

**Marcos André Fortunato**, PhD Candidate,  
Postgraduate Program in Military Sciences, Army Command and Staff College, Brazil  
Email: [fortunato.marcosandre@gmail.com](mailto:fortunato.marcosandre@gmail.com)

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Review Paper

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## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, MISSILE SYSTEMS, AND MISSILE DEFENSE: DECISION COMPRESSION, VULNERABILITY, AND ESCALATION DYNAMICS IN SOUTH ASIA

**Abstract:** *This article examines how integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into cruise missile systems, ballistic missiles, and ballistic missile defense (BMD) architectures reshapes deterrence mechanisms and escalation dynamics in regions characterized by persistent rivalry and compressed decision-making timelines, with particular emphasis on South Asia. Building on a typological-comparative approach, the analysis treats AI as a functional layer that reorganizes the sensor–processing–command–engagement chain across different missile technologies, rather than as an autonomous driver of strategic transformation. The study argues that AI-enabled applications—especially in sensor fusion, target discrimination, and decision support—tend to accelerate operational cycles while simultaneously increasing dependence on data integrity, software reliability, and network resilience. In regional contexts such as the India–Pakistan–China strategic triangle, these dynamics amplify existing dilemmas associated with dual-capable systems, counterforce incentives, and missile defense deployments, narrowing margins for error during crises. The findings suggest that technological advances associated with AI frequently coexist with heightened risks of misperception and inadvertent escalation, reinforcing long-standing concerns identified in the missile age while introducing new layers of vulnerability linked to cyber interference and algorithmic opacity. The article contributes to current debates on emerging technologies and strategic stability by situating AI within the structural conditions of regional deterrence and escalation management.*

**Keywords:** *artificial intelligence; missiles; deterrence; escalation; South Asia*

## Introduction

From the mid-twentieth century onward, the emergence of ballistic and cruise missiles profoundly reshaped strategic calculations, introducing new modalities of deterrence while generating unprecedented sources of instability. As Bernard Brodie emphasized in *Strategy in the Missile Age*, the defining feature of missile-based warfare lies in the drastic reduction of decision time available to political and military authorities, resulting from the combination of speed, range, and destructive potential associated with these delivery systems (Brodie, 1959). This diagnosis builds upon earlier formulations of nuclear Strategy, in which the advent of long-range delivery systems was already understood as a factor compressing political choice and redefining the relationship between technological capability and strategic restraint (Brodie, 1946). Closely linked to nuclear capabilities, ballistic, and cruise missiles became central components of great power strategies. At the same time, their diffusion among regional actors reflected both the pursuit of strategic autonomy and the gradual diversification of deterrence structures (Neufeld, 1990).

In recent decades, the technological evolution of missile systems has been accompanied by a growing incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning techniques into military architectures. Rather than replacing command structures, these technologies reorganize specific functions within the sensor–processing–command–engagement chain, including data fusion, target detection, object classification, and decision-support routines. As a result, AI accelerates information processing and enhances situational awareness in contested environments while simultaneously increasing reliance on data integrity, software reliability, and network connectivity (Bistrion & Piotrowski, 2021). This dual effect—performance enhancement combined with new vulnerabilities—has become a defining feature of contemporary military modernization programs (Khan, Imam, & Azam, 2021).

These developments acquire particular strategic relevance in South Asia, where enduring rivalries among India, Pakistan, and China sustain persistent dynamics of competition and insecurity. In this regional context, the diffusion of ballistic and cruise missiles has been closely associated with perceptions of vulnerability and the adoption of counterforce-oriented doctrines (Sethi, 2021; Sultan, 2021). At the same time, the ambiguous nature of cruise missiles—capable of carrying either conventional or nuclear

payloads—complicates threat interpretation and increases the risk of inadvertent escalation during crises (Acton, 2020). The expansion of missile defense programs further intensifies these dynamics by challenging established deterrence equilibria and incentivizing adaptive responses by potential adversaries (Carter & Schwartz, 1984). Recent contributions have emphasized that emerging military technologies tend to interact with existing doctrines rather than replacing them, often amplifying latent risks embedded in deterrence relationships (Acton, 2018).

