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Doctrinal Shift
in
Pakistan's Deterrence Strategy

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Pakistan Army Rocket Force Command Signals A Doctrinal Shift in Pakistan's Deterrence Strategy

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The announcement of setting up an Army Rocket Force Command (ARFC) by the Pakistan PM on the occasion of the Independence Day should not raise many eyebrows, having been in the offing for a while. Many have linked the timing to an immediate fallout of the disastrous Op BUNYAN UN MARSOOS, while some have opined that the creation of ARFC was necessitated by a need for a doctrinal change, particularly after deterrence failed in Uri 2016, Op Balakot in 2019 and failed again, this time with disastrous consequences post Pahalgam, when the heartland Punjab was struck with impunity for the first time since 1971.

This paper is an attempt to understand the internal debate within Pakistan that precipitated the announcement of an ARFC and, in particular, the failure of the Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) that was once touted as Pakistan's answer to Indian Cold Start doctrine.

But first, let's turn back the pages.

In retaliation to an attack by Pakistan-based terrorists on an army base in Kashmir's Uri on September 18 in which 19 soldiers were killed, Special Forces of the Indian Army launched surgical strikes against terrorist camps in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, striking launch pads and eliminating a number of terrorists while avenging the Uri attack. The defence minister made a bold statement stating that this strike gave a clear message to the world that "we can kill terrorists on this side as well as by crossing the border if the need arises".ⁱ

This is what the then Indian DGMO stated in an MEA press briefing on 29 September 2016:

"Based on very credible and specific information which we received yesterday that some terrorist teams had positioned themselves at launch pads along the Line of Control with an aim to carry out infiltration and terrorist strikes in Jammu & Kashmir and in various other metros in our country, the Indian army conducted surgical strikes last night at these launch pads. The operations were basically focused to ensure that these terrorists do not succeed in their design of infiltration and carrying out destruction and endangering the lives of citizens of our country."ⁱⁱ

Shallow, trans-border, targeted strikes by Special Forces against launch pads in close vicinity of the Line of Control.

Move on to Op Balakote in 2019.

In a direct response to a suicide attack by JeM suicide bomber who killed 40 CRPF personnel on February 14, 2019 at Pulwama, in J&K, the Indian Air Force, carried out air strikes against a JeM camp in Balakote killing many terrorists and destroying the camp. This was the first time the Indian Air Force had struck into Pakistan after 1971.

"In an intelligence led operation in the early hours of today, India struck the biggest training camp of JeM in Balakot. In this operation, a very large number of JeM terrorists, trainers, senior commanders and groups of jihadis who were being trained for fidayeen action were eliminated.

This facility at Balakot was headed by Maulana Yousuf Azhar (alias Ustad Ghouri), the brother-in-law of Masood Azhar, Chief of JeM.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The Foreign Secretary of India continued to emphasise that :

“The Government of India is firmly and resolutely committed to taking all necessary measures to fight the menace of terrorism. Hence this non-military pre-emptive action was specifically targeted at the JeM camp. The selection of the target was also conditioned by our desire to avoid civilian casualties. The facility is located in thick forest on a hilltop far away from any civilian presence.”^{iv}

Not only had India graduated from Special Forces to Air Force in terms of application of force, but the strikes were deep into PoK in depth and size. Balakote is almost 50 kms from the LoC. The air strike called “Op Bandar” marked a paradigm shift in India’s military doctrine. It openly challenged the credibility of Pakistan’s FSD and completely disregarded Pakistan’s nuclear threat.

And then on to Op SINDOOR

On 7 May 2025, the MEA issued a press statement:

“As you are all aware, on April 22, 2025, Pakistani and Pakistan-trained terrorists belonging to the Lashkar-e-Taiba carried out a savage attack on Indian tourists at Pahalgam in Jammu & Kashmir in India. They murdered 26 people, including one national of Nepal, causing the largest number of civilian casualties in a terrorist attack in India since the 26th November 2008 attacks in Mumbai.

.... Earlier this morning as you would be aware India exercised its right to respond and pre-empt as well as deter more such cross-border attacks. These actions were measured, non-escalatory, proportionate, and responsible. They focused on dismantling the terrorist infrastructure and disabling terrorists likely to be sent across to India.”^v

“A little while ago, the Indian Armed Forces launched ‘OPERATION SINDOOR’, hitting terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir from where terrorist attacks against India have been planned and directed.

