Line of Conflict: Rethinking Border Security in India After the 2025 Pahalgam Attack

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Abstract:

India's border regions, especially those adjoining Pakistan, function as more than just territorial demarcations—they are dynamic, contested spaces that embody larger geopolitical tensions and domestic security concerns. This paper offers a critical analysis of the interplay between borderland geopolitics and the architecture of security, with particular reference to the May 2025 Pahalgam attack. Using a wide range of secondary sources, including policy documents, scholarly works, and contemporary media reports, the study investigates how the rise of cross-border militancy, the advent of hybrid warfare, and the use of emerging technologies such as drones and infiltration tunnels have redefined threats along the India–Pakistan boundary. Through a comparative assessment of the Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab border zones, the paper explores the spatial imprint of securitization efforts—such as the deployment of smart fencing, surveillance infrastructure, anti-drone defences, and rapid troop mobilization. In addition to the technological and strategic dimensions, the research delves into the socio-spatial implications of militarization on civilian populations. It highlights the disruptions to livelihoods, forced relocations, restricted land access, and environmental degradation experienced by communities residing in these highly securitized zones. The Pahalgam incident reveals critical vulnerabilities within India's existing security framework, even in territories perceived as stabilized, and highlights the evolving tactics of non-state actors. By situating regional security within the broader framework of everyday human insecurities, the paper advocates for a paradigm shift. It calls for a move away from exclusionary, fortress-style approaches toward a more integrated security model—one that combines technological innovation, community engagement, ecological stewardship, and sustained political dialogue. This reconceptualization is vital for addressing the complex realities of South Asia's volatile frontier landscapes.
(272 Words)

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Introduction:

India's borderlands have long functioned not just as territorial perimeters but as landscapes where national identity, geopolitical tension, and state authority are actively negotiated. This dynamic is particularly visible in Jammu and Kashmir—a region that embodies overlapping layers of ethnic complexity, geopolitical rivalry, military occupation, and civilian endurance. Since the 1947 Partition, the area has remained central to the protracted conflict between India and Pakistan, influenced by overlapping claims, insurgent violence, and repeated efforts at territorial consolidation and state integration. In response, India has fortified its borders with advanced surveillance technologies, fencing systems, troop deployments, and

intelligence-sharing networks. These strategies have significantly curtailed large-scale infiltration but have not sufficiently mitigated the threats emerging from within regions that lie beyond conventional military observation.

The attack in Pahalgam in May 2025 marked a pivotal moment in India's internal security narrative. As one of Kashmir's most iconic tourist destinations—often highlighted as a marker of post-conflict normalization and economic revival—Pahalgam represented a symbol of regional peace and development. The assault, therefore, did not merely constitute a physical breach but also a symbolic strike that disrupted public perception of safety and state control. Unlike traditional attacks along the Line of Control or conflict-prone urban areas, this incident occurred in a zone perceived as tranquil and secure, revealing the strategic agility of militant actors and the shifting spatial dynamics of insurgency.

The Pahalgam incident also brought renewed scrutiny to the Indian government's developmental and security-oriented policies in Kashmir, especially following the revocation of Article 370 in 2019. Since then, state discourse has emphasized economic integration, infrastructure growth, and a resurgence in tourism. Yet, the very success of these initiatives—particularly those focused on symbolic spaces like Pahalgam—may render them attractive targets for insurgent messaging. The attack illustrates the rise of hybrid warfare tactics, where conventional violence is interwoven with psychological and symbolic acts meant to undermine narratives of peace and progress.

Moreover, the event exposed underlying weaknesses in India's internal security apparatus. Despite the extensive militarization of border areas, soft targets within these regions—including tourist hubs, marketplaces, and public gatherings—remain susceptible to attack. The attackers' ability to strike in a zone believed to be under constant surveillance indicates lapses in coordination between local police, intelligence networks, and central security forces. This raises urgent questions about the adaptability of current security frameworks: Are they designed to respond to the dispersed, unpredictable nature of modern insurgent threats? And is it possible to simultaneously foster regional development and guarantee civilian safety in areas with longstanding histories of violence and militarization?