Against this background, the integration of AI into missile and missile defense architectures introduces an additional layer of complexity into already compressed decision-making environments. By accelerating detection, classification, and response processes, AI-enabled systems may reduce reaction times and improve operational efficiency. However, these same features can amplify the strategic consequences of misclassification, deception, or system failure, particularly when algorithmic outputs directly inform decisions taken under time pressure. Consequently, technological performance gains coexist with heightened concerns regarding reliability, escalation control, and crisis management in regional settings characterized by high tension and limited margins for error.

In Security Science terms, missile and ballistic missile defense architectures can be treated as security systems: they transform threat signals into protective functions through detection, classification, decision, and engagement routines. AI integration modifies this security-system logic by reshaping threat perception (what is recognized and prioritized), protection performance (how quickly and consistently responses are coordinated), and system resilience (how the architecture absorbs disruption, deception, and cyber exposure stress).

This article addresses the following research question: How does the incorporation of artificial intelligence into cruise and ballistic missile systems, as well as missile defense architectures, reshape deterrence mechanisms and escalation dynamics in high-tension regional contexts, with particular emphasis on South Asia, and what cyber-related vulnerabilities condition this process? It advances the argument that the diffusion of AI-enabled military technologies, in conjunction with regional rivalries and power asymmetries, intensifies security dilemmas, accelerates arms competition, and undermines existing arms control arrangements. At the same time, the integration of AI into perception and decision-support functions reinforces the long-standing problem of decision

compression identified in the missile age (Brodie, 1959), while aggravating ambiguities associated with dual-capable delivery systems, especially cruise missiles (Acton, 2020).

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, typological-comparative approach to identify the core characteristics of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and missile defense systems. Following Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright (2012), typologies enable structured comparisons across analytically distinct categories, highlighting similarities and differences that may remain obscured in isolated analyses. On this basis, the study examines how AI-enabled functions intersect with each technological family, focusing on their implications for deterrence stability, vulnerability, and escalation management in South Asia. The typological comparison is structured around four criteria: decision-time compression, ambiguity and payload/intent interpretability, points of AI interaction within the sensor–processing–command–engagement chain, and escalation implications under crisis conditions.

### **Artificial intelligence as a functional layer in missile and missile defense systems**

The contemporary integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into military affairs has been widely characterized as a selective process of functional automation rather than a wholesale replacement of command structures. In practice, AI and machine learning techniques are applied to time-sensitive, scale- and data-volume-sensitive tasks, such as target detection, object classification, sensor fusion, decision support, and cyber defense. Reviews of the field emphasize that these applications are primarily designed to reorganize information-processing functions, redistributing cognitive workloads within complex military systems while raising persistent concerns regarding reliability, accountability, and control (Bistrion & Piotrowski, 2021). Beyond performance gains, scholars highlight persistent challenges related to data bias, system brittleness, and contextual misinterpretation, which constrain the reliability of AI-enabled military applications in contested environments (Bistrion, 2020).

When projected onto missile systems and missile defense architectures, this process acquires particular analytical relevance. Ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems all depend on tightly coupled chains linking sensors, data processing, command-and-control nodes, and engagement mechanisms. Within such architectures, AI serves as an intermediary, accelerating the transformation of raw signals into actionable assessments. By enhancing the speed and consistency of classification and

prioritization tasks, AI-enabled routines directly affect how threats are perceived, ranked, and responded to under conditions of severe time pressure. In the case of cruise missiles, the interface with AI is most clearly associated with navigation, environmental recognition, and target discrimination in complex operational settings. Although the specific technical implementations vary, the strategic implication remains consistent: algorithmic systems increasingly mediate what is identified as a target, what is filtered out as noise, and how engagement decisions are framed. Surveys of military AI applications highlight target recognition and object detection as among the most prominent areas of adoption, suggesting a gradual reconfiguration of the human role in perception and interpretation within the decision-making cycle (Rashid et al., 2023).

