

Issue Brief

June 2026
No: 517

**Middle East Crisis:
Lessons Which India
Can Not Ignore**

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Middle East Crisis: Lessons Which India Can Not Ignore

“Capacities takes generations to build, intentions change overnight”

—Gen K Sundarji

Abstract

Post operation Sindoor, the Indian Armed Forces are working on enhancing their capacities, however, more lessons are rapidly emerging with initiation of new global conflicts. Therefore, there is a need to keep up pace with developments happening and undertake mid course corrections, wherever, required. Ukraine and Iran, that were considered PUSH OVERS by Russia and US - Israel respectively are giving tough fights to technological advanced superpowers. “Big is NOT beautiful anymore”, “Quantity has its own quality” and “Mass vs Precision” has become a daily debate in military parlance. It is very clear that the major impediment in India’s dream of Viksit Bharat 2047 is Pakistan who claims to be fighting civilisational conflict with India and will continue to do so with the support of powerful China. This paper attempts to analyse lessons for Indian military and polity from ongoing Middle East crisis which has brought to the fore economic, diplomatic as well as political vulnerabilities of India.

Keywords: Op Sindoor, Middle East Crisis, Mass and Precision, Hard Power, Metal and Mind, Artificial Intelligence

Introduction

On 28 February 2026, the whole world was shocked by visuals of smoke billowing out from buildings in Pasteur Street of Tehran, the capital city of Iran (BBC News, 2026; FP Explainers, 2026). A day prior, negotiations between US and Iran were progressing well under mediation of Oman at Geneva, with no expectations of war (FP Explainers, 2026). Prime Minister Modi was also on a two-day visit to Israel which culminated on 27 February 2026 itself with his historic speech at Knesset and major focus on revival of I2U2 grouping (India, Israel, US and UAE) as well as IMEC (India-Middle East Economic Corridor which was announced in G20 summit in 2023). Few hours later, the fog of Israeli, “Pre emptive strikes” on Iran started, with 40 Iranian leaders dead including 86 year old Supreme leader - Ayatollah Khamenei (BBC News, 2026; FP Explainers, 2026). The world once again woke up to the restart of US and Israel’s “War of Choice” against arch nemesis viz. – Iran. Iranian response was swift with their well thought out “Defence Mosaic” Doctrine supported by narrative of

“War of Survival” (Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Under the Defence Mosaic Doctrine, lower rung hierarchy in Iranian Politics and IRGC took charge and started hitting neighbouring gulf nations with indigenous low-cost missiles and one way attack Shahed-136 drones (NDTV World, 2026; Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Probably, the Iranian aim was to create geopolitical chaos so that American war objective of regime change is buried. World economics and energy security came under threat with Iranian Navy blocking Strait of Hormuz and Proxy Houthis ready to hit Bab-el-Mandab choke point in Red Sea on orders of IRGC (FP News Desk, 2026; FP Explainers, 2026). Military-planners across the world started making notes of effectiveness of expensive technological hard power unleashed by US and Israel and innovative employment of cheap drone missile force by Iranians supported by Chinese Air Defence and Navigation Systems (War on the Rocks, 2026; NDTV World, 2026). Global media started predicting World War-III and United Nations was watching helplessly as usual (BBC News, 2026).

India became party in the conflict with Chabahar Port struck by Israel on the first day and Strait of Hormuz blocked by Iranian Navy wherein 40% of Indian crude oil and 90% of LPG supplies pass through (FP Explainers, 2026). Further, an Iranian ship, IRIS Dena, which attended International Maritime Fleet review at Vishakhapatnam was torpedoed by US submarine in Indian ocean where the Indian Navy is a Net Security Provider (ANI Podcast, n.d.). Ideologically, Indian Shia Muslims in Kashmir, Kargil and Lucknow rallied on streets to protest against US - Israel invasion of Iran and killing of revered Ayotallah Khamenei (Firstpost, 2026). In immediate neighborhood, Pakistan which was already involved in Contact-Kinetic duel on Durand line started paying bill of Field Marshal Munir’s luncheon with president Trump by surreptitiously allowing their land for strikes on Iran (Firstpost, 2026). Anxiety was so high that Pakistan’s President Zardari stated in their Parliament that India is preparing to attack Pakistan (First post, 2026). Indian military planners also started analysing the conflict from the prism of Indo - Pak duel. Also, the technology and weapons of China were again being validated in real battlefield scenario by Iran (War on the Rocks, 2026). This article aims to bring out relevant lessons for India from Politico Military perspective.

