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Nuclear Opportunism and the Strategic Ceiling

Reevaluating the Lowered Threshold for Wars in 2025

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Abstract: This study examines the phenomenon of the lowered threshold for conventional warfare among nuclear-armed or nuclear-backed states, focusing on three major conflicts in 2025: the Israel–Iran War, the India–Pakistan border clashes, and the Russo–Ukrainian War. To overcome the limitations of traditional structural and offensive realist frameworks—which primarily emphasize security-driven motives—this article integrates Hans J. Morgenthau's classical realism with Mark S. Bell's theory of nuclear opportunism. The analysis reveals that contemporary nuclear-armed states no longer merely react to external threats; instead, they leverage the "strategic

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safety net" provided by their nuclear arsenals to pursue opportunistic goals, such as consolidating regional hegemony and elevating national status. A central contribution of this research is the introduction of the "strategic ceiling" concept: by deterring catastrophic escalation, nuclear deterrence paradoxically creates an "opportunistic space" where high-intensity conventional engagements can persist without fear of total war. Furthermore, by presenting an extended stability-instability paradox model—where the deterrence dynamics between behind-the-scenes nuclear allies facilitate conflicts involving nonnuclear states—this study ensures logical consistency across diverse conflict types. The 2025 cases demonstrate that nuclear weapons have evolved from being "guardians of the status quo" into strategic enablers that embolden the sustained and aggressive use of limited conventional force. In conclusion, this article warns of the risk of miscalculation inherent in this lowered threshold and emphasizes the urgent need for new international diplomatic and mediation mechanisms to manage opportunistic provocations under the nuclear shadow.

Keywords: stability-instability paradox, nuclear opportunism, strategic ceiling, 2025 conflicts, conventional warfare threshold, extended deterrence

Introduction

The international security landscape of 2025 was marked by a profound and troubling paradox: as nuclear arsenals continue to provide a ceiling on strategic escalation, the threshold for high-intensity conventional warfare has paradoxically lowered. The Israel–Iran War, the intense border skirmishes between India and Pakistan, and the protracted attrition of the Russo–

Ukrainian War collectively signal a shift in the global order. In these conflicts, nuclear weapons no longer serve merely as passive "guardians of peace" through the threat of mutual destruction. Instead, they have been transformed into strategic enablers that provide a safety net under which states can aggressively pursue regional dominance. This study analyzes this phenomenon by integrating classical and structural realism with the emerging concept of nuclear opportunism, arguing that the anarchic international system, coupled with the strategic stability provided by nuclear deterrence, incentivizes states to engage in limited but high-stakes conventional warfare.

Traditionally, structural realism, as articulated by Kenneth N. Waltz, posits that the anarchic nature of the international system compels states to prioritize survival and security through a "self-help" mechanism.[1] In this view, nuclear weapons are the ultimate deterrent, stabilizing great power relations by making the cost of war prohibitively high. However, the conflicts of 2025 suggest that the stability provided at the strategic nuclear level fosters instability at the conventional level—a phenomenon known as the stability-instability paradox. While this paradox has long been recognized, the current geopolitical climate reveals a more aggressive manifestation. States are not merely reacting to "security dilemmas" or "existential threats," as John J. Mearsheimer might suggest; rather, they are exploiting nuclear deterrence to achieve nonsecurity goals such as regional prestige, status, and the revision of territorial boundaries.[2]

This nuclear opportunism is particularly evident in the actions of Russia and Israel. As Mark S. Bell argues, the possession of nuclear weapons does not only deter challengers but also emboldens states to act independently of

allied constraints and engage in "opportunistic aggression."[3] For example, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, often framed by defensive realists as a reaction to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion, can be more accurately reinterpreted through the lens of power maximization and status restoration. Russia used its nuclear status to "shield" its conventional operations, confident that its deterrent would prevent direct military intervention by Western powers. Similarly, Israel's preemptive strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025 demonstrate how a nuclear-armed state can leverage its capabilities to deter regional adversaries and their patrons, thereby creating a permissive environment for high-intensity conventional force.

