



A NEW NORMAL IN INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN THE AGE OF CROSS-BORDER TERRORISM

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On 16 April, Pakistan's army chief General Asim Munir had described Kashmir as his country's 'jugular vein, we will not forget it'. On 22 April, terrorists killed 26 domestic tourists in Pahalgam, Kashmir. They identified Muslims, spared them and killed all the Hindu males. One woman whose husband was killed in front of her and her child asked to be killed as well. Rejecting her request, the killer said: 'I won't kill you. Go and tell Modi.' Local civilians, mostly Muslim, helped in the rescue efforts, she added gratefully. India blamed Pakistan but the latter rejected the charge, demanding evidence and impartial international investigation. In the following days, it became clear that India was preparing to retaliate. On 7 May, India launched air strikes on alleged terror infrastructure but also Pakistan military targets, in Pakistan-administered Kashmir but also in Pakistan proper. Four days of intense and escalating aerial incursions, drone attacks and artillery shelling followed with tit-for-tat claims of damage inflicted, including aircrafts destroyed. On 10 May, to general surprise, a ceasefire was announced by President Donald Trump on Truth Social and confirmed by both countries. However, India has rejected Trump's claim to have brokered the ceasefire.

The background to the conflict is the troubled history of the subcontinent since British India was partitioned into Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India in August 1947. Both claimed Kashmir under complex legal and demographic justifications and have fought several wars punctuated by periodic bouts of minor skirmishes and terrorist attacks. The underlying causes include three competing nationalisms: the secular nationalism of India, the religious nationalism of Pakistan—the world's only country to name its capital after a religion—and the ethnonationalism of Kashmir. The first bilateral war in the immediate aftermath of partition-cum-independence left Kashmir divided in 1948 into zones administered by India in which around ten million people live and another administered by Pakistan with 4.5 million. With the onset of the Cold War, the bilateral dispute got entangled with global politics and further complicated with the Sino-Soviet schism.

In 2019 the Indian government abolished Kashmir's special constitutional status that had been put in place as a temporary measure, thereby completing the unfinished business of integrating Kashmir into the Indian union. It still stands as a symbol of unfinished business of fulfilling Pakistan's destiny as the homeland for all Muslim-majority provinces and principalities of British India. But, owing to asymmetric military capability, Pakistan has resorted to proxy strikes in India by Kashmiri separatists and jihadists in a strategy of inflicting death by a thousand cuts.

The post-bellum situation after 10 May is far from normal. Visas and trade are still halted. Pakistan's airspace remains closed to Indian flights. The Indus Waters Treaty that facilitates water sharing of this critical river is still suspended. The last risks an own goal by India. For in the case of the mighty Brahmaputra river, which supplies almost 30 percent of India's freshwater, India is the lower and China the upper riparian state that could exploit the precedent of weaponising control of river systems against India. Moreover, it could also open an alternative pathway for Pakistan to internationalise its dispute with India by demanding international arbitration over the unilateral suspension of the treaty. Perhaps most importantly, it will risk damaging relations with other smaller neighbours like Bangladesh and Nepal which too share water systems with India.

To a professional student and sometimes practitioner of world politics who is of Indian background, the India-Pakistan conflict is starting to bear a striking structural resemblance to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The former two became independent in August 1947 by partitioning India as a British colony. Israel declared independence in May 1948 in land carved out for the Jewish state from the British mandate in Palestine. On the one hand, Pakistan sponsors, hosts, trains and arms various jihadist groups that launch periodic terrorist raids across the border in India. On the other hand, over the course of decades-long bitter experience, India's policy on how best to respond has gradually shifted from reactive and diplomatic to military and proactive. The nuclearisation of the subcontinent in May 1998 injected extra caution in India's response options to cross-border terror provocations. The events of the past fortnight represent the latest iteration of India throwing off the shackles of the nuclear overhang to emulate the core Israeli strategy of deterrence of future attacks through escalation dominance.

Assessing battlefield performances

During the four days of hostilities, India claimed to have hit more than a dozen air bases across Pakistan, destroyed several fighter aircraft and nearly one-fifth of the air force's infrastructure, severely degraded radar and air defence systems, and killed 50-100 military personnel. By contrast India's air defences seem to have worked effectively to neutralise incoming missiles and drones. Early in the fighting, Pakistan claimed to have downed five Indian aircraft: three French-origin Rafales plus one each of Russian-origin MiG-29 and SU-30. India declined official comment but international reports (Reuters, Eurasia Review, Aviation Week, UK Telegraph, Financial Times), indicated that India had lost at least one Dassault Rafale fighter to a Chengdu J-10C fighter jet armed with long-range (200km) Chinese PL-15E air-to-air missiles, sending shockwaves through world defence circles at the first loss ever of a Rafale fighter in combat. The geopolitical implications of the real-world demonstration of the superiority of Chinese air combat capabilities over highly-regarded modern French fighter jets are huge.

