



CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES

SEMINAR ON

**CHANGING DYNAMICS IN
INDIAN NEIGHBOURHOOD**



CENJOWS

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SEMINAR REPORT

CHANGING DYNAMICS IN INDIAN NEIGHBOURHOOD

11 MARCH 2026

**PREPARED BY
TEAM CENJOWS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



- The seminar marked the Silver Jubilee of HQ IDS, commemorating 25 years of India's military integration and jointness, against the backdrop of Operation Sindoor and the Pahalgam terror attack.
- India's neighbourhood is in unprecedented flux, and political transitions, military restructuring, and great power competition are reshaping the regional order at an alarming pace.
- Operation Sindoor demonstrated India's capability for effective conventional operations below the nuclear threshold, executed entirely with indigenous platforms, a testament to Atmanirbhar Bharat.
- Pakistan has consolidated military power under a single command: the 27th Amendment grants the Army Chief legal immunity, while the Army Rocket Force Command signals a doctrinal shift toward non-contact standoff warfare.
- Nepal witnessed a historic political earthquake: a 35-year-old Madhesi leader secured a two-thirds majority, sweeping away all established parties. This Gen Z-led, technocratic government demands engagement on terms of equal sovereignty.
- Despite \$8.5 billion in trade and 65% of Nepal's petroleum supplies, India lags behind China in perception building, a gap requiring urgent redressal through digital diplomacy.
- Bangladesh returned to democracy through the BNP after 18 months of interim rule marked by 133 ordinances and an attempted theocratic shift through the July National Charter 2025.
- Challenges persist: 77 Islamist bloc MPs control campuses and streets; journalists and Awami League leaders remain imprisoned; deaths in custody continue.
- China's strategic footprint now encircles India's maritime domain, from Gwadar to Hambantota, with deepening military ties in Bangladesh and logistical access advancing toward India's border through Nepal.
- Grey zone warfare has reached new sophistication; Wars are no longer fought only with armies; they are fought with infrastructure loans, drone manufacturing agreements, and constitutional amendments.

- India's neighbourhood policy must be proactive, not reactive, shaping the regional order through military readiness, diplomatic agility, economic resilience, and technological self-reliance.
- The neighbourhood is India's strategic continuum. Its stability directly influences the nation's long-term security.

OBJECTIVES

- To analyse the fast-evolving geopolitical landscape in India's neighbourhood and its implications for national security and regional stability.
- To evaluate the implications of Operation Sindoor on Pakistan's doctrinal shifts, force restructuring, and nuclear signalling, and formulate calibrated responses for India.
- To assess political transitions and civil-military realignments across neighbouring countries, from Pakistan's military consolidation to Nepal's Gen Z revolution and Bangladesh's democratic restoration.
- To examine the growing influence of external powers, particularly China, in shaping South Asia's regional security architecture through strategic investments and military partnerships.
- To explore the sophistication of grey zone warfare, including China-Pakistan collusion in narrative warfare, and recommend a coordinated national response mechanism.
- To formulate actionable recommendations for India's defence and diplomatic establishments to strengthen India's neighbourhood as part of its strategic continuum.

SCHEDULE

Time (Hrs)	Event	Remarks
0830-0900 hrs	Registration and Tea	
0900-0925 hrs	Guests proceed to Zorawar Auditorium and take their seats	
0930 hrs	CDS arrives	VIP entrance
0940 hrs	Shri Sanjay Seth , Hon'ble Raksha Rajya Mantri arrives at the Manekshaw Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VIP Entrance • Received by CISC and CDS
0945- 0950 hrs	Welcome Address	EMCEE
0950-1010 hrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AI in Military Domain • Launch of Samad Application – CAIR, DRDO • Launch of Integrated Online Training and Evaluation Programme (IOTEP) - IDU 	 By Hon'ble RRM
1010-1030 hrs	Inaugural Address	Shri Sanjay Seth Hon'ble Raksha Rajya Mantri
1030-1100 hrs	Tea Break, Group photograph and Dep of Shri Sanjay Seth, Hon'ble RRM	
SESSION 1 – PAKISTAN POST OPERATION SINDOOR (1100–1500 hrs)		
1100-1125 1125-1130	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Address by CISC • Release of Book 'Secret War' 	 CISC
1130-1200 hrs	Coup-less-Coup – Impact of Pakistan military involvement in politics on its foreign policy and future engagements with India	Amb Ajay Bisaria
1200-1245 hrs	Panel Discussion to include Pakistan emerging relations with the US, Arab world, China and options for India: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel Chair Panel Members: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expert on Pakistan-US relations • Expert on Pakistan-Arab World relations. • Expert on Pakistan-China relations. 	Amb Ajay Bisaria Dr C Raja Mohan Lt Gen P J S Pannu (Retd) Dr Dattesh Parulekar
1245-1315 hrs	Restructuring and doctrinal changes triggered in Pakistan defense establishment post Op Sindoor and their impact on India	Lt Gen DS Hooda (Retd)

1315 - 1415 hrs - Lunch Break		
SESSION 1 – (CONTINUED)		
1415-1500 hrs	<p>Panel Discussion to include impact of creation of CDF, New raisings, Procurements and Doctrinal changes on India:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel Chair <p>Panel Members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expert on land battle • Expert on Air battle • Expert on Sea battle • Expert on Grey Z warfare 	<p>Lt Gen P J S Pannu (Retd)</p> <p>Lt Gen Rakesh Sharma (Retd) Air Marshal RGK Kapoor (Retd) Vice Admiral SJ Singh (Retd) Lt Gen Dushyant Singh (Retd)</p>

SESSION 2 – NEPAL – FROM STABLE KINGDOM TO FRACTURED DEMOCRACY (1500–1615 hrs)		
1500-1530 hrs	Growing instability in Nepal and its impact on future relations with India	Amb Pankaj Saran
1530-1615 hrs	<p>Panel Discussion to include options available to India to address growing aspirations of Gen Z</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel Chair <p>Panel Members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expert on Nepal -China relations • Expert on Nepal-India relations • Expert Military Officer from India 	<p>Amb Pankaj Saran</p> <p>Dr Sriparna Pathak Lt Gen Pawan Bahadur Pande (Retd), NA Lt Gen Shokin Chauhan (Retd)</p>
SESSION 3 – BANGLADESH – FROM STRATEGIC STRENGTH TO AN EMERGING CHALLENGE (1615–1745 hrs)		
1615-1645 hrs	Bangladesh – From strategic strength to an emerging challenge.	Dr Smruti S Pattanaik,

1645-1730 hrs	<p>Panel discussion on the emerging situation in Bangladesh, role of foreign players, impact on India and options available.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel Chair <p>Panel Members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expert on Bangladesh • Expert on Bangladesh • Military Perspective 	<p>Amb Veena Sikri</p> <p>Mr Kallol Bhattacharjee Amb Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty Lt Gen V Bhatia (Retd)</p>
1730-1745 hrs	Closing remarks and Vote of Thanks	DG CENJOWS
1745hrs	Tea Break & Dispersal	

BACKGROUND

Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS), established on 01 October 2001, marked its Silver Jubilee, the 25th Anniversary on 11 March 2026. To commemorate this milestone, CENJOWS organised a distinguished national seminar in New Delhi under the theme 'Changing Dynamics in Indian Neighbourhood'. The event brought together senior policymakers, diplomats, military leaders, strategic scholars, and practitioners to deliberate on India's evolving security environment and the broader implications for national and regional stability.

The occasion was graced by the presence of Shri Sanjay Seth, Raksha Rajyamantri (Minister of State for Defence), who inaugurated the seminar and addressed the distinguished gathering, highlighting India's defence modernisation achievements, regional foreign policy priorities, and the nation's advancing technological capabilities in the military domain.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SILVER JUBILEE

The establishment of HQ IDS in 2001 was a landmark step in India's journey towards military integration and jointness. Over the past 25 years, HQ IDS has served as the nerve centre for orchestrating tri-service coordination, defence planning, and the integration of India's armed forces under a unified command architecture. The Silver Jubilee represents not only an institutional milestone but a reflection of India's evolving

strategic doctrine, one that now places jointness, integration, and technological advancement at its core.

In his address, the Raksha Rajyamantri paid tribute to the role of HQ IDS in shaping India's defence preparedness and expressed confidence in its continued contribution to Viksit Bharat 2047.

INAUGURAL ADDRESS BY SHRI SANJAY SETH, RAKSHA RAJYAMANTRI

Shri Sanjay Seth, in his keynote address, underscored India's unwavering commitment to the welfare of its neighbourhood while firmly articulating India's zero-tolerance posture towards terrorism. He invoked the civilisational values of India, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family), while reminding that India is equally the land of Lord Krishna and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, combining compassion with decisive strength.

On Operation Sindoor

The Raksha Rajyamantri made special reference to Operation Sindoor, a landmark military operation that demonstrated India's resolve in the wake of the Pahalgam terror attack. He stated that in just 88 hours, the Indian Armed Forces, operating with exceptional tri-service jointness, neutralised terrorist infrastructure and destroyed enemy air bases without any loss to Indian forces. He observed that, unlike all previous wars since 1947, which were fought with imported weapons, Operation Sindoor was executed with indigenous platforms, a powerful testament to the success of Atmanirbhar Bharat in the defence sector.

On India-Bangladesh Relations

The Minister reaffirmed India's commitment to Bangladesh as a valued partner and elder brother. He noted that India-Bangladesh bilateral trade stands at USD 30.5-51 billion, with India's export contribution at USD 11.46 billion. India has supported Bangladesh through railway infrastructure, textiles, and development cooperation. He expressed hope that the relationship would continue to strengthen following the recent parliamentary delegation led by Lok Sabha Speaker Shri Om Birla.

On India-Nepal Relations

The Minister described India and Nepal as inseparable, united by history, culture, and shared security interests. He highlighted the deep spiritual connection symbolised by the Shaligram stone from Nepal's Gandaki River, which was used in the construction of the Ram Lalla idol at the Ayodhya Ram Mandir. He noted that India-Nepal bilateral trade stands at USD 8.7 billion, with India continuing to support Nepal through infrastructure projects, including the Janakpur-Kurtha railway link, hydropower projects, trauma centres, and the Motihari pipeline.

On Defence Indigenisation and Exports

Shri Sanjay Seth outlined the remarkable transformation of India's defence industrial base:

- Defence exports have grown from Rs. 686 crores in 2014 to Rs. 23,622 crores in 2025, with a target of Rs. 29,000 crores in 2026 and Rs. 50,000 crores by 2029
- India's defence budget has reached an all-time high of Rs. 7,85,000 crores
- DRDO has built over 64,000 km of border roads, 1,100 bridges, and 20 new airbases
- DDP achieved indigenisation of 3,190 defence components out of 5,012 under positive indigenisation lists
- The MSME sector in defence has grown to 6.5 crore units, providing employment to 25 crore people
- India's start-up ecosystem has grown from 1,000 start-ups in 2014 to over 2.9 million

The Raksha Rajyamantri concluded with a reflection on India's civilisational ethos and its translation into modern statecraft. Drawing from Kautilya's Arthashastra, he noted that the neighbour of the border is never easy, but India's strength lies in its clarity of purpose, democratic resilience, and the courage of its armed forces.

He recited a patriotic verse honouring Operation Sindoor and the spirit of the Indian Armed Forces:

'In the sacred waters of the Sindhu, the pride of Mother India was preserved. With the blaze of Operation Sindoor, all enemies were vanquished. India is the beacon of compassion-the light of the world.'

KEY LAUNCHES AT THE EVENT

Shri Sanjay Seth, Raksha Rajyamantri, launched three pivotal initiatives: the 'AI in Military Domain' policy document, the SAMAD Application developed by CAIR, DRDO, and the Integrated Online Training and Evaluation Programme (IOTEP) by the Indian Defence University (IDU). These launches represent a significant leap toward a data-centric military, ensuring our forces are not only better equipped but also digitally empowered for the challenges of tomorrow.

