



Revisiting Kashmir in the Third Nuclear Age: Implications for Strategic Stability in South Asia

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Abstract

The Kashmir dispute remains the most enduring and strategically consequential territorial conflict between India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed states whose recurrent crises continue to threaten regional and international security. This article examines the implications of the Kashmir dispute for strategic stability in South Asia within the context of the Third Nuclear Age, characterized by intensifying strategic competition, rapid technological innovation, grey-zone warfare, cyber capabilities, and the gradual erosion of traditional arms control frameworks. Drawing on qualitative analysis of contemporary strategic developments, the study argues that Kashmir functions not merely as a territorial dispute but as a structural driver of crisis instability by compressing escalation timelines, increasing the risks of miscalculation, and encouraging conventional and sub-conventional military competition under the shadow of nuclear deterrence. The article further reassesses General

Pervez Musharraf's Four-Point Formula as a potential framework for conflict management and sustainable dispute resolution, evaluating its relevance within the evolving regional security environment. The analysis suggests that although the proposal remains politically challenging, several of its confidence-building and cooperative mechanisms retain practical significance for reducing tensions and promoting dialogue. The study concludes that strategic stability in South Asia cannot be achieved through deterrence alone. In the absence of sustained diplomatic engagement, reliable crisis communication mechanisms, effective multilateral involvement, and innovative regional security arrangements, the risks of escalation will persist. The article contributes to contemporary debates by demonstrating that the Kashmir dispute and nuclear stability are mutually reinforcing strategic challenges that must be addressed through integrated political, diplomatic, and security approaches.

Keywords: *Kashmir dispute; Strategic Stability; South Asia; Third Nuclear Age; Nuclear Deterrence; India-Pakistan Relations; Crisis Escalation; Musharraf Four-Point Formula.*

Introduction

The Kashmir dispute remains one of the most enduring and strategically consequential territorial conflicts in the international system. Since the partition of British India in 1947, the dispute has shaped the political, military, and diplomatic relations between India

and Pakistan, resulting in multiple wars, repeated military crises, and persistent regional instability.¹ Following the overt nuclearisation of South Asia in 1998, Kashmir has increasingly become a potential nuclear flashpoint where conventional military confrontations carry the risk of rapid escalation into a nuclear crisis.²

The evolving strategic environment has further complicated this dispute. Unlike earlier periods of bipolar nuclear competition, the contemporary security landscape is increasingly characterized by strategic competition among multiple nuclear powers, rapid technological innovation, artificial intelligence, cyber warfare, hypersonic weapons, autonomous military systems, and the gradual erosion of international arms-control arrangements.³ These developments have fundamentally transformed the nature of deterrence and crisis management, giving rise to what scholars describe as the Third Nuclear Age.⁴

Although extensive scholarship has examined nuclear deterrence, strategic stability, and India–Pakistan relations, existing studies continue to interpret the Kashmir dispute primarily through classical

¹ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, “Strategic Stability in South Asia: The Role of USA,” *Journal of Contemporary Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–16.

² Shaun Gregory, “Rethinking Strategic Stability in South Asia,” *South Asian Strategy Stability Unit* (2005).

³ Sitara Noor, “Strategic Stability in South Asia,” *Strategic Studies* 43, no. 1 (2023): 64–94.

⁴ Ayesha Rana, “Challenges to Strategic Stability in South Asia,” *Strategic Studies* 38, no. 2 (2018): 1–20.

deterrence theory or the stability–instability paradox.⁵ Comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding Kashmir as a structural catalyst of strategic instability within the changing security environment of the Third Nuclear Age. Consequently, the interaction between emerging military technologies, compressed decision-making timelines, and unresolved territorial disputes remains insufficiently explored.

This article argues that Kashmir should no longer be viewed solely as an unresolved territorial dispute. Rather, it functions as a miscalculation and strategic instability by accelerating escalation pathways, increasing the probability of miscalculation, and encouraging conventional and sub-conventional military competition under the shadow of nuclear deterrence. The article applies the concept of the Third Nuclear Age to explain the transformation of strategic stability in South Asia. It also explores the implications of the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis as an illustration of these emerging dynamics. It further reassesses General Pervez Musharraf's Four-Point Formula as a potential framework for conflict management and sustainable regional stability.

Research Questions

1. How has the Kashmir dispute affected strategic stability in South Asia during the Third Nuclear Age?

⁵ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, “Strategic Stability in South Asia: The Role of USA,” *Journal of Contemporary Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–16.

2. In what ways do emerging military technologies alter crisis escalation between India and Pakistan?
3. What strategic lessons emerge from the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis?
4. Can the Musharraf Four-Point Formula contribute to long-term strategic stability and conflict management?

