

Operation Sindoor & India's New Doctrine of Deterrence

Strategic Lessons from the 2025
India-Pakistan Crisis

Editors

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Introduction

Lt Gen D S Hooda

Operation Sindoor is a strategic inflexion point in India's military history. For decades, India's security calculus vis-à-vis Pakistan has been marked by caution, calibrated response, and an overhanging shadow of nuclear weapons. The operation exemplified India's resolve to counter Pakistan-sponsored terrorism through a combination of kinetic force and political instruments to signal that the pursuit of terrorism as an instrument of state policy would incur tangible and escalating costs.

It was also a statement of political will. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's articulation of the "new normal" after the strikes clarified the doctrine in no uncertain terms. Any act of terror will be met with a strong and resolute response, India will not be intimidated by nuclear threats, and no distinction will be made between terrorists and their state sponsors. These three principles now underpin a fundamentally transformed Indian posture.

A new strategic posture also demands doctrinal clarity and appropriate capability building. This will require an honest assessment of what we have learned from the operation. We must also be conscious that an 88-hour operation cannot be a complete template of how future conflicts of much longer duration could play out.

This compilation, produced by the Council for Strategic and Defense Research and India's World Magazine, brings together a diverse array of perspectives—ranging from military practitioners and strategic analysts to scholars of nuclear deterrence and diplomacy—to offer a comprehensive understanding of Operation Sindoor and its implications for Indian strategy. Collectively, these essays explore not only the execution of the operation but also the doctrinal, operational, and political frameworks that shaped it.

Several essays assess how Sindoor represents a pivotal shift in India's approach to cross-border terrorism. Moving away from the logic of "strategic restraint," India has embraced deterrence by punishment, striking deep into Pakistan's mainland and targeting the leadership hubs of terrorist groups with unprecedented precision. The analysis reveals that this operation was carefully planned to consider escalation thresholds and strategic messaging.

Other contributions explore the nuclear dimension—arguably one of the most complex aspects of the India-Pakistan relationship. These chapters examine how *Sindoor* operated deliberately within the nuclear shadow, pushing the boundaries of conventional retaliation while stopping short of strategic provocation. The muted nature of Pakistan's nuclear signalling during the conflict is examined closely, with some authors suggesting that India may have successfully blunted the utility of Pakistan's long-relied-upon "nuclear shield."

The volume also addresses a growing tension in India's doctrine - the shift from deterrence to compellence. While deterrence seeks to prevent hostile action, compellence aims to induce a change in behaviour. Many of the authors argue that India's long-term objective should not merely be to deter the next attack but to compel Pakistan to dismantle its proxy networks altogether. This would require not only the threat of military punishment but sustained diplomatic isolation, economic coercion, and even support to dissident movements within Pakistan. This would be a shift from episodic responses to persistent pressure.

Another set of essays delves into the diplomatic and legal implications of *Sindoor*. The suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty is examined not as a symbolic act but as part of a broader strategy of comprehensive national coercion. In parallel, the international community's muted response to India's actions is analyzed, suggesting that New Delhi may now have to manage any future crisis independently. Further, a set of essays looks at India's use of Air power in the Operation and draws lessons on what role air power is likely to play in future conflict.

Finally, the volume considers the road ahead. *Sindoor* has shifted the goalposts, but it has not eliminated risk. The next confrontation is likely to begin at a higher threshold, with reduced warning time and compressed decision cycles. Escalation ladders are now steeper and more uncertain. The book argues that India must institutionalize the lessons of *Sindoor*—through doctrinal clarity, capability enhancement, strategic communication, and sustained political resolve.

This volume is both a reflection and a guide. Operation *Sindoor* has raised the bar for India's response to terrorism. We must now craft doctrines and build capabilities to ensure consistency and credibility in the application of force, the management of escalation, and the preservation of deterrence across future crises.

The Nuclear Dimension

India's New Response Doctrine Towards Pakistan

Brig Arun Sahgal & Ambuj Sahu

India's precision strikes on terrorist infrastructure and their military facilities encompassing both mainland Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK) have heralded India's new response doctrine to acts of cross-border terror. Operation Sindoor, marked a swift and decisive retaliation to the gruesome Pahalgam attacks, which claimed the lives of 26 innocent tourists, targeted on religious grounds. These attacks were part incited by a provocative speech from Pakistan Army Chief General (now Field Marshal) Asim Munir. In a rhetorical address to overseas Pakistani's endorsing the two-nation theory as the cause belie, described Kashmir as Pakistan's jugular. The speech was widely viewed as a direct incitement to terrorists and their handlers within the ISI.

India's military response to this act of grave provocation was focused and precise: targeting, terror infrastructure not only in the PoJK, but for the first time headquarters of the terrorist groups Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) at Muridke and Bahawalpur. The operation was the result of weeks of meticulous planning that included detailed intelligence gathering.

Operation Sindoor was unique in many ways. It was the subcontinent's first non-contact war, marked by technology-driven kinetic activity involving missiles and drones. Neither side physically crossed the other's territorial space. It not only showcased India's military and technological superiority, but more importantly restored strategic deterrence, and unveiled a new security doctrine. It upheld strategic autonomy, and established India as a decisive power prepared to employ military capability in pursuit of its core national interests, all while managing the risk of escalation through demonstrated targeting underpinning both capability and intent.

The 'New Normal'

On May 12, Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated the core tenets of India's new response doctrine. First, any Pakistan perpetrated terrorist attack on Indian soil would be met with assured and proportionate retaliation. Second, India would no longer be deterred by nuclear

blackmail in its resolve to strike terrorist sanctuaries across the border. More importantly, it called out the false equivalence that the international community tends to make between India and Pakistan under a nuclear umbrella, thereby ignoring Pakistan's policy for state-sponsored terrorism. Third, India will not differentiate between terrorists and the governments that harbors them. Modi additionally reiterated India's long-held diplomatic position: terror and talks cannot go together.

Assured retaliation towards acts of terror

Operation Sindoor marked a decisive departure in India's approach to terrorism emanating from Pakistan. In previous instances—such as the 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot airstrikes—India, whilst clearly indicating its threshold of tolerance, exercised restraint and symbolic resolve, by avoiding striking deep into Pakistan's mainland. This time, however, the response was fundamentally different. India's focus was on dismantling Pakistan's terror factories across the entire operational chain.

Sites like Markaz Subhan Allah in Bahawalpur and Markaz Taiba in Muridke were not arbitrary targets—they were the nerve centers behind some of the most heinous attacks on India, including the IC814 hijacking, the 2001 Parliament attack, and the 26/11 Mumbai carnage. Camps in Sialkot, Muzaffarabad, and Barnala served as hubs for fanatical indoctrination and recruitment. Meanwhile, the Sarjal facility at Tehra Kalan was identified as a key weapons storage site, and Kotli and Muzaffarabad functioned as forward launchpads for terrorist infiltration.

The detailed targeting of terrorist networks inside Pakistan showed India pursuing a precise objective rather than belligerent goals such as territorial occupation or regime change. With these actions, a new threshold has been established: terror attacks emanating from Pakistani soil will now be met with military force—not merely as a threat but as a firm precedent.

Nuclear blackmail will not go unchallenged

However, the most significant achievement of Operation Sindoor has been posing a fundamental challenge to Pakistan's nuclear doctrine. By treating terrorist attacks originating from Pakistani soil as acts of war, India signaled its intent not to allow Pakistan's nuclear capability deter it from using force restrained by its self-perceived thresholds. Through a campaign defined by clear objectives, controlled escalation, and effective strategic messaging, India demonstrated the ability to call Pakistan's bluff, exposing the limitations of its nuclear deterrent as a shield for the prosecution of terrorism.

Pakistan has long relied on the belief that its nuclear weapons can be leveraged to offset India's

conventional superiority by shrinking the space for conflict below the nuclear threshold. As a result, the strategy of using cross-border terror became the basis of proxy warfare against India in J&K, secure in the belief that India's conventional responses can be contained through nuclear brinkmanship. At the heart of this lay the assumption that any cycle of conventional military response could spiral into a larger conflict breaching nuclear thresholds. This logic formed the essence of Pakistan's 'Full Spectrum Deterrence' doctrine, designed to forestall substantive Indian responses by propagating redlines, crossing which, Pakistan might be left with no option but to escalate up the nuclear ladder. Importantly, Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons were a key component of this response matrix, reinforcing shallow thresholds.

India's measured offensive action, executed with precision and determination in response to Pakistan's cross-border strikes using drones, missiles, and standoff air and missile attacks, starkly exposed the failure of Pakistan's nuclear brinkmanship. By striking eleven major airbases, India effectively neutralized its adversary's capacity to deliver a nuclear warhead (via air) or even a TNW. Complementing this, India's robust and layered air defense systems further constrained Pakistan's missile delivery options.

Additionally, the precise targeting of critical military assets such as Sargodha and Nur Khan underscored India's capability to undertake precision non-strategic conventional strikes on strategic targets with great effect. A particular strike reportedly fell close to Pakistan's command and control center, further indicating a breach of air defenses and showcasing India's precision strike capabilities. Unnerved by India's actions, Islamabad reportedly sought US help for an off-ramp, as highlighted by a direct call from Pakistan's COAS Gen Munir to Secretary Rubio and Pakistan's DGMO, seeking an early ceasefire.

State is not different from state-sponsored terrorism

Pakistan responded to India's missile strikes on nine terror sites with drone and missile attacks targeting both Indian military assets and civilian populations. Viral images of Pakistan Army officers offering state funerals to LeT terrorists in Muridke only reinforced what Operation Sindoor sought to prove: direct Pakistani state complicity in sponsoring cross-border terrorism. It is this direct collusion that made India draw a firm line—Pakistan's military would no longer be viewed as distinct from the terrorist groups it harbors and enables.

In response, India launched a comprehensive offensive against Pakistan's military infrastructure, fully cognizant of the risks of escalation. Operation Sindoor demonstrated India's ability to strike targets deep within Pakistan—terror camps, drone hubs, airbases, or air defense systems—with precision and control, while absorbing Pakistani retaliation at minimal cost. Pakistan's Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos laid bare its desperation: the targeting of

civilian centers blurred any distinction between the state and the terrorists it shields. On the night of May 9-10, in a reckless escalation, Pakistan fired four missiles at New Delhi—all of which were intercepted well before nearing their intended targets.

India's response served a dual purpose: to establish a clear dictum of imposing costs for future terrorist attacks, and to deliver a controlled yet decisive retaliation, short of full-scale war, to Pakistan's military leadership.

Strategic implications of Op Sindoor

Operation Sindoor marks a watershed in India's national security doctrine—an assertive pivot from reactive restraint to strong deterrence by punishment. For decades, Pakistan relied on nuclear brinkmanship and the fiction of plausible deniability to sponsor cross-border terrorism with impunity. That era is now decisively over.

By striking deep into the Pakistani mainland with precision, India not only imposed punitive costs for the Pahalgam massacre but also dismantled the myth of a no-go nuclear threshold. The message was unambiguous: terrorism, when abetted by the state, will invite a calibrated, yet uncompromising military response.

Key lessons for strategic stability in the Indian subcontinent:

- India called Pakistan's nuclear bluff, ascending multiple rungs on the escalation ladder without provoking nuclear retaliation.
- India established a doctrine of deterrence by punishment, making it clear that any future terrorist attack will exact severe costs.
- Alongside military, the non-military thresholds of Pakistan's full-spectrum doctrine have also been breached. Both the suspension of the Indus Water Treaty as well as other economic measures taken by India after the Pahalgam attacks, remain. India has clearly left the door ajar for testing economic and political thresholds in a future crisis.

Conclusion

Operation Sindoor was not born out of adventurism but rooted in strategic clarity. India has asserted its sovereignty, its autonomy, and resolve—on its own terms, and without recourse to third-party mediation. The rules of engagement in the Indian subcontinent have changed. India will escalate conventionally, as in Op Sindoor, in response to sub-conventional attacks. The burden of further escalation now lies with those who use terror as an instrument of state policy.

A Fragile Pause: Caught Between Nuclear Signaling, Off-Ramps, and Escalation Traps

Hely Desai

The May 10 ceasefire between India and Pakistan may have temporarily halted active military hostilities, but it has done little to provide reassurance of a return to stability or predictability in the region. Although the crisis followed a familiar script—terrorist provocation, Indian retaliation, reciprocal military strikes, and an externally brokered de-escalation—the cadence of military activity, retaliation target profile, and the nature of signaling suggest a shift in the dynamics of the confrontation. While much analysis often tends to fall into the pattern of ‘fighting the last war’ by drawing familiar comparisons, the 2025 confrontation resists easy analogies.

Unlike past crises—Kargil (1999), the 2001–02 terror attacks, Mumbai terror attacks (2008), or Balakot (2019)—this confrontation was also marked by the conspicuous absence of the ‘N’ word from Pakistan’s senior leadership until fairly late into the conflict. Aside from a handful of sporadic remarks by mid-level officials and politicians, the nuclear dimension remained muted. The only notable reference to nuclear weapons, in the form of a later-retracted National Command Authority (NCA) meeting, came just hours before the ceasefire and appeared to be aimed more at an international audience than as a credible deterrent signal.

However, the nuclear dimension this time loomed not in overt threats, but in its deliberate ambiguity. The near silence of formal nuclear signaling, broken only by subtle cues and warnings, just to be walked back on, may itself be seen as a signal. It suggested not restraint, but a confidence in mutual vulnerability. This makes the current pause not a step toward resolution, but a lull under the long shadow of further escalation.

From tripwire to tactic: Pakistan’s saber rattling or the lack thereof

Historically, in crises, such as in 1999, 2002, and 2019, the Pakistani leadership has been quick to invoke the nuclear card, sometimes even before the escalation begins. The intent behind

such signaling is often understood as serving three core purposes: swiftly restoring deterrence, compensating for conventional military asymmetry, and internationalizing the crisis.

Crisis / Year	Early Nuclear Signalling?	By Whom	Signalling/Key Statements
Kargil Conflict, 1999	Yes	Pakistani officials: • PM Nawaz Sharif • Foreign Secretary Shamshad Ahmad • Military Spokesman Brig. Rashid Quereshi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Nawaz Sharif</u>: “Confident... to meet [an armed attack] on equal terms.” • <u>Shamshad Ahmad</u>: “We will not hesitate to use any weapon in our arsenal...” • <u>Quereshi</u>: “Right to retaliate by whatever means...”
2001	Implicit Signalling	• Pakistani military (reported)	• Pakistan reportedly <u>moved</u> Hatf-1 and Hatf-2 ballistic missiles closer to the international border (and Indian cities).
2001–02 Standoff	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pakistani leadership • Missile tests • President Pervez Musharraf 	• <u>Musharraf</u> (2002): “As a last resort the atom bomb is also possible.”
Surgical Strike Denial, 2016	No (Outright denial)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PM Nawaz Sharif • Pakistan Army • A Bajwa (ISPR) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Sharif</u>: Military capable of thwarting “any evil design.” • <u>Bajwa</u>: Indian claims “false propaganda,” routine cross-LoC fire.
Balakot Airstrike, 2019	Yes	• National Command Authority (NCA) meeting called by <u>PM Imran Khan</u> on the same day of the airstrikes.	
Current Crisis	No (Top-level) Yes (Second-tier)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second-tier voices / institutional murmurs • Aborted NCA announcement • Railway Minister • Ambassador to Russia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Railway Minister</u>: “Pakistan's nuclear weapons are not for display... 130 nuclear warheads aimed only for India.” • <u>Ambassador to Russia</u>: “Full spectrum of power could be used.”

In the present crisis, the usual choreography—missile tests, fiery rhetoric, and stern NCA statements—was either softened or postponed. This pause suggests a calculated waiting posture - perhaps assuming, based on historical patterns, that India's response would be limited and symbolic. But Pakistan's invocation of the NCA, four days into the standoff, was brief and ultimately reversed—either due to internal confusion, international pressure, or both. The break from the past patterns lies not just in the delay, but also in the walk-back after crossing that threshold. What explains this break from the pattern?

- **Timing and calculus:** One explanation is structural disarray. Pakistan had time to prepare—after the Pahalgam massacre, there was no ambiguity that a retaliatory Indian strike was coming. And given India's past patterns (2016, 2019), Islamabad likely assumed any response would be calibrated, largely symbolic, and designed to avoid escalation. This assumption provided cushion space: a chance to bolster air defense readiness and posture forces without needing to activate overt nuclear signaling.
- **Escalation Dynamics:** The initial Indian strikes avoided military infrastructure, hitting only terror camps, as expected. The NCA was triggered only after a Pakistani military response led to a second wave of Indian retaliation—BrahMos strikes on air bases—but it was soon denied and/or walked back on, indicating that Pakistan had expected the crisis to level off and plateau, without escalating further. The signaling came not as a first line of deterrence but as a fallback option if the escalation breached assumed limits.
- **Strategic Recalibration:** The delay reflects a deeper strategic recalibration. The use of nuclear signaling not as a tripwire but as a pressure release mechanism suggests Pakistan may be seeking to internationalize the crisis, now without appearing reckless. Nuclear threats carry diminishing returns when overused. By delaying them, Pakistan may have sought to preserve its credibility and create more favorable conditions for diplomatic intervention.

Nuclear signaling in the present crisis served more as a channel for diplomacy than a true escalation threat. It was used to trigger off-ramp conversations, not push toward the next rung of the ladder. But that creates risk. If nuclear signaling becomes the primary mechanism for controlling escalation, it may eventually lose its credibility or be misread. In each invocation, it is harder to tell which signals are performative and which are real.

India's evolving deterrence playbook

On the other hand, India's response combined a tone of diplomatic restraint with a firm approach to deterrence. The Foreign Secretary's initial remarks emphasized de-escalation and diplomatic restraint, signaling a preference for stability. Yet, Prime Minister Modi's address

made clear that India would “not differentiate between conventional and unconventional attacks,” implying resolve and deterrence. Days later, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's call for IAEA inspections of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal further emphasized concerns over “irresponsible” behavior. This mixture of diplomatic caution and firm political rhetoric calls into question the space below the nuclear threshold for maneuvering, introducing an element of strategic ambiguity that will impact the nature of the next crisis.

- **Blurred Boundaries:** By erasing the traditional distinction between state-sponsored terrorism and state aggression, India reinforces its right to respond militarily—a measured effort to uphold national security in a complex threat environment. But if every proxy strike is treated as a *casus belli* for military retaliation, does the escalation ladder become shorter—and steeper?
- **Ambiguity as Pressure:** India's mixed messaging creates asymmetric pressures. For Pakistan, the absence of clear thresholds increases the unpredictability of Indian responses. This can either delay nuclear signaling, as seen in 2025, or accelerate it in future crises, depending on perceptions of intent and pressure.
- **A Hardening Posture:** India's strikes on targets near Pakistan's alleged strategic infrastructure at Kirana Hills—close to the Nur Khan and Sargodha air bases, combined with rhetoric about refusing to “give in to nuclear blackmail,” point to a more assertive posture. While Air Marshal Bharti categorically denied targeting Kirana Hills, the perceived proximity to nuclear assets remains sensitive. The practical damage to air bases is often temporary — hangars, runways, or fuel assets that can be taken offline briefly, and usually restored within hours or days. But their symbolic and strategic impact can be outsized, especially if the location is seen as adjacent to nuclear infrastructure or military leadership nodes.

Its posture had, until now, enabled New Delhi to carve out space for operational flexibility under the nuclear umbrella, demonstrating resolve without provoking uncontrollable escalation. But how far can this approach be stretched before the room for calibrated responses disappears altogether?

The Ceasefire as mirage: A faster, harder, riskier crisis template emerges

The key takeaway from the current crisis isn't how nuclear weapons are likely or unlikely to be used — they remain a last-resort option for both sides. But what has changed is the proximity of nuclear signalling to conventional action, and the erosion of space between escalation ladders. If in this crisis India's strikes on military bases were seen as warnings rather than a prelude, then how many more such warnings can occur before one is misread?

The deeper question, then, is not whether deterrence held — it did, narrowly — but how long these back-and-forth cycles can continue before a miscalculation, misinterpretation, or technological failure triggers a crisis no one can pull back from.

The 2025 crisis was not just another tactical flashpoint—it marked a shift in the region’s escalation baseline. Both India and Pakistan walked away claiming success, but the perception of victory on both sides has laid the groundwork for greater risks ahead.

India sees its BrahMos strikes as having compelled the ceasefire. Pakistan views its delayed nuclear signaling as evidence that deterrence remains effective. These opposing narratives have hardened domestic postures and increased the likelihood of future escalation. India’s declarations of its evolving doctrine imply greater willingness to retaliate without courting global sympathy. Pakistan’s more ambiguous nuclear messaging, meanwhile, may reflect a deliberate tactical choice—or simply the symptoms of its strained and disjointed civil-military system grappling with heightened international scrutiny, economic fragility, and political instability. Either way, the crisis stability that once rested on clear red lines and predictable thresholds may no longer hold. Every Pakistani strike now invites more assertive retaliation. Every Indian response that avoids major escalation sets a precedent—and a political expectation—for the next one.

Unlike 1999, when Kargil reset the escalation ladder and reimposed relative predictability, the 2025 crisis institutionalized ambiguity. It has codified a norm of silent sabre-rattling, where deterrence rests on uncertain signals and compressed timelines. This is no return to the old cycle. It is the emergence of a new, far more dangerous one, marked by ambiguous doctrines, precision capabilities, hyper-politicized threat perceptions, and shrinking windows for de-escalation. The ladder of escalation has been repositioned on a steeper, narrower, and more volatile terrain.

Against the mirage of stability of the ceasefire, this crisis shows both sides testing new boundaries of escalation. The confrontation did not restore deterrence; it normalized ambiguity. Strategic signaling has not disappeared—it has been deliberately muted, transformed into a policy of opacity. Each time nuclear signalling is used, its credibility changes—either by inflation or erosion. If it continues to be treated as a bargaining chip to draw in third parties, it may crowd out the very strategic clarity that deterrence is supposed to provide. This silence, while offering little maneuvering space, also clouds thresholds and invites miscalculation. And in a region where perception drives policy, such ambiguity can be dangerously destabilizing.

As the space for sub-threshold action now narrows, both sides face a dangerous paradox: more restraint might now require more risk. The next crisis may not wait for red lines to be crossed—it may be triggered due to the very absence of them.

Op Sindoor: The Nuclear Dimension

Rajesh Basrur

Like all India-Pakistan crises since at least 1999, the current confrontation is widely viewed as a dangerous clash between nuclear powers—yet there is little clarity about what this actually entails beyond standard expressions of alarm. Nuclear weapons have powerful effects which constrain what nations can do. They have been used twice (in Hiroshima and Nagasaki), but only when the targeted nation did not possess them. Military hostilities between nuclear-armed rivals have occurred on numerous occasions, but the risks of escalation have always restricted options on both sides. A glance at these episodes lay bare an inescapable reality: nuclear weapons prohibit a rational resort to major war, and the closer we come to crossing the nuclear threshold, the larger looms the risk of catastrophe. It makes sense, therefore, to seek less hazardous alternatives and, if the adversary simply will not negotiate in good faith, resort to options thus far not considered palatable. Since the 1990s, Indian policy has not achieved much: every crisis has brought a modicum of compromise, but not for long. There is no reason to expect anything different this time unless an out-of-the-box approach is adopted that both eschews nuclear risk and turns an asymmetric conflict into a symmetric one.

Though the fragmentation of Pakistan may produce risks for India, it is worth considering the potential strategic gains from a nuanced Indian standpoint.

Historical patterns of Nuclear confrontation

Let me first outline the patterns discernible in nuclear altercations over the years. Major border skirmishes broke out between China and the Soviet Union in March-September 1969; and between India and Pakistan during the Kargil crisis in March-July 1999. In the mid-1960s, during the Vietnam War, there were occasional dogfights between Chinese and American aircraft; and Chinese-manned anti-aircraft weapons deployed in the North also targeted the latter. Lower-level combat occurred between the US and the Soviet Union in 1960 and 1962 when American intelligence-gathering planes were shot down over the Soviet Union and Cuba respectively; in 1962, when American surface ships dropped practice torpedoes as warnings on

a Soviet submarines near Cuba (which Soviet commanders mistook for real ones); and when Indian and Pakistani land and air forces briefly clashed in 2016 and 2019. Major confrontations without actual serious combat occurred between US and Soviet forces in Berlin in 1961 and Cuba in 1962, and between India and Pakistan in 2001-02. Overall, regardless of the nature of the confrontation, both sides actually cooperated in three ways: by not crossing the threshold between limited combat and major war; by scrupulously avoiding the use of the bomb; and by negotiating overtly as well as covertly.

Op Sindoor: Unprecedented risks in a familiar pattern

The story is similar in the present crisis. In fact, unlike the 2001-02 crisis, there has been no nuclear signalling through statements from political or military leaders, or through missile tests. Both sides have also been careful to avoid deploying troops across the formal lines separating their forces. At the outset, India declared that it had targeted only terrorist infrastructure, not the Pakistani military or civilian population. But the near-war produced at least two unprecedented risks, both initiated by Pakistan: the targeting of civilians, and deep strikes against each other's military bases.

In the latter case, Indian forces struck Pakistan's Nur Khan base, a short distance from the headquarters of its Strategic Plans Division, which controls the country's nuclear weapons. This raised the possibility of accidental nuclear war—one that could occur even without the direct targeting of a nuclear facility or a national command centre. An off-target missile could strike a nuclear facility, or a strike on a non-nuclear target might be misinterpreted (by the target country) as an attack on its nuclear infrastructure. The possibility of rapid escalation to a cataclysmic nuclear conflict costing millions of lives cannot be ruled out. The key question, then, is: what political objective is worth the risk of a nuclear conflagration?

