

SOUTH ASIA'S FRAGILE PEACE: THE CHALLENGES OF INDO-PAK RELATIONS

Eman Bhutto

"When two Nations Fight, The Whole Neighborhood Pays, the Arms Race no One Talks About."

Corresponding Author: *
Eman Bhutto

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15639282>

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
18 April, 2025	18 May, 2025	03 June, 2025	11 June 2025

ABSTRACT

This article explores the ongoing tensions between the two NEIGHBOURING STATES who share the world's most dangerous borders, are affecting the regional stability by highlighting the fragile (delicate and breakable) nature of peace, their historical context, the current scenarios, tensions and their impact on the region of south Asian countries. From discussing the dynamics of recent conflicts and potential flashpoints to the increasing dimension of arms race in the region. This article aims to contribute a deeper understanding of regional dynamic and the constant need for sustained diplomatic efforts to maintain peace and stability in the south Asia.

Keywords: fragile, dynamic, arms race, escalation, diplomatic trust, hostility, warfare, brink, terrorism, deterrence, retaliation.

INTRODUCTION

SOUTH ASIA, a region in the southern subregion of Asia, that is defined in geographical as well as diverse cultural ethnicities consisting 25% of world population. This region includes multiple states like India, Pakistan Bangladesh Bhutan, Nepal and most in view Afghanistan. As this region shows that from the history, this land is consistent in its fragile peace, fighting for peace and stability the states, where missiles get priority over meals. In this article the India- Pakistan rivalry is discussed that how the rivalry of **two** nuclear-armed nations tied by decades of distrust, border clashes, and political bitterness-continues to afflict South Asia's quest for regional peace and harmony, this rivalry undermines the regional stability, by fueling militarization and economic stagnation.

The roots of the India-Pakistan conflict are in the 1947 partition of British India, a rushed and disorganized exercise that resulted in the establishment of Pakistan as a distinct Muslim-majority state. While India decided to remain a secular republic dominated by Hindus, Pakistan

was born with the dream of a homeland for Muslims in South Asia, comprising two divisions: West Pakistan (today's Pakistan) and East Pakistan (which later on became Bangladesh in 1971). For a brief moment, it seemed peace might take root. After the 2003 ceasefire, children along the India-Pakistan border grew up without jumping at the sound of artillery fire. Farmers tilled their fields without scanning the skies, and families rebuilt homes shattered by years of shelling. The numbers told a hopeful story—just a handful of violations between 2004 and 2007, as if the land itself was healing. But by 2008, the cracks began to show. A militant attack in Mumbai reignited old tensions, and by 2013, the border was alight again, the thunder of mortars drowning out the voices of those pleading for calm. the years that followed were some of the bloodiest in decades. From 2013 to early 2021, villages along the Line of Control became ghost towns by dusk, their residents huddled in basements as shells rained down. Schools closed, hospitals overflowed, and farmers

abandoned land their families had worked for generations. the ceasefire of February 2021 brought relief—but also a weary skepticism. "We've seen peace before," said an elderly shopkeeper in Poonch, his voice trembling. "It never stays." And yet, against all odds, the truce held. For four years, from 2021 to March 2025, the guns stayed silent. Children played in fields that were once no-man's-land, and traders cautiously reopened shops near the border. But the scars remain—rusted barbed wire, bullet-pocked walls, and the unshakable fear that the next violation could come at any moment. "We live between hope and dread," said a teacher in Uri, her classroom just miles from the Line of Control. "Peace here is always borrowed. The year 2025 witnessed more violence in the form of border clashes and missile attacks between Pakistan and India, proving the finiteness of peace in South Asia and the prolonged control mechanisms sophistication. The crisis bred the Pahalgam incident that portrayed the actuality of a nuclear-initiated war and its impact on geopolitical stability. While a kind of ceasefire was attained, the unstable environment appears to wait at any minute with newer conflicts breaking out at a rapid rate and on a higher intensity scale. (Parveen, 2023)

Kashmir has also been the important but major factor for most of the conflicts and disputes between India and Pakistan. Due to geographical issue of boundary demarcation from the very start of subcontinent's separation. Both states claim to have their territorial rights on the valley but the people of that land suffer from the instability, by being the core issue for the states and becoming the land of proxy wars and constant instability. The LoC cutting through Kashmir - claimed in full and administered in parts by both India and Pakistan - remains one of the most militarized borders in the world. Conflict is never far behind and ceasefires are only as durable as the next provocation.

