

Contested Restraint: Compellence, Deterrence and the Pahalgam Crisis

Adeel Kazmi*

Abstract

The April-May 2025 Pahalgam crisis offers an insight into the dynamic crisis behaviour of a nuclearised South Asia. Against this backdrop, the study analyses India's compellence strategy of limited-precision strikes pitched against Pakistan's full-spectrum deterrence posture. Drawing on Schelling's coercion theory and the stability-instability paradox, it argues that India's attempt at behavioural change through preventive strikes was counterbalanced by Pakistan's calibrated retaliation, which restored deterrence and constrained further escalation. This doctrinal divergence narrows the shared space for interpreting escalation limits and increases the risk of miscalculation in future crises. Structured survey data gathered in the article support the central argument regarding the limited success of compellence vis-à-vis the relative effectiveness of deterrence. It signifies the heightened strategic risks arising from compressed decision timelines and multi-domain engagements within an environment shaped by drones, cyber tools, and precision munitions. The crisis also highlights the significant role of the U.S. mediation and the absence of bilateral crisis-management mechanisms, since divergent post-crisis interpretations and takeaways by strategic communities of two dyads have increased the probability of future instability. The article concludes that the crisis reflects a pattern of 'contested restraint,' where escalation is managed but remains fragile, underscoring the need for clearer signalling and more robust crisis-management mechanisms.

Keywords: Pak-India Relations, Pahalgam Crisis 2025, Deterrence, Compellence, Escalation Dynamics, Strategic Stability, South Asia.

* The author is a PhD Scholar at School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR), Quaid-i-Azam University. Email: colsadkazmi@gmail.com

Introduction

The enduring hostility between India and Pakistan has witnessed several phases of strategic instability.¹ Specifically, the period after the overt nuclearisation (May 1998) has been rapidly transformational and escalation dynamics evolved as the crises unfolded. Each crisis since then, including Kargil (1999), Twin Peaks Crisis (2001/2002), Mumbai Crisis (2008), Pulwama–Balakot Crisis (2019) and the recent Pahalgam Crisis (2025) — has introduced new facets of instability.² The novelty in crisis dynamics can unhinge the established stability domains of crisis, arms race, and deterrence in South Asia.³ Nevertheless, despite a transient trajectory in the playbook of deterrence, the crisis initiation paradigm is stuck in India’s persistent framing of trans-frontier terror attacks as the *de facto casus belli*. The response parameters to the said crises have changed as India now attempts to resort to incrementally punitive cross-border strikes and Pakistan’s evolved posture of full-spectrum deterrence is a calibrated response to these incursions.⁴ Pahalgam crisis (2025) followed the lines of earlier crises. It showcased that neither side was prepared to blink in the conventional domain, nor relied solely on the nuclear deterrent as the crisis escalated.⁵

¹ T. V. Paul, “Causes of the India–Pakistan Enduring Rivalry,” in *The India–Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry*, ed. T. V. Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3-10.

² Kargil Review Committee, *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2000); Polly Nayak and Michael Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia’s Twin Peaks Crisis* (Washington, DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, 2006); Angel Rabasa et al., *The Lessons of Mumbai* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP249.html; Masahiro Kurita, “The 2019 Pulwama Crisis and India-Pakistan Deterrence Stability in the New Era,” *Security & Strategy* 3 (January 2023): 111–27, <https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/security/pdf/2023/01/10.pdf>; Marion Messmer and Sahil Shah, *Unpacking the May 2025 India–Pakistan Crisis* (London: British American Security Information Council, March 2026), <https://basicint.org/unpacking-the-may-2025-india-pakistan-crisis/>.

³ Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, “Nuclear Weapons Efficacy for Deterrence & Compellence: Post Pulwama Appraisal,” *Strategic Thought*, no. 1 (August 19, 2020): pp. 129-150.

⁴ Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Pakistan to Retain Full-spectrum deterrence Policy,” *Dawn*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1377506>.

⁵ Walter Ladwig, “Calibrated Force: Operation Sindoor and the Future of Indian Deterrence,” Royal United Services Institute, May 21, 2025,

The growing role of precision weapons, unmanned systems, cyber capabilities, and information warfare has further complicated this strategic relationship. At the peak of said crisis, each antagonist used calibrated force to shape the adversary's cost-benefit calculus. The Pahalgam crisis challenged the limits of bilateral deterrence stability and diplomatic intervention of the U.S. to facilitate a ceasefire on May 10, 2025. The intervention revealed that both states are still susceptible to external crisis diplomacy, underscoring a structural gap in formal bilateral crisis-management mechanisms.⁶ These dynamics exhibit the presence of a quandary in which nuclear deterrence remains functional but strategic stability remains elusive.

Against the backdrop of Pahalgam crisis May 2025, the study attempts to address the following research questions. i. How did India's limited strikes compellence interact with Pakistan's full-spectrum deterrence response under conditions shaped by precision weapons, unmanned systems, and cyber capabilities? ii. How did this strategic interaction shape the escalation, control, and crisis-risk perceptions during the Pahalgam crisis? To answer these questions, the study integrates open-source operational reporting, official statements, and structured expert survey data to cross-validate its findings.

The February-March, 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis was the most serious India-Pakistan escalation since Kargil 1999, pushing limits and revealing new strategic approaches. Indian aerial strikes into mainland Pakistan at Balakot were claimed as a paradigm shift from previous restraint, signalling a new doctrine of forceful, punitive retaliation against the alleged and contested framing of terrorism vis-à-vis Pakistan.⁷ Conversely, Pakistan asserted that

<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/calibrated-force-operation-sindoor-and-future-indian-deterrence>

⁶ Rabia Akhtar, "Escalation Gone Meta: Strategic Lessons from the 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, May 14, 2025, <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/escalation-gone-meta-strategic-lessons-2025-india-pakistan-crisis>

⁷ Sitara Noor, "Pulwama/Balakot and the Evolving Role of Third Parties in India-Pakistan Crises," *Stimson Center*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.stimson.org/2020/pulwama-balakot-and-the-evolving-role-of-third-parties-in-india-pakistan-crises/>; Also see Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "Balakot Airstrikes Was a Message That Cross-Border Terrorism Will Not Be a Low-Cost Option for the Adversary, Says Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh,"

these aerial incursions by the Indian Air Force in Balakot did not fundamentally challenge its nuclear deterrence calculus, since the counter-aerial strikes by Pakistan Air Force in Indian-held Kashmir on February 27, 2019 restored deterrence, preventing further escalation by India.⁸ Following the Pulwama crisis in August 2019, India revoked Kashmir's semi-autonomous status (Article 370), a move followed by security crackdowns and policies encouraging non-local settlement in the region.⁹ While the BJP government flaunted a return to normalcy and a boom in tourism, resentments simmered among the masses against the draconian measures in Kashmir valley.¹⁰ A February 2021 ceasefire between India-Pakistan reaffirmation at Line of Control calmed the cross-border shelling by the troops on either side.¹¹ This temporary stalemate was, however, shattered with the Pahalgam attack (2025) in the contested region of Kashmir. The insurgent attack on April 22, 2025, killing 26 civilians, disrupted India's narrative of stabilisation. India immediately alleged Pakistan-linked groups (offshoot of Lashkar-e-Taiba) without any independent corroboration and vowed punitive immediate actions against the perpetrators.¹² New Delhi suspended the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance threatening Pakistan's water supply and other politico-punitive measures.¹³ Pakistan responded and categorically denied any involvement, asserting that any attempt to divert treaty waters would be considered as an act of war inviting use of full force across the entire spectrum

Press Information Bureau, February 28, 2020,

<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1604642>

⁸ Masahiro Kurita, "The 2019 Pulwama Crisis and India-Pakistan Deterrence Stability in the New Era," *Security & Strategy* 3 (January 2023): 111-27, <https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/security/pdf/2023/01/10.pdf>.

