

# **PAHALGAM, OPERATION SINDOOR AND MARKA-E-HAQ:**

Understanding Pakistan-India Crisis  
(May 6-10, 2025)



**SCAN ME**

# PAHALGAM, SINDOOR, IRON WALL

## UNDERSTANDING PAKISTAN-INDIA CRISIS

With  
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### **Pahalgam, Operation Sindoor and Marka-e-Haq: Understanding Pakistan-India Crisis (May 6-10, 2025)**

*Question: As we know, the Pahalgam incident took place on 22nd April. It was an unfortunate event in which innocent lives were lost. However, the response to it has been equally unfortunate. How do you interpret India's rapid attribution of this incident to Pakistan?*

Doctrine is a cerebral concept while the current environment and standoff are visceral. The Indo-Pak standoff lies between these visceral and cerebral dimensions. This standoff is a consequence of India's recent strategic thinking, which has been hijacked by ideology. That ideology believes in domination that springs from the primeval baser instinct, which the Greeks identified as one of the seven deadly sins, i.e. hubris. For some strange reason, the BJP leadership is gripped by a hate-driven, RSS-backed Hindutva ideology, rooted in exclusivism. It thrives on megalomania, is misanthropic, and looks down upon other nations and minorities. It seeks to cleanse India

of all influences other than its brand of religiously driven Hindutva.

Whenever elections approach, tensions are ratcheted up, often relying on communal riots. Elections in Bihar are around the corner, followed by those in West Bengal and Karnataka. India is gripped by a perpetual anti-minority mania, driven by an ideological mindset that continuously fuels a hate narrative. It becomes a small step to externalise it once that hate narrative is internalised.

Kashmir, an international dispute, lies at the heart of India-Pakistan differences and animus. The same ideological narrative drives Indian policy in Kashmir. India has practically annexed Kashmir, and following the annexation, it has sought to consolidate its chokehold by eliminating the last vestiges of Kashmiri identity by dispossessing them, seizing property, altering demographics, and instituting political and administrative changes that give non-subject Kashmiris a greater say

and role in Kashmir's politics and society. This is the big game out of which springs the motive. This broader agenda forms the motive behind the current standoff.

The motive of this standoff which appears quite surreal to any rational mind because seeking conventional war space in a nuclear overhang—between two nuclear powers with well-defined red lines and established nuclear deterrence and clear nuclear doctrines—borders on insanity. But is there a method to this madness? To my reckoning, yes. That method seeks greater glory for their regional agenda of complete domination, winning the elections, and the achievement of concrete objectives. One such objective was to walk out of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT). India was looking for a *casus belli*—a major event, a black swan, or something like the Pahalgam incident—which could provide plausible deniability while attempting to claim the moral high ground, which it had lost.

The second motive was to intensify their stranglehold over Kashmir and initiate a fresh wave of repression. In 2019, Article 370 was revoked. Now, properties are in flux; Kashmiri houses are being demolished, leases cancelled, and over 2,000 Kashmiris have been incarcerated since the Pahalgam incident. Indian occupation forces are trying to dispossess them and a new wave of repression appears imminent.

A third motive was to keep Pakistan destabilised. The country had begun to show signs of economic recovery—its credit ratings were improving, and macroeconomic indicators were stabilising. India sought to embroil Pakistan in a self-enervating internal and external conflict. Internally, this was pursued through proxies such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which Pakistan had started countering effectively. To ease the operational space for these proxies, India resorted to this act to place Pakistan under a nutcracker-like, two-

front war—destabilising it and compelling it to approach India from a position of weakness, ultimately accepting Indian diktat and hegemony.

*Question: Many reports have linked the Jaffer Express incident to Indian involvement, particularly through RAW, considering the financial support traced to BLA. So, the escalation we're witnessing did not begin with the Pahalgam incident; it had already started earlier.*

*Given India's actions post-Uri and Balakot, do you see this latest episode as part of a new escalation ladder? And is Pakistan's current deterrence framework still effective in dissuading the adversary?*

It began with the Jaffer Express, and I am a strong believer in the first-cause hypothesis: one must identify the root cause to understand the effect. Reflexive control was a strategy enacted by a global power to dismember another, involving it in a costly arms race and internal destabilisation. India now appears to be following the same playbook.

