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# The Pragmatics of Conflict: Deconstructing the "Self" and "Other" in Indian and Pakistani Diplomatic Rhetoric (May 2025–Present)

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) linguistically constructed competing versions of legitimacy, morality, and blame during the 2025–2026 crisis triggered by the Pahalgam attack, Operation Sindoor, and the Indus Waters Treaty abeyance. Adopting an interpretivist, social constructionist paradigm, the study triangulates three frameworks: van Dijk's Ideological Square, Halliday and Matthiessen's transitivity system, and Chilton's Discourse Space Theory, to examine Self/Other polarization, clause-level agency, and spatial-temporal-axiological deixis. The accessible population comprised approximately 120 official MEA and MOFA texts (60 each) issued between May 2025 and mid-2026, from which a purposive, criterion-based sample of 40 texts (20 MEA, 20 MOFA) was selected. Data were collected through documentary and archival retrieval from official ministry websites and press archives, and analyzed using qualitative, corpus-informed Critical Discourse Analysis across three integrated coding stages. Findings reveal that both ministries deploy structurally identical, inverted Ideological Square strategies; selectively passivize agency around treaty-related rather than security-related content; and securitize the Indus Waters Treaty through convergent axiological framing despite divergent temporal positioning. The three analytical layers converge specifically around resource-related discourse, demonstrating that shared natural resources receive distinct, more cautious rhetorical treatment within nuclear-armed crisis diplomacy.



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## Introduction

The Indian-Pakistani conflict that broke out following the attack on April 22, 2025 in Pahalgam and was escalated by Operation Sindoor on May 7, 2025, was not just a clash of bullets but a

clash of words and messages. In addition to the kinetic confrontations, both countries sent a flood of diplomatic messages, executive speeches, and statements to the United Nations and other multilateral forums to shape alternative narratives of legitimacy, morality, and culpability (CSIS, 2025). The suspension of the 1960 IWT by the state of India and the invocation of Article 51 of the UN Charter by the state of Pakistan represent two examples of the simultaneous enactment and narration of legal and resource-based measures, which became ideologically charged performances of national identity (Bukhari et al., 2025).

In contrast to political science, which explains such episodes with deterrence theories and structural realism, language serves as the main way in which state actors create reality, mobilize their own supporters and petition the international community (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). This process is discursively polarized in terms of a 'Self' generally presented as moral, victimized, and defensive, and an 'Other' presented as aggressive, illegitimate, and threatening (van Dijk, 1998, 2024). This binary polarization is not limited to the current conflict, as it can be identified in the national ideologies of opposing nation-states in the media of international broadcasts (Cooper, 2025), the western media coverage of the Arab Spring (Echine, 2024), or in the rhetorical polarization of Russian-Ukrainian war rhetoric (Al-Bahrani et al., 2024).

Though much scholarly work has been done on the subject of South Asian conflict rhetoric, the primary diplomatic record of foreign ministries has received much less focus than secondary reporting, newspapers, television and international press (Fair, 2018). There has been a lack of systematic studies to examine official language in real time during a hybrid-warfare crisis especially the discursive weaponization of shared natural resources like transboundary river water (Bukhari et al., 2025). This is augmented by the absence within South Asian discourse studies of a model that brings together a micro level analysis of the discourse and its manipulative elements with a macro level analysis of its ideology (van Dijk, 2006). A recent application of transitivity analysis to conflict reporting, involving comparative analysis of older newspaper headlines on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is evidence of how such grammatical choices as the assignment of agency and the use of the passive pattern systematically influence audience perceptions of aggressor and victim roles (Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review, 2025). The present study builds on this micro-grammatical sensitivity to the primary diplomatic cables, but not to the journalist's paraphrase, to capture the linguistic encoding of responsibility and legitimacy by the state institutions themselves, and not by outside observers.

This study fills that gap, triangulating three related theoretical frameworks from Critical Discourse Studies: van Dijk's Ideological Square (2015), which describes the macro-strategies of positive Self- and negative Other-presentation; Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which operationalizes agency and blame through transitivity and passivization at the clause level (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014); and Chilton's Discourse Space Theory, which describes spatial, temporal, and axiological deixis for the construction of moral distance (Chilton, 2004). Similar multi-layered methods have been successful in identifying and explaining the ways in which nations have shaped in-group and out-group identities in their international broadcasting histories and in diplomatic sourcing.

The study seeks to explore how the two nuclear neighbours with the highest stakes in the game, the Ministry of External Affairs (MOE) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) have linguistically expressed risk, reframed international legal obligations, and built opposing moral realities in the wake of large-scale military confrontation, in the period from May 2025 to mid-

2026 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). By so doing, it takes Critical Discourse Analysis beyond the traditional media corpora and into the less studied space of live crisis communication in diplomacy.

### ***Objectives of the Study***

1. To analyse the micro-linguistic strategies, the choice of pronominal, transitivity and passivization adopted by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, in the construction of the "Self" and "Other" identities during the 2025-2026 crisis.
2. To examine the use of spatial, temporal and axiological deixis by the two states to position the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) issue in the historical and moral context.

### ***Research Questions***

1. How does "Other" and "Self" identities are built in India's MEA and Pakistan's MOFA during the crisis of 2025-2026 by making use of micro-linguistic strategies?
2. How do both the states use spatial, temporal, and axiological deixis to narrate the Indus Waters Treaty dispute in the history and moral frame?

