

Operation Sindoor: Air Power as Enforcer of National Will

Lieutenant General DP Pandey, PVSM, UYSM,
AVSM, VSM (Retd)[@]

Abstract

Air power remains the central instrument for enforcing national will in the contemporary security environment, and the same has been illustrated by three high profile 2025 campaigns i.e., Operation Sindoor (India-Pakistan), Operation Rising Lion (Israel-Iran), and Operation Midnight Hammer (United States' support for Israel). Against recent debates about the primacy of unmanned systems, the timely political will, precise intelligence, and integrated joint operations restored the air force's primacy through speed, reach, visibility, precision, and escalation control. Focusing on Operation Sindoor, a calibrated four-night Indian air campaign in response to the Pahalgam terror attack, the objectives were met through a range of factors that were considered deliberately such as targeting choices, execution, and effects: destruction of terrorist infrastructure and strategic assets, minimal collateral damage, rapid psychological shock to Pakistan's military and political leadership, effective deterrence, and favourable domestic and international messaging. The five facets of air power utility (decisiveness, precision, deterrence, joint integration, and political signalling), when backed

[@]Lieutenant General DP Pandey, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd), was commissioned into 9 SIKH LIGHT INFANTRY and built a distinguished career across high-altitude, counter-insurgency, and conventional operations. He participated in Operation Vijay (Kargil), commanded his unit in Siachen and Eastern Ladakh, led the Rashtriya Rifles and a Counter Insurgency Force in Kashmir, and later commanded the Chinar Corps. His key appointments included the inaugural Director General Territorial Army and Commandant, Army War College. An alumnus of Defence Services Staff College, National War College (US), and National Defence college, he is recognised for expertise in training, leadership, and operational art. He is an elected Council Member at the United Service Institution of India and is also the subject of a book (*Soldiering with Passion*) and the author of *Reflections on Strategy*.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CLV, No. 642, October-December 2025.

by clear political intent and interoperable capabilities, can achieve tactical, operational, and strategic goals while avoiding a full scale war. As defence reforms are undergoing in the Indian military, continued investment in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, precision munitions, air defence, joint theatre commands, and clear rules of engagement to preserve air power's role in future limited and strategic conflicts is an imperative.

Introduction

A supposed obituary of the Indian Air Force (IAF) was written in the 2020s with the emergence of overwhelming eminence of drones as an arbiter in conflicts and wars between two nations, and even in extensive usage by non-state actors. During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020, Azerbaijan virtually dominated and annihilated the Armenian Armed Forces through extensive use of drones, bringing to an end a long-drawn conflict in the region. Similarly, Ukraine has been able to stave off the strong Russian Air Force aggression, denying comprehensive success for more than three years, exploiting the drones of various types, sizes, and payloads. The air forces in each of these conflicts were grounded in a literal sense. Retired Army Lieutenant General David Barno and Nora Bensahel have quoted in *Air and Space Magazine*, "Drones have displaced manned aircraft and are now threatening the US Air Force's relevance with 'An Almost-existential' crisis".¹ The same article further contests the viewpoint as short-sighted and argues that "The biggest lesson from the Russia-Ukraine War is not how small Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) are reshaping air warfare, but rather how they are reshaping ground combat".² Clearly discussion and debates on the relevance of air forces is raging even in the most powerful military in the world.

One of the most transformative defence reforms were announced in the Indian military history from the ramparts of the Red Fort on 15 Aug 2019 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi for creation of the Department of Military Affairs and the post of Chief of Defence Staff.³ Furthermore, directions were given for jointness and integration of the three services, a presumed outcome of which was the structuring of the tri-services into theatre commands.⁴ Since then, a few major technological shocks have disrupted the

way wars will be fought and compelled the military world into evolving new doctrinal precepts. The warfighting methods have changed and in the context of age-old platform and anti-platform competition, the autonomous systems have been discussed animatedly, polarising the experts in two distinct camps; the technology loners and the human-centric war fighters. Air force has landed right in centre of this debate with Unmanned Aerial Systems dominating the air domain. It is imperative that before doctrinal shifts take place, the centrality of air force is appreciated through the context of recent conflicts. As the ongoing defence reforms are pursued in the right earnest, the importance of air power must be understood.

