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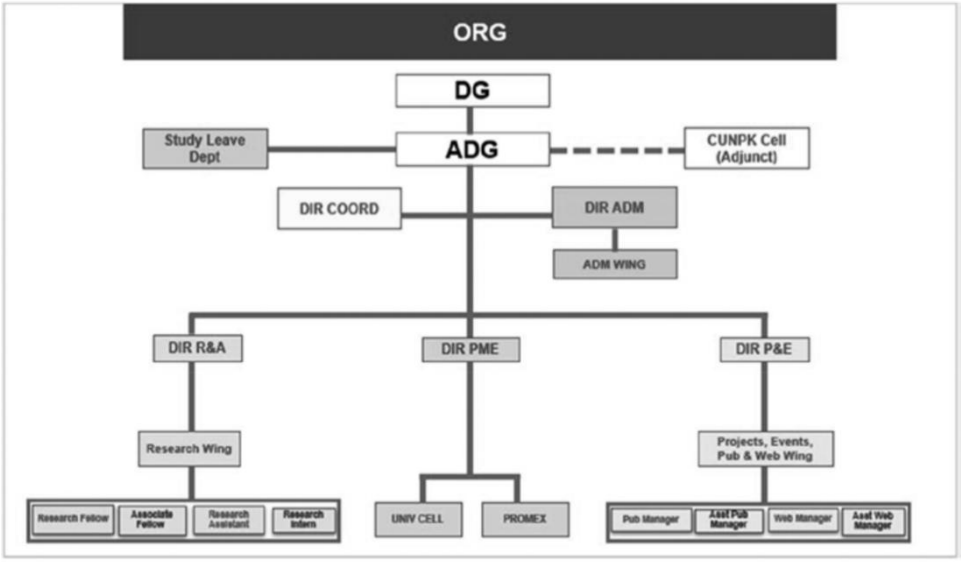
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SCHOLAR WARRIOR

SECTION 1

ARTICLES

CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES

The Kalki Protocol: AI Cortex Securing India's Domestic Skies

HARMEET SINGH

Abstract

In the recent past, small drones have silently but decisively altered India's security environment. They have emerged as a growing security challenge. While India's ability to detect drones has improved considerably, the real challenge now lies in making timely, coordinated decisions once a threat is identified. This article argues that the next major jump in India's counter-drone capability will not come from another jammer, interceptor or kinetic system. Instead, it will come from an indigenous, AI-enabled Command and Control (C2) architecture that functions as the cognitive core – or "brain" – of counter-drone operations. The article explores how an AI-driven operational 'cortex' could be structured and why it has become indispensable. Finally, it contends that the development of an indigenous 'Kalki Protocol Command and Control System' would give India a decisive edge in speed, clarity and reliability of decision-making – what may be described as decision superiority. In a period wherein drones are low-cost, expendable, and extensively available, such superiority is fast becoming a basic necessity for national security.

Introduction

As India enters the 'Year of Networking and Data Centricity,' one has to acknowledge that the character of warfare is transforming[1]. Drones, Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, autonomous systems and data-centric operations are going to be the core that will dictate who achieves advantage in the battlefield. In India, the threat spectrum is vast. It ranges from rogue Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) used for smuggling contraband and terror payloads across borders to intelligence gathering probes over sensitive installations[2]. To tackle these threats, the existing traditional defence systems, relying on human operators to combine inputs from various sensors to drawing a coherent picture and response, are reaching cognitive limits. When inputs from diverse sensors are poured into a control room as raw and uncoordinated data, they become a confusing puzzle for an operator. An operator must cross-check the same, that puts him under psychological stress, which can lead to errors and fatigue. However, the solution to this problem lies in developing a 'brain' that can assist the human operator. Thus, there is a need for a 'technological cortex' which is designed to manage the clutter of lower skies and restore the decisive offensive advantage. The real challenge is not in acquiring AI tools and drones but in having an indigenous Kalki protocol—a unified sovereign AI cortex.

Anatomy of an AI-powered Command and Control (C2) system

In India, every environment creates its own clutter. Urban areas are flooded with cellular signals, creating a haystack from which finding an unfriendly RF needle is very difficult. Similarly, mountainous regions create radar shadows, and desert winds kick up dust that can confuse sensors and radar. Since the modern battlefield is plagued with a problem of '*Data Deluge*'[3], (in which the total numbers, rate and multiplicity of information overwhelm conventional command and control mechanisms), the difference between a false alarm and disastrous breach is a thin thread of understanding[4]. This sets the stage for entrance of AI cortex. It will be a

technological link that can carry out this fusion with speed, reliability and without fatigue. It is like a central nervous system for air defence, taking stimuli from all sensory organs (Electro-Optical Devices, RF, Radars, etc.), processing that information into a clear understanding and recommending a response to the conscious mind (human operators).

To understand the structure of the system, lets start with the base layer that is AI-powered sensor fusion. Then come machine learning algorithms, which act as general translators and engines to correlate. AI cortex then carries out threat assessment of a track and assigns a dynamic threat score, which is based on datasets and behaviour pattern of each drone track. This contextual awareness is AI's superpower. It leads to identifying meaningful threats. The final layer is the presentation of insight and recommendations of action. This is where 'Human on the loop' comes into play, wherein a human commander remains the moral and legal authority to pull the trigger. Thus, AI cortex enables 'decision superiority'—the ability to make better choices faster than the adversary.

Why Indigenous Control Matters

Operation Sindoor presented both opportunities and risks[5]. India could achieve integration in air defence system using AI enabled analytics, drone based ISR and networked systems. However, it also highlighted the challenges and limitations in sensor interoperability and resilience under electronic warfare conditions — a certainty that highlights the necessity for unified, AI-powered Protocol Command & Control architectures to prevent fragmented control, mitigate spectrum congestion and accelerate decision cycles[6].

Reliance on foreign AI software, data protocols, algorithms etc. carry strategic risks. Thus, the value of indigenous AI cortex is not theoretical but actually it is a practical need for India's security scenarios across the subcontinent. For a system whose intelligence is required to be related to local context, reliance on imported equipment is not prudent. An AI model,

trained on data from Silicon Valley based on Nevada desert, will fail in the monsoon and jungle terrain of North-Eastern regions of India. Hence, Atmanirbharta in AI C2 capability is a necessity for relevance.

One has to understand that, firstly, data sovereignty is a prerequisite for success. If training datasets, cloud infrastructure or algorithm updates are externally controlled, then India's operational data will lend itself to exploitation, denial and manipulation. Moreover, since 'Black Box AI' is unacceptable in military decision making[7], there is a need to focus on indigenous systems which can combine Indian context related to doctrines, ethical constraints, escalation control and also add specific safeguards directly into protocol layers. This becomes imperative especially in the multi-domain operations where time criticality of decision making increases the risk of unintended escalation.[8]

Thus, the true '*Kalki Protocol*' – a sovereign, unified AI cortex will require the development of open architecture software standards that allow different sensors and effectors to plug and play with Indian AI brain. Therefore it is vital to appreciate that this will not only be a software and protocol challenge but also a hardware one.

Way Ahead

AI now is required to be a 'decision partner' rather than a replacement.[9] Future roadmap shall include—AI assisted predictive analysis, logistic optimization, ISR fusion and war gaming simulation. Hence, creating efficient indigenous AI models governed by Kalki Protocol would require curated datasets of drone activities in Indian environment. This will require a national effort which will have strategic payoffs, not only in terms of security but also pave the way for world class defence AI industry. In this regard, an indigenous Protocol C2 system can be a game changer.[10]

India can harness speed without sacrificing control by embedding explainable AI and Human-on-the-loop mechanism at critical decision points, thus institutionalizing the balance. This is mainly vital in time critical scenarios concerning drone swarms, loitering munitions and AI aided targeting, wherein mistakes can be disastrous. Moreover, modern day operations require flawless cross-domain coordination across land, air, maritime, cyber and space domains, where fragmented service-specific control systems hamper sensor fusion, slow decision cycles and reduce combat power. Hence, a common Protocol C2 system would enable shared situational awareness, real-time data interoperability and AI-assisted decision support across services. Hence, an important aspect to note here is that 'Kalki Protocol C2 System' must be tri-service compatible from inception, anticipating joint operations by Theatre Commands in future. This would not only formalise the architecture but also define standardised interface between manned and unmanned partnership apart from integration of counter drone systems such as the Integrated Drone Detection and Interdiction System (IDDIS)[11]. As a way forward, the potential and capabilities of DRDO, IITs, MSMEs and defence establishments needs to be harnessed to provide foundation for indigenous innovation aligning with national AI and drone technology.

Conclusion: Towards Decision Supremacy

The evolution of the drone threat is a harsh reality, and the response has to be based on concentrated intelligence. From a future perspective, India's counter-drone architecture will be judged not by the range of its jammers or the accuracy of its interceptors, but by the efficiency and effectiveness of its central nervous system. The development of an indigenous, AI-powered Command and Control cortex viz. 'Kalki Protocol' is the critical path to achieving decision superiority. It can become the force multiplier that transforms a network of sensors into a shield and human operators into empowered commanders. In future warfare, any nation that fields the most intelligent system—one that can see, understand

and act with clarity—will hold a decisive advantage. For India, building this 'Kalki Protocol' is not merely a technical project; it is a strategic imperative for sovereignty and security.

Colonel Harmeet Singh, was commissioned into MARATHA LIGHT INFANTRY Regiment and is an alumnus of Defence Services Staff College and College of Defence Management. The Officer is currently pursuing a Ph.D in Artificial Intelligence and Drone Warfare. Views expressed are personal.

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Beyond Hotline and Handshakes: Need for Institutionalised Military-to-Military Engagements(M2ME) by India

M KHALID ZAKI

Abstract

The emergence of a multipolar world order, coupled with India's evolving approach to navigating its complex security environment, has fundamentally altered the role of military-to-military engagements (M2ME). In a context defined by compressed decision cycles, persistent grey-zone competitions and the shadow of nuclear escalation, M2ME have shifted from auxiliary confidence-building measures to core instruments of conflict management and escalation control. This research argues that, although India sustains multiple engagement mechanisms with its northern and western adversaries, these frameworks remain episodic, reactive, and structurally misaligned with the demands of sustained strategic competition. Drawing on global precedents and regional case studies, the study demonstrates that institutionalised military engagement can stabilise contested spaces even in the absence of formal political settlements. The analysis examines the influence of divergent strategic cultures and civil-military hierarchies in India,

China, and Pakistan, highlighting critical deficiencies within the existing architecture. It proposes a structured and layered M2ME architecture to strengthen deterrence stability, crisis management, and long-term regional security.

Contemporary Security Environment and Strategic Imperatives

The contemporary security environment is defined by a rapidly evolving character of warfare marked by a VUCA environment. Modern conflict is no longer linear or episodic. It is characterised by simultaneity of action across all the domains, compressed decision-making timelines, and an expanded battlespace driven by accelerated technological infusion, pervasive flow of information, and precision strike capabilities. Military power is increasingly applied through integrated kinetic and non-kinetic means, which has enabled the states to achieve strategic effects without crossing the threshold of full-scale war.

Within this environment, Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) have emerged as the dominant operational construct. MDO seeks to synchronise effects across land, maritime, air, cyber, space and the information environment, in order to impose multiple dilemmas on adversaries, degrade decision-making processes and shape favourable strategic narratives. Consequently, the classical conception of war as a discrete and predominantly kinetic engagement has been supplanted by a continuum of competition and conflict that persists below the threshold of formally declared hostilities (IDSA Commentary, 2025).

Parallel to this evolution, grey-zone warfare has become a preferred mode of strategic competition. Through calibrated coercion, incremental territorial or political encroachments, cyber operations, information manipulation, economic leverage, and the employment of proxy actors, adversaries attempt to alter the status quo while operating below conventional and nuclear thresholds (PMC Article, 2021). These activities deliberately blurs the distinction between peace and war, complicating

attribution, constraining response options, and distorting traditional deterrence calculations.

For India, these dynamics deeply manifests across both continental and maritime theatres. Recurrent transgressions, face-offs and prolonged standoffs along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), ceasefire violations and proxy-driven violence along the Line of Control (LC), and persistent cyber intrusions collectively underscore the multi-domain and grey-zone character of the threat environment. Actions undertaken in one domain increasingly generate cascading effects across others, elevating the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation, which would be catastrophic in a nuclearised regional context.

In this environment, institutionalised M2ME assumes critical importance. Professional military engagement and negotiations provide structured mechanisms to manage incidents, clarify intent, reduce operational friction, and establish behavioural norms in contested spaces. Unlike traditional wartime engagements, which were aimed at conflict termination, contemporary M2ME must function continuously during periods of competition and crisis (PMC Article, 2021). Their primary purpose is conflict prevention, escalation control, and post-conflict stabilisation rather than conflict resolution.

Why M2ME Matter: Evidences

Cold War crisis-management mechanisms between the United States and the Soviet Union provide compelling evidence of the value of institutionalised military communication amidst deep strategic hostility (Quincy Institute, 2024). Instruments such as dedicated hotlines, incident-prevention agreements and arms control verification regimes significantly reduced the risk of accidental escalation and established predictable patterns of military behaviour. For India, which is confronting two nuclear-armed adversaries, this experience underscores the necessity of reliable

communication channels, advance notification mechanisms, and agreed behavioural norms to manage incidents along both the LAC and the LC.

The Korean Armistice negotiations (1951–53) further illustrate the enduring utility of military-led negotiations, even during active hostilities. Conducted by commanders operating within defined operational mandates, these talks produced a durable ceasefire regime encompassing demilitarised zones, verification mechanisms, and prisoner exchanges, despite the absence of political reconciliation. The longevity of this arrangement demonstrates that technically focused, politically guided military agreements can stabilise contested frontiers over extended periods. This experience bears direct relevance to the LAC, where disengagements, buffer zones, and mutually accepted verification protocols have similarly mitigated escalation without compromising one's own stance on the underlying boundary issue. The continued stability of the Korean Demilitarised Zone is marked by comprehensive M2M regimes wherein buffer zones, joint mechanisms, rules of engagement (RoE), and routine dialogues have prevented major conflict for decades despite unresolved political and territorial issues. This model underscores the value of sustained military frameworks along the LAC and LC to manage routine friction and prevent tactical incidents from cascading into strategic crisis and hence avoiding the Strategic Corporal Effect.

Crisis dynamics in the Taiwan Strait further demonstrates that escalation control often hinges upon shared military understanding of thresholds, red lines and signalling practices. Tacit rules and back-channel military contacts have historically played a critical role in preventing misinterpretation of force posturing (Quincy Institute, 2024). This lesson is particularly pertinent for India, where force mobilisation, air activity or maritime deployments in one theatre may be misread by China or Pakistan as preparatory escalation in another.

Regional experiences in Southeast Asia, including border management mechanisms between Cambodia and Thailand and operational protocols

in the South China Sea, highlights how structured military communication channels, incident prevention measures, and crisis-specific hotlines can stabilise contested spaces without prejudice to sovereignty claims. These arrangements offer relevant templates for managing grey-zone coercion, patrol interactions and close proximity operations faced by Indian forces along both land and maritime domains.

Across these cases, common effects emerge wherein military engagements contain tactical incidents, reduce miscalculation, and enable behavioural adjustment without political concession. It provides political leadership with time and space to manage domestic and international pressures. M2ME mechanisms thus function as critical buffers between frontline actions and political diplomatic dialogue.

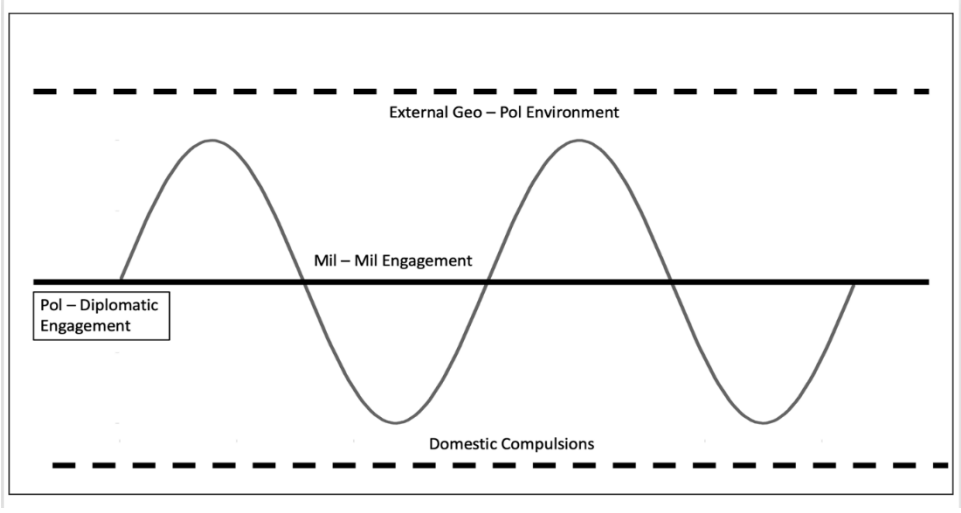


Figure 1: Stability during heightened Domestic and International Compulsions (Author's View)

Since the political upheaval in Bangladesh, there has been multiple inputs with respect to the interim government of Bangladesh taking sides, minority killings, the presence of China at Lalmonirhat airbase, cross-border skirmishes between BSF and BGB on the India-Bangladesh Border

(Times of India, 2025). However, the robust M2ME has provided clarity and prevented escalation, despite misinformation and heightened national emotions on both sides (Organiser, 2025).

In Myanmar, the military, being the ruling power, necessitates M2ME. Although, some part of India-Myanmar Border is not under the control of the Junta, the established mechanisms of M2ME are providing a semblance of normalcy in troubled times (Takshashila, 2024). M2ME are being undertaken at all levels to prevent the spillover effects of the internal situation of Myanmar (ANFREL, 2025).

India's Multi-Front Contingency

India's contemporary security environment magnifies the importance of such mechanisms. The nation faces simultaneous contingencies along two active fronts wherein even minor incidents can acquire disproportionate strategic significance.

Along the western frontier, heightened sensitivities following recent operations have increased the risk so much so that routine troop movements, localised engagements or airspace violations may rapidly escalate due to media amplification and public pressure. Along the northern frontier, prolonged deployments, close contact postures, and infrastructure expansion elevate the probability of inadvertent tactical incidents with strategic consequences, leading to the much-talked-about Strategic Corporal Effect.

This operational reality necessitates disciplined force posture supported by robust, responsive, and institutionalised M2ME frameworks. Immediate clarification of intent, rapid de-escalation of localised friction and containment of incidents before public outcry are no longer discretionary measures; they are central to India's crisis management, deterrence, stability and escalation control mechanism. Existing border

protocols and agreements in vogue have proved to be instrumental in maintaining peace and tranquillity with the Northern adversary.

Framework and Strategic Culture

Purpose of M2ME: Concepts, Not Actions

Effective M2ME is founded on a critical distinction—such interactions are intended to address military concepts, doctrinal frameworks and behavioural norms, not specific military actions or operational outcomes. The objective is conflict prevention before the use of force, through the establishment of shared understanding on force postures, rules of engagement, escalation thresholds, disengagement modalities, verification mechanisms, and crisis communication protocols.

This conceptual focus differentiates contemporary M2ME from post-conflict or ceasefire-driven engagements (Stimson, 2025). In modern competitive environments, M2ME operates continuously during peace, crisis, and confrontation, serving as a stabilising instrument within broader statecraft rather than as a mechanism for conflict termination alone.

Such engagements do not substitute politico-diplomatic dialogue and decision-making. Instead, they bridge the gap between strategic intent and tactical actions, thereby enabling calibrated force posture, disciplined signalling and escalation control in short-fuse, high-tempo, multi-domain security environments (Stimson, 2025).

M2ME within the DIME Construct

State power is often exercised through the DIME framework, incorporating Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic (DIME) instruments. M2ME occupies a distinct niche at the intersection of diplomatic and military instruments, while remaining functionally separate from both.

These engagements are neither purely political dialogues nor routine operational exchanges. Their core agenda is the management of military dimensions of competition, crisis and potential conflict, including force postures, deployments, incident de-confliction, escalation threshold definition, confidence-building measures and crisis communication mechanisms.

Employment of military engagement within the DIME framework reinforces India's image as a responsible and restrained actor, indirectly contributing to economic stability. Synergy between political direction and professional military engagement is therefore a prerequisite for favourable strategic outcomes. When properly structured, M2ME strengthens deterrence, enhances crisis stability and advances national security objectives without undermining political authority.

Strategic Culture as a Determinant of M2ME Outcomes

The aim of M2ME is conflict management without escalation, but its effectiveness often depends on the nuances of strategic cultures and the dynamics of civil-military relations within the participating states. For India, limited political insight and constrained bureaucratic proficiency, M2ME currently emerges as the optimal choice for present-day dynamic and multi-domain operational environments demanding rapid, coordinated response across sectors. India's experience with Pakistan and China highlights how authority structures and decision-making hierarchies directly influence engagement behaviour and outcomes.

The difference in India’s operational conduct on the western borders vis-à-vis the northern borders illustrates this divergence clearly (Onmanorama, 2025). Against Pakistan, kinetic thresholds have been crossed on multiple occasions in grey-zone, including during Operation Sindoor, reflecting a political environment and domestic consensus that permits calibrated kinetic military action for deterrence.

In contrast, on the northern front, despite numerous friction points along the Line of Actual Control, including the inflammatory Galwan incident, India has consciously avoided kinetic escalation against China (Academic, 2025). This asymmetry underscores how M2ME assumes heightened importance in the China context, where confrontation management without escalation is not merely desirable but structurally necessary.

Effective engagement frameworks must therefore account for the underlying strategic cultures of the three actors, shaped by the relationship between people, polity and the military. These differences bring to the fore systemic asymmetry between political intent, diplomatic endeavours and military action, necessitating tailored engagement strategies.

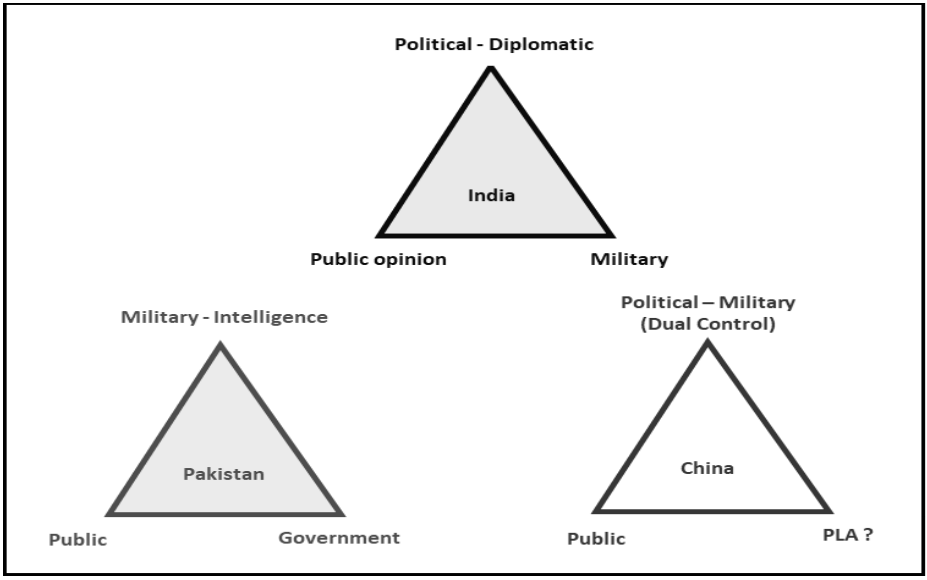


Figure 2: Engagement between Un-equals (Author's Visualisation)

Asymmetry in Decision-Making Hierarchies: Comparative Strategic Cultures

Pakistan: Military First, Government Next, People Marginalised. Pakistan's strategic culture is defined by the primacy of military as the dominant institution in national decision-making (C Christine Fair, 2016). The armed forces exercise de facto veto power over foreign and security policy, with civilian leadership operating within boundaries set by military preferences rather than popular mandate. Public opinion plays a limited role, often mobilised post-facto to legitimise military positions. Kargil is one glaring example in the recent past. This structure creates an asymmetry in M2ME. Pakistani military negotiators often possess greater autonomy and tactical flexibility than their Indian counterparts, enabling rapid decision-making but also insulating outcomes from civilian oversight. While this can facilitate short-term agreements, it also introduces instability by disconnecting military commitments from broader political accountability.

China: Government First, Military as Instrument, People Managed. China's strategic culture places the Communist Party and by extension, the state at the apex of decision-making. The People's Liberation Army operates as an integral instrument of Party authority rather than an autonomous institution. Strategic direction flows from the political leadership, particularly the Politburo Standing Committee, with military actions tightly bound by political directions. Although, the Chinese military negotiators possess limited independent latitude, their engagements carry binding credibility because agreements are anchored in Party authority. Public opinion is managed rather than consulted, ensuring coherence between political intent, military action and negotiated outcomes. For India, this means that verbal or tactical-level understandings require confirmation within China's Party-military chain to ensure durability.

India: People First, Government Accountable, Military Professionally Subordinate India's strategic culture is rooted in democratic legitimacy. Political authority derives from popular mandate, with the government acting as the intermediary—translating public will into national security policy. The military is constitutionally subordinate to civilian control and operates strictly within mandates issued by the political leadership and the Ministry of Defence. Bureaucracy serves as an intermediary, which inherently impedes the flow of information and direction, thereby restricting the military's autonomy. Furthermore, it operates under the guise of political oversight.

While this framework ensures accountability, restraint, and legitimacy, it can also introduce procedural delays and constrain negotiating autonomy at the military level. The Indian military negotiators, therefore, tend to prioritise procedural fidelity and political clearance over expedient decision-making, reflecting the broader democratic ethos underpinning national security governance.

Strategic Implications for M2ME

India-Pakistan engagements must recognise the higher autonomy of Pakistani military negotiators. Indian negotiators, therefore, require clearly articulated political backing, predefined decision thresholds, and rapid approval mechanisms to maintain parity and credibility.

India-China engagements must account for the primacy of Party authority. Agreements reached with Chinese military representatives require validation within the Party-military system, particularly through political commissars, to ensure enforceability.

Verification and enforcement mechanisms must be tailored to each system, aligning military commitments with the respective political and institutional hierarchies to prevent dilution or selective compliance.

By embedding these realities into engagement design, India can mitigate asymmetry, preserve negotiating leverage, and enhance the effectiveness of M2ME.

Transition to Operational Frameworks

Understanding the conceptual purpose of M2ME, its placement within the DIME construct, and the influence of divergent strategic culture provides the intellectual foundation for evaluating existing mechanisms. These insights critically analyse current confidence-building measures, their limitations, and the need for redesigned frameworks based on equivalence, authority alignment, and enforceability.

Existing M2ME and its Limitations

M2ME: Purpose and Relevance

They serve as structured, mutually agreed military, diplomatic, or technical arrangements designed to mitigate mistrust and prevent tactical friction from spiraling into strategic escalation between adversarial states. These measures are primarily voluntary in nature and are not intended to impose binding political obligations (Sophie Harman, 2024). Their effectiveness lies in minimizing errors, misunderstandings, and unintended conflict by facilitating information exchange, incident management, and predictability of behaviour.

Today's security landscape, defined by grey-zone competition, shorter OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide and Act) loops and multi-domain operations, has shifted M2MEs from peripheral instruments to the centre of national security. In the Indian context, they have evolved to function as frontline mechanisms for conflict management and escalation control, particularly with longstanding rivalries on both fronts where even minor tactical incidents can have strategic ramifications (Nair & Basu, 2021).

Structural Fault Lines: Existing Military Frameworks

While multiple CBMs and communication mechanisms exist, India's military engagement frameworks on both fronts, with China and Pakistan, remain hamstrung by systemic gaps that limit their overall effectiveness.

- **Definitional and Procedural Ambiguity:** Most current agreements lack granular details regarding patrol limits, specific disengagement sequences, management of buffer zones, and escalation thresholds. This ambiguity complicates New Delhi's divergent interpretations, complicating the Indian response while allowing adversaries to exploit 'Selective Compliance' to their advantage.

- **Verification Deficits:** Current arrangements rest heavily on goodwill rather than objective and verifiable data. Along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in particular, the absence of joint verification mechanisms, shared surveillance inputs, or neutral technical validation weakens confidence and increases suspicion (Sophie Harman, 2024). Difficult terrain further aggravates monitoring challenges.

- **Limited Scope of Engagement:** Existing mechanisms remain largely reactive. They focus on incident management rather than synchronising long-term force postures or establishing proactive operational coordination. They do not adequately address stabilization of force postures, synchronization across levels, or long-term behavioural predictability (Sheikh, 2023). There is a need to ensure immediate de-escalation, disengagement, and de-induction of forces to prevent protracted deployment, loss to the exchequer, and dissipating operational effectiveness.

- **Communication Fragility:** While multiple channels exist on paper, they operate in functional silos. Without any cross-linkages or pre-

defined redundancies, there is a low probability of success. Response timelines are undefined, and escalation ladders are unclear. The fallback mechanisms are insufficiently institutionalised, creating vulnerability during fast-moving crises. Imbalance or lack of equivalence in power structure further fails to enable dialogue at an appropriate level.

- **Political Sensitivity:** The M2ME mechanism is currently tethered to remain overly dependent on prevailing political conditions (Nair & Basu, 2021). Periods of heightened tension often result in suspension or underutilisation of military channels, undermining their credibility as stabilising instruments.

- **Domain Exclusion:** Current CBMs remain focused on land and maritime domains, with cyber, space, and electromagnetic dimensions largely excluded. This can be attributed as one of the most glaring vulnerabilities in the current CBM mechanism. These 'Grey Zone domains' offer a high degree of deniability and are increasingly the primary theatres of modern-day conflicts (Healey et al., 2014). The current architecture remains terrestrially focused, leaving fault lines which collectively underscore the need for a more resilient, structured, and future-ready military engagement mechanism.

India - China Military to Military Mechanisms: Structure and Limitations

Over the last two decades, New Delhi and Beijing have codified five bilateral agreements to manage the Line of Actual Control (LAC) (Rehman Huma, 2024). While these span the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, their utility is increasingly questioned by the realities of modern border friction.

At the strategic level, the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) serves as the primary diplomatic-military interface, providing policy alignment and crisis guidance (Vidushi Sharma, 2025). Its impact and effectiveness are, however, diluted by periodicity and the tendency of both sides to use the forum for political signalling rather than concrete policy alignment.

At the operational level, Corps Commander-level meetings have emerged as the workhorse for managing prolonged standoffs and negotiating buffer zones (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). These engagements though, have demonstrated utility in sustaining dialogue during prolonged crises; their outcomes are frequently stymied by glacial implementation and the lack of a mutually accepted verification regime. In the absence of an Army Headquarters-level hotline, the Corps Commander are at the Apex of military - military negotiation, with little space of maneuver, as these are the last resort. Hence, there is a need to scale down M2ME at lower levels.

At the tactical level, Border Personnel Meetings (BPMs) and flag meetings serve as the primary conduits for immediate de-escalation and clarification of intent. While these localised interfaces remain effective in containing tactical frictions, their authority is often confined to incident mitigation rather than substantive engagement.

Collectively, the current architecture provides verbal depth through engagement at various levels, but lacks the horizontal integration and possibility required to withstand sustained political strain (RSIS, 2024).

India - Pakistan Military to Military Mechanisms: Crisis Management Orientation

India's military engagement framework with Islamabad is fundamentally shaped by the inherent volatility of the Line of Control (LoC). The Director General Military Operations (DGMO) hotline remains

the most vital instrument for immediate crisis communication and de-confliction as demonstrated during Operation SINDOOR (The Hindu, 2025).

Flag meetings at designated locations supplement the DGMO Channel by addressing local incidents and reaffirming operational understandings. While these mechanisms have proven effective in preventing tactical skirmishes from escalating, these mechanisms remain highly sensitive to prevailing political atmospherics (Jaffrelot Christophe, 2018).

Strategic-level defence dialogues occur only sporadically and lack the institutional continuity required for long-term stability. This makes the current framework tactically functional, but strategically fragile, highlighting an urgent need for institutional insulation from recurring political volatility.

Positive Reference Models : Bangladesh and Myanmar

India's military engagements with Bangladesh and Myanmar provide instructive contrasts in the value of professional military autonomy. During periods of political transition and uncertainty in Dhaka, uninterrupted military-to-military communication has proven essential to ensure border stability, neutralise disinformation, and prevent escalation (Shahid, 2025). These professional links have successfully neutralized misinformation and prevented escalation, demonstrating a greater continuity than traditional diplomatic channels.

In the Myanmar context, despite the challenges of internal conflict and fragmented territorial control, structured military communication has enabled effective border management and de-confliction (Anshuman Chaudhary, 2025). Crucially, these engagements have remained insulated from domestic political turbulence, underscoring the stabilising potential of professional military dialogue even in complex internal security environments.

These cases illustrate the value of institutionalisation, continuity, and professional autonomy in M2ME frameworks.

The analysis confirms that while India maintains an extensive area of military-to-military interfaces, their operational utility is fundamentally restricted by systematic ambiguity, asymmetric authority, and lack of technical verification. These are not merely incidental failures, but structural deficits. The current architecture suffers from acute communication gap, bureaucratic hurdles, and critical exclusion of emerging grey zone domains, including cyber, space, and the electromagnetic spectrum, where modern escalation is most likely to occur.

Addressing India's current deficiencies requires more than incremental adjustment. It demands a deliberate strategic pivot. We must move away from this episodic and reactive engagement towards a structured framework built on delegated authority, technical expertise, and institutional resilience. This necessity forms the basis for the expanded interaction and equivalence framework outlined in the following section.

Expanding Interaction and Establishing Equivalence

Purpose and Context

If we analyse the M2ME discussed in the previous sections, the primary weaknesses in India's current M2ME frameworks come not from the absence of dialogue, but from **ambiguity of mandate, lack of enforceability, and imbalance of communication structures**.

Establishment of clear equivalence across the negotiating levels is required to address these shortcomings.

Therefore, this section outlines a comprehensive framework to strengthen M2ME by aligning authority, defining issue resolution boundaries, leveraging multilateral reinforcement and institutionalising resilient communication infrastructure.

Equivalence Framework: Foundational Principle

For M2ME to produce enforceable and durable outcomes, military interlocutors must operate with clearly established equivalence across three interdependent dimensions of **geographic influence**, **decision-making autonomy,** and **problem-solving capability.** Equivalence across these dimensions ensures that commitments reached at a particular level of engagement can be implemented, monitored, and enforced within corresponding levels of the opposing military, preventing asymmetry in authority, execution or accountability.

- **Geographic Influence** Geographic influence requires that negotiators exercise operational responsibility over comparable areas of deployment or sectors of contact. Alignment of territorial or functional jurisdiction, such as engagement between commanders responsible for equivalent frontage, depth, or maritime zones, ensures that negotiated commitments directly correspond to forces and activities under the negotiator's control. This principle is particularly critical in the India - China and India-Pakistan contexts, where sector-specific agreements on patrolling patterns, disengagement modalities or force postures must be executed at the same echelon on both sides to avoid implementation gaps and selective compliance.

- **Decision Making Autonomy** Decision-making autonomy demands that negotiators possess clearly defined authority to negotiate, conclude, and implement agreements within their mandate. Prior clarity on the scope of permissible commitments reduces ambiguity and prevents post-facto dilution of understandings by higher echelons. Equally important are well-defined reporting, ratification and accountability chains that enable timely oversight and corrective action in case of deviation. Without such autonomy, engagements risk becoming declaratory rather than operationally meaningful.

- **Problem Solving Capability** Problem-solving capability relates to the negotiator's capacity to translate agreements into executable operational outcomes. This includes control over requisite resources, authority to issue orders, ability to activate communication channels, and capacity to coordinate supporting elements. Negotiators must also possess standing to verify compliance within their area of responsibility and escalate violations through established mechanisms. Such capability ensures that engagements result in tangible stabilising measures rather than aspirational intent.

Equivalence as an Escalation Control Instrument

Adherence to equivalence across geographic influence, decision-making autonomy, and problem-solving capability forms the foundation of credible and effective M2ME. In contested and high-risk environments such as the Line of Actual Control and Line of Control, this framework reduces misalignment, enhances confidence in implementation, and strengthens escalation control.

Issue Resolution Framework: Matching Issues to Authority

While equivalence establishes **who** should negotiate, issue resolution frameworks define **what** can be negotiated at each level. Clear delineation of issue categories prevents mandate overreach while enabling focused and productive engagement.

- **Strategic Level** At the strategic level, **India - Pakistan** engagements address nuclear safety, deterrence stability, force posture, and broad defence cooperation. These engagements explicitly exclude territorial sovereignty and Kashmir's political status. India–China engagements focus on establishing norms in emerging domains such as cyber and space, leveraging billet-level coordination as a

cornerstone post-Shimla Agreement to ensure force posture stability, advance arms control, and reinforce regional security frameworks. These engagements explicitly exclude boundary demarcation. **This ensures strategic stability discussions proceed without trespassing into politically non-negotiable domains**.

- **Operational Level** At the operational level, **India-Pakistan** mechanisms manage multi-sector disengagements, escalation thresholds, exercise notifications, and heavy weapons limitations near the LC. While **India-China** mechanisms address LAC disengagements, buffer zone expansion, patrol protocols, infrastructure restraint, and exercise non-interference. **Operational dialogues inform strategic posture but do not independently resolve strategic or territorial disputes**.

- **Tactical Level Issue Resolution** The Tactical level engagements focus on immediate incident management such as Patrol separations, emergency communication activation, local ceasefire enforcement, physical disengagement, causality evacuation, and Humanitarian and Disaster Relief Operations (HADR) at friction points. **Authority is limited to implementation and immediate de-escalation within higher-level frameworks**.

- **Technical-Level Issue Resolution** The technical level supports all other tiers by advising on verification mechanisms, recommending data-sharing protocols, defining communication specifications, and conducting feasibility assessments for CBMs. **Technical bodies provide expert input without binding authority, ensuring decisions remain politically and militarily accountable**. Further, there is a need to form Military-MEA symbiotic structures right from the Tactical Level to the Strategic Level, to carryout delimitation, delineation, and demarcation of LAC.

Expanding Engagement through Multilateral and Regional Forums

M2ME gains resilience when embedded within multi-layered architectures that combine bilateral channels with regional and international forums. These platforms provide political reinforcement and normative legitimacy without substituting direct dialogue.

- **Multilateral Frameworks** Multilateral frameworks such as the **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)** and **BRICS Defence Ministers' Meetings** offer opportunities for reinforcement through consensus building, crisis consultation, and signalling restraint. While they cannot resolve bilateral disputes, they function as stabilising backstops.

- **Regional Mechanisms** Regional mechanisms, including the **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)** and ASEAN Plus platforms, support norm development in cyber and space domains, enabling India and China to align expectations without unilateral perception.

- **International Institutions** International institutions such as the **UN, Military Observer frameworks,** and the **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)** offer technical expertise in verification and humanitarian norms, though their political applicability remains context-sensitive.

- **Track 1.5 Diplomacy** This engagement serves as a critical instrument for multi-tiered conflict resolution, leveraging discreet channels to de-escalate tensions. In the India–China context, it provides an effective framework for managing boundary disputes, enabling strategic dialogue, mitigating potential escalations, and facilitating negotiated settlements without compromising operational readiness or national security imperatives.

Communication Infrastructure: Redundancy, Security and Resilience

Effective M2ME depends fundamentally on communication systems that are reliable, secure, and redundant. Communication architectures must be **redundant,** which are enabling continuity if one channel fails, **distributed** to prevent single points of failure, and **secure**, protecting sensitive exchanges from interception or manipulation.

Operationally, this requires multiple independent channels supported by encrypted systems, documented follow-ups to verbal exchanges, clear escalation protocols, and comprehensive record-keeping. Regular drills ensure readiness and procedural familiarity. A verification mechanism including videography and geotagging should be incorporated to add credence to own historical data.

For **India–Pakistan**, constant readiness of DGMO hotlines, corps-level links, satellite backups, and 24/7 technical support is essential.

For **India–China**, high-level and operational hotlines, secure video coordination, and diplomatic backchannels provide layered resilience.

Balancing transparency and secrecy requires compartmentalisation, tiered information sharing, joint verification protocols, and strict classification discipline.

Section Integration and Transition

The points discussed above- the frameworks of equivalence, issue resolution, multilateral reinforcement, and resilient communication infrastructure, once taken together, constitute the operational backbone of effective M2ME. By aligning authority levels, clearly defining negotiable domains, reinforcing bilateral mechanisms through external forums, and securing communication pathways, India can ensure engagements remain actionable, credible, and resilient under stress. These integrated

mechanisms establish the foundation for translating operational frameworks into political outcomes, providing a natural transition to the synthesis, recommendations, and implementation roadmap presented in the next section.