1. AI Policy Document for the Military Domain:

The event witnessed the release of a landmark policy document on Artificial Intelligence in the Military Domain. The document reflects India's forward-looking vision for AI integration in national security, enhancing operational capability, strengthening decision superiority, and promoting responsible innovation. The guiding philosophy is: Technology with Responsibility, Autonomy with Accountability, and Power with Dharma (Sarvajan Hitaay, Sarvajan Sukhaay).

2. SAMAD- Situational Awareness Module for Aerial Drones:

SAMAD, designed and developed by the Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics (CAIR), was officially launched. It is a scalable, sovereign AI platform that provides real-time situational awareness across autonomous and swarm-drone environments. Key capabilities include planning and tracking of drone flight paths, geolocation with live telemetry, near-field passive 3D photometry, and low-altitude trajectory planning in EWAD environments. SAMAD has been evaluated through major exercises including Exercise COLD START 1, Exercise VAYU SAMANVAY 1, and Exercise MARU JWALA.

3. IOTEP- Integrated Online Training and Evaluation Programme:

IOTEP was launched to cultivate a joint operational mindset among India's middle-level military leadership. Conceptualised by the Chief of Defence Staff and developed through HQ IDS, the platform is hosted on secure networks of all three services. Features include 18 training modules, anytime-anywhere access through secure digital networks, and certification upon completion with a minimum qualifying score.

SPECIAL ADDRESS: AIR MARSHAL ASHUTOSH DIXIT, PVSM, AVSM, VM, VSM, CISC

Air Marshal Dixit, in his inaugural address, presented a comprehensive analysis of India's unique geopolitical reality: it shares borders with two nuclear-armed adversaries, China and Pakistan, and is surrounded by strategically vital smaller neighbours. Afghanistan serves as India's gateway to Central Asia, while the Indian Ocean has shifted from a peaceful backyard to a fiercely contested arena of great-power competition. The neighbourhood is no longer India's sphere of influence by default but a contested strategic space shifting with alarming speed and severity, demanding urgent attention and purposeful action.

Key Takeaways

On China

- Air Marshal Dixit noted that the most consequential structural shift over the past decade has been China's transformation from a cautious regional player into an assertive expansionist power. China views India not as a partner but as a potential threat. The 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash were watershed moments, triggering large-scale military buildup with over 100,000 troops deployed across the Himalayan frontier.
- What was once managed competition has evolved into armed coexistence, with permanent forward deployments and accelerated infrastructure fundamentally altering the strategic equilibrium.
- China's investments- from Gwadar in Pakistan to Hambantota in Sri Lanka- have stitched together a strategic footprint encircling India's maritime domain. In 2025, the Fujian aircraft carrier became operational, and Beijing expanded strategic partnerships across the Global South while deepening ties with Russia.

On Bangladesh

- The ouster of Sheikh Hasina in 2024 and the anti-India sentiment under the Yunus government ended the golden era of India-Bangladesh ties. Air Marshal

Dixit noted troubling developments: the banning of the Awami League, warming of Bangladesh-Pakistan ties, and deepening military engagement with China.

- The inauguration of a Chinese industrial zone in Chattogram, the modernisation of the Mongla port, and a drone manufacturing plant in Bogra signal a clear strategic shift. The Forces Gold 2030 framework, including the planned acquisition of 4.5-generation fighters and discussions on the JF-17 Thunder from Pakistan, marks a generational shift in Bangladesh's airpower ambitions. However, the return to democracy through the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is a genuine positive.

On Nepal and Bhutan

- Nepal's 2025 political turbulence, in which street mobilisation toppled an elected government, raises questions about democratic resilience along India's sensitive frontier. Nepal's engagement with China under BRI, through Pokhara Airport and the Rasu-Vagadhi-Jailong link, steadily advances Beijing's logistical access toward India's border. Nepal seeks to reduce its 70 per cent trade dependence on India.
- Bhutan remains among India's most trusted partners, with India accounting for 86 per cent of Bhutan's exports and 73 per cent of imports. However, Bhutan's border negotiations with China, underpinned by the 2021 three-step roadmap, introduce strategic uncertainty. The 470 km Bhutan-China border overlooks the Siliguri Corridor, making any deal in that region a matter of the highest strategic sensitivity.

On Sri Lanka and the Maldives

- Sri Lanka's excessive borrowing under China's BRI led to catastrophic economic collapse. India stepped up with economic assistance, food, fuel, and humanitarian support. Today, under President Dissanayake, Sri Lanka has emerged as one of India's most important regional partners.
- In the Maldives, the China-Maldives defence agreement raised concerns. Yet when the Maldives faced an economic crisis, India responded with treasury rollovers, lines of credit, and a \$565 million line of credit. Control of influence in the Maldives affects surveillance, sea denial, and maritime security across

India's western and southern seaboard, a small geography but large in strategic consequence.

On Myanmar and Afghanistan

- Myanmar has descended into prolonged civil war and state fragmentation. The open border, deep social ties between Myanmar's Chin communities and India's Mizo population, and resulting illegal migration have made border control both necessary and politically sensitive. Myanmar has become a secondary theatre of India-China competition, with drug trafficking compounding challenges.
- Afghanistan has grappled with isolation since the Taliban's return in 2021. India remains deeply concerned about the potential reactivation of anti-India militant networks from Afghan territory. However, ongoing hostilities between Pakistan and Afghanistan create a complex but occasionally advantageous environment by diverting Pakistan's military resources away from India's western border.

On Pakistan

- Pakistan continues to operate under a deeply embedded adversarial framework toward India, with terrorism and military confrontation remaining instruments of state policy. Operation Sindoor demonstrated that India has found space for effective conventional operations below the nuclear threshold.
- In August 2025, Pakistan announced the Army Rocket Force Command, modelled on China's PLA Rocket Force, representing a doctrinal shift toward non-contact standoff warfare.
- The 27th constitutional amendment, enacted in November 2025, abolished the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee and created the Chief of Defence Forces, with the Army Chief automatically holding this position, concentrating authority over all three services and the National Strategic Command in a single individual.
- Crisis may now evolve faster, escalation ladders may compress, and decision-making may become quicker but more prone to error.

Recommendations

On China

- Accelerate border infrastructure, roads, tunnels, airfields, with a target of completing over 100 BRO projects by 2027.
- Deepen Aatmanirbhar Bharat in defence, particularly in drones, air defence systems, and semiconductors.
- Sustain the Quad alliance with the US, Japan, and Australia as a counterweight to China's regional ambitions.
- Develop a coherent counter-architecture rather than responding project by project, crisis by crisis.

On Bangladesh

- Build on the return to democracy through the BNP; maintain connectivity projects such as the Agartala-Akhara rail link.
- Address Bangladesh's sovereignty concerns maturely; have frank conversations about the use of civilian ports like Mongla as potential logistics hubs for external naval powers.

On Nepal and Bhutan

- Be ready to meet Nepal's expectations on hydropower, infrastructure, and digital connectivity through genuine economic diplomacy.
- Strengthen joint border patrols and intelligence-sharing with Nepal.
- Evolve military engagement with Bhutan into a technology-infused, multi-domain partnership that respects sovereignty while safeguarding shared strategic interests.

On Sri Lanka and the Maldives

- Recognise that influence in the Indian Ocean flows from economic stabilisation, connectivity, and crisis responsiveness, not coercion.
- Replace 'presence' with 'partnership' in the Maldives; institutionalise security cooperation so engagement is enduring, not episodic.

On Myanmar and Afghanistan

- Pursue pragmatic dual engagement with Myanmar; maintain contact with all stakeholders; fence portions of the border; enhance counterinsurgency capability.
- Continue calibrated engagement with Afghanistan; invest in capacity building; harden border security; treat domestic preparedness as forward defence.

On Pakistan

- Treat Pakistan's hostility not as an occasional crisis to be managed but as a structural feature of the relationship to be countered with substantial resolve.
- Calibrate responses to account for faster crisis evolution and decision-making, more prone to error.

Broader Strategic Direction

- Air Marshal Dixit concluded that the Neighbourhood First Policy, the Sagar Doctrine, and the expansion of defence diplomacy must be sustained, strengthened, and made more consistent. India must shape the regional order proactively rather than merely responding to events; the central challenge is not reaction but architecture.
- Wars are no longer fought only with armies; they are fought with infrastructure loans, political suggestions, drone manufacturing agreements, and constitutional amendments. India must respond with military readiness alongside diplomatic agility, economic resilience, and technological self-reliance.

Following the address, Air Marshal Dixit also released the book 'The Secret War: Inside the Dark Nexus of Global Terror' written by Dr Sreoshi Sinha. Published by Pentagon Press, the book provides a compelling exploration of the clandestine networks driving global instability.

SESSION 1- PAKISTAN POST-OPERATION SINDOOR

ADDRESS BY AMB AJAY BISARIA ON COUP-LESS COUP - IMPACT OF PAKISTAN'S EMERGING RELATIONS WITH THE US, ARAB WORLD, CHINA AND OPTIONS FOR INDIA

The speech by Amb Ajay Bisaria examined the evolving internal dynamics of Pakistan, particularly the nature of military control, and its implications for India. The speaker analysed the historical pattern of military rule in Pakistan, the evolution towards 'coup-less coups' and hybrid regimes, the contrasting doctrines of recent army chiefs, and the current poly-crisis facing the country. The discussion covered Operation Sindoor's impact on regime consolidation, Pakistan's foreign policy directions, and concluded with strategic questions for India's policy framework.

The major aspects covered by the speaker are as follows:

1. Evolution of Military Rule in Pakistan

- The speaker outlined the history of military rule in Pakistan, noting three coups in the 20th century: Ayub Khan (1958), Zia-ul-Haq (1970s), and Musharraf (1999). Each ruled for extended periods, with Zia's tenure marking a hard right turn and renewed US partnership after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Musharraf, the architect of Kargil, later sought a grand bargain on Kashmir while becoming a US ally post-9/11.
- The 21st century has witnessed a shift from managed democracy to hybrid regimes. The speaker explained that Pakistan now experiences 'coup-less coups', where the army gains control through a civilian facade without formally seizing power. General Bajwa (2016-2022) exemplified this, being instrumental in both the selection and ejection of Imran Khan.
- The speaker highlighted that, unlike in other nations, a Pakistani army chief's doctrine is not defence-oriented but an ideological tool for establishing power equations.

2. The Bajwa Doctrine vs The Munir Doctrine

- The Bajwa doctrine represented recognition that Pakistan's economy was sinking and required moving away from jihadism towards privileging economic development. However, the speaker characterised Bajwa as a 'hesitating

reformer' lacking complete conviction, noting that Pulwama occurred during his tenure.

- The Munir doctrine draws from Pakistan's foundational mythologies. General Asim Munir combines aspects of Jinnah and Zia-ul-Haq, invoking the two-nation theory, referring to Kashmir as the 'Shah Rag' (jugular vein) of Pakistan, and repositioning the army as the defender of ideological frontiers. Analysts cited by the speaker describe Munir as an 'Islamist in uniform,' leading an army that acts more like an insurgent outfit.

3. Pakistan's Poly-Crisis

Entering its fifth year since 2021, Pakistan faces simultaneous political, economic, and security crises:

- **Political Crisis:** Imran Khan was selected with military backing in 2018 but was ousted by 2022. The May 9th incident saw protesters target GHQ and corps commander residences, the most open challenge to army authority in recent times. The 2024 election was so brazenly rigged that, without it, PTI might have won a two-thirds majority.
- **Economic Crisis:** The 24th IMF program is making no significant difference. Pakistan will almost certainly require a 25th program, as it lacks the business model to cover its costs.
- **Security Challenge:** Pakistan faces threats from Pashtun and Baloch groups (TTP, TTA), compounded by challenges emanating from Afghanistan.

