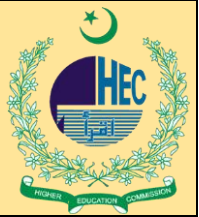




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Martyrdom, Memory, and Identity: A Qualitative Discourse Analysis of Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos in Pakistan's Strategic Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the events of Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos, a military action taken by Pakistan in response to the 2025 Pahalgam attack, in the contexts of strategic retaliation and symbolic identity formation. Placed in the historical framework of Indo-Pakistani conflict, the operation can be viewed not only as a step of calculated deterrence but also as a performative story that is based on Islamic symbolism and collective memory. With the references to the Quran especially Surah Al-Saff (61:4), the operation was presented as a divine obligation, which strengthened national solidarity and national endurance. By analysing qualitative discourse of state rhetoric, media coverage, and commemorations like Youm-e-Tashakur the study exposes the instrumentalization of martyrdom narratives and memory politics to establish the military action as a long-lasting cultural and ideological script. The results show how realist logic of security and constructivist identity making are intertwined in Pakistan, which in part explains how the country uses religious symbolism to justify its actions both at home and abroad. The study can inform the wider perspectives of hybrid warfare and identity politics and the importance of collective memory in the conflict patterns in South Asia, as well as pointing to the dangers of the further development of identity-based antagonisms in the region.

Keywords: Operation Bunyan-Um-Marsoos, Martyrdom, Collective Memory, Identity Construction, Indo-Pakistan Relations, Symbolic Warfare, Islamic Symbolism.

Introduction

The history of the Indo-Pakistan relations has been characterized by partition trauma, territorial conflicts, frequent wars, and unstable peace initiatives that fail and turn into increments of escalation. The 1947 partition resulted in two ideologically different nations, India as a secular republic and Pakistan as a homeland of South Asian Muslims, but it also left the unresolved issues, like Kashmir, which soon became the hotbed of violence (Whitehead, 2013). The 1947-48 Kashmir war institutionalized the mistrust and preconditioned the following wars in 1965, 1971, and 1999, and each of them further entrenched mistrust and militarization. Even such landmark agreements as the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) which was hailed as an example of conflict management became susceptible to the political manipulation of the terrorism or insurgency crisis whenever it heightened (Biswas, 1992; Mirza, 2008). The Nuclearization of South Asia in 1998 has turned this rivalry into a precarious balance between deterrence and instability that has reaffirmed the stability-instability paradox where nuclear deterrence prevents full-scale war but simultaneously allows proxy wars and brinkmanship (Ganguly, 2008; Krepon, 2003).

According to scholars, water, cyberwarfare, and media propaganda have emerged as weapons of influence in South Asia, highlighting the fact that the age-old conflicts over land and sovereignty are merging with modern instruments of hybrid war (Khan, 2015; Thakur et al., 2025). This history sets the scene against which the Pahalgam attack in April 2025 became the starting point of a new and dangerous cycle of confrontation.

The attack on Pahalgam that took place on April 22, 2025, and resulted in the death of 26 Indian tourists led to a significant increase in the Indo-Pakistan conflict (Thakur et al., 2025). India retaliated immediately by canceling the Indus Waters Treaty and suspending visas of Pakistani citizens as well as launching Operation Sindoor that involved missile and drone attacks on Pakistani lands in Bhimber, Kotli and Muzafarabad (The Express Tribune, 2025; BBC News, 2025). This caused civilian casualties and showed the affirmation of coercive hybrid approach in which India used its conventional fire power and resources manipulation through the closure of the Baglihar Dam to create a blockage of the flow of the Chenab River (Masood, 2025).

