



**HARSH VARDHAN SHRINGLA**

# Changing the Narrative: How India Won the Information War

Operation Sindoor marked a paradigm shift and a new normal in India's response to Pakistan-sponsored terror. The well-crafted public diplomacy campaign helped repudiate Pakistan's narrative of victimhood and its web of lies. By leveraging its network of strategic partnerships from Washington to Riyadh to Tokyo, India has built a case that places the onus squarely on Pakistan for any further acts of terrorism, military escalation, and conflict, says Harsh Vardhan Shringla.



The delegation of parliamentarians led by BJP MP Baijayant Jay Panda visited Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Algeria. (Left to Right) Nishikant Dubey (BJP) Phangnon Konyak (BJP), Jay Panda, Rekha Sharma (BJP), Satnam Singh Sandhu (nominated MP), Harsh Shringla, former foreign secretary, and Asaduddin Owaisi (AIMIM).

Operation Sindoor was a moment of reckoning, showing how the course of history and geopolitics can change dramatically within a short span of time. In the aftermath of the Pahalgam terror attack, India's military and foreign policy saw a rapid and unprecedented recalibration. India's traditional toolkit for dealing with major terror attacks consisted of suspending dialogue, freezing people-to-people contacts, and attempting to sensitise the international community to Pakistan's use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy towards India. Unfortunately, this toolkit remained limited in its options given Pakistan's persistent invocation of the nuclear threat.

The international community, while not paying much heed to India's pain and anguish, would nonetheless resist a counter-response, fearing nuclear escalation. Such

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a global response was reflective of double standards: being silent against the perpetrator while silencing the victim. This pattern of events allowed Pakistan to exploit its lack of accountability, as it continued incubating terror proxies and bolstering its terror infrastructure.

### Breaking the Pattern

But India made it clear that the pattern of evasion and ambivalence had reached its conclusion. While addressing a public gathering in Bihar just a day after the attacks, Prime Minister Modi said, "India will identify, track, and punish every terrorist and their backers. We will pursue them to the ends of the earth." As he departed from his usual style of speaking Hindi to domestic audiences, it became clear that PM Modi's switch to English was intended as a message not just to Pakistan, but to the world at large. India's subsequent diplomatic campaign to isolate and expose Pakistan developed in a phased manner. The first phase was about punitive action, focused on a bilateral response vis-à-vis Pakistan, the second phase on narrative building and norm-setting and the third phase on a multipronged global outreach.



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## **Paradigm Shifting ‘New Normal’**

Within days of the Pahalgam attack, New Delhi expelled Pakistani military diplomats, halted visa facilities for Pakistani nationals, and imposed strict deadlines for the immediate exit of any Pakistani nationals residing within India. This was followed by the more notable decision to hold the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance. These moves underscored India's hardening position indicating that any engagement with Pakistan would hinge solely on credible action it would take against terrorist groups on its soil.

A fortnight after the Pahalgam terror attack, India launched ‘Operation Sindoor’ in the small hours of May 7. Using precision-based long-range kinetic action, India specifically targeted known terrorist infrastructure and personnel

in nine locations inside Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK) and Pakistan. By attacking only terror infrastructure and personnel, the onus of escalation was transferred to the Pakistani side. Within a few hours, Operation Sindoor reconfigured the escalation matrix vis-à-vis Pakistan, resulting in the establishment of ‘The New Normal.’

