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Op Sindoor 2.0: Why
&
How India Must Prepare
for the Next Round?

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Crystal Gazing: Ripples of Today; Tsunami of Tomorrow

Operation Sindoor has ushered in a new phase in South Asian crisis dynamics, shaped by shifting red lines, evolving military doctrines, and disruptive technologies. India has successfully reoriented global perception on “assured attribution,” ensuring punitive calibrated action after terror attacks by front-loading Pakistan’s culpability based on a larger canvas of proxy war rather than waiting for presenting dossiers of evidence for a specific terror attack. This bolsters New Delhi’s capacity to retaliate rapidly and unilaterally but simultaneously fuels public and political pressure for an immediate response, leaving little room for strategic pause.

Meanwhile, the strikes on symbolic terror hubs like Muridke and Bahawalpur set new targeting precedents, potentially enlarging escalatory options for future crises and forcing India to consider more provocative targets upscaling the escalatory ladder. Pakistan, for its part, is likely to revise its escalation calculus, alarmed by the penetration and precision of Indian strikes near key military infrastructure. A professional view must not only be what one does but also what the adversary does next. The prism of viewing the adversary must be from his lens.

Equally transformative is the centrality of information warfare and drone use. Pakistan’s proactive information operations, coupled with India’s reactive official communication and sensational media environment, introduced volatility and confusion—risks that could dangerously distort future decision-making. The widespread deployment of drones and loitering munitions marked a shift toward a new middle tier in the escalation ladder, less inflammatory than missiles but still scalable quantitatively and qualitatively triggering overreactions. Russia recently launched a 273 drone swarm attack on Ukraine which may become the new norm of contemporary modern precision standoff attacks. This is the principle of ‘Precise Mass’.

It may be too early but as both sides start drawing lessons, India faces a pressing need to harmonize both quantitatively and qualitatively its multidomain defence indigenous inventory into a coherent, networked warfighting system across land, air, maritime, space, cyber and informational domains. Op Sindoor, while limited in duration, has redefined the contours of future confrontations—setting the stage for faster, more opaque, and potentially more destructive escalations if not carefully managed.

The next round seems only a matter of time before the clarion call is resounded. The next conflict as has been the historic pattern may not be similar to the past but will certainly be more intense, not necessarily so short, nor assured to be a standoff mode only.

Purpose-Driven Warfare: What Did Op Sindoor Achieve?

War is fought by all elements of national power, while warfare refers to the doctrines, strategy, and means used to conduct that conflict. Warfare, at its core, is not about action for its own sake—it is about shaping outcomes through the calibrated use of force. A war without a clear politico-military strategic aim risks becoming an expensive spectacle of destruction with no political dividends. Operation Sindoor stood apart precisely because it was not just a reaction—it was a calculated move with clearly defined objectives. India's response wasn't merely reactive; it was a definitive statement. India didn't just retaliate but redefined the boundaries of conflict and compelled a strategic recalibration in the region.

Operation Sindoor was driven by three core goals. The first was to make Pakistan's action cost-prohibitive and response disproportionate to its role in the proxy war and exporting terrorism. The second was to create a comprehensive and integrated deterrence to such misadventures. The third was aimed at the Pakistan Army which remains the Centre of Gravity, to lower its credibility in the eyes of the nation. India aimed to do this by clearly demonstrating its capability, credibility and resolve to strike back with assured retribution across every domain: air, land, sea, space, cyberspace, and even information. The aims were by and large achieved in a record time of 98 hours.

The results were both operational and strategic. India not only dismantled key terrorist nodes deep inside Pakistani territory but also shifted the psychological balance. By carrying out precision strikes and standing ready for the next level of escalation, India shattered the illusion that cross-border terrorism could be prosecuted without consequences. The cost calculus in Rawalpindi has fundamentally changed terror now invites retaliation, not restraint. The vulnerabilities of the Pakistan Armed Forces lie exposed.

Equally significant was the diplomatic theatre that played out alongside the military campaign. Unlike previous episodes where global powers rushed to de-escalate tensions, Operation Sindoor unfolded in a silence that spoke volumes. India was granted strategic space by the international community—three days of operational freedom without condemnation or interference. This tacit endorsement, or at least calculated indifference, revealed a new geopolitical reality: the world is increasingly unwilling to indulge Pakistan's duplicity on terrorism.

The Indus Water treaty being held in abeyance was a hydro-deep strike both in the physical and psychological domain creating both ascendancy and strategic dislocation.

