Manufacturing Hostility: Indian Media's Role in Shaping Anti-Pakistan Sentiment -A Case Study of Pahalgam

Faizan Khan

A graduate from National Defense Univeristy, Islamabad, with MPhil in IR. Her research areas include South Asia, Indo-Pacific & Great Powers Competition.
faizan@khan888@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is a critical discussion of how Indian mainstream media created an anti-Pakistan image when reporting the Pahalgam incident. The study adopts a case study design, which analyses media framing strategies, selective reporting bias, and rhetoric tools that helped in informing the citizens. The research indicates that sensationalism, blame games and unproven allegations were commonly used to present Pakistan as the main aggressor, with little or no evidence to support some of their claims. These media habits are not only inflaming tensions between the two nuclear powers but also obstructive journalism and personal reporting. The paper states that biased framing strengthens ideological divisions, creates enmity, and restrains the possibility of productive communication. Comparing different sources and finding differences in reportages, the study demonstrates that moral norms, media literacy across national borders, and objective journalism are necessary. It is concluded in the paper that media polarization is a challenge that should be resolved to curb misinformation and facilitate peace and stability in the region.

Keywords: Media Framing, Anti-Pakistan Narrative, Indian Media, Pahalgam Incident, Political Communication, Cross-Border Relations, Media Bias, Propaganda Techniques

Abstract

'Narrative building' is a central concept in international relations. Through narratives, states redefine threats, identities and interests. This research study focuses on the construction of the anti-Pakistan narrative by Indian Media during the Pahalgam incident. Drawing on the insights of the constructivist paradigm, the paper examines how states in conflict situations employ media as a powerful tool to perpetuate narratives, legitimize policies and label the perceived adversaries. The first section of the paper, reviews the theoretical perspective of constructivism, analyses the role of media in narrative building with focus on the Indian media under BJP government. The second section examines the Indian media reporting during the Pahalgam incident. Qualitative content analysis of three leading Indian news outlets - India Today, NDTV and Hindustan Times - during the timeframe of 22 April 2025 - 22 May 2025 is done. The finding reveals the Indian media did biased reporting, it framed Pakistan in a negative light to advance its own national interest.

Key words: Narrative building, Pahalgam attack, media, terror sponsor state, cross border terrorism, Operation Sindoor.

Introduction

Since independence, Pakistan-India relationship has been marred with mistrust and hostility. Peace between these two nuclear armed states have been threatened by the political differences and disputed territorial claims. Till now, Pakistan and India have fought 4 wars

and have been involved in several military standoffs and cross border skirmishes. The Kashmir issue serves as a major bone of contention between the two countries. New Delhi's decision to unilaterally abrogate Article 370 and scrap Kashmir of its special status has further deteriorated the bilateral ties. Despite Pakistan's efforts, increasing anti-Pakistan sentiments, 'terror funding' allegations and scrapping of Article 370 have derailed the prospects of peace talks between the two countries. With the advent of technology, the international arena in which foreign affairs are being conducted has undergone tremendous changes. Warfare techniques have evolved tremendously according to the requirements of the new world. Information, narratives, perceptions have emerged as pivotal weapons in hybrid warfare (Gillani, Nazir, & Pirzada, 2021). Narratives can be defined under the framework of constructivism. They are well crafted world views, presented to the populace of the state to follow. Narratives are often disseminated by academicians, leaders, and the media, all of which work in harmony with state apparatuses to achieve the national and foreign policy objectives (Jilani, 2020).

Under the BJP regime, the anti-Pakistan narrative has engulfed the public discourse in India. Media, a significant tool of perception building, is effectively being utilized by the Indian government to arouse narrow nationalistic sentiments. Its coverage has been characterized by yellow journalism, fake news and anti-Pakistan rhetoric (Javed & Imran, 2023). This was also evident during the Pahalgam attack when Indian media, in its blind conformity with national discourse blurred the distinction between national interest and jingoism. The recent terror incident in Pahalgam serves as a significant case study to examine how the media reporting and coverage play a role in shaping the public perception thus influencing the geopolitical dynamics either by exaggerating or downplaying the tensions. On April 22, 2025 armed men indiscriminately opened fire at the tourists in Pahalgam, Anantnag District, killing 26 individuals. The incident sparked outrage in India. Without presenting any solid evidence, India blamed Pakistan for the incident. How Indian media reported the incident is crucial to analyse. Media serves as a powerful tool in narrative building; its role becomes even more significant during crisis situations. This research paper examines how the anti-Pakistan narrative was built by the Indian government during the Pahalgam attack. It analyzes the themes, narratives and vocabulary used by the news outlets to disseminate and influence the Indian populace.

