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OPERATION SINDOOR

Rewriting the India Pakistan Rulebook

Edited by

AIR VICE MARSHAL ANIL GOLANI (RETD)



CENTRE FOR AEROSPACE POWER & STRATEGIC STUDIES

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Rewriting the India Pakistan Rulebook

Edited by

Air Vice Marshal **Anil Golani** (Retd)



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& Strategic Studies
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CENTRE FOR AEROSPACE POWER & STRATEGIC STUDIES

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To be an independent centre of excellence on national security contributing informed and considered research and analyses on relevant issues.

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INTRODUCTION

Anil Golani

This monograph is a modest attempt by the Centre for Aerospace Power & Strategic Studies (CAPSS) to examine the many dimensions of Operation Sindoor. We take a deep dive into the conduct of the military conflict, especially the use of air power, to understand the unique challenges to Indian security posed by Pakistan's use of cross-border terrorism under the nuclear shadow. We also examine Pakistan's compulsions, its alliances, and expose Pakistan's efforts at narrative building.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not in any way reflect those of the political establishment or the IAF. I would like to place on record my appreciation for the efforts of Air Vice Marshal Ashish Vohra, Dr. Manpreet Sethi, and Dr. Shalini Chawla in assembling this together within a short timeframe, despite their other commitments. We hope that India-Pakistan relations can walk the path of live and let live, if not peace and cooperation as neighbours. However, we fear that more iterations of Operation Sindoor may take place if Pakistan continues to follow the same approach towards India. The monograph, therefore, is an attempt to learn the right lessons from past conflicts as we look ahead into a future which will offer more options on the DIME spectrum. The risk of escalation will never be non-existent. However, Pakistan will also have to bear the cost of its actions.

1. OPERATION SINDOOR: AN OVERVIEW

Anil Golani

Some incidents leave a lasting impact on a nation's psyche, forcing it to shift its strategy as it navigates its future trajectory. Independent India has had many such incidents in its short history, which, when viewed in hindsight, necessitated affirmative action in the national interest. India gained independence in August 1947, facilitated by the British when colonial rule became unsustainable. The process of drawing boundaries between India and Pakistan, which involved many princely states remaining independent at the time, continues to plague relations between them, with no resolution in sight. The liberation of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 have had an impact on the states of India and Pakistan and stability in South Asia. Having fought four wars with Pakistan, one immediately after independence in 1948, followed by the 1965 and 1971 conflicts and the Kargil conflict of 1999, India's response had always been reactive to the situations that it faced. Struggling with alleviation of poverty, economic growth and other development indices, India slowly and steadily charted its own growth story with a vibrant and effectively functioning democracy. Widely recognised today as a significant and growing power in the comity of nations, India echoes the sentiments of the Global South for its rightful place in a world that appears to be increasingly divisive and riddled with conflicts across continents.

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India-Pakistan relations since partition have been bedevilled by the status of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) that Pakistan claims, despite its accession to India by Maharaja Hari Singh, the then ruler of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). Pakistan has continued to use terrorism as an instrument of state policy, giving covert support and harbouring radical militant groups like the *Jaish-e-Mohammed* (JeM) and the *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT). India's decision to desist from using force post the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack and the Pathankot incident in January 2016 displayed strategic restraint, which has been India's strength and acknowledged by the world. However, when the Uri terror attack took place on September 18, 2016, wherein 19 Indian Army soldiers lost their lives, India responded with surgical strikes by the Indian Army on terror launch pads inside Pakistan-occupied Jammu & Kashmir on September 28, 2016. After the Pulwama attack, in which 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel were killed, India responded with 'Operation *Bandar*' on February 26, 2019, carrying out aerial strikes on Jaba Top, a terrorist training camp of *Jaish-e-Mohammed*. This was the first instance, after the 1971 Indo-Pak conflict, that an IAF aircraft crossed the international border to carry out an attack inside Pakistan.

On April 22, 2025, after a considerable gap of six years, the pristine Baisaran valley was rocked by a heinous terror attack in Pahalgam, where 26 innocent tourists were brutally massacred based on their religious identity. Sending ripples of outrage and shock across the country, the initial evidence pointing towards Pakistan prompted the political leadership to take action. This attack was carried out when the US Vice President JD Vance was in India, and the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was on an official trip to Saudi Arabia. The purpose of the attack, in all probability, was to undermine the sense of normalcy returning to J&K, including tourism, which had begun to flourish in recent years. The terrorist attack was intended to create discord within the country on religious lines, internationalise the Kashmir issue once again and test the patience and resolve of the

Indian political establishment. The Prime Minister cut short his visit, and the Cabinet Committee on Security, in its meeting, decided upon unprecedented measures across the Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic (DIME) paradigm. The Indus Water Treaty (IWT) was put in abeyance with immediate effect, visas of all Pakistani nationals in India were revoked, borders were closed, trade was suspended, and the staff strength in the embassy was reduced, including the defence attaches posted in New Delhi. The diplomatic community in New Delhi was briefed by the Ministry of External Affairs, with the Indian Prime Minister and the Minister of External Affairs personally reaching out to leaders worldwide.

Operation Sindoor-Military Conflict

On the night of 06/07 May 2025, the Indian Armed Forces carried out a coordinated attack on nine terror launch pads, headquarters, and training centres across Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). In an unprecedented move, the HQs of *Jaish-e-Mohammed* at Bahawalpur and the *Lashkar-e-Taiba* at Muridke were struck. These attacks were focused, measured and non-escalatory, targeting only the terror infrastructure while ensuring no collateral damage and avoiding strikes on military targets. The message to Pakistan was clear: there would be a cost to pay for any terror attack in India, and that India was willing to stop if there was no escalation from Pakistan.

Pakistan, however, retaliated by carrying out artillery, missile and drone attacks across the LoC and the International Border (IB), indiscriminately targeting civil and military infrastructure. On the night of May 9 and until noon on May 10, 2025, the IAF struck with full force, targeting eleven air bases across Pakistan and PoK with devastating effect. This was done in a calibrated manner by first neutralising the air defence infrastructure of the PAF and sending a clear message that they were vulnerable across the length and breadth of their country. Long-range standoff precision weapons, such as the BrahMos, SCALP, Rampage,

and Hammer, were used with telling effect. The indigenously designed and developed Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) functioned effectively, providing layered air defence against all types of attacks from slow-moving drones to ballistic missiles and loitering munitions. The aerial duel between the IAF and PAF was intense, unprecedented in scale, with Beyond Visual Range (BVR) combat and standoff air-to-ground weapons. The scale of damage inflicted upon PAF infrastructure and resources forced Pakistan to call for a ceasefire on May 10, 2025. India accepted Pakistan's request, stating that 'Operation Sindoor' was only being paused and future terror attacks on Indian soil would be construed as an act of war, eliciting an appropriate response.

While lessons will continue to be drawn from this short and intense skirmish between India and Pakistan, a few key takeaways can already be discerned from the available information.

- (a) With clear political objectives and concerted joint planning, the Indian Armed Forces were able to deliver and achieve military aims in a brief and intense skirmish.
- (b) Joint planning at the apex level and decentralised execution at the individual service level proved to be effective.
- (c) The cyber and space domains were extensively used, and this is a capability that needs to be strengthened through a whole-of-nation approach.
- (d) Active assistance by China and Turkey to Pakistan was witnessed as the conflict unfolded, and India will have to be prepared for a single front with multiple adversaries providing covert support to Pakistan.
- (e) Air power demonstrated its efficacy as the instrument of choice and a potent tool of national power and statecraft.
- (f) *Atmanirbharta* is key to India's defence modernisation and bridging the capability gap. However, it cannot be at the cost of national security, and concerted measures need to be initiated to plug the gaps.
- (g) The need to create theatre commands needs a dispassionate analysis, given the success of Operation Sindoor and the lessons learnt.

- (h) Critical capability gaps of the IAF, including secure communication with Software Defined Radios (SDR), Operational Data Link (ODL), and the paucity of Air-to-Air Refuellers (AAR) and Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft, need to be fulfilled at the earliest.

Pakistan's Compulsions

Pakistan has used its geostrategic location to great advantage since its inception as an independent country. A nation that was founded based on religious identity has deftly managed its way out of many crises through narrative building and alliances with the United States and China, apart from Saudi Arabia and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) states, to its advantage. Having been used by the United States to fight against the erstwhile Soviet Union in Afghanistan, Pakistan played a significant role in providing training, funding and sanctuary to the Taliban, as it was gaining relevance during the Afghan civil war after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces in 1989. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has had a deep-rooted nexus with the Taliban, and Pakistan took great pride in building its relations with them, often portraying Afghanistan as its strategic depth. The United States once again needed Pakistan for its Global War on Terror (GWOT) after the 9/11 attacks by Al-Qaeda. Pakistan used its location once again to great advantage for facilitating the logistics of the multinational forces operating in Afghanistan until their exit in 2021.

Pakistan-China relations, defined by President Xi Jinping as “higher than the mountains” and “sweeter than honey”, go back to Pakistan ceding the Shaksgam Valley to China in 1963 and the construction of the Karakoram Highway that links China’s Xinjiang region with Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). This highway now serves as the main route for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) extending to Gwadar. Both countries view India as a common enemy, and China uses Pakistan as a proxy for keeping India unsettled. The military

relationship is deep-rooted, with more than eighty per cent of Pakistan's arms and equipment coming from China.

Typically, nation-states maintain armies to safeguard themselves against external aggression. Pakistan, however, is a state ruled by its army, which has found it convenient not only to be omnipresent but also to ensure that no Prime Minister is elected without its approval and that no elected government survives without the blessings of the Army Chief. General Asim Munir (now Field Marshal) in a strident speech just before the Pahalgam terror attack called Kashmir Pakistan's jugular vein and vowed to support the Kashmiri brethren in their heroic struggle against Indian occupation. For an army whose entire *raison d'être* is the military threat from India and existential enmity against a secular India, it found itself losing relevance due to a variety of reasons.

Having used Pakistan effectively for peace negotiations with the Taliban in Doha, the United States had lost interest in Afghanistan after the Taliban came to power. Pakistan's bromance with the Taliban ended with the growing presence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban in Pakistan (TTP) and increasing cross-border attacks and clashes between the two. Pakistan army's inability to counter terror attacks by the TTP and rising Baloch nationalism severely dented its image. The Jaffar train hijack on March 11, 2025, carried out by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), resulting in the death of many soldiers and civilians, further undermined the image of the army.

Pakistan had been seething with resentment ever since the revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir and the return of normalcy in the region. With record tourist arrivals and the related economic growth in the region, it was seeking an opportune moment to disrupt the peace, draw attention to internationalise the Kashmir issue, and unite the people in Pakistan. Having used terror attacks in the past, with plausible deniability, Pakistan once again used this option, provoking India to react. Pakistan's offer of help to probe and investigate the incident did not cut ice with India based on its past experience of bringing the perpetrators

of 26/11 to justice, as also the futility of Pakistani assistance in helping the investigation of the Pathankot terror attack. This offer was probably meant to placate the international community that stood against all terror attacks, with its sympathies gravitating towards India.

Pakistan probably did not expect the bold and unprecedented response in the immediate aftermath of the attack that involved putting the Indus Water Treaty in abeyance, apart from other diplomatic and economic measures. There was ample sabre rattling from Pakistan across political parties, with Bilawal Bhutto stating that either water would flow in the Indus or the blood of Indians. Senator Sherry Rehman accused India of weaponising water and threatened the use of nuclear weapons. Pakistan's Defence Minister Khwaja Asif, in an interview stated that the attack was staged by India to create a crisis while also admitting that Pakistan has had a long history of funding and training terrorists for the past three decades, doing this dirty work for the United States and the 'West,' Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar while addressing the media called the terrorists 'freedom fighters.'

Following the end of the military conflict with Pakistan that lasted for a little less than four days, Pakistan portrayed its 'Operation *Bunyan al Marsus*' as a victory. General Asim Munir was promoted to Field Marshal, further cementing his position and restoring the Pakistan Army's reputation as the sole guardian of Pakistan's integrity and sovereignty. With support from China and Turkey during and after the conflict and the bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Pakistan has further consolidated its position as being right while portraying India as the aggressor.

Cross-Border Terrorism Under the Nuclear Shadow

The Kargil war of 1999, which took place in the immediate aftermath of both nations going nuclear, was the first conflict under the nuclear overhang. Pakistan, emboldened by its nuclear capability, underestimated India's response in evicting the Pakistan Army soldiers from the Northern

Light Infantry disguised as intruders, from the icy heights of Kargil, Dras, and Mushko valleys. With a first-use nuclear doctrine, Pakistan has espoused Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD), including the threat of Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNW) repeatedly. The challenge that India faces is unenviable to say the least. Surrounded by two nuclear-armed states, both inimical to India, having fought wars with them in the past, with unresolved border disputes and both colluding with each other, India has several security challenges to contend with.

The Western powers, including the United States, have played into the hands of Pakistan, which has cried wolf every time after a terror attack in India, raising the bogey of nuclear escalation, fearing a conventional response from India. Even though terror attacks in India have invariably been aided and abetted by Pakistan, they have portrayed themselves as the victims of Indian aggression and used every forum to raise the issue of human rights abuses in Kashmir. China's empathy for Pakistan as a victim of terrorism and its clout in regional and international groupings/organisations to speak effectively in favour of Pakistan has also emboldened Pakistan. Nuclear weapons have been used by Pakistan to provide immunity to terror groups like the LeT and the JeM, as well as for preventing India from launching a conventional attack on Pakistan by raising the bogey of nuclear escalation. Pakistan has used nuclear weapons to try to deter India's superior conventional military capability from being brought to bear on Pakistan. India, on the other hand, demonstrated that there is adequate space for traditional conflict under a nuclear overhang.

While the United States and other Western powers have fallen for Pakistan's bait of a nuclear holocaust in South Asia, their appetite has somewhat reduced given their preoccupation with the Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Hamas-Iran-USA conflict and the trade war that the US President Donald J. Trump has unleashed. India's attempts for dialogue with every Prime Minister over the last twenty-five years have been met with terror attacks that have only increased in scale and magnitude. This

itself leads to the logical conclusion that it is the Pakistan Army that calls the shots and does this repeatedly to prove its relevance. Having stopped dialogue and bilateral engagement since the Pathankot attack in January 2016, Pakistan responded with the Uri attack in September 2016 and the Pulwama attack in February 2019. Both the terror attacks led to a calibrated response from India in the form of surgical strikes by the Indian Army on September 28, 2016 and by the IAF on February 26, 2019. India exercised strategic restraint by ensuring that only terror infrastructure was hit with no collateral damage, thereby preventing escalation.

The terror attack on April 22, 2025, which resulted in the killing of 26 innocent tourists in Pahalgam, including a local pony operator, led to military action by India in the early hours of May 07, 2025, that underscored restraint once again in the selection of targets and the method of execution. This time, however, the HQs of JeM and LeT were struck deep inside Pakistan, apart from seven other targets. Retaliation by Pakistan over the next two days led to further escalation with India carrying out strikes on all the major PAF airfields, radars and C2 centres across the country until the ceasefire on May 10, 2025, at Pakistan's behest. The capability of the IAF to carry out precision strikes with Long Range Stand Off Weapons (LRSOW) simultaneously across multiple targets provided the political establishment with an effective tool that could be used to control the escalation matrix. The armies on both sides had not mobilised, while the Indian Navy was poised for action if required, and India once again called Pakistan's nuclear bluff despite sabre-rattling by its leaders. India's No First Use (NFU) nuclear doctrine once again effectively demonstrated the space for conventional conflict under the nuclear shadow.

Conclusion

Operation Sindoor would likely go down as a landmark milestone in the history of India-Pakistan relations. Although the kinetic action of this

conflict is currently on hold, as far as India is concerned, the operations are in a state of *pause*. With India explicitly stating that any act of terror on Indian soil would be treated as an act of war, much water will likely flow below the bridge of India-Pakistan relations. This operation has led to both sides setting new rules not just for military engagement, which was unprecedented, but also in terms of setting aside long-standing treaties that have hitherto stood the test of time. The covert and overt support that Pakistan received from its close friends and allies, including China and Turkey, is a factor that India would have to be wary of in future. India's need for strategic partnerships that still allow it to maintain its strategic autonomy is a challenging task for our diplomacy, particularly in the context of India's quest for *Atmanirbharta*. While employing military power as a tool for statecraft, political will is essential, and the efficacy of air power as an instrument that can not only effectively deliver but also control the escalation matrix has been proved once again.

Even as Operation Sindoor played out from 07-10 May 2025, the Indian Army had not been mobilised and the Indian Navy was only poised for action. The capability of the IAF, which came out clearly through the limited conflict in its rapid execution and effectiveness, given the risks, validates its professionalism as a potent force to reckon with. When the nation looks at the integrated capability development plan of its military power, air power must get the primacy that it deserves as this would invariably be the instrument of choice for deterrence by punishment. With India rewriting the rulebook of India-Pakistan relations the next round would probably require a more robust and swift response with little or no warning. The IAF can not afford to be found wanting and the nation needs to invest and build its capability on a war footing. In order to avoid getting trapped into endless cycles of escalation with Pakistan post any sub conventional operation through a terrorist attack, India's conventional military capability needs to be built up to an overwhelming superiority to deter Pakistan.

2. THE MILITARY DIMENSION OF OPERATION SINDOOR

Ashish Vohra

Introduction

On April 22, 2025, five terrorists of ‘The Resistance Front’ (TRF), an offshoot of Pakistan-based *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT), carried out a dastardly, heinous terrorist attack on unarmed Indian tourists in Pahalgam and killed 26 of them, including one Nepalese national, in cold blood. In response, on May 07, the Indian Armed Forces carried out a coordinated, calibrated, measured, and non-escalatory strike on nine terrorist training camps/infrastructure in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and Pakistan. India offered Pakistan an off-ramp, specifying that if Pakistan did not respond, this operation could be stopped. However, Pakistan chose to escalate and struck a large number of Indian civilian and military targets, from Srinagar in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), down to Naliya in Gujarat. India was therefore forced to respond with punitive air strikes on the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) Air Defence (AD) surveillance radars and AD weapon systems. Pakistan once again chose to respond with attacks on the Indian Air Force’s (IAF) airbases. Consequently, the IAF responded with coordinated air strikes on eleven PAF airbases. **The ferocity and precision of these attacks were such that Pakistan was forced to wave the white flag and ask for a ceasefire in less than four days (88 hours).** Operation Sindoor was a phenomenal success for the Indian Armed Forces and has established a new normal in India’s kinetic response to terror.