Research Gap

Despite the extensive literature on nuclear deterrence and strategic stability in South Asia, three significant gaps remain. First, most studies analyse the Kashmir dispute within the traditional framework of bilateral deterrence without considering the changing characteristics of the Third Nuclear Age. Second, existing research largely overlooks the influence of emerging technologies—including artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, autonomous systems, drone warfare, and hypersonic weapons—on crisis escalation between India and Pakistan. Third, the strategic implications of the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis have received limited scholarly attention, despite representing one of the most technologically sophisticated confrontations between the two nuclear-armed states. By integrating the concept of the Third Nuclear Age with the Kashmir dispute, this article provides a contemporary analytical framework for understanding strategic stability in South Asia.

Theoretical Framework: Classical Deterrence Theory

Deterrence theory is founded on the work of Thomas Schelling, Bernard Brodie, and Herman Kahn. It is based on a rationalist paradigm. The adversaries, with their survivable second-strike capabilities, can deter the initiation of conflict. This happens due to the costs of nuclear retaliation. The structure of deterrence presupposes conditions. It includes the rational decision-making process, the state's threat perceptions, and the command, control, and communication system. In addition to that, the role of effective leadership requires them to have sufficient time for deliberation before and during crises. The rationale behind this is to avoid miscalculation and misinterpretation and to avert nuclear catastrophe.

In the South Asian security landscape, all the conditions that presuppose the sustenance of deterrence are structurally compromised. The first challenge is the rational decision-making process. The domestic political constraints can force leaders to escalate beyond cost-benefit calculations.⁶ In the February 2019 crisis under the nuclear umbrella, Pakistan's decision to return an Indian aircraft was a goodwill gesture and then rapidly sought de-escalation.⁷ The military-political leadership needed to demonstrate resolve domestically while simultaneously signalling moderation to

⁶ Thazha V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtz, eds. *Complex deterrence: Strategy in the global age*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

⁷ Muhammad Sadiq, and Iftikhar Ali. "Challenges of nuclear deterrence stability in South Asia." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 8 (2023): 1511-1527.

international interlocutors.⁸ Second, threat perception in the subcontinent is systematically distorted by decades of mutual suspicion, intelligence failures, and the use of non-state actors as strategic instruments. It is a tactic that creates plausible deniability while producing unpredictable escalatory dynamics.

Nuclear Pessimism vs. Nuclear Optimism

The academic debate on South Asian nuclear stability has long been structured around the optimist and pessimist schools of thought. Kenneth Waltz, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, Sumit Ganguly, and Devin Hagerty, Zafar Iqbal Cheema, and Riffat Hussain, argued that nuclear deterrence has actually stabilized South Asia. For example, the Kargil War of 1999, the 2001–2002 crises, and the Balakot crisis of 2019 all ended without full-scale war. From their perspective, nuclear deterrence generates restraint. The fragile strategic stability was established between India and Pakistan.⁹

Other schools of thought are debated and forwarded by scholars like Scott Sagan, Vipin Narang, and Christopher Clary. The argument of experts is dangerously complacent as they realized and give importance on the role of organizational in nuclear command and control is important.¹⁰ Along with the risk of delegation of launch

⁸ Asma Yaqoob. "India-Pakistan Confrontation: What Has Changed about Indian-Held Kashmir Since 1947?." *Regional Studies* 34, no. 2 (2016): 3-36.

⁹ Sitara Noor, "Strategic Stability in South Asia,"

¹⁰ Shaun Gregory, "Rethinking Strategic Stability in South Asia,"

authority during crises, the dangerous ambiguity of between nuclear and conventional weapons threshold, and the absence of the robust institutional frameworks (hotlines, risk-reduction centers, and agreed protocols) should in play to manage risks. The stability framework worked in the US and Soviet relationship.¹¹ Narang's theory of "asymmetric escalation posture" identifies Pakistan's weapons capability as destabilising.¹² India's perspective is its signals a willingness to use nuclear weapons early in a conventional conflict. It was a posture that could incentivise Indian preemption. Pakistan views India's massive conventional military development, strategic partnerships and ascending defence budgets (under the Cold Start doctrine) as a source of instability for the region.¹³ In response to India, Pakistan's nuclear posture is a force to secure its sovereignty and territory from India's aggressive doctrine.

The Third Nuclear Age

The research intends to apply 'Third nuclear age' concept to review the current dynamics. The persistent Kashmir issue with no near plan of action to decide its fate of freedom, and in presence of multiple factors of instability like multipolar nuclear interdependence, India is

¹¹ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, "Strategic Stability in South Asia: The Role of USA," *Journal of Contemporary Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–16.

