

THE RATIONALE FOR PAKISTAN'S ARMY ROCKET FORCE COMMAND

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The year 2025 witnessed significant alterations in Pakistan's internal and external dynamics, redefining the nuances of its complex power dynamics and strategic posture. The military's position has been strengthened more than ever before, with a series of Constitutional Amendments passed in the last two years. The modernisation of the armed forces has been prioritised, and Field Marshal Asim Munir, now the Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) has been aggressively pursuing military acquisitions, agreements and joint exercises with Pakistan's traditional allies and strategic partners. Pakistan is actively seeking new strategic partnerships, and its evolving relationship with Bangladesh reflects its keenness to expand its footprint in the region.

On August 13, 2025, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif announced the creation of a new Army Rocket Force Command (ARFC) and stated that this would "have modern technology and capability to strike the enemy from every direction".¹ The ARFC

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1. Abid Hussain, "Why has Pakistan Launched a New Rocket Command after India Conflict?", *Al Jazeera*, August 26, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/26/why-has-pakistan-launched-a-new-rocket-command-after-india-conflict>. Accessed on October 25, 2025.

signifies a shift in Pakistan's military thinking and strategic position, which are gearing up to build up conventional missile capabilities under the centralised control of the Pakistan Army to enhance the deterrence spectrum.

RATIONALE BEHIND THE ARMY ROCKET FORCE COMMAND

The four-day India-Pakistan conflict following the gruesome terror attack in Pahalgam on April 22, 2025, demonstrated India's resolve, redefined its war doctrine (Operation Sindoor) and exhibited the effectiveness of India's offensive and defensive capabilities. India's tactical capabilities were effective in striking the key terrorists' sites and the military infrastructure in mainland Pakistan on May 7, 2025, until noon on May 10, 2025. The Indian Air Force (IAF) struck with full force in a calibrated manner by neutralising the Pakistan Air Force Air Defence (AD) infrastructure, which enhanced Pakistan's vulnerability and exposed gaps in its capability. Even though post-ceasefire on May 10, 2025, Pakistan has been driving the chest-thumping narratives of its military, strategic and diplomatic victory, it has certainly recognised its vulnerabilities in its AD and strike capabilities. The four-day conflict has crucial lessons for both India and Pakistan.

For Islamabad, three learnings have been critical. First, the perception regarding the extent of India's military retaliation was dented. The anti-India non-state militant outfits nurtured by the deep state and based in mainland Pakistan, in many ways, cherished the immunity from 'any probable' Indian military retaliation. But this time, the Indian strikes hit the terror bases in the heart of Pakistan with precision. Second, Pakistan's nuclear posturing, which has long relied on maintaining the first use doctrine and projection of a low threshold, failed to deter India from military retaliation. Since the time Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons (1987), the threat of use of nuclear weapons has been used periodically to conduct acts of terror in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and other parts of India, without fear of a potential Indian military retaliation. Pakistan pronounced the nuclear red lines (2002) and has conveniently used the nuclear threat in the past during crises with the intention of managing tensions in its favour. New Delhi's military actions under Operation Sindoor

breached the “vaguely defined” red lines for Pakistan,² and its nuclear threshold has been challenged for the second time (the first time the nuclear threshold was questioned was in 2019, after the Pulwama terror attack). Third, the crisis demonstrated India’s conventional superiority and competence, as India conducted strikes deep into Pakistan’s mainland with deep precision. Pakistan’s air defence and strike capabilities struggled to perform and stood paralysed. The conflict highlighted the vulnerabilities of the Pakistan Air Force, including gaps in its air defence system and the penetrability of its existing equipment. Post conflict, Pakistan appears to be decisively inclined to develop its long-range conventional capabilities to balance India’s conventional might without overreliance on nuclear threats/capabilities. Along with the announcement of the ARFC, Pakistan also unveiled the Fatah IV, a ground-launched cruise missile with a 750 km range, which, according to experts, can penetrate air defence systems and strike targets with high precision.³

MANDATE AND DOMAIN OF THE ARFC

Although there is insufficient documented clarity regarding the ARFC, policy-makers and analysts in Pakistan have made statements that indicate the ARFC’s mandate and domain. According to Lieutenant General Khalid Kidwai, advisor to the National Command Authority (NCA), the ARFC is an “operationally correct step, a bold one and a need of the times”.⁴ The details emerging in the Pakistani media suggest that the ARFC would facilitate a centralised, unified command for Pakistan’s land-based long-range conventional missiles directly under the Pakistan Army

