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**Regional Arms Control in a Nuclearized Neighborhood: A Defensive Realist Analysis of Prospects and Barriers between Pakistan and Iran**

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**Abstract**

One of the most persistent issues in world security is regional arms control in the Middle East and South Asia. Pakistan's nuclear weapons are mostly aimed at India, but they have strategic ramifications that go west, affecting Iran's perceptions of security and the dynamics of regional deterrence. This paper examines the opportunities and obstacles for arms control cooperation between Pakistan and Iran in a nuclearized area using Defensive Realism as the main analytical framework. Both states' cautious nuclear behavior within anarchic regional systems can be understood through the interpretative lens of defensive realism, which emphasizes survival, security maximization, and avoiding over expansion. Based on qualitative secondary analysis, the study concludes that institutional deficiencies, external alignments, and structural asymmetries impede cooperation, but there are still few opportunities for communication and confidence building. The article makes the case that both states pursue nuclear restraint through pragmatic, security driven rationality rather than altruism by basing the discussion on Defensive Realist logic.

**Keywords:** South Asia, Regional Security, Weapons Control, Nuclear Deterrent, Pakistan, Iran, and Defensive Realism

**Introduction**

The security architecture of South Asia has been significantly altered by the development of nuclear weapons. Pakistan's 1998 nuclear tests changed geopolitical assumptions well beyond its eastern border by making it the second nuclear power in the region after India. Pakistan's nuclear capabilities has a strategic and psychological impact on Iran, its western neighbor, even though its deterrent stance is still focused on India. A complicated web of deterrent interactions that go beyond traditional bilateral ties is created concurrently by Iran's contentious nuclear aspirations, which are presented as a civilian program but are seen by enemies as latent weaponization. Such geographical complexity has proven difficult for traditional arms control frameworks to handle. South-West Asia is now a gray area in the global arms control framework due to the lack of formalized institutions, mutual mistrust, and uneven integration into the global non-proliferation regime. In this context, a theoretical lens focused on security seeking conduct rather than expansionist purpose is necessary to comprehend why both Pakistan and Iran continue to be

cautious, reactive, and risk-averse. This paper examines the opportunities and obstacles to regional arms control between Pakistan and Iran using Defensive Realism as its guiding philosophy. Defensive Realism, which has its roots in the writings of Waltz (1979), Jervis (1978), and Glaser (2010), contends that states seek an optimal rather than maximal level of power in order to ensure survival without inciting counterbalancing, in contrast to offensive realism, which holds that states seek to maximize power in order to achieve dominance.

**The central research question guiding this inquiry is:**

In a nuclearized neighborhood, how does defensive realism explain the potential and limitations for regional arms control between Iran and Pakistan?

According to the paper, the fundamental tenets of defensive realism are reflected in both governments' nuclear postures, which are formed by the anarchic regional system, restrained by structural factors, and focused on preserving security rather than realizing revisionist goals. However, the development of formalized arms control cooperation is hindered by foreign alignments, uneven treaty commitments, and inadequate verification procedures. There are six parts to the argument. Following an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of defensive realism, the article examines the role of external powers, examines opportunities and obstacles to cooperation, contextualizes regional nuclear dynamics through that lens, and concludes with policy implications that are consistent with defensive realist reasoning.

**Theoretical Framework: Defensive Realism**

**Fundamentals of Defensive Realism:**

The anarchic nature of the international system forces governments to put survival and security ahead of expansion, according to defensive realism, an evolution within the neorealist school (Waltz, 1979). Defensive realism contends that excessive power accumulation can lead to counterbalancing coalitions, lowering a state's long-term security, in contrast to offensive realism, which holds that power accumulation increases security (Jervis, 1978; Tang, 2009). According to this theory, states are logical entities functioning in the face of uncertainty. States rely on self-help strategies like deterrence and balancing because no central authority can ensure their security. However, they continue to exercise caution to avoid coming across as aggressive because doing so provokes negative reactions. According to Taliaferro (2000), defensive realism forecasts that states that prioritize security will steer clear of needless risks, favor narrow objectives, and, when practical, pursue stability through deterrence and arms control.

