

## Hyper-Nationalism, Hindutva, and the Transformation of Indian Strategic Culture (2014–2025): Challenges for Pakistan

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### Abstract

The transformation of Indian strategic culture during Narendra Modi's tenure (2014–2025) represents one of the most consequential developments in South Asian security. This article examines how the consolidation of Hindutva ideology, hyper-nationalism, and centralized political leadership has reshaped India's strategic behaviour and security outlook. Employing Strategic Culture Theory, particularly Johnston's concept of strategic preferences and Katzenstein's constructivist emphasis on norms and identity, the study argues that India's strategic culture has increasingly integrated civilizational nationalism into foreign and security policy. Rather than representing a complete rupture from earlier traditions, the Modi era demonstrates a selective reinterpretation of historical strategic narratives through Hindu nationalist ideology, stronger military posturing, and a willingness to undertake coercive diplomacy below the nuclear threshold. The article adopts a qualitative analytical approach based on academic literature, official policy documents, and major strategic developments between 2014 and 2025. The findings indicate that ideological narratives have become increasingly intertwined with defence modernization, regional diplomacy, and military signalling. These developments have significantly influenced Pakistan's security environment by increasing crisis instability, accelerating conventional and technological competition, and reducing diplomatic space for conflict management. The study concludes that Pakistan should respond through a combination of strategic deterrence, diplomatic engagement, economic resilience, and enhanced regional partnerships while avoiding reactive escalation. The article contributes to the literature on South Asian strategic studies by explaining the interaction between ideology and strategic culture in shaping contemporary Indian security behaviour.

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### Introduction

The emergence of India as one of the principal geopolitical actors in the Indo-Pacific has generated renewed scholarly interest in the evolution of its strategic culture and the factors influencing its foreign and security policies. During the last decade, India's expanding economic capabilities, accelerating military modernization, increasing diplomatic influence, and strategic partnerships with major powers have substantially altered the regional balance of power in South Asia. At the same time, the domestic political transformation initiated after the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) electoral victory in 2014 has introduced new ideological dimensions into India's understanding of national identity, statecraft, and strategic behaviour.

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These parallel developments have intensified academic debate regarding whether India's contemporary strategic outlook represents continuity with its historical traditions or a significant transformation driven by the interaction of ideology, leadership, and changing geopolitical realities.

The election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 marked a watershed in Indian politics. Although the ideological foundations of Hindu nationalism predate the Modi government and have long been associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party, the post-2014 period witnessed an unprecedented institutionalization of Hindutva within political discourse, governance, and national security narratives. Rather than remaining primarily a domestic political ideology, Hindutva increasingly assumed characteristics of a broader civilizational framework through which India's regional and global role has been interpreted. Political symbolism, historical narratives, military achievements, and diplomatic initiatives have increasingly been presented as manifestations of India's civilizational resurgence, thereby strengthening the relationship between national identity and strategic decision-making. This development has encouraged scholars to reassess conventional understandings of Indian strategic culture that traditionally emphasized restraint, *moralpolitik*, and strategic autonomy.

Strategic culture has emerged as an influential analytical framework for explaining why states possessing similar material capabilities often display markedly different patterns of strategic behaviour. Rather than treating security policy as merely the outcome of military capabilities or structural constraints, strategic culture emphasizes the role of historically embedded beliefs, collective memories, political identities, institutional norms, and strategic preferences in shaping national security decisions. Johnston argues that strategic culture constitutes an integrated system of symbols and assumptions that establishes enduring preferences regarding the use of military force and the management of external threats. These preferences do not determine behaviour mechanically; instead, they provide a cognitive framework through which political leaders interpret security challenges and evaluate strategic options.

Constructivist scholars similarly contend that identities and shared norms play an essential role in defining national interests. Katzenstein's influential work demonstrated that security policies cannot be understood solely through material explanations because ideas, institutions, and collective identities significantly influence how states perceive threats and formulate responses. From this perspective, India's evolving strategic behaviour cannot be adequately explained by changes in military capability alone. Instead, ideological narratives, leadership preferences, historical reinterpretations, and domestic political transformations collectively shape the country's contemporary strategic outlook. This integrated theoretical perspective provides an appropriate framework for examining the relationship between Hindutva, hyper-nationalism, and India's evolving strategic culture.

Historically, interpretations of Indian strategic culture have been characterized by considerable disagreement. Earlier scholarship frequently portrayed India as a strategically restrained power influenced by Gandhian ideals, Nehruvian internationalism, non-alignment,

and a preference for diplomatic engagement over military coercion. Other scholars challenged this interpretation by emphasizing the realist traditions embodied in Kautilya's Arthashastra, arguing that Indian strategic thought has always contained a sophisticated understanding of power politics, deterrence, and statecraft. More recent research suggests that contemporary Indian strategy reflects neither complete continuity nor complete discontinuity. Instead, it represents a selective reinterpretation of historical traditions in response to evolving domestic political conditions and an increasingly competitive regional and global environment. IDSA

Within this evolving context, the rise of hyper-nationalism has become a defining characteristic of India's domestic political discourse. Hyper-nationalism extends beyond conventional patriotism by portraying national identity as inseparable from political legitimacy, historical memory, and perceptions of external threat. In contemporary India, this phenomenon has contributed to stronger public support for assertive foreign policy, enhanced military visibility in political discourse, and increased societal acceptance of coercive responses to perceived security challenges. Military operations, defence modernization, and strategic signalling have increasingly become components of domestic political narratives that emphasize national strength, resilience, and civilizational revival. Consequently, domestic politics and external security policy have become more closely interconnected than in previous decades.

