

# ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK ON SOUTH ASIAN FOREIGN POLICY

*Edited by Aparna Pande*

First published 2022  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2022 selection and editorial matter, Aparna Pande; individual chapters, the contributors

The right of Aparna Pande to be identified as the author of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-0-367-15068-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-05032-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-05480-8 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9780429054808

Typeset in Bembo  
by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

## ALMOST PARITY

Understanding the India–Pakistan  
Conventional Military Balance*Arzan Tarapore*

The strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan has traditionally been the most consequential fault line in the international relations of South Asia. It has sparked four wars, constantly threatens more conflict, drains the national coffers of two massive developing countries, and routinely hampers all attempts at regional cooperation. Yet it persists unabated, even though, by most quantitative measures, the conventional military balance is lopsided. India can amass significantly more military power than Pakistan: its defence budget is six times larger (\$60.5 billion compared with \$10.3 billion), its military has more than twice as many personnel (about 1,445,000 compared with about 653,000), and it operates significantly more tanks (3,565 compared with 2,433), artillery guns (9,719 compared with 4,595), combat aircraft (776 compared with 404), principal surface ships (27 compared with 9), and so on (IISS 2020). This imbalance is as old as partition, and will endure indefinitely – it is a feature of the structural disparity in the India–Pakistan rivalry, where India’s population and economy are several times larger than Pakistan’s.

But countries do not deter or fight wars in quantitative ledgers. Indeed, the historical record of the four wars India and Pakistan have fought does not reflect their structural disparities. Once, in 1971, India meted out a devastating military defeat, cutting Pakistan in half. But their other three wars – over disputed territory in Kashmir in 1948–1948, 1965, and 1999 – ended in stalemate. Each time Pakistan’s revisionist plans were thwarted by a sturdy Indian defence, but each conflict ended with Pakistan undeterred and the dispute unresolved (Ganguly 2002). Since then, India has absorbed multiple Pakistan-based terrorist provocations without launching a threatened conventional riposte. The India–Pakistan frontier continues to be heavily militarised, and both sides continue to pour scarce national resources into their militaries, while gaining little apparent strategic advantage. Why does the conventional military balance, which in aggregate is so heavily skewed in India’s favour, not translate into Indian strategic dominance over Pakistan?

This chapter shows that the conventional military balance between two countries is more nuanced and contextual than a simple numerical comparison would suggest. To be sure, nuclear deterrence is a major factor – Pakistan commonly threatens to resort to nuclear use before any conventional conflict becomes a general or prolonged war, which renders irrelevant many of India’s quantitative advantages (Narang 2009/10). But quite apart from nuclear deterrence, the conventional military balance itself is a function of many factors beyond aggregate numerical dimensions, from technology to geography to military doctrine. In the case of India and Pakistan,

most but not all of these additional factors serve to offset India's quantitative supremacy, making the conventional military balance more equal than aggregate numbers suggest. In fact, the balance of usable conventional military power is almost at parity in the most likely theatres of conflict. India is still militarily more powerful by a significant margin, but it struggles to translate that power advantage into lasting security.

This chapter is divided into four parts. First, I outline some of the qualitative inputs to military capability, showing that the differences between India and Pakistan are in fact negligible. Second, I assess each major theatre and domain of warfare, showing that rival forces are near parity in the most likely and consequential battlefields. Third, I outline each side's military strategy and doctrine, showing they are also likely to produce strategically stalemated results in war. Finally, I assess the implications of this balance, showing that, with their militaries as currently designed, neither side can wield military force effectively to achieve their strategic goals.

### **Qualitative Inputs to Capability**

A military's capabilities are not determined simply by the sum of its troops, tanks, planes, and ships. Both India and Pakistan devote a significant share of their national resources to their militaries – defence spending accounts for 8.8% of India's national budget, and 18.4% of Pakistan's (World Bank 2020a) – which sustain, with varying inefficiencies, massive military forces. Those material holdings certainly matter, and all things being equal, numerical superiority can be strategically decisive. But all things are rarely equal. A military's capabilities are also the synthesis of a range of qualitative inputs, including organisation, training and leadership, technological advancement, and readiness. In those dimensions, the gap between India and Pakistan is considerably narrower. In some cases, this is the result of two rival militaries that share much of their organisational cultures – the result of a common inheritance from the British Indian Army. In other cases, it is the result of powerful foreign partners, especially China and the United States, that see benefits in providing lavish security cooperation.

The organisation of a military helps to determine how efficiently its various elements support each other to fight as a unified system, ideally so that the whole is faster and deadlier than the sum of its parts. At the broadest level, this demands 'jointness,' by which the Army, Air Force, and Navy all plan and fight as an integrated, seamless whole. In both India and Pakistan, however, jointness is grossly underdeveloped. India just inaugurated the position of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in January 2020, after decades of successive reform recommendations and half-measures such as the establishment of an administrative Integrated Defence Staff. This new position of CDS is the first step, and will probably be the lead agent, in a longer process of introducing joint – and therefore more efficient – procurement processes and support services. It is also designed to adjust some command structures, including with the establishment of joint theatre commands that integrate Army, Air Force, and Navy forces in planning and operations. Pakistan adopted a fig-leaf of joint high command earlier, with the creation of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee in 1976. But that position remains impotent, with no command authority, and is informally eclipsed by the Chief of Army Staff, reflecting the institutional power that resides in the Army at the expense of the other services or joint headquarters.

