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A Framework to Model the India—Pakistan Conflict Escalation

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ABSTRACT

The India-Pakistan conflict has variously been described as an 'enduring rivalry' or a 'protracted conflict' — characterised by its long duration, recurrence of armed exchanges, and the involvement of state and non-state actors. This entrenched 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.[1]

The limited aim of this paper is to provide a descriptive framework that can explain the dynamics of this enduring rivalry. The analytical framework is meant to encourage discussions on the security dilemma facing the Indian subcontinent. The endeavour is to explain the nuances involved during times of hostility between the two countries, providing policy makers with the right starting point for designing a de-escalation policy.

The highlights of the conflict escalation framework presented in the chapter are:

- there is an ***asymmetry in nuclear & conventional thresholds*** between the two countries;
- the strategies of the two nation-states to alter their respective nuclear and conventional threshold levels are in ***diametrically opposing directions***;
- there are a total of ***five*** conflict levels possible between India and Pakistan;
- the levels of ***conflicts preferable to India are different from the ones desired by Pakistan***; and finally
- the ***pathways of conflict escalation are different*** for both states.

CONTEXT

In a major step towards completing India's nuclear triad, the nuclear-capable ballistic missile K-4 was test-fired from nuclear submarine *Arihant* in March 2016.[2] This test led Pakistan's Foreign Office to issue a statement that such tests would "disturb strategic balance in South Asia".[3]

Similarly, in January 2016, Pakistan conducted the fifth test flight of the Air Launched Cruise Missile (ALCM) *Ra'ad*, and claimed that this test enabled Pakistan to achieve air-delivered strategic stand-off capability on land and at sea.[4]

In March 2015, Gen. Khalid Kidwai, former Director General of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division, at the *Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference* 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]

Such instances of belligerent posturing of nuclear capabilities have become a recurrent feature of the India—Pakistan conflict. The fear that this enduring conflict might eventually end up in a nuclear catastrophe makes many other nation-states identify themselves as stakeholders in the India—Pakistan conflict. Consequently, the Indian subcontinent has time and again been described as "a deep threat to global stability and the current world order"[6] or worse still as "the most dangerous corner of the world".[7]

At the conventional level, the India—Pakistan conflict continues to be played out in more tangible terms. The last round of border skirmishes from July 2014 to November 2015 claimed more than a hundred lives on both sides. Even high level meetings between the two Prime Ministers failed to suppress rising tensions on the border. Exchanges of similar intensities had occurred in 2013 and 2011 as well.

The year 2015 also gave glimpses of how an ongoing limited conventional exchange might escalate to the nuclear domain. In June that year, the Indian armed forces conducted a cross-border raid into Myanmar. A minister 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 a nuclear war should India ever launch a similar incursion into Pakistan.[8]

Taken together, the belligerent nuclear posturing from both sides and the full-scale conventional, limited conventional and sub-conventional exchanges of the past provide a template to analytically assess the India—Pakistan conflict.

PREVIOUS WORKS ON INDIA—PAKISTAN CONFLICT ESCALATION

Various frameworks have been deployed to understand the peculiar nature of the India—Pakistan conflict. This section of the paper presents the core arguments of some of these studies, and explains the accomplishments and deficiencies of these frameworks.

The "stability-instability paradox" is commonly used to describe the India—Pakistan conflict. The core argument here is that nuclear (strategic) stability might paradoxically lead to conventional instability. The reasoning is as follows: a mutual recognition that all-out war could be catastrophic for both sides can encourage greater risk-taking because each side assumes that the other's fear of escalation to nuclear war will raise its tolerance of coercive behaviour.[9]

A corollary of this argument is that not only does nuclear stability lead to conventional stability, it can in fact increase sub-conventional and limited conventional war levels as well. This is because the shared fear that a general war could lead to a nuclear war reduces the risk that the other party will escalate a limited engagement to a general war;[10] therefore the shared risk encourages nuclear states to

undertake limited conventional wars or even employ sub-conventional methods such as terrorism through proxies.

This fundamental premise of the stability-instability paradox has been used in a number of analyses on the India—Pakistan conflict. Sumit Ganguly has assessed that the stability-instability paradox will hold for the foreseeable future because "neither side has the requisite capability to pursue a decapitating first strike against the other."[11] On the other hand, Dr Adil Sultan contends that if new technologies like the ABM systems and submarine launched ballistic missiles are introduced into the region, it would further destabilise the region as stability-instability paradox could turn into instability-instability paradox, i.e. instability at full spectrum of the conflict.[12]

The applicability of stability-instability paradox to the India—Pakistan conflict has been contested by many scholars on the grounds that it does not adequately explain why aggressive Pakistani attempts as in the case of Kargil (1999) or Mumbai (2008) have been met with relatively restrained Indian efforts to maintain status quo. S. Paul Kapur argues that instead, "South Asian violence has resulted from a strategic environment in which nuclear escalation is a serious possibility in the event that a limited Indo-Pakistani confrontation spirals into a full-scale conventional conflict. Thus, a significant degree of instability at the strategic level, which Cold War logic predicts should discourage lower-level violence, has actually promoted tactical instability on the subcontinent."[13] Another limitation of the stability-instability paradox is that it does not adequately explain why Pakistan would choose to increase instability at the nuclear level by developing battlefield nuclear weapons.