The cyber warfare is a new way of showing the capabilities in both nations are put on their strategic arsenal, for this new type of warfare has many different and novel risks such as disruption of critical infrastructures, economic losses, and the psychological impact on civilian populations. The greater part of these cyber

confrontations is brought into a study on greater international importance concerning South Asian security dynamics. The digital media warfare played an important role in the war like situation like in recent Pak India conflict, using the artificial intelligence where the misinformation, distrust, portrayal of authentic news or disinformation and hatred spread by media influencers, fan pages and other sources, helping in motivating the audience or creating a panic into them. Cyber security, surveillance systems and hacking brought a new dimension in the conventional warzone, the world has transformed and stepped into a new warfare system like cyber warfare. (Riaz, 2025)

RESEARCH GAP:

From the scratch, we have to understand the gap between the two nations who are very much alike in languages and cultural attire, the gap by which they are ready to ruin each other which initiates discrimination among them that after years of being separated they still start to clash, escalations apart from having multiple ceasefires in decades after decades but ending up at limited war.

These military escalations are not just only threat for themselves but also a security threat to the global world and the economy of international system. Ceasefire violations here can range from "low-level firing to major land grabbing to surgical strikes", says Happymon Jacob, a foreign policy expert.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

This question tends to explore that what measures should be taken from both the sides to minimize their escalations and threat to their security and sovereignty by maintain the peace in the region. moreover, how the non-state actors (terrorist and extremist) get benefit from the diplomatic distrust and defining digital hatred from each side.

How would major flashpoints, specifically the extremist groups and terrorism, affect the India-Pakistan relationship, and what can be done to manage or fix these areas and stabilize peace in the region?

THEORIES APPLIED:

As we know that both the states are nuclear armed states which is a very prominent security

threat. In that case there are some international relation theories which can be applied in the recent ongoing tension of both the states. Game theory, offensive and defensive realism.

Game theory:

Game theory illustrates how two rational players, India and Pakistan, often end up making choices that ultimately harm both sides. The two neighbors who could thrive by collaborating, engaging with peaceful relation but yet remain stuck in hostility, each fearing that showing restraint will be seen as a sign of weakness. This isn't just a theoretical concept; it plays out in the real world. Every time when of the two states get attacked by any militants group or any activity which is harmful for the state's sovereignty, they both find themselves in a similar bind, condemn the attack and lose influence, or stay ambiguous and risk provoking a response from each other

Offensive realism:

The ongoing cycle illustrates the principles of offensive realism, where both the countries focus on showcasing their strength to deter present and future security threats. These rising tensions contribute to regional instability, impacting the security and economic interests of neighboring countries, while also affecting civilian lives through disrupted livelihoods and increased anxiety. The whole scenario creates a tricky security dilemma, where immediate deterrent actions might unintentionally lead to long-term instability, bringing humanitarian challenges for communities along the border on both sides.

Take pahalagam attack as an example: terrorist attack happened on tourists, but India supposed that this attack is a product of Pakistan's support to lashkar-e- tayaba and jaish-e- Muhammad. In response, India suspended the INDUS WATER TREATY and attacks the civilians, cities of Pakistan claiming that these territories are under control of these terrorist organization (operation Sindoor) which was absolutely declined and refused by Pakistani government.

Defensive realism:

When India launches military strikes by naming it *operation sindoor*. launches its retaliating operation called as *Operation*

Bunyan-um-Marsoos. Pakistan responds not out of aggression but from a place of defensive realism acting to safeguard its sovereignty and deter the attack. This ongoing cycle of action and reaction, while driven by self-preservation, ends up destabilizing the entire region.

Role of other states:

The peace efforts in *Afghanistan* hit a standstill as militant groups take advantage of the rising tensions, *China's economic initiatives* face setbacks, and everyday families on both sides bear the consequences. parents are forced to keep their kids home from school during border clashes, farmers suffer losses from unexpected shelling, and entire communities are left grappling with the trauma of unpredictable violence.