This paper seeks to explore the broader implications of the Pahalgam attack within the context of India's borderland governance and security infrastructure. It argues that while the Indian state has prioritized securing its territorial boundaries, the real challenge lies in ensuring the safety of civilian spaces embedded within these militarized environments. Drawing on perspectives from critical geopolitics and security studies, the paper investigates how the state envisions, administers, and at times fails to manage these contested zones. The Pahalgam attack, in this context, becomes a lens through which to rethink border security, hybrid warfare, and the limits of development-centric state narratives.

Statement of the problem: -

Despite notable advancements in India's border security mechanisms—ranging from physical fortifications to technological surveillance—the 2025 Pahalgam attack revealed a significant disconnect between external militarization and the safeguarding of internal civilian zones. While considerable resources have been invested in reinforcing the Line of Control (LoC) with fencing, monitoring systems, and a sustained military presence, insurgent actors have continued to evolve in both strategy and capability, managing to bypass these defences and execute attacks deep within areas considered secure. This incident brings to light a pressing question: How did a country like India, known for its comprehensive and militarized border management systems, fail to prevent a deadly assault on civilians in a location of both economic importance and political sensitivity such as Pahalgam? The core issue lies in the limitations of

the prevailing security framework, which often treats border security and internal stability as distinct domains. However, the fluid nature of modern militancy challenges this division by exploiting the porous boundaries between peripheral zones and civilian centers. This research aims to investigate the underlying structural, strategic, and geopolitical factors that have contributed to such security lapses. By focusing on the Pahalgam attack as a focal point, the study seeks to critically assess how insurgent threats adapt to and expose the weaknesses of India's securitization strategies in its highly sensitive border regions.

Objective: -

1. To analyze the strategic significance of the 2025 Pahalgam incident within the broader framework of India's borderland security approach.
2. To identify and evaluate the infrastructural, institutional, and operational shortcomings that persist within the existing security architecture.
3. To explore how contemporary forms of hybrid militancy are able to circumvent conventional border defence mechanisms.
4. To develop a multi-layered, community-oriented security model tailored for high-risk regions situated within and beyond militarized border zones.

Methodology: -

This research employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology, grounded in the analysis of secondary data. The approach focuses on systematically collecting, organizing, and thematically interpreting data from publicly accessible and credible sources to understand the broader dynamics of borderland security and the implications of the 2025 Pahalgam attack. The methodology is structured around the following components:

1. Data Collection

The study draws upon a diverse array of secondary sources to build a comprehensive analytical base:

- Government Publications: Annual reports from the Ministry of Home Affairs (2023–2025), official statements, policy documents, and press briefings from security agencies.
- Academic Research: Peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books focusing on border security, insurgent strategies, hybrid warfare, and critical geopolitical perspectives.
- Think-Tank Reports: Analytical reports and commentaries from institutions such as the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), and Carnegie India, which provide policy-oriented insights.
- Media Sources: News stories, editorials, and investigative pieces from reputable outlets including The Hindu, Indian Express, The Wire, BBC, and Al Jazeera, offering real-time perspectives and ground-level reporting.

Terrorism Databases: Statistical and incident-based data drawn from the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to contextualize the Pahalgam attack within broader patterns of militancy.

2. Thematic Analysis

Collected data were systematically coded and categorized under recurring themes such as "militarization and its civilian impact," "security infrastructure and vulnerabilities," and "blurring boundaries between internal and external threats." This thematic classification enabled the identification of patterns, contradictions, and emerging trends in insurgent activities and state responses.