There are also a number of studies that specifically focus on the nature of escalation thresholds and controls in this conflict. For instance, Ashley Tellis contends that India and Pakistan would continue to be in a state of "ugly stability"—a stability that

derives substantially from the inability of both sides to attain what may be desired political objectives through war. He concludes that premeditated conventional conflicts will remain absent for some time to come, though security competition will continue through sub-conventional violence waged with varying levels of intensity.[14]

Michael Krepon is of the view that escalation control on the subcontinent has depended heavily on two risky assumptions: First, that jihadi groups would refrain from such horrendous acts of violence as to spark a war; and second, that the Indian government would refrain from attacking Pakistan in response to lesser grievances.

These two assumptions constitute a very poor basis for nuclear stabilisation.[15]

All previously mentioned studies provide valuable insight into the India—Pakistan conflict dynamic. However, they fall short of providing an analytical description of the various levels of conflicts, and specifically the levels preferred by each adversary. Even the studies that describe the asymmetric nature of nuclear & conventional thresholds between the two countries do not venture into the diametrically opposing ways in which the two nation-states are altering their respective nuclear and conventional threshold levels.

This study bridges these gaps by modelling the India—Pakistan conflict using a simple conflict escalation dyad to answer the following questions: What is the difference in conflict thresholds between the two doctrines, in the conventional and nuclear domains? What 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?

CONSTRUCTING A CONFLICT ESCALATION FRAMEWORK

The first step of constructing an India—Pakistan conflict escalation framework is to understand the conventional and nuclear thresholds for both states. This step will result in identifying the levels at which an eventual conflict might play out.

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.[16]

   This strategy of potential first use of nuclear weapons — on the battlefield, is in direct contrast to India's doctrine. India's nuclear doctrine[17] 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** because Pakistan is more likely to use a nuclear weapon earlier in a conflict.

2. Pakistan has invested in battlefield nuclear weapons[18], while India does not plan to develop such nuclear weapons.

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.[19] **This approach means that Pakistan threatens to push its nuclear threshold further down through the threat of employing tactical 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.[20]

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.[21] 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

1. Apart from these differences in the nuclear doctrines, significant differences exist in lower levels of conflict as well. India maintains a conventional military advantage vis-a-vis Pakistan. Though the purported military advantage is itself minor, Islamabad has projected it as a springboard to pursue a wide range of military strategies. As Christine Fair notes in her book *Fighting to the End,* 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 ensuresurvivability. This perspective manifests itself in conventional and sub-conventional warfare methods which are significantly different from those employed by India.

   Another reason for the difference in strategies is due to the existence of a Pakistani Military—Jihadi complex[22]: a dynamic network of military, militant, radical Islamist and political-economic structures that pursues a set of domestic and foreign policies to ensure its own survival and relative dominance.

   The existence of this complex means two things: First, it allows Pakistan to employ violent non-state actors (VNSAs) as tools for meeting its foreign policy objectives. This means that the sub conventional conflict level for Pakistan involves employment of various jihadist elements while retaining plausible deniability.

   Second, it allows the Pakistani army, in some cases, to provide overt support to these elements in their anti-India operations. This was illustrated in the 1948 and 1999 attacks in Kashmir, which were clearly a result of collaboration between the Pakistan Army and the non-state agents of the Pakistani state.

In sharp contrast, India's reactions to such acts of terror by the Military—Jihadi complex have been restricted to retaliatory acts on India's own territory (1999) or by moving a large number of military personnel on the border in combat mode (2002).

Based on these two distinct approaches, **it can be said that Pakistan's conventional threshold is lower than India's in the conflict escalation ladder.**

2. **Pakistan wants to push its conventional threshold upwards while India's effort is to push its own downwards.** The conventional threshold for Pakistan is 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. A ground campaign by the Indian army, characterised by a sharp armoured and infantry thrust into Pakistani Punjab in order to punish the Pakistan military and hold territory, a maritime exclusion of Pakistan's major port at Karachi to pressure Pakistan's economy or limited air strikes against terrorist-linked facilities and perhaps also Pakistani military or intelligence targets believed to support terrorist operations[23], are all capabilities aimed at pushing the Indian conventional threshold downwards.

