

Pakistan-India Nuclear Competition, and the Role of Media

Abstract

One of the most important and unstable topics in contemporary world security is the nuclear competition between India and Pakistan. Due to their extensive nuclear arsenals and complicated battle histories, as well as the ongoing Kashmir issue, both countries are constantly at risk of miscalculation and escalation. Although some contend that nuclear deterrence has avoided major conventional conflicts, the possibility of disastrous results never goes away. In addition to contrasting their nuclear doctrines and postures and emphasizing significant periods in their nuclear advancements, this study explores the historical background of India-Pakistan relations and the impact of the media on public opinion and the course of events. In order to illustrate how media coverage can heighten tensions and make de-escalation attempts more difficult, significant events like the Kargil War, the 2008 Mumbai bombings, and the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis are examined. The new Episode of the Pahalgam incident, Indian mainstream media amplified hyper-nationalist themes in order to methodically disseminate misinformation during "Operation Sindhoor" in May 2025. Outlets incorrectly claimed a full-scale war, including the capture of Islamabad and the destruction of Karachi port, despite government briefings indicating limited, targeted operations. This kind of coverage, which used AI-generated images and rehashed battle footage, put emotional and Jingoist mobilization ahead of journalistic ethics, undermining public confidence and damaging India's reputation abroad. The events lead to a conclusion emphasizing how crucial responsible media should be in reducing dangers and promoting dialogue between the two countries. Media can help create a more secure and tranquil regional environment by encouraging truthful reporting and fostering communication.

Keywords: India-Pakistan relation, Historical Background, Pakistan-India nuclear weapons, Theoretical Framework, Nuclear Deterrence, Pakistan-India historical conventional conflicts, Media Influence, Propaganda, Nuclear rivalry, and the dispute in Kashmir.

Introduction

Encapsulating the intricacies of power dynamics, historical grudges, and conflicting strategic theories in South Asia, the nuclear competition between India and Pakistan

continues to be one of the most unstable and enduring threats to regional and global security. In addition to changing the region's strategic environment, this competition has had a significant impact on global peace, stability, and non-proliferation regimes. The hazards connected with this nuclear race have been further heightened by the interaction of historical hostilities, geopolitical rivalries, and media narratives, underscoring its wider implications for the architecture of global security in a multipolar world.¹

India's 1974 "Smiling Buddha" nuclear test, which it described as a harmless nuclear explosion, is where this nuclear rivalry got its start. A significant shift in South Asia's strategic thinking was brought about by this test. The perceived existential risks resulting from India's 1962 border war with China and Beijing's subsequent nuclear test in 1964 significantly influenced India's quest for nuclear capabilities. In addition to strengthening its defense posture in a region that is extremely unstable, India's nuclear program represented its goal to become a regional force that can deter both China and Pakistan.²

India's nuclear aspirations were seen by Pakistan, which was already embroiled in territorial conflicts with India, especially over Kashmir, as a direct existential danger. Pakistan's sense of vulnerability was further solidified by the trauma of the 1971 war, which resulted in the establishment of Bangladesh.³ Former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto eloquently expressed this when he said, "If India builds the bomb, we will eat grass or leaves, even go hungry, but we will get one of our own." This declaration summed up Pakistan's resolve to attain nuclear parity with India, regardless of the social and economic costs involved. Abdul Qadeer Khan was instrumental in obtaining vital centrifuge technology for uranium enrichment as Pakistan rallied resources to advance its nuclear program throughout the 1970s.⁴

Although Pakistan's nuclear stance was unclear until its tests in 1998, it was known by the 1980s that Islamabad was capable of producing nuclear weapons. The rhetoric of strategic dominance and India's nuclear developments only strengthened Pakistan's resolve. A turning point in the dynamics of regional security was reached in May 1998 when both countries conducted a series of nuclear tests that officially designated South Asia as a nuclearized zone.

¹ "India-Pakistan Nuclear Dynamics" by Rakesh Sood, *Nautilus Institute*, 2021.

² "The India-Pakistan Nuclear Dyad and Regional Nuclear Dynamics" by Zafar Khan, *Asia Policy*, 2013.

³ Tellis, A. J., Fair, C. C., & Medby, J. J. (2001). Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani Lessons from the Kargil Crisis. In *RAND Corporation eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.7249/mr1450>.

⁴ "Nuclear Doctrine: Implications for Pakistan's Security" by Zulfqar Khan, *Policy Perspectives*, 2016

⁵This event solidified a risky cycle of deterrence that is regulated by India's no-first-use policy and Pakistan's minimum credible deterrence philosophy. The spread of sophisticated delivery technologies such ballistic missiles and tactical nuclear weapons, however, created complications brought about by these doctrines, such as the possibility of unintentional escalation, miscalculation, and destabilization.⁶

The stability-unrest paradox describes how the nuclearization of South Asia has paradoxically brought to both stability and instability. One could argue that the existence of nuclear weapons has prevented major conflicts, as seen by the lack of major battles since the Kargil War in 1999. However, the same deterrence has given both countries the confidence to fight proxy wars and low-intensity conflicts, especially in Kashmir. This contradiction highlights the unstable power dynamics in the area, where the promise of mutual annihilation offers a semblance of stability yet permits tactical provocations that run the risk of unchecked escalation.⁷

The region's vulnerability to a crisis is demonstrated by events such as the 2016 Uri attack, the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot incident, and continuous cross-border conflicts. On May 7, 2025, India initiated "Operation Sindhoor" in response to a mass shooting in Pahalgam that claimed 26 civilian lives, straining the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. The Indian digital and broadcast media quickly abandoned ethical restraint, notwithstanding the Ministry of Defense's emphasis on calibrated, targeted operations against militant hideouts. Unverified reports concerning the takeover of twelve cities, the arrest of Pakistan's Army Chief, and attacks on nuclear installations were broadcast by media outlets. These stories used incendiary language like "blood for blood" and "revenge," as well as anonymous "top sources," in opposition to India's "No First Use" nuclear strategy. Information warfare, democratic discourse, and regional stability became major issues as a result of journalism's transition from informative reporting to hyper-nationalist performance. The distinction between conventional and nuclear combat has become increasingly hazy due to Pakistan's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons and India's Cold Start doctrine, raising the possibility of miscalculation.

