THE HARD LESSONS: RIPPLES BEYOND PAHALGAM

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Abstract

The Pahalgam conflict presents a moment of critical reflection for Pakistan. Clearly, India could not be deterred from undertaking a new type of technology-savvy war, revealing India's willingness to exploit nuclear ambiguity and Pakistan's internal vulnerabilities. It underscored India's growing appetite for limited war under a "counter-terrorism" pretext. Pakistan must urgently respond to the lessons as the next war is around the corner. Modernisation of air defence systems, refinement of war conceptualisation, and strengthening of tri-service synergy are no longer mere options. Equally urgent is economic revival and national unity in order to deter aggression and maintain strategic stability in the face of growing threats. Without holistic reforms, India's escalating aggression backed by international impunity will continue to test Pakistan's strategic tolerance, or may eventually escalate beyond.

Keywords: Pakistan, India, Nuclear, Pahalgam, Deterrence.

Introduction

It was in the beautiful mountains of Pahalgam in April 2025 that a gruesome plot began to unfold – one that would trigger a crisis between two nuclear-armed states and bring South Asia to the brink of nuclear confrontation. What began as a so-called "terrorist attack" rapidly spiralled into a full-blown military confrontation, a "modern war," to be precise, exposing the fragility of deterrence in an environment where nuclear posturing and conventional aggression coexist in lethal ambiguity. For Pakistan, the crisis was not merely another flare-up in the perennial cycle of hostilities with India; it was a stark revelation of strategic miscalculations, diplomatic inertia, and the dangerous consequences of a misplaced nuclear-conventional deterrence posture against a conventionally

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superior adversary. The lessons of Pahalgam extend beyond the events of those fateful days; they lay bare uncomfortable truths. Pakistan's security paradigm has altered, and another conflict may loom on the horizon, as India's military confidence and global tolerance for its blatant aggression grow in the emerging world order. In this context, Pahalgam has a message for Pakistan: some invaluable "hard lessons".

The Pahalgam crisis unfolded with a terrifying clarity; India is no longer deterred from applying military force even in the face of Pakistan's nuclear capability. In the face of India's growing appetite for limited war, Pakistan is confronted with an existential question: How can a nation with dwindling economic reserves and multiple internal fault lines sustain a credible defensive posture against an adversary which has enhanced international support for its aggression, and which naively and recklessly does not account for the threat of mutual annihilation? There is a need to urgently seek answers to these questions as Pahalgam is not the last, but another iteration of Indian probing to widen the space for war and comprehend Pakistan's strategic tolerance. Next such confrontation may not be far, and before that, Pakistan must not only learn from the Pahalgam conflict, but also take decisive actions to address its strategic shortcomings. This paper thus seeks to extract key insights from the Pahalgam confrontation through the prism of established theoretical frameworks. It will attempt to juxtapose relevant existing theories with the conduct of war by Pakistan and India in the backdrop of the Pahalgam attack, in an effort to expose limitations in Pakistan's defence paradigm. Finally, it would outline broad contours of possible lines of action for achieving sustainable security for Pakistan in an asymmetrical regional landscape.

Aim & Objectives of the Paper

This is analytical research[1], which will examine events of the Pahalgam conflict in the backdrop of Pakistan's nuclear deterrence, conventional capabilities and Indian appetite for a new war, within the framework of existing theoretical constructs, where applicable. The objective is to extract lessons from the Pahalgam conflict with a focus on comprehending the inadequacies contributing towards Indian confidence in waging war and Pakistan's defence challenges for the future.