Three events in 2025 brought the air force back as the key enforcer of the national will. The Israeli domination of Iranian airspace during Operation Rising Lion, wherein, the entire air defence systems, most of the ballistic missile systems, the critical infrastructures of the nuclear program, and military command and control were decapacitated.⁵ The operation, launched on 13 Jun 2025 and lasting for 12 days, displayed the will of the Israeli establishment being enforced through its air force. The show of force transited through more than 1,500 kms to Iran with no shared land borders. The second event was Operation Midnight Hammer by the United States (US) Air Force launched on 21 Jun 2025 in support of Israel.⁶ The American air power was projected through continents and over oceans, flying for more than 18 hours one way, involving more than 125 aircraft, resulting in the remnants of the Iranian nuclear ambition being bombed out. There may be varying intelligence inputs on the damages caused but the escalating conflict between Iran and Israel was brought to closure within 12 days by an overnight strike by the US. These were possible only through the application of the instrument of air power.

The third and the most significant event was Operation Sindoor, wherein, through application of air power, the escalating situation between India and Pakistan was brought to a sudden end. The Indian Air Force applied it sparingly, for less than 30 mins each, two times over the course of an 88-hour military exchange as punishment for the Pakistani establishment-orchestrated terror attack in Pahalgam, compelling the Pakistan military to kneel down and seek surrender.⁷

Air Force as an Important Element of National Will

National will flows out through the instruments of power (diplomatic, informational, economic, and military) to protect interests both within the country and outside. While each element has an important role to play and is mutually congruent, the salience of military power is undeniable. In the military spectrum, the air power allows a nation to project its will across the world because of its speed, reach, visibility, precision, and flexibility. In addition to its relevance in national security through air warfare and strategic deterrence, the air power has vital contributions towards managing natural disaster consequences. For interventions in international efforts towards peace and stability and across the spectrum employment, the air power is the central force to project strength. The capacity to respond with speed and for extended ranges makes air power indispensable to a nation's defence and sovereignty.

While Operations Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer showcased the flexibility and reach of air power against a nation state, Operation Sindoor was representative of an entire-spectrum operation, ranging from counter terrorism to conventional military force application, impacting the national consciousness of the target country through a visible domination and destruction, thus, breaking the will of a nuclear power within days. In two strikes—three days apart—on night of 06/07 May and 09/10 May 2025, the military and political objectives were achieved with minimum collateral, sending a message worldwide of national moral standing and geopolitical autonomy.

Context of Operation Sindoor

In a terror incident at the beautiful tourist destination of Pahalgam in Jammu and Kashmir, 26 innocent male civilians, mostly tourists, were killed on 22 Apr 2025.⁸ The brutal killings, after deliberate segregation based on religion in front of the young children and wives, had obvious emotional backlash from the domestic population and worldwide condemnation.

This barbaric act of such a scale, since the Pulwama terror attack of 2019, warranted suitable muscular response. It was evidenced that after surgical strikes post the Uri attack in 2016, there was a period of peace till the Pulwama incident. Same was

the case with peace after the Balakot Strike post Pulawama on 14 Feb 2019, wherein, the IAF set new parameters for response by transgressing the Line of Control (LoC) and bombing terror camps across the International Border for the first time since 1971. Following this, there was a period of peace for six years. After due considerations, Operation Sindoor, named as mark of respect and response for the women widowed in the Pahalgam terror attack, was launched on the night of 06/07 May 2025.

Objectives

The political direction was unambiguous. The armed forces were given a clear directive: respond as deemed necessary. Air Chief Marshal AP Singh, the Air Force Chief, later confirmed “The presence of political will” and “No restrictions were put on us... If there were any constraints, they were self-made...”.⁹ Political leadership, cognisant of the strategic vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047* (Developed India 2047), would surely avoid escalation to war and, hence, escalation control was an imperative. Therefore, the military objectives were set for retaliatory strikes to punish terrorists and for the destruction of terror infrastructure. It was also important to signal to the Pakistani establishment that hosting of the latter will have retribution in Pakistan as well and will not be limited to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). The most important messaging was to the international community that had failed to rein in Pakistan from launching terror attacks. It clarified that Bharat will take decisions of military response without adopting the dossier system of providing proof of complicity.

