



**The 'Hindutvafication' of Jammu & Kashmir:
A Potential Nuclear Flashpoint in South Asian Region**

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Abstract:

Over last seven decades, Kashmir conflict has evolved as a major issue of contention between Pakistan and India. Though both states have intermittently managed to strike breakthroughs through dialogue and negotiations; with Bharatiya Janata Party led government ruling India, the political and demographic landscape of Jammu and Kashmir has continued to deteriorate since 2014. After the revocation of Articles 370 and 35-A of Indian Constitution in 2019, Modi administration has reportedly issued a substantial number of domicile certificates to non-residents Hindus for converting the in to a Hindu dominated region. This study analyzes the ideological concept of Hindutva and its implementation by Modi government in Indian illegally occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK), its impacts on regional security and its evolution as a nuclear flashpoint between Pakistan and India. Using a qualitative approach based on secondary data, the paper also evaluates policy shifts, demographic transformations, strategic competition and bilateral tensions between India and Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistan, India, Jammu and Kashmir, Bharatiya Janata Party, Kashmir Civil Act Hindutva, nuclear flashpoint

INTRODUCTION

Kashmir conflict began in 1947, shortly after the division of Indian subcontinent by British government into two dominions: Pakistan, with a Muslim majority and India, predominantly Hindu population. Under the partition plan, more than 500 princely states ruled by the British, including Jammu and Kashmir, were given the choice to accede to either state or remain independent. Maharaja Hari Singh, the ruler of Jammu and Kashmir initially favoured independence (Singh, 2020). However, following a popular uprising among the Muslim-majority population and Indian military intervention that triggered the first Indo-Pak war. India took up the Kashmir issue before the UN Security Council (UNSC), using its authority to intervene. To determine Kashmir's future, UNSC proposed a plebiscite to be conducted. But before the vote, the two nations failed to agree over demilitarization. However, both states signed a ceasefire agreement in 1949 establishing a Line of Control (LoC) which divided Kashmir between India and Pakistan. Thus, the unresolved status of the region remains central to hostilities between the two nuclear-armed neighbours that led to various armed confrontations and diplomatic breakdowns.

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South Asia is one of the world's most volatile regions shaped by a persistent security dilemma. Both India and Pakistan have significantly modernized their militaries while dealing with unresolved Kashmir conflict. India's changing ideologies, especially the emergence of Hindu nationalism under Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) increasingly influence policy toward Kashmir. Due to which Kashmir has been subjected to the strategic and demographic ramifications of BJP's Hindutva ideology, which sees India as an essentially Hindu country. Indian Constitution's Articles 370 and 35A were repealed by the BJP administration on August 5, 2019, depriving Jammu and Kashmir of its autonomy (Ahlawat & Izarali, 2020). Preceding this move, India imposed curfews, increased troop deployments and suspended telecommunications (Khalid, 2021).

Though framed as an administrative integration, the abrogation served a broader ideological project aligned with Hindutva. Measures such as issuing domicile certificates to non-residents and altering property rights suggest a settler-colonial strategy aimed at reshaping Kashmir's demographic and political landscape. The result is what various observers in public discourse have termed the *Hindutvaification of Kashmir*, a process of ideological consolidation and demographic transformation by state institutions to target the Muslim-majority population (Zia, 2022; Junaid, 2020).

This ideological turn has intensified regional volatility. Any militant attack in Indian illegally occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) can trigger a significant military escalation as evidenced in 2019. Such a crisis underscores the fragility of deterrence in South Asia, where nationalism and ideology increasingly drive state behavior. The Kashmir dispute has evolved from a territorial issue into an identity-based conflict fueled by India's internal ideological shifts. The abrogation of autonomy and the subsequent policy trajectory reflect an attempt to redefine the region's identity through majoritarian nationalism. This has deepened alienation among Kashmiris and heightened Pakistan's strategic anxieties, reinforcing its claim to the region and its readiness to respond through both military and diplomatic channels. As a result, Hindutva-driven policies have turned Kashmir a more dangerous nuclear flashpoint.

This article contends that the ideological restructuring of Kashmir under Hindutva since 2019 has increased the region's strategic risks. It also focuses on how internal ideological changes in India externalize conflict, threaten regional stability and intensify the threat of nuclear escalation through the prism of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). In addition to diplomatic and military restraint, political frameworks that put the rights, dignity and ambitions of the people of Kashmir first will be necessary for a lasting peace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kashmir has historically been a highly militarized and territorially contested region, but the presence of Hindutva ideology has changed its political landscape and introduced a combustible ideological overlay. M. Saleem Pandit's *Footprints of Hindutva in Kashmir* (2022) offers a modern historical description of how RSS and BJP have worked to gradually but purposefully change Kashmir's identity from a Muslim-majority, semi-autonomous region to a symbol of Hindu nationalist consolidation. He tracks the ideological continuity between pre-Partition and post-2014 events, emphasizing how the official incorporation of Jammu and Kashmir into the Indian Union and the repeal of Article 370 were the results of the RSS's long-term intellectual goals. Despite

being carried out in accordance with the constitution, many in Pakistan and Kashmir perceived this act as a kind of forced homogenization that supported the Hindutva ideal of a single Hindu Rashtra. The future of secularism in India is seriously called into doubt by Pandit's speculative but well-founded claim that the Manusmriti may replace or reinterpret the Indian constitution by 2047 as part of the BJP's ideological agenda. However, the book does not deeply interrogate the international security consequences of these ideological shifts, particularly regarding nuclear escalation, which remains a critical gap that necessitates integration with strategic literature.

