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Post Operation Sindoor:
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to
Reality Check

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Abstract

Narratives shape public perception, especially in the aftermath of military success like Operation Sindoor. While tactical victories fuel national pride, unchecked jingoism risks masking systemic weaknesses in strategic planning, technology, joint operations, and civil-military synergy. Over reliance on self-created narratives breeds complacency among armed forces and policymakers. India's defence ecosystem ranging from indigenous innovation to strategic communication requires urgent reforms. Leadership must resist the allure of self-affirming stories and instead focus on critical introspection and future readiness. Without genuine capability enhancement, especially against major adversaries, belief in one's own constructed narrative may lead to catastrophic consequences in future conflicts.

Keywords: Narratives, jingoism, lies, military success, introspection.

“Narratives are imperative but Don't believe in your own Lies” is my opening line for leadership talks spanning tactical to strategic. Jingoism, post the success of Operation Sindoor, is justified but taking it too far would mean giving birth to unrealistic expectations by the people of the country from the Indian Armed Forces and other elements of National Power. It is imperative, that the national leadership, political and military, review the major challenges and failures of the short 88 hours of sharp exchange rather than focussing on the successes achieved that are significant but superfluous. A full-fledged war of the like of Ukraine-Russia conflict or the Israel- Hamas would actually need to be played out on the drawing boards and war rooms to extrapolate the lessons of Operation Sindoor. The chinks or chasms will be evident and must be accepted for corrective policy actions.

Spinning narratives as part of Information Warfare and psychological operations are more targeted towards own population, be it common citizen or trained professionals on the ground, with an aim to create a surge of dopamine to believe in own moral and material strengths to overwhelm the enemy or competition. It is far easier than using narratives to target the enemy's mind to defeat him before he joined the battle, war or any contests, which is the next objective. Convincing the world, of superiority of the National Power or any of its elements is third objective. Narratives, stories, disclosing complete, part or nothing of

operational details before, during or after contests of any element of national power, is a game that is played by the leadership. In the end, it is all about winning, by the stronger or weaker power, with least application of National power, most importantly the military. More often 'spinning a yarn multiple times may feel like a manifestation theory, wherein a 'section of optimist believes that if willed strongly, the Almighty intervenes to make the desires come true'. Unfortunately, unlike in the Indian context, the enemy on the West (Pakistan) also prays equally strongly. In our case, Pakistan prays as a country to one God, and in unison. There is no ambiguity. Whereas, in the North, the Chinese pray to the Communist Party. They only believe in the power of the Party which is far more dangerous because their motivation to succeed evolves out of fear and fear of failure. Consequences are far more dangerous than loss of lives in the battlefield or the boardroom.

The winning drums of Operation Sindoor, politically expedient and well deserved, have started to reinforce the post -Uri surgical strike halo that, the Indian Armed Forces can enter enemy territory, and destroy any number of enemies, win the war and return safely unscathed. The celebrated success of Balakot strikes have bolstered a similar image of the Indian Air Force. The Navy, after multiple evacuations of Indian nationals and a successful operation against pirates also gained an image of superheroes. The rescuing of a Bulgarian commercial ship, MV Ruen, by the Marcos Prahars who were airdropped at the high seas, boarded and arrested 35 Somalian pirates, rescuing 17 crew members, became the benchmark operation of Navy (Sagar, P.R, 2024). The people's believe in the Indian Armed Forces were re-affirmed and that was exhilarating.

While serving during that time, I was more worried that when the next action comes up wherein the scale will be higher and response sought will be so accordingly, the challenges will be significant against a professional force in the West. But in case of another Doklam or Galwan, these challenges will be of different scale and proportion. Meeting the expectations of the people and the political leadership will be impossible.

The challenge of the narrative of success is that our soldiers, junior officers and even the senior ones start getting convinced by the repetitive narrative of military success. The focus shifts to celebrations rather than critiquing, which is unacceptable as that will surely contradict the narrative of overwhelming success. This belief on success or strength is necessary when fighting a close battle of life and death in last 200 metres or when engaged in the aerial combat with even a superior enemy. At the sub tactical and tactical level, success and loss are temporary

but in the strategic and operational realms will surely lead to consequences that maybe unacceptable to the Nation. . The incongruence at the strategic level on certain sensitive issues viz. loss and damages as well as hitting of nuclear targets are at best avoided. Tactical success has limited depth but strategic neutrality hurts forever. Post, mere acceptance of possible issues about the tactical plans by the CDS brought out the daggers in the hands of the opposition political parties that started to puncture holes in the narrative balloons of overwhelming success. Target was the political leadership of the country but the impact was in the mind of own population that became suspicious of the claims. It also gave enough material to the Pakistani establishment to emerge out of caves to start claiming success where there was none. The world, particularly the US administration, had a different leverage thereafter.

A simple tweet, by the American President on the evening of 10 May 2025 not only stole the thunder of the phenomenal successes on the Indian Armed Forces on the night of 9/10th May but also cast a doubt on the future of the present government. A few minutes earlier than the formal announcement planned by the Indian Foreign Secretary, the tweet destroyed the entire edifice of the success by a fake claim of brokering ceasefire between India and Pakistan. Few months have elapsed since the pause of Operation Sindoor and yet no structured Strategic Communication system is being discussed is an obvious challenge of a bureaucracy that is not only in civil services but that also of political and military.

The second Narrative in play is of indigenous military systems successfully overwhelming that of the Chinese and Turkish ones in play for the Pakistani military. While the credit goes to the present government for Atmanirbharta and focus on indigenous systems but the challenges on ground must be analysed dispassionately to grow in the right direction. The indigenous innovations requires more work so that it can deliver results against the primary threat in the North. Against a far more economically and militarily weak Pakistan, it was stretched for resilience. However, the narrative remains strong, “our home-grown systems beat the Chinese systems and also the Turkish ones”. The capability and trust in the public and private manufacturers are not even fragment of percentage desired for the military and economic power that India is. The public sector units have upped their game but remains inefficient and unaccountable in terms of quality, quantity and for R&D. On the other hand, the Indian private sector, that is profit focussed, is merely looking to exploit the government’s drive towards indigenization and is unwilling to invest into R&D. The ecosystem lauded upon is frail, supported by meagre governmental aids and are not based on deliverables. Few successes

over decades of worth of efforts is not sustainable for the niche technology investments. The much-touted engagements with IITs and other premier engineering institutes need a comprehensive outcome-based analysis. These institutes are actually struggling to comprehend the needs of the armed forces in weapons, ammunitions and communication systems as they have no exposure to military. The students don't come to serve the Nation but to survive and look for the opportunities, preferably abroad if extremely brilliant or else get an opening into corporates/ civil services within the country based on attractive pay scales/ power. The true R&D focus is only possible when the private industry develops a pipeline of assured jobs and security in return of innovations and inventions. Without the necessary R&D inputs, the systems will continue to be of foreign origin with Make in India stamp.

The politics of narrative, which is necessary for politics, of having overwhelmed the enemy on Indian innovations and systems, should not become the truth. The reality is that the spectacular success of strikes was achieved through Brahmos, technically a Russian system, jointly developed in India. There were other systems in play but had enough foreign components and technology to really call them Indian. As such the Pakistanis threw at us low grade drones and other munitions. The Chinese systems were manned by the Pakistani soldiers and officers and not Chinese. Therefore, the narrative perception of overwhelming success of the indigenous systems should be considered with due caution by all policymakers. It is important that an ecosystem, as is in play in US and China, be put in place to actually indigenise.

The third issue that merits immediate discussion is the synergy between the three services. The perception of synergy needs to take a hard look, sooner the better, because the next conflict is around the corner. Mere presence of the three service Chiefs or their representative spokespersons or Directors of Operations together makes for a great visual delight. But there are wide gaps between the three services and the fault lines are as wide as in the country in terms of religion, language, rich – poor, region etc. while there are few sane voices but they are few. The apt example of this wide chasm between the three services is that four years has elapsed, but an outline of the Theatre Commands is yet to see the light of the day. The reasons being functional or more of HR driven, either way if the three services cannot resolve and come to an acceptable organisation when the push is from a strongest government ever since Independence, speaks volumes of the synergy or jointness. At least, an acknowledgement maybe in order that the concept of theaterisation is a compulsion for the Chinese and Americans who have global ambitions and their theatre commanders have

diplomatic and other powers. In Indian context these sharing of power will never be acceptable to the civilian bureaucracy. Synergy in the operational level and jointness at the functional level is the best bet given the distinctive terrains and geography and the adversaries involved.

The fourth major challenge in front of the security planners is the immersion of niche technology not only in the military but for the entire country. The next war is going to be technology driven and an all-Nation affair. It was evident in the short engagement that neither the population is ready nor the technology. The competition for the resources for the next generation technology and the scientific temper to even match the Turkish, Iranian, Chinese capabilities and capacities is nowhere in the horizon. While the world is looking at the sixth-generation fighters, the world's fourth largest economy and military power is yet to have a plan to make its own aircraft engine. While, the Prime Minister had to use the ramparts of the Red Fort on 15 August 2025, to give a policy decision and time line for an Indian aircraft engine, there is a wide gap between intent declaration and actualisation. This may be now feasible if the recent declaration of joining a French collaboration for producing the aircraft engine domestically materialises. The semiconductor plants are now being established but the technology continues to remain ahead of the curve for India to catch up. An institutional system is mandatory to ensure that the chips, which are heart and soul of the contemporary warfighting complements from platforms, weapons, missiles, communications and entire range of command-and-control systems. With AI being invested heavily, the decision cycles are going to be faster and the compulsions of decision taking within areas of grey in terms of information very heavy. The human resource to handle the high-end technology-based systems and also leadership to understand and take informed decisions has to be invested into. This, in our country, wherein a large recruitment pool comes from the rural and semi-urban base, is a challenge and also a politically sensitive issue.

The fifth challenge is Processes. The Indian bureaucracy is the bane and the major hurdle in the progress of the country.. The steel frame, with the British systems inherited while the colonial masters have evolved, remains an obstacle in all ventures of the country. Extremely qualified and brilliant and powerful, the cream of the Indian education system becomes a major stumbling block once the pen is wielded. Rightly so, to protect the constitution and also the entire structure of the Nation, the steel frame has to do due diligence in the bureaucratic process. But as there is no ownership or responsibility for the progress or failures of projects, the processes have remained laggard and sluggish. The lateral entry scheme was blocked as

efficiently with no solutions on offer to hasten the processes of modernisation of the country including the armed forces. This facet needs a review from the very bureaucracy, that is unwilling to change, barring few exceptions. The processes in the Indian system must be looked at with some urgency as all other reforms are likely to bite dust due to delays in name of diligence.

There are many more but the sixth and the last challenge one is highlighting is preparing the civilian population for conflicts. For, far too long, the civilian population has believed that wars and conflicts are going to be along a line with uniformed soldiers engaged into battle. As AI is invested into the range of critical infrastructure establishments, that are civilian, military or dual use, the warfighting is going to be complex and all are going to be fair target. The ranges of missiles and the explosive content and munitions carrying capacities are on the rise. Their destructive capabilities are increasing. The strikes by India, deep into Pakistani territory and similar instances elsewhere in other ongoing conflicts is only an indicator of future violent times. With collapsing international institutions and mechanisms, the civilians and civilian infrastructure is par for the course. The 0.5 threat, the internal challenge is going to be an important issue that needs sufficient laws and policy guidance. The threat by the DG ISPR and other politicians of Pakistan that the next challenge for India will start from the East is not a mere ruse it is a reality that can be seen manifesting with increased engagement of Pakistan and Bangladesh and the presence of ISI in the region. As seen in recent conflicts, including between the recent short exchange between India and Pakistan, the civilians are going to be preferred targets to capitulate a Nation's will. The civilian population needs to be prepared for a long haul of warfighting, economic isolation and a period of denial of basic necessities. That Nation will lose whose population capitulates first, not the Army.

Jingoism, after a short military engagement at sub- tactical level, that may have had strategic connotations for political purpose should never deviate the national security professionals from reality check. They must analyse and review the challenges and gaps in the planning process and operational execution. The reality is starkly different from the narrative of the strong armed forces and the resilient National security mechanism that remains structured on archaic systems and needs major overhaul or rather deconstructing to create modern structures. It is not a success or failure of the current government in power but what ails is the eight decades worth of absent national security focus. Hence, never believe own lies that needs to be told to the common public for, if done so, then the results will be catastrophic.

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About the Author

Lt Gen Devendra Pratap Pandey, UYSM, AVSM, VSM, (Retd) carries experience across various terrain and operational environments. Commissioned into the 9th Battalion, The Sikh Light Infantry Regiment, he has showcased exemplary leadership in diverse roles, including participation in Operation Vijay (Kargil) in 1999. With notable commands at Siachen Glacier, Chushul Sector in Eastern Ladakh, and prestigious appointments such as GOC of the 15 Corps in Kashmir valley, he has demonstrated exceptional proficiency in challenging scenarios.

His illustrious career encompasses instructional roles at the National Defence Academy, service as a Military Observer in UNTAC, Cambodia, and pivotal staff appointments along the Line of Control and in Army Commands. Holding two postgraduate degrees from esteemed institutions like the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, and the National War College at National Defence University, Washington D.C., as well as an M.Phil from the National Defence College, New Delhi, he is renowned for his strategic acumen and expertise.



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