3. Critical Interpretation

The findings were interpreted through the lens of critical geopolitical and security studies frameworks. This allowed for an examination of how state narratives on security and development intersect—and often conflict—with insurgent strategies and local spatial realities. Emphasis was placed on understanding the symbolic and strategic dimensions of the Pahalgam attack in relation to broader questions of governance, control, and resistance in India's borderlands.
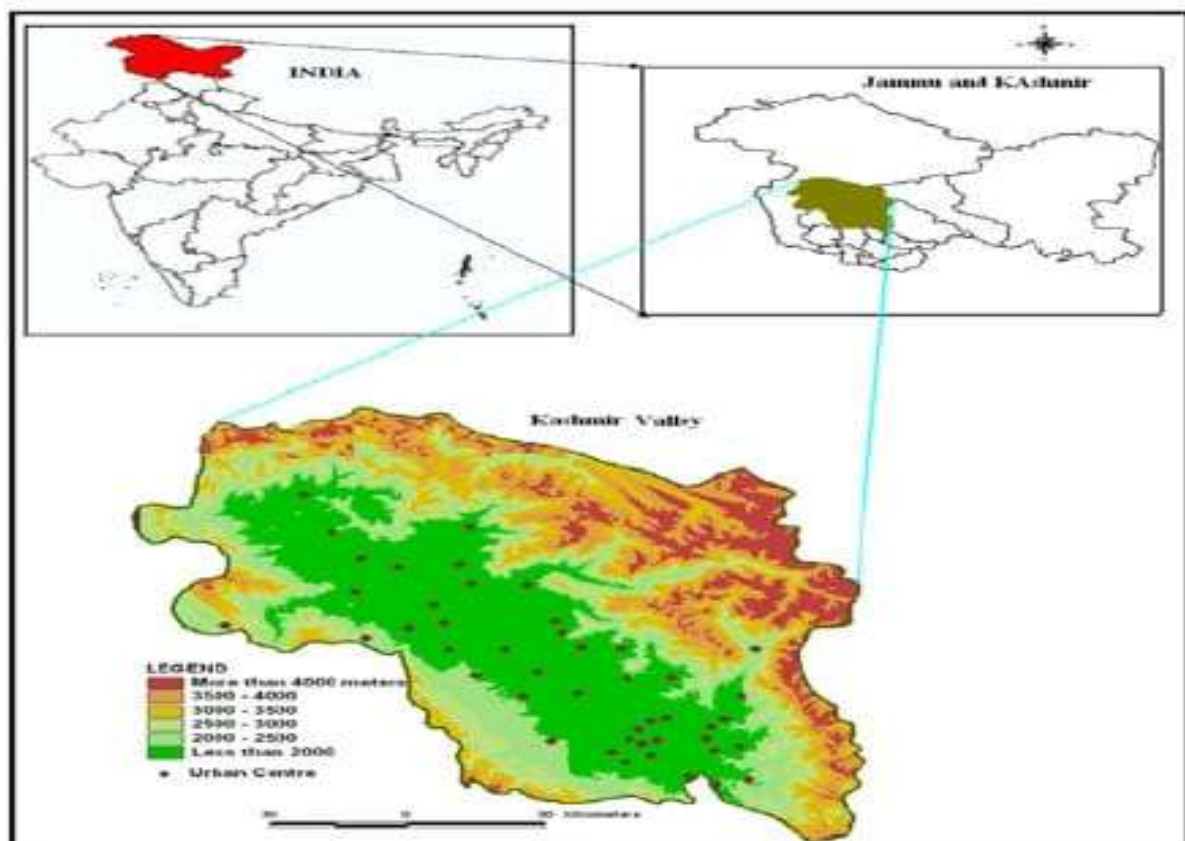
Theoretical Framework: -

This research is anchored in critical geopolitics, drawing from Gearóid Ó Tuathail's assertion in Critical Geopolitics (1996) that "geopolitical reasoning is a cultural and political practice through which elites define spaces of danger and protection." Applying this framework reveals how the Indian state narrates Kashmir as a space of both integration and threat containment.

Equally integral is the theory of securitization by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (1998), who argue that "security is a speech act" in which issues are framed as existential threats to legitimize extraordinary measures. The framing of Pahalgam as a peace zone before the attack, and its rapid reclassification afterward, is a textbook case of such discursive shifts.

