

Doctrinal Evolution of the Indian Armed Forces Since 1947

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Abstract

The essay examines the evolution of Indian military doctrine from independence in 1947 to the present, tracing its transformation from a colonial legacy of defensive minimalism to a progressively sophisticated multi-domain orientation. It situates doctrinal change within India's volatile security environment, shaped by wars with Pakistan and China, nuclearisation, persistent insurgencies, and the emergence of hybrid, cyber, and space threats. The essay analyses key inflection points—including the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the 1965 and 1971 Wars, the Sunderji Doctrine, the Kargil Conflict, and the emergence of the Cold Start and proactive operations—highlighting how each of these reshaped India's approach to deterrence, escalation management, and jointness. It further assesses contemporary reforms such as the creation of the position of the Chief of Defence Staff, theatrisation, and multi-domain operations. The essay concludes by proposing tenets for a future doctrine that balances conventional deterrence, nuclear thresholds, and hybrid resilience while integrating civil-military, technological, and strategic instruments of national power.

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Introduction

Since independence in 1947, the Indian Armed Forces have undergone a profound process of doctrinal evolution. At the moment of freedom, India inherited a military structure created primarily for colonial policing rather than national defence, with its ethos, leadership patterns, and operational doctrines rooted in the British model.¹ Yet, almost immediately, the nation was thrust into existential conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir, inaugurating an era in which security threats—both conventional and unconventional—would shape military doctrine as much as technological and geopolitical change.

The concept of doctrine itself has evolved over time. Initially viewed as a narrow set of operational guidelines, the doctrine has since broadened to encompass strategic culture, force structuring, and the state's approach to escalation and deterrence.² India's security environment has been unusually volatile—four wars with Pakistan, one with China, multiple counterinsurgency campaigns, a nuclearised neighbourhood, and the emergence of hybrid, cyber, and space domains. Each of these has left a distinct imprint on India's doctrinal outlook.

From the defensive minimalism of the 1950s to the forward defence orientation after 1962; from the offensive–defensive doctrines of 1965–71 to the Sunderji Doctrine of the 1980s; and from limited war concepts after Kargil to the Cold Start and proactive operations approach of the 2000s, India's doctrinal trajectory has been one of gradual but uneven sophistication. In the 21st Century, this journey continues with growing emphasis on jointness, theatrisation, and multi-domain operations as India confronts collusive threats from China and Pakistan.

This essay traces this evolution across many sections, contextualising each doctrinal transformation with historical experience, scholarly debate, and policy shifts. The concluding section proposes tenets of a future doctrine capable of balancing conventional deterrence, nuclear thresholds, and hybrid threats in an era dominated by disruptive technologies and complex geopolitics.

Colonial Legacy and Early Post-Independence Doctrine (1947-62)

At independence, the Indian Army (IA) remained structurally and culturally a continuation of the British IA. Its doctrine emphasised conventional battle formations, slow mobilisation, and imperial 'Small Wars' aimed at internal security and frontier policing.³ In the absence of a clearly articulated national security strategy, the armed forces were not guided by a comprehensive doctrinal framework aligned with India's long-term strategic interests.

This deficiency was closely linked to the political leadership's worldview. The then-Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru accorded primacy to economic development and diplomacy, while military modernisation and doctrinal innovation remained secondary. The result was a strategic culture in which the use of force was viewed as the last resort, and the armed forces were largely treated as instruments of territorial defence rather than proactive tools of state policy.

The consequences of this approach became evident during the First Kashmir War (1947-48). When tribal raiders supported by Pakistan entered Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), India's response was improvised rather than doctrine-driven. Troops were airlifted into Srinagar in an emergency fashion and operations were conducted in a reactive mode. The Indian Air Force (IAF) played an important supporting role, but within limited doctrinal and resource constraints, while the Indian Navy (IN) remained a marginal factor.⁴ The conflict ended in a stalemate and a United Nations-mediated ceasefire, leaving behind the Line of Control (LoC) and institutionalising a persistent zone of contestation.

