
INDIA'S SECURITY CONCERNS AND POLICIES: STRATEGIC RELATIONS, DEFENCE POLICY, AND DOCTRINE IN A CHANGING REGIONAL ORDER

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ABSTRACT

Few questions in contemporary international relations carry greater regional consequence than the trajectory of India's security policy. Situated between two nuclear-armed neighbours with whom it shares unresolved territorial disputes, and at the centre of an Indian Ocean region of growing strategic contestation, India has been compelled across the decades since independence to forge a security posture adequate to a remarkably demanding strategic environment. This paper analyses that posture across six interlinked dimensions: Sino-Indian relations from the Panchsheel framework of 1954 through the Eastern Ladakh standoff and the October 2024 patrolling agreement; India-Pakistan relations from Partition through the wars of the twentieth century to Operation Sindoor in May 2025 and the unprecedented suspension of the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty; the structural constraints confronting regional cooperation under SAARC and India's corresponding turn toward BIMSTEC; the institutional evolution of India's defence establishment from Nehruvian restraint through the creation of the Chief of Defence Staff in 2019; India's maritime security strategy and the SAGAR doctrine; and the conventional and nuclear doctrines that govern India's use of force. The paper argues that Indian security policy has progressively shifted from the strategic restraint characteristic of the early post-independence decades toward a more assertive and calibrated posture, while remaining constrained by a two-front challenge, a dormant regional architecture, and the requirements of nuclear stability. It relies on official government documents, bilateral treaties, strategic analyses, and contemporary reporting to assess the degree to which India's declared doctrines have kept pace with this evolving environment.

Keywords: India's Security Policy; Sino-Indian Relations; India-Pakistan Relations; South Asian Regional Cooperation; Maritime Security; Nuclear Doctrine.

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of Indian security policy begins with geography. India occupies a position of unusual strategic complexity: its northern and north-eastern frontiers abut China across a boundary that remains undemarcated and contested; its western frontier confronts Pakistan, a nuclear-armed State whose relationship with India has been defined as much by conflict as by diplomacy; its peninsular coastline extends into an Indian Ocean whose lanes carry the bulk of India's energy imports and export trade; and its immediate neighbourhood includes States whose political trajectories periodically generate instability that spills across India's borders. No account of India's security concerns can be adequate that does not engage with each of these dimensions simultaneously.

India's response to this environment has evolved considerably since independence. The Nehruvian era was marked by an emphasis on non-alignment, diplomacy, and relative military restraint, a posture that proved inadequate when tested by the 1962 war with China. The decades that followed saw progressive military modernisation, the acquisition of nuclear capability, and an increasingly sophisticated institutional architecture for defence policy-making. The period since 2014, and especially since 2020, has been marked by a further shift toward more assertive responses to perceived security challenges, most visibly in the management of the Eastern Ladakh standoff with China and in the escalatory trajectory of the India-Pakistan relationship culminating in Operation Sindoor in 2025.

This paper traces that evolution systematically across six domains: Sino-Indian relations, India-Pakistan relations, South Asian regional cooperation, the development of India's defence policy, maritime security strategy, and conventional and nuclear doctrine. It aims not merely to describe the current state of each dimension but to situate it within a longer historical trajectory that illuminates the structural continuities and genuine shifts that together define India's contemporary security posture.

II. TRACING SINO-INDIAN RELATIONS

The post-independence relationship between India and China opened with a period of declared friendship, institutionalised in the 1954 Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between India and the Tibet Region of China, whose preamble articulated the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence — mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression,

mutual non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence — that Nehru and Zhou Enlai jointly promoted as a framework for Asian international order.¹

That cooperative moment was definitively ended by the 1962 border war, which exposed severe deficiencies in India's military preparedness and produced a political trauma whose effects on Indian strategic thinking persisted for decades.² The origins of the conflict lay substantially in the unresolved boundary, particularly the McMahon Line in the eastern sector, which China has never formally recognised, and the western sector in Aksai Chin, through which China had constructed a road connecting Tibet to Xinjiang without Indian awareness. China's unilateral ceasefire and withdrawal left the Line of Actual Control as a working but undemarcated boundary, and the management of that boundary became the central preoccupation of subsequent India-China diplomacy.

