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Operation Sindoor and the Geopolitics of Narrative: Framing India and Pakistan in Global Media

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ABSTRACT

Following the deadly April 22, 2025, terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir, carried out by The Resistance Front (TRF), an offshoot of the Pakistan-backed Lashkar-e-Taiba, which resulted in the deaths of 26 civilians, India launched Operation Sindoor. From India's perspective, this operation, which began on May 7, 2025, was a calibrated military intervention targeting terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan in response to the initial provocation. Yet global media coverage portrayed India as the aggressor, downplaying the April terror attack. This study analyzes 16 international media articles to examine framing strategies adopted by prominent global outlets during Operation Sindoor. Using thematic analysis, the research identifies three dominant frames shaping global coverage: aggressor–victim, hyphenation, and decontextualized violence. Drawing on media framing theory and broader civilizational perspectives, this study reflects critically on how pervasive narrative choices in international media flatten asymmetries and obscure causality. The reasons are analyzed through the lens of historical post-World War II alliances like India–Russia and US–Pakistan and contextualized within the dynamics of Western hegemony and India's growing stature as a global power.

Keywords: Operation Sindoor; India–Pakistan Hyphenation; Decontextualized violence; Global media narratives; Geopolitics

INTRODUCTION

In the early hours of May 7, 2025, the Indian armed forces launched a calibrated military operation, targeting terrorist training camps at nine locations across Pakistan and Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir. Dubbed Operation Sindoor, this action was a direct response to the terrorist attack in Pahalgam on 22 April 2025 when 26 civilians were killed. The Resistance Front (TRF), an offshoot of the Pakistan-backed Lashkar-e-Taiba, claimed responsibility for the attack^{1,2}. Pakistan escalated the situation by striking both civilian and military installations within India. India responded with counter-retaliatory strikes, targeting Pakistani military infrastructure. After three days of sustained hostilities, during which Pakistan Army suffered “significant losses in numbers, morale and initiative” (ANI News, 2025), the Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) of

Pakistan reached out to his Indian counterpart to request a ceasefire—temporarily halting India's military operations³. As far as India was concerned the “original escalation” was the Pakistan-backed terror attack on 26 civilians in Kashmir on 22nd of April 2025⁴.

Global media, however, portrayed the incident through a markedly different lens—often framing India as a violent aggressor. Coverage tended to depict the episode as merely the latest escalation in the long-standing India–Pakistan rivalry over Kashmir, while downplaying the April terror attack. From previous scholarship on conflicts like Israel–Gaza⁵ and Russia–Ukraine⁶, we can identify recurring patterns when one side is predominantly framed as the aggressor. These frames not only decontextualize violence but also legitimizes the “victim” side's struggle. Geopolitical adversaries' sides are often hyphenated in a chosen frame

of equivalence, and historical complexities are flattened. We observe similar framing patterns in the international media coverage of Operation Sindoor.

Global outlets consistently hyphenated India and Pakistan, decontextualizing India's various grievances and downplaying the deadly April 2025 Pahalgam attack. For example, the Pahalgam attack was variously described as a "militant attack" or "gun attack" by AP News^{7,8}, a "mass-shooting", or simply an "attack" by DW⁹—removing explicit references to religious terrorism. At the same time, in the portrayal of India and Pakistan—two vastly different nation-states, one a secular democracy with a fast-growing economy and the other marked by military rule, a theocratic political structure, and economic dependence on IMF support—global media tended to blur these distinctions. From an Indian perspective, such negative framing has tangible social consequences as it engenders biased public discourse. This study examines 16 media articles, to analyze such framing strategies. Using thematic analysis, the research identifies dominant frames, exploring their motivations, and implications for geopolitical narratives.

METHODOLOGY

The study draws on media framing theory as its theoretical basis. Framing refers to the way information is organized, packaged, and presented in order to shape how audiences interpret and understand events. Certain elements of a story—whether visual or textual—are selectively emphasized while strategically omitting others, thereby guiding the audience's perception of reality¹⁰. A thematic analysis of international media coverage (N = 16) related to the India–Pakistan military escalation in May 2025 is conducted to identify the frames to understand how media narratives shape public understanding of geopolitical events. The articles were selected from a purposive sample of prominent global media outlets known for international conflict coverage (Table 1). Each sampled article was subjected to close reading, with relevant excerpts—including headlines, key phrases, and relevant descriptors—carefully extracted and catalogued. These textual elements were then organized into themes, based on recurring patterns in language use and narrative focus. These themes were mapped to higher-order frames, such as aggressor–victim, hyphenation, and decontextualized violence.

