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National Capacity for Manoeuvre: India's Strategic Perspective

Kumar Amit

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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National Capacity for Manoeuvre: India's Strategic Perspective

Abstract

Manoeuvre is a foundational principle in the realm of statecraft, strategy and competition—whether in diplomacy, economics, military operations or the cognitive domain. Traditionally associated with military doctrine, manoeuvre refers to actions that seek to place an adversary in a position of disadvantage through agility, adaptability and the ability to shape the environment to one's favour. However, in the 21st century, manoeuvre has expanded beyond the battlefield and now encompasses a wider spectrum of tools—political negotiations, economic leverage and cognitive strategies that collectively determine the outcomes of conflicts and competitions without necessarily relying on kinetic force.

National capacity for manoeuvre represents the fundamental ability of a state to move, redirect and concentrate its strategic, operational and tactical resources in response to threats, opportunities and evolving strategic circumstances. This paper examines India's national capacity for manoeuvre through the lens of the DIME-T framework comprising Diplomatic, Information/Cognitive, Military, Economic and Technology dimensions. It aims at providing a comprehensive analysis of India's strategic capabilities and vulnerabilities in the 21st-century security environment.

The examination is relevant and particularly timely given India's recent operational demonstration through Operation SINDOOR (May 2025), which showcased the nation's evolving capacity to integrate all instruments of national power in a coordinated strategic response and the current geopolitical turmoil due to the West Asia crisis. This analysis reveals that while India has made significant progress in military modernisation and technological integration, challenges persist across diplomatic coordination, information operations and sustained economic investment in defence capabilities.

The paper concludes that India's future strategic success depends not merely on individual component strengths but on the seamless integration of all elements of national power within a coherent strategic framework. The concept of a 'whole-of-nation' approach has now transitioned from a theoretical idea to an absolute necessity.

Introduction: Defining National Capacity for Manoeuvre

Conceptual Framework

National capacity for manoeuvre can be defined as the integrated ability of a sovereign state to mobilise, concentrate and employ its strategic resources across all instruments of national power to achieve political objectives, respond to threats and seize opportunities in an increasingly complex and contested strategic environment. This capacity encompasses both the structural capability to generate power and the institutional flexibility to apply it in diverse scenarios [1].

The concept is based on both modern strategic thinking and traditional military doctrine. The movement of forces to gain positional advantage is traditionally referred to as a manoeuvre in military doctrine. However, manoeuvre in national strategy goes

beyond kinetic military actions to include information operations, economic pressure, diplomatic initiatives, technological innovation, and the coordinated use of all these components in pursuit of national objectives [2].

The DIME-T framework emerged as a systematic approach for understanding and optimising national manoeuvre. It was originally developed in U.S. strategic planning circles. DIME-T has become increasingly relevant worldwide, particularly in India, which faces multifaceted security challenges requiring coordinated national responses [3]. The framework encompasses:

- **Diplomatic (D):** The capacity to negotiate, coerce diplomatically, build alliances and shape international norms and institutions.
- **Information/ Cognitive (I):** The ability to shape narratives, conduct influence operations, achieve information dominance and shape adversary cognition.
- **Military (M):** Traditional coercive instruments including armed forces, weapons systems and operational capabilities.
- **Economic (E):** Financial leverage, trade relationships, sanctions and economic statecraft.
- **Technology (T):** The development, acquisition and integration of advanced technologies across all other dimensions.

Relevance to Indian Strategy

India faces a unique security challenge of managing two primary fronts, with the real possibility of collusive action by adversaries. This creates a dilemma in terms of strategy and

resource allocation. The situation is further complicated by an unstable neighbourhood, with risks of political or social breakdown as seen in recent incidents in Bangladesh and Nepal, along with persistent internal security issues and grey-zone threats.

India's strategic environment offers unique drivers for the development of comprehensive national manoeuvre capacity. India faces persistent security challenges from multiple directions as it is geographically situated in South Asia with maritime interests extending into the Indian Ocean [4]. The regional instability in the Indian Ocean, the ongoing terrorism financed by Pakistan, the China challenge in the north, and the competition between great powers all call for integrated strategic solutions that go beyond conventional military-only methods.

The Indian Army's 2018 Land Warfare Doctrine and subsequent strategic documents increasingly emphasise the integration of military capabilities within broader national strategy [5]. However, the practical implementation of truly integrated DIME-T operations remained largely theoretical until recent operational demonstrations proved the concept's viability.

This paper examines how India's national capacity for manoeuvre has evolved, identifies current strengths and vulnerabilities across all DIME-T dimensions, and highlights the requirements for enhanced strategic agility in handling future challenges.

The Diplomatic Dimension: Creating Strategic Manoeuvre Space

Diplomatic Architecture and Strategic Autonomy

India's diplomatic capacity for manoeuvre is fundamentally rooted in its commitment to strategic autonomy – a principle that has guided Indian foreign policy since independence. In the Indian

context, strategic autonomy means the ability to make decisions regarding national security without being influenced by any external power, while maintaining flexibility to cooperate with multiple partners across various fields [6].

This commitment shapes India's diplomatic manoeuvring capacity in multiple ways. It allows India to not to enter into binding alliance commitments that might limit decision-making flexibility. Unlike NATO members or U.S. treaty allies, India has deliberately avoided formal military alliances, preferring instead a network of strategic partnerships calibrated to specific interests. While this approach provides manoeuvre space, it also limits the institutional depth of military cooperation available to a network of allied nations.

Contemporary Diplomatic Initiatives

India's diplomatic manoeuvre capacity has expanded significantly through several key initiatives:

Quad Alliance. India, the US, Japan and Australia are members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which has developed from a loose coordination framework into a more formal strategic alliance aimed at maintaining Indo-Pacific stability. While avoiding a formal great power alliance, the Quad gives India diplomatic leverage to limit China's regional aspirations [7]. With no formal alliance responsibilities, the group's focus remains on capacity building, rules-based order and a free and open Indo-Pacific, giving India requisite diplomatic leverage.

SCO Membership. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a Eurasian political, economic, defence and international security alliance established in 2001. The ten-member bloc includes India, China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It operates as a major

forum for counter-terrorism, regional stability and economic cooperation. India's engagement with the SCO, despite Chinese presence, demonstrates its sophisticated diplomatic manoeuvre. Through this platform, India maintains channels to Central Asia, Russia and Iran while simultaneously engaging with China, including managing tensions in a multilateral framework that constrains unilateral action by any single member [8].