Throughout the 1950s, Indian military doctrine remained underdeveloped. Some modernisation occurred—the IAF inducted jet aircraft and the IN initiated modest expansion—but the IA continued to dominate doctrinal thinking, and joint planning remained embryonic. This period can best be characterised as one of the defensive minimalisms in which the armed forces were structured primarily for territorial defence without clearly articulated offensive concepts or integrated operational planning.⁵

The neglect of doctrine was not merely a military failing but also a political one. The assumption that diplomacy and moral authority would deter adversaries created strategic complacency. When skirmishes began along the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in the late 1950s, India lacked a coherent doctrine for mountain warfare, high-altitude logistics, or joint employment of forces. By the time China launched its offensive in 1962, India possessed neither the force posture nor the doctrinal clarity required to conduct effective high-altitude operations. The debacle that followed was, thus, rooted in this prolonged period of doctrinal neglect.

The 1962 Sino–Indian War: Doctrinal Awakening

The war with China in 1962 constituted a watershed in India's military history and a turning point in its doctrinal consciousness. The IA was deployed along the disputed Himalayan frontier under the politically driven and militarily ill-conceived 'Forward Policy', which sought to establish a chain of lightly held posts in remote and inhospitable terrains. These positions were expected to deter Chinese advances despite the absence of adequate infrastructure, logistics, combat support, or reserves.⁶

Indian formations fought at extreme altitudes without sufficient winter clothing, artillery support, or reliable communications. Operational planning was weak, intelligence assessments were flawed, and command arrangements lacked coherence. Although the IAF possessed the capability to provide tactical air support, it was deliberately restrained by political leaders who feared horizontal and vertical escalation. The IN, for its part, played no meaningful role in the conflict. The result was a rapid and humiliating collapse of Indian positions in the NEFA (present-day Arunachal Pradesh) and Ladakh, with entire formations overwhelmed by better prepared and logistically supported Chinese forces.^{7,8}

The doctrinal implications were stark and far-reaching. First, the conflict exposed the hollowness of India's earlier policy of defensive minimalism and the dangers of relying on diplomatic goodwill in the absence of credible military capability. Second, it revealed the severe consequences of the absence of joint planning and integrated employment of the services. The IA operated in isolation, the IAF was marginalised, and the IN remained peripheral. Third, the war demonstrated the lack of a coherent doctrine for

mountain warfare, high-altitude logistics, and sustained operations in difficult terrain.

In the aftermath of 1962, India undertook a major organisational and doctrinal reset. The IA raised additional mountain divisions, strengthened forward deployments, and placed greater emphasis on territorial defence in the Himalayas.⁹ Infrastructure development in the border areas was accelerated, including roads, airfields, and logistics nodes. The IAF expanded its transport and fighter fleets and improved radar coverage and air defence networks along the northern frontier. These measures reflected a shift from strategic complacency to a more threat-driven approach to force development.

Perhaps most importantly, the defeat compelled India's political and military leadership to acknowledge that doctrinal neglect carries strategic costs. While a comprehensive national security doctrine did not immediately emerge, the experience of 1962 planted the foundations for a more systematic and professional approach to military planning. The concept of preparedness, credible deterrence, and the necessity of aligning political objectives with military means began to gain greater acceptance. In this sense, 1962 represented India's first true doctrinal awakening.

1965 and 1971 Wars: Emergence of Offensive-Defensive Doctrine

The conflict with Pakistan in 1965 constituted the first major doctrinal test for the Indian Armed Forces after the trauma of 1962. Pakistan's Operation Gibraltar sought to infiltrate irregular forces into J&K with the expectation of triggering a popular uprising and internationalising the dispute. India's initial response was cautious and reactive; however, as the scale of Pakistani involvement became evident, the IA undertook large-scale conventional operations across the 'International Border' in Punjab.

Although the war ended in a tactical stalemate, Indian forces demonstrated improved operational competence and resilience. Armoured engagements, particularly at Asal Uttar, revealed the IA's ability to blunt Pakistani offensives and conduct effective counterattacks.¹⁰ These experiences reinforced the lesson that India could not rely solely on static defence and that limited offensive action was necessary to impose costs on an adversary.

