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## Evolving Indo-Pak Conflict Dynamics and its Strategic Implications in the Post-Pahalgam Scenario

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### ABSTRACT

First portion of study covers changing operational dynamics, dominating Pak-Indian conflict situation in their latest four-day war in May 2025 after the Pahalgam attack. From Pulawama to Pahalgam, Indian pivot of aggressive air strikes in Pakistan has become a new operational reality, while the latter's reliance on airpower—armed with new technologies and Electronic Warfare tools, has strengthened its war fighting posture to counter Indian military offensivism. Thanks to the Information Age and other technological advances, this rivalry has transformed into 'kill chain' of a multi-domain operating environment—an outcome which has arguably lowered not only the nuclear threshold but also challenged the very foundation of deterrence stability in South Asia.

Second portion analyzes strategic implications that rose due to changing operational realities in the battle-zone. For example, Indian military humiliation in operational terms has effectively damaged if not totally demised its regional image, while globalizing the Kashmir Issue. From deepening the Sino-Pak strategic cooperation to transforming it into a deep interoperability along with rising American involvement to mediate the conflict, these strategic developments were made possible partially due to the changing operational realities in the battle-field.

**Keywords:** Deterrence Stability, Multi-Domain Warfare, South Asian Security Dynamics, Pakistan-India Conflict, Technological Warfare

### INTRODUCTION

Since the attacks on tourists in Pahalgam valley of Indian Occupied Kashmir by the homegrown Kashmiri separatist group, the Resistant Front, killing 26 people, the Pak-Indian conflict situation has gone through many transformations.<sup>1</sup> India first

<sup>1</sup> Tanya Mehra, "Operation Sindoor: a Turning Point for India in Addressing Terrorism in Kashmir,"

blamed Pakistan of harbouring militants and launched preemptive strikes inside Pakistan's heartland on May 7, 2025, killing about 40 civilians and destroying civilian properties, and secondly, engaged in a four-day bloody war with Pakistan, which transformed their existing rivalry manifold.<sup>2</sup>

From Indian-pivot of preemptive strikes in Pakistan's heartland to the dominant role of airpower in their 'dogfighting' and the emergence of massive use of drone warfare to the launching of disinformation and propaganda warfare as a kill chain strategy, these four operational avenues changed the way the Indo-Pak strategic rivalry went through, over the course of previous two decades.<sup>3</sup> These changing dynamics—unprecedented, has made the Indo-Pak crisis susceptible to off the ramp, while lowering the nuclear threshold.<sup>4</sup>

Away from this, massive use of technological tools—Electronic Warfare (EW), Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), space and cyberspace, being utilized by both adversaries in all levels of the battle has made this conflict a kill chain of multi-domain operating environment—an outcome which could erode the strategic calibration of maintaining a deterrence in a short-period of time.<sup>5</sup> This study describes how operational and tactical realities on the ground transformed into a strategic phenomenon, challenging regional and global security.

Keeping these changing operational dynamics in mind, some questions are important to investigate. Why India is gradually pivoting towards a strategy of preemptive strike in Pakistan? How the range of technological and EW assets influenced the Indo-Pak operational and tactical contours of war-fighting? How the role of third party has become a paradoxical phenomena both in fueling and defusing the crisis? How the Sino-Pak deep interoperability helped strengthen the country's airpower to outmaneuver the much touted Indian airpower? How these changing operational patterns in Indo-Pak threat spectrum have lowered the nuclear threshold are the main questions to be answered as academic and policy matters.

### **How Conflict Evolved Between Pakistan and India in the Post-Pahalgam Incident**

As the conflict situation has always been oriented on Kashmir between Pakistan and India, April 22, 2025 witnessed another terrorist attack in Pahalgam tourist resort in Indian Occupied Kashmir. India blamed Pakistan without providing any evidence. As the crisis unfolds, India unilaterally suspended the Indus Water

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*The International Center for Counter Terrorism*, May 21, 2025, <https://icct.nl/publication/operation-sindoor-turning-point-india-addressing-terrorism-kashmir>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Arslan Bilal, "Drones, Missiles, and a Battle of Chinese and European Fighter Jets: Lessons on the Future of War from the Indian Subcontinent's Skies," *Modern War Institute*, June 19, 2025, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/drones-missiles-and-a-battle-of-chinese-and-european-fighter-jets-lessons-on-the-future-of-war-from-the-indian-subcontinents-skies/>

<sup>4</sup> "Pakistan, India Close to Completing Border Troop Reduction: CJCSC Gen Mirza," *Dawn News*, May 30, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1914287>

<sup>5</sup> Rabia Akhtar, "Escalation Gone Meta: Strategic Lessons from the 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis," *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/escalation-gone-meta-strategic-lessons-2025-india-pakistan-crisis>

Treaty—a hallmark water management agreement signed between the two countries under the auspices of World Bank in 1960.<sup>6</sup>

