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Analyzing Trump's 20 Point Peace Plan for Gaza

Maryyum Masood

On 29 September 2025 at the White House, President Donald Trump unveiled a 20-point proposal to end the Gaza war, casting it as a "ceasefire-plus" framework. Substantively, the plan pivots on an exchange-driven ceasefire. Within 72 hours of Israel's acceptance, all Israeli hostages, alive and deceased, would be returned, in parallel with a large Palestinian prisoner release (roughly 1,700 detainees plus about 250 serving life terms). Israeli military operations would pause, and forces would reposition in phases to designated areas rather than withdraw immediately. The sequencing is meant to deliver rapid humanitarian relief and de-escalation while preventing a security vacuum. Yet the same mechanics expose the plan's fragility; the intended symmetry is clear in the text and reporting, but implementation still turns on one decisive contingency – Hamas agreement.

On governance, the plan proposes a technocratic Palestinian committee running Gaza under the supervision of an international "Board of Peace," chaired by Trump and reportedly including figures such as Tony Blair. Hamas would be excluded from post-war governance; members who disarm could receive amnesty, while those seeking exile would be granted "safe passage" to countries willing to host them. As per the plan, this design aims to "de-radicalize" Gaza while restoring basic administration and services. However, it raises serious legitimacy questions: external supervision, reliance on high-profile individuals, and the exclusion of Hamas may produce a governance deficit unless Palestinian ownership is clearly defined and tied to a firm timeline.

Security provisions in the plan extend beyond disarmament. They include a US-led international stabilization force and external support for security-sector reform, both standard features of post-conflict arrangements since the 1990s. Their utility lies in constraining spoilers and raising professional standards within internal security institutions. However, ill-defined mandates, especially those with uncertain authority, rules of engagement, and oversight, tend to trigger mission creep and provoke public resistance. Given Gaza's complex political environment, any foreign security footprint will be seen as legitimate only if it has a clear mandate, credible and transparent exit conditions, and can demonstrate neutrality, even when Arab or Muslim actors are involved.

Furthermore, humanitarian access and reconstruction are positioned as early deliverables. The plan commits to UN-supervised aid, infrastructure repair, and a "New Gaza" economic track, including

a special economic zone. But here, too, the logic of sequencing matters: the aid surge is conditional on sustained de-escalation, while reconstruction is linked to a deradicalized, demilitarized Gaza administered by reformed institutions. Without durable guarantees against re-strikes or re-occupation, the aid-rebuild cycle remains vulnerable to disruption. Although the plan asserts that there will be "no forced displacement and no Israeli occupation," but enforcement mechanisms are not fully specified in the public text.

The plan's most contested part is its political dimension. It affirms Palestinian self-determination and eventual Gaza–West Bank integration, but makes progress contingent on Palestinian Authority reforms and broader societal "mindset change," including interfaith initiatives. Despite European endorsements, the document provides neither a dated pathway to final-status negotiations nor a freeze on settlements, widely considered essential to avoid an interim government becoming permanent. This imbalance, precise security steps but vague political promises, repeats the main flaw of earlier deals – they created brief calm without a credible path to a final settlement.

At the regional level, responses are varied. Several Arab and Muslim states have signaled a willingness to assist with implementation, while Hamas has stated that it is "reviewing" the proposal. Israel has signaled approval, and Netanyahu has stated that the IDF could retain a presence in Gaza in the plan's initial phase. The early signals point to a dual purpose; the plan operates as a ceasefire instrument and as a trial of whether stakeholders will accept an interim construct that provides neither statehood nor a reversion to the pre-war order. While the plan can reasonably be viewed as an opportunity to halt active hostilities and expand humanitarian access, it leaves major substantive questions unresolved. Core uncertainties persist regarding the legitimacy of the proposed governance architecture, the scope and duration of any external security footprint, and the credibility of a two-state outcome in the absence of dated political commitments. Until these gaps are addressed, the plan is best understood as a provisional mechanism to halt the conflict, rather than a framework for a permanent resolution which would define the fate of the Palestinians.

