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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17259061>**Hard Power over Soft Power: India's Strategic Approach towards Pakistan****Sadia Zaheer**

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Regional stability in South Asia suffered a significant setback in May 2025 when India, accusing Pakistan of sponsoring cross-border terrorism, launched Operation Sindoor. This military escalation marked a new peak in the longstanding hostility between the two nuclear-armed neighbours and posed a serious threat to regional peace. While India has actively employed soft power strategies such as cultural diplomacy, development aid, and media influence across much of its neighbourhood, its approach toward Pakistan has remained predominantly hard power-oriented, largely due to enduring territorial and water disputes. Drawing on Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, this article critically examines the 2025 India-Pakistan war to evaluate limitations of soft power in this volatile bilateral relationship. The study further explores the challenges that Pakistan may face in the post-conflict landscape. The study reveals that India's unwillingness to utilize and promote soft power in Pakistan stems from multiple factors that remain unaddressed to date, consequently hampering the bilateral soft power potential. By adopting a case study approach, the research investigates the prevalence of hard power in India-Pakistan relations and exposed the limitations and potential of soft power in crisis management.

Keywords: Soft Power, India, Pakistan, Operation Sindoor, 2025 India-Pakistan war.

Introduction

Since their independence in 1947, India and Pakistan are in a complex and hostile relationship primarily due to territorial disputes, ideological divergence, and competing regional ambitions. Kashmir issue, being the principal dispute, has resulted in multiple full-scale wars, border skirmishes, and diplomatic standoffs between both the countries. Although there are a few examples of positive diplomatic engagements between both the countries but the Modi era is witnessing transition from diplomatic engagement to the assertive deployment of hard power encompassing military force, coercive diplomacy, economic sanctions, and intelligence operations.

The 2025 India-Pakistan war is an example of hybrid warfare tactics such as using advanced drones, real-time satellite intelligence, cyber intrusions and strategic economic coercion. Indian response to Pahlgam attack reflects its shift from reactive to pre-emptive hard power doctrine. India accuses Pakistan of cross-border terrorism and thus resorts to using hard power to fight against its regional arch-rival. India also blames Pakistan for interfering in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJK), which the former believes to be an internal issue of India

(defending sovereignty and territorial integrity). Since 2014, when Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister of India, there is an evident strategic shift from restraint to strategic assertiveness of which Balakot airstrikes and other surgical strikes are an example.

Significantly, while India urges and promotes its usage of soft power across the globe, it hardly applies it to Pakistan (Kalimullah & Mahmood, 2019). A brief introduction of the theoretical framework is provided in order to suggest a better understanding of the issue.

Theoretical Framework:

Joseph Nye first introduced the concept of 'soft power' in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990) and later elaborated in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004). He argued that the post-Cold War period witnessed a shift in international system prompting change in power resources. Nye defines soft power in the behavioural terms as 'the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment' (Nye, 2004). Nye suggests three sources of soft power: culture, political values and foreign policies. When a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies are viewed by other nations as fair, just, and trustworthy, they help the country gain respect and admiration around the world. This kind of positive image makes other countries more willing to cooperate or follow its lead — not because they are being forced to, but because they are naturally attracted to what the country represents. In this way, the country strengthens its global influence without needing to use military force or economic pressure.

The concept of soft power has drawn a wide range of criticism from academicians. Critiques identified the foundational roots of soft power back to E.H. Carr, a prominent realist political scientist. He divided power in three categories: military power, economic power and power over opinion (Carr, 1946) the latter often cited as precursor to soft power. Similarly Luke's three dimensional approach (Lukes, 1974) and Gramscian concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) also indicate towards presence of soft power in earlier theoretical debates. Moreover, there has been criticism regarding the inability to measure soft power (Layne, 2010) and even the mechanism of attraction not being sufficiently clear in Nye's writings (Mattern, 2005).

In response to critiques of soft power's limitations, Nye introduced the concept of smart power in 2003. He developed this idea to address the misconception that soft power alone is sufficient for effective foreign policy. He suggested that desired outcomes can be achieved through coercion, inducements, or attraction. While hard power operates through coercion and payment, soft power seeks preferred outcomes by fostering attraction. However, he acknowledges that soft power cannot fully replace hard power; hence, the necessity for smart strategies that integrate both hard and soft power resources in a complementary manner (Nye, 2009).

