

REGIONAL AND NATIONAL MEDIA NARRATIVES ON THE INDUS WATERS TREATY DURING OPERATION SINDOOR: A COMPARATIVE FRAMING ANALYSIS IN POST-370 JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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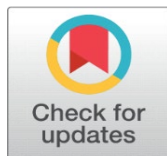
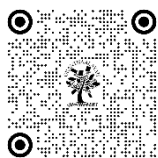
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Received 15 March 2026

Accepted 14 May 2026

Published 26 May 2026

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i12s.2026.8331](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i12s.2026.8331)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

The post-abrogation period in Jammu and Kashmir has witnessed major transformations in political discourse, security narratives, and regional media practices. The Pahalgam terror attack of April 2025 and the subsequent launch of Operation Sindoor intensified tensions between India and Pakistan and brought renewed focus to the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), one of the longest surviving water-sharing agreements in South Asia. India's decision to suspend participation in certain treaty mechanisms marked a significant shift in the relationship between hydro-diplomacy and national security. The present study examines how regional and national newspapers framed the Indus Waters Treaty during Operation Sindoor. The study comparatively analyses the coverage of Greater Kashmir, Daily Excelsior, and The Hindu between April 22 and May 15, 2025. Using qualitative comparative content analysis, the research explores differences in framing patterns, thematic emphasis, language use, source selection, headline orientation, and visual representation. The findings reveal clear differences in editorial orientation. Greater Kashmir largely framed the issue through humanitarian and diplomatic concerns while also situating the developments within historical and legal continuity. Daily Excelsior strongly emphasized nationalism, retaliation, and securitization narratives, presenting the treaty suspension as a strategic response to terrorism. The Hindu adopted a policy-oriented and diplomatic framing, focusing on regional stability, international implications, and legal dimensions of the treaty. The study draws upon Framing Theory, Securitization Theory, and Conflict Reporting Models to interpret these differences. The findings suggest that media framing in post-370 Jammu and Kashmir is shaped not only by geography and readership but also by political positioning and institutional orientation. By examining the intersection of hydropolitics, terrorism, diplomacy, and media narratives, the study contributes to the growing scholarship on conflict reporting and resource securitization in South Asia.

Keywords: Indus Waters Treaty, Operation Sindoor, Media Framing, Hydropolitics, Securitization, Conflict Reporting, Jammu and Kashmir, Post-Article 370, Regional Media, National Media



1. INTRODUCTION

The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), signed in 1960 between India and Pakistan under World Bank mediation, is widely regarded as one of the most durable international water-sharing agreements in the world (Iyer, 2019). Despite several wars, prolonged diplomatic tensions, and recurring military confrontations between the two countries, the treaty remained operational for more than six decades. Scholars have often described it as a rare example of institutional continuity in a deeply conflict-prone region.

The constitutional changes introduced through the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 significantly altered the political and administrative structure of Jammu and Kashmir. The post-370 period witnessed changes in governance, communication systems, media practices, and security arrangements. At the same time, terrorism-related incidents and military operations continued to shape public discourse in the region.

In April 2025, the Pahalgam terror attack led to major casualties and triggered Operation Sindoor, a large-scale counter-insurgency operation launched by Indian security forces. During this period, India also announced the suspension of participation in certain dispute-resolution mechanisms associated with the Indus Waters Treaty. This development transformed the treaty from a diplomatic and technical framework into a major subject of strategic and political discourse (Prakash, 2026).

The linkage between terrorism, military response, and water diplomacy generated widespread media attention. Newspapers across Jammu and Kashmir as well as national media organizations framed the issue differently depending on their editorial orientation, audience base, and political positioning.

Regional newspapers operating in conflict-prone areas often reflect local anxieties, social concerns, and regional political realities. National newspapers, on the other hand, frequently focus on policy implications, strategic discourse, and international consequences. Therefore, examining how regional and national newspapers framed the IWT during Operation Sindoor becomes important for understanding how media narratives shape public understanding of conflict and diplomacy.

