

# Nuclear Volatility in South Asia

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**Abstract:** *South Asia's nuclear powers, India and Pakistan, have a longstanding rivalry, particularly over Kashmir. This paper examines how their recent domestic political developments impact their foreign policy choices and contribute to the risk of nuclear conflict. India's rise in far-right nationalism under Modi and Pakistan's deep-seated military influence are analyzed through relevant frameworks of nuclear proliferation and conflict. The paper argues that Modi's "Akhand Bharat" vision and Pakistan's proxy war strategy fueled by groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed challenge classical deterrence theory. The stability-instability paradox plays out through Pakistan's asymmetric warfare and India's conventional responses. With Modi showing an inclination for forceful reactions, the risk of escalation towards nuclear brinkmanship intensifies. The paper concludes by highlighting the urgent need for de-escalation measures and dialogue to avert a catastrophic nuclear incident in South Asia.*

## INTRODUCTION

South Asia is one of the most geopolitically important regions in the world. Strategically located, the region serves as a crossroad between Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia, and the Indian Ocean. Being at such a critical geostrategic juncture, South Asia serves as a key global economic waypoint, and a melting pot of various cultures, ideologies and nationalities. At the heart of region lie India and Pakistan- two nuclear powers who have been engaged in a long-standing conflict since 1947 over the disputed territory of Kashmir. Over the years, these two powers engaged in multiple low and high intensity conflicts, as well as well-coordinated and sustained asymmetric warfare campaigns against each other (Behra 2001). In addition to having strained relations with each other, both of these countries are facing glaring issues that impact their respective domestic politics. Pakistan has been seeing political instability since the 1950's characterized by

coups, assassinations, and dissolution of democratically elected bodies (Barany 2009). Among the primary sources of this continuous political fluctuation is the deep entrenchment of the Pakistani military into the country's politics and economy, which has significantly weakened the country's democratic institutions by the means of direct political interventions, suppression of dissent, co-opting civilian institutions, and weakening the rule of law (Siddiqua 2017). In addition to these longstanding factors, Pakistan's asymmetric warfare campaign against India has been negatively impacting its domestic politics. Pakistan is now overdependent on its terror proxies as a tool to achieve its foreign policy objectives (Jones and Fair 2010). As a result, these proxies have so deeply embedded themselves into the social fabric of Pakistan's domestic politics that even if their armed wings are shut down, they'll still find ways to function (Center for International Security and Cooperation 2018). What this means is that in addition

to civilian leaders, designated terrorists make up for a certain portion of the Pakistani polity.

India, on the other hand, has been witnessing a surge in far-right hyper nationalist sentiment since 2014 when Narendra Modi led Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) came to power. Modi's brand of governance can be best characterized as a homogenous concoction of authoritarianism, Hindu nationalism, and cult-based politics. Over the course of his Prime Ministership he has managed to circumvent, completely dismiss, and even crush five of the core pillars of a functioning democracy: dissent within his own political party, consultation from his cabinet, freedom of press, nonpartisanship of civil services, and fairness of the judicial system (Guha 2022). All of these trends clearly point towards centralization of power within a single individual.

Given the clear states of disarray in which India and Pakistan's domestic politics are in right now, the question arises: how –and if- these two countries foreign policies towards each other are a function of their respective domestic political atmosphere. This paper zeroes in on a more specific aspect of the aforementioned question- given the changing foreign policy attitudes between the two countries, is the South Asian region becoming increasingly vulnerable to a inter-state nuclear incident? In order to approach the question, this paper looks at theoretical frameworks pertaining to nuclear proliferation and conflict within the international relations theory, and applies them to the domestic political atmospheres of India and Pakistan to look at the feasibility of nuclear conflict.