⁹ Kumar Aryal, Sandeep, and Syed Muneer, "Geopolitics, Conflict and Narratives: An Assessment of Kashmir Conflict after the Abrogation of Article 370," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 60, no. 2 (2023): 1310-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231192318>

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, *Raising the Stakes in Jammu and Kashmir*, Asia Report No. 310 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, August 5, 2020), 1-3, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1304356/dl>

¹¹ Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "Joint Statement," *Press Information Bureau*, February 25, 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1700682>

¹² "Act of War: What Happened in Kashmir Attack That Killed 26 Tourists?," *Al Jazeera*, April 23, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/23/act-of-war-what-happened-in-kashmir-attack-that-killed-26-tourists>.

¹³ "Kashmir Attack: Does India's Indus Waters Treaty Freeze Threaten Pakistan?," *Al Jazeera*, April 24, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/24/kashmir-attack-does-indias-indus-waters-treaty-freeze-threaten-pakistan>

of national power.¹⁴ This duel of ultimatums set a perilous stage for what was in the offing for the next few days. Indian officials in their statements hinted at adoption of an offensive doctrine (terming it their new normal) by equating any terror attack on their soil as an act of war against India, warranting the debilitating cross-border preemptive strikes on alleged terror networks. Such a provocative strategic posture was termed by Pakistan as deeply troubling, for making escalation a default response between two nuclearised states and that, too, without any credible probe.¹⁵ Taken together, these reciprocal signals of coercion and resolve laid the groundwork for the military exchange that would soon test the limits of compellence, deterrence, and crisis stability.

Compellence, Deterrence, and Crisis Stability in the Pahalgam Crisis (2025)

The 2025 Pahalgam crisis offers a single case study for re-examining fundamentals of coercion theory and the existing literature on crisis stability, especially within the framework of nuclear competition and emerging technological advancements. Thomas Schelling posits that most conflicts involve bargaining dynamics where each actor's ability to achieve objectives hinges significantly on the decisions of the other party.¹⁶ Within this bargaining framework, coercion is the cardinal feature and a primary tool that states (especially powerful and nuclearised states) use in practicing international relations. Schelling's theoretical framework differentiates between deterrence and compellence as two modes of coercion.¹⁷ *Deterrence* is the threat of use of retaliatory force to prevent an adversary from taking an action, essentially dissuading aggression by

¹⁴ Tom O'Connor, "Trump Faces New Nuclear Crisis as India-Pakistan Tensions Soar," *Newsweek*, April 25, 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/trump-faces-new-nuclear-crisis-india-pakistan-tensions-soar-1792842>.

¹⁵ Apoorvanand, "India's 'New Normal' of Perpetual War Will Damage Its Democracy," *Al Jazeera*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinion/2025/5/13/indias-new-normal-of-perpetual-war-will-damage-its-democracy>

¹⁶ Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 5.

¹⁷ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 2.

fear of unacceptable consequences.¹⁸ In contrast, *compellence* is the materialisation of threat or use of force to make an adversary *do* something or stop it from doing something already being done. In deterrence, punishment is conditional to the adversary's future action, whereas in compellence, punishment is applied until the adversary complies.¹⁹ Schelling notes that compellence is inherently more challenging, since it requires the adversary's active compliance with a visible and often humiliating concession which the compelled actors are to make. Deterrence, by contrast, asks only for inaction, which can be passively sustained to normalise or de-escalate.²⁰

These distinctions aptly describe the contending strategies by India and Pakistan in the April-May 2025 Pahalgam crisis. India's Operation Sindoor apparently embodied a compellent strategy. India's compellent posture during the Pahalgam crisis may not be taken as a response to an established Pakistani state policy, but as a response to New Delhi's attributional framing of the attack. The allegations that Pakistan systematically employs cross-border terrorism is an instrument of New Delhi's state policy, and remain largely uncorroborated and denied by Islamabad.²¹ This study does not treat that claim as an established fact. Rather, it examines how India's perception and political framing of Pakistan's alleged support for militant networks shaped its resort to punitive limited strikes. In this backdrop, New Delhi launched limited air and missile strikes into mainland Pakistan as *punitive* actions aimed at compelling Islamabad to change its course and crack down on alleged militants, signalling that Pakistan's alleged support to insurgent groups would invite escalating costs that it may not bear.²² In Schelling's terms, India wielded the "power to hurt" with a strategic aim to compel a change in Pakistan's strategic behaviour. However, as the compellence

¹⁸ Tami Davis Biddle, "Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners," *The Strategist*, *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 95–100, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/8864>.

¹⁹ Biddle, "Coercion Theory," 95.

²⁰ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 2.

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Pakistan Rejects India's Propaganda, Calls for Responsible Conduct," Press Release no. 105/2026, Islamabad, April 23, 2026, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/pakistan-rejects-indias-propaganda-calls-for-responsible-conduct>

²² Ministry of External Affairs, "Transcript of Special Briefing on Operation Sindoor (May 07, 2025)," *Press Briefing*, Government of India, May 7, 2025, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?51/Press_Releases.

theory would predict, this attempt faced challenges in achieving the stated objectives. Pakistan absorbed the initial punishment and retaliated without yielding on strategic plane; the coercive pressure apparently proved inadequate to force compliance. Pakistan's response (Operation Bunyan-ul-Marsoos), by contrast, exemplified an effective deterrent response.²³ Islamabad engaged the hostile Indian aircraft and resorted to calibrated counter-force strikes on Indian military establishments to *dissuade* New Delhi from further escalation.²⁴ This strategy aligned with the deterrence-by-punishment strategy to dissuade the Indians from any further attacks. Pakistan's reciprocative actions communicated that further escalation may push the conflict towards the risk of unacceptable damages. Apparently, the riposte restrained India from further escalatory moves aligning with the core objectives of deterrence. In theoretical terms, the crisis validated that deterrence is easier to achieve than compellence; India's compellent gambit was ineffective to impose on Pakistan's strategic will, whereas Pakistan's deterrent signals succeeded in preventing further Indian aggression.

The Pahalgam crisis dynamics are also consistent with the concept of the stability-instability paradox, though emerging technologies appear to complicate the traditional formulation. The said concept was articulated by Glenn Snyder and later reinforced by Robert Jervis, positing that the core logic underlying the stability-instability paradox is sound; however, this framework can be misleading when contextually applied to nuclear deterrence, as it may imply the complete absence of any conflict-related events.²⁵ He contends that the presence of nuclear weapons and strategic stability doesn't necessarily heighten the probability of conventional or unconventional warfare and dismisses the understanding of absolute deterrence stability induced by nuclear weapons as utopian.²⁶ Viewing the Pahalgam crisis in the said paradox's framework has several subtle

²³ Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), "*Marka-e-Haq (22 April–10 May 2025)*," YouTube video, 1:35:33, May 12, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQvsb4ouuI0>.

