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Fighting Above and Beyond the Battlefield: Air Superiority, Information Warfare, and Escalation Management from India–Pakistan to Israel

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Introduction

The military confrontation between India and Pakistan in May 2025 represents far more than another round of violence in a chronically tense region. Instead, *Operation Sindoor* constitutes a critical inflexion point in the conduct of modern limited wars, illustrating how air superiority, long-range precision strike, information warfare, and escalation management have become deeply intertwined. The conflict highlights a shift away from direct, large-scale manoeuvre warfare toward technologically mediated confrontation, in which control of airspace, sensors, narratives, and escalation thresholds is as decisive as physical destruction on the battlefield.

This article examines *Operation Sindoor* as a case study in contemporary warfare, focusing on the integration of air power, unmanned systems, layered air defence, electronic warfare, and cognitive operations. It further situates the India–Pakistan confrontation within a broader comparative framework, demonstrating its relevance for Israel’s evolving security environment. The core argument advanced here is that future limited conflicts will be decided not solely by

kinetic superiority, but by the ability to synchronise military capabilities with information dominance and carefully calibrated escalation control under conditions of constant global scrutiny.

Air Superiority and Stand-Off Warfare as the Primary Battlespace

From the outset, the May 2025 crisis elevated the air domain to the central arena of confrontation. Both India and Pakistan deliberately avoided large-scale ground operations and territorial incursions, instead relying on air power and long-range strike capabilities. This choice reflects a strategic preference for stand-off warfare, enabling both sides to signal resolve and impose costs while minimising the risk of uncontrolled escalation.

The initial phase of the confrontation featured one of the most extensive aerial engagements in South Asia's history, involving dozens of combat aircraft supported by advanced intelligence, surveillance, and command-and-control systems. The scale and duration of the engagement underscored the growing role of airspace as a strategic rather than merely tactical domain. Air superiority was no longer defined solely by freedom of movement for manned aircraft, but by dominance over detection, missile envelopes, and electronic infrastructure.

In the subsequent phase, the conflict expanded into intensive use of unmanned aerial systems and long-range missiles. Both sides increasingly relied on beyond-visual-range engagements, reducing exposure to close-range dogfights and reinforcing dependence on sensors, data fusion, and precision-guided munitions. This evolution reflects a broader doctrinal shift in which air superiority is achieved through control of effects rather than control of airspace alone.

Layered Air Defence and Precision Strike

One of the most significant features of *Operation Sindoor* was the prominent role played by integrated, multi-layered air defence systems. India's air defence architecture, combining indigenous systems such as *Akash* with advanced imported platforms including the Russian S-400 and the Israeli *Barak* demonstrated the growing importance of layered interception capabilities against diverse aerial threats. These included missiles, rockets, and numerous unmanned systems operating at varying altitudes and ranges.

The effectiveness of layered air defence was closely linked to advanced command-and-control infrastructure, which enabled real-time coordination among sensors, interceptors, and decision-makers. This integration allowed India to preserve freedom of action in the air domain while mitigating the impact of retaliatory strikes.

On the offensive side, India employed a combination of manned aircraft, precision-guided munitions, loitering munitions, and long-range missiles. The emphasis on precision stand-off strikes against clearly defined targets reflected a deliberate effort to impose military costs while maintaining escalation control. Commercial satellite imagery and open-source reporting supported assessments that these strikes were carefully calibrated, reinforcing a strategic narrative of restraint alongside capability. Taken together, these dynamics underscore a central principle of contemporary air warfare: superiority is no longer measured solely by penetration and destruction, but by the ability to synchronise defence, precision strike, and escalation management.

Chinese and Non-Western Systems as a Live Test Case

The conflict also attracted global attention due to its implications for assessing non-Western military technologies. Pakistan's reliance on Chinese-manufactured aircraft, missiles, and air defence systems, most notably J-10C and JF-17 fighters armed with PL-15 air-to-air missiles, alongside HQ-9 and HQ-16 air defence systems, provided a rare opportunity to observe these platforms in a high-intensity operational environment.

