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**Climbing Into the  
Abyss: A Compelling  
Comparison of the  
US-Iran War and the  
Looming Indo-Pakistan**

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# **Climbing Into the Abyss: A Compelling Comparison of the US-Iran War and the Looming Indo-Pakistan Conflict**

## **Abstract**

*The War in Middle East has been 'Unprecedented' in its scale and levels of destruction and also due to its impact across the globe. The escalation ladder is witnessing new methods and newer phenomena. The US-Israeli coalition attempts 'to achieve their strategic objectives, seem to have engulfed them into an 'Escalation Trap' from where they are finding it difficult to extricate. The Iranians have been extremely successful in expanding the rungs of escalation into the 'Horizontal realm' extending the conflict across the Middle East. The coalition capabilities, in the multi-domain, has resulted in an 'Illusion of Control' over the escalatory continuum which seems to have become more 'Delusional' as the conflict becomes protracted. Militaries, across the globe, are learning and adapting to the lessons of the ongoing conflict. The ongoing conflict in the Middle East and Operation SINDOOR in the Indian sub-continent have many subtle similarities. The article is an effort to compare the US-Iran war with a looming Indo-Pakistan conflict and the possibility of Pakistan adopting a course of action or modus operandi akin to the Iranians employing predominantly missiles and drones in their arsenal besides the threat in other domains of warfare, to engulf India into an Escalation Trap.*

**Keywords:** Middle East Conflict, Escalation Trap, Illusion of Control, Cross-Domain Operations, Military Adaptation, Asymmetric Warfare

## **Introduction**

**It is 'No Hold Barred'.** The US and Israel War against Iran can be termed 'Unprecedented' in the history of geo-politics and military confrontation. The Russia- Ukraine War, which is probably the largest war the world has witnessed since the World War II, might not have seen the level of destruction that has ensued in the last four weeks. The confrontation has now become 'No Holds Barred'. The American folly in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq seems nothing in comparison to the present conflict with Iran. One can term this conflict as the 'America's Boer War' signalling the very beginning of the end of the US global hegemony. An insight into the US, Israel- Iran confrontation during the 'Twelve-Day War' in June 2025 brings to fore many valuable lessons in 'Escalation Control'. However, the present conflict that commenced with the US-Israeli decapitation strike on 28 February 2026 is worth a study on the 'Rungs of Escalation'. A Vertical Escalation is something the Americans and Israelis seems to have envisaged. The targeting of Iranian Political and Military Leadership i.e. the identified

Centre of Gravity, should have ideally given the 'Escalatory Dominance' to seek cessation of hostilities and provide the most important 'Exit Strategy'. But that is not how the Iranians had scripted this war. The Iranian Mosaic Strategy gave them a decentralised architecture to counter the effect of the strategic decapitation strike on the Clausewitzian Centre of Gravity (Pawa, R. 2026). The Iranian response of targeting the Gulf States was something out of the American and Israeli playbook that resulted in Horizontal Escalation.

This war is an excellent chapter in the art of military confrontations. There are many nations who prefer to engage in actions below the threshold of war (in Grey Zone or Heightened Grey Zone) over an all-out war, to ensure political stability, economic prosperity and prevent loss of precious lives. This article is an attempt to extrapolate the Iran-US-Israel confrontation into a future Indo-Pakistan conflict. It is important to understand that nations across the globe are learning quickly from the present conflict, so would be our Western adversary.

### **The Slippery Slope of Incrementalism**

**'Situation Always Seem Ripe'**. The American and Israeli path to achieve the strategic objectives by military force, seems to have been an ill-conceived idea. Their likely objectives were Regime Change, decapitation of Nuclear Capability and denuding the IRGC missile and drone capabilities. (Atlantic Council, 2026) The events leading to 28 February 2026, reinforced the American and Israeli thinking that, this time, their strategic objectives were easily achievable. The capabilities of the Iranian Proxies 'The Triple H' — Hezbollah, Hamas and Houthis, were deteriorated. The popular uprising in Iran in December 2025 and January 2026 had forced the Iranian Islamic Regime to go on the backfoot. Above all, the earlier strikes on Iranian nuclear capabilities, in June 2025, seems to have had a severe impact. So, the situation seemed ripe for achieving the strategic aim of ending the Iranian threat once for all, something, the Americans and Israelis have been yearning since 1979.