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Certainty of Military/Kinetic Response

The Pahalgam terror attack on April 22, 2025, was such a barbaric, religiously-divisive and repulsive attack that it crossed all Indian redlines and completely shattered India's strategic patience. Entire India was united in its resolve that a kinetic/military response should be given to this provocative terrorist attack; the only variables were how, when and where. The element of surprise was hence lost immediately after the attack. Pakistan's air defence was activated immediately after the Pahalgam attack and put on the highest alert state. Despite this, India did manage to achieve strategic surprise with the scale of attack and the selection of targets¹—nine terrorist training camps/infrastructure were targeted and neutralised through a coordinated and synergetic air strike by the Indian Air Force (IAF) and Indian Army (IA) on May 07, between 0105 hrs to 0130 hrs IST.

Amongst the nine terrorist training camps/infrastructure that India attacked, five were across the Line of Control (LoC) in PoK and four across the International Border (IB) in Pakistan. The Sawai Nala camp in Muzaffarabad, the Syedna Bilal Camp in Muzaffarabad, and the Gulpur and Abbas camps in Kotli were in PoK. The Sarjal and Mehmoona camps in Sialkot, the Markaz Taiba camp in Muridke (HQ of *Lashkar-e-Taiba*) and the Markaz Subhan Allah in Bahawalpur (HQ and training academy of *Jaish-e-Muhammad*) were in Pakistan.² The Indian air strikes succeeded in eliminating approximately 100 terrorists, the most prominent amongst them was Abdul Rauf Azhar, who was responsible for the IC-814 hijacking in 1999.³ Ten family members of the JeM chief Masood Azhar were also killed in the strikes. Pakistani senior military and government officials attended the funerals of the terrorists.

Military Objectives and Achievements

One important feature of Operation Sindoor was the precise articulation of the national and military objectives. The strategic and military

objectives enunciated by India's Higher Defence Organisation (HDO) for Operation Sindoor were kept simple, focused and unambiguous.⁴

- (a) Apart from the perpetrators of the terrorist strike, the planners and sponsors of the cowardly terrorist attack at Pahalgam were to be punished. The terrorist organisations like the *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, *Hizbul Mujabideen*, and *Jaish-e-Mohammad* were to be directly punished for their repeated terrorist attacks in India, and their terrorist infrastructure/camps were to be targeted and incapacitated.
- (b) The Pakistan Armed Forces were to be punished and made to pay the price for their continued support to the terrorist organisations. This was to shift the costs of terrorism to its epicentre. Pakistan was to be deterred from undertaking any such misadventure in the future through a comprehensive and disproportionate response. Pakistan was to be taught a lesson that cross-border terrorism would henceforth not be a low-cost option, and there would be escalating costs for Pakistan.
- (c) India largely achieved these military objectives in a record time period of 88 hours.

Sequence of Operations

The Indian government chose the IAF as the first and principal responder for carrying out the calibrated, measured, and non-escalatory response to the terror attack at Pahalgam, wherein the in-depth terror camps were given to the IAF and the terror camps close to the LoC were given to the IA to decapitate.

May 07. The IAF and the IA launched coordinated air strikes on nine terrorist camps/infrastructure in response to the terrorist attack at Pahalgam on April 22. These strikes were carried out on May 07, between 0105 hrs and 0130 hrs. All nine locations were either key training centres or HQ of terrorist organisations like JeM and LeT, which had been responsible for several major terror attacks in India. These strikes

were carried out with extremely restricted Rules of Engagement (ROE). No civilian or military targets, including enemy Air Defence radars and SAM systems, were engaged before the air strikes. India informed Pakistan that they were willing to stop any further strikes if Pakistan did not respond.

08/09 May. Pakistan chose to retaliate with Operation “*Marka-e-Haq*” wherein they carried out artillery, missile, rocket and drone attacks on Indian forward posts along the LoC and in several Indian cities like Poonch, Rajouri, and Kupwara sectors. Pakistan carried out targeted attacks on Indian religious sites like the Shambhu Temple in Jammu, a Gurudwara and a Christian convent school in Poonch. These strikes were aimed at disrupting India’s religious harmony. Pakistan also fired conventionally armed Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs) on targets in India, in the form of the Fatah-I and Fatah-II missiles. The IAF responded with Suppression of Enemy Air Defence (SEAD) attacks through drones and Harop and Harpy Loitering Munitions (LMs) on Pakistan’s AD network, striking their long-range surveillance radars and the PAF’s Surface to Air Missile (SAM) AD systems. On 07/08 May, surveillance radars at Lahore and Gujranwala (possibly LY-80/HQ-16) were targeted and destroyed, and one AD radar at Chunian was destroyed.⁵ On May 09, Pakistan also carried out drone and missile attacks on a few of the IAF air bases.

May 10. The IAF responded to the PAF strikes on its air bases with full force. The IAF targeted eleven air bases of the PAF on the night of May 10. Eleven air bases, from Skardu in the North to Bholari in the South, were targeted with Long-range, Stand-off precision weapons. Approximately 20 per cent of the PAF infrastructure was destroyed in just a matter of three hours. The air strikes targeted the Runways, Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) centres, drone control centres, maintenance hangars, and ammunition dumps. The scale and the ferocity of the IAF’s attacks were such that it forced Pakistan to come down on its knees and

request a ceasefire. The targeting details of the eleven air bases struck by the IAF on May 10 are listed below:^{6, 7}

- (a) Nur Khan (Chaklala) Air Base: Houses the SAAB Erieye AEW aircraft, C-130 transporters, and IL-78 refuelling aircraft. The C2 AD Centre, a Hardened Deeply Buried Target (HDBT), was targeted.⁸
- (b) Rafiqui (Shorkot) Air Base: The Runway and UAV Complex were targeted.
- (c) Rahimyar Khan Air Base: The Runway and Maintenance complex were targeted.
- (d) Sukkur Air Base: Houses F-16 and JF-17 Squadrons. The Aircraft hangar and radar site were targeted.
- (e) Mushaf (Sargodha) Air Base: Houses the Central Air Command HQ of PAF and F-16 and JF-17 Squadrons. The Cross Runway intersection was targeted.
- (f) Bholari (Jamshoro) Air Base: The Aircraft hangar was targeted.
- (g) Shahbaz (Jacocabad) Air Base: The Aircraft hangar was targeted.
- (h) Murid (Chakwal) Air Base: C2 AD Centre, a Hardened Deeply Buried Target (HDBT) was targeted.⁹ The UAV complex operating various UAVs like TB2s and Shahpar-I was targeted.
- (i) Sialkot Air Base: Maintenance infrastructure was targeted.
- (j) Pasrur Air Base: Surveillance Node and radar installation targeted.
- (k) Qadri (Skardu) Air Base: The Air base was hosting F-16 and JF-17 Squadrons. Exact target still not known due to the unavailability of air base imagery.

Weapons Utilised and Rules of Engagement. The weapons used by the IAF to target the terrorist infrastructure and the PAF air bases (through the length and breadth of Pakistan) ranged from the Air Launched cruise missile (ALCM) BrahMos to the Système de Croisière Autonome à Longue Portée (SCALP), Long-Range Air-to-Ground, Supersonic Missile (RAMPAGE), and HAMMER (Highly Agile

and Manoeuvrable Munition Extended Range) long-range precision weapons. The PAF Surveillance and the SAM AD radars were targeted with long-range LMs, such as the Harop and Harpy. The selection of targets was done to ensure minimal collateral damage, no targeting of civilian infrastructure and yet send a strong and stern message to Pakistan. The air strikes showcased the IAF's capabilities of long-range stand-off targeting. India forcefully redefined the ROE, striking targets not only in PoK but also deep inside Pakistan's military stronghold of Punjab province. India made it abundantly clear that no location inside Pakistan was outside India's reach and would be struck with telling accuracy and impunity.¹⁰

Tri-Services Operation. Operation Sindoor was India's first Tri-Services cross-border, counter-terrorism operation jointly planned and synergistically executed. Apart from the IAF, the IA and the IN were also involved in Operation Sindoor. The IA carried out coordinated attacks in conjunction with the IAF on seven of the terrorist camps/infrastructure with Skystriker LMs on May 07. The IA also carried out attacks on the Pakistan Army's hardened bunkers and terrorist launch pads along the LoC. The carrier battle group (CBG) and 36 ships of the IN were deployed in the Arabian Sea for establishing 'Sea Control' and Surveillance along Pakistan's coast.¹¹

Air Defence. India's Integrated Air Defence System (IADS), comprising of the IACCS and *Akashteer*, ensured that all the shooters, comprising of fighter interceptors, long-range, medium-range, short-range SAMs and Low-Level AD Guns, received timely inputs about the incoming air threats. IACCS directed the most appropriate shooter to engage and neutralise all the incoming threats before they could hit their targets. The IADS was successful in intercepting the hundreds of incoming missiles, rockets and drones fired by Pakistan, resulting in minimal loss of life and property. In contrast, Pakistan's Air Defence system performed sub-optimally, failing to intercept the Indian missile and drone attacks.

Offensive Air Defence. India's IADS was successful not only in shooting down Pakistan's missiles, rockets and drones inside our territory, but it was able to achieve 'air superiority' over the enemy's airspace as well. Though not officially acknowledged by Pakistan, **India's S-400 was successful in shooting down one of the PAF's Airborne Early Warning (AEW) aircraft (SAAB-2000) well inside Pakistan's air space.**¹² Also Rafale aircraft with its Meteor BVRAAM (Beyond Visual Range Air-to-Air Missile) was capable of shooting down the PAF aircraft well inside Pakistan's air space. The combined fear of the S-400 and Meteor missiles was so great that it forced the PAF to keep their aircraft well outside the launch envelopes of the S-400 and Rafael and Meteor BVR AAM. This facilitated the Indian aircraft to carry out punitive air strikes at PAF AD infrastructure and air bases, from inside our airspace. **Air defence has metamorphosed and expanded into Offensive Air Defence, which in turn facilitated offensive air power.**¹³

Escalation Matrix. The Indian military's response ensured proportionality (response was in the same domain but larger in scale). India maintained strategic superiority and degraded the Pakistan terrorism ecosystem without risking an uncontrolled war. At each rung in the escalation ladder, India provided Pakistan an off-ramp. All attacks were carried out from within Indian territory using long-range and stand-off precision munitions, which was a testimony to India's deep strike capability.

Offensive Air Power. Operation Sindoor revived offensive air power as a credible, calibrated, and potent instrument of deterrence in India's national security doctrine.¹⁴ In Operation Sindoor, the use of air power in a sub-conventional contingency was taken to the next level with it being used in an unrestricted and unrestrained manner to climb the escalation ladder. Operation Sindoor emphatically demonstrated that the calibrated, deliberate, and focused use of air power in sub-conventional contingencies was non-escalatory, and air power could be utilised offensively in both conventional and sub-conventional

operations, even under a nuclear overhang. Operation Sindoor also unequivocally emphasised air power's ability to produce strategic effects using long-range precision weapons with minimal collateral damage, and to create deterrence while remaining within the bounds of escalatory control. Offensive Air power has tremendous capabilities for waging non-contact warfare and imposing high costs on the adversaries without committing boots on the ground.

Operations

Whole-of-Nation-Approach. One of the defining features of Operation Sindoor was the precise articulation of the national and military objectives, and the complete synergy achieved not only among the three Services but also through the Civil-Military fusion. Operation Sindoor's success was attributable to the 'whole of nation' approach, wherein all the Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic (DIME) measures were synergised to achieve the stated military objective of dismantling Pakistan's military-supported and sponsored terrorist infrastructure and establishing credible deterrence for the future.

Jointness and Integration. This operation was the first conflict after the establishment of the Department of Military Affairs and the appointment of the CDS. One of the primary goals laid down for the CDS was to enhance the jointness and integration amongst the three Services and shed the parochial individual Service interests. Following the Pahalgam attack, the Prime Minister met regularly with the three Service Chiefs to finalise the overall plans. Unlike Kargil, which had three different names for the operations by the three Services, Operation Sindoor had a single name for the joint Tri-Services operation.

Operation Sindoor was a jointly conceived, planned and synergistically executed operation, wherein the core strengths of the three Services were individually applied towards the attainment of the common overall military objective. The overall integrated plans were made under the aegis of the CDS, while the individual Service

plans were executed under the skilful and professional tutelage of the three Service chiefs. **The concept of centralised command, distributed control, and decentralised execution was the cornerstone of Operation Sindoor's phenomenal success.**¹⁵ Additionally, following the operations, there was no effort by any of the Services to claim glory or highlight their achievements individually.

ISR and Targeting Intelligence. The fifteen intervening days between the Pahalgam terror strike and the initiation of Operation Sindoor provided the Services ample time to update their intelligence regarding the terrorist camps, review and refine their strike plans, and enhance their training levels. An initial list of 21 terrorist camps and infrastructure was narrowed down to nine, based on the technical intelligence, such as Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), Multi Agency Centre (MAC), Defence Image Processing and Analysis Centre (DIPAC), and Aviation Research Centre (ARC), and human intelligence such as Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).¹⁶ The Intelligence agencies provided curated strategic and tactical inputs to the three Services in real-time.

The accuracy of long-range precision weapons, such as SCALP, HAMMER, and BrahMos is heavily dependent on the availability of accurate intelligence. Precise target coordinates and comprehensive target intelligence are necessary for programming these technology-intensive precision weapons. The precision strikes executed on the terror camps/infrastructure and the PAF air bases indicate the availability of accurate and up-to-date intelligence folders with the IAF. However, India had to rely on commercial imagery sources, such as Maxar, for the videos and photographs of the destroyed targets, which highlight the inadequacy of ISR satellites for real-time intelligence. This shortage needs to be addressed quickly.

One of the probable reasons for the Pahalgam terror attack taking place was the failure of technical and human intelligence. This failure needs to be thoroughly investigated and addressed as a priority. India's capabilities in ELINT (Electronic Intelligence), COMINT

(Communication Intelligence), and HUMINT (Human Intelligence) are currently fairly limited and require significant enhancement to prevent incidents like Pahalgam in the future. The IAF has issued a tender for ISTAR (Intelligence Surveillance and Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance) aircraft on February 22, 2024, towards this.¹⁷

Pakistan was provided with real-time intelligence about the deployments and movements of Indian operational units by the Chinese. In spite of these inputs, Pakistan was unable to neutralise any significant Indian military target. Pakistan's oft-repeated claims that the Indian S-400 launcher and the IAF air bases had been struck were proven to be false. This highlights the effectiveness of the Indian IADS in neutralising all PAF air strikes and the success achieved in protecting military assets. It also illustrates the success of the shoot-and-scoot tactics employed by our AD weapon systems. Post the ceasefire, Pakistan has taken steps to enhance its surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities by allotting INR 1.7 billion (PKR) towards Optical remote sensing in their defence budget 2025- 26.¹⁸

Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA). The high-resolution drone images and videos of the destroyed terrorist camps/infrastructure on May 07 were prominently shown in the media briefings, immediately after the air strikes. This was a lesson learnt after the 2019 Balakot air strike, wherein we were unable to provide images of the damage inflicted by the air strikes. The IAF also utilised the commercial imagery of Maxar for showcasing the damage inflicted in the air strikes on the eleven PAF air bases on May 10. The high-resolution images of the air strikes clearly highlighted their resounding success.

Civil-Military Fusion. One key aspect that stood out during the conflict was the synergy of the Higher Defence Organisation. The Ministries of External Affairs and Defence jointly planned, formulated, and synergised the diplomatic and military courses of action. This was also evident in the joint press briefings. The initial press briefings were conducted by the Foreign Secretary and two female officers of the IA

and the IAF. Following the ceasefire, briefings were conducted by the Director General Operations of the respective Services and the MEA spokesperson.

New Normal. Post Operation Sindoor, India has reframed the contours of its unwritten national security strategy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has enunciated India's policy against terrorism wherein 'Any act on Indian soil will be considered as an act of war.'¹⁹ This is a more assertive and proactive national security strategy that is aimed at 'prevention, pre-emption, and punishment' as the new normal against Pakistan. If Pakistan continues to use state-sponsored terrorism as a tool for undermining the territorial integrity and religious unity of India, Pakistan would have to bear the consequences of this.

Contribution of Space in Operation Sindoor. The limited number of Indian electro-optical and radar (SAR) imaging, and Communications satellites performed creditably and provided accurate targeting data and other support services for the air operations during Operation Sindoor. However, due to the limited satellite resources and their large revisit times, India was forced to utilise commercial imagery data of Maxar for the Battle Damage Assessment (BDA). The Maxar satellite images of May 10 and May 11 brought out in great detail the extensive damage inflicted the air bases in Sukkur (Sindh), Nur Khan (Rawalpindi), Rahim Yar Khan (Southern Punjab), Mushaf in Sargodha, Jacobabad (Northern Sindh), and Bholari (Northern Thatta district).²⁰ The images clearly illustrated that the Indian airstrikes had created large craters in the PAF runways, and damaged the infrastructure in the PAF air bases.

Cyber Warfare in Operation Sindoor

During Operation Sindoor, India put in efforts to enhance the usage of the cyberspace domain. Cyberspace domain was utilised for both defensive and offensive operations. The cyberspace operations revealed certain systemic vulnerabilities, which would need to be addressed as a priority.

India was successful in limiting the cyber breaches during Operation Sindoor to approximately 150 out of 1.5 million attacks carried out by Pakistan.²¹ India needs to focus not only on enhancing its cyber defence capabilities, but it also needs to develop potent offensive capabilities as well. This should include capabilities for preemptive cyber strikes, digital deterrence, and parallel escalation management.²²

Information Warfare/Cognitive Warfare. Information/Cognitive Warfare has become increasingly more important in shaping the strategic narrative during operations, as perception battles are intensely monitored and commented upon by the international media. India's restraint in providing details of the operations and narrative building during Operation Sindoor was in stark contrast to Pakistan's hyperactive media outreach. Post Operation Sindoor ceasefire, the presentation of comprehensive satellite imagery of the damage inflicted on the PAF air bases and the comprehensive briefings done by the Director General of Military Operations (DGMO), Director General of Naval Operations (DGNO) and Director General of Air Operations (DGAO); the narrative in the international media houses started changing gradually in favour of India. During the conduct of the operation, the briefings by the Foreign Secretary and the Service representatives, though better than during Balakot, were inadequate in feeding the information-hungry international media and shaping the narrative.