Furthermore, this study addresses a critical gap in the existing literature by exploring the extended stability-instability paradox. Critics often argue that this paradox only applies to direct confrontations between two nuclear-armed rivals. However, the conflicts of 2025 illustrate that even when one belligerent is a nonnuclear state—as in the cases of Iran or Ukraine—the underlying nuclear balance between the state's patrons (e.g., the United States, NATO, and Russia) creates a "strategic ceiling." This ceiling prevents the conflict from escalating into a global conflagration but allows for a brutal and sustained conventional war within a localized theater. As Vipin Narang has noted, the proliferation of nuclear capabilities among regional powers has fragmented the global security architecture, making limited wars a viable tool for power projection in an increasingly multipolar world.[4]

Ultimately, the lowered threshold for conventional warfare in 2025 reflects a dangerous erosion of the barriers to armed conflict. Hans J. Morgenthau's classical realism reminds readers that the struggle for power is

an inherent part of human nature and statecraft; when the fear of total annihilation is mitigated by strategic stability, the *animus dominandi*—the desire to dominate—reemerges in the form of conventional aggression.[5] By examining these three cases, this article demonstrates that the interaction between systemic anarchy and nuclear deterrence has created a strategic environment where conventional war is no longer a failure of deterrence but rather a calculated choice within its framework.

Theoretical Framework: Beyond Defensive Realism

To understand the strategic landscape of 2025, one must move beyond a monolithic interpretation of realism. The conventional wisdom that nuclear weapons exclusively serve defensive purposes is increasingly challenged by the reality of limited yet high-intensity wars. This section establishes a multilayered theoretical framework that integrates structural anarchy with the psychological and opportunistic drivers of state behavior under the nuclear shadow.

Structural Anarchy and the Animus Dominandi

The foundational premise of this study rests on Waltz's structural realism, which identifies systemic anarchy as the primary constraint on state behavior. In an anarchic system, the absence of a central authority compels states to prioritize relative power and security.[6] However, while Waltzian neorealism emphasizes survival, it often fails to account for the proactive pursuit of prestige and regional dominance. Therefore, this research incorporates Morgenthau's classical realism, which identifies the *animus dominandi* as a driving force of international politics.[7] By combining these perspectives, one

can see that the conflicts of 2025 were not merely responses to "security dilemmas" but were driven by states seeking to exploit systemic instability to assert their national interests and status.

The Stability-Instability Paradox and the Strategic Ceiling

The core mechanism explaining the lowered threshold for conventional warfare is the stability-instability paradox. First articulated during the Cold War, this paradox suggests that when two states achieve strategic nuclear stability (making total war "unthinkable"), they feel emboldened to engage in lower-level conventional provocations because neither side believes the other will risk nuclear annihilation over a limited objective.[8]

In 2025, this paradox has evolved into what this study calls a strategic ceiling. Nuclear weapons act as a physical and psychological barrier that suppresses the upward escalation of conflict. Robert Jervis argues that the "fear of the unintended" often keeps nuclear-armed rivals from the brink.[9] However, the current era demonstrates that this very fear provides a permissive environment for conventional aggression. Because the "ceiling" is perceived as unbreakable, states such as Russia and India have calculated that they can cross conventional "red lines" without triggering a strategic nuclear response. This effectively lowers the "floor" or the threshold at which conventional force becomes a viable tool of statecraft.

Nuclear Opportunism: Bell's Typology of Behavior

To address the critique that states act only out of insecurity, this study adopts Bell's theory of nuclear opportunism. Bell posits that nuclear weapons do not just provide deterrence (the status quo); they also offer leverage for a variety

of foreign policy behaviors.[10] According to Bell, nuclear possession can lead to aggression, where a state uses its nuclear shield to pursue conventional territorial gains, and independence, where a state acts without the permission or restraint of its allies.[11]

This framework explains the actions of Israel and Russia in 2025. Israel's strikes on Iranian assets reflect independence—using its nuclear status to ignore U.S. calls for restraint—while Russia's actions in Ukraine represent aggression enabled by the confidence that its nuclear arsenal prevents a NATO-led counterinvasion of Russian territory. As Vipin Narang notes, different nuclear postures—such as Russia's "asymmetric escalation" posture—are specifically designed to enable conventional warfighting under a nuclear umbrella.[12]

The Extended Paradox and Patron-Client Dynamics

A critical theoretical expansion in this research is the extended stability-instability paradox. Traditional theories focus on dyadic nuclear relations (state A vs. state B). However, many modern conflicts involve nonnuclear states acting as proxies or clients for nuclear powers. As Glenn H. Snyder's work on the "deterrence-commitment" dilemma suggests, the risk of being entrapped in a client's war often leads patrons to limit the scope of conflict.[13]

