

# Restraint in Force Application for Strategic Outcomes

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## Abstract

*This article explores the concept of strategic restraint in the use of military force, using the case of Operation Sindoor (2025) as a contemporary reference. It argues that restraint in military action, though often unpopular with public sentiment and media narratives, can yield significant strategic, political, and diplomatic advantages. Drawing from historical precedents, such as the 1971 Indo-Pak War, Kargil Conflict, and Balakot strikes, the discussion contextualises India's approach to calibrated responses that prioritise long-term national objectives over short-term gratification. This article also reflects on the strategic outcomes achieved through limited force application, including geopolitical positioning, validation of defence reforms, and neutralisation of hostile infrastructure, while highlighting the risks of overreach. It advocates for mature political decision-making and escalation control as key tenets of effective statecraft in contemporary conflict dynamics.*

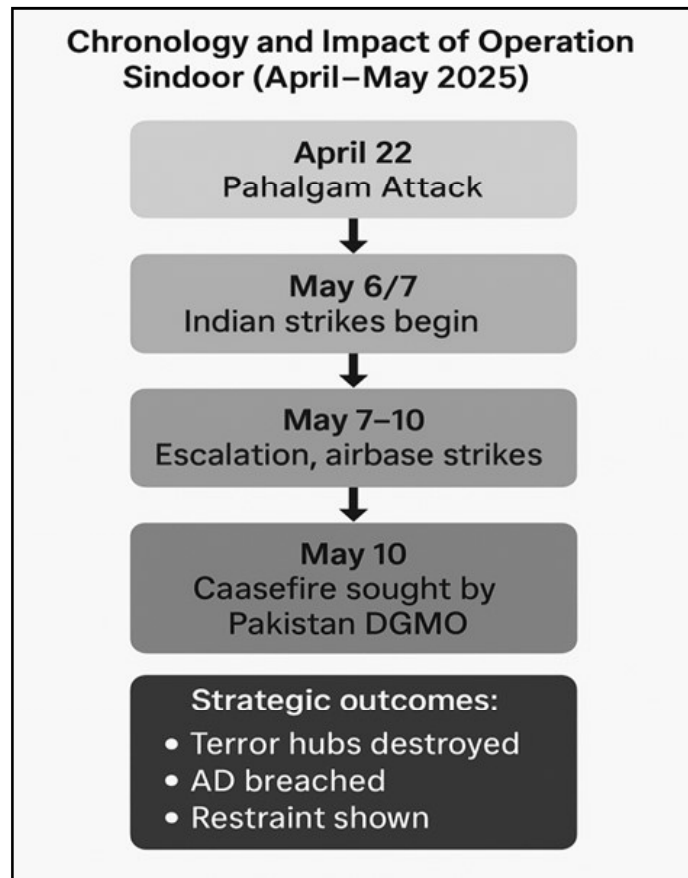
## Introduction

The events following the heinous terror attack in Pahalgam on 22 Apr 2025 reignited national outrage and demands for retribution. Amidst overwhelming public sentiment, the Indian government launched Operation Sindoor to deliver a swift and

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precise military response. However, the real story lies not in the magnitude of military might, but in the restraint exercised after the objectives were met. This article analyses the strategic merit of such restraint, in contrast to the often emotion-driven public and media calls for escalation.<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1**

*Source: Compiled by the author*

### **The Trigger: Pahalgam Attack and National Sentiment**

Post 22 Apr 2025, the anger of the Indian population was palpable and visible when 26 innocent lives were taken in the renowned tourist destination of Pahalgam in South Kashmir. Such terror acts were a norm few decades before, but had scaled down after abrogation of Article 370 in 2019. The nation was witnessing fruits

of peace in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and the local population was reaping the benefits of peace and stability. The dastardly act by Pakistan-controlled terrorists caught the attention of the world, as the killings were carried out in front of women and children after careful and deliberate identification based on religion. Men were asked to recite *kalma* (Islamic declaration of faith), and they were stripped down to check if they were Hindus and shot dead brutally. A country that had chosen to forget the genocide of partition—wherein lakhs of Hindus and Sikhs were brutally killed, and women were raped, murdered, and raped again—was bound to see such events repeated. The genocide of Kashmiri Pandits in the 1990s was conveniently brushed aside from the history by Indians and in recent times, when news of similar carnage emerged from Bangladesh after the elected government led by Sheikh Hasina was thrown out, the same was ignored again.