Theoretical Frameworks

This paper draws on several theoretical frameworks to examine the events of the Pahalgam confrontation. Making use of the "Realist paradigm", the paper seeks to comprehend the world and shifts in the existing global order, with a view to drawing pertinent conclusions for Pakistan. "Theory of Deterrence", which is rooted in the nuclear standoff between the US and the Soviet Union, has been used to understand Pakistan's deterrence posture and identify reasons behind increased Indian boldness. Thomas Schelling first articulated the theory[2] and was later refined by scholars like Patrick Morgan[3] and Michael Mazarr[4], emphasising how the possession of destructive capabilities can dissuade adversaries and serve national interests. Clausewitz's "Nature and Character of War", along with his concept of the "Trinity", further expounded by Colonel Summers, has been employed to understand the need for Pakistan to revise its response paradigm and to identify incentivising elements in Indian strategic thought. The modern concept of "Integration and Jointness" in force application has proven helpful in highlighting the changing character of war, while also revealing shortcomings in Pakistan's defence framework. Finally, Indian use of media has been studied in the backdrop of the concept of "Information Warfare", drawing policy recommendations for Pakistan.

Anarchy & Chaos

The realist paradigm defines the global system in terms of chaos and self-help with no central authority to enforce order. While the idea is debatable, at its core, the global system has somehow reflected the strands of anarchy and chaos, despite thin outer layers of order and cooperation. Realists like Hans Morgenthau repeatedly cautioned states operating in a competitive environment to comprehend the need for prioritising "strategic necessities" of the states over moral concerns[5]. Kenneth Waltz, on the other hand, emphasised the need to rely on 'self-help' against threats independently and on one's own[6]. John Mearsheimer, another proponent of the realist school, proposes maximisation of power by states for survival, while Thomas Hobbes' portrayal of the "state of nature" as a "war of all against all" amply explains the inner skew of human fundamental nature. And finally, Thucydides reflects this logic in as few words as "the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must"[7].

This realist worldview provides a valuable lens for understanding the Pahalgam crisis, revealing some relevant conclusions. Indian stage-managed attack on its own people, killing as many as 26 civilians, and leveraged it for their

greater intent; the prioritisation of the state's strategic needs over morality. Missile attacks on Pakistan were a blatant violation of international norms. Yet, India endeavoured to use the UN statement on Pahalgam attacks as a jus ad bellum for their use of military instruments. Before doing so, it continuously shaped the international environment, even managed to attain a US nod for their upcoming offensive, a pure display of power play and realism wherein the Indians leveraged their relevance and market for their sinister political designs. While several countries supported Pakistan, at least in the perception domain, India managed to portray diplomatic isolation, highlighting the need for self-help.

The message is crystal clear for Pakistan; it needs to understand that appeals to international law and morality are all symbolic and superficial. The core of international relations is anarchic, chaotic, devoid of morality, and marked by the nude expression of violence and power. In a crisis, no guarantor will rush to aid, and moral high ground offers no shield against raw power, hence the need for self-help.

However, while realism emphasises the maximisation of power, Pakistan must adopt a broader understanding of what that power is. Military strength is essential, but it cannot be created, sustained, or projected in isolation. Lasting national strength comes from the fusion of multiple elements of national power: economic resilience, technological advancement, educated human capital, internal stability, diplomatic relevance, and the ability to shape international perception. A narrow focus on hard power alone risks building a hollow structure vulnerable to strategic shocks, directly undermining latent or potential power. These neglected domains, like education, socio-economic reforms, human resource development, etc, are not luxuries, but core components of national strength in the long run. The inability to nurture them weakens internal cohesion, erodes innovation, and leaves the state ill-equipped to deal with emerging threats or to leverage opportunities. Strategic resilience, therefore, depends not just on tanks and missiles, but on minds, markets, and institutional capacity.

Hence, the requirement for self-help must be viewed holistically, not just in military terms. Pakistan needs to build its relevance by not only strengthening its hard military power, but also, alongside, by meaningful investments in human resource development, science and technology, regional connectivity, and trade integration. Pakistan must also move beyond ad-hoc approaches and urgently establish a sustained, multi-tiered Research & Development (R&D) ecosystem, one

that identifies and nurtures talent, integrates seamlessly with quality higher education, and aligns closely with long-term strategic and defence needs. Such a framework should embed innovation within academia, link it to national objectives, and be driven by consistent policy.

