

Beyond the Battlefield: Pakistan's Strategic Reckoning in the Wake of Operation Sindoor

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The four-day confrontation post the Pahalgam terror attacks—branded by India as *Operation Sindoor* and *Operation Bunyan al-Marsoos* by Pakistan—paused under what was described as a ['temporary suspension of hostilities'](#). Amid discrepancies and conflicting accounts over assets lost and targets hit, both sides were quick to claim victory, with nationalistic public and media rhetoric competing to frame the conflict in terms of the material damage inflicted on the adversary. The high-intensity exchange, marked by missile strikes, drone incursions, and aerial skirmishes, played out across multiple domains: from traditional military engagements to narrative warfare and digital propaganda. For both countries, the confrontation offered more than just tactical data points—it became a stress test of strategic posture, economic preparedness, and

information control, with either side manoeuvring to impose escalation costs that would make further response prohibitively risky for the other.

A Post-Conflict Reckoning for Pakistan: Key Takeaways

With both India and Pakistan now engaged in post-conflict assessment, the urgency of drawing coherent and actionable takeaways has become more pronounced for Islamabad. Confronted with structural economic fragility, internal political volatility, and overreliance on external defence partners, its post-conflict reckoning may not be merely strategic—it calls for a broader reassessment of its national priorities. Domestically, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has continued to [downplay](#) the risk of further escalation, citing the “Trump factor” and India’s economic stakes as natural deterrents for New Delhi. This posture, however, may conceal a more sobering internal calculus. Pakistan must now prepare for a future shaped by sustained, multidimensional pressure.

Militarily, the conflict has reaffirmed Pakistan’s [confidence](#) in Chinese defence platforms and underscored Beijing’s centrality as a ‘friend for all seasons’. The conflict has triggered calls for selective but urgent [modernization](#), especially in integrated air defence, and [fast-tracking](#) the acquisition of the fifth-generation aircraft. The focus now may not be on expansive rearmament, but on prioritized upgrades tailored for multi-domain threats. Pakistan [aims](#) to assert a revised strategic baseline while shifting the burden of escalation onto India. Its approach remains grounded in constraining India’s freedom to operate in the conventional domain and in raising the costs associated with New Delhi’s strategy of incremental pressure, which seeks to weaken Pakistan’s capabilities systematically.

[Economically](#), the war reinforced a familiar yet unavoidable truth: a credible defense posture is unsustainable without structural economic reform. The need to reduce reliance on

external debt, widen the tax base, and align defence spending with national capacity has also gained renewed urgency.

Officially, Islamabad has cast its response as measured and deliberate—a calibrated counterstrike that stayed within escalation thresholds while still imposing costs on India. The intended message, both domestically and internationally, is that Pakistan demonstrated strength through restraint: a rational actor that maintained regional stability while defending its sovereignty. This portrayal is not just about shaping public perception at home; it is also central to securing diplomatic backing abroad. As part of this effort at the Shangri La Dialogue, the Pakistani Director-General of Military Operations (DGM0) publicly called for a shift from conflict management to conflict resolution—what prima facie appeared to be a performative appeal, aimed less at genuine transformation and more at reinforcing Pakistan’s image as the responsible, non-aggressive party. This narrative aims to attract external partners by portraying Pakistan as committed to de-escalation, even as it continues to manage tensions on its own terms.

Battle of narratives

A consequential theatre of this conflict also included a non-kinetic aspect. As Pakistan’s deployment of Chinese-origin aerial equipment demonstrated narrowing performance differentials with India and posed credible challenges, reflecting a notable shift, there remained little indication of disparity in tactical effectiveness. The challenge for both sides, hence, lies as much in claiming the narrative as in translating these experiences into coherent introspective lessons for military preparedness, strategic posture, and domestic resilience.

The engagement through air power and ordnance was therefore

accompanied by a parallel effort in shaping perception, managing public morale, and asserting legitimacy. However, compounding this effort for India was the military's silence on its asset losses, which Pakistan leveraged to fuel speculation and amplify narratives of official opacity, creating space for its own, often also unverifiable, counterclaims to circulate unchallenged.

Additionally, in a departure from [previous encounters](#), where Pakistan defaulted to outright denial of Indian strikes, this time, New Delhi [furnished](#) satellite imagery, strike coordinates, and visual documentation to substantiate its claims. Pakistan, in response through a series of media pressers, relied on a patchwork of unverifiable satellite grabs, which many widely dismissed as [doctored](#), along with WhatsApp [audio](#) clips and screenshots purporting Indian involvement in the Baloch insurgency. It also [denied](#) any connection to the Pahalgam terror attack and has [routinely](#) rejected the existence of militant camps that Indian strikes claimed to target.

