



INDIAN PROVOCATIONS OF MAY 2025 & ITS AFTERMATH

ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE REPORT

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Round Table Conference Report

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The discussion and report have followed Chatham House Rules. The statements, facts, and opinions by speakers do not constitute the official policy of the Institute for Strategic Studies, Research & Analysis.

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CONCEPT NOTE

The incident on 22 April 2025, in Pahalgam marked a critical turning point in the already strained India-Pakistan relationship. India's immediate attribution of the attack to Pakistan triggered a sharp four-day military escalation along the Line of Control (LoC), characterized by cross-border exchanges, aggressive military posturing, and intensified diplomatic hostility. This abrupt deterioration in relations has heightened regional tensions and raised serious concerns over India's increasingly assertive posture and its implications for South Asian stability.

Considering these developments, the Institute for Strategic Studies, Research, and Analysis (ISSRA) at the National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad, organized two Round Table Conferences to examine the strategic, diplomatic, and regional ramifications of the Pahalgam episode. The discussions brought together legal experts, diplomats, civil-military strategic thinkers, and policy specialists to explore whether the incident represented a deliberate escalation by India, to assess the broader geopolitical dynamics at play, and to evaluate the policy options available to Pakistan in responding to this evolving security environment.

Key Themes of Discussions were:

1. The Pahalgam Incident – Actors and Attribution.

This theme explored the competing narratives surrounding the April 22 attack. Key questions were: Who may have orchestrated the incident? What evidence has emerged from either side? Is this part of a broader campaign of hybrid warfare and disinformation, and how is it shaping public perception and policy in both countries?

2. Strategic Objectives and Outcomes of the Four-Day Escalation.

This segment assessed the military, political, and psychological objectives pursued by both India and Pakistan during the crisis. It also evaluated the extent to which these objectives were achieved.

3. What Next? Strategic Options for Pakistan.

The final theme focused on Pakistan's way forward. It considered how Pakistan should recalibrate its defence posture, strategic communication, and diplomatic outreach to deter future provocations.

The discussions aimed to generate a comprehensive and forward-looking assessment of the Pahalgam incident and its aftermath. The insights generated are intended to inform future policymaking on Pakistan's regional positioning in the context of growing instability in South Asia.

ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE(S) PROGRAM

Session	Time	Details/Speakers
Arrival of Participants	10:55	
Opening Remarks	11:05	Major General Muhammad Raza Aizad DG ISSRA
Indian Provocations: Strategic Implications & The Regional Response	11:05–11:45	Opening remarks by all the Discussants
Discussion	11:45–13:55	All Discussants
Closing Remarks	13:55–14:00	Major General Muhammad Raza Aizad DG ISSRA
Lunch 14:00 Onwards		