Synthesis and Recommendations

Strategic Synthesis: Need for M2ME. The contemporary security environment, which encompasses multi-domain operations, grey-zone competition, compressed OODA cycles, and nuclear overhang, essentially alters the role of M2ME. M2M is no longer an auxiliary confidence-building tool, but a core instrument of conflict management, escalation control, and strategic stability. Historical experiences of the Korean Armistice, Cold War crisis management mechanisms to contemporary practices in disputed regions demonstrate the capability of professional military dialogues to stabilise regions even in the absence of political solutions. The principal value of M2M lies not in resolving sovereignty issues, but in the prevention of tactical incidents mutating into strategic crises. In the Indian scenario, M2ME assumes greater significance with the prospect of collusion between two nuclear-armed neighbours. In addition, persistent grey-zone, media hyped escalation dynamics and changing regional scenarios necessitate reliable, continuous and fool-proof M2M communications. The same would manifest as disengagement, de-escalation, and de-induction of forces from the disputed areas. Institutionalised M2MEs will allow space for balanced political decisions, ensure calibrated signalling, and insulate national leadership from reactive escalation response. Therefore, establishing a credible M2ME structure is not a discretionary diplomatic exercise but a strategic imperative to ensure India maintains a credible deterrence posture, crisis management mechanism, and regional leadership role.

Foundational Principles for Enhanced M2ME. Based on the preceding analysis, effective Mil to Mil engagement should rest on five foundational

principles, which should act as foundational principles to inform the subsequent recommendations: -

- **Political Ownership** The underlying core issues of the "two nations theory" and our neighbours' claims on Kashmir, along with the illegitimacy and non-recognition of the colonial boundary agreement, are unlikely to be resolved in the near-term. Consequently, it is imperative to minimize the recurring crisis situation and ensure the containment of escalation to a level that does not escalate to a full-blown war.

- **Equivalence in Authority.** Stakeholders dealing with M2ME should execute authority empowered with matched geographic responsibility, autonomy in decision-making and execution to ensure long-term credibility and implementation.

- **Well-defined Charter.** Clearly delineated charters at each engagement tier, aligned with overall aim, to prevent overreach while enabling focused progress.

- **Resilient Communication Architecture.** A redundant, secure, and tiered communication architecture is essential to sustain dialogue under duress.

- **Verification Mechanism.** Agreements and engagements at every level should be backed by feasible verification mechanisms to maintain confidence and compliance.

- **Institutional Continuity.** Engagement frameworks must remain insulated from political volatility to function reliably during crises.

Recommendations

Structural and Procedural Reforms

- **Establish Layered Equivalence Frameworks.** There is a need to formalise engagement hierarchical structures at strategic, operational, tactical, and technical levels, with clearly articulated mandates and decision thresholds. Internal authorisation protocols must specify autonomous decision space, with a clearly laid down end state. Reciprocal equivalence understanding with China and Pakistan should be developed through exploratory engagements. The resolution of Chushul-Moldo and Naku La patrolling mechanism (Sep 2021) at the tactical level is a positive example. Further, certain issues can be resolved at the Battalion Commander/ Colonel level, obviating unnecessary media glare. In addition, **MEA representatives,** right from the tactical level, would assist in obviating bureaucratic miscommunications. There would, however be a need to clearly define their mandate and role to ensure they do not militate against operational autonomy of the framework.

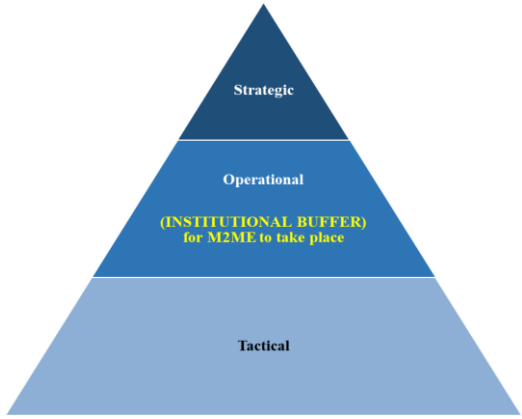


Figure 3: Optimising the Institutional Buffer (Author's Visualisation)

- **Well-Defined Issue Resolution Baskets.** Each tier of M2ME should have well-defined issue resolution baskets – based on the

tactical, operational, and strategic level, to prevent mandate ambiguity. Strategic-level engagements should address **posture stability** and emerging domains, operational levels should focus on disengagements and the threshold matrix, while tactical levels should ensure incident control and immediate de-escalation.

- **Institutionalised Verification Mechanisms.** M2ME would be further strengthened by the introduction of **joint verification patrols** in agreed buffer zones, **shared surveillance feeds** under defined classification protocols, and **standing technical working** groups to review compliance.

Communication and Escalation Control

- **Formalised Communication Architecture.** The study suggests augmenting the existing hotlines at different tiers of engagement, backed by satellite links in high-altitude and remote areas. Well-established protocols must define criteria for activation, periodicity and scope of communication.

- **Define Graduated Escalation Control Protocols.** Define threshold incident triggers that mandate escalation from tactical to operational and strategic level. In addition, establish standardised de-escalation sequences, prioritising military channels before political intervention.

Institutionalised Cadre Base Development

- **Formalised Strategic Culture Literacy for the Military.** A formalised training for military cadre, based on the Military-Intelligence (Deep State) dynamics of Pakistan and the Party-Military relationship in China, is essential for pragmatic mandate execution. This cadre base should ensure continuity, preserve institutional memory and provide authoritative representation in

sustained engagements. Further, retired military veterans with domain expertise can be embedded in the structures at various levels for an archival base.

- **Strengthen Functional Competence in Engagements.** The study suggest prioritising domain expertise and operational relevance over rank-centric representation to enhance credibility and long term applicability. In addition, embedding Under Secretaries, Secretaries, and Joint Secretaries, MEA, right from the tactical level to the strategic level, would allow cross-domain comprehensive engagements.

- **Leverage Multilateral Platforms.** Use platforms such as SCO, BRICS, and G20 to reinforce commitment to dialogue and norm-based competition, while preserving bilateral autonomy. Regional forums should support cyber and space-based development, supporting the overall bilateral engagements.

- **Media Management.** M2ME needs insulation from ubiquitous media to preserve the integrity of engagements. This necessitates dedicated, encrypted access-controlled military communication channels, tiered disclosure protocols limiting wide publicity to strategic-level engagements, rapid-response mechanisms training for media houses to prevent information distortion, driving escalation dynamics.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Phase I - Institutional Preparation.** Establish a military cadre base, finalise engagement doctrines, define equivalence frameworks, and upgrade communication architecture.

- **Phase II - Technical Foundation.** This phase includes conduct of exploratory engagements, activation of technical working groups and pilot verification mechanisms along select LAC and LC sectors.

- **Phase III - Operationalisation.** Implement layered engagement structures, verification mechanisms reinforced by multilateral platforms.
- **Phase IV - Consolidation and Adaptation.** Expand frameworks into emerging domains, institutionalise normalisation protocols and refine mechanisms based on operational experience.

Concluding Assessment

M2ME has evolved into an indispensable instrument of contemporary statecraft. Their effectiveness lies not in resolving entrenched political disputes but in managing friction, preventing miscalculation and preserving strategic decision space. For India, transitioning from episodic crisis management to institutionalised military diplomacy is both a defensive necessity and a strategic opportunity. By embedding equivalence, clarity in charter, resilient communication, and professional competence into its military engagement mechanism, India can strengthen deterrence stability, reduce escalation risks, and reinforce its image as a responsible regional power. The proposed framework offers a structured, future-ready pathway to achieve these objectives, provided it is supported by sustained political commitment, institutional investment, and a cultural mind shift that **professional military engagement is a strength, not a concession**.

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Civil-Military Fusion: An Imperative For India

AKHIL DOGRA

Abstract

Exploring the concept of Civil-Military Fusion (CMF) and its imperatives for India's national security and economic development objectives, this article traces the historical evolution of civil-military relations in India from pre-colonial governance structures to contemporary reforms. The study examines the dimensions and scope of CMF, while critically analysing the merits and limitations of the globally existing models; thereby identifying opportunities and challenges for implementation in India. Through qualitative research methodology and thematic analysis of the primary and secondary data, the research article presents key findings and recommendations, crystallising them into an implementation framework, tailored for India. It highlights the need for comprehensive policy reforms, ushering cultural shifts, and establishing effective collaboration among stakeholders to overcome the challenges and capitalise on opportunities. The article argues that CMF is a potential transformative paradigm for India, which can unlock significant gains in national security and economic growth objectives, fostering resilience and strategic autonomy on the global stage.

Introduction

Civil-Military Fusion (CMF) is a concept that seeks to achieve favourable national security outcomes by integrating the civil and military

domains. It leverages their strengths and capabilities to attain comprehensive national resilience while pursuing rapid economic development. It aims to achieve collaborative fusion between civil and military resources, expertise, and capacities. CMF emphasises seamless blending of civilian and military capabilities, leveraging each other's strengths to enhance preparedness and response in the face of multifaceted security challenges[1]. The term 'Civil-Military Fusion' (CMF) was first prominently used in the context of China's strategic discourse and policy frameworks around middle of the last decade. In due course, it has been particularly associated with China's efforts to modernise its military capabilities and address the evolving security landscape by emphasising the need for comprehensive cooperation and synergy between civilian and military domains[2].

Notwithstanding recent origins of the term, the concept of CMF traces back to the strategic evolution observed in the trajectory of global powers throughout history. Colonial powers in the 19th century, followed by the United States of America (USA) and the Soviet Union in the last century, underwent processes akin to CMF. As the respective periods mark peaks of national power of these nation-states, experts argue that CMF paves the path to geostrategic greatness[3]. Presently, while China stands as the most notable proponent, actively engaging in CMF, the USA, Israel, and Turkey are other significant examples. Therefore, understanding, imbibing and implementing CMF holds significant relevance for an emerging power like India.

India faces unique challenges and opportunities as an aspiring global power. To secure its strategic interests and contribute to regional and global stability, India must explore the potential of CMF to bolster its national security and developmental objectives. The need for a comprehensive examination of CMF, tailored to India's unique value system, realities, and aspirations, is therefore evident[4]. In this context, this article argues that CMF is an imperative for India, not merely as a strategy

for defence but as a comprehensive approach that intertwines security, technological advancements, economic growth, and global competitiveness. Its implementation is pivotal in shaping India's future resilience, innovation, and strategic autonomy on the world stage. The article will delve into the multifaceted aspects of CMF, examining its conceptual percepts in the light of historical evolution in India; evaluating and seeking inspirations from the models, existing in different countries; and finally identifying the opportunities and challenges for execution, crystallising them into an implementation framework.

Historical Evolution of Civil-Military Relations in India

India's civil-military relations epitomise a transformative journey, evolving from colonial-era divisions to contemporary reforms. This trajectory navigates democratic challenges, structural changes, and the pursuit of self-reliance. Recent policy direction from the government signifies the blending of civilian oversight and military expertise for a robust defence ecosystem. It mirrors India's commitment to collaboration, innovation, and strategic autonomy, aligning defence with national aspirations[5]. A brief appraisal, as described below, is necessary to understand the trajectory of civil-military integration, and associated nuances of potential fusion:

- **Pre-Colonial: Era of Rich Inheritance**. The pre-colonial era civil-military paradigm in India showcases a rich inheritance. This era was characterised by regional kingdoms and empires, each with distinct governance and military systems. Military forces were intricately woven into the societal fabric, often being a part of local ruling structures. The administration and command of military forces were largely decentralised, with significant autonomy vested in regional rulers and their appointed military leaders[6]. The period was marked by varied military strategies, from localised defence mechanisms to expansive military campaigns, shaping the dynamics of governance, society, and defence structures.

- **Colonial Period: The Foundations of Division**. With India slipping into colonial rule, the balance was disrupted, ushering a clear segregation between civilian and military domains. As administering a vast colony like India became increasingly complex, the segregation of the Military Department grew deeper, albeit with integrated representation in the governance structures through a Military Member. Subsequent legislation and restructuring fortified the supremacy of the Governor General's or later Viceroy's Council and the sidelining of the military Commander-in-Chief[7].

- **Post-Independence Period: Shaping of Democratic Oversight**. Post-independence, the quest for establishing civilian control over the armed forces resulted in complete isolation of the military from the government. The Nehruvian era emphasised political control, symbolised by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), including its earlier versions, and the Ministry of Defence (MoD), while the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) advised on military affairs. MoD shaped civil-military relations, delineating spheres of influence and facilitating communication between civilian and military leadership. Successive structural alterations further marginalised the Service Chiefs and their direct involvement in the strategic decision-making[8].

Recent Transformations: Laying the Foundation for Integration. In recent years, India has witnessed substantial reforms aimed at enhancing coordination and synergy among the armed forces. The Kargil Review Committee and Group of Ministers recommended structural changes, leading to the establishment of the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) and subsequently the appointment of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), and the establishment of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in 2020. Presently, India's pursuit of CMF stands on the foundation laid by the 'CDS-DMA' and policies such as 'Atamnirbhar Bharat' and 'Make in

India', emphasising self-reliance in defence, fostering collaboration between civilian and military sectors. However, entrenched bureaucratic structures, cultural differences, and the need for synchronised planning pose challenges[9]. Overcoming silos and promoting a collaborative culture alongside balancing security imperatives with civilian interests remain vital. Yet, there exist opportunities through technological advancements, innovation, and public-private collaborations, promising substantial progress toward self-reliance and national security.

Research Methodology

To achieve a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of CMF and its implications for India, Qualitative Research Methodology was employed, which includes the following:

- In-depth interviews of the subject matter experts and stakeholders, selected through purposive sampling, based on stringent criteria. It includes senior retired and serving military officers from all three services, civilian officers, academics working in the field, and representatives from leading defence industries.
- Comparative analysis of the CMF models of China, USA, Israel and Turkey based on the inputs from Panel Discussions on the subject, conducted by Manohar Parrikar - Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) and Observer Research Foundation (ORF).
- Data (primary and secondary) were thematically analysed and integrated to generate themes, which were further analysed and collated into key findings and recommendations as described subsequently in this article.

Analysis of Themes: Scope and Concept of CMF

Paradigm Shift from Traditional Civil-Military Relations. CMF represents a paradigm shift in how societies approach security, resilience,

and development by fostering collaboration, integration, and the leveraging of synergies between civilian and military sectors. CMF relies on a multidimensional approach, optimising the military and civilian sectors towards addressing the multifaceted national security and economic development challenges. The following aspects of the CMF represent the paradigm shift from traditional civil-military relations:

- **Collaboration vs Separation**. Clear distinction between civilian and military spheres, with limited interaction and collaboration has been a key characteristic of traditional civil-military relations, particularly witnessed in contemporary democracies, including India[10]. CMF, on the contrary emphasises integration between civil and military sectors, in order to leverage their strengths optimally.

- **Holistic Approach**. Traditional civil-military relations are mostly restricted to defence and security-related issues. However, CMF represents a more holistic approach towards national security, encompassing a wider spectrum of challenges that go beyond the scope of traditional security concerns[11].

- **Emphasis on Technologies.** Leveraging dual-use technologies that are beneficial to both civilian and military sectors is a key tenet of CMF. It is a major departure from the traditional approach, wherein civil and military technologies followed segregated paths of advancement[12].

- **Shared Responsibilities**. CMF envisages shared responsibility of the civil and military sectors in national security and economic development. It emphasises collaborative functioning of both the sectors, in contrast to their distinct roles, as witnessed in traditional civil-military relations[13].

- **Mutually Beneficial Strategy**. CMF relies on mutually beneficial strategies that aim to achieve robust national security and economic development by catalysing defence modernisation and

technological innovation. It is premised on the necessities of the contemporary world, where the security and economic goals of the nations are increasingly interdependent[14].

- **Adaptability and Flexibility**. Adaptability and flexibility are the essential tenets of CMF. It relies on rapidly adapting to the ever-changing challenges of the contemporary security environment. Scholars consider this ability to continuously evolve a significant reason for the success of CMF.

Scope of CMF. While the scope of CMF spans a broad spectrum of fields where civil and military domains can collaborate, the integration of military, academia, and industry forms the core tenet of this concept[15]. Explained through a Rich Picture depicted in the Figure below, CMF functions as a network where military, government, industry, academic, and research institutions converge their strengths and capabilities with the objective of national security and economic development gains. In this network, the military provides a strong national security framework, collaborating closely with civilian government, providing a secure environment and demand for the industry to grow. Simultaneously, academia-industry collaboration under governmental oversight prioritises dual-use and cutting-edge technologies, reinforcing the military and industrial capabilities of the nation. This framework generates mutually beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders, propelling the national security and economic development objectives. Encompassing diverse entities, the success of CMF is premised upon the seamless flow of information, technology transfer mechanisms, sharing of resources, and above all, the commonality of purpose and shared responsibility towards national security and developmental objectives[16]. Despite its collaborative character, CMF however, faces critical challenges in execution, particularly in diffusing the existing silos, achieving equitable distribution of resources, establishing amenable technology sharing frameworks, and often witnessing divergence in national security and economic growth priorities.

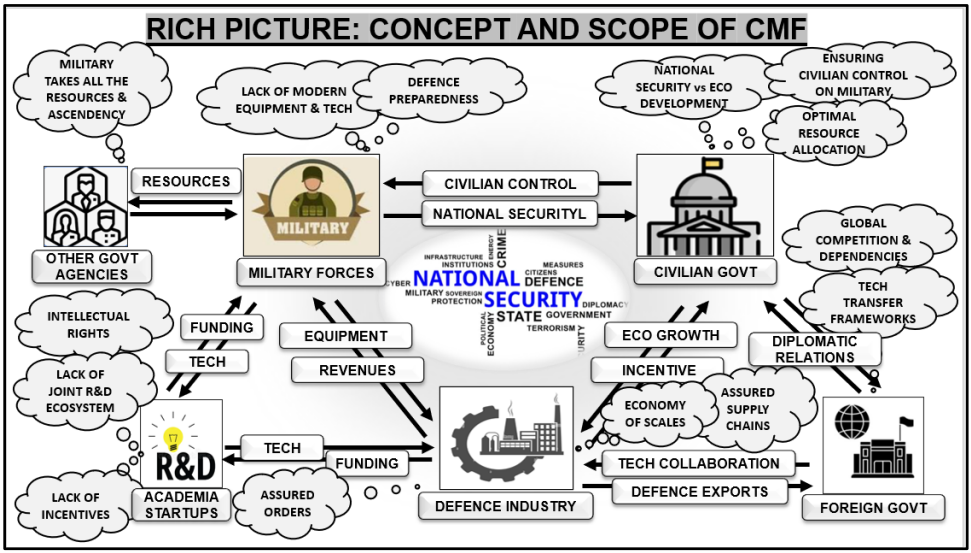


Figure 1: Rich Picture Analysing Concept and Scope of CMF

Comparative Analysis of Global Models of CMF

Analysis of the CMF models prevalent in various countries of the world provides valuable insights for India. These models represent the evolving strategies through which nations harness the synergies between civilian innovation, technological prowess, and military capabilities. In an era where technological advancements are pivotal to national security and economic progress, countries like the USA, China, Israel, and Turkey have developed distinct frameworks to integrate their civilian and military sectors[17]. Each model bears its own intricacies, strengths, limitations, and nuances in balancing innovation, governance, and strategic alignment.

China's model, propelled by a national strategy, intertwines economic growth with military dominance but faces criticism for unethical practices, coercive methods, and extreme centralisation[18]. In contrast, the US system emphasises disaggregated yet robust collaboration between civilian and military sectors, showcased by initiatives like the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and Army Futures Command (AFC).

However, its open nature exposes the model to technology theft threats and bureaucratic red-tape. Israel's model showcases seamless synergy between the military, industry and academia, however, its over-reliance on the conscript system and reservist corps, presents challenges[19]. Turkey's model relies on focused approach for technological advancements in specific fields, for instance the drone technology. However, the economic instability and restrictions on innovation due to excessive governmental control pose significant challenges. With its own strengths and limitations, each model offers insights for India in crafting bespoke CMF strategies, aligned to environmental realities and cultural preferences. The Figure below tabulates the comparative analysis of these models along with their applicability for India:

Model	Strengths/ Advantages	Weaknesses/ Shortcomings/ Limitations	Applicability for India
China	• Strong politico-strategic direction and support • Centralised and top-driven policy-based rapid implementation • Holistic approach to national security and development	• Coercive and unethical methods of technology acquisition • Concerns over the excessive state control inhibiting innovation • Challenges in the execution due to vast scope	• Offers insights into an approach based upon centralised planning and implementation • Coercive and unethical practices not compatible with Indian ethos
USA	• Disaggregated, yet robust collaboration between the military, academia, and industry	• Bureaucratic and systemic complexities • Potential threats of espionage and technology theft	• The collaborative model aligns with the Indian ethos and technology development aims

Model	Strengths/ Advantages	Weaknesses/ Shortcomings/ Limitations	Applicability for India
	• Private partnerships foster a culture of innovation (DARPA and AFC) • Proven track record with significant military, economic, and technological capabilities	• Dependence on a few key industry players	• Provides a model for integrating diverse expertise • Emphasis on private sector aligns with India's economic goals and recent policy direction
Israel	• Reservist corps and conscript-service-based model • Rapid innovation and responsiveness • Achieves close societal integration	• Resource constraints due to smaller size and limitations in scale • Heavy reliance on US and Western support	• Synergy between sectors could inform the Indian collaboration efforts • India does not have conscript service. The recent 'Agniveer' scheme differs in scope, scale and gestation period.
Turkey	• Strong government support and centralised control • Development of indigenous defence capabilities • Strategic focus on key technologies (Drone Technology)	• Political and economic instability impacting progress • Restrictive centralised government control affecting innovation • Limitations in scope	• Emphasis on defence-industry alignment mirrors India's objectives • Learnings to focus on certain niche technologies, such as, IT, space, biotech, aerospace and hyper-sonics

Figure 2: Comparative Analysis and Applicability for India

Analysis of Themes: Opportunities and Challenges for Implementation

The complexity of aligning civilian and military sectors for national security and economic growth poses several challenges for the implementation of CMF in India. A collaborative approach is essential which includes ushering cultural shifts through policy reforms, thereby achieving synergy between the civilian and military domains. At the same time, a host of opportunities exist. By capitalising on these opportunities, India can bridge the gap between civilian and military sectors, facilitating technological advancements, fostering innovation, and ensuring national security while propelling economic growth and global competitiveness[20].

Imperatives for Implementation. Key themes pertaining to the opportunities and challenges, which have emerged from the interview of experts were analysed to identify imperatives for implementation[21]. These are tabulated in the Figure given below:

Implementation Challenges	Implementation Opportunities	Imperatives for Implementation
• Organisational silos • Lack of a coherent policy • Lack of an implementation roadmap	• Recent Policy Initiatives	• Coherent policy frameworks facilitating collaboration and addressing security concerns. • Capitalisation of recent policy initiatives of the government to bolster indigenous production and self-reliance in defence technology. • Development of a clear roadmap for streamlined CMF implementation.
• Security concerns	• Increasing realisation of benefits and	• Fostering a mindset of collaboration and shared objectives between sectors. Aligning

Implementation Challenges	Implementation Opportunities	Imperatives for Implementation
• Resource allocation • Need for cultural shifts	strategic guidance for integration	private sector interests with national security priorities. • Balancing and aligning the allocation of resources between defence needs while ensuring economic growth.
• Lack of technological integration	• Technological prowess in certain sectors • Burgeoning Startup ecosystem • Vast technical talent pool	• Leveraging technology expertise in specific sectors for accelerating CMF implementation. • Promotion of dual-use technologies and harmonising applications through legal frameworks. • Harnessing the burgeoning technical talent pool and startup ecosystem.
• Lack of engagement with Private Sector	• Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) and academic collaborations • Defence production and exports • Economic Growth of India	• Boosting defence production and exports to bolster indigenous defence capabilities. • Leveraging the economic growth towards increased R&D investments and technology initiatives. • PPP-driven R&D focused towards dual-use technologies.
• International technology collaboration complexities	• Enhanced Geopolitical status and collaborations	• Leveraging strategic partnerships for acquiring critical technologies and supply chain security.

Figure 3: Implementation Opportunities, Challenges and Imperatives

Recommendations

India's Evolutionary Trajectory: Potential CMF Leap. Recent reforms in India's higher defence organisation; like the appointment of CDS and the establishment of DMA, exhibit that the political leadership is seized of the merits in ushering CMF. India's historical trajectory of civil-military relations, from pre-colonial convergence to post-independence civilian dominance, seems to have transited the proverbial full circle, uniquely positioning it to adopt CMF strategies for substantial gains in national security and economic growth outcomes. Initiatives like 'Make in India' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' emphasise self-reliance in defence production, propelled through collaboration and integration of civilian and military resources[22]. Learning from the historical lessons, India stands at the cusp of transformation in national security setup and defence ecosystem. It is therefore imperative for India not to miss the proverbial golden opportunity to embrace CMF. However, its implementation requires concerted political will, strategic direction and paradigm shifts.

Lessons from Global Models and Practices. The article meticulously examined the strengths and limitations of global CMF models, offering critical insights and discerning key takeaways for adopting a tailored framework for India[23]:

- **Adaptable Strategies: Tailored Model**. The analysis underscores necessity for flexible strategies, balancing national security and economic growth objectives. At the same time, technological advancements should be balanced with ethical considerations and societal integration. India must tailor its CMF approach, leveraging strengths and avoiding pitfalls evident in global models.
- **Political-will and Centralised Implementation**. India should seek inspiration from Chinese model's politico-strategic coherence and centralised top-driven implementation to achieve rapid

transformation. The growing realisation in merits of CMF among India's decision makers should be fully capitalised.

- **Technology and Innovation Driven Approach**. Indian model should emulate the US model's collaborative approach, fostering innovation in dual-use and disruptive technologies through industry partnerships, yet navigate potential hurdles. Following recommendations particularly emerge:
  - **Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO)**. Re-organisation and empowerment of DRDO on the lines of DARPA to drive, rather than undertaking critical research in defence technology is recommended.
  - **Capability Development Command**. Establishment of an agency similar to US AFC is recommended to closely interact and drive collaborative R&D with academia, startups and industry.
  - **National Defence University (NDU)**. India should enhance collaboration between academia, industry, and the military to rapidly prototype and deploy cutting-edge defence technologies, through establishment of institutions such as NDU.
- **Focus on Specific Technologies**. Drawing inspiration from Turkey's model, India can emphasise strategic focus on high payoff technologies, such as Information Technology (IT), space, biotech, aerospace, Artificial Intelligence (AI), hypersonic, unmanned systems and other emerging technologies.
- **Un-ethical Acquisition of Technologies**. Indian ethos is not compatible with unethical practices and coercive control. Hence, lure towards un-ethical acquisition of technologies and coercive

practices are avoidable. At the same time, guarding against threats to security of intellectual property is essential.

- **Societal Integration**. Reservist corps and conscript systems of Israel is a significant factor in success of its CMF. While the model cannot be replicated in India, the recent Agniveer scheme certainly holds potential to enhance societal integration, which should be expanded. In addition, the feasibility of its expansion to officer ranks through 'Tour of Duty' scheme may be explored.

Implementation Framework. Based on a thorough analysis of the concept and scope of CMF suitable for Indian realities, learnings from global models and practices, and the specific challenges and opportunities, a broad and outline Implementation Framework has been developed. It proposes a multifaceted approach that integrates actions across political, bureaucratic, societal, military, academic, and industrial dimensions, as tabulated in the Figure below[24]:

Dimension	Implementation Strategies
Policy and Regulatory Reforms	• **Collaborative Policies**. Continuously evolve policies promoting collaboration and integration between civilian and military domains. • **Regulatory Framework**. Establish a regulatory framework facilitating civilian-military synergy while addressing security and propriety concerns. • **Implementation Roadmap**. Develop a clear roadmap for streamlined CMF implementation.
Cultural and Collaborative Shifts	• **Cultural Adoption**. Foster a collaborative mindset across sectors, aligning private-sector interests with national security objectives through cross-pollination and societal integration.

Dimension	Implementation Strategies
	• **Resource Management**. Integrate national security with economic developmental needs under the aegis of NITI Aayog, ensuring optimal allocation of resources.
Technological Integration	• **Leverage Technological Expertise**. Leverage India's technological strengths in IT, space, biotech, and other emerging technologies for CMF. Initiate policies and establish institutions to integrate cross-sector expertise. • **Dual-Use Technologies**. Foster collaboration for dual-use technologies benefiting both civilian and military applications. Establish legal frameworks to harmonise the objectives.
Innovation and Talent Development	• **Startup Ecosystem and Talent Pool**. Nurture startups and tap into their innovation potential. Promote and consolidate formal mechanisms for cross-sector training to develop a versatile and adaptable workforce. • **Academic Collaborations**. Integrate academia, industry and military to drive R&D and innovation through PPP and accelerated establishment of institutions such as the National Defence University (NDU).
Defence Production and Economic Growth	• **Indigenous Defence Capabilities**. Promote MSMEs and startups to bolster indigenous defence production and capabilities, by improving their ecosystem, funding, policies, and mentoring. • **Policy Initiatives**. Continue to evolve and invest in policy initiatives such as 'Atamnirbhar Bharat' and 'Make in India' to enhance resilience and self-reliance. • **Leverage Economic Growth**. Leverage economic growth to channelise more funds towards R&D and technological initiatives through the establishment of National Research Fund or Foundation.

Dimension	Implementation Strategies
International Collaborations	• **Global Technology Partnerships**. Leverage strategic partnerships with USA, Russia, France, Japan and other friendly nations to develop critical technologies. • **Geopolitical Leverage**. Strategically navigate global complexities, fostering alliances conducive to CMF objectives.

Figure 4: Implementation Framework

Conclusion

India's journey towards embracing CMF reflects its dynamic evolution from pre-colonial governance structures to contemporary reforms aimed at bolstering national security and fostering economic growth. With groundwork laid by the recent defence policy initiatives and organisational reforms, India stands poised to harness the transformative potential of CMF. However, overcoming the challenges of culturally entrenched organisational silos, lack of public-private partnership and technological collaboration, and geopolitical complexities requires steadfast political will, strategic direction and concerted efforts at all levels. Yet, by capitalising on its technological prowess, establishing cross-sector integration, and embracing a collaborative approach, India can reap the benefits from CMF, providing significant gains in national security and economic growth objectives, fostering resilience and strategic autonomy on the global stage.

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Beyond Weapons and Numbers: An Analysis of Military Superiority through the Experiences of the Indian Army

TANAY D. MUNSHI

Abstract

This research paper explores the foundations of military superiority through the experience of the Indian Army, deliberately moving beyond assessments centered on numerical strength, technological sophistication, or defence expenditure. Using a qualitative, case-based approach, the study analyses how leadership culture, institutional learning, operational adaptability, soldier ethos, and strategic restraint interact to shape military effectiveness over time. Drawing on major post-independence conflicts – including the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the 1971 Indo-Pak War, the Kargil conflict, and contemporary limited-conflict episodes such as the Galwan Valley clash, the surgical strikes following the Uri attack, the Balakot air strike, and Operation Sindoor – the paper advances the argument that military superiority is best understood as an evolving institutional capability rather than a static material advantage. The analysis suggests that

effectiveness lies in the ability to balance discipline with flexibility, restraint with resolve, and tradition with adaptation, offering broader insights into sustainable military power within democratic political systems.

Introduction

India's security environment has been shaped by persistent geopolitical complexity, contested borders, and an evolving spectrum of conventional and unconventional threats. Since independence, the Indian Army has remained the central institution responsible for safeguarding territorial integrity and national sovereignty, often operating in extreme terrains and under intense political, diplomatic, and ethical constraints. Few modern armies have been required to function across such a wide range of operational contexts with comparable continuity.

Discussions on military power frequently reduce superiority to visible indicators—numbers, budgets, or advanced platforms. While these factors contribute to capability, they offer only a limited explanation of how military effectiveness is sustained over time. History repeatedly demonstrates that armed forces facing material constraints can still prevail when leadership quality, institutional learning, adaptability, and morale align effectively. Conversely, materially superior forces have often faltered in the absence of these attributes.

This paper is motivated by the need to examine military superiority beyond surface-level metrics. Rather than treating wars as isolated events or outcomes as products of technology alone, the study approaches military effectiveness as an institutional process shaped by experience, reform, and human agency. The Indian Army presents a particularly instructive case because its history includes both significant success and profound setbacks.

The 1962 Sino-Indian War occupies a central place in this analysis, not as a defining failure but as a moment of institutional reckoning. The conflict exposed deep structural and strategic shortcomings, yet it also

initiated a long-term process of reform that reshaped doctrine, leadership development, infrastructure, and political–military coordination. Subsequent conflicts—from the 1971 war to Kargil and contemporary limited-conflict episodes—cannot be understood without recognizing the lessons internalized after 1962.

The objective of this paper is therefore not to advance a celebratory or nationalistic narrative. Instead, it seeks to understand how the Indian Army has developed the capacity to operate effectively under constraint, apply force with restraint, and adapt to changing forms of warfare. By focusing on non-technical dimensions such as leadership culture, soldier ethos, institutional learning, and strategic restraint, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions on what constitutes sustainable military superiority in democratic states.

Conceptual Framework: Defining Military Superiority

In this study, military superiority is approached not as a static measure of capability but as a sustained institutional capacity to translate political intent into effective military outcomes under conditions of uncertainty. Rather than equating superiority with material dominance, the framework emphasizes how armed forces operate within ethical, political, and operational constraints. This perspective allows for a more realistic assessment of effectiveness, particularly in democratic systems where legitimacy and escalation control are as consequential as battlefield success.

Classical military theory distinguishes between tactical success and strategic success. Tactical success refers to battlefield outcomes, while strategic success concerns whether military action advances political objectives. An army may achieve tactical victories yet fail strategically if its actions undermine legitimacy, provoke escalation, or erode political cohesion. Military superiority must therefore be assessed across both dimensions.

Five interrelated parameters structure this framework:

- Strategic clarity – alignment between political intent and military objectives
- Operational adaptability – ability to adjust tactics and posture under evolving conditions
- Leadership and command culture – decentralized execution, accountability, initiative
- Soldier ethos and morale – cohesion, discipline, motivation beyond material incentives
- Strategic restraint – calibrated use of force to preserve legitimacy and manage escalation

Restraint in this framework is not passivity. It requires confidence, discipline, and long-term judgement. These parameters together form the analytical lens for the study.

Historical Evolution of the Indian Army

Following independence in 1947, the Indian Army emerged from the legacy of the British Indian Army amidst the disruptions of Partition. Early conflicts required rapid institutional adaptation, integration of diverse formations, and operational improvisation under political uncertainty.

The 1962 Sino-Indian War occupies a central place in institutional memory. While the conflict exposed serious deficiencies in infrastructure, logistics, intelligence, and civil–military coordination, its long-term significance lies less in battlefield outcomes and more in the reforms it initiated. Post-1962 reforms were systemic—expanding force structure, investing in mountain warfare capability, strengthening leadership training, and improving border infrastructure. The conflict thus functioned as an institutional awakening rather than a terminal failure.

Subsequent decades reflected the consolidation of these lessons, culminating in the decisive 1971 war and the politically restrained yet tactically innovative Kargil conflict of 1999.

Major Conventional Wars: Case Studies

The conventional wars fought by India since independence provide a structured lens through which the evolution of the Indian Army can be assessed. Rather than evaluating these conflicts purely in terms of victory or defeat, this section treats them as institutional stress tests—each revealing strength, exposing weaknesses, and shaping long-term organizational learning. The emphasis here is not on battlefield narration, but on how each conflict influenced doctrine, leadership culture, and civil–military alignment.

Indo-Pak War of 1947-48: Formation under Strategic Uncertainty

The first conflict faced by independent India occurred under extraordinary conditions of political flux and organizational disruption. Partition had divided units, logistics chains, and command structures, while political objectives evolved in parallel with military operations. The Indian Army entered the conflict with limited strategic clarity and incomplete institutional cohesion.

Despite these constraints, the Army demonstrated an early capacity for adaptation and decentralized decision-making. Tactical actions were frequently shaped by on-ground leadership rather than rigid operational planning, highlighting the importance of junior commanders in fluid environments. This reliance on initiative compensated, to an extent, for the absence of a fully developed strategic framework.

The conflict yielded two enduring institutional lessons. First, military effectiveness in politically uncertain environments requires flexibility rather than procedural rigidity. Second, early exposure to ambiguity fostered an organizational culture comfortable with operating under

incomplete information—a characteristic that would recur in later conflicts.

Sino-India War of 1962: Strategic Failure and Institutional Reckoning

The 1962 Sino-India War remains one of the most consequential episodes in Indian military history. Operational shortcomings were evident across multiple dimensions: inadequate infrastructure, flawed intelligence assessments, unclear political guidance, and weak civil–military coordination. These deficiencies resulted in outcomes that were widely recognized as unfavorable.

However, the long-term significance of the conflict lies not in its immediate results but in its transformational impact on institutional thinking. The war exposed the limits of political signaling without credible military preparedness and challenged assumptions about deterrence in high-altitude and infrastructure-poor environments.

In response, post-1962 reforms were comprehensive rather than symbolic. They included expansion of force structure, focused investment in mountain warfare capability, reorientation of training institutions toward operational realism, and sustained development of border infrastructure. Leadership development also shifted toward practical command competence rather than ceremonial seniority.

From an analytical perspective, 1962 represents an institutional inflection point. The willingness to acknowledge failure and pursue systemic reform became a defining organizational strength. Subsequent improvements in preparedness and doctrine cannot be understood without recognizing the depth of learning initiated by this conflict.

Indo-Pak War of 1965: Tactical Competence amid Strategic Ambiguity

The 1965 conflict occurred during a transitional phase in the Indian Army's evolution. Reforms initiated after 1962 were underway but had not

yet fully matured. As a result, the war revealed a mixed picture of progress and limitation.

At the tactical and operational levels, the Army displayed greater resilience, coordination, and confidence than in earlier conflicts. Leadership at lower echelons showed improved initiative, suggesting early dividends from reforms in training and command culture. Units demonstrated the ability to sustain operations under pressure, reflecting growing organizational stability.

Strategically, however, the conflict underscored the costs of ambiguous political objectives. Tactical effectiveness did not translate into decisive strategic outcomes, reinforcing a critical lesson: battlefield competence alone is insufficient in the absence of coherent political direction. This insight further shaped later emphasis on political–military alignment.

Indo-Pak War of 1971: Convergence of Strategy, Leadership, and Execution

The 1971 war stands out as a case where political intent, military planning, and diplomatic strategy were closely aligned. Unlike previous conflicts, objectives were clearly defined, allowing the Indian Army to plan and execute operations with strategic coherence.

Operationally, the Army demonstrated mature command and control, effective logistics management, and flexibility in maneuver. These capabilities reflected the cumulative impact of reforms undertaken since 1962, particularly in leadership development and joint planning.

Equally significant was the role of restraint. Military force was applied decisively but within clearly articulated political limits, avoiding unnecessary escalation beyond strategic objectives. The conflict illustrated that military superiority lies not in maximal application of force, but in precision and proportionality aligned with national aims.

From an institutional standpoint, 1971 validated the Indian Army's reform trajectory and reinforced confidence in its doctrinal and leadership foundations.

Kargil Conflict of 1999: Tactical Innovation under Political Constraint

The Kargil conflict presented a unique set of challenges: high-altitude terrain, adverse weather, international scrutiny, and explicit political restrictions on escalation. These conditions imposed significant constraints on operational planning and execution.

The conflict highlighted the importance of junior leadership, unit cohesion, and morale. Operations required decentralized decision-making and improvisation under extreme physical and psychological stress. Leadership presence at the tactical level proved decisive in sustaining momentum and discipline.

Politically, limitations on escalation were internalised rather than contested. This institutional acceptance of restraint enabled military objectives to be achieved without widening the conflict. The experience reinforced a growing emphasis on escalation control as an operational capability, influencing later thinking on limited war and deterrence.

Institutional Lessons from Conventional Warfare

Taken together, these conflicts reveal a clear pattern of organizational evolution driven by experience rather than ideology. Each war contributed distinct lessons:

- 1947–48: Adaptability under political and organizational uncertainty
- 1962: Necessity of preparedness, infrastructure, and honest self-assessment
- 1965: Limits of tactical success without strategic clarity

- 1971: Importance of political–military alignment and proportional force
- 1999: Centrality of leadership, cohesion, and restraint under constraint

The cumulative effect of these lessons shaped an institution capable of operating across diverse conflict environments with increasing coherence and discipline. Rather than reflecting linear progress, this trajectory underscores the Indian Army's capacity for learning through adversity, a hallmark of sustained military effectiveness.

Shift to Modern and Hybrid Warfare

The character of conflict confronting the Indian Army has undergone a marked transformation since the latter half of the twentieth century. While early post-independence wars were largely conventional and territorially defined, subsequent decades witnessed a gradual shift toward hybrid, sub-conventional, and ambiguous forms of warfare. This transition was not abrupt; rather, it emerged through sustained exposure to proxy conflict, internal security challenges, and contested border management.

Hybrid warfare blurs traditional distinctions between peace and war, military and non-military instruments, and state and non-state actors. In such environments, the application of force is constrained not only by adversary capability but also by political, legal, and informational considerations. For the Indian Army, adaptation to this landscape required more than doctrinal revision—it demanded changes in command culture, operational thinking, and institutional priorities.