The confidence-building agreements of 1993 and 1996 represented an attempt to stabilise the LAC pending a final boundary settlement, establishing protocols for troop deployments, patrolling limits, and the peaceful resolution of incidents.³ These arrangements proved increasingly strained as China's strategic ambitions expanded. The 2017 Doklam stand-off, in which Indian and Chinese troops confronted each other at the India-China-Bhutan trijunction for over two months over Chinese road construction, signalled the limits of the existing confidence-building framework.⁴

The June 2020 clash in the Galwan Valley, in which Indian and Chinese soldiers engaged in hand-to-hand combat resulting in fatalities on both sides, marked the most serious deterioration of the bilateral relationship since 1962 and triggered a sustained military standoff across multiple friction points in Eastern Ladakh.⁵ Disengagement proceeded through an extended negotiating process: troops were withdrawn from four friction points by September 2022 after twenty-one rounds of Corps Commander-level talks, though the most sensitive positions at

¹Agreement between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China on Trade and Intercourse between India and the Tibet Region of China, Apr. 29, 1954, 299 U.N.T.S. 57 (preamble embodying the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, or Panchsheel).

²S.D. Muni & Tan Tai Yong, *Falling Out: India-China Relations after 1962* (2024); Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *India-China Bilateral Relations*.

³Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, Sept. 7, 1993; Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, Nov. 29, 1996.

⁴Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Press Statement on the Doklam Stand-off* (2017).

⁵Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *The Galwan Clash, 15 June 2020: An Assessment* (2024) (recording the first fatalities on the India-China border since 1975).

Depsang and Demchok remained contested.⁶ Those final flashpoints were resolved only in October 2024, when a patrolling agreement was reached on the margins of the BRICS Summit in Kazan, where Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping met directly for the first time since the Galwan incident.⁷

The relationship as it stands in mid-2026 is one of managed friction rather than either genuine rapprochement or open confrontation. The structural drivers of rivalry — the unresolved boundary, China's expanding strategic footprint across South Asia and the Indian Ocean, and the underlying power asymmetry — have not been addressed by the patrolling agreement, even as high-level diplomatic contact has cautiously resumed. A striking paradox of the relationship is that bilateral trade has continued to expand across the same period that witnessed the military standoff, reflecting a pattern of strategic competition coexisting with deepening economic interdependence that neither side has found a satisfactory way to manage.

III. INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

The relationship between India and Pakistan has been one of the most persistently adversarial bilateral relationships in the post-colonial world, structured from the outset by the violence of Partition, the unresolved dispute over Jammu and Kashmir, and the mutual suspicion that has prevented sustained normalisation across eight decades of independence.⁸

The two States fought wars in 1947-48, 1965, and 1971. The 1971 war, culminating in the creation of Bangladesh and the comprehensive defeat of Pakistani forces in the eastern theatre, resulted in the Simla Agreement of 1972, which committed both States to resolving disputes bilaterally and to respecting the Line of Control as the working boundary in Jammu and Kashmir pending a final settlement.⁹ India has maintained a continuous military presence on the Siachen Glacier, the world's highest battlefield, since Operation Meghdoot in 1984 — a presence that Pakistan has repeatedly contested but which India regards as strategically

⁶Sylvia Mishra, *Negotiating the India-China Standoff: 2020-2024*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Dec. 2024) (recording disengagement at four friction points by September 2022 following twenty-one rounds of Corps Commander-level talks).

⁷Id. (recording the October 21, 2024 agreement on patrolling at Depsang and Demchok, reached following the meeting between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping at the BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia).

⁸Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *India-Pakistan Relations: Historical Background*.

