

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Operation Sindoor and China's Response

Prashant Kumar Singh

May 21, 2025

Summary

Chinese foreign ministry statements did not appear keen to separate terrorism from the broader Kashmir issue. Chinese official statements provided a very powerful hyphenation between India and Pakistan, terming them equally important “countries” in South Asia, a subtle way to remind India of its South Asian 'place'. While the Chinese responses are indeed disappointing from an Indian point of view, they still leave space to conclude that the prior momentum that sought to repair bilateral ties can be maintained.

A dastardly terrorist attack facilitated by Pakistan claimed the lives of 26 innocent people, mostly tourists, at Baisaran meadow near Pahalgam on 22 April 2025. In response, India launched a punitive military strike on terror infrastructure, Operation Sindoor, in Pakistan as well as Pakistan-occupied Kashmir on 7 May. The next four days saw intense exchange of firepower between the two sides, with Pakistan targeting India’s military installations, forcing it to retaliate. A ceasefire was announced on 10 May.

This Brief analyses China’s official responses, relying on the statements issued by its foreign ministry and the official media, *Xinhua* and *China Daily*. It seeks to ascertain whether the Chinese response will break the normalisation momentum between India and China begun late last year after a more than four-year-long stand-off that began in April–May 2020 with the PLA seeking to change the status quo in eastern Ladakh. It concludes that while the Chinese response is indeed disappointing from an Indian point of view, it still leaves space to conclude that the prior momentum that sought to repair bilateral ties can be maintained.

Chinese Official Statements

On 23 April, the Chinese foreign ministry “strongly” condemned the attack, generically maintaining that “China firmly opposes all forms of terrorism”¹ but without any reference to cross-border complicity in the heinous act. As India began turning up the heat on Pakistan for its crimes, the ministry stated on 28 April that China “supports carrying out fair and just investigations at an early date”.² It advised both India and Pakistan to “exercise restraint”, calling them “important countries in South Asia”, reminding both of them that they are China’s neighbours and their “harmonious coexistence is vital to the peace, stability and development of the region”.³ It further added that both countries should “solve differences through dialogue and jointly keep the region peaceful and stable”.⁴

On 7 May, the day when India launched punitive strikes on terror infrastructure in Pakistan, Beijing termed India’s military operation as “regrettable”,⁵ skirting the point that India’s targets in “Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir were mainly related to terror infrastructure”.⁶ Furthermore, it expressed its willingness to play

¹ [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun’s Regular Press Conference”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), The People’s Republic of China, 23 April 2025.

² [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun’s Regular Press Conference”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People’s Republic of China, 28 April 2025.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian’s Regular Press Conference”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People’s Republic of China, 7 May 2025.

⁶ Ibid.

“a constructive role in easing the current tensions”⁷ ... “with the rest of the international community...”⁸ and promote talks to keep “the region peaceful and stable”.⁹ It counselled both countries “to observe international law, including the UN Charter”.¹⁰ Advising them to refrain from further escalation, it urged them to “return to the track of political settlement through peaceful means”,¹¹ without specifying the nature of the political settlement.

After India and Pakistan announced a ceasefire on 10 May, the ministry said that China had been “in close communication with relevant parties”, specifically mentioning Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s telephonic calls to India’s National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and Pakistan’s Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar. It stated that the purpose of the calls was “to counsel de-escalation and realization of a full and lasting ceasefire”.¹² It claimed that both “responded positively” and China reiterated its wish to “play a constructive role in realizing a full and lasting ceasefire”.¹³ The Chinese readout informs that during his call to Ajit Doval, Wang Yi conveyed to him that “China applauds [his] statement that war is not the choice of the Indian side”. Apart from this, Wang Yi by and large conveyed the same broad points that the Chinese foreign ministry has been making from 23 April onwards.¹⁴

However, the Chinese readout on his conversation with Mohammad Ishaq Dar reveals a more substantial message. He expressed sympathies for “civilian casualties” the conflict had “caused on the Pakistani side”. While the readout of his conversation with Doval informs that he condemned “the terrorist attack in Pahalgam area”, it does not mention whether he expressed any sympathies for the victims in the terrorist attack, and, particularly, for the loss of life in artillery shelling by Pakistan in the Poonch area.

Wang Yi assured Dar of China’s support for “Pakistan in safeguarding its national sovereignty and dignity”. He acknowledged that “Pakistan stands at the forefront of the international fight against terrorism and has made important contributions to the counter-terrorism efforts, and China supports Pakistan’s continued firm counter-terrorism actions”. Advising Pakistan to “respond to the current situation with calm and make decisions in line with its fundamental and long-term interests”, he supported an early ceasefire and conveyed that China was “willing to continue

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian’s Regular Press Conference”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People’s Republic of China, 8 May 2025.

⁹ [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian’s Regular Press Conference”](#), no. 5.

¹⁰ [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian’s Regular Press Conference”](#), no. 8.

¹¹ [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Remarks on the Escalating Tension Between India and Pakistan”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People’s Republic of China, 10 May 2025.

