

About BTTN

Balochistan Think Tank Network (BTTN) was established at Quetta, on March 1, 2021. It is an autonomous, non-profit, non-partisan, and multidisciplinary Research Center with a focus not limited to Balochistan only but includes the regional and global dynamics which can influence Pakistan. Broadly, BTTN endeavors to undertake in-depth research of provincial issues with a view to developing the socio, political, and economic status of the province. Its interests also include issues of Energy, Regional Stability, Strategic Stability, Peace and Security, Arms Control and Disarmament, Non-Proliferation, Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Technology, Conflict Resolution, Regional Connectivity, and Socioeconomic development at the national level. Geopolitically, besides South Asia, BTTN's research areas also include regions of Europe and Africa.

BTTN OP-EDs

Balochistan Think Tank Network (BTTN) Faculty of Research has been writing op-eds on a regular basis on different contemporary issues that are published on various international and national platforms. The opinions expressed in this edition are the authors' individual views and do not reflect the official policy of BTTN or any governmental organization. This electronic review is compiled monthly.

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Editor's Note

October has been a month of particularly eventful happenings in the context of South Asian security and strategic events. This concern provides a complete contemplation of the arising geopolitical changes, deterrence posture changes, and defense reorientation that keeps redefining the regional balance of power. The set of articles featured here explores the murkiness of diplomacy, the modernization of defense, and strategic signaling--all articles are good as they provide a fine understanding of the multivariied nature of modern regional politics.

Our first article discusses the politics of sports diplomacy, that is, how cricket, which has traditionally been viewed as a unifying force in South Asia, has become more and more a political hostage, subject to political discourses and maneuvers. The discussion can be seen as an extension of diplomatic isolation beyond the realms of official dialogue and the way it is reflected in cultural and sports fields, where attitudes and perceptions between the neighboring states are developed.

The following articles extend to the strategic and defense arenas where new alliances and emerging doctrines are transforming old equations of security. The mutual defense agreements debate highlights the opportunities and threats of a strategic partnership as states cope with a quickly changing international order characterized by competition, polarization, and realignments.

Similarly, the case analysis of the Indian mobility and modernization projects on its missiles including the rail-mobile Agni-Prime presents a critical reflection in real-time on the technological development and its effects on deterrence stability in the region. These analyses, combined with the discussion of the Indian naval buildup, highlight the growing competition in the maritime and ground-based strategic space. Combined, they point to a territory that is being continually rewired and tested, creating pressing concerns regarding escalation management and strategic restraint.

The article also comprises insightful views on the changing defense relations, especially with Saudi Arabia. The works comment on the larger strategic payoffs such partnerships could return to both bilateral relationships and the regional security architecture in general. Such strengthening of relations can perhaps become the stabilizing element in a turbulent strategic climate--assuming the canny diplomacy and long-range planning.

The final group of entries shifts the critical focus on the rising rhetorical militarism of India, its policy of hegemony through escalation, and on its long-standing hegemony in the region. Overall, the authors claim that this kind of posturing, however aggressive it might seem on the surface, can destabilize the region and reveal the inconsistency in the Indian grand strategy. They support a new emphasis on stability, dialogue, and responsible statecraft to ensure that the region does not descend into strategic miscalculation.

All in all, this is the competition of deterrence and diplomacy, ambitions and restraint, cooperation and competition that this issue of our publication encapsulates. South Asia has found itself at a junction on the road to strategic change, and there is an urgent need to explore these changes with critical acumen and the weight of a balanced judgment by academics, leaders, and practitioners alike. The analyses gathered here are intended to make something of value to that debate--not mere commentary, but thoughtful understanding and an invitation to practical action in an area that can hardly afford further confrontation.

Editor

Dr. Siraj Bashir Baloch

Diplomacy Denied: The Politics Behind India's Cold Shoulder in Cricket

Nomeen Kassi

In South Asia, where there has been conflict instead of diplomacy and co-operation, sporting events such as cricket have always served as a connecting factor between two estranged siblings; India and Pakistan. However, India's recent actions in the 2025 Asia Cup appear to have severed this delicate relationship. Being unwilling to shake hands with their Pakistani counterparts, the Indian players not only violated the rules of etiquette in sports but also made a calculated diplomatic rebuff, such a step that turned a cricket game into the staging ground of aggression and separation. What might have been an opportunity for soft diplomacy and symbolic reconciliation was utilized as a scene by India to sketch in military undertones and nationalistic dedication. This is the most recent step by India, which has been in contrast to a

rising belligerence on its part, both in words and actions towards Pakistan. The connection made between the Asia Cup game and the Operation Sindoor, the recent Indian military reaction to the Pahalgam incident, was an eye-catching effort to militarize a sporting event. The statement by the Indian captain, Suryakumar Yadav, which gave the victory to the armed forces fighting in Kashmir was obviously pre-planned to carry a political theme rather than the sporting spirit. The implication was quite clear that Pakistan was the enemy even in the field of cricket and that sportsmanship should be subservient to nationalism.

Such actions are not only disappointing, but also dangerous. Historically, Cricket has provided India and Pakistan with the much-needed pressure reliever to ease public sentiments, to substitute bombs

with boundaries, and to make people support their nation without supporting war. From the 1980s, when Zia-ul-Haq tied up in the “Cricket for Peace diplomacy,” to President Musharraf’s visit to India in 2005 to watch an India vs. Pakistan Test match, cricket has performed the unofficial ambassador of peace duty on numerous occasions. Even in 2011, when Prime Ministers Yousaf Raza Gillani and Manmohan Singh sat next to each other in the semifinal of the world Cup, it was a moment of apprehensive hope, but in 2025, India chose animosity over amity.

This change cannot be considered separately or seen as a sudden move. In the recent few years, India’s posture toward Pakistan has changed to an increasingly aggressive tone. The revocation of Article 370 in 2019, the Balakot airstrikes, and more recently, Operation Sindoor, all are part of a wider pattern of India flexing its military strength while at the same time refusing diplomatic engagement. On the other hand, Pakistan

has been a constant advocate of dialogue, restraint and depoliticization of sport. The Pakistani squad went to the Asia Cup in the spirit of sportsmanship and with the hope that they might prove that the frosty relations could be melted together by what they shared on the field. Instead, they faced stone-cold silence and political posturing.

Additionally, the Indian narrative of linking sports victory to the Pahalgam attack is equally unethical. India is not only politicizing the sport by dragging the sport of cricket to the shady waters of counterterrorism and military action but it is also silencing any reconciliation bloc early on. Furthermore, this account does not recognize that there are mounting suspicions even about the very existence of Pahalgam, including the false accusations on Pakistan and the haste with which military action against Pakistan was taken and the conveniently timed escalation that followed. Regardless of speculation, the fact remains: Pakistan has denied being involved and

volunteered to collaborate in an impartial investigation, an offer that was predictably ignored.