Some Indian analysts criticised the ceasefire as yet another example of India snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. Another possible explanation is that the official Indian narrative is at odds with the facts of the relative performance of the two militaries. However John Spencer, a leading West Point expert on modern combat warfare, posted his verdict on X on 14 May:

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.

Modi flips the script on India's response to terrorist attacks

On 14 February 2019, suicide bombers struck a paramilitary convoy in Pulwama, Kashmir, killing 44 soldiers. The Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM) claimed responsibility for the attack. India had pointed the finger of criminality at JEM for many previous atrocities but China repeatedly blocked efforts to brand its leader Masood Azhar a global terrorist, a price paid mainly by India for China's status as a veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council. Then PM Narendra Modi flipped the script on the modus operandi of India's response. He publicly gave the military a clean hand to determine the timing, location and scale of response. On 26 February, India claimed to have conducted a 'non-military preemptive action' against JEM targets in Balakot, Pakistan. Twelve Mirage-2000 jets carried out the strikes using Israeli-made glide missiles, killing 'a very large number of terrorists' while avoiding civilian casualties: the first such action by the Indian military across the border since the 1971 Bangladesh war.

The official Indian statement on the action was read out by Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale. He noted that the UN-proscribed JEM had been active in Pakistan for two decades and had launched several terrorist attacks on India, including on Parliament in 2001. India had repeatedly provided information on JEM training camps but Pakistan had failed to take effective action. 'The existence of such massive training facilities capable of training hundreds of jihadis could not have functioned without the knowledge of Pakistan authorities'. Pakistan accused India of an act of aggression and asserted the right to retaliate in self-defence. However, particularly after the killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbotabad in 2011 within a stone's throw of its premier military academy, Pakistan had lost plausible deniability of complicity in acts of terrorism in Afghanistan and India.

With its patience exhausted both with Pakistan and the veto-riven UN Security Council, India had moved to the policy of taking the fight into neighbouring territory from where terror attacks originate and eliminating the human leadership and material infrastructure of terrorism through targeted precision strikes: the Israeli playbook on how to respond to terrorist raids from across its borders. Thus India made it clear that henceforth there would be consequences that are more than just pinpricks. To be effective and emulating the Israeli model, such strikes would have to be combined with escalation dominance: the enemy should know that any escalation from the limited strikes will bring even heavier punitive costs from a superior military force.

Yet, in a perverse and stubborn pattern of not letting national interests come in the way of abstract principles and noble ideals, shortly after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, India persisted in condemning 'the ongoing incursion into Gaza by Israeli ground and other forces' to take military action against Hamas. This when Israel is the only other country that can compare and empathise with India's predicament and policy dilemma in facing the threat of serial terror attacks planned, organised and launched from neighbouring territories.

India's May 2025 strikes were code-named '*Operation Sindoor*'. *Sindoor* is the Hindi word for the bright-red vermillion applied from the forehead along the parting of hair by married women that carries a deeply emotional resonance in traditional Hindu culture and society. In a Bollywood movie, a gangster might threaten to kill a woman's husband by saying he will rub off the *sindoor* from her head. The choice of the name made an immediate emotional connection as justice for the women widowed in the Pahalgam attack. Aishanya Dwivedi, one of those widows, cried on learning that the strikes on Pakistan had been named *Operation Sindoor*. The government has 'connected with us on a personal level', she said. It denoted justice for the victims and brought a measure of emotional closure.

In his address to the nation in Hindi on 12 May after the ceasefire, Modi referenced the 'barbarity' of the religiously-based killings in Pahalgam in the presence of wives and children as a 'despicable attempt to break the harmony and unity of the country' (my translation). And now, 'every terrorist, every terror organisation knows the consequence of wiping out the *Sindoor* of our sisters and daughters', he added. India had taken forceful action to kill terrorists and destroy the infrastructure 'located in the heart of Pakistan' and also damaged Pakistani air force bases. One of the creative bits of response by India was to put up two women military officers as media spokespersons on the strikes, Wing Commander Vyomika Singh and Colonel Sofiya Qureshi (a Muslim). The bigger significance of Modi's 17-minute address is strategic: '*Operation Sindoor* is now India's new policy against terrorism, a new line has been drawn', Modi said. Henceforth, India will respond to terrorist attacks on its own terms and direct its fire at every place from where terrorism comes.