From Mass Mobilization to Persistent Preparedness

Conventional military planning traditionally relied on large-scale mobilization followed by decisive engagement. However, the requirements of hybrid conflict render such models increasingly

impractical. Delayed mobilization risks strategic surprise, while overt force concentration may provoke escalation or international scrutiny.

In response, the Indian Army progressively shifted toward a model of persistent preparedness. This approach emphasizes forward deployment, rotational readiness, and the ability to respond rapidly with calibrated force. Preparedness is maintained continuously rather than activated episodically, reducing response time and enhancing deterrence credibility.

This transition reflects an understanding that modern conflict often unfolds incrementally. Superiority, therefore, lies not in overwhelming force application but in the ability to shape adversary behavior across time.

Counter-Insurgency Experience as a Foundation for Hybrid Adaptation

Extended experience in counter-insurgency and internal security operations played a significant role in shaping the Indian Army's approach to hybrid warfare. These operations required balancing force application with population-centric considerations, intelligence integration, and political sensitivity.

Lessons from such environments reinforced the importance of localized intelligence, decentralized command, and disciplined use of force. While counter-insurgency differs from interstate conflict, the skills developed—judgement under ambiguity, restraint, and leadership at lower echelons—proved transferable to broader hybrid scenarios. Importantly, this experience fostered an institutional culture that recognized the strategic consequences of tactical actions. In hybrid environments, where narratives and legitimacy are contested, such awareness becomes critical.

Doctrinal Evolution and Command Culture

Doctrinal adaptation accompanied experiential learning. The Indian Army's evolving doctrine reflects a gradual movement away from rigid, prescriptive models toward principle-based guidance. Emphasis is placed

on the commander's intent, flexibility in execution, and alignment with political objectives.

This doctrinal shift places greater responsibility on commanders at all levels. Rather than following fixed templates, leaders are expected to interpret intent, assess escalation risk, and exercise judgement in real time. Such an approach enhances responsiveness but also demands high professional standards and accountability.

Command culture, therefore, becomes a central determinant of effectiveness. Institutional emphasis on leadership development and ethical conduct supports this decentralized model, mitigating risks associated with increased autonomy.

Technology as an Enabler, Not a Determinant

Technological advancements have undeniably altered the conduct of modern warfare. Surveillance, communications, and precision capabilities enhance situational awareness and operational reach. However, in hybrid environments, technology functions as an enabler rather than a determinant of success.

The Indian Army's experience underscores the limitations of technology in the absence of human judgment. Systems may enhance decision-making, but they cannot substitute for contextual understanding, ethical assessment, or political awareness. Over-reliance on technological solutions risks rigidity and vulnerability in contested or degraded environments.

Consequently, technological integration within the Indian Army has been accompanied by sustained emphasis on training, leadership, and adaptability—ensuring that human decision-making remains central.

Hybrid Warfare, Signaling, and Escalation Management

A defining feature of hybrid conflict is the importance of signaling—communicating resolve, restraint, and capability without provoking uncontrolled escalation. Military actions are often designed as messages rather than decisive engagements.

The Indian Army's evolving approach reflects sensitivity to this dynamic. Operations are planned not only for their immediate tactical effect but also for their strategic signaling value. Readiness, posture, and limited action collectively convey intent while preserving escalation control.

This approach aligns with a broader understanding that deterrence in hybrid environments is cumulative rather than instantaneous. Credibility is built over time through consistent behavior, disciplined conduct, and demonstrated preparedness.

Organisational Continuity amid Change

Despite adaptation, a notable characteristic of the Indian Army's evolution is organizational continuity. Core institutional values—discipline, leadership accountability, and civilian control—have been retained even as doctrine and operational methods evolved.

This continuity mitigates the risks associated with rapid doctrinal shifts. Rather than oscillating between paradigms, the institution has pursued incremental adaptation grounded in experience. Such an approach reduces friction, preserves coherence, and sustains legitimacy.

From an analytical perspective, this balance between continuity and change reinforces the central argument of this paper: military superiority in the contemporary era is sustained through institutional learning rather than episodic innovation.

Implications for Understanding Military Superiority

The Indian Army's transition toward modern and hybrid warfare highlights a broader insight into military effectiveness. Superiority is not achieved by mastering a single form of conflict but by cultivating the capacity to operate across a spectrum of ambiguity.

Hybrid environments reward discipline, judgement, and restraint as much as aggression. Institutions that internalize these attributes are better positioned to manage escalation, preserve legitimacy, and achieve long-term strategic objectives.

In this context, the Indian Army's experience illustrates how sustained exposure to diverse conflict types can foster an adaptive, balanced, and resilient military institution.

Contemporary Operations and Readiness

In the contemporary security environment, military effectiveness is increasingly shaped by readiness, institutional discipline, and escalation control rather than by reactive mobilization or large-scale force deployment. For the Indian Army, this shift reflects both structural necessity and accumulated experience across varied conflict types. Modern operations are conducted under heightened political scrutiny, rapid information flows, and constrained escalation thresholds, requiring an approach that integrates preparedness with restraint.

Unlike earlier eras where conflict was episodic and clearly demarcated, contemporary military challenges often unfold in a persistent grey zone between peace and war. This environment places a premium on forward posture, intelligence integration, and command judgement at multiple levels. Readiness, therefore, is not merely a function of force availability but of institutional coherence—the ability to align political intent, military options, and ethical considerations in real time.

The Indian Army's contemporary posture reflects a gradual but deliberate transition from mobilization-centric thinking to readiness-centric deterrence. This involves maintaining forces at a level of preparedness that allows calibrated response without necessitating large-scale escalation. Such an approach reduces strategic surprise while preserving political flexibility.

Readiness as a Strategic Capability

Readiness in the modern context extends beyond numerical strength or equipment holdings. It encompasses training realism, leadership preparedness, intelligence fusion, and the ability to operate under ambiguity. For a force tasked with continuous territorial responsibility, readiness must be sustained rather than surged.

The Indian Army's experience across multiple theatres has reinforced the importance of distributed readiness—ensuring that capability and decision-making authority exist not only at higher headquarters but also at forward and tactical levels. This reduces response time and enhances resilience in scenarios where communication or political guidance may be constrained.

Importantly, readiness also functions as a deterrent signal. A force perceived as disciplined, prepared, and controlled reduces adversary incentives to test thresholds. In this sense, readiness contributes to stability by shaping adversary calculations even in the absence of overt military action.

Contemporary Case Illustrations of Limited Conflict and Escalation Control

Recent episodes along India's contested borders illustrate how readiness, restraint, and leadership interact in practice.

The Galwan Valley clash (2020) represented a significant moment in high-altitude confrontation under conditions of extreme environmental

stress and political sensitivity. The episode underscored the importance of troop-level discipline, leadership presence, and adherence to command intent in a scenario where escalation risks were acute. While the incident highlighted structural challenges inherent in contested border management, it also demonstrated the capacity to assert territorial resolve without immediate transition to conventional warfare.

Earlier, the surgical strikes conducted in response to the Uri terror attack (2016) marked a visible shift in India's approach to deterrence. These actions reflected an attempt to impose limited costs while consciously avoiding broader escalation. From an institutional perspective, the significance of the strikes lay not in their scale but in their signaling value—demonstrating readiness, intent, and control simultaneously.

The Balakot air strike (2019), though executed by air power, formed part of a broader joint deterrence posture. The Indian Army's role in maintaining ground readiness and escalation control was central to containing the crisis that followed. The episode illustrated how joint preparedness and political–military coordination can prevent limited action from spiraling into wider conflict.

More recently, Operation Sindoor reflects continuity rather than departure in operational philosophy. Emphasis on intelligence-led planning, rapid mobilization, and controlled application of force suggests an institutional preference for deterrence through preparedness rather than reactionary escalation.

Escalation Control and Command Judgement

A defining feature of contemporary operations is the requirement for escalation control at multiple levels of command. Unlike conventional wars, where escalation pathways are often explicit, modern conflicts involve ambiguous thresholds and competing narratives. This places

significant responsibility on commanders to exercise judgment that balances tactical advantage with strategic risk.

The Indian Army's operational culture increasingly emphasizes internalization of political constraints rather than resistance to them. This approach reduces friction between military execution and political intent, allowing force to be applied with precision and proportionality. Escalation control, in this sense, becomes an operational skill rather than a political imposition.

Such command judgment is particularly critical in environments where tactical actions can have disproportionate strategic consequences due to media scrutiny and rapid information dissemination. Discipline, clarity of intent, and leadership presence, therefore, serve as stabilising factors.

Readiness, Legitimacy, and Long-Term Stability

Contemporary military effectiveness cannot be separated from questions of legitimacy. Operations conducted without discipline or proportionality may yield short-term tactical gains but undermine long-term strategic objectives. The Indian Army's emphasis on readiness combined with restraint contributes to maintaining legitimacy domestically and internationally.

This legitimacy enhances strategic space over time, preserving freedom of action and reducing the likelihood of external intervention or diplomatic isolation. In this framework, readiness supports not only military outcomes but also broader national objectives.

Institutional Continuity in Contemporary Operations

A notable aspect of the Indian Army's contemporary posture is continuity rather than abrupt transformation. Recent operations reflect doctrinal evolution grounded in accumulated experience rather than reactive change. This continuity reinforces institutional coherence and reduces the risk of overcorrection in response to individual incidents.

From an analytical standpoint, this suggests an organization that prioritizes learning, discipline, and control over symbolic displays of force. Such an approach aligns with the broader argument of this paper: that military superiority is best understood as an evolving institutional capability sustained through readiness, leadership, and restraint.

Human Capital and Soldier Ethos

While doctrine, technology, and organizational structure shape military capability, the decisive factor in sustained effectiveness remains the human element. Across its history, the Indian Army's performance has been deeply influenced by its approach to leadership development, unit cohesion, and institutional ethos. These human dimensions function as force multipliers, amplifying material capability while mitigating operational uncertainty.

Leadership Culture and Decentralized Command

Leadership within the Indian Army is characterized by an emphasis on responsibility, presence, and initiative at all levels of command. Unlike rigidly centralised systems, the Army has historically relied on decentralized execution guided by the commander's intent. This approach enables junior leaders to exercise judgement in fluid and high-risk environments where delays or rigid adherence to orders could prove costly.

Operational experience—from high-altitude warfare to counter-insurgency—has reinforced the necessity of this leadership culture. Officers are expected not only to command but to share risk, thereby reinforcing trust and legitimacy within units. Such leadership practices enhance responsiveness and morale, particularly in environments where communication may be degraded or political constraints impose operational ambiguity.

Regimental System and Unit Cohesion

The regimental system remains a defining institutional feature of the Indian Army. Beyond administrative organization, it serves as a social and psychological framework that fosters identity, loyalty, and continuity. Shared traditions, history, and symbols create bonds that extend beyond individual deployments or postings.

This cohesion becomes especially significant in prolonged or high-stress operations. Units with strong internal identity demonstrate greater resilience, discipline, and willingness to endure hardship. Rather than relying solely on external enforcement, cohesion encourages self-regulation and mutual accountability, reducing the likelihood of indiscipline in escalation-sensitive environments.

Ethos, Discipline, and Moral Motivation

Soldier ethos within the Indian Army is rooted in concepts of duty, discipline, and service rather than transactional motivation alone. While professional incentives matter, sustained effectiveness in adverse conditions often depends on deeper sources of commitment. This moral framework supports restraint as much as courage, encouraging soldiers to apply force judiciously and in accordance with political intent.

Importantly, this ethos does not imply passivity. Instead, it enables controlled aggression—decisive action bounded by discipline. In contemporary operations, where the consequences of excess can outweigh tactical gains, such moral grounding becomes strategically significant.

Human Capital as Institutional Memory

Human capital also functions as a repository of institutional memory. Experience gained in one generation of conflict informs training, doctrine, and leadership norms for the next. The Indian Army's long exposure to varied operational environments has created a cumulative learning process that reduces dependence on theoretical doctrine alone.

This transmission of experience ensures adaptability without eroding institutional identity. As warfare evolves, human judgment remains the integrating element that aligns technology, doctrine, and political intent.

Strategic Restraint and Political-Military Synergy

In democratic systems, military effectiveness cannot be separated from political legitimacy. The Indian Army's operational history reflects a consistent emphasis on strategic restraint and close alignment with civilian authority—an approach that has shaped both its domestic credibility and international standing.

Civilian Control and Institutional Professionalism

The Indian Army operates firmly under civilian authority, reflecting a mature model of civil–military relations. Political leadership defines objectives and constraints, while the military is responsible for execution within those boundaries. This division of responsibility fosters professionalism and prevents the militarization of political decision-making.

Rather than constraining effectiveness, this framework enhances coherence. Military action aligned with political intent reduces the risk of strategic miscalculation and ensures that tactical success contributes to long-term national objectives.

Restraint as a Strategic Capability

Strategic restraint is often misinterpreted as weakness. In reality, it represents confidence in capability and discipline in execution. The Indian Army's operational record demonstrates repeated instances where force was applied deliberately and proportionately, even when broader escalation was possible.

Such restraint preserves legitimacy, limits adversary narrative exploitation, and maintains international support. In nuclearized and

information-saturated environments, these factors directly influence strategic outcomes. Restraint therefore, functions as an enabling capability rather than a limitation.

Political-Military Synchronization in Crisis

Effective crisis management depends on synchronization between political decision-makers and military commanders. The Indian Army's experience suggests increasing sophistication in this domain, with clearer communication channels and a shared understanding of escalation thresholds.

This synchronization allows military options to remain credible without becoming automatic. It preserves strategic flexibility, enabling political leadership to calibrate response while relying on military readiness.

Ethics, Legitimacy, and Long-Term Deterrence

Ethical conduct reinforces legitimacy, which in turn strengthens deterrence. An army perceived as disciplined and responsible retains greater freedom of action over time. The Indian Army's emphasis on conduct, accountability, and restraint enhances its credibility, particularly in contested environments where perception shapes reality.

Comparative Perspective (Non-Adversarial)

Comparative analysis is useful when conducted without adversarial framing. Rather than measuring superiority against specific opponents, this section contrasts broader models of military organization and purpose.

Defensive-Responsibility v/s Expeditionary Forces

Expeditionary forces prioritize power projection and rapid intervention, often operating far from national territory. In contrast, defensive-responsibility forces focus on territorial integrity, internal

stability, and long-term presence. The Indian Army aligns strongly with the latter model.

This orientation shapes doctrine, training, and ethos. Endurance, local knowledge, and restraint become central attributes, reflecting responsibilities that extend beyond battlefield success to long-term stability.

Experience-Based v/s Technology-Centric Models

Technology-centric militaries emphasize networked platforms and precision capabilities. While effective in permissive environments, such models risk fragility in degraded conditions. Experience-based militaries rely more heavily on human judgement and adaptability.

The Indian Army's effectiveness derives from accumulated experience across diverse terrains and conflict types. Technology enhances this capability but does not replace it, preserving resilience when systems fail or ambiguity prevails.

Institutional Ethos v/s Contractual Professionalism

Some military systems emphasize service as employment, prioritising efficiency and specialization. Others cultivate an institutional ethos rooted in identity and long-term commitment. The Indian Army's regimental system and leadership culture align with the latter.

This model supports cohesion and moral resilience, particularly in prolonged or politically sensitive operations where transactional motivation may prove insufficient.

Implications of the Comparative Model

These comparisons reinforce a central conclusion: military superiority is context-dependent. The Indian Army's model is not universally replicable, but it is well-suited to India's strategic environment. Its strength

lies in coherence between national objectives, institutional culture, and operational practice.

Challenges and Future Outlook

While the evolution of the Indian Army reflects sustained institutional learning and adaptability, military superiority is not a static achievement. It is continuously tested by changing threat environments, technological disruption, human-capital demands, and political constraints. Understanding future challenges is, therefore, essential to assessing whether past strengths can be sustained.

Managing the Expanding Spectrum of Hybrid Threats

The most immediate challenge confronting the Indian Army lies in the expanding spectrum of hybrid threats. Contemporary conflict increasingly combines conventional deterrence with sub-conventional pressure, cyber activity, information operations, and legal–diplomatic contestation. These elements rarely manifest in isolation, complicating attribution and response.

For a force operating under democratic oversight, responding to hybrid threats requires precision rather than scale. Excessive or poorly calibrated responses risk strategic overreach, while inaction may invite incremental erosion of deterrence. The challenge, therefore, lies in maintaining credibility without escalation, a task that places sustained demands on intelligence integration, decision-making speed, and political–military synchronization.

Technological Integration without Institutional Overreach

Rapid technological change presents both opportunity and risk. Advances in surveillance, communications, unmanned systems, and data-driven decision support can enhance operational effectiveness. However,

technology also introduces vulnerabilities—dependence on networks, susceptibility to disruption, and the risk of decision-making compression.

A key challenge for the Indian Army will be integrating emerging technologies without allowing technology to dominate doctrine or judgment. Over-reliance on technical solutions can undermine adaptability, particularly in contested or degraded environments. The future effectiveness of the force will depend on preserving human judgement as the final arbiter of military action, with technology serving as an enabler rather than a determinant.

Human Capital Sustainability in a Prolonged Readiness Environment

Sustained readiness places significant demands on human capital. Extended deployments, high operational tempo, and persistent vigilance can generate cumulative physical and psychological strain. Unlike episodic wars, contemporary military commitments often lack clear temporal boundaries, increasing the risk of fatigue and burnout.

Maintaining morale, cohesion, and leadership quality under these conditions will be a central challenge. Institutional mechanisms for rotation, training balance, and professional development must adapt to ensure that readiness does not come at the expense of long-term force sustainability. The preservation of soldier ethos and leadership credibility will be as critical as equipment modernization.

Civil-Military Balance in Accelerated Decision Cycles

The speed of contemporary crises compresses political and military decision-making timelines. Information flows rapidly, public narratives form quickly, and international scrutiny intensifies early in crises. This environment places pressure on civil–military coordination, increasing the risk of misalignment or premature escalation.

For the Indian Army, maintaining effectiveness under these conditions requires continued clarity of roles: political leadership defines objectives

and limits, while the military provides calibrated options. Preserving this balance in compressed decision cycles will be essential to avoiding strategic miscalculation while retaining operational credibility.

Ethical Conduct, Legitimacy, and Information Warfare

Future conflicts will be fought not only on physical terrain but also in the information domain. Allegations, narratives, and perceptions can influence strategic outcomes irrespective of battlefield realities. Ethical conduct and discipline, therefore, acquire heightened strategic significance.

The Indian Army's emphasis on conduct, accountability, and restraint contributes to long-term legitimacy. However, sustaining this reputation in an era of misinformation and narrative contestation will require proactive institutional engagement, transparency where appropriate, and consistent internal enforcement of standards.

Strategic Continuity amid Political and Geopolitical Change

Geopolitical realignments and domestic political change can alter strategic priorities. A key challenge for any military institution is maintaining continuity amid shifting external and internal environments. Abrupt doctrinal swings or politicization risk eroding institutional coherence.

The Indian Army's historical strength lies in its ability to adapt incrementally while preserving core values. Sustaining this balance will be essential as India's strategic profile expands and expectations of military performance increase.

Outlook: Sustaining Superiority as a Process, Not a Condition

Looking ahead, the central challenge is not achieving superiority but sustaining it. Military effectiveness in the coming decades will depend less on episodic demonstrations of force and more on institutional resilience—

leadership judgement, human capital integrity, ethical conduct, and political–military coherence.

The Indian Army's experience suggests that superiority is best understood as a continuous process rather than a fixed state. Institutions that recognize this reality are better positioned to adapt, endure, and remain credible under pressure.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine military superiority not as a static condition derived from material advantage, but as an institutional capability shaped by learning, judgment, and restraint. Through an analysis of the historical experience of the Indian Army, the paper has demonstrated that sustained effectiveness in warfare emerges from the interaction of leadership culture, human capital, doctrinal adaptability, and political–military alignment rather than from numerical strength or technological dominance alone.

The historical trajectory of the Indian Army illustrates that setbacks can function as catalysts for institutional renewal rather than markers of permanent decline. The experience of the 1962 Sino-Indian War, in particular, compelled structural reform, doctrinal reassessment, and a recalibration of civil–military coordination. Subsequent conflicts did not represent isolated successes but reflected the cumulative impact of these reforms. Wars such as 1971 and Kargil, as well as contemporary limited-conflict episodes, underscore how effectiveness is built over time through disciplined learning rather than episodic displays of force.

In the contemporary security environment, characterized by hybrid threats, ambiguous escalation thresholds, and intense informational scrutiny, the meaning of military superiority has further evolved. Episodes such as the Galwan Valley clash, the Uri surgical strikes, the Balakot air strike, and Operation Sindoor illustrate a transition from reactive

mobilization to readiness-driven deterrence. In these cases, restraint did not dilute effectiveness; rather, it enhanced strategic control and legitimacy. The ability to apply force selectively while preserving escalation dominance emerges as a defining feature of modern military competence.

A central finding of this study is the enduring importance of human capital. Leadership presence, regimental cohesion, and a professional ethos rooted in duty and discipline continue to function as force multipliers. Technology and doctrine enhance capability, but they do not replace judgment. Institutions that preserve ethical conduct and decentralized initiative are better positioned to manage uncertainty and avoid strategic miscalculation.

From a broader comparative perspective, the Indian Army's experience suggests that military superiority is inherently context-dependent. Models built on expeditionary power projection or technological primacy are not universally applicable. Instead, effectiveness must align with national objectives, political culture, and strategic geography. The Indian case demonstrates how a defensive-responsibility force can maintain credibility through endurance, restraint, and institutional coherence rather than through constant escalation.

Ultimately, this study argues that military superiority should be understood as a continuous process rather than a permanent condition. It must be renewed through honest self-assessment, adaptation to changing threat environments, and sustained civil–military trust. In democratic systems, especially, the legitimacy of force is inseparable from its effectiveness. The Indian Army's experience offers valuable insight into how disciplined restraint, leadership accountability, and institutional learning can together produce a form of military power that is resilient, credible, and strategically sustainable.

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The Inception and Future Impact of the Posts Army Subedar Major and Command Subedar Majors in the Indian Army: An Analysis

MANISH KUMAR

Abstract

This article examines the inception and impact of Army Subedar Major and Command Subedar Majors by delving into their roles to dwell upon the existing challenges in the Indian Army related to bridging communication gaps, providing their perspective and feedback on policy matters, and fostering training, welfare, and morale of the organisation. The research has been conducted using qualitative and quantitative methods, with the primary focus on interviewing the Army Subedar Major and inputs from the Indian Armed Forces Officers. The findings suggest that they are going to play a prominent role in improving the defence ecosystem, provided their own readiness as well as that of the Indian Army is deliberately worked out.

Introduction

The current Chief of Army Staff, General Upendra Dwivedi's directive led to the creation of new posts in the Indian Army named '**Army Subedar Major (ASM)**' and '**Command Subedar Major (CSM).'** (Rana, 2025) Though the concept is not new in the military, many have realised the role of a senior Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) in improving the defence ecosystem. Subedar Major is a rank that everyone respects as it holds a wide range of experience and is a fatherly figure for other ranks. (Sharma, 2025) As the role of the ASM and CSMs is not clearly given by the Indian Army, therefore a deliberate attempt to research the same has been made through interviewing the Army Subedar Major (questions were answered through email, not through physical interaction) and a survey conducted among a total of forty retired and serving officers of the Indian Armed Forces of seniority from Lieutenant General to Lieutenant and equivalents (refer to *Appendix A*), in which a questionnaire with both facets was filled by each respondent and these responses were analysed, and findings were derived to find out three aspects related to these appointments; like, the need for creating these posts, the areas they are meant to work on, and finally, the scope of further enhancement.

After researching these issues, there is clarity over their creation; their roles and responsibilities reflected the areas that they remain their focus on, and the impact of these posts; lastly, the scope of further improvements has been examined.



Figure 1: Interaction of the COAS and senior officers with Newly Appointed Command Subedar Majors Source: ADGPI, 2025

Existing Models

There are some militaries in the world, including India, where such appointments have been made in the past. In the United States of America, the equivalent of Army Subedar Major is Sergeant Major of the Army, and Command Subedar Major is Command Sergeant Major. The first one was appointed in 1965 (Department of Army, 2020), and the latter one the very next year, in 1966. (Elder, 2015) Furthermore, similar concepts have been in the Indian Air Force and the Indian Navy for quite some time.

A brief discussion of these models is provided below:

- **The United States:** The United States of America has had a similar model in place since the 1960s; it was then the Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson, who established this model and named them Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA) and Command Sergeant Major (CSM). (Elder, 2015) They played important role in many events, including the Vietnam War, Gulf War, and the Global War on Terrorism. (Elder, 2015) Their focus has been mainly on five key issues, like reinforcing the commander's directive; maintaining

battlefield coordination; streamlining discipline; understanding and sorting out the problems of personnel below officer rank (PBOR); and capturing soldiers' mindsets and suggestions and passing them on to the commander. (Elder, 2015)

- **The Indian Navy (IN) and the Indian Air Force (IAF**): The IN has a Master Chief Petty Officer (MCPO) appointed at Naval HQ with CNS since 2022. The role of CNS's MCPO is to create an interface between the IN's senior leadership and junior leaders, including PBOR. In the IN, the post is not ceremonial but is very productive, as he provides his advisory role to CNS. The IAF has these structures at various levels, like Air HQ, Command HQs, Base HQs, and Station HQs. 62.5 percent of responders have agreed that these posts in the IAF and the IN have been effectively utilised.

Inter-applicability of the model

62.5 percent of responders have agreed that the equivalent posts in the IAF and the IN have been effectively utilised, and the same percentage agreed with the suitability and compatibility of ASM and CSMs in the IA. Their long service exposure with troops will prove their utility, where 72.5 percent of responders agreed to it. But a few of the responders have cautioned that such models are not inter-applicable from one service to another, and 10 percent of the responders have disagreed with the utility, compatibility, and suitability of this model in the IA. However, many have felt that the usefulness of these appointments has to be watched.

Was it needed?

Out of the total responders, 55 percent felt that there was a need for creating these posts, and 32.5 percent felt that there might be a need but were not sure. 12.5 percent felt that there was no need to create them; however, this percentage increased to 15 when the qualitative responses were analysed.

Why is it so important?

Subedar Major (SM) is the highest rank a PBOR can attain; it is achieved after rigorous selections/promotions from one rank to another, and so far in the IA structure of a unit, the senior-most commissioned officer of the rank of colonel is the commanding officer, and the senior-most JCO is the SM. Each one in a unit shows the importance of both. Post-COVID, the Indian Armed Forces, including the IA, have gone through a major transformational change since the adoption of the 'Agnipath' policy as the only recruiting model for PBOR, which has brought a mixed kind of positive and concerning responses from within the organisation and society as well. (Hooda, 2022) Therefore, there have been facets like the need to bridge the communication gap between senior officers and ground-level troops (Pathak, 2014), the representation or perspective of PBOR in policy matters, and improving the training, welfare, and morale of the IA. The appointment of SMs at the apex level can contribute to improving these facets.

Real Tiger or Paper Tiger (Ceremonial): In the survey, 13.5 percent of responders have felt that this appointment is purely ceremonial or may become the same with no real influence unless they are empowered with a clear charter of duties with authority; given respect to these appointments; well aligned with the existing command structure with clear demarcation of their roles with no interference with legally prescribed channels; and provided with appropriate training and selection.

Moreover, these posts should not be ceremonial but impactful with proper authority.

Roles for ASM and CSMs

The role of ASM and CSMs in the 21st century, when the IA is undergoing major transformation, is that the role of ASM and CSMs becomes very critical in matters related to policy, operational reviews,

bridging communication gaps, strengthening training standards, troop welfare, morale, etc. Their tenure will be for two years, with one year of extendibility; the selection will be through an interview process, and they will have no administrative responsibilities but only advisory ones. (Rana, 2025)

While the ASM has been provided with charter of duties, with a total of eight duties. These include, key advisor to the COAS on issues concerning JCO and ORs; key point of reference for the COAS on HR and welfare inputs of JCOs/ORs; accompanying the chief during his visits to interact with JCOs/ORs; assimilate best practices; visit office spaces and ground to gauge motivation level and routine; provide his feedback on irrelevant exiting policies and traditions; dissemination of new policies, initiatives, focus areas of JCOs/ORs; occasional visits to residential areas for assessing quality of life, challenges, and early resolution of points received. While the charter of duties of CSMs is not provided.

After looking at all these duties, the pertinent roles for ASM and CSMs remain revolving around three facets, as discussed below:

Bridging the Communication Gap between PBOR and the IA's senior leadership

52.5 percent of the responders have felt that these appointments are meant to bridge the communication gaps between the PBOR and the senior leadership. This percentage increased to 67.5 percent when the qualitative responses were analysed. It is evident that they direct our attention towards existing communication between the higher defence and ground level troops in the IA, and these appointments will fill the existing gap. This is not from PBOR, but the officers themselves felt this.

The problem is not novel; pre-independence, the JCOs were used by British officers to assist in C2 and minimise the communication gap in units. (Subbu, 2012) Till now, the same structure has been followed in units. Since at the strategic and operational level, the use of JCOs had not been

facilitated and utilised so far, but now in 2025, the COAS General Upendra Dwivedi has appointed an ASM at Army HQ and CSMs at various Command HQs. After their absorption into the Higher Defence Organisations, the communication gap will be filled, and it will also be ensured that the commander's directives reach the soldiers at the ground level. An example from the USA, from Jeff Mellinger, a former CSM to Multi-National Force-Iraq Commander, said, "*Commanders routinely make observations and give directions and tasks during meetings. Sometimes those directions get filtered down to the lowest echelons and the message has changed*." (Elder, 2015) It states that the ASM/CSMs would strengthen the bond between the Army's top brass and ground-level units. They will also be visiting along with the Army Chief/Commander and would be able to talk to PBOR at their levels, as both belong to the same fraternity. Therefore, the tendency is high that they would grasp more.

Improving Training, Welfare, and Morale (TWM) Standards of the IA

This is a very pertinent issue, if not the main one. The training, welfare, and morale standards of organisations like the IA play a very crucial role. 10 percent of responders have selected this option as their primary role. This percentage increased to 37.5 percent when the qualitative responses were analysed. It suggests that their second most demanding role would be to foster the TMW standards.

The IA has gone through a major transformation in terms of human resource (HR). The Agnipath Scheme has been implemented as the only pipeline for candidates to join the army as recruits. This scheme has some effects on TMW. Firstly, it shortened the training months but added the burden on training establishments and recruits to train and learn the same in a shorter time, which led to an increase in day-to-day training hours and intensity; secondly, it has affected the welfare mechanism, as the Agniveers would have no pension, no canteen, or other facilities against the regular or pre-Agnipath recruits after their (75 percent) release on completion of

four years; last but not least, these both have lowered the morale of Agniveers. (Behera & Kaushal, 2023)

So, to deal with such challenges, the ASM and CSMs have to take a contributory role in working on TWM-related issues with the Chief and Commanders.

Providing his perspective and feedback on policy matters related to PBOR

Though they would not have any direct involvement in policymaking, their absorption at the Army headquarters and command levels strictly points towards their opinion on the policy matters related to PBOR. 27.5 percent of responders have felt that their role in providing their perspective and feedback on policy matters would be pivotal. It further increased to 35 percent after the qualitative responses were analysed. Their long-service experience would certainly help the commanders to get a clear picture of the perception of troops, their requirements, abilities, concerns, etc. Their operational reviews would also be sought to enhance the overall defence preparedness and ecosystem.

Challenges in front of ASM and CSMs

After analysing the responses, there are some key challenges that surfaced in front of them, mainly led by two facets: first, their own readiness to be absorbed at these appointments, and second, the readiness of the IA to absorb them.

- **Own readiness**: In this, the key challenges in front of the ASM/CSMs are analysed. The main concern in this section is whether they themselves are ready for this role or not. If not, then what should be done to enhance their readiness? However, 72.5 percent of responders agreed that their long service experience with troops will prove their utility as they understand the ground reality, the issues about PBOR, etc. But, 77.5 percent of the responders have felt that they are not fit for appointment in the

present form and suggested that providing them strategic-level training/orientation on the functioning of higher and joint HQs, additionally, they need separate training for improving their skills like leadership, grooming, communication, etc., can make them fit for these roles.

- **Organisational Readiness:** In addition to the individual challenges, there are organisational challenges too, which would affect their conduct or appointment. It is still not clear whether these posts are ceremonial or genuinely created to play some roles like bridging communication gaps, improving TMW standards, providing his advice on policy matters, etc. Though the majority of responders have felt that they would play a role in the matters mentioned above, 13.5 percent of officers still feel that it is a ceremonial role or it may become the same if they are not empowered with this charter of duties. Also, some of the responders have cautioned that there should be a clear demarcation of their roles within the chain of command so that they do not interfere with or dilute existing channels by creating parallel structures.

Without addressing these issues, these appointments may not produce the desired results.

Need to appoint new or expand the roles of existing SMs at Brigade, Division, and Corps HQs?

At present, there are SMs at Brigade, Division, and Corps HQs, but their role is limited only to the administration of the camp areas, unlike the SMs at a unit level. Though the same has also been at commands. But the ASM and CSMs have not been assigned this duty. Therefore, to streamline the C2 and smooth functioning of the organisation, the role of Brigade SM, Division SM, and Corps SM either has to be expanded or appointed separately. In the survey, 50 percent of the responders felt that if the IA

expands the roles of SMs at these HQs, it would be pragmatic and would produce good results, but 32.5 percent felt otherwise by disregarding the expansion, and the remaining 17.5 percent were not sure.

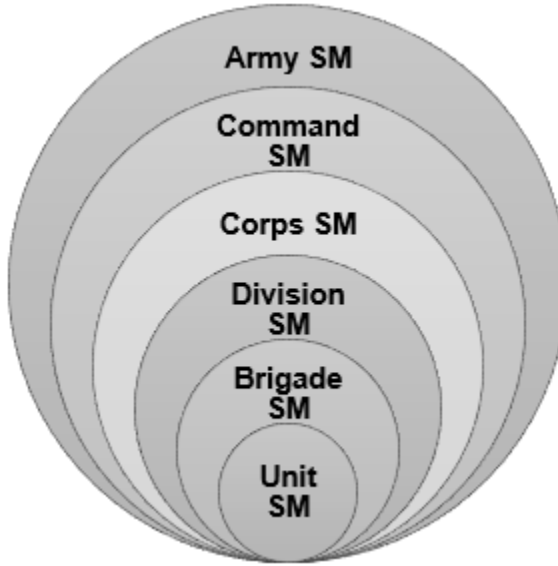


Figure 2: Proposed Multilayered Model for SMs at all levels above the unit levels for a better chain of command, smooth functioning, and selection & appointment procedures in the IA. Source: Prepared by the Author

Providing Training to SMs/Senior JCOs

77.5 percent of respondents have suggested that the SMs should be additionally trained before appointing them for these roles. But the ASM's stance differed, he said: "*No, there is no additional training required for this role. I have the requisite experience of service and knowledge to carry out duties expected of me*". This raises a question of whether they should be provided additional training or not. The variation between the two responses is simple. As the appointment is novel, things are still evolving and they may be provided with training whenever the problem of the interface occurs in the future. Without proper training, they may not be able to execute the duties. In the IAF and the IN, it may not be needed, but there is a lot of

difference between the quality of JCOs in these organisations and the IA as highlighted by Subbu (2012).

Some of the important aspects, as mentioned below, should be imparted in a special course for them:

- **Higher Defence Organisation (HDO):** Unlike officers, the PBOR are generally not well versed with the HDO as most of their service remains within the parental units. Therefore, before an SM is appointed at any post above the unit, they should be provided with the orientation of functions and environment of the HDO, their own alignment with them, etc.

- **Knowledge of Other Arms/Services:** Till the service of an SM at the unit level, he generally has not much idea about the functioning of other arms or services. So, before appointing them for such posts (above unit level), they need to be provided additional training or cross-postings in other arms/services for comprehensive ground knowledge of non-parental organisations or arms.

- **Enhancing required skills like leadership, communications, etc./OLQs:** The weak standards of intelligence, education level and leadership initiatives of PBOR in the IA is one of the irritants in their effective utilisation. (Subbu, 2012) In the HDO, where they may have to regularly interact with senior officers, foreign military attachés, etc., where all these qualities are needed. Therefore the need to provide them with separate training on skill enhancement.

These aspects need to be either changed through additional training or modifications through the recruitment process. The latter one would be a larger step; in due course, they can be trained for these roles, but there is no way out without following either of the two. The rigidity of not providing them training must not be continued, and provide them with separate courses and training sessions for improve their effectiveness.

Futuristic roles in Integrated Theatre Commands (ITCs)?

The role of ASM/CSMs or equivalents is not just limited to the present HDOs, but they can play a great role in enforcing jointness among the three services at ground level, i.e., also in the case of Integrated Theatre Commands (ITCs). 47.5 percent of responders have felt that the appointment of ASM/CSM or equivalent from the other two services will bring synergy among the armed forces if appointed in ITCs.



Figure 3: ASM, MWO, and MCWO held discussions at Air HQ on matters related to training, discipline, welfare, and measures to enhance combat synergy. Source: Indian Air Force on X. Source: IAF X Account, 2025

International Participation and Collaboration

They can be utilised for international participation and collaboration with other militaries worldwide. They should be regularly sent abroad for courses, training, participating in conferences, exercises, etc. A fine example is from the 28th August 2025, when the equivalent of ASM in the IAF, MWO Pardeep Kumar Yadav was sent to the Annual Chiefs of Defence Conference held in Thailand as a Senior Enlisted Leader (SEL) of the Indian Armed Forces, where all SELs from participating nations met to exchange views on NCO empowerment, joint training, military education,

enhancing interoperability at tactical level, etc. (HQ IDS, 2025) He was accompanying Chief of Integrated Defence Staff Air Marshal Ashutosh Dixit. The participation of SMs and senior JCOs in similar conferences must be supported by the IA.

Selection Process

While in the interview, the ASM Gopa Kumar clarified the selection process for this post; it is carried out by the concerned directorate based on QR and bio data. The panel is assessed by a board of officers appointed by the directorate to scrutinise JCOs based on an interview. Final selection is carried out at the Adjutant General Branch and the COAS Secretariat.

While some of the responders have highlighted the need to have an effective criterion for their selection. This may include the short Services Selection Board (SSB) type test to include all three aspects (Mansa, Vacha, and Karma) by qualified assessors trained by the Defence Institute of Psychological Research (DIPR).

One of the responders in survey named Brigadier Surender Singh Joon (Retd.) who is an Ex. President of Services Selection Board Allahabad, says "*While it may not be appropriate to put them through the complete SSB procedure but a short test to include all three aspects could be worked out. It could be conducted at one of the Regimental Centres by a team of IOs/ GTO/Psych pooled in from all three services if the appt is for a tri-service organisations*".

Additionally, DIPR should design special tests, training modules for the SMs or equivalents.

Shortlisting of SMs: It is very important to have certain eligibility criteria for them for such appointments. Hereby, a brief proposed shortlisting and eligibility criteria are given below:

- **Army SM:** Selection amongst a panel of SMs who have provided their services as Command SMs.

- **Command SM:** Selection amongst a panel of SMs who have provided their services as Corps SMs.
- **Corps SM:** Selection amongst a panel of SMs who have provided their services as Division SMs.
- **Division SM:** Selection amongst a panel of SMs who have provided their services as Brigade SMs.
- **Brigade SM:** Selection amongst a panel of SMs who have provided their services as Unit SMs.

For Tri-Services Organisations: For tri-services appointments, the SMs or equivalents from all three services would be competing with one another.

- **CDS SM (or equivalent):** Selection amongst a panel of SMs or equivalents who have provided their services as ASM/CSMs or equivalents.
- **ITC SM (or equivalent):** Selection amongst a panel of SMs or equivalents who have provided services in any tri-services structure or done any inter-services postings.

Introduce a Common Uniform for SMs above the unit level

As these pictures surfaced, it can be seen that the ASM and CSMs were still wearing their regimental belongings, but a revision and a common uniform for all appointees should be introduced. This is also the case with all officers, including brigadiers and above a common uniform with no sign of their parental unit.

It is because they represent all PBOR from all arms and services, and may not serve the purpose if they still wear their regimental belongings.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The appointment of ASM and CSMs is an effective step to address the key challenges faced by the IA, like bridging the communication gap between the HDO ground-level troops. They will facilitate the core issues related to PBOR by providing their advice and feedback on the same. The TMW standards will also be improved by the absorption of these posts. These three holistically pave the way for a future-ready IA with a strong defence ecosystem. This will happen only if these posts are given proper authority rather than being purely ceremonial posts.

Recommendations

The ASM and CSMs should be empowered with a clear charter of duties with authority, where these appointments should be respected. They have to be well aligned with the existing command structure, with clear demarcation of their roles with no interference with legally prescribed channels. Additionally, provide them with appropriate training and selection, and introduce a common uniform for SMs above the unit level. They forthcoming roles for them can be that they should also be used for international cooperation and collaboration related to the PBOR issues. The findings highlight that the proposed multilayered model should be implemented for SMs. Either appoint new or empower the existing SMs at Brigade, Division, and Corps HQs and give them proper authorities. They should be properly aligned with the posts above, i.e., ASM and CSMs, and below, i.e., Unit level SMs. There is a serious need to incorporate certain qualities in the IA's JCOs, which will improve their standards and make them competent for appointment at such higher levels. At present, these lower standards would affect the effectiveness of interface that can be improved by providing them with training separately before appointments.