This time around, the images and videos of the incident finally shook the psyche of the entire country—except for a few—only because of the power of social media and digital platforms, where they streamed onto the mobile phones of everyone. Finally, the entire nation wanted retribution. For once, the political parties across the spectrum and the entire social fabric of the country came together. There were no religious biases nor were there any ideological differences. In the modern world, media can start wars, and if possible, fuel them to the last the person alive. Bringing down the enemy and the entire ecosystem was the singular message to the ruling dispensation.

### **Operation Sindoor: Execution and Impact**

Operation Sindoor was launched within 15 days. On the night of 06/07 May 2025, the launchpads across Pakistan-occupied J&K (PoJK) were pulverised. Following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's directive to 'Destroy those behind the terror attack in Pahalgam', the Indian Armed Forces conducted blistering attacks on nine terrorist launchpads and camps in PoJK and Pakistan's Punjab province. For the first time, attacks were carried out in Pakistan's Punjab, destroying the global headquarters of the infamous Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) at Bahawalpur and Muridke, respectively, reducing them to the ground. While the military objectives set by the political leadership were achieved by the armed forces on the very first night, the country was not

satisfied and demanded more. The Pakistani military offered themselves as further bait by sending drones and missiles across the entire International Border (IB) and the Line of Control and broke the ceasefire across the region of J&K. The cycle of punishment every 24 hours, in response to Pakistan's attempts to escalate, was measured, proportionate, and restrained—targeting only military objectives. Pakistan kneed early, within 88 hours, the shortest ever military conflagration in the modern history of military engagements, wherein on 10 May 2025, the Director General Military Operations (DGMO) of Pakistan asked for a ceasefire.<sup>3</sup> The entire air defence system of Pakistan was breached and laid bare, as Indian missiles and drones rained hell and death on 11 airfields and several other critical installations. Pakistan had already approached the United States (US) for intervention, but was politely ignored by India, stating that the issue was bilateral. Off-ramping had been offered daily from 07 May onwards, and Pakistan was required to seek a ceasefire directly. The pause button was hit by the Indian military on 10 May 2025. The military mission, as dictated by the political establishment, was achieved and much more.



**Map 1: Target Zones: Operation Sindoor**

Source: *Hindustan Times*<sup>4</sup>

### **Strategic Restraint vs Public Sentiment**

However, the nation, particularly the media, legacy, digital and social, were unsatiated and wanted more.<sup>5</sup> The demands from the political establishment from the other side of the floor were particularly feverish to push for more with obvious reasons and so were from those who were armchair experts on warfighting. The prevailing perception and sentiment running amok was that the pause in Operation Sindoor—a gesture of restraint—was a loss; a comprehensive victory was just days away, or so went the contention, the common refrain, and the public desire. It very quickly became a political slugfest and the decision, nearly a political suicide for the ruling party.

Is strategic restraint a curse word? A weakness? Non-muscular? These questions rise in the minds of the practitioners of warfare and statecraft, and with the common public every time the country has the winning hand. A citizen unaware of ramifications of application of force and the unintended consequences is obviously frustrated, as if unleashing war machinery is like a limited-over cricket match in the Indian Premier League where with more wickets in hand in the last few overs, a faster run rate is mandated to ensure a comprehensive win.

There are numerous considerations for the application of the armed forces, the last tool of diplomacy in statecraft. They range from the geostrategic environment, the economic compulsions, and the political atmosphere, including the rage and capacity of the population to undergo a prolonged warfighting scenario. Military hardware, human resource, morale, logistics, and overall stamina are also factors for consideration. At times, the winning side, in the process of overexploitation after an overwhelming victory, overextends itself—resulting in a severe turnaround, isolation on the world stage, economic setbacks, and strategic reverses. The strategic leadership, particularly the political dispensation leading the country, must be mature to ensure stringent escalation control, and restraint and rein in the military at the most appropriate position of strength, after which the direction and trajectory of the conflict or war cannot be anticipated. The recent example of the Russia and Ukraine conflict and the German offensive into Russia during the World War II are instructional. This has political cost and only a mature nation and leadership are capable of such a decision.