Defensive Realism thus rests on three fundamental propositions

**Security-seeking behavior:** States do not act to subjugate others, but rather to protect their own survival.

**Perception and misperception:**

Arms rivalry is frequently motivated by mistrust and uncertainty rather than aggressive intent (Jervis, 1978)

**Cost-benefit restraint:** States are predisposed toward moderation and maintaining the status quo since overexpansion compromises security (Glaser, 2010) When applied to nuclearized contexts, Defensive Realism forecasts that nuclear nations will implement stabilizing policies and look for institutional or informal risk management systems

## **Nuclear Arms Control and Defensive Realism**

Defensive Realism offers an analytical framework in nuclear politics for comprehending why states cooperate only sparingly despite deep hostility. Waltz (1981) made the well-known claim that nuclear weapons can have a calming impact because they encourage prudence due to the high costs of war and mutual vulnerability. Defensive Realists, however, stress that this stability is contingent upon the lack of perceived aggressive doctrines, survivable deterrence, and believable communication (Glaser & Kaufmann, 1998). After achieving credible deterrence. According to this theory, nuclear weapons are tools of assurance and deterrent rather than force or conquest. From a Defensive Realist perspective, arms control is a practical instrument to manage insecurity rather than an altruistic endeavor. According to Tang (2009), states may choose cooperation that improves security through openness and predictability when they realize the declining benefits of power building and the skyrocketing costs of arms races. However, when there is a lack of trust or when verification asymmetries continue, cooperation is still vulnerable.

## **Why Defensive Realism Fits the Pakistan Iran Context**

More than any other theory, the Pakistan-Iran dyad satisfies the presumptions of Defensive Realism. Without reliable multilateral institutions, both states function in anarchic regional order. Both Pakistan and India, as well as Iran and the US, Israel, and Gulf adversaries, face existential security challenges. Instead of aiming for regional dominance, both states prioritize regime survival, strategic depth, and deterrence in their security plans. Additionally, each demonstrates the risk aversion and cautionary defensive realism logic. Pakistan's goal to preserve stability without inciting excessive weapons competition is reflected in its "credible minimum deterrence" concept. Iran also demonstrates a determination to maintain latent capabilities while avoiding overt proliferation that could lead to preemptive strikes or international isolation by adhering to the NPT despite accusations of infractions. Their mutual constraint is also explained by defensive realism. Pakistan and Iran have avoided nuclear rivalry or overt hostilities despite having a violent border and divergent ideologies. This caution is not motivated by friendship, but rather by the knowledge that outright conflict would jeopardize the survival interests of both states. According to a Defensive Realist perspective, systemic mistrust ingrained in anarchic environments rather than revisionist ambition is the main barrier to arms control. The unwillingness of any state to enter into legally binding accords is due to reasonable caution rather than animosity or defection.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative interpretivist design based on secondary analysis is used in this investigation. It is based on scholarly publications, institutional reports (SIPRI Yearbook 2025; IISS Strategic Survey 2024), and think tank publications (Carnegie Endowment, Brookings Institution). A thematic analysis based on Defensive Realist presumptions is used to analyze the data. The interpretation is guided by three analytical dimension:

**Security perceptions:** How Iran and Pakistan use self-help and threat perception to analyze each other's nuclear and strategic capabilities.

**Institutional asymmetry:** How insecurity is exacerbated by differences in international status, such as Pakistan's non-NPT status and Iran's scrutinized NPT membership. The degree to which both states use restraint and deterrence in accordance with Defensive Realism's predictions of risk-averse behavior is a measure of regional stability dynamics. Here, defensive realism serves as an explanatory framework rather than a normative theory, explaining why security-seeking states are reluctant to formalize cooperation in an anarchic regional setting.

## **Defensive Realist Perspective on Regional Nuclear Dynamics**

From a Defensive Realist standpoint, Pakistan's and Iran's nuclear actions demonstrate how survival and threat management are more important than ambition or growth. Every state faces structural forces that limit its options for strategy and encourage prudence.