²⁴ "Pakistan Never Requested Ceasefire :DG ISPR Briefs Nation on Military Response to Indian Aggression", *The Express Tribune*, May 11, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2545242/dg-ispr-holds-press-briefing-on-operation-bunyan-un-marsoos-launched-against-indian-aggression>

²⁵ Robert Jervis, "Conclusions" in *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 1988), 147-150.

²⁶ Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1979): 617-33.

dimensions for the stability in the region. India and Pakistan owing to the mutual credibility of strategic deterrence, paradoxically enabled risk-taking at the sub-conventional and conventional levels. This stability at the top and instability below the dynamic is evident in the willingness of the two states to engage in calibrated cross-border military strikes. Dr. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal reinforces this logic by showing that India's upgrading of dual-capable conventional and nuclear delivery systems further narrows the margin between conventional signalling and nuclear risk, thereby intensifying the very instability that the stability-instability paradox predicts below the strategic level.²⁷ Simultaneously, the Pahalgam crisis marked a departure from earlier crises paradigm by introducing the destabilising effects of emerging and disrupting technologies (EDTs). The deployment of armed drones, precision missiles, and cyber operations compressed the decision-making timeline and expanded the operational domain beyond traditional theatres of war.²⁸ James Acton's warns that modern technologies and offensive cyber tools complicate the defined conventional-nuclear boundary thus increase the probability of inadvertent escalation.²⁹ The use of swarm drones and cyber disruptions by the contending states in the Pahalgam crisis heightened the risk of misperception and preemptive retaliation. These systems invited rapid escalation, undermining crisis stability by affecting the strategic buffer between conventional and nuclear thresholds.³⁰

Operation Sindoor: India's "Non-Escalatory" Precision Strikes

India launched Operation Sindoor on May 7, 2025 which was a combination of surface-to-surface and air-to-surface missiles' assault on

²⁷ Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, "The Sham Strikes," in *India's Surgical Strike' Stratagem, Brinkmanship and Response* (Islamabad: Khursheed Printers (Pvt) Ltd, 2019).

²⁸ Shakeel Akhtar Thakur, Iram Shabbir, Huma Bilal, and Muhammad Shoaib Jamil, "Pahalgam to Indus Water Disputes: Nuclear Deterrence and Modern Warfare," *Research Journal for Social Affairs* 3, no. 4 (June 2025): 49-55, <https://doi.org/10.71317/RJSA.003.04.0252>

²⁹ James Acton, *Silver Bullet? Asking the Right Questions About Conventional Prompt Global Strike*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., September 3, 2013, 71-85

³⁰ Michael T. Klare, *Assessing the Dangers: Emerging Military Technologies and Nuclear (In)Stability*, An Arms Control Association Report (Washington, DC: Arms Control Association, February 2023), https://www.armscontrol.org/sites/default/files/files/Reports/ACA_Report_EmergingTech_digital.pdf.

multiple locations inside Pakistan and Azad Kashmir. These strikes were termed as *limited-non-escalatory* retaliation and a response to the Pahalgam terror attack. Although India officially framed Operation Sindoor as a *non-escalatory*, its operational character carried clear escalatory implications. First, the strikes crossed the international boundary and targeted locations inside Pakistan and Azad Kashmir, thereby expanding the crisis from a sub-conventional terrorist incident into a conventional military exchange. Second, the use of standoff precision munitions signalled a willingness to employ advanced conventional force beyond symbolic retaliation. Third, even if Indian planners avoided Pakistani military bases in the initial phase, the strikes nevertheless created pressure on Pakistan to promptly retaliate in order to restore deterrence credibility. These strikes claimed to target the alleged infrastructure associated with Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba.³¹ The Indian forces employed advanced standoff munitions, including SCALP-EG land-attack cruise missile and precision AASM glide bombs to engage these targets.³² India in the initial escalatory phase did not deliberately strike any Pakistani military installations or bases.³³ While Indian strikes reportedly hit several civilian targets, the operations' trajectory and narrative shifted because of Pakistan's air defence response to these incursions. Pakistan Air Force (PAF) engaged multiple Indian aircraft in response to the Indian aerial incursions on its territory. Pakistan's J-10C fighters armed with PL-15E missiles, effectively engaged multiple Indian aircraft, including Rafales which marked the first combat loss of the aerial platform in any combat zone.³⁴ Subsequent Pakistani official briefings reported a toll of five Indian jets, including three of India's prized French-made Rafale fighters (inducted in 2020), as

³¹ Aishwarya S. Iyer et al., "India-Pakistan Conflict Escalates After Kashmir Massacre," *CNN*, May 8, 2025, updated May 9, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/08/india-pakistan-conflict-escalates-after-kashmir-massacre/index.html>

³² The Concise Global Industry Guide: Military Aircraft Handbook, Issue 1 (London: Shephard Media, February 2022), 141, <https://mags.shephardmedia.com/legacy-handbooks/MA2022.pdf>.

³³ Mallick, "Operation Sindoor and Beyond," *Strategic Study India*, May 7, 2025.

³⁴ Xinhua, "Pakistan Downs 2 Indian Jets in Retaliation for Overnight Strikes," *Global Times*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202505/1333461.shtml>. Als see Admin, "From Crisis to Catastrophe? If India Faltered Against PL-15E, Pakistan's Future PL-17 Could Tip the Balance of Air Power," *Defence Security Asia*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.defencesecurityasia.com/from-crisis-to-catastrophe-pl-17>

well as a Su-30MKI and a MiG-29.³⁵ India's reputed newspaper, *The Hindu*, initially reported the discovery of debris from three Indian aircraft within India, despite official denials of losses.³⁶ India framed its May 7, 2025 strikes as precision attacks on alleged terrorist sites accompanied by impact videos, whereas Pakistan countered that the bombardment killed 31 civilians, including women and children, and levelled two mosques, fuelling public demand for a robust response.³⁷ India's strikes, meant as counter-terror actions to appear aggressive, prompted Pakistan to demonstrate its ability to repel them with strong conventional defenses.

Operation Bunyan-ul-Marsoos: Pakistan's Riposte

India's air-to-surface missile attacks on three Pakistani military airbases (Nur Khan, Rafiqui, and Murid) on May 9-10, 2025, marked the peak of the dyadic crisis.³⁸ In retaliation to these escalatory strikes, Pakistan launched Operation Bunyan-ul-Marsoos (Concrete Wall) on May 10, 2025, a retaliatory campaign aimed at establishing military parity and a step further as part of its "Quid Pro Quo Plus" (QPQ Plus) response parameters.³⁹ The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) statement on the subject declared that multiple targets "all across India" were engaged and vital Indian military facilities were targeted.⁴⁰

³⁵ Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), "Marka-e-Haq (22 April 2025 to 10 May 2025)," Facebook post, May 12, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/ISPROfficial1/posts/isprawalpindi-12-may-2025marka-e-haq-22-april-2025-to-10-may-2025the-conduct-of/1118302963659827/>.