Literature Review

National narratives, in simple terms, can be defined as construction, de-construction and dissemination of information that shapes the perception, worldviews of the population. Many regard it as a buzzword, while few view it as a political slogan, however in its true spirit 'Narrative' is a well drafted idea or a notion on which leadership attempts or plans to do 'something' to achieve its objectives. Narratives are concerned with societal aspects, based on their themes and level of acceptability, they can further be termed as 'social narrative' which resonates mostly with a group or 'national narrative' which provides a base for a country's socio-political progress (Malone et al., 2017). Sheikh G Jilani (2020) states that these narratives are constructed with the assistance of academia, media, think tanks, leaders who work along the state institutions to formulate a narrative that are well in alignment with the state's broader goals. Iryna Lysychkina argues that while the media is an effective tool to voice one's opinion, this same tool is systematically utilised by states to diminish the plurality of possible interpretation of events. States frequently broadcast one interpretation of the event which aligns with the narrative, to a point that this information becomes a widely accepted general knowledge (Lysychkina, 2019).

The overall objectivity of Indian media, under Modi's regime has declined tremendously. The anti Pakistan narrative has made its footprint in the Indian media. Vaishnavi C criticizes Indian media for its unrestrained rhetoric against Pakistan. He very effectively argues that, "if India and Pakistan ever resolve their conflict, it won't be thanks to the Indian media" (Chandrashekhar, 2019). During the conflict situation, its role becomes even more critical. The comparative study of the Indian and International media coverage during the Pahalgam crisis, revealed that while international media reporting remained more objective and analytical, Indian media reporting was marked by emotional and nationalistic narratives. Content analysis of the Indian media depicted that national narratives, individual bias and emotional sentiments often overpowers the journalistic ethics (Bagaitkar-Palkar, 2025). Similarly, by opting for the theoretical lens of Framing, a research study examined the prevalent media narratives during the Pak-India military escalation in 2025. It analysed how journalism became an important tool during the conflict situation. Editorial bias, emotions and national interests (Shahid & Zahra, 2025) influence journalism during the conflict situation.

Literature Gap

The role of media during conflict situations has become significantly important as it facilitates states to construct narratives, images and identity of different actors. While many academicians have done comparative study of Indian and Pakistani media during the conflict situation, the exploration of formation of anti-Pakistan by Indian media during the Pahalgam incident through the theoretical lens of constructivism remains unexplored. This study aims to fill the prevailing gap.

Research Questions

This research paper aims to answer following questions:

1- What role does the media play in narrative building?
2- How did the Indian media construct an anti-Pakistan narrative during the Pahalgam attack?

Research Objectives

Following are the research objectives of this study

1- To examine the role of media in narrative building.
2- To analyze the negative role of Indian media in constructing anti-Pakistan narrative during Pahalgam attack.

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses the theoretical lens of constructivism to analyze the narrative and perception building in India. According to constructivists, anarchy, identity and beliefs can be understood by understanding the meaning ascribed to it by states. Constructivists give more weightage to ideas and beliefs. Within the states, powerful actors such as influential leaders continuously construct and deconstruct the nature of norms, beliefs and narratives. Hopf (1998) discusses the constructivist paradigm and highlights the importance of socially constructed identities and norms in influencing the state's conduct in the international arena. Constructivist assumptions provide a foundational base for understanding how the state utilizes media as a tool to alter the perceptions and interaction of the populace. Its principles help analyze the role of media in narrative building and crafting diplomatic agendas which influence state's strategic behavior, foreign policy outlook (Miskimmon, 2013). States strategically utilize the media to construct a narrative to advance their national and foreign policy objectives. This was observed in the case of India during the Pahalgam crisis when Indian media, in conformity with the state's agenda, advanced the anti-Pakistan narrative.

Hostility was reflected in the statements of the BJP leaders, whose words were later carefully used by media outlets to add a sense of hyper nationalism and sensationalism to their reporting. Pakistan's image as a "terrorism sponsoring nation" was portrayed by Indian media. A sense of urgency and threat perception was created among the population.