In 2025, the stability between major nuclear powers (e.g., the United States and Russia) created a ceiling that extends over their nonnuclear clients (e.g., Ukraine). This ensures that while the clients may engage in a brutal conventional struggle, the patrons will not allow the conflict to escalate to a global nuclear level. This extended version of the paradox allows for prolonged conventional wars in "shatter-belt" regions, as seen in Ukraine and

the Middle East. Furthermore, as Stephen M. Walt's offshore balancing theory suggests, nuclear powers can maintain regional balances by supporting their clients with advanced conventional weaponry without the risk of direct nuclear confrontation.[14]

In conclusion, the intersection of systemic anarchy, the strategic ceiling of the stability-instability paradox, and the behavioral shift toward nuclear opportunism provides a comprehensive explanation for why conventional warfare has become more frequent and sustained in the nuclear age. States are no longer deterred from all war; they are merely deterred from total war, leaving a vast and dangerous space for conventional ambition.[15]

Three Wars of 2025: The Lowered Threshold of Conventional Conflict

Case Study 1: The Israel-Iran Conflict

The military escalation between Israel and Iran in June 2025 serves as a quintessential example of how a nuclear-armed state can leverage its strategic capabilities to engage in high-intensity conventional warfare against a nonnuclear adversary. Unlike traditional Cold War models that emphasized mutual deterrence between two nuclear-armed rivals, this conflict illustrates a more complex dynamic: the use of a nuclear shield to enable opportunistic aggression while deterring the intervention of regional rivals and their great-power patrons.[16] By analyzing Israel's preemptive strikes on Iranian nuclear and military infrastructure, this case study demonstrates that the lowered threshold for conventional warfare is driven not merely by defensive necessity but by the strategic latitude afforded by nuclear possession.

Nuclear Opportunism and Strategic Independence

The primary driver of Israel's 2025 campaign against Iran was what Bell identifies as the "independence" and "aggression" effects of nuclear weapons.[17] For decades, Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity (*Amimut*) served as a tool of ultimate survival. However, in 2025, Israel transitioned from using its arsenal as a passive deterrent to using it as a strategic facilitator. Facing the imminent prospect of an Iranian nuclear breakout, Israel used its nuclear status to ignore calls for restraint from its primary ally, the United States, and conducted a massive conventional air campaign against Iran. This reflects Morgenthau's assertion that states do not merely seek security; they seek to exert their national will through available means when the risk of total annihilation is mitigated.[18]

Israel's confidence in launching such a high-stakes strike stemmed from the realization that its nuclear monopoly in the Middle East provided a ceiling on how Iran or its proxies could respond. Israeli decision-makers calculated that while Iran could launch retaliatory missile strikes or mobilize Hezbollah, it could not pose an existential threat to Israel without risking a disproportionate nuclear response. This strategic safety net effectively lowered the threshold for Israel to initiate a preemptive conventional war, as the fear of an Iranian total victory was nonexistent.

The Extended Stability-Instability Paradox

A significant challenge in applying the stability-instability paradox to this case is that Iran remained a nonnuclear state at the time of the conflict. However, as the extended stability-instability paradox suggests, the logic of the paradox still holds when considering the involvement of external nuclear powers.[19]

Iran's security architecture in 2025 was increasingly tied to its strategic partnership with Russia, a major nuclear power. Conventional wisdom would suggest that a direct Israeli attack on a Russian-aligned state would carry extreme risks of escalation.

Yet, the strategic stability between the global nuclear powers—the United States and Russia—created a strategic ceiling over the Middle Eastern theater. Both Washington and Moscow were deterred from direct military confrontation by the specter of global nuclear war. This upper-level stability ironically fostered lower-level instability by allowing Israel to strike Iranian targets with the confidence that Russia would not intervene militarily for fear of clashing with Israel's nuclear-armed patron, the United States. As Snyder's deterrence-commitment theory suggests, the nuclear balance between patrons often leaves regional clients to fight brutal but localized conventional wars.[20]

Signaling Resolve through Conventional Attrition

Narang's work on nuclear signaling provides further depth to this analysis. He argues that regional nuclear powers often use conventional conflicts to signal resolve to their adversaries.[21] By sustaining a multiweek conventional bombing campaign, Israel signaled to both Tehran and Moscow that it was willing to accept significant conventional risks to maintain its regional dominance. The 2025 conflict was not just about destroying physical centrifuges; it was a psychological operation aimed at demonstrating that Israel's conventional threshold had been lowered because its nuclear ceiling remained inviolable.