The present study comparatively analyses the coverage of three newspapers:

- 1) Greater Kashmir (Kashmir-based regional newspaper)
- 2) Daily Excelsior (Jammu-based regional newspaper)
- 3) The Hindu (national newspaper)

The study focuses on front-page and lead coverage between April 22 and May 15, 2025 because front pages carry high symbolic and agenda-setting value. Front-page headlines, visuals, and lead stories indicate what newspapers consider most important for public attention (McCombs, 2004). It examines how these newspapers framed the treaty suspension, military operations, and India-Pakistan tensions through different narrative approaches.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. MEDIA FRAMING AND CONFLICT NARRATIVES

Framing theory explains how media organizations select certain aspects of reality and make them more prominent in communication. According to Entman (1993), framing influences how audiences understand political events, conflicts, and public issues. Media frames not only highlight specific problems but also shape interpretations, moral judgments, and possible solutions.

In conflict situations, media framing becomes particularly significant because newspapers and television channels often influence public perception regarding violence, national security, diplomacy, and political legitimacy. Wolfsfeld (2004) argued that media are not neutral observers during conflicts but active participants in shaping political discourse.

Galtung (1998) differentiated between peace journalism and war journalism. Peace journalism emphasizes dialogue, context, multiple perspectives, and conflict resolution. War journalism focuses more on elite narratives, violence, military action, and polarized binaries. This distinction has become important in understanding media behavior in conflict-prone regions such as Jammu and Kashmir.

2.2. SECURITIZATION OF RESOURCES

The concept of securitization was developed by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998). According to securitization theory, political actors transform ordinary political issues into security threats that require extraordinary responses. Once an issue is framed as a national security concern, governments often justify exceptional political or military measures.

In South Asia, water resources have increasingly become part of strategic and political discourse. Several scholars have argued that rivers, dams, and treaties are no longer viewed only as developmental resources but also as instruments of strategic leverage.

Zeitoun and Warner (2006) explained how water-sharing agreements may become securitized during periods of geopolitical conflict. In the context of India and Pakistan, the Indus Waters Treaty has increasingly been discussed alongside terrorism, border tensions, and military operations.

2.3. MEDIA IN POST-370 JAMMU AND KASHMIR

The media environment in Jammu and Kashmir has undergone major changes after the abrogation of Article 370. Studies suggest that the post-370 period witnessed increased institutional pressures, communication restrictions, and changes in editorial practices (Press Council of India, 2021).

Regional newspapers in Jammu and Kashmir often reflect different political and social realities. Valley-based newspapers generally foreground humanitarian concerns, civilian anxieties, and political complexities, while Jammu-based newspapers often emphasize nationalism, state legitimacy, and security discourse.

Kaul (2023) observed that editorial realignment became visible in many regional newspapers after 2019. Singh (2024) similarly argued that media narratives in Jammu and Kashmir increasingly reflected polarized regional identities.

2.4. NATIONAL MEDIA AND STRATEGIC FRAMING

National newspapers frequently frame conflict issues through policy-oriented and strategic perspectives. Coverage often emphasizes diplomatic consequences, foreign policy implications, national security frameworks, and geopolitical dimensions.

Research suggests that elite national newspapers tend to rely heavily on government officials, policy experts, and diplomatic sources while framing international conflicts and strategic decisions. This often leads to narratives that focus on institutional legitimacy and strategic implications rather than localized social experiences.

The Hindu has historically been viewed as a newspaper that foregrounds policy analysis, constitutional discourse, and diplomatic perspectives. Its reporting style generally avoids overtly emotional or sensational language and instead emphasizes analytical interpretation.

2.5. RESEARCH GAP

While several studies have examined terrorism coverage and post-370 media narratives in Jammu and Kashmir, limited research has comparatively analyzed how regional and national newspapers frame hydropolitics during security crises.

The present study addresses this gap by examining how the Indus Waters Treaty was framed by regional and national newspapers during Operation Sindoor. The study also explores how media narratives intersect with diplomacy, securitization, nationalism, and humanitarian concerns.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical foundation of the study is based on three interconnected theoretical frameworks.