Unpacking Pakistan's Evolving Playbook: Balancing Perceptions and Denials

However, this post-conflict behaviour of Pakistan—characterized by denial, deflection, and curated press briefings—may not merely be about propaganda. Rather, it appears to reflect a broader strategic approach, where narrative framing is also used as a tool to manage internal pressures, pre-empt external perceptions, and convey a sense of stability. These efforts seem to be driven by three overlapping imperatives.

1. Reversing the Optics: Capitalizing on India's Internal Dissent

Pakistan seems to have taken a page out of India's post-2016 template—using information operations to shape the perception

battle. If India's success has been in spotlighting Pakistan's support for cross-border militancy, Islamabad's response has been to flip the script: position itself as the rational, tolerant actor, and project India as the destabilizing force—internally divided, [oppressive](#), and [irresponsible](#).

At the heart of this effort is Pakistan's active attempt to capitalize on India's domestic dissent. This includes amplifying issues tied to religious polarization and highlighting alleged human rights violations. For instance, while Pakistan mirrored India's tit-for-tat measures almost entirely—shutting down communication channels, blocking airspace, and cutting down diplomatic strength, even down to suspending the largely redundant postal services—it notably left the Kartarpur Corridor untouched. It [still remains open](#) from the Pakistani side and shut on the Indian end, seemingly not just as a gesture of goodwill, but as a counter-symbol to projecting Pakistan's accommodation of minorities against India's perceived marginalization of them. This gimmick further intensified with [statements](#) like "Sikhs are never on Pakistan's target" and "India's Hindutva mindset", from the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, with the undertone—India alienates; Pakistan accommodates.

Further, as India released satellite images and precise strike data, Pakistan responded with counterclaims of Indian [false-flag operations](#), particularly in [Kashmir](#) and [Amritsar](#). These were accompanied by messaging about Indian media control, mistreatment of minorities, and the silencing of dissent. The DG ISPR's [remarks](#) absurdly asserted that Pakistan is a democratic, tolerant state where the military is accountable, the media is free, and minority rights are respected—however selectively or strategically that narrative may be constructed. By a propagandistic and distorted portrayal of internal unrest in India—whether among Sikh groups, Muslims, or activists—suggesting the failure of India's pluralistic model, Pakistan seeks not only to obfuscate international

perceptions but also to exacerbate internal divisions within India. Responding to these assertions, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri starkly [noted](#): “It may be a surprise to Pakistan to see citizens criticizing their government. That is the hallmark of an open and functioning democracy.”

Ironically, Pakistan is [borrowing](#) from India’s tactical lexicon. Just as India once internationalized its grievances against Pakistan-backed terror, Pakistan now seeks to internationalize India’s domestic tensions. The attempt may lack the credibility or institutional depth of India’s earlier campaigns, but the intent is glaring. In doing so, Islamabad is not seeking victory in the factual domain. It is attempting to create narrative parity, with sufficient contradiction and moral equivalence, to avoid an outright reputational setback. Whether this holds over time is uncertain. But in the short term, it offers breathing room—both at home and abroad.

2. Externalizing Blame: Diversions from Internal Faultlines, Insurgency and Military Control

But this is not purely external messaging. Much of it may also be aimed inward. In a time of economic stress, political instability, ethnic insurgency, and military overstretch, Pakistan needs a unifying narrative.

Claiming moral and political superiority over India helps contain internal faultlines at home. Instead of engaging with legitimate grievances of regional alienation, Islamabad projects these internal conflicts as orchestrated by “external handlers,” [primarily India and Afghanistan](#). Balochistan, with its intensifying separatist movement and persistent unrest in parts of Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, exemplifies this dynamic. This narrative projection aims to suppress public introspection on issues within the military and political establishment, thereby avoiding any admission of potential

governance failures.

In moments of political flux, such as elections or military reshuffles, the military has often intensified this rhetoric, positioning itself as the indispensable guardian against Indian aggression and international conspiracies. This externalization of threat tries to justify the military's dominant role over civilian leadership and the continued militarization of civilian spaces. This broader strategic posture, as reflected, for example, by the controversial promotion of General Asim Munir to Field Marshal, underscores how the military reinforces its institutional dominance beyond immediate crises.

Echoing the norm within the subcontinent, labelling political opponents, dissenters, and minority groups as ["anti-state"](#) elements further delegitimizes internal criticism, stifling calls for meaningful reform. Increased surveillance, curbs on freedom of assembly, and aggressive security operations in restive regions are framed as necessary measures to counteract foreign-supported [terror proxies](#).