Operation Sindoor was against the terror network and was not territorial.¹⁰ It was non-escalatory and with minimal collateral. Nine terror camps and headquarters were selected for retribution. Two targets, in-depth and of immense significance, were allotted to the air force, both in Pakistan’s Punjab. Bahawalpur, the headquarters of Jaish-e-Mohammad, was in a depth of more than 80 kms, out of the range of the Indian Army weapon systems. Muridke, the second target and the headquarters of Lashkar-e-Taiba, responsible for the Pahalgam attack, was ensconced in the safety accorded due to the proximity to Lahore. In any case, a belief that Punjab region (Pakistan) will never emerge in the crosshairs of the Indian Armed Forces till conventional war breakout had allowed these terror networks to prosper and operate with impunity.

Indian Air Force Delivers Justice for Pahalgam Victims

On 06/07 May 2025, as part of the integrated plan to punish the terror networks in Pakistan and PoK, nine targets were reduced to dust. The psychological impact of the bombing by precision systems of the IAF shook the confidence of the Pakistani military and political leadership. The terrorists felt the heat and death due to the strikes led by the air force. So did the military and political hierarchy of Pakistan. The recordings of the bombings, fires, and eventually the destroyed buildings, followed by much publicised funeral prayers of the terrorist leaders, shook the entire country. The senior Pakistani military leadership were compelled to be publicly present for the burials of the terrorist leaders, exposing the deep-rooted connections of the terror network with Pakistani military to the world.

The Long Arm of Justice Bombs out the Confidence

Once the Pakistan Army decided to become proxy of the terror networks as a signature act of brotherhood after the nine terror targets were blown out of the ground, the Indian military objectives shifted to escalation control through shock effect. The ceasefire violations and the attempts to strike through missiles and drones by the Pakistan military changed the scope of Operation Sindoor. The targeting of innocent civilians living along the LoC and International Border had to be responded firmly.¹¹ While the effective targeting by the Indian Army delivered punishment to its Pakistani counterpart, the air force was tasked to shock the bravado out of the rogue Generals and propped-up politicians.

Eleven targets, well inside of Pakistan covering the entire frontage from North to South were carefully identified, selected and targeted on the night of 09/10 May 2025. These were strategic targets hosting strategic assets well in-depth, away from the ranges of the Indian Army. The long arm of justice was delivered by the Indian Air Force; in 25 minutes, the sky warriors bombed out any remnants of confidence of the Pakistani leadership. Pakistan kneeled and keeled over.

While the claims of the Americans in brokering the ceasefire or pause in Operation Sindoor will continue to be debated forever, the role of the air force as the enforcer of the national will was affirmed emphatically. The interests of the defence industry of the

world in the centrality of the air force were resurrected. Operations Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer followed thereafter to seal the confidence.

Air Power in Enforcing National Will

There are convincing arguments in favour of the air force with respect to its capabilities to enforce the national will. From the prism of Operation Sindoor, a few facets that emerge distinctively.

Firstly, the speed, reach, and surprise with which the targets were destroyed deep inside the Pakistani territory, covering the entire length and breadth, in less than 30 mins twice in a four-day period. The speed of the direction of attacks and delivery of range of ordinance with significant destruction capabilities took the Pakistanis with shock and surprise, breaking their will to continue with escalation. It was a decisive application of force.

Secondly, the exploitation of precision-guided munitions to avoid collateral damage and targeting the terror infrastructure in the first night and the military targets on the second night allowed the Indian military the high moral ground while applying the full force of kinetic punishment. The political messaging was clear; the retaliation is forceful but not reckless. The escalation control was in the hands of the Indian military by isolating the Pakistani population from the military and terror network.

