INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF SOUTH ASIA

Deterrence Stability in South Asia: Crises and Debates

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 17, 2026 • 23 min read



India and Pakistan became open nuclear powers in May 1998. Since then the central question of South Asian security has been simple to state but hard to answer: **has the bomb made the region safer or more dangerous?** Nuclear weapons have not stopped India–Pakistan conflict. The two countries have gone through a series of serious crises – Kargil (1999), the Twin Peaks standoff (2001–02), Mumbai (2008), Uri (2016), Pulwama–Balakot (2019) and Operation Sindoor (2025). But none of these crises has turned into a full-scale war, and nuclear weapons have never been used. Scholars read this record in very different ways.

To study this debate, we first need to be clear about what “stability” means in nuclear strategy. Scholars use three related ideas.

Deterrence stability

Deterrence is **stable** when neither side has a reason to start a major war, because each knows that the other can inflict unacceptable damage in return. The key requirement is a **secure second-strike capability** – forces that can survive an enemy first strike and still retaliate. When both sides have such forces, the situation is often called **mutual vulnerability** or mutual assured destruction (MAD).

Crisis stability

Crisis stability is about behaviour **during a crisis**. A situation is crisis-stable when neither side feels pressure to strike first out of fear that the other is about to strike (the “use them or lose them” problem). Thomas Schelling called this the problem of the “reciprocal fear of surprise attack”. Crisis stability falls when:

- forces are vulnerable to a first strike;
- warning and decision times are very short;
- leaders have poor information or misread signals;
- command and control is weak or pre-delegated.

Arms race stability

Arms race stability means that neither side feels compelled to build more and better weapons in response to the other. It falls when new technologies (MIRVs, missile defence, hypersonic missiles) appear to give one side a possible first-strike advantage, forcing the other to respond.

Why South Asia is a special case

South Asia differs from the US–Soviet Cold War in important ways, and these differences make stability harder:

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- **Geographical proximity**: India and Pakistan share a long border. Missile flight times between them are only a few minutes, so warning time is very short.
- **Unresolved territorial dispute**: Kashmir remains a live dispute, unlike the relatively settled European frontier of the Cold War.
- **Sub-conventional conflict**: cross-border terrorism by non-state groups repeatedly triggers crises. This is the most distinctive feature of South Asian crises.
- **Conventional asymmetry**: India is conventionally stronger. Pakistan relies on nuclear weapons, including a first-use posture, to offset this gap.
- **History of hostility**: the two states have fought four wars (1947–48, 1965, 1971 and 1999).
- **A third nuclear power**: China's presence creates a **strategic chain** (China → India → Pakistan) rather than a simple pair.

The rest of this topic examines the theoretical debate (the stability–instability paradox and the optimist–pessimist debate), the record of crises, the role of outside powers, and the new sources of risk.

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The Stability–Instability Paradox

The original idea

The **stability–instability paradox** was first described by **Glenn Snyder** (1965), and the idea is also associated with **B. H. Liddell Hart** and **Robert Jervis**. Snyder's argument was:

> *When two states have mutual nuclear deterrence, a **major war becomes less likely** (stability at the strategic level), because neither can win it. But for the same reason, each side may feel **freer to engage in limited conflict** at lower levels (instability at the sub-strategic level), confident that the other will not escalate to nuclear war.*

In simple words, the bomb makes big wars unlikely but may make small wars more likely.

Application to South Asia

The paradox fits South Asia closely, and it is one of the most frequently used frameworks in exam answers.

- **Pakistan's side of the paradox**: scholars such as **S. Paul Kapur** argue that nuclear weapons gave Pakistan a **shield** behind which it could support insurgency and terrorism in Kashmir and India. Pakistan calculated that India would not respond with a large conventional attack because of the risk of nuclear escalation. Kargil (1999), which came only a year after the tests, is the classic example: Pakistani troops occupied heights across the LoC, apparently believing that nuclear weapons would limit India's response.
- **India's side of the paradox**: India responded by searching for space for **limited conventional war below the nuclear threshold**. Cold Start (around 2004), the "surgical strikes" of 2016, the Balakot air strike of 2019 and Operation Sindoor in 2025 are all attempts to show that nuclear weapons do not prevent Indian punishment. In other words, India too exploits the "instability" space – but from the other direction.