Mridu Rai's book *Hindu Rulers, Muslim Subjects: Islam, Rights and the History of Kashmir* explores the causes of political and religious inequality in Kashmir under Dogra rule, provides deeper roots for this historical and ideological framework (Rai, 2004). Rai contends that Kashmiri Muslims' current political marginalization was made possible by the establishment of a Hindu-ruled princely state under British suzerainty. Her archival research shows how the Dogra kingdom, supported by the British, established a system that denied Muslims legal and political rights and shaped their identity against the dominant Hindu class. According to her, the seeds of Muslim political consciousness and discontent that subsequently fueled the insurgency and the current resistance to Hindutva were sown by this historical enslavement. Though the book delves thoroughly into issues of legitimacy, identity and authority, Rai's study primarily ignores the strategic and military aspects of this shift, despite contextualizing contemporary ideological domination as an extension of colonial patterns of power. It is nevertheless necessary to link these long-standing political complaints to the security conundrum that the area is currently facing, which is made worse by nuclear posturing.

In the article *The Rise of Hindutva, Saffron Terrorism and South Asian Regional Security*, Khurram Iqbal bridges the ideological and security spheres by providing a methodical analysis of Hindutva as a securitized and institutionalized danger (Iqbal, 2022). The paper focuses on the radicalization of Hindutva, especially under BJP control, as a destabilizing force, diverging from traditional security paradigms that frequently emphasize Islamist radicalism. Iqbal contends that during Indo-Pak conflicts, especially when Kashmir is the primary flashpoint, the room for strategic de-escalation has been reduced due to the increasing congruence between Hindutva ideology and Indian state policy. He argues that Pakistan is forced to take a more inflexible, frequently preemptive stance, which adds to the crisis instability in the region, as a result of Hindutva's influence on India's foreign and domestic policies, which are expressed through military assertiveness and cultural nationalism. Iqbal's study does not quantitatively evaluate how these ideological alterations translate into changes in military doctrine or nuclear posture, despite the fact that he identifies the ideological threats with effectiveness. This suggests a possible field for additional empirical research.

In research paper *Rising Hindutva's Impact on Strategic Stability in South Asia*, Iqbal and Mehdi (2023) further on this issue by showing how Hindutva's ideological expansionism influences India's strategic thinking and defense modernization. According to their study, India's military posture has grown more forceful under BJP leadership, as evidenced by increased defense budget, muscular border policy and a decreased capacity for diplomatic restraint. They draw attention to how the incorporation of Hindutva ideology into security decision-making reduces the space for strategic ambiguity, which is a vital safeguard against nuclear deterrence, by framing Pakistan as both a

geopolitical opponent and a civilizational foe. Although it does not explore how civilian political ideologies may influence operational military thresholds in real-time war scenarios, this study offers insightful analysis of the militarization of ideology. The degree to which ideological leadership affects nuclear command and control choices, particularly during rapid escalation periods, is a significant study subject that is brought up by this.

The strategic instability surrounding the Kashmir issue is the main topic of Abdul Rehman's study, *Kashmir as the Disputed Legacy and Flash Point in Nuclear South Asia* with special attention on how ideological polarization increases the region's nuclear hazards. Rehman (2022) revisits the legacy of the Line of Control and Partition, but he highlights how current events, especially the repeal of Article 370 and the rise of Hindutva ideology, have drastically changed the strategic landscape in South Asia. Rehman claims that the religious nationalism-driven political climate in India today limits the possibility of diplomatic engagement and complicates the resolution of the issue in Kashmir, increasing the likelihood of a mistake between two nuclear-armed governments. His research emphasizes how backchannel diplomacy is eroding, how traditional crisis-management norms are being undermined and how populist nationalism is becoming more and more influential in strategic decision-making. Although Rehman's study highlights the structural risks of Kashmir as a nuclear flashpoint, it makes the assumption that strategic conduct is logical and ignores the skewed impact that ideology, particularly religious nationalism, may have on how threats are seen and how crises are handled. By looking at how ideological narratives directly affect nuclear posture and regional conflict dynamics, future study might fill a critical research vacuum.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This paper examines the changing security dynamics of South Asia, especially in terms of Kashmir dispute in light of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). RSCT is constructed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. According to this theory, security threats are grouped regionally not globally that too with the surrounding states as highly interconnected systems wherein insecurity within one state resonates across others (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Global attention switched away from superpower confrontations to regionalized conflicts with the end of Cold War. RSCT emphasizes the interconnectedness of internal and external security. It focuses on how internal processes like ideological upheavals, social unrest and identity politics can lead to exterior insecurity. South Asia exemplifies the core of its regional security complex with the enduring India-Pakistan rivalry rooted in the Kashmir dispute. Kashmir conflict started being merely a postcolonial territorial conflict. But gradually it evolved into a volatile security nexus exaggerated by rising political radicalism, identity conflict and nuclear proliferation. Moreover, India's acquiring strategic cooperation with United States, combined with Pakistan's strengthening connections with China, adds major power rivalry to South Asia's already volatile security the situation. These external alignments reflect global multi-polarity and exacerbate regional security tensions, particularly as global arms control regimes deteriorate and great-power competition reignites.

