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GLOBAL FOREIGN POLICIES REVIEW
p-ISSN: 2788-502X
e-ISSN: 2788-5038

GFPR

GLOBAL FOREIGN POLICIES REVIEW

HEC-RECOGNIZED CARTEGORY-Y

DOI (Journal): 10.31703/gfpr
DOI (Volume): 10.31703/gfpr/.2025(VIII)
DOI (Volume): 10.31703/gfpr/.2025(VIII.II)

VOL. VIII, ISSUE II, SPRING (JUNE-2025)

Double-blind Peer-review Research Journal
www.gfprjournal.com

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Humanity Publications(HumaPub)
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Doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.31703

Article Title

India's Technological Ascendancy in South Asia: Strategic, Security, and Geopolitical Challenges for Pakistan

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Keywords: Indo-Pakistani Rivalry, Military Modernization, Offensive Realism, Security Dilemma, Strategic Stability, Geopolitical Dynamics, Nuclear Deterrence

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Pages: 31-36
DOI: 10.31703/gfpr.2025(VIII-II).04
DOI link: https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2025(VIII-II).04
Article link: https://gfprjournal.com/article/indias-technological-ascendancy-in-south-asia-strategic-security-and-geopolitical-challenges-for-pakistan
Full-text Link: https://gfprjournal.com/fulltext/indias-technological-ascendancy-in-south-asia-strategic-security-and-geopolitical-challenges-for-pakistan
Pdf link: https://www.gfprjournal.com/jadmin/Auther/31rvIolA2.pdf

Global Foreign Policies Review

p-ISSN: 2788-502X **e-ISSN:** 2788-5038
DOI(journal):10.31703/gfpr
Volume: VIII (2025)
DOI (volume):10.31703/gfpr.2025(VIII)
Issue: II Spring (June 2025)
DOI(Issue): 10.31703/gfpr.2025(VIII-II)

Home Page
www.gfprjournal.com

Volume: VIII (2025)
https://www.gfprjournal.com/Current-issue

Issue: II-Spring (June 2025)
https://www.gfprjournal.com/issue/8/2/2025

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Doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.31703

Citing this Article

04	India's Technological Ascendancy in South Asia: Strategic, Security, and Geopolitical Challenges for Pakistan		
Authors	Ahmad Farooq Muhammad Khan Sidra Khan	DOI	10.31703/gfpr.2025(VIII-II).04
		Pages	31-36
		Year	2025
		Volume	VIII
		Issue	II

Referencing & Citing Styles	
APA	Farooq, A., Khan, M., & Khan, S. (2025). India's Technological Ascendancy in South Asia: Strategic, Security, and Geopolitical Challenges for Pakistan. *Global Foreign Policies Review*, *VIII*(II), 31-36. https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2025(VIII-II).04
CHICAGO	Farooq, Ahmad, Muhammad Khan, and Sidra Khan. 2025. "India's Technological Ascendancy in South Asia: Strategic, Security, and Geopolitical Challenges for Pakistan." *Global Foreign Policies Review* VIII (II): 31-36. doi: 10.31703/gfpr.2025(VIII-II).04.
HARVARD	FAROOQ, A., KHAN, M. & KHAN, S. 2025. India's Technological Ascendancy in South Asia: Strategic, Security, and Geopolitical Challenges for Pakistan. *Global Foreign Policies Review,* VIII**,** 31-36.
MHRA	Farooq, Ahmad, Muhammad Khan, and Sidra Khan. 2025. 'India's Technological Ascendancy in South Asia: Strategic, Security, and Geopolitical Challenges for Pakistan', *Global Foreign Policies Review*, VIII: 31-36.
MLA	Farooq, Ahmad, Muhammad Khan, and Sidra Khan. "India's Technological Ascendancy in South Asia: Strategic, Security, and Geopolitical Challenges for Pakistan." *Global Foreign Policies Review* VIII.II (2025): 31-36. Print.
OXFORD	Farooq, Ahmad, Khan, Muhammad, and Khan, Sidra (2025), 'India's Technological Ascendancy in South Asia: Strategic, Security, and Geopolitical Challenges for Pakistan', *Global Foreign Policies Review,* VIII (II), 31-36.
TURABIAN	Farooq, Ahmad, Muhammad Khan, and Sidra Khan. "India's Technological Ascendancy in South Asia: Strategic, Security, and Geopolitical Challenges for Pakistan." *Global Foreign Policies Review* VIII, no. II (2025): 31-36. https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2025(VIII-II).04.