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The paradox in a South Asian form

Many scholars therefore describe South Asia as showing a **“double” or “two-sided” stability–instability paradox**:

Level	What happens
Strategic (nuclear)	No full-scale war; no nuclear use; both sides avoid crossing the other’s declared red lines
Conventional	Limited strikes and short wars become thinkable (Kargil, Balakot, Sindoor)
Sub-conventional	Militancy and terror attacks continue to trigger crises

Criticism of the paradox

- **Too mechanical**: critics say it ignores politics, domestic pressures and leaders’ beliefs, which shape whether a state takes risks.
- **Causation is unclear**: Pakistan’s support for militancy began **before** it had nuclear weapons (for example, in Punjab in the 1980s and Kashmir from 1989). Nuclear weapons may have strengthened, but did not create, this behaviour.
- **Both sides claim it works in their favour**: Pakistan sees its nuclear shield as working; India sees its limited strikes as proof that the shield can be pierced. This shows that the paradox does not tell us where the real threshold lies.

The stability–instability paradox is a good starting point, but it must be combined with an analysis of crises, which follows.

Major India–Pakistan Crises under the Nuclear Shadow

The best way to judge deterrence stability in South Asia is to look at how actual crises began, escalated and ended. Scholars usually divide them into crises of **covert or “opaque” nuclearization** (before 1998) and crises of **overt nuclearization** (after 1998).

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Crises of the opaque nuclear period

Brasstacks crisis (1986–87)

- India’s very large military exercise, Brasstacks, under Army Chief General K. Sundarji, alarmed Pakistan, which moved its own forces forward. For some weeks the two armies faced each other along the Punjab and Rajasthan border.
- In an interview in early 1987, Pakistani scientist **A. Q. Khan** told Indian journalist Kuldip Nayar that Pakistan had the bomb. This was widely seen as **nuclear signalling**.
- The crisis was defused through diplomacy and an agreement to pull back troops.
- **Significance**: it showed that even an unclear nuclear capability could be used for signalling, and it pushed both sides to agree on the **Agreement on Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities** (signed 1988, in force 1991).

Kashmir crisis (1990)

- The insurgency in Kashmir began in 1989–90. India accused Pakistan of supporting it, and troop movements on both sides created fears of war.
- The United States sent Deputy National Security Adviser **Robert Gates** to Islamabad and New Delhi in May 1990 to urge restraint (the “Gates mission”).
- Some writers (for example, Seymour Hersh) later claimed that Pakistan had prepared nuclear weapons for use; most scholars treat this claim with caution.
- **Significance**: this was the first crisis in which the **US acted as crisis manager** between two nuclear-capable rivals, a pattern that continued later.

Crises after the 1998 tests

Kargil War (May–July 1999)

- Within a year of the tests and only months after the **Lahore Declaration** (February 1999), Pakistani troops and militants occupied heights on the Indian side of the LoC in the Kargil sector.

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- India responded with **Operation Vijay**, but its political leadership ordered the forces **not to cross the LoC**, even though this made military operations costlier. This restraint is often explained by the nuclear factor and the wish to keep international support.
- Statements by Pakistani leaders hinting at nuclear use added to fears. US President **Bill Clinton** met Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Washington on **4 July 1999** and pressed him to withdraw; Pakistan then pulled back.
- **Significance**: Kargil is the textbook case of the **stability–instability paradox** – a limited war was fought under the nuclear shadow, but it did not escalate into a full war.

