

Need to Focus on Hard Military Power to Ensure Deterrence

By

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Introduction

After 88 hours of clinical precision strikes, the Indian Armed Forces, which had been given full ‘operational freedom’ following the heinous terror attack at Pahalgam, Kashmir on 22 April, achieved their objectives in a calibrated, controlled, and decisive manner. What also stood out in an era of unending conflicts was the wise drawing of a finish line.

Operation ‘Sindoor’ represented an evolution in our war-fighting doctrine, showcasing the capability and ability of our Armed Forces. There was a marked escalation in the scope, intensity, and precision-targeting compared to India’s earlier responses to terror attacks. Soon after the Prime Minister articulated India’s ‘new normal’, the doctrine was clear and unambiguous. This watershed moment marked the unveiling of a new national security posture, one that treats state-sponsored terrorism as an act of war.

Parliament, Mumbai, Pathankot, Uri, Pulwama, and now Pahalgam – all these terror attacks had one thing in commonit was Pakistan’s use of terror as an instrument of state policy. However, after Pahalgam, India drew the ‘Sindoor line’ and targeted terror sites in the heartland of Pakistan’s Punjab, going for their ‘jugular’.

The fact is that our actions were aimed at forcing Pakistan to change its behaviour as far as using terrorism as an instrument of state policy was concerned. The question, however, remains that whether our political will and military action have ensured deterrence.

Understanding Deterrence

The challenge of deterrence, implying the discouraging of states from taking unwanted actions, especially military aggression, is a principal theme of a nation’s defence policy. In his press briefing after the initial operation, India’s Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri stated that Pakistan’s failure “to take action against the terrorist infrastructure on its territory” necessitated a military operation “to deter and to pre-empt.”ⁱ

Deterrence can be further amplified as the practice of restraining an actor in world politics, usually a nation-state, from taking unwanted actions.ⁱⁱ It involves an effort to stop or prevent an action, as opposed to the closely related but distinct concept of “compellence,”

which is an effort to force it to do something. If a state considers attacking an adversary, but refrains due to concern over that adversary's military power, it has been deterred.

Deterrence typically takes two forms: *deterrence by denial* and *deterrence by punishment*.ⁱⁱⁱ Deterrence by denial strategies seek to deter an action by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed, thus denying a potential aggressor confidence in attaining its objectives by deploying sufficient local military forces to defeat a design in other words convincing an adversary that its attack would be unsuccessful because it would be physically blocked.

Whereas deterrence by punishment, on the other hand, threatens severe penalties, if such an attack occurs. Simply put, it is based on the threat of imposing costs through retaliation. Steps taken include placing significant military capabilities directly in the path of an aggressor, which speak loudly and clearly.

Deterrence is usually unnoticed by the public, since it is about preventing aggression rather than taking visible action.^{iv} However, the terror crises faced by India in this century reveal where and how deterrence is failing or succeeding, since visible military decisions are now made public.

India earlier deterred terror attacks attributed to militants based in Pakistan by threatening a conventional military response. Following the Parliament attack in 2001, India mobilized its troops all across the border with Pakistan. As per Jaswant Singh, "the objective of India's mobilisation was to defeat cross-border terrorism and infiltration without conflict".

Pakistan, in turn, looked to prevent retaliatory conventional military action through the threat of nuclear weapons. The fact is that these terrorist incidents kept happening at a regular pace, followed by India's retaliation, suggests that there were gaps in deterrence.

Deterrence is difficult, as it hinges on the adversary's cost-benefit calculations. Despite asymmetries in power, a determined opponent may still opt for using force. As Harsh V Pant stated 'Pakistan is not a normal state it does not perceive the consequences of using force in the manner that other states do'.^v

The failure of deterrence has led to leaders and policymakers sometimes referring to military operations as being designed to "restore deterrence." However, even this can be a misleading phrase. As Professor Debak Das of the University of Denver states, "there may be something wrong with the method of deterrence".^{vi}

Over the coming weeks and months, analysts and policymakers will assess how successful both sides' military operations were in restoring deterrence, which remains a key question with the potential to shape regional security dynamics going forward.^{vii}

Nuclear Deterrence

The most powerful deterrent a state can possess is nuclear weapons. Soon after the development of these weapons of mass destruction, scholars argued that these

capabilities were so powerful that no two nuclear-armed states would dare to fight one another. In other words, they would be deterred from doing so.

However, while nuclear weapons may ensure stable deterrence at the strategic or nuclear level, instability, and conflict are likely to occur at lower levels because both sides believe in controlling escalation till that point. This led to Pakistan feeling there was space to conduct a sub-conventional proxy war against India.

India has taken action to punish Pakistan militarily in response to terror attacks. Notable examples have ranged from the development of the Cold Start military doctrine intended to quickly capture territory and extract concessions and Operation Parakram in 2001 to the “surgical strikes” across the Line of Control in 2016 and the airstrike at Balakot in 2019.^{viii} Each response pushed the envelope further, both vertically and horizontally displaying India’s ability to impose costs within a nuclear overhang.

Following Pahalgam, India dramatically increased the scope of its military action against Pakistan in response to terrorism. This represented an expansion in its willingness to conduct conventional operations beneath the nuclear threshold.

Operation ‘Sindoor’ has proven that conventional power, wielded with precision, can eliminate threats and convey a message without the attendant fear of a mushroom cloud.^{ix} Pakistan’s military-backed terrorist groups, who used to be secure in the knowledge that India won’t risk nuclear escalation, would no longer be able to operate with impunity. Pakistan’s space for nuclear deterrence has been shrunk due to India’s non-contact kinetic actions facilitated by newer technologies.