International Media Reviews. The aviation experts and international media began writing positive reviews about Operation Sindoor after the DGMO's briefings.

The US warfare expert John Spencer, in his article dated May 14, "Operation Sindoor: A Decisive Victory in Modern Warfare", emphasised, "After just four days of calibrated military action, it is objectively conclusive: India achieved a massive victory. Operation Sindoor met and exceeded its strategic aims—destroying terrorist infrastructure, demonstrating military superiority, restoring deterrence, and unveiling a new national security doctrine."²³ In a detailed report

by Stimson on May 28, the author, Christopher Clary, highlighted that, “India demonstrated an ability to deliver precise standoff attacks across large swathes of Pakistan on each day of the conflict, but especially May 7 and May 10. While Pakistani air defenses likely interfered with or intercepted some attempted strikes, Pakistan has a meaningful and serious vulnerability to Indian air attack.”²⁴

John Spencer, in his article “Operation Sindoor: India’s Indigenous Arsenal Outshines Chinese Weapons” on May 29, praised India, saying, “India’s defence transformation and self-reliance in Operation Sindoor, showcased indigenous weapons systems’ effectiveness against Chinese-supplied platforms.”²⁵ In another article titled, “Why Operation Sindoor Is A ‘Decisive Victory’ In Modern Warfare”, John Spencer articulated that “Operation Sindoor ‘exceeded its strategic aims’ as it neutralised terrorist infrastructure and showcased India’s military dominance.”²⁶ Professor Justin Bronk, in a largely neutral article dated June 02, “Key Questions about the India-Pakistan Aerial Clashes”, emphasised that presently only a few things could be stated with the caveat that they were preliminary findings and based on fragmentary initial data-points. One of the main points that he highlighted was “The Indian Air Force was consistently able to penetrate Pakistani air defences with air-launched standoff munitions to strike a range of terrorist-linked and military sites, despite heavy and well-coordinated defences.”²⁷

Pakistan-China Collaboration. Over the years, the Pakistan-China collaboration in the political, military, technological, and intelligence domains has increased exponentially, evolving into a strategic partnership. During Operation Sindoor, though the Chinese condemned terrorism, they called for restraint on both sides, while implicitly justifying Pakistan’s right to defend its sovereignty.

Over the years, Chinese-origin military equipment in the Pakistan Armed Forces has grown by leaps and bounds and has reached nearly 80 per cent of their total military equipment. Pakistan’s dependence on China for the maintenance and technical support of its military

equipment has become fairly extensive. The major Chinese military equipment that Pakistan used during the skirmish is listed below:

Aircraft: JF-17, J-10 CE and ZDK-03 AEW&C

Air-to-Air Missiles: PL-15 E Beyond Visual Range (BVR) Air-to-Air Missiles (AAMs). These missiles have been integrated on the J-10 CE and the JF-17 Block III. After the terror attack in Pahalgam, China made an urgent supply of PL-15 AAMs to PAF.²⁸

Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs): LY-80/HQ-16 FE, HQ-9/P LRSAM, FM-90/HQ 7B SRSAM, FN-16 MANPADs.

- (a) **Radars:** JY27A LR 3-D air surveillance and guidance VHF Radar, YLC series radars.
- (b) **Networks:** IADS networked AD system.
- (c) **UAVs:** CH-4 and Wing Loong II for ISR.
- (d) **ISR Satellites:** Yaogan and Gaofen Chinese ISR satellites provided Pakistan with satellite intelligence about the deployments/movements of the combat units of the IA and the IAF.
- (e) Though not proven, it appears that the Chinese were providing support to Pakistan in the cyberspace domain and also in the Pakistani disinformation campaign, wherein they extensively utilised Chinese State media platforms for building up false narratives. The Chinese were also intricately involved in building a favourable image for the performance of Chinese-manufactured and supplied military equipment.
- (f) The Chinese want to utilise Pakistan as a proxy for keeping India embroiled in petty conflicts and stymie India's growth. Post Operation Sindoor, China has already committed to providing forty J-35 stealth fighters to Pakistan by the end of 2025. Additionally, China has offered Pakistan its HQ-19 AD system and KJ-500 Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) aircraft.²⁹ India needs to be prepared for even greater collaboration between Pakistan and China in any future conflict.

Pakistan-Turkey Collaboration. While Turkey's support to Pakistan was not on the same scale as China's, it provided valuable niche capabilities to Pakistan. The following is a list of Turkish equipment that Pakistan used during the skirmish:

- (a) **UAVs/UCAVs:** Bayraktar TB2 MALE UAV, Anka-S MALE drones, Asisguard Songar low altitude quad-rotor UAV, Akinci UAV.
- (b) **Loitering Munitions (LMs):** Yiha-III low-cost LMs, Kargu-2 LMs.
- (c) **Electronic Warfare (EW):** ASELSAN systems for EW and secure communication.
- (d) **Technical Support:** F-16s, drones and UCAVs.

Though not confirmed, it is reported that the Turkish drone advisors were brought in by Pakistan to help in UAV operations. This depicts both equipment and personnel dependency.³⁰ Turkey vocally supported Pakistan in the international arena and condemned India's retaliatory action, describing it as aggression. Turkey supplied Pakistan a fairly large number of UAVs at short notice after the Pahalgam terror attack. Pakistan-Turkey military nexus is only likely to become stronger in the future. India needs to be cognisant of this growing military collaboration and take adequate measures to be prepared for it.

Atmanirbharta Success Story

IACCS cum Akashteer Integrated Air Defence System. The undisputed star of Operation Sindoor's stupendous success was undoubtedly the indigenously developed multi-layered Integrated Air Defence System (IADS)—the Indian Air Force's IACCS (Integrated Air Command and Control System). The IACCS successfully fused all the ground-based and airborne sensors scanning the humongous volume of Indian airspace. IACCS provided the Recognised Air Situation Picture (RASP) to all the AD weapon systems (shooters), ranging from the Long Range Surface-to-Air Missiles (LRSAMs) such as the S-400 to the Medium

Range Surface-to-Air Missiles (MRSAMs), Akash systems, and the shoulder-fired QRSAMs, including the Iгла missile.³¹ The Indian Army's Air Defence System, the indigenously developed *Akashteer*, was connected to the IACCS and ensured effective monitoring of the airspace and real-time control of the AD weapon systems of the IA. The IACCS and *Akashteer* synergistically ensured that all shooters, comprising of fighter interceptors, long-range, medium-range, short-range SAMs, and Low-Level AD Guns, engaged and neutralised all incoming threats with the most appropriate weapons. Consequently, the Indian airspace was practically impregnable to the repeated aerial assaults by the large number of armed drones, swarm drones, Surface to Surface Missiles (SSMs), loitering munitions and even Air-to-Air Missiles (AAMs).

Other Indigenous Weapon Systems

The indigenously designed and developed Akash missile system and the MRSAM, an indigenous variant of the Israeli Barak-8 SAM system, jointly developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), were the other major contributors to the success of Operation Sindoor. They were key AD weapon systems of India's multi-layered Integrated Air Defence system that were successful in neutralising multiple enemy aerial threats.

The BrahMos long-range supersonic cruise missile, jointly developed by the DRDO and NPO Mashinostroyeniya of Russia, was responsible for the precise and massive damage inflicted on the PAF airbases.

The Israeli Elbit Systems designed, Alpha Design Technologies locally manufactured Skystriker Loitering Munitions were used by the IA for the precise destruction of the terror training camps and other training infrastructure on May 07.³² PALM-400 (Precision Attack Loitering Munition), which is being produced by an India-Israel joint venture named AVision Systems, was also utilised for incapacitating

critical terrorist infrastructure. The DRDO developed D4 C-UAS system, with its 3 km engagement zone, was highly successful in neutralising the repeated attacks by the enemy drones/drone swarms and contributed to the safety of our VA/VPs.

Surface-to-Air Missile for Assured Retaliation (SAMAR) has been developed by the Maintenance Command by re-engineering the life-expired R-73 and R-27 from air-to-air to surface-to-air missile. SAMAR was effective in neutralising the low-level aerial threats of drones, missiles and rockets during Operation Sindoor.

One of the biggest and most surprising successes of Operation Sindoor was the performance of the legacy gun systems like the L-70 and the Z-23mm Shilka guns; both of which were locally upgraded with a radar input for target detection, electro-optical sights for target acquisition, auto-tracking systems and provision of electric drives. The legacy gun systems consequently became fairly accurate and highly cost-effective in neutralising the slow-moving drones and swarm drone threats.³³

Recommendations

Defence Budget Enhancement. The defence budget of India for the FY 25 is approximately USD 79 billion (the fourth largest in the world), which is slightly less than 2 per cent of our GDP. However, it is significantly smaller than the defence budget of China for FY 25, which is USD 245 billion.³⁴ The defence budget needs to be enhanced to approximately 3 per cent of GDP for the next few years, as there are several critical capability gaps in the technological upgradation and modernisation of our Armed Forces. We need to expeditiously develop/acquire disruptive or asymmetric capabilities for credible deterrence. ‘Deterrence is costly, but wars are even costlier’ is a well-known military adage. India needs to ensure that national security is firmly embedded into the edifice of economic security.

Primacy of Air Power. Operation Sindoor's success has once again unequivocally reiterated the undisputed primacy of air power, which essentially implies that a nation needs to achieve success in air operations to win the war. During any conventional or even sub-conventional contingencies, air power is always the first responder and can hit the enemy's Centres of Gravity simultaneously. In Operation Sindoor, India utilised air power in an offensive, unrestrained, unrestricted, precise and calibrated manner for the first time since the 1971 war, and it produced exceptional results.³⁵ The crippling impact of the IAF air strikes forced Pakistan to ask for a ceasefire in just 88 hours. Operation Sindoor is the shortest military operation executed either by India or any other country, wherein the laid-down military objectives were achieved and operations ceased within just 88 hours.

Joint and Integrated Operations. Operation Sindoor was a jointly planned and synergistically executed operation, wherein the core strengths of the three Services were individually applied towards the attainment of the common overall military objective. The overall integrated plans were made under the aegis of the CDS, while the individual Service plans were executed under the skilful and professional tutelage of the three Service chiefs. The strengths of this highly successful joint and integrated operations need to be thoroughly analysed while finalising and implementing the impending Integrated Theatre Commands. Additionally, the geographical Commands of the three Services should be revamped to have common geographical boundaries and responsibilities. Operation Sindoor has demonstrated that the overall military plans must be made centrally and jointly, but there should be distributed control and decentralised synergistic execution. The Service Chiefs' professional knowledge and leadership skills should be utilised, and they should not be sidelined to raise, train, and sustain personnels in their roles.

IAF Capability Enhancement. Operation Sindoor demonstrated the precision, lethality and coercive impact of the IAF offensive air strikes. The offensive air strikes had a profoundly demoralising impact

on Pakistan's national morale and war-waging capability. It forced the Pakistanis to ask for a ceasefire within 88 hours. The IAF is presently grappling with an acute shortage of fighter aircraft due to the repeated delays in the indigenous fighter aircraft development programme and the time-consuming, cumbersome, and inefficient defence acquisition procedures (with regards to the delays in the procurement of 114 x MRFA aircraft). The IAF is also facing a crippling shortage of force multipliers like the Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) and Air-to-Air Refueling (AAR), for supporting offensive air operations. The IAF's fighter squadron strength has dropped to a precarious level (31 Squadrons), the lowest level in the past five decades.³⁶ These shortages of fighters and force multipliers need to be addressed on a war footing, which has also been recommended by the High-powered defence committee, led by the Defence Secretary in March 2025.³⁷ There is an urgent need to build up the capabilities of the IAF expeditiously, so as to bridge the large capability gaps with our Northern adversary and also be able to cater for a two-front conflict.

Offensive Air Power-Fighter or UAV Dilemma? The self-defence capabilities of modern-day manned fighters, combined with their precision, lethality, and load-carrying capability, as well as their enhanced situational awareness and decision-making ability in complex situations, mandate that manned fighters continue to remain the primary aerial offensive platforms in the foreseeable future. In spite of the rapidly increasing capabilities and ranges of the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (FPV drones, loitering munitions, swarm drones and UCAVs), UAVs still have problems of survivability in contested air spaces and are capable of inflicting only limited damage to the adversarial weapon systems. UAVs would complement manned fighters in offensive aerial operations rather than replace them in the foreseeable future.

Space and Cyber Capability Enhancement. The Defence Space Agency (DSA) and Defence Cyber Agency (DCyA) need to be expeditiously upgraded to Space Command and Cyber Command,

respectively. The capabilities and capacities of Space and Cyber space domains need to be enhanced on a war footing. Following Operation Sindoor, the Indian government has already issued directions to expedite the deployment timelines of the 52 satellites of the Space Based Surveillance (SBS) Phase-3 from the previously planned four-year timeframe.³⁸ However, a lot more needs to be done. India also needs to expeditiously replace the old life-expired Navigation with Indian Constellation (NavIC) satellites with new satellites, strengthen the ground segment and upgrade the Services of NavIC to NavIC 2.0. India needs to move from a predominantly reactive cyber defence posture toward developing a well-defined offensive doctrine. This should include capabilities for preemptive cyber strikes, digital deterrence, and parallel escalation management. India needs to build a dedicated offensive cyber arm comparable to Israel's Unit 8200 or U.S. Cyber Command.³⁹

Focus on Defence R&D and Induction of State-of-the-art Technologies. The military technological edge of India vis-à-vis Pakistan, which was amply visible during Operation Sindoor, needs to be further enhanced while making all efforts to narrow down the military technological edge that China presently enjoys with regard to India. This needs to be achieved through a dedicated focus on the development of cutting-edge technologies like high-power jet engines, hypersonics, long-range precision weapons and Artificial Intelligence. A holistic approach towards technology development needs to be fostered, wherein failure needs to be accepted as a stepping stone to success. The MoD's defence R&D budget needs to be enhanced significantly, and guidance and hand-holding provided to the private defence industry and start-ups. MoD needs to encourage and foster collaboration amongst the DPSUs, the private defence industry, the start-ups and academia.

Strengthen Atmanirbharta. Operation Sindoor demonstrated the success of India's *Atmanirbharta* initiatives. The sterling performance and contributions of indigenous weapon systems and weapon platforms to the success of the operations were indeed commendable and need to be

sustained. The *Atmanirbharta* initiative needs to be further strengthened with a 'whole-of-nation' approach and be made more broad-based. The indigenous development programs of Tejas Mk1A, Tejas Mk II, Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA), the 110 kN high-performance jet engine, long-range precision weapons, larger range BVR AAMs (Astra- II, III), Ghatak UCAV, swarm drones, larger range DEW C-UAS systems and the CATS air warrior program need to be focused upon and speeded up.

Combined Joint All Domain Command and Control (CJADCC). The IACCS and *Akashteer* were a huge success and a crucial enabler for the AD operations during Operation Sindoor. They endowed IACCS's numerous users with an unmatched Situational Awareness that significantly reduced the OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act) loop, the Sensor-to-Shooter time-lag, and ensured the protection of the Indian airspace. India needs to further enhance this network by integrating the naval sensors and their Command and Control (C&C) network (Trigun) with IACCS. Simultaneously, India needs to start working on upgrading the integrated Tri-Service C&C network to the Combined Joint All Domain Command and Control (CJADCC), which would be capable of coordinating and controlling all the sensors and shooters in multiple domains (all the five domains) - Air, Land, Sea, Space, and Cyberspace.

Information Warfare/Cognitive Warfare. India needs to establish a joint Strategic Communication Directorate in the Department of Defence (DoD) and task it with strategic narrative building. The Directorate should be capable of real-time coordination between the three Services, HQ IDS, MEA, MoD and the intelligence agencies. The Strategic Communication Directorate in MoD needs to be headed by a three-star ranked officer and have representation from the three Services, HQ IDS, MEA, MoD and the intelligence agencies. The Directorate should also develop contacts with Indian and international defence experts, who are on the rolls of national and international media houses.

Conclusion

India needs to shed its image of a diffident power and emerge as a more confident, responsible and mature regional power. India needs to expeditiously prepare for the future and build up the capabilities and capacities of our Armed Forces on a war footing as future battles/wars would be appreciably more intense, more widespread (probably two-front) and multi-domain, encompassing land, sea, air, space, cyberspace, and cognitive domains. Future wars would have a greater infusion of technology and Artificial Intelligence and would be increasingly fought in the digital and shadowy grey zones of Cyberspace, Space, and Cognitive Domains. It would need to be an integrated 'Whole-of-Nation' approach with even greater Civilian-Military Fusion for ensuring success.

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3. OPERATION SINDOOR: PAKISTAN'S PERCEPTIONS, PROJECTIONS AND EVOLVING DYNAMICS

Shalini Chawla

The four-day India-Pakistan conflict triggered by the heinous terror attack on April 22 targeting the tourists in Pahalgam, claimed by The Resistance Front (TRF), led to a significant shift in India's war doctrine, its position with Pakistan and redefined red lines. Needless to say, the conflict demonstrated India's military capability and competence, where India conducted strikes deep into Pakistan's mainland with precision. Pakistan's air defence and strike capabilities struggled to perform and stood paralysed. The conflict highlighted the vulnerabilities of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), including gaps in its Air Defence (AD) system and the penetrability of its existing equipment.

However, following the ceasefire on May 10, Pakistan has been on a chest-thumping victory narrative, attempting to mask its strategic defeat, the failure of its low-threshold nuclear projection, and its assets and infrastructure losses. Pakistan's reliance on narratives is not a new phenomenon; for decades, Pakistan has attempted to balance its strategic ambitions, the dominance of the military elite in power dynamics, and the State's weaknesses and limitations with narratives revolving around India's hegemonic posture and Pakistan's victimhood. The narratives were seen as a necessity for Pakistan to justify the use of terror and

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breed militant Islam to conduct its foreign policy *vis-à-vis* India (and Afghanistan).

It would be interesting to analyse Pakistan's perceptions and projections before and after the Pahalgam attack, post announcement of the ceasefire and the pause of the India-Pakistan conflict.

Why Pahalgam?