Pakistan's launch of Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos on May 10, 2025, marked a significant escalation following a period of restraint. The large-scale operation employed precision-guided munitions to strike 26 Indian military targets (Hussain Sayed, 2025). According to security sources, the strikes inflicted heavy losses, destroying critical infrastructure such as the BrahMos storage facilities in Beas and Nagrota, the Udhampur and Pathankot airbases, a Brigade Headquarters, and an Uri supply depot. A sophisticated cyber-attack complemented the physical strikes, crippling 70% of India's national electricity grid (The Nation, 2025). The operation's rationale was not solely military; as noted by Ali, Bibi, & Alam (2025), it was imbued with symbolic meaning derived from Surah Al-Saff (61:4), framing the retaliation within an ideological discourse of resistance. This event exemplifies the triad of terrorism, water disputes, and nuclear posturing that destabilizes the region, highlighting the potent role of symbolism in legitimizing warfare.

Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos was not just a tactical operation; it also was a symbolic operation of memory building and identity assertion. Pakistan military and political leadership used Quranic references to martyrdom and collective struggle to justify the operation within the context of a national struggle and sacrifice. Choosing the name of the operation, Bunyan-um-Marsoos (a solid wall), turned it into a symbol of strength, solidarity, and divine luck, and turned the event into a cultural memory that lasted long-term (Ali et al., 2025). The way the state frames the operation in the media, commemoration of the operation like Youm-e-Tashakur (Day of Gratitude), and political language is one way in which acts of warfare become lasting symbols of collective identity (Dawn, 2025). According to theorists of collective memory, states tend to sacralise national security crises by referring to martyrdom and therefore enshrine them in both religious and national memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Fair, 2014). In this respect, Bunyan-um-Marsoos cannot be narrowed down to an act of defense; it is also a performative ritual that unites Pakistani identity around sacrifice, resistance, and sovereignty. The appeal to martyrdom puts the operation within the context of a larger civilizational conflict, strengthening a group-based mindset that is not subject to the rationality of military operations.

The interest in studying Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos is in the fact it served both tactical purpose and represented a symbolic event that contributed to the formation of the collective identity of Pakistan. Whereas the realists view it as a rational behavior of deterrence in the anarchic global society (Mearsheimer, 2019), constructivists refer to its naming, religious contextualization, and commemorations as tools of identity building (Risse, 2015). The operation

demonstrates how Pakistan employs Islamic symbolism in its security narrative in order to create a sense of national unity and international legitimacy, in which the retaliatory action could be seen as not only legal under Article 51 of the UN Charter but also morally-justified within the Quranic tradition (Al Jazeera, 2025). In the combination of military intervention and memory politics, Bunyan-um-Marsoos is a clear illustration of how notions of martyrdom and sacrifice can be used as identity scripts to support the sovereignty and resistance narratives of the strategic culture of Pakistan. This study therefore adds to the literature on the interaction of religion, memory and security, and the extent to which the symbolic aspects of the warfare come to dominate material calculations in the construction of national identities in South Asia.

Problem Statement

While Pakistan claims that Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos is a legal operation of self-defense and a symbol of national unity, in dominant international discourse, it is simply seen as a military response to military action as part of the Indo-Pak conflict cycle (Ali, et al., 2025). Such a reductionist framing ignores a more symbolic meaning that the operation holds in the sociopolitical landscape of Pakistan. The call to martyrdom, sacrifice, and unity, which is based on religious and cultural traditions, is also the part of the intentional need to incorporate the operation into the memory and identity of the nation (Hussein, 2023). Nonetheless, the literature on South Asian conflicts has been dominated by strategic stability, deterrence and military balancing, with little attention paid to how the symbolism of religion, media rhetoric and popular commemorations convert military actions into narratives of national resilience. This omission leaves unanswered the critical question of how memory politics and martyrdom narratives build the identity of Pakistan and contribute to internal cohesion, as well as to its strategic culture in the larger South Asian scenario.

Objectives

1. To explore the historical and political context of Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos is narrated and represented
2. To explore how martyrdom and memory are constructed through the operation's symbolism.
3. To examine the role of state, media, and society in shaping collective identity around the operation.
4. To assess the broader implications of memory politics in Pakistan's strategic culture.