In the future, the tri-service HQs should have a similar structure for bringing jointness and synergy among the three services or smooth

functioning of ITCs. At present, the inter-posting of senior JCOs should be done to gain the ground-level experience of other arms and services.

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Appendix- A

1. Interview(s): 01

The author has interviewed **Army Subedar Major Gopa Kumar** through official communication with the Additional Director General of Public Information (ADGPI), Indian Army on 25 November 2025.

2. Total Responders (in Survey): 40

Service: Responders	Rank	Total
Indian Army: 34	Lieutenant General	01
	Major General	06
	Brigadier	06
	Colonel	11
	Lieutenant Colonel	04
	Major	02
	Captain	02
	Lieutenant	02
Indian Air Force: 04	Group Captain	02
	Flying Officer	01
	Flight Lieutenant	01
Indian Navy: 02	Commodore	02
Grand Total	**-**	**40**

Wreckage to Intelligence: Institutionalising Drone Forensics in the Indian Army

INDERJEET BALOTIA

"प्रत्यक्षानुमानोपदेशैः सिद्धि"
Pratyakṣa–anumāna–upadeśaiḥ siddhiḥ
(Success is achieved through direct observation, inference, and systematic instruction)
— Kautilya, ***Arthashastra (Book 1, Chapter 11, Sutra 6)***

Abstract

The proliferation of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) across contemporary battlefields has elevated drone warfare into a persistent tactical and operational threat. Current counter-UAS responses emphasise detection, disruption, and destruction; however, the systematic exploitation of neutralised platforms remains underdeveloped. This paper contends that drone forensics must be institutionalised as an operational capability within the Indian Army. Drawing lessons from recent conflicts and Indian operations, including Op Sindoor, it proposes a structured battlefield-to-laboratory forensic workflow and a tiered deployment model across unit, theatre, and central levels. Embedding drone forensics within doctrine, training, and intelligence processes will enhance force protection, enable credible

attribution, strengthen counter-UAS responses, and generate enduring decision advantage in multi- domain operations.

Introduction

Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), commonly referred to as drones, have become pervasive instruments of modern warfare, employed across the full operational spectrum from tactical reconnaissance and target acquisition to precision strikes, loitering munitions, and coordinated swarm attacks. For the Indian Army, drones represent a dual challenge and opportunity. On one hand, they pose a persistent and evolving threat through hostile surveillance, payload delivery, electronic warfare support, and kinetic attacks. On the other, intercepted or recovered drones constitute a valuable intelligence reservoir. Such platforms often retain digital, electronic, and physical artefacts capable of revealing operator intent, command-and-control architecture, geographic origin, supply chains, payload configuration, and operational tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). Despite increasing encounters with hostile drones, the Indian Army currently lacks a formalised, doctrinally embedded drone-forensics framework capable of systematically exploiting recovered UAS across echelons.

Recent counter-UAS operations, including **Op Sindoor,** have underscored the operational relevance of drone forensics for the Indian Army. During such operations, hostile drones employed for surveillance and payload delivery were neutralised or recovered, enabling detailed technical examination. Forensic exploitation of these systems revealed recoverable artefacts such as flight logs, firmware identifiers, communication modules, and component-level modifications, allowing assessment of adversary intent, launch methodologies, and technological sophistication. The lessons derived from Op Indoor highlight the necessity of institutionalised drone-forensics capabilities to support timely intelligence generation and adaptive counter-drone responses.

Drone forensics refers to the structured and methodical set of procedures, tools, and organisational mechanisms employed to extract, preserve, analyse, and interpret evidence from captured or destroyed UAS platforms. When executed systematically, drone forensics enables the transformation of battlefield debris into actionable intelligence and, where required, legally admissible evidence. This paper examines the operational rationale for drone forensics within the Indian Army, outlines a practical end-to-end forensic workflow, identifies laboratory and field-deployable infrastructure requirements, evaluates feasibility under operational conditions, and proposes a structured way ahead for institutionalising drone-forensics capability as part of India's evolving counter-UAS and multi-domain operations framework.

Operational Imperatives of Drone Forensics in Modern Drone Warfare

The widespread employment of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) in contemporary conflict has made drone forensics an operational necessity rather than a niche technical function. As adversaries increasingly deploy drones for surveillance, payload delivery, electronic warfare support, and kinetic attacks, the exploitation of recovered UAS platforms provides critical advantages across tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Collectively, these imperatives demonstrate that drone forensics is not merely a technical adjunct to counter-UAS operations but a core enabler of decision superiority across the tactical strategic continuum.

- **Operational Intelligence and Attribution.**
  Recovered drones often retain flight logs, telemetry, firmware identifiers, RF signatures, onboard imagery, and hardware serial numbers. Forensic analysis of these artefacts enables linkage to manufacturers, supply chains, ground control stations, and in some cases launch or operator locations—supporting both immediate counter-measures and higher-level strategic attribution.

- **Tactical Exploitation and Force Protection.**
  Rapid analysis of navigation data and communications parameters enables identification of ingress routes, operating frequencies, and attack patterns. These insights support interdiction, improve electronic warfare responses, and enhance force protection against repeat attacks.

- **Vulnerability Discovery and Counter-Development.**
  Hardware and firmware examination can reveal insecure communications, default credentials, or exploitable interfaces. Exploiting these weaknesses supports tailored counter-UAS measures, including jamming, spoofing, or cyber-enabled neutralisation.

- **Legal, Diplomatic, and Intelligence Utility.**
  Forensic outputs collected through standardised procedures strengthen intelligence reporting and provide credible evidence for diplomatic engagement, legal proceedings, and international attribution in grey-zone conflicts.

- **Doctrine and Training.**
  Forensic insights feed directly into lessons-learned processes, threat libraries, simulations, and training curricula for combat, EW, and EOD units, enhancing long-term preparedness and adaptability. Figure 1 describes the Operational Imperatives of Drone Forensics in Modern Drone Warfare.

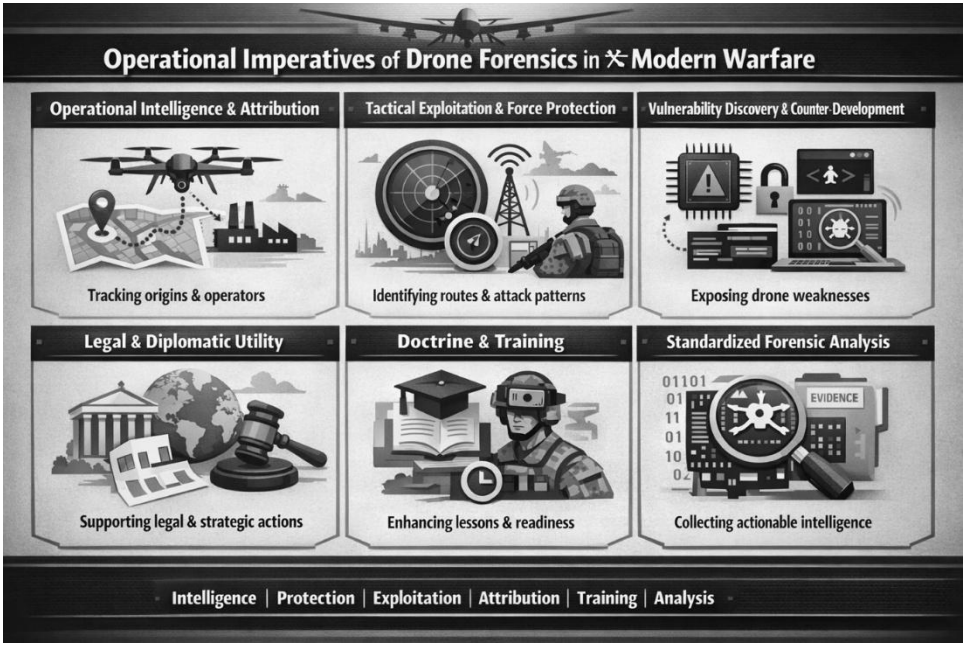


Fig 1: Operational Imperatives of Drone Forensics in Modern Drone Warfare

Lessons from Russia–Ukraine and Iran–Israel Conflicts and Op Sindoor

- **Russia–Ukraine Conflict (2022–ongoing.** The large-scale employment of Iranian-origin *Shahed* loitering munitions, alongside a wide spectrum of commercial and improvised UAS, has generated extensive battlefield debris and captured systems. Forensic examination of recovered components—such as GNSS modules, electric motors, flight controllers, telemetry units, and onboard storage—has enabled analysts to trace production modifications, re-engineering efforts, supply chains, and evolving operational patterns. Ukrainian military assessments and open-source technical studies indicate rapid adaptation of FPV kamikaze drones, mass saturation tactics, and hybrid use of commercial and bespoke platforms, underscoring battlefield wreckage as a recurring and high-value intelligence source.

- **Iran–Israel Engagements (April 2024 and Related Incidents).** The large-scale Iranian drone and missile barrage on 13–14 April 2024, reportedly involving hundreds of UAS and missiles, resulted in widespread interceptions across multiple airspaces. Debris fields and partial telemetry recovered from intercepted systems were exploited for attribution, assessment of guidance technologies, navigation resilience, and launch profiles. The scale, tempo, and coordination of the attack highlighted the necessity of rapid evidence collection, RF analysis, and technical exploitation to inform air-defence posture, escalation management, and diplomatic signalling.

- **Indian Context : Op Sindoor.** Indian counter-UAS operations, including Op Sindoor, have demonstrated comparable forensic value at the tactical and operational levels. During these operations, hostile drones employed for cross-border surveillance, reconnaissance, and payload delivery were neutralised or recovered in varying states of integrity. Post-recovery examination revealed exploitable artefacts such as flight logs, firmware signatures, navigation modules, communication components, power systems, and payload integration methods. Forensic analysis enabled the identification of launch patterns, operator skill levels, modification techniques, and recurring design features, offering insights into adversary intent and operational practices. The experience from Op Sindoor, in particular, highlighted the importance of timely collection and structured exploitation of drone debris to support counter-measures, intelligence assessments, and refinement of counter-UAS tactics. Unlike the open battlefields of Ukraine, Indian LC/LAC environments impose constraints of altitude, terrain masking, and short reaction times, increasing the value of rapid forward-level forensic exploitation.

- **Stages / Steps of Drone Forensics.** Drone forensics follows a structured and sequential methodology to ensure safety, evidentiary integrity, and analytical reliability. Drawing from established digital forensics principles and adapted to the operational realities of unmanned aerial systems, the process spans from initial recovery at the incident site to technical analysis and intelligence dissemination. Standardising these stages enables consistent exploitation of recovered drones across tactical, operational, and strategic levels. This workflow mirrors classical digital forensics models while accounting for the kinetic, electronic, and environmental complexities unique to unmanned systems.

    - **Scene Assessment and Safety.** Drone forensic examination begins with an assessment of the recovery site to identify hazards such as unexploded payloads, residual fuel, or unstable batteries. Coordination with Explosive Ordnance Disposal/ Explosive Ordnance Reconnaissance (EOD/EOR) elements is essential before handling. The site is secured, and contextual details, including time, location, and environmental conditions, are recorded.

    - **Scene Documentation.** The recovery site is documented through photographs and video recordings taken from multiple angles with scale references. GNSS coordinates of major debris components are recorded, along with details of surrounding terrain, infrastructure, and relevant witness observations.

- **Evidence Identification and Triage**. Recovered material is examined to identify items of forensic value, including onboard storage media, flight controllers, RF modules, navigation units, cameras, power systems, propulsion components, and payload

remnants. Fragile or data-sensitive items are prioritised for preservation.

- **Evidence Isolation and Preservation**. Components capable of wireless communication are isolated using RF-shielded containers to prevent interference or data alteration. Electronic items are packaged in anti-static materials. All evidence is labelled, sealed with tamper-evident measures, and documented in a chain-of-custody log.

- **Transport and Custody Transfer.** Preserved evidence is transported to an appropriate forensic facility using methods that minimise physical and environmental damage. EOD clearance is confirmed before movement, and all custody transfers are formally recorded.

- **Digital Acquisition and Integrity Assurance.** Removable storage media are imaged using write-blocking devices to create bit-for-bit copies. Embedded memory extraction techniques, such as chip-off or direct access, are conducted in controlled laboratory environments. Cryptographic hash values are generated to verify data integrity.

- **Forensic Analysis.** Digital analysis focuses on extracting flight logs, telemetry, imagery metadata, timestamps, and navigation records. Firmware and hardware are examined using standard interfaces and static or dynamic techniques to assess functionality and modification patterns. RF data is analysed to identify frequency use and emitter characteristics, while navigation data supports geospatial reconstruction of flight paths and mission profiles.

- **Correlation and Attribution.** Findings are cross-referenced with forensic repositories and intelligence databases to assess hardware provenance, firmware signatures, RF fingerprints, and metadata.

Attribution assessments are expressed with defined confidence levels rather than absolute conclusions.

- **Reporting and Evidence Management.** Results are documented in a structured forensic report detailing methods, tools, findings, limitations, and confidence assessments. Evidence and records are securely archived in accordance with established procedures.
- **Knowledge Integration.** Forensic outputs are disseminated to relevant operational and intelligence stakeholders and incorporated into threat databases, training programmes, and counter-UAS capability development efforts.
- **Lab Setup Required for Drone Forensics in a Field Environment.** Drone forensics in operational areas requires laboratory facilities that can function in field conditions while still meeting safety and forensic standards. Unlike routine digital forensics, drone forensics must deal with damaged equipment, explosive hazards, harsh environments, and the need for quick results. A layered lab setup—from basic forward kits to mobile and rear-area facilities—allows recovered drones to be preserved, analysed, and attributed on time without affecting operational tempo or evidentiary integrity.

Minimum Deployable Field Kit (Patrol / Team Level)

- **Safety:** EOD gloves, eye protection, fire suppressant.
- **Documentation:** Rugged GNSS-enabled camera, scale, measuring tape, scene markers, evidence tags, chain-of-custody forms.
- **Containment:** Faraday bags/boxes, anti-static bags, tamper-evident seals, battery isolation containers.
- **Data Acquisition:** Rugged laptop (air-gapped forensic OS/VMs), write-blocker, SD/eMMC adapters, USB/UART interfaces.

- **RF Tools:** Portable SDR, directional antenna, spectrum analysis application.
- **Teardown Tools:** Precision screwdrivers, micro-soldering iron, multimeter, compact hot-air rework tool.

Mobile Field Lab (Vehicle / Tented Setup)

- ESD-safe workbench, UPS/generator, basic climate control, lockable evidence storage.
- Imaging station with validated forensic tools, hardware programmers (JTAG/SWD, SPI), field-approved chip-off kit, and microscope.
- Network isolation devices, an interim evidence storage array, and secure evidence safe.

Central Technical Lab (Garrison Level)

- Clean-room capability, advanced chip-off and rework stations, spectrum analysis and direction-finding lab, RF anechoic chamber (as required).
- High-performance computing for imagery exploitation, ML-based pattern analysis and timeline reconstruction.
- Secure classified databases for firmware hashes, RF fingerprints and inter-agency intelligence sharing.

Software & Data Repositories

- Vendor and open-source parsers (DJI, ArduPilot, PX4), proprietary format decoders, firmware tools (Binwalk, IDA, Ghidra).
- Centralised, access-controlled forensic repository for hardware, firmware and RF indicators.

- Standardised SOPs, validated tool lists and chain-of-custody documentation.

Tiered Drone Forensics Deployment Matrix

To operationalise drone forensics across the full spectrum of conflict, the Indian Army requires a tiered and scalable deployment model that balances speed, analytical depth, and evidentiary rigour. Battlefield conditions—particularly in LC/LAC environments, as observed during **Op Sindoor,** requirement of immediate preservation and rapid exploitation of recovered unmanned aerial systems at the forward edge. In contrast, more complex technical analysis, reverse engineering, and strategic attribution are better conducted at rear-area and central facilities equipped with specialised infrastructure and expertise.

A tiered architecture enables the distribution of forensic tasks according to operational urgency and technical complexity. Forward-level elements focus on safety, documentation, triage, and preservation; intermediate-level facilities undertake detailed digital, firmware, and RF analysis; and central-level laboratories support advanced exploitation, long-term intelligence correlation, and strategic attribution. This structured approach ensures timely operational utility, efficient use of specialised resources, and consistency in forensic standards, enabling drone-derived evidence to inform tactical counter-measures, operational planning, and strategic decision-making across echelons.

Table 1: Tiered Drone Forensics Deployment Matrix

Parameter	Tier I – Unit / Formation Level	Tier II – Command / Theatre Level	Tier III – Central / Strategic Level
Primary Role	Rapid triage & preservation	Detailed technical analysis and exploitation	Strategic attribution & capability development

Parameter	Tier I – Unit / Formation Level	Tier II – Command / Theatre Level	Tier III – Central / Strategic Level
Deployment Location	Battalion / Brigade areas (forward edge)	Corps / Command Theatre HQ (mobile lab)	Permanent central facility
Typical UAS Handled	Commercial & modified quadcopters, FPV drones	Loitering munitions, encrypted/ modified UAS	Major Drone / Weapon platforms
Core Activities	Scene documentation, battery isolation, Faraday containment, SD/eMMC imaging, basic log extraction	Full memory imaging, firmware analysis, RF fingerprinting, timeline reconstruction	Chip-off, advanced RF demodulation, controlled testing, Artificial Intelligence based analysis
Major Equipment	PPE, GNSS camera, Faraday bags, rugged laptop (air-gapped), write-blocker, SDR, hand tools	ESD benches, UPS/generator, JTAG/SPI tools, microscopes, forensic servers	Clean-room labs, advanced spectrum suites, High-performance computing (HPC), Machine learning tools for pattern analysis and correlation and Machine learning tools for pattern analysis and correlation
Personnel	Trained EME / Signals Technicians	EME, Signals & forensic specialists	Qualified Officers/ HMTs and Senior engineers, scientists, inter-agency analysts
Turnaround Time	Minutes to hours	Hours to days	Days to weeks

Parameter	Tier I – Unit / Formation Level	Tier II – Command / Theatre Level	Tier III – Central / Strategic Level
Primary Outputs	• Scene documentation • Basic flight log extraction • Identification of frequencies, payload type, and preliminary indicators	• Full memory and firmware extraction • RF fingerprinting and protocol analysis • Flight path reconstruction and operational attribution	• Long-term threat pattern identification • Doctrine, training, and R&D inputs • Strategic attribution and supply chain analysis
Operational Value	Immediate force protection, EW/AD cueing	Campaign-level counter-UAS optimisation	Strategic deterrence & policy support
Limitations	Limited firmware/RF depth	Mobility constraints	Distance from battlefield

Way Ahead

The way ahead lies in institutionalising drone forensics through doctrine, training, and tiered capability development. Frontline units must be equipped for rapid recovery and preservation, while command-level mobile labs and a central technical facility should support deeper analysis and strategic attribution. Integrating forensic outputs into operations, procurement, and training will ensure that counter-UAS engagements generate lasting intelligence advantage.

(a) Policy & Command Decision (0–3 months) Approve a pilot drone-forensics programme under corps/command HQ with clear mandate, funding, and inter-service coordination directives.

(b) Pilot Implementation (3–12 months) Equip and appoint staff to mobile forensic labs (e.g., one for Western Command and one for Northern/Eastern as needed).

- Issue field triage kits to brigade/regimental EOD detachments.
- Create SOPs for scene safety, triage and evidence transfer; develop chain-of-custody templates.

(c) Training & Certification (6–18 months, parallel) Develop modular training: (a) front-line triage (3–5 days), (b) field forensic acquisition (2–4 weeks), (c) advanced analysis and reverse engineering (3–6 months). Certify personnel under an Army forensic accreditation scheme.

(d) Central Technical Lab & Repository (12–24 months)

- Establish a centralised Forensic Technical Laboratory with chip-off capability, RF lab and classified database of firmware/part-hashes and RF signatures.
- Integrate with national SIGINT/CERT and set rules for controlled sharing.

(e) R&D & Indigenous Tooling (12–36 months) Fund DRDO/defence R&D and private start-ups to produce Indian forensic toolchains, parsers for popular proprietary formats, and RF fingerprinting solutions suited to regional threats.

(f) Doctrinalisation & Exercises (from 12 months onward) Incorporate drone forensics into regular exercises and war games; run lessons-learned cycles for iterative improvement.

(g) Interagency & International Cooperation (ongoing) Establish MoUs with investigative agencies, MEA, allied militaries and

academia for knowledge sharing and joint capability development under controlled protocols.

(h) Performance Metrics and Continuous Improvement: Define KPIs (time-to-initial-exploitation, evidence chain intactness, number of attributions supported) and review quarterly to refine SOPs and resource allocation.

Conclusion

Drone forensics has emerged as a critical capability in modern conflict, as unmanned aerial systems are increasingly employed for surveillance, precision attack, and influence operations. For the Indian Army, frequent hostile drone activity—particularly along contested borders—necessitates systematic exploitation of recovered platforms rather than treating each encounter as an isolated tactical event. Experiences from recent conflicts and operations such as Op Sindoor demonstrate that even damaged drones can yield high-value intelligence when handled through structured forensic processes.

This paper has outlined a practical framework for institutionalising drone forensics within the Indian Army, encompassing standardised workflows, tiered laboratory infrastructure, and trained personnel. As adversaries adopt more sophisticated and resilient drone technologies, timely and forensically sound exploitation will become increasingly decisive; in future conflicts, advantage will accrue not merely to those who neutralise unmanned systems, but to those who exploit them most intelligently.

"गुप्तचरैः सम्यगुपलब्धं कार्यसिद्ध्यै भवति"

"Well-acquired intelligence leads to successful execution of objectives."

-- Kautilya, ***Arthashastra*** *(Book 1, Chapter 12, Sutra 1)*

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From Qom to Kargil: Unveiling Shadows of Influence in India

NIRZHER AGARWAL

Abstract

From Qom to Kargil: Unveiling Shadows of Influence in India analyses the evolving influence of the Shia community in the Indian subcontinent and examines whether this presence strengthens or threatens India, as a state and society. The article traces the ideological roots of Iranian influence, framed as a defensive strategy, and highlights potential vulnerabilities that adversaries could exploit. It emphasizes the need for strategic foresight and proactive engagement rather than neglect. The study concludes that sustained monitoring and constructive convergence are essential for safeguarding internal security, shaping a future diplomatic roadmap with Iran and reinforcing bilateral ties in a shifting geopolitical landscape.

Introduction

The Achaemenid Empire, often identified as the Persian Empire, was an ancient Iranian civilization established by Cyrus the Great in 550 BCE. At its zenith, it spanned from the Balkans and Egypt to large swathes of West and Central Asia, reaching the Indus Valley in South Asia. (Turchin, Adams, and Hall 2006) Zoroastrianism, the primary religion of the

Persians, would later shape the beliefs of the Parsi community in India. The 7th century CE, saw the fall of the pre-Islamic Persian Empire due to Arab Muslim conquests. Despite numerous dynasties ruling Iran subsequently, the Safavid Dynasty of the 16th century played a transformative role in moulding modern Iran. It declared Twelver Shia Islam as the state religion, thereby defining Iran's Shia identity and positioning the nation as a central figure in the global Shia Muslim community.

Modern-day Iran has a turbulent history shaped by uprisings and political upheavals. A pivotal moment was the 1953 coup, when the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh was overthrown with support from the U.S. and U.K., restoring Mohammad Reza Shah to power. The Islamic Revolution of 1979, however, transformed Iran's trajectory by forcing the Shah into exile, facilitating the return of Ayatollah Khomeini, and establishing a new theocratic constitution that declared Khomeini as the Supreme Leader. Since then, Iran has gradually positioned itself as the global leader of the Shia community, undertaking an ambitious project to guide and influence Shia populations across the world. This outreach has extended into South Asia, with India emerging as an important focus of Iran's religious diplomacy. Within India's Shia community, Iran's theological and ideological engagement has largely manifested through clerical networks and religious institutions, which remain peaceful but carry the latent potential to be manipulated by hostile actors. Against this backdrop, India stands at a crossroads—balancing the need to safeguard against possible internal vulnerabilities while preserving constructive ties with a critical regional power.

Iran as a Nation State

Theological Position & Constitution

Iran's religious doctrine is firmly anchored in Twelver Shia Islam, which serves as the official religion as per its constitution. The legal and governmental structures are required to conform to Islamic laws,

specifically interpreted through the Twelver Ja'fari school of jurisprudence. Central to this ideology is the principle of "Velayat-e Faqih" (Davari 2004), which maintains that during the absence of the twelfth Imam, a righteous and knowledgeable Islamic jurist (faqih) should assume leadership over the Muslim community. This role is occupied by the Supreme Leader, who wields overarching authority across Iran's executive, legislative, and judicial branches, ensuring their operations align with Islamic values. Although Iran is a theocratic state, it grants limited recognition to religious minorities such as Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians. These groups are allowed to observe their faith within legal boundaries.

Iran's governance structure blends elements of theocracy with aspects of democracy. While elected institutions, such as the Parliament (Majlis) and the President, play significant roles, their authority ultimately answers to the Supreme Leader. The Guardian Council, comprising Islamic scholars and legal experts, is tasked with reviewing and approving legislation and screening candidates for major elections. Another key body, the Assembly of Experts, is charged with selecting the Supreme Leader and theoretically has the authority to dismiss him, should he no longer meet the required qualifications. (Schirazi 1997)

The Sectarian Divide

Shah Ismail I, who founded the Safavid Empire in the early 1500s, declared Twelver Shia Islam as the official faith of the newly established state. In an effort to consolidate power and distinguish Iran from its Sunni neighbours, especially the Ottoman Empire, the Safavids actively promoted and enforced Shia Islam among a largely Sunni population. They invited Shia scholars, especially from Lebanon, to help build educational institutions and construct a framework for Shia jurisprudence and theology. This transition led to recurring tensions with the Sunni Ottoman Empire and deeply embedded a Shia identity within Iran. Over time, the country underwent a comprehensive religious shift from Sunni

to Shia majority, intertwining Shia Islam with the national identity of Iran. (McMahon 2023)

Navigating Challenges in the Middle East

Iran positions itself as a key player in a long-standing ideological and geopolitical conflict involving the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. These three powers are seen by Iran as threats to its leadership, regional dominance and promotion of Shia Islam. Following the fall of the Shah and labelling of the US as the "Great Satan," along with Saudi Arabia's role as a Western ally, tensions surged. The revolutionary events of 1979, including the Islamic Revolution and Siege of Mecca, symbolized this animosity, necessitating stringent defensive measures.

Iran's defence doctrine hinges on two primary strategies: Asymmetric Warfare and Forward Defence. These tactics have driven Iran's support for groups such as Hezbollah, Houthis, Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, and the arming of Kurdish factions under Saddam Hussein. Through its foreign policy and ideological outreach, Iran has extended its influence across West Asia by leveraging its Shia ideological appeal, activities of the IRGC Quds Force, and allied militias. Khomeini's strategy included breaking ties with Israel and utilizing Syria as a gateway to spread Shiism into Lebanon, while also aiding the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) against Israel. Over time, Iran has cultivated strong political and militant networks in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. This network, collectively referred as the "Axis of Resistance" (Skare 2023) receives military, financial, and logistical backing from Iran. These alliances serve Tehran's goal of deterring threats to its territory by engaging adversaries at their borders, far from Iranian soil.

Bilateral Ties with the Indian Subcontinent

India's key strategic interests in Iran revolve around energy security, regional connectivity, and geopolitical influence. Diplomatic relations

between the two nations were formalized in 1950. While high-level visits have played a role in strengthening bilateral ties, the relationship remained relatively subdued throughout much of the 20th century. This was largely due to Iran's alliance with the Western bloc and India's commitment to non-alignment, with a tilt towards the Soviet Union. (Hussain 2012) A significant development occurred in the early 2000s, when two nations signed the Tehran Declaration, which laid the foundation for future collaboration. During this visit, the Indian Prime Minister extended a $200 million line of credit to support Iran's third economic development plan. (Ramachandran 2001) Additionally, India promoted the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a project welcomed by Iran as it envisioned, transforming the country into a major transportation hub linking Central Asia.

In 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official visit to Iran resulted in a Joint Statement, emphasizing historical and cultural ties between the two countries. A range of bilateral consultative mechanisms has since been established, enabling regular interactions at various levels. These include strategic dialogues between India's Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) and Iran's Institute of Political and International Studies (IPIS), as well as consistent engagement between national security advisors and foreign secretaries on matters such as counterterrorism, energy cooperation, and regional security.

Major Convergences

The geopolitical shifts following the Soviet Union's collapse and the emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s drew India and Iran closer, particularly as both backed the Northern Alliance against the Taliban regime. This shared interest in Afghanistan's stability laid the groundwork for deeper security cooperation. A key development in this context was the 2002 Defence Cooperation Agreement, which included provisions allowing Indian access to Iranian military facilities during conflicts with Pakistan and Iran's access to Indian defence technology. In 2003, India and

Iran conducted their first joint naval exercise in the Persian Gulf, underscoring their growing defence collaboration. Both countries recognized mutual threats, especially terrorism, and pursued stability across the Indian Ocean Region. Their cooperation expanded to include maritime security, intelligence sharing, and counter-narcotics operations. These engagements have been shaped by a common understanding of regional threats and a desire to ensure the safety of vital trade and energy routes. (PN 2021)

Chabahar Port in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province, given its immense regional and global significance, has become a crucial axis of convergence between the two nations. As Iran's only deep-water port with direct access to the Indian Ocean, Chabahar serves as a critical maritime hub. Its geographical proximity to India, Pakistan and Afghanistan enhances its relevance, particularly in the context of INSTC. One of Chabahar's notable advantages is its exemption from US sanctions, which enables smoother trade operations with regional and global partners. The port is seen as a cornerstone of India's efforts to bypass Pakistan and establish direct trade routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Chabahar's development strengthens not only India-Iran ties but also boosts India's broader connectivity ambitions and trade access in the region. (Stanly 2008)

Influence of Shia Islam in India

Genesis of Shia Community in India

The presence and growth of Shia Islam in India have been shaped by a combination of early Islamic expansion, waves of migration and cultural exchange. the Parsi community (Persian Zoroastrians) was introduced to the Indian subcontinent as early as the 7th century CE, during the final phase of the Rashidun Caliphate. Over the following centuries, particularly after Mongol invasions of Persia, many Persian scholars, bureaucrats and

artisans migrated to India, seeking refuge and opportunities within the Sultanates. One of the notable figures in this spread was Mir Syed Ali Hamdani, an Iranian Sufi who arrived in Kashmir in 1381. He played a major role in spreading Islam across the Himalayan region, from Skardu to Tibet, reportedly converting large numbers of Hindus and Buddhists. By 1505, the Shah Mir dynasty's ruler had embraced Shiism, and the Chak clan of Kashmir followed suit. (Haider 2012) This transformation drew opposition from local Sunni authorities, leading to ten major campaigns of violence against Shias, known as "Taraaj-e Shia."

The Bahmani Sultanate witnessed a substantial influx of Iranian (Afāqī) nobles, many of whom were Shia Muslims. This era marked increased patronage for Persian culture and Shia practices. After the decline of the Bahmani Sultanate, five successor states emerged in Deccan, two of which, namely the Qutb Shahi dynasty and the Nawabs of Awadh, became prominent Shia rulers. (Khalidi 1990) The Qutb Shahis ruled from Golconda (Hyderabad), while the Nawabs of Awadh governed from Faizabad (Lucknow). Both dynasties actively promoted Shia education, architecture, and religious observances while maintaining close ties with Persia. (Ahmed 2011) The medieval spread of Shia Islam across India laid enduring foundations that now make India, with nearly 40 million adherents, the world's second-largest Shia demographic after Iran's 66 million.

Expanding Influence

Iran's positioning as a global Shia leader underpins its strategy of broadening its influence through active engagement with Shia populations across countries, balanced with pragmatic relations with national governments. Several Iranian institutions play key roles in cultivating these transnational religious networks. The Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), which is directly overseen by the Supreme Leader, promotes ideals of the Iranian revolution and seeks to strengthen relations with Muslim nations. Another major institution is Al-Mustafa

International University (MIU), based in Qom, which operates religious seminaries and affiliated institutions in more than 50 countries. Thousands of foreign students, many of whom receive full financial support, study in Iran at campuses managed by MIU. (Haqqani 2020)

Iran's outreach efforts in India include supporting Shia seminaries and educational institutions. Key institutions facilitating this outreach include the Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IKMT), Islamia School Kargil (ISK), and Jamiat-ul-Ulama Isna Asharia Kargil (JUIAK). (Shinde 2024) In contrast to dispersed Shia populations in cities like Lucknow and Hyderabad, the Shia community in Kargil is more concentrated, making it easier to connect and influence the region. Established in 1979, IKMT has supported the local population through charitable and educational initiatives. Clerics from India often receive religious education and funding from seminaries in Qom, Isfahan, and Tehran, promoting Iranian theological ideologies. These clerics tend to follow and propagate the teachings of leading Iranian religious authorities. A representative of Ayatollah Khamenei in India, once highlighted the existence of over 90 Shia seminaries in the country and more than 1,000 Indian students enrolled in religious studies in Qom. Iran’s influence in India extends beyond ideology and training, including financial support through religious NGOs such as Ahl-Ul-Bayt World Assembly (ABWA). These organizations are believed to fund Shia seminaries, particularly in areas like Kargil and Lucknow, supporting Indian clerics trained in Iran. The IKMT, led by clerics educated in Iran, is said to receive direct funding from Iranian religious institutions, further embedding Tehran’s influence in the region.

Indian Shias maintain strong theological ties with Iranian authorities (Marja' al-taqlid), although Indian intelligence agencies have generally not identified them as being involved in transnational terrorist activities. Organizations such as ABWA, which is suspected to have ties to the IRGC, are believed to recruit promising individuals among Indian Shias to spread

Iranian revolutionary ideology. Iranian-linked organizations in India also endorse political and ideological causes, such as Qods Day during Ramadan, initiated by Ayatollah Khomeini, and observe the anniversary of Khomeini's death.

Outcomes of Iran's Influence

The 1979 revolution saw the rise of the so-called "cassette revolution," whereby Ayatollah Khomeini's recorded speeches helped disseminate revolutionary ideas and religious teachings. This had a transformative impact on Kargil. Today, the town exhibits strong Iranian cultural influences as women commonly wear head coverings, alcohol is largely unavailable except illegally, and there are no cinemas. (Akhter 2013) One notable display of this influence was public reaction in Kargil to the 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's IRGC Quds Force, by a US drone strike. Thousands in Kargil seized the streets in protest, chanting anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans and expressing solidarity with Soleimani. (Shinde 2024) Political rivalries in the region have further highlighted Iran's ideological impact. The political divide has amplified differences in religious interpretations, contributing to factionalism within the Shia community. IKMT not only participates in religious outreach, but is also active in political demonstrations, such as annual rallies commemorating the Iranian Revolution and protests against Israel and the US. (N. Desk, IKMT Kargil Marks 45th Anniversary of Islamic Revolution with Massive Rally and Calls for Action on Global and National Issues 2024) In April 2024, a controversy arose when a textbook published in Uttar Pradesh categorized Ayatollah Khomeini among "most evil people in the world." IKMT pressurised the central government to take legal action against the publisher. (N. Desk, "Will not accept apology, initiate legal action": IKMT responds to derogatory remarks against Ayatollah Khomeini 2024)

Vulnerabilities in India from Adverse Powers Weaponizing Iran's Influence

Indian Shia Community at a Crossroads

The influence over Indian Shia clerics, particularly through institutions such as IKMT, presents a potential avenue for external manipulation. In regions like Kashmir, such organisations have been involved in shaping clergy along specific ideological lines, creating vulnerabilities that could be leveraged by hostile actors. While Indian authorities remain aware of these dynamics, they are often viewed through the prism of India's greater security concern with Sunni extremism originating from Pakistan. Notably, some Indian clerics have engaged with senior leaders such as Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah of transnational groups like Hezbollah and publicised these interactions on social media, raising concerns about ideological and political alignments with external actors. Although this does not equate to violent extremism, it highlights how soft power cultivation within segments of India's Shia community can create openings for adverse organisations to expand their influence.

The Indian Shia community has long navigated a complex political landscape shaped by historical legacy and contemporary challenges. Historically influential in regions like Awadh, post-independence Shias have sought greater political representation and attention to sectarian concerns. This pursuit became particularly evident in 2012, when Shia organizations in Uttar Pradesh demanded more substantial inclusion in the state government, citing their significant demographic presence (TNN 2012). External religious outreach has also affected the political dynamics of the Indian Shia community. By promoting particular interpretations of Shiism and training clergy, such outreach elevates the political and social status of clerics within their local contexts. Consequently, some religious leaders become influential in political spaces, shaping local agendas. There are growing concerns that hostile actors could exploit sectarian divisions to influence the political behaviour of prominent clerics and community

figures, thereby aligning them with external interests. While not overtly destabilizing, such dynamics pose long-term risks to India's internal cohesion and political independence.

Manifestations of Ideological Influence

The longstanding strategy of external actors employing proxies to extend influence is visible in countries such as Lebanon (Hezbollah), Iraq (Shia militias), Yemen (Houthis), and Palestine (Hamas) raises concerns about similar trajectories in India. While no militant proxies are known to be currently active in India by Iran, the ideological groundwork established by Iran through transnational institutions and clerical networks could facilitate such possibilities in the future to hostile actors. The widespread influence of Shia ideology in India, coupled with the known tactics of leveraging sectarian networks for strategic ends, makes this a potential area of concern. Following the October 7, 2023, developments in the Middle East, mass protests in Kargil illustrated how external ideological influence can be mobilized in ways that intersect with India's foreign policy. Analysts warn that adversarial organisations could seek to disrupt India's growing partnerships by sponsoring protests or dissent among sympathetic Shia populations. (Smith 2024) Reports also suggest that organisations such as ABWA, along with affiliated transnational networks, are engaged in identifying and grooming individuals who may serve as ideological or political operatives within India.

While Iran's ideological influence in India has not led to widespread violence, isolated incidents have raised security concerns. A notable case occurred in 2012, when an Israeli diplomat's wife was injured in a bomb attack in New Delhi. The blast, triggered by a motorcycle, coincided with attempted attacks on Israeli personnel in Tbilisi and Bangkok, with investigations linking the incidents to transnational operatives retaliating against Israel. Though such actions have not been repeated, they highlight the latent risks associated with external influence in India. The clerical and

institutional networks established across Shia communities could be exploited in future conflicts, particularly those involving regional rivalries.

Recent developments have heightened these concerns. On Kashmir Solidarity Day, leaders of Pakistan-based terrorist organisations such as Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) reportedly met senior Hamas representatives, including Dr. Khalid Al Qadoumi. (Sharma 2025) These interactions suggest a convergence between Middle Eastern groups supported by Iran and Pakistan-based extremists, raising alarms about the possible spillover of anti-India rhetoric. Hamas's participation in a Pakistan-hosted conference—where it expressed support for Kashmiri separatists and condemned alleged human rights violations—further illustrates, how external actors and aligned organisations may contribute to regional instability. Although there is no direct evidence implicating Indian Shias in terrorism, the entanglement of transnational networks and proxy strategies necessitates close monitoring.

Diverging Interests

Iran's public positioning on Kashmir has often complicated its relationship with India. Iranian leaders, particularly Ayatollah Khomeini, have previously drawn parallels between Kashmir and Palestine, casting the region as another example of Muslim suffering. Such comparisons have been perceived by India as interference in its internal affairs. Iran's position was especially contentious during the 2000 Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summit in Doha. At the time, Iran supported a resolution calling for the people of Kashmir to exercise their right to self-determination in accordance with the UN Security Council. (NO.14/9-P(IS) 2000) India strongly opposed this resolution, viewing it as a breach of its sovereignty. Despite India's consistent objections, Iran occasionally revisits the topic, which creates tension and highlights the contradiction in Iran's claim of non-interference, while simultaneously advocating for Muslim causes globally. Such actions reveal the complex nature of Iran's foreign policy, balancing statecraft with ideological outreach.

India's foreign policy is driven by a strong commitment to safeguarding national interests, which sometimes results in friction with countries like Iran. For instance, in 2005, India supported a resolution by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to report Iran to UN Security Council over concerns regarding its nuclear program. This move strained the bilateral relations. (Asef 2005) Multiple bilateral projects have been delayed or abandoned due to diverging interests. These include the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline, the failed agreement to import five million tonnes of LNG annually from Iran, and prolonged delays in the development of Chabahar Port. Such setbacks highlight the fragile nature of the bilateral relationship, especially when India's actions are perceived as aligning with Western or Israeli propositions. Iran's hyperactive influence in India, particularly in religious and strategic contexts, becomes a concern when it is paired with fluctuating diplomatic engagement and unresolved economic projects.