This ‘New Normal’ was expanded upon by Prime Minister Modi during his eloquent address to the Nation on May 12th. In his speech, the PM underlined India's approach to Pakistan and highlighted three key points underpinning this paradigm shift. First, no terrorist attack would go unpunished, and India would respond on its own terms at a time of its choosing. Second, Pakistan's nuclear escalation bluff would no longer be a deterrent against India's retaliation, delinking conventional escalation from the nuclear ladder. Third, India will not differentiate between terror perpetrators and terror sponsors. The infamous video of Pakistani army personnel standing alongside internationally wanted terrorists during the state funeral accorded to the terrorist casualties of Operation Sindoor was but one of the many recent illustrations of the deeply entrenched military-terror nexus. This also illustrated that taxpayer money, state resources, and grants/loans received from international organisations and states are diverted towards terror incubation and cultivation. Hence, the burden of proof shall no longer lie with India (which has already furnished substantial evidence on previous occasions). As long as India has evidence of attacks being planned from Pakistani soil, it will strike at the very source of terrorism. Essentially, Pakistan can no longer take cover under the excuse of non-state/third-party actors. There will be no distinction between the Pakistani State and terrorist groups operating on its soil.

Overall, ‘The New Normal’ provides a comprehensive, paradigm-shifting rewiring of the Indian response mechanism, conflict escalation matrix and subsequent bilateral engagement with Pakistan.





## Information War

Following the targeted strikes under Operation Sindoor, during the four-day conflict, Pakistan launched a dedicated mass misinformation campaign over social media, making unverified and undocumented claims of damage incurred on the Indian side. This war of information exposed another dimension of the conflict: international narrative building and shaping. This catalysed the third phase of India's campaign.

Soon after the official declaration of ceasefire on May 10, New Delhi launched an extensive global outreach campaign. This campaign was designed to address three crucial points: to present incontrovertible evidence of Pakistan's links to the Pahalgam attack, expose the broader web of Pakistan's state-sponsored terrorism, and rally support for India's stance that terrorism must be confronted, not tolerated, or 'balanced' with calls for dialogue. In what

became the largest diplomatic outreach since the 1971 Bangladeshi refugee crisis, seven multi-party parliamentary delegations fanned out to 33 countries across Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas in the span of a few weeks.

Having been involved in this unprecedented diplomatic exercise, I witnessed first-hand how India's unity across party lines became our most powerful diplomatic weapon. Senior politicians from both the ruling and opposition parties, including figures like Bajjayant Panda, Shashi Tharoor, Ravi Shankar Prasad, Supriya Sule, Sanjay Jha, Eknath Shinde and Kanimozhi Karunanidhi led these teams. This cross-party composition struck international observers as particularly significant — here was a nation that could put aside domestic political differences to present a united front against terrorism.

Group-1 that I was a part of, visited the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria,

where we were met with a warm reception. In Kuwait, we discovered a remarkable piece of history at an exhibition showcasing trade and monetary ties between India and Kuwait dating back centuries. It was fascinating to learn that the Indian Rupee had served as legal tender in Kuwait and Bahrain from 1947 to 1962, a reflection of the deep historical and economic relationship between our nations. This historical connection resonated powerfully with their leaders who understood that the current terrorism challenge threatened not just India, but the stability of the ancient heritage and partnerships that had bound our civilisations for generations.

During our interactions with Gulf partners, the economic dimensions of our 'new normal' approach proved particularly compelling. As BJP MP and veteran parliamentarian Bajjayant Panda ji, who led our multi-party delegation, contextualised: "The delegation's remit was not just to put India's case on its right to retaliate against terror acts on its soil but also to convey the 'new normal' of imposing economic sanctions against Pakistan for the same." He also pointed out that two of the four nations we visited had played a role in the UN Security Council in proscribing terrorist elements in Pakistan, along with participating as members of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) board which had put Pakistan under its 'Grey List.'

In Saudi Arabia, the diplomatic reception was particularly warm, building on Prime Minister Modi's recent successful visit to the Kingdom, signalling the deep strategic trust that had developed between the two nations. This alignment was also reflected in our interactions with Saudi think tanks, who underscored that the Pahalgam attack was illustrative of "state-enabled asymmetric warfare." Essentially, they asserted that this was a coordinated operation by Pakistan's military and the ISI, under the garb of terrorism.