Research Questions

1. How has Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos been framed in Pakistan's strategic, political, and public discourse?
2. What role do martyrdom narratives (religious and nationalist) play in shaping Pakistan's identity?
3. How do memory practices (commemorations, media coverage, symbolic naming) reinforce national unity?
4. In what ways does the operation reflect continuity or change in Pakistan's use of Islamic symbolism in state identity?

Literature Review

The historical trend of South Asian conflicts shows that there is a long-standing habit of rivalry between India and Pakistan where along with the conventional warfare, proxy wars and hybrid war have co-existed with nuclear deterrence. The Kashmir issue has been a focal point of the

hostility ever since the partition of 1947, which led to the war between 1947 and 1948, or the war in 1965, 1971, or the Kargil war of 1999 (Whitehead, 2013; Ganguly, 2001). The Indus Waters Treaty of 1960, considered by many as a paradigm of conflict management, has been tested several times during the crisis, which occurs due to terrorism and border conflicts (Biswas, 1992; Thakur et al., 2025). The South Asian region in 1998 has entered a precarious stability-instability paradox where nuclear weapons ensure that there is no major war, but allow low-intensity conflict and coercion (Krepon, 2003; P. Kapur, 2007). Recent escalations like the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot and the 2025 Pahalgam-Sindoor-Marsoos cycles show how the issue of terrorism, resource-related conflicts, and military signaling still fuels the conflict (Fair, 2024; Hussain Sayed, 2025). More so, modern warfare, which includes cyber activities, disinformation, and weaponization of water has redefined the boundaries of conflict, introducing new facets of insecurity (Khan, 2015; Riaz, 2025). Therefore, whereas South Asian scholarship has a large body of literature on deterrence and escalation, it mainly frames the conflict within strategic-military contexts and tends to ignore the symbolic and cultural aspects that form the backdrop of resistance and legitimacy narratives.

In Islamic and South Asian cultures, the idea of martyrdom (shahadat) has been used to justify armed conflict and the fabrication of communal strength. The verse in the Qur'an 61:4 in Surah Al-Saff, which reads, Indeed, Allah loves those who fight in His cause in a row as though they are a [single] structure joined firmly (Sahih International, 1997/2021) presents a theological rationale of solidarity and perseverance in combat. Muslim polities, freedom movements, and later Pakistani military have used this verse in their attempts to view national defense as a holy obligation (Ahmed, 2010; Nasr, 2021). The name of Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos was based on this verse, and the retaliation of Pakistan against India in May 2025 was entrenched in an Islamic narrative of sacrifice and solidarity (Ali, Bibi, & Alam, 2025). In South Asia, the martyr has become less a figure of the battlefield and more of cultural and political representation, with the martyred iconified as a figure of resistance, whether militant in Kashmir or soldier in the Indian army (Devji, 2008; Shaikh, 2022). The combination of nationalism and martyrdom can also be found in other movements, like the anti-colonial resistance of 1857 and the discourse around the war of 1971, where martyrdom was discussed as both an act of faith and a patriotic act (Talbot, 2016). By casting the military action in the language of Quran, Pakistan has been able to combine the ideals of Islam with the demands of contemporary strategy, resulting in a language in which martyrdom is both a religious explanation and a political rallying cry. This tradition highlights that states use religious symbolism not only as propaganda but as an identity script that goes deep into the psyche of the people and keeps them going in times of crisis.

The manner in which the memory and the identity are constructed around the military action like Bunyan-um-Marsoos reveals the importance of collective memory in the construction of national consciousness. The theory of collective memory proposed by Maurice Halbwachs (1992) explains how collective memory is created to support a sense of identity, and Assmann (2011) develops this into the concept of cultural memory, which is codified through commemorations, rituals, and monuments. In Pakistan, such memory politics have long been deployed by the military and the state apparatus, whether through forms of commemoration of the 1965 war, or media narratives around the Kargil conflict (Fair, 2014; Jalal, 2017). Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos is one such example: its nomenclature, media-framing, and the proclamation of Youm-e-Tashakur (Day of Gratitude) all served to convert a military action into a lasting story of