Crises within Pakistan: Need for a Consolidating Factor

In recent years, Pakistan has been facing a multidimensional crises marked by a prolonged phase of political instability, mounting debt burden, polarisation within the country and the military's efforts to tighten its grip over the democratic institutions and economy. The security situation has been alarming, with the *Tehreek-e-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, Pakistan's declining strategic relevance, which the state has cherished for decades due to its strategic location and recurrent engagement as a key ally of the United States (US). The US did rely on Pakistan for the peace negotiations with the Afghan Taliban at Doha. Pakistan took the credit for bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table with the US and finally getting the Taliban in power (2021), which Islamabad perceived and celebrated as its strategic victory. The US' interest in Afghanistan has decreased significantly post its exit from the region, and its reliance on Pakistan has also diminished. Additionally, the US's increasing focus on the Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China did not offer space to Pakistan.

Second, the Pakistan military's image was severely dented due to a multitude of reasons: Imran Khan's popularity and his overt anti-military campaign, which garnered significant support, the inability of the army to counter TTP's relentless terror attacks, and the failure to contain Baloch resentment and counter Pashtun nationalists, who have been, for

years, despairingly shouting the slogan “*Ye jo dehsbat gardi hai, iske piche vardi hai*” (The uniform is behind all acts of terror).

Pakistan has witnessed anti-military sentiments in the past. General Musharraf’s tenure did witness the assertiveness of the robust judiciary, and General Kayani’s tenure did experience grave humiliation after Osama bin Laden was killed in Abbottabad in 2011. But recent years have probably been the worst for the Pakistan military’s image. Army Chief Asim Munir’s speech at the Convention for Overseas Pakistanis in April 2025¹ indicated his growing frustration and efforts to revive the military’s declining relevance and prestige. The script of the speech was clichéd, and it was from General (Now Field Marshal) 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 challenged the growing Baloch resentment, for which Pakistan has perpetually blamed India.

As Pakistan’s society and institutions stood polarised, and the military has been desperate to revive its esteem and dominance, the India factor probably served as the most apt consolidating factor. The army under Munir has managed to weaken democratic institutions and expand its power through a series of constitutional amendments, including the Army Amendment Act 2023 and the 26th Constitutional Amendment Bill 2024. However, the military felt the need to unify the masses and gather support in favour of the legitimacy of its existence.

Urge to Challenge Normalcy in Kashmir

The situation in Kashmir had been steadily improving, and the Valley had witnessed record tourist arrivals, given five years of stability and improvement in the security situation. More than 3 million tourists visited Kashmir in 2024, marking the most significant number the Valley had seen in decades. The daily footfall at the Nishat Mughal Garden rose to around 5,000-6,000, with non-locals being most of the visitors.²

While Pakistan-sponsored media continued to raise questions on the positive trends in Kashmir, the locals have been cherishing a decrease in the violence (Table 1), a surge in tourism (Figure 1) and also an upscaling of the economic activities in Kashmir (Table 2). A key development indicator is the labour force participation rate of women, which saw a significant change in Kashmir.³

Table 1: Jammu and Kashmir Violence

Year	Incidents of Killing	Civilians	Security Forces
2021	153	36	45
2022	151	30	30
2023	72	12	33
2024	61	31	26
2025	22	28	10

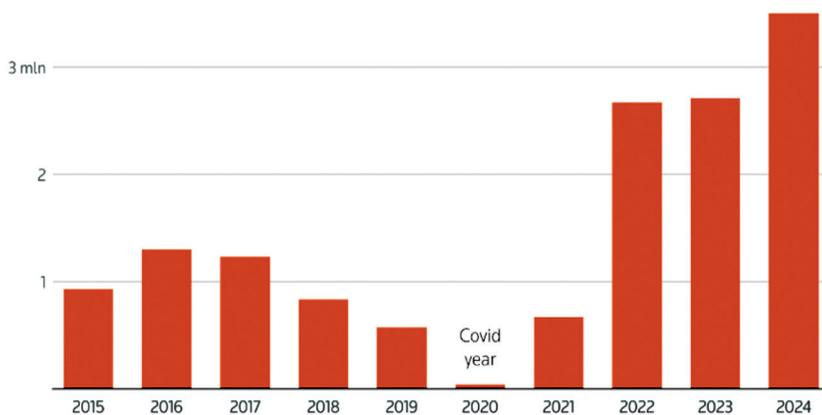
Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) – For 2025.

Note: The data is till July 6, 2025.

**Table 2: Development Indicator in Kashmir
(Labour Force Participation Rate of Women)**

Development Indicator—Female LFPR (excluding family labour)						
	Agricultural Years			LFPR Change		
State	1999	2011	2019	2023	2011-13	2019-23
Himachal Pradesh	35.7	53.6	53.8	60.5	6.9	6.7
Jammu & Kashmir	6.8	20.9	29.1	52.3	31.4	23.2
Kerala	41	38.8	39.8	50.4	11.6	10.6
Tamil Nadu	44.2	41.5	43.6	47.1	5.6	3.5
National Average	30	25.6	26	35.6	10	9.6
Source: NSS and PLFS data; different agricultural (July-June) years; 1999 means 1999-2000						
Note: Data for women aged 25-54 years; LFPR excluding family labor						

Source: As cited in Surjit S. Bhalla, “Kashmir’s Normalcy, Pakistan’s Turmoil”, *Tribune*, May 17, 2025.

Figure 1: Tourist Footfall in Kashmir

Source: By Vijdan Mohammad Kawoosa, Department of Tourism Jammu and Kashmir, as cited in Fayaz Bukhari and Krishna N. Das, “Attack in Kashmir’s Pahalgam Shatters Modi’s Tourism Success in Troubled Region,” *Reuters*, April 23, 2025.

*The Chart shows the number of tourists visiting the Kashmir region annually between 2015 and 2024. There was a surge in the footfall in the past three years, peaking at 3.5 million in 2024.

Developments in Kashmir and the Valley being seen as a terror-free area did challenge Pakistan’s position on Kashmir, which has been built around the so-called ‘call for freedom in Kashmir’. The terror attack in Pulwama triggered India’s military retaliation and a strong signal to Pakistan about New Delhi’s low threshold for terrorism. Although violence in Kashmir came down, frequent statements from time to time were issued by the Pakistani leadership aimed at reminding its own people and the global community that its ambitions in Kashmir are very much alive. It appears that Pakistan’s military felt compelled to keep the pot boiling in Kashmir to be able to rationalise its stature, sustain dominance in the power dynamics and continue to modernise military equipment. Days before the Pahalgam attack in May, Munir did describe Kashmir as the jugular vein of Pakistan and reminded his people that the nation would continue to support the Kashmiri people in the “struggle against the Indian occupation.”⁴

Pakistan Underestimated the Extent of India's Retaliation to Its Act of Terror

India has been firm in its stance with Pakistan, and the two nations have not been in a diplomatic bilateral dialogue since the Pathankot attack in 2016. India's decision to abrogate Article 370 in August 2019 further strained bilateral ties. India's diplomatic presence in Pakistan has been significantly reduced since the abrogation of Article 370. There has also been a growing sense of hopelessness in New Delhi regarding any positive change in the relationship with Pakistan. India has been focused on its economic growth, building up its diplomatic profile and strengthening its strategic posture. India's *Neighbourhood First Policy* (sans Pakistan) has continued to focus on refining and expanding its ties in the region. The neighbourhood remains challenging owing to political and economic factors, and New Delhi has been cautious in addressing the anxieties in its neighbourhood and fulfilling its financial, developmental, and strategic commitments.

India's position on terrorism and its military response to Pakistan's terror attacks in Uri and Pulwama demonstrated a critical shift in India's thinking, which has traditionally been dominated by 'strategic restraint.' India refrained from showing any inclination to engage with Pakistan and remained firm in its position regarding conditional dialogue. Given India's posture, Pakistan estimated a limited military retaliation to the Pahalgam attack, which it felt it was equipped to handle. Pakistan repeatedly issued statements projecting its military preparedness to face India's military actions after the Pahalgam attack. Reports also suggest that the seminaries/madrassas in the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) were closed after the attack, fearing India's military action in the area.⁵ Top militant leaders were also reportedly relocated from their main bases. However, it appears that Pakistan did not calculate the intensity and extent of the Indian response this time.

Pakistan's Anxieties Post Pahalgam Attack

Within 24 hours of the Pahalgam attack, India responded to Pakistan with stern diplomatic measures, including the announcement to hold the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) in abeyance. The treaty, signed in 1960, stood the test of India-Pakistan crises (till now) and remained in place even after three wars and ongoing Pakistan-sponsored attacks on Indian territory. Pakistan's reactions to India's decisions were a mix of acute anxiety and frustration.

The policymakers and leadership in Pakistan termed the attack a homegrown terror act, a **false-flag operation** aimed at maligning Pakistan. Statements/Publications from policymakers and academia came out projecting the Pahalgam attack as a false-flag operation by India.⁶ Islamabad stated that it “vehemently rejects the Indian announcement to hold the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance” and any attempt to stop or divert the flow of water belonging to Pakistan as per the Indus Waters Treaty will be considered as “an act of war.”⁷

After the attack, there were repeated statements projecting Pakistan's **readiness for war** and a response to India's probable aggressive moves. The National Security Committee in Islamabad said that India needs to “refrain from its reflexive blame game and cynical, staged, managed exploitation of incidents like Pahalgam to further its narrow political agenda.”⁸ Pakistan's Senate passed a resolution on April 25, 2025, asserting the state's capability to defend its “sovereignty and territorial integrity against any aggression, including water terrorism or military provocation.”⁹ The resolution stated that any provocation by India will be met with a “firm, swift, and decisive” response by Pakistan.¹⁰

Although towards the end of the conflict, Pakistan claimed that it avoided the nuclear escalation, the fact remains that Pakistan did try to highlight the **threat of nuclear weapons**, and nuclear sabre-rattling was noticeable. Pakistan's Minister of Railways, Hanif Abbasi, in response to India's decision on the Indus Waters Treaty, said, “If they cut off our water supply, (the Indians) must be ready for an all-out war. The weapons

we have, the missiles we have, are not for display. Nobody knows where we have deployed our nuclear weapons.”¹¹ Also, Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) leader Bilawal Bhutto Zardari highlighted a nuclear threat when he said, “I want to tell India that Indus is ours and will remain ours. Either water will flow in this Indus, or their blood will.”¹²

Pakistan’s Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif did use the threat of nuclear weapons, and the *Roznama Jang* daily quoted him, “After the Pahalgam incident, the threat of attack from India is present due to which the military’s presence has been increased and some strategic decisions have been made. The next few days are important... A military action by India is possible at any time because the tension is deepening between the two nuclear powers. Pakistan is on high alert, and in such a situation, we can use nuclear weapons when there is a direct danger to our existence.”¹³ Senator Sherry Rehman, a senior leader from the PPP, accused India of weaponising water and raised the issue of both nations possessing nuclear weapons.¹⁴

Pakistan’s Narratives and Projections

Over the decades, power brokers in Pakistan have heavily relied on narratives to rationalise and garner support for the changing power dynamics, which often involved the expansion of the military’s dominance and its control over civilian domains, to justify military spending at the expense of developmental expenditure, and build alliances with major powers (the US and China). Pakistan has been aggressively pushing some noteworthy narratives in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor.

Denial of support to terrorism is not new for Pakistan, and even while fighting the war on terrorism along with the US, it denied support to the global militant groups. After receiving more than USD 30 billion in aid from the West, Osama bin Laden was discovered residing in the mainland Pakistan. Pakistan’s efforts to shelter the terror groups are well acknowledged. The TRF claimed responsibility for the Pahalgam attack (and later denied it), but Pakistan, as expected, has been playing the

victim card and has denied its role in support of terror factions. Pakistan's Defence Minister did accept Pakistan's role in nurturing terror groups in the past.¹⁵ Bilawal Bhutto, Pakistan's ex-foreign minister, also admitted Pakistan's record of supporting terrorism during an interview with *Sky News*. Despite the repeated confessions and well-known historical details, Pakistan now claims its sincerity towards combating terrorism.

Pakistan has extensively used *the narrative of India sponsoring terrorism in Balochistan* to counter India's claims of Pakistan's support for militancy in Jammu and Kashmir. Balochistan has long been a troubled province, and recent years have seen an increasing resistance by the Baloch groups against the State and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The Global Terrorism Index 2025, released in March 2025, ranked Pakistan as the second most terrorism affected country globally.¹⁶ There has been a 45 per cent increase in terrorism related deaths, and this is attributed to the resurgence of the TTP, intensified attacks by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and growing influence of the Islamic State of Khorasan. The Baloch separatist groups have overtly rejected Pakistan's claims that it is a foreign proxy.¹⁷ The Baloch struggle for their fundamental rights and opposition towards the state's policies has been ongoing since the inception of Pakistan. Post India-Pakistan crisis, the military and political leadership in Pakistan have been aggressively trying to project India as a sponsor of terrorism at the national and international forums.¹⁸

The narrative of civilian casualties and damage has been substantial from Pakistan's side, and according to Lieutenant General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, Director General of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) media wing of Pakistan's military, 31 Pakistanis were killed and 57 were injured following attacks by India along the Line of Control (LoC).¹⁹ Although the Indian strikes on May 7 were precise and targeted the terror infrastructure, the narrative of civilian casualties has been aggressively pursued (by Pakistan) in the media by the leadership, influencers, and policymakers.

Pakistan has hailed the *narrative of victory on multiple fronts*. Bilawal Bhutto stated that Pakistan has won on three fronts: the diplomatic front, the narrative war, and the military front, by defending its borders, “We were told India is a huge country, seven times bigger in terms of resources, with strong ties to global powers. Yet Pakistan not only defended itself but brought down six of their aircraft.”²⁰

The narrative of military victory has been primarily based on Pakistan's claims that it shot down a significant number of Indian jets (5 to 6) on May 7, 2025. India has neither denied losing jets nor provided details on the numbers. This has been perhaps the most crucial narrative for the Pakistan military, as the revival of its image was based on how it managed to declare a military victory against a conventionally superior and larger India. Pakistan has not talked about the damage inflicted on its air bases on the last day of the conflict, which pushed it to a ceasefire. Pakistan was indeed quick in formulating its claims on winning the conflict, although the realities do not align with the claims. Pakistan's victory narrative got all-out support from China, which, for the first time, tested its equipment in a live combat situation. Although the Chinese air defence system failed to deter India's strikes on Day 1 of the conflict, both Pakistan and China have refrained cautiously to avoid attention on this aspect.

Pakistan's *narrative on Kashmir* has been crucial on three fronts. First, Pakistan projects militancy in Kashmir as a “struggle for freedom,” According to Field Marshal Asim Munir, “What India labels as terrorism is, in fact, a legitimate and lawful struggle for freedom, recognised by international law ... Those who have tried to suppress the Kashmiri people's will and pursue conflict elimination instead of resolution have only made the movement more relevant through their own actions.”²¹ Second, Pakistan has continued to position itself in support of Muslims, and ironically, Pakistan's call for the ‘Muslim Brotherhood’ is strong for Kashmir but does not apply in neighbouring Afghanistan, where women are struggling for their fundamental rights to education and work. Third,

Pakistan has consistently tried for third-party mediation in Kashmir, and its desperation for US mediation in Kashmir has been intense post-Pahalgam. Pakistan has been keen on bringing Kashmir under the global spotlight, and with the recent crisis, it believes that Kashmir has once again caught the international attention.

Pakistan's *narratives on the Indus Waters Treaty* have oscillated between emotions of anger, frustration, issuing threats and appeals. India's decision to put the treaty into abeyance was a setback to Pakistan's long-held belief in India's 'restrained' posture. Pakistan termed India's decision on the treaty as an act of 'water warfare' and retaliated by holding the 1972 Simla agreement and closing its airspace to India-owned airlines.²² Pakistan's statement reflected its anxiety and restlessness: "The treaty is a binding international agreement brokered by the World Bank and contains no provision for unilateral suspension. Water is a vital national interest of Pakistan, a lifeline for its 240 million people, and its availability will be safeguarded at all costs ... Any attempt to stop or divert the flow of water belonging to Pakistan, and the usurpation of the rights of lower riparian will be considered as an act of war and responded with full force."²³

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said that India "had no authority" to suspend the treaty unilaterally, and termed this as India's "evil design."²⁴ The military and political elites also issued a series of threats that India's position could lead to bloodshed and war. Pakistan's DG ISPR reiterated Hafiz Saeed's words on the Indus Waters Treaty, when he said, "Tum Hamara Pani Band Kar Doge, Hum Tumhara Sans Band Kar Denge (If you stop our water, we stop your breath)."²⁵ The narrative is likely to intensify in the coming time, given Pakistan's pressing need for water.

Pakistan has expressed *keenness to talk to India*, and repeated statements have been made by the political leadership, even though Pakistan never refrains from threatening India when it talks about peace. This approach more often sounds like blackmail. Shehbaz Sharif

spoke about having a comprehensive dialogue with India and said, “If you [India] attack us, you will lose everything... We are ready for war and dialogue. Now the choice is yours... Let us extinguish this fire. Let us sit together to talk on Kashmir and water.”²⁶ Pakistan has been keen on the US mediation in talks with India,²⁷ and has been suggesting Saudi Arabia as a neutral venue for the negotiations.²⁸

India has maintained a stance that discussion with Pakistan will be only on the issue of terrorism. Pakistan, on the other hand, has repeatedly asserted to have talks on Kashmir and water. Pakistan's eagerness for talks can be attributed to two factors: First, by projecting its desire to hold talks with India, it aims to build an image of a peace-loving nation and portray India as an aggressor. Second, India's position on the Indus Waters Treaty is hurting Pakistan, and it has been keen to find a solution.

Evolving Dynamics in Pakistan

Shifts in the Internal Dynamics

The conflict has significantly altered the internal dynamics of Pakistan in favour of the military and civilian leadership. The military leadership under Asim Munir seems to have gained the confidence and respect of the masses. The civilian leadership, which has been seen as a puppet of the Generals, has gained legitimacy. Imran Khan and his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) have seen a decline in their clout. The 2024 elections were seen as dictated and controlled elections aimed at marginalising Imran Khan. The conflict has changed the public perception in favour of the Sharif government.

The Pakistan military's image suffered a significant blow with Imran Khan's anti-military position and the evolving security situation in the country. The May conflict has undoubtedly altered the dynamics for the military. Asim Munir has been honoured with the title of Field Marshal and seems to enjoy immense popularity post Operation Sindoor. After

the ceasefire, people came out on the streets of different parts of the country to hail the efforts and victory of the armed forces.²⁹ Interestingly, the crowd included members from the PTI and the opposition parties as well.

