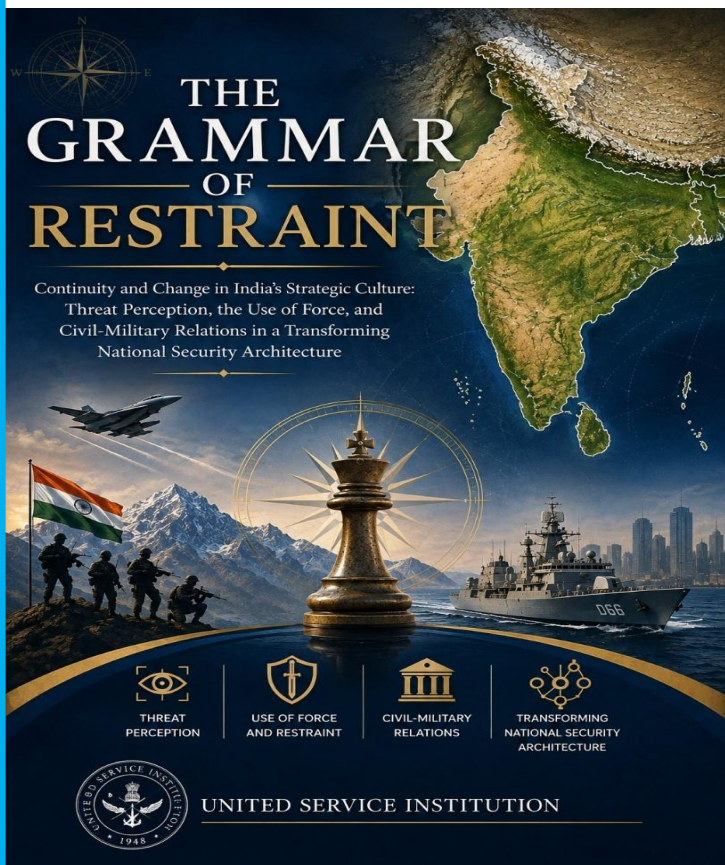


USI Occasional Paper

No 9 - 2026



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About the Occasional Paper

This occasional paper examines three interlocking dimensions of Indian strategic thought: strategic culture as an analytical category; the evolution of threat perception and the use of force, particularly the erosion of strategic restraint; and the changing institutional landscape of civil-military relations. It argues that these constitute a single system under continuous renegotiation: strategic culture provides the durable grammar, threat perception and force employment the sentences written within it, and civil-military institutions the mechanisms through which these are debated and executed.

Indian strategic culture is presented not as a coherent doctrine but as a contest among Nehruvian, neoliberal and hyperrealist strands, whose relative influence shifts with political leadership and external shocks. The paper traces India's response to cross-border terrorism from the diplomatic-coercive restraint of 2001 and 2008, through the bounded strikes of 2016 and 2019, to Operation Sindoor in 2025, characterised as a doctrinal inflexion without representing an abandonment of restraint. India's posture towards China, however, has not undergone a comparable shift, resulting in a two-track threat architecture.

In civil-military relations, the paper traces the transition from control through separation to post-2019 reforms, including the Chief of Defence Staff, the Inter-Services Organisation Act 2023, and integrated theatre commands. It identifies civilian sponsorship of military jointness as the more consequential change and concludes with recommendations for bridging the gap between organisational jointness and doctrinal, strategic-planning and net-assessment capacity.

The Grammar of Restraint: Continuity and
Change in India's Strategic Culture Threat
Perception the Use of Force and Civil-
Military Relations in a Transforming
National Security Architecture

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Introduction: Three Questions, One System

Three questions frame this occasional paper. How useful is the concept of strategic culture for understanding Indian strategic thinking, and what are its principal features? How have India's threat perceptions and its approach to the use of force evolved, particularly in relation to the notion of strategic restraint? And have changes in civil-military relations and in the institutional landscape of national security altered the manner in which strategic issues are debated and resolved in India? Taken separately, each question belongs to a distinct body of academic literature: strategic culture to comparative political psychology and constructivist international relations; the use of force and strategic restraint to deterrence theory and crisis bargaining; and civil-military relations to comparative institutionalism. Taken together, however, they describe a single system. Strategic culture is the accumulated grammar through which a state reads threats and licenses responses. Threat perception and the use of force are the sentences composed in that grammar in a given period. Civil-military institutions are the drafting process, the mechanism through which competing readings of the grammar are reconciled into policy and executed by instruments of state power.

