

Application of Operational Art in Operation Sindoor

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“Operation Sindoor was more than a military response; it was a strategic statement, a template of application of modern operational art”

Abstract

Operation Sindoor marked a watershed in India's strategic doctrine, launched after the Pakistan-sponsored Pahalgam terror attack of Apr 2025. It showcased India's shift from restraint to calibrated offensive action to integrated military precision strikes with diplomatic, economic, and informational tools. By degrading terror infrastructure, suspending the Indus Water Treaty, and leveraging indigenous technologies like Akashteer and Système de Croisière Autonome à Longue Portée (SCALP) [Long Range Autonomous Cruise Missile], India demonstrated comprehensive national power and atmanirbhar (self-reliance) capability. By carefully applying principles of operational art—clear end-state, centre of gravity identification, surprise, deception, and escalation control—India executed multi-domain precision strikes while avoiding a full-scale war. The operation exposed gaps in information warfare, reaffirmed the role of drones, and tri-service integration, while establishing a new deterrence doctrine: terrorism will be treated as an act of war.

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Backdrop: The Context of Conflict

Operation Sindoor marked a significant inflection point in India's strategic and military posture towards cross-border terrorism and its sponsors. It emerged as a decisive and multifaceted Indian response to the Pakistan-sponsored Pahalgam terror attack¹ of Apr 2025. It marked a significant shift in India's statecraft from strategic restraint to calibrated offensive poise, successfully demonstrating precision strike capabilities.

The Pahalgam attack, which deliberately targeted civilians based on religious identity, marked a provocative attempt by Pakistan to fracture India's internal cohesion and provoke military overreach. In response, India launched Operation Sindoor—a finely calibrated, multi-domain operation that exemplified the principles of operational art, while leveraging multiple instruments of national power across diplomatic, economic, military, and informational domains.

This operation not only dealt a tactical blow to the terror infrastructure but also sent a strong strategic message to Pakistan's military elite about Indian resolve to strike anywhere in Pakistan, ignoring nuclear blackmail. More importantly, it showcased India's evolving military doctrine and the urgent need to recalibrate policy and institutional mechanisms to prepare for future conflicts. It also established a new benchmark in Indian response to terrorist actions by declaring all such acts to be treated as 'Acts of War'².

Pakistan's Strategic Aim: Provocation and Disruption

Pakistan's intention behind orchestrating the Pahalgam terror attack was not limited to inflicting casualties or spreading fear. It aimed to undermine the peace and development in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), trigger communal unrest, and internationalise the Kashmir issue by provoking an uncontrolled Indian response. Habitual of using terror as a low-cost option under the nuclear hangover, Pakistan's strategy was intended to project its continued relevance in the region, while bolstering domestic morale through a perceived show of resistance, besides diverting domestic attention from economic and internal security debacles.

However, the strategy failed to trigger communal unrest in India or restrain the development of Kashmir. Instead, it strengthened internal cohesion in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and fuelled strong

national anger to punish Pakistan's terror sponsors. Pakistan faced significant degradation of its terror infrastructure and the psychological realisation that no place in its territory is safe from Indian strikes.

India's Aim: Strategic Response and Message of Deterrence

India's strategic aim was clear—to punish the perpetrators, degrade the terror infrastructure, and signal a firm red line against the use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy. The centre of gravity was to influence the minds of Pakistan's military leadership into conceding their vulnerability to the conventional reach of Indian strikes across the country—unaffected by nuclear blackmail. India used all instruments of national power during Operation Sindoor, unlike earlier occasions where only one or two were used.

Operation Sindoor's scope was deliberately limited to avoid full-scale war, yet potent enough to achieve deterrence, demonstrating its operational reach and precision strike capability to Pakistan. Precision strikes eliminated key terror camps and senior commanders across Pakistan-occupied J&K and the Pakistani heartland.

The Pakistani military's actions were met with retaliatory precision strikes, executed to demonstrate the vulnerability of its strategic and military airbases and assets across the country, ultimately forcing its leadership to plead for a ceasefire. India demonstrated a nuanced ability to control the escalatory ladder, while maintaining legitimacy through adherence to international norms and operational ethics.

Comprehensive National Power: A Synchronisation of State Instruments

Operation Sindoor exemplified India's ability to mobilise Comprehensive National Power. Kinetic military actions, including coordinated tri-service strikes and airspace denial, were supplemented by diplomatic offensives, economic sanctions, legal restrictions, and social disengagement.

The suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty³, the closure of trade routes, and revocation of Pakistani visas collectively imposed substantial costs on Pakistan. Simultaneously, India's diplomatic outreach ensured global understanding of its actions, gradually

limiting the space for adversarial narratives. The orchestration of these instruments created a multi-layered deterrent, underscoring India's capability to respond to hybrid threats with hybrid tools.

Military Execution: Precision, Technology and Integration

Operation Sindoor represented a paradigm shift in India's conduct of warfare. Employing standoff weapons such as *Système de Croisière Autonome à Longue Portée* (SCALP) [Long Range Autonomous Cruise Missile] missiles and loitering munitions, India achieved deep strikes with surgical accuracy. Joint operations between the army, navy, and air force reflected the increasing maturity of India's tri-service interoperability. While the initial strikes were precisely against terrorist infrastructure⁴ (non-military targets) in a non-escalatory manner, but enemy military response was anticipated and responded well by deep conventional strikes on high value military targets without undue escalation.

Electronic warfare units disrupted enemy communication, while multi-layered air defences (e.g., Akashteer, L-70, Shilka) created an effective shield. intercepted over hundreds of Pakistani drones and missiles in 25-minute operation. The operation highlighted the transformation of the Indian military into a network-centric force capable of delivering effects across all domains of warfare with precision, speed, and efficiency. The combat experience of Indian security forces in counter terror operations bore fruits as in Operation Mahadev⁵ the terrorists linked with the Pahalgam attack were eliminated.

***Atmanirbhar Bharat* in Action: Indigenous Technological Superiority**

A noteworthy feature of Operation Sindoor was the successful deployment of indigenous defence technologies. The Akashteer Air Defence Control and Reporting System intercepted hostile aerial platforms, while Defence Research and Development Organisation-developed electronic warfare systems played a key role in jamming adversary radars. Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets and targeting platforms, mostly domestically produced, were instrumental in real-time mission execution. This demonstrated India's growing self-reliance in defence and reinforced the strategic utility of its *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-reliant India) initiative in the national security architecture.

Application of Operational Art

Aim and Clarity of End-State. Operation Sindoor had a clear political objective—to retaliate proportionately and deter future attacks without inviting full-scale war. The military aim, therefore, was limited and achievable: to neutralise specific terrorist targets with minimal collateral damage, and to respond strongly to any military action by Pakistan with precision strikes on military targets.

Centre of Gravity. India accurately identified the psychological and operational centres of gravity—terror leadership, training camps and air bases—and degraded them through surgical strikes. At the strategic level the centre of gravity was to create psychological dislocation of the mind of Pakistani military leadership, by demonstrating the intention and strategic reach of Indian forces, raising cost of any misadventures in future, calling out nuclear blackmail.

Avoiding the ‘Nuclear Trap’. By not targeting military establishments directly in the first wave and keeping the operation within the realm of counterterrorism, India effectively dodged the trap of ‘Nuclear Blackmail’. Instead, it signalled readiness for further escalation if required—thus shifting the psychological balance.

Surprise and Deception. Mock drills and a veil of routine exercises masked India’s real intentions, achieving absolute tactical surprise. The military assets moved quietly, and rehearsals were conducted in complete secrecy, without raising alarm. The result was a delayed and disoriented Pakistani response.

Operational Reach and Tempo. The use of long-range vectors like Rafale jets, BrahMos and SCALP missiles loitering munitions and electronic warfare ensured rapid, deep strikes. The tri-service coordination ensured operational tempo remained high, while keeping escalation controlled.

Using Strength Against Weakness of the Enemy. Among the three services, India’s asymmetric advantage over Pakistan was greatest in the maritime domain, but the Indian Navy was employed primarily for deterrence—perhaps to avoid unwanted escalation. However, in a similar scenario in the future, Pakistan could expect a far greater application of naval power aimed at degrading its capabilities.

Well-Timed Ceasefire and Exit Strategy. An often-underappreciated element of conflict is its termination. India showed strategic prudence by agreeing to a well calibrated ceasefire/strategic pause at the right moment, just after establishing dominance and imposing costs. The 'Conflict Termination/Strategic Pause' was a calibrated exit, ensuring that India retained both the initiative and the narrative of de-escalation from a position of strength. It underscored maturity in both political and military leadership and India's image as a responsible actor.

Winning the Information War?

Narrative War and Countering Disinformation. Parallel to the kinetic operations, a sophisticated information warfare campaign was a part of operations by both sides. Pakistan employed fake videos, fabricated casualty figures, and a barrage of disinformation to manipulate international perception. India countered this digital offensive with measured and timely communication. Government briefings, dissemination of credible facts with irrefutable evidence, fact-checking initiatives, and digital literacy campaigns, played a pivotal role in neutralising misinformation. However, in absence of a credible 'Information Warfare Strategy', structures and procedures, India had to do a fair amount of damage control in narrative warfare, which needs to be addressed for future conflicts.