Thirdly, the focus is on imposing deterrence. The application of the air force to strike deep and with speed signals that there is no place to hide for the terror network and the hand that facilitates terror. Most important was the political will to use the air force. While Balakot could have been an aberration, the application of the air force again is an indication of resolve of the political dispensation. It states without ambiguity that 'There is no limit' to political will and national resolve to punish the truant nation or terror organisations.

Fourthly, it projects an image of jointmanship, integration, and synergy amongst various dimensions of military power and the other elements of national power. The application of air force warrants immense synergy amongst the forces in field. It has to be integrated with all elements of the army, electronic warfare, and communication systems. At the national level, the integration with other elements of power is imperative to justify, the *jus ad*

bellum (Justified War), to the world and the domestic audience in case of escalation or even otherwise. The employment of the air force in the manner it was done during Operation Sindoor reflected confidence in operational integration at multiple levels.

Fifthly and lastly, the political legitimacy and international signalling are the central arguments for the application of air force. The visible usage of air power has a salutary effect domestically. The recordings of the targets getting hit and the satellite imageries of the runways and command and control destroyed continues to be celebrated along all platforms, legacy media, and social media. Internationally, the signalling was obvious. India is willing to go all alone but will retaliate to each and every provocation. The message is not only for terror attacks but also to similar aggravations by others.

Analysis of the Utility of the Air Power to Enforce National Will During Operation Sindoor

Firstly, the political and military objectives in Operation Sindoor were achieved in terms of destruction of the terror headquarters, launch pads, and training establishments comprehensively on the first night. The Indian response to the Pahalgam attack shocked the adversary on the first day itself and brought them to surrender on the fourth because strikes were across a wide territory, rapid and strategic. The deterrence message had succeeded and the popular desire of India for retaliation fulfilled.

Secondly, the escalation control was well under the grip of the Indian Armed Forces. The precision strikes deep into the territory of Pakistan caused damages to military and terror infrastructure deep and yet avoided targeting Pakistani civilian population or military force broadly, thereby, seeking to avoid a full-scale war.

Thirdly, informational elements succeeded with the visible application of the air power uplifting the morale of the domestic population, followed with satellite imageries and video evidence of the extensive damages in Pakistan empowered the leadership to frame public perception and positive national narrative.

Fourthly, the international impact and reactions were positive with respect to the muscular response to terror and its supporter. The legitimacy of the military action was justified with avoidance of the collaterals.

Operations Rising Lion, Midnight Hammer and Sindoor—Air Power Projections of 2025

Applied in different geographies, the three operations within weeks of each other have resurrected the relevance of air power as enforcer of the national power. The naysayers had already cast the last stone on the relevance of the air force in the light of dismal performances in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict due to heavily contested airspace and domination of the drone warfare. However, the successful application of air force, particularly in Operation Sindoor, has revived the interests of defence experts, particularly when Pakistan was well-provided with drones by Türkiye and China and had a very credible and hardened air defence wall.

Operation Rising Lion, launched by Israel within a month of Operation Sindoor, added weight to the argument towards the relevance of the air force. Israel was able swiftly traverse a distance of 1,500 kms across the airspace of different countries to degrade the Iranian nuclear program over 12 days. Neither land nor naval components were involved. The launch of the Operation Midnight Hammer by the US on the night of 21/22 Jun 2025 reinforced the importance of air power in the modern-day warfighting milieu as the enforcer of the national will, as an escalating conflict was brought to closure within days. The assertions of those pitching for the drones at the cost of the air force were laid bare.

Air Power in the Indian Context

The terrain, the complexities, and the ranges for application ensures salience of the air power in the Indian context. Operation Sindoor demonstrated that air power is a potent instrument for enforcing national will, enabling swift, precise strikes, and sending deterrent signals. It can achieve political legitimacy and be integrated with broader force capabilities. In Operation Sindoor, air power was central to India, achieving its political aim (retaliation for cross border terror), operational aim (destroying terror camps), and strategic aim (demonstrating resolve and deterrence), while maintaining escalation control.