Trinity – People, Army and the Government

Clausewitz conceptualises war as a phenomenon composed of three central and interrelated elements—primordial violence, chance, and subordination to policy, forming what he calls a "paradoxical trinity". These three elements in his "paradoxical trinity" find expression in a distinct societal actor: primordial violence in the people, chance and probability in the military, and rational policy in the government[8]. Building on Clausewitz's ideas, US Army Colonel Harry G. Summers Jr. introduced the concept of the "Summersian Trinity". He emphasised that a nation cannot hope to achieve victory in war unless the people, the army, and the government are kept tightly aligned[9]. Summers' framework goes beyond Clausewitz by stressing not just the existence of these elements, but their synchronisation; a lesson hard-learned from America's strategic failure in Vietnam.

In Pakistan's case, however, this foundational alignment has remained fragile. From the outset, Pakistan inherited a tapestry of identities marked by underlying fissures. Building nations over such a diverse population demands a patient, inclusive political order capable of reconciling differences, nurturing civic institutions, and building a durable consensus. Instead, what took root was an ad-hoc, control-driven structure that relied on temporary fixes rather than long-term cohesion. As a result, state-society relations remained inelastic, and institutions lacked the maturity needed for enduring stability. This underlying fragility, over time, introduced imbalances into the core structure of Clausewitz's trinity. It gradually eroded the trust that binds its components. As this bond weakens, alignment fades, leaving the system incoherent and unresponsive to complex challenges. Such internal dissonance, even if unnoticed in the moment, creates long-term vulnerabilities. In an era of "hybrid warfare" and "grey-zone conflicts", they offer adversaries ample space to exploit. Even without external interference, the continued reliance on exclusionary, short-term frameworks fosters discontent. Left unattended, this discontent risks crystallising into irreversible divides, driving fragmentation not by force, but by internal drift.

The Pahalgam confrontation must be seen in this broader strategic context of the Clausewitzian trinity. It was this visible disalignment within Pakistan's trinity, coupled with a permissive strategic environment, that gave India the confidence to apply force, anticipating multiple strategic gains. Apart from further expanding space for war and eroding strategic deterrence, India sought to manipulate perceptions. It aimed to widen the perceived gulf in Pakistan's trinity, portraying Pakistan's state apparatus as disjointed and its military overstretched. The attempt was to create a double stretch onto the leadership, external through direct strategy, and internal through mil-eco degradation and indirect strategy. India expected that this would trigger public outrage, not against India, but against the Armed Forces and the government of Pakistan.

Indeed, India could not succeed in achieving its design. But what has become evident is that Pakistan has in its neighbourhood a cunning enemy, which is constantly seeking any exploitable opportunity. Hence, the need for a stronger trinity. Pakistan cannot afford to have any gaps in this bond, lest India would always exploit such voids to its advantage in future. Pakistan must institutionalise the alignment of its people, military, and government through good governance, economic resilience, and political stability. The media's role in shaping public perception, the military's adaptability to hybrid threats, and the representative government's ability to deliver governance must function in harmony. Only then can Pakistan deter not just conventional aggression, but also the insidious campaigns aimed at fracturing its national unity.

Conceptualisation of War

Military development is a continuous process, which is usually capability-based or threat-based [10]. Pakistan's military strategy for development has traditionally hinged upon the environment, threat and integration of modern warfare techniques[11]. The Pahalgam conflict has highlighted several gaps in our military capabilities and development strategy. Most of Pakistan's development expenditure is being allocated to expanding land forces, reflecting a warfare concept dominated by land-based strategy. Contrarily, the Pahalgam standoff has unveiled an entirely different type of war. Stretched over almost five days, this war was technology-heavy, long-range, precise and deadly, with more reliance on air and non-contact assets, with an effective display of Indian missile defence capability. Notwithstanding issues with our deterrence posturing, if the permissible window of 5-6 days of war does exist in the subcontinent, then the