If anything, Pakistan has handled the Indian posturing with maturity. As the Indian players walked off the field in refusal to shake hands, Pakistani players remained in position, stretching their hand which was left hanging. It was not the petulance of Pakistani captain Salman Ali Agha to subsequently refuse the post-match ceremony, but an implicit protest against a system that values the performance of nationalism more than the actual sport. The idea of India insisting on the integration of militarism with cricket is also ironical in that it is sensitive to its own area when the international arena politicizes matters pertaining to it. India has been quick to term such statements as 'interference in internal affairs' when international sportsmen or celebrities have talked about human rights in Kashmir. However, in this case, it was by the Indian team which decided to turn an international cricket match into a political

affair. Not only is the hypocrisy visible, but it is blinding.

What India does not realize or may have chosen to turn a blind eye towards is that each such act is a bit that erodes the peace and mutual trust of the region. This is an aggressive and undiplomatic form of behavior that does not sit well with a country that hopes to be a global leader, and an advocate of democratic values. It conveys to the world that India is willing to exchange the universality of sport for a narrow political narrative.

The Asia Cup match could have marked a significant milestone. Even a handshake at the toss, a bit of mutual respect at the end of the game or even a detached commentary on the beauty of the game, these trifles might have said it all. They would have softened the public sentiments, turned the players on each side into humans, and reminded us all that there are more than just the borders of the nation-states between which the competition and culture of the same. India has lost another chance for

peace and betrayed cricket's spirit by favoring symbolism over sport, nationalism over hospitality, and military over diplomacy.

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Where Will the Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement Take Us To?

Ali Abbas

The recent Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) signed between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia marks a major milestone in Pakistan's foreign policy. Its mechanism is in line with established multilateral security agreements such as the NATO, where one of the clauses of the agreement clearly states, "an attack on one is considered an attack on both". The pact demonstrates Pakistan's amplified role in the region as a security guarantor, as Pakistan, evidently possesses the stronger military wherewithal amongst the two. Saudi Arabia on the other hand would be the one in a better economic position which will be exchanged with the security that Pakistan will have to offer. Turning this into a mutual win-win situation for the both.

This pact entails major strategic signaling effects which will be felt first and foremost

in the Middle Eastern and South Asian regions, and more broadly across the globe. The deal may in effect pave the way for a broader regional coalition involving other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, as well as other countries in the region that may find themselves increasingly aligned with other state actors in major foreign policy objectives – such as countering the threat posed by Israel to its neighboring states. Israel, in the past two years, has demonstrated increased belligerence and an utter disregard for international protocols, human rights, and the sovereignty of its neighbors as well as its adversaries. The genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza, its continued military pressures imposed on Syria, the irresponsible attacks on Iranian military and nuclear sites, and most recently an air-strike targeting Hamas leaders in Qatar, all highlight Israel's increasingly

destabilizing actions that can push the globe towards an unwanted and unwarranted major conflict. Moreover, Benjamin Netanyahu in a first, publicly supported the idea of a Greater Israel – meaning that he and his supporters in the government are willing to escalate the ongoing conflict to other zones. To this end, Pakistan's defense pact with Saudi Arabia provides the latter with a degree of guarantee in face of an Israeli misadventure which it will have to sustain, if the Greater Israel project were to be initiated.

As far as India is concerned, the fact remains that Saudi Arabia is a major oil producer and provides around 16-20 percent of India's total crude oil imports. The deal would come into effect if India attacks Pakistan in the future and as a response, Saudi Arabia may, to a high degree of certainty, block oil exports to India which will induce major economic repercussions on the latter. This factor will hold a significant deterrent effect on India

which may prevent it from future reckless military actions in South Asia. This may prove potentially positive as far as South Asian strategic stability is concerned. The deal also acts as a catalyst for Pakistan to increase regional defense cooperation with other regional countries. Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar has already stated that other neighboring Islamic countries have showed willingness to join the pact, potentially increasing its scope and effect. Last month, a top military advisor to Iran's supreme leader also expressed his desire to join the Pak-Saudi pact and marked it as a constructive step towards further regional integration.

As part of the ongoing talks stemming from the deal, a Saudi economic delegation is expected in Pakistan that will discuss Saudi funding in multiple industrial and economic sectors within Pakistan, such as agriculture, technology, and sports equipment. Initially, a Saudi investment of \$1 billion has been eyed with more expected in the coming months

and years. However, Saudi officials have expressed that they are willing to see economic reforms in the planned sectors before an economic deal is finalized.

The deal in itself, as well as in an expanded format, will prove beneficial for Pakistan's defense export sector as well. The Global Defense Industrial Solutions (GIDS) has in recent years finalized major defense export deals, especially with the Gulf countries – testimony to that is the signing of 82 MoUs with GCC partner countries for the export of domestically produced defense equipment worth nearly \$30 billion last year.

Pakistan currently exports the Shahpar-III drone to 14 countries that include Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This trend continues to highlight major strides in Pakistan's defense equipment technology that has gained the confidence of foreign buyers. The defense pact may create further sale

opportunities for more Pakistan-made defense hardware.

Lastly, the deal will have a lasting and positive impact on Pakistan's prestige and its image as a security provider. This deal has effectively neutralized the propaganda churned by Pakistan's adversaries that aim to portray an isolated image of the country. Pakistan is by no means isolated at this point in time and is pursuing a balanced and forward-looking policy in line with the emerging multipolar world order where exclusivity has taken a back seat and is being replaced with broader accommodation.

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Rail-Mobile Agni-Prime

Samra Hamid

The Indian test of the rail-mobile Agni-Prime missile in late 2025 is clearly not a defensive measure, but a unilateral strategic escalation measure that, in fact, sabotages the already weak balance in South Asian security. This so-called medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) of high accuracy, solid-fuel propellant, and inherently stealthy rail-based launch capability is very important to New Delhi because it has greatly increased its capacity to launch a prospective disarming first strike.

Although India represents development under the pretext of its Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD), Pakistan monitors it as a qualitative leap of aggression aimed at a counter posture. The calculated mechanism of the Agni-Prime is of strategic secrecy, based on non-transparency and quick deployment, which has successfully rendered the theoretical foundation of any significant,

verifiable arms control/disarmament negotiation between India and Pakistan insignificant. This development proves the maximalist military ambitions in India and its contemptuous disregard for peace in the region.

