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Abstract: *This study explores the interplay of emotion, risk perception, and nuclear decision-making during major South Asian crises between 2019 and 2026. While conventional deterrence theories assume rational strategic behavior, political psychology suggests that leaders often make critical security decisions under conditions of fear, anger, uncertainty, and cognitive bias. Using a qualitative political psychology framework, the study examines key crises, including the Pulwama-Balakot confrontation, recurring India - Pakistan border tensions, and subsequent military escalations. The analysis argues that emotional responses and subjective risk assessments significantly shape strategic calculations, crisis signaling, and escalation dynamics in a nuclearized environment. Findings indicate that nationalism, threat perceptions, domestic political pressures, and psychological biases frequently influence leaders' choices beyond purely rational cost-benefit considerations. Consequently, nuclear stability in South Asia remains vulnerable to misperceptions and emotionally driven decisions. The study concludes that integrating psychological factors into nuclear strategy is essential for strengthening crisis management, deterrence stability, and regional security (Pauly & McDermott, 2023).*

Introduction

Nuclear decision-making represents one of the most consequential forms of political judgment in international relations, where a single miscalculation can generate catastrophic regional and global consequences. Traditional deterrence theories have largely portrayed state leaders as rational actors who carefully weigh costs and benefits before making strategic decisions. However, contemporary scholarship in political psychology challenges this assumption by demonstrating that emotions, cognitive biases, and subjective risk perceptions significantly influence decision-making during high-stakes crises (Pauly & McDermott, 2023). In nuclearized environments, leaders often operate under extreme

uncertainty, time pressure, incomplete information, and intense domestic political scrutiny, making emotionally driven judgments increasingly likely.

The South Asian security environment provides a particularly important context for examining the relationship between emotion, risk, and nuclear decision-making. Since the Pulwama-Balakot crisis of 2019, India and Pakistan have experienced recurrent periods of military confrontation, strategic signaling, and heightened nuclear rhetoric. These crises reveal that strategic behavior is not solely determined by material capabilities or deterrence doctrines but is also shaped by fear, anger, nationalism, threat perception, and psychological biases that influence leaders' assessments of risk and escalation (McDermott, 2023). Recent studies further suggest that human emotions can alter perceptions of danger, affect strategic calculations, and increase the probability of brinkmanship in nuclear crises (McDermott, 2025; Pauly & McDermott, 2023).

Literature Review

The existing literature on nuclear decision-making in South Asia has traditionally been dominated by rational deterrence theory, which assumes that political leaders make strategic choices based on cost-benefit calculations and the desire to avoid catastrophic conflict. However, recent scholarship increasingly challenges this assumption by emphasizing the role of psychological factors, emotions, and risk perceptions in shaping state behavior during crises. Political psychology scholars argue that decision-makers often operate under conditions of uncertainty, incomplete information, and intense emotional pressure, making nuclear choices susceptible to cognitive biases and emotional influences rather than purely rational calculations. Research on the India–Pakistan rivalry demonstrates that crises such as Pulwama–Balakot (2019) and the 2025 military confrontation were characterized by heightened threat perceptions, nationalistic narratives, and strategic signaling, all of which influenced leaders' assessments of risk and escalation. Yusuf and Zeb (2026) contend that crisis behavior in South Asia cannot be fully explained through Cold War deterrence models because regional nuclear signaling is embedded within broader political and psychological processes. Similarly, Hussain (2025) argues that strategic stability in South Asia is increasingly affected by leadership risk orientation, conventional military asymmetries, and emerging technologies, which complicate crisis decision-making and escalation control.

The growing literature on emotions in international relations further highlights the importance of fear, anger, humiliation, and national pride in nuclear politics. Raz (2025) demonstrates that fear can significantly influence nuclear-related strategic behavior by shaping threat perceptions and policy urgency. Studies of political discourse and crisis communication also reveal how emotional narratives and polarized rhetoric can intensify public pressure on leaders during interstate confrontations, reducing the political space for de-escalation. Despite these contributions, a significant gap remains in understanding how emotions and risk perceptions directly interact to influence nuclear decision-making during South Asian crises between 2019 and 2026. Most studies focus on deterrence, military capabilities, or strategic stability, while insufficient attention has been given to the psychological mechanisms underlying leaders' decisions. Therefore, this study bridges the gap by integrating political psychology with nuclear strategy, providing a deeper analytical understanding of how emotions, cognitive biases, and risk assessments shape crisis behavior and escalation dynamics in the world's most volatile nuclear region.

