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From Strategic Restraint to Punitive Deterrence: India's Emerging Multi-Domain Doctrine To Defeat Pakistan's Proxy War

Vikas Sharma

CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES

Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw, better known as Sam "Bahadur", was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw's contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier's soldier and a General's General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India's best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.

Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC
1914-2008

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

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From Strategic Restraint to Punitive Deterrence: India's Emerging Multi-Domain Doctrine to Defeat Pakistan's Proxy War

Abstract

The strategic directive issued by Prime Minister Narendra Modi following Operation Sindoor constitutes a clear national-level articulation redefining India's approach to deterrence, escalation management, and the calibrated use of force. Moving beyond routine political signalling, it establishes an overarching framework that clarifies response thresholds, restores operational autonomy, and rejects nuclear coercion as a constraint on conventional and sub-conventional action (Freedman, 2013; Narang, 2014).

This paper argues that the post-Sindoor directive marks India's transition from strategic restraint to a doctrine of calibrated punitive deterrence executed across multiple domains. By integrating military force with economic, diplomatic, informational, and resource instruments, India challenges Pakistan's reliance on proxy warfare conducted under nuclear cover, compressing the strategic space between sub-conventional provocation and punitive response (Kapur, 2007; Ganguly, 2001; Schelling, 1966).

Situating Operation Sindoor within India's post-2014 doctrinal evolution—including the Uri surgical strikes and Balakot air operations—the study highlights a shift toward escalation control, joint operations, and precision strike capabilities designed to impose calibrated costs while preserving strategic stability (Freedman, 2013; Ladwig, 2017).

Through escalation ladder modelling and comparative doctrinal analysis, the paper concludes that India's evolving approach represents a pragmatic adaptation, enabling credible deterrence against proxy aggression while maintaining crisis stability under nuclear overhang conditions (Narang, 2014; Raghavan, 2021).

Introduction: Strategic Communication as Doctrine

Operation Sindoor, (07 to 10 May 2025) represents a pivotal moment in India's strategic trajectory. Following the operation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered a message of unprecedented clarity and specificity, directed not only at the Indian population but also at Pakistan and the international strategic community. Unlike conventional political addresses, this communication functions effectively as a **strategic directive**, setting forth operational principles, thresholds, and expected modes of Indian action in response to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism and cross-border provocations. In view of the above, it may be worthwhile to examine the evolution of India's offensive defence doctrine within the broader framework of regional deterrence under a nuclear overhang.

India's traditional strategic posture had historically emphasised restraint, legitimacy, and controlled escalation, particularly in the post-1980s era when overt nuclearisation of the Subcontinent was a well-recognised fact. These principles were designed to prevent inadvertent escalation with Pakistan, which

consistently employed low-threshold nuclear signalling to offset its conventional inferiority (Kapur, 2007; Ganguly, 2001). The result of this policy was a tightly constrained strategic environment: India faced severe limitations in translating conventional superiority into actionable deterrence, particularly in the sub-conventional domain where proxy warfare and terrorist operations were routine. Operation Sindoor and the Prime Minister's subsequent directive signal a decisive departure from this posture, asserting that India would now exercise operational autonomy and impose costs on adversaries in a calibrated but uncompromising manner.

Three core principles underpin this strategic shift. **First**, India asserts the right to deliver responses on its own terms, calibrated to national interest and operational feasibility. This principle directly challenges Pakistan's long-standing strategy of exploiting the space between low-intensity conflict and nuclear escalation and is explicitly articulated in India's post–Operation Sindoor political signalling, which emphasises operational autonomy and proportional but decisive retaliation (Government of India, 2025a).

Second, the doctrine explicitly rejects nuclear coercion as a veto on conventional action, reaffirming the operational relevance of conventional forces even under nuclear overhang. This reflects India's doctrinal evolution away from restraint induced by Pakistan's nuclear signalling and aligns with established analyses of India's effort to restore conventional deterrence credibility below the nuclear threshold (Narang, 2014; Kapur, 2007).

Third, the directive establishes a conceptual linkage between counter-terrorist action and broader instruments of statecraft, including water resource management, economic leverage, and international diplomacy. This reflects a deliberate expansion of the coercive toolkit beyond the military domain, consistent with classical theories of compellence and modern interpretations of

integrated national power (Schelling, 1966; Freedman, 2013; Government of India, April 2025).

The public acknowledgement of cross-border surgical strikes (Sept 2016), the Balakot air strikes (Feb 2019), and the multi-domain Operation Sindoor (May–July 2025) form a sequence of state actions and official statements that together signal India's transition from strategic restraint toward a calibrated offensive-defence posture." (Ministry of External Affairs & Ministry of Defence, 2016; Ministry of External Affairs, 2019; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Prime Minister's Office, 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, India's strategic directive aligns closely with deterrence theory, particularly the notion of 'compellence by punishment' articulated by Schelling (1966). By demonstrating the willingness and capability to impose costs pre-emptively, India seeks to constrain adversary behaviour through credible threat rather than reactive actions, primarily in the diplomatic or economic domains. Additionally, the directive resonates with the doctrine of offensive defence, which posits that defensive advantage can be maximised by maintaining the initiative and imposing strategic costs on the adversary while minimising own vulnerabilities (Freedman, 2013). In practice, this approach requires quick decision cycles, integrated multi-domain operations, rapid deployment capabilities, and modular force structuring to generate flexibility and unpredictability.

The academic and policy relevance of examining Operation Sindoor and its doctrinal implications is multifaceted. **First,** it contributes to the literature on South Asian strategic stability, illustrating how a regional nuclear power navigates the dual imperatives of conventional superiority and nuclear prudence. **Second,** it provides a practical lens for evaluating the effectiveness of structural and doctrinal shifts envisaged in India's defence

framework in achieving deterrence objectives. Third, it offers insights into how India seeks to leverage non-military instruments—diplomacy, economic coercion (including use of Water as a Weapon), and information operations—as integral components of a composite deterrence framework.

This paper addresses the following questions:

- How does Operation Sindoor exemplify India's post-2014 transition toward an offensive defence posture in the sub-conventional and conventional domains?
- In what ways do multi-domain operations and civil-military fusion underpin India's ability to manage escalation while maximising operational impact?
- What are the implications of this strategic directive for force design, capability acquisition, and deterrence stability in the India–Pakistan context?

In answering these questions, the paper situates Operation Sindoor within the broader theoretical and doctrinal evolution of Indian strategic thought, connecting operational practice with long-term force transformation objectives. By integrating multi-domain operational theory, escalation management, and doctrinal innovation, this study offers a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding India's emerging offensive defence posture.

Historical Context: Pakistan's India Strategy and India's Operational Constraints

South Asia's security landscape has evolved around a strategic contest between India and Pakistan, characterised by pronounced asymmetries in conventional military strength, divergent nuclear doctrines, and fundamentally dissimilar strategic aims. These

imbalances have generated a fragile regional order in which sub-conventional violence, nuclear blackmail, and escalation control coexist uneasily. Pakistan's security policy has historically relied on compensating for its conventional military inferiority through a combination of proxy warfare, signalling of low nuclear threshold and deliberate ambiguity regarding escalation rationality (Kapur, 2007; Ganguly, 2001). These elements have collectively constituted a strategic template designed to constrain Indian operational freedom and prevent decisive punitive action without the spectre of nuclear escalation. Understanding this historical context is essential to situating Operation Sindoor and the post-2014 evolution of India's offensive defence doctrine.

Pakistan's Proxy Warfare and Low Nuclear Threshold

From its inception, Pakistan has invested in cultivating irregular and proxy forces as a cornerstone of its security doctrine. Particularly in Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan leveraged non-state actors, terrorist networks, and paramilitary formations to achieve strategic objectives at a low cost while maintaining plausible deniability (Ganguly, 2001). These proxy campaigns were systematically designed to:

- Inflict casualties and disrupt governance in Indian-administered territories.
- Exploit the gap between conventional deterrence and nuclear escalation, creating strategic ambiguity.
- Compel India to demonstrate restraint to preserve international legitimacy and avoid nuclear confrontation.
- Gain leverage vis-à-vis India on Kashmir to push for a desirable end state.

Complementing proxy operations, Pakistan established a low-threshold nuclear posture, explicitly signalling that even limited conventional Indian operations could trigger nuclear responses (Kapur, 2007). This doctrine of nuclear intimidation was intended to neutralise India's conventional superiority by raising the stakes of military escalation, thereby reinforcing a status quo favourable to Pakistan's strategic interests.

India's Constraints Before 2014

Before 2014, India sought to deter Pakistan primarily through diplomatic coercion and international pressure, publicly highlighting Islamabad's support for cross-border terrorism and attempting to shape global opinion against state-sponsored proxies in forums such as the UN and through diplomatic engagements (Mahadevan, 2017). Part of this strategy involved leveraging financial oversight mechanisms, such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), by pushing for Pakistan's inclusion on or scrutiny under its grey list for weaknesses in combating terrorist financing, thereby aiming to constrain Pakistan's financial channels supporting militant networks and to tarnish its international credibility. However, these measures had limited impact on Pakistan's proxy war, as militant infrastructure and infiltration continued despite diplomatic pressure and FATF actions, with groups operating through alternative networks or digital platforms beyond formal financial oversight (Basrur, 2017; Fair, 2014). This approach reflected India's preference for restraint, multilateral pressure, and limited covert responses rather than large-scale conventional retaliation under the nuclear shadow. These constraints manifested in operational and political terms as under:

- **Limited cross-border operations**: India's military responses were often restricted to defensive actions or limited punitive

measures, avoiding overt escalation beyond the Line of Control (LoC). (Ganguly, 2001; Kapur, 2007)

- **International signalling and diplomacy**: India prioritised global perception, particularly in Western capitals, to justify defensive measures and prevent Pakistan from exploiting international opinion.
- **Nuclear prudence**: India maintained a No First Use (NFU) nuclear doctrine, reinforcing a perception of conventional constraint and limiting the scope of offensive planning (Narang, 2014, Basrur, 2017; Fair, 2014).