Chronological Overview of the 2025 Indo-Pak Conflict:

Since this article focuses on case-study method, an event wise description of the events is provided below for developing a better understanding of the conflict.

a) Pahlgam Attack:

While India has previously faced terrorist attacks and issued responses, the Pahlgam attack marked a shift in the scale and nature of India's retaliation. Pahlgam attack on 22nd April 2025 resulted in the death of 26 people, which is the deadliest attack on civilians since 2000. It is a tourist spot situated 90km by road from Srinagar. The Resistance Front (TRF), an offshoot of Lashkar-e-Taiba, took responsibility of the attack. "In a social media post, the group expressed anger over the settlement of more than 85,000 outsiders in the Muslim majority region,

accusing the BJP government of provoking a demographic change”¹ however, the TRF later denied any such involvement in the attack claiming a cyber-attack on their social media sites. However, India was quick to blame Pakistan for these attacks. Pakistan reiterated its commitment to anti-terrorism claiming that the country itself is hard hit by cross-border terrorism from Afghanistan and thus it strongly rejects the Indian allegation of being involved in Pahlgam attack and urged for a fair and impartial investigation into the attack.

b) India's Military and Diplomatic Measures:

Narendra Modi chaired a Cabinet Committee on Security on 22nd April 2025 which decided upon the following measures.

- 1) The Indus Water Treaty of 1960 will be held in abeyance with immediate effect until Pakistan provides credible and irreversible assurances to cease such support.
- 2) The integrated check post at Attari will be closed immediately, with a provision allowing those who crossed with valid endorsements to return by 1st May 2025.
- 3) Additionally, Pakistan nationals will no longer be permitted to travel to India under the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme, and those currently in India on SVES visas have been given 48 hours to leave.
- 4) Furthermore, India has declared Pakistan's defence, air, and naval advisors stationed in its High Commission in New Delhi as persona non grata, requiring them and their support staff to leave within a week. India will reciprocally withdraw its defence, air, and naval advisors from Islamabad.

Modi also gave “operational freedom” to his military forces to tackle the situation during a closed meeting with the heads of three armed forces.²

c) Pakistan's Countermeasures:

Prime Minister Shahbaz Shariff while condemning all sorts of terrorism, offered India to conduct a neutral probe into the Pahlgam attack. An emergency session of National Security Committee (NSC) headed by Prime Minister Shahbaz Shariff convened on 24th April 2025. Pakistan outrightly rejected Indian claim of Pakistan's involvement in the attack and demanded that India should provide evidence against its claim. Condemning India's reckless disregard for international conventions, UN Security Council resolutions, and bilateral commitments, Pakistan announced the suspension of all bilateral agreements with India, including the Simla Agreement, until India ceases its involvement in terrorism within Pakistan, cross-border killings, and its defiance of international law and UN resolutions on Kashmir. Pakistan closed the Wagah Border Post with immediate effect, suspending all cross-border transit from India, while allowing returns by 30 April 2025 for those who crossed with valid endorsements. Additionally, all SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme visas for Indian nationals were cancelled with immediate effect giving only 48 hours to exit Pakistan, except for Sikh religious pilgrims. Pakistan has also declared the Indian Defence, Naval, and Air Advisors in Islamabad persona non grata, ordering their departure along with their support staff by 30 April 2025, and annulling these positions in the Indian High Commission. Furthermore, Pakistan has closed its airspace to all Indian-owned or operated airlines with immediate effect and has suspended all trade with India.

The most important point that would affect Pakistan in the greatest possible way is the decision to put IWT in abeyance. Pakistan is already struggling with water shortages and is severely affected by the climate change. According to Pakistan Economic Update published by the World Bank, nearly 10 million Pakistanis could face acute food insecurity during the current fiscal year 2025. Pakistan has categorically rejected India's announcement to suspend the Indus

¹ Express Tribune, Old Script and Choreographed Reaction, April 24, 2025

² Dawn Report. (2025, April 30). *Modi gives his forces carte blanche for incursion*. Dawn.

Waters Treaty, asserting that it is a binding international agreement brokered by the World Bank with no provision for unilateral suspension. Declaring water a vital national interest essential to the survival of its 240 million people, Pakistan warned that any attempt to stop or divert its rightful water under the Treaty will be treated as an act of war, warranting a full-spectrum national response. Analysts believe that India might use the treaty suspension as an excuse to speed up development on hydroelectric and storage projects along the western rivers including Pakal Dul, Ratle Kiru and Sawalkot, which India was unable to construct due to objections from Pakistan over its design. Indian Water Resource Minister CR Patil ensured that not a single drop of water will flow to Pakistan.

