



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW MAY 2025

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INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

The ISR features an assessment of key developments, trends, and policies pertaining to India's immediate and continental neighbourhood, and is authored by Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), Distinguished Fellow for Military Strategy. The research team includes Shreyas Deshmukh, Research Associate. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Shreyas Deshmukh at shreyas@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

Cover Images:

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited AFS Adampur, a frontline airbase located in Punjab, and interacted with soldiers on May 13 2025. Source: [X/@PMOIndia](#)

On May 21, 2025, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi chaired an informal trilateral meeting of foreign ministers of China, Afghanistan and Pakistan in Beijing. Source: [MOFA PRC](#)

2nd India-Maldives High Level Core Group (HLCG) meeting was held on May 26 in New Delhi. Source: [X/@MoFAMv](#)

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India Strategic Review

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

PAKISTAN

Operation Sindoor

There was a sharp spike in India-Pakistan tensions following the terrorist attack on April 22 in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir, which claimed the lives of 26 civilians. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by The Resistance Front (TRF), a group affiliated with Lashkar-e-Taiba.

On May 2, a special Corps Commanders Conference was held at the General Headquarters in Rawalpindi to review the standoff with India. The forum "reaffirmed the unflinching resolve of the Pakistan Armed Forces to uphold the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country against any aggression or misadventure."¹

Pakistan also began reaching out to countries such as China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt for diplomatic support. After a call between Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, Beijing stated, "China fully understands Pakistan's legitimate security concerns and supports Pakistan in safeguarding its sovereignty and security interests."²

The expected military response by India came on the night of May 6-7. Codenamed "Operation Sindoor," India's armed forces struck nine locations targeting terrorist infrastructure within Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir. The most significant of these strikes were at the headquarters of Lashkar-e-Taiba at Muridke and of Jaish-e-Mohammed at Bhawalpur.

During a press briefing, India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri stated that intelligence reports indicated an imminent threat of further attacks against India. Therefore, there was a compulsion to deter and preempt. He described the actions as "measured, non-escalatory, proportionate, and responsible."³

India provided photographic evidence of having struck all the targets with precision to ensure there was no collateral damage. It was also clarified that no

military establishments were targeted, but any escalation would be met with an equally strong response.

In response to Indian missile strikes on terrorist installations, Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif declared the action an act of war, reserving the nation's right to respond. Pakistan also claimed to have shot down several Indian warplanes, resulting in at least 10 deaths.⁴

On the night of May 7-8, Pakistan attempted to engage several military targets in Northern and Western India using drones and missiles. The possible purpose of such large-scale aerial intrusions was to test air defence systems and collect intelligence. In response, India attacked four air defence sites with armed drones, destroying an air defence system at Lahore. Heavy shelling commenced at the Line of Control, with Pakistani firing killing several civilians in the border town of Poonch.⁵

Pakistani Drone attacks continued on the night of May 8-9 but had little impact as most of these were neutralised. Indian drones continued to target Pakistan's air defence assets, although Pakistan claimed to have shot down 48 drones.

The situation escalated dramatically on the night of 9-10 May, with Pakistan firing several high-speed missiles at bases in Punjab. One Fatah-II ballistic missile, with a range of 400 km, was shot down near Sirsa.⁶ In a wide-ranging attack, the Indian Air Force struck Pakistan's airbases, command centres, military infrastructure, and air defence systems. The first wave of strikes hit Nur Khan, Rafiqui, Rahim Yar Khan, and Sukkur. This was followed by strikes at Sarghoda, Bholari, and Jacobabad airbases. India also struck command and control targets at Murid and radar sites at Chunian, Arifwala, and Pasrur.⁷

Satellite imagery showed extensive damage to the 11 Pakistani airbases caused by BrahMos and SCALP missiles. This was one of the reasons Pakistan requested a ceasefire during a call between the two Director Generals of Military Operations (DGsMO) at 3:35 PM on May 10. While India accepted the Pakistani request, the ceasefire was soon mired in controversy.