independence and defiance (Dawn, 2025). Media rhetoric and a national mobilization further contributed to the operation as an act of divine favor and national pride, which became ingrained in the memory of Pakistan (Rashid, 2019; Siddiq, 2020). However, the scholarly discourse on South Asian security is still heavily concentrated on deterrence relations, arms races and crisis stabilization, with little regard to the sacralization of operations through martyrdom narratives and memory practices (Bhutto, 2025). This divide highlights the necessity to study how symbolic identity construction - via religion, martyrdom and collective memory - can serve as a neglected aspect of South Asia strategic culture.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in discourse analysis to examine the symbolic, cultural, and political dimensions of Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos. A qualitative framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how language, narratives, and imagery are employed to frame military action as both a defensive strategy and a nation-building event. Discourse analysis is particularly suited to uncovering the ways in which martyrdom and collective memory are constructed, circulated, and institutionalized, as it emphasizes the role of rhetoric, symbolism, and social interpretation in shaping meaning. By focusing on narratives rather than numerical data, this approach facilitates an exploration of the operation not only as a strategic event but also as a cultural performance that contributes to Pakistan's evolving identity.

Data Sources

The research relies on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data includes official government statements, speeches by political leaders, and press briefings by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), which provide insights into how the state framed the operation in religious, strategic, and symbolic terms. Media coverage from national and international outlets is also examined, as these sources capture the immediate discursive construction of the operation in both domestic and global contexts. Secondary data is drawn from academic journals, think tank publications, and scholarly analyses that address South Asian security, deterrence, and the role of identity formation in national security discourse. These materials together offer a layered understanding of the narratives surrounding Bunyan-um-Marsoos.

Analytical Strategy

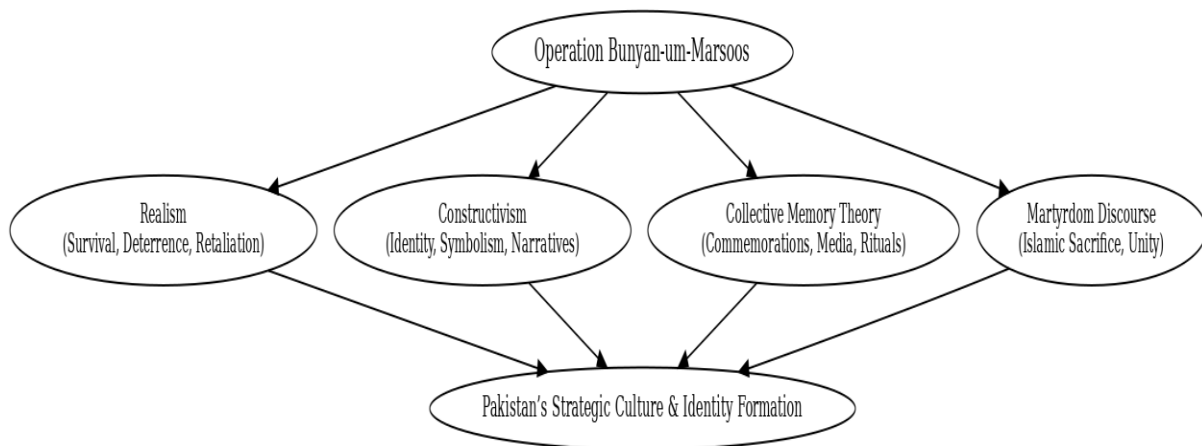
The study employs thematic discourse analysis to trace recurring patterns in language, symbolism, and representation across various sources. Key themes such as martyrdom, unity, sacrifice, and sovereignty are identified and analyzed to understand how they contribute to the embedding of Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos into Pakistan's collective memory. Comparisons are made between state-led narratives and media representations to highlight convergences and divergences in framing. Special attention is given to religious references, such as the invocation of Surah Al-Saff (61:4), which exemplify the fusion of Islamic imagery with strategic rhetoric. This analytical strategy not only uncovers the ideological underpinnings of the operation but also situates it within broader patterns of Pakistan's military and political discourse.