Gulf and ASEAN Engagement. India's diplomatic impetus on Gulf Arab states and ASEAN nations expands its manoeuvre space by building economic and strategic partnerships in regions of critical importance for its prosperity and security. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and bilateral partnerships with Gulf states provide economic leverage, strategic positioning, and ensure its energy security.

African and Global South Connections. India's leadership role in the Global South through initiatives like the Voice of Global South Summit demonstrates diplomatic manoeuvre, which aims at building international coalitions underlining India's interests and vision for multipolarity. This grassroots diplomatic approach complements India's great power engagement.

Diplomatic Constraints and Challenges

Despite the above-mentioned initiatives, India's diplomatic manoeuvre capacity faces several constraints. Firstly, the complexity of managing relationships with both Russia (a traditional security partner) and the United States (an emerging democratic alliance) creates tensions that constrain diplomatic flexibility, particularly in multilateral forums [9].

Secondly, India's commitment to non-alignment creates diplomatic risks when consensus among multipolar powers proves impossible to achieve. India's inability to align definitively with

either China or the West leaves it without the certainty of diplomatic backing available to aligned states.

Thirdly, Pakistan's effective diplomacy in international Islamic forums and its cultivation of relationships with Gulf states (despite terrorism concerns) limits India's ability to isolate Pakistan diplomatically. The FATF (Financial Action Task Force) grey-listing of Pakistan represents a significant diplomatic achievement for India, yet Pakistan's removal from the blacklist was ultimately facilitated by Gulf state intervention, demonstrating the limits of unilateral diplomatic pressure [10]. In addition, the recent shift of US focus towards Pakistan for obtaining rare earth materials and it also acting as a mediator in brokering peace between the US and Iran can be seen as a challenge for India in diplomatically isolating Pakistan.

Lastly, India's internal political conflicts, especially concerning minority concerns and Kashmir, often give our adversaries diplomatic tools, reducing India's moral authority in international forums that emphasise democratic governance and human rights.

Operation SINDOOR's Diplomatic Component

India launched Operation SINDOOR against Pakistan on 07 May 2025, targeting nine key terrorist camps and their HQs in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Jammu & Kashmir (PoJK), in response to Pakistan's dastardly Terror attack in Pahalgam (J&K), which left 26 innocent civilians dead. Pakistan responded with multiple drone attacks along the western border on 08-09 May 2025. The failed attempts to penetrate India's defences prompted Pakistan to launch a more aggressive operation code-named Bunyan-um-Marsoos. This operation involved a hybrid assault using missiles, drones, LMs, precision-guided weapons and cyber strikes deep into Indian territory. Despite Pakistan's claims, the operation miserably failed to achieve any substantial success, as the

same was severely blunted by India's layered and robust Air defence systems and also by the targeting of its 11 airbases by the Indian Armed Forces, thereby severely degrading Pakistan's offensive capability. The Indian response to Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos was so emphatic that it forced Pakistan to plead for ceasefire on 10 May 2025. India accepted Pakistan's ceasefire request, as it was able to achieve its politico-military objectives [11].

Operation SINDOOR demonstrated calibrated diplomatic manoeuvre preceding and following military operations [12]. Before the launch of the actual operation, India coordinated with key powers to establish diplomatic space for potential military action. Post-operation, though slightly delayed, India's multi-party delegation outreach to various countries was also able to convey our narrative in a positive way. India's restraint in not escalating the conflict post-response to Pakistan's Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos further reflected calculated diplomatic-military coordination aimed at achieving battlefield objectives while managing escalation risk.

However, despite India's above-mentioned efforts, Pakistan was able to leverage its geography and natural resources for closer relations with China and the US, and religious leanings for closer relations with Turkiye and Azerbaijan. Moreover, India's ability at forums such as the IMF, FATF, and the UN General Assembly was also handicapped by the presence of Pakistan and its allies as members on various international committees, especially the UNSC [11].

The Information/Cognitive Dimension: Strategic Narrative and Influence

Information Operations and Strategic Narrative

The Information/Cognitive dimension encompasses

traditional information operations, strategic communications, cyber warfare, and the broader sphere of narrative construction and cognitive influence. In the contemporary security environment, this dimension has gained a lot of importance as information warfare increasingly accompanies and sometimes precedes kinetic operations [13].

In modern conflicts and diplomacy, narratives influence outcomes almost as much as tangible power. For India, scaling narratives entails more than just projecting its policies; it also entails creating and maintaining a genuine strategic narrative that has resonance both locally and internationally. This national narrative includes India's democratic credentials, its leadership in areas like digital innovation, climate responsibility and humanitarian help, and its civilisational ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ('the world is one family'). Effective scaling of these narratives, however, requires consistency across national and international platforms and coherence between words and deeds. In order to articulate India's vision for regional stability, economic development and global governance reform, strategic communication must shift from reactive postures to proactive narratives. The rise of digital diplomacy, social media engagement by government institutions and coordinated messaging during crises (e.g., during the Balakot airstrikes, Operation SINDOOR or during pandemic diplomacy) highlight India's growing awareness of narrative warfare. Yet, scaling narratives also demands capacity building, viz. training public communicators, leveraging private media networks, and integrating academic and cultural institutions into the storytelling ecosystem. A strong narrative, amplified credibly and consistently, enhances deterrence, builds alliances and strengthens India's overall strategic manoeuvrability.

India's information warfare capacity has expanded significantly in recent years. The Additional Directorate General of

Strategic Communication at Army HQ, Information Warfare branches of field formations of the Indian Army, cyber units within the services, and dedicated civilian intelligence assets now constitute a growing capability for information operations across domestic, regional and global domains. However, information warfare being a continuous process, there is always a lot of scope for improvement towards enhancing its effectiveness for enduring impact.

Contemporary Information Operations

Narrative Construction. India has developed sophisticated approaches to constructing strategic narratives supporting national objectives. During the 2019 Balakot strikes and Operation SINDOOR, India's information strategy emphasised the targeted, precision nature of operations, the minimisation of collateral damage and India's adherence to international law and norms – creating a narrative of responsible military power [14]. This narrative construction served diplomatic purposes by reducing international condemnation and framing Pakistan's retaliation as reckless.

