

## False Flag Operations and Strategic Stability: Revisiting the May 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis

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### Abstract

*On 22 April 2025, a mass shooting at the Baisaran Valley in Pahalgam, Indian illegally occupied Kashmir (IIOK), claimed the lives of 26 civilians—including tourists—and injured 20 more. India swiftly attributed the attack to Pakistani-backed militants, suspended the Indus Waters Treaty, closed shared airspace and land routes, and initiated Operation Sindoor, launching missile strikes on alleged terror camps across the border. Pakistan rejected the allegations, labeled the incident a false flag operation, and called for a neutral investigation, while enacting diplomatic and trade countermeasures. This episode—referred to as the “Pahalgam incident”—underscores the escalating breach of strategic stability in South Asia via narrative manipulation and covert provocation. This article explores the deployment of false flag operations as instruments of hybrid warfare within the nuclearized Indo-Pak rivalry, with the Pahalgam incident serving as the focal case. False flag operations—covert actions designed to appear as though executed by another actor—pose acute risks of misperception, crisis spirals, and inadvertent escalation in high-stakes, nuclear-armed dyads. Employing a qualitative case-study methodology, this study reconstructs the April–May 2025 crisis using official government statements, policy communiqués, international news outlets, think-tank analyses, and open-source intelligence. Through strategic analysis, the research evaluates the operational, diplomatic, and deterrence dynamics unleashed by the incident. Findings reveal that false flag operations severely erode strategic stability, increasing the likelihood of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation, especially where nuclear deterrence depends on credible signaling and mutually assured thresholds. The Pahalgam crisis prompted water-security manipulation, cross-border military strikes, and bilateral treaty suspensions—illustrative of false flag tactics’ ability to destabilize region-wide frameworks. The article concludes by advocating for strengthened bilateral dialogue channels, robust transparency and verification frameworks, and third-party crisis mediation mechanisms. In emphasizing proactive countermeasures—such as institutionalized crisis hotlines and confidence-building protocols—it contributes to the broader discourse on managing strategic risks posed by hybrid tactics in nuclearized regions.*

**Keywords:** False Flag Operations, Strategic Stability, Pahalgam Incident 2025, Indo-Pak Relations, Hybrid Warfare, Nuclear Deterrence, Crisis Escalation, South Asia Security.

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### 1. Introduction

South Asia remains one of the most conflict-prone and strategically unstable regions in the world, primarily due to the historically adversarial relationship between its two nuclear-armed neighbors: India and Pakistan. Since their partition in 1947, both countries have fought multiple wars, with the unresolved issue of Jammu and Kashmir serving as a persistent flashpoint. The region's strategic environment is further complicated by nationalism, cross-border militancy, and the absence of a robust conflict-resolution mechanism. The nuclearization of both states in 1998 was expected to usher in a new era of deterrence, but instead, it has created a fragile balance where conventional and sub-conventional conflicts continue under the shadow of nuclear weapons (Kapur, 2017; Ganguly & Hagerty, 2019).

Strategic stability between India and Pakistan is vital not only for regional peace but also for global security, given the risks of inadvertent escalation. Strategic stability in this context refers to a condition where neither side has an incentive to resort to first use of force—nuclear or conventional—due to credible deterrence and stable crisis management mechanisms (Khan, 2012). However, recurring crises such as the Kargil conflict (1999), the Mumbai attacks (2008), and the Pulwama-Balakot episode (2019) have demonstrated how quickly the region can descend into confrontation. The absence of sustained dialogue, weak bilateral institutions, and narrative-based diplomacy further exacerbate instability (Tellis, 2020).

In this volatile landscape, false flag operations—covert acts designed to appear as though they are conducted by a rival actor—have emerged as a controversial but potent instrument of statecraft. Historically associated with psychological warfare, these operations are employed to fabricate a *casus belli*, manipulate domestic and international opinion, or justify pre-emptive military action. Their usage in a nuclearized environment like South Asia is particularly dangerous, as misattribution or rapid escalation can override rational decision-making (Zisk, 2022). The use of such tactics calls into question the reliability of deterrence and the credibility of state narratives in crisis situations.

