

# SPLITTING THE LADDER

NEW ESCALATION  
DYNAMICS  
BETWEEN  
INDIA AND PAKISTAN

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## ABOUT THIS POLICY PAPER

The paper examines India-Pakistan escalation dynamics pre- and post-nuclearization (1998), identifying complexities in applying Cold War era theories due to the unique nature of their relationship. It emphasizes the longstanding 'normalized' violence along the Line of Control in Kashmir. A novel descriptive escalation ladder is introduced, dissecting crises from 2001 to 2019 into Means and Objectives categories, elucidating new escalation patterns. Breaks in past dynamics by India and Pakistan during crises in 2016 and 2019 are analyzed alongside risk control methods. The paper delves into the roles of sub-conventional actors, the minimalist nature of bilateral relations, and evolving third-party involvement in crisis management. It highlights maintained confidence-building measures and concludes by mapping crisis moves and identifying maneuvering space below the nuclear threshold, reflecting India's historical approach to engaging with Pakistan in crises.

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## Executive Summary

- **In 2016 and 2019, India's strategic restraint was modified.** Between the Kargil war and the 2016 Uri attack, India's 'strategic restraint' had become increasingly associated with the Line of Control; New Delhi's image as a responsible nuclear power physically manifested in Indian troops remaining on their side of the LoC (save for the otherwise regular instances of cross-border action at the tactical level which has normalized a degree of violence at the LoC – until 2021). In 2016 and 2019, India disrupted this restraint by publicly announcing cross-border strikes in response to terror attacks by Pakistan-based militant groups.
- **There were limitations built into India's disruption of strategic restraint.** To illustrate this, the paper proposes splitting the conventional escalation ladder into two – that of means and objectives. In India's official view, the terror attack by Pakistan-based groups constituted Rung I. India's responses in both 2016 and 2019 were an escalation along the means ladder (the use of special forces and the Indian Air Force, respectively) but were restricted on the objectives ladder. India refrained from including the conventional assets of the Pakistan Army during its response and publicly clarified the lack of intention to do so.
- **Both India and Pakistan seek to avoid manipulating risk.** Despite India's modification of strategic restraint and its cross-LoC response, both states relied on two means of risk reduction: clear communication and de-measures.

**Clear communication**—India and Pakistan conducted comprehensive press conferences in 2016 (but more so in 2019) within a short span of their cross-border actions. These were abundantly laden with de-escalatory language and sought to clarify intentions, removing ambiguity. The increase in certainty of actions and objectives, in turn, reduced misperceptions about the opponent's intentions on both sides.

**De-measures** –India and Pakistan deliberately avoided larger preparations that signal readiness for a conventional war. Instead, the quick, "surgical" nature of action and retaliatory action creates a fast-paced escalation loop, allowing both states to claim the preservation of deterrence. Here, the lack of war preparations is termed 'de-measures'. In 2019, the increased state of readiness of India's missiles and naval assets was directly tied to one objective – the release of the Indian pilot. This readiness was also not intended as preparations for a larger war (unless Pakistan escalated).

- **The agency of sub-conventional actors to trigger India-Pakistan escalation has increased.** While such actors acted as precursors for larger conventional engagement between the Indian and Pakistani Armies, post the Kargil war, their acts (terror attacks in Indian territory) are viewed as standalone attacks – hence sufficiently constituting Rung I for New Delhi.
- **The space for third-party states to manage the India-Pakistan crisis has evolved.** Before 2016, international efforts following a terror attack (Rung I for New Delhi) were based on two questions – if New Delhi would cross the LoC, and how? Crisis management focused on avoiding such an outcome, which could trigger a larger war. In 2016 and 2019, the space for mediation shrunk between Rung I and New Delhi's cross-LoC response. However, external

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actors were able to act as signal ‘amplifiers’ to prevent further escalation (mostly in 2019) – allowing both states to save face.

- **The scope for inadvertent escalation still exists.** India-Pakistan ties are presently defined by a degree of ‘minimalism.’ While India portrays a ‘de-hyphenation’ from Pakistan and refuses a return to old dynamics, Pakistan has favored engagement but thus far tied it to the undoing of India’s constitutional amendments related to Kashmir in August 2019. While Pakistan could climb down from its demands, and India could indicate some reception to Pakistani requests for engagement in the future, a high-value, high-visibility terror attack could threaten a reversal to a 2016/2019-esque crisis. Moreover, should either state fail to read each other’s intentions despite clear communication or the closure of the first round of escalation, the chances of inadvertent escalation increase.

Additionally, confidence-building measures have worked more for nuclear risk reduction than conventional crisis management. The hotlines between both states are sparsely used, and communication is contingent on political will. However, failing such a Rung I attack (in India’s view), both states have enough incentive to avoid military engagement – further evident in the endurance of the fresh ceasefire at the Line of Control, jointly announced by both militaries, in February 2021.

## 1. Introduction

In the year 2019, almost two decades after the Kargil War, fighters of the Indian Air Force (IAF) crossed the Line of Control (LoC) and dropped ordnance in the Balakot area of Pakistan. It marked the first time the IAF had crossed over for such an attack since the 1971 war. However, despite the intensity of the crisis between the two nuclear-armed neighbors, it did not escalate to a larger confrontation or stand-off that would breach the nuclear threshold. Writing a year after Kargil, and just a few months before the terror attack on the Indian Parliament in the same year, PR Chari observed - "How can conflict between two nuclear adversaries be graduated to ensure that it would not escalate and that nuclear weapons would not be used? There is no credible answer to this question."

Evidently, in the 26 years since overt nuclearization, India-Pakistan escalation dynamics have evolved, with both states staying clear of nuclear options despite multiple crises. This paper explores this evolution and presents a new escalation ladder that can explain crises in the subcontinent since the Kargil War of 1999.

First, the paper outlines pre- and post-nuclearization (1998) escalation dynamics between India and Pakistan. It establishes the peculiarities of the India-Pakistan relationship, which hinder the direct application of the Cold War era escalation theories. It then outlines a vital characteristic of the India-Pakistan de-facto border in Kashmir, the Line of Control, to highlight that a certain level of 'normalized' violence has long existed along the Line.

Second, it presents a fresh descriptive escalation ladder to analyze the India-Pakistan crises between 2001 and 2019. It splits the ladder into Means and Objectives and maps at least four crises to better explain new escalation dynamics in the subcontinent. In doing so, for 2016 and 2019, the paper explains the break from past escalation dynamics by India and Pakistan and outlines their methods for risk control.

Third, the paper addresses the evolving role of sub-conventional actors in triggering India-Pakistan crises, the new 'minimalism' that defines India-Pakistan relations and its effects on escalation dynamics, the evolution of the role of third states in crisis management, and the confidence-building measures that have held between both states thus far. The paper concludes by mapping out each crisis in a series of moves and delineating the room for maneuvering below the nuclear threshold India has carved out for its engagement with Pakistan in past crises.

## 2. India-Pakistan Pre-nuclearization Escalation Dynamics

The India-Pakistan bilateral relationship has been ridden with conflict since the inception of both states as independent sovereign entities in 1947. The enduring character of the political differences between both states operating along territorial (and ideological) lines and inextricably linked to the partition of the subcontinent on religious lines in 1947 has made the state of 'conflict' between both states semi-permanent.

However, the nature of crests in the conflict and the thresholds they crossed in terms of military force applied have drastically varied over the last 76 years, with nuclearization in 1998 marking a

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key watershed. Consequently, both India and Pakistan have since been engaged in a series of 'crises' rather than full-scale conventional war, the last of which was fought in 1971. The definition of crisis best suited in this regard is that by Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing (1977) - "an international crisis is a sequence of interactions between the governments of two or more sovereign states in severe conflict, short of actual war, but involving the perception of a dangerously high probability of war." In a 1959 essay, Thomas Schelling particularly noted that "for both human and mechanical reasons, the probability of inadvertent war rises with a crisis."

Between 1947 and 1998, India and Pakistan fought three full-scale conventional wars, with the application of military force serving as an instrument to manage or resolve conflict (Raghavan, 2010). While both states actively began pursuing a nuclear weapons program in the 1970s and 80s, their overt declaration as nuclear weapons states occurred in 1998. All three wars, however, resulted from conscious, deliberate choices made by the establishments in Islamabad and New Delhi. These choices anticipated a response from the other state - leaving only the scale of the response as unanticipated. This scale, along with relative military strength, strategy, and tactics, determined the outcome of the engagement of forces.

Arguably, in these wars, the element of uncertainty operated so far as it pertained to the enemy's next tactical move, choice of location to concentrate its military power, and ability to expand the war. It did not operate in the sense that both states were uncertain of perceptions by the enemy - Pakistan anticipated Indian military responses in 1947/48 and 1965, and India anticipated a Pakistan military response in 1971. It is in the intervening years between 1971 and 1998, when "crises" in the sense as has been defined here revealed how both states differently read/anticipated the enemy's willingness to tolerate escalation - without looking to fight a conventional war, thus increasing uncertainty.

For instance, during the Brasstacks exercises of November 1986, the positioning of key Indian Army units close to the border increased Pakistan's threat perceptions - viewing Indian actions as escalatory. Despite Indian attempts to placate Pakistan (without any major alterations to the Indian Army's deployments), the latter's act of moving two strike corps in response - was first viewed by India as "defensive and precautionary" - an equivalent move matching India's. However, when Pakistan's Army Reserves North and South crossed the Sutlej River - now threatening India's Bhatinda and Ferozepur - it caused alarm in New Delhi, with Pakistan having climbed a rung higher (Chari et al., 2007).