Agni-Prime (Agni-P) is, as it was designed, a weapon specific to Pakistan. Many may argue that this 2,000-km range provides no strategic benefit against China in secure central Indian bases, but it has the benefit of entirely covering the entire depth of the Pakistani territory. More importantly, the system is not only optimized in retaliation, but in preemption.

It has an advertised Circular Error Probable (CEP) of 10 meters, which shows that it has the ability to strike hardened military targets and nuclear command-and-control (C2) nodes, the hallmark of a first-strike weapon. This

offensive capability is complemented by unsurpassed concealment. With the canisterized missile laid into the large railway system in India, a 67,000 km track network, the Indian Strategic Forces Command (SFC) can disperse almost undetectably. The fact that the launch platform can masquerade as civilian rolling stock with the assistance of massive rolling tunnels in India and its mountainous terrain offers nearly absolute defense against pre-emptive attack or advanced Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR). This technological advantage is an act to capitalize on the asymmetry that exists in the satellite and surveillance of Pakistan. The message sent to Islamabad is very direct and aggressive. India is developing the capacity to carry out a disarming attack, as well as ensuring the survivability of its own infrastructure, and in the process, tries to neutralize Pakistan's nuclear deterrence.

The new rail-mobile Agni-Prime missile of India has an operational agility, which conflicts with the official No First Use (NFU) of the nuclear policy of the nation. The capability of the missile, by increasing its capability to launch a nuclear counter-strike when mounted on an unseen and moving platform, virtually cancels the commitment made publicly that India will never be the first country to deploy nuclear weapons.

A state that is really devoted to Credible Minimum Deterrence must just have sufficient survivable firepower to cause unacceptable damage in retaliation (countervalue targeting). It does not entail a very mobile and high-precision missile that can destroy the military capabilities of an enemy (counterforce targeting). The purchase of systems such as Agni-P, as well as the integration of Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRV) technology of the Agni-V long-range system, gives India the operational capability to consider an

operation of selective first strike or, more probably, decisive counterforce operation in the event of a crisis.

This technological shift proves the fact that the Indian strategic posture has shifted from minimum deterrence to maximum ambition. This deeply affects the strategic stability of South Asia, which in turn compels Pakistan to develop effective countermeasures to preempt such Indian rail-mobile capability. Although mobility is part of nuclear strategy, effective countermeasures such as remote sensing, space-based radar, and infrared (IR) sensors can effectively strike back at such missiles in mobility. Ultimately, mobility can effectively be countered and undermined. Thanks to effective counter-technologies, to balance out deterrence stability in a particular region India's rejection of the restraint regime is evident in its natural design of the rail-mobile missile. The mutual transparency and verification are the key to any effective bilateral agreement (such

as Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) or treaties restricting the number and deployment areas of missiles). Other than the engineering of the missiles, the proximity to identify this missile is nearly impossible, making it invincible if India wages a war against Pakistan. The Agni-Prime system is designed in such a way that such verification is systematically impossible. How would the international community, or Pakistan, ever be able to confirm the boundaries of a missile system that cannot be differentiated from the civilian infrastructure and is continuously floating over a large rail system? New Delhi has conspicuously created a weapon that is an impervious shield against diplomacy. The rail-mobile Agni-Prime reminds us that India considers unilateral technological development and strategic avoidance in its doctrine of choice, and makes it a point to seal its position as the main menace to nuclear non-proliferation and the possible creation of a restraint regime in South Asia.

With India wrathfully pursuing this survivability increase and first-strike ability, Pakistan has had to focus on the survivability of its own deterrence in order to sustain its critical Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) position.

It is an inevitable self-defensive response against India to restore deterrence stability in the region. India's rail-mobile Agni-Prime is a sophisticated military development that has strategically destabilized the nuclear balance of South Asia. By choosing the path of technological evasion over transparency, India has permanently foreclosed the possibility of a formal and verifiable strategic restraint regime.

The focus of the international community must now urgently shift from passively observing this arms race led by India to actively pursuing robust risk-reduction mechanisms. The world must acknowledge that India is an aggressor and an ambitious actor pushing this destructive cycle of strategic modernization.

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Rewiring Regional Deterrence!

Asad Ullah Raisani

Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) share a long history of strong relations. The recent Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) has further formalized and strengthened these ties. The pact was signed in the shadow of escalating regional volatility across the Middle East and South Asia. As Pakistan's Defense Minister Khawaja Asif stated in his interview with Zeteo's Mehdi Hasan, Israel's strike on Hamas leaders in Doha, Qatar, accelerated the process of the pact. Unsurprisingly, the Pakistan-India standoff in May 2025 might have also served a similar purpose.

The most discussed clause of the pact in both media and academic circles, "any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both", modeled after NATO's Article 5, has stirred both concern and optimism. It worries some while giving hope to others who may wish to join the pact. This also

shows that the agreement is far from a mere bilateral accord; it embodies a strategic convergence driven by shared vulnerabilities. At least so far, it appears to be a win-win arrangement for both Pakistan and the KSA.

For instance, the Kingdom's quest for diversified security amid waning US assurances is evident, particularly as Qatar, despite hosting the largest US military base in the region, was still attacked by Israel, with Washington merely persuading Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to apologize for violating Qatar's sovereignty. For Islamabad, the pact provides an opportunity to leverage its military prowess for both geopolitical influence and economic gain.

Therefore, it can be argued that the SMDA not only fortifies the resilience of Riyadh and Islamabad but also heralds a nascent

framework for collective deterrence in the Muslim world. As Pakistan's Defense Minister clearly indicated, the "doors are not closed" for other Gulf or Muslim-majority states to join the pact, although the conditions for such membership have not yet been clarified.

At its core, the pact yields multifaceted gains for both parties, intertwining economic imperatives with security objectives in a manner that transcends traditional patronage dynamics. For Pakistan, a country long encumbered by fiscal fragility, the agreement operationalizes the KSA's role as a financial anchor. The Kingdom has already extended more than \$6 billion in loans and deposits, along with deferred oil payments and refinery investments amounting to a similar sum. This also points toward a broader trajectory of \$75-100 billion in potential Gulf inflows. These economic lifelines have now been reinforced by defense commitments that

could potentially help mitigate Islamabad's balance of payments crisis.