One needs to argue that all political dispensations, after the debacle of 1962—due to an over reach, with ill-prepared military and no clear mission, which resulted in a severe loss of face for the country—have since matured enough to understand the calibration and management of the military force. The political dispensations, over the past three decades, have shown great sagacity and an understanding of both the power and the limitations of using military force as the final arbiter when other elements of statecraft fail. They have displayed, repeatedly, a far better understanding of the strategic restraint and patience as compared to the strategic community responsible for various verticals of the elements of statecraft. They have also shown a great deal of insight into understanding public emotion and the influence of the geopolitical, economic, and informational environment since 1962. Barring the deployment in Operation Pawan in Sri Lanka, which, again, one could argue was not solely the fault of the political leadership but also the result of certain influences that changed the paradigms of military force applications. In all minor or major interventions/conflicts/wars within and outside the country, since 1962, the armed forces had clear mandates and missions. After achieving the outlined missions within the restrictive guidelines laid out by the leadership of the day, the military force was sheathed again. In each set, the strategic outcomes were immensely favourable. The same shall be in the instant case of Operation Sindoor.

### **Strategic Restraint in Past Conflicts**

The instances of force applications, since 1962, are those where the application of force was nuanced and followed by timely disengagement. The 1967 minor artillery duel at the tactical level in Nathula, the induction of forces through the heli-borne route to stop the Chinese in Sumdurong Chu in 1986-87, and the air-borne induction of forces for Operation Cactus into the Maldives in 1988 were mission-specific and the escalation was controlled.

The economic and diplomatic rise of India in the past decade has been unprecedented in a rapidly evolving and complex geopolitical and economic environment. This rise has not been appreciated and, therefore, there has been a great amount of friction. Yet, the calibrated and proportional response to the Uri incident through a surgical strike in 2016, followed by the Pulwama

incident responded by the Balakot strike across the IB while retaining the escalation control against an irrational neighbour, is a textbook case of restrained application of military force to meet the internal political aspirations and showcase the political and national will to the external environment.

Similarly, through the careful management of the Doklam incident in 2017 and the Galwan Valley imbroglio of 2020 against a far more powerful adversary (economically, militarily, technologically, and diplomatically), the country ensured that the military situation did not spiral out of control. It came out on top with the focus remaining on the long-term agenda of *Viksit Bharat@2047* (Developed India at 2047).<sup>6</sup>

There are many other examples of politically mature strategic decisions that were marked by restraint and patience; however, the 1971 War, the Kargil Conflict of 1999, and Operation Sindoor in 2025 serve as case studies in the consistent application of strategic patience and restraint, despite being undertaken by different political and military leaderships in contrasting geostrategic environments.

Therefore, in 1971, even when the rout in the Eastern Sector was completed within two weeks, more than half of the Pakistani Army had been taken as prisoners of war, and its morale was at its lowest, the government of the day called off the war. There were segments in the military dispensation and political leadership who wanted to push the advantage in the Western Sector, where operations could have been progressed by sidestepping the high on morale forces from the Eastern Sector. However, the politico-military objectives had been met and there was no reason to prolong the conflict. This maturity comes to those responsible and maybe it is cultural. The strategic outcomes were phenomenal once restraint was exercised and the urge to continue beyond the success achieved was controlled. India emerged as a responsible nation that had exercised the ultimate and the last tool of state policy—the military—to ameliorate the conditions of millions of Bengalis in the erstwhile East Pakistan who were being butchered, raped, and pillaged by the brutal force of Punjabi-led Pakistani Forces. There was *jus ad bellum* (the right to go to war) to cross the IB, and once the Pakistan Army offered surrender, there was no need to push the military offensive further. The last tool of statecraft was sheathed.