## **AUTHORITARIANISM IN INDIA**

Over the last decade, the world has seen a sharp uptick in national leaders with moderate to high levels of authoritarian tendencies. From Bolsonaro in Brazil to Putin in Russia, the latest historical generation of authoritarians have been accused of pretty much everything ranging from rigging elections to committing war crimes. The Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, is an interesting member of this aforementioned generation; he walks a fine line flexing his autocratic tendencies while maintaining a charismatic personality to swoon the majority of the Indian population who align with his ideological beliefs. Under the covers of brilliant oratory performances and grandiose public appearances, Modi's rule is laced with repression of free speech, perpetuation of hate and violence against the minorities, and diminishment of civil liberties among other fundamental rights that the citizens of any well-functioning democracy should be entitled to (Chowdhury 2022).

Ever since assuming power in 2014, the Modi administration has launched several systematic measures to curb civil liberties. Acts such as Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act (UAPA), National Investigation Agency (NIA) Act, and Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) have been employed and abused to detain vocal critics of the government under the veil of national security (Chowdhury 2022). In addition to cracking down on individual liberties, the government has also restrained the freedom of speech and expression historically enjoyed by the press and media by forcefully sealing newspaper offices and interrupting live news broadcasts. Not only does Modi led BJP suppress free media, but uses a few pliant news channels to spread selected state propaganda. This multi-

faceted usage of the media establishes a one-way communication channel between the government and the population (Pinto 2022).

The question then arises: how does Narendra Modi still enjoy an approval rating of almost 78 percent (Morning Consult 2024)? Ever since Modi started his Prime Ministerial campaign for 2014 elections, it has been clear that instead of being a representative extension of his political party, the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), he operates as a discrete political entity in himself. This personal 'brand' of Modi has been pivotal in creating ardent following consisting of the common population, politicians, journalists, bureaucrats, and members of the judicial establishment. As historian Ramachandra Guha puts it, this 'cult' of Modi has elevated him to a demigod-like status where his leadership is equated with the very existence of the nation. This has biasedly swayed the supposedly democratic institutions in favor of Modi (Guha 2022).

One of the ways Modi maintains his following- and voter base- is by stoking and fueling the rapidly growing Hindu nationalistic sentiment in India's predominantly Hindu population. He uses the Hindu nationalistic rhetoric and vocabulary to woo his right-wing Hindu vote-bank. This selective use of language creates a 'us vs. them' divide which has led to increased polarization and violence against minority communities (Guha 2022). However, there is only a certain extent to which Modi can capitalize on his implicit domestic anti-Muslim rhetoric without tarnishing whatever is left of India's image as a democracy on the world stage. In order to maintain the balance between appeasing his Hindu nationalist voter base and retaining the pseudo-image of a democratic leader, Modi focusses on the next best

thing- Pakistan. A quick analysis of the Modi government's foreign policy towards Pakistan clearly shows that it is a fine-tuned balance of diplomacy and theatrics (Times of India 2019). One such example is the aftermath of the Pathankot airstrikes carried out by the Indian Air Force. These airstrikes were carried out in response to a terrorist attack on Indian paramilitary forces in Pulwama, Kashmir by Jaish-e-Mohammed- a terrorist organization funded by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) (Times of India 2019).

The Hindu nationalistic connotation in Modi's foreign policy goes far beyond Pakistan. From an ideological standpoint, it is inspired by the idea of '*Akhand Bhaarat*,' which translates to 'undivided India' (Mogul 2023). It is a concept perpetuated by the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh)- BJP's ideological parent organization- since 1925 (Frayer and Khan 2019). It carries the notion of re-integrating states ranging from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives back into India. The resulting geographical entity- *Akhand Bharat*- would be identical to what ancient India looked like more than 2,000 years ago. Integration of this ideology into policy to produce tangible change has already started. In 2019, India passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act that expedites the path to citizenship for Hindus from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan and excludes Muslims (Singh 2022). That same year came one of the most momentous and controversial decision with respect to the disputed region of Kashmir- the abrogation of Indian constitution's Article 370. Article 370 gave the people of Kashmir partial lawmaking autonomy and rights to self-governance as a disputed territory. By abrogating it, Modi government brought the entire disputed

territory of Kashmir under the federal rule (Goel 2019). Pakistan, the contending party opposite India in the Kashmir dispute, was obviously not happy. The Modi government taking tangible actions to materialize its expansionist ideology contributes to increasing the volatility of the region that already has a history of weak geopolitical stability.

