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India Redefines Its National Security Vis-à-Vis Pakistan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In May 2025, following a deadly terrorist attack on Pahalgam in Kashmir, India suspended the Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan, conducted strikes deep within Pakistani territory, and declared that any future terrorist attack would henceforth be considered an act of war. These measures reflect a doctrinal shift from a policy of deterrence to one of "compellence", or coercion. India has also unveiled unprecedented upgrades to its military capabilities that are part of a comprehensive organizational reform. India is positioning itself as a global military and technological power that is operating under a sovereign and independent strategy. This shift in India's doctrinal approach reflects a continuation of its response to Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. According to Indian nationalists, Israel's response to Hamas's massive assault served as inspiration for an uncompromising policy towards Islamic terrorism.

Between immediate escalation and limited resolution

The events that began on April 22 with the deadly terrorist attack on Pahalgam in Kashmir—an assault that resulted in the deaths of 26 tourists, most of whom were Indian citizens—escalated within days into a severe regional crisis. India pointed the finger at The Resistance Front (TRF), perceived as an arm of Lashkar-e-Taiba operating under the auspices of Pakistani intelligence. Public shock and domestic nationalist pressure compelled the Modi government to respond swiftly and decisively.

Within hours, India had suspended the historic Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan, closed the main border crossing at Attari, revoked visas for Pakistani

nationals, and reduced Pakistan's diplomatic presence in India. Subsequent airstrikes and armed drone attacks targeted military installations and command centers in Pakistan, including some deep within Punjab province. Pakistan responded with artillery fire and the deployment of unmanned systems toward Indian targets.

Against this backdrop, the ceasefire that was achieved is notable for its restraint. According to both India and Pakistan, the initiative came from the Pakistani side, but the intention was mutual—to halt the escalation without committing to a political process. No date was set for talks, and regional issues such as Kashmir or cross-border terrorism were not mentioned.

Terrorism as an act of war

India's most dramatic move did not occur on the battlefield but in the doctrinal arena. Shortly before the ceasefire announcement, the Indian government issued an official statement declaring that "from now on, any terrorist attack against India will be considered an act of war and will be responded to accordingly".

Behind this wording lies a new strategic concept: the institutionalized use of the principle of the right to self-defense as defined in Article 51 of the UN Charter, eliminating the traditional distinction between terrorism and a clear state threat.

This declaration cements India's shift from a policy of deterrence to one of “compellence”, or coercion—not mere prevention, but the imposition of a tangible cost on hostile behavior with the object of altering the adversary's patterns of action. This represents an inflation of the concept of "war"—not as rhetorical exaggeration, but as a cognitive, political, and military strategy.

This is one of the most assertive steps taken by a liberal democracy in the global security arena in recent years. It indicates a profound change in the Indian security establishment's mindset. India seeks to extricate itself from the loop wherein "restraint is the responsible tool". It is signaling that restraint is not only ineffective but may be perceived as surrender.

In practical terms, this change has several implications. First, India will conduct proactive military responses in the future, including to attacks not carried out by regular armies but by organizations supported or sponsored by Pakistan. Second, the Indian army is expanding its operational scope to include areas deep inside enemy territory, and it will employ special forces, targeted strikes, and possibly cognitive warfare to conduct such operations. Finally, there is a cumulative impact on the regional balance, as neighboring countries will need

to prepare for a reality in which terrorism is not just an internal problem but grounds for declaring interstate conflict.

Furthermore, this declaration should be seen as a direct continuation of ideological trends already evident in India's responses following Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. It is a direct product of the Indian nationalist discourse that positioned Israel as an inspiration for an active, assertive, and uncompromising policy against Islamic terrorism. This analogy has now taken shape in a clear doctrinal change placing India in a new operational space.

Breaking the framework: Undermining conflict management agreements

The current crisis has not only exposed the deepening rift between India and Pakistan but also directly undermined the validity of two foundational documents that have governed their conflict management over decades: the Indus Waters Treaty and the Shimla Agreement.

One of India's first moves following the Pahalgam attack was to suspend its commitments under the Indus Waters Treaty, signed in 1960 with World Bank mediation. The treaty allocated India control over three eastern rivers (Beas, Ravi, Sutlej) and Pakistan control over three western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab), all of which are vital for agriculture, infrastructure, and civilian consumption. Despite three previous wars (1965, 1971, 1999), the treaty had been preserved as the symbol of a protected domain in bilateral relations. Now, for the first time in 65 years, India has signaled that it no longer views the separation between "water" and "political conflict" as sacrosanct. In other words, water has become a strategic tool that is now integrated into Delhi's security toolkit.