India believes, in its hubris, that it is now too large to face a serious response from Pakistan. It seeks indirect control through proxy warfare and destabilisation. Ajit Doval, their current National Security Adviser and former RAW chief, has publicly stated India's intention to pursue an "offensive-defence" doctrine. In one of his university lectures, he remarked that India would "bleed Pakistan through a thousand cuts." That is their strategy.

The nuclear equation involves understanding the evolution of nuclear strategy and the core concepts that now form the warp and woof of nuclear doctrine, before focusing specifically on the subcontinental context.

The nuclear strategy was originally conceived to prevent wars. It was designed to intimidate through the threat of massive retaliation—first

developed during Eisenhower's time, premised on the principle of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). The idea was that the devastation would be so extreme that no rational actor would initiate conflict.

The most significant proponent of this approach was Bernard Brodie, a nuclear strategist and thinker. He came up with the idea of using nuclear weapons' credibility as a dissuasive tool. He argued that deterrence must be credible, otherwise it holds no value. He was followed by Thomas Schelling, who emphasised the art of intimidation—possession of the weapon and the readiness to use it, but more importantly, convincing the adversary of one's willingness to act.

A third thinker, Lawrence Freedman was the proponent of the concept of "flexible response." Originally popularised by Robert Kennedy, this approach involved using a range of tools—diplomatic, economic, soft power, conventional, and nuclear—in a synergised manner to achieve national objectives and break the enemy's will.

NATO's defence planners extrapolated this concept to propose a graduated response; instead of immediate massive retaliation—starting with conventional forces, followed by tactical nuclear weapons and climbing up the escalation ladder step by step.

Herman Kahn coined the term "escalation ladder." A proponent of thermonuclear war, he believed such a war was fightable and winnable. He outlined a sequence of 44 rungs, beginning with posturing, then signalling, and progressively escalating. It was a detailed theoretical framework. However, these ideas were eventually challenged by on-ground realities. Israeli military writer Martin van Creveld assessed these notions and argued that nuclear strategy is so destructive that only deterrence works. He argues that those who have coined terms such as nuclear war-fighting strategy, and tactical nukes use are actually

deluding themselves. Van Creveld asserted that each of these nuclear war strategies choked on its own absurdity as nuclear war was not winnable. He went further, claiming that nuclear strategy is not a strategy at all—it is purely deterrence.

Van Creveld stated that under the nuclear overhang, deterrence ensures that future conflicts will not be fought through conventional or nuclear wars but sub-conventional and low-intensity conflict involving non-state actors. Since these actors are immune to nuclear retaliation—how could one target the cellular structure of terrorists with nuclear weapons? Therefore, wars will transform accordingly.

In the South Asian context, Pakistan is a smaller protagonist in this conflict equation, whereas India is the bigger one. India has a large conventional army, and a strong economy, and perhaps in a long-drawn-out conventional conflict, Pakistan might emerge as the loser. That was the calculation of Pakistan's strategic planners when they opted for nuclear deterrence. The aim of attaining nuclear capability was to close the space for conventional war and ensure that our security is safeguarded by nuclear deterrence.

Pakistan has a 'Credible Minimum Deterrence doctrine,' which means it will have just enough nuclear weapons to ensure that the deterrence holds. It aims to achieve this through full-spectrum dominance, in air, sea, and land, including battlefield nukes which were introduced to ensure that the operational space for conventional war that India seeks at the battlefield level is denied to it. Pakistan has added an element of uncertainty for the Indians because if they wish to pursue territorial gains—planned through doctrines like Cold Start, later known as Proactive Operations—that too is completely thwarted.

This was not done with the aim of actual battlefield use, but rather to ensure that—whether it is a battlefield, land, air, or naval



domain—Pakistan has the capabilities to counter both Indian nuclear and conventional threats. This is the interplay of war dialectics between the two countries: India, being the larger protagonist, now wishes to seek conventional dominance and is very keen on opening the space for conventional warfare, because it believes its larger mechanised component, better array of arms, air force, navy, and an annual defence expenditure of around 77 billion dollars—compared to Pakistan’s much smaller defence budget—provides it with an advantage. By sheer quantitative edge, India believes it can achieve certain goals—whether territorial or related to force destruction—to extract concessions from Pakistan. But Pakistan’s strategy is to deny that space. Pakistan’s art of war relies on denial. Hence, Pakistan believes in avoiding war, and this is achieved through deterrence.