⁹Agreement between the Government of India and the Government of Pakistan on Bilateral Relations (Simla Agreement), July 2, 1972, 858 U.N.T.S. 71.

essential to preventing Pakistani consolidation of the high ground.¹⁰

The Kargil conflict of 1999, in which Pakistani regular and irregular forces crossed the Line of Control in the Kargil sector while bilateral diplomatic engagement was ongoing, represented a significant escalation whose management under conditions of overt nuclear capability on both sides provided a sobering early demonstration of the risks of limited war between nuclear-armed adversaries. The conflict prompted a substantial review of India's higher defence organisation through the Kargil Review Committee.¹¹

Cross-border terrorism has served as the primary vehicle through which the relationship has been managed, and periodically destabilised, in the years since Kargil. The November 2008 Mumbai attacks, in which Pakistan-based operatives killed over one hundred and sixty people in a coordinated assault on the city's public spaces over four days, set a threshold that India has since treated as a condition for any resumption of comprehensive bilateral dialogue.¹² The surgical strikes following the 2016 Uri attack¹³ and the Balakot air strikes following the 2019 Pulwama suicide bombing¹⁴ each represented incremental escalation of India's willingness to cross the Line of Control in response to cross-border terrorism, establishing a pattern of calibrated kinetic response that the Modi government presented as a departure from the strategic restraint of earlier administrations.

That trajectory reached its most significant escalation point with the Pahalgam terror attack of April 22, 2025, in which twenty-six civilians were killed in Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁵ India's response, Operation Sindoor launched on May 7, 2025, involved coordinated strikes on multiple terror infrastructure sites across Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, representing the most extensive Indian military action across the international boundary since 1971.¹⁶

¹⁰Ministry of Defence, Government of India, Siachen Glacier and Operation Meghdoot (recording the commencement of continuous Indian military presence on the Siachen Glacier in April 1984).

¹¹K. Subrahmanyam et al., *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report* (2000).

¹²National Investigation Agency, Government of India, Mumbai Terror Attack Case (26/11) (recording the deaths of more than one hundred and sixty people in the November 2008 attacks).

¹³Ministry of Defence, Government of India, Press Release on Surgical Strikes (Sept. 29, 2016).

¹⁴Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Press Statement on the Balakot Air Strike (Feb. 26, 2019).

¹⁵Indus Waters Treaty to Remain in Abeyance Until Pakistan Ends Terror Support: India, *The Tribune* (May 7, 2026) (recording the Pahalgam terror attack of Apr. 22, 2025 and the resulting deaths of twenty-six civilians). Available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/india/indus-waters-treaty-to-remain-in-abeyance-until-pakistan-ends-terror-support-india/>.

¹⁶*Id.* (recording Operation Sindoor, launched May 7, 2025, as coordinated strikes on terror infrastructure across Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir).

Equally unprecedented was India's decision to place the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 in abeyance following the attack, suspending a water-sharing arrangement that had survived three prior wars and was widely regarded as one of the most durable institutions in South Asian international relations. The Government stated that the Treaty would remain suspended until Pakistan credibly and irreversibly dismantled the cross-border terrorist infrastructure operating from its soil, a condition it maintained as of mid-2026.¹⁷ Whether the suspension of the Treaty constitutes a sustainable long-term instrument of strategic pressure or an escalatory measure with unintended consequences for regional water security remains a question that analysts continue to debate.

IV. INDIA AND SOUTH ASIA: CHALLENGES FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, established by its Charter in 1985, was conceived as a vehicle for economic integration, cultural exchange, and collaborative development across a region whose States share deep historical, civilisational, and economic ties.¹⁸ In practice, SAARC has been chronically constrained by the India-Pakistan rivalry, whose shadow has fallen across every significant institutional initiative. The organisation has not convened a Summit since 2014; the nineteenth Summit, scheduled for Islamabad, was effectively abandoned after India and several other member States declined to participate in the aftermath of the 2016 Uri attack.¹⁹

India has responded to SAARC's paralysis by investing in alternative platforms, most significantly BIMSTEC, which connects India with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal, and Bhutan around the Bay of Bengal and excludes Pakistan, thereby avoiding the structural veto that the India-Pakistan relationship exercises over SAARC's functioning. The Neighbourhood First policy, articulated as a framework for India's engagement with its immediate neighbourhood, has emphasised connectivity infrastructure, development assistance, and crisis support.²⁰

¹⁷Indus Waters Treaty, Sept. 19, 1960, 419 U.N.T.S. 125; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Statement on the Indus Waters Treaty (Apr. 23, 2025) (placing the Treaty in abeyance). Available at: <https://www.mea.gov.in/>.

