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OPERATION SINDOOR WILL NOT DETER PAKISTAN'S ADVENTURISM IN THE FUTURE

C. Christine Fair

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OPERATION SINDOOR

Most analysts expected a less provocative response for several reasons. First, unlike the Jaish-e-Mohammed suicide attack at Pulwama in 2019, for which there was a so-called shaheed video, the attack at Pahalgam lacked a smoking gun bearing the Resistance Front's imprimatur. Although it should be noted that the organisation, purportedly a front for the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, took credit and then immediately disavowed the attack. Second, unlike Pulwama, in which 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel were murdered, the 28 victims at Pahalgam's carnage were civilians. Finally, most analysts assumed that targeting the Punjab was off-limits due to the fact that it would goad Pakistan into making its own provocative counter-strikes. However, in hindsight, in the aftermath of Pulwama, when India attacked targets associated with Jaish-e-Mohammed using

Israeli-origin SPICE missiles, perhaps it should have been expected that India would up its own ante.

Punjab is the most important province of Pakistan. It particularly has the most salience for Pakistan's army. Punjab is Pakistan's strategic centre of gravity, home to most of the country's economic activities. A plurality of Pakistanis are Punjabi and most of Pakistan's army personnel—as well as Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba personnel—hail from the Punjab. In contrast, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Sindh are peripheral to the thinking of the Pakistan army.

WHY WASHINGTON STEPPED IN

Pakistan's response, which [reportedly](#) resulted in several downed Indian aircraft, a claim rubbished by the Indian government but generally accepted by the international community, was swift, resulting in a rapidly escalating conflict without ready-made off-ramps. Moreover, India failed to secure fulsome international condemnation of Pakistan's behaviour or full-throated support of India. Most international actors—including Russia—regurgitated dated talking points about “both sides resolving their conflicts peacefully.” President Donald Trump offered a bizarre formulation in which he claimed both sides have been fighting for “thousands of years”, while Vice President J. D. Vance boldly declared that the conflict was not in the interest of the United States. Such “both sides” talking points reward Pakistan as they acknowledge Pakistani equities in the disputed dispensation of Jammu and Kashmir while punishing India because India does not

recognise a disputed status in the state, arguing that it holds the Instrument of Accession for the state signed in October 1947. In the end, the United States was moved to act despite previous statements that it would not do so. The precipitant for American action was evidence that Pakistani and Indian Air Forces had begun to engage in serious dogfights, as well as the fact that Pakistan dispatched some 300 to 400 drones into Indian territory to probe its air defences. The main cause for American concern was the explosions at the Nur Khan air base in Rawalpindi, the garrison city adjacent to Islamabad. As the *New York Times* [reported](#), this was disconcerting because it is one of the key transport hubs for Pakistan's military. It also houses the air refuelling capability that keeps Pakistani fighters in the air. Crucially, it is nearby the headquarters of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division (SPD). The SPD oversees and secures Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, which is believed to include some 170 or so warheads, which are presumed to be dispersed throughout the country. Both India and Pakistan dispute the degree to which the United States was involved or the terms of the tenuous peace that was brokered and announced by President Trump. Despite ceasefire violations that occurred in its wake, the peace appears to be holding.

NO COMPELLING REASON TO CHANGE

As the dust continues to settle, independent analysts using satellite imagery will hopefully shed some light on what happened, where and with what outcomes, since neither national press has much legitimacy due to its jingoist and deliberate promulgation of disinformation.

However, what can be said of this conflict is that it will not deter Pakistan from future terrorist adventurism.

The reasons for this are several. First, from the Pakistan army's point of view, the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 is incomplete because Kashmir did not become a part of Pakistan. Without Kashmir, Pakistan is inherently an incomplete state. This has been a narrative that has been promulgated since the time of the state's inception. Muhammad Ali Jinnah himself—Pakistan's founder—emphasised the importance of Kashmir for Pakistan, noting that it was the jugular vein of the country. There is a wide consensus across Pakistan's military, political elites and ordinary Pakistanis alike that Kashmir belongs to Pakistan. In other words, the geographical dispensation is a source of ontological insecurity for the Pakistani state and its citizenry.

To understand why Pakistan continues to use terrorism in Kashmir, it helps to understand Pakistan's army as an insurgent institution. It cannot defeat India. And the way in which it can meaningfully demonstrate that it has not been deterred by India is

to conduct terrorist strikes. These strikes not only demonstrate that Pakistan has not been deterred by India, but these terror strikes also belie India's claims to normalcy in the valley. India surprised analysts of the Pakistan-India security competition when it launched Operation Sindoor, which encompassed attacking nine targets in Pakistan, including two sites associated with the Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba in Pakistan's heartland, the Punjab