These constraints, while supporting international credibility, inadvertently created an environment in which Pakistan's strategy could operate with relative impunity. The reliance on restraint effectively permitted sustained sub-conventional attacks, as seen during the 1990s insurgency campaigns in Jammu and Kashmir and repeated cross-border provocations in the 2000s. (Mahadevan, 2017)

Key Conflict Episodes Illustrating Strategic Dynamics

Several historical conflicts underscore the operational and doctrinal asymmetries between India and Pakistan:

- **1965 War:** Despite India's overall quantitative superiority, especially in Infantry and artillery, the 1965 conflict revealed a more complex balance of power. Pakistan enjoyed qualitative advantages in the armoured and air domains through U.S.-supplied M-47/M-48 Patton tanks and F-86 Sabre fighter aircraft, acquired because of its close military alignment with Washington via the SEATO and CENTO alliances. However, as hostilities escalated, the United States imposed an arms embargo on both India and Pakistan, suspending military supplies to the subcontinent. While formally even-handed, the

embargo had asymmetric effects, constraining Pakistan more severely due to its heavy dependence on U.S. equipment and spares. On the other hand, India's diversified procurement base reduced the immediate operational impact. Ultimately, U.S. diplomatic intervention and broader international pressure contributed to limiting escalation and accelerating the ceasefire, particularly as fighting expanded across Punjab and Kashmir. Together, these dynamics reinforced a lasting Pakistani strategic belief that external alignment, diplomatic mediation, and great-power leverage could compensate for conventional weakness, a logic that would later evolve into reliance on nuclear deterrence and external balancing to constrain India's strategic options (Ganguly, 2001; Cohen, 2004; Riedel, 2011).

- **1971 War:** The Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 underscored India's ability to achieve decisive operational and strategic objectives, culminating in the creation of Bangladesh and the dismemberment of Pakistan. In anticipation of Indian escalation, Pakistan sought to deter further action through external balancing, relying on diplomatic and strategic backing from both the United States and China. The U.S. naval deployment in the Bay of Bengal and Chinese diplomatic signalling were intended to exert coercive pressure on India and impose escalation costs. However, the inability of either Washington or Beijing to prevent Pakistan's defeat exposed the limits of external alignment as an effective deterrent against a determined regional power operating with clear political objectives and favourable military conditions. While great-power involvement contributed to post-war restraint and diplomatic mediation, its failure to alter the battlefield outcome reinforced a critical lesson for Pakistan: external patronage could not reliably substitute for indigenous strategic capability. This experience deepened Pakistan's search for alternative

deterrence mechanisms and contributed to the emergence of strategic ambiguity and, ultimately, nuclearisation as a means of constraining India in the post-1971 security environment (Ganguly, 2001; Kapur, 2007; Raghavan, 2013).

- **Exercise Brass-tacks (1986–87):** Brass-tacks represented the most extensive peacetime mobilisation undertaken by the Indian Army, featuring large-scale manoeuvre formations, deep operational movements, and prolonged force concentration in western India. Although conceived as a training exercise, its scale, forward posture, and proximity to Pakistan's border created acute ambiguity regarding Indian intentions. For Pakistan, this served as a strategic warning signal, heightening fears of a potential pre-emptive offensive by India. As the crisis unfolded, Pakistan complemented conventional alert measures with overt nuclear sabre-rattling, including public references to nuclear capabilities intended to signal resolve and raise the perceived costs of escalation. Although Pakistan lacked an operational nuclear arsenal at the time, this deliberate introduction of nuclear ambiguity succeeded in internationalising the crisis. External powers, concerned about inadvertent escalation under conditions of uncertainty, intensified diplomatic engagement with both sides, which contributed materially to the eventual de-escalation by early 1987 (Kapur, 2007; Stimson Center, 2016).

- **Kargil War, 1999:** Pakistan's covert infiltration across the Line of Control in the Kargil sector was premised on the belief that the recent overt nuclearisation of South Asia would constrain India's military options and deter large-scale retaliation. India's calibrated response included concentration of superior conventional forces, including overwhelming artillery firepower, and measured air power, with deliberate escalation control designed to prevent horizontal or vertical conflict

expansion. While battlefield success ultimately restored the status quo ante, the nuclear overhang necessitated parallel diplomatic engagement, particularly with the United States, to impose political costs on Pakistan and reinforce the illegitimacy of its actions. American diplomatic pressure, coupled with India's battlefield successes along the LoC, played a decisive role in compelling Pakistani withdrawal without triggering wider war. The episode demonstrated both the limits of Pakistan's nuclear coercion strategy and India's ability to integrate conventional operations with international diplomacy to manage escalation under nuclear conditions (Kapur, 2007; Ganguly, 2001; Riedel, 2011).

- **Operation Parakram (2001–02):** The operation exposed the structural limits of India's then-prevailing mobilisation and coercive strategy. The prolonged timelines required to move large conventional formations from peace stations to forward deployment areas eroded strategic surprise and gave Pakistan ample warning to undertake counter-mobilisation and defensive preparations (Kapur, 2007; Ladwig, 2017). The extended deployment further diluted coercive leverage by allowing Pakistan to harden critical vulnerabilities, reposition forces, and prepare for a potential conventional contingency, thereby reducing the asymmetry India initially sought to exploit. Pakistan combined conventional readiness with overt nuclear sabre-rattling, deliberately signalling a low tolerance for escalation to raise the perceived risks of Indian offensive action (Narang, 2014; Fair, 2014). This signalling successfully internationalised the crisis, prompting sustained diplomatic intervention by external powers—particularly the United States—which reinforced pressure on New Delhi to exercise restraint (Ganguly, 2001; Kapur, 2007). Rather than compelling behavioural change, Parakram underscored how slow

mobilisation, nuclear brinkmanship, and third-party mediation combined to neutralise India's conventional superiority, shaping subsequent Indian efforts to compress timelines and regain the escalation initiative (Ladwig, 2017; Narang, 2014).

Post-2014 Evolution: From Restraint to Punitive Action

Post 2016, India's strategic posture began a gradual yet profound transformation. Three critical milestones illustrate this evolution:

Uri Attacks and Surgical Strikes (2016)

The terrorist attack on an Indian Army base at Uri, Jammu and Kashmir, in September 2016, prompted India to conduct Special Forces–led surgical strikes across the Line of Control later that month. Though limited in scope and duration, the operation marked a clear departure from India's earlier reliance on ambiguity, as New Delhi openly acknowledged cross-border military action undertaken in response to Pakistan-based terrorist infrastructure. Official statements characterised the strikes as pre-emptive and proportionate, aimed at disrupting launch pads rather than escalating toward conventional war. Strategically, the episode demonstrated India's capacity for rapid, time-bound punitive action in the sub-conventional domain while maintaining escalation control under nuclear overhang. By imposing visible costs without widening the conflict, the Uri strikes undermined Pakistan's assumption that proxy violence could be pursued with impunity, signalling a calibrated but consequential shift in India's deterrence posture (Ministry of External Affairs & Ministry of Defence, 2016; Pant & Joshi, 2017; Narang, 2017).

Pulwama and Balakot (2019)

The Pulwama attack, which killed 40 Indian security personnel, was followed by the Balakot airstrikes, marking India's first

conventional airpower strike deep inside Pakistani territory. The operation breached a long-standing red line: Pakistan's nuclear signalling could no longer automatically deter India from executing proportionate punitive actions. Strategically, Balakot showed glimpses of the Offensive Defence Doctrine, as India conducted high-precision strikes designed to impose costs without triggering uncontrolled escalation (Narang, 2014; Freedman, 2013).

Operation Sindoor (Post-2019)

Operation Sindoor consolidated this doctrinal trajectory, involving multi-domain attacks on Pakistan-sponsored terrorists and Pakistani military infrastructure, including air bases, command nodes, and enabling facilities. Unlike prior operations, Sindoor institutionalised unpredictability, systematically disrupting Pakistan's operational planning and exploiting the gap between sub-conventional provocations and nuclear escalation thresholds (Schelling, 1966). Operational uncertainty became a deliberate strategic tool, reinforcing India's capacity to shape adversary decision-making without occupying territory or triggering nuclear retaliation.