Indeed, in both India and Pakistan, the Army overwhelmingly dominates the military – accounting for about 85% of military personnel in both countries (IISS 2020). This emphasis on ground forces was originally a legacy of the British Indian Army, whose core missions were the defence and pacification of the Raj's large land periphery, but has been reinforced by the ongoing intense strategic rivalries India has with both Pakistan and China. In the absence of joint operational commands in either country, the individual services conduct their own

procurement and planning. The respective Armies represent by far the most potent force each side can muster, with the Air Force and Navy playing supporting roles at best – and are often an afterthought in contingency planning. Even during the deliberately planned Kargil War, for example, the Pakistan Air Force was not briefed on the Army's invasion plan until after operations had commenced (Tufail 2009).

The principle of jointness, of course, is not the exclusive purview of higher defence organisation; it can be applied at every operational echelon down to the tactical level. Indeed, in the absence of joint operations at the tactical level, Indian and Pakistani Army units lack ready access to the combat power that their Air Forces could otherwise provide. Even within their respective armies, setting aside other services, both India and Pakistan are still experimenting with combined-arms formations at lower echelons. In the case of India's Integrated Battle Groups, for example, brigade-level formations will task their own organic artillery support without having to appeal to a higher headquarters (Unnithan 2019). Such organisational designs show how a military can better exploit – or, in their absence, waste – the finite equipment and personnel they have at their disposal.

The quality of training and leadership in a military also shapes how expertly its equipment and personnel are employed. Both India and Pakistan have maintained generally high levels of senior officer professionalism; but in the heat of battle, they have also both suffered shortfalls in creativity or grit. For example, the Indian Army's operational commander in the 1965 war, as well as the government's official history, lambasted Indian unit commanders for 'an unimaginative obsession for frontal attacks' (Singh 2012: 261); and Pakistani observers and the government review of the 1971 debacle roundly villainise the Pakistani senior commanders for 'culpable negligence' (Hamoodur Rehman Commission 2000). Nevertheless, the officer corps in both militaries are generally cohesive and disciplined professionals. A pair of recent studies assessed the character and quality of the Pakistani and Indian officer corps, respectively, using a large body of rare observations of their command and staff colleges (Smith 2018, 2020). The studies showed, using systematic evidence rather than anecdotes, that the mid- and senior-level officers of each army share much of the same core organisational culture and ethos relating to secular and apolitical armed forces. Some of their technical and doctrinal military expertise may deviate from U.S. standards of best practice, but there was little notable gap in the comparative quality between individual Indian and Pakistani military leaders.

Along with leadership, equipment also varies qualitatively, most obviously with regard to its technological advancement. In a world where leading military powers such as the United States and China are increasingly relying on information technology as 'force multipliers,' to increase the speed, lethality, and coordination of their combat operations, India and Pakistan still maintain largely industrial-era military equipment. Both countries struggle to find the resources for necessary modernisation – that is, updating their inventories with higher technology equipment. For example, about 56% of the Indian Air Force's combat aircraft, and about 64% of the Pakistan Air Force's combat aircraft, are considered 'legacy' systems that were designed during the Cold War (IISS 2020: 221). Advanced technology matters, especially for capital-intensive military services like the air force. More advanced aircraft – such as India's newly inducted Rafale fighters and Pakistan's JF-17 fighters – are better able to detect and track targets, fire on them with longer range and more precise weapons, survive engagement because they are low observable, and share operational data with other forces. Recapitalisation of these air forces with more advanced aircraft is a years-long process. As older aircraft types in India are retired before new airframes are acquired, and as Pakistan acquires more advanced fighters from China, analysts predict with high confidence that India's air combat capability advantage will shrink in coming years (Tellis 2016).

The halting pace of military modernisation reveals two significant strategic challenges for both India and Pakistan. First, modernisation is extremely difficult for both countries to afford. It relies most fundamentally on the vitality of their respective national economies, which is questionable for India and parlous for Pakistan. But it also requires astute prioritisation, balancing the need for long-term capability development with more immediate operational or sustainment requirements. In India, the Army's ballooning personnel costs are crowding out the possibility of investment in new equipment, requiring all services to revise their procurement plans downward (Bedi 2020). The stand-off between India and China on the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh, starting in May 2020, may, over the longer term, also prompt India to devote more resources to maintaining a larger forward operational presence in inhospitable terrain, at the expense of capital acquisitions. In Pakistan, the politically powerful Army-led military consistently overspends its allotted budget, and has increased its budget even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, but has nevertheless had to curtail its foreign-sourced arms procurement by more than half in the past decade (Devasher 2020; SIPRI 2020).