### **Pakistan's Security Calculus**

The Defensive Realist concept of security optimization is embodied in Pakistan's nuclear doctrine, which is formally known as credible minimum deterrence. Islamabad uses nuclear capability as an affordable equalizer rather than a tool of coercion to counter India's conventional superiority (Kristensen, Korda, & Johns, 2023). The pursuit of second strike stability is reflected in its progressive modernization of delivery systems, including the Ababeel MIRV capable missile and the Babur-III submarine launched cruise missile. Pakistan's resistance to pressure to engage in nuclear brinkmanship with India or other neighbors can be explained by defensive realism. Pakistan's survival would be threatened by overexpansion or overt aggression, which would encourage counterbalancing from the US, China, and India. Rather, it preserves strategic ambiguity, a cautious deterrent stance intended to prevent provocation while preserving autonomy. This is exactly in line with Jervis's (1978) "security dilemma" theory, which holds that attempts to improve security inadvertently make others feel insecure, perpetuating the cycle of distrust.

### **The Deterrence Strategy of Iran**

Defensive Realist patterns are also evident in Iran's nuclear trajectory. In accordance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Tehran formally asserts that its program is for peaceful purposes. However, its insistence on enrichment autonomy indicates a desire for latent deterrence, or the capacity to deter without resorting to violence (Ajili & Rouhi, 2019). This ambiguity prevents the disastrous effects of explicit proliferation while reducing threats from adversarial powers. This reasoning is supported by historical experience: a sense of vulnerability was fostered by the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), U.S. sanctions, and regional isolation. According to defensive realism, these experiences encourage states to adopt self-help tactics, strengthening their defenses without resorting to overt hostility. Iran's methodical development of nuclear and missile technology is an example of a quest for security sufficiency rather than domination.

### **Strategic Caution and Mutual Perceptions**

Iran and Pakistan do not view one another as existential threats despite their ideological and sectarian differences. While Pakistani strategists view Iran as regionally significant but non-hostile, Iranian analysts see Pakistan's deterrent as India-focused. Waltz's (1981) argument that nuclear weapons, when incorporated into logical deterrent doctrines, can stabilize relations among security-seeking states is supported by the lack of direct military competition. According to Defensive Realism, this non-rivalrous equilibrium results from mutual understanding that conflict would reduce rather than increase security rather than from trust. As a result, both states demonstrate restraint, which is a fundamental requirement of the moderation logic of defensive realism.

### **Opportunities and Obstacles for Arms Control: A Defensive Realist Perspective**

There are several obstacles to arms control between Pakistan and Iran that stem from institutional, structural, and perceptual imbalances. Defensive Realism offers a methodical justification for these challenges.

### **The Security Dilemma and Structural Anarchy**

States do not have authoritative security guarantees in anarchic regional orders. A security conundrum results from each having to rely on self-help (Jervis, 1978). Uncertainty is increased by Iran's disputed compliance and Pakistan's non-membership in the NPT. Every attempt at arms control, including data sharing, inspection, and verification, is viewed with suspicion because collaboration may reveal weaknesses that could be exploited by others. Thus, rational caution triumphs over idealistic cooperation, as Defensive Realism predicts.

### **Asymmetric Treaty Commitments**

Pakistan's abstention from the NPT and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) stands in stark contrast to Iran's participation. This asymmetry, according to defensive realists, reflects varying assessments of relative gains. Formal commitments, according to Khan (2019), could put Pakistan under discriminatory scrutiny and freeze its deterrent advantage. According to defensive realism, states only cooperate when the advantages outweigh the possible drawbacks and avoid agreements that could jeopardize their security autonomy.

### **Systemic Pressures and External Alignments**

Deeply ingrained in rival alliance networks are both states. Pakistan's connections to China, Saudi Arabia, and sporadic U.S. cooperation contrast with Iran's support for Russia and opposition to American influence. Bilateral trust is distorted by third party pressures introduced by these relationships. Taliaferro (2000) asserts that systemic limitations, such as resource scarcity, alliance dependencies, and external threats, restrict states' ability to pursue autonomous arms-control agendas. Pakistan and Iran's cautious approach is a reasonable response to outside uncertainty in such a setting.