Thus, the 1965 war contributed to the emergence of an offensive-defensive doctrinal concept. Under this approach, forces deployed along vulnerable sectors were tasked with holding operations, while designated strike formations were developed to undertake counteroffensives into the enemy territory.¹¹ This represented a conceptual shift away from a purely defensive mindset towards a more balanced posture that integrated defence with limited offensive manoeuvre.

These ideas matured and were applied with far greater coherence during the 1971 Indo–Pakistan War. Unlike earlier conflicts, 1971 witnessed the execution of a carefully planned and politically synchronised campaign. The IA conducted multi-axis offensives in East Pakistan, while holding Pakistani forces along the western front. Simultaneously, the IAF achieved rapid air superiority through systematic attacks on Pakistani airfields, enabling unhindered support to ground operations. The IN executed decisive maritime strikes, notably Operations Trident and Python, and imposed an effective blockade on Karachi.¹²

The integrated employment of land, air, and maritime power produced a swift and decisive victory, culminating in the creation of Bangladesh.¹³ Doctrinally, 1971 marked the high point of India's military effectiveness in the 20th Century. It validated the principles of political-military synergy, joint planning, and manoeuvre-oriented operations.¹⁴ For the first time, India demonstrated the capacity to design and execute campaigns based on coherent doctrinal concepts rather than ad hoc responses to crisis.

The lessons of 1965 and 1971 firmly established the offensive-defensive approach as the cornerstone of Indian conventional doctrine. However, this success also created an intellectual comfort with large-scale conventional manoeuvre that would later be challenged by changing strategic and technological conditions.

Post-1971 Era: Sunderji Doctrine and Nuclear Context

The post-1971 strategic environment introduced a new set of complexities for Indian military doctrine. Internally, India confronted growing insurgencies in the Northeast and later in Punjab, while externally Pakistan continued to pursue revisionist objectives, increasingly through indirect means. At the same time, the conventional balance in South Asia began to evolve, and technological modernisation gathered momentum across the region.

Against this backdrop, the IA in the 1980s, under the intellectual leadership of General K Sundarji, articulated what came to be known as the Sunderji Doctrine. This doctrine envisaged large-scale, high-intensity conventional warfare based on deep armoured thrusts into Pakistani territory by powerful strike corps, supported by holding corps that would fix and attrite enemy forces along the forward edge.¹⁵ The underlying premise was that the rapid and decisive manoeuvre, combined with overwhelming firepower, could achieve favourable military and political outcomes in a future Indo–Pakistani conflict.

Conceptually, the Sunderji Doctrine represented a continuation and refinement of the offensive-defensive ideas that had emerged after 1965 and 1971. It placed heavy emphasis on mechanisation, mobility, and synchronised corps-level operations, and drove significant organisational changes, including the raising of additional strike formations and the modernisation of armoured and artillery forces.

However, the doctrine also exhibited important limitations. Its reliance on large-scale mobilisation meant that the initiation of offensive operations would require considerable preparation time, thereby, reducing strategic surprise. The scale and visibility of such mobilisation also carried escalatory risks. These weaknesses were highlighted during Exercise Brasstacks (1986-87), which demonstrated both the operational potential of the doctrine and its propensity to generate severe crisis instability, bringing India and Pakistan close to an armed conflict.^{16,17}

The strategic context of the 1990s further complicated the viability of deep offensive doctrines. Pakistan's covert development of nuclear weapons, followed by India's overt nuclear tests in 1998, fundamentally altered the character of deterrence in South Asia. The prospect of escalation to the nuclear level imposed new constraints on conventional operations. Under a nuclear overhang, the feasibility of large, deep armoured thrusts aimed at decisive victory became increasingly questionable.¹⁸

Consequently, Indian doctrinal thinking began to shift towards exploring options for limited conventional war under nuclear conditions. The objective was to retain credible conventional deterrence and punitive capability while avoiding actions that might cross an adversary's nuclear thresholds. This intellectual transition

marked a gradual departure from the Sunderji Doctrine's emphasis on deep, decisive manoeuvre towards more calibrated and flexible concepts of employment.