Cyber Operations. While details remain classified, India's growing cyber capabilities form an integral part of its information manoeuvre capacity. The establishment of the Defence Cyber Agency and emphasis on cyber warfare in doctrine represent acknowledgment of this dimension's criticality [15]. Cyber operations can achieve military effects without kinetic engagement, offering options along the spectrum of conflict below open warfare.

Counter-Disinformation. India has developed government and quasi-government mechanisms for countering its adversary's hostile disinformation campaigns. The flood of false narratives about Indian military operations, particularly regarding civilian

casualties, demands rapid and credible counter-narratives to prevent information dominance by adversaries [16].

Social Media and Information Dominance. Non-state actors, terrorist organisations, and government-linked social media campaigns within India create parallel information environments where strategic narratives compete. India's capacity to shape these environments remains underdeveloped compared to some peer powers, creating information vulnerabilities.

Challenges in Information Manoeuvre

Informatisation Gap. India's Armed Forces suffer from a significant 'informatisation' gap—the integration of information technology into military processes and decision-making. While the US and China have substantially informatised their militaries, the Indian military remains partially dependent on legacy systems and processes [17]. This gap limits the speed of decision-making and the effective dissemination of information across military hierarchies.

Technological Asymmetries. China and Pakistan maintain sophisticated cyber warfare capabilities that exceed India's current capacity for defensive and offensive cyber operations. The 2019 Indian Air Force website hack, attributed to Pakistani actors, demonstrated vulnerabilities in critical defence infrastructure [18].

Narrative Competition. Pakistan and China have proven effective in global information competition, particularly in framing Kashmir narratives, portraying India as aggressive and garnering support in international Islamic forums. India's counter-narratives, while improving, sometimes lack the coordinated international distribution and financing of hostile information operations.

Domestic Information Environment. India's plural and contested domestic information environment, while reflecting democratic pluralism, creates vulnerabilities to hostile information

operations. The ability of foreign actors to amplify existing domestic divisions through targeted information operations represents a strategic vulnerability [19].

Military-Media Paradox. The ‘military-media paradox’ underscores the delicate balance between operational security and strategic communication. In the information age, where perception often dictates policy, managing narratives is as crucial as managing operations. India’s military establishment, traditionally discreet and security-conscious, faces the paradox of needing to project strength and transparency while safeguarding sensitive information. This paradox becomes especially evident during crises, such as cross-border strikes or border tensions, where media coverage influences both domestic morale and international perception. The Indian experience shows that uncoordinated or speculative media reporting can compromise operational secrecy or distort national narratives. Conversely, timely, accurate and credible communication can amplify deterrence and strategic influence. Bridging this paradox requires the establishment of a professionalised information management ecosystem where the military, government and media function in a symbiotic relationship. Institutional media cells, trained defence spokespersons and coordinated narrative dissemination strategies can ensure coherence between national objectives and public messaging. In an era of misinformation and psychological warfare, India’s capacity to manoeuvre increasingly depends on its ability to wield information as a strategic asset while maintaining the integrity of operational secrecy.

Integration in Recent Operations

Operation SINDOOR's information dimension was crucial to strategic success. Pre-operation, careful information management

prevented intelligence leakage to Pakistan. During operations, rapid information release by Indian authorities shaped the narrative, with details of target destruction and precision strikes dominating initial reporting. Post-operation, sustained information operations highlighted India's restraint and Pakistan's recklessness, supporting diplomatic objectives [20]. However, information warfare being so crucial and a continuous process, India needs to build requisite information warfare infrastructure at the national level which is resilient, more robust and works seamlessly across all the spectrum.

The Military Dimension: Traditional Instruments of Power

Overview of Military Capacity

The Military dimension of national manoeuvre capacity encompasses the structure, doctrine, equipment, training, and deployment of Armed Forces to accomplish national security objectives. For India, military capacity represents both the most developed dimension of national power and the area undergoing most rapid transformation [21].

The Indian Armed Forces (approximately 1.4 million active personnel) comprise three services: the Indian Army (approximately 1.2 million active personnel), the Indian Navy (approximately 60,000 active personnel), and the Indian Air Force (approximately 1,40,000 active personnel). Together with the Coast Guard and paramilitary organisations, India maintains one of the world's largest military establishments [22].

Structural Transformation and Modernisation

Integrated Theatre Commands: India is in the process of establishing integrated theatre commands combining elements from all three services under unified operational command. This structural change, driven by recommendations from successive

defence reviews, represents a significant shift from traditionally service-centric organisation towards integrated operations that support DIME-T manoeuvre [23].

Equipment Modernisation: The Indian military has embarked on ambitious modernisation programs across all services. The Indian Navy is expanding its maritime strike capacity with indigenous carrier development and submarine modernisation. The Indian Air Force is acquiring advanced fighter aircraft including the Rafale and LCA Tejas. The Indian Army is modernising artillery systems, armoured vehicles and incorporating new tactical formations [24].

Personnel Professionalisation: Reforms in military training, education, and professional development have improved the quality of military decision-making and operational planning. The establishment of theater-level joint planning establishments ensures military advice is coordinated across services rather than compartmentalised [24].

Modern Capabilities

Long-Range Precision Firepower: India has significantly expanded its precision strike capacity, particularly through systems like BrahMos (cruise missile), extended-range variants of BrahMos, and enhanced Pinaka rocket systems. These capabilities enable rapid concentration of firepower and long-range targeting independent of air superiority – a critical asymmetric advantage over Pakistan [25].

In 2025, the Pinaka Long-Range Guided Rocket (LRGR) achieved approximately 120 km range in testing, with future variants projected to reach 300 km capability. These capabilities provide India with "stand-off" engagement options that minimise

exposure of firing platforms to enemy air defence, expanding operational manoeuvre space [26].

Unmanned Systems Integration: India has extensively expanded unmanned systems deployment. As of 2025, India's Armed Forces operate approximately 3,000 Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPAs), 150 tethered drones, swarm drones, logistics drones for high-altitude operations and kamikaze (loitering) drones. These systems provide intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities while simultaneously offering precision strike options [27].

The establishment of specialised units like Ashni Platoons (drone-enabled ISR and precision-strike units) and Shaktibaan Regiments (formations centered on unmanned systems) represents institutional incorporation of unmanned technology into operational structures rather than treating it as a specialised add-on [28].