The conflict has an impact on both the internal dynamics of these countries as well as the stability and security of nearby countries like China and Afghanistan. After 1947, an intrastate, military-political struggle developed out of a dispute between an Islamic Pakistan and a secular, multicultural, multi-religious India. Subsequently, the security environment in South Asia is predicted by Indo-Pak relationship. Hindutvafication can be understood as the cultural, political

and demographic integration of Kashmir, marks a huge internal transformation with far-reaching regional implications. Pakistan sees abrogation of J&K's special status and implication of Hindutva as an existential challenge to its ideological basis and the rights of Kashmiri Muslims. This exacerbates the security dilemma, in which efforts intended by one state to improve internal stability are interpreted by the other as offensive preparations.

Another aspect contributing to the volatility is India and Pakistan's nuclearization. Both nations are de facto nuclear powers stuck in a state of perpetual enmity, thus the possibility of miscalculation is always present. Concerns regarding India's intention to carry out targeted assaults are raised by the ambitious Cold Start initiative, which aims to explore space for unconventional and limited strategic rivalry under nuclear deterrence. With India overtaking US as the world's second-largest arms buyer, Pakistan has voiced concerns about the widening military disparity. In addition to abolishing the autonomy of J&K and controversially passing the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the Modi administration also exacerbated hostilities with Pakistan, a nuclear-armed state. Since the 2019 military standoff in Pulwama, the Modi administration has used the threat of military action with risks that extend to the possible use of nuclear weapons and to get Pakistan to act in a desired manner. These absurd moves BJP government implemented reveal how unstable the situation has grown in India over the past year under the control of Hindu radicals. These issues led to significant worries about the future of India's nuclear weapons under a hyper-nationalist government. Throughout the 2019 general election, Narendra Modi and BJP made terrible racist, biased, communal and aggressive statements. BJP manifesto was seen as an outlier in Indian politics. The shift from a First-Use to a No-First-Use nuclear policy has played a key role in transforming India's nuclear doctrine moving it from a posture of non-deployment to one involving operationally deployed nuclear assets (Desai & Desai, 2021). A nuclear compliance strategy against Pakistan is also being used in place of nuclear deterrence. This shift in India's nuclear policy sparked concerns about the region's possible escalation of hostilities. This approach differs from the conventional one of maintaining a defensive nuclear posture and it may have significant effects on the dynamics of regional security.

Under BJP, domestic ideology and strategic doctrine have increasingly converged. The projection of Hindutva onto Kashmir has blurred the boundaries between internal governance and external aggression. This ideological radicalization alters not only Kashmir's internal dynamics but also shapes regional threat perceptions, nuclear signaling and crisis behaviour. Viewed through the RSCT framework, the *Hindutvaification* of Kashmir marks a paradigmatic shift from a conventional territorial dispute to an ideologically driven regional security crisis. In this environment, religious nationalism has infused statecraft with heightened volatility, transforming Kashmir into the frontline of nuclear brinkmanship in South Asia's rapidly evolving security architecture.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study examines the relationship between Kashmir's ideological shift via Hindutva and its consequences for regional nuclear stability using a qualitative research approach based on secondary data analysis. The study uses scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy papers, government statements and publications from think tanks to investigate how the security dynamics between India and Pakistan have changed as a result of the growing influence of Hindutva ideology in and its imposition in the Kashmir region. The research attempts to critically evaluate

how ideological nationalism leads to strategic rigidity and diminishes the opportunity for diplomatic de-escalation by combining historical narratives, political discourse analysis and strategic policy changes. In order to identify trends, create meaning and assess the causal relationships between Hindutva-driven policies in Kashmir and their potential to act as a nuclear flashpoint in South Asia, the technique relies on interpretive analysis of publically accessible materials rather than primary research.

