a full-scale war.

The concept of security complexes, developed by Buzan and Wæver, provides one of the most comprehensive frameworks for analyzing the key variables necessary for regional security assessment. The expanded version of this concept offers a grand theoretical framework that has been applied to nearly every region of the global system (Buzan and Wæver 2003). While the core assumptions of regional security complexes theory (RSCT) have remained essentially unchanged, they continue to provide opportunities for research on regional security and demonstrate the theory's validity as a widely used analytical tool (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998, 10). Actors in international relations are influenced by emerging challenges, which shape their perceptions of risks, opportunities, and threats. Regional security complexes theory, as a tool for analyzing regional security, reflects this dynamic. In this study, RSCT was employed to

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examine regional security policy in the Indo-Pakistani conflict, leading to the identification of the primary factors and threats driving the conflict.

A "balance of power" system is one in which the authority possessed and exercised by states is restrained and counterbalanced by the authority of other states. When a nation's power grows to the point of threatening other powerful states, counterbalancing coalitions form to prevent the emergence of global hegemony. A balance of power system requires at least two or more actors of roughly equal strength, governments that seek to survive and maintain their independence, flexible alliances, and the capacity to engage in war if necessary (Schweller 2016).

Based on structural realism, as advanced by Kenneth Waltz in "Theory of International Politics" (1979), the self-help anarchic system and shifts in the relative distribution of capabilities lead to the recurrent formation of balances of power in the international system (Ejituwu, Obi, and Ojinnaka 2024, 39). The balancing actions of states are consistently aimed at ensuring security, which can result in opposing behaviors among them. Waltz articulates the relationship between security and power, noting: "Excessive weakness may provoke an attack that greater strength would have deterred an adversary from initiating. Excessive power may compel other nations to augment their armaments and consolidate their efforts against the preeminent state" (Waltz 1988, 615).

This study applies the balance-of-power theory to analyze the impact of the Indo-Pakistani conflict on the international system and regional security. Questions concerning nuclear security between India and Pakistan, and their influence on regional and international stability, are examined using the aforementioned theoretical approaches.

INDIA-PAKISTAN CONFLICT APRIL–MAY 2025: NUCLEAR RISKS AND ESCALATION

The India-Pakistan conflict is one of the longest-running and most complex in modern international relations. It first emerged during the Kashmir War of 1947–1948, which began shortly after the partition of British India. The conflict was rooted in historical disagreements, ideological differences, territorial disputes, and struggles for power, dynamics further shaped by regional and global actors alongside national forces (Wenning 2003).

The Second Kashmir War began in 1965 when Pakistan fomented an insurgency in the Indian-controlled region of Kashmir. The conflict escalated into open warfare and ended with the Tashkent Agreement of 1966. However, the underlying causes remained unresolved, paving the way for further conflicts (Jauhari 2012).

The third war, known as the Bangladesh Liberation War, started in 1971 when Pakistani repression forced millions of refugees to flee to India. In response, India intervened militarily in East Pakistan (Misson 2023a). The war concluded with Pakistan's surrender and the recognition of Bangladesh's independence.

In 1999, the nuclear powers engaged in a military standoff in the Kargil region of India involving Pakistani forces and Kashmiri militants (Zeb 2021). India successfully repelled the incursion, but the conflict highlighted the persistent threat of nuclear escalation and the fragility of regional stability.

Tensions resurfaced following the attacks on the Indian Parliament in 2001 and in Mumbai in 2008 (Dravid 2025). Military clashes continued in 2016 and 2019, with India launching airstrikes in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. In 2019, India conducted airstrikes in

Pakistan in response to the Pulwama attack and later revoked Kashmir's special autonomous status, further escalating tensions (Pandya 2019).

The presence of nuclear weapons in both states makes the current situation even more dangerous. India described the events as asymmetric warfare, although Pakistan denies any involvement. Broadly, the roots of the dispute between India and Pakistan lie in the region's colonial past, which evolved into ideological and territorial disagreements and ongoing confrontations. While Kashmir remains at the core of the conflict, it is only one component of a larger, systemic struggle. Achieving lasting peace requires a comprehensive examination, careful analysis, and gradual resolution of all elements of the conflict.

