Op Sindoor: Conventional Operations Under the Nuclear Shadow

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Since 1998, when both India and Pakistan emerged as nuclear-weapon states after undertaking a series of tests, the India-Pakistan crises have followed a predictable pattern. The first escalatory step is invariably a terrorist attack by one of the numerous terrorist groups based in Pakistan; India's outrage and political, diplomatic, economic and, (since 2016) measured kinetic retaliation against specific terrorist targets, signalling a possible closure to hostilities; Pakistan's military retaliation that sets into motion a cycle of escalation, often accompanied by nuclear sabre rattling designed to energise the international community, leading finally to a de-escalation with both countries getting a face saving exit.

The terrorist attacks permit Pakistan a degree of deniability unless a perpetrator has been captured (as happened in the Mumbai 2008 attack) though the deniability claims carry little

conviction, given Pakistan's well documented, long-standing policy of nurturing such jihadi outfits. India has been a slow learner in developing and acquiring the intelligence and kinetic means to be able to track and engage in precision targeting of terrorist groups inside Pakistan. Though subjected to major terrorist attacks, especially since the 1990s, the recourse to kinetic retaliation only began in 2016. After Pahalgam, Prime Minister Modi has described it as an expansive "new normal."

Developing kinetic retaliation capability

In 2001, following the attack on the Indian parliament by five JeM terrorists, India mobilised its ground forces with the strike formations. The process lasted weeks, giving Pakistan adequate time to prepare its counter-mobilisation. Since the U.S. needed Pakistan's military cooperation for its Op Enduring Freedom launched against the Taliban in October 2001, and the Pakistani military claimed that it was stretched on the India front, Pakistan was prevailed upon to provide assurances of "not allowing its territory to be used for terrorist attacks against India." The exercise in coercive diplomacy helped provide a reprieve for seven years.

The 26/11 Mumbai attacks are often called India's 9/11 moment. A group of 10 LeT militants targeted 12 locations in Mumbai. The carnage lasted four days and claimed 175 lives, including nine militants. Among the dead were 29 foreign nationals from 16 countries, including six from the U.S. The captured militant provided the details of Pakistan's involvement. While this enabled international condemnation and diplomatic measures to penalise Pakistan, the absence of any kinetic retaliation drew unfavourable comparisons in certain domestic sections with the U.S and Israel. In Pakistan, it led to a growing conviction that its tactical nuclear weapons served as an effective deterrent against any conventional military action by India.

Kinetic retaliation, from Uri to Pahalgam

Realising that its military forces were a blunt instrument ill-equipped to undertake short, sharp punitive operations, India began to build up its capabilities slowly. The 2016 attack on a military camp in Uri by four JeM militants killed 19 soldiers and provided an opportunity to employ kinetic retaliation for the first time. A coordinated set of simultaneous cross-border operations was launched by special teams to neutralise more than half a dozen terrorist launch pads. The operation was successfully projected as a shift to a more punitive approach, and these "surgical strikes" were the subject of a successful Bollywood film. Pakistan found a face-saver by denying that there had been any intrusions.

In 2019, a suicide attack on a paramilitary convoy, claimed by JeM, claimed forty lives. With general elections less than two months away, the Modi government had little choice. Days later, Indian authorities announced that the IAF had carried out an air strike on a JeM training camp at Balakot, 65 km from the LoC, in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. Once again, it was described as a limited operation against a terrorist location, based on real-time intelligence, and therefore pre-emptive and defensive.

Pakistan denied that there was any camp, protested at its airspace violation, and the following morning, five Pakistani aircraft entered Indian airspace. Indian fighters scrambled, and in the ensuing dogfight, an Indian pilot ejected, ending up in Pakistani custody. This created a fresh crisis, leading to U.S. involvement to ensure the pilot's release was expedited. The following morning, Pakistan PM Imran Khan announced that Pakistan had demonstrated its capability and resolve by retaliating against India's intrusion and would return the Indian pilot as a humanitarian gesture, providing a face-saver to both sides.

According to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, senior

officials from both countries had been in touch with U.S. officials, blaming each other for nuclear escalation and threatening retaliation, thereby leading to U.S. involvement. Saudi Arabia and the UAE also claimed to have intervened and counselled restraint.

The Pahalgam attack on April 22 claimed 26 civilian lives. Though a series of political and economic measures were announced, including putting in abeyance the Indus Water Treaty, it was evident that the scope of the kinetic retaliation had to be larger. Eventually, nine terrorist locations, including iconic locations such as the LeT and JeM headquarters in Punjab, weretargeted using loitering munitions, stand-off air-to-surface missiles, and smart bombs. It was emphasised that India had targeted terrorist locations, and the operation was over unless Pakistan escalated matters. The next three nights saw an escalation of strikes and counter-strikes, with both sides employing drones and standoff missiles, although the aircraft remained within their respective airspaces. Once again, senior U.S. officials began to engage as the crisis sharpened and news about the ceasefire was made public by President Trump shortly before the official announcements on May 10.