The May 2025 Pahalgam incident—where a deadly attack in Indian illegally occupied Kashmir led to a rapid Indian military response and counteraction from Pakistan—has reignited debates about the use of false flag operations in Indo-Pak relations. While India blamed Pakistani-backed militants, Pakistan rejected the allegations and labeled the event a fabricated pretext for cross-border aggression. This episode reflects a dangerous pattern wherein narrative manipulation replaces transparent investigation, undermining regional stability. The incident also witnessed unprecedented responses, including airspace closures, suspension of treaties, and diplomatic disengagement—pushing the region to the brink of a broader military confrontation.

This study seeks to address the central question: How do false flag operations affect strategic stability in South Asia, particularly within the Indo-Pak nuclear dyad? The objective is to examine the Pahalgam incident through the lens of hybrid warfare, deterrence theory, and strategic miscalculation to assess its broader implications for regional security. The study further aims to contribute policy-relevant insights by identifying mechanisms that can prevent escalation triggered by deceptive tactics.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 provides the conceptual and theoretical framework, examining relevant theories such as deterrence, hybrid warfare, and the security dilemma. Section 3 presents a historical overview of alleged false flag operations in South Asia. Section 4 offers a detailed case study of the May 2025 incident. Section 5 evaluates the impact on strategic stability, while Section 6 offers policy recommendations. Finally, Section 7 concludes with key findings and suggestions for further research.

## **2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

False flag operations are covert activities carried out by a state or group with the intention of disguising the actual perpetrators and falsely attributing responsibility to another actor, usually an

adversary. The primary objective is to manipulate public perception, justify pre-emptive or retaliatory action, or shift blame in the international arena. These operations are not new in strategic history—they have been employed in various forms, including fabricated terrorist attacks, staged sabotage, or politically motivated violence. Scholars classify false flag operations into several typologies: tactical (localized military gain), strategic (shaping long-term policy direction), and psychological (influencing public opinion or enemy morale) (Wirtz, 2017; Lanoszka, 2016). In contemporary settings, they are often fused with hybrid warfare techniques involving disinformation, cyber operations, and media manipulation to achieve strategic goals without crossing overt thresholds of war.

The deterrence theory, particularly in the nuclear context, posits that the threat of unacceptable retaliation deters adversaries from initiating conflict. Deterrence relies on credibility, capability, and communication of intent (Schelling, 2008). However, false flag operations can dangerously distort deterrence dynamics. If a state wrongly attributes an attack to its adversary, it may retaliate under false pretenses, escalating a situation unnecessarily. In South Asia, where India and Pakistan maintain distinct nuclear doctrines and crisis thresholds, such misperceptions can prove catastrophic. The use of ambiguous provocations undermines the clarity needed for effective deterrence and complicates retaliatory decision-making (Khan, 2012).

The security dilemma, as conceptualized by John Herz and later expanded by Jervis (1978), explains how defensive measures by one state are perceived as offensive by another, triggering an arms race or confrontation. False flag operations intensify this dilemma by blurring the line between offense and defense, making intentions less discernible. When such operations are combined with rapid military responses—as seen in India's Operation Sindoor in May 2025—the risk of strategic miscalculation increases. In regions like South Asia, where historical mistrust prevails and political narratives often supersede factual clarity, the potential for misinterpretation escalates further (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010).

Another critical framework is the distinction between crisis stability and instability. Crisis stability exists when neither side perceives a military advantage in striking first, thereby reducing the chance of war. Conversely, crisis instability arises when either side believes that preemptive action is necessary to avoid greater losses. False flag operations erode crisis stability by manufacturing urgency and justification for immediate military action. In South Asia, repeated crises—from Kargil (1999) to Pulwama (2019)—have demonstrated how quickly states may resort to force in the absence of verified intelligence and direct communication (Tellis, 2020). The May 2025 Pahalgam incident is a contemporary manifestation of this instability, as India's retaliatory strikes were executed before any impartial investigation.