This move places India in a complex position. On the one hand, it strengthens its leverage over Pakistan. On the other, it risks international criticism for violating humanitarian conventions and setting a precedent for weaponizing natural resources.

Indian political and military officials have also hinted that the Shimla Agreement is "dead." This is a bold statement, given the agreement's longstanding status since 1972 as an anchor for bilateral dispute resolution and preservation of the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir.

Should India indeed withdraw from Shimla, it would mark a groundbreaking shift with both military and legal implications. It would enable operations beyond the LoC on the premise that the collapsed diplomatic framework no longer binds either party.

Upgrading the Indian military

To understand India's response to the crisis, one must consider the strategic reform its defense establishment has undergone over the past decade. India is pursuing the establishment of integrated theater commands, multi-domain force structures, and the intensified adoption of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, cyber warfare, hypersonic missiles, and sea-based nuclear delivery platforms.

The transition from restraint and legacy conflict management to compellence, flexible deterrence, and operational pressure is a direct expression of India's new security doctrine, which aims to create a networked, proactive military force that can respond in real time.

The crisis has served not only to test India's deterrence posture but also to expose its maturing organizational reforms: real-time integrated intelligence, the use of unmanned systems on the western front, and ceasefire management via the DGMO channel. These all indicate a fusion of doctrine, structure, and technology under a sovereign and assertive security policy.

Over the past decade, India has emerged as a military and technological powerhouse with global-level strategic capabilities. While the world's attention has been focused primarily on the US-China rivalry, India has been quietly but steadily building a layered security architecture that combines nuclear capability, advanced technology, and indigenous development in the space, maritime, and ballistic missile domains.

India has developed five core military capabilities that establish it as a flexible, multi-theater power and that shift its standing in the global balance of power:

1. Anti-satellite weapons (ASAT): Dimensional control

In March 2019, India successfully tested its ASAT capabilities by launching a PDV MK-II missile that destroyed a satellite in low earth orbit (LEO), thereby joining the elite club of the US, Russia, and China. The ability to neutralize satellites provides India with critical deterrent capabilities in space warfare, a rapidly growing domain in 21st-century conflict. Disabling satellites can cripple an adversary's communications, navigation, and intelligence.

2. Ballistic missile defense (BMD): A dual-layer shield

India possesses a dual-layer BMD system: one for exo-atmospheric and one for endo-atmospheric interception. Given that it has two nuclear-armed neighbors, Pakistan and China, India must prepare for potential missile attacks. Its BMD

system acts as a strategic missile defense shield, placing it within an exclusive group that includes the US, Russia, China, and Israel. The full potential of this system will only be realized in an integrated command structure, as is planned under India's new theater commands. Integration will enable real-time cross-service responses to complex missile threats, enhancing Indian deterrence.

3. Hypersonic strike missiles

In 2024, India successfully tested a long-range anti-ship missile (LRAShM) that travels at speeds exceeding Mach 5. Hypersonic missiles are nearly impossible to intercept and offer significant offensive advantages, especially in naval warfare. This capability strengthens India's deterrence posture in the Indian Ocean, particularly vis-à-vis China and foreign maritime presences.

4. Intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and MIRV technology

India's Agni-V ICBM, with a range exceeding 5,000 km, is now equipped with MIRV (multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles)—a single launch platform carrying several nuclear warheads aimed at different targets. This is a true force multiplier that places India alongside the top nuclear powers: the US, Russia, China, the UK, and France.

The Pahalgam crisis was the first real-world test of India's upgraded strategic defense infrastructure. During the conflict, India deployed world-class missile defense systems in an operational environment filled with threats, intercepting armed drones and rocket attacks while coordinating a multi-service control network. Simultaneously, India launched advanced strike capabilities, including precision-guided missiles and deep strikes inside Pakistan, demonstrating high operational readiness and a successful integration of intelligence, firepower, and cyber warfare.

Though hypersonic and nuclear platforms were not used in combat this time, their mere availability during the clash, along with a public Agni-V test shortly afterward, conveyed a clear message of advanced deterrence.