By the end of the 20th Century, Indian military doctrine had, thus, evolved from colonial defensiveness to an offensive-defensive posture, and further towards nuclear-constrained conventional thinking. This evolution reflected not only military learning but also the interplay of political will, adversary strategies, and the changing nature of war.¹⁹

Kargil War (1999): Lessons for Limited War Doctrine

The Kargil Conflict of 1999 was a defining episode in India's post-nuclear strategic experience. It was the first major conventional confrontation between India and Pakistan after both states had demonstrated nuclear capability, and unfolded under conditions of intense international scrutiny. Pakistani regulars and irregulars infiltrated across the LoC and occupied tactically dominant heights in the Kargil–Dras sector, seeking to alter the status quo while remaining below the threshold of a full-scale war.²⁰

India's initial response was marked by surprise and intelligence failure, which delayed accurate assessment of the scale and intent of the intrusion.²¹ Once the extent of the infiltration became clear, the IA undertook a systematic campaign to evict the intruders through high-altitude infantry assaults, supported by artillery and air power. Political direction imposed a critical constraint; Indian forces were instructed not to cross the LoC in order to prevent horizontal escalation.

Several doctrinal lessons emerged from Kargil. First, the conflict demonstrated the practical reality of limited war under nuclear conditions. India was compelled to pursue strictly defined military objectives while exercising strategic restraint. Second, Kargil highlighted the indispensability of joint operations. The IAF's Operation Safed Sagar provided close air support, interdiction, and reconnaissance, significantly enhancing the effectiveness of ground operations. Third, the conflict exposed serious deficiencies in Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), leading to a subsequent emphasis on integrated ISR capabilities.

Kargil also underscored the importance of rapid mobilisation and preparedness. Although India ultimately achieved its military objectives, the initial delay in mounting a coherent response revealed structural and procedural weaknesses. These shortcomings were examined in detail by the Kargil Review Committee (2000), which recommended wide-ranging reforms, including improved inter-service coordination, better intelligence integration, and enhancements in higher defence management.²²

Doctrinally, Kargil reinforced the notion that future conflicts with Pakistan were likely to be limited in scope, politically controlled, and conducted under the shadow of nuclear weapons. At the same time, it highlighted the necessity of possessing credible conventional options for swift and punitive response. This dual requirement—restraint combined with capability—set the intellectual foundation for the development of new operational concepts in the early 21st Century.

Thus, Kargil became the catalyst for a shift towards doctrines that acknowledged nuclear constraints while emphasising rapid, precise, and limited conventional action. This evolution directly influenced subsequent thinking on the Cold Start and proactive operations.²³

Cold Start Doctrine and Proactive Operations

In the aftermath of Kargil and the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in Dec 2001, India confronted the practical limitations of its existing conventional doctrine. Operation Parakram (2001-02), which involved the large-scale mobilisation of Indian forces along the western border, revealed serious shortcomings. Mobilisation took several weeks, during which Pakistan was able to reinforce its defences and successfully internationalise the crisis.²⁴ India, despite its numerical and qualitative advantages, was unable to translate mobilisation into credible military action, thereby, exposing a gap between political intent and military capability.

These experiences provided the impetus for the conceptual development of the Cold Start Doctrine. This doctrine envisaged the rapid mobilisation of integrated, brigade-sized or division-sized Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) capable of launching shallow, limited offensives within 48-72 hours of a political decision.²⁵ The

objective was to impose swift and punitive costs on Pakistan while remaining below its perceived nuclear thresholds. Unlike the Sunderji Doctrine's emphasis on deep armoured thrusts, Cold Start prioritised speed, surprise, flexibility, and limited territorial objectives that could serve as bargaining leverage.

For several years, India officially denied the existence of Cold Start, even as Pakistani strategic discourse treated it as an operational reality. Pakistan responded by developing tactical nuclear weapons, such as the Nasr missile, and by lowering its declared nuclear thresholds. This interactive doctrinal evolution produced a more complex and potentially unstable deterrence environment, characterised by compressed decision-making timelines and heightened escalation risks.

