



THE ILLUSION OF WAR: ACHIEVING STRATEGIC GAINS BEYOND CONVENTIONAL CONFLICT WITH PAKISTAN

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Received: 01/03/2026

Accepted: 26/04/2026

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ABSTRACT

The India–Pakistan strategic rivalry, defined by nuclear overhang, recurring crises, and entrenched mutual hostility, presents a paradox: two states locked in permanent confrontation yet restrained from full-scale conventional war since 1971. This paper argues that India has deliberately cultivated what may be termed the “illusion of war,” a strategic posture of calibrated coercion that maintains the credible threat of military force while operating primarily within the grey zone of sub-conventional, diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments. Rather than a failure of resolve, this posture represents sophisticated strategic discipline under conditions of nuclear deterrence. Drawing on Thomas Schelling’s framework of coercive diplomacy, the stability–instability paradox articulated by Glenn Snyder and Michael Krepon, and the evolving literature on hybrid warfare in South Asia, the paper examines four principal instruments through which India has advanced its strategic objectives without crossing the threshold of conventional conflict: diplomatic and economic isolation, information and narrative warfare, calibrated military signalling, and exploitation of Pakistan’s internal vulnerabilities. The 2025 Pahalgam terrorist attack and the subsequent Operation Sindoor, India’s most expansive cross-border precision strike operation to date, serve as the primary case study, illustrating both the maturation of India’s grey-zone doctrine and its inherent limitations. The paper further interrogates the structural constraints on India’s coercive strategy, including the risk of miscalculation, Pakistan’s adaptive resilience, and China’s role as Islamabad’s strategic backstop. It concludes that the illusion of war, sustained through credible but restrained coercion, has enabled India to impose costs, recalibrate deterrence, and shape the strategic environment while avoiding the catastrophic risks of full-spectrum conflict in a nuclear rivalry.

KEYWORDS Grey zone, coercive diplomacy, India–Pakistan relations, Operation Sindoor, hybrid warfare, stability–instability paradox, calibrated coercion, nuclear deterrence.

INTRODUCTION

The India–Pakistan relationship constitutes one of the most enduring and consequential strategic rivalries in contemporary international relations. Since the partition of British India in 1947, the two states have fought four wars, endured countless crises, and maintained a posture of mutual hostility that shows no structural sign of abating. Yet a striking paradox defines this rivalry: despite the depth and persistence of antagonism, the two nuclear-armed neighbours have not fought a full-scale conventional war since 1971. This is not an accident of history, nor is it simply the product of mutual exhaustion. It is, this paper argues, the outcome of a deliberate and increasingly sophisticated Indian strategic posture that may be termed the “illusion of war.”

The illusion of war does not denote deception in the conventional sense. Rather, it describes a condition in which the credible threat of military force is sustained and periodically demonstrated through calibrated action, while the actual prosecution of full-scale conventional conflict is systematically avoided. India has learned, particularly across the post-Kargil decades, that the threat of war, when managed with precision, can deliver strategic dividends that war itself cannot. Diplomatic isolation, economic pressure, military signalling below the threshold of conventional conflict, and the exploitation of Pakistan’s internal vulnerabilities have collectively served as instruments of strategic gain without triggering the catastrophic risks of full-spectrum war in a nuclear rivalry. This paper examines how India has operationalised this posture across the diplomatic, economic, informational, and military dimensions of statecraft. It argues that India’s grey-zone strategy has enabled it to impose costs on Pakistan, recalibrate deterrence, and progressively shape the strategic environment in its favour. The 2025 Pahalgam terrorist attack and the subsequent Operation Sindoor serve as the primary case study, representing the most mature and expansive expression of this doctrine to date.

Conceptual Framework: Between War and Peace

India’s strategic behaviour toward Pakistan cannot be adequately understood through the lens of conventional war or simple deterrence theory. It occupies what contemporary strategic studies literature terms the “grey zone,” defined by Votel et al. (2016) as the space of competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality. In the India–Pakistan context, this grey zone is not a temporary condition but a permanent theatre of strategic competition. The theoretical anchor for understanding India’s approach is Thomas Schelling’s framework of coercive diplomacy, articulated in “Arms and Influence” (1966). Schelling distinguished between brute force, which seeks to overcome an adversary’s resistance, and coercion,

which seeks to influence behaviour through the manipulation of risk. India’s post-Kargil strategy reflects precisely this Schellingian logic: the goal is not to defeat Pakistan militarily but to impose sufficient costs and risks to compel behavioural change, or at minimum to deter further provocation. The surgical strikes of 2016, the Balakot airstrikes of 2019, and Operation Sindoor of 2025 are best understood not as acts of war but as acts of coercive communication.

