

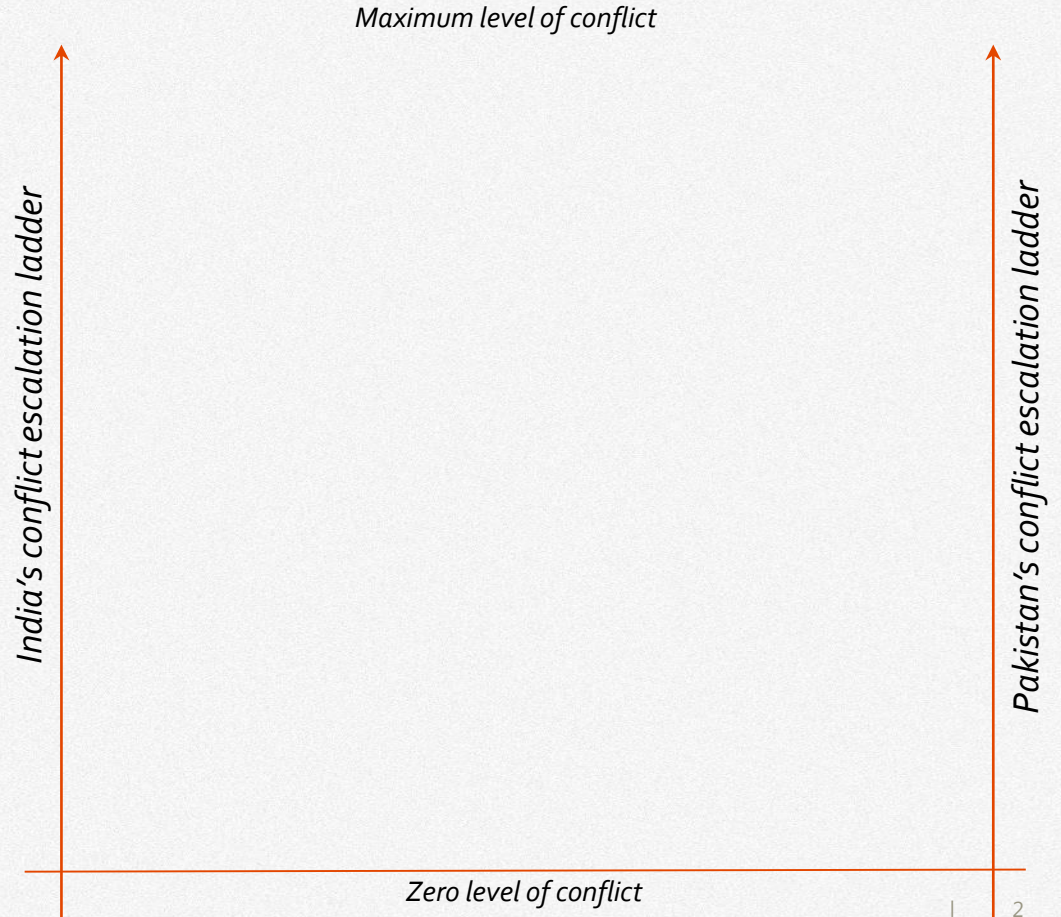
AN ANALYSIS OF THE POST- URI SCENARIO BASED ON A CONFLICT ESCALATION FRAMEWORK

*Making Operational
Conventional
Retaliation Work*

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Constructing an India-Pakistan conflict escalation framework

A dyad that explains the various levels at which a conflict between India and Pakistan can take place.