RESULTS

The following frames were identified through thematic analysis: aggressor–victim, hyphenation, and decontextualized violence. These are presented in Table 2, which outlines each frame and provides a brief description of each frame. Each frame comprises underlying themes, and a number of textual examples were matched to these themes during analysis. The terminology of frame, theme, and example is

Table 1: Article classification by media outlet

Media Outlet	Count
Al-Jazeera	2
AP	2
Bloomberg	1
BBC	3
CNN	2
New York Times	2
The Guardian	3
UN News	1
Total	16

used consistently throughout the study.

Table 2: Frames Identified

Frame	Description
Aggressor	— One actor is depicted as the sole initiator of violence, the other as the victim.
Victim	
Hyphenation	Both parties are portrayed as equivalent actors in the international arena including shared history, and defense capabilities
Decontextualized	Coverage of violence omits prior provocations (e.g., terror attacks, occupation), presenting aggression as sudden
Violence	

Aggressor–Victim Frame

A recurring frame in the global media coverage was the tendency to portray India as the sole initiator of violence, while depicting Pakistan as a passive or reactive actor (Table 3). This aligns with the aggressor–victim frame, where the complexities of conflict and antecedent provocations are excluded or downplayed during reporting. Leading global media outlets presented India's military action as the initiating event, omitting or minimizing references to the preceding April terror attack that provoked the response. This resulted in a skewed representation of causality and legitimacy. Two dominant themes identified within this frame: the depiction of India as the instigator and its characterization as inherently violent or militaristic.

Hyphenation Frame

Despite significant asymmetries in capabilities, historical trajectories, and global stature, Operation Sindoor coverage frequently portrayed India and Pakistan as comparable actors based on the shared history and common issues. The key themes identified include nuclear parity, the Kashmir dispute, shared responsibility for violence, and international calls for mutual de-escalation (Table 4). This type of hyphenation depicts India as a regional South Asian player "bogged down by instabilities" and "held hostage to its history"¹⁵ rather than an aspiring global power. Phrases like



Table 3: Themes and examples under aggressor-victim frame

Frame	Examples	Media House	Author
India as the aggressor or instigator	"India hits Pakistan, (Pakistan-administered Kashmir)"	Al Jazeera	(Hussain et al., 2025) ¹¹
	"India's strikes on Pakistan a major escalation..."	Al Jazeera	(Hussain et al., 2025) ¹¹
	"The Indian attacks were the most expansive since..."	Al Jazeera	(Hussain et al., 2025) ¹¹
	"The fighting this week was first inflamed on Wednesday after Indian missiles struck nine sites in Pakistan, killing 31 people"	The Guardian	(Ellis-Petersen & Baloch, 2025) ¹²
	"Indian military operations across the Line of Control and the international border with Pakistan."	UN News	(United Nations, 2025) ¹³
	"The military face-off began... when India struck several sites in Pakistani territory..."	The New York Times	(Mashal & Masood, 2025) ¹⁴
India as violent or militaristic	"Modi's deadly bombing strike on Pakistan goes to the heart of India's great dilemma"	The Guardian	(Bajpaei, 2025) ¹⁵
	"India fired attack drones into Pakistan on Thursday, killing at least two civilians..."	Al Jazeera	(McCready et al., 2025) ¹⁶
	"India fires missiles into Pakistani-controlled territory, killing at least 26"	The Associated Press	(AP News, 2025) ¹⁷
	"Does this attack mark a new escalation?"	BBC	(Biswas, 2025) ¹⁸

"two archrivals"⁷ and Kashmir as the "prime flashpoint"¹⁹ perpetuate this false equivalence.

Such hyphenation obscures fundamental differences in economic size, institutional maturity, and international standing²⁰. For example, a Bloomberg report notes similar stock market volatility and rebound in both nations during the military action²¹, but this comparison falsely implies parity, overlooking India's significantly larger and more developed market.

Decontextualized Violence Frame

Decontextualized violence framing is evident in much of the global media coverage of Operation Sindoor (Table 5). India's military action against Pakistan was often presented as sudden, unprovoked, or lacking context, with the preceding Pahalgam attack downplayed. This obscures the historical realities of cross-border terrorism and Pakistan-sponsored violence in Kashmir and other parts of India. Within this frame, reports frequently highlighted civilian suffering, predominantly on the Pakistani side, and that India acted without credible evidence. Furthermore, the depiction of regional fear or anxiety was centered on the notion that both countries were alarmed by India's aggression.

ANALYSIS

As illustrated in Table 3 through Table 5, media coverage of Operation Sindoor is shaped by a distinct set of frames and recurring themes. The dominant narrative positions India and Pakistan as comparable regional rivals, bound by a shared history and the Kashmir dispute. Within this framing,

India—despite being a secular democracy governed by the rule of law—is frequently cast as the aggressor. At the same time, Pakistan's long-standing support for terror groups is often minimized or overlooked. All three identified frames are supported in existing literature in various contexts: the aggressor–victim frame in conflict reporting^{27,28}, the hyphenation frame in geopolitical discourse^{29,30}, and the decontextualized violence frame in legal and policy contexts on violence^{31,32}.

