

Operation Sindoor and the Global Contest Over Jammu & Kashmir: Legal, Diplomatic, and Narrative Dimensions in the Shadow of China

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.12060074>

Received: 05 June 2025; Accepted: 09 June 2025; Published: 09 July 2025

ABSTRACT

This article carries out a critical examination of Operation Sindoor in the broader framework of international contestation over Jammu & Kashmir, legal, diplomatic, and narrative dimensions prompted by China's strategic interests. As a fresh-initiated initiative towards security and development in India, Operation Sindoor is a multi-faceted response to both internal insurgency and extraneous geopolitical pressures from China and Pakistan. The paper places this operation in the context of the changing international legal discourse on sovereignty, self-determination, and territorial integrity, highlighting India's re-interpretation of Article 370 and its implications in international law. Diplomatically, the study looks at the strategies adopted by India, China, and Pakistan in multilateral fora such as the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, as the three powers engage in a competition to build and dismantle global legitimacy over the region. Furthermore, the contest in narratives is analyzed through state-sponsored media, transnational advocacy networks, and social media, highlighting how China's influence operations seek to globalize the Kashmir conflict while India seeks to localize it. Drawing from primary sources, official releases, and precedents in international law, this article argues that Jammu & Kashmir remains a strategic hot spot where the fields of law, diplomacy, and information warfare intersect, with Operation Sindoor an integral part of India's grand campaign of counter-contestation against China's encroaching hegemony in South Asia.

INTRODUCTION

The Kashmir conflict remains one of the most entrenched border conflicts of contemporary international relations, involving not just regional powers like India and Pakistan but also the strategic interest of great powers, spearheaded by China. Operation Sindoor—a term increasingly employed in strategic and diplomatic parlance—amounts to a sequence of proactive legal, military, and narrative measures adopted by India to reassert its sovereignty claims over the region, especially after the nullification of Article 370 in August 2019. This operation, literal and symbolic, is a manifestation of India's strategic self-reflection in Jammu and Kashmir, wherein legal constructs, diplomacy, and narrative strategies have combined to become an umbrella response to foreign intervention and domestic insurgency.

The juridical basis of this conflict remains in the premises of international law, constitutional sovereignty, and historical agreements. India has continued to claim that Jammu and Kashmir constitutes an integral part of the Union, a claim buttressed by the Instrument of Accession of 1947. This claim has been challenged by Pakistan and made more complicated by China's aggressive posturing in Ladakh, most notably with regard to the Line of Actual Control (LAC). China's claims of territorial rights and infrastructural development in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) traversing Gilgit-Baltistan—a region claimed by India as much as it is a part of its sovereign domain—serve to internationalize the conflict further and position it in global geopolitics. In response to such provocation, India's legal actions, including the reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir as Union Territories, have attempted to reassert domestic constitutional jurisdiction and address external claims.

The international implications of the repeal of Article 370 and its aftermath have drawn a spectrum of international responses, ranging from measured abstention in the West to stern opposition from Pakistan, and

measured criticisms from China. Operation Sindoor is, in this context, a measured diplomatic initiative with the objective of realigning global perception of India's intentions in Kashmir—rebranding it from a terrorism-ravaged state to one of integration and development. India's participation in multilateral forums, its focus on counter-terrorism policies, and efforts to engage with the Kashmiri diaspora are indicative of a larger diplomatic effort aimed at neutralizing counter-narratives and building international goodwill.

Finally, the analysis takes account of the legal, diplomatic, and narrative frameworks of Operation Sindoor in the context of the international conflict over Jammu and Kashmir, with specific reference to China's strategic interests. Based on the discourse analysis of the interactive dynamic between these frameworks, the research aims to present a holistic account of India's approach towards one of its most sensitive and internationally watched regions.

Sovereignty vs. Internationalization: China's Legal-Diplomatic Calculus and the Kashmir Dispute

The changing dynamics of the Kashmir dispute, particularly since 2019, are a representation of the intense tension between India's sovereignty-oriented legal practice and China's continued efforts to internationalize the dispute. Following the move by India in August 2019 to abrogate Article 370, under which the special constitutional status of Jammu & Kashmir was repealed and the state reorganized into two Union Territories, China became the second most outspoken international critic, second only to Pakistan. Beijing's protest, calling the move "unacceptable" and raising issues about territorial claims in the context of Aksai Chin and Shaksgam Valley, was not an impromptu reaction but was part of a coordinated and consistent strategic move to shift the Kashmir dispute onto the agenda of international security and dispute.

