

The India—Pakistan conflict escalation framework¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The India—Pakistan conflict has variously been described as an ‘enduring rivalry’² or a ‘protracted conflict’ — characterised by its long duration, recurrence of armed exchanges, and the involvement of state and non-state actors.

To explain this complex conflict analytically, a framework is presented in this paper which highlights the following:

- There is an asymmetry in nuclear & conventional thresholds between the two states
- There are a total of five conflict levels — the levels of conflicts preferred by India are different from the ones desired by Pakistan
- The different ways in which a conflict between the two states can escalate as a result of their differential conventional and nuclear thresholds
- India will have to rely on its covert capabilities until it develops precise air-strikes as a credible option for eliminating terrorists
- India will have to enhance the credibility of its nuclear deterrence against all weapons of mass destruction

This realist assessment of the nature of the India—Pakistan conflict will be able to better explain the nuances involved during times of hostility between the two countries. It will help the decision makers of both nation-states to make prudent judgment calls in de-escalating conflicts.

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² TV Paul, “Causes of the India—Pakistan enduring rivalry”, in *The India-Pakistan conflict: An Enduring Rivalry*, ed. TV Paul, (Cambridge University Press, 2005)

CONTEXT

The entrenched India—Pakistan inter-state conflict began with the birth of the two states in 1947, and it has continued ever since, with the periodic resumption of wars and crises.³

The past few months have stayed true to this trend — with even high level meetings between the two Prime Ministers failing to suppress rising tensions on the border and belligerent posturing about weapon capabilities.

The latest round of armed skirmishes between the two border forces started in July 2014 and continues to this day. This low-level conflict has the potential to escalate to the next level.

In June 2015, the Indian armed forces conducted a cross-border raid into Myanmar. A Minister of State in the Indian government called this operation a “message” to countries such as Pakistan that India will not hesitate to pursue threats outside of its borders. In response, the Pakistani defence minister brought up the possibility of nuclear war should India ever launch a similar incursion into Pakistan⁴. Such reactions again illustrate the pathways for conflict escalation.

In March 2015, Gen. Khalid Kidwai at the Carnegie conference on Nuclear Policy provided a glimpse of Pakistan’s aspirations in the nuclear domain — a move towards full-spectrum deterrence, the desire for a sea-based deterrent, and how “having tactical nuclear weapons would make a war less likely”⁵. In the same month, an essay “Pakistan’s Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Operational Myths and Realities”, concluded that the induction of short-range, nuclear-capable delivery vehicles in Pakistan’s arsenal as both dangerous and problematic⁶.

The above mentioned triggers only highlight the need to analytically assess this conflict. This paper attempts to bridge this gap by presenting analytical framework that can explain this stability—instability paradox between the two countries.

This framework will answer the following questions: What is the difference in conflict thresholds between the two doctrines, in the conventional and nuclear domains? What

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Indian military operation along Burma border opens new rift with Pakistan”, *The Guardian*, 16th June 2015 goo.gl/zTvgAE

⁵ “Pakistan needs short-range tactical nuclear weapons to deter India”, *The Express Tribune*, 24th March 2015 goo.gl/2pql2p

⁶ Jeffrey D. McCausland, “Pakistan’s Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Operational Myths and Realities”, *Stimson Center*, 10th March 2015 goo.gl/Cy59gu

are the various levels of conflicts possible? What are the ways in which a conflict can escalate? And what are the optimal conflict scenarios desired by the two states?

THE CONFLICT ESCALATION FRAMEWORK

The India–Pakistan conflict escalation framework looks as shown in *Figure 1*.

