Blind Spots and Silver Linings: Past and Prologue of Op. Sindoor

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While Operation Sindoor successfully imposed costs on Pakistan and demonstrated India's resolve against terrorism, its execution revealed crucial strategic insights about the limitations of India's current military doctrine. Despite operational successes, the operation highlighted that India's approach remains framed around deterrence rather than compellence—a fundamental misalignment with the challenge at hand. Pakistan's persistent use of terror proxies demands not merely dissuasion from specific actions but a comprehensive change in policy, which requires overwhelming operational advantages rather than merely relative parity. As India analyzes this conflict and prepares for future engagements, it must recognize that without establishing clear military dominance, particularly in the air domain, it risks becoming trapped in escalatory cycles that divert resources from broader strategic priorities, including the China challenge. India's declaration that future terror attacks will

be treated as acts of war signals political will, but must be matched with corresponding shifts in military doctrine and capabilities.

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Deterrence should not be India's strategic goal

India has framed the problem of Pakistan's support for terror networks and resultant terror attacks aimed at India as one of deterrence. However, this is a misnomer. Deterrence, at its heart, pertains to signaling assured costs and risks to dissuade a state from undertaking an action. Pakistan's use of terror proxies has never been a singular act but an established policy. Therefore, the panacea to this is a doctrine of compellence, not deterrence.

Compellence is about forcing a state to alter an existing policy, making it both a higher reward than deterrence, but also requiring greater investments and resources. A state can deter another even while suffering a military disadvantage. However, compellence requires, more often than not, and certainly in the case of Pakistan, an overwhelming and clear military advantage as a state of being.

In the India-Pakistan case, India's ability to compel Pakistan through the operational balance of power, especially in the air domain, is key to understanding both the meaning of Op Sindoor and the future trajectory of India-Pakistan military conflicts.

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Operational domain (Air) – where compellence lies

There has been a strong expectation amongst Indian citizens that in any military contest, India is likely to easily triumph over Pakistan. After all, India has overwhelming size advantages in terms of population, territory, economy, as well as annual defense budget. However, Indian punitive actions in response to Pakistan are a different kettle of fish compared to conventional attrition-based warfare. Bound by the fact of nuclear weapons in the sub-continent as well as India's need to avoid a long-drawn, wasteful war, such actions have been domain-specific, brief and swift, and yet extricable in theory. Macro-advantages in terms of overall national power do not significantly impact this operational environment, and their influence is somewhat limited.

In 2019, post the Pulwama attacks, India carried out deterrence-restoring punitive military strikes predominantly in the air domain. Post Op Sindoor, this choice of domain is likely to continue. This is because naval compellence takes time by its very nature, while ground-based operations are more demanding, closer to nuclear redlines, and are also harder to extricate from. Israel, the U.S., and Russia's recent quagmires in Gaza, Iraq-Afghanistan, and Ukraine testify to this facet of boots on the ground.

Air options, such as drones and missiles, are cleaner, politically impactful, and extricable by nature. Hence, air-based operations are fit for purpose as a punitive option that a civilian administration would like to have during a crisis with Pakistan. Rather than overall military strengths, it is

niche capabilities that matter more and immediately in this operational environment. Essentially, what is being referred to is the effectiveness of platforms within a highly sophisticated network, including integrated air defence systems, as well as the numbers and capabilities of drones and missiles.

India's strategy of emphasizing air operations makes perfect sense given these realities. However, this creates a challenge: Pakistan, with significant Chinese assistance, has been specifically investing in capabilities designed to counter India's air advantage and reduce the operational power gap between the two nations. The Air domain remains key, and by the same token, it is losing the element of surprise – leading to both focused investment by Pakistan and higher forms of escalatory exchanges.

Existing military balance in the operational domain

While the 2019 Balakot strike was a great success in heralding a new strategic doctrine for a new India, it also demonstrated the distance the PAF has covered since the early 2000s in terms of both platforms and modernization, particularly after the Kargil war and Operation Parakram.

India had learnt operational lessons from Balakot, and hence, there has been a focus on filling niche tech-based gaps. This has entailed a focus on procuring or inducting AWACS jets, data link systems, and the procurement of Software Defined Radios (SDR) to protect against Jamming, as well as the successful induction of 36 4.5-generation Rafael jets and the formidable S-400 Air Defense (AD) system. However, this has been an ongoing, albeit incomplete, process. It's no secret that the Indian Air Force (IAF) has faced challenges, particularly in procurement, upgradation, and maintenance, due to erratic supplies from a war-engaged Russia. This has been widely discussed and written about, and even noted by Air Chief Marshal B. S. Dhanoa, as well as the present Air Chief,

A. P. Singh.

However, it is worth noting that post-Balakot, Pakistan did not remain idle and sought to enhance its deterrence in response to India. This occurred in the form of inducting the J-10 and JF-17, intense tech-heavy training, along with a focus on newer AD systems. Through exercises with China's People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has sought to familiarize itself with Su-series Indian platforms, as well as refine electronic counter-countermeasures (ECCM). The cost-efficiency of Chinese jets and missiles also works to Pakistan's relative advantage, as it can acquire advanced jets and missiles in much greater numbers, partially offsetting lower defense spending compared to India.