By following the Israeli Defence Forces' unilateral habit, India launched preemptive strikes inside Pakistan's heartland on May 7, 2025, killing 30 to 40 civilians while outrightly violating the international border—a bold move which was uncommon, at least in the previous Indo-Pak conflicts.<sup>7</sup> It oriented a new precedent of arbitrary Indian offensive approach, undermining the deterrence stability, compelling Pakistan to respond in similar kind. Resultantly, Islamabad responded with code-name Operation Bunyan-ul-Marsoos on May 10, 2025: striking the Indian airpower while blinding its command and control structure by using the modern EW systems partially by the Chinese military cooperation.<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note that post-Pahalgam conflict the overall evolving military incidents were based on three main segments: first, India unilaterally attacked the Pakistan's civilian areas they claimed to be “terrorist” training centers which proceeded by the Beyond-Visual-Range (BVR) air fighting, and ultimately transforming it into third phase of the conflict—an attritional drone warfare between the two nuclear states.<sup>9</sup> As these operational dynamics are new to the conflict, their strategic implications are still unfolding.

### **Changing Military Dynamics: Multi-Domain Operational Environment**

There are some core factors that contributed to transform the existing operating environment and they will continue influencing in the future's threat perception too. From the ongoing Indian policy of preemptive strikes in Pakistan to the rise of heterogeneous airpower—an amalgamation of traditional crewed-led airpower along with UAVs, missiles, rockets, and the massive use of disinformation and propaganda warfare to undermining the existing deterrence stability, are of the main factors that have transformed the existing military dynamics in South Asia.

How this paradigm shift will affect the future's South Asian strategic stability, will be a question of great concern to investigate.

### **Indian-Pivot of Air Strikes in Pakistan**

From Pulwama to Pahalgam, the Indians are gradually moving towards the doctrine of aggressive military air operations in Pakistan—an operational shift which

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<sup>6</sup> “Pahalgam Terror Attack: Indus Water Treaty Suspended, Attari Border Closed- The 5 Big Decisions Taken by India,” *Times of India*, April 23, 2015, [https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pahalgam-terror-attack-indus-water-treaty-suspended-attari-border-closed-the-5-big-ccs-decisions-taken-by-india/amp\\_articleshow/120557480.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pahalgam-terror-attack-indus-water-treaty-suspended-attari-border-closed-the-5-big-ccs-decisions-taken-by-india/amp_articleshow/120557480.cms)

<sup>7</sup> Frederic Grare, “The May 2025 India-Pakistan Conflict,” *NBR*, June 16, 2025, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-may-2025-india-pakistan-conflict-neither-quite-the-same-nor-quite-another/>

<sup>8</sup> Sardar Jahanzaib Ghalib, “Warfare Reimagined: Algorithmic Warfare and the Shifting India-Pakistan Strategic Landscape,” Issue Brief: ISSI, June 4, 2025, p.4, [https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/IB\\_Jahanzaib\\_June\\_4\\_2025.pdf](https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/IB_Jahanzaib_June_4_2025.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Arslan Bilal, “Drones, Missiles and the Battle of Chinese and European Fighter Jets: Lessons on the Future of War From the Indian Subcontinent's skies,” *Modern War Institute*, June 19, 2025, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/drones-missiles-and-a-battle-of-chinese-and-european-fighter-jets-lessons-on-the-future-of-war-from-the-indian-subcontinents-skies/>

was unprecedented in the past between the two South Asian strategic rivals.<sup>10</sup> For example, since the Indian air attacks in Balakot in 2019, this strategy has been resurged and even dominated in the latest Indian unilateral preemptive strikes in the Pakistan's heartland of Punjab on May 7, 2025—crossing the traditional battleground of Kashmir, while lowering the already fragile nuclear threshold.<sup>11</sup> Here the main question arises how the coming Indian pivot of unilateral air strike the preemptive in nature could damage the existing deterrence stability, as it's over extension could force Pakistan to believe whether nuclear threshold has been lowered.<sup>12</sup>

It means, that after unilaterally declaring Indian occupied Kashmir as its Union Territory in 2019, now New Delhi could widen its attacking strategy, hitting even inside Pakistan beyond the “pre-determined” threshold, at least in Kashmir.<sup>13</sup> Aggressive air strike strategy between the conventional forces having no nukes and by a nuclear state against the non-nuclear is a probable scenario; being employed by various nations in a relatively secured environment. If true, the post-air strike implications do not escalate the crisis, as the desired purpose might be to prevent an existential threat from emanating.<sup>14</sup> But, this operational freedom could not be incentivized in such an environment of nuclear parity where both adversaries maintain size-able nuclear arsenals to retaliate. As this situation exists in South Asia, rising Indian-pivot of preemptive strikes to cross the traditional threshold could undermine the containment measures a credible nuclear state like Pakistan might pursue to deescalate the crisis.<sup>15</sup> For example, India adhered to “No First Use” policy but its impending bid to preemption both in conventional and unconventional manners could blur its stated stance, while forcing Pakistan to doubt whether declared Indian nuclear doctrine is static.<sup>16</sup> And this situation is a threat causing erosion of deterrence in this age of extended conventional warfare between the two