Problem Statement

Despite the presence of nuclear deterrence in South Asia, recurring crises between India and Pakistan from 2019 to 2026 have demonstrated that nuclear decision-making is not governed solely by rational

strategic calculations. Existing studies primarily focus on military capabilities, deterrence stability, and geopolitical factors, while largely overlooking the influence of leaders' emotions, cognitive biases, and risk perceptions during crisis situations. The role of fear, anger, national pride, and political pressures in shaping escalation and de-escalation decisions remains insufficiently explored. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of how nuclear-armed states behave under conditions of uncertainty and heightened tension. Therefore, this study investigates how emotional dynamics and risk perceptions influenced nuclear decision-making during major South Asian crises between 2019 and 2026 through the lens of political psychology.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the influence of emotions, particularly fear, anger, national pride, and perceived threat, on nuclear decision-making processes during South Asian crises between 2019 and 2026.
2. To analyze how leaders' risk perceptions and cognitive biases shaped crisis escalation, deterrence behavior, and strategic choices in India–Pakistan nuclear confrontations through a political psychology framework.

Research Questions

1. How did emotions such as fear, anger, national pride, and perceived threat influence nuclear decision-making during major South Asian crises between 2019 and 2026?
2. In what ways did leaders' risk perceptions and cognitive biases shape crisis escalation, deterrence dynamics, and strategic choices in India–Pakistan nuclear confrontations from 2019 to 2026?

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) and Political Psychology, which explain how leaders make decisions under conditions of uncertainty and perceived loss. Prospect Theory argues that decision-makers become more risk-prone when facing threats or strategic setbacks. Political Psychology emphasizes that emotions such as fear, anger, humiliation, and national pride significantly shape threat perceptions and policy choices. In South Asian nuclear crises, these psychological factors influence leaders' assessments of risk, escalation, and deterrence. Therefore, the study examines how emotions and risk perceptions affected nuclear decision-making in India - Pakistan crises from 2019 to 2026.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design within the framework of Political Psychology to examine the role of emotions and risk perceptions in nuclear decision-making during South Asian crises from 2019 to 2026. The research focuses on major India–Pakistan crisis episodes, including the Pulwama - Balakot crisis and subsequent security confrontations. Data are collected from secondary sources such as official statements, policy documents, speeches, academic literature, think-tank reports, and credible media sources. A comparative case study approach is used to analyze decision-making patterns across different crises. Qualitative content analysis and process tracing are employed to identify the influence of fear, anger, threat perception, and risk assessment on leaders' choices. Source triangulation is applied to enhance the credibility and reliability of findings. The study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how psychological factors shape nuclear decisions in South Asia's volatile security environment.

Significance of the Study

This study enhances understanding of how emotions and risk perceptions influence nuclear decision-making during South Asian crises. It contributes to Political Psychology and Strategic Studies by examining the psychological factors that shape leaders' choices under conditions of uncertainty. The

research provides valuable insights for policymakers and security practitioners seeking to reduce crisis escalation, strengthen strategic stability, and prevent nuclear conflict in South Asia.

Political Psychology, Emotion, and Nuclear Decision-Making

Political psychology provides a valuable framework for understanding how leaders make decisions in complex and high-risk security environments. Traditional theories of international relations often assume that state leaders act rationally and systematically evaluate costs and benefits before making strategic choices. However, political psychology challenges this assumption by emphasizing the role of emotions, cognitive biases, perceptions, and individual psychological factors in shaping political behavior (Huddy et al., 2022). In the context of nuclear decision-making, where the consequences of miscalculation can be catastrophic, understanding these psychological dimensions becomes particularly important. Emotion plays a central role in how political leaders perceive threats and respond to crises. Emotions such as fear, anger, anxiety, pride, and humiliation influence the interpretation of information and affect risk-taking behavior. Fear often encourages caution and restraint, while anger may increase confidence and willingness to adopt confrontational policies (Mercer, 2014). During international crises, leaders are frequently required to make rapid decisions under conditions of uncertainty, incomplete information, and intense domestic and international pressure. Under such circumstances, emotional responses can significantly shape strategic judgments and policy outcomes.