Comparative Frame

To strengthen the analysis, a comparative dimension is incorporated by examining the symbolic narratives of earlier military operations, notably the Kargil conflict (1999) and the Balakot strikes (2019). These cases are selected because they similarly combined military strategy with discursive framing, enabling an exploration of continuity and change in Pakistan's memory

politics. By comparing how martyrdom, sacrifice, and national unity were articulated in these prior episodes with the narratives surrounding Bunyan-um-Marsoos, the study highlights shifts in the ways Pakistan constructs its identity through conflict. This comparative frame situates Bunyan-um-Marsoos within a historical continuum of securitized symbolism, demonstrating how each operation has contributed to shaping Pakistan's strategic culture and collective consciousness.

Theoretical Framework



Theoretical Framework of the Study (adapted from Mearsheimer, 2019; Wendt, 1999; Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011; Nasr, 2021; Shaikh, 2022).

Realism: State Survival and Retaliation

Realism has long dominated the study of international relations in South Asia, emphasizing the pursuit of power, survival, and security in an anarchic system (Mearsheimer, 2019). The Indo-Pakistani rivalry exemplifies this paradigm, where both states—armed with nuclear weapons—operate under a security dilemma intensified by territorial disputes and periodic crises. Offensive realism suggests that states maximize power to deter adversaries, a pattern reflected in India's Operation Sindoor and Pakistan's counter-response through Bunyan-um-Marsoos (Jervis, 2021). By launching precision strikes against 26 Indian military installations, Pakistan sought to reassert deterrence and signal its resolve to defend sovereignty (Ali, Bibi, & Alam, 2025). Defensive realism, however, better explains Pakistan's restrained framing: avoiding civilian targets, invoking Article 51 of the UN Charter, and presenting the operation as lawful self-defense (Al Jazeera, 2025). The episode reinforces South Asia's persistent security dilemma, where even defensive actions create instability. Realism thus provides a robust framework to interpret Bunyan-um-Marsoos as a rational, survival-driven response that simultaneously highlights the tragic irony of regional insecurity—states seeking safety through deterrence while perpetuating instability (Bhutto, 2025).

Constructivism: Identity, Symbolism, and Shared Memory

Where realism highlights survival, constructivism underscores how ideas, identity, and symbolism shape national interests (Wendt, 1999). In Pakistan's case, Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos was more than a retaliatory strike; it was framed through Islamic and nationalist imagery to construct a narrative of resilience and sacrifice. The very naming of the operation, drawn from Surah Al-Saff (61:4), positioned Pakistan's actions within a Qur'anic framework of unity and steadfastness, transforming military strategy into a symbolic performance (Shaikh,

2022). Constructivist scholarship emphasizes that states act not only based on material interests but also on identity constructions that shape legitimacy at home and abroad (Risse, 2015). Pakistan's projection of Bunyan-um-Marsoos as a sacred duty consolidated public morale, mobilized nationalist sentiment, and challenged India's framing of the conflict as terrorism-driven. Through media coverage, political speeches, and commemorations like *Youm-e-Tashakur*, the operation became woven into Pakistan's collective identity, reflecting constructivist arguments that national interests are socially constructed through shared narratives rather than solely dictated by material power (Fair, 2024).

Collective Memory Theory: Socially Constructed Narratives

Maurice Halbwachs' (1992) theory of collective memory is central to understanding how states institutionalize past events to bind national identity. Military operations such as Bunyan-um-Marsoos become embedded into cultural memory through state rituals, commemorative practices, and media framing. Pakistan's leadership not only emphasized the military success of the operation but also sacralized it by declaring a national *Day of Gratitude*, thereby converting a tactical event into a permanent fixture of public consciousness (Dawn, 2025). Scholars of memory politics argue that such practices transform fleeting moments of violence into enduring identity markers that unify populations (Assmann, 2011; Jalal, 2017). In Pakistan's case, memory of martyrdom, sacrifice, and steadfastness is mobilized to reinforce narratives of sovereignty under threat. Unlike earlier conflicts such as Kargil or Balakot, Bunyan-um-Marsoos was deliberately framed through religiously infused symbolism, which not only sustained domestic morale but also created a long-term collective memory of resilience. This underscores how states do not merely fight wars; they construct memories of war to maintain legitimacy, strengthen unity, and transmit identity across generations (Siddiqi, 2020).