⁵ "Evolutions of the Nuclear Postures of India and Pakistan and Their Implications" by Tomonori Yoshizaki, *Asia-Japan Research Academic Bulletin*, 2019

⁶ *India-Pakistan Crises under the Nuclear Shadow: The Role of Reassurance* by Moeed Yusuf, *Asian Security*, 2019

⁷ "Evolutions of the Nuclear Postures of India and Pakistan and Their Implications" by Tomonori Yoshizaki, *Asia-Japan Research Academic Bulletin*, 2019

In order to avoid unintentional escalation, this delicate equilibrium requires strong confidence-building measures and ongoing discussion, which have frequently been eclipsed by domestic political imperatives and nationalist rhetoric in both countries. The media has a significant and complex influence on the nuclear narrative between India and Pakistan.⁸ The media has become a significant player in the nuclear debate in a period when the CNN effect is prevalent and real-time media coverage shapes public opinion and policy choices. Media outlets have fueled nationalist feelings in Pakistan and India by portraying nuclear weapons as markers of strategic dominance, pride, and sovereignty.⁹

The nuclear rivalry between India and Pakistan, which combines media dynamics, strategic aspirations, and historical grievances into a delicate balance of power, is a perfect example of the complexity of contemporary geopolitics. Large-scale conflicts may have been avoided by nuclear deterrence, but the dangers of escalation and the destabilizing effects of cutting-edge technologies underscore the pressing need for ongoing communication and steps to foster confidence.¹⁰ The multifaceted nature of this rivalry is further demonstrated by the CNN effect and the stability-instability conundrum, highlighting the significance of addressing both the structural and perceptual aspects of conflict. This study seeks to offer critical insights on the paths towards a safer and more stable South Asia by examining the rivalry's historical, strategic, and media aspects.¹¹

Literature Review

One of the most persistent and unstable processes in international security is the nuclear rivalry between India and Pakistan. It has a significant impact on international non-proliferation initiatives in addition to influencing the stability of the South Asian area. This competition, which has its roots in strategic anxieties, historical grievances, and ideological differences, goes beyond military posturing to include social, political, and economic aspects. The media is crucial in constructing nuclear narratives, influencing public opinion, and influencing governmental decisions since it both reflects and shapes popular attitude. In addition to analyzing the media's complex role in escalating or reducing tensions, this

⁸ "Nuclear Doctrine: *Implications for Pakistan's Security*" by Zulfqar Khan, *Policy Perspectives*, 2016

⁹ India-Pakistan Nuclear Rivalry: *Perceptions, Misperceptions, and Mutual Deterrence*, ASIA PRINTERS ISLAMABAD, January 2005, Zulfqar Khan

¹⁰ India-Pakistan Nuclear Rivalry: *Perceptions, Misperceptions, and Mutual Deterrence*, ASIA PRINTERS ISLAMABAD, January 2005, Zulfqar Khan.

¹¹ "The India-Pakistan Nuclear Dyad and Regional Nuclear Dynamics" by Zafar Khan, *Asia Policy*, 2013.

literature review synthesizes scholarly insights into the theoretical, historical, and practical aspects of the India-Pakistan nuclear struggle.¹²

Historical Context and Evolution of Nuclear Strategies

The Genesis of Rivalry:

The larger backdrop of India-Pakistan animosity, which has been characterized by wars in 1947–1948; 1965; and 1971, is where the nuclear competition got its start. Despite their brief duration and scope, these battles had a tremendous impact on both countries' strategic interests. Pakistan's existential uneasiness in relation to India was heightened by the 1971 war, which resulted in the establishment of Bangladesh.¹³

India's 1974 nuclear test, code-named Smiling Buddha, which was described as a harmless nuclear explosion but actually marked a radical change in South Asia's security dynamics, made this uneasiness even worse. After China's nuclear test in 1964 and the Sino-Indian War in 1962, India saw China as a threat, which fueled its quest for nuclear¹⁴ capabilities. India's nuclear development highlighted to Pakistan how urgent it is to achieve nuclear parity.¹⁵

The 1998 Test and Beyond

Both countries' 1998 nuclear tests marked a turning point and officially launched South Asia's nuclearization. Pakistan's prompt reaction demonstrated its belief that nuclear weapons are vital to its existence, even though India's tests were presented as a reflection of its ambitions to become a world power. A cycle of deterrence characterized by the establishment of opposing theories was solidified by these events.

- No First Use (NFU) in India: This theory presents nuclear weapons as a last-resort deterrent and presents it as a responsible strategy.
- ¹⁶• Full-Spectrum Deterrence in Pakistan: India's conventional military supremacy, especially under its Cold Start Doctrine, is intended to be challenged by this more assertive posture, which includes tactical nuclear weapons.

¹² Tellis, A. J., Fair, C. C., & Medby, J. J. (2001). Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani Lessons from the Kargil Crisis. In *RAND Corporation eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.7249/mr1450>

¹³ "India-Pakistan Nuclear Doctrines: A Comparative Analysis" by Waqar Hussain, *Regional Studies*, 2022.

¹⁴ The India-Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry" by T.V. Paul, *Cambridge University Press*, 2005.