character of this war has to be redefined in terms of enemy capabilities and force application strategies. This highlights the need to prioritise non-contact warfare (precision strikes with capabilities to evade missile defences) while reinforcing our air defences. In that, too, quality as well as quantity, both would matter. In the Pahalgam conflict, we saw the Indian propensity to remain in lower rungs for extended durations. Had they not suffered substantial losses right from the outset, Pakistan could have expected extended lower rungs cross-domain operations. For such a war, responding once may not be sufficient and hence the importance of numbers. Equally important is the ability to respond with effects. Should Pakistan's missiles be intercepted before reaching their intended targets, it would create a significant strategic asymmetry, particularly given India's ability to conduct strikes with relative impunity. Answer thus, may lie in more advanced, perhaps hypersonic missiles; quality defined by range, accuracy, lethality and effectiveness. More broadly, this necessitates a force development strategy rooted in an ontological understanding of warfare as an evolving dialectic between capability and contingency. Only such an approach can enable timely and effective responses and avoid last-minute surprises with limited options.

Deterrence Dilemma

Pakistan and India have had a complex deterrence relationship since the overt nuclearisation of both in 1998. Pakistan's nuclear policy, while hinged upon the idea of 'ambiguity', was still somewhat defined in terms of certain thresholds extracted out of talks and statements by numerous related officials[12]. India's military strategists interpreted these thresholds as "space for limited war", leading to doctrines like Cold Start and later Pro-Active Operations strategy, which envisioned rapid, shallow incursions designed to stay below Pakistan's nuclear redlines. Pakistan responded by developing "Full Spectrum Deterrence", including tactical nuclear weapons, multiple re-entry vehicles, and a nuclear triad, aiming to close gaps in its deterrent posture. Yet, despite these capabilities, Pakistan's deliberate ambiguity and displayed rational behaviour in crises have inadvertently emboldened Indian confidence in waging a controlled conflict without triggering nuclear escalation[13].

The 2019 Balakot crisis became a critical case study in this dynamic. India's airstrike on Balakot (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, mainland Pakistan) was framed as a counterterrorism operation. It was met with a restrained Pakistani response confined to disputed Kashmir. This exchange reinforced India's belief that Pakistan would avoid nuclear escalation in limited conflicts, further

eroding deterrence. The episode also highlighted the stability-instability paradox [14]. Balakot was refined and has been repeated in the Pahalgam confrontation, in which India pursued a short, high-intensity cross-domain campaign for four days, inflicting military and economic costs while avoiding nuclear retaliation.

So, the question is what is wrong with Pakistan's deterrence. Repeated cycles of force application over the last two decades (2016-Uri, 2019-Balakot, 2022-Mian Chunnu, 2025-Pahalgam) have enabled India to comprehend Pakistan's behaviour, which is rationality-driven and cautious. In reality, nuclear and conventional deterrence are incompatible in a given context, and their simultaneous[15] employment is very complex, even paradoxical. This is especially true in the case of Pakistan and India, where the latter has demonstrated a willingness to employ military force, while the former consistently insists otherwise. In such an environment, if India manages to initiate a conflict (as it has repeatedly done over the last two decades) and Pakistan's conventional forces suffer significant attrition owing to Indian military action, it might face the dangerous choice of either accepting defeat or escalating to nuclear use; a lose-lose scenario. Pakistan can expect similar episodes in future with a further fine-tuned Indian strategy. A conceivable and potentially perilous scenario can emerge in future, in which India may manage to strike militarily in a calibrated manner using contact and non-contact means in a short, high-tempo operational cycle, degrading critical assets of the Armed Forces of Pakistan. Having imposed higher costs of war or at least destroying or damaging critical assets, it may then switch to indirect warfare, economic pressure, and global diplomatic manoeuvres, stretching its efforts in the mid to long term, to isolate Pakistan, portraying it as an unstable nuclear state.

