COMMENTARIES

From Kargil to Operation Sindoor: How India Changed the Rules of Responding to Pakistan

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

From the restrained use of force during the Kargil War to the precision strikes of Operation Sindoor, India's response to Pakistan-backed terrorism has undergone a fundamental transformation. What was once a strategy shaped by diplomatic caution and fear of escalation has evolved into a doctrine of calibrated retaliation, combining intelligence, airpower, precision weapons and political signalling. This shift reflects not only advances in military capability, but also a changing belief in New Delhi that restraint alone cannot deter cross-border terrorism.

India's response to Pakistan has undergone a fundamental transformation since the summer of 1999. During the Kargil War, Indian soldiers climbed near-vertical, enemy-held mountain positions to restore territory that had been occupied through surprise and deception. The Indian Air Force supported the campaign but operated under strict orders not to cross the Line of Control.

More than 25 years later, Operation Sindoor reflected a very different strategic posture. India was no longer responding merely by evicting an adversary from its territory. It was using intelligence-led, long-range precision strikes to impose costs across the border while attempting to prevent a limited military operation from expanding into a full-scale war.

The difference is not simply that India has acquired more advanced aircraft and missiles. The deeper change lies in how intelligence, airpower, precision weapons, political messaging and escalation control have been integrated into a single coercive strategy. Kargil was a campaign to restore the status quo. Operation Sindoor was designed to change the cost of disturbing it.

From Strategic Surprise to Targeted Intelligence

Kargil exposed severe weaknesses in India's national-security system. Pakistani troops and irregular forces occupied strategically important heights on the Indian side of the Line of Control without being detected in time. The official Kargil Review Committee Report concluded that the intrusion came as a major surprise and identified deficiencies in intelligence collection, assessment, coordination and dissemination.

Information existed in fragments, but it was not fused into a coherent warning. Intelligence agencies, military commands and political decision-makers did not possess a common operational picture. India eventually reconstructed Pakistan's planning through captured documents, communications intercepts and battlefield evidence, but much of this understanding emerged after the intrusion had already become a military crisis.

The reforms that followed Kargil attempted to correct these shortcomings. The Group of Ministers Report on National Security recommended changes in intelligence coordination, higher defence management and joint military structures. Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff was subsequently established, surveillance capabilities expanded and systems for coordinating intelligence and military operations gradually improved.

By the time of Operation Sindoor, intelligence was not simply being used to understand the adversary. It had become the foundation for target selection.

According to the government's initial briefing on Operation Sindoor, nine terrorist facilities in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir were selected after multi-agency intelligence assessments. The operation depended on identifying the location, function and operational relevance of the targets before weapons were released.

This marked a shift from intelligence as warning to intelligence as an instrument of precision warfare.

Modern surveillance is also no longer confined to reconnaissance photographs or reports passed through separate chains of command. Airborne early-warning aircraft, satellites, unmanned platforms, ground radars and electronic sensors feed information into networked command systems. During Operation Sindoor, the Indian Air Force's Integrated Air Command and Control System reportedly worked with the Army's Akashteer network and other service-level systems to build a more unified operational picture. Kargil showed what happens when information remains fragmented. Sindoor demonstrated the advantage of turning information into real-time military action.

Airpower Moves to the Centre

Airpower played an important role during Kargil, but it was initially used cautiously and with considerable difficulty. Operation Safed Sagar began on May 26, 1999. Indian aircraft had to locate small, well-camouflaged positions located at extreme altitudes, often against snow-covered or rocky backgrounds. Pilots faced shoulder-fired missiles, difficult weather conditions and the political restriction against crossing the Line of Control.

Early close-air-support missions produced limited results. As Benjamin Lambeth's detailed study, Airpower at 18,000 Feet, explains, the Indian Air Force gradually moved away from attempting to strike individual frontline positions and increasingly targeted supply routes, command centres and logistical nodes.

The Mirage 2000 became particularly important. The rapid integration of Litening targeting pods and laser-guided bombs allowed the aircraft to attack Pakistani positions with far greater accuracy. The precision strike on command facilities near Tiger Hill became one of the defining moments of the air campaign.

Yet precision during Kargil remained relatively limited and, in some respects, improvised. India had the aircraft and a small number of advanced weapons, but precision strike had not yet become the organising principle of its conventional response.

Operation Sindoor reversed that relationship. Airpower and precision engagement were central from the beginning.

The opening strikes were described by the Ministry of External Affairs as "measured, non-escalatory, proportionate and responsible". India initially stated that it had targeted terrorist infrastructure rather than Pakistani military installations. The aim was to demonstrate that it could strike across the border while limiting the scope of the confrontation.

When Pakistan attempted to attack Indian military targets with drones and missiles, however, the target set widened. India responded against air-defence systems and subsequently struck military facilities and air bases. Official accounts highlighted the use of precision weapons, electronic warfare, loitering munitions and integrated air defence.