³⁶ David Rising, "India's Clash with Pakistan Sees Use of Chinese Missiles, French Jets, Israeli Drones and More," *CNN*, May 10, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/india-pakistan-operation-sindoor-05-08-25-intl-hnk>; Also see *Daily Sun* Report, "The Hindu Removes Report on 3 Fighter Jet Crashes," *Daily Sun*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.daily-sun.com/post/803913>

³⁷ "DG ISPR Condemns Indian Strikes that Killed 31 Civilians, Calls Out Targeting of Innocents," *Nation*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.nation.com.pk/07-May-2025/dg-ispr-condemns-indian-strikes-that-killed-31-civilians-calls-out-targeting-of-innocents>

³⁸ Rebecca Choong Wilkins, Yang Yang, and Naomi Ng, "The India-Pakistan Crisis and the Trump Truce," *Bloomberg*, May 13, 2025, updated May 13, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-05-12/the-india-pakistan-crisis-and-the-trump-truce>.

³⁹ "Pakistan launches Operation Bunyanun Marsoos in response to Indian provocations: Xinhua," *Global Times*, May 10, 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202505/1333720.shtml>.

⁴⁰ *Global Times*, "Pakistan Launches...", May 10, 2025.

A Pakistani missile salvo struck an Indian air base at Udhampur in the Indian-controlled Kashmir, the Indian Air Force's Pathankot airfield in Punjab and BrahMos missile storage depot in the Beas region.⁴¹ These attacks were unprecedented, as never had Pakistan openly engaged Indian high-value assets so far beyond the front lines. Indian officials, for their part, privately conceded that the attacked installations suffered damage, even as they refuted the scale of destruction claimed by Pakistan.⁴² A significant element of *Bunyan-ul-Marsoos* was the integration of cyber warfare as an effective force multiplier targeting elements of India's power infrastructure, though Indian officials denied large-scale disruption and independent confirmation of the scale of impact mostly remained conjectural.⁴³ These measures represented a novelty in South Asian conflict since such disruptive cyber offensive at a strategic scale, potentially can be chaotic in the rear areas. Indian authorities dispute the extent of cyber damage, calling reports of grid collapse false while admitting to some power disruptions.⁴⁴ The two antagonists engaged in narrative control campaigns, seeking to shape perceptions of dominance while avoiding the panic at domestic level.⁴⁵ Fake-news claims, doctored videos were ostensibly circulated and propagated by social media platforms with a blitz of unchecked misinformation.⁴⁶ Pakistan's response reflected the effectiveness of its

⁴¹ *Global Times*, "Pakistan Launches...", May 10, 2025.

⁴² Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shah Meer Baloch, "India and Pakistan Accuse Each Other of Cross-Border Attacks on Military Bases," *Guardian*, May 10, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/09/pakistan-accuses-india-targeting-three-military-bases-tensions-escalate>

⁴³ *Geo News*, "Pakistan destroy 70% of India's power grid in cyber-attack | Breaking News," YouTube Video, May 10, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZP-46Ys1rzY>.

⁴⁴ *NDTV*, "India-Pakistan Tension Live Update: Operation Sindoor, Pahalgam Terror Attack, Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan Blackout in Punjab," *NDTV*, accessed May 14, 2025, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-pakistan-tension-live-update-operation-sindoor-pahalgam-terror-attack-jammu-and-kashmir-rajasthan-blackout-in-punjab-8366542>.

⁴⁵ DJ Kamal Mustafa, "India's Narrative Control: When Truth Gets Lost in the Shuffle," *Samaa TV*, April 29, 2025, <https://samaa.tv/2087332574-india-s-narrative-control-when-truth-gets-lost-in-the-shuffle>; Also see Soumya Awasthi, "Weaponising the Narrative: Social Media Propaganda Post-Pahalgam Attack," *Observer Research Foundation (Expert Speak)*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/weaponising-the-narrative-social-media-propaganda-post-pahalgam-attack>.

⁴⁶ Deependra Singh Hooda, "How to Win the War of Narratives in Times of Conflict," *Hindustan Times*, Opinion, May 23, 2025, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/how-to-win-the-war-of-narratives-in-times-of-conflict-101748008913150.html>.

conventional deterrence capabilities using upgraded air-defence systems, precision missiles, and enhanced integration, thereby reducing reliance on nuclear coercion vis-à-vis India. Public diplomacy and rhetoric justified retaliation as necessary to restore deterrence, while keeping back-channel communications open to manage escalation and avert all-out war.⁴⁷

Escalation Dynamics: Multi-Domain Interaction of Compellence and Deterrence

The Pahalgam crisis was a calculated interplay of escalation and restraint, with both the rival states carefully calibrating their responses below the nuclear threshold. The contending strategies were reflective of William R. Kintner's duality of purpose, where leaders pursue advantage yet remain committed to managing risks.⁴⁸ Pakistan's immediate reaction on the night of May 7-8 was dual-pronged. First, along the Line of Control and international border, Pakistani forces engaged in intense retaliatory fire with medium and heavy guns directed against Indian military posts and headquarters.⁴⁹ This suggested a calibrated signal, as it responded to Indian provocation with localised military pressure, yet didn't broaden the crisis beyond contested border zones. Second, Pakistan concurrently began probing India's rear areas using unmanned systems and long-range precision fire. Following these actions, Indian authorities reported waves of Pakistani drones targeting over two dozen locations across India's northern and western sectors.⁵⁰ Pakistan's use of these advanced stand-off capabilities and

⁴⁷ Adeel Kazmi, "Restoring Deterrence: Pakistan's Response to Indian Strikes," *Stratheia*, May 7, 2025, <https://stratheia.com/restoring-deterrence-pakistans-response-to-indian-strikes/>.

⁴⁸ William R. Kintner, "*Crisis Management: Confrontation and Diplomacy in the Nuclear Age*," by Phil Williams (New York: Halsted Press, John Wiley, 1976)," *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 3 (1978): 1189-91, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1955274>

⁴⁹ Maj Gen P K Mallick, VSM (Retd), "Operation Sindoor Day 2: How India Is Taking Out Pakistani Air Defence Systems," *Indian Strategic Studies*, May 11, 2025, <https://www.strategicstudyindia.com/2025/05/operation-sindoor-day-2-how-india-is.html#:~:text=Meanwhile%2C%20after%20the%20launch%20of,16%20civilians%20including%20five%20children.>

⁵⁰ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Aakash Hassan, "Pakistan Accused of Launching Fresh Wave of Drone Strikes on India," *Guardian*, May 9, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/09/india-accuses-pakistan-drones-attack-cities-bases>: Also see *Global Times*, "India Committed to No Escalation if Pak

integrated air-defence systems demonstrated the growing sophistication of its conventional response architecture. As the crisis escalated, the Indian military attempted to target Pakistan's air defence systems employing Israeli-made Harpy loitering drones to attack and disable Pakistan's surface-to-air missile sites around Lahore and other major cities. The attempt of striking Pakistan's military assets (AD systems) on its home soil was a deliberate act of escalation, ostensibly justified by India as retaliation for Pakistan's drone strikes against Indian cities. However, Operation Sindoor had already crossed the escalatory threshold since its inception by extending military action into mainland Pakistan and targeting its civilian sites inducing multiple casualties.⁵¹ The geographical expansion of force and the use of precision munitions directly against military targets made the subsequent operations precariously escalatory. These actions represented India's effort to regain air superiority by blinding Pakistan's radar coverage. Responding to Indian incursions Operation Bunyan-ul-Marsoos marked Pakistan's calibrated Quid Pro Quo Plus (QPQ Plus) response, combining precision strikes, cyber operations, and narrative management to restore conventional deterrence, signal military parity, and contain escalation below the nuclear threshold. Each tit-for-tat action, thereafter, by the two contending states reflected the climbing of escalation ladder.⁵²

Deterrence Dynamics and Emerging Technologies

The Pahalgam crisis underscores how deterrence dynamics in South Asia are evolving. Both sides made clear choices to limit escalation, refraining from targeting each other's nuclear or strategic assets suggesting mutual restraint. The absence of overt nuclear signalling and the U.S.-brokered ceasefire

Reciprocates; Pakistani Deputy PM Says Recent Military Response a 'Defensive Measure,'" *Global Times*, May 10, 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202505/1333732.shtml#:~:text=The%20Pakistani%20army%20used%20drones>.