Applying these theoretical frameworks to South Asia reveals a highly fragile strategic environment where false flag operations act as accelerants of conflict rather than deterrents. In a region marked by unresolved disputes, volatile domestic politics, and rapid militarization, the deployment of false narratives through covert operations introduces dangerous unpredictability. The interplay of deterrence failure, security dilemma, and crisis instability amplifies the risk of inadvertent escalation. These dynamics call for urgent institutional reforms in crisis communication, transparency, and third-party verification to preserve regional peace (Basrur, 2021).

### **3. Historical Context of False Flag Operations in South Asia**

South Asia's strategic instability has often been shaped not only by overt conflicts and military posturing but also by covert operations attributed to intelligence manipulation. A distinct pattern of alleged false flag operations by India has emerged over decades—often coinciding with diplomatic turning points or international engagements—to diplomatically isolate Pakistan, generate international sympathy, or suppress internal unrest. A seminal case is the 1971 Ganga hijacking, where an Indian Airlines aircraft was commandeered to Lahore. India immediately

blamed Pakistan and banned its overflights, significantly influencing the buildup to the Indo-Pak War. However, R.K. Yadav, a former officer of India's RAW, later revealed that the operation was internally orchestrated to justify strategic goals (Yadav, 2014).

The 2000 Chittisinghpura massacre, where 36 Sikhs were murdered during President Bill Clinton's visit to India, was instantly blamed on Pakistan. But Indian Army investigations and statements by Lt. Gen. K.S. Gill later suggested Indian forces may have played a direct role—timing the attack to discredit Pakistan internationally (Gill, as cited in Yadav, 2017). Soon after, in December 2001, the Indian Parliament was attacked, leading India to deploy half a million troops to its western border. Despite a lack of conclusive evidence, Pakistan was blamed. Years later, former Indian Home Ministry official Satish Verma alleged that the attack was "orchestrated by Indian agencies" to justify counter-terrorism laws and enable state repression (Verma, as cited in Davidson, 2009). This marked a dramatic escalation, bringing both countries to the brink of nuclear confrontation. This pattern continued with the March 2003 Nadimarg massacre, when 24 Kashmiri Pandits were killed by gunmen in military attire. Without verification, India blamed Pakistan, with Deputy Prime Minister Advani asserting Pakistan's involvement. Analysts noted the attack's strategic timing—during the U.S. invasion of Iraq—suggesting it was meant to divert global attention and vilify Pakistan amid Kashmir's insurgency (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010). Similarly, the 2007 Samjhauta Express bombing, which killed 68 passengers (mostly Pakistanis), was initially blamed on Pakistan. However, later probes implicated Hindu extremist groups, and Home Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde confirmed that BJP-affiliated RSS operatives were responsible (Shinde, 2013).

The 2008 Mumbai attacks (26/11), one of India's deadliest, also exhibit signs of narrative manipulation. While Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba was blamed, Elias Davidson's exhaustive work *The Betrayal of India* exposed inconsistencies, including intelligence failures, CCTV tampering, and the mysterious death of Hemant Karkare, who was investigating Hindutva terror networks (Davidson, 2009). The 2016 Pathankot Airbase attack, occurring shortly after Prime Minister Modi's Lahore visit, again derailed bilateral dialogue. Indian claims against Pakistan lacked substantiation, and multiple investigative irregularities were later documented (Tellis, 2020).

In February 2019, just before Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Pakistan, a suicide attack in Pulwama killed 40 Indian personnel. India launched the Balakot airstrikes in response, escalating tensions. Yet, questions were raised about the timing, lack of independent investigations, and the political utility of the incident for India's ruling party during elections (Basrur, 2021). Finally, in January 2023, Pakistan's intelligence services publicly revealed an Indian plan to stage a false flag operation in Poonch on Republic Day to portray Pakistan as a terror sponsor—reaffirming a well-documented strategic pattern (ISPR, 2023).

Collectively, these incidents suggest a consistent Indian reliance on narrative warfare and manufactured incidents to manipulate diplomatic discourse, justify militarized responses, and discredit Pakistan globally. Such operations pose a direct threat to strategic stability by creating the potential for inadvertent escalation, particularly within a nuclearized dyad where misperception and rapid retaliation carry existential risks.