The volatile nature of US-Iran relations continues to impact India's engagement with Tehran. American sanctions, particularly those tied to Iran's nuclear ambitions, have repeatedly hindered India's economic cooperation with the country, most notably in the energy sector, where oil imports have suffered. These sanctions have also complicated India's pursuit for Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with Iran, contributing to a sharp decline in bilateral trade. (T. W. Desk 2025) At the same time, China's expanding political and economic presence in the Middle East, especially its strengthening ties with Iran, presents significant strategic challenges for New Delhi. Chinese investments across sectors such as infrastructure, technology, and commerce are gradually eroding India's influence and market share in vital Gulf nations like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Furthermore, China's establishment of military and naval outposts in the Red Sea, Arabian Peninsula, and Indian Ocean threatens the security of India's own civilian and defence assets in the region. As India struggles to strike a delicate balance in its diplomatic relations with Iran, the U.S., and Israel, Iran may increasingly lean toward China. (Kumar and

Kudajadri 2024) The prospect of deteriorating relations with Iran, driven by global power politics, combined with Tehran's closer ties with India's adversary, raises concerns of China leveraging Iranian influence in the Ladakh region.

Safeguarding External Exploitation of Iran's Influence

Countering Religious Radicalisation & Foreign Funding

Given the complexity of Iran's religious influence in India and vulnerability to its manipulation by adverse actors, India must adopt a nuanced, multi-dimensional strategy. This approach should aim to safeguard the country's secular character and national interests, while maintaining healthy diplomatic ties without marginalisation of the domestic Shia community. A critical component of this strategy involves reinforcing counter-radicalization efforts by promoting inclusive education, celebrating India's pluralistic religious traditions, and instilling secular values to build resilience against extremist ideologies. To effectively push back against radical narratives, it is essential to engage and empower local communities and religious leaders. Public awareness initiatives should also be undertaken to highlight the risks posed by religious extremism and foreign influence in domestic religious affairs. Enhancing the capabilities of intelligence and security agencies is crucial for tracking financial flows, monitoring the operations of foreign-affiliated religious institutions, and identifying the spread of extremist doctrines. Continuous oversight of digital and social media platforms is also necessary to detect and respond swiftly to extremist propaganda and foreign-driven content.

To effectively regulate the inflow of foreign funds to religious institutions, there must be rigorous enforcement of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) 2010 and accompanying Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Rules 2011 by compulsory disclosure of funding sources and expenditure details. Organizations seeking to receive foreign

donations must first secure FCRA registration, which is granted only if they are engaged in well-defined cultural, religious, educational, economic or social initiatives and possess a credible history of consistent activity over time. Moreover, all foreign contributions must be deposited into a pre-designated bank account. This requirement is intended to ensure that international funding is processed through a monitored and transparent financial channel. (Baijal 2009)

Convergence on Regional Security

India should prioritize strategic collaboration with Iran on regional security issues by focusing on common threats, particularly from Sunni extremist groups like ISIS and Taliban, which both countries have historically opposed. Enhanced intelligence sharing and coordinated counterterrorism measures targeting instability in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region could serve as practical steps toward deeper cooperation. Another important area for joint security engagement is the fight against narcotics trafficking, especially along the Afghanistan-Iran-India corridor, a known route for illicit drug trade. Framing counterterrorism cooperation around this shared threat offers a more compelling basis for unity and shielding religious networks from manipulation by adverse actors. Additionally, safeguarding maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf is essential to the economic and energy interests of both nations. Bilateral efforts in maritime security, such as anti-piracy operations, would reinforce this partnership. (Banerjee 2025) Establishing regular, institutionalized security dialogues, particularly between National Security Advisors and other high-ranking officials, can help both countries align their strategic outlooks, better understand mutual concerns, and work collaboratively to address shared security challenges.

Leveraging Bilateral Trade and Energy Interests

India can tactfully use its economic engagement and bilateral ties with Iran to cultivate a certain level of strategic leverage, particularly through

its large energy demands and Chabahar Port development partnership. By strengthening economic and energy cooperation, while diversifying beyond oil into other sectors, India can promote mutual growth and deepen interdependence. Positioning itself as a consistent and dependable consumer of Iranian energy, especially during periods of sanctions, allows India to negotiate favourable trade and build economic influence. Furthermore, India's commitment to strategic autonomy enhances its value as a partner for Iran as well as for a contrast. In a geopolitical environment where Iran faces international isolation, collaboration with India offers Tehran a way to counterbalance external pressures.

India's continued investment in the Chabahar Port project not only secures a direct trade route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan, but also deepens economic engagement with Iran, which may help temper concerns over religious influence. Effective implementation of INSTC could significantly boost regional trade, connectivity, and economic interdependence, contributing to greater regional stability and cooperation. Expanding non-oil trade and investment offers a promising avenue for building a resilient and balanced partnership that can later extend to joint security efforts. Focusing on sectors not directly impacted by sanctions, such as agriculture, pharmaceuticals, machinery, and handicrafts, can create a more stable and sanctions-resilient trade framework. Establishing dependable banking and insurance infrastructure is vital to facilitating cross-border trade. Developing alternative payment solutions that comply with global regulations yet avoid dependence on US dollar-based transactions will be key to sustaining and expanding bilateral trade. In essence, deeper bilateral interdependence between the two nations remains crucial for managing the trajectory of religious influence within India, aligning it with national interests and policy priorities.

Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy

Highlighting deep-rooted cultural and historical ties between India and Iran, particularly through shared Sufi traditions and pre-sectarian

interactions, can help cultivate a sense of collective identity that goes beyond religious distinctions. (Khan 2022) Promoting academic collaborations and cultural initiatives centred on these commonalities can enhance public engagement and reinforce a mutual understanding grounded in historical connection. At the diplomatic level, it is essential to maintain open and transparent dialogue with the Iranian government, ensuring that any concerns related to the manipulation of ideological influence are addressed promptly while firmly reiterating India's commitment to protect its internal affairs and respecting the pluralistic character of its Muslim population. Additionally, supporting Indian Shia voices that champion inclusive values and national integrity can further strengthen internal cohesion. Providing platforms for these leaders and scholars can help balance external influences and reaffirm India's secular and sovereign stance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the intricate interplay of historical ties and Iran's post-revolution religious outreach as a global leader of the Shia community presents a nuanced undercurrent within India's diverse Shia community due to its vulnerability to external manipulation. While fostering religious awareness and cultural connections, Iran's efforts to propagate its theological and political ideology may inadvertently foster sectarian sensitivities and open avenues for radicalisation by hostile actors, particularly in its engagement with sections of the Indian Muslim population. However, India's secular framework, the diversity within its Shia population, and its strong traditions of interfaith harmony offer significant resilience. India must adopt a strategy of deliberate monitoring to recognize vulnerabilities, ensure appropriate recognition by policymakers, and prepare calibrated responses. This approach should be guided by clearly defined long-term strategic objectives and a detailed roadmap. Ultimately, a balanced approach that safeguards India's secular principles while maintaining respectful diplomatic engagement with Iran

is crucial for navigating this complex landscape and ensuring social cohesion.

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Social Media: The Firehose of Information in War

SATISH KUMAR SINHA AND SUBODH SHAHI

> "The ubiquity of social media means that the 'fog of war' is being replaced by a 'firehose of information.' In modern conflict, the first report of a tank crossing a border doesn't come from a satellite; it comes from a teenager's TikTok."[1]
>
> — Eliot Higgins, founder of Bellingcat.

Abstract

Due to its unique characteristics and ubiquitous reach, social media has significantly transcended its benign role and now directly influences multiple aspects of life. Analysis of recent conflicts; the Russia – Ukraine War (since 2022) and the Israel – Hamas War (2023 -24), reveals that during armed conflict, social media has become a dominant instrument in Information Warfare, as well as an important operational enabler in facilitating intelligence generation, targeting, conduct of post-strike-damage-assessment and the adjudication of competing claims, thus deciding the battle of legitimacy. Apropos, the Indian Armed Forces must recognise the centrality of social media in modern conflict and initiate measures to effectively leverage it for their own advantage.

Introduction

Distinctive attributes of rapid proliferation, instantaneous dissemination of information, interactive content, and the plausible anonymity of users have propelled social media into a powerful and pervasive position influencing multiple domains of contemporary life. In fact, social media has transcended far beyond its original function of being a benign platform for interpersonal communication. In armed conflict zones, social media has assumed diverse and often decisive roles including storytelling, real-time documentation, organising search-and-rescue efforts, disseminating propaganda, mobilising domestic and transnational supporters, enabling fundraising, conducting intelligence collection, keeping surveillance over adversary forces, directly contributing to targeting processes, and acting as an arbiter of claims. During war, with large number of individuals with a smartphone pouring in information, social media has turned the scarcity of information (fog of war) to an overwhelming abundance of it (firehose of information).[2]

The most recent armed conflicts, Israel–Hamas war (October 2023 to January 2024), and the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war since February 2022, have demonstrated the multifaceted and impactful role of social media during conflict. An examination of these conflicts reveals that social media's influence extends well beyond narrative construction and morale enhancement. Instead, the role of social media has become critical in three domains: information warfare, the digital kill chain, and the audit or arbitration of contested claims. While the role of social media as a tool for information warfare (IW) is relatively understood, its two other important roles; as an enabler in the digital kill chain and as an evidence-based arbiter of claims, are relatively less recognised, despite being highly consequential, especially from a military perspective.

As an important cog within the modern digital kill chain, social media aids military functions such as the collection of granular intelligence on the movement and disposition of forces, facilitation of targeting processes, and

conduct of post-strike battle damage assessment (PSDA).[3] Open-source imagery, geo-located content, and user-generated data increasingly contribute to operational awareness, blurring traditional distinctions between civilian digital activity and military intelligence processes. In a nutshell, social media intelligence (SOCMINT)[4] and intelligence generated through social media have become a vital resource on the battlefield, and the inability to leverage it would put the military in an acutely disadvantaged position.

With respect to auditing claims and arbitrating victory, social media has assumed an unprecedented role by putting evidence-based narratives for public consumption, and as a corollary, either corroborate or de-legitimise official accounts. Verified visual material, crowdsourced analysis, and independent open-source investigations have grown manifold, and these form the backbone in forming perceptions of success, failure, and proportionality, often constraining state narratives and influencing international responses.

Taken together, these developments underscore a fundamental shift: social media has emerged as a frontline instrument in shaping narrative and aiding functions that were considered to be within the military domain exclusively. To draw lessons relevant to the Indian Armed Forces, this study analyses the aforementioned conflicts in order to identify the role of social media as operational enablers, especially its role with respect to kinetic targeting process and PSDA as well as the audit of claims.

Russia–Ukraine War (Since February 2022)

The Russia–Ukraine war commenced in February 2022, and it continues till date as one of the longest-duration interstate wars of the post–Cold War era. During the course of the war, the character of warfare and the role of social media have evolved substantially. Social media has become deeply embedded not only in narrative formation and morale sustenance but also as an integral component of the digital kill chain. The

conflict marks a decisive shift from social media as a peripheral informational tool to a core opinion maker and operational enabler.

The significance of social media as a source of information and shaping of narrative is well known. The significance and reliance get amplified in a conflict scenario. In the aftermath of the outbreak of hostilities, reliance on social media for news consumption increased sharply. By May 2022, approximately 77 per cent of Ukrainians reported using social networks as their primary source of news, up from 62 per cent in 2020.[5] In 2025, the preference for usage of social media platforms for news among the Ukrainian population has been; Telegram - 65.7%, YouTube - 61.2%, Facebook - 57.8%, Viber - 48%, and Instagram - 29.1%.[6]

Social Media as a Military Tool

In the initial phases of the war, Ukraine rapidly integrated social media into its fire execution architecture. Informal civilian networks and volunteer groups supplied actionable intelligence, including real-time locations of Russian troop concentrations, force movements, artillery positions, fuel depots, and air defence systems to enable near real-time detection, classification, targeting, and post-strike verification of targets. Innovatively, the Ukrainian government quickly adapted its DIIA - an acronym for the Ukrainian phrase "Derzhava i Ya" (*Держава і Я*), which translates to "The State and Me"- app, application launched in 2020 as part of Ukraine's digital transformation, by integrating eVorog (e-Enemy) Chatbot over Telegram in March 2022.[7] It enables verified users to report Russian troop movements, equipment locations, and suspected collaborators. The app requires users to authenticate via an e-passport system, and users can upload photos and videos of enemy assets. The app automatically attaches a timestamp and geolocation, turning raw civilian sightings into actionable "civil intelligence" for the Armed Forces. Once submitted, these crowdsourced reports are aggregated and fed into centralized military systems.[8] In the beginning of June 2023, Ukraine's Vice Prime Minister Mykhailo Fedorov reported that 6,74,000 Ukrainians had

already used the eVorog chatbot for reporting on Russian military activities.[9] Similarly, the ePPO app has been used extensively by Ukrainians to report on aerial threats.[10]

Ukraine's early and innovative employment of low-cost FPV drones proved significant at the tactical level, and the targeting ecosystem became increasingly refined over time. Studies and expert analyses indicate that Ukraine's battlefield targeting cycle has undergone major compression during the conflict. [11] While the early phases often saw intelligence processing and strike coordination take many hours, integrated drone ISR and digital battlefield management systems have enabled sensor-to-shooter cycles measured in minutes towards the latter half of 2025.[12] Social media platforms continue to facilitate strike validation and generate cues for follow-on attacks or repeat punishment to target(s).

The Russian military adopted a parallel, though structurally distinct, approach. Pro-Kremlin military bloggers ("milbloggers") operating through Telegram-based 'Z' channels played a dual role: shaping domestic opinion and acting as distributed reconnaissance nodes. Russian social media functioned not merely as a commentary space but as a sensor network feeding inputs to shooters. For the generation of civilian intelligence, Russia launched various telegram-based apps such as Cyber Squad (*Кибердружина*), Z-Pentest / Cyber Army of Russia, Privet Bot, Amina (Tracking App) Premise (to pay individuals in occupied Ukrainian territories to take photos of infrastructure and military assets), and the most significant one, Radar.NF (*Радар.НФ*). The Radar app, launched in September 2023, functions on 'point and report' mode via smartphones and has been significant in gathering real-time data on Ukrainian drones and missiles.[13]

Both sides increasingly employed artificial intelligence (AI) enabled image classification tools, analysing imagery circulating on social media to conduct automated damage assessments and to determine whether repeat strikes were required. On both sides, non-state civilian actors, operating

through open digital networks, have emerged as precision-strike multipliers, fundamentally altering traditional assumptions about military exclusivity over targeting processes.

PSDA based on high-resolution commercial satellite imagery from providers such as Maxar Technologies and Capella Space routinely support or refute official claims of damage. On multiple occasions, Russian assertions of having destroyed Ukrainian air defence systems such as S-300 batteries were publicly disproven within hours through OSINT-based geolocation and imagery analysis circulated on social media. This continuous cycle of public verification has imposed reputational costs on inaccurate claims and significantly constrained narrative manipulation.

Another consequential effect of pervasive social media use has been the erosion of traditional deception, concealment, and denial techniques. Persistent reporting, rapid dissemination of imagery, and crowdsourced analysis have rendered deception increasingly difficult, costly, and time-sensitive. The window for exploiting ambiguity has narrowed considerably, compelling both sides to adapt camouflage, decoy, and dispersal measures at greater expense.

Israel–Hamas War (2023–2024)

On 07 October 2023, Hamas launched a coordinated surprise attack in southern Israel, including an assault on the Nova music festival near Re'im, where approximately 360 civilians were killed. The blitzkrieg operation by Hamas resulted in the deaths of around 200 people and the abduction of approximately 250 individuals. In response, Israel initiated immediate air strikes and subsequently launched a full-scale ground offensive in the Gaza Strip on 27 October 2023. In the course of operations, Israel also conducted strikes against Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iran-linked organisations, thus extending military action into Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iran. Following sustained diplomatic engagement, led by the United States, a ceasefire is effective from 19 January 2025.[14]

The conflict demonstrated a dense and volatile information environment characterised by real-time contestation, unprecedented civilian visibility, high kinetic tempo, and rapid global emotional contagion. In this conflict, social media was not merely a parallel theatre but functioned as a primary domain through which the conflict was experienced, interpreted, and judged by global audiences.

Social Media Exploitation by Hamas

As revealed by IDF investigations, Hamas collected sensitive intelligence on IDF bases and equipment from soldiers' social media activity for years before the raid on IDF army bases on 07 October 2023. Reportedly, Hamas had established a SOCMINT (Social Media Intelligence) unit in 2018, which expanded to approximately 2,500 individuals and tracked nearly 1,00,000 IDF military personnel through social media. Also, Hamas had also learned, through social media posts of IDF personnel, about a 'hidden kill switch' on the Merkava Mark 4, the most advanced tank of Israel, that could disable the tank and render it useless. Reportedly, Hamas employed this technique during attacks on IDF bases on 07 October, especially while assaulting Nahal Oz base, where 53 soldiers were killed and 10 were taken hostage.[15]

Immediately after the attack, Hamas sought to create psychological shock and trauma by rapidly releasing GoPro-recorded attack footage, images and videos of abducted hostages, and mobile phone recordings. The operation was showcased by Hamas as "victory" against a formidable enemy, which subsequently transitioned into narratives centred on "victimhood" and "resilience". Visual representations of civilian suffering in Gaza were weaponised to generate coercive political pressure by mobilising international support, particularly within Western democracies.

The cognitive and digital campaign by Hamas relied on circulating emotionally evocative content and fostering an ideological polarisation.

The effects of kinetic actions were magnified and amplified through short and highly visceral video clips circulated via TikTok, Telegram, and WhatsApp, which emerged as the fastest transmission vectors for the masses. Hamas demonstrated how a non-state actor, unencumbered by institutional hierarchies, legal accountability, or fact-checking constraints, could leverage social media to dominate the digital information space by being a first-mover and resorting to rapid upload cycles. The scale and intensity of content uploading is evident from the fact that between 07 October and 17 November 2023, TikTok alone removed over 1.16 million videos related to the conflict, which violated its guidelines on account of violence, terrorism, hate speech, and misinformation. Further, approximately 9,33,000 bot-generated comments associated with conflict-related hashtags were also deleted.[16]

IDF Engagement on Social Media

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) responded with a more institutionalised and structured information strategy and showcased remarkable adaptability. Its counter-narrative relied on rebuttal mechanisms, amplification of official messaging, evidence-based claims, emphasis on lawful targeting, hostage recovery efforts, moral framing, and counter-terrorism justification. In the immediate aftermath of the 07 October attacks, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and IDF significantly expanded their digital outreach. Between 06 and 12 October 2023, the foreign ministry's account grew from approximately 9,38,000 to 1.2 million followers, while the IDF's official account expanded from around 1.5 million to over 2 million followers.[17] This surge reflected the centrality of the digital battlespace.

The IDF, especially its intelligence outfit, Unit 8200, extensively used an AI-based programme 'Lavender' with considerable inputs drawn from social media to mark all suspected operatives of Hamas, which proved crucial for targeting.[18] Similarly, another AI based targeting tool used by IDF, *Habsora* (Hebrew for "The Gospel"), synthesised all data, including

from social media, and produced target list with due prioritisation, which enabled bombing in exponentially high numbers. According to Lieutenant General Aviv Kochavi (Retired, Chief of General Staff of IDF from 15 January 2019 to 16 January 2023), in Israel's 11-day war with Hamas in May 2021, the Gospel generated 100 targets in Gaza a day whereas in the past IDF would produce 50 targets in Gaza per year, and 50% of the Gospel produced targets were attacked.[19]

Effects Achieved by Social Media in the Conflict

The war illustrated the capacity of social media to mobilise global public opinion, particularly in Western capitals and on university campuses. Large numbers of non-combatants, including students, diaspora communities, activists, and ideologically aligned individuals, even geographically far removed from the conflict, actively participated in legitimising one side while delegitimising the other. The contest over legitimacy and morality was largely decided by public discourse spearheaded on social media. Various social media platforms acquired distinct roles; TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp primarily transmitted emotionally charged content; Telegram carried more sustained operational and war-related information; and X emerged as the preferred platform for analytical debate, OSINT dissemination, and the adjudication of contested claims.

The patterns observed regarding OSINT-based claim verification in Operation *Sindoor* and the Russia–Ukraine war also prevailed during this conflict. However, since the TBA featured a far denser information environment within a geographically compressed space, input availability was more intense and claim verification cycles were much faster, often occurring within minutes rather than hours. The explosion at Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza on 17 October 2023, which resulted in 100 to 500 civilian casualties, witnessed rapid shifts in blame. However, within hours, OSINT analysts leveraged social media circulated videos, geolocation, trajectory

analysis, and crater assessment to challenge, corroborate, and refine official claims.[20]

In this conflict, too, social media played the role as a quasi-referee in deciding the legitimacy contest in the digital sphere. As a corollary, the authority and credibility of legacy media such as official briefings, mainstream news outlets, and television broadcasts were visibly diminished. Their role increasingly shifted from primary narrators to secondary amplifiers or interpreters of evidence already circulating within the social media and OSINT ecosystem. The conflict revealed that social media-based narrative formation and PSDA precede the official narrative and formal factual verification cycles.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative assessment of the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war, and the Israel–Hamas war of 2023–2024 reveals several convergent patterns. First, the meaning and interpretation of war now begin to crystallise well before evidence-based assessments are disseminated through official channels. Narrative formation precedes factual verification. In both cases, social media platforms served as the primary arena in which initial perceptions were formed, contested, and stabilised. Truth remained fluid and disputed, while social media functioned as the principal mechanism through which public opinion was shaped. Warfare has thus become increasingly social, distributed, participatory, and audience-driven. Armed forces are now compelled to fight simultaneously in the kinetic domain and within the global digital public sphere.

Second, no state or institution retains monopoly control over the digital information environment. Mass participation, often unstructured and spontaneous, defines the cognitive battlespace. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp primarily amplified emotionally charged content, while Telegram and X emerged as key conduits for operational information, analytical discourse, and OSINT dissemination. This

functional differentiation across platforms reflects an emergent ecology in which content type, speed, and audience segmentation determine strategic impact.

Third, non-state actors have emerged as consequential precision multipliers. OSINT, including SOCMINT analysts, civilian volunteers, drone engineers, independent researchers, diaspora activists, and digital influencers, have performed functions traditionally associated with state militaries and intelligence agencies. Their roles have included target identification, damage assessment, technical innovation in drone employment, emotional amplification, coercive influence on political decision-makers, and mobilisation of transnational public opinion. In several instances, these activities preceded and shaped diplomatic manoeuvres, effectively pre-empting formal state engagement.

Fourth, claims regarding strikes, damage, and operational success are now subject to rapid verification through OSINT, with findings disseminated almost instantaneously to global audiences. False or exaggerated claims are quickly repudiated, often resulting in significant credibility costs for government agencies. Conversely, claims that align with independently verifiable evidence enhance institutional credibility. Social media has thus assumed the role of a near real-time referee and validator of contested claims.

Fifth, social media has evolved into a global marketplace of legitimacy in which public verdicts are rendered on the justifiability and proportionality of military actions.[21] Legitimacy is no longer conferred solely through international law, state declarations, or institutional diplomacy; it is increasingly mediated through a digitally networked public. In both the examined conflicts, the perceived moral standing of belligerents was shaped as much by social media narratives and visual evidence as by formal legal arguments.

Finally, social media has transcended its traditional role as a communication medium and has become an integral component of the digital kill chain. In both conflicts, social media enabled military functions such as intelligence generation, munition vectoring, target refinement, and PSDA. Platforms facilitated the identification of geo-tagged targets, continuous surveillance of force movement, dissemination of sensor data, and provision of extended sensing inputs to shooters. The FPV drone ecosystem in the Russia–Ukraine war, in particular, demonstrated the unequivocal utility of social media-enabled networks in compressing sensor-to-shooter timelines and enhancing precision in kinetic operations.

Taken together, these convergent trends indicate that future conflicts will be defined as much by contests over perception, legitimacy, and information dominance as by conventional military superiority. For armed forces, the imperative is clear: operational success in contemporary warfare demands doctrinal, organisational, and technological integration of the digital-cognitive domain alongside traditional kinetic capabilities.

Recommendations

The growing centrality of social media in contemporary armed conflict must be acknowledged explicitly. Social media is no longer a peripheral information tool; it has emerged as an integral component of both the digital kill chain and the arbiter of claims. It is evident that in future conflicts, social media will be the primary medium through which news of strikes will first emerge, and accompanying narratives will get established during the opening salvo. Thereafter, social media will continue to outpace legacy media and official briefings in shaping perceptions. By the time formal statements are released through traditional channels, the informational centre of gravity on social media will have shifted to subsequent developments, rendering delayed responses ineffective. To remain synchronised with this accelerated tempo, the Indian Armed Forces must institutionalise mechanisms for proactive and responsive engagement with social media. The recent re-organisation of Command

Cyber Operation and Support Wing (CCOSW) and the decision to raise Information Operation Group (IOG) and Information Operation Detachments (IOD) is a much-needed and welcome step. These new organisations must be fully aligned to leverage the power of social media.

The establishment of dedicated social media cells at Brigade, Division, and equivalent headquarters across the three services is an inescapable requirement. These cells should operate under clearly defined protocols enabling the rapid release of curated and verified content, supported by authenticated imagery and evidence. Their mandate must include countering disinformation and sustaining a continuous cycle of timely, factual public communication. At operational and tactical headquarters, standard operating procedures must strike a careful balance between operational security and the imperative of rapid, credible public communication. At higher levels, information warfare doctrine and policies require revision to formally integrate social media with explicit instructions on information release authorities, legal constraints, and ethical boundaries.

The exponential proliferation of advanced civilian technologies has fundamentally transformed open-source intelligence. OSINT today frequently complements, and in certain cases rivals, traditional military intelligence. A diverse ecosystem of civilian analysts, technologists, and enthusiasts now generates military-grade intelligence continuously, rendering their contributions invaluable during conflict. This valuable resource must be tapped by the Indian Armed Forces intensely and purposefully by establishing OSINT liaison cells at tactical and operational levels. These cells should maintain structured engagement with credible OSINT communities and social media groups specialising in geospatial analysis, imagery interpretation, and technical forensics. At the service headquarters level, select OSINT groups may be discreetly resourced and aligned to service-specific requirements under conditions of plausible deniability. Such arrangements would allow the armed forces to benefit

from civilian innovation while mitigating the reputational risk in case of any ethical or legal infringement by these groups.

Recent conflicts have also demonstrated that OSINT-enabled targeting is no longer theoretical but operationally consequential. Memoranda of Understanding with commercial satellite imagery providers and trusted OSINT networks will be essential for timely access to high-resolution electro-optical and synthetic aperture radar imagery. Further, effective exploitation of OSINT-enabled targeting will require doctrinal adaptation, organisational restructuring, and clearly articulated protocols governing preliminary target indicators, corroboration standards, and validation thresholds. These frameworks need to be defined clearly in order to translate OSINT into kinetic effects.

Fact-checking and authentication have emerged as among the most effective counters to propaganda and disinformation. As elucidated above in respect of all three wars, OSINT-based evidence circulating on social media not only repudiated false claims but also imposed substantial credibility costs on the actors propagating them. Conversely, verifiable and transparent claims strengthened institutional legitimacy. Evidently, a rapid and credible fact-checking mechanism can arrest misinformation campaigns in their early stages, before they achieve critical mass. Existing public relations architectures in our armed forces possess limited capability in this domain. Information Operation warfare cells at various headquarters must therefore be reoriented and resourced to maintain continuous monitoring of digital platforms, identify emerging disinformation, and disseminate evidence-backed rebuttals at speed. This capability will inevitably require sustained investment in commercial imagery procurement, structured collaboration with civilian analysts, and paid access to specialised OSINT products.

AI offers significant potential advantages during conflicts. AI-enabled tools can assist in segregating propaganda from authentic information, generating actionable intelligence, collating evidence to counter

disinformation, facilitating targeting processes, and creating dynamic repositories of verified content. It is recommended that the Indian Armed Forces pursue the development of customised AI solutions tailored to service-specific operational requirements and the task could be accomplished by specialised public and private sector agencies under appropriate oversight of services.

Social media must be fully integrated into military training and preparedness cycles. Major war games and field exercises should explicitly incorporate social media dynamics for narrative shaping, psychological operations, targeting support, and post-strike damage assessment. Such simulations will enable commanders and staffs to internalise the realities of operating under conditions of persistent digital scrutiny and contested legitimacy, thereby enhancing preparedness for future conflict.

Conclusion

The armed conflicts examined in this study unequivocally demonstrate that social media has undergone a qualitative transformation in both significance and utility, emerging as a core variable of the contemporary battlespace. It now operates simultaneously within the cognitive and kinetic dimensions of warfare, with both domains increasingly fused. Social media has become integral to the conduct and outcomes of modern conflict, shaping perception, enabling operational effects, and influencing strategic decision-making. Actors who will leverage social media effectively will gain substantial advantages over their adversaries.

For the Indian Armed Forces, the lessons emerging from these conflicts should serve as a call for reorientation and reforms in order to enable effective usage of social media. Treating social media as an ancillary or supporting function is no longer tenable; it must instead be incorporated as an integral element of force design and operational planning. Future conflicts are likely to be characterised by high-tempo social media campaigns, contested and rapidly shifting narratives, disputed battle

damage claims, dense OSINT-driven information environments, and digital war in the cognitive domain. Under such conditions, social media will directly influence legitimacy claims, institutional credibility, diplomatic manoeuvrability, operational advantage, and escalation control. The logic for reform is straightforward. The role and impact of social media have been empirically established, and this trajectory is unlikely to reverse. The imperative for the Indian Armed Forces is not merely to adapt reactively but to prepare proactively in order to operate effectively within an increasingly volatile and contested information environment during conflict.

The measures recommended in this paper, doctrinal and policy revisions to formally integrate social media, formulation of clear standard operating procedures and engagement protocols, establishment of Memoranda of Understanding with commercial imagery providers and credible OSINT networks, structured liaison with civilian analytical communities, and the creation of dedicated social media cells at brigade, division, and equivalent headquarters across the services, will be immensely valuable in leveraging social media during conflict.

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Chinese Grey Zone Strategy: Is Barahoti the Next Flashpoint?

RAJEEV CHAUDHRY

Abstract

Over the past decade, China–India tensions along the Line of Actual Control have increasingly played out below the threshold of open war, using calibrated pressure, ambiguity, and controlled escalation. Episodes at Doklam (2017), Galwan (2020), and Yangtse (2022) suggest a pattern of deliberate grey-zone tactics rather than isolated accidents. The piece argues Beijing now rotates pressure across sectors to probe Indian readiness, test response limits, and manage escalation while avoiding full-scale conflict. That makes the once-quiet middle sector – and places like Barahoti – more strategically important, since ambiguity, historical restraint, and symbolic value could invite future pressure. At the same time, India's faster infrastructure build-out since 2021 has narrowed mobilisation gaps, improved surveillance, and raised the costs of low-risk coercion. The result is a shrinking operational space for deniable pressure and a shift in tactics toward caution and reversibility. Rather than forecasting war, the analysis stresses that preparedness, measured responses, and regional diplomacy can contain grey-zone competition and keep symbolic disputes from becoming strategic crises.

Introduction: Grey Zones, Flashpoints, and the Himalayan Frontier

Over the past decade, tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) have moved into a grey area between peace and open war. Standoffs at Doklam (2017), Galwan (2020), and Yangtse (2022) were not declared wars, but each had real military and political consequences. Rather than accidental clashes, these episodes fit a pattern of **calibrated pressure**: deliberate, ambiguous actions meant to change facts on the ground while staying below the threshold that would invite full-scale retaliation. Strategic scholars call this **grey-zone strategy**—incremental coercion that seeks advantage without provoking decisive countermeasures. (Mazarr, 2015; Echevarria, 2016). The Himalayan frontier is especially suited to this approach. No mutually agreed boundary, differing views of the LAC, harsh terrain, and limited transparency make it easy for patrols, infrastructure moves, and controlled confrontations to be contested or denied. In practice, these tactics let Beijing probe Indian readiness and test escalation limits while preserving political deniability. (Fravel, 2020).



Figure 1. Barahoti Valley sits at approximately 14000 to 15400 feet

Since 2017, Chinese activity shows a clear logic: pressure rotates across sectors, targets perceived weaknesses, and adapts to Indian responses. That pattern makes the once-quiet middle sector—especially Barahoti—worth watching. Compared with Ladakh or Arunachal, Barahoti has lower troop density, ambiguous control, and symbolic value, all features that can invite low-cost coercion. At the same time, India's post-Galwan infrastructure push—new roads, bridges, logistics hubs, and surveillance—has narrowed mobilisation gaps and raised the price of deniable pressure. The central question is whether Barahoti is the next likely pressure point or whether India's improved posture has shifted the cost–benefit balance enough to deter such moves. This analysis does not predict inevitable conflict; it aims to show how grey-zone pressures are likely to appear and how preparedness, measured responses, and diplomacy can keep symbolic disputes from spiralling into strategic crises.

Conceptual Framework: Grey Zone Warfare in Continental Border Disputes

Grey-zone warfare covers a range of state actions that sit between routine diplomacy and full-scale war: deliberate, ambiguous moves that stop short of open combat but go beyond normal military interaction. Indian strategists increasingly see this as ***coercive competition*** that uses uncertainty, small, cumulative steps, and calibrated force to secure political aims without provoking outright war (Raghavan, 2021; Pant & Bommakanti, 2020). Along the India–China frontier, such measures are not accidental by-products of an unclear border; they are purposeful tools of statecraft meant to probe responses while keeping escalation under control.

This approach works especially well where borders are disputed and geography is opaque. The LAC is not mutually defined, so actions that might be framed as defensive patrols can instead be used to shift patrol patterns or assert presence without formal territorial claims (Joshi, 2020;

Singh, 2021). China's grey-zone playbook is incremental and reversible: temporary camps, nudging infrastructure toward perceived claim lines, assertive patrolling, and non-lethal confrontations are designed to be deniable and adjustable (CLAWS, 2021). These tactics force political attention and mobilise resources from the opponent while keeping the initiator's risk of escalation low. The Galwan clash changed outcomes but not the underlying intent; violence remained limited in space and time (Raghavan, 2021).

Grey-zone pressure is most potent where asymmetries exist—in roads, surveillance, logistics, or political tolerance. Before 2017, China's infrastructure edge, especially in the western and middle sectors, lowered the cost of probing actions (IDSA, 2019). Because grey-zone competition shapes perceptions of resolve and capability rather than seeking outright conquest, deterrence must be graduated and continuous, not binary or episodic (Pant, 2022). The middle sector—historically under-militarised—offers tempting scope for low-risk experimentation, but expanding infrastructure, surveillance, and local force posture are steadily shrinking the space for ambiguity to be exploited without consequence (VIF, 2022). Understanding grey-zone warfare as an adaptive, contested process helps assess whether places like Barahoti remain vulnerable or are being hardened by deterrence.

Spatial–Temporal Pattern of Chinese Probing: From Doklam to Yangtse

The confrontations at Doklam (2017), Galwan Valley (2020), and Yangtse (2022) are better seen as linked episodes in a deliberate Chinese approach to pressure along the LAC rather than as isolated accidents. Indian strategic assessments point to a clear logic in how Beijing chooses timing, terrain, and tactics—suggesting structured probing to test Indian readiness while keeping escalation under control (IDSA, 2021). Across these cases, China appears to favour calibrated, reversible actions that impose costs without crossing into full-scale war.

Doklam 2017: Tri-Junction Pressure and Strategic Signalling

Doklam was the first major post-1962 crisis to showcase infrastructure-driven grey-zone pressure. Road building near the India–Bhutan–China tri-junction was presented by Beijing as routine development, even as Bhutan objected and India invoked treaty obligations (Joshi, 2018). The mid-2017 timing—before India's major upgrades in Sikkim and during favourable weather—suggests a chosen window to maximise operational advantage. Doklam was less about seizing land than about signalling limits: incremental construction tested whether India would act beyond its claimed areas and whether such moves could be made without shots being fired (Pant & Bommakanti, 2017). India's forward deployment forced a negotiated disengagement and set a precedent: future probes would diversify in location and method rather than repeat the same script.

Galwan 2020: Controlled Escalation within Grey-Zone Logic

Galwan represented a sharp change in outcome but not necessarily in intent. Coordinated PLA moves across Eastern Ladakh culminated in the most violent clash in decades, with fatalities on both sides. The incident exposed how fragile escalation control can be in grey-zone settings despite confidence-building measures (IDSA, 2020). Eastern Ladakh offered China tactical advantages—proximity to Indian infrastructure, strategic depth from Aksai Chin, and pressure points near the DSDBO road (Sawhney, 2020). The timing, amid global distraction from the COVID-19 pandemic, likely influenced risk calculations. Still, the PLA kept violence geographically and temporally limited, reinforcing the view that the clash was bounded rather than an uncontrolled slide into war (Raghavan, 2021).

Yangtse 2022: Testing the Eastern Sector without Escalation

Yangtse returned to non-lethal confrontation despite higher force levels after Galwan. Indian analysts read it as a probe of Eastern-sector readiness and recent infrastructure gains rather than a bid for territory (CLAWS, 2022). The choice of a symbolically sensitive location amplified

the signalling value. Tactically, the PLA used short, non-lethal engagements and quick disengagements—an adaptation that preserved diplomatic off-ramps after the costly lessons of Galwan (VIF, 2023).

Synthesis: A Pattern of Rotational, Calibrated Probing

Viewed together, these episodes form a **rotational** pattern across Western, Middle, and Eastern sectors designed to avoid predictability and stretch Indian attention and resources. Incidents cluster in operationally favourable windows and often align with infrastructure activity or wider geopolitical distractions. The tactical arc—from infrastructure nudging (Doklam) to controlled violence (Galwan) and back to non-lethal probing (Yangtse)—suggests adaptive learning rather than impulsive behaviour. Understanding this pattern helps frame policy responses that combine deterrence, readiness, and diplomacy to limit the space for deniable coercion. Areas under dispute along the LAC across the Western, Middle, and Eastern sectors are illustrated in Figure 1.

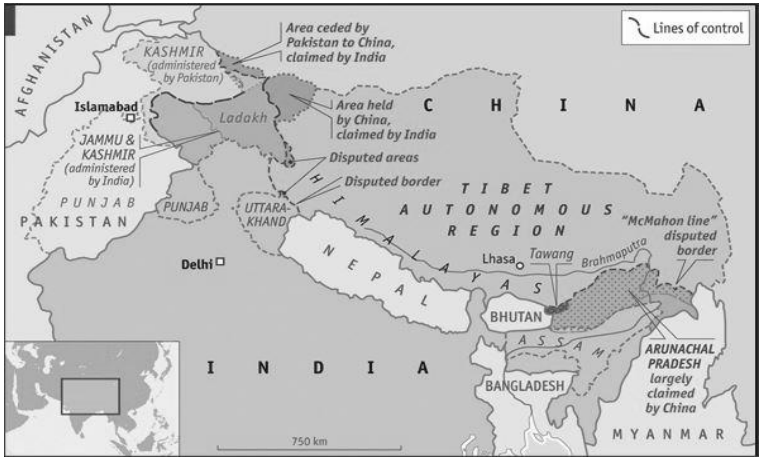


Figure 2. Disputed Areas along LAC

China seeks to normalize pressure rather than start a war. Each probe gauges political will, military response, alliance backing, and crisis management, while limiting escalation. If pressure is rotated and adaptive,

quieter, ambiguous areas—like the middle sector and Barahoti—become natural targets for future testing, signalling, and deterrence assessment efforts.

Why the Middle Sector Matters: Geography, History, and Strategic Neglect

The India–China boundary is usually discussed in terms of its most volatile ends—the Western sector in Ladakh and the Eastern sector in Arunachal Pradesh. By contrast, the middle sector across Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh has drawn less strategic attention. That relative neglect stems from fewer recorded transgressions, shorter disputed stretches, and long-standing confidence-building measures that seemed to stabilise the area (IDSA, 2018). Yet those same features make the middle sector important in grey-zone terms: its ambiguity and lower visibility create opportunities for subtle pressure. Figure 2 highlights this distinct, under-analysed position between Ladakh and Arunachal.



Figure 3. The Middle Sector comprises Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand along the LAC

The middle sector of the India–China boundary feels different from the well-known flashpoints in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. It does not offer the PLA the broad plateau depth of Aksai Chin, nor does it carry the symbolic weight of Tawang. Instead, this stretch is made up of high-altitude pasturelands, seasonal settlements, and long-standing grazing practices that blur the line between civilian and military space. That mix of terrain and human use creates persistent ambiguity—over who controls what and what actions really mean on the ground (Joshi, 2020).

Historically, the Middle Sector has been described as "**largely settled**," with China accepting much of India's alignment while leaving a few pockets of dispute, most notably Barahoti (called Wu Je in Chinese sources). Indian analysts stress that calm here has owed more to mutual restraint than to any formal settlement (VIF, 2019). Unlike Ladakh, where patrol lines collide, or Arunachal, where sovereignty claims are explicit, the middle sector rests on tacit understandings rather than clear legal arrangements. That legacy of restraint has bred a degree of strategic complacency. For years, force posture, surveillance, and infrastructure in the Middle Sector lagged behind other fronts, reinforcing the sense that it was low risk (CLAWS, 2020). Scholars warn that such asymmetries invite selective probing: grey-zone tactics work best where responses are likely to be measured, localised, and diplomatically manageable (Singh, 2021).

