INTERNATIONAL DAY OF Remembrance of and Tribute to the Victims of Terrorism

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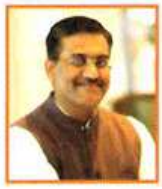

India's War Against Terrorism

India's counter-terror strategy now blends precision military strikes with institutional reforms and global partnerships. As the threat evolves, resilience and proactive measures continue to redefine national security.

The heinous attack on civilians at Baisaran Valley in Jammu and Kashmir's Pahalgam region on 22 April 2025, has once again demonstrated the scourge of cross-border terrorism that India has experienced for more than four decades. Tackling, countering, and fighting terrorism and its enabling ecosystem have become the central pillar of India's national security strategy. In the past, India chose restraint, preferring dialogue and engagement with Pakistan over coercion and direct action. However, the pathological behaviour of Islamabad and Rawalpindi in pursuing terrorism as an instrument of state policy has now exhausted New Delhi's patience. Over the last decade, policymakers have redefined India's counter-terrorism (CT) stance, choosing pre-emption and proactiveness to neutralise Pakistani maleficence.

In this 'war against terrorism', India has implemented a comprehensive, multi-domain strategy encompassing coordinated efforts across military, domestic, and diplomatic spheres. Accompanying these efforts is a new strategic articulation that Prime Minister Narendra Modi clearly laid out in his address to the nation on 12 May 2025. Laying down India's red lines vis-à-vis Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism, he asserted that India will not distinguish between the terrorists and those elements that support them and that any future terrorist attack on Indian soil or its interests will be deemed an 'act of war'. This Indian policy now places the responsibility directly on the Pakistani government and its society for any role they play in supporting terrorism against India. The pretext of 'plausible deniability' would no longer work. Prime Minister Narendra Modi also made it clear to the global community that this is undoubtedly not the era of war, but it is also not the era of terrorism.

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Utilising Force as a Military Response

In responding to the Pahalgam attack, India's response was swift and precise in the form of 'Operation Sindoor', hitting the terrorist infrastructure targets in Pakistan and Pakistan-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK) belonging to the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Hizbul Mujahideen. In carrying out these strikes, India utilised precision-strike capabilities to avoid civilian casualties, since many of the terrorist sites are located in densely populated civilian neighbourhoods. While this was the deepest military campaign that India launched inside Pakistan since the 1971 War, it broadly followed the template that the country has been following in the last few years in tackling terrorist activities.

The 2019 Balakot airstrike targeting the JeM facility in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the 2016 surgical strikes conducted across the Line of Control (LoC) have demonstrated that terrorist infrastructure located across the borders is no longer off-limits for the Indian military. Each of these operations has been a gradually intensifying campaign attuned to the gravity of the terrorist attacks that have been witnessed, including the Pulwama suicide attack and the Uri attack. With these actions, India has decided to take its fight against terrorism to the very facilities and sites in Pakistan and PoJK that breed this menace. A similar approach was also evident in the 2015 'Operation Hot Pursuit' against insurgents in Myanmar.

This proactive approach also establishes another critical tenet shaping India's posture. By demonstrating the resolve and capability to carry out strikes deep inside Pakistan, India will no longer be deterred by nuclear threats or blackmail, which Pakistan often takes recourse to. India has also kept up pressure on Pakistan through the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, with the Prime Minister making it amply clear that "water and blood cannot flow together". This redefining of the rules of engagement with Pakistan brings a new normal in India's CT posture.

Strengthening Institutional Capacity

However, beyond the military response, India has undertaken several steps in the last 15 years within the domestic CT apparatus to strengthen law enforcement and intelligence capabilities as part of its 'zero tolerance against terrorism' policy.

Many of these reforms began right after the 2008 Mumbai attacks that were carried out by the LeT, with the support of the Pakistani Army. In the aftermath of the attacks, the government reinvigorated the Multi-Agency Centre (MAC) within the Intelligence Bureau. The MAC and Subsidiary MACs serve as an information-sharing platform on CT for security and intelligence agencies. In 2009, the government also established the National Investigation Agency (NIA), which has since emerged as the primary CT agency. Another key measure has been the establishment of the National Intelligence Grid, which enables real-time information sharing between agencies by linking their databases.