¹⁸Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, Dec. 8, 1985.

¹⁹Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Statement on the Nineteenth SAARC Summit (2016) (recording India's decision not to participate following the Uri attack).

²⁰Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, BIMSTEC and India's Neighbourhood First Policy.

The practical challenges confronting regional cooperation in South Asia are formidable even setting aside the Pakistan dimension. Intra-regional trade volumes remain among the lowest of any regional grouping in the world, constrained by inadequate physical connectivity, non-tariff barriers, and the mutual suspicion that pervades bilateral relationships across the region. China's Belt and Road Initiative has complicated India's regional calculus further by offering South Asian States infrastructure financing at a scale and speed that India has struggled to match, providing an alternative patronage network that has been embraced to varying degrees by Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. India's management of periodic political volatility in its neighbourhood — including the Sri Lankan economic crisis of 2022, during which India extended substantial financial support, and recurring shifts in political alignment in the Maldives, Nepal, and Bangladesh — reflects the difficulty of maintaining durable bilateral relationships with States whose domestic politics increasingly include significant pro-China constituencies.

V. THE MAKING OF INDIA'S DEFENCE POLICY SINCE INDEPENDENCE

India's defence policy in the Nehru era rested on the premise that the country's security was best served by non-alignment, active diplomacy, and the avoidance of expensive military commitments that would divert resources from development. This posture reflected a genuine strategic philosophy, but it also left the armed forces underfunded and institutionally neglected in ways that the 1962 war with China exposed with devastating clarity.²¹

The aftermath of 1962 produced a sustained effort at military modernisation, including the expansion of the Defence Research and Development Organisation, established in 1958 to drive indigenous defence technology development, whose mandate was significantly broadened following the war.²² India demonstrated its growing conventional capability in the 1971 war, before conducting the Pokhran-I nuclear test in May 1974²³ — described officially as a peaceful nuclear explosion but widely understood as establishing the technical foundation for a weapons programme — and the decisive Pokhran-II tests in May 1998, after which India

²¹Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Evolution of India's Defence Policy Since Independence.

²²Defence Research and Development Organisation, About DRDO (recording its establishment in 1958 and subsequent expansion following the 1962 war).

²³Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Evolution of India's Nuclear Policy (recording the Pokhran-I test of May 1974).

formally declared itself a nuclear weapon State.²⁴

The organisational lessons of the Kargil conflict, which exposed deficiencies in inter-service coordination and civil-military interface, set in motion a reform process that took two decades to reach its most significant institutional expression: the creation of the office of Chief of Defence Staff in December 2019, intended to provide the integrated military advice and theatre command coordination that Kargil had shown to be lacking. General Bipin Rawat, the first CDS, served until his death in a helicopter crash in December 2021; General Anil Chauhan succeeded him from September 2022; and Lieutenant General N.S. Raja Subramani was appointed to the office in 2026.²⁵

The period since 2020 has been marked by two further policy emphases. The Agnipath scheme introduced in 2022 sought to alter the demographic profile of the armed forces by recruiting short-term soldiers who would return to civilian life with military training after four years, a reform that generated considerable controversy within the defence establishment and in public debate.²⁶ The Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative has simultaneously pressed for a substantial increase in the share of indigenously manufactured equipment in defence procurement, seeking to reduce India's historically high dependence on imported platforms, particularly from Russia, the United States, and France. These twin ambitions — a leaner, younger force structure and greater self-reliance in equipment — represent the most significant attempted restructuring of Indian defence organisation since the post-1962 modernisation drive, though their outcomes remain contested among strategic analysts.

VI. INDIA'S MARITIME SECURITY AND STRATEGY

India's peninsular geography, with coastlines extending over seven thousand kilometres across the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, and its dependence on sea-borne trade for the overwhelming share of its energy imports and export cargo, have made maritime security a central and growing dimension of its strategic posture. The Indian Ocean Region carries not

²⁴Id. (recording the Pokhran-II tests of May 1998).

²⁵Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Lieutenant General N.S. Raja Subramani (Retd.) Appointed as Chief of Defence Staff (2026) (recording the creation of the office in December 2019, General Bipin Rawat's tenure until December 2021, and General Anil Chauhan's tenure from September 2022). Available at: <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2259242>.

²⁶Ministry of Defence, Government of India, Press Release on the Agnipath Scheme (2022).

only India's own trade but the trade of much of the wider world, and India's position at its geographic heart creates both opportunity and obligation.

The doctrinal articulation of India's maritime aspirations came in 2015 with Prime Minister Modi's enunciation of the SAGAR doctrine — Security and Growth for All in the Region — which positioned India as a net security provider across the Indian Ocean littoral, with responsibilities extending beyond the protection of India's own maritime interests to the security of neighbouring island States and the maintenance of open sea lanes.²⁷ The Indian Navy gave operational content to this aspiration in its strategy document Ensuring Secure Seas, which mapped the principal threats to Indian maritime interests — ranging from piracy and terrorism to State-level naval competition — against the force development and partnership priorities required to address them.²⁸

India has deepened its maritime security partnerships through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the United States, Japan, and Australia, which has increasingly acquired a naval dimension oriented toward preserving freedom of navigation and rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.²⁹ These partnerships have been driven in substantial part by China's expanding naval presence in the Indian Ocean, manifest in submarine deployments, port investments across the littoral — in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Djibouti — and the expansion of China's blue-water naval capability. Indian strategic commentary has described this encirclement through the 'string of pearls' framework, and the Indian Navy has responded with a sustained emphasis on modernisation and on strengthening bilateral maritime ties with island States in the Indian Ocean.

The commissioning of INS Vikrant, India's first indigenously constructed aircraft carrier, in September 2022 represented a milestone in this modernisation programme, demonstrating India's capacity to design, build, and operate a capital ship of the first rank.³⁰ The Indian Navy has maintained continuous anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden since 2008 and has conducted humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations across the Indian Ocean littoral, giving operational expression to the developmental as well as security dimensions of the SAGAR framework. The effective management of the maritime domain has thus become

²⁷Prime Minister's Office, Government of India, PM's Remarks at the Commissioning of Coast Ship Barracuda, Mauritius (Mar. 12, 2015) (articulating the doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region).

²⁸Indian Navy, Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy (2015).

²⁹Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, India and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.

³⁰Indian Navy, Press Release on the Commissioning of INS Vikrant (Sept. 2, 2022).

inseparable from the broader question of whether India can sustain the role of regional security provider that its doctrine has proclaimed.

VII. INDIA'S DEFENCE DOCTRINES AND STRATEGIES, INCLUDING NUCLEAR DOCTRINE

A. Conventional Doctrine

At the conventional level, the experience of Operation Parakram in 2001-02 — a large-scale mobilisation in response to the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament that required months to complete and ultimately achieved no military result — is widely understood to have prompted a rethinking of India's conventional war-fighting approach. The doctrine that emerged, referred to in strategic commentary as Cold Start, envisages rapid offensive action by Integrated Battle Groups operating across multiple sectors simultaneously, intended to seize shallow gains that inflict punishing costs on Pakistan before international pressure for ceasefire mounts and before the adversary can credibly invoke nuclear thresholds.³¹ The Indian Army has neither formally acknowledged nor definitively disavowed this doctrine, and its precise content and current operational status remain a matter of debate among analysts.

Operation Sindoor in May 2025 has been read by a number of strategic analysts as a further evolution of India's calibrated strike posture, extending the precedents set by the 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot air strikes into a more sustained campaign against multiple target sets across a wider geographic area. Whether this represents a systematic doctrinal evolution or an ad hoc operational response to exceptional provocation remains to be seen, but its implications for the future management of the India-Pakistan escalation ladder are likely to occupy Indian strategic planning for years to come.