Political psychology also highlights the importance of risk perception in decision-making. Leaders do not always assess risks objectively; rather, their evaluations are influenced by personal experiences, beliefs, and emotional states. Prospect Theory, developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), argues that decision-makers tend to behave differently when confronted with potential losses than when pursuing potential gains. In situations where leaders perceive themselves to be facing losses, they are more likely to engage in risky behavior. This insight is particularly relevant to nuclear crises, where perceived threats to national security, prestige, or political legitimacy can encourage escalation rather than restraint. Nuclear decision-making is therefore not solely a product of strategic calculations or military capabilities. It is also shaped by how leaders interpret threats, assess risks, and manage emotions during moments of crisis. In South Asia, where India and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons and have experienced multiple confrontations, emotional factors have often influenced crisis behavior. Nationalist sentiments, public pressure, and perceptions of credibility frequently interact with strategic considerations, creating conditions that may increase the likelihood of escalation. Political psychology helps explain why leaders sometimes deviate from purely rational behavior and adopt policies that appear excessively risky from an external perspective.

The integration of political psychology into the study of nuclear decision-making provides a deeper understanding of crisis dynamics. By examining the interaction between emotion, cognition, and risk perception, scholars can better explain how leaders make choices under extreme pressure. Such insights are essential for improving crisis management, reducing misperceptions, and strengthening strategic stability in nuclearized regions such as South Asia.

Nuclear Politics and Strategic Stability in South Asia (2019 - 2026)

South Asia remains one of the most sensitive nuclear regions in the world, where strategic stability is continuously challenged by political rivalry, territorial disputes, military modernization, and recurring crises. Between 2019 and 2026, nuclear politics in the region was shaped primarily by the enduring competition between India and Pakistan, alongside the growing influence of China in the regional security environment. The Pulwama-Balakot crisis of 2019 marked a significant turning point, demonstrating that conventional military engagements could occur despite the presence of nuclear

weapons, thereby raising concerns about escalation and crisis stability. Scholars argue that the crisis exposed the limitations of traditional deterrence assumptions and highlighted the risks of miscalculation between nuclear-armed rivals. Strategic stability refers to a condition in which states are deterred from initiating conflict because the costs of escalation outweigh potential gains. In South Asia, however, stability remains fragile due to persistent mistrust and competing security doctrines. India's pursuit of advanced military capabilities, missile defense systems, precision-strike technologies, and evolving nuclear doctrines has generated concerns in Pakistan regarding the credibility of its deterrent posture. In response, Pakistan has continued to strengthen its policy of credible minimum deterrence and full-spectrum deterrence to maintain strategic balance. These competing strategies have contributed to an ongoing security dilemma in which measures adopted by one state to enhance security are perceived as threats by the other.

The period from 2019 to 2026 also witnessed significant technological transformations affecting nuclear stability. The integration of cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, and advanced surveillance technologies has complicated traditional deterrence relationships. Emerging technologies can improve military effectiveness, but they may also reduce decision-making time during crises and increase the risk of accidental escalation. The growing reliance on technology creates uncertainty regarding command-and-control systems and raises concerns about first-strike vulnerabilities. Consequently, strategic stability is no longer determined solely by nuclear arsenals but also by technological competition and information dominance. Another important feature of South Asian nuclear politics during this period was the persistence of crisis behavior despite nuclear deterrence. Rather than eliminating conflict, nuclear weapons appear to have created a situation in which limited military actions are undertaken under the assumption that escalation can be controlled. The Balakot episode and subsequent tensions illustrated how leaders may engage in risk-taking behavior while relying on nuclear deterrence to prevent full-scale war. This phenomenon challenges classical theories of deterrence and suggests that nuclear weapons can simultaneously restrain and encourage strategic competition.