The paradox holds that strategic nuclear stability between two states paradoxically enables instability at lower levels of conflict, as each side calculates that the other will not escalate to nuclear use over sub-conventional provocations. Pakistan has historically exploited this paradox to sustain proxy conflict and deniable terrorism against India beneath the nuclear threshold. India’s evolving grey-zone doctrine represents a sustained effort to contest and redefine that threshold, progressively raising the costs of sub-conventional aggression without triggering nuclear escalation. Finally, this paper inverts the classical Clausewitzian formulation. Where Clausewitz held that war is the continuation of politics by other means, India’s approach to Pakistan suggests the reverse: in a nuclear rivalry where full-scale war is structurally irrational, politics, diplomacy, economics, and calibrated military signalling become the continuation of war by other means. The illusion of war is, in this sense, not an absence of strategy but its most sophisticated expression.

WHY CONVENTIONAL WAR FORFEITS STRATEGIC GAINS

The most fundamental reason India has avoided full-scale conventional war with Pakistan since 1971 is not a deficit of capability or political will, but a rational calculation that conventional war, in a nuclear rivalry, forfeits more strategic ground than it secures. Four interlocking arguments sustain this position.

The first and most structurally determinative argument concerns the nuclear overhang. Both India and Pakistan are nuclear-armed states with demonstrated second-strike capabilities and documented doctrines of use. Pakistan’s relatively lower nuclear threshold, reflected in its rejection of a No First Use posture and its development of tactical nuclear weapons such as the Nasr (Hatf-IX) missile system, creates what Basrur (2008) has described as a “existential constraint” on Indian conventional military options. The logic of mutual assured destruction, even in its South Asian variant, renders full-scale war an instrument of potential national annihilation rather than strategic gain. As Krepon (2009) observed, nuclear weapons in South Asia have not produced stability so much as they have produced a peculiar and dangerous form of managed instability, in which both states are simultaneously

deterred from full war and incentivised toward sub-conventional competition. This dynamic, rather than any normative commitment to peace, explains the persistence of Indian strategic restraint.

The second argument concerns economic and developmental costs. India's grand strategic ambition in the twenty-first century is not territorial conquest but the consolidation of regional primacy and the achievement of great power status. This ambition is fundamentally dependent on sustained economic growth, foreign investment, and regional stability. A full-scale war with Pakistan, regardless of its military outcome, would devastate precisely the conditions India requires. Mohan (2006) has argued that India's strategic transformation since the 1990s has been defined by the recognition that economic power and military power are not alternatives but complements, and that war with Pakistan would undermine both simultaneously. The costs of the Kargil conflict alone, limited and ultimately successful as it was, ran to an estimated USD 2 billion (Behera, 2016), underlining the disproportionate economic burden even of constrained conventional operations.

The third argument addresses international normative and diplomatic constraints. Every major India–Pakistan crisis since 1999 has attracted rapid and intense international attention, particularly from the United States, China, and the broader international community. Tellis (2001) documented in detail how American diplomatic intervention during Kargil effectively shaped the terms of Pakistani withdrawal, demonstrating that India's conventional military options are never exercised in an international vacuum. Full-scale war would trigger immediate pressure for ceasefire, potential sanctions, and the internationalisation of the Kashmir dispute in ways deeply unfavourable to India's long-term position. Pant & Bommakanti (2019) has further noted that China's deepening strategic partnership with Pakistan adds a second layer of external constraint, as any Indian conventional operation risks triggering not merely diplomatic opposition from Beijing but potential material support to Islamabad.

