Firstpost.

Time to make Pakistan pay the price for its proxy war in Kashmir

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Indian security force personnel patrol on the banks of Dal Lake, after Pahalgam terrorist attack, in Srinagar, Kashmir. Reuters

The heinous terrorist attack against the innocent civilians in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), on the afternoon of April 22, 2025, was the deadliest strike in years, resulting in 26 fatalities and many wounded. The obvious intent of the perpetrators of the dastardly act was to destabilise the region by hurting its tourist economy and fuelling sectarian divide.

The sign of normalcy returning to the Kashmir Valley is apparent from the favourable groundswell and record number of tourist arrivals as a sequel to the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, coupled with the peaceful conduct of assembly

elections last year. This obviously is not palatable to the deep state of Pakistan, as it apprehends losing the Kashmir narrative.

The recent ghastly incident is part of Pakistan's proxy war against India for the last three and a half decades. The Resistance Front (TRF), a franchise of Lashkar e Taiba (LeT), first claimed and later backtracked on the responsibility for the attack. The massacre was timed when PM Narendra Modi was on a visit to Saudi Arabia and US Vice President JD Vance was in India, so as to draw international attention. Before that, Pakistan Army Chief General Asim Munir, while addressing the overseas diaspora convention on April 17, 2025, ardently vindicated the 'two-nation theory' and referred to Kashmir as the country's jugular vein. He reiterated the same a few days later while addressing the cadets at Pakistan Military Academy at Kakul, Abbottabad.

The people of Kashmir have openly condemned the cowardly act. PM Modi has declared that India will identify, track and punish the terrorists and backers and pursue them to the 'ends of the earth'. India has announced a slew of punitive measures, including holding in abeyance the Indus Water Treaty (IWT), closing down the Integrated Check Post at Attari, downsizing the strength of personnel in the missions and cancellation of visas of Pakistani nationals. In a knee-jerk reaction, the Pakistan government has declared that all the agreements stand suspended, including the Shimla Agreement, which was in tatters. Islamabad has issued a warning that any diversion of waters of the Western Rivers will be taken as an act of war.

The proxy war in J&K is the core of Pakistan's military doctrine. Its prosecutors in Rawalpindi have continuously adopted varying tactics by shifting areas of focus, recruiting locals to give an indigenous touch and changing the pattern of terrorist operations. Treating it as cross-border terrorism, India's approach has been reactive, with the prime focus being on checking infiltration on the Line of Control (LoC) and ensuring an effective counterinsurgency grid in the hinterland. India did go in for a

shallow strike across the LoC against terrorist launch pads in 2016 and an air strike at a Balakot terrorists' camp in 2019, but Pakistan has remained undeterred. In 2003, two sides agreed to a ceasefire on the LoC, which was again renewed in 2021. This gave a free pass to the Pakistan Army: immunity to punitive action by the Indian forces against terrorists' infiltration. There was no ceasefire agreement when the author was the commander in this area towards the early 2000s, which gave a free hand to punish the Pakistani posts engaged in pushing terrorists across the LoC.

After the Balakot air strike, Pakistani handlers resorted to smaller terrorist actions, keeping below the threshold so as to limit India's response. The Pahalgam incident marks a clear shift and comes at a time when the Pakistani Army is on the backfoot following a series of attacks by the Baluch fighters and Taliban outfits against the security forces. It is obvious that the deep state in Pakistan wants to engage India in 'tit for tat' responses so as to reaffirm its relevance to the home constituency. Instead, India is expected to deliver an overwhelming military response at the time and place of its own choosing to send a strong message to Pakistan.

In fact, it is an excellent opportunity for India to change the game. While Pakistan has the capability to engage in intense engagements for a limited period, it has constraints to sustain it. Hence, India's political intent should be to deter Pakistan by engaging in a prolonged battle of attrition and ultimately defeat the proxy war by employing all instruments of national power. Military operations must aim to destroy terrorist infrastructure and take impactful reprisal actions against the Pakistan Army, making its proxy war a cost-prohibitive proposition. With all agreements under suspension, it is an ideal time to realign the LoC to our advantage. Alongside this, Pakistan's internal vulnerabilities must be fully exploited.

Rawalpindi's likely counter-strategy will be to up the ante of the proxy war with heightened infiltration of terrorists, maintain an offensive posture on the LoC and effectively retaliate to India's punitive strikes. Heavy artillery, precision-guided munitions, missiles and drones are expected to be used extensively. Pakistan will

avoid full-scale war at all costs to obviate yet another defeat, given India's distinct edge. In view of the dire straits of its economy and domestic unrest, Pakistan would definitely bring about pressure on India through its masters to exercise restraint and press for third-party mediation.

While the international community has reached out to support India, it is only Israel which has expressed complete solidarity. The US initially extended unequivocal support but later went on to adopt a neutral stance. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) issued a watered-down statement on the Pahalgam carnage, evading to name the TRF outfit. China has vowed support to its all-weather ally Pakistan and sent express deliveries of advanced PL-15 long-range air-to-air missiles to counter the Rafale threat. Further, Turkey is a major supplier of weapon systems to Pakistan, including Bayraktar UAVs and Kemankes cruise missiles, besides corvettes for the Navy. There are reports of Turkish Hercules C-130 transport aircraft carrying military cargo landing in Pakistan recently, which Ankara has refuted.

When it comes to safeguarding the country's sovereignty and security, no price is too big. It is a time of reckoning for India as a nation and its leadership to take the fight against Pakistan's proxy war to its logical conclusion and change the political landscape of the region. It is certainly going to be a long haul.

The writer is a war veteran, currently Professor of Strategic and International Relations. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.