This oversimplification of a multi-dimensional crisis—where internal dissent, economic fragility, and Indian military posture coexist—into a singular, totalizing Indian threat allows Pakistan to externalize blame efficiently. The complexity of Pakistan's internal challenges is thus reduced to a manageable rhetoric: India is the root cause of instability and unrest. This narrative, while politically expedient, prevents genuine dialogue or reforms and instead entrenches a militarized state apparatus that perpetuates cycles of repression and instability.

Thus, Pakistan's narrative choice is not a simple case of denial of its terror affiliations, but a strategic effort to preserve internal cohesion by manufacturing a clear enemy image. Yet, this short-term narrative protection risks undermining long-term strategic credibility, both within the

country and among international partners, by eroding trust and obscuring the need for deeper reforms essential to Pakistan's stability.

For Pakistan's military establishment, narrative control is often not just a wartime necessity—it remains a peacetime governance strategy in general. The military's dominance over state affairs depends not only on coercive strength but also on political passivity and a tightly managed national discourse that avoids scrutiny. This control is devised to preserve its supremacy without resorting to overt interventions, such as coups, which carry costs both domestically and internationally.

3. Countering Diplomatic Marginalization

Pakistan's narrative—positioning itself as a victim of extremism rather than a state complicit in sheltering militant groups—draws partly on its historical coordination with [Western powers](#) in funding such actors. This effort at narrative control is increasingly also shaped by the need to counter India's rising global influence and diplomatic reach. New Delhi has effectively positioned itself as a victim of cross-border terrorism and a responsible regional actor, over the years, establishing Pakistan as the aggressor and exporter of instability. For Islamabad, this framing undermines its credibility with global lenders, weakens its diplomatic leverage, and reinforces a rhetoric of dysfunction and dependency. Dismissal of involvement with militant networks, then, is not simply about face-saving—it is also to preserve institutional legitimacy, prevent external pressure, and signal coherence to both domestic and international audiences. At a time when Pakistan's geopolitical relevance has waned, particularly following the West's disengagement from Afghanistan, and India has improved ties with the Gulf, it faces mounting pressure to reshape its global image. The persistent association with terrorism and internal instability

has eroded its standing.

By rejecting the occurrence and/or efficacy of any Indian military action, Islamabad seeks to reinforce a [perception](#) it has long peddled: that of a restrained, beleaguered state [confronting](#) a militarily superior neighbour. This posture not only enables the eliciting of diplomatic sympathy but also helps internationalize the crisis, drawing external intervention.

Pakistan's Geopolitical Realignments in the Aftermath of the Conflict

Following the Indian diplomatic outreach, Pakistan has also assigned [two delegations](#) to engage with key international actors, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and Russia, to present its case. Moving forward, Pakistan's approach to its bilateral ties will reflect a careful recalibration based on shifting global alignments and regional priorities. Pakistan's diplomatic outreach at large is likely to be shaped by its engagement with three tiers: major global powers, its long-standing allies, and key regional partners. The following breakdown explores each category and the strategic logic underpinning Islamabad's approach.

Engagement with Major Global Powers

United States: Pakistan will maintain a cautious yet pragmatic approach toward the United States. Despite the unpredictability of U.S. foreign policy under a second Trump administration, Islamabad will aim to reaffirm its strategic relevance in the region. Trump has frequently highlighted his self-proclaimed role as a peacemaker in the recent crisis, including his public offers to [mediate](#) the Kashmir issue. Pakistan may seek to capitalize on this tendency by framing the India-Pakistan crisis as a destabilizing development that merits renewed U.S. involvement. In doing so, Islamabad will

need to strike a balance between its close ties with China and its exploration of emerging areas of cooperation with Washington, particularly in sectors such as [critical minerals](#) and regional connectivity.

Russia: While Russia has traditionally been an ally of India, recent geopolitical shifts, particularly following the Ukraine conflict, have led Moscow to deepen its strategic partnership with China, a key economic and military ally of Pakistan. Islamabad will seek to engage Moscow, leveraging its role in regional stability efforts, especially in Afghanistan—an area of shared interest highlighted through Russian-led platforms such as the [Moscow Format](#) and the [Afghan Quad](#). Given Russia's broader ambitions in Eurasia, Pakistan is likely to maintain a diplomatic posture directed at preserving open channels with Moscow, while positioning itself as a regional stakeholder Russia cannot ignore.