INTRODUCTION

- A Round Table Conference (RT) on “Indian Provocations of May 2025 & its Aftermath” was organized by ISSRA, NDU, Islamabad, and held on 3 June 2025 (RT-1). However, due to the complexity of the discussion and the evolving regional dynamics, it was decided that a second session was needed to explore the issues further.
- As a result, a second RT on the same topic was held on 16 June 2025 at the NDU premises (RT-2). Both RTs convened a diverse group of international law experts, diplomats, civil-military strategic analysts, and policy specialists from relevant governmental agencies and think tanks to analyze the Pahalgam incident, consider the broader geopolitical context, and explore policy options available to Pakistan. Notably, the second RT also addressed the recent developments in the Iran-Israel conflict and their strategic implications for the region.
- The RTs comprised a single, integrated session that examined both the circumstances surrounding the recent escalation following the Pahalgam incident and the aftermath thereof.
- The discussions focused on three main questions: (1) Who was responsible for the Pahalgam incident, and what narratives emerged? (2) What strategic objectives did India and Pakistan pursue during the four-day escalation, and were they achieved? (3) What strategic options does Pakistan have moving forward to sustain regional stability?
- The RTs were conducted under the Chatham House Rule, enabling participants to participate in open and honest discussions without attribution.
- The RTs addressed issues from legal, diplomatic, political, military, and strategic points of view, aiming to develop a unified and practical strategy for Pakistan to handle the changing challenges caused by recent Indian actions.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Pahalgam incident, according to a majority of experts, was characterized as a “false flag” operation driven by India’s domestic political agenda. These experts concurred that the timing of the attack and the lack of credible attribution indicate a deliberate orchestration to malign Pakistan’s image internationally, divert attention from India’s internal Islamophobic controversies, and boost electoral support for the Modi government.
- A few experts suggested the involvement of “third-party” in precipitating the escalation. These experts noted that the third party’s goal was not to achieve a specific military outcome but to keep Modi in check and push him to align more closely with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, acting more predictably and effectively against China. In their opinion, the narratives that emerged after the escalations supported this view.
- Some experts associated the Pahalgam attack with India’s oppressive measures in Jammu and Kashmir, particularly those driven by Hindutva extremism. They contended that this ongoing repression in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) has compromised the Kashmiri people’s right to self-determination and contravenes international law.
- Experts mainly dismissed India’s claim that Pakistan was responsible for the Pahalgam incident, arguing that Pakistan was unlikely to predict and control key variables that followed the attack. However, there was general agreement that Pakistan skillfully handled the escalation and ultimately came out as the strategic winner.
- The recent escalation has demonstrated contrasting outcomes for key stakeholders. India’s efforts to assert military supremacy and to shape a domestic narrative of success ultimately proved counterproductive, revealing a disconnect between its civilian and military authorities and impairing its international credibility, as the global community, by and large, did not subscribe to India’s narrative.
- The U.S. was somewhat successful in reestablishing strategic checks on India, whereas Israel failed to demonstrate India’s military stature on the international stage.
- In contrast, Pakistan accomplished its fundamental objective of safeguarding its territorial sovereignty through effective conventional deterrence.

- The escalation reaffirmed Pakistan’s importance in the emerging multipolar world order. Experts observed that Pakistan’s firm stance and strategic performance elevated its standing among major world powers.
- The Simla Agreement was repeatedly referred to as lacking active and enforceable obligations. Experts agreed that while its symbolic value endures, it holds limited practical utility in the current environment. There was consensus that withdrawing from the Agreement would yield no useful benefits; instead, Pakistan could remain a party to it while maintaining a posture that presents it as the rational actor adhering to international norms.
- Experts highlighted the need for Pakistan to take a systematic and flexible approach to the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), keeping all legal and diplomatic options open—including engagement with the Permanent Indus Commission, the World Bank, Court of Arbitration, and ICJ—to protect its water rights in the face of India’s unilateral actions.
- Experts observed that Pakistan must cultivate enhanced “Strategic Clarity” by eradicating any residual “Strategic Haze” in its geopolitical alignments. Key stakeholders involved in security, diplomacy, and governance are required to coalesce around a cohesive grand strategy to respond effectively to regional threats and global power dynamics.
- Experts emphasized that Pakistan must sustain comprehensive military readiness and transition from a conventional quid pro quo plus (QPQ+) strategy to a more agile, “Asymmetric Response Strategy” to deter India from future provocations effectively. Additionally, Pakistan should leverage recent support from friendly states during the escalation to foster international pressure against India’s unlawful actions.
- India and Pakistan, as the primary actors in the recent escalation, each perceived the outcome as a victory. Both nations interpreted the events through their respective strategic narratives, thereby reinforcing the conviction that they can manage or even capitalize on future escalations. This collective sense of achievement is perilous, as it elevates the likelihood of recurrent confrontations.