Before an official announcement of the ceasefire by the two countries, US President Donald Trump announced, "After a long night of talks mediated by the United States, I am pleased to announce that India and Pakistan have agreed to a FULL AND IMMEDIATE CEASEFIRE." A few minutes later, Secretary of State Rubio explained further that "the Governments of India and Pakistan have agreed to an immediate ceasefire and to start talks on a broad set of issues at a neutral site."⁸

India has firmly rejected President Trump's claims and stated that the ceasefire was a result of a request from the Pakistan DGMO. New Delhi has also said that there was no agreement to start talks with Pakistan on any issue.⁹

Post-Sindoor Developments

In a national address on May 12, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that India had decided to temporarily suspend its counter-operations against Pakistan's terrorist and military installations. He reiterated that this suspension is not a conclusion, and India will continue to assess Pakistan's every move in the coming days, ensuring that its future actions align with its commitments to cease terrorist activities.¹⁰

The Prime Minister outlined three key pillars of India's security doctrine. The first pillar is decisive retaliation to any terrorist attack on India on its own terms, targeting terror hubs at their roots. The second is that there will be no tolerance for nuclear blackmail, and India will not be intimidated by nuclear threats. The third pillar is that there would be no distinction between terror sponsors and terrorists; India will no longer see terrorist leaders and the governments sheltering them as separate entities.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has also announced victory in the conflict, stating Pakistan has taken the revenge of 1971 war.¹¹ The Pakistan government promoted Chief of the Army Staff General Asim Munir to the rank of Field Marshal for his role in leading the "armed forces of Pakistan with unflinching courage and outstanding service in a remarkable victory against India."¹² The government also announced a second, open-ended extension in the tenure of Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmed Babar.

Although the ceasefire between the two countries is holding, rhetoric has sharpened. Field Marshal Munir has stated that Pakistan would not accept Indian hegemony called water as "Pakistan's red line," referring to India's move to keep the Indus Water Treaty in abeyance. Munir has also claimed that militants in Balochistan were proxies acting on behalf of India.¹³

Two countries that openly supported Pakistan during the crisis were China and Turkey. On May 20, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar met with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing. China reiterated its firm support to Pakistan in safeguarding its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. In response, Dar said Pakistan hopes to "continue to receive strong support from China in overcoming current difficulties" and in promoting national development, security and stability.¹⁴

Turkey's support for Pakistan has resulted in friction in India-Turkey ties. India has called on Turkey to "strongly urge Pakistan to end its support to cross-border terrorism and take credible and verifiable actions against the terror ecosystem it has harboured for decades."¹⁵ On May 15, India revoked the security clearance of Turkish firm Celebi Airport Services, citing national security concerns. Several Indian universities, including Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia, and Maulana Azad National Urdu University, have also suspended academic ties with Turkish institutions.¹⁶

Implications for the Next India-Pakistan Crisis

Operation Sindoor marks a paradigm shift in India's strategy to deal with terrorism emanating from Pakistan. India now makes no distinction between terrorists and their backers, and a strong response can be expected to any major terrorist attack. It is also clear that both sides now feel that sufficient space exists below the nuclear threshold for a limited conventional conflict.

Pakistan also feels that it can create a notion of victory by dominating the battle of narratives through the extensive use of misinformation and disinformation. On May 10, Pakistani newspapers carried headlines about the destruction of airbases at Udampur at Pathankot, an S-400 system in Adampur, and BrahMos missile storage sites at Nagrota and Beas. It was also reported that 70% of India's electricity grid had been rendered dysfunctional due to a cyberattack. None of this was true, but it enabled Pakistan to claim a win with their domestic population.

With ties between the two nations showing no signs of repair, the next crisis could see faster escalation using advanced drones and standoff, precision weapons. The geography of conflict could also increase, both in the physical and cyber domains. Operation Sindoor saw strikes across the breadth of Pakistan, and it is likely that the conflict could also extend to the seas in the next crisis. In such a situation, managing escalation would be the biggest challenge.