These ideological developments have coincided with significant changes in India's strategic behaviour. Military responses following the 2016 Uri attack and the 2019 Pulwama–Balakot crisis illustrated India's willingness to undertake calibrated conventional military operations below the nuclear threshold while simultaneously managing escalation risks. At the same time, India's defence modernization programme, indigenous military production initiatives, maritime expansion, and growing engagement with Indo-Pacific security arrangements demonstrate an increasingly proactive approach to regional and global security. Collectively, these developments indicate that India's strategic culture has become more confident, outward-looking, and prepared to employ multiple instruments of national power—including military, diplomatic, technological, economic, and informational capabilities—to achieve strategic objectives.

The Indo-Pacific has further reinforced this transformation. India's expanding cooperation with the United States, Japan, Australia, France, and other strategic partners has enhanced its geopolitical influence while supporting its objective of balancing China's growing regional presence. Participation in minilateral and multilateral initiatives has strengthened India's international standing and expanded its strategic options. These external developments have interacted with domestic ideological narratives to produce a strategic outlook that combines traditional notions of strategic autonomy with greater willingness to engage in coalition-building and selective security partnerships. This combination of civilizational identity, strategic autonomy, and external balancing represents one of the defining characteristics of India's contemporary strategic culture.

For Pakistan, understanding these transformations is not merely an academic exercise but a strategic necessity. India and Pakistan remain engaged in one of the world's most enduring security rivalries, characterized by unresolved territorial disputes, nuclear deterrence, periodic military crises, and persistent political mistrust. Changes in India's strategic culture therefore possess direct implications for Pakistan's security environment, affecting deterrence stability, crisis escalation, military modernization, diplomatic engagement, and regional strategic competition. An ideologically informed strategic outlook that exhibits greater acceptance of calibrated military force and coercive diplomacy presents new challenges for Pakistan's defence planning and foreign policy.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study synthesizes two complementary perspectives. Johnston's (1995) Strategic Culture Theory explains how deeply embedded strategic preferences influence state behaviour over time. Katzenstein's constructivist perspective emphasizes that identities, norms, and political ideas shape national security policies beyond material capabilities. Combining these perspectives suggests that India's contemporary strategic behaviour cannot be understood solely through military modernization or power transition. Instead, ideological narratives, political identity, and leadership agency collectively shape strategic decision-making.

### **Strategic Culture as an Analytical Framework**

Strategic culture has become one of the most influential conceptual approaches for explaining why states with comparable material capabilities often display markedly different patterns of strategic behaviour. While realist theories primarily attribute state conduct to the distribution of power within the international system, the strategic culture approach argues that security policy is also shaped by historically rooted beliefs, collective memories, institutional traditions, and normative understandings regarding the use of force. Consequently, strategic choices are influenced not only by objective assessments of military capabilities but also by culturally embedded assumptions about national identity, historical experience, and appropriate strategic conduct (Gray, 1999; Johnston, 1995; Lantis, 2002).

The concept of strategic culture first gained prominence during the Cold War, when scholars sought to explain why the Soviet Union and the United States frequently interpreted similar strategic situations differently despite operating within the same bipolar international system. Early studies argued that national strategic behaviour could not be understood solely through rational choice or structural realism because political elites interpret external threats through historically conditioned cognitive frameworks. These frameworks are transmitted across generations through military institutions, political traditions, educational systems, and collective historical narratives, thereby creating relatively enduring strategic preferences (Gray, 1981; Snyder, 1977; Johnston, 1995). Although the concept has evolved considerably over the past four decades, contemporary scholarship generally agrees that strategic culture does not mechanically determine policy outcomes. Rather, it establishes the intellectual and normative context within which political leaders define national interests, evaluate threats, and select among competing strategic alternatives. Strategic culture therefore functions as an

intervening variable linking historical experience and political identity with foreign and security policy behaviour (Lock, 2010; Lantis, 2002).

**Colin Gray and the Contextual Approach to Strategic Culture.** Among the leading contributors to strategic culture scholarship, Colin Gray argued that culture should be understood as the broader strategic context within which military and political decisions are made. Rejecting the notion that strategic culture rigidly determines state behaviour, Gray maintained that strategic decision-makers operate within historically inherited cultural environments that shape their understanding of power, legitimacy, and security. Consequently, strategy cannot be separated from the political, historical, and societal contexts in which it is formulated (Gray, 1999, 2003). Gray's contextual perspective is particularly relevant to the Indian case because India's strategic traditions have developed through the interaction of multiple historical experiences, including ancient statecraft, colonial rule, independence, partition, wars with neighbouring states, nuclearization, and democratic politics. Rather than replacing previous traditions, successive political leaderships have selectively reinterpreted these historical experiences to address contemporary strategic challenges. The Modi government similarly operates within an inherited strategic tradition but has attached greater significance to civilizational nationalism, military symbolism, and national identity. Gray further emphasized that strategic culture evolves gradually instead of changing abruptly. Historical continuity remains important even during periods of political transformation because institutions, military organizations, and strategic elites retain many previously established assumptions regarding national security. This insight provides an important analytical foundation for understanding why India's strategic culture after 2014 exhibits both continuity and change. While the Modi government introduced significant ideological innovations, many traditional objectives, including strategic autonomy, regional influence, and military modernization, remain consistent with earlier phases of Indian foreign policy.