¹² Shaun Gregory, "Rethinking Strategic Stability in South Asia,"

¹³ Andrew Futter and Benjamin Zala, "Strategic Non-Nuclear Weapons and the Onset of a Third Nuclear Age," *European Journal of International Security* 6, no. 3 (2021): 257–277.

deterring both Pakistan and China. India rationalizes its threat perception to vertically expand its arsenal and in that response it drives Pakistani threat perception and move towards force development. The other factor is new emerging technologies development and deployment. The AI-assisted military systems, the use AI in decision making, early warning systems, advent of drones and hypersonic weapons in warfare and how it compress decision making time process.¹⁴ It increases the risk of computerized escalation pathways without human intervention.¹⁵ The third factor is the collapse of arms control, leaving nuclear-armed states without institutionalized risk reduction mechanisms.¹⁶ The fourth factor is the grey-zone operations, where proxy conflict, cyber-attacks, and hybrid warfare erode the conventional-nuclear firebreak by making attribution ambiguous.¹⁷ Against this framework, the paper argues that the Kashmir dispute is not merely a political or territorial problem

¹⁴ Jenny L. Naylor, "The Third Nuclear Age," *Comparative Strategy* 38, no. 4 (2019): 276–288.

¹⁵ Andrew Futter, Ludovica Castelli, Cameron Hunter, Olamide Samuel, Francesca Silvestri, and Benjamin Zala, *The Global Third Nuclear Age: Clashing Visions for a New Era in International Politics* (Taylor & Francis, 2025).

¹⁶ Nina Tannenwald, "Life beyond Arms Control: Moving toward a Global Regime of Nuclear Restraint & Responsibility," *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (2020): 205–221.

¹⁷ Rabia Akhtar, "The Global Third Nuclear Age: Clashing Visions for a New Era in International Politics," (2025): 1529–1531.

but a systemic feature of Third Nuclear Age instability.¹⁸ It demands a correspondingly systemic resolution strategy.

Table 1.1: Three Nuclear Ages (Source: Author has developed it, based on SIPRI 2026 Yearbook)

<i>First Nuclear Age (Cold War period)</i>	<i>Second Nuclear Age (Nuclear proliferation)</i>	<i>Third Nuclear Age (Emerging advanced technologies)</i>
<i>The USA's attack on Japan in 1945</i>	<i>India and Pakistan acquire nuclear weapons capability</i>	<i>Ukraine (USA)-Russia war</i>
<i>The USSR became a nuclear weapons state.</i>	<i>North Korea acquires nuclear weapons capability</i>	<i>India-Pakistan crisis</i>
<i>Cuban Missile Crisis</i>	<i>Iran is on a strategic journey to attain nuclear weapons capability</i>	<i>US (Israel)-Iran war</i>

The Kashmir Dispute: Historical Context and Contemporary Dynamics

The Kashmir dispute is rooted in the unfinished agenda of the partition of British India in 1947. The Maharaja Hari Singh's accession of Kashmir to India, signed on 26 October 1947, was immediately contested by Pakistan. It was a clear stance by Pakistan that the Muslim-majority region is integral to the foundational logic of partition.¹⁹ The divergence of interests led to the First Kashmir War in 1948. The war ended with the direct interference of the UN who

¹⁸ Sania Muneer and Saroj Kumar Aryal, “Mapping Pakistan’s Strategic Culture,” in *Untangling Pakistan: A Post-Colonial Approach to Understand Pakistan’s Strategic Culture* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2026), 139–185.

¹⁹ Taraknath Das, “The Kashmir Issue and the United Nations,” *Political Science Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (1950): 264–282.

brokered a ceasefire.²⁰ It is the first time that the Ceasefire Line was set, now termed as the Line of Control LoC.²¹ It assumes that with free and fair plebiscite, the region will be allotted accordingly. But unfortunately it was never held.

This founding ambiguity the existence of UN resolutions that neither party has implemented and that the international community has largely ceased to press — created a structural condition of resolution. The LoC did not become a formally recognized international boundary and nor did it become an It was a negotiated settlement, rather than a de facto, but very militarized, division between the two states.²² In four wars in 1947, 1965, 1971 and the Kargil conflict in 1999, and countless serious crises, India has faced a host of challenges.²³

The next 70 years were punctuated with the same. India administers Jammu and Kashmir revoked the region's special autonomous status under Article 370 in August 2019 and Ladakh, now a Union Territory.²⁴ Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan are governed by

²⁰ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, "Pakistan, India, and Kashmir: A Historical Review," in *Perspectives on Kashmir* (Routledge, 2019), 93–118.

²¹ Victoria Schofield, "Why Kashmir Is Still Important," *Asian Affairs* 46, no. 1 (2015): 18–31.

²² Andrew F. Krepinevich, "The New Nuclear Age," *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 3 (2022): 92–104

²³ Adeela Ahmed, Arsim Tariq, and Rashida Abbas. "Demographic Changes in Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOJK) and the Future of UN Resolutions." *International Journal of Kashmir Studies* 3, no. 2 (2022).

²⁴ Mahwish Hafeez, "The Line of Control (LoC) Trade," *Strategic Studies* 34, no. 1 (2014): 74–93.