From the mid-2010s onwards, India began to demonstrate elements of Cold Start-type thinking through what came to be described as 'Proactive Operations'. The surgical strikes across the LoC in 2016 and the Balakot air strikes in 2019 signalled a willingness to conduct limited, time-bound, and publicly acknowledged punitive actions in response to major provocations. These operations were carefully calibrated to achieve political and psychological effects while seeking to avoid uncontrolled escalation.^{26,27}

Doctrinally, Cold Start and proactive operations represent an important transformation in India's approach to conventional deterrence. They reflect an effort to regain strategic initiative by combining rapid mobilisation, joint employment of forces, and controlled escalation. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain. Without fully implemented theatrisation, integrated logistics, and seamless joint command and control, Cold Start risks remaining more a conceptual framework than a consistently executable doctrine.

Hybrid Threats and Grey-Zone Warfare

By the late 2000s, it had become increasingly evident that conventional war was no longer the sole or even the primary mode of strategic competition in India's security environment. Pakistan progressively relied on proxy warfare, employing terrorist groups and supporting insurgency in J&K and elsewhere. Simultaneously, China adopted a pattern of grey-zone behaviour,

characterised by incremental territorial assertions, coercive diplomacy, cyber intrusions, and information operations designed to alter facts on the ground without triggering large-scale armed conflict.²⁸

This environment necessitated a doctrinal shift towards recognising and countering hybrid warfare—conflict that blends conventional military force with sub-conventional violence, cyber operations, information warfare, economic coercion, and political influence. Hybrid threats deliberately blur the distinction between peace and war, creating ambiguity and complicating deterrence.

The IA responded by refining counterinsurgency and counterterrorism doctrines that emphasised population-centric approaches, intelligence-led operations, and the integration of kinetic and non-kinetic measures. Development initiatives, psychological operations, and information campaigns were increasingly viewed as integral components of operational success. The IAF and IN also began incorporating hybrid concepts, placing greater emphasis on non-contact warfare, electronic warfare, and maritime domain awareness.

Several high-profile incidents reinforced the salience of hybrid and grey-zone challenges. The 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks demonstrated how non-state actors could generate strategic-level effects under the nuclear shadow. Chinese transgressions and standoffs in Ladakh (2013, 2020) and the Doklam crisis (2017) illustrated the effectiveness of salami-slicing tactics in pursuing limited objectives while avoiding open war.^{29,30}

India's doctrinal response to these challenges has been incremental rather than revolutionary. The creation of specialised counterterrorism forces, the strengthening of cyber defences, and the establishment of information warfare and psychological operations cells represent important steps. However, the broader challenge remains the development of an integrated doctrine that can synchronise military, diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments of power to counter hybrid adversaries effectively.³¹

Hybrid and grey-zone warfare, thus, represent a persistent condition rather than a temporary phase. For India, success in this domain will depend not only on military preparedness but also on institutional coordination, strategic communication, and political resolve.

Jointness and Theatrisation

One of the most persistent weaknesses in Indian military doctrine has been the absence of institutionalised jointness. Despite the demonstrated success of integrated operations in 1971 and the clear lessons of Kargil, the three services continued for decades to function largely within separate organisational and planning silos.³² Service-specific doctrines, procurement priorities, and command structures inhibited the development of a truly integrated warfighting approach.

The Kargil Review Committee (2000) and subsequent reform initiatives recommended the creation of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and the establishment of integrated planning structures to promote jointness. However, implementation was slow and uneven. It was only in 2020 that India appointed its first CDS, marking a significant doctrinal and institutional milestone.³³

The CDS has been tasked with advancing theatrisation—the reorganisation of the armed forces into integrated theatre commands responsible for specific geographic or functional domains.³⁴ Theatrisation seeks to replace single-service operational control with unified commands capable of planning and executing operations across land, air, maritime, cyber, and space domains. In doctrinal terms, this represents the most substantial structural reform in Indian military organisation since independence.