Escalation During Operation ‘Sindoor’

What was witnessed were multiple rounds of retaliation, including strikes on major military bases, and the use of capabilities never previously employed between the two countries.

On the opening day of strikes, on 07 May, the Indian Armed Forces demonstrated the ability to identify and destroy terrorist-linked infrastructure in Pakistani territory, employing stand-off weapons to deliver precision strikes at speed without crossing the international border. The intent was clear, India was focused on degrading the terrorist ecosystem that exists in Pakistan.

In the following days, operations expanded in scope, as Pakistan chose to retaliate and India then penetrated Pakistan’s Chinese-supplied air defence network to target selected airbases for the first time since the 1971 War.

Further, India’s multi-layered air defence ensured the security of its airspace by eliminating Pakistani drones and missiles. Operation ‘Sindoor’ was a calibrated use of force, intended to signal resolve, degrade terrorist infrastructure, and demonstrate capability and impose costs for supporting terrorism

Escalation control depends on taking carefully calibrated actions in the fog of war. As per Dr Walter Ladwig of RUSI, "this conflict illustrates that limited military engagement under the shadow of nuclear weapons can be contained provided escalation thresholds are mutually understood, signaling remains disciplined, and objectives are narrowly defined".^x

Application of Military Power

Operation 'Sindoor' demonstrated India's ability to apply military power with restraint and precision. India's signal of intent to retaliate against cross-border terrorism marks a clear shift in posture. Yet, 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.^{xi}

Hence, in a strategic environment shaped by tempo, perception, and public pressure, preserving space for discretion may be as vital as projecting resolve, particularly when domestic audiences may expect increasingly forceful responses in the wake of future provocations.^{xii}

Equally salient is the operational challenge of maintaining the effectiveness of coercive military action over time. As targeted groups adapt by dispersing their assets, improving their concealment techniques, and altering their operational rhythms, the demands placed on India's intelligence and targeting means will also intensify. An iterative contest of adaptation may also play out in which each side seeks to outpace the other's capacity for detection and response.^{xiii}

Conclusion

As the damage to Pakistani assets increased and their vulnerabilities were exposed, the Pakistani DGMO reached out over hotline to his Indian counterpart, asking for a ceasefire.

There was no doubt that India had achieved its stated objectives. Its decisive response was not a product of improvisation but that of the professionalism of its Armed Forces, and the structural reforms and investments in India's defence capabilities, which included doctrines, weapon systems, and infusion of cutting-edge technologies.

The contours of its response toolkit has been redefined. The instrument of force is now more calibrated and precise. There is no doubt that in future, India's response in degrading assets enabling terrorism will be of a greater magnitude. Given the fact that India was able to use force over a long trajectory and target Pakistan at will with precision and lethality, degrades its capabilities.

One of the lessons that stands out is that hard power matters. Though building deterrence through hard power is costly, wars are even costlier, which is a lesson Europe is facing presently, having prematurely celebrated victory at the end of the cold war by downsizing military structures and capabilities. Hence, there needs to be an urgency while addressing military imbalances, as despite being tactically and operationally successful, we cannot afford to be prone to coercion. Hard military power is therefore the key.

While India has demonstrated its muscular policy, the instrument of force needs to be continuously nourished to ensure that it always retains the element of deterrence.

Endnotes

ⁱ South Asian Voices. "Five Key Concepts to Understand the India-Pakistan Crisis." South Asia Journal, June 2, 2025. <https://southasiajournal.net/five-key-concepts-to-understand-the-india-pakistan-crisis/>.

ⁱⁱ Michael Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence" (RAND Corporation, 2018), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE295/RAND_PE295.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ South Asian Voices. "Five Key Concepts to Understand the India-Pakistan Crisis." South Asia Journal, June 2, 2025. <https://southasiajournal.net/five-key-concepts-to-understand-the-india-pakistan-crisis/>.

^{iv} "Five Key Concepts to Understand the India-Pakistan Crisis • Stimson Center." Stimson Center, May 20, 2025. <https://www.stimson.org/2025/five-key-concepts-to-understand-the-india-pakistan-crisis/>.

^v Harsh V. Pant, and Yogesh Joshi. "Operation Sindoor and Beyond: India's Response and Pakistani Calculus." orfonline.org, 2025. <https://www.orfonline.org/index.php/expert-speak/the-complexity-of-deterrence-calculus-india-s-pakistan-conundrum>.

^{vi} Five Key Concepts to Understand the India-Pakistan Crisis • Stimson Center." Stimson Center, May 20, 2025. <https://www.stimson.org/2025/five-key-concepts-to-understand-the-india-pakistan-crisis/>.

^{vii} Five Key Concepts to Understand the India-Pakistan Crisis • Stimson Center." Stimson Center, May 20, 2025. <https://www.stimson.org/2025/five-key-concepts-to-understand-the-india-pakistan-crisis/>.

^{viii} South Asian Voices. "Five Key Concepts to Understand the India-Pakistan Crisis." South Asia Journal, June 2, 2025. <https://southasiajournal.net/five-key-concepts-to-understand-the-india-pakistan-crisis/>.

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^x Ladwig, Walter. "Calibrated Force: Operation Sindoor and the Future of Indian Deterrence." Rusi.org, 2025. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/calibrated-force-operation-sindoor-and-future-indian-deterrence>.

^{xi} Pib.gov.in. "Operation SINDOOR: India's Strategic Clarity and Calculated Force," 2025. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2128748>.

^{xii} Ladwig, Walter. "Calibrated Force: Operation Sindoor and the Future of Indian Deterrence." Rusi.org, 2025. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/calibrated-force-operation-sindoor-and-future-indian-deterrence>.

^{xiii} Ibid

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