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## Terrorism At A Crossroads Of History: The 2025 Pahalgam Attack And The India Pakistan Relationship

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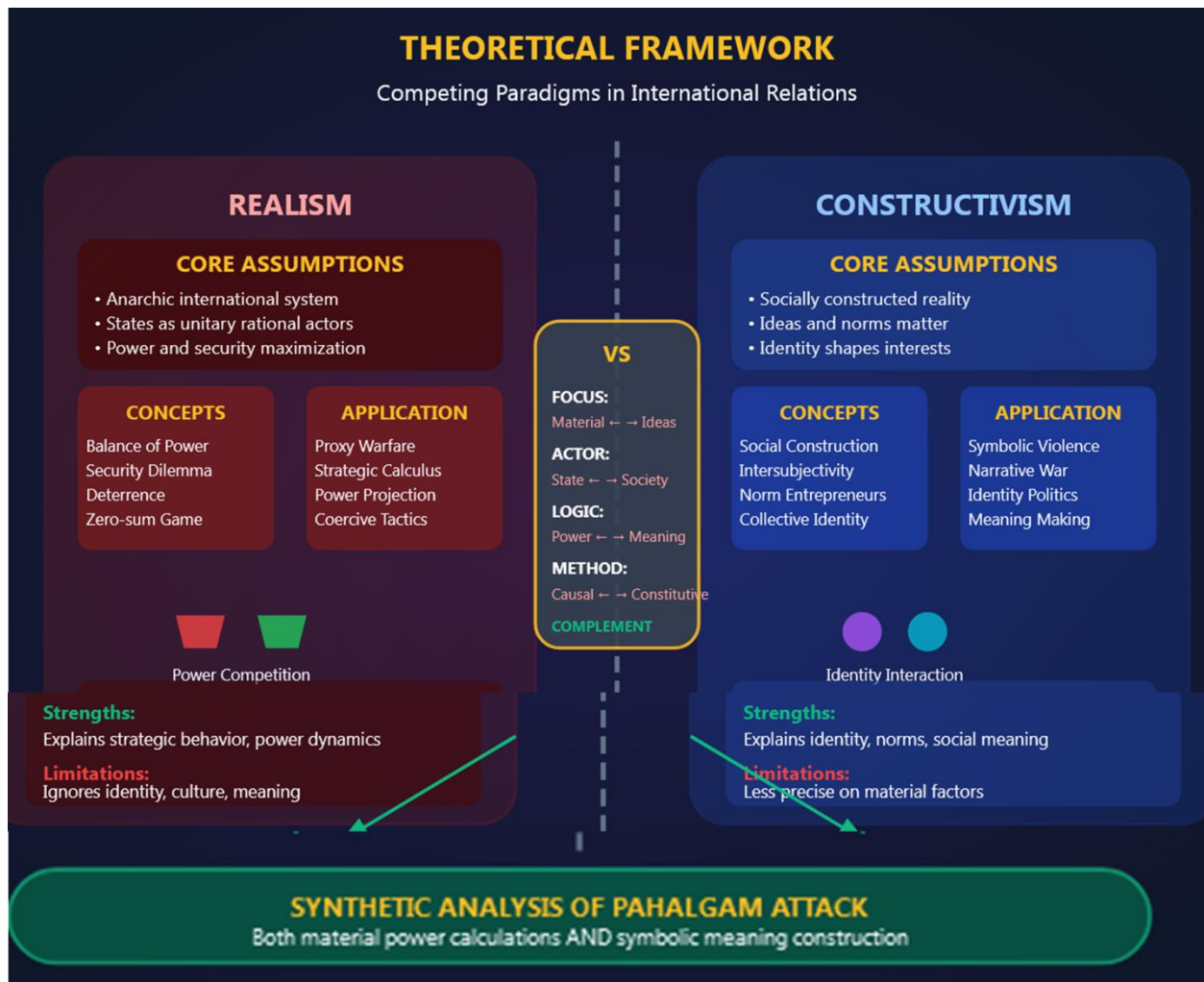
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### Introduction

The Pahalgam Attack of 2025 represents a thematic shift in the current history of terrorism in South Asia and an uneasy relationship between India and Pakistan. The attack happened on April 22, 2025, against a convoy of Hindu pilgrims and domestic tourists in the picturesque town of Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir. Carried out by a Pakistan-based militant organization, the attack cost the lives of 26 civilians, with many more injured, provoking an escalation immediately in the diplomatic arena as well as a stark increase in military readiness levels on either side.



The thematic implications of the attack are that terrorism is seen as a tool and a disruption of ideation all in one package; a challenge to state power, communal living, and geopolitical stability. The Pahalgam Attack occurred at a time when India and Pakistan were exploring a rapprochement cautiously, as there were back channel talks and confidence building measures. In that regard, it points to the continuous fragility of the peace processes to non-state violence with ideological motives but geopolitical instrumentation.