Altogether, nine (9) sites have been targeted.

Our actions have been focused, measured and non-escalatory in nature. No Pakistani military facilities have been targeted. India has demonstrated considerable restraint in selection of targets and method of execution.”^{vi}

Of the nine targets struck, seven were in POK, at ranges upto 70 kms while the Air Force struck Muridke and Bhawalpur terror camps in the heartland of Pak Punjab. All were counterforce targets. Subsequently, as matters escalated, SSM and Cruise missiles and stand-off AAMs were also fired at targets in areas well in depth and as far as Nur Khan air base near Islamabad and Bholari air base near Karachi.

Clearly, from the Pakistani perspective, deterrence had failed. Despite Pak denials that threshold for use of Tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) like NASR were not reached, one official from Pakistan Special Plans Division (SPD) which controls the nuclear weapons is quoted as saying “if force is employed, deterrence by definition has failed”, a candid admission

that Pakistan needed to recalibrate its deterrence strategy. vii Ali Mostafa admits that “India responded by targeting Pakistani airbases using standoff missiles, just before the ceasefire announcement. This suggests that Indian leadership, at least partly influenced by Pakistan's failure to completely destroy well-defended military targets, was not sufficiently deterred.”viii

Pakistan's Dilemma

Pakistan's FSD concept, essentially a deterrence strategy that runs through all tiers of conflict envisions to “plug the gap created by Indian conventional advantage in the deterrence stability in South Asia. It is a qualitative response by Pakistan to counter the threat created by Indian CSD {Cold Start Doctrine, brackets mine}. Its scope ranges from conventional to strategic, and to the tactical levels.”ix

The development of TNWs had added a new dimension to the conflict, considerably lowering the threshold to deter pro-active operations (PAOs) across the Line of Control or International Border (IB). The FSD was intended to up the ante at the very commencement of operations to a nuclear threat in a bid to deter and counter India's huge conventional asymmetry. For two decades the FSD worked.

Lieutenant General Khalid Kidwai, the former Director SPD, in an interview defined the following as likely situations that can compel Pakistan to use its nuclear weapons:

- a. India attacks and conquers a major portion of Pakistani territory.
- b. India destroys large portion of Pakistani land or air forces.
- c. India proceeds to the economic strangling of Pakistan.
- d. India pushes Pakistan into political destabilization or creates a largescale internal subversion in Pakistan.x

Interestingly, Pakistan's nuclear policy has never been formally ever written, but Pak scholars have gleaned the essentials from various statements and interviews with senior military officers and civilian strategists. xi However, the objectives of Pakistan's nuclear policy have been enunciated as :

Deter all forms of “external threats” posed to the national frontiers of the mainland.

Development of conventional and strategic forces is the prerequisite for enhancing the credibility of nuclear deterrence.

Deterring India from launching (pre-emptive) attacks against country's strategic forces through retaliation with the nuclear strike.

Preserving strategic parity within the South Asian belt.xii

Clearly, during Op SINDOOR, the Pakistan National Command Authority had a problem of indecision on their hands. The airstrikes and employment of artillery to decimate nine targets by the Indian Armed Forces did not justify a nuclear threat or nuclear response. This despite the fact that the envelope of depth of engagement, degree of punishment and use of larger forces had systematically been enhanced since Uri and Balakot right into the heartland of Pakistan. No land forces had crossed the borders, nor had any troops entered Pakistan, yet air

bases and counterforce targets were struck with airpower and long-range missiles. Pakistan leadership had full confidence of its Full Spectrum Deterrence strategy, premised on Indian Army's Pro-Active Operations (PAO) and Cold Start Doctrine (CSD), none of which had been attempted by the India Armed Forces in the instant case. Worse still, from a Pakistani point of view, none of the four conditions that would compel Pakistan to use nuclear weapons had even been remotely threatened, viz, loss of territory, destruction of land or air forces, economic strangulation or political destabilisation.

Pakistan was behind in the OODA loop and forced to retaliate to a situation where the initiative remained with the Indian military. *In fact, all the three cycles of escalation from 7-10 May saw Pakistan responding with quid-pro-quo (QPQ) actions as a consequence of Indian actions.* All Pakistani responses were conventional with no indication of pulling out the 'nuclear card' that it had used with impunity earlier. FSD had failed the Pakistani leadership and India had called the bluff.