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.**

The second step in developing the framework is to put together these significant differences in one escalation dyad. When done, the differential thresholds in the India—Pakistan context give rise to ***five*** levels of conflicts as shown in *Figure 1*.

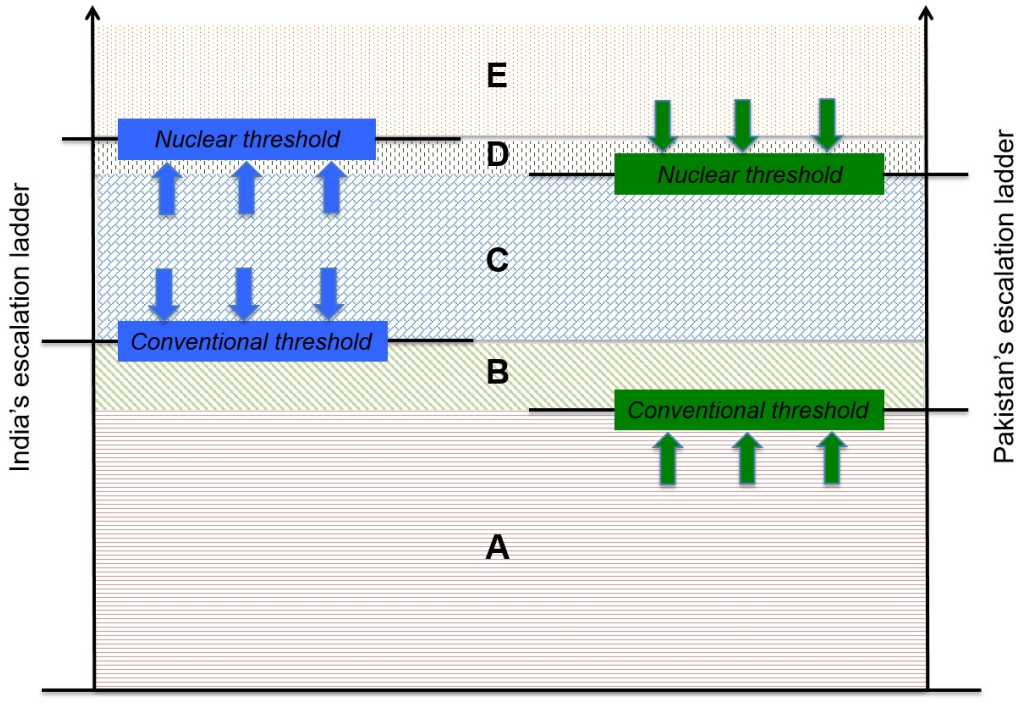

Figure 1: The India—Pakistan conflict escalation framework

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 country'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. In this conflict level, Pakistan operates through its violent non-state actors (VNSAs) like Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (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 stalemate, 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)[24] 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, such a scenario 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.

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	1. When it can bring the Kashmir infiltration on a boil to allow for overt army involvement. 2. When the internal situation in Khyber-Pakhtunkwa or Balochistan worsens, and Pakistan puts the blame on Indian actors.	1. As a coercive diplomacy tool in response to a terrorist attack on Indian soil. Example: Operation Parakram. 2. In conducting strategic air raids to take out specific terrorist elements within Pakistan.
B → C	In response to an air attack by India on Pakistani soil.	To open up multiple fronts of war to seize an advantage. Example: 1971 war.
C → D	1. When Indian forces enter into Pakistani territory. 2. When Pakistan attacks Indian troop formations on the Indian side of the border.	Level D does not exist in India's calculation and nuclear strategy.
D → E	1. As a first-strike option 2. As a second-strike option.	When any weapon of mass destruction is used against India.

Table 1: Trigger points for conflict escalation

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.

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.

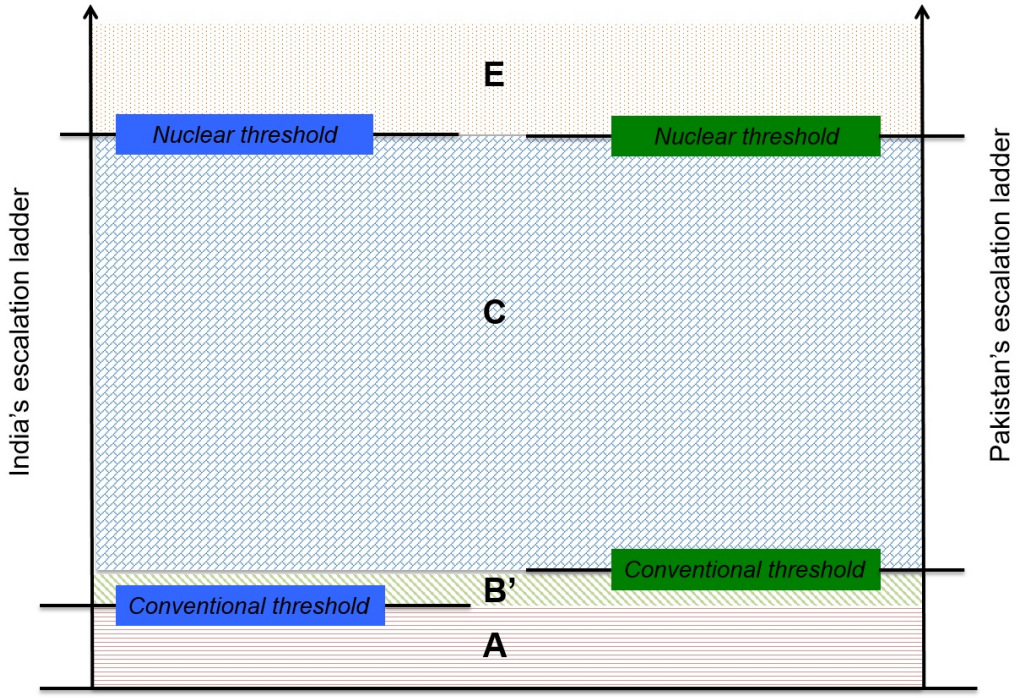

Figure 2: India's optimal conflict escalation scenario

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.

As both Walter Ladwig[25] and Christopher Clary[26] identify separately, this option has a potential for inadvertent escalation to a full-scale war. Given that an escalation resulting from a limited air-strike might escalate the conflict to Level C, where India enjoys relative superiority[27], the final decision would rest on the confidence that even a full-scale conventional war would not result in a nuclear response from Pakistan.

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 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.'

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

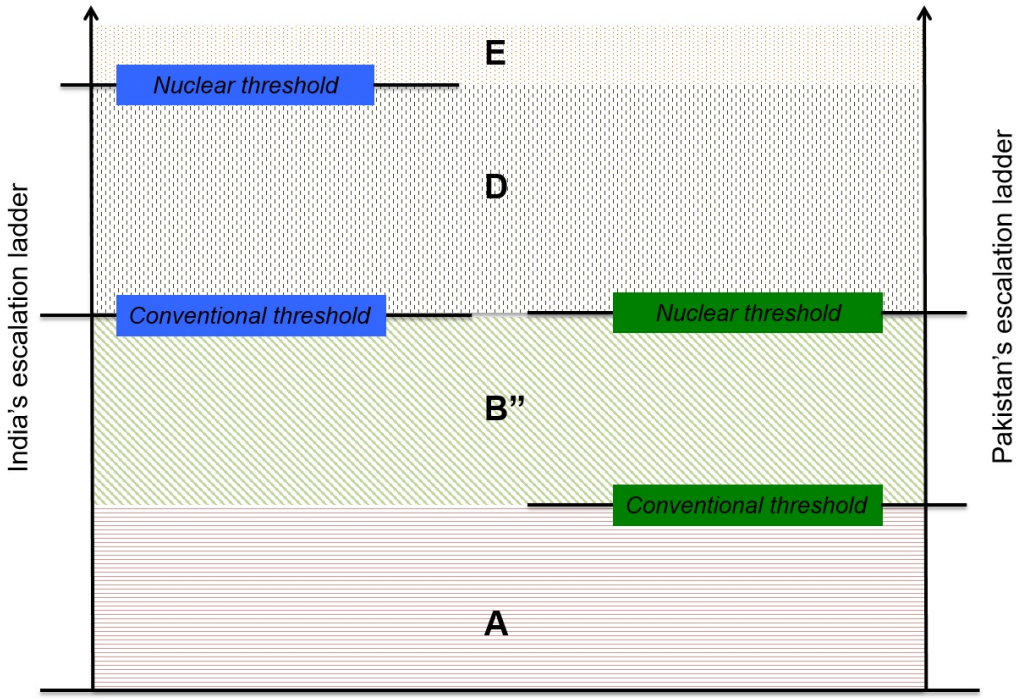

Figure 3: Pakistan's optimal conflict escalation scenario

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 tactical 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.

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

[18] 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.

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 tactical 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.

[19] Whether or not this threat is credible is ignored for the purpose of constructing an analytical framework.

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[27] Importantly, Walter Ladwig also gives evidence for the claim that India’s conventional superiority over Pakistan is overestimated. He concludes that “modernizing or not, the Indian military is capable of bringing far less force to bear in a limited conflict with Pakistan than the pessimists realise.”