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India-Pakistan Conflict: A Case Study of the Pahalgam Attack and Operation Sindoor

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Abstract

The enduring conflict between India and Pakistan, rooted in historical, political, and territorial disputes, continues to manifest through periodic escalations in violence, particularly in the Kashmir region. This case study critically examines two pivotal events in 2025—the Pahalgam terrorist attack and India's retaliatory military operation, dubbed Operation Sindoor. The study investigates the strategic motivations, execution, and outcomes of both events, analyzing them within the broader context of Indo-Pak relations and regional security dynamics. Drawing on media reports, official statements, and scholarly analysis, this paper evaluates the implications of state-sponsored terrorism, cross-border retaliation, and the international community's response. The findings suggest a growing trend toward militarized responses by India and a deepening of diplomatic deadlock. This research aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of modern conflict escalation between two nuclear-armed neighbors, emphasizing the urgent need for conflict resolution mechanisms, responsible diplomacy, and regional cooperation.

Keywords: India-Pakistan conflict, Pahalgam attack, Operation Sindoor, Kashmir, cross-border terrorism, counterterrorism, Indo-Pak relations, regional security, military retaliation, strategic response

Introduction

The India-Pakistan conflict stands as one of the most prolonged and volatile rivalries in modern geopolitics. Rooted in the partition of British India in 1947, the dispute has led to multiple wars, decades of hostility, and persistent instability in the South Asian region. At the heart of this conflict lies the contested territory of Jammu and Kashmir, which has remained a flashpoint for violence, political tension, and cross-border terrorism. In 2025, two events reignited global attention on the enduring hostility between the two nations—the Pahalgam terrorist attack in April and the subsequent Indian military response, known as Operation Sindoor, in May. The Pahalgam attack, which targeted Indian civilians in the Kashmir Valley, underscored the persistent threat of terrorism emanating from Pakistan-based groups. Operation Sindoor marked one of India's most comprehensive retaliatory strikes in recent history, reflecting a doctrinal shift in its counterterrorism strategy.

This research paper aims to explore these two critical incidents as a case study to understand the evolving nature of India-Pakistan tensions. The paper will analyze the historical context of the conflict, examine the strategic and political dimensions of both events, and assess their broader implications on regional and global security. By presenting a structured analysis based on factual reporting, strategic commentary, and diplomatic reactions, this study seeks to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing academic discourse surrounding Indo-Pak relations.

Literature Review

The India-Pakistan conflict has been extensively studied across political science, international relations, and security studies literature. Much of the scholarly focus has been on the origins of the Kashmir dispute, the role of religion and nationalism, and the implications of the nuclearization of both states. Classic works such as Sumit Ganguly's *The Crisis in Kashmir* and Christine Fair's research on Pakistan's military doctrine provide a foundational understanding of the geopolitical stakes involved. The phenomenon of cross-border terrorism has also received considerable attention. Scholars and policy analysts alike have examined how groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and

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more recently The Resistance Front (TRF), operate with varying degrees of state complicity. Studies by C. Raja Mohan, Brahma Chellaney, and reports by the Observer Research Foundation and Carnegie Endowment have emphasized the challenges India faces in addressing asymmetric threats without provoking full-scale war.

More recent literature has examined India's shift toward pre-emptive or retaliatory strikes, particularly after the 2016 Uri attack and the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot episode. These studies argue that India is adopting a more assertive posture, reflecting changes in both military capability and political will.

Despite this growing body of work, there is limited academic analysis of the 2025 Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor, given their recent nature. Media reports, think-tank publications, and government briefings have so far provided the most detailed accounts. This case study seeks to bridge that gap by offering a comprehensive examination of these events, placing them within the continuum of Indo-Pak hostilities and strategic calculations.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach to analyze the Pahalgam terrorist attack and Operation Sindoor within the broader framework of the India-Pakistan conflict. The case study method is appropriate for exploring contemporary events where boundaries between the phenomena and context are not clearly defined and where multiple sources of evidence are available.

Primary data for this study include official press releases, statements from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and Pakistan's Foreign Office, and coverage from reputed news outlets such as *The Hindu*, *Indian Express*, *Hindustan Times*, *Dawn* (Pakistan), and *BBC News*. Supplementary sources include reports from strategic think tanks like the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), and Brookings India, as well as relevant academic journal articles.