Pakistan. China controls India occupies a small area, the Aksai Chin plateau, which India claims to be part of Ladakh, as well as a smaller area.²⁵ This territory was ceded to Pakistan, according to the agreement between Pakistan and China in 1963. This three-way Kashmir is a complex case in the history of territorial conflicts, thanks to territorial overlap.

The Kashmir issue as Nuclear Flashpoint

In May 1998, the nuclear aspect of the Kashmir issue was institutionalised when India did the Pokhran-II tests (Operations Shakti, 11-13 May) and Pakistan gave a strategic response. The Chagi tests were conducted on 28 May, which included a week of testing.²⁶ The Kashmir issue was not the creation of the nuclear tests, which transformed its character. Kashmir shifted from being a territorial issue to an active nuclear flash point.²⁷ The area where incidents of any level of the escalation ladder could, under plausible conditions, starts a chain of events leading to the use of nuclear weapons.²⁸ This transformation has three structural features. The nuclearization of the conflict was the first. It refers to as "the stability-instability paradox".²⁹ Nuclear weapons

²⁵ Meena Khan. "Ladakh." In *The Territories and States of India 2024*, pp. 392-399. Routledge, 2024.

²⁶ Andrew F. Krepinevich, "The New Nuclear Age,"

²⁷ Haider Nizamani, "South Asian Nuclear Weapons and Dilemmas of International Non-Proliferation Regimes," *Contemporary Security Policy* 22, no. 2 (2001): 27-48.

²⁸ Strobe Talbott, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy, and the Bomb* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010).

²⁹ Rodney W. Jones, *Minimum Nuclear Deterrence Postures in South Asia: An Overview* (Reston, VA: Policy Architects International, 2001), 55.

stabilize the Strategic (full-scale war is unlikely) and Sub conventional (proxy war, cross border terrorism, and limited military operations) levels.

Pakistan's weapons capability is specific to fight Indian conventional forces against Pakistan.³⁰ India's Cold Start (officially "Proactive Operations"), imagines conventional military operations that are fast, limited and conventional strikes meant to inflict punishment on Pakistan.³¹ They are certain that crisis will not cross the nuclear threshold. It is very sensitive space that can triggers with any level of misperception and adventure.³² In recent years, China has increasingly been involved in strategic collaboration, particularly with Pakistan via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).³³ China and India have been involved in various conflicts on the Line of Actual Control, particularly along the CPEC, military-to-military relations, and even China's own issues with India. It generated a multipolar nuclear nexus in Ladakh (LAC) no bilateral framework can adequately address such risky situation.

³⁰ Rashida Abbas, Adeela Ahmed, and Muhammad Tabish. "Mediation in armed conflict: A case of Kashmir." *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 5, no. 2 (2022): 1-12.

³¹ Adeela Ahmed, "The Contours of Pakistan's Relations with Russia." In *Pakistan's Foreign Policy*, pp. 181-192. Routledge, 2022.

³² David J. Karl, "Lessons for Proliferation Scholarship in South Asia: The Buddha Smiles Again," *Asian Survey* 41, no. 6 (2001): 1002–1022.

³³ David J. Karl, "Lessons for Proliferation Scholarship in South Asia: The Buddha Smiles Again,"

Nuclear Postures, Doctrines, and the Third Nuclear Age

India's nuclear doctrine is articulated in the 1999 Draft Nuclear Doctrine and the 2003 Cabinet Committee on Security. It rests on three pillars, for example, No First Use, credible minimum deterrence, and massive retaliation. It works in response to a nuclear first strike. India has developed a nuclear triad.³⁴ It includes land-based Agni ballistic missiles (with ranges from 700km to submarine-launched ballistic missiles (Arihant class SSBN), all of which are currently in development. India possessed guaranteed second-strike survivability.³⁵ Nevertheless, the NFU posture is ambiguous and generates instability for the nuclear stability of the region. National security adviser Menon and other former officials have publicly noted that NFU does not prevent India from striking first if there is credible intelligence that Pakistan is preparing to use nuclear weapons.³⁶

This level of ambiguity is a strategic good idea but a bad one from an operational point of view: it means Pakistan can never place complete faith in Indian NFU, as it hampers its crisis decision-making.³⁷

³⁴ Ali Ahmed, "Cold Start: The Life Cycle of a Doctrine," *Comparative Strategy* 31, no. 5 (2012): 453–468.

³⁵ Christopher Clary, and Vipin Narang, "India's counterforce temptations: Strategic dilemmas, doctrine, and capabilities," *International Security* 43, no. 3 (2018): 7–52.

³⁶ Vipin Narang, "Posturing for Peace? Pakistan's Nuclear Postures and South Asian Stability," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (2010): 38–78.

³⁷ Devin T. Hagerty, "India's Evolving Nuclear Posture," *The Nonproliferation Review* 21, nos. 3–4 (2014): 295–315.