⁵¹ Al Jazeera Staff, "Operation Sindoor: What's the Significance of India's Pakistan Targets?" *Al Jazeera*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/7/operation-sindoor-whats-the-significance-of-indias-pakistan-targets>.

⁵² Anupreet Das, "India-Pakistan Enter Third Night of Conflict Amid Efforts at Peace," *New York Times* (live update), May 9, 2025, updated May 10, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2025/05/09/world/india-pakistan-kashmir>.

indicate that deterrence held, but barely on the brink.⁵³ The crisis exposed new operational asymmetries beyond mere numbers: wherein India has advantages in overall size and resources, Pakistan has gained effective niche capabilities (drones, air defence, tactical missiles, networked weapons) largely indigenously and partly through strategic partnerships.⁵⁴ India and Pakistan have shown inclination to invest more into drones, exacerbating the potential of inducing an arms race of modern UAVs while preparing for any potential crisis. India approved emergency funds for combat and surveillance drones; Pakistan similarly sought more UAVs to avoid endangering its advanced jets.⁵⁵ Cyber warfare also looms as a new front in the domain. In this crisis, the use of cyber-attacks (power grid disruption, hacking government systems) signalled that India and Pakistan are willing to fight in the digital domain in tandem with kinetic strikes. NS Focus, a global cybersecurity firm notes that the era of covert cyber skirmishes is shifting toward “overtly declared ‘combat’” between nations, as seen in claimed grid blackouts and website defacements.⁵⁶ Indeed, the “hybrid” character of the conflict a “dual-line linkage” of real forces and cyberspace, suggests that future skirmishes will feature deep integration of drones, missiles, cyber commands, and even electronic warfare. All of these technologies operate under the nuclear overhang. Even routine strikes risk spiralling to nuclear thresholds in South Asia’s volatile mix.⁵⁷ As Dr. Rabia Akhtar warns, “nuclear deterrence does not guarantee strategic stability” when

⁵³ Ladwig, “Calibrated Force.”; Also see Diya Ashtakala, “What Led to the Recent Crisis Between India and Pakistan?” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 20, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-led-recent-crisis-between-india-and-pakistan>.

⁵⁴ Sidharth Raimedhi, “Blind Spots and Silver Linings: Past and Prologue of Op. Sindoor,” *Blind Spot*, CSDR Online, May 16, 2025, <https://csdronline.com/blind-spot/blind-spots-and-silver-linings-past-and-prologue-of-op-sindoor/#:~:text=been%20particularly%20concerned%20about%20the%20A0A%20WACS>.

⁵⁵ Parvez Jabri, “India, Pakistan’s Drone Battles Mark New Arms Race in Asia,” *Reuters*, May 27, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/india-pakistans-drone-battles-mark-new-arms-race-asia-2025-05-27/>.

⁵⁶ NSFOCUS Global, “India-Pakistan Conflicts: Escalating Military Operations and DDoS Attacks Making Targeted Strikes,” *NSFOCUS Global*, May 25, 2025, <https://nsfocusglobal.com/india-pakistan-conflicts-escalating-military-operations-and-ddos-attacks-making-targeted-strikes/#:~:text=After%20May%207%2C%202025%2C%20the,of%20India%E2%80%99s%20power%20grid>.

⁵⁷ Akhtar, “Escalation Gone Meta.”

modernisation, high-alert postures, and asymmetries are at play. The doctrines differ: India professes a redundant NFU, while Pakistan maintains first-use options at lower escalation rungs.⁵⁸ In 2025, neither side publicly signalled the nuclear use, but the specter did loom in the background. The U.S. officials privately worried the spiral could escalate to an apocalyptic war. After the ceasefire, both capitals realise that any future clash could be even more dangerous. These events may harden Indian thinking toward achieving overwhelming conventional superiority, a prerequisite, analysts say, if India hopes to credibly compel Pakistan in future crises.⁵⁹ Conversely, Pakistan will likely double down on its full-spectrum deterrence, supported by material upgradations and external technology transfers to preserve its own strategic autonomy.⁶⁰ Advanced missile defences and cross-domain deterrence, drones, and cyber operations, undermine second-strike stability and weaken the logic of mutually assured destruction. Counterforce measures, including enhanced direct targeting systems (EDTS), drone strikes, cyber operations, and disinformation campaigns have injected new volatility into South Asia's deterrence calculus by enabling actors to shape crisis narratives and assert hazy unilateral victories.⁶¹ The intense air engagements during the Pahalgam crisis demonstrate that Southern Asia's strategic forces derive their potency not from lone platforms but from the seamless integration of radars, shooters, and command networks. Pakistan's employment of ground radars, J-10C fighters, and AEW&C assets to execute a beyond-visual-range kill chain against an Indian Rafale illustrates how systems integration can recalibrate conventional balances even under a nuclear shadow. By contrast, India's eclectic mix of Western, Russian, Israeli, and indigenous aircraft presents systemic integration challenges that may undercut the credibility of its conventional deterrent.⁶² The crisis highlighted how evolving conventional capabilities, networked sensors, and long-range precision systems are compressing operational timelines and reshaping escalation management in South Asia.

⁵⁸ Akhtar, "Escalation Gone Meta."

⁵⁹ Stohl, "Calibrated Force."

⁶⁰ Raimedhi, "Blind Spots..."

⁶¹ Clary, "Four Days in May."

⁶² John A. Tirpak, "The Biggest News from India-Pakistan Air Battle: the Kill Chain," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, May 19, 2025, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/india-pakistan-air-battle-kill-chain/>.

The Pahalgam crisis illustrates the intertwined dynamics of deterrence and compellence in a nuclearised dyad. India's actions exemplified compellence by executing precision strikes on alleged militant infrastructure deep inside Pakistani territory, New Delhi sought to coerce Islamabad into ceasing support for terrorist proxies under the implicit threat of further punitive action.⁶³ This coercive posture required India not only to signal credible commitment deploying SCALP-EG and BrahMos stand-off munitions but also to overcome Pakistan's reputational imperative to resist capitulation, given Islamabad's domestic and institutional constraints.⁶⁴ Conversely, Pakistan's measured air and missile counter-strikes, bolstered by robust integrated air defenses (JF-17C/PL-15 chain), demonstrated enduring deterrence.⁶⁵ Islamabad needed only to shape a credible retaliatory posture by striking back with equal or superior force to dissuade India from escalating beyond conventional limits. The crisis thus underscored that while deterrence entails demonstrating assured retaliation to forestall aggression, compellence demands the more arduous task of manipulating the adversary's cost-benefit calculus through demonstrable kinetic capability and unambiguous political resolve. By balancing calibrated punitive strikes with the specter of nuclear escalation, India sought compellent leverage; yet Pakistan's full-spectrum deterrence anchored in conventional parity and latent nuclear response curtailed New Delhi's coercive ambitions.⁶⁶

Crisis Termination and Implications for Deterrence Stability

After four days of brinkmanship, coordinated pressure and high-level outreach led by the U.S. and China, pushed India and Pakistan toward

⁶³ Ajai Sahni, "Compellence, Not Deterrence, Is the Way Forward," *Frontline*, May 25, 2025, 2025, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/operation-sindoor-india-pakistan-kashmir-analysis/article69597632.ece>

⁶⁴ Fabian Hoffmann, "Operation Sindoor: Indian Air Strikes and Pakistani Air Defenses," *Missile Matters*, May 8, 2025, <https://missilematters.substack.com/p/operation-sindoor-indian-air-strikes>.