Conflict/ Operation	Year	Action Taken	Restraint Shown	Strategic Outcome
Nathula Clash	1967	Tactical Artillery Use	No escalation	Tactical advantage maintained
Operation Cactus	1988	Airborne insertion	Mission-specific withdrawal	India's regional leadership reinforced
Kargil Conflict	1999	Offensive in LoC sector	No expansion beyond LoC	Global credibility, sanctions lifted
Balakot Strikes	2019	Cross-border air strikes	No wider war	Counterterror message sent, 6-year calm
Operation Sindoor	2025	Precision attacks	Stopped post-Pak DGMO request	Redefined regional doctrine on counterforce

**Table 1: Past Operations***Source: Compiled by the author***Strategic Restraint Amidst Escalation**

India gained international respect for its responsible behaviour and its military might was acknowledged by the world. The country could focus on other pressing issues of looking after the population, uninterrupted by the enemies in the North and West. There were many other strategic outcomes, but the most important was that the stature of India grew worldwide as a peaceful and responsible nation, despite a powerful and professional military, and peace in the region prevailed for nearly three decades to come out of the poor economic conditions in which the colonial masters had left at the time of independence.<sup>7</sup>

Similar strategic restraint was witnessed in the Kargil War of 1999. Once the politico military objectives were achieved within the laid down restrictions of the government of the day, the ceasefire was accepted and India emerged as a responsible and mature nation in a strife-ridden subcontinent and was able to unshackle the chains of sanctions and isolation imposed in 1998



by the world community after the nuclear test.<sup>8</sup> The alternative was to have scaled up the conflict in depth through the employment of air force and/or expanding the conflict areas elsewhere into full-scale war without detailing other strategic outcomes. It is important to highlight that the current economic progress and India's rising stature across all elements of national power are the result of the strategic restraint exercised by the government of the day. The leadership took a decisive call to evict the intrusion, established clear parameters for conflict management, and called off the current operation once all key mission objectives were accomplished. The levers of control for escalation were kept in safe and mature hands.

Operation/ Event	Year	Strategic Action Taken	Restraint Shown	Strategic Outcome
Kargil Conflict	1999	Limited use of air power	Yes	Diplomatic success, image of restraint
Balakot Airstrikes	2019	Targeted non-military assets	Yes	Global legitimacy, de-escalation
Operation Sindoor	2025	Specific precision strikes	Yes	International respect, peace preservation

**Table 2: Strategic Restraint**

*Source: Compiled by the author*

A similar situation is evident in the current scenario of Operation Sindoor. Popular sentiment across the nation—particularly amplified by the media—calls for a war to decisively finish Pakistan. China and the deep state led by the military-industrial complex of the Western world wants the conflict to continue, if possible, scale up. The rest of the world does not care. The decision to hit the pause button—when the country was ahead and the military-terror infrastructure was being effectively targeted—is nothing short of political suicide, particularly in India, where actions are often politically motivated and rarely driven by national security considerations. Yet the government, which had laid out a clear and unambiguous mission for the armed forces, decided to call off the assaults the very next day of the first strike on 06/07 May 2025 and the same was offered to the Pakistani

establishment. The proportional, precise, and specific targeting of only the terror infrastructure—including their headquarters—while excluding military targets on the first night, and then gradually scaling up to include military targets in subsequent nights, solely to signal non-escalatory intentions to both Pakistan and the international community, is extremely challenging and difficult to execute.

The escalation control was firmly in the powers of the government that was also exercising other tools, such as suspension of the Indus Water Treaty, on the table to tighten the levers. Whatever the reasons may be—left to imagination and speculation—the Pakistanis sought the mediation from the US administration, which seized the proverbial ‘Last Straw’ to salvage some credibility, having promised to end the Ukraine–Russia conflict within a day of taking office, but failing to deliver even after five months of swearing in. The Indian government paused Operation Sindoor only after a formal request by Pakistani DGMO on 10 May 2025.

### **Establishing a New Normal in Regional Security**

With application of only a fraction of military power and far less than that in terms of the national power, the assigned politico objectives were achieved. The number of strategic outcomes of the 88 hours of display of military prowess were significant. The popular and emotional angst of the nation was met with the strikes at nine major terror hubs across, including the global Headquarters of JeM, LeT, and Hizbul Mujahideen.