The period under review, roughly over two decades since the 2001 Parliament attack, is unusually rich in material because it contains three genuine inflection points rather than mere policy adjustments: the institutionalisation of nuclear overhang after 1998, and its stress-testing in the Kargil conflict of 1999; the post-Uri and post-Balakot correction to the use of force against

Pakistan-based terrorism between 2016 and 2019; and the still-unfolding transformation set in motion by the creation of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) appointment in 2019, culminating in the events of 2025 and 2026 examined later. The occasional paper treats these not as isolated episodes but as data points along a longer trajectory, and examines what that trajectory reveals about the deeper structure of Indian strategic thinking.

Strategic Culture as an Analytical Category

The Tanham Thesis and Its Critics.

- The modern debate on Indian strategic culture begins, somewhat unfairly, with an outsider's diagnosis of absence. George Tanham's 1992 RAND essay argued that India possessed no coherent, systematically articulated strategic doctrine. It attributed this to a civilisational inheritance of cyclical time, cosmological fatalism, and a preference for accommodation over confrontation, which left Indian planning ad hoc and reactive rather than anticipatory.¹ The thesis was influential precisely because it was provocative: it offered American and Indian strategists alike a ready explanation for the absence of a published national security strategy, a standing net-assessment capability, or a publicly articulated doctrine comparable to those of Washington or Islamabad.

- The rebuttal, developed over the following two decades chiefly by Kanti Bajpai, Rodney W Jones and Rajesh Rajagopalan, does not deny the absence of a single codified doctrine but disputes the inference drawn from it.² Rajagopalan's essay in the same volume argues that the absence of declaratory doctrine reflects a considered preference for strategic ambiguity rather than a lack of strategic thought, and that Indian planners have, in fact, displayed a consistent, if understated, realist logic across the 1962, 1965, 1971, 1999, and post-2001 episodes.
- The distinction matters for practitioners as much as for scholars. Treating India as culturally incapable of strategic coherence invites analysts, both foreign and domestic, to dismiss genuine continuities in the Indian behaviour as accident. The more productive reading, adopted in this occasional paper, is that Indian strategic culture is real, identifiable and durable, but deliberately under-codified: ambiguity is itself an instrument, not an absence.

A Plural Framework: Nehruvian, Neoliberal, Hyperrealist.

- The most analytically productive typology remains Bajpai's tripartite division of Indian strategic thought into Nehruvian, neoliberal and hyperrealist schools.³ The Nehruvian strand privileges normative restraint, non-alignment reconceived as strategic

autonomy, and a preference for multilateral and diplomatic instruments over the use of force. The neoliberal strand, associated with the economic reform era from 1991 onward, subordinates security policy to the requirements of growth and integration into the global economy, favouring stability and predictability over assertiveness. The hyperrealist strand, most visible since 2014, privileges power maximisation, a narrower tolerance for provocation, and an explicit linkage between military capability and national status.

- None of the three strands has ever operated in isolation. The value of the framework lies in explaining apparent contradictions in Indian policy without resorting to charges of incoherence: a government can simultaneously expand defence cooperation with the United States, France and Japan, invoke strategic autonomy at the United Nations on the war in Ukraine, and describe itself as a leading voice of the Global South, because these are not competing policies drawn from a single doctrine but expressions of different strands operating in adjacent policy domains. The centre of gravity among the three strands has shifted markedly since 2014 toward the hyperrealist pole. The shift is traceable in the trajectory examined later, but the older strands have not been extinguished; they persist in India's continued abstention from formal alliance commitments and in its rhetoric of multipolarity.

Durable Features.