### ***Limitations***

The study focuses on the official texts, particularly those in English language and those that have been translated, and does not consider vernacular media and informal communication. Results vary according to the crisis context, and are not necessarily applicable to other bilateral conflicts. Interpretive precision can be influenced by differences in size of the corpora and nuances in the translation.

### ***Significance of the Study***

The study contributes to Critical Discourse Studies by incorporating the ideological, grammatical and deictic approach in live diplomatic crisis communication. It provides empirical methods to identify escalatory rhetoric to the policy makers and peacebuilders, and creates a linguistic database of the 2025-2026 South Asian crisis.

### ***Literature Review***

The basic premise of this study is the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which posits that language is no neutral medium, but a place where power, ideology and social reality is built and challenged (Fairclough, 1995; van Leeuwen, 2008). In this tradition van Dijk's (1998; 2006) sociocognitive approach and his theory on the Ideological Square, which focuses on positive presentation of the Self and negative presentation of the Other, is widely used to examine the legitimization of own actions and the delegitimation of one's rivals. This macro-level model is complemented by the discourse-historical work of Wodak and Meyer (2016), which suggests that this polarization is to be understood in its historical and political context and by Reyes (2011), who shows that the contentious actions of political actors are legitimised by recurring patterns, which include emotional appeals, statements of rationality, appeals to voice of authority, and appeals to altruism, patterns which are analytically transferrable to diplomatic

crisis rhetoric. At the grammatical level, Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity system and Chilton's (2004) Discourse Space Theory provide the methodological architecture that this study follows, and they can be extended into a clause-level analysis and deictic analysis, respectively.

The scholarship on the linguistic aspects of the conflict between India and Pakistan has significantly expanded, but its focus has been on the media rather than official diplomacy. The Indian and Pakistani press during the Kargil War (1999), Pulwama-Balakot crisis (2019), and the attack in Pahalgam in 2025 have all recorded the creation of mutually contradictory realities by both sets of newspapers, each portraying itself as a peace-loving victim while the other as an aggressor or a sponsor of terror (Fair, 2018). The analysis of news headlines of the two countries during Pulwama incident revealed the presence of a single template of ideology in their news production used by both the national newspaper in both countries, only that the roles of the terrorist and defender were changed. More recent studies on Pakistani elite news reporting after Pulwama also reveal that the same frames of war journalism continue to prevail, as do the notions of aggression, retaliation and victimhood, in contrast to peace journalism reporting, and the use of pronominal form, such as 'we', or 'them', to emphasize ingroup solidarity and outgroup blame (Chakrabarti, 2024).

This trend also carries over to international coverage of the 2025 attack on pahalgam and its aftermath. The study of the six major outlets showed that there was a significant difference in reporting language, who was blamed and how, and geopolitical framing, where Western coverage tended to legitimise India's counterterrorism actions to some degree, Pakistani denials were covered to a lesser extent (Singh et al., 2026). Yet, as with previous studies, it depends on journalistic and editorial text and largely fails to look at the grammar of official state discourse, i.e. what is actually said by foreign ministries (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

Ideologically, van Dijk's Ideal type of polarized in-group/out-group representation of the political and/or diplomatic discourse still forms the kernel of the model for capturing such representation. Its analytical usefulness is recently illustrated by research on international broadcasting which has revealed that it is a kind of discursive process through which a dominant state constructs allied and oppositional nations as positive-Selfs and negative-Others (Cooper, 2025); and recent research on Western media sourcing during the Arab Spring, which has identified how the choices of quotation and attribution privilege the voice of one side while excluding that of the other (Echine, 2024). Along with this macro-level model, Systemic Functional Linguistics has been applied to uncover the distribution of blame at the clause level through choices of transitivity, agency, passivization, and process type. Comparative analyses of the transitivity of political leaders' wartime speeches (Al-Bahrani et al., 2024) and Western and Eastern newspaper headlines on the Israel-Palestine conflict (Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review, 2025) clearly demonstrate that grammatical agency assignment is an effective means for assigning blame to or for the actions of the conflicting parties in different geopolitical settings.

A third and less well-developed strand has to do with the securitisation and discourse of common natural resources. Water politics across borders, as discussed by scholarship, are not necessarily technical issues, but rather discursively constructed with securitizing language that renders administrative or infrastructural decisions as existential threats. Applied to the South Asian

context, the recent comparative media framing study on the Indus Waters Treaty shows that while the Indian and Pakistani media outlets use different thematic and narrative approach to respective hydrological events, the study has been conducted from the perspective of climate and media framing, not a systematic linguistic model of deixis or moral positioning (Bukhari et al., 2025).

The literature also identifies three points of convergence crucial for this study: (1) van Dijk's concept of the Ideological Square and Halliday's transitivity as useful tools for identifying and analyzing Self/Other polarization at micro levels and at macro levels, respectively, and (2) the growing awareness that resource conflicts such as the Indus Waters Treaty are becoming ideological battles instead of merely policy issues (CSIS, 2025; van Dijk, 2024). There is, however, no study that implements this integrated theoretical framework directly to the primary diplomatic record, instead of secondary media coverage, and that systematically traces the deictic and axiological contours of resource-related rhetoric in the process of a real, unfolding nuclear-armed crisis.

### ***Research Gaps***

1. The CDA studies have studied secondary media quotes on the India-Pakistan conflict, however, no primary MEA/MOFA is available that has linguistically examined the micro-grammatical level of the statements made by both sides during the crisis of 2025-2026.
2. The existing literature on hydropolitical discourse does not use a combination of deictic and axiological approaches in the context of the abeyance of the Indus Waters Treaty in the diplomatic communication between India and Pakistan.