There has been a significant shift in the public perception in favour of the Pakistan military. Gallup Survey Pakistan released in May suggested, “The Pakistani military received high praise, with 97 per cent rating its performance as good or very good. Public opinion of the army improved for 93 per cent of respondents following the conflict. In contrast, the civilian government received a positive rating of 73 per cent.”³⁰ The military’s image has got a boost, and it has managed to revive its position as the guardian of Pakistan’s sovereignty and integrity.³¹

Imran Khan’s scandalous ouster from the Prime Minister’s office in 2022, followed by a series of PTI rallies and Khan’s relentless speeches blaming the military for the country’s economic and security woes had polarised the nation. Not only did the Pakistani populace stand divided between the pro-Imran and anti-Imran camps, but the divisions were also obvious within the state institutions. Conflict with India and the projection of a military victory against India have changed the dynamics, and the military has offered India as the most suitable consolidating factor to the people of Pakistan. For Pakistan, fighting India and defending its sovereignty and integrity is above all the domestic divisions.

On the economic front, Pakistan’s confidence was bolstered with the comfortable sanctioning of loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Pakistan’s Stock Exchange projected optimism after Pakistan’s proclaimed victory. Pakistan also received lavish debt rollovers from its allies, which significantly reduced its burden of debt servicing in the current fiscal year.

The military appears inclined towards a robust military modernisation and expansion of its nuclear arsenal post-conflict, primarily due to three factors.

First, even though the regime is cherishing its narrative-building exercise and projects India as a loser, it is certainly conscious of the reality. The reality is that India did manage to hit the terror camps in mainland Pakistan, and Pakistan's air defence system was unable to counter India's moves. Pakistan would aim to overcome its conventional vulnerabilities in the coming years.

Second, India did manage to challenge Pakistan's nuclear position of a low nuclear threshold. For decades, Pakistan has positioned its nuclear weapons for war prevention, and the May conflict did challenge Pakistan's position. Even though the nuclear weapons for Pakistan did not serve the purpose of denying India space for conventional war, Pakistan's reliance on nuclear weapons is unlikely to change, and expansion of its nuclear arsenal is not unexpected.

Third, the conflict has legitimised the conventional military build-up for the people, and Pakistan's defence budget has been significantly increased to support modernisation. Even though military modernisation for Pakistan will be at the cost of developmental expenditure.

Shifts in the External Dynamics

Pakistan's Relationship with the US

Over the past four decades, Afghanistan has been the most significant factor in determining Islamabad's relationship with Washington. After the US exit from Afghanistan in August 2021, the dynamics of the relationship seem to have altered. There has been a new resetting of US-Pakistan ties for which the following factors have been crucial:³²

1. The US interest in the region has decreased significantly since its exit from Afghanistan, and its reliance on Pakistan has diminished.
2. The US' increasing tensions with China, Pakistan's closest ally.

3. The US' increasing focus on the Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China, where Pakistan does not occupy any space. The USA has been fully engaged with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), along with India, Japan, and Australia.
4. Pakistan's increasing reliance on China. Pakistan and the US have completely divergent opinions on China.

At present, the US-Pakistan relations are not at the highs of the 1980s and post-2001, when the US military assistance surged, nor are they at the lows of the 1990s, when Pakistan faced stiff US sanctions. A more pragmatic relationship has been evolving between the two states, and the US has been engaging with Pakistan on non-security issues, including energy, trade, climate change, and human rights. The US seems to be recognising Pakistan's cooperation on counterterrorism, and President Trump acknowledged Pakistan's role in the arrest and extradition of a wanted Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) terrorist. Pakistan has been keen on the revival of the security dynamics in the relations and has urged the US to provide military equipment, citing its growing security challenges. Until now, the US has refrained from providing military assistance and has cut down on military aid (Table 3), apart from sanctioning funds for the sustainment of the F-16s.

Operation Sindoor and the US projecting itself as a peacemaker have offered Pakistan much awaited leverage. Pakistan's efforts have been to project itself as an actor which is inclined towards 'peace with India'. Asim Munir's much touted lunch at the White House with President Trump in June has raised hopes within Pakistan about the status of its ties with Washington, the military's prominence over the civilian regime in Pakistan, as well as the potential of the relationship in bringing Kashmir to the international stage. President Trump's direct engagement with the military aims to establish a comfort quotient with the army, which the US views as serving its strategic and security interests. Following the lunch, Pakistan nominated President Trump for

Table 3: Direct Overt US Aid Appropriations for and Military Reimbursements to Pakistan, FY2002-FY2024
(rounded to the nearest millions of dollars)

Program or Account	FY2002- FY2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	Program	FY 2023 (req.)	FY 2024 (req.)
							or Account Total		
CN	341	—	—	—	—	—	341	a	a
FMF	4,073	—	—	—	—	—	4,073	—	—
IMET	52	—	—	—	4	3	59	4	4
INCLE	949	21	40	21	25	25	1,081	17	17
NADR	182	2	2	1	1	—	188	1	1
PCF/PCCF	2,352	—	—	—	—	—	2,352	—	—
Total Security- Related	7,939^b	23	42	22	30	28	8,406^b	22	22
Climate	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	9	37
CSH/GHCS/GHP	295	—	—	3	7	31	336	30	32
ESF/ESDF	8,696 ^c	48	62	53 ^d	45	50 ^e	8,954	54	82
Food Aid ^f	643	—	—	—	—	—	643	—	—
IDA	1,065	36	—	6	3	47	1,157	a	a
MRA	371	4	28	32	2	62	499	a	a
Total Economic- Related	11,356^g	88	90	94	57	190	11,875^g	93	151
CSF Reimbursements^g	14,573^h	^h	^h	—	—	—	14,573	—	—
Grand Total	34,190	111	132	116	87	218	34,854	115	173

Source: U.S. Departments of State, Defense, and Agriculture; U.S. Agency for International Development. Cited in K. Alan Kronstadt, "Pakistan and US-Pakistan Relations", Congressional Research Service, May 22, 2023, R47565, pp. 11-12.

Note: Final obligation and disbursement totals may be lower than program account appropriations

- This funding is "requirements-based"; there are no pre-allocation data.
- Includes USD 312 million "global train and equip" funds from FY2006-FY2009 authorized by Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY2006, within which USD 100 million in FY2008 and FY2009 funds were for Pakistan's paramilitary Frontier Corps.

- c. Congress authorised Pakistan to use the FY2003 and FY2004 ESF allocations to cancel a total of USD 1.5 billion in debt to the US government. Also includes USD 17 million in Human Rights and Democracy Funds from FY2002-FY2007.
- d. Includes USD 7 million in FY2020 COVID supplemental funds.
- e. Includes USD 10 million in supplemental FY2022 ESF under the Additional Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-128).
- f. P.L. 480 Title I (loans), P.L. 117-328 P.L. 480 Title II (grants), and Section 416(b) of the Agricultural Act of 1949, as amended (surplus agricultural commodity donations). Food aid totals do not include freight costs.
- g. Includes USD 286 million in Development Assistance appropriated from FY2002-FY2008.
- h. CSF was Defense Department funding to reimburse foreign forces for logistical and operational support of US-led military operations; it is technically not foreign assistance. Beginning in FY2015, successive NDAA's subjected one-third to one-half of the annual CSF to Pakistan to Haqqani Network-related certification requirements that could not be waived by the Administration. The Administration did not issue certifications for FY2015-FY2018. The NDAA for FY2019 revamped the CSF program, authorizing USD 350 million to support security enhancement activities along Pakistan's western border, subject to certification requirements that have not been met to date. The NDAA for FY2020 disallowed the use of FY2020 funds to reimburse Pakistan.

CN:	Counternarcotics Funds (Pentagon budget)
CSF:	Coalition Support Funds (Pentagon budget)
GHP:	Child Survival and Health; Global Health and Child Survival (GHCS) from FY2010; Global Health Programs (GHP) from FY2013
ESF:	Economic Support Funds; Economic Support and Development Funds (ESDF) from FY2018
FMF:	Foreign Military Financing
IDA:	International Disaster Assistance (Pakistani earthquake, flood, and internally displaced persons relief)
IMET:	International Military Education and Training
INCLE:	International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (includes border security)
MRA:	Migration and Refugee Assistance (also includes Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance or ERMA; shows obligations)
NADR:	Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining, and Related (the great majority allocated for Pakistan is anti-terrorism assistance)
PCF/ PCC:	Pakistan Counterinsurgency Fund/Counterinsurgency Capability Fund (PCF overseen by the Pentagon, PCCF overseen by State)

the 2026 Nobel Peace Prize, citing his 'proclaimed' role in averting a nuclear war in the region.

Although Pakistan has been overtly keen to improve its relationship with Washington, it has some arduous choices given the US' position with Iran. The US strikes on the Iranian nuclear sites generated immense restlessness in Pakistan, which was torn between condemning the US strikes and also trying to balance its newly glossed ties with Washington. Pakistan cannot afford instability in Iran at this moment, when tensions with India are at their peak and its relationship with the Afghan Taliban has been strained, given the Taliban's reluctance to withdraw support to the TTP. Instability in Tehran would have profound implications for the restive Balochistan province and also for the Shia community in Pakistan.

Another interesting dimension has emerged in the overall US-Pakistan dynamics with the *Foreign Affairs* report suggesting that Pakistan is developing a nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with the ability to strike the US.³³ This potential development would bring the US within Pakistan's nuclear strike range and also transform Pakistan's nuclear doctrine, which has maintained an India-centric posture till now. While details on Pakistan-China collaboration on ICBM developments could unfold in the coming time, the development is likely to have two probable dimensions: First, Pakistan will come under the US scanner and face some strict measures by the US which would treat it as a nuclear adversary.³⁴ Second, this could ring alarm bells in Washington, and Pakistan could leverage this to seek military assistance from the Trump administration.

Pakistan is hopeful of military, strategic, economic and diplomatic dividends from the Trump administration. However, it remains to be seen how Pakistan balances its position, guards its interests and how long the US-Pakistan bonhomie sustains given the evolving regional dynamics.

Momentum of Alliance with China to Continue

China's support to Pakistan in the crisis was not unexpected given the strong alliance the two nations share. Following the Pahalgam attack,

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, "As an ironclad friend and an all-weather strategic cooperative partner, China fully understands Pakistan's legitimate security concerns and supports Pakistan in safeguarding its sovereignty and security interests," He advocated "for a swift and fair investigation" and said that Beijing "believes that conflict does not serve the fundamental interests of either India or Pakistan, nor does it benefit regional peace and stability."³⁵ Commenting on the Indian strikes on May 7, Lin Jian, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, termed the Indian strikes as "regrettable."³⁶

China extended its support to Pakistan, while maintaining a neutral position, urging both sides to de-escalate. It is speculated that China could have extended technical support to Pakistan during the crisis.³⁷ Pakistan's Defence Minister Khwaja Asif, in an interview, said that China shared intelligence information gathered through satellites on India's Air Defence system, missiles, and flight path with Pakistan.³⁸

China's posture during the crisis can be seen as a cautious balance where it was trying to manage its eternal brotherhood with Islamabad, significant investment and stakes within Pakistan (CPEC), while at the same time judiciously expressing concerns about terrorism and maintaining a neutral stance which favoured stability.

Pakistan relies heavily on China for its weapon modernisation, and approximately 80 per cent of Pakistan's equipment is imported from China. Beijing's strategic interests allowed a robust export of defence equipment to Pakistan starting in the mid-1960s. For Pakistan, Chinese weapons are cheaper than Western equipment and credit from China is available on easy repayment terms. Over the last two and a half decades, the focus of Pakistan's arms procurement has been modernisation of the PAF and build-up of the maritime and strike capabilities of the Navy. In this regard, technology transfer from China has been a key feature.

Pakistan remains heavily reliant on Beijing for its defence modernisation. The momentum of the defence cooperation between

the two iron brothers is likely to continue. According to reports, Pakistan plans to acquire up to 40 units of the Chinese fifth-generation stealth fighter, the J-35A. The J-35A, developed by Shenyang Aircraft Corporation, is the second fifth-generation stealth fighter, followed by the J-20.³⁹ The PAF also aims to acquire long-range air-to-air missiles. The J-35A will be equipped with China's PL-17 air-to-air missile, which has a range of approximately 400 km.⁴⁰ However, the question remains whether Pakistan will draw lessons from Operation Sindoor and explore other options for its defence requirements, specifically the air defence systems. The performance of the Chinese Air Defence systems HQ-9 and HQ-16 was indeed a setback to Pakistan during the crisis, and reports suggest Pakistan is planning to acquire Air Defence systems from Türkiye.⁴¹

China did raise the issue of Kashmir at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and its position on Kashmir has been much more vocal in recent years. There are dual standards in Beijing's position, where on one side it talks about Kashmir being a bilateral issue. On the other side, its efforts have been to internationalise Kashmir and discuss it on multilateral forums. China's diplomatic support is evident in the recent joint statement at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting. The document skipped mentioning the Pahalgam attack but mentioned Balochistan, accusing India of supporting the Baloch resentment.⁴²

Pakistan and Türkiye: Growing Strategic Partnership and Brotherhood

During Operation Sindoor, not only did Pakistan extensively rely on the Turkish drones (Songar armed drone systems, manufactured by Turkish defence firm Asisguard) but also cherished diplomatic backing from Türkiye's leadership. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stood in strong support of Pakistan during and after Operation Sindoor. He termed Türkiye and Pakistan's relationship as "one of the finest examples

of true friendship.”⁴³ Türkiye faced a strong reaction in India for its support for Pakistan during the crisis, leading to cancellations by a large number of Indian tourists visiting Türkiye and also the cancellation of contracts for Turkish companies in India.

Erdogan’s recent comments on Kashmir have been provocative for India. In February 2025, the Turkish President, during his visit to Pakistan, said, “The Kashmir issue should be addressed according to the UN resolution through dialogue and keeping in mind the aspirations of the people of Kashmir.”⁴⁴ The Turkish leader has once again raked up the Kashmir issue after the recent India-Pakistan conflict and expressed his interest in playing the role of mediator between India and Pakistan and also involving international bodies. He said, “As Turkey, we hope for a resolution that respects human rights and involves constructive engagement from international bodies ... If requested, Turkey is ready to play its part. We want peace.”⁴⁵

Pakistan’s relations with Türkiye have evolved over time, given the mutual strategic interests and ideological empathy the two countries share. Türkiye and Pakistan have shared stable economic and defence ties and have collaborated on defence technology and joint ventures. Pakistan is the second largest recipient of the Türkiye arms exports (2020-2024).⁴⁶ There has been a steady development in the cooperation areas. Türkiye has been active in upgrading F-16s for Pakistan and has supplied Pakistan with advanced drones, including the Bayraktar, TB2 and Akinci. The PAF did choose Turkish-made Aselpod for the JF-17s and ordered Aselpod from the Turkish firm ASELSAN in 2016.⁴⁷ The Turkish technology company, HAVELSAN, has also delivered a full-spectrum electronic warfare training range to Pakistan.

Pakistan has been aspiring for the fifth-generation aircraft and has been in discussion with Türkiye for the possible export of Turkish KAAN manufactured by Turkish Aerospace Industries (TUSAŞ).⁴⁸ There are reports that the two nations will be setting up a joint factory

to produce the Turkish KAAN.⁴⁹ In this respect an emerging triangle of defence cooperation between Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Pakistan adds an interesting dimension. Türkiye and Azerbaijan signed an agreement in 2023 to advance the development of the KAAN. Azerbaijan is offering financial assistance to KAAN, and Pakistan has provided hundreds of officials and engineers for the project.⁵⁰

Türkiye's diplomatic and strategic choices are shaped by the complexities of the geopolitical developments, its involvement in Syria, tensions with Russia and Iran, and its eagerness to be close to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Ankara's economic interests in Pakistan cannot be ignored, and it potentially sees Pakistan as a connector to Asia to expand its exports. Türkiye has maintained a consistent strategic and economic partnership with Pakistan, and the relationship is likely to grow in the coming years. Pakistan's growing relationship with Türkiye will contribute towards its defence modernisation and strategic positioning. Although Pakistan is a recipient of a consistent supply of Chinese defence equipment, it looks like the Pakistan military has been keen to expand channels of defence imports.

Efforts to Nurture Comfortable External Dynamics

Pakistan is attempting to expand its alliances, establish new relationships, and strengthen existing ties, as evidenced by the latest survey, which indicates Pakistan's growing confidence in its allies and friends (Fig. 2). *Azerbaijan* stood in complete support of Pakistan during the crisis.⁵¹ The leaders of the two countries held a meeting on the sidelines of the Economic Cooperation Organisation summit hosted by Azerbaijan. Following this, Pakistan and Azerbaijan have signed an agreement for an investment of USD 2 billion in various sectors of Pakistan's strained economy.⁵²

Reactions from *Saudi Arabia* and *Iran* were expressions of deep concerns and also a willingness to initiate mediation efforts. Saudi

Arabia has been a significant supporter of Pakistan and continues to play a crucial role in stabilising Pakistan's economy. The Sharifs' coming back to power has been a contributor to the revival of Pakistan-Saudi ties. In 2023, Saudi Arabia extended much needed financial support, which boosted Pakistan's depleting foreign reserves and also facilitated the requirements to meet the conditions of the IMF bailout. The Pakistan Army and the Royal Saudi Land Forces have been conducting regular joint military exercises.

After being elected (2024), Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif visited Saudi Arabia on his first foreign visit. The visit came after months of political uncertainty and an alarming phase of economic crisis in Pakistan. The joint statement issued following Sharif's visit to Saudi Arabia highlighted Saudi Arabia's supportive role in Pakistan's economy, strengthening trade and investment ties, and commitment from both sides to expedite the first wave of investment package worth \$5 billion.⁵³ The joint statement also included "importance of dialogue between Pakistan and India to resolve the outstanding issues between the two countries, (especially the Jammu and Kashmir dispute) to ensure peace and stability in the region."⁵⁴

The *Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)* countries expressed their keenness for de-escalation of tensions during Operation Sindoor and are attempting to balance their ties with both Pakistan and India, while also playing a subtle diplomatic role to de-escalate tensions.