HINDUTVA AS IDEOLOGICAL STATECRAFT

Hindutva is not just religious revivalism; it is an all-encompassing political project for reimagining India's national identity in an ethno-majoritarian key. Terminology was first coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1923. Savarkar's vision of a Hindu Rashtra premised cultural and religious adherence as prerequisites to national belonging (Visana, 2021). Vinayak Damodar Savarkar acquired and appropriated the idea from the West, including Mussolini's fascism and Hitler's Nazism. In Savarkar's conception of Hindu Rashtra, there is only one "Hindu" culture, together with one language, Hindi and one religion, Hinduism (Sharma, 2007). Savarkar and Golwalkar categorically opposed territorial or civic nationalism, which encompasses all Indians born in India. They were only open to accepting Hindu cultural nationalism. They contend that adopting Hindu "dharmacracy" rather than Indian democracy is the path to political redemption. Therefore, establishing India as a Hindu Rashtra is the long-term goal of Hindutva. Developing these positions, RSS ideologue M.S. Golwalkar envisioned a dharmic state where Muslims and Christians, as civilizational Other, could become citizens only by cultural absorption (Sharma, 2007). This exclusionary framework constructs a hierarchy of citizenship, where minorities are cast as internal threats. Hence, Hindutva is an ideology that strives to make Hindus, their practices and values prominent in all aspects of Indian society (Visana, 2021). Only Hindu Muslims and Hindu Christians could exist in his Hindu Rashtra system, not the other way around.

As a result, the *Hindutvavadis* inferred that both 'foreign' faiths' practitioners are unfaithful to Mother India or Bharat Mata. Christians and Muslims may only be considered "second-class citizens" at most. Savarkar asserts that there were no Muslims or Christians in central India during the pre-Mughal and pre-colonial periods (Ekasiwi & Bram, 2022). Because the progenitors of today's Muslims and Christians were all originally Hindus, the *Hindutvavadis* formally declared that all the Muslims and Christians living in India must be reconverted to Hinduism. Hindutva ideology segregates Indians via hateful politics. It promotes a discourse of enmity throughout Indian groups, commanding them to murder their enemies and detest their neighbors. In India, where many Christians and Muslims are being slaughtered and subjected to horrific torture, the anti-conversion statute makes the situation worse, being strictly implemented.

The emblem for Hindu Rashtra is PM Narendra Modi. BJP administration, which now controls over both chambers of parliament, is attempting to transform India into a dictatorial Hindu Rashtra. Prime Minister Modi has enabled its operationalization across state institutions, reinforcing surveillance, mob vigilantism and systemic discrimination under the pretext of national security (Khaitan, 2020). The supremacist Hindutva ideology demonizes and denies the humanity of minorities, which opens the door for state-sponsored violence to subjugate and

eradicate their adversaries. They impose dominance in the name of religion by engaging in systematic violence against non-Hindus. The most horrific acts of violence have been conducted against minorities in the guise of uncontrolled mob violence that is coordinated with collaborating enforcement of laws and Hindu groups to achieve political influence.

Under BJP, Hindutva has transitioned from ideology to statecraft. Policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35-A exemplify a broader effort to define Indian identity in Hindu terms. These measures are not isolated legal reforms but integral components of an ideological reordering that marginalizes non-Hindu communities and equates dissent with disloyalty (Ekasiwi & Bram, 2022). The line between rhetoric and policy blurs with domestic radicalization shaping India's strategic doctrine recasting the Kashmir conflict from a political or territorial dispute to a civilizational confrontation. India's increasingly ambiguous nuclear doctrine, moving away from its traditional No First Use (NFU) stance, raises the specter of strategic miscalculation (Desai & Desai, 2021). Therefore, Hindutva functions not only as a framework for domestic governance but also as a driver of regional instability and doctrinal shift.

STATE-DRIVEN HINDUTVAFICATION OF KASHMIR

The sociological narrative of Hindutva encourages the marginalization of India's Muslim minority. Muslims have always been seen as the "threat" within Hindu nationalist discourse. Therefore, the propagation of Hindutva to Kashmir is an intentional and systematic attempt to merge the territory into BJP's Hindu nationalist project. BJP government has supported an atmosphere that encourages hatred, executions and violence against Muslims under the pretext of Hindu nationalism to carry out administrative restructuring, demographic realignment and symbolic dominance in IIOJK. Kashmir's distinct political and cultural identity, rooted in its Muslim-majority population, makes it a primary site for ideological assertion under BJP rule. The revocation of Articles 370 and 35A in 2019 marked a pivotal moment in this process. Stripping Jammu and Kashmir of its autonomy without local consultation, the central government reclassified the state into two federally administered Union Territories (Gupta & Bhardwaj, 2020). The move was accompanied by a military lockdown, communication blackouts and mass detentions exposing the repressive underpinnings of Hindutva statecraft (Zishan & Fatima, 2022). Beyond constitutional change, the state has pursued cultural domination. Reports of temple constructions on disputed land, the promotion of Hindu festivals and the use of pro-Hindutva slogans by officials are designed to symbolically overwrite Kashmir's Muslim heritage. These actions align with RSS-BJP vision of redefining public space and cultural narratives to assert Hindu supremacy. Framing Kashmir dispute as a counterterrorism issue enables the Indian state to delegitimize indigenous political movements. By portraying dissent as extremism, India justifies the suppression of civil liberties while distancing itself from obligations to engage in dialogue or recognize Kashmiri political agency (Farooq & Javaid, 2020). This securitized lens narrows the conflict's framing and consolidates Hindutva as a mechanism of territorial and ideological absorption.

