



# **QUARTERLY**

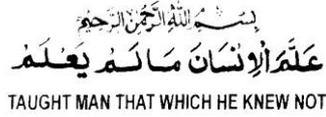
A Periodical of INSIGHTS

**CONFLICT & DETERRENCE**

**MARKA-E-HAQ**

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Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and Analysis (ISSRA)  
National Defence University, Sector E-9, Islamabad, Pakistan  
**Website:** <https://ndu.edu.pk/issra/index.php>  
**Email:** [issra@ndu.edu.pk](mailto:issra@ndu.edu.pk)



# E9

# QUARTERLY

A Periodical of INSIGHTS

## (Special Edition 2025)



Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and Analysis (ISSRA),  
National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan

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# E9 QUARTERLY

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## Editorial Note

The special edition of *E9 Quarterly* devoted to the May 2025 crisis between Pakistan and India presents a multi-dimensional view of one of the most dangerous episodes in recent South Asian history. Eight contributions by senior diplomats, retired military officers, and strategic scholars trace the crisis across air, land, sea, and the digital battlefield, while also unpacking its international, political, and informational consequences. Taken together, these insights reveal a stark lesson: the subcontinent remains perched on a razor's edge where even manufactured provocations can spiral into high-intensity confrontation between nuclear powers.

Ambassador Zamir Akram situates the May confrontation within a broader arc of strategic instability. Triggered by the alleged terrorist attack in Pahalgam, India's punitive strikes were widely perceived in Pakistan as a false-flag operation, aimed at electoral gains and international demonisation of Pakistan. His analysis demonstrates that despite India's attempt to project escalation dominance, Pakistan's integrated conventional response imposed severe costs and forced a US-brokered ceasefire. The episode reaffirms that credible nuclear deterrence underwrites South Asian stability, even when conventional deterrence alone proves effective.

Dr Zahir Kazmi extends this logic by reminding readers that there is “no space for war” between nuclear-armed neighbours. His contribution highlights how India's rhetoric of a “new normal” was revealed as a strategic mirage. Pakistan's joint operations — involving precision strikes on Indian depots, batteries, and command nodes — underscored that deterrence is not limited to nuclear use, but is layered across domains. Diplomacy and restraint were as decisive as firepower in keeping the crisis bounded.

Two contributions focus on the air dimension, where the crisis reached its most intense pitch. Air Marshal Javaid Ahmed critiques India's inability to learn from past operations, showing how misleading narratives and politicised storytelling once again clouded operational lessons from "Operation Sindoor". By contrast, Pakistan Air Force (PAF) planning and execution exposed the fragility of Indian air superiority claims.

Air Marshal Aamir Masood provides a detailed account of the 7 May air battle, underscoring the integration of J-10Cs, PL-15s, and a network-centric "kill chain" that allowed Pakistani pilots to dominate beyond-visual-range engagements. His writeup illustrates how PAF operational art transformed technology into strategic deterrence.

Two insights by Vice Admiral Ahmed Saeed and Vice Admiral Faisal Shah underline the maritime dimension. The Pakistan Navy's rapid adoption of Anti-Access/Area Denial strategies deterred the Indian Navy's carrier group, forcing it to retreat to safe havens. Both accounts highlight how Pakistan's naval preparedness, situational awareness, and human resource quality neutralised India's numerical superiority. Beyond tactical outcomes, they show how maritime deterrence now forms a critical pillar of Pakistan's overall force posture.

Dr M.A. Gul widens the frame to the international environment, reminding us that the crisis unfolded amidst other flashpoints — Iran-Israel, Russia-Ukraine, and the Gaza war. He warns that while Pakistan strengthened its deterrence credibility, India has successfully enlarged "the space" for calibrated conventional strikes under the nuclear shadow. His insight cautions that future confrontations may expand beyond Kashmir to issues such as water security and geopolitical alignments in the Indo-Pacific.

Finally, Dr Rabia Akhtar addresses the parallel information war, where deepfakes, AI-generated propaganda, and hyper-nationalist media played as decisive a role as missiles and drones. The May 2025 crisis showed how weaponised narratives blur battlefield realities, fuel panic, and constrain space for de-escalation. Her recommendations — real-time fact-checking, media literacy, and international cooperation — point to a new frontier of crisis management in the digital age.

# May 2025 Crisis: Strategic Dimensions

*Ambassador (Retired) Zamir Akram*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT discusses the May 2025 Pakistan-India crisis, triggered by an alleged terrorist attack in Pahalgam, which escalated into a four-day military confrontation. India's unprovoked aggression, including aerial strikes, was met with a strong Pakistani response, destroying Indian fighter jets and causing minimal damage on Pakistan's side. The international community, including the UN, refused to support India's claims, while the United States brokered a ceasefire. Despite claims of India's military superiority, Pakistan's conventional deterrence and credible nuclear capability prevented further escalation. The crisis highlighted the fragile strategic stability in South Asia and the dangerous consequences of India's actions.*

**Keywords:** Strategic Dimension, Pahalgam Incident, Military Confrontation, Aggression, Ceasefire.

**T**he Pakistan-India crisis over four days in May 2025 has been the subject of extensive analyses and commentaries on both sides of the border as well as at the international level. While there are multiple dimensions to this crisis, this insight focuses on its strategic and international dimensions.

The trigger for the May crisis was the terrorist incident at Pahalgam in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJ&K) on 22 April 2025. Within hours of the incident, India accused Pakistan of the attack without any proof or investigation. Apart from being a massive failure of Indian security, the fact that Pahalgam is more than 200 kilometres from the LOC, with multiple checkpoints in between, making any infiltration impossible, was completely ignored.

India also rejected Pakistan's offer to initiate a neutral inquiry into the incident while announcing a slew of punitive measures against Pakistan, including the decision to hold the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance. The clarity with which India acted led to the conclusion in Pakistan that this was a premeditated act or a "false-flag" operation aimed at demonising Pakistan internationally and for reaping electoral benefits for the Modi government in the coming state-level elections. It was also taken for granted in Pakistan that India would use the Pahalgam incident to launch an attack on Pakistan, especially since the Indian Prime Minister gave a "free hand" to his armed forces to "avenge" the terrorist incident.

The anticipated attack came on the night of 6-7 May. This aerial operation using aircraft, missiles, and drones targeted the so-called terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Azad Kashmir. Contrary to Indian claims, the damage was minimal, though over 30 civilians were killed, and some mosques and houses were destroyed. But the Indians paid a heavy price for this aggression since they lost six top-of-the-line fighter aircraft in air combat with the Pakistan Air Force. In fact, Pakistan's response was so effective that the Indian air force grounded its aircraft for the next 2 days, as later conceded by the Indian Chief of Defence Staff. Thereafter, on 9 and 10 May, Pakistani airbases and civilian areas were targeted, again with minimal damage, while Pakistan retaliated by attacking Indian airbases and military targets, including a S-400 missile battery. By then, India was looking for an off-ramp, which was provided by US President Trump, ending the crisis on the night of 10 May.

However, Indian acceptance of the ceasefire and that too brokered by an external power, let loose a storm of domestic criticism against Modi's government. This was the consequence of the disinformation and outright lies that the pliant Indian media had churned out at the instigation of the government to the effect that Pakistan had been on the verge of defeat, and even that Karachi had been captured, as had been the "port" of Lahore.

But, apart from such ridiculous claims, there were more substantive charges, such as India succumbing to US “pressure” for a ceasefire; Trump treating India and Pakistan on equal footing and offering to mediate a solution to the Kashmir dispute, despite being India’s ally; and India’s failure to generate international support for its allegation blaming Pakistan for the Pahalgam incident.

To manage such high domestic expectations raised to a fever pitch by a jingoistic Indian media, Prime Minister Modi was forced to make claims that will have far-reaching consequences in the future. Modi asserted that the operations against Pakistan had been “paused”. In other words, the ceasefire was temporary, and military operations could be resumed at any time. Moreover, Modi categorically denied that Trump had brokered the ceasefire, claiming

it was India’s own decision. He also declared to have established a “New Normal” according to which any terrorist incident against India would be blamed on

**South Asia’s fragile strategic balance reflects Pakistan’s credible deterrence and India’s exposed strategic and diplomatic vulnerabilities. India’s continued pursuit of an aggressive “New Normal” risks undermining regional stability and could push the subcontinent toward an uncontrollable confrontation.**

Pakistan without waiting for providing any proof of Pakistan’s responsibility. Moreover, Modi boasted that India had called Pakistan’s “nuclear bluff” and did not submit to Pakistan’s “nuclear blackmail”. Some Indian defence experts have further interpreted this as signifying that Pakistan’s nuclear weapons, in particular its policy of Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD), did not and will not prevent India from resorting to military action against Pakistan.

There are obvious strategic implications that flow from the Indian leader’s claims, even though these may have been made to placate domestic opinion. It would be a dangerous delusion if the leaders believed in their own rhetoric.

The reality is that at no stage in the four-day crisis did Pakistan even signal or threaten to implement its FSD. Pakistan's conventional capabilities were sufficient to defeat and deter Indian aggression and enforce a ceasefire. Moreover, Pakistan's conventional response more than matched the level and scope of the Indian aggression, and Pakistan did not need to invoke deterrence through FSD, which is clearly meant to respond to an Indian attack that poses an existential threat to Pakistan, as envisaged under India's Cold Start or Dynamic Response doctrine. In the May crisis, the Indian army and navy were missing in action while its air force was grounded for two days of the four-day conflict.

Hence, there was no need for Pakistan to activate its FSD option since deterrence at the conventional level was sufficient.

Nevertheless, it must still be noted that for this very reason, India did not implement its Cold Start or Dynamic Response doctrine and demonstrated restraint, as claimed by the Indians themselves; it is Pakistan's credible nuclear deterrence which FSD ensures at the operational, tactical and strategic levels. As such, it is Pakistan's credible nuclear deterrence that has prevented India from launching even a limited conventional or nuclear war against Pakistan.

Accordingly, the Indian leadership and their defence analysts have tried to promote a false narrative by making baseless assertions about Pakistan's nuclear bluff or nuclear blackmail. But it would be a grave error if they believed their own disinformation.