Why the Next Pulwama 2.0 is Inevitable

Pakistan's military establishment remains in a compulsive strategic relationship with Kashmir. Its institutional identity is tied to keeping the Kashmir issue alive—politically, diplomatically, communally and militarily. This obsession has led to its unholy marriage with Islamist terrorist groups, creating a dual-use militant infrastructure that serves both as a state

asset and a plausible deniability tool. This is unlikely to change and at best will be a reconstruction pause before the next strike. Pakistan will also draw strength from its Iron Clad friend and the three-brother alliance who remain inimical to India's Viksit Bharat rise. Some realities that impact the future are: -

- **China-Pakistan-Turkey Axis:** Pakistan remains committed to proxy warfare. China, dissatisfied with the visibility of its defence equipment during Op Sindoor, will likely seek to test and showcase its hypersonic technology, AI-driven ISR platforms, cyber capabilities, and space-based assets in the next conflict. Turkey, via Bayraktar drones and joint cyber efforts, is also invested in aiding Pakistan strategically. Turkey by way of being a NATO ally also receives US aid and advanced technology weapons.
- **Perceived Indian Escalation Dominance:** With India successfully calling Pakistan's nuclear bluff, the threshold for the next conflict will likely shift upward. The next engagement could witness attempts at rapid, high impact strikes within the first 72-96 hours from both sides. The duration and intensity could be at another level too.
- **Cyber Front Already Active:** Chinese and Turkish hackers targeted Indian networks during Op Sindoor, including power grids, rail networks, and satellite command links. Cyber warfare is no longer a parallel front—it is an integrated theatre.
- **AI and Space Dominance Gap:** China leads in hypersonics, satellite denial capabilities, and AI integration. Pakistan benefits indirectly from this lead. India must race to bridge this doctrinal and technological gap.
- **Defence Technology as Geopolitical Messaging:** China and Turkey may exploit future conflicts as arms showcase platforms, potentially flooding the Pakistani theatre with their cutting-edge hardware to boost export potential and geopolitical leverage.

Chanakya's Fourfold Threat Model and Pakistan

Today India faces Chanakya's both external and internal threats, both externally and internally abetted. India must thus evolve its national threat perception model from reactive to proactive and pre-emptive, drawing on the classical Arthashastra framework:

1. **External Threat:** Pakistan's persistent state sponsorship of terrorism. China's proxy play with inciting Pakistan to fight its wars. What Hezbollah is to Iran; Pakistan is to China.
2. **Internal Threat:** Islamist radicalisation and subversion influenced by Pakistani information warfare.
3. **Hidden Threat:** ISI-backed proxies, sleeper cells, and covert logistics chains. Also, the serpents within, fed from outside.
4. **Emerging Threat:** Hybrid warfare including narrative control, drone swarms, and cyber-attacks.

India's deterrence must be multi-vector: combining physical dominance, psychological warfare, and real-time technological edge.

Lessons from Operation Sindoor: Strengths and Gaps

Successes:

- **Precision Kinetic Strikes:** Tri-service synergy ensured accurate, decisive targeting of terror hubs. Certainly, at the armed forces level, it was a resounding operational victory even before the scorecards awaited to be disclosed.
- **Indigenous Technology Validation:** Platforms like ALFA-S, swarm drones, D4 system, NAVIC, and AI-based ISR proved operationally viable. It was a battle test of indigenous capability against the perceived mighty Chinese ability. Atmanirbhar Bharat prevailed under combat conditions.
- **Political and Strategic Unity:** Unified civil-military decision-making added coherence to strategic messaging.
- **A Nations War:** The multifront application of political, economic, diplomatic and military instruments of national power in a synergised harmony

Failures:

- **Narrative Deficit:** Pakistan and Western media narratives overpowered India's story. Lack of credible, global outreach mechanisms.
- **Information Warfare Gap:** Indian media theatrics diluted strategic seriousness. No institutional control or framing of media particularly electronic media and social media.
- **Underwhelming Cyber Response:** Despite cyberattacks on India, counter-offensives were either muted or undocumented.

Strategic Recommendations for Op Sindoor 2.0 Preparedness

1. National Security Strategy (NSS) Formulation

- The absence of a stated national security strategy creates a disconnect and inhibits coherence in matters relating to security policy and decision-making. Its absence also impinges on the long-term vision and strategic communication to the world, which is critical for the growth and stature of a nation.
- Urgently codify a National Security Strategy to align military planning, diplomatic posture, and economic resource prioritisation.
- The NSS must define thresholds for action, escalation ladders, and whole-of-nation coordination protocols.
- Along with NSS, the nation deserves an **Indian National Defence University** to create a national-level defence ecosystem. Matters defence requires education and not on-the-job learning for those who make decisions and do not wear the uniform.

2. Intelligence Audit and Internal Security Reform

- The internal security domain needs greater accountability, transformation and empowerment. This would require dispassionate and professional propriety to ruthlessly identify voids and vulnerabilities of the present system for a diagnostic reset.
- Conduct a comprehensive review of Pahalgam's intelligence and security failures. Fix accountability and responsibility.
- Integrate advanced AI-based predictive analytics, and HUMINT-TECHINT fusion, and create a technology-enabled intelligence grid with real-time inputs.