Weaponising the Arms Market Narrative. Interestingly, global arms manufacturers entered the fray, shaping narratives based on commercial interests. Chinese and Western defence manufacturers' lobbies amplified conflicting claims to promote their platforms by underplaying Pakistani military setbacks—creating confusion in international perception. Indian-made platforms like BrahMos eventually gained credibility, but only after initial media scepticism. However, the delayed announcement of the ceasefire allowed foreign powers to capture narrative space—highlighting the need for more agile, real time strategic communication mechanisms in the future. An immediate ceasefire announcement following India's decision could have saved a great deal of the effort later required to counter hijacked news and fake propaganda.

Regional Threat Expansion

Pakistan-China-Turkey Nexus. During Operation Sindoor, India confronted a Pakistan-China-Türkiye nexus on a single front, signalling an expanded regional threat beyond Pakistan. China, the so-called 'Iron Brother,' backed the shadow war by providing space-based ISR support through Baidu satellites, J-10/J-17 aircraft, PL15 beyond visual range missiles and HongQi-9 Air Defence Missile Battery. Türkiye too demonstrated tacit support for Pakistan, in sync with its Islamic leadership ambition, by providing Byker Yiha III Kamikaze Drones and Asisguard Songar Drones.

Emerging Bangladesh Front. Beyond Sindoor India can expect Bangladesh to emerge as a new potential front, especially with political instability and terrorist network, reviving a new terror corridor in collusion with Pakistan. Despite a strong message by India, the intention of Pakistan to wage proxy war is unlikely to change, but considering the increased cost, its modalities may change to improve deniability. India could expect terrorist action routed through Bangladesh or Nepal to complicate its response.

Understanding China's Calculated Restraint. China's passive posture during Operation Sindoor—despite rhetorical, moral, diplomatic and material support to Pakistan—was telling. It reflects Beijing's prioritisation of economic interests and its ongoing strategic contestation with the United States (US). While China continues to arm Pakistan and extend credit (disguised as weapon delivery payments), it refrains from opening a second front against India, especially when its own interests vis-à-vis Taiwan dominate strategic priorities. However, in any future confrontation with Pakistan, India should assume that the minimum level of external support extended to Pakistan would be comparable to what the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is currently providing to Ukraine.

Strategic Lessons from Operation Sindoor

Multi-Domain Integration. Operation Sindoor offers multiple lessons for future conflict preparedness. It validated the relevance of multi-domain operations to include land, air, cyber, space, and information warfare. India must institutionalise joint doctrines and operational synergy across land, air, cyber, space, and information domains for resultant strategic deterrence. The relevance of strategic communication and information war was a lesson and

reminder to expedite Indian capability in this important domain of modern warfare.

Relevance of Drones and Cruise Missiles. The operation reaffirmed the relevance of drones and precision-guided munitions. Drawing lessons from the Armenia-Azerbaijan, Israel-Hamas, and Ukraine-Russia wars, India realised that future wars would rely heavily on standoff platforms. Drone production and indigenous capabilities need rapid scaling. Like Ukraine and Russia, India has the potential to become a major drone manufacturing hub if national effort is directed appropriately. Rapid advances in drone warfare and precision-guided systems are essential.

State of the Art Aerial Assets. The capability gaps in areas like 5th generation aircraft and drone warfare assets were evident. India needs to buy a few 'State of the Art' fighter aircraft to arrest the declining superiority against Pakistan and mitigate the capability gap against China. The indigenous production of Tejas and medium multi-role combat aircraft needs to be accelerated with special effort to tide over the problems of engines and other critical components. India needs to fast-track the upgradation its air defence systems in preparation for a potential conflict with China or a collusive confrontation. The announcement of Sudarshan Chakra, a future air defence shield is the right step in this direction.

Budgetary Realism. The operation underscored the urgent need of budgetary realism, raising defence spending above 2 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), accelerating indigenous defence production and prioritising defence Research and Development (R&D). It must be recognised that defence spending can stimulate R&D, industry, and GDP, and act as an economic force multiplier. Battle tested systems can boost defence exports to generate forex for critical procurements. Thankfully, there is a growing public awareness on importance of national security and people as well as corporates understand growing, multi-front strategic threats and support the need for stronger national defence, even at a higher financial cost.