New Tactical Units and Formations: The Indian Army has announced fielding of new tactical units and formations in 2025 designed to reshape combat capability for future conflict. These include:

- **Bhairav Battalions.** Light commando battalions designed for rapid response and asymmetric operations. The plan includes operationalising 25 Bhairav battalions in an accelerated timeline [29].
- **Divyastra Batteries.** Artillery units centered on loitering munitions and autonomous weapons systems, providing rapid concentrated firepower with reduced manning requirements.
- **Rudra Brigades.** Rudra Brigades are all-arms, high-tempo, self-contained formations comprising Infantry, mechanised

infantry and armoured units, special forces, artillery including precision and loitering munitions, aviation assets, unmanned systems, electronic warfare, communication enablers and integral logistics. These are designed to fight and sustain independently across the spectrum of operations with both Kinetic & Non-Kinetic capabilities [30].

Digitalisation and Data-to-Decision: Significant progress in operational digitisation includes the establishment of edge data centers to accelerate "data-to-decision" cycles closer to tactical battlefields. This compression of the OODA (Observe-Orient-Decide-Act) loop provides tactical manoeuvre advantages through faster decision-making than potential adversaries [31].

Ammunition Indigenisation: India achieved 91% indigenisation of ammunition by 2025, reducing dependence on foreign suppliers and improving security of supply. This capability enables sustained operations without concern for supply chain disruption, a critical manoeuvre requirement [32].

Strategic Lift and Force Projection

India's capacity for force projection i.e. the ability to rapidly move military forces to distant locations has improved through acquisition of transport aircraft, development of amphibious capabilities and establishment of forward logistics infrastructure. The Indian Navy's expansion of amphibious ships and the Air Force's acquisition of C-17 Globemaster transport aircraft has enhanced India's ability to project power throughout the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)[33].

This force projection capacity supports India's role as a regional security provider, enabling rapid response to crises in neighbouring countries and in the IOR. The 2004 Indian Ocean

tsunami response, multiple humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations, and support to friendly nations demonstrate the operational value of force projection capacity [34].

Operational Doctrine Evolution

The Indian Army's Land Warfare Doctrine (2018) and subsequent service doctrines emphasise several key concepts that enhance manoeuvre capacity:

Multi-Domain Operations (MDO). The future conflict will encompass simultaneous operations across land, sea, air, cyber, and space domains requiring coordinated operational planning and execution. MDO doctrine acknowledges that air superiority may be incomplete, that cyber-attacks may accompany kinetic operations, and that space-based systems may become contested. This doctrine forces military planners to develop options across multiple domains rather than assuming dominance in any single domain [35].

Combined Arms Operations. Doctrine emphasises coordination of different military systems (armour, artillery, infantry, air support) to achieve synergistic effects greater than the sum of individual capabilities. The Russia-Ukraine war, studied extensively by Indian strategic thinkers, provides contemporary validation of combined arms effectiveness [36].

Asymmetric Operations. Doctrine acknowledges the need to employ unconventional tactics against adversaries with superior numbers or capabilities. Special Operations Forces, commando units, and light formations like Bhairav battalions provide options for asymmetric manoeuvre even when conventional force balance appears unfavourable [37].

Operations Below the Threshold of War. Doctrine recognises that future conflict may remain below the threshold of declared

war, encompassing terrorism, surgical strikes, cyber-attacks, and information operations. The 2019 Balakot strikes and 2025 Operation SINDOOR exemplify this strategic space where military force achieves political objectives without full-scale conventional war [38].

Military Constraints and Vulnerabilities

Despite significant progress, India's military capacity for manoeuvre faces several persistent challenges:

Experience Gap. India has not fought a full-fledged conventional war since 1971. The 1999 Kargil war was confined only to the hill sector of J&K. On the other hand, the year-long deployment during Operation Parakram in 2002 involved only mobilisation of troops along the Western Front but did not translate into any kinetic action. While counter-insurgency operations have provided valuable experience in asymmetric warfare, they offer limited preparation for large-scale conventional operations against peer or near-peer military competitors. This experience gap translates to potential gaps in operational planning, logistics, and sustained combat operations [39].

Technological Acquisition Pace. Despite indigenous development programs, India continues to depend significantly on foreign suppliers for advanced military technology. The lengthy procurement cycle for imported systems, combined with delays in indigenous development programs, creates gaps in capability that adversaries may exploit. The defence ministry's technology perspective roadmap identifies multiple capability gaps requiring resolution [40].

Scale and Density Problems. The Indian military's size (while numerically large) creates density problems in training and equipment distribution. Not all units operate at equal capability

levels; many continue to operate with legacy equipment requiring significant upgrades. This variation in unit capability reduces the ability to concentrate manoeuvre power at critical points [41].

Logistics and Sustainment. While improvements have been made, India's logistics infrastructure remains vulnerable to disruption. Concentrated supply lines, particularly in border regions, could constrain sustained operations. The contrast between peacetime logistics and wartime requirements remains inadequately addressed in many contingency plans [42].

Quality vs. Quantity Tradeoff. The Indian military has historically compensated for superior adversary technology by relying on numerical superiority. However, in a modern conflict against technologically advanced adversaries, this approach becomes increasingly problematic. Pakistan and China have smaller militaries but technologically superior capabilities in many domains, a gap that numerical superiority cannot fully overcome [43].

Recent Military Manoeuvre: Operation SINDOOR

Operation SINDOOR demonstrated India's military manoeuvre capacity across multiple domains [44]. The operation, conceived and executed over a compressed timeline following a major terrorist attack in Pahalgam, exemplified rapid decision-making and coordinated military action:

- **Air strikes.** Indian Armed Forces conducted simultaneous strikes against nine targets in Pakistan and PoJK, including for the first time the headquarters of Jaish-e-Mohammed in Bahawalpur and Lashkar-e-Taiba in Muridke [45]. In addition, 11 Pak air bases were also struck by the Indian Armed Forces in response to Operation Bunyan-um-

Marsoos, thereby severely degrading Pakistan's offensive capability and forcing them to plead for ceasefire.

