



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



GLOBAL HORIZONS

MAY 2025

Author

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Cover Images:

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced India's new strategic approach against terrorism in his first address to the nation after 'Operation Sindoor', on May 12, 2025. Source: [Prime Minister of India](#)

US President Donald Trump speaks with officials and staff in the Oval Office during the announcement of the Golden Dome missile defense system, on May 20, 2025. Source: [X/@WhiteHouse](#)

President of Russia, Vladimir Putin met the President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, in Moscow, on May 8, 2025. Source: [Kremlin](#)

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by

Nalin Surie

The Indian response to the reprehensible Pakistan supported terrorist attack in Pahalgam on April 22 caught Pakistan and the world by surprise, both in terms of its focus on destroying terrorist camps in Pakistan and POK and the speed and accuracy of its counter attacks on military targets to the ill-judged but anticipated Pakistani response to the attack on the terror camps. The attack on the terrorist camps came very early on the morning of May 07 and the counter on military targets on May 09-10. Extensive damage was done and a large number of terrorists killed. No border or line of control was crossed. Seamless and accurate electronic and conventional warfare was on show by India's armed and para military forces.

Pakistan sought a ceasefire on May 10. India agreed to a halting of military operations across all services. That remains the status at the time of writing, i.e. suspension of action by India against Pakistan's terror and military camps.

The state of readiness in India to respond to any further direct Pakistani misadventure, or by its terrorist proxies, remains very high.

In a significant move, laden with poignancy, the Indian operation was given the name Operation Sindoor. This, in recognition of the deliberate killing of the husbands of Hindu women on April 22 by terrorists, thereby compelling them to no longer wear sindoor (vermillion) on their forehead's, for widows do not wear sindoor.

Equally significant was the public announcement by PM Modi in an address to the nation on May 12 of a new policy to deal with terrorism and attempts to break the harmony and unity of India. The message was not addressed only to Pakistan but also to its supporters and to the international community at large.

In brief, Operation Sindoor represents a new normal and a new parameter; if there is a terrorist attack on India, a fitting reply will happen on India's terms and against every place from where the roots of terrorism emerge; India will not tolerate any nuclear blackmail ; India will not differentiate between the government sponsoring terrorism and the masterminds of terrorism.

With Pakistan, terror and talks cannot go together; terror and trade cannot go together; water and blood cannot flow together; talks will be only on terrorism and on POK. Modi clarified that while this is not the era of war, it is not the era of terrorism either.

Finally, Modi it made clear that to fulfill the dream of becoming a Developed (Viksit) India, it is very necessary for India to be powerful and also use this power when required.

This new Indian doctrine for the fight against terrorism is no doubt exercising minds in Pakistan, its allies and in Chancellories across the world. Receiving lip service and advice to be restrained when terrorist attacks take place can no longer be the acceptable norm. India has taken terrorist body blows for too long now. It will henceforth aggressively protect its citizens and democracy from the menace of externally supported terror. The ball now lies firmly in Pakistan's court and that of its supporters. India is prepared for all eventualities and will assess with interest the signalling by the latter of their continued support for Pakistan. At some point they will need to make a choice going forward and advise Pakistan to cleanse itself of the Devil that resides within it.

In Europe there was a flurry of activity but lack of clarity in respect of the war in Ukraine. The ambivalence of the Trump Administration towards Ukraine and willingness to give Russia a long rope created virtual consternation in Kiev and EU capitals. With some major US concessions, including over Ukraine not becoming a NATO member, in its pocket and a tighter bromance with China following the Xi-Putin summit on May 08, Russia kept pushing the military campaign, causing death and destruction across Ukraine while stringing out talks for a ceasefire; when they happened, there was no real progress except for a prisoner of war exchange. Ukraine was not sitting idly by either, and the reported spectacular drone attacks on airfields deep in Russian territory on June 01 demonstrated Ukrainian resolve to keep going and not succumb.

Russian intransigence over the ceasefire and other talks in the face of US vacillation has strengthened European resolve through their Coalition of the Willing and the EU to urgently put in place the means for Europe to help Ukraine and also defend itself from Russia. Ideally, they would like the US and NATO on board, but they no longer seem to be holding their breath for that to happen. The June Summit of NATO could shed some light on the future US approach. But the signal from Washington appears to be that the Europeans will increasingly have to do the heavy lifting in Europe.