Furthermore, Graham T. Allison's "Thucydides Trap" framework highlights the role of fear in driving Israel's actions.[22] This fear was not of an immediate invasion, but of a shift in the regional balance of power. Israel's willingness to sustain a prolonged conventional engagement despite international condemnation aligns with Robert Gilpin's theory of preventive war in the face of power transitions.[23] Israel's nuclear arsenal provided the "strategic cushion" that made this preventive conventional war a viable and attractive policy option.

The Role of Status and Domestic Survival

Finally, this conflict underscores that the motives for conventional war under the nuclear shadow are often tied to nonsecurity factors such as status and regime security. For the Israeli leadership in 2025, a robust military response was essential to restoring national prestige following the internal and external shocks of previous years.[24] By leveraging its nuclear deterrence to enable a victorious conventional strike, the Israeli government sought to consolidate domestic support and reestablish its image as the regional hegemon.

In conclusion, the 2025 Israel–Iran conflict demonstrates that the lowered threshold for conventional warfare is a direct consequence of the permissive environment created by nuclear weapons. The strategic stability between global patrons and the opportunistic aggression of a regional nuclear power combined to transform the Middle East into a theater of high-intensity conventional war, proving that nuclear weapons facilitate rather than prevent limited wars in the modern era.[25]

Case Study 2: The India–Pakistan Conflict

The brief but intense military confrontation between India and Pakistan in May 2025 provides a compelling illustration of the stability-instability paradox within a mature, dyadic nuclear relationship. Unlike the case of Israel and Iran, this conflict involved two established nuclear-armed rivals with sophisticated command-and-control systems. While critics might point to the relatively low casualty count (estimated in the dozens) as evidence of a minor skirmish, this study argues that the limited nature of the conflict was a deliberate outcome of strategic calculation under the nuclear shadow.[26] These clashes demonstrate that nuclear deterrence does not merely prevent war; it compresses conventional conflict into a highly calibrated and survivable format, thereby lowering the threshold for its initiation.

Calibrated Aggression and the Strategic Ceiling

In early 2025, following a series of cross-border insurgent attacks, India launched a series of precision strikes involving standoff weaponry and specialized drone units. Pakistan's response was equally measured, targeting Indian military logistics while avoiding major civilian centers. This calibrated aggression reflects the essence of the stability-instability paradox: both sides felt emboldened to use conventional force because they were certain that the strategic ceiling provided by their respective nuclear triads would prevent the other from escalating to a full-scale invasion.[27]

From the perspective of Bell's nuclear opportunism, the Indian leadership used its nuclear status to pursue a policy of aggression—specifically, a limited conventional punishment intended to signal resolve without crossing Pakistan's nuclear red lines.[28] The possession of nuclear

weapons provided a safety net that allowed Indian decision makers to bypass traditional diplomatic channels and opt for a kinetic response, knowing that Pakistan's existential survival was not being threatened and therefore neutralizing the risk of a nuclear first-use.

The Role of External Mediation as a Functional Variable

A question may be raised whether the cessation of hostilities was a result of nuclear deterrence or the decisive intervention of external mediators, specifically the United States. This study argues that mediation is not an alternative to the logic of the paradox but rather a functional variable within it. The swiftness with which both New Delhi and Islamabad accepted international mediation in 2025 was driven by a shared "nuclear anxiety."

As Jervis observed, the fear of "the brink" often compels nuclear-armed states to seek ways out or accept exit ramps that preserve their national honor while avoiding catastrophe.[29] Without the underlying nuclear threat, a conventional superior power like India might have been tempted to continue its offensive to achieve a decisive military victory. As a result, the external mediation served as the diplomatic manifestation of nuclear deterrence, providing a face-saving mechanism to deescalate once the conventional signaling objective had been achieved.