- **Precision and discrimination.** The strikes were conducted with precision munitions designed to minimise collateral damage, supporting diplomatic and information operations emphasising India's responsible military posture.
- **Coordinated response.** The operation integrated planning and execution across air, land, and potentially cyber domains, achieving coordinated effect despite operational risks.
- **Limited escalation.** The operation achieved significant military-strategic effect while remaining bounded in scope, avoiding full-scale conventional war that would impose unsustainable costs on both sides [46].

The Economic Dimension: Financial Power and Statecraft

Defence Spending and Economic Base

India's economic dimension of national manoeuvre capacity is fundamentally constrained by the level of defence spending relative to economic size. India's defence budget, while globally significant in absolute terms (approximately USD 72-75 billion in 2024-2025), represents only about 2.3-2.4% of GDP [47]. This percentage remains below comparable spenders and requires careful prioritisation of modernisation initiatives against competing social and infrastructure spending demands.

The absolute size of India's defence budget, however, provides leverage in the South Asian context where Pakistan spends considerably less (approximately USD 7-8 billion annually). India's economic base, with a GDP exceeding USD 4 trillion, provides

growth potential for defence spending if political consensus supports increased military investment [48].

Defence Industrial Capacity

Under the '*Atmanirbhar Bharat*' (Self-Reliant India) initiative, India has started extensive defence indigenisation programs with an aim of reducing its reliance on foreign suppliers and boosting domestic defence industrial capabilities. Key achievements include:

Ammunition and Ordnance. 91% indigenisation of ammunition used by Indian forces represents significant progress in achieving self-sufficiency in basic military supplies [49].

Ship Building. The Indian Navy has developed indigenous capacity to design and build advanced naval vessels, including frigates, corvettes and submarines. The indigenous aircraft carrier project (INS Vikrant) demonstrates technological sophistication and industrial capability [50].

Fighter Aircraft. The Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas program, while experiencing delays, represents India's commitment to developing indigenous fighter aircraft capabilities. Integration of Tejas into operational squadrons (approximately 200+ aircraft projected) will reduce dependence on foreign aircraft suppliers [51].

Missile Systems. India's indigenous missile development programs (BrahMos, Pinaka, Akash, Astra) have achieved operational capability, providing alternatives to foreign procurement. The technology transfer achieved through joint programs like BrahMos with Russia demonstrates capacity for cooperative weapons development [52].

Economic Statecraft and Sanctions

India has employed economic instruments as elements of national manoeuvre, though less extensively than some other powers. Key examples include:

Trade and Tariff Policy. India has selectively employed tariff barriers and trade restrictions against Pakistan and China to signal displeasure and impose economic costs, though the impact remains limited given the small volume of bilateral trade[53]. Recently, India also successfully navigated through US Tariffs and oil import restrictions. In order to meet its energy security and the interests of the country, India leveraged strategic autonomy to counter US restrictions. It adopted a two-pronged strategy of energy diversification and targeted diplomacy with respect to oil imports from Russia and the US by securing 18% tariff instead of a 25% oil-related penalty tariff levied by the US via a landmark February 2026 trade deal.

FATF Cooperation. India has worked through the Financial Action Task Force to constrain Pakistan's international financial access, targeting terrorism financing networks and limiting Pakistan's ability to finance terrorist organisations. The grey-listing of Pakistan represented a significant economic sanction, though Pakistan's subsequent exit from the grey list demonstrated the limits of this approach [54].

Investment Restrictions. India has occasionally imposed restrictions on foreign investment (particularly from China) in strategic sectors, providing a mechanism for constraining foreign economic influence while protecting sensitive industries [55].

Suspension of Indus Water Treaty (IWT). Post Pahalgam terror attack, India for the first time suspended the IWT signed in 1960 between India and Pakistan on sharing of water of River

Indus. This treaty had survived three wars and thousands of proxy attacks by Pakistan-sponsored terror groups in the last four decades. This suspension was a strong message from India, creating severe long-term vulnerabilities for Pakistan's agriculture and energy sector.

Regional Economic Integration

India's economic manoeuvre capacity extends through participation in regional economic groupings:

BIMSTEC. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation provides economic cooperation mechanisms with regional partners.

IORA. The Indian Ocean Rim Association enables economic and security cooperation with regional maritime states.

SAARC Alternative Mechanisms. Following the breakdown of SAARC processes, India has pursued bilateral economic partnerships with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and other South Asian states as alternatives to multilateral mechanisms disrupted by Pakistan.

India's growing economy provides increasing leverage in these partnerships, with Indian investments in regional infrastructure, development assistance and trade growing substantially [56].

Economic Constraints and Vulnerabilities

Development Imperatives. India's large population, with significant percentages remaining below or near poverty lines, creates political pressure to direct more resources towards development rather than defence. This competing demand for resources constrains defence spending growth [57].

Import Dependence. Despite indigenisation progress, India remains dependent on foreign suppliers for critical technologies including advanced semiconductors, precision manufacturing equipment and some advanced military platforms. Supply chain vulnerabilities create manoeuvre constraints [58].

Economic Size Relative to China. China's economy, approximately 2-2.5 times larger than India's, translates to larger defence budgets and greater capacity for technological development. This economic gap manifests in military capability gaps in advanced technologies [59].

Forex Reserve Requirements. India must maintain foreign exchange reserves for broader economic purposes, limiting resources available for military procurement. Unlike some competitors with commodity export surpluses, India faces constraints in foreign exchange availability for large foreign military purchases [60].

Economic Dimension in Strategic Operations

There has been a decisive shift in India's strategy against terror. It has been made clear to the world that any act of terror against India would be treated as an act of war. Accordingly, India's Response Strategy against Pak's abetment to terrorism in J&K is now based on three pillars: decisive retaliation, no tolerance for nuclear blackmail, and no distinction between terror sponsors and terrorists. This decisive shift has, in effect, increased the cost of war for our western adversary, which was earlier not the case. Though Operation SINDOOR's economic dimensions were less visible than military ones, it remained strategically significant. The operation demonstrated India's capacity to sustain military operations through crisis periods without economic collapse. Pakistan's economic weakness and vulnerability to external pressure (particularly from Gulf state financiers) influenced Pakistan's

decision to conduct retaliatory operations in a limited manner rather than escalate to full-scale conflict [61].