3.1. FRAMING THEORY

The study draws upon Framing Theory developed by Entman (1993). Framing refers to the process through which media organizations select and emphasize certain aspects of reality while downplaying others. Frames shape public interpretation by influencing how audiences understand causes, consequences, and responses.

In the context of the present study, framing theory helps examine how newspapers portrayed the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty. Some newspapers framed the development as a strategic response to terrorism, while others emphasized legal continuity, diplomacy, or humanitarian implications.

3.2. SECURITIZATION THEORY

The study also employs Securitization Theory proposed by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998). The theory explains how political issues become transformed into national security concerns.

The suspension of treaty mechanisms during Operation Sindoor reflected the securitization of water diplomacy. Water was no longer discussed only as a shared resource but increasingly portrayed as a strategic instrument linked with terrorism, retaliation, and national security.

This framework helps explain how newspapers legitimized or questioned the transformation of a diplomatic treaty into a security issue.

3.3. CONFLICT REPORTING MODELS

The third theoretical lens comes from Galtung's (1998) distinction between peace journalism and war journalism.

Peace journalism emphasizes dialogue, historical context, multiple viewpoints, and de-escalation. War journalism focuses on military responses, elite narratives, confrontation, and symbolic nationalism.

The framework helps evaluate whether newspaper coverage contributed to contextual understanding or reinforced polarized conflict narratives.

3.4. INTEGRATIVE RELEVANCE

Together, these three frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of how media organizations framed the intersection of hydropolitics, terrorism, diplomacy, and nationalism during Operation Sindoor.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopts a qualitative comparative content analysis approach. Qualitative content analysis is widely used in media studies to examine themes, narratives, and framing patterns in communication texts.

The method is suitable for conflict reporting studies because it allows researchers to examine both explicit content such as headlines and visuals and implicit dimensions such as tone, symbolic language, and ideological orientation.

4.2. NEWSPAPER SELECTION

Three newspapers were purposively selected for the study:

- 1) Greater Kashmir – Kashmir-based regional newspaper
- 2) Daily Excelsior – Jammu-based regional newspaper
- 3) The Hindu – National English-language newspaper

The selection was based on circulation, editorial influence, regional representation, and ideological diversity.

4.3. TIME FRAME

The study covers the period from April 22 to May 15, 2025.

This period was selected because:

- 1) April 22 marks the Pahalgam terror attack.
- 2) The period includes Operation Sindoor.
- 3) India's suspension of participation in IWT mechanisms became a major issue during this phase.
- 4) The selected timeframe captures immediate media reactions and framing patterns.

4.4. SAMPLING STRATEGY

The study focuses mainly on:

- Front-page reports
- Lead stories
- Major headlines
- Related visual content

Editorials and opinion pieces were excluded to maintain focus on straight news reporting.

4.5. CODING CATEGORIES

The following coding categories were used:

| Category | Indicators |
|----------------------|---|
| Tone | Supportive, critical, neutral |
| Frame Type | Security, diplomatic, humanitarian, economic |
| Source Type | Government, military, experts, civilians |
| Headline Orientation | Strategic, diplomatic, emotional, informational |
| Visuals | Military imagery, political imagery, humanitarian visuals |
| Language Use | Nationalist, diplomatic, contextual, symbolic |

4.6. DATA COLLECTION

Articles were collected from:

- E-paper archives
- Official newspaper websites
- Digital editions

Screenshots and metadata were preserved to analyze page placement and visual emphasis.

4.7. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The analysis was conducted in three stages:

- 1) Identification of dominant themes and frames.
- 2) Comparative analysis of regional and national narratives.
- 3) Interpretation using framing, securitization, and conflict reporting theories.

4.8. LIMITATIONS

The study is limited to English-language newspapers and a short time period. Urdu and Hindi newspapers were not included. The study focuses primarily on qualitative interpretation rather than statistical generalization.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

5.1. GREATER KASHMIR: HUMANITARIAN AND CONTEXTUAL FRAMING

Greater Kashmir largely adopted a contextual and diplomatic framing approach during Operation Sindoor and the Indus Waters Treaty debate. Although the newspaper reported official statements regarding treaty suspension and military operations, it frequently situated these developments within historical and legal contexts.