### **POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN PAKISTAN**

Pakistan has been experiencing frequent, if not consecutive, periods of political fluctuation. This history of instability is directly tied to its military's long-standing ambition to exert influence over the spheres of polity that usually fall under the democratically elected civilian government (Nayar 2007). The first notable intervention was led by General Ayub Khan in 1958, when he completely abolished the constitution established in 1956. This set a dangerous precedent, and Pakistan saw subsequent military coups in October 1958, July 1977, and October 1999 (ConstitutionNet 2018). Even Pakistan's judiciary has played a significant role in undermining the legitimacy of its democratically elected leaders. In 1954, Pakistan's governor general dissolved the elected constituent assembly, after dismissing the East Bengali prime minister who enjoyed a majority in Parliament. However, Pakistan's democratic spirit saw its darkest days in 1977 when Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was imprisoned by the Chief of Army Staff Zia ul Haq on unverified charges of murder. When Bhutto's wife challenged his unlawful detention in the supreme court, the court not only deemed the military takeover perfectly legal, but also allowed his execution by the military (Guruswamy 2022). In more recent times, this pattern of instability continues with the

disqualification of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from holding any public office, and the ousting of his successor, Imran Khan.

The entrenchment of Pakistan's military in its domestic state of affairs runs much deeper than top-brass politics. The military has a significant share of Pakistan's land, industries, and businesses, making it deeply involved in the country's economy. The military's economic activities are carried out through various entities, including the Fauji Foundation, the Shaheen Foundation, and the Army Welfare Trust, among others (Siddiqi 2017). These entities have interests in industries such as cement, fertilizer, and banking, as well as real estate and agriculture. This involvement in the economy has led to a lack of transparency and accountability, which has contributed to corruption and inefficiency. As noted by Ayesha Siddiqi in *'Military Inc. - Second Edition: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy,'* such deep investments in the country's economic interests is directly proportional to ability to influence the country's political decision-making apparatus.

It is important to note that the military's influence on Pakistan's policy making transcends into the realm of foreign policy as well. The ISI is usually in charge of advancing Pakistan towards its long-standing foreign policy objectives. One of these objectives is obtaining complete control over the disputed territory of Kashmir, and in order to do so Pakistan has long relied on asymmetric warfare (Behra 2001). The use of proxy warfare by Pakistan against India finds its roots way back in 1947 as both countries wanted complete control over the state of Kashmir (Blakemore 2019). Using the tactics and resources from supporting the CIA in Afghanistan, Pakistan's ISI launched 'Operation Tupac' in Kashmir, aimed at creating multiple terror proxies to

destabilize the region. A major component of Tupac was radicalizing the Kashmiri population, which was already disgruntled by harsh crackdowns by the Indian security forces in the region (Kanwal 1999). The combination of proper funding, arms supply, and local disdain for the Indian government served as the perfect recipe for the ISI to create multiple proxies against India. Two of the most notable ones are Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. Out of all the proxies supported by ISI, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LT) is perhaps the most effective and notorious. This can be attributed to its deep integration with Pakistan's domestic politics, and the successful siege of the Indian city of Mumbai in 2008 (Macander 2021). LT found its origins as the militant wing of Markaz-ud-Dawa-wal-Irshad (MDI), a so-called 'missionary and social-welfare' organization found in Pakistan during the 1980s to oppose the Soviet presence in Afghanistan (CIA n.d.). Following the Soviet withdrawal, it focused its attention on Indian administered Kashmir, and consequently garnered ISI's support in the form of funding and training. LT surpassed the effectiveness of most Kashmiri militant organizations in 1999, when it introduced *fidayeen* style suicide attacks in Kashmir, primarily targeting Indian paramilitary and police forces (Macander 2021). Emboldened by the development of a successful *fidayeen* strategy in Kashmir, LT targeted the Indian capital, New Delhi. In 2000, two LT terrorists open fired on the historical Red Fort, killing two Indian army personnel. Almost a year later, in 2001, LT, in collaboration with Jaish-e-Mohammed, targeted the Indian parliament (Center for International Security and Cooperation 2018).