**Johnston's Theory of Strategic Preferences.** Alastair Iain Johnston developed one of the most systematic theoretical formulations of strategic culture by defining it as an integrated system of symbols that establishes durable assumptions regarding the role and effectiveness of military force. According to Johnston (1995), strategic culture influences how political elites interpret threats, evaluate strategic alternatives, and determine the circumstances under which military force is considered legitimate or necessary. Unlike deterministic cultural explanations, Johnston conceptualizes strategic culture as shaping probabilistic rather than inevitable policy outcomes. Johnston identified three principal components of strategic culture. First, states develop historically embedded assumptions regarding the nature of the strategic environment and the character of external threats. Second, these assumptions influence elite beliefs concerning the utility of military force relative to diplomatic, economic, or political instruments. Third, these beliefs generate relatively enduring strategic preferences that persist over time while remaining capable of gradual adaptation in response to changing political and security environments (Johnston, 1995). Applied to India, Johnston's framework suggests that the country's strategic behaviour cannot be understood solely by examining contemporary military capabilities or shifts in the regional

balance of power. Instead, Indian strategic choices reflect the interaction between long-standing historical narratives and emerging ideological preferences. During the Modi era, strategic preferences increasingly incorporated themes of civilizational resurgence, national pride, and political centralization. These developments contributed to a greater willingness to employ calibrated military force while maintaining India's broader objective of preserving strategic autonomy. Johnston's emphasis on continuity also helps explain why contemporary Indian strategy combines traditional and innovative elements. India's pursuit of military modernization, diplomatic activism, and strategic partnerships does not represent a complete departure from earlier strategic thinking. Rather, these initiatives have been reinterpreted through an ideological framework that emphasizes national resurgence and the restoration of India's perceived historical status as a major power.

**Katzenstein's Constructivist Perspective.** Whereas Johnston focuses primarily on strategic preferences, Peter Katzenstein broadens the analytical framework by emphasizing the importance of norms, identity, and political ideas in shaping national security policy. Constructivist scholarship argues that national interests are not fixed or objectively given; instead, they are socially constructed through political discourse, institutional practices, and collective understandings of national identity (Katzenstein, 1996). According to Katzenstein, states respond not only to objective material threats but also to ideational factors that define which actors are perceived as friends, rivals, or adversaries. National security policies therefore emerge through the interaction of material capabilities with historically constructed identities and normative beliefs. Political leadership, public discourse, educational institutions, and state narratives all contribute to the construction and reproduction of these identities. This constructivist perspective is particularly valuable for understanding the increasing influence of Hindutva on India's strategic outlook. Since 2014, narratives emphasizing civilizational identity, cultural continuity, and national resurgence have become more prominent within political discourse. These narratives have shaped elite perceptions regarding India's regional role, strategic responsibilities, and responses to external challenges. Consequently, foreign policy increasingly reflects not only calculations of power but also ideational conceptions of India's identity as an emerging civilizational power. Constructivism also explains why symbolic actions, including constitutional decisions, commemorative events, diplomatic messaging, and military signalling, carry strategic significance beyond their immediate material effects. Such actions reinforce national identity while simultaneously communicating strategic intentions to both domestic and international audiences.

**An Integrated Analytical Framework for the Present Study.** This article adopts an integrated analytical framework combining the complementary insights of Gray, Johnston, and Katzenstein. Gray provides the historical and contextual foundation explaining the persistence of strategic traditions; Johnston identifies how enduring strategic preferences influence the use of force; Katzenstein explains the role of identity, norms, and ideology in shaping national security behaviour; while Lantis demonstrates how strategic cultures evolve in response to political and geopolitical change. Using these four perspectives together makes it possible to analyse the transformation of Indian strategic culture during 2014–2025 more comprehensively than any single theoretical approach alone. Rather than interpreting India's

recent strategic behaviour exclusively through realist power politics or domestic political change, this integrated framework explains how historical traditions, ideological narratives, institutional evolution, leadership agency, and changing regional dynamics have collectively contributed to the emergence of a more assertive strategic posture. Accordingly, this study argues that the Modi era should be understood as a process of strategic adaptation rather than complete strategic discontinuity. Long-standing objectives, such as strategic autonomy, regional influence, and major-power aspirations, have persisted, but they have increasingly been pursued through a political discourse rooted in Hindutva, hyper-nationalism, centralized leadership, and a greater readiness to employ calibrated coercive diplomacy. This theoretical synthesis provides the conceptual foundation for the subsequent analysis of how ideological transformation has reshaped India's strategic culture and altered the strategic environment confronting Pakistan.

### **Hyper-Nationalism and the Rise of Hindutva**

Hindutva represents a political ideology that defines Indian nationhood primarily through Hindu civilizational identity rather than secular constitutional nationalism. Since 2014, this ideology has increasingly influenced public discourse, educational narratives, foreign policy symbolism, and security institutions. Several developments illustrate this evolution: -

**Ideological Foundations and the Reconfiguration of Indian Strategic Culture.** The transformation of India's strategic culture during Narendra Modi's tenure cannot be adequately understood without examining the ideological foundations of Hindutva and the rise of hyper-nationalism in Indian political discourse. Although strategic culture is shaped by historical experiences, institutional traditions, and external security environments, it is equally influenced by the identities and ideas through which political elites interpret national interests. In the Indian context, the post-2014 period witnessed the increasing convergence of political ideology, national identity, and strategic policy. Consequently, security discourse became more closely linked with civilizational narratives, historical reinterpretation, and the projection of India as a resurgent global power (Katzenstein, 1996; Johnston, 1995; Hall, 2022). Rather than viewing India's contemporary strategic posture solely through the lens of military modernization or power transition, the strategic culture approach suggests that ideological transformation has fundamentally influenced how national security challenges are perceived and addressed. The Modi government's emphasis on civilizational identity, national pride, cultural revival, and centralized leadership has contributed to the emergence of a strategic outlook that increasingly combines material capabilities with ideational motivations. This interaction between identity and strategy constitutes one of the defining characteristics of India's evolving strategic culture.