In modern times, the threat of nuclear weapon use has been heightened by the escalation of the traditional India-Pakistan conflict. This is not merely a regional issue: a large-scale war between the two countries could seriously compromise global security. The crisis that emerged between India and Pakistan in April 2025 represents both the culmination of a unique international environment, characterized by polarization, inconsistencies, confrontational rhetoric, widespread challenges to the status quo, and global rearmament, and the predictable continuation of a historically multifaceted conflict (Misson 2023b).

Tensions escalated sharply after the events of April 22, 2025, when gunmen in Kashmir opened fire on tourists in the Pahalghan meadow, killing 26 people and wounding 17. The little-known group "Kashmir Resistance" claimed responsibility for the attack. The Indian government blamed Pakistan, which Islamabad denied, requesting third-party assistance in the investigation. In response, India revoked visas for Pakistani citizens, downgraded diplomatic relations, urged its citizens to leave Pakistan, closed the only land crossing between the two countries, and suspended the agreement regulating water distribution from the Indus River (Clary 2025a).

In turn, Pakistan suspended visas for Indian citizens, declared military advisors at Indian diplomatic missions persona non grata, closed its airspace to Indian airlines, and warned that any attempt to halt the flow of water from the Indus River would be considered an act of war, with a corresponding response.

On May 7, 2025, India launched a missile strike on Pakistan and its administered region of Kashmir, which was followed by a terrorist attack in Pahalgam. After a month of escalating tensions, including missile strikes, the downing of fighter jets, and public confrontations between political leaders, India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire (Matoi 2025a). The situation had brought both countries to the brink of war, although a ceasefire was finally established on May 10.

Peace between the neighboring states was achieved through negotiations between their leaders and the intervention of external actors. However, this temporary cessation of hostilities may serve as a prelude to another escalation. The conflict could resurface in a different form in the future, potentially triggering a new confrontation.

The current standoff between Pakistan and India is not merely a local tension between two states. Both countries are nuclear powers, and their conflict poses a potential challenge to the international system. This risk is heightened by the fact that neither state has signed the UN General Assembly resolution on the prohibition of nuclear weapons (Curtis 2025a). Their position is understandable in this context, as both countries lack robust security guarantees, making nuclear weapons their primary tool for maintaining security.

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The recent kinetic actions between India and Pakistan in May 2025 have undermined the notion of India's "new normal" and reasserted the concept of deterrence in the region.

After a terrorist incident in Pahalgam, Kashmir, in early 2025, India announced the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, further escalating tensions. It is important to briefly examine the Indus Waters Treaty, signed in 1960 and unviolated during the previous Indo-Pakistani wars. In this case, India's policy shifted following the conflict, as it blocked the Indus River at its source, causing the water levels in the three branches flowing into Pakistan to drop significantly (Curtis 2025b). If India does not restore the water supply, Pakistan's agriculture could be devastated, pushing millions of people to the brink of starvation.

The Indus River originates in the Tibetan mountains and splits into six branches, three of which flow into Pakistan and three into India. India's water management policy thus carries the potential to spark another conflict between the two rival states.

Modern international politics continues to exhibit signs of bloc divisions. Despite the end of the Cold War, the distribution of regional and global spheres of influence persists, and the global order is changing, reminiscent of a new Cold War. Current examples include the Russia-Ukraine war and other unstable regional processes worldwide. The India-Pakistan confrontation illustrates how geopolitical approaches to conflict are evolving.

India, with its demographic strength and growing economy, is a strategic partner for the West, particularly the United States, which views India as a key lever to balance China in the Asia-Pacific region. Conversely, Pakistan maintains close ties with China, driven not only by geostrategic considerations against India but also by economic interests, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Matoi 2025a). This partnership provides Beijing with dual strategic advantages: geopolitical leverage against India and facilitation of China's regional expansion.

The India-Pakistan conflict, while primarily regional, carries potential global implications. Nuclear weapons, control over regional water resources, and ongoing terrorist threats create a complex security challenge that requires careful monitoring and preventive measures. A major terrorist attack in a sensitive area such as Pahalgam could trigger a future crisis, potentially prompting India to reconsider its position on the Indus Waters Treaty.

The crisis demonstrated how rapidly tensions between nuclear-armed powers can escalate. Drones were used in combat for the first time in the region, marking a new phase of technological warfare. Pakistan underscored its nuclear capabilities and issued a "double signal" through military countermeasures as the crisis intensified. The incident drew renewed international attention to South Asia's security and highlighted the importance of active dialogue and confidence-building measures during both crises and periods of peace.