Malicious Effects of Hindutva in Kashmir

Since BJP's rise to power, Kashmir has become a laboratory for implementing Hindutva ideology through legal, military and demographic means. The Hindutvafication of Kashmir extends beyond

symbolism; it manifests in institutionalized violence, suppression of dissent and attempts to re-engineer the region's demography. The post-2014 period has seen an escalation in extrajudicial tactics including enforced disappearances, custodial killings, torture and sexual violence. This complete wave of human rights violations is indicative of a counterinsurgency campaign rooted in ideological control rather than democratic resolution (Zishan & Fatima, 2022). Articles 370 and 35-A were intended to preserve the demographics of Kashmir as well as the identity and culture of the Kashmiri people. But then, Indian government claimed that the revocation of article 370 was to integrate Kashmiris into the Indian mainstream and provide them with the same rights as other Indians. However, the government's actions and the secretive, unilateral way the decision was made refute this assertion. Since most residents of Kashmir were confined to their houses without access to landline telephones, television, the internet, or mobile networks, it is possible that they were unable to hear the Indian Home Minister's statement, which was meant to bring the people of Kashmir into the mainstream of Indian politics (Gupta & Bhardwaj, 2020).

Indian government and its armed forces disseminate violence and instability in Jammu and Kashmir due to the emergence of Hindutva narratives. They introduced the repressive laws like Public Safety Act (PSA), Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and the 2020 New Media Policy to criminalize protest, limit press freedom and permit indefinite incarceration. These tools are wielded not for security alone but to eliminate spaces of democratic resistance (Seshu, 2020). State-sanctioned incentives for inter-community marriages and Hindu migration further underscore efforts to reshape the region's demographic profile. These policies not only undermine the constitutional promise of secularism but also aggravate Kashmiris' alienation and deepen Pakistan's perception of Hindu majoritarian aggression. Ultimately, these attempts comprise intellectual colonization, with legal manipulation, militaristic control and cultural overwriting used to enslave Kashmir under the guise of Hindutva nationalism. India is downplaying Kashmir's freedom struggle and their right to referendum by using terrorism to divert attention from the awful reality of IIOJK. India repealed Articles 370 and 35A to establish new domicile policies and laws in IIOJK to alter the demography of Kashmir. The state has also pursued demographic engineering through the Jammu and Kashmir Civil Services Act, which allows long-term residents to acquire domicile status. Over past five years, millions of domicile certificates were issued to non-Kashmiris and in July 2022, even temporary residents were granted voting rights. This move has been widely condemned in Jammu and Kashmir as a blatant attempt to engineer demographic change (Lodhi, 2024).

Ideological Militarization and The Transformation of Kashmir Conflict

Islamophobia in India has heightened discrimination against Muslims among Hindu populations enabling BJP government to portray Kashmir issue as an intellectual and civilizational dispute. In 2019, following its majority win in the lower house of India's parliament, BJP became the second-largest party in the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly. Under BJP rule, Muslims have been recast as both internal and external threats, allowing the state to justify repressive measures in Kashmir while framing political dissent as terrorism (Hilali, 2021). The abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 marked a critical turning point in this ideological project. Long regarded as a constitutional safeguard of Kashmiri identity, its revocation signaled a shift from legal accommodation to demographic and symbolic absorption. The move was not accompanied by

meaningful democratic engagement or regional consultation; instead, it ushered in communication blackouts, mass arrests and prolonged military lockdowns. For many Kashmiris, this was less an act of integration and more an imposition of ideological conquest (Bose, 2021).

This ideological shift was mirrored by administrative and cultural interventions designed to reshape the region's demographic and symbolic landscape. New domicile laws encouraged non-resident settlement, while state-sponsored promotion of Hindu rituals and festivals projected civilizational dominance over the region's Muslim-majority population (Zutshi, 2020). Such steps have a two-fold purpose: undermining the socio-political uniqueness of Kashmir and announcing the victory of Hindu majoritarianism. The net result is a further alienation, increasing skepticism about India's secular establishment and increased demands for self-determination or international intervention.

