

Framing Conflict: A Review of Media Representation during the 2025 Pakistan-India War

Bisma Bashir

bbisma523@gmail.com

MS Scholar Riphah Institute of Media Studies (RIMS) Riphah International University, Pakistan

Dr. Muhammad Shahid

muhammad.shahid@riphah.edu.pk

Assistant Professor and In-Charge Postgraduate Program (MS & PhD) at the Riphah Institute of Media Sciences,
Riphah International University, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: * Bisma Bashir bbisma523@gmail.com

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Received: 09-03-2025 | Revised: 10-04-2025 | Accepted: 04-05-2025 | Published: 27-05-2025 |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the way media discussed the 2025 Pakistan-India war using both Hall's Media and Representation Theory and Framing Theory. It looks at how a range of media, including social networking apps, helped people form perceptions, spread stories and encouraged reactions from politicians and citizens. The paper analyzes how media reports the two major military operations known as Operation Sindoor by India and Operation Bunyan al-Marsus by Pakistan. Results suggest that both traditional and digital media strongly affected the rise of nationalism, formed enemy images and played a key part in the way countries related to one another.

Keywords: Media framing, Representation, Pakistan-India war 2025, Operation Sindoor, Operation Bunyan al-Marsus, Nationalism, Social Media, Conflict Journalism

INTRODUCTION

In today's environments, media helps spread propaganda and shapes people's opinions for and against war. In the 2025 Pakistan-India war, the media in both countries mixed up journalism with information warfare by using confusing narratives. The purpose of this review is to look at the techniques the media use to tell the story and how these tactics affect the path of the conflict.

The conflict between Pakistan and India in 2025 lasted only a short time; yet it brought extreme tension to South Asia. It began because of historical animosity and a dispute over Jammu and Kashmir between the nuclear-armed neighbours Pakistan and India. Since the partition of British India in 1947, Kashmir has remained a flashpoint, leading to three full-scale wars and multiple skirmishes (Schofield, 2021).

The 2025 conflict was triggered by a devastating terrorist attack on April 22, 2025, in Pahalgam, Indian-administered Kashmir, where 26 civilians were killed. The Resistance Front (TRF), an insurgent group that India said was allegedly operating from Pakistan, claimed responsibility. The Indian government promptly accused Pakistan of supporting cross-border terrorism, escalating political rhetoric and military readiness (Dawn, 2025a). On May 7, 2025, India launched Operation Sindoor, a military strike against alleged militant bases in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Pakistan retaliated on May 10, 2025, with Operation Bunyan al-Marsus, targeting Indian military installations across the Line of Control.

This escalation alarmed the global community due to the nuclear capabilities of both countries. The United States, China, and the United Nations quickly intervened diplomatically, leading to a ceasefire on May 11, 2025. Despite the brevity of the war, its media coverage—both traditional and digital—was unprecedented in intensity and reach. During the armed conflict, both official and private news sources along with Twitter, Facebook and YouTube played key parts in how people understood the events.

The paper examines these media narratives by using Hall's Media and Representation Theory and Framing Theory. To discover how these media reports shaped public opinions, policy decisions and talks between the countries involved, researchers studied information from Indian, Pakistani and international news organizations. The paper highlights that media has two roles: choosing what is reported and changing people's views about the conflict.

Theoretical Framework

Hall (1997) argued in Media and Representation that media takes part in forming our understanding of reality with the use of language, symbols and conversation. It discusses how media uses certain images, words and descriptions to describe adversaries and back up decisions taken by governments. Hall explains from his 1980s research that the way audiences interpret these messages is determined by their socio-political environment.

During the 2025 war, television, radio and newspapers in both India and Pakistan showed images of war-damaged places, lonely families and groups in military parades which helped sell the idea of nationalism and raised certain emotions among their viewers. It supports the understanding of how people find and exchange meanings during significant periods of emotion.

Goffman (1974) first suggested the basic idea of Framing Theory which was developed more by Entman (1993) and suggests that media picks out some details of news and ignores others. Frames guide the identification of problems, discover the reasons behind them, judge right from wrong and propose solutions. When a country is at war, simple schemas often appear, with choices between good (aggressor) and bad (victim) and between patriots who are for the war and traitors who oppose it.

This case fits very well with Entman's (2003) view on media frames. In India, media said the war was needed to defend against terrorism, but in Pakistan it was reported as an act of self-defense. International news reports covered the conflict in different ways, sometimes without bias and sometimes being slightly biased. Such stories helped guide a country's foreign policy and the views of its citizens.