The Technology Dimension: Innovation and Capability Development

Technology as Cross-Cutting Enabler

The Technology dimension differs fundamentally from other DIME-T elements, because it functions as a cross-cutting enabler across all other dimensions. Diplomatic capacity is enhanced by advanced communications technology. Information operations depend on cyber capabilities and sophisticated IT systems. Military power increasingly depends on technological sophistication. Economic statecraft is enhanced through technology-based trade advantages. Thus, technology must be understood as both a distinct dimension and as the foundation enhancing all other dimensions [62].

Military Technology Modernisation

India's military technology development encompasses several key areas:

Precision Strike Capabilities. India is focusing more on precision-guided weapons systems, thereby reducing dependence on area bombardment and enabling more surgical operations. BrahMos cruise missiles, extended-range Pinaka systems, and precision-guided munitions represent quantum leaps in strike precision [63].

Unmanned Systems. The extensive use of various unmanned systems worldwide viz. RPAs, loitering drones, swarm drones, logistics drones etc. indicates that the military technology domain is undergoing rapid change. India's expansion to approximately 3,000 RPAs provides reconnaissance and strike capability without

risking pilots, while reducing cost per sortie compared to manned aircraft [64].

Artificial Intelligence and Autonomous Systems. India is investing in AI-enabled target recognition, autonomous vehicle navigation and AI-assisted decision support systems. These capabilities compress the OODA loop and potentially enable faster decision-making than human-only systems [65].

Network-Centric Operations. The shift toward digitalised, networked military operations requires sophisticated IT infrastructure, cyber protection and real-time data dissemination. India's progress in establishing edge data centers and integrated digital networks represents progress in this critical domain [66].

Space Technology. India's advancement in space technology, including satellite communications and earth observation, provides crucial support to military operations. The Chandrayaan and Mangalyaan programs demonstrate India's technological sophistication and provide spin-off benefits for military applications [67].

Cyber Technology

India has established the Defence Cyber Agency as a dedicated cyber warfare organisation. Cyber capabilities encompassing offensive cyber-attacks, defensive cyber protection and cyber intelligence have become integral to military operations [68]. The sophistication of cyber-attacks demonstrated by both China and Pakistan indicates that India must match or exceed adversary cyber capabilities to maintain strategic deterrence.

Defence Research and Development

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) represents India's primary mechanism for indigenous defence

technology development. DRDO operates multiple laboratories and research centers focused on missile development, aircraft systems, naval systems and electronic warfare [69]. Key DRDO achievements include:

- Development and testing of indigenous ballistic missiles (Agni series)
- Indigenous fighter aircraft development (LCA Tejas)
- Missile systems (Pinaka, Akash, Astra, BrahMos {co-developed with Russia})
- Naval systems (ship design and submarine technology)
- Electronic warfare and radar systems

However, DRDO has faced periodic criticism for long development timelines in some cases, where indigenous development proved more costly than foreign acquisition. The Technology Perspective and Capability Roadmap (TPCR) 2025 issued by MoD (GoI) provides strategic guidance for prioritising technology investments [70].

Industry Partnership and Technology Transfer

India increasingly partners with private sector defence contractors and international suppliers for technology development and production. Programs such as the joint BrahMos missile development with Russia demonstrate technology transfer arrangements that provide India access to Russian expertise while reducing development timelines and costs[71].

International partnerships with France (Rafale aircraft production), the United States (potential advanced technology cooperation) and Israel (various sensor and electronic warfare

systems) provide access to cutting-edge technology while building industrial capacity [72].

Critical Technology Gaps

Despite progress, India faces several critical technology gaps requiring urgent attention:

Advanced Semiconductors. Dependence on external suppliers for advanced semiconductors creates vulnerabilities. Chinese and American dominance in semiconductor production constrains India's technological options [73].

Advanced Manufacturing. High-precision manufacturing capabilities required for advanced aerospace and defence systems remain limited in India. The establishment of semiconductor fabs and advanced manufacturing facilities is also progressing slowly [74].

Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning. While India has significant IT sector expertise, the application of AI/ML to defence and security domains lags behind competitors. Recruiting and retaining AI expertise in defence organisations remains challenging [75].

High-Temperature Materials. Development of advanced materials for aerospace and missile systems remains constrained. India depends significantly on foreign suppliers for composite materials and specialised alloys [76].

Quantum Technology. Emerging quantum computing technology, with potential applications in cryptography and secure communications, represents a domain where India lags competitors. Investment in quantum research is increasing but remains below levels in competing powers [77].

Operation SINDOOR demonstrated integration of multiple technology systems in coordinated strikes. Precision munitions, real-time ISR from advanced sensors, command-and-control systems enabling coordination of simultaneous strikes, and suppression of Pakistani air defence through advanced electronic warfare systems all contributed to operational success [78]. The technological sophistication displayed demonstrated India's progress in integrating diverse systems for coordinated effect.

Integration and Synergy: Moving Beyond Silos

The Integration Challenge

While previous sections analysed DIME-T elements individually, the strategic manoeuvre capacity emerges not from individual dimension strength but from integrated employment of all dimensions towards unified strategic objectives. This integration challenge remains, in many respects, India's greatest strategic hurdle [79].

Historically, the Indian government has operated with significant departmental silos. The Ministry of External Affairs (diplomacy), Ministry of Defence (military), Ministry of Finance (economic), various civilian intelligence agencies (information), and multiple technology development organisations (technology) have operated with limited formal coordination mechanisms [80].

Structural Reforms Supporting Integration

Recent structural reforms have begun addressing the integration challenge:

Chief of Defence Staff. The establishment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) as a permanent position created a unified military voice superior to service-specific interests. The CDS chairs

the Defence Staff Committee and provides military advice integrating all three service perspectives [81].

National Security Council. The National Security Advisor chairs the NSC, bringing together military, diplomatic, intelligence and other national security agencies for coordinated strategic planning [82].

Joint Planning Mechanisms. The development of joint planning establishments at theatre and national levels ensures military planning integrates perspectives from all services rather than staying service-specific [83].

Integrated Crisis Management. The government has developed mechanisms for integrated crisis management, including rapid coordination between the NSA office, military leadership, diplomatic channels and intelligence agencies. Operation SINDOOR demonstrated these mechanisms functioning effectively [84].

Institutional Barriers to Integration

Despite structural reforms, institutional barriers persist:

Service Silos. While joint planning has improved, individual services retain significant autonomy in training, doctrine, and operational procedures. Complete integration faces resistance from service-specific institutional interests [85].