e-ISSN: 2788-5038 **Volume:** VIII (2025) **Issue:** II-Spring (June-2025) **p-ISSN:** 2788-502x

Global Foreign Policies Review
www.gfprjournal.com
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr

Pages: 31-36 **URL:** https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2025(VIII-II).04 **Doi:** 10.31703/gfpr.2025(VIII-II).04

Title

India's Technological Ascendancy in South Asia: Strategic, Security, and Geopolitical Challenges for Pakistan

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Abstract

What India has achieved in acquiring, in hardly any time, next-generation weapon systems for future battlefields, hypersonic missile capability, warfare with artificial intelligence, cyber power, quantum computing, and space-based assets has suddenly changed the military-strategic landscape in the subcontinent and added to Indo-Pak rivalry, besides putting structures of nuclear deterrence under severe stress. Anchored in the lenses of offensive realism and security dilemma theories, the paper also examines the drivers of India's military modernization, its linear progression, and the multi-dimensional implications for Pakistan's defense policy and geostrategy. Specific focus is drawn to India's unilateral suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT). Results add to the growing narrative of the destabilization of strategic stability, intensified arms race kinetics, and environmental exposure, illustrating the need for active diplomacy, legal action, and asymmetric responses to encourage de-escalating trends in a nuclearized part of the world.

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Contents

Introduction

The geopolitical schema of South Asia is dominated by the longstanding rivalry between India and Pakistan, which began following the 1947 partition and was maintained through longstanding feuds, such as over Kashmir. In recent decades, India's aggressive pursuit of advanced military technologies encompassing hypersonic missiles capable of evading conventional defenses, AI-enhanced command and control systems, sophisticated cyber warfare tools, quantum computing applications, and space-based intelligence platforms has significantly heightened tensions, creating a pronounced security dilemma. In this paradigm, measures India undertakes to bolster its defense are perceived by Pakistan as offensive threats, fueling cycles of mistrust and competitive armament (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). Backed by a formidable $3 trillion economy and an $81 billion defense budget, India's strategic orientation aligns with offensive realism, wherein states seek to maximize power to ensure survival in an anarchic international system, especially against perceived challenges from Pakistan and China.

This article investigates how India's technological superiority disrupts Pakistan's strategic equilibrium and explores viable countermeasures for Islamabad under severe economic constraints. The objectives are

threefold: to dissect the economic, political, and geopolitical catalysts driving India's modernization; to assess the resultant impacts on Pakistan's nuclear and conventional doctrines; and to evaluate the broader geopolitical ramifications, including alliance dynamics and normative breaches. The article draws on qualitative insights from South Asian security specialists, complemented by an extensive review of archival records, official policy statements, and contemporary reports from sources such as SIPRI. These illuminate escalation patterns, as evidenced by the 2025 Pahalgam terrorist attack contested by Pakistan as a false-flag operation and the subsequent cross-border military operations Sindoor (India) and Bunyan-um-Marsoos (Pakistan). In a region armed with approximately 350 nuclear warheads, the analysis underscores the urgent need for diplomatic and legal mechanisms to mitigate the risk of catastrophic instability.

The literature on military modernization in South Asia is grounded in foundational theories of international relations, with a particular emphasis on the security dilemma and deterrence paradigms that elucidate how technological advancements exacerbate interstate anxieties. Herz's (1950) seminal concept of the security dilemma illustrates how India's hypersonic and AI advancements prompt Pakistan's compensatory armament, thereby fueling an arms race (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). Offensive realism contextualizes India's initiatives as strategic hegemony, aimed at countering the Sino-Pakistani axis. Historical narratives chart India's shift from post-independence conventional forces to integrated nuclear and space capabilities, with the 1998 nuclear tests spurring Pakistan's development of tactical nuclear weapons.