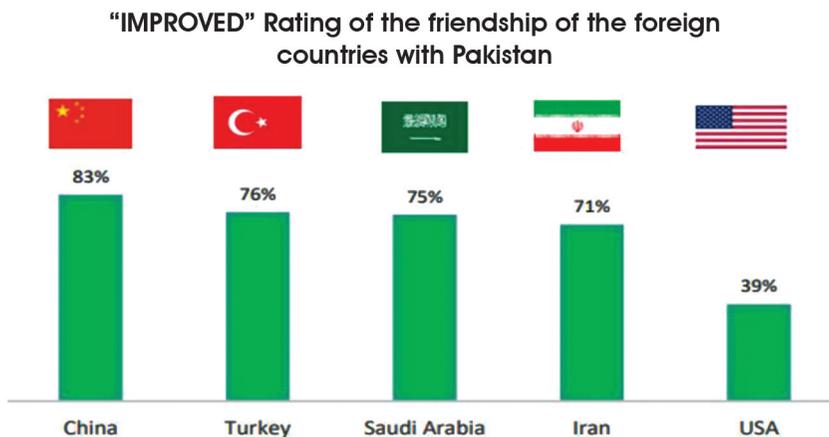
Critical support for Pakistan seems to be emerging in *Bangladesh*. Pakistan's relations with Bangladesh have improved at an accelerated pace after the fall of the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 and the rise in anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh. There are commonalities of objectives between the two nations, with the most crucial one being dealing with the anger and anxiety against India. The interim regime in Bangladesh has been unhappy with India giving shelter to Sheikh Hasina, whom they see as a corrupt and

hegemonic leader. Just a few months before Operation Sindoor, there had been crucial developments indicating a positive relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh. In a significant development, a direct maritime connection between Pakistan and Bangladesh has been established, and a cargo vessel from Karachi was docked at the Chittagong Port, marking a crucial shift in the strained bilateral relations. There have been some notable developments in the military-to-military relationship between the two countries. A high-level delegation from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), led by Major General Shahid Amir Afsar, visited Dhaka, marking one of the first high-level engagements between the ISI and Bangladeshi officials. Lieutenant General S M Kamrul Hassan, Principal Staff Officer (PSO) of the Armed Forces division of Bangladesh, travelled to Pakistan and held talks with the Chief of Army Staff General (now Field Marshal) Asim Munir.

During the India-Pakistan crisis and Operation Sindoor, Bangladesh initially maintained neutrality, then commended India, Pakistan and the US for the ceasefire. However, in a surprising move, after the ceasefire, the Chief Adviser of Bangladesh, Muhammad Yunus, made a statement projecting India's northeastern states as separate entities from India. He tweeted, "Chief Adviser Professor Chief Muhammad Yunus has called for an integrated economic strategy between Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Seven North Eastern States of India, emphasizing the potential of cross-border collaboration in hydropower, healthcare and road connectivity."⁵⁵

Pakistan and Bangladesh are attempting to strengthen their ties, and China has been exerting its influence through deeper engagement in the region and efforts to establish a nexus. In June 2025, China, Bangladesh, and Pakistan held their first trilateral meeting in Kunming, China.⁵⁶ The meeting indicates a growing alliance between the three countries and possibly the formation of a geopolitical nexus.

Figure 2: Views on Pakistan’s Friendship with Foreign Countries After the Indo-Pak Tensions



Source: Gallup Pakistan, “Public Opinion After India-Pakistan Ceasefire: Comprehensive Report”, May 2025.

Conclusion

Pakistan has turned its defeat into victory and its humiliation into victimhood through an aggressive narrative-building exercise. The narrative war and the information warfare have been the most crucial aspects of the India-Pakistan conflict. Pakistan’s reliance on narratives and perception management is not new, and the country has managed to navigate through the most challenging situations with its narratives. Internally, Pakistan’s military has managed to consolidate its position and garner public opinion in support of its dominance and posture as the supreme force, ultimately serving as the guardian of the state. The emerging trends in Pakistan, which need to be understood by India’s policymakers, are as follows:

- Pakistan will continue to thrive on the narrative of military victory *vis-à-vis* India and claim to have revived the regional strategic balance in favour of Pakistan. The narrative of victory helps Pakistan internally to escalate its defence spending and continue military

modernisation, even amid economic challenges. Externally, Pakistan's narrative of victory and, more importantly, the projection of India's defeat is aimed at portraying India's failure as a 'net-security provider' in the Indo-Pacific region.

- The strategic alliance with China remains inviolable, and China's support for Pakistan's military modernisation is likely to intensify.
- Pakistan will continue the momentum of building up its nuclear arsenal. It will continue the expansion and modernisation of the arsenal. The nuclear rhetoric is likely to lie low for some time, but Pakistan's reliance on nuclear weapons for its strategy *vis-à-vis* India is unlikely to change.
- Pakistan will aggressively aim to modernise its defence equipment, focusing on building the PAF and diversifying channels of acquisition. Pakistan-Türkiye defence collaboration is likely to flourish.

India's military strikes on May 7 were a coercive signal and also to indicate that the safe havens for the well-known terror organisations Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed in Pakistan did not enjoy immunity from military retaliation because of their location in mainland Pakistan. The India-Pakistan conflict has redefined India's position, its war doctrine and its resolve to impose cost on Pakistan for its acts of terror. India did challenge Pakistan's nuclear position and its rhetoric on Full Spectrum Deterrence, which asserts the horizontal and vertical dimensions, signalling a low nuclear threshold and use of weapons at any point of a potential crisis. Pakistan was left with limited options after the attacks on its air bases on the morning of May 10 and was desperate for a ceasefire. However, after Pakistan's Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) reached out to India's DGMO on May 10, and the ceasefire was agreed upon, Pakistan moved rapidly and sneakily in the information domain, which has been its forte. Narratives of victory against a "much larger and militarily superior India" were built for the

domestic audience, and narratives of India's aggression and victimhood were constructed for the international domain.

For India, indeed, there are lessons to be learnt, and India's narrative-building exercise did have critical lapses, giving more space to Pakistan to exercise control over the domain of information warfare. India's communication apparatus remained weak and was primarily based on fact-based technical briefing.⁵⁷ Chinese media outlets worked as an extension arm for Pakistan's propaganda machine. The Chinese media rebroadcast Pakistan's narrative and also questioned India's intentions. Pakistan's other allies Türkiye and Malaysia have also been active on this front by raising questions on India's prosecution of the minorities.⁵⁸ Even though the victory and heroism narrative has been held high by the regime in Pakistan, the fact remains that India managed to attain its objectives of punishing Pakistan by conducting strikes deep into Pakistan territory, leading to damage to the terrorist infrastructure and also critical military infrastructure.

Pakistan's victory narratives, which stand united against India, will not allow it to amend its strategic calculus based on the use of terror against India. However, Operation Sindoor has clearly redefined India's war doctrine, and Pakistan will be compelled to calculate the risk and the costs involved in its strategy.

India-Pakistan relationship stands at a new normal, where the two countries now communicate in the information domain, with no diplomatic engagement. Every crisis reduces the space for any constructive dialogue. India's position on terrorism remains firm, and there has been no indication of any change in Pakistan's position. Even after India hit the well-acknowledged terror infrastructure in Pakistan on May 7, the optics of senior military officers attending the funerals of the militant leaders in Pakistan reflect its continued support to the anti-India terror network.⁵⁹

India's Pakistan strategy needs to aim at strengthening its military capability, focus on building up its communication strategy and continue

the momentum of its diplomatic engagement at both regional and global levels. A careful assessment of Pakistan's strategy, based on the evolving trends within Pakistan, remains critical to be able to analyse India's responses to Pakistan's strategy.

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4. THE CHALLENGE OF CROSS-BORDER TERRORISM UNDER NUCLEAR SHADOW—A REVISIT THROUGH OPERATION SINDOOR

Manpreet Sethi

In the wake of Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests in 1998, several officials and scholars from the USA and Western Europe trooped into New Delhi to condemn the development and express anxiety for the future of South Asia. Bemoaning the difficult relationship between the two neighbours who had already fought three wars by then, besides routinely engaging in skirmishes at the Line of Control (LoC), there was concern that the next war between the two countries would witness the use of nuclear weapons. Their conclusions were coloured by their experience of the Cold War, where two nuclear powers had seldom faced a confrontation and expected such an eventuality to lead to nuclear escalation quickly. The same was expected in South Asia.

At every interaction, therefore, India was counselled that conventional war was no longer an option given the risk of escalation to the nuclear level. This reality was not lost on India either. But Pakistan's behaviour has not allowed New Delhi the luxury of accepting Western advice. Instead, the possibility of conventional war with Pakistan has continued owing to the persistent cross-border provocations in various forms—illegal occupation of territory in Kargil in 1999, to the terrorist strike

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on the Indian Parliament in 2001, to many more such strikes on Indian military, para-military and civilian targets over the last quarter century.

India, a nuclear-armed state, faces a unique challenge where another nuclear-armed state orchestrates terror attacks with the help of well-supported, trained and equipped terrorist organisations. India has had to find its own strategy for conducting conventional operations in the nuclear shadow. This has evolved over time, and its latest iteration, in the form of Operation Sindoor, has established new benchmarks. Of course, the operation cannot be expected to guarantee that Pakistan will not mount more terror incidents. Nevertheless, India has credibly demonstrated that there is space between Pakistan's sub-conventional actions and its projection of a low nuclear threshold for the conduct of conventional punitive operations.

The kinetic phase of Operation Sindoor is over for now. The India-Pakistan relationship, though, is nowhere near normal. More crises are not ruled out, given that Pakistan shows no desire to abandon a nuclear strategy that shields acts of terrorism. What is this strategy, and how does it work? How have the Indian responses evolved to be able to fight a conventional war in the presence of nuclear weapons? What were the factors that made Operation Sindoor possible? What is the role of third parties in the India-Pakistan crisis? What can be expected of Pakistan in the future? This paper addresses these questions while also offering recommendations for India across the diplomatic, economic, informational, military, and social spectrums.

Pakistan's Nuclear Strategy—A Shield for Cross-border Terrorism

Resentful since independence for the “moth-eaten state”¹ that Pakistan was born as, the country has spent the last seventy-eight years looking for ways to equalise the perceived power asymmetry with India. This has been attempted in three ways: one, through alliance building with the USA and China and exploiting their equation with India to enhance Pakistan's strategic relevance; two, through the acquisition of modern conventional

and nuclear weaponry; and third, through the use of cultivated proxy actors to wage terrorism against India to cause damage to the Indian political, and socio-economic fabric.

Over time, Pakistan has found that a combination of the three is most effective. The strategy to bleed India through terror inflicted by state-sponsored, supported, equipped, and trained organisations, and blunting a possible Indian military response by crying nuclear wolf in front of Washington and Beijing has been part of the Pakistani playbook over the years. It is no secret that Pakistan holds its nuclear weapons as the ultimate guarantor of national survival. Notably, Gen Mirza Aslam Beg, the former Chief of the Army Staff of Pakistan, had made this point in one of his writings in 1994. In an article appropriately entitled “Pakistan’s Nuclear Imperatives,” he wrote, “Oxygen is basic to life, and one does not debate its desirability... nuclear deterrence has assumed that life-saving property for Pakistan.”²

Pakistan’s use of terrorism acquired a new lease of life and intensity once its army became confident of its nuclear weapons capability. It sought to use proxy actors to wreak physical havoc and psychological terror on India, while also using the threat of the use of nuclear weapons to stymie the likelihood of a conventional response. Accordingly, Pakistan’s nuclear weapons are less for ‘nuclear’ deterrence and more for providing immunity to wage other modes of conflict. Deterring the nuclear weapons of India is the least important function of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons. They are more for deterring a conventional attack, the risk of which arises from terror mounted on India, and which is sought to be deterred by raising the fear of escalation to the nuclear level.

Pakistan uses the risk of escalation to achieve two objectives: one, to deter India from using its superior conventional military capability; and two, to magnify the fears of a nuclear holocaust for the international community. The Pakistan military works on the assumption that a ‘concerned’ international community (especially the USA) would restrain India from using military force. Its nuclear weapons, in Pakistani

perception, give it the immunity to execute its strategy of bleeding India through a thousand cuts, while containing India's response to merely dressing its wounds without being able to strike at the hand that is making the injuries.

This is a strategy of nuclear brinkmanship aimed at deterring a conventional response by a superior military by projecting the risk of losing control over the situation. Thomas Schelling explained this as "a threat that leaves something to chance." In his words, "If brinkmanship means anything, it means manipulating the shared risk of war. It means exploiting the danger that somebody may inadvertently go over the brink, dragging the other with him."³ He graphically described this with the analogy of two cars coming towards an intersection from different directions. As one of the drivers accelerates his vehicle, he gives a signal to the other of his determination to cross first. This places the onus on the other side to either slow down to let the first pass or to ignore the signal and continue at the same speed, even at the risk of a collision that could be equally harmful to both sides. If the second driver slows down, the first has successfully deterred him by the threat of collision. Pakistan may be compared to the first driver who accelerates his speed (or indulges in provocative acts of sub-conventional conflict) and seeks to deter India from speeding (or launching a military response) by threatening the possibility of collision.

Another way of describing Pakistani behaviour is through Herman Kahn's theory of "rationality of irrationality."⁴ An irrational threat, such as of a collision or war, can become rational and, hence, successful in imposing deterrence, if it achieves its objective. Pakistan employs the threat of an all-out nuclear war, which is irrational because of the damage that it would cause to itself in the process. But when Pakistan's irrational threat achieves its aim, it comes to be perceived as a rational act. In fact, it achieves even more gravitas when the international community accepts it at face value and urges restraint on India for the sake of regional stability. So, emphasis shifts to 'rational' India to resolve the issues that bedevil

the bilateral relationship so that 'irrational' Pakistan does not have the pretext to push the region over the nuclear brink. It is overlooked that Pakistan is somewhat rationally using the idea of irrationality. Over the years, this has been attempted through the projection of a low nuclear threshold premised on flaunting tactical nuclear weapons, announcing a doctrine of full-spectrum deterrence, and the concept of zero-km range nuclear weapons.⁵

India, however, believes that despite such overtures, Pakistan's military has complete control over the country's nuclear strategy. As a professional, rational force, it understands the consequences of a possible first use of its nuclear weapon and has no intention to use it physically. But it has found the perfect foil in the use of irrationality to deter India. As was stated by one analyst, "Islamabad is convinced that the mere *threat of approaching the nuclear threshold* will prevent India from seizing the strategic initiative and military dominance of events, permitting Pakistan to escalate the crisis at will without the fear of meaningful Indian retribution."⁶

Indian response, however, has evolved in trying to find answers to the challenge of Pakistan's nuclear strategy.

Evolution of Indian Response

The Indian response has progressed along four pathways with different degrees of success. It has resorted to defensive measures, such as improving border fencing along the approximately 2,400 km-long International Border (IB) and the 740 km-long Line of Control (LoC), to intercept infiltrators. This has met with reasonable success, but can never be fool proof.⁷ Similar is the case with intelligence gathering, which has become far more effective, but gaps will always persist; New Delhi has also reached out to constituencies in Pakistan that do not perceive India as an existential threat and are desirous of a friendly relationship with India. Unfortunately, these do not hold much sway in Pakistani decision-making and, hence, despite their and India's efforts, no results are evident and not much is expected unless there is structural change in

the domestic polity of the country; further from time to time, India has made the international community aware of Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorism and subjected it to diplomatic isolation and economic cut-offs from international lending institutions. Such a global campaign after the 2008 Mumbai attack had succeeded in getting Pakistan to admit that terrorists were raised and trained on its soil. Pakistan was placed on the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a global watchdog for combating money laundering and terrorist financing, for the first time in 2008, and subsequently in 2012 and 2018.⁸ To be removed from the list, Islamabad has had to demonstrate improvements in its financial prudence and associated legislation.

Regarding garnering international support, India's experience shows that nations often prioritise their national interests over a principled approach to combating terrorism. This is evident in the indifference or silence of the West, as also in China's expressed empathy for Pakistan as a victim of terrorism. As opined by a former Indian ambassador, "Gone are the days of 'zero tolerance' to terror. Gone are the days when the perpetrators of terror were called out and accountability demanded..., the global fight against terror is no longer a collective fight."⁹ So, while there is ample evidence of Pakistani linkages with terrorism, countries have chosen to acknowledge it, or not, depending on their interest calculus. Another example of this was evident in the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting, where the final statement made no mention of the Pahalgam terror incident. Indian Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, stated, "Some countries use cross-border terrorism as an instrument of policy and provide shelter to terrorists. There should be no place for such double standards. SCO should not hesitate to criticise such nations." But when the Indian position was not reflected in the final statement, he declined to sign it.

In a fourth way of dealing with Pakistan's continued provocations, India has sought to impose military punishment on terrorists and their infrastructure. In 2016, after a terrorist strike on an Army camp in Uri,

India conducted surgical strikes across the Line of Control and openly announced the action. In 2019, after a deadly attack on CRPF personnel in Pulwama, the Indian Air Force (IAF) undertook air strikes against terror infrastructure in Balakot, a location across the international boundary. Most recently, in response to the April 22 Pahalgam attack, New Delhi hit multiple terrorist relevant targets in not just Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJ&K) but also in Pakistan.

The territorial and target envelope has expanded with every military action. Yet, strategic restraint stands out as a standard feature of all operations from Kargil to Operation Sindoor. Kargil was the first instance where the two neighbours fought a war under the nuclear shadow. Tasked with the eviction of the Pakistani army that had illegally occupied Indian territory, the IAF was constrained by the government to undertake air strikes without crossing the LoC. During Operation *Bandar* in 2019, the IAF was strictly mandated not to cause any collateral damage. In the case of Operation Sindoor, too, the IAF operated “under strict rules of engagement that prohibited initiating attacks on Pakistani aircraft or pre-emptively suppressing air defence systems.”¹⁰ The clear order was that the strikes should be confined only to terrorist-linked infrastructure, even at the cost of operational risks. There are reports that some IAF aircraft were lost on the opening day of the operation owing to these constraining rules of engagement. But the Indian attempt to maintain a distinction between terrorist and military targets to prevent escalation has been an essential feature of military action.

This distinction, however, may blur in the future. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his address to the nation on May 12, 2025, said, “We will not differentiate between the government sponsoring terrorism and the masterminds of terrorism.”¹¹ The future target list, then, could be less discrete and include military targets too. This is intended to erode the credibility of the Pakistani military in the eyes of its populace. By adopting this approach, India is suggesting that in a future crisis, it would not bear the burden of restraint alone. There is a

greater willingness to manipulate risk. Schelling's second driver seems to be signalling that it might not reduce speed as it races towards the intersection, and the onus of stabilising the situation would be on the first driver too.

What made Operation Sindoor Possible?