The dilemma is best explained by Abid Hussain, writing for Al Jazeera who quotes an analyst as saying, "When India employed the BrahMos missile, Pakistan was unable to deploy its Babur cruise missiles in a conventional role, as they are solely managed by the SPD and Strategic Forces Command for nuclear missions,". Babur, also known as Hatf-7, is a ground-launched cruise missile with a 700km (435-mile) range, and has been operational since 2010 but remains tied to Pakistan's nuclear doctrine.^{xiii} Tahir Azad, writing in the Small Wars Journal accepts that the " (Indian) strikes were alarming both symbolically and strategically, as they demonstrated that Pakistan's air defence systems and conventional deterrent missiles were unable to consistently intercept or neutralize India's precision-guided threats. *It is evident that the Pakistan leadership was in a quandary, indecisive and unable to grasp the changed circumstances having been caught unawares by the Indian action.*"

The other realisation, according to Ali Mustafa, appears to be the folly of designating several missile systems as dual capable, possibly to economize on its limited missile inventory and keeping the operational control centralised. By declaring them dual capable, Pakistan lost the flexibility of using them in Op SINDOOR for fear of escalation to a nuclear war while the Indian military used BrahMos conventional cruise missiles, SCALP and HAMMER precision guided munitions with total freedom and no threat of nuclear escalation.^{xv}

That is why a Rocket Force was announced on 14 August 2025.

The Debate

There has been considerable debate in Pakistan's strategic community on the development. While some argue that the ARFC is not a knee-jerk reaction to India's upping the ante during Op SINDOOR, there is a candid acceptance that India's "first strike posture" and long-range precision capabilities hastened the announcement of the creation of ARFC.^{xvi} Mansoor Ahmed, a lecturer in Australian National University echoes the larger sentiment that India's growing counter-force capabilities, especially the ability to strike deep, necessitates reciprocity. Others like Usman Haider and Abdul Moiz Khan argue that ARFC will be a "constant reminder to New Delhi that if it launches conventionally armed long-range vectors, Islamabad will retaliate with its policy heavily in line with its policy of quid-pro-quo plus". This formulation of "quid pro quo plus appears to be new. *One possible understanding of this formulation is that ARFC will respond to every Indian attack with conventional missiles and rockets in addition to developing supersonic missiles and hypersonic missiles to strengthen conventional deterrence. Some call it FSD plus doctrine.*"^{xvii}

Another view suggests that Pakistan's quid pro quo plus doctrine refers to the “possibility of a response, which goes beyond simple reciprocal action, by being more expansive or even disproportionately severe in a way that could risk intensifying the conflict, but remain contained enough to avoid nuclear escalation.”^{xxviii} This view suggests that Pakistan is indeed developing a conventional capability to fight a conventional war without escalating to a nuclear threat.

There is also a school that argues that ARFC clearly delineates boundaries between nuclear and conventional weapons. Apparently, the ARFC is unlikely to be under command of the Nuclear Command Authority or Special Plans Division, thus confirming that its Command and control will be under the Army. Some analysts also argue that this will “minimise the load” on the Artillery Brigades of the Strike Corps who can focus on engaging tactical level targets.

The other contention is the huge cost that Pakistan is likely to incur at a point when its economy is in shambles and its survival on IMF bailout packages. Aside from creating a new force which is equipment heavy, there will be a need to establish new “infrastructure, bases, supplies, personnel, and secured integrated communication systems.”^{xix} In fact, Tahir Azad argues forcefully about issues of coordination as this force will require to be integrated into a cohesive C4ISR network, because operating independently will “diminish the efficacy of retaliation” especially after the May 2025 crisis “revealed issues with the deconfliction of drone operations, cruise missile strikes, and air defense deployments.”^{xx} **That is an admission of dissonance and lack of coherence in higher direction of war.**

Army Rocket Force Command

While the details of the ARFC are sketchy and still unravelling, what is known is:

- The ARFC will be under the direct operational control of the Army.^{xxi}
- It will be equipped with Fatah I, Fatah II Rockets and Fatah IV missiles. While Fatah I has a range of 140 kms, Fatah II has a range of 400 kms and Fatah IV is a cruise missile with a range of 750 kms.^{xxii}
- A former Pak Army officer is quoted as saying that The ARFC will have only conventional rocket systems, while another source also confirms that it will have conventional warheads.^{xxiii}^{xxiv}
- Its HQs will be located away from the NCA to avoid “entanglement” with nuclear and conventional command & control centres.^{xxv}
- The ARFC will solely engage counterforce military targets deep inside India.^{xxvi}
- The ARFC is likely to have supersonic and hypersonic missiles on its inventory to ‘diversify’ its conventional missile force and strengthen conventional deterrence.^{xxvii}
- The ARFC will be headed by a three -star rank officer.