At the strategic level, SDMA elevates Pakistan from a transactional client to a co-architect of Gulf security. It aligns with the vision of Pakistan as a "resilient fortress of the Muslim World," however, how far this fortress will go to defend Muslims like Gazans remains unclear in its nascent phase. Moreover, the pact not only deters potential Israeli and Indian adventurism but also positions Islamabad as the vanguard of Islamic solidarity that has the potential to expand and assert its influence through platforms like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

The KSA, in return, gains strategic autonomy from the pact. The Kingdom envisions defense self-reliance, aiming to localize more than 50 percent of its defense procurement by 2030 and to build momentum through bilateral forums for co-production. Security-wise, the pact

diversifies partnerships beyond the United States while harmonizing threat perceptions without explicit targeting. Economically, the SMDA safeguards the Kingdom's oil infrastructure, which remains periodically vulnerable to Houthi incursions from neighboring Yemen. This pact fosters a symbolic resilience that transforms the bilateral ties between Riyadh and Islamabad into a bulwark against hybrid threats in the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea. At the regional level, the SMDA intersects with the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) joint defense clause, originally signed in 2000 and activated after Israel's strike on Doha on September 9, 2025. The clause states that an attack or threat against one member state will be considered an attack or threat against all. This makes the SMDA timelier and more relevant for the Gulf countries. Indeed, the GCC members are likely considering participation in the pact, as it offers joint security at a time when the US security guarantees no longer hold the same weight.

Moreover, the current Iranian President, Masoud Pezeshkian, has also hailed the bilateral pact at the UN General Assembly as a precursor to "collective security" mechanisms, likely seeing its potential in the context of a broader entente that could eventually undercut the US and Israeli isolation strategies toward Tehran. As far as Israel is concerned, the pact is worrisome for a state that views the Middle East as its strategic playground. In case the GCC members join the pact, and given that Iran has already expressed interest, Israel's expansionist ambitions could face significant obstacles if the alliance proves to be active rather than symbolic. This could challenge the Zionist state's vision of the so-called "Greater Israel," something it is unlikely to tolerate and may seek to counter by coercing the United States to take action in its favor.

In South Asia, the pact compels India to recalibrate its aggressive posture. With the KSA providing 60 percent of New Delhi's crude imports, along with the United Arab

Emirates (UAE) and Iraq, any Pak-India escalation, like that of May 2025, risks \$30 billion (nearly three-quarters percent of India's GDP) in annual GCC trade and remittances from 2.5 million Indian expatriates working in the KSA. This pact also affects the India-Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC) and complicates New Delhi's balancing act in the Gulf. India was already concerned about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the possibility of its regional dominance being further diminished. Moreover, in the event of an Indian attack against Pakistan, amid the growing noise of a so-called "Operation Sindoor 2.0" in New Delhi, it would be considered an attack against KSA. To uphold its credibility, KSA would have to respond across political, economic, and military domains. KSA would also deploy army units and naval vessels to Pakistan, even as a token force. Unless KSA employs military forces, it would not fulfill the obligations of the SDMA.

Globally, the pact signals the fraying of unipolarity, as the US unconditional support for Israel has heightened Gulf skepticism toward its security guarantees, epitomized by the US President Donald Trump's remark, "Without us, they (Gulf countries) probably wouldn't exist right now," a statement that further fuels diversification. However, it cannot be overlooked that the pact complements existing US-Pakistan counterterrorism agreements. Moreover, if Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, during his November visit to Washington, seeks a security guarantee from the United States as well, it could test the durability of the bilateral pact. Israel's reaction in such a scenario would also be interesting to observe.

Conclusively, the SMDA is the talk of the town today. Several Muslim-majority nations are likely considering joining it, given its regional and global implications. However, its true test will begin only if

either of the signatories is threatened or
attacked.

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India's Naval Modernization and Security Dynamics of South Asia

Musavir Hameed

The Indian Ocean, the third largest ocean after the Pacific and Atlantic, is again in the spotlight following the recent four-day conflict between India and Pakistan in May 2025. Once considered a secondary theatre, the sea could become a main battlefield in future conflict between the two South Asian nuclear-armed neighbours. This maritime region could serve as a new theatre of conflict alongside air and land. India's ongoing naval modernisation, characterised by the expansion of nuclear submarines and warships, could alter security dynamics in the region. India's increasing sea-based capabilities, supported by strategic partnerships with the United States and other powers, could turn the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) into a new conflict zone, particularly complicating the India-Pakistan crisis. Consequently, Pakistan is prompted to invest in and modernise its naval fleet and acquire new technologies

to strengthen its maritime capabilities. This article re-evaluates the naval aspects of a potential India-Pakistan conflict.

India's Growing Sea-Based Capabilities

The past few years have seen increased efforts by India to potentially increase its regional influence in the Indian Ocean, which it aspires to. To achieve this, New Delhi has expanded its presence in several states along the Indian Ocean coast, particularly in Oman, Seychelles, Madagascar, Iran, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, and most of the Ocean's smaller island nations. Additionally, India has established a more tangible presence in key maritime areas of the Ocean, especially in the Bay of Bengal through initiatives like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Andaman Sea. At the same time, India has enhanced relationships with countries

having overseas territories in the Indian Ocean, including the United States, the United Kingdom and France.

In recent years, India's power projection in and around the Indian Ocean has become increasingly noticeable. India aims to make the Indian Ocean "India's Ocean." India's naval expansion has included the addition and deployment of warships, submarines, frigates, and corvettes. India is pursuing a large military navy programme to extend its influence across the IOR. In 2024, India allocated a record \$20bn domestic defence manufacturing. Similarly, India plans to significantly boost its naval capabilities through a substantial shipbuilding programme with a massive fund allocation of \$28bn. The plan includes 17 warships and 9 submarines. This complements the existing fleet of 61 warships and submarines, which are being built indigenously. All of this forms part of a broader strategy to expand the Indian Navy to 175 ships by 2035.

Power Projection Beyond IOR

India's acquisition of a sea-based nuclear deterrent marks a significant development in the region. The functioning of INS Arihant and INS Arighaat, with further addition of INS Aridhaman in late 2025, equip India with ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) capable of launching K-4 (3,500 km) and K-15 (750 km) missiles. With new addition of K-5 with projected range of 5000 to 8000 km will redefine India's nuclear posture by potentially hitting target from Europe to East Asia: These submarines, with varying ranges of submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), have not only the potential to hit Pakistan from its location, but with K-5, it goes beyond threatening the European and the American security interests. In recent development, the newly built INS Varsha base near Rambilli, is due to be functional next year, offering secure facilities for submarines to patrol. India justifies these developments as a response to the presence of the Chinese naval force.