The limits of military deterrence

Claims that India has demonstrated its power to punish recalcitrant adversaries and created a "new normal" ring hollow when we recall that Pakistan has supported terrorist groups targeting India for decades, periodically backing off under pressure, only to revive its low-cost strategy of asymmetric warfare. Ultimately, though, nuclear deterrence works both ways, limiting India's capacity to flex its military muscle. To be sure, Pakistan has not gained anything substantial: the overall situation regarding Kashmir remains largely unchanged. What repeated crises do achieve is the strengthening of the Pakistani military's entrenched political power, which sustains hostilities between the two countries.

The international dimension: Support without substance

Nor has India benefited from support extended by other nations. The Kargil conflict was a rare occasion when firm American support was obtained quickly, but it remained in place for only a short while. The crises of 2001-02 and 2008 did not see an iteration of such support. Though intelligence agencies, media investigations, and even admissions by Pakistani leaders have repeatedly implicated Islamabad, the same governments and news outlets have usually been coy about calling out the Pakistani government. This is hardly surprising given that Indian foreign policy similarly avoids taking strong positions on conflicts in the Middle East, Ukraine and elsewhere. India needs to focus on self-help alternatives.

Beyond military solutions: Alternative approaches

What, then, might help alter the tired old pattern of attacks and limited military responses that enhance nuclear risk and lead nowhere? A negotiated agreement is not out of the question. In the wake of the 2001-02 crisis, comprehensive talks—between the governments of Pakistan’s military strongman Pervez Musharraf and India’s Atal Bihari Vajpayee—produced an agreement to soften the Line of Control (LoC) that divides the portions of Kashmir held by India and Pakistan, encourage cross-border movement, and enhance overland trade. The compromise was prompted by the nuclear risks posed by the crises of 1999 and 2001-02. Reports at the time indicated that the two nations were on the verge of an agreement that had the potential to gradually convert the LoC into a formal border. As it happened, Musharraf’s domestic political star went into a tailspin and the Pakistan army turned its back on the whole effort. Today, although the army remains powerful, its position is uncertain, so it is unlikely to consider a similar compromise. On the contrary, given the political turmoil and economic uncertainty prevailing in Pakistan, a confrontation with India serves the Pakistani military’s interests by allowing it to portray itself as the guardian of national survival and to remain at the helm as the real power, but without real responsibility.

Still, a major national crisis could prompt a change of heart. Looking to European history, it is worth remembering that, after a 75-year tug of war, including two world wars, between France and Germany over Alsace-Lorraine, the territory eventually came under permanent French control. More importantly, while half of its population speaks the Germanic dialect Alsatian, there is no present-day tension between the two nations over the once-disputed land. That resolution came as a result of World War II—an event unlikely to occur in South Asia. However, should Pakistan face national collapse or the weakening of the army due to its inability to prop up a crumbling polity, a positive denouement could yet appear. Though the fragmentation of Pakistan may produce risks for India, it is worth considering the potential strategic gains from a nuanced Indian standpoint.

The domestic imperative: India's internal challenges

But let us bear in mind that a major source of India's Pakistan problem is internal. As several critics have pointed out, the Pahalgam massacre that triggered the present crisis was made possible by a serious lack of security preparedness, leaving the victims vulnerable to terrorist attack. Looking back at the series of crises that have plagued India—the 1999 Kargil conflict, the 2001-02 standoff, the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, and now the Pahalgam killings—the domestic dimension cannot be ignored. Over the decades, regardless of the party in power, successive Indian governments have shown a woeful lack of preparation for countering violent attacks with regard to intelligence, equipment, training, and organisation. Above all, there is little evidence of accountability with regard to the failings of security forces, civilian officials, and political decision makers, allowing serious vulnerabilities to persist. Finally, a strong foundation for security must rest on working out a domestic settlement that integrates Kashmir comfortably and meaningfully into India—a challenge that has not been adequately met since independence.

Strategic options: The Pakistan fragmentation scenario

Of course, Pakistan's military will still have to be reckoned with. One possible approach to incentivise positive change in Pakistan could be for India to retaliate in kind: support the Baloch nationalist movement in a substantial way, encourage separatist tendencies in Sindh, which is already experiencing unrest, and back secessionist tendencies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which has an unstable border with Afghanistan. This need not actually be carried out to fruition—even the credible threat of such internal destabilisation might compel the Pakistan Army to rethink its strategy on Kashmir.

On Strategic Thought and Preparedness

Twelve Arguments to Make Sense of Op Sindoor

Happymon Jacob

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 potentially 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.

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

Sidharth Raimedhi

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.

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.

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).

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.

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.

The Indian Navy's Role and Impact in Operation Sindoor: Historical Precedents and Future Imperatives

Capt Sarabjeet S. Parmar

The employment of the Indian Navy since its baptism under fire in 1971 has followed a well-laid-out doctrine and strategy, evolving in response to advancements in technology—of one's own and that of adversaries. Since 1971, the Indian Navy has been mobilized and deployed in full force on two occasions—Operation Talwar in 1999 and Operation Parakram in 2002. While the Indian Navy did not see any action due to Pakistan's non-confrontational approach in the maritime domain, these deployments definitely “influenced events on land”. Influencing events on land is an important part of the Indian Maritime doctrine and its unclassified 2015 strategy document, “Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy”, where it is an objective of the military role in the Indian Navy's “Strategy for Conflict”.

The success of the actions in 1971, along with the deployments in 1999 and 2002, have established a template that—with appropriate changes based on political directives, the prevailing security scenario, and available technology and assets—can frame strategic-level planning and offer multiple operational-level deployment options.

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The effectiveness of MDA and the operational reach were enabled by networked operations within the Navy and through joint coordination with the Army and Air Force—both of which are categorised as “Operational Enablers” in the “Strategy for Conflict”. This strategy also places the delivery of firepower under “Force Projection” against designated legal targets, thereby conforming to the additional operational principles of “Application of Force” and “Strategic Effect”.

Major operations and employment of the India Navy are centered on “Sea Control”. The number of ships at sea, especially the Carrier Battle Group, supported by land-based maritime reconnaissance aircraft (such as P8Is and HALE UAVs), would have enabled the requisite degree of sea control. This was, of course, made easier by the absence of the Pakistan Navy in the areas of deployment.

The conduct of firing exercises in late April by both navies is a routine measure during times of high tension, signaling intent to use firepower when required, while also honing crew skills and procedures. That the exercises were conducted beyond each other’s maritime zones indicates restraint on both sides. Such an exercise is possibly a first for Pakistan, suggesting the Pakistan Navy’s active involvement in overall planning. In contrast, the Indian Navy carried out several such exercises in 1999 and 2002 to demonstrate its intent. While the actual areas of Indian Navy operations may never be publicly known, it is reasonable to assume that deployed ships and submarines operated around designated attack points— potentially within Pakistan’s maritime zones, depending on onboard equipment and missile ranges. Consequently, the Indian Naval force established a de facto blockade, confining Pakistan Navy units to their harbors, proving the template and associated operational plans. It is important to note that a blockade is an act of war; thus, its imposition would be a deliberate and hence considered decision.

Future imperatives

Policy shift on terrorism

First, is the change in policy against terrorism that “any attack on Indian soil will be considered as an act of war”. This could result in the India Navy being brought into action earlier than before—with maritime strikes on designated targets at sea, along the coast, and potentially inland. This would expand the area of operations for both India and Pakistan, and the resultant escalation could expand into a full-fledged conflict. This policy shift would require

re-evaluating and shortening the Navy's response time, including the operationalisation of forward operating bases and logistical chains.

Failure of deterrence and the role of compellence

As deterrence has failed to contain terrorist attacks from Pakistan, compellence may become the preferred strategy. Doctrinally, the Indian Navy recognizes compellence as a concept related to the use-of-force and hence includes it under the military role in its "Strategy for Conflict". Incorporating actions that support compellence into operational plans is therefore straightforward. In the context of Op Sindoor, it has been stated that "the carrier group acted as a force for compellence". The Carrier Battle Group and other deployed ships, supported by adequate logistics, can act as effective instruments of compellence.

The nuclear dimension

Since the above two factors have the potential for escalation, the nuclear factor may come into play earlier than expected. While the actual use of nuclear weapons—especially on land—remains debatable, the maritime domain presents a different arena, especially where tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) are concerned. The existing naval asymmetry could encourage Pakistan to raise the TNW flag at sea with a higher use criterion, especially against the Carrier Battle Group. Though it is unclear whether Pakistan possesses TNWs for use at sea, land-based missiles could, in the meantime, serve as substitutes. India's nuclear doctrine calls for retaliation with nuclear weapons in the event of a major attack on Indian territory and Indian forces anywhere. The same extends to attacks by biological or chemical weapons. This may impact conventional operations under the nuclear shadow, and therefore India could look at enhancing operations in a more intense manner, while managing escalation to pre-empt raising of the nuclear flag.

Additionally, international sentiment must be accounted for, as maritime conflict in the region would impact global trade—especially shipping through the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb. Any restrictions on international shipping, whether due to blockades or military operations, would need to be formally communicated through exclusion zones or navigational area warnings, as outlined in the Indian Maritime Doctrine.

A future conflict with Pakistan, triggered by a terrorist attack, will require a re-calibration of operational plans—particularly in terms of intensity and design—so as to enable early conflict termination on terms favorable to India.

Conventional Operations Under the Nuclear Shadow

Rakesh Sood

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, were targeted 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 –

- Does the expansive 'new normal' establish deterrence?
- 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?
- 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 announcement by 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 repeatedly thanked President Trump for his mediation and urged him to 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 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.

Op Sindoor and India's Defense Indigenization Effort

Lt Gen Sanjay Verma

Op Sindoor will go down in history as a watershed response to terrorist operations. The steely resolve and intent displayed in identifying and targeting the perpetrators of the ghastly and inhuman attack on unsuspecting and vulnerable tourists marks a departure from the earlier model of 'surgical strikes' in response to similar provocations. The unified political support across party lines and bold leadership in drawing up the operational plan, with the three services, was commendable. The purpose and intent had remarkable resonance. In a volatile global geopolitical environment, marked by multiple flashpoints, the operation garnered significant international support. The 88-hour series of calibrated strikes on targets—ranging from close to deep inside Pakistani territory—redefined the classical military response matrix, as well as the selection of force levels to convey the intended message.

The extensive use of technology—spanning air defense, surveillance, target acquisition, missiles, drones, and loitering munitions—was central to showcasing India's capability to undertake precision strikes with impunity. The power of Information Warfare and its manifestation in various domains and capability to influence outcomes is eliciting a 'de-novo' assessment. Op Sindoor is thus now under scrutiny in strategic discourse, with focus on dimensions such as strategy options, political and military objectives, leadership, decision-making, capability, capacity, and termination scenarios. Drawing lessons, identifying voids, and shaping future postures is imperative. The Kargil conflict similarly triggered a major review process, resulting in the Kargil Review Committee and subsequent GoM recommendations, which continue to form the structural basis of India's national security apparatus. In a classical sense, Op Sindoor, being limited in both scope and application of force, does not alter the macro-outlook, but does offer an opportunity to reassess the response-escalation matrix and matching capabilities.

The military capability employed predominantly long-range standoff missiles and munitions packaged in aerial delivery platforms under an active air defense umbrella with a fair mix of indigenous and imported systems. Notably, indigenous platforms such as Akash and BrahMos, along with select drones, have boosted confidence in the public and private defense

ecosystem. It also reinforces faith in the Atmanirbhar journey and the bold and radical reforms initiated over the last few years. However, this engagement falls short of offering a complete gauge of capability readiness. But what does stand out— bearing an uncanny resemblance to the post-Uri surgical strike, Balakot, and Galwan—is the talk of a fifth tranche of Emergency Procurement approved to the tune of a staggering INR 40,000 Cr to enhance combat readiness.

This highlights existing voids and the need for priority acquisitions. Under the previous tranche (EP-IV), between September 2022 and September 2023, the Indian Army spent almost INR 11,000 Cr on 70 schemes, while the Air Force and Navy executed 65 and 35 schemes valued at INR 8,000 Cr and INR 4,500 Cr respectively. With an average scheme cost of INR 123-157 Cr, factoring in taxes, duties, warranties, spares, and margins, the actual capability punch of each scheme is limited.

Clearly, a long journey lies ahead. Critical force equipping must be prioritized. Emergency Procurement, while helpful, is not a panacea for holistic capability development—it only fills select gaps. India needs to look inward to develop larger platforms and enhance long-term preparedness. Despite a wave of reforms and procedural revisions, progress has been slow. With 2025 declared as the ‘Year of Transformation’, the Defence Acquisition Procedure may enter its ninth iteration since its 2002 inception, but that alone is not the answer. Two issues need serious overhauls and Op Sindoor should be taken as a wake-up call to adopt these reforms: A) Institutionalized and robust R&D; B) Structural reform in capability building.

Institutionalized and robust R&D

The essence of true Atmanirbharta lies in self-reliance through research and innovation. This can only happen if the nation nurtures a research-oriented outlook. The issue assumes greater importance in today’s context of emerging and disruptive technologies, Defense R&D must not be seen as limited to military needs—it demands a whole-of-nation approach. It intersects with national R&D in fields such as advance materials, aerospace, tele-communication, strategic electronics, AI, robotics and autonomy, marine, aeronautics, sensors and actuators, scientific computing, power systems, nano-technology, quantum, and space, among others. Recent financial allocations are encouraging, as shown in the table below (illustrative, not exhaustive):

DEPARTMENT	ALLOCATIONS
Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO)	Rs 23,855 Cr
Technology Development Fund (TDF)	Rs 60 Cr
Innovation in Defence Excellence (iDEX)	Rs 518 Cr in FY 2024-25 from Rs 115 Cr in FY 2023-24
2021-India Semiconductor Mission (ISM)	Outlay of ₹76,000 Cr
2023- National Quantum Mission	Outlay of Rs 6003 crore from 2023-24 to 2030-31
Central Sector Schemes/Projects in the DST – NQM	Rs 2800 Cr
Science and Engineering Research Board and Technology Development Board - DST	Rs 903 Cr
National Research Foundation (NRF) including provision for Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF)	Rs 2000 Cr
Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and National Laboratories	Rs 6265 Cr

- This is a positive and mission-oriented landscape. However, many initiatives still operate in silos and lack direction. Key trends in national R&D expenditure are: India's Gross Expenditure on R&D (GERD) is around 0.64-0.66% of its GDP.
- India accounts for only 3.1% of global GERD.
- Countries like Germany, Japan, Israel, USA, and South Korea spend more than 3%.
- In India, the government drives 59.2% of GERD (of which the central government drives 43.7% across twelve major scientific agencies).
- Public sector and private sector R&D expenditure is 4.4% and 36.4% respectively.
- Public sector R&D units invest 0.3% of sales in R&D vs. 1.46% in private sector.
- In countries like China, South Korea, USA, business enterprises drive over 70% of R&D.

Reforms at the national level in R&D are therefore the way ahead. India must increase R&D investment with strategic focus. Many technologies overlap with defense needs. While intent exists, efforts must be synergized to prevent loss of capital and delayed outcomes. The government would do well to establish a National Research & Development Commission, linking sectoral R&D to respective ministries. Missions like National Quantum and Semiconductor Mission with timelines and budgets. Specific action points include:

- Draft a national strategy and roadmap for R&D.

- Build a credible database of all ongoing R&D activities.
- Synergize and align research efforts.
- Identify strategic technologies including defense and deep-tech and assign lead agencies.
- Identify technologies having dual/multi applications across sectors and institute a lead mission.
- Incentivize private R&D investment.
- Monitor research across Centres of Excellence and academia for tangible outcomes.
- Scale up funding and build a robust R&D ecosystem.

Structural reform for capability building

The current acquisition framework—rooted in the Kargil Review Committee recommendations and implemented via the Defence Acquisition Council and Defence Procurement Board—is fragmented. While forces prepare for grey zone warfare, grey zones in acquisition structures are unacceptable. The presence of multiple stakeholders, all operating in silos, hinders forward movement. Collegiate approaches, layered committees, and undefined accountability delay outcomes for years. Other countries have faced similar challenges. Even the US struggled for years to arrive at the option of Army Futures Command adopting a cross-functional team model oriented towards outcomes rather than processes. India too needs integrated, process-friendly structural reform in defence acquisition.

The US Army Futures Command offers a useful model. In the MoD-constituted Pritam Singh Committee report of 2017 there was a recommendation for a similar autonomous body. It is time to revisit that proposal. A professional, accountable, and empowered organisation must be created—featuring experts in operations, finance, law, academia, science, industry, and quality control. The Acceptance of Necessity (AoN) should assign a named Project Manager, with timelines and targets, supported by a cross-functional team. Only this approach can ensure ownership and drive timely results. These teams should be responsible for resolving conflicts, removing bottlenecks, and integrating workflows. Technology can further infuse agility. Digital simulations, pricing models, and negotiation tools can greatly speed up decision-making. A simple example is the CNC which does not take very long and is an ideal process for evolving a technology driven pricing and negotiating strategy.

Water as Leverage: India's IWT Suspension is Here to Stay

Bashir Ali Abbas

On April 23, the Indian government announced a raft of diplomatic measures against Pakistan in response to the Pahalgam terror attack (a day earlier). Among other decisions, India declared that “the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) of 1960 would be held in abeyance with immediate effect, until Pakistan credibly and irrevocably abjures its support for cross-border terrorism.”

Rejecting India's move, Pakistan in turn declared that “any attempt to stop or divert the flow of water belonging to Pakistan as per the Indus Waters Treaty, and the usurpation of the rights of lower riparian will be considered as an Act of War.”

While Pakistan continued to voice its concerns internationally with India's decisions, the issue over the IWT and India's actions was temporarily relegated to the background as a fresh military conflict played out between India and Pakistan between May 7 and 10. Presently, a ceasefire is in effect between both states, following a hotline conversation between the Indian and Pakistani Director Generals of Military Operations on May 10 and 12. Following the discussion, both sides have agreed that “not a single shot” will be fired at each other, “aggressive and inimical” action will be avoided, and that the overall number of troops on either side of the Line of Control will potentially be reduced. While the DGMOs are set to speak again on May 18 (until when the ceasefire has been reportedly extended), diplomatic tensions continue between both sides, especially with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh asserting on May 15 that Pakistan's nuclear weapons should be placed under IAEA Supervision. However, amidst the fog that continues to exist over the developments between May 7 and 10, a significant and clearly new point of contention between the two states is the dispute over the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT). The waters of the Indus—especially its three Western rivers (Indus, Chenab, Jhelum)—are a lifeline for about 240 million people in Pakistan.

Water as diplomatic leverage: The strategic shift

In its ceasefire understanding with Pakistan on May 12, India focused solely on the technical military dimensions of the May 7-10 crisis. India did not commit to rescinding any of the

diplomatic measures it undertook against Pakistan on April 23, meaning that the 64-year-old Indus Waters Treaty remains “in abeyance”. There are two crucial aspects related to India that keep the Treaty suspended.

First, the IWT was already in the midst of an unprecedented dispute between India and Pakistan since January 2023. Since then, India has sent at least four notices to Pakistan, asking to renegotiate key provisions of the Treaty with a particular focus on its dispute resolution mechanism. India’s immediate concerns related to the World Bank initiating two parallel tracks of dispute resolution (the Court of Arbitration and the Neutral Expert), while India preferred only the NE. The disputes were related to India’s Kishenganga and Ratle hydropower projects, located on the Jhelum (a tributary) and Chenab rivers, respectively. But, there have also been long-standing concerns in India about the need to update the Treaty’s provisions in light of growing consumption as well as climate change. Hence, arguably even without the Pahalgam trigger, the IWT would suffer a similar fate.

Second, India’s new and assertive connection between the issue over the Indus and the issue of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in Kashmir. The Pahalgam attack allowed India to innovatively use a ‘national security’ based reasoning to suspend the Treaty. No issue that either side might have with regard to the merits of the IWT itself allows either a suspension or a unilateral withdrawal. However, India is implicitly arguing a fundamental “change in circumstances” from when the Treaty was signed, and now in line with the rights of a state under the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties.

In 1960, the issue of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism did not exist as a sustained threat to India, and it substantially began only in the late 1980s. In his first address to the nation since Op Sindoor, PM Modi reiterated his long-standing view that “water and blood cannot flow together.” But this time, the backdrop is different. None of the earlier such assertions had led to any adverse action by New Delhi against the Treaty, meaning that, beyond limited military cross-border skirmishes, India now views the IWT as its strongest leverage over Pakistan to compel Islamabad and Rawalpindi to cease their support for cross-border terror. As Dr Happyman Jacob has argued, India’s suspension of the IWT has possibly “replaced Kashmir with water as the central issue in India-Pakistan relations, thereby changing the terms of their bilateral engagement.”

India's calculated move: Permanent recalibration

India’s IWT decision is unlikely to be reversed; India does not look to return to adhering to the provisions of the Treaty, as they presently stand (*lex lata*). The immediate effects of India’s IWT decision have already been evident—a halt to all data-sharing related to water flow with Pakistan, and a lack of warning before opening or closing dams (as water levels rise or fall).

A case in point is India's surprise water release from the Baglihar and Salal dams on May 5. India's actual ability to substantially manipulate the course of the Western rivers has been repeatedly cast in doubt by credible analysts and hydrology experts, especially since India does not have adequate infrastructure on the Indus (storage facilities on Jhelum, for instance) to cause any unacceptable damage to Pakistan, in the short term. Building these will take time.

However, the increased political willingness to use the IWT as potentially successful leverage against Pakistan undercuts this limitation. Such political willingness can help accelerate the timeline for new infrastructure construction on the Western rivers – especially by the relevant departments of the Ministries of Power, Water, and the Central Public Works Department. Already on April 25, India's Union Jal Shakti Minister C.R. Patil held a meeting with Union Home Minister Amit Shah and declared that the Ministry was undertaking “short, medium, and long-term plans to ensure that “not a drop of water will go to Pakistan.”

Arguably, India deems this a credible plan to compel Pakistan to course correct on terrorism. Apart from India's willingness to bear the risk of testing Pakistan's freshly reiterated war threshold (and an implicit nuclear redline since stopping the Indus' flow counts as economic strangulation), Pakistan itself needs a viable route out of this crisis.

Ensuring that India releases enough water for Pakistan's agriculture and livelihood is an imperative that has no alternative. This, in turn, means that the military approach might worsen, and not improve, Pakistan's ability to reverse this decision. Moreover, the faster India can impose more *fait accompli* by building new infrastructure, the more the pressure on Pakistan to negotiate with India in good faith, on India's core issue of terrorism, before it can negotiate on its (new) core issue of water-sharing.

Naturally, the Indus Waters Treaty has been a crucial high-stakes arrangement for Pakistan, and it has shown a past tendency to relent on key issues, reinforcing the perception of Pakistan having limited choice except cooperation with India. This was evident when Pakistan eventually joined the Neutral Expert-led process, even as India stayed out of the Court of Arbitration. Now, Indian government sources have confirmed (on May 15) that the Pakistan Water Secretary wrote “a polite letter” to India which protested India's decision to set the IWT in abeyance and deemed it a violation of the treaty's terms. But the letter also asserted that Pakistan is willing to meet and would like to begin the process for arranging the necessary logistics.

Given India's new national security-based reasoning for the IWT, it is likely that whenever New Delhi engages Islamabad in IWT re-negotiations or a new Treaty entirely, it will indicate that Pakistan has “credibly and irreversibly” stopped its support for terrorism against India.

Anything short of this will harm New Delhi's credibility, given its public statements about the yardstick against which the IWT will now be measured.

The International Dimension

India's Missing Friends During Op Sindoor

Mohammad Kunhi

Operation Sindoor, India's military response to the Pakistan-sponsored deadly terrorist attack in Pahalgam that claimed 27 civilian lives on 22 April, has ignited a national reckoning, not only over counterterrorism strategy, but also of the country's understanding of its friends and foes. When India launched a major round of strikes under Operation Sindoor between May 7 and 10, destroying nine terrorist camps and thirteen military installations across Pakistan and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir with force and precision, the country's perceptions of friends who can truly be trusted in moments of crisis, those who are less reliable, and outright friends of its enemies, became far more defined.

The response of Western powers, particularly the United States, to Indian retaliation against Pakistan not only fell short of expectations from friends but also challenged India's long-held positions against third-party involvement in the India-Pakistan conflict. These powers appeared to compromise their declared commitments to counterterrorism, adopting a troubling posture of neutrality that effectively benefited Pakistan.

While the West's stance caused disappointment, it was the support Pakistan received from Turkey and Azerbaijan that truly struck a nerve with Indian public sentiment. This triggered significant backlash, with strong Indian public anger directed at these countries, leading substantial decline in Indian tourist traffic to these destinations.

As India keeps Operation Sindoor in suspension, declaring that there will be no compromise with enemies who target the country through conventional or non-conventional means, the renewed understanding of friendship and enmity is likely to continue shaping Indian public discourse across a wide range of national concerns.

Analysing the global response to Operation Sindoor, this article explores India's newly emerged understanding of alliance, neutrality, and enmity in a world increasingly driven by interests rather than ideals.

The Western response: Expectations and disappointments

The Indian strategic establishment was highly confident about its growing alignment with Western powers, especially with the United States, the UK, and France, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. When India emerged as a major defence partner of some of these countries through a range of defence agreements, many observers expected that India could politically and diplomatically benefit from such a partnership during moments of crisis.

When Operation Sindoor was launched, there was a widely shared expectation in India that the West would support India's right to retaliate against Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism. However, the Western powers not only refused to extend unequivocal support to India's counterterrorism efforts but also urged "restraint", "de-escalation" and "dialogue", categorically dismissing the Indian narrative about Pakistan's involvement in the Pahalgam terror attack.