The Middle Sector also fits into a broader pattern of rotational pressure. As India hardened its posture in Ladakh after 2020 and accelerated infrastructure in Arunachal, attention naturally shifts to quieter sectors where escalation thresholds are less defined. Defence analysts caution that quiet does not equal secure; these seams are precisely where an adversary can test adaptability and vigilance (IDSA, 2022).

Recognising the Middle Sector's strategic relevance does not mean conflict is inevitable. Rather, it calls for rethinking assumptions about stability. In grey-zone competition, the absence of clashes may reflect a temporary alignment of interests, not durable deterrence. Barahoti matters

not only because it is disputed but because it exemplifies how ambiguity, geography, and historical restraint combine to create potential pressure points. Understanding that context is essential before judging whether Barahoti will be exploited or whether India's changing posture is closing that window of vulnerability.

Barahoti as a Grey Zone Pressure Point

Barahoti sits apart on the India–China boundary map—a small, high-altitude pastureland in Uttarakhand's Chamoli district, yet strategically significant. India has administered the area since its independence, but China disputes its status, pointing to historical grazing patterns and unclear maps (IDSA, 2018). Unlike Ladakh or Arunachal, Barahoti has not seen sustained military clashes; it instead exemplifies the Middle Sector's '**quiet dispute'**.

From a grey-zone perspective, Barahoti's features make it a likely testing ground. Control there rests on seasonal grazing and customary use rather than a clearly demarcated border, so movements by PLA patrols or civilian herders can be framed as routine rather than hostile. That plausible deniability complicates escalation management: actions can be politically disowned while still exerting pressure, and responses must be calibrated to avoid unintended escalation (VIF, 2019). In short, Barahoti's mix of ambiguous control, low visibility, and symbolic value creates the conditions grey-zone tactics exploit. The geographic ambiguity that makes Barahoti vulnerable to such pressure is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 4. Barahoti Grazing Grounds in the India–China Middle Sector

Second, Barahoti's sparse troop presence and historically low surveillance made it an attractive place for probing actions—until recently. Unlike Ladakh or Tawang, where incidents quickly draw national and international attention, activity in the Middle Sector has often stayed local and been managed through flag meetings and confidence-building measures. Those mechanisms stabilise, but they also create predictable routines that an adversary can exploit in calibrated pressure campaigns. (CLAWS, 2020; Singh, 2021)

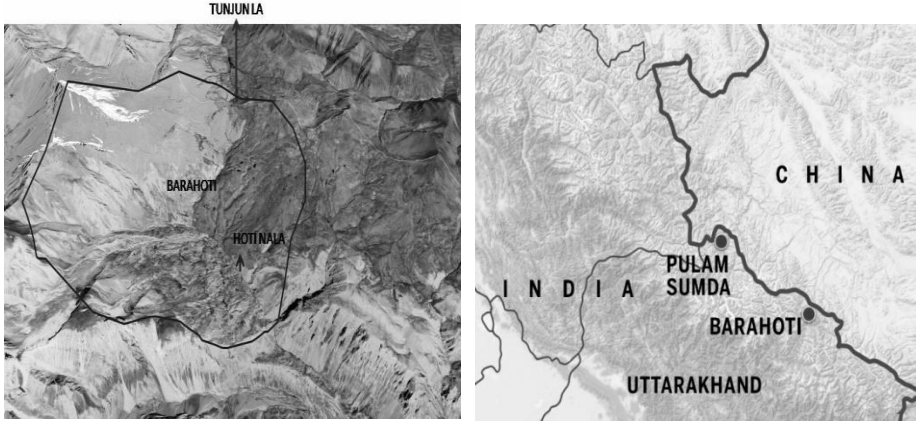


Figure 5. An Aerial and Schematic View of Barahoti Sector in Chamoli, Uttarakhand

Third, the area's value to an external actor lies less in seizing ground than in signalling capability. A limited, non-kinetic move in Barahoti would not dramatically shift military balances, but it could demonstrate reach, resolve, and tactical flexibility. Grey-zone tactics are designed to shape perceptions—testing response times, political sensitivity, and rules of engagement—rather than to redraw maps. In that sense, Barahoti functions as a testing ground for probing behaviour rather than as an end in itself. (IDSA, 2022)

Yet this should not be read as inevitability. Indian assessments point to a narrowing vulnerability: improved roads, better surveillance, and heightened institutional awareness after the Ladakh and Arunachal crises mean Barahoti is no longer an informational blind spot. Today, any unusual activity would be detected, recorded, and quickly placed in a political and strategic context, reducing the plausibility of low-cost coercion—the very condition grey-zone strategies depend on. (Pant, 2022)

China's post-Galwan posture also matters. Analysts see a tilt toward tactical caution, with Beijing more mindful of escalation optics and the risk of provoking unified domestic or international responses. (Raghavan, 2021) Consequently, Barahoti is a conditional—not automatic—flashpoint: its appeal as a grey-zone target depends on perceived Indian restraint and the broader risk calculus, not on geography alone.



Figure 6. Chaukhamba Peaks (23,419 feet) are seen in the backdrop of Barahoti Valley

Understanding this conditionality is essential before projecting future scenarios: Barahoti remains a theoretical pressure point, but its practical utility to an adversary is increasingly constrained by India's evolving posture and visibility.

Infrastructure as Deterrence: India's Strategic Transformation Along the LAC

Since 2021, India's rapid build-out of border infrastructure along the Line of Actual Control has changed the strategic balance in ways not seen for decades. Where roads, bridges, and logistics were once treated as background support, they are now central to deterrence thinking—tools that shape an adversary's calculations in the grey zone rather than mere enablers of movement (IDSA, 2021). This shift matters most in places like the Middle Sector, where earlier gaps created exploitable asymmetries.

For much of the post-1962 era, India's border networks lagged behind China's because of political caution, budget limits, and a belief that underdevelopment reduced risk by denying easy access. In practice, that posture constrained India's options and let the PLA exploit superior mobility and logistics (Sawhney, 2019). The recent acceleration has reversed much of that disadvantage. he scale of the expansion is striking: all-weather roads, heavy-load bridges, upgraded landing grounds, logistics hubs, and forward habitat facilities have compressed mobilisation timelines across sectors (Ministry of Defence, 2022). Faster reinforcement denies an adversary the surprise and fait accompli that underpin many grey-zone tactics (CLAWS, 2021). In short, the ability to move troops and supplies quickly raises the cost and uncertainty of limited probing actions.

In the Middle Sector, this effect is especially pronounced. Historically, thin connectivity and sparse forces made the area attractive for low-visibility pressure. New road links and improved surveillance now shrink that grey space by ensuring movements—whether civilian or military—are detected and put into context rapidly (VIF, 2022). Effective

deterrence in grey-zone settings depends less on overwhelming force than on the credible certainty of a timely, proportionate response; infrastructure delivers that certainty (Pant & Bommakanti, 2020). China sometimes points to Indian construction as a provocation, but Indian analysts stress that deterrence failures arise from vulnerability, not visibility (IDSA, 2022). Infrastructure does not force escalation; it removes the operational asymmetries that make opportunistic coercion attractive. By clarifying thresholds and reducing miscalculation, roads and logistics can stabilise a contested frontier even as they increase military presence.

Infrastructure also signals political resolve. Sustained investment in difficult terrain is a visible, costly commitment that is hard to reverse—making it a credible message to domestic and external audiences (Raghavan, 2021). Unlike rhetoric, physical works change the strategic environment over time and constrain adversary options. That said, infrastructure is not a panacea. Its deterrent effect is cumulative rather than absolute: it reshapes the character of competition rather than ending it. Post-2020 patterns show Chinese probing continuing but in more cautious, localised, and reversible forms—suggesting a recalibration of risk (CLAWS, 2022). For the middle sector, including Barahoti, this means the window for low-cost testing is narrowing; ambiguity increasingly favors the defender rather than the initiator.

Has Infrastructure Deterred China—or Merely Changed Its Tactics?

While India's accelerated infrastructure development has clearly altered the operational environment along the LAC, a critical question remains: has it deterred Chinese coercive behaviour, or has it merely prompted tactical adaptation? Infrastructure has not eliminated grey-zone pressure but has reshaped its form, intensity, and risk calculus (IDSA, 2022). Empirically, Chinese probing has not ceased since India's post-2021 infrastructure push. Patrol confrontations, face-offs, and attempts at

forward presence continue across sectors, indicating that infrastructure alone does not impose absolute restraint (CLAWS, 2022). However, a discernible shift has been noted in the *character* of these actions. Compared to the deep, coordinated advances observed in Eastern Ladakh in early 2020, subsequent incidents have been more localised, shorter in duration, and explicitly non-lethal, suggesting heightened Chinese sensitivity to escalation risks (Raghavan, 2021).

This behavioural adjustment points toward deterrence by denial rather than deterrence by punishment. Infrastructure has reduced China's ability to create fait accompli situations by compressing India's response timelines and improving force sustainability. As a result, Chinese actions increasingly focus on symbolic assertion and signalling rather than durable positional advantage (Pant, 2022). This shift reflects a recalibrated cost–benefit analysis rather than abandonment of grey-zone strategy (Singh, 2021).

At the same time, infrastructure development may introduce new dynamics of competition. Improved connectivity enables faster counter-mobilisation, but it also increases the density of forces and frequency of encounters, raising the risk of friction even when neither side seeks escalation (IDSA, 2021). However, deterrence stability in grey zones depends not only on capability but also on command discipline, communication mechanisms, and political signalling (VIF, 2023). Infrastructure strengthens capability, but without parallel investment in escalation management, it can amplify crisis sensitivity.

Another important consideration is China's ability to adapt asymmetrically. Indian analyses highlight Beijing's increasing reliance on non-kinetic tools—information campaigns, diplomatic signalling, and selective civilian presence—to complement limited military actions (CLAWS, 2021). These methods seek to exploit political and narrative spaces that infrastructure alone cannot control. Thus, while roads and

bridges constrain physical manoeuvre, they do not fully neutralise psychological or diplomatic pressure.

From an Indian perspective, the net effect of infrastructure development appears stabilising but incomplete. It has raised the threshold for effective coercion, reduced the feasibility of surprise, and imposed higher reputational and escalation costs on China. Yet it has not eliminated the underlying strategic competition or Beijing's incentive to test boundaries in subtler ways (Pant & Bommakanti, 2020). This outcome aligns with broader Indian strategic thinking that views deterrence as dynamic and contested rather than final or absolute.

In the context of the Middle Sector and Barahoti, infrastructure has narrowed the grey zone but not erased it. The space for low-cost experimentation is shrinking, yet not closed. Consequently, future Chinese actions—if they occur—are more likely to be cautious, reversible, and symbolically calibrated rather than overtly confrontational. Deterrence, in this sense, is functioning not as a wall but as a filter, shaping behaviour without guaranteeing its absence.

The Nepal Vector: Peripheral Pressure and Strategic Signalling

China's deepening footprint in Nepal is a strategic lever that amplifies grey-zone pressure on India's Himalayan frontier; targeted projects such as the China-funded Pokhara International Airport illustrate how infrastructure and influence combine to complicate India's Middle Sector security calculus.

Strategic Framing and Intent

China's engagement with Nepal is ***peripheral pressure*** that complements grey-zone operations along the LAC rather than replacing them (Pant, 2020). **Beijing's investments—*political, economic, and infrastructural*—are designed to reshape the strategic environment** by widening Kathmandu's options and subtly diluting India's traditional strategic depth (IDSA, 2021). This is not about converting Nepal into a

military proxy; it is about ***signalling, leverage, and diplomatic bandwidth*** that can be mobilised when Sino–Indian tensions rise.

Concrete Examples and Implications

- **Pokhara International Airport**. A high-visibility China-funded project built by China CAMC has become emblematic of Beijing's infrastructure diplomacy in Nepal; governance and cost controversies around the airport have drawn sustained attention and illustrate how Chinese construction projects create long-term economic and political ties.
- **Connectivity and BRI Projects**. Under the Belt and Road umbrella, enhanced road and rail proposals and cross-border linkages expand Kathmandu's alternatives to India, reducing New Delhi's leverage and complicating logistics and diplomatic responses during border crises (IDSA, 2021).

These projects matter for the **Middle Sector** because they **reshape the periphery that frames LAC politics**. When Nepal's diplomatic bandwidth is occupied by bilateral disputes or when Kathmandu's infrastructure choices signal diversification, India's political attention and crisis management capacity can be stretched—precisely the effect grey-zone actors seek (CLAWS, 2021).

Narrative Leverage and Timing

Map controversies—Lipulekh, Kalapani, Limpiyadhura—have periodically flared alongside broader Sino–Indian tensions, amplifying domestic debate in India and Nepal and creating **narrative friction** that benefits external actors by diverting attention (VIF, 2020). This is strategic convergence, not necessarily orchestration: ***timing and amplification matter more than direct control***.

Constraints and Nepali Agency

Kathmandu's choices remain driven by **regime stability, economic need, and hedging instincts**; overt alignment risks nationalist backlash and political instability (Joshi, 2021; IDSA, 2022). Excessive pressure from any external power can therefore be self-defeating, limiting how far Beijing can convert infrastructure into coercive leverage.

Policy implications for India

India must treat the Nepal vector as ***an amplifier, not a trigger*** for Middle Sector insecurity. Effective responses combine **sustained diplomacy, targeted economic engagement, and calibrated messaging** alongside military readiness (Pant & Bommakanti, 2020). By stabilising ties with Kathmandu and reducing informational blind spots, New Delhi can deny adversaries the peripheral space that grey-zone strategies exploit.

Future Scenarios: What a Barahoti Crisis Would (and Would Not) Look Like

Assessing whether Barahoti could become a future flashpoint means moving beyond a simple peace-or-war binary and instead mapping a spectrum of plausible outcomes consistent with grey-zone competition. Indian strategic literature warns against deterministic forecasts, noting that future border incidents will be shaped by the interaction of Chinese risk appetite, India's deterrence posture, and the wider geopolitical context—not by geography alone (IDSA, 2022). Seen this way, Barahoti is a contingent space: neither immune to pressure nor preordained for escalation.

- **Routine Grey-Zone Probing without Escalation**. Most Probable. This would take the form of limited PLA presence, overlapping patrols, or symbolic civilian activity presented as traditional or administrative. Such moves are intended to test surveillance responsiveness, local command initiative, and political sensitivity

while avoiding a prolonged standoff. Indian assessments link this pattern to China's post-Galwan preference for reversible, low-visibility actions that preserve escalation control (CLAWS, 2022). In this scenario, incidents are absorbed by established local mechanisms—flag meetings, diplomatic notes, and calibrated military posturing—thereby reinforcing deterrence without materially changing the status quo.

- **A Prolonged but Contained Standoff**. Moderate Possibility. A limited incursion or dispute over infrastructure could prompt short-term forward deployments on both sides, accompanied by diplomatic signalling and heightened media scrutiny. Analysts judge such standoffs likelier when probing coincides with heightened political sensitivity or simultaneous pressure across multiple sectors (VIF, 2023). Yet, unlike Ladakh in 2020, the Middle Sector's terrain and India's improved infrastructure make sustained positional advantage harder to achieve, increasing the odds of negotiated de-escalation rather than entrenched confrontation.

- **Localized Escalation with Strict Containment.** Less Probable**.** This would involve a physical confrontation—possibly non-lethal—triggered by miscalculation or a breakdown in local command discipline rather than deliberate strategic intent. Post-Galwan institutional learning on both sides has heightened sensitivity to escalation risks, especially in areas with limited strategic payoff (Raghavan, 2021). Thus, while friction cannot be ruled out, the likelihood that kinetic violence will cascade into a wider crisis remains low.

It is equally important to clarify what a Barahoti crisis is unlikely to resemble. Indian assessments strongly discount a Galwan-type outcome in the Middle Sector. Galwan's escalation reflected unique conditions—large overlapping deployments, proximity to critical infrastructure, and a period

of strategic misalignment amplified by global distraction (IDSA, 2020). Those conditions are not present to the same degree in Barahoti, where force densities are lower and escalation ladders are shorter.

Across all scenarios, India's infrastructure-enabled deterrence to moderate risk. Faster mobilisation, enhanced surveillance, and improved logistics compress the window for surprise and raise the costs of sustained pressure. Scholars describe this as deterrence through uncertainty: an initiator cannot reliably predict the scale or speed of response, which discourages experimentation beyond symbolic assertion (Pant, 2022). In this way, deterrence does not remove risk but channels it into more manageable forms.

Ultimately, developments at Barahoti—if they occur—are more likely to be acts of strategic signalling than expressions of territorial ambition. Grey-zone competition thrives on ambiguity and reversibility, not decisive conquest. The most useful question is therefore not whether a crisis will happen, but how effectively existing mechanisms, posture, and political judgment can prevent limited friction from escalating into systemic instability. Barahoti's importance lies less in its inherent vulnerability than in its capacity to test whether deterrence, institutional learning, and disciplined restraint can coexist in an era of persistent, adaptive competition.

Policy Recommendations: Closing Grey Zones Without Closing Doors

India's accelerated infrastructure and posture improvements along the LAC have narrowed many tactical advantages once enjoyed by the adversary, but grey-zone competition persists. Barahoti and the broader Middle Sector remain conditional pressure points: ambiguous control, seasonal use, and historically low visibility create opportunities for calibrated probing. Effective policy must therefore combine deterrence by denial, calibrated force posture, adaptive confidence-building, and

proactive neighbourhood diplomacy to deny adversaries low-cost coercive options while preserving diplomatic space (IDSA, 2022; CLAWS, 2021).

Strategic objectives

- **Deny** adversaries the operational benefits of surprise and low-cost coercion.
- **Detect** and document incursions rapidly to shape domestic and international narratives.
- **Deter** through credible, timely, and proportionate responses rather than massed deployments.
- **Defuse** incidents through updated local mechanisms and sustained regional engagement (Pant & Bommakanti, 2020).

Recommendations

- **Consolidate Dual-use Infrastructure with Integrated ISR.** Continue building all-weather roads, bridges, and forward logistics while prioritising interoperable surveillance—sensors, persistent UAV coverage, and real-time data links to local command nodes. Infrastructure must enable rapid reinforcement and evidence collection to raise the cost of probing (Ministry of Defence; CLAWS, 2021).
- **Institutionalise Rapid, Proportionate Local Decision Protocols.** Delegate calibrated response authority to local commanders with clear escalation thresholds and legal-political guidance. Certainty of timely reaction, not force size, is the most effective deterrent in grey zones (Pant, 2022).
- **Adopt a Mobile, Layered Force Posture.** Replace static mirroring with agile task forces supported by pre-positioned logistics and rapid airlift. Mobile units reduce footprint normalization and lower

inadvertent escalation risks while preserving strategic reserves (VIF, 2023).

- **Modernise Confidence Building Mechanisms.** Update flag-meeting formats, patrol protocols, and incident-reporting to reflect new infrastructure and ISR realities. Introduce digital logs, time-stamped geo-location records, and joint verification options to reduce ambiguity and speed de-escalation (Raghavan, 2021).

- **Strengthen Neighbourhood Diplomacy and Economic Engagement.** Deepen targeted cooperation with Nepal—infrastructure financing, trade facilitation, and people-to-people ties—to reduce peripheral friction and blunt narrative leverage that can distract Indian crisis management (Pant & Bommakanti, 2020).

- **Enhance Strategic Communications and Legal Documentation.** Publicly and privately document incursions with verifiable evidence; articulate calibrated red lines while avoiding inflammatory rhetoric. Use multilateral forums and third-party briefings to internationalise facts when necessary (IDSA, 2021).

- **Invest in Institutional Learning and Simulation.** Regular war-games and joint civil-military exercises focused on grey-zone scenarios will improve command discipline, reduce miscalculation, and refine proportional response playbooks.

- **Targeted Economic and Social Resilience in Frontier Communities.** Strengthen local governance, livelihood programs, and rapid civil-military coordination to reduce the political impact of peripheral incidents and deny adversaries leverage through local grievances.

Implementation Considerations & Resourcing

- **Phased Rollout.** Prioritise surveillance and command upgrades in the most ambiguous stretches, then expand connectivity and logistics.
- **Budgeting.** Reallocate existing border modernisation funds toward ISR and rapid-response capabilities; pursue public-private partnerships for dual-use projects.
- **Metrics.** Track detection-to-response time, incident resolution rates, and local sentiment indices to measure effectiveness.

Risk management

Avoid over-militarisation that normalises tension; calibrate public messaging to deter without provoking. Monitor Nepali domestic politics to ensure engagement remains constructive and non-securitising (Joshi, 2021; IDSA, 2022).

Conclusion: Managing Grey Zones in the Shadow of Deterrence

The pattern of confrontations at Doklam, Galwan, and Yangtse makes clear that Beijing's approach along the Line of Actual Control is neither random nor purely reactive; it is a deliberate, calibrated practice of grey-zone competition designed to probe limits, signal intent, and shape outcomes while avoiding full-scale war. Read this way, Barahoti is not an outlier or an inevitable flashpoint but a conditional space whose strategic relevance depends on three interacting factors: the persistent ambiguity of control, the legacy of mutual restraint that has kept the area quiet, and the evolving balance of deterrence shaped by infrastructure and posture. The article has argued that Chinese tactics are rotational and adaptive—pressure moves across sectors to avoid predictability and to stretch an opponent's attention and resources. Barahoti's value to an external actor lies less in seizing terrain than in signalling capability: limited, deniable

actions there test surveillance, response times, and political sensitivity without demanding a decisive outcome.

India's infrastructure push since 2021 has begun to change that calculus. Better roads assuring last mile connectivity, stronger logistics, improved surveillance, and forward sustainment compress mobilisation timelines and reduce the operational asymmetries that once made low-cost coercion attractive. **Infrastructure thus functions as deterrence by denial**: it does not eliminate competition, but it raises the price and uncertainty of probing, nudging adversaries toward more cautious, reversible tactics. In practice, this has already altered the character of Chinese probing—less blunt, more localised, and more mindful of escalation optics. Deterrence in this context is therefore dynamic and graduated; its purpose is to channel competition into manageable, containable forms rather than to eradicate friction altogether.

Equally important is the recognition that military measures alone cannot secure grey-zone stability. Peripheral diplomacy, narrative management, and regional relationships—especially with neighbours like Nepal—shape the strategic backdrop against which border pressure is applied. Diplomatic bandwidth and domestic political attention are finite resources; when they are consumed by peripheral disputes or amplified by contested narratives, the capacity to manage LAC tensions is weakened. A holistic approach that combines credible deterrence with sustained neighbourhood engagement and disciplined strategic communication is therefore essential to deny adversaries the indirect levers they seek to exploit.

The practical implication is straightforward: Barahoti's future will be determined less by geography and more by the interaction of Chinese risk appetite, India's posture, and the broader political environment. **Preparedness, proportionality, and political judgment—underpinned by infrastructure-enabled detection and rapid response—offer the most credible path to preventing symbolic incidents from escalating into**

strategic distractions. This is a posture of managed competition: accept that friction will occur, but ensure it remains local, reversible, and politically containable.

In short, the goal is not to pretend competition can be eliminated but to make it unprofitable and unattractive. By narrowing the operational space for deniable coercion, clarifying thresholds of response, and sustaining diplomatic resilience in the neighbourhood, India can shift the burden of risk back onto the initiator. That is the most realistic and sustainable route to stability in the Himalayas: not the absence of friction, but the capacity to contain it through credible deterrence, institutional learning, and steady political stewardship.

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From Factional Purges to Preventive Control: Internal Political Cleansing in the Chinese Communist Party under Xi Jinping and the Road to the 21st Party Congress (2012–2027)

ASHU MAAN

Abstract

This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the development of internal political cleansing within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the rule of General Secretary Xi Jinping, from his rise to power in 2012 to the present critical juncture of the 21st Party Congress in 2027. The main argument of this paper is that the CCP's disciplinary system has fundamentally changed its strategic orientation from reactive factional cleansing to destroy potential power centers (2012-2017) to preventive control systems to atomize the elite and prevent the emergence of any possible coalitions, regardless of their loyalty (2018-2027). Based on the latest information on the hollowing out of the Central Military Commission

(CMC) in 2026, the "Seven Princelings" scandal in Hunan, and the systemic transformation of the financial regulatory state, this paper contends that the Chinese regime has entered a new phase of "Personalist Leninism" with high-intensity preventive repression. While ensuring Xi Jinping's immediate personal dominance, this strategy has caused bureaucratic paralysis, undermined military preparedness, and created a succession void that threatens the very survival of the regime in the face of its centennial objectives in 2027.

Introduction

Communist China under Xi Jinping has seen the most comprehensive and longest-lasting purge of internal party corruption since the Cultural Revolution (Dong, 2025). Nevertheless, to interpret this process merely as a homogeneous anti-corruption drive would be to miss the increasingly complex political rationale behind it. During the last fifteen years, the purge mechanism has developed from a weapon of factional struggle into a permanent tool of statecraft, which has completely changed the ruling bargain between the top leader and the party elite.

The Shift from Performance to Security Legitimacy

For the post-Mao leadership collectives of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao, the CCP's legitimacy was essentially grounded in economic performance (Kubat, 2018). Intraparty discipline was largely responsive, sanctioning extreme corruption that endangered public order or balancing the relationship between contending factions (such as the Shanghai Gang versus the Communist Youth League). The implicit bargain was that elites could reap the rewards of economic expansion as long as they provided political cohesion and met GDP growth targets (Ang, 2020).

Under Xi Jinping, especially since the 19th Party Congress in 2017 and increasingly towards the 21st Party Congress in 2027, the regime has moved towards security-based legitimacy (So, 2019). In this model, the maintenance of the Party-state against internal betrayal and external

encirclement is the supreme political value. The idea of Comprehensive National Security, articulated in 2014 and later developed in 16 domains by 2022, encapsulates political security and the defence of Xi's central role as the "bedrock" of politics (Drinhausen, 2022). This has required a transformation from reactive repression (punishing dissent after the fact) to preventive control (preventing the possibility of dissent before it happens).

The Logic of Preventive Control

Preventive control in the Xi era is different from previous precedents. It is no longer a matter of eliminating enemies but of the atomization of the elite. As shown by the prominent ousting of loyalists such as Foreign Minister Qin Gang, Defence Minister Li Shangfu, and ultimately CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia in 2026, the purge does not need to have a predicate of disloyalty anymore. Rather, it is based on a logic of pre-emption, targeting people who have the potential to build their own power centers, even if they have shown absolute loyalty.

This paper breaks down this development in three clearly defined phases:

1. Phase I (2012-2017): The Factional Purge (Consolidation).
2. Phase II (2017-2022): The Institutional Purge (Norm Destruction).
3. Phase III (2023-2027): The Preventive Purge (Atomization and the "Führer Era").

Through an investigation of the particular case studies of the PLA Rocket Force collapse, the 2026 financial sector crackdown, and the "Seven Princelings" scandal, this paper will explain the inherent contradictions of

a system that calls for 'New Quality Productive Forces[1]' and simultaneously terrorises the technocratic and military elites who are needed to produce them.

Theoretical Framework: Personalist Leninism and the Sentinel State

To understand the mechanics of the purge leading up to the 21st Party Congress, we must first establish the theoretical model of the current CCP regime. The system has evolved beyond the 'fragmented authoritarianism,[2] of the 1990s into Personalist Leninism (Wen, 2025).

The major components of Xi's Personalist Leninism are:

- "Personalist Leninism" is a combination of Maoist personalism and Leninist organisational rigidity.
- **The Personalist Component**: Decision-making is centralised in the hands of one person, undermining the "collective leadership" rules

1 The term "New Quality Productive Forces" was first introduced by Xi Jinping during his 2023 inspection of Heilongjiang and formally adopted at the 2024 "Two Sessions." It represents a shift in Marxist economic theory adapted for the digital age, prioritizing "disruptive" technological innovation in sectors like AI, green energy, and quantum computing. Unlike traditional productive forces that rely on land, labor, and capital expansion, this concept emphasizes **Total Factor Productivity (TFP)** and the "greening" of the industrial chain. See "Explanation on the Concept of New Quality Productive Forces," *Xinhua News Agency*, 21 February 2024, url: https://english.news.cn/20240221/3e0d1b79a39f4e6c89724049558e1082/c.html.

2 The "fragmented authoritarianism" model was pioneered by Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg in *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton University Press, 1988) and further refined in Lieberthal's *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1995). The model posits that while the Chinese state appears monolithic, authority is actually diffused across a disjointed matrix of vertical functional hierarchies (*tiao*) and horizontal territorial administrations (*kuai*). In the 1990s, this structural fragmentation required constant informal negotiation and consensus-building among various ministry heads and provincial leaders, often resulting in policy outcomes that were "protracted, disjointed, and incremental."

set by Deng Xiaoping. This gives rise to a 'Dictator's Dilemma.' (Wu, 2025) in which the leader, surrounded by courtiers, is poorly informed, resulting in policy mistakes.

- **The Leninist Component**: Unlike personalist dictatorships in general (such as Mobutu's Zaire[3]), Xi relies on the strong, far-reaching Party organisational apparatus (the Organization Department, the Discipline Inspection Commission) to impose his will. The Party apparatus is not undermined by the leader's ascendancy; rather, it is harnessed.

This particular combination gives rise to a special kind of vulnerability: the 'Crown Prince Dilemma[4] (Thomas, 2024).' In a personalised regime with no rules of succession (after the abolition of term limits in 2018), succession planning is fraught with danger because it establishes an alternative power center that challenges the ruler. On the other hand, the lack of a successor planning strategy leads to institutionalised uncertainty, in which the leader must regularly cleanse the elite to ensure that no one has enough power to become a de facto challenger.

3 For the foundational analysis of Mobutu's personalist rule, see Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). The authors detail how Mobutu dismantled formal institutions to centralise power in the presidency, utilising "Mobutism" as a state ideology to equate the nation with his own person. Further conceptualisation of the regime as a "kleptocracy" is provided by Steve Weissman, "Mobutu: The Formative Years," *Intelligence and National Security* 13, no. 1 (1998), which explores how external support during the Cold War enabled the bypass of domestic accountability.

4 The "Crown Prince Dilemma" refers to the inherent instability of formal succession in non-democratic regimes, where a designated heir-apparent becomes a natural focal point for dissent or a premature challenger to the incumbent. To mitigate this, autocrats often rotate subordinates, leave the position vacant, or undermine their own successors to prevent a "lame duck" presidency. For the seminal theoretical framework on the risks of naming a successor, see Victor C. Shih, *Coalitions of the Weak: Elite Politics in China from Mao to Xi* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 15-38. See also Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 162-170, for an analysis of how power-sharing agreements between a dictator and his elite circle often collapse during the succession phase.

The Sentinel State and Preventive Repression

The "Sentinel State" is the operational mechanism of this control, as described by Minxin Pei. The CCP has shifted from a labour-intensive surveillance system to a distributed surveillance system that utilises technology. Nevertheless, the essence is Leninist organizational penetration.

- **Preventive Repression**: The aim is to stymie opposition before it can act. In elite politics, this means preventive purges, the removal of officials based on their network density or resource control, as opposed to actual acts of treachery.
- **The Logic of Atomization**: In purging the "Fujian Gang" and the "Shaanxi Gang" largely in disregard of their loyalty, Xi demonstrates that factionalism itself, rather than merely oppositional factions, is the offense (Yuwen, 2025). This puts elites into a condition of informational isolation, which precludes the formation of coalitions required for a coup or effective resistance.

Feature	**Reactive Repression (Pre-2012)**	**Preventive Control (Post-2022)**
Trigger	Overt corruption, policy dissent	Potential for faction/coalition formation
Target	Rival factions (e.g., Shanghai Gang, Communist Youth League)	Loyalists, Technocrats, Military Elite
Mechanism	CDIC investigation after violation	Continuous "Political Inspections" (Xunshi)
Goal	Balance of power	Elite atomization & Absolute Security
Result	Stability via patronage	Paralysis via terror

The Military Purges: Hollowing Out the Gun (2023–2026)

The most consequential application of preventive control has occurred within the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Between 2023 and 2026, Xi Jinping systematically dismantled the very military leadership he appointed, creating a black hole in the Central Military Commission (CMC) as the 2027 centennial readiness goal approached.

The First Wave: The Rocket Force Implosion (2023–2024)

The PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), in charge of China's strategic nuclear forces and conventional missiles aimed at Taiwan, was the first to fall victim to the logic of the new purge. In mid-2023, PLARF Commander Li Yuchao and Political Commissar Xu Zhongbo were suddenly ousted (Ranade, 2024), followed by the disappearance of ex-Defense Minister Li Shangfu (Wright, 2023).

- **Corruption vs. Loyalty**: Although couched in terms of anti-corruption (tied to procurement fraud in the Equipment Development Department), the purge was aimed at the "tip of the spear" about a Taiwan contingency.
- **Significance**: These individuals were personally selected by Xi. Their ouster indicated that the vetting process established by the 2016 military reform had failed, and a crisis of confidence in the purity of the nuclear chain of command had been reached. The leadership of the PLARF was severely depleted, not because these individuals were opposed to Xi, but because the organisation had evolved to possess autonomous traits and corruption networks that challenged the absolute leadership of the Party.

The Second Wave: The Fall of the "Fujian Gang" (Late 2025)

The purge continued in late 2025, extending to the so-called 'Fujian

Gang[5],' a group of officers with connections to the 31st Group Army in Fujian, which was a power center for Xi during his tenure in the province.

- **Targets**: CMC Vice Chairman He Weidong and Admiral Miao Hua (Director of the Political Work Department) were purged (Dang, 2025).
- **Operational Impact**: He Weidong oversaw operational planning related to Taiwan. His dismissal, together with Eastern Theater Commander Lin Xiangyang, decapitated the operational command structure less than two years before the 2027 readiness deadline.
- **Factional Politics**: This might play into the hands of the Shaanxi Gang[6], the other CMC Vice Chairman, Zhang Youxia's faction. This was later shown to be a mistake in interpreting Xi's preventive strategy. The Fujian Gang purge showed that even the most loyal factions, based on their history with the leader, can be eliminated if they start to act as a cohesive interest group.

5 The "Fujian Gang" within the PLA refers to a cohort of senior officers who built personal and professional ties with Xi Jinping during his tenure as a local official and political commissar in Fujian Province. Scholars such as Cheng Li identify this group as a critical pillar of Xi's military authority, noting that their rapid promotion to the Central Military Commission (CMC) and other key commands since 2012 served to bypass traditional factional loyalties linked to the Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao eras. See Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessment and Re-evaluation*(Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 112-135; see also Joel Wuthnow, "The PLA Beyond the 20th Party Congress," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2023).

6 The "Shaanxi Gang" refers to an elite network of officials whose political loyalty is forged through shared ties to Shaanxi Province, particularly the revolutionary base of Yan'an. This faction is centered on Xi Jinping, who spent seven years as a "sent-down youth" in Liangjiahe, Shaanxi, during the Cultural Revolution. Scholars note that Shaanxi serves as a "sacred land" for the New Era, providing a pool of trusted cadres who facilitate Xi's centralisation of power. Key members include Li Zhanshu and Zhao Leji, who have held top positions in the Politburo Standing Committee. See Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessment and Re-evaluation* (Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 140–162.

The Third Wave: The Purge of Zhang Youxia (January 2026)

The final stage of the military purges came in January 2026 with the investigation of General Zhang Youxia, the highest-ranking military officer in China and a childhood friend of Xi Jinping (a "princeling" himself) (LEE, 2026).

- **The Event**: Zhang was noticeably absent from a top-level study session on January 20, 2026. Four days later, the Ministry of National Defense announced that he was under investigation for "serious violations of discipline and law," together with Chief of Joint Staff Liu Zhenli (Siong, 2026).

- **The "Hollowing Out" of the CMC**: With Zhang's ousting, five of the seven members of the CMC appointed at the 20th Party Congress had been purged in less than four years. The remaining members were only Xi Jinping and discipline chief Zhang Shengmin.

- **Strategic Rationale**: Why remove a lifelong ally?

    1. **Preventive Control**: Zhang's power within the PLA Ground Force and his Shaanxi Gang network had become too thick. In a personalist regime, a too-powerful loyalist is as threatening as a rival. The Crown Prince Dilemma is relevant in this case to military deputies; Zhang had become a rallying point for military officers seeking support, thus creating a secondary center of gravity.

    2. **Legacy of Corruption:** Zhang had previously led the Equipment Development Department (EDD) before Li Shangfu. The investigation probably showed that the corruption in the EDD was more widespread and long-standing than previously thought.

3. **Resistance to Restructuring**: There were signs of strategic differences over Xi Jinping's advocacy of "New Quality Combat Forces" in preference to the ground force's traditional agenda.

Impact on PLA Readiness and the 2027 Goal

The hollowing out of the CMC has very serious implications for the PLA's ability to satisfy the "Davidson Window."[7] (2027) for a possible invasion of Taiwan.

- **Command Degradation**: The high turnover rate has created a Schrodinger's General dilemma[8], where the officers are frozen with fear, wondering if they are next. This has resulted in a significant loss of operational initiative and mission command capability necessary for a complex amphibious assault. Another important thing to note here is that in China, when a leader or a general is

7 The "Davidson Window" is a strategic concept named after Admiral Philip S. Davidson, then-commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, who testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on 9 March 2021, that the threat of a Chinese military move against Taiwan will "manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years." The year 2027 is considered a critical "red line" because it marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PLA and coincides with the completion of major military modernisation milestones ordered by Xi Jinping. While some intelligence assessments, including those from the CIA, confirm that Xi has instructed the PLA to be ready for an invasion by 2027, many scholars debate whether this represents a definitive timeline for action or merely a target for military readiness. See Philip S. Davidson, "Statement of Admiral Philip S. Davidson, U.S. Navy Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee," March 9, 2021.

8 The "Schrödinger's General" dilemma refers to the precarious state of senior military leadership in a "high-purge" environment, where an officer is simultaneously a trusted loyalist and a potential target of the anti-corruption apparatus until the "box is opened" by a formal investigation. This concept highlights the inherent instability of elite political status under Xi Jinping, where high-profile promotions are frequently followed by sudden disappearances or "falling from a horse" (*luoma*). Scholars argue this creates a dual-state of professional existence: generals must be "hyper-loyal" to survive, yet that very prominence makes them a threat to the leader's absolute control.

purged, his whole network is purged with him. Ergo the CMC is without any experienced personnel now.

- **Equipment Quality:** The corruption probes have exposed serious problems with missile fuel and guidance systems, raising serious doubts about the material condition of the arsenal.

- **The Loyalty Trap**: Xi has placed greater emphasis on political loyalty than on military competence. By appointing political commissars and discipline inspectors to key operational positions, the PLA may fall back into the Red over Expert trap[9] (Baum, 1964). The loss of experienced war leaders such as Zhang Youxia (a veteran of the Sino-Vietnamese War) means that the PLA is now headed by political administrators with no actual war-fighting experience.

Table 1: The "Hollowed Out" Central Military Commission (Status as of Feb 2026)

Name	Position (20th Congress)	Status (2026)	Reason for Removal
Xi Jinping	Chairman	**Active**	N/A
Zhang Youxia	Vice Chairman	**Purged (Jan 2026)**	"Serious Violations of Discipline" / EDD Corruption / Factional Power
He Weidong	Vice Chairman	**Purged (Oct 2025)**	Factional (Fujian Gang) / Operational Failures

9 The "Red over Expert" dilemma is a foundational concept in the study of Chinese political mobilization, first articulated during the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Leap Forward. It posits that political loyalty and ideological commitment ("Redness") must take precedence over technical or scientific proficiency ("Expertise"). While the Deng Xiaoping era (1978–2012) largely shifted toward technocratic "expertise" to drive economic reform, scholars note a significant "Red" resurgence under Xi Jinping, characterized by the "Party leads everything" doctrine. This creates a "trap" where officials and military commanders may prioritize performative political loyalty over objective data or operational effectiveness to ensure personal survival. See Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, Vol. 2: The Great Leap Forward* (Columbia University Press, 1983).

Name	Position (20th Congress)	Status (2026)	Reason for Removal
Li Shangfu	Member (Defense Minister)	**Purged (Oct 2023)**	Corruption (EDD Procurement)
Liu Zhenli	Member (Joint Staff)	**Purged (Jan 2026)**	Associated with Zhang Youxia
Miao Hua	Member (Political Work)	**Purged (Oct 2025)**	Factional (Fujian Gang)
Zhang Shengmin	Member (Discipline)	**Active (Promoted)**	Replaced He Weidong as Vice Chair

The Technocratic Slaughter: Financial and Regional Cleansing (2024–2026)

Parallel to the military purges, the CCP launched a ferocious campaign against the economic and financial elite. This "technocratic slaughter" aimed to end the "financial autonomy" of state banks and regulatory bodies, subordinating economic logic entirely to political security.

Dismantling the "Financial Faction"

Xi's distrust of the financial sector, perceived as a site of Westernised thinking and the accumulation of wealth outside the Party's control, precipitated a structural transformation.