Pakistan's strategic move towards full-spectrum deterrence was announced in 2013.³⁸ It marked the as principal doctrinal change in South Asian nuclear history since the tests were conducted in 1998. FSD intended to deter Indian conventional forces from striking Pakistan with their conventional military.³⁹

Escalation Model: Kashmir issue as Nuclear Flashpoint

The escalation model intends to explore the unique escalation risks for the Kashmir issue. The study recognizes eight escalation stages. Each stage steps up towards the next level when the key driver factor fails to manage, and no de-escalation process can be workable during the crisis.⁴⁰ The principal factors that are likely to either slow, halt, or accelerate the escalatory process are outlined. The stage starts from sub-conventional level and can escalate to nuclear level catastrophe. The table set which identifies there are three specific stages that can be particularly dangerous. The first is the transition from third (Ground Force Mobilization/Cold Start) to Rung fifth. Historical context of the Twin Peaks crisis 2001-2002 indicates that mobilizing all Indians would be an effective approach.⁴¹ The Pakistani planners

³⁸ Feroz Hassan Khan, "Going Tactical: Pakistan's Nuclear Posture and Implications for Stability" (2015).

³⁹ Rizwan Zeb, "David versus Goliath? Pakistan's Nuclear Doctrine: Motivations, Principles and Future," *Defense & Security Analysis* 22, no. 4 (2006): 387–408.

⁴⁰ Iftikhar Ali and Jatswan S. Sidhu, "Strategic Dynamics of Crisis Stability in South Asia," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 57, no. 7 (2022): 1357–1375.

⁴¹ Polly Nayak and Michael Krepon, "US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis," in *The India-Pakistan Military Standoff: Crisis and Escalation in South Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011), 143–186.

were misinterpreting forces which were supposed to be a mechanism for coercive signaling. With the lack of a formal nuclear hotline, a serious crisis ever occurred, conventional communications would be cut, and the confusion regarding nationality would cause chaos.⁴² The study identifies eight escalation stages, each associated with a triggering mechanism, an estimated timeline for escalation to the next rung, and the principal factors that could slow, halt, or accelerate the escalatory process.

Table 2: Escalation Model Source: Author has developed it.

Stages	Trigger Event	Key Drivers	De-escalation Mechanism	Historical Precedent
1	Cross-border attack	Pakistani militant groups; deniability	International pressure; attribution delay	Mumbai 2008
2	Surgical strikes	Domestic political pressure on India	Signalling limits; back-channel messaging	Balakot 2019
3	Cold Start mobilization	Failure of coercive diplomacy	Military-to-military contacts; US mediation	Twin Peaks 2001-02
4	Limited conventional war	Intelligence failure; miscalculation	Third-party mediation; exhaustion	Kargil 1999
5	Nuclear signaling	Indian conventional advantage,	Nuclear hotline	Twin Peaks (near-miss)
6	TNW employment	Delegation of authority; panic	Weak	No precedent
7	Limited strategic exchange	Indian massive retaliation doctrine	Rapid response	No precedent

⁴² Adeela Ahmed, “The New Emerging Technology Cyber Capabilities: Prospective Hazards on Deterrence Stability between India and Pakistan,” *International Journal of Kashmir Studies* 7, no. 1 (2025).

8	Nuclear war	command automation	None	No precedent
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May 2025 Crisis: The Third Nuclear Age

On 22 April 2025, gunmen attacked a group of tourists in Pahalgam, Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, killing 26 civilians — 25 Indian nationals and one Nepali national, the majority of them Hindu tourists.⁴³ The attack was the deadliest militant assault in Kashmir since the 2008 Mumbai bombings and the most consequential single incident in the India-Pakistan relationship since the 2019 Balakot crisis. Within hours, Indian intelligence agencies attributed the attack to Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba, both designated terrorist organizations with documented links to Pakistani state and military institutions.⁴⁴ Pakistan denied involvement and called for an international inquiry. No credible forensic evidence was publicly shared.

The Indian government's response unfolded in two phases. The diplomatic phase (22 April - 5 May 2025) saw India suspend the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 - the most significant bilateral treaty between the two states and a cornerstone of regional water security - expel

⁴³ Shabnam Gul. "Beyond Nuclear Deterrence: The May 2025 Pakistan–India Crisis and the Evolution of Multi-Domain Deterrence." *The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies* 4, no. 1 (2026): 1968-1978.

⁴⁴ David Tyodzer Marker, and Tyodzer Patrick Pillah. "Twelve Days of Escalation: Analyzing the June 2025 Israel–Iran War and US Precision Strikes on Nuclear Infrastructure." *IRASS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 7 (2025): 1-12.