However, LT's most notorious attack was in 2008 on the Indian city of Mumbai,

which consisted of multiple near simultaneous attacks on multiple locations, lasting for four days and resulting in around 174 deaths (D'Souza 2022). The sophistication, coordination, and ingenuity of these attacks was far beyond what LT alone is capable of and suggests that there was direct involvement of ISI in planning and executing these attacks. This was confirmed by one of LT's operatives, David Coleman Headley, who was responsible for narrowing down potential targets and performing reconnaissance. According to Headley's statement, every major LT operative had a direct ISI handler. Moreover, the planning of these attacks involved oversight from serving and retired ISI officers (Tankel 2011). The direct operational and logistical support by the ISI clearly shows that the Pakistan's state support for LT goes far beyond training and funding.

Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) is yet another proxy used by the ISI against India. Unlike LT, the ISI was directly responsible for creating JeM. Following the hijacking of Indian passenger flight IC-814 by terrorists associated with Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, and the consequent release of the Pakistani terrorist Maulana Masood Azhar, the ISI saw the opportunity to prop up another proxy in Kashmir. ISI's exact rationale for having another proxy in the region remains unknown, but many analysts claim that this was done because, at the time, ISI was losing its grip over LT, and wanted a more reliant and compliant proxy (Fair 2017). In 2001, as JeM evolved to operate outside ISI's complete sphere of influence, it underwent an ideological split. The primary reason for this was Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's support for the United States campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Between the two splintering JeM factions, Azhar remained with the one

loyal to the state of Pakistan and continued reporting to the ISI, demonstrating his loyalty.

Other than that joint attack, in collaboration with LT, on the Indian parliament in 2001, JeM has carried out several attacks on its own against Indian armed forces. In January 2016, it attacked the Indian Air Force station in Pathankot, Punjab, that led to 29 casualties (BBC News 2016). The notable aspect of this attack was its timing- just a few days after the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the Afghan parliament, signed a new defense deal with Russia, and, most importantly, held bilateral talks with the then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. These bilateral talks were critical to diffusing the 2015 tensions and exploring diplomatic solutions for the Kashmir situation (Rifaat 2016). Both things go against what ISI has been working for since the past forty or so years in Kashmir. Conveniently enough for the ISI, JeM's attack sabotaged the diplomatic progress as then Indian External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, called off any further prospects of bilateral talks (Indian Express 2016). Therefore, the Pathankot attack serves as a prime example of the ISI using proxy warfare as a tool to achieve Pakistan's policy objectives (Kanwal, Strategic Stability in South Asia: An Indian Perspective 2017). Other attacks by JeM along similar lines include the 2016 Uri attack and the 2019 Pulwama attack. Both were followed by Indian armed forces conducting surgical strikes on Pakistani soil (Mukherjee 2019).

### **APPLYING NUCLEAR FRAMEWORKS**

By now it is clear that India and Pakistan's respective foreign policies

towards each other are a function on their domestic political issues. However, the fact that both these countries have a sizable nuclear arsenal means that their respective domestic situations can influence the overall geopolitical stability of South Asia. This section takes three theoretical frameworks of nuclear conflict- Deterrence, Stability-Instability Paradox, and Nuclear Brinkmanship- and applies them to the case of India and Pakistan and analyzes which framework is best suited given both countries' geopolitical dynamic with each other.