Comparative Historical Analysis: Escalation and Operational Constraints

Table 1: Comparative Historical Analysis Pakistan's Strategy vis-à-vis India & Indian Responses

Event	Pakistan Strategy	Indian Response	External Factors	Outcome / Strategic Implications
1965 War	Strategic offensive to sever J&K; reliance on qualitative military edge (US-supplied	Counter-offensive across sectors, leveraging numerical strength and diversified	US arms embargo; diplomatic intervention; no nuclear factor but external balancing	Strategic stalemate with relative Indian advantage; reinforced Pakistan's belief in external

Event	Pakistan Strategy	Indian Response	External Factors	Outcome / Strategic Implications
1971 War	Attempt to deter Indian action in East via offensive in West; reliance on US-China support	Decisive multi-front strategy: Strategic offensive in East, defensive in West	US naval signalling; Chinese diplomatic posture; pre-nuclear but external balancing prominent	Decisive Indian victory; creation of Bangladesh; exposed limits of external support - impetus for Pakistan's nuclearisation
Exercise Brass-tacks (1986–87)	Conventional posturing combined with deliberate nuclear ambiguity to deter a perceived Indian offensive	Large-scale mobilisation as exercise; no offensive action; calibrated de-escalation	Early nuclear signalling; crisis internationali-sation; diplomatic intervention	Demonstrated the effectiveness of nuclear ambiguity; introduced nuclear dimension into crisis management dynamics
Kargil War (1999)	Limited war under nuclear cover; covert infiltration exploiting perceived Indian restraint	Calibrated conventional response: high-intensity artillery & limited air power strikes; strict escalation control	An overt nuclear backdrop led to strong US diplomatic pressure on Pakistan	Indian Tactical success; reaffirmed LoC sanctity; showed limits of nuclear shield but constraints on escalation persisted
Operation Parakram (2001–02)	Proxy attack backed by nuclear brinkmanship. Counter mobilisation; strategy of delay and internationalisat ion	Full-scale coercive mobilisation without an actual offensive	Nuclear signalling; prolonged crisis; US-led de-escalation pressure	Highlighted slow mobilisation constraints; failure of coercive strategy - led to evolution of Cold Start Strategy

Event	Pakistan Strategy	Indian Response	External Factors	Outcome / Strategic Implications
Uri (2016)	Proxy attack with expectation of Indian restraint under nuclear shadow – aimed to enhance proxy war footprint in J&K	Surgical strikes across the LoC using Special Forces; publicly acknowledged	Controlled escalation; limited nuclear signalling; strong narrative management	Marked shift to overt punitive response; challenged Pakistan's assumption of impunity in the sub-conventional domain
Balakot (2019)	Proxy attack to re-establish deterrence on the LC	Precision airstrikes deep inside Pakistan, crossing traditional escalation red lines	Nuclear backdrop present but not triggered; rapid crisis containment	Demonstrated viability of conventional action under nuclear overhang; emergence of offensive defence logic
Operation Sindoor (Post-2019)	Continued proxy warfare with psychological and strategic signalling	Integrated multi-domain operations targeting terror and military infrastructure; calibrated grey-zone actions	Nuclear backdrop present but not overplayed, effective escalation, dominance and control	Institutionalised unpredictability; compressed escalation space; strengthened India's deterrence credibility and multi-domain posture

Source: Annotated by the Author

The historical trajectory highlighted in the table above demonstrates a shift from constrained, reactive operations to calibrated, multi-domain offensive doctrine, reflecting India's evolving strategic thinking. It also highlights the persistent role of Pakistan's low-threshold nuclear doctrine, which continues to shape India's escalation management calculus.

Doctrinal Evolution: From Restraint to Offensive Defence

India's strategic posture since 2014 reflects a deliberate departure from largely reactive and territorially bounded defence towards a framework of calibrated offensive defence, shaped by operational imperatives, expanding technological enablers, and conscious signalling practices (Narang, 2014; Basrur, 2017). Before this shift, Indian responses to provocation were predominantly considered within the conventional military spectrum and remained tightly constrained by concerns over escalation control and nuclear risk, which led to their being unviable or unacceptable (Ladwig, 2017). From 2016 onwards, however, New Delhi adopted a more layered approach to escalation, employing sub-conventional and grey-zone instruments of force against terrorist infrastructure across the Line of Control, while simultaneously and publicly defining the scope, intent, and limits of such actions as counter-terrorism rather than interstate conflict (Kapur, 2018; Fair, 2014). This combination of restrained application and overt articulation constituted a novel form of escalation management, designed to impose costs without precipitating uncontrolled vertical escalation.

This approach drew on lessons from earlier crises in which India's conventional advantages failed to generate sustained coercive leverage, despite being reinforced by ongoing institutional reforms—including the adaptation of Cold Start Doctrine, advances in theatre-level integration and structural reforms like adoption of RAPID (Reorganised Army Plains Infantry Division) organisation and intended move towards Integrated Battle Groups—which together improved responsiveness, precision, and decision-cycle compression under nuclear conditions (Narang, 2014; Ladwig, 2017). By deliberately framing military action as punitive counter-terrorism rather than an Indo-Pakistan conflict, India narrowed Pakistan's ability to credibly invoke nuclear

thresholds as a shield for proxy warfare, thereby increasing the political and strategic costs of sub-conventional aggression and shifting the burden of escalation management onto Islamabad (Kapur, 2007; Basrur, 2017).

Cold Start Doctrine: Operationalising Offensive Options

The **Cold Start Doctrine** (CSD) was conceived as a **response to Pakistan's low-threshold nuclear strategy** and conventional inferiority. (Ladwig, 2007) Its core tenets include:

- **Rapid mobilisation of conventional forces** to achieve limited, politically calibrated objectives without triggering nuclear retaliation.
- **Integrated battle groups (IBGs)**, modular formations capable of combined arms operations with autonomous operational capacity (Freedman, 2013).
- **Joint operations and precision targeting**, reducing the risk of prolonged attrition and minimising collateral damage.

The articulation of the Cold Start Doctrine represented an early but incomplete effort to translate India's long-standing concept of offensive defence into an operationally viable conventional framework against Pakistan's persistent proxy war strategy. Its core objective was not territorial conquest but the provision of time-sensitive, limited conventional options that could impose costs without triggering uncontrolled escalation. By seeking to restructure forces into Integrated Battle Groups and compressing mobilisation timelines, the doctrine sought to overcome historical constraints that had rendered India's conventional superiority politically unusable, while simultaneously injecting ambiguity and unpredictability into India's response calculus—thereby

complicating Pakistan's escalation planning (Ladwig, 2007; Kapur, 2010).

However, despite its doctrinal promise, Cold Start remained largely unimplemented in practice due to a combination of Pakistan's deliberately projected low nuclear threshold and India's own political caution. Pakistan's strategy of nuclear signalling—designed to deter even limited conventional retaliation—proved effective in reinforcing Indian restraint, most visibly after the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. Despite the scale of provocation, which struck at India's economic and symbolic core, New Delhi refrained from overt military retaliation, underscoring the absence of political will to test escalation space under nuclear overhang conditions (Arzan Tarapore, 2025).

This strategic inertia began to shift only after 2016, when India reframed the risk calculus underpinning conventional action. The surgical strikes following the Uri attack in 2016, the Balakot air operation in 2019, and Post Pahalgam OP Sindoor amply demonstrated a deliberate effort to separate nuclear deterrence from sub-conventional and limited conventional responses, thereby contesting Pakistan's long-standing assumption that nuclear threats would automatically paralyse Indian decision-making. In effect, post-2014 political will created the necessary space for calibrated conventional action below the nuclear threshold and thus enabled the operationalisation of its Offensive Defence Doctrine (Pant & Joshi, 2017; Raghavan, 2019).

Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) and Modular Organisations

IBGs were envisaged to constitute the tactical expression of Cold Start principles. Designed for rapid, precise, and autonomous action, these modular formations were to combine:

- Infantry, Artillery, Armoured and Mechanised Infantry units duly supported by other combat support & service elements.
- Long Range Operational Fires.
- Organic/ Area Air Defence and electronic warfare (EW) components.
- Integrated command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) nodes.
- Modular and re-organised operational Logistics.

Modularity and mission-tailored force structuring are intended to enhance operational resilience by compressing mobilisation, decision-making, and execution timelines through the rapid assembly and reassembly of combat groupings. However, the incomplete operationalisation of Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) has constrained the realisation of this logic. In the absence of standing, pre-integrated formations with delegated command authority and assured enabling support, force generation remains sequential rather than concurrent, limiting the speed, flexibility, and rapid mobilisation envisaged under the Cold Start Doctrine and weakening the viability of swift, limited-objective offensives below escalation thresholds (Narang, 2014; Ladwig, 2017; Pant & Joshi, 2017).

Theatre Commands: Enhancing Jointness and Multi-Domain Integration

The intended move towards the establishment of Integrated Theatre Commands represents a doctrinal and structural innovation aimed at integrating land, air, and maritime capabilities under unified operational control. Key features are expected to include:

- **Unified command**: Eliminating inter-service duplication and streamlining decision-making.
- **Multi-domain synergy**: Synergising cyber, space, EW, information warfare and Special Forces alongside conventional forces.
- **Rapid deployment capability**: Ensuring short-notice responsiveness across diverse operational theatres (Freedman, 2013; Ladwig, 2017).

The Theatre Command structure, as and when put into place, is expected to enable operationalisation of the offensive defence doctrine, ensuring coherent application of force across the escalation spectrum while maintaining political and strategic control.

Comparative Doctrinal Overview: India vs Pakistan

India's evolving doctrinal posture stands in marked contrast to Pakistan's continued dependence on proxy warfare, nuclear signalling, and deliberate operational ambiguity as instruments of state policy. Whereas India has progressively moved towards a framework that privileges predictable escalation management, multi-domain integration, and the selective application of calibrated offensive force, Pakistan's approach remains oriented towards exploiting the residual effects of India's earlier restraint and sensitivity to escalation risk. This asymmetry reflects divergent strategic cultures: India seeks to stabilise the escalation ladder through transparency of intent and control over the scope of military action, while Pakistan relies on uncertainty, brinkmanship, and deniability to offset conventional inferiority.