The newspaper often referred to the historical origins of the treaty and highlighted concerns regarding regional stability, diplomatic continuity, and civilian anxieties. Reports discussing the treaty generally avoided highly aggressive or retaliatory language.

Greater Kashmir also emphasized uncertainty and public concern regarding escalation between India and Pakistan. Several reports foregrounded political dialogue, diplomatic implications, and the risks associated with transforming water diplomacy into a strategic weapon.

The newspaper's framing reflected certain characteristics of peace journalism. While security concerns were acknowledged, the coverage attempted to maintain contextual depth and avoid overt militarized symbolism.

Visual presentation in Greater Kashmir was comparatively restrained. Parliamentary visuals, diplomatic meetings, and symbolic institutional imagery appeared more frequently than aggressive military visuals.





Keywords commonly associated with Greater Kashmir coverage included:

- dialogue
- treaty
- diplomacy
- continuity
- stability
- legality
- concern

These patterns suggest that the newspaper attempted to balance security reporting with legal and humanitarian framing.

5.2. DAILY EXCELSIOR: NATIONALIST AND SECURITIZED FRAMING

Daily Excelsior strongly emphasized nationalism, retaliation, and securitization during the coverage period.

The newspaper frequently framed the suspension of treaty mechanisms as a justified and strategic response to terrorism. Coverage highlighted themes such as national sovereignty, military strength, retaliation, and strategic assertion.

Headlines often carried symbolic and emotionally charged language. Political and military leaders were prominently featured as primary sources, while alternative or diplomatic perspectives received comparatively less emphasis.

The newspaper portrayed the treaty suspension not as a diplomatic dilemma but as an assertion of national strength and strategic correction. Historical references frequently positioned earlier diplomatic approaches as weak or ineffective.



Visual framing in Daily Excelsior prominently featured:

- military personnel
- national flags
- security operations
- strategic infrastructure

The language used in headlines and reports reflected war journalism tendencies. Elite political and military narratives dominated the reporting structure.

Common keywords in Daily Excelsior coverage included:

- security
- retaliation
- sovereignty
- blood
- response
- strategic action
- nationalism

The newspaper's overall narrative strongly aligned with securitization discourse.

5.3. THE HINDU: DIPLOMATIC AND POLICY-ORIENTED FRAMING

The Hindu adopted a comparatively analytical and policy-oriented framing approach.

Unlike Daily Excelsior, which foregrounded retaliatory rhetoric, The Hindu largely focused on diplomatic implications, treaty legality, international reactions, and strategic consequences.

The newspaper frequently discussed:

- implications for India-Pakistan relations
- regional stability
- international law
- water governance
- diplomatic risks
- geopolitical consequences

The Hindu also highlighted concerns regarding escalation and treaty sustainability. Reports often included expert opinions, strategic analysts, and references to international legal frameworks.

The newspaper's language remained relatively restrained and policy-centric. Instead of emphasizing symbolic nationalist rhetoric, it foregrounded strategic analysis and institutional discourse.

The framing reflected elements of diplomatic journalism and policy reporting rather than overt war journalism.



Visual framing was comparatively moderate and institutional. The newspaper used:

- parliamentary visuals
- diplomatic meetings

- maps
- river infrastructure imagery
- policy-related visuals

Keywords frequently appearing in The Hindu's coverage included:

- diplomacy
- regional stability
- treaty obligations
- strategic implications
- bilateral relations
- water governance
- international law

This pattern positioned The Hindu between conflict reporting and strategic policy analysis.

5.4. COMPARATIVE FRAMING PATTERNS

The comparative analysis revealed major differences between regional and national media narratives.

| Newspaper | Dominant Frame |
|-----------------|--|
| Greater Kashmir | Humanitarian and contextual diplomacy |
| Daily Excelsior | National security and securitization |
| The Hindu | Diplomatic and policy-oriented framing |

The findings suggest that geography, readership orientation, and editorial positioning significantly influenced coverage patterns.

Greater Kashmir attempted to contextualize conflict developments within legal and historical frameworks.

Daily Excelsior normalized securitization and nationalist retaliation narratives.