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Link: ***https://policyeast.com/analyzing-trumps-20-point-peace-plan-for-gaza/***

The Role of Pakistan-China People-to-People Relations in Consolidating 'all Weather Friendship

Bilal Zubair

Executive Summary

People have taken the central stage in the practice of modern-day diplomacy. Along with political, economic and defence relations, diplomacy is now equally focused on culture, relations supporting People-to-People exchanges. Such exchanges are instrumental in nation-branding and improve the soft power of the respective countries. As a consequence, city diplomacy, gastro diplomacy, sports diplomacy, digital diplomacy, spiritual diplomacy has gained recognition in the contemporary discourse and practice of diplomacy. Pakistan-China relations must also be viewed in the context of growing focus on the people-centric approach in bilateral relations. The political leadership from both countries has repeatedly emphasized the importance of people in bilateral relations. As a result, a remarkable surge is the P-to-P exchanges has been observed in Pakistan-China relations for the past two decades. Keeping in view the evolution of Pakistan-China relations from an 'All-Weather Friendship' to an 'All Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership,' this study analyses the historical development, the present state of relations and the future trajectory of bilateral ties especially focusing of P-to-P bilateral relations.

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Promising Outlook of Pakistan in 2026

Bilal Zubair

In the context of Pakistan's journey in 2025, it was arguably the most consequential year reinvigorating the nation's morale, making it more resilient, confident and determined. As the country braces for 2026, one may reflect on the tone set in 2025. Despite several security, economic, and climate-induced challenges, Pakistan has shown its tremendous potential and capacity to overcome them. The following takeaways from 2025 have set the tone for the succeeding year:

- Pakistan's decisive victory in the four-day war with India, in May 2025, reshaped the South Asian Strategic architecture, positioning Pakistan as a strategic stabilizer in the region.
- In the post-Pehalgam scenario, Pakistan's 'strategic narrative' not only won the 'battle of truth' against India but also neutralized Indian war-enticing rhetoric. Pakistan's commitment to peace and stability won global praise.
- On the diplomatic front, Pakistan's foreign policy has shown tremendous successes. Pakistan's relations with all the significant partners, including China, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran, have strengthened further. The upwards trend in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) of USD 2.45 billion in 2025 is likely to grow in the coming years.[1] Pakistan has also emerged as a key player in global politics in efforts leading to a ceasefire in Gaza and a constructive role during the Iran-Israel war.
- Pakistan-Saudi Arabia's Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) of September 2025 is evidence of Pakistan's deterrent capabilities and strategic role in the regional security architecture.[2]
- Similarly, Pakistan's economic indicators have shown resilience against the global economic slowdown. Exports of goods increased by 6.4 percent and the services sector by 9.6 percent, respectively, compared to 2024. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has predicted [3].6 percent growth rate in FY 2026-27.

These trends are plausible indicators of Pakistan's internal stability and external projection. One must remain confident yet wary of the challenges posed by Pakistan's strategic location. In a murky international order and a troubled neighborhood, Pakistan's strategic priorities must aim to strengthen its deterrent capabilities, subdue externally-supported terrorism, ensure social cohesion, and, most importantly, revitalize the economy. One must understand that Pakistan exists in a region that has intricate regional equations such as China-Pakistan-India, Iran-Israel-West,

unstable Afghanistan and unresolved core disputes like the Kashmir issue. India's ambitions of becoming *'Vishwa Guru'* (Great Teacher) and *'Maha Shakti'* (Great Power) defy regional power equations and geostrategic realities. This false sense of confidence, supported by the notion of a 'Net Security Provider,' led to a series of military misadventures that are pushing the region towards unaffordable nuclear escalations.

Pakistan's national security prism must also be viewed through the non-traditional security threats. Pakistan's National Security Policy (NSP) laid out non-traditional threats alongside traditional threats at the centre of security discussions. The burgeoning unemployed and illiterate population, water security, and temperature-induced climate change have emerged as the most significant non-traditional threats to Pakistan. Therefore, the nation's geostrategic outlook must incorporate a comprehensive assessment and strategic planning of these challenges in 2026 and beyond.