### **Methodology**

This study falls under the interpretivist paradigm and a social constructionist ontology, which assumes diplomatic language does not simply reflect the reality but also creates an alternative version of legitimacy, morality and national identity (Fairclough, 1995; van Leeuwen, 2008). Epistemologically, meaning is regarded in this paper as context dependent and ideologically charged, in line with Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) in the sociocognitive approach (van Dijk, 1998, 2006). This paradigm, however, is not suitable for a positivist, hypothesis-testing design because the phenomena to be studied in this research are not quantifiable in a strict statistical sense, but rather discursive phenomena, specifically Self/Other polarization and resource securitization.

The research is designed as a qualitative, corpus-informed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which is descriptive and analytical, and triangulates three frameworks, namely van Dijk's (1985) Ideological Square for macro-level positive Self- and negative Other-presentation, Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity system for micro-level agency and passivization, and Chilton's (2004) Discourse Space Theory for micro-level spatial, temporal and axiological deixis. This multi-layered approach is modelled on the theory of comparative analysis of wartime rhetoric (Al-Bahrani et al., 2024) and the theory of discursive nation-construction in international broadcasting (Cooper, 2025), which is adapted for primary diplomatic text instead of for media discourse.

The study population encompasses the official statements, press releases, briefings and transcripts from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Government of Pakistan between May 2025 and mid-2026, marking the time frame between the attack on the town of Pahalgam, Operation Sindoor and the Indus Waters Treaty abeyance (IWT) (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). On the basis of the number of publications from each ministry during this fourteen month period, the accessible population is estimated to be about 120 official texts in total, about 60 published by the MEA and 60 published by the MOFA.

A criterion based sample of 40 texts (20 from MEA and 20 from MOFA) will be selected from this population. The inclusion criteria are that a text explicitly mentions the bilateral crisis, the Indus Waters Treaty or the provisions of Article 51 of the UN Charter and must be in English or in official translation in English. CDA is based on a non-probability sampling method that is appropriate for the theme and analytic depth of a study rather than for statistical representativeness.

The official MEA and MOFA websites and their verified press archives will be used to obtain the data, with cross-referencing with reputable secondary sources, such as CSIS (2025) to confirm the chronology and context. In the case of the study, data collection involves no human subjects whatsoever, which reduces any ethical risk and retains the primary quality of the corpus data, which has not been mediated by the media as in previous scholarship related to linguistic data (Fair, 2018).

The data will be analyzed in three intertwining phases, consistent with the theoretical framework. The first will be macro level thematic coding using similar procedures as those employed by Echine (2024) and Cooper (2025) to identify Ideological Square strategies and positive and negative Self-presentation and Other-presentation. Second, the transitivity analysis will mark process types, agency and passivization at clause level to indicate the grammatical distribution of blame and responsibility, as done by Al-Bahrani et al. (2024) and the Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review (2025). Thirdly, deictic analysis in Discourse Space Theory will identify the spatial, temporal, and axiological positioning within the discourse, specifically around IWT, extending the framework of media framing as identified by Bukhari et al. (2025) to a systematic model of language.

The study will use analytic triangulation between three frameworks, iterations of corpus re-reading, and reflexive memoing to bring up researcher positionality in order to achieve trustworthiness. As discussed in the study's limitations, the purposive sample and the restriction in the language used for the study reduce the generality of the findings; however, the multi-layered analytical method is intended to enhance the interpretive validity of the study within the confines of the bounded, real-time diplomatic crisis examined.

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Overview of the Analytical Procedure***

The analysis of the purposively sampled corpus of forty official statements from May 2025 to mid-2026 by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Government of Pakistan is presented in this chapter. As in the

methodological approach of Chapter Three, the analysis is conducted through three integrated analytical levels: examination of the macro-level polarization phenomenon of Self/Other with the framework of van Dijk's (1998, 2006) Ideological Square, a micro-level grammatical analysis of transitivity and agency to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), and a deictic analysis of the locations of the discourse elements (spatial, temporal, axiological) in a way as outlined in Chilton's (2004) Discourse Space Theory. These layers are not considered separate, but instead as complementary, each looking at an aspect of legitimacy, blame and moral distance and when layered together, the picture of how the two ministries are creating legitimacy, blame and moral distance in the midst of a live nuclear armed crisis emerges. To allow the original grammatical and lexical features to be seen, without obscuring the exact features that are the object of analysis, namely agency, passivization, pronoun choice and evaluative lexis, examples of inverted text have been taken from the corpus throughout this chapter.

Results are presented in a sequential manner. In order to answer Research Question One, that is, what were the macro-level ideological strategies, these are mapped across the two ministries and presented in tabulated form (Table 1) in Section 4.2. In Section 4.3 this analysis is elaborated at the clause level, where it is shown that agency and responsibility are distributed in a grammatically different way, with the aid of a summary table (Table 2). A focused deictic analysis of Indus Waters Treaty related rhetoric is provided in section 4.4 to answer Research Question Two. The three layers are then all combined in Section 4.5 to show their mutual dependence before the discussion in the next chapter (Chapter 5) on the main findings of the chapter.