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<sup>10</sup> Air Marshak Anil Khosla, “OP Sindoor: India's Policy of Punitive Deterrence Against Pakistan-Sponsored Terrorism, *IIRF*, June 15, 2025, <https://indusresearch.in/op-sindoor-indias-policy-of-punitive-deterrence-against-pakistan-sponsored-terrorism/>

<sup>11</sup> Rabia Akhtar, “Escalation Gone Meta: Strategic Lessons from the 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis,” *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/escalation-gone-meta-strategic-lessons-2025-india-pakistan-crisis>

<sup>12</sup> Atman Trivedi, “The question is not if Pakistan will retaliate, but when and how,” *Atlantic Council*, May 6, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react/experts-react-india-just-launched-airstrikes-against-pakistan-whats-next/#atman>

<sup>13</sup> Rahul Mishra, Harshit Prajapati Prisie L. Patnayak, “India has More Strategic Room to Hit Pakistan Below the Nuclear Threshold-Analysis,” *Eurasia Review*, June 2, 2025, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/02062025-india-has-more-strategic-room-to-hit-pakistan-below-the-nuclear-threshold-analysis/>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Rabia Akhtar, “Fast Wars, Steady Threshold: Why South Asian Nuclear Restraint Persists in a Compressed Battlespace,” *The Wire*, June 13, 2025, <https://m.thewire.in/article/security/south-asian-nuclear-restraint-persists-india-pakistan#>

<sup>16</sup> Yashraj Sharma, “No Guardrails: How India Pakistan Combat Obliterated old Red lines,” *Aljazeera*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/13/no-guardrails-how-india-pakistan-combat-obliterated-old-red-lines>

nuclear states.<sup>17</sup>

### Changing Dynamics of Traditional Airpower

Since 1965, South Asian battle zone has long been dominated by airpower. Yes, airpower was always there but it was mainly in a homogeneous way—a traditional crewed-led aircraft used only for air fighting in which both South Asian traditional rivals maneuvered almost equally, while maintaining a sense of strategic clarity even in a minimum way.<sup>18</sup> There are two main factors that contributed to transform the existing airpower conception in South Asia: the rise of third party support to its relative proxy, and the massive application of technological and network centric systems in air operations, changing the operational and tactical aspects of traditional homogeneous airpower used in support of ground forces.<sup>19</sup>

For example, Chinese provision of J-10C fighters and PL-15 air-to-air missiles to Pakistan, while France's sale of its Rafale fighters to India in their latest battle after Pahalgam attack has witnessed that great powers are more interested to test their weapon systems in South Asia, while heightening the crisis off-the ramp.<sup>20</sup> Thanks to the deep Sino-Pak interoperability, at least in the latest conflict, Pakistan utilized not only Chinese military hardware but also its satellite intelligence and positioning systems including Beidou—which helped strengthening Islamabad's net-centric deep penetration into the Indian layers of Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) to jam its EW systems, while blinding it to analyze the real-time operational situation which overly tilted in Pakistan's airpower favour.<sup>21</sup> That's why; Pakistan's Air Force would not be able to gain its operational objectives without considering the importance of J-10C fighters armed with PL-15 missiles that were fired from a distance of over 200 KM without violating the enemy's air space, destroying both French made Rafales and other jets.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, only the crewed aircrafts are not the ultimate source of airpower. Rather, range of missiles and rockets onboard along with their ability to penetrate deeply in the complicated EW environment has unfolded another avenue

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<sup>17</sup> Diya Ashtakala, "What led to the Recent Crisis between India and Pakistan," *CSIS*, May 20, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-led-recent-crisis-between-india-and-pakistan>

<sup>18</sup> Justin Bronk, "Key Questions about the India-Pakistan Aerial Clashes," *RUSI*, June 2, 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/key-questions-about-india-pakistan-aerial-clashes>

<sup>19</sup> Arslan Bilal, "Drones, Missiles and the Battle of Chinese and European Fighter Jets: Lessons on the Future of War From the Indian Subcontinent's skies," *MWI*, June 19, 2025, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/drones-missiles-and-a-battle-of-chinese-and-european-fighter-jets-lessons-on-the-future-of-war-from-the-indian-subcontinents-skies/>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "China's Space Edge: How Beijing Helped Pakistan Shoot Down Indian Jets with Satellite Intelligence," *Defence Security Asia*, June 7, 2025, <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/chinas-space-edge-how-beijing-helped-pakistan-shoot-down-indian-jets-with-satellite-intelligence/>

<sup>22</sup> Arslan Bilal, "Drones, Missiles and the Battle of Chinese and European Fighter Jets: Lessons on the Future of War From the Indian Subcontinent's skies," *MWI*, June 19, 2025, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/drones-missiles-and-a-battle-of-chinese-and-european-fighter-jets-lessons-on-the-future-of-war-from-the-indian-subcontinents-skies/>

in the air warfare arena, making it a heterogeneous airpower potential.<sup>23</sup> Resultantly, importance of missile, rockets, and their employment along with fourth or fifth generation fighter jets has been gaining ground.<sup>24</sup> Pakistan's utilization of Chinese HQ-9 and the Indian use of Brahmos cruise missiles, a juxtaposition with crewed-led traditional airpower has increased the web of air operations from the prism of air defence.<sup>25</sup>

