Acts of Terror are Acts of War: What It means, Does not mean, and One Question

May 14, 2025



On May 10, 2025, after India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire, top sources in the Government of India declared to media outlets that, “any future act of terror in India will be considered an ‘act of war’ (AoW) against the country and will be responded to accordingly”. This is not an official declaration by the Government of India, but rather a declaration issued anonymously and unofficially to the press by government sources. A written commitment to such a declaration would arguably require definitions of what India considers an act of terror and what an AoW implies. Doing so would undermine the flexibility that the unofficial declaration allows.

A Response to Pakistan

In the wake of India’s suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty on April 23, Pakistan’s National Security Committee decided on

reciprocal measures against India. Among other things, it stated – "Any attempt to stop or divert the flow of water belonging to Pakistan as per the Indus Waters Treaty, and the usurpation of the rights of lower riparian will be considered as an Act of War and responded with full force across the complete spectrum of National Power." Pakistan's AoW declaration was to deter India from substantially following through with its suspension of the IWT and attempting to physically manipulate the Western waters of the Indus, which are its lifeline. For India, then, it was necessary to reiterate that the immediate trigger for India's IWT measure was a national security concern, Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. This, in turn, required a substantial decision to under-cut Pakistan's linkage of the Indus waters with an AoW, by India.

Moreover, India's AoW declaration, 16 days after Pakistan's NSC statement, is also meant to cement its decision to respond kinetically to an act of terrorism against Pakistan *in the future*. India's new unofficial declaration is a supplementary act to indicate India's political resolve to respond to terrorism through cross-border action. This political resolve was publicly reiterated by the Prime Minister of India on May 13.

What it does not imply

India's new view of terror attacks as an AoW does not imply that any terror attack, regardless of scale and scope, creates a commitment trap for India by pushing it to prove the credibility of its war threshold. Rather, it injects more flexibility in how India's decision-making is done and helps prepare faster for its response against the source of the terror attack, using the methods of its own choosing. As the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs (Shashi Tharoor) asserted in an interview on May 13, it gives India the freedom to determine, according to its yardstick, which act of terror qualifies as an AoW and "not the act of every madman".

What It Implies

It implies two things: India is now free to undertake any and all measures (including those in the Union War Book) to signal its preparedness to Pakistan, and that India's understanding of the measures it will take after an act of terror has evolved. If the May 7-10 crisis and India's Operation Sindoor are a yardstick to go by, it can be reasonably inferred that for India, its preferred response is swift, calibrated, and non-escalatory action through stand-off platforms. This further implies that India will take it as its right to attack the terror infrastructure in Pakistan directly. Given that India does not consider the Pakistan military as its preferred target during a response to an Act of Terror (as witnessed in 2016, 2019, and 2025), India's proportionate response will be against the terrorists themselves, rather than any conventional military force. Hence, India's new AoW threshold does not commit it to a conventional war against Pakistan or necessitate the partial or full mobilization of its armed forces.

In any case, the fact that India drew a connection between Acts of War and acts of terror, at least privately, was already evident following the 26/11 terror attacks in 2008. It triggered a need for India to update its secret Union War Book by 2010 (by then, Union Home Secretary, GK Pillai). Evidently, the subsequent terror attacks in India that caused an India-Pakistan crisis at multiple points in the following decade did not trigger preparations for conventional war on India's part. Very simply, it provides a normative status to India's kinetic response against sub-conventional targets in Pakistan, in response to an act of terror that India deems an AoW.

The Main Question That This Raises

India's ability and resolve to take cross-border military action (with political ownership) against targets in Pakistan

as a response to a terror attack in India was introduced in 2016, reiterated in 2019, and cemented in 2025. Between 2019 and 2025, there were several attacks on both military personnel and civilians in Jammu and Kashmir, perpetrated by groups that act as fronts for older terror organizations such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad in Pakistan. These include attacks by the Resistance Force (LeT proxy), such as an attack in Jammu's Reasi district against a bus carrying Hindu pilgrims travelling to Katra. The attack, caused by TRF terrorists opening fire at the bus, killed at least nine and injured 41, as the bus fell into a deep gorge.

India's response to the attack was not cross-border, but rather an intensification of its post-2019 approach to deal with such incidents as law enforcement issues that necessitate better counter-terrorism measures locally. In any case, after the re-opening of the Jammu theatre in January 2023 with terror attacks in Rajouri, the government's focus was on transplanting several of the successful anti-terror measures that it applied in Kashmir, to Jammu.

By not re-focusing on a cross-border response, India preserved its 'de-hyphenation' with Pakistan and prevented the older India-Pakistan fault-line from blowing up and returning global focus on a linkage that India has worked hard to remove. Now, even if India's response to a terror attack is not a full conventional war and only stand-off strikes with a counter-terror focus, Pakistan's agency to escalate to the conventional level (to which India will respond) exists. It will also test the potential risk of the international community to focus on yet another 'India-Pakistan' crisis, possibly, a renewed focus on the Kashmir issue.

In the April-May crisis of 2025, India arguably secured international support for its action through continual private communication with key allies and a robust case for self-defense. The public-facing aspect of such

diplomacy was blown apart by the unexpected statements by US President Donald Trump, which included remarks that are anathema to India's position on Kashmir and its appetite for third-party mediated dispute resolution (which it has rejected since the 1972 Simla Agreement). Even if the present Trump-led disruption is successfully contained in the long term (since Trump's initial public statements usually differ from the administration's actual policy decisions and actions in several sectors), the short-term effect of his statements is yet to be discerned.

Essentially, then, the question is not about the credibility of India's threat of military action in response to a terror attack. India's resolve to execute such a response has been conclusively proven. Rather, the question is whether the potential international fallout, regardless of scale, and the potential risks to India-Pakistan de-hyphenation, are in India's interest. Additionally, there is the second, more speculative, question to be asked – will terrorism then become a tool that Pakistan will use even more liberally since India's assured response will draw global attention, regardless of the scale of India's military action?