An analyst added that since the NSC has categorically declared that water is “vital national interest” the country’s political and military leadership “will not even think for a minute and strike the place which endangers provisions of water to Pakistan”³. Noteworthy is the fact that even before Pahlgam attack and the subsequent suspension of Indus Water Treaty by India, Pakistan lodged a complaint in the Hague base Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) against the change in designs of the two Indian hydropower projects namely Kishenganga and Ratle. Minister for State, Law and Justice Aqeel Malik said that Pakistan is thinking on three options against Indian water aggression. These options include World Bank, Permanent Court of Arbitration or the International Court of Justice and the United Nations Security Council. He further claimed that there is no provision of unilaterally suspending or putting the treaty in abeyance. Amid tensions between India and Pakistan, DG ISPR Lt Gen Ahmed Sharif Chaudhary carried out a press conference providing evidences against Indian sponsored terrorism in Balochistan province, arrest of an Indian-trained Pakistani citizen Abdul Majeed from Jhelum bus stand, recovery of Indian drone IEDs. Despite Pakistan's diplomatic rebuttals and calls for impartial investigation, tensions escalated further on the military front.

d) Operation Sindoor and Operation Bunyanum Marsoos:

India first violated ceasefire line on the night of April 29-30 which received a befitting response from Pakistan army. On 3rd May 2025, India expanded its punitive measures against Pakistan by banning the imports coming from or transiting via Pakistan, blocking social media access and barring Pakistani ships.

On 6th May, India launched “Operation Sindoor” to avenge the Pahlgam attack. From within its territory, India targeted mosques in Kashmir and Punjab. Pakistan responded by downing three enemy aircrafts and destroyed Indian brigade headquarters. Along with dozens of drones targeting Pakistani territory, India also attacked three PAF bases, Nur Khan, Muridke and Shorkot. DG ISPR also blamed India for hitting missiles and targeting Sikh population in Amritsar. Pakistan repeatedly urged India to restrain as this aggression could be devastating for regional peace and stability. Pakistan reserves the right to respond and retaliate to Indian aggression.

As a retaliatory response to Indian aggression, Pakistan launched Operation Bunyanum Marsoos in the early hours of 10th May 2025. It was a well-co-ordinated response by the Pakistan army, air force, navy and cyber domain. As a part of their strategy, Pakistan only targeted military facilities, which were engaged in aggression against Pakistan. At least 26 military targets were destroyed in Indian Illegally Occupied Kashmir and mainland India.

³ Express Tribune. (2025, April 25). Pakistan could use nukes to secure its water share: Analysts. *The Express Tribune*.

Pakistan armed forces also carried put comprehensive and effective cyber offensive to temporarily damage their critical infrastructure. This escalation reinforced the dominance of hard power in Indo-Pak relations, further diminishing the already negligible space for soft power engagement. The military engagement by both sides underscored the entrenched security dilemma, where trust deficits and historical grievances make the soft power toolkit almost irrelevant.

e) US-Brokered Ceasefire:

This decisive response by Pakistan was unimaginable by India and the rest of the world. On 10th May 2025 within hours of the attack, Trump administration brokered a ceasefire between India and Pakistan. The ceasefire agreement included commitments from both sides to halt further military operations and re-establish backchannel communications to avoid accidental escalation. Despite these diplomatic efforts, the ceasefire remains fragile. Prime Minister Modi publicly declared that the war was merely "paused, not ended," reflecting India's readiness to resume hostilities if provoked. Similarly, Pakistan maintained a high alert posture, emphasizing its preparedness to defend against any future aggression.

India's exclusion of soft power in its approach toward Pakistan appears to be a strategic decision, shaped by enduring geopolitical tensions and historical mistrust. The recent episode of India-Pakistan war 2025 is an evidence that not only India refrains using soft power in Pakistan, but it prefers to use hard power against its arch rival.