Research Methodology

For the purpose of examining the pattern of trends and narratives, constructed by India media with respect to Pakistan during the Pahalgam incident, Content Analysis of three leading Indian newspapers, *India Today, NDTV,* and *Hindustan Times*, have been done. Articles related to the Pahalgam incident, from 22 April 2025 to 22 May 2025 were analysed. Recurring themes, patterns and tones of the reporting was analysed.

Narrative Building and Constructivism:

'Narratives' are one of the crucial concepts in international relations. They are utilized by states, international organisations and non-state actors to assign meaning and formulate perception about international order, actors and events. They help connect the timelines by aligning past present and future, in a manner that makes implementation of certain policies appear necessary and legitimate. In IR scholarship, this understanding is further elaborated by the concept of strategic narratives. Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle in the book, Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations, defines Strategic Narratives as communicative tools utilized by the elites to advance their interests in international order (Alister Miskimmon, 2017). According to constructivism, state identities and interests are not predetermined. They are socially constructed by the shared norms, ideas and discourses. Media is one of the powerful tools that are utilised by the state actors to formulate strategic narrative and make them acceptable for the general population (Happer & Philo, 2013).

During the conflict situation, its role becomes even more evident as the media circulated narrative promotes a sense of 'selves' and 'others' that either frames the conflict plausible or peace rethinkable. In such conflict situations, it's not the anarchy that determines the outcome; ascribed meaning does. Narratives are incorporated into policy making through two mechanisms: Framing and Securitization. Framing is a strategic process through which the actors select a certain aspect of the reality, assign labels or meaning to it. Securitization further provides a lens, through which an issue or situation is elevated to the rank of existential threat (Pinto, 2014). It is then used by the elites to justify the use of extraordinary countermeasures. Recurring use of labels and speech shapes the audience's thoughts, opinion thus formulating certain 'images' or 'narratives'. These narratives are not decorative in nature, rather they define public consent, policy priorities and agenda, especially during the crisis situation.

Media and Tools of Narrative Construction

With the emergence of the information age, the dynamics of international relations have evolved. The media effectively builds, sustains and alters public opinion. Media narratives are not unintentional, they carry intended meaning. It is crucial to distinguish between the simple reporting and narrative. Normal reporting highlights the facts without sensationalism or exaggeration whereas narrative lists only the intended and selective facts. Media outlets use different mechanisms or tools to construct a narrative.

1- Selective Coverage / Gate Keeping:

Media organisations control the flow of information. It gate keeps the information, by managing and filtering the details; what to report and what to conceal. In this process, certain viewpoints and information get amplified while many crucial facts are concealed intentionally to shape desired public perception regarding the issue (Shabir, Safdar, Imran, & Mumtaz,

2015). Many times, at organisation level, media outlets intentionally do gatekeeping to get desired viewership. However, it is also used as a strategic tool by the government actors to shape or influence the public perception especially in the countries where there is media regulation.

2- Agenda Setting:

Repetitive coverage of specific issues creates a sense of urgency and importance. Media outlets often deliberately over hype certain issues. This pattern is evident, especially in the circumstance when certain actors want to exploit a situation for personal gains. During the election season, Indian media focus on the cross border terrorism, portraying Pakistan as the 'problem' and a failed state to enlighten the nationalistic sentiments among the population and distract them from the domestic issues. The media's agenda setting helps shape the public agenda. Recurring themes such as, "Pakistan harbours terrorists" or allegedly "sponsors cross border terrorism" creates a narrative of an ever present next door, external enemy which needs to be 'taught a lesson' or deterred.

3- Propaganda and Misinformation:

In many cases, narrative building requires the spreading of misinformation to reinforce a certain perception or belief in the public. When factual data is scarce, media outlets rely on the uninformed or unverified source to advance the narrative. The same trend was recognised during the Pak-India military escalation, Post Pahalgam incident. Factually incorrect reporting, and sharing of fake or AI generated visuals dominated the coverage. Platforms such as Al Jazeera and Deutsche Welle (DW) Fact Check debunked the misinformation spread by the mainstream Indian media (Kathju, 2025).