The Hindu focused on diplomatic implications and strategic consequences.

5.5. PEACE JOURNALISM VS WAR JOURNALISM

The comparative findings also reflected clear differences between peace journalism and war journalism approaches.

Greater Kashmir displayed partial peace journalism characteristics by:

- providing historical context
- foregrounding dialogue
- discussing treaty continuity
- reducing overt militarized symbolism

Daily Excelsior reflected stronger war journalism tendencies through:

- elite-driven sourcing
- symbolic nationalism
- retaliatory rhetoric
- militarized framing
- polarized binaries

The Hindu occupied an intermediate position where diplomatic and strategic analysis remained central.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that media framing during Operation Sindoor was deeply shaped by regional political environments and editorial orientations.

6.1. REGIONAL IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

The regional newspapers reflected differing social and political realities.

Greater Kashmir's contextual and humanitarian framing reflected concerns associated with prolonged conflict exposure and local anxieties regarding escalation.

Daily Excelsior's securitized narrative aligned more closely with nationalist and strategic discourse.

These differences illustrate how regional identity influences media framing in conflict zones.

6.2. NATIONAL MEDIA AND STRATEGIC DISCOURSE

The Hindu's coverage reflected a broader strategic and diplomatic perspective. Rather than focusing primarily on emotional rhetoric or symbolic nationalism, the newspaper emphasized policy implications and regional stability.

This suggests that national media organizations often frame conflicts through institutional and geopolitical lenses.

6.3. SECURITIZATION OF WATER DIPLOMACY

The study confirms that the Indus Waters Treaty was increasingly framed as a strategic and security issue during Operation Sindoor.

The transformation of a diplomatic water-sharing agreement into a national security narrative reflects broader trends in global hydropolitics.

The media played a major role in amplifying these narratives.

6.4. AGENDA-SETTING AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

The findings support agenda-setting theory by demonstrating how newspapers influence not only what audiences think about but also how they think about specific issues.

Different newspapers foregrounded different dimensions of the same event:

- humanitarian concerns
- strategic retaliation
- diplomatic implications
- treaty legality

This shaped varying public interpretations of the crisis.

6.5. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study contributes to:

- 1) Framing Theory by showing divergent media salience patterns.
- 2) Securitization Theory by illustrating how water diplomacy becomes linked with terrorism and strategic discourse.
- 3) Conflict Reporting Models by identifying peace journalism and war journalism tendencies across newspapers.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Greater Kashmir, Daily Excelsior, and The Hindu demonstrates that media framing during Operation Sindoor varied significantly across regional and national newspapers.

Greater Kashmir largely adopted a contextual and humanitarian approach while emphasizing treaty continuity and diplomatic concerns.

Daily Excelsior strongly framed the issue through nationalism, retaliation, and securitization narratives.

The Hindu focused primarily on policy implications, strategic discourse, and regional stability.

The findings reveal that media organizations are not passive transmitters of information. Instead, they actively shape how audiences interpret conflict, diplomacy, and national security.

The study also highlights the growing securitization of hydropolitics in South Asia, where water-sharing agreements increasingly become linked with military and strategic discourse.

7.2. RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Balanced Conflict Reporting

Media organizations should integrate legal, diplomatic, humanitarian, and environmental dimensions alongside security narratives.

2) Inclusion of Expert Perspectives

Coverage should include hydrologists, legal experts, environmental scholars, and conflict analysts in addition to political and military sources.

3) Reduction of Polarized Framing

Newspapers should avoid excessive symbolic nationalism and militarized rhetoric that may intensify public polarization.

4) Greater Contextual Reporting

Conflict reporting should include historical and legal background to help audiences better understand treaty frameworks and diplomatic processes.

5) Cross-Regional Media Dialogue

Collaborative reporting initiatives between regional and national media organizations may help reduce narrative polarization.

7.3. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future studies may:

- include Urdu and Hindi newspapers
- conduct longitudinal analysis over longer periods
- examine television and digital media narratives
- analyze audience perception through surveys and interviews
- compare South Asian hydropolitical conflicts with other international river disputes

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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