The fourth and perhaps most instructive argument derives from the Kargil experience itself. The 1999 Kargil conflict demonstrated that even limited conventional military success carries significant strategic costs. India's military response was operationally successful, but the conflict internationalised the Kashmir dispute, placed India under intense diplomatic scrutiny, and ultimately required American mediation to resolve (Malik, 2006). The lesson India drew was not that conventional force is ineffective, but that its use, even when restrained and successful, produces strategic externalities that sub-conventional instruments do not. As Ladwig (2015) has argued, India's post-Kargil strategic evolution has been defined by a sustained search for options that impose costs on Pakistan while avoiding the escalatory and diplomatic risks of conventional military engagement. Strategic restraint, in this reading, is not passivity. It is

the disciplined management of escalation in pursuit of durable strategic advantage.

THE INSTRUMENTS OF SUB-CONVENTIONAL STRATEGIC GAIN

If conventional war forfeits strategic gains, the question that follows is what instruments India has employed to advance its objectives within the grey zone. This section maps four principal instruments through which India has systematically imposed costs on Pakistan, shaped the strategic environment, and recalibrated deterrence without crossing the threshold of full-scale conventional conflict.

Diplomatic and Economic Isolation

The most sustained and structurally consequential instrument of Indian grey-zone strategy has been the progressive diplomatic and economic isolation of Pakistan at the bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels. India has pursued this through multiple channels simultaneously, creating a cumulative pressure architecture that operates independently of military signalling.

At the multilateral level, India's most significant success has been its contribution to sustaining Pakistan's designation on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list from 2018 to 2022. While India's behind-the-scenes lobbying is not formally documented, Indian diplomats provided member states with evidence on terror financing networks. The economic consequences were substantial: a Tabadlab study estimated that repeated FATF grey-listing episodes from 2008 to 2019 resulted in cumulative real GDP losses for Pakistan of approximately USD 38 billion, driven largely by reduced consumption, exports, and inward FDI (Sardar 2021).

At the bilateral level, following the Pulwama attack in February 2019, India revoked Pakistan's Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status, raised customs duties on Pakistani imports to 200 percent, and effectively suspended bilateral trade, people-to-people contacts, and participation in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit process (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2019). These measures signalled India's willingness to use economic instruments as tools of strategic coercion rather than mere diplomatic protest.

The most dramatic deployment of economic leverage occurred in April 2025, when India placed the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) of 1960 in abeyance in response to the Pahalgam attack. Brokered by the World Bank and long regarded as one of the most durable bilateral agreements in South Asia, the IWT governs the distribution of the Indus river system. Its suspension directly targeted Pakistan's agricultural economy, which remains overwhelmingly dependent on Indus basin irrigation (Salman et al, 2002). This move demonstrated a fundamental willingness to weaponise even entrenched institutional frameworks as instruments of strategic pressure.

Information and Narrative Warfare

The second instrument is India's increasingly sophisticated deployment of information and narrative warfare to shape international perceptions, delegitimise Pakistan's strategic behaviour, and consolidate the "state-sponsored terrorism" frame in global discourse. This instrument has grown markedly more capable across successive crises. Following the Pulwama attack in February 2019, India conducted a rapid diplomatic blitz, briefing representatives of over twenty-five countries within forty-eight hours and presenting intelligence dossiers linking Jaish-e-Mohammed to Pakistani state structures. This internationalisation of the terrorism narrative served the dual purpose of building legitimacy for India's subsequent response and constraining Pakistan's diplomatic space. As Ganguly and Kapur (2010) have argued, narrative control in India–Pakistan crises has become as strategically significant as military positioning, since international responses are shaped as much by perceived legitimacy as by facts on the ground.

India's information operations have not been without limitations. Pakistan has developed counter-narrative capabilities, and the disinformation environment during and after Operation Sindoor in 2025 featured competing, often unverifiable claims from both sides regarding military losses, targets struck, and ceasefire terms (Clary 2025). Nevertheless, India's advantages in international media reach, English-language diplomacy, and established relationships with Western governments have generally enabled it to frame its actions as counter-terrorism rather than aggression.

Military Signalling Without Full Escalation

The third instrument is calibrated military signalling, through which India has progressively redefined the thresholds of acceptable response without triggering full-scale conventional war. This instrument has evolved significantly across three major episodes between 2016 and 2025, each representing a qualitative escalation in scope and visibility. The 2016 surgical strikes across the Line of Control marked the first public acknowledgement by India of cross-LoC ground operations against terrorist launch pads, breaking the prior convention of official deniability. The strategic significance lay in crossing a psychological threshold and demonstrating both will and capability for limited operations in Pakistani-administered territory. The 2019 Balakot airstrikes escalated this further, marking the first Indian aerial strike on Pakistani territory since 1971 and establishing the precedent of visible, attributable military force in response to mass-casualty terrorist attacks (Ladwig 2015).