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2. Lieutenant General Khalid Kidwai stated the nuclear red lines in an interview to Italian journalists. Paolo Cotta-Ramusino and Maurizio Martellini, *Nuclear Safety, Nuclear Stability and Nuclear Strategy in Pakistan*, Landau Network – Centro Volta Report, January 2002.
 3. “Pakistan Unveils Fatah-4 Cruise Missile During Independence Day Parade,” *Global Defense Insight*, August 13, 2025, <https://defensetalks.com/pakistan-unveils-fatah-4-cruise-missile-during-independence-day-parade/>. Accessed on October 20, 2025.
 4. Lieutenant General Khalid Kidwai, “Preface: Restraint By Design: Pakistan’s Deterrence Logic and the May 2025 Crisis”, in Prof (Dr) Rabia Akhtar, ed., *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post Pahalgam – May 2025* [Centre for Security, Strategy and Policy Research (CSSPR)], University of Lahore, and Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) Islamabad, 2025, p. 12.

Headquarters, without any intermediary.⁵ This implies that control of the conventional missiles rests entirely with the Pakistan Army.

The ARFC will be accountable solely to the army and would facilitate quick decision-making without the interference of the civilian leadership. According to the Pakistani media reports, the ARFC is expected to function as a corps-level formation, led by a lieutenant general and reporting to the Chief of Army Staff. This entails rapid decision-making, smooth logistics management, and readiness for war.

With the creation of the ARFC, Pakistan has managed to separate the operational employment of the land-based conventional missiles from land-based nuclear missiles. For years, a repeated point of discussion within the strategic community has been that by commingling the conventional and nuclear missiles, Pakistan aims to enhance ambiguity and contribute to strategic instability. With the ARFC, Pakistan intends to distinguish between nuclear and conventional missiles. This brings a different dimension to Pakistan's nuclear posture, which has relied on ambiguity to enhance deterrence. The ARFC is a critical shift from Pakistan's historic position where both the conventional and nuclear missiles were controlled by the National Command Authority (NCA). According to Khalid Kidwai, "The creation of the ARFC also considerably resolves the age-old dilemma which academics have often pointed out of whether an incoming missile carries a conventional warhead or a nuclear warhead."⁶

There has been a crucial structural shift in Pakistan with the 27th Constitutional Amendment ratified in November 2025. The amendment, aimed at establishing the military's supremacy and providing Asim Munir with distinct leverage has restructured Pakistan's national security architecture. A new position, CDF, has been created, held by the Army Chief, Asim Munir, and the position of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC) has been abolished. The operational command of the three forces, the army, navy, and air force, has been consolidated under one authority. The amendment provides for a National Strategic Command (NSC),

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

headed by a general appointed by the civilian leader, the prime minister, on the recommendation of the army chief. The commander of the NSC will supervise the strategic planning and readiness across all the Services. This implies that the army's centralised role has now been thoroughly institutionalised in the country's defence apparatus. The NSC assumes the role of supervising the nuclear arsenal, which was till now managed by the NCA, which had representatives from both the civilian regime and the military, and reported to the CJCSC. This ensured that all the three Services and the civilian leadership had a say in nuclear issues. Although in practice, the army's supremacy in strategic decision-making has rarely been underestimated, on paper, a fair balance was maintained to prevent any one Service or institution dominating the nuclear decision-making. This has been changed by the 27th Amendment.

WHAT DOES THE ARFC IMPLY FOR INDIA-PAKISTAN DYNAMICS?

With a consolidated rocket force, Pakistan aims to counter India's long-range capabilities. The ARFC reflects a shift towards a more structured and formalised missile-centric strategy. The objective is to provide the military with a precise, long-range strike capability to be able to hit deep inside the enemy's (India's) territory without opting for the use of nuclear weapons. Pakistan's military recognises the criticality of building conventional missile capabilities, both defensive and offensive, for future conflicts. The development reflects alterations in military thinking, based on the lessons learnt from the recent conflict with India, as well as assessments of emerging trends in high-technology warfare and strained regional dynamics. With the ARFC, Pakistan intends to achieve graduated response capabilities without escalation to the nuclear threshold. With the Fatah missile series, Pakistan intends to "enhance the reach, lethality and survivability" of its conventional missile systems.⁷

7. "Pakistan Army Says it Successfully Test-Fired a Long-Range Surface-to-Surface Missile," *AP News*, September 30, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-test-fired-long-range-missile-b5bf8fb29fe6f093095deffed051200>. Accessed on October 10, 2025.