In a bid to de-construct this question, this essay uses two prominent international relations theories namely Realism and Constructivism to explain the Pahalgam Attack within its historical and political context. Realism and its focus on power and national interest as well as anarchy in the international system makes terrorism look like a continuation of the interstate competition through other means. Constructivism, by contrast, emphasizes identity and norms as well as social construction of threats, which allows to better comprehend how memory of the past, religious imagery, and nationalist ideology intersect in the narrative of terrorism. Such frameworks

enable us to look beyond description and instead examine structural and ideational processes that not only incite but also sustain such violence in the subcontinent.

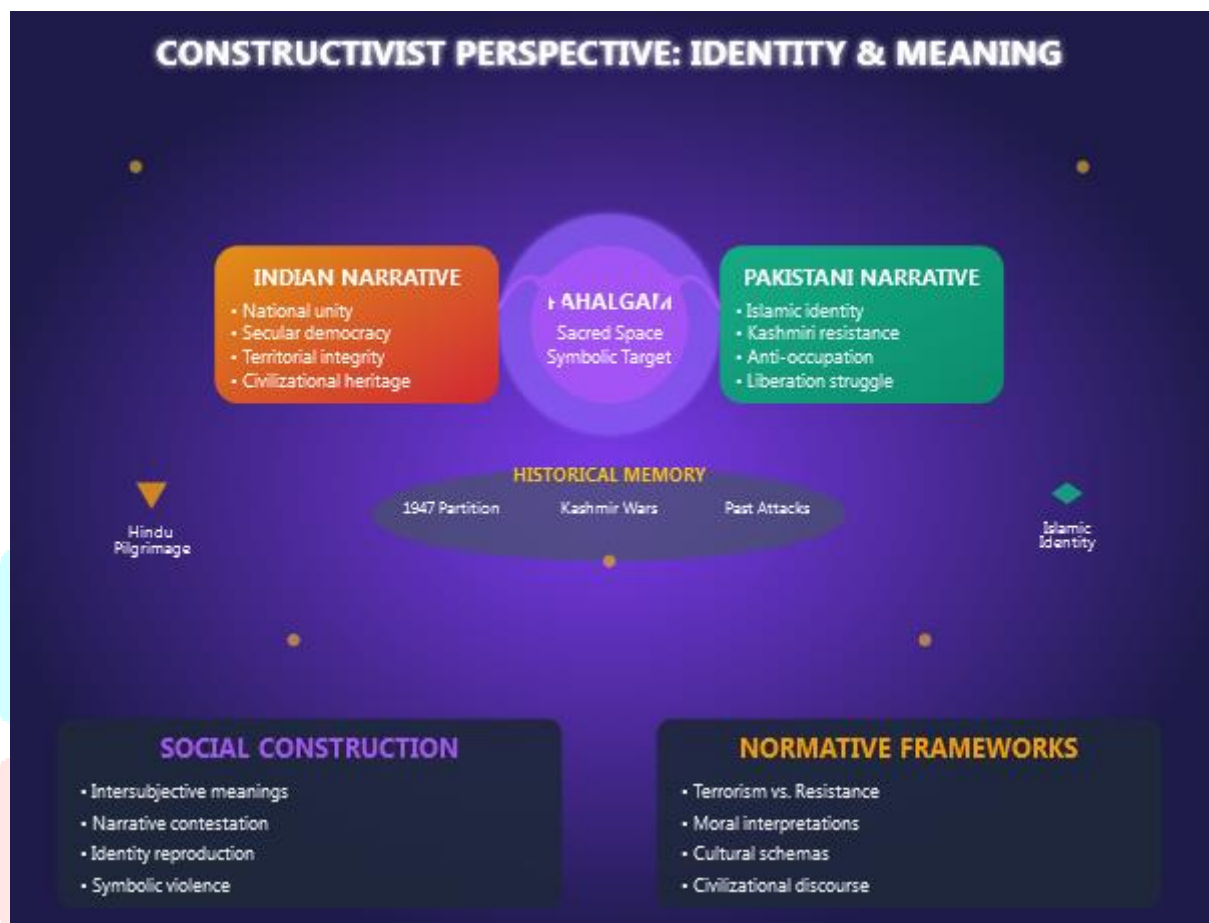


Through these two prisms, this essay will address the manifestation of multidimensionality of terrorism in such a historic moment, and how violence turns into a tool of power politics as well as a manifestation of socially located discourses of enmity.