3. Integrated Theatre Commands Implementation

- Move decisively but with deliberation on outcomes rather than the urgency of implementation. Review the OODA loop in theatre commands versus the need for real real-time decision cycle.
- Debate Integrated Theatre Commands versus integrating resources within the present theatres with shared ISR, air defence, cyber, drones and logistic backbones.
- Empower services before theatre-isation and manage transition control to ensure no temporal vulnerabilities.
- Emphasise decentralised execution with centralised planning.

4. Armed Forces Modernisation Drive

- **Modernisation Strategy:** The art of modernisation will be to balance capability, sustainability, and readiness with technology scalar infusion to achieve the desired ends. The technology cycle and procurement cycle gap must be compressed to the minimum which requires a review of the present procurement system. This requires us to build our equipping priorities based on value, vulnerability and risks with scalar technology infusion.
- **Acquisition Reform- Smart Warfighting requires Smart Procurement Reforms:** The legacy lethargic and overly bureaucratic complex procurement procedure and acquisition cycle is a never-ending game with more snakes than ladders. It sans ownership and accountability and leads to frustration. The acquisition cycle and delays have no accountability. The need is not another DAP but a completely new responsive system which is time-sensitive with minimum layers. There is also a need to further decentralise and enlarge the envelope of emergency procurement power to ₹450 crore for Vice Chiefs.
- **Introduce a Defence Technology Fund:** Balance kinetic versus non-kinetic, manned versus unmanned and contact versus non-contact vectors.
- **Budget Reforms:** Raise defence budgetary allocation to 2.5% of GDP excluding pensions. Ensure capital funds are non-lapsable year on year and at least 1% of the GDP. Introduce non-lapsable capital funds with assured

allocation for new schemes. This time the reforms committee must be led by the three services, not bureaucrats.

- **Defence R&D and Startups:** Empower, enable and not discourage and demolish startups. Nurture promising startups with a 5-year assured life support ecosystem. Most die in this golden period with more skeletons than projects. Establish a "Red Tape to Rapid" task force for procurement acceleration. Defence R& D must be upscaled in tune with global norms and the technological revolution.
- **Smart Atmanirbharta for Smart Warfighting:** Align doctrine and acquisitions with tech evolution cycles. The need for smart warfighting is smart Atmanirbharta. Capability building for the next round and beyond must be holistic and comprehensive – technology, training, doctrines, tactics, legacy structures and civil-military interface.
- **Next-Gen Technologies require Next-Gen Capabilities:** The next round will be with next-gen technologies aimed to obviate vulnerabilities exposed and overcome the challenges of the adversary. China has already started work in this direction to empower Pakistan. Military technology collusivity is a reality between China and Pakistan. These could very well manifest in the next round. India must aim to remain relevant in the technology loop.
- **Drone Warfare:** To counter threats from adversaries like China and Pakistan, India must develop a robust drone industrial ecosystem, enhance multi-platform induction, and foster military adaptation through doctrinal innovation, adaptive training, and collaboration with start-ups. Between 5 to 10% of the defence capital budget should be allocated for procurement of drones on the outright purchase or lease-based model as well as upgradation of the existing drone fleet (excluding MRO services).
- **HR Issues and Armed Forces Status:** Revamp military compensation through the 8th Pay Commission to attract top-rate talent. The HR dimension is always downgraded both in numbers and attractiveness of defence as a choice of the youth. Pension seems to be the bad word in budgets with many hidden layers of civil defence pensions and higher scales of politicians' or Judges' pensions and perks. The existing deficiency in the strength of the Defence Forces needs to be addressed. More importantly, the Government must view the soldiers as assets in peace who act as insurance of national security in war by blood and valour. There must not be any dilution in status, respect or emolument for soldiers and veterans alike. Today's soldier is tomorrow's veteran.

5. Multi-Domain Warfare Doctrine Institutionalisation

- Integrate space, drone, cyber, electromagnetic, and cognitive operations.
- Doctrine must be based on deterrence by denial and domination.
- Build integrated wargaming and simulation capabilities for real-time decision matrices.

6. Border Infrastructure and Mobilisation Readiness

- Prioritise critical road, rail, and logistics upgrades across western, northern, and eastern sectors.
- Invest in pre-positioned fuel, medical, and munitions depots.
- Accelerate S-400 upgrades and full-scale integration with Akash, Barak, and indigenous AD systems until Kusha becomes fully operational.

7. Cyber Warfare Command Creation

- Form a dedicated Cyber Warfare Command reporting to the CDS.
- Operationalise both defensive cyber architecture and offensive capabilities.
- Build civilian cyber reserve corps and establish joint protocols with private sector critical infrastructure operators.