China: The recent conflict has reaffirmed Pakistan's strategic partnership with China and is likely to accelerate further military cooperation, including the potential acquisition of advanced equipment such as fifth-generation fighter aircraft. As the upper riparian state in key river systems, China also holds theoretical [leverage](#) in the region's water politics—an area where Pakistan [allegedly threatens](#) to seek Beijing's support. While unlikely to yield concrete outcomes, it primarily serves to exert symbolic pressure on India. Allegations of Chinese satellite and military support to Pakistan during the standoff further illustrate the growing integration of their defense and technological capabilities. This cooperation may expand beyond economic domains, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), evolving into a broader security framework that encompasses cybersecurity, satellite collaboration, and the protection of critical infrastructure. By recasting CPEC not just as an economic initiative but as a strategic security corridor, Pakistan aims to encourage deeper Chinese engagement to counterbalance

India's regional influence. It also actively leverages China's expanding diplomatic role, particularly Beijing's efforts to facilitate reconciliation between Afghanistan and Pakistan, to assert its indispensability in regional stability. By positioning itself as a key interlocutor and partner in China-led regional initiatives, Islamabad underscores its strategic value to Beijing's broader Eurasian ambitions.

Sustaining Long-standing Alliances

Arab World: Pakistan is likely to recalibrate its diplomatic approach toward Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, shifting from a focus on aid dependency to one that emphasizes attracting investment. As Gulf states deepen their ties with India, Islamabad recognizes the need for a more nuanced and pragmatic engagement. Pakistan may seek to attract economic investment while reaffirming its geostrategic significance. It will continue to leverage its sizeable expatriate workforce and shared religious connections to bolster diplomatic goodwill. Rather than seeking overt political backing in regional disputes, Pakistan may prioritize practical cooperation in trade, labor, and defense, aiming to maintain its strategic relevance amid the rapidly shifting dynamics of the Middle East.

Turkey: Apart from Azerbaijan, Turkey remains one of Pakistan's most pronounced supporters. Pakistan is expected further to deepen its ideological and defense ties with Ankara to strengthen its counter-India stance. Joint narratives highlighting Islamic solidarity and common regional security challenges will be amplified through coordinated media campaigns and enhanced defense cooperation. This partnership is likely to expand to accelerate the transfer of advanced defense technology and energy.

Regional Engagement

Bangladesh: Pakistan will continue to engage with Bangladesh

by promoting shared cultural and religious ties. Islamabad is likely to frame the recent conflict as a broader threat to regional stability. Diplomatic outreach to Bangladesh's interim government and informal connections with religious groups may run in parallel with public messaging that focuses on economic cooperation and cultural solidarity. This dual-track approach may look to exacerbate existing tensions in India-Bangladesh relations following the departure of the Hasina government. Against this backdrop, however, it is equally important to consider how and to what extent these shifting alliances may shape the nature of future conflicts between India and Pakistan.

Nature of Escalation and Risks in Future India-Pakistan Wars

Future India-Pakistan conflicts are likely to ignite swiftly and escalate rapidly, defined by short, high-intensity operations followed by premeditated narrative arcs. Compressed political decision-making timelines, combined with heightened domestic expectations, may reduce the space for calibrated responses, raising the risk of breaching critical escalation thresholds before adequate stabilizing mechanisms can take effect. This shift reflects the growing centrality of narrative-building and denial in both countries' strategic communications, fundamentally reshaping the post-conflict conduct, especially within the information domain. Pakistan's mixed track record in narrative control will continue to inform its strategic calculus, enabling it to galvanize domestic support and frame India as the aggressor in regional and international forums.

During border incidents and skirmishes, both sides may intensify efforts to project strength and resilience, feeding victory-driven narratives to increasingly assertive domestic audiences. The [expectation](#) of a strong retaliation is now ingrained in the political narrative, making the public and media less receptive to de-escalation, which in turn constrains diplomatic options and increases the political

cost of restraint.

Compounding these dynamics is the potential for [China-Pakistan strategic convergence](#), aimed at pressuring and distracting India. Both countries are accelerating their military modernization—Pakistan with Chinese backing, and India through investments in its military-industrial complex and diversification of global partnerships. The usual Indian response cycle to such attacks—measured military retaliation coupled with domestic assertions of success and diplomatic condemnation of Pakistan-backed terror—is being increasingly influenced by a more contested information space and evolving regional pressures. This is likely to harden further the region's conflict dynamics, narrow diplomatic off-ramps, and entrench a cycle of confrontation, complicating crisis management and potentially undermining prospects for long-term stability in South Asia.