- **Institutional Erasure**: The establishment of the Central Financial Commission (CFC) and the National Financial Regulatory Administration (NFRA) (State Council, PRC, 2023) in 2023 stripped regulatory authority from technocrats in the PBOC and CSRC, vesting it in Party functionaries instead.

- **Key Purges**:

    1. **Fan Yifei (PBOC):** The former Deputy Governor was sentenced to death (suspended) for bribery (Reuters, 2024). His ouster marked the end of the PBOC's policy autonomy.2. **Liu Liange (Bank of China) & Wang Bin (China Life):** These dismissals were aimed at the "financial tigers" who used state capital for factional patronage (Disgraced top China banker Liu Liange married son's girlfriend, causing his chronic depression, 2024).

    3. **Bao Fan (China Renaissance):** The disappearance of China's top tech dealmaker was a chilling reminder to the private sector that financial success did not guarantee immunity (The Guardian, 2025).

The "Seven Princelings" Scandal (Hunan 2026)

In February 2026, a massive corruption scandal in Hunan province exposed the continued predation of the Red Second Generation, shattering the myth that Xi's allies were immune.

- **The Scandal**: A group of seven sons of high-ranking officials, led by Yi Shiwei (son of Zhejiang Party Secretary Yi Lianhong), was implicated in embezzling billions from state infrastructure projects (Vision Times, 2026).

- **The Trigger**: The scandal erupted after the mysterious death of Liu Wenjie, Hunan's Finance Director, who jumped from her apartment building in September 2024 during a debt crisis (Palmer, 2024). It was found that she was forced to back private loans for the Princelings.

- **The Purge**: On 10 February 2026, the CCP launched an investigation into Yi Lianhong, a full member of the Central Committee and a key member of Xi's New Zhijiang Army (officials who worked with Xi in Zhejiang) (Vision Times, 2026).

- **Significance**:

    1. **Eating the Base:** Yi Lianhong was one of the most loyal officials. His purge shows that the anti-corruption campaign has turned into an autophagic (self-eating) process.

    2. **Limits of Patronage**: The Seven Princelings scandal proved that corruption within Red families is still widespread despite a decade of purges.

    3. **Elite Fracture:** The persecution of Red families may estrange the Party's hereditary aristocracy, which is perilous for Xi as he nears the 21st Party Congress.

Mechanisms of Preventive Control: The Architecture of Fear

How does Xi Jinping maintain control while simultaneously attacking the military, financial, and regional elites? The answer lies in the institutionalisation of preventive control mechanisms that create a panopticon effect within the Party.

The Expansion of the Disciplinary Code

The CCP Code of Penalties for Disciplinary Violations has been amended in 2015, 2018, and 2023 (Subba, 2018). There has been a clear shift in these amendments:

- **From Economic to Political**: In the 2015 amendment, there was a substantial cut in the number of words allocated to economic crimes (bribery) and an increase in the number of words allocated to "political discipline."

- **Vague Crimes**: Offenses such as "distorting the policies of the Central Committee," "disloyalty and dishonesty," and "improper discussion of central policies" have been introduced. These crimes

with vague definitions enable the CCDI to remove any official they want, leading to a situation of "institutionalized uncertainty."

- **Preventive Logic**: The 2023 amendments are particularly aimed at "forming cliques" (tuan tuan huo huo) even in the absence of conspiracy. This makes horizontal communication between elites a crime, ensuring that all information is channeled to the center (Xinhua, 2023).

Political Inspections (Xunshi) as Governance

The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) has evolved from a judicial institution to a participant in daily governance.

- **Permanent Patrols**: "Political inspections" are no longer ad hoc. Inspection teams are now permanently stationed in all ministries and financial institutions.

- **The Three Differentiations Failure:** In an effort to counter the bureaucratic freeze that resulted from this terror, Xi launched the "Three Differentiations" to separate "honest mistakes" from corruption (Pei, 2025). However, in his January 2025 speech to the CDIC, Xi dropped this term, indicating a return to the "Zero Tolerance" policy (Pei, 2025).

- **Result**: A bureaucracy that practices "lying flat" (tangping)[10] Bureaucrats are reluctant to take the initiative since it is safer to do

10 *Tangping* (lying flat) is a counter-cultural movement that gained viral traction in 2021, representing a rejection of the "996" work culture (9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week) and the hyper-competitive social environment known as "involution" (*neijuan*). By choosing to do the bare minimum to survive, eschewing marriage, children, and property ownership, proponents of *tangping* seek to opt out of the "rat race" of modern Chinese capitalism. State authorities and official media, including *Guangming Daily*, have criticised the trend as a threat to "high-quality development" and national rejuvenation.

nothing than to do something that could be considered a political mistake.

The Sentinel State and Elite Surveillance

Based on Minxin Pei's work, the regime uses a "distributed surveillance" approach, which combines Party cells, neighborhood committees, and online surveillance networks (Skynet, Sharp Eyes) (Pei, 2024).

- **Internal Espionage:** The "One Percent" of society serving as informants includes cadres monitoring other cadres. The Ministry of State Security (MSS) has broadened its mandate to include the surveillance of the internal communications of Party members, searching for cliques and unauthorised associations.

- **Pre-Political Screening**: The aim is to identify would-be dissidents before they become a problem. This effectively eliminates 'informational autonomy,' ensuring that there is no private realm for elite communication. The 'Sentinel State' is more than a surveillance state; it is a surveillance state of the Politburo.

Table 2: Economic vs. Political Discipline in CCP Code Revisions

Revision Year	Economic/ Bribery Content	Political Discipline Content	Key Additions
2003 (Hu Era)	High Detail	Minimal	Focus on embezzlement and lifestyle
2015 (Xi Era)	**Reduced by ~50%**	**Expanded Significantly**	"Improper discussion of central policies"
2018 (Xi Era)	Stable	Expanded	"Two Safeguards"; Loyalty to the Core
2023 (Xi Era)	Stable	**Maximal Expansion**	Vague definitions of "disloyalty"; Retroactive application

The Road to the 21st Party Congress (2027): Scenarios and Risks

As the CCP approaches the 21st Party Congress in 2027, the regime faces a convergence of crises driven by the very success of Xi's consolidation.

The 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030): Security-Led Stagnation

The 15th Five-Year Plan (FYP), drafted in late 2025, enshrines the policy of "security-led growth (OSMAN, 2026)."

- **Priorities**: The plan reverses the logic of past FYPs, ranking "National Strategic Integration" and "Security Endurance" over GDP growth.
- **Economic Impact**: The plan admits a "structural turn" to a 4.5% to 5.0% growth trajectory, but the massive investment in non-productive security assets (dual-use infrastructure, strategic reserves) produces a "fiscally frayed" context. The "New National System" for technology aims to evade US sanctions but may produce a closed loop of inefficient innovation.
- **Contradiction**: The purges of financial technocrats such as Fan Yifei and the intimidation of private bankers such as Bao Fan directly contradict the aim of "New Quality Productive Forces." Innovation is a risky business, and risk is systematically penalized by the preventive control system.

The 2027 Taiwan Scenario: Capability vs. Intent

The year 2027 is the centennial of the PLA. US intelligence has traditionally noted this as the year Xi told the PLA to be prepared for a Taiwan invasion.

- **The Readiness Paradox**: The 2023–2026 purges have caused the PLA's human software to be badly compromised. On one hand, the

PLA's hardware (ships, missiles) is increasing, but the brain of the PLA, its command structure, is demoralised and depleted. The dismissal of Zhang Youxia and He Weidong takes away the two most knowledgeable officers about Taiwan invasion plans.

- **Deterrence Implications**: Ironically, the turmoil within could make Xi more cautious about a full-scale invasion, as he would not be sure if his generals can follow through on complex plans or stay loyal in a crisis. But it could also raise the chances of diversionary conflict or gray zone tactics to demonstrate strength without a full-scale war.

The Succession Void and the "Perfect Dictatorship"

The ultimate threat to the regime is the lack of succession.

- **No Heir**: Xi will be 74 by 2027. Without a successor, every high-ranking official becomes a potential suspect in the leader's eyes and a potential rival in the eyes of equals.

- **The Trap**: To have a successor means to face the 'Crown Prince Dilemma' (to make himself a lame duck). To have no successor means to face a chaotic struggle for power upon his death or incapacitation.

- **Preventive Control as a Trap**: The preventive control system demands that the leader alone is the arbiter of truth and power. As the bureaucracy freezes and the elite breaks apart, the state loses its capacity for self-correction. The 'Perfect Dictatorship' turns out to be a brittle one, robust on the outside but empty inside.

Table 3: Key CCP Purge Phases (2012–2027)

Phase	Time Period	Primary Logic	Key Targets	Strategic Outcome
I. Factional Cleansing	2012–2017	Eliminate Rival Power Centers	Zhou Yongkang, Bo Xilai, Ling Jihua, Xu Caihou	Consolidation of the "Core"; Destruction of "Collective Leadership"
II. Institutional Reset	2017–2022	Norm Destruction & Restructuring	Sun Zhengcai, Fu Zhenghua, Meng Hongwei	Abolition of Term Limits; 19th/20th Congress domination
III. Preventive Control	2023–2027	Elite Atomization & Loyalty Tests	Li Shangfu, Qin Gang, **Zhang Youxia**, **Yi Lianhong**	"Hollowing Out" of CMC; Paralysis of Technocracy; Absolute Security State

Detailed Analysis of Key Purge Events

The "Seven Princelings" Scandal (Hunan 2026)

The downfall of Yi Lianhong and the "Seven Princelings" clique marks a turning point in the erosion of the "Red Second Generation" bargain.

- **The Mechanism**: The corruption involved state financial vehicles (LGFVs) in Hunan Province to pay performance bonuses to the offspring of senior officials. The mastermind, Yi Shiwei, used his father's influence to corner the market for provincial construction projects.
- **The Extent**: Billions of RMB were siphoned off. The tragic death of Finance Director Liu Wenjie revealed the toxic effects of predation when funds became scarce. Her 13th-floor jump was more than a suicide; it was a symptom of the 'coercive debt' that the Princelings exacted from local technocrats.

- **The Political Message**: Xi's arrest of the offspring of incumbent officials (including the son of the Mayor of Chongqing) indicates that the implicit immunity of the Red nobility is no longer valid. This upends the post-Mao bargain that shielded the families of the elite, increasing the existential risk for all high-ranking officials.

The "Financial Super-Regulator" Purges

Fan Yifei purge and the restructuring of the PBOC are more than anti-corruption campaigns; they are ideological corrections.

- **Ideological Divergence**: The financial technocrats are more concerned with market stability and integration with international capital. Xi's 'Financial Super-Regulator' (NFRA) is more concerned with the orientation of credit to strategic industries (semiconductors and AI) irrespective of profitability.

- **Preventive Logic**: The removal of Fan Yifei is not only due to bribery charges but also due to his ability to build an influence network within the central bank that could potentially counter the Party's monetary policy. The application of the death penalty (suspended) is a terror signal to the rest of the technocrats to get in line with the new statist ideology.

Future Outlook: The "Davidson Window" and the 2027 Congress

The convergence of the 21st Party Congress and the 2027 PLA centennial creates a period of great danger.

- **Scenario A**: The Bunkerisation. Xi, intimidated by assassination or coup attempts from the 'cornered beasts' (purged elites), further withdraws into his bunker, relying only on the security apparatus (MSS) and a handful of secretaries (Ding Xuexiang, Cai Qi). Decision-making becomes increasingly erratic.

- **Scenario B**: The Diversionary War. To consolidate the divided elite and legitimise the terror regime, Xi launches a limited war (e.g., Kinmen seizure or Taiwan blockade). This mobilises his 'nationalist' support base and coerces the military into line.

- **Scenario C**: The Soviet Stagnation. The 'security-led growth' strategy proves a failure. Youth unemployment and local debt crises worsen. The regime maintains itself through brute force alone, but China embarks on a lost decade of stagnation, like the Brezhnev era, sustained by digital surveillance.

Final Assessment: The path to 2027 is littered with the wreckage of CCP institutions. Xi Jinping has constructed a 'Sentinel State' that can see all, but perhaps trust no one. In his quest for ultimate security, he has wrought ultimate vulnerability.

Conclusion

The course of the CCP under Xi Jinping from 2012 to 2027 is a tragic one of authoritarian modernisation. What began as a necessary campaign to sweep away corruption and revitalise the Party has degenerated into a perpetual purge that devours the state's own strength.

In moving from purges of factions to preventive governance, Xi has managed to atomize the leadership[11] and rule out any imminent coup. But he has done so at the expense of institutional durability. The hollowing out of the CMC, the freeze on the financial technocracy, and the estrangement of the Red aristocracy in the wake of the Hunan scandal indicate that the

11 "Atomization of leadership" refers to the transition from an institutionalised collective leadership system to one of personalistic rule, where elite political networks (factions) are broken down into isolated individuals whose survival depends solely on their direct relationship with Xi Jinping. By utilising anti-corruption purges and the "Two Establishes" (*liangge quelian*), Xi has prevented the horizontal coordination among elites that once allowed for internal checks and balances.

regime is now entering a phase of 'high-entropy stability', stable in its repression, but deteriorating in its competence.

As the 21st Party Congress draws near, the CCP is not a monolith of power but a Sentinel State defending against its own darkness, locked into a vicious cycle in which the only remedy for insecurity is more purges, and each purge begets further insecurity.

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Pakistan's Doctrinal Evolution Post Op Sindoor

HARSH VARDHAN SINGH

Abstract

Pakistan's doctrinal evolution post Operation Sindoor reflects a shift to an integrated Multi-domain Strategy anchored in Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) and Converged Battle Domains (CBD). Facing structural asymmetry with India, Pakistan seeks parity in effect above the conventional threshold and parity in action below it through calibrated sub-conventional operations, cyber warfare, missile expansion and nuclear signalling. The doctrine centres on a Resilience Sprint, Crisis Control and a Short Win through escalation management. While multi-domain integration enhances deterrence flexibility; economic fragility, maritime inferiority, internal faultlines and escalation risks constrain Pakistan's capacity for sustained conflict and strategic parity with India.

Pakistan's military doctrine has undergone a profound transformation since 1947, shaped by repeated crises during Operation Sindoor, internal instability, economic fragility and the changing character of warfare. The ability of Pakistan's military to evolve doctrines in sub-conventional domain has had an envious track record. However, the same cannot be said

about conventional warfare; it has been reactionary to stimulus to Indian Armed Forces since inception, the last such evolution being Triple R and NCWF[1] post articulation of Proactive Strategy by India[2]. The situation for Pakistan military exacerbated with the articulation of Dynamic Response Strategy[3] by India in 2019 which primarily bridged the gap between sub-conventional and conventional operations by employing conventional vectors against sub-conventional targets, calling the Pakistan bluff on transitioning to nuclear domain and closing the conventional force application window.

For more than seven decades, Pakistan's national security strategy has been dominated by the challenge of confronting a larger and economically stronger India and besotted with the idea of an existential threat to its being[4]. This structural asymmetry and psychological dogma has compelled Pakistani military planners to search for methods that offset conventional disadvantages while preserving strategic relevance. The result has been a gradual but decisive evolution from traditional territorial defence to a complex doctrine centred on nuclear deterrence, proxy warfare, and more recently, multi-domain operations. At the core of the evolutionary process is the Pakistan Army's search for strategic relevance and regime security under conditions of conventional asymmetry and growing domestic vulnerability[5]. The contemporary doctrine moves to a multi-layered framework that fuses sub-conventional tools, information operations, cyber capabilities, space support through collusion, and nuclear deterrence into what Pakistani analysts term "Full Spectrum Deterrence" (FSD)[6]. Pakistan formally articulated the concept of **FSD**, designed to deter India across all levels of conflict, from sub-conventional skirmishes to potential nuclear exchanges and close the window of conventional conflict. In the 2020s, this idea has been further expanded into what Pakistani strategists describe as **Converged Battle Domains** (CBD)[7]; an integrated approach combining cyber, space, information, and cognitive warfare with conventional and nuclear capabilities.

Pakistan's doctrinal story is inseparable from its conflict history with India, which provides the empirical basis for the Army's After-Action Reviews (AARs) and its shifting preferences for above and below-threshold options. The use of irregular Lashkars in 1947–48[8], Operation Gibraltar in 1965[9], and Operation Koh-e-Paima in Kargil (1999)[10] exemplify an early reliance on deniable or quasi-deniable forces to alter the status quo under the cover of ambiguity. Each episode, however, produced strategic setbacks and international opprobrium, forcing the Army to recalibrate without abandoning the basic impulse to exploit the seam between peace and war. The crises of 2001–02 (Operation Parakram), the 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot–Swift Retort cycle further exposed Pakistan's conventional disadvantages and India's growing willingness to use calibrated conventional force across the Line of Control. In response, Pakistan refined "Grey Zone Operations" and "***Bleed India with Smaller Cuts***," signaling a preference for persistent, lower-intensity violence that avoids the large-scale mass-casualty benchmark of the 2019 Pulwama attack while sustaining pressure on Indian forces[11] (Figure 1 refers). The 22 December 23 Poonch attack, where terrorists aimed to kill four to five soldiers rather than replicate a Pulwama-type strike, captures this micro-calibrated approach to escalation management[12]. By 2024, the doctrine explicitly treated sub-conventional operations as a widened "spectrum" below the conventional threshold, employing vectors in all domains of warfare, including cyber-attacks and creating religious polarization in the Indian heartland[13]. Operations were framed as part of an integrated ladder of escalation in which Pakistan seeks "Escalation Dominance: Multi-domain & Sub Conventional" while preserving a shroud of ambiguity as the conflict moves toward conventional and nuclear rungs.

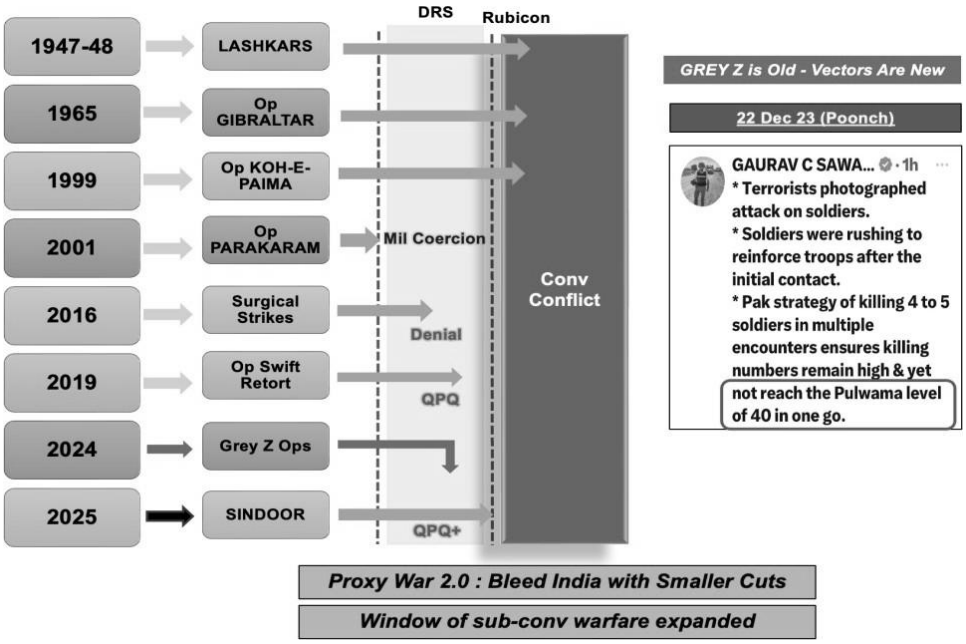


Figure 1: The Evolution of Pakistan's Sub-conventional Strategy

From Pakistan's perspective, conventional deterrence in its classical sense, preventing war through a credible threat of denial of India's victory markers, has become increasingly tenuous as India's economic and military advantages widen. Yet the doctrine does not concede irrelevance; instead, it reframes conventional power as one layer within a broader FSD posture that relies on horizontal and vertical integration. Horizontally, FSD covers the full spectrum from sub-conventional to nuclear; vertically, it links strategic, operational, and tactical levels, including the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) such as Nasr. The Pakistan Military insists on *'parity in effect above the line of conventional war'* rather than strict numerical or technological parity and *'parity in action below the line of conventional war'*. This is to be achieved by combining missile force, air power, naval enhancements, and alliance-supplied technologies with below-threshold tools that degrade Indian political and social cohesion. Post Operation Sindoor, Pakistan has come to terms that to achieve the

'parity in action' there is a need to evolve a doctrinal perspective to support this strategic hypothesis. It has also been realised that a response by India to a sub-conventional attack would not be an ***'exception'*** but always an ***'expectation'.*** If the Parity in Action has to be maintained in the expectation paradigm, there would be a need to develop a multi-domain and multi-vector response. The doctrine would be predicated on the acronym RCS (Figure 2 refers).

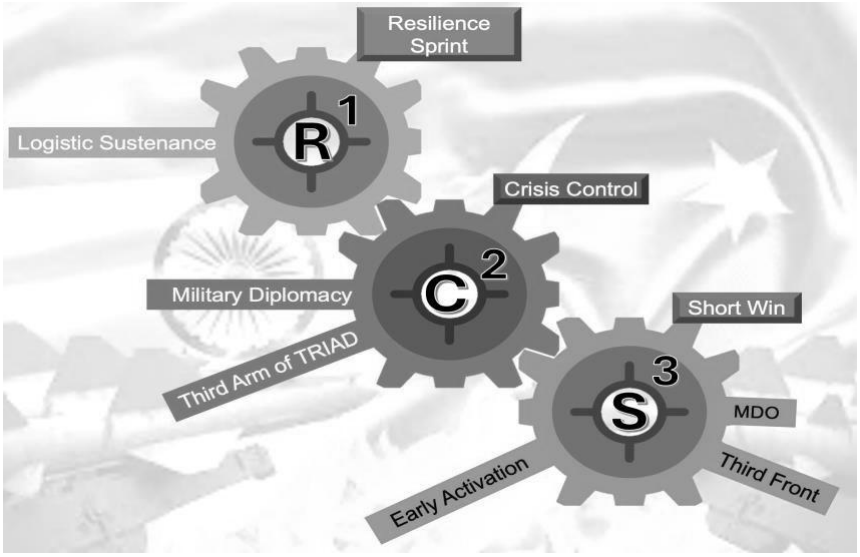


Figure 2: RCS Doctrine of Pakistan Military

Resilience Sprint

This the ability of Pakistan to respond vector to vector and match the number India has to maintain parity in action, Pakistan's ballistic and cruise missile inventory, from Shaheen and Ghauri series to Babur and Nasr is hamstrung in numbers (Figure 3 refers) and would not be able to last a longer exchange as the 87 hours of Operation Sindoor have revealed and hence there would be an **immediate requirement to upscale the inventory of missiles** it has. This would also have to cater for the escalation into a conventional conflict and also transition to the nuclear domain. This would

allow Pakistan to maintain both parity in action and also parity in effect. Simultaneously, on 13 August 2025, the Prime Minister of Pakistan announced the establishment of a **new Army Rocket Force Command (ARFC)**[14]. This directive would possess contemporary technology and the capability to engage the adversary from all directions. There is no revealed public information regarding the ARFC structure, size or mission. The official statement just discusses that the focus will be on conventional missile systems rather than nuclear delivery vehicles, which remain under the prime control of the Strategic Plans Division (SPD). Some commentators thought that this announcement of an ARFC was a vital step to deter India, which is growing its missile and hypersonic capabilities.

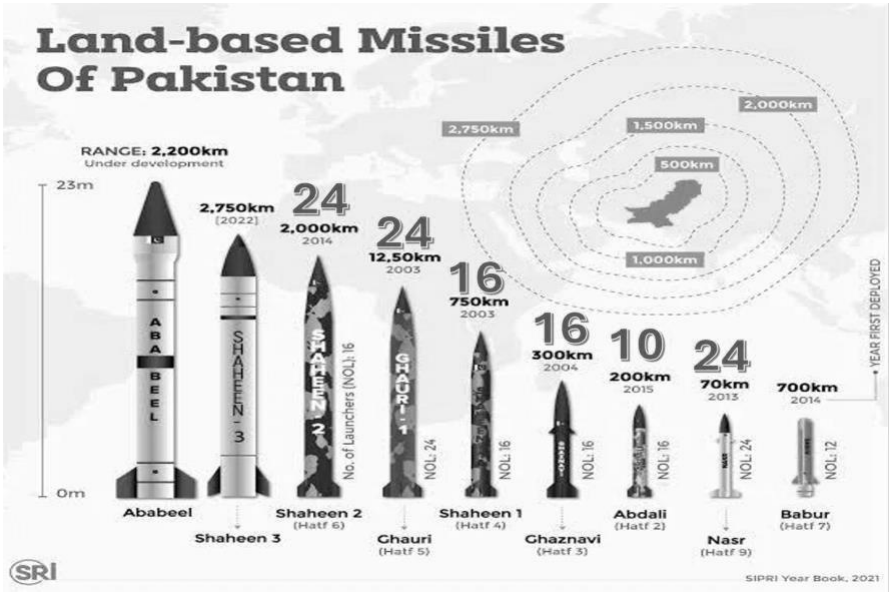


Figure 3: Missile Inventory of Pakistan

In the highly volatile environment of modern warfare, the "drone revolution" has shifted from an exclusive military resource to a critical component of modern defence planning and national security architecture. Pakistan-Turkey relations are long-standing and go beyond normal diplomatic ties, encompassing formalized defence cooperation, joint

military training, research and development, and continued engagement in aerospace development. This alliance is taking a **strategic flight in 2026 post Operation Sindoor**. The relationship was marked by periodic acquisitions and modernizations, but now the buyer-seller relationship has transitioned to a **co-production and technology-transfer paradigm**. The original equipment manufacturer (OEM) at the centre of the negotiations is said to be Baykar, which has already exported platforms such as the Bayraktar TB2 and Akinci to the Pakistan Air Force (PAF). Additionally, the Bayraktar Kizilelma stealth UAV, with comprehensive technology transfer provisions enabling local co-production, is in the pipeline[15]. Pakistan is anticipated to get initial Kizilelma-A subsonic variants, with possible supersonic upgrades in the future, following BVR tests in November 2025 off Turkey's Sinop coast[16]. Baykar is also engaged in a strategic joint R&D agreement with the National Aerospace Science and Technology Park (NASTP).[17] It has also developed a domestic subsidiary, Baykar Technologies Pakistan, which is participating directly in the larger UAV and loitering munitions market.

The **Resilience Sprint** represents the opening phase of Pakistan's doctrine, focused on absorbing initial shocks and preserving strategic coherence under conditions of intense pressure. Recognizing its structural economic and conventional asymmetry with India, Pakistan assumes that any major confrontation will place disproportionate strain on its military, logistical and political systems. The Resilience Sprint, therefore, prioritises **logistic sustenance, rapid diplomatic engagement and deterrence stabilization** as immediate imperatives. Logistically, the emphasis is on ensuring continuity of supply chains, force readiness and critical infrastructure to withstand early Indian punitive actions. Diplomatically, Pakistan seeks engagement for creating a defence eco-system for indigenous production to withstand a crisis through outreach to key partners, particularly China, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia. Collectively, the Resilience Sprint is designed to buy time, prevent strategic paralysis and create the conditions necessary for effective **Crisis Control**, reflecting

Pakistan's preference for short, controlled conflicts rather than protracted conventional wars.

Crisis Control

Crisis Control represents the central organizing principle of Pakistan's contemporary military doctrine. It signifies that, in any confrontation with India, Pakistan's primary objective is not decisive battlefield victory but **escalation management and conflict termination on favourable politico-cognitive terms**. Crisis Control integrates diplomatic manoeuvring, calibrated military actions, information operations, and nuclear signaling to regulate the intensity, duration and trajectory of a conflict. The doctrinal percept assumes that Pakistan's conventional asymmetry with India makes prolonged war untenable; therefore, strategic success depends on preventing uncontrolled escalation while imposing limited costs sufficient to compel negotiation. This functions as the pivotal mechanism connecting the initial **Resilience Sprint**, which ensures survivability and international support, with the final objective of a **Short Win**, where early de-escalation allows Pakistan to claim political and narrative advantage. In essence, the Crisis Control reflects a doctrine of **managed confrontation**, prioritizing ambiguity, deniability, and multi-domain pressure to constrain India's response options under the shadow of nuclear deterrence.

The enduring asymmetry between India and Pakistan in the maritime domain has been a defining constraint on Islamabad's strategic calculus[18]. India's larger and technologically superior navy, combined with its expanding blue-water capabilities, gives the Indian Armed Forces a decisive edge to dominate SLsOC and project power across the Arabian Sea, an advantage Pakistan cannot credibly match through indigenous resources alone. This imbalance has repeatedly compelled Pakistan to recalibrate its responses toward other domains, particularly land-based sub-conventional operations, missile forces, cyber activities and nuclear signaling is also limited to a bi-dimensional paradigm. Post Operation Sindoor, Pakistan has sought to reduce this structural disadvantage through intensive engagement

with external partners, most notably China and Turkey, to modernize its fleet with submarines, anti-ship missiles, maritime surveillance systems and naval aviation assets[19]. The acquisition of **Hangor-class submarines from China** (Figure 4 refers), the integration of Babur-3 submarine-launched cruise missiles[20], and growing Sino-Pakistan cooperation in maritime domain awareness reflect a deliberate effort to ensure that Pakistan does not enter future crises from a position of irreversible naval inferiority[21]. It underlines an effort to **strengthen the maritime leg of deterrence** and complicate India's operational planning in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. While the gap remains substantial, reinforcing Pakistan's broader doctrinal preference for multi-domain strategies that compensate for maritime weakness through escalation control and deterrence in other arenas is now being supported by renewed vigour to reduce the asymmetry the Indian Navy enjoys. These upgrades are less about achieving parity with India than about establishing a **minimum credible maritime deterrence**[22] that provides Pakistan with additional tools for escalation management. By possessing the ability to threaten Indian naval assets and sea-borne trade in a limited conflict, Pakistan seeks to strengthen its overall crisis-control architecture, ensuring that maritime inferiority does not translate into strategic paralysis during future confrontations.

Hangor-Class Submarine	Launch Date
PNS Hangor	26 April 2024
PNS Shushuk	15 March 25
PNS Mangro	15 August 25
PNS Ghazi	17 December 25

Figure 4: Pakistan's Hangor-class Submarines: Launch Dates[23]

Short Win

Perhaps the most significant doctrinal innovation is the formal

articulation of **Converged Battle Domains (CBD)** for Pakistan's defence forces. Drawing on Maheen Shafeeq's concept, CBD is defined as operations across the full spectrum from sub-conventional to nuclear, with the centre of gravity located in the nuclear and cognitive domains[24]. The objective is the synergy of multiple vectors, land, sea, air, space, cyber, and cognitive through collaboration, cooperation, and integration across tactical, operational, and strategic levels. In this framework, traditional domains are no longer treated as discrete silos but as mutually reinforcing components of a single battle space. Cyber-attacks enable information warfare; space assets provide optical, electronic, and radar reconnaissance; electronic warfare targets radio networks and radars; social media operations shape international and domestic opinion; and kinetic tools in each domain are synchronized under a Full Spectrum Deterrence umbrella. The emphasis is on "integration of six conventional domains with the nuclear domain," underscoring that nuclear forces are not isolated assets but embedded within the broader operational matrix.

Name	CBD (Converged Battle Domains)
Conflict Scenario	Operations in full spectrum (Sub-conventional-nuclear)
CoG	Nuclear & Cognitive Domain
Focus	Synergy of vectors
	Collaboration & cooperation
	Integration of six conventional domains with nuclear domain
Integration	Integration of tactical, operational and strategic domains
Domains	Land Sea Air Space Cyber Cognitive Nuclear

Figure 5: Pakistan's Converged Battle Domains Doctrine for MDO

CBD is explicitly linked to **collusion with the People's Liberation Army (PLA),** the establishment of an Army Cyber Command, an Army Rocket Force, and the documented presence of Pakistan-based APT groups targeting Indian government, defence, and critical infrastructure networks are presented as institutional manifestations of this convergence. There are seven APT groups responsible for 1.5 million cyber-attacks, the **SideCopy and APT36 spear-phishing campaigns**, and Pakistan–China joint efforts in cyber and information warfare are empirical anchors (Figure 6 refers). Furthermore, Pakistan's integration into China's space architecture through BeiDou navigation, Yaogan remote-sensing satellites, and joint remote sensing launches, as well as the projected presence of a Pakistani astronaut on China's Tiangong space station[25], are force multipliers in the CBD environment. The AI dimension is also incorporated through the Pakistan Air Force's creation of CENTAIC[26] and the articulation of a National AI Policy 2025[27], which envisions centres of excellence, large-scale training, regulatory sandboxes, and cross-border AI partnerships. CBD thus serves as the doctrinal bridge between Pakistan's long-standing FSD posture and the emerging reality of multi-domain operations. It reframes Pakistan's doctrine not only as the prevention of large-scale conventional or nuclear war but also as the continuous management of the information–cyber–cognitive space in a limited confrontation where perceptions of success and legitimacy can be as decisive as battlefield outcomes. Conventional deterrence for the Pakistan Armed Forces is neither fully dead nor fully alive in classical terms. Rather, it has been subsumed into a multi-domain FSD architecture in which conventional forces serve as a bridge between persistent sub-conventional pressure and the ultimate backstop of nuclear use, while being augmented by cyber, space, and information warfare capabilities.

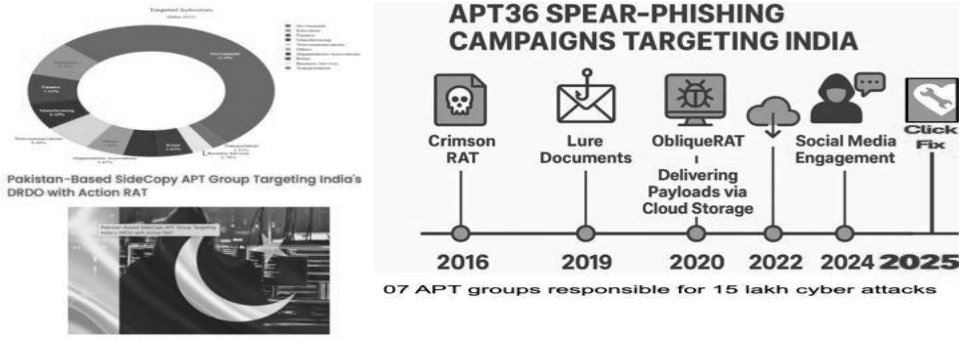


Figure 6: Cyber Campaign Against India

The doctrinal objective is a short win by escalation control through calibrated intensities. At the low-intensity end, false narratives and rumors, swarming with bots and astro-turfing on social media are used to divide Indian society and discredit leaders. The use of proxies in Kashmir, support to groups in Rakhine and along the India–Bangladesh–Nepal corridor, and the cultivation of Islamic State and AQIS narratives around "Mughalistan" (Figure 7 refers) and an undivided Islamic nation in the subcontinent allow Pakistan to influence security dynamics while formally distancing the state from direct responsibility. At higher intensities, Pakistan contemplates kinetic strikes against space assets (ASAT) with PLA support, GPS spoofing against reconnaissance platforms and unmanned systems, and disruptive attacks against critical infrastructure such as power grids, railways, banking systems, and air traffic control. The emphasis on exploiting "Chinese space niche tech advantage" and BeiDou-based navigation underscores the role of Sino-Pakistani collaboration in enabling these capabilities. A defining leitmotif of Pakistan's doctrinal evolution is narrative engineering, shaping domestic and international perceptions of conflict outcomes, legitimacy, and blame. The doctrinal postulation above presents both opportunities and risks for Pakistan. On the positive side, multi-domain integration, cyber and space capabilities and external partnerships offer tools to offset conventional asymmetry and to impose costs on India below the threshold of major war. FSD and CBD provide a

conceptual framework for orchestrating sub-conventional, conventional, and nuclear options, while narrative engineering help manage domestic legitimacy and international opinion. However, the doctrine also carries significant structural vulnerabilities. Economically, Pakistan faces a "quagmire," with reduced growth, sectoral decline, and chronic external financing needs limiting its capacity to sustain prolonged high-intensity conflict. The "triple stretch," the risk of international isolation, potential "Balkanisation," and limited war stamina are serious constraints. Internally, persistent militancy from TTP, Baloch groups and transnational jihadist organizations creates a security dilemma in which tools cultivated for external leverage can rebound domestically.

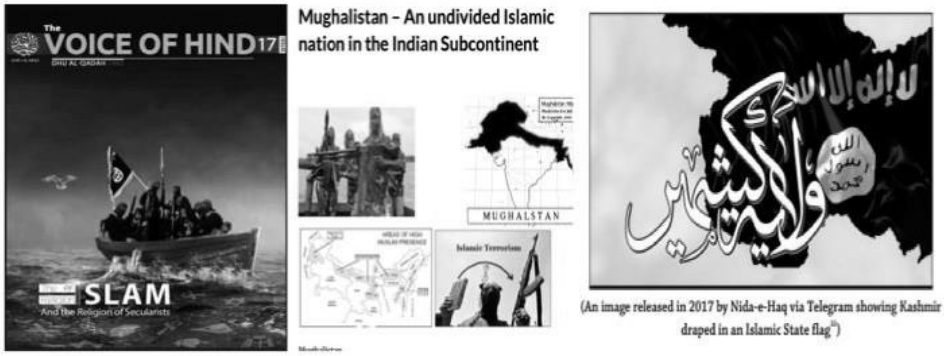


Figure 7: Social Media Narratives for Islamic Polarization

Escalation management is another critical concern. The strategy of Proxy War 2.0 "***bleed India with smaller cuts***" assumes that calibrated violence will not cross India's red lines or provoke disproportionately punitive responses. Yet the experience of 2016, 2019 and 2025 suggests that Indian thresholds are themselves evolving, with a greater willingness to conduct cross-border strikes and to frame them as legitimate responses to terrorism. Moreover, the integration of cyber, space, and information warfare into conflict dynamics raises the risk of misperception, inadvertent escalation, and entanglement of civilian infrastructure, especially when attribution remains contested. The heavy reliance on nuclear signaling and

TNWs as backstops to conventional disadvantages also invites debate about stability. While Pakistan's planners may view low-yield nuclear use on or near the battlefield as a means of restoring deterrence, India may interpret any nuclear use as a strategic red line, potentially inviting massive retaliation. The doctrinal layering of nuclear options into an already congested spectrum of sub-conventional and cyber operations may thus increase the complexity of crisis management rather than stabilizing it. Finally, narrative engineering, while tactically useful, risks creating a gap between perceived and actual outcomes. Repeated claims of victory and parity, reinforced by selective polling and controlled media narratives, may foster overconfidence, misread adversary resolve and underplay structural economic and demographic trends. This "parity in action" narrative may succeed domestically but could encourage risk-acceptant policies that outstrip Pakistan's material base and diplomatic bandwidth.

Following the heavy military and diplomatic setback of Operation Sindoor, Pakistan with Chinese support, has sought to create a new ***"axis of convenience"*** by engaging Bangladesh. The interim government in Bangladesh, which took charge after August 2024, has moved away from India-focused policies, gravitating towards Pakistan. Reports indicate high-level visits by Pakistani military officials to Bangladesh, with discussions on acquiring JF-17 fighter jets and potential training of the Bangladeshi army by Pakistan. Alongside military moves, a concerted disinformation campaign was launched involving Pakistan, Turkey, China and elements within Bangladesh to distort the narrative of Operation Sindoor. The resumption of direct shipping links, bypassing traditional inspections, has raised security concerns about contraband entering Bangladesh. There are reports of Pakistani ISI officials visiting regions close to India's sensitive Siliguri Corridor, potentially aiming to revive Islamic fundamentalist networks. Statements by DGISPR of responding to Operation Sindoor-like situations from the East allude to this burgeoning nexus between Pakistan and Bangladesh (Figure 8 refers).



Figure 8: Press Statement of DGISPR on 05 AUG 2025

Pakistan's doctrinal evolution from the early irregular forays of 1947–65 to the sophisticated FSD–CBD framework of now reflects a sustained effort to reconcile strategic ambition with structural constraints. Conventional deterrence has not disappeared; it has been re-embedded within a multi-domain architecture that seeks to compensate for asymmetry through sub-conventional operations, cyber and information warfare, alliance-based technology transfers and a diversified nuclear posture. Thresholds of conflict are no longer seen as rigid lines but as manipulable windows and doors, enabling Pakistan to operate in an expanded Grey Zone while retaining options for rapid escalation and early conflict termination. At the same time, internal economic fragility, persistent militancy, and the potential for miscalculation pose serious challenges to this doctrine. Narrative engineering and lawfare can temporarily shield the Army's image and claim victories in the perception space, but they cannot indefinitely mask the underlying trade-offs between strategic parity aspirations and resource realities. Pakistan's evolving doctrine underscores the need to analyse deterrence not only in terms of weapons and forces, but also in terms of information flows, domestic

legitimacy and the cognitive domain in which modern conflicts are increasingly fought and "won."