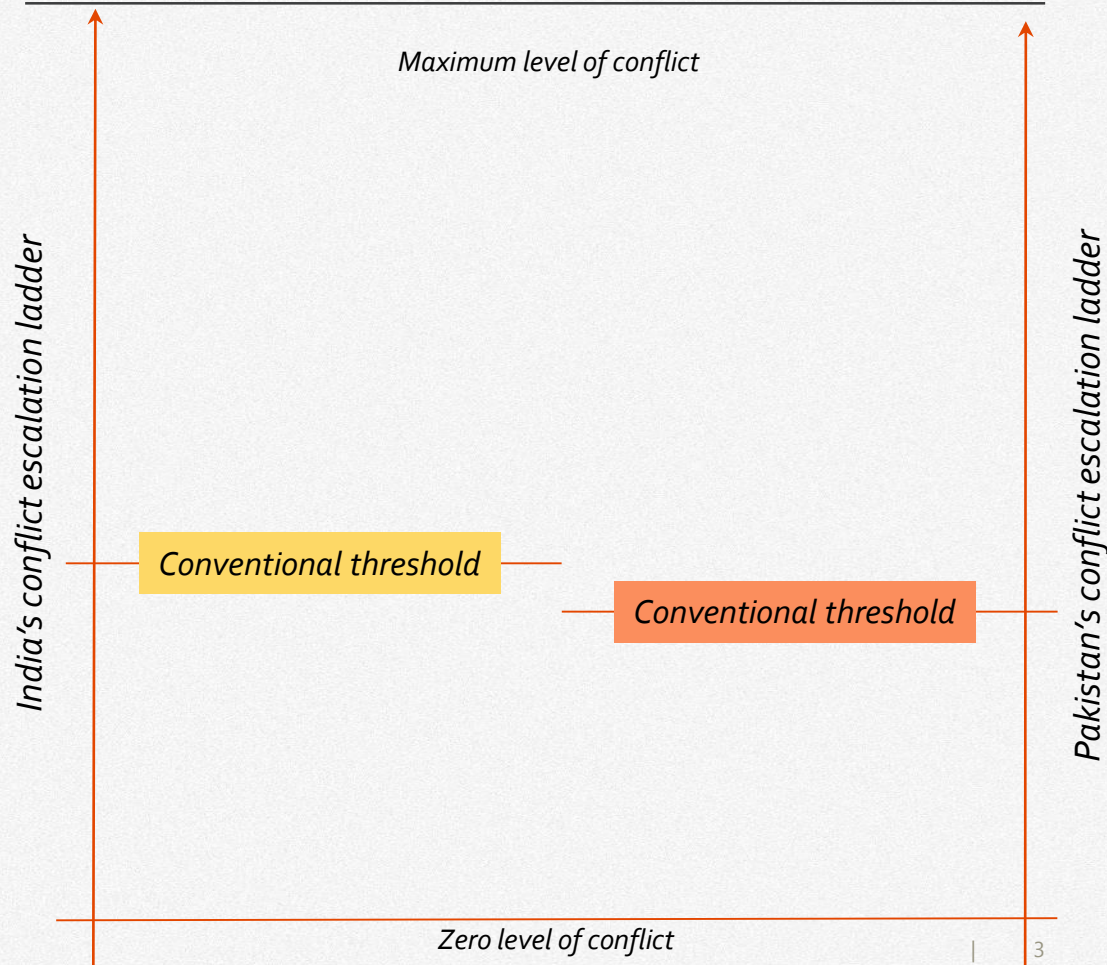


Constructing an India-Pakistan conflict escalation framework

As the weaker power in the India–Pakistan dyad, Pakistan believes that it must have “escalation dominance at all rungs of the military ladder—from low-intensity conflict to conventional war and all the way to nuclear war” to ensure survivability.

— Fighting to the End, C Fair

Pakistan has a belligerent stance, and it uses its conventional forces much earlier in a conflict than India does, case in point being the Kargil conflict in 1999. Thus, its conventional threshold is lower than that of India.

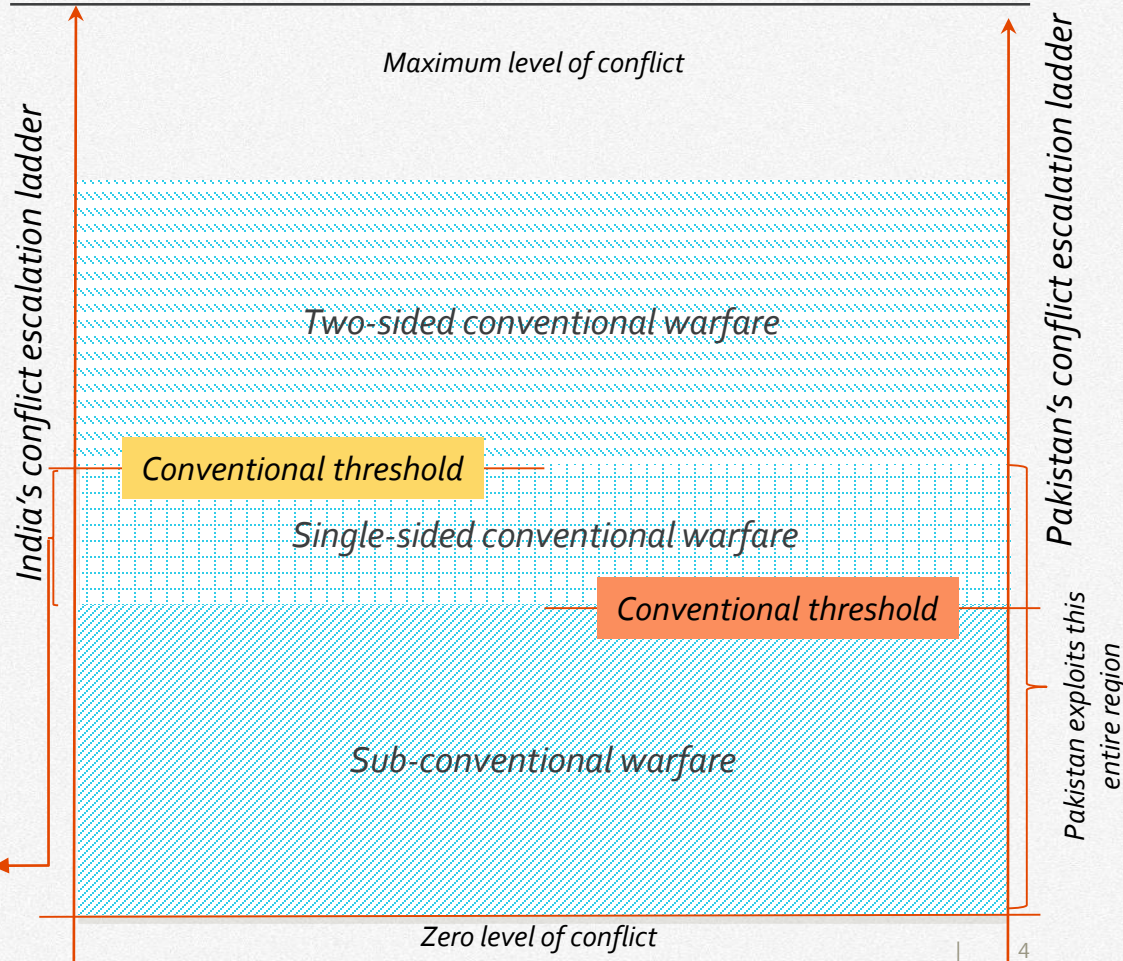


Difference in conventional thresholds

Three conflict levels arise because of the difference in conventional thresholds of both states: sub-conventional warfare, single-sided conventional warfare, and two-sided conventional warfare.

