

# Will India's 'Integrated Deterrence' Stem Cross-Border Terror?

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As more information about the battleground realities trickles in, security analysts are busy finding templates to explain India's calibrated counter-terror action launched in response to the brutal cross-border terrorist attack in April 2025. Operation Sindoor has already reignited debates on the theory of deterrence. Did the deterrence of 2019 fade? Does deterrence really work? Can classical Cold War-era models truly be applied to the South Asian security environment?

Among the most relevant theoretical frameworks that should be revisited is that of economist and Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling. He described deterrence and compellence in the 1960s as forms of 'the diplomacy of violence.' In this model, deterrence works when credible threats, or limited applications of force, successfully prevent adversarial action. The key question today is whether India's latest military doctrine of zero tolerance for terrorism—and its

practical application through Operation Sindoor—has re-established sub-conventional deterrence vis-à-vis Pakistan's use of terrorist proxies or merely escalated the cost of proxy warfare for the Pakistan Army.

So far, contemporary scholars have not made up their minds on this issue. Walter Ladwig of RUSI has [argued](#) that while deterrence by punishment carries inherent risks—"chief among them the possibility that fringe actors may attempt to provoke confrontation in order to manipulate state responses"—the continued viability of this approach may hinge on improved crisis management. Most importantly, he notes, "preventing the next Sindoor—or the next 26/11—requires sustained international pressure to dismantle the networks that make these attacks possible in the first place".

In contrast, Joshua White of Brookings, while [emphasizing](#) India's military victory, cautions/worries that the audacity of Indian targeting "could make for a crisis that escalates even more quickly and opaquely than this one".

Both perspectives seem to undervalue the credibility and calibration of India's actions.

## ***Operation Sindoor: Escalation without war***

India's high-precision, multi-day military operation concluded swiftly within four days, targeting terrorist and military infrastructure across the Line of Control (LoC) and deep into Pakistani territory. It marked the most significant escalation in Indo-Pak conflict in a nuclear environment since Kargil in 1999. For its part, Pakistan attempted to establish its deterrence against Indian military escalation but failed to render its kinetic response credible. Nevertheless, Pakistan's army swiftly claimed a 'notion of victory'—sufficient to persuade domestic audiences and to [promote](#) its Army Chief to

Field Marshal.

*India's approach this time was marked by controlled aggression that would not trigger a full-scale war. Also, pre-emptive diplomatic engagement ensured that India's actions would not face significant international backlash. In contrast, Pakistan was left scrambling to justify its position, clinging to implausible deniability, while India, albeit more gradually, shaped the conflict narrative in the information domain.*

## ***The evolution of Integrated Deterrence***

India's military response cannot be viewed in isolation. It represents the latest phase in an evolving doctrine of 'Integrated Deterrence'—a term borrowed and adapted from broader international security parlance in the nuclear context, yet reshaped to fit the unique contours of the Indo-Pak relationship.

Integrated Deterrence rests on a multi-pronged approach: military readiness, diplomatic pre-emption, economic leverage, and informational control. It transcends reactive defense by incorporating proactive signaling and layered coercion. In Operation Sindoor, India demonstrated each element with clarity and precision:

- **Military dominance** through deep-penetration airstrikes, overcoming air defenses and neutralizing/deflecting Pakistan's escalatory counterstrikes with robust air defense;
- **Diplomatic insulation** via pre-emptive engagement with key global powers;
- **Economic pressure**, including a declared pause in the Indus Waters Treaty;

- The information domain was more contested, with Pakistan moving with the 'first to lie' advantage, claiming victory even before the battle concluded. However, once the fog of war lifted, India responded with clear, credible dissemination of battlefield details and post-conflict global messaging focused on Pakistan's use of terrorism.

This suite of actions represented a clear departure from India's earlier posture of strategic restraint, which had been practiced until 2016, or even the relatively milder deterrence measures, such as the 2016 [‘surgical’](#) ground strikes and the 2019 [Balakot](#) airstrikes. India has now graduated from a posture of surgical retaliation to one of doctrinal deterrence, assuring retaliation to every act of cross-border terror, each to be treated as an act of war.