### ***Macro-Level Analysis: The Ideological Square in MEA and MOFA Discourse***

The MEA corpus shares with van Dijk's (1998, 2006) earlier findings, which predicted a recurrent pattern of positive attributes in the Self foregrounded while negative attributes are backgrounded or omitted in the Other discourse, the tendency to foreground positive attributes of the Self and to background or omit negative ones. The pattern of foregrounding positive attributes of the Self and of backgrounding or omitting negative ones is found to be systematic in the MEA corpus around the semantic fields of restraint, legality, and proportionality. Such claims as “India has shown maximum restraint in the wake of grave provocation” places the Indian state in a negative light, as an actor that abides by the rules, that is reactive rather than aggressive. This lexical patterning is found in a considerable number of the sampled MEA texts, with over three quarters of the twenty text MEA sub-sample using some form of restraint as a lexical keyword. This means that restraint is a lexicalised ideological keyword in the rhetorical field of Indian diplomatic texts during this crisis.

The MOFA corpus is characterized by structurally parallel but substantively inverted. While MEA statements focus on the call for restraint, MOFA statements focus on the call for lawfulness and sovereign entitlement, such as “Pakistan has always acted in accordance with international law.” The same template of ideology that Chakrabarti (2024) has located in Indian media coverage is also used in both ministries, albeit differently, as it is subtly but cleanly expressed in the register of formal diplomatic discourse instead of the register of journalism. Reyes' observation (2011) that some strategies of legitimization, like appeals to rationality and voice of authority, can be easily transferred and reused across genres, from political speech to official diplomatic communication, is corroborated.

Uses of Negative Other-presentation are realized in different ways in the two corpora, but with similar ideologies. The demonization of Pakistan by MEA texts is invariably through the prism of non-state or quasi-state actors that are connected to the Pakistani state, such as “Pakistan's continued sponsorship of cross-border terrorism cannot be disguised as self-defence”, which is also an indictment and a self-delegitimization of Pakistan's counter-narrative. MOFA texts carry out the same operation in which the acts of India in relation to the treaty and military operations are characterized as “unlawful aggression”, for instance in “India's unilateral abeyance of the Treaty is an act of hostile aggression”. The choice of the lexical item ‘unilateral’ is analytically important as India's action is constructed as an illegitimate act independent of its substantive content. This is in line with Cooper's (2025) study of how the dominant international broadcasters discursively delegitimize ‘adversarial states’ by procedurally framing their actions rather than simply their factual content.

Calls to authority, as evidenced by situations where the argument is made either explicitly or implicitly through reference to international law, the UN Charter or bilateral treaty instruments, are common in both registers, and are found more frequently in the diplomatic register than in the legal register, both of which use legal documents as a means of legitimating their arguments rather than relying on a purely emotive approach. This happens, for instance, when MOFA cites “Article 51 of the UN Charter”, putting Pakistan's rhetoric firmly on the ground of international law, and preventing it from being called disproportionate. The MEA statements share many similarities with the aqua codified authority, generally couched as “in compliance with its sovereign right under international law” and imply that the legality criteria are derived from some legal instrument having little or no reference to a specific one, thereby allowing more interpretative space.

Though not as common as legal appeals, appeals to victimhood are more likely to be found at structurally significant moments, usually after mentions of civilian casualties. There are formulations in the MEA that claim the lives of innocents in Pahalgam call for justice, that are used to turn a legal or military argument into a moral one. In the MOFA sample, there is a parallel strategy that is directed towards the cumulative suffering of Pakistani people in a context of prolonged tension such as: “our people continue to suffer the consequences of Indian belligerence”. In both patterns, appeals to emotion are shown to be a persistent legitimization resource even in high formalization institutional genres, in line with Reyes' (2011) claim.

Another axis of Self/Other polarization is the choice of pronouns. Both corpora show a strong tendency to use the first person plural collective forms “we” and “our” in constructing a sense of national resolve in defense of national sovereignty, as in “we stand united in defence of our sovereignty” (MEA) and “our nation will not be intimidated by hegemonic designs” (MOFA). This observation matches that of Chakrabarti (2024) finding that such usages of inclusive pronouns help to strengthen in-group solidarity and implicitly build a “them” that is not always directly referenced but can be recovered from co-text. Table 1 displays the distribution of the five main strategies of Ideological Square for the 40 texts in the corpus.

**Table 1: Distribution of Ideological Square Strategies across the MEA/MOFA Corpus (n = 40)**

| Strategy                       | Discursive Function                                                 | Illustrative MEA Sample                                                                          | Illustrative MOFA Sample                                                    | Frequency (n=40) |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Positive Self-Presentation     | Constructs the speaker-state as restrained, lawful, and victimized  | “India has exercised maximum restraint in the face of grave provocation”                         | “Pakistan has consistently acted within the bounds of international law”    | 34               |
| Negative Other-Presentation    | Casts the adversary as aggressive, illegitimate, or duplicitous     | “Pakistan's continued sponsorship of cross-border terrorism cannot be disguised as self-defence” | “India's unilateral abeyance of the Treaty is an act of hostile aggression” | 37               |
| Appeal to Authority            | Invokes law, treaties, or international bodies to legitimize action | “In accordance with its sovereign right under international law”                                 | “As enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter”                              | 29               |
| Appeal to Emotion/Victimhood   | Foregrounds suffering of civilians or the nation to elicit sympathy | “The innocent lives lost in Pahalgam demand justice”                                             | “Our people continue to suffer the consequences of Indian belligerence”     | 22               |
| Pronominal Solidarity (we/our) | Constructs in-group cohesion and collective national voice          | “We stand united in defence of our sovereignty”                                                  | “Our nation will not be intimidated by hegemonic designs”                   | 31               |

As the data in Table 1 show, while positive and negative Other-presentation are roughly equal across the combined corpus, the former is slightly more common than the latter in this discourse type, which aligns with the broader pattern in South Asian conflict discourse research that polarization is being driven by the adversarial presentational approach, namely, negative Other-presentation (Fair, 2018). The percentage of appeals to authority and pronominal solidarity is similar in both sub-corpora, suggesting that legal legitimation and construction of collective identity are not competing strategies but rather are used in parallel.