Even at the conventional level, Pakistan's integrated air operations resulted in the loss of 6 advanced Indian fighter aircraft, Rafales, SU-30s and MiG-29, shot down by Pakistan J-10Cs and JF-17s using PL-15 long-range air-to-air missiles. This outcome not only grounded the Indian air force for two days but also demonstrated the superior quality of both Pakistani pilots and Chinese-made aircraft and missiles. This has had far-reaching repercussions on the international assessments of Chinese equipment as compared to the French and Russian aircraft and missiles.

Moreover, India claimed the ability to hit targets “deep” within Pakistan, which is also a false narrative, as Pakistan’s lack of geographic depth enabled India to reach these targets. By contrast, Pakistan demonstrated restraint and escalation control by not using its longer-range missiles that can reach any target in India since these are ballistic missiles designated for the delivery of nuclear weapons and their use, even with conventional warheads, would have sent an escalatory signal to India. India did not demonstrate such restraint since it used its BrahMos dual-use ballistic missile on several occasions during the crisis. Still, the Indians need to realise that all targets on the Indian mainland and its islands are within Pakistan’s range.

Beyond the theatre of conflict, India confronted multiple reversals on the diplomatic front as well. No country, not even its American and Russian allies, accepted the Indian allegations against Pakistan and refused to endorse the Indian charge about Pakistan’s involvement in the Pahalgam terrorist incident. Similarly, the UN Security Council, in its statement, while condemning the terrorist attack, did not blame Pakistan, as was also the case in statements by the SCO and BRICS.

Even more serious repercussions have emerged from Modi’s denial of Trump’s role in brokering the ceasefire and his rejection of the American President’s offer to mediate a solution to the Kashmir dispute. This has not only placed Kashmir at the center of Pakistan–India tensions and exposed the Indian falsehood about normalcy in occupied Kashmir but has also led to tensions between India and the US. According to American media reports, Modi’s denial of any US role in bringing about a ceasefire has angered an egotistical person like Trump, who has responded by imposing 50 per cent tariffs on Indian exports to America. Trump has also dismissed the Indian economy as “dead”, reaffirmed that 6 Indian aircraft were shot down and declared the Baluch Liberation Army (BLA) and its Majeed Brigade, which Pakistan has stated are funded by India, as terrorist organisations. While these steps may not necessarily have been motivated by Modi’s denial of Trump’s role in arranging the ceasefire, the fact remains that for the first time in 25 years, US-India relations are in a downward spiral.

This has forced India to make amends even with China after being America's "Net Security Provider" against China for the last quarter-century. This would be a major strategic realignment for India, although it is unlikely to mislead the Chinese.

Finally, the Indian action against the 62-year-old Indus Waters Treaty is seen globally and, in particular, by the dispute mechanism of the Treaty itself, the Court of Arbitration, as a flagrant violation of the Treaty and international law. Besides, the weaponisation of water by India is seen as an irresponsible act that can potentially lead to war with Pakistan, whose survival depends on the waters of the Indus basin. It is also an act that could involve China as the upper riparian state, especially in aid of Pakistan.

In this context, it is also relevant to note that China is already constructing its largest hydroelectric dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) river in Tibet, which some Indians have termed a "ticking water bomb". Accordingly, the Indians may soon discover that using water as a weapon may prove to be a double-edged sword.

The sum of these developments demonstrates that strategic stability in South Asia is extremely fragile. In this situation, belligerent and reckless Indian behaviour, as demonstrated by the Modi government at escalating levels of crisis from 2016 to 2019 to 2025, sets a dangerous precedent. The next crisis will begin from where the last ended. The US played a role in bringing about a ceasefire in the past; it may not do so in the future, given Indian behaviour. The next crisis may also escalate, perhaps beyond the nuclear threshold, by accident if not by intention, given India's irresponsible behaviour. Pakistan must, therefore, be prepared for any Indian adventurism in the future.

### About the Author

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*Ambassador (Retired) Zamir Akram is a seasoned diplomat and foreign policy expert, currently serving as Advisor on Foreign Policy and Strategic Issues at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI). He previously represented Pakistan as Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva, where he played a key role in disarmament and strategic stability negotiations and can be reached at [zamirakram53@gmail.com](mailto:zamirakram53@gmail.com).*

# No Space for War: Marka-e-Haq and the Logic of Deterrence in South Asia

*Dr Zahir Kazmi*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT explores the dynamics of nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan, focusing on the May 2025 crisis triggered by a false flag operation. It highlights the resilience of Pakistan's conventional deterrence in preventing escalation, despite India's attempts to redefine red lines through conventional strikes. The article critiques the mischaracterisation of the conflict by India and discusses the strategic restraint exercised by Pakistan, affirming that deterrence remains effective. The author concludes by stressing the importance of diplomacy and international legal norms in achieving lasting peace in the region.*

**Keywords:** Conventional Deterrence, Escalation, False Flag Operation.

**T**his is the first in an occasional series of contributions reflecting on the lessons of the Pahalgam episode for managing and preventing future crises in South Asia. We invite future contributions from expert and practitioner communities. The views expressed belong solely to the author(s) and do not reflect any government's position, any affiliated institutions, or that of BASIC.

The crisis was triggered by what Pakistan views as a second major false flag operation in Pahalgam, located in what Islamabad designates as Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K). The unfolding of events closely followed a now-familiar playbook. The 1995 Al-Faran hostage crisis, later chronicled in *The Meadows*, had raised troubling questions about how state-linked misinformation can be weaponised.

Once again, India cast itself as accuser, judge, and executioner, bypassing verification and international mechanisms, and launched standoff strikes across frontiers. This crisis did not merely strain regional peace; it tested the resilience of deterrence in South Asia.

As Pakistan's Operation Bunyanum Marsoos unfolded in response, a cardinal truth of the nuclear age was reaffirmed: there is no space for conventional war between nuclear powers. Despite India's rhetorical assertion that Operation Sindoor created a "new normal" for conventional strikes below red lines, what emerged instead was a reality few in New Delhi may be prepared to accept: Pakistan's conventional deterrence held and held firm. In attempting to test Pakistan's deterrence posture through brinkmanship, India miscalculated the response. It failed to achieve escalation dominance — a gamble that backfired diplomatically, militarily, and in the court of global perception.

### **Dissecting the Crisis**

India claimed that its missile and drone strikes were part of a counter-terrorism campaign. Yet no independently verified evidence was presented to substantiate this. Pakistan viewed these actions not as law enforcement but as coercive diplomacy and responded with measured restraint.

Pakistan's joint force response was one of the most extensive in decades. Fatah-series missiles, beyond visual range munitions, and multi-domain joint fires were used to strike 26 Indian military targets, including BrahMos depots, S-400 batteries, forward HQs, and logistics nodes from Adampur to Srinagar.

This was no show of force for domestic optics; it was doctrine in motion. Pakistan's Air Force executed precision strikes with standoff systems. The armed forces integrated joint targeting across air, land, cyber, and space, reflecting high-level jointness and operational maturity. These operations demonstrated real-time situation awareness and escalation control, hallmarks of a credible deterrent.

For instance, Pakistan's Navy maintained operational readiness in its assigned maritime sectors, ensuring coordinated surveillance and readiness throughout the crisis. In joint briefings, the Navy emphasised its role in maintaining maritime situational awareness and securing coastal zones, consistent with its contribution to integrated joint services operations.

### **India's "New Normal" Is a Strategic Mirage**

Prime Minister Modi's remarks following Operation Sindoor were heavy with bravado: "ghus ke maareng" (strike deep inside), "mitti mein mila denge" (grind them to dust), and the claim of a new benchmark. But strategic posturing does not alter military realities.

Since 9/11, India has blurred the distinction between armed resistance under occupation and acts of terror. International humanitarian law — notably the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions — affirms the right of people under foreign occupation to resist, including through armed struggle. Kashmir, like Palestine, remains a recognised dispute, not an outpost of "terror." Pakistan, of course, unequivocally condemns all acts of terrorism, especially those targeting civilians. The Pahalgam incident warrants an impartial international investigation, grounded in evidence rather than emotion.

India's mischaracterisation serves tactical political goals: justifying the militarisation of IIOJK, sidestepping bilateral talks, diluting the right to self-determination, and repackaging its actions as self-defence. Yet using conflict for domestic electoral gains brings diminishing returns and rising risks. India's actions in this crisis seem to reflect the behaviour of a revisionist state that seeks to reshape borders, bypass international norms, and redefine the thresholds of the conflict spectrum.

Thanks to international mediation, a ceasefire was re-established. India agreed to DGMO-level re-engagement. This tacit reliance on external actors raises a deeper question: has India quietly redefined its long-cherished ideal of strategic autonomy? If sustained, it may open the door to a structured bilateral dialogue. Churchill once said, "To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war."

## Deterrence Was Not Broken — It Was Enforced

Some Western and Indian commentators have suggested that nuclear deterrence didn't work simply because the crisis involved conventional strikes. This view misunderstands the layered architecture of deterrence. Deterrence in the South Asian context is not limited to preventing nuclear use alone; it encompasses the prevention of war across all domains. In this crisis, cross-domain deterrence- nuclear, conventional, cyber, and informational- held the line. No other nuclear-armed state has so frequently resorted to cross-border strikes under the nuclear umbrella or used unverifiable incidents as pretexts for escalation.

**For peace to prevail, the world must reject doctrines that normalize military adventurism and demand accountability from all nuclear powers, especially those that challenge global norms.**

India's behaviour in this regard is an outlier in global nuclear conduct, not a norm. While the precise counterfactuals remain speculative, the threshold for total war was not crossed due to a combination of timely third-party mediation and Pakistan's rapid imposition of costs. The integrated military response, alongside diplomatic outreach, helped shape escalation control before further descent became inevitable.

Speculation that "space for war has been won under Pakistan's red lines" remains just that – speculation. Pakistan has never published formal red lines. Like other nuclear powers, it deliberately maintains calculated ambiguity. Deterrence here is not a traffic-light system of red, yellow, and green; it is a spectrum of responses shaped by perception, posture, and psychology. It is constructed in the adversary's mind and is not listed in the declaratory policy. Unlike in 2019, the National Command Authority was not convened, inter alia, due to greater confidence in conventional deterrence through conventional platforms like Fatah missiles. The difference underscores Pakistan's response doctrine and force posture evolution: strategic prudence nested within operational clarity.

Cross-domain nuclear deterrence was not held due to invisibility, but because highly integrated response mechanisms operated as designed. Recent commentary, including by Western media, speculated that Indian strikes near critical military infrastructure risked a “decapitation” scenario, potentially galvanising third-party intervention.