Core:

The heartbreaking irony is that both nations are in search of security, yet their defensive actions only serve to fuel a shared instability, leaving millions stuck in the middle, longing for a sense of stability that always seems just out of reach.

THE ARMS RACE:

In a world increasingly shaped by conflict, global military spending reached \$2.72tr in 2024 – a 9.4 per cent increase from 2023 and the sharpest annual rise since the end of the Cold War, according to (Sipri). This marks the 10th consecutive year of rising global military expenditure. The international relations literature lays out the phenomenon of the arms race in the context of security dilemmas. An arms race is considered the competition between two or more entities to accumulate weapons, armed forces, advanced military technology, and military might. It is the competitive, resource-constrained, dynamic process of interaction between two states or coalitions of states in their acquisition of weapons.

India-Pakistan nuclear competition has been a defining element of South Asian geopolitics, influencing regional security dynamics. Using the conceptual frameworks of the balance of power, deterrence, mutual assure destruction and security dilemma, this study focuses on the

India-Pakistan nuclear race and its impacts for regional security. (Manahil Mohi-ud-din, 2025). From 1956 to 2024, India spent \$1.4 trillion on military expenditure, compared to \$348 billion in Pakistan, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sipri), an independent international institute that provides data based on open sources. According to India's union budget 2024-2025, the defense budget of India is \$75 billion USD from its total GDP, in comparison to Pakistan, whose total defense budget is only \$7.8 billion USD, mentioned in Pakistan finance ministry. 'The arms revenues of the Top 100 arms producers still did not fully reflect the scale of demand, and many companies have launched recruitment drives, suggesting they are optimistic about future sales,' said a 2024 report by (Sipri).

This ongoing arms race, driven by years of mutual distrust and periodic crises, has created a security dilemma where each nation views the other's defensive measures as potential threats, resulting in a cycle of escalation. The tensions of 2023-24, marked by cross-border artillery exchanges and competing missile tests, illustrate how quickly restrained actions can escalate into dangerous brinkmanship, with civilian populations often caught in the crossfire. The human toll of this rivalry is immense and multifaceted. As emerging technologies continue to change the security calculus of the states, the arms race is on for investing in the development and acquisition of offensive and defensive technologies in South Asia. (Sidhu, 2023)

Where Missiles Get Priority Over Meals sheds light on the troubling reality that India and Pakistan prioritize military might over the essential needs of their citizens. Both nations pour billions into their defense budgets—India's stands at a staggering \$75 billion, while Pakistan invests heavily in nuclear capabilities. Meanwhile, millions of people are left grappling with hunger, inadequate healthcare, and a lack of educational opportunities. When tensions flare, whether due to border skirmishes or militant actions, funds that could have been used to nourish children or construct hospitals are diverted to purchase missiles and tanks. The communities closest to these conflict zones bear the brunt of this neglect farmers see their crops destroyed by shelling, students are forced to skip

school during military exercises, and families live in a state of perpetual anxiety. (fatima s attarwala, 2025)

THE NUCLEAR DETTERENCE:

Pakistan and India maintain that their nuclear capabilities are for deterrence. At this point, both governments are using rhetoric indicating their willingness to continue exchanging airstrikes and artillery fire; in other words, showing confidence that the other side is, and will remain, deterred. This is likely the case in the short term, but it will also be important that the governments in New Delhi and Islamabad make use of the opportunity afforded by deterrence to begin dialogue on how to stop the cycle of violence. There is also a possibility for outside actors, particularly the United States, now that it seems to have gotten over the Vice President's initial opinion that "it's none of our business," to use the common interest in avoiding nuclear destruction to facilitate a peace process.

why depending on nuclear deterrence as a security strategy can be quite risky?

especially since It has already failed to prevent numerous deaths in the ongoing conflict. First off, there's the troubling notion that if nuclear weapons are seen as a source of security, then having more of them must be even better. In truth, just a handful of nuclear weapons can effectively deter potential threats, as the devastation caused by even one would be catastrophic enough to be unacceptable for any government. Yet, this "more is better" mindset often influences policy decisions, as we can currently observe with China. They already possess enough nuclear weapons to deter both Russia and the United States (and India), but they're still ramping up their arsenal. The second major concern is the risk of becoming overly reliant on deterrence, to the point where it becomes the sole focus of security policy. While deterrence can raise the stakes for using nuclear weapons to an intolerable level, it doesn't tackle the root causes of conflict or the chance that tensions could escalate, altering what might be deemed acceptable. To truly address security crises and provide a peaceful alternative to violence, we need

diplomacy. Deterrence can help promote restraint when it comes to the potential use of nuclear weapons, but it's a dangerous assumption to think it's enough for every situation or that adversaries won't change their risk calculations. Ultimately, deterrence should be seen as a way to create more room for diplomacy, not as a substitute for it. (Erath, 2025)