Maneuverability has been here and will remain to be a cornerstone of military operation.<sup>26</sup> But this trend is also changing in the technologically-driven net-work centric airpower—a situation where more technological edge rather than the traditional kinetic maneuverability will define the outcome of air operations in the future. Thus, the latest Indo-Pak 'dogfighting' was based on Beyond the Visual Range (BVR) air operations, relying more on the success and accuracy of long and medium range missile systems designed to make the gains in an optimum way.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the era of close and With-in-Visual Range (WVR) dogfighting is almost over, forcing the crew to critically rely on range of technological and electronic warfare systems away from solely relying on his or her visual range, at least, in an operational environment of nuclear powers rivalry.<sup>28</sup>

Indo-Pak dramatic reliance on space and cyberspace has transformed their crewed-led dogfight into a complex kill chain, an operational scenario which can dramatically blur the escalation ladder, is another military aspect, heightening the traditional air operations.<sup>29</sup> As the kill chain is always based on range of electronic and cyber assets being employed in a synergistic battle zone for optimum gains, it does not immune from threat-zero environment. Rather, it may be another mounting threat both to blurring the escalation ladder and deterrence stability—a situation which could force the conflict to escalate with its own dynamic in South Asia.<sup>30</sup> And given this along with changing contours of homogeneous airpower and the net-work centric EW systems on which the modern airpower is heavily relied on, coming dogfighting between the two South Asian traditional rivals might be

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Layton, "Heterogeneous Airpower is Here," *The Strategist*, June 19, 2025, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/heterogeneous-air-power-is-here/>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Clary, "Four Days in May: The India-Pakistan Crisis of 2025," *Stimson Center*, May 28, 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2025/four-days-in-may-the-india-pakistan-crisis-of-2025/>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Arslan Bilal, "Drones, Missiles and the Battle of Chinese and European Fighter Jets: Lessons on the Future of War From the Indian Subcontinent's skies," *MWI*, June 19, 2025, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/drones-missiles-and-a-battle-of-chinese-and-european-fighter-jets-lessons-on-the-future-of-war-from-the-indian-subcontinents-skies/>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> "Flawless Kill China: Pakistan's Networked Strike Took Down Indian Fighter, Says U.S. analyst," *Defence Security Asia*, June 20, 2025, <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/flawless-kill-chain-pakistans-networked-strike-took-down-indian-fighter-says-u-s-analyst-2/>

<sup>30</sup> Yousaf Nazar, "South Asian Nuclear Flashpoint: The 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis," *Friday Times*, May 13, 2025, <https://thefridaytimes.com/13-May-2025/south-asia-s-nuclear-flashpoint-the-2025-india-pakistan-crisis>

more lethal and dangerous, dilapidating their nuclear deterrence furthermore.<sup>31</sup>

### **Rise of Drone Warfare in the South Asian Battlezone**

How drone and all of its other UAVs systems including swarms and loitering munitions influenced the existing Indo-Pak battlezone, is a question of great inquiry. Drone warfare entered the foray in a third and final phase of the four day Indo-Pak conflict—a situation which was more deadly, forcing both sides to ultimately deescalate the crisis, until it could derive its own dynamics.<sup>32</sup> For its part, Pakistan used its drone inventory of both homemade and Turkish build *Bayraktar*, while India also employed its homemade and Israeli build drones to maintain its drone-party with Pakistan in this new competition of heterogeneous airpower.<sup>33</sup> From locating to hitting the target along with evading hostile radars and anti-drone strikes, both sides used range of UAVs including lancet, swarms, and loitering systems, attacking of each other's air bases and other critical military targets. These operational capabilities have presented the UAVs more effective and penetrating than that of crewed aircrafts in an increasingly hostile environment.<sup>34</sup> This was the main reason that forced India to quickly resorting to the drone warfare strategy as a flexible option when its crewed-led airpower was being knocked down by the Pakistani Air Force.

Like the selected air strike strategy the hallmark tenet of asymmetric threat spectrum, UAVs and its related unmanned technologies also belonged to the irregular operating environment, given their “limited direct implications” from the main battlefield. Therefore, this situation has posed a new operational dilemma which could transform into a security dilemma in the long run—the employment of UAVs by both nuclear powers designed to destroy the enemy's sensitive military targets deep inside the homeland, hitting even the counter-value targets, while still deluding it a “safe and stand-off distance weapon”.<sup>35</sup> For instance, employment of UAVs in nuclear-centric environment could dramatically blur the line of “predetermined threshold” in a foggy war—an outcome which could fasten the process of escalation ladder. And this dangerous situation could make the conflict harder to control, escalating with its own dynamism and pace.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Pravin Sawhney, “Operation Sindoor: How India's Gamble Backfired and Made it More Vulnerable,” *The Wire*, June 8, 2025, <https://m.thewire.in/article/analysis/operation-sindoor-how-indias-gamble-backfired-and-made-it-more-vulnerable/amp>