Narrative Dominance. Operation Sindoor revealed that victory in the modern era is determined not just by battlefield outcomes but also by dominance in the cognitive and digital domains. There is a need to have a strategy, doctrine, appropriate organisational

structures and procedures to handle it effectively. A need to establish a permanent information warfare division for proactive and reactive narrative control with social media responsiveness needs to be examined immediately.

Upgrading Deterrence Paradigm. Operation Sindoor has upgraded the deterrence paradigm in a manner that every terrorist attack will be taken as an 'Act of War'. It entails higher preparedness and response level in escalation dynamics. Future operations must sustain this momentum through unpredictable, targeted actions to ensure that deterrence by punishment continues.

Diplomatic Caution. On the diplomatic front India was once again disappointed with US inconsistency in relation to Pakistan after events in Bangladesh. Washington's response revealed the limits of partnerships during crises. India should revisit its partnerships, as strategic autonomy has served Indian interest in peacetime, but it also left New Delhi with an unpleasant taste of isolation at the time of military confrontation.

Shaping Future Strategy: Beyond Sindoor

India must now institutionalise the strategic and operational gains of Operation Sindoor. This includes the development of theatre commands, enhanced integration of space and cyber capabilities, and the creation of real-time narrative control mechanisms by creating a 'National Narrative Warfare Cell'. The recent release of cyber, space and amphibious warfare doctrines are steps in right direction. Furthermore, India must expand the indigenous defence ecosystem beyond legacy platforms by fast-tracking artificial intelligence, drone swarms, electronic warfare systems and other niche technologies. Strengthening civil-military fusion and reinforcing border infrastructure are also critical. India must make up the requirements.

New Delhi needs to recalibrate future retaliation, in context of Beijing's support to Islamabad or a regrouped Pakistan-Türkiye-China axis, granting them the opportunity to make up for their weaknesses, having tested their military assets and procedures in war conditions. It must consider substantial capability development being undertaken by Pakistan which has hiked up its defence budget by 20 per cent⁶ over the 2024 allocation and China's continued efforts to modernise its military at unprecedented pace. India will thus have to fast pace its capability development too.

Pakistan has continued nuclear rhetoric beyond Operation Sindoor with Asif Munir restating the nuclear threat⁷ from US soil. However, India remains firm in its refusal to yield to any form of nuclear blackmail. Islamabad has also made some diplomatic moves to get the Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA) decision from Hague on the Indus Water Treaty, rejected by India, which earlier sought neutral expert mechanism. India maintains that as the PCA in this case is 'Illegally Constituted'⁸, devoid of jurisdiction; hence, it continues to hold the treaty in abeyance, ruling out any negotiations with perpetrators of terrorism. Our future response strategy must factor these developments. India needs to adopt proactive strategies in shaping the international environment and countering the challenges mentioned above.

'Manpower is Still Key', despite technological advancements, ground forces remain indispensable due to India's geographical compulsions. From the line of control, line of actual control to the Indo-Myanmar border, boots on ground will continue to be a critical requirement. Therefore, reducing recruitment or cutting troop strength under modernity pretexts may be strategically counterproductive.

Conclusion: Recrafting India's Future Ready Strategic Doctrine

Operation Sindoor validated the concept of integrated national power application, highlighted the relevance of standoff warfare, and underscored the importance of narrative dominance. However, it also exposed weaknesses in strategic communication, procurement delays, and budgetary constraints.

Operation Sindoor was more than a military response; it was a strategic statement, a template of application of modern operational art. It demonstrated how calibrated force, applied with strategic restraint and backed by comprehensive national power, could alter the strategic landscape without crossing red lines. India, thus, redefined the contours of regional deterrence with diplomatic maturity. It reaffirmed that in the era of hybrid warfare, success lies not just in kinetic prowess but in the ability to tell the right story, at the right time, to the right audience.

The operation marked a transition from reactive posturing to proactive doctrine—one that integrates restraint with resolve, and

technology with tenacity. By integrating lethal precision, India laid the foundation of a new deterrence doctrine—one rooted in resolve, responsibility, and readiness.

India must codify a new 'Deterrence Doctrine', making it clear that terrorism and its sponsors will be treated indistinguishably. Above all, India must maintain an unpredictable yet credible deterrence posture that dissuades adversaries from testing its resolve.

India needs to prepare for multi-front, multi-domain warfare—including conventional and hybrid forms—against a collusive threat from China and Pakistan, which would automatically cover any contingency from a lesser adversary. It needs to enhance military readiness, revamp economic thinking to support defence capacity building. It should also address new threats emerging from the east as well as maritime domains.

The overarching lesson is unambiguous: India must modernise its military while simultaneously evolving its doctrines, strengthening indigenous capability, and mastering the war of narratives.

Endnotes

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