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Nationalist Rhetoric: Response to Terrorism and the Language of Indian Political Leadership

By Dr. Soham Das and Dr. Garima Sarkar



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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's framing of the 2019 cross-border strike on terrorist camps in Pakistan marked a pivotal moment in the construction of India's national security narrative. More than a tactical response, it became a symbolic assertion of sovereignty and civilizational strength that narrows space for democratic debate and redefines terrorism in cultural and ideological terms.

In the aftermath of "Operation Sindoor," Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's political speeches took on a strikingly familiar tone, one that fused nationalism, military valor, and the threat of terrorism into a singular narrative of Indian strength and resolve. During his national address, Modi condemned Pakistan, praised the operation as a testament to India's military might and

national unity, and called it a moment of collective pride and patriotic resurgence. In contrast, the Indian prime minister did not mention Pakistan in his international addresses at forums like the BRICS summit (in Brazil) and the G7 summit (in Canada) following the operation. He framed India's counter-terrorism efforts as essential to preserving not only national security but also global stability—positioning India as a responsible sovereign actor confronting cross-border terrorism.

The rhetoric around "Operation Sindoor" in Modi's speeches demonstrates how national leadership in India increasingly draws on a language of nationalism and strength, using the specter of terrorism to bolster internal solidarity while asserting India's geopolitical legitimacy abroad. These speeches by the Indian prime minister do more than recount military success; they manufacture consent, consolidate nationalist sentiment, and construct a vision of India where sovereignty is both defended by arms and sanctified through rhetoric.

Richard Jackson's (2005) analysis of the Bush administration's counter-terrorism rhetoric offers a valuable lens to understand how India's "Operation Sindoor" has been framed within the Bhartiya Janata Party's (BJP) nationalist discourse. Much like the post-9/11 US narrative, the BJP has employed emotionally charged language and imagery to construct this operation not only as a counter-terror initiative, but as a moral and national imperative to portray the Indian state as righteous and cross-border terrorists as existential threats to its national unity.

His speeches, whether delivered to domestic crowds or at international forums invoke a common language—one that celebrates the valor of Indian armed forces and portrays the state as a vigilant guardian against terrorism. However, a notable feature of Modi's international addresses is the strategic omission of any direct reference to Pakistan, the country long accused by Indian officials of sponsoring cross-border terrorism. Rather, the language is calibrated and focused on "terrorist threats," "cross-border terrorism," "global security," "humanity," and "cooperation," deliberately decontextualising the adversary while amplifying India's moral and strategic

This shift is not incidental and by refraining from naming Pakistan, Modi avoids the optics of bilateral hostility in global forums like the G7. The absence of any direct reference to Pakistan or its state-sponsored terrorism in Modi's international speeches might appear diplomatic, but it also reflects a calculated political strategy of balancing domestic and international pressures without provoking a direct confrontation in international forums.

terrorism

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development

brics

g-7

gratitude

south

summit

global

data

attack

century

technology

assault

dignity

efforts

security

challenges

terrorists

support

future

countries

Word Cloud 1. Source: Authors. Cloud generated with words mentioned at least 3 times by Prime Minister Modi at BRICS and G7 Summit addresses

The strategy of condemning cross-border terrorism in international forums shows how the rhetoric of counter terrorism has been used to consolidate India's foreign policy positioning. In contrast, in his national addresses, the reference to "sindoor" or "vermilion" is emotionally and strategically appropriated to systematically categorise the counter-terrorist attacks as judicious vengeance by the Indian armed forces. The use of the terms "Bharat," "unity," "nation," "pride," and "Pakistan" reflect the ideological arc of nationalist rhetoric and nation building during times of security crises.

This carefully managed language reflects a broader transformation in [India's national identity and global image](#), one where the line between security and sovereignty is increasingly blurred. This narrative was further reinforced by the Indian [multi-party missions sent abroad](#) to justify India's military actions and counter misinformation.

As India seeks a greater role on the global stage, how it chooses to frame its security challenges and whom it chooses to name or not, reveals as much about its domestic political ambitions as its foreign policy ones. In reframing terrorism as a global threat without naming Pakistan, Modi has crafted a dual narrative by projecting India as a responsible global power abroad, while mobilising nationalistic sentiment at home. This calibrated "political rhetoric" aims to strengthen India's diplomatic posture and consolidate domestic political legitimacy in the long run. But it also raises critical questions about transparency, peace negotiations, diplomatic dialogues, and the narrowing space for dissent in the name of national security. As India's global stature rises, so too must the assessment of how its leadership wield the language of securitisation and national unity.

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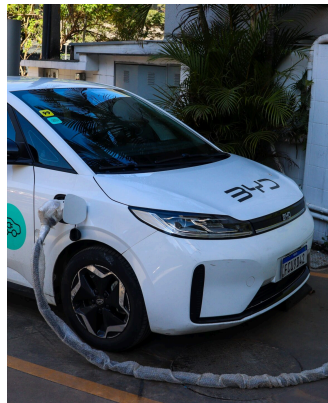
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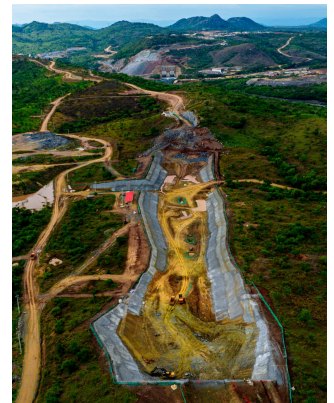
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