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A Strategy Based Doctrine: Opportunities for a Future-Ready Indian Army

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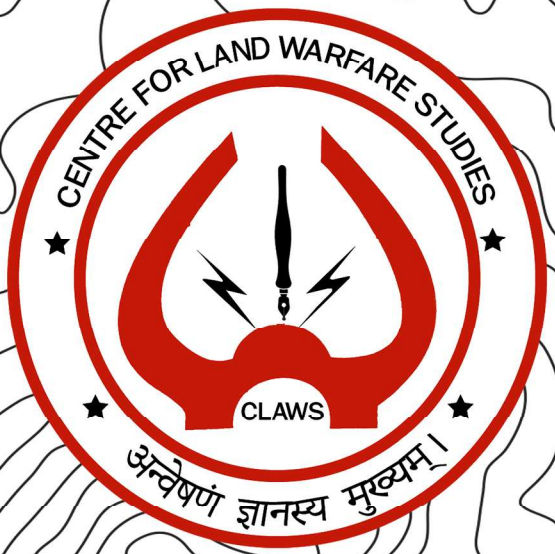

A Strategy Based Doctrine: Opportunities for a Future-Ready Indian Army

Abstract

How can the Indian Army retool itself for future strategic challenges? Over the past 25 years, it was unable to adequately meet India's most pressing security threats, because it focused only on cosmetic organizational changes rather than conceptual changes. Now, as the country faces new types of security threats, the Army has an opportunity to develop new operational concepts. However, new concepts will only be effective if they are rooted in a systematic appreciation of India's specific strategic needs, and the changing character of war. This paper offers a framework for such an appreciation, and outlines three illustrative examples of concepts the Indian Army may wish to consider, based on India's emerging threats and the Army's evolving missions.

Keywords: Doctrine, Strategy, Modernisation, Reform

Introduction

In the wake of Operation Sindoor, the Indian Army was quick to seize on the perceived lessons learned and posture for wars of the future. The Chief of the Army Staff, General Upendra Dwivedi, announced that every infantry battalion will gain a drone platoon, alongside the advent of new Rudra and Bhairav formations (Pandit, R. 2025). The Army announced it will issue procurement tenders for over $200 million of drone-related equipment by the end of 2025 (YouTube, 2025); further, it is also planning to add more surface-to-air missile batteries and air defence guns to its arsenal, through emergency procurement provisions (TNN, 2025). The scramble to prepare for future wars has yielded quick decisions on force structure and organisation. However, new equipment and new structures are only quick-fix band-aid solutions. To make the Army "future-ready" demands a deeper reconsideration of doctrinal missions and concepts.

The Indian Army has a rare opportunity to meaningfully retool itself for future challenges. For almost 25 years, it was unable to adequately meet India's most pressing security threats; Pakistan could continue to launch cross-border terrorist attacks, and China could continue to launch probes and incursions, because the Indian Army was only postured to defend Indian territory against large-scale conventional attacks. It was an extremely blunt instrument of policy,

presenting successive governments with an 'all-or-nothing choice' between war and inaction (Tarapore, A. 2020). Now, in 2025, the country faces new types of security threats and the Army will be called on to execute new missions. Although, Operation Sindoor gave some insight into those new missions, however, it is only one part of the larger picture. To be truly future-ready, the Indian Army needs to think beyond the last conflict, and beyond easy equipment or organisation solutions. It must develop new operational concepts based on a thorough and rational assessment of national security needs — in other words, it needs new strategy-based doctrinal thinking.

This Issue Brief argues that changes in India's security environment demand a systematic revision of the Indian Army's doctrine, and offers some principles that should guide that revision. It makes three main claims—**First**, it argues that the Indian Army failed to adapt to previous strategic changes, because it focused only on cosmetic organisational changes rather than conceptual changes. **Second**, it shows how a serious conceptual revision of doctrine would need to account for India's specific strategic needs, and the changing character of war. **Finally**, it offers three illustrative examples of new doctrinal concepts that the Indian Army could consider, to meet the emerging missions it faces.