Operation Sindoor in May 2025 represented the most expansive iteration to date. On 7 May, India employed precision missiles and drones in tri-service coordination to strike nine terrorist infrastructure sites linked to Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, five in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and four in Pakistan's Punjab province (including Muridke and Bahawalpur areas). India deliberately limited targets to terrorist

infrastructure, avoiding Pakistani military installations, thereby reinforcing the coercive rather than conventional character of the operation.

Exploiting Pakistan's Internal Vulnerabilities

The fourth instrument involves India's strategic exploitation of Pakistan's significant internal vulnerabilities, including ethno-nationalist movements, economic fragility, and contradictions generated by the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). While this dimension is the least publicly acknowledged, it forms a meaningful part of the overall pressure architecture. Pakistan's internal fault lines particularly the Baloch insurgency and the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement represent structural vulnerabilities that India has leveraged through diplomatic and informational means while maintaining official deniability of direct support (Fair 2014). Prime Minister Modi's 2016 Independence Day reference to Baloch suffering signalled that India retained the option of internationalising Pakistan's domestic conflicts as a counter to its proxy war in Kashmir.

Pakistan's deepening economic fragility, reflected in repeated IMF bailouts, has created indirect leverage. As fiscal space narrows, Pakistan's ability to sustain both military modernisation and proxy conflict is constrained a dynamic India has sought to reinforce through diplomatic engagement with multilateral lenders (Pant and Bommakanti 2019). Finally, CPEC has introduced its own contradictions: repeated attacks on Chinese personnel and infrastructure by Baloch groups have complicated Pakistan's management of its most important external relationship, generating friction that India has observed with strategic interest (Small 2015).

CASE STUDY: THE PAHALGAM–SINDOOR PARADIGM

The April–May 2025 crisis represents the most significant test of India's grey-zone coercive strategy since the 2019 Balakot airstrikes. Triggered by a major terrorist attack and culminating in Operation Sindoor, the sequence demonstrated India's maturing multi-domain approach: rapid non-kinetic pressure, calibrated military signalling, narrative shaping, and escalation control, all while avoiding full-scale conventional war under the nuclear shadow.

Trigger and Context

On 22 April 2025, terrorists attacked tourists in the Baisaran meadow near Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir, killing 26 civilians (mostly Hindu tourists) and injuring about 20 others. The Resistance Front (TRF), widely assessed as a Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) proxy, initially claimed responsibility. Indian authorities and later the US State Department linked the attack to Pakistan-based networks with ISI connections (Roggio 2025; CRS 2025). The targeting of civilians in a prominent tourist area carried clear symbolic intent which was to undermine post-2019 normalisation efforts in Kashmir and provoke a strong Indian reaction. The domestic context intensified pressure on New Delhi. Tourism in Jammu and Kashmir had reached post-insurgency highs,

and the attack struck at both India's security narrative and the government's credibility. As scholars have long noted, mass-casualty incidents create strong domestic imperatives for visible retaliation, complicating strategic restraint (MEA 2025).

India's Multi-Domain Response

India's reaction was deliberately sequenced rather than purely kinetic. On 23 April 2025, within 24 hours, the Cabinet Committee on Security announced the suspension (or placement "in abeyance") of the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty, expulsion of Pakistani diplomatic personnel, closure of the Wagah-Attari border, and revocation of visas for Pakistani nationals (MEA 2025). These steps formed the most comprehensive non-military punitive package to date, weaponising economic and resource levers alongside diplomatic downgrading. The IWT move was especially potent, given Pakistan's heavy dependence on Indus basin waters for agriculture ("Indus Waters Treaty" 2025). Parallel diplomatic efforts sought to shape the international narrative. Indian officials briefed UN Security Council members, Gulf states, and Indo-Pacific partners, presenting intelligence on TRF-LeT links and framing any forthcoming response as legitimate self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter. This pre-emptive outreach drew lessons from 2019, when Pakistan contested India's narrative more effectively.