The next slide describes all the three levels.

India's strategic restraint gap



The three conflict levels per the different conventional thresholds

1. *Sub-conventional warfare*

A scenario that many analysts refer to as “jihad under the nuclear umbrella”, this level is below the conventional war threshold of both countries. In this conflict level, Pakistan operates through proxies like Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), orchestrating insurgency and terrorism on Indian soil.

India, on the other hand employs intelligence-backed operations 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.

2. *Single-sided conventional warfare*

This is a scenario where the Pakistani state openly acts in collaboration with its proxies while India resists from launching a full-scale war. One such example was the Kargil conflict (May—July 1999).

In this case, Pakistani soldiers and militants infiltrated 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, unlike the 1965 Indo—Pakistan war.

3. *Two-sided conventional warfare*

This 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 stalemate, the 1971 war ended with the surrender of Pakistani forces and the liberation of Bangladesh. This bitter experience makes this level extremely undesirable for Pakistan’s strategic thought. Thus, it has been Pakistan’s endeavour to narrow this level.

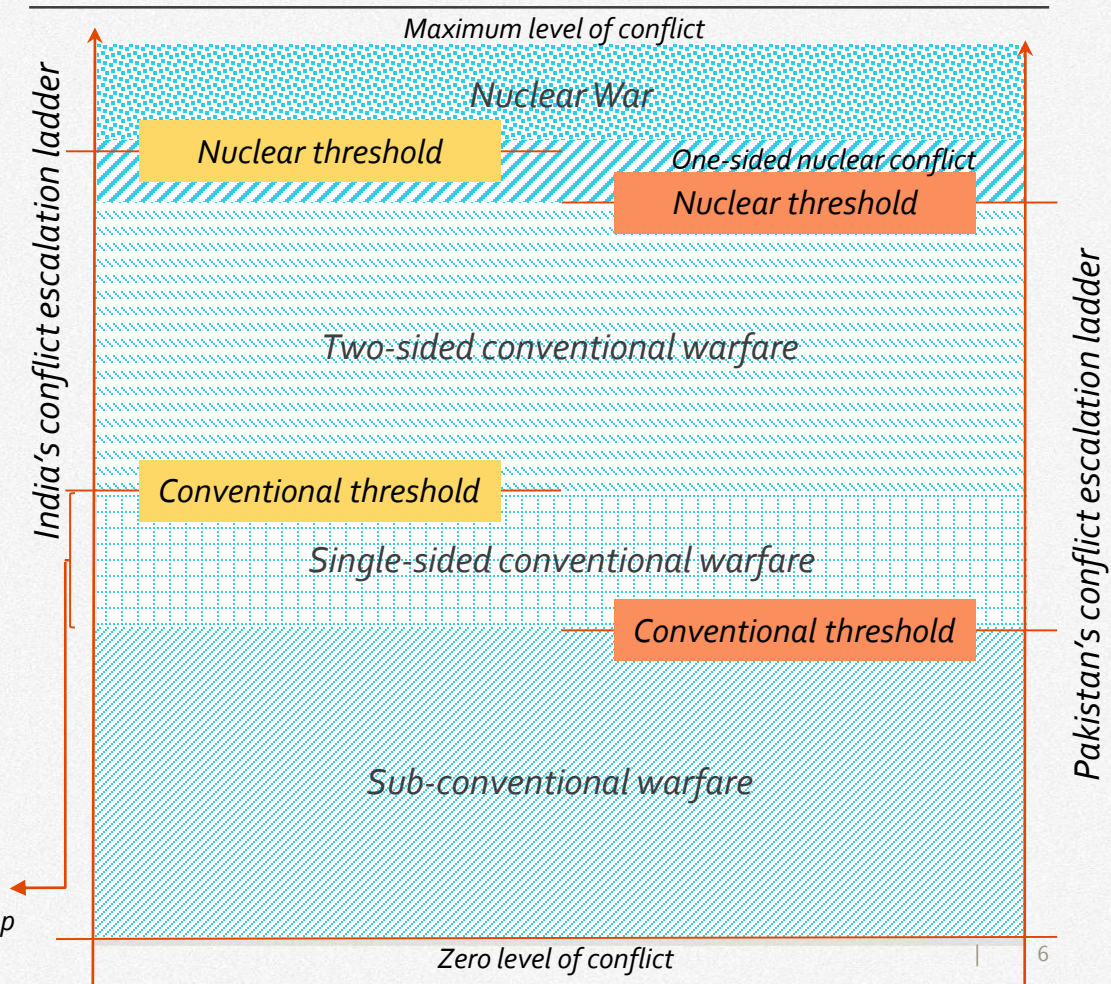
Difference in nuclear thresholds

Nuclear thresholds of India and Pakistan are different. Pakistan has a First Use policy while India has a declared No First Use (NFU) stance.