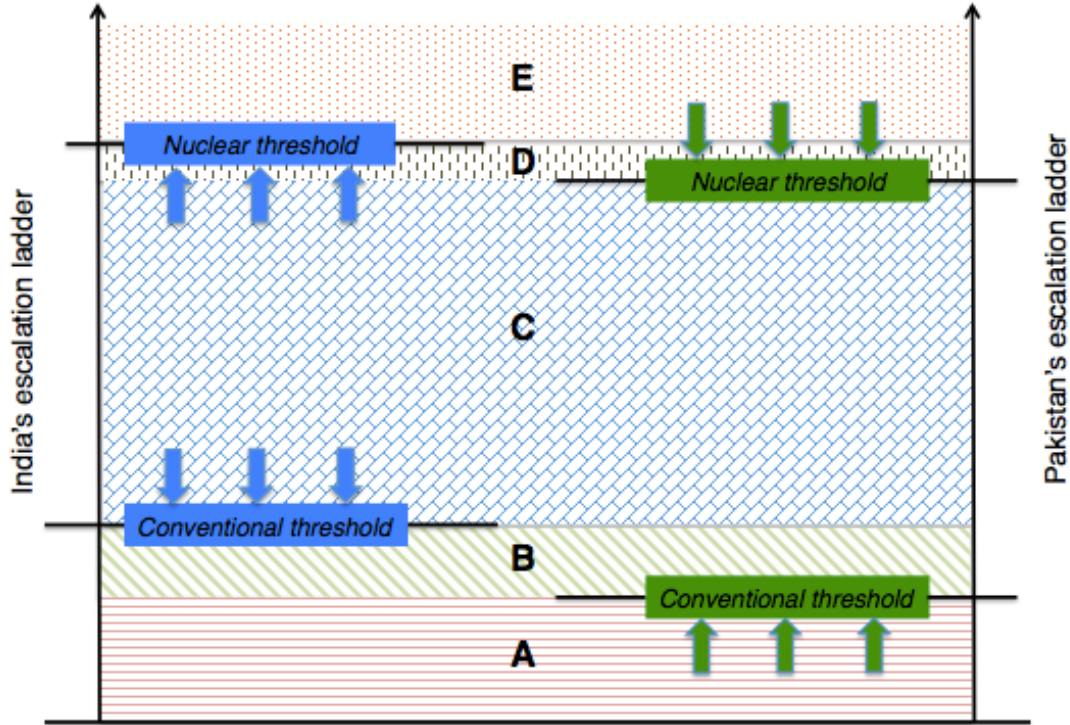


Figure 1: The India–Pakistan conflict escalation framework

The left vertical axes is the conflict escalation ladder for India while the vertical axis on the right represents the escalation ladder for Pakistan. As one goes up the escalation ladder, each state’s belligerence increases.

The five conflict levels

Level A describes the scenario what many analysts have called “jihad under the nuclear umbrella”. This level is below the conventional war threshold of both countries. At this conflict level, Pakistan operates through its violent non-state actors (VNSAs) like LeT, HuM and others in orchestrating insurgency and terrorism on India’s soil. India, on the other hand, tries to use intelligence gathering to prevent such attacks. On the border, this conflict level is characterised by heightened defences. Ceasefire violations and occasional exchange of fire are also common at this conflict level.

Level B is a scenario where the Pakistani state openly acts in collaboration with its VNSAs while India resists from launching a full-scale war. An example of such a conflict was the Kargil conflict (May–July 1999). In that particular case, Pakistani soldiers and militants

infiltrated on the Indian side of the territory. The Indian Army retaliated, and recaptured the positions occupied by the infiltrators. At the same time, India refrained from launching a full-scale conventional war against Pakistan on other fronts, as was seen in the 1965 Indo—Pakistan war.

Level C is a scenario of a full-scale conventional war between the two states. An example of this conflict were the wars of 1965 and 1971 when there was direct military confrontation between the two armies on multiple fronts. While the 1965 war ended in a stalemate⁷, the 1971 war ended with the surrender of Pakistani forces and the liberation of Bangladesh. This bitter experience of full-scale wars makes this level an extremely undesirable one in Pakistan's strategic thought. Thus, it has been Pakistan's endeavour to narrow this level.

Level D is a scenario where Pakistan deploys its low-intensity nuclear weapons, assessing that India will not use its own nuclear weapons and escalate the conflict further. Examples of this scenario are battlefield nuclear attacks on Indian formations that have entered Pakistani soil, or sub-kilotons attack on Indian troops on Indian soil. According to the Indian nuclear doctrine, this level does not exist as India maintains that any nuclear attack would be met with mutually assured destruction.

Level E describes the Mutually Unacceptable Destruction (MUD)⁸ scenario. This level is not the same as the Cold War era construct of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). At the low levels of availability and operability of nuclear warheads in both countries, not even a total nuclear exchange will completely destroy India or Pakistan. However, a level E conflict will no doubt cause widespread destruction and unprecedented misery and hence even these levels of destruction are unacceptable to India, and in all likelihood should be unacceptable to Pakistan too. The Indian side particularly wants the nuclear threshold to be as high as possible so that it does not have to use nuclear weapons ever, knowing that it will halt its economic growth.