Derek Gregory's concept of the "everywhere war" (The Colonial Present, 2004) is employed to understand how conflicts today transcend borders and infiltrate civilian life. He writes, "War is no longer confined to battlefields; it seeps into everyday life, manifesting in checkpoints, surveillance, and sudden violence." The Pahalgam attack exemplifies this fluidity.

Locational Analysis: -

Source: ResearchGate- Altitude Zonation of Kashmir Valley

Topographical Map of Pahalgam and Surrounding Aeras: -

Source: Topographical map of Pahalgam.

Detailed Map of Pahalgam Town: -

Source: Pahalgam City map- Maps of India

1. Findings and Discussion: -

The 2025 Pahalgam attack exposed more than just an operational lapse; it highlighted fundamental shortcomings in India's broader security approach, particularly in how it conceptualizes and manages threats in its borderland regions.

1.1. Evolution of Hybrid Militancy and Shifting Conflict Zones

The attack signifies a strategic evolution in militant tactics. Unlike conventional cross-border infiltrations near the Line of Control, this assault was executed deep within a civilian zone long considered secure. By targeting an area associated with peace and tourism, militants disrupted the constructed narrative of normalcy and revealed how insurgency is no longer confined to peripheral areas. The symbolic choice of Pahalgam—frequented by tourists and celebrated as a development success—demonstrates an intent to instil fear while undermining confidence in state-led peacebuilding.

1.2. Infrastructural Gaps and Institutional Coordination Failures

Despite the deployment of modern surveillance tools like CCTVs and drones, the security apparatus failed to translate intelligence into timely action. The existence of prior warnings, reportedly unheeded or poorly coordinated across agencies, reflects a structural disconnect between intelligence gathering and ground-level response. This fragmentation indicates not just resource constraints but also institutional inertia, where multiple agencies operate in silos rather than through integrated frameworks.

1.3. Fragility of Developmental Symbolism

Pahalgam had been positioned as a symbol of the government's post-Article 370 development push, meant to showcase peace, investment, and reintegration in Kashmir. The attack disrupted this narrative by transforming a beacon of stability into a site of vulnerability. Militants appear to have deliberately targeted this high-profile location to sabotage the very idea that tourism and economic activity can coexist with unresolved political tensions. In doing so, they turned development into a strategic liability.

1.4. Limitations of a Centralized Security Model

The event also laid bare the insufficiency of centralized, militarized approaches in dealing with localized, dynamic threats. Traditional security strategies that rely on top-down control mechanisms are ill-equipped to detect and deter fluid, asymmetric attacks. What is needed is a more decentralized approach—one that fosters local intelligence networks, community trust, and grassroots vigilance. These localized systems can offer early warning signals that centralized agencies often miss.

1.5. Political Messaging and Narrative Control Post-Attack

In the aftermath, official narratives focused largely on attributing blame to external actors, without a parallel introspection into systemic failures. This emphasis on image preservation over institutional accountability weakens long-term security readiness. By sidelining critical inquiry, the state risks repeating the same vulnerabilities under the guise of narrative control.

In conclusion, the Pahalgam attack should not be viewed merely as an isolated breach but as a complex and multi-dimensional event. It reveals how security in India's borderlands must be redefined—not simply as the prevention of incursions, but as the capacity to secure the socio-political and symbolic spaces that insurgents increasingly target. A reimagined, inclusive, and community-based security model is essential for addressing the evolving nature of threats in post-conflict regions like Kashmir.

2. Findings and Discussions (Investigate the strategic implementations of the 2025 Pahalgam attack in the context of India's Borderland security policies): -

The 2025 attack in Pahalgam has prompted a critical rethinking of India's approach to borderland security.

While existing frameworks—such as the Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS), the Border Area Development Programme (BADP), and the "One Border One Force" policy— represent important milestones in India's border security architecture, the incident has revealed their limitations in responding to the evolving nature of cross-border and internal threats.