<sup>32</sup> Joshua T. White, “Lessons for the Next India-Pakistan War,” *Brookings Institution*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/lessons-for-the-next-india-pakistan-war/>

<sup>33</sup> Rueben Dass, Abdul Basit, “Drone Warfare is Redefining India-Pakistan Rivalry,” *The Diplomat*, June 4, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/06/drone-warfare-is-redefining-india-pakistan-rivalry/>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> “The First Drone War: India-Pakistan Enters a New Era of Unmanned Warfare,” *Jewish Image*, May 9, 2025, <https://imageusa.com/the-first-drone-war-india-pakistan-conflict-enters-a-new-era-of-unmanned-warfare/?amp=1>

<sup>36</sup> Arslan Bilal, “Drones, Missiles and the Battle of Chinese and European Fighter Jets: Lessons on the Future of War From the Indian Subcontinent's skies,” *MWI*, June 19, 2025, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/drones-missiles-and-a-battle-of-chinese-and-european-fighter-jets-lessons-on-the-future-of-war-from-the-indian-subcontinents-skies/>

Thus, drone warfare, has made this situation a fighting of dangerous game in which prerequisites of maintaining a credible deterrence could not be fulfilled, making the situation off the ramp.<sup>37</sup> For example, when the Indians targeted Pakistan's key strategic installations and bases including Noor Khan Airbase through its incessant drone strikes, Islamabad forced to consider of calling the National Command Authority meeting, a state level premier body responsible for the safety, security, and policy about dealing the nukes.<sup>38</sup> It means, that UAVs'-mounted threat was existential, forcing the Pakistan's strategic community to consider whether attritional drone warfare could off the ramp the existing conflict trajectory? In sum, coming drone-led heterogeneous airpower has presented itself too difficult to comprehend in the nuclear-dominated strategic landscape of South Asia, making it a new threat to the already fragile nuclear deterrence.<sup>39</sup>

### **Rise of Disinformation and Propaganda Warfare; Blurring the Escalation Ladder**

Given the heightening of disinformation and propaganda warfare between India and Pakistan, it could threaten the basic tenets of deterrence stability.<sup>40</sup> Analyzing the spread of state-sponsored disinformation and propaganda warfare, Indian information sources exposed to be ill-conceived and unreliable as-compared to the Pakistan's Information Operations (IOs) during their latest conflict in May 2025. Even it was based on some exaggerated and false reporting, Pakistani media war and disinformation operations were limited to tactical and operational level, portraying the Indian attacks on Sikh temples and the penetration of massive Pakistani missiles to severely damage the Indian military bases.<sup>41</sup> But the Indian-led IOs and media war strategy was strategic in nature crossing the redlines; threatening even the broader strategic stability in South Asia.<sup>42</sup> From making deep-fake videos of Pakistan military's DG ISPR of admitting the downing of Pakistani aircrafts by India to the trolling of fake Indian navy attack on the Karachi coast, Indian Information Operation was a blow to the deterrence stability.<sup>43</sup> Propaganda warfare between the non-nuclear states is a threat; propaganda warfare between the nuclear states is an

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Layton, "Heterogeneous Airpower is Here," *The Strategist*, June 19, 2025, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/heterogeneous-air-power-is-here/>

<sup>38</sup> Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, "India-Pakistan Drone and Missile Conflict: Differing and Disruption Narrative," *IISS*, May 15, 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/05/indiapakistan-drone-and-missile-conflict-differing-and-disputed-narratives/>

<sup>39</sup> Debashis Chakrabarti, "When Indo-Pak Tensions Go High, It's the People Who Pay the Price," *Frontline*, May 10, 2025, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/india-pakistan-drone-war-kashmir-budget-crisis/article69560398.ece/amp/>

<sup>40</sup> Muskan Mozzam, "The Battle of Perception: Indian Information Warfare Against Pakistan," *ISSI*, June 5, 2025, [https://iissi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/IB\\_Muskan\\_Moazzam\\_June\\_5\\_2025.pdf](https://iissi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/IB_Muskan_Moazzam_June_5_2025.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> K.B.Sidhu, "Pakistan Tried Hard to Instigate Sikhs Against India During Operation Sindoor," *The Print*, May 17, 2025, <https://theprint.in/opinion/pakistan-khalistan-propaganda/2628681/>

<sup>42</sup> How to Avoid Nuclear War in An Era of AI and Misinformation," *Nature*, July 18, 2025, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-02260-z>

<sup>43</sup> Junaid Kathju, "Indian Media Fuels Panic with Disinformation," *Al Jazeera Media Institute*, May 15, 2025, <https://institute.aljazeera.net/en/ajr/article/3188>

existential threat.<sup>44</sup>

Some other instances of fake news and baseless reporting are: fake clips of Pakistani forces' surrender near border areas, but actually these footages were from the NATO exercise in Afghanistan. Furthermore, India claimed of destroying Pakistani aircrafts including F-16s in its initial campaign of Operation Sindoor, but no independent satellite data verified it, undermining the credibility of both Indian IOs and operational gains.<sup>45</sup>