Such narratives often overstate the fragility of deterrence and understate its layered resilience. Like all nuclear-armed states, Pakistan’s command and control architecture is designed with survivability in mind — technically, institutionally, and doctrinally. As strategic planners understand, the “always/never” dilemma is not resolved through rhetoric, but through robust, redundant systems and measured signalling.

The fact that the crisis was credibly managed at the conventional level — without overt nuclear posturing or escalation — reflects not vulnerability, but maturity.

### **Narratives and Responsibility in Crisis Management**

India’s crisis playbook increasingly resembles other unresolved conflicts: provoke, claim victimhood, retaliate disproportionately, and seek de-escalation on favourable terms. But this time, the mask slipped.

The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) openly declared itself India’s “military arm” from Pakistan’s western front. This was not bravado; it was a veritable confession of proxy warfare. India’s plausible deniability has worn thin. Its proxies are vocal. Funding trails will become increasingly traceable. The narrative of innocence would not withstand scrutiny.

Pakistan engaged its diplomatic channels extensively to de-escalate and address disinformation. Missions in New York, Washington, Beijing, Ankara, Riyadh, Tehran, Rome, and key European capitals presented Pakistan’s perspective. Coordinated outreach, led by the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, contributed to crisis de-escalation and affirmed Pakistan’s commitment to regional restraint.

### **Strategic Restraint, Not Submission**

Pakistan's decision to avoid civilian targets, limit platform use, and prevent escalation was not a weakness but a disciplined strategic calculation. Responding precisely, avoiding airspace breaches, and maintaining clear firebreaks between conventional and nuclear thresholds reflected maturity, not fear. Pakistan's full-spectrum deterrence capability held firm. External actors did not impose restraint; it was internally calibrated, and rightly so.

This disciplined posture should not be mistaken for strategic passivity. It reinforced Pakistan's full-spectrum deterrence credibility while denying India the ability to redefine engagement norms. In doing so, Pakistan conveyed a clear message: deterrence is about measured capability, not performative risk. The crisis reaffirmed that escalation control is a strategic asset, not a sign of hesitation.

### **In the Nuclear Age, War Itself is the Enemy**

As Denzel Washington's character—Lieutenant Commander Ron Hunter—reminds us in *Crimson Tide*, “In the nuclear age, the true enemy is war itself.” South Asia must remember this, not as poetry, but as policy.

The 1985 Reagan-Gorbachev axiom that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought” remains valid even under stress tests, as reaffirmed by NATO and non-NATO frameworks since. Its logic must extend to proxy wars and conventional escalation. There is no meaningful “new normal” when a nuclear peer tests escalation ladders. Any attempt to normalise standoff strikes, drone incursions, or the doctrine of unilateral action under the nuclear umbrella risks global mimicry, weakening international legal norms.

Pakistan's *Marka-e-Haq*, the Righteous Campaign, avenged innocent civilian lives and restored balance. It reminds us that sovereignty, balance, and legitimacy must be preserved without inviting catastrophe. It also reaffirms that IIOJK remains a disputed territory. Its final status lies not in missiles but in diplomacy, justice, and recognition of self-determination.

Attempts to redraw boundaries through coercion risk regional instability and the long-term erosion of the aggressor's credibility. This crisis reaffirmed that restraint is not weakness, and retaliation is not recklessness — both are instruments of deterrence when wielded with discipline.

For peace to prevail, the world must reject doctrines that normalise military adventurism and demand accountability from all nuclear powers, especially those that challenge global norms. The path forward lies not in standoff posturing but in structured dialogue, strategic restraint, and a commitment to international law. Diplomacy can achieve enduring peace, stability, and justice, which war never will. As the dust of this crisis settles, let it not be remembered only for what was avoided, but for what could now be built: a renewed commitment to peace through responsibility.

### About Insight and Author

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# Bandar to Sindoor and Beyond: Learning the Wrong Lessons

*Air Marshal (Retired) Javaid Ahmed*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT critiques India's handling of military operations, particularly focusing on Operation Sindoor, and examines how India's political narrative influences its strategic responses. It highlights the Indian government's failure to learn from past conflicts, including the lack of accountability for military failures and the propagation of misleading narratives. In contrast, Pakistan's military and diplomatic responses, especially by the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), are presented as effective and well-prepared. The article also critiques India's post-conflict analysis, which is shaped by political motivations rather than objective lessons learned. The analysis emphasises that while Pakistan has strengthened its deterrence, India remains entangled in a cycle of misrepresentation and miscalculation.*

**Keywords:** Operation Sindoor, Misleading Narratives, Diplomatic Responses.

**T**he controversy in India on the 6-Nil aircraft losses in operation Sindoor continues unabated. As the days pass, it becomes apparent that the Indians are set to learn the wrong lessons once again. Wise nations prudently steer clear of military conflicts, preferably relying on conciliation and exterior manoeuvres; however, if they are thrust into a confrontation, they fight and put in their best effort. Subsequently, they analyse conflict results and learn the right lessons. The pros and cons, the dos and don'ts, strengths and weaknesses, benefits and risks, causes and effects are then applied to craft future policies, development plans, and strategies.

This requires strong institutions, visionary leaders, and unbiased analysis by academics, strategists, and think tanks. However, this doesn't seem to be the case in a BJP-led India.

In several dimensions, the features of Ops Sindoor can be linked to similar intervention plans of Ops Bandar in 2019 and the losses sustained. The Pulwama incident, which led to the death of 40 personnel, was not probed by the Indian Government. Even the unofficial probe results were never made public. No accountability for lapses by security agencies, the governing elite, or the military was carried out, and the perpetrators went scot-free. In the election season, no heads rolled, and the broad-brush victory narrative was widely propagated. The incident's link to Pakistan was never established.

As for the Indian Air Force (IAF), it was intentionally left off the hook for Balakot strikes by the BJP leadership. Why did the IAF miss the targets? How were two IAF aircraft shot down, and a pilot captured? The fratricide of the helicopter was investigated but not attributed to PAF's electronic warfare, which had resulted in the loss of situational awareness of IAF's radar and traffic controllers. Even before his return, the downed pilot was credited with a fictitious F-16 kill and decorated despite all his missiles lying intact in a PAF museum. The then IAF chief, Air Chief Marshal Dhona, an experienced veteran, was forced to forge the IAF's successes in front of the media. The fake narrative ensured that the BJP got the right votes and subsequently won the elections. In short, the debris of Operation Bandar was swept under the carpet.

So, what were the lessons learnt? The Indian public is so gullible that it could be easily duped. Pakistan bashing and fake narratives sell better than the bitter truth. India is a rising power with diplomatic clout, cosying up with the US as a counterweight to China. Using its clout, Kashmir could be demographically engineered gradually. The Rafales were an answer to all the IAF's shortcomings.

It was these hypotheses with which India planned Operation Sindoor. The tragic Pahalgam 'false flag' was timed to coincide with the US Vice President's visit. Within minutes of the incident, Pakistan was portrayed as a terror hub and blamed for Pahalgam.

The media was let loose to build up an almost uncontrollable frenzy. The hoodwinking of the 1.4 billion Indian public was complete. Under pressure to deliver on slogans, Modi's advisers and the military troika came up with a ragtag strategy, pitching the Rafale-led IAF to strike Pakistan. What the objectives, planned subsequent moves, and the end game are shrouded in mystery. What was clear were the results and lessons that began appearing in the first hour of combat as the planes and with them the plans fell apart. Air combat and engagements are swift, lethal, and precise.

Pakistan and the PAF were prepared. The superb Rafales were no match for the PAF, led from the front by an Air Chief who had planned, trained, and strategised to counter every move of the IAF through a precise 'kill chain' developed and employed by a Multi Domain Ops trained force. The appreciation and deductions on PAF's capability and response were incorrect. Within a mere 58 minutes of intense engagement, six Indian aircraft comprising three Rafales, one SU-30, one Mirage 2000, and a MiG-29 were shot down. The paralysis of the Indian military leadership was apparent. Even the Indian DGMO, in his call to his Pakistani counterpart, a mere 30 minutes after the attack, was not aware of the aerial massacre underway in the skies. The rest of the 89 hours of conflict and the Indian request for a ceasefire brokered by the US are history.

The four-day intense conflict had many firsts in the subcontinent's war history. Militarily, the six IAF aircraft were lost within minutes, some at record ranges in the largest BVR battle since World War II. After the Ukraine war, the S-400 loss was a first in the region. The IAF was no match for the PAF, having lost air superiority in the first hour of combat, it mainly remained grounded for the rest of the conflict. The geographical length and depth of both countries were exposed to drone warfare. The SSMs' use by India as a last resort was a dangerous escalation equally matched by Pakistan's response. On the other front, the berserk Indian broadcasters drew international condemnation for misreporting facts. The Indian government banned all media presenting an anti-government account. Except for Israel and Afghanistan, India's narrative was thumped globally.

Comparatively, Pakistan's stature was elevated globally, and its restraint appreciated by world powers. Much to India's dismay, Kashmir was back on the global agenda with President Trump repeating his ceasefire and mediation involvement (29 times and counting). In another blow to India's narrative, Pakistan made it to the UN, leading the UNSC's Counter-terrorism Committee.

The events and the 80-hour military action are all etched in history and provide glaring examples and conclusions for political and military analysts. The takeaways are clear for those who intend to learn and draw the right lessons, but not the IAF and BJP, which are not prepared to swallow a loss to Pakistan.

Accordingly, a strategy rooted in deception and fake narratives is actively unfolding. From rewriting history by incorporating Sindoor in National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) textbooks to a narrative of involving China in supporting Pakistan with full assets is being propagated. 'Sindoor on Pause' and 'The New Normal' mantra were presented to the opposition in the Indian Parliament's Monsoon Session.

However, the flip-flops of the ruling BJP were an eye-opener for objective experts. Despite Mr Chidambaram's statements blaming an insider job at Pulwama, alleged terrorists were

**India's persistent refusal to confront its military shortcomings, relying instead on propaganda and politicised narratives, stands in stark contrast to Pakistan's measured response and credible deterrence. This pattern of denial and distortion prevents genuine introspection and risks pushing the region toward yet another perilous confrontation.**

killed in Kashmir in a dubious Ops Mahedev, timed to coincide with the parliament session. True to tradition, the IAF Chief ACM Amar Preet Singh woke up 3 months after the conflict to claim shooting down 6 PAF aircraft, much to the amusement of the global media. The Bollywood-savvy India public also saw the spectacle of the military spokespersons paraded in a quiz show. For the Indians, the games had to go on.