### **Deficits in Verification and Perception Control**

The significance of information asymmetry in maintaining mistrust is emphasized by defensive realism. Cooperation is still dangerous in the absence of trustworthy verification methods, such as hotlines, pre-notification of missile tests, or fissile-material transparency. Every state views transparency as a possible weakness. According to Tang (2009), when institutional safeguards are inadequate, security-seeking states may want to cooperate but avoid doing so out of fear of being exploited by adversaries.

### **Regime Security and Domestic Restraints**

From a Defensive Realist standpoint, regime security the internal aspect of survival often takes precedence over external collaboration. Sustained arms-control policymaking in Pakistan is hampered by political unrest and civil-military imbalances. Iran's securitized governance structures and the dominance of the Revolutionary Guards put regime continuity ahead of international obligations. According to both, national survival and political system survival are synonymous, which is a defining feature of defensive realist reasoning.

### **The Role of External Powers: Structural Pressures in a Defensive Realist System**

Defensive Realism holds that state behavior is shaped by systemic structure rather than individual intent. It is impossible to comprehend the Pakistan-Iran dyad apart from the larger power dynamics.

### **U.S. and Western Influence**

The United States' selective nuclear cooperation with India and its 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) are prime examples of what Defensive Realists refer to

as systemic discrimination. These acts strengthen Pakistan's mistrust of international non-proliferation agreements and Iran's sense of insecurity. From a structural perspective, this kind of asymmetry encourages self-help behavior instead of confidence in international organizations.

### **The Strategic Mediation of China**

Secondary powers take advantage of systemic weaknesses, as evidenced by China's expanding role as a security mediator, such as its 2024 mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. According to defensive realism, China's involvement is a strategy to counter Western influence while stabilizing its periphery rather than being selfless. This alignment helps Pakistan, which uses Chinese assistance to lessen its reliance on Western institutions.

### **Systemic Equilibrium and Multipolarity**

A fluid balance is created by the current trend toward multipolarity, whereby small and middle powers modify their actions to maintain autonomy. Iran and Pakistan both manage this environment defensively, avoiding entanglement in great-power rivalries while striking a balance against threats. This structural balancing supports Waltz's (1979) hypothesis that security-seeking states seek equilibrium rather than dominance in anarchic multipolar worlds.

### **Implications for Policy and Theoretical Thoughts**

Several policy insights are obtained by applying defensive realism:

**Context-Specific Arms Control:** Formal treaties should not take precedence over small, trust-building steps like information sharing, cooperative crisis hotlines, and safety workshops. While limited cooperation maintains flexibility without jeopardizing sovereignty, defensive realism cautions against overreach.

**Security-Centered Cooperation:** Rather than using moral arguments for disarmament, initiatives should be presented as mutually beneficial for regime survival, such as counterterrorism, border security, and non-traditional threats.

**Third-Party Facilitation:** In line with Defensive Realism's view of mediated stability under anarchy, neutral actors like China, Russia, or the IAEA can lower transaction costs and perception gaps.

**Defensive Realism in Policy Design:** Lawmakers must understand that arms control will only be effective if it strengthens rather than weakens national security. Defensive Realist reasoning is consistent with emphasizing mutual restraint and shared vulnerability.

**Academic Reorientation:** Future research should examine regional nuclear dynamics as logical responses to structural insecurity rather than moralistic narratives of proliferation.

### **Conclusion**

According to this article, the most compelling explanation for Pakistan's and Iran's cautious, risk-averse nuclear behavior is defensive realism. Both states adopt restrained nuclear postures in line with the logic of security maximization and cost minimization, operate in anarchic conditions, and prioritize survival over expansion. Institutionalized arms control is still hampered by structural asymmetries, alliance dependencies, and verification deficiencies. However, these barriers themselves show logical defensive behavior: cooperation that jeopardizes autonomy is logically avoided when there is uncertainty. Institutionalized arms control is still hampered by structural

asymmetries, alliance dependencies, and verification deficiencies. However, these barriers themselves show logical defensive behavior: cooperation that jeopardizes autonomy is logically avoided when there is uncertainty. Pakistan and Iran must decide whether to continue managing insecurity on their own or to institutionalize limited cooperation in order to manage it jointly as global multipolarity grows. The most sustainable path to long-term regional stability is modest, security-driven cooperation, as predicted by defensive realism and supported by empirical data.

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