The US Role

The US's persistent support for India under the strategic partnership between the two countries reinforces India's regional hegemonic ambitions while maintaining the four military agreements between New Delhi and Washington. The Joint Indo-US naval exercises, often refining anti-submarine warfare, boost India's maritime capabilities. The Washington designation of New Delhi as a "net security provider" in the broader Asia-Pacific Strategy appears threatened for the security and defence of Islamabad. While the US focuses on China's global rise, the unintended pressure on Pakistan—already constrained by limited naval resources—cannot be ignored. This alignment amplifies Pakistan's sense of strategic encirclement.

Role of the Navy in future Pakistan-India Conflicts

Amid the ceasefire intact, the Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's remarks and Pakistan's naval preparedness highlight the growing role of maritime

forces could play in future conflicts. The recent four-day conflict between Pakistan and India witnessed the use of both conventional and modern warfare. But there may be a more important role of the navy in future. The Indian defence minister's remarks about the leading role of the Indian navy in future conflict with Pakistan signify a more assertive naval posture in future conflict. India's growing sea-based capabilities, alongside its assertive naval posture, are threatening strategic stability in the region. India's increasing sea-based capabilities, both in the conventional and nuclear domains, could potentially lead to miscalculations through a false sense of superiority, thereby risking a perilous nuclear escalation.

Consequently, Pakistan may be forced to strengthen its naval capabilities and maintain deterrence against India. Following the recent conflict with India, Pakistan initiated a more frequent, integrated joint operational exercise with the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) to further

reinforce synergy and interoperability between the two services. Currently, Pakistan is outnumbered by India's 17 conventional submarines. India plans to include six additional nuclear-powered attack submarines under Project 75i. New Delhi's potential to dominate critical sea lanes in the IOR threatens Islamabad's economic lifelines, as 95% of its trade traverse these routes. Regarding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), its dependence on the Gwadar deep seaport is prone to Indian naval interdiction. This might not only weaken Pakistan's maritime security, but it also intensifies its strategic vulnerability in a crisis. With the launch of Pakistan's Navy's second Hangor-class submarine, Pakistan's maritime capabilities would be strengthened further. The submarine is included in an eight-vessel deal signed between Pakistan and China in 2015.

Pakistan has already acquired under sea nuclear capability, further enhancing its nuclear deterrent against India. The

addition of Hangor-class submarines with advanced weapons and sensors will be vital to maintaining strategic balance in the region. Pakistan should also organise naval exercises with China, Turkey and Gulf nations. Defense agreements may be signed to bolster maritime security in the IOR. Naval confidence-building measures and diplomatic engagements may be promoted as an effective instrument of nuclear risk reduction. For Pakistan, it is important to acquire capabilities, including maritime patrol aircraft, electronic warfare system, and underwater drones to counter the potential threats.

Conclusion

India's naval modernization, both in the conventional and nuclear domains, is impacting the regional security dynamics of South Asia. This necessitates countermeasures by Pakistan to further enhance its deterrent capabilities vis-à-vis India. The international community should take steps to strengthen strategic stability in the region and keep a check on India's

military modernization, a country outside the NPT but receiving benefits from the US West.

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Pakistan, Saudi Arabia Defense Pact: A Potential Game Changer for the Region

Shahzadi Irum

From the growing militarisation in South Asia to the persistent turmoil in the Middle East, the region is caught in a constant struggle for security and stability. The gradual decline of Western involvement, especially the United States (US), which once acted as a stabilising force, has left nations to confront emerging threats largely on their own. As the world shifts toward multiple centres of power, nations are realising that they can no longer rely solely on distant allies for protection. Instead, they are turning to their neighbours and trusted partners to build regional strength and mutual defence. This evolving reality is giving rise to a new understanding that lasting security must stem from cooperation, not dependence, and that trust among regional partners is now the most valuable shield in an unpredictable world. It is within this shifting

landscape that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have taken a decisive step toward redefining regional security through a historic defence pact.

Signed on 17 September 2025, at the Al-Yamamah Palace in Riyadh by Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Pakistan-Saudi Defence Pact marks a historic milestone in their nearly eight-decade-long alliance. Seen by many as a "geopolitical marriage," the pact **mirrors** the spirit of NATO's Article 5, carrying the powerful clause that "an attack on one will be considered an attack on both." This single line captured global attention, signifying a new level of strategic trust between the two nations. Beyond symbolism, it represents a significant step in redefining regional defence cooperation at a time when Gulf

anxieties are growing and Washington's credibility in the Middle East appears to be waning. For both Islamabad and Riyadh, this pact is more than a diplomatic agreement; it is a game-changing move toward collective security and greater autonomy. If it succeeds, it could pave the way for the broader alliance of Muslim nations dedicated to collective defence and regional stability, possibly evolving into a bloc more united and strategically cohesive than NATO.

The Islamabad-Riyadh Defence Pact, officially referred to as the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA), had been under discussion for over a year, driven by Riyadh's concerns about Tehran's regional ambitions and Washington's unpredictable commitments. However, the recent attack in Doha became the turning point that prompted both sides to take action. The fear of regional spillovers, especially after repeated Israeli strikes carried out with impunity on neighbouring countries,

underscored how fragile the security situation in the Middle East has become. For Saudi Arabia, it was a signal to reduce reliance on foreign powers and develop stronger regional partnerships that could ensure its own safety. For Pakistan, the motivation extends beyond military cooperation. The pact enables Islamabad to strengthen ties with one of its closest allies, enhance defence collaboration, and explore new economic and energy opportunities, particularly at a time when Pakistan's economy is facing significant challenges. It also helps Pakistan improve its regional reputation as a dependable security partner and act as a bridge between South Asia and the Gulf. For both countries, this agreement marks a shift toward protecting their interests and shaping their future through mutual strength rather than outside dependence.

The Pak-Saudi Defence Pact marks a significant and strategic milestone. For years, the failure of international organisations like the United Nations (UN)

to promote justice or stop conflicts has caused frustration throughout the Muslim world. Whether it was the **lack of** response to India's actions in Kashmir, silence during Pakistan's division in 1971, or ongoing crises in Gaza, Iran, and, more recently, in Qatar, the UN's inability to act decisively has hurt its credibility. This failure to intervene strengthened the view that global systems are either unwilling or unable to hold aggressors accountable. In this context, the pact demonstrates a clear understanding by both Islamabad and Riyadh that it is time to take matters into their own hands, to safeguard their interests through regional cooperation and mutual defence, rather than relying on distant promises.

This new security understanding has undoubtedly caused unease in New Delhi and Tel Aviv. For India, which has maintained close economic and political ties with Riyadh in recent years, the pact introduces an unexpected strategic dilemma. The clause stating that "an

attack on one will be considered an attack on both" changes the situation for India.