As the Sindoor episode recedes in the rear-view mirror, any worthwhile lessons from the conflict have been replaced by slogans and catch-phrases. The realities of a failed campaign, the BJP's motivation for the war, the IAF's humiliation, and global rejection of the Indian stance are all lost to political hubris. In emergency military procurements, billions of dollars are being poured into modernising the Indian armed forces, with the IAF as the lead recipient.

The allocation of INR 62000 Crore for 97 Tejas jets, the AMCA revival, the search for a 5<sup>th</sup> Gen fighter, 'Sudarshan Chakra, the Indian Iron Dome, the Agni 5, etc., all aim to regain lost ground. There is no reflection or debate on the fiasco except for a few sane voices who dare to differ. The Indian analysis and conclusions drawn from the conflict reflect a systemic failure of institutions and intelligentsia who are bent upon pushing the subcontinent towards another showdown. With the BJP firmly in charge, IWT's illegal suspension, Kashmir on the edge, and around 20 separatist movements, it is only a question of time before the two traditional rivals meet again.

As for Pakistan, there is no new normal. Its conventional and nuclear deterrence have been strengthened. The PAF controls the skies, and it will not give up its 'Domain Domination'. The military victory has not inflated egos, as the leadership remains grounded in reality. Unlike India, Pakistan is not hostage to political narratives. In the case of any new adventurism, Pakistan will respond with force, with the entire nation behind it.

### About the Author

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Air Marshal (Retired) Javaid Ahmed is the President of Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS). Under his leadership, CASS has emerged as a premier think tank, contributing to research and policy on aerospace, defence and national security. He can be reached at [cass.thinkers@casstt.com](mailto:cass.thinkers@casstt.com).

# Air Battle for Pakistan: Pakistan Air Force Employment on 7th May

*Air Marshal (Retired) Aamir Masood*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT discusses the evolution and strategic importance of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), particularly focusing on the air battle that occurred between Pakistan and India on May 7, 2025. It highlights the technological advancements and integration of air power, including the use of J-10C aircraft and PL-15 missiles. The PAF's ability to adapt swiftly in a network-centric, multi-domain environment is underscored, as well as the crucial role of leadership and decision-making in air combat. The piece emphasises the operational superiority of the PAF, which successfully countered Indian airstrikes, demonstrating the vital role of air power in modern warfare and strategic deterrence.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan Air Force, Technological Advancement, Integration of Air Power.

**F**or the Pakistan Air Force, its transformation started on the day when our founding father, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, gave his strategic vision that “A country without a strong air force is at the mercy of any aggressor. Pakistan must build up its air force as quickly as possible. It must be an efficient air force, second to none”. United States Air Force General Deptulla, architect of the 1991 US Airpower employment against Iraq and “Shock and Awe” effects through use of debilitating air strikes, mentions that “An Air Force employing 5<sup>th</sup> generation platforms would underperform if its concept is 3<sup>rd</sup> generation”.

That means the complete system of the Air Force must transform together, from training to integration to operational deployment and employment, ensuring seamless fusion, Interoperability, resilience of the network and redundancy for quicker and efficient employment of the kill chain and domination of the EW spectrum in multi-domain operations.

The 7 May Air Battle between Pakistan and India wasn't about the employment of modern aircraft and missiles. Technically, Rafael, equipped with Meteor BVR and a state-of-the-art Spectra EW suite, was a much more potent and advanced fighter aircraft. However, this new technology was neither well harnessed nor well integrated into the existing Indian Air Defence system. PAF Pilots operating Chinese-origin

J-10C aircraft, equipped with PL-15 long-range air-to-air missiles, benefit from integrated battle management networks enabling real-time coordination between ground controllers and airborne assets. This

**This Air Battle over the skies of India and Pakistan would be studied as one of the most modern Air Battles with both adversaries using state-of-the-art aircraft, drones and beyond visual range weapons, while no aircraft violated each other's airspace, but the weapons did with precision.**

technological integration has enhanced situational awareness for Pakistani pilots while simultaneously denying the same advantage to the adversaries through electronic warfare attacks and communication disruption, enabling overall control over the spectrum. PAF Combat air patrols (CAPs) have demonstrated remarkable operational fluidity, transitioning seamlessly from defensive postures to an offensive role.

In the past, Operation Swift Retort 2019 demonstrated Pakistan's ability to retaliate proportionately against Indian provocation while denying IAF impunity and freedom of action over Pakistani airspace. Those familiar with the characteristics and tenets of air power can appreciate that it was nothing extraordinary that the IAF was able to make a quick incursion into contiguous Pakistan on 26th Feb and withdraw. Still, PAF's response in broad daylight was far bolder, daring and conceptually imaginative.

The Indian airstrike lost its value in one day. Indian leadership used deceit and lies to cover their embarrassment. Indian conventional deterrence was so severely compromised by the end of the air action. In this operation, the PAF came out strongly as a well-gelled team.

However, due to measured, non-escalatory and calibrated response during swift retort, a few independent analysts and practitioners felt that PAF may not have re-established its deterrence; rather, the whole war narrative was hijacked by the false and fake narrative of the Modi government, who subsequently managed to win elections.

Coming to “Operation Sindoor and PAF response”, in the aftermath of the Pahalgam incident, Indian media and RAW-affiliated social media accounts launched a nefarious and well-organised campaign, hastily blaming Pakistan without any evidence and fueling war hysteria.

Indian Air Force, on the night of 6/7 May, launched a large-scale airstrike comprising 80 fighter jets and support platforms against various targets in Pakistan and Azad Kashmir. As Mr Ejaz Haider, a renowned journalist, mentions in his “The Dawn”, article, “The motifs that run through their assessments, almost like the Indian government’s talking points, need to be listed: India began with the “surgical strikes” in 2016; they were shallow incursions. In 2019, it used the air force (escalatory step) to strike a single target in Pakistan; this time it crossed more red lines as part of “an assertive strategy of escalation dominance to impose steep costs on future Pakistan-backed terrorism”; it has struck harder, bigger, deeper and has demonstrated military superiority and technological precision” as far as their missile technology is concerned in the form of Brahmos and Scalp missiles.

However, Pakistan Air Force vigilant Shaheens were in the air, for the defence of their airspace and didn’t let the aggressors go scot free. PAF was flying defensive CAPs; however, their intentions and state of mind were offensive. Pakistan Combat Air Patrol (CAP) was being done by almost 36 fighter jets, including Chinese J10C and JF-17 carrying PL-15 Beyond Visual Range missile, and F-16s aircraft armed with AMRAAM-C missile, supported by EW and AEW&C aircraft. All these aircraft were on alert to shoot any intruder.

The message was loud and clear from the PAF leadership: “No enemy aggressor aircraft will be spared”. Indian jets fired long-range air-to-ground missiles comprising Brahmos and Scalp against Pakistani targets. At the same time, they stayed 50-70 km inside their border—the Indian force package comprised of M-2000, Rafael and Su-30s and Mig-29s.

By the time Indians were engaging Pakistani targets, our CAP fighter jets, which were well integrated through a common datalink with the Command-and-Control Centre, received information about the air-launched Brahmos and Scalp missiles. Thereafter, our CAP went on the offensive to shoot maximum aircraft across the border at ranges of 100-150 km. Our jets exactly knew the placement and location of Rafael and other Indian fighters. They surgically and precisely targeted Indian Rafael (IAF Centre of Gravity) through silent interception.

Pakistan Air Force J-10C aircraft were able to shoot down six Indian aircraft in the first 30 minutes, by using a combination of long-range missiles, networked “third party” kill chain and adoption of superior tactics by using terrain masking techniques to “hide” forward J-10Cs from Indian aircraft, AWACS and ground radars. In high velocity conflict in the air where seconds matter, the kill chain starts from detection, includes identification, tracking, targeting, disengagement, damage assessment and retargeting if required. All this must be done promptly than your enemy. Modern aircraft are equipped with several situational awareness sensors. The moment an aircraft’s radar is switched on, the enemy pilot is warned about radar tracking or missile lock. J10C achieved the first kill due to the maintenance of silence over the electromagnetic spectrum while denying control over this spectrum to the enemy. A common data link between all the players in the friendly battle space allowed the own BVR fighters, primarily being used as a missile carrier vehicle, and the AWACS and the datalink did the remaining work. This allowed the J-10C to perform “shoot-and-scoot” (or more precisely “shoot-and-stay-cold”) tactic, which drastically reduced exposure time to enemy aircraft and allowed the J-10C to stay outside of Indian missile range.

PAF maintained a faster OODA (Observe Orientate Decide Act) loop and system-centric approach through a common data link and recognised operating picture, Indian Air Force “3rd Generation platform centric approach” while employing Rafael resulted in delayed decision-making and significant attrition on May 7, 2025.

### Lessons

In the final analysis, Air forces of the world are measured by air power effectiveness, which, in my reckoning, is not only a matter of numbers and technology but of many other factors that were discussed earlier and are extremely important as per my experience.

This Air Battle over the skies of India and Pakistan would be studied as one of the most modern Air Battles with both adversaries using state-of-the-art aircraft, drones and beyond visual range weapons, while no aircraft violated each other's airspace, but the weapons did with precision. Pakistan Air Force employment was a textbook example of multidomain operation in action. Moreover, a few very pertinent lessons would resonate in the employment of air power in any future conflict.

First and foremost is the concept that must be articulated by the strategic commander as to how the Air Defence assets would be employed. Clarity of the concept would ensure a better Air Strategy. Remember, as Deptulla mentioned, “A force equipped with modern 5<sup>th</sup> generation weapons would be employed conventionally if the concept of operation is obsolete and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation. Strategic clarity is the foundation for tactical brilliance.

Early employment of air power - pre-emption, may become a new normal in any future battle scenarios between India and Pakistan. It would thus be highly vital to Pakistan's military and civilian leadership to understand the importance of the air force and ensuring its future transformation to dominate the operational environment that is rapidly and continuously evolving in spheres of technology/capability.

Another factor is leadership and clarity of decision making, which includes the vision and performance of senior leaders at the strategic level, and their ability to design, plan, take quick decisions and conduct campaigns at the operational level. Indian lost the battle due to flawed and poor decision-making at the strategic level. Equally important is tactical leadership for the application of force in an integrated fashion. Lastly, training of the combat crew in realistic training scenarios, large-scale exercises, and each pilot's confidence in his machine.