The differential nuclear and conventional thresholds

The framework has five conflict levels because of the differential thresholds of nuclear and conventional thresholds between both states. It will be instructive to understand the reasons behind this construction. This section deals with the magnitude and the direction of nuclear and conventional thresholds for both countries.

⁷ Sushant Singh, "1965 is about solemn commemoration, nothing to celebrate in war", *The Indian Express*, 10th July 2015 goo.gl/fl2Bs9

⁸ Nitin Pai, "MUD, not MAD", *The Acorn*, 31st August 2009 goo.gl/ADVPFq

I. Different nuclear thresholds of India and Pakistan

1. Many researchers have previously noted the differences in the nuclear doctrines of India and Pakistan. Though Pakistan has never announced a formal nuclear doctrine, it is believed to have four central tenets: First, Pakistan’s nuclear deterrent is India-specific. Second, Pakistan has embraced a doctrine of credible, minimum deterrence. Third, the requirements for credible, minimal deterrence are not fixed; instead, they are determined by a dynamic threat environment. And fourth, given India’s conventional military advantages, Pakistan reserves the option to use nuclear weapons first in extremis.⁹

This strategy of potential first use of nuclear weapons — on the battlefield, is in direct contrast to India’s doctrine. India’s nuclear doctrine¹⁰ articulates a *No First Use (NFU)* position, but commits to massive retaliation in the event that a nuclear weapon is used against it (referred to as “punitive retaliation with nuclear weapons to inflict damage unacceptable to the aggressor”). Thus, in the event that Pakistan were to target India with nuclear weapons, it will likely invite a response commensurate with India’s nuclear doctrine, regardless of Pakistan’s strategy around the type of nuclear weapon in question.

As a result, **a conflict escalation framework that represents the two states’ nuclear doctrine will assign a lower threshold for Pakistan in comparison to that of the Indian threshold**, simply because Pakistan is more likely to use a nuclear weapon earlier in a conflict.

2. Pakistan has invested in battlefield nuclear weapons, while India does not plan to develop such nuclear weapons. Pakistan calls such weapons “tactical” — borrowing from a dated concept from Cold War era, when nuclear war fighting and nuclear war winnability were seriously being considered as policy options. At that point in time, two distinct types of nuclear weapons were envisaged: the first were “strategic” in nature, which implied the use of high-yield nuclear devices delivered over great distances through strategic means — Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), Submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) or long-range bombers — aimed to deliver a decapitating blow to the target state, its cities or its military and industrial facilities.

⁹ Michael Krepon, “Pakistan’s nuclear strategy and deterrence stability”, *Stimson Center*, 9th May 2012 goo.gl/c5oNnq

¹⁰ “Draft report of National Security Advisory Board on Indian Nuclear Doctrine”, MEA, Government of India, 17th August 1999 goo.gl/ejG8eW

The second type was referred to as “tactical”, meant to be used on the battlefield to halt military advances or debilitate large army formations. By design, these weapons were of a significantly lower yield than the strategic nuclear weapons. The underlying principle was that though the employment of nuclear weapons against an advancing army would cause huge losses, the recipient would not respond in a manner that would escalate the war to a strategic scale.

Pakistan has maintained that its low-intensity nuclear weapon arsenal is meant to offset India’s conventional force advantage. Thus, Pakistan aims to deter India by posing that it will be free to use nuclear weapons on the battlefield against an Indian Army on Indian territory or even Indian Army formations on the Pakistani territory. **This approach means that Pakistan is attempting to push its nuclear threshold further down through the threat of employing low-yield nuclear weapons.** This threat serves two purposes. One, it draws international attention even during minor skirmishes on the India—Pakistan border. Two, Pakistan hopes to deter any militarised Indian response either to territorial incursions by regular or irregular Pakistani troops or significant activity against Indian interests by Pakistan-supported or Pakistan-based terrorists. Pakistan assumes that given its possession of nuclear weapons and, increasingly, tactical nuclear weapons, India is simply likely to “tolerate” these nuisances rather than risk a full-scale war.¹¹

On the other hand, India’s perspective has been that any nuclear exchange will result in horrendous consequences to both countries, and the eventuality that Pakistan may suffer much more damage than India will, is no consolation.¹² Considering that any such nuclear exchange will be a big dent in India’s larger growth narrative, **it has been India’s approach to keep pushing its nuclear threshold higher.**

By combining I.1 and I.2, the observations regarding nuclear thresholds of the two countries are: **one, Pakistan’s nuclear threshold is lower than that of India’s nuclear threshold. Two, it is Pakistan’s endeavour to keep pushing this threshold lower while it is in India’s interests to push its own nuclear threshold higher.**