Civil-Military Fusion. In India, the traditional separation between the military and civilian domains still exists, which occasionally leads to variance between military strategy and political direction. The lack of integrated policy-making at senior levels also sometimes results in military operations lacking full appreciation for diplomatic implications and vice-versa [86].

Ministry Coordination Challenges. The Ministry of External Affairs and Ministry of Defence sometimes pursue divergent diplomatic strategies, creating incoherence in integrated DIME-T manoeuvre. For example, military operations may achieve tactical success while diplomatic follow-up proves inadequate [87].

Interagency Intelligence Sharing. Intelligence organisations, both civilian and military, sometimes restrict information sharing to preserve organisational equities. This compartmentalisation reduces the quality of strategic decision-making [88].

Operation SINDOOR as Integration Model

Operation SINDOOR represented perhaps India's best execution of integrated DIME-T operations [89]:

Political Direction. The Prime Minister provided clear political direction regarding Pakistan-sponsored terrorism and the intent to conduct military operations against terrorist infrastructure [90].

Military Planning. The military rapidly developed operational plans for precision strikes against designated targets in Pakistan and PoJK, with strikes coordinated across multiple locations and service elements [91].

Diplomatic Preparation. India coordinated with key international partners to establish diplomatic space for potential military action, ensuring that potential escalation would not result in international pressure against India [92].

Information Operations. Pre-operation, India carefully controlled information to prevent operational security leaks. During and immediately after operations, India released carefully calibrated information through joint media brief represented by the Foreign Secretary and representatives of the three services,

emphasising precision, restraint and adherence to international law [93].

Economic Consequences. The operation had implicit economic dimensions related to Pakistan's vulnerability and the role of Gulf state economic support in constraining Pakistani escalation options[94].

Technology Integration. The operation demonstrated integration of precision-strike technology, advanced ISR capabilities, and coordinated command-and-control systems [95].

However, while Operation SINDOOR demonstrated effective integration in kinetic operations, the post-operation phase revealed integration challenges. Diplomatic follow-up, while competent, could have been more systematic. Information operations, while effective, could have been more sustained. Economic statecraft, while implicit, was not explicitly orchestrated [96].

Strategic Vulnerabilities and Threats to Manoeuvre Capacity

The China Challenge

China poses India's most significant long-term strategic challenge, with capabilities exceeding India's across all DIME-T dimensions [97]:

Diplomatic. China has cultivated relationships throughout South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean and Africa, creating a network of diplomatic relationships exceeding India's. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides diplomatic leverage through economic infrastructure development [98].

Information. China's sophisticated information warfare capabilities, demonstrated through controlled domestic media and

extensive global propaganda networks, provide information dominance capabilities that India lacks. The 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy style provides Chinese information operations with aggression that Indian diplomatic restraint may not match [99].

Military. Chinese military capabilities in advanced aircraft, naval platforms, long-range precision strikes and unmanned systems exceed India's across most domains. China's advanced weapons systems and superior technological sophistication create asymmetric advantages [100].

Economic. China's economy exceeds India's by almost 2-2.5 times, translating to substantially larger defence budgets and greater capacity for sustained military operations [101].

Technology. China's advanced semiconductor industry, space technology achievements, AI development, and integration of technology across military and civilian sectors exceed India's capacity [102].

The Pakistan Challenge

Pakistan presents an acute, near-term challenge despite smaller size and less advanced capabilities:

Terrorism Sponsorship. Pakistan's continued sponsorship of terrorist organisations operating in India creates persistent security threats that constrain India's manoeuvre capacity by requiring sustained counter-terrorism operations [103].

Nuclear Weapons. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and low threshold for its employment constrain India's military options. Full-scale conventional war against Pakistan risks nuclear escalation, limiting India's manoeuvre space [104]. Though the nuclear bluff of Pakistan has been debunked by India during

Operation SINDOOR and subsequently the announcement of a shift in India's Response Strategy against terror.

International Support. Pakistan has cultivated support from China, Saudi Arabia, and the US, providing diplomatic and economic support that constrains India's ability to isolate Pakistan [105].

Tactical Innovation. Pakistan has demonstrated innovation in terrorism tactics, cyber warfare, and information operations that occasionally exceed Indian counter-capability [106].

Internal Constraints

Civil-Military Relations. While India's civil-military relations remain healthy compared to many countries, occasional variance between military preferences and civilian political direction creates coordination challenges [107].

Resource Constraints. Competition between defence spending and development spending limits the resources available for military modernisation [108].

Implementation Challenges. India's complex and rigid bureaucratic structures sometimes impede rapid implementation of strategic decisions [109].

Geographic Vulnerabilities. India's long land borders with multiple countries and vast coastal areas create defence challenges requiring significant force distribution [110].

Future Requirements and Strategic Implications

Structural Improvements

To enhance national capacity for manoeuvre, India should:

Deepen Integrated Planning. Expand joint planning mechanisms beyond military services to encompass diplomacy, intelligence, information operations, economic statecraft and technology policy [111].

Formalise Civil-Military Coordination. Establish formal structures ensuring military perspective informs diplomatic and economic decisions while political direction guides military planning [112].

Accelerate Information Integration. Compress the timeline for intelligence dissemination and information integration across government agencies, reducing compartmentalisation that limits strategic decision quality [113].

Strengthen Technology Prioritisation. Align technology development across DRDO, private sector and international partnerships toward agreed-upon strategic priorities rather than allowing organisational interests to determine investment [114].

Capability Development

Diplomatic Reach. Expand India's diplomatic network and sophistication in less-developed regions, particularly Africa and the Middle East, to build coalitions supporting Indian strategic interests [115].

Information Warfare. Accelerate development of offensive and defensive cyber capabilities, strategic communications infrastructure and rapid-response information operations to match adversary capabilities [116].

Military Modernisation. Accelerate modernisation timelines, particularly in precision-strike systems, unmanned systems and integrated air defence, to maintain technological edge [117].

Economic Statecraft. Develop more sophisticated economic tools for strategic purposes, including expanded trade leverage, investment restrictions in strategic sectors and financial network protection [118].

Technology Development. Accelerate progress on critical technologies including advanced semiconductors, high-precision manufacturing, AI/ML applications and quantum technology to reduce foreign dependence [119].

Doctrine and Operational Concepts

Whole-of-Nation Approach. Institutionalise ‘whole-of-nation’ warfighting approach that Operation SINDOOR demonstrated, ensuring routine integration of DIME-T elements in strategic planning [120].

Multi-Domain Operations. Develop doctrine more fully articulating the integration of operations across land, sea, air, cyber, space and information domains [121].

Escalation Control. Develop doctrine and procedures for controlling escalation when military operations are employed, particularly with reference to nuclear weapons [122].

Strategic Communications. Develop doctrine for strategic communications ensuring military operations are accompanied by coordinated messaging supporting diplomatic and information objectives [123].

Conclusion

National capacity for manoeuvre is the ability of a nation to integrate and employ all instruments of national power in coordinated response to strategic challenges. It represents a fundamental requirement in the contemporary security

environment. For India, enhanced manoeuvre capacity is essential for navigating a complex strategic landscape featuring rising great power competition, continuing terrorism and multiple simultaneous security challenges.

This analysis of India's manoeuvre capacity across the DIME-T framework reveals a nation with significant achievements in military modernisation, growing diplomatic sophistication, improving information capabilities and expanding technological capacity. Operation SINDOOR demonstrated India's ability to integrate elements of national power effectively, achieving politico-military objectives while managing escalation and supporting diplomatic goals.

However, significant challenges still persist. Institutional silos continue to compartmentalise decision-making across diplomacy, defence, intelligence, information and technology domains. Pakistan's nuclear weapons and continued terrorism sponsorship continue to constrain India's military options. China's comprehensive advantages across all DIME-T dimensions create long-term strategic challenges requiring sustained investment and innovation. Technology gaps in critical domains also limit India's military and economic manoeuvre options.

India's path to enhanced manoeuvre capacity requires commitment to several strategic imperatives. Firstly, deepening institutional integration across all government agencies involved in strategy and defence represents the most urgent priority. The compartmentalisation of decision-making that has characterised Indian government operations must be replaced by truly integrated strategic planning encompassing all instruments of national power.

Secondly, sustained investment in defence modernisation and technology development must continue despite competing development imperatives. India's size and long-term economic

potential position it to maintain strategic competition with China, but only if modernisation continues at accelerated pace.

Thirdly, diplomatic initiatives should be sustained and expanded. India's network of strategic partnerships – Quad, multilateral engagement, bilateral partnerships with key powers – must be deepened to ensure adequate diplomatic support for strategic operations.

Fourthly, information and cyber capabilities require accelerated development to match adversary sophistication. The information domain increasingly shapes strategic outcomes, and India cannot afford to allow adversaries to achieve information dominance.

Finally, India must continue developing doctrine and operational concepts for employing national power in integrated fashion. The conceptual framework must move beyond recognition that integration is desirable to operational doctrine specifying how integration occurs and ensuring all government agencies operate according to integrated plans.

India's strategic future depends on its capacity to manoeuvre effectively in a complex multipolar world. It depends on moving beyond compartmentalised, single-instrument approaches to strategy toward comprehensive employment of all elements of national power. Operation SINDOOR demonstrated that such integration is possible. The strategic challenge ahead is making such integrated manoeuvre formalised into an organised structure and ensuring its implementation as a norm rather than an exception in Indian strategic operations in pursuit of its national interests.

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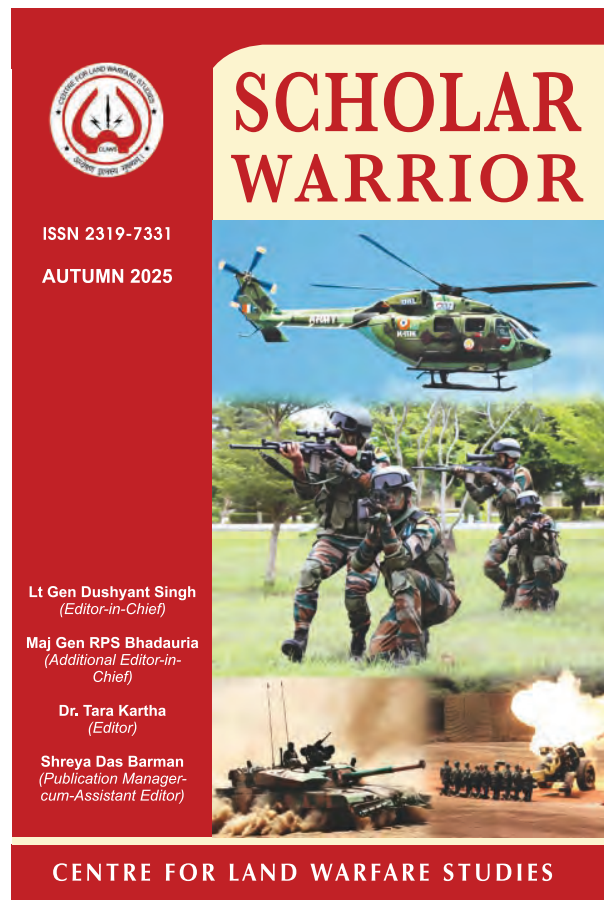
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Manoeuvre is essential in statecraft, extending beyond military applications to include diplomacy, economics and cognitive strategies. It involves positioning adversaries disadvantageously through agility and adaptability. This paper analyses India's national capacity for manoeuvre within the DIME-T framework (Diplomatic, Information/ Cognitive, Military, Economic, Technology) against the backdrop of recent events and challenges. The recent Operation SINDOOR demonstrated India's capability to synchronise various national powers in response to geopolitical crises. Despite advancements in military modernisation, India faces challenges in diplomatic coordination and economic investment in defence. The paper highlights that India's strategic success hinges on integrating all elements of national power within a cohesive framework, emphasising the 'whole-of-nation' approach as vital in modern strategy.

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Colonel Kumar Amit, SM, was commissioned into the Mechanised Infantry Regiment of the Indian Army. The officer has a rich experience of over 25 years of serving across varied terrains. He has held various command, staff and instructional appointments. He has served in CI/CT areas in J&K, been a Directing Staff at the JC wing in Army War College, and has held key staff appointments in a Mountain Brigade in High Altitude Area and Directorate General of Operational Logistics and Strategic Movement at Army HQ.

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The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an independent Think Tank dealing with contemporary issues of national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional & sub-conventional conflicts and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy oriented in approach.

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