In practice, India's doctrine aims to deny Pakistan the strategic dividends of proxy violence by narrowing the space for ambiguity

and signalling clear thresholds of tolerance, thereby increasing the costs of sub-conventional aggression. Pakistan, by contrast, continues to integrate proxy operations with nuclear posturing to reintroduce escalation uncertainty and invite external mediation. The resulting interaction produces a structurally asymmetric escalation dynamic, in which India attempts to impose discipline on the conflict environment, while Pakistan seeks to disrupt it. The table below distils these doctrinal divergences across key dimensions of force employment, escalation logic, and strategic signalling.

Table 2: Comparative Doctrinal Overview: India vs Pakistan

Dimension	India	Pakistan	Dimension
Strategic Objective	strategic autonomy and regional stability	*offset Indian dominance through Proxy War and Nuclear Leverage*	Strategic Objective
Nuclear Doctrine	No First Use, Resilient and survivable Nuclear Forces & assured massive retaliation	First Use; low-threshold deterrence by delegating Tactical nuclear Weapons to Operational Commanders	Nuclear Doctrine
Conventional Doctrine	Offensive-defence through calibrated punitive deterrence	Offensive-defence through calibrated punitive deterrence	Conventional Doctrine
Escalation Logic	Deliberate Escalation Control, Predictable Signalling, and Escalation Dominance	Cultivated irrationality and low nuclear threshold signalling	Escalation Logic

Dimension	India	Pakistan	Dimension
Integration of Technology	UAVs, drones, EW, cyber, space, C4ISR – Evolving indigenous capability	Limited indigenous capability, focus on asymmetric tools, dependent on external support	Integration of Technology
Operational Philosophy	Multi-domain, Political Oversight	Proxy-centric, nuclear intimidation, limited multi-domain capability	Operational Philosophy

Source: Synthesised by the author from Narang (2014), Kapur (2007), Ladwig (2007; 2020), Fair (2014), Tellis (2017; 2022), and Cohen and Dasgupta (2010)

Operational Implications of Doctrinal Evolution

The doctrinal shift produces practical and strategic consequences for India's force design, deployment, and operational planning:

- **Enhanced Responsiveness**: Forces can be mobilised and integrated for multi-domain operations on short notice.
- **Multi-Domain Capability**: Synergised employment of the Land, Air, Maritime, Cyber, Space, and Information domains leads to seamless planning, real-time data fusion and cross-domain support. These domains reinforce each other to create a force-multiplying effect, enabling faster decision cycles, decisive manoeuvres, and projection of overwhelming combat power across the entire spectrum of conflict.
- **Operational Unpredictability**: By varying the timing, scale, and modality of strikes, India can create strategic uncertainty for adversaries.

- **Escalation Management**: Modular and multi-domain formations allow for **precise control over escalation**, avoiding inadvertent nuclear signalling.
- **Integration of Civil and Military Capabilities**: Leveraging civilian technological advancements—AI, cyber, and dual-use innovations—strengthens operational resilience and force multiplier effects (Ladwig, 2017).

Linking Doctrine to Force Structuring and Multi-Domain Capability

Operationalising the doctrine requires restructuring forces across multi-domain axes:

- **Air:** India's air power requires integrated sensors, long-range precision strike capabilities, and seamless data-linking with land and maritime forces for real-time targeting. Enhancing airborne early warning, manned–unmanned teaming, drone swarms, and network-centric air operations is essential for rapid response in contested environments. Equally critical is the fielding of a long-range, integrated air-defence architecture capable of countering threats ranging from UAVs to cruise and hypersonic missiles, thereby ensuring freedom of action in the air domain (Deptula, 2015; Hallion, 2018; Tellis, 2017).
- **Land:** The Indian Army requires integrated and networked formations, supported by indigenous ISR and battlefield management systems tailored for diverse terrains—from mountains and deserts to dense urban environments. Integrated firepower, automated logistics, resilient communications, and AI-enabled decision-support systems will be central to enhancing operational tempo and lethality, particularly along the northern and western fronts where high-intensity, hybrid, and grey-zone challenges demand rapid joint

responses (Ladwig, 2017; Cohen & Dasgupta, 2019; Narang, 2014).

- **Maritime:** As India confronts growing competition in the Indian Ocean Region, maritime force design must integrate naval platforms with space-, cyber-, and air-based surveillance networks. Carrier strike groups, nuclear-powered submarines, underwater sensor arrays, and unmanned maritime systems—networked through secure data links—will be essential for sea control, deterrence, and horizontal escalation management (Freedman, 2013; Tellis, 2017; IISS, 2022).

- **Cyber:** Cyber capabilities must evolve into a fully integrated offensive–defensive instrument to secure critical infrastructure while degrading adversary command networks, logistics chains, and digital ecosystems. As cyber operations emerge as a primary tool of grey-zone warfare, India must advance indigenous encryption, rapid cyber-response mechanisms, and the integration of cyber effects with kinetic and information operations to shape the battlespace before physical contact, particularly against technologically sophisticated adversaries (Singer & Friedman, 2014; Valeriano & Jensen, 2019; Horowitz, 2020).

- **Space:** Space-based ISR, communications, and navigation assets form the backbone of precision engagement and real-time situational awareness in joint operations. India must expand satellite constellations, strengthen space domain awareness, and develop non-kinetic and selective counter-space capabilities to ensure resilience in a contested environment. Scholarly literature also notes the growing debate on space-enabled precision strike concepts, underscoring the need for credible deterrence while carefully managing

escalation risks in the space domain (Narang, 2014; Tellis, 2017; Acton, 2020).

- **Information:** Information dominance requires tightly coordinated psychological operations, strategic communication, and counter-disinformation mechanisms to shape perceptions across domestic, regional, and global audiences. A national-level Information Warfare architecture, linked to dedicated military IW structures, is essential for unified messaging, real-time narrative management, and AI-enabled sentiment analysis. The ability to generate rapid and sustained information cycles enables strategic effects even in the absence of kinetic action, reinforcing cognitive-space superiority as a core element of modern deterrence (Freedman, 2013; Giles, 2016; Baruah, 2021).

This integration ensures that India's offensive defence doctrine is not purely conceptual, but embedded in force design, structuring, and technology acquisition, providing a credible, calibrated, and sustainable deterrent posture under nuclear overhang conditions (Freedman, 2013; Narang, 2014).

Multi-Domain Structuring, Force Design, and Capability Development

India's shift toward an offensive-defence doctrine cannot be sustained through doctrinal articulation alone; it demands a fundamental reconfiguration of force structure, capability prioritisation, and operational integration across domains. Under the conditions of nuclear overhang and persistent sub-conventional conflict, the imperative is not only to optimise force application, but to build structures that ensure integrated decision dominance, calibrated escalation control, and effective cross-domain leverage to offset both conventional and sub-conventional challenges (Narang, 2014). Consequently, India's emerging force design

increasingly reflects the logic of multi-domain operations (MDO) and mosaic warfare, wherein distributed capabilities are meant to converge to generate disproportionate strategic effects (Freedman, 2013; Krepinevich, 2017). However, Theatreisation—despite years of discussion, consultations and planning—remains largely at the conceptual stage, and the window for incremental evolution is narrowing (Raghavan, 2021). India must now move from deliberation to decisive implementation, taking resolute steps to establish integrated theatre commands and institutional mechanisms that enable seamless multi-domain employment of combat power (Ladwig, 2020).

Conceptual Foundations of Multi-Domain Operations in the Indian Context

Multi-Domain Operations refer to the coordinated employment of capabilities across land, air, maritime, cyber, space, and the electromagnetic spectrum to impose systemic dilemmas on an adversary. Unlike platform-centric warfare, MDO is decision-centric, targeting the adversary's ability to sense, decide, communicate, and escalate coherently (Schelling, 1966).

In the Indian context, MDO serves three critical doctrinal purposes:

- **It provides strategic tools that allow the circumvention of nuclear thresholds** by applying force in domains traditionally perceived as non-escalatory—such as cyber, space, information and precision stand-off capabilities—thereby enabling punitive action without triggering immediate vertical escalation (Tellis, 2017; Narang, 2014).
- **It provides a framework to disrupt Pakistan's escalation management strategy**, which relies on sub-conventional proxy warfare complemented by ambiguity and rapid nuclear

signalling to deter Indian retaliation (Fair & Ganguly, 2008; Narang, 2014).

- **MDO strengthens India's capacity to retain political control over conflict escalation**, allowing policymakers to calibrate effects, impose strategic costs, and shape outcomes without prolonged territorial engagement or open-ended conflict (Narang, 2014). India's adoption of MDO is therefore not derivative of Western expeditionary models, but a bespoke response to South Asia's unique escalation dynamics.

Mosaic Warfare and Distributed Force Employment

Closely aligned with the logic of Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) is the concept of mosaic warfare, which seeks to disaggregate combat power into a diverse mix of interoperable, modular, and comparatively low-cost platforms (Carter & Clark, 2020; DARPA, 2019). Instead of being dependent on a small number of exquisite, capital-intensive systems, the loss of which may be strategically debilitating, mosaic warfare envisions a force composed of numerous heterogeneous nodes that can be recombined, networked, and task-organised on demand to create specific operational effects (Work, 2015). This approach prioritises redundancy, adaptability, and resilience, enabling commanders to compose mission packages like "tiles in a mosaic" based on the evolving tactical picture rather than rigid platform-centric planning (Mahnken et al., 2020).