4- Framing and Language Choice

How the media frame a story, the vocabulary or terminology it uses sets the tone of the news. The subtle tone of the report, triggers the thought process and frames the perception of the reader. Indian leaders, such as its Minister of External Affairs (EAM), Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, accuse Pakistan of operation, "terror factory". These harsh statements are quoted by Indian media outlets with added exaggeration and sensationalism. The constant use of bigrams and trigrams such as the term "terror sponsor", "state sponsor terrorism" in the reports discussing Pakistan, subconsciously creates a narrative that if there is a terror related incident, Pakistan must have a direct or indirect linkage to it. Framing and use of language has been discussed in detail in the second part of the article in relation to the Pahalgam incident.

Restricted Freedom of Indian Media under BJP

India is one of the most populous countries in the world. By 2024, its population was recorded to be 1.451 billion. India consists of 28 states and 8 Union territories. It entails a large network of digital, social and print media. One of the core elements of democracy is the Freedom of Speech and media serves as a significant tool to advance public opinion. Under BJP's regime, the freedom of press has been restricted. Public opinion has been suppressed. Noam Chomsky in his book 'Media Control' argues that "propaganda is to democracy as the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state" (Chomsky, 2002). The media is the primary source to deliver propaganda and to 'control minds of the state'. The premiership of Narendra Modi in India, began in 2014 and since then the control over media has increased. The term 'Godi Media' has become popularised by veteran Indian journalist Ravish Kumar, depicting that Indian media has become lapdog (in literal words) of PM Modi. Meaning that media is utilised as a state tool to further the interests of Modi's BJP party. International observers have taken note of the downward slide of press freedom in India. Reporters Without Borders (RSF), in its rating (World Press Freedom Index), ranked Indian 151th out of 180 countries (Reporters

Without Borders, 2025). It highlighted that journalism in India has been in 'crisis' since PM Modi came to power in India. It emphasised that "business interests close to Modi turned the once independent news outlets into lapdogs". Many news channels are involved in the spread of 'anti-Muslim' sentiments in line with Hindu nationalist agendas (Allsop, 2025).

Pahalgam: Indian Media's Construction of Anti-Pakistan Narrative

Description of the Content

Our content analysis of Indian media coverage and reporting on Pahalgam attack and its aftermath, from April 22, 2025 to May 22, 2025, comprises of a sample of 60 articles, with 20 articles each from Hindustan Times, NDTV, and India Today. The most dominant and recurrent themes in these three media outlets constructs a narrative where Pakistan is framed as a state which is a source of terror - manifested by Pahalgam attack and evidenced by history of Pakistan's alleged involvement in other incidences of terrorism such as Pulwama and Uri. This narrative construction then dovetails into another narrative where a response is necessitated is the form of aggressive measures such as abeyance of Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) by India, suspension of diplomatic relations, land border and air space closure, finally culminating into a retaliatory response – Operation Sindoor, an escalation justified on the basis of Pakistan's alleged repeated involvement in terror attacks inside India and coded in the language that the step has been taken as a measure to forestall and forewarn Pakistan of any future misadventure. The labelling of India's response to Pakistan's alleged involvement in Pahalgam attack as 'Operation Sindoor' serves the goal of placating domestic audience as the strikes inside Pakistan retaliates the vermillion of women widowed in Pahalgam and internationally, sets the ground that whenever a terror attack occurs inside India, Pakistan is to be blamed without producing the evidence and India would reserve the right to respond militarily (Tirumurti, 2025). The content analysis of Indian media's anti-Pakistan narrative construction throughout the time period selected for our study, from the occurrence of Pahalgam attack, degradation of bilateral diplomatic ties, IWT abeyance, Operation Sindoor, Pakistan's counter strikes (Bunyan-um-Marsoos) till ceasefire coupled with mediation claims by President Trump is detailed in the next section.

Content Analysis & Findings

Table 1: Corpus Size/ Word Count Contribution by Each Outlet

1	NDTV	14090
2	Hindustan Times	12646
3	India Today	8552

NDTV tends to shape narratives with detailed operational framing, while the other two outlets complement this with policy framing and moral condemnation. The relative sizes suggest a division of labour across Indian media in reinforcing the anti-Pakistan discourse.