The need for ARFC is in itself debated. Brig Tughrul Amin is quick to point that the creation of ARFC is a “long term doctrinal evolution” rather than a “short term reaction.” While international analysts like Christopher Clary argue that Pakistan had already begun shifting its planning towards having more short-range Ballistic missiles options against India.^{xxviii}

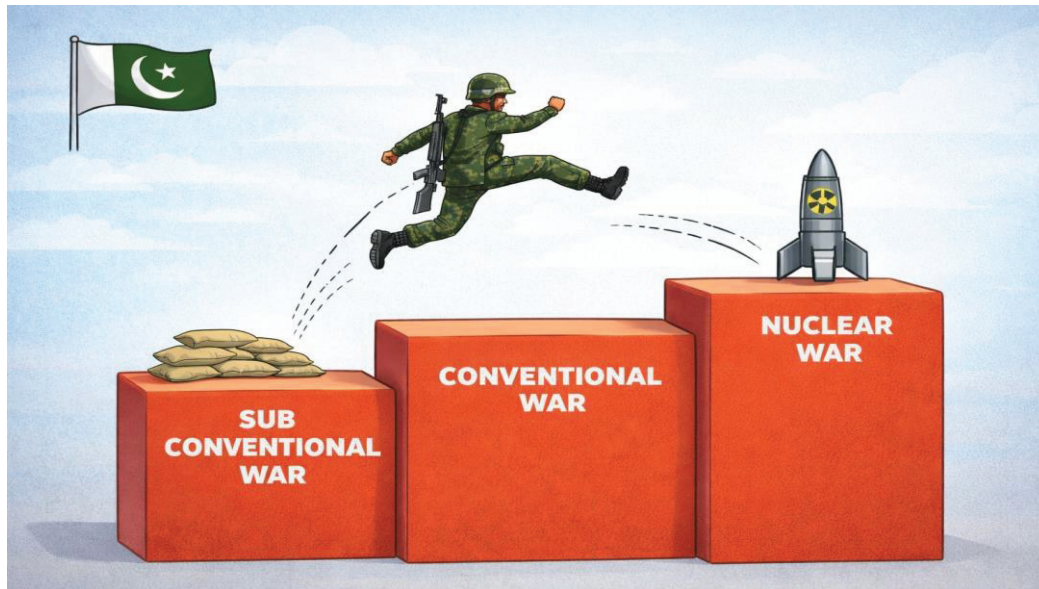
One school of thought has referred to the creation of ARFC as a consequence of India's Integrated Rocket Force (IRF), conceptualised by the late Indian CDS, Gen Bipin Rawat. The rationale is based

on a prevalent view in Pakistan that the Indian IRF will compose of Pralay, Brahmos and Agni-5 missiles, all conventional variants.^{xxix}

The role of ARFC is still a matter of debate and will require more enquiry in the days ahead. Some analysts argue that this signals a changing artillery doctrine where “the ARFC will use its munitions to achieve bigger tactical goals and, in aggregate, [deliver} a strategic outcome rather than narrowly supporting a specific land manoeuvre.”^{xxx}

What is the Shift?