For India, the relevance of mosaic warfare is immediate and operationally significant. A distributed force structure limits the risk posed by surprise attacks or counter-force strikes, thereby reducing vulnerability to first-strike degradation—a critical consideration in the context of China's counter-intervention capabilities and Pakistan's pursuit of battlefield tactical nuclear options (Tellis, 2022; Rajagopalan, 2021). Moreover, a web of

dispersed sensors, shooters, and autonomous systems complicates adversarial targeting, ISR requirements, and escalation calculations, as no single platform becomes a decisive centre of gravity (Gilli & Gilli, 2019). The availability of multiple interchangeable kill chains also enables proportionate and calibrated responses across the escalation ladder, allowing India to impose costs without crossing thresholds that may trigger strategic retaliation (Horowitz, 2020).

Advances in unmanned aerial systems, loitering munitions, precision artillery, electronic warfare suites, autonomous maritime platforms, and AI-enabled cyber tools make this model increasingly practical (Singer & Friedman, 2014; Kalyanaraman, 2023). When distributed employment of these assets is supported by secure communications, battlefield networking, edge-AI processing, and robust logistics, India can generate cumulative, domain-spanning effects while avoiding the political and operational burdens of large-scale manoeuvre warfare (Miller & Gunzinger, 2021). As Ladwig (2017) notes, the ability to pursue attritional, disruptive or harassment strategies (using swarms and cross-domain precision fires) provides a new ladder of military options below the threshold of conventional war.

In essence, mosaic warfare should be understood as a logical extension of India's evolving multi-domain operations (MDO) approach rather than as an immediately realisable construct. In recent years, tangible steps have been taken to improve inter-domain synergy, including greater joint planning, enhanced coordination among the services, incremental integration of ISR and command networks, and movement toward functional jointness in selected operational domains. These developments indicate that India has begun its transition from service-centric force employment.

At the same time, mosaic warfare presupposes the prior existence of a coherent and fully institutionalised MDO architecture, encompassing integrated theatre commands, unified cross-domain command and control, and mature data-fusion and targeting frameworks. These foundational enablers remain under development, with Theatreisation and higher-order joint command reforms progressing in niche areas rather than a full-scale execution. Thus, mosaic warfare can be best viewed as a medium- to long-term force design objective, contingent on the completion of ongoing MDO-related organisational and structural reforms (Scales, 2018; Ladwig, 2020; Raghavan, 2021).

Land Domain: From Massed Formations to Networked IBGs

Traditional Indian Army force structures emphasized mass, depth, and sequential mobilisation, reflecting legacy continental warfare paradigms. The offensive defence doctrine necessitates a departure from this model toward networked, modular, and rapidly deployable formations.

Intended move towards creation of IBGs (Rudra brigades can be considered to be a step towards creation of Modular organisations); (Shivani Sharma, 2025), are central to this transformation. Their defining characteristics include:

- **Organic integration.** Infantry, mechanised infantry, armoured units, artillery, Special Forces, and Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), supported by tailored combat support and logistics.
- Such integrated formations would allow India to conduct simultaneous, geographically dispersed operations, overwhelming Pakistan's defensive and escalation planning while remaining below strategic thresholds (Kapur, 2007).

Air Domain: Precision, Stand-Off, and Escalation Control

Air power plays a decisive yet carefully calibrated role in India's offensive defence framework. The Balakot strikes, as also the subsequent air and missile strikes during Op Sindoor demonstrated that air power could be employed within contested escalation environments without automatic nuclear escalation, provided political messaging and operational execution remain coherent (Narang, 2014).

Key air domain priorities include:

- **An integrated ISR Architecture,** with a consolidated air picture being available across domains.
- **Stand-off precision strike capabilities**, reducing pilot risk and escalation symbolism.
- **Integration with ground-based fires**, drones, and ISR platforms.
- **Restoration of squadron strength**, ensuring sustained operational tempo.
- **An integrated air defence architecture,** for protection & providing freedom of action to air assets.

Air power increasingly functions as a horizontal escalation tool, capable of shifting effects across geographies and domains rather than escalating vertically in intensity, as was the case earlier.

Maritime Domain: Strategic Depth and Horizontal Escalation

While the India–Pakistan conflict discourse is predominantly land-centric, the maritime domain offers India asymmetric leverage. Pakistan's economic vulnerability and dependence on sea

lines of communication create opportunities for horizontal escalation without immediate battlefield confrontation.

India's maritime force design emphasises:

- Networked Aerial, surface, and sub-surface platforms.
- Long-range maritime ISR and precision strike capabilities.
- Integration with space and cyber-Domains for persistent coverage.

Under an offensive defence framework, maritime operations provide India with a distinct vector of coercion that enables horizontal escalation without immediate battlefield confrontation on land. By leveraging naval presence, sea control, and selective sea denial in the Indian Ocean Region, India can impose strategic pressure on Pakistan's economic lifelines, maritime trade, and energy flows—areas of acute vulnerability given Pakistan's dependence on seaborne commerce and limited strategic depth. Such maritime signalling, ranging from heightened naval deployments to surveillance, interdiction readiness, and control of key sea lines of communication, allows India to generate coercive effects while avoiding rapid vertical escalation in the continental domain. Importantly, maritime actions are inherently **graduated, reversible, and politically controllable**, making them well-suited for escalation management under nuclear overhang conditions. In this sense, the maritime domain functions not merely as an adjunct to land-centric conflict but as a **strategic pressure valve** that expands India's menu of credible response options while preserving escalation dominance and crisis stability (Freedman, 2013; Tellis, 2017; Holmes, 2018).

Cyber and Electromagnetic Domains: Shaping the Battlespace

Cyber and EW capabilities are increasingly central to India's force design, not as adjuncts but as core operational tools. These domains allow India to:

- Disrupt adversary command-and-control networks.
- Degrade ISR and early-warning systems.
- Shape information flows during crisis escalation.

Crucially, cyber and EW operations provide deniability and reversibility, enabling India to impose costs while preserving escalation dominance. This aligns closely with Schelling's conception of coercion through controlled uncertainty rather than brute destruction (Schelling, 1966).

Space Domain: ISR, Targeting, and Escalation Stability

Space-based assets form the connective tissue of contemporary multi-domain operations, enabling real-time intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), navigation, communications, and targeting that bind land, air, maritime, space, and cyber actions into a coherent operational whole. India has steadily expanded a formal Space-Based Surveillance (SBS) programme—a multi-phase initiative approved at the Cabinet Committee on Security—to establish a dedicated constellation for defence and dual-use surveillance, with the most recent phase envisaging a network of approximately fifty-two satellites developed by ISRO and private partners to provide persistent land and maritime domain awareness, AI-assisted imagery exploitation, and resilient SATCOM support for joint operations (Katoch, 2024; Haider, 2025). Programmatically, SBS-1 focused on integrating and synchronising existing electro-optical and radar earth-observation satellites to improve revisit rates and baseline situational

awareness; SBS-2 expanded this framework through the induction of additional surveillance payloads, enhanced maritime surveillance, and early sensor-fusion capabilities; SBS-3 marks the transition to a purpose-built, large-scale, multi-spectral surveillance constellation capable of near-real-time coverage (Katoch, 2024; Haider, 2025). Architecturally, the SBS system is inherently multi-spectral and multi-sensor, combining electro-optical, infrared, and radar payloads across multiple orbits to ensure day–night, all-weather surveillance and enhanced target discrimination through cross-cueing and data fusion. Collectively, these capabilities significantly enhance persistent cross-border and maritime surveillance, precision targeting for stand-off weapon systems, and secure theatre-level communications for integrated commands.

At the same time, Indian official policy discourse has deliberately avoided endorsing overt weaponisation of space, reflecting awareness of the destabilising escalation risks associated with counter-space operations and a broader doctrinal preference for escalation stability over absolute domain dominance (Narang, 2014).

Integrated Information Warfare Architecture

The increasing centrality of the information domain in contemporary conflict underscores the necessity for an integrated information warfare (IW) architecture anchored to a national-level Information Warfare authority. Fragmented, service-specific or ministry-bound information responses are structurally ill-suited to counter the speed, scale, and narrative coherence of modern adversarial misinformation campaigns, which deliberately blur the boundaries between military, diplomatic, economic, and societal targets. A centralised authority—while preserving decentralised execution—would enable strategic narrative alignment, rapid cross-domain cueing, and synchronisation of military messaging,

diplomatic signalling, cyber-enabled influence, and public communication. Such an architecture enhances agility and responsiveness, allowing the state to contest adversarial narratives in near real time, pre-empt information shocks, and prevent tactical misinformation from cascading into strategic perception failures. Importantly, expert analyses emphasise that effective information warfare is not episodic propaganda but a continuous, whole-of-state function requiring institutionalised coordination, doctrinal clarity, and calibrated political oversight—particularly in crisis situations where escalation control and credibility are paramount (Libicki, 2016; Rid, 2020; Mukherjee, 2021).

Integrating Force Design with Escalation Management

The ultimate measure of India's force transformation is not battlefield effectiveness alone, but its contribution to escalation control. Multi-domain structuring enables India to:

- Select domains and tools aligned with political objectives.
- Modulate visibility, attribution, and intensity.
- Impose costs without triggering adversary nuclear thresholds.