⁶⁵ Shaheer Ahmad, "India-Pakistan Military Crisis: A Testing Ground for Chinese Military Hardware," *The Diplomat*, May 13, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/india-pakistan-military-crisis-a-testing-ground-for-chinese-military-hardware/>

⁶⁶ "Pakistan's N-capability Cornerstone of Its National Security: Kidwai," *Nation*, May 29, 2025, <https://www.nation.com.pk/29-May-2025/pakistan-s-n-capability-cornerstone-of-its-national-security-kidwai>.

restraint and dialogue, halting escalation.⁶⁷ At the same time, each country interpreted Washington's engagement in light of its own narrative. Indian leaders pointed to the U.S. counterterrorism partnership as a tacit approval of India's strikes,⁶⁸ whereas Pakistani spokesmen portrayed American calls for calm as diplomatic validation of Pakistan's choice to show restraint. Throughout the crisis, official U.S. statements emphasised dialogue and mutual caution: for example, Secretary Rubio's statement congratulated both Modi and Sharif on the 'path of peace' they had chosen, and analysts noted that it was sustained U.S. diplomacy and pressure not favoritism that ultimately clinched the truce.⁶⁹

As the U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced a brokered ceasefire between India and Pakistan following high-level engagements, both the sides agreed to an immediate cessation of hostilities and future talks at a neutral venue.⁷⁰ The U.S.-mediated dialogue gained traction by May 10, 2025, and that evening the Pakistani and Indian Director General of Military Operations (DGMOs) convened a special hotline call. A ceasefire was reached remarkably given the intensity of fighting. On the evening of May 10, 2025 largely, the cross-border firing ceased under a mutual agreement. Both governments took pains to frame the outcome favourably. Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister, Ishaq Dar after the announced of ceasefire that Pakistan has always strived for peace... without compromising on sovereignty.⁷¹ India's External Affairs Minister likewise posted that a cessation of hostilities had been achieved by mutual understanding. The crisis marked a shift toward

⁶⁷ Syed Irfan Raza, "U.S. Urges Pakistan and India to Give Peace a Chance," *Dawn*, May 9, 2025,

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1909583#:~:text=United%20States%20on%20Thursday%20urged,down%20tensions%20in%20the%20region>.

⁶⁸ Moed W. Yusuf, "Has the U.S. Prevented Another India-Pakistan War?," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, May 5, 2025, <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/has-us-prevented-another-india-pakistan-war>.

⁶⁹ Niha Masih et al., "India and Pakistan Agree to Ceasefire, Then Resume Fight," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2025, sec. World,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/05/09/india-pakistan-military-attacks/>.

⁷⁰ Marco Rubio, "Announcing a U.S.-Brokered Ceasefire between India and Pakistan," *U.S. Department of State*, May 10, 2025,

<https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/05/announcing-a-u-s-brokered-ceasefire-between-india-and-pakistan/>.

⁷¹ Staff Report, "Pakistan, India Agree to Full, Immediate Ceasefire, De-escalation," *Pakistan Today*, May 10, 2025, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/05/10/pakistan-india-agree-to-full-immediate-ceasefire-de-escalation/>.

simultaneous multi-domain manoeuvre, where cost imposition depended on reciprocal restraint, revealing the emergence of new sub-conventional rungs below the nuclear threshold. Strategic signalling is now less about overt nuclear gestures and more about calibrated coercion through ISR-enabled precision strikes and information warfare.⁷² Thus, rather than an outright war, the said crisis functioned as a bargaining interaction in which each move depended on how credibly the adversary could and would counter-move. Both sides were caught in Schelling's logic: winning depends as much on shaping the opponent's choices as on military strength.⁷³

Survey on Strategic Dynamics of the Pahalgam Crisis

To strengthen the empirical grounding of this study, a structured expert survey was administered using a Google Forms instrument designed around the article's core analytical themes. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items assessing perceptions of compellence efficacy, deterrence credibility, escalation risks associated with emerging technologies, the role of third-party mediation, and the implications of divergent post-crisis interpretations. Respondents included scholars and practitioners in Strategic Studies, International Relations, Nuclear Politics, and related fields across India, Pakistan, and China, ensuring cross-national perspective diversity. Responses were exported to Excel and analysed in SPSS version 27 using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to identify patterned trends in assessment. The instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86, supporting the reliability of composite interpretation. While the findings are not statistically generalisable due to sample size constraints of 24 respondents, the survey provides systematically structured expert insight that complements the qualitative case analysis and enhances the analytic credibility of the article's conclusions.

⁷² Rabia Akhtar, "Fast Wars, Steady Thresholds: Why South Asia's Nuclear Restraint Persists in a Compressed Battlespace," *The Wire*, June 13, 2025, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/south-asias-nuclear-restraint-persists-india-pakistan>.

⁷³ Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 5.

Table No. 1
Strategic Dynamics of Pahalgam Crisis

Q#	Question Gist	Summary of Expert Responses	Interpretation of Responses
Q1	Effectiveness of India's "punishment-plus" compellence (Operation Sindoor) in coercing Pakistan	Over 70% rated it as not at all or slightly effective; only 13% found it moderately to highly effective.	Survey consensus is that compellence strategy did not substantively coerce Pakistan into altering its stance.
Q2	Effectiveness of Pakistan's "QPQ Plus" deterrence (Operation Bunyan-ul-Marsoos) in deterring Indian strikes	61% rated it very to highly effective; 22% moderately effective; only 17% considered it slightly or not effective.	The prevailing view is that Pakistan's counter-action deterred India to stand down from further escalation.
Q3	Emerging Technologies (drones, cyber, missiles) (increased risk of inadvertent escalation)	83% agreed or strongly agreed; 9% disagreed; and 8% remained neutral.	The expert consensus held integration of emerging technologies in the Pahalgam crisis significantly increased the complexity and risks of escalation, enabling unpredictable pathways to inadvertent escalation.
Q4	External actors are indispensable for crisis control; bilateral mechanisms are insufficient	78% agreed or strongly agreed; 17% remained neutral; and only 4% disagreed.	An overwhelming share of experts agreed that the U.S.-brokered mediation underscored that third-party actors remain the reliable safety valve in Indo-Pak escalations and that bilateral mechanisms alone would likely have been insufficient.
Q5	Divergent crisis interpretations by India and Pakistan pose future instability risks	91% agreed or strongly agreed; 9% were neutral; none disagreed.	There is broad agreement that if Indians and Pakistanis interpret the outcomes of this crisis in fundamentally different (and self-serving) ways, the stage is set for

			dangerous miscalculations down the line.
<i>Expert assessments point to four patterns (1) limited Indian strikes showed doubtful lasting impact, (2) Pakistan's response stabilized escalation, (3) Emerging technologies heightened inadvertent risk, crisis termination relied on external mediation, and (4) Divergent post-crisis narratives may shape future escalation dynamics.</i>			