For the first time in subcontinental history, India has disturbed that deterrence. Deterrence is about making the adversary fearful of assured retaliation. Despite throwing the potential of escalation of the conventional war to the nuclear domain, India had the --- to attack Pakistan. This was a manifestation of complete operational and strategic megalomania. They crossed Pakistan’s airspace and launched missiles targeting ‘so-called terrorist camps.’ In reality, those were mosques and madrasas, where innocent women and children lost their lives.

Unfortunately, Indians do not realise that what is past is past. Pakistan has taken strict action against all non-state actors. Pakistan is grappling with its own terrorism problems. These madrasas are under a great deal of scrutiny. Pakistan has a National Action Plan (NAP) and is constantly re-evaluating extremism and counter-extremism measures. It is inconceivable that Pakistan would allow militant non-state actors’ activity or any cross-border movement. Even the Kashmiris who are fighting for their self-determination, now complain that Pakistan should do more in terms of support—something Pakistan has

deliberately withheld in the interest of peace. And yet, India sent missiles, disturbing a stable deterrence. This is where the danger lies. Once such a rash act is taken, Pakistan—which entirely relies on its deterrence—would be forced to retaliate to restore it. This could lead to an unintended spiral and potentially escalation towards a nuclear exchange. That is the environment under which the nuclear dynamics operate.

*Question: Now, on your point regarding deterrence and the layperson not understanding why Pakistan has not yet responded: although our official statements have clarified that we will respond at a time and place of our choosing, there is still confusion—especially after recent drone incursions. I assume these were for reconnaissance or surveillance, but they caused fear and panic among the public. People are now questioning when the response will come and whether our doctrine is merely a bluff—especially the part concerning the first use of nuclear weapons. Additionally, a layperson may not grasp the sophistication and complications that arise when escalation spirals. Perhaps I can address that as well. Moving forward, one must also consider the risks of strategic miscalculation—especially when a state blends kinetic responses with disinformation. We are seeing this repeatedly on Indian digital platforms. Overnight, there was a flood of fake news—claims of attacks in Kashmir, taking over Islamabad and Lahore, even a coup—completely false. This kind of disinformation saturates the info sphere.*

About ‘delayed response,’ one can say that the response was there. Deterrence is all about preventing the enemy from attacking you—and Pakistan succeeded in that. Six Indian high-performance jets were shot down in response to missile attacks. Kudos to the Pakistan Air Force for shooting down one of the most advanced fighter platforms, i.e. Rafales. The reason was Pakistan’s forces’ alertness, better preparedness, superior training,

professionalism, and better integration of sensor-shooter systems, satellite fusion, and overall system coordination. This is modern warfare. It's no longer about platform vs platform; it's about networks. Pakistan invested in kill systems, honed through training, data links, satellite communication, and the use of Airborne Early Warning (AEW). While India focused on platforms, Pakistan developed sensor-shooter-fighter networks, fighting in net-centric mode. This gave Pakistan the upper hand. It is the era of net-centric warfare now. Within two to three hours, five Indian kills were confirmed. The Indian Air Force scrambled with aggressive intent and would likely have followed up their missile attack with an aerial incursion. But after this setback, they grounded their Rafales. The PL-15 missile, our electronic warfare capability, effective radar coverage, and preparedness gave them a serious setback. This hit their egos and is now reflected in their erratic actions.

To compensate for their embarrassment, they resorted to another provocative act: the use of loitering munitions, specifically, the Harop drones. These carry a 23 kg payload and have a range of approximately 1,000 km. Their purpose is to seek out and map air defence positions, sending data back in real-time. Pakistan responded wisely after a casualty on a military site in Lahore. Pakistan deliberately avoided activating radar systems to conceal the radar locations. Instead, it used guns like Oerlikon systems to bring down the drones and jammed their communication links through electronic jamming. So far, 84 Harop drones have been downed. That figure is astonishing—compare it to the entire Azerbaijan war, during which only a limited number of such drones were used. This scale of drone use is unprecedented, and it reveals the irrationality of Indian decision-makers. These drones, once they lose tracking or are disabled, can fall anywhere—even debris can cause civilian harm. That makes it another dangerous escalation.