All in all, all these theories give us a strong method to examine the ways the 2025 conflict was talked about, organized and perceived.

LITERATURE REVIEW

How the media depicts conflict has been analyzed many times. In his study, Wolfsfeld (2004) explains that media reports conflicts, in addition to becoming involved in them. Hallin (1986) pointed out that in times of national crisis, the media tends to sound patriotic and usually agrees with the government's messages instead of questioning them.

Both Zia and Syedah (2015) and Thussu (2002) point out that Indian and Pakistani media outlets usually depict disputes through a nationalist perspective. During 1999 the Kargil War and 2019 in the Pulwama-Balakot episode, the media in both countries appeared to have a strong preference for one side, suppressing stories of peace (Siraj, 2008; Chadha & Bhandari, 2020).

Thanks to social media, war reporting has undergone many new changes. Ahmed and Matthes (2017) argue that platforms like Twitter and Facebook act as amplifiers of both truth and misinformation. During the 2025 war, social media was rife with viral hashtags like #AvengePahalgam and #DefendKashmir, often spreading unverified claims and graphic content without context (Express Tribune, 2025).

International media outlets such as BBC, Al Jazeera, and The New York Times attempted to maintain neutrality, but their framing still reflected geopolitical interests. For instance, BBC's coverage highlighted civilian casualties and diplomatic efforts, while some U.S. media sources emphasized India's role as a counterterrorism partner (NYT, 2025).

Scholars like D'Angelo and Kuypers (2010) emphasize that framing is often ideologically driven, and war reporting tends to align with dominant power structures. This ideological slant becomes particularly visible during brief, high-stakes conflicts like the 2025 war, where speed often trumps accuracy.

Overall, the literature affirms that media framing during conflict is seldom neutral. It is shaped by political agendas, journalistic norms, audience expectations, and technological constraints

DETAILED CASE ANALYSIS

Overview of the 2025 Pakistan-India Conflict

Triggering Event: Pahalgam Attack

Twenty-six lives were lost as a result of a terrorist attack hit in the Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam, Indian-administered Kashmir, on April 22, 2025. The Resistance Front (TRF), a group India thinks is tied to Lashkar-e-Taiba from Pakistan, has admitted responsibility. The government of Pakistan asserted it had no part in the incident and urged an impartial probe.

India's Response: Operation Sindoor

As a result, India carried out "Operation Sindoor" on May 7, 2025, attacking nine areas across Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, in Bahawalpur, Muridke, Shakar Garh and close to Sialkot. According to the Indian authorities, these were militant facilities associated with LeT and JeM.

Pakistan's Counteraction: Operation Bunyan-al-Marsoos

On May 10, 2025, Operation Bunyan-al-Marsoos was begun by Pakistan, which struck Indian military establishments, including those at Udhampur and Pathankot, as well as facilities in Gujarat and Rajasthan. Pakistan said it also launched cyberattacks that targeted Indian digital networks.

Media Coverage and Framing

How the 2025 Pakistan-India war was presented in the media rapidly changed between April 22 and May 11 due to fresh events, what those in power said and the public's reaction.

From April 22–30, 2025: The Torch in Action With 26 civilians dead from the Pahalgam bombing, Indian media gave it the label of terrorism.

Headlines like "Another Attack, Another Red Line Crossed" (Times of India, 2025) and "Pakistan Must Pay" (India Today, 2025) dominated the Indian news cycle. TRF's claimed responsibility was heavily emphasized. Pakistani media, meanwhile, questioned the authenticity of the claims, with headlines like "Who Benefits from Blame?" (The News International, 2025). International media such as BBC and Al Jazeera initially highlighted the humanitarian cost and called for restraint (BBC, 2025).

May 1–6, 2025: Build-up to Conflict Military mobilization and troop movements were widely reported. Indian media showcased footage of tank deployments and public opinion segments urging retaliation. Nationalist commentators like Arnab Goswami called for decisive action on Republic TV. On Pakistani channels such as ARY News and PTV, analysts warned of India's war-mongering and emphasized

diplomatic channels. On Twitter, hashtags like #JusticeForPahalgam and #NoWar trended concurrently, showing a split in public discourse (Express Tribune, 2025).

May 7–9, 2025: Operation Sindoor and Escalation

On May 7, India launched Operation Sindoor. Mainstream Indian outlets described the airstrikes as “precise and surgical” (Hindustan Times, 2025). Pakistan labeled them “unprovoked aggression” (Dawn, 2025b). The Pakistani military’s response through Operation Bunyan al-Marsus on May 10 was framed domestically as a “measured but strong defense” (ISPR Press Briefing, 2025).

