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More Than Strategy: National Honour and Emotional Identity in Indian Foreign Policy

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The terror attack on tourists in Jammu and Kashmir's Pahalgam in April sparked not only official condemnations from world leaders but also stirred a powerful emotional current across India. The national mood was awash with grief, anger, and a thirst for justice. In response, New Delhi enacted a series of swift diplomatic measures: suspending the Indus Water Treaty, shutting down the border at Attari, reducing the strength of diplomatic missions, and signalling a hardened stance against cross-border hostility. However, it was the launch of Operation Sindoor—India's military campaign targeting terror launchpads and infrastructure—that most viscerally embodied the national sentiment. Framed not merely as a strategic necessity but as a moral imperative, the operation marked a significant escalation, one fuelled by collective anguish and the deeply felt need to restore national dignity. These actions, while calculated, were also profoundly emotional—charged with a sense of collective hurt and the urgent need to reaffirm India's resolve and honour on the global stage. Moments like these reveal an important, often overlooked dimension of foreign policy: the role of emotions.

Traditional theories in International Relations (IR) often reduce state behaviour to strategic calculations of power and interest. Yet, emotions—particularly those tied to national identity and honour, shape how states perceive threats and project their power. India is no exception. This article poses a central question: How do emotions, especially national honour, shape India's foreign policy? Through an examination of pivotal moments such as Operation Sindoor and the Balakot airstrikes, and the discourse surrounding India's global aspirations, this piece argues that national honour functions not just as a rhetorical device, but as a powerful force in shaping strategic decisions, diplomatic posture, and public legitimacy.

In recent years, emotions have become central to IR theory and practice, offering deeper insight into the complex motivations behind state behaviour. Scholars like Emma Hutchison argue that emotions are not only inevitable in human affairs but are also "intrinsically linked to, and imbued within, the discourses and social structures that underpin societies and their politics." While the so-called 'emotional turn' in IR emerged over a decade ago, the foreign policy decisions of India's strategic elites have yet to be thoroughly examined through this lens.

Indian foreign policy, traditionally interpreted through the lenses of strategic realism or material power, demands a more textured reading. In *Indian Foreign Policy: The Politics of Postcolonial Identity from 1947 to 2004*, Priya Chacko moves beyond such conventional frameworks, arguing that Indian foreign policy is best understood as postcoloniality—a self-reflective, ethically-driven project rooted in the experience of colonialism. She posits that Indian foreign policy is not just about external relations, but a discursive site where the state performs its identity: a civilizational actor with a moral mission and a history of resisting imperial subjugation. This identity, as she underscores, is not just intellectual or ideological. It is deeply emotional.

At the heart of this identity lies the idea of national honour—an emotive concept through which India interprets global hierarchies, responds to external threats, and asserts its moral agency. From a postcolonial perspective, national honour functions as a powerful emotional register shaped by historical memory, collective grievance, and an enduring desire for recognition and status. It is invoked not only in response to violence or provocation, but also as an active assertion of India's civilizational distinctiveness and strategic autonomy. In moments of geopolitical tension,

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New Delhi often draws upon narratives steeped in honour to reinforce its sovereignty and legitimacy, mobilizing both state rhetoric and public sentiment.

The performance of national honour in Indian foreign policy is particularly visible in the emotionally charged speeches and statements of political elites. These are moments where statecraft intersects with sentiment; where the language of diplomacy blends with the language of pride, grief, vengeance, and collective resolve. Following the terror attack in Pahalgam, Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde declared, “The game has been started by Pakistan, but we are confident that it will be ended by Indian jawans. There will be reaction to action, blood for blood, brick for a brick. Such is the valour of our soldiers.” Prime Minister Narendra Modi echoed this stating, “India will identify, track and punish every terrorist and their backers. India’s spirit will never be broken by terrorism. Terrorism will not go unpunished. The entire nation is firm in this resolve.”

In the days that followed, this emotional resolve translated into concrete action with the launch of Operation Sindoor—a precision military strike targeting terrorist infrastructure across the Line of Control. While framed officially as a targeted security operation, its timing and messaging carried powerful emotional overtones. The operation was portrayed as the nation’s direct response to grief and fury, an act of moral reckoning rather than mere tactical retaliation. In his public address capturing the mood of a nation unwilling to tolerate further provocation, Modi expressed the emotional engine propelling the state’s actions:

Operation Sindoor is not just a name but it’s a reflection of the feelings of millions of people of the country. Operation ‘Sindoor’ is our unwavering commitment to justice. India will strike at the roots of terror, without hesitation, without fear.

Such rhetoric is not new. Modi’s statements following the 2019 Balakot airstrikes similarly invoked India’s transformation into a nation no longer willing to absorb blows: “This new Bharat does not endure terrorism, rather it inflicts serious damage upon perpetrators. The people who used to terrorise us are nowhere now.” In his 2021 Independence Day address, he invoked the 2016 surgical strikes as emblematic of India’s assertive new posture:

India is fighting the twin challenges of terrorism and expansionism with great courage, and does not hesitate in taking tough decisions. By conducting surgical and air strikes, the country sent out the message of ‘New India.’

The emotional resonance of honour is also evident in India’s handling of border conflicts, particularly with China. During his 2020 visit to Leh, after the deadly Galwan Valley clash, Modi paid tribute to the Indian soldiers, stating: “Through display of your bravery, a clear message has gone to the world about India’s strength. Your courage is higher than the heights where you are posted today.” These remarks captured the essence of an emotional foreign policy—one that pairs military restraint with rhetorical assertiveness. In both the 2017 Doklam standoff and the Galwan incident, political messaging emphasized sovereignty, resilience, and the memory of betrayal, even as India avoided open military escalation.

The Indian media has also played a significant role in amplifying these narratives. Following the 2019 Balakot strikes, media coverage overwhelmingly embraced the government’s framing of the operation as an act of justified retribution. Outlets employed emotionally charged language, framing the airstrikes as a restoration of pride and a demonstration of India’s moral and strategic resolve. *Times of India* proclaimed that India had “broken free of its shackles,” while *Dainik Bhaskar* hailed the moment as historic, noting that it was the first time in nearly five decades that the Indian Air Force had crossed the Pakistan border. These portrayals did not merely report events but they shaped public perception and intensified national sentiment, reinforcing the idea that the Indian state was acting to protect and vindicate national honour.

Across these episodes, from cross-border strikes to diplomatic messaging, India’s foreign policy appears not just as a series of strategic responses, but as a continuous performance of identity. Emotions, particularly those tied to honour are not incidental, but are constitutive. They serve to unify domestic audiences, assert India’s global posture, and reframe geopolitical conflicts as moral imperatives. In this sense, emotion functions as a strategic tool of statecraft—rational, potent, and deeply rooted in the narratives that define modern India’s place in the world.

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India's foreign policy discourse is infused with emotionally resonant language that ties state actions to national psychology and justifies assertiveness. These emotional narratives unfold in a highly mediated environment, where media reinforces state messaging and create a feedback loop between public sentiment and policy signals. Yet, this emotional turn carries both risks and rewards. While it strengthens cohesion and legitimacy, it can also escalate conflicts, reduce diplomatic flexibility, and promote zero-sum thinking. When honour dominates, compromise can appear as weakness. Still, emotional identity helps explain why India often prioritizes recognition, ethical positioning, and narrative control over raw material interest. Recognizing these emotional undercurrents reveals a more layered, human understanding of how India engages the world. States do not just pursue interests—they perform identities. And in India's case, that performance is deeply emotional, historically grounded, and deliberately proud.

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