Responding to the Indian military strikes, US President Donald Trump remarked, "They've gone for tit-for-tat, so hopefully they can stop now", signalling Washington's tacit acceptance of India's right to retaliate. However, this did not amount to an acceptance of the broader Indian stance. Further clarifying the US position, Vice-President JD Vance told Fox News, "What we can do is try to encourage these folks to de-escalate a little bit, but we're not going to get involved in the middle of a war that's fundamentally none of our business and has nothing to do with America's ability to control it."

The British Prime Minister Keir Starmer stated that the UK is engaging "urgently with both countries, as well as other international partners, encouraging dialogue, de-escalation and the protection of civilians". UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy echoed similar concerns, emphasising the seriousness of the situation. Similarly, Spanish Foreign Affairs Minister Jose Manuel Albares held talks with his Indian and Pakistani counterparts, urging restraint amid escalating tensions.

Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide also urged both India and Pakistan to show restraint. He noted that "this is exactly the type of escalation we hoped to avoid". Italy's Deputy Prime Minister Antonio Tajani reached out to the foreign ministers of both India and Pakistan, expressing Italy's willingness to mediate and urging both parties to de-escalate the situation.

The lukewarm response of the West turned into a flashpoint in Indian public discourse, on May 10, when President Trump announced a "full and immediate ceasefire" and expressed his desire to work with India and Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir dispute, challenging the Indian position against third-party involvement in the India-Pakistan conflict.

Trump claimed that he made India and Pakistan agree to a 'ceasefire' by threatening to suspend trade with both of them. However, India dismissed Trump's claim of brokering a ceasefire and rejected his offer to mediate on the Kashmir issue. The Indian government clarified that Operation Sindoor had not concluded and that the temporary pause in military activity was the result of direct negotiations between the armed forces of both countries.

Public dissatisfaction with the West grew further with subsequent developments: reports on the Trump family-backed company's cryptocurrency deal with Pakistan, a USD 1 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to support Pakistan's failing economy, and Islamabad's elevation to the chairmanship of several United Nations Security Council Committees. Together, these developments not only exposed the blunder of Western neutrality but also forced India to reimagine its idea of friendship in international politics.

Friends we can trust now: Israel, France, and Russia

Response from a few countries stood out either due to unequivocal support or through substantive gestures during Operation Sindoor.

Israel emerged as the only country extending unequivocal support to India's retaliatory military action against Pakistan. In a clear and concise message posted on X, Israel's Ambassador to India declared, "Israel supports India's right for self-defence". The statement resonated deeply within Indian strategic circles and public discourse, reaffirming the depth of India's relationship with Israel.

Among the major Western powers, France distinguished itself by acknowledging India's legitimate security concerns while advocating restraint. French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot stated in an interview, "We understand India's desire to protect itself against the scourge of terrorism, but we obviously call on both India and Pakistan to exercise restraint to avoid escalation". Echoing the stand, the French Embassy in India posted on X that "France is deeply concerned about the latest developments between India and Pakistan", while also affirming that "France supports India in its fight against terrorist groups".

India's long-standing strategic partner, Russia, responded with a careful but significant message. While President Vladimir Putin made no personal remarks, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed "deep concern" over the escalation between India and Pakistan, and strongly condemned terrorism in all its forms, calling for global unity in combating the menace. It also urged both sides to exercise restraint to prevent further escalation and expressed hope that the dispute would be resolved through negotiations, guided by the 1972 Shimla Agreement and the 1999 Lahore Declaration.

However, what truly reaffirmed Moscow's strategic alignment with India came days later. In early June 2025, Russia renewed its offer to India for the Su-57E, its fifth-generation fighter jet, with an unprecedented defence proposal. The offer included the setting up of a joint production facility in India, full technology transfer, and complete access to source code. This would allow India to integrate its indigenously developed weapons into the jet, ensuring strategic autonomy and avoiding long-term dependency on foreign military systems. Through these gestures, these countries gained renewed significance in Indian public discourse—as nations that stood by India when it mattered most.

A measured neutrality: The response of Global South

Among India's South Asian neighbours, Nepal expressed concern over the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan. While it did not explicitly express solidarity with India, the statement affirmed that “Nepal stands together with all in the fight against terrorism”, and emphasised that “Nepal shall not allow any inimical forces to use its soil against its neighbouring countries”.

Sri Lanka took a neutral and balanced stance. Cabinet Spokesman Nalinda Jayatissa, in a press briefing, stated, “Our territorial land, waters, and airspace will not be used by one country against another”. He reaffirmed Sri Lanka's commitment to its longstanding policy of ‘non-alignment’ in regional geopolitical disputes.

In Southeast Asia, Singapore expressed concern about the military confrontation between India and Pakistan, and called on “both parties to de-escalate tensions through diplomatic means and ensure the safety of all civilians”. Similarly, Indonesia urged restraint, posting on X, “We urge both parties to exercise restraint and prioritise dialogue in resolving the crisis”.

Malaysia, reiterating Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's call for a thorough investigation into the Pahalgam attack, released a statement urging “both sides to exercise maximum restraint and restore channels of communication”. It also reaffirmed Malaysia's “support for all efforts aimed at de-escalation and meaningful dialogue between India and Pakistan”.

Brazil issued a statement expressing “grave concern” over the “military actions in the Kashmir region, in areas administered by both India and Pakistan”. It urged all parties to exercise restraint to prevent further escalation of tensions.

Countries including Iran, Qatar, the UAE and Egypt issued general calls for restraint and de-escalation, without taking explicit sides in the conflict.

Notably, Saudi Arabia sought a more proactive diplomatic role in de-escalating the tensions in the region. Its Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Abdel Aljuber, visited both India and Pakistan as part of the Kingdom's "efforts to de-escalate tensions, end current military confrontations, and promote the resolution of all disputes through dialogue and diplomatic channels".

In general, most of the Global South adopted a cautious or neutral approach toward India's Operation Sindoor. However, the silence of India's neighbour Bangladesh stood out as an exceptional and conspicuous omission. While these responses did not oppose India, their caution underlined the limits of solidarity when strategic interests collide with moral clarity.

Friends of our enemy: Turkey, Azerbaijan and China

Pakistan shares a deep, historically rooted, "brotherhood" with both Turkey and Azerbaijan. With ties defined by shared Islamic identity and cultural commonalities, both countries have consistently supported Pakistan's stance on the Kashmir dispute. While Turkey is one of the major suppliers of arms to Pakistan, Azerbaijan considers Pakistan a strategic partner. Given these close ties, the responses of Turkey and Azerbaijan to Operation Sindoor carried considerable weight in public discourse.

When India launched its retaliatory military action, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed solidarity with Pakistan. A statement from Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned that India's strikes risked "an all-out war" and condemned what it called "provocative steps" as well as "attacks targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure". Echoing this stance, Azerbaijan also issued a statement expressing solidarity with Pakistan and condemning Indian military strikes on terrorist infrastructure in the region.

During the operation, reports emerged that Turkish cargo planes had delivered military supplies to Pakistan. Although Ankara denied such claims, Pakistan deployed over 400 Turkish-made Asisguard Songar drones to target both civilian and military areas in India. More recently, reports have also indicated that Pakistan is preparing to purchase the ALP-300G air defence system from Turkey.

Extending their support to Pakistan, both Turkey and Azerbaijan became the subject of public debates in India. Many in the country called for a boycott of products from these countries, urged the government to halt trade deals and demanded a ban on travel to these nations as vacation destinations. Media reports suggest that the boycott call led to a significant decline in Indian tourists choosing these countries as their vacation destinations.

While Turkey and Azerbaijan faced Indian backlash for supporting Pakistan, Indian public sentiment against China, the largest supporter of the Pakistan army, remained less intense. In the context of Operation Sindoor, China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian described the Indian military operation as 'regrettable' and urged both sides to act in the larger interest of peace and stability. He emphasised the need for calm and restraint and stated that China is willing to play a role along with the international community in de-escalating the situation.

However, China provided multi-layered and critical support to Pakistan during the operation. Its JF10 fighter jets, PL15 missiles and drones remained core assets in Pakistan's military arsenal. Its real-time battlefield surveillance and intelligence sharing enabled Pakistan to better coordinate both ground and air operations. Additionally, its online ecosystem contributed to Pakistan's narrative-building efforts against India.

Following the military tension reports emerged that China may fast-track its military deliveries, including J-35A stealth fighters, to Pakistan. This deepening military support not only reveals China's strategic intent in the subcontinent but also highlights its role as an ally and supporter of Pakistan's actions against India.

New lessons on friendship and enmity

While asserting India's military resolve, Operation Sindoor not only redefined India's response to sub-conventional attacks but also brought greater clarity to its concept of strategic partners and reliable friends. Contrary to expectations, many so-called partners of India chose ambiguity at a moment when clarity and conviction were most needed. The 'neutral stance' of Western powers was not just diplomatically hollow but politically consequential. Although the new realisations are unlikely to bring a radical transformation in India's defence cooperation and global engagement, public perception in India regarding the friendship of Western powers has undergone a dramatic transformation.

Meanwhile, countries like Israel, France, and Russia demonstrated that friendship with India holds more value than echoing hollow sentiments of neutrality. The open support for Pakistan from Turkey and Azerbaijan clearly underscored that moral values hold little significance in international politics. China's crucial support to Pakistan once again highlighted the depth of strategic challenges India faces in dealing with its two belligerent neighbours. The largely cautious posture of the Global South, though not antagonistic, underscored the strategic limitations of solidarity when confronted with competing geopolitical interests.

As the smoke of Operation Sindoor clears, India emerges with a sharpened understanding: the world is not divided simply between friends and enemies, but between those who offer support when it matters and those who do not. In this new global outlook, trust will no longer be built on diplomatic pleasantries but on proven reliability in times of crisis.

The China Factor in Operation Sindoor: Diplomatic, Military, and Strategic Ramifications Now and Beyond

Ashok K Kantha

The four-day military confrontation between India and Pakistan, from May 7 to May 10, 2025, served as a stark reminder of the complex security landscape in South Asia. While India's calibrated yet assertive use of force drew significant regional and international attention, the role of China in shaping both the prelude and the aftermath of this crisis demands close scrutiny, particularly against the backdrop of the durable China-Pakistan strategic nexus.

This article undertakes such an examination and concludes that India's deterrence dynamics vis-à-vis China and Pakistan have been further complicated. While the traditional notion of India facing a "two-front war" with China and Pakistan launching simultaneous military operations remains less likely, a more imminent challenge has emerged: a "one-front reinforced war", with a conflict with Pakistan inherently involving China.

China's diplomatic and media stance: A calculated narrative

In previous India-Pakistan conflicts as well, China refrained from directly intervening militarily and creating a two-front situation for India.

During the 1965 India-Pakistan war, China extended strong diplomatic support to Pakistan, condemned India's actions as "naked aggression", and accused India of violating the Line of Actual Control (LAC) along the India-China border, particularly in the Sikkim sector. It issued ultimatums, demanding that India dismantle alleged military structures within three days or face "serious consequences," but this threat remained rhetorical and did not materialize into actual combat.

In the 1971 Bangladesh war, China continued to support Pakistan diplomatically, and there were reports of limited Chinese troop movements along the Sino-Indian border, particularly in the eastern sector, but this did not escalate into conflict. China resisted prodding from the US and entreaties from Pakistan, refusing to come to Pakistan's rescue.

During the 1999 Kargil conflict, China adopted a relatively neutral position, a departure from its earlier pro-Pakistan positions in 1965 and 1971. Diplomatically, Beijing called for restraint and dialogue between India and Pakistan, emphasizing respect for the Line of Control (LoC) and avoiding explicitly supporting Pakistan's actions.

This time, too, there were no diversionary activities by China along our northern frontiers, but its stance has evolved and acquired qualitatively different dimensions.

Diplomatically, China's initial response to the Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor reflected a calculated narrative. Chinese state media, such as Xinhua, characterized the April 22 incident as a "shooting incident," frequently downplaying its nature or omitting details entirely. This framing aimed to minimize the severity of the terrorist attack that provoked India's subsequent military actions.

Official statements from China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Guo Jiakun, urged restraint from both India and Pakistan, advocating for a "quick and fair investigation" into the Pahalgam attack, reflecting Pakistan's position. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi engaged in discussions with Pakistani Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, conveying China's "full understanding" of Pakistan's "legitimate security concerns" and offering support in safeguarding its sovereignty and security interests.

During the four-day conflict, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian explicitly stated on May 7 that China found India's military operation "regrettable." China's criticism of India's targeting of terrorist facilities in Pakistan, while maintaining silence on the massacre of Indian civilians, revealed a notable asymmetry in its normative behavior. On May 10, Wang Yi spoke to National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, condemning the terrorist attack in Pahalgam and expressing hope for calm and a lasting ceasefire, while applauding Doval's statement that war was not India's choice. Notably, until Wang Yi's call, India had avoided any political-level contact with China in the context of Pahalgam and Operation Sindoor, unlike with other UNSC members (excepting Pakistan), signaling India's assessment of China's unhelpful stance.

China also backed Pakistan's narrative at the UN, playing a role in tempering the language of the UNSC's statement. In the UNSC, India was able to secure a strong press statement on May 10. Although Pakistan is a non-permanent member and was supported by China, it couldn't dilute the statement, except by excluding the reference to the Resistance Front (TRF). The

statement noted: “The members of the Security Council underlined the need to hold perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of this reprehensible act of terrorism accountable and bring them to justice.”

The underlying narrative in Chinese media portrayed India's retaliatory response as unwarranted. By omitting the context of the terror attack's severity, Chinese reports sought to imply that India's military actions were disproportionate. Some members of China's strategic community went further, suggesting that the Pahalgam terrorist attack was a "false flag operation" orchestrated by Indian security forces.

Indeed, Chinese media and commentators amplified Pakistan's propaganda. This included the propagation of unverified stories regarding Indian aircraft losses and accusations that India was escalating tensions by violating the Indus Waters Treaty. Chinese bloggers and wumao (online commentators) provided extensive support to Pakistan's disinformation and psychological warfare efforts, drawing directly from the Pakistan Army's Inter-Services Public Relations to exaggerate Indian losses and shape Pakistan's narrative. A recurring theme among Chinese experts was the concern that the crisis could escalate into a nuclear conflict, prompting calls for international diplomatic intervention to prevent further escalation.

The military dimension: Chinese-origin weapons in combat

Militarily, the crisis marked a significant turning point towards battlefield collusion between Pakistan and China. For the first time, advanced Chinese-origin systems were visibly employed by Pakistan in a live operational environment, with the Chinese media cheering the alleged success of those platforms in their first-ever encounter with advanced Western weapon platforms in a combat situation. The Pakistan Air Force's use of Chinese J-10C fighter aircraft equipped with PL-15 beyond-visual-range missiles, coupled with Chinese-made HQ-9 air defense systems, showcased a new level of interoperability and capability enhancement. Interoperability has been refined through progressively sophisticated Shaheen series and other joint military exercises over the past 15 years.

Beyond specific hardware, the tactical approaches employed by Pakistan, such as drones, net-centric operations, and potentially more sophisticated cyber warfare efforts, hint at the adoption of a "Chinese military playbook." There is reason to believe that Chinese intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) assets may have provided real-time inputs or situational awareness support during Pakistan's military operations. A Chinese fishing fleet was reportedly used to monitor the India Navy's deployments, while the Pakistan Navy remained confined to its coastal waters.

Likewise, there are credible reports that China's BeiDou Navigation Satellite System was utilized for global positioning services. The PL-15 missile's guidance system crucially includes BeiDou satellite updates, demonstrating a direct and critical integration of China's indigenous satellite navigation system into Pakistan's advanced weaponry.

Our experts have suggested that there was a fusion of not only Chinese-origin platforms but also the Swedish-designed Saab 2000 Erieye airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) system, an arrangement which was reportedly instrumental in bringing down Indian aircraft on May 7.

While the efficacy of Chinese-origin platforms in actual combat remains contested, their value in reinforcing the China-Pakistan defense nexus is undeniable.

Strategically, the crisis highlights the evolution of China's traditional role—from bolstering Pakistan's strategic and conventional capabilities to keep India off balance, to acting as a strategic enabler for Pakistan in an operational scenario involving India.

In recent years, India has considered China as the primary strategic challenge and tended to view Pakistan as a threat that could be handled en passant. However, the reality is that India views Pakistan and China as a potent, combined challenge.

The significant role played by advanced Chinese weapon systems in Pakistan's operations, coupled with reports of real-time ISR inputs, the use of BeiDou satellites, and Chinese advisory roles, indicates a deeper, more layered military involvement. This pattern of battlefield collusion has significantly complicated India's deterrence dynamics. The traditional notion of India facing a "two-front war" with China and Pakistan has evolved into a "one-front reinforced war". This means that a conflict with Pakistan now inherently involves China due to their strong military relationship and significant defense interoperability. Chinese support to Pakistan in its military operations can take many forms, including ISR inputs, targeting data, cyber interference, and live support extended by Chinese Original Equipment Makers (OEMs), with China stopping short of any overt involvement. China is better positioned to sustain prolonged pressure across multiple axes and has the strategic depth to play a long game, testing India's red lines while simultaneously denying direct provocation. This grey-zone technique of enabling Pakistan while avoiding open confrontation allows China to probe India's thresholds.

India has maintained high-level troop deployments and infrastructure build-up along the LAC with China since 2020. The ceasefire along the India-Pakistan LoC and international boundary was restored in February 2021 and largely held, though there was some escalation in violence since late 2023. During Operation Sindoor, there was intense shelling across the LoC, and our borders with Pakistan are now live, which necessitates the diversion of crucial assets,

including troops, air defense units, ISR platforms, and logistical support, towards the western front, or at least a division of these limited resources.

The impact is more worrisome along the northern borders with China. India's conventional deterrence against China relies on maintaining a credible defensive posture along the LAC and the ability to impose costs on any PLA aggression. A two-live-front situation affects this capability by diverting resources and attention. China, with its larger military and defense-industrial base, is better positioned to sustain a long standoff or exploit India's predicament.

Looking ahead, we can expect China to strengthen its military collaboration with Pakistan further and maintain its diplomatic, economic, and strategic support. Now that India has carved out greater space for conventional operations against Pakistan despite the nuclear overhang, we can expect China and Pakistan to work together to prepare for this situation, creating their own “new normal” to deal with India. This adjustment will almost certainly involve China actively helping Pakistan plug any loopholes or weaknesses exposed during the recent hostilities. Pakistan will undoubtedly share data emerging from the 87-hour conflict, and together, the two countries will learn lessons on how to deal with India more effectively in the future. The conflict also served as an invaluable “live-fire demonstration” for China's defense industry, providing critical performance data and validating its capabilities.

Indeed, the government of Pakistan announced on June 6 its intention to buy China's J-35 stealth fighter jets as part of a major arms purchase. The deal would mark China's first export of the fifth-generation jet, which boasts advanced stealth capabilities, and would also include the KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft, as well as the HQ-19 ballistic missile defense system. Pakistan is notably the only country that has received the J-10C fighter jets from China.

There are reports suggesting that China is helping Pakistan develop the sea leg of its nuclear triad to complement its land and air-based capabilities. China is providing the Pakistan Navy with eight Hangor-class submarines, four built in China and four in Pakistan with Chinese technology, under a 2015 deal. These submarines, equipped with air-independent propulsion, are believed to be capable of carrying nuclear-tipped Babur-3 submarine-launched cruise missiles. These missiles are potentially Pakistan's primary sea-based nuclear delivery system, designed to develop a second-strike capability. China is suspected of providing technical assistance in propulsion systems and guidance technology for Babur-3.

US role

Doubts about the reliability of the US as a strategic partner under President Trump further complicate our response. The friction between Washington and New Delhi over their divergent

messaging at the end of the crisis has injected tension into a relationship that has otherwise been on a strong footing for the past several years.

President Trump has repeatedly claimed that the US brokered the ceasefire between India and Pakistan, while India has suggested that the ceasefire was agreed after India's DGMO was approached by the Pakistan counterpart. Trump has also linked ongoing trade talks with India's position on continued military operations and established a false equivalence between India, the victim of terrorism, and Pakistan, the perpetrator of terrorism. Secretary of State Marco Rubio claimed that India and Pakistan had agreed to hold talks in a neutral venue after the ceasefire. Trump's White House lunch meeting with the Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan, Asim Munir, sent negative signals from India's perspective.

Besides, Trump's strategic stance towards China remains unclear beyond trade and tariff issues. Senior US officials like Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth have spoken of the "imminent threat" posed by China, but Trump speaks highly of President Xi Jinping and seeks a "beautiful deal" with China. In talks on trade and tariff issues, the US has repeatedly backed down, while China has taken a relatively firm stand. Given Trump's transactional approach, his disdain for alliances, and his targeting of friends and adversaries alike with enhanced tariffs, concerns have arisen in the Indo-Pacific region about how far the US will fulfill its security commitments to counter China.

Against this backdrop, India needs a pragmatic assessment of the role of external balancing in its deterrence strategy to counter China. A crucial question to address is how to avoid a mismatch of expectations regarding the US role in an India-China conflict and the Indian role in an Indo-Pacific conflict against the backdrop of the US-China rivalry.

India's options

In the expansive "new normal" that PM Modi outlined on May 12, he reiterated India's right to respond militarily to any terror attack and not be deterred by "nuclear blackmail", while adding that India would not differentiate between terrorists and their masterminds or the governments sponsoring terrorism. This addition puts the Pakistani military on notice that the next time, India's kinetic response under an Operation Sindoor 2.0 may not be limited to terrorist targets. The hardening position is evident in his statement, "terror and talks cannot go together; terror and trade cannot go together; water and blood cannot flow together."

By expanding the scope of conventional operations below the nuclear threshold, PM Modi is seeking to nullify the nuclear overhang, but this requires a significant expansion in conventional capabilities. Capabilities to suppress hostile air defenses and adopt a network-centric approach that seamlessly integrates manned and unmanned air systems with satellite-

based support for surveillance, communication, and targeting will need to be introduced. India will need to develop its capabilities to counter China and Pakistan acting in collusion.

Simultaneously, India needs to draw lessons from the intelligence and security lapses that led to Pahalgam to better plan, predict, and prevent future attacks of a similar nature. Only then will the “new normal” be a credible deterrent against terrorist attacks. It is open to question to what extent Operation Sindoor will deter future misadventures by Pakistan, more so given China’s role.

India seeks to avoid external involvement in its relations with Pakistan. There are only two ways of avoiding external intervention: first, increase the economic and military differential with Pakistan, and second, maintain independent communication channels between the two countries. Unfortunately, recent developments have led to re-hyphenation with Pakistan.

We will need to think creatively to address these challenges. Above all, we need to upgrade our economic, military, and technological capabilities. Some of the data here is not very encouraging.

Studies by PRS Legislative Research reveal an inconvenient fact: in recent years, the central government’s expenditure on defense has decreased as a share of its total expenditure, from 17.1% in 2014-15 to 13% in 2025-26 (BE).

India’s R&D spending as a percentage of GDP dropped from 0.81% in 2011-12 to 0.64% in 2023-24, while China increased its R&D spending from 1.7% in 2010 to 2.7% of GDP in 2024. The corresponding figure for the US is 2.7% in 2010 and 3.4% in 2024. Let’s remember, China’s GDP is five times larger than India’s. Thus, India is falling further behind, while Operation Sindoor confirmed that future wars will be more technology-intensive.

Finally, can India avoid raising the altered reality of battlefield collusion between China and Pakistan in its diplomatic dialogue with the former? India should categorically convey to China that the nexus with Pakistan has a serious impact on India’s security environment, and therefore, it would have negative implications for the future course of India-China relations.

Between Words and Weapons: Europe and the India–Pakistan Flashpoint

Devika Makkat

On 22 April, tourists in the Pahalgam region of Kashmir were targeted in a terrorist attack, resulting in the deaths of 25 Indian citizens and one Nepali national. The attackers, reportedly affiliated with a group called The Resistance Front (TRF), specifically targeted Hindus. Coming after years of relative calm in the volatile region, such an attack on tourists — traditionally considered off-limits even by “militant” groups in the Valley due to the impact on local livelihoods — sent shockwaves across the subcontinent. In response, the Indian government conducted targeted strikes on multiple sites within Pakistan and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) that it claimed as terrorist infrastructure. After multiple retaliatory strikes from both sides, the two countries have arrived at a ceasefire.

The diplomatic response from various world actors have come under scrutiny within domestic discussions in India. The European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas put out a series of statements condemning the terrorist attack as well as acknowledging “every state’s” duty and right to “lawfully protect its citizens from acts of terror”. Nonetheless, as tensions mounted in the subcontinent, and an Indian response seemed imminent, the EU’s [statement](#) urged both countries to “exercise restraint, to de-escalate tensions and desist from further attacks.” — remarks that were poorly received in New Delhi. India perceived them as drawing an unfair equivalence between itself — the aggrieved party — and the aggressor. Prominent commentators opined that the statement is likely to undermine the EU’s relations with India, at an “avoidable” time. In a public engagement soon after, EAM Jaishankar stated that India is looking for “partners, not preachers” — a statement widely considered to have been directed at Europe.

Even if in line with precedent, the EU’s position has disappointed New Delhi, considering the years of closer engagement since Balakot in 2019, the last major Ind-Pak conflict. The move has largely been viewed through the lens of reciprocity, a like-for-like response for India’s position on Ukraine.

Europe's stakes

Meanwhile, the European stakes in the issue have finally boiled over into the material realm. The latest conflict was the biggest live, air-to-air kill combat between the aerial forces of two nuclear armed states in recent times. From the active combat performance of key modern equipment, to the working thresholds (and limits) of nuclear deterrence, and the role of non-state actors in inter-state conflict, the world has received a glimpse into a wide array of modern combat realities amidst rising uncertainty in the global order.