Table 2: Theme Frequencies

	Theme	Hindustan Times	India Today	NDTV
1	Pakistan as Terror Source	497	293	564
2	Operation Sindoor	79	67	98
3	Policy Hardening	33	6	24

4	Delegitimising Pakistan	45	21	25
5	Community/Security Paternalism	29	32	30
6	Nuclear Rhetoric Management	11	29	12

Table 3: Top Terms per Outlet

Outlet	Term	Count
Hindustan Times	Pakistan	196
Hindustan Times	India	139
Hindustan Times	Terror	78
Hindustan Times	Indian	69
Hindustan Times	Attack	59
Hindustan Times	Military	51
Hindustan Times	Pakistani	49
Hindustan Times	Air	47
Hindustan Times	Operation	44
NDTV	Pakistan	191
NDTV	India	140
NDTV	Terror	105
NDTV	attack	94
NDTV	terrorists	65
NDTV	Pakistan's	58
NDTV	Indian	54
NDTV	Pahalgam	49
NDTV	Pakistani	49
India Today	Pakistan	112
India Today	India	98
India Today	Indian	50
India Today	Terror	45
India Today	Air	44
India Today	Attack	43
India Today	Pahalgam	36
India Today	Military	34

Overall Theme Distribution

Theme Frequencies by Outlet
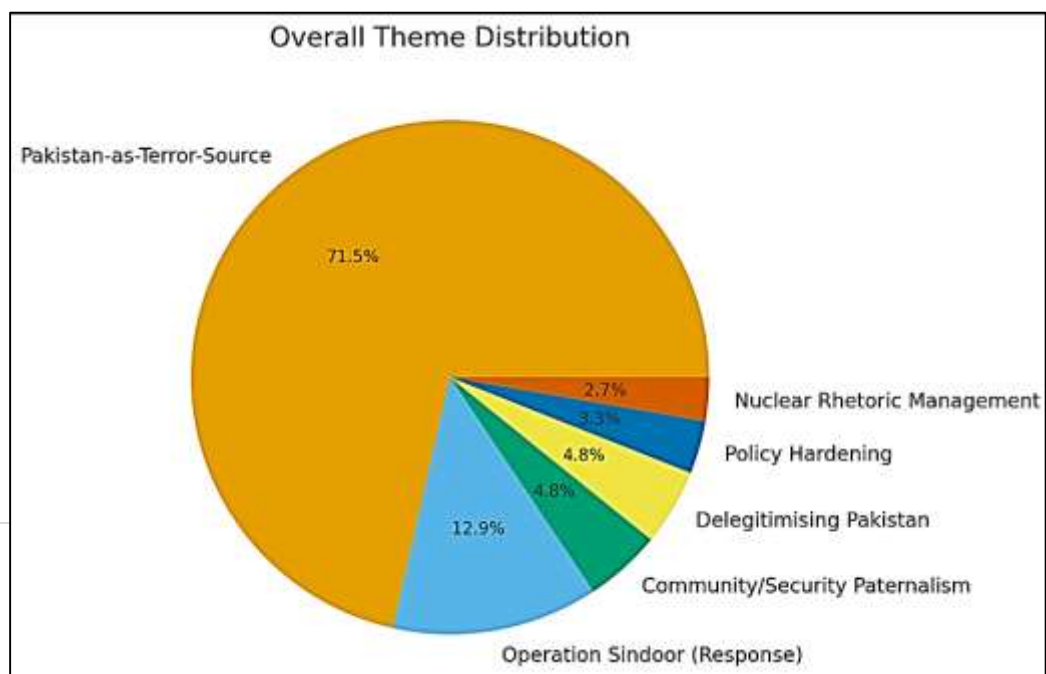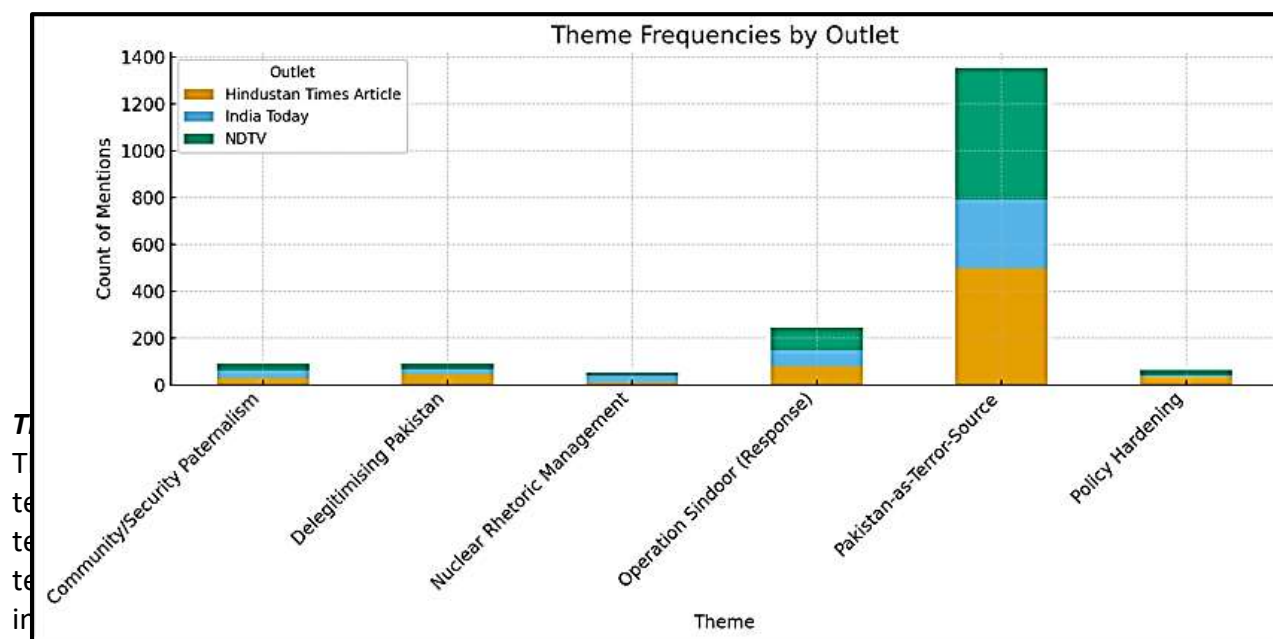
terrorism, tries to present Pakistan as the root cause of terrorism, reducing the multifaceted and complex body politic of Pakistan into a single entity, that serves as a breeding ground for terrorism, causing instability in the region. Thus, the identity of Pakistan is deliberately constructed as a destabilizing regional force. The media narrative and political positioning goes hand in hand where both complement and supplement each others' stance and fuel anti-Pakistan narrative, visible in political speeches and remarks, catered to domestic and international audience alike. "If the terrorists are in Pakistan, we will hit them where they are" (Laskar, 2025). This statement by Indian EAM reflects India's positioning itself vis-à-vis Pakistan, assuming the role of resetting the rules of engagement with Pakistan, where any act of terror inside India would be presumed to be carried out by Pakistan, India does not bear any responsibility to present the evidence and its military action against Pakistan would be justified – setting a new normal in Pakistan-India ties.