Hard Power is the Real Currency

This conflict has once again distinctly brought out that in DIME paradigm, what matters most is the military power which strengthens balance domains i.e. Diplomacy, Information & Economy. 16th century Indian epic Ram Charitmanas quote “*Bhay Binu Hoye Naa Preet (There is no friendship without fear)*” is relevant even five centuries later. “Bhay” i.e. fear can only be generated with military hard power backed by technological innovation and self-reliance. French President Macron summed it up well in his speech at Nuclear Submarine base at France on 02 March 2026, and stated - that “To be free, one must be feared and to be feared, one must be powerful” (France24, 2026).

Israel and US have developed military hard power over years with consecutive defence spending of 3.5 - 5% of the GDP. This power have propelled them to undertake offensive actions against Iran which is 1500km away from Israel and 12000km from US (Financial Times, n.d.). On the contrary, sanctions over years crippled Iranian hard power leaving them with vintage fleet of Navy and almost non- existential air force. However, Iranians invested heavily in creating a formidable drone-missile force by shadowily innovating and doing reverse engineering of American equipment. Iran also created a network of proxies all across the Middle East which provided them leverage in their dealing with US, Israel and other gulf monarchies (Foreign Affairs, n.d.; War on the Rocks, 2026).

In our context, we are facing two primary nuclear armed adversaries - Pakistan who is weak but irrational and China who is strong with super power ambitions. As demonstrated in Operation Sindoor, the cocktail of both adversaries is the most dangerous option which we may face in any future conflict. Public declaration of Cold Strike Doctrine and considering 'every terrorist attack as an act of war' has further pushed us in commitment trap, due to which, our corresponding military capacities cannot wait to be built upon. Therefore, it is incumbent upon Indian planners to generate Combat Overmatch against Pakistan so that he is deterred from undertaking any terrorist attack which may force us to execute declared cold strike. Against China, there is a need to create Asymmetric Deterrence by developing border military infrastructure, force posturing, perception management and use of battle field equalisers. In order to develop these capacities, undoubtedly, we need to increase our defence budget which is currently 1.9% of the GDP, harness civil - military integration for technological innovations and promote self-reliance to reduce dependencies on unreliable global partners. There is also a need to revive strategic culture with military studies as subject in schools/ universities, revamp our defence procurement procedures and enhance budget allocation for research and development (War on the Rocks, 2026; Atlantic Council, n.d.).