II. Different conventional war thresholds of India and Pakistan

¹¹ C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* pages 183-184, (Oxford University Press 2014)

¹² K. Sundarji, *The Blind Men of Hindoostan: Indo-Pak nuclear war*, (UBS Publishers 1993)

effectively its threshold for plausible deniability. If the conflict moves above this level, Pakistan owns up to the usage of conventional forces against India. If the conflict scenario remains below this level, it continues to employ terrorism and insurgency that cannot be directly attributed to the Pakistan Army. The optimum strategy for Pakistan is to push this threshold of plausible deniability higher, so that it can achieve its aims without inviting international criticism or a full-scale war with India.

India, in contrast, **wants to push its conventional threshold downwards in order to send a political message that any action against its people** — either by terrorists or by uniformed Pakistani soldiers will not be tolerated.

By combining II.1 and II.2, the observations that can be made regarding the conventional thresholds of the two countries are: **one, Pakistan's conventional threshold is lower than that of India's conventional threshold. Two, it is Pakistan's endeavour to keep pushing this threshold higher while it is in India's interests to push its own conventional threshold lower.**

These significant differences have been captured in the conflict escalation framework presented in *Figure 1*. It is these differences that give rise to the five levels of conflicts discussed above.

Pathways to conflict escalation

Having analysed the five levels of conflict and the rationale behind their existence, we can now assess the conditions under which either country would choose to escalate the conflict. *Table 1* lists a non-complete set of the trigger points for conflict escalation. The underlying assumption is that both countries continue to be at their existing levels of relative military and economic strength.

Conflict escalation mode	When would Pakistan do it?	When would India do it?
A → B	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> When it can bring the Kashmir infiltration on a boil to allow for overt army involvement. When the internal situation in Khyber-Pakhtunkwa or Balochistan worsens, and Pakistan puts the blame on Indian actors. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> As a coercive diplomacy tool in response to a terrorist attack on Indian soil. Example: Operation Parakram. In conducting strategic air raids to take out specific terrorist elements within Pakistan.
B → C	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> In response to an air attack by India on Pakistani soil. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> To open up multiple fronts of war to seize an advantage. Example: 1971 war.
C → D	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> When Indian forces enter into Pakistani territory. When Pakistan attacks Indian troop formations on the Indian side of the border. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Level D does not exist in India's calculation and nuclear strategy.
D → E	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> As a first-strike option As a second-strike option. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> When any weapon of mass destruction is used against India.

Table 1: Conflict escalation modes

OPTIMAL CONFLICT SCENARIOS: AN ASSESSMENT

The conflict escalation framework allows us to objectively assess the optimal scenarios for India and Pakistan in the event of a flareup. Figure 2 shows India's optimal conflict escalation dyad.

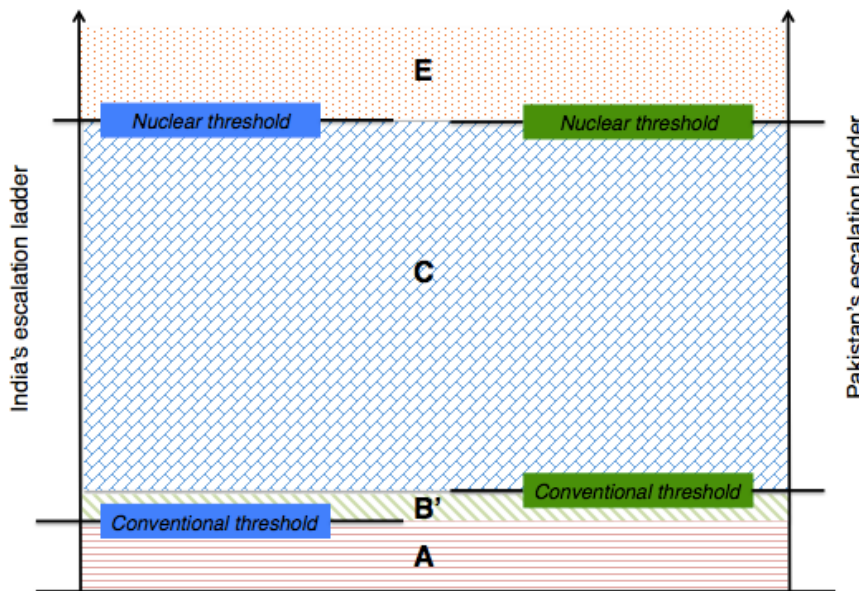


Figure 2: India's optimal conflict escalation scenario

By maintaining the posture that ‘the Indian deterrent will remain credible against all categories of weapons of mass destruction’, India seeks to eliminate level D altogether. This can be achieved in two ways: first, by enhancing the credibility of the threat that India will not flinch in using nuclear weapons when attacked with any form or type of a Pakistani nuclear weapon. Two, by destroying Pakistan’s battlefield nuclear weapons.

