COMMENTARIES

Operation Sindoor and India’s New Doctrine of Punitive Deterrence

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

The terrorist attack in Pahalgam on 22 April 2025 marked a critical inflection point in India’s counterterrorism and national security posture. Carried out by heavily armed terrorists linked to The Resistance Front, an offshoot of the Pakistan-backed Lashkar-e-Taiba, the attack involved the cold-blooded killing of 26 civilians, most of them tourists, after reportedly segregating victims on the basis of religion. The assault was not merely another act of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. It was a deliberate strategic provocation designed to reignite instability in the Valley, undermine the return of normalcy, and challenge the credibility of the Indian state. India’s response came through Operation Sindoor launched on 7 May 2025, one of the most significant cross-border military operations undertaken by India in recent years. The operation targeted terrorist infrastructure across multiple locations in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, including facilities linked to Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba at Bahawalpur and Muridke. The strikes were carefully calibrated, intelligence-driven, and deliberately confined to terror infrastructure in order to signal both capability and restraint. New Delhi made it explicitly clear that Pakistani military establishments had not been targeted during the initial phase of operations, while simultaneously warning that any escalation by Pakistan would invite an appropriate response. Pakistan, however, responded with a calibrated military escalation involving cross-border shelling, drone incursions, missile attempts, and attacks against Indian military installations across the western sector. The conflict rapidly expanded into a multidomain confrontation involving air power, drones, missile defence systems, artillery exchanges, and naval deployments. By the night of 9 and 10 May, India had escalated its response by launching precision strikes

> *against key Pakistani military infrastructure, including airbases, radar facilities, command and control nodes, and operational assets associated with Pakistani offensive actions. Targets reportedly included installations at Nur Khan, Rafiqui, Murid, Rahim Yar Khan, and other strategically significant facilities. Satellite imagery and subsequent disclosures indicated substantial damage to Pakistani military assets and infrastructure. Operation Sindoor therefore represented far more than a retaliatory strike. It reflected the emergence of a new Indian approach rooted in punitive deterrence, escalatory credibility, and proactive compellence. The operation signalled that India was no longer willing to remain trapped within the cycle of absorbing terror attacks followed by limited tactical responses. Instead, it demonstrated an evolving doctrine in which terrorism sponsored under the cover of nuclear blackmail would invite calibrated but increasingly expansive military consequences.*

Operation Sindoor marked a defining moment in India's evolving national security doctrine. Far beyond a calibrated military strike, it represented India's strategic thunderclap that sought to rewrite the rules of engagement, dismantle the terror-state nexus, and signal that Indian sovereignty would now be defended with steel rather than restraint.

The operation demonstrated a convergence of military precision, diplomatic signalling, economic coercion, and information warfare into a unified national response. Diplomatically, India framed its actions within the accepted framework of a just war and sovereign self-defence, thereby aligning its military response with international norms. Economically, instruments such as the Indus Waters Treaty and cross-border trade emerged as levers of strategic pressure. Militarily, the surgical targeting of terrorist launchpads reflected operational maturity, intelligence integration, and political resolve. In the information domain, India successfully challenged Pakistan's false narratives while projecting before the international community the idea of a Dharma Yudh against terrorism.

Operation Sindoor also underlined the growing importance of narrative warfare in modern conflict. The credibility of India's messaging stood in contrast to the visible cracks in Pakistan's narrative architecture. Yet the operation simultaneously exposed the need for India to become far more proactive and pre-emptive in the digital battlespace, where perceptions increasingly shape strategic outcomes.

Most importantly, the operation reflected a doctrinal shift from reactive containment towards proactive compellence. It established a new threshold in India's strategic posture by signalling that New Delhi was now willing not merely to absorb and respond, but also to shape escalation dynamics in its favour.

Pakistan's Internal Power Dynamics: The Structural Barrier to Peace

The enduring instability in India-Pakistan relations continues to stem from Pakistan's deeply entrenched civil-military imbalance. Pakistan's democracy effectively ends where the General Headquarters in Rawalpindi begins.

For decades, the Pakistani military-ISI complex has systematically undermined peace overtures whenever civilian governments attempted rapprochement with India. The deep state survives on controlled instability and continues to employ non-state actors as instruments of asymmetric warfare. Organisations such as Jaish-e-Mohammed, Hizbul Mujahideen, and Lashkar-e-Taiba do not function independently. They remain recruited, trained, tasked, and enabled by elements within the Pakistani establishment itself.

The military-mullah nexus therefore remains the principal obstacle to regional peace. Until this ecosystem is dismantled, diplomacy risks remaining a charade while the people of Pakistan themselves continue to suffer the consequences of militarised statecraft. India's strategic calculus must consequently account for Pakistan's structural disequilibrium in every engagement.

Breaking the Cycle: Ending the “Mowing the Grass” Phenomenon

India’s previous approaches towards terrorism often reflected strategic restraint and episodic retaliation. Such responses produced temporary tactical gains but failed to generate lasting strategic consequences. Repeatedly trimming the weed of terror could never cleanse the field. The roots themselves required removal.

Operation Sindoor signalled movement towards a cost-imposition strategy in which Pakistan would increasingly bear cumulative military, economic, diplomatic, and psychological consequences for sponsoring terrorism. Kinetic actions were intended not as symbolic gestures, but as punitive and overwhelming instruments of strategic messaging. The logic of hitting hard, hitting where it hurts, and hurting where it lasts formed the essence of this approach.

The operation also highlighted the importance of hybrid warfare capabilities. Cyber disruption, financial choking, psychological operations, and information campaigns must increasingly complement conventional military force. Equally important is the deliberate preservation of escalatory ambiguity so that adversaries remain uncertain and cautious regarding India’s future responses.