**'Escalation is Not by Choice'**. The Americans has envisaged a vertical escalatory ladder wherein the IRGC would carry out attacks on Israel, by employing ballistic missiles and drones as it did during the Twelve-Day War. The Iranian targeting of economic and oil infrastructure in the Gulf nations supporting the American- Israeli Enterprise came as a shocker. This marked a distinct level of escalation which seems to have not been envisaged by the coalition. This kind of a Horizontal Escalation is unprecedented in any modern conflicts. This has resulted in the widening of the conflict in geography and more so, in the selection of targets. The Iranians have been successful in making the Gulf States question the premise of paying a

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price for Israeli policies which seems to have become expansionist over the last decade (Beaumont, P. 2026). The deeper the US involvement in this war, the more likelihood of loss of support of the American population. A ground invasion would have definitely become murky, and the very idea of bringing body bags back to the American mainland had always led to internal challenges to those US Administrations conducting wars across the globe.

**The Escalation Trap.** The success in an Escalation Ladder or Rungs of Escalation is the ability of an attacker to achieve strategic success. At each stage in the Escalation Matrix, tactical actions should result in strategic success i.e. achievement of strategic objectives or aims and force the defender to seek de-escalation. However, if that fails, the attacker is drawn into a more complex and protracted conflict wherein the level of escalation increases with the attacker adopting the next stage of tactical actions to achieve strategic success. This phenomenon is known as the 'Escalation Trap'. (Beaumont, P. 2026). In the ongoing conflict, ideally the strategic decapitation strikes should have given the Americans the window to declare success and end the conflict. But the Iranian response to the killing of their Supreme Leader and elimination of top tier military leadership was out of the American- Israeli playbook. The Iranians matched the American actions by equal and proportionate response, which forced them to take it to the next stage. (Yacoubian, M. 2026). The strike on Kharg Island also did not deliver the final blow for the Americans, as the Iranian response was more aggressive than before. Consequently, the US fell into an Escalation Trap from where an exit would be an extremely difficult proposition.

**The Illusion of Control.** The Israeli- American Coalition forces enjoyed maritime and air supremacy and their freedom to engage targets, deep in Iran, may have been given them an Illusion of Control over the escalatory ladder. In spite of President Trump announcing that the Iranian Command and Control, Air Defence and the entire Naval Fleet has been destroyed and their missile programme and drone facilities have been targeted and denuded, the Iranians were successful in shooting down or destroying more than 25 aerial platforms (F-35s, F-16, F-15Es, MQ-9s, KC-135s) and successfully targeted the THAAD radar network. The American Aircraft Carrier seems to have been targeted too and the coalition air defence umbrella have been badly mauled. Besides, the US bases across the Middle East seems to have been hit and devastated. In spite of all the claims of destruction of its naval fleet, Iran still controls the Straits of Hormuz. So, along the rungs of escalation, the attacker always seems to float in an Illusion of Control

and as the conflict becomes protracted, this illusion becomes a ‘Delusion of Control (Ben-Meir, A.2026). This war is a battle between the American-Israeli Battlefield Dominance and the Iranian Endurance. As the economics of this conflict pan out, endurance is likely to get the better of battlefield dominance.

### **US-Iran War and the Looming Indo-Pakistan Conflict: An Analogy**

To many readers, co-relating the US-Israel- Iran conflict to an Indo-Pakistan confrontation may not seem prudent since Iran and Israel or the US does not share a land boundary as India and Pakistan and also the fact that both India and Pakistan are nuclear armed states. Well, the myth that, ‘nuclear armed states will not go to war’ has been shattered already in Operation SINDOOR. Let us compare the US-Iran war with a looming Indo-Pakistan conflict and the possibility of Pakistan adopting a course of action or modus operandi akin to the Iranians employing predominantly the missiles and drones in their arsenal besides the threat in other domains of warfare albeit with Chinese or even American assistance.

**‘It is a Matter of When’.** Pakistan and Iran are nations who have many similarities and differences. As with Iran, Pakistan will consider any conflict with India as an Existential Conflict. The Pakistani Army, akin to IRGC, runs the show in Pakistan. As in the case of Iran, a conflict with India will unite Pakistanis to rally behind their Army against a belligerent India. In a conflict with India, Chinese and Turkish support to Pakistan would be assured and unlike in the case of Iran, Pakistan will definitely have the US, Europeans and Arab nations supporting them in some way or the other. Though, the Pakistan Armed Forces have been developing matching capabilities in the air and maritime domain, it is the missile and drone programmes that has seen maximum investment in the recent years. The raising of Pakistan Army Rocket Forces Command (ARFC) in August 2025 is a testimony to the ever-growing focus on missile capabilities. For India, a long-drawn conflict with Pakistan is something that would not be beneficial especially keeping in view economic downside and also the impact on military readiness along the Northern Borders. Rather, an Indo-Pakistan conflict will be beneficial to many of India’s near and peer competitors as it will severely impact India’s clout in global order, its growth trajectory, and above all, denudation of its military readiness. As most Pakistan watchers are aware, Pakistan is a nation-state that is revanchist and considers India as a ‘Threat in Being’. At some point, it will question or challenge the existing status quo and thus an Indo-Pakistan conflict is in the horizon, the only question is ‘When?’