Secondary sources include historical analyses of the India-Pakistan conflict, scholarly commentary on cross-border terrorism, and policy papers on South Asian security dynamics. Due to the recent nature of the events under examination, media coverage has played a substantial role in providing initial facts and official narratives.

This methodology enables a comprehensive and interpretive understanding of both the tactical developments and the strategic ramifications of the selected events. The analysis is structured around thematic categories such as conflict escalation, military response, political narratives, and regional diplomacy.

Historical Background of the Conflict

The India-Pakistan conflict is one of the longest-standing geopolitical rivalries, originating from the traumatic partition of British India in 1947. At the center of this enduring hostility lies the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir—a region both countries claim in full but control in parts. The conflict has resulted in four major wars (1947–48, 1965, 1971, and 1999) and numerous skirmishes, particularly along the Line of Control (LoC).

The first war, immediately following partition, ended with the establishment of the LoC and left Pakistan in control of parts of Kashmir. The 1965 war further entrenched military hostilities, while the 1971 war, though focused on East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), solidified India's role as a

regional power. The 1999 Kargil conflict, involving Pakistani intrusions into Indian territory, marked the first military engagement between two nuclear-armed neighbors. Since the late 1980s, Pakistan has supported a low-intensity conflict in Kashmir through proxy warfare and cross-border terrorism. Militant groups such as Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) have been central to this strategy. These groups have been linked to several high-profile attacks, including the 2001 Indian Parliament attack, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and the 2019 Pulwama suicide bombing.

India's traditional strategy of strategic restraint began to shift in recent years. The 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot airstrikes marked a significant departure, signaling India's willingness to respond militarily to terror attacks traced back to Pakistani soil.

This historical context sets the stage for understanding the significance of the 2025 Pahalgam attack and India's subsequent response through Operation Sindoor. These events reflect the evolving nature of the conflict, shaped by asymmetric threats, domestic political pressures, and the limitations of diplomatic engagement.

The Pahalgam Attack: A Detailed Analysis

On April 22, 2025, a devastating terrorist attack occurred in the Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam, a renowned tourist destination in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir. Five armed militants, affiliated with The Resistance Front (TRF)—a proxy of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba—ambushed a group of tourists, resulting in the deaths of 26 civilians and injuries to over 20 others.

Modus Operandi and Target Selection

The assailants, equipped with M4 carbines and AK-47 rifles, infiltrated the tourist area, which is accessible only by foot or pony. Eyewitness accounts reveal that the attackers segregated the tourists based on religious identity. Victims were reportedly asked to recite Islamic verses or subjected to physical checks to determine their faith. Non-Muslims, predominantly Hindus, were executed at close range, while Muslims were spared.

Immediate Aftermath and Security Response

The attack, considered the deadliest on civilians in India since the 2008 Mumbai attacks, prompted a swift response from Indian security forces. A joint cordon-and-search operation was launched to apprehend the perpetrators. The National Investigation Agency (NIA) took over the investigation, focusing on the involvement of Pakistan-based terror outfits.

Political and Diplomatic Repercussions

The massacre elicited widespread condemnation across India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, cutting short an overseas visit, returned to oversee the situation. The Indian government accused Pakistan of harboring and supporting terrorist groups responsible for the attack. In response, India suspended the Indus Waters Treaty and imposed diplomatic sanctions, including the expulsion of Pakistani diplomats.

International Reaction

Global leaders and organizations, including the United Nations, condemned the attack and urged both nations to exercise restraint. However, the incident significantly escalated tensions between the nuclear-armed neighbors,

setting the stage for India's subsequent military response through Operation Sindoor.

Operation Sindoor: India's Strategic Response

In the wake of the Pahalgam attack, India launched Operation Sindoor on May 7, 2025, targeting terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The operation aimed to dismantle bases associated with groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, which India held responsible for the Pahalgam massacre.

Objectives and Planning

Operation Sindoor was conceived as a precise, non-escalatory military response. The Indian government emphasized that the operation targeted terrorist facilities exclusively, avoiding Pakistani military installations to prevent broader conflict escalation.