Despite Pakistan's nuclear deterrence, India has so far managed to repeat these cycles recurrently. It implies that there may be a need to review, evolve and fine-tune Pakistan's deterrence posture. Deterrence theory rests on clarity of communication [16], whereas ambiguity thrives on deliberate opacity. The effectiveness of deterrence is directly tied to the degree of "certainty" instilled in the adversary's mind about the consequences of a given action. In Pakistan's case, however, this effectiveness is steadily diminishing for two reasons: first, Pakistan's ambiguous deterrent posture gainsays established principles of deterrence, which are predicated upon 'clarity'; second, India, through repeated iterations of limited force applications, continues to evolve its policies and strategies within the

conventional military and nuclear domain. Pakistan's response to these provocations has always displayed deliberate rationality and caution.

Deliberate rationality stands as the antithesis of nuclear deterrence, which instead requires a stronger and more explicit projection of irrationality[17]. In fact, since the early phases of development of strategies post-nuclearisation of the US and USSR, this projection of irrationality has been clearly visible. For instance, the US strategy of "massive retaliation", the Soviet doctrine of "Preemptive strikes", and, of late, statements by President Putin threatening the use of nuclear weapons against NATO countries[18]. The whole idea hinges upon displaying 'deliberate irrationality' to invoke fear of unacceptable cost, without which an adversary like India, which is bent upon using its military might, cannot be deterred.

Displayed rationality (instead of irrationality) by Pakistan is precisely why Indian military planners are increasingly getting confident that there exists operational space for conventional conflict short of Pakistan's perceived nuclear threshold. This must change. There are a number of possible ways to project deliberate irrationality, as already highlighted in cases of the US and USSR. These may involve the delegation of launch authorities, loss of control and other conceivable measures. It would signal a higher risk of escalation to dissuade Indian adventurism. Secondly, instead of an ambiguous nuclear threshold, clarity would be more beneficial[19]. Explicit redlines would strengthen deterrence by eliminating Indian misperceptions. Finally, adaptive posturing and regularly revising nuclear and conventional strategies would disrupt India's predictability models. These measures would impose a serious check on Indian efforts to manifest limited-war strategies against Pakistan. Only through imposition of such a check can Pakistan avoid getting embroiled in a long-drawn war of attrition or a short high-intensity war of high cost amidst economic crisis and internal instability.

Expression of Violence

War is an expression of violence, and this expression has to be extreme[20] to reset the environment and cater for the policy failures leading to war. In the Pakistan-India conflict, India is the one which has hegemonic aspirations. With the changed domestic mood and rise of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power, this aspiration, especially against Pakistan, has intensified manifold. Indian calculus perceives the Pakistan-India equation as a zero-sum game. Therefore, the

propensity for violence against Pakistan will always be there. To thwart Indian aggression, Pakistan principally relies on nuclear deterrence coupled with a strategy of QPQ plus[21] or notch above response'. But over the last two decades, as explained above, India has managed to erode it by repeated cycles of force applications and due to the displayed rationality and caution in Pakistan's response. Hence, we cannot rule out such iterations by India in future as well.

The need, therefore, is twofold. Pakistan needs to deter India effectively by evolving, in order to sap any space for war, even a limited one, as already highlighted before. However, if Pakistan intends to respond to India's lower rung provocations (like in the Balakot and Pahalgam crises), then it must conform to the logic of war. War is an expression of violence which has to be intense. Pakistan's response to Indian lower rung provocations, therefore, should be considerably violent, and not cautious or restrained. Only such a disproportionate response, a high-vertical escalation, with precise and long-range munitions against high-value targets, would deter India from continuing the violence further or repeating it in future.

Given this context, we can notice specific gaps on Pakistan's part in the Pahalgam Crisis. After the first round of aerial battle, Pakistan's military 'Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR)' announced that five Indian jets had been destroyed successfully. However, more could have been[22], barring the exercise of restraint. Why this humbleness? Indians initiated war with total disregard for international norms and attacked mainland Pakistan with missiles, inflicting casualties and destruction to civilian properties. The defensive response by Pakistan was a right granted to it by the UN[23]. And while delivering such a response, it is not understandable why Pakistan remained humble. If more jets could have been downed, even more should have been. And built into such a response should have been heavy military targeting with lethal and precise munitions to deliver a severe blow to Indian aggression. Neither of these two was executed. As Pakistan went into response decision-making, India took no time to switch to drone warfare. Pakistan waited even further, which led to another wave of Indian missile attacks on military targets, including on Noor Khan Air Base in Rawalpindi [24]. Finally, Pakistan responded with a well-synchronised and coordinated offensive by the Army's Artillery and Air Force assets, which led to the destruction of Indian critical assets like S-400[25] and damage to their other military installations. But this again was a sober response. While India continuously used the long-range supersonic Brahmos missile, Pakistan