Twin Peaks crisis (2001–02)

- The attack on India's **Parliament on 13 December 2001** by Pakistan-based militants led India to launch **Operation Parakram**, the biggest mobilisation since 1971. About half a million troops were deployed on the border for around ten months.
- The crisis had two peaks: January 2002 and **May–June 2002** (after the Kaluchak massacre). Nuclear rhetoric was heard on both sides.
- Strong diplomatic pressure from the US and the UK, and Musharraf's speech of **12 January 2002** promising action against militant groups, helped defuse it.
- **Significance**: India's slow mobilisation gave the international community time to intervene and Pakistan time to prepare. This experience led Indian strategists to develop **Cold Start**, a doctrine of quicker, limited offensives.

Mumbai attacks (November 2008)

- Ten Lashkar-e-Taiba gunmen attacked Mumbai from **26 to 29 November 2008**, killing over 160 people.
- India chose **not to use military force**. It relied on diplomacy, international pressure and evidence-sharing.
- **Significance**: some scholars see this as proof that nuclear deterrence restrained India; others point to India's lack of ready military options. The restraint also caused domestic criticism in India, which shaped later policy.

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Uri and the “surgical strikes” (September 2016)

- After militants attacked an army camp at **Uri on 18 September 2016**, India carried out cross-LoC raids on launch pads on **29 September 2016** and publicly announced them.
- Pakistan denied that any strikes had taken place, which allowed both sides to step back without further escalation.
- **Significance**: India **publicly** claimed a cross-border military response for the first time, signalling a shift away from restraint.

Pulwama–Balakot (February 2019)

- A suicide bombing on a CRPF convoy at **Pulwama on 14 February 2019** killed 40 personnel. Jaish-e-Mohammed claimed responsibility.
- On **26 February** the Indian Air Force struck a target at **Balakot** in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – the first Indian air strike on undisputed Pakistani territory since 1971.
- On **27 February** Pakistan responded with air strikes near the LoC. In the air battle an Indian pilot, **Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman**, was captured and returned on **1 March** as a “peace gesture”.
- Both sides made claims that the other disputed. There were also reports of missile-related threats, but the crisis ended without further strikes.
- **Significance**: both sides crossed lines that had earlier been avoided, but each also found a way to declare victory and stop.

Pahalgam and Operation Sindoor (April–May 2025)

- On **22 April 2025**, militants killed 26 people, mostly tourists, at Baisaran near **Pahalgam** in Jammu and Kashmir. India blamed Pakistan-based groups; Pakistan denied involvement and called for a neutral investigation.
- India took non-military steps first, including holding the **Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance**.

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- On **7 May 2025** India launched **Operation Sindoor**, striking nine sites in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir that it described as terrorist infrastructure. Pakistan called its military response **Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos**.
- Over four days the conflict expanded to drone and missile exchanges, heavy firing along the LoC, and strikes on military targets including air bases.
- Fighting intensified sharply on 9–10 May. The United States and other countries feared rapid escalation and pressed both sides for a ceasefire.
- Hostilities stopped on **10 May 2025** after an understanding between the two **Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs)**.

Significance of Sindoor for deterrence stability:

- It was the first conflict between the two states fought largely with **precision missiles, drones and long-range air-launched weapons**, and it went deeper into Pakistani territory than any action since 1971.
- India’s declared approach is that it will respond militarily to major terror attacks, will **not accept “nuclear blackmail”**, and will not distinguish between terrorists and their sponsors. Pakistan, in turn, claimed that its response restored deterrence.
- Scholars disagree about what it shows: one view is that it widened the space for conventional war below the nuclear threshold; another is that it made escalation faster and less predictable.

Summary table of crises

Crisis	Trigger	How it ended	Lesson for stability
Brasstacks 1986–87	Indian exercise	Diplomacy, troop pullback	Opaque nuclear signalling
Kashmir 1990	Insurgency, troop moves	US (Gates mission)	US as crisis manager