4. Operation Sindoor and Its Implications

- The speaker noted that the Pahalgam attack represented an attempt at regime consolidation, a standard ploy where a weak regime uses managed conflict with India to strengthen its position.
- Following Operation Sindoor, General Munir received two promotions: to the rank of field marshal and to the post of chief of defence forces. The operation reflected Pakistan's panic over the army's control over the navy and air force in an air-dominated battle. Through the 27th Amendment, Munir has effectively given himself indefinite rule.
- The speaker warned that whenever the regime faces trouble, there exists a perverse incentive for short, managed conflict with India, making the dangers of terrorism and instigation larger.

5. Pakistan's Foreign Policy

- Pakistan's foreign policy is dominated by the army, with China as its primary partner. Operation Sindoor demonstrated a collaborative battlefield that became a live laboratory for Chinese equipment.
- Transactional diplomacy with the US created an illusion of success, with President Trump hosting Pakistani leadership and claiming credit for the ceasefire. Other engagements include the crypto deal with US entities, counter-terrorism cooperation with CENTCOM, and the mutual defence agreement with Saudi Arabia.

6. Questions for India: Options and Considerations

- The speaker noted that India faces a Pakistan where the deep state and key foreign policy decisions are taken by the army. The central diplomatic challenge, he observed, is identifying the appropriate interlocutor, as conversations with civilian leadership may not carry significant weight.
- The speaker outlined India's policy evolution as follows:
 - Following the URI in 2016: No talks with terrorism.
 - Following Pulwama and Balakot in 2019: No trade with terrorism.
 - Following Operation Sindoor in 2025: No water for terrorism (through abeyance of the Indus Waters Treaty).
- He observed that this has created a new normal where every act of terrorism is treated as an act of war.
- The speaker concluded by posing several questions for consideration. He asked whether the policy of no talks, no trade, and no water has run its course. He questioned whether there is value in engaging the Pakistan army as a forever interlocutor to mitigate risk.
- He further pondered whether India can maintain a posture of treating every act of terrorism as an act of war while simultaneously challenging the myth of not talking to Pakistan.
- Finally, he raised the question of whether there is value in engaging the Pakistan army in conversation while maintaining a firm stance against terrorism.

SESSION 1: PANEL DISCUSSION 1

PANEL DISCUSSION TO INCLUDE PAKISTAN'S EMERGING RELATIONS WITH THE US, ARAB WORLD, CHINA AND OPTIONS FOR INDIA:

After the speech, a panel discussion was convened to examine Pakistan's emerging relations with the United States, the Arab world, and China, and to explore options for India. Ambassador Ajay Bisaria served as the Session Chair.

The panellists were:

1. Dr C. Raja Mohan, who addressed Pakistan-US relations
2. Lt Gen PJS Pannu, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd.), who addressed Pakistan-Arab World relations
3. Dr Dattesh Parulekar, who addressed Pakistan-China relations

To maintain the flow of discussion, the chair dispensed with formal introductory remarks and proceeded directly to the panel discussion, posing the opening question to which the panellists responded. The various aspects covered by the panellists are as follows:

1. Dr C. Raja Mohan

On the topic of Pakistan-US relations, Dr C. Raja Mohan delivered the following analysis.

- Dr Rajamohan observed that Pakistan has consistently demonstrated skill in tactical manoeuvres and achieving tactical successes. However, its history of concrete, strategic achievements remains limited. The speaker noted that Pakistan's relationship with major powers has been intense but highly episodic, driven by tactical rather than strategic changes.
- He highlighted that Pakistan possesses significant inherent leverage derived from its large population, nuclear arsenal, and strategic location at the confluence of the Gulf, South Asia, Central Asia, and China.
- However, the speaker noted that the country's relative economic decline and persistent internal turbulence prevent it from capitalising on emerging opportunities. Furthermore, the speaker pointed out that Pakistan is locked in

conflict with both India and Afghanistan, which prevents it from seizing opportunities that arise.

- He observed that for six decades, Pakistan maintained strong relationships with both the US and China, the world's two largest economies. The speaker noted that paradoxically, Pakistan has little to show for this except the 26th IMF program, highlighting a failure to translate diplomatic ties into economic progress.
- The speaker noted that for four years under the Biden administration, there was no high-level contact between the White House and Pakistan. The speaker observed that, under the second Trump administration, engagement improved, attributing this to Pakistan's active outreach following its geopolitical sidelining.
- The speaker pointed out clear limits to Pakistan's utility as a US partner. When a stabilisation force was announced, Indonesia took the lead role with 8,000 troops, while Pakistan could not deliver. Additionally, the speaker noted that Pakistan's elevation of Islamic ideology internally creates contradictions that constrain its foreign policy, making it unable to act against Iran even if requested by Gulf allies.
- The speaker highlighted that despite tactical outreach to the US, the structural depth of the Pakistan-China relationship remains intact. Military exercises like Operation Sindoor demonstrated detailed integration between Pakistani and Chinese commands. The speaker quoted Pakistani sources describing the relationship as 'higher than the Himalayas, deeper than the Indian Ocean, and sweeter than honey.'
- He characterised recent Pakistani overtures to the US as offering access to its resources and mining assets, with a \$6 trillion figure being discussed. However, the speaker questioned whether these resources can actually be mined and delivered.
- Regarding cryptocurrency initiatives, the speaker noted that these were driven by 'fly-by-night operators' and non-resident Pakistanis, with benefits likely accruing to the Trump family rather than Pakistan.
- The speaker observed that Beijing has been publicly unperturbed by the affinity between Pakistan's military leadership and the Trump administration. He also assessed that China has calculated that American interest in Pakistan is waxing

and waning on a whim rather than through serious strategic calculus, underscoring China's confidence in managing its relationship with Pakistan.

- The relationship with India is the primary driver of its foreign policy loyalties. Pakistan seeks alignment with any power that supports it against India. While this role is no longer guaranteed in the US, it remains unchanged in China. The speaker noted that China's goal is to limit India's primacy in South Asia, while Pakistan seeks parity with India.
- The speaker assessed that Pakistan currently has sufficient room to engage with both the US and China, though limits will be reached as US-China tensions multiply. The speaker noted that China does not publicly question Pakistan's US relationship, based on confidence that it can ultimately manage Pakistan.

2. Lt Gen PJS Pannu, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)

On the topic of Pakistan-Arab World relations, Lt Gen PJS Pannu (Retd) delivered the following analysis.

- Lt Gen PJS Pannu observed that wherever oil is present, conflict and competition for control follow. Pakistan's Gulf engagement was described as a combination of religion and oil, while America's interest combines oil, power, and regional defence.
- The General noted that since its inception, Pakistan has positioned itself as a leader of the Muslim world, leveraging its manpower and military strength as a natural security provider to the Gulf. Regarding Saudi Arabia's holy shrines, the speaker highlighted that Pakistan was uniquely positioned to provide security guarantees on behalf of the Muslim world.
- He identified Saudi Arabia and the UAE as critically important to Pakistan's economy, given their large diaspora, substantial remittances, and job opportunities.
- Despite these ties, he noted a fundamental disconnect: Pakistanis and Arabs share little commonality. No significant number of Pakistanis speak Arabic, and Arab League members view Pakistan primarily as a religion-based state without a shared language or ideology.

- The speaker explained that in the 1970s, Pakistan leveraged the 'Islamic bomb' concept to secure Arab funding, presenting its nuclear program as a guarantee for the Muslim world. The speaker noted that A.Q. Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto engaged in technology sharing, providing know-how and components to Iran and, eventually, to North Korea.
- The speaker detailed profound military integration between Pakistan and the Gulf states:
 - Fifty per cent of the UAE military, including half its pilots, were Pakistani personnel.
 - Five former chiefs of air staff of the UAE have been Pakistani.
 - Pakistan provided pilots to Egypt and Jordan during the wars with Israel.
 - The Saudi-Pakistan Air Force Organisation was created in 1982, with Pakistan providing a brigade and approximately 30,000 troops to Saudi Arabia.
 - In the 1970s, Pakistan provided an armoured brigade to the UAE along with instructors.
 - Pakistan has been deeply embedded in training the Army, Navy, Air Force, and special forces of most Arab nations.
 - A significant portion of trainees in Pakistani military academies comes from Arab nations.
 - Former ISI chiefs, including Sujaib Pasha, have served as security advisors to the UAE.
 - General Rahel Sharif, a former Army chief, now heads a coalition of 41 Islamic nations on counter-terrorism.
- He noted that the contemporary conflict landscape has shifted, leaving Pakistan uncertain of its identity and alignment regarding Islam, the Arab world, and the Persian Gulf. He emphasised that Pakistan should not be viewed in isolation, being Punjabi-dominated and grappling with internal problems while constantly looking to the Arab world.
- Regarding the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement of September 2025, the speaker noted that Saudi Arabia does not consider it India-centric, though Pakistan may interpret it as such.

- The speaker described Pakistan as geographically ‘sandwiched’ between two neighbours with complex relations. To the west lies Taliban Afghanistan, with tribal commonalities but conflict over the Durand Line. Personal conflicts exist between generals and warlords over the management of drug money.
- The speaker noted that Pakistan has historically been used as a ‘firm base’ by external powers, first the Americans and now the Chinese, for securing energy and ocean access, rather than for achieving its own strategic depth.
- The speaker cautioned against underestimating the Pakistan army and its politically astute generals. During the Ukraine crisis, Pakistani military leadership engaged with the US while the civilian Prime Minister engaged with Moscow, demonstrating multi-layered engagement capabilities.
- India's stable relationship with the Arab world, in contrast to Pakistan, was highlighted:
 - India maintains a large diaspora, receives substantial remittances, and ensures energy security through regional ties.
 - No Arab country has made statements against India on Kashmir.
 - Saudi Arabia has never engaged on Kashmir as Pakistan would desire.
 - When Pakistan attempts to use India to gain leverage in the Arab world, it has consistently failed.

3. Dr Dattesh Parulekar

On the topic of Pakistan-China relations, Dr Dattesh Parulekar laid down the following analysis:

- Dr Dattesh Parulekar noted that traditional descriptions of the China-Pakistan relationship as Tactical, Transactional, and Transient have reached an inflexion point during Operation Sindoor. The speaker characterised the relationship as now a ‘collusive compact’ that is strategic, straddling, and systemic in nature.
- He observed that since India's abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, China has moved the UN Security Council three times in favour of Pakistan. China has made strong assertions regarding the Shaksgam Valley, framing it as natural Chinese territory. The speaker suggested China is implicitly indicating that Kashmir is no longer just part of a CPEC spur but a core national interest.

- The speaker identified three layers to the China-Pakistan relationship:
 - The Integration Layer involves increasing integration and building capacity for Pakistan, ensuring that capacity leads to 'strategic capacitation', converting capacity into enhanced capability across ISR and cyber support areas.
 - Regionalisation Layer where China is promoting mini-lateral formulations with Pakistan as the anchor, including trilateral formats with Afghanistan and meetings with Bangladesh in Kunming. The speaker noted China has been explicit in not accepting Indian leadership in South Asia, excluding India from regional forums while giving Pakistan a central role.
 - Externalisation Layer: The speaker explained that the critical aspect of China's Belt and Road Initiative is not the horizontal lines but the 'spurs' connecting land and maritime domains. This land-maritime continuum is central to BRI, with Pakistan playing a key role.
- The speaker noted that three Central Asian leaders visited Pakistan consecutively-the Kyrgyz leader in December, the Kazakh leader in January, and the Uzbek leader in February-the first such visits in two decades, resulting in strategic partnership announcements. He identified China's 'invisible nudging hand' in facilitating these engagements.
- He highlighted CPEC 2.0 as increasingly important, with focus shifting from a bilateral project to a 'labyrinth' connecting through Afghanistan to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. This approach embeds Pakistan within a larger strategic framework, mainstreaming it into China's South Asia policy to keep India in check.
- The speaker observed that Beijing remains publicly unperturbed by Pakistan's outreach to the Trump administration, calculating that American interest in Pakistan is waxing and waning. Unlike Venezuela, where China stopped grants upon recognising the country's decline, China continues to prop up Pakistan despite its indebtedness. The speaker noted that CPEC funds continue because China recognises Pakistan's strategic value vis-à-vis India and South Asia.