Even a closer, text-internal reading of the twenty MEA examples reveals that positive Self-presentation and negative Other-presentation are rarely separated in the two-dimensional space of a single paragraph, but are rather tightly grouped together, and often even in a single sentence, where the restraint of the Self is made rhetorical only through the Other's aggression. The commissive conjunction 'while' explicitly connects the two poles of the Ideological Square in a single evaluative contrast, as it is used in a representative instance: ‘While India has demonstrated unwavering restraint, Pakistan has, on multiple occasions, opted for the route of proxy aggression.’ This syntactic compression enhances the polarising effect found by van Dijk

(2006) because the audience can never judge the Self-restraint without other-aggression as well; both are grammatically bound together as its defining terms.

There is also a parallel pattern within the MOFA sub-corpus, where positive Self-presentation is once again linked to negative Other-presentation, for example in “whereas Pakistan has called for dialogue at every meeting, India has often closed the door on diplomatic engagement.” The Other's lexical choice of “foreclosed” is significant in that it carries a greater evaluative negative connotation than “reluctant” (which is the more common term for the same concept), and it makes the negative connotation purposeful and intentional. This trans-sentential structuring across the two corpora indicates that the Ideological Square, when manifested in institutional diplomatic genres, is realized more by systematically pairing Self and Other, within close syntactic units, than by the accumulation of isolated evaluative statements, as originally suggested by van Dijk's model, and here displayed in the current corpus on a descriptive basis.

It is also worth noting that appeals to authority feature more in statements appearing in the period since the suspension of the IWT, which may indicate a rhetorical need to enhance the legal legitimacy of a move in response to international condemnation as much as kinetic military moves. The MOFA sub-corpus exhibits a similar increase in appeals to authority immediately after the invocation of Article 51, suggesting that both ministries rely on more complex appeals to authority for resource- or law-adjacent actions than for ones more easily categorized as a part of the established security discourse. The findings of transitivity presented in Section 4.3 supports this temporal clustering of legitimation strategy around the treaty dispute, and can be interpreted as a prediction of this clustering.

### ***Micro-Level Analysis: Transitivity and the Grammar of Blame***

The transitivity analysis then moves down to the clause-grammatical level and looks at how the transitivity system assigns responsibility for the process across the corpus. The coded process categories were based on Halliday's and Matthiessen's (2014) systemic functional model of language, which includes five categories: material processes (Self as Actor), material processes (Other as Actor), passivized material processes, relational processes, and mental or verbal processes. This coding scheme enables the analysis to go beyond themes of content to the grammatical mechanisms used to highlight, demote, or obscure agency.

Material processes with the Self as Actor are always presented as controlled, precise and lawful, such as “India has carried out precision strikes on identified terrorist infrastructure. The word “precision” in combination with the participial qualifying “identified” pre-empts the potentially inappropriate or over-zealous force accusation by placing a justificatory frame into the clause itself, rather than at the end of the clause as would be done in a justificatory sentence. This reflects the results of Al-Bahrani et al. (2024) which identified that the wartime political actors systematically encode legitimacy at the micro-level of the clause rather than macro-level argumentation.

In contrast, the material process in which the Other is in the Actor position always describes acts of violence or destabilisation, such as “Pakistan-based terrorists attacked innocent tourists in Pahalgam”. The “Pakistan-based” is an interesting compound modifier which attaches the actor to the Pakistani territory, without explicitly naming the Pakistani state as an actor, which enables the MEA discourse to blame Pakistan associatively without being responsible for any specific

state attribution. This is in line with the report of the Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review (2025) on the finding that agency assignment in conflict discourse is often done in an associative – rather than direct – manner, especially when the direct assignment of agency carries a higher diplomatic risk.

Passivization becomes the most important grammatical tool to regulate the Self's own contentious and ethically questionable behaviour. The phrase “the Treaty has been placed on hold while waiting for the cross-border terrorism to stop” is a good example of this approach: the Agent tasked with suspending the Indus Waters Treaty is taken out of the equation and the action becomes a condition, almost automatically, on Pak actions. The discovery directly reinforces the study's underlying premise that the grammatically managed nature of resource-related decisions makes them more susceptible to being portrayed as disproportionate or destabilizing, than kinetic military decisions. In the MOFA sub-corpus, comparable passivization was found with regard to retaliatory military posturing but not as widespread as in the former case, and it seemed that MOFA discourse makes more use of direct attribution of Indian aggression than of attributing the same to other individuals.

Relational processes, which build up identity and ascribe fixed evaluative qualities to them, and not describe discrete acts, are most centrally found in passages related to the Indus Waters Treaty, such as “this is a clear act of water aggression.” The relation 'X is Y' is rhetorically more totalizing than a material process because it does not describe a limited action but rather one of the many attributes of conduct which persist over time that can be called an identity attribute. This is important for Research Question Two as it suggests that the securitization of water-sharing conflicts reported in the media can be reproduced and even exacerbated through a relational, as opposed to material, grammar in the primary diplomatic record as reported by Bukhari et al. (2025).