AFGHANISTAN

Foreign Relations

The Taliban government is deepening ties with regional countries. On May 15, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar, engaged in a telephonic discussion with the Taliban's Acting Foreign Minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi. Dr Jaishankar appreciated the explicit condemnation of the Pahalgam terrorist attack by the Taliban administration. He also welcomed Muttaqi's firm rejection of attempts to generate distrust between India and Afghanistan.

through false and baseless reports. This was a reference to reports in Pakistan that Indian missiles had hit Afghanistan.¹⁷

As a "special gesture," India approved the entry of 160 Afghan trucks carrying dried fruits and nuts via the Attari border.¹⁸ India has resumed granting several categories of visas to Afghan citizens, including those for business persons and artists. This comes five years after India suspended all visa services to Afghans and shut down its embassies and consulates in 2021.¹⁹ India is also continuing with humanitarian assistance, providing food aid to Afghan returnees who have been expelled from Pakistan.²⁰

Improving ties between Afghanistan and India are of concern to Pakistan, and Islamabad is moving to repair its relations with Kabul, which have been strained over terror attacks from Afghan soil into Pakistan. On May 10, the Taliban's acting Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, hosted a trilateral meeting in Kabul with Pakistan's Special Envoy, Mohammad Sadiq, and China's Special Envoy, Yue Xiaoyong. While no official statement was released regarding the visit, Pakistani newspaper The Express Tribune reported that Pakistan had requested India's presence in Afghanistan be limited to diplomatic activities, discouraging any broader strategic or economic footprint.

On May 21, China hosted an informal trilateral ministerial meeting attended by the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. China appears to have successfully mediated to bring about an improvement in relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Chinese foreign ministry said, "Afghanistan and Pakistan expressed clear willingness to elevate diplomatic relations and agreed in principle to exchange ambassadors as soon as possible. China welcomed this and will continue to provide assistance for the improvement of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations."²¹

According to the Pakistan Foreign Ministry press release, the three Foreign Ministers held a wide-ranging and constructive dialogue to deepen cooperation through enhanced communication and mutual trust. Pakistan reaffirmed its commitment to promoting close, cooperative ties with Afghanistan, especially in trade, transit, health, and connectivity. China and Pakistan reiterated their support for extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan. A proposed highway connecting Peshawar with Kabul and a trans-Afghan railway project linking Central and South Asia could also be developed under the next stage of the CPEC.

Following these meetings, news reports suggest a thaw in relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan is planning to bring Afghan refugees under

a single-document policy and will be given a one-year multiple-entry visa to Pakistan, with a fee of \$100. Pakistan has also removed a 10% tax on select Afghanistan exports, aiming to strengthen bilateral trade and improve economic ties.²²

There are also reports that the Taliban have started cracking down on the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Many TTP members have been imprisoned and are facing legal action.²³ In a public statement, senior Taliban commander Saeedullah Saeed issued a warning to militant factions, stating that any act of jihad carried out without the explicit authorisation of the Amir (supreme leader) is not only illegitimate but also constitutes fasaad (corruption) under Islamic law. This is being interpreted as a direct rebuke to the TTP and other groups operating from Afghan soil.²⁴

DEVELOPMENTS ON THE INDIA-CHINA LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)

Situation at the LAC

Even as conflict erupted on India's western border with Pakistan, the situation at the LAC remained calm. In an interview with Reuters, India's Chief of Defence Staff, General Anil Chauhan, stated that although Pakistan is closely allied with China, there was no sign of any actual help from Beijing during the conflict. "While this was unfolding from (April) 22nd onwards, we didn't find any unusual activity in the operational or tactical depth of our northern borders, and things were generally all right."²⁵

After the ceasefire was announced between India and Pakistan, India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, spoke to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Doval stated that the Pahalgam terrorist attack had caused significant casualties and that India needed to take counter-terrorism actions. He also emphasised that India does not intend to choose war as it does not serve the interests of any party. Wang Yi condemned the Pahalgam terror attack and opposed all forms of terrorism. He hoped that both sides would remain calm and exercise restraint, resolve differences through dialogue and consultation, and avoid further escalation.²⁶

On May 11-12, China's Civil Aviation Ministry released new names for 27 locations in Arunachal Pradesh in another attempt to assert claims over this area. Indian Ministry of External Affairs has issued a strongly worded statement: "We have noticed that China has persisted with its vain and preposterous attempts to name places in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Consistent

with our principled position, we reject such attempts categorically. Creative naming will not alter the undeniable reality that Arunachal Pradesh was, is, and will always remain an integral and inalienable part of India."²⁷