The information domain—including rumours—is crucial. This is the information age, and information has effectively become another principle of war. Waging war in the information domain is essential to staying ahead of the enemy's thinking, shaping public opinion, and maintaining narrative control. Many rumours circulate, but the Pakistani media has performed commendably well in managing them. One of the most important aspects during such an information joust is the ability to retain composure and disseminate the correct facts, packaged appropriately and at the right time. This is being done quite effectively by mainstream Pakistani media and even its social media platforms, which are usually mired in political sparring, hatred, and polarization. Those all united to present a solid, cohesive front. The right picture is being conveyed to the world. Correspondents from Al Jazeera, CNN, BBC, and others are moving around, observing events first-hand, and reporting the reality. In contrast, in India, the situation is reminiscent of a "Potemkin village"—a term referring to an artificial village constructed by a king to showcase the supposed prosperity of his subjects, though it was far removed from reality. India did something similar during the G20 summit, erecting barriers in Delhi to hide impoverished areas from the view of international delegates. The world was shown a make-believe reality. It reflects a kind of Bollywood syndrome, where one wishes to live in a cinematic, imagined world—a Cloud Cuckoo Land—believing in a climax of one's choosing, choreographed as in Bollywood movies. But reality is not Bollywood. That is why this is a dangerous escalating spiral both countries are caught in. When ideology, raw hate, and emotion dominate operational and strategic thinking, the result can be catastrophic. This is where the role of the international community becomes vital. Rather than issuing general exhortations, they must take concrete action: convene an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council; the P5 must play their part—order an immediate ceasefire and bring both countries to the

negotiating table. There is a wide range of options available to the international community. However, at the level of both countries, I do not see much rationality emerging—certainly not from the Indian leadership, which appears to be in the complete grip of frenzy, hubris, and chest-thumping.

***Question: Regarding the international arena, with India's growing strategic alignment with the United States and its elevation in Indo-Pacific politics, how do incidents like these affect Pakistan's geopolitical balancing act with countries like China, the Gulf States, and Russia? We know a Saudi representative was recently in India and is expected to visit Pakistan as well. China and Russia have also called for de-escalation. How do you see Pakistan's position evolving in light of this?***

Shorn of international relations verbiage, the fact remains that Pakistan will receive diplomatic and, to an extent, military support from China due to its investments in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). With the United States, we have long-standing ties. Pakistan essentially seeks to navigate a balanced course, but in practice, achieving such balance is extremely difficult. There are many concepts by thinkers like Kant or even realists such as Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt talking of offshore balancing, internal balancing, and bandwagoning—all meant to underwrite state security. But in reality, balancing is incredibly complex when it involves two global powers in a competitive posture. One must choose national interests with great care. The best approach is to pursue options that offer the greatest benefit without disadvantaging or discrediting any other power. Block politics should be avoided. But when national interest demands it—such as acquiring defence systems, satellite access, or AI technologies—if one source is denied, you must seek another. That is the pragmatic approach. Pakistan should make it clear to the global community that it remains open to the world for trade, commerce, connectivity, and technological collaboration.

Following a win-win model, the east-west economic corridor should materialise alongside BRI and CPEC variants. Instead of taking an adversarial position, it is in Pakistan's interest to leverage its geography for geo-economic gains—something Pakistan aims for but must pursue more diligently—without losing sight of geopolitical realities. If those realities are being used against Pakistan, hedging bets becomes necessary. How shrewdly and strategically Pakistan hedges is the “pearl of great price” to pursue. The task of Pakistani diplomats and strategic leadership is to avoid offending any global power while not becoming overly dependent on another. Relations must be based on sovereign equality and serve Pakistan's interests. However, when confronted by an adversary acting as a ‘regional surrogate’ within a major power's broader containment strategy—such as Indo-Pacific and other economic-centric alliances, Pakistan should avoid getting engaged in such adversarial alliances. At the same time, it must maintain strong regional allies. Regionalism, particularly a “Look East” policy, seems the way forward. There is a genuine desire for regional integration among Central Asian, West Asian, and South Asian states. The region as a whole must benefit from connectivity and trade.

As for this containment agenda, its outcome remains uncertain. It is possible that President Trump might re-engage with Xi Jinping.

***Question: Lastly, back to India and Pakistan—specifically this one incident—how do you think it fits into the broader arc of our bilateral relations? Would you be optimistic about any viable pathway for further bilateral engagement to de-escalate, or do you see this only spiralling ahead?***

I am a great believer in positive peace and the notion of structural violence, as articulated by Johan Galtung. You have to go to the root causes of the conflict. You cannot have a lasting, sustained peace without removing the basic causes. But until those causes are removed, one has to manage the present.