- Four features recur across the literature and across the empirical record examined in this occasional paper, and together they constitute what can properly be called India's strategic culture rather than merely its current government's strategic preferences. They are worth setting out in turn, though none of the four operates on its own; each shapes and is shaped by the others.
- The first is a continental-maritime imbalance rooted in the geography of colonial and post-colonial threats. Land threats from Pakistan and China have historically absorbed the greater share of institutional attention and resource allocation. India's maritime position in the Indian Ocean region, by contrast, has long offered the more favourable long-term strategic opportunity and received a smaller share of institutional energy.
- A second and closely related feature is reactive rather than anticipatory threat perception. Doctrine tends to change after a shock, not before one. The pattern runs from the surprise of 1962 through the Kargil intrusion of 1999 to Balakot in 2019; each produced a step change in policy only once the failure of the preceding posture had already been demonstrated, at real cost.⁴

- A third feature, and arguably the most distinctive, is a preference for ambiguity over declaratory doctrine as an instrument of deterrence in its own right, rather than as a gap to be filled once resources allow. It is visible in India's preference for maintaining flexibility around escalation thresholds and in the qualified character of its nuclear no-first-use doctrine.
- The fourth is civilian primacy expressed historically through distance and information asymmetry rather than through structural integration. The uniformed services were kept outside the core policy-making apparatus, a pattern Stephen Cohen described as control achieved by exclusion rather than by fusion.⁵

From Restraint to Calibrated Assertiveness

The Logic of Restraint, 1998–2016.

- The nuclear tests of May 1998 and Pakistan's counter-tests later that month created the structural condition under which the following two decades of Indian threat perception would operate: a version of the stability-instability paradox in which nuclear parity was understood, by Pakistan-based militant groups and their state patrons, to create space for sub-conventional provocation without fear of full-scale Indian conventional retaliation.⁶ Vipin Narang's later comparative work on regional nuclear postures situates Pakistan's doctrine

within a broader pattern of asymmetric escalation postures designed precisely to license low-intensity aggression under a nuclear shield.⁷

- India's answer through most of this period was diplomatic-coercive rather than kinetic. Operation Parakram, the nearly year-long mobilisation of the Indian Army along the western border following the Dec 2001 Parliament attack, achieved no cross-border military action despite substantial cost in terms of readiness, morale and international attention, and is widely regarded within the Indian strategic community as a demonstration of the limits of coercive diplomacy absent a credible threshold for actual force employment. The pattern repeated, in a different register, after the Nov 2008 Mumbai attacks: India pursued diplomatic isolation of Pakistan, extensive dossier diplomacy and international pressure, but no overt cross-border military response. This was strategic restraint as a semi-formal doctrine: costly, criticised at the time as an inadequate response to state-sponsored terrorism, but deliberate, and consistent with the Nehruvian and neoliberal strands.

The Uri-Balakot Correction. The correction began in Sep 2016. Following an attack on an Indian Army administrative base at Uri, Indian Special Forces conducted surgical strikes across the Line of Control (LoC) against suspected staging camps, the first officially

acknowledged cross-LoC ground action in the post-1998 period. The strikes were narrowly scoped, publicly confirmed but deliberately understated, and explicitly framed as non-escalatory. The pattern matured in Feb 2019: following the Pulwama attack, the Indian Air Force conducted a strike against a facility near Balakot, well inside Pakistani territory proper rather than merely across the LoC, marking the first use of airpower across the International Border (IB) since the 1971 war. Both episodes remained bounded in scope, target selection and messaging; both were followed by rapid de-escalation once each side had, in its own telling, restored deterrence.

Operation Sindoor and the 2025 Inflection.

- Operation Sindoor represents a change of degree sufficient to constitute a change of kind. Following the killing of 26 civilians—25 Indians and one Nepali citizen in a terrorist attack at Pahalgam on 22 Apr 2025, India conducted coordinated strikes in the early hours of 07 May 2025 against nine sites identified as terrorist infrastructure across Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir and, significantly, inside Pakistan's Punjab province proper, including facilities at Bahawalpur and Muridke associated with Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba.⁸ India also struck targets at Sarjal and Mehmoona Joya in Sialkot district by striking across the IB rather than confining action to the LoC or to Pakistan-administered Kashmir, dismantling the long-standing assumption that Pakistani sovereign

territory beyond the contested zone functioned as an effective sanctuary for terrorist infrastructure.⁹ Table 1 sets out the trajectory across five episodes since 2001.