Second, modernisation requires close security cooperation with foreign partners – India and Pakistan both lack a sufficiently robust domestic arms manufacturing capacity. India remains reliant on a wide range of partners for its most sophisticated weapons systems, including Russia, the United States, France, and Israel. While it has recently increased its acquisitions from the United States, the bulk of its military equipment remains Russian-origin, which creates a path-dependent reliance on Russia for continued replacement and maintenance support, as well as access to high-technology systems such as long-range air defence. Pakistan, recently cut off from the lavish military aid it received from the United States, is heavily dependent on China for its arms imports. Indigenous weapons development is weak in both countries. India has a world-class capacity for developing some high-technology systems – such as missiles – but these represent low numbers of niche military capabilities. Its development and production of the Arjun main battle tank or the Tejas light combat aircraft, for example – which should be the mainstays of the military – suffered long delays and featured obsolete technology. Thus, the Indian government's COVID pandemic-era plans to redouble its domestic arms production efforts under the banner of *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, or self-reliant India, will likely require the military services to accept some reduction in their weapons' performance parameters.

No matter how well led or equipped a military unit is, its capability hinges on readiness and logistics support – its ability to launch and sustain operations. Readiness and logistics are composite measures of massive systems of training, maintenance, resupply, transport, and so on. Readiness determines, most basically, what proportion of the force can be launched into battle, and how quickly. For example, India's front-line Su-30MKI fighters normally suffer low serviceability rates of about 55–60% (Bedi 2017), meaning that nearly half of the vaunted Su-30MKI airframes in the Air Force's inventory are unavailable for combat at any given time. The state of logistics support is also dire. India's continued shortage of war stocks means the military lacks some key weapons, such as anti-tank missiles, to sustain high-intensity operations for the mandated period of 10 days (Pandit 2020). And the multiplicity of different types of equipment – for example, seven different types of fighter aircraft, from four different countries of origin – means that different types require different resupply and maintenance systems, introducing significant duplication and inefficiencies.

Readiness and logistics can be – literally – war-stoppers. The Indian Army's concerns over dwindling war stocks – whether or not those concerns were actually well-founded – compelled it to accept a cease fire in the 1965 war. Its inability to mobilise quickly in the 2001–2002 crisis foreclosed the option of using military force, and became the central driver for the organisational and doctrinal reforms under the rubric of Cold Start (Ladwig 2007/08). India's problems with

readiness and logistics may not be any greater than Pakistan's – but they nevertheless serve as a significant brake on India's military plans and operations, and a significant foil to its military power. No matter how impressive is India's quantitative advantage over Pakistan, its shortcomings in qualitative inputs to capability such as jointness and readiness – often irrespective of Pakistan's capabilities – stand as a major hindrance to its ability to mobilise and apply military force.

### **The Equalising Effects of Geography**

Another major hindrance that serves to erode India's quantitative advantages is geography. At the broadest level, geography disadvantages India because New Delhi faces pressing military threats in two opposite directions, from Pakistan and China, which compels India to divide its forces. In some cases, Indian units – especially air power – can be dual-assigned to both theatres, since they can easily move between them. But in most cases, large Indian Army formations are dedicated to only one front. In December 2020, in the midst of the Ladakh stand-off, the Army ordered one of its three strike corps facing Pakistan to be re-tasked for the China front. With that re-tasking, 22 Indian Army divisions will now face Pakistan, while 14 are allocated to the China front and 2 are held in national reserve (Shukla 2021). This decision has further shrunk India's local quantitative advantages over Pakistan and vividly demonstrates India's two-front strategic dilemma.

India's worst-case scenario, and its most taxing defence planning construct, is a 'collusive' threat leading to a two-front war. Such a threat has never materialised, in the five land wars India has fought, but remains plausible. The challenge in this scenario is not simply the availability of sufficient combat forces, but the transport and resupply they would require on opposite sides of the country. The Indian Air Force tested such a scenario with its exercise Gagan Shakti, but even it was limited by the relative scarcity of key enablers, such as air-to-air refuellers (Sachdev 2018). In a major two-front war, India would very likely have to accept a degree of risk on one of the fronts.

In contrast, Pakistan faces a conventional threat from only one direction, and is able to concentrate its forces – 7 of the Army's 9 Corps – to face India (Global Security 2020). A significant number of Pakistan Army troops had been diverted to the domestic counterinsurgency campaign in the northwest of the country, but could be relatively quickly redeployed to the Indian border, as they were during the 2001–2002 crisis (Kanwal 2002: 69).

Geography also acts as an equaliser between India and Pakistan at the theatre level. The most likely zones of conflict are areas where terrain and the respective armies' deployed force density prohibits major operational success by either side. Every time India and Pakistan have fought a war – including the 1971 war where the decisive action was in current-day Bangladesh – they have fought in the disputed territory of Kashmir, where sovereignty is divided by the Line of Control (LoC). With this unresolved territorial dispute and history of conflict, India and Pakistan have heavily militarised Kashmir, deploying about 3 Corps' worth of troops each, in addition to paramilitary forces. The terrain in Kashmir is unforgiving – most of it is mountainous, heavily forested, and under snow cover for several months each year. Roads and movement corridors are scant and low capacity, so except in the lower elevation sectors of Jammu, most of the LoC cannot be crossed by heavy mechanised or armoured forces. This theatre is therefore suitable largely for slow-moving infantry and artillery only – as it was repeatedly in several wars (Gill 2009). Geography in Kashmir gives military advantage to the defender – ground offensives by either side are likely to quickly bog down.

