

India–Pakistan Tensions in the Wake of the Pahalgam Attack (2025): New Patterns of Proxy Conflict?

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Abstract

The April 2025 attack in Pahalgam, which killed 26 civilians in Kashmir, was a big step up in the tensions between India and Pakistan. It showed how proxy wars are changing in South Asia. This paper looks at the strategic, political, and regional effects of the attack. It shows how this event connects with past situations but also shows new trends in cross-border fighting and how governments are responding. India quickly blamed Pakistan-based groups and started Operation Sindoor, which shows a shift from just fighting terrorism to using military force as a warning. At the same time, groups like The Resistance Front and the use of fake information online, along with mixed political messages, show that proxy wars are getting more complicated and spread out. The paper also looks at how other countries like the United States and China are helping to calm things down. It also talks about how long-standing agreements between India and Pakistan, like the Indus Waters Treaty and the Simla Agreement, are becoming weaker. The study says that although the Pahalgam crisis is based on old rivalries in the region, it marks a new kind of proxy war that uses different methods, includes fighting with stories and information, and is hard to manage during crises. The paper ends with suggestions for policies that can help keep the region stable and stop future conflicts from getting worse.

Keywords: Pahalgam Attack, India–Pakistan Relations, Proxy Warfare, Operation Sindoor, The Resistance Front, Hybrid Conflict, Disinformation, Strategic Stability, Indus Waters Treaty, Simla Agreement, Crisis Management, Proxy War

1. Introduction:

On April 22, 2025, a group of armed attackers carried out a deadly attack in the Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam, killing 26 tourists, most of whom were Hindus, and injuring many others. Both India and international experts called this one of the worst attacks on civilians in Indian-administered Kashmir since 2008. At first, the attackers claimed responsibility for the attack, saying they were part of The Resistance Front, a group that is widely believed to be connected to Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba. However, this claim was later withdrawn, with some suggesting that the group might have been influenced by a cyber attack or decided to pull back. India accused Pakistan-based militant groups and launched a broad campaign of retaliation. Pakistan denied any involvement and asked for an independent international investigation, criticizing India's actions as being too aggressive.

2. Historical Continuities: From Pulwama and Balakot to Pahalgam

2.1 Previous Proxy Warfare Episodes

The pattern of India and Pakistan using each other's militants has been going on for a long time. The Uri attack in 2016 was blamed on Jaish-e-Mohammed. India responded with a special operation inside Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The Pulwama suicide bombing in February 2019 killed 40 security personnel. India responded with airstrikes on LeT training camps in Balakot, and Pakistan carried out its own aerial attacks in return. These attacks all involved Pakistan-linked militant groups carrying out major acts of violence, followed by carefully planned responses from India.

2.2 Pahalgam: Continuity or Break?

The TRF, founded post-2019, is seen as a splinter of LeT, active in recruiting and targeting civilians, especially minorities in Kashmir. Analysts note a spike in insurgent violence in 2024 onwards—with 58 incidents and rising civilian and security casualties. In this sense, Pahalgam fits within an established proxy-based escalation trajectory.

3. The Attack, Attribution, and Strategic Ambiguity

3.1 The Attribution Puzzle

India swiftly identified the attackers as Pakistani nationals tied to LeT, citing ballistic evidence, voter IDs, and witness testimony; subsequent security operations killed three suspects in Operation Mahadev. Home Minister Amit Shah confirmed this in Parliament. However, Congress leader P. Chidambaram raised the possibility of a “home-grown” militant involvement, challenging the cross-border attribution and generating political controversy.

3.2 Proxy or Inside Job?

Such ambiguity in attribution reflects evolving tactics: proxy groups may now operate with distributed, cloud-based leadership, obfuscating direct Pakistani command. The initial claim-and-withdraw pattern also raises questions of cyber manipulation or a staged responsibility claim by TRF, bolstering plausible deniability.

This pattern suggests a more compartmentalized proxy environment, where state-linked proxies operate semi-autonomously, complicating attribution and escalation control.

4. India's Response: From Tactical to Strategic Escalation

4.1 Operation Sindoor

On May 7, 2025, India launched Operation Sindoor—conventional missile and air strikes across the LoC into Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir—focusing on sites tied to LeT/JeM leadership and infrastructure. Analysts considered this the most extensive such operation in over five decades, signaling a shift to more assertive doctrinal posture. Security experts like Dr. Walter Ladwig (King's College London) regard Operation Sindoor as a new baseline in India's global counterterrorism posture, showcasing a willingness for punitive, cross-border escalation even without a full-scale war designation.