**Historical Evolution of Hindutva.** The ideological origins of Hindutva considerably predate the Modi government. The concept was systematically articulated by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (1923), where he argued that Indian nationhood should be understood primarily through a shared Hindu civilization rather than

solely through territorial or constitutional citizenship. Savarkar conceptualized the nation as a cultural and civilizational community whose historical continuity derived from common ancestry, sacred geography, and cultural traditions. This formulation differed significantly from the inclusive civic nationalism promoted by many leaders of India's independence movement. Subsequently, M. S. Golwalkar expanded these ideas by emphasizing cultural homogeneity, national discipline, and civilizational unity. Through organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), these ideological principles gradually became embedded within a broader movement seeking to redefine Indian national identity. Although these ideas remained politically influential for decades, they did not become the dominant framework of state policy until the Bharatiya Janata Party achieved a parliamentary majority in 2014 (Jaffrelot, 2021; Hall, 2022). Importantly, Hindutva should not be equated with Hinduism as a religion. Most scholars distinguish Hinduism as a diverse religious tradition from Hindutva as a political ideology centred on cultural nationalism and state identity. This distinction is essential for analytical clarity because the present study examines the influence of political ideology on strategic culture rather than the role of religion itself.

**Hindutva and the Institutionalization of State Identity.** One of the most significant developments after 2014 has been the gradual institutionalization of Hindutva within multiple organs of the Indian state. This process extends beyond electoral politics and encompasses educational reforms, cultural institutions, foreign policy symbolism, public diplomacy, historical narratives, and national security discourse. The growing prominence of civilizational language in official speeches and diplomatic engagement suggests that identity has become increasingly intertwined with strategic communication (Hall, 2022; Hall, 2024). This institutionalization should not be interpreted as the replacement of all previous strategic traditions. Rather, it reflects the selective reinterpretation of existing strategic concepts through an ideological lens. India's longstanding objectives- strategic autonomy, regional influence, economic development, and military modernization- have largely persisted. What has changed is the ideological vocabulary through which these objectives are justified and communicated domestically and internationally. The incorporation of civilizational symbolism into diplomatic practice illustrates this trend. International initiatives increasingly emphasize India's ancient heritage, spiritual traditions, yoga diplomacy, Buddhist diplomacy, and cultural leadership. These initiatives contribute to projecting India not merely as an emerging economic or military power but as a civilizational state possessing a unique historical mission within international politics (Hall, 2024).

**Hyper-Nationalism as a Strategic Narrative.** Hyper-nationalism represents one of the most visible features of contemporary Indian political discourse. Unlike conventional patriotism, which emphasizes attachment to the nation-state, hyper-nationalism tends to portray national identity as inseparable from political legitimacy, security policy, and perceptions of external threats. It frequently encourages a binary distinction between national strength and perceived internal or external adversaries, thereby strengthening public support for assertive strategic policies. Within India, this narrative has increasingly linked military achievements with political leadership and national prestige. Public commemoration of military operations, extensive media coverage of defence modernization, and the symbolic

celebration of security institutions have contributed to a broader political environment in which demonstrations of military capability are interpreted as indicators of national resurgence. Consequently, military power functions not only as an instrument of external deterrence but also as a source of domestic political legitimacy. From the perspective of strategic culture theory, these developments are significant because they reshape elite and societal perceptions regarding the appropriate use of military force. Johnston (1995) argues that strategic preferences evolve gradually through historically embedded assumptions about conflict and security. Hyper-nationalist discourse contributes to this process by normalizing greater acceptance of coercive responses to external challenges while reinforcing public expectations regarding decisive political leadership.

**Leadership, Political Centralization, and Strategic Decision-Making.** Leadership has emerged as a particularly important variable in understanding India's contemporary strategic culture. The Modi government has demonstrated a marked tendency toward centralized strategic decision-making within the Prime Minister's Office, allowing faster coordination among political, military, and intelligence institutions. While previous governments frequently relied upon broader bureaucratic consultation, the current decision-making process has been characterized by greater personalization of strategic authority. Strategic culture scholars acknowledge that leadership agency interacts with existing cultural traditions rather than replacing them. Gray (1999) argues that leaders operate within historically conditioned strategic environments but retain considerable discretion in interpreting national interests. The centralization of authority under Modi has therefore facilitated the translation of ideological preferences into policy implementation. Decisions concerning constitutional changes in Jammu and Kashmir, responses to cross-border terrorism, defence modernization, and strategic partnerships have reflected a closer alignment between political leadership and national security institutions than was evident during many previous administrations.

**Civilizational Nationalism and India's External Identity.** A defining feature of the Modi era has been the increasing projection of India as a civilizational state rather than merely a post-colonial nation-state. This perspective presents India as possessing a continuous historical identity extending from ancient civilization to contemporary global power. Such narratives frequently emphasize India's cultural heritage, democratic traditions, philosophical contributions, and historical resilience while portraying the country's contemporary rise as the restoration of its natural international status (Hall, 2022). Civilizational nationalism has significant strategic implications because it broadens the conceptual basis of foreign policy. National interests become associated not only with territorial security or economic development but also with cultural influence, diplomatic prestige, and normative leadership. Consequently, India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific, the Global South, and international institutions increasingly reflects aspirations extending beyond conventional power politics. For strategic culture analysis, these developments illustrate Katzenstein's argument that identities shape perceptions of national interest. Material capabilities remain important; however, they acquire strategic meaning through historically constructed narratives concerning who the state believes itself to be and what role it seeks to perform within the international system (Katzenstein, 1996).