Information Operations and media monitoring from the Pakistani side throughout four day of conflict, that followed was almost uniform in nature, given the centralization of ISPR and the homogeneous nature of informational flow it controls.<sup>46</sup> After destroying the Indian Rafales and other fighter jets in its Operation Bunyan-al-Marsoos, ISPR along with other Air and Naval Public Relations Directorates jointly held an evidence-based joint press conference, presenting videos and footages of real-time combat operation, justifying the credibility of Pakistani media monitoring during this critical security situation.<sup>47</sup>

In this age of disinformation and irresponsible reporting of battle-zone developments on the media—a nightmarish situation for a credible deterrence, it has further galvanized the existing stability measures.<sup>48</sup> If both Pakistan and India could not verify whether the media propagated attack is real or fake, this ambiguity could blur the existing conventional understanding of escalation ladder.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, public inflammatory rhetoric based on false information is another challenge to the escalation ladder, forcing the strategic leaders to pay more attention to their public pulse, weakening the communication channels between Pakistan and India in a time of crisis.<sup>50</sup>

### **Lowering of the Nuclear Threshold**

Even in an escalating crisis situation in South Asia since 2001, nuclear deterrence has had provided a source of strategic stability to both Pakistan and India, at least in a fragile environment.<sup>51</sup> But this blessing is no longer an eternal reality,

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<sup>44</sup> Colin McINNES, *Nuclear Strategy, Warfare in the Twentieth Century: Theory and Practice*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp.141-142.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> “Pakistan Never Requested Ceasefire DG ISPR Briefs Nation on Military to Indian Aggression,” *Express Tribune*, May 11, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2545242/dg-ispr-holds-press-briefing-on-operation-bunyan-un-marsoos-launched-against-indian-aggression?amp=1>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Brian Cook, “Nuclear Mis-and Disinformation and Impacts to the American Public,” *Nuclear Network CSIS*, April 24, 2024, <https://nuclearnetwork.csis.org/part-1-nuclear-mis-and-disinformation-and-impacts-to-the-american-public/>

<sup>49</sup> Rebecca Hersman, “Wormhole Escalation in the New Nuclear Age,” *TNSR*, July 9, 2020, <https://tnsr.org/2020/07/wormhole-escalation-in-the-new-nuclear-age/>

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Antoine Levesques, “Nuclear Deterrence and Stability in South Asia: Perceptions and Realities,” *ISSI*, May 2021, pp.11-12, <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/nuclear-deterrence-and-stability-in-south-asia---perceptions-and-realities.pdf>

given the changing operational environment. As the nuclear threshold already hinges on fragile and limited buffer spaces, the post-Pahalgam operational environment has further pushed this to lower level, leaving a less room to maneuver and defuse the crisis.<sup>52</sup>

There are some core factors that contributed to lowering of the nuclear threshold between Pakistan and India. First, rising Indian-pivot of unilateral air strike posture to penetrate even the Pakistani heartland has forced Islamabad to analyze operational environment under the prism of lowering nuclear threshold.<sup>53</sup>

Resultantly, in the wake of expanding Indian surprise attacks to hitting the critical strategic infrastructure, the Pakistan's government had to consider of calling the NCA meeting in time, justifying that Islamabad will not hesitate to escalate further, employing even nukes for its survival.

Secondly, blurring the line between conventional and strategic targets was another factor that forced the Pakistan's decision makers to believe whether existing threshold has tremendously been lowered.<sup>54</sup> With potpourri of hostile Indian drones/loitering munitions, and stand-off distance weapons, attacking on Pakistan's military installations, airbases, and even Noor Khan airbase near strategic command center, evidenced in the recent Pak-India four day war, it has been justified that Pakistan's sensitive military targets would not be immune from these Indian surprise attacks in the future. And it ultimately forced Pakistan to revisit its traditional war-fighting strategy, at least, in countering the range of Indian air attacks both regular and irregular.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, as the disinformation and propaganda warfare campaigns have made the strategic clarity harder to maintain—an outcome which makes the threshold level too difficult to gauge, this is an emerging threat to lowering it. While employing cyber-attack as a way of hybrid warfare tactics in the nuclear age, it should not be a tool of plausible deniability; rather, it could pose a kinetic threat, given its kill chain ability to both of nations' national security they have been witnessed in their four day war.<sup>56</sup>

### **Strategic Implications of Indo-Pak Conflict**

From globalizing Kashmir Issue to strengthening of the Sino-Pak deep interoperability, along with rising Pakistan's role as a credible nuclear state, these factors have been evolved into strategic reality. These factors will be analyzed in the second portion of this study.