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

A. The Genesis of Escalation: Triggers and Attribution

- The 22 April 2025 Pahalgam attack was the triggering event in the latest escalation between India and Pakistan.
- India immediately accused Pakistan of orchestrating the attack; however, the Indian Foreign Secretary admitted publicly that an investigation was ongoing, highlighting the absence of credible attribution.
- Experts stated that there is no credible evidence of Pakistan’s involvement and that the principle of attribution is entirely lacking.
- Pakistan’s response amid the escalations was framed as lawful and defensive under Article 51 of the UN Charter, emphasizing its right to self-defence in response to Indian provocations.
- Most experts viewed the Pahalgam attack as a “false flag” operation designed to frame Pakistan and support India’s domestic political and election goals. They suggest the attack was staged to boost nationalist sentiment ahead of key state elections. Several experts also noted that India appears to have adopted the Israeli playbook—engineering or amplifying crises to advance its internal political strategies. In this case, they maintained that the incident was motivated by Modi’s internal and external aims, especially portraying Pakistan as a hostile actor to rally the BJP’s political base and to distract public attention from controversial initiatives like the Waqf Bill and other Islamophobic policies.
- A few experts, who also described the Pahalgam incident as a false flag operation, went further to suggest the involvement of both Indian and Israeli deep state elements in orchestrating it. According to this perspective, the attack aimed not only at domestic political goals but also at broader geopolitical objectives, particularly positioning India as a regional hegemon aligned with Israeli strategic interests. These analysts argued that the episode was part of a deliberate effort to strengthen India-Israel security cooperation and mutual diplomatic support.
- A few experts also viewed the incident as part of a longer series of similar provocations, including the *Uri* (2016) surgical strikes, *Balakot* (2019), and *Mian Channu* (2021) episodes.

- While a few experts viewed the Pahalgam incident as a “false flag” operation, others speculated that a “third-party” involvement—mainly pointing towards the U.S.-Israel nexus—was responsible for orchestrating the recent escalations between Pakistan and India. These experts considered the Pahalgam attack as a calculated trigger by a third party, knowing that Modi’s domestic pressures and ideological extremism would likely provoke retaliation. This created a strategic “win-win” scenario for them: if India succeeded, it would be reinforced as a counterweight to China; if it failed, the setback would make it easier for the third party to justify and impose restrictions on India’s notion of strategic autonomy.
- A few experts connected the Pahalgam attack to India’s “ideological occupation” of IIOJK, suggesting that the rise of extremist Hindutva ideology has increased repression in IIOJK, potentially fueling an internal revolt by the local population.
- Experts warned that the situation is deteriorating due to India’s systematic suppression of the Kashmiri people’s right to self-determination and ongoing violations of international law. India’s deepening entrenchment in its ideological echo chamber not only results in the denial of fundamental rights in IIOJK but also creates a dangerous cycle—where legitimate resistance is labeled as terrorism, attributed to Pakistan without evidence, and used as a pretext to escalate tensions and conflict with Pakistan.
- Experts overwhelmingly rejected India’s narrative of blaming Pakistan for the Pahalgam incident, arguing that the complexity and unpredictability of key variables made it implausible for Pakistan to have orchestrated the attack.

B. Strategic Objectives: What the Stakeholders Wanted—and Got?

- A few experts noted that through the recent escalations, India was attempting to “stretch the envelope” by testing the limits of military thresholds—probing how far it could go without triggering Pakistan’s nuclear response. However, the strategy backfired, as Pakistan effectively countered the aggression through conventional means while deliberately avoiding nuclear escalation, reinforcing its image as a rational and responsible actor.

- India, in the recent escalations, aimed to assert military dominance over Pakistan and boost domestic political support ahead of state elections by projecting strength. However, the Modi government's pursuit of optics over military pragmatism, despite reservations, revealed a disconnect between the civilian and military leadership.
- India aimed to construct a post-conflict narrative of decisive victory through psychological warfare, using pro-Modi media to portray Pakistan's defeat and rally domestic support. While this messaging was partially successful in creating a controlled narrative within India, experts noted that it ultimately triggered a strategic setback. The tactic also backfired internationally, as global media began to expose the disconnect between India's claims and the ground realities—damaging the credibility of India's media and narrative on the international stage.
- Following the Pakistan-India escalation, the U.S. emerged as the key beneficiary. President Trump publicly took credit for facilitating the ceasefire, reinforcing America's role as a regional power broker. Meanwhile, the rising perception of close Pakistan-China military cooperation has made it increasingly challenging for any Indian government to pursue strategic cooperation with China in the near future. As a result, India's dependence on the U.S. is expected to deepen across diplomatic, military, and economic domains.
- Pakistan's primary objective was to protect its territorial sovereignty and prevent any breach of its borders—and it successfully achieved this through an effective conventional military response during the recent escalation.