responded with the Fatah series and air-launched missiles, with mediocre range and lethality. Still, though effective, Pakistan's response was met by a massive Indian counter-response, all over Pakistan targeting maximum Pakistan Air Force's air fields, a third wave, destroying runways and damaging equipment. The expression of violence, then, was visible in Indian responses, but was modest in Pakistan's. The idea to give face-saving or an exit window to the adversary (or even 'escalation control' in this case/scenario) is flawed in every term when it comes to war. War is an expression of extreme violence by nature. While the character of war may change, this nature has to be truly exhibited to smash the opposing will to continue violence. After the war, something must change. While it can be said to have happened for India, Pakistan's claim to such change is diffident. India is likely to resort to another episode of such blatant use of force in the near future, albeit in an even more refined manner. To break these cycles, Pakistan may need to consider recalibrating its deterrence posture as already explained. However, a strategy of 'QPQ plus / notch above response', additionally, would require aggressiveness, intensity and low regard for 'restraint', inflicting a very high cost on India to affect conventional deterrence.

Perceptions – A New Reality in Its Own Might

We live in a post-truth era, where perceptions are the truth of the day. In today's interconnected world, a significant function of diplomacy and foreign policy is to shape perceptions; instead, some even consider it their very essence[26]. A nation's success often depends more on how it is seen than what it actually does. Perception management, therefore, becomes a quiet art, the deliberate shaping of beliefs, both at home and abroad. At its core, it is the strategic projection of identity, strength, and purpose, crafted to make others believe what one needs them to believe.

India has developed a sophisticated information warfare (IW) ecosystem, blending state-aligned media, cyber operations, and psychological tactics to shape narratives domestically and internationally. The profundity and effectiveness of this ecosystem were first uncovered in great detail by "EU Disinfo Lab", which clearly revealed fifteen years of massive Indian online and offline influence operations to discredit Pakistan internationally[27]. Recent studies have revealed Indian IW's influence over hundreds of media outlets operating across the world in more than 60 countries[28]. Pahalgam conflict further exposes the Indian effective use of this IW ecosystem. False claims of destruction in Pakistan, covering up of own losses, fake military strikes, fabricated stories, and proactive disinformation

were hallmarks of Indian use of this ecosystem. Major outlets like Zee News, India Today, and Times continued to broadcast fabricated reports. These efforts were amplified by a network of social media influencers, bots, and pro-government outlets, which propagated hyper-nationalist content to inflame public sentiment and legitimise military actions internationally. This ecosystem demonised Pakistan, framing it as a "terrorist state" integrating AI-driven deepfakes and sentiment analysis tools for real-time manipulation of public opinion, creating a seamless blend of factual reporting and orchestrated falsehoods. Indian media effectively used its own deliberate (or technical error-based) missile strikes on Amritsar to shape Sikhs' perception about Pakistan[29], and Pakistan's strikes in Kashmir as "anti-civilian". Indian outlets circulated fake videos, pushing narratives of "Hindu victimhood"[30]. The government-military-information nexus was stark; anchors like retired Major Gaurav Arya, Arnab Goswami, Palki Sharma and others continued making false claims[31], offensive language[32] and provocative statements on primetime TV. Social media platforms were flooded with AI-generated content, like a viral deepfake falsely showing a Pakistani pilot in Indian custody[33]. Notwithstanding the flip side of this massive dis-info campaign wherein Indian media lost a great deal of its credibility, the campaign's most insidious effect was the entrenchment of a binary "us vs them" worldview, an emotional narrative that sidelined Kashmir's human rights crisis and illegal Indian occupation, reframing Indian aggression as "measured self-defence"[34]. Even when India itself offered a ceasefire, it later reversed the narrative, claiming Pakistan had initiated the request, further reinforcing its victim posture.