The Resistance Front,¹² an avatar of the UN-proscribed *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT), first claimed and then denied responsibility for the dastardly terror incident in Baisaran, Pahalgam on April 22, 2025, where 26 innocent male tourists and one pony operator were killed after being identified as non-Muslim. Following this, India announced a slew of diplomatic measures. These included visa restrictions, withdrawal of diplomatic staff, and the placing of the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) in abeyance. The last step was taken for the first time since the treaty had been concluded in 1960. New Delhi vowed to “identify, track and punish” those behind the terrorist strike. In response, Pakistan's railway minister held out a nuclear threat. Islamabad conducted a test of its 450 km range, nuclear-capable, surface-to-surface Abdali missile on May 3, 2025 and of a Fatah surface-to-surface missile with a range of 120 km two days later.

India, however, chose to ignore these signals as it undertook “measured, non-escalatory, proportionate, and responsible” action against five terrorist relevant targets in PoJ&K and four in Pakistan on the night of 06/07 May 2025. Nine terror sites with significant symbolic and operational value in the terror ecosystem, including the headquarters of the LeT at Muridke, *Jaish-e-Mohammed* at Bahawalpur, and a Hizbul Mujahideen base in Sialkot, were targeted with “niche technology weapons with careful selection of warheads.”¹³ The attacks were based on intelligence inputs that more terrorist strikes were planned. As foreign secretary Vikram Misri said, “There was thus a compulsion both to deter and to pre-empt.”¹⁴

Within minutes of the operation's completion, the Ministry of Defence issued a press statement, time-stamped 1:44 am, May 7, 2025.

It underscored India's "considerable restraint in selection of targets and method of execution" and that "no Pakistani military facilities have been targeted."¹⁵ However, after India's military action, Pakistan's Defense Minister Khawaja Asif said that the threat of nuclear war was "clear and present." Rawalpindi responded on 07/08 and 08/09 nights by launching swarms of UAVs, drones across the border and artillery across LoC, targeting Indian military and civilian sites. The layered and integrated Air Defence Grid of the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force, however, ensured 'minimal loss' on the Indian side, all bases and systems remaining operational. 13 civilians were killed and 59 injured in Pakistan's shelling in Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch district, besides damage to the civilian houses and shops. India responded against these strikes by missiles, air strikes on several Pakistani air fields, radars, air defence systems and through artillery on Pakistani posts across the LoC. On the third day of the engagement, May 10, 2025, after first declaring and then denying a meeting of its National Command Authority, Pakistan called for a ceasefire.

India's ability to conduct a military operation that hit multiple targets much deeper inside Pakistani territory than ever before set new benchmarks. Conscious of the fact that every conventional conflict carries the seed of escalation into an unwanted nuclear exchange, India has exhibited discipline and restraint in its use of force, keeping it below the assumed red lines of the adversary. Thereby, India demonstrated that the conduct of conventional operations in the presence of nuclear weapons can be orchestrated to punish without bringing the adversary's nuclear weapons into play. India eschewed the format of a classical war, envisaging occupation of territory or a *blitzkrieg* to cause high military attrition. Given the higher risks of escalation in these cases, India chose military instruments that minimise the risk of escalation to the nuclear level. Its actions were meant to disabuse Pakistan of the assumption that its nuclear weapons have tied India's hands and provided Islamabad, or rather Rawalpindi, with a *carte blanche* for provocative acts; and to expose

the brinkmanship inherent in Pakistani strategy to the international community.

A coalescence of several factors enabled India to conduct Operation Sindoor. Six of these are identified in the following paragraphs.

The first factor was an understanding of Pakistan's nuclear strategy that, despite its projection of a low nuclear threshold, there is space to conduct conventional attacks of a particular kind. In this context, it is worth recalling the words of Mr George Fernandes, India's Defence Minister during the Kargil conflict. Soon after the end of the conflict while speaking at a National Seminar on "The Challenges of Limited War: Parameters and Options" on January 05, 2000 he said, "Nuclear weapons did not make war obsolete; they simply imposed another dimension on the way warfare was conducted ... conventional war remained feasible, though with definite limitations, if escalation across the nuclear threshold was to be avoided." The experience of Operation *Parakram* in 2001-02 further reinforced the view that conventional war in the presence of nuclear weapons needed to be undertaken differently. Military force needs to be punitive and yet not threatening enough for Pakistan to reach for its nuclear weapons. This was implemented in the case of Operation Sindoor with a restrained and calibrated use of military force.

The second factor that enabled the operation was the availability of appropriate military instruments, which could be employed through joint planning. These tools offered maximum possibility of calibrated escalation and quick de-escalation. Special Forces (specially raised and trained for the purpose), air power, or even maritime power offer such possibilities and have become preferred options. In the cases of Operations *Bandar* in 2019 and *Sindoor* in 2025, air power was chosen for its ability to demonstrate resolve by undertaking precision operations while simultaneously offering flexibility of disengagement, thereby facilitating the retention of escalation control. The ability of the IAF to identify and destroy terrorist-linked infrastructure in Pakistani territory,

with standoff precision weapons at speed, was the critical capability that allowed the execution of the operation.

The third factor is that over the years, India has developed the necessary competencies to counter such attacks effectively. These include the ability to collect intelligence from diverse technical and human sources, deploy a range of ISR assets and employ precision strike weapons. Such capabilities have minimised the chances of collateral damage and increased the confidence of the political leadership to approve the use of force for hitting terror targets or military sites. This has allowed India to use the salami slicing strategy, not for slicing the 'salami' of territory but for slicing that of Pakistani assets and infrastructure that are used to inflict damage upon India.

The fourth factor is that national resolve backed by a united polity, strong leadership, and public legitimacy made this operation possible. The unity of politico-military action exhibited decisiveness from the start of the operation. Moreover, articulation of precise and clear political and military objectives limited to degrading the terrorist ecosystem supported by Pakistan helped select appropriate targets. The clear communication of objectives helped indicate the strictly limited goals of the operation and reduce the potential for miscalculations and misperceptions that India intends to pose an existential threat to Pakistan. At the same time, this clarity also enabled better management of domestic expectations. Political resolve in a democracy is influenced by public opinion, which can both strengthen or constrain the government's actions. Sensitivity to public opinion, therefore, determines the government's freedom of action, and the response to Pahalgam provided ample support for Operation Sindoor.

The fifth factor that made Operation Sindoor possible was an international climate far more accepting of the use of force. To recall, India's initial use of force in 2016 and 2019 was tentative and limited, undertaken at a time when military actions were viewed with discomfort. Compared to that, the operation in 2025 took place in an environment

where wars were already raging in Europe and the West Asia region. The world had already seen the employment of drones, missiles, and war casualties. Consequently, there is a sense of enhanced tolerance for military action by one country against another. The presence of a more permissive environment regarding the use of force created a new dynamic in which military action seemed more acceptable.

The sixth factor was India's declared doctrine of no first use which allowed the country to reclaim the space for a conventional response that Pakistan's nuclear strategy has tried to deny. Had India too professed a first-use strategy, it would have exacerbated Pakistan's fear of losing its nuclear assets to Indian nuclear preemption. This would have heightened the possibility of nuclear use in a conflict. India's precise strikes over conventional targets despite their proximity to nuclear command and control or storage sites were deliberate, while carrying a powerful signal. By placing the onus of nuclear escalation on Pakistan and by executing its military action in a calibrated fashion, India was able to consciously stay away from posing an existential threat that may have made Pakistan feel the need for nuclear use.

Overall, then, in showing the ability to mount a conventional response even in the face of nuclear brinkmanship and by emphasising that every future act of terrorism will be treated as an act of war, India has forced Pakistan to go back to the drawing board to recalculate the benefits of using nuclear weapons as a shield for mounting terrorism.

The Issue of Third-party Involvement

Much controversy has erupted over the role of the US administration, particularly President Trump, in facilitating the ceasefire on May 10, 2025. In over a dozen tweets, the US president has claimed that he was instrumental in preventing a nuclear war between the two warring neighbours. According to him, he brokered the ceasefire through the offer of trade. Pakistan accepts this thesis, and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has repeatedly thanked the US President for his mediation.

India, however, has rebutted this account. In a phone conversation with President Trump on June 17, 2025, Prime Minister Modi clarified that “at no point during this entire sequence of events was there any discussion, at any level, on an India-US Trade Deal, or any proposal for a mediation by the US between India and Pakistan. The discussion to cease military action took place directly between India and Pakistan through the existing channels of communication between the two armed forces, and it was initiated at Pakistan’s request. Prime Minister Modi firmly stated that India does not and will never accept mediation.”¹⁶ As the sequence of events is believed to stand, Pakistan reached out to the USA for a ceasefire, and Secretary of State Rubio dialled India. EAM Jaishankar then told him that Pakistan could reach India directly through the DGMO channels. Rawalpindi accepted this advice, and the call from Pakistan’s DGMO to his Indian counterpart seeking a ceasefire, eventually led to one.

While India stands firm on non-acceptance of mediation on the issue of Kashmir, past experience shows that a certain level of outside involvement, mainly of the US, has been critical for de-escalation. Traditionally, Pakistan has had more confidence in the good offices of the USA owing to its closer bilateral relationship. However, as India’s own relationship with the US has improved, Pakistan’s trust in American mediation has reduced. Yet, with no other saviour in sight, Islamabad continues to lean on Washington, as it did in 2025 too. While it is not known what Gen Munir and Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif said to Secretary Rubio or President Trump on May 9/10 after suffering extensive damage on military targets in Rafiqui, Murid, Chaklala, Rahim Yar Khan, Sukkur, Chunian, Pasrur and Sialkot, the reported nuclear rhetoric was enough to ‘spook’ them to reverse an earlier hands-off approach in favour of attempts to de-escalate the situation.

In future crises, too, Pakistan’s proclivity to drum up fear of nuclear escalation as a way to seek off-ramps through outside pressure is unlikely to change. Despite the availability of bilateral crisis communication

channels as hotlines, confidence in their use to achieve de-escalation without a nudge from a third party is deemed to be low.

India's sensitivity to the third-party role revolves around the prospect of mediation and the possibility of "internationalisation" of the Kashmir issue. However, it needs to be recognised that crises post-1998 have benefited from the US involvement in enabling de-escalation. This is not to suggest that India should depend on the US or other states to deal with its security concerns *vis-à-vis* Pakistan. But to highlight that in the Indo-Pak relationship, especially in the presence of nuclear weapons, the role of external powers is naturally going to be greater, owing to their apprehensions of nuclear escalation.

Neither does India need to be overly concerned about its hyphenation with Pakistan. When India and Pakistan are the two nations involved, they will often be mentioned in the same breath. But India's repeated mature handling of crises and the evidence of Pakistan's terrorist footprint in attacks across the world distinguish the behaviours of the two nations. An adept use of the growing Indian influence with all major capitals is necessary to keep Pakistan from getting away with its games of nuclear brinkmanship.

Meanwhile, another point for consideration is the need to expand communication channels beyond existing contacts at the National Security Advisor (NSA) and Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) levels. While these are critical for exchanges on operational and tactical issues, some other trusted contact points could offer decision-makers greater flexibility to communicate to contain future crises. In a strategic environment highly influenced by the speed of action and public pressure, channels of communication can preserve space for discretion that is insulated from domestic pressures seeking increasingly forceful responses. In the past, former diplomats and seasoned journalists have offered valuable cross-border connections due to their association (or even friendship) with counterparts from the other side. However, with the prolonged disruption of contacts between India and Pakistan, such

trusted channels are disappearing and will become even more difficult to find in the future. Such channels, however, can be quite instrumental and must be explored and/or created.

What can One Expect from Nuclear Pakistan

Continued use of Cross-border Terrorism

India must not expect that its military operations can permanently deter the use of terrorism by Pakistan. This is a low-cost tool for the country. Till such time that the Pakistan military believes that its own stature can be secured only by playing upon Pakistan's insecurity *vis-à-vis* India, it will continue to support and exploit terrorism. Neither will Pakistan's hostility towards India end even with a resolution of its list of issues of discord. For the Pakistan Army, which is the primary determinant of the nature of the relationship with India, the idea of the issues of conflict rather than their resolution is more useful. Nothing, except a change in its thinking, perceptions, ideology, and purpose, can reduce its apparent sense of discomfort with a geographically larger, economically buoyant, religiously secular and pluralist society. These are the real issues that are in conflict with the idea of Pakistan. Therefore, unless Pakistan changes its view of India, the points of conflict will remain only symptoms of the problem, not the problem itself. And, it will continue to depend on the tool of terror.

Strengthening of Conventional Capability

Pakistan will focus on shoring up its conventional military capability, as it realises that, despite a projected low nuclear threshold, the real action takes place in the conventional realm. Having borne the brunt of Indian military strikes that caused suppression and destruction of enemy air defences, thereby laying the country's military infrastructure defenceless, the country would be keen to plug the gaps.

China and Turkey have emerged as its current choices for further military build-up. Their equipment has the advantage of being affordable and hence acquirable in larger numbers. However, given the renewed buoyancy in the US-Pak relations, the continuance of historical military cooperation could also be expected.

The purchase of military hardware would come at a cost for Pakistan's fragile economy and a population already facing increasing social and environmental challenges. But, as always, Pakistan army will not find it difficult to rally the nation around the need to spend more on arms by raising the India threat. Little, least of all a national budget or impositions by international financial institutions, can be expected to come in the way of Pakistan's conventional capability accretion. The Pakistan defence budget announced in mid-June 2025 has allocated a 20 per cent increase in defence spending. Though this amounts to 1.97 per cent of the GDP, comparable in percentage terms with India, it is a well-known fact that all sources of Pakistan's defence expenditure have never been transparently disclosed in the budget figures made public. Meanwhile, as pointed out by an analyst, the defence budget increase has been made "against the sharp cut to expenditure on health, from an estimated PKR 52 million to PKR 31 million, and the complete wiping out of the section on environment protection."¹⁷

Signalling of Riskier Nuclear Behaviour

In view of the fact that India has declared that it would not be subject to nuclear blackmail, nor be influenced by the cries of nuclear wolf, Pakistan can be expected to double down on providing more teeth to its doctrine of full-spectrum deterrence and adopt even riskier approaches to re-establish nuclear deterrence. High-pitched nuclear rhetoric has been a normal feature of its crisis behaviour since 1998. This may now be accompanied by signalling of risky manoeuvres on the ground as well to deter an Indian response. Tactical nuclear weapons have obviously been built for this

purpose, and in future conflict situations, Pakistan may be inclined to signal their deployment as a way of leaving something to chance.

This would be a risky step, fraught with the possibility of inadvertent escalation. Under the circumstances, the international interlocutors need to rethink where their restraining actions need to be directed, including help in checking policies that support the use of terrorism.

Nuclear Capability Build-up—Numbers, Sea-based Deterrence, Missile Defence

The 2025 Worldwide Threat Assessment released by the US Defence Intelligence Agency states, “Pakistan regards India as an existential threat and will continue to pursue its military modernisation effort, including the development of battlefield nuclear weapons, to offset India’s conventional military advantage.”¹⁸

Indeed, Pakistan places immense importance on its nuclear weapons since they are central to its strategy of using terrorism and protection against an Indian retaliation. Among the areas of strategic build-up, the focus is likely to be on the numbers and yields of warheads, as well as the accuracy of delivery systems. Pakistan will also be keen to acquire some form of sea-based deterrence, a capability that it has not been able to indigenously/collaboratively build as of now. Help from China will be sought on this, as well as for missile defence. Operation Sindoor would likely have whetted the appetite for both these technologies.

Strengthened Relationship with China

Pakistan’s relationship with China is a special one. Since both have a common strategic adversary in India, there is a strategic rationale for the relationship. China has emerged as an important benefactor for the build-up of Pakistan’s infrastructure, as well as its military. Nearly 80 per cent of Pakistan’s military equipment is currently of Chinese origin. This has also changed the kind of position and assistance that China

now provides to Pakistan in a conflict with India. For instance, during the Kargil conflict, China did not come to the military aid of Pakistan and, in fact, the Chinese advice to the then-Pakistani Prime Minister was to withdraw from the heights. In contrast, at the time of the recent Pahalgam attack, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a highly empathetic statement, "As an ironclad friend and an all-weather strategic cooperative partner, China fully understands Pakistan's legitimate security concerns and supports Pakistan in safeguarding its sovereignty and security interests."¹⁹ Help on the operational front has also been reported, especially to reorganise Pakistan's radar and air defence systems and adjust satellite coverage over India.²⁰

Such military assistance is bound to cast an ominous shadow over India's security by raising the possibility of facing a two-front war. Theoretically, such a contingency cannot be dismissed, and the country's military modernisation must cater for it. In fact, given that China does not want to see India rise as a major power and neither does it want to get embroiled in a direct war with India lest it pushes New Delhi more towards Washington, Beijing benefits the most from keeping the region on a slow boil with controlled tensions rather than a full-blown conflict. Pakistan serves as a useful proxy. Shivshankar Menon, India's former National Security Advisor, aptly points out that "India's Pakistan problem now is in large part a China problem, because it is China that enhances Pakistan's capabilities, keeping it one step behind India at each stage of its nuclear progress, building up its defence, and committing to its long-term future in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor."²¹

Re-engineering the Relationship with the USA

The US-Pak relations have gone through umpteen difficulties. However, it is to the credit of the Pakistani political and military leadership that it has managed to turn around every challenging episode in their relationship by re-engineering its relevance for the USA. From serving

as a useful base for conducting intelligence-gathering flights into the Soviet Union during the Cold War, to covertly fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, to being part of the war on terror in the 2000s, Pakistan has managed to extract billions of dollars from the US for support. Despite being aware of Pakistan's duplicity, especially on its commitment to act against extremist groups operating from its soil, the US has nevertheless been satisfied with the limited actions it has taken to satisfy its short-term security interests at different points in time.

The most recent thaw in the relationship has come from President Trump's satisfaction at Pakistan having apprehended the perpetrator of the Abbey Gate bombing at Kabul airport in August 2021, which occurred as thousands of Afghans tried to flee following the Taliban takeover.²² From being what Trump himself had described as a country that gave the US "nothing but lies and deceit" and safe havens to terrorists, he broke protocols to host an Army Chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, for lunch, marking another shift in the relationship.

While President Trump's mercurial nature is well-known, there is speculation about what precisely the Pakistani Army Chief might have offered to the US to mark this turnaround. Time will tell. For now, the US seems to have decided that instead of isolating Pakistan, it would maintain a selective and limited relationship to get Pakistan to keep an eye on terrorist groups such as the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) that are a threat to the USA. This US-Pakistan counter-terrorism 'cooperation' is likely to be kept distinct from Pakistan-sponsored terrorism that is antithetical to Indian interests.