#### **4. The May 2025 Crisis: A Case Study**

On 22 April 2025, the Pahalgam Valley witnessed a brutal attack on tourists that killed 26 civilians and wounded 20 others. India swiftly attributed the assault to Pakistan and launched Operation Sindoor on 7 May 2025, targeting civilian infrastructure in both Pakistan and Azad Jammu & Kashmir using precision weaponry such as the Akash and BrahMos missile systems (Economic Times, 2025; NDTV, 2025). Pakistan countered that strikes struck military sites and shot down six Indian aircrafts, escalating military exchanges including drone and missile launches under its

Operation Bunyan al-Marsus (Reuters, 2025). This sequence of events highlights how covert incidents can rapidly precipitate major military escalation.

India's narrative emphasized a counter-terror tool designed to defend civilians and dismantle militant networks, consistently citing Article 51 of the UN Charter (NDTV, 2025). Pakistan's government rejected this portrayal, labeling the Pahalgam incident a false flag operation orchestrated by Indian intelligence, pointing to the ultra-speedy FIR—filed 10 minutes after the attacks—as proof of pre-planned blame (The Express Tribune; Epoch Essentials, 2025). Islamabad called for an independent third-party investigation and released a dossier detailing discrepancies and civilian casualties from Indian strikes (Epoch Essentials, 2025; The Nation, 2025). This clash of narratives deepened distrust and highlighted the centrality of false-flag rather than terrorism in diplomatic framing.

Regional and global actors played crucial roles in de-escalation efforts. The United States maintained contact with both Delhi and Islamabad, urging restraint and supporting ceasefire calls, while China, Malaysia, Turkiye, and Azerbaijan publicly endorsed Pakistan's third-party inquiry demand (NDTV; Epoch Essentials, 2025). Following days of exchanges—from 7–10 May—both sides announced a ceasefire on 10 May, and leadership engagement resumed (Reuters, 2025). The US played a key role to facilitate the ceasefire and further invited a high-level visit such as Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Field Marshall General Asim Munir to Washington, which internationalized the Kashmir issue by signaling strategic reversal in the United States view of South Asian strategic stability through diplomatic signaling (India Times, 2025).

At the societal level, Indian media broadcast graphic coverage of “terrorism” and justified military action, while protests in Pakistan—especially in Peshawar, Karachi, and Islamabad—condemned what were deemed Indian war atrocities, including mosque strikes (The Hindu & Reuters, 2025). Backed by intelligence narratives, both countries employed strategic communications to cement domestic support: India leveraged emotional nationalism tied to civilian deaths in Pahalgam, while Pakistan stressed national unity, transparency, and juridical legitimacy (Epoch Essentials; Tribune India, 2025). This media tug-of-war illustrates how false flag events can be weaponized into information warfare campaigns.

The crisis exemplifies the modern use of hybrid warfare, blending kinetic missile strikes with narrative control, cyber-hype and rapid FIRs, and multi-vector disinformation. While Indian plans for Operation Sindoor reflected conventional precision strikes, Pakistan countered with the air superiority, missile strikes, drone operations and by leveraging global opinion through its diplomatic outreach (Economic Times; Epoch Essentials, 2025). The Pahalgam incident reinforces how hybrid coercion—an amalgam of physical and informational tactics—can thrust nuclear-armed adversaries toward brinkmanship, making strategic stability contingent not only on military capabilities but also on the power of narratives themselves.

### **5. Impact on Strategic Stability in South Asia**

The May 2025 incident demonstrates how false flag operations risk undermining crisis stability in South Asia, primarily by inducing misperceptions and hasty retaliatory calculations. When events are misattributed or fabricated—such as the alleged Pahalgam false flag—states may act on incomplete or manipulated information, escalating tensions prematurely (Basrur, 2021). The rapid Indian military response under Operation Sindoor and Pakistan's counter-operation illustrated how easily narrative manipulation can trigger conventional force deployment, increasing the likelihood of miscalculation and first-strike temptations, especially in a high-alert environment with nuclear undertones (Sagan & Waltz, 2013).