Pakistan’s long-standing reliance on nuclear signalling to shield subconventional warfare also appeared increasingly ineffective. Operation Sindoor demonstrated that adequate strategic space exists for calibrated conventional punitive action below the nuclear threshold. The fear of escalation, long internalised in New Delhi, now appeared to shift towards Rawalpindi.

Uprooting Terror Networks: Targeting the Kingmakers

Operation Sindoor reinforced the understanding that retaliation against foot soldiers alone cannot deliver strategic transformation. Tactical retribution may strike the pawns, but genuine transformation must target the kingmakers who sustain terrorism.

This requires dismantling the entire ecosystem that enables terrorism. The destruction of terror financing structures, the targeting of politico-military patrons inside Pakistan, and the disruption of logistical as well as ideological supply chains must become integral to India’s long-term strategy. Simultaneously, India must intensify efforts to expose Pakistan internationally as the epicentre of global terrorism.

Military strikes therefore cannot remain isolated events. Every strike on terrorist infrastructure must be followed by financial audits, cyber exposures, diplomatic offensives, and persistent information campaigns. Punitive retribution must evolve into a sustained and continuous strategy rather than a periodic reaction.

Redefining Deterrence: Operation Sindoor’s Strategic Impact

Operation Sindoor marked a significant evolution in India’s deterrence doctrine by replacing ambiguity with visible resolve and demonstrable capability. Deterrence without demonstration remains an illusion.

The operation raised the threshold of Indian response and introduced greater uncertainty into Pakistani strategic calculations. India’s nuclear posture increasingly functioned as a shield that protected strategic flexibility rather than as a restraint that paralysed political decision-making.

At the international level, India emerged as a responsible state defending sovereignty against terrorism, while Pakistan faced growing diplomatic isolation due to its entrenched links with extremist organisations. Operation Sindoor consequently reinforced the credibility of India’s framework of intent, capability, and consequence.

International Reactions: The United States, China, and Strategic Autonomy

Global responses to Operation Sindoor reflected shifting geopolitical realities. The United States largely confined itself to diplomatic balancing and strategic platitudes while demonstrating limited leverage over the Pakistani military establishment. Such balancing behaviour increasingly risks eroding Indian trust in Washington as a dependable strategic partner.

China, meanwhile, continued to maintain strategic ambiguity. Although Beijing avoided overt alignment during the crisis, its deep economic and strategic investments in Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor ensured continued moral, informational, and material support to Islamabad. In strategic terms, Pakistan increasingly functions for China in a role comparable to that played by Hezbollah for Iran.

At the same time, India's democratic credibility and calibrated conduct generated broad international support. India's actions were widely perceived as assertive yet measured, compelling major powers to reassess both India's resolve and Pakistan's strategic liabilities.

Operation Sindoor also reaffirmed that India's foreign policy after Sindoor would be shaped not by rigid alliances but by strategic autonomy rooted firmly in national interests.

India's Nuclear Doctrine: Balancing Restraint and Preparedness

India's nuclear doctrine continues to reflect strategic maturity rather than moral rigidity. Its framework retains inbuilt flexibility designed to adapt to evolving threat environments.

While India's No First Use policy remains intact, doctrinal recalibration continues. India does not differentiate between tactical and strategic nuclear weapons in Pakistan's arsenal. Any nuclear use, or even credible threat of use, carries the possibility of an appropriate Indian response.

Pakistan's repeated nuclear sabre-rattling has long aimed at shrinking the strategic space between subconventional conflict and conventional warfare. Yet this strategy increasingly appears ineffective. Pakistan's limited geographical depth makes it significantly more vulnerable in any nuclear exchange. India's deterrence posture therefore continues to rest on credible minimum deterrence reinforced by the certainty of massive retaliation.

Operation Sindoor demonstrated that deterrence cannot remain static and that old strategic playbooks no longer constrain India's options.

Assessing Pakistan's Nuclear Posture

Pakistan's nuclear posture relies heavily upon opacity, first-use threats, and deliberate ambiguity. However, such signalling increasingly resembles political theatre rather than coherent military doctrine.

India, by contrast, projects strategic stability through transparency, institutional maturity, triad capability, and credible command-and-control mechanisms. Massive retaliation is intended not as rhetorical signalling, but as a strategic certainty designed to reinforce deterrence credibility.

Operation Sindoor reaffirmed that India's deterrence framework derives strength from clarity rather than clutter.

Massive Retaliation: The Backbone of Credible Deterrence

India's expanding strategic arsenal, including Agni-V systems, MIRV technology, and sea-based deterrence through SSBN capabilities, continues to strengthen the credibility and survivability of its deterrence posture.

Massive retaliation is not fundamentally about numerical parity. Its essence lies in ensuring certainty and severity of punishment. Deterrence ultimately rests upon three pillars which are capability, credibility, and communication. Operation Sindoor demonstrated that India possesses all three in sufficient measure.

Conclusion: Operation Sindoor and the Future of Warfare

Operation Sindoor was far more than a successful military operation. It was a strategic message directed equally towards adversaries and partners that the era of Indian strategic reticence had ended.

India seeks peace, progress, and stability. However, peace cannot survive indefinitely when terrorism is employed as an instrument of state policy. The objective of deterrence is not perpetual war but ensuring that adversaries think repeatedly before initiating aggression.

India today stands as a resilient, resolute, and responsible power. It is no longer merely reactive. It is strategically prepared, operationally confident, and increasingly willing to impose costs on those who challenge its sovereignty and national security.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of CNAWS.

Image Source: ChatGPT