The role of political leadership has also been central to strategic stability. Decisions during crises are influenced not only by military calculations but also by domestic politics, public opinion, nationalism, and leadership perceptions. Strong nationalist narratives in both India and Pakistan have often intensified political pressures during crises, reducing the space for diplomatic compromise. Political leaders frequently face demands to demonstrate resolve and credibility, which can contribute to escalation risks even when both sides seek to avoid war. Political psychology therefore becomes essential for understanding how emotions, perceptions, and cognitive biases influence nuclear decision-making in South Asia. The regional strategic environment has become increasingly complex due to the triangular relationship among India, Pakistan, and China. China's military modernization and its strategic competition with India have added a new dimension to South Asian security. As India strengthens its capabilities to address challenges from China, Pakistan perceives shifts in the regional balance of power and adjusts its security policies accordingly. This interconnected rivalry has transformed South Asian nuclear politics from a purely bilateral competition into a broader regional security system.

The nuclear politics in South Asia between 2019 and 2026 was characterized by strategic competition, technological transformation, doctrinal evolution, and recurring crises. Although nuclear deterrence has prevented large-scale war, it has not eliminated instability or the risk of escalation. The region continues to face significant challenges arising from misperceptions, emerging technologies, political nationalism, and evolving military doctrines. Sustaining strategic stability will require enhanced crisis-management

mechanisms, effective communication channels, confidence-building measures, and sustained diplomatic engagement among regional actors. Understanding these dynamics is essential for preventing future crises and ensuring long-term peace and security in South Asia.

Emotion and Risk Perception in South Asian Crises

Emotion and risk perception are critical factors in understanding crisis behavior and decision-making in South Asia. Traditional strategic theories assume that political leaders make rational calculations based on objective assessments of costs and benefits. However, Political Psychology demonstrates that leaders often interpret threats through emotional and cognitive lenses, particularly during high-stakes crises involving national security and nuclear deterrence. Emotions such as fear, anger, anxiety, humiliation, and national pride significantly shape how leaders perceive risks and formulate policy responses (McDermott, 2025). In the context of South Asia, where India and Pakistan have experienced repeated military confrontations, emotional reactions frequently influence strategic calculations. During crises, leaders operate under intense pressure, limited information, and severe time constraints. Under such conditions, emotions become powerful determinants of decision-making. Fear may encourage caution and diplomatic engagement, while anger can increase perceptions of resolve and encourage risk-taking behavior. Research suggests that leaders who publicly express anger are often perceived as more credible and determined, which can influence both domestic audiences and adversaries (Yoon, 2026).

Risk perception is equally important because decision-makers do not assess threats objectively. Rather, their perceptions are shaped by prior experiences, ideological beliefs, domestic political pressures, and emotional states. During South Asian crises, political leaders often face strong nationalist expectations that can amplify perceptions of threat and reduce the willingness to compromise. Public mobilization, media narratives, and political rhetoric may create an environment in which leaders perceive greater risks in appearing weak than in pursuing escalatory policies. Recent research highlights how emotionally charged political messaging can increase nationalist sentiment and public support for assertive actions during interstate crises. The Pulwama-Balakot crisis of 2019 provides a significant example of how emotions and risk perceptions can shape crisis behavior. Following the terrorist attack in Pulwama and India's subsequent airstrike in Balakot, both governments faced intense domestic pressure to demonstrate strength and resolve. Nationalist narratives, public outrage, and concerns about credibility influenced strategic choices on both sides. Although neither state sought full-scale war, the interaction of emotional responses and perceived risks increased the possibility of miscalculation and escalation. Similar patterns have continued to influence subsequent crises and military standoffs in the region.