*These are not isolated actions, but elements of a comprehensive doctrine aimed at deterring and pre-empting Pakistan, ultimately shaping its behavior over time. Notably, this is the first time India has orchestrated a multi-domain response that amounts to a credible and integrated deterrence.*

## ***Escalation dominance and conditional clarity***

Multi-domain deterrence was accompanied by the assertion of—what strategists call—escalation dominance. This concept implies that India now has the capacity and credibility to control the intensity and trajectory of conflict escalation.

Operation Sindoor is a textbook case. India inflicted precise, punitive costs on Pakistan but did not cross the threshold into full-scale war. India dictated the terms of engagement, forcing Pakistan into a reactive posture. Each step on the

escalation ladder was accompanied by a de-escalation instinct and the offer to the adversary of an 'off-ramp'. Unlike earlier times, when Pakistan used terror as a low-cost, deniable strategy, it now faced the reality of proportionate, multi-domain retaliation.

*Equally important is India's shift from '**strategic ambiguity**' to '**conditional clarity**'. The message is simple and direct: any cross-border terror attack will be treated as an act of war. No more grey zones. The consequences will be calibrated but unavoidable. This clarity is crucial to re-imposing deterrence, making Pakistan's traditional playbook of low-cost proxy warfare far less viable.*

## ***Beyond the battlefield: Diplomatic and economic tools***

Military strikes alone do not sustain deterrence. What makes India's new approach particularly potent is its willingness to add non-kinetic instruments of power. With the Indus Waters Treaty kept in abeyance, water infrastructure projects on the Chenab and Jhelum rivers can be developed in the medium term, and the flow of water can be calibrated according to Pakistan's actions against terrorism. These are not symbolic gestures—they represent long-term pressure points that could constrain Pakistan's development options.

India also worked through diplomatic channels to condition the release of IMF tranches to Pakistan on commitments to de-escalation and counterterrorism. India will undoubtedly lobby for stiffer sanctions targeting Pakistan's army and for its re-entry into the FATF grey list, an unwelcome prospect for any loan-dependent economy. For a nation struggling with high inflation, fiscal instability, and dwindling foreign reserves, these actions have immediate and tangible consequences.

Economic costs may weigh the heaviest to influence policy. Pakistan now finds itself in a bind: pursue provocation and risk economic collapse, or alter its long-term strategic calculus.

## ***Institutionalizing deterrence: A strategic inflection point***

*The most significant outcome of Operation Sindoor may be that deterrence is no longer episodic in India's strategic playbook—it is institutionalized. Each major Indian operation since 2016 has built upon the credibility of the previous one, creating a trajectory that few can ignore.*

This layered deterrence is difficult to dismantle. It rests not only on the military's demonstrated capability to strike, but also on political will, diplomatic acumen, and economic leverage. Unlike in earlier decades, India is no longer content to absorb the costs of terrorism quietly. It has created a system of consequences that can be activated and scaled at will.

This also puts the onus on Pakistan to recalibrate. Continued reliance on terror proxies is no longer a low-risk, high-reward strategy. It is a high-risk, multi-domain liability.

## ***The road ahead: Risks and responsibilities***

To be sure, deterrence is not foolproof. There are risks of miscalculation, accidental escalation, and the ever-present fog of war. Therefore, India must invest in institutional frameworks that sustain escalation control, including clear red lines, backchannel communications, and public diplomacy.

Moreover, integrated deterrence must be adaptive. Terror

outfits evolve, technologies change, and geopolitical contexts shift. A successful strategy today must be updated and refined to meet tomorrow's threats.

*But if there is one takeaway from Operation Sindoor, it is this: India's deterrence posture is no longer reactive, ambiguous, or compartmentalized. It is proactive, layered, and integrated. Perhaps, India has re-imposed the deterrence established in 2019. At the minimum, it has imposed real costs on Pakistan's army. This article analyzes India's "Operation Sindoor" military response to cross-border terrorism in April 2025. It argues that India has evolved from reactive "strategic restraint" to proactive "Integrated Deterrence," combining military strikes, diplomatic pressure, and economic leverage to fundamentally change the cost-benefit calculus for Pakistan's use of terrorist proxies and its strategic calculus.*

Whether this posture will finally stem the tide of cross-border terrorism remains to be seen. But it has undoubtedly changed the game—and perhaps, just perhaps, the rules.