If war stretches further south, in the plains of Punjab and the Thar desert straddling Rajasthan and Sindh, India and Pakistan are more likely to use large combined arms formations. These areas have relatively flat, open terrain, and high-capacity roads. Unsurprisingly, this theatre witnessed

the massive multi-Corps offensives and tank battles in 1965, and the coercive manoeuvres and war scares of the Brasstacks exercise and Operation Parakram. Today, both sides position their strike corps, with large armoured forces at their centre, in this theatre. But even here, large and fast conventional offensives are highly unlikely. Both sides have built large static terrain obstacles to impede enemy advances. Most famously, Pakistan has built an extensive network of canals near the international border, designed to be used as line defences against Indian invasion. These canals were effective obstacles in the 1965 war, and would, along with urban sprawl, serve to slow down any threatened Indian offensive. The Thar Desert, further south in Sindh, presents fewer built obstacles, thereby offering better prospects for penetrating armoured assaults. But with negligible political or economic value, Pakistan has deliberately kept those areas empty as a strategically secondary buffer zone (Ladwig 2015: 15).

Any major conventional offensive, moreover, is likely to come with ample warning to allow the defender to mobilise. India's Pakistan-facing strike corps are garrisoned in the interior of the country; unless and until the Indian Army completes the transition to an Integrated Battle Group structure, any offensive manoeuvre by India would probably require at least several days of highly visible preparations to move to and across the border. In 2001, the Indian Army took a full three weeks to position its Strike Corps' armoured columns for an attack across the border (Ladwig 2007/08: 160–61). More fundamentally, any such Indian offensive is likely only as a response to a Pakistan-backed provocation – so Pakistan may raise its defensive readiness levels as a precaution following any major terrorist attack in India. Achieving surprise for major conventional operations is highly unlikely (Ladwig 2015).

Conversely, comparatively minor offensives have succeeded in gaining surprise – most notably India's seizure of the Siachen glacier in 1984 and Pakistan's occupation of heights in Kargil in 1999. But precisely because such surreptitious actions occurred, both sides are increasingly attuned and postured to prevent such fait accompli campaigns in the future. With both sides increasingly enabled by improving surveillance technology, such surprise land-grabs are decreasingly likely. India's ongoing efforts to construct multiple layers of fencing and electronic surveillance on the LoC has been designed primarily to prevent infiltration by small numbers of militants, but also serves to make future Kargil-style incursions easier to detect and prevent (Singh 2015).

With the combination of difficult natural terrain, added obstacles, and dense force dispositions, the most likely ground theatres of a conventional conflict strongly favour the defender. Any attack would be channelled into predictable and well-defended movement corridors, and both sides would struggle to penetrate more than 10–20 km across the LoC or the international border in Punjab. On the ground, then, the military balance approximates local parity – India's aggregate numerical superiority offers no meaningful advantage.

The conventional balance is much more lopsided on the open seas. Unlike the highly constricted ground terrain of Kashmir and Punjab, the maritime domain around India and Pakistan better resembles a 'featureless plain' (Holmes 2019). With relatively open and unimpeded coastlines, the Arabian Sea adjacent to India and Pakistan even lacks maritime key terrain features such as chokepoints or narrow seas, which might otherwise have allowed the smaller Pakistan Navy to exercise some asymmetric options. Instead, India's considerably larger surface and subsurface fleet is free to exercise sea control off the Pakistan shoreline, in effect denying the use of the sea to the Pakistan Navy. If a major conventional war were to include a naval dimension, India's quantitative advantage would likely be decisive through attrition of the Pakistan Navy.

However, even with that advantage, India's usable military options short of general war are scant. In a limited conflict, its navy could seek limited action against the Pakistan Navy, seeking



to target Pakistani vessels that are already at sea. Or it could seek to launch an attack on one or more of Pakistan's three major ports – Karachi, Qasim, and Gwadar – as it did successfully against Karachi in the 1971 war. But given Pakistan's shore-based air power, the Indian Navy is unlikely to succeed, or at least unlikely to escape without suffering significant losses of its own; and attacking the Chinese-operated Gwadar port would be highly escalatory, risking an expansion of war to include China. Or the Indian Navy could seek to maintain a disruptive or coercive presence, especially using submarine forces, off a Pakistani port. It reportedly attempted such a coercive move during and after the February 2019 crisis – it diverted a flotilla of ships on exercise to deter the Pakistan Navy from deploying, and possibly deployed a submarine to Karachi port (Siddiqui 2019). Finally, one of India's most effective options is defensive – in a reaction to the seaborne infiltration of terrorists in 2008, the Indian Navy and Coast Guard have redoubled their radar and electronic surveillance of India's coastline. Coastal defence has been enshrined a high priority in India's maritime doctrine, but as with other military and security forces, it remains underresourced and poorly organised (Singh 2018).