Air war is a competition, and thus its effectiveness will always be measured against an opponent who is also changing and adapting to newer technological/operational advancements. PAF displayed superior interoperability of all elements of air power and ultimately achieved more than its objectives.

Air Power would remain as an instrument of choice for political leadership in any future military conflict. Air power is the only force that can directly strike the heart of the enemy; for that, it should have control of the air, and for that to happen, Air Power should be employed independently with complete freedom to inflict maximum cost, pain and attrition on the enemy. That's the only way to re-establish conventional deterrence.

May 7, 2025, PAF multi-domain operation is the first such instance of air combat under an integrated, network-centric environment, where air, land, electronic, and cyber capabilities operate as a unified system. PAF's approach, combined with rapid intelligence gathering, electronic dominance, and coordinated strikes, allowed swift, tactical responses at multiple levels. It was a textbook example of a multi-domain operation in action. Whether we have been able to reassert our conventional deterrence will be confirmed in the days to come.

### About the Author

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Air Marshal (Retired) Aamir Masood is a distinguished former officer of the Pakistan Air Force, where he pioneered the establishment of the Centre for Artificial Intelligence with expertise in leadership, training, and human resource development. He has held key national and international roles and currently serves as an advisor to the Chief of the Indonesian Air Force. He can be reached at [jazzleader82@gmail.com](mailto:jazzleader82@gmail.com).

# Deterrence at Sea: Pakistan Navy's Role in Operation "Bunyanum Marsoos"

*Vice Admiral (Retired) Ahmed Saeed*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT explores the role of the Pakistan Navy in ensuring maritime security and stability in the Indian Ocean, particularly during the 2025 Pahalgam crisis. The Pakistan Navy's strategic deployment and enhanced combat readiness through Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategies significantly deterred potential aggression from the Indian Navy. The article emphasises the importance of maritime forces in safeguarding national interests, maintaining economic stability, and preserving regional peace. It highlights the Pakistan Navy's pivotal role in both collaborative and independent security operations and its resilience in the face of escalating tensions.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan Navy, Maritime Security, Indian Ocean, Combat Readiness.

Seapower has always been the quiet strength of nations throughout history. One doesn't notice it until it's tested. Armies guard borders; navies guard survival. If a state loses control at sea, its economy feels the blow within days. This fact is realised even more so knowing that over 80 percent of global trade moves across the oceans. For Pakistan, the figure is even higher: above 90 percent. Every ship that enters or leaves our ports carries not just cargo but the lifeblood of the nation.

That is why the navies stand as both the first and last line of defence. It keeps our sea lanes open and the sovereignty intact. But "good order at sea" is not a slogan – it is a living condition. It means that commerce can move freely, that various maritime economic sectors can operate safely, and that nations can coexist without fear of disruption.

UNCLOS-82 – the guiding framework for the seafaring nations – places that duty on every littoral state. For Pakistan, the meaning is twofold: we must secure our own waters and uphold the principle of innocent passage for others. Add to this the modern expectations of the concept of Blue Economy: sustainable resource use, marine protection, and regional cooperation – and the Navy’s role stretches far beyond deterrence as it becomes both a shield and a steward.

At the AMAN Dialogue 2025, Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Naveed Ashraf summed it up with precision: “No nation can secure the seas alone. International unity, inclusive partnerships, and action-oriented collaboration are imperative to address shared maritime challenges.” That was not a ceremonial remark but the essence of maritime diplomacy around the world. Since joining the Combined Maritime Forces in 2004, Pakistan has stood shoulder to shoulder with the world’s leading navies: from CTF-150 to CTF-151, while maintaining its own Regional Maritime Security Patrols. These weren’t symbolic gestures; they were statements of responsibility, a message that Pakistan takes ownership of its maritime front and its part in the wider Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Over two decades, PN has become a multidimensional force. Surface ships, submarines, naval aviation, marines, and now cyber – all tied together with joint work alongside the Army and Air Force. From defending Sir Creek to joint interdiction drills against carrier groups, the Navy trains for layered defence. Always in a state of “ever ready”. That readiness was tested in May 2025.

The crisis began after the Pahalgam attack in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir. India blamed Pakistan immediately. Then came the political theatre: suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, closing of Attari-Wagah, downgrading of ties, freezing of SAARC visas. But while the world was still watching diplomats trade words, the Indian military moved. On land, they initiated ceasefire violations along the Line of Control (LoC). At sea, things were more telling as the fleet units massed off the western seaboard. INS Vikrant sailed out from Karwar. Surface combatants armed with BrahMos land-attack missiles moved southwest of Mumbai.

It was not routine but coercive posturing. And to Pakistan, it felt eerily familiar as Pulwama had followed a similar script. This time, however, Pakistan knew from experience.

Our assessment was clear: India was not just reacting; it was executing a pre-planned set of moves. PN activated an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A<sub>2</sub>/AD) plan. Submarines slipped out quietly. Surface ships dispersed but held strike ranges. Naval aviation increased patrols. Marines prepared coastal defences. It was a deliberate effort to create a “deterrence umbrella” across the North Arabian Sea.

The effect was immediate. The Indian task group never risked pushing north. Instead of patrolling aggressively, they withdrew southwards, hugging safer waters. Their P-8I patrol aircraft kept away from our airspace. Their carrier, which had set out with great noise, ended up back near Karwar, not in striking distance of Karachi. In the first hours of the crisis, PN had already imposed its will on the battlespace. Indian media began shouting that Karachi was under blockade – a classic case of disinformation and

**The May 2025 conflict underscored Pakistan Navy's strength as a credible maritime deterrent, using strategic foresight and preparedness to ensure dominance without confrontation. Its coordinated operations safeguarded sea routes, upheld regional stability, and exposed the limits of India's naval power, affirming PN's stature as a modern and professional force rooted in strategic restraint.**

media sensationalism. It did not make military sense. A blockade is not a slogan. It means the opposing fleet is neutralised beyond recovery. It requires absolute superiority. India did not have that. Not against a navy backed by nuclear deterrence and submarines already at sea.

The Vikrant group itself was far from invulnerable. No nuclear-powered submarines: escorts stretched thin; no balanced surface mix; air cover insufficient for extended operations. If they had come closer, they would have been exposed. PN's missile ships and long-range aviation could have struck. Submarines prowling in the depths were ready to exploit openings. In plain words, it was a risk they dared not take.

Karachi, meanwhile, remained open. Merchant ships arrived. Port Qasim kept working. Though some companies rerouted cargo through feeders, trade never stopped. India's bans on Pakistani vessels and its attempts to deny innocent passage under UNCLOS were reckless. But they failed to shake global confidence in Pakistan's waters. Shipping companies knew the difference between rhetoric and reality.

Several points stand out. The speed of deployment was decisive. PN's ability to disperse forces early, to pre-emptively position submarines and missile units, created deterrence without firing a shot. Second, clarity of doctrine mattered more than sheer numbers. Against a navy five times larger, PN maintained control of its frontier. Submarines provided the silent shield. Surface ships extended long-range strike power. Aviation gave surveillance and reach. Marines and SSGN units denied the enemy comfort in littoral zones like Sir Creek. It was a web of deterrence – each layer reinforced the other.

India's posture revealed something else. Their deployments were too quick, too prepared, to be mere retaliation. It suggested standing war plans, rehearsed and waiting for a trigger. Pahalgam provided the excuse. That orchestration did not go unnoticed. Yet when faced with the Pakistan Navy's readiness, India held back. They refrained from escalation at sea, despite their aggressive rhetoric. That hesitation was not weakness; it was calculation. They knew the risks outweighed potential gains. To test PN's defences would invite severe losses.

The episode reinforced why maritime deterrence is different from land skirmishes. At sea, perception shapes reality faster. A carrier may look dominant on television, but without layered protection, it becomes a liability. Numbers alone cannot buy freedom of action. Doctrine, leadership, and readiness decide outcomes. For Pakistan, the operation validated years of investment in asymmetric strength. Rather than matching India ship for ship, PN built competence in submarines, missile warfare, and joint integration. That edge, when applied decisively, created paralysis on the other side.

Importantly, PN showed restraint. It did not open hostilities. It calibrated responses to military objectives only. Neutral shipping was respected, and international laws were observed. This responsible behaviour stood in contrast to India's restrictions, which openly violated UNCLOS by denying innocent passage. That difference was noticed globally.

In May 2025, the Pakistan Navy demonstrated deterrence in its most valid form, not by firing the first shot, but by denying the enemy the confidence to act. By holding the line with discipline and foresight, PN ensured that trade continued, sovereignty was preserved, and escalation was contained. It proved once more that even against a numerically superior adversary, resolve and doctrine can tilt the balance. Submarines in the deep, missile ships on the surface, aircraft overhead, and marines ashore — together, they created a shield India could not pierce.

As Sun Tzu said: “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.” That is precisely what happened. Pakistan Navy did not just defend the coast. It turned the North Arabian Sea into a deterrence zone. And in doing so, it showed that the nation's first and last line of defence remains unbroken.

### About the Author

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Vice Admiral (Retired) Ahmed Saeed is the President of the National Institute of Maritime Affairs, Pakistan. As President of NIMA, he leads efforts in advancing maritime research, policy development, and awareness on Pakistan's maritime potential and security. He can be reached at [presidentnima@bahria.edu.pk](mailto:presidentnima@bahria.edu.pk).

# From Operational Mute to Strategic Glory

*Vice Admiral (Retired) Faisal Ali Shah*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT discusses the May 2025 armed conflict between Pakistan and India, with a focus on naval operations. Despite India's attempts to assert dominance through its superior naval fleet, Pakistan Navy's preparedness and strategic vigilance effectively deterred escalation at sea. The article highlights the importance of naval readiness, human resource quality, and the economic consequences of maritime conflicts. Ultimately, the conflict underscored Pakistan's strategic success, while India's naval capabilities failed to meet expectations, leading to a significant loss of credibility for the Indian Navy.*

**Keywords:** Naval Fleet, Pakistan Navy, Naval Readiness, Maritime Conflicts.

**I**n May 2025, Pakistan and India had a brief armed conflict, which caused India heavy damage not only due to loss of military hardware, infrastructure and human lives but also in the shape of damage to its politico-strategic repute. The very premise of the aggression waged by India was suspicious, which had put India on a weak footing right from the beginning. It was a similar incident three times in the last nine years with the same actors, location and even the dialogue. Several questions remain unanswered, for which the Indian leadership is under fire from the opposition. There have been conflicting statements from the top tier of Indian political and military hierarchies, indicating a lack of synergy, cohesion and coordination. Contrarily, the Pakistani side emerged as a very professional body and worked in unison to tackle this uncalled-for situation created by India merely to gain political mileage.