Trigger / Year	Event	Indian Response	Doctrinal Character
2001–02	Parliament attack	Operation Parakram — full mobilisation, no cross-border action.	Coercive diplomacy without kinetic use of force.
2008	26/11 Mumbai attacks	Diplomatic isolation of Pakistan; no overt military response.	Restraint as deliberate policy, criticised domestically.
2016	Uri army base attack	Surgical strikes across the LoC.	Narrow, bounded, explicitly non-escalatory.
2019	Pulwama attack	Balakot air strike inside Pakistan proper.	First cross-IB air action since 1971; still limited in objective.

Trigger / Year	Event	Indian Response	Doctrinal Character
2025	Pahalgam attack	Operation Sindoor — coordinated strikes on nine sites, including targets inside Punjab province and across the IB.	Cross-border terrorism treated as an act of war; Calibrated military response under deliberate escalation control.

Table: Evolution of India's Response to Cross-Border Terrorism, 2001–2025

Source: Compiled by the author from open official and press reporting.

- The scholarly and analytical consensus that formed within a year of the operation reads it as marking the effective end of strategic restraint as a governing doctrine toward Pakistan, and its replacement by a posture that treats cross-border terrorism originating from Pakistani soil as an act of war warranting direct military response regardless of geographic sanctuary.¹⁰ A collection edited by Lieutenant General DS Hooda (Retd) and Happymon Jacob brings together military practitioners and diplomats to examine the operation's implications for escalation

management under the nuclear shadow. It situates the shift explicitly as a move away from strategic restraint toward treating terrorism as an act of war.¹¹

- A rigorous account should nonetheless resist the temptation to read the operation as an unconditional abandonment of restraint. Three qualifications complicate the tidier story, and each deserves to be taken on its own terms rather than folded into a single verdict.

- Start with escalation management within the operation itself. A contemporary assessment by the Royal United Services Institute notes that both India and Pakistan made deliberate choices about what not to target in the early phases, with India initially refraining from striking Pakistani air defences or forward-deployed fighter aircraft, even as it expanded the target set in response to Pakistani retaliation.¹² The more accurate characterisation, on this evidence, is not abandonment but relocation. The more useful conclusion is therefore not that India has abandoned strategic restraint, but that it has changed where restraint operates. The threshold for responding to a major terrorist attack has become less restrictive, while restraint continues to shape the scale, sequencing and escalation of the response. This is a more consequential change than a simple shift from restraint to assertiveness. It suggests that Indian strategic culture is being

reweighted rather than replaced, with the degree of restraint now varying according to the adversary, the nature of the provocation and the risk of escalation.

- A second complication concerns how durable the new threshold actually is. India has not published a formal declaratory doctrine specifying the conditions under which a comparable response will recur, so the practical effect of Operation Sindoor is narrower than it first appears: it narrows the ambiguity around the decision to respond, while leaving the scale of any future response as open as before. That is consistent with the third durable feature identified earlier, an adaptation of the ambiguity instrument rather than its retirement. It also builds in a commitment-trap risk. A future government facing a comparable provocation but opting for a visibly smaller response could be read, at home and abroad, as retreating from the new baseline.

- The third and most consequential complication is nuclear signalling. A central strategic question raised by the operation was whether Pakistan's doctrine of full-spectrum deterrence, built on the threat of early tactical nuclear use to deter significant Indian conventional retaliation, would actually constrain Indian behaviour when tested.¹³ It did not. Several analysts interpreted the relative absence

of overt Pakistani nuclear signalling during the crisis as evidence that the constraining effect of Pakistan's declared posture may have been overstated. A single episode cannot settle the question conclusively, and a future crisis perceived as higher stakes could unfold quite differently.¹⁴

The China Exception: Restraint Without Erosion.