Hence, wider global interest has been on the active combat performance of European equipment fielded by India (mostly the French-made Rafales) against Pakistan's Chinese weapons. Unconfirmed reports of a Chinese-made J-10C aircraft equipped with the PL-15 long-range air-to-air missiles shooting down an Indian Rafale have been making the rounds, raising concerns about the performance of Western equipment against China's in fatal combat interaction. Dassault's stocks took a hit, even as China hailed the incident as a "DeepSeek" moment for its defense industry. However, Indian experts have been largely ambivalent about the potential loss of the Rafale, insisting that it doesn't speak to any quality concerns. How India and Pakistan proceed in the near term could signal broader trends in modern warfare.

For Europe, this also expands into a more urgent concern about the kind of advanced capabilities China may be able and willing to provide partners like Russia. The Sino-Russian bilateral increasingly focuses on joint military and defense-industrial collaboration. Europe is not without concerns about the lessons Russia has learnt in Ukraine amidst Western rejoicement about the superiority of its modern equipment over Soviet-era munitions. China could likely balance some of those gaps for Russia.

A renewed PR problem

Beyond the narratives on equipment and the managed back-and-forth of official rhetoric, Europe should be more concerned about the popular Indian perception of Western abandonment in this conflict. Western media coverage and leaders' comments have reinforced the view that the West's historical "affinity" for Pakistan endures, despite recent deepening engagement with — and even reliance on — India. While Pakistan secured clear support from close allies like Turkey and China — who also serve as its key arms suppliers — India didn't generate similar optics. This has reinforced a perception that India's Western partners remain primarily transactional in their approach, interested in India's purse rather than a more meaningful partnership. Despite emerging relatively confident in the military outcomes, the narrative battle played out in Western coverage, and India feels shortchanged — particularly amidst partners with far greater economic and strategic stakes in India than in Pakistan.

Meanwhile Russia, despite saying little, has gained in public perception. Despite a lack of official confirmation regarding both, Russia's S-400 system has been cheered as a reliable and successful addition to India's military arsenal, contrasted with the alleged loss of the much-heralded Rafale. This has strengthened Russia's image as a steady, no-frills partner — free from the perceived hypocrisy and conditionality of Western partnerships. This narrative increasingly defines itself in opposition to Europe (and the U.S.), who are seen as unwilling to back India in a moment of crisis, despite grand declarations about the partnership. The landscape has somewhat reshored existing popular Indian distrust of the West, harking back to easy parallels like the 1971 war and more.

The potency of this sentiment is far from trivial. The Indian government must account for domestic opinion, particularly on an emotionally charged issue like India-Pakistan relations. Public sentiment has already boiled over as the unseemly backlash, however unjustified, against foreign secretary Vikram Misri. Despite projecting strong ties with Western partners over the past decade, the Indian government risks appearing as though it has little to show for it. It is not without risks to the Indian government's incentive structures, both internal and external.

India will now be busy taking stock of the military lessons from the conflict. New Delhi will be undertaking some recalibration of its priorities and partnerships, with Russia, and Israel, likely to assume renewed prominence in the defense realm. The implications of the current, admittedly brief, flashpoint for India-Europe relations will likely only pan out over the long term.

The Geopolitical Context and its Challenges Around Op Sindoor

Sidharth Raimedhi

The Pahalgam terror attack and the need for an Indian response did not take place in a geopolitical vacuum. India needed to take into account geopolitical realities in terms of choosing the means, scale, and accompanying narratives of the response. Clearly, there was a sense in Delhi that the impending military imbroglio could divert India from its larger strategic trajectory that had been so carefully cultivated over the last few years. This pertained to India's rising status as a leading power in a fracturing world. Additionally, the geopolitical lens was also shaped by the template of the Balakot strikes and its associated geopolitical context. Notably, India achieved significant diplomatic support and understanding from the U.S. in February 2019 under Trump's first administration. However, post-Pahalgam, India appeared to face a significantly changed geopolitical context. This is most strongly characterized by the following features—an unwillingness by key players to place blame on Pakistan; the U.S.' hands-off and on-again approach; the active support provided by China and Turkey to Pakistan; and Russia's perceived indifference.

In this context, there are four primary takeaways:

Military support in crisis vs strategic autonomy

The conflict has made India take note of the contrast between itself and Pakistan in terms of benefitting from strategic allies during conflict or crisis. India's non-alignment or strategic autonomy approach had been a key aspect of its rising profile as a great power. India's ability to maintain foreign policy independence, after all, has been a marker of its greatness. However, the conflict has demonstrated that such an approach may have certain short-term (but key) disadvantages as well. Hence, the conflict has shown that India's strengthening partnerships lack a certain amount of military wherewithal compared to Pakistan's more concrete strategic partnerships with Iron brother Turkey and historic ally China. This played out in terms of military logistics and operations as well, given that shared or common platforms and equipment between China and Pakistan allowed a sophisticated degree of network-centric interoperability, and hence a hard to discount kill-chain. India, in comparison, and related to

its pursuit of military diversification as well as strategic autonomy conducted the conflict with a patchwork of systems that were more difficult to integrate with each other. India's dividends from strategic autonomy are abiding and long-term in nature, however they do entail short-term costs.

Narrative and anti-terrorism

India had expected greater understanding from the world, including its partners, based on the view that it had been a victim of a dastardly terror attack by Pakistan-sponsored terrorists. Arguably, India was left dissatisfied by general responses. To a degree, this was a function of external countries offering support and sympathy to India while hesitating to explicitly blame Pakistan in the absence of conclusive proof. However, this disjunct is also a consequence of the broader shift in global norms regarding the prioritization of terrorism. In a world where great power competition has returned with force, global cooperation and solidarity against terrorism has arguably weakened. Given that India's initial series of strikes against Pakistan were much more extensive and decisive than previous cost-imposition kinetic actions (2016 and 2019), it led to an escalatory spiral that appeared dangerous, unprecedented, and out of control in many ways. This naturally amplified fears of a nuclear escalation, which overshadowed concerns about terrorism itself.

Sweet spot disturbed

India's rising geopolitical influence in recent decades has been a function of it inhabiting what is known as a geopolitical sweet spot. This dynamic was shaped by the U.S.' long-term bet on India as a future counter-balancer to China, as well as China's efforts to appeal to Indian sensitivities in order to weaken momentum toward a stronger India-U.S. strategic partnership. However, this sweet spot has been saturated in recent years due to a multiplicity of factors. Primarily, the U.S.' faith in the long-term bet on India has weakened to a degree, and with it China's need to exercise greater caution and restraint vis-à-vis India. President Trump's transactional leverage-based approach to foreign policy runs counter to the traditional U.S. long term view of India. The latter has been replaced by an approach that seeks immediate gains for the U.S. in relations to a India-Pakistan crisis or conflict. This growing dynamic meant that Pakistan was able to lean on both China as well as the U.S. to help achieve specific goals related to the conflict. Pakistan's cultivation of strong ties with Turkey, meanwhile, also allowed it to benefit from a sophisticated arms industry as well as ideological goodwill. Hence, Israel's rare unequivocal support of India's positions was appreciated in Delhi, but it also explains India's recent discomfort in multilateral groupings such as BRICS and SCO.

A more unrestrained China

China has traditionally adopted an approach of largely ‘keeping out’ of conflicts in the sub-continent. This has been the case in almost all India-Pakistan wars, with relatively minor exceptions (such as in 1965). This trend had only strengthened after normalization of ties between India and China after the end of the Cold War, reflecting in China’s greater understanding towards India during the Kargil conflict (much to Pakistan’s dismay). China’s own serious concerns pertaining to terrorism only reinforced this status quo. China’s stance and position during the Balakot strike was also not an obstacle to India. Given that India and China have chosen to achieve a thaw in relations and a movement towards greater restoration of ties and pragmatism, there were reasons to expect China to continue with its ‘restrained’ approach. However, Chinese statements of intent, warning, and support to Pakistan were notable. Their impact on India’s decision-making is yet unknown, but future historians will certainly choose to examine the same. Did anticipation of possible Chinese entry (through diversion) reinforce the need for de-escalation?

China did not undertake any form of preparedness or mobilization at the LAC that could have put India off-balance. However, China’s active support provided to Pakistan during the conflict—in terms of satellite data feeds and possibly urgent deliveries of supplies—marked the crossing of a new threshold in the India-Pakistan-China trilateral. Content with the PAF’s performance in the conflict, China is likely to increase its levels of support to Pakistan in future crises—with recent reports of expedited arms deliveries only strongly indicating the same. If anything, this aspect is arguably the strongest geopolitical repercussion of the conflict.

Op Sindoor and its aftermath has served as a wakeup call to India in many senses. It has reinforced India’s quest for strategic and defense self-reliance and alerted India to Pakistan’s stealthy building of transactional ties with major powers over the years. Pakistan’s niche abilities in air warfare have also left a mark on India’s military assessments. Similar to Balakot 2019, both India and Pakistan have declared, and projected victory, towards their domestic audiences—thereby reinforcing deterrence instability. There is a lurking sense that both sides see the conflict as unfinished, reinforced by the fact that India has also not officially called off Op Sindoor. The anticipation of a future conflict with Pakistan, especially given the new terror doctrine, complicates India’s long-term plans for military preparedness vis-à-vis China—the real existential threat. India’s growing need to balance short-term regional threats (Pakistan, and possibly Bangladesh) along with preparations for long-term competition will mark India’s new geopolitical zeitgeist.

Bilateral Implications of the Crisis

Why Water Will Dominate India-Pakistan Conversations Going Forward

Happymon Jacob

As the dust settles after the military standoff between India Pakistan in May this year, what is emerging is that the India's decision to keep the Indus Waters Treaty will dominate the India-Pakistan conversations in the months and years to come. Kashmir is an emotional and political issue for Pakistan, but water is a life and death issue, senior members of the Pakistani strategic community candidly admit.

While the India-Pakistan ceasefire, agreed through the director general of military operations (DGMO) channels and reportedly brokered by the US, on May 10 ended the rapidly escalating military hostilities between the two sides, India-Pakistan relations may have changed in fundamental ways between the Pahalgam attack on April 22 and the ceasefire on the May 10. And it will take a great deal of diplomacy for the two sides to go back to where they were on the day of the terror attack (i.e., the minimal relations), let alone going back to normalcy and dialogue. But most importantly, Pahalgam and after has fundamentally transformed the terms of engagement between the two sides, and to India's advantage.

Let's quickly recall how things stood between India and Pakistan on the day of the attack. Despite unresolved tensions, functional mechanisms were in place: A stable ceasefire, adherence to the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), several functional confidence building measures (CBMs), and an open Wagah-Attari border with limited travel. Senior diplomatic officials (minus high commissioners) were present in respective capitals, and there were expectations that some form of discussions on Kashmir would be plausible someday. On April 23, a day after the attack took place, New Delhi announced that it was putting the IWT in abeyance, closing the Attari-Wagah border, and cancelling the posts of defence attaches, among other such measures. The ceasefire between the nuclear-armed neighbours eventually broke down, and Pakistan threatened to suspend the Simla agreement of 1972.

The hostilities have since ended, and a ceasefire is in place. But what exactly does this ceasefire do, and what is it that it doesn't? The ceasefire agreed upon on May 10 is a technical agreement between the two DGsMO to end military attacks against each other that includes firing and shelling on the Line of Control (LoC), use of drones, missiles and other long-range weapons against each other, and so on. What the ceasefire does not entail is more important to the argument I am making here. The ceasefire agreement of May 10 doesn't undo the measures India took on April 23 or Pakistan thereafter. The ceasefire is a technical instrument, not a political one — DGsMO are not authorised to enter into political agreements. That is for the respective foreign offices to do, which they have not done. Put differently, the status quo ante bellum between India and Pakistan as on April 22 has not been reinstated. And, as a result, there is a new status quo between India and Pakistan today.

This means that the IWT will continue to be in abeyance, with India dealing with the river waters as it pleases, unwilling to share hydrological data with Pakistan, thereby triggering long-term implications for Pakistan's economy and domestic politics. More crucially, the suspension of the IWT has the potential to fundamentally transform the structure of India-Pakistan diplomacy going forward. In announcing the suspension of the IWT, India stated that the treaty would not be reinstated unless Pakistan "credibly and irreversibly" ceases support for cross-border terrorism against India. This can, of course, be changed either by India unilaterally undoing the suspension of the treaty or doing so after negotiations with Pakistan. But the ceasefire agreement of May 10 doesn't cover this.

In that sense, for New Delhi, the revival of the IWT will now be a major bargaining chip with Pakistan. Simply put, if Pakistan wants water from the Indus basin rivers, it will have to concede to India's demands on terrorism. While Kashmir is an emotive issue for Pakistan, water is one of life and death — literally and figuratively -- for the people of Pakistan. So, while Pakistan may continue to harp on the Kashmir question going forward, their real objective would be to get India to reverse its decision on the IWT, with the latter becoming far more substantive than the former. Therefore, going forward, the IWT is bound to replace Kashmir as the key point of conversation between the two sides. Let me rephrase that: With the singular act of suspending the IWT, New Delhi may have replaced Kashmir with water as the central issue in India-Pakistan relations, thereby changing the terms of their bilateral engagement.

Delhi did something similar in the Simla agreement of 1972 signed after the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war. After the war ended, it refused to accept the territorial status quo ante bellum (unlike after the 1965 war) thereby changing the name of the border in Kashmir from ceasefire line to line of control (LoC). In doing so, India refused to entertain third party mediation in Kashmir and has since ignored the presence of the UN observers in Jammu and Kashmir for, in the Indian argument, the job of the UN observers was to monitor the ceasefire line in Kashmir that had ceased to exist.

Therefore, while the Pahalgam attack and the aftermath may have brought some international attention to the Kashmir issue which Pakistan was keen on, India may have deftly removed Kashmir from the negotiating table as Pakistan will now be forced to focus on the IWT instead of Kashmir. Pakistan needs water and India wants an end to terrorism. So, the new terms of engagement for bilateral conversations would be Pakistan ending terrorism for the Indian provision of water, instead of India agreeing to have a dialogue on Kashmir for Pakistan agreeing to end terrorism.

The 'life and death' consequences of keeping the IWT in abeyance will materialize as India constructs infrastructure in J&K to control water flows into Pakistan. While Islamabad has a brief window before India takes those irreversible steps, delaying discussions only diminishes Pakistan's ability to alter India's actions and safeguard its water supply. So we must expect Pakistan to bring up this issue sooner than later.

Role of the DGMOs Hotline in India-Pakistan Crises

Lt Gen Paramjit Singh

On May 10, 2025, as tensions between India and Pakistan reached a dangerous crescendo threatening to spiral into full-scale conventional warfare, a single telephone call changed the trajectory of South Asian security. At 15:35 hours, Pakistan's Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) initiated contact with his Indian counterpart, setting in motion a communication that would halt military operations across land, air, and sea by 17:00 hours the same day. This pivotal moment underscores both the critical importance and inherent limitations of existing crisis management mechanisms between two nuclear-armed adversaries.

The announcement by India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri came as a welcome surprise to a world watching the fourth day of escalating hostilities with growing alarm. The agreement to cease operations, with both DGsMO scheduled to review the situation on May 12 at 12:00 hours, demonstrated the enduring value of direct military-to-military communication channels even in the most heated moments of conflict. Yet this incident also revealed the precarious nature of peace in the subcontinent, where a single hotline serves as the primary bulwark against catastrophic escalation.

The architecture of military communication: A proven but limited framework

The May 10 ceasefire was not an anomaly but rather the latest successful deployment of a well-established, multi-tiered communication mechanism that has evolved to manage the complex security relationship between India and Pakistan. This framework operates on multiple levels, ranging from local commanders addressing routine border incidents to DGMO-level interventions for matters that threaten broader stability.

At the grassroots level, local military commanders regularly communicate through established hotlines and flag meetings to resolve issues ranging from inadvertent border crossings by shepherds and cattle to more serious concerns involving unauthorized military presence or

terrorist activities. These mechanisms handle the daily friction points along the Line of Control, preventing minor incidents from escalating into major confrontations.

However, when situations develop the potential for significant escalation, as occurred in the lead-up to May 10, the matter ascends to the DGMO level, where senior military leadership can engage directly to find solutions. This system has proven its worth on multiple occasions, most notably during the February 2021 understanding between the two DGsMO that brought sustained calm to the border until the Pahalgam attack on April 22, 2025, once again shattered the peace.

The durability of this communication framework reflects its practical design and the mutual recognition by both militaries of its essential role in conflict management. Unlike diplomatic channels that can become entangled in political posturing, military-to-military communication often maintains a professional focus on operational realities and immediate security concerns. The fact that these channels remained open and effective even during the intense four-day standoff of May 2025 speaks to their institutional strength and the professionalism of the officers involved.

Yet the May 10 communication also highlighted the limitations of relying primarily on military channels for crisis management. The conflict had evolved beyond traditional border skirmishes to encompass operations across multiple domains and geographical areas, raising questions about whether existing mechanisms are adequate for managing increasingly complex scenarios.

Op Sindoor: A new paradigm of retaliation and its implications

The May 2025 crisis marked a qualitative shift in the dynamics of the India-Pakistan conflict, exemplified by the scope and strategic objectives of Operation Sindoor. Unlike previous engagements confined to border areas, this operation demonstrated India's willingness to strike deep into Pakistani territory, targeting nine terrorist headquarters and training facilities across Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir and mainland Pakistan, including Punjab province.

The operation's characteristics—its scope, magnitude, weapon systems employed, and target selection—suggested a level of retaliation that arguably exceeded the traditional purview of the DGMO, whose primary responsibility centers on Indian Army operations. This evolution reflects India's declared strategy of increasing the cost of Pakistan's state-sponsored proxy war beyond bearable thresholds, fundamentally altering the escalation calculus that has governed subcontinental conflicts for decades.

India's strategic communication following Operation Sindoor was equally significant. Through coordinated briefings by the Ministries of External Affairs and Defence, India clearly articulated its limited objectives while simultaneously warning of proportionate responses to any Pakistani escalation. This measured approach demonstrated sophisticated crisis management, combining decisive military action with diplomatic signaling to prevent uncontrolled escalation.

Pakistan's response, however, revealed the persistent challenges in managing conflicts with a state that continues to view terrorism as a legitimate policy instrument. By escalating through attacks on both civil and military targets, Pakistan brought the confrontation to the brink of conventional war, demonstrating how quickly situations can deteriorate despite initial restraint by one party.

The success of the May 10 communication in halting this escalation should not obscure the underlying structural problem: Pakistan's continued reliance on state-sponsored terrorism ensures that future crises are virtually inevitable. With India's declared intention to respond more forcefully to future terrorist attacks than it did during Operation Sindoor, the region faces an escalating cycle that existing communication mechanisms may struggle to contain.

Strengthening crisis management: Recommendations for enhanced stability

The May 2025 crisis offers valuable lessons for strengthening crisis management mechanisms between India and Pakistan. While the DGMO-level communication successfully prevented war, the episode highlighted several areas that require urgent attention to enhance stability and reduce the risk of catastrophic escalation.

First, the sanctity and confidentiality of military-to-military communication channels must be preserved and protected. These conversations provide crucial space for military leadership to step back from escalation without public loss of face. The effectiveness of such channels depends on maintaining their professional character and ensuring that both parties refrain from making irresponsible public statements or engaging in media rhetoric that could undermine future communications.

However, accountability mechanisms require significant enhancement. The February 2021 ceasefire understanding, despite simultaneous press releases from both DGsMO, failed to specify public conditions for maintaining the ceasefire. This ambiguity allowed Pakistan to avoid accountability while providing room for interpretation that ultimately facilitated the breaking of commitments. Future agreements should include joint statements or simultaneous press releases signed by both DGsMO, clearly articulating the agreed-upon conditions and establishing public accountability frameworks.

The current crisis management architecture, while functional, appears inadequate for the evolving nature of India-Pakistan conflicts. Drawing from successful models like the India-China special representative mechanism—where National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and China's Wang Yi maintain dedicated communication channels alongside established military hotlines—India and Pakistan should consider appointing special representatives with dedicated crisis management mandates.

Such a system would provide multiple layers of communication, ensuring that various types of crises can be addressed through appropriate channels. While military-to-military communication excels at operational issues, political-level dialogue may be better suited for addressing underlying policy disagreements that fuel recurring crises.

The May 10, 2025, communication that prevented war stands as both a testament to the value of existing crisis management mechanisms and a warning about their limitations. As India and Pakistan navigate an increasingly complex security environment characterized by expanding military capabilities and persistent underlying conflicts, strengthening these mechanisms becomes not just advisable but essential for regional and global stability. The hotline that prevented war in May 2025 may not be sufficient to prevent the next crisis from escalating beyond control.

Maritime Lessons of Op Sindoor: A Perspective Based on the Principles of War

VAdm Anil K Chawla

The three-day conflict under the ongoing Operation Sindoor, which occurred from 7-10 May 2025, may have been brief but has revealed several important lessons that need to be imbibed and acted upon expeditiously. The war against Pakistan-sponsored terror is far from over. This analysis uses the immutable principles of war as a framework to either derive new lessons or validate existing ones, with a particular focus on the maritime sphere.

Selection and maintenance of the aim

‘Selection and maintenance of the aim (objective) is the ‘master principle of war’ as it enables unity of effort and purpose. However, prior to deciding the objective, the ‘desired end state’ (DES) needs to be determined—i.e., the political, military, economic, social, or other conditions the political leadership seeks at the end of hostilities. From this, the military leadership derives the military-strategic DES, which in turn informs theatre-strategic, operational and tactical objectives.

In Op Sindoor, the national-strategic DES was clear: dissuade Pakistan from sponsoring terror groups and their attacks inside India. The initial military action planned in execution of this end state, and stated clearly by the Government of India, was to attack terror camps and terrorists inside Pakistan—not the Pakistani state or its people. Additional dissuasion measures included suspending the Indus Waters Treaty, complete severing of economic links and people-to-people exchanges, and further down-grading diplomatic relations.

“It is crucial to consider the adversary’s likely desired end state—in this case, escalating the conflict to provoke international mediation under the pretext of nuclear threat, with the goal of reviving global attention on Kashmir. While this does not alter our own DES, it is vital for planning military operations, especially regarding the potential escalation ladder.”

Offensive action

Any future conflict with Pakistan is likely to be intense but short, given Pakistan's propensity to invoke the nuclear threat to draw international intervention. Therefore, early gains are critical, and the next principle of war, 'offensive action', attains greater salience. Winning a war requires bold action to obtain a decisive advantage. Without proactively creating and exploiting opportunities the best that can be achieved is maintenance of the status quo.

It is also a truism of warfare that an attacking force will almost always suffer greater losses than the defending side, which could provide the weaker power a chance to claim a notional victory in a brief conflict. The Armed Forces must be mindful of this in future operations. In the maritime sphere this may necessitate reprioritizing objectives—with longer-term aims (such as sea control or blockades) being subordinated by rapid offensive actions against enemy forces. Achieving this will not be easy as smaller navies will always seek shelter in a 'fortress' which will need to be breached. This will require appropriate weapon systems, training, deep tactical and technical knowledge of one's own and adversary weapon systems and tactics, and insight into the adversary's mindset.

Security

The principle of 'security' includes protecting your own forces and information, and also the availability of adequate intelligence about every aspect of the adversary. In the maritime sphere, maritime domain awareness (MDA) is the starting point. The Indian Navy (IN) has invested heavily in this capability over the past two decades and should maintain an accurate picture of the maritime order of battle in the likely area of operations—the North Arabian Sea.

While this might be of comfort to operational commanders at sea, it needs to be kept in mind that a high level of domain awareness would also be made available to the Pakistan Navy (PN) through Chinese surveillance and intelligence assets to enable specific sea denial operations, which is the PN's maritime strategy. This possibility warrants even more investment in MDA to enable a near real-time picture of the area of operations, with satellites and drones being the preferred platforms.

Surprise

The principle of 'surprise' is important as it can demoralize the enemy and create decisive opportunities, though achieving it is very difficult in the modern era of transparency and interconnectedness. The limited Indo-Pak theatre of war further increases predictability. Yet, lack of surprise is generally a recipe for failure. While the physical element of surprise may be

difficult to achieve, surprise in ‘intent’ is possible, and something that needs to be thought about deeply. Likewise, the adversary’s own capacity for inventive intent must be anticipated to avoid being caught off-guard.’

Unity of command and Jointness

‘Unity of command’ is vital for coordinated and efficient operations. This has seen major improvement at the military-strategic level with the creation of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) but remains a ‘work in progress’ at the theatre-operational level.

Jointness also ensures better ‘concentration of force’, ‘economy of effort’, ‘flexibility’ and ‘maneuverability’—four other important principles of warfare. The principle of ‘concentration of force’ implies concentration and coordination of effort in space and time. This requires the prioritization of resources and sequencing of their deployment and usage to achieve the maximum effort against the adversary, essentially matching weakness with strength. No individual service will ever have all the resources they wish for, and combining their individual resources will make ‘the whole greater than the sum of its parts’. As an example, Operation Sindoor demonstrated high levels of synergy in air defense, which can be enhanced with the creation of the long-proposed Integrated Air Defence Command (IADC). In the maritime theatre, the creation of an Integrated Maritime Theatre Command (IMTC) also brooks no further delay.

Sustainability

‘Sustainability’ encompasses the adequacy of logistics support. It includes the entire range of materiel, ordnance, and other support necessary for an armed force to sustain its warfighting effort. This is an especially critical consideration for navies; while duration of actual hostilities may be short, navies remain at sea for considerable periods before and after conflict. It needs to be borne in mind that land and air systems and machinery are not required to be run day and night. Navies can also not ‘live off the land’ and maintenance and rearming facilities require to be integral to a fleet. This is a key consideration that is not new, but needs to be reiterated, and chinks, if any, ironed out earliest.