The UK is on board with Europe's approach to the war in Ukraine. They appear to be rediscovering their need for Europe post Brexit. This was clearly manifest

in the joint statement of the UK-EU summit on May 19 issued in London, and in the Security and Defence Partnership between the EU and UK of the same date. In effect, the UKs return to EU structures has begun to happen.

On the geo-economic front, the continued unilateral and arbitrary gyrations by the Trump Administration on its tariff policies continued to create uncertainty, threaten price rise and disrupt the markets. Among its two biggest trade and economic partners, both China and the EU received some temporary reprieve, but outcomes are not clear. The threat of major trade disruption continues to loom.

The crackdown on foreign students in the US caused further turbulence and could negatively impact the lives and careers of thousands of students, especially from China and India.

The not unexpected announcement by the US President on May 20 that he had selected a design for the USD 175 billion Golden Dome missile defence shield made waves. It is intended for protection against Russia and China. Trump said it should be operational before his term ends. That remains to be seen, but this revival of the Reagan Star Wars initiative, that is now technologically feasible, has set off alarm bells in Moscow and Beijing. The joint statement of China and Russia of May 08 on Global Strategic Stability, i.e. in anticipation, describes the Global Dome announcement as "deeply destabilising in nature" and that "this means a complete and ultimate rejection to recognise the existence of the inseparable interrelationship between strategic offensive arms and strategic defensive arms, which is one of the central and fundamental principles of maintaining global strategic stability". The additional concern expressed is that the program "also directly envisages significant strengthening of the arsenal of means to conduct operations in space". Russia and China agreed to promote on a global scale the international initiative/political commitment "not to be the first to deploy weapons in outer space".

President Trump's announcement seems to have set the cat amongst the pigeons. The disastrous implications of the arms race set off by Reagan on the then Soviet Union are not lost on China and Russia. One more arrow in Trump's quiver in dealing with China and Russia perhaps.

The situation in Gaza went from worse to horrendous from the humanitarian and civilian deaths perspective. There was no effort by the US and others to force some restraint on Israeli operations. Much verbal condemnation but in the absence of US pressure, no impact.

During the month, President Trump made his first overseas visit, of this term, May 13-16, other than for the funeral of Pope Francis, to Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar. On the face of it, the main agenda was economic and investment driven. The reality, though, is that the region is critical to long term US economic and security interests. Also, from the perspective of Israeli security and keeping Iranian nuclear and other ambitions in the region in check. And to constrain China and its influence.

There was also the Iran factor vis-à-vis the Gulf nations. US-Iran talks on the latter's nuclear program continued, but without any clear outcome. Iran is reportedly baulking at agreeing to excessive limits being placed on its ability to enrich uranium.

President Trump conveniently missed going to Israel on that trip. This appears to have been a deliberate ploy: signal annoyance with Netanyahu and keep the pressure of Palestine off his back in the Gulf.

During this visit, Trump announced the lifting of sanctions on the new regime in Syria; part of the Western strategy of minimising Russian, Iranian, Turkish and other influences in this critical geography. Syria also directly impacts Israeli security. Trump received the interim Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa in Riyadh on May 14. Al-Sharaa, a former al-Qaeda fighter, had a USD 10 million US bounty on his head.

Not unexpectedly, given the projection in recent years of the China threat and that from Russia by the West; the strategic uncertainty in Eurasia resulting from US policies under Trump; the uncertainty and turmoil also on account of US trade policies; and the earlier ongoing process of establishing secure and proximate supply chains, countries/entities like China, Russia, ASEAN and the GCC among others continued to work on new mutually beneficial trade and economic arrangements. The US also doubled down on the criticality of the Indo-Pacific for its continued global pre-eminence.

To start with, China and Russia renewed their vows over their "no limits" partnership. Chinese President Xi Jinping was de facto the main guest at Russia's celebration of the 80th anniversary of the victory in WW 2 and the founding of the UN.

Two important statements were issued. One on "Further strengthening cooperation to uphold the authority of international law" and the second on Global Strategic Stability (GSS). The former is important for both, since they are permanent members of the UNSC and wish to preserve their powers and monopoly under the UN Charter, and indeed want to ensure that the UN

remains the principal organ for international cooperation and multilateralism. Hence, they agreed to “jointly safeguard the international system with the UN at its core”.