¹² [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian’s Regular Press Conference”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People’s Republic of China, 12 May 2025.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ [“Wang Yi Has a Phone Call with Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People’s Republic of China, 11 May 2025.

playing a positive role in this regard”. Separately, he asked Dar to “ensure the security and safety of Chinese personnel and institutions in Pakistan amid the current tensions”.¹⁵

Chinese Official Media

A perusal of the news stories published by *Xinhua*, and re-circulated by *China Daily*, during the period under review revealed a subtle sympathy for Pakistan but no overtly hostile overtones towards India. Although they gave space to Indian statements, nevertheless they appeared to be giving more coverage to the statements and claims by Pakistan regarding civilian damages Indian military action caused on their side¹⁶ and also military losses the Pakistanis claimed to have inflicted on India. This may have been partly because the Pakistani sources probably spoke more to attract international attention and sympathy under India’s deadly punitive strikes.

The headlines in some news reports, particularly concerning Pakistani claims of military losses India suffered at their hand, were presented in the form of plain statements without any attribution, even though they were lifted from Pakistani statements (incidentally, in one instance they used a report by *The Hindu*, an Indian newspaper).¹⁷ There were some exceptions, when the headlines made it clear that the claim was Pakistan’s.¹⁸ More valuable to note here is the phraseology: “a guerilla war has been going on between militants and Indian troops stationed in the region since 1989”.¹⁹ This is from the report on the terrorist attack on 22 April, which *Xinhua* published the same day.

A *Xinhua* news story in *China Daily* used a picture of a woman holding a baby and crying supposedly “at the Attari-Wagah border crossing after India revoked visas issued to Pakistani citizens”.²⁰ However, the evocative picture of Himanshi Narwal, who was widowed by the terrorists within a week of her wedding, is missing from both *Xinhua* as well as *China Daily*.²¹ Incidentally, the photographs of Pakistani army

¹⁵ [“Wang Yi Has a Phone Call with Pakistani Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People’s Republic of China, 11 May 2025.

¹⁶ [“31 Civilians Killed, 57 Injured in Indian Attack, Border Clash with Pakistan: Official”](#), *Xinhua*, 8 May 2025; [“26 Civilians Killed, 46 Injured in Indian Attack on Pakistan: Official”](#), *Xinhua*, 7 May 2025; [“Pakistan Launches Operation against India amid Continuous Provocation”](#), *Xinhua*, 10 May 2025.

¹⁷ [“Pakistani Jets Destroy Air Defense System in India’s Punjab”](#), *Xinhua*, 10 May 2025; [“3 Indian Jets Crash in Indian-controlled Kashmir”](#), *Xinhua*, 7 May 2025; [“Urgent: Pakistan Downs 2 Indian Jets in Retaliation for Overnight Strikes”](#), *Xinhua*, 7 May 2025.

¹⁸ [“Pakistan Downs 5 Indian Fighter Jets in Response to Overnight Strikes: Defense Minister”](#), *Xinhua*, 7 May 2025.

¹⁹ [“25 Tourists Killed in Indian-controlled Kashmir”](#), *Xinhua*, 22 April 2025.

²⁰ [“Pakistan Warns of Possible Indian Military Strike within 24-36 Hours”](#), *China Daily*, 30 May 2025.

²¹ Rohit Paul, [“Married on 16th, Tragedy on 22nd: Navy Officer’s Wife Salutes Coffin”](#), *NDTV*, 23 April 2025.

officers attending the funeral of terrorists, killed in the Indian strikes, is also missing from their coverage. The photographs are evidence of the Pakistani state’s complicity with the terrorists, proof that China continually emphasises that India provide. Also, there is no comparable focus on the loss of civilian lives as a result of Pakistan’s artillery fire in Uri and Poonch area. Thus, support and sympathy for Pakistan is more noticeable in what they have not published.

The official media prominently carried the aforementioned foreign ministry statements and adhered to the political line they exhibited. Incidentally, Lou Chunhao, Vice-President of the Ministry of State Security (MSS)-affiliated China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), in a video interview given to *China Daily*, ruled out the possibility of an outbreak of general war between India and Pakistan.²² On the whole, the coverage remained steadfast to the political line and appeared to be struggling to maintain journalistic balance. Sympathy for Pakistan was unmistakable, which again was in conjunction with the government’s political line.

Analysing the Official Responses

It is clear that China did not consider the terrorist attack in Pahalgam as the first strike in a spiral of escalation. By demanding so-called “fair and just investigation”, it obliquely conveyed that it was not convinced (or unwilling to accept) Pakistan’s hand in the ghastly event. This demand basically harked back to its old demands for ‘evidence’ in similar cases previously. Till date, it is unclear what they mean by “evidence”, and what constitutes ‘convincing evidence’ in their jurisprudence in the context of state-supported international terrorism. Any evidence to prove state complicity in international terror cases would be largely circumstantial and comprised of intelligence intercepts only.