On the night of 6–7 May 2025, India launched Operation Sindoor. Using stand-off precision missiles and drones, Indian forces struck nine terrorist infrastructure targets linked to LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammed. Five sites were in Pakistan-administered Kashmir (PoK) and four in Pakistan's Punjab province (including areas near Bahawalpur and Muridke). India emphasised tri-service coordination, deliberate avoidance of Pakistani military installations, and a counter-terrorism framing to limit escalation (PIB 2025). Indian statements claimed over 100 terrorists killed, including senior commanders; independent verification remains limited amid competing claims and the fog of war.

Escalation Management

Pakistan responded with retaliatory drone, missile, and artillery strikes targeting Indian military positions along the Line of Control and international border. Pakistani officials issued implicit nuclear references consistent with its asymmetric escalation posture (Narang 2014). Limited air engagements occurred, with both sides claiming successes (Pakistan alleged downing Indian aircraft; India highlighted effective air defences and subsequent strikes on Pakistani assets). India maintained calibration: responses focused on military targets while avoiding Pakistani command centres, nuclear sites, or broad civilian infrastructure. The exchange remained intense for roughly three to four days (7–10 May). De-escalation came via DGMO hotline communications and active US diplomatic intervention (DD News 2025). On 10 May, a ceasefire was announced, with the United States claiming a brokering role (acknowledged more openly by Pakistan than by India). This external off-

ramp echoed patterns in prior crises, providing both sides diplomatic cover without overt capitulation (Clary 2025).

Strategic Outcomes and Limitations

Operation Sindoor delivered several tangible gains that reinforce the logic of India's sub-conventional strategy. It imposed direct costs on terrorist infrastructure, established a precedent for deeper strikes into Pakistani territory (including Punjab), demonstrated improved tri-service integration and stand-off capabilities, and projected deterrent credibility. Internationally, while calls for de-escalation were universal, many states accepted (or did not strongly contest) India's counter-terrorism framing of the initial response. Yet the episode also exposed structural constraints. Pakistan showed resilience through asset dispersal, rapid adaptation, and mobilisation of Chinese diplomatic support. Competing casualty and damage claims created a dense disinformation environment that complicated narrative dominance. Long-term behaviour change remains uncertain: proxy networks have historically absorbed episodic pressure and reconstituted, as analyses of Pakistan's strategic culture have documented. The crisis also highlighted potential diminishing returns in coercive signalling. Each successive Indian action vis-à-vis surgical strikes (2016), Balakot (2019), and Sindoor (2025) has required greater scope and visibility to achieve comparable effect. If this pattern persists, the margin between effective grey-zone coercion and risky conventional escalation may narrow, increasing inadvertent escalation dangers in future crises.

In sum, the Pahalgam–Sindoor paradigm validates key elements of India's "illusion of war" approach: calibrated multi-domain pressure can raise costs on Pakistan's proxy strategy while avoiding the prohibitive expenses and international backlash of full-scale conflict. At the same time, it underscores persistent challenges which are Pakistani adaptation, great-power mediation dependence, and the need for sustained international narrative efforts that will continue testing the doctrine's durability.

CONSTRAINTS, RISKS AND THE CHINA COMPLICATION

India's grey-zone coercive strategy has demonstrably advanced its strategic objectives across successive crises, but a sober assessment must account for structural constraints that threaten to erode its logic over time.

- The most immediate risk is miscalculation. Grey-zone operations function through deliberate ambiguity and incomplete information, conditions that are simultaneously their strategic strength and their most dangerous vulnerability. States under crisis conditions are systematically prone to worst-case interpretation of adversary signals and cognitive bias, elevating the risk of inadvertent escalation. The Sindoor episode illustrated this starkly: Pakistani leadership made implicit nuclear signalling gestures that Indian decision-

makers were required to interpret accurately under compressed timelines and significant information uncertainty. The margin between successful escalation management and catastrophic miscalculation in a nuclear rivalry proved uncomfortably narrow, and its successful navigation owed as much to circumstance as to design.