Outlet	Bigram	Count
NDTV	Terror attack	32
Hindustan Times	Terror attack	23
India Today	Terror Attack	13
Hindustan Times	Cross border	20

Theme 2: Operation Sindoor - Just Response

Outlet	Bigram	Count
Hindustan Times	Operation Sindoor	29
India Today	Operation Sindoor	23
NDTV	Operation Sindoor	22

India, while launching Operation Sindoor justified its military action against Pakistan by naming the latter as an existential source of terror. Indian media built upon this rationale and repetitively used the terms of precision strikes, proportional measure, restraint in Indian strikes, strikes against terror infrastructure, measured and non-escalatory response. This repetition across media outlets serves the purpose of solidifying the image of Pakistan as a terror source in public imagination and Indian actions or response as just and duly warranted. Operation Sindoor in public imagination is further legitimized by employment of terms such as India carrying out precision strikes without hitting civilian infrastructure or killing civilians while exercising maximum restraint and serving justice. Indian media continuously projected BJP's government labelling the Pahalagam attack as an act of war – as a pre-emptive rationale for carrying out its military action against Pakistan. These media outlets further framed it avenged the blood of those killed in the dastardly and barbaric Pahalgam attack. The entire episode from the incident to Operation Sindoor is coded into the language of a nation with both moral and security imperatives.

This theme constructs the image of India as a responsible actor on the international stage - able to use force yet directed by principles and ethics. It neutralizes global criticism by portraying escalation as justified and essential. In securitisation theory, this is the legitimization phase: extraordinary measures are rendered acceptable via discourse that frames them as precise, regulated, and ethically warranted.