Any military provocation or false flag operation against Pakistan would now carry far greater risk. Under SMDA, Riyadh would need to respond in political, economic, and military ways to show its commitment. This could mean suspending oil exports to India, recalling Indian workers, or even deploying limited military forces to support Pakistan. In light of these possibilities, India, which has often relied on aggressive military designs, from broader skirmishes to full-scale operations like the recent "Operation Sindoor," will now have to think twice before taking such actions. The pact effectively raises the cost of hostility, reminding India that any miscalculation could draw wider regional attention and stain its diplomatic relations with the Gulf.

Israel faces a similar recalibration. Having long operated with a sense of military freedom in the Middle East, launching strikes whenever it deemed necessary,

Israel too must now consider the potential ripple effects of its actions. With Riyadh stepping into a formal defence agreement with Islamabad, a country deeply respected across the Muslim world, the balance of deterrence in the region is shifting. The message is clear: unilateral aggression will no longer go unchecked. Once confident in their freedom to act, they must now act cautiously. The pact sends a clear message; any aggressive step could trigger wider consequences. It is a reminder that the regional landscape has changed, and caution, not confrontation, is the smarter path forward.

The Pakistan-Saudi Defence Pact marks the start of a new dawn in regional politics, one that is reshaping the dynamics of South Asia and the Middle East. If it succeeds, it could pave the way for the broader alliance of Muslim nations dedicated to collective defence and regional stability, possibly evolving into a bloc more united and strategically cohesive than NATO. Such cooperation

would not only deter countries like India and Israel from reckless aggression but also expose how the West has long benefited from regional unrest. This pact shows that the Muslim world is no longer waiting for others to guarantee its security; it is ready to stand united, protect its interests, and forge a future based on peace, dignity, and mutual respect.

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Pakistan, Saudi Arabia Defense Pact: A Potential Game Changer for the Region

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On September 17, 2025, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed the historic defense pact, referred to as the Pak-Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement SMDA. The pact is one of its kind. In times when proxy wars are at their peak and border tensions are growing with each passing day, this pact is aimed at addressing both countries' concerns. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, sharing common Islamic values and mutual regional vulnerabilities, will both achieve security assurance and economic support through this pact.

In times like these, when Saudi Arabia's dependence on the West is waning due to the West's non-trustworthy approach towards allies, and Pakistan's attempt at reshaping its position as a strategic Muslim player in the region, this pact is the best way out for both. This is their attempt

at transforming the security paradigms of both the Middle East and South Asia.

In nature, the SMDA is a bilateral defense agreement that states, 'an act of aggression against one of the states will be considered an act of aggression against both'. In this case, the adversary will be responded to in all military, economic, and political terms. Since the pact is defensive in nature, it aims at conducting a preemptive strike against potential attackers in a scenario of early threat perception, be the potential attacker is among the Houthis who keep threatening Saudi oil exports, or be it Pakistan's rivalry with India, given India's expansive and aggressive policies. the pact aims at assuring both countries a security policy in the asymmetric warfare trends of today's age.

Among its defense clauses, the pact also includes cooperation between the two countries in terms of joint military drills, intelligence sharing, and joint training. In this regard, Pakistan aims to export Shahpar-III combat drones to Saudi Arabia and the UAE which will aid in technological transfer enabling Saudi Vision 2030 to reach its goals and move towards self-sufficiency of arms. Saudi's vision 2030 involves the development of maritime surveillance with countries in Red Sea chokepoints to protect the area. For this, Saudi Arabia shares trilateral projects with Turkey aimed at building fifth-generation fighters, such as KAAN. The same naval cooperation is hinted at to be part of this pact as well.

As far as economic cooperation is concerned, in this agreement, Saudi Arabia pledges to provide up to \$3 billion loans to Pakistan, \$2 billion in terms of investment MOUs, and oil payments of up to \$1.2 billion are owed to Pakistan are aimed at improving Pakistan's economic

crisis. Additionally, a refinery project of about \$6 billion is also part of this pact. This will help enhance Saudi's energy exports and side by side stabilize Pakistan's economic conditions.

In terms of strategic importance in the region surrounding Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the SMDA is analyzed as a remarkable attempt at reframing Pakistan's position as a key player. Pakistan, under the grey shadows of FATF grey listing, constant border tensions, conflict and skirmishes was displayed as a rather weak state. Under this pact, Pakistan will become Saudi Arabia's security guarantor and it changes a lot about Pakistan's image. It will help Pakistan re-emerge as regional role player in the Muslim world as well as the Gulf. This will not only lead Pakistan to freedom from being a scapegoat to Western sanctions., but will also connect the security fault lines of both South Asia and the Middle East.

In South Asia's case, the pact has a strong effect given that the last conflict between India and Pakistan was not long ago. This pact will create a dis-balance in India's calculation of Pakistan in the future. Saudi Arabia sells up to 60% of India's crude oil needs to India. In case of any mischief from India this time around will disrupt its energy lifelines and will have its workers sent back from the Saudi Arabia to their homes. Also, any attempt of a surgical strike on Pakistan by India will be seen as an attack on Saudi Arabia under the pact. This agreement will also support Pakistan's fight against intensifying Baloch insurgencies in Balochistan and terrorist activities of Tehrik-I-Taliban in tribal region.

Globally, SMDA will allow Islamabad to reestablish itself as a one of the major player in global power politics by decreasing its dependence on its traditional allies—China and the US. As per this agreement, Riyadh is pound to send its military and navy to Pakistan in

times of war with enemy country. In response, Islamabad will offer its defense and deterrence services to KSA in wars of all kinds including technological infusion and a seat and strengthened their voices at higher platforms alongside other major players.

There is no denying of the fact that this agreement has sowed the seed of new alliance and it will be a potential torch bearer of Eastern defense which later on enlarge by the inclusion of countries like Qatar and possibly Iran too.

In nutshell, the SMDA is a major advancement in the partnership between Islamabad and Riyadh. This agreement will boost their defense and deterrence potentials and will result in more cordial relations between them amid the changed world order.

For Islamabad, it will bring both economic and defense benefits. For Riyadh, the deal will bring military benefits and a great market for its energy exports. It will

enhance their strategic posture in the region and globally as well.

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India's Rhetorical Militarism and Pakistan's Imperatives for Stability

Alamgir Gul

South Asia was taken once again towards the brink of a very dangerous precipice in recent months. It is not an unexpected crisis or a skirmish that caused it, but rather the intentional exaggeration of rhetoric by the Indian leaders.