Pakistan's strategic adaptations, including Full-Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) and multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs), reflect asymmetric responses to economic disparities and India's conventional dominance (Siddique, 2014; Ahmed, 2016). Geopolitical perspectives contrast the U.S.–India partnerships, such as the MQ-9 B drone transfers, with China–Pakistan collaborations, including the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and JF-17 co-production. The advent of cyber and hypersonic domains introduces novel ambiguities, as seen in the Balakot airstrike and the 2025 confrontations, where digital disruptions and rapid-strike capabilities challenge established escalation ladders.

The security dilemma framework elucidates how India's advanced armaments, such as the Mach 7 BrahMos II hypersonic missile, erode distinctions between offensive and defensive capabilities, heightening Pakistan's strategic apprehensions (Abbas, 2024; Raza & Mehmood, 2023). According to offensive realism, these attempts are all part of a broader project of calculated power building that is reflected in India's (multidomain) doctrines, such as the 2018 Land Warfare Doctrine and its stress on integrated operations. The course of the relationship, with wars in 1965, 1971, and 1999, and matching nuclear tests in 1998, highlights deep-set perceptual distortions (India's 1974 "Smiling Buddha" test drove Pakistan's nuclearization). Last year's escalation crises, for instance, the 2025 Pahalgam attack (which resulted in 26 deaths and was denounced by Pakistan as a staged provocation), illustrate "escalation ambiguity," the fact that non-kinetic vectors such as drones or cyber operations can empower sub-threshold actions without crisp red lines (Clary, 2025).

With an economic vibrancy that boasts a GDP of $3 3trillion, India is a country with a defense budget of some $81 81billion (SIPRI, 2025; Reuters, 2025) focusing on indigenization through Atmanirbhar Bharat and institutions such as the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) (SIPRI, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Hindutva-driven policies in the era of Prime Minister Narendra Modi fuel a sense of global greatness, or "Vishwaguru" status. Interviewee stress: "India is able to induce coercive impacts through technology due to economic inequalities, forcing Pakistan into debt-fuelled muscled replies."

Geopolitical rivalries, particularly with China over Ladakh and ongoing tensions with Pakistan, drive acquisitions from diverse partners, including MQ-9B drones from the United States, S-400 air defense systems from Russia, cyber technologies from Israel, and Rafale jets from France (36 acquired in 2016, with 26 Marine variants planned for 2025). Military exercises, such as Bharat Shakti in 2024, integrate AI and hypersonic capabilities, showcasing network-centric warfare. Pakistan, on the other hand, is depending on Chinese JF-17 fighters and Turkish drones to counter these enhancements.

India's military modernization trajectory spans several phases. From 1947 to 1998, India evolved from conventional forces to nuclear and space capabilities, marked by milestones such as the 1975 launch of the Aryabhata satellite and the 1998 Pokhran-II nuclear tests. The period from 1998 to 2010 witnessed post-Kargil acquisitions, including Su-30MKI jets and T-90 tanks, alongside the development of the Cold Start doctrine aimed at enabling rapid, limited offensives (Ladwig, 2008). Between 2010 and 2019, events such as the precision strikes on Uri (2016) and Balakot (2019), as well as the 2019 Mission Shakti anti-satellite test, signaled India's growing strategic assertiveness. Since 2019, significant advances, including the 2020 Mach 6 Hypersonic Technology Demonstrator Vehicle (HSTDV) test, have culminated in a multi-domain operational capability. The most recent illustration was

Operation Sindoor in 2025, which involved drone-assisted BrahMos missile strikes targeting Pakistani positions following the Pahalgam incident (Sharma, 2025).

India's Rafale jets, equipped with beyond-visual-range missiles, and S-400 air defense systems challenge Pakistan's airspace control, prompting the evolution of Full-Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) from its 1998 origins as a minimum credible deterrence posture. Pakistan has since expanded its nuclear doctrine to include tactical nuclear weapons, notably the Nasr missile introduced in 2011 and the Ababeel MIRV system launched in 2017, both aimed at countering India's growing conventional and missile defense capabilities (Arms Control Association, 2023; Karim et al., 2023). Budgetary disparities remain stark: Pakistan allocates approximately $1 billion to its nuclear programs compared to India's $5 billion, with experts warning that "fiscal constraints undermine FSD as Pakistan's asymmetric bulwark." Conventionally, Pakistan has pursued indigenous JF-17 fighter production in collaboration with China, acquired J-10C fighters since 2022, and integrated Burraq drones since 2015. However, Pakistan's efforts are hampered by challenges such as human capital flight, the economic toll of counterterrorism operations, with over 90,000 fatalities, and political volatility, which collectively hinder timely procurement and modernization.