Limitations of Indian Soft Power in Pakistan:

India has been utilizing its soft power potential since independence under Nehru. However, it was in the latter half of the 1990s that India consciously pursued soft power as a policy. The 'Incredible India', 'India Everywhere' and 'India@60' and the more recent 'Make in India' campaigns are a few examples of how India prioritized the projection of its soft power (Hall, 2019). As Patryk Kugiel claims, India has various resources of soft power such as its philosophical concept of *ahimsa*, the universalism of Hinduism, Gandhi's non-violent movement, its cuisine, fashion, Bollywood, yoga and Ayurveda, music and dance etc. (Kugiel, 2017). However, when it comes to Pakistan, these soft power tools have little to no effectiveness due to historical, ideological and geopolitical barriers that are discussed below.

1) Historical and Ideological Barriers

Throughout the history, Indian approach towards Pakistan has remained that of hard power. History being the primary reason, the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan is a key factor in defining hostilities between the two countries. Indian politicians never accepted Pakistan as an independent state and believed that it would collapse and reunite with mother India in a few months. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad recalls that Sardar Patel was an ardent supporter of partition however, Patel was of the view that Pakistan was not viable and could not last (Azad, 2022). Similarly, other Congress leaders such as Nehru and Rajendra Prasada were also of the opinion that Pakistan will collapse and reunite with India.

Nye suggests that shared values and identities are essential for generating attraction for soft power. However, the founding ideologies of both the countries were fundamentally distinct. While India opted for secular democracy, Pakistan aimed to be an ideological Islamic state. This difference still causes friction between both the countries as India constantly blames Pakistan for exporting religious terrorism leaving little opportunity for soft power.

2) Cultural and Civilizational Disconnect:

The unjust partition of Punjab in 1947 resulted in two major bilateral issues i.e. Kashmir issue and water issue. Punjab, historically, was a shared cultural and civilizational space, with rich traditions of Sufism, poetry, music, and language (Punjabi). The partition violently disrupted

these connections through mass killings, forced migrations, and mutual distrust, which have since been embedded in national narratives, particularly in Punjab on both sides of the border resulting in limited cultural exchange and cross border people to people contact

Soft power requires consistency. While there are certain instances of cultural diplomacy such as cricket and through media, the inconsistent attitude of India hampers the possibility of mending ties. Recent act of abrogation of Indus Water Treaty, Operation Sindoor, Balakot airstrikes and cricket controversies are examples of how India prefers using hard power against Pakistan rather than resolving the issue through diplomacy.

3) Media Narratives and War Hysteria:

Although Indian media especially Bollywood has a huge following across the globe and is considered an important source of Indian soft power however, the Indian media's negative portrayal of Pakistan is less likely to be a source of soft power. Also, during the recent Operation Sindoor, Indian media promoted war hysteria and biased dissemination of misinformation against Pakistan. Shashi Tharoor writes 'India must remain the land of better story India has an extraordinary ability to tell stories that are more persuasive and more attractive than those of its rivals' (Tharoor, Winter 2011-Spring 2012). Syed Moazzam Ali points out Indian agenda of using media to project itself as the victim of Pakistan's terrorism (Hashmi, Hashmi, & Farooqi, 2018). The role of media, therefore, becomes paradoxical in Indo-Pak relations while being an asset for India's global image, it becomes a liability in bilateral contexts where it spreads hostility

4) Hindutva Politics and Religious Polarization:

The rise of Hindutva politics, the persecution of Muslims, and increasing intolerance in India effects its image as a secular country and undermines India's ability to project soft power in Pakistan. The institutionalization of this ideology is evident in education reforms, where historical narratives are being revised to emphasize Hindu civilizational pride while minimizing Muslim contributions (Jaffrelot, 2021). Policies such as Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) coupled with BJP's anti-Muslim rhetoric make it impossible for India to project itself as an inclusive democracy. It has not only compromised India's secular credentials but also eroded the potential for cultural diplomacy and soft power outreach in Pakistan.

5) Geopolitical Zero-Sum Mindset:

India's strategic alignment with the U.S. raises alarm in Pakistan. Under the premiership of Narendra Modi, India has signed three significant agreements to enhance her military cooperation with the U.S.: Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) 2016, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) 2018 and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) 2020. Additionally, India's active participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), aimed at counterbalancing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific, is viewed in Pakistan with suspicion, given Islamabad's strategic partnership with Beijing and its flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Moreover, Pakistan interprets India's vision of "Akhand Bharat" as hegemonic design and an existential threat to its sovereignty. Moreover, India's investment in Chabahar Port in Iran is viewed in Pakistan as efforts to counter Gwadar port. All these factors work as a barrier in fostering cordial relations thus limiting any prospect of soft power engagement between India and Pakistan.