**Hindutva and the Transformation of Strategic Behaviour.** The cumulative effect of these ideological developments has been the gradual transformation of India's strategic behaviour. Security policy increasingly exhibits stronger integration between domestic political narratives, military modernization, diplomatic activism, and strategic signalling. The willingness to undertake calibrated military operations below the nuclear threshold following the Uri and Pulwama crises reflected not merely improvements in military capability but also changing strategic assumptions regarding escalation management, deterrence, and political resolve. Nevertheless, analytical caution remains necessary. It would be inaccurate to conclude that ideology alone explains India's evolving strategic behaviour. Structural factors, including China's rise, technological competition, maritime security, terrorism, and shifts in the global balance of power, have also exerted significant influence. A comprehensive explanation therefore requires integrating ideological and material variables rather than privileging one at the expense of the other. This balanced interpretation is consistent with the broader strategic culture literature, which treats ideas, institutions, historical experience, and material capabilities as mutually reinforcing determinants of state behaviour rather than competing explanations (Gray, 1999; Johnston, 1995; Katzenstein, 1996).

**Transitional Analysis.** The preceding discussion demonstrates that Hindutva and hyper-nationalism have contributed to reshaping India's strategic culture by strengthening the relationship between identity, political leadership, and national security policy. Yet ideological transformation alone does not explain the practical manifestation of this evolving strategic outlook. Its full significance becomes evident through changes in military doctrine, strategic decision-making, defence modernization, regional diplomacy, and the increasing normalization of calibrated coercive statecraft. The next section therefore examines how these ideological foundations translated into the broader transformation of Indian strategic culture between 2014 and 2025, focusing on institutional reforms, military modernization, crisis behaviour, and India's expanding geopolitical ambitions.

### **Transformation of Indian Strategic Culture (2014 - 2025)**

The Modi era demonstrates several interconnected transformations.

**Ideological National Security.** National identity increasingly became integrated with security discourse. Internal cohesion, external threat perceptions, and military modernization were framed within a broader narrative of national resurgence.

**Centralization of Strategic Decision-Making.** Another significant transformation concerns the increasing centralization of strategic decision-making. India's constitutional framework remains democratic, with established civilian control over the military. Nevertheless, numerous analysts have observed that the Modi administration has concentrated greater authority within the Prime Minister's Office, enabling faster coordination among political, military, intelligence, and diplomatic institutions (Hall, 2022; Pant & Joshi, 2016). So, decision-making became increasingly centralized within the Prime Minister's Office, allowing faster responses during crises while reducing bureaucratic diffusion.

**Normalization of Limited Military Force.** Perhaps the most visible transformation in Indian strategic culture concerns the growing willingness to employ calibrated conventional military force below the nuclear threshold. Traditionally, mutual nuclear deterrence encouraged considerable restraint during Indo-Pakistani crises because political leaders feared uncontrolled escalation. However, developments during the Modi era suggest a greater willingness to accept calculated strategic risks. The military response following the Uri attack (2016), described by India as "surgical strikes" across the Line of Control, represented an important departure from previous crisis management practices. Similarly, the Balakot airstrike (2019) following the Pulwama attack demonstrated India's willingness to employ air power beyond the Line of Control while simultaneously managing escalation risks. Regardless of differing interpretations regarding the operational effectiveness of these actions, both incidents significantly influenced regional strategic perceptions by signalling India's readiness to undertake limited conventional operations under the shadow of nuclear deterrence (Joshi & Pant, 2023; Basrur, 2020). From Johnston's perspective, these developments indicate an evolution in strategic preferences concerning the utility of military force. Military action increasingly appears to be regarded not merely as a last resort but as one instrument within a broader spectrum of coercive statecraft that also includes diplomacy, economic measures, information campaigns, and strategic communication. Nevertheless, caution is warranted. These cases do not necessarily establish a universal doctrine of routine cross-border military operations. Crisis-specific political, military, and international circumstances remain important determinants of decision-making. Consequently, they should be interpreted as indicators of greater strategic flexibility rather than evidence of complete doctrinal transformation.

**Military Modernization.** Military modernization constitutes another central component of India's evolving strategic culture. Since 2014, India has accelerated efforts to modernize its armed forces through indigenous defence production, technological innovation, organizational reform, and expanded procurement of advanced military capabilities. These initiatives support broader objectives associated with strategic autonomy, deterrence credibility, and major-power status (Pant & Joshi, 2016). The "Atmanirbhar Bharat" initiative has encouraged greater domestic defence production, reducing long-term dependence on external suppliers while strengthening India's indigenous technological base. Simultaneously, India has invested in advanced missile systems, precision-guided munitions, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, space-based surveillance, unmanned systems, and integrated command-and-control architectures. These developments reflect recognition that contemporary strategic competition increasingly extends beyond traditional conventional warfare into the technological domain. Institutionally, reforms such as the establishment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and the ongoing development of integrated theatre commands seek to improve jointness among the armed services. Such organizational changes represent more than administrative adjustments; they indicate evolving assumptions regarding future warfare, operational efficiency, and the coordination of national military power. From a strategic culture perspective, institutional reforms contribute to the gradual socialization of military organizations into new strategic practices and operational concepts.