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Kargil 1999	Pakistani intrusion across LoC	Clinton–Sharif meeting; withdrawal	Limited war under nuclear shadow
Twin Peaks 2001–02	Parliament attack	US/UK pressure; Musharraf's pledge	Slow mobilisation gave space; led to Cold Start
Mumbai 2008	LeT attack	No military response	Restraint under nuclear shadow
Uri 2016	Attack on army camp	Pakistan denied strikes	Public cross-LoC raids
Pulwama–Balakot 2019	JeM suicide bombing	Pilot returned; both claimed victory	Air strikes on Pakistani territory
Pahalgam–Sindoor 2025	Terror attack on tourists	DGMO understanding, 10 May	Missile–drone war; faster escalation

Patterns across crises

1. **Trigger**: nearly every post-1998 crisis began with a **terrorist attack** linked by India to Pakistan-based groups.
2. **Rising level of Indian response**: restraint (2001–02, 2008) → cross-LoC raids (2016) → air strike in Pakistan (2019) → missile and drone strikes across Pakistan (2025). Each crisis went higher on the escalation ladder than the last.
3. **Short duration**: recent crises have been compressed into days, not months.
4. **Third-party role**: the US and others have played a role in most crises, though India rejects mediation.
5. **Face-saving exits**: both sides usually find a way to claim victory, which helps end the crisis.
6. **No nuclear use**: every crisis has stayed below the nuclear threshold so far.

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Third Parties and Crisis Management

A special feature of South Asian crises is the role of **outside powers**, especially the United States. Scholars such as **Moeed Yusuf** (*Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments*, 2018) call this **“brokered bargaining”**: instead of a simple two-player game, South Asian crises are a three-cornered game, in which India and Pakistan each try to influence the third party as well as each other.

Why outside powers get involved

- The fear of nuclear use makes any India–Pakistan crisis a **global concern**.
- The US has close ties with both states (India as a strategic partner; Pakistan as a past ally and counter-terrorism partner).
- Other states, such as the UK, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran and China, also have interests and contacts on one or both sides.

Record of crisis management

Crisis	Main third-party role
1990	US Gates mission to both capitals
1999 Kargil	Clinton pressed Sharif to withdraw (4 July 1999)
2001–02	US Secretary of State Colin Powell, Deputy Richard Armitage and UK leaders shuttled between capitals
2008	US and UK pressed Pakistan to act against LeT
2019	US, Saudi Arabia and UAE reportedly helped to defuse tension and secure the pilot’s release
2025	US Vice President and Secretary of State contacted both sides; Gulf states also active

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The 2025 controversy over mediation

After Operation Sindoor, the question of third-party involvement became politically sensitive.

- US President **Donald Trump** repeatedly claimed that the US had brokered the ceasefire and that he had used trade as leverage.
- **India rejected** this account. It said that the cessation of hostilities was agreed directly between the two DGMOs, that trade was not discussed, and that India does not accept mediation on India–Pakistan issues. Prime Minister Modi reportedly conveyed this directly to President Trump in June 2025.
- **Pakistan welcomed** the US role and thanked Washington.

This disagreement reflects an old pattern: **India prefers bilateralism** (based on the Simla Agreement, 1972) and resists outside involvement in Kashmir, while **Pakistan seeks internationalisation** of the dispute.

Implications for stability

- **Positive**: outside pressure has helped end crises quickly and given leaders a face-saving way to step back.
- **Negative (moral hazard)**: if each side expects outsiders to step in, it may take **greater risks**, believing that someone will stop the crisis before it goes too far. Some scholars argue that Pakistan's strategy of nuclear signalling partly aims to draw in outside powers.
- **Declining reliability**: outside powers may be distracted (Ukraine, the Middle East), less trusted, or less willing to act. A crisis in which no one intervenes in time could be more dangerous.

Bilateral mechanisms

Alongside third parties, India and Pakistan have some direct mechanisms:

- **DGMO hotline** (since 1971; used to agree the 2025 cessation of hostilities).

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- Hotline between foreign secretaries (2004).
- **Agreement on Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations** (1988): both sides exchange lists of nuclear facilities every **1 January**.
- **Agreement on Pre-notification of Flight Testing of Ballistic Missiles** (2005).
- **Agreement on Reducing the Risk from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons** (2007; extended several times).
- **LoC ceasefire understanding** (2003; recommitted in February 2021).