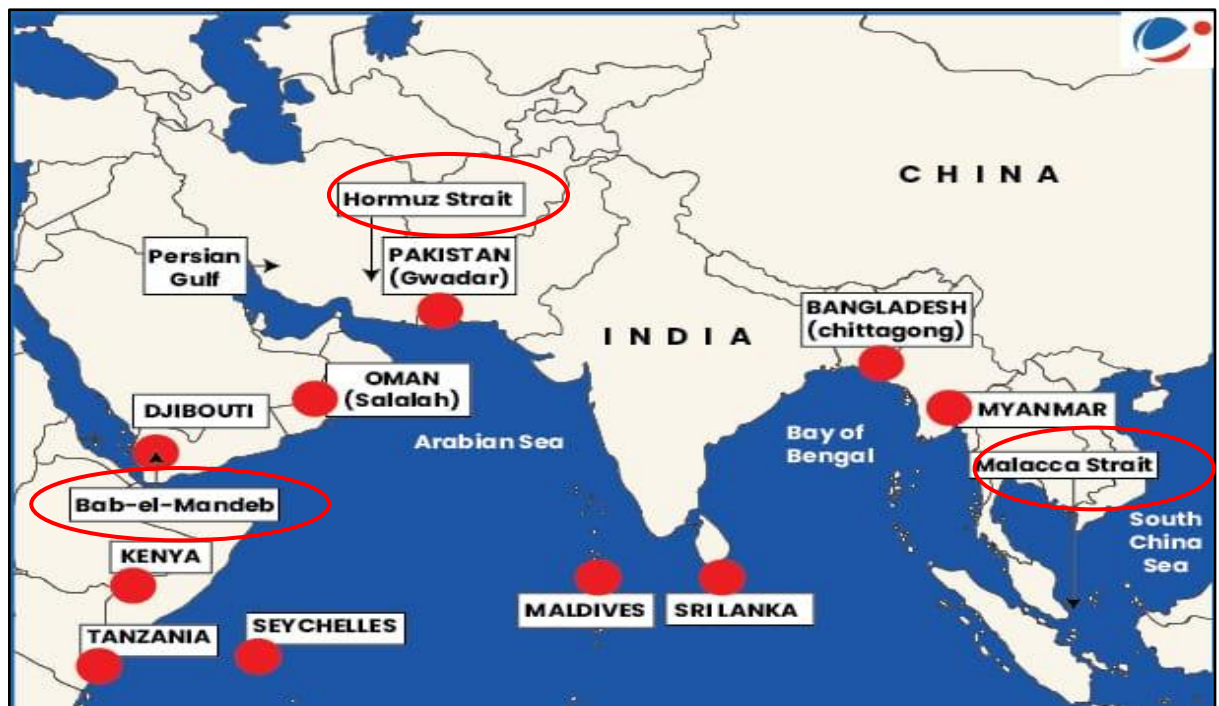
Strong Military: Economic Leverage

US military is having 800 bases across the world and 11 aircraft carriers which provides them leverage to secure their economic supply chains and choke economies of antagonist nations (Firstpost, 2026). China has also embarked on a similar trajectory with rapid expansion of PLA Navy and setting up of military bases in critical regions i.e South and East China Sea, Arabian Sea, Red Sea as well as South America (Firstpost, 2026). In the current conflict, Iran has choked Strait of Hormuz which is sending ripple effects across the world with first order effect of rise in crude oil prices and Gas supply disruptions and second order effects of disruption in food supplies and rising inflation (FP Explainers, 2026). The anti-access area denial (A2AD) umbrella of Iranian Navy is so strong in Hormuz, that the most powerful US Navy with two aircraft carriers is also not able to open the strait

(FP Explainers, 2026). Iran also has adequate leverage on second choke point i.e. Bab-el-Mandab in Red Sea with proxy Houthis waiting to be unleashed (ANI Podcast, n.d.).

In the Indian context, geography favours us with Indian land mass located in centre of critical energy choke points i.e Red Sea, Arabian Sea and Malacca Straits. Andaman and Nicobar Command, disposed 90 miles from Malacca Straits, can generate shivers for Chinese energy security and therefore, possibly, China is securing alternative supply routes through Pakistan. The Indian Navy is well positioned to be a Net Security Provider in the Indian ocean region (ANI Podcast, n.d.), however, it is further required to develop capacities in terms of more aircraft carriers and better A2AD capabilities (War on the Rocks, 2026). This conflict is a reminder that India should be well prepared in future so as not to be impacted by such blockades as also be able to deny critical choke points to adversaries' in case of a future conflict.

Figure 1: Centrality Of India to Sensitive Economic Choke Points



Source: Adapted from Google Map

Intelligence is Not an Accessory, it's the Foundation

Year long intelligence operations by Mossad and CIA in Iran brought results in few minutes of start of Operation Epic Fury on 28 February 2026 (BBC News, 2026; FP Explainers, 2026). Development of human operators, exploitation of societal fault lines, pattern of life analysis using Artificial Intelligence, hacking of traffic signals and cameras by Israeli cyber unit 8200, and finally directing the standoff precision weapons were drivers of initial success (Firstpost, n.d.; WION News, n.d.). The reports suggest that 2000 targets were hit by Israelis to kill 40 leaders of Iranian regime on

the first day of conflict (FP Explainers, 2026). Mossad had proved their mettle in October 2024 too when Hezbollah Chief Nasrallah was killed in underground bunker followed by Pager blasts on next day leading to casualties of Hezbollah operatives (BBC News, 2026). These successes suggests that intelligence domain should not be considered as adjunct to military operations but, the foundation which needs to be strong (Atlantic Council, n.d.).