The variables pushing both states closer to war were enhanced by the atmosphere of uncertainty then prevailing on both sides - enhanced by General K Sundarji and Defence Minister (of State) Arun Singh's briefings to the Indian press, which established the fact that a 'crisis' was indeed under-way (Badhwar and Bobb, 1988). However, while the crisis was enhanced by a lack of trust in the information being supplied by either side at key stages of the exercises, the communication channels were active and in use. Both states eventually displayed clear signs of conflict avoidance. They utilized off-ramps in multiple side-line meetings at multilateral summits and a bilateral meeting with the Pakistani President traveling to India (Chari et al., 2007).

Hence, this crisis (or the one right after it due to fresh tensions in Kashmir) did not give rise to a conventional war, partly due to continued communication between both sides (Bhaskar, 1997).

### 3. India-Pakistan Post-nuclearization Escalation Dynamics

India and Pakistan both declared themselves to be nuclear weapons states in May 1998. Since then, any crises between the two states have inevitably led to commentators making ready references to the potential for inadvertent escalation to the nuclear level. Indeed, the limited war the two states fought within two years of establishing overt nuclear deterrents makes such references well warranted.

Generally, when describing the crisis escalation between two nuclear-armed states, the metaphor that has proven most enduring is a ladder. It is a simple but effective heuristic device that allows for the clear demarcation of levels at which each state acts during a crisis.

Richard Smoke (1977) defined these as ‘salience’. Hence, escalation then comprises “an action that crosses a salience which defines the current limits of a war and that occurs in a context where the actor cannot know the full consequences of his action, including particularly how this action and the opponent’s potential reaction(s) may interact to generate a situation likely to induce new actions that will cross still more saliences”. Writing during the Cold War, authors such as Smoke and others have used similar descriptions of escalation. However, few have been associated with the escalation ladder as much as Herman Kahn (1965), who constructed a 44-run ladder, envisioning scenarios from peacetime to full nuclear exchange.

Writing a few years following the Cuban missile crisis, Kahn describes his ladder as “a methodological device that provides a convenient list of the many options facing the strategist in a two-sided confrontation and that facilitates the examination of the growth and retardation of crises.” (Kahn, 1965). He also maintains that the order of the rungs is not fixed, as the actual circumstances of any escalation can actuate shifts in the order. He acknowledges that there is no necessity for an actor to inexorably go up the ladder rung-by-rung - an escalator could skip rungs or go to lower rungs during a crisis. In light of the scope of this paper, Rungs 1-17 from Kahn’s Ladder are shown in Figure 1.

|   |    |  |
|---|----|--|
| <b>INTENSE CRISES</b>                         | 17 | Limited Evacuation (Approximately 20 percent)    |
|   | 16 | NUclear “Ultimatums”                             |
|   | 15 | Barely Nuclear War                               |
|   | 14 | Declaration of Limited Conventional War          |
|   | 13 | Large Compound Escalation                        |
|   | 12 | Large Conventional War (or Actions)              |
|   | 11 | Super-Ready Status                               |
|   | 10 | Provocative Breaking Off of Diplomatic Relations |
| <b>(NUCLEAR WAR IS UNTHINKABLE THRESHOLD)</b> |    |  |



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|                                       |   |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>TRADITIONAL CRISES</b>             | 9 | Limited Evacuation (Approximately 20 percent) |
|                                       | 8 | NUclear “Ultimatums”                          |
|                                       | 7 | Barely Nuclear War                            |
|                                       | 6 | Declaration of Limited Conventional War       |
|                                       | 5 | Large Compound Escalation                     |
|                                       | 4 | Large Conventional War (or Actions)           |
| <b>(DONT ROCK THE BOAT THRESHOLD)</b> |   |   |
| <b>SUBCRISIS MANEUVERING</b>          | 3 | Solemn and Formal Declarations                |
|                                       | 2 | Political, Economic, and Diplomatic Gestures  |
|                                       | 1 | Ostensible Crisis                             |
| <b>DISAGREEMENT - COLD WAR</b>        |   |   |

FIGURE 1

The ladder contains seven groupings of rungs (three shown above), separated by six ‘fire-breaks’ (three shown above) - thresholds at which very sharp changes in the character of the escalation take place.

However, escalation is virtually meaningless without some manipulation of risk by either state. The need for a certain degree of uncertainty that removes either actor's ability to be in full control of events is imperative. With this uncertainty, Thomas Schelling (1966) associates his theory of ‘brinkmanship’. He defines this as the manipulation of the shared risk of war, which involves “exploiting the danger that somebody may inadvertently go over the brink, dragging the other with him”. [1] In escalating during a crisis, an actor also signals their ability to bear the costs associated with escalation (Carlson, 1995). Such logic leads states with a greater capacity to bear costs to use escalation as a bargaining tool to create an incentive at any point in the escalation ladder for the opposing state to concede to demands. The use of escalation as a bargaining tool has been reiterated numerous times by deterrence theorists (Schelling, 1960, 1966; Kahn, 1965; Carlson, 1995; Smoke 1977).

Such conceptions fit the chessboard of the Cold War well. However, sub-continental crises under nuclear conditions demand other qualifiers before applying any analytical framework drawn from the experiences of the United States and the USSR. Indeed, several authors have attempted to use either Kahn’s escalation ladder or a fresh formulation to better understand Indo-Pak crises since 1998 (Jones, 2011; Whitfield, 2015; Mukherjee, 2019). However, while making valuable contributions, these works skip crucial peculiarities that characterize the India-Pakistan relationship. Numerous other publications, including simulation reports and papers from the Stimson Center, have mapped various escalation pathways between India and Pakistan with varying triggers across several conflict scenarios (Nayak and Krepon, 2006; Haegeland et al., 2018; Lalwani et al., 2020). In the exercises involving terror attacks in Indian territory, a key point of divergence among both was the identification of what constituted ‘move one’ in the escalation ladder. The Indian participants argued that the original trigger event - a terror attack - constituted

move one, while the Pakistanis defined India's retaliation to the attack as the first move (Lalwani et al., 2020). The Indian formulation is adopted for this paper as it is the lowest conceivable rung observed as a kinetic trigger during Indo-Pak crises in the past two decades, without prejudice to the Pakistani formulation, which by default becomes the next rung. Indeed, all military stand-offs between India and Pakistan since the 1999 Kargil War have been triggered by a terror attack on Indian territory by Pakistan-based militants (who act, in India's official view, in the interests of the Pakistani state).

## 4. The Peculiarities of the India-Pakistan Relationship

Kahn considers his ladder a "scenario generator that connects sub-crisis disagreements or incidents of the Cold War with some kind of aftermath" (Kahn, 1965). However, Kahnian 'sub-crisis maneuvering, as illustrated in Figure 1, is almost perpetually present in the India-Pakistan context, which manifests itself more violently as Ceasefire Violations (CFVs) at the Line of Control (LoC). Elements of that grouping, which include 'ostensible crisis', 'political, economic, and diplomatic gestures,' and 'solemn and formal declarations', continually exist in the India-Pakistan relationship, along with other elements from higher rungs in Kahn's ladder. For instance, Rung 10 in Figure 1 - 'provocative diplomatic break' - would have been construed as an observable escalatory action during the Cold War, given that both states maintained full diplomatic ties. Neither India nor Pakistan currently maintains official diplomatic representatives at the ambassadorial level in either capital. However, this predicament of severed diplomatic ties is not an act committed during an ongoing crisis or a war. Instead, it is a characteristic of the simmering sub-conventional conflict between these states generally triggered by a specific crest in the conflict in 2019. Indeed, it has led New Delhi-based commentators to define India's relationship with Pakistan as having entered a state of minimalism (Jacob, 2022). Essentially, the major peculiarities of the India-Pakistan dynamic are:

- Military actions that have involved conventional assets and personnel crossing the border have often been triggered by sub-conventional incidents involving terrorists and non-state actor groups.
- While the two states are matched in nuclear strength (SIPRI, 2023), there is a disparity in the two lower thresholds -
- India's conventional armed strength, across the three primary services, is observably higher than Pakistan's (IISS, 2023).
- Pakistan's willingness to undertake sub-conventional attacks against India through non-state proxies, as seen from the official Indian view, is observably higher (SATP, 2023).
- This paper illustrates the unique dynamics at the Line of Control in the following section.

### 4.1 Dynamics at the Line of Control: Autonomous Military Factors (AMFs)

The India-Pakistan border in the Jammu and Kashmir region is demarcated through a Line of Control - a ceasefire line based on the Karachi Agreement of 1949 and updated by the Simla Agreement of 1972. A certain degree of violence has constantly been present at the Line. For instance, while terror attacks served as the immediate trigger for the 2001-02 crisis, Sawhney and Sood (2003) show that by early 2000, lower-level formations of the Indian Army's Northern Command undertook "calibrated offensive action" across the Line to engage Pakistani troops and "sanitize areas of infiltration", which left 16 Pakistani soldiers dead. Such low-level "back and

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forth” cross-border operations between Indian and Pakistani troops have been routine even without major crests in the simmering conflict. These have involved torturing, mutilating, and beheading soldiers from the other side.