The 2025 Pahalgam event and its military aftermath demonstrate how technological disparities shape crises in both spatial and temporal dimensions, effectively blurring lines between conventional and nuclear thresholds. The Pahalgam attack on April 22, which killed 26 tourists, was swiftly blamed by India on cross-border militants, while Pakistan dismissed the accusations as a fabricated pretext for aggression (Shaikh, 2025).

India launched Operation Sindoor from May 6 to 7, targeting nine sites in Pakistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir using stand-off weapons like drones and BrahMos missiles. According to Indian officials, the strikes were aimed at terrorist infrastructure, but they caused collateral damage in locations such as Muridke and Kotli. Pakistan labeled the strikes "a grave provocation and a gross violation of sovereignty." Pakistani briefings later reported higher death tolls, though uncertainty remains about the actual figures (Charye, 2025).

In retaliation, Pakistan initiated Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos on May 9–10, claiming the downing of six Indian fighter jets, including Rafales, and successful cyberattacks on Indian government systems such as the BJP website and BSF databases. Though India denied the loss of jets, both sides acknowledged a significant escalation involving kinetic and cyber capabilities (Shaikh, 2025; Charye, 2025). These developments underscore how advanced technologies drones, precision missiles, and cyber warfare lower the threshold for conflict escalation and widen regional deterrence gaps.

Further compounding those martial rhythms, on April 23, India unilaterally abrogated the Indus Waters Treaty, simultaneously making implausible terrorism claims. This act introduced an ecological and water security dimension to an already intricate contestation. India's suspension of the treaty under Article XII of its domestic framework conflicts with obligations under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, which requires mutual consent for amendments or withdrawal (Rizvi, 2025; Clingendael, 2025). Expert commentators stress that the humanitarian provisions of VCLT Article 60(5), which safeguard life-sustaining water flows, are violated when water security for millions in Pakistan's Indus Basin, where apportioned flows support around 80 % of agriculture, is compromised (Zawahri & McCracken, 2025).

This unilateral move breaches two core principles of customary international law governing water resources: equitable utilization and the obligation to prevent significant harm. It could trigger ecological destruction, such as depleted aquifer recharge and increased delta erosion from glacier melt due to climate change (Zawahri & McCracken, 2025; Clingendael, 2025). Interviews with security experts underscore the severity: one retired officer warned that "weaponizing water converts Kashmir's political deprivation into an existential threat and erodes mutual vulnerability." Additional fallout, including sudden water releases from Uri Dam that caused panic in Hattian Bala, breaches the UN Watercourses Convention norms on cooperation during conflict (Zawahri & McCracken, 2025; Rizvi, 2025).

Geopolitically, the suspension prompted international reactions: China reasserted its support for Pakistan's sovereignty; the U.S. intervened via a May 10 ceasefire reportedly prompted by a former U.S. president's tweet highlighting broader regional stakes. Statements from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Türkiye both decried India's unilateralism and voiced support for Pakistan's self-defense, reflecting how the crisis was internationalized around Kashmir water insecurity (Clingendael, 2025).

"The 2025 crisis revealed India's strategy to expand operational space below nuclear thresholds, leveraging technological superiority", while "Pakistan's restrained response enhanced its international credibility" (Mishra, 2025). Such technological asymmetries, illustrated by advanced systems like the S-400 air defense and ballistic missile defenses, reduce missile flight times to under five minutes, significantly heightening the preemption risk.

The events of 2025 India's calibrated standoff strikes followed by Pakistan's measured retaliation maintained nuclear thresholds but starkly underscored the fragility of escalation controls (Reuters, 2025).

