

## **NEW FRONTIERS OF DETERRENCE OF PAKISTAN SPONSORED PROXY WAR**

For decades, India has sought to deter Pakistan through conventional military superiority. However, the geopolitical reality, marked by China-Pakistan Nexus demonstrates that kinetic superiority alone has reached a point of diminishing returns. While Operation SINDOOR (May 2025) was an episodic strategic victory for India, an important and disturbing aspect in this operation was the collusive support that was provided by China to Pakistan. This would be the trend in future too when any significant Indian military move would immediately be met with Chinese material and intelligence support to Islamabad. Beijing's interest in keeping India "regionalized" effectively provides Pakistan with the necessary stamina for continuing with its proxy war.

Furthermore, the recent 27th Constitutional Amendment in Pakistan has formalized a "Garrison State." By creating the post of Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) and granting the military lifetime immunity, Pakistan has removed whatever little civilian controls that had existed. Under such a state of play, ***the crux of strategic deterrence against Pakistan must devolve around the discrediting of its Army in the eyes of its population.***

### **Enlarging the Canvas of Strategic Deterrence - Societal and Economic Deterrence**

If the Pakistani military elite is insulated from the costs of war, deterrence must also factor in their population, besides the military. The goal is to make the "proxy war" policy an existential liability for the average citizen. ***Grey Zone Warfare, is a game that two can play.*** A very potent tool in this domain is the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) which now becomes a vital strategic lever (although much needs to be done to enhance infrastructure to substantially divert or stop flow of waters into Pakistan. The additional infrastructure so created should be dual purpose; of generating hydel power by run of the river projects, while having the capability to also gainfully divert waters if the need arises in consonance with this strategy).

With a very large portion of its agriculture dependent on the Indus system, Pakistan is uniquely vulnerable to a hydrological disaster of inadequate waters in their river systems.

**The "Blood and Water" Doctrine:** India's shift toward holding the treaty in abeyance (as signalled in early 2025) transforms a diplomatic instrument into a psychological weapon. By linking water flow to terror activity, India forces the Pakistani public to question the cost of their military's adventurism.

The ultimate goal of this strategy is to discredit the Pakistani military in the eyes of its own nation. When the population realizes that the military's "Bleed India" policy has resulted in international isolation and the potential loss of water security, the military's domestic legitimacy would be under threat.

**Neutralizing the China Factor:** By focusing on water and internal stability, India creates a crisis that China cannot easily solve with hardware or satellite intelligence. Beijing will have no 'locus standi' for a military intervention due to a domestic civil-military fallout triggered by resource scarcity within Pakistan. Possibly, China will try to coerce India to desist from such a strategy using a similar context on the Brahmaputra Waters (dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo), which in any case they are planning, for which India should be prepared, and be already working on suitable adoptive countermeasures.

**Why the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) Works in the Larger Deterrence Game.** Since conventional military strikes often fail to penetrate the decision-making calculus of the Pakistani military who are insulated from the costs of war, India must utilize the Indus Water Treaty as a non-kinetic strategic weapon. Unlike an invasion, "tinkering" with or rescinding the IWT sits in a legal gray zone. By bringing

water security into the deterrence equation, India forces the entire Pakistani population into the game, as essential stakeholders.

To give this non-military domain deterrence teeth, India requires an openly articulated National Security Strategy. This document would serve as the "legal and moral dilemma" for the Pakistani state by codifying two critical aspects:

- **Redefining the Act of War:** The NSS besides other declarations related to core national interests, must also explicitly state that any act of terror or proxy war directed against India by Pakistan will be construed as a formal Act of War. (this has already been articulated by the PM of India). This removes the fiction of "non-state actors" and patently places the responsibility for every terrorist incident squarely on the Pakistani state (albeit after concrete evidence).
- **The "All Options" Mandate:** The strategy must articulate that in the event of such an act, India retains the legitimacy to deploy any and all responses—ranging from kinetic strikes and economic measures to the unilateral abrogation of the Indus Waters Treaty.

A publicly articulated National Security Strategy acts as a stabilizer. It informs the international community that India's actions are not "knee-jerk" reactions but the execution of a pre-announced sovereign policy. More importantly, it speaks to the Pakistani public with a clear, pre-emptive message: "Your military's actions have triggered these consequences; we warned you."

By combining the abrogation of the Indus Waters Treaty with the legal clarity of an NSS, India creates a form of deterrence that no amount of Chinese aid can offset. It transitions India from a posture of reactive restraint to one of declaratory dominance, ensuring that the cost of proxy war is finally felt by those who authorize it.

**Psychological Warfare & Perception Management to Support this Strategy.** The IWT is a tool, but Perception Management is the delivery system. To achieve true restraint, India must employ a propaganda strategy directed at the Pakistani people that their military's proxy-war obsession is directly resulting in their water and economic insecurity.

**Supporting Strategies Directed at the Pakistani Public.** Alongside the hard stance of "weaponising IWT", conciliatory and well-meaning diplomatic and economic overtures would need to be made that would appeal to the Pakistani public on the benefits of trade and cordial relations with India. The options are many. In addition, the government of the day must take all necessary measures, internally and externally, to change growing perceptions of intolerance against minorities. This is an urgent imperative that needs to be undertaken, which otherwise would remain a propaganda tool to be used against India by its detractors.

### **A Pakistani "Spring"**

Ultimately, this strategic shift would create internal dissensions as recently witnessed in the Iranian revolt of 2025-2026. In Iran, the collapse of the social contract, driven by economic mismanagement and cruel and harsh measures by the Islamic Regime, finally pushed a diverse cross-section of the public to come out on the streets in great numbers, across the country against a seemingly untouchable security apparatus. By weaponizing the Indus Waters Treaty and publicizing a clear National Security Strategy, India places the Pakistani military in a similar "legitimacy trap." When the Pakistani public realizes that their military's continued sponsorship of proxy war is the direct cause of their water scarcity and international pariah status, the "Garrison State" will face an unprecedented domestic reckoning. Much like the Iranian protests, this is could force a tipping point where the population no longer sees the military as a "necessary evil" for defence, but as the primary architect

of their existential ruin. By making the cost of terror visible through such a demonstrated strategy, duly reinforced by focussed psychological operations, India can catalyze a grassroots movement that achieves what decades of conventional kinetic responses could not: the forced restraint of the Pakistani military by its own people. While such a strategy does not aim to impoverish the Pakistani population, India's capability and intent of diverting the flow of waters must be clearly implicit to the Pakistani Military and more importantly their people.

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not of MARS*

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