A key focus in the last few years has been on countering terrorist financing, which sustains many of the terrorist activities. As a member of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a Paris-based intergovernmental body that combats money laundering and terrorist financing, India set up the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU-IND) in November 2004 and became a part of the Egmont Group of FIUs. Moreover, the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, was amended in 2009 to expand the list of scheduled offences and strengthen the legal framework against money laundering and terrorist financing. The PMLA Amendment Rules, 2023 have tightened India's anti-money laundering framework by lowering the threshold for identifying beneficial owners from 25% to 10%, expanding due diligence norms, and bringing professionals like CAs and CSs under its scope. It also mandates registration of NGOs on the DARPAN portal and includes crypto transactions within its purview—aligning India's compliance with global FATF standards and boosting transparency across financial and non-profit sectors.

The NIA, too, has taken up several cases related to terrorist financing, particularly in J&K. The agency has a Terror Funding and Fake Currency Cell to conduct focused investigations. The National Investigation Agency (Amendment) Act, 2019 significantly bolstered India's counter-terror efforts by expanding the NIA's jurisdiction to investigate offences committed outside India, subject to international treaties. It also added new crimes to its mandate, including human trafficking, counterfeit currency, cyber-terrorism, prohibited arms, and explosives-related offences. The amendment enabled the creation of Special Courts for speedy trials and enhanced the agency's financial and technological autonomy, ensuring more effective and timely investigations.

Disrupting Kashmir's Insurgency

J&K has become the key focus when it comes to fighting terrorism. Adapting its CT strategy to the changing nature of insurgency in the Kashmir Valley, the security establishment has focused on keeping pressure on terrorist groups and the associated ecosystem. This sustained pressure has also led these terrorist organisations to shift in recent years to the south of *Pir Panjal*, in the bordering districts of the Jammu region. Security agencies have particularly paid attention to stemming local recruitment, which has largely dented the operational capabilities of the terrorist organisations, forcing them to depend on 'white collar' or 'hybrid' cadre, who are terrorist sympathisers but typically lack a criminal record and therefore are more likely to dodge police scrutiny. In addition, terrorist organisations have also propped up virtual/proxy terrorist groups like LeT's The Resistance Front (TRF) and JeM's People's Anti-Fascist Front (PAFF) to carry out terrorist attacks, targeting civilians, security forces, religious minorities, and political workers.

Another key emphasis for the local security agencies has been unearthing cases of narco-terrorism, where terrorist organisations have utilised proceeds from drug sales and smuggling to support their subversive activities. Between 2022-23, J&K Police have registered 26 cases of narco-terrorism in the Union Territory, in which LeT has been linked to 17 cases. In addition, the local administration has also started to attach the properties of drug peddlers to deter them and consequently choke the financial network. These measures complement the national effort under which the government has proactively addressed this threat. This includes coordinated efforts by the Narcotics Control Bureau and the Narco Coordination Centre at the Ministry of Home Affairs to pursue investigations in narco-terrorism and trafficking-related cases.

Tackling the cross-border infiltration of militants on the International Boundary (IB) and the LoC has been another key dimension in fighting insurgency in J&K, as these infiltration routes have long brought the Pakistani militants to fight with the Indian security agencies and sustain the terrorist violence. These have also served as routes for smuggling of contraband like narcotics, small arms and counterfeit currency. In recent years, India has raised a three-tiered counter-infiltration grid that has largely curbed the flow of militants. Moreover, it has constructed extensive barbed-wire fencing along the LoC and IB, deploying an Anti-Infiltration Obstacle System and strengthening surveillance through reconnaissance drones, night-vision equipment, and hand-held thermal imaging devices to detect unauthorised crossings.

These measures undeniably contributed to the substantial drop in violence in the region. In this context, the massacre at Pahalgam was a calculated move to undo these hard-won gains of recent years.