2.1. Rethinking CIBMS Beyond Surveillance

The CIBMS, largely reliant on electronic surveillance and fencing, must evolve into a more predictive and terrain-sensitive system. Future iterations should incorporate artificial intelligence, spatial analytics, and early warning systems tailored to regional topographies and threat patterns. Given that insurgents increasingly exploit terrain complexity to bypass monitored zones, high-altitude civilian areas like Pahalgam must be prioritized for enhanced technological integration. Extending coverage to these vulnerable regions could significantly reduce blind spots and improve early threat detection.

2.2. Overcoming Institutional Silos: Enhancing Force Coordination

The "One Border One Force" doctrine, while aimed at jurisdictional clarity, continues to suffer from a lack of seamless coordination among security forces. The Pahalgam incident underscores the need for an integrated operational framework. Instead of a compartmentalized approach, a unified command structure that brings together the armed forces, paramilitary units, and local police is essential. Joint training exercises, interoperable communication systems, and shared command protocols would foster better coordination and quicker response times in crisis scenarios.

2.3. Intelligence Architecture: Moving Towards Regional Fusion Centres

One of the most glaring gaps exposed by the attack was in intelligence sharing and response. Delays in acting on threat inputs highlight a fragmented system. To address this, India must establish decentralized Regional Intelligence Fusion Centres (RIFCs). These hubs would enable real-time information processing at the local level, closer to potential conflict zones. Collaborating with geospatial experts and using ground-level inputs, these centres can produce dynamic threat assessments that evolve with changing conditions.

2.4. Embedding Communities in Security Frameworks

Current development initiatives under BADP largely overlook the potential of civilian involvement in security. To bridge this gap, community-based security models should be formalized. Village Defence Guards (VDGs), equipped with mobile apps for real-time incident reporting and GPS-tagged surveillance logs, can act as the first line of detection. These groups must be backed by legal safeguards and financial incentives to ensure sustainable civilian engagement in security operations.

2.5. From Reactive to Preventive Security Doctrine

India's borderland policy must undergo a conceptual shift from reaction-based defence to proactive threat management. This includes deploying highly specialized counter-infiltration teams with localized training in guerrilla tactics and psychological operations. These units would be stationed permanently in high-risk, unmapped areas with a dual focus on deterrence and reconnaissance. Their presence can serve as both a deterrent and a source of continuous intelligence.

2.6. Diplomatic Engagement and Multilateral Intelligence Coalitions

While cross-border tensions often result in reactive diplomatic measures such as treaty suspensions, a longer-term solution lies in multilateral cooperation. India should strengthen regional intelligence-sharing mechanisms aimed at dismantling the funding and ideological channels that sustain militancy. Diplomatic resources must also support cross-border tracking of emerging technologies like drones and encrypted communication networks used by insurgent groups.

Conclusion: The attack on Pahalgam has laid bare the vulnerabilities of a system still rooted in rigid structures and outdated assumptions. India must transition to a more flexible, layered, and community-integrated security strategy. Policy responses should not only include technological upgrades and institutional reforms but also prioritize local engagement and multiscale coordination. By adopting such a comprehensive security framework, India can better protect its sensitive borderlands while promoting long-term peace and resilience.

The Disputed Area of Kashmir: -

Source: Library of Congress- disputed Area of Kashmir Map

3. Finding and discussions (Infrastructural, Institutional, and Operational Limitations in the Current Security Framework): -

The 2025 Pahalgam incident has laid bare several systemic weaknesses within India's current security apparatus, particularly in terms of infrastructure, institutional coordination, and on-the-ground operations. While border zones have been heavily fortified, internal regions, especially those perceived as peaceful or economically important, remain relatively vulnerable.

3.1. Infrastructural Gaps

The security infrastructure within interior spaces such as Pahalgam does not match the robustness seen along the Line of Control (LoC). While border villages are equipped with military installations, thermal sensors, and 24/7 surveillance, areas categorized as tourist or cultural hubs often lack the same level of strategic preparedness. These sites tend to rely on local police stations and limited patrol presence, leaving them exposed to high-impact threats. The assumption that economic zones are less likely to be targeted has led to a false sense of security and underinvestment in technological monitoring systems in these areas.

