

Operation Sindoor and the Battle of Narratives: Rethinking India's Strategic Communication

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Introduction

Operation Sindoor began in the early hours of 07 May 2026 in response to the Pahalgam terrorist attack. The Operation's first stage targeted 9 terrorist sites in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir and Pakistan-proper, and its latter stages destroyed multiple Pakistan military sites, resulting in the destruction of multiple strategic assets for Islamabad. On the Indian side, although both man and material losses were recorded, no strategic assets were lost. The Operation was put on hold 4 days later following a ceasefire call, on Pakistan's initiative, between the respective Directors General of Military Operations.¹

Following the successful execution of hostilities against India's western neighbour, the national mood took a jubilant turn. However, wars are a violent means of pursuing political goals, with numerous variables affecting their outcomes, requiring a close, individual, and impersonal dissection of their constituent parts to ensure mistakes are not repeated. In the same vein, Operation Sindoor is no exception. Its evaluation must extend beyond the battlefield to encompass the broader political context in which military operations were conceived, conducted, and communicated.

All wars have two components: military and political. Carl von Clausewitz, in his seminal work, *On War*, argues that winning in war is fundamentally a political concept. Military victory is only meaningful insofar as it secures the political objectives for which the war was fought. Battlefield success is therefore a necessary means in many conflicts, but political success is the ultimate measure of victory. Clausewitz's assertion applies perfectly to Operation Sindoor.²

Of the political aims, there were multiple, many of which were achieved. E.g., reestablishing deterrence against cross-border terrorism, imposing costs on Pakistan, and preserving escalation control.³ However, the war effort was found to be lacking in managing perception and in communicating military gains to the public (both foreign and domestic). This is doubly egregious as the Indian apparatus knew that Operation Sindoor was going to happen and either did not plan it comprehensively enough or failed to include a proper media management strategy in it.

Media Management

India's strategy to communicate its military gains relied on holding press briefings and utilising a mix of defence personnel and civil servants. Four such briefings were jointly hosted by Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, Colonel Sofiya Qureshi, and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh between the 7th and 11th of May 2026.⁴ One briefing was conducted by the three Directors General (DG) of the Tri-Services.⁵ Both were followed by one final address to the nation by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.⁶

There are various drawbacks to this strategy adopted by the Government for disseminating information. Firstly, in this age of social media, where most people receive their information through apps such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp (among others), simply holding press briefings, which, due to their nature, can only be conducted at certain points during the day, are a rather slow process. Social media operates far more quickly (on a minute-to-minute basis) than the aforementioned. Therefore, it has the advantage of speed. Meanwhile, Pakistan utilised its social media to spread disinformation, such as their military hitting the port of the landlocked city of Patna. Secondly, utilising Colonel Qureshi and Wing Commander Singh to address the press was very obviously done to send the message of *Naari Shakti* (Female Power) following the Pahalgam attack, where women were separated from their male partners. At the same time, the men were shot to death to create widows. Furthermore, Colonel Qureshi was chosen because of her religion to send the message of nationalistic Muslims being in service of the nation. Both reasons for selecting officers are sound. However, they should have been utilised as an add-on to the main press briefings conducted by the DGs of the Tri-Services. Currently, the posts of the DGs in the Tri-Services are tenanted by three-star ranks (Lieutenant Generals and equivalent ranks), by which point in their service they've had the experience of commanding a Corps (and equivalents) and undergone training at the National Defence College. Simply put, Colonels and Wing Commanders have less experience, training and exposure than the DGs.

Furthermore, and most importantly, press briefings, as explained above, lack the speed in disseminating information as compared to social media. Ideally, they should have been utilised only to address heads of state and for diplomatic purposes. For the public, both foreign and domestic, social media is far more effective.

