India's Push for Long Range Air-to-Surface Missiles

By
Abdul Wassay

India's accelerating induction and expansion of long-range air-to-surface missiles (LR-ASM) into its conventional stockpile marks a shift in its military doctrine after the May 2025 war with Pakistan. While Indian officials frame this build-up to strengthen deterrence, the pattern raises deeper concerns. By favouring LR-ASMs, India is preparing for deep strikes without risking aircrew. This doctrinal shift may disrupt the already fragile escalation ladder in South Asia and dangerously blur the lines between conventional and nuclear thresholds. LR-ASM missiles could reshape crisis dynamics and deterrence stability between India and Pakistan.

In May 2025, Pakistan shot down seven Indian warplanes, a claim backed by later credible reports. U.S. sources confirmed Chinese-built J-10C fighters shot down Indian Rafales, and Pakistan's Air Chief Zaheer Ahmed Babar Sidhu publicly tallied the Indian fighters destroyed in combat. Multiple reports also identified wreckage of an Indian Rafale and Mirage-2000 at Pakistani strike sites, reinforcing Pakistan's account. India provided no evidence to dispute these claims.

India's response to those losses has been to extensively enlarge its LR-ASM arsenal. In the May war, the Indian Air Force (IAF) used its BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles, French SCALP/Storm Shadow, and Rampage missiles to strike targets from its own territory. Now India openly seeks even longer reach. Reports say India is in talks to procure the Air-LORA long-range missiles from Israel and is also field-testing an 800 kilometer (km) range BrahMos. Almost two years ago, India contractually signed its largest-ever BrahMos procurement (220 missiles, approximately $2 billion) and approved 110 more air-launched BrahMos.

Longer-range missiles enable Indian jets strike "from safe distances," beyond Pakistan's air defence zones, including advanced Pakistani air-to-air weapons like PL-15. Each new LR-ASM thus allows India to hit targets deep from its own soil. After the May war, India is changing its tactics: attack Pakistan without risking aircraft losses. Thus, in the next conflict, Pakistan will also retaliate equally, and this might take the crisis up the rungs of the escalation ladder. Every extra kilometer of range brings Pakistan's "red lines" closer. For Islamabad, even a strike from hundreds of kilometers away could look indistinguishable from a major attack. Analysts note that with 800 km range missiles, all Pakistani cities, from Islamabad to Karachi, lie within reach of Indian jets flying entirely from Indian territory. Some analysts warn there is now almost no conventional buffer: any use of these missiles could be conflated with a strategic attack.

Pakistan's doctrine of "full-spectrum deterrence" is designed to deter threats "at all rungs" of that ladder. In practice, using LR-ASM will make any deep Indian conventional counterforce strike against Pakistan more feasible, and this will be treated in Pakistan as an existential threat. These novel weapons will also cause an illusion of security in India since they will feel that they can launch attacks with no major reprisal by the Pakistani side, or if there is any, then it will be countered. Due to this expansion, India has made limited strikes a more attractive coercive instrument and bargaining an increasingly risky game of brinkmanship. LR-ASM enables an attacker to impose rapid, precision costs on an adversary (targeting runways, command-nodes, air-defences, logistics) without risking pilots, so political leaders can credibly threaten or carry out deep strikes short of general war. This kind of weapon also

compresses the decision-making time windows through which India can compel Pakistan's actions and shift the onus of responsibility of escalation onto Pakistan.

The consequences for deterrence are also stark: a limited conflict in future may have a much higher probability of escalation. Modernization and high-alert postures already leave "little margin for error" in South Asia. When India can hit sensitive targets from 800 km away, and Pakistan retaliate back via its quid-pro-quo-plus (QPQP) strategy, multiple rungs can be skipped, potentially leading to a full-scale war. In such a scenario, Pakistan's Army Rocket Force Command and the Pakistan Air Force's long-range unmanned systems would form part of Islamabad's broader retaliatory and signalling toolkit. Indian strategists may view a layered mix of BrahMos, Rampage, and Air-LORA as a route to "escalation dominance" by pressuring Pakistan while minimising their own vulnerabilities. Yet the May 2025 losses only deepen this appetite for so-called risk-reducing stand-off capabilities, even though classic Kahn and Schelling deterrence theories warn that such confidence in controllable escalation is often an illusion.

LR-ASM expansion after the May 2025 war will generate an illusion of dominating the escalation ladder in the Indian psyche. This increases the possibility of a conventional strike, which would compel both states to skip multiple rungs of the escalation ladder and risk a more dangerous crisis. The May 2025 war demonstrated exactly how LR-ASM capabilities increased the dangers of escalation. In the absence of force posture transparency, plausible restraint signalling, and a solid mechanism of crisis handling, the deterrence equilibrium will be more fragile in the region with major consequences of potential nuclear involvement.

Abdul Wassay is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies, Lahore. He can be reached at info@casslhr.com. The views expressed are those of the author.