Pakistani diplomats, close airspace, and sever trade.⁴⁵ These were the aggressive diplomatic sanctions India imposed on Pakistan in the decades.⁴⁶ The military phase began on the night of 6-7 May 2025, when India launched strikes under the operational codename Operation Sindoor, targeting nine sites identified as terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, including targets in Pakistani Punjab.⁴⁷ This was a significant departure from the 2019 Balakot precedent, which involved a single strike in a relatively peripheral location.

Escalation Dynamics: A New Benchmark

Pakistan responded with an operation named 'Bunyanun Marsoos'. It marked the first instance of Pakistan conducting precision-guided missile and drone strikes against Indian Territory in direct retaliation for an Indian conventional operation.⁴⁸ Both sides deployed combat drones against each other military installations: the first drone-to-drone warfare between nuclear-armed states in history. The conflict lasted 88 hours before a US-brokered ceasefire on 10 May 2025,

⁴⁵ Dan Smith, "The Nuclear Dilemma in a 360-Degree Context." *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 9, no. sup1 (2026): 120-129.

⁴⁶ Alike Guchua, "Nuclear Deterrence and Crisis Stability in South Asia: The India-Pakistan Case Study." *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 11, no. 3 (2025): 118-140.

⁴⁷ Jahan Zaib Adil, Mehar Sohail, and Shazad Farid. "Pak-India War Crisis: A Historical and Strategic Analysis." *The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies* 3, no. 3 (2025): 131-144.

⁴⁸ Rabia Akhtar, ed., *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post-Pahalgam* (Lahore: Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research, 2025), uol.edu.pk

announced following intense back-channel diplomacy involving Saudi Arabia and the UAE alongside Washington.⁴⁹

The crisis represented a significant escalation benchmark across multiple dimensions. First, the geographic scope of Indian strikes extended into Pakistani Punjab rather than being confined to the Azad Kashmir periphery. It crossed a threshold that Pakistani strategic planners had long considered a serious red line. Second, the pace of escalation was faster than any previous India-Pakistan crisis: the interval between the terrorist attack and cross-border missile strikes was only 14 days, with dramatically greater scale and multi-domain simultaneity than in 2019.⁵⁰ Third, the introduction of drone warfare into the conflict created a new category of military exchange without any agreed rules, protocols, or escalation ceiling.

Nuclear Signalling and the Deterrence Test

The most strategically significant dimension of the May 2025 crisis was Pakistan's nuclear signalling. According to multiple credible reports, Pakistan National Command Authority was placed on heightened alert during the crisis, and Pakistan's dual-use ballistic missile systems were readied for potential use. Senior Pakistani

⁴⁹ Matthew Chance, "The US Takes Credit for India-Pakistan Ceasefire, but This Trump Truce May Not Herald Lasting Peace," *CNN*, May 10, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/05/10/india/analysis-us-role-india-pakistan-ceasefire-latam-intl>.

⁵⁰ See also Muneeb Yousuf, "Pakistan's Kashmir Policy: Blocked Desires and the Search for an Honourable Exit," in *Kashmir after 2019*, 204–228 (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2025).

officials publicly reaffirmed Pakistan Full Spectrum Deterrence posture at a seminar on 28 May 2025, stating that Pakistan full spectrum deterrence ensures that no space exists for aggression below the nuclear threshold. Pakistan's Field Marshal General Asim Munir made reference to nuclear capabilities on US soil in what analysts characterized as an attempt to develop a catalytic nuclear posture - using the threat of nuclear use to attract US intervention as a de-escalation mechanism.⁵¹

Critically, however, Pakistan did not employ its nuclear weapons and did not, by most assessments, come close to the actual employment threshold. This outcome has prompted vigorous analytical debate. Optimists argue that deterrence held: the nuclear balance prevented conventional conflict from crossing the nuclear threshold. Pessimists counter that the crisis revealed the dangerous inadequacy of existing crisis management architecture there was no formal hotline between Indian and Pakistani heads of government; drone warfare had no agreed protocols; the ceasefire was achieved by improvisation and US intervention rather than institutional mechanisms.⁵²

⁵¹ Moeed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), chap. 4

⁵² Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments*, 85.

Post-Sindoor Structural Changes

The aftermath of Operation Sindoor has produced significant structural changes in both states' strategic postures directly relevant to the Third Nuclear Age framework. For Pakistan, the crisis exposed what Indian Air Marshal Ashutosh Dixit described as a critical gap between Pakistan's nuclear rhetoric and its actual ability to employ conventional missile power during a conflict. Pakistan's dual-use missile architecture - the same systems capable of delivering both conventional and nuclear warheads meant that using conventional ballistic missiles during the crisis risked triggering Indian nuclear escalation.⁵³ Pakistan has since created a separate Army Rocket Force to separate conventional from nuclear missile systems, centralised command-and-control under the Army Chief, and reset air-defence procurement priorities, acknowledging that the pre-2025 ambiguity was a strategic mistake.