Political Psychology therefore offers a deeper understanding of South Asian crises by revealing how emotions influence threat perception, risk assessment, and strategic decision-making. Rather than viewing emotions as obstacles to rationality, contemporary scholarship recognizes them as integral components of political judgment. Understanding the interaction between emotion and risk perception is essential for improving crisis management, reducing misperceptions, and strengthening strategic stability in one of the world's most volatile nuclear regions.

Crisis Decision-Making and Nuclear Escalation Dynamics

Crisis decision-making is one of the most critical aspects of international security, particularly in regions where nuclear weapons are integrated into national defense strategies. In nuclearized environments, decisions made by political and military leaders during moments of tension can have far-reaching consequences for regional and global stability. South Asia, characterized by the long-standing rivalry between India and Pakistan, provides a significant case for understanding how crisis decision-making

influences nuclear escalation dynamics. The presence of nuclear weapons has altered the nature of conflict in the region, creating a complex environment in which leaders must balance military objectives, political pressures, and the risks associated with escalation. Traditional theories of deterrence argue that nuclear weapons reduce the likelihood of large-scale war because of the catastrophic consequences associated with their use (Sagan & Waltz, 2013). However, the existence of nuclear deterrence does not eliminate crises; rather, it changes the way crises are managed and perceived. Political leaders often operate under conditions of uncertainty, incomplete information, and intense time pressure. In such situations, decision-making is rarely fully rational. Instead, leaders rely on perceptions, assumptions, emotions, and cognitive shortcuts that may influence their judgments and strategic choices (Jervis, 1976).

One of the most important factors shaping crisis decision-making is threat perception. Leaders assess threats not only on the basis of objective military capabilities but also through subjective interpretations of an adversary's intentions. Misperceptions can emerge when decision-makers misunderstand signals, overestimate hostile intentions, or underestimate the risks of escalation. Jervis (1976) argues that perception and misperception are central elements of international politics because leaders frequently interpret information through existing beliefs and biases. During a crisis, these psychological tendencies may lead to decisions that unintentionally intensify tensions. The concept of nuclear escalation dynamics refers to the process through which a political or military confrontation gradually moves toward higher levels of conflict and potentially nuclear use. Escalation does not occur automatically; rather, it is influenced by a series of decisions made by leaders responding to evolving circumstances. Each action taken by one state often generates a counteraction from the other, creating an action-reaction cycle that can become increasingly difficult to control. In South Asia, this dynamic has been evident during several crises where limited military actions generated fears of broader escalation.

The Pulwama-Balakot crisis of 2019 illustrates the complexity of crisis decision-making in a nuclear environment. Following the terrorist attack in Pulwama, India launched airstrikes in Balakot, prompting a military response from Pakistan. Although both countries ultimately avoided full-scale conflict, the crisis demonstrated how rapidly tensions can escalate between nuclear-armed rivals. Domestic political pressures, public expectations, nationalist rhetoric, and concerns regarding credibility all influenced the decisions of policymakers. The crisis highlighted that nuclear deterrence does not prevent risk-taking behavior; instead, leaders may engage in limited military actions while assuming that escalation can be managed and controlled (Narang, 2022). Political psychology provides additional insight into escalation dynamics by emphasizing the role of emotions in decision-making. Emotions such as fear, anger, humiliation, and pride can significantly influence leaders' assessments of risk. Fear may encourage restraint and caution, while anger can increase confidence and willingness to accept greater risks. During crises, leaders often face pressure to demonstrate resolve and avoid appearing weak before domestic and international audiences. These emotional and political pressures may narrow the range of available policy options and increase the probability of escalation (McDermott, 2020).

Another important factor influencing nuclear escalation dynamics is technological change. Advances in missile systems, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, and surveillance technologies have transformed the strategic environment. While these technologies can enhance military effectiveness, they may also reduce decision-making time during crises. Leaders may feel compelled to act quickly before losing strategic advantages, thereby increasing the likelihood of miscalculation. The growing speed of modern warfare places significant pressure on command-and-control systems and raises concerns regarding accidental or unintended escalation. Communication and crisis-management mechanisms play a vital

role in preventing escalation. Effective communication channels enable states to clarify intentions, reduce uncertainty, and avoid misunderstandings. Confidence-building measures, diplomatic engagement, and military-to-military contacts can help manage crises before they reach dangerous levels. Historical experience demonstrates that many nuclear confrontations have been resolved not through military victory but through communication, negotiation, and mutual recognition of the risks associated with escalation.