Pakistan has continued to project reliance on nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis India; the creation of the ARFC could lead to expansion of the space for strategic deterrence between conventional war and the employment of nuclear forces. Pakistan has perpetually aimed at maintaining a low nuclear threshold, which it believed complemented its strategy of proxy war. In 2002, during India's military mobilisation, Operation Parakram, following the terror attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001, Lieutenant General Khalid Kidwai, the head of the Strategic Plans Division, pronounced four nuclear thresholds to signal Pakistan's willingness and readiness to use nuclear weapons in case of India's military aggression. He went on to state that Pakistan would definitely use nuclear weapons in case the deterrence fails and:

1. If India attacks Pakistan and conquers a large part of its territory (space threshold).
2. If India destroys a large part of either Pakistan's land or air forces (military threshold).
3. If India proceeds to the economic strangling of Pakistan (economic strangling).
4. If India pushes Pakistan into political destabilisation or creates large-scale internal subversion in Pakistan (domestic destabilisation).⁸

Over time, Pakistan's terminology for projecting its nuclear threshold has evolved, but the central messaging has remained unchanged, indicating a low nuclear threshold. Over the last 20 years, the nature of warfare has undergone significant shifts due to emerging technologies, including supersonic and hypersonic missiles, as well as other advanced weaponry. The nuclear brinkmanship has been a regular feature in South Asia due to Pakistan's excessive reliance on nuclear weapons for war prevention. However, the brinkmanship was seen in the Russia-Ukraine War, with Russia's projection of its intent, willingness and readiness to use nuclear weapons. Also, wars have continued between nuclear Russia and non-nuclear Ukraine, and nuclear Israel and non-nuclear Iran. Indeed, the reliance on nuclear

8. As cited in Cotta-Ramusino and Martellini, n. 2.

weapons has failed to achieve the objective of war prevention or the deescalation of tensions. Pakistan has drawn some significant lessons from the May conflict and the ongoing wars, and is now getting ready for an expanded space for conventional confrontation. The ARFC is a critical step in this direction. With the ARFC, the policy planners in Pakistan seek to have an additional layer of strategic deterrence between the employment of conventional forces and the potential use of nuclear forces.⁹ According to Khalid Kidwai:

By creating the ARFC, the Pakistan Army has simply responded to a need of the modern battlefield. All in all, therefore, the creation of the ARFC in the Pakistan Army was an operational necessity to address the demands of the South Asian strategic landscape, and that, in my opinion, has been met.¹⁰

Even though the ARFC is intended to focus on precision-guided strikes and reduce Pakistan's reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence, it is unlikely that Pakistan would move away from its perpetual inclination to use the threat of nuclear weapons during India-Pakistan crises. Following the May 2025 conflict, Pakistan has used the threat of nuclear weapons rather loosely and irresponsibly, citing India's decision to suspend the Indus Waters Treaty as an existential crisis for Pakistan. Field Marshal Asim Munir issued a nuclear threat against India on US soil, followed by Bilawal Bhutto and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.¹¹

THE EXTERNAL SUPPORT: CHINA, TÜRKIYE AND OTHERS

The Pakistan-China strategic nexus started as purely military assistance from China and has expanded into other domains, including the economy (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) and diplomacy. Pakistan is heavily dependent on military imports and assistance from China for its conventional and nuclear build-

9. Kidwai, n. 4, p. 12.

10. Ibid., p. 13.

11. Praveen Swami, "The Print Exclusive: Asim Munir's India Nuke Threat from US Ballroom—'Will Take Half the World Down'" *The Print*, August 10, 2025, <https://theprint.in/world/pakistan-army-chief-field-marshal-asim-munir-florida-speech-nuclear-threat-india/2718095/>. Accessed on August 20, 2025.

up. Approximately 80 per cent of Pakistan's defence exports are from China. Given China's history of providing generous military assistance and support to Pakistan, it is reasonable to assume that the ARFC would be modelled on the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF). In 2016, the PLARF was elevated to a full-Service branch of the military and is responsible for China's conventional, nuclear, ballistic and cruise missiles. Pakistan's nuclear missiles, the Hatf I, Hatf II, Hatf III, Shaheen I, II, and III have similarities with the Chinese M-11 and also the M-18. The conventional missile build-up will have close support from China in terms of technology and training. The ARFC is a critical step to enhance conventional capability and, thus, will be a significant force in terms of numbers, resembling the structure of the PLARF.