With the persisting existential threat from India, Pakistan's armed forces are ever ready to take on any challenge posed by India from the eastern border. The post-Pahalgam incident developing situation was, therefore, not a surprise, and it was normal for the military leadership and personnel to gear up for the upcoming misadventure that could be perceived. Navies, especially, are always battle-ready owing to their capacity to proceed to sea in a matter of minutes. Pakistan Navy's seagoing platforms were thus at sea soon after the Indian leadership began the same old rhetoric. A critical area for the navy is the Creeks Area, which also hosts Sir Creek, a disputed water artery between the two countries. Pakistan Navy's Marines are permanently deployed in the area for defence and do not require much preparation for transition to wartime from peacetime. Along the coast, there are several security initiatives from the Pakistan Navy which function around the clock. They just assumed *battle stations*, as they are called in naval vernacular. So, the Pakistan Navy was already prepared for any action at sea, which, according to some, did not happen, so there is less talk about the "sea front" during the May 2025 conflict between Pakistan and India. Conversely, many activities took place that pitched both navies against each other several times, short of the actual firing of shots.

The most important job at sea for any navy is to find out its adversary and watch its movements. It surely helps in assessing the intentions and preparing accordingly. Pakistan Navy continuously watched the position and movements of Indian Navy elements right after Apr 22, 2025. Few of the Indian Navy's platforms were found off Duqm and Salalah, while the rest of the fleet loitered abreast Ratnagiri, some 600 Nautical Miles (1200km) from Karachi. One surveillance aircraft, P-81 of the Indian Navy, attempted to carry out reconnaissance of the area near Pakistan on May 5, 2025, yet it was timely detected, monitored and persuaded to abandon its mission and leave the area. The Pakistan Navy's strength in keeping a watch on the Area of Interest (AOI) shrank the sea for the Indian Navy, which couldn't hide from the eyes and ears of its adversary. It was this impediment that kept the Indian Navy at bay in operational terms, and their posturing at sea was effectively deterred due to the readiness of the Pakistan Navy in all domains.

The misperceived capability of the Indian Navy owing to its numerical superiority led the Indian political leadership and media to hedge their bets for a sea face-off. However, realising its true potential, the Indian Navy leadership, despite having full autonomy on decision-making from political masters, could not venture into any action against Pakistan.

The Indian Navy saw a rapid development during the last three decades. They did not resort only to acquisitions but also adopted indigenisation through the transfer of technology. This grew the Indian Navy's fleet exponentially up to six times that of the Pakistan Navy's, and so did the misconception in the minds of the Indian political and military leadership about the Indian Navy's hegemony. Harnessing ambitions of being a Blue Water Navy and Net Security Provider in the Indian Ocean were, therefore, natural outcomes. The Indian leadership perhaps overlooked the fact that navies are not compared according to their numbers but by the capabilities that they possess. It is also interesting to note that the capability is not restricted to the kind of platforms and equipment, but primarily the quality of human resources that can most optimally use the equipment and platforms in the inventory held. It was classically demonstrated during the May 2025 conflict between the two armed forces, wherein the Pakistan armed forces emerged victorious due to the high quality of human resources.

It is pivotal to note that India acquired its pseudo-naval hegemony in the Indian Ocean Region through the extra-regional powers' influence and tried to position itself with naval security arrangements like Quad and I2U2 under the overall ambit of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. On the international plane, India benefited in political, economic, technological and military domains merely because of this alliance against China. It could conclude several vital agreements with the US and other nations in the region, with practical manifestation of operating together through exercises, chiefly the MALABAR series. This naval collaboration should have enhanced the capacity and capability of the Indian Navy, which was, in fact, misperceived by the Indian political leadership, yet the Indian Navy leadership was aware of the exact situation and was therefore reluctant to open the sea front despite operational autonomy from the political leadership.

It is but a universal fact that conflict at sea soon turns into economic turmoil not only for the adversaries engaged in the conflict but also for others who have their Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) passing through the conflict zone. The conflict at sea, therefore, does not remain restricted to the adversaries but engulfs many others. Also, in case of targeting of Pakistan's economic infrastructure, there would have been much severe consequences for India as their vulnerability to the Pakistan Navy was much greater than expected. For instance, in the case of targeting Karachi Port Complex (KPC), as was professed by the Indian media, it would have caused at least five times bigger damage to India if its Kandla and Mundra ports were hit. Likewise, there is a far greater number of Indian shipping emanating from the Gulf of Oman and the Gulf of Aden than Pakistani. Targeting any Pakistani merchant ship would have afforded the Pakistan Navy the liberty to sink a greater number of Indian ships traversing the Arabian Sea. Besides, the shipping companies carrying cargo for other countries of the region or beyond charge a War Surcharge to pass through a conflict zone, making it expensive. War at sea is more disruptive, destructive and costly than on land or in the air. Indian Navy's leadership seemed aware of the consequences of opening a seafont against Pakistan, and that's why they refrained from doing so and resorted to a face-saving exit.

The much-hyped Indian Navy's aircraft Carriers lost their credibility when INS VIKRANT, despite being at sea, kept loitering from 400 to 500 Nautical Miles (700 to 900km) away from Pakistan's coast. Often, Indian Carriers are equated with the Carriers of other countries, which leads to a wrong analogy. The actual job of an Aircraft Carrier is to sail the aircraft onboard to a different position in a theatre where these aircraft achieve air superiority against the adversary, under which not only the Aircraft Carrier itself seeks protection, but also the other naval and land components of that force accomplish assigned tasks. This requires a hefty number of aircraft to do the job, and that's why generally Aircraft Carriers carry 60 to 70 aircraft. Conversely, Indian Aircraft Carriers carry 10 to 12 aircraft, which are insufficient even to provide air cover to the Carrier itself.

It was for this reason that INS VIKRANT, despite much fanfare from the Indian media, hid itself twice under air cover from mainland abreast Ratnagiri on the night of May 6/7, 2025, and again on the night of May 9/10, 2025, when there were combat actions taking place between both countries in the air and on land. It may be concluded that the Indian Aircraft Carriers are currently not worthy of performing the tasks they are assigned with, and it is for this reason that the India Navy contracted to purchase 26 Dassault Rafale Marine (M) aircraft, on April 29, 2025, with deliveries expected between 2028 and 2030. The other pride of the Indian Navy is its two nuclear submarines currently operational. There are plans to construct four more. It is interesting that despite a sizeable submarine fleet, Indian discourse lacked any mention of their submarine warfare capability during the whole saga. Submarines are stealthy in nature, and their operations have to be covert. Their success obviously lies in remaining undetected. Detecting a submarine is one of the most intricate naval operations. It

is but a fact that Indian submarines have been detected by the Pakistan Navy four times during the last seven years. Soon after April 22, 2025,

**During the May 2025 Pakistan-India conflict, the Pakistan Navy achieved strategic success through superior preparedness, surveillance, and restraint, effectively deterring India from opening a sea front. Despite its numerical advantage and Blue Water ambitions, India's Navy revealed operational and human resource weaknesses.**

the Pakistan Navy was aware of the position of Indian submarines, especially the exact condition and position of its nuclear submarines. It needs to be emphasised that localisation of a submarine nullifies its potency in totality. This must be known to the Indian Navy also, which avoided undue rant over their submarine capability. When it comes to the quality of human resources, the Indian Navy could not avoid a recurrent high number of non-combat losses in terms of men and material over the last three decades. The list includes loss of forty-five lives, sinking of four ships and a submarine, collision involving seven ships and one submarine and severe damage to one submarine and seven ships.

A high number of accidents clearly implies that the quality of human resources with the Indian Navy has not been commensurate with the equipment and platforms they have been inducting or operating.

India's position in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy was contingent upon its military capability, as it was to act as a bulwark against China. Its status as Net Security Provider was based on the Indian Navy's potent capability, which it could not demonstrate against Pakistan.

With the inherent shortcomings, it was not an opportune time for the Indian Navy to challenge the Pakistan Navy; it therefore chose to remain disengaged despite being at sea with the wherewithal it kept in its inventory. Deterring a navy with Blue Water ambitions and aspirations of becoming a Net Security Provider in the Indian Ocean earned Pakistan Navy the recognition it deserved. By merely maintaining operational mute, it decimated the Indian Navy's stature in the eyes of the whole world, which could not fire even a single shot despite continuous instigation from the Indian media. The strategic glory that Pakistan Navy reached will be remembered in the annals of history, while it will take the Indian Navy decades to overcome the humiliation it suffered.

### About the Author

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Vice Admiral (Retired) Syed Faisal Ali Shah, Sitara-i-Imtiaz (Military), is a distinguished former officer of the Pakistan Navy with extensive command and staff experience. He has held key leadership roles, including Commander West, Commander Creeks, and Commander Marines Operational Unit. He can be reached at [faisel68.fs@gmail.com](mailto:faisel68.fs@gmail.com).

# The Strategic Implications of 4-Day Military Escalation of May 2025

*Dr M. A. Gul*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT discusses the May 2025 armed conflict between Pakistan and India, with a focus on naval operations. Despite India's attempts to assert dominance through its superior naval fleet, Pakistan Navy's preparedness and strategic vigilance effectively deterred escalation at sea. The article highlights the importance of naval readiness, human resource quality, and the economic consequences of maritime conflicts. Ultimately, the conflict underscored Pakistan's strategic success, while India's naval capabilities failed to meet expectations, leading to a significant loss of credibility for the Indian Navy.*

**Keywords:** Naval Operations, Fleet, Strategic Success, Indian Navy.

**I**t has been slightly over three months since the Pehlgaam attack took place, but it appears that a lifetime has passed since then. It is because, geopolitically, so much has happened around the world since that fateful event. For example, immediately after the 4-day Pakistan-India tit-for-tat military escalation, there was a 12-day Iran-Israel military stand-off culminating in the destruction of Iranian nuclear sites by the US bombing, brutal continuation of Palestinian Genocide by Israel, continuation of the Russia-Ukraine War well into its third year, and so on.