Air power does not operate in its own distinct theatre, but forces can operate in the air domain independently. Indeed, given the paucity of jointness on both sides, each Air Force is likely to devise plans and execute operations independently of the Army. In some scenarios demanding only limited force, air operations offer an attractive option. India, for example, launched an air strike in February 2019 in response to a Pakistan-based terrorist attack, against what it claimed was a terrorist training facility in Balakot, Pakistan – although it remains unclear whether the target was actually destroyed. Pakistan responded with its own aerial incursion across the Line of Control the next day, during which it shot down one Indian fighter, and Indian anti-aircraft fire shot down an Indian helicopter. Those skirmishes provide only small and anecdotal evidence, but they suggest two lessons. First, with an air strike of dubious effect, an unanswered loss in air-to-air combat, and a loss to friendly fire, India cannot confidently claim dominance in the air domain. Second, it also revealed that limited actions in the air domain, independent of major ground operations, provide a highly visible spectacle of military action which may satiate domestic political demands, but they are highly unlikely to yield strategic effects. In February 2019, both sides claimed victory to their domestic audiences and continued their military strategic plans unchanged.

Thus, while India maintains conventional military superiority in the maritime domain and contested power in the air domain, and while its advantages are not neutralised by geography, those advantages nevertheless have limited strategic utility. India's maritime and air coercive options short of general war are few and threaten to impose only relatively modest costs on Pakistan. Even though geography may not equalise the conventional balance at sea and in the air, it still renders those forces less salient, because the maritime domain is likely to remain peripheral and air operations are likely to be a supporting element of ground operations. The main effort in an India–Pakistan conflict is generally likely to occur in the heavily contested theatres on land, as it has been in previous wars and crises. Naval action, if it occurs at all, is likely to be geographically distant from that land theatre, and its stakes and costs are likely to be secondary. Independent naval or air operations are likely to have negligible effects on national-level strategic calculations.

## **Strategy and Doctrine**

Military capabilities are not deterministic. Even once the balance of military power has been estimated in any given context, the strategic effect of that balance is shaped by how the belligerents use that power – as well as a range of imponderables, including leadership personalities and

chance on the battlefield. The way that belligerents use their military power is a function of their military strategy and doctrine – how they expect to use military force to advance their national policy goals, and how military commanders employ the capabilities at their disposal, respectively. Emphasising the role of strategy and doctrine returns some agency to the national and military leadership, although their choices are generally heavily constrained by structural limitations and sticky preferences. India and Pakistan are no different – they have military doctrines that mirror each other greatly; and setting aside uncertainty over human behaviour in a future contingency, their declared doctrine, patterns of past experience, and force structures all suggest that they will broadly adhere to these known doctrines.

For India, military strategy against Pakistan is designed around two key tasks. The first is to deter and defeat any Pakistani attempts to attack or surreptitiously seize Indian territory – most likely in Kashmir. This was the driving mission of the Indian military from the moment of partition, through all its wars with Pakistan, including the Kargil conflict in 1999. The second key mission is to threaten or use military force to compel Pakistan to desist from its subconventional campaign of supporting terrorism against India. This mission has gained prominence since India and Pakistan became declared nuclear powers, because it implicitly accepts the notion of the stability–instability paradox, in which a relatively stable nuclear dyad can coexist with – or even encourages – simmering subconventional provocations (Ganguly and Kapur 2012). The totemic case of this mission was the Operation Parakram mobilisation of 2001–2002, when in retaliation for terrorist attacks, India mobilised all three strike corps and twice stood on the brink of a major conventional war (Kanwal 2002). This mission still stands as the archetypal scenario that triggers conventional war between India and Pakistan.

This strategy relies on the logic of punishment: that India would respond – or threaten to respond – to Pakistani provocations by imposing intolerably high costs on Pakistan. In this logic, a rational Pakistan, calculating that the Indian-imposed costs exceeded the benefits it gained from its subconventional campaign, should be compelled to cease that campaign. The Indian Army's doctrine for achieving this strategic effect calls for launching a counteroffensive, to answer either a Pakistani military incursion or a Pakistan-supported terrorist attack. The Indian Army would use large combined-arms formations to seize some Pakistani territory and attrite some Pakistani military forces, thereby imposing costs on Pakistan that can be used as leverage in post-conflict negotiations, or as a deterrent for future revisionism (Tarapore 2020).

This logic, however, is flawed in at least two significant ways. First, Pakistan is not a rational security-seeking state which weighs the costs and benefits of its subconventional campaign. It is, instead, an ideologically revisionist state for which competition with India and the cause of seizing control of Kashmir are the primary organising principle of national security policy. India holds no serious revanchist intent and has long sought to codify the status quo of a divided Kashmir; but Pakistan – and especially the Pakistan Army, which dominates the state – remains convinced that India seeks to subjugate or even destroy Pakistan, and is inveterately bent on undermining India, no matter how self-injurious that approach may be (Fair 2014). Accordingly, Pakistan's pain threshold is high – it will absorb significant material damage before conceding to Indian coercion.

Second, even if Pakistan were a rational security-seeking state, the logic of punishment requires that India have the operational wherewithal to levy sufficiently painful costs on Pakistan. As I assessed in the previous section, the most likely theatres of conflict in Kashmir and Punjab are extremely well-defended and India is unlikely to achieve anything beyond marginal tactical effects. Given the close military balance in those areas, it is unsurprising that India has not been able to make its strategy of punishment work, and Pakistan remains undeterred.