In terms of missiles, drones, and AWACS, Pakistan is close to equaling India operationally, and especially in the context of a short and swift military contest where attrition does not come into play. India has been particularly concerned about the AWACS gap with Pakistan since 2019 and has made strong efforts to offset the same. However, the gap has remained, allowing Pakistan to achieve greater situational awareness and sensor-radar separation, thereby increasing the stealth and lethality for a first strike. In this context, Pakistan has also benefited greatly from China's strategic and collusive assistance. As military analyst and China-watcher Craig Singleton described during Op Sindoor, "Beijing's long-standing support for Islamabad – through hardware, training, and now increasingly AI-enabled targeting – has quietly shifted the tactical balance." Delhi needs to pay greater attention to such subtle but important shifts for the future.

Pakistan lost, but imposed risks and costs on India

Despite embarrassing shortcomings in air defense (AD) and suffering significantly greater losses in terms of airbase hits, Pakistan demonstrated its increased confidence in the

air domain by making escalatory decisions. In the operational domain, India will now have to plan to subdue this confidence.

The effectiveness of both deterrence and compellence ultimately depends on how the adversary perceives them, not how the acting state intends them. For example, after the 2019 Balakot strikes, India and Pakistan developed completely different interpretations of what happened, which destabilized deterrence and increased the risk of escalation in future conflicts. Similarly, once the current situation resolves, both countries will likely draw different strategic conclusions again. This pattern makes it essential for India to establish unmistakable military advantages if it wants to maintain control over escalation during conflicts.

Advancements in preparedness by both sides before May 7 – and based on the template of Balakot 19- led to an operational balance that was suited for deterrence adjustments (along the existing scale) by India. However, it was not suited for domination and compellence. This is the structural reality that needs to be appreciated in assessing Op Sindoor. Given these constraints, Operation Sindoor's success becomes even more impressive—its planning, rapid execution, and effectiveness in a high-risk environment deserve special recognition. The operation has established the Indian military's reputation as a nimble fighting force capable of delivering powerful strikes. Furthermore, India's political leadership demonstrated a willingness to take significant risks with full public support, signaling a new chapter in Indian military strategy that will likely unsettle adversaries in future conflicts.

Yet, despite being economically disadvantaged, with Pakistan's entire GDP smaller than just India's Maharashtra state, Pakistan still managed to mount several responses to India's actions. These included reportedly targeting Indian fighter jets with some potential success, using artillery to impact

civilian areas in Poonch, conducting PsyOps with swarm drones, and launching retaliatory strikes against Indian military assets (though these missed their targets overwhelmingly). For India, an aspiring great power, this situation isn't ideal strategically and is too close for comfort. While acknowledging this reality may be uncomfortable in the short term, it's worth noting that nations rise to great power status by enduring and learning from even more difficult challenges. Recognizing Pakistan's military capabilities is essential for understanding why India needs to pursue greater operational and military dominance in the region.

Therefore, India faces a strategic crossroads. Without establishing overwhelming military superiority, India risks becoming trapped in endless and worsening cycles of escalation with Pakistan that divert resources and attention from its global ambitions and the growing challenge posed by China. These recurring conflicts are inevitable if India maintains its reactive approach, merely adjusting deterrence strategies after deterrence has already failed. Escaping this insidious pathway requires a military doctrine based on compellence, clear operational advantage, as well as supplementary support in the non-kinetic domain (think IWT and various forms of economic and diplomatic pressure).

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The next crisis: Starting from a higher threshold

Op Sindoor can be viewed as Balakot air strikes magnified exponentially. The next military conflict is likely to start with deeper and harder strikes (a higher threshold) and with

military targets seen as fair game sooner than has been the norm. India's decision to prioritise de-escalation by not targeting AD units during the airstrikes may have resulted in the loss of valuable military assets. This will influence politico-military choices during the next crisis. The latest crisis saw limited engagement in the naval and land domains. In the next confrontation, this could change, and it is more likely to occur in the ground domain (greater artillery strikes and troop movements). Therefore, developing decisive conventional and operational superiority over Pakistan represents the most elegant solution to break these dangerous cycles of retaliation.

Without operational domination, India's future military options will remain high-risk, constrained, and unable to deter Pakistan's 'misadventures' in response to India's punitive strike. With operational domination, India will have greater coercive leverage during peacetime as well as more flexible and lower-risk military options during a near-war crisis.

Given that Pakistan's procurement plans, as well as its modernization efforts, are ongoing and rapid, India will have to offset these developments on its way towards striving for a clearer imbalance of power. Instead of denigrating and pooh-poohing the Pakistan armed forces, India's military revival would actually hinge on over-estimating them, regardless of the emotional dissatisfaction involved in the thought.

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New Assurances and silver linings

Op Sindoor and the resulting conflict have also provided many sources of reassurance and confidence. This includes the better-than-expected performance of various indigenous platforms, such as the Akash SAM system, as well as the resiliency and success rate of the integrated air defense system, a testament to nascent jointness. Additionally, it encompasses the state of national unity and civilian morale in the face of drones and missile strikes. Notably, these are all indicators of strengths that are only likely to grow manifold in the coming years, especially indigenization and jointness.

Along with continued modernization (at a faster pace), these mega-trends are likely to help boost Indian military wherewithal towards clear asymmetry vis-à-vis Pakistan in the coming years. This also constitutes the pathway that converts Comprehensive National Power to overall military asymmetry, a favorable operational environment (mainly air) for power projection, and the material architecture for supporting strategic and political objectives pertaining to compellence (rather than tit for tat deterrence). In fact, this same road, combined with necessary higher military spending, is certain to bolster deterrence vis-à-vis China (by reducing operational asymmetries) over the long term as well. Even as the last crisis was a close shave in terms of loss of escalation control, the future holds great promise and potential if the right lessons are learnt.