Priorities in 2026.

Pak-India Relations

Pakistan-Indian relations in 2026 warrant careful examination. Pakistan's decisive victory in the May 2025 conflict has reinforced the primacy of strategic stability in South Asia. Pakistan's conventional military capabilities and professional approach deny India any space for limited war. As the Indian Premier Mr. Narendra Modi stated that "Operation Sindoor" is paused, signaling India's intent of reigniting hostilities in the future, Pakistan is fully prepared to respond to any future Indian aggression.3 India's inclusion in new defence and security blocs, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), bolsters its naval power and intelligence-sharing capabilities. Pakistan's policy of Quid Pro Quo Plus (QPQ Plus) approach—a calibrated conventional response—is designed to restore deterrence in case of any misadventure.

In the post-May conflict, India's resort to use of terrorism through Fitna al Hindustan (BLA) poses a significant challenge, considering its close nexus with Fitna al Khawarij (TTP) and other insurgent groups. Eliminating foreign-sponsored terrorism would be key to Pakistan's security apparatus. India's growing influence in Afghanistan in support of the Fitna al Khawarij has broader security implications, likely leading to more covert operations inside Pakistan. To address these multifaceted challenges, the credibility of Pakistan's conventional forces and its uncompromising resolve against terrorism are the key factors.

Pak-Afghanistan Relations

Afghanistan would be a high priority in Pakistan's stability in the coming years. The Taliban regime's inability to control transnational terrorist groups operating inside Afghanistan pose a significant challenge to Pakistan. Sharing a 2,700 km porous border in mostly porous provinces of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) poses a significant logistical challenge for Pakistan. Considering Afghanistan's imperative for regional connectivity and trade, Pakistan envisages that Afghanistan will clamp down on the terrorist networks operating within its territory. Normalization of future bilateral relations with Afghanistan would be contingent on practical manifestation of counterterrorism cooperation. The stepped-up diplomatic course adopted by Pakistan through brotherly Muslim countries such as Türkiye, Qatar, Iran, as well as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members like China and Russia would be instrumental in changing the Taliban regime's behavior with regard to Pakistan's security concerns. The onus now lies on the Taliban regime to recalibrate its priorities in order to reset its ties with Pakistan.

Pak-China Relations

For Pakistan, its relations with the People's Republic of China are the most important and consequential. Pakistan-China Friendship is grounded in an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership grounded in trust and reliability spread across defence, economy, diplomatic and people-to-people relations. China-Pakistan defence cooperation has underscored the importance of this relationship for maintaining strategic stability by counterbalancing India and preserving the balance of power in South Asia. Considering the region's delicate landscape, Pakistan would continue to expand its defence and security cooperation with China across all domains of warfare, including counterterrorism.

On the economic side, the China-Pakistan Joint Action Plan 2025-2029 lays the framework for deepening Phase II of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with a focus on investment in infrastructure, maritime action plan, green energy, industrial parks, investment in digital infrastructure and security.[4] In the year 2026, Pakistan is focusing on materializing the framework for sustainable development through investment in the industrial, energy and manufacturing sectors under this Joint Action Plan.

Challenges Related to Disinformation

The May 2025 conflict has reinforced the dangers posed by disinformation and cyber warfare. Adversaries are weaponizing social media, propaganda, and fake news to destabilize societies. For

Pakistan, countering this psychological aspect of warfare is now as crucial as defending borders. The Fitna al Hindustan and Fitna al Khawarij are using social media to spread disinformation to fuel separatism, malign ongoing development projects such as CPEC, and exaggerate grievances to serve the agendas of external sponsors. Beyond militant propaganda, state adversaries exploit digital platforms to amplify fake news, target state institutions, and sow distrust among the public. This coordinated disinformation aims to weaken morale, fracture social cohesion, and create divisions within society. Our security dynamics are confronted with this psychological warfare, which seeks to weaken the state from within. Engaging youth in dialogue, promoting transparent communication, and recognizing their primary role in national cohesion must be prioritized by all national institutions.