Its once again a reminder for India to reform its intelligence apparatus which is currently marred by lack of integration, inter agency rivalry, outdated technology and limited cross domain convergence. The compartmentalised approach of dealing with external and internal intelligence separately may prove fatal in any future conflict. Within the armed forces, inter service integrated ISR concept needs to be adopted by creating staff structures, multi domain ISR units backed by common data cloud riding on artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence is also required to be amalgamated to carry out pattern of life analysis of important terrorist leaders of western adversary and continuously update database for precision strikes, whenever required.

Figure 2: Ayotallah Ali Khamenei Was Killed On 28 February 2026 as a Result Of Intelligence Based Precision Strikes



Source: Adapted from BBC News (2026), FP Explainers (2026) and Firstpost (n.d.)

Achievable and Firm Politico Military Objectives

US and Israel started air campaign with a declared aim of “Regime change in Iran” under the impression that ‘once Iranian top rung leadership is decimated, people will flock to the streets and

consequently regime will fall' (FP Explainers, 2026; Firstpost, 2026). However, the regime stayed and Iranian public rallied behind the flag (BBC News, 2026). Thereafter, war objectives of US and Israel swapped from 'Regime change' to 'Regime adjustment', unconditional surrender, dividing Iran, destruction of Iranian nuclear and missile capabilities etc. (FP Explainers, 2026; Firstpost, 2026). This kind of flips during the war exhibits lack of strategic coherence and diminishes credibility which goes against public perception (BBC News, 2026).

Conversely, during Operation Sindoor, the Indian aim of destruction of terrorist infrastructure inside Pakistan was achieved in first 30 minutes of initiation of the conflict. Later, Pakistan climbed the escalation ladder by retaliation, which was a contingency well thought out by Indian planners and therefore, was handled well. The current Middle East crisis teaches us an important lesson that **'politico-military objectives should be well thought out and clearly declared before initiation of any conflict'** by doing adequate war gaming and detailed contingency planning. Decisions taken under pressure of public sentiments may prove fatal and change of aims amid war damages overall narrative (War on the Rocks, 2026).

Territorial Defence to Homeland Security

The drones and missiles, unleashed by Iran, breached the seven layered air defence umbrella of Israel and caused substantial damage (FP Explainers, 2026; BBC News, 2026). Iran did not hesitate to target neighbouring gulf nations and hit US bases, desalination plants, oil infrastructure, data centres and hotels thereby blurring dividing line between civil and military targets (Firstpost, 2026; The Guardian, n.d.). US forces also targeted civilian infrastructure in Iran especially a school in Minab, leaving 168 students dead and justifying it as collateral damage (Iran Wire, 2026). During Operation Sindoor, Pakistan targeted religious sites (Golden temple in Amritsar and Gurudwara in Poonch) and border towns along International Border using low cost drones, missiles and loitering munitions (BBC News, 2026; FP Explainers, 2026; First post, 2026; NDTV World, 2026).