For ballistic missiles and, more directly, for missile defense architectures, the relevance of AI becomes even more pronounced. The defining feature of these systems lies in compressing decision time, as detection, tracking, and interception must occur within narrow temporal windows. In this context, AI is frequently discussed as a means to improve reaction speed and coordination across sensor and interceptor networks. Existing studies associate AI-enabled decision-support systems with enhanced performance in air and missile defense environments, precisely because such systems are designed to operate under conditions of high velocity, saturation, and uncertainty (Khan, Imam, & Azam, 2021). As a result, AI contributes to strengthening the operational coherence of what is often described as a “system of systems,” integrating early warning, tracking, command, and engagement functions. At the same time, this growing reliance on algorithmic mediation introduces a structural dependence on data integrity, software robustness, and network connectivity. Missile and missile defense systems increasingly rely on distributed sensors, communication links, and processing nodes, thereby expanding the surface exposed to cyber interference and informational manipulation. Research on cybersecurity and AI-enabled defense emphasizes that several vulnerability pathways become operationally salient in AI-enabled missile and missile defense architectures: training-data poisoning and data manipulation (including injected false tracks), spoofing and deception against sensors and navigation inputs, sensor interference and jamming that distorts sensor-fusion outputs, command-and-control (C2) exposure through compromised links or nodes, and network dependence that enables cascading failures across distributed components (Abaimov & Martellini, 2022). In such environments, the distinction between technical failure and strategic misinterpretation becomes increasingly blurred.

An additional source of concern stems from the intrinsic properties of machine learning models. Pattern-recognition systems tend to reproduce biases and limitations embedded in their training data, a feature that becomes especially consequential when models are deployed in operational contexts characterized by deception, countermeasures, and adversarial adaptation. The literature notes that vulnerabilities such as evasion attacks and data poisoning may undermine system performance precisely at moments of heightened tension, when confidence in classification and prioritization is most critical (Rashid et al., 2023). This concern is particularly salient in command-and-control structures, where algorithmic decision-support tools increasingly mediate human judgment under time pressure, reshaping authority and responsibility within military organizations (Khan, 2022). Consequently, questions of trust and reliability shift from hardware-centric assessments toward the governance of data, models, and update processes. From a strategic perspective, the acceleration produced by AI-enabled systems has been identified as a key driver of escalation risk, especially in scenarios characterized by compressed warning times and high levels of mistrust (Rashid, 2024). As emphasized in recent analyses of autonomous and AI-enabled weapons systems, cyber vulnerabilities constitute a systemic challenge that can degrade performance and distort strategic signaling (Erendor, 2024).

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that AI reshapes missile-related capabilities through a dual mechanism. On the one hand, it enhances operational performance by accelerating perception and coordination within missile and missile defense architectures. On the other hand, it amplifies systemic sensitivity to informational disruption, error propagation, and opaque decision-support processes. In strategic terms, this combination situates AI at the intersection of effectiveness and vulnerability, linking technological modernization to broader concerns about deterrence stability, escalation management, and crisis control in regional security environments.

### **Ballistic missile systems and strategic implications**

Ballistic missiles constitute one of the most consequential categories of strategic weapon systems, given their close association with nuclear deterrence, rapid delivery, and the compression of political and military decision-making. Defined by a flight profile that combines powered ascent with ballistic trajectories at high altitude, these systems have long been valued for their speed, range, and capacity to overcome geographic distance. As classical analyses of missile strategy emphasize, their most destabilizing feature lies in the

drastic reduction of warning and response time, which amplifies the risks of misperception and miscalculation under crisis conditions (Brodie, 1959).

Beyond their basic technical characteristics, ballistic missiles exhibit significant internal differences that directly affect strategic stability. Variations in range, accuracy, payload, and basing modes generate distinct operational roles and doctrinal incentives, shaping how states integrate these systems into broader force postures (Neufeld, 1990). Later assessments of ballistic missile development further underscore the persistence of stability concerns even as technological sophistication evolves, particularly in regions with limited strategic depth (Neufeld, 2000). In regional contexts, the development of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles has been particularly salient, as geographic proximity intensifies time pressure and heightens the relevance of counterforce-oriented strategies (Sethi, 2021).

**Table 1 - Types of Ballistic Missiles**

Missile Type	Approximate Range	Strategic Use	Examples
<i>SRBM (Short-Range Ballistic Missile)</i>	Up to 1,000 km	Predominantly regional; short-range conflicts	Scud (USSR), Prithvi (India)
<i>MRBM (Medium-Range Ballistic Missile)</i>	1,000 km — 3,000 km	Expanded regional theaters; deterrence of an extended neighborhood	Agni-II (India), Nodong (North Korea)
<i>IRBM (Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile)</i>	3,000 km — 5,500 km	Expanded regional theaters; deterrence of an extended neighborhood	Agni-III (India), DF-26 (China)
<i>ICBM (Intercontinental Ballistic Missile)</i>	Above 5,500 km	Global deterrence; intercontinental offensive capability	Minuteman III (USA), SS-18 Satan (USSR/Russia)

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Neufeld (1990, p. 101) and National Air and Space Intelligence Center (2017).