In the post-truth world, truth alone is not enough; what matters is what the world believes. Despite tactical, operational or strategic gains, perceptual defeats can overshadow reality. India's disinformation machine poses a long-term threat to reality, and to counter this, Pakistan must move beyond ad-hoc responses. It needs a comprehensive information operations policy, backed by a resilient media ecosystem with global reach. Without it, disinformation will continue to shape the narrative and even history itself.

Tri-Services Synergy

World's modern militaries are increasingly prioritising tri-service synergy, having recognised that seamless coordination between army, navy, and air forces is now indispensable for achieving decisive and quick operational advantages in contemporary warfare. The complexities of multi-domain operations[35], spanning land, sea, air, space, and cyber, demand integrated command structures, shared

real-time intelligence, and synchronised strike capabilities in cross domains to outmanoeuvre adversaries.

Pahalgam confrontation vividly displayed Indian capabilities in synergising multi-domain warfare capabilities. While it continues to develop and mature this synergy and jointness, it is already in the advanced stages of operationalising theatre commands. Another upcoming key component of this integration is the proposed "Integrated Rocket Force (IRF)"[36], which would centralise India's diverse missile arsenal under a single command, enabling rapid, precision strikes in conventional roles. Meanwhile, India's drone[37] and counter-drone capabilities, showcased in the Pahalgam Crisis, amply display its prowess in indigenous systems, integrated with real-time ISR networks for deep-strikes and battlefield dominance. India's space-based surveillance (GISAT, EMISAT) feeds[38] must have had a role in feeding real-time targeting data to missile forces and drones. Indian Air Force's S-400 and Barak-8 were repeatedly in action intercepting Pakistani missiles and drones[39], thus creating a multi-layered air defence shield, synchronised with ground-based radars and electronic warfare jamming systems. This transformation reflects the Indian military's broader understanding and synergised force application operating as a unified, lethal whole.

The high-tech, precision and long-range engagements with multiple platforms, which continued for almost five days in the Pahalgam confrontation, now shape the contours of any future war. We have seen that India employed a synergised blend of all instruments of national power. Within the military domain, we see India's use of niche technologies in cross-domain operations, blending air, drones, information operations, cyber and missiles. Such synergy and synchronisation will be more mature and well-timed in future.

Any future Pakistan-India war, thus, would require Pakistan to have enhanced battlefield awareness at the tri-service level, with well-coordinated application to achieve synergy. This cannot be done at the spur of the moment. It is the peacetime preparation in terms of organisation, training and equipment, through which such synergy can be affected, warranting attention in the Armed Forces of Pakistan. Pakistan's response to Indian cross-domain operations lies in enhancing and synergising its own surveillance capabilities, battlefield awareness, and engagement grid stretched across tri-services with "unity in command". Joint

Staff Headquarters has a role in achieving this synergy and jointness. War Gaming at the Joint Staff Headquarters level can be a prudent step in this regard.

Air Defence

With the rapid advancement in air power coupled with drones, missiles, and stealth aircraft, no country can expect effective defence without having the ability to detect, intercept, and neutralise these threats and protect civilian populations, military assets, and critical infrastructure. The proliferation of precision-guided munitions and unmanned systems has further elevated the need for layered defence mechanisms, combining radar, surface-to-air missiles, swarms of drones and electronic warfare capabilities. The effectiveness of air defence in modern warfare can mean the difference between "strategic victory" and "catastrophic loss".