While limitations exist, in this case, air power largely delivered. The combination of political will, good intelligence, precise targeting, and integrated force structure maximised its effectiveness and minimised downsides. For future operations, Indian doctrine should

continue to invest in air defence, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, joint commands, precision weapons, rules of engagement, and political clarity. In a volatile region, air power will continue to be central in enforcing national will but must be used carefully, in coordination, with awareness of costs and risks.

Operation Sindoor is an example of modern limited counterterror operations crossing borders. It shows how air power can be used not only for defence or war, but as a tool of punitive, deterrent foreign policy. Even though, it may shift norms in South Asia on what is an acceptable response, raising the bar for neighbouring states that tolerate or facilitate terrorism, but yet it must be applied offensively.

Conclusion

Application and unleashing of the air power is a national statement, an intent to project power beyond the national boundaries to achieve strategic interests. Beyond the glamour of a fighter aircraft streaming across the blue sky, unleashing destruction on an unsuspecting enemy from a standoff distance, the comprehensiveness of the air power must be understood. The air domain transcends the other two (land and water) not only in the reach, ferocity, and speed, but also allows for an overwatch. If applied effectively, the employment of the forces on the land and sea maybe avoided or the friction reduced. As seen in the recent engagements across the world, the application of air power can be an instigator for conflict, such as the air attack on Kabul by the Pakistan Air Force or to ensure compliance by Pakistan after the strikes of 09/10 May 2025 by the IAF.

In the Indian context, the air force has finally come out of age, both militarily and politically. While the western powers understood the relevance of air power, the same is now being appreciated in the context of the Indian subcontinent, thereby, shifting its posture from defensive to offensive. With the application of air power pre-emptively for punitive actions and war-closure enforcement force, the unleashing of the air force is now becoming a national statement. It is, therefore, imperative that the ongoing defence reforms exploit the air force as an important element of national power.

Endnotes

¹ Lieutenant Colonel Grant Georgulis, USAF, "Drone Hype and Airpower Amnesia", *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, 25 Jul 2025, accessed 20 Nov 2025, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/drone-hype-and-airpower-amnesia/>

² Ibid.

³ PTI, "PM Modi announces creation of chief of defence staff", *Times of India*, 15 Aug 2019, accessed 12 Nov 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-announces-creation-of-chief-of-defence-staff/articleshow/70685997.cms>

⁴ "Chief of Defence Staff Office", *Press Information Bureau*, 04 Nov 2021, accessed 10 Nov 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/FactsheetDetails.aspx?Id=148566>

⁵ Michael N. Schmitt, "Israel's Operation Rising Lion and the Right of Self-Defense", *Lieber Institute West Point*, 16 Jun 2025, accessed 15 Nov 2025, <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/israels-operation-rising-lion-right-of-self-defense/>;

⁶ Kirti Sharma, "What is Operation Midnight Hammer?", *Jagran Josh*, 23 Jun 2025, accessed 17 Nov 2025, <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/what-is-operation-midnight-hammer-1820000166-1>

⁷ Saubhadra Chatterji, "Operation Sindoor paused after forces met aims: Centre", *Hindustan Times*, 29 Jul 2025, accessed 16 Nov 2025, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/operation-sindoor-paused-after-forces-met-aims-centre-101753755962970.html>

⁸ PIB, "Operation SINDOOR: India's Strategic Clarity and Calculated Force", *Press Information Bureau*, 14 May 2025, accessed 13 Nov 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=2128748>

⁹ HT News Desk, "'There was political will...no restrictions': IAF chief on Operation Sindoor", *Hindustan Times*, 09 Aug 2025, accessed 15 Nov 2025, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/no-restrictions-on-us-had-full-freedom-to-plan-and-execute-air-chief-marshal-on-operation-sindoor-101754725425172.html>

¹⁰ PIB, "Operation SINDOOR"

¹¹ Shivani Sharma and Manjeet Negi, "15 civilians, jawan killed in Pak firing along LoC; UN team, villagers evacuated", *India Today*, 08 May 2025, accessed 16 Nov 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pakistan-cross-border-shelling-along-loc-jk-kupwara-2721288-2025-05-08>