Communications and information warfare

‘Swift, reliable, secure and redundant communication’ has always been a fundamental requirement for effectiveness in battle. Today, ‘communication’ also implies seamless connectivity between weapons and sensors of different origins to enhance their effectiveness and enable armed forces to fight as a ‘joint system’. This issue acquires great urgency today due

to the ever-faster incorporation of new technologies in weapon systems, and the debut of unmanned craft.

The information and communication technology (ICT) revolution has also made Information Warfare (IW) an all-pervasive aspect of modern warfare, with adversaries such as China clearly professing and practicing the need to obtain ‘information dominance’ over an adversary. IW—especially its employment to impact human cognition—is directly related to the principle of ‘maintenance of morale’. In Op Sindoor, considerable time was spent on combating disinformation, which can erode morale, both within the forces and among the civilian population, and damage international perceptions. IW must therefore be a major focus before, during, and long after any conflict.

Maritime forces have unique attributes of flexibility, mobility, and endurance. Coercion is also a specialty of maritime forces as witnessed during Operation Sindoor. This operation has yielded several lessons that need to be incorporated into maritime strategy vis-à-vis Pakistan, as in the next round the IN’s role may not be restricted to coercion. However, the option to escalate to the maritime domain must be a calibrated move, with changes in the strategic environment and weapons technology being used to modify the escalation ladder as required.

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

Ajay Bisaria

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.

Op 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 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.

Op Sindoor and the Evolution of International Law

Bashir Ali Abbas

Countermeasures and restraint: India's conduct in Op Sindoor is a rare victory for international law

The April-May 2025 military confrontation between India and Pakistan, triggered by the Pahalgam terror attack, represents a significant development in international law, particularly regarding state responsibility for internationally wrongful acts. India's treatment of 'terrorism' as an act of war, its calibrated military cross-border response against Pakistan against terror targets, and its cessation of hostilities after it deemed its response over (with any escalation being made contingent on Pakistani action) – collectively advances the norm of self-defence against terrorism. But more specifically, it illustrates a rare instance of a state credibly upholding other international norms in its response to terrorism, without excesses against another state's (Pakistan's) sovereignty.

Sovereignty vs state responsibility

The sovereignty of every state is inviolable. However, the concept of sovereignty has evolved to include responsibility for violations of the existing norms of international law, or "internationally wrongful acts". A distillation of the views of all United Nations member states on the responsibility of states for internationally wrongful acts was adopted by the UN General Assembly in its 53rd session in 2001. These Articles on State Responsibility (ARSIWA) – which India has long supported – open with the assertion that every internationally wrongful act by a state entails the responsibility of that state (Article 1).

India's single most significant allegation against Pakistan is its support and sponsorship of anti-India terrorist groups, especially since the 1990s following the beginning of the Kashmir insurgency. Both before and parallel to this, and until their last semi-conventional war in Kargil, 1999, Pakistan also relied on groups of 'raiders' mixed with Pakistan Army regulars to trigger at least three wars with India. New Delhi's assertions of Pakistan's support to terror groups, has United Nations sanction, at least since UN Security Council adopted Resolution

1267 (1999) in which it designated several Pakistan-based anti-India terror groups, including the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). This has been reiterated and strengthened by subsequent resolutions. Terror attacks by these groups (as well as their direct proxies) have been a recurrent feature of Pakistan's policy to pressure India's position on the Kashmir dispute. These attacks have ranged from mass casualty civilian bombings and shootings to attacks on the Indian Parliament, State Assemblies, and military installations and bases.

The latest attack in Pahalgam was a targeted attack against Hindu tourists from several parts of India, by a proxy force of the LeT – The Resistance Front. Already by hosting these groups Pakistan has consistently breached an old customary norm of international law – famously reasserted by the International Court of Justice in Nicaragua v. United States (1986) – an obligation to not let its territory to be used in a manner that infringes upon the rights of other states (here: India's).

Hence, even without Pakistan actively sponsoring terror groups, its passive facilitation of their activities would amount to an internationally wrongful act. But Pakistan also actively funds and directs the activities of these groups either in whole or in part. International jurisprudence is divided over whether a state should have 'overall' control (Nicaragua v USA, ICJ) or 'effective' control (Prosecutor v Duško Tadić, ICTY) over a group to garner responsibility. However, Pakistan's actions attract such responsibility in both the letter and spirit of Article 8 of the ARSIWA, which considers the conduct of groups as acts of the state which instructs, directs, or controls such conduct. The consistency of such attacks in India across two decades also amounts to Pakistan's wrongful act being continually conducted in breach of its obligation for cessation and non-repetition of such acts (Article 30).

The use of force

As the state that has consistently suffered the consequences of the wrongful acts for which the Pakistani state is responsible, India has a raft of rights and duties drawn from both customary and conventional principles in international law.

The most obvious among these is the supersession of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prevents using force, with Article 51, which enables states to respond to an "armed attack". Despite the strict thresholds that an act has to meet to qualify as an "armed attack" as well as the fact that the global practice of invoking Article 51 against terrorists is still new (relative to other historic principles of inter-state conduct), India's case is relatively unique. Unlike globalized traditional jihadist groups or armed non-state actors in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, or Palestine (where these groups share in government and have some degree of autonomy) India-

focused groups such as JeM and LeT draw succor and support from the Pakistani security establishment and are actively used by the state as instruments of policy. This also makes India's case distinct from the United States' traditional (and globally unrecognized) basis for the use of force against a state which is "unable or unwilling" to act against such groups. Here, the Pakistani state actively co-opts these groups as part of a deliberate strategy of sub-conventional war and has also historically helped key individuals from these terror groups find new sanctuaries from international action through diplomatic, political, and security cover – a unique mix.

Therefore, apart from India retroactively considering acts of terror as acts of war (and hence legitimizing a counterattack), New Delhi also benefits from the ARSIWA's provisions on 'countermeasures'.

First, such measures should be taken "as far as possible" in such a way as "to permit the resumption of performance" (by Pakistan) of the obligations it has breached (Article 49). In the last two decades, India has attempted to cooperate several times with Pakistan to demand fulfillment of Islamabad's international obligations by eliminating terror groups on its soil. The Composite Dialogue process itself was scuttled, among other things, by a mass casualty terror attack in Mumbai in 2008, reflecting Pakistan's strong inclination to continue its wrongful acts.

Second, countermeasures must be both necessary and proportional, i.e., commensurate with the injury suffered, "taking into account the gravity of the internationally wrongful act" (Article 51, ARSIWA). India began taking such countermeasures in 2016, with the latest in May 2025 (Op Sindoor). India's strikes in Op Sindoor on May 7 were "focused, measured and non-escalatory", conducted within 30 minutes and against terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan, commensurate with the attacks conducted by these groups in India. Moreover, by explicitly asserting that Pakistani military facilities were not targeted, India's actions also stayed clear of being a 'reprisal' or a disproportional act of vengeance. India's response to each round of Pakistani escalation on the nights of May 8 and 9 was similarly proportional, conducted on the heels of Pakistan's attacks, which Islamabad justified as responses to violations of its sovereignty.

Crucially, however, India's countermeasures and its conduct cannot be considered internationally wrongful acts themselves. International sanction for such actions has evolved through decades of state practice, with the ARSIWA codifying it in Article 22 – it asserts that the wrongfulness of such actions is precluded if it qualifies as a countermeasure. Essentially, then, it is not the case that India's use of force does not violate Pakistan's sovereignty or stays clear of Article 2(4) of the Charter. Rather, within a strict scope and scale, India's actions are justified violations of Pakistani sovereignty and exceptions to Article 2(4), since they are legal countermeasures to Pakistan's continuing wrongful acts.

Moreover, India has consistently worked within the UN's larger legal framework. While it kept the members of the UNSC apprised of its intent and right to self-defense (as also implicitly required by Article 51 of the Charter) before/during/after May 7 through bilateral communications, India has also spent years presenting evidence against Pakistan to the UN. This includes providing intelligence about The Resistance Front's links to Pakistan-based groups to the 1267 Sanctions Committee.

India's contribution to an evolving norm

The United Nations Charter was formally adopted decades before terrorism became a global threat. In line with both the need to evolve the global understanding of the Charter's provisions – specifically on self-defense – and the growing intensity of terrorist conduct (such as in 9/11), the UN Security Council concluded at least a quarter century ago that a state's inherent right to self defence can be invoked against acts of terrorism. Both UNSCR 1368 and 1373 reaffirmed this, while also categorizing the 9/11 attacks as a “threat to international peace and security” (with a rare invocation of Chapter VII of the UN Charter). Drawing from Article 25 of the Charter and subsequent ICJ jurisprudence, such UNSC Resolutions form a part of the extant norms of international law (*lex lata*) and are legally binding on states.

India's actions then are an advancement of the reasoning in these resolutions, but without the excesses of force conducted by other states in their actions against terror groups. Unlike the coalitions led by the United States after 9/11 or Israel's actions after Hamas' October 7th terror attacks, the Indian action was necessary and proportionate, against nine terror targets in Pakistan. India also communicated the cessation of its operations to Pakistan, while also asserting its right to respond if Pakistan escalates proportionately.

Given Pakistan's targeting of Indian military infrastructure, India calibrated its escalation, first against Pakistan's air defence sites, followed by its airbases. Throughout its countermeasures, India restricted itself to proportional terrorist (May 7) and military (May 8, 9) targets. Essentially, in all three times that India has exercised its right to countermeasures since 2016, its actions have been strictly proportionate. Unlike both American actions in Afghanistan and Iraq which have included unjustified excesses and recognized breaches of international law, as well as Israeli actions in Gaza for which the International Court of Justice is investigating the charge of genocide, the Indian military action is a rare and unique application of international law which significantly involved the element of restraint (and effectively respect for Pakistan's sovereignty). Such restraint is crucial to ascribing legal intent to a state's actions (opinio juris) since India was cognizant of its international legal responsibilities. Combined with its practice, Op Sindoor, as well as India's past cross-border action, is a distinct and laudable advancement of state practice that further contributes to the evolving custom of self-defense against terror

groups in another state. Within such framing, any future terror attack in India actively sponsored or passively enabled by Pakistan allows India to continue its countermeasures.

Essentially, should India's response uphold the same characteristics as May 2025, it will be among the few states to uphold and further the norm of proportionate self-defense against terror groups in another state, without excesses against that state's sovereignty, with sincerity and diligence. Each such action flows from Pakistan's responsibility for acts that are legally recognized as internationally wrongful.

Beyond the Battlefield: Pakistan's Strategic Reckoning in the Wake of Op Sindoor

Hely Desai

The four-day confrontation post the Pahalgam terror attacks—branded by India as Operation Sindoor and Operation Bunyan al-Marsoos on the Pakistani end—paused under what was officially described as a 'temporary suspension of hostilities'. Amid discrepancies and conflicting accounts over assets lost and targets hit, both sides were quick to claim victory, with nationalistic public and media rhetoric competing to frame the conflict in terms of the material damage inflicted on the adversary. The high-intensity exchange, marked by missile strikes, drone incursions, and aerial skirmishes, played out across multiple domains: from traditional military engagements to narrative warfare and digital propaganda. For both countries, the confrontation offered more than just tactical data points; it became a stress test of strategic posture, economic preparedness, and information control, with either side maneuvering to impose escalation costs that would make further response prohibitively risky for the other.

A post-conflict reckoning for Pakistan: Key takeaways

With both India and Pakistan now engaged in post-conflict assessment, the urgency of drawing coherent and actionable takeaways has become more pronounced for Islamabad. Confronted with structural economic fragility, internal political volatility, and overreliance on external defence partners, its post-conflict reckoning may not be merely strategic; it calls for a broader reassessment of its national priorities. Domestically, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has continued to downplay the risk of further escalation, citing the "Trump factor" and India's economic stakes as natural deterrents for New Delhi. This posture, however, may conceal a more sobering internal calculus. Pakistan must now prepare for a future shaped by sustained, multidimensional pressure.

Militarily, the conflict has reaffirmed Pakistan's confidence in Chinese defence platforms and underscored Beijing's centrality as a 'friend for all seasons'. The conflict has triggered calls for

selective yet urgent modernization, especially in integrated air defense, and for accelerating the acquisition of fifth-generation aircraft. The focus now may not be on expansive rearmament, but on prioritized upgrades tailored for multi-domain threats. Pakistan aims to assert a revised strategic baseline while shifting the burden of escalation onto India. Its approach remains grounded in constraining India's freedom to operate in the conventional domain and in raising the costs associated with New Delhi's strategy of incremental pressure, which seeks to systematically weaken Pakistan's capabilities.

Economically, the war reinforced a familiar yet unavoidable truth: a credible defense posture is unsustainable without structural economic reform. The need to reduce reliance on external debt, widen the tax base, and align defence spending with national capacity has also gained renewed urgency.

Officially, Islamabad has cast its response as measured and deliberate, a calibrated counterstrike that stayed within escalation thresholds while still imposing costs on India. The intended message, both domestically and internationally, is that Pakistan demonstrated strength through restraint: a rational actor that maintained regional stability while defending its sovereignty. This portrayal is not just about shaping public perception at home; it is also central to securing diplomatic backing abroad. As part of this effort at the Shangri La Dialogue, the Pakistani Director-General of Military Operations (DGMO) publicly called for a shift from conflict management to conflict resolution, what prima facie appeared to be a performative appeal, aimed less at genuine transformation and more at reinforcing Pakistan's image as the responsible, non-aggressive party. This narrative aims to attract external partners by portraying Pakistan as committed to de-escalation, even as it continues to manage tensions on its own terms.

Battle of narratives

A consequential theatre of this conflict also included a non-kinetic aspect. As Pakistan's deployment of Chinese-origin aerial equipment demonstrated narrowing performance differentials with India and posed credible challenges, reflecting a notable shift, there remained little indication of disparity in tactical effectiveness. The challenge for both sides, hence, lay as much in claiming the narrative as in translating these experiences into coherent introspective lessons for military preparedness, strategic posture, and domestic resilience.

The engagement through air power and ordnance was therefore accompanied by a parallel effort in shaping perception, managing public morale, and asserting legitimacy. However, compounding this effort for India was the military's silence on its own asset losses, which Pakistan leveraged to fuel speculation and amplify narratives of official opacity, creating space for its own, often also unverifiable, counterclaims to circulate unchallenged.

Additionally, in a departure from previous encounters, where Pakistan defaulted to outright denial of Indian strikes, this time, New Delhi furnished satellite imagery, strike coordinates, and visual documentation to substantiate its claims. Pakistan, in response through a series of media pressers, relied on a patchwork of unverifiable satellite grabs, which many widely dismissed as doctored, along with WhatsApp audio clips and screenshots purporting Indian involvement in the Baloch insurgency. It also denied any connection to the Pahalgam terror attack and has routinely rejected the existence of militant camps that Indian strikes claimed to target.

Unpacking Pakistan's evolving playbook: Balancing perceptions and denials

However, this post-conflict behaviour of Pakistan—characterized by denial, deflection, and curated press briefings—may not merely be about propaganda. Rather, it appears to reflect a broader strategic approach, where narrative framing is also used as a tool to manage internal pressures, pre-empt external perceptions, and convey a sense of stability. These efforts seem to be driven by three overlapping imperatives.

1. Reversing the Optics: Capitalizing on India's Internal Dissent

Pakistan appears to have adopted a page from India's post-2016 playbook, utilizing information operations to shape the perception battle. If India's success has been in spotlighting Pakistan's support for cross-border militancy, Islamabad's response has been to flip the script: position itself as the rational, tolerant actor, and project India as the destabilizing force, internally divided, oppressive, and irresponsible.

At the heart of this effort is Pakistan's active attempt to capitalize on India's domestic dissent. This includes amplifying issues tied to religious polarization and highlighting alleged human rights violations. For instance, while Pakistan mirrored India's tit-for-tat measures almost entirely, shutting down communication channels, blocking airspace, and reducing diplomatic strength, even suspending the largely redundant postal services, it notably left the Kartarpur Corridor untouched. It still remains open from the Pakistani side and shut on the Indian end, seemingly not just as a gesture of goodwill, but as a counter-symbol to projecting Pakistan's accommodation of minorities against India's perceived marginalization of them. This gimmick further intensified with statements like "Sikhs are never on Pakistan's target" and "India's Hindutva mindset", from the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, with the undertone, India alienates; Pakistan accommodates.

Further, as India released satellite images and precise strike data, Pakistan responded with counterclaims of Indian false-flag operations, particularly in Kashmir and Amritsar. These were accompanied by messaging about Indian media control, mistreatment of minorities, and the silencing of dissent. The DG ISPR's remarks absurdly asserted that Pakistan is a

democratic, tolerant state where the military is accountable, the media is free, and minority rights are respected, however selectively or strategically that narrative may be constructed. By a propagandistic and distorted portrayal of internal unrest in India, whether among Sikh groups, Muslims, or activists, suggesting the failure of India's pluralistic model, Pakistan seeks not only to obfuscate international perceptions but also to exacerbate internal divisions within India. Responding to these assertions, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri starkly noted: "It may be a surprise to Pakistan to see citizens criticizing their own government. That is the hallmark of an open and functioning democracy."

Ironically, Pakistan is borrowing from India's own tactical lexicon. Just as India once internationalized its grievances against Pakistan-backed terror, Pakistan now seeks to internationalize India's domestic tensions. The attempt may lack the credibility or institutional depth of India's earlier campaigns, but the intent is glaring. In doing so, Islamabad is not seeking victory in the factual domain. It is attempting to create narrative parity, with sufficient contradiction and moral equivalence, to avoid an outright reputational setback. Whether this holds over time is uncertain. But in the short term, it offers breathing room, both at home and abroad.

2. Externalizing blame: Diversions from internal faultlines, insurgency, and military control

But this is not purely external messaging. Much of it may also be aimed inward. In a time of economic stress, political instability, ethnic insurgency, and military overstretch, Pakistan needs a unifying narrative.

Claiming moral and political superiority over India helps contain internal faultlines at home. Instead of engaging with legitimate grievances of regional alienation, Islamabad projects these internal conflicts as orchestrated by "external handlers," primarily India and Afghanistan. Balochistan, with its intensifying separatist movement and persistent unrest in parts of Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, exemplifies this dynamic. This narrative projection aims to suppress public introspection on issues within the military and political establishment, thereby avoiding any admission of potential governance failures.

In moments of political flux, such as elections or military reshuffles, the military has often intensified this rhetoric, positioning itself as the indispensable guardian against Indian aggression and international conspiracies. This externalization of threat tries to justify the military's dominant role over civilian leadership and the continued militarization of civilian spaces. This broader strategic posture, as reflected, for example, by the controversial promotion of General Asim Munir to Field Marshal, underscores how the military reinforces its institutional dominance beyond immediate crises.

Echoing the norm within the subcontinent, by labeling political opponents, dissenters, and

minority groups as “anti-state” elements further delegitimizes internal criticism, stifling calls for meaningful reform. Increased surveillance, curbs on freedom of assembly, and aggressive security operations in restive regions are framed as necessary measures to counteract foreign-supported terror proxies.

This oversimplification of a multi-dimensional crisis, where internal dissent, economic fragility, and Indian military posture coexist, into a singular, totalizing Indian threat allows Pakistan to externalize blame efficiently. The complexity of Pakistan’s internal challenges is thus reduced to a manageable rhetoric: India is the root cause of instability and unrest. This narrative, while politically expedient, prevents genuine dialogue or reforms and instead entrenches a militarized state apparatus that perpetuates cycles of repression and instability.

Thus, Pakistan’s narrative choice is not a simple case of denial of its terror affiliations, but a strategic effort to preserve internal cohesion by manufacturing a clear enemy image. Yet, this short-term narrative protection risks undermining long-term strategic credibility, both within the country and among international partners, by eroding trust and obscuring the need for deeper reforms essential to Pakistan’s stability.

For Pakistan’s military establishment, narrative control is often not just a wartime necessity; it remains a peacetime governance strategy in general. The military’s dominance over state affairs depends not only on coercive strength but also on political passivity and a tightly managed national discourse that avoids scrutiny. This control is designed to maintain its supremacy without resorting to overt interventions, such as coups, which incur costs both domestically and internationally.

3. Countering Diplomatic Marginalization

Pakistan’s narrative, positioning itself as a victim of extremism rather than a state complicit in sheltering militant groups, draws partly on its historical coordination with Western powers in funding such actors. This effort at narrative control is increasingly also shaped by the need to counter India’s rising global influence and diplomatic reach. New Delhi has effectively positioned itself as a victim of cross-border terrorism and a responsible regional actor, over the years, establishing Pakistan as the aggressor and exporter of instability. For Islamabad, this framing undermines its credibility with global lenders, weakens its diplomatic leverage, and reinforces a rhetoric of dysfunction and dependency. Dismissal of involvement with militant networks, then, is not simply about face-saving; it is also about preserving institutional legitimacy, preventing external pressure, and signaling coherence to both domestic and international audiences. At a time when Pakistan’s geopolitical relevance has waned, particularly following the West’s disengagement from Afghanistan and India’s improved ties with the Gulf, it faces mounting pressure to reshape its global image. The persistent association with terrorism and internal instability has eroded its standing.

By rejecting the occurrence and/or efficacy of any Indian military action, Islamabad seeks to reinforce a perception it has long peddled: that of a restrained, beleaguered state confronting a militarily superior neighbour. This posture not only enables the eliciting of diplomatic sympathy but also helps internationalize the crisis, drawing external intervention.

Pakistan's geopolitical realignments in the aftermath of the conflict

Following the Indian diplomatic outreach, Pakistan has also assigned two delegations to engage with key international actors, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and Russia, to present its case. Moving forward, Pakistan's approach to its bilateral ties will reflect a careful recalibration based on shifting global alignments and regional priorities. Pakistan's diplomatic outreach at large is likely to be shaped by its engagement with three tiers: major global powers, its long-standing allies, and key regional partners. The following breakdown explores each category and the strategic logic underpinning Islamabad's approach.

Engagement with major global powers

United States: Pakistan will maintain a cautious yet pragmatic approach toward the United States. Despite the unpredictability of U.S. foreign policy under a second Trump administration, Islamabad will aim to reaffirm its strategic relevance in the region. Trump has frequently highlighted his self-proclaimed role as a peacemaker in the recent crisis, including his public offers to mediate the Kashmir issue. Pakistan may seek to capitalize on this tendency by framing the India-Pakistan crisis as a destabilizing development that merits renewed U.S. involvement. In doing so, Islamabad will need to strike a balance between its close ties with China and exploring emerging areas of cooperation with Washington, particularly in sectors such as critical minerals and regional connectivity.

Russia: While Russia has traditionally been an ally of India, recent geopolitical shifts, particularly following the Ukraine conflict, have led Moscow to deepen its strategic partnership with China, a key economic and military ally of Pakistan. Islamabad will seek to engage Moscow, leveraging its role in regional stability efforts, especially in Afghanistan, an area of shared interest highlighted through Russian-led platforms such as the Moscow Format and the Afghan Quad. Given Russia's broader ambitions in Eurasia, Pakistan is likely to maintain a diplomatic posture directed at preserving open channels with Moscow, while positioning itself as a regional stakeholder Russia cannot ignore.

China: The recent conflict has reaffirmed Pakistan's strategic partnership with China and is likely to accelerate further military cooperation, including the potential acquisition of advanced equipment such as fifth-generation fighter aircraft. As the upper riparian state in key river systems, China also holds theoretical leverage in the region's water politics, an area where

Pakistan allegedly threatens to seek Beijing's support. While unlikely to yield concrete outcomes, it primarily serves to exert symbolic pressure on India. Allegations of Chinese satellite and military support to Pakistan during the standoff further illustrate the growing integration of their defense and technological capabilities. This cooperation may expand beyond economic domains, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), evolving into a broader security framework that encompasses cybersecurity, satellite collaboration, and the protection of critical infrastructure. By recasting CPEC not just as an economic initiative but as a strategic security corridor, Pakistan aims to encourage deeper Chinese engagement to counterbalance India's regional influence. It also actively leverages China's expanding diplomatic role, particularly Beijing's efforts to facilitate reconciliation between Afghanistan and Pakistan, to assert its own indispensability in regional stability. By positioning itself as a key interlocutor and partner in China-led regional initiatives, Islamabad underscores its strategic value to Beijing's broader Eurasian ambitions.

Sustaining Long-standing Alliances

Iran: In stark contrast, Pakistan's recent manoeuvres, however performative, reflect a calculated diplomatic balancing act. Islamabad has re-engaged the Gulf, expressed solidarity with Tehran post the U.S.-Israeli attacks, and maintained informal communication channels with Israel, all while publicly distancing itself from sensitive allegations. For instance, it promptly rejected claims by a senior IRGC official, General Mohsen Rezaei, that Pakistan had pledged nuclear retaliation on Iran's behalf in the event of an Israeli strike, reaffirming its India-centric nuclear doctrine while still preserving diplomatic space. Periodic speculative reports of the ISI's backchannel contacts with Israeli officials, including one as recent as March 2025, further illustrate Pakistan's efforts to quietly preserve strategic flexibility across opposing blocs. This balancing was also evident following the Trump-Munir lunch after which Pakistan nominated President Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in brokering the India-Pakistan ceasefire, yet managed to issue a carefully worded condemnation the very next day after US strikes on Iran, positioning itself in a way that neither alienated Tehran nor provoked Washington.

Arab World: Pakistan is likely to recalibrate its diplomatic approach toward Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, shifting from a focus on aid dependency to one that emphasizes attracting investment. As Gulf states deepen their ties with India, Islamabad recognizes the need for a more nuanced and pragmatic engagement. Pakistan may seek to attract economic investment while reaffirming its geostrategic significance. It will continue to leverage its sizeable expatriate workforce and shared religious connections to bolster diplomatic goodwill. Rather than seeking overt political backing in regional disputes, Pakistan may prioritize practical cooperation in trade, labor, and defense, aiming to maintain its strategic relevance amid the rapidly shifting dynamics of the Middle East.