Recommendations for India

India-Pakistan relations have seen several ups and downs since independence. The use of proxies has been a constant feature of Pakistan's engagement with India since then. After acquiring nuclear weapons in 1998, Islamabad has presumed a free hand in the use of terrorism while tying India's hands by the fear of escalation. Undoubtedly, the presence

of nuclear weapons casts a shadow on the use of force. But repeated provocations by Pakistan over decades have breached India's tolerance threshold, even as improved capabilities have enabled options to use conventional capability to punish terrorists and simultaneously impose a reputational cost on the Pakistani armed forces.

If one were to go by the mindset reflected in the statement made by Pakistan Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Munir on April 17, 2025, and his explicit support of the two-nation theory and the supposedly irreconcilable ideological chasm between Hindus and Muslims, there is little hope for improved relations.²³ Indeed, the short phases of relatively better relations have often been disturbed by terror attacks traced to the Pakistani ISI and Army, the deep state. Consequently, it cannot be presumed that the relationship would improve once the current Army chief passes the baton. His view appears to permeate the country's power structures. Pakistan's military uses India as a threat to stay at the top of the pyramid. Given this logic, Pakistan is unlikely to abandon the instrument of terror to keep India unsettled.

So, in finding an answer to this conundrum, India will have to continue to deploy a multi-pronged strategy across the DIMES (diplomatic, information, military, economic and social harmony) spectrum to utilise all instruments of national power in a whole of the nation approach. This will have to be pursued with wisdom and executed with patience. It will be a long haul. The following sections provide only a modest overview of the dimensions and cues for action.

Diplomatic Efforts

Diplomacy demands consistent engagement with nations to build influence in support of one's national interest. While military capability is necessary to deter and dissuade the adversary, diplomatic efforts are equally important. India needs these to create "sustained international pressure on Pakistan to dismantle the networks that make these attacks possible in the first place."²⁴

This effort, however, will be expectedly complicated in the complex VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) world of today, where countries are primarily driven by national interests, rather than principles. The international commitment to zero tolerance for terrorism is weak, and major powers are chary of designating Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism. As aptly voiced by an analyst, “India’s counter-terrorism concerns, deeply rooted in hard evidence and lived experiences, continue to be met with global indifference, diplomatic ambivalence or, at best, procedural sympathy.”²⁵

For this situation to change, India needs to repeatedly share its experience in a continuous, rather than episodic process. Our diplomats across the world need to use every opportunity to sensitise capitals to India’s unique security challenge of having to face cross-border terrorism under the nuclear shadow. The narration needs to be persistent, including making the international community aware of various types of infiltration patterns and the inordinate investment of manpower and resources that India is compelled to make in keeping its borders secure. Visits of foreign diplomats to see these areas should be mandatory ‘education’ for their India assignment. Such efforts will help create an *a priori* understanding of the context when an incident takes place. The international community will then be able to situate it in its right perspective and grasp the nuances of the situation, rather than painting India and Pakistan with the same broad brush, which has caused much angst in India during Operation Sindoor.

India’s diplomatic overtures, however, can be a challenge given the country’s relatively small foreign service in relation to the numerous tasks it needs to perform across geographies and issue areas. With approximately 1,000 foreign service officers, the Indian diplomatic corps is as small as that of Singapore. Former Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao drew attention to this problem when she said, “Given India’s responsibilities, interests and challenges we face in the global arena, we

need much more... Our foreign policy commitments and involvements have definitely increased in recent years.”²⁶

The government will need to take stock of this issue, as drawing international attention to the matter is crucial. Several countries hold significant weight in various global and regional fora, including the United Nations, and thus can shape multilateral frameworks. One such instrument is the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). On Pahalgam, it has been noted that such an incident could not have taken place “without money and the means to move funds between terrorist supporters”. Consequently, it has decided to launch an investigation into the financial trail of the Pahalgam attack. Such an investigation would be helpful to determine the sources that keep Pakistan from caring “even if access to international financial assistance, crucial for it, is cut off.”²⁷ The investigation, therefore, will exert pressure on the country to squeeze terror financing.

In seeking to exert more pressure on Pakistan, India must develop a proactive policy addressing convergent concerns with all major powers worldwide, as well as in its immediate neighbourhood. Indeed, shaping the regional environment is critical. New Delhi must not let the issues or grievances of others fester, as this provides an opportunity for to its adversaries to exploit them. Through its stated “Neighbourhood First” policy, India has prioritised a consultative, non-reciprocal, and development-oriented approach, focusing on delivering benefits like enhanced connectivity, improved infrastructure, development cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges. The Indian model of engagement stands in sharp contrast to China’s initiatives, which have proven to be debt-creating, environmentally insensitive, and sometimes even unsuited to local requirements. But, the fruits of India’s efforts should be more evident to make others, including Pakistan, desirous of partaking in these benefits.

Lastly, on the diplomatic front, India’s decision to hold the Indus Waters treaty in abeyance will need some deft handling. Water sharing

is a sensitive issue everywhere. India and Pakistan concluded the Indus Water Treaty in 1960 as a water-sharing arrangement whereby the waters of three western rivers—the Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab were allocated to Pakistan, and three eastern rivers—the Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej were allotted to India. Through the various crises with Pakistan, India never violated its commitment to the IWT even though the need for a modification of the treaty which allocated as much as 79 per cent of the Indus river basis to Pakistan and only 21 per cent to India had been felt for a long time in view of changes in population, climate change induced changes in water flows, and the increasing energy requirements. Pakistan, however, has refused to engage with India on these issues and raised objections to the run-of-the-river dams that are well within India's rights.

Frustration with Pakistan's blockading of formal requests for changes to the IWT and anger at the dastardly Pahalgam incident led India to hold the IWT in abeyance. By doing so, India is no longer obligated to share hydrological data with Pakistan. This has been seen in Pakistan as having severe implications for its agriculture-dependent economy since India, as an upper riparian state, could use reduction as well as increased flow (flooding) at different times. According to Pakistan's Economic Survey of 2025, its agriculture sector contributes "24 per cent in GDP and 37.4 per cent in employment. The predominance of agriculture in the economy indicates that agricultural growth is a critical driver of economic growth, employment, and poverty reduction, given its linkages with the other sectors."²⁸ About 70 per cent of Pakistan's exports are directly or indirectly derived from agriculture. These figures demonstrate the centrality of agriculture to Pakistan's economy. It is also worth noting that the Indus River and its tributaries are the most densely populated parts of the country. Pakistan has already called India's new stand on IWT as 'an act of War.' It is likely to resort to international arbitration, presenting itself as a victim, being a lower riparian state, making all of this an evolving story.

In IWT, India has a potent tool that can be used as both a carrot and a stick. By using the term ‘abeyance’, India implies that the treaty remains temporarily suspended. But it also leaves open the possibility of its reinstatement if Pakistan “credibly and irreversibly” ceases support for cross-border terrorism against India. The IWT, therefore, is a bargaining chip with India. It should be used wisely by proactively shaping the global narrative on how the Pak Army holds the fate of its populace in its own hands. The onus of the future of the IWT lies with the Pakistan deep state, and that India is no enemy of the people of Pakistan, who should demand a behavioural change of their armed forces.

Informational Space Management

The battle for mind-space has always been a crucial aspect of the international arena. However, it has become even more critical in contemporary times, as technology offers numerous channels to amplify narratives. Winning on the ground but losing in the minds can turn the picture around. Therefore, informational space management is a crucial part of the national strategy.

To undertake the necessary tasks in informational sphere, one former Army commander who has served several times in the state of J&K has recommended “a dedicated, statutory body on national strategic communication—a civil-military-media interface that works not in isolation, but as part of India’s national security architecture.”²⁹ This recommendation suggests involving diplomats along with representatives from the ministries of defence, home, and information and broadcasting, senior military officers with experience in information warfare, experts from media, digital platforms, cognitive psychology, and behavioural science, data scientists, AI specialists, and digital monitoring professionals, and academics with expertise in strategic affairs.

Taking this to the international level, the government must step up engagement with diaspora experts. Some years ago, many international experts were honoured with letters of appreciation by the local Indian

embassies. Engagement (by our embassies) with such experts in informal dialogues on India's security concerns could result in increased presentation of 'Indian perspective in different shades.' Simultaneously, increased engagement with international media, abroad and locally, is imperative. In Operation Sindoor, this gap was felt when many dailies in major countries were unable to present the nuances of the crisis in a manner that sympathetically portrayed the Indian side of the picture. The Indian government must not shy away from cultivating credible media outlets and personalities by periodically presenting them with briefings on matters of concern, including visits to the state of Jammu & Kashmir. Only then can they be expected to correctly understand the complexities of India's security challenges and present relevant information during a crisis.

Of course, such engagement is equally necessary for the Indian media. Of course, they already enjoy the advantage of a better historical understanding of India's relationship with Pakistan, which should enable a more accurate interpretation of the facts. They need to maintain the highest standards of reporting. The electronic media especially needs to break out of the 'breaking news' mould. By ensuring that serious factual reports are gathered from the ground and that adequate analysis is conducted by experts in studios, these channels can ensure credibility and reduce cut down instances of sensationalism or factual misrepresentation.

Meanwhile, for the public at home, India must carefully build the narrative on its counterterrorism challenges and efforts without being defensive or gung-ho about it. Only then can international messaging be in harmony with the picture at home. Both will strengthen the government's hand in dealing with the issues.

Military Capability Build-up

Operation Sindoor has demonstrated the mettle of capabilities such as unmanned autonomous platforms (whose loss proved to be less escalatory on both sides), air attack capabilities with precision weapons to minimise risk of collateral damage, accurate cruise missiles, and air

and missile defences. More of the same will be needed. Emergency procurements by the Indian Armed Forces in recent times are efforts in this direction.

In Pakistan, India has a neighbour that has nuclear weapons, houses and supports terrorist outfits, and lives in denial of the threats that both pose. Further in its conventional military modernisation, Pakistan is likely to utilise relatively cheaper hardware, whose lack of top-notch quality may be offset by sheer numbers to overwhelm India.

For a developing country, the demands on its resources are always numerous. India's defence requirements will need to be addressed through resource optimisation, with continuous analysis of threats from China and Pakistan. Recent conflicts and wars around the world underscore the need to integrate advanced technologies, while also fostering a more agile and responsive armed forces. Technology research and development measures for India should include:

- Investing in AI-driven platforms for intelligence gathering, signal analysis, and decision-making for improving situational awareness and response times.
- Integrating drones and other unmanned systems for reconnaissance, surveillance, to enhance force projection and reduce personnel risk.
- Strengthening cybersecurity capabilities to protect critical infrastructure and defence systems from cyberattacks.
- A wise combination of traditionally strong DRDO, Indian public sector and burgeoning innovative private defence industry to arrive at cost-effective indigenous solutions.

The jointness of operations cannot be over emphasised. Similarly, our defence cooperation and joint exercises with friendly foreign nations, especially the US, UK, France, Australia, SAARC and South Eastern neighbours, must continue.

Training of armed forces also needs continuous upgrade and revision. Investing in advanced training programs to equip personnel with the

requisite skills to operate and maintain complex modern technologies is imperative. There is a need to enhance the numbers and strength of special forces and para-commandos across all services, as future operations are expected to rely heavily on them. It will also be essential to highlight the necessity of policies to attract and retain bright, motivated and talented young men and women.

Good intelligence is key not only to the prevention of terrorist attacks but also to providing optimal targeting options during a crisis. Technical and human intelligence resources are equally critical. For technical intelligence, the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO) has proven to be a crucial element. Established on the recommendation of the Kargil Review Committee, it gathers technical intelligence by “intercepting and analysing communications signals, imagery intelligence, and cyber intelligence ... also conducts scientific and technical research and development in the field of technical intelligence.”³⁰ Techint also needs to be supplemented with humint since terrorists have shifted to more encrypted means of communication. Meanwhile, Indian space assets, such as Cartosat and the RISAT series, were significantly effective in facilitating repeatable data access, thereby enhancing surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. Shortfalls were made up through international satellite imagery providers. More Indian eyes in the sky would enable better ISR systems that can provide a more coherent situational awareness supporting informed decision-making.

Lastly, nuclear deterrence will also need to be strengthened. India has been developing a survivable second-strike capability. Given its no-first-use doctrine, it is imperative to concentrate on increasing the survivability of not just the warhead or the delivery vehicle, but also the entire command and control structure, communication networks, and, above all, the survival of the political will to retaliate. The deployment of long-range, MIRVed land-based missiles, as well as quicker operationalisation of SSBNs with longer-range missiles, are critical capabilities. While India does not need to strike the panic button on nuclear warhead numbers accumulation,

it must ensure survivability of the arsenal through a combination of deception, mobility, dispersal and defences.

Economic Growth

Steady economic growth can be India's biggest strength. It will ensure an increase in the size of the pie that can offer adequate resources for defence spending. Therefore, even if the budgetary allocation remains at the same percentage of GDP, as the latter grows, it automatically ensures a larger amount as well. At another level, economic growth also serves as a lodestone for other nations across the globe to engage with India. Trade relations can create a diverse and interlocking set of vested interests, thereby increasing India's leverage and influence.

Besides, the benefits of economic growth are also essential for addressing the aspirations of a relatively young nation (with a median age of about 29 years and a per capita GDP of approximately USD 2,700)³¹ when the prosperity of developed nations is so visible online today. It is well known that economic disparities foster social unrest and disaffection which can be exploited by an adversary to create fissiparous tendencies. Governments must remain vigilant to such possibilities and continue to shape economic policies in a way that is inclusive of all, to avert these risks.

India's economic growth must ensure a movement towards independence in strategic areas, including energy, technology and defence. The three dimensions are critical to a fourth-largest economy that emphasises strategic autonomy. Vulnerabilities in any of these pillars can be inimical to India's interests.

Social Harmony

With Islam existing on the subcontinent for over 1200 years, Pakistan carved out a separate nation for Muslims based on the two-nation theory post-independence from British colonialism is a much younger experiment. It took a hit in the late 1960s when the socio-cultural-

linguistic sentiments of the Bengalis in East Pakistan trumped the bonds of religion by the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Similarly, the militant struggles in Balochistan and Sindh continue to test the country's foundational structure based on religion. Contrastingly, India, a country of continental proportions with a multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual populace, continues to baffle the world. Its democratic polity and composite, pluralistic character have been core strengths that have managed to address the stresses of different sections of society from time to time. The diversity, however, will naturally continue to throw up challenges.

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan has and will continue to make use of every opportunity to create or exploit rifts in secular India's social fabric. India will have to guard against such attempts and not offer any 'domestically created circumstances' that could be exploited by the adversary. The constitution of the nation offers ample empowerment to all sections, especially the weakest, the marginalised and the minority.

While terrorist recruitment has seen a downward trend in Kashmir valley since 2021, there were more incidents of targeting of security forces in Jammu between 2022 and 2024. "Security forces have noted that the infiltrating terrorists, gathering in groups of four to five, have used tactics of conservation and consolidation, i.e., staying quiet for some time and blending with the local population before carrying out attacks."³² The tendency of countrymen driven by misplaced nationalistic fervour to paint all residents of J&K as terrorist supporters or to fan the fissures of religion would only weaken India in its fight. Unity of population and purpose, on the other hand, can help forge the necessary national will that the polity can use to seek legitimacy for its actions in a democracy.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, then, Pakistan's continued use of cross-border terrorism in the belief that the nuclear shadow provides it ample immunity

has been repeatedly tested by how India has seized the space to conduct conventional operations. In the case of Operation Sindoor, too, India did not allow nuclear weapons any space to make their presence felt. Instead, India signalled that it would no longer succumb to risk manipulation and is willing to play this game.

Going forward, it would be ideal if Pakistan desisted from creating more crises, as it would be in no one's interest to test the possibilities of escalation. With a population of 250 million, Pakistan is the fifth most populous country in the world. The youth deserve a chance at life other than having to face the consequences of terrorism imposed upon them by elements of their deep state. The country's intelligentsia would do their citizens and the region a favour by drawing up a progressive vision for the country's future. In the meantime, India needs to maintain its flanks across all DIMES issues, as briefly discussed above.

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Notes

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12. India had given inputs on the TRF to the monitoring team of the 1267 Sanctions Committee in 2024 bringing out its role as a cover for the LeT. While the TRF later denied its role in Pahalgam, it is telling that Pakistan sought to remove any reference to the organisation in the April 25 UNSC press statement.
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This monograph explores the dynamics of India-Pakistan relations in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor. A relationship that had frayed considerably since the last decade took a turn into a new abyss after the sinister and despicable terror attack that killed 26 innocent tourists, singled out on the basis of their religion, in Pahalgam on 22 April 2025. Actions taken by India across the Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic (DIME) paradigm have been unprecedented leading to rewriting of the rulebook of India-Pakistan relations. The monograph examines Pakistan's compulsions, India's military retaliation of deterrence by punishment and the challenge of cross border terrorism under the nuclear shadow. The authors give their perspectives on the dynamics of military action, Pakistan's perception and its narrative along with its alliances, apart from the risk of escalation into a conventional conflict under the nuclear overhang.



Air Vice Marshal **Anil Golani** is a Qualified Flying Instructor and an Instrument Rating Instructor and Examiner, commissioned into the fighter stream of the Indian Air Force (IAF) in December 1982. He commanded an Air Defence Direction Centre and an operational base and is one of the few to have served in senior ranks in both the Joint Services Commands of the country, the Andaman & Nicobar Command as the Air Force Component Commander and Strategic Forces Command as the Chief Staff Officer (Air Vector). His other joint Services appointments include Air Officer Commanding Maritime Air Operations in Mumbai and Chief Instructor, Air Force, at the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington. AVM Golani has completed the Staff Course, Higher Air Command Course and a year's course in International Security and Strategy at the Royal College of Defence Studies, London. He superannuated from service in November 2019. An avid writer and author, he has written several articles on air power, national security, strategy and integration of the armed forces. He has also co-edited three books, Air Power and Emerging Technologies, Indian Air Force in its Centennial Decade and Emerging Technologies and Changing Dimensions of Threats for India. He took over as Additional Director General of Centre for Aerospace Power & Strategic Studies (CAPSS) on May 7, 2021, and Director General of CAPSS on April 1, 2024.

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