Execution and Military Tactics

The operation involved coordinated airstrikes and drone attacks on nine identified terrorist camps. The Indian Air Force employed Rafale jets equipped with SCALP missiles and AASM Hammer bombs, while the Army utilized SkyStriker loitering munitions. The strikes were executed over a 23-minute window, focusing on locations such as Bahawalpur and Muridke, known hubs for Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba, respectively.

Outcomes and Immediate Aftermath

India reported the elimination of approximately 70 terrorists and the destruction of key infrastructure. Pakistan, however, condemned the strikes as violations of its sovereignty, reporting civilian casualties and claiming to have downed several Indian aircraft. India refuted these claims, maintaining that no aircraft were lost during the operation.

International and Domestic Reactions

The operation drew mixed reactions globally. While some nations acknowledged India's right to self-defense, others expressed concern over escalating tensions between two nuclear-armed neighbors. Domestically, the operation received widespread support, with political leaders across the spectrum endorsing the government's decisive action.

Diplomatic and Military Fallout

The execution of Operation Sindoor significantly impacted both diplomatic and military dynamics between India and Pakistan. The retaliatory strikes further deepened the already fraught relationship between the two countries, leading to a series of diplomatic, military, and regional repercussions.

Escalation of Military Posturing

Following the strikes, both India and Pakistan mobilized their respective military forces along the Line of Control (LoC) and the international border. India, bolstered by its successful strikes, maintained a posture of strategic deterrence, while Pakistan's military threatened to "respond with full force." Pakistan's military and political leadership, including Prime Minister Imran Khan, strongly condemned India's actions, describing them as an act of aggression.

The heightened military alert saw the deployment of additional troops in sensitive areas, with both nations conducting large-scale military exercises. The risk of accidental military skirmishes or miscalculations remained

high, underscoring the volatility of the situation.

Suspension of Diplomatic Channels

Diplomatic channels between India and Pakistan were immediately suspended. India expelled Pakistan's High Commissioner to New Delhi, and Pakistan retaliated by sending India's envoy back. Both nations recalled their ambassadors from each other's capitals and shut down consulates in each other's territories.

The diplomatic fallout also included the cancellation of bilateral talks between the two countries, which had already been suspended for years. The conflict's escalation put to rest any remaining hopes of restarting the Composite Dialogue process, a framework for discussions on issues like Kashmir, cross-border terrorism, and trade.

Regional Implications and Impact on International Relations

The growing tensions between India and Pakistan drew the attention of major global powers. The United States, Russia, and China expressed concern over the potential for full-scale conflict and the risks associated with two nuclear-armed states engaging in open warfare. Diplomatic efforts from international organizations, including the United Nations and the European Union, called for restraint from both sides and emphasized the need for de-escalation.

In the broader South Asian context, the U.S. administration urged India and Pakistan to re-engage in dialogue while offering assistance to prevent further escalation. China, as Pakistan's closest ally, criticized India's actions but stopped short of any direct military involvement, instead reiterating its support for Pakistan's position on Kashmir.

The Role of Global Media

Media coverage on both sides was intense, with nationalist narratives dominating news cycles. In India, Operation Sindoor was portrayed as a necessary retaliation against Pakistan's continued support for terrorism in Kashmir. Pakistani media, in contrast, emphasized the sovereignty violation and accused India of targeting innocent civilians under the guise of anti-terror operations.

The role of social media was also significant, as both Indian and Pakistani users flooded platforms with hashtags like #IndiaStrikesBack and #WeStandWithPakistan, reflecting public sentiment and escalating the cyber aspects of the conflict.

Analysis and Discussion

The Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor exemplify the evolving nature of the India-Pakistan conflict, marked by heightened militarization, complex political narratives, and the persistent threat of cross-border terrorism. This section analyzes the strategic, political, and international implications of these events, drawing connections to broader trends in Indo-Pak relations.