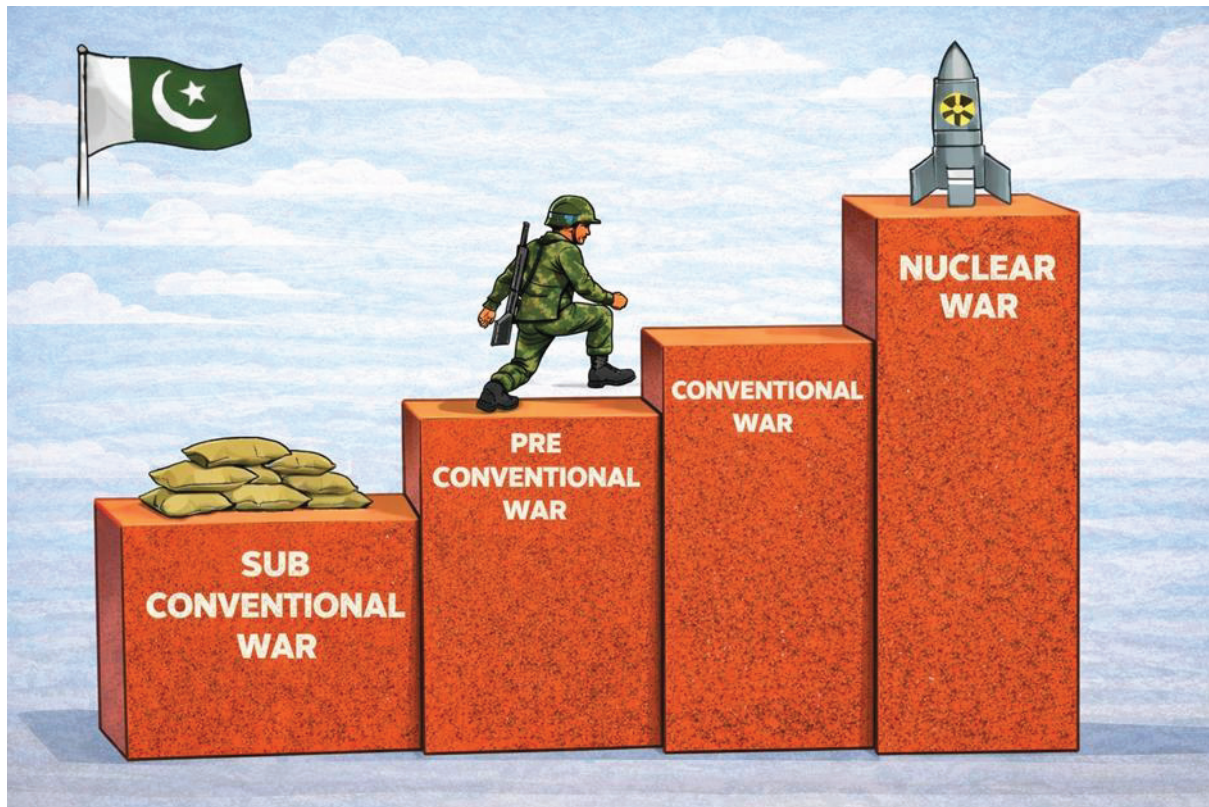
The biggest doctrinal shift that has happened in Pakistan strategic thinking is the acceptance of existence of a what I would term as a “pre-conventional domain” in the traditional domains of warfare. This ‘pre-conventional’ domain lies between the sub-conventional and conventional domains and is characterised by non-contact, deep and calibrated DRAM (Drones, Rockets, Air and Missiles) operations. *This domain has been pried open by the Indian strategy of Dynamic Response and perfected after gradually escalating the intensity and depth of engagement from Uri to Balakot and now Pahalgam.*



(Fig 1 – Pakistan’s FSD intended to raise the ante to nuclear war)

Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) hinged on threatening the use of Tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) at the tactical level to thwart Indian Cold Start doctrine thereby rapidly escalating the war into the nuclear domain and neutralising the conventional superiority of the Indian Armed Forces. (See Fig 1)

That has since changed. The ARFC is likely to use “precise, long-range strike capability that can hit high-value targets deep inside enemy territory without resorting to the use of nuclear weapons.” A piece in the *South Asia Times* suggests that the” new force is designed to add a layer of conventional deterrence, a tool for limited war scenarios that avoids the escalation to the nuclear threshold.”^{xxxi} That is the ‘pre-conventional’ domain that Pakistan has been forced to address in a step-by-step escalatory ladder. (See Fig 2)



(Fig 2 – The paradigm Shift in fighting a pre-conventional war)

Simply put, Pakistan needs to face three new realities:

One, FSD is irrelevant. The credibility of “Full Spectrum” of its deterrence posture has been challenged by the Indian military with impunity in a calculated and incremental manner forcing Pakistan to submit to its conventional superiority. ***ARFC forces Pakistan to fight conventionally before it raises the ante in a rational escalatory step towards nuclear war.***