Uncertainty has been heightened by India's changing no-first-use (NFU) stance and Pakistan's first-use nuclear policy (Curtis 2025c). As a result, crisis instability persists, fueled by brinkmanship in which both nations test the limits of escalation. This often necessitates third-party mediation, with China and the United States playing key roles in defusing tensions during the India-Pakistan conflict.

New forms of coercion have also emerged, including cyber deterrence, as both sides engage in hacking and disinformation campaigns. While deterrence has so far averted full-scale war, the strategic security of South Asia remains threatened by cross-border conflicts, recurring crises, and acts of terrorism (Raeesa and Akhtar 2025a).

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Nuclear deterrence is essential for regional stability, helping to mitigate the significant security risks in South Asia. Although it has prevented full-scale conflicts since 1998, the possibility of miscalculation remains. The Pulwama-Balakot crisis in 2019 and the Pahalgam incident leading to air strikes in May 2025 illustrate how traditional conflicts can rapidly escalate into dangerous confrontations (Raeesa and Akhtar 2025b). The absence of effective crisis management frameworks and arms control mechanisms exacerbates regional instability, leaving the area vulnerable to sudden military escalation. Non-state actors and cross-border terrorist activity further destabilize the region.

From a realist perspective, states act rationally and are guided primarily by national interests rather than universal moral principles. The Kashmir conflict remains frozen but unresolved, as both India and Pakistan continue to claim the disputed territory. Consequently, future Indo-Pakistani standoffs remain a distinct possibility. Multiple unresolved issues continue to drive confrontation, making the India-Pakistan conflict a serious challenge to both regional and international security.

COMPARING THE MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN

The Indo-Pakistani military confrontation has been a defining feature of South Asian geopolitics since 1947. The military capabilities of both countries have evolved significantly over time, reflecting ongoing political tensions and the expansion of their strategic potential. This evolution in military armaments highlights the strategic priorities and security concerns that are strongly shaped by national politics, regional dynamics, and broader international political processes.

To accurately assess their military potential, it is essential to examine their military doctrines, force size, conventional capabilities, nuclear arsenals, and defense procurement trends. India's efforts to modernize its military are aimed at enhancing its regional dominance, particularly vis-à-vis Pakistan. Recent defense expenditures reflect shifts in geopolitics, economic conditions, and strategic priorities. As part of an increased defense budget of USD 77.8 billion for 2024–2025 (see Figure 1), India allocated USD 19.64 billion specifically for the acquisition of advanced weapons and technologies in the fiscal year 2024 (Blackbird House 2025).



Figure 1: India's Total Defense Budget (Billion USD) and Annual Growth, 2021–2030f (Source: Ministry of Defense, India, GlobalData Intelligence, APDR 2025)

In contrast, Pakistan's defense budget for the fiscal year 2024–2025 was USD 7.6 billion (see Table 1), representing a nearly 15% increase from the previous year. However, this accounts for only 1.7% of its GDP, down from the previous allocation of 2% (Zubair and Tarar 2025).

Table 1: Pakistan's Defense Budget (USD) (Source: Sareen 2025)

Year	Defence Budget (PKR million)	Exchange Rate (PKR: US$)	Defence Budget (US$ million)
2016-17	860,169	104	8215.56
2017-18	920,166	109	8377.33
2018-19	1,100,334	136	8085.34
2019-20	1,152,535	158	7293.14
2020-21	1,289,134	160	8056.08
2021-22	1,370,000	177	7720.48
2022-23	1,563,000	248	6301.40
2023-24	1,804,000	282	6376.81
2024-25	2,122,000	279	7603.55
2025-26	2,550,000	282	9042.55

Using data from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Statista has illustrated each country's annual military expenditures since 1980. India's military budget is significantly larger than Pakistan's (see Figure 2), directly reflecting its greater military potential.