However, as time passes and the fog of war starts clearing, it becomes easier to dispassionately analyse the past events, including the Pakistan-India military escalation of May 2025. Over the past three months, a great deal has been written and said on the subject from both sides, namely Pakistan and India.

Unsurprisingly, both sides claimed victory in their versions. However, one of the most dangerous signs, as remarked by a few analysts, is that both Pakistan and India have drawn different lessons from the episode.

Hence, the likelihood of another military escalation is pronounced. In any case, the Indian Prime Minister Modi has only paused Operation “Sindoor” temporarily until the next terrorist attack against India. As far as Pakistan is concerned, its own Operation “Bunyanum Marsoos” was a resounding success, enhancing its geo-political stature in the world.

So, with the advantage of hindsight, let’s analyse some aspects of this. 4-day military escalation of May 2025 between Pakistan and India.

At the operational level, there seems to be a growing consensus among strategic experts that Pakistan gave a bloody nose to India. It is almost confirmed that Pakistan was able to shoot down six Indian fighter aircraft in this 4-day air battle without losing a single plane.

Although a few questions were raised about the performance of Pakistan’s ground-based air defence, such analysis would remain incomplete without the availability of accurate data. Similarly, Pakistan was also able to hit back successfully on many Indian military targets, thus raising similar question marks over the performance of Indian ground-based air defence. Most of the operational-level successes and failures, as claimed by both sides, remain shrouded in obscurity due to the unavailability of accurate information. However, military leadership of both sides must have learnt their lessons and would now be preparing for the subsequent encounter, whenever it takes place. However, if Pakistan has to meaningfully deter India from initiating another military showdown, it will have to think beyond the response paradigm of “QPQ (+)” and move towards a more “Asymmetric Response Paradigm”, including but not limited to pre-emption complemented by an integrated approach of all elements of national power.

However, at the strategic level, there is relatively more transparency regarding what happened and who gained or lost what from this 4-day encounter.

First, there is no doubt that since 2016 and 2019, India has pushed the “military envelope” further. Indian Prime Minister terms it as the “New Normal”, and Pakistani experts call it the “New Abnormal.” In any case, it is clear that militarily India pushed the boundaries further by striking deep into Pakistan proper at both military and civilian targets through long-range vectors, thus initiating the “non-contact warfare” in South Asia.

More importantly, the world did not object to it and watched the military spectacle with great interest, much like bystanders. From an Indian perspective, the ‘world’s apathy’ for a limited military showdown between two nuclear powers constitutes a diplomatic and geopolitical victory. From a Pakistani perspective, this should be an alarming development, but not surprising, as the world did not object to Indian strikes on Balakot too, back in 2019.

In other words, India has been successful in enlarging the space for military operations without touching the nuclear threshold of Pakistan. Careful and calibrated selection of targets and non-contact vectors like the air force, drones, missiles, rockets, cyber, etc., by both sides enabled them to keep the military escalation below nuclear limits. The Pakistani stance that the ‘deterrence stability’ in South Asia remained intact, as the military escalation did not spiral down to a full-blown large-scale conventional war, also holds value since both sides were careful not to cross each other’s red lines.

**As Pakistan works to act as a pivot, rather than a pawn, in the US-China rivalry, it should build its rightful geopolitical space by nurturing greater partnerships, especially in its Western neighbourhood, with the support of China, Russia and other like-minded countries to safeguard its strategic interests.**

Second, India has also been able to push the “political envelope” further by holding the Indus Water Treaty in abeyance for an indefinite period. It should be noted that in 2019, following the Balakot strikes, India abrogated Articles 370 and 35A, thereby altering the decades-old status quo in Jammu and Kashmir.

Hence, in the garb of limited military escalations with Pakistan, India has been successfully pushing the political and diplomatic boundaries with impunity in line with its strategic interests. Now, the Indian thinking seems to indicate that water security would replace Kashmir as the core issue for Pakistan.

Hence, in their opinion, it would be more convenient for India to bargain for a stoppage of alleged Pakistani support for terrorism in exchange for water.

From Pakistan's perspective, this is another dangerous development since the world has not objected to India's belligerence against a well-reputed and time-tested international treaty. Although the Court of Arbitration established under the Treaty has rejected India's stance, it does not prevent India from violating its obligations stipulated under the Treaty. Similarly, President Trump announced his desire to mediate on Kashmir, much to the dismay of the Indians. This desire may not also bear fruit as India continues to be the US's strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), aimed at containing China.

Third, it appears that the US-Israel nexus was the biggest beneficiary of the Pehlgam episode. Israel was the only country that stood by India, unequivocally, during the 4-day military escalation by providing material and planning support. After one month, India reciprocated by staying neutral (thus favouring Israel) in the 12-day Iran-Israel conflict despite having very close relations with Iran.

Similarly, the US benefited fully from the dominant narrative that India was not only fighting against Pakistan but also against China. Interestingly, this fabricated media narrative was not only propagated within India but also in the international community. As a result, Modi was reminded again and again about the limitations of his notion of 'strategic autonomy'.

It appears that for the foreseeable future, it would be tough for any political government in India to engage in potentially meaningful strategic cooperation with China without paying a heavy domestic political price.

Hence, India would be drawn deeper into the QUAD arrangement as part of the IPS, much to the advantage of the US. However, the future trajectory will still depend upon the course of action adopted by Modi.

Fourth, the apparent ‘geo-political warmth’ shown by the US towards Pakistan, starting from the infamous ceasefire tweet by President Trump, which irked the Indians, also caught both Pakistan and India by surprise. Some analysts attribute it to a typical unpredictable Trump style. In contrast, others consider it a calculated move to put pressure on India for safeguarding the long-term strategic interests of the US in the region. Therefore, unless the US’ positive overtures towards Pakistan convert into meaningful actions, e.g., support in the United Nations for the resolution of the Kashmir Dispute, restoration of the Indus Water Treaty, development of Pakistan’s economic corridors with Central and West Asia, etc., this will only be a transactional ‘happy’ phase in Pakistan-US relations without any long-term strategic implications. However, as limited as it may be, Pakistan should capitalise fully on this small window of opportunity and utilise it to serve its long-term strategic interests, rather than pursuing short-term gains only.

Fifth, as the global order evolves, strategic realignments are becoming clearer every day. 4-day military escalation between Pakistan and India in May 2025 and a 12-day conflict between Iran and Israel in June 2025 have further crystallised these alignments. It appears that the “US-Israel-India Nexus” is central to the US policy of containing China, particularly in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Although it will always be a challenge for the US to keep Israel and India’s quest for greater strategic autonomy within manageable limits, the dividend for keeping this nexus alive, as perceived in Tel Aviv and New Delhi, far exceeds that of any other strategic arrangement due to multiple reasons. As can be seen above, Pakistan cannot afford to allow any ‘strategic haze’ to confound its long-term strategic priorities in the region.

Unless India gives up its hegemonic ambitions and sits down to resolve outstanding issues with all neighbouring countries, it is apparent that South Asia will continue to remain an economically fractured and militarily violent region. Similarly, Pakistan-US relations will also remain ‘transactional’ due to a lack of any strategic convergence.

Therefore, Pakistan must move forward with greater 'strategic clarity' in terms of its relations with China. Despite challenges, Pakistan needs to work towards greater regional economic integration with its western neighbourhood, including West and Central Asia, as well as Russia.

As Pakistan works to act as a pivot, rather than a pawn, in the US-China rivalry, it should build its rightful geopolitical space by nurturing greater partnerships, especially in its Western neighbourhood, with the support of China, Russia and other like-minded countries to safeguard its strategic interests.

### About Insight and Author

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# Disinformation, Deepfakes, and Crisis Dynamics: Lessons from the India-Pakistan Crisis of May 2025

*Rabia Akhtar*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT analyses the role of disinformation and deepfakes in escalating the India-Pakistan crisis of May 2025, illustrating how digital manipulation of narratives influenced the conflict dynamics. Amid military tensions, false news and AI-generated content significantly blurred the truth, complicating efforts at de-escalation. It highlights the importance of controlling information in modern conflicts, as misinformation can trigger unpredictable escalations, especially between nuclear-armed states. The article also offers recommendations for combating such challenges in future crises, focusing on real-time fact-checking, media literacy, and international cooperation.*

**Keywords:** Disinformation, Deepfake, Narrative, Fact Check.

**I**n modern conflicts, battles are fought not just with missiles and tanks, but also with narratives and bytes. The brief yet intense India-Pakistan crisis of May 2025 vividly demonstrated how disinformation and AI-generated deepfakes can become force multipliers in a conflict, distorting perception and fueling escalation. During those tense days in early May, as missiles and drones flew across borders, fake news flooded television and social networks, creating a “fog of war” thicker than ever before. This information onslaught had a tangible impact on crisis dynamics between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, showing that controlling the narrative can be as crucial as military strategy. Experts have warned that such “weaponised” narratives could push rivals closer to war, especially in an era when escalation ladders are no longer linear.

## The May 2025 Crisis and the Parallel Information War

The immediate trigger for the May 2025 standoff was a terrorist attack on 22 April in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (the Pahalgam attack), after which India launched retaliatory airstrikes under the codename “Operation Sindoor” on May 7. Over the next four days, the two countries traded cross-border strikes with missiles and armed drones, bringing them to the brink of all-out conflict. However, *alongside the kinetic clashes, another crisis unfolded*: a massive wave of misinformation and propaganda inundated both mainstream and social media. Panicked rumours spread on television, for example, one Indian news report falsely claimed a Pakistani missile strike on the town of Sopore in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir, causing a student in New Delhi to fear for her family. Across the border, social media buzzed with “news” of an impending Indian Navy attack on Karachi port, sowing fear among Pakistanis in Karachi. All these reports turned out to be false. Still, they reflected a broader pattern: the conflict was accompanied by an unprecedented flood of disinformation that fueled public panic and confusion on both sides.

Such disinformation added to the fog of war and constrained space for de-escalation and diplomacy. Each side accused the other of atrocities while loudly amplifying its own “victories,” often with little evidence. Indian and Pakistani officials traded tit-for-tat claims, from downed jets to drone strikes, that were difficult to verify amidst the chaos. This fog was not a natural byproduct of combat; it was deliberately thickened by a deluge of fake news circulating in real time. In effect, information itself had become a battleground, with each side vying to shape perceptions domestically and internationally.