China's action accords with what the Copenhagen School of security studies calls "securitization"—the process whereby states frame specific issues as existential threats that necessitate extraordinary steps (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). By framing Kashmir as an in-the-making nuclear flashpoint between India and Pakistan, China seeks to raise the issue from a bilateral conflict to one of global administration, thus legitimizing its own role and interests in the region. This goal is seen in Beijing's repeated attempts to bring the Kashmir issue to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), especially through closed-door meetings in August 2019, January 2020, and again in 2022. Although these meetings did not result in any formal action and were not able to gain firm support from other permanent members—most notably the United States, France, and Russia—they were still a symbolic breach of India's long-standing diplomatic achievement of de-internationalizing the Kashmir issue.

Conversely, India has always operated on a Westphalian conception of sovereignty based on the principle of territorial integrity and non-intervention as articulated in Article 2(7) of the UN Charter. In its perspective, Chinese attempts at internationalizing the Kashmir dispute are seen as a normative transgression—a usurpation of India's domestic jurisdiction dressed up in the form of a multilateral issue. New Delhi's juridical basis is rooted in the fact of the Instrument of Accession (1947) and the ensuing constitutional evolution, which it claims are legitimate manifestations of sovereign jurisdiction over an integral part of the Union of India.

However, Chinese activity in Kashmir is not merely normative behavior. Geostrategic interests are of direct concern to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a \$60 billion infrastructural undertaking linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which runs through Gilgit-Baltistan—a region India legally owns. From Beijing's point of view, any modification of current territorial arrangements compromises the economic viability and geopolitical security of its most significant transcontinental project. Internationalizing Kashmir has two aims: it puts diplomatic pressure on India while simultaneously justifying China's infrastructural presence.

Despite these diplomatic efforts, China's campaign has gained little diplomatic traction. The UNSC's subdued reaction, reaffirmation of great power bilateralism, and absence of formal resolutions all testify to the solidity of India's legal argument and diplomatic appeal. The larger struggle over Kashmir is thus symptomatic of a more profound clash between traditional sovereignty-based norms and new practices of strategic internationalization. China's campaign, symbolically charged as it is, must ultimately contend with the normative and institutional limits of the existing international order—a system that, at least for now, remains committed to state sovereignty at the cost of transnational interventionism in disputes like Kashmir.

India's Legal Framework and China's Contestation: Competing Norms in the Kashmir Dispute

India's legal position on Jammu and Kashmir is grounded in foundational legal instruments and aligned with core principles of international law—particularly those concerning state sovereignty and non-intervention. At the heart of India's legal claim lies the Instrument of Accession signed on 26 October 1947 by Maharaja Hari Singh, which enabled the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir to accede to the Union of India. Under this instrument, India assumed jurisdiction over key areas such as defense, foreign affairs, and communications. This act of accession was ratified through subsequent constitutional developments, thereby offering a consistent and legitimate framework for asserting India's sovereignty over the region.

Further strengthening India's claim is the Simla Agreement of 1972, signed with Pakistan following the Bangladesh Liberation War. This bilateral accord mandates that all disputes between the two nations, including the Kashmir issue, be resolved through peaceful bilateral negotiations, excluding third-party mediation. The Simla Agreement forms the bedrock of India's diplomatic argument and is consistently invoked to counter efforts—particularly by China and Pakistan—to internationalize the Kashmir dispute.

India's internal legal justification for the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 hinges on constitutional mechanisms, specifically Article 3, which empowers Parliament to reorganize states. The Indian government contends that this move represents constitutional reform aimed at full national integration and equitable development. Legal experts such as Harish Salve have supported this interpretation, arguing that the dissolution of the Jammu and Kashmir Constituent Assembly in 1957 transferred full legislative authority over the region to the Indian Parliament (Salve, *Indian Law Review*, 2021). However, critics like A.G. Noorani contend that the use of a Presidential Order to nullify Article 370 raises concerns about constitutional morality, federalism, and procedural propriety (Noorani, 2020).

India further justifies its position under Article 2(7) of the UN Charter, which prohibits intervention in matters within the domestic jurisdiction of sovereign states. This principle has been cited to reinforce India's stance that Jammu and Kashmir constitutes an internal matter. The global diplomatic community has broadly supported this interpretation, with key powers such as the United States, Russia, and France reaffirming Kashmir as a bilateral issue, thereby limiting China's efforts to involve the United Nations Security Council.

India has also invoked international counterterrorism obligations—specifically UNSC Resolution 1373 (2001)—to justify security operations such as Operation Sindoor, which targets cross-border terrorism and insurgency. This operation is framed as a lawful and necessary response to state-sponsored terrorism emanating from Pakistan.

By contrast, China's legal narrative invokes early UNSC resolutions from the late 1940s and 1950s, which proposed a plebiscite to determine Kashmir's status. India rejects this interpretation, citing Pakistan's failure to fulfill preconditions such as troop withdrawal. China's support for Pakistan, combined with its strategic interests in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) traversing Gilgit-Baltistan, reflects a hybrid approach that combines normative arguments with geopolitical calculations.