¹⁵ Tellis, A. J., Fair, C. C., & Medby, J. J. (2001). Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani Lessons from the Kargil Crisis. In *RAND Corporation eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.7249/mr1450>

¹⁶ India-Pakistan Nuclear Rivalry: Perceptions, Misperceptions, and Mutual Deterrence, ASIA PRINTERS ISLAMABAD, January 2005, Zulfiqar Khan.

The disparity in their strategic calculations is highlighted by these doctrinal differences, which raises the possibility of misunderstandings and escalation.¹⁷

Theoretical Perspective

Realism and Deterrence Debate

The debate over the nuclear rivalry between India and Pakistan is dominated by the realist perspective. According to classical realism, nuclear weapons have created a precarious stability that prevents full-scale confrontations while permitting smaller-scale ones. This dynamic, referred to as the stability-instability paradox, explains why major confrontations have been avoided although crises like Pulwama-Balakot (2019) and skirmishes like the Kargil War (1999) continue to occur.

The dangers of South Asia's nuclearized environment are further explained by deterrence theory. The proximity of Indian and Pakistani forces, along with a lack of effective command and control systems, results in a delicate equilibrium where the lack of steps to foster confidence increases the potential of escalation¹⁸.

Constructivism: Narratives and Identity

Constructivist academics place a strong emphasis on how cultural beliefs, historical narratives, and identity shape nuclear policies. India's perception of itself as a growing world power and a responsible participant in international security is entwined with its nuclear program. On the other hand, Pakistan's narrative of existential fear and its function as a counterbalance to India are inextricably linked to its nuclear identity.¹⁹

Media theories: Framing and Agenda-setting

Media studies investigate how public discourse on nuclear issues is shaped by framing and agenda-setting. In both countries, the media's presentation of nuclear weapons as emblems of national pride serves to marginalize voices calling for de-escalation and discussion while reinforcing popular support for aggressive posturing. This has significant

¹⁷ "Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Their Impact on Stability" by Feroz Hassan Khan, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2015

¹⁸ "The Role of Tactical Nuclear Weapons in South Asia" by Brigadier (Retd.) Naeem Salik, *Strategic Studies*, 2013

¹⁹ "The Impact of Nuclear Weapons on Pakistan's Security Culture" by Rabia Akhtar, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 2011.

policy ramifications since nationalist sentiments propagated by the media frequently prevent leaders from holding fruitful negotiations.²⁰

Media's role in the India-Pakistan Nuclear Dynamics

Amplifying Nationalism and Polarization

State narratives are amplified by the media in both Pakistan and India. Sensationalism is frequently given precedence over subtlety in media coverage of crises, which frames events in ways that heighten tensions. For example, Pakistani media defines its nuclear capabilities as a defensive requirement, crucial for thwarting Indian aggression, while Indian media often presents its nuclear program as a stabilizing force and a way to assert global legitimacy. This contradiction creates a vicious cycle of mistrust between parties, whereby public opinion drives decision-makers to take tough positions.²¹

CNN and Crisis Escalation

Miscalculation and escalation risks have increased due to the CNN effect, which is the quick spread of information through the media. Real-time media coverage heightened public fears and limited diplomatic alternatives during crises like the Kargil War and the Pulwama-Balakot incident, providing little opportunity for de-escalation.²²

Discourse Analysis: comparatives insights

Research examining newspapers like *The Hindu* in India and *Dawn* in Pakistan shows glaring differences in how they present nuclear issues. While Pakistani channels emphasize deterrence and national resilience, Indian outlets frequently promote technological advancement and strategic stability. This difference reflects and supports both states' overarching strategic narratives.²³

Emerging challenges: Technology and Non- Traditional threats

²⁰ "The Impact of Nuclear Weapons on Pakistan's Security Culture" by Rabia Akhtar, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 2011

²¹ "The Impact of Nuclear Weapons on Pakistan's Security Culture" by Rabia Akhtar, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 2011

²² "Deterrence Stability and Escalation Control in South Asia" by Michael Krepon, *Stimson Center*, 2010

²³ "Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy" by Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Cambridge University Press*, 2017

Advancement in Delivery System

New complications have been brought about by the development of advanced delivery technologies, including as ballistic and cruise missiles. Although Pakistan's Babur series and India's Agni-V represent important technological advances, they also increase the possibility of unintentional escalation. A crucial component of Pakistan's strategy, tactical nuclear weapons increase instability by reducing the threshold for nuclear use²⁴.

Cyber Security and Nuclear Stability

Nuclear stability is being threatened by emerging technologies like cyberwarfare. Command and control systems' cyber vulnerabilities could compromise deterrence and cause unanticipated escalation²⁵.

Media and Emerging Technologies

Implication of Non-Proliferation and Regional Security

Although crucial, the media's role in covering new technologies is not well understood. Sensationalist reporting about cyber capabilities or hypersonic missiles has the power to affect public opinion and policy choices, which could exacerbate tensions.²⁶

Challenges of the NPT Regime

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is viewed as discriminatory by both India and Pakistan, which is reflected in their non-membership. Agreements like the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Deal have helped India win worldwide recognition, but Pakistan is still being watched, especially because of proliferation worries connected to the A.Q. Khan network.²⁷

The Role of External Actors

The nuclear environment of South Asia has been significantly shaped by external countries such as the US, China, and Russia. Although these players have occasionally helped

²⁴ South Asia's Nuclear Future: A US Perspective" by Ashley J. Tellis, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2013

²⁵ "Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia" by Feroz Hassan Khan, *The Non-proliferation Review*, 2003

²⁶ The Impact of Nuclear Weapons on Pakistan's Security Culture" by Rabia Akhtar, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 2011

²⁷ "Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia" by Feroz Hassan Khan, *The Non-proliferation Review*, 2003

defuse crises, their conflicting agendas, like the Sino-American rivalry, often make attempts to promote regional security more difficult²⁸