### India’s Weaponisation of the Narrative

Analysts and media critics have singled out the role of Indian mainstream media in weaponising the narrative through fake news during the crisis. In New Delhi’s frenzied media landscape, hyper-nationalist television channels turned the conflict into what one former Indian official called a “parallel reality” driven by “abnormal triumphalism”.

Major Indian news networks, including prominent Hindi and English channels, broadcast a barrage of false or unverified “breaking news” that painted a picture of decisive Indian victory.

Media watchdogs and fact-checkers rapidly debunked many of these stories. They traced the “exclusive” visuals on Indian TV to unrelated events, the Gaza war, old military exercises, or digital creations. Indian fact-checkers such as Alt News and others worked overtime to label these visuals as fabrications. Even India’s Ministry of Home Affairs felt compelled to issue an advisory warning TV channels against over-dramatising the conflict, noting that such sensationalism could desensitise citizens and compromise emergency response. Yet, during the height of the crisis, these false narratives largely went unchecked on air, as journalism gave way to jingoism. The New York Times likewise observed that in India, large segments of the news media now “*thrive on misinformation,*” prioritising sensational, unverified claims that align with nationalist sentiment.

### **Deepfakes and the Digital Battlefield**

A particularly unsettling aspect of the May 2025 information war was the use of AI-generated “deepfake” content to further muddy the waters. Deepfakes, ultrarealistic fake videos or audio produced by AI, made their debut on the South Asian crisis stage, heralding a new era of deception.

The infusion of AI-driven deception greatly complicates crisis management. As Rebecca Hersman, a nuclear escalation scholar, observes in her essay *Wormhole Escalation in the New Nuclear Age*, “*advances in digital technology, from deep fakes to AI-enabled social media campaigns, are transforming the speed and precision with which influence campaigns can reach and manipulate their desired targets.*” In other words, propaganda travels farther and faster with AI, and it can be tailored to exploit emotional triggers. During the May 2025 crisis, the speed of false information outpaced the speed of truth. Government agencies and fact-checkers struggled to catch up and debunk rumours in real time.

Every minute a deepfake or fake story remains uncorrected is a minute in which it can go viral to millions. Hersman warns that an adversary armed with deepfakes could even stage a “deception revolution,” flooding the information space so thoroughly that *“elements of the public, deceived by a disinformation campaign, become unwitting soldiers on behalf of an adversary.”* In May 2025, we saw echoes of this: ordinary social media users, swept up by patriotic fervour, shared false stories by the thousands, essentially acting as digital foot soldiers to amplify disinformation.

The chaotic information environment of the May 2025 conflict exemplifies what Hersman calls “wormhole escalation,” the idea that escalation in modern crises may not follow the old, linear step-by-step ladder, but can jump unpredictably to higher levels due to new variables like cyber and information warfare. Herman Kahn’s classic Cold War concept of a tidy **44-rung** “escalation ladder” assumed that conflicts progress through discernible phases, giving adversaries time to signal and control the climb. But Hersman argues this framework is now outdated and dangerously misleading. Today, the boundaries between sub-conventional, conventional, and strategic conflict are blurring, and actors wield a mix of tools (informational, cyber, economic, as well as military) all at once. In such a milieu, escalation might not climb a ladder so much as leap through a wormhole.

In a stable deterrence scenario, leaders rely on clarity and confident communication. But disinformation undermines the transparency and trust that help prevent miscalculation. The linear model of escalation presumes rational actors with accurate information making calibrated moves. The wormhole model recognises that *in the real world, actors may be reacting to misinformation, emotional public narratives, or cyber-induced misperceptions, causing sudden escalation jumps.*

The May 2025 conflict showed that the escalation ladder between India and Pakistan is no longer neatly stepwise. Both governments had to navigate not only the military engagements but also narrative escalation: each feared losing the “storyline” to the other. This added a layer of complexity to de-escalation.

Indeed, even after the ceasefire on May 10, both sides immediately claimed victory and continued to push their chosen narratives, delaying a clear-eyed mutual assessment of what had happened.

### **Countering the Disinformation Threat: Lessons for Pakistan and Beyond**

Despite being the target of a concerted Indian narrative offensive, Pakistan navigated the 2025 information war with some agility, and those experiences offer insights into how to counter disinformation in future crises. Pakistani authorities, especially the military's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) wing, actively countered false Indian claims in real time, leveraging both traditional and social media. For example, when Indian channels began circulating rumours of a coup in Pakistan, officials quickly refuted the claim and even showcased Gen.

Asim Munir continuing his duties, quelling the speculation. Similarly, as Indian media boasted of strikes on Karachi and Lahore, Pakistani leaders and journalists in those

**Mastering the information domain is vital to national security. Pakistan's timely communication and fact-checking efforts proved the value of a proactive narrative strategy, but also revealed the need to institutionalize stronger, long-term defences against information warfare.**

cities took to social platforms to show that life was continuing normally, undermining the credibility of the fake reports. This strategy of providing rapid, factual updates helped prevent panic among Pakistan's public and maintained morale, even as they were bombarded with psychological operations from the other side. In essence, Pakistan attempted to "flood the zone" with counter-narratives grounded in reality, as an antidote to the flood of fake news.

Pakistan also made a noteworthy decision to lift a ban on Twitter (X), which had been blocked in the country, so that its officials and citizens could engage on the platform during the crisis. This move recognised that an information vacuum would be dangerous; if Pakistanis had no access to social media, they would only see hostile narratives about their country with less ability to rebut them.

Moving forward, Pakistan and countries in similar positions should consider a multi-pronged strategy to inoculate themselves against disinformation, especially in crisis scenarios. Some key imperatives include:

- **Establish a Centralised Disinformation Response Unit:** As one Pakistani analyst recommends, Pakistan should create a National Disinformation Response Unit (NDRU) under a high-level body (e.g. the National Security Division or ISPR). Such a unit would serve as a nerve centre to monitor, detect, and counter false information during crises (and in peacetime). It would coordinate among civilian agencies, military public relations, and intelligence services to ensure a unified response to malign narratives. Essentially, this is about institutionalising what was done ad hoc in 2025, so that the next time, the response is faster and more synchronised.
- **Invest in Real-Time Fact-Checking and Communication:** Governments must have the capacity to fact-check viral claims in real time and broadcast corrections widely. This means training and equipping teams to use open-source intelligence (OSINT), satellite imagery, and digital forensics at short notice. Having pre-existing relationships with major media outlets and social media companies can help push out verified information quickly when needed.
- **Strengthening Media Literacy and Public Resilience:** A long-term antidote to disinformation is an informed, critical-thinking citizenry. Pakistan can integrate media literacy programs into school curricula and run public awareness campaigns about identifying fake news. If citizens learn to verify images (for example, doing reverse image searches, checking credible news sources, etc.), the effectiveness of disinformation in causing mass hysteria will diminish. During the crisis, many Pakistani social media users themselves flagged fake posts (like pointing out that a supposed “explosion in Karachi” video was actually from Beirut 2020, for instance). Encouraging this civic scepticism is vital. Civil society and tech platforms should be partners in this effort, teaching users how not to fall prey to sensational rumours.

- **Engagement with Social Media Platforms for Content Moderation:** Governments cannot fight disinformation alone. Companies like Meta (Facebook) and X (Twitter) must be pushed to take responsibility during conflicts. The May 2025 conflict revealed a “catastrophic failure” by platforms to moderate content; of hundreds of high-view disinformation posts identified, only a small fraction was flagged or removed by platforms. Pakistan should engage with these companies to develop protocols for crises, such as priority takedowns of proven fake news that could incite war.
- **Regulate the Use of AI and Deepfake Technologies:** On the policy front, there may be a need to regulate the creation and dissemination of deepfakes, especially those targeting national security. Pakistan can update its cybercrime and media laws to criminalise the deliberate production of deepfake audio/video that could endanger lives by spreading false alerts (with appropriate safeguards for satire or art). Internationally, Pakistan could advocate for norm-setting around not using deepfakes against nuclear states’ command-and-control or leadership, given the unique risks. While enforcement is tricky, even publicly declaring such norms can raise awareness. Technical measures, like promoting deepfake detection tools, are also key. Investing in AI tools that can authenticate media (e.g., digital watermarks or blockchain for news footage) could help distinguish real from fake in the next crisis.
- **Diplomatic and Multilateral Initiatives:** Finally, countering disinformation is not just a national task but a global one. Pakistan should actively participate in and perhaps initiate multilateral efforts to combat online disinformation. This might include sharing best practices with other countries that have faced similar info-war tactics (Ukraine, Baltic States, etc.), and pushing for forums (UN, SCO, etc.) to address information warfare as a threat to international peace.

## Conclusion

The May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis will be remembered not only for its drones and missiles but for its deluge of bytes and lies. It highlighted the emergence of disinformation and deepfakes as significant factors in crisis dynamics, especially between nuclear-armed adversaries. In the backdrop of those four days in May, the Indian media's weaponisation of the narrative through fake news demonstrated how modern information tools can be used to project power and cause confusion. At the same time, the crisis validated Rebecca Hersman's warning that the escalation ladder in the nuclear age may have wormholes, nonlinear jumps fueled by the likes of AI-driven deception and information warfare. The result is a far more unpredictable escalatory environment, one where "digital soldiers" acting as proxies online can have real-world consequences for peace and security.

For Pakistan, and indeed any state facing an onslaught of narrative warfare, the May 2025 experience underscores a critical lesson: controlling the informational high ground is now integral to national security. Pakistan's relative success in blunting the impact of India's disinformation, through quick fact-checks, real-time communication, and engaging international media, shows that a proactive strategy can pay off. But much more needs to be done to institutionalise these defences. Hybrid warfare is here to stay, and the informational front will only grow more complex with advancing AI. Strengthening resilience against fake news, building rapid response mechanisms, and fostering a more discerning public are essential steps to ensure that facts, not falsehoods, guide the next crisis.

## About the Author

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Dr Rabia Akhtar is Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Lahore and a leading scholar in nuclear policy and international security. She is the Founding Director of the Centre for Security, Strategy and Policy Research (CSSPR) and a member of prestigious international networks on nuclear studies. She can be reached at [rabia.akhtar@csspr.uol.edu.pk](mailto:rabia.akhtar@csspr.uol.edu.pk).





NATIONAL DEFENCE UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD