Issue Brief

Operation Sindoor and India's Future Warfighting Readiness: Lessons Learnt

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Abstract

Operation Sindoor marks a watershed moment in India's strategic evolution both geopolitically and militarily. It signalled a crossing of the proverbial Rubicon in terms of escalation parameters: targets (depth, range and breadth), modes (military and non-military), platforms (unmanned systems, stand-off precision weapons) and response timelines. Some of the critical lessons learnt are as given below.

Strategic Lessons Learnt

DIME Verdict

Before coming to the lessons learnt it would be prudent to give a slightly harsh verdict from the DIME perspective.

- **Diplomatic**. On the diplomatic front it was a mixed bag with Pakistan having leveraged its **geography** and **natural resources** for cosier relations with China and US, and **religious** leanings for closer relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Comparatively, India's diplomatic bandwidth seemed constrained initially. However, subsequently the multi- Party delegation outreach to various countries was able to gradually restore the narrative. India's ability at forums such as IMF, FATF and UN General Assembly was handicapped by the presence of Pakistan and its allies as members on various international committees especially the UNSC.

- **Information**. In the cognitive domain, the loss for India was definitely more pronounced and despite military supremacy on the battlefield, the loss on the narrative and perception front was extremely profound. Strategic Communication needs a comprehensive overhaul. While perceptible effort was made to co-opt lessons from Balakot, the plot ultimately fell apart and coherence in the strategic communication was lacking.

- **Military**. It was a decisive unqualified military victory both offensively and defensively for India. However, this defeat has also pushed Pakistan into the embrace of China and Turkey, hence, in future, the conflicts will have fusion rather than mere collusion. India had full and final control over the escalation and de-escalation. A decisive victory will always be elusive in this paradigm of swift and sharp engagements, giving Pakistan the luxury of a 'notch above response'. There is no advantage of marginal conventional asymmetry in such engagements. Therefore, narrative should focus on clear attainable objectives and de-escalation from a position of strength.

- **Economic**. While the effects of IWT suspension on Pakistan economy will be known only over the next few months. Paradoxically, Pakistan emerged financially reinforced, having secured IMF and ADB assistance during the conflict.

VUCA to BANI Transition

The world order and prevailing geopolitical situation has certainly transitioned from VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) to BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Non-Linear and Incomprehensible). Peace at own borders is not a given anymore and is certainly out of control of a single entity. Trigger events can rapidly escalate. Responses under the BANI conditions will have to be measured and strategic decisions now require deeper deliberation within rapidly shrinking timeframes.
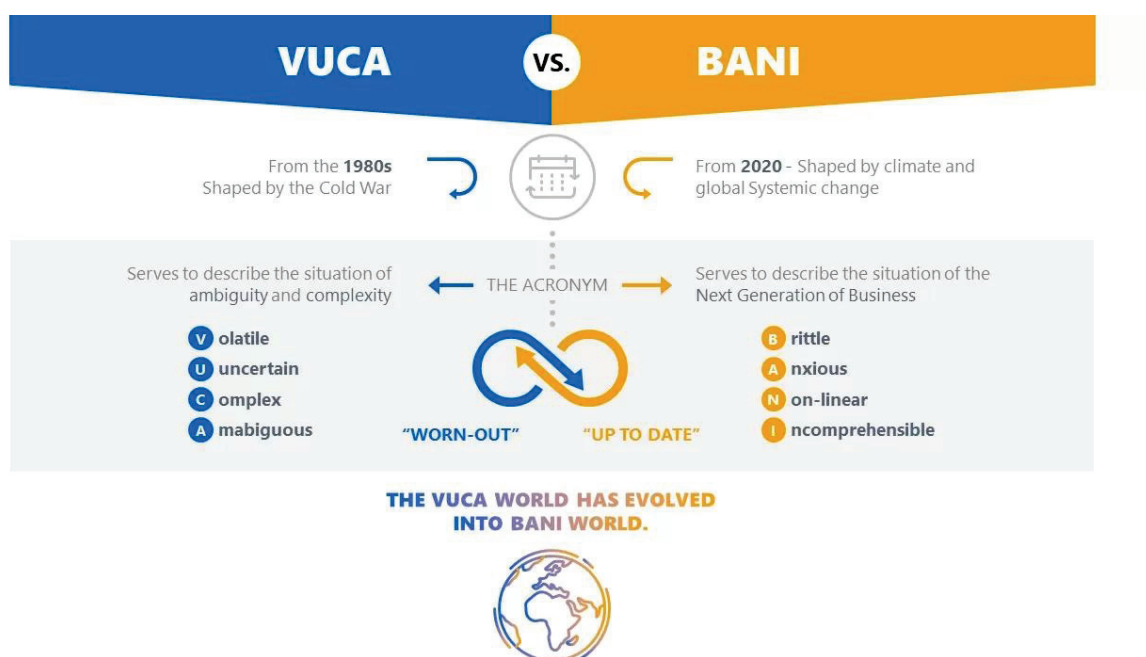

Figure 01

Political Will

A strong polity takes strong decisions and emboldens the various pillars of the National Power to manifest and express themselves freely, innovatively and unabashedly. Op Sindoor was the perfect example of Civil-Military synergy, Selection and Maintenance of Aim, Unity of Effort and a genuine Whole of Nation Approach. The case for a decisive national mandate at the Centre eschewing coalition fragility—was never clearer.

Atmanirbharta coupled with Capability and Capacity

Op Sindoor was a perfect demonstration of need for Atmanirbharta with Brahmos, Akash Weapon System and Sky Striker ruling the battlespace and demonstrating efficacy in combat. It also underlined the requirement of being able to produce capable systems that prove their mettle in conflict. A four-day operation inflicted a sizeable percentage dent to holding

ammunition of AD weapon systems that were deployed, exposing the critical need to scale production and build wartime stamina. Sustenance in protracted war scenario such as Russia-Ukraine or Israel-Hamas, will require a serious re-think. Capability and capacity will be required beyond PSUs with deep incubation and involvement of Private Industry.

Appetite for Casualty and Bomb Shelters

A four-day operation was not a perfect rehearsal for future conflict scenario. Being the largest population in the world also brings vulnerabilities of casualties due to sheer numbers. Even Iron Dome (touted to be the best) has been failing in Israel during the ongoing conflict with Iran, had the barrage of missiles, rockets, FPV drones been more saturated the loss of lives would have created a rethink in the tone and tanner of the conflict. Moreover, lack of bomb shelters in urban areas is a serious cause of concern. A more nuanced approach towards de-congesting and re-distributing population with equal opportunities elsewhere (Tier 2/3 cities) may have to be thought through. Civil defence must be institutionalised with drills and air-raid protocols integrated into public life.

Indian Subcontinent: A New Battlespace for Great Power Duels

Rise of India as a nation with its own conscience, expression and strategic autonomy is not palatable to the risen powers and hence the turmoil in the Indian neighbourhood could and would foment trouble. Unrest and unease in Bangladesh, restive Baluchistan & KPK in Pakistan, a strife torn Myanmar and embroiled Iran are recipes of US and China handiwork. Any new conflict scenario will be dangerous and may result in multi-front conflagrations and therefore India needs to be wary of becoming the battleground for any such power struggle.

Military Strategy Shift : From PAO to DRS Validated

- Response over reaction
- Escalate to De-escalate
- Expanded canvas of response dynamics
    - In geography-LC to IB
    - In means/tools- kinetic : non-kinetic contact : non-contact
    - In targets- terror and military

Operational Lessons Learnt

Persistent ISR is Non-Negotiable

The operation exposed gaps in 24x7 surveillance over Pakistan's airspace. True deterrence requires resilient satellite, air, naval and ground-level ISR nodes to monitor adversary force movements continuously. The gaps in the Chinese AoR is furthermore pronounced.

Permanent Deployment – State of Complacency

Operation Sindoor has been suspended and not concluded. This indicates high state of readiness posturing to be maintained at all times and all round permanent forward deployment. This carries risks of both fatigue and complacency.

Precision Joint Strikes

On May 7, India executed cruise-missile strikes (e.g., BrahMos, SCALP) against terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and Punjab. The coordinated tri-service strike and the swift ceasefire show carefully calibrated execution, but expose command integration fissures.

Multi Domain Ops

In a first, it was a first full blown Multi- Domain operation which was carried out in a Non-Contact Kinetic fashion with forces carrying out operations without transcending boundaries. Some of the military lessons are enumerated below:

- **Coordinated MDW Execution**. Strictly in military parlance Operation Sindoor represented a quad-domain operation: land launchers, naval BrahMos, IAF cruise missiles supported by satellite and drone-based ISR. However, MDW integration still falls short—data delays persisted, hindering threat detection and unified targeting. Among the first should be the seamless integration between IACCS and Akashteer.

- **Cyber, EW & Space as Essential Domains**. The operation revealed that the contested cyberspace and disinformation campaigns can undermine strategic advantage. EW, jamming, spoofing, and data denial were employed during air-skirmishes. Electronic Warfare since long has been given just the lip service resulting in loss of focus and unmindful purging of capability development. A leaner PLA SSF model may be studied for its benefits in the Indian Armed Forces context.

- **AI-Enhanced Multi-Domain Fusion**. Manual data fusion remains slow. India must invest in AI-enabled fusion centres—possibly at Corps or Theatre HQs—to synthesize space, cyber, EW and traditional ISR feeds in real time.

Disaster-Camouflaged Grey-Zone Tactics. **Operation Spider Web** has amply shown that future conflicts may employ warhead-camouflage under disaster or aid operations in neighbouring states. India must plan for countering "ambulance drones" and multispectral civilian-camouflage tactics being mindful of the capability of adversary to hit from within our own borders. **Unmanned is more Manpower Intensive and High Intensity**

With the power and reach of unmanned systems being displayed amply during the operation, it also brought out that audacity and intensity was far greater owing to relative safety of the systems operators/ crews. At the same time, swarm of attacks emerged particularly lethal, necessitating advanced countermeasures.

War-Stamina Logistics & Indigenous Build-Up

Sustainment across multiple fronts was manageable for 72-96 hours but can India sustain extended operations in remote high-altitude theatres remains the moot question. A war-stamina culture, backed by domestic production of critical systems is required in the following critical sectors:

- Ammunition production
- Drone production
- Fielding of Indigenous Info-System solutions for Decision Support and C4I platforms etc.

Tactical Lessons Learnt

- **SHIC (Short High Intensity Conflict) Realism** While the Indian Army is always prepared for a Short High Intensity Conflict, recent conflicts have been the longer ones, however, Op Sindoor has shown the viability of a SHIC from LC to IB with even nuclear assets being under threat. It also showcased the probability of a sudden stoppage thereby giving a short window to make and consolidate gains.

- **Prolonged Grey Z to a Full Spectrum**. The Indian Armed Forces will have to be ready for a Full Spectrum War under the Nuclear overhang and enhanced Grey Zone prior to that.

- **Cyber-EW Hardened C2**. Prolonged connectivity vulnerabilities expose frontline C2 nodes to jamming or cyber assault. Embedding Cyber and EW teams within the strike formations to ensure communications and autonomy under attack, needs to be considered.

- **Mission Command and Decentralisation**. Field commanders successfully adapted to dynamic air-land battlespace. Further empowerment—with secure tactical data links and smart E-Networks—can enable real-time ground-to-air coordination. There is a requirement of standardising communication equipment and SDRs for all the three services.

- **Organic Tactical ISR & Drone Integration**. Battalion-level drones were pivotal in surveillance and target validation. Doctrine must formalise "drone batteries" as organic assets within Infantry and Mechanised formations and co-opted with Arty Divisions to ensure reduction in sensor to shooter loop.

- **Portable EW for Small Units**. With PAF and Turkish-style drones used by adversaries, each company must have tactical EW kits and electronic detection capability to sustain operations under jamming. Integration of C-UAS dets at Bde/Bn level depending on the operational ranges of the equipment will become an imperative along with spectrum management of comn & non comn users of this space.

- **Real-Time Information Operations**. Countering disinformation with factual military communiqués. There is requirement of seamless integration between the Social Media space with traditional TV & News media and maintaining narrative dominance.

Important Arm Specific Insights

- **Air**

  - Dense AD environment- BVR engagements with cis frontier weapon release.
  - Dispensability of unmanned platforms vs Psychological impact of downed manned platforms. Similar impact will be seen in Inf & Armr employment.
  - PSDA is as critical as the mission itself— Burden of proof vs Strength of conviction. Satellite imagery, Photo-Recce/ real-time surveillance capacity upgrades.
  - Counter '**Kill Chain**' tactics.
  - With unmanned aerial assets being the flavour of warfighting in the recent years, incorporating UAS in Squadron strengths to permanently supplement and make up the denuding fighter squadron strengths needs working upon.