The nuclear rivalry between India and Pakistan is a complex issue with significant ramifications for both regional and international security. As a major force in determining policies and forming narratives, the media has enormous power to either reduce or increase tensions. A comprehensive strategy that includes steps to boost confidence, ethical media practices, and thorough academic research is needed to²⁹ address the risks connected with this rivalry. This review emphasizes how historical grievances, strategic calculations, and media dynamics interact to provide important insights on how to promote a more stable and secure future in South Asia.³⁰

The Partition and the Kashmir Conflict: seeds of Hostility

Decades of animosity were sparked by the 1947 division of British India into India and Pakistan, two independent countries. Deep-seated resentment, enormous migrations, and widespread violence were all results of the hurried and badly thought-out partition process. The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir became the most controversial of the unsolved problems left by partition. The First Indo-Pakistani War (1947–1948) resulted from the decision of Maharaja Hari Singh, the ruler of Kashmir, to join India after being invaded by Pakistan-backed tribal forces. A truce mediated by the UN brought this conflict to an end, and Kashmir was split along the Line of Control (LoC). But because both countries claimed the area in the fight, it planted the seeds for ongoing hostility.³¹

The 1947 split of British India into two separate nations, India and Pakistan, set off decades of hostility. The hasty and poorly planned partition process led to extensive violence, massive migrations, and deep-seated anger. The most contentious of the unresolved issues resulting from partition was the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir.³² After being overrun by tribal forces supported by Pakistan, Maharaja Hari Singh, the monarch of Kashmir, decided to join India, which led to the First Indo-Pakistani War (1947–1948). This conflict ended with a UN-mediated peace, and Kashmir was divided along the Line of Control (LoC).

²⁸ "The Evolution of India's Nuclear Policies" by Harsh V. Pant, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2017

²⁹ "India-Pakistan Nuclear Doctrines: A Comparative Analysis" by Waqar Hussain, *Regional Studies*, 2022.

³⁰ Tellis, A. J., Fair, C. C., & Medby, J. J. (2001). Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani Lessons from the Kargil Crisis. In *RAND Corporation eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.7249/mr1450>

³¹ "The India-Pakistan Nuclear Dyad and Regional Nuclear Dynamics" by Zafar Khan, *Asia Policy*, 2013

³² India-Pakistan Nuclear Rivalry: Perceptions, Misperceptions, and Mutual Deterrence, ASIA PRINTERS ISLAMABAD, January 2005, Zulfiqar Khan.

But it sowed the seeds for continued animosity because both nations claimed the battleground.³³

The 1965 and 1971 wars: Escalating tensions

Operation Gibraltar, Pakistan's attempt to deploy forces into Indian-administered Kashmir and incite insurrection, was the catalyst for the Second Indo-Pakistani War in 1965. India's massive military response resulted in an unresolved confrontation that only served to heighten the already-existing hostility. Future conflicts could still arise because the fundamental problems were not addressed, even after the Tashkent Agreement, which demanded a return to pre-war positions³⁴.

The conflict of 1971, however, was a watershed. Internal struggle in East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh) gave rise to this conflict when a nationalist movement seeking for independence clashed with the central government. A full-scale conflict resulted from India's backing of the Bengali nationalist movement and the large-scale refugee inflow into its territory.³⁵ The outcome was the division of Pakistan and the establishment of Bangladesh, a humiliating loss for Pakistan that had a significant impact on its security calculations. This defeat highlighted Pakistan's vulnerability and strengthened its determination to produce nuclear weapons in order to fend off India's potential existential threats.

The Genesis of India's Nuclear Program

India had early interest in using atomic energy for peaceful purposes, which preceded its independence. The groundwork for India's nuclear program was established in 1948 with the creation of the Atomic Energy Commission, which was headed by Dr. Homi Bhabha. However, after the Sino-Indian War in 1962, India's nuclear ambitions became clearly strategic. India's strategic priorities were reevaluated after the devastating loss in this conflict revealed weaknesses in its defense position.³⁶

India's security fears were made worse by China's successful nuclear test in 1964. India responded by stepping up its nuclear research and development, which led to the country's first nuclear test in 1974, known as "Smiling Buddha." This test was an obvious

³³ "How an India-Pakistan Nuclear War Could Start—and Have Global Consequences" by Alan Robock et al., *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2019.

³⁴ "India-Pakistan Nuclear Dynamics" by Rakesh Sood, *Nautilus Institute*, 2021.

³⁵ "Evolutions of the Nuclear Postures of India and Pakistan and Their Implications" by Tomonori Yoshizaki, *Asia-Japan Research Academic Bulletin*, 2019

³⁶ "Nuclear Doctrine: Implications for Pakistan's Security" by Zulfqar Khan, *Policy Perspectives*, 2016

display of India's nuclear capability, even though it was disguised as a non-combative nuclear explosion for civilian use. Pakistan was forced to reconsider its security posture as a result of this test, which significantly changed the South Asian geopolitical environment.³⁷

The 1998 Nuclear tests: overt Nuclearization

In May 1998, India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests, marking a turning point in their nuclear competition. Following a series of tests known as "Operation Shakti," India was formally designated as a nuclear weapons state. In response, Pakistan confirmed its status as a nuclear state by launching six of its own nuclear tests in the Chagai Hills. These tests were a reflection of Pakistan's long-standing security worries as well as a reaction to India's moves.³⁸

The relationship between India and Pakistan changed as a result of the overt nuclearization of South Asia. The region remained dangerously unstable even after both countries adopted deterrent-maintenance doctrines, Pakistan's "Minimum Credible Deterrence" and India's "No First Use" policy. Miscalculation, unintentional escalation, and the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in an emergency situation become critical issues for both regional and international security.³⁹

