

India's New Counter-terror Doctrine: Coping with Nuclear Impunity

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Summary

The terror attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir, on 22 April 2025 – resulting in the death of 26 civilians – and India's muscular military response to it in early May 2025 marked an important inflection point in India's strategic posture toward Pakistan. As he brought the curtains down on military hostilities, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared that India would no longer be deterred by the threat of nuclear escalation and would respond decisively to cross-border terrorism. This assertion signifies a transformation in India's long-standing security doctrine that underlined restraint in responding to terror attacks originating in Pakistan.

Historically, India had adopted a posture of strategic restraint, largely refraining from direct military retaliation despite enduring a series of terror attacks traced to Pakistan-based groups – most notably in Mumbai (2008). This restraint has been informed by the belief that military escalation, particularly across the Line of Control (LoC), risked spinning out into a broader conflict that could involve the use of nuclear weapons. Pakistan's emphasis on the first use of nuclear weapons added to India's reluctance to exercise conventional retaliation against terrorism.

Since they took charge of the Indian government in 2014, Modi and his advisers sought to break out of this difficult constraint. The attempt to break out of the dilemma were marked by the Modi government's surgical strikes against terror hideouts in Pakistan in 2016, following the terror attack in Uri, and the aerial strikes against terror infrastructure in Pakistan after the Pulwama terror attack in 2019.

These operations signalled India's willingness to cross the LoC (2016) and, more significantly, strike targets within Pakistan proper (2019). The response to the Pahalgam attack further cements this transition. Indian airstrikes conducted on May 7 2025 targeted terror camps not only in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir but also [deep inside western Punjab](#) – specifically in Muridke and Bahawalpur. Muridke hosts the headquarters of Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), and Bahawalpur is the base of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). LeT and JeM have been at the forefront of the jihad against India, but New Delhi thought that these places were too risky to engage due to proximity to civilian populations and the fear of escalation.

India's response to Pahalgam was not immediate. The two-week delay allowed India to carefully calibrate its responses. It began with the downgrading of diplomatic missions in the two capitals and cutting the remaining trade links. In a major move, [India suspended the implementation of the Indus Waters Treaty](#) (IWT) – a foundational water-sharing agreement from 1960 – and declared that the treaty will remain in abeyance until Pakistan stops its support for cross border terrorism.

On the diplomatic front, India mobilised international support by highlighting Pakistan's continued complicity in fostering terrorism and sharing information on the Pahalgam terror attack. Most countries did call for restraint but also expressed empathy and sorrow at the terror attack. Except for China and Turkey, the international community largely backed India's right to self-defence. A significant diplomatic win was the [United Nations Security Council's refusal to issue any statement](#) on Pakistan's complaint against India's aggressive posture and the threat to international peace and security.

After the May 7 2025 air strikes on Pakistan, [India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri](#) called them "measured, non-escalatory, proportionate and responsible". Misri also said India's focus was on terror camps and minimisation of civilian collateral damage. While targeting Pakistan's heartland of Punjab, India did lose some air assets ([Pakistan claimed](#) it shot down five Indian fighter aircraft, but the Indian side has not confirmed the extent of its combat losses).

The main message from New Delhi was that it will no longer hold itself back in responding with conventional military force against terror attacks originating from Pakistan. New Delhi also signalled that it has no desire to further escalate the situation. However, the vigorous Pakistan counter attacks saw India eventually respond with another round of air strikes – this time on [11 Pakistani airbases](#) on 10 May 2025.

As the crisis escalated, United States' (US) Vice President J D Vance and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio stepped into defuse the situation. The [Indian announcement of a ceasefire](#) came on the evening of 10 May 2025 after the Pakistani Director General of Military Operations Major General Kashif Abdullah called his Indian counterpart, Lieutenant General Rajiv Ghai, on the hotline between the two military establishments. While [US President Donald Trump claimed credit](#) for the ceasefire, the [Indian side insisted](#) that there was no American mediation and the decision came about in the conversations between the two military establishments.

In a [major speech on 12 May 2025](#), Modi offered a comprehensive Indian version of the events leading to the ceasefire and laid out three specific markers for Pakistan and the world – one, Modi declared that any terror attack from Pakistan will be met with decisive retaliation; two, India will not tolerate Pakistan's nuclear 'blackmail', and that the existence of Pakistani nuclear weapons will no longer stop India from striking against terrorist safe havens; and three, India will no longer differentiate between terrorist organisations and the entities that shelter and support them.

While the current strikes represent a psychological victory and an assertion of deterrence, they also expose the structural deficiencies in India's defence posture. Despite its growing economic and diplomatic clout, India's military capabilities remain insufficient to impose New Delhi's will on Pakistan. To enforce the new redlines, the Modi government would have to revitalise its intelligence capabilities to prevent and pre-empt terror attacks and accelerate its defence modernisation to acquire a decisive edge over Pakistan's military. This is bound to years to achieve once the government embarks purposefully on such a mission.

Perhaps the most long-term implication of the Pahalgam crisis lies in the potential restructuring of the India-Pakistan engagement framework. The suspension of the IWT underlines India's determination to use the [Indus waters as a leverage](#) to compel Pakistan to stop supporting terrorism.

The Modi doctrine represents a decisive departure from the era of strategic restraint that has defined Indian responses to Pakistan-backed terrorism since the 1990s. By discarding the fear of nuclear escalation as an absolute deterrent, India has opened new space for assertive retaliation and strategic maneuvering. However, the sustainability of this approach will depend on New Delhi's ability to quickly bridge the gap between its political demands on Islamabad and India's military capabilities. It will also depend on the kind of military political choices that Pakistan might make in response to Modi's new doctrine.

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