Meanwhile, the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra is set to resume with about 750 pilgrims travelling to Tibet between June and August 2025. The Chinese government suspended the Yatra due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and it was not resumed due to the tensions which erupted at the LAC. After the disengagement at the LAC in October 2024, both sides agreed to restart the Yatra.²⁸

BANGLADESH

Political Turmoil

In a move that could change the political landscape of Bangladesh, on May 12, the Bangladesh Election Commission announced the suspension of Awami League's registration. The suspension followed the Home Ministry's imposition of a ban on the Awami League's political activities until the completion of the trial of the party's leaders and activists at the International Crimes Tribunal.²⁹ Sheikh Hasina, the former Prime Minister who is in exile in India, has been formally charged with crimes against humanity, and her trial has commenced in Dhaka.

The ban came in response to mounting pressure from the newly formed National Citizen Party (NCP) and the other religious parties. The Awami League has rejected the ban and vowed to continue its activities. However, the marginalisation of a major political force could deepen divisions within the country and raise questions about the interim government's approach to political inclusivity.

The interim government finds itself under pressure from all quarters. Bangla Nationalist Party (BNP) has been vociferous in its demands to hold elections as soon as possible. BNP Standing Committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury has said, "The people want change through elections—not at the end of a year. We will ask the chief adviser to bring forward the polls. Holding them late will only deepen uncertainty."³⁰

On the other hand, the NCP maintains that sweeping reforms must precede the elections. NCP Coordinator Nahid Islam has criticised the current Election Commission as "incompetent and untrustworthy" and called for its immediate restructuring.³¹ The Jamaat-e-Islami has expressed trust in the interim

government's proposed schedule of holding elections between December 2025 and June 2026.

Meanwhile, the military has also weighed in. During an address to officers on May 21, Bangladeshi Army Chief General Waker-Uz-Zaman is reported to have stated that the national election should be conducted by December 2025. Sources have quoted him as saying, "Bangladesh needs political stability. This is only possible through an elected government, not by unelected decision-makers."³²

The army has also pushed back against the interim government's decision to establish a UN-proposed humanitarian corridor to Myanmar's Rakhine State. General Waker-Uz-Zaman stated that the corridor could impinge on Bangladesh's sovereignty, and an unelected government should not make such a decision. He also voiced concerns over other high-risk decisions being taken without a mandate, such as those involving the Chattogram seaport and the launch of Starlink.³³ After the Army Chief's warning, the government has now backtracked on the corridor.

The political vacuum is also creating greater space for extremist elements. Bangladesh's Supreme Court has directed the Election Commission to restore the registration of Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), a right-wing Islamist party that had been barred from contesting elections since 2013. Hefazat-e-Islam, an extremist group, has threatened to paralyse the country if their demands are not met. The demands include the dissolution of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission, cancellation of its report, which is considered "anti-Quran", restoration of faith and trust in Allah in the constitution instead of pluralism, and end to Muslim persecution in Gaza and India."³⁴

Amidst mounting pressure, there were reports indicating that Chief Advisor Mohammad Yunus was threatening to resign if political parties failed to support him. Although the resignation has not occurred, the period of instability in Bangladesh is likely to persist.

India-Bangladesh Ties

India-Bangladesh ties remain strained. On May 17, India restricted imports of ready-made garments from Bangladesh to only the ports of Kolkata and Nhava Sheva and barred imports of a range of consumer goods through 11 land border posts. This step is anticipated to affect trade significantly, given that Bangladesh's annual ready-made garment exports to India, valued at approximately \$700 million, predominantly utilise land ports (93%). The

restrictions will not apply to Bangladeshi goods transiting through India to Bhutan and Nepal.³⁵

A former Bangladesh Army officer and close aide of Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus has suggested that Dhaka should collaborate with China to occupy India's Northeastern States if it attacks Pakistan in response to the Pahalgam terror attack. These remarks were made Major General (Retd.) A.L.M. Fazlur Rahman, who posted his comments on social media. Although the Interim Government has distanced itself from these remarks, they reflect the growing dissonance in relations.