SUGGESTION TO ACHIEVE PEACE AND CONTROL

Initiate table talks with negotiations by settling disputes

Increase trade with diplomacy Increase people to people contact

Influence the minds of people by sharing positive information and perceptions apart from sharing hatred

Look for new opportunities and ways to make the bilateral relations better

Lastly making the foreign policies by keeping in view to stabilize the peace in the region.

CONCLUSION:

The India-Pakistan conflict is still one of the most unpredictable hotspots in the world. Here, militant attacks, military responses, and nuclear threats create a relentless cycle of tension that comes with heartbreaking human costs. Even with ceasefires and behind-the-scenes negotiations, deep-seated mistrust keeps peace hanging by a thread. It's the civilians who suffer the most—forced to flee from shelling, radicalized by ongoing violence, and struggling to meet basic needs as budgets favor missiles over meals. Achieving true stability will take more than just temporary ceasefires; it requires bold leadership willing to tackle the root issues, from the status of Kashmir to the complexities of proxy warfare. Until that happens, South Asia's future remains uncertain, teetering between the looming threat of war and the unfulfilled hope for peace.

As governments continue to prioritize defense, often at the cost of education, healthcare, and public welfare, the long-term economic and social consequences are profound, something we have proof of in the malnourished children living in poverty and illiteracy. While governments may argue that military and defense is essential for safety, it's the everyday

citizens who end up paying the highest price. The true threat to security isn't solely the risk of war; it's the pervasive issues of poverty, malnutrition, and lost chances for a better life. Until both countries find a way to balance their defense spending with the need for development, their people will continue to sacrifice meals for missiles. The real choice isn't about strength versus weakness; it's about choosing between an arms race and a stable, hopeful future for everyone. The result is a heartbreaking cycle military escalation—ceasefire and hostility. The loss of soldiers losing their lives at the borders, civilians living in fear of shelling, and billions of dollars that could have built schools or hospitals being funneled into missiles. The long-standing rivalry between India and Pakistan is a complex issue that highlights a troubling paradox: the quest for military security often undermines human security, leading to serious consequences for both regional stability and development. Both countries invest heavily in their defense—India's military budget stands at a staggering \$75 billion, while Pakistan allocates around 3.5% of its GDP to defense—despite facing significant socioeconomic challenges. Communities along the border suffer from disrupted livelihoods due to constant shelling, children's education is compromised as schools close during military standoffs, and essential public resources are redirected from development to defense. Despite being the world's fifth-largest economy, India ranks 111th on the Global Hunger Index, while Pakistan's economic crisis worsens even as it continues to expand its nuclear capabilities. The opportunity costs are equally alarming: the combined annual military spending of both nations could instead fund universal healthcare, eradicate malnutrition, or ensure access to clean water for their most vulnerable citizens. This security framework also contributes to broader regional instability.

REFERENCES

- Erath, J. (2025). Deterrence can create space for diplomacy, not replace it. *NUKES OF HAZARD*.
- fatima s attarwala. (2025). the business of battles. *dawn*.

- hussain, m. (2024). Indo-Pakistan rivalry and integrated ring balancing: prospects and challenges to regional stability in South Asia. *asian journal of political science*, 74-91.
- Manahil Mohi-ud-din, D. S. (2025). India-Pakistan Nuclear race and its Impacts on Regional Security (1998-2022). *lira*.
- Parveen, S. (2023). South Asian Conflicts and Regional Security in the Context of Pakistan-India Relations: A Political Analysis. *REGIONAL LENS*.
- Riaz, B. (2025). Cyber Warfare between India and Pakistan: Implications for the Region. *journal of Development and Social Sciences*.
- Sidhu, I. a. (2023). Strategic Dynamics of the Arms Race in South Asia. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*.