Martyrdom Discourse: Islamic Sacrifice and Mobilization

The discourse of martyrdom (*shahadat*) is a powerful lens to analyze Bunyan-um-Marsoos, where Islamic narratives of sacrifice were explicitly invoked to legitimize and mobilize support. Martyrdom in Islamic tradition symbolizes the ultimate act of devotion, blending spiritual duty with national defense (Nasr, 2021). By aligning the operation with Qur'anic imagery, Pakistan transformed military retaliation into an act of sacred sacrifice, reinforcing both divine legitimacy and patriotic unity. Scholars note that martyrdom discourse has historically mobilized South Asian Muslim communities during anti-colonial struggles and later during wars with India (Devji, 2008; Talbot, 2016). In 2025, this tradition was renewed as soldiers, drones, and even cyberwarfare were discursively linked to the ethos of defending faith and homeland. Martyrdom not only legitimized state action but also mobilized mass support, converting fear into pride and vulnerability into unity. Yet, academic literature has underexplored this symbolic dimension, focusing largely on deterrence and strategy. Integrating martyrdom discourse into theoretical frameworks thus reveals how religious symbolism operates as a tool of statecraft, binding identity and power in Pakistan's strategic culture (Rashid, 2019; Shaikh, 2022).

Findings

Defensive and Proportionate Framing through Qur'anic Imagery

Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos was discursively framed by Pakistan as a defensive and proportionate act, firmly embedded in Qur'anic imagery that emphasized unity, steadfastness, and divine approval. Drawing directly from Surah Al-Saff (61:4)—“*Indeed, Allah loves those who fight in His cause in a row as though they are a [single] structure joined firmly*”—the operation

was symbolically named to project cohesion and resilience. This religious framing allowed Pakistan to elevate a military counteraction into a narrative of sacred duty and national solidarity. Government briefings, particularly those by ISPR, repeatedly emphasized the restraint exercised, stressing that all targets were strictly military and conducted within the bounds of international humanitarian law (Ali, Bibi, & Alam, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025). The strategy echoed the principles of defensive realism, where survival rather than expansion was the guiding motive, but it was amplified through a religious lens that transformed deterrence into a spiritual act of collective defense. In this way, the operation's proportionality was not only communicated to international actors as lawful self-defense but also domestically reinterpreted as an Islamic obligation to preserve sovereignty, thus binding strategic rationality with theological legitimacy (Shaikh, 2022; Nasr, 2021).

Public Response, Morale, and Symbolism of Unity

Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos domestically created a phenomenal reaction that boosted the spirit and reinforced the religious-national unity. The operation was formalized as a national celebration in the declaration of Youm-e-Tashakur (Day of Gratitude) and it became a national ritual of memory and resilience (Dawn, 2025). The triumph of the operation was attributed to divine providence by public speeches by civilian and military leaders, which presented Pakistan as militarily competent as well as morally justified in its fight against aggression. This strengthened a common sense of resistance where martyrdom, sacrifice and sovereignty were interconnected discourses. The symbolic overtones of the operation, especially its Quranic allusion, were echoing in the ears of a population used to seeing religion and patriotism combine in times of a crisis (Rashid, 2019; Jalal, 2017). This jubilant spirit was manifested in large crowds, television coverage, and prayers that were offered nationwide, indicating how the operation was more than a military accomplishment, it was a cultural ritual of solidarity. The symbolic politics of conversion of anxiety to pride and trauma to gratitude helped the state rekindle unity in a time of insecurity and hence reestablish the union of Islamic and national identity in the strategic culture of Pakistan (Fair, 2024).