Thus, force design becomes an instrument of strategic signalling, reinforcing deterrence while preserving crisis stability (Schelling, 1966; Freedman, 2013).

Escalation Ladder, Nuclear Overhang, and Crisis Stability

A central challenge in South Asian security dynamics is managing escalation in a region with asymmetric conventional capabilities and low-threshold nuclear postures. India's emerging offensive defence doctrine seeks to operate below the nuclear threshold while maintaining credible deterrence, which requires

careful mapping of escalation ladders, domain-specific levers, and crisis control mechanisms.

Conceptualising the Escalation Ladder

Schelling (1966) posits that conflict can be conceptualised as a series of rungs, each representing an increase in intensity or scope. In South Asia, escalation is particularly sensitive due to Pakistan's low nuclear threshold, ambiguity in signalling, and reliance on proxy forces (Kapur, 2007; Ganguly, 2001). India's offensive defence doctrine operationalises escalation control by designing response options calibrated to political objectives, domain capabilities, and adversary perception.

A preliminary model of India–Pakistan escalation under the new doctrine can be conceptualised as follows:

Escalation Ladder with Strategic Nuclear Strike Added

Table 3: Conceptual India–Pakistan Escalation Ladder

Rung	Conflict Character	Adversary Action	Indian Response Options	Primary Domains Employed	Escalation Management Considerations
1	Low-Intensity / Proxy War	Terrorist attacks, cross-border infiltration, and proxy violence below LoC threshold	Localised surgical strikes, SF raids, UAV interdiction, precision fires against launch pads	Land, ISR, UAV, Special Forces	Low visibility and deniability; punitive but limited action to avoid horizontal or vertical escalation
2	Grey-Zone Warfare (Air, Artillery and Missile Strikes)	Major terrorist attack; calibrated use of artillery, stand-off missiles, UAVs, and limited air action	Precision artillery and missile strikes, UAV swarms, limited air campaigns, cyber / EW disruption	Land, Air, Missiles, UAV, Cyber, EW	Proportionality and attribution critical; narrative control essential; avoid strategic / civilian targets

Rung	Conflict Character	Adversary Action	Indian Response Options	Primary Domains Employed	Escalation Management Considerations
3	Limited Conventional War	Shallow conventional attacks, Multi Domain Operations Limited in scope and space	IBG mobilisation, limited offensive manoeuvre, CAS, integrated joint fires	Land, Air, Cyber, EW, Space-ISR	Strong political oversight; shallow objectives; avoid deep penetration that may trigger nuclear thresholds
4	Full-Scale Conventional War	Large-scale conventional offensives across multiple sectors	Theatre-level joint operations, deep strikes, maritime pressure, sustained air campaigns	Land, Air, Maritime, Cyber, Space	Very high escalation risk; continuous signalling, crisis communication, external diplomatic engagement
5	Employment of Tactical nuclear weapons	Battlefield nuclear use: demonstrative or limited nuclear strikes	Massive conventional retaliation; coercive war-termination operations; readiness of strategic forces	Multi-domain (Air–Land–Sea–Cyber–Space)	Extreme escalation risk; preserve C2 resilience; maintain crisis channels; manage international intervention
6	Strategic Nuclear War	Large-scale counterforce or counter-value nuclear strikes	Activation of national nuclear doctrine, assured massive retaliation; civil defence and continuity-of-government measures	Strategic Nuclear Forces, National C2, Space & Strategic ISR	Deterrence failure stage: focus shifts from escalation control to national survival, damage limitation, and war termination under catastrophic conditions

Source: Adapted from Schelling, 1966; Kapur, 2007; Narang, 2014

This model emphasizes **India's ability to select rungs and domains to impose costs while preserving crisis stability**. Multi-domain force design directly enables this calibrated response.

Nuclear Overhang and Conventional Restraint

While the post-Cold Start construct envisioned rapid, limited offensives to punish Pakistan for proxy terrorism without triggering strategic escalation, its practical execution remained constrained by Pakistan's deliberately projected low nuclear threshold. From the early 2000s onwards, Pakistan signalled willingness to employ battlefield nuclear weapons even against shallow Indian incursions, framing deterrence around defending "every inch" of territory (Khan, 2012). The induction of Nasr tactical nuclear missiles, forward deployment, and repeated nuclear signalling during crises created a perception in New Delhi that even calibrated manoeuvres risked escalation beyond controllable limits (Narang, 2014; Ladwig, 2008).

This ambiguity was a strategic instrument—Pakistan leveraged nuclear opacity to create escalation paralysis at the conventional level. Political leadership often assessed that punitive strikes, though militarily feasible, may invite nuclear brinkmanship or third-party intervention (Tellis, 2001; Krepon & Clary, 2018). As a result:

- **Slow mobilisation during Operation Parakram** allowed space for nuclear coercion and diplomatic pressure (Pant, 2012).
- The Cold Start concept matured intellectually but **remained untested in crises** like 2001–02 and Mumbai 2008 due to nuclear escalation risk (Ladwig, 2015).

- **Pakistan converted its nuclear arsenal into a shield for sub-conventional warfare**, enabling sustained proxy attacks under deterrence cover (Haqqani, 2013).

This produced a deterrence gap — India possessed conventional superiority and a doctrine for limited war, yet lacked politically executable options below Pakistan's perceived nuclear ceiling (Sagan, 2009). The recognition of this gap drove structural changes post-2014, focused on restoring punitive capacity without breaching nuclear red lines through rapid, shallow manoeuvres, stand-off strike complexes, Special Forces raids, and cyber-EW disruption tools (Joshi, 2017; Subramanian, 2020). In essence, India's evolving posture is designed to generate coercive leverage inside the grey zone between sub-conventional conflict and nuclear escalation, narrowing Pakistan's confidence in exploiting nuclear risk manipulation. credibility and crisis control (Freedman, 2013).

Crisis Stability and Signalling

India's doctrine prioritises **clear signalling and credibility** to avoid inadvertent escalation:

- **Operational transparency** through briefings, media messaging, and diplomatic communication ensures adversaries and international stakeholders understand India's thresholds (Ladwig, 2017).
- **Decentralised yet networked C2** allows rapid action without sacrificing political oversight.
- **Redundancy and mosaic employment** complicate adversary targeting and decision-making, reinforcing deterrence without excessive force build-up.

Strategic communication complements kinetic operations, ensuring perception management is integral to operational planning.

Lessons from Operation Sindoor

Operation Sindoor exemplifies India's ability to navigate the escalation ladder effectively:

- **Multi-domain strikes generated operational ambiguity and strategic surprise**, complicating Pakistan's escalation calculus and denying the adversary a predictable doctrinal response template (Schelling, 1966; Deptula, 2015). The synchronised use of air, cyber, ISR, and electronic effects reinforced the value of integrated operations (Freedman, 2017).
- **Precision targeting enabled punitive action without triggering nuclear thresholds**, supporting literature that calibrated, proportionate force under nuclear shadow remains viable when backed by political resolve and real-time situational awareness (Kapur, 2007; Ladwig, 2017).
- **Diplomatic signalling and strategic communication helped achieve narrative legitimacy internationally**, reducing space for external mediation and ensuring escalation remained politically controlled (Tellis, 2019; Basrur, 2008).
- **The decision not to neutralize Pakistani air defence radars and C2 nodes emerged as a notable operational constraint**, allowing adversary AD systems to remain active and limiting Indian freedom of action in subsequent waves (Gunzinger & Dougherty, 2021). Future operations demand early SEAD / DEAD action and electromagnetic suppression to widen the air corridor (Hallion, 2015).

- **Information warfare remained a visible gap throughout the conflict.** Pakistan executed rapid narrative framing and disinformation campaigns, whereas Indian messaging cycles were slower and reactive, confirming the necessity for dedicated information warfare commands with real-time influence capabilities (Baruah, 2021; Giles, 2016).
- **Air defence emerged as a decisive capability variable.** The importance of layered AD, distributed sensors, redundancy, and counter-UAS systems stands reinforced for future conflicts involving drone swarms and saturation fires (Sankaran, 2020; Global IISS, 2022).
- **Indigenous weapons systems demonstrated resilience and sustainability**, reducing supply-chain vulnerabilities and enabling scalable escalation without dependency constraints (Saran, 2021; Mehta, 2020). This strengthens the case for accelerated indigenisation in missiles, drones, EW systems, and PGMs under 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat'.
- **While jointness and emerging theatre-level integration** have enhanced operational tempo in multi-domain actions such as Operation Sindoor, recent expert assessments of India's theatre-command transition indicate that significant frictions persist in the alignment of joint target prioritisation, approval chains, and battle damage assessment mechanisms. In the absence of permanently constituted joint targeting cells and interoperable digital data architectures, these procedural and institutional seams risk slowing decision cycles and diluting the effectiveness of outcome-oriented operations (Centre for Land Warfare Studies, 2025; Economic Times, 2025).
- **The conduct of *Operation Sindoor* demonstrated the operational utility of distributed force employment and manned–unmanned teaming,** with unmanned aerial systems

integrated alongside manned platforms to sustain ISR coverage, enable rapid target cueing, and impose costs on the adversary without committing large, escalation-prone force packages. Post-operation assessments by Indian strategic experts highlight that this approach generated tactical surprise and operational persistence, while remaining calibrated below thresholds associated with overt conventional escalation (Centre for Land Warfare Studies, 2025; Joshi, 2025). These operational lessons are codified into doctrinal evolution, shaping future IBG deployments, multi-domain operational planning, and escalation control mechanisms.