Theme 3: Policy Hardening

Under this theme, the selected media outlets created news reports and stories that established linkage between the Pahalgam attack and severe policy gestures. Indian media framed the series of steps taken in the aftermath of the incident ranging from the abeyance of IWT, visa curbs, degradation of diplomatic ties as necessary policy instruments. The harsh policy measures are coated in binary slogans such as the abeyance of IWT is framed as 'blood and water can never flow together' (Pareek, 2025) creating the binary of blood and water. IWT abeyance is framed by the media as an act of reclaiming sovereignty - an indication of zero tolerance for any act of terror that can even turn an obligation/ requirement under international treaty into an act of non-compliance.

Likewise, non-existence of 'terror and talks' (PM Modi hits out at Pakistan: 'Terror and talks cannot coexist', 2025) became the chant of Indian media while Indian government upped the ante during Pahalgam. Hence, the disengagement with Pakistan at all fronts is justified, serving the logical basis of severing the ties and escalation. Policy hardening portrays Pakistan as undeserving of cooperation, an actor, unworthy of being entered into and complied with under international law and bilateral agreements. Constructivism shows that states use binary slogans to simplify complex disputes into moral absolutes, securing public consent for tougher positions.

Theme 4: Delegitimising Pakistan's Diplomacy & Contesting Evidence

Indian media outlets systematically attempted to undermine Pakistan's credibility by calling out Pakistan's stance of neutral and impartial investigations of Pahalgam attack via linking it to Pakistan's past calls for investigating terror incidents as dubious (Trivedi, 2025). The calls for neutral investigations were presented as Pakistan's denial of responsibility and proof of bad faith (Islam, 2025). Indian media boosted up Indian government's denial of third party mediation as claimed by US President Donald Trump on multiple occasions and asserted

Indian government stance of cessation of bilateral strikes and ceasefire agreement bilaterally – this asserting agency of India as a decisive actor. The tactic is employed to reduce any leverage that Pakistan might gain diplomatically and re-centers India's posture of resolving all bilateral issues bilaterally, where India is given an upper hand, and prevents counter-narratives from gaining traction. Thus, through the delegitimation construct, Indian media attempts to render Pakistan as an actor that is incapable of conducting diplomacy and shaping global perceptions.

Theme 5: Security Paternalism & Social Order Restoration

One of the themes observed, although a very small volume of data on it among our sample, has been security paternalism or community paternalism. Some of the news reporting covered Indian forces' engagement in protecting community religious spaces, such as repairing a mosque damaged by cross-border shelling. The media thus projected military power as humanitarian guardianship. The rare occurrence of such news incidents and reporting, has its own symbolic significance, reflecting the Indian position that *Pakistan destroys, India restores*. Indian media thus narratively positioned India as a protector of order and community, reinforcing legitimacy.

Theme 6: Containing Nuclear Fear & Recoding Deterrence

A final theme observed in our study has been on nuclear posture in South Asia, with Indian media covering the latest episode of escalation, shifting nuclear risks and responsibility involved for such risks on Pakistan. Pakistan is depicted as an irresponsible nuclear state which uses nukes to blackmail adversaries into submission or to turn the tides of events in its favour. India is represented as a responsible, restrained actor that obliges by its pact on non-attack or *No First Use Policy.* The entire discourse surrounding nuclear weapons in Indian media attempted at framing Pakistan's strategic deterrence as reckless, delegitimising Pakistan in public imagination and discourse.

Conclusion

The relationship between the two South Asian nuclear powers - Pakistan and India has been characterized by mistrust and hostility and their mutual peace threatened by the political differences and disputed territorial claims. As the two states have evolved with proceeding times, so has their warfare techniques. In the current age of hybrid warfare, information, narratives, perceptions have emerged as pivotal weapons, disseminated by multiple means including media. Under the BJP regime, the anti-Pakistan narrative has engulfed the public discourse in India. Media, a significant tool of perception building, is effectively being utilized by the Indian government to arouse narrow nationalistic sentiments. The latest episode of escalation between Pakistan and India clearly presented to the entire world the power of media in constructing, framing, moulding, angling, distorting, presenting and projecting the image of the adversary in public imagination and discourse. And Indian media seems to have taken the lead in distorting reality and presenting the facts as it suits its own and state's interests, where media crafts public perceptions to serve the policy objectives of the ruling regime and *escalation* has been projected as the new *normal.*

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