Regional Connectivity Initiatives.

Our NSP envisages geoeconomics as central to Pakistan's future, aiming to transform Pakistan into a hub of regional connectivity.5 Pakistan's ability to harness its strategic location at the crossroads of South Asia and Central Asia, connecting West Asia with Africa is crucial for promoting regional connectivity and trade. Such connectivity through South and Central Asia is imperative for harnessing the enormous untapped natural resources of the Central Asian Republics (CARs). Year 2026 must prioritize regional connectivity and trade as an immediate need of the hour.

Climate-Induced Challenges

Climate change has emerged as a significant non-traditional threat to Pakistan's peace and stability. According to a report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Pakistan loses around USD 2 billion annually due to climate-induced disasters.6 Although contributing less than one percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, Pakistan is among the ten most climate-vulnerable countries. According to the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) forecast, the 2026 monsoon is likely to be more intense than the 2025 monsoon.7 These changes affect rural livelihoods, drive migration, and increase poverty. This is not just an environmental crisis; it is an existential security challenge. Recognizing these risks, Pakistan has undertaken initiatives aimed at enhancing climate resilience, including development of more climate-resistant crops and increased investment in renewable energy for agricultural growth. In short term, priority should be set towards forecasting and an early warning system (EWS), and close interprovincial and federal coordination. In medium-to-long-term planning, investment in climate-resilient infrastructure and forestation would be key to mitigate the climate challenge.

Pakistan's security environment continues to be shaped by a complex interplay of both traditional and non-traditional threats. While it has demonstrated its capability to respond decisively to any traditional security challenges like it did in May 2025, it is imperative to address emerging risks like climate change and food security through comprehensive policy making.

In 2026, we need to focus on addressing the challenges of climate security, health security, food security, and other non-traditional challenges through an inclusive policy. A bright future with economic stability is at our doorstep. We will overcome all internal and external challenges. Year 2026 is a year of hope and prosperity, and we, as a nation, are ready to take on all challenges with matching abilities to respond.

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Pakistan's Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Technology: Role of Pakistan's Nuclear Regulatory Authority

Dr. Rahat Iqbal

Director General (DG) International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Rafael Mariano Grossi, in a video message aired on December 24, 2025 commended Pakistan's efforts in harnessing nuclear technology in the field of medicine. According to the DG IAEA, "the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission, PAEC, has established 20 cancer hospitals in the country and trained a fleet of professionals." He further added, "he discussed with the Pakistani prime minister how to widen cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear technology." DG IAEA's remarks on Pakistan's peaceful uses of nuclear technology is a testimony to the fact that nuclear technology has been playing a vital role in Pakistan's health sector. This was not the first time that DG IAEA has applauded Pakistan's peaceful use of nuclear technology. In February 2023, during his visit to the Pakistan's Center of Excellence (PCENS) and National Institute of Safety and Security (NISAS) among others, DG Grossi applauded Pakistan's nuclear safety mechanism, calling it "robust and world class". DG Grossi's remarks are reflective of Pakistan's seriousness and commitment towards harnessing the potential of nuclear technology for human wellbeing. But health is not the only sector where Pakistan has excelled in utilizing nuclear technology. In fact, for more than 50 years, Pakistan has been utilizing this technology for peaceful purposes in a wide range of socio-economic sectors, including agriculture and energy.

One of the defining features of Pakistan's peaceful nuclear pursuit is its clean track record of nuclear operations. During 50 years, Pakistan has not faced any single nuclear incident, which makes Islamabad one of the few countries with zero nuclear accidents. Even international think tanks such as Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) have placed Pakistan among top most countries for its robust nuclear safety and security measures. However, without an established institutional framework, it would have been difficult for Pakistan to maintain such a clean record. This framework includes Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) that is responsible for development and applications of nuclear technologies and Pakistan's Nuclear Regulatory Authority (PNRA) accountable for regulatory omissions. In this context, the role of PNRA is more crucial and critical as it ensures nuclear safety through stringent regulatory frameworks that aligns with international standards prescribed by IAEA.