Secondly, the Indian side wants to lower its conventional threshold so that it can be lower than Pakistan’s conventional threshold. India would like to carve out a new scenario B’, in which it can carry out options such as precise air-borne attacks to eliminate strategic targets in Pakistan. This would require India to build up capabilities to affect such a manoeuvre.

Until then, India will have to rely on its intelligence agencies to weed out terrorists. As George Perkovich and Toby Dalton conclude, India’s incapability to stage a precise air-borne strikes at this moment ‘does not mean that India lacks ways to punish Pakistan and motivate it to demobilise groups that threaten to perpetrate terrorism in India. Rather, it suggests that more symmetrical and covert operations would yield a better ratio of risk to effectiveness for India. There are many ways to make Pakistani military leaders conclude that the cohesion, security, and progress of their own country will be further jeopardised if they fail to act vigorously to prevent terrorism against India. Limited, precision air strikes are not India’s best option now or for the foreseeable future.’¹⁴

Now, we look at the optimal scenario for Pakistan. This is explained in Figure 3.

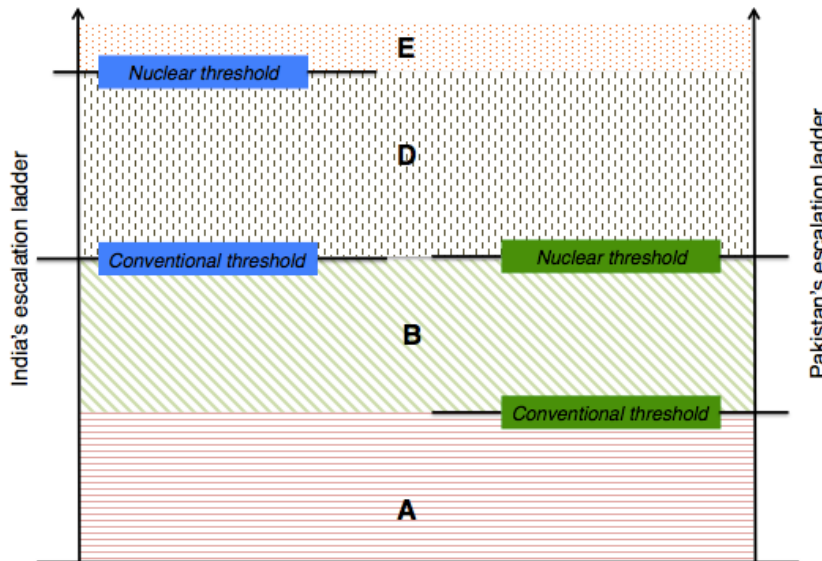


Figure 3: Pakistan’s optimal conflict escalation scenario

¹⁴ George Perkovich and Toby Dalton, “Modi’s strategic choice: How to respond to terrorism from Pakistan”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 20th May 2015

Pakistan wants to lower its nuclear threshold through the threat of battlefield nuclear weapons. This would effectively eliminate level C which is Pakistan's least desirable conflict scenario. To make the threat credible, Pakistan will project that it is not impossible for its low-intensity nukes to land up with terrorists, notwithstanding the impact of such an act on its own population. As long as there is no internal opposition to this bogey of battlefield nukes, it will continue to remain a threat to be factored in for any conflict analysis.

Widening of level D also allows Pakistan to sustain conflict in levels A and B, indicated by a widening of these conflict bands.

CONCLUSION

The framework is meant to encourage discussions on the security dilemma facing the Indian subcontinent. The framework clearly illustrates that there is an asymmetry in the thresholds of nuclear and conventional thresholds between the two countries. This mismatch creates conflict levels that might be preferred by one country but not the other. As a result, all de-escalation measures need to take into account the stickiness of a conflict level for both countries.

The framework also gave an illustrative list of the triggers that can cause conflict escalation. Apart from the responses of the two states involved, the role of the international community will be crucial in determining the direction of the conflict in case of an escalation.