So Pakistan's nuclear threshold is lower than that of India. Two conflict levels arise: one-sided nuclear conflict, and a full scale Nuclear War.

Knowing this framework allows us to identify strategies of both countries in the dyad.

India's strategic restraint gap



The two conflict levels due to different nuclear thresholds

One-sided nuclear conflict

This 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 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 — any nuclear attack would be met with retaliation that is massive in nature.

Nuclear War

Nuclear War describes the Mutually Unacceptable Destruction (MUD) scenario.

At current levels of availability and operability of nuclear warheads in both countries, a total nuclear exchange cannot completely destroy India or Pakistan.

However, such a scenario will cause widespread destruction and unprecedented misery and hence these levels of destruction are unacceptable to India, and in all likelihood should be unacceptable to Pakistan as well.

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 pause the pursuit of prosperity for its citizens.

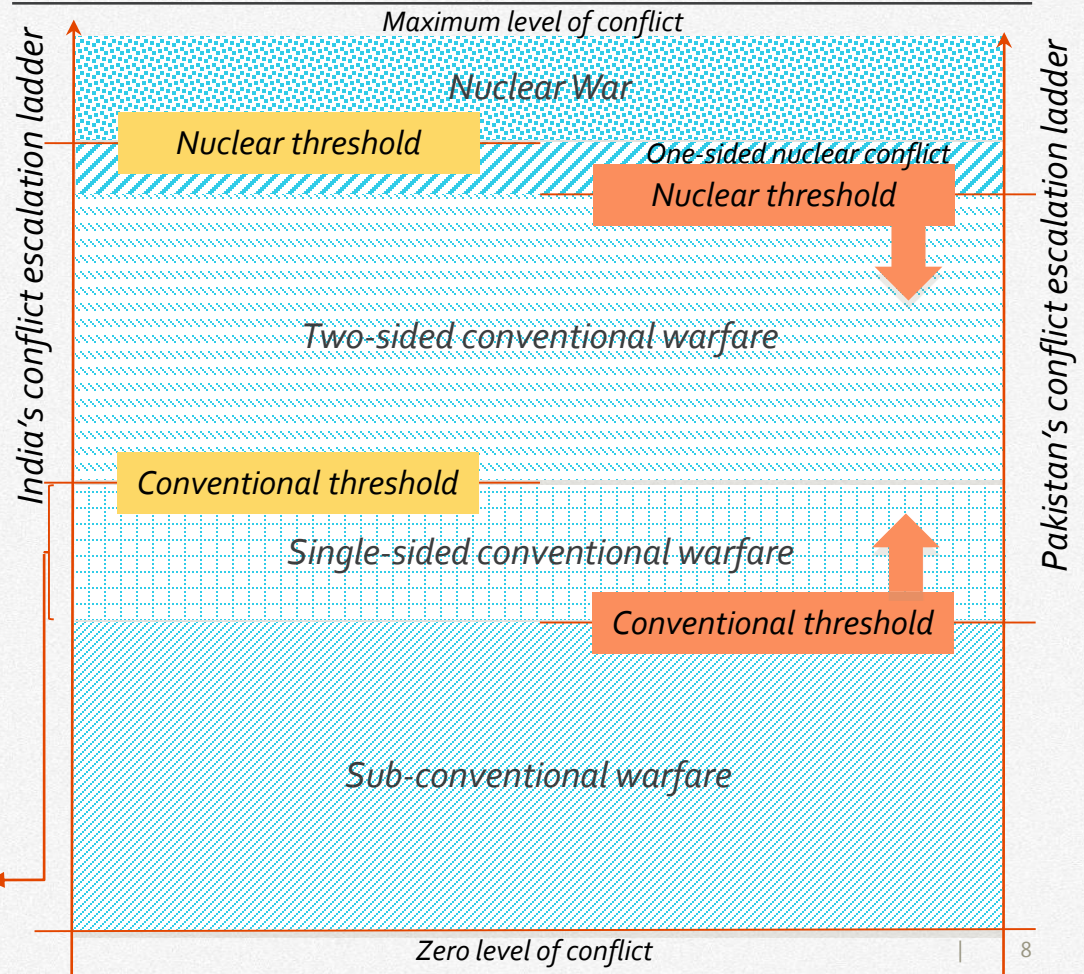
Pakistan's strategy

Pakistan wants to squeeze the two-sided conventional warfare space by moving the conventional threshold upwards and the nuclear threshold downwards.

The assumption is that India would consequently move its own conventional threshold upwards.

The resultant dyad is on the next slide.