Failure to Adapt

The primary mission of the Indian Army has traditionally been territorial defence. Almost immediately after independence, India faced hostile neighbours and unsettled borders. It fought multiple wars to safeguard its sovereignty, against conventional and unconventional attacks and destabilising strife on its borders.

For this mission, the Army attracted the lion's share of the military's resourcing. It consistently boasts the largest share of the defence budget (about 57%) {PRS, 2023} and an even larger share of the military's personnel (about 84%) {The Military Balance, 2025}. Over successive decades, it built a force structure for the mission of defending against conventional invasions— focused on large, combined-arms formations.

The Army's force structure went hand-in-hand with its default concept of operations, known as the 'quid pro quo'. In this concept, the Indian Army would defend against an initial attack, and then launch counter-offensives into the enemy's territory. According to the 'quid pro quo' logic, the Army would seek to destroy some of the enemy's fighting force and capture some

territory, which could be used as bargaining leverage in post-war negotiations to restore the status quo (Joshi, Y. and Mukherjee, A. 2023).

That concept was used in the 1965 war, when India captured and then returned parcels of land such as the Haji Pir pass. It was used in the western front of the 1971 war, when India realigned the Cease Fire Line into the Line of Control. It was the Army's default plan to respond to the 1999 Kargil incursions, until the government forbade offensives into Pakistan. It was also the concept underpinning India's response to recent Chinese incursions in 2020 wherein, India launched Operation Snow Leopard to occupy previously unoccupied heights – albeit on the Indian side of the Line of Actual Control—in the Kailash range, and used that occupation as leverage to gain disengagement at multiple points (Gokhale, N.A.2023).

While the concept was apt during the 20th century against large Pakistani invasions, it became less useful in recent decades. Major changes to India's strategic environment fundamentally altered the nature of the threats India faced. In the 1990s, both India and Pakistan became declared nuclear powers, incorporating nuclear weapons into their defence planning; and after the Kargil misadventure, Pakistan shifted its strategy to an unconventional campaign centred on the use of terrorist proxies. These changes meant that India was much less likely to face a conventional military attack as it had in previous decades.

Accordingly, the primary purpose of military power shifted. Rather than defending its borders from enemy invasion, the government began to look to the military as a tool of compellence (Biddle, T.D. 2020). The logic of this concept called for punitive strikes into Pakistan, imposing costs on the enemy that would convince it to abandon its campaign of sub-conventional attacks.

Compellence was the animating logic behind Operation Parakram in 2001-02, when the Indian Army mobilised to a war footing for 10 months, threatening to invade Pakistan as punishment for a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament. India ultimately calculated—after some intense international diplomatic intervention — that a general war among nuclear rivals would be imprudent. In a series of further terrorist attacks in subsequent years, including the gravely provocative 26/11 attacks in Mumbai, the Indian government faced the same all-or-nothing choice: it could use the Army as an instrument of compellence, in which case it would trigger a general war, or it could do nothing. In each case, caution prevailed and New Delhi did not order an attack.

The Army set about enacting reforms to generate more usable options for the government. Soon after Operation Parakram, it promulgated a new proactive doctrine sometimes known as "Cold Start", to be able to mobilise and launch operations more quickly, before international diplomacy forestalled action. Later, it developed new formations known as Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs), designed to be more nimble, for shallow incursions against Pakistan. In 2015, it launched a special force raid across the LoC to destroy terrorist launchpads, to much fanfare, but to negligible strategic effect as Pakistan was not deterred. In all cases, the Army's goal was to optimise its ability to attack Pakistani territory and to impose a punitive cost.

The problem for the Indian Army was that the concept of punitive strikes was inherently incompatible with India's strategic environment. Punitive strikes would only yield a strategic effect —compelling the adversary to cease its campaign— if they imposed an intolerably high cost on the enemy. But imposing such costs against the ideologically motivated Pakistan Army would require a general war, possibly leading to nuclear exchange. India could not deter Pakistan at an acceptable cost.