The statement on GSS is important. It states, inter alia, that “the risk of nuclear conflict has increased”; expansion of existing and newly formed military alliances (by the US e.g. AUKUS etc.) is “highly destabilising”; forward deployment of military infrastructure and advanced weaponry is of serious concern, and the like. The reference to the Global Dome system above also refers. It is argued that the effort, by the US, to “ensure overwhelming military superiority, ‘strategic invulnerability’ and ultimately ‘absolute strategic security’, “fundamentally contradicts the logic underlying the maintenance of strategic balance and runs counter to the principle of equal and indivisible security”. (Note: the latter phrase is part of standard Chinese doctrine to justify their military build up.)

China and Russia are clearly perturbed by the likelihood of a new strategic arms race and wish to ensure “undiminished security for all”. India cannot escape the downsides of such an arms race and will need to be prepared for that.

On the economic and trade side, a major initiative was the convening under the Malaysian presidency of a trilateral ASEAN-GCC-China summit in Kuala Lumpur on May 27. From China, Premier Li Qiang attended.

In his opening remarks, PM Anwar Ibrahim described the format as creating “a new space for collaboration as we explore pathways to synergise our strengths”. The potential is substantial, and China reacted with positivity and alacrity. Li Qiang said at the summit that “by enhancing connectivity and cooperation we can pool our resources, production capacity and markets to foster a vibrant economic circle and growth pole”. He offered to discuss with ASEAN and GCC a trilateral action plan for “high quality Belt and Road cooperation”(!!) and proposed stepped up cooperation in AI, the digital economy, green and low carbon development as new growth drivers. In effect, China will want to use the opportunity to further tie in ASEAN and GCC into its hub to enable it to utilise its capacities and exploit their markets. To underline this, Li Qiang hard sold the strengths and capacities of the Chinese economy in his address to the ASEAN-GCC-China Economic Forum, also held on May 27.

The joint statement issued after the summit addresses developments in the Middle East, but not the Ukraine war.

On the substance of cooperation going forward, the joint statement covers Economic Integration, Connectivity, Energy Security and Sustainability, Digital

Transformation and Innovation, Food and Agriculture and P2P exchanges. China has strengths and capabilities in several of these sectors. This emerging new trilateral arrangement has implications for India's trade and economic partnerships with ASEAN and GCC countries and will require careful monitoring, participation where feasible and proactive protective measures where required.

China issued its first ever White Paper on National Security on May 12. The objective is to elevate the priority of safeguarding national security and accelerate the modernisation of its national security system and capacities. The paramount task is safeguarding national security. The fundamental task is political security; the primary task is advancing high quality development; the foundation is economic security; and the guarantee is military, technological, cultural and social security. None of this is new, but its re-articulation in this precise manner is thought provoking.

The unified blueprint has four dimensions: the national security system, public security governance mechanisms, social governance systems and foreign related national security mechanisms.

Security is obviously a major bugbear for the CCP and the Chinese state.

The Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore, held on May 30-June 01, provided the opportunity for the US and France to clearly enunciate their continued priority towards Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Perhaps on account of tensions in bilateral relations with the US, the Chinese Defence Minister did not attend, while the US Secretary for Defence Hegseth delivered an extensive address on May 31. President Macron of France was the chief guest and delivered the Keynote address on May 30. The PM of Malaysia spoke on May 31.

Hegseth outlined the three major objectives of US defence policy, viz., restoring the warrior ethos, rebuilding the military (USD 1trillion to be spent on this), and reestablishing deterrence.

Hegseth made clear that beyond its borders and neighbourhood, the US focus is on "reorienting toward deterring aggression by Communist China" which seeks to become a hegemonic power in Asia. The US will not be pushed out of this critical region and will not let its allies and partners be subordinated or intimidated. Further, that as allies share the burden in NATO, the US "can increase our focus on the Indo-Pacific, our priority theatre". He underlined that the US "is here to stay" in the Indo-pacific.

Interestingly, Hegseth made three important references to collaboration with India and one to the Quad.

He warned that an attempt by China to conquer Taiwan by force “could be imminent”. He also warned those who are tempted to seek economic cooperation with China and defence cooperation with the US. This, because he believes that the malign influence China will gain through economic cooperation may “complicate(s) our (US) defence decision space during times of tension”. It is not clear how China’s ASEAN economic partners will react to this. The Chinese unhappiness with the approach outlined by Hegseth was palpable and articulated by their spokesperson.