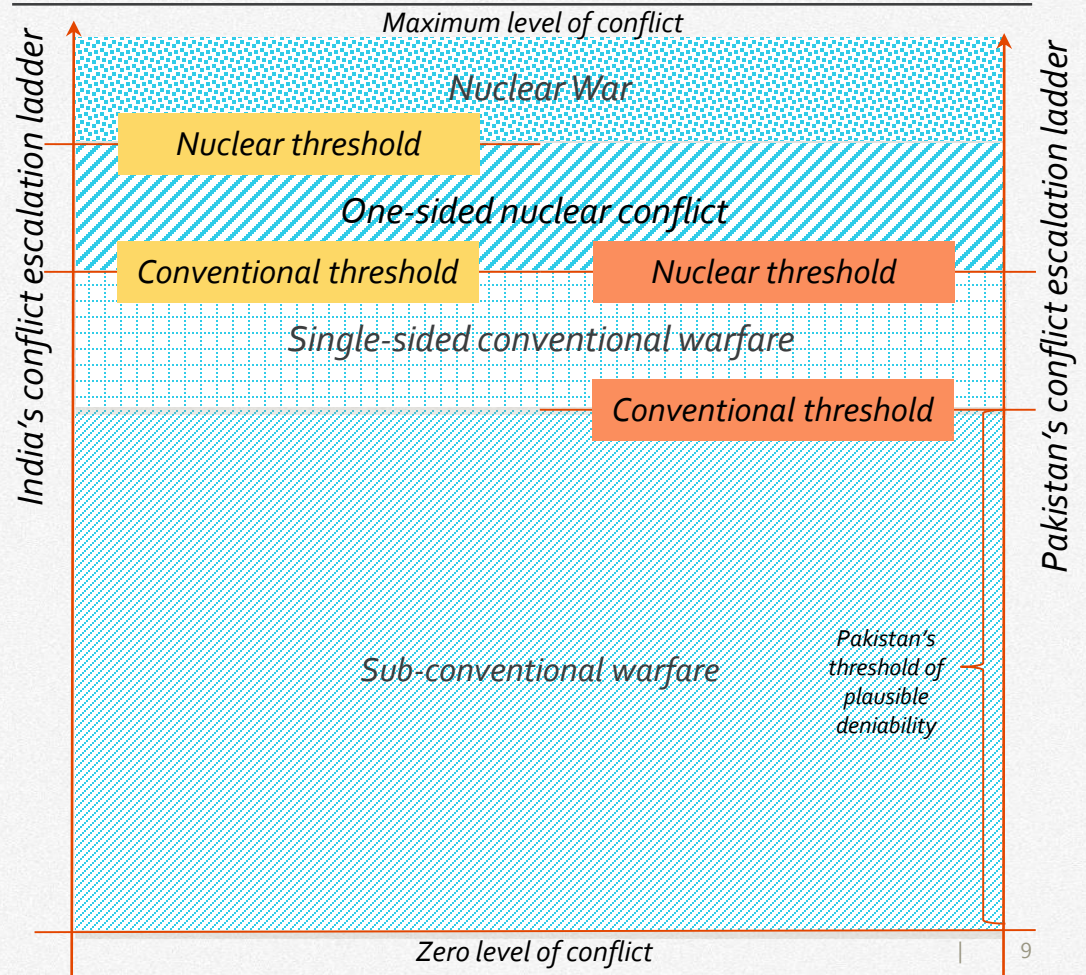
India's strategic restraint gap



Pakistan's strategy

Ultimately, Pakistan's aim is to project an equalisation of India's conventional threshold to Pakistan's nuclear threshold.

This strategy widens the space of sub-conventional warfare, allowing Pakistan to hurt India at regular intervals through effective use of proxies.