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**‘The Need to Define Your Objectives’.** One of the lessons, from the present conflict, is the need to have clearly defined objectives and a strategy to achieve the objectives. Be it the Iran War or Operation SINDOOR, the strategic objectives were either not defined, or were not achievable or kept on shifting. While it is not an easy proposition to define objectives, in such conflicts, below the threshold of all-out war, it is imperative to define them and create a strategy to achieve them. Along the rungs of escalation, the objective to seek an adversary to capitulate would depend on the level of retribution intended by the aggressor to seek an exit or offramp. Therefore, objectives defined should be achievable, and the strategy adopted should result in accomplishment of the defined objectives. What should concern India is the stated Pakistani Military Doctrine of Quid Pro Quo Plus. The doctrine is designed to respond to an Indian aggression with retaliatory action that exceeds the initial provocation in both scale and severity, pillared on the objectives of Retaliation, Deterrence and Balance of Power in the region. (Malik, H.B. 2020) Though, adopted in 2020 post the Balakot Strikes, Pakistani leadership has been calling it a ‘New Normal’ post Operation SINDOOR in the subcontinent (Afghanistan Times, 2025). How will you define your objectives and adopt a strategy to counter the Quid Pro Quo Plus doctrine that could result in an assured response that exceeds the initial provocation? At what point will India or Pakistan seek an exit?

**‘The Enemy is Learning Faster’.** Operation SINDOOR witnessed Pakistani attempts to undertake a Drone-Missile campaign with predominant employment of drones over missiles. The targeting by Pakistan was limited by operational depth (<100 Kilometres). The Indian Armed Forces struck targets deep in the Pakistani territory, though, it was limited to terrorist infrastructure initially, and military infrastructure subsequently. Even though both the Navies were on heightened state of readiness, nothing much transpired in the maritime domain. Above all, both nations refrained from targeting economic infrastructure and especially civil population centres. In a future conflict scenario, Pakistan, after having learned from the Iranian experience, is likely to engulf India into an extortionate, risky and long-drawn conflict. One of the biggest challenges for India would be to prevent falling into an Escalation Trap. Even though during Operation SINDOOR, the Indian strike on Nur Khan Base brought the conflict to an early termination with Pakistan seeking an exit, such an exit from the escalatory ladder may not be a possibility against an adversary who would have learned his lessons and would be better prepared next time. In line with their stated doctrine of Quid Pro Quo Plus, Pakistan is likely to attempt to up the ante/ raise the stakes at every stage, and prevent India from exiting

with a strategic success. (Malik, H.B. 2020) An even better way to progress, along the rungs of escalation, would be to attempt an Asymmetric Escalation cycle and strike targets across the spectrum to keep the pot boiling below the threshold and ensure a protracted and costly conflict (Yacoubian, M. 2026).

**‘Is there a CoG?’**. The Americans believed that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the top leadership is the CoG of the Iran Regime and elimination of the top leadership would result in the collapse of the regime and return democracy in Iran. (Marzbanmehr, A. 2026). They were successful in the addressing the CoG, yet four-weeks of fighting did not result in accomplishing their stated goals. So, what exactly will be a CoG in conflicts below the threshold of an all-out war. Will addressing an identified CoG result in providing an off-ramp to the aggressor? Or will it result in an exponential escalation as seen post the elimination of the Iranian Supreme leader? Will the CoG change once an aggressor puts boots on ground? In an Indo-Pakistan conflict, what could be the CoG for Pakistan? If, in case, India has been able to identify a CoG, what could be the likely consequences of addressing the CoG? Is there a Culmination Point (in DIME paradigm), that would force Pakistan to capitulate?