5. Nuclear-armed submarines (SSBNs)

India's Arihant-class nuclear submarines, which are armed with nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles, make it the sixth nation in the world with "second-strike" capability—the ability to retaliate even after sustaining a full-scale nuclear attack. These hard-to-detect submarines serve as the ultimate insurance policy and form the backbone of the MAD doctrine (mutual assured destruction).

Emerging power between east and west

The capabilities described above reflect a quiet but systematic process of building multidimensional strategic power. India is no longer merely a regional actor focused on local security. It aspires to position itself as a global influencer that engages with both China and the West.

India's unique model lies in its blend of cutting-edge technology, indigenous development, and deterrence-driven security policy. It does not belong to traditional military alliances, yet it maintains strategic connectivity with powers such as the US, Russia, France, and Israel. It is not technologically dependent on any one partner, yet it leverages cooperation judiciously.

The possession of hypersonic missiles, ASAT capabilities, and nuclear submarines is not, however, enough by itself. They must be embedded in a broader joint operational framework and be supported by industrial strategy and a unified command. India in 2025 is not merely showcasing innovation. It is also presenting the organizational infrastructure necessary to translate these capabilities into strategic impact on both regional and global scales.

Structural reform: From technological training to integrated command

These capabilities do not exist in a vacuum. In parallel with India's technological upgrades, its armed forces are undergoing a deep transformation in organizational and command structures. The objective is to create a modern, integrated, and multi-theatre military.

The reform focuses on establishing integrated theater commands that merge the army, air force, and navy under unified operational zones. This command shift will be based on strategic fronts: the northern border with China, the western border with Pakistan, and the Indian Ocean. Supporting horizontal commands are being created in logistics, firepower, intelligence, and cyber to establish an end-to-end operational continuum from intelligence gathering, decision-making, and force deployment to supply chain management.

The entire process is guided by the newly established role of Chief of Defense Staff (CDS). This individual is tasked with ensuring inter-service coordination and implementing the integrated command doctrine on the ground.

Equally important is India's adaptation to new dimensions of warfare: cyber, AI, space, and cognitive warfare. India is building dedicated facilities, such as the WARDEC simulation center, to advance AI-based decision-making and autonomous warfare capabilities, emphasizing distributed command and operational initiative.

This reform marks a shift from reactive defense to proactive, networked, and flexible doctrine. It unites structure, doctrine, and technology and positions India not only as a country with technological potential but as a military force capable of immediate real-world application.

On a broader level, India is signaling that the old rules of the game—those shaped by past kinetic and narrative wars—no longer dictate its behavior. It seeks to create new rules grounded in advanced deterrence, regional pressure, and the creation of operational facts on the ground.

International perceptions and the battle for a responsible image

As India adopts aggressive and unprecedented security measures, it is also engaged in a parallel struggle—narrative and diplomatic—to maintain its image as a responsible and measured global actor. Official Indian discourse consistently emphasizes the principle of "proportional response" and India's inherent right to self-defense in the face of state-sponsored terrorism.

India is being cautious not to portray itself as the instigator of total war or as deviating from norms expected of democratic states. The decision to announce a new counter-terrorism doctrine while simultaneously halting escalation through direct military channels reflects a strategic balancing act between force projection and international legitimacy.

India is sending a dual message: that it will not hesitate to use force when necessary, but it operates within, and sometimes seeks to refine, existing international norms.

The ongoing challenge

The ceasefire was not accompanied by any agreement on the conflict's core issues—Kashmir, cross-border terrorism, or international oversight. This raises the question of whether the next crisis is only a matter of time. The strategic reality between India and Pakistan remains fragile, marked by distrust and the constant risk of escalation.

The implications of India's doctrinal shift go beyond bilateral dynamics. Defining terrorism as an act of war may set a precedent that invites responses from other states, possibly destabilizing existing principles of international law. Suspending the historic water-sharing treaty with Pakistan may become a dangerous precedent for using essential resources as punitive tools in other conflict zones.

For India, these are not reactive measures to a single event but part of a broader strategy to assert a sovereign assertive security policy that is driven by nationalist currents, regional ambitions, and a desire to reshape the strategic order in South Asia.

In the coming weeks and months, India faces a dual challenge: to maintain deterrence against Pakistan without sliding into a large-scale war, and to convince the international community that its actions are not impulsive reactions but components of a deliberate state strategy.

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