For India, Operation Sindoor has been interpreted as establishing a new normal: a demonstration that sustained and precise conventional strikes deep into Pakistani territory could be conducted without triggering nuclear escalation. This interpretation, if embedded in Indian strategic culture, carries significant risks - it may incentivise future Indian decision-makers to conduct similar or larger operations

⁵³Unsa Jamshed, Amar Jahangir, and Sumaira Shafiq, "India-Pakistan Standoff (2001–2002): Chinese Diplomacy to De-escalate," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 5, no. 4 (October–December 2021): 205–216, [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2021\(5-IV\)16](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2021(5-IV)16).

under the assumption that deterrence will hold, progressively eroding the nuclear firebreak through normalisation. The post-Sindoor period has also seen India invest heavily in drone warfare, precision standoff weapons, and space-based ISR, developments that Pakistani planners view through a compensatory nuclear lens.

Operation Sindoor and the Four-Point Formula: Implications

The May 2025 crisis has both complicated and reinvigorated the case for the Four-Point Formula.⁵⁴ It has complicated it because Indian public opinion following Pahalgam and Operation Sindoor has hardened against engagement with Pakistan, and any government that revives back-channel diplomacy faces significant domestic political risk. And yet the crisis has demonstrated with terrifying clarity precisely why the Four-Point Formula is necessary. The 2025 crisis was triggered, at its root, by the unresolved Kashmir dispute. It was managed by improvised diplomacy in the absence of any institutional crisis management architecture.⁵⁵ It produced structural changes in both nuclear postures that increase the risk of the next crisis being worse. The case for the Four-Point Formula is not weakened by Operation Sindoor; it is made urgent by it.

⁵⁴ Yousuf, Muneeb. "Pakistan's Kashmir Policy: Blocked Desires and the Search for an Honourable Exit." In *Kashmir after 2019*, pp. 204-228. Routledge India, 2025.

⁵⁵ Naeem, Shabana, and Shabnam Kausar. "Kashmir Issue During Musharraf Era: A Diplomatic Shift Towards Peace." *Social Science Review Archives* 3, no. 2 (2025): 383-394.

The Musharraf Four-Point Formula: An Assessment

The Four-Point Formula, first publicly articulated by Pakistan's President General Pervez Musharraf in interviews with Indian journalists in December 2006 and elaborated in subsequent back-channel negotiations, represents the most serious and operationally specific proposal for resolving the Kashmir dispute that has yet emerged from either state. Its four elements are: (1) rendering the Line of Control irrelevant through soft/open borders enabling free movement of people, goods, and commerce; (2) phased, mutual demilitarization of both sides of the LoC; (3) Kashmiri self-governance - not independence, but maximum autonomy on both sides of the LoC, allowing Kashmiris to manage their own affairs; and (4) a joint supervisory mechanism involving India, Pakistan, and Kashmiri representatives to oversee implementation and manage disputes.⁵⁶

Pillar I: Soft Borders

The "soft borders" concept - rendering the LoC irrelevant by allowing free movement without redrawing it - is the most innovative element of the formula and its most important from a strategic stability perspective. It resolves the zero-sum character of the territorial dispute: India does not relinquish sovereignty over J&K; Pakistan

⁵⁶ Shabana Naeem and Shabnam Kausar, "Kashmir Issue during Musharraf Era: A Diplomatic Shift towards Peace," *Social Science Review Archives* 3, no. 2 (2025): 383–394.

does not formally accept the LoC as an international boundary; and Kashmiris gain practical freedom of movement across a historically militarized divide. European integration provides a partial analogy: the Schengen Agreement made internal EU borders largely invisible without eliminating state sovereignty. The analogy is imperfect - the EU had decades of institutional development and shared democratic values - but it demonstrates that the concept is not utopian.

The strategic stability implications are significant. Open movement across the LoC would reduce the value of controlling territory on one or the other side, diminishes the strategic premium on aggressive border management, and creates economic and social interdependencies that raise the cost of conflict. It would also allow militant infiltration routes - a primary Indian grievance - to be managed through agreed border protocols rather than unilateral military action.

Pillar II: Phased Demilitarization

The demilitarization component addresses perhaps the most dangerous near-term escalation driver: the presence of approximately 700,000 Indian security forces in the Kashmir Valley. It is the world's highest military deployment density relative to population. It generates constant friction, civilian casualties, and a grievance environment that sustains militancy. Pakistan maintains several hundred thousand troops along the LoC and in Azad Kashmir.

Phased mutual demilitarization, verified through a joint mechanism and potentially international monitoring, would achieve several strategic stability goals simultaneously. It would reduce the probability of accidental or provoked escalation from military incidents. It would reduce the political pressure on the Pakistani leadership to "do something" about Kashmir militarily. It would also reduce the Indian domestic political pressure to respond to militant attacks with disproportionate military force - a dynamic that drives Cold Start planning and thus Pakistani TNW development.