These internal changes have raised the conflict's strategic stakes. Kashmir is now not only a disputed territory but a symbolically charged border in an overarching ideological conflict between Hindu nationalism and Islamic identity politics. The stakes are no longer only about territory but include sovereignty, legitimacy and religious nationalism. Pakistan's refusal to acknowledge the revocation of Article 370 as an international law violation rests on its long-held position that Kashmir is still a disputed territory in the jurisdiction of the UNSC (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

This civilizational construction of the conflict enhances the danger of destabilization in the region. Militarized confrontations, like the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot incident illustrate how rapidly confrontation can spiral under ideological duress. Historical precedent, 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999 wars and almost perpetual border clashes highlight the volatility of the region. The nuclear factor turns every crisis into a possible flashpoint with international consequences.

For Pakistan, Kashmir represents not just a territorial issue but a moral and ideological imperative rooted in the two-nation theory and the vision of Pakistan as a homeland for the Muslims of South Asia. Against this backdrop of clashing national identities i.e. Islamic nationalism versus Hindutva, Kashmir becomes the ultimate test of Indian secularism and Pakistani ideological legitimacy. In this situation, the conflict is no longer controlled by rational deterrence theory but identity-driven posturing. Hindutvafication of Kashmir has the risk of driving the region into an asymmetric arms race and dismantling the very pillars of nuclear stability. The threat of nuclear catastrophe increases as nationalist passion trumps diplomatic prudence and strategic restraint. Diplomatic solutions, international mediation and robust de-escalation mechanisms are urgently required, as any misstep could push the region and the world toward a catastrophic nuclear confrontation.

Strategic Competition Between Pakistan and India

South Asia stands as one of the most heavily militarized regions globally largely due to the ongoing rivalry between neighboring nuclear powers India and Pakistan. The structural imbalance that resulted from the two nations' erroneous boundary distribution at the time of partition is the main cause of this competition. At the heart of this strategic competition lies not only the colonial legacy of flawed boundary demarcation particularly in Kashmir. It also includes the increasingly ideological orientation of Indian policy under the Hindutva doctrine which has intensified instability across the region (Siam, 2023). The 2019 revocation of Article 370 effectively absorbed Kashmir under centralized Indian authority compounding South Asia's already complex geopolitical

dynamics. It weakened international standards pertaining to disputed areas and set off fresh cycles of India-Pakistan armaments buildup and deterrent signaling. United Nations' indecisiveness and the broader international community's reluctance to act, have allowed India to pursue these unilateral moves with impunity, marginalizing the Kashmiri demand for self-determination.

In classical realist terms, the security dilemma where one state's pursuit of security fuels insecurity in its rival has defined Indo-Pak relations since partition. The persistent rivalry is driven not merely by geography but by strategic doctrines, mutual distrust and contrasting ideological nationalisms. Over time, both states have resorted to balancing strategies: external (alliances), internal (military modernization) and soft balancing (diplomatic and economic tools), to reinforce deterrence and deny the other a decisive edge (Shah & Afgun, 2020). Following the 2001–2002 military standoff, India's security establishment began formulating a limited war doctrine under nuclear overhang later revealed as the Cold Start Doctrine. Publicly acknowledged in 2017 by General Bipin Rawat, this strategy envisions rapid mobilization and shallow incursions into Pakistani territory designed to punish without crossing Pakistan's nuclear thresholds. While this doctrine aims to exploit conventional military asymmetry, it also risks miscalculation in a compressed decision-making window typical of nuclearized crises (Panda, 2017).

Pakistan, recognizing the shift in Indian posture, responded by developing a full-spectrum deterrence policy, including tactical nuclear weapons and diversified delivery systems. This doctrinal development aims to seal strategic loopholes and ensure credible deterrence at every level from strategic to operational and tactical. The idea is to undermine the feasibility of Cold Start so that any Indian attack no matter how modest provokes unacceptable costs. This stance highlights the precarious balance that nowadays characterizes South Asian deterrence: a single wrong move might set uncontrollable escalation off (Cohen & Dasgupta, 2019).

The necessity of enhancing Pakistan's strategy and operational stance became clear in the wake of India's aggressive military operations plan. To deny India any edge in war, Pakistan's strategy implementation opted to progressively plug the strategic deficiencies in its force posture with nuclear-tipped missiles using different delivery systems. By addressing the voids in its deterrent stance, Pakistan's doctrinal policy seeks to prevent a conventional invasion from India. In response to India's balakot strike, Pakistan demonstrated its capability and resolve through both aerial and ground operations. Pakistan's doctrinal maturity in proportionate retaliation bolstered not just its strategic parity but also its capacity to send messages of resolve without crossing escalation points. Most importantly, this military engagement was matched by diplomatic dividends as Pakistan brought internationalized the Kashmir question, re-initiating debates in different multilateral forums and pointing to the impossibility of peace in South Asia without the solution of Kashmir.