Post-Crisis Lessons and Competing Interpretations of Deterrence Stability

The May 2025 Pahalgam crisis illustrates how overt nuclearisation, coupled with a regionally triangular strategic setting, has compressed power asymmetries and hence crisis management has become complex. Pakistan's demonstrated ability to respond conventionally to India's incursions using precision strikes, advanced air defence systems, and cyber operations showed that it could reinforce deterrence and wrest crisis initiative despite conventional asymmetry in arms. The antecedent argument was corroborated in Pahalgam crisis as Pakistan appeared to restore the conventional deterrence from the onset and corrected any mis-apprehension that it would either back down or immediately escalate to signal the use of nuclear bargain. This is a notable evolution from earlier post-1998 episodes; for example, in 1999 or 2001-02, Pakistan's conventional inferiority led it to lean heavily on nuclear signalling to deter an overwhelming conventional Indian attack. In 2025, Pakistan engaged India conventionally, demonstrating restraint (limiting targets to Indian military sites) and strategic discipline. Such calibration, intentional restraint and strategic rationality suggest that the nuclear thresholds are less likely to be tested in future crises. The crisis, however, exposed additional risks, as India and Pakistan appeared willing to engage in high-intensity conflict under the nuclear overhang, practicing a form of calibrated brinksmanship while seeking to keep escalation within their respective thresholds of tolerance. Yet, as the multi-domain escalation demonstrated, involving drones, missiles, cyber operations, and information warfare, escalation control became increasingly challenging, especially as both states appeared to assume that mutual nuclear deterrence would prevent the conflict from crossing the conventional nuclear threshold despite mounting domestic pressures. For instance, Happymon Jacob, writing from an Indian strategic standpoint, offers several arguments to suggest that Operation Sindoor

represents a doctrinal pivot in India's counter-terrorism policy. In his view, the operation treats terrorism as a *casus belli* for conventional military strikes, blurs the sub-conventional/conventional and conventional/nuclear thresholds, establishes a tripwire deterrence posture, lowers evidentiary burdens for retaliation, and reinforces a more rigid paradigm in India-Pakistan crisis behaviour.⁷⁴ In his follow-up article titled, *Deterrence by Exhaustion*, Jacob argues that India's response to the Pahalgam terror attack has evolved into a clear 'punishment-plus' strategy termed 'deterrence by exhaustion,' underpinned by nine interlocking elements. These include publicly assured conventional retaliation for future sub-conventional strikes; progressively raising the costs and intensity of responses; blurring the line between terrorism and military aggression; containing escalation below the nuclear threshold; embedding an intrinsic off-ramp after punitive strikes; leveraging sustained pressure to deplete Pakistani resources; accepting only technically limited third-party ceasefire mediation; rejecting political concessions as de-escalation levers; and narrowing bilateral dialogue to discrete issues like the Indus Waters Treaty.⁷⁵ Dr. Rabia Akhtar posting from a Pakistan's strategic perspective argues that the Pahalgam episode challenges prevailing assumptions about Pakistan's conventional deterrence limitations under the nuclear overhang. Despite India's attacks, Islamabad successfully defended itself, effectively engaged Rafales and drones, and re-established credible conventional deterrence without resorting to any signalling on paying a nuclear bargain. Crucially, neither side crossed the nuclear threshold. The clash unfolded within a fragile space of managed escalation below the ultimate red line. Dr. Akhtar calls for institutionalising crisis-management mechanisms to codify this restraint and avert an inadvertent drift into nuclear war.⁷⁶ In the midst of crisis, on May 10, 2025, Zahir Kazmi cautioned that India's attempt to "codify coercion, blur thresholds, and claim escalation dominance is unlikely to succeed soon." He emphasised measured doctrines like Pakistan's Quid Pro Quo Plus (QPQ Plus) cannot be abandoned overnight, even amid reactive, disinformation-driven strikes. True deterrence,

⁷⁴ Happymon Jacob, "Twelve Arguments to Make Sense of 'Operation Sindoor'," *IndiasWorld*, May 7, 2025, <https://indiasworld.in/twelve-arguments-to-make-sense-of-operation-sindoor/>.

⁷⁵ Happymon Jacob, "'Deterrence by Exhaustion': Nine Elements of India's Emerging Strategy Against Terrorism," *India's World*, May 12, 2025, <https://indiasworld.in/deterrence-by-exhaustion-nine-elements-of-indias-emerging-strategy-against-terrorism/>.

⁷⁶ Rabia Akhtar, Ph.D., Facebook Post, May 10, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/16JGQ2y87L/?mibextid=wwXIfr>.

he argued, is demonstrated by restraint and “what didn’t happen,” invoking Santayana’s warning against those who script “false flags.”⁷⁷ Jointly attending the Shangri La dialogue (May/June 2025) in Singapore, India’s Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), General Anil Chauhan and Pakistan’s Chairman Joint Chiefs, General Sahir Shamshad Mirza posited their perspectives regarding the Pahalgam crisis. While, both the generals agreed that nuclear signalling did not materialise during the May 2025 clash but diverged on future risks. General Chauhan emphasises military rationality and argues that, if conventional conflict stays below the nuclear threshold, rational actors will restrain themselves even in a nuclear scenario.⁷⁸ By contrast, General Mirza warned regarding the risks of strategic miscalculations, which may occur under crisis pressure, leaving open the possibility of nuclear use.⁷⁹ Thus, India’s and Pakistan’s top military leaders extracted tangent lessons from the same strategic events, reflecting their distinct doctrinal lenses. Ultimately, both militaries and political leaders will have to internalise restraint measures and prepare for nuclear crisis management, future conflicts may regress into nuclear exchanges from the outset. India’s Chief of Defence Staff posits that there is ample room for calibrated conventional operations without crossing into actual use of nuclear weapons. Pakistan’s military leadership, however, counters that even below any nuclear threshold, crises can spiral unexpectedly, leaving little margin for error.

The diversification of standpoints on the issue of managing and dominating the escalation is one of the key takeaways of the Pahalgam crisis. Walter Ladwig characterises Operation Sindoor as calibrated coercion and as per his contention India demonstrated controlled risk-taking, precision targeting, and self-imposed restraint, embedding cross-border punitive strikes within a limited-war doctrine without crossing nuclear thresholds.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Zahir Kazmi (@zahirkazmi), X |Post, May 10, 2025, <https://x.com/zahirkazmi?s=21&t=2M1dTP54eXgGGWxZhcaqzA>.

⁷⁸ Haslinda Amin and Philip Heijmans, “India Confirms It Lost Fighter Jets in Recent Pakistan Conflict,” *Bloomberg*, May 31, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-05-31/india-confirms-it-lost-fighter-jets-in-recent-pakistan-conflict>

⁷⁹ Idrees Ali and Raju Gopalakrishnan, “Exclusive: Pakistan, India Close to Completing Border Troop Reduction, Senior Pakistani General Says,” *Reuters*, May 30, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/pakistan-india-close-completing-border-troop-reduction-senior-pakistani-general-2025-05-30/>

⁸⁰ Ladwig, “Calibrated Force.”