The typological differentiation of missile defense systems provides an analytical framework for assessing these dynamics. Distinctions among boost-phase, midcourse, and terminal-phase defenses correspond to different operational challenges, technological requirements, and strategic implications. While boost-phase systems aim to neutralize missiles shortly after launch, midcourse and terminal defenses operate under more compressed timelines and greater uncertainty, relying heavily on accurate discrimination and rapid coordination. While longer-range systems are typically associated with strategic deterrence and second-strike postures, shorter-range ballistic missiles play a central role in regional deterrence dynamics and in the entanglement between conventional and nuclear capabilities (Sultan, 2021). From a strategic standpoint, the proliferation and modernization of ballistic missile forces are closely connected to debates on counterforce and escalation control. Improvements in accuracy, mobility, and survivability enhance the perceived feasibility of targeting adversary military assets, thereby reinforcing incentives for preemptive or damage-limitation doctrines (Lieber & Press, 2017). Subsequent studies have reinforced this interpretation by demonstrating how technological improvements in accuracy and sensing capabilities recalibrate expectations about escalation control and damage limitation (Lieber, 2019). At the same time, such developments may undermine crisis stability by increasing fears of vulnerability and encouraging rapid decision-making under uncertainty (Acton, 2020). The gradual incorporation of artificial intelligence into ballistic missile architectures adds a layer of complexity to these dynamics. Although AI is not associated with autonomous launch authority, its use in early warning, tracking, and classification functions affects how threats are identified and prioritized within command-and-control systems. By accelerating data processing and supporting decision-making under time pressure, algorithmic systems may improve responsiveness; however, they also magnify the strategic consequences of error, as misclassification or deceptive inputs can propagate rapidly through decision-support chains (Khan, Imam, & Azam, 2021; Rashid et al., 2023). Taken together, ballistic missile systems remain central to contemporary deterrence configurations because they concentrate speed, destructive potential, and informational uncertainty within a single technological domain. Their evolution, particularly when intersecting with AI-enabled information processing, reinforces the structural tension between operational effectiveness and escalation control. In regional environments such as South Asia, where warning times are limited and rivalries are

persistent, this tension underscores the need to assess ballistic missiles as catalysts of strategic risk embedded within broader security architectures (Sethi, 2021; Acton, 2020).

**Cruise missiles and dual-capable ambiguity**

Cruise missiles occupy a distinct position within contemporary missile arsenals due to their combination of precision, flexibility, and ambiguous strategic signaling. Unlike ballistic missiles, cruise missiles typically operate at lower altitudes, follow non-ballistic trajectories, and rely on sustained propulsion throughout flight. These characteristics enhance survivability against air defenses and enable accurate strikes against fixed and mobile targets, making cruise missiles attractive instruments for both conventional and nuclear missions (Neufeld, 1990; Acton, 2020).

From a strategic standpoint, the most consequential feature of cruise missiles lies in their dual-capable nature. Because the same delivery system can carry both conventional and nuclear payloads, cruise missiles complicate threat assessment during crises. As Acton (2020) argues, the inability to distinguish payload type in real time introduces ambiguity into early warning and decision-making processes, thereby increasing the risk of misinterpretation and inadvertent escalation. This ambiguity is particularly destabilizing in regions characterized by compressed decision timelines and persistent strategic mistrust. Earlier efforts to conceptualize strategic stability already warned that ambiguous delivery systems could blur thresholds and complicate crisis management, especially when conventional and nuclear roles overlap (Acton, 2015). In the South Asian context, cruise missiles have increasingly been framed as instruments of escalation control that nonetheless generate new uncertainties for adversaries’ threat perceptions (Sultan, 2022).