In his concluding remarks, Ambassador Ajay Bisaria summarised the session's deliberations with a concise observation. He stated that the key takeaway from the

discussion is the need to deal with Pakistan as it is, rather than worrying about Pakistan's dealings with the rest of the world.

The panel discussion examined Pakistan's historical relationships with the United States, its deep but complex ties with the Gulf monarchies, and its evolving, systemic alignment with China. The panellists painted a picture of a nation possessing significant strategic assets, nuclear weapons, geographic location, and historical leverage, yet struggling to assert its agency amid persistent internal turbulence and a shifting regional order.

**ADDRESS BY LT GEN D S HOODA, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (RETD) ON
PAKISTAN'S MILITARY DOCTRINE AND STRATEGIC RESTRUCTURING POST-
OPERATION SINDOOR: IMPACT ON INDIA**

Lt Gen D S Hooda (Retd) addressed military issues and doctrinal developments in Pakistan's defence establishment post-Operation Sindoor. He raised two caveats before proceeding: no published doctrine by the Pakistan military post-Operation Sindoor is available, and open-source information on procurement directions, a key indicator of doctrinal focus areas, remains limited. He noted that his analysis would draw on strategic writings, organisational developments, restructuring, the establishment of the Army Rocket Force Command, nuclear command and control restructuring, and the appointment of the CDF. Various aspects covered by Lt Gen Hooda are as follows:

1. Evolution of Pakistan's Military Doctrine

Lt Gen Hooda outlined two critical phases in Pakistan's doctrinal evolution.

- **First Phase (2009-2013):** This period marked Pakistan's response to India's Cold Start doctrine. Through four Azm-i-Nau exercises, Pakistan sought to deny India quick success in the first 72 to 96 hours of an offensive. The new concept of war fighting involved speeding up mobilisation and creating additional reserves at defensive formation levels to strengthen defences against early initiatives, while retaining two strike corps for potential riposte into Indian territory. This gave Pakistan confidence that, despite Indian military superiority, it could hold off without losing too much ground in a short, limited campaign.

- Second Phase (2016 onwards): Following India's shift in strategy post-2016, responding militarily to major terrorist strikes, Pakistan began recalibrating. After the 2016 surgical strikes, Pakistan publicly ignored the incident but privately started considering responses, which manifested in Balakot. Terminologies like 'QPQP' (Quid Pro Quo Plus) emerged, signalling an intention to respond proportionately but slightly more than India's action. The key doctrinal question for Pakistan became how to respond if India attempted military coercion.

2. Pakistan's Doctrinal Thinking Post-Operation Sindoor

- The speaker observed a clear understanding on the Pakistani side that space exists for conventional operations below the nuclear threshold. Pakistan is moving away from relying solely on tactical nuclear weapons as the first line of response and recognises the need to strengthen conventional capability and credibility.
- Regarding QPQP, while Pakistan talks about responding slightly more than India's action, Operation Sindoor did not witness a significant escalation from their side, suggesting this remains more of a narrative than a practised doctrine. The raising of the Army Rocket Force Command was intended to signal stronger conventional deterrence.
- The speaker explained Pakistan's approach to crisis management: crises must be managed to prevent them from spiralling out of control, as Indian conventional superiority would increasingly come into play as escalation progressed.
- Pakistan seeks to demonstrate that it will not be passive or accept Indian action without response, while simultaneously practising restraint. This combination of resolve and restraint is communicated through kinetic action and strategic messaging.

3. Multi-Domain Operations

- Post-Operation Sindoor writings emphasise multi-domain operations as the only way to offset India's conventional superiority through superior technology. There is considerable focus on UAVs, electronic warfare, ISR, cyber, and information operations.

- Pakistan is also discussing strengthening the kill chain through networking. Project Wing 17 aims to network ground stations, AWACS, and satellites to feed a battle picture into pilot cockpits for faster response. China is already providing support in ISR capabilities.
- The appointment of the CDF is intended to strengthen multi-domain operations by bringing all services under unified command. However, when operating across different domains, cyber, information, EW, land, sea, air, escalation management becomes increasingly difficult to control.
- In any limited conflict, information warfare is not a sideshow but a main theatre. With kinetic effects limited, information contestation plays a key role in shaping narratives of victory and defeat. Pakistan emphasises fully integrating information warfare with kinetic operations, cyber warfare, and diplomacy.
- He laid out three threads in Pakistan's information operations:
 - International legitimacy: projecting responsibility and playing the victim card.
 - Domestic resilience: tailoring narratives for the domestic audience.
 - Psychological impact: affecting the adversary's decision-making.

4. Nuclear Dimension

- The speaker noted that emphasis on conventional capabilities does not mean dilution of nuclear importance. Full-spectrum deterrence remains a robust and critical posture, as it limits the risk of conventional conflict by signalling to India that it should not cross certain thresholds. Pakistan dismisses Indian talk of 'nuclear bluff' as disingenuous.
- Regarding Operation Sindoor, Pakistan suggests the nuclear card was not played because the damage was limited and manageable. Pakistan maintains 'deliberate structural ambiguity' regarding its nuclear threshold, keeping India uncertain about the circumstances under which Pakistan might consider nuclear use. The raising of the National Strategic Command is portrayed as a signal of responsible nuclear stewardship and strengthened command and control.
- Pakistan acknowledges the US has played an important role in crisis management and considers third-party mediation essential. However, Pakistan

also recognises that this broker model is eroding due to India's growing geopolitical clout, and relying on third parties for future crisis management carries risks.

- The speaker added that fundamental issues between India and Pakistan must be addressed bilaterally.

5. Recommendations for India

The speaker offered several recommendations:

- There must be complete clarity on what India wishes to achieve when considering military force, whether the destruction of terrorist camps, the destruction of Pakistan's military infrastructure, or the psychological impact. This clarity must precede action.
- Military strategy must encompass everything from initial target selection to crisis termination. India should not play into Pakistan's hands by allowing them to manage escalation. India should set initial targets and determine the terms of conflict termination on its own terms.
- The contest is more cognitive than kinetic. India should focus on the cognitive impact on Pakistan's military leadership, their assessment of risks, costs, and India's resolve. Actions should be planned with an eye on how they shape Pakistani thinking.
- India needs an integrated communication strategy across political, diplomatic, and military levels.
- Should India prioritise successfully managing the next crisis or ensuring it does not happen at all? Current planning focuses on response rather than prevention.
- If India's strategy is to deter Pakistan from using terrorism as an instrument of state policy, then another crisis signifies strategic failure. Pressure must be applied in peacetime to influence Pakistan's military leadership into abandoning terrorism as a policy tool.

SESSION 1: PANEL DISCUSSION 2
IMPACT OF CREATION OF CDF, NEW RAISINGS, PROCUREMENTS AND
DOCTRINAL CHANGES ON INDIA

Chair: Lt Gen PJS Pannu, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)

Panellists:

1. Lt Gen Rakesh Sharma, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)
2. Air Marshal RGK Kapoor, PVSM, AVSM, VM (Retd)
3. Vice Admiral S J Singh, SYSM, PVSM, AVSM, NM (Retd)
4. Lt Gen Dushyant Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)

Chair's Remarks: Lt Gen PJS Pannu (Retd)

- The Chair opened by observing that rapid changes in the Indian neighbourhood are impacting every country, with alignments shifting quickly. On warfare, he noted that while the prediction of high-tech wars has proven true, the assumption of short and swift conflicts has not; once engaged, hostilities continue, requiring doctrines to constantly evolve.
- Discussing Operation Sindoor, the Chair observed that Pakistan's Army Chief found an opportunity in the new normal. General Asim Munir was promoted to Field Marshal, but neither assumed the ceremonial role nor resigned as Army Chief. Instead, he consolidated power, removed the Joint Chiefs of Staff concept, and became Chief of Defence Forces, assuming complete command of the three services and the nuclear arsenal.
- Contrary to global trends toward integration and multi-domain operations, Pakistan opted for complete power consolidation. This was driven by the Army's low point when corps commanders faced attacks from civilians and political parties. Choosing to resist rather than surrender, the Army consolidated its position.
- On the Kill Chain and Strategic Gaps, he emphasised understanding the 'web kill chain,' starting with narratives. Munir built a narrative around the two-nation theory and the jugular vein.
- Following Pahalgam, India used precise missile strikes deep into Pakistani infrastructure. Pakistan identified a critical gap between their proxy warfare,

conventional operations, and India's deep strike capability. To address this, they created a unified command and began boosting deep-strike capabilities, having previously relied solely on drones.

- He laid out certain key restructuring developments:
 - Creation of CDF (4th December): Unified command established with all three services and the National Strategic Command under the CDF.
 - Army Rocket Force Command (13th August 2025): Formed to address gaps in conventional deep strike capability exposed during Operation Sindoor.
 - Procurement Focus: Advanced military delivery systems with Chinese technology and enhanced conventional deterrence, including tactical nuclear weapons.
 - Doctrine and Strategy: Pakistan's doctrine now centres on full-spectrum deterrence under unified command, moving away from service-specific planning towards faster, more aggressive decision-making.
 - With the convergence of cyber and space, AI enables faster decision-making, but cybersecurity remains critical. The Chair observed that the decision cycle has evolved from OODA to OOSDA: Observe, Orient, Secure, Share, Decide, Act.
- The Chair concluded that India must assess the Pakistan Army's capability not only in terms of doctrine, restructuring, and equipment, but also in terms of legal immunity: it is immune from legal provisions, and none will ever be implicated by Pakistan's courts.

The session then proceeded to the panel discussion. Major points discussed by the panellists are as follows:

1. Lt Gen Rakesh Sharma, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)

Topic: Pakistan's Strategy vis-à-vis Indian Land Forces, Asymmetric Warfare, Nuclear Signalling, and Doctrinal Gaps

- The speaker observed that, following Operation Sindoor, a seminar held at the IISS in Pakistan in June 2025 articulated Pakistan's understanding of India's 'Dynamic Response Strategy' (DRS). Pakistan has clubbed the 2016, 2019, and 2025 operations under this label, claiming that India's Cold Start or

proactive strategy has failed and that India lacks the gumption for conventional operations.

- The speaker noted that while Pakistan publishes this assessment, India's Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) were not even employed in these operations, yet India continues to discuss them.
- Pakistan's conclusion, the speaker noted, is that India is only capable of dynamic response and not conventional operations of the type articulated since General Sundarji's era. This raises a serious question: whether India's own strategic articulation has created an impression that it lacks the strength for conventional war.
- The speaker highlighted Pakistan's self-assessment as an asymmetrically weak nation, lacking conventional strength to fight India in any physical or virtual domain where India is ahead.
- However, he noted that historically, symmetrically weaker nations have taken stronger nations to task, Vietnam against China and America, Afghanistan against the USSR and USA. Asymmetrically weaker nations find methodologies to succeed against stronger opponents.
- Pakistan's strategy, therefore, is to avoid fighting in realms where India is stronger. Instead, they seek to fight where India is weaker or lacks the gumption to respond.
- This involves treachery, deviousness, and ambushing, premeditated approaches exploiting India's political decision-making hiccups. Operations must be executed quickly and under pressure to succeed. This is characteristic of asymmetrically weaker nations and has become integral to Pakistani strategy.
- The speaker drew attention to a significant nuclear signal: Pakistan's Field Marshal visited Tampa, Florida, and on US soil declared, 'If we go down, we'll take half the world with us.' Not a single American official or think tank debated or challenged this statement. The speaker noted this was an open nuclear threat to India and the world, met with only minimal noise, effectively normalising such rhetoric.
- The speaker outlined clear trends from Pakistan's post-Sindoor acquisitions:

- On 5th September, Pakistan signed a contract with PSAT China to buy 20 satellites off the shelf and another 32 satellites in 2026, all in Low Earth Orbit (LEO). This will provide seamless battlefield transparency. The total cost is approximately \$400 million for all 52 satellites, which have been booked and paid for.
- Pakistan claims significant upgrades to Link 17, creating connectivity between the Air Force and Army.
- These acquisitions demonstrate Pakistan's intent to leverage space-based ISR to continuously monitor India.
- The speaker observed that India is bound to fight both old and new wars; this is the destiny of a nation with disputed borders that cannot be resolved in the foreseeable future. India is committed to the 1963 and 1993 resolutions to defend its borders as and when required.
- He noted that India must subsume and deploy all available technologies, demonstrating initiative and the strength to strategize. While the recent release of a vision document is welcome, the speaker noted that it has come 80 years too late.
- More critically, the Army, Navy, and Air Force have their own doctrines, and the joint services doctrine was written after these service doctrines to align with them. The correct approach, he emphasised, should be to first produce a joint doctrine from which service doctrines would flow.
- He concluded that India must first pull up its socks and consider how it will fight, what warfighting entails, and its strategy. Only after this can the technology and the structural requirements be discussed.