3.2. Institutional Fragmentation

One of the most pressing concerns is the lack of coordination between central security agencies and local

enforcement bodies. The chain of command in security response is often unclear, with overlapping responsibilities among the Ministry of Home Affairs, regional police units, and intelligence organizations. This siloed structure results in poor communication and delays in critical decision-making. During the Pahalgam attack, early threat inputs reportedly failed to translate into actionable intelligence due to bureaucratic hurdles and inefficient data relay systems.

3.3. Operational Shortcomings

The existing security strategy continues to be more reactive than preventive. Despite credible warnings and heightened regional tensions, security protocols in Pahalgam were not significantly reinforced ahead of the tourist season. This points to an operational mindset that is still anchored in conventional threat perception—one that prioritizes border infiltration over internal disruption. The adaptive strategies of modern militant groups, who blend symbolic targeting with guerrilla tactics, demand a more agile and anticipatory operational model. However, standard operating procedures have not evolved to meet these challenges.

Conclusion: The Pahalgam attack demonstrates that India's current security framework requires an urgent overhaul. Infrastructure must be expanded beyond border areas to include internal zones of strategic significance. Institutionally, there is a need for synchronized command and data-sharing mechanisms across all tiers of government and law enforcement. Operationally, a shift toward proactive risk mitigation—grounded in real-time intelligence and adaptable strategies—is critical. Without addressing these foundational issues, even heavily fortified states may find themselves unprepared for the new face of asymmetric conflict.

4. Findings and Discussions (Assess how hybrid militancy bypasses traditional border defence):

The Pahalgam attack offers a stark example of how hybrid militancy can outmanoeuvre traditional border-centric security mechanisms. Unlike conventional militant operations that emphasize cross-border infiltration and direct engagements with military forces, hybrid militancy relies on a blend of asymmetric tactics—including local recruitment, social manipulation, and symbolic targeting. It moves fluidly across spatial and strategic dimensions, exploiting both physical gaps in infrastructure and cognitive blind spots in national security thinking. In this specific case, attackers did not attempt to breach fortified borders. Instead, they leveraged local networks and exploited areas perceived as non-threatening, such as tourist destinations and civilian hubs. The choice of Pahalgam—a place associated with peace, pilgrimage, and development—was calculated to both inflict material damage and symbolically challenge India's projection of stability in the Kashmir Valley. This shift away from border confrontations to targeting the hinterland suggests a redefinition of conflict geography by militant actors. Traditional military frameworks, which prioritize fencing, surveillance, and armed deployment along boundary lines, are insufficient against such elusive and multi-layered threats. Hybrid militancy adapts quickly, making use of digital coordination, community anonymity, and socio-political grievances to execute low-cost, high-impact attacks. As a result, India's current security design must pivot towards intelligence-led, decentralized, and community-informed strategies that can pre-emptively detect and disrupt such threats before they materialize.

5. Findings and Discussions (Analyze the implications of soft target attacks on the local population and tourism economy in Pahalgam): -

The targeting of soft civilian spaces like Pahalgam reveals the strategic intent behind hybrid militant oper-

ations: to create widespread disruption with minimal direct confrontation. The 2025 attack on tourists in this high-profile region was not merely an act of violence; it was an effort to destabilize both the economic base and symbolic narrative surrounding Kashmir's reintegration and normalization.

Economically, the aftermath was severe. As news of the attack spread, tourism—the lifeblood of Pahalgam's economy—collapsed almost overnight. Hotel reservations were cancelled en masse, pilgrimage routes were suspended, and international travel advisories discouraged visits to the region. With tourism-linked employment forming a substantial part of local livelihoods—ranging from hotel workers and guides to transport operators and small vendors—entire communities faced abrupt income loss and heightened financial insecurity.