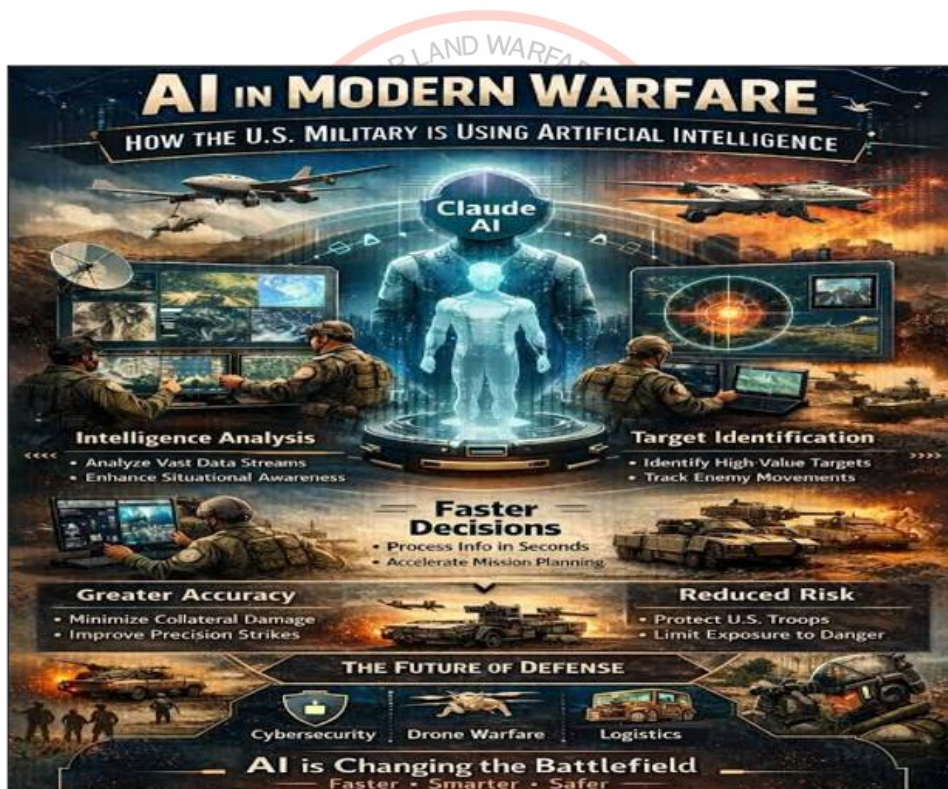
21st century warfare is bringing to the fore that civil targets are equally legitimate and cost benefit analysis tilts in favour of attacker who is using cheap one way attack drones costing 20-30,000 USD against interceptors costing 1-3 million USD (NDTV World, 2026; Financial Times, n.d.). The data also suggests that 25% interceptors were used by US in the first week of war itself (Financial Times, n.d.). Therefore, it is evident that we need to expedite the Sudarshan Chakra vision given by PM Modi on 15 August, 2025. Our approach needs transition from existing territorial defence along land and maritime borders to complete homeland security integrating all civil and military resources at disposal. Attack on civil targets by Pakistan during Operation Sindoor is a stark reminder of indispensability of drone missile defence shield which needs to be created at the earliest as any further delay will prove fatal in next such engagement.

Automated Swift Kill Chains

Developing swift kill chains have always been a challenge for all armed forces due to restriction of analytical speed of human operators and unreliable communication. In the 21st century, slow human operators have been replaced by artificial intelligence backed by robust Starlink communication (Atlantic Council, n.d.). Israel used 'Lavender' in Gaza war and now US is using 'Claude AI' which have reduced identification to engagement loop from hours to seconds (WION News, n.d.; The Guardian, 2026), though, they blatantly ignored associated ethical challenges (The Guardian, 2026).

In our context, it is not possible to create reliable swift kill chains without civil-military fusion and therefore, we need to integrate private sector in a big way to amalgamate all sensors and firepower resources of armed forces backed by AI and robust communication (Atlantic Council, n.d.; WION News, n.d.).