The pattern observed toward Pakistan does not extend to China, and this asymmetry is itself an important feature of contemporary Indian strategic culture. Following the fatal clash at Galwan in Jun 2020, the first fatal India-China border confrontation in over four decades, India's response combined a significant military posture correction, additional troop deployment, infrastructure investment along the Line of Actual Control and sustained diplomatic negotiations on disengagement conducted over several years, while deliberately avoiding kinetic reciprocation. This reflects a rational assessment that escalation dominance *vis-à-vis* China cannot be assumed to the same extent as it can *vis-à-vis* Pakistan, given the disparity in comprehensive national power between India and China. The result is a genuinely bifurcated threat posture: assertive and increasingly punitive toward Pakistan-based sub-conventional threats, and cautious, denial-oriented and diplomatically managed toward China. Any account of India's strategic culture that treats threat perception as a single, undifferentiated variable will misread this asymmetry; a more accurate description is of two parallel doctrines operating within a single strategic culture, calibrated to two very different balances of power.

Institutional Transformation and Civil-Military Relations

The Old Architecture: Separation as Control.

- India's post-independence civil-military model, inherited substantially from British colonial practice and reinforced by Nehru's own instincts, achieved civilian control not through structural fusion of civilian and military decision-making but through the deliberate separation of the two: the uniformed services were kept outside core strategic planning and policy formulation, denied a single unified voice in the Cabinet Committee on Security, and subordinated administratively to a Ministry of Defence dominated by the Indian Administrative Service.¹⁵ The model achieved its central purpose, the prevention of military intervention in politics, a notable and consequential achievement given the frequency of military coups elsewhere in the postcolonial world, but it did so at a cost: the absence of integrated jointness, coordinated net assessment and a unified professional military voice in the highest councils of national security decision-making.
- The cost of this arrangement was most visible in moments of strategic surprise. The 1962 war with China exposed a near-total absence of coordinated threat assessment between the

political leadership, the intelligence apparatus and the military command. A more contained but still significant failure occurred in 1999, when Pakistani regular and irregular forces occupied positions along the Kargil sector undetected for weeks, a lapse the subsequent official inquiry attributed in substantial part to the absence of integrated intelligence assessment and joint operational planning across the three services.

Kargil to Chief of Defence Staff: Two Decades of Halting Reform.

- The Kargil Review Committee prompted a fundamental review of higher defence management; the subsequent Group of Ministers recommended creation of the CDS. These recommendations were subsequently endorsed, with modifications, by a Group of Ministers task force in 2001.¹⁶ Implementation nonetheless stalled for nearly two decades, obstructed by a combination of inter-service rivalry, principally the Air Force concern that the position of a single CDS would in practice concentrate power in the Army given its numerical dominance, and bureaucratic resistance within the civilian Ministry of Defence to ceding coordinating authority to a unified military office. A further review by the Naresh Chandra Task Force in 2012 and by the Shekatkar Committee in 2016, which specifically proposed three integrated theatre commands, produced incremental

administrative reform, such as the Andaman and Nicobar Command, established in 2001, provided an early model of integrated command.

- The breakthrough came only in 2019, with the creation of the CDS appointment as head of a newly formed Department of Military Affairs within the Ministry of Defence. General Bipin Rawat, the first incumbent, championed the theatre command agenda explicitly as the natural culmination of the jointness project begun with the Integrated Defence Staff in 2001, and his successors, General Anil Chauhan and, since the end of May 2026, General NS Raja Subramani, have carried the project forward.¹⁷

Theatrisation: The Unfinished Business

- The Inter-Services Organisation (Command, Control and Discipline) Act of 2023 provided the legal foundation for theatre commands by empowering a designated theatre commander with disciplinary authority over personnel of all three services under his command, resolving a jurisdictional obstacle that had stalled earlier attempts at organisational integration.¹⁸ The first tri-service command under the new dispensation, the Andaman and Nicobar Command, together with the proposal announced in 2024 to develop Mumbai as the first tri-service Common Defence Station to merge logistics and maintenance functions across

the three services, function as proof-of-concept nodes for the wider reform.¹⁹

- Tri-service net-centricity is indispensable. Theatre commands cannot function effectively with segregated networks or inadequate resources. Functional commands for space, cyber and information warfare, and interdomain interoperability must precede them. A common data architecture, unified encryption protocols, shared spectrum management, and clear lines of accountability are essential. Command authority without control over data flows would remain largely notional.²⁰