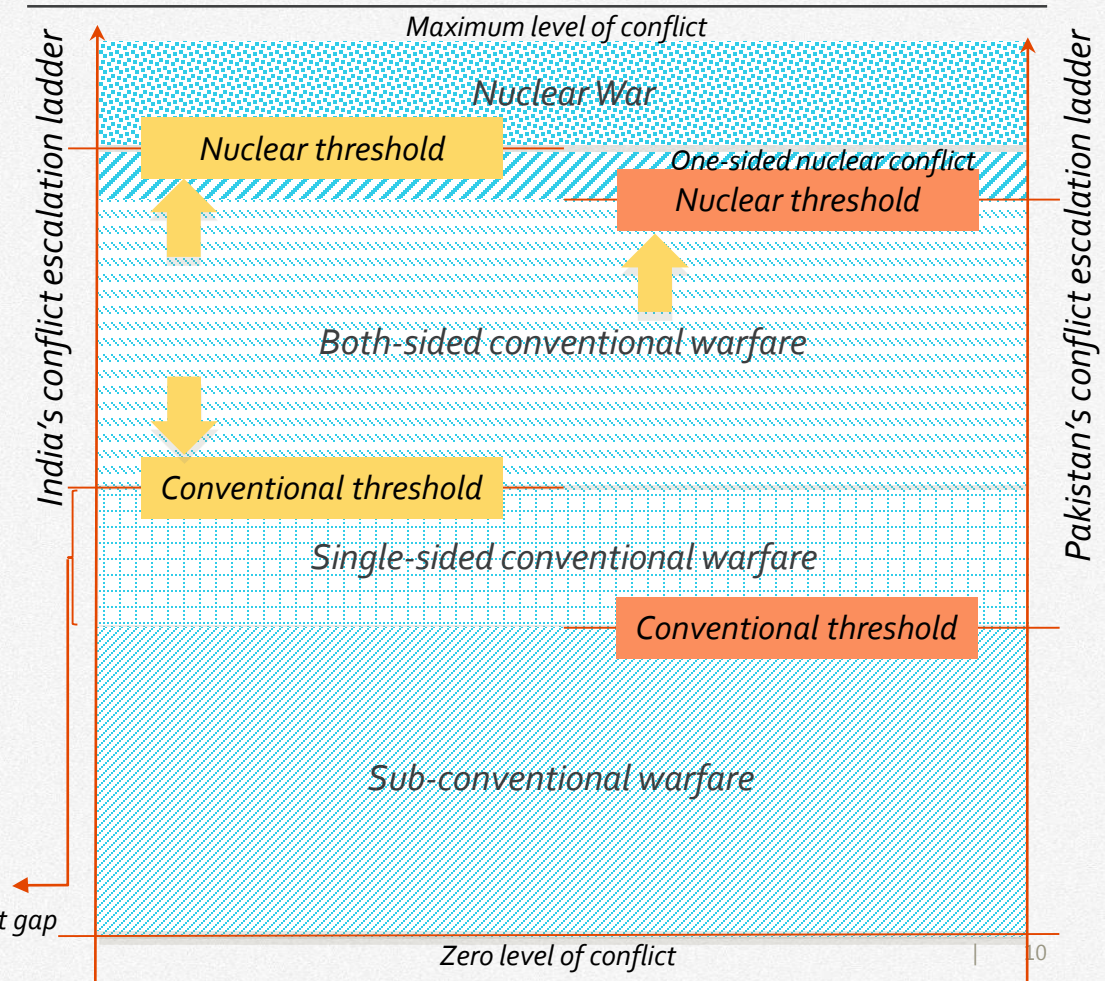


India's conventional & sub-conventional strategy

India has three options:

1. Exercise strategic restraint in response to Pakistan's provocations.
2. Engage in its own sub-conventional warfare through proxies, just like Pakistan.
3. Reduce its conventional threshold below that of Pakistan.

India's strategic restraint gap

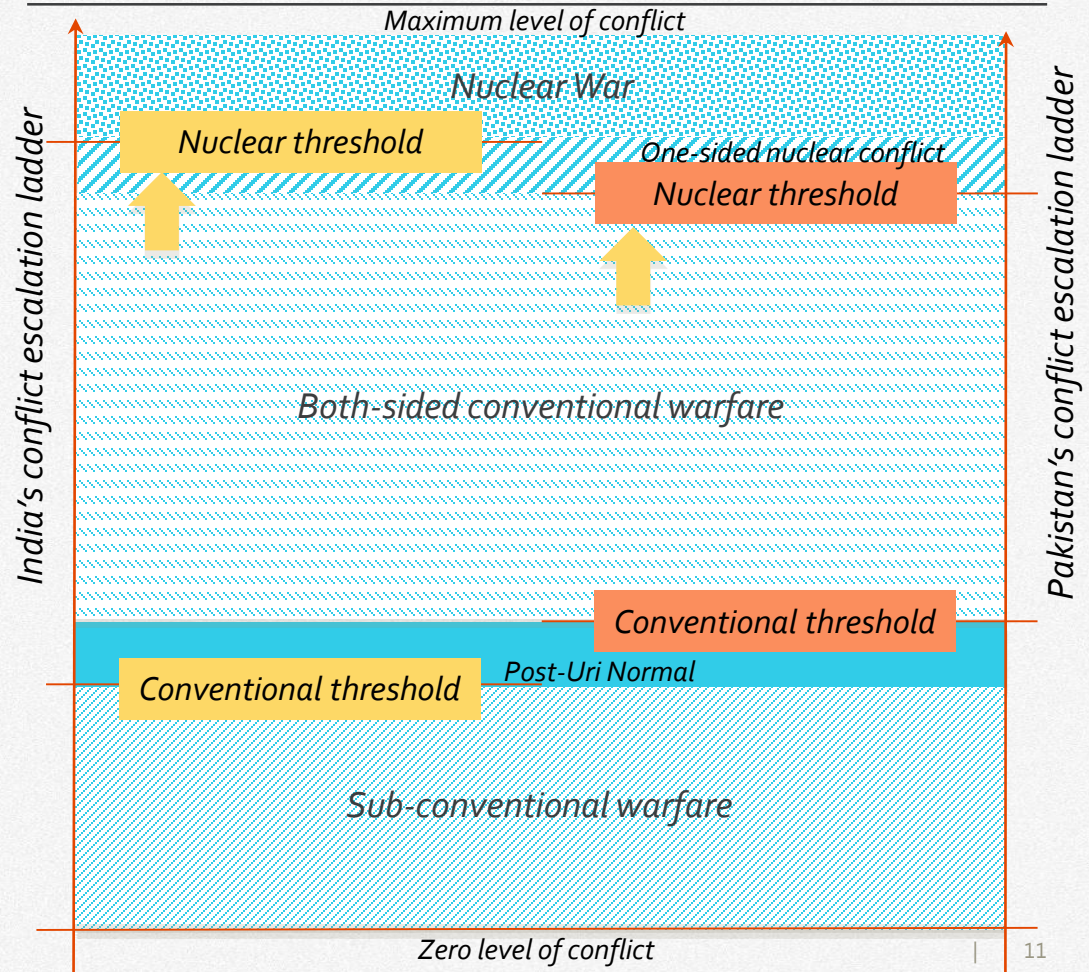


India's strategy

Through the Operational Conventional Retaliation post-Uri attacks, India has put its weight behind option #3, i.e. moving the conventional threshold downwards.