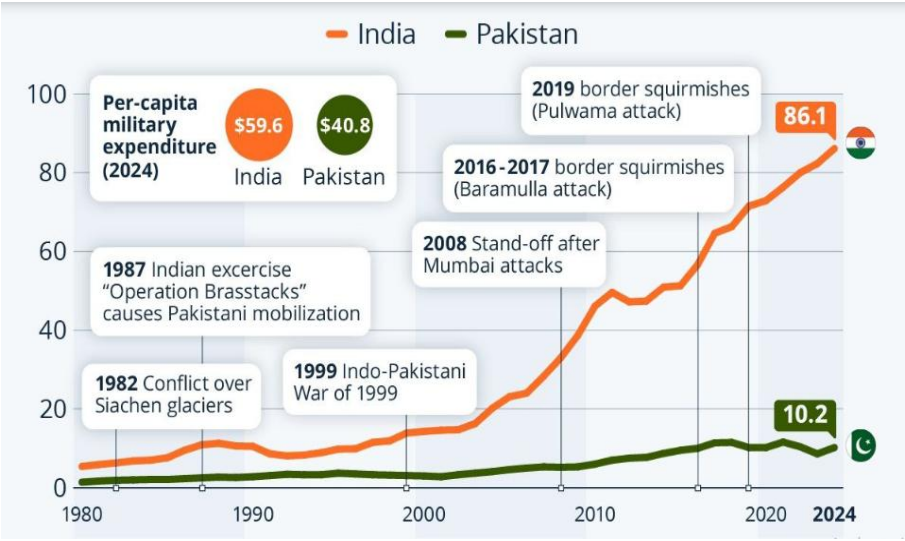


Figure 2: Total Military Expenditure of India and Pakistan (Billion US Dollars) (Source: Rao 2025)

India has one of the largest armies in the world, with 1.45 million active personnel and over one million in reserve (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2025a). The Indian Armed Forces comprise three branches: the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force. The Indian Army is capable of conducting conventional warfare as well as counterinsurgency and guerrilla operations. Its armored units primarily consist of Russian T-90 tanks and the domestically developed Arjun tanks. Additionally, it maintains a mechanized infantry force capable of rapid deployment and equipped with advanced artillery systems (Zubair and Tarar 2025).

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An important element of India's strategic deterrence is its Air Force, which operates a fleet of over 700 aircraft. These include the Sukhoi Su-30MKI, Mirage 2000, Jaguar IS/IN, Tejas, and the French Rafale, all of which are multi-role fighters that significantly enhance India's air capabilities (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025b). The Indian Navy has expanded its operational reach to become a blue-water navy with substantial littoral capabilities, including the aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya, multi-role combat ships, and nuclear submarines, strengthening India's position in the Indian Ocean region (Levesques, Bowen, and Gill 2021a).

In contrast, Pakistan's military, while smaller with approximately 654,000 active personnel, has earned a reputation for professionalism and strategic agility. The Pakistan Army emphasizes rapid mobilization and incorporates specialized infantry and mechanized units capable of both conventional and asymmetric warfare (Siddiqa 2017a). The Al-Khalid tank, developed in collaboration with China, along with older models such as the Type 85, forms the backbone of Pakistan's armored forces. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) operates around 400 combat aircraft, including American F-16A/Bs, Mirage III/V, and the domestically produced JF-17 Thunder, co-developed with China. This combination of national and international aircraft provides the PAF with notable flexibility, despite its relatively modest size (Siddiqa 2017b).

During the crisis, India's Russian-built S-400 air and missile defense system gained significant attention. Its exact role in the conflict remains unclear. Since the crisis ended, Indian journalists, some reportedly close to the Modi government, have offered differing accounts of the S-400's involvement. According to some reports, it was deployed more than ten times and successfully engaged at least one Pakistani aircraft, while others described only minor engagement. Debris found in both Pakistan and India appears consistent with S-400 interceptors, suggesting at least some operational use, including attempted intercepts in Pakistani airspace (Clary 2025b). Overall, the S-400 did not play a decisive role in military operations, as its effectiveness depends on Pakistan's military capabilities and the number of detection systems available to India.

Nevertheless, India maintains a strategic advantage by possessing the S-400. The Pakistan Navy, while smaller than India's, focuses heavily on coastal defense and deterrence through its diesel-electric submarines. These submarines are reportedly equipped with anti-ship missiles, making them a serious threat beneath the surface in the Arabian Sea and beyond (Small 2015a). This naval posture reflects Pakistan's need to counter India's growing maritime capabilities while safeguarding its own maritime interests.

Nuclear weapons are a central component of India and Pakistan's military strategies, serving primarily as instruments of deterrence. At the start of 2025, nine states, the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel, collectively possessed approximately 12,241 nuclear weapons, of which 9,614 were considered potentially operational. An estimated 3,912 of these warheads were deployed with operational forces, including roughly 2,100 kept at high operational alert on ballistic missiles (SIPRI, 2025a).