Now, in 2025, the Army has unveiled its new combined-arms formations known as Rudra brigades and Bhairav battalions. The new organisations were field-tested in Exercise TRISHUL in October and November 2025, with the Southern Army Commander suggesting that, with these new formations, a new concept of "Cold Strike" may replace "Cold Start" (Pandit, R. 2025). However, none of the multiple attention-grabbing organisational reforms or rebranding challenged the flawed conceptual logic of punitive strikes. As a result, the Indian Army will remain unable to execute the mission of compellence which the government demands of it.

New Concepts Require Strategic Appreciation

The Indian Army did not properly address its key mission for the early 21st century because it did not undertake a systematic appreciation of India's specific strategic needs as well as the changing character of war. However, facing new challenges, the Indian Army has already been tempted to seize on key technologies such as drones, and organisational notions such as Rudra brigades, as steps towards modernisation. Moreover, a serious conceptual revision — and the Army's ability to be "future ready" and strategically relevant — is only possible when it thoroughly understands the nation's particular strategic requirements.

The first and most foundational element of that strategic appreciation should be an understanding of India's national security interests and policy. This is, of course, a matter for the government of the day to articulate, perhaps in the form of a National Security Strategy. Such a document would ideally make ruthless decisions on where to prioritise effort and where to accept risk, and be released publicly for the sake of transparency and accountability (Tarapore, A. 2024). In the absence of an explicit policy statement, the Army and other military services would be left the task of inferring national political priorities.

Having established the national priorities, a dialogue between the government and military leaders should then clarify the missions the government can reasonably expect the military to undertake. How does the government expect military power will advance national security interests? This must be an interactive civil-military process because the government's wishes must be tempered by the military's frank and expert advice on what effects are viable at given levels of resourcing (Mukherjee, A. 2019). This process of setting missions is the core task of national military strategy. It must balance the national policy ends with the available ways and means.

Only after articulating the government's missions for the military can the Army's and the other services' doctrine writers set about the task of developing operational concepts that would execute those missions. Most importantly, the concept articulates a "theory of victory" — how certain military actions achieve the desired end-states (Hoffman, F.G, 2020). This is significant for building confidence in organisational reforms and force structure decisions.

This whole process is designed to impose rigour to the development of doctrinal concepts. It forces the national security apparatus to comprehend India's strategic situation and generate a hierarchy of nested plans, from national security strategy to strategic missions to operational concepts.

Implicit in this is the notion of threat-based defence planning, rather than capabilities-based planning. Capabilities-based planning seeks to equip the military with a wide range of the best-available capabilities, on the premise that they would endow the force with the greatest degree of flexibility and ideally overmatch against all adversaries. Such an approach may be appropriate to a sole superpower facing diffuse minor threats. But for powers engaged in well-defined security rivalries, such as India, it creates a temptation to fixate on particular weapons systems or organisations as a simple solution for complex military problems (Johnson, D. 2022). Moreover,

long-lasting equipment inventories later become constraints on operational concepts (Johnson, D. E. 1998).

For decades, the Indian Army indulged in capabilities-based planning, seeking to maximise combat power as a generic combined-arms force, which inadvertently had the effect of limiting its usability to large conventional operations. Today, it appears to have become enamoured with drones, and specifically first-person view small drones, which will become part of the order of battle of every infantry battalion. That may prove to be a sound force planning conclusion – but it is a conclusion based on the generic capabilities as demonstrated in distant contingencies such as Ukraine, rather than the specific conditions the Indian Army is likely to face in the future, for example, against China in the Himalayas.

Threat-based planning, in contrast, argues that a military force should be tailored for the threats it faces — specifically, the geography, adversary force composition, and respective objectives of each force. It is designed, in other words, to satisfy particular strategic missions. Such planning is much more likely to expend scarce resources on the nation's highest priorities, and develop more realistic contingency plans against a specific adversary in a specific theatre.

Threat-based planning should also prompt the Army to think creatively about its role alongside other military services. Not every threat will require the Army to take a leading role; in some cases, other services may provide more apt ways and means to achieve the mission end-state, with the Army in a supporting role. For that reason, strategic planning would be best conducted by a joint staff process, using the principles of Multi-Domain Operations (MDO).