While there is almost invariably an aspect of retribution for Pakistan-sponsored sub-conventional attacks in Indian-administered Kashmir, these strikes by the Indian Army were primarily against units and posts (conventional targets) of the Pakistan Army in response to conventional attacks. It is a documented fact that at the LoC, the Armies of both states operate under some degree of operational autonomy. The government in India at the time of most of these strikes had reportedly given a free hand to the Indian Army to avenge Pakistani acts of mutilation (Pandit, 2017). Moreover, the competition for ‘moral ascendancy’ at the Line, which results in ceasefire violations and engagements between the forces, is a function of such autonomy. Notably, the Indian Army has tactical autonomy but not strategic. This manifests as what Happymon Jacob (2019) terms ‘Autonomous Military Factors’ (AMFs). He defines AMFs as “military factors on the tactical, operational field that are not tightly controlled or determined by the central political or bureaucratic authorities even if, and when, they wish to.” Notwithstanding the ability of AMFs and ceasefire violations to act as escalatory triggers, this paper proposes a new escalation ladder to better describe contemporary India-Pakistan crises, outlined in the next section.

### 4.2 The Two Ladders of Escalation between India and Pakistan

From this point, any illustration of the escalation ladder between India and Pakistan must necessarily incorporate the Line’s on-ground dynamics. Factoring sub-conventional triggers and autonomous military factors (AMFs), the ladder can be constructed in two parts, as illustrated below.

#### *Ladder I (Means)*

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| Rung I   | The use of sub-conventional assets with the state having varying degrees of effective control over them [2] (insurgents, infiltrators, militants, irregulars), retaining plausible deniability.                      |
| Rung II  | The use of a state’s uniformed armed forces for limited covert action into the opposing state to compensate/reinforce earlier losses/gains made due to AMFs along the Line.  |
| Rung III | The use of a state’s uniformed armed forces for limited covert action into the opposing state, without retaining plausible deniability, and with public acknowledgement.   |
| Rung IV  | The use of higher order assets (including air power) of a state’s uniformed armed forces for limited covert action into the opposing state, without retaining plausible deniability and with public acknowledgement. |
| Rung V   | The use (or preparation) of higher order military assets of a state’s armed forces for limited overt military action into the opposing state.  |
| Rung VI  | The use (or preparation) of higher order military assets of a state’s armed forces for unlimited overt military action.  |

**Ladder II (Objectives)**

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| Rung A | Targeting personnel from the state’s uniformed armed forces to compensate/reinforce earlier losses/gains due to AMFs along the Line.  |
| Rung B | Targeting assets (bases, camps, launch pads, training grounds) belonging to sub-conventional forces with/without ancillary conventional assets of the opposing state, nearer to the Line. |
| Rung C | Targeting assets belonging to sub-conventional forces with/without ancillary conventional assets, deeper into the opposing state, farther from the Line.                                  |
| Rung D | Targeting (or threatening) lower/higher order conventional military assets, nearer to the Line.   |
| Rung E | Targeting (or threatening) lower/higher order conventional military assets, deeper into the opposing state, farther across the Line.  |
| Rung F | Targeting (or threatening) lower/higher order conventional military/political assets, deeper into the opposing state, in undisputed territory.  |

Rungs E-F are not intended to indicate actual military options that India may consider should it seek to expand its objectives and climb Ladder II. Instead, it highlights a possible vertical and horizontal expansion of targets that raise enough costs for Pakistan, based on what India has threatened to do in the past. Moreover, the rungs of each ladder are not necessarily exclusive from each other. A move by one state can straddle multiple rungs simultaneously at different levels.[3] Hence, the ladders do not necessarily form a prescriptive pathway for future escalation. The illustration is more of a descriptive tool that can be used to map India’s military responses to sub-conventional attacks thus far. As Kahn (1965) says, “The ladder is supposed to stretch and stir the imagination, not confine it.”

## 5. India’s Strategic Restraint

Less than a year after their May 1998 nuclear tests in Pokharan and the Chaghai Hills respectively, India and Pakistan fought their first (and thus far last) ‘limited-war’ in the Kargil heights of J&K. Triggered by mass infiltrations of militants into India’s Ladakh, Pakistan’s Kargil operation was designed to be “a series of limited tactical actions that normally would not require prior political authorization” but which snowballed into an uncontrolled strategic engagement which the military leadership had not anticipated (Jacob, 2019). While India succeeded in repelling opposing forces from the heights in a high-altitude limited war spanning two months, the war yielded a fresh understanding of strategic stability in the subcontinent, which Ashley Tellis and Christine Fair (2001) termed “ugly stability” - the persistence of unconventional conflicts. However, several factors gave the Kargil War some unique characteristics.

First, it contained the seeds of India’s ‘strategic restraint’, which would grow into a well-watered norm across the rest of the decade. One of Pakistan’s politico-strategic motives was to highlight Kashmir as a nuclear flashpoint and invite international intervention (Menon, 2017), using Rungs I

and II and a mix of objectives at Rung E. In India's view, "Pakistan was trying something new" (Menon, 2017). India's response to this novel approach to internationalizing Kashmir was to inject a new aspect into its response - a conscious and publicly declared choice not to cross the Line of Control to project India as a responsible nuclear power. This, at once, imparted the LoC with new meaning and linked it with India's 'restraint'. Due to the circumstances of its provenance, this 'strategic restraint' became seemingly linked with India's perception of its image as a responsible nuclear power. The ghost of Kargil then ensured that this strategic restraint turned into a norm, and the LoC was its physical manifestation. This paper defines it as the 'LoC-SR' norm.

Second, notwithstanding India's restraint, the war opened the door for parallels to the 'stability-instability paradox' (Glaser, 1990; Snyder, 1965)[4], often considered the zeitgeist between two adversarial nuclear powers. Analysts such as PR Chari (2004) wrote early on, "it is by no means axiomatic that another conflict between the two countries is either unthinkable or would be terminated without escalating across the nuclear threshold". Moreover, India's strategic elite, including the then Defence Minister, had themselves noted that "the issue was not that war had been made obsolete by nuclear weapons, and that covert war by proxy was the only option, but that conventional war remained feasible though with definite limitations" (George Fernandes, in Chari, 2003).

However, one fact that was later established is that Pakistan fought the Kargil war without being entirely sure of its nuclear payload delivery systems' readiness, effectively relying on a nuclear bluff (by Pervez Musharraf's admission in his autobiography).[5] Hence, beyond the Kargil war which occurred a time of intense civil-military crisis in Islamabad/Rawalpindi (eventually leading to the displacement of civilian rule by the Pakistan Army), it is the 2001-02 crisis which yielded greater lessons for how both states seek to escalate or refrain from it across an extended crisis, under truer nuclear conditions than Kargil.

### 5.1 Strategic Restraint and Operation Parakram (2001-02 Crisis)

In the month after 9/11, militants belonging to the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mujahideen attacked the Jammu and Kashmir State Assembly, killing about 40 and injuring several more. Even as the United States engaged in Op Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, with Pakistan's operational support, the Indian PM communicated to the American President that India's patience with Pakistan was dwindling. A subsequent attack in December on the Indian Parliament by militants, again belonging to JeM, ignited the powder trail laid in October. This triggered a full-scale mobilization of the Indian Army, code-named Operation Parakram. It involved the movement of several formations, including its Strike Corps (I-Mathura, II-Ambala, XXI-Bhopal), from their permanent peacetime bases to forward locations facing Pakistan (overall, involving about 800,000 troops). Notably, just before mobilization was underway, policymakers in India were debating the military options available to them, which included air strikes against terrorist camps located in Pakistan (Rung C). This option was turned down, as Sumit Ganguly (2016) outlines in the advice given to the Cabinet Committee on Security -

"as early as December 17, the Indian service chiefs argued before the apex CCS that such strikes would be of limited efficacy in blunting the terrorist threats. These camps, which amounted to little more than drill squares and firing ranges, could be easily reconstituted. Furthermore, such attacks were fraught with the prospect of military escalation."

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The operation is infamous for the Indian government's lack of political direction and its outlining of explicit strategic objectives (Noorani, 2005). By the end of it, the then Chief of Army Staff (General S Padmanabhan) also commented publicly about the need to clearly define the Army's role whenever a situation demands military action to avoid confusion (Kanwal, [2011](#)). Without such top-bottom clarity, the mobilization was driven more by a bottoms-up strategy.

Hence, in December 2001, the primary aim was restricted to J&K, where the Indian Army would undertake limited thrusts across key parts of the LoC and occupy territory in PoK to check future infiltration and improve India's tactical positions along the Line. However, by January 2002, several factors caused the Indian leadership to reconsider its expected gains from the mobilization. Pressure from the United States, as well as Musharraf's public expressions and actions against terror outfits in Pakistan, diluted India's *casus belli*.

However, an attack on the Indian Army's Kaluchak base, which killed personnel, their wives, and children, acted as a fresh trigger for potential military action against Pakistan. Sawhney and Sood ([2003](#)) assert that by June, the Indian Army's war aims changed. In this period, it trained its forces for a war across an expanded theatre of operations. It first reoriented three dual-role China-facing divisions towards Pakistan and employed them in Jammu. Pakistan was expected to rely on its Mangla-based I Corps to meet this threat. Upon commencement of operations, India's three strike corps, which had been concentrating in the Thar Desert, would then cross the border in Rajasthan, relying on the Indian Air Force's perceived edge over the opponent. Pakistan, which had only one other strike corps (II-Multan), would be forced to pull down its Army Reserve North to reinforce the South. India was expected to bear the ensuing war of attrition well. Essentially, "in January, Op Parakram was undertaken for offensive action in J&K, with the option of preparing for full-scale war if Pakistan chose to escalate the conflict outside the state. In June, it aimed to launch deep thrusts in the Rajasthan sector and destroy Pakistan's offensive formations in detail" (Sawhney and Sood, [2003](#)). This would take the Indian response to Rung V and VI, with objectives at Rung F or G).