Established in 2001, PNRA is a regulatory body with a cadre of trained, competent and dedicated professionals that work in collaboration with PAEC for developing stringent mechanism in ensuring the safety in all aspects of nuclear operations and radiation protection for workers, public and environment. It is thus accountable for control, regulations and supervision of all matters related to nuclear safety and radiation protection through the formulation of robust and effective regulatory mechanism. It also fosters a healthy relationship with the licensees and to maintain transparency in regulatory actions and decision-making process.

Moreover, it is also responsible for developing rules and regulations, issue guidance for assuring the safe operation of nuclear technology, techniques for preventing risks from ionizing radiations, safety of nuclear installations and radiation facilities; granting of authorization, issuance of licenses for nuclear installations and radiation facilities with the inspection of all facilities for mitigating risks. Along with this there is No Objection Certificates (NoC) issued to by the PNRA to the companies of radioactive sources both nationally and internationally to radioactive companies and also Radiation Free Certificates with regard to exported items primarily of food. In connection with its work, the regulatory body also pursues onsite operations, transportation and disposal of radioactive materials. Additionally, PNRA also serves as the lead organization, responsible for ensuring that operating organizations and licensees maintain national preparedness for nuclear and radiological emergencies and accidents. It also acts as the primary point of contact for international agreements and cooperation related to nuclear and radiological emergencies.

To improve the regulatory frameworks and to enhance the safety mechanism, PNRA has always appreciated its cooperation with IAEA. It holds membership in several IAEA Safety Standards Committees, including the Nuclear Safety Standards Committee (NUSSC), Transport Safety Standards Committee (TRANSSC), Waste Safety Standards Committee (WASSC), Radiation Safety Standards Committee (RASSC), Nuclear Security Guidance Committee (NSGC), the Global Nuclear Safety and Security Network (GNSSN), and the Commission on Safety Standards (CSS). It also closely coordinates with other IAEA frameworks and systems, including the International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale (INES), the International Reporting System for Operating Experience (IRS), the Incident and Trafficking Database (ITDB), the Response and Assistance Network (RANET), the Regulatory Cooperation Forum (RCF), the Radiation Safety Information Management System (RASIMS), the International Generic Ageing Lessons Learned (IGALL) programme, and the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR), among others, to ensure transparency, updates and it consistency with global nuclear

safety standards implementation. PNRA will be celebrating its Silver Jubilee in 2026. While it's a moment of pride for all of Pakistan, it also reminds us about the hard work that went into making PNRA one of the world's top-notch nuclear regulatory authorities. PNRA's Silver Jubilee will be celebrated all over Pakistan and the marvellous feat that PNRA has so far achieved.

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The Strategic Weight of Pakistan's AIP-based Hangor-Class Submarines

Saad Riaz

Introduction

Pakistan Navy launched its fourth Hangor-class Submarine, which is undergoing sea trials and is in the final stage of its induction. It is developed with the assistance of China's Wuchang Shipbuilding Industry in Wuhan. The first three of this class of submarines were developed and entered into sea trials in 2024 and 2025. The remaining four are to be developed at Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works Ltd. (KS&EW) under the Transfer of Technology (ToT) agreement.

This development is significant as it seeks to balance rising maritime threats in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), driven by India's expanding and increasingly assertive naval posture. Similarly, the Hangor-class submarine is diesel-electric but is fitted with an Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP) system, which allows it to generate power underwater without surfacing, thereby enhancing endurance and stealth. This analysis provides technical parameters and operational efficacy of the Hangor-class submarine, examines the operational advantages of AIP integration, and assesses how these capabilities contribute to balancing India's growing maritime presence in the IOR.