Figure 3: AI image of US military use of Claude AI



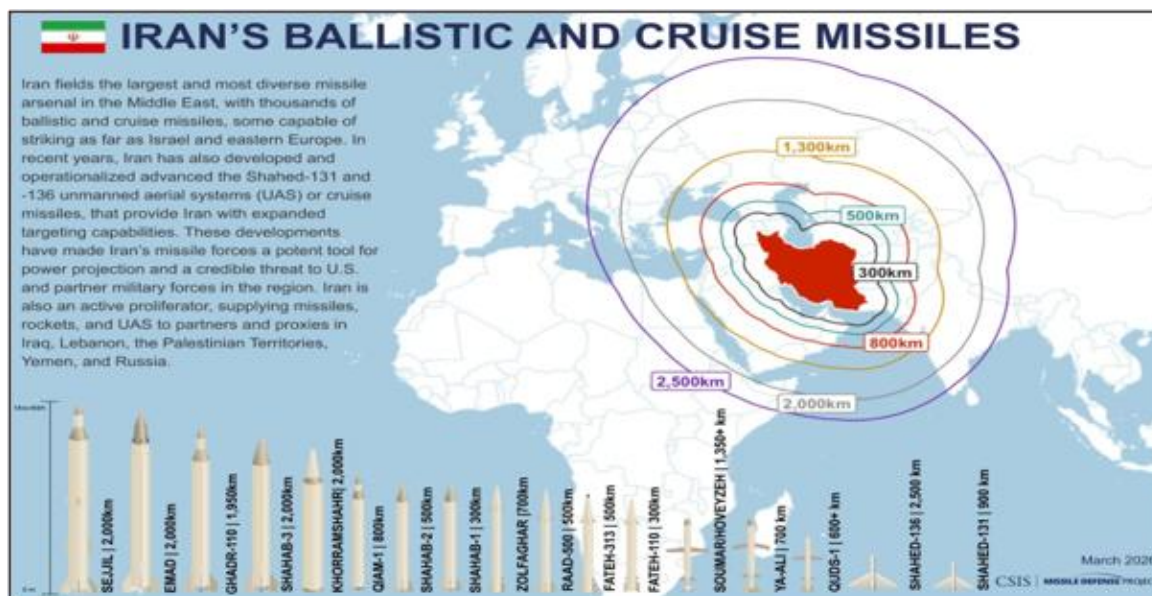
Source: Adapted from WION News

Drone Missile Force Reducing Cost of War

Iran, which has been crippled by western sanctions, invested heavily in developing cheap drone missile force with an aim to create an asymmetry against technologically advanced adversaries (Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Now, this long-term investment is paying rich dividends to Iran in sustenance of the conflict (War on the Rocks, 2026; Financial Times, n.d.).

Our western adversary, Pakistan, is also developing these capacities with support of China and Turkey to rupture Indian conventional superiority (War on the Rocks, 2026). The announcement of creation of the Army Rocket Forces Command (ARFC) by Pakistan post Operation Sindoor is an indicator of centralized employment of this ‘Recce Strike complex’ (Firstpost, 2026). Indian planners need to critically look at these developments and build capacities suiting our operational requirements in existing geopolitical landscape (War on the Rocks, 2026; Financial Times, n.d).

Figure 4: Iran’s Ballistic Missile Arsenal



Source: Adapted from CSIS Missile Defense Project (March 2026) and Foreign Affairs

Figure 5: Economic Cost of The Conflict

Drones / Offensive attack systems	
● Shahed-136 (Iran):	\$20,000 to \$50,000
● LUCAS clone (US):	\$35,000
● Merops counter-drone interceptor:	\$1,000 to \$2,000
● MQ-9 Reaper drone:	\$30 million per unit
Defence / Intercept systems (per shot)	
● Iron Dome interceptor (Israel):	\$40,000 to \$100,000
● Patriot PAC-3 missile (US):	\$4 million to \$5 million
● THAAD interceptor (US):	\$10 million to \$15 million
THE FINANCIAL TOLL	
US campaign cost in first 6 days - \$11.3 billion (Excludes lost aircraft, damaged infrastructure, medical support, deployment overheads)	
For every Shahed drone Iran fires at roughly \$50,000, the US can spend up to \$15 million to shoot it down. That is a cost ratio of 300 to 1	

Source: Adapted from Financial Times and War on the Rocks (2026)

Data Centres: Asset as well as Liability

If data is the new oil, AI data centres are its refineries. With the construction of data centres globally, the world could be witnessing largest infrastructure build up in history of mankind, however, it comes with its associated vulnerabilities (Atlantic Council, n.d.). During current crisis, Iran targeted Amazon data centers in UAE and Bahrain on the second day of war which deprived nine million people of basic essential services (The Guardian, n.d.). Cyber attacks were done by Iranian hackers on data cloud of *Stryker*, a US based medical technology company, which disrupted its global operations (The Guardian n.d.). This exposes a major threat to the military data centers which are backbone for algorithmic kill chains used in recent conflicts (Atlantic Council, n.d.).