This was not a repetition of the Kargil model. There was no territory to recapture and no requirement for aircraft to provide sustained support to infantry fighting uphill. Operation Sindoor was a campaign of stand-off punishment, air-defence penetration and coercive signalling.

The growing importance of beyond-visual-range combat also illustrated how the character of air warfare had changed. Aircraft could engage one another without crossing the border or even seeing the opposing platform. The decisive factors were sensor range, electronic warfare, missile performance, airborne surveillance and the speed with which information moved through the combat network.

This also means that public claims about aircraft losses and battlefield success must be treated cautiously. The Stimson Center's assessment of the May 2025 crisis noted that reliable information remained limited and that Indian and Pakistani claims diverged considerably. Modern air campaigns generate vast quantities of data, but they also produce intense information warfare.

The strategic transformation, however, is difficult to dispute. In 1999, airpower supported a ground campaign. By 2025, airpower had become the primary instrument through which India attempted to shape the crisis itself.

Restraint Has Not Disappeared. It Has Changed Form

India's refusal to cross the Line of Control during Kargil was one of the most important political decisions of the war. Militarily, the restriction complicated operations. Indian troops had to attack heavily defended positions from disadvantageous directions, while aircraft were denied the freedom to strike some supply routes and supporting facilities across the LoC.

Politically and diplomatically, however, restraint proved highly effective.

By respecting the LoC, India strengthened the argument that Pakistan had attempted to alter the territorial status quo through force. As a Brookings assessment of the conflict observed, the United States increasingly accepted India's account and pressured Pakistan to withdraw. India obtained international support partly because it presented itself as the power restoring, rather than revising, the existing boundary.

Kargil was therefore a war of legitimacy through restraint.

Operation Sindoor operated with a broader definition of restraint. India crossed the LoC and struck targets inside Pakistan, but attempted to limit escalation through target selection, stand-off weapons and carefully structured public messaging.

The initial objective was not territorial occupation. Indian forces did not attempt to seize Pakistani land or launch a large ground offensive. The first strikes avoided Pakistani military facilities, according to official statements. Military targets were attacked only after Pakistan expanded its response.

This amounted to a new escalation ladder. Cross-border force was no longer treated as inherently incompatible with restraint. Instead, restraint was defined by the nature of the target, the weapon used, the scale of damage sought and the political objective being pursued. The boundary of acceptable retaliation had widened, but it had not disappeared.

Political Objectives Have Become More Punitive

The political objective in Kargil was clear: evict the intruders, restore the Line of Control and isolate Pakistan diplomatically. Once the occupied positions had been recovered and Pakistani forces withdrew, India's principal objective had been achieved. Operation Sindoor pursued a different aim. It was launched after the April 2025 terrorist attack in Pahalgam and was presented as an effort to destroy terrorist infrastructure, punish those responsible and establish a new deterrent threshold.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi subsequently described the operation as a "new normal" in India's response to cross-border terrorism. The political message was that terrorist attacks linked to Pakistan-based organisations could trigger direct military action and that the distinction between terrorist groups and their state supporters would carry diminishing strategic protection.

Diplomacy remained important, but its role had changed. During Kargil, diplomatic engagement helped India secure support for territorial restoration. After Sindoor, India used diplomacy to defend the legitimacy of punitive action. Seven all-party delegations were sent abroad to explain India's position on cross-border terrorism and the rationale behind the operation.

Military action and narrative management were therefore conducted together. The strike was intended not only to damage physical infrastructure but also to establish an international and domestic understanding of the circumstances under which India would use force.

A More Capable Response, but Not a Risk-Free One

The evolution from Kargil to Operation Sindoor should not be described simply as a shift from restraint to aggression. India continues to operate under the nuclear shadow, and every conventional action against Pakistan carries the danger of miscalculation.

Precision weapons can reduce collateral damage, but they cannot eliminate escalation. Better intelligence can improve target selection, but it cannot guarantee that the adversary will interpret the operation as intended. Networked air defence can intercept drones and missiles, but it may also encourage both sides to conduct larger and more complex attacks.

The more accurate conclusion is that India has redesigned restraint through capability.

Kargil taught India that intelligence failures, limited surveillance and inadequate precision options could impose enormous costs. The response over the following decades was the development of better intelligence coordination, airborne surveillance, precision weapons, integrated air defence and joint command networks.

Operation Sindoor demonstrated the strategic consequences of that transformation. India could now strike across the border, defend against retaliation, expand or restrict its target set and communicate political objectives almost simultaneously.

Kargil was a campaign of eviction under severe operational constraints. Operation Sindoor represented calibrated coercion supported by precision, networks and a wider range of military choices.

That is the most important change in India’s approach to Pakistan. The objective is no longer merely to absorb aggression and restore the previous position. It is to retain the ability to impose costs, control the pace of escalation and define the political meaning of the confrontation before outside powers or battlefield events define it instead.