Pakistan's FSD and MIRV developments counter India's ballistic missile defenses, yet tactical nuclear weapons like Nasr introduce command-and-control vulnerabilities. Confidence-building measures (CBMs), such as hotlines and transparency protocols, often falter amid entrenched mistrust, which is exacerbated by the Pahalgam-Sindoor cycle's contested narratives and cyber disruptions. Conventionally, India's MQ-9B drones outmatch Pakistan's Burraq systems, but Pakistan's J-10C effectiveness in downing Indian jets demonstrates tactical proficiency, though budgetary constraints limit scalability.

It was further muddled by narrative divergences. India claimed that Pakistan had hit civilian and religious sites, such as temples and gurdwaras, allegations that Pakistan denied, insisting it only made accuracy-centric strikes on military targets. The United States brokered a ceasefire on May 10, calling for negotiations by both sides. On the other hand, China declared support for the sovereignty of Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Türkiye called for de-escalation, with Saudi Arabia offering mediation and Russia offering facilitation. Israel continued to be a reliable friend of India. Meanwhile, India's stopping of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) on April 23, on grounds that this is because terror, contravene the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT) and International Court of Justice (ICJ) precedents, in the absence of evidence of material breach and overriding humanitarian safeguards embodied in Article 60(5). The traditional principles of international water law, guided by the maxim of equitable utilization and the obligation not to cause significant harm, remain applicable to India, and violations are susceptible to ecological impact and violations of human rights.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

India's technological superiority remains the centrifuge of causing an insecure cycle, compelling Pakistan's strategic parity scissors within burgeoning asymmetries. The escalations in 2025, Sindoor's deep strikes, and Bunyan-um-Marsoos's effective retaliation show that India can hike conflict parameters below nuclear thresholds, and that Pakistan can respond decisively without overstepping these thresholds. India's suspension of the IWT, which is a blatant violation of the VCLT and customary water law, undermines the humanitarian and ecological security, revealing a naked hegemonic stance. Pakistan's restrained response, complemented by partnerships with China (for BeiDou navigation) and Türkiye (related to drones), maintained deterrence but highlighted economic vulnerabilities such as a $128 billion debt load that constrained modernization.

The alternative narratives India's firm anti-terror resolve versus Pak's self-defence claim reflect deep-seated perceptual differences that could potentially lead to more arms races and misperceptions in a nuclearized dyad.

In order to overcome these challenges, Pakistan will have to adopt the following far-reaching methods:

Strengthen Deterrence: Invest in MIRVs (and ABABEEL-like MIRVs) and cyber warfare to offset India's technological advantage. A 20 percent increase in the budget should be allocated to strengthen space programs in collaboration with China and SUPARCO, covering the gaps in satellite reconnaissance.

Legal Mobilisation: Seek arbitration under Article IX and Annexure G of the IWT and exploit the guarantor role of the World Bank to contest India's suspension. Pursue a World Court Drive (WCD) through the UN General Assembly over the legality of unilateral treaty denunciation, focusing on transnational water norms.

Diplomatic: Forge alliances with lower riparian states, such as Egypt and Bangladesh, to highlight how India's IWT violation has set a precedent in international law. Redefine the Kashmir conflict within an environmental security framework, connecting water availability to a crucial form of regional safety and security. Juxtaposing: The interim integration of Gilgit-Baltistan is an option to protect resource governance

Style Diversion: Reject allegations of terrorism and satisfy the Financial Action Task Force norms to counter India. Leverage the UN Security Council and General Assembly podiums to criticize the IWT suspension as a dangerous precedent and thereby undermine India's claim to global leadership.

Economic Reforms: Bailout packages will be negotiated with the IMF to drive modernization while broadening a reliance on Russia and Türkiye to remove $128 billion of debt, guaranteeing fiscal capacity to maintain strategic resilience.

The stepped-up measures, if undertaken with a clear-cut approach, could transform India's overreach into an opportunity for Pakistan to consolidate its strategic position, increase its international stakes, and contribute to regional stability. Strategic thinkers also need to better understand the long-term implications of AI and quantum technologies, the role of culture in strategic decision-making, and the changing logic of war and peace in South Asia, as influenced by international law.

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