- As of Aug 2026, theatrisation is the sole recommendation among thirty-four Kargil-era proposals for which the government's final decision remains pending, according to the Ministry of Defence's own submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence. General Chauhan submitted his final report on the proposed structure, understood to comprise three theatre commands oriented respectively on the northern land border with China, the western border with Pakistan and the maritime domain, before demitting office at the end of May 2026, and General Raja Subramani has since carried the file forward, with a presentation to the Defence Minister expected in the course of the year.²¹ The process has not been without interruption: the Standing Committee noted that deliberations

were temporarily delayed by the demands of Operation Sindoor itself, a reminder that institutional reform and operational readiness compete for the same finite senior military bandwidth even in a period of acknowledged urgency.²²

- The most persistent source of delay across successive committees has not, in fact, been civilian reluctance. It has been inter-service concern, most durably articulated by the Indian Air Force, that subordinating scarce and inherently flexible air assets to geographically bounded theatre commanders would degrade the concentrated, cross-theatre employment of airpower that its own doctrine treats as a defining strength. That inverts a common assumption in the civil-military relations literature, which usually models resistance to jointness as civilian anxiety about a more powerful, unified military voice. Across this particular reform cycle, the resistance has run the other way.

Civilian Agency Reconsidered.

- The more analytically interesting civil-military story of the past decade, and the one most likely to be underweighted in conventional treatments, is not that civilian control has been eroded by the creation of a more powerful and unified military voice through the CDS position. It is that civilian political leadership has been the principal sponsor and accelerant of military

jointness reform that the uniformed services themselves, for institutionally rational if parochial reasons, had resisted or delayed for two decades. The significance of this shift extends beyond organisational reform. Civilian control in India is beginning to acquire a different institutional character: not control through distance from the military, but control through the direction of how the military is organised, integrated and employed. The emerging model is therefore neither civil-military fusion nor the older separation of the two spheres. It is a form of guided integration in which political authority remains firmly civilian while the military instrument is made more joint, more responsive and more strategically coherent.

- This reframing carries an important caveat, however. Organisational jointness has advanced considerably faster than either doctrinal jointness or the civilian side's own net assessment and strategic planning capacity. The Ministry of Defence, still substantially staffed and led by generalist civil servants of the Indian Administrative Service rather than by a professionalised, permanent cadre of civilian defence and security analysts on the model found in several Western ministries, retains the deeper policy levers of budget allocation, procurement decision-making and the linkage between defence policy and foreign policy, even as the uniformed side gains a more unified operational and

organisational structure through the CDS and the coming theatre commands. The practical effect is a widening gap between an increasingly integrated military instrument and a civilian policy apparatus whose own institutional capacity for strategic analysis, net assessment and long-range planning has not grown at a comparable pace. This gap, rather than any question of the military's political loyalty, which has never seriously been in doubt in the Indian case, is the central civil-military relations challenge of the present period.

Synthesis: What the Evolution Indicates.

- Read together, the three dimensions examined in this occasional paper describe a strategic culture that is neither the incoherent, reactive absence diagnosed by Tanham in 1992 nor a fully mature, codified grand strategy on the model of established Western powers, but something in between: a culture with durable, identifiable features that is actively reweighting its own internal balance of strands, correcting a long-standing threshold problem in its use of force against sub-conventional threats, and restructuring the institutional mechanism through which strategic decisions are made, all within roughly the same decade.
- Three broader conclusions follow, and none of them is quite as tidy as the headline narrative of an assertive new India would suggest.