This has created a new level labeled as "Post-Uri Normal" in the adjoining figure.

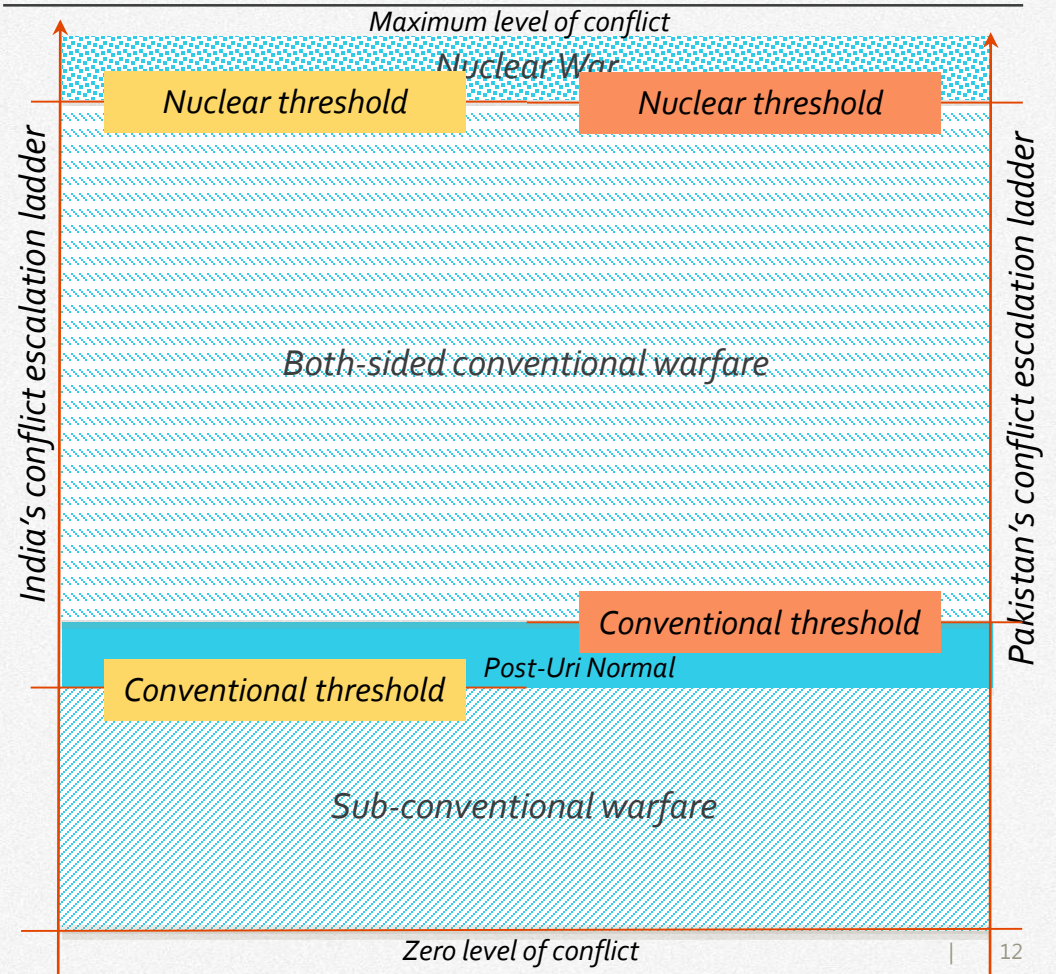
This is the only option that reduces the space for sub-conventional warfare. Strategic restraint or engaging in sub-conventional warfare do not reduce the space for sub-conventional warfare.



India's strategy

On the nuclear front, India does not believe that space for a one-sided nuclear conflict exists.

Indian nuclear doctrine does not differentiate between the type of nuclear weapons deployed by the adversary.



What's different now?

Strategic restraint vs Operational Conventional Retaliation

Strategic restraint prevented escalation but could not prevent sub-conventional warfare or single-sided conventional warfare.

OCR prevents single-sided conventional warfare and reduces the space for sub-conventional warfare however it also increases chances of escalation.

OCR increases hostilities on the Line of Control, rendering the ceasefire ineffective. A heightened state of tensions on the border will have an adverse impact on the already volatile political situation in Jammu & Kashmir.

OCR raises expectations of a proportionate response, should there be another terrorist attack.

How to make OCR work? How to manage the risks of escalation?

Timing

Strike immediately after a terrorist attack

Get international opinion on your side

Make sure that none of the 3 important international actors: KSA, US, and China take Pakistan's side

Claim responsibility for the attacks and signal its closure

Focus on peripheral targets

Pakistani army should be hurt but not humiliated

No chest thumping after the attacks

Officials should try to play down the response

Attack with weapons that have minimum escalatory potential

By avoiding use of Air Force or large-scale military movement

Discussion

This paper was presented at the Takshashila Roundtable on 3rd November, 2016 in New Delhi for a discussion.

The next section captures some of the discussion points raised.