A successful demilitarization framework would likely require: (a) a detailed phased timetable with clear benchmarks; (b) a joint verification mechanism with teeth; (c) parallel reduction of Pakistan Army deployments in Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan; and (d) confidence-building measures including prior notification of military exercises, communication protocols between local commanders, and regular meetings of senior military officers. UNMOGIP (the UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan), currently operating in a limited capacity, could be revitalised and given a stronger mandate.

Pillar III: Self-Governance

The self-governance pillar addresses the core Kashmiri grievance. The political marginalisation and denial of meaningful autonomy - without requiring India to cede sovereignty or Pakistan to abandon its

claim. The model envisions maximum autonomy on both sides of the LoC, allowing Kashmiris to elect their own governments, manage their own economies, and run their own affairs, subject to defence, foreign policy, and communications remaining with the respective sovereigns.

India's revocation of Article 370 in August 2019 is gradually eliminating J&K's special autonomous status and bifurcating it into two Union Territories is a significant complication. It removed the constitutional instrument through which Kashmiri autonomy had historically been framed, and it generated deep resentment among Kashmiris and condemnation in Pakistan. Any revival of the Four-Point Formula would need to address this change - either by restoring a form of special status or by constructing an alternative autonomy architecture. The former is politically very difficult in the current Indian political environment; the latter requires creative constitutional engineering.

Pillar IV: Joint Oversight Mechanism

The joint mechanism include India, Pakistan, and Kashmiri representatives, is the institutional keystone of the formula. Without it, the other three pillars have no implementation vehicle, no dispute resolution process, and no accountability. The mechanism would need to be structured carefully to address three concerns: Indian resistance to anybody who implies shared sovereignty over J&K;

Pakistani desire for meaningful Kashmiri representation; and the practical difficulty of defining who speaks for Kashmiris, given the diversity of political opinion across the Valley, Azad Kashmir, and the diaspora.

A graduated approach might begin with a Joint Economic and Development Commission, politically less sensitive than a body with security functions and expand its mandate over time as trust builds. The precedent of the Indus Waters Treaty (1960), which has survived three wars and seven decades of hostility between India and Pakistan, demonstrates that bilateral institutional arrangements can prove remarkably resilient even in adversarial relationships.

Why the Four-Point Formula: The Practical Available Framework

This paper argues that the Musharraf Formula represents the optimal available framework for Kashmir resolution for four reasons. First, it is the only proposal that has received serious engagement from both parties at the highest levels: back-channel negotiations between National Security Adviser Tariq Aziz on the Pakistani side and academic-diplomat Satinder Lambah on the Indian side reached an advanced stage by 2007, with both sides reportedly close to a draft framework agreement before the formula was overtaken by Pakistan's domestic political crisis (the lawyers' movement and Musharraf's subsequent fall from power). Second, it is the only proposal that

addresses all three of the dispute's core dimensions simultaneously, territorial, political, and humanitarian, without requiring either state to formally concede its legal position. Third, it has Kashmiri precedent: elements of soft borders and enhanced movement have been implemented in limited form (e.g., cross-LoC trade and bus services, though suspended since 2019). Fourth, it is structurally compatible with both states' minimum requirements: India retains sovereignty; Pakistan avoids permanently foreclosing its legal claims; and Kashmiris gain meaningful self-governance.

Conclusion

The Kashmir dispute should no longer be understood solely as an unresolved territorial conflict but as a structural determinant of strategic stability in South Asia. While classical deterrence theory explains the persistence of nuclear restraint between India and Pakistan, it offers only a partial account of contemporary crisis dynamics. The emergence of the Third Nuclear Age has fundamentally altered the regional security environment by introducing technological innovation, multi-domain competition, and increasingly compressed decision-making cycles that complicate escalation management and weaken the assumptions underpinning traditional deterrence models. Within this changing strategic landscape, Kashmir remains the principal arena through which political grievances, military doctrines, and nuclear postures converge, making crisis stability progressively more fragile. The

analysis of the May 2025 crisis demonstrates that future confrontations are likely to evolve through interconnected conventional, cyber, informational, and nuclear domains rather than through linear patterns of military escalation observed in earlier crises.

This finding suggests that strategic stability in South Asia is increasingly contingent upon the ability of both states to manage uncertainty rather than merely preserve deterrence. In this context, the continued relevance of the Musharraf Four-Point Formula lies less in its immediate political feasibility than in its recognition that sustainable stability requires institutionalised dialogue, confidence-building measures, and mechanisms capable of addressing the underlying political dimensions of the dispute. The broader implication of this study is that unresolved territorial conflicts can no longer be analysed independently of technological transformation and evolving nuclear strategy. As South Asia enters the Third Nuclear Age, maintaining regional stability will depend not only on the credibility of deterrence but also on the development of adaptive crisis-management institutions capable of responding to an increasingly complex and interconnected security environment.