Therefore, both countries need to talk. The fundamental cause of the conflict, the issue of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir, needs to be resolved. Until that is achieved, both states must sit down and assess each other's maximalist and minimalist positions and find common ground, leveraging the present advantages that geography, technology, and trade confer upon both these countries. Instead of denying connectivity or getting into a perpetual adversarial mode—which is self-defeating and drains energies on both sides—the future lies in cooperation. Whether that is in the shape of a regional alliance, a pact, or opening up on the trade front. The essential point is to overcome that visceral hatred, that hubris, which is the fundamental impulse that drives exclusivism in India.

It is hoped that Indian leadership will adopt a more reasonable approach. An opposition alliance led by Congress may gain traction in India. Voices of sanity exist—pockets where people think differently from the Hindutva agenda. Those forces must come to the fore, enabling both countries to resolve their differences. Until a lasting solution is achieved, Pakistan should implement intermediate measures to act as a bulwark against violence and visceral animosity and to foster a climate of cooperation.

The present standoff is dangerous because it emanates from *primaev*al instincts that drive atavistic behaviour, i.e. 'otherization.' One community does not want another to exist. One way of life is unwilling to let another survive. It seeks to stamp out all vestiges of pluralism and other civilisations. How can that thinking be squared with modern notions of cooperation and progress?

For that to happen, an attitudinal shift has to come from within India. Because Pakistan has already understood and realised the need for peace. Pakistan needs to control extremist entities from within, and the future lies in economic cooperation, trade, and human-centric progress that improves people's lives.

Until Pakistan reaches those lofty goals, it must be careful in navigating these minefields. The present standoff shows how irrationality, when it takes control of policy-making hubs, can lead to irrational choices.

While the standoff is ongoing. Loitering Munitions are still being used. Pakistan's response is being considered. And when that response takes the shape of major attacks to restore strategic balance, how will India react? A country still gripped by a frenzy, fuelled by a make-believe sense of triumphalism—will it de-escalate or go one step further? And then we will respond again. This spiral of escalation could lead to the unthinkable—a nuclear exchange.

Pakistan is denying the conventional war space. It has the capability. Its new warfighting concept is an antidote to India's proactive operations. It compresses that space for them and denies them room to manoeuvre. Pakistan's New warfighting concept launches its reserves early, maintains a forward-leaning posture, and integrates weapon systems—air, artillery, air defence—all to thwart incursions into its territory.

When conventional space is denied, what remains? Nuclear deterrence becomes the guarantor of peace. That deterrence must be restored. One way to restore it is to make the other side realise the cost it will have to bear in case of an attack.

It remains to be seen whether India will stop at the next step on the escalation ladder or continue seeking space within the grey zone. It is already exploiting that grey zone through loitering munitions. It tried exchanges at the Line of Control but miserably failed. It got a bloody nose at the Line of Control—losing over 40 lives, two brigade installations, and many posts. What more do they hope to achieve? Now they have started targeting Pakistani civilians. This escalating spiral will persist until rationality intervenes and realism prevails.



I, for one, hope that this spiral of escalation ends. Because like Herman Kahn, we do not have the luxury of 44 rungs. Both states are standing eyeball to eyeball. Even one wrong step on an escalation ladder could lead to catastrophe.

*Comment by Host: Exactly. It could be a direct dive. That is quite an optimistic approach. But from my end, I feel that even if we were to give our response, the way things are moving—the way their people are creating pressure—it would still escalate. They have created a Frankenstein of their own, pushing for retaliation. We keep hearing their media battering the same narrative: “We will respond if anything is done.” Naturally, we have to establish our own rules in this game too.*

There is a need for a study on the irrationality of RSS sociology. People have lapped up the BJP and RSS narrative—hook, line, and sinker. They have internalised hyper-nationalism. I would have loved to hear Shashi Tharoor’s perorations on anti-colonialism and how India was deprived of its riches. But when it serves another purpose—when it fuels hyper-nationalism and leads to the otherization of minorities—I am concerned. I thought of him as an anti-colonial figure, but he has proven to be a votary of Hindutva exclusivism and supremacism.

**IPRI Podcast:** This write-up is based on an interview in the podcast

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**Podcast available at:**

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