The discussion panellists present were:

- *Cmde. Uday Bhaskar (Retd)*
- *Sushant Singh*
- *Brig. Sanjay Agarwal (Retd)*
- *Brig. Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd)*
- *Amb. Ranjeet Gupta (Retd)*
- *JC Verma*
- *Ravi Bhoothalingam*
- *Manoj Joshi*
- *Rana Banerji*
- *Kunal Singh*
- *Jyoti Malhotra*
- *Mohit Satyanand*
- *Dinakar Peri*
- *Jhoomar Mehta*
- *Rohan Mehta*
- *Paran Balakrishnan*

On conventional threshold levels

Panellist 1: It is not right to assume that India's conventional threshold has historically been higher than that of Pakistan

For example, during Operation Parakram, India mobilised its forces before Pakistan could. So, even though we did not go to war, our ability to mobilise before Pakistan could mean India's threshold level is below that of Pakistan.

Has the conventional threshold really come down only because of post-Uri strikes? Maybe not, because India has conducted such actions on the Line of Control on previous occasions as well, even though such actions were not declared publicly.

Panellist 2: Using special forces against terrorist launch pads across the LoC does not constitute a lowering of conventional threshold.

It is merely another tool available to India against sub-conventional warfare. There are other options too: using artillery against bunkers from a vantage point while avoiding collateral damage, use of air to surface strikes, or use of missiles such as BrahMos.

On India's strategy

Panellist 1: If bringing conventional threshold is the answer to reduce sub-conventional warfare, why even wait for 18—20 soldiers to be killed or for 200 people to be killed as was done in Mumbai, 2008?

Does this mean that India should bring its conventional threshold as low as possible, responding with retaliatory strikes even when the smallest of terror strikes takes place?

Thresholds will vary greatly depending on the political aim of the Indian establishment.

If the aim is to assuage domestic audience, an action like OCR might work. But if the aim is to destroy the military—jihadi complex or take out Pakistan's nuclear weapons, then the action will have to be completely different.

Predictability of response serves us better especially because the adversary is armed with nuclear weapons.

On India's strategy

Panellist 2: In contrast to maintaining a certainty of type of response, India must maintain the newly acquired unpredictability of response. Thus the need to keep the threshold dynamic, based on provocation; timing of own reaction etc.

Panellist 3: On political aims

The policy of strategic restraint is a well thought-out strategy that India has followed for a couple of decades. The political aim of completely stopping Pakistan from waging a proxy war is merely an aspirational one, because that would involve dismemberment of Pakistan. An achievable aim would be to significantly raise the costs for Pakistan from waging a war, eventually making it prohibitive. From this aim flow the military and diplomatic aims. A corresponding military aim would be to degrade Pakistan army's combat potential and capture Pakistani territory to be used as a bargaining chip.

Panellist 5: Should the political aim be to change Pakistan or to manage Pakistan?

On Pakistan's strategy

Panellist 1: Pakistan might not be averse to a two-sided conventional warfare scenario.

Pakistan has formations such as the Army Reserve North & Army Reserve South which are aimed at capturing high value Indian territory.

Even if India were to strike on Pakistani territory in a full-scale war, Pakistan will give a tough conventional response for eight-ten days before contemplating use of nuclear weapons.

Panellist 2: Pakistan is now introspecting the use of proxy forces for its political aims because there is a realisation at the highest levels that the strategy has inflicted immense costs internally.

On what's different with the post-Uri strikes?

Panellist 2: Three major factors made the latest "surgical strike" unprecedented:

- *Ownership of the action by top Indian political leadership.*
- *A consciously coordinated action involving the exercise of various constituents of national power.*
- *The spread (~250 km) of the strikes, the number of simultaneous strikes.*

Panellist 5: Because of ownership at the highest levels, we have now committed ourselves to a local escalation every single time a terrorist strike takes place.

Bombardment on the LoC benefits Pakistan more than India as they can provide cover for getting insurgents in. The bombardment will knock down parts of the fence, which was hitherto instrumental in reducing the inflow of terrorists.

Panellist 3: It is incorrect to say that India has committed itself to respond in the same manner to every terrorist strike. Thus far, our response was predictable. Now it isn't. We have conveyed that we will choose to act in the manner we want to.

On making Operational Conventional Retaliation work

Panellist 2: The critical need to institutionalise the synergising of various constituents of national power, irrespective of the political party in power, personalities of decision makers etc. Make it procedure driven so that the response can be swift regardless of the nature of the political leadership.

To be effective, the escalation construct must factor-in potential non-military escalations and their ramifications.

On nuclear threshold levels

Panellist 2: Pakistan only portrays a low threshold for a trigger to use of nuclear weapons against India. The decision makers in Pakistan do not understand the multi-faceted ramifications of using nuclear weapons. India needs to weigh this portrayal pragmatically.

Panellist 3: Pakistan's low nuclear threshold is a bluff that can be called easily.

Panellist 4: Pakistan's low intensity nuclear weapons have not been fully tested. There is also no clarity yet, on who should approve its deployment during war: whether it should be the Strategic Forces Command or a battlefield commander. There is also a concern that a lower nuclear threshold could lead to weapons going into the wrong hands.

FURTHER READINGS

Discussion Document: The India—Pakistan conflict escalation framework

Creating space for a limited conventional response

Creating space for a limited conventional response – Part II

For any inputs and feedback please write to pranay@takshashila.org.in.

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The Takshashila Institution