**Indo-Pacific Orientation.** India's strategic transformation has also become increasingly evident in the maritime domain. Historically, Indian strategic thinking concentrated primarily on continental security challenges arising from its borders with Pakistan and China. During the past decade, however, maritime strategy has assumed greater prominence owing to the growing strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, expanding Chinese naval activities, and the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a central geopolitical concept (Pant & Joshi, 2016). India has expanded naval modernization, strengthened maritime domain awareness, and increased participation in bilateral and multilateral naval exercises. Cooperation with the United States, Japan, Australia, France, and other partners has deepened through logistics agreements, intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and defence dialogues. While India continues to emphasize strategic autonomy, its Indo-Pacific engagement demonstrates greater willingness to participate in flexible strategic partnerships that support regional stability and freedom of navigation.

Collectively, these developments indicate a strategic culture characterized by greater confidence, assertiveness, and willingness to employ coercive diplomacy.

### **Strategic Implications for Pakistan**

The transformation of Indian strategic culture between 2014 and 2025 carries significant implications for Pakistan's national security, defence planning, foreign policy, and long-term strategic posture. Although competition between India and Pakistan has historically been influenced by territorial disputes, conventional military asymmetries, and nuclear deterrence, the emergence of a more assertive Indian strategic culture introduces additional ideological, political, and technological dimensions into the bilateral rivalry. Consequently, Pakistan's strategic environment is increasingly shaped not only by changes in India's military capabilities but also by evolving perceptions of national identity, political leadership, crisis behaviour, and regional geopolitical ambitions.

Strategic culture literature suggests that changes in elite beliefs and national identity influence the interpretation of external threats and the selection of strategic responses (Gray, 1999; Johnston, 1995; Katzenstein, 1996). Therefore, understanding India's evolving strategic culture is essential for Pakistan because strategic behaviour derives not only from material capabilities but also from historically embedded perceptions, institutional preferences, and ideological narratives. Contemporary developments indicate that India's strategic outlook increasingly combines traditional objectives of regional leadership with greater acceptance of calibrated coercion, military signalling, and strategic competition. National Bureau of Asian Research

**Changing Patterns of Deterrence Stability.** Perhaps the most immediate implication concerns the changing nature of deterrence stability in South Asia. Since the overt nuclearization of the subcontinent in 1998, strategic stability has largely rested upon mutual recognition that unrestricted conventional conflict carries unacceptable risks of nuclear escalation. This understanding contributed to relative caution during previous crises despite persistent political hostility. However, the post-2014 period has witnessed India's increasing

willingness to undertake limited conventional military operations while seeking to remain below the perceived nuclear threshold. The Uri episode in 2016 and the Balakot crisis in 2019 have been widely discussed as examples of this evolving approach. Regardless of differing national narratives regarding these events, they indicate that Indian policymakers increasingly regard limited conventional responses as compatible with maintaining escalation control. This represents an important shift in crisis management and has significant implications for deterrence dynamics within South Asia (Basrur, 2020; Joshi & Pant, 2023).

For Pakistan, these developments complicate traditional deterrence calculations. Decision-makers must now prepare for crises characterized by rapid escalation, extensive media attention, cyber operations, information warfare, and diplomatic competition occurring simultaneously with military activity. Consequently, deterrence increasingly depends upon effective communication, intelligence, technological capability, and political decision-making rather than nuclear capability alone.

**Conventional Military Asymmetry.** India's sustained investment in defence modernization has widened the conventional capability gap between the two countries. Expansion of indigenous defence production, modernization of air and naval forces, acquisition of advanced surveillance systems, missile defence initiatives, cyber capabilities, space-based assets, and artificial intelligence collectively enhance India's conventional military effectiveness.

Pakistan has traditionally compensated for conventional asymmetry through strategic deterrence and operational innovation. Nevertheless, technological developments require continuous adaptation because future conflicts are likely to involve multidomain operations extending beyond traditional land warfare. Precision-guided munitions, unmanned aerial systems, electronic warfare, cyber operations, and integrated command-and-control systems increasingly determine military effectiveness. This changing operational environment necessitates sustained investment in defence technology, research, indigenous production, and professional military education. Rather than attempting to match India's defence expenditure quantitatively, Pakistan may derive greater strategic advantage through selective modernization emphasizing qualitative effectiveness, operational flexibility, and credible deterrence.

**Crisis Management Under Increased Political Nationalism.** The growing interaction between domestic politics and external security policy also influences crisis management. Hyper-nationalist political narratives can generate stronger public expectations regarding decisive governmental responses during periods of heightened tension. Consequently, political leaders may encounter greater domestic pressure to demonstrate resolve through military or diplomatic measures. Strategic culture scholars argue that political narratives shape elite perceptions concerning acceptable strategic behaviour (Johnston, 1995; Katzenstein, 1996). Within this context, crises may become increasingly influenced by domestic political considerations alongside traditional security calculations. This dynamic

increases the importance of effective crisis communication mechanisms capable of reducing misunderstanding, preventing accidental escalation, and preserving strategic stability.

For Pakistan, maintaining credible crisis-management institutions, effective military-to-military communication where available, and diplomatic engagement with major international actors becomes increasingly important. Crisis stability depends not only upon military preparedness but equally upon effective political decision-making and timely communication.

**Diplomatic and Geopolitical Challenges.** India's expanding diplomatic engagement with major powers has strengthened its international profile and increased its influence within regional and global institutions. Strategic partnerships with the United States, France, Japan, Australia, and several European countries have enhanced cooperation in defence, maritime security, emerging technologies, and Indo-Pacific affairs. Simultaneously, India has strengthened its position within forums such as the G20, BRICS, and the Quad, projecting itself as a major contributor to regional and global governance. Sage Journals

For Pakistan, these developments require sustained diplomatic adaptation rather than reactive balancing. While China remains Pakistan's principal strategic partner, long-term foreign policy effectiveness also depends upon constructive engagement with the Gulf states, Türkiye, Central Asian republics, ASEAN members, the European Union, and multilateral organizations. Diversification of diplomatic partnerships enhances strategic flexibility and reduces excessive dependence upon any single external actor. Geo-economic diplomacy likewise assumes increasing importance. International influence is increasingly associated with economic resilience, technological innovation, investment attractiveness, and connectivity initiatives rather than military capability alone. Pakistan's long-term strategic position will therefore depend significantly upon domestic economic performance alongside defence preparedness.