- A second constraint concerns diminishing returns. Coercive credibility is a depreciating asset if threats are repeatedly made without full execution. India's sequential escalation across 2016, 2019, and 2025 has progressively raised the threshold of what constitutes a meaningful signal, creating structural pressure toward ever-greater scope and visibility in future operations. If each successive response must be larger than the last to achieve equivalent deterrent effect, the space between meaningful grey-zone coercion and conventional war narrows correspondingly, increasing inadvertent escalation risks in future crises.
- The third constraint is the domestic political economy of restraint. Mass-casualty attacks on civilian populations generate intense public pressure for visible military responses, systematically biasing governments toward more expansive action than strategic logic alone might dictate. The twenty-four hour news cycle and social media amplification of casualty imagery further compound this dynamic. Historically, this domestic pressure architecture has functioned as one of Pakistan's most reliable strategic assets, as attacks designed to provoke disproportionate Indian responses simultaneously generate the domestic conditions that make such responses politically unavoidable.
- The fourth constraint is Pakistan's adaptive resilience. Despite successive rounds of diplomatic isolation, economic pressure, and military signalling, Pakistan's strategic behaviour has shown no fundamental transformation. Pakistan's military establishment has constructed a strategic culture specifically oriented toward sustaining the proxy war against India at manageable cost. Each Indian coercive action has generated a Pakistani adaptation that partially neutralises its effect, sustaining the structural conditions that make the next action necessary.
- The fifth and most structurally significant constraint is China. The Sino-Pakistani relationship provides Pakistan with diplomatic protection, military hardware, economic sustenance through CPEC, and intelligence cooperation that collectively limit the coercive space available to India. During the Sindoor crisis, Chinese diplomatic intervention in support of Pakistan was rapid and substantive. China's permanent UN Security Council membership provides Pakistan a reliable diplomatic buffer; its sustained transfer of advanced military technology complicates India's escalation calculus; and CPEC gives Beijing a direct material interest in preventing Indian coercive actions that threaten Pakistani stability. Additionally, China's upstream control of the Brahmaputra river system represents a latent counter-leverage instrument against

India's weaponisation of the Indus Waters Treaty. India's strategic challenge is therefore not bilateral but triangular, a constraint that bilateral analysis of the India-Pakistan rivalry alone cannot capture.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that India's management of its strategic rivalry with Pakistan since 1971 reflects not an absence of conflict but the deliberate cultivation of what may be termed the illusion of war: a posture of calibrated coercion that sustains the credible threat of military force while operating principally within the grey zone of sub-conventional, diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments. The evidence examined across successive crisis episodes suggests that this posture has enabled India to impose meaningful costs on Pakistan, recalibrate deterrence thresholds, and shape the strategic environment in its favour without incurring the prohibitive risks of full-spectrum conventional conflict in a nuclear rivalry. The four instruments analysed in this paper, diplomatic and economic isolation, information and narrative warfare, calibrated military signalling, and exploitation of Pakistan's internal vulnerabilities, have functioned not in isolation but as a mutually reinforcing strategic architecture. The progression from the 2016 surgical strikes through Balakot to Operation Sindoor illustrates the institutional maturation of this architecture, with each episode demonstrating greater operational sophistication, deeper target sets, and more effective pre-strike narrative shaping than its predecessor.

The doctrine is not, however, without significant structural limitations. The risk of inadvertent miscalculation in compressed crisis environments, the diminishing returns inherent in repeated coercive escalation, the domestic political pressures that systematically bias responses toward visibility over calibration, Pakistan's demonstrated adaptive resilience, and China's deepening role as Islamabad's strategic backstop collectively represent challenges that episodic coercive action cannot permanently resolve. Precise military strikes are unlikely to produce the fundamental transformation in Pakistani strategic behaviour that would render the doctrine unnecessary. The illusion of war has thus far functioned as a viable strategic instrument for India, enabling it to manage a deeply asymmetric and nuclear-shadowed rivalry without crossing into conventional conflict. Its continued viability will depend on India's capacity to sustain institutional discipline in escalation management, adapt its coercive toolkit to an accelerating technological environment, and navigate the increasingly triangular India-Pakistan-China dynamic that now frames every bilateral crisis. These are demanding requirements, and the Pahalgam-Sindoor episode, for all its strategic gains, also exposed how narrow the margin between successful coercion and uncontrolled escalation can become. That margin deserves to be the central preoccupation of Indian strategic planning in the years ahead.

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