On social media, fake videos and AI-generated content circulated widely. A video purporting to show Indian jets over Islamabad was later debunked by fact-checkers (Alt News, 2025). Pakistani TikTok and YouTube influencers spread patriotic songs and reaction videos, while Indian influencers shared military visuals and commentaries.

May 10–11, 2025: Retaliation and Ceasefire

Operation Bunyan al-Marsus targeted Indian bases in Jammu, triggering heavy retaliation from Indian artillery. Civilian casualties occurred on both sides, which was extensively covered by global media. UN Secretary-General António Guterres issued a statement on May 10 calling for “immediate de-escalation” (UN News, 2025).

Media framing during this period focused on nationalism. Indian media highlighted soldiers’ bravery and strategic superiority, while Pakistani media showed civilian suffering and resistance. China and the U.S. both described the ceasefire which was arranged by them on May 11, as a diplomatic triumph for both sides (Reuters, 2025).

In general, we saw that these sources didn’t only pass along information, but were key in spreading nationalist passion, casting blame on their enemy and changing foreign views.

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

The 2025 Pakistan-India war gives us a valuable opportunity to explore how media changes people’s views of a conflict. The most notable thing for me was the big difference in what was said in the Indian and Pakistani media. Media outlets from India highlighted the situation as a counter-terrorism mission, remembering many earlier attacks, making military actions acceptable to their audience (Chadha & Bhandari, 2020). Pakistani media made clear that it could defend the country’s territory and described India’s bombing as against international law (Zia & Syedah, 2015).

This difference can be explained by using Entman’s (1993) idea of Framing Theory. Indian media put the blame on the attackers, called it a war against terror and highlighted attacking the terrorists as the main response. While British media pointed to Pakistani independent actions, Pakistani media accented suffering victims and encouraged help from around the world (Dawn, 2025c).

Such differences in approach impressed the public at home, promoting strong feeling of patriotism and diminishing the standing of other options like seeking peace, diplomacy or two-way talks.

Social media intensified this dynamic. As observed by Ahmed and Matthes (2017), social platforms have become echo chambers where users engage with content that aligns with their biases. The 2025 war witnessed a surge of digital nationalism, with content creators and influencers actively shaping war narratives. This participatory media environment blurred the lines between verified information and

propaganda. The virality of deepfakes and AI-generated visuals highlighted new challenges in conflict reporting (Alt News, 2025).

International media coverage also revealed subtle biases. While outlets like BBC and Al Jazeera attempted neutrality, their framing often depended on geopolitical leanings. U.S.-based media portrayed India as a counterterrorism partner, a framing that aligns with Western strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region (NYT, 2025). Chinese and Russian media, on the other hand, focused on the risk of nuclear escalation, emphasizing the need for diplomatic restraint (Global Times, 2025).

Hall's Representation Theory (1997) provides additional insights here. Media is not a passive conduit but an active site where meanings are contested and negotiated. In the 2025 war, media representations of 'the enemy' were not accidental—they were deeply embedded in historical, political, and cultural discourses. For example, Indian media's portrayal of Pakistani military actions as barbaric and unprovoked echoed long-standing stereotypes, while Pakistani media's depiction of Indian aggression reinforced narratives of victimhood and resistance.

The role of state influence cannot be overlooked. Coverage in both countries was limited by what national security required during the conflict. Only the information or pictures brought during the government briefings, provided by the military or blocked by censorship could appear in the news. Wolfs Feld (2004) agrees that media in conflict zones typically works as an instrument of the state.

So far, the media in each nation hasn't spent much time reviewing the consequences of the war. Instead of evaluating how the conflict changed the balance of power, most analysis highlighted America's hardness or military skills. This absence is what Hallin (1986) meant by the "sphere of legitimate controversy," in which certain stories are always missed.

In brief, the experience of 2025 war teaches us that media not only shows war, but also helps to make sense of it. Framing, showing events and letting people get involved online impacted opinions, changed policies and played a role in worldwide diplomacy thanks to media coverage. To create fair and responsible conflict journalism, knowing about these dynamics is important.

CONCLUSION

Rather than emphasize battles, stories, media broadcasts and social exchanges were the main source of information about the future war between Pakistan and India during 2025. Storytelling was used by media in India, Pakistan and elsewhere to fuel their activities, influence people's minds and decide international events. I learned that Hall's theory highlights how different forms of messages shape ideas and Framing Theory showed me which stories are more likely to be mentioned.