Theatrisation promises several advantages: streamlined command and control, improved resource utilisation, faster decision making, and enhanced operational synergy. At the same time, the initiative has encountered resistance.^{35,36} The IAF has expressed concerns about potential dilution of its operational flexibility, while the IN has highlighted issues of resource prioritisation and the safeguarding of maritime interests.

Despite these debates, a broad doctrinal consensus is emerging that India cannot effectively prepare for a two-front or multi-domain conflict without integrated command structures. Joint doctrines, integrated logistics, common training standards, and interoperable systems are, therefore, essential enablers of future warfighting capability. Theatrisation, though complex and contested, is central to India's ongoing doctrinal transformation.

Technological Drivers of Doctrinal Change

Modern military doctrine is inseparable from technological transformation. Since the late 20th Century, India has sought to incorporate the lessons of the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' into its doctrinal framework. The Kargil Conflict (1999) exposed deficiencies in surveillance, precision targeting, and real-time intelligence sharing, prompting accelerated investment in unmanned aerial vehicles, satellite capabilities, networked communications, and precision-guided munitions.³⁷ The 2008 Mumbai attacks further underscored the need for rapid-response, technology-enabled counterterrorism capabilities.

In the 2010s, space and cyber emerged as operational domains of growing importance. India's anti-satellite test in 2019 signalled formal recognition of space as a warfighting domain. The establishment of the Defence Cyber Agency and the Defence Space Agency reflected an institutional shift towards preparing for non-kinetic forms of conflict.³⁸ Artificial intelligence, electronic warfare, autonomous systems, and drone swarms increasingly feature in doctrinal discussions as force multipliers capable of reshaping the character of combat.

India's acquisition of advanced air defence systems, development of indigenous ballistic missile defence, and expansion of long-range precision strike capabilities indicate a doctrinal emphasis on layered deterrence. Maritime doctrine has likewise evolved, with greater focus on the Indo-Pacific, carrier-based operations, nuclear-powered submarines, and integrated maritime domain awareness networks.

These developments collectively point towards an emerging orientation centred on multi-domain operations. Multi-domain thinking seeks to integrate kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities, conventional and unconventional means, and offensive and defensive operations within a unified operational design.³⁹ The challenge, however, lies in ensuring that technological modernisation is accompanied by organisational adaptation, doctrinal clarity, and sustained investment.

India's emphasis on indigenous research and development, including initiatives under the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-reliant India) framework, is intended to strengthen long-term technological

autonomy.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, procurement delays, budgetary constraints, and skill gaps continue to slow full-spectrum integration. Technology, while transformative, yields doctrinal advantage only when embedded within coherent structures of command, training, and strategy.

Challenges in Doctrinal Consolidation

Despite notable progress in doctrinal thinking and institutional reform, the consolidation of a coherent and fully operationalised Indian military doctrine remains incomplete. A number of enduring structural, strategic, and political challenges continue to constrain doctrinal effectiveness.

First, India confronts the persistent reality of a two-front threat. The prospect of coordinated or collusive pressure from China and Pakistan stretches resources, complicates force planning, and imposes difficult choices in prioritisation.⁴¹ Doctrinal frameworks must, therefore, be capable of addressing simultaneous contingencies across distinct theatres.

Second, escalation management under nuclear conditions remains a central dilemma. Pakistan's development of tactical nuclear weapons complicates concepts such as Cold Start, while China's expanding nuclear arsenal introduces new uncertainties into India's deterrence calculus.⁴² Balancing conventional flexibility with nuclear stability requires carefully calibrated doctrine and robust political-military coordination.