C. Strategic Implications for the Region

- The recent escalations underscored the deepening polarization in South Asia, with alignments shifting toward a multipolar order.
- China's visible and assertive support for Pakistan during the escalation was seen by some experts as driven by strategic necessity—specifically to counter the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific strategy. However, this alignment reinforced the importance of Pakistan's strategic partnership with China. It was a setback for India, which views growing regional consolidation around China as a challenge to its ambitions.

- India’s failure to achieve its objectives is likely to provoke another round of escalation—potentially larger and more intense—especially under pressure from Modi’s Hindutva base. This would heighten regional instability and increase the risk of miscalculation between two nuclear-armed states.
- Modi’s domestic political rhetoric—centered on anti-Pakistan sentiment—is contributing to regional instability. His government’s ideological commitments have created a “commitment trap,” whereby any future triggering incident could compel escalation due to prior political posturing, thereby increasing the risk of conflict across South Asia.
- If India unilaterally attributes terrorist incidents within its territory to Pakistan without credible evidence and conducts strikes against self-proclaimed “terrorist targets” inside Pakistan, it would constitute a clear violation of Pakistan’s territorial integrity. Such actions would entitle Pakistan to respond in self-defence, potentially triggering retaliatory strikes escalating into a full-scale regional conflict.
- Both Pakistan and India emerged from the recent escalation with their interpretations of victory, each claiming success based on differing metrics and narratives. This divergent lesson-learning increases the likelihood of future confrontations, as both sides may feel emboldened to repeat similar actions, believing escalation can be managed or won on their terms.

D. Strategic Implications for Pakistan

- Following the 4-day escalation with India, Pakistan’s national resolve has been revitalized; where previously there was a sense of isolation and growing Indian geopolitical dominance, the recent conflict has restored public confidence and reaffirmed Pakistan’s strategic importance in the region.
- Following recent escalations, experts recommended that establishing greater “Strategic Clarity” through improved coordination among the country’s political, diplomatic, military, and economic institutions is crucial to ensure a unified and effective national response to emerging regional and global challenges.
- The limited scope of the conflict avoided nuclear escalation, reinforcing the credibility of Pakistan’s deterrence doctrine.

- Pakistan should deepen its partnerships with China, Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states to broaden its strategic alignment and enhance regional cooperation.
- Pakistan's regional strategy with its western neighbors—such as Afghanistan and Iran—needs to be coherent and revitalized to address shared security challenges effectively. However, even with improved regional cooperation, Pakistan must ensure it remains firm and does not soften its stance on TTP-related threats to internal security.
- Pakistan must consider its own norms for pre-emptive engagement and avoid complacency or euphoria following tactical successes. Future responses must be measured, mature, and strategically calculated.
- Experts stressed that responsibility for de-escalation should not rest solely on Pakistan. Ensuring deterrence requires a posture that places pressure on India to refrain from engaging in any new provocation.
- War should be understood as a continuous process rather than a singular event with clear winners and losers. Experts highlighted that Pakistan must now prepare for evolving threats, particularly in the domains of cyber warfare, drone warfare, and internal sabotage, etc.

E. Strategic Implications for the Simla Agreement

- Experts widely regarded the Simla Agreement as lacking enforceable, active obligations—unlike the IWT, which provides for active obligations for both Pakistan and India.
- As such, there is little legal necessity to maintain Simla, especially since India has breached it multiple times; however, withdrawal must be calculated to avoid portraying Pakistan as a violator of bilateral commitments.
- Experts noted that maintaining the agreement while highlighting India's repeated breaches allows Pakistan to present itself as a rational actor and India as the rogue party.