Stability Instability Paradox and the Role of Media

A crucial paradigm for comprehending the nuclear dynamic between India and Pakistan is the stability-instability dilemma. This paradox implies that nuclear weapons simultaneously reduce the threshold for conventional battles and sub-conventional skirmishes while also providing strategic stability by preventing large-scale hostilities. This contradiction is best shown in South Asia by the Kargil conflict of 1999, the attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001, and the Pulwama-Balakot incident in 2019. These events demonstrate how brittle deterrence is and how escalation can occur even when nuclear weapons are present.⁴⁰

It is impossible to overstate the influence of the media on the nuclear narrative between India and Pakistan. Media outlets in both nations have frequently fuelled nationalist feelings by portraying nuclear weapons as emblems of security and pride. Although the media

³⁷ "The Changing Dynamics of India-Pakistan Deterrence" by Zulfqar Khan, *Strategic Studies*, 2015

³⁸ "The India-Pakistani Military and Nuclear Arms Race in Post-Cold War Era" by Muhammad Sadiq, *Jurnal Global & Strategis*, 2018

³⁹ "India-Pakistan Nuclear Doctrines: A Comparative Analysis" by Waqar Hussain, *Regional Studies*, 2022.

⁴⁰ "The Stability-Instability Paradox: A Fresh Perspective from South Asia" by S. Paul Kapur, *International Security*, 2005.

can promote educated public debate, its sensationalist inclinations have often increased tensions and influenced public opinion and governmental decisions in ways that impede communication and efforts to restore confidence.⁴¹

Implication for Regional and Global security

India and Pakistan's nuclear competition has significant ramifications for both regional and international security. With the potential for disastrous outcomes in the event of a crisis, the existence of nuclear weapons in South Asia has created an unstable power balance. The dangers of nuclear proliferation, the security of nuclear arsenals, and the possibility of escalation have all been issues of concern to the international community on several occasions.⁴²

⁴³Third-party mediation, arms control agreements, and confidence-building initiatives have all been used to try to reduce these dangers. Meaningful communication is feasible, as evidenced by historical precedents like the Islamabad Summit in 2004 and the Lahore Declaration in 1999. However, the ability to address the root causes of conflict, political will, and mutual trust are still necessary for such efforts to be sustained.⁴⁴

The establishment of their nuclear programs and the historical background of India-Pakistan relations highlight the intricate interactions between geopolitical imperatives, strategic anxieties, and historical grievances. Although it might be argued that nuclear weapons have avoided full-scale conflicts, they have also prolonged hostile and distrusting cycles.⁴⁵

A comprehensive strategy that incorporates ongoing communication, steps to foster confidence, and attempts to settle underlying conflicts is needed to address these issues. A striking reminder of the enormous risks involved in handling disputes in a nuclearized world is provided by the nuclear rivalry between India and ⁴⁶Pakistan. Additionally, it provides

⁴¹ "Deterrence Stability and Escalation Control in South Asia" by Michael Krepon, *Stimson Center*, 2010

⁴² "The Myth of Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age" by Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *Cornell University Press*, 2020

⁴³ "How an India-Pakistan Nuclear War Could Start—and Have Global Consequences" by Alan Robock et al., *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2019.

⁴⁴ "India-Pakistan Nuclear Rivalry: Perceptions, Misperceptions, and Mutual Deterrence, ASIA PRINTERS ISLAMABAD, January 2005, Zulfiqar Khan.

⁴⁵ "The Impact of Nuclear Weapons on Pakistan's Security Culture" by Rabia Akhtar, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 2011

⁴⁶ "Deterrence Stability and Escalation Control in South Asia" by Michael Krepon, *Stimson Center*, 2010

important insights for international non-proliferation initiatives and the quest for regional security in other areas that are prone to violence.

Pakistan nuclear posture: first use and full spectrum Deterrence

On the other hand, NFU is not a part of Pakistan's nuclear doctrine. To offset India's conventional military dominance, it retains the option of first use instead. Its "Full Spectrum Deterrence" doctrine, which attempts to prevent all forms of aggression, from limited conventional attacks to full-scale nuclear war, embodies this approach. Pakistan aims to counter India's conventional advantages and deter any possible military adventurism by keeping the first-use option. The development and use of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs), such the roughly 60-kilometer-range Nasr missile⁴⁷, is a prominent component of Pakistan's strategy. The purpose of these short-range, low-yield weapons is to counter or discourage India's limited conventional assaults. The implementation of TNWs lowers the threshold for nuclear use to increase deterrence credibility, reflecting Pakistan's reliance on a flexible response strategy. However, there are serious command and control issues with TNW deployment, which raises questions about the possibility of unintentional escalation or unauthorized usage. Because of Pakistan's internal security dynamics, the deployment of these weapons to advanced positions calls for strong security measures to stop non-state actors from obtaining them.⁴⁸

Role of media in India Pakistan Nuclear Conflicts

Nationalist Narratives and Escalation of tensions

The media in Pakistan and India has a big say in how people think and how policies are made, and they frequently reflect and amplify nationalist feelings. Nationalist narratives in the media, which depict the other nation as fundamentally hostile and unreliable, intensify already-existing tensions throughout times of calm and crisis. This framing stifles opportunities for communication and reconciliation by reinforcing long-standing prejudices and preconceptions⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ Nuclear Learning in South Asia: The Levels of Analysis" by Vipin Narang, *The Non-proliferation Review*, 2010

⁴⁸ "The Myth of Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age" by Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *Cornell University Press*, 2020

⁴⁹ "India-Pakistan Nuclear Dynamics" by Rakesh Sood, *Nautilus Institute*, 2021.