**The China Factor.** China constitutes one of the principal variables influencing the strategic environment of South Asia. India's strategic concerns increasingly extend beyond Pakistan toward long-term competition with China, particularly following the deterioration of Sino-Indian relations after border confrontations in Ladakh. Consequently, India's strategic planning now incorporates simultaneous consideration of both continental and maritime theatres.

Pakistan occupies a unique position within this broader regional context because of its strategic partnership with China and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). While this partnership provides important opportunities for economic development, infrastructure modernization, and regional connectivity, it also increases Pakistan's relevance within wider Indo-Pacific strategic competition. Maintaining strategic balance requires Pakistan to preserve productive relations with China while simultaneously avoiding unnecessary involvement in great-power rivalry. Foreign policy should therefore emphasize regional stability, economic cooperation, and strategic autonomy consistent with Pakistan's national interests.

**Information Warfare and Strategic Communication.** An increasingly important dimension of contemporary strategic competition concerns information warfare. Advances in digital communication, social media, artificial intelligence, and cyber technologies have transformed the information environment into an important domain of national security. Narratives concerning terrorism, democracy, human rights, regional stability, and international responsibility increasingly influence diplomatic outcomes and public opinion. Consequently, strategic communication has become an essential component of national power alongside military capability.

Pakistan therefore requires an integrated strategic communication policy capable of presenting coherent national narratives through diplomatic channels, international media, academic engagement, and public diplomacy. Effective communication contributes to deterrence credibility, strengthens international partnerships, and enhances the country's international reputation.

**Economic Security as National Security.** Contemporary strategic competition demonstrates that sustainable military capability ultimately depends upon economic resilience. Countries possessing diversified economies, technological innovation, industrial capacity, and stable fiscal institutions are generally better positioned to sustain long-term strategic competition. Pakistan's national security strategy should therefore integrate economic reform, industrial development, technological innovation, and human capital formation within its broader security framework. Investments in education, scientific research, digital infrastructure, and advanced manufacturing contribute not only to economic growth but also to national resilience and defence capability.

Recognizing economic security as an integral component of national security represents one of the most important lessons arising from contemporary regional strategic competition.

**Strategic Adaptation Rather than Strategic Reaction.** The analysis presented throughout this article suggests that Pakistan should avoid interpreting India's evolving strategic culture exclusively through a reactive security framework. Strategic competition does not necessarily require symmetrical responses to every political or military development. Rather, effective strategy emphasizes long-term adaptation, institutional resilience, diplomatic engagement, technological modernization, and credible deterrence. Pakistan's comparative advantages include its professional military institutions, strategic geographic location, expanding regional connectivity initiatives, and established deterrence capability. Strengthening these advantages through sound governance, economic modernization, technological investment, and proactive diplomacy offers a more sustainable response than policies driven primarily by short-term crisis dynamics.

Accordingly, India's evolving strategic culture presents both challenges and opportunities. While increasing strategic competition undoubtedly complicates Pakistan's security environment, it also highlights the importance of comprehensive national power in which diplomacy, economic development, technological innovation, and institutional

effectiveness complement traditional military capabilities. A balanced approach grounded in strategic patience, credible deterrence, and constructive regional engagement remains the most appropriate long-term response to the changing strategic landscape of South Asia.

### **Recommendations for Pakistan**

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the transformation of Indian strategic culture has created a more complex and multidimensional security environment for Pakistan. Consequently, Pakistan's response should not be confined to military preparedness alone but should instead adopt a comprehensive national security approach integrating defence, diplomacy, economic development, technological innovation, and institutional resilience. Strategic competition in the twenty-first century increasingly depends upon the effective coordination of military and non-military instruments of national power. Accordingly, Pakistan's long-term strategy should emphasize adaptation rather than reaction, recognizing that sustainable national security rests upon comprehensive national strength rather than military capability alone (Gray, 1999; Johnston, 1995). Therefore, Pakistan should adopt a balanced long-term strategy comprising: -

**Strengthening Credible Minimum Deterrence.** Pakistan should continue to maintain its policy of credible minimum deterrence while ensuring that deterrence remains responsive to the evolving regional security environment. The objective should not be participation in an unrestricted arms race but the preservation of strategic stability through credible retaliatory capability, survivability, and effective command-and-control arrangements. Continued modernization of strategic forces, supported by robust early-warning systems and secure communication networks, will remain essential for preserving deterrence credibility in an increasingly complex strategic environment (Khan, 2012). Equally important is the maintenance of doctrinal clarity. Transparent communication of Pakistan's deterrence posture can reduce the risks of miscalculation during periods of crisis and contribute to long-term strategic stability.

**Accelerating Defence Modernization.** Future conflicts are likely to be characterized by multidomain operations involving cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, electronic warfare, precision-guided weapons, autonomous systems, and space-based assets. Pakistan should therefore prioritize selective technological modernization rather than attempting to match India's defence expenditure quantitatively. Investment priorities should include:

- Air Defence capabilities
- Cyber defence capabilities
- Artificial intelligence applications
- Unmanned aerial systems
- Integrated air and missile defence
- Electronic warfare.
- Space-based surveillance.
- indigenous defence research and development.