Signaling Resolve and Domestic Political Opportunism

The 2025 clashes also highlight the role of domestic political status in lowering the threshold for conflict. For both Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's administration and the Pakistani military establishment, the skirmishes served as a tool for status reinforcement.[30] By engaging in a visible, albeit

limited, military exchange, both regimes were able to satisfy nationalist domestic audiences and project an image of strength.

Narang's typology of asymmetric escalation is particularly relevant here, as Pakistan's reliance on a low nuclear threshold for first-use actually encouraged India to engage in "subnuclear" conventional strikes that are specifically designed to stay below that threshold.[31] This creates a perverse incentive structure where the very presence of nuclear weapons incentivizes frequent, low-level conventional testing of the adversary's resolve. The conflict was less about territory and more about "resolve signaling" within a managed anarchic framework.[32]

Technological Enablers and the Precision Threshold

Finally, the role of modern military technology, as analyzed by Stephen Biddle, cannot be ignored. The use of precision-guided munitions and real-time intelligence in 2025 allowed both India and Pakistan to strike with surgical accuracy, minimizing the collateral damage that could have accidentally triggered an escalatory spiral.[33] This technological precision, combined with the strategic cushion of nuclear deterrence, has significantly lowered the practical barriers to conventional engagement. It allows leaders to believe that they can "dial in" the exact amount of pain necessary to achieve a political objective without losing control of the ladder of escalation.

In summary, the India–Pakistan clashes of 2025 reveal that the lowered threshold for conventional warfare is a permanent feature of contemporary nuclearized environments. The conflict was not a failure of deterrence but rather a sophisticated exercise of power projection within the safety of the

strategic ceiling. The limited casualties were not an accident; they were a result of a highly rationalized and nuclear-constrained mode of warfare.[34]

Case Study 3: Russia-Ukraine Conflict

The ongoing Russia–Ukraine War stands as the most profound evidence of how a major nuclear power can sustain a prolonged, high-intensity conventional war by exploiting the strategic ceiling provided by its nuclear arsenal. Unlike the previous two cases, this conflict involves a direct clash between a nuclear superpower and a nonnuclear state backed by a nuclear-armed alliance (NATO). This case study moves beyond Mearsheimer's traditional realist explanation to argue that Russia's actions are a manifestation of nuclear opportunism—where nuclear weapons are used not only to prevent an existential threat but also to shield offensive conventional operations intended for regional hegemony and status restoration.[35]

Beyond Defensive Necessity: The Opportunistic Drive

Mearsheimer has famously argued that the West is principally responsible for the Ukrainian crisis, suggesting that Russia's invasion in 2022 was a defensive reaction to the "existential threat" of NATO expansion.[36] However, this logic falters when considering Russia's nuclear status. If nuclear deterrence provides absolute security, the presence of NATO-aligned conventional forces in Ukraine cannot truly pose an existential threat to the Russian state.

Therefore, this study reinterprets the 2025 stage of the conflict through Bell's typology of aggression and expansion.[37] Russia's persistence in Ukraine is driven by a desire to reestablish its status as a great power and to assert a sphere of influence that ignores the sovereignty of its neighbors. The Russian

leadership calculated that its nuclear deterrent would effectively "sanitize" the battlefield, allowing it to wage a brutal war of attrition within Ukraine while being immune from a NATO-led counterinvasion of Russian territory. This is a clear example of using a nuclear shield to facilitate a predatory conventional war, reflecting Morgenthau's observation that states will exploit any power advantage to assert dominance.[38]

The Inverse Stability-Instability Paradox: NATO's Constraint

A critical theoretical nuance in this case is the inverse stability-instability paradox. While Russia is emboldened by its own nuclear weapons, NATO's behavior is constrained by Russia's nuclear threat. This creates a two-way pressure (table 1).

Table 1. The inverse stability-instability paradox in the Russo–Ukrainian War

Russia's emboldenment	Russia's nuclear arsenal prevents the West from establishing a "no-fly zone" or deploying direct combat troops, thereby lowering the threshold for Russia to use high-grade conventional munitions without fear of external military intervention.
NATO's restraint	NATO powers, specifically the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, have limited their support to "proxy" means—providing advanced weaponry such as long-range missiles and intelligence—to avoid a direct kinetic clash with a nuclear peer.

Source: courtesy of the author.