Indian media saw the war as the proper answer to terrorism, yet Pakistan portrayed it as an attack that was unjustified. Coverage across the world was dependent on what was happening politically inside each country. Since social media moves so quickly and is widespread, it became difficult to tell the difference between news and propaganda.

The findings underscore the urgent need for ethical journalism and robust media literacy, especially in conflict-prone regions. Future conflicts are likely to be shaped not only on battlefields but in digital and informational arenas. Understanding the mechanics of framing and representation is thus essential for policymakers, journalists, and the public alike.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis of media framing during the 2025 Pakistan-India war, the following recommendations are proposed for media practitioners, policymakers, and researchers:

1. Establish Independent Conflict Monitoring Bodies

Both Pakistan and India should support independent media monitoring institutions that ensure balanced, non-partisan conflict reporting. These bodies can issue regular audits on war coverage to deter propagandist narratives (Wolfsfeld, 2004).

2. Strengthen Media Literacy Initiatives

Public education campaigns on digital literacy should be institutionalized, particularly targeting youth, to counter misinformation and emotionally charged content spread during conflicts (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017).

3. Develop Peace Journalism Protocols

Media outlets should adopt peace journalism frameworks that prioritize conflict resolution narratives, human stories, and diplomatic developments over sensationalism (Siraj, 2008).

4. Cross-Border Media Dialogues

Forums for cross-border journalistic collaboration and training should be institutionalized, potentially facilitated by international organizations like UNESCO, to bridge ideological divides and build professional solidarity.

5. Regulate and Monitor Social Media Algorithms

Governments and platforms must collaborate to ensure algorithmic transparency, especially during national crises, to prevent the viral spread of false and inflammatory content (Express Tribune, 2025).

6. Encourage Research on Conflict Framing

Universities and research councils should fund comparative media studies on conflict reporting to identify best practices and localized solutions for ethical journalism in South Asia.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S., & Matthes, J. (2017). Media representation of Muslims and Islam from 2000 to 2015: A meta-analysis. *International Communication Gazette*, 79(3), 219–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048516656305>
- Alt News. (2025, May 9). Fake war videos flood Indian Twitter amid Kashmir conflict. <https://www.altnews.in>
- BBC. (2025, April 23). UN urges calm after Pahalgam bombing. <https://www.bbc.com>
- Chadha, K., & Bhandari, M. (2020). Media framing of the Pulwama attack and Balakot airstrikes: National security, journalism, and populism in Indian media. *Journalism Practice*, 14(9), 1117–1133.
- D'Angelo, P., & Kuypers, J. A. (2010). *Doing news framing analysis: Empirical and theoretical perspectives*. Routledge.
- Dawn. (2025a, April 23). India blames Pakistan after Kashmir attack. <https://www.dawn.com>
- Dawn. (2025b, May 8). Pakistan condemns Indian strikes across LoC. <https://www.dawn.com>
- Dawn. (2025c, May 10). Civilian areas targeted in Indian retaliation, says ISPR. <https://www.dawn.com>

- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.
- Entman, R. M. (2003). Cascading activation: Contesting the White House's frame after 9/11. *Political Communication*, 20(4), 415–432.
- Express Tribune. (2025, May 9). Social media flooded with fake news during conflict. <https://www.tribune.com.pk>
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall et al. (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128–138). Hutchinson.
- Hallin, D. C. (1986). *The uncensored war: The media and Vietnam*. University of California Press.
- ISPR Press Briefing. (2025, May 10). Response to Indian aggression under Operation Bunyan al-Marsus.
- NYT. (2025, May 10). India strikes militant bases, heightening tensions with Pakistan. *The New York Times*.
- Reuters. (2025, May 11). Pakistan and India agree to ceasefire after intense border clashes. <https://www.reuters.com>
- Schofield, V. (2021). *Kashmir in conflict: India, Pakistan and the unending war*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Siraj, S. A. (2008). War or peace journalism in elite US newspapers: Exploring news framing in Pakistan–India conflict. *Global Media Journal*, 7(13).
- Thussu, D. K. (2002). Managing the media in an era of round-the-clock news: Notes from India's first Tele-war. *Journal of International Communication*, 8(1), 55–70.
- Wolfsfeld, G. (2004). *Media and the path to peace*. Cambridge University Press.
- Zia, A., & Syedah, A. (2015). Use of religion in media: A case study of framing the conflict in Kashmir. *Journal of Media Studies*, 30(1), 15–28.