Issues for Pakistan:

Pakistan may face significant challenges post 2025 Indo-Pak war. The absence of soft power between both the countries has led to enduring difficulties especially for Pakistan due to being

economically unstable with multiple national security issues. The insecure eastern border and hostile relations with India will lead to further constraints which are discussed below.

a) Water Security Issues:

One of the most immediate and pressing issue post 2025 war was India's unilateral decision to put Indus Water Treaty (IWT) in abeyance which is being regarded as a clear violation of International laws. Since Pakistan is amongst the countries hard hit by climate change, this act has put Pakistan's water security at high risk. Flash floods in summers and water shortages in winter will further lead to food security issues.

b) Terrorism Narrative and Diplomatic Isolation:

Pakistan has been the target of Indian projection of being a terrorist sponsor state. India was quick to attribute Pahlgam attack to Pakistan without providing substantial evidence. Pakistan repeatedly called for an impartial international investigation, but these requests were mostly ignored by the global community. Meanwhile, Indian media and diplomatic efforts successfully reinforced the perception of Pakistan's involvement, further shaping international opinion against Pakistan leading to a possible diplomatic isolation.

c) National Security Threats and Covert Operations:

Pakistan accused India for orchestrating covert operations notably in the form of Jafar Express bombing and intensified terrorist activities in Khyber Pakhtonkhuwa. These acts of aggression from India is a serious threat to Pakistan's national security leading towards mutual distrust making it harder to create space for dialogue, diplomacy, or the use of soft power.

d) Erosion of Pakistan's Soft Power Potential:

Pakistan's soft power potential, historically underdeveloped, would likely suffer further setbacks after the Indo-Pak War 2025. Globally, Pakistan is often viewed through the lens of security concerns, militancy, and regional instability, largely due to its association with cross-border terrorism, internal insurgencies, and hard-line ideologies. A renewed military conflict with India would reinforce these negative perceptions, overshadowing Pakistan's cultural, historical, and diplomatic assets that could otherwise enhance its image internationally. Moreover, Indian propaganda against Pakistan will have far reaching consequences on the Pakistani diaspora, which could serve as a soft power bridge in the West and the Middle East.

e) Militarization and the Escalating Arms Race:

The Indo-Pak War 2025 is likely to trigger an intensified arms race between India and Pakistan, further militarizing the region. Historically, both countries have maintained a delicate military balance, particularly due to their nuclear capabilities. However, a full-scale war would raise security anxieties, compelling Pakistan to prioritize military modernization to match India's growing defence capabilities consequently minimizing the opportunity for diplomacy and confidence-building measures. Moreover, increased defence spending would necessitate diverting funds away from critical sectors like education, healthcare, infrastructure, and poverty alleviation deepening socio-economic disparities, stalling human development indicators, and worsening public services.

f) Constraints on Public Diplomacy and Cultural Exports:

Consequently, Pakistan would struggle to project itself as a peaceful, culturally rich, and cooperative nation. Its efforts in public diplomacy, cultural exports (such as music, film, and sports), educational exchange programs, and tourism promotion would likely be undermined by the dominant global narrative of Pakistan as a conflict-prone and extremist state. This reputational damage makes it harder for Pakistan to build strategic partnerships, attract foreign investment, and engage effectively in international forums, all of which are critical dimensions of soft power

Conclusion:

This research shows that in highly hostile regional relationships like that of India and Pakistan, soft power remains limited and often secondary to hard power. The 2025 war between the two countries highlights that when conflict and mistrust dominate, states prefer to rely on military strength and coercion rather than attraction or diplomacy. While India utilizes soft power tools in many countries to attain her objectives, it is not the case with Pakistan. Decades of hostility, lack of trust, ideological differences makes it difficult for India and Pakistan to engage in diplomacy and confidence building measures (CBMs). Therefore, unless the core political and historical issues between India and Pakistan are addressed, soft power is unlikely to function effectively, and hard power will continue to shape their regional strategies. At a time when India is working on normalizing ties with China, it should also consider Pakistan. Moreover, it's high time that Pakistan addresses its short comings. Along with military and technological advancements, water security needs special attention. Unless both countries participate in long-term peace-building and regional cooperation, South Asia will remain trapped in a cycle where force prevails over the power of persuasion.

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