Psychologically, the impact was equally profound. Residents who had begun to place trust in the state's assurances of peace and economic development felt betrayed. A renewed sense of fear and anxiety emerged, weakening the fragile relationship between the state and the local population. Instead of serving as a symbol of peace and prosperity, Pahalgam became a reminder of vulnerability and instability.

Strategically, these attacks undermine long-term governance efforts. By disrupting regions that have been positioned as success stories of post-Article 370 integration, insurgents aim to delegitimize state-led narratives and foster disillusionment among local populations. This tactic not only causes immediate harm but also sows the seeds of future unrest by destabilizing the social and economic foundations of affected communities.

6. Findings and Discussions (Evaluate the responsiveness and adaptability of local security forces during and after the Pahalgam incident): -

The 2025 attack in Pahalgam exposed notable deficiencies in the speed and flexibility of local security forces' responses. Although intelligence agencies had flagged a rise in militant activity in South Kashmir beforehand, coordination among local police, central paramilitary units, and intelligence bodies was insufficient and fragmented. During the assault, delays in the arrival of backup forces and confusion over command jurisdiction hindered an effective and timely tactical response. Post-attack investigations uncovered those local forces had not undergone adequate simulation exercises tailored to managing large-scale attacks targeting civilians. Additionally, the absence of a unified crisis communication plan exacerbated the situation, leading to misinformation, widespread panic among tourists, and a temporary communication blackout that slowed emergency efforts. While the security forces took reactive measures after the incident, these lacked systemic changes such as revised patrolling strategies or enhanced surveillance in key civilian zones away from the borders. This episode highlighted a gap: although India's security apparatus is proficient in handling conventional border conflicts, it remains underprepared for unpredictable, asymmetric threats occurring within civilian spaces of symbolic importance. The inability to swiftly transition from traditional defence tactics to a more dynamic, urban counterterrorism approach underscores the urgent need for reforms in operational doctrines and improved collaboration across agencies.

7. Findings and Discussions (Propose a multi-scalar, community engaged security framework for vulnerable regions): -

The terrorist attack in Pahalgam underscored significant security weaknesses in regions heavily reliant on tourism, emphasizing the necessity for a comprehensive, multi-tiered security framework that actively involves the local community. This framework should function effectively at local, regional, and national

levels, blending grassroots participation with coordinated institutional efforts. At the local level, empowering community members—including residents, entrepreneurs, and leaders—to engage in surveillance, early warning mechanisms, and security education can capitalize on their unique familiarity with the area, enabling quicker threat detection and reporting. At the regional scale, strengthened collaboration among state police, paramilitary forces, and administrative agencies is critical to ensure rapid and efficient responses as well as resource sharing. On the national stage, intelligence agencies must enhance information exchange to better predict and prevent attacks. Central to this strategy is meaningful engagement with local communities, fostering mutual trust between civilians and security forces, which is essential for cultivating a shared commitment to public safety.

Conclusion: -

The 2025 Pahalgam attack stands as more than a tragic incident; it serves as a revealing case study that exposes the vulnerabilities inherent in India's internal security framework, particularly within sensitive borderland zones. Historically, the state has prioritized militarization and border security, yet this focus has unintentionally created security blind spots in civilian areas. The emergence of hybrid militancy exploits these gaps by targeting soft, symbolic locations like tourist destinations and pilgrimage sites, aiming to undermine public confidence and disrupt the narrative of peace and development. In regions like Pahalgam, where tourism symbolizes post-conflict recovery, such attacks have far-reaching impacts on local economies and societal trust in state protection. The delayed and fragmented response from local security forces further highlights the critical need for enhanced inter-agency coordination, localized intelligence gathering, and flexible operational tactics.

Ultimately, the Pahalgam incident reveals the limitations of a security approach cantered solely on border defence. India's internal security strategy must evolve into a multi-layered, integrated model that is sensitive to spatial dynamics, technologically adept, and deeply rooted in social engagement. Only through such a holistic framework can resilient security be established not just along the nation's borders, but within its most vulnerable internal communities.

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