### Realism and the Strategic Logic of the Pahalgam Attack

Through the lens of theoretical perspective of Realism, the 2025 Pahalgam Attack could be seen as a calculated strategic move rooted within the logic of power politics and interstate competition. According to realism, there is no central power governing the international system (above sovereign states) since it is anarchic. In this state, the survival, power and national interest are the main factors that guide the states. The assault on the Pahalgam resort, which was carried out by a militant outfit that has known connection to the intelligence services of Pakistan, can be slotted into the Realist slant of a proxy war. In this perception, Pakistan (though officially denying its role in this)- may be regarded as having a strategic incentive to destabilize the Indian-controlled

Kashmir to counter India regional dominance as well as to maintain the Kashmir issue on the diplomatic tables of the world. The act acted as a coercive message, against any further normalization of ties or international legitimization of the Indian policies in occupied Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370.



Furthermore, the fact that the attack came at a time when there had been a spell of diplomatic activity and increasing bilateral trade negotiations indicates the Realist idea that states (and their proxies) take actions to maintain relative power advantages. To hardline sections of the Pakistani security establishment, any Indian economic integration in Kashmir or international recognition of the status quo post-2019 shows a zero-sum loss. The assault thus is not only ideological but also very Realist in its own right: it interferes with Indian political authority, raises global awareness, and pushes New Delhi into a reactive defense mode, thus taking back some of its strategic initiative.

India's response further illustrates core Realist tenets. The rapid mobilization of military forces, the calling off of cross border discussions, and talking of retaliation all culminate to the Realist assumption of power projection and deterrence. The legitimacy of the state is pegged on its ability to provide security and any inability to act

with force would undermine its domestic solidity and international reputation. In Realist terms then, the Pahalgam Attack is absorbed into a larger power struggle, a chess move in a greater game of subcontinental geopolitics, where peace is temporary, and violence is merely another instrument of statecraft by other means.

### **Constructivism and the Social Meaning of the Pahalgam Attack**

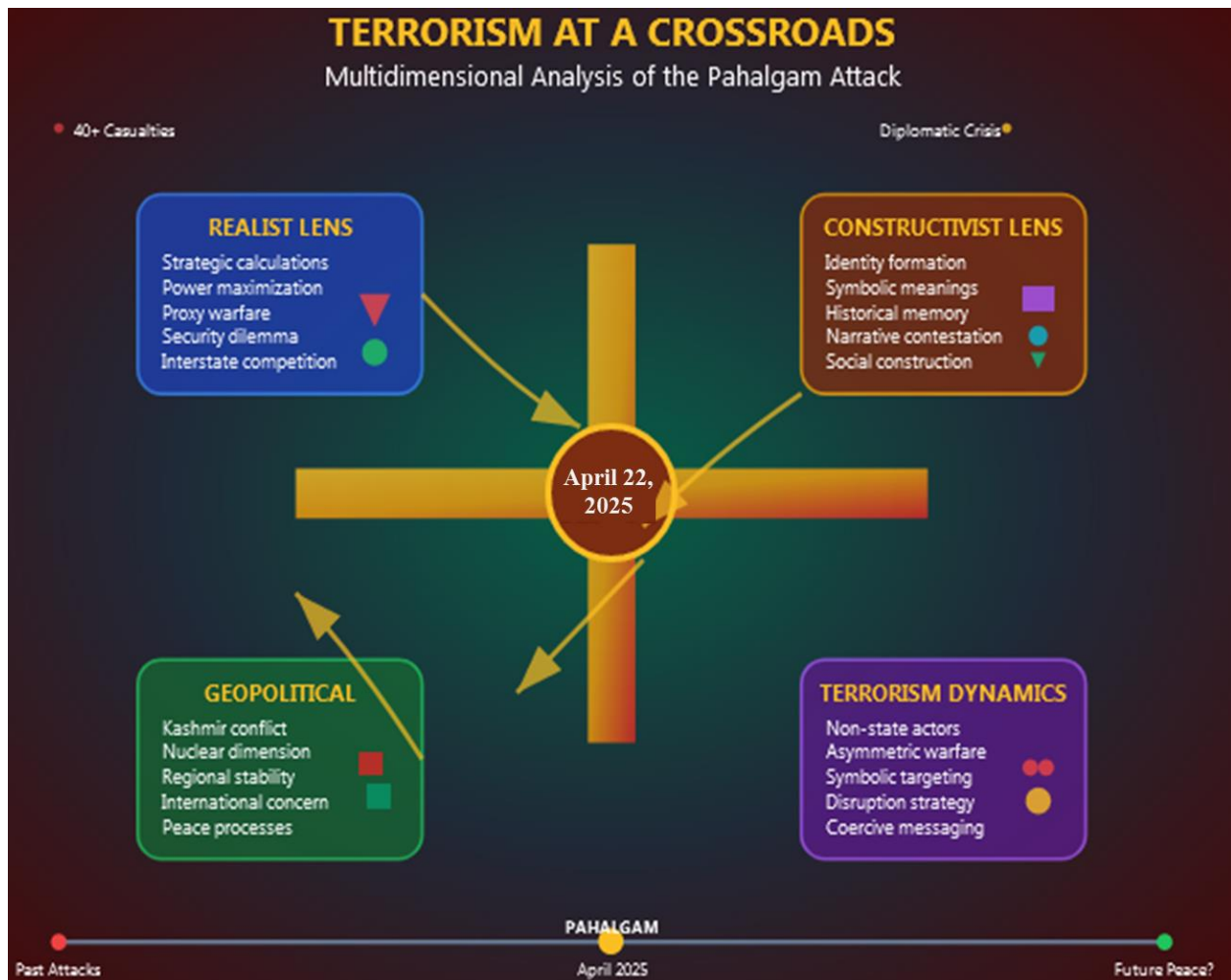
Compared to the power-centric reasoning of Realism, Constructivism presents a fundamentally dissimilar manner of conceiving the 2025 Pahalgam Attack, which puts the significance of ideas, identity, historical memory, and meaning making in international relations to the fore. Constructivist theory underlines that international system is not only determined by material capabilities, but it is a societal construct that is produced by norms, narratives, and intersubjective understandings. Within this paradigm, violence is a mix of instrument of coercion and a performative act, which carries a symbolic meaning. When viewed in the light of this construct, the Pahalgam Attack can be conceptualized as a calculated act of intervening in the conflicting discourses of nationhood, martyrdom and religious identity that form the basis of India Pakistan relations.