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<sup>52</sup> Raisina Debates, "The Nuclear Overhauling: The India-Pakistan Escalation After Pahalgam," *ORF*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-nuclear-overhang-india-pakistan-escalation-after-pahalgam>

<sup>53</sup> Arzan Tarapore, "Operation Sindoor and the Evolution of India's Military Strategy Against Pakistan," *War on The Rocks*, May 19, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/05/operation-sindoor-and-the-evolution-of-indias-strategy-against-pakistan/>

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Rebecca Hersman, "Wormhole Escalation in the New Nuclear Age," *Texas National Security Review*, July 9, 2020, <https://tnsr.org/2020/07/wormhole-escalation-in-the-new-nuclear-age/>

## Globalizing Kashmir Issue and the Demise of Indian Regional Influence

Dents in Indian soft power image started in the wake of post-Pahalgam episode, where some factors contributed to eroding what India was touting as a rising South Asian power. Failure to comprehend the wave of new homegrown anti-Indian insurgency that undertook the highly soft tourist targets of Pahalgam valley of Kashmir, it exposed both the Modi government's "strong rule" and failure of Indian normalcy narrative in Kashmir.<sup>57</sup>

Military setbacks in its Operation Sindoor against Pakistan was ended in Indian military humiliation—an outcome which equally undermined its ability to defend and the credibility of military armaments of its western backers. And now New Delhi has exposed itself as a non-credible western proxy to contain the Chinese 'juggernaut' in Asia.<sup>58</sup> Here again India exposed not only its much touted "military modernization" but also divulged the "unmatched western military armament technology" being degraded by Chinese military equipments, employed by Pakistan in a four-day war of May 2025. Had the four-day war not ended, the Indians along with their western weaponry systems would have been exposed further, undermining their overall strength and soft power in front of Chinese modern military technology.<sup>59</sup>

These military setbacks have ultimately forced New Delhi to retreat from its hawkish and unilateral approach when dealing with the Kashmir Issue—an enduring crisis Pakistan has been grappling with to resolve, since long.<sup>60</sup>

Third party mediation to defuse the crisis as a short-term ceasefire was another evolving factor, involving both the US and China to support and engage their partners deeply, globalizing the Kashmir Issue the root-cause of the conflict, while eroding the Indian role as a credible bilateral actor.<sup>61</sup> That's why, the US President Donald Trump offered his mediation to resolve the Kashmir Issue between India and Pakistan with much to the chagrin of the former, which long held considered Kashmir conflict a "local issue" between the two countries. Resultantly, in post-Pahalgam scenario India is unwillingly convinced to consider Pakistan as a peer competitor in South Asia.<sup>62</sup>

### Coming Sino-Pak Interoperability: A Sign of Strengthening Strategic Partnership

Deepening interoperability at all levels of real-time battle-zone has transformed the Sino-Pak strategic cooperation into a quasi-military alliance—a new

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<sup>57</sup> Yashraj Sharma, "'Burst Balloon': How Pahalgam Attack Shattered Modi's Kashmir Narrative," *Al Jazeera*, April 28, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2025/4/28/burst-balloon-how-pahalgam-attack-shattered-modis-kashmir-narrative>

<sup>58</sup> Pravin Sawhney, "Operation Sindoor: How India's Gamble Backfired and Made it More Vulnerable," *The Wire*, June 8, 2025, <https://m.thewire.in/article/security/operation-sindoor-how-indias-gamble-backfired-and-made-it-more-vulnerable>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Kashaf Rehman, "US Confirms Trump's Willingness to Mediate Kashmir Dispute After India-Pakistan Dispute," *Arab News*, June 11, 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2604106/amp>

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

precedent, at least in South Asia.<sup>63</sup>

In subverting the looming Indian-pivot of surprise and unilateral air strikes in Pakistan—mimicking the Israeli preemptive striking strategy in the Middle East, both China and Pakistan worked together to secure the latter's skies through range of ISR measures armed with electronic warfare systems designed to counter the aggressive Indian airpower.<sup>64</sup> From cooperating jointly in building the JF-17 Thunder fighter jets to providing Pakistan with China's emerging technology of 4.5 generation fighters, J-10C and new advanced missiles on board, named PL-15 that penetrated the Indian airspace to precisely hitting its Rafales and other targets from a distance of 200 to 300 KM, while remaining in Pakistan in a Beyond the Visual Range operational environment, Sino-Pak military cooperation clearly evident in this latest conflict.<sup>65</sup>

When it comes to maneuvering and operating in the changing environment of space and cyberspace, Chinese version of Beidou and other space-oriented assets helped strengthen Pakistan's fighting posture in its deep operational achievements, which could not be achieved, at least by relying on American or any other version of GPS. Thus, Sino-Pak interoperability is based on multi-domain operational environment centered on network-centric warfare systems. And this operational achievement ultimately consummated into a strategic victory both the nations got benefited.<sup>66</sup>

It means, that more the Indians are antagonized against Pakistan, the more the Sino-Pak relations will strengthen mainly in military spheres. By testing and visualizing the power and credibility of its military technology against the much touted western weaponry systems including the US, the Chinese also gained much from its cooperation with Pakistan. Now the Chinese weapon system, in particular, its inventory of modern aircrafts including J-10C are being acclaimed worldwide as a peer competitor as-compared to the western military technology—an outcome which would likely favour the Chinese defence industry than that of the western Military Industrial Complex in the future.<sup>67</sup>