False flag incidents also erode the credibility of nuclear deterrence, particularly in South Asia's asymmetric environment where Pakistan relies heavily on its nuclear posture for national defense. Pakistan's *Full Spectrum Deterrence* doctrine was developed precisely to prevent conventional

incursions like India's Cold Start strategy, yet when incidents are engineered or misrepresented, the clarity of red lines becomes blurred (Khan, 2015). In such cases, the fear that a conventional skirmish could spiral into a nuclear conflict remains high. The May 2025 exchange, though limited, demonstrated how rapidly both countries can mobilize cross-domain assets, signaling their willingness to escalate if provoked (Tellis, 2020).

Communication channels such as military hotlines and Track-II diplomacy play a vital role in containing escalation. During the 2025 crisis, diplomatic and backchannel communication, including direct leadership contact between Prime Ministers Modi and Sharif, reportedly helped de-escalate the situation (Reuters, 2025). However, false flag operations severely undermine the trust upon which such communications depend. If one party suspects deception or manipulation, even reliable crisis-management mechanisms lose effectiveness, reinforcing the danger of strategic misperception (Lavoy, 2009).

Moreover, the region is witnessing a slow arms race and doctrinal evolution driven by mutual suspicion. India's investment in rapid mobilization and precision-strike capabilities under the *Cold Start* doctrine, and Pakistan's diversification of its nuclear arsenal—including tactical weapons and cruise missiles—under *Full Spectrum Deterrence*, have intensified strategic insecurities (Khan, 2015). Each side's doctrinal shift is based on worst-case assumptions, often fueled by covert operations or high-profile incidents like Pulwama (2019) and Pahalgam (2025), which act as justifications for preemptive modernization (Basrur, 2021).

The greatest danger posed by these dynamics is the potential for vertical escalation from conventional skirmishes to nuclear exchanges. Unlike Cold War models, where deterrence was stabilized by bipolarity and robust crisis management institutions, South Asia's environment is more volatile, with shorter decision windows, less developed warning systems, and greater domestic political pressure to retaliate (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010). False flag operations, when combined with escalatory doctrines and fragile communication mechanisms, dangerously increase the chance that a localized incident may spiral into an existential crisis.

## **6. Policy Implications and Recommendations**

One of the foremost lessons from the May 2025 crisis is the urgent need for transparency and verification mechanisms between India and Pakistan. False flag operations flourish in the absence of independent forensic analysis, real-time intelligence sharing, and neutral verification bodies. The establishment of joint investigative teams (JITs) or third-party forensic audits—under regional or international frameworks—can help validate or debunk claims rapidly, preventing misattribution and retaliatory actions (Basrur, 2021). Transparency in attribution is critical to avoid escalation based on manipulated narratives or fabricated events, as illustrated in the aftermath of the Pahalgam incident (The Express Tribune, 2025).

Reinvigorating confidence-building measures (CBMs) and reopening arms control dialogues are essential to reducing threat perceptions and enhancing mutual predictability. Previous CBMs such as prior notification of missile tests and hotline communications between DGMOs have proven useful, but they now require expansion into areas like space, cyber, and hybrid domains (Tellis, 2020). The dormant Composite Dialogue Process must be revisited, and both states should explore updating the Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Facilities with wider confidence-building clauses (Khan, 2015). These steps would not only reduce the strategic fog but also curb the temptation to exploit covert actions for geopolitical advantage.

The May 2025 crisis reaffirmed the importance of early warning systems and third-party mediation, particularly when escalation is driven by ambiguous or false flag incidents. Given the short missile flight times and weak civil-military coordination in both countries, strategic misinterpretation remains a persistent risk (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010). The United Nations, China, or neutral states like Norway could serve as formal or informal mediators to verify events, diffuse

tensions, and support hotline activation protocols. Additionally, early warning cooperation through shared satellite imagery, seismic data, or real-time alerts could be explored through multilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Lavoy, 2009).