4.2 Integrated Deterrence and Diplomacy

India complemented its military response with secondary coercive tools: Suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, altering water-sharing and threatening to withhold hydrological data. Closure of the Simla Agreement (Indian diplomatic framing), expulsion of Pakistani advisers, suspension of trade, visa bans, and degraded border engagements. Nationwide civil defense drills (Operation Abhyaas) on May 7 in 244 districts to signal internal readiness and societal resilience. This multi-domain strategy reflects a shift to

structured convoluted deterrence, raising the costs of future proxy-led attacks through military, diplomatic, and economic levers. Accounts, reflects how information warfare and terror narratives are central battlegrounds—a new frontier in proxy conflict.

5. Escalation, Ceasefire, and Great Power Involvement

5.1 Military Actions and Talks

After India carried out strikes, Pakistan started Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos and there were back-and-forth missile and drone attacks until a ceasefire was reached on May 10.

This ceasefire was helped along by the United States. India later said the conflict was over because they had reached their goals, and they denied that the U. S. pressured them to end it at that time.

5.2 Outside Influence

The U.S. was publicly thanked by Pakistan for helping to bring about the ceasefire. India, on the other hand, said they weren't giving in to outside pressure. China, however, stayed quiet during the crisis. Their attitude showed they were keeping their options open. Experts think this silence might be China testing if they would support Pakistan without limits or if they would stay neutral. Pakistan, who is getting more involved with both the U.S. and China, still depends on outside help to deal with pressure from India. These events show that big countries are still deeply involved, even though India still doesn't want help from others in dealing with the Kashmir issue.

6. Are These Conflicts New or Just Changed?

6.1 More Complex and Uncertain

The Pahalgam incident shows a trend: militants acting as proxies with a lot of uncertainty. There's not clear proof of who was responsible, initial claims are later retracted, there's plausible deniability, and there's also use of the internet to influence public opinion. These tactics are new ways of using proxy conflicts.

6.2 Lowering the Threshold for Action

When India describes attacks like Pahalgam as acts of war rather than just terrorism, they are changing what's considered a reason for a foreign response. Indian military thinking includes the idea that future attacks could lead to limited but strong actions across the border.

6.3 Using the Internet and Information

The confusing blame game around the attack, along with India blocking thousands of social media accounts, shows that fighting over information and controlling narratives is now a key part of proxy conflicts.

This is a new area of conflict that's becoming more important.

7. Domestic Politics and Contestation

7.1 Government Position

Prime Minister Modi and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh kept saying that the military was successful and refused to admit that foreign help made the ceasefire happen. Modi pointed out that almost 1,000 Pakistani missiles and drones were stopped, showing that India is ready and can act on its own.

7.2 Opposition & Critique

Leaders from the opposition and Congress, like P.

Chidambaram and Rahul Gandhi, raised questions about the government's story: Rahul Gandhi said that India might have limited its actions for political reasons and worried about the growing partnership

between China and Pakistan. P. Chidambaram's idea that local forces might have been involved led to more public discussion about who is really responsible. These discussions show how stories about conflicts can become political issues within a country, affecting national unity and the support for foreign policy decisions.

8. Regional and Global Implications

8.1 South Asian Strategic Stability

The Pahalgam situation shows how unstable the risk environment can be, where proxy terrorism, quick responses, and escalation according to rules can bring two nuclear countries close to war. Unlike past events, the use of missiles and drones adds a new technology-based element to this competition.

8.2 Role of Institutions

Stopping treaties like the Indus Waters Treaty, the Simla Agreement, and closing airspace and trade routes shakes the structures that have helped prevent full-scale war in the past.

8.3 International Trends

The confusion about who is responsible, the interference in how stories are told, and controlled retaliation may set new standards for how proxy conflicts are handled. These developments offer lessons for counterterrorism and regional deterrence not just in South Asia, but around the world.

9. Toward De-escalation: Policy Recommendations

1. Independent investigation into Pahalgam attribution to reinforce credibility and prevent politicized narratives.
2. Confidence-building measures across the LoC to re-establish space for crisis management and military transparency.
3. Resumption or renegotiation of treaties like Indus Waters, with conditional oversight, to revive institutional constraints.
4. Regional dialogues, possibly involving neutral regional powers, focused on norms limiting escalation and proxy launching.
5. Strengthening oversight of surveillance policies in Kashmir to balance security and civil liberties, especially after media blockages post-attack .

10. Conclusion

The Pahalgam attack and its aftermath reinforce historical patterns of cross-LoC proxy conflict, but with evolving features: ambiguity in attribution, digital disinformation, calibrated punishment doctrine, and multipronged deterrence. India's assertive response—Operation Sindoor and integrated policy coercion—is emblematic of a new, systemic deterrence posture that treats proxy attacks as acts of war. At the same time, domestic contestation and international tensions show how intertwined strategic decisions and narrative politics remain.

Though old dynamics persist, Pahalgam marks a more complex and layered phase of proxy conflict in South Asia—one where national narratives, technological domains, and multilateral pressures increasingly intersect. Managing such escalatory pressures requires rebuilding trust mechanisms, reinforcing institutions, and investing in narrative transparency as much as military readiness.

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