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the global nuclear weapons inventory as of January 2025 is distributed as follows: USA – 5,177; Russia – 5,459; UK – 225; France – 290; China – 600; India – 180; Pakistan – 170; North Korea – 50; Israel – 90 (SIPRI, 2025b). India possesses 180 nuclear warheads, supported primarily by ballistic missiles, especially the Agni series. India's nuclear doctrine is based on a "no first use" policy,

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emphasizing credible minimum deterrence and a secure second-strike capability, which relies on both nuclear submarines and land-based delivery systems (Kristensen et al. 2025a).

Pakistan's approach to nuclear policy differs significantly from that of other nuclear-armed states. The country possesses approximately 170 warheads and maintains strategic ambiguity, rejecting a "no first use" doctrine. It relies on tactical nuclear weapons designed to counter India's conventional superiority, particularly in the context of a potential conflict in Kashmir (Ganguly and Kapur 2010b). This strategy has raised concerns about command and control, escalation management, and regional stability, as the risk of unintended or rapid escalation remains high.

The nuclear policies of India and Pakistan have evolved in response to each other. Following nuclear tests in 1998, India declared its "credible minimum deterrence" doctrine, based on a policy of retaliation only. Pakistan began developing nuclear weapons in 1972 after India's nuclear program, particularly following India's decisive victory in the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War and the independence of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan). India's 1974 Smiling Buddha test further accelerated Pakistan's program. By the 1980s, Pakistan's technology was considered advanced enough to produce a nuclear bomb. Pakistan conducted its own nuclear tests following India's 1998 tests, marking both nations' public nuclearization while the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) system was being strengthened globally (Izuyama and Ogawa 2003).

Following two rounds of nuclear testing, India formally declared itself a nuclear-armed state in 1998. Pakistan responded with its own tests and declared a month later, raising concerns about a potential arms race. Despite not being a signatory to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) or the NPT, Pakistan has sought to portray itself as a "responsible" nuclear power, stating that it will sign these treaties only after India does. Pakistan is currently blocking the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT), which aims to prevent the continued production of fissile material for nuclear weapons (CND UK 2025b).

Defense procurement trends further highlight the differences in military modernization strategies. India has pursued a hybrid approach, combining significant imports, primarily from Russia, France, Israel, and the United States, with ambitious domestic development programs (Levesques, Bowen, and Gill 2021b).

Pakistan's defense procurement relies heavily on foreign suppliers, particularly China, which provides combat aircraft, missile systems, and naval vessels. Chinese assistance has been crucial in maintaining and enhancing Pakistan's defense capabilities, including the development and deployment of JF-17 fighter jets and the construction of naval vessels under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Small 2015b). This dependence has significantly shaped Pakistan's relationship with China, strengthening both its military capabilities and broader geopolitical ties.

India holds a clear advantage over Pakistan in conventional military capabilities, both in terms of quantity and quality. However, Pakistan has emphasized asymmetric warfare, rapid mobilization, and nuclear deterrence to counterbalance the conventional disparity. Both countries maintain substantial military infrastructure, yet their strategies and procurement priorities reflect different threat perceptions and objectives. The uncertainty and mutual fear generated by these growing capabilities continue to complicate bilateral relations and influence the behavior and policies of both states (Mearsheimer 2014).

Accordingly, a comparative analysis shows that India and Pakistan differ significantly in terms of territorial size, resource endowment, demographics, social and economic development,

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and military and economic power. Against this backdrop, the likelihood increases that, if Pakistan finds itself in a deadlock or strategic dilemma, it could, in line with its declared nuclear policy, consider the use of nuclear weapons. Both India and Pakistan are actively modernizing their nuclear arsenals and seeking to strengthen their nuclear capabilities.

The ongoing military rivalry between India and Pakistan has significant implications for South Asian security, especially given the regional geopolitical dynamics and the nuclear factor. The continuous modernization and expansion of armed forces by both countries make security in a nuclear environment increasingly precarious (Upadhyay 2019). To prevent this rivalry from escalating into open conflict, far more effective diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and escalation-reduction strategies are essential.

