

Security, Strategy, and Soft Power

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Security, Strategy, and Soft Power: India's Evolving Global Engagement

Context

Following **Operation Sindoor (May 7-10, 2025)** — a four-day military engagement — India has faced **sharp criticism** not for its actions alone but for the **diplomatic messaging** that followed. Unlike previous instances of cross-border terror where global support was widespread, the international response this time was **muted and fragmented**. This has raised important questions about the **effectiveness of Indian diplomacy**, especially in light of **geopolitical shifts** and **perception challenges**.

Eroding International Support

- In contrast to events like the **2008 Mumbai attacks**, **2016 Uri**, and **2019 Pulwama**, global support for India post-Operation Sindoor has been **relatively lukewarm**.
 - Despite strong condemnations of the **Pahalgam attack**, India **did not receive unequivocal backing**, especially from **South Asian neighbours**.
 - **Pakistan**, however, secured **explicit support** from nations such as **China, Türkiye, and Malaysia**, and organisations like the **OIC**.
 - This asymmetry in responses is seen as a **failure in India's diplomatic outreach**, especially when compared to past successes.
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Diplomatic Wins for Pakistan

- **Islamabad influenced multilateral forums**, such as the **UNSC**, to its advantage.
- In **April 2025**, Pakistan succeeded in **removing references to The Resistance Front**

(TRF) from a UNSC resolution on the Pahalgam attack.

- Symbolic and strategic gains included:
 - **Leadership roles in UNSC counter-terrorism bodies**
 - Access to **international loans** despite India's objections
 - Continued engagement with the **United States**, with **General Asim Munir hosted at the White House**
 - These developments raise concerns about **India's declining narrative traction** in international diplomacy.
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Hyphenation by the United States

- A major setback was the **U.S. President's repeated statements equating India and Pakistan**, suggesting **moral parity** between the two.
 - Offers of **mediation on Kashmir** and **weak condemnations of terrorism** indicate a shift in **strategic alignment**.
 - Such comparisons **undermine India's global position** and highlight gaps in bilateral understanding.
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Message vs. Messenger

- As the famous line from *Antony and Cleopatra* states: "*I that do bring the news made not the match*", diplomats can only deliver what they are instructed to.
- The real issue lies in the **content, clarity, and tone** of India's **post-Sindoor diplomatic communication**.
- Blame directed at diplomats is therefore **misplaced**, and should instead focus on the **messaging strategy**.

Modi's "New Normal" Doctrine and Global Perceptions

India's military doctrine has undergone a shift, raising concerns internationally. Key aspects include:

- **Terror = War:** Positions terrorism on par with war, **lowering the threshold** for retaliation.
- **Rejection of Nuclear Blackmail:** Promotes **strategic autonomy**, but introduces **nuclear brinkmanship** into regional discourse.
- **No distinction between State and Non-State Actors:** Implies that attacks by non-state actors can invite **full-scale retaliation**, destabilising regional norms.
- These positions may project **domestic strength**, but **globally appear aggressive**, especially in a time of heightened sensitivity to territorial aggression.

Changing Global Attitudes Post-2020

- The global discourse on military action has changed since **Russia's invasion of Ukraine** and **Israel's actions in Gaza**.
 - India's positions, such as:
 - **Non-condemnation of Russia**
 - Increased **oil imports from Moscow**
 - **Silence on Gaza**
 - Have **eroded moral credibility**, especially in **Europe and the Global South**.
 - This perceived **selective consistency** undermines India's **diplomatic legitimacy** when calling out terrorism or seeking support.
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Democracy, Image and Credibility

- India's traditional strength in diplomacy has been its image as the **world's largest democracy**.
 - However, rising concerns over **democratic backsliding** have challenged this perception.
 - Key issues include:
 - **Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA)**
 - **Abrogation of Article 370**
 - **Internet shutdowns**, arrests of **dissenters**, and allegations of **extraterritorial killings**
 - During Operation Sindoor, Indian diplomats had to **defend not just India's security stance**, but also its **human rights record**.
 - This blurring of India's democratic distinction from Pakistan **weakens its diplomatic leverage**.
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The Way Forward: Rethinking India's Diplomacy

To address current challenges and regain diplomatic momentum, India must:

- **Reframe its messaging** to project itself as a **democratic, responsible, and stabilising power**.
- Ensure that its **strategic autonomy** does not translate into **moral inconsistency**.
- Recognise that **perception management** is as critical as **military or economic strength** in international relations.
- Reinforce credibility through **coherent foreign policy, clear narrative, and value-based engagement**.

Conclusion

India's **right to defend against cross-border terrorism** is unquestionable, and global indifference is understandably frustrating.

However, **effective diplomacy** requires more than military strength—it demands **moral consistency, strategic clarity**, and alignment with **global expectations**.

The current criticisms reflect not a failure of diplomats, but a **broader disconnect between India's actions, narrative, and international perception**.



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