In terms of strategic outcomes, a new normal has been established by India in the subcontinent aka the American way of ‘War on terror’. India will deliver punitive strikes by targeting specific and precise objectives at will—such as terror networks, launchpads, training camps, headquarters, and leadership. Additionally, a clear strategic message was conveyed to the international community. Having provided proof of the complicity of Pakistan in terror strikes in Uri, Pulwama, and many others attacks to the world with no avail, India will decide for itself the punishment to terrorists and their masters. The worldview and international organisations’ oversight has become irrelevant.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of application of force, limited strikes as punitive punishment has become a new strategic path as it provides a period of intervening peace. After the surgical strikes in 2016, post the Uri terror attack, there was a period of peace for three years till Pulwama in 2019. Thereafter, the Balakot strike, conducted just 12 days later, provided a period of relative calm lasting six years—until the Pahalgam terror attack. A gap between the sub-conventional to conventional has been created for subsequent utilisation by punitive punishment on Pakistan.

Another extremely important strategic shift that has not found adequate space for discussion is the suspension of Indus Water Treaty. Water will be used as a weapon and any treaty signed with any country is up for review if the national security is challenged. A very direct message by the Prime Minister signalling towards the Pakistani people was given on the same recently during a political rally in Gujarat, “I want to tell the people of Pakistan—*sukh chain ki zindagi jiyo, roti khao, warna meri goli to hai hi* (live a life of peace and eat your bread in calm, or else, my bullet is always ready)”.<sup>10</sup> He distinguished between the people of Pakistan and the establishment and said, “The people of Pakistan need to come forward to get rid of terrorism in their country. Their youth will have to come forward”.<sup>11</sup>

### **Strategic Validation and Global Messaging**

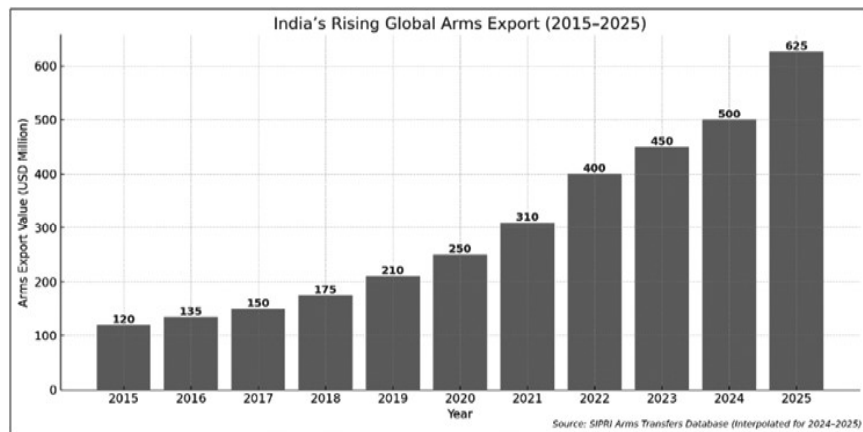
During this short period, a significant degree of validation was achieved across multiple facets of defence transformation. This included reforms in the armed forces, the effectiveness of indigenous systems, and the broader push towards indigenisation and self-reliance through initiatives like *Atmanirbharta* (self-reliance), the induction of Agniveers, enhanced jointmanship, the establishment of the Department of Military Affairs and the Chief of Defence Staff, and the corporatisation of defence public sector undertakings. Additionally, the operational integration of new platforms such as Akash, BrahMos, Akashteer, drones, loiter munitions, and advanced navigation and communication systems into a cohesive warfighting network was also demonstrated. Similarly, the breaching of the Chinese-based air defence systems and attacks on the Pakistani airfields with absolute freedom was an assessment for the Northern Front capabilities. These validations are showing enhanced interest in the world market for the Indian-

made defence products. It is a strategic outcome for not only economic enhancements in terms of export but also a reduction in the import bills, a degree of autonomy in exploitation of in-house developed systems. The finest outcome is the technological investments that will commence within the country through public and private enterprise towards niche and cutting-edge systems.