In sum, Sino-Pak strategic cooperation has been transformed into a deep interoperability of operational and tactical engagement during the latest battle between nuclear states—an unlikely scenario which was not seen in the past. And this development is a clear indication that both nations will cooperate furthermore

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<sup>63</sup> Ranjit Bhushan, "The Depth of Pakistan-China Alliance and What it Means for India," *Mint*, May 14, 2025,

<sup>64</sup> Srikanth Kondapalli, "China's Proxy War Against India and Implications of Supporting Pakistan," *IMPRI*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.impriindia.com/insights/china-againstindia-supporting-pakistan/>

<sup>65</sup> Arslan Bilal, "Drones, Missiles, and a Battle of Chinese and European Fighter Jets: Lessons on the Future of War from the Indian Subcontinent's Skies," *MWI*, June 19, 2025, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/drones-missiles-and-a-battle-of-chinese-and-european-fighter-jets-lessons-on-the-future-of-war-from-the-indian-subcontinents-skies/>

<sup>66</sup> Pravin Sawhney, "Operation Sindoor: How India's Gamble Backfired and Made it More Vulnerable," *The Wire*, June 8, 2025, <https://m.thewire.in/article/security/operation-sindoor-how-indias-gamble-backfired-and-made-it-more-vulnerable>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

even in the areas that are still unexplored, strengthening the Sino-Pak overall force posture and the will to contain the Indian hawkish military approach in South Asia.

### **Rising Pakistan's Role as a Credible Nuclear State**

Amid the Indian propaganda warfare, Pakistan restrained throughout heightening the crisis, avoiding nuclear brinkmanship to incentivize no first use policy, while presenting Islamabad with a credible nuclear posture. Resultantly, this situation could not pose nuclear alerts at public level to prevent any public panic from dominating the crisis.<sup>68</sup> For instance, when India deliberately expanded its aggressive drone campaign near to Pakistan's strategic command center, Islamabad raised this concern as an existential threat for global security with the US and other powers, paving the way of direct American mediation to defuse the crisis. This situation has justified how Pakistan perceived the threat in time of mounting Indian aggression. Civil-military unison to deal with foreign aggression is another strong side, providing Islamabad an edge how to comprehend the evolving conflict and the measures to contain it in the post-Pahalgam attack scenario.<sup>69</sup>

Take the NCA, for example, it was in-time meeting call by the Pakistan's government to alarm the international community and, in particular, the U.S. that India is bent on expanding its operational web—a clear deviation from its previous position, has undermined the South Asian strategic stability.<sup>70</sup>

Amid the Pakistan's air strikes deeply penetrating the Indian airspace, the Modi government had to rethink of not sticking to its existing "No First Use" policy, claiming it that New Delhi would not to live up with Pakistan's "Nuclear Blackmail"—a changing position from its previous "No First Use" policy.<sup>71</sup> Humiliation in conventional military capacity could force India to "compensate" it with nuclear brinkmanship, raising the concerns for already fragile deterrence stability in South Asia.

## **CONCLUSION**

Given the Indian military humiliation and its demising regional influence in the latest four day war against Pakistan, coming anarchy in South Asia is imminent—an outcome which could force New Delhi to restart another conflict against Pakistan. It means, that nuclear threshold could further erode from its existing trajectory of already lowering. And this dangerous trajectory will attract other outsider powers to support their respective partners, just to heightening the

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<sup>68</sup> Rabia Akhtar, "Fast Wars, Steady Threshold: Why South Asia's Nuclear Persists in a Compressed Battlespace," *The Wire*, June 13, 2025, <https://m.thewire.in/article/security/south-asias-nuclear-restraint-persists-india-pakistan>

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> "Pakistan PM Calls Meeting of Body that Oversees Nuclear Arsenal, Says Pakistan Military," *Reuter News*, May 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-pm-calls-meeting-body-that-oversees-nuclear-arsenal-says-pakistan-2025-05-10/>

<sup>71</sup> "Statement By Official Spokesperson," *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, August 11, 2025*, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/39987/Statement\\_by\\_Official\\_Spokesperson](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/39987/Statement_by_Official_Spokesperson)

crisis.

While some new technologies and war fighting techniques have damaged deterrence stability, these changing operational dynamics will decide whether nuclear deterrence is the last resort of maintaining strategic stability in South Asia. And this is a very dangerous trend.

Airpower is remained and will remain to be a strategy of survival in the modern warfare, decreasing the utility of land forces, if not totally eliminating them in the coming Indo-Pak conflict. This trend will force both adversaries to invest more in airpower to strengthen their range of various new layers of advancement—the heterogeneous airpower for multi-domain operational environment. In a nutshell, the Pak-Indian evolving conflict situation, and, in particular, after the Pahalgam attacks, has been transformed into a new era of military competition, where chances of threat situation monitoring and its reduction are becoming increasingly grim. And this situation will ultimately run counter to the strategic stability of South Asia the both nuclear states maintained, since 2001.