For instance, India's alleged human rights abuses in Kashmir are regularly brought up by Pakistani media, which portrays them as a symbol of Indian domination and aggressiveness. On the other hand, based on events like cross-border infiltrations and backing for extremist organisations like Lashkar-e-Taiba, Indian media frequently portrays Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism. These stories not only fuel domestic resentment but also establish a framework for interpretation that is zero-sum for interpreting bilateral relations, where concessions are seen as weakness rather than opportunities for peace

This dynamic creates an atmosphere of mistrust and animosity, deepening societal divisions. Media sources frequently highlight historical grievances and perceived threats because they need to increase audience and provide exciting content. The public demands forceful foreign policy as a result of these representations, which gives governments limited leeway in diplomatic negotiations. Conflict risk rises as a result of authorities being pressured to take strong positions by the rise of nationalist discourse.⁵⁰

Key events in the Nuclear era:

Kargil War 1999

From May to July 1999, India and Pakistan engaged in a brief armed war in Kashmir's Kargil district known as the Kargil war. Along the line of control LOC, which serves as a de facto border between the two nations, Pakistani soldier and militants infiltrated Indian controlled territory, starting the conflict. This unplanned invasion resulted in fierce combat in high altitude mountainous areas, with heavy losses on the both sides. Nuclear weapons were present throughout the Kargil War, which increased the conflict level of risk to an unprecedented degree. Given that both India and Pakistan had nuclear weapons, there were worries about the likelihood of escalation and a nuclear exchange. Because of the increased stress, the situation was unstable and any mistake in judgement or calculation could have had disastrous results. The public perception and the conflicts trajectory were greatly influenced by the media. Media portrayals of the conflict as a question of national pride and security frequently stoked nationalist feeling in the both India and Pakistan.⁵¹In addition to raising spirits within each nation, this increased sense of nationalism made diplomatic attempts to defuse the

⁵⁰ India-Pakistan Crises under the Nuclear Shadow: The Role of Reassurance" by Moeed Yusuf, *Asian Security*, 2019.

⁵¹ Singh, Jasjit. Nuclear Weapons and Indian security. Sage Publications, 2007.

situation more difficult. Both governments were under additional pressure to adopt more muscular military actions as a result of the continuous stream of news reports, many of which were sensationalized and emotionally charged.⁵²

Mumbai Attacks (2008)

In November 2008, A train station, and hotels were among the many targets, which were a string of well-planned terrorist assaults carried out by Pakistani terrorists affiliated with the Lashkar-e-Taiba. Over 166 people were killed and hundreds more were injured as a result of the attacks. The assaults showed a high degree of complexity and coordination due to their careful planning and execution. The bilateral ties between India and Pakistan were significantly impacted by the Mumbai attacks. The attacks were sharply denounced by Indian government, which also charged Pakistan with failing to stop and prosecute the attackers. The already shaky relationship between the two nations was further damaged by this claim. Anti-Pakistan sentiment in India was further heightened by the assaults, and many people called for the government to take firm action. The public opinion of the Mumbai attacks and the political conversation around them were greatly influenced by the media.⁵³ Calls for military vengeance and a firm response from the government were heightened by the frequently emotive and critical Indian media coverage of Pakistan. In contrast Pakistani media mostly denied that the state was involved in the attacks and charged that India was using the event for its own political ends. This divergent media portrayal made attempts to resolve the matter through discussion and diplomacy more difficult and widened the already-existing rift between the two nations.⁵⁴

Pulwama-Balakot crisis 2019

Forty soldiers were killed in February 2019 Pulwama incident, a suicide bombing by a Jaish-e-Muhammad jihadist that struck a convoy of Indian paramilitary forces in Pulwama, Jammu Kashmir. Tensions between India and Pakistan significantly increased as a result of the attack, which was claimed by the extremist organisation Jaish-e-Muhammad, which is based in Pakistan. The Indian Air Forces launched airstrikes on a

⁵² The Myth of Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age" by Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *Cornell University Press*, 2020

⁵³ India-Pakistan Nuclear Rivalry: Perceptions, Misperceptions, and Mutual Deterrence, ASIA PRINTERS ISLAMABAD, January 2005, Zulfiqar Khan.

⁵⁴ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2021* (Routledge, 2021), p. 254.

Jaish-e-Muhammad training camp in Balakot, Pakistan, in retaliation for the Pulwama attack. Since it was the first time the Indian Air Force had carried out raids within Pakistani territory in decades, this signaled a major increase in the level of hostilities between the two nations. Pakistan retaliated with its own attacks after intercepting Indian fighter fighters. The media in both countries had an important part in the Pulwama-Balakot crisis. Both sides media coverage was intense and frequently stoked nationalist feelings. The Pulwama incident and the ensuing airstrikes were widely reported in India's media, which portrayed them as a show of India's military might and a resolute response to terrorism. The media in Pakistan concentrated on emphasizing Pakistan's military powers and downplaying the significance of the Indian airstrikes. Public opinion in both nations was further agitated by his extensive media coverage, raising the possibility of further escalation and impeding de-escalation attempts.⁵⁵

May 2025 Pahalgam Attack

During the recent episodes of geopolitical escalation of May 2025, Indian mainstream media disseminated a series of specific false claims and unverified narratives that significantly diverged from the verified facts provided by official military and government sources. Outlets such as *Zee News*, *India Today*, and *Times Now*, circulated fabricated reports claiming that the Indian Army had captured Islamabad, entered Pakistan, or captured twelve Pakistani cities, while simultaneously alleging that the Pakistan Army Chief had been arrested and the Pakistani Prime Minister was hiding in a bunker.⁵⁶ These narratives stood in stark contrast to official briefings from the Indian Ministry of Defense, which characterized "Operation Sindhoor" as a series of "targeted operations" limited to militant camps rather than an all-out war against the Pakistani state. To support these misleading frames, media houses employed high levels of sensationalism and visual disinformation, including the use of video game footage, old clips of a plane crash in Philadelphia, and recycled imagery from conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon to falsely represent Indian strikes on Pakistani territory.⁵⁷ The use of nationalist framing was particularly prominent, as newsrooms were transformed into simulated "war rooms" with air raid sirens, and anchors like Arnab Goswami engaged in

⁵⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2021* (Routledge, 2021), p. 254.