Third, resource constraints undermine doctrinal ambition. Budgetary limitations delay modernisation and leave critical gaps in air defence, cyber capabilities, intelligence infrastructure, and naval power projection. Without sustained and predictable investment, doctrinal concepts risk outpacing material capability.⁴³

Fourth, civil-military integration in strategic planning remains limited. Although the creation of the CDS represents a major advance, India still lacks a publicly articulated and comprehensive National Security Strategy (NSS) that clearly links political objectives with military doctrine and force development.⁴⁴

Finally, political-military synergy and strategic communication remain uneven. In an era of hybrid and grey-zone conflict, the ability to shape narratives, signal resolve, and manage escalation

is as important as battlefield performance. Without coherent strategic messaging and whole-of-government coordination, doctrine risks remaining reactive rather than anticipatory.⁴⁵

Addressing these challenges is essential if India's evolving doctrinal ideas are to translate into credible and sustainable warfighting capability.

Towards a Future Doctrine: Proposed Tenets

Drawing upon historical experience and contemporary threat assessments, a future Indian military doctrine should rest on a set of clearly articulated and mutually reinforcing tenets. These are intended to provide conceptual coherence while allowing sufficient flexibility to adapt to a rapidly changing security environment as under:

- **Multi-domain Integration.** Operations across land, sea, air, cyber, and space must be planned and executed in an integrated manner. Theatre commands supported by networked command, control, communications, computers, ISR architectures should enable seamless coordination and real-time situational awareness across all domains.
- **Flexible Deterrence.** Doctrine must offer calibrated response options across the spectrum of conflict—from sub-conventional to conventional and, if necessary, nuclear—so that political leadership retains multiple pathways for escalation control.
- **Rapid Force Mobilisation.** IBGs and theatre commands should be capable of generating credible combat power within 48-72 hours against both western and northern contingencies, thereby, preserving strategic initiative.
- **Resilience in Hybrid Warfare.** Counterterrorism, cyber defence, electronic warfare, and information operations must be integrated into mainstream operational planning to blunt grey-zone and proxy strategies.
- **Maritime Emphasis.** As the Indo-Pacific assumes central importance in global geopolitics, India's doctrine must prioritise sea control, sea denial, and power projection through a capable blue-water navy and strong maritime partnerships.

- **Civil–Military Synergy.** A comprehensive NSS should integrate military doctrine with diplomatic, economic, technological, and informational instruments of national power.

Collectively, these tenets seek to balance deterrence with adaptability. They aim to ensure that India can deter adversaries, fight limited wars when necessary, and manage escalation in a nuclearised, multi-domain environment.⁴⁶ Periodic doctrinal review, institutional learning mechanisms, and selective international cooperation should complement this framework to sustain long-term relevance.

Such a doctrine would balance deterrence with adaptability, ensuring India can deter adversaries, fight limited wars, and manage escalation in a nuclearised, multi-domain environment. Expanding on this, the tenets should incorporate adaptive learning mechanisms, regular doctrinal reviews, and international partnerships to counter collusive threats, drawing from global best practices like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s multi-domain frameworks while tailoring to India’s unique geopolitical context.^{47,48}

Conclusion

The evolution of Indian military doctrine since 1947 has been shaped by the cumulative impact of war, technology, and shifting geopolitics. From a colonial inheritance characterised by defensive minimalism, India’s doctrine progressed through the shock of the 1962 defeat, the emergence of offensive-defensive concepts in the 1965 and 1971 Wars, the deep manoeuvre orientation of the Sunderji Doctrine, and the nuclear-constrained limited war thinking that followed Kargil. Each phase reflected adaptation to a distinct strategic context.

In the 21st Century, doctrinal transformation is increasingly driven by hybrid threats, disruptive technologies, and multi-domain competition. The pursuit of jointness, theatrisation, and integrated command structures represents an effort to translate conceptual evolution into operational capability. At the same time, persistent challenges—ranging from two-front contingencies and nuclear escalation management to resource constraints and civil–military integration—continue to shape the boundaries of doctrinal ambition.

India's future doctrine must, therefore, be anticipatory rather than reactive. It must integrate historical lessons with emerging realities, link political objectives to military means, and synchronise kinetic and non-kinetic instruments of power. The ultimate objective is to build armed forces that can credibly deter adversaries, respond decisively across the spectrum of conflict, and contribute to India's rise as a strategically autonomous and responsible great power.

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