SWOT ANALYSIS OF INDIA-PAKISTAN NUCLEAR SECURITY

The nuclear capabilities of India and Pakistan constitute a pivotal element of their respective national security architectures, exerting a profound influence on the stability of the South Asian region. To more precisely delineate the role and significance of nuclear weapons within the bilateral relations and enduring confrontation between these two states, marked by a protracted strategic rivalry, it is essential to evaluate their nuclear security and its implications for both regional and global stability through a SWOT analysis.

Strengths – India and Pakistan maintain robust nuclear command and control systems designed to ensure the security and reliability of their arsenals. India's nuclear doctrine asserts a no-first-use policy, which contributes to strategic stability by emphasizing deterrence and a defensive posture (Kristensen et al. 2025b). India has placed particular emphasis on secure second-strike capabilities, including nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles deployed on submarines, which reinforce its deterrence policy and readiness to retaliate in the event of a first strike. Pakistan's nuclear policy, by contrast, maintains deliberate ambiguity and includes mechanisms to protect its arsenal from unauthorized use or theft (Ganguly and Kapur 2010c). Both countries actively participate in international nuclear security initiatives and global non-proliferation forums, which is important for building trust within the community of nuclear-armed states.

Weaknesses – Despite these strengths, both countries' nuclear security frameworks exhibit particular vulnerabilities. Pakistan's doctrine, which does not rule out first use, heightens India's threat perception and increases the risk of military miscalculation, particularly during asymmetric or low-intensity conventional conflicts. The deployment of tactical nuclear weapons by Pakistan is a particular concern, as their short range and varied delivery systems allow for front-line deployment, raising the risk of accidental or unauthorized use. Meanwhile, India's diverse nuclear arsenal, though well protected, requires technological modernization, and bureaucratic coordination challenges can delay decision-making during crises. Both sides also face weaknesses in protecting critical infrastructure, which heightens the risk of escalation. Damage to or the destruction of key infrastructure could create security dilemmas or impasses that might push either side toward nuclear escalation, posing a significant challenge to regional, international, and global security.

Opportunities – India and Pakistan have significant potential to enhance nuclear security cooperation and reduce risks through confidence-building dialogue. Communication hotlines could serve as vital channels to prevent nuclear crises. Additionally, accession to and expansion

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of global arms control agreements could provide further avenues for stability. Greater transparency regarding nuclear doctrines and stockpiles may help alleviate tensions and reduce the likelihood of confrontation (Perkovich 2001). Both countries could also pursue joint initiatives to improve the security of nuclear materials and prevent their proliferation. The adoption of an "Open Skies" treaty framework could substantially help restore and consolidate confidence. Regional and global actors can support diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions and promote strategic stability (Narang 2014), which is crucial for strengthening security at national, regional, and global levels.

Threats – Nuclear security in South Asia faces persistent and multifaceted threats. The unresolved Kashmir dispute remains a significant flashpoint that could escalate into a nuclear confrontation. Tensions over water resources further exacerbate regional instability. The presence of non-state militant actors on Pakistani territory increases the risk of sabotage or theft of nuclear materials (Sagan 2011). Rapid technological developments have also amplified cyber threats, posing new risks to the command and control systems of nuclear weapons on both sides. Cyberattacks could disrupt decision-making processes or manipulate critical systems (SIPRI 2019). Moreover, the absence of a formalized arms control agreement between India and Pakistan heightens the risk of nuclear escalation during crises. Information warfare further complicates security, as it is resource-intensive and difficult to manage effectively in the context of new technologies. Collectively, these challenges underscore the fragile nuclear security environment in South Asia and highlight the serious threats to regional and global stability.

Achieving peace and stability between India and Pakistan is critical to regional and international security. If the conflict were to escalate into a large-scale war, the potential use of nuclear weapons would have catastrophic consequences. Officials from both countries have emphasized that they are prepared to use nuclear weapons if necessary, which could result in millions of deaths and widespread radiation-related illness. Such an outcome would threaten not only the populations of India and Pakistan but also neighboring regions and the broader international community. The direction and extent of radiation spread from a nuclear explosion are highly unpredictable, making the consequences even more uncertain. The timing and circumstances of potential nuclear use remain unknown, further heightening the risks.