Deterrence- The deterrence theory is based on the rational theory of decision making (Geller 2017).<sup>33</sup> It operates on the fundamental principles of probabilistic game theory. A strategic confrontation is viewed as a 'game' with two opposing 'players,' who do a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis before making a move. The idea of deterrence lies in the conceptualization that one player threatens the other player with such massive retaliation that the latter decides that launching an attack is not in their best interest. The key concept of deterrence is the threat of punishment. In order for deterrence to be effective, the potential adversary must believe that the threat of punishment is credible and that it will be carried out if the undesirable action is taken (Geller 2017). In the context of nuclear deterrence, this means that both sides must believe that the other will respond with overwhelming force in the event of a nuclear attack. There are two types of deterrence: direct deterrence and extended deterrence. Direct deterrence refers to the use of threats or force to deter an adversary from acting against the deterring state

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<sup>33</sup> The following paragraph contains information from Geller (2017) exclusively.

itself. Extended deterrence refers to the use of threats or force to deter an adversary from acting against another state that is allied with the deterring state. Deterrence theory assumes that both sides are rational actors who seek to maximize their own interests. It also assumes that both sides are aware of the other's capabilities and intentions, and that they can communicate effectively in order to avoid misunderstandings or miscalculations.

Deterrence theory has worked successfully in explaining nuclear stability between India and Pakistan starting from when both became nuclear powers till 2014. Even though there have been multiple skirmishes and a few notable wars, both states showed extreme nuclear restraint. A prime example would be the 1999 Kargil conflict, about which many scholars believe that the nuclear deterrence of both countries kept the conflict limited and constrained (Sipress and Ricks 2002). However, deterrence theory functions on the assumption that both the players are rational enough to conduct a cost benefit analysis from an objective standpoint. The fulfillment of this condition seems bleak given Modi's hawkish foreign policy to stoke his nationalist image marred with authoritarian tendencies.

Stability-Instability Paradox- The stability instability paradox is the idea that the presence of nuclear weapons can simultaneously promote stability at the strategic level while increasing the likelihood of conflict at the tactical level (Kapur 2017). At the strategic level, the possession of nuclear weapons by two or more states can create a state of deterrence that reduces the likelihood of a direct

military confrontation. The theory of deterrence suggests that if each side believes that the other will respond with overwhelming force in the event of an attack, then neither side will initiate a military conflict. This creates a stable strategic environment in which both sides are deterred from taking aggressive action against each other. However, at the tactical level, the stability created by deterrence can paradoxically lead to instability (Krepon 2003).<sup>34</sup> This is because each side may feel emboldened to take aggressive actions that fall short of direct military conflict, such as supporting proxy wars or engaging in low-level skirmishes. This can create a situation where each side is constantly testing the limits of the other's resolve, leading to a heightened risk of miscalculation, escalation, and conflict. In essence, the stability instability paradox suggests that the presence of nuclear weapons creates a stable strategic environment, but paradoxically increases the risk of conflict at the tactical level. This is because each side may feel more secure in their deterrence posture and may take more risks in their interactions with the other side.

At the strategic level, both India and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons, which creates a state of deterrence that reduces the likelihood of direct military conflict. Both countries are aware of the catastrophic consequences of a nuclear exchange and thus have an incentive to maintain stability at the strategic level (Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation n.d.). However, at the tactical level, the stability created by deterrence can lead to instability. This can be seen in Pakistan's actions of funding terrorism in

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<sup>34</sup> The remainder of this passage contains information deduced from Krepon (2003) exclusively.

Kashmir as a means of asymmetrical warfare (Behra 2001). Even though at times India does not have grounds to have a direct confrontation with Pakistan in the aftermath of an ISI-sponsored attack, the former usually increases the intensity of cross border artillery firing (Al Jazeera 2020). Needless to say, this increases the risk of a conventional response, therefore logically fulfilling the paradox.