⁵⁶ 1. Syamili C. and Anoop K. R., "Information War in the Age of AI: Media Narratives and Misinformation during 'Operation Sindhoor'," IFLA Repository, 2025.

⁵⁷ Junaid Kathju, "Indian Media Fuels Panic with Disinformation," Al Jazeera Journalism Review, May 15, 2025.

communalized rhetoric that labeled dissent as "anti-national". Furthermore, reports by *Republic TV* and the *Economic Times* utilized hyper-nationalist language, claiming Pakistan "begged" for a ceasefire and calling for "blood for blood", which served to cultivate a "Mean World Syndrome" and normalize the inevitability of conflict over diplomatic solutions. This reliance on unverified "top sources" and speculative claims regarding the destruction of Karachi port or the targeting of nuclear facilities illustrates a broader trend of "strategic deception," where sensationalist media narratives were used to bolster domestic nationalist fervor and voter consolidation despite the risk of inciting mass anxiety and global embarrassment. The divergence between these media narratives and official reality is as vast as a **theatrical performance staged in a war-movie set versus the calculated precision of a restricted military operation**, where the spectacle of the former intentionally obscured the reality of the latter.⁵⁸

International perceptions and Media Influence

The way the media presents the India-Pakistan dispute has a big impact on how people around the world view it, how diplomacy is conducted, and how people react globally. The media in India and Pakistan frequently portray opposing viewpoints in an effort to win over the sympathies and support of other countries.⁵⁹

With reference to events like the Mumbai attacks and cross-border infiltrations, Indian media highlights Pakistan's purported involvement as a sponsor of terrorism. This story is consistent with India's larger diplomatic isolationist policy against Pakistan, which includes pressuring global institutions such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to examine Pakistan's conduct.⁶⁰

Pakistani media, on the other hand, emphasizes India's violations of human rights in Kashmir, portraying them as transgressions of international standards. Pakistan aims to counter India's diplomatic moves and bring attention to the problem worldwide by highlighting the suffering of Kashmiris.

International actors' policy choices, ranging from sanctions to mediation initiatives, are influenced by these conflicting narratives. For instance, the way the events were portrayed in

⁵⁸ Nahida Hussain, "Pahalgam and the Specter of a False Flag," *Strathea*, August 8, 2025.

⁵⁹ Singh, Jasjit. *Nuclear Weapons and Indian security*. Sage Publications, 2007.

⁶⁰ "India-Pakistan Nuclear Doctrines: A Comparative Analysis" by Waqar Hussain, *Regional Studies*, 2022.

Indian media influenced the U.S. response to the Mumbai attacks, which included putting more pressure on Pakistan to crack down on militant groups.⁶¹

Ethical Journalism and Way Forward

The media has the ability to improve the relationship between India and Pakistan despite its potential for negative effects. Accuracy, fairness, and empathy are the three main tenets of ethical journalism, which can promote understanding and ease tensions. By drawing attention to common issues like poverty, climate change, and public health emergencies, the media may alter the conversation from one of conflict to cooperation.

Building bridges can also be aided by initiatives like cooperative reporting projects and cross-border media exchanges. Such initiatives can combat the polarizing narratives that predominate in mainstream coverage by promoting discussion and offering diverse viewpoints.⁶²

The media has a complex role in the nuclear crisis between India and Pakistan, serving as a source of tension as well as a possible peacemaker. Sensationalized reporting and nationalist discourse have frequently intensified disputes, but responsible and ethical reporting has the potential to promote communication and understanding. It is impossible to overestimate the impact of the media on public opinion and governance in an area rife with strategic rivalries and historical grievances.⁶³ It takes a coordinated effort from journalists, legislators, and civil society to put truth, balance, and empathy first in order to harness this impact for good. By doing this, the media may help create a more stable and peaceful South Asia, changing its function from one of escalating violence to one of promoting peace.⁶⁴

Concluding the Navigation and the Complexities of the India and Pakistan Nuclear Competition

One of the most urgent and unstable security issues facing the modern world is still the nuclear rivalry between India and Pakistan. The fact that both sides have nuclear weapons raises the ante and maintains a constant and frightening risk of escalation. A combination of political, geographical, and historical issues that are ingrained in the sociopolitical fabric of

⁶¹ "The India-Pakistan Nuclear Relationship: Theories of Deterrence and International Relations" by E. Sridharan, *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability*, 2018

⁶² "How an India-Pakistan Nuclear War Could Start—and Have Global Consequences" by Alan Robock et al., *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2019.

⁶³ Singh, Jasjit. *Nuclear Weapons and Indian security*. Sage Publications, 2007.

⁶⁴ "The India-Pakistani Military and Nuclear Arms Race in Post-Cold War Era" by Muhammad Sadiq

the area make this dangerous position worse. Even small-scale incidents have the potential to turn into major crises, endangering regional and international security, because of the unresolved Kashmir dispute, recurring military clashes, and ideological rivals.⁶⁵

The media plays a crucial and contradictory role in this dynamic. On the one hand, the media facilitates public discourse and the spread of information. However, there are serious concerns associated with its tendency to spread false information, sensationalise events, and elevate nationalist sentiments. Particularly during times of increased tension, the effects of nationalist narratives, disinformation campaigns, and sensationalised reporting can intensify animosity, obstruct diplomatic attempts, and raise the possibility of escalation. The situation is made more difficult by social media's quick and frequently uncontrolled information sharing, which feeds cycles of mistrust and misunderstanding⁶⁶.