- The hyperrealist strand identified by Bajpai has clearly gained ground relative to the Nehruvian and neoliberal strands over the period examined here, most visibly in the shift from restraint to calibrated assertiveness toward Pakistan. It has not displaced them. Strategic autonomy still functions as a working diplomatic vocabulary; India still engages the Quad and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the same season; formal alliance commitments remain off the table. Indian strategic culture in 2026 is better described as reweighted than as replaced.
- The erosion of strategic restraint, too, is real but partial, and it does not run evenly across the board. It is most pronounced in the sub-conventional domain against Pakistan-based terrorism, where the threshold for a major kinetic response has visibly narrowed across five episodes since 2001. Toward China it is far less pronounced; the underlying balance of power counsels continued caution, whatever the domestic appetite for assertiveness. A single narrative of Indian assertiveness risks missing what still holds on the northern border: a policy of denial and diplomatic management, not punishment.
- Finally, the institutional reforms of the past seven years amount to the most significant restructuring of India's higher defence organisation since independence, yet their full

effect on the quality of strategic decision-making cannot be assessed yet. Theatrisation, the central piece, remains unimplemented as this occasional paper goes to print, and organisational integration on the military side has already outpaced the growth of comparable civilian strategic and net-assessment capacity. The durable feature identified earlier, civilian control through separation, is being replaced by something new. That replacement is unfinished, and what it finally looks like will depend substantially on whether civilian institutional capacity for strategic analysis catches up with the integration already under way on the military side.

- The larger lesson is that India's strategic culture is not moving along a straight line from restraint to assertiveness. It is becoming more differentiated. Restraint remains embedded in the political and strategic vocabulary, but its application is increasingly shaped by the adversary, the nature of the threat and the anticipated cost of escalation. At the same time, the institutions through which these choices are made are changing, with greater military jointness being accompanied by a growing requirement for stronger civilian strategic capacity. The evolution is therefore best understood as a reconfiguration of the relationship between threat perception, force and institutions. India is not discarding the grammar of restraint. It is rewriting the sentences in which that grammar is expressed.

Policy Recommendations

Operationalise theatre commands according to a fixed, publicly stated timeline, subject to two important prerequisites. First, functional commands for space, cyber and information warfare should precede their establishment. Second, the transition must be deliberately managed to prevent operational turbulence or vulnerability.²³ General Chauhan's own estimate, made public before he demitted office, placed full implementation at eighteen to twenty-four months from the point of government decision.²⁴ A further open-ended delay risks allowing the file to drift into the tenure of a fourth CDS without resolution, repeating the pattern of the Kargil-to-2019 interval.

Build a permanent, professionalised civilian strategic analysis cadre within the Ministry of Defence and the National Security Council Secretariat, recruited and retained on terms competitive with the uniformed career track, to close the gap between military organisational integration and civilian net-assessment capacity.

Publish a calibrated, narrow declaratory statement on the threshold for future responses to major cross-border terrorist attacks, sufficient to lock in the deterrent gain achieved by Operation Sindoor without foreclosing the operational ambiguity that has historically served India well, thereby managing the associated commitment-trap risk.

Resource the maritime and continental dimensions of the theatre command structure in closer proportion to their respective long-term strategic returns, correcting the historical imbalance, while ensuring that the China-facing theatre retains the denial-oriented posture and infrastructure investment appropriate to the asymmetry in comprehensive national power.

Institutionalise a standing, joint civil-military net assessment body reporting directly to the Cabinet Committee on Security, distinct from both the Department of Military Affairs and the existing intelligence apparatus, tasked specifically with long-range threat construct analysis across the western, northern and maritime fronts, to ensure that a comparable investment matches the reweighting of Indian strategic culture toward assertiveness in anticipatory rather than reactive threat assessment.

Conclusion

India's strategic evolution is best understood not as a rejection of restraint but as a recalibration of where, when and how restraint is exercised. The strategic culture that once privileged ambiguity, caution and reactive adaptation is being reweighted by a greater willingness to employ calibrated force, particularly against Pakistan-based terrorism, while retaining a cautious, denial-oriented posture towards China. Simultaneously, reforms since 2019 are transforming civil-military relations from control through separation towards guided integration, greater jointness and more coherent employment of military power. Yet, institutional reform remains incomplete:

military integration is advancing faster than civilian strategic planning, doctrinal development and net-assessment capacity. India's challenge, therefore, is to align strategic intent, military capability and institutional capacity without sacrificing strategic autonomy or escalation control. The grammar of restraint endures, but the sentences written within it are changing—reflecting a more differentiated, capable and increasingly confident approach to national security.

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About the Author

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