It was not accidental that Pahalgam, a pilgrimage center, a natural beauty spot and a representation of Indian sovereignty was chosen. For Constructivists, the symbolism of space and time matters. That attack was not only an attack on civilians but on a fabricated Indian national identity that incorporates Kashmir into its territorial and civilizational imagination. The fact that the pilgrims are being targeted in a season that is marked by religious adherence changes the violence into a message, which is intended to instill historical trauma and religious polarization. It tries to re-write the concept of Kashmir not as a secular democratic place, but as a land of clashing civilizational projects Hindu and Islamic, Indian and Pakistani, occupier and liberator.

In addition, Constructivism insists on the issue of identity in defining the state interests. The perpetuation of enmity between India and Pakistan has not been solely due to the asymmetries of power but the historically produced identities based on the trauma of Partition, the ideological difference between secular nationalism and Islamic exceptionalism and mythologization of Kashmir as an incomplete project of statehood by both of them. The Pahalgam Attack can be therefore viewed as a phenomenon that strengthens these hostile identities,



nationalistic discourse and a vicious cycle wherein both states would continue to view each other through the prism of existential threat perceptions.



The reactions that followed further illustrate Constructivist dynamics. The Indian media and political elites constructed the attack as a security breach, and more so, a moral outrage by terming it as an attack on Indian values and national unity. Such framing awakened the shared memories of past attacks, i.e., Pulwama in 2019 and Uri in 2016, and formed a discursive genealogy of martyrdom and retaliation. On the other hand, Pakistan framed Indian allegations to delegitimize Kashmiri resistance and muzzle dissent and thereby strengthened an opposing counter-narrative of victimhood and resistance.

Notably, Constructivism puts emphasis on the fact that terrorism is a concept that is interpreted differently by various states, depending on the normative environment: where one state would regard it as an act of barbarism, another would consider it as an act of resistance. By doing so the Pahalgam Attack is transformed into more than merely a physical event wherein meaning is struggled over, identities reproduced, and historical grievances re-

inscribed. It highlights the Constructivist observation that international conflict exists not only what states do, but what those actions imply in the larger social and historical stories.

## CONCLUSION

The Pahalgam Attack of 2025 exists at an explosive confluence of geopolitical strategy and identity politics that is deeply rooted, and it shows the multifaceted nature of terrorism in South Asia. It reinforces the continuing dominance of power, survival and competition within a self-help system- particularly in a nuclearized region where conventional warfare is more limited, and sub-conventional instruments become more useful.

Conversely, constructivist analysis points to the ideational structure that supports the event. It sheds light on the view of terrorism as a form of intervention that goes beyond an act of violence and is highly symbolic in strengthening disputed identities, historical injustices, and social narratives of victimhood and resistance.

Altogether, both frameworks can be used to provide complimentary understandings of the polymorphous quality of terrorism in modern geopolitics. Realism helps to seize the structural and strategic drives of state and their proxies, whereas Constructivism clarifies the manner in which violence gets meaning, legitimacy, and emotional salience within filigree of wider sociopolitical conditions. The usefulness of the two theories is in bringing out the fact that terrorism in the subcontinent is not instrumentally or symbolically pure, but a hybrid phenomenon, influenced both by calculations of power and politics of meaning at the same time.

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