Arguably, the mobilization during Operation Parakram, its immense shortcomings, and resultant casualties notwithstanding, was used by the Indian leadership as an instrument of crisis bargaining, as much as (if not more than) one for potentially waging a kinetic war. The net result then is that New Delhi considered large-scale military mobilization on the Indian side of the border as a better deterrent tool, with a lower risk of escalation than cross-border strikes.

In India's eyes, the threat of using Rung V or VI with objectives at Rungs D-G would achieve the necessary political objectives. Notwithstanding Parakram's immense cost, New Delhi's lesson from the crisis nourished its Cold Start doctrine that sought to undertake limited armed thrusts into Pakistan with objectives across Rungs E to G. Even as India officially denied the existence of the doctrine, a similar document's existence was confirmed by General Bipin Rawat ([2017](#)) in statements made to the press during his tenure as India's Army Chief and later Chief of Defense Staff. The 2001-02 crisis directly yielded an extended period of speculation on the new doctrine supposedly being tested by the Indian Army in 2001 (Exercise Vijayee Bhava) and involving limited, rapid armored thrusts with infantry and necessary air support. While the Army reportedly re-validated the doctrine in 2011 (Exercise Sudarshan Shakti), the Indian Army refrained from officially accepting it, instead attributing its military exercises to a new "proactive operations" doctrine to replace the erstwhile Sundarji doctrine. Pakistan has long asserted that it can mount a

conventional response to this attack (evinced through its Azm-e-Nau exercises between 2009 and 2013). However, this conventional capability notwithstanding, Pakistan's development of its Nasr missile in 2011 widely led to the belief that it now possesses "tactical" or "battlefield" nuclear weapons. This would further allow Pakistan to build more credibility in its doctrine of 'full-spectrum deterrence', effectively acting as a higher-rung check on India's lower-rung conventional military threat (Noor, [2023](#)). While Azm-e-Nau injected more perceived instability in the subcontinent due to the asymmetry in forces, the introduction of battle-field nuclear weapons (and lingering doubts in Indian strategic minds about command and control of such weapons) added more cause for restraint in India's response matrix to a Pakistani move at the sub-conventional level (Ahmed, [2013](#)).

## 6. New Watersheds - Explaining Recent Crests in the Conflict

### 6.1 The 2008 Crest

In November 2008, terrorists belonging to the Lashkar-e-Taiba (based in Muridke, Pakistan) executed a well-planned and well-resourced attack on India's commercial center - Mumbai. The attack was unmatched in scale compared to earlier terror attacks in Mumbai and other cities. India firmly attributed the attack to the LeT and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence. However, its chosen response method was primarily politico-diplomatic. Shivshankar Menon ([2016](#)), then Foreign Secretary and future National Security Advisor, later deemed this response "the right one for that time and place". Menon ([2016](#)) himself, at the time, was in favor of some kinetic response, such as an Indian strike against LeT training camps in PoK or their headquarters in Muridke, Pakistani Punjab - Rung IV and Rung C.

However, US-based intelligence reports from the time had made it clear that India had considered the military option only initially and briefly. Such options were evaluated as being more limited in scale compared to the 2001-02 mobilization and more in the form of "unilateral precision strikes inside Pakistan-administered Kashmir, along with special forces action on the ground in Pakistan proper" (Stratfor, [2008](#)) - which would escalate India's means to Rungs III or IV, with objectives at Rung C. Eventually, India attributed greater value to not attacking Pakistan. Menon ([2016](#)) also notes that precision strikes on LeT bases would "have had limited practical utility and hardly any effect on the organization, as U.S. missile strikes on Al-Qaeda in Khost, Afghanistan, in August 1998 in retaliation for the bombing of the U.S. embassies."

#### 6.1.1 Normalization of 'strategic restraint'

India's 2008 response showed that it ultimately sought to impose costs on Pakistan for its continued support of terror through non-militarily coercive means by lobbying for international diplomatic support against Pakistan. A narrative of India's 'strategic restraint' had already begun to take shape decades prior. Evaluating India's behavior since independence, Stephen Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta ([2011](#)) noted that "the Indian political leadership has generally seen military force as an inappropriate instrument of politics." They added, however, that "if India were to deviate from strategic restraint, Pakistan would be central to that change." The lack of any kinetic cross-border punitive action by India, despite a substantial sub-conventional trigger in 2008, strengthened this narrative of strategic restraint. The normative character acquired by 'strategic restraint' manifested again at the Line of Control. India consciously chose not to undertake cross-

LoC military action (Ahmed, [2016](#); Cohen & Dasgupta, [2011](#)).

## **6.2 Breaking of Strategic Restraint under the Nuclear Threshold**

In 2016, the strategic restraint narrative was disrupted. In September, four terrorists attacked the Indian Army's 12th Brigade Headquarters in Uri, Kashmir. The attack, which resulted in 19 Indian soldiers being killed and a similar number of wounded, was planned and executed by the JeM. At the time of the attack, the fatality rate was the highest suffered by Indian security forces in two decades. The resulting public outcry reified the need for the new Bharatiya Janata Party-led government to live up to its promises of not tolerating threats to national security. A few days following the attack, Special Forces belonging to the Parachute Regiment of the Indian Army conducted strikes across the Line of Control against at least six launch pads used by the JeM. On the next day, following a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security chaired by the Prime Minister, a joint press briefing was conducted by the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of External Affairs (a first since the Kargil War of 1999) (Mitra, [2016](#)).

In the briefing, the Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) declared the conduct of “surgical strikes” across the LoC in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. He highlighted Pakistan's non-commitment to its undertaking at the 2004 SAARC Summit in Islamabad to not allow its territory to be used by terrorists for attacks against India. He also added that the strikes were conducted based on intelligence reports of more terrorists positioning themselves at several launch pads near the LoC, with the intent of infiltrating into India and conducting more attacks. Moreover, not only did the DGMO state that information about these operations was provided to the Pakistani DGMO but also that there was “no intention” to continue the operation, which had ceased after neutralizing the terrorists (MEA, [2016](#)). There was clear evidence of official intent to portray this as a strictly counter-terrorist operation and not one against the Pakistan Army (Mitra, [2016](#)). Indian Army officials further explained to the press that this was “not a military operation” despite using military assets. The Inter-Services Public Relations of Pakistan denied any such operation by India and asserted that there was only increased ‘cross-fire’ across the LoC, which was an “existential phenomenon” (ISPR, [2016](#)).

### **6.2.1 The structure of incentives for India's ‘norm-break’**

In the 2001 crisis, India had initially considered Rung IV means, with objectives at Rung B/C (Ganguly, [2016](#)). However, it favored a Rung V/VI approach, along with a threatened increase in objectives. In the end, neither translated into a kinetic cross-LoC response. In the 2008 crisis, means at Rung IV with objectives at Rung C had been considered but later abandoned. In both cases, the risk of further escalation was considered over the potential costs imposed on Pakistan through such means. This consideration was modified in 2016 using Rung III means with objectives at Rung B. During CFVs and cross-border strikes triggered by AMFs and not a major sub-conventional attack, India and Pakistan engaged in Rung B objectives. However, a former Northern Army Commander highlighted that escalation to Rung D objectives also occurs when CFVs are more intense and protracted.[6] Moreover, the escalation of means can occur even if the same instruments are used but whose value in the escalation game increases due to the political capital assigned to it – which means that while cross-border strikes due to AMFs remained an occasional tactical event (with some political acknowledgment), they later acquired greater value because the political dispensation assigned it greater political capital through their direct involvement in decision making (Philip, 2019).



Right after the attack on Uri, even before India's response, articles criticizing India's strategic restraint began appearing in the media (Livemint, [2016](#)). Following India's response, analysts noted that India was moving from strategic restraint to 'strategic pro-activism' with a greater propensity to use force (Ahmed, [2016](#)). Michael Krepon ([2016](#)) also noted that the decision to go public with such cross-border strikes was novel. India's strategic restraint had been modified. There are two elements to how India's incentives to modify its strategic restraint came about.

### **6.2.2 Line of Control - Strategic Restraint (LoC-SR)**

India broke the norm it had created with Kargil - that it considered the LoC as the physical manifestation of its strategic restraint (LoC-SR). However, it restricted itself on the Objectives Ladder by limiting its military objectives to Rung B. Combined with a low turn-around time, the limitation applied to objectives also ensured that space for international intervention would be reduced. India's press conference was aimed at the international body, just as it was to Pakistan. This was a sharp contrast to earlier crises, such as during Brasstacks, where press conferences by Indian military and civilian leaders, as the crisis unfolded, comprised open-ended messaging - leaving the potential for escalation open. Post the 2016 surgical strikes, India's messaging was aimed at closure. Indeed, it was in New Delhi's interest to project it as having fulfilled India's immediate objectives, regardless of Pakistan's willingness/non-willingness to escalate.

### **6.2.3 'De-measures'**

While India went about breaking the LoC-SR norm, it accompanied it with a lack of preparations for conventional war. It refrained from indicating a willingness to escalate on the Means Ladder by not undertaking any measures at Rungs V and VI. This conscious choice not to undertake larger preparations for war actively supplemented India's attempts at 'closing' the crisis despite having broken the LoC-SR norm. This paper terms this approach as one of 'de-measures'. De-measures reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation by reducing the indicators available for the opponent to perceive, rightly or wrongly, a willingness to escalate. Rather, de-measures actively signal the lack of such willingness to initiate further escalation (but not a lack of willingness to respond, should the other side escalate).