Strategic competition in South Asia is thus not material only, but ideological to the core. India's Hindutva-driven militarization of policy and space has ideologized the security environment. It made traditional confidence-building measures increasingly ineffective. As both countries accelerate the modernization of their military strategies under these ideational pressures, the risk of accidental escalation particularly as a reaction to provocations or militant events remains perilously high. Achieving peace in South Asia remains unlikely without a fair and just resolution of Kashmir dispute.

NUCLEARIZATION OF SOUTH ASIA

The dynamics of Indo-Pak relations reflect a history of conflict interspersed with diplomatic engagement. The persistent hostilities have led to a militarized area and sporadic violent outbursts, impeding attempts at a peaceful resolution and further aggravating their relationship. Unlike India, which did so in 1974, Pakistan just got nuclear weapons in 1998. The 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan served as the impetus for the overt nuclearization of South Asia, which has drastically changed the strategic landscape of the area. With the pretext of ongoing crises, the quick upgrade of nuclear forces and changing doctrines has arguably prevented full-scale conflicts. South Asian strategic instability is increasingly exacerbated by China's growing military presence and the trilateral nuclear geometry it produces, rather than being limited to bilateral India-Pakistan dynamics. One of the most significant and enduring flashpoints remains the Kashmir dispute. The region has witnessed multiple military crises with nuclear undertones, notably the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot episode, which involved Indian airstrikes in Pakistan’s territory and a retaliatory downing of an Indian aircraft by Pakistan. In 2020, the Sino-Indian standoff in Ladakh further demonstrated how territorial disputes can escalate into militarized confrontations involving nuclear-armed states. South Asia is thus uniquely positioned as the only region where three nuclear-armed states i.e. India, Pakistan and China have engaged in recent military conflict along contested borders (Kristensen & Korda, 2021).

In parallel, technological advancements and shifting security postures have created a precarious environment. India’s development of canisterized missiles and ongoing work on MIRV capabilities, coupled with Pakistan’s pursuit of tactical nuclear weapons and full-spectrum deterrence, suggest an ongoing arms competition rather than strategic restraint (SIPRI, 2024; Narang, 2014). China's own modernization efforts, including the deployment of dual-use missile systems and theater-range weapons in the Tibetan Plateau, have further raised the stakes. The interaction between regional disputes and nuclear modernization increases the risk of conflict escalation and miscalculation. If India’s strategic posture shifts to deter China, Pakistan may respond by enhancing its own capabilities to maintain a perceived strategic equilibrium. This action-reaction cycle has the potential to trigger an asymmetric arms race with destabilizing consequences for regional and global security (Dalton & Gibbons, 2020).

Strategic scholars argue that South Asia is entering a phase of “cascading deterrence,” where deterrent relationships are no longer dyadic but multilayered and fluid (Basrur, 2021). In this evolving environment, the traditional frameworks of stability and deterrence may prove insufficient, as technological diffusion and political tensions raise the probability of inadvertent escalation. The evolution of India and Pakistan's nuclear doctrines, arsenal developments and associated regional politics especially Kashmir conflict make South Asia an enduring nuclear flashpoint. The analysis is framed through the lens of RSCT, which posits that security concerns are clustered in geographically proximate states and are largely shaped by their interdependent threat perceptions. The India-Pakistan dyad, especially its locus around Jammu & Kashmir, exemplifies such a tightly interlinked regional security complex.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of India and Pakistan's Nuclear Doctrines and Capabilities

Category	India	Pakistan
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Declared Doctrine	No First Use (NFU), Minimal Credible Deterrence (MCD), Assured Second-Strike Capability	Full-Spectrum Deterrence (FSD), First Use Option, Credible Minimum Deterrence
Motivating Threat Perception	Pakistan as tactical threat	India as primary existential threat
Doctrinal Evolution	Increasing ambiguity around NFU, MIRV development, canisterized delivery systems	Emphasis on tactical nukes (e.g., NASR), rejection of NFU, credible deterrence at all levels
Delivery Platforms	Nuclear Triad: air (Mirage-2000, Rafale), land (Agni series), sea (Arihant-class SSBNs with K-15, K-4)	Dual-capable systems including short-range (Hatf series), medium-range (Shaheen) and strategic delivery systems; Babur cruise missiles
Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs)	Not officially acknowledged	Yes – NASR (Hatf-IX) with 60–70 km range
Missile Modernization	Agni-V canisterized; MIRV-capable Agni-P and development of hypersonic BrahMos-II	Multiple variants of Shaheen and Babur missiles, focus on mobility and survivability
Command and Control	Civilian-led with institutional NSC; survivability through triad	Military-led; emphasis on rapid deployment and C2 resilience in battlefield scenarios
Stated Objectives	Strategic restraint, regional prestige, second-strike capability	Strategic equilibrium with India, deterrence against conventional aggression

Data compiled from SIPRI (2024), Kristensen & Korda (2022), Tellis (2001) and Khan (2012)

A Nuclear Flashpoint Anchored in *Hindutvaification*

BJP's current Hindutva-driven approach in IIOJK has heightened tensions turning the conflict into an even more unstable nuclear flashpoint. According to the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), this development deepens the security interdependence between India and Pakistan as a nuclear dyad. India's revocation of J&K's semi-autonomous status further intensified Pakistan's perception of an existential threat (Devare, 2021; Noorani, 2020). This move triggered an immediate escalation in ceasefire violations, diplomatic downgrades and an elevated military posture along the Line of Control (LoC).