Key Challenges and insights

Risk of Escalation: The stability-instability paradox, which states that conventional or sub-conventional wars can arise because of strategic nuclear deterrence, casts a shadow over the India-Pakistan nuclear struggle. Events like the 1999 Kargil War, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis serve as examples of how regional conflicts and terrorist attacks can intensify into larger conflicts when there is a nuclear threat.⁶⁷

Misinformation and Propaganda: The quick dissemination of false information via social and traditional media can sway public opinion and skew the views of decision-makers. Conflicting accounts of the scope and effectiveness of the airstrikes in the Pulwama-Balakot incident increased public pressures and limited the room for diplomatic de-escalation.

Media driven polarization: Media outlets in both nations support a dichotomous worldview that portrays one as the aggressor and the other as the victim by presenting the dispute via a nationalist lens. In addition to solidifying public animosity, this framing puts pressure on governments to take more steadfast and unyielding stances.

⁶⁵ Nuclear Learning in South Asia: The Levels of Analysis" by Vipin Narang, *The Non-proliferation Review*, 2010

⁶⁶ Deterrence Stability and Escalation Control in South Asia" by Michael Krepon, *Stimson Center*, 2010

⁶⁷ Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia" by Feroz Hassan Khan, *The Non-proliferation Review*, 2003

Potential of miscalculation: There is a greater chance of error or unintentional escalation in such an atmosphere since little incidents might be exaggerated into existential threats. This risk is increased when there are no efficient routes of communication during emergencies.

International Implication: Despite being aware of the dangers, the India-Pakistan rivalry poses, the international community is frequently limited by conflicting geopolitical interests. Pakistan uses its strategic significance and security concerns to win over other countries, whereas India uses its expanding economic and geopolitical power. Both nations' media narratives have a big impact on how the world is perceived and how international ⁶⁸

Recommendations for Mitigation and Peacebuilding

Addressing the complicated issues brought on by media dynamics, old grievances, and geopolitical tensions is crucial to navigating the intricacies of the India-Pakistan nuclear rivalry and promoting a more stable regional environment. The suggestions that follow provide a means to lower risks and encourage positive participation:

1. Promoting Conscientious Journalism

1. Media outlets in both nations need to embrace moral principles that put context, objectivity, and veracity ahead of sensationalism.
2. Create independent fact-checking systems to combat false information, especially in times of emergency.
3. Promote fair reporting that steers clear of divisive terminology and cultivates a sophisticated comprehension of controversial topics.⁶⁹

2. Fostering Inter-Border Media Cooperation

1. To foster trust and lessen preconceptions, support collaborative reporting projects and media interactions.
2. To move narratives away from conflict, promote cooperative storytelling that emphasizes common issues like poverty, climate change, and public health emergencies.
3. Encourage journalistic training programs that emphasize the media's role in peacebuilding and conflict-sensitive reporting.

3. Using the Media to Promote Peace

1. Spread messages of tolerance, peace, and reconciliation through media channels.

⁶⁸ Nuclear Doctrine: Implications for Pakistan's Security" by Zulfqar Khan, *Policy Perspectives*, 2016

⁶⁹ Nuclear Doctrine: Implications for Pakistan's Security" by Zulfqar Khan, *Policy Perspectives*, 2016

2. To encourage greater society involvement, highlight effective instances of cross-border collaboration, such as cultural exchanges and people-to-people projects.
3. Encourage stories that highlight shared ideals and passions, opposing the dichotomous pitting of "us vs. them."⁷⁰

4. Strengthening Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)

1. Expand the use of CBMs to include media representatives and civil society players, and strengthen those that already exist, such as military chiefs communicating by hotline.
2. Increase public trust in peace initiatives by using the media to promote CBMs and their results.
3. Encourage grassroots initiatives that unite people from both nations in order to promote empathy and understanding⁷¹.

5. Resolving Common Regional Issues

1. Make use of regional forums, like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), to encourage cooperative solutions to shared problems.
2. Run media efforts to increase public awareness of common concerns like pandemics, terrorism, and climate change while presenting them as chances for cooperation.
3. Encourage foreign players to back regional cooperation projects by highlighting their potential for stability over the long run.

6. Strengthening Crisis Communication Systems

1. To stop the dissemination of false information during emergencies, establish procedures for direct communication between the media regulators in the two nations.
2. Create collaborative media norms for crisis reporting that emphasize de-escalation, accuracy, and restraint.
3. To combat opposing viewpoints, promote the use of impartial third-party venues for the dissemination of validated information.⁷²

Final Recommendation

Finally recommending a pathway for India and Pakistan's nuclear rivalry serves as a metaphor for the larger issues confronting international security in the twenty-first century.

⁷⁰ South Asia's Nuclear Challenges: Interlocking Views from India, Pakistan, China, Russia, and the United States" by Michael Krepon and Julia Thompson, *Stimson Center*, 2017

⁷¹ India-Pakistan Nuclear Doctrines: A Comparative Analysis" by Waqar Hussain, *Regional Studies*, 2022

⁷² The Impact of Nuclear Weapons on Pakistan's Security Culture" by Rabia Akhtar, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 2011.

There are a lot of hazards, but there are also a lot of chances for positive interaction and peacebuilding. Both countries may pave the road for stability and collaboration by tackling the structural, informational, and perceptual aspects of their rivalry.

As a potent influence on public opinion and political discourse, the media must be at the forefront of this change. Beyond its current role as a source of conflict, the media can serve as a conduit for communication and understanding, creating a public that is more informed and more sympathetic. To do this, journalists, legislators, and civil society must work together to redefine the media's function from a purveyor of division to a champion reconciliation

In conclusion, the course of the relationship between India and Pakistan will be influenced by both the narratives that define their societies and the decisions made by their governments. Both countries can move past their past hostilities and create a future based on peace, stability, and respect for one another by utilizing the power of responsible journalism, encouraging cross-border cooperation, and tackling common issues.

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