Recommendations

India's propagation of its side of the story should have begun in the early hours of Operation Sindoor when the first nine targets were hit. India has a thriving podcast ecosystem on YouTube with some of the most recognisable names. The three top Indian podcasts (by subscriber count) are *Figuring Out by Raj Shamani*, *The Ranveer Show by Ranveer Allahbadia*, and *The Prakhar Gupta Experience*. These podcasts have massive followings (both domestic and foreign) and curate content from eminent and diverse guests. In the early hours of Operation Sindoor, the three above-mentioned could have been brought in (paired with one DG each) to produce 15-20-minute clips highlighting the actions taken and the reasons for their selection of targets. They could have been uploaded to the internet before the morning (and shared from all verified Government handles), before Pakistan had a chance to muddy the waters with its disinformation campaign, which effectively began around 10 in the morning on the 7th of May. This idea would have served India's information campaign extremely soundly, as these individual podcasters produced content with eminent retired Army officers on the same topic for an audience increasingly hungry for views of defence personnel on Operation Sindoor. Most notably, Ranveer Allahbadia (only 36-40 hours in the Operation) uploaded a nearly two-hour-long episode with Lieutenant General Satish Dua (former Commandant 15 Corps). The

most important point to note with this recommendation is that when Operation Sindoor resumes, this approach can be taken up and utilised with great effect.

Furthermore, there are lessons to be learnt from even the worst of enemies. Such is the case with Pakistan. Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations maintains a vibrant social media presence with thousands of employees, where even Twitter handles with limited reach and followers receive responses within 24 hours. In the same vein, a *sine qua non* of the Indian military's media apparatus is the creation of a DG-level officer who presides over a similar structure. The functioning, at least initially, can be facilitated by the retired officers of the Tri-Services. Every year, for myriad reasons, officers from the short service stream from all three forces retire, usually after 10-12 years of service (generally in their early 30s). They can be given post-retirement jobs as civilian contractual employees, preferably under the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff, following a mandatory training period of 06 months to one year. The underlying factor here is that those young, recently retired officers understand the workings of the armed forces and can, hence, translate operational details into workable media nuggets for mass consumption post-training.

Conclusion

In the end, the author concludes that the creation and management of a soft power mechanism is a strategic imperative as soft power acts as a force multiplier and greatly enhances India's ascending global standing. Narratives put down in media outlive the events and the individuals involved. There is an old African proverb: Until the lion learns to write, every story will glorify the hunter. It means that those in power dictate history and narratives. As long as one side controls the storytelling, their perspective will dominate and hence justify actions. In the same vein, the late Captain Vikram Batra's now-famous quote, *Yeh Dil Maange More* (The heart wants more), spoken in the context of recapturing peaks stolen by Pakistan, has outlived the man who said it. Most people may not be aware of the details of Captain Batra's service but will remember the easily quotable line. And that is the essence of soft power.

Endnotes

¹ "Operation SINDOOR: India's Strategic Clarity and Calculated Force", *Press Information Bureau*, 14 May 2025, accessed on 06 Aug 2026
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2128748&reg=48&lang=2>

² "Carl Von Clausewitz: On War", *United States Marine Corps University*, 1984, accessed 06 Aug 2026
<https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/EWS%20On%20War%20Reading%20Book%201%20Ch%201%20Ch%202.pdf>

³ "Overall politico-military objective of Operation Sindoor was to punish Pakistan for fighting a proxy war; Pak-sponsored terrorism is a well-planned strategy & fundamental rage: Raksha Mantri in Lok Sabha", *Press Information Bureau*, 28 Jul 2025, accessed 06 Aug 2026
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2149356&reg=48&lang=2>

⁴ Manjiri Chitre, "At India's Briefing On Operation Sindoor, 2 Women Officers Take Lead", *NDTV*, 07 May 2025, accessed 06 Aug 2026
<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/at-indias-briefing-on-operation-sindoor-2-women-officers-wing-commander-vyomika-singh-and-colonel-sofiya-gureshi-take-lead-8351354>

⁵ "Press Briefing on Operation Sindoor", *PIB India*, YouTube Video, 11 May 2025, accessed 06 Aug 2025
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUXwnp_6vB8

⁶ "English rendering of PM's address to the Nation (May 12, 2025)", *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, 14 May 2025, accessed 06 Aug 2026
https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/39498/English_rendering_of_PMs_address_to_the_Nation_May_12_2025

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