This inverse dynamic creates a strategic ceiling that is exceptionally rigid. Because both sides recognize that a direct clash would likely lead to global thermonuclear war, they are forced to keep the conflict limited in

geography (Ukraine) and means (conventional). Paradoxically, the very rigidity of this ceiling allows the war within Ukraine to become more intense and prolonged, as neither side can achieve a decisive nuclear-backed "knockout blow," nor can they risk an escalation that would end the war through total victory.[39]

Sustained Attrition and the Signaling of Resolve

By 2025, the Russo–Ukrainian War has evolved into a "managed attrition war." Narang's work on asymmetric escalation postures is vital here. Russia has employed frequent nuclear signaling—including tactical nuclear drills and rhetoric—to maintain the boundaries of the conflict.[40] These signals are not intended to initiate a nuclear strike but to remind NATO of the threshold of Russian tolerance.

This signaling allows Russia to sustain a conventional war on a scale that would be unthinkable for a nonnuclear state facing international sanctions. Its nuclear arsenal acts as a strategic buffer that absorbs the political and economic shocks of the war, providing the regime with the longevity needed to outlast the political will of the West. As Gilpin noted, "preventive wars" often become wars of attrition when the declining power uses every resource to stall a perceived shift in the global balance of power.[41]

The Role of Status and Hegemonic War

Finally, the Russo–Ukrainian War underscores the role of status in realism. As E. H. Carr observed, states often capitalize on international instability to reinforce their regional positions.[42] Russia's invasion is a hegemonic war in a localized theater, designed to prove that the international system remains

multipolar. The threshold for conventional war was lowered because the Russian leadership prioritized the prestige of being a regional hegemon over the security of a stable, albeit NATO-integrated, border.

In conclusion, the Russia–Ukraine War demonstrates that nuclear weapons do not just prevent wars; they change the rules of engagement for conventional conflicts. The status of the war proves that the anarchic structure of the system, when filtered through the stability-instability paradox, creates a terrifyingly sustainable environment for high-intensity conventional warfare. The lowered threshold is not a failure of the system but rather a calculated exploitation of the system's ultimate stability.[43]

Comparative Synthesis: Opportunism under the Strategic Ceiling

By synthesizing the dynamics of the Israel–Iran, India–Pakistan, and Russia–Ukraine conflicts, this section identifies the systemic patterns that define the lowered threshold for conventional warfare in 2025. Rather than viewing these conflicts as isolated regional disturbances, a comparative approach reveals a consistent strategic logic: the exploitation of nuclear deterrence as a permissive shield for conventional power projection.

Convergent Motives: From Security to Status and Opportunism

A cross-case analysis demonstrates that the primary driver for initiating conventional hostilities is no longer a simple "security dilemma" in the Waltzian sense. Instead, the motives have shifted toward nuclear opportunism. In the Israel–Iran and Russia–Ukraine cases, nuclear-armed states (or those with an implicit nuclear shield) engaged in aggression to restore regional status and neutralize potential rivals. In the India–Pakistan

case, the motive was status reinforcement and domestic political signaling. This confirms Bell's hypothesis that nuclear weapons embolden states to pursue both "independence" and "aggression."[44] In all three instances, the possession of a nuclear deterrent, or the backing of a nuclear patron, provided the psychological and strategic confidence to bypass traditional diplomatic constraints and opt for a kinetic solution.

The Universality of the Strategic Ceiling

A defining commonality across all three cases is the presence of a strategic ceiling. This ceiling represents the threshold beyond which any further escalation would risk nuclear exchange, thereby compelling all actors—including great power patrons—to contain the conflict within conventional limits. In dyadic nuclear relations (India–Pakistan), the ceiling is direct and immediate, compressing the conflict into a highly calibrated exchange. In asymmetric or proxy-led conflicts (Israel–Iran, Russia–Ukraine), the ceiling is provided by the extended stability-instability paradox, where global patrons (the United States and Russia) suppress escalation to avoid a direct superpower clash.[45] Paradoxically, the more robust and credible this ceiling is, the more safe states feel in initiating high-intensity conventional warfare beneath it. These conflicts prove that the stability at the nuclear level is the very condition that fosters instability at the conventional level.

Comparative Table of Conflict Dynamics

Table 2 summarizes the strategic variables across the three cases, highlighting how nuclear factors influenced the conventional threshold.