F. Way Forward for Pakistan

- Given the sensitive regional situation, particularly with India, experts suggest that Pakistan should work toward greater “Strategic Clarity” by strengthening coordination among its key institutions to support a more cohesive national response.
- Take advantage of Pakistan’s elevated post-conflict standing to secure international economic opportunities and redefine its narrative.
- Pakistan should continue to strengthen its strategic partnership with China. Meanwhile, it should capitalize on the recent diplomatic warmth shown by the U.S. by exploring opportunities for enhanced cooperation across economic, military, political, and technological domains. However, this renewed engagement with the U.S. should not be mistaken for a shift in strategic alignment, since India remains Washington’s primary partner in countering China. Instead, Pakistan needs to carefully manage its relationships—aiming for constructive engagement with the U.S. without jeopardizing its long-standing strategic ties with China.
- Despite India’s current policy of disengagement, Pakistan should explore avenues for Track 2.0 diplomacy by engaging with more rational and willing segments of Indian society to reduce the risk of future miscalculations and promote regional stability.
- Rebuild regional partnerships with Iran, Turkey, and Central Asian states—even if it comes with diplomatic risks.
- Closely monitor India’s domestic political calendar to anticipate the timing of future provocations—specifically elections.
- Engage the UNSC immediately under Article 51 to legitimize Pakistan’s right to self-defence and to expose India’s unilateral aggression.
- Strategically file a legal case against India’s conduct under the IWT—framing treaty suspension and water diversion as violations of international law.
- Experts stressed that Pakistan should treat any Indian attempt to alter water flow as a strategic threat and respond with military action, if necessary, as it possesses the capability to do so.

- Experts emphasized the need for Pakistan to develop and internalize a clear and consistent Kashmir strategy, ensuring clarity of purpose and direction in all diplomatic and strategic engagements related to the issue.
- Utilize forums like the UNSC to deny India’s title claims on Kashmir and build pressure for adherence to UN resolutions.
- Strengthen the Kashmir narrative worldwide by aligning with Gen Z activism, which increasingly sympathizes with analogies comparing Israel’s actions in Gaza to India’s conduct in Kashmir.
- Pakistan should reassess its military posture by transitioning from the conventional QPQ+ model to a more adaptable “Asymmetric Response Strategy,” which means Pakistan must not be limited in how it responds to Indian provocations in any domain—military, economic, or diplomatic. This approach also emphasizes the importance of preemptive actions in military areas, as long as the strategic environment supports it.
- Ensure continued investment in military capability and conventional deterrence to prevent escalation beyond manageable limits.
- Experts cautioned that Operation *Sindoor* appears to be on hold, not concluded; therefore, Pakistan must remain militarily prepared across all domains to deter future escalations.

LIST OF DISCUSSANTS

Round Table-1

Sr. No.	Name	Designation
CHAIR		
1.	Major General Muhammad Raza Aizad	DG ISSRA
DISCUSSANTS		
2.	Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Aamer Riaz	Ex-President NDU, Ex-DGMO.
3.	Amb. (Retd.) Zamir Akram	Ex-Ambassador of Pakistan.
4.	Brig. (Retd.) Ajab Khan	Director Area Studies, NDU.
5.	Ms. Naseem Zahra	Senior Journalist & National Security Analyst.
6.	Mr. Oves Anwar	Director Research, RSIL.
7.	Ms. Ayesha Malik	Deputy Director, RSIL.
8.	Ms. Maham Ayaz	Research Fellow, CEIL, ISSRA.

Round Table-2

Sr. No.	Name	Designation
CHAIR		
1.	Major General Muhammad Raza Aizad	DG ISSRA
DISCUSSANTS		
2.	Air Marshall (Retd.) Aamir Masood	Air Marshal (Retd.)
3.	Amb. (Retd.) Masood Khan	Ex-Ambassador of Pakistan.
4.	Mr. Ejaz Haider	Senior Journalist & Political Analyst.
5.	Ms. Maria Sultan	President, South Asian Strategic Stability Institute (SAASI).
6.	Mr. Asad Rahim	Advocate High Court.
7.	Dr. Marium Fatima	Assistant Professor, NDU
8.	Ms. Maham Ayaz	Research Fellow, CEIL, ISSRA.



PICTURES GALLERY



Conversations



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