B. Nuclear Doctrine

India's nuclear doctrine was formally articulated in two stages: a draft released by the National Security Advisory Board in August 1999, and the official doctrine adopted by the Cabinet Committee on Security in January 2003.³² The doctrine rests on three foundational pillars. First,

³¹Walter C. Ladwig III, A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine, 32(3) International Security 158 (2007/08).

³²National Security Advisory Board, Government of India, Draft Report on Indian Nuclear Doctrine (Aug. 17, 1999); Cabinet Committee on Security, Government of India, Press Release on India's Nuclear Doctrine (Jan. 4, 2003).

credible minimum deterrence: India maintains a nuclear arsenal sufficient to inflict unacceptable damage on any adversary but does not seek quantitative or qualitative parity with larger nuclear powers. Second, No First Use: India commits not to be the first to employ nuclear weapons in any conflict, reserving nuclear weapons exclusively for retaliation. Third, massive retaliation: if nuclear weapons are used against India or Indian forces, the response will be punitive and massive, intended to impose costs so severe as to deter any rational adversary from initiating nuclear use.

The doctrine additionally extends India's deterrence posture to cover major attacks involving biological or chemical weapons, reserving the option of nuclear response to such attacks on Indian territory or forces. Command authority is vested in a civilian-led Nuclear Command Authority, reflecting the constitutional principle of civilian supremacy and India's broader commitment to responsible nuclear stewardship. The doctrine further provides assurance that India will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon States, a commitment that reinforces India's credentials as a responsible nuclear power despite its status outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Periodic statements by senior Indian officials have raised questions about whether No First Use retains its absolute character, particularly in scenarios involving Pakistan's battlefield nuclear weapons or attacks employing chemical or biological agents. The formally declared policy has not, however, been revised. The deeper tension in India's nuclear posture lies in the relationship between its conventional doctrine and its nuclear commitments: limited conventional offensives of the kind associated with Cold Start and demonstrated in Operation Sindoor carry an inherent risk of crossing thresholds below which Pakistan, which has not adopted a no-first-use policy, might feel compelled to employ tactical nuclear weapons. Managing this escalation ladder while maintaining the deterrent credibility of both conventional and nuclear postures remains the central strategic challenge that India's doctrinal architects have not fully resolved.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The picture that emerges from the foregoing analysis is one of a security policy in genuine transition. The strategic restraint that characterised India's early post-independence decades has given way, incrementally and unevenly, to a more assertive posture that is prepared to use force calibrated to provocation — across the Line of Control in 2016, into Pakistani airspace in 2019, and against multiple Pakistani targets in 2025 — while simultaneously investing in institutional

reform, maritime capability, and indigenous defence production on a scale without precedent in independent India's history.

Yet this assertiveness operates within enduring structural constraints. The boundary dispute with China remains unresolved, and the October 2024 patrolling agreement, welcome as it is, addresses only its most recent manifestation rather than its underlying causes. The India-Pakistan relationship, despite or perhaps because of Operation Sindoor and the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, remains one in which the risk of uncontrolled escalation is structurally present whenever a significant terrorist attack occurs. Regional cooperation in South Asia remains hostage to the India-Pakistan rivalry, and BIMSTEC, whatever its merits, cannot substitute for the integrated regional market and connectivity network that SAARC was meant to deliver. The two-front challenge — the simultaneous requirement to deter and if necessary fight both China and Pakistan — has not been reduced by recent events, and India's force structure and doctrinal architecture have not yet been fully adapted to address it.

The defining question of Indian strategic policy for the remainder of this decade is whether the institutional and doctrinal advances of recent years will prove sufficient to sustain a more assertive posture without crossing escalatory thresholds that could unravel the relative stability that, despite everything, the South Asian nuclear order has so far maintained. The answer will depend not only on India's choices but on the responses of its adversaries and on the willingness of the international community to sustain the norms of responsible state behaviour that India's own doctrines have, in their better moments, been designed to uphold.

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