Indeed, the key insight from MDO is that a military service, normally associated with a certain domain, can achieve important effects in other domains. That is, an Army can also achieve operationally meaningful effects in air, sea, or electromagnetic domains (Army Headquarters, USA, 2021). MDO was developed by the US Army in the previous decade and has now been widely adopted across the world, including in India (HQ IDS, 2025).

As one leading example, the US Army Pacific – the Army component command at US Indo-Pacific Command – has used the MDO concept to define new and important tasks for the Army in a largely maritime theatre. It is developing new capabilities for land-based anti-ship fires, to disrupt China's naval forces; and it is building "army support to other services" in the form of

theatre sustainment, force protection, intelligence collection, and command & control organisations (Flynn, C. and Devine, T. 2024). Armies are generally accustomed to wielding manoeuvre forces to defend or seize and hold ground; but in contemporary warfare, MDO shows how they have a much wider array of potential roles.

Many of the conceptual and organizational changes in the United States —and for that matter, China—offer valuable lessons for India, but there are limits to the utility of emulating these foreign forces. Rather, India should focus on developing its own indigenous industry.

The United States and China both emerged as hi-tech military powers after undergoing massive transformations, which India is exceptionally unlikely to experience. The United States' military reforms in the 1970s-80s, and China's reforms in the 2010s, were the product of strict top-down direction from national leaders, massive financial investments in defence, and access to thriving research & development and industrial capacity. In India's case, the national government has largely delegated defence reforms to the military, so reforms are slower and less coherent; defence budgets have been actually declining in real terms over the past decade; and defence production remains dominated by public-sector undertakings.

Under those conditions, basing future missions or concepts on the expectation of having a largely hi-tech force akin to the US or China is destined to fail. Hence, an astute strategic appreciation should yield operating concepts based on India's particular national security objectives and its particular array of threats.

Emerging Missions and Concepts

This final section outlines three new operating concepts that the Indian Army may wish to consider, given India's shifting strategic environment and the government's evolving demands for the military.

The **first** of these concepts, which I call "anti-systems warfare," is designed to address the Army's oldest mission: territorial defence. It is a purely notional concept developed by this author – not a concept the Indian Army has adopted – for the very specific geography and threats China poses at the LAC. The **second** concept, which I call "stand-off battle" emerged in practice with Operation Sindoor, and the subsequent pronouncements made by India's political and military

leaders. The **third**, "joint expeditionary operations," is an incipient concept that I argue will emerge as a critical role for the Army in the next decade.

The three new concepts, along with other existing concepts for context, are summarized in Table 1 below. The table shows how the Army's core mission of territorial defence has traditionally been addressed by the operational concept of "quid pro quo", and more recently by the low-intensity concept I call "anti-grey zone defence", designed to thwart the PLA's probes. The table also provides examples of capabilities for each concept, designed only to be illustrative, not comprehensive. Thus, the main capabilities for "quid pro quo" were the Strike Corps, and the subsequent evolution of Integrated Battle Groups. The table also shows the newer mission of compellence, served by the concept of "punitive strikes", which was operationally very similar to "quid pro quo",using the exact same capabilities.

Table 1: Summary of Indian Army's Missions, Concepts of Operations and Illustrative Capabilities

Mission	Concept	Illustrative Capabilities
Territorial Defence	Quid pro quo	Strike Corps, IBGs, etc.
	Anti-grey zone defence	ISR and QRF, etc.
	Anti-systems warfare	Dispersal, Hardening, etc.
Compellence	Punitive strikes	Strike Corps, IBGs, etc.
Cost Imposition	Stand-off battle	SSM, IRF, AD
Power Projection	Joint expeditionary operations	SOF, LPD, ASCM, etc.

