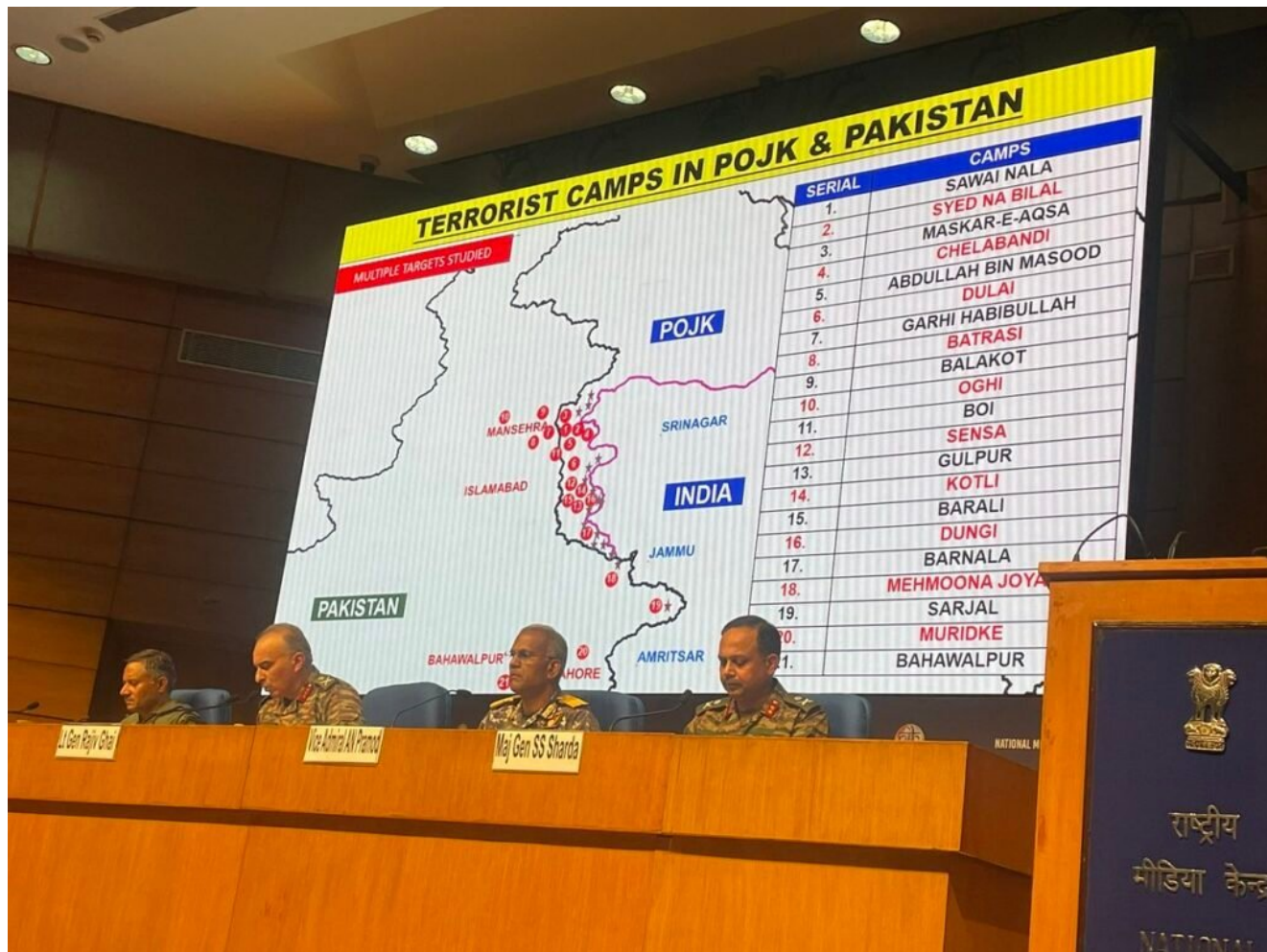


Twelve Arguments To Make Sense Of 'Operation Sindoor'

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The arguments:

1. **Operation Sindoor underscores the idea that the government of India is determined to respond to terrorism, regardless of the consequences of such a response.** Although Delhi has long signalled this intent, it hasn't become formal policy nor was this policy implemented convincingly. With Operation Sindoor—a high-intensity, open, and public military operation—**Indian policymakers seek to establish a 'military response to terrorist attacks' as a doctrinal innovation.** If this interpretation is accurate, we might be witnessing a strategic shift in how India handles terrorism in the years to come.

2. Low-level military actions (like 2016 and 2019) may not be the preferred response any longer: The recent (declared, publicised and unambiguous) response is a strategy to mainstream Indian response as a doctrinal move. This would mean that New Delhi could employ varying degrees of conventional force in future in response to terrorism, opening up, thereby, a range of potential punitive possibilities.