2. Air Marshal RGK Kapoor, PVSM, AVSM, VM (Retd)

- Air Marshal RGK Kapoor (Retd) drew parallels with the Russia-Ukraine war, noting that tactical drones have created a no-go zone of approximately 15-20 km on the ground, while Beyond Visual Range (BVR) air-to-air missiles have created a no-go zone of 150-250 km in the air. On the ground, this is achieved through loitering munitions, kamikaze drones, and First-Person View (FPV) drones.

- He noted that historically, Pakistan's air strategy against India centred on proactive, pre-emptive strikes in conventional battles to inflict maximum attrition on the Indian Air Force, thereby offsetting their numerical disadvantage. Following such strikes, they would fall back to air-to-air engagements to secure kills and project a narrative of victory.
- Over six decades, Pakistan's force structuring has been exclusively India-centric; from Sabres to F-16s with AMRAAMs, and when India acquired Rafales, Pakistan responded with J-10Cs equipped with PL-15s. The objective was to maximise the no-engagement zone through first-shot capability.
- However, the speaker noted that Pakistan's approach remained tactically oriented, fighting tactical battles and falling back, a pattern reinforced by Army dominance over the Air Force.
- The speaker emphasised that future conflicts will be shaped by a combination of drone, missile, and aircraft weapon systems as a complete ecosystem. Tactical drones provide tactical advantage, missiles deliver deep-strike capability, and aircraft bring the weight of attack required to target specific targets. All three elements are critical when integrated.
- Post-Operation Sindoor, the speaker observed that Pakistan's primary focus is on achieving integrated air defence, integrating larger surface-to-air missile systems operated by the Army into a decision matrix controlled by the Air Force. During Operation Sindoor, Pakistan possessed weapon systems with adequate range but could not employ them effectively, likely due to integration failures.
- To cut down India's no-go zone, the speaker observed that Pakistan is pursuing multiple capabilities. These include acquiring stealth capability through fifth-generation fighter aircraft, collaborating with Turkey on manned-unmanned teaming involving the Khan fighter and Kizil Elma stealth drone, and potentially acquiring stealth J-35As from China.
- The speaker noted that these capabilities would restore Pakistan's first-shot capability and enable closer engagement.

The speaker outlined several implications for India:

- India will need a much better ISR system capable of dynamically picking up threats- drones and missiles require continuous tracking for targeting. Effective

Battle Damage Assessment (BDA) is also essential to avoid wasting resources on repeated missions against the same targets.

- Pakistan is likely to pursue a leaner force structure designed to achieve Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) effects, with better integration of its air defence system, which failed during Operation Sindoor.
- The creation of the rocket force and drone capabilities represents a third critical development. Pakistan is likely to move toward indigenised drone manufacturing, with China providing PNT (Positioning, Navigation, Timing) support for accuracy, as seen in the current Iran conflict.
- Long-range weapons and no-contact warfare will continue. India must find solutions to breach the no-go zone created by BVR missiles.
- The speaker noted that the transition to autonomous systems cannot occur in a single step. It must proceed through progressive autonomy, first semi-autonomous systems, then complete autonomy.
- He cited Iran's current practice: launching drones and having them engaged by AI-enabled systems, which analyse drone trajectories, determine the most efficient weapon for interception, and ensure the minimum and most applicable weapon system is used.

3. Vice Admiral S J Singh, SYSM, PVSM, AVSM, NM (Retd)

- Vice Admiral S J Singh (Retd) observed that all issues raised by previous panellists regarding land and air are equally applicable at sea, with forces operating on the surface, above the surface, and additionally below the surface, a third dimension unique to maritime warfare.
- Drawing from the 1971 war, he highlighted the strategic significance of opening a third front. In addition to land and air, India opened a maritime front that bottled up adversary forces, preventing them from receiving support or escaping. This strategic pressure remains the crux of maritime operations; the sea is a strategic theatre.
- The speaker emphasised that any action in international waters, which begins just 12 nautical miles (25 km) from the coast, carries immediate strategic ramifications. While six personnel crossing the Line of Control might not raise an eyebrow beyond brigade headquarters, six personnel captured or killed in

international waters becomes an international incident within six hours. This is the complexity of operating at sea.

- He illustrated further complexity by asking the audience to imagine conducting air operations in the Gulf amid 200 flights, neutral military, civilian, and potential adversary aircraft, while identifying and engaging only the adversary without affecting anyone else.
- Operating alongside neutrals, international shipping, and both friendly and adversarial vessels demands paramount maritime domain awareness to enable correct actions and compliance with the laws of armed conflict.
- Just as the first principle of land warfare is interdicting lines of communication, the same applies at sea, except that sea lines of communication operate directly at the strategic level rather than operational or tactical levels.
- The speaker noted that the effect on Pakistan from just ten days of war elsewhere is evident; they are already rationing fuel. Another week, and the country would be defenceless should an incident occur, with no fuel to fight.
- During Operation Sindoor, the Indian Navy maintained a forward-restrained posture, while the Pakistan Navy ran back close to the coast. The only capability Pakistan could exercise was sea denial using submarines to push out long-range vectors, for which India has adequate counter-firepower.
- The net result was that nothing moved in or out of Pakistani ports for 3-4 days. If stretched to 14 or 40 days, this represents strategic coercion and pressure: the ability to fight a war without firing a shot by opening a strategic front and choking sea lines of communication, whether for energy, ammunition, food, or other vital cargo.
- The speaker noted that over the last few years, Pakistan has been undergoing a resurgence in maritime capabilities. This resurgence has been ongoing for a decade and has not yet reached a critical, alarming point, but it is around the corner. Key developments include:
 - A major submarine resurgence underway.
 - Growing drone capability at sea.
 - Expanding long-range vectors.
 - Rapidly improving ISR and network communications capabilities.

- Additionally, open-source reports indicate Pakistan is once again training terrorists to operate at sea. The maritime front is certainly an area of core interest to Pakistan, and it will look to exploit it in the times ahead.
- The speaker concluded that parallel developments of maritime capability have been ongoing in India, and the edge still remains. This edge must be maintained in technological, training, and doctrinal terms.

4. Lt Gen Dushyant Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)

- Lt Gen Dushyant Singh (Retd) began by offering his personal view that grey zone warfare is 'old wine in a new bottle.' What has changed, he noted, is the intensity with which various nations, especially non-state actors, are now inclined to use grey-zone tools. In the Indian context, he observed that during Operation Sindoor, the only operational line running continuously from start to finish was the grey zone.
- The speaker highlighted that collusion between China and Pakistan was most pronounced in the grey zone domain. He provided a striking example: a YouTube video in Pakistan claiming that India had lost six aircraft initially had about 900 viewers.
- By the next morning, the same YouTube video, operating under the guidance of Beijing University, had drawn 533 million views in a single night. While practically impossible through organic means, technology enabled this manipulation.
- The speaker noted that technology has played a significant role in creating grey-zone narratives as an effective tool to influence not only the adversary but also international audiences. It was after this that channels like Al Jazeera began picking up the issue.
- The public, he observed, is uncontrolled in the grey zone; feed them something attractive, and they will run with it. A new narrative was created in the United States targeting Indian society, with hashtags like 'Indians are dirty' going viral. When such narratives go viral, the leadership of that country gets affected, especially if the administration lacks governance experience, as was seen in the US at that time.

- The speaker revealed that the Chinese are conducting a detailed analysis of Indian media, mapping individuals and then feeding content likely to incite them.
- He cited a direct tweet from a clear ISI handle to multiple individuals, which stated: 'Initially, we did not know what to do when the India-Pakistan spat took place on 6th May and thereafter, but now we have got hold of the narrative. The entire nation is behind the Pakistan Army. Whatever you may like to do, whether you stop the Indus water, etc., before the water of the Indus dries, there will be a religious war in your country.'
- The tweet targeted the government, the public, and influencers, aiming to change their voice or tact. This, the speaker emphasised, is the narrative war.
- The speaker analysed the implications of Pakistan's Field Marshal assuming dual hats post-Operation Sindoor.
- This consolidation has created two major problems for India in the grey zone. In the narrative domain, there is now no control from Pakistan's political hierarchy; narratives are directly driven by General Munir.
- This will affect grey-zone threats in three ways. First, there will be a surge in deniable proxy groups and actions inside India, a trend already underway. Second, deniable small-scale actions that keep things below the threshold of war will continue, with internal fault lines being exercised; the Red Fort incident being a prime example.
- Third, since everything is now Munir's responsibility, if he cannot manage the Afghanistan situation effectively, there could be a diversion in Afghanistan to distract his own public, potentially reactivating the eastern front, a danger signal that must be closely tracked.
- The speaker noted that Pakistan has willingly achieved a whole-of-nation approach because one man now drives everything. In contrast, India has no owner at the apex level.
- The speaker recommended creating a National War Centre capable of tackling grey-zone operations. Grey zone is not an activity that can be switched on and off- it is persistent, played out over long periods, including during war.
- He suggested that the definition of grey zone needs revision. It is not merely an activity between war and peace. Rather, it is an activity ongoing during peace,

between peace and war, and during war, with intensities varying, highly intense during war, moderate in interim periods, and low-intense during peace.

During the Q&A session following the panellists' presentations, the discussion highlighted that while India is making good progress in cyber operations and information warfare, there is a lack of coordination at the apex level that needs to be resolved. The speaker recommended creating a National War Council, a fusion between the National Security Council, the three services, and the Chief of Defence Staff. It was emphasised that unless such a council is created, grey zone threats cannot be tackled effectively. This apex-level organisation is essential for managing both hybrid and conventional operations and should precede the establishment of theatre commands, which are still needed.

SESSION 2 - NEPAL - FROM STABLE KINGDOM TO FRACTURED DEMOCRACY

ADDRESS BY AMB PANKAJ SARAN ON GROWING INSTABILITY IN NEPAL AND ITS IMPACT ON FUTURE RELATIONS WITH INDIA

Ambassador Pankaj Saran, in his speech, observed that the Indian neighbourhood has undergone significant upheaval over the last two years, prompting criticism of India's handling of regional relationships. He laid down that the key lesson from 2023 onward is the need to hold firm, avoid confusing short-term challenges with medium-term trends, and develop wisdom to understand neighbourhood processes. The speaker emphasised that if India cannot understand its own neighbourhood, it cannot expect to understand the world. Despite claims of familiarity, the speaker highlighted a significant expertise gap regarding smaller neighbours across academia, government, security establishments, and intelligence agencies.