Countering Radicalisation

Amidst this, a significant challenge has been that of radicalisation, which has emerged as a sensitive issue for policymakers. As several studies have pointed out, multiple factors contribute to this phenomenon, including peer pressure, victimhood feelings, and

self-radicalisation enabled by cyberspace and social media propaganda. While the influence of pan-Islamist terrorist organisations like the 'Islamic State' and 'Al-Qaeda' has diminished on the ground, their efforts in the virtual space to influence vulnerable minds and mobilise cadres persist.

The perilous impact of such efforts is evident from the two incidents of violence in 2022 in Udaipur, Rajasthan, and Amravati, Maharashtra, executed by the radicalised lone wolves or self-radicalised individuals. The NIA continues to make regular arrests of terrorist suspects on charges of recruitment and radicalisation. Tackling this radicalisation phenomenon remains a work in progress.

Collaborating with Like-minded Diplomatic Partners

In the face of the evolving threat of terrorism, India has expanded its diplomatic engagements on counter-terrorism, seeking to enlist like-minded partners. For this, New Delhi has leveraged several regional and multilateral platforms, including the G20, FATF, and its 'No Money for Terror' conference. In 2022, India also hosted the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) special meeting of the Counter-Terrorism Committee and the 90th INTERPOL General Assembly in New Delhi, which discussed evolving a coordinated approach to countering terrorism by leveraging best practices and learnings from each other.

A focus in these convenings has been on assessing the impact of emerging technologies and their implications for CT and law enforcement. For instance, during the Third Ministerial 'No Money for Terror' conference in November 2022, India highlighted the need to tackle advanced means of terrorist financing, including the use of cryptocurrencies. Similarly, the Delhi Declaration at the end of the UNSC CT meeting in October 2022 focused on drone technologies, terrorist financing and terrorist organisations' use of information and communications technologies.

Bilateral relations have also played a critical role in CT collaborations. The recent extradition of 2008 Mumbai attacks suspect Tahawwur Hussain Rana from the United States to India is a case in point. Similarly, India has regularly worked with neighbouring countries, particularly Bangladesh and Nepal, to neutralise the activities of anti-India terrorist organisations, which had used these countries for recruitment and infiltration into India.

Notwithstanding the growing convergence on the threat posed by transnational terrorism, the global community are yet to agree on a standard definition of terrorism. This is evident from the oft-invoked adage, "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter", which underscores the selective approach adopted by different countries. This is precisely why the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism proposed by India at the UN in 1996 remains stalled.

The Way Forward

It is a matter of fact that Pakistan has chosen to utilise terrorism against the Indian state to compensate for not only its conventional inferiority against India but also New Delhi's meteoric rise in its global stature. This is the policy of bleeding India with a 'thousand cuts' through sub-conventional warfare. In that sense, every act of terrorism from Pakistan/PoJK-based anti-India terrorist organisations like the LeT and JeM is meant to derail the success story of India.

Of course, over the years, acts of cross-border terrorism, too, have undergone shifts. For several years, mass-casualty terrorist attacks in a major Indian city, such as the 2005 Delhi serial blasts, 2006 Mumbai train bombings and 2008 Mumbai attacks, were the usual practice for the terrorist organisations. Then they shifted to attacks targeting security forces and military personnel in bordering regions of Punjab and J&K, as was seen in the case of incidents at Gurdaspur (2015), Pathankot (2016), Uri (2016), and Pulwama (2019). Consequently, attacks in the hinterland went down drastically. The following change came about post-August 2019, when the state of J&K was reconstituted into the Union Territories of J&K and Ladakh. Since then, we have seen the emergence of proxy groups like the TRF and PAFF carrying out terrorist attacks and attempting to keep the insurgency alive.

Pakistan has, of course, time and again chosen to obfuscate these violent acts as 'false flag operations'. However, India's evolving response to these cross-border terrorist attacks through cross-border/LoC strikes and crackdowns on the terrorist ecosystem, particularly in J&K, has now demonstrated the baselessness of these claims.

Eradicating terrorism is an enduring struggle, especially amid the evolving geopolitical dynamics and shifting priorities of nations. Nevertheless, India must remain steadfast in its resolve and strengthen its resilience in confronting this menace. ❑