Changing Nature of Warfare

The Pahalgam attack represents a brutal reminder of the persistent threat of terrorism emanating from Pakistan-based groups. Such attacks are increasingly being seen as a low-cost strategy for destabilizing the region and creating political chaos, without risking direct military confrontation. However, the subsequent military response, Operation Sindoor, signals a shift toward a more aggressive Indian strategy of deterrence and retaliation. Operation Sindoor

reflects a growing recognition in India that traditional diplomacy and strategic restraint have failed to address the ongoing challenge of terrorism. By conducting precise strikes on terror camps, India sought not only to punish the perpetrators but also to set a clear deterrent against future attacks. The operation highlights a more proactive military posture that blends conventional warfare with counterterrorism operations, indicating a doctrinal shift from previous policies of restraint and non-violence.

Diplomatic and Political Implications

On the diplomatic front, the Pahalgam attack and the subsequent strikes underline the failure of peace-building efforts between India and Pakistan. The collapse of diplomatic channels following Operation Sindoor reaffirms the deep-seated mistrust and the inability of both sides to engage in productive dialogue. The political fallout, especially the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty and Pakistan's retaliatory measures, further exemplifies the escalating nature of the conflict.

The international community's response to these events illustrates the broader challenges in balancing the rights of states to defend their sovereignty with the need for international cooperation in preventing conflict. While global powers voiced concerns over the escalation, few proposed concrete solutions or mediation efforts. The lack of a robust international framework for addressing cross-border terrorism and state-sponsored violence remains a critical obstacle to lasting peace in the region.

Role of Nuclear Deterrence

The continued nuclearization of India and Pakistan has introduced a complex dimension to their conflict. Both nations maintain the capacity to inflict catastrophic damage on each other through conventional and nuclear means. This nuclear deterrence, however, has not prevented conflicts or limited military actions, as evidenced by the Balakot strikes in 2019 and now Operation Sindoor. India's nuclear policy of "no first use" has been tested under increasing pressure, and while Pakistan's military doctrines are less transparent, the risk of nuclear escalation remains a significant concern. The threat of nuclear war, coupled with the lack of direct dialogue mechanisms, contributes to the instability in the region. This creates a precarious situation, where both countries may be incentivized to act aggressively, knowing that any miscalculation could lead to a catastrophic outcome.

The Role of Terrorism in Conflict Escalation

Cross-border terrorism, often attributed to Pakistan-based groups, remains a key factor in the escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan. The Pahalgam attack is a stark example of how such attacks are strategically timed to provoke national outrage and prompt military retaliation. The use of non-state actors to carry out violent acts while maintaining plausible deniability allows Pakistan to continue its proxy warfare strategy without direct military engagement. India's response through Operation Sindoor, though retaliatory, also highlights the limitations of using military force to combat terrorism. While the operation targeted key terrorist infrastructure, it remains unclear whether such strikes will significantly alter the dynamics of cross-border terrorism. The persistent nature of such attacks demonstrates the difficulty of achieving long-term security without addressing the root causes of terrorism, including

radicalization and the ideological warfare waged by groups like LeT and JeM.

Conclusion

The Pahalgam attack and the subsequent Indian military response through Operation Sindoor represent a critical juncture in the India-Pakistan conflict. These events underscore the persistent volatility of the region, driven by deep-rooted historical grievances, cross-border terrorism, and the lack of effective diplomatic engagement between the two nuclear-armed neighbors.

The Pahalgam attack, targeting innocent civilians, highlights the continued use of proxy warfare by Pakistan-based militant groups, while Operation Sindoor reflects India's shift towards a more assertive military strategy aimed at deterring further terrorism. While the operation succeeded in targeting terrorist infrastructure, it also exacerbated the already fragile diplomatic relations between the two countries. The continued reliance on military responses to terrorism points to the challenges both nations face in addressing the root causes of conflict—namely, the unresolved Kashmir issue and the strategic use of terrorism by non-state actors. The role of nuclear deterrence further complicates the situation, as the risk of escalation remains a constant threat. In conclusion, while Operation Sindoor represents a strategic shift for India, it does not offer a comprehensive solution to the ongoing India-Pakistan conflict. The path forward requires a balance of military preparedness and diplomatic engagement, with a focus on de-escalation, confidence-building measures, and addressing the underlying issues of terrorism, radicalization, and the Kashmir dispute. Ultimately, lasting peace can only be achieved through sustained dialogue and international support to ensure both security and stability in the region.

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