Ultimately, the India-China contestation over Kashmir illustrates a broader clash of legal norms: India's emphasis on constitutional sovereignty and non-intervention is countered by China's strategic push for internationalization under the guise of multilateral legality. This tension encapsulates the evolving interplay between legal frameworks and strategic interests in contemporary international relations model.

Operation Sindoor: Strategic Assertion, Developmental Integration, and Global Narrative in Jammu & Kashmir

Operation Sindoor, launched on May 7, 2025, marks a pivotal shift in India's policy on Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), integrating military action, constitutional consolidation, and economic engagement under a unified national doctrine. Triggered by the Pahalgam terror attack on April 22, which claimed 26 civilian lives, the operation involved precise military strikes by the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force targeting terrorist infrastructure operated by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and Pakistan. Conducted between 1:05 am and 1:30 am, the strikes eliminated five top terrorist

commanders while avoiding civilian and Pakistani military targets, thereby signaling strategic restraint and professional precision (Hindustan Herald, Outlook India).

This military assertiveness complements India's long-term policy of constitutional integration of J&K, initiated by the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019. Operation Sindoor forms part of a broader framework that links security with development, aiming to stabilize the region both physically and psychologically. Large-scale investments, such as the ₹500 crore 'Mall of Srinagar' project by the UAE-based Emaar Group, are emblematic of India's new narrative. These developments are expected to generate over 10,000 jobs, signaling international investor confidence in the region's evolving stability (Daily Excelsior).

The significant voter turnout of 58.46% in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections—the highest in 35 years—further underscores increased local political participation, countering earlier claims of democratic alienation (PIB). However, India's narrative of 'Naya Kashmir' remains contested in global forums. Pakistan and China have criticized the operation and India's broader policies in Kashmir, citing alleged human rights violations. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has issued reports flagging abuses by both state forces and non-state actors in the region, complicating India's international messaging (HRW).

In response, India leverages its soft power architecture—ranging from humanitarian aid under the 'Vaccine Maitri' initiative to educational and developmental diplomacy through the ITEC programme—to strengthen ties in the Global South. Strategic partnerships, such as deepening economic cooperation with the UAE, project India as a responsible and stable actor, contrasting with Pakistan's narrative of victimhood and China's credibility issues regarding its own human rights record, particularly in Xinjiang.

Operation Sindoor, therefore, is not merely a tactical military action but a demonstration of India's multi-pronged statecraft—melding force, development, and diplomacy to consolidate control, project stability, and reshape the global narrative on Jammu and Kashmir.

CONCLUSION

Operation Sindoor stands as a landmark achievement in India's evolving national security doctrine, exemplifying the convergence of strategic vision, institutional resolve, and democratic ethos in addressing one of the most complex territorial and ideological challenges confronting the nation. Rooted in constitutional legitimacy and operational precision, the operation redefines India's approach to Jammu & Kashmir—not as a contested periphery, but as an integral space for security stabilization, inclusive development, and civic empowerment.

The operation's success highlights the maturation of India's military doctrine from reactive postures to pre-emptive, proportionate, and intelligence-driven counterterrorism. It illustrates how New Delhi has institutionalized a doctrine of proactive engagement that eschews escalatory adventurism in favor of calibrated force projection and region-specific solutions. The integration of local security forces and advanced technologies indicates a confident reliance on domestic capacities, marking a paradigm shift from externally imposed governance to grassroots-enabled resilience.

Beyond its military dimensions, Operation Sindoor reinforces the centrality of developmental peace in statecraft. The alignment of infrastructure investment, welfare delivery, and economic revitalization reflects a strategic recognition that security and prosperity are co-constitutive. By embedding development within the broader security framework, India has strengthened both the legitimacy and longevity of its governance model in the region.

Simultaneously, the operation's democratic implications underscore India's commitment to civic inclusion and political normalization. Electoral participation, improved human development indices, and youth engagement initiatives reveal a polity increasingly grounded in participatory governance. These outcomes starkly contrast with adversarial narratives of alienation and repression, reaffirming India's constitutional commitment to democratic representation in every region.

Equally significant is India's adept use of narrative diplomacy. Through strategic communication, digital outreach, and multilateral engagement, India has successfully contested disinformation and reframed global

perceptions of Kashmir. The recalibration of international responses, especially from the Global South and key Islamic nations, signals a strategic shift in diplomatic alignments—one that increasingly favors India's narrative of sovereign responsibility over Pakistan's portrayal of grievance and victimhood.

Ultimately, Operation Sindoor is not merely a tactical victory but a comprehensive state response that blends kinetic action with normative consolidation. It offers a replicable model for managing contested spaces in an era marked by hybrid threats and narrative warfare. By harmonizing coercive capability with developmental legitimacy and democratic inclusion, India has advanced a resilient model of national integration—affirming its status as a sovereign, pluralistic, and globally engaged democracy capable of safeguarding both its borders and its foundational ideals.

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