Table 2. Strategic variables highlighting how nuclear factors influenced the conventional threshold

Variable	Israel–Iran	India–Pakistan	Russia–Ukraine
Dominant effect	Nuclear independence and preemption	Managed signaling and crisis stability	Shielded aggression and attrition
Role of nuclear weapons	Deterring patron intervention	Preventing existential escalation	Sanitizing the conventional theater
Mediation impact	Low (strategic autonomy)	High (exit-ramp provision)	Medium (controlled proxy support)
Conventional intensity	High (targeted strikes)	Low (calibrated skirmishes)	Extreme (total attrition)

Source: courtesy of the author.

Mediation and the Management of the Paradox

Contrary to the view that mediation signals a failure of deterrence, the comparative evidence suggests that mediation is a byproduct of the stability-instability paradox. In the India–Pakistan and Russia–Ukraine case studies, external intervention was sought or tolerated specifically because the actors recognized the ceiling. Mediation serves as the cooling mechanism for the paradox, allowing states to achieve limited political gains through conventional force without accidentally breaking the strategic ceiling.[46] As Jervis noted, the "rationality of irrationality" only works if there is a shared understanding of the brink; in 2025, mediation provided the necessary "safety valve" to maintain this understanding.[47]

Conclusion of Synthesis: A New Grammar of War

Ultimately, the comparison reveals a "new grammar" of warfare in the nuclear age. The threshold for conventional war has been lowered because the cost of such wars—while high in human and economic terms—is no longer perceived as "state-ending" as long as the nuclear ceiling holds. These three case studies show that states have learned to "price in" the risks of conventional conflict, treating it as a legitimate tool of statecraft rather than a desperate last resort.[48]

Conclusion

The geopolitical crises of 2025 demonstrate that the global security architecture has entered a new and volatile era. By examining the conflicts between Israel and Iran, India and Pakistan, and Russia and Ukraine, this article has illustrated a profound shift in the use of nuclear weapons. Contrary to the traditional view of nuclear weapons as agents of absolute peace through total deterrence, the contemporary strategic environment reveals that nuclear arsenals now function as a strategic safety net that paradoxically lowers the threshold for high-intensity conventional warfare.

A critical finding of this research is the evolution of state motivation under the nuclear shadow. While structural realism traditionally emphasizes survival and security as the primary drivers of state behavior, the evidence from 2025 suggests that the strategic latitude provided by nuclear deterrence facilitates nuclear Opportunism. As possession of a nuclear deterrent mitigates the risk of existential defeat, states are increasingly incentivized to engage in conventional aggression to pursue nonsecurity objectives, such as regional prestige, status restoration, and the unilateral revision of territorial

status quos. This behavior aligns with the classical realist assertion that the *animus dominandi*—the drive for dominance—remains a potent force in international politics, particularly when the ultimate cost of conflict is perceived to be capped by nuclear stability.

Furthermore, this study has refined the application of the stability-instability paradox through the concept of the strategic ceiling. In 2025, nuclear weapons provided a rigid upper limit on escalation, ensuring that regional conflicts did not spill over into global thermonuclear war. However, the robustness of this ceiling is precisely what emboldened states to conduct aggressive conventional operations beneath it. This dynamic is not limited to nuclear-armed dyads; it also manifests as an extended stability-instability paradox, where the strategic balance between global patrons creates a permissive theater for their nonnuclear clients to engage in sustained attrition.

The policy implications of these findings are significant. The international community must recognize that the "stability" provided by nuclear deterrence is no longer a guarantee of peace but rather a structural condition that can sustain localized, high-intensity wars. The lowered conventional threshold increases the risk of miscalculation, where a state might cross an adversary's poorly defined red line under the false impression that nuclear weapons will always prevent a catastrophic response.

In conclusion, the conflicts of 2025 serve as a stark reminder that nuclear weapons have not abolished war; they have merely changed its grammar. The interaction between systemic anarchy and nuclear technology has fostered an environment where conventional force is used with greater frequency and less restraint. To prevent the strategic ceiling from collapsing

under the weight of these conventional provocations, a renewed effort in international diplomacy, crisis management, and the clear communication of red lines is imperative. Without such mechanisms, the very stability that has prevented a third world war may eventually provide the foundation for an uncontrollable global disaster.

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