The February 2019 Balakot airstrikes, in response to the Pulwama attack, had already marked a shift in India's strategic signaling by crossing a longstanding threshold—conducting air operations across the LoC into Pakistani territory. Pakistan's downing of an Indian MiG-21 and capture of the pilot brought the two nuclear powers to the brink of war (SIPRI, 2020). Though full-scale escalation was avoided, likely due to nuclear deterrence, the incident exposed the fragility of peace under high ideological and territorial contestation. These developments challenge the conventional wisdom that nuclear-armed states avoid open conflict. Far from being deterred, both India and Pakistan may engage in direct hostilities under the nuclear shadow.

The ideological transformation of India's Kashmir policy under the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has contributed to this shift. Hindutva's framing of Kashmir not as a bilateral territorial dispute but as a nationalist reclamation project reduces the political space for dialogue or concession. By conflating Kashmiri dissent with Islamic extremism, Indian policy justifies a

securitized response, which in turn provokes reactive military posturing from Pakistan (Hilali, 2021). RSCT framework posits that security concerns among geographically proximate states are mutually constitutive. The Pahalgam conflict demonstrates how domestic ideological realignments in one state reverberate across the regional complex. India's internal political developments, marked by Hindu majoritarianism—have externalized insecurity, leading Pakistan to reinterpret internal policy shifts as offensive strategies with strategic implications. In short, South Asian strategic dynamics have surpassed conventional deterrence. Civilizational discussions and ideological clashes are now at the forefront. The Indo-Pak escalations suggest that the line between conventional and nuclear war has gotten more blurred. India's willingness to incur the price of battle constrained by nuclear cover suggests a shift in its deterrent approach. This new posture appears to prioritize ideological mastery in Kashmir over regional peace. As long as nuclear doctrines are vague and tactical weapons proliferate, the risk of misinterpretation or miscalculation escalation will rise.

CONCLUSION

With Kashmir serving as both the ideological fault line and the historical epicenter, this study has demonstrated that India-Pakistan nuclear dyad remains one of the most precarious strategic alliances in the world. RSCT explains that long-standing rivalry is the result of reciprocal threat perceptions based on identity politics and civilizational nationalism rather than traditional military differences or unresolved territorial conflicts. The evidence supports the central hypothesis: Kashmiri Hindutvaification-driven policies, including the revocation of Article 370, population manipulation and religious nationalism claim have significantly increased regional strategic instability. These ideological shifts are violations of global norms and risks to their very survival contributing to the interrelated security concerns that define the South Asian regional security complex.

Regional insecurity is exacerbated by the differing nuclear ideologies of India and Pakistan. India has a formal No First Use (NFU) policy but recent advancements like as MIRV technology and canisterized missile deployment suggest increased doctrinal flexibility. This indicates a potential move toward a more forceful deterrent posture. Pakistan, on the other hand, uses a full-spectrum deterrence posture. This includes the option for first use and the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons such as NASR missile system. Instead of encouraging stability, ideological disparity creates conditions in which minor confrontations might easily develop in the presence of nuclear weapons. Kashmir has evolved into a nuclear flashpoint that is unstable and ideologically inflamed. Long-standing grievances, demographic changes and nationalist rhetoric have rendered traditional deterrence more ineffective. Crises like as Kargil (1999), and Balakot incident (2019) demonstrate how fast restraint may disintegrate. Even with nuclear weapons in situ, the threat of open confrontation remains quite high.

To avoid a catastrophic future, South Asia must reconsider deterrence beyond weapons and military doctrines. It must address the ideological and civilizational impacts that influence state conduct. Key efforts include resurrecting Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), increasing doctrinal transparency and reinstating official communication channels like as military hotlines and diplomatic meetings. Arms control should no longer be considered an ideal; rather, it is a strategic requirement. Regional players even if they are not official members must participate with global

frameworks such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), utilizing them as de-escalation instruments. True and sustainable peace cannot be achieved just via deterrence. A political solution to the Kashmir dispute is necessary. This approach must avoid population engineering, adhere to international legal standards and protect the rights and interests of all parties. Unless larger structural and ideological drivers particularly the growth of Hindutva in Indian policy and its impact on Kashmir are addressed, the region will stay perilously near to nuclear catastrophe. Only by comprehensive discourse, regional collaboration and socioeconomic integration will South Asia overcome entrenched animosity and progress toward a more stable future.

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