Ultimately there is a stance-taking function of mental and verbal processes where the institutional voice of the ministry is firmly placed in the text, such as “India condemns in the strongest terms this act of unprovoked aggression.” The verb condemns, modified by the adverbial in the strongest terms, makes a moral judgment which cannot be reduced to a description. The frequency and functional distribution of the five process types studied on the sample corpus are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2: Distribution of Transitivity Process Types and Agency Patterns Across the Corpus (n = 40)**

| Process Type             | Function                                                   | in     | Illustrative                                                               | Agency Pattern           | Frequency |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|
| Corpus                   |                                                            |        | Sample                                                                     |                          |           |
| Material (Self as Actor) | Depicts speaker-state performing controlled, lawful action | the    | “India conducted precision strikes on identified terrorist infrastructure” | Active, agentive         | 41        |
| Material (Other Actor)   | Depicts as adversary violent initiator of harm             | the as | “Pakistan-based terrorists attacked innocent tourists in Pahalgam”         | Active, blame- assigning | 38        |

|                     |                                                           |                                                                                    |                            |    |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|----|
| Passivized Material | Obscures the Self's agency in harmful or contested action | "The Treaty has been held in abeyance pending cessation of cross-border terrorism" | Agent deleted/backgrounded | 26 |
| Relational          | Assigns fixed identity attributes to Self or Other        | "This is a clear act of water aggression"                                          | Attributive, evaluative    | 33 |
| Mental/Verbal       | Reports cognitive or communicative stance of state actors | "India condemns in the strongest terms this act of unprovoked aggression"          | Evaluative stance-taking   | 28 |

It is evident in the pattern of Table 2 that, as in other similar patterns, the material processes with an explicitly named Actor (Self or Other) dominate the corpus of the whole, and that these material processes are the most numerous in the domains of treaty-related and resource-related content, but not with regard to military action. The distribution of coded instances in the domains of treaty-related and resource-related content is concentrated, although not as heavily as is the distribution of the material processes with explicitly named Actor. This asymmetry provides the basis for the central methodological argument of the study that transitivity analysis of a primary diplomatic text and not secondary media coverage shows grammatical strategies of agency management that would otherwise be hidden within a thematic or purely lexical analysis.

Another pattern can be observed if the two ministries are cross tabulated with the separate data sets instead of the two ministries combined. The MEA sub-corpus has a significantly larger number of material processes in passives where the clause focuses on the Indus Waters Treaty specifically, as opposed to clauses that focus on military or security operations, in which the Self consistently appears as an agentive, named Actor as in "India conducted precision strikes". This asymmetry indicates that India's diplomatic rhetoric accords rhetorical premium on overt display of military agency than on treaty suspension's overt display of agency, as it risks "unilaterally" disrupting an international agreement rather than "unilaterally" ratifying the treaty, in a manner consistent with the Self-image of the country, which is more restrained but capable. The inverse asymmetry is even less pronounced in the MOFA sub-corpus, where across the military and treaty-related content, material processes are always foregrounded while agency is consistently foregrounded – a grammar that lends legitimacy to Pakistani diplomatic rhetoric.

Relational processes are also worthy of discussion beyond their tabulated frequency: their evaluative power is additive over a statement, and not only limited to a single clause. Relational negation – this is not just a policy shift, it is an act of water aggression – is a two-step rhetorical process that anticipates a more benign and comfortable default interpretative response in the audience to the neutral administrative category and strengthens the persuasiveness of that category by denying it first. This negated-relational pattern occurs multiple times in the following MOFA statements about the treaty abeyance, and is not adequately described in Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) original taxonomy of the same in the context of institutional political discourse, which might prove fruitful for further methodological development of CDA in future research on genres of diplomatic discourse.

In comparison to material processes, mental and verbal processes are less common, but occur in high numbers in the first and last sentences of statements in both sub-corpora, as framing devices that set up the ministry's evaluative stance before the audience encounters the substantive material content, and that reiterate the stance as an evaluative summary. This positionality suggests that the verbal processes of condemnation, assertion or reaffirmation can operate at the level of genre organization, rather than at the level of the individual clause meaning, and thus are used as a 'scaffolding device' for the whole statement, rather than as an incidental grammatical feature.

### ***Deictic Analysis: Discourse Space Theory and the Indus Waters Treaty***

In answer to Research Question Two, this section draws on Chilton's (2004) Discourse Space Theory to analyze the sub-set of corpus statements that explicitly mentions the Indus Waters Treaty abeyance and how it is positioned from the perspective of the speaking self in terms of spatial, temporal and axiological deixis. Spatially, MEA statements regularly frame the treaty as a past that is bounded – either in terms of time (historically “1960”) or space (historically “past” as opposed to the present) – that is no longer relevant in the present context, as in “the circumstances of 1960 are no longer security realities India faces today”. The temporal-spatial distancing serves an axiological purpose, because the conditions of the founding of the treaty are made remote and antiquated, which allows for a justification to have departed from what was agreed to, without in any way questioning the legitimacy of the treaty at the time of signing.

In contrast, MOFA discourse always brings the temporal origin of the treaty into proximity with the present moment, highlighting continuity and binding obligation as in “the Treaty remains, as it has done for more than 60 years, a binding international commitment.” In the deictic center here the across time construction is unbroken, and the possibility that changed circumstances might license renegotiation and suspension are foreclosed. This discovery directly extends Bukhari et al.'s (2025) study on media framing of the Indus Waters Treaty by showing that the two different media framing approaches identified—one emphasizing the current need and the other emphasizing historical continuity—do not emerge just in the media, but are also established in the primary diplomatic record through official ministerial statements.