Source: Author's Own

Anti-Systems Warfare

The hypothetical concept of "anti-systems warfare" is designed to meet the very specific needs of the Indian Army facing the Chinese threat on the LAC. It is based on the assessment that the PLA is organised and equipped to fight wars as a "system of systems" — that is, a networked joint force that seeks to use precision fires and electronic attack to disable its enemy's ability to fight coherently (Cozad, M. et.al, 2023). China has developed this model to fight the United States, but uses it across the PLA, including with its forces facing India at the LAC. It has undertaken a breathtaking modernisation of equipment, reorganisation of structures, and change of leadership

—all lavishly resourced —to support this concept. If India seeks to mirror the PLA, as a state-of-the-art networked military, it will be thoroughly outmatched.

Instead, the concept of "anti-systems warfare", could posture the Indian Army as a resilient defensive force that can remain combat effective even without the accoutrements of a networked military. In other words, if the PLA wants to fight a system, the Indian Army should not be a system — at least at the contact layer at the LAC. Indian defenders could develop the ability to sustain resistance against PLA attackers, with dispersed forces that can protect and sustain themselves, and operate largely autonomously (Tarapore, A. 2025). Such operational resilience requires that units are able to retain effective command, control, and communications even in completely digitally-denied environments (Shivane, A.B. 2025).

The 'theory of victory' of this concept suggests that Indian forces, simply remaining combat effective and sustaining theatre-wide resistance, should be enough to deny China a quick fait accompli victory; and would hopefully deter Chinese aggression in the first place.

This concept is obviously designed only for a specific task, geography, and adversary—for static defence against the PLA at the LAC. It is not appropriate for territorial defence of India's borders, let alone for the Indian Army's other missions. It does not require major reorganisations or acquisitions, so it has the advantage of being relatively quick and cheap to adopt. But it does require a conceptual rethink, for the Indian Army's leaders to accept new ways of defending national sovereignty.

Stand-Off Battle

Operation Sindoor, beginning with India's attack on terrorist targets in Pakistan, represents a subtle but important shift in India's military strategy against Pakistan. The Indian government probably now accepts that it cannot deter future terrorist attacks—so it appears to have adopted a cost-imposition strategy. That is, by imposing direct costs on the terrorist networks, and degrading their capacity to attack India (Tarapore, A. 2025). Prime Minister Narendra Modi codified this new approach in a speech after the cease fire, declaring that India would assuredly retaliate against future terrorist attacks by striking back at terrorists and their military sponsors (PIB, 2025). This new mission has thereby become declared Indian policy.

The concept's strategic logic suggests that meaningful attrition of enemy personnel and infrastructure, especially if it is repeated in several contingencies, will force the enemy to divert resources and attention to simply surviving. This will necessarily reduce its capacity to target India, so terrorist attacks become less severe or frequent. This concept therefore seeks simply to suppress the threat, not resolve it.

To achieve that mission, Indian forces in Operation Sindoor used a concept of 'non-contact kinetic action' labelled as "stand-off battle". This concept centres on the use of long-range precision strike, and air defences to protect against the enemy's long-range strike. This type of non-contact kinetic action has advantages over offensives by large ground formations because it can be deployed relatively quickly, and can be calibrated to escalate or de-escalate as operational needs dictate. However, it also requires competence in dynamic targeting, which demands significantly greater intelligence capabilities, and can lead to quicker escalation if the long-range fires deliberately or inadvertently strike strategic or politically sensitive targets.

Such non-contact kinetic capabilities have been used extensively in other conflicts around the world, including in Ukraine, but this concept puts them at the centre of the military's operational design. Prime Minister Modi announced a decade-long program known as *Sudarshan Chakra* to build India's air defence and long-range strike capacity, and the Indian Army, alongside other services, has announced force structure decisions to invest in surface-to-surface missile, drone, and air defence capabilities.

However, new concepts are not built out of new technologies and acquisitions alone. "Stand-off battle" is a fundamentally joint paradigm, as Operation Sindoor showed, and will require even more inter-service integration as planners develop the concept. The Air Force and Navy also have a significant role to play in delivering non-contact kinetic effects, and joint cyber, space, and Special Forces capabilities play important supporting roles.

Moreover, while the government may have introduced a new cost-imposition mission for the military, it has not dispensed with the other missions of territorial defence and compellence. Had Operation Sindoor continued and escalated, the Army and other services would probably have been tasked with offensive or defensive operations, to compel Pakistan to cease operations or launch a "quid pro quo" attack, respectively. In that case, planners and commanders would have to seamlessly shift from one operating concept to another.