**Table 2 - Types of Cruise Missiles**

Type	Approximate Range	Strategic Use	Examples
<i>(Sea-Launched Cruise Missile)</i>	500 – 2,500 km	Naval power projection; precision strikes launched from submarines and surface vessels	Kalibr (Russia), Tomahawk (USA)
<i>ALCM (Air-Launched Cruise Missile)</i>	1,000 – 3,000 km	Launched from strategic aircraft; enhances nuclear and conventional flexibility	CJ-10 (China), AGM-86 (USA)



GLCM (Ground-Launched Cruise Missile)	500 – 5,000 km	Land-based deployment; integrated into medium- range arsenals and regional doctrines	SSC-8 (Russia), DF-10 (China)
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Source: Author’s own elaboration based on Werrell (2015), Betts (1985), and Hoffman (2021).

The classification of cruise missiles according to range, launch platform, and mission profile provides an analytical basis for assessing their strategic implications. As summarized in Table 2, distinctions among air-launched, sea-launched, and ground-launched cruise missiles correspond to different operational roles and signaling effects. While longer-range and stealthier systems are often associated with strategic deterrence and power projection, shorter-range systems tend to support regional deterrence and limited military options. This differentiation is especially relevant in contexts where states seek to expand conventional strike capabilities while maintaining nuclear deterrence (Sethi, 2021; Sultan, 2021).

In regional security environments such as South Asia, cruise missiles have gained prominence as tools for signaling, coercion, and controlled military action below the nuclear threshold. Their perceived suitability for precision strikes has led to their integration into doctrines aimed at expanding the spectrum of response options. At the same time, this doctrinal logic may erode crisis stability, as adversaries confronted with cruise missile launches cannot reliably infer whether the attack is conventional or nuclear, nor whether it represents a limited action or the initial phase of broader escalation (Acton, 2020).

Technological advances have further reinforced these dynamics by improving accuracy, range, and penetration capabilities. Enhancements in guidance, navigation, and mission planning increase confidence in the ability to strike specific targets with reduced collateral damage, thereby strengthening counterforce incentives and narrowing the perceived boundary between conventional and nuclear employment (Lieber & Press, 2017). As a result, cruise missiles increasingly occupy a gray zone between conventional precision strike and strategic deterrence. The incorporation of artificial intelligence into cruise missile functions directly intersects with these issues of ambiguity and escalation. AI-enabled applications are most plausibly associated with navigation optimization, environmental recognition, and target classification, where machine learning techniques assist in processing complex sensor inputs and supporting mission execution in contested

environments. Reviews of military AI applications identify target recognition and object detection as central domains of adoption, suggesting that algorithmic mediation increasingly shapes how cruise missiles perceive and interact with their operational surroundings (Rashid et al., 2023). While such capabilities may enhance precision, they also deepen reliance on data integrity and sensor fidelity, exposing cruise missile systems to deception, spoofing, and cyber interference (Bistrion & Piotrowski, 2021).

Taken together, cruise missiles illustrate how advances in military technology can simultaneously expand operational options and intensify strategic uncertainty. Their dual-capable character, combined with increased accuracy and AI-assisted perception, amplifies ambiguity at critical moments of crisis decision-making. In regional contexts marked by enduring rivalries and limited margins for error, these features position cruise missiles as particularly salient drivers of escalation risk, linking technological sophistication to challenges of signaling, interpretation, and crisis management (Acton, 2020; Sethi, 2021).

### **Ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems and strategic stability**

Ballistic missile defense systems have long occupied a contested position in strategic debates due to their potential to alter established deterrence relationships. Designed to detect, track, and intercept incoming ballistic missiles, BMD architectures integrate sensors, command-and-control nodes, and interceptor platforms into a tightly coupled operational network. While proponents emphasize their defensive character and contribution to protection against limited attacks, critics have consistently argued that missile defense systems may undermine strategic stability by weakening adversaries' confidence in their retaliatory capabilities (Carter & Schwartz, 1984). Subsequent debates on the offense–defense balance have reiterated that even limited defensive deployments may carry disproportionate strategic consequences on altering perceptions of vulnerability and resolve (Carter, 1989).

From a strategic perspective, the most consequential effect of BMD deployment lies in its interaction with offensive missile forces. By raising doubts about the effectiveness of an adversary's strike, even imperfect missile defenses may incentivize countermeasures such as force expansion, diversification of delivery systems, or the adoption of more aggressive doctrines. In this sense, BMD systems are frequently associated with counterforce dynamics, as they interact with offensive capabilities in ways that reshape

incentives for preemption, arms racing, and escalation under uncertainty (Lieber & Press, 2017).