Making punishment work, in general and especially against Pakistan, would require unusually effective military operations. To impose significant operational costs on Pakistan, the Indian military would have to act with speed and surprise, concentrating enough force to break through Pakistani defences, and either seizing valuable territory or destroying valuable military or militant infrastructure – all while avoiding or absorbing a Pakistani nuclear retaliation. In other words, making punishment work requires a degree of conventional military superiority that India cannot muster. India's military strategy and doctrine are primed for a military balance where it is able to quickly and decisively defeat Pakistan – they are unsuited to the military reality of local parity and defensive advantage that India actually faces. The marginal advantages that India may boast are not enough to allow its doctrine to succeed – they are, therefore, not only insufficient, but also irrelevant.

Pakistan's military strategy sees force – in a continuous spectrum, from subconventional terrorism, through conventional arms, to nuclear weapons – as a tool to resist Indian hegemony and undermine Indian power. From the earliest days after partition, Kashmir has been the focal point of this strategy – wresting control of the Indian-administered portion of Kashmir would validate Pakistan's founding principle of the 'two-nation theory,' that South Asia's Muslims are civilisationally distinct and require a separate homeland in Pakistan. The Pakistan Army has thus launched multiple campaigns to capture all or some of Kashmir (Nawaz 2008). In 1947 and 1965, it placed its irregular adjuncts at the centre of its plan, seeking to foment an anti-Indian insurrection – which failed each time. Each time those irregulars were organised and led by Pakistan Army officers, and then reinforced by conventional units of the Pakistan Army when the initial unconventional phase failed.

Over time, Pakistan came to rely increasingly on non-conventional forces and strategy (Kapur 2017). Following a catastrophic conventional military defeat in 1971, the Pakistan Army came to rely even more centrally on irregulars to advance its policy goals (Cohen 2004: 112–13). By the 1980s, it was actively supporting militancy on multiple fronts – including the Khalistani Sikh separatist movement in India's Punjab, the anti-Soviet mujahideen in Afghanistan, and a new insurgency in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan also began to more aggressively pursue a deployable nuclear capability as a guarantee against Indian conventional advantages. For a country smaller and weaker in aggregate than its chief rival, with an absence of strategic depth that left key population centres and lines of communication within easy reach of an invading army, a nuclear deterrent would be a necessary equaliser, no matter the cost.

Both its irregular campaigns and nascent nuclear deterrent became central pillars of national strategy, inseparable from its conventional military. This was vividly illustrated with the Kargil conflict in 1999, when Pakistan used regular troops, albeit in small detachments without uniforms, to seize and hold high ground overlooking a key Indian road, before India could respond. This attempt to revise the territorial control of Kashmir – now through a *fait accompli*, under the umbrella of a nuclear deterrent – once again failed. Pakistan also attempted to expand the subconventional campaign of supporting terrorism beyond Kashmir and into major Indian cities. Most notably, the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament triggered the major conventional war scare of Operation Parakram. This campaign is ongoing and constantly threatens to cross the threshold to conventional war – most recently with the February 2019 attack in Pulwama which elicited a retaliatory Indian air strike at Balakot and subsequent aerial skirmish over Kashmir.

As this historical evolution shows, Pakistan's military strategy is asymmetric – it does not seek to counter India's conventional military advantages primarily through conventional power. In every variation of this asymmetric strategy, from the 1947 invasion of Kashmir to Pulwama and beyond, the Pakistan Army in fact eschewed conventional military action – it would resort

to conventional military operations only as an escalatory or retaliatory option. In that sense, it would move along a continuous spectrum of force once its initial subconventional options failed. This strategy regards conventional capabilities not as a qualitatively distinct phase of security competition – there is no clear firebreak between peacetime and wartime – but as tightly integrated with acts of terrorism at one end of the spectrum, and nuclear weapons at the other end. Accordingly, Pakistan has commonly brandished the threat of nuclear use in case its conventional capabilities fail to hold back an Indian assault.

This integration between conventional and nuclear options became the centrepiece of Pakistani military doctrine in response to India's post-2001 Cold Start reforms. If those Indian reforms came to fruition, a more rapid Indian mobilisation could breach Pakistani defences; and given Pakistan's lack of strategic depth, an Indian invasion could threaten major cities or cut Pakistan in half – again. To answer such a threat, Pakistan's doctrine developed in two directions. First, conventional military forces were to launch a 'comprehensive response,' in which Pakistan's two strike corps would seek to retaliate against India's attack with their own 'riposte' into Indian territory (French 2016). The aim – in a mirror image of India's punishment strategy – would be to capture a quantum of Indian territory as leverage in post-war negotiations, and to do so more quickly than the Indian invading forces, to ensure that India's attack would be thwarted before it endangered Pakistan's national heartland.

Second, Pakistan developed tactical nuclear weapons to use against the invading Indian forces – possibly even on Pakistani territory. These nuclear weapons, with relatively low yield and mounted on short-range ballistic missiles, were inherently designed as instruments of warfighting, not as unthinkable threats for deterrence – so they will probably be used when Pakistan determines they are militarily necessary (Abdullah 2019). Pakistan's red lines for nuclear use are ambiguous – and, worryingly, probably not clearly understood in the Indian military (Smith 2020).