Second, Pakistan has lost the justification to use TNWs. TNWs are for land-based operations. Any use of TNWs, under the present circumstances, when DRAM operations may have already caused enough damage in taking out counterforce targets, would render TNWs or their use as meaningless. ***In fact, the cost benefit analysis of the use of TNWs clearly indicates that the days of TNWs in the Pakistan nuclear inventory are numbered.***

Third, there is an acceptance that Pakistan has to fight a conventional war, not of its choosing, against a superior Indian military, in a rational, calibrated and responsible manner. ***Its policy of ‘contrived irrationality’ no longer poses a threat to Indian plans nor is there any ‘ambiguity’ left in Pakistan’s nuclear policy.***^{xxxvii}

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ⁱ “Surgical strike day: Here's how the 2016 operation was carried out” Hindustan Times, 29 September 2012. Since then 29 September is celebrated as Surgical Strike day.

ⁱⁱ MEA briefing, 29 September 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Statement by Foreign Secretary on 26 February 2019 on the Strike on JeM training camp at Balakot, MEA briefing, February 26, 2019.

^{iv} Ibid

^v Statement by Foreign Secretary: OPERATION SINDOOR, MEA , May 07, 2025

^{vi} MOD Press Release, “Operation Sindoor : Indian Armed Forces Carried Out Precision Strike At Terrorist Camps”, PIB Delhi, 07 MAY 2025.

^{vii} Ali Mustafa,, “Firebreak or Fuse? Pakistan’s Rocket Force and the Deterrence Dilemma in South Asia,”, South Asian Voices, November 11, 2025

^{viii} Ibid

^{ix} Farzana Siddique ,”Full Spectrum Deterrence: Pakistan’s Strategic Compulsion”, CISS Insight: Quarterly News & Views, nd.

^x Dr. Ashfaq Ahmed, Muhammad Jawad Hashmi & Saima Kausar , “Pakistan Nuclear Doctrine from Minimum Deterrence to Full Spectrum Credible Minimum Deterrence (FSCMD)”, Pakistan Social Sciences Review December 2019, Vol. 3, No.2 [86-101]

^{xi} Ibid , pg 87

^{xii} Ibid, pg 88

^{xiii} Abid Hussain, “Why has Pakistan launched a new rocket command after India conflict?”, Al Jazeera, 26 Aug 2025 available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/26/why-has-pakistan-launched-a-new-rocket-command-after-india-conflict>, (accessed 4 Jan 2026).

^{xiv} Tahir Azad, “Pakistan’s Army Rocket Force: Strategic Leap or Burdened Gamble?” *Small Wars Journal*, 22 December 2025.

^{xv} Ali Mostafa, Op Cit

^{xvi} Mansoor Ahmed, a lecturer in Australian National University. Op cit , pg 2.

^{xvii} Tahir Azad, op cit

^{xviii} Ibid pg2.

^{xix} Tahir Azad, “Pakistan’s Army Rocket Force: Strategic Leap or Burdened Gamble?” *Small Wars Journal*, 22 December 2025.

^{xx} Ibid

^{xxi} Usman Haider & Abdul Moiz Khan, “Why Did Pakistan Create Its Army Rocket Force?”, The Diplomat, 25 August 2025

^{xxii} Ibid

^{xxiii} Ibid

^{xxiv} Abid Hussain, Op cit

^{xxv} Ibid

^{xxvi} Ibid

^{xxvii} Ibid

^{xxviii} Abid Hussain, Op cit

^{xxix} Usman Haider & Abdul Moiz Khan, “Why Did Pakistan Create Its Army Rocket Force?”, The Diplomat, 25 August 2025, Pg 5.

^{xxx} Bilal Khan, “Pakistan Army Rocket Force Command: Rawalpindi's New Escalation Doctrine Takes Shape”, Quwa, available at <https://quwa.org/pakistan-army-news/rawalpindis-new-escalation-doctrine-army-rocket-force-command-is-built-for-one-reason-08-14-2025/> dated 13 August 2025.

^{xxxi} “What Is Pakistan's Army Rocket Force Command (ARFC)?”, South Asia Times, 18 Aug 2025

^{xxxii} In the context of Pakistan's nuclear doctrine refers to a deliberate strategy to appear unpredictable, reckless, or irrational to deter a conventionally stronger adversary (India) from initiating conflict, even at low levels.



About the Author

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