Reports of engagements between Chinese-origin systems and advanced Western platforms fueled international debate regarding the narrowing technological gap in modern air combat. While specific claims such as the reported downing of a Rafale aircraft remain contested, the broader significance of the episode lies in its demonstration that advanced non-Western systems must be taken seriously in future threat assessments.

For Israel, which operates predominantly Western-origin platforms, this development underscores the need to continually assess the capabilities of advanced Chinese and Russian systems that may be acquired by regional adversaries. Such assessments are essential not only for air defence planning but also for shaping offensive doctrines and assumptions regarding technological advantage.

Information Warfare and the Cognitive Domain

Alongside kinetic operations, *Operation Sindoor* vividly illustrated the centrality of information warfare and the cognitive domain. From the earliest stages of the conflict, official statements, visual imagery, media reporting, and social media dissemination became integral components of the war effort. The struggle was not limited to battlefield outcomes but extended to shaping domestic and international perceptions of success, restraint, and legitimacy. In contemporary conflicts characterised by decentralised communication and rapid information diffusion, disinformation and competing narratives are not anomalies but structural features. Out-of-context imagery, false claims, recycled footage, and exaggerated achievements circulated widely during the crisis, complicating efforts to establish a clear and objective picture of events. These dynamics are not unique to any single actor, but reflect the broader challenges inherent in modern information environments.

Crucially, information warfare did not merely accompany military operations; it influenced escalation dynamics, strategic signalling, and international response. Control of the narrative emerged as a force multiplier, shaping how military actions were interpreted by domestic audiences, adversaries, and external stakeholders alike.

Escalation Management under the Nuclear Shadow

Despite the intensity of the fighting and the deployment of advanced military technologies, the confrontation remained limited in duration and scope. Hostilities lasted only a few days and concluded with a rapid ceasefire, reportedly facilitated in part by diplomatic mediation, particularly by the United States. This outcome underscores that escalation control was not incidental but the result of deliberate strategic choices.

Both sides largely confined operations to their respective airspaces, even during long-range missile exchanges, avoiding large-scale ground manoeuvres or territorial crossings. Given that India and Pakistan are declared nuclear powers, managing escalation thresholds has emerged as a central strategic objective. The crisis demonstrated that even under the nuclear shadow, states can employ significant military force while maintaining restraint through signalling, stand-off operations, and diplomatic engagement.

Escalation management thus emerges as a core component of modern warfare, requiring institutional preparedness, clear doctrines, and integration between military and diplomatic instruments.

From India–Pakistan to Israel: Strategic Insights

Although the conflict unfolded far from the Middle East, *Operation Sindoor* offers valuable insights for Israel as well. The integration of air superiority, layered air defense, electronic warfare, and cognitive operations closely parallels dynamics observed in Israel’s own recent military experience, including *Operation Am Kalavi* against Iranian infrastructure in June

2025.

Both cases illustrate how contemporary conflicts increasingly depend on precision stand-off strikes, robust air defence, and sophisticated information management when confronting well-equipped adversaries operating simultaneously in kinetic and informational arenas. For Israel, the lessons are particularly salient in three areas: preparedness against large-scale unmanned aerial threats, resilience in the cognitive domain, and adaptation to an environment in which every military action is scrutinised through cameras, algorithms, and competing narratives.In this context, operational success is no longer defined solely by battlefield outcomes but by the ability to integrate military effectiveness with information dominance, legitimacy, and escalation control.

Conclusion

Operation Sindoor demonstrates that modern limited wars are fought both above and beyond the battlefield. Air superiority, missile warfare, unmanned systems, layered defence, information operations, and escalation management now form an integrated strategic ecosystem. The India–Pakistan confrontation of May 2025 highlights how technological integration and cognitive dominance have become as decisive as kinetic power.

The broader implication is clear: future conflicts will not be won solely through superior firepower, but through the ability to synchronise military capabilities with narrative control and calibrated restraint under conditions of constant global visibility. For Israel and other states facing complex, high-intensity security challenges, the lessons of *Operation Sindoor* underscore the need to think holistically about air power, information warfare, and escalation management as inseparable components of contemporary strategy.

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