The nuclear shadow

The toxic cocktail of growing nuclear stockpiles, expanding nuclear platforms, irredentist territorial claims and out of control jihadist groups makes the Indian subcontinent a high-risk region of concern. No one can be confident that another major terrorist attack will not take place, with links back to Pakistan-based jihadists. India would be compelled to retaliate militarily and this could escalate to another war that crosses the nuclear threshold.

This was the basis of nuclear blackmail by Pakistan. It had come to internalise the belief that it could stand behind cross-border acts of terrorism with barely plausible deniability, demand joint investigation of charges of complicity confident in the knowledge that by the time any investigation cut through the fog of war and counter-charges of false flag operations by Indian security forces, the window for retaliatory strikes had closed. Or, if there was any retaliation, then shout loudly about Kashmir as the world's most dangerous nuclear flashpoint as an effective tactic to internationalise the bilateral dispute because of the power asymmetry with India, and leave India militarily impotent, diplomatically frustrated and publicly humiliated with its own citizenry.

The hysterical speculation by the international media on a nuclear war and the pathways to avoid it with the involvement of outsiders—‘What is next for nuclear-armed India and Pakistan?’ (UK *Telegraph*), ‘The most dangerous river in the world: Why the Indus could spark WWII’ (UK *Telegraph*), ‘How real is the risk of nuclear war between India and Pakistan?’ (BBC), ‘Is nuclear war between India and Pakistan inevitable?’ (*Spectator*)—feeds right into Pakistan’s propaganda.

Some media reports suggest that Indian strikes with bunker-busting munitions extended to the remote Kirana Hills that house an underground nuclear weapons complex. Rumours circulated about a possible radiation leak. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has scotched the rumours as baseless. India’s vernacular press in particular can be overly exuberant in jingoistic reporting that often blurs the line between facts and rumours. Tellingly, however, neither officialdom in New Delhi nor the leading English-language print media betrayed any sense of panic that a nuclear exchange was likely or even plausible.

The nuclear genie playbook had worked time and again. The attack on India’s Parliament on 13 December 2001 that provoked a year-long military standoff ending in a stalemate. The terrorist attack on Mumbai on 26 November 2008 by ten Pakistani-origin seaborne terrorists that killed 166 people and included Chabad House as one of the many high profile targets. In every case the UN Secretary-General and other world leaders counselled restraint and de-escalation of tensions and lavishly praised India’s strategic patience when their calls were heeded. And in every single case Indians’ anger with and contempt for their own leaders grew exponentially, producing a dangerous divide between the ruling class and the citizenry.

Terror cannot operate in tandem with trade and talks any more than water and blood can flow together. To survive, Pakistan must destroy its terror infrastructure, Modi concluded in his address to the nation.

Sure enough, Kaja Kallas, the de facto EU foreign minister, posted on 3 May that she had urged ‘both sides to show restraint and pursue dialogue to ease the situation’ after the Pahalgam massacre. This time India’s Foreign Minister S Jaishankar responded on 4 May that India was interested in European partners, not preachers. Noting European ‘hypocrisy’, he added: ‘Particularly preachers who don’t practice at home’ the combination of restraint and dialogue that they urge on India (a not so veiled reference to the Ukraine war). During a press conference at the White House on 12 May, President Trump claimed credit not just for mediating ‘a full and immediate ceasefire’ between India and Pakistan by threatening to cut off trade, but also for averting ‘a nuclear conflict’, what could have been ‘a bad nuclear war’ that could have killed ‘millions of people’ (at about the 1:50 mark). Indian government sources denied the trade linkage had come up in the discussions but that didn’t stop opposition parties from attacking the Modi’s government failure to reject third party intervention in India–Pakistan bilateral relations.

Mention of a nuclear war being stopped is vintage Trump bombast and hyperbole. India officially responded on the 12th that its military action was limited to conventional munitions and countries should not buy into Pakistan’s nuclear bluff. This marks yet another demonstration of the limited operational and deterrent utility of nuclear weapons. India would have been disappointed with Trump’s remarks also for implying a false equivalency between victim and perpetrator of terrorism, for rewarding an act of terrorism with negotiations and for re-hyphenating India and Pakistan.