In South Asia, maintaining strategic stability requires a comprehensive understanding of both rational and psychological dimensions of decision-making. Nuclear weapons create powerful incentives for caution, yet they do not eliminate the influence of emotions, domestic politics, and perceptual biases. Crisis decision-making remains a human process shaped by uncertainty, fear, and competing political interests. Therefore, understanding how leaders perceive threats, assess risks, and respond to evolving crises is essential for preventing escalation and preserving regional peace. The crisis decision-making and nuclear escalation dynamics are closely interconnected. The risk of escalation is influenced not only by military capabilities but also by perceptions, emotions, political pressures, and technological developments. South Asian crises demonstrate that even in a nuclearized environment, limited conflicts can generate significant escalation risks. A deeper understanding of these dynamics is crucial for developing effective crisis-management strategies, reducing misperceptions, and strengthening long-term strategic stability in the region.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that nuclear decision-making in South Asia cannot be understood solely through traditional rational deterrence theories. Political leaders operate in environments shaped by uncertainty, emotional pressures, domestic political demands, and evolving security threats. Emotions such as fear, anger, pride, and humiliation significantly influence how leaders perceive risks and respond during crises. The study further reveals that misperceptions and cognitive biases can intensify escalation dynamics, even when both states seek to avoid large-scale conflict. The Pulwama–Balakot crisis and subsequent regional tensions highlight the persistent vulnerability of South Asia to strategic miscalculation. Moreover, emerging technologies and shifting military doctrines have increased the complexity of crisis management and reduced decision-making time. Therefore, sustainable strategic stability in South Asia requires not only effective deterrence mechanisms but also improved communication channels, confidence-building measures, and a deeper understanding of the psychological factors that shape nuclear decision-making in times of crisis.

Findings

1. Emotional factors, particularly fear, anger, and national pride, significantly influence nuclear decision-making during South Asian crises.
2. Political leaders often rely on subjective risk perceptions rather than purely rational calculations when responding to security threats.
3. Domestic political pressures and nationalist narratives increase the likelihood of escalatory behavior during interstate confrontations.
4. The Pulwama–Balakot crisis demonstrated that nuclear deterrence does not eliminate the risk of limited military conflict or miscalculation.
5. Cognitive biases and threat misperceptions remain critical drivers of crisis instability between India and Pakistan.
6. Emerging technologies, including cyber capabilities and artificial intelligence, have reduced decision-making time and increased escalation risks.

7. Strategic stability in South Asia is shaped as much by psychological and political factors as by military capabilities and deterrence doctrines.
8. Effective crisis-management mechanisms and communication channels are essential to minimizing the risks of unintended nuclear escalation.

Recommendations

1. South Asian states should institutionalize regular crisis communication mechanisms to reduce misperceptions and prevent unintended escalation.
2. Political leaders should incorporate psychological risk assessments into national security and nuclear decision-making frameworks.
3. Confidence-building measures between India and Pakistan should be strengthened to enhance transparency and strategic stability.
4. Governments should discourage inflammatory nationalist rhetoric during crises to minimize emotional escalation and public pressure.
5. Nuclear command authorities should receive specialized training on cognitive biases, emotional decision-making, and crisis management.
6. Regional actors should establish protocols for managing emerging technologies, including cyber and artificial intelligence capabilities, in security affairs.
7. Diplomatic engagement and military-to-military communication channels should remain active even during periods of heightened tension.
8. Policymakers should promote Track-II diplomacy and academic exchanges to foster mutual understanding and reduce adversarial threat perceptions.
9. Early-warning and conflict-prevention mechanisms should be enhanced to identify and address escalation risks before they intensify.
10. A comprehensive regional security dialogue involving India, Pakistan, and China should be encouraged to address evolving strategic and nuclear challenges in South Asia.

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