The major aspects covered by the speaker are as follows:

1. Structural Realities of the Neighbourhood

- The speaker highlighted that physical proximity, shared borders, language, food, and religion do not automatically translate into a genuine understanding of a neighbour.
- The speaker pointed out that, unlike China or the United States, India lacks a national consensus on whether to call the region 'South Asia' or the 'Indian subcontinent.' The speaker stressed that words matter, as terminology reflects the strategic perspective driving relationships. The speaker expressed a preference for 'Indian sub-continent' as recognition that the region remains a work in progress.
- The speaker observed that while neighbouring countries possess legal sovereignty, almost all define their sovereignty in relation to India. For Pakistan and Bangladesh, the speaker noted that it added complexity, as both were part of India until recently, making their psychological mindset toward India even more intricate.
- He laid down that across Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, internal political processes, foreign policies, and defence policies are 100 per cent focused on India.
- The speaker also noted that travelling to these countries reveals how large India looms. Their expectations from India are consequently very different, and frictions begin when expected responses are not received. The speaker warned that these frictions can escalate from small narratives into military campaigns.

2. The India-Nepal Dynamic

- The speaker observed that any balance sheet of India-Nepal relations would show positives outweighing negatives: shared religion, similar history, open border regime, the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, and hundreds of thousands of Nepalese working in India. The speaker noted that there is no real geostrategic contestation between the two countries.
- The speaker drew a comparison with the Canada-United States relationship, highlighting power asymmetry. Despite this, more than one Nepalese Prime Minister has declared the era of Indian domination over.

- The speaker noted that one Communist Party leader, who became Prime Minister multiple times, successfully demonstrated that playing the anti-India card was good politics, allowing anti-Indianism to flourish.
- The speaker pointed out a strategic miscalculation: India assumed the monarchy was the seat of Nepal's pro-China policies and that transitioning to multi-party democracy would serve Indian interests. However, 19 years of post-monarchy Nepal (2006-2025) have seen only ups and downs.
- In September 2025, amid political chaos and economic instability, a generation under 20 took to the streets, burning parliament, invading government houses, and beating political leaders. The speaker described this as an unanticipated revolution.

3. The March 5th Elections

- The speaker characterised the March 2025 elections as among the most historic in Nepal's history, observing that the nation now appears as a victorious democracy.
- The speaker laid down that all established political parties were wiped out, with Nepali Congress leader Gagan Thapa defeated in his own constituency and KP Oli and his UML party completely eliminated from parliament. The speaker emphasised that not a single shot was fired; only the ballot decided the outcome. For the first time in decades, the speaker noted, Nepal will have a political party with a two-thirds majority, led by 35-year-old former Kathmandu Mayor Balen Shah, who is a Madhesi.
- The speaker highlighted the historic significance of a Prime Minister from the Madhes region emerging for the first time. The speaker further emphasised that this transformation occurred without violence, without any questioning of the electoral process, and most notably, without India being a factor in the election.

4. Questions for India

- The speaker laid down several questions for consideration. He stated that the onus is on India to respond to the revolution of expectations and the emergence of a new generation, questioning whether India will do business as usual or rise to the enormity of the occasion.

- He also emphasised that the first order of business is to comprehend what happened in Nepal, asking whether India has grasped this political earthquake or remains focused on West Asia, Iran, war, and energy, thereby overlooking developments right next door.
- On the question of strategic response, the speaker posed how the dominant power should handle a smaller neighbour asserting itself, questioning whether India should treat it as a threat, show temper, respond with indulgence, or formulate a strategic impulse.
- On general principles, the speaker reiterated that India must hold firm, avoid confusing short-term with medium-term challenges, and develop wisdom to understand neighbourhood processes.
- Finally, the speaker observed that before comparing India with other regions, the country lacks a national consensus on even the correct terminology for defining the region it inhabits, stressing that words matter because they reflect the strategic perspective that drives relationships.

**PANEL DISCUSSION TO INCLUDE OPTIONS AVAILABLE TO INDIA TO
ADDRESS THE GROWING ASPIRATIONS OF GEN Z**

The panel discussion on 'Options Available to India to Address Growing Aspirations of Gen Z' was initiated, followed by the speech that featured insights from Dr Sriparna Pathak, General Pawan Bahadur Pande, and Lt Gen Shokin Chauhan. The session examined Nepal's recent political transformation, the emergence of a Gen Z-led government, and the strategic options available to India for engaging this new demographic while navigating historical sensitivities and institutional relationships. Amb Pankaj Saran assumed the role of Session Chair.

The panellists were:

1. Dr Sriparna Pathak- Nepal-China Relations
2. Lt Gen Pawan Bahadur Pande (Retd), NA- Nepal-India Relations
3. Lt Gen Shokin Chauhan PVSM, AVSM, YSM, SM, VSM (Retd)- Expert Military Perspective

Ambassador Pankaj Saran, who delivered the speech, subsequently took over as Session Chair. Given the limited time available, he moved straight to the panel discussion by opening the floor with a question to the panellists.

The various aspects covered by the panellists are as follows:

1. Dr Sriparna Pathak

On the topic of Nepal-China relations, Dr Sriparna Pathak presented the following analyses:

- Dr Sriparna Pathak observed that Nepal now has a completely new Gen Z government, a development she characterised as extraordinary and unprecedented. She noted that while the revolution stemmed from issues of corruption, joblessness, and social media mobilisation, it had nothing to do with China or external meddling.
- She observed that over the last year, there has been growing consciousness in Nepal about predatory loans and a lack of clarity regarding China's Belt and Road Initiative. The new Gen Z-led government, she noted, adopts a 'Nepal first' approach with sovereignty as its primary concern.
- The speaker emphasised that this government is not ideologically driven by communist-versus-capitalist frameworks or India-versus-China binaries. Led by a 35-year-old Prime Minister, this administration represents technocratic leadership that will closely track India's actions, words, and body language. The speaker highlighted that this generation utilises apps, Discord, and Signal groups for mobilisation and engagement.
- The speaker laid down that, despite India remaining Nepal's largest trading partner with significant bilateral trade volumes, China has been more effective at shaping perceptions in Nepal.
- She provided the following economic data: bilateral trade with India stands at \$8.5 billion, and India supplies 65 per cent of Nepal's petroleum. Recent developments include trade deals, 400-kV cross-border transmission lines signed in late 2025, long-term energy pacts, and projects like Arun 3, being developed by Indian firms.
- In contrast, China's BRI commitment stands at \$13 billion, but is skewed toward imports with no equivalent export stability in energy and infrastructure. Despite

these tangible Indian contributions, the speaker noted that perception has not been effectively created.

- During the September 2025 protests, the speaker observed that 48 to 50 per cent social media adoption had exploded. Bans on Facebook and WhatsApp mobilised over 100,000 people, while TikTok remained accessible in Nepal. Protesters utilised VPNs, Telegram, and various digital apps for mobilisation.
- The speaker noted that understanding this age group, their aspirations, and their methodology offers India an opportunity to engage effectively.
- The speaker proposed leveraging digital platforms for vital engagement, taking lessons from the September 2025 protests.
 - She suggested launching hashtag campaigns such as #IndiaNepalRising or #DebtFreeHimalayas on TikTok and Instagram.
 - She recommended collaborating with Gen Z influencers already active in cyberspace, citing the example of 'Gen Z 212', a Nepal-based user with 100,000 followers.
 - In terms of content creation, she proposed developing 15-second videos comparing Indian-funded projects, such as the 900 MW Arun 3 dam, which generates jobs for 5,000 locals, with underutilised Chinese infrastructure projects.
 - She also suggested interactive tools, such as a gamified app called 'Himalaya Balance' or quizzes on aid impacts, that allow users to simulate leadership decisions and learn from examples like Sri Lanka's Hambantota port to showcase the perils of BRI entanglement.
 - Regarding social media engagement, she recommended amplifying content on X through targeted threads and polls that compare India's grants with China's loans, drawing lessons from the Chinese embassy's social media practices in New Delhi.
- The speaker recommended using Google Analytics to track engagement rates and conducting pre- and post-awareness polls targeting approximately 10,000 respondents, aiming for a 20 per cent shift in sentiment within six months. She noted that similar outcomes have been achieved in Sri Lanka's anti-BRI youth campaigns.

- The speaker emphasised that engagement must never adopt an overtly pro-India framing, as this would invite backlash. Instead, she stressed emphasising 'Nepal first' sovereignty, which aligns with what Gen Z in Nepal wants. By empowering Gen Z with facts over slogans, she observed that strategies can transform passive scepticism into active advocacy.
- The speaker suggested hosting development debates at universities such as Tribhuvan University and Jawaharlal Nehru University to build connections between Gen Z populations in both countries.
- She recommended establishing influencer and peer networks, potentially identifying 100 Gen Z ambassadors from post-uprising groups. Media collaborations with Nepal's outlets, such as The Rising Nepal, utilising data from research institutions, could lead to sustained long-term engagement.
- The speaker noted that India has not focused on Gen Z engagement thus far. Even after the recent AI Summit in India, where AI was acknowledged as particularly interesting to Gen Z, there has been no planning for the utilisation of digital tools to engage Nepal's youth. The speaker concluded that India has not used these tools to date.

2. Lt Gen Pawan Bahadur Pande (Retd), NA

- General Pande offered a counterpoint, observing that while the RSP swept the elections, the perception that other parties have been completely wiped out is incorrect. He noted that established parties remain deeply rooted and will oppose not in Parliament but on the streets, a dynamic that requires careful attention.
- The speaker described the election result as most unexpected, though some on the ground had predicted the RSP sweep. He characterised Nepal as unique, a country where citizens could burn half of Kathmandu one day and be out cleaning streets the next.
- Regarding Nepalese attitudes toward India, he posed a fundamental question: whether the lack of affection is a Nepalese problem or an Indian problem, emphasising the need to understand this dynamic.
- To engage the current government, General Pande stressed the importance of understanding the millennials who will run the country. He observed that they

do not think like old political leaders, do not want to discuss geostrategy, and instead want to advance, are tech-savvy, desire start-ups, and want good relations with India.

- General Pande noted that while his father, a drafter of the 1950 treaty, had challenged his Nepalese counterparts to secure a better treaty, the document belongs to a different period and requires review. He highlighted the Eminent People's Group (EPG) report, which was prepared over one to two years but has not received adequate attention, describing it as a very good report.
- The speaker addressed the contentious issue of Gurkha recruitment. Historically, from 1815, the British Indian Army recruited Gurkhas, and recruitment continues today. However, over the last two to three years, the Indian Army has been unable to recruit Gurkhas because the Government of Nepal has denied permission.
- General Pande noted that Agniveer was implemented without notice to the Government of Nepal, and the tripartite agreement among Britain, India, and Nepal was not adhered to. He recommended that the sooner this agreement is reviewed by all three countries, the sooner Gurkha recruitment can resume.
- The speaker explained the historical context of the Kalapani dispute. Following the British war with Nepal, Garhwal and Kumaon were ceded, with the Mahakali River as the boundary. At the top toward the north, the Mahakali curves west, but the British erroneously believed it curved east, a cartographical aggression that changed the boundary.
- More contentious today is Kalapani, which General Pande stated belongs to Nepal and was given to India for a limited period because the opposite river bank is too steep for troop deployment.
- However, misunderstandings have escalated, leading Nepal to incorporate Kalapani into its maps and feature it on banknotes and stamps. He recommended that both governments meet to resolve the issue.

3. Lt Gen Shokin Chauhan PVSM, AVSM, YSM, SM, VSM (Retd)

- Drawing on his three and a half years as Defence Attaché in Kathmandu during the Maoist Jan Andolan, Lt Gen Chauhan observed that the Nepal Army, as an institution, has always remained the most stable, best-liked, and never targeted.

He noted that the Nepal Army and Indian Army function as a single family, training together, sharing weapon systems, and jointly training younger soldiers.

