COMMENTARIES

From Deterrence to Attrition: Why India Must Watch Pakistan's Emerging Security Partnerships

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

This commentary examines how Pakistan's expanding security partnerships with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, particularly through the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement, could affect India's future strategic environment. Drawing lessons from Operation Sindoor and the Russia–Ukraine war, it argues that military superiority does not necessarily guarantee a quick victory if an adversary can access sustained external support. While the Makkah agreement should not be equated with NATO-style collective defence or assumed to guarantee intervention in an India–Pakistan conflict, its potential to develop into a broader financial, diplomatic, technological or military support architecture warrants Indian attention. The article argues that India must complement military preparedness with "pre-crisis deterrence diplomacy" and deepen its engagement with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye to prevent future conflicts from becoming prolonged wars of attrition.

Operation Sindoor demonstrated an important proposition about India's evolving military strategy: military asymmetry can be converted into credible deterrence when political objectives are clearly defined, escalation is calibrated and the adversary is convinced that aggression will carry tangible costs. Yet, the experience of the Russia–Ukraine war offers an equally important warning. Military superiority alone does not guarantee a decisive outcome if the weaker adversary possesses sufficient external support to sustain a prolonged conflict.

This distinction is becoming increasingly relevant for India as Pakistan develops deeper security relationships with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, most recently reflected in the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement. The agreement should neither be exaggerated nor dismissed. Its immediate military implications remain uncertain, but its potential to evolve into a broader support architecture deserves careful Indian attention.

Operation Sindoor and the Russia–Ukraine war present two very different models of conflict. India's objective during Operation Sindoor was limited: impose costs on Pakistan following the Pahalgam terrorist attack, demonstrate that terrorism would not be insulated from military retaliation, and restore deterrence without allowing the confrontation to develop into an unrestricted war. India demonstrated its ability to strike targets inside Pakistan while simultaneously defeating Pakistani attempts to attack Indian military installations. The conflict was consequently terminated before it developed into a prolonged war of attrition.

The Russia–Ukraine war illustrates the opposite dynamic. Russia possesses enormous advantages over Ukraine in territory, population, military resources and defence-industrial capacity. Yet these advantages have not translated into a decisive victory. One of the principal reasons is Ukraine's ability to continuously regenerate its military capabilities through extensive Western assistance. This support has gone far beyond the transfer of individual weapons systems. It has included ammunition, intelligence, training, air defence, financial assistance, logistics, industrial cooperation and long-term military procurement.

The lesson for India is therefore not simply that "external support matters". It is that external support can transform military asymmetry into strategic endurance. A weaker state does not necessarily need to defeat a stronger adversary if it can prevent the stronger state from achieving its objectives quickly. The longer a conflict continues, the more military superiority begins to interact with economic endurance, industrial capacity, diplomatic support and political will. A conflict that could initially be resolved through military coercion can gradually become a war of attrition.

This is precisely why the emerging Saudi–Pakistan–Türkiye security relationship deserves Indian attention. The Makkah agreement reportedly establishes a principle of collective defence between Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye. At present, however, it would be premature to equate this arrangement with the kind of comprehensive military, economic and industrial support that Ukraine has received from Western countries. The agreement does not publicly establish anything comparable to NATO's institutional architecture, nor is there sufficient evidence that Saudi Arabia or Türkiye would automatically enter a future India–Pakistan conflict on Pakistan's side.

But this should not produce complacency. The strategic concern lies in what such relationships could become over time. Saudi Arabia possesses enormous financial and energy resources, while Türkiye has developed significant defence-industrial capabilities, particularly in unmanned systems and aerospace technologies. Pakistan already maintains an exceptionally important defence relationship with China.

If these relationships gradually evolve into mechanisms for financing, supplying, training or sustaining Pakistan during a future conflict, India's military superiority could become more difficult to translate into a rapid political outcome.

The relevant question, therefore, is not whether Saudi Arabia or Türkiye would fight India on Pakistan's behalf. It is whether they could provide Pakistan with enough diplomatic, financial, technological or military support to increase its capacity to absorb losses and prolong a conflict.

History also provides reasons not to overestimate these partnerships. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have maintained close defence relations for decades, yet formal strategic understandings have not automatically translated into military intervention whenever their interests have diverged. The clearest example was the Yemen crisis in 2015, when Saudi Arabia sought Pakistani military participation but Pakistan ultimately chose not to become directly involved. Strategic

partnerships, therefore, do not eliminate the autonomy of individual states.

Nevertheless, India should not rely upon historical precedent to assume that future behaviour will remain unchanged. This is particularly important because India's strategic horizon extends beyond the next military confrontation. India is attempting to transform itself into a developed economy by 2047. A prolonged conflict with Pakistan would impose costs that extend far beyond the battlefield. Resources would have to be diverted towards ammunition replenishment, emergency procurement, mobilisation, air defence, logistics and military replacement. Even if India ultimately prevailed, a prolonged war could impose significant opportunity costs on infrastructure, technological development, human capital and economic growth.

For India, therefore, the objective should not merely be to maintain the capacity to win a war. It should be to maintain the capacity to end a war quickly and on favourable terms. This requires military preparedness, but military preparedness alone is insufficient. India must also pursue what may be called pre-crisis deterrence diplomacy.

New Delhi should deepen its economic, technological, defence and diplomatic engagement with both Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. India should create sufficient economic and strategic stakes with these countries that, during a future India–Pakistan crisis, they possess strong incentives to encourage restraint rather than facilitate Pakistan's endurance. Engagement should not be understood as appeasement. It should be viewed as an extension of deterrence.

The central lesson of Operation Sindoor is that credible military capability can impose costs and restore deterrence. The lesson of Ukraine is that deterrence can weaken when an adversary acquires the external support necessary to sustain prolonged resistance.

India should therefore ensure that Pakistan's emerging partnerships do not eventually transform a future India–Pakistan confrontation from a short, controlled conflict into a prolonged war of attrition. India's strategic objective should be clear: not merely to possess the power to win the next war, but to prevent the next war from becoming the kind of war that neither side can afford to end.

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

Image Source: ChatGPT