

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## Pakistan's Nuclear Ploy

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### **S***ummary*

Pakistan no longer gains a substantial strategic advantage from its nuclear posturing, even as it continues to view the display of a nuclear threat as a strategic tool in conflict scenarios.

Pakistan has once again attracted unfavourable attention concerning nuclear matters. During a visit to the United States (US), its Chief of Army Staff, Munir Akram, issued a statement, including a threat to use nuclear weapons recklessly to target not only India but also half of the world. This provocative declaration was ostensibly aimed at pressuring the international community and India to grant concessions to Pakistan regarding the Indus Water Treaty (IWT). What is the significance of this statement? Does it represent any new development?

As the spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) aptly stated: “Nuclear sabre-rattling is Pakistan’s stock-in-trade.”<sup>1</sup> The Pakistani leadership is known for occasionally making this kind of irresponsible statement. So, to a large extent, there is nothing new about the posturing. The reason for making the statement (IWT), though, may have changed. In the past, such statements were issued by the Pakistani government in response to India contemplating military action against Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, India getting clean exemptions in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), NSG members supporting India’s membership, and the like.

Moreover, as the Indian government has highlighted and extensively covered by the media, the statement was ‘made from the soil of a friendly third country’, that is, the US. This is rather unfortunate. It creates the impression that the statement was aided and abetted by the US establishment, which has been engaging the army chief while ignoring the Pakistani political leadership. The Trump Administration is completely overlooking Pakistan’s Prime Minister and President. As critics point out, the US swears by democracy and hugs authoritarians in practice. The US action *vis-à-vis* Munir Akram aptly substantiates this.

Quite interestingly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Pakistan responded strongly to the statement made by the MEA spokesperson. It claimed that the spokesperson, the media, and the global strategic community’s reaction was based on distorted facts and ‘twisting statements out of context’.<sup>2</sup> The MFA spokesperson seemingly distanced Pakistan from destroying India and the world. In the past, the country frequently threatened to use nuclear weapons for no rhyme or reason. It thus resorted to nuclear blackmail not only as a tactic but also as a strategy.

The Pakistani MFA statement, meanwhile, notes that Pakistan stands against nuclear blackmail and states: “Pakistan remains firmly opposed to the use or threat of use of force [nuclear force].” Moreover, the statement adds: “We also note with

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<sup>1</sup> “[Statement by Official Spokesperson](#)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 11 August 2025.

<sup>2</sup> “Statement by Spokesperson Regarding the Statement Made by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad, 11 August 2025.

concern a pointless reference to the third countries...”<sup>3</sup> Given that Pakistan never hesitated to involve a third party in a bilateral or Pakistan-induced dispute, these statements by the MFA look odd.

Following the Pahalgam massacre in April and India’s firm resolve to bring the perpetrators and their supporters to justice—that saw action against groups operating from Pakistani territory—Pakistan responded predictably. It entered denial mode and resorted to its familiar tactic of nuclear blackmail. Is this outdated nuclear scaremongering strategy still effective in 2025? Pakistan’s nuclear rhetoric offers little strategic, security, or diplomatic benefit. This prompts a key question: Why is that the case?

Pakistan’s *First Use* nuclear doctrine inherently creates a strategic dilemma—when should it use nuclear weapons? To act decisively, a threshold or red line, crossing which would justify nuclear use, would need to be defined. Launching an early strike against a nuclear adversary like India—armed with a credible and robust second-strike capability—could prove disastrous. Waiting too long, after the destruction of Pakistan’s conventional forces, would leave its leadership struggling to justify any meaningful military objective. Both scenarios complicate decision-making and undermine the credibility of Pakistan’s deterrence strategy.

Furthermore, if Pakistan decides to use nuclear weapons, it must specify the scope and type of deployment. Its ongoing signals indicate a preference for tactical nuclear arms, like the low-yield Hatf-9/Nasr. Nonetheless, many studies highlight the severe consequences of such weapons in combat. While they might provide small tactical benefits—such as disrupting or psychologically disturbing enemy ground forces—their overall military usefulness remains limited.