Implications for Force Structuring and Acquisition

To sustain credible and controllable escalation dominance in future India–Pakistan contingencies, New Delhi must prioritise multiple parallel capability and structural imperatives:

- **Rapid expansion of multi-domain strike capacity**, particularly in **drones, loitering munitions, hypersonic-capable precision missiles, electronic warfare suites, and offensive cyber units**, enabling rapid, tailored escalation without disproportionate kinetic thresholds.
- **Full-spectrum integration of ISR, battle management, and fires through common operational pictures**, linking land–air–maritime–space data into real-time kill chains. This requires **satellite-enabled targeting, AI-driven sensor fusion, and hardened communication architectures** to withstand cyber and EW disruption.
- **Strengthening of civil–military fusion mechanisms**, enabling faster R&D cycles, operational prototyping, and surge manufacturing for attritable systems. Start-up integration

through **iDEX, DRDO–private joint labs, and dual-use technology incubation** will strengthen resilience.

- **Institutionalised theatre-level war gaming and joint exercises** to validate escalation ladders, test nuclear thresholds in simulation, and refine IBG–Air–EW integration under compressed timelines.
- **Development of a dedicated Information Warfare Command**, integrating narrative operations, psychological operations (PSYOPS), counter-disinformation, and strategic communications to dominate the perception battle early in crises.
- **Robust air defence and counter-UAS architecture**, including directed-energy systems and layered AD bubbles, ensuring operational freedom while degrading adversary strike options.
- **Distributed basing and logistics redundancy**—road / highway airstrips, dispersed ammunition storage, fuel depots, micro-basing for drones—to mitigate first-strike vulnerability and ensure war-sustaining capacity.
- **Clear command-and-control protocols for limited war scenarios**, including pre-authorised response packages, crisis hotlines, and escalation review boards to prevent miscalculation under pressure.
- **Enhancement of indigenous production capacity** to reduce dependency on foreign supply chains during high-intensity operations, prioritising missiles, sensors, propulsion, secure communication systems, and electronic warfare technology.
- **Strategic reserve forces—conventional and multi-domain—kept off the table as deterrent capital**, signalling capacity for horizontal escalation even after kinetic exchanges begin.

These capability vectors convert doctrine into real deterrence, enabling India to act below nuclear thresholds while holding credible punitive options above them. By expanding multi-domain flexibility, securing information dominance, and hardening C2 networks, India strengthens its ability to **manage crises proactively rather than reactively**, maintaining initiative across the entire escalation spectrum.

Strategic Consequences of the Post–Sindoor Directive for Indo–Pak Proxy Conflict

The strategic directive issued by Prime Minister Narendra Modi following Operation Sindoor marks a decisive inflection point in the long-running Indo–Pak proxy conflict. Unlike earlier crisis communications—which were often reactive, ambiguous, or diplomatically framed—the post-Sindoor directive functions as an explicit doctrinal signal. It clarifies India's escalation logic, rejects nuclear intimidation as a veto on conventional action, and links counter-terrorism responses to a wider set of state instruments. In doing so, it fundamentally alters the incentive structure underpinning Pakistan's proxy war strategy (Freedman, 2013; Narang, 2014).

What Has Changed: Shrinking Space for Pakistan's Proxy Warfare

Historically, Pakistan's proxy strategy rested on three assumptions: India's reluctance to escalate beyond sub-conventional responses, the effectiveness of nuclear signalling in deterring conventional retaliation, and international pressure acting as a brake on Indian military action (Ganguly, 2001; Kapur, 2007). The post-Sindoor directive systematically weakens all three. By explicitly asserting operational autonomy, India has removed predictability from Pakistan's escalation planning, thereby undermining Islamabad's ability to safely calibrate proxy actions

below assumed thresholds (Ladwig, 2017). Further, by rejecting nuclear coercion as a barrier to conventional action, India has narrowed the strategic gap between proxy violence and punitive response, signalling that terrorism will be treated as a state-attributable act with cross-domain consequences (Narang, 2014).

Additionally, by linking military responses to economic, water, diplomatic, and informational instruments, India has expanded the cost matrix imposed on Pakistan. Proxy warfare no longer triggers isolated military reactions but activates a cumulative penalty regime affecting Pakistan's economy, diplomacy, and internal stability (Tellis, 2017; Freedman, 2013).

From Episodic Punishment to Persistent Deterrence

A defining feature of the post-Sindoor posture is the transition from episodic punitive strikes toward persistent deterrence. Rather than treating terrorist attacks as discrete triggers, India signals an intent to maintain continuous pressure across multiple domains, denying Pakistan escalation recovery time (Ladwig, 2017; Joshi, 2017).

This shift increases Pakistan's cumulative costs and complicates civil–military coordination by forcing planners to account for economic, diplomatic, maritime, cyber, and informational consequences—domains traditionally peripheral to Pakistan's escalation calculus (Fair & Ganguly, 2008). As a result, Pakistan's long-standing strategy of sustained low-cost proxy violence faces diminishing strategic returns.

Water as a Strategic Instrument: Expanding the Non-Kinetic Coercive Toolkit

A notable and under-examined dimension of India's post-Sindoor strategic signalling is the deliberate elevation of **water as**

an instrument of statecraft and coercive leverage. By explicitly linking counter-terrorism accountability with the review and recalibration of water-sharing arrangements, India has signalled that Pakistan-sponsored proxy violence will no longer be insulated from consequences in non-military domains traditionally treated as apolitical or sacrosanct. This represents a shift from India's long-standing preference for legalistic and treaty-bound water management toward a more assertive interpretation of riparian rights under conditions of persistent hostile action (Biswas, 2011; Iyer, 2018). While India has not violated the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), its signalling underscores that treaty obligations are not immune to broader strategic context, particularly when one party systematically exploits restraint to conduct sub-conventional warfare. The controlled use of water-related measures—such as accelerated infrastructure development, revised operational protocols, and diplomatic signalling—functions as a form of **horizontal escalation**, imposing cumulative economic and political costs without crossing kinetic or nuclear thresholds (Tellis, 2017). In the post-Sindoor environment, water thus emerges as a calibrated coercive tool, reinforcing deterrence by expanding the spectrum of penalties available to India while remaining consistent with international law and escalation stability.

Likely Pakistani Responses: Reinforcing a Constrained Deterrence Architecture

The events post 22 March have tested the resilience and military capability of our nation as well as the decisiveness and maturity of its leadership. As a nation, we have emerged victorious with all our objectives having been met. However, this is not the end of the road as Pakistan is not likely to back down so easily. It is expected that Pakistan will go back to the drawing board, address the gaps in its defence capability with Chinese and Turkish assistance and at a future date get back to mischief. We need to use this intervening

period to ensure that we are prepared, as we were in this round, to give Pakistan a bloody nose in the next round as well.

Intensified Nuclear Signalling and Delegation

Pakistan may amplify nuclear signalling through military posturing and strategic rhetoric in response to Indian conventional operations, especially when adversarial actions like *Operation Sindoor* challenge established deterrence thresholds and expose vulnerabilities in Pakistan's security calculus. In the immediate aftermath of *Sindoor*, analysts observed that Islamabad faced pressure to reaffirm its commitment to "full spectrum deterrence" — including implicit emphasis on lower thresholds and tactical nuclear options — as a way to counterbalance India's conventional advantage and signal resolve, even as such signalling risks being misinterpreted or losing coercive weight over time Analysts caution, however, that repeated reliance on declaratory nuclear signalling without observable escalation behaviour risks diluting its coercive value, increasing ambiguity around thresholds and heightening the potential for miscalculation and crisis instability over time (Khan, 2012; Narang, 2014; Krepon & Clary, 2018).

Horizontal Expansion of Proxy and Grey-Zone Activity

Facing constraints along the LoC, Pakistan may diversify proxy activity into urban terrorism, cyber sabotage, maritime attacks, and information operations to preserve deniability (Haqqani, 2013; Fair, 2014). However, India's expanding attribution, ISR, and information warfare capabilities increasingly limit the effectiveness of such concealment strategies (Horowitz, 2020).

External Balancing and China's Leverage

Pakistan is also likely to deepen reliance on China for diplomatic cover, military technology, and economic insulation.

While this may provide short-term reassurance, it increases Pakistan's strategic dependency and exposes it to triangular escalation risks, particularly if India responds asymmetrically in domains where China's direct equities are limited (Tellis, 2022; Rajagopalan, 2021).

Capability Development Imperatives Under the Post–Sindoor Doctrine

For the post-Sindoor directive to function as an operational doctrine rather than a declaratory policy, it must be underwritten by credible capability development across force structure, readiness, and integration.

Accelerate Setting Up of Theatre Commands with Integrated Firepower Authority

Theatreisation must advance beyond extended doctrinal discussion to firm institutional execution through Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)–enabled theatre commands endowed with genuine operational authority. Properly conceived, theatreisation is not a cartographic rearrangement of forces but a transformation of command relationships, decision hierarchies, and information flows across land, air, maritime, space, cyber, and electromagnetic domains, aimed at compressing decision cycles and preserving political control over military escalation.