Another area of urgent attention is the regulation of media narratives and disinformation during crises. Both traditional and social media played polarizing roles during the 2025 conflict, reinforcing nationalistic posturing and demonizing the other side (Tribune India, 2025). States should consider joint media codes of conduct, third-party fact-checking collaborations, and temporary content moderation protocols during conflict escalation phases. This approach would help dampen public hysteria and prevent mass manipulation or “manufactured consent” in favor of military action (Davidson, 2009). Civil society actors, media watchdogs, and regional think tanks can also play a role in countering fake narratives.

The international community must assume a more proactive role in crisis prevention in South Asia. Nuclear flashpoints like India and Pakistan should be integrated into broader global nonproliferation and conflict prevention agendas. International bodies such as the UN Security Council, IAEA, and OIC can facilitate both diplomatic space and verification infrastructure to preempt false flag escalations (Basrur, 2021). Bilateral military exchanges, strategic dialogues, and joint peacebuilding initiatives—encouraged by actors like the U.S., EU, and China—can foster a norm of restraint and transparency. Without sustained international engagement, false flag crises may continue to test the limits of South Asia’s fragile deterrence equilibrium.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study has examined the recurrent pattern of false flag operations in South Asia, particularly by India, and their profound implications for regional strategic stability. By analyzing historical precedents—from the 1971 Ganga hijacking to the 2025 Pahalgam incident—the paper establishes a consistent tendency to employ covert or manipulated violence for diplomatic, electoral, or coercive military gains (Davidson, 2009; Yadav, 2014). The case study of the May 2025 crisis illustrates how a strategically timed incident, when combined with pre-constructed narratives and rapid military action, can push two nuclear-armed rivals toward the brink of full-scale conflict (Basrur, 2021).

False flag operations, as demonstrated, dangerously erode strategic stability by blurring the lines between offense and defense, fact and fiction, and perception and reality. They introduce elements of miscalculation, escalate threat perceptions, and challenge the credibility of nuclear deterrence by compelling hasty, emotionally charged responses (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010; Sagan & Waltz, 2013). More importantly, such operations undermine bilateral trust and delegitimize mechanisms like hotlines, military CBMs, and third-party mediation, which are critical for crisis containment (Tellis, 2020). In the current South Asian context, these operations, far from being tactical instruments, now pose strategic and even existential risks.

The study reaffirms the urgent need for responsible crisis management, renewed regional security dialogues, and a joint framework for countering disinformation and attributing incidents transparently. It recommends strengthening early warning systems, reviving arms control discussions, and engaging neutral international actors to mediate verification processes. Without mutual trust, even robust deterrent doctrines like India’s Cold Start or Pakistan’s Full Spectrum Deterrence risk becoming destabilizing rather than stabilizing (Khan, 2015; Lavoy, 2009).

India’s persistent reliance on manufacturing false flag operations in a nuclearized environment has significantly undermined strategic stability in South Asia. These operations, such as the Pahalgam incident in April 2025, dangerously blur the lines between provocation and retaliation, compelling Pakistan to respond under nuclear overhang—thereby increasing the risk of escalation due to misperception or miscalculation. This strategic adventurism was exemplified in the Indian invocation of the so-called “Dynamic Response Strategy” following the Pahalgam incident, which

aimed to normalize offensive posturing as a recurring feature of regional deterrence dynamics. However, this approach was categorically rejected by Pakistan. Lt. General (R) Khalid Kidwai, former head of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division, publicly criticized India's strategy, noting that Pakistan's calibrated and resolute response to the May 2025 strikes constituted a "deliberate act of denial"—effectively nullifying India's attempts to establish a “New Normal” under the guise of controlled military coercion (Kidwai, 2025). He emphasized that such reckless doctrines are incompatible with the region's nuclear realities and warned against any misreading of Pakistan's thresholds. Thus, Indian false flag adventurism—rooted in a doctrine of narrative manipulation and strategic deception—fuels instability by attempting to lower the threshold of conflict while ignoring the catastrophic risks of misjudgment in a nuclear context (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010; Sagan & Waltz, 2013).

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