A verbal battle, triggered by the statement of the Indian Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi, who threatened to wipe Pakistan off the map, has not only revealed the volatility of the strategic thought at New Delhi but also disclosed the ideological undertones behind New Delhi's foreign and security policies. It has further escalated to a level where even words can now instigate strategic instability. It is a new stage in the confrontation in South Asia as such belligerent rhetoric is voiced by the highest ranks of the Indian political and military leaders. Although relations

between India and Pakistan have never been devoid of aggression, the words and tone of the latest utterances of threats of border crossing, first strike, and destruction are an indication of a deep loss of control. In the case of the nuclearized region, with the sphere of error being dangerously small, the militaristic discourse normalization bears serious consequences.

An analysis of the present stage of the behaviour of India is not possible without the identification of the ideological system that supports it. The domestic and foreign politics have been merged in one discourse of bigot supremacy and militarized nationalism under the Hindu nationalist rule of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Aggression is not only condoned in this political order, but it is also celebrated.

The fact that the leadership has been calculating on the use of anti-Pakistan rhetoric as a means of gaining domestic backing, and escapism from economic and governance shocks, and projection of strength in the run-up to electoral periods, is the best move. As major state elections are on the verge of being held, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is replaying its old-time gimmick of creating hatred against Pakistan to rally its supporters. This is not new, in itself, but its militarized version, which is now deeply connected to the institutions of national security, is quite perilous in its own right. When the hyper-nationalism of political leaders is replicated by the military leaders, there is a deadly danger of confusing professional deterrence signalling with populist posturing.

The words about crossing the boundaries where needed or wiping Pakistan off the map are not mere figurative words used by the Indians to get them to the realm of reality. They portend a greater

undermining of strategic restraint. India, which has a long history of its so-called declared No First Use (NFU) nuclear policy in the region, the current statements by Indian senior officials that it may alter depending on the situation have brought about uncertainties in the management of crisis. This ambiguity promotes worst-case thinking in Islamabad, which causes Pakistan to stock up on the worst-case scenario of pre-emptive attacks. History is full of examples. The Balakot, the post-Uri surgical strikes, the so-called Operation Sindoor all demonstrate a trend: symbolic military operations at the right time to have their payoff in the form of political dividends and not strategic imperative. The intention is not to change the field of battle but to form discourses of hegemonies. During every episode, it is shown that escalation is based not on military reasoning but rather on domestic politics.

It is impossible to discuss the dangerous normalization of Indian militarism without referring to the permissive international

environment, which makes it possible. The United States and other Western powers, which are keen on developing India as a strategic balance to China, have always been blind to the aggression, democratic backsliding, and the abuse of human rights by New Delhi. Civil nuclear cooperation, transfer of defence technology, and inclusion in elite groupings such as the Quad has helped the West strengthen the sense of exceptionalism in India.

Such biased interaction is not without effects. The cost of aggression has been lowered by the major powers rewarding the aggressive behaviour of India with strategic alliances and diplomatic concessions. They do not say anything against the inflammatory language of Indian officials; in fact, they make it legitimate, indirectly sending a message to New Delhi that the militaristic conduct will not just go unpunished, but can be even followed by geopolitical rewards. The

response of Pakistan to the provocations of India has been cautious yet sure.

The words of its military leaders, especially the one that an erasure would be reciprocated, highlights a deterrence-based policy, but not dominance. Pakistan has offered dialogue, risk-reduction measures and Strategic Restraint Regime, nuclear and missile restraint, conventional arms control and dispute settlement on numerous occasions. Such suggestions do not indicate the lack of power, it is maturity, the realization that stability is impossible with unbridled militarism.

However, restraint should not be a source of complacency. Pakistan cannot risk taking its guard down, or lose focus on the fringe military engagements, be it in the Middle East or in any other region. The fulcrum of its security lies on the eastern border. Credible minimum deterrence, modernization of command and control, as well as reinforcement of crisis-communication mechanisms are essential

to achieve stability in the face of the India's rhetorical brinkmanship.

Pakistan should intensify its diplomacy to expose India's escalating behaviour and warn the world of the catastrophic fallout of a potential nuclear war, from climate collapse to humanitarian disaster.

External powers should link India's partnerships to responsible conduct and regional dialogue, as short-term China balancing cannot outweigh South Asia's long-term stability. India's militaristic rhetoric and ideological rigidity show its rejection of coexistence, turning national pride into provocation.

Pakistan should remain resilient, strong yet restrained, upholding peace as a shared survival goal.

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India's Strategy of Escalation

Dominance

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Recent, statements by Indian Air Force Chief Marshal AP Singh and Indian Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi reflect how India's military doctrine is transforming, which, in recent years, has undergone a significant shift and is marked by a more offensive and assertive approach. India continues to expand its military modernization program beyond its defense needs, as evidenced by its ranking as the world's second-largest importer of military equipment, alongside its huge investment in indigenization.

India's strategy of escalation dominance, aimed at acquiring the ability to control the pace, intensity, and outcome of a conflict at each successive rung of the escalation ladder, as well as termination on its own terms, is underway. There are indications of development of such a strategy. Conventional superiority, strategic

signaling, ready-to-use nuclear forces, and crisis management are all examples. Its strategy of escalation dominance, coupled with damage limitation, is supported by multilayered missile and air defense systems and canisterization of its nuclear-capable missile for a ready-to-use force, as well as cyber and space capabilities.

These capabilities are considered key to a state's escalation dominance strategy. However, India's escalation dominance in South Asia is not only accelerating the intensity of the security dilemma by increasing its own security but also deepening the threat perception of the adversary—weakening the strategic stability of South Asia.

In 2004, India revealed its Cold Start doctrine, a limited warfighting offensive

plan to achieve conventional objectives within a limited time frame. Later, two more doctrines, known as the Joint Doctrine for Indian Armed Forces and the Land Warfare Doctrine, were issued in 2017 and 2018.

Recently, the Indian government announced a joint exercise by the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force, named Cold Start, in the first week of October 2025. The exercise aimed to test drones and counter-drone systems that officials labelled as the biggest such drill to be conducted since the May India-Pakistan conflict.

On September 25, 2025, the Indian Ministry of Defense announced that India had conducted a successful flight test of a rail-based Agni-Prime intermediate-range ballistic missile (MRBM). This is the first railway-based ballistic missile, which the minister called “under a full operational scenario.” A rail-based launcher is considered a significant development

since the missile can move freely across the national rail network. This increases the flexibility of the system in terms of its operational capability and survivability, as well as its ability to be deployed quickly.