Therefore, this apparent new concept requires new levels of integration—between the military services, and between different concepts of operation. This has flow-on implications for capability development and organization, which may treat the Army more as a supporting, rather than the supported, service. A rational joint planning process may determine, for example, that other services should acquire more units of a new weapons system; or that India should implement the erstwhile Integrated Rocket Force model, separate to the existing services. In sum, developing the new concept of "stand-off battle" unveiled in Operation Sindoor requires a rigorous and holistic approach that goes well beyond equipment procurement.

Joint Expeditionary Operations

A third new concept the Indian Army may seek to consider addresses emerging threats around the Indian Ocean Region, which have thus far been peripheral to India's national security interests, but which are growing more acute with time. There are precedents for the Army to project power — in Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the 1980s — with mixed results. More recently, India has increased the tempo of out-of-area operations, from the Persian Gulf to the South Pacific – although those deployments are generally in permissive environments, for evacuations or relief operations, and generally executed by the Navy or Air Force.

However, security competition in the Indian Ocean region is on the cusp of intensifying, posing more acute threats to Indian strategic interests. China is developing capabilities and has a declared intent for large and persistent presence in the Indian Ocean, which will challenge Indian interests in peacetime and complicate plans in case of a conflict. Much of the burden of projecting power to manage these threats will fall to the Navy, but the Indian Army will also have significant roles to play. Together, therefore, the Indian military will have to develop its concept of operations for "joint expeditionary operations".

This concept must be truly joint— the Army will be unable to deploy without the other services. But equally, the Army will be critical for a range of roles— possibly for large-scale relief operations, but especially for amphibious operations in both permissive and non-permissive environments. Recalling a principle from MDO, the Army could also be well-suited to achieve kinetic effects in other domains. Relatively small and agile Army teams, for example, could deploy to key terrain at maritime chokepoints, in either a defensive or offensive role, using ground-launched missiles against surface or air targets (US Marine Corps, 2023).

The theory of victory of such a combat concept is that ground forces can usefully supplement the navy in creating maritime effects — to deny access to enemy naval forces, or to support the Indian Navy achieving local sea control.

Conclusion

These three illustrative concepts address important operational challenges; but they also highlight general lessons for future doctrine-writers. As "anti-systems warfare" shows, some concepts can be very specific to a particular military problem in a particular theatre. As "stand-off battle" shows, new concepts cannot function simply with the admixture of new technologies; they also require dedicated planning to integrate with other concepts and other services. As "joint expeditionary operations" show, astute strategic appreciation can anticipate emerging threats, allowing the Indian Army to shape threats before they become emergencies.

As the Indian Army grapples with a more complex and dynamic strategic environment, it recognises the need for change —even embarking on a "decade of transformation"— but it should also accept there will be significant limits to that change. The Indian Army is prodigiously large, and its existing force structure is unlikely to be recapitalised or rebalanced. Its 3,750 main battle tanks and 10,000 artillery pieces impose significant inertia on conceptual rethinking, and limit the funds available for new equipment. Its organisation and leadership is similarly tied to old ways of fighting, with deeply-ingrained ethos that prizes territory as the chief currency of victory in combat; and its political leadership is highly unlikely to assert a particular vision for defence reform. In that context, becoming "future-ready" will be a struggle.

The changes in India's strategic environment are daunting, but they offer the Indian Army an opportunity. It can no longer focus only on defending the Indian territory against conventional attack. Now, and increasingly in the near future, the Indian government will place new demands on its military— for example, to deter an aggressive China at the LAC, impose meaningful costs on Pakistan-based terrorists, and safeguard Indian interests across the Indian Ocean. The Army will never be able to meet those threats simply through quick procurement of high-profile equipment or repeated reorganisations of its combined arms formations. It will only be able to execute its new missions, as part of a joint force, with new doctrinal concepts based on a thorough appreciation of India's specific strategic needs and the changing character of war.

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