These portrayals reflect deeper geopolitical alignments going back almost eight decades. For much of the post-World War II era, the West—the Euro-American bloc—was the undisputed global arbiter of geopolitics. This dominant position, forged from a unique convergence of economic, military, and ideological strengths, allowed it to largely shape the international order, including the control of prevailing narratives³³. During the Cold War, this Western dominance manifested in different ways in the Indian subcontinent, and Pakistan emerged as a key ally of the West, receiving substantial military and economic aid³⁴. Pakistan's consistent alignment with Western interests including a post-9/11 "War on Terror" partner³⁵, has often translated into diplomatic favoritism, despite evidence of its continued support for non-state militant actors. Conversely, India's pursuit of non-alignment, coupled with its close relationship with the Soviet Union, meant it was often viewed with suspicion or as implicitly aligned against Western interests³⁶.

This established a narrative framework where India could rarely be portrayed favorably, as doing so would undermine the geopolitical utility of designated allies. This framing aligns with established theory on conflict reporting that media outlets rarely challenge the dominant political



Table 4: Themes and examples under hyphenation frame

Frame	Examples	Media House	Author
Nuclear Parity	“But in recent years, particularly after both built deterrence through nuclear weapons in the 1990s, their military confrontations had been limited to largely along their border regions”	The New York Times	(Mashal et al., 2025) ¹⁹
	“Tensions have been escalating between the two nuclear-armed countries...”	Al Jazeera	(McCready et al., 2025) ¹⁶
	“Tensions have soared between the nuclear-armed neighbors...”	The Associated Press	(AP News, 2025) ¹⁷
Kashmir Dispute	“The two countries have fought several wars over Kashmir, a region that they have split but that each claims in whole”	The New York Times	(Mashal et al., 2025) ¹⁹
	“India and Pakistan have fought three wars since they were established in 1947, two of them over Kashmir.”	The Guardian	(Bajpaei, 2025) ¹⁵
	“Kashmir at the crux of the dispute... a disputed Himalayan region divided between them where armed insurgents resist Indian rule”	The Associated Press	(Butt, 2025) ⁷
	“The latest escalation between the longtime foes has killed dozens on both sides so far.”	CNN	(Saifi et al., 2025) ²²
	“India and Pakistan... have fought several wars, with the main flashpoint being their competing claims over the Himalayan region of Kashmir...”	The New York Times	(Mashal & Masood, 2025) ¹⁴
Shared responsibility for violence	“India and Pakistan both claim Kashmir in full”	BBC	(BBC News, 2025) ²³
	“India and Pakistan blame each other for escalating military tensions”	BBC	(BBC News, 2025) ²³
	“India and Pakistan appeared to be dangerously escalating their armed confrontation”	The New York Times	(Mashal & Masood, 2025) ¹⁴
	“Pakistan and India are blaming each other as their Kashmir conflict spirals.”	CNN	(Saifi et al., 2025) ²²
	“The two sides spent the day firing off escalatory allegations at each other”	The Guardian	(Ellis-Petersen & Baloch, 2025) ²⁴
	“India and Pakistan accuse each other of ‘violations’ after ceasefire deal”	BBC	(BBC News, 2025) ²⁵
International calls for mutual de-escalation	“The UN chief has expressed ‘deep concern’ over Indian military operations across the Line of Control and the international border with Pakistan.”	UN News	(United Nations, 2025) ¹³
	“A spokesman for the U.N. secretary general, António Guterres, called for restraint from the two sides...”	The New York Times	(Mashal et al., 2025) ¹⁹
	“Many countries are calling for restraint, fearing a wider devastating conflict could erupt.”	CNN	(Saifi et al., 2025) ²²
	“Throughout the day, the international community had made efforts to mediate between India and Pakistan and bring them back from the brink of all-out war”	The Guardian	(Ellis-Petersen & Baloch, 2025) ²⁴
	“...Secretary of State Marco Rubio spoke with leaders from both countries on Thursday and emphasized the need for ‘immediate de-escalation,’”	The New York Times	(Mashal & Masood, 2025) ¹⁴