Technical Parameters and Operational Efficacy

On 17th December 2025, the Hangor-class codenamed "Ghazi" Submarine, which is a Type 039B Yaun-Class Chinese Submarine, was launched in Wuhan, China. The Inter-Service Public Relations (ISPR) reiterated that the submarine is undergoing "rigorous sea trials and is in the final stages of being handed over to Pakistan". The report suggests that the submarine is 76 meters long and has a displacement of 2800 tons. It has six 533mm torpedo tubes, which are capable of firing torpedoes and launching missiles. The submarine is diesel-electric but retrofitted with an AIP system, which allows it to operate underwater without snorkelling, unlike conventional diesel-electric submarines, which depend on air for their engine combustion. The AIP system increases submarine endurance and stealth while avoiding detection by the adversary, as the submarine can remain underwater for three to four weeks. While the traditional submarines are noisy, the engine makes noise while charging and even releases exhaust fumes during the combustion process, further undermining stealth and the element of surprise, AIP system prevents this.

The type of AIP technology retrofit is not revealed yet. However, the reports suggest that the Hangor-class submarines are probably equipped with the Stirling AIP system. The Stirling AIP

involves combustion, but the exhaust fumes are recycled during the process rather than being released. This reduces the thermal detection and acoustic signatures of submarines. However, the Stirling-based AIP submarine is a little less efficient than the Fuel-Cell AIP system, as it involves piston movement during the combustion process. But it is much better than the Module d'Energie Sous-Marin Autonome (MESMA) AIP systems retrofitted in Khalid-class submarines.

The MESMA uses liquid oxygen and Ethanol to produce electrochemical reactions and provide combustion. But during the process, it releases a lot of heat, leaving high acoustic and thermal signatures. This AIP system increases the boat's endurance but at the cost of stealth, which is compromised during the combustion process, making it less efficient. That makes these Hangor-class submarines significant, as they would be much better than the decade-old Khalid and Hashmat-class submarines, which would significantly increase endurance, provide stealth, and improve operational efficacy.

Balancing the Indian Threat

Following India's massive naval buildup and intentions in the IOR, the development of these submarines holds immense significance. The May 2025 conflicts reflect Pakistan's Navy maintaining sea denial through Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) against the Indian Navy. The Indian Navy had an ambition to attack from the waters to the Pakistan mainland. However, the continuous patrolling in the waters deterred the Indian Navy from taking any action. Similarly, after the conflict Indian government and military have been making statements and showing an intention of using the maritime domain to attack Pakistan in the future. Such as their Minister of Defence Rajnath Singh's statement regarding Karachi, when he said, "one route to Karachi passes through the Sir Creek". Then he openly stated that "If Pakistan does any unholy act this time, it is possible that the opening will be done by our navy".

Apart from this, senior Indian military commanders have publicly commented on the possibility of future conflict extending into the maritime domain. They further stated that, "If another military conflict escalates, the probability of navies being actively involved is high." Such statements are reinforced by rapid developments in the maritime domain. For instance, the Indian Navy already operates two aircraft carriers, while INS Vishaal, envisioned as the third, is under development. Similarly, India's nuclear-powered submarine fleet continues to expand. The Arihant-class submarines are already operational, while INS Aridhaman and the S4* submarines are expected to be commissioned by 2026. Moreover, the Indian Navy launched Project-75I to equip its

conventional submarines with Fuel-Based AIP technologies. India justifies these developments through its ambition to become a blue-water navy. However, if conflict were to escalate, would these inductions not be centered around Pakistan? And would India realistically refrain from employing its expanding naval assets exclusively in such a scenario?

Considering the Indian Naval modernization, the acquisition of Hangor-class submarines holds immense significance in deterring India's expanding naval footprints and growing sub-surface capabilities in the IOR. Their induction will significantly enhance the Pakistan Navy's undersea presence by improving endurance, stealth, and the ability to remain submerged for extended periods. Collectively, these capabilities will act as a force multiplier, enabling the defence of the maritime territories and further strengthening sea-denial operations, and limiting an adversary's ability to establish naval superiority in the waters. However, in the long run, the nuclear-powered submarines would also be necessary to strategically deter India's broader naval ambition. For which they are developing the next generation of nuclear-powered submarines, S5. So, in order to deter such acquisition, Pakistan needs to shift its priorities in developing and acquiring nuclear-powered submarines.