However, if Pakistan were to use a battlefield nuclear weapon against a nuclear-armed adversary such as India—one with extensive delivery systems and high-yield warheads—it would essentially give India a license to pursue the destruction of Pakistan. While India follows a ‘No First Use’ nuclear policy, it explicitly states that any nuclear first strike will be met with a massive retaliation intended to cause unacceptable damage.

Indian leadership has consistently stated that its response to a nuclear attack will not distinguish between tactical or battlefield nuclear use and a full-scale strategic strike. The use of any nuclear weapon—regardless of its yield—will trigger an overwhelming and indiscriminate retaliation. On several occasions, Indian officials

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

have also warned that if Pakistan introduces nuclear weapons into the India–Pakistan conflict, it could face consequences so severe that they may threaten the very existence of the Pakistani state.

The collapse of the long-standing global nuclear taboo—if triggered by Pakistan’s first use—would not restrict India’s response. Pakistan’s leadership is highly aware of these risks. While it often engages in seemingly irrational nuclear brinkmanship, it does so with deliberate intent. Historically, whenever India has responded decisively, Pakistan has toned down its nuclear rhetoric.

Since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, no nuclear-armed state has used these weapons, even without the threat of nuclear retaliation. Violating this norm could trigger a significant global diplomatic backlash against Pakistan, a country already widely seen as a hub of terrorism.

Yet, Pakistan continues to seek to leverage its nuclear status to deter India and to instil fear—both regionally and globally. Essentially, Islamabad views the display of a nuclear threat as a strategic tool in conflict scenarios. Pakistan no longer gains a substantial strategic advantage from its nuclear posturing. India has repeatedly challenged Pakistan’s nuclear bluff—not only in response to the Pahalgam massacre but also in earlier cases. Pakistan’s nuclear threats have failed to prevent India’s measured conventional responses, even when they are limited and non-escalatory.

For example, on 10 May 2025, Pakistan used its familiar tactic by unofficially announcing a meeting of its National Command Authority. However, the government later officially denied that any such meeting took place. When the suspension of India’s military operation occurred, some in the strategic community speculated that Pakistan’s nuclear signalling had pressured the world into accepting the truce. Interestingly, Pakistan’s self-defeating move to violate the suspension agreement within hours exposed the emptiness of its nuclear signalling. India quickly responded to the breach, undermining any strategic advantage Pakistan aimed to gain through nuclear posturing. Now, leading Pakistani commentators, including some former diplomats, are realising that Pakistan’s past strategy of deterring and blackmailing India has largely failed. Write-ups in the Pakistani media and think tank reports already reflect this thinking. This quickly becomes the dominant perspective, though some exceptions will always exist. It is widely acknowledged in Pakistan that India can undertake a limited war or strike without regard for Pakistan’s nuclear bluff. They openly discuss reviewing this strategy and replacing it with a new, more effective one. The Pakistani official statements may still deny this stark reality.

At one time, Pakistan’s nuclear signalling succeeded in convincing a segment of the international community—particularly in the West—that its leadership, influenced by a jihadi mindset, might resort to nuclear use. However, the global perception has gradually shifted. This shift, at this moment, looks silent even though a section in the Western policy community has started coming out against Pakistan’s nuclear blackmailing tactic.

Pakistan and India are now often casually grouped as nuclear-armed rivals. Notably, Pakistan and the United States are also both nuclear powers, yet Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal does not deter the US from conducting drone strikes on its territory. So, the issue is different from nuclear. Indeed, throughout the history of Pakistan’s nuclear weaponisation, the strategic interests of the Western world, China, and, to some extent, West Asian countries have often taken precedence.

While some of these interests persist, the evolving global order and India’s rising stature within it are compelling these actors to reassess and recalibrate their policies towards a nuclear-armed Pakistan. At present, Pakistan may retain a marginal diplomatic advantage by projecting itself as an irresponsible nuclear state. India must work proactively to deny Pakistan even that limited space, and India ought to be militarily prepared for the next stage, calling Pakistan's nuclear bluff again and managing the influential global actors more effectively.

## About the Author



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