- During the September agitation, the speaker highlighted that the Nepal Army stood tall, saved Kathmandu and other towns from further damage, took over, and handed them back within 2 to 3 days. He emphasised that this institution will survive and continue to thrive.
- Lt Gen Chauhan advocated that, regardless of the political winds in Nepal and whether governments or leaders are pro-India or otherwise, the army-to-army relationship must continue uninterrupted.
- The speaker emphasised that the Himalayas have provided India with magnificent frontiers that cannot be allowed to be penetrated, as they constitute the principal barrier to India. While appreciating Nepal's independence, he noted that Nepal's security directly impacts India's security, a reality acknowledged since 1950.
- He described Nepal as a 'yam between two boulders', the kingdom of the north (China) and the kingdom of the south (India). If Nepal rolls either side, it risks being flattened by the other. This geographic reality must inform all engagement.
- Nepal occupies 147,181 square kilometres, stretching 650 kilometres long and 200 kilometres wide. It occupies absolute strategic space, with East Nepal forming one shoulder of the Siliguri Corridor continuously. The mountains of Nepal open into the great Indian plains at the virtual edge of India's heartland, where defensible lines would be difficult to protect.
- Lt Gen Chauhan noted centuries of military ties, shared frontiers, and Gurkha tradition forming the background of cooperation. During the 1948 Hyderabad operation, Nepal provided assistance with troops led by Major General Sharda Sherjan Bahadur Rana, deployed across Hyderabad, Ranchi, Calcutta, Dehradun, and Ramgarh.
- The speaker concluded that this is a relationship between two sovereign countries that must always remain one of equal brothers. The Indian Army and Nepal Army must always maintain a very close, continued relationship.

With the session running out of time, the Chair dispensed with formal concluding remarks and thanked all the panellists for their insights before closing the discussion.

ADDRESS BY DR SMRUTI S. PATTANAİK, RESEARCH FELLOW, MP-IDSA, ON
'BANGLADESH: FROM STRATEGIC STRENGTH TO AN EMERGING
CHALLENGE'

Dr Smruti S. Pattanaik examined the recent political transformation in Bangladesh, transitioning from a period of 'strategic strength' under the Awami League to the current challenges posed by a new regime. She noted that for 17 years, India and Bangladesh shared a deeply institutionalised relationship characterised by significant growth in trade, security cooperation, and military-to-military ties. The sudden fall of the previous government in August 2024 has introduced a period of uncertainty, requiring a recalibration of India's regional strategy amid rising anti-India sentiments and shifting geopolitical manoeuvres.

The major takeaways from the address are given below.

Key Takeaways:

- The speaker observed that under the previous regime, the relationship reached unprecedented levels of formal cooperation, including annual defence dialogues, joint military exercises (Sampreeti series), and intelligence sharing.
- She highlighted that trade increased manifold to nearly \$14 billion, supported by approximately \$8 billion in Indian lines of credit, which significantly enhanced border security and regional connectivity.
- The speaker noted that the transition from the Awami League to the current BNP-led interim arrangement is viewed as a major strategic challenge for India, accompanied by a visible surge in anti-India sentiment.
- She pointed out that historical patterns suggest anti-India feelings in Bangladesh are often synonymous with anti-Awami League sentiments, a trend that dates back to 1974.

- The speaker drew attention to a notable shift in American foreign policy, with the US moving toward direct bilateral engagement with Bangladesh rather than consulting India as it had in the past.
- Despite past tensions, she noted that the early posture of the current BNP regime appears positive. Early indicators, such as the visit of the DGFI chief to India, suggest a desire to avoid policies that directly hamper Indian interests.

Key Recommendations:

- The speaker recommended that while the initial phase of the current regime is positive, India must closely observe whether this 'politics of contestation' remains stable or reverts to the hostile postures seen between 2001 and 2006.
- She advised that India should prepare for a landscape where international partners, specifically the US, may pursue independent bilateral interests in Bangladesh that do not necessarily align with or involve Indian consultation.
- The speaker emphasised that efforts should be made to preserve the institutional frameworks, security dialogues and military ties established over the last two decades to ensure stability regardless of the political party in power.

PANEL DISCUSSION ON THE EMERGING SITUATION IN BANGLADESH, THE ROLE OF FOREIGN PLAYERS, THE IMPACT ON INDIA AND THE OPTIONS AVAILABLE

Chair: Amb Veena Sikri (Retd)

Panellists:

1. Amb Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty (Retd)
2. Lt Gen V Bhatia, PVSM, AVSM, SM (Retd)
3. Mr Kallol Bhattacharjee

Chair's Remarks: Ambassador Veena Sikri (Retd)

- Setting the stage for the discussion, Amb Sikri asserted that the July-August 2024 events were not a students' uprising but a regime change operation conducted by Pakistan through the Jamaat-e-Islami with Western backing. The

Jamaat-e-Islami has been the power behind the throne for 18 months, with Mohammad Yunus acting as their spokesperson.

- The Chair stated that Jamaat's objective was to regain the space they lost in 1971. Two parallel developments occurred: Pakistan re-established its pre-1971 operational command and control with Bangladesh, and Jamaat pushed an ideological agenda demanding reforms and delaying elections.
- Jamaat successfully pushed through the July National Charter 2025, which reversed Bangladesh's 1972 Constitution. Democracy and secularism were abandoned in favour of a theocratic state, with the president gaining more powers while the prime minister's authority was reduced.
- With no parliament for 18 months, Yunus issued 133 ordinances. On 12th March 2026, parliament must consider these within 30 days. Three controversial ordinances stand out: one amending the constitution via the July Charter, one granting indemnity to participants in the uprising, and one banning the Awami League.
- Jamaat insisted MPs take two oaths, as parliament members and as members of a Constitutional Reform Council. The BNP refused to take the second oath, calling it unconstitutional, which created growing friction between the two parties.
- The so-called student participants were actually Islami Chatra Shibir members. Their party secured only 6 seats, while Jamaat-e-Islami won 68 seats, forming a bloc of 77. The Awami League remained banned.
- Anti-India sentiment whipped up during the uprising had died out by the election. Attacks on minorities, which occurred daily until the election, have completely stopped, confirming they were orchestrated by Jamaat to push minorities out.
- Tariq Rehman has adopted a 'Bangladesh first' approach, determined to maintain good relations with India. He has allowed Awami League offices to reopen, though in border areas with West Bengal, where Jamaat holds seats, local administrations have instructed non-cooperation with Awami League.
- India demonstrated strategic restraint over 18 months, continuing trade, supplying rice and essential commodities, and providing 5,000 metric tonnes of diesel through the friendship pipeline despite its own energy challenges.

- Democracy must be restored in Bangladesh, which has been absent for 18 months. If Tariq Rehman seeks genuine restoration, he should allow the Awami League to return. He faces challenges as groups within BNP remain pro-Jamaat, given their alliance history.
- The election results show the people of Bangladesh do not want Islamism. Women pushed back strongly, having been severely affected. India must encourage forces in Bangladesh that want democracy, secularism, and good relations with India.

The floor was open for the panellists to make their points. Their main analyses are as follows:

1. Amb Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty (Retd)

- The Ambassador observed that political turbulence is nothing new in Bangladesh, noting several such phases throughout its history. He offered a sanguine view, expressing belief that there will be a return to usual normality.
- He drew an important distinction between three major regime changes in the region: Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal. In Nepal, the youth who overthrew the government subsequently participated in elections, won a two-thirds majority, and elected a highly capable president. In Bangladesh, this did not happen.
- The speaker explained that the movement began as a genuine students' protest against job quotas that had been in place since 1972, which had become a political patronage issue, with the same families benefiting for generations. When the Supreme Court ruled to remove the quota, leaving only 7% for minorities and tribals, the student leaders went back. However, the protests did not stop; that is where the regime change operation began.
- The speaker noted that Jamaat-e-Islami is a splinter group of the Indian and Pakistani Jamaat-e-Islami. Surprisingly, while Maulana Maududi, its founder, was originally against the partition of India, the organisation today is the most Islamic in Bangladesh.
- Since 1971, Jamaat has functioned as Pakistan's fifth column in Bangladesh, with the vision of making Bangladesh an Islamic republic. However, the

liberation war was fought on the values of secularism and socialism, not Islamism.

- Students took a backseat while Jamaat cadres, with help from Pakistan and Western supporters who deployed NGOs, took over. Social media was a powerful tool for this regime change operation, apart from the training provided by American NGOs that took some leaders abroad for guidance, all now documented.
- The BNP, formed by General Zia-ur-Rehman after Sheikh Mujib's assassination in 1975, is back in power. The speaker observed that BNP is not a grassroots party, unlike the Awami League, which is present in almost every village. Jamaat is present because they run the madrasas.
- Jamaat-e-Islami has never won an election historically; their maximum was about 18 seats. Today they hold 68 seats primarily because the Awami League was banned. Even in Islamic Pakistan, Jamaat never wins elections, indicating that people do not want to be ruled by religious parties.
- The BNP is a mosaic of various elements, as General Zia wanted to form a party quickly to gain political support. The current situation remains unstable in many ways, with many decisions pending.
- The speaker emphasised that India exercised deliberate strategic restraint, with an eye to the future. Bangladesh depends heavily on essential commodities, particularly rice, and India did not want to send a negative message by cutting off trade. The diesel supply pipeline from Numaligarh to Parbatipur, built during Hasina's time with India paying 80% of the cost, continues to operate.
- The policy decision was to avoid knee-jerk reactions. While some tit-for-tat measures were taken, such as non-tariff barriers requiring certain products to enter via Mumbai instead of land borders, these were kept low-key.
- The anti-India rhetoric during the upheaval claimed that India had ignored people's interests and only supported one party or leader. The speaker noted there was no point in reacting when the system was so charged.
- The speaker acknowledged that anti-India sentiment exists in Bangladesh, rooted in history, geography, and the overhang of partition. It is also an assertion of a separate identity. He recalled General Zia-ul-Haq's observation that without Islam, he would be an Indian.

- The separation of 1947 created an enduring identity challenge: ‘Who am I? I was an Indian, but today I am not. The challenge of building one's own identity is more prevalent in Pakistan than in Bangladesh.
- On the security front, the DGFI visited Delhi for discussions after the new government took over. Regarding detained individuals, slowly, one or two people are being granted bail, including journalist Anis Alamgiri. Things are gradually returning to normal.
- The ultimate goal is to restore normal trade and people-to-people movement. Visas have already been opened, with Bangladesh taking the first step. This give-and-take is already visible.
- The speaker concluded that India, as the region's rule-setter, must take a measured approach.

2. Lt Gen V Bhatia, PVSM, AVSM, SM (Retd)

- Lt Gen V Bhatia (Retd) highlighted a significant shift in Bangladesh's internal and external posture since August 2024, noting a rise in boisterous anti-India sentiment. He characterised the emerging security landscape as a ‘collaborative threat’ involving a China-Pakistan-Bangladesh axis.
- The discussion emphasised that India must move from a ‘good neighbour’ policy to an assertive stance that leverages economic and strategic ‘Sharp Power’ to safeguard its national interests.
- The speaker identified two primary threats to India's territorial integrity:
 - There is a historical precedent of the BNP providing bases and support to Indian insurgent groups. While the North East is currently stable, an anti-India regime in Dhaka could reactivate these sub-critical threats.
 - A collaborative China-Pakistan-Bangladesh alignment poses a direct threat to the Siliguri Corridor (the ‘Chicken's Neck’). Maps circulating in Bangladeshi academic/political circles reportedly include India's North Eastern states as part of Bangladesh, signaling a direct challenge to Indian sovereignty.
- The session analysed the geographical and economic leverage both nations hold:

- The Siliguri Corridor: This vital link connects eight-and-a-half states and 55 million people. Its protection is India's non-negotiable priority.
- Bangladeshi Vulnerabilities: While threats are made against Siliguri, Gen Bhatia noted that Bangladesh is more vulnerable. 90% of their trade passes through the Chittagong Corridor (only 29.5 km wide).
- The Rangpur Corridor also remains a point of strategic weakness for Dhaka.
- A shift in self-identification is occurring in Bangladesh, moving from 'Bengali first' to 'Muslim first.' This transition is coinciding with increased Pakistani ISI influence and military delegations between Islamabad and Dhaka.
- India has a history of intervention without expansion (Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh). Gen Bhatia emphasised that while India has no interest in expanding territory, it will not tolerate the establishment of Pakistani-backed airfields or insurgent bases near its borders.
- The speaker argued that 'soft power' is insufficient in the current global climate (the 'Trump era'). India must employ Sharp Power, the strategic use of 'fear and favour':
 - India should be prepared to close land ports and suspend essential services.
 - Mentioning the Numaligarh pipeline and power grid as tools, the speaker suggested that Bangladesh must feel the 'economic pinch' if security concerns are ignored.
 - India must treat the relationship as a transaction. If security concerns are not met, there must be a tangible cost to anti-India policies.
- India seeks a neutral, if not pro-India, neighbour. A pro-China or pro-Pakistan Bangladesh is unacceptable. India must be assertive, leveraging its economic and military might to ensure that its neighbourhood remains stable and that the cost of being anti-India becomes unsustainable for Dhaka.