**Figure 3: Weapon Systems Operation Sindoor**

Sources: *Machine Maker*<sup>12</sup>, *Current Affairs Adda*<sup>13</sup>, *Military Watch*<sup>14</sup>, and *OrbitsHub*<sup>15</sup>



**Graph 1: India's Global Arms Export**

Source: *Compiled by the author*

India has reaffirmed its position in the world as a responsible nation that wants to rise in stature for the global good and avoids wars, a message and articulation, which has been the common theme for all political leadership since Independence. The military capacity and capabilities exist but will be exercised with restraint and in a proportional manner when compelled.

The Chinese equipment myth has been shattered. It will affect its military-industrial complex and the desire to export to the countries in the debt grip. The technology might as well have been busted. For a rising economy and a late starter in investment in technology, India had a doubt about itself. That barrier has been broken. The future has opened opportunities for research and development in niche and cutting-edge technology and manufacturing.

The world will intervene and international organisations will come forward to stop a brewing conflict. Moving towards war was a commonplace belief in the strategic environment of the country, even though the failings were obvious in the ongoing Ukraine-Russia and Hamas-Israel conflicts, where the same countries are fuelling war through technology, equipment transfers, and provision of funds. This incapability or unwillingness to intervene—as stated by US Vice President JD Vance on 07 May, the second day of Operation Sindoor—is an important strategic lesson for the political, military, and diplomatic leadership: the country must be prepared for a long war.

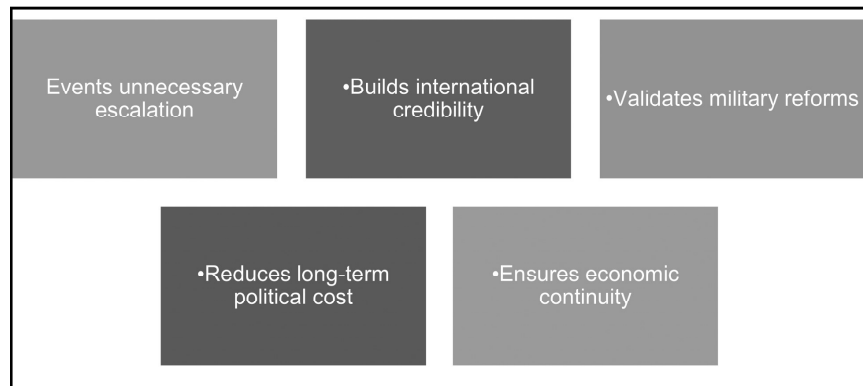
Lastly and most importantly, the nuclear bluff of Pakistan was called out. While the debate on the control and the use of nuclear arsenal by Pakistan, when redlines are crossed, will continue, the strategic message is clear—Pakistan will be hit before thinking of the employment of nuclear bomb and the consequences for Pakistan will be devastating.

### **The Strategic Value of Restraint**

There are many more strategic outcomes of the restraint shown during the current imbroglio, the true implications of which can be analysed only after a few years, as articulated by former Chief of the Army Staff General VP Malik, who led the Indian Army during the Kargil conflict. The leadership's shift in understanding—that *Viksit Bharat@2047* will be achievable only with a strong military

that ensures a *Surakshit Bharat* (Protected India)—is an outcome that is incidental.

As on date, there continues to be an emotional high and celebratory environment and cheer within the country which itself is a major strategic outcome and a strong validation coming from across the world of the success of Operation Sindoor. It is, therefore, imperative to understand the true value of restraint in application of military force, because overuse has diminishing returns over time, and it severely retards the overall growth of a country.



**Figure 4: Why Strategic Restraint Pays**

*Source: Compiled by the author*

## Conclusion

Operation Sindoor stands as a textbook case of responsible and restrained force application. Despite public clamour and political costs, India's decision to halt after achieving mission objectives has reinforced its position as a mature power. The strategic dividends—diplomatic credibility, technological validation, and regional stability—demonstrate the long-term value of military restraint. This article underscores that in the evolving landscape of hybrid warfare, the true test of power lies not just in its application, but in the wisdom to hold it back when needed.

## Endnotes

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