**Nuclear Brinkmanship-** The theory suggests that in a situation where two nuclear powers are in conflict, both parties may use the threat of nuclear warfare to try and force the other side to back down and concede to their demands. The term "brinkmanship" refers to the strategy of pushing a situation to the brink of disaster, in the hope that the other side will back down and make concessions. In the context of nuclear brinkmanship, this means that one or both sides may threaten to use nuclear weapons in order to try and achieve their goals. The theory assumes that both sides are rational actors who seek to maximize their own interests, and that neither side actually wants to engage in nuclear warfare, which would have catastrophic consequences for both sides (Powell 2015).<sup>35</sup> One of the key concepts of nuclear brinkmanship is deterrence. The idea is that both sides will refrain from using nuclear weapons if they believe that the other side will respond with overwhelming force. This is known as mutually assured destruction (MAD), and it serves as a deterrent against the use of nuclear weapons. However, nuclear brinkmanship involves a delicate balance, and there is always a risk of miscalculation or unintended escalation. In a crisis, both

sides may feel that they have no choice but to escalate their threats in order to demonstrate their resolve and avoid appearing weak. This can lead to a dangerous cycle of escalation, with each side pushing the other to the brink of disaster.

This framework is perhaps the most applicable for India Pakistan nuclear stability moving forward. Since 2016, a new trend has emerged as part of Modi's policy-responding to acts of asymmetric warfare with conventional responses. This was first seen in 2016 in the aftermath of the attack on an Indian army camp in Uri, when Indian special forces launched simultaneous surgical strikes in Pakistan Administered Kashmir (Bhattacharjee 2016). A few years later following an attack on an Indian paramilitary convoy in India Administered Kashmir, Indian Air Force launched airstrikes in Balakot, Pakistani territory. Following the airstrikes, Pakistan Air Force sent its own strike package into Indian airspace, which resulted in an aerial dogfight. In the skirmish, an Indian Air Force pilot was captured by Pakistan. After a failed round of heated negotiations, both sides started readying their nuclear missiles. It was only when the, then, United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo intervened that situation de-escalated (Biswas n.d.). India and Pakistan are in a vicious cycle where Pakistan's every action to wage asymmetric warfare against India fuels Modi to take overt and grandiose actions to maintain his Hindu nationalist image, only to further incentivize both the parties (Guha 2022). Given this, it would be fair to say that the current trajectory of the

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<sup>35</sup> The remainder of this passage contains information deduced from Powell (2005) exclusively.

India-Pakistan relations is aligning towards brinkmanship model.

### CONCLUSION

To conclude, India and Pakistan are two nuclear armed states that have a bloody history, primarily over the disputed territory of Kashmir. However, apart from the geopolitical dispute, both countries have domestic political issues as well. India is seeing a surge in hyper-nationalism because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's alignment with the BJP's pro-Hindu ideology and authoritarian governance practices. These policies and ideology expand into the realm of foreign policy as well with Modi envisioning an *Akhand Bhaarat*. Pakistan, on the other hand, is going through severe political instability, with the military embedding itself into the country's economic and policymaking spheres. This has direct effects on Pakistan's dynamic with India as the former's intelligence (ISI) wages a proxy war campaign against the latter. Two of Pakistan's most successful proxies are Lashkar-e-Taiba (LT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). Both of these organizations operate with direct logistical and operational support from ISI. Moreover, many of the attacks by these organizations have a policy aftermath which is very much in line with ISI's agenda, clearly indicating that Pakistan uses terrorism as an effective foreign policy tool. Given these domestic state of affairs in India and Pakistan, different frameworks of nuclear conflict can be applied to see how they fit in. Deterrence theory explains the era of nuclear stability before Modi, but his wanton policy actions violate the theory's assumption that both the parties are rational actors. The stability-instability paradox is most commonly observed framework in action as Pakistan wages proxy warfare against India, the latter

responds conventionally. Finally, the brinkmanship theory seems to be more fitting as we look toward the future- Modi is becoming increasingly willing to respond to acts of asymmetric warfare with symmetric responses, opening the possibilities of conventional retaliations which might become nuclear.

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