Conclusion

In short, submarine development is both significant and necessary to maintain regional balance and mitigate maritime threats. India's Naval buildup is no longer merely aspirational; it is increasingly translating into operational reality, with the Indian Navy expanding its fleet and enhancing its power-projection capabilities. In the near term, the induction of modern conventional submarines would provide the Pakistan Navy with a critical advantage by strengthening sea-denial and deterrence at the conventional level. However, over the longer term, maintaining assured second-strike capability would require the development of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), which remain essential for credible deterrence and for countering India's expanding undersea and maritime ambitions.

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From Cold Start to Cold Strike: India's Quest for Limited Conventional Options

Syed Ali Abbas

In Exercise Akhand Prahaar, conducted as part of the larger tri-service Exercise Trishul on the western front, Lieutenant General Dhiraj Seth commented during a press briefing that "the time has come to change the Cold Start doctrine into the Cold Strike one." The statement suggests that the Indian Army is reevaluating the use of force during the initial phases of a crisis against Pakistan. Currently, little publicly available data exists to specify the Cold Strike as an official doctrine. However, exercise observations, efforts to structure forces like the Rudra integrated brigade and statements of senior Indian leadership in the wake of recent crises are indicators of Indian thinking. This article thus considers Cold Strike as a refined version of the Indian Cold Start Doctrine. It analyses how such an approach would unfold in practice, what operational issues it is meant to solve, and how its implementation would influence the dynamics of crisis behaviour and escalation between India and Pakistan.

Cold Start: The Operational Constraint

Cold Start was designed to provide India with the capability to launch limited ground actions at the onset of a crisis, the purpose of delivering military effects before global pressure could limit additional operations. It was based on Integrated Battle Groups based near to Pakistan's border, a mix of armour, mechanised infantry, artillery, engineers, air defence and logistics in units that were expected to move at short notice. In practice, Cold Start faced long-term operational limitations. These included;

The first was mobilisation time. The forward corps of the Indian Army still relied on the flow of forces and resources from deep reserves to form an effective offensive package, even when the alert levels were comparatively higher. This process entailed the transportation of armour, opening of fuelling and maintenance bases, ammunition storage, placement of air defence resources and pre-positioning of logistics. These preparations could not be easily hidden and could leave visible signs, which could provide Pakistan an early warning and preparation window.

The second limitation was political will. Ground operations between the international border involve risks of escalation in terms of scale and intensity, particularly under conditions of nuclear

deterrence. Third, Pakistan responded to Cold Start by inducting a low yield nuclear weapon, Nasr. As a result, Cold Start functioned more as a paper plan than as an employable option during crises, as witnessed during Operation Parakram

Meanwhile, the Cold Strike is currently being framed as an attempt to operate with these constraints. Instead of using visible mobilisation and large ground manoeuvres, it aims to provide political leaders with pre-assembled strike alternatives which can be deployed within a short time and with a smaller initial footprint. The main question is whether this approach can produce the desired effects or create new risks.

Cold Strike: Logic and Components Structural

The military trend indicates that what is being characterized as Cold Strike is based on three broad structural components; establishment of permanently integrated high-readiness formations, use of multi-domain effects, and the use of a targeting approach designed to focus on limited, though operationally significant targets.

The former manifests itself in the creation and use of units such as the Rudra Brigade, under the XII Corps (Konark Corps). The Rudra Brigade was involved in the land manoeuvres during Exercise Akhand Prahaar which was a larger corps-level exercise incorporating mechanised and infantry manoeuvres, aviation assets and supporting arms. Such formations comprise armour, mechanised infantry, artillery, air defence, engineers, signals, electronic warfare elements and organic unmanned systems under one command, unlike traditional brigades which are organised around a single combat arm. The rationale of such an organisational structure is to minimize reliance on mobilisation during crisis and to minimise the time lag between political approval and the use of force. Tasks which involve long preparation time and produce observable signals can, theoretically, be performed faster and less subjectively.