In his thoughtful keynote address at the SLD on May 30, President Macron spoke of the need for a new special relationship between both Europe and the Indo-Pacific, and the EU and ASEAN. He underlined the need for strategic autonomy and freedom of sovereignty, both for Europe and the Indo-Pacific, which means cooperate, but not want to depend. This applies to Europe and the US too.

He argued that if China does not want NATO being involved in Southeast Asia or in Asia, they should prevent DPRK from being engaged on European soil.

Macron argued that Europeans and Asians are much more intertwined than thought. He proposed while that the time for non-alignment had undoubtedly passed, “the time for coalitions of action has come and requires that countries capable of acting together give themselves every means to do so”. The rules must remain the inviolability of borders, respect for sovereignty, refusal to use force as a means of domination, cultivating a spirit of independence and a desire for cooperation.

Finally, he stressed that our shared responsibility is to ensure that our countries are not collateral victims of the imbalances linked to the choices made by superpowers. The message to China, Russia and the US was clear.

In his speech at the SLD, Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim spoke of his country’s posture of “active non-alignment to preserve our ability to act on our own terms” and to “remain outward facing, connected and in control of our strategic space”. He conveyed that Malaysia does not believe in spheres of influence and that what Southeast Asia needs is a dynamic equilibrium that “enables cooperation without coercion and balance without bloc politics”. This, he said, enables Malaysia to assert its sovereignty and make its own choices on its own terms. Perhaps easier said than done, but a necessary aspiration.

Countries in the Indo-Pacific are hustling to sustain their ability to make their own choices in the light of the fast evolving international geo-strategic and geo-economic environment.

The new Pope Leo XIV was formally installed on May 18. India was represented by the Deputy Chairman of the Rajya Sabha and the Deputy Chief Minister of Nagaland. PM Modi conveyed his sincere felicitations.

It was a good month for the new interim Syrian President and his regime. In addition to the meeting with Trump referred to earlier, the EU lifted economic restrictions by the end of the month, except for those related to security. Earlier in the month, the World Bank announced it would resume programs in Syria after Saudi Arabia and Qatar cleared its debt to the Bank.

It remains to be seen whether the bet placed by the West, the Gulf countries and Turkey on the new regime in Syria will pay off. The security situation, especially of the minorities, remains under a cloud. Iran will not wish to be sidelined. Israel remains a wild card with critical security interests in Syria. Will it buy the change of heart of the new regime?

UNICEF, in a report released on May 28, warned of the growing threat from cholera in Sudan. For its part, the WHO in a report issued on May 27 warned that the ongoing conflict and displacement has further exacerbated the state of the fragile health infrastructure, thereby posing a risk of mass disease transmission. Separately, the Sudan army chief and de facto head of state appointed former UN official Kamal Idris as Prime Minister. It remains to be seen, though, whether he will be able to materially improve the impact of the humanitarian and displacement crises. The civil war continues, and Sudan continues to suffer. The danger is that given what is happening in other parts of the world, even the limited focus on Sudan may further dissipate.

As regards the conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as agreed last month, the US State Department reportedly received a draft peace agreement on May 05 from the DRC and Rwanda. It is not clear, though, whether this was a joint text or separate texts were presented. Details and follow up are awaited. In the meantime, former DRC President Kabila returned to the DRC and made a first public appearance in Goma on May 30. Some see him as part of the problem, linking him to the M23 rebels. Others believe he can help in the peace process. All this while, the security situation in eastern DRC remains volatile. The US seeks preferential access to the region's mineral wealth.

As part of its ongoing efforts to improve its access to international markets in the present volatile and non-rules based international trade environment, India finalised a FTA with the UK on May 06. Both sides have made some concessions to arrive at this agreement that has been under negotiation for long. The UK described it as a "huge economic win for UK". India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry described it as "a historic and ambitious deal to boost jobs, exports and national growth". The truth, no doubt, lies somewhere in between and a deeper analysis will have to await the full text of the agreement after it is signed and comes into force. Nevertheless, this marks a good beginning. Agreements with the US and EU are under negotiation, and the agreed template with the UK will no doubt be reflected there.

It was a hectic month in international relations, with a constant churn on the chess board of international relations. The non resolution of crucial conflicts and issues persists and dangers continue to grow. The need to walk back from failed policies and outdated approaches has never been greater and, therefore, diplomacy must again be allowed to take centre stage.



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