Media Narratives and Memory Construction

Media played the key role in creating the story of resilience, heroism, and sovereignty of Bunyan-um-Marsoos. Both government-owned and independent media depicted the operation as a well-planned but courageous self-defense, with the themes of precision, restraint and national power being especially emphasized. Broadcasting of satellite images, video briefings, and oratory symbols made certain that the operation was not only a military exercise but also a historical moment in the strategic culture of Pakistan (BBC News, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Local press magnified the visuals of soldiers, drone attacks and mass demonstrations and institutionalized them into the national memory as shared memory. This framing in the media was based on the theory of collective memory as proposed by Halbwachs (1992) that institutions influenced social memory to make it into a part of identity. In this regard, the operation did not only leave a mark in the history of its tactical results but also in its symbolic meaning of a victory of solidarity over violence. Moreover, the digital platforms and social media platforms were used effectively to raise the patriotic spirit, challenge Indian accounts, and have the world know the Pakistani side of the story (Riaz, 2025). The orchestration of a memory narrative by the media that focused on sovereignty and resilience highlights how military actions are tactically reconfigured into identity-making projects that have long-term durability beyond the battle at hand.

Diplomatic Signaling of Restraint and Resolve

On the international stage, Pakistan projected Bunyan-um-Marsoos as a restrained yet resolute response, carefully balancing deterrence with diplomatic responsibility. By highlighting the precision of its strikes, its avoidance of civilian targets, and its openness to third-party mediation, Pakistan presented itself as a responsible actor committed to lawful self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter (Al Jazeera, 2025; Policy Wire, 2025). This diplomatic messaging was bolstered by outreach to key partners such as China, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, as well as appeals to multilateral institutions like the United Nations, which reinforced Pakistan's credibility as a restrained power seeking stability rather than escalation (Hussain Sayed, 2025). Western reactions, including measured responses from the United States and the European Union, reflected recognition of Pakistan's calibrated approach (Erath, 2025). Strategically, this projection of restraint was designed to counter Indian accusations of aggression, while simultaneously reaffirming deterrence by signaling Pakistan's ability to inflict significant military and cyber costs if provoked further. By successfully combining military strength with diplomatic prudence, Pakistan not only reinforced its deterrence posture but also advanced its international legitimacy, positioning Bunyan-um-Marsoos as both a tactical victory and a diplomatic narrative of sovereignty, responsibility, and resilience.

Discussion

The rhetoric of martyrdom in Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos has transformed the meaning of sacrifice within the Pakistani context as it combines religion with nationalism in a manner that further intensifies national identity. It was presented by citing the Quranic imagery, specifically Surah Al-Saff (61:4), and the operation was not merely revenge, but it was a holy task carried out to protect sovereignty and Islam. This recontextualization turned martyrs and dangers of the military service into the signs of the Godly sacrifice, which was inserted into the national memory of Pakistan (Nasr, 2021; Shaikh, 2022). Youm-e-Tashakur is one of the rituals of commemorating this memory and transforming the tactical military events into religiously determined cultural milestones (Dawn, 2025). The ideology of sacrifice went beyond the battlefield and called upon the civilian population to envision their participation in a common battle to survive and find dignity. This is in line with Devji (2008) who argues that in South Asian Muslim political thinking, martyrdom can be seen as a moral economy of resistance, where sacrifice sets up a legitimacy and an identity against a more materially powerful opponent. The memory of Marsoos therefore is not only a reaction to Indian aggression but also a radical act of identity formation, which has attached the story of the survival of Pakistan to the ethos of Islam of sacrifice and resistance.