India has been working on its air and missile defence system for quite some time. India's use of this system in the Pahalgam crisis needs to be assessed to comprehend its impact on Pakistan. Notwithstanding its vulnerabilities, which Pakistan optimally exploited, the system is a well-coordinated combination of Russian-made S-400, indigenous Barak-8, Israeli-made Swordfish, and Green Pine radars, integrated with Prithvi, Akash and Russian-made missiles to detect and intercept aerial threats, including fighters, missiles and drones. In the Pahalgam conflict, India effectively used these systems to intercept launches from Pakistan. Contrarily, the lack of such defensive cover with Pakistan allowed the Indians to strike multiple targets, including major Air Bases[40] and other targets, with relative impunity. On top of that, swarms of killer and reconnaissance drones[41] continued to harass the common populace, while also enhancing Indian real-time battlefield situational awareness, for which Pakistan had a limited coordinated response.

The need, therefore, is to have strong Air Defence. While such a cover for the complete Pakistan would neither be possible nor advisable, critical assets like Air Bases, Command and Control nodes (C2), missile storage and launching sites, and major cities must have a layered Air Defence system, articulated under a unified command. That may imply having a robust Air Defence Force as a separate service, parallel to the existing three services, or part of the Air Force, based on the Russian[42] and Chinese[43] model.

Conclusions

The discussion thus far can be summarised in the form of the following pertinent conclusions, the hard lessons, as appended below:-

- Pakistan must internalise that, despite the facade of international norms, the global system remains anarchic and power-driven. It necessitates establishing global relevance through a holistic approach towards 'power maximisation', especially in science, technology, connectivity, and trade. It also demands initiating long-term defence R&D rooted in quality higher education to achieve indigenisation.

- The Pahalgam conflict has clearly revealed the continuous need for Pakistan to enhance internal cohesion through economic resilience and political stability, as the enemy waits to exploit any perceived internal weaknesses.

- Pakistan's military development must adapt to emerging threats. Correct conceptualising of war is central in this regard. The emerging reality is of high-tech, long-range, non-contact engagements. To remain effective, Pakistan must shift its military development towards precise, effective, lethal and long-range weapons with effective air defence, ensuring both quality and quantity to counter evolving enemy capabilities and avoid strategic surprises.

- Pakistan's deterrence posture needs to be further strengthened by projecting a 'deliberate irrationality' and 'clarity' instead of 'opacity', adapting its strategies to disrupt India's predictability and prevent conflict.

- If Pakistan intends to fight a war with India in lower rungs, then the punch should be delivered with extreme intensity, disproportionately, with precision and long-range strikes to deter further Indian escalation as Pakistan displayed its capability during Operation Marka-e-Haq. Restraint in war is not a virtue, but a vice.

- There is a need to develop hi-tech, hypersonic missiles, to counter Indian Air and Missile defence systems, if Pakistan intends to deliver an effective response to Indian missile attacks in future.

- Pakistan needs a comprehensive information operations policy and considerable influence over the global audience, either through media presence or sway over existing outlets, as perception today overrides reality.

- The need to enhance tri-services battlefield awareness, surveillance, and coordination through unified command at the Joint Staff Headquarters level with consistent peacetime preparations is more critical than ever.
- Pakistan needs a unified, layered Air Defence system to protect critical assets, possibly through a dedicated Air Defence Force or an expanded Air Force role, as seen in Russian and Chinese models.

Summing Up

The Pahalgam conflict was not merely another episode in India's military aggression; instead, it was a stark reminder that war remains an ever-present danger in South Asia. For Pakistan, this episode must serve as a wake-up call, exposing vulnerabilities in its defence strategy. Additionally, Pakistan's internal fragility, economic instability, political discord, and institutional misalignment are emboldening Indian adventurism. To counter this existential threat, Pakistan must undertake urgent and comprehensive reforms. It needs to review its deterrence and Indian propensity to carve out space for war based on the counter-terrorism construct. Modernising air defence systems, mastering perception management and correct conceptualisation of war to set correct force development goals are other areas which Pakistan must focus on immediately. However, none of this will suffice without addressing the foundational weakness, economic resilience and national unity. Only through a holistic, long-term strategy can Pakistan secure its sovereignty, stabilise the region, and prevent a catastrophic conflict with India, which it constantly seeks in its reckless strategic calculus.

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