Within this framework, cross-domain targeting and integrated firepower constitute a single operational function rather than parallel activities. Theatre commanders must exercise unified control over long-range precision strike assets—rockets, missiles, loitering munitions, and unmanned systems—supported by fused ISR inputs from space, airborne, cyber, and electromagnetic sources. This integration enables rapid sensor-to-shooter linkage, domain-agnostic weapon–target matching, and calibrated

application of force without deep territorial penetration, a critical requirement for escalation management under nuclear overhang (Ladwig, 2020; Raghavan, 2021).

At a higher level, Theatreisation must be enabled by mosaic warfare capability and network-centric integration, wherein distributed sensors, shooters, decision nodes, and non-kinetic capabilities are dynamically assembled into mission-specific kill webs. Secure digital backbones and AI-enabled battle management systems integrate all domains into an adaptive operational ecosystem, sustaining decision dominance while avoiding fragmentation in high-tempo conflict (Mahnken et al., 2020).

Standardise Modular High-Readiness Forces

Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) and Rudra-type brigades must evolve beyond manoeuvre-centric formations into firepower-enabled, networked combat teams. (Kapur, 2007; Ladwig, 2017).

Policy should mandate:

- Organic integration of precision artillery, rockets, UAVs, loitering munitions, and electronic warfare.
- MDO capability through seamless linkages with Air Force and Navy and Cyber &space commands via integrated networks.
- Capacity for seamless grouping and re-grouping.
- Customised combat support and Logistics.

Integrated Air and Missile Defence

To counter Pakistan's acquisition of missiles and other Force Multipliers like drones & UAVs, Multispectral Sensors and emerging hypersonic capabilities, India must prioritise layered air and missile defence, integrating sensors, shooters, and battle

management systems (Tellis, 2017; Miller & Gunzinger, 2021). Air defence now functions as an enabler of offensive freedom, allowing calibrated action without disproportionate vulnerability.

Integrated Information Warfare Capability

A national-level Information Warfare (IW) architecture is now central to any credible escalation management in contemporary conflict. Such an architecture must function as the apex authority for strategic intent, narrative coherence, and cognitive-domain prioritisation, providing overarching guidance to Defence Information Warfare Agencies. While service-specific IW units execute operational and tactical tasks, their messaging, attribution posture, and counter-disinformation actions must be synchronised and directed by a central national mechanism to prevent narrative fragmentation during crises.

At this level, unified strategic communication, rapid multi-source attribution, AI-enabled sentiment and narrative analysis, and whole-of-government counter-disinformation coordination become integral elements of deterrence rather than ancillary support functions. The absence of national direction risks cognitive fratricide, contradictory signalling, and loss of political control over escalation. Without sustained superiority in the cognitive domain, even operationally successful military actions may fail to translate into strategic effect, allowing adversaries to reshape perceptions, dilute deterrent messaging, or internationalise crises unfavourably (Freedman, 2013; Singer & Friedman, 2014; Acton, 2020).

Institutionalise Offensive Defence as Joint National Doctrine

India should formally codify offensive defence as a joint doctrinal framework, integrating land, air, maritime, cyber, space,

and information operations under a unified escalation management construct. This doctrine must explicitly:

- Link counter-terrorism responses to integrated conventional and non-kinetic actions.
- Clarify escalation thresholds, political oversight mechanisms, and domain-specific employment logic.
- Harmonise service doctrines to eliminate inter-service divergence in escalation interpretation (Freedman, 2013; Narang, 2014).

Formal doctrinal articulation enhances deterrence credibility by reducing ambiguity of intent while preserving operational flexibility.

Integrated Firepower as the Primary Tool of Controlled Escalation

India should explicitly prioritise integrated firepower—rather than large-scale ground offensives—as the principal instrument of offensive defence. This includes:

- Precision stand-off strikes against terrorist infrastructure, logistics nodes, and enabling military assets.
- Cross-domain fire planning linking cyber disruption, EW suppression, and kinetic fires.
- Escalation control through selective targeting, graduated intensity, and reversibility.

Firepower-centric deterrence allows India to impose repeated costs while remaining below Pakistan's perceived nuclear thresholds (Schelling, 1966; Narang, 2014).

Operationalise Cyber as a Coercive and Preparatory Domain

Cyber operations must be fully integrated into India's escalation ladder as both preparatory and coercive tools. Policy directions should include:

- Dedicated cyber components within theatre commands.
- Standing offensive cyber plans against adversary C2, logistics, financial networks, and information infrastructure.
- Legal and political frameworks for calibrated cyber employment below the threshold of armed conflict.

Cyber operations offer deniability, reversibility, and horizontal escalation options, making them particularly effective against proxy warfare ecosystems and crisis mobilisation networks (Singer & Friedman, 2014; Horowitz, 2020).

Integrate Space Capabilities into Joint Warfighting and Deterrence Planning

Space must be treated as a warfighting enabler, not merely a support domain. India should:

- Expand space-based ISR, navigation, and secure communications tailored for theatre-level operations.
- Strengthen space domain awareness and resilience against adversary counter-space actions.
- Develop non-kinetic counter-space options (jamming, dazzling, cyber interference) as escalation-controlled tools.

Policy restraint on overt space weaponisation should continue, but credible counter-space capability enhances deterrence by

protecting India's multi-domain kill chains (Narang, 2014; Tellis, 2017).

Maintain Persistent Multi-Domain Readiness and Escalation Exercises

Offensive defence requires continuous readiness, not episodic mobilisation. Policy should mandate:

- Regular joint exercises simulating proxy attacks, cyber escalation, space denial, and precision-fire retaliation.
- Political–military war-gaming of escalation ladders under a nuclear overhang.
- Institutionalised civil–military crisis rehearsals integrating economic, diplomatic, and informational responses.

Persistent readiness reinforces deterrence by signalling both capability and resolve (Narang, 2014; Ladwig, 2017).

Conclusion

India's emerging offensive defence doctrine represents a structural shift in strategic behaviour rather than a transient departure from restraint. Operation Sindoor demonstrates how a regional nuclear power can impose costs, retain initiative, and manage escalation below nuclear thresholds by integrating conventional force with multi-domain and non-kinetic instruments of statecraft. The analysis shows that Pakistan's long-standing strategy of proxy warfare under nuclear cover is increasingly constrained by India's ability to respond across domains, timelines, and geographies in ways that are politically controlled yet operationally unpredictable.

However, doctrinal articulation alone will not sustain deterrence credibility. The durability of offensive defence depends

on institutional follow-through—particularly the implementation of theatre commands, the standardisation of modular high-readiness forces, the integration of precision firepower, and the establishment of credible cyber, space, and information warfare capabilities. If these elements are consolidated, India's approach offers a viable model for managing the stability–instability paradox without precipitating uncontrolled escalation. In doing so, it contributes to a more stable—though contested—deterrence equilibrium in South Asia.

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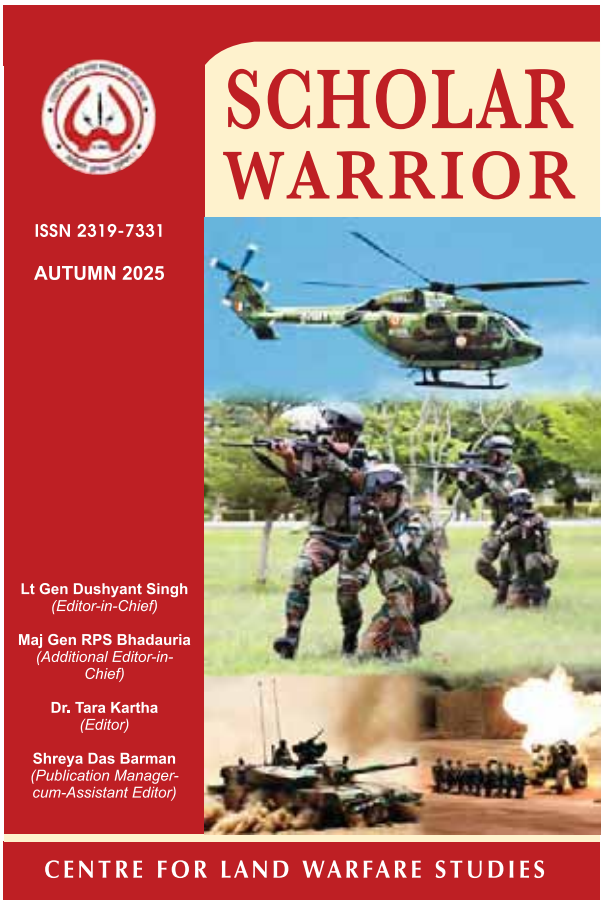

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This paper examines India's evolving strategic doctrine in the light of Operation Sindoor—marking a decisive shift from long-standing strategic restraint to a framework of calibrated punitive deterrence. It argues that India has begun to systematically integrate military, economic, diplomatic, informational, and technological instruments to counter Pakistan's proxy warfare strategy. By analysing key conflict episodes, doctrinal developments, and multi-domain operational concepts, the study highlights how India is compressing the space between provocation and response while maintaining escalation control.

It also highlights critical capability development imperatives—such as theatreisation, multi-Domain integration of firepower, Integration of Air and Missile Defence Architecture and the critical need of an Integrated Information Warfare Architecture — required to translate doctrine into credible operational outcomes. Through the lens of deterrence theory and escalation dynamics, the paper seeks to examine how political signalling, operational innovation, and force restructuring are reshaping regional stability, thereby creating a sustainable model for credible deterrence under a nuclear backdrop.

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