The Pakistani strategic culture which has long been driven by the realist demands of survival, deterrence and reciprocity is expressed in the Bunyan-um-Marsoos through the interaction of realism and constructivism. Realism is used to justify the military response of Pakistan: to re-establish deterrence, destroy Indian forward deployment capabilities and demonstrate the desire to survive in a regional system of anarchy where asymmetric power reigns supreme (Mearsheimer, 2019; Bhutto, 2025). However, realism as such is not sufficient to explain why the operation should be symbolically marked with Qur'anic terms or why it should be celebrated as sacred. Constructivist perspectives can fill this gap, and demonstrate how identity, symbolism, and collective stories inform state action as well as material interests (Wendt, 1999; Fair, 2024). By positioning its retaliation as both a rational act of defense and spiritual act of sacrifice, Pakistan was able to show how strategic culture in South Asia is ambivalent-based on power

politics but articulated and inspired by identity politics. This dichotomy is a continuation of what Cohen (2004) had noted earlier, that the security paradigm of Pakistan is based on a combination of military requirements and ideological discourses which makes its strategic culture distinct in the international system. In this regard, Bunyan-um-Marsoos is an empirical example of how constructivism and realism merge in reality: a material act of deterrence supplemented with symbolic acts of identity and legitimacy.

Bunyan-um-Marsoos also highlights the politics of memory in the long term strategy of sacralizing military Defence in Pakistan that has implications in the region. Within the context of adopting martyrdom narratives of the military action, Pakistan strengthened a collective memory, which naturalizes defense as a national duty and a divine obligation (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1992). This politics of memory is not novel-it is reminiscent of the commemorations of the 1965 war, martyrdom discourses of the 1971 war, the symbolic framing of Kargil and Balakot. However, Marsoos is a stronger manifestation of the same trend since the operation was not only reported, but also ritualized in real-time through media, official rituals, and state imagery (Riaz, 2025; Reuters, 2025). The threat, though, is the possibility of the regionalization of the martyrdom discourse. By integrating warfare into the sacred discourse, the conflict has the potential of moving beyond competition driven by deterrence to antagonism driven by identity where compromising becomes more and more difficult. The Indian political rhetoric has also rallied around religious nationalism, especially the Hindu nationalist ones, which may further sanctify the Indo-Pak rivalry (Jaffrelot, 2021). When both states increasingly define conflicts in terms of martyrdom and religious identity, the region of South Asia may be set on a deeper course of intractability where escalation is strategic, but also existential. This indicates that although Bunyan-um-Marsoos was able to strengthen national cohesion and deterrence it also deepened identity-based divisions that may hinder future peacebuilding and diplomacy.

Conclusion

Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos is a good example of how strategic necessity and symbolic identity formation are intertwined in the emerging security discourse in Pakistan. Although presented as a proportionate and defensive action against Indian aggression, its use of Quranic imagery transformed it into a sacred act of resistance, as a symbol of not only sovereignty but also faith. The popular reaction showed how the communal morale can be boosted when military operations are combined with religious imagery and nationalistic pride as a turning point in history when the crisis is turned in a cultural highlight. The operation was also made part of Pakistan memory politics through Youm-e-Tashakur and other commemoration activities, which guaranteed that its influence would not be limited to the battlefield. Meanwhile, media discourses enhanced the importance of the operation and created a lasting image of heroism and sovereignty that strengthened the national unity and consolidated the support of the population to the state security paradigm.

On the global platform, Bunyan-um-Marsoos placed Pakistan as a restrained, yet resolute state that can also retaliate decisively and yet sensitive to international rules. Diplomatically this equilibrium reinforced Pakistani legitimacy and showed how military responses can be tactfully balanced in a way that they facilitate deterrence without compromising on the claims to responsible statehood. However, the operation also demonstrates the dangers of sacralizing conflict: martyrdom discourse, as effective as it has been in building unity can also increase regional tensions and make reconciliation all the more elusive. The case of Bunyan-um-Marsoos

is therefore another reminder of the dual nature of modern warfare in South Asia--where both deterrence and symbolism, power politics and memory politics coexist. To Pakistan, it confirms the timeless importance of religion, sacrifice, and identity in shaping the strategic culture; to the region, it creates important questions about how religiously charged security discourses can contribute to cycles of escalation in the Indo-Pakistani rivalry.

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