In contrast, Kazmi argues that such interpretations overlook Pakistan's reciprocal deterrence posture. From his perspective, the triggering incident was contested, and subsequent strikes were viewed in Islamabad as coercive signalling rather than counterterrorism. Pakistan's integrated response, framed domestically as disciplined and proportionate, was presented as an evidence that conventional deterrence remained intact and escalation dominance unachieved.⁸¹ As long as one side seeks symbolic dominance and the other seeks deterrence by denial, there is potential for future conflict initiation and protraction. The crisis underscored an emerging crisis pattern: both sides increasingly treat sub-conventional provocations and disputed attributions as triggers for calibrated conventional reprisals below the nuclear threshold, enabled by drones, cyber tools, precision weapons, and external strategic partnerships.⁸² New Delhi has proclaimed that the once-sacrosanct thresholds between sub-conventional terrorism and conventional retaliation are now ineffective and it now has the resolve and readiness to punish every act of terrorism through kinetic response.⁸³ At the same time Islamabad's quid pro quo-plus posture ensures measured and potent response at all tiers of strategic spectrum. Escalatory strikes by both the dyads in the Pahalgam crisis pushed the boundaries of conventional warfare beneath the nuclear threshold. By signalling a readiness to accept higher risks these strikes tested the resolve of either side without fracturing the basic deterrent balance. However, growing arsenals, multipolar pressures and actions by non-nuclear states can potentially complicate escalation control.⁸⁴ This creates a dangerous equilibrium wherein each side trains for constant reciprocity, domestic pressures mount for ever-stronger reprisals, and any misread radar track or ambiguous drone incursion could trigger an

⁸¹ Zahir Kazmi, "No Space for War: Marka-e-Haq and the Logic of Deterrence in South Asia," *BASIC News*, May 20, 2025, <https://basicint.org/analysis/no-space-for-war-marka-e-haq-logic-deterrence-in-south-asia>.

⁸² Aqil Shah, "The Next War Between India and Pakistan," *Foreign Affairs*, May 23, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/next-war-between-india-and-pakistan>.

⁸³ Satinder K. Saini, "Why We Stopped When We Stopped," *Economic Times*, May 14, 2025, <https://m.economictimes.com/etreporter/author-satinder-k-saini-479269797.cms>.

⁸⁴ Neelam Raaj, "Operation Sindoor's Changed Rulebook, but Hasn't Undercut Nuclear Deterrence: Ankit Panda," *Times of India*, Sunday Times: All That Matters, May 25, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/all-that-matters/operation-sindoors-changed-rulebook-but-hasnt-undercut-nuclear-deterrence-ankit-panda/articleshow/121384214.cms>.

unintended spiral. Without clear, mutually respected lines in the sand, a controlled *new normal* may instead become a runaway crisis that is far harder to control. Farhan Siddiqi in his piece for Stimson Centre captures this ‘resolve paradox,’ wherein India and Pakistan in recent brinkmanship highlighted the risky conventional warfare strategies and a win-at-all-costs mentality. In both 2019 (Pulwama-Balakot) and 2025 (Pahalgam), competing claims to have upheld national honour and imposed meaningful costs enabled a rapid slide down from the brink. The problem with this pattern of de-escalation is that each ceasefire merely resets the rivalry at a higher rung of escalation. Each crisis raises the bar for future aggression. Closed communication and hyper-nationalist media increase the risk of cataclysmic miscalculation, especially with nuclear weapons involved.⁸⁵ The foregoing discussion reveals that the Pahalgam crisis did not produce a single agreed lesson; rather, it generated competing Indian, Pakistani, and neutral interpretations of deterrence stability, as summarised below.

Table No.2
Competing Interpretations of the Pahalgam Crisis 3(2025)

Themes	Indian Perspective	Pakistani Perspective	Analytical Perspective
Operation Sindoor	Calibrated counter-terror strike to impose costs	Coercive action based on contested attribution	Limited conventional strike below nuclear threshold
Compellence /Deterrence	Punishment-plus strategy to compel change	QPQ Plus restored deterrence	Compellence and deterrence interacted inconclusively
Military Balance	Precision force challenged restraint	Conventional response offset asymmetry	Technology narrowed capability gaps
Escalation	Calibrated coercion remained controllable	Escalation could spiral despite restraint	Managed escalation coexisted with risk

⁸⁵ Farhan Hanif Siddiqi, “The Resolve Paradox in India-Pakistan Crisis Bargaining,” Defence & Security, South Asian Voices, May 23, 2025, <https://southasianvoices.org/sec-m-pak-r-resolve-paradox-india-pakistan-bargaining-05-23-2025/>.

Stability–Instability	Nuclear deterrence enabled conventional space	Nuclear deterrence did not remove miscalculation risk	Paradox validated under emerging-tech pressures
Emerging Technologies	ISR, drones, and precision strikes aided coercion	Drones, cyber, and air defence aided denial	Technology compressed decision timelines
Nuclear Dimension	Room exists below nuclear threshold	Sub-threshold crises can still escalate	Nuclear threshold held but remained salient
Crisis Outcome	India signaled a new retaliation template	Pakistan denied escalation dominance	Both claimed success, deepening narrative divergence
Strategic Lesson	Retain punitive strike options	Preserve QPQ Plus response	Build crisis-management mechanisms
Long-Term Impact	Terrorism allegations will trigger automated kinetic response	Reciprocal deterrence will constrain coercion	Tactical volatility and narrative competition will grow

Source: Author's analysis.

Conclusion

The Pahalgam crisis is a stark reminder to the strategic establishments of two rival states that maintaining restraint in the strained nuclearised strategic environment of South Asia will always remain an enduring challenge. These states define their strategic red lines with tangent perspectives, entailing misreading each other's intentions during the crisis. It also reflects on the transforming nature of conflict vis-à-vis the emergence of new destructive yet precision-oriented technologies. The unique blend of legacy of recurrent crises, nuclear rivalry and challenges posed by modernising weaponry adds to complexity of the regional strategic crisis. India has gradually moved toward a more compellent strategic posture and seeks to affect Pakistan's strategic behavior through (force) coercion or at best the deterrence by punishment strategy. However, it faces clear limits in use of force beyond a certain threshold due to fear of retaliation. Pakistan's deterrent strategy against India is grounded in credible retaliation, and tends to gain effectiveness through QPQ Plus response as the crises move up the escalation ladder. The emerging disruptive technologies (EDTs), precision weapons, and cyber capabilities have accelerated the pace of conflict and have blurred escalation boundaries between ascendent rungs. Especially, in the nuclearised

South Asia, where geographic distances are shorter, decision-making windows are reduced to minutes and seconds, all these factors synthesise and increase the risks of apocalyptic outcome. External actors, particularly the U.S., continue to play an important mediatory role, underscoring the lack of dependable bilateral crisis-management mechanisms. The Pahalgam crisis revealed differing interpretations of conflict outcome, with each contending side defining success at its own terms. When both states claim success under separate logics, the likelihood of future crises increase with no common lessons of restraint learned. In such perilous setting, strategic stability depends not only on nuclear deterrence but also on perception management, communication and escalation control.