Second, because Pakistan cannot change maps by force, from the earliest days of the state's inception, it has used non-state actors as tools of foreign policy to achieve its strategic ends. Readers should

recall that in 1947, Pakistan dispatched non-state actors from Pakistan's tribal areas, later rechristened mujahideen, to seize Kashmir despite India having a standstill agreement with Kashmir's sovereign Maharaja Hari Singh. As the marauders approached Srinagar, leaving a trail of atrocities in their wake, Hari Singh requested military assistance from Delhi. Delhi offered this assistance on the condition that Kashmir accede to India. Consequently, on October 26, 1947, Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession. India began the airlift of troops, and the first India-Pakistan war of 1947-48 began. The war ended on January 1, 1949, with a UN-brokered ceasefire agreement which established the Cease-Fire Line under which Pakistan controlled about 30 per cent of the contested territory and India controlled the remainder. While some may say Pakistan's adventurism with nonstate actors eventually led to the first conventional war, I point out that from Pakistan's point of view, it learned a valuable lesson. Namely, the strategy worked. Had Pakistan not been risk-acceptant and adopted this strategy, it would have had no portion of the prized state. Pakistan continued using sabotage and covert operations to destabilise the region throughout the following decades. Indian malfeasance in Kashmir in the late 1980s coupled with the conclusion of anti-Soviet jihad created opportunities for Pakistan to sustain a proxy war in Kashmir that had perdured to date.

Third, with the introduction of an existential deterrent in the early 1980s when Pakistan acquired a crude bomb, Pakistan has been able to be increasingly bold in its reliance upon non-state actors in Kashmir as well as in other parts of India. Pakistan's nuclear weapons serve two catalytic purposes. First, they raise the risk of an Indian response. This was evident in the last crisis, as both countries quickly climbed the

escalation ladder, and both sides began looking for face-saving off-ramps to de-escalation. Second, Pakistan's nuclear weapons and the catalytic posture it has adopted also serve to galvanise the international community into helping both combatants find off-ramps to the conflict. In other words, nuclear weapons provide Pakistan some degree of impunity because they make a full-scale punitive war too risky to wage.

I argue that to understand why Pakistan continues to use terrorism in Kashmir, it helps to understand Pakistan's army as an insurgent institution. It cannot defeat India. And the way in which it can meaningfully demonstrate that it has not been deterred by India is to conduct terrorist strikes. These strikes not only demonstrate that Pakistan has not been deterred by India, but these terror strikes also belie India's claims to normalcy in the valley. No matter how robust India's counter-insurgency grid may be, it is impossible to pre-empt every terror attack. Each terror attack precipitates yet new rounds of repression in Kashmir, which further alienate that very population the Indian state claims to represent.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS AS STATE INSURANCE

India is in an unenviable position: there is literally nothing it can do short out of devastating military defeat of the Pakistan army to change its strategic calculus. Nuclear weapons, as noted, make such a conflict nigh impossible. And I am not even certain that this would precipitate permanent change. After all, India vivisected Pakistan in 1971. After several years of peace, there was another military coup launched by

Gen. Zia-ul-Haq in 1977, who in turn initiated the Pakistan-sponsored unrest in the valley following Indian electoral malfeasance in the state in 1987.

The international community could presumably adopt policies that would force the state to change course. These include denying access to IMF bailouts, sanctions on Pakistan's military personnel and civilians with ties to terrorism, visa denial regimes and so forth. However, the international community is coerced by Pakistan's nuclear weapons, believing that these weapons make Pakistan too dangerous to fail. Consequently, no matter how dangerous the crisis slide may be stemming from Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, the international community is too worried about the state's viability to consider coercive measures that might change Pakistan's behaviour.

Sadly, even if Operation Sindoor represents a new doctrine of deterrence through disproportionate response, it is unlikely to permanently deter Pakistan. It's useful to consider the gains that the Pakistan army has accrued. First and foremost, it has wrecked Indian claims to normalcy in Kashmir. It secured international statements that concede Pakistani equities. When the escalation became too dangerous, international actors intervened to create off-ramps. Finally, Pakistan's army chief, General Asim Munir, and the army he commands have been the butt of domestic criticism and ignominy over its treatment of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Yet, as a result of this crisis, Pakistanis are once again rallying around its fauj. These are victories that should not be discounted. This, in addition to claimed military gains. While Indians may view themselves as the winner, they

should stop and ponder how Pakistan's men on horseback have attained a victory of their own.



C. Christine Fair is Professor of Security Studies at Georgetown University. Her books include The Literature of Lashkar-e-Tayyaba: Deadly Lines of Control (Oxford University Press 2024), In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2018/2019); Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War (Oxford University Press); Pakistan's Enduring Challenges (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), Policing Insurgencies: Cops as Counterinsurgents (Oxford University Press, 2014); Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh (Routledge, 2010); Treading on Hallowed Ground: Counterinsurgency Operations in Sacred Spaces (Oxford University Press, 2008); The Madrassah Challenge: Militancy and Religious Education in Pakistan (USIP, 2008), and The Cuisines of the Axis of Evil and Other Irritating States (Globe Pequot, 2008), among others.