These mechanisms are useful but limited. There is no regular nuclear dialogue, and political relations have been frozen for long periods. (Arms control and risk reduction are covered in detail in Topic 5.)

The Optimist–Pessimist Debate

The theoretical debate over South Asian nuclear stability is a regional version of a wider debate in international relations about the spread of nuclear weapons.

The general debate: Waltz vs Sagan

The classic statement is **Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate*** (1995; later editions *A Debate Renewed* and *An Enduring Debate*).

Kenneth Waltz – the proliferation optimist

- A **structural realist**, Waltz argued that **“more may be better”**. Nuclear weapons make war very costly and very visible, so rational states become cautious.
- New nuclear states will behave like the old ones: they will build secure second-strike forces and avoid war with each other.
- On South Asia, Waltz argued that nuclear weapons had made full-scale India–Pakistan war much less likely.

Scott Sagan – the proliferation pessimist

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- Using **organisation theory**, Sagan argued that **“more will be worse”**. States are not single rational actors; nuclear weapons are controlled by organisations, especially militaries, with their own biases.
- Military organisations tend to: prefer **preventive war** and offensive doctrines; neglect **safety** and fail to build robust command and control; and make it hard to achieve secure second-strike forces quickly.
- In South Asia, Sagan pointed to **military dominance in Pakistan**, Kargil, close calls and the risk of **accidents and unauthorised use**.

The South Asian debate: Ganguly vs Kapur

The main regional statement is **Šumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, *India, Pakistan, and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia*** (2010).

Šumit Ganguly – the optimist case

- Nuclear deterrence has worked: despite many crises, there has been **no full-scale war since 1998**.
- In Kargil, India deliberately limited its operations to its own side of the LoC, and in 2001–02 it did not go to war despite massive mobilisation. Nuclear weapons induced **caution**.
- Leaders on both sides understand the dangers and have built crisis-management habits.

S. Paul Kapur – the pessimist case

- In *Dangerous Deterrent: Nuclear Weapons Proliferation and Conflict in South Asia* (2007), Kapur argued that nuclear weapons have **made South Asia more unstable**.
- Nuclear weapons emboldened the **weaker, revisionist state** (Pakistan) to pursue aggressive policies such as Kargil and support for militancy, because it believed India could not respond strongly.
- India in turn adopted more aggressive doctrines (Cold Start, punitive strikes) to show that the nuclear shield could be pierced.

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- He contrasted the late 1980s–1990s with the more violent post-1998 period.

Other important voices

- **Vipin Narang** (*Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, 2014): Pakistan's **asymmetric escalation** posture deters India's conventional attacks more effectively than India's assured retaliation posture deters Pakistani sub-conventional attacks. Doctrine shapes stability.
- **Rajesh Basrur** (*Minimum Deterrence and India's Nuclear Security*, 2006): India's minimum deterrence posture supports stability, but both sides' risk-taking is a concern.
- **Michael Krepon** (Stimson Center): stressed the dangers of the stability–instability paradox and the need for risk reduction.
- **Feroz Hassan Khan** (*Eating Grass*, 2012): offers a Pakistani view of how nuclear weapons serve as an equaliser against India.
- **Moeed Yusuf**: third-party "brokered bargaining" shapes crisis outcomes.
- **Ashley Tellis**: wrote on India's "force-in-being" and later warned that India's limited-war approach carries rising escalation risk.

Comparing the two positions

Point	Optimists	Pessimists
Theory	Structural realism, rational deterrence	Organisation theory, psychology
Main claim	Nuclear weapons prevent major war	Nuclear weapons encourage risky behaviour and accidents
Evidence	No full war or nuclear use since 1998	Kargil, Twin Peaks, Balakot, Sindoor; militancy
On Pakistan	Rational state that wants survival	Revisionist; military-dominated; uses nuclear shield
On crises	They end without war	They are increasingly frequent and intense

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Policy view	Accept nuclear deterrence	Risk reduction, arms control, resolve disputes

Evaluation

- The optimists are right that **no crisis has crossed the nuclear threshold**, and that leaders have shown caution at key moments.
- But the pessimists are right that **crises have recurred and grown more intense**, and that each one has gone higher on the escalation ladder. Luck and outside pressure, not just deterrence, played a role.
- A balanced view: nuclear weapons have produced **“ugly stability”** – they prevent total war but allow repeated, dangerous lower-level conflict. Whether this stability is **robust or fragile** depends on doctrines, technology, domestic politics and leaders’ judgement.