Turkey: Apart from Azerbaijan, it remains one of Pakistan's most pronounced supporters. Pakistan is expected to further deepen its ideological and defense ties with Ankara to strengthen its counter-India stance. Joint narratives highlighting Islamic solidarity and common regional security challenges will be amplified through coordinated media campaigns and enhanced defense cooperation. This partnership is likely to expand, accelerating the transfer of advanced defense technology and energy.

Regional engagement

Bangladesh: Pakistan will continue to engage with Bangladesh by promoting shared cultural and religious ties. Islamabad is likely to frame the recent conflict as a broader threat to regional stability. Diplomatic outreach to Bangladesh's interim government and informal connections with religious groups may run in parallel with public messaging that focuses on economic cooperation and cultural solidarity. This dual-track approach may look to exacerbate existing tensions in India-Bangladesh relations following the departure of the Hasina government. Against this backdrop, however, it is equally important to consider how and to what extent these shifting alliances may shape the nature of future conflicts between India and Pakistan.

Nature of escalation and risks in future India-Pakistan conflicts

Future India-Pakistan conflicts are likely to ignite swiftly and escalate rapidly, defined by short, high-intensity operations followed by premeditated narrative arcs. Compressed political decision-making timelines, combined with heightened domestic expectations, may reduce the space for calibrated responses, raising the risk of breaching critical escalation thresholds before adequate stabilizing mechanisms can take effect. This shift reflects the growing centrality of narrative-building and denial in both countries' strategic communications, fundamentally reshaping the post-conflict conduct, especially within the information domain. Pakistan's mixed track record in narrative control will continue to inform its strategic calculus, enabling it to galvanize domestic support and frame India as the aggressor in regional and international forums.

During border incidents and skirmishes, both sides may intensify efforts to project strength and resilience, feeding victory-driven narratives to increasingly assertive domestic audiences. The expectation for a strong retaliation is now ingrained in the political narrative, making the public and media less receptive to de-escalation, in turn constraining diplomatic options and increasing the political cost of restraint.

Compounding these dynamics is the potential for China-Pakistan strategic convergence, aimed at pressuring and distracting India. Both countries are accelerating their military modernization efforts. Pakistan is doing so with Chinese backing, while India is pursuing

investments in its military-industrial complex and diversifying its global partnerships. The usual Indian response cycle to such attacks, measured military retaliation coupled with domestic assertions of success and diplomatic condemnation of Pakistan-backed terror, is being increasingly influenced by a more contested information space and evolving regional pressures. This is likely to further harden the region's conflict dynamics, narrow diplomatic off-ramps, and entrench a cycle of confrontation, complicating crisis management and potentially undermining prospects for long-term stability in South Asia.

Counter-terrorism

Terror, Tactics, and Territory: India's Evolving Response to Cross-Border Threats

Tara Kartha

The Pahalgam attack is now part of a 34-year history of cross-border terrorism, which began just before Pakistan formally announced its nuclear capability to the world in 1987. Reports from the Ministry of Home Affairs confirm that terrorism was nonexistent until the mid 1980's, but from then on it details terrorism in Punjab, with clear footprints from across the border. By 1998, Kashmir was in flames, with the graph of violence climbing steadily. Both have yet to die down, and a Prime Minister even lost her life as a result of counter-terrorism operations in Punjab. As Pakistan realized it could not win in two wars, it chose the terrorism option. With such a long and well-documented history, the current demand for “proof” of Pakistani involvement seems disingenuous. But in the present situation, there is a need to look inwards at not just our narrative, but also its effectiveness in delivering the desired outcome: an end to terrorism from Pakistan.

Accustomed to terrorism

Over these long years of withstanding terror, some trends have become evident. First, terrorism has become normalized to an extent where most incidents of infiltration and terror were unreported in national media, let alone the international press. While paramilitary or armed forces responded at a local level, the broader government and bureaucracy, not unnaturally, continued with business as usual. Diplomats hardly ever articulated the narrative of a debilitating terror sponsorship, barring at the UN when regular ‘standardized’ statements were made. Even the Balakot attack did not see any outreach by major embassies including the one in London, or even a press briefing in Washington.

Overall media reaction was similarly lacklustre, dominated instead by Pakistan's narrative. Indian officials' claims of having eliminated hundreds of terrorists in Balakot were refuted, and Pakistan even accused India of “eco terrorism” for hitting trees in a protected forest. A similar

situation unfolded after Pahalgam. Analyses of X (formerly Twitter) accounts of 24 embassies in G-20 countries revealed that none had organized any outreach event after the tragedy. While the Foreign Secretary's official briefings and Operation Sindoor were masterpieces in controlled escalation, no outreach was apparent prior to Op Sindoor from our outposts across the world. Clearly international opinion mattered, since India did send out delegations to some 32 countries. But building an effective narrative requires sustained effort, not sporadic crisis management.

India and the world

The second major trend is the nature of India's reaction. The only time India received not just sympathy but also meaningful international action against Pakistan was during George W. Bush's "War on Terror." The then government had little difficulty in linking the 2008 Mumbai attack to this huge effort lead by the United States. Indeed, investigative agencies of various countries were involved in tracing the operation, while Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency conducted a thorough investigation, given the intense outside pressure. Some terrorist camps were shut down, and by 2011, Kashmir police were reporting zero success in infiltration. During this relatively peaceful period, India-Pakistan relations improved. Prime Minister Modi even 'dropped in' on Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in December 2015. Following the Pathankot attack, India invited Pakistani investigators to the air base and shared intercepted communications between Jaish-e-Mohammed terrorists, who claimed the attack, and the United Jihad Council. Pakistan, in turn, shared a tip off on a group planning attacks. Interestingly, India provided consular access to jailed terrorists to establish its case.

The use of force

This budding counter-terrorism cooperation ended with a vicious attack in Uri (2016) which killed 19 soldiers. India presented evidence of Pakistan involvement—including names of guides from POK and a captured Pakistani national—to then-Ambassador Abdul Basit. This time, PM Sharif, who was ousted just six months later, dismissed it as a 'false flag operation', despite pressure from the US and UK. India responded with surgical strikes into PoK, signaling a major shift in strategy. For two years, government agencies noted a decline in terror attacks. India responded with surgical strikes, just a few kilometers into Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, signaling a major shift in strategy. For two years, government agencies noted a drop in terror attacks.

But in February 2019, a convoy was targeted in Pulwama, killing forty personnel after rules on troop movements had been relaxed. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh tactfully 'apologized' to Kashmiris for reinstating movement restrictions during military transport, walking back from India's earlier pro-people policies in the Valley. The Jaish claimed the attack and the National

Investigation Agency provided a detailed charge sheet. Amid an outpouring of sympathy, NSA John Bolton said India had “a right to self defence” which it exercised with the Balakot attacks; but that had consequences. Then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed in his memoir that Indian Foreign minister Sushma Swaraj informed him that Pakistan was preparing to use nuclear weapons and that India would act accordingly. Washington apparently worked overtime to prevent it, even as Trump hinted that he facilitated the release of a captured Indian pilot. Trump’s then reiterated his offer of mediation after meeting Imran Khan in September 2019. Pakistan was not slow to learn that lesson.

Terrorism goes well under

Balakot did lead, relatively, to a reduction in terrorism in Kashmir for nearly five years, despite the revocation of Article 370. Following the Galwan skirmish with China, a surprising development was the February 2021 agreement between India and Pakistan to observe a ceasefire along the LoC. The hotline between the Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs) played a key role, and the border went quiet. India then shifted focus to the larger threat from China.

However, terrorism hadn’t ended—it had merely gone quiet. Reporting was sparse, and incidents were few. Terrorists also got smarter, evading interception by using smart phones with radio sets, encryption, and self-destructing chats. These were highly trained individuals who avoided populated areas, operated in small numbers, and used advanced equipment like day-and-night sights. At no time did their number exceed 50, making them virtually invisible. As Indian troops were redeployed to the Chinese border, a series of incidents began, with one targeting a bus full of pilgrims in 2024. The casualties were limited only because the bus fell into a gorge. The main perpetrators were never apprehended. Clearly, the patterns had changed.

The end effect

Then came Pahalgam. Every indication suggested Pakistan sought escalation: cruel taunts to victims’ families, and inflammatory rhetoric from Gen. Munir just days prior, against Hindus, and Kashmir as a ‘jugular vein’. And this time around, Pakistan was fully prepared militarily for its own version of ‘victory’ in hitting a few aircraft, even as six of its own airfields were struck. Meanwhile of 123 countries surveilled, 64.4% supported India, with 54.4% expressing ‘solidarity’. But even France, while defending India’s right to self-defense, called for restraint. The end effect was that global focus shifted once again from the terrorist attack to the “dangers” of an India-Pakistan war. President Trump sailed in with his declaration that he had stopped a nuclear war, and that talks would happen, at a ‘neutral’ location. A senior aide to Putin Russia later confirmed Trump’s ‘personal involvement’.

Benefits and costs

On the face of it, Pakistan's army got what it wanted, which was 'mediation', a huge (but temporary) boost to the military's image, a new Field Marshall, and a jump in defense expenditure apparently with the concurrence of the IMF, due to 'risks of war'. Meanwhile, much has been made of the testimony given by Gen. Kurilla, Commander US Central Command, calling for cooperation with Pakistan, and the testimony provided by Paul Kapur, nominated to the State Department, who indicated that Washington would cooperate with Pakistan if deemed 'beneficial to US interests'. It seems the near ignoring of Pakistan had ended. Pakistan has long been adept at offering up terrorists—including the alleged Abbey Gate bomber timed to disrupt Trump's congressional address—and providing access to strategic minerals to keep the US engaged. In addition, Gen. Kurilla also pointed out that other Pakistanis in the US have been caught planning terrorist attacks. Pakistan military has been able to offer up goodies including strategic minerals to keep the US engaged. None of this has anything to do with the India-Pakistan conflict.

Meanwhile, Gen. Asim Munir's secret visit to the US, reportedly to CENTCOM, suggests that Pakistan may be repurposed to counter Iran. With its IMF dependence, Pakistan's bargaining power is limited. Its longstanding support for Iran may now be compromised under external pressure.

India's "Operation Sindoor" ushered in a new doctrine based on the three core pillars: decisive retaliation to terrorism on India's terms, zero tolerance for nuclear blackmail, and no distinction between terrorists and their sponsors. This doctrine will require significantly higher defence spending and a permanent alert posture, particularly in Kashmir. Any relaxation has historically led to renewed terrorism. The hard-won gains of normalization may be lost if security forces are forced to return to heavy-handed tactics. Modi also said that any 'talks' would be about Pakistan-occupied Kashmir only. The operation also demonstrated that India can retaliate under the nuclear threshold. With the Indus Waters Treaty suspended, India has added another tool of pressure. However, India's insistence on excluding outside actors from talks may be tested—especially since international players have historically played a role in de-escalation.

India will need to invest considerable diplomatic capital in navigating future negotiations, where US interests are likely to dominate. It must also strengthen its counterterrorism stance through alliances with other affected countries like Australia, the UK, Israel, and many other nations grappling with extremism. As a former Foreign Secretary said, India needs a new T-20, with structure and institutionalized architecture. Many of these countries include Islamic states worried by extremism in their own lands. Ultimately, if India wants terrorism to end, it must not only build a compelling narrative and military deterrence but also find ways to address internal divisions—perhaps the most difficult challenge of all.

What Awaits J&K in Terms of Terrorism and How to Prepare for it?

Shiv Sahai

Terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir had been driven by several factors, primarily the region's confusion about its future—whether it would be independent, go with Pakistan, or remain with India. Independence has always been their eternal dream. Some radical elements, especially those backed by Jamaat-e-Islami, favored Pakistan. However, India also had a strong base of support, first evident during the resistance against the Kabali raiders in 1947 and again during Operation Gibraltar in 1965. Both events led to wars that ended in Pakistan's defeat.

In 1971, Pakistan faced complete humiliation with the creation of Bangladesh. Bhutto responded by vowing to wage a thousand-year war against India, laying the groundwork for the asymmetric warfare that Pakistan continues to pursue. Alongside this political dilemma was the issue of religion. During the 1930 movement against the Hindu Maharaja, the Muslim Conference gave the struggle a religious dimension, inspired by the Muslim League's quest for a separate Muslim state. This sentiment was further underscored by the gradual exodus of Kashmiri Pandits, culminating in 1989-90.

Economically, Kashmir had been linked to Lahore, with most trade routes passing through what is now Pakistan. The Partition closed that option, fostering a sense of economic deprivation. Communications with the rest of India were arduous and fraught with uncertainty.

The dismissal of Sheikh Abdullah's government in 1953 following his arrest, Farooq Abdullah's in 1984, and the allegedly rigged 1987 elections strengthened the belief that democracy in J&K would remain a farce.

Pakistan seized this opportunity in 1987 to initiate an armed struggle, having gained experience during anti-Soviet operations in Afghanistan. They first encouraged the 'Azadi' sentiment and

slowly ensured the decimation of those groups by introducing pro-Pakistan elements like the Hizbul Mujahideen. They built on this ideological base to create several outfits, finally settling on the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammed.

Over the past three decades, the conflict has evolved from insurgency to militancy, and now to terrorism. Today, violence is at its lowest levels, thanks to the success of security forces, democratic reinforcement, economic development, and Pakistan's relative decline.

India's tolerance for violence has reduced significantly, as shown by its response to the Pahalgam attack. The question remains: how much will this deter the Pakistan Army? Is the promotion of Asim Munir to Field Marshal merely a face-saving move, or is it based on misplaced confidence in Chinese support? The Pakistan Army, under pressure from its own people and seeking legitimacy, may have gained some temporarily. Unless it is punished—directly or indirectly—it is unlikely to abandon terrorism. What worked in Afghanistan will not work in India.

Pakistan has continued to train groups like Lashkar and Jaish, now rebranded as the Resistance Front or the People's Anti-Fascist Front to give them a secular-political facade. These highly-trained groups depend on advanced technology for movement and communications. They have sophisticated weapons for precise strikes, night vision devices and thermal imagers. They are well trained in marksmanship. They are trained to survive in the jungles and are very mobile. They strike in different parts of the state and are constantly on the move, making it difficult to track them or to gather intelligence about them. This is a departure from the past, earlier groups of terrorists were entrenched in specific areas where it was easier to dislodge them. However, studying past hideout geographies may still offer clues to their movements. Combined with human and technical intelligence, their activities can be anticipated.

Emerging communication technologies must also be studied—especially Chinese-made devices, reportedly used in the Pahalgam attack. Currently, wireless data transfer technology is being used by these groups. Jungle warfare remains slow and manpower-intensive. While the overground network has weakened, some elements persist. Local recruitment is at an all-time low, but a few radicalized individuals still join. As the state edges closer to ending terrorism, public sentiment must be watched closely.

After the Pahalgam attack, there were public protests against Pakistan. The state must ensure this sentiment continues. Pakistan will try to spin a narrative of victory, bolstered by Chinese support. It is crucial to prevent radicalized elements from regaining hope. Grassroots democratic engagement and public outreach are essential to counter Pakistani propaganda.

Tactically, the Pahalgam incident must be thoroughly analyzed and used to adapt operational strategies. Security forces need to reorient to counter the guerrilla tactics of cross-border terrorists. Small group operations, familiar to the Jammu & Kashmir Police and other forces, may result in casualties but are necessary. Local police and seasoned military personnel, with their understanding of the terrain and public support, hold a distinct advantage over the technology-dependent terrorist sustaining on casual contact or a small support base itself fearful of being discovered.

The human intelligence network, by greater interaction particularly with border populations, need to be strengthened. This has been done before and can be done again—only now, the approach must be more granular. A careful, sustained effort can identify the right sources. A knee-jerk reaction to every incident will not help to create the systems required to eliminate terrorism. What's needed is a cadre of committed individuals who value results over personal glory; success requires patience and diligence.

Counter-intelligence capacities must be enhanced by penetrating terror networks—possibly by flipping overground workers. Cooperating with intelligence agencies of friendly countries could help monitor the movement of money from other countries.

Equally important is cyber-patrolling. Monitoring social media to prevent youth radicalization is vital. Involving civil society and families can help prevent vulnerable youth from being drawn in.

The abrogation of article 370 resolved the political question. Any lingering confusion over J&K's sovereignty must be addressed by reinforcing the belief that no level of terrorism will help Pakistan alter the boundaries.

A large, pragmatic, and aspirational youth population sees its future in India. Economic integration through trade, manufacturing, and tourism will further deepen emotional ties. The reaction of Himanshi Narwal, widow of the naval officer killed in Pahalgam, who was moved by the local support she received, is a powerful example of solidarity.

As Pakistan remains relentless in its pursuit to destabilize J&K, India must be equally steadfast in strengthening its own constituency. Strong border management, improved intelligence, and adaptive operational tactics must ensure terrorism does not silence the majority. Over the last several decades, the people have seen the duplicity of Pakistan. Their faith must be reinforced with robust institutional support. As the last shreds of anti-India sentiment dwindle, so will terrorism, making way for sustained peace.

Beyond Operation Sindoor: Rethinking India's Counter- Terrorism Strategy

Col. Shashank Ranjan

The dastardly terror strike perpetrated by Pakistan-sponsored proxies on April 22 in Pahalgam and India's retribution through Operation Sindoor have fundamentally altered the security landscape of South Asia. Four days of "calibrated, measured and retaliatory military actions" targeting terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan mark a watershed moment in which India has decisively redrawn its red lines and achieved escalation dominance vis-à-vis Pakistan. This military operation represents a significant departure from India's traditionally restrained posture and signals the emergence of a more assertive strategic doctrine.

However, while Operation Sindoor represents an undeniable tactical and operational success, its strategic efficacy in diminishing the long-term terrorist threat remains to be seen. Although the Operation delivered an unmistakable and clear message across the border - one that is likely to be taken seriously - a more comprehensive approach is required at home. This approach should aim to address both external and internal dimensions of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir and balance military imperatives with political and social considerations.

Terrorism in J&K and the external element

Pakistan bears substantial responsibility as the principal external element for the security situation in J&K. The pronounced trends of militancy that emerged in the late 1980s have their roots in the years immediately following the first India-Pakistan war of 1947-48. In its pursuit of the "unfinished agenda of partition," Pakistan has consistently supported underground separatist movements since the late 1940s, though the character of this support has evolved over time in response to changing regional dynamics and international scrutiny.

The security landscape has transformed from predominantly indigenous insurgency to significant participation of foreign terrorists—a strategic shift orchestrated by Pakistan's

security establishment. Direct involvement of Pakistan's proxies commenced in the mid-1990s when Pakistan diversified terrorism's footprint from the Kashmir Valley to the Jammu region while withdrawing support for local terrorists. This recalibration was designed to maintain plausible deniability while continuing to advance Pakistan's strategic objectives in the region.

Analysis of insurgency patterns in J&K reveals that local dynamics related to identity, marginalization, repression, political disenfranchisement, socio-economic disparities, and psychological and historical contexts have played pivotal roles in providing overground support to foreign actors. These facets have provided fuel to Pakistan's efforts to foment trouble in J&K and require a long-term strategy from India that addresses these underlying grievances rather than merely treating their symptoms. The interplay between external sponsorship and internal vulnerabilities creates a complex ecosystem of terrorism that defies simplistic military solutions.

Indian security forces have made substantial progress, reducing overall fatalities from more than 4000 in 2001 to 127 last year and 57 thus far in the current year. This remarkable achievement stems from the consolidation of the security grid, non-military governmental outreach to local populations, and Pakistan's diminishing capacity to wage high-intensity proxy warfare due to its internal challenges and growing international isolation. This positive trajectory suggests that India's multifaceted approach has yielded tangible results, even as significant challenges remain.

Internal shifts: The new pivot to radicalization in J&K

India's strategy vis-à-vis the external element – Pakistan – has evolved especially since 2016, with New Delhi showing a greater appetite for cross-border kinetic actions. However, an analysis of terror-related fatalities in Jammu and Kashmir over the past decade reveals a concerning reality: high-profile kinetic operations like the 2016 Surgical Strikes and 2019 Balakot aerial strike have failed to deter Pakistan-sponsored terrorism effectively. Contrary to strategic expectations, fatalities actually increased from 175 in 2015 to 267 in 2016, with this upward trajectory continuing through 2019. This implies the need for a greater focus on the internal dynamics of J&K's security.

The contemporary terrorism landscape in the region exhibits notable shifts in operational patterns. Local youth participation has diminished significantly compared to the Burhan Wani era. However, this apparent improvement is counterbalanced by the increasing technological sophistication of foreign terrorists who operate with reduced dependence on local support networks. Nevertheless, the contribution of local operatives remains strategically significant. Recent intelligence assessments following the Pahalgam attack have identified 14 local

terrorists operating in the region, providing critical logistical support to foreign operatives through their affiliations with established groups like Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jaish-e-Mohammed.

A particularly noteworthy development since 2019 has been the emergence of ostensibly new terror organizations such as The Resistance Front (TRF), People's Anti-Fascist Front (PAFF), and Kashmir Tigers (KT). These entities represent a sophisticated rebranding strategy rather than genuinely independent movements. Their creation served as a calculated maneuver by Pakistan to evade Financial Action Task Force (FATF) gray-listing sanctions—a status Pakistan maintained from 2018 to 2022. These groups strategically position themselves as opposing the abrogation of Article 370, with nomenclature deliberately crafted to suggest secular political resistance rather than religious extremism.

The 2019-20 period initially saw these emergent groups encounter formidable resistance due to a reinforced security infrastructure in the Kashmir Valley. However, the subsequent Indo-China standoff necessitated troop redeployment from the Jammu region to Ladakh, creating critical security vacuums. Terrorist elements swiftly exploited these vulnerabilities, expanding operations throughout the Jammu region—including Kathua, Reasi, Kishtwar, Doda, Udampur, Rajouri, and Poonch—precipitating a marked deterioration in regional security. The kill ratio shifted unfavorably, emboldening terrorist cadres and culminating in the April 22, 2025, Pahalgam attack.

Particularly concerning is the apparent erosion of human intelligence (HUMINT) capabilities, as evidenced by the continued evasion of the perpetrators of the Pahalgam attack. This intelligence deficit suggests deeper challenges in community engagement and trust-building. Therefore, the current situation demands a substantive recalibration of governance approaches, emphasizing enhanced outreach to local populations and more meaningful engagement with civil society. Effectively addressing these challenges will require empowering elected representatives and strengthening the authority of the Chief Minister to foster greater political accountability and community trust.

Beyond kinetic operations: A multidimensional approach

Following the Pahalgam massacre, bipartisan demonstrations erupted in J&K in solidarity with the victims, which were spontaneous, widely participated in, and unprecedented. Similarly, border communities affected by recent ceasefire violations unanimously voiced their opposition. Such civic engagement represents a strategic opportunity that must be consolidated rather than squandered through counterproductive measures like demolishing houses of alleged terrorists or initiating mass arrests of youth. These expressions of solidarity with the

Indian state could potentially transform the sociopolitical landscape of J&K if appropriately leveraged and sustained through inclusive policies.

While the externalization of terrorism through high-impact, war-like responses to terror acts is necessary, it could also lead to undesirable overkill situations that inadvertently alienate the very populations whose support is essential for long-term success. It is anticipated that the Indian government's policy will incorporate more nuanced thresholds that differentiate between various levels of terrorist threats and calibrated responses. Expert commentary following Operation Sindoor suggests a concerning tendency to oversimplify the complex challenge of insurgency in J&K, potentially numbing policymakers to harder questions regarding terrorism and its multifaceted roots in both external sponsorship and internal grievances.

Historical evidence suggests limitations to the deterrent effect of kinetic actions against terror infrastructure. Fatalities in J&K actually increased following the 2016 surgical strikes and continued rising until 2019-20, when Article 370 was abrogated and a severe clampdown imposed. This counterintuitive outcome underscores the complex relationship between military operations and terrorist violence, suggesting that tactical successes do not automatically translate into strategic gains without complementary political and social initiatives.

What is required is a long-term perspective on terrorism that may necessitate a fundamental reconsideration of current approaches. Operation Sindoor demonstrates India's growing prowess in kinetic non-contact warfare, but must be complemented by non-kinetic tools, including economic, diplomatic, legal, informational, and cyber capabilities, to establish a more effective deterrent against Pakistan. This comprehensive approach would target not only terrorist infrastructure but also the financial networks, ideological foundations, and diplomatic cover that sustain terrorism as a strategic tool for Pakistan.

Most critically, this multidimensional approach cannot neglect internal dynamics where the fundamental principle of "people as the center of gravity" must be respected. For India, this basic tenet has been a challenge, due to the preference for more immediately visible and politically expedient security measures that address symptoms rather than causes. The genuine grievances and aspirations of J&K's diverse populations must be addressed through sustained political engagement, economic development, and social integration that goes beyond security-centric paradigms.

Therefore, while Operation Sindoor represents a tactical victory in India's counter-terrorism campaign, its strategic success will ultimately be determined by India's ability to integrate

military operations within a comprehensive framework that addresses both the external and internal dimensions of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. Only through such a holistic approach—one that combines decisive military action with political acumen, economic development, and social inclusion—can India achieve sustainable security and peace in this troubled region. The path forward requires not merely military superiority but also strategic patience, political wisdom, and a genuine commitment to addressing the complex realities of J&K beyond the simplified narratives of cross-border terrorism.

Air Domain in Op Sindoor

Offensive Air Power in India's National Security: Lessons from the 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis

Air Mshl (Dr) Diptendu Choudhury

The 2019 air strike on Jabba Top by the Indian Air Force (IAF) was a Rubicon moment for India, as offensive air power was used for the first time to strike terror targets inside enemy territory, to drive home the lesson that terror will come at a cost. Arguably, it deterred large-scale terrorist attacks for a little over seven years, till Pahalgam. Despite the nationwide outrage and pressure, the Government eschewed the option of a swift retaliation and instead chose to respond at its own pace, with a calculated multi-pronged approach. The close nexus between the Pakistani military and its proxy terror groups, and Islamabad's past penchant for nuclear blackmail when under threat of any possible Indian military response, had constrained India's response matrix in the past.