### **6.2.4 Pakistan's reaction and incentive structures**

Whether actively or passively, Pakistan read India's 'de-measures' based signaling as an incentive not to undertake escalation alone. It denied the Indian action across the LoC completely and emphasized that there was only an intensification of ceasefire violations along the LoC.[7] Pakistan was incentivized to adopt a denial-based strategy for two reasons:

- A denial-based strategy prevents India from normalizing a cross-LoC response and New Delhi from breaking from its past approach, which had borne a vital element of uncertainty.
- A denial-based strategy also reduces Pakistan's imperatives to respond in kind. By characterizing the development as part of the normal set of occurrences at the Line of Control, Pakistan avoids committing itself to a higher-rung response.

## **6.3 2019 - Further Modification to the LoC-SR Norm Break**

In February 2019, a bomb-laden vehicle attacked a convoy of personnel from the Indian Central Reserve Police Force, leading to 40 fatalities – the highest number in a single terror attack on

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Indian forces in 30 years. The planning and execution of this attack were again attributed to the JeM, with the group explicitly claiming responsibility. With general elections due in a few months, the BJP government in New Delhi was expected to respond with a higher-order measure to the attack. On 26th February, 12 Mirage 2000 fighters of the Indian Air Force crossed the LoC and struck a ground target in the Balakot region of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The target destroyed was (according to India) the biggest terror camp belonging to the JeM.

Following the strikes, a high-level meeting involving members of the CCS was chaired by the Indian PM (Maanvi, [2019](#)). The Indian Foreign Secretary, in his statement on the same day, detailed the strike as an "intelligence-led operation" that eliminated JeM terrorists, trainers, senior commanders, and groups of jihadis who were being trained for 'fidayeen' (suicide) action for more terror attacks in Indian cities. He added that this was a "non-military pre-emptive action... specifically targeted at the JeM camp" away from civilian presence (MEA, [2019](#)).

In the early hours of the following day, the Pakistan Air Force sent its fighters into Indian air space with the intention (later stated) of demonstrating the "right of self-defense" and not causing casualties (Firstpost, [2019](#)). During what Pakistan named Operation Swift Retort, an IAF MiG 21 Bison encountered a Pakistani F-16, which led to an aerial engagement that resulted in the latter being shot down, according to the IAF. Subsequently, the MiG itself was shot down with the pilot captured by Pakistan (and released a few days later, partly due to US-led international mediation). PAF jets, however, managed to drop ordnance close to intended military targets in J&K (Subramaniam, [2019](#)). Pakistan claimed that this was deliberate. India claimed that the jets missed their intended targets - the Indian Army's Brigade Headquarters in Rajouri was the intended target - due to intercepting action by Indian jets as part of the IAF's air defense grid (Philip, [2020](#)). The Foreign Ministry of Pakistan issued a statement asserting that the Pakistani air strikes were "not a retaliation for Indian belligerence". Instead, it aimed at "non-military targets, avoiding human loss", with the sole purpose of demonstrating Pakistan's "right, will, and capability for self-defense" (Roche, [2019](#)).

Notably, the air-to-air battle that caught much public attention was incidental to the cross-border operation conducted by the IAF and not part of a larger intention to engage the PAF for air superiority or as a precursor to other conventional operations. This is further evident in the 'turn-cold' order issued to IAF jets, ordering them to abandon the chase of enemy aircraft (India Today, [2021](#)). The engagement between the MiG and F-16 was a result of one Indian jet continuing to pursue a Pakistani fighter after the order.

### ***6.3.1 The new structure of incentives for India***

In 2019, India escalated its means of kinetic response. It climbed to Rung IV but restricted its objectives to sub-conventional targets at Rung C. Hence, by the end of the exchanges in 2019, the 'breaking of strategic restraint' narrative had further strengthened due to Indian use of air power in undisputed Pakistani territory. It was also clear that the BJP government, in power then and now, was living up to its more assertive disposition (Rej and Sagar, 2019). This was true even though, in its initial years, the ruling party did not starkly break from the previous government's approach to Pakistan.

### **6.3.2 LoC-SR**

While it broke from the LoC-SR norm in 2016, India's decision to cross the LoC again and strike deeper into Pakistani territory furthered this break. Its new approach was an escalation across the Means ladder and to cross the LoC, but to restrict itself on the Objectives ladder - striking targets at Rungs B and C. Like in 2016, post the 2019 Balakot strikes, India's messaging was aimed at closure. There are differing opinions amidst India's strategic community on whether the PAF deliberately or accidentally missed their conventional military targets. Some senior officers claim that it was impossible for the PAF to come so close and not hit the Brigade HQ, while other officers firmly believe that the PAF intended to hit the HQ but missed. However, there is enough indication that official thinking was eventually inclined to accept Pakistan's reasoning - Air Marshal RKS Bhadauria (2023), who served as the Indian Air Force's Chief of Staff from September 2019, later indicated that India considered Pakistan to be a rational actor - both about the release of the captured Indian pilot, as well as its decision not to hit Indian military targets.

### **6.3.3 De-measures**

In 2019, India continued using de-measures to signal crisis closure after its cross-LoC strikes, bringing this approach closer to becoming a norm. However, as a result of the ancillary aerial engagement that occurred after India's air strikes in Pakistan, the capture of Wg Cdr Abhinandan Varthaman by Pakistan required India to credibly threaten escalation to ensure a favorable (specific and clearly communicated) outcome, i.e., release of the captured pilot. India's reported signaling to Pakistan through the heightened state of readiness of its missiles, accompanied by the aggressive posturing of the Indian Navy, was part of its approach to increase incentives for Pakistan to concede to Indian demands and release the pilot. Outside of the immediate and discernible objective of securing the pilot's release, India did not accompany its cross-border strikes with conventional preparations for a larger war that could reach closer to the nuclear threshold.

### **6.3.4 The new structure of incentives for Pakistan**

Compared to 2016, Pakistan had less room to deny India's cross-border strikes (even while denying Indian claims of having hit terror camps in undisputed Pakistani territory). This denial helped it limit its response; it was now responding to a 'violation of airspace' rather than to loss of life or material of its military and civilian structures. In deliberately avoiding Indian military targets while delivering ordnance into Indian territory, it achieved the objectives it set for itself. It was communicated publicly to India and the international community through press statements by the DG-ISPR. The subsequent capture of the Indian pilot after an aerial skirmish was anticipated neither by India nor Pakistan - a situation borne out of the equivalent of the fog of war.

While this increased space for diplomatic intervention, the agency undertaking the next move on the escalatory ladder belonged to Pakistan. In the absence of any fresh incentive to escalate the crisis, Pakistan released the Indian pilot - bringing an end to the crisis. Most importantly for this paper, however, Pakistan's messaging during and after Operation Swift Retort with a clear indication of intent was supplemented by its de-measures. Like India, Pakistan also reduced variables that could trigger uncertainty in the escalation ladder due to the opponent's misreading intentions. Its act of releasing the captured Indian pilot served as an ideal off-ramp, proven by the fact that Indian aggressive missile deployments and naval movements reduced in the immediate

aftermath of the pilot's return (even as standard deployments and a state of high alert remained).

## 7. Sub-conventional Actors as Conflict Initiators in India-Pakistan Crises

Crises between India and Pakistan, as well as full-scale conventional wars, have invariably involved sub-conventional actors in the form of non-state armed groups based both in Pakistan as well as in J&K (with support from groups based in Pakistan).

Agency - Before Kargil, such groups were an instrument for the Pakistan Army to generate a *casus belli* - support to 'freedom fighters' in Kashmir and the injection of Pakistan Army regulars. The agency to use such actors categorically lies with Pakistan, notwithstanding some degree of operational autonomy within the leadership of such actors. In India's view, they were more a means than an end for Pakistan. In the crisis immediately after Kargil, these groups evinced an ability to execute attacks within India, using more of their agency (Fair, [2014](#)). The approach of these groups moved from organized guerilla movements in J&K that would draw in the Pakistan Army in support to indiscriminate attacks in India's urban centers both inside and outside J&K. This change in character gave rise to two distinct views/interpretations in both New Delhi as well as Islamabad/Rawalpindi.

For India, such attacks by terrorist actors now ended in themselves for the Pakistan Army and the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (especially during and since 2008), proof of their strategy of "bleeding India with a thousand cuts".

For Pakistan, these attacks were evidence of the autonomy of these groups and their agency in perpetrating terror attacks, with Pakistan itself being victim to multiple attacks from other militant groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.[8]

This entrenched difference in interpretation and Pakistan's insufficient action against sub-conventional actors post the 2001-02 crisis, in India's view, cemented such terror attacks as themselves being a Rung I move. The 2019 crisis, in particular (on the back of the lessons from 2016), reflected the increased agency of sub-conventional actors to trigger escalation between India and Pakistan consciously. Hence, while applying a discreet line of division is difficult, there is sufficient evidence to prove that the Pakistan Army lowered its overt involvement with non-state groups and their use as springboards/precursors for a full-scale conventional war, post-nuclearization and Kargil. Kargil itself, as outlined earlier, occurred under a peculiar set of circumstances (with Pakistan's nuclear capabilities being underdeveloped and a high-stakes civil-military crisis brewing in Islamabad/Rawalpindi).