In a set of instructions issued in May, the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs has set a 30-day deadline for states and Union Territories to verify the credentials of persons suspected of being illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar.³⁶ There are reports that more than 2,000 illegal Bangladeshi immigrants have been sent across the India-Bangladesh border since Operation Sindoor was launched on May 7.³⁷

Bangladesh has protested the "push-ins" as unacceptable and urged New Delhi to adhere to established repatriation mechanisms. Dhaka has warned that such 'forcible deportations' "fuel negative public sentiments" and can hamper bilateral relations.³⁸ However, India appears determined to send a signal that illegal immigration into India needs to be deterred.

SRI LANKA

Local Municipal Elections

The local municipal council elections held on May 6 in Sri Lanka reflect both the continued dominance of the ruling National People's Power (NPP) and the emerging challenges it faces.

The NPP, led by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, emerged as the largest party, winning 265 out of 339 councils. However, their vote share dropped significantly from 61.6% in the November 2024 parliamentary election to 43.3%, a decline of approximately 18.3 percentage points. This drop, from 6.8 million votes in November 2024 to 4.5 million in May 2025, represents a 34% reduction in vote numbers.³⁹ This suggests a weakening mandate, possibly due to voter fatigue or dissatisfaction with the NPP's performance in its first six months in power.

The opposition, particularly the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), made significant gains, winning 14 councils and increasing its vote share to 21.7%

from 17.7% in November 2024. Other parties, such as the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), did not win any councils but secured 1,123 out of 8,299 council seats.⁴⁰

In specific areas, such as Colombo, the NPP won 48 out of 117 seats but lost to a combined opposition, indicating challenges in urban centres. Ethnic-based parties also performed strongly. The Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) won 43 out of 58 councils in the northeast without alliances, reflecting continued support for Tamil nationalist agendas.

The elections have not weakened the government, but a strengthened opposition and regional parties could lead to more competitive national politics. The success of Tamil nationalist parties in the north and east might pressure the NPP on ethnic issues, potentially influencing national policy on devolution and reconciliation.

NEPAL

Political Developments

The pro-monarchy rallies continue in Nepal. On May 29, approximately 20,000 people gathered in Kathmandu to demand the restoration of the monarchy, which was abolished in 2008, and the reinstatement of former King Gyanendra Shah as head of state. The protests were organised under the aegis of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), with participants marching through the city centre, waving national flags, chanting slogans such as "Our king is dearer than lives ... king come back and save the country," and playing traditional drums and musical instruments. The demonstrators also called for Hinduism to be reinstated as the state religion.⁴¹

The timing of the protest was significant, as it coincided with Republic Day, which commemorates Nepal's transition to a federal democratic republic. This led to a stark contrast, with supporters of Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli holding counter rallies at different locations to celebrate the republic.

Nepal's political landscape has been characterised by instability, with frequent government reshuffles and shifting alliances among major parties. This opportunism, combined with allegations of corruption, is seen as a key factor in public disillusionment.

MALDIVES

India-Maldives Ties

Dr. Abdulla Khaleel, the Maldivian Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited India between May 25 and 27. He headed the Maldivian delegation to the second India-Maldives High-Level Core Group meeting on May 26. A review was conducted of the progress made in implementing the India-Maldives Vision Document, with a focus on intensifying political exchanges, defence and security cooperation, development partnership, trade, economy, health and people-to-people linkages.

Dr. Khaleel strongly condemned the terrorist attack in Pahalgam in April 2025. He expressed Maldives' solidarity with the people and Government of India and its firm support to India in the fight against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.⁴²

Earlier on May 18, India signed agreements to provide the Maldives with an MVR 100 million grant to expand the country's Raajje Transport Link (RTL) high-speed ferry network. The RTL network was launched in 2022 during the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) administration to link the scattered Maldivian archipelago with a high-speed ferry network. Maldives and India also signed 13 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) under the third phase of India's grant assistance scheme, the High-Impact Community Development Project.⁴³ India has also extended financial support to the Maldives by rolling over a \$50 million treasury bill by another year at the request of the Maldivian government.

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