Two Air Chiefs have confirmed that despite the IAF's readiness for a punitive response immediately after the Parliament and Mumbai terror attacks in 2001 and 2008, the option was not exercised by the Government. The choice of using offensive air power for an air strike in the prevailing no-war-no-peace (NWNP) conditions inside Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), to punish the Jaish-e-Muhammad for the Pulwama terror attack, which left 40 Indian paramilitary personnel dead in 2019, established a unique precedent. The airstrike importantly dispelled the long-held, misplaced notion in the larger national security context that the employment of air power in conflict was escalatory. Contrarily, kinetic air strikes have provided a much-needed political option to the national leadership to employ the military instrument of force within the escalatory dynamics of a nuclear-armed adversary, and therefore became the logical instrument of choice.

Air Power: The Instrument of Choice

With surprise no longer being a response option, India chose to retaliate in a time and manner of its choosing. India responded two weeks later, on May 07 at 0115 AM, with coordinated air strikes, which for the first time struck multiple terror targets deep inside the heartland of

Pakistan, the home of its power-brokers. The Indian response replaced the surprise of pre-emption with a surprise of scale. The deliberate and selective targeting of nine terror hubs simultaneously, five in POK and four in Pakistan, at depths ranging up to a hundred km and across a frontage extending over a thousand km, in an operation aptly named Sindoor, conveyed the fury of India's ire. The IAF employed a combination of its advanced aerial assets comprising the Rafale, Sukhoi 30, Mirage 2000, and the MiG-29 fighter aircraft, with a lethal mix of long-range advanced specialist stand-off weapons such as the Hammer, Rampage, and Spice 1000/2000s, and supported by combat enablers which included Airborne Warning and Control System, Airborne Early Warning and Control and aerial refueller aircraft.

The operation comprised synergised 24 precision stand-off strikes within 22 minutes, with lethal accuracy on nine selected terror targets from inside our airspace. Responding to the successful strikes on all designated targets, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) claimed to have scrambled 42 high-tech fighters, including the J-10s, JF-17s, and possibly F-16s. According to their spokesperson, the PAF dynamically changed the rules of engagement in the air from 'deter and deny loss' to 'destroy targeting Rafales'. Announcing it to be the largest air battle in modern history, the PAF claimed to have launched 40 beyond visual range missiles, identified subsequently as the Chinese PL-15s, and shot down three Rafales, one Sukhoi, and one MiG-29.

India's initial strikes were exclusively on the terrorist infrastructure of all the groups with a history of attacks on India, with the political intent to differentiate between the State of Pakistan and the state-sponsored terrorist entities funded and controlled by the Government of Pakistan. India's Ministry of Defence clarified that 'No Pakistani military facilities have been targeted. India has demonstrated considerable restraint in selection of targets and method of execution', and the Defence Minister Rajnath Singh reiterated that 'targets we had set were destroyed with exactness according to a well-planned strategy', highlighting that 'We have shown sensitivity by ensuring that no civilian population was affected in the slightest.' Not surprisingly, some believe that Indian strikes 'were largely anticipated', since 'given the prevailing tensions, Pakistan is highly likely to retaliate', and 'Doing otherwise essentially would give India permission to strike Pakistan whenever Delhi feels aggrieved and would run contrary to the Pakistan military's commitment to retaliating with quid pro quo plus'.

Effects: Calibrated Offensive Air Power

Ignoring the distinction, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif asserted that India's strikes were an 'act of war' and would get a 'befitting reply', while it commenced indiscriminate cross-border shelling and closed its airspace. Retaliatory strikes followed against IAF bases and other civilian targets using rockets, missiles, and unmanned aerial systems (UAS). These ranged from small quadcopter drones in large numbers in an attempt to saturate and wear out the Indian AD, as well as armed drones for strike like the Turkish Asisguard Songar, the TB-2 Bayraktar,

and the Pakistan-Turkey developed Yiha-III loitering munitions. The indigenous IACCS that integrates and synergises multi-layered, multi-level sensors and shooters, including the S-400 surface-to-air missile system, provides the nation with an 'extended integrated AD (EIAD) system'. It forced the PAF fighters on the defensive, making them unable to execute any air operations against India. The indigenous Akashteer system was another success, which complemented AD operations by effectively tackling the short-range, low-altitude tactical threat of Pakistani UAS using the Army's legacy AD guns. Pakistan's retaliation on IAF bases, which are major military targets, was a strategic mistake, as such an attack was 'casus belli', technically an act of war. It provided India the vital space for an escalation-controlled, strategically astute riposte of enormous maturity and restraint.

The IAF riposte was planned and systematic, using Harpy and Harrop loitering munitions to neutralize key PAF AD assets, which included radars at Lahore and Gujranwala. The pressure was relentlessly escalated on May 9th and 10th, with the IAF striking Pakistan in its heartland with long-range vectors. Rafale fighters armed with SCALP cruise missiles, and the Su-30 MKIs equipped with the BrahMos-A air-launched cruise missiles, carried out depth strikes on eleven military installations, including PAF airfields of Nur Khan, Murid, Rafiqy, Sukkur, Sialkot, Pasrur, Chunian, Sargodha, Skardu, Bholari, and Jacobabad air bases, within three hours. Critical centres of gravity were struck with precision in each of these targets, including runways, hangars, key infrastructure facilities, aircraft on ground, operations and communication centres, weapon and logistic nodes, etc. These offensive aerial strikes, synergised with attacks by the land-based BrahMos missile systems, delivered a multi-pronged assault that overwhelmed Pakistan's defences to hit and hurt their military hard.

The unequivocal message was that IAF's selective targeting was capable of striking Pakistan in its depths with precision, and that it would do so with greater mass, depth, scale, and destructive outcome, should it continue to escalate its military actions. It was the cumulative impact of these relentless and precise offensive operations that seriously hurt Pakistan and compelled them to seek a ceasefire through their Director General of Military Operations at 1535 hours on May 10. Though the IAF's operational momentum and significant ability to destroy and degrade the enemy's war-waging potential were well placed to continue offensive action, it ceased all offensive operations as the ceasefire came into effect at 1700 hours.

Key Considerations Post-Op Sindoor

Many key takeaways have emerged, which will be analysed in depth and will undoubtedly find their way into the doctrines and strategies of the military. Since the Government has announced a zero-tolerance threshold, declaring that any act of terror in the future would be considered an act of war, the implications for India's military response and preparedness are profound. The enhanced scale of India's kinetic response and the declared tough policy stand

has created two outcomes. It seeks to reassert conventional deterrence against terror; and it has also established space for effective employment of offensive air power in India's response matrix. In between all the white noise and media over-hype generated, and the widespread debates and discussions that have followed, it would be prudent for all to consider that Operation Sindoor was just a limited punitive operation against terror, and not a war. All stakeholders therefore must be cognisant of the serious distinction especially while drawing lessons.

The distinction between war and peace has long been blurred with Pakistan's deliberate use of terror proxies as an instrument of the state and its stated strategy to 'bleed India with a thousand cuts'. Therefore, the inclusion of offensive kinetic air power as a political instrument of the state in the current NWNP conditions has widened India's response options. This is a welcome change from the limited two-dimensional and narrow approach to national defence and security of the past, where the threat and response options were seen only from a surface dominant perspective. Given the still relevant but rapidly shrinking space for boots on ground approaches in current conflicts, the future-relevant uniquely Indian threat dynamics, and the nation's overarching grand strategy of economic growth and progress, air power employment offers the national leadership a wider range of choices. Some of the key aspects from a macro-perspective, which have emerged and are relevant for future employment of air power and the military instrument of force, are covered in the following paragraphs.

Constraints on Air Power:

India's future conflict dynamics will continue to be driven by political imperatives, and given its historical record, will continue to constrain or place restrictions on military employment options. The nation's 78-year-long post-independence legacy of air power employment has been one of constrained and restrained use in all its wars and conflicts, except the 1971 War. Despite the creation of space for a conventional military response, the future sub-conventional threat environment will continue to be a challenge. Pakistan will do all it can to reduce this space created by 'hair-triggering' the escalation dynamics of the nuclear overhang, in order to impose limits and constraints on India's conventional military. The deliberate choice of striking only terrorist and not military targets in the first strike on May 07 came at a cost, as Pakistan made no such distinction and chose to target IAF assets well inside Indian airspace. Though the Defence Secretary clarified that there were 'No political constraints on our armed forces and they have full operational freedom in conflict'[1], the decision of not engaging military targets itself was a constraint. Walter Ladwig explains that – 'The strikes by the Indian Air Force against targets in Pakistan offer a powerful lesson in restraint, and Operation SINDOOR adds a new approach to India's strategic toolbox... pilots operated under strict rules of engagement that prohibited initiating attacks on Pakistani aircraft or pre-emptively suppressing air defence systems. This decision – to accept heightened operational risk in order to confine the conflict strictly to terrorist-linked infrastructure – is telling... The mere fact that the Indian Air Force

could strike targets under defended conditions and undertake follow-on attacks demonstrates its capacity for coercive precision operations'. The IAF's willingness to conduct the first strike under the heightened risk conditions of not hitting military targets is commendable. Still, the national leadership will need to carefully consider the outcomes of constrained exploitation of air power in the future, as doing so in war would prove disastrous.

The Strategic Communication & Media Synapse:

A misinformation overdrive by Pakistan sought to create the narrative of Indian aggression and the PAF's claimed tactical success of downing five IAF jets. China too jumped on the bandwagon to claim the success of its J-10 fighter, the PL-15 beyond visual range air-to-air, and HQ-9 AD systems by highlighting Rafale losses. Speaking to international media, India's Chief of Defence Staff stated that the PAF's claim of five jets was incorrect, while admitting to losses. History bears testimony to the fact that, worldwide, losses during combat are never declared officially during conflicts for very good reasons. India's stand is not surprising since the loss of a MiG-21 Bison and the capture of its pilot, to a US-supplied advanced medium-range air-to-air missile fired from an F-16, had hijacked the media attention away from the Government's larger strategic communication in the aftermath of the Balakot strike. The Indian Government had chosen not to make public the satellite imagery of the successful targeting of the JeM training facility, possibly to prevent conflict escalation. Arguably, this was a strategic mistake, as Pakistan's disinformation and media strategy succeeded in sowing the seeds of doubt by portraying the strike as a failure.

This time, also, the social and electronic media disinformation drive run by the Inter Services Public Relations Directorate of Pakistan Armed Forces initially succeeded in creating a narrative of the PAF's combat superiority. As the open-source imagery of the scale and extent of the damage caused by the IAF attacks emerged, accompanied by professional and balanced analysis by international subject experts and strategic think tanks, the facts were clear. Corroborated with reliable inputs from all domains, the success of India's escalation-controlled conventional air operation within the rubric of a nuclear overhang was contrasted by the relative silence of the Pakistani media. Notwithstanding the significant improvement from the past, India's strategic communication remains reactive, compared to the super-proactive approach of Pakistan.

PAF-PLAAF: Collusion to Collaboration:

For more than a decade, the PAF and PLAAF have been engaged in operational collusion, as evidenced by the regular bilateral annual air exercise called Ex Shaheen. Despite being flagged for its growing India-focused and contemporary operational training content, it received little consideration amongst the surface-dominant strategic community and leadership. The symbiotic relationship provides the PAF near-unlimited access to advanced military aviation technology, developmental support of its aviation industry, and assured supply chains, while

the PLAAF benefits from operational experience of the PAF, joint training, and exposure to IAF tactics and concepts. China's supply of combat platforms and enablers, missiles, spares, space support, loan, access to space-based imagery and intelligence, EW support, etc., is a long list. The overt and extensive Chinese assistance has made the term collusion irrelevant and has effectively been replaced by active cooperation, which is, all likelihood, a given in future conflicts. The harsh reality of a near-peer PAF and a larger tech-advanced PLAAF should ring alarm bells in New Delhi, given that the two adversarial AFs are deeply entrenched in their respective military strategies.

Return of Offensive Air Power:

The ability of aggressive offensive air power to create strategic effects in India's national security has been re-established. It was last employed to have a significant strategic impact on the Western front during the 1971 war when the strategic targeting of Pakistan's energy system led to a severe shortage of fuel, necessitating emergency imports from Iran. The speed, scale and destructive capability of IAF's targeting deep inside the enemy's home and hearth, the ability to penetrate and act inside PAF's decision cycles, the simultaneity of attack across a wide frontage across almost 1500 kilometers, and its vital ability to control and dominate the enemy airspace for unhindered multi-domain air operations, has undeniably revived the salience of air power. The significant platform losses of fighters and support platforms in the air and on the ground, destruction of radars, combat assets, loss of trained personnel, and the extensive damage to PAF infrastructure, within 90 hours of the operation, underscore offensive air power's ability to create operational effects and shape strategic outcomes. Had the IAF escalated its offensive, the PAF would have suffered critical damage. The much-vaunted offensive-defence strategy of the PAF failed, as it was forced to withdraw and unable to conduct any offensive operations. It's a hyped AD ground environmental system, and integration with modern fighters and enablers, long-range Chinese SAM systems, and kill chains, could not prevent the IAF from doing what it did. The collateral-minimising precision and calibrated lethality, combined with its combat mass, resilience, and endurance, have firmly established the place of offensive air power in all military and national response strategies.

Success of Offensive Air Defence:

The conceptual robustness and efficacy of IAF's EIAD to destroy, deter, and deny the PAF was proven equally credibly within the short, swift, and limited duration of Op Sindoor. The aggressive approach of India's offensive air defence enabled the domination of adversarial airspace to deter a strong and well-trained PAF in the limited non-contact conflict. EIAD will play an equal if not a more vital role in future conflicts, as it will directly impact all surface operations in both continental and maritime domains. Another defining takeaway is the critical necessity of ensuring an asymmetric range advantage in both air-to-air and surface-to-air weapons for AD to retain India's offensive advantage by enabling the domination of adversarial airspaces and its control. It has also laid bare the limits of air denial as a concept, having failed

to safeguard Pakistan. Another sobering fact that emerges is that, given the large-scale proliferation of manned/unmanned aerial platforms and weapons, there are serious limits to the AD of the nation. Considering India's long, hostile land borders, the volume and scale of sovereign airspace over its landmass and extensive island territories, defending it will continue to be a challenge between resource availability and threat prioritisation.

Viability of Calibrated Escalation:

The ability to prosecute an escalation-controlled conventional operations was established beyond doubt with India's 'remarkable shift toward a calibrated cost-imposition strategy that avoided full-scale escalation'. The option of long-range stand-off targeting at all depths avoiding contact or boots on ground, target-specific weapon employment for maximising effects, minimising of collateral damage with precision, scalability of lethal mass to the level of messaging desired, simultaneity of strike across a wide frontage, and the ability to defeat enemy AD decisively through technology and tactics for enabling unhindered operations, all came together to play an essential role in India's escalation controlled calibrated response.

Future Technology Imperatives:

Technology has and will continue to revolutionise the ways and means of conducting warfare and its critical role in a nation's full spectrum deterrence and security construct needs no emphasis. Future-generation platforms, advanced weapons with extended ranges, wide choice of target specific weaponry, survival and self-defence capabilities, multi-spectral sensors and weapons, critical combat enablers, advanced electronic warfare (EW) capabilities, real-time intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities to provide persistent-stare over battlespaces and areas of interest, robust and secure communications and networking, shrinking of shooter-sensor networks and shortening of kill chains, etc., are all areas where the Indian defence eco-system and industry need to focus. Balancing the defence budget for India's long-term Atmanirbharta goals and the unavoidable immediate purchase of critical necessities will be a challenge that needs to be addressed with eyes wide open towards India's future threat realities. Access to proprietary technology and supply-chain compulsions will continue to play a role in our defence industry, especially aviation. It will have to be developed with a long-term vision, which includes strategic partnerships.

Reality of Drones and Missiles:

The widespread proliferation of drones and missiles has widened the scope of air power both offensively and defensively. Their relatively low cost has democratised their wide range of sub-conventional exploitation, including ISR, delivery of a variety of payloads, suicide targeting, swarming, saturation, jamming, spoofing, decoying, etc., making them a new normal in India's threat and security response scenario. Despite the current limitations of their payload capacity, range, and speed challenges, and battlefield vulnerability, their sheer cost effectiveness makes them a future combat reality. Their increasing employment imposes high costs on the AD of a

nation, forcing it to commit costly high-technology weapon systems to combat the proliferation of cheaper, garage-manufactured low-tech weapons. The widespread employment of UAS over tactical battlespaces has caused widespread disruptions in conventional surface operations. Though they may not be war-winning silver bullets, they have certainly expanded the employment options of the aerial dimension in warfare. Missiles with their relatively larger payload provide effective long-range standoff targeting options at varying depths, and give mass to firepower. Drones and missiles launched from across the borders have also demonstrated their ability to bring the war to the doorsteps of a nation's citizens, deep inside rural and urban spaces.

Doctrinal Prescience and Reliability:

The IAF's revised doctrine of 2022 made several bold contemporary and future relevant changes. The inclusion of a section on NWNP air strategy was driven by 'the necessity to alter/control the behaviour of the adversary through calibrated application of kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities while remaining below the threshold of war and preventing onset of major combat operations.' The two doctrinal pillars of IAF's air strategy in Op Sindoor were: Exploitation of an offensive air defence approach that includes appropriate employment of sensors, platforms, SAM systems, and counter-UAS technology; And conduct of direct punitive air actions for strategic political signalling, while exercising control on escalation. The prescient doctrine credibly proved its relevance and efficacy of air power employment in India's larger national security and interests.

Conclusion

The bold employment of air power in 'Operation Sindoor should be remembered not as a dogfight between airframes, nor as a stumble toward strategic instability. It was a calibrated use of force, intended to signal resolve, degrade terrorist infrastructure, and demonstrate capability – without crossing the line into broader war.' It re-established the enduring relevance of offensive air power, while firmly establishing its role in India's sub-conventional grey zone conflict spectrum. There are many more tactical and operational lessons that the IAF and the other Services will have gleaned, and these will need to be addressed with a sense of urgency, given the high possibility of conflict repetition. Offensive air power and offensive AD are conjoined twins whose synergized application is a future military strategy imperative. The coming together of the Services, the free hand given by the Government, and the strategic maturity displayed by the Armed Forces leadership to assess all the military options available and letting one Service lead with the others providing active support, heralds the beginning of a new multi-domain, multi-service approach in India's military instrument and its force application.

Reshaping the Battlefield: The Decisive Role of India's Air Power in Op-Sindoor

Air Chief Marshal V R Chaudhari

On May 07, 2025, fifty-four years after the 1971 conflict, the Indian Air Force (IAF) successfully displayed its offensive capabilities by targeting deep inside Pakistan's Punjab, with long-range air-to-ground weapons. The IAF's fighter aircraft did not need to cross the International Border (IB) to launch these weapons. This effective use of offensive air power, while retaining escalation dominance, reflected meticulous planning and preparations by the IAF during Operation Sindoor.

The spectacular strikes on the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) HQs at Muridke and Bhawalpur required an in-depth analysis of the target 'system.' The urban environment that housed these targets presented significant challenges, including the need to distinguish combatants from civilians cohabiting in crowded localities. Therefore, the objectives included both the successful neutralization of non-state actors and their supporting infrastructure, as well as suppressing the counter-offensive capabilities and actions of the Pakistani Air Force (PAF), while ensuring minimal collateral damage through precision targeting.

This chapter examines the IAF's strategic and operational approach during Op Sindoor, focusing on the integration of advanced technologies, evolving tactics, and doctrinal adaptations that enabled the success of these strikes. It also explores the implications of these developments for the future employment of air power in complex, no-war, no-peace scenarios, emphasizing the IAF's ability to leverage flexibility, precision, and responsiveness to maintain a decisive edge.

IAF's response to the Changing Character of Warfare

Recent conflicts, across different geographical contexts, have shown that the character of warfare is evolving rapidly, even if the nature of war remains the same. Technology is the

most significant driver of this change, having introduced new domains of warfare and innovative methods of conducting conventional wars. In the India-Pak context, the developments in the air domain could be seen through changes in the following technologies:

Air-to-air weapons

Examining the India-Pakistan dyad, in September 1965, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) reportedly equipped some of its F-86F Sabre fighter aircraft with Sidewinder heat-seeking missiles, which had a range of approximately three miles. While this was still within visual range, it marked the transition from being prepared not only for gunfights but also for air-to-air missile combat. Although only a handful of Sabres were equipped with missiles, the IAF had to assume that every F-86 it encountered was carrying them.

Over the next five decades, there was incremental growth in the capabilities of air-launched weapons. Radar-guided air-to-air missiles could boast a range of 50 nautical miles (almost 100 km). The induction of the MiG-23MF aircraft into the IAF in 1982-83 introduced the first Beyond-Visual-Range Air-to-Air Missile (BVR AAM) to our inventory. This was a formidable counter to the PAF's newly acquired F-16s. Shortly thereafter, the Mirage 2000 was inducted, which came with the Matra Magic and Super 530D missiles. The MiG-29 air superiority fighters that joined the IAF in 1987 were equipped with all-aspect close combat missiles and radar-guided and heat-seeking BVR missiles. During the Kargil conflict, the BVRs carried on the MiG-29 and M-2000 helped the IAF maintain its edge.

With the induction of the Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missile (AMRAAM) into the PAF, this advantage was blunted, necessitating the development of new tactics. Over the past decade, new seeker technologies, coupled with ramjets and dual-pulse motors, have led to the emergence of missiles such as the Meteor, AIM-120, and the Chinese PL-12 and PL-15, which have brought about a paradigm shift in the way aerial combat is conducted.

The PAF procured the J-10C from China, and with that, received the PL-15 BVR missiles. This missile was never fired in any live engagement, unlike the Meteor or the AMRAAM; however, given its stated range, it maintained the long-range advantage over the IAF's platforms.

The Tactics and Air Combat Development Establishment (TACDE), the premier institute of the IAF, has kept pace with these technologies and inductions, continuously preparing frontline squadrons with tactics to counter such weapons. Simulations of these long-range weapons are typically conducted during all training exercises and practised regularly by fighter pilots. Furthermore, multinational exercises, in which the IAF has participated over the past few years, including the renowned Exercise Red Flag in the US, have focused on developing countermeasures and tactics against the increasingly long ranges and no-escape zones of these missiles.

In essence, what we witnessed during Op Sindoor stands on the shoulders of a continuous process of adoption of new technologies, assessing adversarial intent and capabilities in the air domain, and ensuring that the IAF, its assets, personnel, and tactics remain fit for purpose.

Air-to-ground weapons

In the realm of air-to-ground weapons, conventional gravity-drop bombs and unguided rockets were the mainstay of the IAF till beam-riding or laser-guided bombs and rockets appeared. The laser designation pods on the aircraft and with the ground forces could point a laser beam at the target. The fighter aircraft would then release the weapon to ride on the laser beam. To enhance the target tracking range, airborne forward air controllers in light utility helicopters were trained to designate targets. It was expected that drones would take over this role, but before the transition could occur, technology provided First-Person View (FPV) drones that can seek and destroy targets without requiring high-risk fighter attacks.

As guidance technology improved, these air-to-surface weapons could be launched from increasingly longer stand-off ranges. Range extension kits were added to conventional bombs to make them glide over long distances to their target, aided by new-generation guidance systems. During the Kargil conflict, the precise targeting of enemy bunkers at altitudes of 18,000 feet was achieved through the quick integration of laser designation pods on the Mirage 2000 aircraft, which guided the bombs through the small openings of the stone bunkers. These pods can now be fitted onto all IAF aircraft, providing excellent offensive strike capability.

Today, air-launched BrahMos, SCALP, and High-Speed Low Drag (HSLD) bombs of the IAF provide pinpoint targeting accuracy after being released from well within our territory. Naturally, these would be the weapons of choice for taking down targets deep inside enemy territory. The satellite imagery of targets in Pakistan after the IAF struck them on 07 May 25, is testimony to the accuracy and lethality of these weapons.

Air Defense Systems

The active induction and use of BVR weapon systems impacted the utility of surface-to-air weapons (for Air Defence), as attacking aircraft would release their bombs from well beyond their sensor/weapon capabilities. This led to the need for Air Defense Systems (ADS) that could provide the necessary coverage and targeting. Initially, India's air defence systems, whether operated by the Army or the Air Force, were designed to intercept targets up to ranges of 25 km and were best suited for terminal defence. However, as weapon release ranges permitted the mother aircraft to turn away before entering the lethal zone of Surface-to-Air Guided Weapons (SAGW), it was decided to re-equip Air Defence units with longer-range weapons and simultaneously integrate these systems into a network.

The Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) was developed, which now connects all surveillance systems - airborne or ground-based - with shooters, fighter aircraft, and SAMs. The surveillance elements provide a fused, common air picture, which has allowed the IAF to maintain centralized command. However, due to the vast geographical span of the country and regional commands having independent control over allotted resources, the system allows for distributed control over Air Defence activities. Finally, the shooters, fighter aircraft, or SAMs are granted full authority to execute the mission (the shooters could either be aircraft or SAMs). This decentralized execution provides flexibility and a shorter decision-making chain. This feature of centralized command and decentralized execution sets the IAF apart from the other services, which need resources to be placed under command for effective utilization. The interceptors comprise fighter aircraft on three to five-minute readiness and an assortment of SAMs, including Air Defence guns. The addition of the S-400, Medium-Range Surface-to-Air Missile (MRSAM), and Akash missile systems has added the necessary punch to deter or destroy enemy air intrusions.