8. Narrative Warfare and Strategic Communication

- Create a Cognitive Warfare Directorate under MoD.
- Form expert panels with veterans, linguists, behavioural scientists, and regional specialists.
- Institutionalise partnerships with credible influencers and media creators.
- Establish a globally credible Indian international media house akin to BBC or Al Jazeera.
- **ADG Strategic Communication:** Establish a dedicated professional analyst panel for real-time narrative framing, separating facts from noise. These must find space over the present self-styled experts in all national and private TV Channels.

9. Diplomatic Coherence and Strategic Alliances

- Institutionalise terror-related diplomacy as a core pillar. Indian diplomacy is brilliant individually but nets better collective efforts.
- Campaign for a UN Terror Financing Accountability Mechanism (TFAM). !4 Crores to International Terrorist and Head of banned JeM by Pakistan must not go without accountability.
- Build stronger diplomatic coalitions with Armenia, Greece, Egypt, Vietnam, and ASEAN to counter the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Pakistan triangle.

- Push back against IMF bailouts to state sponsors of terror. More aggressive FATF posture against Pakistan.
- Neighbourhood first policy requires review and greater outcomes.

10. Kinetic Strikes as Precise Mass Doctrine

- Institutionalise periodic intelligence-based kinetic actions to dismantle terror ecosystems. Replace mowing the lawn with uprooting the roots.
- Expand covert options and deniable assets to ignite and fuel the faultlines.
- Link cross-border kinetic response doctrine to specific tactical and strategic triggers.

11. **Keep The POK Card Live:** Psychological ascendancy is important and it presents an area where internal faultlines could meet India's external forays. Identify those dominating areas or friction points on LoC that need to be levelled and taken over.
12. **Maritime Dominance in the Arabian Sea:** The greatest asymmetry lies in the maritime domain with the advantage of India. It is also a strategic manoeuvre where internal faultlines meet external vulnerabilities thus becoming a flank of decision.
13. **National Citizens Security Culture:** The society is both the target as also the strength of the nation. Society must be empowered by a 'National Citizen's Security Culture' as security is everyone's business. This would mitigate both the non-kinetic threats especially disinformation and kinetic threats by sleeper cells and anti-national elements. A great initiative by a one crore force under CAPSI – Central Association of Private Security Industry merits institutionalisation by the GoI.

Emerging Pattern of Past Indicative of Future: Need for Readiness

An emerging pattern is evident in India's neighbourhood, with recurring tensions and provocations from China and Pakistan alternately. It may be by design or default but while Pakistan recoups India must be prepared for the next friction point on the Chinese front too. The aim is to keep India on the simmers to stymie its growth trajectory. Key incidents of the recent past of collusivity post-CPEC include: Depsang (2013) and Doklam (2017) standoffs with China, Uri (2016) and Pulwama (2019) terrorist attacks linked to Pakistan, the COVID-19 Chinese pandemic's impact (2020), the Galwan Valley clash (2020) with China, and Bangladesh's evolving dynamics (2023). The recent Pahalgam attack (2025) highlights ongoing security concerns with Pakistan. This pattern underscores India's complex relationships with its neighbours, marked by periods of tension and cooperation with the Chinese shadows behind them.

Conclusion: From Preparedness to Pre-eminence

The next war will not be declared. It will unfold in digital shadows, proxy zones, and narrative skirmishes before manifesting as kinetic strikes. India must act with foresight, agility, and strategic discipline. Predictive intelligence and proactive strikes must empower the doctrine of 'Act of Terror = Act of War.' Yet the adversary must never be underestimated. The

wise prepare with a sense of urgency and pragmatism for the future. Glory can never rest in the past.

To prepare for Op Sindoor 2.0, India must move beyond reactive doctrines, legacy structures, ineffective equipping philosophies, bureaucratic hurdles and embrace a 21st-century deterrence posture built on:

- National Security Strategy,
- Indian National Defence University,
- Multi-domain technological supremacy,
- Redefined doctrines,
- Reviewed Professional Military Education system,
- Narrative control,
- Inter-agency synergy,
- Global diplomatic coherence,
- National Citizens Security Culture,
- And institutionalised readiness.

Victory in modern war is not just about territory or attrition—it is about shaping perception, owning escalation ladders, and deterring adversaries across all domains of conflict. It's not only a 'Whole of Nation' approach but a 'Whole of Society' approach.

India must not wait for the next inevitable trigger. We do not have the luxury of time nor the peacetime lethargic procedures. Empowerment of the defence forces must be on war footing as capabilities take time but the threat could manifest sooner than later. It must be pre-empted and prevented by proactive application as the new norm.

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