Table 5: Themes and examples under decontextualized violence frame

Frame	Examples	Media House	Author
Selective victimhood representation	“...the Indian Army targeted the mosque in our neighborhood... I ran outside, and my daughter followed me. That's when the second missile hit, and a piece of shrapnel lodged in her chest. She spent two days in the hospital”	CNN	(Iyer et al., 2025) ²⁶
	“The strike on Nur Khan caused mass panic in the densely populated area. Video from the scene shared on social media showed flames and smoke billowing into the night sky, with residents running into the streets”	The Guardian	(Ellis-Petersen & Baloch, 2025) ¹²
Questioning legitimacy of action	“Islamabad has also pointed out that India has not offered any evidence to support its claim.”	BBC	(Biswas, 2025) ¹⁸
	“India blamed Pakistan for the attack, which Islamabad denied.”	CNN	(Saifi et al., 2025) ²²
	“Pakistan denied that any terrorist groups had been operating in the areas hit by Indian missiles, and said the strikes had targeted only civilians”	The Guardian	(Ellis-Petersen & Baloch, 2025) ²⁴
Regional Fear	“...since India conducted widespread airstrikes on its neighbor... hostilities... have exploded, leaving families on both sides fearing for their lives”	CNN	(Iyer et al., 2025) ²⁶
	“Tens of thousands of people living along the disputed border that divides the region of Kashmir continued to flee...”	The Guardian	(Ellis-Petersen & Baloch, 2025) ²⁴
	“Does anyone take consent from us people before starting a war?”	CNN	(Iyer et al., 2025) ²⁶

narratives of their home country or allied states.

The identity of the aggressor is determined by which political elite's version of events the press chooses to adopt. Consequently, news media tend to depict the opposing side—or “enemy”—as the initiator of violence, while presenting their own nation or allies as merely acting in self-defense, even when objective facts suggest otherwise. This process of “vilification” is frequently accompanied by a systematic reinforcement of negative stereotypes about the adversary:

“In times of war, the press is an important agent of vilification, a tool that enables leaders to mobilize public support for their policies.” (Wolfsfeld, 2004, p.14)³⁷.

“The news media are easily mobilized for the vilification of the enemy... Claims about our own acts of aggression and the other's suffering are either ignored, underplayed, or discounted. We are always the victims, they are always the aggressors.” (Wolfsfeld, 2004, p. 23)³⁷.

Issues of national identity and geopolitical alignment often lead media outlets to frame international events in ways that reflect their home country's strategic interests³⁸. Major media houses frequently “manufacture consent” by reinforcing narratives aligned with political and economic elites, rather than offering an unbiased account of conflict, in line with Herman and Chomsky's (1988)³⁹ propaganda model. This is further compounded by India's rapid eco-

nomic growth, increasing military capabilities, and assertion of strategic autonomy, and the fact that the U.S. is no longer being seen as the sole dominant global power.⁴⁰ This complicates India's place in established Western narratives. Consequently, despite being a thriving secular democracy and major economy, India is often portrayed negatively in Western media. Meanwhile, Pakistan, despite its crumbling economy and documented ties to terror sponsorship, frequently receives greater sympathy. By hyphenating India and Pakistan, Western foreign policy and media circumvent such discrepancies and effectively flatten the stark disparities between the two nations.

This false equivalence, where both parties are often held equally culpable despite significant power asymmetries and historical context (Philo & Berry, 2011)⁴¹, is evident in media's use of neutral terms like “militant” instead of “terrorist.” Although often seemingly adopting objective language, wartime coverage frequently embeds subtle biases that decontextualize violence and obscure underlying asymmetries. For example, a CNN report by Iyer et al. (2025)²⁶ presents what appears to be balanced testimonies from both sides of the Line of Control. However, a subtle pro-Pakistan bias is evident: a resident from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir directly blames the Indian Army for violence, while an Indian testimony ambiguously refers to “shelling” without naming the Pakistan Army. Another



Indian respondent notably criticizes the war itself, asking, “Does anyone take consent from us people before starting a war?” Such statements, presented without context, implicitly blames India while omitting the precipitating terrorist attack, thus downplaying causality and flattening asymmetries.

This study, while offering in-depth qualitative analysis, is limited by its small sample size (N=16). The focus on English-language outlets also potentially overlooks coverage in other major languages, such as French, Spanish, or Arabic. Furthermore, the analysis is restricted to the three-day conflict, which might not reflect subsequent media narratives. Future research could employ larger sample sizes and adopt a comparative longitudinal approach, examining how framing shifts across different conflict phases or among media in various geopolitical blocs.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of international media coverage surrounding Operation Sindoor, launched by India on May 7, 2025, in the wake of the devastating April 22, 2025, terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir, reveals a large difference between India's stated intent and global perception. While India viewed the operation as a measured response to the April attack that claimed 26 civilian lives, international media majorly portrayed India as the primary aggressor, often minimizing the initial act of terror. This study's thematic analysis of 16 prominent global media articles identified three dominant framing strategies: “aggressor-victim,” “hyphenation,” and “decontextualized violence” which demonstrably obscured the underlying causes and flattened asymmetries. The study contextualizes the findings by examining how historical post-World War II alliances such as India-Russia and US-Pakistan, the ongoing dynamics of Euro-American hegemony, and India's role as a rising global power, shape these narratives. As the study demonstrates, promoting a more historically informed and balanced geopolitical discourse is essential. It will not only allow a better public understanding of key issues but also promote responsible international engagement on global issues.

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