Both Indian and Pakistani doctrine, therefore, suggest that India has no meaningful conventional military advantage over Pakistan. India's strategy of punishment demands decisive advantages, and short of that superiority, any marginal Indian advantages are strategically irrelevant. Pakistan's subconventional asymmetric strategy and tactical nuclear weapons render the conventional military balance less relevant as a source of national security and power. The ways these militaries use force, quite apart from their material conditions, suggests that the conventional balance approximates local parity, with a significant advantages for the defender.

### **Assessment and Implications**

For at least a generation, with a ballooning economy and diplomatic profile, India has aspired to be unshackled from its rivalry with Pakistan. Since India's economic liberalisation in the early 1990s, its relative economic size has doubled – the Indian economy was six times larger than Pakistan's in 1991, and by 2019 was almost 12 times larger (World Bank 2020b). But the military balance has not shifted in India's favour as starkly – if at all. In aggregate quantitative terms, the Indian conventional military remains significantly stronger than Pakistan's. But its usable military power relative to Pakistan has not grown concomitant with its overall national economic or diplomatic power. The advent of deployed nuclear forces has served as a significant equaliser. But even among only the conventional forces, India has not been able to break free of a hotly contested and finely balanced military competition.

As this chapter has demonstrated, military capabilities are not determined by aggregate size or equipment inventories, but by a much broader and more complex range of qualitative factors. In the India–Pakistan rivalry, despite a massive disparity in aggregate numbers, the balance of

usable conventional military force is almost at parity in the most likely theatres of conflict. In part this is because neither side has clear advantages in critical qualitative inputs to capability, such as organisation, leadership, technology, or readiness. In part it is because capabilities must be refracted through the particular geographic theatres where conflict is most likely, which advantage the defender and neutralise India's quantitative advantages. In part it is because India's military strategy can only work if India boasts decisive advantages – which it lacks – and because Pakistan's reliance on subconventional and nuclear force further neutralise India's conventional numerical advantages.

This near-parity in usable force has at least four implications for the military rivalry between India and Pakistan. First, it means that for both sides, military force has limited policy or strategic utility. Any future conventional military confrontation, then, is likely to achieve the same result as most past wars have – strategic stalemate. Neither side has the wherewithal to militarily impose its will on the other. Neither side has the capability to even use conventional military force as a reliable instrument of coercion – India cannot compel Pakistan to cease its campaign of subconventional provocations, and Pakistan cannot seize control of all of Kashmir, let alone subdue Indian national power.

Second, it means that in crisis or conflict, each side will work hard to gain advantage, which will introduce greater risk to any contingency. Out of military necessity, each side should logically seek to apply force more quickly than its rival, or escalate the intensity of force, or spread the conflict to a new locale, or take unexpected or disruptive actions. Both sides have a long history of readily escalating force in the midst of conflict. Nuclear deterrence may dampen some escalatory impulses, but both India and Pakistan have military doctrines that seek to use aggressive offensive campaigns below the nuclear threshold. All of these options are likely to trigger a cycle of escalating responses, and a conflict in which neither side has conventional escalation dominance is more likely to cross the threshold to nuclear use.

Third, over the longer term, a close balance in military capabilities is likely to prolong an intense dyadic rivalry. Relative parity in local power is likely to spur each side to invest resources to gain elusive advantages, or at least to not fall behind. Such a rivalry of local parity and global asymmetry remains unsolvable militarily, but also attracts open-ended commitments of resources and attention (Paul 2006).

Fourth, this ongoing intense rivalry incurs opportunity costs for both sides. For India, continuing to maintain large and ready forces on the frontier with Pakistan necessarily denies resources that could be used to strengthen its position against China, either on their land border or in the wider Indian Ocean region. More broadly, many of India's recently burgeoning partnerships with other great powers, including the United States and Japan, as well as a host of regional states, is premised on India taking a larger role in maintaining regional security. The intense India–Pakistan, however, continues to impede the modernisation to update the Indian military's equipment, let alone the accrual of capabilities for power projection into the Indo-Pacific. For Pakistan, the intense rivalry – and in particular the Army's ideological preoccupation with India – has profound implications for domestic security and governance. The Army resiles from diverting more military resources and attention away from India to decisively suppress various anti-state insurgents. For its asymmetric strategy, it maintains active support or at least tacit tolerance of several other anti-India networks. Domestic security continues to deteriorate, including in major cities in the Pakistani heartland. The Army's privileged position in the economy and its overwhelming political power allows it to extract resources from the state, at an unrestrained pace even as those resources become increasingly scarce (Ahmed 2012). And it deepens Pakistan's economic, political, and military dependence on China.

An accurate assessment of conventional military capabilities therefore has significant explanatory power. A simple numerical comparison may suggest that India could easily deter and dominate Pakistan militarily – and in many ways such a lopsided balance may improve stability, governance, and prosperity in South Asia. But a more comprehensive comparison, accounting also for qualitative, geographic, and doctrinal factors, explains why the conventional military balance is much closer – almost local parity – and why, therefore, the India–Pakistan rivalry remains so intense, dangerous, and costly for all of South Asia.