Pakistan's relations with Türkiye have evolved over time, and the two nations have collaborated on defence technology and joint ventures. Pakistan is the second-largest recipient of Türkiye's arms exports (2020-24). The defence cooperation between the two countries reflects a growing strategic partnership. In 2025, multiple Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) for defence collaboration were signed, and Turkish support in Pakistan's missile build-up is expected. The latest collaboration between the two nations covers the development of joint rocket technology and precision munitions.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have signed a defence pact, which can be seen as a significant move, facilitating cash-strapped Pakistan with Saudi funds to proceed with missile development and further military modernisation. Access to Saudi funds could also potentially support Pakistan's military acquisitions (plans) from the US. Pakistan has been trying to revive the US' security assistance. Financial assistance from Qatar will also contribute towards Pakistan's overall capacity to channel funds towards defence spending.

CONCLUSIONS

India is closely monitoring developments in Pakistan, which will influence India's build-up and defence planning. India continues to maintain its position of low tolerance for terrorism, and its resolve to respond militarily to Pakistan-sponsored acts of war has been demonstrated more than once. This remains unchanged. New

Delhi has always believed that there is space for a conventional war against Pakistan, and this too remains unchanged. Irrespective of India's position, nuclear weapons have played a crucial role in conflict escalation/deescalation between the two nuclear-armed nations. For India, the Pakistan-China nexus is a crucial challenge as Pakistan continues to leverage China's muscularity. Not only have the Chinese defence exports been persistent, but Pakistan's space-based intelligence capabilities have also benefited from Chinese assistance. It is speculated that China could have extended technical support to Pakistan during the May crisis. Reports suggest that China assisted Pakistan in reorganising its radar and air defence systems and managing satellite coverage over India.

For India, *two recent developments* are crucial. First, the Pakistan-Saudi defence pact. How the pact will impact Pakistan's strategic posture in the region will unfold in the coming months/years. The pact is significant in India's Gulf calculus. Saudi Arabia has been traditionally viewed as a neutral partner by India, and it has now formally aligned with Pakistan. Now, whether the ripple effects of the pact will complicate India's cooperation with the Saudis on intelligence sharing, energy, and other matters, or India manages to reinforce its diplomacy with Riyadh, remains to be seen.

Second, the emerging nexus among Bangladesh, Pakistan, and China. This could raise fresh challenges for India, specifically in its northeast.

There are two *critical aspects to the establishment of the AFRC*. By clearly demarcating a line between conventional and nuclear missiles, Pakistan has added some transparency to its strategic positioning, which could reduce the chances of misunderstandings and accidents during conflict and tension. On the other hand, both India and Pakistan are likely to accelerate the development of precision weapons, and a continued arms race is inevitable. Pakistan would accelerate the expansion of its missile programme, and it appears that it is preparing to use conventional missiles extensively in future wars. At the regional level, the arms race and collaboration of major powers facilitating the arms race will only continue to complicate the strategic dynamics. In this scenario, deescalation of tensions is unlikely.

The United States, under President Trump, has been more generous towards Pakistan, and a reset in the relationship between the two countries has been achieved, which has been a crucial dimension of Pakistan's foreign policy. Islamabad not only gave the credit for the ceasefire to Trump but also nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. The US currently appears to be inclined towards Pakistan's strategic utility in the regional dynamics. Field Marshal Asim Munir is cherishing the US patronage and feels confident and emboldened. This was evident when Munir issued a nuclear threat to India from the US soil (and there was no reaction from the West).¹² It is unlikely that the formation of the ARFC would provoke adverse reactions from the West at this point. After the May conflict, Pakistan has been very aggressively driving the narrative of victory and victimhood at the same time. This, in a way, has created a rationale for its military build-up.

Pakistan, in the past, has continued to build up its conventional and nuclear capabilities with China's assistance, and future acquisitions are expected to see little change. Pakistan's reliance on China will go up as scaling to a large-scale rocket force requires significant investment, and Pakistan's weak economy will be insufficient to fund the build-up of the AFRC. Indeed, there are concerns in the West (the US and the UK) about the arms race and regional tensions, but these are unlikely to pose a challenge to Pakistan's position any time soon. There may be efforts at the international level to address the risks associated with missile transfer technology, and potential initiatives aimed at reducing tensions in the region.

12. Ibid.