



The Pahalgam Terror Attack and Pakistan's Growing Anxiety



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The heinous terror attack on April 22 targeting the tourists in Pahalgam claimed by Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) proxy, The Resistance Front (TRF), and later *disowned*, has been condemned globally and has escalated the existing tensions between India and Pakistan. India has responded with stern diplomatic measures, including the announcement to hold the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance. The treaty, signed in 1960, stood the test of the India-Pakistan crises (till now) and remained in place even after three wars and continued Pakistan-sponsored attacks on Indian territory. Pakistan's reactions to India's decisions have been a mix of acute anxiety and frustration, as expected.

The policymakers and leadership in Pakistan have termed the attack a homegrown terror act, a false-flag operation aimed at maligning Pakistan. Islamabad stated that it "vehemently rejects the Indian announcement to hold the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance" and any disruption of water belonging to Pakistan as per the Indus Waters Treaty will be considered as "an act of war". Pakistan's Senate passed a resolution on April 25, asserting Pakistan's capability to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The resolution states that any provocation by India will be met by a "firm, swift, and decisive" response by Pakistan. Senator Sherry Rehman, a senior leader from the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), accused India of weaponising water and raised the issue of both nations possessing nuclear weapons. Large-scale violations have also taken place along the Line of Control (LoC) after the attack.

1 | <https://capsindia.org/>

The two countries have had a complete absence of diplomatic dialogue since 2016, post the Pathankot terror attack, which derailed the Modi government's affable overtures towards Pakistan. The relationship further deteriorated after the abrogation of Article 370, India's military response to Pakistan's acts of terror and New Delhi's firm position that terror and talks cannot go together.

The long-practised strategy of covert war through terrorism has traditionally provided Pakistan the space to hold a position of denial and shift the blame on India. Pakistan's tenacious relationship with terrorism has been well acknowledged, and its current security challenges are a blowback to the policies it has pursued in Kabul. Although Islamabad conveniently blames geopolitical developments and its alliance with Washington for embracing terrorism, the fact remains that Pakistan opted for sub-conventional war since its inception in 1947 when it launched the first war for Kashmir under the label of 'tribal revolt'. The covert war option for Pakistan evolved over the decades, and Islamabad has subsequently tried to compensate for its internal weaknesses through terrorism vis-à-vis India. It started developing nuclear weapons after the humiliating defeat in the 1971 war and adopted an irrational posture with an unwritten but repeatedly proclaimed 'first use nuclear doctrine' after it acquired the nuclear bomb in 1987. Nuclear weapons have been a shield under which Pakistan felt it could conduct terrorism without fear of Indian retaliation.

In recent years, Pakistan has been facing multi-dimensional crises marked by a prolonged phase of political instability, mounting debt figures, acute polarisation within the country, the military's efforts to tighten its grip over the democratic institutions, its economy, and an alarming security situation with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) launching relentless terror attacks targeting the security personnel. Although the crises are not new to Pakistan, two factors have changed in this period. First is Pakistan's declining strategic relevance, which it cherished for decades, given its strategic location and recurrent engagement as a prime US ally. The US exit from Afghanistan in 2021, Washington's focus on the Indo-Pacific strategy and Pakistan's continued instability did reduce its strategic utility for the West. Second, the Pakistan military's image has been severely dented due to a multitude of reasons - Imran Khan's overt anti-military campaign, which garnered vast support, the inability of the Pakistan army to counter TTP's attacks, and its inability to contain Baloch resentment and counter Pashtun nationalism, who have been, for years, despairingly shouting the slogan "*Ye jo dehshat gardi hai, iske piche vardi hai*".

To contain the growing opposition and potential moves challenging its dominance, the military has taken measures to further alter the power dynamics in its favour and gain a tighter grip within the country. In the last two years, a series of Constitutional Amendment Acts have facilitated the Army's unquestionable control over the state institutions, including the judiciary, which has been assertive in the past. The 26th Constitutional Amendment, passed last year, introduced radical changes in the structure and functioning of the judiciary.

Recently, Pakistan Army Chief General Asim Munir's chest-thumping speech to a group of overseas Pakistanis indicated his growing frustration and efforts to revive declining relevance and respect. The script of the speech was clichéd, and it was from a new actor, General Asim Munir, who has been little known for his verbal expressions (until now). Munir talked about the two-nation theory, asserted that Hindus and Muslims are different, threatened action in Kashmir, and also challenged the growing Baloch resentment, which Pakistan has perpetually blamed on India. He reiterated the two-nation theory while addressing the Pakistan Military Academy parade in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. It is critical to remember that Munir was serving as the head of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) when the Pulwama attack took place in 2019.

The Pahalgam attack is a desperate attempt by the Pakistan military to revive its strategic relevance, resuscitate its reverence within the country, challenge the normalcy in Kashmir, internationalise the Kashmir issue and instigate communal violence in India. Pakistan's reactions post-attack reflect its deep anxiety and, in the coming days, it is expected to once again heavily rely on the following: 1) use the nuclear threat repeatedly, 2) projection of a low nuclear threshold, 3) express deep concerns about regional instability, 4) seek Chinese assistance diplomatically and militarily to counter India. But will these deter the Modi government from responding to Pakistan's continued acts of terror? The answer is probably a resounding "no".

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