In conclusion, although India and Pakistan have made significant progress in securing their nuclear arsenals, serious risks remain. Doctrinal ambiguities and the decision-making processes of political authorities mean that responses in a crisis may not always be entirely predictable, posing challenges to both regional and global security. The relationship between the two countries remains fragile, compounded by the current geopolitical situation and emerging threats associated with modern technologies. It is therefore imperative to prioritize confidence-building measures, strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation, enhance transparency, and address both traditional and non-traditional security challenges. These steps are essential to reinforce nuclear security and ensure regional stability in South Asia. Without such measures, the risks associated with nuclear security could extend beyond the region, posing broader threats to international peace and security.

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CONCLUSION

The resolution of the Kashmir conflict requires a nuanced, complex strategy that addresses the interests of the parties involved through long-term negotiations. It is impossible to fully satisfy all parties, given the intersection and competition of their interests. Accordingly, aside from negotiations, a logical resolution could theoretically involve the victory of one party; however, the nuclear arsenals and military capabilities of India and Pakistan make such an outcome highly unlikely. Overall, the Kashmir region remains one of the most densely militarized areas in the world, characterized by the presence of terrorist organizations, national armies, rebel groups, protest movements, and oppressed populations. The Kashmir issue is widely recognized as one of the most difficult conflict-resolution challenges in modern history, and the recent escalation has introduced new threats to global security, including the potential use of nuclear weapons.

The theoretical frameworks employed in this study facilitated an analytical justification that allowed us to answer the research questions and assess the role of nuclear weapons in the India-Pakistan conflict. The analysis confirms that nuclear weapons continue to act as a deterrent to large-scale wars in the post-Cold War period. Amid a new Cold War environment, global and regional power rivalries are intensifying, increasing the threats to international stability. Given the ongoing conflicts and wars worldwide, the involvement of global actors is crucial in preventing a large-scale war between nuclear-armed states. Any nuclear conflict, whether involving a small or large arsenal, would have irreversible consequences with devastating implications for humanity and the planet.

Nuclear weapons play a central role in India-Pakistan relations, complicating the security environment while simultaneously contributing to a form of strategic stability. However, the longevity of this balance remains uncertain, as India's declared "no first use" policy contrasts with Pakistan's strategic ambiguity and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons, which heightens the risk of escalation and miscalculation. Uncertainty surrounding military doctrines, combined with emerging cyber threats, further exacerbates these dangers, underscoring the critical need for restored confidence and open communication to prevent inadvertent escalation that could lead to full-scale nuclear conflict.

Disputes over water resources further complicate India-Pakistan relations. The Indus Waters Treaty has historically served as a rare example of successful bilateral cooperation, yet political tensions, particularly over Kashmir, have diminished its effectiveness. Climate change is contributing to growing water scarcity, making cooperative water management increasingly urgent. This issue has the potential to spark future military conflict, particularly given nationalist policies on both sides, which hinder constructive dialogue and limit prospects for joint resource management. Nonetheless, water resource management also presents an opportunity for diplomatic engagement, trust-building, and conflict risk reduction, provided that regional and global actors actively promote cooperation and adherence to international norms.

In summary, the India-Pakistan conflict encompasses several critical issues that drive confrontation, given the high level of interdependence between the two states. These include territorial disputes, military rivalry, the nuclear arms race, asymmetric threats, and challenges in resource management. Among these, nuclear security emerges as the most pressing issue, as it plays a central role in deterring large-scale war.

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Using comparative and SWOT analyses, this study highlights the importance of the balance of power and nuclear deterrence policies in India-Pakistan relations, which serve to restrain both sides from engaging in extensive conventional warfare. The complexity of regional security is further amplified by the interests of other regional actors committed to preventing nuclear escalation. Any use of nuclear weapons would have devastating consequences, including the spread of nuclear radiation across an expanded geographical area, depending on the scale of the nuclear detonation, posing significant challenges to global security.

Accordingly, regional and global actors, as well as international organizations, play a crucial role in managing the India-Pakistan conflict and promoting stability. Their active engagement is essential to prevent potential threats, mitigate risks, and maintain both regional and international security.

This study relies mainly on publicly available sources, which may not capture sensitive information about nuclear capabilities or strategic decision-making. It focuses on a broad regional perspective, limiting analysis of localized dynamics and specific incidents. Additionally, qualitative methods, such as comparative and SWOT analyses, provide insights but cannot yield precise predictions about nuclear escalation. Finally, rapid geopolitical and technological changes mean that some conclusions may require ongoing revision.

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