India's data centre market is booming with capacity expected to reach 2GW by 2026 and 8 GW by 2030 (Atlantic Council, n.d.). According to 2025 Deloitte report, India produces around 20% of the world's data but maintains just 3% of global data centre capacity (Atlantic Council, n.d.). Union budget of year 2026 announced a 21 days tax holiday for foreign firms providing global cloud services using India based data centres (Atlantic Council, n.d.). Therefore, learning lesson from current crisis, it is imperative upon us to prepare defence shield for existing data centres and create 'new hardened, bunker grade data centres' to protect them against military precision strikes (Atlantic Council, n.d.; The Guardian, n.d.).

Figure 6: Representative Image of Data Centre



Source: The Guardian and Atlantic Council

Exploitation of Fault Lines

While President Trump's clarion call to people of Iran to come out on streets for regime change did not fructify, CIA and Mossad are working tirelessly to pit a Kurdish front against Shia regime exploiting existing ethnic fault line. Similar strategy was adopted by US forces in Iraq to raise a Shia and Kurdish front against Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein (Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

Pakistan, has adequate societal vulnerabilities with Pashtun, Baloch and Sindhi dissidents fighting/ protesting against the Punjabi dominated Pakistan Army. These fault lines are getting more deeper due to high handedness of Pakistan's - army as witnessed in forced disappearances in Balochistan and use of airpower against own citizens along the Durand line. Pakistan government's collusivity with US and China is not welcomed by common citizen which was evident in recent attack on US consulate in Karachi. Chinese also have the fault lines with unresolved Tibet and Xinjiang regions bordering India (Foreign Affairs, n.d.). These fault lines needs to be factored in during military planning and should be exploited as suggested by 4th century BC Kautilyan Maxim of "Saam, Daam, Danda and Bheda" (Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

Ultimate Reliance: Self Reliance

Iranian IRGC claimed recently that they can fight a sustained war for six months which may be an exaggeration but this confidence only comes from self-reliance (War on the Rocks, 2026). For Iran, it was a not a choice but compulsion due to long drawn western sanctions. President Trump's tariff rattling and dwindling support for Ukraine is now pushing Europeans to become self-reliant (Atlantic Council, n.d.). Ukraine is gradually developing indigenous military production capacities while the war rages on (War on the Rocks, 2026).

India's defence export been increased 30 times in last decade due to renewed impetus on self-reliance post Russian invasion of Ukraine. We also realised the importance of Atma Nirbharta in defence during Operation Sindoor (Atlantic Council, n.d.). Innovation, stringent quality checks, private participation and faster delivery timelines can only make self-reliance story an assured success. Therefore, we need to review our procurement procedures, reward delivery timelines met, switch from Lowest bidder (L1) to highest bidder (H1) and enmesh private participation in defence industry so as to build capacities of high quality.

Metal Vs Mind

Brute military mass with two aircraft carriers in Persian Gulf, amassing of 40-50K soldiers, stealth aircrafts, submarines etc. by US and Israel has also not guaranteed assured victory. Human

Psychology still remains ultimate arbiter of victory or defeat. It is now about psychological resilience of the soldiers in trench, cognitive biases of Generals in joint operation centre and misinformation as well as disinformation which matters WION News, n.d.). In case of Iran, strength of 5000 year old Persian civilisation and concept of self-sacrifice in Shia faith is propelling IRGC to continue fight despite successful decapitation strikes (Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Therefore, we need to invest equally in human resources of armed forces and psychologically prepare citizens of the country to fight disinformation campaign expertised by our western and northern adversary.

Conclusion

Variety of lessons have been given out by the Russia-Ukraine as well as the US-Iran-Israel Wars. Those who will evolve and adapt will only come out victorious, while those who are suffering from “Ostrich Mentality” will perish. While riding on the path of Viksit Bharat 2047, we need to invest well in our military with whole-of-nation approach as only brute force can help in realisation of our ultimate objectives. Lessons learnt needs to be implemented because in wars, there is no prize for runners up (Atlantic Council, n.d.; War on the Rocks, 2026; Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

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