- **AD**

  - Networking of systems- IACCS - Akashteer.
  - Need to network AD & C-UAS (Soft Kill and Hard Kill).
  - Vulnerabilities to drones - need to revisit TTPs of employment of Infantry, Armour and Rotary wing aircrafts.

- **Intelligence**

  - New normal speaks of imposing costs which will require intelligence for sustained narrative building that Pak is complicit, ability to Pre-empt through cover/overt means and lastly respond against well-established tangible targets that can be linked to terror.
  - Networked AI enabled systems required for Intelligenc fusion between agencies, services & commands.

- **IW**

  - Sustained as against episodic.
  - Involve all media forms- think tanks, newspapers, TV, Social media.

- Need for coherence between Ministries & Services, Commands within services.

- **Training**

  - Tweaking training methodology with inclusion of METs & METLs for the new paradigm of DRS (Dynamic Response Strategy).

Key Sectors for Investment

Some of the key sectors that require to be invested in must include the following:

- Artificial Intelligence and its incorporation.
- Counter Unmanned Aerial Systems (C-UAS).Counter Drone Swarm Capability.
- Precision Strike Munitions.
- Satellite on Demand facility both ISR and Communications.
- Counter Electronic Warfare Systems.

Scope for Improvement/ Refinement

Need to Break the Breaking News Culture. Media frenzy and unnecessary rhetoric needs to be curbed. Time for realism and responsibility rather than jingoism and sensationalism.

Public – Private Industry partnership is a must. Defence preparedness must leverage industrial synergy.

Dual use infrastructure development and technology needs to be pursued with vigour.

Our Multi- Domain Operations need to be honed up and improved. In view of the evolving nature of warfare and the Unmanned Systems carving a niche for themselves, it may be the right time to dwell upon force structuring and focus on Human Resource Management.

There is a need to study DG ISPR and the Chinese model more carefully to be able to learn Best Practices in Perception Management and Narrative Control.

Some Questions

Is Theaterisation now Imperative?

Is it the right time to embrace Theaterisation? Operation Sindoor reinforced the imperative of integrated theatre commands that can seamlessly switch from HADR to full-scale warfighting. The operation demonstrated that national security **demands** unified planning and execution structures capable of responding to conflict across domains—land, sea, and air—while preparing for hybrid and grey-zone threats

Should India rethink Non-Alignment?

In future scenarios, especially involving simultaneous tensions along the LAC and LoC, India must seek alliances or alignments for redundancy—particularly to secure logistical support, diplomatic cover and collective deterrence. Should India look to ditch its Non-Aligned nature and look for alliances and partnerships to ensure inflow of niche tech.

Will Martial Law Weaken or Embolden Pakistan's Army?

Pakistan is moving into the Martial Law at a feverish pace resulting in increase in powers and its involvement in nations' internal affairs. With a professional Army embroiled in running the nation, unrest in its states and economic interests overshadowing public interest, will it weaken the Pak Army or embolden it.

Lessons Learnt by the Adversary that will require greater Inquest

- Equipment Failings against Indian onslaught.

Tactics and Deployment of the Indian Armed Forces

- Importance of Narrative War
- Collusion to Fusion (China-Pakistan-Turkey) the need of the hour.
- Persistent Surveillance needs.

Conclusion

Operation Sindoor was a decisive shift in strategic posture and response strategy – calibrated, punitive and multi-domain in execution. It was a calibrated punitive action launched along multi-domain synergy land, air, sea, cyber, and space in a limited conflict. India demonstrated precision, restraint and effective deterrence while retaining escalation dominance. Yet, systemic gaps remain in narrative control, real-time MDW fusion, cyber resilience, drone supremacy, and alliance architecture.

Given the adversaries' collusion tending towards fusion Pakistan's grey-zone blitz with Chinese satellite, Turkish drone, and Azerbaijani joint-training India's path forward must not only involve military modernisation, but also diplomatic anchoring, intelligence integration, and multi-national confidence-building. The question is: **Are we ready to evolve from calibrated responses to sustained strategic posture with partnership, preparedness, and domestic resolve?**