## 8. 2021 - Fresh Ceasefire and the Era of Minimalism

As India and Pakistan broke off diplomatic and economic ties post-August 2019, the traditional pattern of ceasefire violations at the Line of Control continued. Data from the Indian Home Ministry to Parliament showed that Pakistan breached the ceasefire along the LoC and IB 2,140 times in 2018, 3,479 in 2019, and 5,133 in 2020 (PIB, [2021](#)). However, on 25th February 2021, the Directors General of the Indian and Pakistani Armies jointly declared a re-commitment to the pre-existing ceasefire along the Line of Control (PIB, [2021](#)). Consequently, while there were 664

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ceasefire violations in 2021 before the fresh ceasefire in February, the number reduced to just about a dozen in the rest of the year - with that number holding (and even reducing) till 2024. The ceasefire occurred amidst a shift in posture in New Delhi. Since 2019, India has evinced an ability to sustain a 'minimal' relationship with Pakistan - a characterization provided by Happymon Jacob (2022). This entails a transactional approach to the bilateral relationship without diplomatic and economic ties, with intermittent contact to ensure stability at the border, without engaging in broader political dialogue.

Indian officials, such as its External Affairs Minister (2019), made several statements between 2019 and 2023, asserting that India had "de-hyphenated" from Pakistan. Moreover, since 2019, the overall levels of violence in J&K have reduced significantly. There is no overt organized display of disaffection (partly due to the high level of Indian security presence); infiltration from Pakistan continues but has been considerably checked (according to the Indian Home Ministry's figures presented to the Indian Parliament, 2022). Collectively, these factors further influence India's new approach to Pakistan. The Indian Home Minister's addresses in J&K, such as one in Baramullah in late 2022, indicated that for India, there was no more need to engage with Pakistan on J&K. Rather, the Indian government now focused on consolidating its political position within J&K, by relying on a development based narrative.

### 8.1 The Effects of Minimalism on Escalation Dynamics

The reasoning delineated in Section 6 on the agency of sub-conventional actors to trigger an escalation between India and Pakistan can be applied between 2001-02 and 2019. The Pulwama attack proved that it crossed India's pain tolerance threshold, given the death of 40 troops of India's CRPF. However, there is uncertainty over what constitutes India's pain threshold post-2021 (given the current 'minimal' state of bilateral relations) and what yardstick is to be applied to determine the nature and scale of an attack for it to constitute Rung I in India's view. Across late 2022 and 2023, several attacks by new militant groups (such as The Resistance Force, backed by Pakistan-based LeT) led to several casualties among Indian security troops, especially in Jammu - a hitherto 'quiet' theatre in the last five years. Cumulatively, the consistent operations and ambushes by both old and new groups resulted in many casualties till the end of 2023, exceeding or closing in on the scale that a single attack caused in February 2019, shown in the table below. The number of security personnel killed is marked in red.

| Year | Incidents of Killing | Civilians | Security Forces | Terrorists/Insurgents /Extremists | Not Specified | Total |
|------|----------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|-------|
| 2020 | 140                  | 33        | 56              | 232                               | 0             | 321   |
| 2021 | 153                  | 36        | 45              | 193                               | 0             | 274   |
| 2022 | 151                  | 30        | 30              | 193                               | 0             | 253   |
| 2023 | 72                   | 12        | 33              | 87                                | 2             | 134   |

(South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2020-2024)

Hence, India's ability to bear multiple attacks across 2022 and 2023 with the deaths of officers proves that the Rung I characterization of terror attacks in J&K is dependent on India's domestic and geopolitical priorities. More accurately, even if such attacks continue to constitute Rung I, India has reflected an ability to not respond with escalation across either the means or objectives ladders. While a cross-LoC response and a resultant escalation of means (and perhaps even objectives) would have been naturally expected given the Indian ruling party's nationalist credentials since 2014, India prioritized its focus of not being drawn into older escalation dynamics with Pakistan that could threaten its narrative of security, stability, and development; terrorism in Kashmir is now a law and order issue, even as the Indian government continues to pressure Pakistan internationally to halt state-sponsored terrorism.

### 8.2 Enablers for Minimalism - Regional Context

Two reasons emanating from the regional context were the principal enablers for the transactional character both states adopted during and since 2021 - specifically since the ceasefire. On the one hand, increasing Chinese assertiveness at the Line of Actual Control warranted a re-commitment of Indian military resources for contingencies at its eastern border. On the other hand, the return of the Afghan Taliban to Kabul in August 2021 and the gradual deterioration of Af-Pak relations despite the initial promises made by the Taliban on recognizing the Durand Line and reducing space for anti-Pakistan forces (such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan), forced Pakistan to re-focus on its Eastern/Northern borders. The former resulted in India pivoting key Pakistan-facing units in J&K to face the Chinese threat. At the same time, the Pakistan Army itself focused on meeting a resurgent internal security challenge from the TTP and ensuring stability at the Af-Pak border. In this regional context, Indian and Pakistani troop levels at the Line of Control have come closest to equaling each other compared to previous years.

### 8.3 Pakistan's Response to India's Transactional Approach

Pakistan's response to India's transactional approach has been one of denial and debate. It denies the attempted normalization by India of a Pakistan-less South Asia by injecting itself (especially since Qamar Bajwa as Army Chief) into more diverse partnerships beyond the People's Republic of China to advocate for Pakistan's geopolitical importance and counter India's reluctance to engage in dispute resolution. It debates India's position on the Kashmir issue by making repeated offers (at least four within a year of Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif's tenure as Prime Minister across 2022 and 2023). However, while India now distinguishes more concretely between terrorism and the territorial dispute over J&K, Pakistan has consistently qualified its calls for talks with India's 2019 abrogation of J&K's special constitutional status and removal of statehood (PMO, 2023). While the abrogation of special status was legally validated by the Indian Supreme Court, both the Indian government as well as leaders from its ruling party have overtly committed to the restoration of statehood to Jammu and Kashmir. Hence, should Pakistan meet India's expectation of accepting the finality of the abrogation of J&K, India's restoration of J&K's statehood (without special status) will (in effect, if not in cause) allow Pakistan to climb down from its stringent focus on special status.

Moreover, even as India engaged with the Chinese PLA in a fresh crisis, such as at Tawang in 2022, Pakistan (dealing with a poly-crisis internally) was not incentivized to take advantage of the situation and engage the Indian Army at the LoC.[9] Rather, both states have enough incentives to continue this posture of a 'cold peace' at the LoC in the foreseeable future. While it cannot be categorically asserted that both states shall uphold the ceasefire in the long term (the ceasefire

has broken down in the past despite prolonged periods of adherence), it is undeniable that both sides have largely upheld the 2021 re-commitment - CFVs have reduced to a few dozen or less per year, compared to over a thousand violations per year, before 2021.

### 9. Tertiary Actors as Conflict Managers in India-Pakistan Crises

Ever since the territorial dispute between India and Pakistan, third-party states have held considerable agency in influencing the direction of the bilateral relationship. However, following the 1972 Shimla Accords and India's confidence in its stronger bargaining position vis-a-vis Pakistan changed both states' appetite for third-party intervention. Pakistan continued to rely on international intervention for the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, while India stuck to its 'strictly bilateral' view of the problem. Notwithstanding this watershed, key crises between India and Pakistan continued to feature third-state mediation/influence, with the United States playing the most prominent role (Yusuf, [2018](#)) among other states (Russia, China, and eventually UAE). While external states have played a broad role in increasing incentives for both states to resolve their dispute, this section focuses on their crisis management in 2001-02, 2008, 2016, and 2019 rather than dispute resolution. It engages less with the causal factors pushing these states to involve themselves in these crises (besides the overarching concern of potential nuclear war) and more on the space available and final impact. It has been established that 2016 marked a paradigm shift regarding the meaning of the LoC for India and the associated 'de-measures.' In this context, at which escalation stage does international mediation prove to be most effective in the new escalation dynamics between India and Pakistan?

In Kargil, Washington's position as the principal third-party crisis manager was established, given the impact of Bill Clinton's meeting with Nawaz Sharif, which expedited the cessation of hostilities. In the crises thereafter, top-level diplomats of the United States liaised with their counterparts in the United Kingdom to push both states toward de-escalation (Nayak and Krepon, [2014](#)).

#### 9.1 2001-02

In 2002/02, India's preparations for war at Rungs V and VI increased the time and space available for third-party actors to intervene. The weeks-long duration of the mobilization during the first peak cost the Indian Army the element of surprise, allowed Pakistan to counter-mobilize, and created greater room for US-led international pressure (Ganguly, [2016](#)). By the second peak, the United States had played a consistent role in dousing the series of fires in the sub-continent through continuous engagement (Nayak and Krepon, [2014](#)). At this stage, it did so through its Deputy Secretary of State - Richard Armitage, and Secretary of Defense - Donald Rumsfeld (Tewari, [2021](#)). Moreover, in May, Pakistan had also tested three nuclear-capable missiles, which added impetus for the US to stay India's hand, for fear of escalation.

#### 9.2 2008

India's response to the 2008 crisis has already been outlined as being executed primarily on the political and diplomatic front, without climbing the means or objectives ladder bilaterally with Pakistan. In any case, Washington's role as a 'neutral mediator' was beginning to be interpreted differently by India and Pakistan. While the US-India bilateral relationship was making progress, the US-Pakistan bilateral was strained due to multiple civil-military crises within Pakistan.

Nonetheless, Washington's role in evidence sharing and intelligence assistance to Indian investigators ensured continued US involvement in the aftermath of the crisis, despite the Bush (and then Obama) administrations not considering the 2008 attacks as being as escalatory as the 2001-02 crisis. The United States' preferred approach to crisis mediation was through "top-level diplomacy, high-level official visits, playing for time, and close cooperation with British officials" (Nayak and Krepon, [2012](#)). This tried and tested template incorporated the learnings from 2001/02.