3. Operation Sindoor seeks to show that India no longer accepts there is a fundamental distinction between subconventional (terrorism) and conventional (military) aggression. Pakistan has traditionally exploited this distinction to paint a doomsday escalatory scenario to prevent Indian military response to terror attacks. If India doesn't accept that distinction any longer, Pakistan's ability to exploit that space to carry out/allow/do nothing about terror attacks against India no longer exists.

4. Operation Sindoor has challenged two of Pakistan's important deterrent assumptions vis-à-vis India. One, as pointed out above, Pakistan has traditionally attempted to create a space between subconventional (terrorism) and conventional (military) aggression and refused to accept the space between conventional and nuclear domains, meaning that India will not be able to undertake conventional military options without worrying about Pakistani tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs). Op Sindoor calls both the bluffs: It removes the space between subconventional and conventional aggression; and given that there was little nuclear talk in 2019 or now, it has called the nuclear bluff too.

Pakistan can no longer depend on nuclear threats to deter Indian conventional attacks in response to subconventional aggression. In that sense, India has Pakistan where it wants it: In the strictly conventional space where it enjoys superiority. Pakistan is not a military pushover, for sure, but India certainly enjoys far more conventional firepower and potential military suppliers. A conventional exchange/limited

war with India without nuclear threats in play is not something Pakistan can win.

Operation Sindoor seeks to create a tripwire situation regarding escalation. The Indian doctrine underlined by it is that by carrying out a terrorist attack against India, it is actually Pakistan – its adversary – that is initiating a conventional military conflict. The onus is on Pakistan to ensure there is no terrorist attack if it seeks to prevent a military conflict as a terror attack will, in all probability, lead to a conventional response – with the latter being the rule and its non-occurrence being the exception.

5. Operation Sindoor severely diminishes Pakistan's ability to hide behind the lack of conclusive evidence to show the Pakistani state's complicity in terror attacks against India. The emerging Indian argument is that in so far as there are anti-India terrorist organisations in Pakistan who have attacked India, and who have not been brought to justice by Islamabad, those are reasons enough for Delhi to take punitive measures. Waiting for conclusive evidence to punish Pakistan is not helpful in the Indian thinking given that such evidence will always be disputed, and by the time such evidence emerges the situation would have changed dramatically.

6. Delhi no longer feels the need to furnish reams of evidence to the international community about who is responsible for the attacks. It has done that in the past with little effect either on the international community or on Pakistani investigation into those responsible. The Mumbai attacks trial is a prime example. India inviting Pakistani investigators into Pathankot airbase for joint investigations in 2016 (with no return invitation from Islamabad) is another.

7. Operation Sindoor seeks to create a tripwire situation regarding escalation. The Indian doctrine underlined by Op Sindoor is that by carrying out a terrorist attack against

India, it is actually Pakistan – its adversary – that is initiating a conventional military conflict. The onus is on Pakistan to ensure there is no terrorist attack if it seeks to prevent a military conflict as a terror attack will, in all probability, lead to a conventional response – with the latter being the rule and its non-occurrence being the exception. In other words, the starting point of India-Pakistan escalation is not the Indian use of conventional force, but the Pakistani use of subconventional force. India has put the ball in Pakistan's court on future escalation. Op Sindoor is the trailer.

8. Operation Sindoor seeks to reinstate deterrence against terrorism which was established by the 2019 Balakot strikes but then ruptured by the Pahalgam terror attack. There have not been any high intensity terror attacks since the Pulwama terror attack. In the Indian thinking, the Balakot air attacks deterred Pakistan from carrying out or allowing terrorist attacks against India thereafter. The Pahalgam attack undid the deterrence established in 2019. In that sense, Operation Sindoor is an attempt to reinstate deterrence against terrorism as achieved by the Balakot strikes.

9. From an Indian perspective, the role of third parties is now limited to either stand with India or choose not to, each of which could have varying degrees of influence on India's relationship with them. Those publicly advising restraint and dialogue with Pakistan will get no traction in Delhi's corridors of power.

10. Going forward, Delhi is likely to expect its strategic partners to align with its policy on terrorism, broadly to put pressure on Pakistan, and react strongly to those seeking to repudiate Indian retaliation or morally shame India for its military response to terrorism. Expect Delhi to use its leverage as a major economy, growing market, participant in global forums and governance, and its vast diaspora and its strategic partnerships to achieve this.

11. There has been a gradual escalation in the Indian military response to terror attacks by Pakistan based terror groups: 2001-2002 (mobilisation but no action); 26/11 attacks (no overt response); 2016 surgical strikes (limited in scope and impact); 2019 Balakot strikes (limited objectives). However, the 2025 Operation Sindoor far exceeds the scope, intensity, outcome and escalatory potential of any of the previous operations.

12. Operation Sindoor has pretty much ended the old India-Pakistan relationship. There is little chance of India-Pakistan relations going back to the old format of comprehensive/composite dialogues, discussions on Kashmir, people to people cooperation etc. Even the start of conversations to establish normal relations with Pakistan will take considerable time and effort. Clearly, no one is thinking of dialogue right now.

*Cover Image: Smita Sharma on Twitter