The second aspect is how operations are undertaken across multiple domains. The Indian land warfare doctrine focuses on simultaneity over a strict phasing with effects being applied on land, air, cyber, space and the electromagnetic spectrum. Exercise Akhand Prahaar was a reflection of this strategy with the integrated use of ground forces, Army Aviation attack helicopters, Indian Air Force fighter ground-attack strikes and electronic warfare grids backed by intelligence provided by drones and other unmanned systems. Instead of a set sequence of operations, the exercise focused on coordinating effects in a highly integrated manner across domains. Ground forces, including

the Rudra Brigade, operated within this framework to exploit or consolidate effects being generated across the wider battlespace, rather than acting in isolation.

The third aspect is a targeting strategy that will create a few but focused impacts. The Indian land warfare doctrine emphasizes on precision and depth in operation, as the May 2025 crisis showed. However, Exercises like Akhand Prahaar seem to be aimed at legitimizing the capacity to produce focused military effects in a short period of time, while retaining a narrative of control and restraint in its political dimension.

Despite these adaptations, Cold Strike has significant limitations. High-readiness formations that are permanently integrated are ones that are resource intensive and need long term investment in training, maintenance munitions and personnel. The credibility of precision and standoff capabilities relies on availability in exercises, but also the depth of its stockpile, the industrial replenishing capability and its capacity to sustain during an operation. Most importantly, the successful implementation of a multi-domain strategy demands some degree of joint integration among the Army, Air Force and Navy that is not yet balanced, as shown by the slow and contentious development of Indian theatre command reform. These aspects will determine the extent to which Cold Strike can be developed as an exercise-proven concept into a reliable operational plan.

Obstacles to Combat on a Nuclearized Battlespace.

Cold Strike is based on the premise that Pakistan can, and will, be able to differentiate between a limited strike and the initial phase of a larger offensive. This is a weak assumption in a nuclearized environment where timelines are compressed. A standoff strike on an airbase, ammunition depot, or command node cannot be evaluated in isolation when decisions are made in minutes rather than hours. To the state being attacked, the object of attack is not the declared purpose of the attacker but the risk of follow-on operations. It is challenging to interpret political signalling where there is a little time.

In these circumstances, ambiguity increases the risk of escalation. Speed diminishes the effectiveness of diplomatic intervention, and standoff effects render the difference between tactical and strategic targets indistinct, especially when a command-and-control or deterrence-related capability is at stake. Thresholds are no fixed points that are unilaterally calibrated by the attacker. They are guided by the situation, choice of targets and how the defender's perception of threat

may follow. History shows that operations which are meant to be limited tend to spread when kinetic action commences, such as war in Korea, Vietnam and the current Russia-Ukraine Conflict

The Response and Crisis Stability

A rational Pakistani response lies in shaping posture to make Cold Strike less reliable as a crisis option, while reinforcing stability. This centres on three priorities: hardening, counter-ISR and preservation of decision space. Hardening and dispersal reduces the chance of an opening strike to produce paralysis. Dispersed and camouflaged basing, layered and mobile air defence, redundant communications and frequent relocation of sensitive assets will ensure that no early strike can effectively neutralise vital capabilities. By reducing the pay-off of early strikes such measures play a direct role in crisis stability.

Counter-Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance is also important. Cold Strike depends on timely, accurate intelligence. Signatures jamming, false decoy, false mobilisation and active counter-UAS can weaken Indian sensing and targeting. By making decisions uncertain, these steps slow the decision cycle for the attacker and restore the time the Cold Strike is attempting to compress. Preserving decision space is the most important consideration. The decision space itself becomes a form of deterrence during rapidly developing crises. By means of well-developed crisis communications; timely and transparent signaling; robust command system and correct early warning data, leaders can reduce the likelihood of decisions under duress. While technology has an impact on this process, operational clarity which will be more important for reducing the risk of unintended escalation in a rapidly developing crisis. War is inherently unpredictable. Most concepts that emphasize rapid action and packaged solutions tend to create crises that become increasingly difficult to manage or control. Therefore, Pakistan needs to reinforce credible deterrence, sustain the ability to endure high levels of pressure, and ensure that a developing crisis can be contained.

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Link: https://defensetalks.com/from-cold-start-to-cold-strike-indias-quest-for-limited-conventional-options/

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