The development is part of India’s ongoing military modernization program by fielding more types of weapon systems. A rail-based launcher, compared to fixed silos and road mobile launchers, has the advantage of quick deployment, maneuverability, and greater chances of survivability. With the test, India has joined a select group of nations with this capability.

India’s counterforce capability, followed by emerging trends in its nuclear posturing and technological developments, play into Pakistan’s fears. Indian ambitions for conventional counterforce capabilities only increases Pakistan’s fears. Reportedly, India is also pursuing a missile capable of carrying a bunker-buster. Its potential to

cause massive destruction could cross Pakistan's threshold for nuclear use, thereby leading to a serious crisis.

These ambitions require expansion of India's nuclear arsenal in terms of more missiles, more warheads, and more fissile material to fulfill the requirements of its emerging nuclear posture, which is detrimental to regional peace and stability. India's pursuit of an escalation dominance strategy vis-à-vis Pakistan could be perilous and lead to retaliation and war, as true escalation dominance is rarely attainable in any confrontation.

It is not something that is a feasible policy objective. Ending conflict on favorable terms remains a perilous policy objective. This is the capability of a state to dictate the endgame of a conflict, ensuring that peace is maintained on its own terms, not the opponent's. Nevertheless, India's policy of escalation dominance in South Asia is escalatory, while remaining elusive. The recent four-day conflict is the

latest example of India's objectives to end the conflict on advantageous terms militarily, economically, and diplomatically. For instance, after its strike inside Pakistan, the Indian government immediately started to claim the success of Operation Sindoor, praising its military capabilities and technological strides.

On the diplomatic level, India anticipated the international community's response to the attacks and support for the Indian stance to strengthen its regional and international standings. However, the failure of the Indian strategy was exposed at the military level when India faced tough retaliation from Pakistan, resulting in the reported loss of its six jets, besides damage to its key military installations, including its costly defense systems. At the diplomatic and economic levels, Trump's repeated claims of credit for ending the conflict question its long-held stance of strategic autonomy and rejecting third parties' role in resolving the Kashmir dispute. After the ceasefire,

Trump claimed that to end the conflict between India and Pakistan, his threat of extremely high tariffs was instrumental in reaching a ceasefire agreement.

India has been unable to achieve the desired outcomes from the conflicts it has initiated many times over the past two decades. Latest statements from the Indian military leadership also show that India is unsatisfied with the outcomes of its strategy. It is more useful to treat escalation dominance as a philosophical aspiration than as a feasible policy objective, especially against a country that has a qualitative edge over the initiator of the crisis. Therefore, advanced

technologies could be decisive in any future conflicts, but it could be that reciprocal development can offer a counter-capability in the same-domain deterrence and thus may challenge escalation dominance. Pakistan's policy of full-spectrum deterrence is instrumental in countering Indian ambitions at every level of the escalation ladder. India's pursuit of escalation dominance complicates the regional security dynamics, which already lack institutionalized Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), a nuclear risk-reduction mechanism, and an arms control framework aligned with the emerging technologies.

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India's Aspiration for a Regional Hegemony – An Awaited Failure

Zafar Khan

India aspires for a regional hegemony as India's conventional and strategic forces rapidly grow up both on land and in sea. India through the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) has been developing several mega strategic projects such as the ICBMs, MIRVing, BMDs, SLBMs, TNWs, hypersonic missiles, and parts of emerging technologies such as anti-satellite, drones, and lethal autonomous weapon systems. India never lags behind in increasing the ranges of its delivery systems that goes beyond the South Asian region. All these weapon systems not only make India appear more aggressive and offensive in South Asia, but also such strategic imperatives would further boost up India's aspiration for regional hegemony.

With an immense juggernaut increase of conventional and nuclear forces, the Indian security leadership would aspire to

opt for an escalation dominance strategy. It is a known fact that India spends multiple times more on defence than any other country in Asia. It has become one of the leading arms-importing countries. Credible sources also indicate that India is the fastest growing nuclear weapon state. India has more nuclear weapons than Pakistan. Without putting up a restraint, India will continue to increase its nuclear weapons along with the related delivery systems fuelling an unending arms race, crisis instability and risk of escalation in the South Asian region.

India has been intervening directly or indirectly into the affairs of many South Asian countries, including other vulnerable countries such as Afghanistan by dangerously playing out its proxies against Pakistan. It had a serious border conflict with China more recently. It keeps a strategic aspiration for waging a limited

war against Pakistan under the nuclear threshold. Under the banner of the so-called “New Normal”, it opted for preventive strikes such as the 2019 and May 2025 conflicts risking for escalation to a serious level. It undermines the US vital security and economic interest in the region despite having an increasing strategic partnership.

Considering its “Act East” policy, India continues to proclaim the Indian Ocean as India’s ocean that in turn may push the US from the Indian ocean region. In that context, India develops a number of nuclear-powered submarines with longer ranges targeting not only Pakistan and China, but also the vital security interest of the US in the Indian ocean region. More importantly, India is trying to increase its naval bases in the broader Asia-Pacific region. All these strategic imperatives across the board provide India the incentives to dominate the region while undermining the economic and strategic

interests of the other players including that of Pakistan.

While critically analysing the empirical evidence on the failures of leading players to become the regional and/ or global hegemon, a renowned Professor of Harvard University, Stephen M. Walt in his recent research article “Hedging on Hegemony” argued that states “in the modern world, in short, trying to become a regional hegemon has failed more than 80 percent of the time. And the failures were not just minor setbacks: They were unmitigated disasters for the governments that made the attempt. At a minimum, pursuing regional hegemony did not make any of these states more secure, which casts doubts on one of offensive realism’s main prescriptions.” Despite having an aspiration for becoming a regional hegemon of the region, India may never be able to become a successful hegemon of the region for obvious reasons: a) it has an acute security rivalry with a credible nuclear weapon state Pakistan. b) It has a

border issue with China as it fought a short war in 1962 and experienced many border clashes with China. c) it continues to have many unresolved issues with Pakistan, China and other South Asian countries. d) while punching above the weight, it undermines the vital security and economic interest of other leading players in the system such as the US and rising China in the broader Asia-Pacific region. e) it still does not have the economic and material sources much needed to become the regional hegemon.

In fact, India can never be a regional hegemon in its true sense despite having the ambition for such an imperative. With all such weakness and major gaps, any attempt to become a regional hegemon will potentially risk crisis instability, more serious military conflicts, and dangerous escalation. Therefore, India needs to be cautious enough to move on while taking up equally on-board other players of varying interests in the region. This in turn will boost cooperation under security dilemma, co-existence, and competition for stability in the broader region without aspiring to wage any type of war against others in the region.

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