Fellow delegation member, BJP MP Nishikant Dubey ji highlighted that "Pakistan's economy was heavily reliant on foreign loans and grants, and would collapse if the world halted this funding." He also voiced similar concerns in

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Kuwait, communicating that "we explained in detail the reality behind Pakistan's placement and removal from the FATF Grey List. It became necessary for Pakistan to publicly commit, during the period from 2018 to 2022 when it was in the FATF Grey List, that it would stop funding terrorists." The FATF list was an important and recurring topic throughout the visits. AIMIM MP and leader Asaduddin Owaisi ji, whose presence in the delegation sent a powerful message about India's secular unity against terrorism, offered crucial insights during our meetings. Speaking about Pakistan's military-terror nexus, he noted: "Pakistan's current army chief and former ISI DG Asim Munir represents a symbolic link in Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. Even though Pakistan was on the FATF Grey List, the country continued to receive significant international aid, which instead of strengthening its economy or alleviating poverty, indulged in a systematic diversion of resources toward terrorist infrastructure." In furtherance to this assertion, he also pointed to how amidst the FATF grey listing of Pakistan, not only was there a decrease in terrorism, but also the trial of the infamous 26/11 handler Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, highlighting the effectiveness of the



All-party delegation led by Congress MP Shashi Tharoor with members of India Caucus in the House of Representatives, Rich McCormick and Andy Barr, in Washington.

FATF mechanism and the urgent need to place Pakistan back on the FATF list.

Veteran leader and former Chief Minister of Jammu & Kashmir Ghulam Nabi Azad ji brought forth his insights and experiences. Referencing personal experiences, he discussed how the ISI made attempts at political manipulation and coercion throughout the years. The key

takeaway, as he put it was “We don’t want to eliminate any country. We want Pakistan to dismantle this terrorist infrastructure and take action against terrorists,” calling for stronger international support (including at OIC). He also highlighted how, in the wake of the Pahalgam terror attack, the people of Jammu & Kashmir spontaneously came out to protest against Pak-sponsored terrorism.

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In a copycat exercise, Pakistan scrambled its own delegation in response. These envoys attempted to reassure audiences that Pakistan remained committed to the February 2021 LoC ceasefire and the fight against terror, while accusing India of jeopardising regional stability. Pakistan also penned letters to the

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UN and key countries accusing India of war-mongering and “human rights violations in Kashmir” during security crackdowns after the attack, desperately trying to pivot the conversation back to Kashmir rather than terrorism. However, Pakistan’s appeals found limited traction. No country, with some notable exceptions, explicitly criticised India’s Operation Sindoor. Pakistan faces an enduring credibility problem due to its historic ties to jihadi groups, and our campaign further reinforced this reality.

### Changing Global Public Opinion

India’s diplomatic campaign significantly tilted the scales of global opinion in India’s favour on the issue of terrorism. The narrative that Pakistan must “do more” against terrorist groups was reinforced in world capitals. By leveraging our network of strategic partnerships and engaging in grounded dialogue, we built a compelling case that holding Pakistan accountable was a necessary step not just for regional security, but for the global war against terrorism.

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As a result, Pakistan today faces a more sceptical international environment where its cries of victimhood are met with references to its past conduct. The foundation has been laid for a new international consensus that terrorism cannot be tolerated, regardless of its source or stated justification. Whether this translates into sustained pressure through sanctions or conditionalities will depend on continued follow-through by India and its partners, but the diplomatic groundwork for such measures is now firmly in place.

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Harsh Vardhan Shringla is Member, Rajya Sabha (Upper House of India’s Parliament). He served as India’s Foreign Secretary from January 2020 to April 2022 and Chief Coordinator for India’s G20 Presidency from 2022-2023. He has been Ambassador to the United States of America, Bangladesh, and Thailand. A graduate of St. Stephen’s College, he is known for strengthening India-US ties and organising high-profile events such as the “Howdy Modi” summit. He is also a fluent linguist and writer on diplomacy and regional affairs.