> *Evidently, the Modi government's policy for dealing with Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attacks has been evolving, in keeping with improving capabilities. The first Rafale aircraft landed in India in mid-2020, with some of the weapon systems following. The Harop drone fleet was expanded after 2019, and indigenous Sky Striker drones were ordered in 2021, including kamikaze versions. Therefore, compared to the 2019 Balakot operation, India was better placed to ensure precision targeting and avoid collateral damage, especially in populated areas like Bahawalpur and Muridke.*

The lessons from Pahalgam

In his address to the nation on May 12, PM Modi announced that Op Sindoor had redefined the fight against terror and established a “new normal.” This consisted of India’s right to respond militarily since any act of terror was an act of war; India would not be deterred by “nuclear blackmail,” and India would not differentiate between terrorists and their masterminds or the governments sponsoring terrorism. Two new elements can be discerned in this – while claiming a right to military response is not new, as it was exercised in 2016 and 2019 too, calling every terror attack an “act of war” expands the scope of the military action that has so far been limited to terrorist locations. Second, putting together the terrorists and the ISI puts the military on notice, but what form this would take is left uncertain. In 2016, 2019, and 2025, India has consistently emphasised that its kinetic action was “non-escalatory” as it was directed at known terrorist locations and not at a military site.

Even though Op Sindoor’s objectives had not been spelled out, it is clear that on May 7, Indian forces demonstrated their capability in identifying and destroying multiple terrorist camps and related infrastructure, across a distance of 800 km, in a speedily executed, coordinated operation using precision strike weapons. In subsequent days, the operations grew gradually, and by May 10, the IAF had shown its ability to penetrate Pakistan’s air defence to inflict damage on nearly all Pakistan’s forward air bases and air defence installations. Yet, this did not emerge as the prevailing narrative.

On May 7, Pakistan claimed that five Indian aircraft had been downed, a claim denied by India. The narrative, therefore, became one of evaluating Chinese technologies (J-10 and JF-17 aircraft, and PL-15E missiles) versus those of the French (Rafale aircraft) and Russian (SU-30 and MiG-29) aircraft. The

Indian statement on May 11, “We are in a combat scenario and losses are part of combat…we achieved all our objectives and all our pilots are back home,” if made earlier, would have prevented the misleading commentary and maintained the primacy of the Indian narrative. The fact that the IAF operated under non-escalatory rules of engagement and did not neutralise Pakistani air defences in advance was a signal to assure Pakistan that our strike was only against terrorist targets. It would also have reinforced the impact of the punitive strikes on May 10, in the face of repeated Pakistani escalatory provocations.

It is reasonable to assume that the terrorist infrastructure that has been degraded will be rebuilt, presumably also at more inaccessible or concealed locations. It is highly unlikely that the ISI will dismantle the LeT, JeM, or the dozen other outfits that it has nurtured over the decades. A recent Gallup Pakistan poll revealed that 96 percent of the Pakistanis believe that Pakistan has emerged victorious from the four-day limited conflict. The elevation of the COAS Gen Asim Munir to Field Marshal has been welcomed by the political parties, including the PTI.

> *The current ceasefire is fragile and could therefore break down along the predictable pattern that led to Pahalgam and earlier attacks. A full-scale war like the 1971 war is not feasible, as it is an unaffordable exercise that yields no practical military objectives. Therefore, a key takeaway is to define narrower objectives that yield desirable outcomes and build capabilities, both kinetic and non-kinetic, accordingly. A realistic objective will combine three elements: degrade terrorist capabilities as decisively as possible; inflict punitive measures, political, economic, and military; and demonstrate national unity and resolve.*

Exploring the ‘new normal’

The conception of a ‘new normal’ poses three key questions –

A. Does the expansive ‘new normal’ establish deterrence?
B. Second, if deterrence fails and there is a terrorist attack, does the ‘new normal’ lead to more rapid escalation, and does it ensure superior escalation management?

C. And finally, does it enable de-escalation without external involvement?

Deterrence normally implies ‘deterrence by denial’ coupled with ‘deterrence by punishment.’ ‘Denial’ implies strengthening intelligence capabilities to track infiltration, movement, and communications of terrorists, to plan and prevent such attacks. It also means better preparation to reduce response times, unlike in the Pahalgam instance. If the number of casualties were less than five, if the perpetrators had been killed or captured, the attack, though heinous, would have registered on a lower scale. It would deny the adversary the sense of ‘satisfaction’ at having inflicted significant harm and loss.

In case of failure of deterrence-by-denial, punitive deterrence kicks in. The terrorist needs to be convinced that punishment will be certain and severe enough to make the terrorists refrain from the act, in the first place. India has so far declared that its kinetic retaliation was based on hard intelligence and pre-emptive; pre-emption against a terrorist attack has now gained acceptance as a legitimate act of self-defence. However, a terrorist is not always guided by a rational cost-benefit analysis, as the scourge of suicide attacks demonstrates. Nevertheless, since the terror attacks

are often green-lighted by the ISI, the certainty of severe punishment does strengthen deterrence.