New Sources of Instability

The debate is no longer only about whether nuclear weapons prevent war. Since 2019, and especially since 2025, analysts have focused on **new factors that may weaken deterrence stability**.

Terrorism as the trigger

- Every major post-1998 crisis began with a terrorist attack. This gives **non-state actors** the power to start a crisis between two nuclear states.
- India’s declared policy after 2025 is that any major terror attack will be treated as an act of war and met with a military response. This **lowers the threshold for a crisis to turn into conflict**, and ties India’s hands in advance.
- Pakistan rejects responsibility for such attacks and says India acts without evidence. This dispute over **attribution** itself adds to escalation risk.

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Compressed escalation and the “new normal”

- Crises have become **shorter and faster**: Twin Peaks lasted ten months; Sindoor lasted four days.
- Precision weapons, drones and stand-off missiles allow quick strikes deep inside enemy territory, reducing the time for diplomacy.
- Each crisis sets a **new baseline**: the next crisis is likely to start at the level where the last one ended.
- Both sides claimed victory after Sindoor, which can encourage overconfidence in **escalation control**.

Tactical nuclear weapons and early use

- Pakistan’s **Nasr** and its “full spectrum deterrence” posture aim to deter even limited Indian conventional operations.
- Short-range systems may need to be **deployed forward** and may require **pre-delegation** of launch authority in war, raising the risk of accidents, theft or unauthorised use.
- India says it will retaliate massively to any nuclear use, including on its forces in Pakistan. The credibility of this threat is debated.

Conventional–nuclear entanglement

- Both sides have **dual-capable missiles** (for example, some Indian ballistic and cruise missiles, and Pakistan’s Babur and Ra’ad, can carry conventional or nuclear warheads).
- Strikes on air bases, command centres or missile units can be **misread as attacks on nuclear forces**. Reports during Sindoor about strikes near sensitive sites illustrated this danger.
- Pakistan’s **Army Rocket Force Command** (2025) for conventional missiles may sharpen this problem if its systems are hard to tell apart from nuclear ones.

New technologies

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Technology	Possible effect on stability
MIRVs (Agni-V, Mission Divyastra 2024; Pakistan's Ababeel)	One missile can hit several targets; could encourage first-strike thinking and arms racing
Ballistic missile defence (India's two-tier BMD)	May weaken the other side's second strike, pushing it to build more missiles
Hypersonic and manoeuvring weapons	Very short warning times; harder to defend against
Sea-based deterrent (Arihant class; Pakistan's Babur-3)	Improves survivability (stabilising) but raises command and control challenges at sea
Drones and loitering munitions	Lower the cost of striking; may tempt quick escalation
Cyber and space capabilities	Could disrupt nuclear command, control and early warning
Artificial intelligence	Faster decisions, but risk of automation bias and errors

Information warfare and misperception

- During Sindoor, **competing claims** about losses, aircraft shot down and damage spread very fast through social media and television.
- False or exaggerated claims can create **domestic pressure** on leaders to escalate, and can make it harder for each side to read the other's real intentions.
- **Nationalist public opinion** in both countries reduces the space for restraint.

Civil–military relations in Pakistan

- The Pakistan Army has long controlled nuclear policy through the Strategic Plans Division.
- The **27th Amendment (November 2025)** created the post of **Chief of Defence Forces** and reorganised strategic command, concentrating more authority in the army leadership. Some analysts worry about the weakening of civilian checks; others argue it brings clarity to command.