Strengthening domestic defence industries would simultaneously improve strategic autonomy, reduce dependence upon external suppliers, and contribute to national technological development.

**Enhancing Economic Resilience.** Economic strength increasingly constitutes one of the principal foundations of national security. Sustainable defence capability depends upon fiscal stability, industrial productivity, technological innovation, and human capital development. Consequently, Pakistan's national security strategy should integrate economic reform with broader strategic planning. Priority areas include:

- Macroeconomic stability.
- Export diversification.
- Industrial modernization.
- Digital transformation.
- Energy security.
- Infrastructure development.
- Investment in higher education and scientific research.

A stronger economy expands diplomatic influence, improves defence sustainability, and increases national resilience during periods of strategic competition.

**Expanding Proactive Diplomacy.** Pakistan should pursue an active and diversified foreign policy that balances strategic partnerships with constructive engagement across multiple regions. While China will remain Pakistan's principal strategic partner, long-term diplomatic effectiveness requires stronger relations with the Gulf states, Türkiye, Central Asia, ASEAN, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Participation in regional economic initiatives, multilateral organizations, and confidence-building mechanisms should remain an important component of Pakistan's diplomatic strategy. Constructive diplomacy can reduce regional tensions while simultaneously expanding opportunities for trade, investment, and technological cooperation (Pant & Joshi, 2016).

**Investing in Emerging Technologies.** Technological competition increasingly influences national power. Pakistan should formulate a comprehensive national innovation strategy emphasizing artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cybersecurity, biotechnology, satellite technologies, and digital infrastructure. Universities, research institutions, and the private sector should be integrated into national technological planning. Greater collaboration between academia, industry, and government would accelerate innovation while supporting defence modernization and economic competitiveness.

**Improving Strategic Communication.** Modern strategic competition extends beyond military operations into the information domain. Pakistan should establish an integrated strategic communication framework capable of presenting coherent national narratives through diplomatic channels, international media, think tanks, and academic institutions. Professional public diplomacy can improve Pakistan's international image, counter

misinformation, strengthen foreign partnerships, and increase international understanding of regional security challenges.

**Institutional Capacity and National Governance.** Long-term national security requires effective governance, institutional stability, and policy continuity. Defence planning should therefore be integrated with economic planning, technological development, educational reform, and administrative modernization. Institutional coordination among civilian and military organizations enhances policy implementation while improving national resilience during periods of crisis.

**Regional Stability and Crisis Management.** Despite persistent political differences, Pakistan should continue supporting mechanisms that reduce the risks of military escalation. Confidence-building measures, military hotlines, diplomatic engagement, and crisis communication remain valuable instruments for preventing misunderstanding during periods of heightened tension. Strategic stability serves the interests of both regional and international security. Consequently, Pakistan's foreign policy should continue emphasizing peaceful dispute resolution consistent with international law and the principles of the United Nations Charter.

**Comprehensive National Security.** Ultimately, Pakistan's long-term response should be guided by the concept of comprehensive national security. Military preparedness, economic resilience, technological advancement, diplomatic engagement, institutional effectiveness, and social cohesion should be viewed as mutually reinforcing components of national power rather than independent policy domains. Such an integrated approach provides the most sustainable basis for preserving national security within an increasingly competitive South Asian strategic environment.

Such measures would improve strategic stability without encouraging unnecessary escalation.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the transformation of Indian strategic culture during the Modi era (2014 - 2025) through the analytical perspectives of Johnston's Strategic Culture Theory and Katzenstein's constructivist approach, supplemented by the broader contributions of Gray. The analysis demonstrates that India's contemporary strategic behaviour reflects neither complete continuity nor complete discontinuity with its historical strategic traditions. Rather, it represents an adaptive evolution in which enduring strategic objectives have been reinterpreted through the ideological framework of Hindutva, hyper-nationalism, centralized political leadership, and an increasingly ambitious vision of India's regional and global role.

The findings indicate that ideological narratives have become progressively integrated into India's foreign and security policies. National identity, civilizational discourse, military modernization, strategic communication, and diplomatic activism increasingly reinforce one another, producing a strategic culture characterized by greater confidence, willingness to employ calibrated coercive measures, and expanded geopolitical engagement. Events such as

the Uri crisis, the Balakot airstrike, constitutional developments concerning Jammu and Kashmir, and India's expanding Indo-Pacific partnerships collectively illustrate this broader transformation.

The study further argues that India's strategic culture cannot be explained exclusively through realist assessments of material capabilities. While military modernization and changing regional power balances remain significant, they operate alongside historically constructed identities, political ideas, institutional evolution, and leadership preferences. Consequently, strategic culture provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding the interaction between ideology and national security policy than approaches focusing solely on material power.

For Pakistan, these developments require sustained strategic adaptation rather than reactive policy responses. Preserving strategic stability will depend upon maintaining credible deterrence while simultaneously strengthening economic resilience, technological innovation, diplomatic engagement, institutional effectiveness, and comprehensive national security planning. Long-term competitiveness will increasingly depend upon the successful integration of military preparedness with economic modernization and scientific advancement.

The study contributes to the literature on South Asian strategic studies by demonstrating how ideological transformation influences strategic culture and, consequently, state behaviour. By integrating Johnston's concept of enduring strategic preferences with Katzenstein's constructivist emphasis on identity and norms, the article provides a comprehensive explanation of India's evolving strategic outlook during the Modi era. It further argues that the interaction between ideology, leadership, and strategic decision-making will remain a defining feature of South Asian security for the foreseeable future.

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