**‘External Powers and their External Pressures’**. In the case of an Indo-Pakistan conflict, we have always witnessed ‘External Powers’ intervening to prevent a nuclear standoff in the subcontinent. The External Powers intervened albeit on Pakistan’s behest and invariably, it is India that has been maximum affected by ‘External Pressures’. So, in the future, India has to find a way to withstand these External Pressures to ensure the accomplishment of its strategic objectives. During the US-Iran conflict, Russia and China reportedly played a major role in assisting Iran with multi-domain capabilities and resources. During Operation SINDOOR, Chinese and Turkish assistance to Pakistan was profound, while India stood all alone. So, in a future conflict, assured support from China and Turkey is definitive, however, the question is, who else are going to back Pakistan. The Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan has already witnessed Pakistan Armed Forces deployment in the Kingdom. So, in the case of an Indo-Pakistan conflict, will the Kingdom actively support Pakistan by deploying troops and equipment? With its newly found role as a ‘Mediator’ in West Asia, will Pakistan draw more support from Islamic nations in the Middle East? Will Azerbaijan assist Pakistan as part of their ‘Three Brothers’ trilateral agreement with Turkey? And what about India, who will be with us? These are questions to ponder upon, especially if the conflict is going to become a protracted one.

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**‘Shaping Operations’.** In confrontations akin to the current US-Iran conflict or Operation SINDOOR, shaping operations play a major part. This should not be seen at the operational and tactical level to shape the battlefield before the launch of the main effort. The current conflict has exemplified the importance of conducting shaping operations in the DIME paradigm with actions being orchestrated from strategic to tactical level. Shaping Operations will be conducted prior, during and post the conflict with Narrative Building through Information Warfare playing a pivotal part in letting the world decide the outcome and the winner. Operation SINDOOR is a testimony to the importance of Information Warfare especially in building narratives. During the current conflict, the US-Israeli efforts to sanction Iran, carryout diplomatic isolation in West Asia and attempt to carry out a Regime Change through widespread protests across Iran, in December 2025- January 2026, can all be termed as Shaping Operations. Similarly, Iranian closure of Straits of Hormuz during the conflict, that resulted in skyrocketing of oil prices and economic turbulence, can be attributed as part of Shaping Operations.

**‘Preserve First, then Fight’.** One of the most pertinent lessons of the current conflict and Operation SINDOOR is the need to develop ‘Force Preservatory’ capabilities, including both active and passive measures. The US-Iran War showcased the extensive network of Iranian underground military infrastructure that could evade Israeli and American eyes and was resilient enough against repetitive strikes. The Iranians had built an extensive network of hardened underground missile bases known as ‘Missile Cities’ from where they retaliate American strikes. This shows that the Iranians had appreciated the threat correctly and prepared themselves. Having learned from Operation SINDOOR and from the Iranians, it can be assumed that Pakistan would be in the process of building on their already existing underground military infrastructure to withstand Indian air and missile strikes. As far as India is concerned, the network of military stations including ammunition and logistic installations, closer to the international border, should be of utmost concern to the Indian military leadership.

**Everything will be a ‘Target’.** Another lesson is that, ballooning nature of the conflict brings to fore an expansion in the list of targets that would be stuck by both sides all along the escalatory continuum. This could lead to devastating effect on both sides. Besides military targets, civilian and economic targets to include ports, airports, electric power grid, nuclear reactors, financial gateways, oil refineries, LNG import infrastructure, strategic petroleum

reserves etc. , will all become legitimate targets beside major population centres. Even the undersea fibre optic cable infrastructure and the data hubs would become deep concerns. India, being an agrarian economy, the public- private sector network of fertilizer plants would also form part of the vulnerabilities to guard against adversary's designs in multi -domain.

**'Precision is Precious'**. Ever since the Yom-Kippur War, Precision guided munitions (PGMs) have grabbed all the limelight. The Gulf war, wars in Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan only reinforced the importance of precision targeting, minimising collateral damage. But, then PGMs are exorbitantly expensive and even major powers such as the US and Russia find it difficult to have enough stockpiles to fight a long-drawn war. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) experienced severe shortage of PGMs within ten days of the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War and requested for American assistance for replenishment of PGM stocks (Mathews, M. 2008). Both India and Pakistan are wary of this fact, though what would give Pakistan a definite edge is its indigenous defence industrial capacity to manufacture variety of PGMs {Taimoor Air Launched Cruise Missile (ALCM), Takbir and Al Battaar Glide Bombs, AZB-81LR Small Diameter Bomb (SDB), Ship launched Anti-Ship Missile (SMASH) and Babur Cruise Missile}. Besides, Chinese and Turkish assistance are ever forthcoming. On the other hand, Indian indigenous capability to develop PGMs has not gone much beyond BrahMos, with number of projects still at the developmental stage, thereby relying on imported systems such as HAMMER and SCALP which are expensive and difficult to replenish during a conflict.