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The China factor and the strategic chain

- India’s nuclear modernisation (longer-range Agni missiles, SSBNs, MIRVs) is largely driven by **China**, whose arsenal is growing rapidly (SIPRI estimated about 620 warheads in January 2026).
- Pakistan sees India’s moves as aimed at itself and responds in turn. This **security dilemma chain** (China → India → Pakistan) makes bilateral arms control between India and Pakistan very hard.
- China’s close military relationship with Pakistan, and Pakistan’s use of Chinese-origin weapons in 2025, add a **two-front** dimension for India.

Erosion of political and legal frameworks

- The **Indus Waters Treaty** has been held in abeyance by India since April 2025. Pakistan has said that any stopping of its water would be treated as an act of war. Water is now a possible crisis trigger.
- The **Simla Agreement** and the LoC ceasefire have come under strain, and there is no structured dialogue between the two states.
- **Lack of trust** means that even existing confidence-building measures (CBMs) are used narrowly.

Conclusion

Nuclear deterrence in South Asia has passed a basic test: since 1998 there has been **no full-scale war and no nuclear use**, despite at least six serious crises. This supports the optimists’ claim that nuclear weapons make leaders cautious.

But the region has not achieved **robust stability**. The stability–instability paradox is visible on both sides: Pakistan’s nuclear shield has coexisted with cross-border militancy, and India has repeatedly sought, and widened, space for conventional punishment below the nuclear threshold. Each crisis has climbed higher on the escalation ladder, and the latest – Operation Sindoor – involved missiles and drones striking deep into both countries in a matter of days.

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The main risks today are therefore not a deliberate nuclear first strike, but **inadvertent escalation**: misreading signals, attacks on dual-use targets, compressed decision time, domestic pressure, information warfare, and the influence of new technologies. Outside powers have helped end past crises, but their role is contested and cannot be relied upon.

For exam answers, a balanced conclusion is that South Asia has a **fragile or "ugly" stability**: deterrence works at the top of the ladder, but crises below it are frequent and dangerous. Lasting stability requires not just weapons and doctrines, but **risk-reduction measures, crisis communication, and political engagement on the underlying disputes**, including terrorism and Kashmir.

Quick Revision

Item	Key fact
Stability–instability paradox	Glenn Snyder (1965): nuclear stability at top encourages limited conflict below
Brasstacks crisis	1986–87; A. Q. Khan interview; led to nuclear installations agreement (1988)
Gates mission	May 1990 Kashmir crisis
Kargil War	May–July 1999; Clinton–Sharif meeting 4 July 1999
Twin Peaks / Op Parakram	Parliament attack 13 Dec 2001; standoff to Oct 2002
Mumbai attacks	26–29 Nov 2008; no Indian military response
Surgical strikes	29 Sept 2016, after Uri (18 Sept)
Balakot	Pulwama 14 Feb 2019; air strike 26 Feb; Abhinandan returned 1 Mar
Operation Sindoor	Pahalgam 22 Apr 2025; strikes 7 May; DGMO understanding 10 May
Pakistan's 2025 response	Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos
Waltz–Sagan	*The Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (1995): "more may be better" vs "more will be worse"
Ganguly–Kapur	*India, Pakistan, and the Bomb* (2010)

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Kapur	*Dangerous Deterrent* (2007)
Moeed Yusuf	*Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments* (2018): brokered bargaining

One-line memory aids

- **Three stabilities**: deterrence (no reason to start war), crisis (no pressure to strike first), arms race (no pressure to build more).
- **Escalation ladder of Indian responses**: restraint (2002, 2008) → raids (2016) → air strike (2019) → missile–drone war (2025).
- **Optimists** = Waltz, Ganguly. **Pessimists** = Sagan, Kapur.