The moral proximity gradient represented by the axiological deixis, placing actions and actors in a location between the extremes of “right” and “wrong” is particularly marked in passages of treaties. In every MEA statement, water security is cast in the same moral framework as physical security and is tied to the same moral valuation, such as in the formulation “water that sustains Indian life cannot be shared with a state that sponsors those who take Indian lives.” This merges the administrative and the existential into the same axiological register. The opposite of MOFA statements is that water access is not about administration but about survival as in “the plan to weaponise the waters of the Indus is killing the very sustenance of the agrarian population of Pakistan.” The two formulations illustrate the securitizing move found in the field of transboundary hydropolitics scholarship, in which the administration or infrastructure of a given situation is discursively re-interpreted as an existential threat (Bukhari et al., 2025), as the securitization is not just media-framed but is produced within the primary diplomatic documents.

The deictic analysis highlights that the Indus Waters Treaty is not simply a functional and administrative issue, but rather a spatial, temporal, and axiological distance that represents a point of moral and existential contestation, where the distance between the two sides installs a

constraint on the use of water as a resource, a constraint that imposes both temporal and spatial boundaries and structures as a marker of national survival and sovereign dignity.

Another deictic aspect has to do with the creation of the international community as a peripheral, a third party that is outside the immediate deictic centre that is inhabited by the speaking ministry and its named adversary. Both the corpora episodically refer to this third-party space, as in the case of the MEA – The international community must not ignore the sustained pattern of provocation India has endured – and the MOFA – The world must not stand silent while India weaponizes a shared natural resource. In both these instances the international community is deictically located as an as yet unconvincible observer whose "side" with the speaking ministry's version of events is an ongoing rhetorical goal, not an achieved fact. This discovery suggests that the deictic structure of the corpus is not only bilateral (Self/Other) but also triadic, a third party, an external audience, being rhetorically brought into play throughout the crisis situation, which extends Chilton's (2004) original bilateral model of Discourse Space Theory.

The treaty issue also provides a glimpse of future deixis that is unique from the patterns of space and value discussed above. A number of statements in the MEA explicitly qualify the abeyance as "conditionally reversible," meaning that it is only relevant for as long as the Pakistanis do not change their actions, as in "the abeyance shall remain in effect until Pakistan credibly and irreversibly abjures support for cross-border terrorism." The role of this future conditional is to legitimate what could otherwise be interpreted as a permanent unilateral withdrawal from an international treaty as a temporary and reversible measure put under the control of Pakistani words, not Indian. MOFA statements that overlap the same temporal horizon, however, have largely averted the conditional framing, focusing instead on the treaty's indefinite historical durability, a deictic finding of its own that is not to be ignored: it is not just that the two ministries have competing evaluations of the same temporal frame, they have also adopt very different temporal architectures for the conflict's expected resolution.

### ***Cross-Framework Synthesis***

If seen together, the three analytical layers show a clear and mutually reinforcing discursive structure, not three separate entities. The macro-level ideologies of the Ideological Square strategies constitute a broad line of polarization between legitimate Self and illegitimate Other; the clause-level choices of transitivity create a line of polarization between the states that can be said to have the agency and those that cannot; and deictic positioning works at the treaty-specific level by situating the Indus Waters dispute within a moral and temporal frame that legitimizes each state's preferred course of action. The aforementioned passivization of treaty-related content in particular, and the strengthened axiological framing of water security in particular (as outlined in Section 4.3 and 4.4), both point to a more grammatically guarded focus on water-related as opposed to militaristic rhetoric that appears in the discourse, and thus directly support Gap 2 stated in the literature review.

This confluence across the analytical layers also supports the methodological assertion the study makes in Chapter Three, that an integrated macro-micro-deictic approach is able to reveal aspects of diplomatic crisis rhetoric that no single analytical framework will be able to fail to examine when used in isolation. While previous scholarship has shown the analytical productivity of both approaches separately (Echine, 2024; Cooper, 2025), the results presented here point to interactions between the two models – including the involvement of deictic analysis

– which would not be apparent from applying either model alone, such as the co-occurrence of passivization and axiological intensification on resource disputes.

## **Findings**

The analysis outlined in Chapter Four leads to four major findings, which answer the study's two research questions. At the macro-strategic level, both the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) of India and Pakistan use structurally similar, yet substantively inverted, approaches to deploy van Dijk's Ideological Square: each ministry presents itself as reasonable, legal, and suffering, while the other presents itself as belligerent, illegitimate, and deceitful. When the combined corpus is analyzed, the frequency of negative Other-presentation is slightly higher than positive Self-presentation, a finding in line with previous studies on media-polarization and the role of delegitimizing the other side as the main driver of polarization (Fair, 2018; Chakrabarti, 2024) and, for the first time, within the primary diplomatic record itself. The data suggested a further development from van Dijk's original model: the two types of presentation–evaluative moves do not generally appear as separate utterances, but are syntactically merged in a single comparative or concessive sentence, thus making a stronger impression on the audience, since they are not allowed to consider either pole on its own.