## Summary

Tarapore's chapter assesses the conventional military balance between India and Pakistan. He finds that, while India's military is overall significantly larger than Pakistan's, the balance of usable military force is actually much closer – almost at parity. This is because military power is a function not only of aggregate numbers of soldiers and equipment; it must also account for a range of qualitative measures of capability, as well as the effects of geography and military strategy and doctrine.

## References

- Abdullah, S. (2019) "Nuclear Ethics? Why Pakistan Has Not Used Nuclear Weapons... Yet," *The Washington Quarterly* 41:4.
- Ahmed, I. (2012) *Pakistan, The Garrison State: Origins, Evolution, and Consequences, 1947–2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Bedi, R. (2017) "Painful Progress: Indian Air Modernisation Inches Forward," *Jane's Defence Weekly* (4 January):75–88.
- Bedi, R. (2020) "Fettered Future: India's Struggle to Modernise its Armed Forces," *Jane's Defence Weekly* (2 January).
- Cohen, S. P. (2004) *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press).
- Devasher, T. (2020) "A Budgetary Farce in Pakistan," *Vivekananda International Foundation* (24 June 2020).
- Fair, C. C. (2014) *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).
- French, R. W. (2016) "Deterrence Adrift? Mapping Conflict and Escalation in South Asia," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 10:1.
- Ganguly, S. (2002) *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Relations Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Ganguly, S. and Kapur, S. P. (2012) *India, Pakistan, and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Gill, J. (2009) "Military Operations in the Kargil Conflict," in Lavoy, P. R. (ed.), *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 92–129.
- Global Security (2020) "Pakistan Army Corps," accessed 1 November 2020, available at: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/pakistan/army-orbat-corps.htm>
- Hamoodur Rehman Commission (2000) *The Report of the Hamoodur Rehman Commission of Inquiry into the 1971 War, as Declassified by the Government of Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard).
- Holmes, J. R. (2019) *A Brief Guide to Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press).
- IISS (International Institute for Strategic Studies) (2020) *The Military Balance 2020* (London: IISS).
- Kanwal, G. "Military Dimensions of the 2002 India-Pakistan Standoff – Planning and Preparation for Land Operations," in Davis, Z. S. (ed.), *The India-Pakistan Military Standoff: Crisis and Escalation in South Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 67–95.
- Kapur, S. P. (2017) *Jihad as Grand Strategy: Islamist Militancy, National Security, and the Pakistani State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Ladwig, W. C. (2007/8) "A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine," *International Security* 32(3): 158–90.

- Ladwig, W. C. (2015) "Indian Military Modernisation and Conventional Deterrence in South Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38(5): 729–772.
- Narang, V. (2009/10) "Posturing for Peace? Pakistan's Nuclear Postures and South Asian Stability," *International Security* 34:3.
- Nawaz, S. (2008) *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its Army, and the Wars Within* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Pandit, R. (2020) "Army Stocking Up Munitions for 40-Day War," *Times of India* (27 January).
- Paul, T. V. (2006) "Why Has the India-Pakistan Rivalry Been So Enduring? Power Asymmetry and an Intractable Conflict," *Security Studies* 15:4.
- Sachdev, A. K. (2018) "Flight Refuellers for the IAF: Lessons from Gagan Shakti 2018," *Indian Defence Review* 33(Oct–Dec):4.
- Shukla, A. (2021) "Army's Pivot to the North", Broadsword blog, January 2021, available at: <https://www.ajaishukla.com/2021/01/armys-pivot-to-north.html>
- Siddiqui, N. (2019) "Pakistan Navy Foils Attempt by Indian Submarine to Enter Pakistani Waters," *Dawn* (5 March).
- Singh, A. (2018) "India's Coastal Security: An Assessment," *Observer Research Foundation* (23 November).
- Singh, H. (2012) *War Despatches: Indo-Pak Conflict 1965* (New Delhi: Lancer).
- Singh, S. (2015) "How Army Hopes to Winterproof Line of Control, Shut Out Infiltrators," *Indian Express* (6 August).
- SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) (2020) "Arms Transfers Database," accessed on 1 November 2020, available at: <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>
- Smith, D. O. (2018) *The Wellington Experience: A Study of Attitudes and Values Within the Indian Army* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center).
- Smith, D. O. (2020) *The Wellington Experience: A Study of Attitudes and Values Within the Indian Army* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center).
- Tarapore, A. (2020) "The Army in Indian Military Strategy: Rethink Doctrine or Risk Irrelevance," *Carnegie India Working Paper* (10 August).
- Tellis, A. J. (2016) *Troubles, They Come in Battalions: The Manifold Travails of the Indian Air Force* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).
- Tufail, M. K. (2009) "Role of the Pakistan Air Force During the Kargil Conflict," *CLAWS Journal* (Summer): 101–112.
- Unnithan, S. (2019) "The New Strike Strategy," *India Today*, 6 September.
- World Bank (2020a) "Database: Military Expenditure (& of General Government Expenditure)," accessed 1 November 2020, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.ZS>
- World Bank (2020b) "Database: GDP (Constant 2010 US\$)—India, Pakistan," accessed 1 November 2020, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD?end=2019&locations=IN-PK&start=1991&view=chart>