Previously, China repeatedly demonstrated this unreasonable approach in blocking India’s repeated demands in the UNSC 1267 Sanctions Committee to sanction Pakistan-based terrorists Masood Azhar and others. Further, calling Pakistan a victim of terrorism and lauding its efforts to combat terrorism amounts to ignoring its own complicity in midwifing terrorism.

Additionally, its foreign ministry statements did not appear keen to separate terrorism from the broader Kashmir issue. Its unclear references to the “political settlement” of problems in the given context can only be an allusion to the Kashmir issue. The *China Daily*’s description that “a guerilla war has been going on between militants and Indian troops stationed in the region since 1989” reveals that its basic

²² Liu Jianna, “[Expert Decodes India-Pakistan Conflict](#)”, *China Daily*, 10 May 2025.

understanding about the Kashmir issue has probably not moved from the Maoist days when they saw a national struggle there.

Furthermore, that Chinese official statements have provided a very powerful hyphenation between India and Pakistan, terming them equally important “countries” in South Asia, is also a subtle way to remind India of its South Asian ‘place’. Besides, by calling them its neighbours, China has declared itself a South Asian actor. Its repeated and continuous assertions that it is willing to play “a positive role” to facilitate dialogue between the two countries speaks of its eagerness to insert itself in the South Asian space and bring it within its Global Security Initiative.

Conclusion

China’s understanding of the Kashmir issue, Pakistan’s role in terrorism there and its habitual insensitivity to the plight of Indians victimised by that terrorism is disappointing. It is even more disappointing considering that it leaves no stone unturned to highlight its own fight against terrorism, separatism and religious extremism in its western hinterlands and to seek international cooperation towards this. However, although its approach and attitude towards terrorism faced by India is disappointing, it is not surprising. This disappointment has been longstanding, and is in-built into India’s strategic calculations of the China–Pakistan strategic nexus. The present Chinese attitude only reminds us of the perennial strategic challenge of the China–Pakistan nexus to India’s security.

Yet, this is not reason enough to let the normalisation momentum in India–China relations be derailed. One should underline that China found India’s punitive military strikes “regrettable”, which is a much milder word than outright condemnation in the international diplomatic lexicon. Besides, China confirmed the opening of Mansarovar Yatra, a pending issue in the normalisation process, on 28 April amid rising India–Pakistan tensions, noting that “this year marks the 75th anniversary of China-India diplomatic ties” and “China stands ready to work with India to earnestly implement the important common understandings between the leaders of the two countries and advance China-India relations on the track of sound and stable development”.²³ The two instances taken together underline that China is willing to pursue good relations with India without sacrificing them entirely on the altar of Sino-Pak ties.

One should understand that no government in India has ever made a disconnection between China and Pakistan a precondition of normal India–China relations. While India has conveyed its anguish about China’s military cooperation with Pakistan, it was always clear that it cannot control Beijing’s actions.²⁴ Deep security and military

²³ [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun’s Regular Press Conference”](#), no. 2.

²⁴ John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2001, pp. 222–224.

relations with Pakistan are in the fundamentals of China’s realist understanding of maintaining a balance of power in South Asia. Therefore, setting the unachievable task of China–Pakistan separation was never truly an Indian foreign policy objective. The best phase in India–China relations concerning Kashmir, when China gradually withdrew itself from backing Pakistan’s bid to internationalise the issue, began in 1979²⁵ and lasted until the rise of Xi Jinping. Even during this period, military cooperation continued.

Thus, the present situation is complex and requires a balanced assessment. Replicating extreme demands made on social media and op-eds in response to the Chinese statements and directly or indirectly casting aspersions on India’s efforts to rebuild trust with China is unwarranted. Striving to glean some dramatic ‘facts’ warning India about an imminent ‘two front war’ is even more pointless. In commenting on China’s response, one should not overhype it.

Thus, this Brief concludes with the following recommendations:

1. Engage China more and persist with the momentum, given the continuing uncertainties at the global level.
2. Try to de-emphasise the China–Pakistan connection in the public discourse by employing creative and intelligent interventions.
3. Set the policy objective of dissuading China from internationalising the Kashmir issue.
4. China has already offered moral support and confidence-boosting statements favouring Pakistan. The historical pattern suggests that high-level bilateral visits and military assistance to Pakistan may be on the way. Monitor what new weapons it may deliver to Pakistan and enhance own capabilities accordingly.
5. Be alert at the border as many commentators observed that India’s military and political actions concerning Kashmir in 2019 such as the Balakot surgical strike and the abolition of Article 370, inter alia, motivated Chinese military actions to alter the status quo in Eastern Ladakh in April/May 2020 that led to the bloody incident in June 2020 and a more than four-year-long military stand-off.
6. Since India has declared that every terror act will be considered an act of war and will be responded appropriately, Pakistan may resort to testing this time and again. However, it will need some international backing to indulge in such a misadventure. India needs to be watchful of every quarter in the world that is sympathetic to Pakistan.
7. Also, India should be found well prepared diplomatically in the international arena if such a situation occurs again.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 272–31.

About the Author



Dr. Prashant Kumar Singh is Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2025