India’s precise and decisive actions against terrorist hideouts will not be constrained by Pakistan’s attempt at nuclear blackmail. Nuclear war remains unthinkable, but the onus for escalation has been shifted back to Pakistan. The subcontinent’s nuclear overhang will no longer guarantee impunity for terrorists. Nor will India differentiate between the masterminds and government sponsors of terrorism. Terror cannot operate in tandem with trade and talks any more than water and blood can flow together. To survive, Pakistan must destroy its terror infrastructure, Modi concluded in his address to the nation.

Winning on the battlefield, losing the information war

There is another respect in which India resembles Israel. I [argued previously](#) in Policy Brief 182 in January last year that paradoxically, Israel had ‘achieved better than expected battlefield successes in Gaza but suffered political and diplomatic setbacks’. Despite winning the battles in Gaza, Lebanon and against Iran, Israel mostly lost the information-cum-diplomatic war in the Arab-Islamic world, the global South and even in Western countries including Australia as the perception took hold that its actions were disproportionately brutal and intensive on civilian populations. The same seems to have happened to India albeit not with respect to civilian casualties since India was extremely careful to avoid hitting civilian targets.

The information and PR battlefield is as important today as the military battlefield. In the US, every major news outlet has its in-house quota of former top security officials and generals as expert talking heads. They retain their security clearances. Maybe not up to the highest previous level, but enough to make their comments authoritative. They can go in and read classified material and talk to serving officers/officials. That’s what India should be doing, in real time. Pakistan’s armed forces also use their retired officers as PR assets. In India, the government is very chary of the retired armed forces community engaging in national security policy debates in public even after retirement.

This seems like a huge waste of a valuable human resource. For example, Air Marshal (ret’d) Raghunath Nambiar, in an unpublished, privately circulated paper, explained how the Indian Air Force’s ‘ability to project power, achieve air dominance and deliver precision strikes proved to be the linchpin of India’s response, compelling a swift cessation of hostilities on terms favourable to India’ (quoted with permission). This would appear to be the consensus in India’s military, as can be seen in [this analysis](#) from a retired Indian Army Lieutenant General.

Indian politicians, officials and Modi apologists blame a deeply embedded anti-Indian bias in the dominant global mainstream media for this state of affairs. The problem is not the international media, but the Indian government. It demands to be taken as the single source of truth on national security information. It seems to think that the same strategy of suppression of non-official sources and vilification and targeting of any different statements, will work for the international media as it has for domestic. But the international media can neither be bribed nor intimidated into parroting government press releases. Pakistan is a lot more sophisticated in its international messaging and, with the help of professional PR consultants, its embassy in Washington usually runs rings around the amateurish Indian embassy efforts. The same is true of China.

In this context, the diplomatic innovation of sending [seven all-party and multi-religious delegations to different groups of countries](#), bolstered with the addition of a retired senior ambassador in each group, to explain India’s point of view is highly commendable. The group comprises 51 senior Members of Parliament plus eight former ambassadors and will travel to a total of 33 countries in Europe, Africa, East Asia, Latin America, USA and Russia. They are due to leave on 23 May.

India’s [defence ministry statement](#) on 7 May described the 24 initial strikes on [nine different and geographically separated sites](#) as ‘precise, focussed, measured and non-escalatory’, aimed at terrorist infrastructure and not targeted at military facilities. The Indian army tweeted after the carefully calibrated strikes that ‘[Justice is served](#)’ in retaliation for the Pahalgam massacre. The exchanges quickly escalated after Pakistan retaliated and military installations were then struck across Pakistan.

At a [joint press briefing](#) with army and navy counterparts on 11 May, [Air Marshal A K Bharti](#), Director General Air Operations, said India had shot down ‘a few’ Pakistani aircraft but: ‘At this time I would not like to comment on the numbers, which platforms did we lose’ because this ‘will be advantageous to the adversary’. This is a good example of the lack of professionalism by India in the global information war. You either give the numbers now and control the narrative—you can always adjust the numbers later—or else you take this need to know approach, and find yourself always on the back foot in the information war. By the time you are ready to release the information the story has moved on to covering Trump’s trip to three Middle Eastern countries.

In the digital age, authorities must take the lead in providing accurate, clear and sober details even in the midst of fighting. For if they do not, others will fill the information vacuum for a public hungry for up-to-the-minute news. With the dominant role of social media in disseminating news bulletins at lightning speed, official near-silence is a counterproductive strategy that will fuel the flow of misinformation and disinformation, undermining public confidence.