In regional security environments such as South Asia, the expansion of missile defense capabilities has been closely linked to broader patterns of action–reaction dynamics. The deployment or enhancement of BMD systems by one actor is often interpreted by others as a potential erosion of deterrence, prompting adaptive responses that may include increased missile inventories, improved penetration aids, or diversification toward cruise missiles and other delivery platforms (Sethi, 2021; Sultan, 2021). As a result, missile defense, rather than stabilizing competition, may heighten insecurity and arms competition in regions marked by enduring rivalries. The incorporation of artificial intelligence into missile defense architectures further intensifies these dynamics. AI-enabled applications are particularly relevant for early warning, sensor fusion, target discrimination, and engagement coordination, where rapid processing of large volumes of data is essential. By accelerating detection-to-interception cycles and supporting decision-making under severe time constraints, algorithmic systems may enhance operational effectiveness in BMD environments (Khan, Imam, & Azam, 2021). However, this same acceleration magnifies the strategic consequences of error, as misclassification or deceptive inputs can propagate quickly through interconnected defense networks, shaping engagement decisions at moments of crisis.

Moreover, the reliance of AI-enabled BMD systems on data integrity, software reliability, and network connectivity introduces additional layers of vulnerability. Research on AI and cybersecurity indicates that missile defense architectures, due to their reliance on distributed sensors and communication links, are particularly vulnerable to cyber interference, spoofing, and data manipulation (Abaimov & Martellini, 2022). In contested environments, such vulnerabilities blur the line between technical malfunction and strategic signaling, complicating attribution and increasing the risk of escalation driven by faulty or manipulated information.

Taken together, ballistic missile defense systems illustrate the complex relationship between defensive technologies and strategic stability. While BMDs aim to mitigate vulnerability to missile attack, their interaction with offensive forces, combined with AI-enabled acceleration of decision-making, can intensify counterforce incentives and exacerbate crisis instability. In regions with compressed decision timelines and high levels

of mistrust, these systems emerge as central components of escalation dynamics, linking technological modernization to broader challenges of deterrence management and regional security (Carter & Schwartz, 1984; Lieber & Press, 2017). Contemporary critiques further question the assumption that technological innovation necessarily produces a qualitative break in deterrence dynamics, emphasizing continuity in escalation incentives despite advances in defensive systems (Lieber & Press, 2021).

### **India, Pakistan, and China: Missiles, Artificial Intelligence, and Escalation Dynamics in South Asia**

The strategic interaction among India, Pakistan, and China constitutes one of the most complex and volatile regional security environments in the contemporary international system. Characterized by enduring rivalries, asymmetric capabilities, unresolved territorial disputes, and overlapping deterrence relationships, South Asia presents structural conditions in which technological change tends to produce pronounced effects on stability and escalation. The development and deployment of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and missile defense systems have become central elements of these dynamics, shaping threat perceptions and doctrinal choices across the region (Sethi, 2021; Sultan, 2021). Analyses of crisis stability in South Asia consistently highlight how technological asymmetries and rapid modernization interact with enduring rivalries to produce volatile escalation pathways (Sethi & Roy, 2020).

India's missile posture reflects a dual orientation toward Pakistan and China, combining regional deterrence requirements with broader strategic ambitions. The expansion and diversification of India's ballistic and cruise missile programs have been accompanied by growing investments in missile defense and advanced command-and-control capabilities. From a strategic standpoint, these developments are frequently interpreted as efforts to enhance survivability, strengthen second-strike credibility, and mitigate vulnerabilities vis-à-vis China, while simultaneously preserving escalation dominance in contingencies involving Pakistan (Sethi, 2021). However, this posture also generates security dilemmas, as improvements in Indian capabilities tend to be perceived by both adversaries as eroding deterrence stability.

Pakistan's response to India's missile modernization has emphasized offset strategies aimed at restoring deterrence credibility amid conventional and technological asymmetry. The development of short-range ballistic missiles, the diversification of

delivery systems, and the increasing reliance on cruise missiles are often interpreted as measures designed to counter India's conventional superiority and potential missile defense deployments (Sultan, 2021). In this context, ambiguity plays a deliberate strategic role: dual-capable systems and flexible employment doctrines are intended to complicate adversary calculations and deter both conventional and nuclear escalation, even as they introduce additional risks of misinterpretation during crises (Acton, 2020).