### 9.3 2016

In 2016, in response to the attack at Uri by JeM militants, the Indian leadership chose to publicly claim ownership of the cross-LoC raids carried out by the Indian Army and legitimize a tactical instrument hitherto used covertly with limited political acknowledgment against the Pakistan Army. The Indian government accompanied the move to publicize the strikes with verbal assurances that India had hit sub-conventional targets (Rung B) and not conventional targets (Rung E). Given that Pakistan chose denial as its favored response, asserting that the usual engagement at Rung D at the LoC was the only development, it did not warrant or feature concentrated US-led crisis mediation, given that the crisis ended with Pakistan's denial.

### 9.4 2019

The 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis provides a wealth of insight for third-party crisis management. While diplomatic activity began early during the crisis, they reached new heights following the aerial skirmish that led to the Indian pilot's capture and Pakistan's perception of a credible missile threat from India. India's posturing (deployment of naval assets and reported positioning of missiles closer to Pakistan) was supplemented by third-party pressure to increase incentives for Pakistan to release the Indian pilot and not escalate the crisis further. The American and British Ambassadors to India and Pakistan further conveyed India's seriousness to Islamabad and Rawalpindi (Bisaria, [2024](#)), boosting the threat's credibility and reducing the chances of Pakistani misinterpretation and inadvertent escalation. India itself was relying partly on diplomatic channels to increase pressure on Pakistan (with the Indian Foreign Secretary conveying to the capitals in the UK, USA, Saudi Arabia, and UAE that India would climb the escalation ladder if Pakistan chose to or if the Indian pilot was harmed).

The Trump administration played up the risk of escalation, with the President asserting it to be a "very dangerous situation between the two countries. We would like to see it stop. (sic)" Later, the then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo ([2024](#)) claimed that both India and Pakistan were headed towards nuclear war. While the aftermath of the Pulwama-Balakot strikes spawned a charged atmosphere with heightened tensions, characterizing the acts of both states as "brinkmanship", as several reports did, would be insufficient. This is due to the lack of incentive on Pakistan's part to escalate further after executing Operation Swift Retort, India's de-measures (during the Balakot strikes) and its messaging, as well as international crisis mediation, which secured the channel of communication between both states - waterproofing it from uncertainty and the risk of misinterpretation of threats. Hence, both states relied on bilateral and international indicators to read each other's intentions and resolve a situation from the original crisis.



## 9.5 The New Space for Tertiary Actors

The space for third-party crisis mediation is greatest after India's Rung III or IV action at Rung B or C and not before. In the pre-2016 crisis, the international community had enough room to influence either state's decision-making as India's decision-making timeline was extended, with each day that the LoC was not crossed, leading to greater uncertainty about whether India would cross it and how it would cross it. Post-2016, the space for mediation between Pakistan's Rung I action (in India's view) and India's cross-LoC response has considerably shrunk. India twice undertook a time-sensitive, "surgical" response to meet both its counter-terrorism goals as well as to service its domestic political narrative of responding with force. While a powerful symbol of force, the 'surgical' strike was almost counter-intuitively a form of assurance that the strike was not a prelude to a larger conventional military operation or to escalate horizontally.

However, this response generated more Indian appetite for international involvement after its cross-LoC response, which was part of its crisis-closure attitude. In essence, it puts the onus of de-escalation on Pakistan, being prepared for a same-rung response should Pakistan escalate. This extended window at once carries the seeds of inadvertent escalation due to the open crisis but also greater room for international intervention for de-escalation - securing the accurate interpretation of threats and signal balloons. For India, third states act more as 'amplifiers' for their signaling than mediators.[10]

Ultimately, the peculiar nature of each crisis determines its outcome. In 2019, the capture of the Indian pilot caused India to prepare for further escalation while increasing Pakistan's agency to influence the outcome of the crisis as Islamabad/Rawalpindi decided to release the pilot. It is in these post-crises periods after Rung III, IV, and Rung B, C action that international involvement is more necessary and most effective.

## 10. CBMs and their Role in Escalation Control

Between 2005 and 2019, a number of preexisting and new confidence-building measures (CBMs) influenced escalation between India and Pakistan. For risk reduction, India and Pakistan followed up the 1999 Lahore Memorandum of Understanding with an agreement on pre-notification of ballistic missile tests and an additional agreement on reducing the risk of accidents related to nuclear weapons states in 2007. Notably, both states already had an existing 1991 agreement on the prohibition of attacks on nuclear installations and facilities (Gilani, 2022).

While risk reduction CBMs aid in crisis management, the specific set of measures that both India and Pakistan have looked towards for better crisis management is the use of political and military hot-lines and meetings between operational commanders at the Line of Control and International Border (Pathania, 2021). These include hotlines between the Foreign Secretaries, the Directors General of Military Operations, and the Prime Ministers' offices. Among these, the hotlines between the DGMOs were used to communicate red lines and seek clarifications from the other side whenever the situation across the Line of Control heated (Sabharwal, 2022). Between 2005 and 2017, the DGMOs intermittently used this channel to sound the other side out on key developments or to sustain contact.[11] However, the other hotline-related CBMs have been observed more in their non-use than otherwise.

## 10.1 Which CBMs succeed

In terms of being observed more diligently, the risk reduction CBMs have largely succeeded. With South Asia's dense population centers, both states have continued incentives to uphold them to reduce the risk of conventional and nuclear crisis triggers. Despite the crests and troughs of the India-Pakistan relationship, the difference in interpretation of conflict-initiation (Rung I), and the further deterioration of mutual trust and break in diplomatic and economic relations by 2019, both states continue to adhere to these agreements. India and Pakistan exchanged lists of nuclear installations as recently as January [2024](#), while both states informed each other of ballistic missile tests both bilaterally as well as through general Notices to Airmen.

## 10.2 Which CBMs fall short

Both states have intermittently used direct channels such as hotlines and other crisis management mechanisms between 2005 and 2016. The infrequent and inconsistent nature of hotline communication was a phenomenon even in the crises before nuclearization. For instance, during the Brasstacks crisis, despite the existence of the DGMO hotline, neither side made use of it, even as uncertainties snowballed and the crisis grew. Analyzing the Brasstacks crisis, Chari, Cohen, and Cheema ([2007](#)) agree that "although a hotline had been set up between the directors general of military operations (DGMOs) of both countries, it was relaying little information to Pakistan."

Instead, both states have used the hotline whenever the political atmosphere has been conducive when escalation on either ladder is not triggered by a Rung I event, and when the situation at the LoC needs clarification. Moreover, India's new approach to responding with an escalation on the Means Ladder, within a short period after the Rung I event, accompanied by de-measures, further disincentivizes the Indian government to seek clarifications from Pakistan before executing a response. Like the case for external mediation, it is after its cross-LoC response that it reflects more appetite for clarification in communication - India's NSA interacted with his Pakistani counterpart in October 2016 (Samanta, [2018](#)), after the crisis had blown over, not before. In 2019, the Indian leadership did not display a willingness to communicate with Pakistan between the Rung I and Rung IV events, or instead, before India could carry out its response and then move towards crisis closure. India's last High Commissioner to Pakistan later confirmed that the Pakistani Premier attempted to directly reach out to the Indian PM's office at midnight amid the 2019 crisis - to no avail (Bisaria, [2024](#)). Instead, India's crisis-closure came through a public press conference aimed at Pakistan and the international community.

## 10.3 New Sectors for CBMs: The Maritime Arena

Besides entrenching India's new approach to cross-LoC action in response to a Rung I move, the 2019 India-Pakistan crisis also bore evidence of how conflict escalation can play out in the maritime domain, even though there was no direct engagement of naval forces. Parallel to land and air developments, the Indian Navy deployed INS Arihant, its active SSBN. At the same time, its other ships actively hunted the Pakistan Navy's PNS Saad - a French-built Agosta submarine equipped with Air Independent Propulsion. The Indian Navy, which deployed over 60 warships during the Balakot crisis, including the carrier strike group of the INS Vikramaditya, had orders to force the Saad to surface. While the Saad remained in a discreet location in the Western section of Pakistan's seaboard, the key lesson that the Indian Navy learned was that should it succeed in bringing to bear its numerical superiority during a crisis; it could force the Pakistan Navy to remain deployed close to the Makran coast and not venture out in the open ocean (Dubey, [2019](#)). A

natural question is whether India’s heightened naval preparedness indicates a break of the ‘de-measures’ approach. Notably, the Indian Navy was already deployed for Exercise Cutlass and could transition its assets from exercises to operations.

However, a unique character of the maritime domain is that deployments by both the Indian and Pakistan Navies do not neatly correspond to rung-by-rung escalation by either state when India decides to respond to a Rung I attack. Instead, given the continuous deployment of assets at sea, naval assets are fungible instruments of coercion whenever either state decides to intensify a particular threat. In 2019, India’s naval deployments were related to its point focus on the pilot’s release from Pakistani captivity, which was supplemented by the need to disincentivize further escalation by Pakistan. Moreover, the naval arena is where the potential for confidence building measures is arguably the highest - from potentially coordinating HADR operations (with the Indian Navy having rescued stranded Pakistani citizens from multiple conflict zones) to potential agreements to prevent the capture of fishermen from either side who stray into the other states’ territorial waters or exclusive economic zone.