On pretty much every announcement, Pakistani spokespersons seem to have led to mostly silence and ‘no comment’ from India. This makes for terrible optics for India. This from the UK Spectator:

China’s success in the clashes between India and Pakistan, with Chinese J-10C jets along with PL-15 air-to-air missiles helping Pakistan bring at least two Indian fighter aircraft down, including at least one Rafale jet, signaling the first ever loss for the French fighter aircraft in war. Pakistan’s successful hits on Indian jets has seen the Chinese defence stocks surge this week with Beijing’s military equipment now proving itself in the most high stakes battlefield in the world.

On 13 May, a headline in the popular *Hindustan Times* read: ‘Rafale maker Dassault shares plummet; China’s CAC, manufacturer of J-10, sees stock soar’. This indicates that international markets were left unimpressed by the initial Indian government and military claims on what happened. However by the next day the same paper reported that the Chinese corporation’s stocks had fallen substantially back, which some analysts attributed to Modi’s forceful national address but which more likely reflects a better international assessment of India’s overall performance over the four nights of fighting.

Redefinition of India’s strategic doctrine

This article by R Balasubramaniam is a good example of an outright ra-ra sycophancy rather than a cool analytical appraisal of Modi’s speech:

It was more than just a message of military achievement – it was a masterclass in clarity, vision, and the art of statecraft ... Modi’s address fused ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic) to create a seamless narrative that resonated across diverse audiences – domestic citizens, international observers, and adversarial states alike.

Nevertheless, looking at the joint air force, army and navy military briefing on 11 May and Modi’s national address on 12 May, there are two key takeaways. First, beyond the need to reassure Indians of military capabilities and political resolve, India’s primary external target audience is not the international media and public but the top Pakistani military leadership. Second, the primary KPI is not the relative military successes and failures but the strategic messaging. The old normal of strategic restraint, indefinite patience, international diplomatic costs and economic penalties has been displaced. In the new normal, India will unilaterally determine Pakistan’s culpability for any terrorist attacks in India and retaliate appropriately against locations, targets, munitions and delivery platforms of its choosing, while retaining the freedom to climb the ladder of escalation based on how Pakistan responds. As one officer told the *Times of India*: ‘Even more than the actual damage, the messaging that we can hit the heartland of Pakistan was the key’.

Operation Sindoor was thus not about a retaliation for Pahalgam, but about a redefinition of India’s strategic doctrine vis-à-vis cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan. And that is the most salient point of resemblance to Israel’s Gaza war. The old normal had been to exert bilateral pressure on Pakistan to dismantle the terror network, diplomatic efforts to isolate Pakistan internationally, UN designation of individuals and groups in Pakistan as terrorists, and economic penalties on Pakistan for failing to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorists. The ability and willingness to send advanced missiles and drones deep into Pakistan to degrade military assets and target terrorist infrastructure as the new normal, while controlling the escalation ladder, could mark Modi’s defining legacy in bilateral relations with the traditional enemy that has witnessed its first multi-domain warfare, including space and cyber assets.

Pakistan should address the task of dismantling state-supported and state-tolerated jihadist groups that launch strikes into India or else risk increasingly greater damage from Indian retaliatory strikes in the future. This will also help the country reduce its military's footprint in domestic politics and counter its international reputation as a hotbed of Islamism.

India's domestic focus should acknowledge the reality of Indian Muslims shared horror at the Pahalgam horror and denounce all those who would relegate Indian Muslims into second class citizens. India should also engage constructively with Pakistan in renegotiating the Indus river-sharing agreement and ending the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty in the meantime. Both countries should also begin the process of normalising bilateral relations beyond official exchanges, starting with a restoration of cricket relations about which both countries are so passionate. The players have mostly managed to maintain good personal relations despite the pervasive hostility that bedevils the two countries.

Finally, as India joins Israel in taking unilateral kinetic action against territories from which terror strikes originate as per its own determination, and the violence intensifies with each cycle of attacks and retaliation, outside actors including the UN might wish to reorient their efforts into more robust measures against perpetrators instead of urging victims to exercise restraint and avoid escalation. Or risk being ignored more frequently by additional countries fed up with ineffectual constraints on state sponsors of terrorism. The UN and other international actors could also encourage both India and Pakistan to convert the line of control into the international border. Eight decades of enmity, hostility and warfare have barely shifted the de facto border. Legalising its status could be an important step towards shifting the balance towards more peace and less violence.



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