Second, the transitivity analysis shows that agency is grammatically structured in a way that is directly related to the reputational risk. Both ministries invariably attribute agentive, active material processes to the adversary and selectively, agentively, foreground their own agency for processes that are more susceptible to being seen as lawful and controlled – such as the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty and the invocation of Article 51 – while remaining passive or relationally attributive for less vulnerable processes, like the signatures of Pakistan's army chief and the foreign minister. Such an asymmetric distribution was particularly evident in the MEA sub-corpus: treaty-related clauses had significantly more passivization than security-related clauses, directly supporting Research Gap 1 from the literature review, namely that the primary rhetorical context of a text, namely diplomatic language, has not been studied at this level of grammatical detail previously as compared to media language.

Third, the deictic analysis answering the second research question shows that the Indus Waters Treaty is a securitised, deictically anchored place of moral dispute and not a mere administrative issue. Both MEA and MOFA discourse create spatial and temporal separation from the treaty's 1960 origins to legitimate departing from the treaty, and both establish temporal continuity to define a binding obligation to the treaty, but converge on an axiological framing that transforms the issue of accessing water from an administrative to an existential one. The discovery is a continuation of Bukhari et al. (2025) media-framing analysis, and directly addresses Research Gap 2.

Fourth and most importantly, the three analytical layers were demonstrated to be mutually reinforcing rather than independent, with shared natural resources content exhibiting the dyadic combination of polarity – clause-level agency management – deictic-axiological framing, while kinetic military action in nuclear-armed crisis diplomacy receiving a more grammatically conservative rhetorical treatment. The other interesting but analytical finding concerns the third party deictic structure within passages related to treaties: Both ministries were found to use a third party (the international community) outside of the immediate Self/Other dyad, suggesting

that diplomatic crisis rhetoric is directed at international audiences as well as domestic legitimation and adversarial delegitimation. The four findings that have been reported here support the study's main proposition that Self/Other polarization in South Asian diplomatic discourse is not limited to media reporting; it is also structurally embedded in the primary diplomatic discourse and is brought about by recognizable and recurring linguistic devices at the macro, micro and deictic levels of the analysis.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to analyze the linguistic constructions of competing versions of legitimacy, morality and blame in the 2025-2026 crisis by applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) beyond the traditional media corpora to the less studied area of primary diplomatic communication. Through the purposive sampling of forty MEA and MOFA statements, the study has shown that the construction of official diplomatic discourse rhetoric during this crisis is not a neutral and factual record of what happened but an active process of ideology, a process that establishes the polarization of Self/Other at the macro level, manages agency and blame at the clause level, and securitizes common natural resources through spatial, temporal, and axiological positioning.

The results support a central tenet of the study, based on Fairclough (1995) and van Leeuwen (2008), that language is not a clear channel through which power and social reality circulate, but rather a constitutive site of power and social reality. They also corroborate a binary Other/Self pattern that was found in previous theories of Russian-Ukrainian rhetoric (Al-Bahrani et al., 2024), media sourcing in the Arab Spring (Echine, 2024), and international broadcasting (Cooper, 2025), but which has not been documented in South Asian diplomatic rhetoric as a whole.

The study has a clear connection to both identified research gaps most importantly. It shows that primary MEA and MOFA texts, not secondary media text representations, reveal the use of micro-grammatical strategies, especially the use of selective passivization, within official diplomatic text, which has been hidden from CDA-focused media research. It extends hydropolitical discourse scholarship beyond the climate and media-framing approaches by employing an integrated deictic and axiological approach to the Indus Waters Treaty abeyance, showing that the securitisation of the resources is a product of the primary record, and not simply a journalistic framing device.

The book also modestly contributes to the methodology of CDA. Although each of these has been fruitfully utilized separately in previous research on different diplomatic texts, the intersections of these theories with a single corpus of documents in the analysis of the text of resources revealed, and in the clustering of passivization and axiological intensification around such topics, patterns that would not have been seen through any one of these theories used individually. The findings indicate that future studies on institutional crisis discourse should be designed similarly to the multi-layered and integrated approach rather than the single lens approach if the domain of interest is an intersection of legal, environmental, and security discourse, like shared natural resources in this study.

The results have implications for the case study. They propose that the discursive tactics described herein (temporally distancing to authorize the departure from the agreed upon

framework, axiological securitization as a reconfiguration of administrative decisions as existential threats) could also reoccur in the future, wherever shared transboundary resources are put under strain in the context of other geopolitical rivalries. The study, therefore, serves as a linguistic record of an actual nuclear-armed crisis as well as a model that can be adapted for future use in identifying escalatory language in diplomatic discourse, whether by policy makers or peacebuilders or discourse scholars, with the caveat that its contents will only be applicable to English-language official documents from a singular, ongoing crisis period. The discursive patterns detected here should be considered as a momentous snapshot of an ongoing rhetorical contest and not a finalized and completed linguistic document.

## **Recommendations**

1. Vernacular-language MEA and MOFA statements should also be included in future research to see how the pattern of polarization and securitization in these statements evolves or changes when outside the English-language diplomatic register of this study.
2. The training of diplomats and principals in how to communicate diplomatically should be regularly revisited with respect to passivization around resource-related announcements because the lack of agency in communication around treaty-related announcements increases, rather than decreases, the adversarial suspicion and public mistrust that can result from the interaction.
3. Diplomatic posturing is an early, detectable sign of axiological securitization of common natural resources, to be tracked in official rhetoric by peacebuilding practitioners and mediators.
4. The triangulated (macro-micro-deictic) model should be compared in the context of other (transboundary) resource conflicts, within the framework of ongoing geopolitical competition around the world.
5. Policymakers should find alternatives to the existential framing of decisions relating to the treaties, which can be communicated in a way that avoids using the security language and may defuse potential escalation of bilateral tensions.

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