Thirty-six hours after India initiated Op Sindoor, hitting multiple terror infrastructures with standoff weapons, the PAF retaliated with long-range drone and missile attacks on India's airfields, military installations, and, civilian habitations. All these attacks were thwarted by the Air Defence systems that have been networked to provide longer interception ranges and a much higher probability of kill. During Pakistan's retaliatory strikes, India's air defense systems demonstrated the utility of centralized command, distributed control, and decentralized execution.

Key Takeaways

Operation Sindoor highlights the transformative impact of air power in achieving strategic objectives with precision and controlled escalation. The following takeaways provide specific insights into the IAF's capabilities and their implications for future operations, grounded in the operation's outcomes and credible technological and doctrinal trends:

- Airpower as a first choice of deterrence and compellence: Air power's inherent speed, reach, responsiveness, and accuracy will always make it the preferred instrument of choice for most future operations. The IAF's doctrine, published in 2022, clearly brings out the close connection between India's national security and its air power. The doctrine enunciates the need for the nation to have a greater understanding of air power, based on which national security planners can leverage this important military instrument. So far, the flawed approach to viewing air power as merely an arm to support joint operations has significantly limited the nation's strategic options and narrowed down its security response matrix. The doctrine has highlighted that effective use of offensive air power in a nation's military strategy can often bring about effects that cannot be achieved by other kinetic and

non-kinetic means. However, the use of drones or conventional ballistic missiles should not be seen as a silver bullet, unless they are available in such large numbers that they can match the Net Explosive Content (NEQ) and CEP of long-range air-launched weapons. Integration of weapons matching the capability of Brahmos/Scalp on all combat aircraft of the IAF will provide the necessary weight of attack to execute the core missions of the IAF.

- Weapon procurement specifications need to be redefined, considering that there is no time for incremental enhancement of capabilities: A large leap is essential if we are to remain at par with, or ahead of, our adversaries. Our present capability enhancement plan is based on a standard recapitalization program that seeks to replace aging platforms with newer and more capable platforms. A multi-domain approach to include cyber and space-based capabilities is necessary. An immediate upgrade of all existing platforms to carry long-range stand-off weapons is essential. Capabilities with persistence, range, and survivability will be key features of upgrades. Air-launched weapons need to be miniaturized more quickly to allow more weapons to be carried on each aircraft. Our standoff capabilities should broadly consist of a mix of 4.5-5 gen aircraft that can penetrate/neutralize enemy AD, at the same time launch long-range precision weapons, complemented by conventional ballistic or cruise missiles launched from the ground, along with short-range drones.
- Aerospace domain awareness must be strengthened: This requires the seamless integration of airborne and ground-based sensors with space-based assets, providing information on all cooperative and non-cooperative targets, up to near space. The ability to monitor and analyse all activities in the airspace cannot rely only on ground-based radars. It needs to be supplemented with airborne and space-based sensors, all interlinked with high-speed information processing tools to provide the necessary information superiority for decision making. Procurement of passive radars, acoustic, EO/IR sensors, and High Altitude Pseudo Satellites (HAPS) will enhance situational awareness and provide necessary redundancy to conventional radars.
- Balanced force — either for defence or offence—would require an amalgamation of closely networked systems: Along with a stand-off force, we need an attritable force. The stand-off force would broadly consist of non-penetrating platforms capable of delivering large volumes of weapons from beyond the lethal range of Air Defence systems. The attritable force would consist of a large number of drones with modular payloads that can be reused multiple times but are also inexpensive enough that losing some in a high-threat environment is acceptable.
- We need to carry out an assessment of the effectiveness, technological maturity, expected cost, and dependencies of a drone-based force: Concepts of operation can only be validated and developed to make them effective in the expected operational environment through

such an exercise. Since a drone force can only supplement the offensive capabilities of air power, creating an independent structure for their usage is neither prudent nor utilitarian. Considering the contested airspace in our environment and the survivability of drones, our development and production of drones should focus on anti-radiation loitering munitions, FPV drones, mini AEW drones, and stealthy/highly manoeuvrable platforms that can endure the air defences of our adversaries. Given the exponential rate of development of drones, our procurement policies should allow for purchase from multiple sources simultaneously and with a tolerance to upgrade SQRs based on the maturity of technology.

- Update IAF doctrine based on lessons: The IAF has always updated its doctrine based on the geopolitical landscape, technological developments, and lessons learnt from previous conflicts. It clearly understands that doctrines should not be dogmatic and that there is no set time period for updating them. Based on the conduct of Op-Sindoor, we have seen that airspace control depends largely on sensor dominance. Wielding a longer stick than the adversary is essential not only for air operations to succeed, but also for follow-on ground action to be conducted. Cross-domain integration and joint planning are essential for any situation. Centralised command, distributed control, and decentralised execution work best in our context. While military hardware from China would give Pakistan an assured capability, it is the sharing of air domain awareness that enhances it. Denying an advantage of situational awareness should be a doctrinal precept for the Indian Armed Forces.

These takeaways reflect the IAF's operational success and provide a roadmap for sustained dominance through technological innovation, doctrinal refinement, and integrated joint operations.

The Pakistan Air Force: From Balakot to Pahalgam

Bashir Ali Abbas

On May 7, 2024, the Indian Air Force (IAF) deployed a combination of multi-role fighter aircraft, along with uncrewed aerial vehicles, to strike nine terrorist targets inside Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir and deep within Pakistan. The IAF's fighters achieved their mission objectives in 25 minutes by staying within Indian airspace and relying on long-range stand-off munitions to strike the targets. The joint Indian Army-Indian Air Force operation occurred nearly two weeks after Pakistan-sponsored terrorists killed 26 civilians in Kashmir's Pahalgam on April 22. In these two weeks, as the Pakistani military anticipated a cross-border military response from India, New Delhi made its intentions clear on April 29, with the Prime Minister giving the armed forces "complete freedom to decide on the mode, targets and timing" of India's response. Given the experience of both states in the 2019 Pulwama-Jabba Top crisis after the Pulwama terror attack, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) declared that it had scrambled over 40 aircraft, including its latest J-10CE fighters, to take on the IAF. Later, Pakistan claimed that its beyond visual range air-to-air missiles had shot down three Rafales, one Sukhoi SU30MKI, and one MiG29 of the Indian Air Force, after the largest air battle in modern South Asian history. These claims remain unverified. However, the PAF's evolution since its experience in the 2019 crisis has been well evident.

Doctrinal/Operational Evolution

Across the history of India-Pakistan conflicts and wars, the Pakistan Air Force has played a subservient role to the Pakistan Army, with decision-making almost always having been an exclusive Army domain. In the last six years, however, India and Pakistan have engaged in two crises, both sparked by Pakistan-sponsored terror attacks in India, and both resulting in the principal contest being fought out in the aerial domain. In India (whose own Air Force has different concepts of warfare compared to the Army), the organizational consequences were negligible, with the IAF getting its due share of credit. In Pakistan, however, the PAF emerged in a rare instance of a non-Army service that dominated Pakistan's politico-military narrative

This essay is written by deliberately relying on Pakistani sources – official, academic, analytical, and journalistic – to represent Pakistan's assessment of its aerial performance.

after both the 2019 and 2025 crises – displaying the full operationalization of its doctrine to deter and defend Pakistan from the air, apart from its traditional role of support for ground operations. The 2019 crisis with India, especially, was illuminating for the PAF.

Lessons from Pulwama-Jabba Top Crisis of 2019

The key lesson for the PAF during the IAF's Op Bandar (code name for IAF's Balakot airstrikes) on February 26, 2019, was two-pronged – that the IAF's Mirage 2000s were able to deliver ordnance from as far as 40 km away, and that interception of the ingressing IAF aircraft was not possible. The latter, based on Air Cdre Kaiser Tufail's assessment, was because – first, the hostile intentions of the IAF fighters could not be read as they were flying within Indian territory and Pakistan could not fire first and “be accused of unprovoked aggression”, and second, that the IAF fighters “turned back rapidly” and could not be chased as the release of bombs “was discovered only after some time”.

Arguably, despite detecting Indian fighters within Indian airspace, the PAF was guided by the lack of precedent of the use of air power alone for a limited strike by India. Even if it anticipated potential or actual ingress of aircraft, the PAF evidently did not scramble to ‘deter and deny’ in time, which supplemented its inaccurate reading of Indian intentions. Subsequently, the Pakistani political and military leadership shifted the goalpost to secure the credibility of its deterrence posture. It argued that IAF jets had not hit their targets, and Pakistan treated the IAF operation only as one violating Pakistani sovereignty, which could then be responded to with a proportional action by demonstrating the PAF's ability to also drop ordnance on Indian territory, without needing to strike military targets directly. This would allow Pakistan to meet India on the escalation ladder (in Pakistan's view) and protect the credibility of its threats.

This Pakistani action was executed on February 27, as Indian Air Force fighter aircraft were on defensive combat air patrol near Bandipora (Mirage 2000s) and Naushera (Sukhoi SU30MKIs) while a number of MiG-21s remained on operational readiness patrol. The PAF's two flights of four JF-17s and four F-16s were meant to tackle the IAF's Mirage and Sukhoi fighters, respectively, while the main strike packages on Mirage IIIs were escorted by a second flight of JF-17s and F-16s. Multiple international and Pakistani sources agree that the 18-odd PAF aircraft's engagement was directed and controlled by a Saab-2000-based Erieye AEW&C.

- The PAF's Mirage IIIs and JF-17s, when equipped with H-4 stand-off weapons and range extension kits, could both reach their targets within enemy territory but stay out of range for defending Indian aircraft. The Erieye's success in providing battlefield awareness and tracking IAF aircraft cemented the value of network-centric warfighting to the Pakistan Air Force. When contrasted with the IAF's lack of an operational data link (especially with its diverse platforms), the PAF's network-centric learnings have stood in sharper relief.

- Despite the BVR range, the JF-17s were unsuccessful in generating firing solutions for the IAF's Mirage 2000s. Here, even as its F-16s fared better in altitude and armament, their AMRAAMS failed to hit a single IAF SU-30. However, the PAF's intent to destroy Indian aircraft was categorically evident, with their failure being caused principally due to insufficient capabilities/tactics.
- Despite the Erieye AEW&C providing direction to the PAF, the IAF's MiG-21s operating from near the Pir Panjal range managed to disrupt the PAF's main strike package, forcing the adversary to turn around. However, Pakistan's successful radio jamming led to an Indian MiG 21 missing the IAF's 'turn cold' order, resulting in its shooting down. The Pakistan Air Force categorically denies that the Indian MiG shot down a Pakistani F-16.

Broadly, like most professional air forces globally, the PAF observed in 2019 that the entire air battle was beyond visual range, with no scope for classic dogfighting – a first in the subcontinent's military history.

Lessons from CT Ops in Iran/Afghanistan

While not directly relevant to the PAF's ability to fight the IAF, the PAF has also had steady experience on other fronts. Objectively, the PAF has flown more combat missions in the last five years since Balakot than the IAF, with a focus on air-to-ground roles. For instance, Pakistan has been bombing Afghan territories since its inception as a state, from the Waziristan rebellion of 1949 till the fresh escalation with Taliban-ruled Kabul post 2021. However, in the last two years, the PAF has shown greater proclivity to be used for cross-border counter-terrorism missions in Afghanistan's Paktika and Khost provinces – using its JF-17s, Mirage IIIs, and F-16s.

More importantly, in January 2024, Iran and Pakistan exchanged airstrikes against Baloch targets in each other's territory, and the PAF used the J-10CE for its first operational deployment. Even if used as an escort for strike packages carried by JF-17s and F-16s, the J-10CE successfully aided the Pakistani effort in controlling the airspace. While this did not equate to fighting an adversary's air assets beyond or within visual range, it provided crucial experience to the J-10CE crew in network-centric warfighting.

Anticipation of the Next Crisis with India

There are two main aspects to Pakistan's anticipation of its next crisis with India since 2019.

First, it is in terms of India's political will to mount a military cross-border response and the IAF being the principal instrument of choice. Following 2019, global presumptions abounded of India having set a new normal in the subcontinent where the use of air power alone is considered a non-escalatory instrument, and not the trigger for further escalation. For

Pakistan, however, it was viewed as an unprecedented escalatory step, which explains why IAF fighters' intentions on February 29 were given the benefit of doubt. Post-2019, however, the PAF sought to be prepared to tackle any such eventuality – to either prevent Indian aircraft from ingressing or intercepting them successfully and in time, especially if they drop ordnance.

Second, there is a monitoring of the Indian Air Force's key acquisitions and procurements. Between 2019 and 2025, the effective squadron strength of the IAF has gradually decreased, and the force in 2025 is the farthest from its sanctioned strength of 42 squadrons than it has been in six decades. This issue has been further exacerbated by prolonged delays in the HAL Tejas – both Mk1 and Mk1A. However, the single most important IAF acquisition, in the PAF's view, has been the Dassault Rafale, a French multi-role fighter potentially with MBDA Meteor BVR A2A missiles (with ramjet engines) and SCALP cruise missiles. While the PAF has also focused on the IAF's upgradation of its Sukhoi SU30 aircraft to 'Super Sukhois' that can operate in dense electronic warfare environments and potentially jam/spoof radar, this presents more of a threat-in-being for the PAF SU-30s (upgraded) are ready, rather than an extant threat. Presently, the SU-30 threat is increasing to the PAF only insofar as incremental upgrades in armament are concerned.

Modernization

The Pakistan Air Force, with a personnel strength of approximately 70,000 personnel, flies over 600 aircraft across categories, including over 300 combat fighters divided into 25 squadrons. Quantitatively, the PAF today is only four squadrons behind the IAF's 29 operational squadrons. Between 2019 and 2025, Pakistan has also sought to close the qualitative gap. Here, apart from the non-exhaustive lessons outlined above, the PAF's principal focus since 2019 has been to prevent another instance of IAF's high altitude fighters successfully ingressing and bombing Pakistani territory, without being intercepted. Since then, the PAF's modernization has been evident in both acquisitions and procurements, as well as in enhancing its combat abilities through more joint exercises.

In terms of acquisition, the PAF has relied almost exclusively on China for its new frontline fighters, even as its older American F-16s and French Mirage IIIs continue to play vital operational roles. By March 2022, on the back of an accelerated eight-month time frame, the Pakistan Air Force acquired and inducted 20 Chengdu J10-CE multi-role combat aircraft, with AESA radar and – most notably – the Chinese PL15E long-range (145kms) A2A missile that would be a riposte to India's Meteor. At the same time, the PAF unveiled its JF-17 Block III, also equipped with an AESA radar, with 20 (out of 30) aircraft delivered by China to the PAF as of March 2025. Moreover, by 2021, Pakistan had also inducted the HQ-9P air defense system – a Chinese derivative of the Russian S-300 and Pakistan's closest SAM system to the Russian S-400, which India operates along the Chinese and Pakistani borders.

More significantly, the PAF has also brought about a shift in its view of EW operations, making it a more central aspect of its doctrine since early 2024. From relying on EW for specific roles during offensive air operations and its traditional EW approach focusing on electronic attacks or electronic countermeasures through its multi-role fighter aircraft, the PAF now relies as much on its Erieye aircraft for electronic intelligence.

Moreover, the PAF's modernization has not been in equipment and platforms alone. Parallel to the PAF acquiring Chinese fighters such as the J-10CE, the PAF's exercises with the PLA Air Force increasingly focused on interoperability, especially since 2020. This was evident in the iterations of the PAF-PLAAF Shaheen exercises of 2020, 2021, and 2023. In the latter exercise, the PAF's new J-10CE and JF-17 jets exercised with the PLAAF in Northwest China before returning to their bases in Pakistan. Note that in the same year's Exercise Bright Star in Egypt (co-hosted by the United States) in which India also participated with its Dassault Rafales, the PAF only sent its JF-17s, and not its J-10CE fighters. As recently as 11 days before the Pahalgam terror attack, PAF Chief Zaheer Ahmed met the Chinese Defence Minister – Admiral Dong Jun – and both sides “agreed on enhancing Air Force-to-Air Force cooperation, particularly through complex and aggressive tactical-level scenarios during aerial exercises”, according to DG-ISPR. Presently, there is more public domain evidence of Chinese assistance to the Cyber and Emerging Technologies Cell at PAF's Air HQ to develop AI-enabled EW and real-time sensor fusion capabilities.

Cumulatively, the increase in the PAF's Chinese characteristics in terms of fleet and increase in combat exercises with the PLAAF, the Indian military assessment of active Chinese involvement in Pakistan's air action on May 7-10, is further vindicated.

Op Sindoor

Implementation of Lessons

Given Pakistan's spotlight on the IAF's acquisition of the Dassault Rafale across the last four years, the PAF's acquisitions, as well as its operational focus during the aerial BVR engagement on May 7, were on the Rafale. Apart from the PAF's claims of shooting down Indian aircraft, PAF Chief Zaheer Sidhu reportedly “wanting Rafales” during the onset of Op Sindoor, further indicates the high value on the Rafale's symbolism that the PAF placed. Operationally, like in the Jabba Top strike, the PAF failed to prevent IAF aircraft from delivering their ordnance to the designated targets, especially through guided stand-off ordnance such as the SCALP and Hammer. However, unlike 2019, the PAF promptly declared the successful interception of the Indian aircraft from within Pakistani territory. By May 8, Pakistan further claimed that shooting down Indian assets was made possible due to missiles like the PL-15E – a vindication of long-range air-to-air munitions acquired from China. Arguably, the PAF's objective was to ensure Rafale+ kills, even if India succeeded in delivering its munitions on terror

infrastructure; the IAF's proven ability to do so has long been evident to the PAF.

New Lessons

The most prominent failure of the Pakistan Air Force was its complete absence in action on May 10, during and after India's precision strikes on key centers of gravity. Certain targets, such as the Rahim Yar Khan air base, remain out of commission at the time of writing (August 3) and are expected to remain so at least until August 15. For the PAF, May 7-10 provided a key lesson – that despite losses due to possible tactical errors (such as under-estimating the range of the PL-15E), the IAF can ensure quick adaptability and return to offensive roles. Hence, while the PAF perceives categorical success in redressing their earlier shortcoming during India's Op Bandar (2019) – engaging Indian aircraft during their offensive mission – it has assumed a position of silence on its May 10 absence.

Like the 2019-2024 era, when India's advanced munitions and unprecedented willingness to use air power forced Pakistan into acquiring the J-10CE fighters, its fresh lessons post Op Sindoor are likely to include a focus on replicating the J-10's quick acquisition process for a fifth-generation fighter (possibly the Shenyang J-35s). Unlike India's acquisition of the Rafale, which suffered protracted delays, its search for a fifth-generation fighter continues without conclusive evidence of the direction of the IAF's thinking. With the indigenous AMCA not set to be inducted until 2034, India's requirements for transfer of technology and domestic production could possibly also delay a foreign purchase.

In Pakistan's view, continued modernization and upgradation of its conventional capabilities are crucial to ensure the credibility of its nuclear doctrine of full-spectrum deterrence, meaning that the Pakistani state can be expected to be even more willing to buy off-the-shelf without a focus on ToT. As Pakistani scholars have argued, Indian claims of Pakistan's nuclear bluff having been called are immaterial as Pakistan's nuclear weapons are not for use at the onset of a crisis, certainly not during limited exchanges of stand-off strikes. Rather, Pakistan's ability to use an adequate array of conventional options to meet India's conventional threat is its real deterrent. Without discussing the merits of this position, it is evident that such learnings drive it towards greater conventional modernization. Like in 2019, and just as the IAF is also doing, the PAF is likely to be guided by its performance during Op Sindoor/Op Bunyan al Marsoos.

Collectively, the above factors mean that the PAF is likely to get more aggressive in the future, with a potential willingness to engage IAF fighters even before Indian cross-border strikes.

Beyond Op Sindoor: Scaling India's Drone Warfare Capabilities for Future Conflicts

Lt Gen D S Hooda

Operation Sindoor has been described as South Asia's first drone war. Senior Indian military officials have spoken about the revolutionary employment of drones during the operation and the effectiveness of India's counter-drone systems.

Drones have undoubtedly become central to modern conflict, and India's successful defence against Pakistani intrusions has been justifiably praised. Yet a closer analysis of drone employment during the operation shows that drone warfare in both countries is still at a nascent stage. This is borne out by how the two countries utilised drones during the operation.

On the night of 7–8 May 2025, a day after India launched strikes on nine terrorist camps, Pakistan retaliated with drone activity targeting Indian military bases in 15 locations across Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Gujarat, and Rajasthan. The following night saw further intrusions at 36 locations, stretching from Leh to Sir Creek, with an estimated 300 to 400 drones. According to official briefings, the aim of these incursions was likely to test Indian air defence systems and gather intelligence.

On the night of May 9-10, drone activity was reported at 26 locations, spanning from Srinagar to Naliya. Most of these drones were successfully neutralised, though limited damage was sustained at Udhampur, Pathankot, Adampur, and Bhuj.

According to media reports, most of the drones employed by Pakistan were unarmed. A few specialised military drones, such as Turkey's Asisguard Songar and the Yiha-III loitering munition, were used. The Songar has a range of approximately 10 km and can be equipped with a light armament, such as a gun or grenade launcher. The Yiha-III is designed for precision strikes against high-value targets, but it remains a low-end capability compared to more sophisticated systems.

Indian drone strikes, though fewer in number, were more targeted and precise. These employed loitering munitions such as the Harpy and Harop. The Harpy is an anti-radiation drone designed to destroy enemy radar systems, while the Harop has electro-optical sensors and can engage a broader range of targets. Polish Warmate and the indigenously developed Nagastra-1 loitering munitions were also employed.

It is likely that some of the Indian strikes on terrorist camps on 7 May were carried out by drones, though this has not been officially confirmed. What has been revealed through press briefings is that on 8 May, Indian drones targeted air defence radars and systems at multiple locations inside Pakistan, destroying one radar in Lahore. On 9 May, four more air defence sites were targeted, with at least one additional radar destroyed.

On 10 May, the Indian Air Force launched devastating airstrikes on Pakistani airbases, command centres, and military infrastructure using long-range standoff weapons such as the BrahMos and SCALP cruise missiles, and air-to-ground munitions like the Crystal Maze and Rampage. These strikes were preceded by decoy drones and Harops designed to degrade Pakistani air defence systems.

On the counter-drone front, Pakistan claimed to have downed at least 48 Indian drones. The Indian counter-drone effort was commendable as it neutralised almost all Pakistani drone attacks. At the forefront were air defence guns like the L-70, ZU-23, and Shilka. India also has an indigenous Drone Detection and Interdiction System that would have played an important part in neutralising hostile drones.

India did come out on top in the brief drone war, but there are some important lessons. The reason drones are having such a significant impact on the battlefield is due to their affordability and ubiquity. \$500 drones in the hands of soldiers make aerial surveillance, precision strikes, and real-time intelligence accessible to even small infantry units. Low-cost drones also permit strategic reach, as seen in Ukraine's deep strikes into Russia.

It is not the technology, but the scale of drone warfare that is redefining warfighting. Both Ukraine and Russia are estimated to have between one and two million drones in their military inventory. It is the mass usage that is the fundamental characteristic of drone warfare, and this has sparked innovation in tactics and battlefield adaptation.

One important lesson from the Ukraine war is that large, slow-flying drones have limited utility. Drones like Ukraine's Bayraktar TB2 did have some success in the initial stages of the conflict, but as counter-drone measures improved, these quickly disappeared from the skies, replaced by thousands of commercial off-the-shelf drones repurposed as combat tools.

One might argue that a four-day conflict between India and Pakistan cannot be compared to the Ukraine war. There is merit in this argument, but then we should also not conclude that the Sindoor experience offers a reliable blueprint for future conflicts involving drones. In fact, it highlights several areas that must be addressed.

Indian drone strikes were precise but primarily carried out by specialised drones. Such drones are highly expensive; each Harop drone costs approximately \$700,000. What is required is a massive infusion of low-cost drones, particularly in the army. Units at the tactical level must then devise practical doctrines and battlefield tactics for their effective employment.

Recent media reports indicate that the Indian Army is set to restructure its infantry, artillery, armour, and engineer units to bring in specialised drone operators. This is a welcome step, and at a later stage, the raising of specialised drone units could also be considered.

India must also develop medium and long-range strike drones indigenously. Ukraine has created a series of drones with ranges of up to 1000 km, which moved from concept to combat deployment in approximately six months. While this wartime mobilization is not feasible in India, drone development timelines must be significantly shortened through mission-mode programs and agile public-private partnerships.

The military must also not rest on its laurels of having countered Pakistani drones. With few exceptions, the drones were mostly unarmed and posed little direct threat. An effective counter-drone system must address both tactical and operational levels. Frontline troops must be equipped with portable Electronic Warfare jammers and anti-drone guns that can disrupt a drone's radio control or GPS link. Modern optical sights like the Israeli-made "SmartShooter" use sophisticated image processing software to help soldiers hit fast-moving drones with ordinary gunfire.

At the operational level, the most effective architectures integrate long-range detection by radar and other sensors, mid-range disruption through jamming or spoofing, and close-in destruction by kinetic means. Typical counter-drone systems can detect drones at around 100 km and jam their control or GPS signals within a 15–20 km radius. Ukraine's cutting-edge project, Pokrova, is a networked spoofing system that can fake GPS signals over broad areas, essentially misdirecting incoming drones by feeding them false coordinates.

Above all, there must be a clear operational concept for the employment of drones. This would include their envisaged role, type of capabilities required, numbers to be procured, and their complete operational integration into warfighting plans.

Preparing for the future means thinking beyond the victories of Operation Sindoor. It requires scaling up the employment of drones, rewriting doctrine, and integrating drone defences into every level of the battlefield. While drones are transforming the battlespace, their true potential will be realised only through a shift from platform-centric acquisition to the development of a cohesive ecosystem.