In the past, the limited kinetic retaliation in 2016 and 2019 failed to establish deterrence. Therefore, deterrence capabilities for both 'denial' and 'punishment' will need to be strengthened by continuous investments in new technologies, particularly cyber and space, to monitor and penetrate terrorist groups and prevent attacks as also permit engagement without contact and inflict punishment at a distance, if the 'new normal' has to prevent future terrorist attacks.

India needs to plan afresh for managing escalation because if every terror attack is to be considered an act of war, and no distinction is to be made between terrorists and their masterminds and sponsors, the response to any future terrorist attack will be larger in scope, raising the prospects of more rapid escalation.

In the Balakot (2019) crisis, an Indian pilot being taken captive in Pakistani territory after his aircraft was shot down was an unforeseen escalatory development. India demanded his immediate return to maintain the narrative of its successful strike; Pakistan wanted to capitalise on its air superiority. Neither India nor Pakistan could control the escalation, leading to external involvement.

In 2025, the U.S. initially adopted a relatively detached approach, initially condemning the terrorist attack and urging Pakistan to cooperate with India, and after May 7, urging both sides to work together to de-escalate tensions. By May 9, however, the U.S. position shifted, and it adopted a more active role.

During the 88-hour crisis, India managed to retain control of escalation. In the initial round, the IAF refrained from targeting Pakistan air defences, a restraint that may have led to higher operational risks. Pakistan's retaliation was

against military targets and not against civilian targets. Even as artillery shelling intensified across the LoC, there was no large-scale mobilisation of ground forces or strike formations. These were signals that both sides were exploring thresholds but not crossing them.

By May 10, the temptation for India to exploit its advantage, having neutralised Pakistan's forward-based air defences, was high and could have led to a notch up the escalation ladder. It would have increased Indian reluctance to let Pakistan get a face-saving exit. Finding off-ramps or de-escalation between nuclear adversaries requires that both sides find a face saver, though backed by competing narratives. To establish superior escalation management, India must internalise that at every step on the escalation ladder, it must signal to Pakistan a face-saver, as was done successfully in the early stages of the Pahalgam crisis. This requires better narrative management so that policy shapes sentiment rather than the other way around.

> *Finding an off-ramp without external involvement creates a different challenge. There is a tacit acknowledgement that the Pakistani establishment has been complicit in sponsoring and aiding terrorist attacks in India for decades, and India is justified in kinetic retaliation. At the same time, given that both India and Pakistan are nuclear weapon states, nuclear sabre rattling during rising tensions grabs international attention, with de-escalation emerging as the priority. Since 1998, Pakistan has successfully exploited this opening, as this also serves Pakistan by obfuscating the distinction between the perpetrator and the victim of the terrorist attack.*

Successive U.S. presidents have played a role in defusing crises since 1998 – President Clinton during the 1999 Kargil crisis, President Bush following the 2001 Parliament attack, Presidents Bush and Obama in 2008-09 following the Mumbai

attack, and President Trump in 2019 with the Balakot strike and the 2025 Pahalgam crisis. With the sole exception of President Trump, they were prudent in not offering to mediate between India and Pakistan; the current aberration is more a reflection of the disarray in the US administration and President Trump's propensity for impulsive pronouncements.

During Pahalgam, no nuclear threats were exchanged between India and Pakistan. The only nuclear signalling, presumably directed to the international community, was the announcementby the Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar on May 9 that a meeting of the National Command Authority was to be held the following day, though he backtracked later after the phone call with Secretary of State Rubio. This did not prevent President Trump from claiming on May 12, "We stopped a nuclear conflict. I think it could have been a bad nuclear war. Millions of people could have been killed", and repeating the claim a couple of days later.

The contrast between Indian and Pakistani reactions to President Trump's claims is revealing. Pakistan PM Shehbaz Sharif has repeated thanked President Trump for his mediation and urged him continue mediation on other issues while the Indian Foreign Office spokesperson denied on May 13 that there was any US mediation or any nuclear escalation or signalling and the ceasefire was arrived at bilaterally; further, there was no scope for any mediation and no broader talks at a any neutral venue were planned. Therefore, unlike in 2019, there was neither any nuclear brinkmanship nor any strategic mobilisation.

> *The 'new normal' is a shifting line and introduces a degree of ambiguity. The aim is to determine if it enhances deterrence. So far, both sides have shown an interest in de-escalation. However, this requires a face saver for both sides. This means that each side creates its narrative of "victory" and can sustain it. As the stronger power, India must calibrate how far it should discredit the Pakistan*

> *military to disincentivise it from sponsoring terrorist attacks while keeping it invested in de-escalation. This is necessary to ensure that conventional operations remain below the nuclear threshold despite brinkmanship.*

Today, there is an absence of established crisis management mechanisms between India and Pakistan. During Pahalgam, the only channel of communication in operation was the DGMO's hotline. Past practice and experience indicate that in military hierarchies on both sides, a degree of faith in an inbuilt culture of restraint remains. However, it is possible that a terrorist group may deliberately act to heighten confrontation to sabotage de-escalation, severely testing the culture of restraint. At such moments, until India and Pakistan invest in building crisis management mechanisms and additional communication channels, de-escalation will continue to be outsourced to external parties.