China occupies a distinct yet deeply influential position in South Asian strategic dynamics. While Beijing's primary strategic focus extends beyond the subcontinent, its military modernization and missile developments exert indirect but significant effects on India-Pakistan relations. China's investments in advanced missile technologies, integrated air and missile defense, and increasingly sophisticated command-and-control architectures shape Indian threat perceptions and, by extension, India's own force posture. This triangular interaction creates layered deterrence relationships, in which actions taken by one actor reverberate across multiple dyads, amplifying uncertainty and complicating the management of escalation (Sethi, 2021). Within this regional configuration, the integration of artificial intelligence into missile-related architectures introduces a new dimension to escalation dynamics. AI-enabled systems increasingly support early warning, target recognition, sensor fusion, and decision-support functions, thereby accelerating the cycle of perception, assessment, and response. In South Asia, where geographic proximity compresses warning times and political decision windows are already narrow, such acceleration carries particular strategic significance. Algorithmic mediation may enhance operational efficiency, but it also increases the likelihood that errors, false positives, or deceptive inputs propagate rapidly through command-and-control systems, shaping decisions under acute time pressure (Khan, Imam, & Azam, 2021; Rashid et al., 2023).

The informational and cyber dimensions of regional competition compound these risks. Missile systems and missile defense architectures depend on dense networks of sensors, communication links, and data-processing nodes, all of which constitute potential targets for cyber interference and manipulation. In crisis scenarios, disruptions affecting data integrity or system reliability may blur the distinction between technical malfunction and hostile intent, complicating attribution and heightening escalation risks. As research on AI and cybersecurity underscores, adversarial exploitation of vulnerabilities in data-driven

systems poses a systemic challenge for military organizations operating under conditions of contestation and mistrust (Abaimov & Martellini, 2022).

Taken together, the interaction of missile technologies, artificial intelligence, and regional rivalries in South Asia produces a strategic environment marked by heightened sensitivity to misperception and rapid escalation. While states seek to leverage technological advances to enhance deterrence and operational effectiveness, these same advances compress decision timelines and amplify the consequences of error. In the triangular relationship among India, Pakistan, and China, AI-enabled missile and defense systems thus emerge as critical factors shaping crisis stability, linking technological modernization to enduring challenges of signaling, interpretation, and escalation control.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined how the integration of artificial intelligence into cruise and ballistic missile systems, as well as missile defense architectures, reshapes deterrence mechanisms and escalation dynamics in high-tension regional environments, with particular emphasis on South Asia. By adopting a typological-comparative approach, the analysis treated AI not as an isolated technological innovation, but as a functional layer that reorganizes the sensor–processing–command–engagement chain across different families of missile technologies. This perspective enabled connecting operational changes to broader strategic consequences, especially those related to decision compression, ambiguity, and crisis stability.

Across ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and ballistic missile defense systems, the findings indicate that AI-enabled functions tend to accelerate perception and coordination while simultaneously increasing dependence on data integrity, software reliability, and network resilience. These dynamics reinforce long-standing concerns associated with the missile age—most notably the reduction of political decision time—while introducing new forms of vulnerability linked to cyber interference, misclassification, and opaque algorithmic mediation. Rather than resolving deterrence dilemmas, technological gains in speed and precision often coexist with heightened risks of misperception and inadvertent escalation.

The South Asian case illustrates these tensions with particular clarity. Enduring rivalries, geographic proximity, and asymmetric capabilities already compress warning

times and complicate signaling among India, Pakistan, and China. Within this context, the diffusion of AI-enabled missile and defense systems amplifies action–reaction dynamics, intensifies counterforce incentives, and narrows the margin for error in crisis management. The triangular nature of regional interactions further magnifies these effects, as technological and doctrinal adjustments by one actor reverberate across multiple deterrence relationships. The contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that artificial intelligence should be analyzed as a structural accelerator of existing strategic pressures rather than as a purely transformative force. By embedding AI within the logic of missile technologies and regional rivalries, the article advances the debate on how emerging technologies interact with deterrence, escalation, and stability. Future research would benefit from closer empirical examination of organizational practices, command-and-control integration, and crisis decision-making processes, as well as from comparative analysis across regions where similar technological trends intersect with distinct strategic contexts.

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