**'Air Power is a Game-Changer, yet NOT the Be-all and End-all'**. Going into the War, the US-Israeli coalition had the air power that had achieved massive success in all the preceding wars in the Middle East, Balkans and Central Asia. In spite of declaring that the entire Iranian Air Defence infrastructure has been obliterated and Air Superiority has been achieved over Iranian Airspace, the Americans have lost more than 25-odd aerial platforms. Though, the airstrikes resulted in massive destruction and devastation across Iran, it did not pummel the Iranians into subjugation. Air Power is definitely a game- changer, yet it comes with a cost. Regardless of the ability to carry out precision targeting, there is always a risk of collateral damage, especially in protracted conflicts. Further, the loss of an aircraft has devastating Information Warfare challenges, as experienced by the Indian Airforce during Operation SINDOOR.

**'Drones are the New David Sling'**. The current conflict reinforces the fact that Drones have become a transformative breakthrough in the modern battlefield. Be it the Contact-Kinetic

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domain as in Ukraine or the Non-Contact Kinetic realm as in West Asia, Drones have been extensively employed to force 'Asymmetric Advantage', especially against a superior adversary. During the current conflict, Iran employed Drones to saturate the US-Israeli Air Defence, and strike a plethora of targets in strategic depth. The Shahed-136 and Mohajer-10 drones have wreaked havoc across the Middle East and Hezbollah has employed FPV drones to challenge IDF in South Lebanon. During Operation Bunyan-UI-Marsoos, Pakistan succeeded in forcing the asymmetric advantage with the employment of drones. In any future Indo-Pakistan confrontation, the side who can optimally employ drones, and defend itself against adversary's drones will definitely have a competitive edge.

**'Pakistan ARFC should ring Alarm Bells'**. The creation of ARFC is a direct fallout of the lessons learned during Operation SINDOOR. This clearly demarcates the command and control of the conventional missile and rocket capabilities from the nuclear arsenal. Before Operation SINDOOR, Pakistan's conventional long range strike capability was dispersed across the services. With the raising of ARFC under GHQ, this capability has been centralised, that will result in increased decision and operational velocities reducing response time. (Raman, A. 2026) We can draw parallel to the IRGC Aerospace Force (NEHSA) responsible for control of their missile and rocket capability. It ensured prompt and precise response at the time and place of their choosing during the current war. The ARFC and Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) in a country, run by the army, gives the right arrangement to execute their stated Quid Pro Quo Plus doctrine.

**'The Proxies have a Role'**. One aspect that needs to be pondered upon is as to how Pakistan would employ its proxies (JeM, LeT, HM and other terror groups) to coordinate hybrid warfare in India's strategic depth, needless to mention the extensive sleeper cells. Iran's ability to coordinate its actions with its proxies separated geographically, is one of the lessons Pakistan will learn to employ against India during such an open confrontation. At the same time, the present Pakistani preoccupation with Taliban, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and Baloch Separatists provide India with adequate tools for conduct of Hybrid Warfare deep inside Pakistan during the escalatory continuum.

**'But then, Pakistan is NOT Iran'**. Iran as a nation is one of the oldest civilisations and has a strong national identity. Major powers have always gambled with the prospect of controlling Iran and have failed miserably. The discovery of oil in the Middle East only

complicated the issue. The British Empire, till World War II and later the Americans, were devious in their designs on Iran. Starting from 1950s till 1979, the US somehow managed to get their way through. However, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 changed the US-Iran relationship forever. In 47 years, Iranians have endured and survived everything the Israeli-American enterprise have thrown at them. This is exactly where Iran differs from Pakistan. Pakistan has no civilisational backgrounds, lacks a national identity and have not endured as the Iranians. However, for Pakistan, an Indian threat is an existential one and Pakistan Army would optimally use it to stir up nationalism at least in the Punjabi Army to present a formidable challenge. For whatever it is worth, it is better to give due to an adversary for whom tying down India in a military confrontation below the threshold of a full-blown war is the best course of action and is in its best interest.

## Conclusion

The US- Iran War has drawn number of lessons for militaries across the globe. In West Asia, we just witnessed a re-enactment of the David vs Goliath battle wherein Iran not only endured the very might of the US-Israeli coalition capabilities, nonetheless forced the Americans to seek a ceasefire and brought them to the negotiating table. It is only a ceasefire and conflict could reignite any moment and could go anywhere from here. The longer the duration, the greater would be the devastation especially in Middle East, and disruption across the globe. But then, that is how things are. For India, the revanchist Pakistani threat is always looming. India should prepare itself for a long-drawn conflict, both from an attacker and defender point of view. India has to shed the Limited War or Short War ideology. There is also a need to clearly define 'Objectives', create 'Strategies' to achieve them and focus to develop 'Capabilities' in multi-domain to ensure 'Strategic Success' in any such future conflict.

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