Exam Practice

Long-answer questions

1. Explain the concept of deterrence stability. Has nuclear deterrence brought stability to South Asia?
2. Discuss the stability–instability paradox with reference to India–Pakistan relations.
3. Critically examine the India–Pakistan crises since 1998. What do they reveal about nuclear deterrence?
4. Compare the optimist and pessimist views on nuclear stability in South Asia.
5. What is the role of third parties in managing India–Pakistan crises? Discuss with reference to 2025.
6. “Operation Sindoor has created a new normal in South Asian deterrence.” Discuss.
7. Identify the emerging sources of instability in the nuclear relationship between India and Pakistan.

Short-answer questions

1. Crisis stability
2. Stability–instability paradox

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3. Brasstacks crisis
4. Kargil War and nuclear deterrence
5. Operation Parakram
6. Balakot air strike
7. Operation Sindoor
8. Brokered bargaining
9. Conventional–nuclear entanglement
10. Waltz–Sagan debate

MCQs (UGC-NET / OPSC style)

1. The stability–instability paradox was first formulated by:
   - (a) Kenneth Waltz (b) Glenn Snyder (c) Thomas Schelling (d) Bernard Brodie
   - **Answer: (b)**

2. Which crisis led India to develop the Cold Start doctrine?
   - (a) Kargil (b) Brasstacks (c) Twin Peaks (2001–02) (d) Balakot
   - **Answer: (c)**

3. The author of *Dangerous Deterrent* (2007) is:
   - (a) Šumit Ganguly (b) S. Paul Kapur (c) Vipin Narang (d) Scott Sagan
   - **Answer: (b)**

4. Scott Sagan’s pessimism about proliferation is based mainly on:
   - (a) Structural realism (b) Organisation theory (c) Liberal institutionalism (d) Marxism
   - **Answer: (b)**

5. The 1990 crisis between India and Pakistan was defused partly through the mission of:
   - (a) Colin Powell (b) Strobe Talbott (c) Robert Gates (d) Richard Armitage

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- **Answer: (c)**

6. India and Pakistan exchange lists of nuclear installations every year on:
   - (a) 1 January (b) 26 January (c) 14 August (d) 1 July
   - **Answer: (a)**

7. Match the following:
   - A. Mumbai attacks – 1. 2016
   - B. Uri surgical strikes – 2. 2008
   - C. Balakot air strike – 3. 2025
   - D. Operation Sindoor – 4. 2019
   - **Answer: A-2, B-1, C-4, D-3**

8. Assertion (A): Kargil War is cited as an example of the stability–instability paradox.
   Reason (R): A limited war was fought between two nuclear-armed states without escalating to full-scale war.
   - **Answer: Both A and R are true, and R is the correct explanation of A.**

9. The concept of “brokered bargaining” in South Asian crises is associated with:
   - (a) Moeed Yusuf (b) Michael Krepon (c) Ashley Tellis (d) Feroz Hassan Khan
   - **Answer: (a)**

10. The hostilities of May 2025 were halted through an understanding reached between:
    - (a) the two Prime Ministers (b) the two Foreign Ministers (c) the two DGMOs (d) the two NSAs
    - **Answer: (c)**

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Suggested readings

- Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate*.
- Šumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, *India, Pakistan, and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia*.
- S. Paul Kapur, *Dangerous Deterrent*.
- Moeed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments*.
- P. R. Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema and Stephen P. Cohen, *Four Crises and a Peace Process*.
- Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*.
- Manoj Joshi and Harsh V. Pant (eds.), *Operation Sindoor: India Defines a "New Normal"* (2026).

Sources for recent developments

- Deep Learning From Operation Sindoor: Five Takeaways From a Four-Day War (War on the Rocks, January 2026)
- Op Sindoor shifted something in Pakistani nuclear command structure (ThePrint)
- Operation Sindoor and the Illusion of Control in Nuclear South Asia (The Friday Times, May 2026)
- Airpower Under the Nuclear Shadow (Small Wars Journal, June 2026)
- Walter Ladwig, Battlefield Lessons of Operation Sindoor (2026)
- India's Modi tells Trump there was no US mediation in Pakistan truce (Al Jazeera, June 2025)
- Trump says US diplomacy stopped India–Pakistan fighting (The National, May 2025)

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