4. Mr Kallol Bhattacharjee

- Mr Bhattacharjee shared observations from three visits to Bangladesh over 17 months, including a ten-day visit in February 2026, highlighting the stark

contrast between the charged atmosphere of August 2024 and the cautious optimism after the elections.

- In August 2024, every encounter raised the question of why India was holding Sheikh Hasina. By February 2026, Awami League offices were reopening within hours of the election results. An auto-rickshaw driver summed up the post-election mood with optimism, explaining that under extremist rule, they could not speak. His simple demand was safety, to work and return home secure.
- The speaker observed that the Yunus government failed almost every day to provide police and administrative security to its own population, leading to a law and order breakdown.
- The speaker drew a contrast between Tariq Rehman and Mohammad Yunus. From the moment he returned to Bangladesh on 25th December 2025, Tariq Rehman spoke the language of reconciliation, thanking those from the police, administration, and diplomats who had provided security.
- In contrast, the Nobel Peace Prize winner repeatedly labelled the bureaucracy, police, and others as allies of fascism, targeting senior bureaucrats who had served for decades under various governments.
- For the first time in Bangladesh's history, the Islamist bloc holds more than 77 seats in parliament. The speaker highlighted two significant assets of this bloc: they are winning all elections on university campuses, and they remain a potent force on the streets.
- With the Awami League off the ground and BNP in a weaker state, the streets of Bangladesh, crucial for governance, are currently not under BNP's control.
- On the economic challenges, he noted that India recently transferred 5,000 metric tonnes of high-speed diesel, a positive move. However, long fuel queues in Chittagong and Dhaka represent Tariq Rehman's biggest challenge.
- Bangladesh is one of India's largest trading partners, with bilateral trade of \$12 to \$14 billion entirely in India's favour. The speaker noted that Bangladesh recently signed a trade deal with the United States, under which nearly \$2 billion worth of cotton exports that India used to enjoy will now come from the US.
- India should prioritise the normalisation of bilateral trade to maintain influence in Bangladesh; furthermore, it may be strategically prudent for New Delhi to

assist the Tariq Rahman administration in meeting certain domestic goals to secure long-term cooperation.

- During the interim government's time, nearly 300 journalists were physically assaulted and lost their jobs. Approximately ten journalists remain imprisoned, including proprietors and senior editors, some ailing in prison on charges with little connection to reality. Tariq Rehman must take steps to restore these people to their basic dignity and profession.
- The speaker emphasised that there must be evident justice from the Tariq Rehman government toward the minority community. The interim government would describe violence against minorities as politically motivated, not communal.
- Thankfully, the BNP government in the last 20 to 25 days has not made similar statements, indicating they will not justify communal violence targeting Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians. India must convey that it is closely monitoring this aspect; it is a humanitarian issue.
- There has to be an internal rebuilding of the administration. For this, Tariq Rehman must ensure justice for the killing of policemen. If the police department is not helped to recover, it will be difficult for Bangladesh to ensure law and order.
- Conversations being contemplated today will only be possible if Bangladesh returns to normalcy under effective police administration. India will have to play a constructive role in helping them take these steps.

The Chair endorsed Mr Kallol Bhattacharjee's observation that many media personnel remain in jail, suffering with no indication of when they will be freed. The Chair reiterated that the excesses of the July-August uprising were committed by Jamaat-e-Islami, which boasted publicly that killing policemen was essential to capturing power. This confirms that the events were a regime-change operation, not a student movement. Youngsters have since distanced themselves from the 18-month regime. On positive notes, she observed that the DGFI has visited India with productive discussions, and the border situation remains under control. The Ganga Waters Treaty comes up for renewal at year-end, and the Teesta issue, stalled by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for over a decade, requires resolution after the West Bengal

elections. Water resources are bread-and-butter issues for both countries, making vital dialogue essential.

The Chair concluded that while there is hope, many difficulties remain. The parliament session beginning on 12th March 2026, and how it handles the 133 ordinances from the last 18 months, will be a crucial indicator.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND VOTE OF THANKS

Maj Gen Ashok Kumar, VSM, PhD (Retd), DG CENJOWS, delivered the closing remarks and proposed the vote of thanks. He expressed gratitude to all speakers, panellists, and participants for their valuable contributions to the day's deliberations. He extended special thanks to the Chair and panellists of each session for steering the discussions on critical issues pertaining to India's neighbourhood. The Director General also acknowledged the efforts of the CENJOWS team in organising the seminar and ensuring its successful conduct.

He emphasised that the insights shared during the sessions would significantly shape strategic thinking on India's regional challenges and opportunities. The event concluded at 1545 hrs.

MAJOR INSIGHTS OF THE SEMINAR

- **Operation Sindoor Fundamentally Altered the Strategic Calculus.** India demonstrated effective conventional operations below the nuclear threshold using indigenous platforms, proving that Atmanirbhar Bharat delivers. Pakistan's gaps in deep strike capability were exposed, leading to the creation of the Army Rocket Force Command.
- **Pakistan has Undergone Absolute Military Consolidation.** The 27th Amendment grants the Army Chief legal immunity, while the creation of the Chief of Defence Forces position concentrates authority over all three services and the nuclear arsenal in a single individual. Crisis will now evolve faster, and decision-making will be more prone to error.
- **Nepal's Gen Z Revolution is a Historic Turning Point.** A 35-year-old Madhesi rapper, Balen Shah, secured a two-thirds majority, wiping out all established parties. This technocratic, digitally native government demands engagement on terms of equal sovereignty, not lectures, and India must adapt to this new reality.
- **Bangladesh's Return to Democracy is Fragile.** While BNP's victory is positive, the 77-seat Islamist bloc controls university campuses and streets. Journalists and Awami League leaders remain imprisoned, deaths in custody continue, and China is deepening military ties through drone manufacturing and port modernisation.
- **China's Strategic Encirclement is Now a Reality.** From Gwadar to Hambantota, from Pokhara Airport to Chattogram's Chinese industrial zone, Beijing's infrastructure and military partnerships have physically encircled India's maritime and land frontiers.

- **Grey Zone Warfare has Reached Unprecedented Sophistication.** A Pakistani YouTube video claiming India lost six aircraft garnered 533 million views overnight under Chinese guidance. Direct ISI tweets target the Indian government and influencers. Wars are no longer fought with armies alone; they are fought with narratives, loans, and algorithms.
- **India Exercised Remarkable Strategic Restraint.** Despite 18 months of provocation in Bangladesh, India maintained trade, supplied diesel through the friendship pipeline, and avoided knee-jerk reactions, a deliberate policy with an eye to the future.
- **Domestic Politics Directly Impacts Regional Strategy.** The Teesta agreement remains stalled for over a decade due to West Bengal's political dynamics, while the Agniveer scheme was implemented without considering its impact on Nepal's Gurkha recruitment, demonstrating how internal decisions shape external outcomes.
- **The Neighbourhood is India's Strategic Continuum.** Political transitions, military restructuring, and great power competition in neighbouring countries directly influence India's long-term stability and security, requiring proactive engagement rather than reactive crisis management.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Launch a Comprehensive Digital Diplomacy Offensive in Nepal.** India must leverage digital platforms through hashtag campaigns (#IndiaNepalRising, #DebtFreeHimalayas), collaborate with Gen Z influencers like 'Gen Z212,' create 15-second videos comparing Indian-funded projects with Chinese debt traps, and develop gamified apps like 'Himalaya Balance' to showcase the perils of BRI entanglement.
- **Establish a National War Council to Counter Grey Zone Threats.** A National War Council that fuses the NSC, the three services, and CDS is essential to

tackle persistent grey-zone operations that persist during peace, crisis, and war, with varying intensity. India currently lacks an owner at the apex level for grey zone coordination.

- **Press for Justice, Media Freedom, and the Protection of Minorities in Bangladesh.** India must urge the BNP government to release imprisoned journalists and Awami League leaders, ensure justice for killed policemen, and guarantee minority safety. The Ganga Waters Treaty renewal and the Teesta agreement require urgent dialogue as bread-and-butter issues for both countries.
- **Develop a Coherent Counter-Architecture to China's Strategic Encirclement.** India must respond to China's regional ambitions, not project by project or crisis by crisis, but through a unified counter-architecture. Accelerate border infrastructure with a target of completing over 100 BRO projects by 2027 and deepen Aatmanirbhar Bharat in drones, air defence, and semiconductors.
- **Adopt a Proactive Neighbourhood Policy Rather than Reactive Crisis Management.** India must shape the regional order proactively, recognising that wars are now fought with infrastructure loans, drone manufacturing agreements, and constitutional amendments, requiring military readiness alongside diplomatic agility, economic resilience, and technological self-reliance.

CONCLUSION

The Silver Jubilee seminar on 'Changing Dynamics in Indian Neighbourhood' delivered a sobering yet confident assessment of India's regional standing. Over two days of intensive deliberation, one truth emerged with absolute clarity: the old certainties of India's neighbourhood are gone. What was once considered India's sphere of influence by default has become a contested strategic space, shifting with alarming speed and severity.

The seminar captured a region in the midst of a fundamental transition. Pakistan has consolidated military power under a single command with legal immunity, concentrating authority over its armed forces and nuclear arsenal in ways that compress escalation timelines and introduce new volatility. Nepal has witnessed a generational revolution; a young technocrat now leads with a two-thirds mandate, signalling that the old rules of engagement no longer apply. Bangladesh has returned to democracy after 18 months of interim rule, but the presence of a 77-seat Islamist bloc and deepening Chinese military ties present enduring challenges. China's strategic footprint now visibly encircles India, from Himalayan infrastructure to Indian Ocean ports.

Yet amidst this turbulence, the seminar affirmed that India is not a passive spectator. Operation Sindoor demonstrated India's capability to conduct effective conventional operations below the nuclear threshold using indigenous platforms. The defence export surge from Rs. 686 crores to Rs. 23,622 crores, the launch of SAMAD and IOTEP, and the AI Policy Document all reflect a military-industrial transformation that is now irreversible.

The central message resonating through every session was this: the neighbourhood is India's strategic continuum. Political transitions, military realignments, and great power competition in neighbouring countries directly shape India's long-term stability and security. Wars are no longer fought with armies alone; they are fought with infrastructure loans, drone manufacturing agreements, and social media narratives.

The seminar concluded that India must now shape the regional order proactively rather than merely responding to events. This requires military readiness alongside diplomatic agility, economic resilience, and technological self-reliance. The Silver Jubilee of HQ IDS marks 25 years of jointness and integration. The next 25 years must build on this foundation, engaging the neighbourhood on new terms, with clarity of purpose, strategic resolve, and the decisive strength demonstrated from the mountains of Galwan to the skies of Operation Sindoor.