## 11. Conclusion and Future Projections

India-Pakistan escalation dynamics have evolved in the last two decades. While incentives for conventional war limited or otherwise have decreased, sub-conventional actors have garnered increased agency to trigger an escalation between India and Pakistan; India views attacks by sub-conventional actors as constituting the first rung of the escalation ladder. However, from the Kargil war till the 2008 crisis, India’s non-crossing of the Line of Control became increasingly associated with its ‘strategic restraint’. In the 2001/02 crisis, for instance, the key question (given the nature of the targets during the Rung I attack) was if/when India would cross the LoC into Pakistan after having mobilized its troops. Mapping the 2001/02 crisis (using a non-exhaustive set of events) shows the key points of the escalation ladder in that crisis.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>2001/02</b>   |  |
| <b>Move 1 (Pakistan)</b>   | Attack on India’s Parliament (sub-conventional means-Rung I; conventional objectives-Rung F)   |
| <b>Move 2 (India)</b>  | Planned limited thrusts along the LoC; orders for full mobilization (conventional means - Rung V/Rung VI; threatened objectives- Rung E) - open-ended measures for war           |
| <b>US led international mediation focused on escalation control after first peak</b> |  |
| <b>Move 3 (Pakistan)</b>   | Orders for full mobilization to meet India’s Rung V/Rung E move. Attack on Kaluchak base camp in India (sub-conventional means-Rung I; conventional objectives-Rung D)           |
| <b>Move 4 (India)</b>  | Planned attack across the Thar; continuation of mobilization (conventional means - Rung V/Rung VI; possible objectives - Rungs F-G) - aggravation of open-ended measures for war |

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| US led international mediation focused on escalation control after second peak |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Move 5 (Pakistan)</b>   | Political and diplomatic measures, including a ban on key terror outfits and verbal assurances to curb the activities of terror groups operating on Pakistani soil (Meeting India's later stated political objectives for escalation) |
| <b>Move 6 (India)</b>  | Military de-escalation - demobilization   |

Notably, during the 2001/02 crisis, both states actively undertook preparations for conventional war without clear messaging to either side about the nature of particular measures - such as moving ballistic missiles close to the border, Pakistan's SUPARCO tests, increased Rung II - Rung D action at the LoC and IB, expelling each other's High Commissioners, and politically charged rhetoric in public speeches that increased the risk of a conventional war. However, India's ultimate non-crossing of the LoC contributed to the strategic restraint narrative - which was even more firmly cemented in 2008. In 2016 and 2019, India broke the LoC-SR norm through a time-sensitive, limited surgical response. It accompanied these with de-measures and its public messaging aimed at crisis closure to incentivize Pakistan not to escalate further. Both crises are mapped on the two ladders below.

| 2016                     |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| <b>Move 1 (Pakistan)</b> | Attack on Uri basecamp (sub-conventional means-Rung I; conventional objectives-Rung D)  |
| <b>Move 2 (India)</b>    | Indian surgical strikes across the LoC (escalated conventional means-Rung III; sub-conventional objectives-Rung B) with de-measures |
| <b>Move 3 (Pakistan)</b> | No action; Denial (No escalation); continuation of AMF based Rung II - Rung D action.   |
| <b>Move 4 (India)</b>    | Rung II - Rung D; Higher order escalation controlled  |

| 2019                     |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <b>Move 1 (Pakistan)</b> | Attack on Indian security convoy by Pakistan based militants (sub-conventional means-Rung I; conventional objectives; Rung D)  |
| <b>Move 2 (India)</b>    | Air strikes against explicitly identified militant infrastructure in Pakistan (escalated conventional means-Rung IV, sub-conventional objectives, Rung B) with de-measures |
| <b>Move 3 (Pakistan)</b> | Counter air strikes close to posts of the Indian Army (equivalent rung conventional means-Rung IV, threatened conventional objectives- Rung D/E) with de-measures          |
| <b>Move 4 (India)</b>    | Missile deployments (with possible objectives threatened across Rungs D to G) with direct and indirect messaging demanding the release of the Indian pilot                 |

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|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <b>Move 5 (Pakistan)</b> | Indian pilot released; higher order escalation controlled. |
|--------------------------|--|

Although two events (2016 and 2019) alone are insufficient to discern a firm pattern, India's disinclination to escalate objectives to the conventional level during crises (Rungs E-G) has also been witnessed in the consistent 'non-military' focus of the 2016 and 2019 operations in official statements. Evidence of this disinclination was cemented during India's non-move during Move 4 in 2019. In light of the contemporary character of India-Pakistan relations, however, two scenarios can be imagined as a trigger for fresh escalation.

**Scenario 1 (Deliberate) - A high-intensity sub-conventional attack with about 50 casualties undeniably constituting Rung I for India.**

**Scenario 2 (Inadvertent) - The PAF actually hitting Indian conventional targets, either by chance or by design. India would be forced to respond, despite international mediation.**

While scenario 1 is a replay of the 2019 crisis, scenario 2 is a more plausible trigger for inadvertent escalation.

Tracing an apparent evolution of Indian nuclear doctrine since 1998, Frank O'Donnell (2019) asserts that India's behavior in 2019 reflects a nuclear 'counter-revolution.' This is guided by an indigenous nuclear learning curve that now relies on a more diversified nuclear force with a higher state of readiness (more akin to the US' 'flexible response' rather than massive retaliation). More pertinently, for this paper, he argues that India's ability to terminate crises such as that of 2019 without nuclear escalation has been interpreted by New Delhi as proof that "there is still room on the bilateral escalation ladder before either side initiates nuclear operations" (Donnell, 2019).

Splitting the escalation ladder into two shows how India has expanded such room for maneuvering below the nuclear threshold by escalating means and restricting objectives. Indeed, on being shown the ladders, one Brigadier of the Pakistan Army, formerly in the Strategic Plans Division,[12] agreed that the two states had evinced strong intentions to stay well clear of the nuclear threshold, especially due to the space available in the sub-conventional/conventional domain. This is further bolstered by New Delhi's control of risks during escalation through de-measures and public messaging.[13] The relative ease with which either state can switch between rungs during crises (especially Rungs I-IV) due to the constant state of violence at the Line of Control also proves that the clean firebreaks envisioned in a Kahn-esque ladder cannot be applied to the subcontinent. The military officers interviewed for this paper especially affirmed this absence of firebreaks, including one former Commander of the Indian Army's XV Corps[14] (responsible for the LoC). Essentially, this paper has shown that by operating with a unique, risk-controlled logic of escalation in the sub-continent, both India and Pakistan have found methods of military engagement to resolve a crisis triggered by sub-conventional actors. While this does not preclude the possibility of new crises triggered by either conventional or sub-conventional variables in the future and both deliberate and inadvertent escalation, the lessons drawn from the crises thus far reflect a deliberate intent to save face, control risks, and close the crisis.

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<https://twitter.com/PakPMO/status/1615263023425257474?>

ref\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1615263023425257474%7Ctwgr%5E1dd6b0472483407f877b8d2c17c88d430e00d606%7Ctwcon%5Es1\_&ref\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fthewire.in%2Fdiplomacy%2Fpakistan-pm-sharif

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## Endnotes

[1] Schelling illustrates this with a metaphor - If two climbers are tied together, and one wants to intimidate the other by seeming about to fall over the edge, there has to be some uncertainty or anticipated irrationality, or it won't work. If the brink is marked and provides a firm footing, no loose pebbles underfoot, and no gusts of wind to catch one off guard, if each climber is in full control of himself and never gets dizzy, neither can pose any risk to the other by approaching the brink. There is no danger in approaching it, and while either can deliberately jump off, he cannot credibly pretend that he is about to. Any attempt to intimidate or deter the other climber depends on the threat of slipping or stumbling. With loose ground, gusty winds, and a propensity toward dizziness, there is some danger when a climber approaches the edge; one can credibly threaten to fall off accidentally by standing near the brink.

[2] The concept of ‘effective control’ relates to the degree of control a state exercises over an entity, in its specific operations. The concept was further fleshed out by the International Court of Justice in Nicaragua v. USA. The International Law Commission incorporated this concept in its Articles on State Responsibility for Internationally Wrongful Acts, in Article 4.

[3] Author’s interview with a former Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) of the Indian Army.

[4] Glaser defines it as “lowering the probability that a conventional war will escalate to a nuclear war—along preemptive and other lines—reduces the danger of starting a conventional war; thus, this low likelihood of escalation—referred to here as ‘stability’—makes conventional war less dangerous, and possibly, as a result, more likely.”

[5] Pg 97 of ‘In the Line of Fire’ by Pervez Musharraf.

[6] Interview conducted by the author on the 21st of July 2022. re-affirmed in Track II conversations across 2022 and 2023.

[7] Author conversation with a former Corps Commander (Lahore), Pakistan Army on 21st January 2024.

[8] The attacks by the TTP against Pakistan state establishments and associated civilian hubs, are viewed as distinct in character from those by the JeM/LeT’s attacks in India. Objectively, the TTP has remained an anti-state actor in Pakistan since its provenance, while the JeM/LeT have displayed more pro-state tendencies, benefiting from support from Pakistani intelligence.

[9] Pakistani participants reiterated this in multiple Track II meetings with their Indian counterparts across 2022 and 2023.

[10] The author is grateful to Amb Ajay Bisaria, Fmr High Commissioner to Pakistan, for this characterization.

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[11] Author interview with former Director General of Military Operations, Indian Army.

[12] The Strategic Plans Division is responsible for the protection of Pakistan's tactical and strategic nuclear arsenal and stockpile.

[13] Interview conducted by the author on the 17th of September, 2022, re-affirmed in Track II conversations across 2022 and 2023.

[14] Interview conducted by the author on the 15th of September, 2022, re-affirmed in Track II conversations across 2022 and 2023.