Brigadier Harsh Vardhan Singh has served in Jammu & Kashmir and Eastern Ladakh as well as in UN Peace Keeping Operations in Sierra Leone. He has been an instructor at the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, Defence Services Staff College, Wellington and Mechanised Infantry Centre & School. Currently, he is pursuing his PhD in International Relations from MAHE. Views expressed are personal.

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Gwadar Port and the Emerging Strategic Geometry of the Arabian Sea

KUMARA NANDA AND SK SHAHI

Abstract

Gwadar Port has emerged as a possible strategic pivot in the emerging strategic geometry of the Arabian Sea. This paper aims to examine key questions, vis-à-vis, first, how the Gwadar port alters the balance between India and China in the Arabian Sea. Second, do the insurgency and geopolitical tensions in Pakistan and the heavy securitisation of Gwadar affect or neutralise its economic and logistical advantage. Lastly, the impact of Balochistan unrest on the Gwadar port. To answer these questions, this paper attempts to use a multi-layered lens by triangulating three variables, which are the broader shifts in regional politics and the local unrest and resistance in Balochistan. The paper argues that while Gwadar is projected as a Crown jewel of CPEC and a testament of China-Pakistan cooperation, it is heavily impacted by local Baloch resistance, militarisation, and insurgency. Furthermore, the paper posits that Gwadar port in the Arabian Sea is a strategic but unpredictable geopolitical pivot which is significant for shaping the strategic behaviour of nations like India, China, and West Asian States.

Introduction

The Arabian Sea is regarded as the vital corridor in the emerging Indo-Pacific order for its global trade and energy. It is located at the confluence of major regions vis-à-vis South Asia, West Asia, and East Africa, wherein it is part of the significant Sea lanes of Communication. While historically the Arabian Sea always remained peripheral to the global power competitions that involved the Strait of Malacca or the South China Sea, the Arabian Sea has recently been at the forefront of a complex and evolving geopolitical geometry. It is important to note that this transformation is not based on solely the natural geography or the trade routes, rather it is fundamentally driven by the shifting balance of power and strategic realignments by regional and extra-regional actors. At the very centre of this strategic recalibration a deep-sea port located in Pakistan's Balochistan province, which is now operated by a Chinese state-owned enterprise – Gwadar Port.



Figure 1: Strategic Maritime Nodes in the Arabian Sea[1]

Gwadar Port, part of China's One Belt-One Road Initiative, is located at "the mouth of the Arabian Gulf just outside the Strait of Hormuz, touching the key shipping routes in and out of Gulf"[2]. Most assessments look at the Gwadar port as the logistical node in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor but this paper contends that its is time that Gwadar port be understood as the emerging geopolitical pivot in the Arabian Sea. This port offers China a direct outlet to the Arabian Sea and helps it to circumvent its dependence on the Straits in Southeast Asia. While it is affirmative that the Gwadar port has the strategic potential but it is also defined by Pakistan's domestic politics and security complexities. This paper posits that Gwadar has become a catalyst for the changing strategic geometry in the Arabian Sea, especially with the presence and interactions of China, India and the Gulf States. While China seeks to consolidate its western maritime presence through Gwadar, India on the other hand, has expanded its naval presence in Duqm, Chabahar, and the Andaman-Nicobar Command. Similarly, the Gulf states, which primarily depended on the guarantees of the West, have now started rethinking their alignments and diversified their partnerships by engaging with China, India, and Pakistan. Therefore, Gwadar is no longer an isolated infrastructure project, it is defined by strategic competition and regional hedging. Lastly, this complex geometry is further affected by the instability in Balochistan, which is characterised by insurgent violence and ethnic grievances. This paper situates Gwadar as a strategic pivot in this emerging strategic geometry of the Arabian Sea.

In its current form, Gwadar port functions with three multi-purpose berths which are set along a 602-metre continuous qual wall, including "three 200m multipurpose ship berths that can accommodate up to 50,000 DWT vessels with a maximum 12.5m draught. The designed capacity is 137,000 TEU (containerized cargo) per year, and 868,000 tons of general and bulk cargo per year".[3] Kardon et al (2020) note a stark difference between Gwadar's projected role and its actual commercial performance. Phase II expansion envisages nine additional berths to the east of the

existing quay. While the long-term projections are ambitious, its realization is far from reality.

This paper aims to answer three key questions, vis-à-vis, first, how does the Gwadar port alters the balance between India and China in the Arabian Sea. Second, does the insurgency and geopolitical tensions in Pakistan and heavy securitisation of Gwadar affect or neutralise its economic and logistical advantage. Lastly, the impact of Balochistan unrest on the Gwadar port. In order to answer these questions, this paper attempts to use a multi-layered lens by triangulating three variables which are the broader shifts in regional politics and the local unrest and resistance in Balochistan. It explores how Gwadar which once was a fixed node in the global maritime dynamics is increasingly emerging as a strategic pivot in the evolving geopolitical architecture.

Gwadar's Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Significance

Gwadar port is located at the southwestern tip of Pakistan and it occupies the central position in the shifting maritime dynamics of the Arabian Sea. It is a critical node in the strategic calculus of the Arabian Sea, wherein it acts as a strategic asset for China's maritime ambitions, as a cornerstone of Pakistan's ambitions and an important pivot in India's counter strategy in the Western Indian Ocean. Although Gwadar port is an important geoeconomic asset under China's BRI, its true significance lies within the broader Indo-Pacific regional architecture. It is located just near the Strait of Hormuz through which approximately one-fifth of the global oil passes.[4] These ports lie at the intersection of major regions such as South Asia, West Asia, North-East Africa, and the Arabian Sea. With respect to China, this geography provides a lucrative opportunity to extend its strategic presence westward and reduce its dependence in the Southeast Asian ports. On the other hand, Pakistan considers CPEC as an important pillar of the China-Pakistan all-weather partnership. While presiding over the CPEC roundtable, Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar in 2023 stated that, "The CPEC remains a shining example of the

BRI's promise of economic prosperity and connectivity. It has transformed the socio-economic landscape of Pakistan, upgrading modern infrastructure, enhancing regional connectivity, ensuring energy security, and creating jobs… In a world marred by multiple challenges like conflicts, economic recessions, food insecurity, social inequalities, and climate change, the salience of the Pakistan-China all-weather strategic cooperative partnership assumes great importance. It is a source of pride and comfort for our two peoples and a factor of peace and stability in the region and beyond. Ours is a relationship of the past, present, and future, and nothing can alter this reality".[5]

Chinese port investments at Gwadar operate under a dual-use logic that integrates both commercial integration and its military utility. Although it is presented as a commercial investment under the CPEC, its characteristics vis-à-vis governance structure, strategic location align closely with what Chinese analysts call the 'overseas strategic strongpoints".[6] According to research conducted by the China Maritime Studies Institute, overseas strategic strongpoints are characterised by features like geographical location, management coordination, a comprehensive management coordination and its potential for military use.[7] Gwadar port fits all these criteria but many analysts argue its wartime utility, especially due to host-state reluctance but it could serve as a dedicated naval base for peace-time.[8]

Yet, any assessment of the dual use and the strategic potential of Gwadar is not complete without confronting the fundamental reality of the port being situated in the most politically volatile and insurgency-affected region. Baloch politics is characterised by resource extraction, marginalisation, and persistent resistance. Nisar Baluch, the General Secretary of the Baloch Welfare Society, observed that "No matter how hard they try to turn Gwadar into Dubai, it won't work. There will be resistance. The future pipelines going to China will not be safe. The pipelines will have to cross our Baloch territory, and if our rights are

violated, nothing will be secure[9],[10] It is pertinent to note that any large-scale infrastructure project in the resource-rich region of Balochistan primarily only focuses on external strategic interests rather than local development, which has been the main cause of concern for many in the region.

Dr. Kaiser Bengali, Pakistani economist, stressed the economic unfeasibility of Gwadar and a collapse of the CPEC expectations.[11] He noted that despite the initial announcement of a USD 46-62 billion investment package, it largely remained a politically charged rhetoric and nothing materialised economically. Some of the economic limitations that has impacted the port till date is the lack of hinterland and the distance between the port and the major economic centers. He further argues that Gwadar could only achieve it if it served as a transit corridor for Afghanistan, but the geopolitical shifts in the last decade from Iran's Chabahar port have rendered Gwadar unfeasible. While Gwadar as an economic asset is improbable but it still remains as a pivotal geopolitical asset. Its failure to emerge as an economically thriving hub has dual implications vis-à-vis sharpening strategic competition in the Arabian Sea and complicating the development aspirations of Pakistan.[12]

Table 1: Comparative Features of Gwadar and Chabahar Port

Feature	**Gwadar Port (Pakistan)**	**Chabahar Port (Iran)**
Primary External Partner	China (China Overseas Ports Holding Co. Ltd)	India (Indian Ports Global Ltd.
Strategic Role	Strategic Node under CPEC, China's access point in the Arabian Sea	India's gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia (sidelining Pakistan)
Distance from the Strait of Hormuz	~ 400km	~ 280km
Harbour Depth	11-14m	14-18m
Military Access	Dual-use (Debatable)	Limited
Political Stability	Low (Baloch Insurgency)	Moderate

Note: Compiled by the Author

In order to comprehend the comparative dynamics, the table above contrasts Gwadar and Chabahar ports in the Arabian Sea. The comparison highlights a broader asymmetry wherein Gwadar offers geopolitical leverage but is impacted by local unrest and Chabahar, on the other hand, offers a more stable regional gateway to India. Furthermore, it underscores that geography alone does not determine strategic value, stability and political context impact the long-term viability of any maritime infrastructure.

Balochistan: Internal Insecurity and External Ambitions

Balochistan is the most significant factor shaping Gwadar, as the location of Gwadar is in a historically marginalised and contested province, which is vulnerable to social resistance despite the continued efforts by Beijing and Islamabad to portray it as an economic gateway. The Baloch political landscape is characterised by varied challenges ranging from resource exploitation, militarisation, and systematic exclusion, which has generated a persistent crisis for Pakistan. It is these grievances that have affected Gwadar the most. One of the recent instances is that of July 2024 wherein the ethnic Baloch protestors staged a demonstration after the arrest of activists who were associated with Haq Do Tehreek.[13] This demonstration saw the participation of people of multifarious sections of society spanning from the fishermen to students to religious leaders and so on. Major issues included the restrictions around fishing rights, cross-border movement with Iran and inequitable access to water and electricity.[14] These circumstances reflect that the instability in the Baloch region is not just a product of military violence rather systemic governance failures which negatively day to day lives in Gwadar.

Additionally, this civic resistance is reinforced by the continued presence of insurgency groups such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) which increasingly challenge and target Chinese nationals and CPEC infrastructure.[15] In fact, analysts also note that the anti-China sentiments is not just limited to armed movements, rather it has transformed and made

its place in the mainstream political discourse wherein China is perceived and portrayed as having little regard for local welfare.[16] There is a perception that Chinese investment has led to militarisation rather than development.

From the perspective of Beijing, the regional instability in Baloch has become a strategic liability and many assessment reports suggest that China could most probably be reassessing the role of Pakistan as a long-term partner in infrastructure.[17] From being symbolised as the western gateway under the BRI, Gwadar has now exposed Chinese investments to the unpredictability of Pakistan's domestic politics. The increased involvement of Chinese private security firms indicates that Islamabad is in no position to guarantee the safety of the port, which has led Gwadar to become a pivot where external ambitions converge with internal political fragilities of Pakistan. Moreover, the Gwadar port authority, provincial administration and other agencies have conflicting mandates, which have resulted in weak implementation and inconsistencies in policies. There is a growing presence of checkpoints and restricted zones with the rise of security. Another instance is that of a political gathering which was organised by the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) in July 2024, which saw a heavy crackdown by the Pakistan security forces. The BYC termed the protest as a, "referendum against the Baloch genocide, the exploitation of Baloch resources under the guise of so-called megaprojects, and the conversion of Balochistan into a prison under the pretext of security."[18] One of the Baloch activists even told an American media house that, "Gwadar is being called a game-changer for Pakistan and China, so it was important to tell them and the international media that this land belongs to us… the crackdown shows Baloch are not allowed to enter Gwadar."[19] Salman and Usmani even allege that the Chinese investments have led to 'abuse of rights'.[20] Even a convoy of Chinese engineers was targeted in Karachi's airport, in which two Chinese nationals were killed and around 10 people were injured.[21]

Notably, none of these local dynamics is isolated, and they fundamentally shape the geopolitical advantage of Gwadar but the Baloch instability hampers the commercial objectives of CPEC. Therefore, it is pertinent to acknowledge that the strategic advantage of Gwadar is continuously recalibrated by the subnational resistance.

Discussion and Analysis

In contemporary times, the strategic geometry of the Arabian Sea is a multi-layered contestation that places Gwadar as a point of convergence and friction. The significance of Gwadar lies less in its economic output as it still has not delivered on that front and more in how it shapes and structures the geopolitical competition between China, India, and West Asia. Therefore, it is extremely important to understand the evolving dynamics of the Arabian Sea by triangulating major-power strategies, local insecurities and regional hedging behaviour.

In addition to the above, even India's maritime posture has become more assertive in the Western Indian Ocean as Indian Navy is slowly "shedding its traditional reticence and adopting a more proactive approach to the maritime domain, moving beyond the IOR".[22] Since 2017, the Indian Navy has operational presence across chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, Mozambique Channel, Bab el Mandeb, etc. The Western Fleet, supported by the P-8I, now operates in a forward-leaning posture across the northern Arabian Sea, which signaled India's commitment to a secure and stable Western Indian Ocean. It is affirmative that Chinese investment in Gwadar has helped position China in the region, but India's active naval presence ensures that China's presence is not translated into a major reconfiguration of maritime power. The strategic balance in the Arabian Sea is not merely dependent on intentions rather its functionality, which Gwadar has not achieved yet. The port lacks major commercial activity or logistical depth, which could help support continuous naval operations. The possibility of the use of Gwadar by PLAN vessels is also in doldrums, especially because Pakistan is marred by political fragility and

insurgency in the Baloch region. This remains one of the most limiting factors because Balochistan is characterised by insurgency, securitisation, anti-China sentiment, and long-standing grievance of resource extraction. The narrative of such infrastructure projects as development projects has been contested by the local Baloch population, which neutralises Gwadar's logistical promise. As a result, it weakens Pakistan's ability to secure its own port and China's willingness to deepen its economic investments in Pakistan.

All these factors suggest that while Gwadar occupies a strategically significant position, which is symbolic in nature but constrained economically because it does not change the maritime dynamics between India and China and nor does it function as a major commercial hub, which could in some way transform the economy of Pakistan. Instead, Gwadar stands as a case study of how major powers are impacted by domestic fragility and regional grievances such as the Baloch resistance. Although it is a possibility that in the near future, Gwadar could turn out to be a commercial success but it all depends on Pakistan's ability to tackle domestic challenges affecting the Baloch region, as this is the only way to transform Gwadar's geopolitical intent into a functionally viable port.

Conclusion

Gwadar is positioned at the crossroads of structural constraints and geopolitical aspirations. While it was initially presented as China's anchor in the Arabian Sea and a gateway for Pakistan to economically transform itself, it has instead underscored the limitations of power projection by major powers through geo-economic infrastructure without actually resolving or looking out for domestic political and security divisions. It is asserted that Gwadar expands the Chinese maritime footprint in the region but this is reciprocated by India's growing naval presence as well. Despite this, this shift has not resulted in any significant shift to the Western Indian Ocean. One of the major challenges that Gwadar faces are the domestic fragilities within Pakistan. The consistent Baloch grievances, recurring

protests, targeted anti-China violence, and heavy militarisation have prevented the port's stability, hindering its capability to acquire commercial stand or dual-use functionality. The politically unsettled and economically marginalised Balochistan has made it to impossible for Gwadar to evolve into a logistics hub let alone, a strategic strongpoint capable of altering regional power dynamics. The Gwadar's future, whether, geo-economic potential or geo-strategic relevance, it depends on Pakistan's ability to stabilise its periphery and integrate local aspirations into national policy.

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Coercion Through Aerospace Control: Operation Absolute Resolve and Strategic Geography

SACHIN SHARMA

Abstract

*The paper examines the strategic implications of '**Operation Absolute Resolve**' undertaken by US forces in Venezuela and concurrent geopolitical assertions of the USA over Greenland, situating both within the framework of Coercion through Aerospace Control and Strategic Geography. It argues that the rapid neutralization of Venezuela's Air Defence network demonstrated the decisive impact of integrated Airpower, Cyber Warfare, Electronic Warfare, and Sensor Shooter Fusion in achieving regime-level objectives. Despite possessing advanced Russian origin systems, Venezuela's failure stemmed from Poor Readiness, non-networked architecture, Supply Chain Dependency, and lack of Layered Defence in Depth. The study highlights how Aerospace Dominance, coupled with Cyber Electromagnetic Disruption, can decisively bypass Static and Point-based AD Grids. Parallel US emphasis on Greenland underscores the enduring strategic value of Geographic Choke Points such as the GIUK Gap in great-power competition. Drawing lessons for India, the paper advocates Layered and Networked AD architecture, Cyber-EW resilience, Indigenous Production*

capacity, and Supply Chain Autonomy. It concludes that Deterrence credibility in the 2026–2035 security environment depends not on Hardware Acquisition alone, but on sustained readiness, integration, and Strategic Foresight.

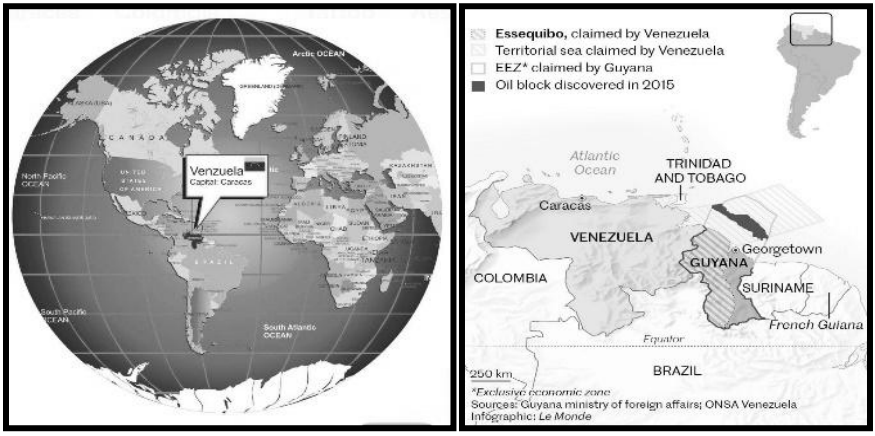
Introduction

Recent US military intervention in Venezuela, culminating in the capture of President Nicolás Maduro and blockade of Venezuelan oil exports, has underscored a marked shift in Washington's willingness to employ hard power beyond traditional diplomatic and economic coercion. In parallel, renewed US assertions in Greenland, grounded in its centrality for Arctic Defence and access to critical minerals, have exacerbated tensions with its European allies and highlighted a resurgence of power politics over cooperative security frameworks. While Venezuela episode demonstrates the decisive impact of Air Control, EW, and Sensor Shooter Integration, suggesting continued focus on robust Air Defence (AD), Data Centric C2, and indigenous technological developments to counter contemporary threat vectors, the US posture on Greenland emphasises the centrality of geographic Choke Points and Resource Access. These interconnected events underscore that **Strategic Autonomy** and **Military Modernisation** are indispensable for India's pursuit of sustained economic growth and international influence in an era where the traditional rules-based order is increasingly becoming subservient to raw strategic imperatives.

Geopolitical Context

Operation Absolute Resolve. The Venezuelan military intervention executed on 03 Jan 26 reiterates the fact that the US retains the military capability and political will to undertake major power projections in regions historically dominated by American influence. Intervention rationale, maybe, attributed towards the following connected geopolitical drivers: -

Oil Competition and Regional Instability. Venezuela's competing claims over Guyana's Essequibo region, home to some of the world's largest proven oil reserves, created a flashpoint for regional destabilization. US intervention to prevent Venezuelan territorial aggression reflects both **Energy Security concerns** and the prevention of a potential **Humanitarian Crisis** that could have destabilized neighbouring democracies[1].



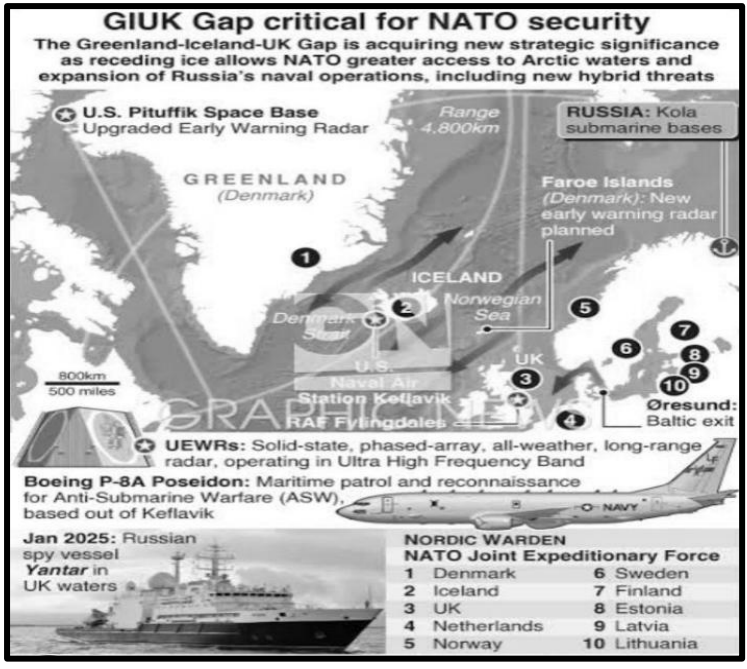
Venezuela: Geographic Layout[2]

Countering Russian & Chinese Influence. Venezuela's deepening strategic ties with Russia and China directly challenged the traditional US hegemonic dominance. Presence of Russian Military Advisors, Chinese investments in Venezuelan infrastructure and the precedent of great-power competition in the Western Hemisphere, prompted US to reassert the '**Monroe Doctrine**'[3].

Regime Change and Democratic Restoration. The operation targeted the capture of President Nicolás Maduro, whose authoritarian governance and human rights abuse created international pressure for immediate intervention, besides also eliminating the proxy vulnerability for Russian and Chinese Influence Operations[4].

Control of Greenland. Simultaneously with the Venezuela operation, President Trump also intensified demands for US control of Greenland, framing its centrality to Arctic Security and National Defence. Criticality of Greenland's geography may be attributed to: -

- ***GIUK Gap (Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom).*** The gap constitutes a critical maritime and air choke point controlling **access between the Arctic–North Atlantic and the wider Atlantic Ocean**, making it central to US strategic calculations. Focus on Greenland is driven by the requirement to monitor, deter, and if necessary, interdict Russian submarine and long-range bomber movements transiting this gap. Control of the GIUK Gap, thus, underpins US objectives of maintaining Security of Atlantic Sea Lanes, Credibility of its Nuclear Deterrence and Arctic Power Projection in an era of renewed great-power competition[5].



GIUK Gap[6]

- Early Warning Radar Networks with Greenland's Pituffik Space Base hosting US Missile Warning facilities integrated into the North American Aerospace Defence Command (**NORAD**)[7].
- Positioning of layered Air and Missile defences in Greenland against emerging Hypersonic and Cruise missile threats.
- Arctic Domain awareness against Russian and Chinese polar expansion.
- Control of Arctic Shipping Routes and Resource Access, as climate change opens new polar pathways[8].

Together, the Venezuela intervention and Greenland claims illustrate a broader US strategic calculus signifying employment of overwhelming military force and coercive diplomacy to reshape regional orders while pursuing vital strategic interests. India must, therefore, develop indigenous, resilient capabilities to deter unilateral intervention while avoiding over-reliance on support systems of its allies viz Russia/ France, vulnerable to great-power pressure.[9]

Operation Absolute Resolve: Assessment

Conduct. The operation was executed on 03 January 26 to capture Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, on charges of Narco Terrorism. The campaign began with synchronized airstrikes and suppression of Venezuelan AD using precision-guided munitions and EW to create a secure corridor and achieved tactical surprise, enabling Special Operations Aviation and ground teams to penetrate Caracas and seize targeted individuals with speed and minimal US casualties. The operation's execution reflected extensive interagency planning and integration of Intelligence, Cyber, Air, Maritime and Special Forces assets[10]. Certain milestones which had an overbearing effect on conduct of operations are enumerated in succeeding paras.

Venezuelan AD Architecture.

- ***Layered and Dispersed Defence.*** Venezuela's AD Grid was Static and organised around Static Point Defences concentrated near Caracas and major cities, creating a "**linear**" AD architecture, vulnerable to '**Bypass**' and '**Saturation**'.

- ***Lack of Redundancy***. Loss of major AD Nodes (particularly around Caracas) created an operational vacuum with no backup assets, available for '**Layering'** or '**Defence-in-Depth'**[11].

Cyber and EW Vulnerabilities. US operation was preceded by extensive Cyber and EW operations. Specific Vulnerabilities and effects achieved are as highlighted below:-

- ***Blackout of C2 Centres.*** US Cyber Operations created sustained blackouts in Venezuelan AD Command Centers, preventing tactical decision-making and coordination among dispersed AD Nodes.

- ***Radar Jamming.*** US EW aircraft created electromagnetic environments that blinded Chinese JY-27 and JYL-1 radars, rendering them ineffective for air picture generation, despite physical integrity[12].

- ***Communication Networks.*** Venezuelan C2 networks lacked hardened Communication Protocols and Encryption Standards, making them vulnerable to both **Cyber Infiltration** and **Jamming**.

System Readiness. Venezuela's catastrophic AD failure, despite possessing Russian S-300VM, Buk-M2E, and Chinese JY-27 radar systems, reveals that hardware acquisition alone does not guarantee operational effectiveness without sustained readiness and activation. The following facets may be attributed to the subject failure: -

- ***Unpowered Batteries.*** Advanced S-300VM and Buk-M2E Batteries, sat mothballed with power disconnected for years, due to a shortage of spare parts. Foreign supply chains, particularly those dependent on Russian components, were diverted to Ukraine operations, creating cascading logistics failures[13].

- ***Non-networked radars.*** JY-27 radar network, critical for air picture integration, was not networked operationally, despite vendor claims of integrated C2 capability. This fragmentation prevented unified AD responses across the defensive grid[14].

- ***Single-Source Dependency***. Venezuela possessed no indigenous capacity to manufacture critical spare parts, viz., radar components, electronics, and missiles, creating absolute dependency on foreign suppliers.

Low Altitude Penetration and Terrain Exploitation. US forces successfully employed MH-47 special operations helicopters that exploited radar blind spots to transit into Caracas without any active AD engagements. Salient aspects were:-

- **Line of Sight Radar Limitations**. S-300 and Buk systems depend on line-of-sight radar operations for target acquisition. MH-47 heptrs flew at ultra-low altitudes (50-100 feet) through mountainous terrain around Caracas, placing mountains between the aircraft and Venezuelan radar systems.

- **Lack of Short-Range AD**. Venezuelan Point Defence systems (Tor-M1/M2, MANPADS teams) were either not activated or lacked real-time cueing to engage the approaching helicopters.

Decoy Saturation. Advanced air-to-surface and air-to-air decoys deployed by US aircraft created false radar returns, degrading target discrimination and engagement accuracy[15].

Asset Dispersal and Camouflage Discipline. The most visible tactical failure in Venezuela was the placement of high-value AD systems in easily identifiable, exposed locations, permitting precision targeting. Salient facets were:-

- **Buk-M2E Visibility**. Buk-M2E batteries at La Carlota were destroyed by pre-raid strikes from F-35 and F-22 aircraft, which identified targets through satellite imagery and real-time reconnaissance. The systems' large radar and launcher vehicles, combined with their predictable location patterns, made them vulnerable[16].

- **S-300 Radar Signatures**. S-300 battery radar components, despite their sophistication, generate distinctive EM signatures detectable by US reconnaissance-strike complexes. Lack of movement discipline and camouflage protocols made them easy targets.

Lessons Learnt

US interventions in Venezuela and strategic positioning toward Greenland reveal a great power competition landscape where **military capability, integrated doctrine, and supply chain resilience determine strategic outcomes**. Venezuela's AD collapse, despite billions in foreign acquisitions, demonstrates that hardware alone cannot generate deterrence without continuous operational readiness and activation, sustained supply chains & integrated layered defences resistant to saturation and bypass. Certain takeaways, specifically from an AD perspective, are highlighted in succeeding paragraphs.

AD Architecture. Requirement of designing AD architecture as a layered, nested, and overlapping grid rather than a point defence-based architecture, protecting specific locations. Salient rudiments of the same are as enumerated below: -

Tiered and Layered AD Architecture (Layers in Depth)

- **Outer Layer**. Long-Range Systems viz S-400.
- **Middle Layer**. Medium-Range Systems, viz., Akash.
- **Inner Layer**. Short-Range Systems viz QRSAM Systems.
- **Point Defence**. VSHORADS and Gun Systems.

Geographical dispersion of each layer to create a '**Layered Defence in Depth**' coverage across critical corridors and vulnerable terrain. Ensure no "**Highway**" exists through AD Grid without being covered by multiple layers and weapon systems.

Surveillance UAS

- **UAS-based detection**. Acquire/Develop UAS specially designed for AD reconnaissance, including high-altitude platforms (>15,000 meters) capable of 8-12 hours persistence. These platforms should provide real-time video, infrared, and ELINT to compensate for jamming-induced radar degradation at ground.
- **Tactical Drone Deployment**. Tactical UAS (Loitering Munitions, Reconnaissance Drones) to provide organic Protection and Decoy Deployment capability.

Validation Exercises. Conduct quarterly Exs in contested EW environments, simulating Cyber and EW attacks that preceded the Venezuela operation. Exercises would validate combat effectiveness despite sustained jamming, spoofing, and Cyber Attacks.

Multi-Sensor Fusion. Integrate data from UAS surveillance, ground-based radars, and EW detection into a unified and Recognisable Air Situation Picture (RASP).

EW Fail Safe Communication. Mandate Frequency Hopping and Spread Spectrum Communications across all AD networks, with air-gapped backup Communications, independent of internet connectivity.

Deception and Dummy Positions. Establish Dummy Radar and Launcher positions using inflatable Decoys or Electronic Emitters simulating AD signatures, creating decision dilemmas for precision weapons.

Real Time EW Threat Detection. Equip AD radars with automated ESM receivers to identify Jamming Patterns, Emitter Frequencies and Jamming Technique characteristics.

Cyber Defensive Measures

- **Cyber and EW Command**. Establish a dedicated Command responsible for continuous Cyber and EW Threat monitoring, incident response and network resilience. This command would operate 24 x 7 regardless of peacetime/wartime status.

- **Command Authority**. Establish hardened, redundant JADCs with air-gapped communications.

- **Operational Security**. Implement Emission Control protocols as a subset to EEP in places where radar systems operate in intermittent "**Look**" **and** "**Listen**" modes rather than continuous transmission. Rotate radar locations and emission patterns to deny stable target signatures to the enemy EW system.

- **AI based Anomaly Detection**. Develop AI-based **Anomaly Detection Systems** capable of identifying Cyber and EW attacks in near-real time.

Indigenisation and Supply Chain Management. Certain critical facets which merit attention are:-

- **Indigenous Radar Development**. Accelerate Radar Development programs focused on the development of Tactical Control/ Acquisition/ Tracking long-range and medium-range radars to

reduce Russian dependency. Target 50% replacement of Russian radar systems with indigenous variants by 2030.

- **Domestic Missile Production**. Expand Brahmos Aerospace and DRDO capacity to domestically produce IR/ LBR MANPADS, with component manufacturing spread across multiple private vendors to create supply chain resilience. Target 80% domestic content for all new AD systems by 2030.

- **Spare Parts Management**.

    - Develop indigenous Spare Parts production capacity and redundant Supply Chains independent of single-source foreign vendors.

    - Establish strategic reserves for spare parts sufficient for 18-24 months of sustained operations, stored in distributed and hardened locations.

Technology Transfer and Reverse Engineering. Mandate technology transfer in major acquisitions, permitting Indian firms to develop production and service capability. Support domestic firms in reverse engineering of critical components to reduce supplier dependency.

Takeaways: Greenland Claims

Assertions over Greenland, while essentially diplomatic and geopolitical in nature, do not offer any direct or immediate military lessons specific to AD operations. However, viewed holistically, the episode underscores the enduring strategic value of geographically isolated landmasses for power projection, surveillance and domain control, carrying long-term implications for the integrated military, infrastructural, and AD network of India's Island Chains.

- **Geography as Strategic Leverage**. The US approach underscores how influence over critical geography (**Greenland astride the**

GIUK Gap) can decisively shape great power competition. For India, this reinforces the enduring value of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands & Lakshadweep as leverage points against Chinese naval expansion.

- **Primarily of Early Warning and Domain Awareness**. US emphasis on Greenland is driven by ISR, Missile Warning, and Undersea Surveillance requirements. India must similarly prioritise integrated Maritime, air, space, and undersea domain awareness in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea.

- **Strategic Patience**. The Greenland case demonstrates that great powers prepare for contingencies decades in advance. India's force planning must, therefore, remain future-oriented, anticipating 2035–2050 threat vectors, rather than reacting episodically.

Conclusion

India must absorb these lessons with urgency, recognizing that similar patterns of supply chain dependency, readiness degradation, and integration gaps could render its AD ineffective against great-power military action. The path forward requires investments in indigenous capability, continuous validation of readiness and Cyber EW resilience commensurate with the threat landscape India faces from both China and Pakistan. Strategic, operational and tactical excellence in AD is no longer a luxury but an existential requirement for Indian sovereignty in the 2026-2035 security environment.

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From Information Warfare to Cognitive Domain Conflict: A Structural Transformation in the Logic of Contemporary Conflict

RAKESH KUMAR SINGH

Abstract

Contemporary security discourse frequently treats cognitive warfare (CW) as an extension of information warfare (IW) or as a sub-component of hybrid conflict. This paper argues that such classifications obscure a more fundamental structural development. Rather than representing merely an expansion in tools or techniques, cognitive domain conflict reflects a qualitative shift in the primary locus of strategic effect. The object of contestation is no longer limited to narrative dominance or instrument blending, but increasingly concerns the shaping and constraining of decision-making environments at societal and elite levels. The article develops a conceptual distinction between information warfare, hybrid warfare, and cognitive domain conflict by examining their respective units of strategic effect, temporal characteristics, and escalation dynamics. While IW centres on message control and hybrid warfare on cross-domain integration,

cognitive conflict operates through persistent modification of cognitive environments and strategic perception. Its effects are cumulative rather than episodic, and its escalation is depth-based rather than force-based.

To clarify this transformation, the paper introduces a Three-Stage Non-Kinetic Escalation Model: informational contestation, cognitive shaping, and decision constraining. The model demonstrates how contemporary conflict increasingly moves inward—from narrative competition to the structured narrowing of strategic choice—without crossing traditional kinetic thresholds. This inward escalation complicates established understandings of deterrence, escalation control and war–peace distinctions.

By situating cognitive domain conflict within the broader evolution of strategic theory, the paper contributes a structural analytical framework suitable for assessing emerging non-kinetic competition. It concludes that cognitive conflict should be understood not as a tactical adjunct to hybrid warfare, but as a distinct mode of strategic contestation whose implications for national security thinking require conceptual, rather than merely operational, reassessment.

Introduction

In ***On War*, Carl von Clausewitz** defined war as a **contest of opposing wills conducted through force**.[1] He also cautioned that beyond physical destruction lay the realm of "moral forces"—**perception, cohesion, confidence, and judgment**—which often exert **effects disproportionate to material strength**.[2] While classical warfare centred on the physical disarming of the adversary, Clausewitz's broader formulation left open the possibility that the struggle of wills might manifest through **means other than kinetic violence.**

Contemporary strategic competition increasingly unfolds in a space between declared peace and open war. States and non-state actors employ information operations, cyber tools, economic pressure and psychological

influence in persistent campaigns designed to shape political environments **without crossing traditional kinetic thresholds.**[3] The conceptual vocabulary describing this activity has expanded accordingly. Terms such as information warfare, hybrid warfare, grey zone conflict, and cognitive warfare (CW) are frequently invoked, **often interchangeably**.[4]

Yet terminological expansion has not always been matched by conceptual clarity. CW is often portrayed either as a technologically enhanced form of information warfare(IW) or as a **sub-component of hybrid strategy**. Such interpretations risk obscuring a deeper structural development. The growing emphasis on cognition suggests not merely a change in instruments, but **a qualitative shift** in the primary locus of strategic effect.

This paper asks: Is CW an extension of hybrid conflict or does it represent a structural transformation in strategic logic? It argues that contemporary cognitive domain conflict reflects an inward movement in escalation—from message control to the shaping of interpretive frameworks and ultimately to the constraining of decision-making environments.

To clarify this transformation, the article distinguishes analytically between information warfare, hybrid warfare and cognitive domain conflict. It introduces a Three-Stage Non-Kinetic Escalation Model to demonstrate how contemporary competition can intensify without visible kinetic thresholds. By offering a structural rather than operational framework, the paper seeks to contribute conceptual clarity to an area of growing strategic importance.

Information Warfare: Message and Perception

Information warfare emerged as a conceptual response to the growing recognition that control over information flows could yield strategic advantage without the immediate application of kinetic force. Rooted in

earlier traditions of psychological operations and propaganda,[5] it focuses on influencing how audiences perceive events, actors, and outcomes within a conflict environment. Its central mechanism is the crafting, dissemination, and amplification of messages designed to persuade, mislead, deter, or demoralise.

Doctrinal articulations—particularly within Western military frameworks—define information operations as the integration of psychological operations, electronic warfare, cyber activities and public affairs to influence adversary decision-making.[6] Despite integration, the central mechanism remains message control. The objective is to shape perception through narrative dominance, information denial, deception, or strategic communication. Works examining the digital transformation of influence campaigns highlight content virality, network amplification and narrative contestation rather than structural modification of cognition.[7]

Analytically, IW can be characterised by four features. First, its unit of strategic effect is the perception of specific events or actors. It seeks to alter how developments are interpreted, whether by domestic populations, adversary publics or international audiences. Second, it is typically episodic in orientation, often intensifying during crises, elections, or military operations. Third, its escalation logic is campaign-based: influence efforts are mounted, countered and recalibrated in response to unfolding events. Fourth, its strategic objective is persuasion, confusion or morale degradation rather than enduring transformation of cognitive frameworks.

None of this diminishes the importance of information warfare. Indeed, the capacity to shape narratives has repeatedly demonstrated operational and strategic relevance. However, the conceptual boundaries of IW remain tied to the management of messages within identifiable informational environments. Even when digitally accelerated, it largely operates through contestation over content—what is said, how it is framed and how widely it circulates.

The distinction is critical. While IW aims to influence what audiences think about particular issues, it does not necessarily seek to restructure how they think in a deeper or persistent sense. Its focus is on the interpretation of events rather than on the underlying cognitive architectures through which decisions are made. In this respect, IW remains perception-centric and campaign-driven. It alters the informational surface of strategic competition but does not fundamentally relocate the locus of strategic effect.

This limitation becomes clearer when contrasted with hybrid warfare, which expands the range of instruments available for strategic competition. Yet hybrid approaches primarily broaden the toolkit of coercion rather than alter the underlying object of contestation. The emergence of cognitive domain conflict points to a further shift—beyond message control and instrument blending toward persistent shaping of interpretive frameworks and decision environments.

Hybrid Warfare: Instrumental Integration

The concept of hybrid warfare gained prominence in the early twenty-first century as analysts sought to explain conflicts that did not conform neatly to conventional military paradigms.[8] Rather than relying solely on regular armed forces, hybrid approaches combine conventional capabilities, irregular tactics, cyber operations, economic coercion and information activities in an i**ntegrated manner**. The defining characteristic is not any single instrument, but the deliberate b**lending of multiple tools** of power to generate **cumulative strategic pressure** across domains.

Early formulations emphasised the fusion of regular and irregular forces operating simultaneously within the same battle space. Subsequent interpretations broadened the concept **beyond strictly military dimensions**, incorporating political subversion, economic leverage, cyber disruption and informational influence as coordinated components of statecraft. Analyses of **Russian and Chinese** strategic practice further

highlighted **ambiguity, deniability, and calibrated escalation** as central attributes of hybrid approaches.[9] In these accounts, hybrid warfare functions as a method of pursuing strategic objectives while complicating attribution, fragmenting response, and avoiding direct kinetic confrontation with superior adversaries.[10]

Analytically, hybrid warfare may be understood through f**our structural features**. First, it is **instrumentally integrative:** military, economic, cyber, informational, and diplomatic tools are synchronised to reinforce one another. Second, it operates across **blurred thresholds**, deliberately exploiting the grey space between peace and war. Third, its **escalation logic is incremental and ambiguous**; pressure is applied below levels likely to trigger collective defence mechanisms or overt retaliation. Fourth, it remains fundamentally **coercive in orientation**, seeking to **alter adversary behaviour** through multi-domain leverage rather than through decisive battlefield victory alone.

The unit of strategic effect in hybrid warfare is therefore best conceptualised as **cross-domain coercive advantage**. By multiplying vectors of pressure, hybrid strategies aim to impose costs, exploit systemic vulnerabilities and shape strategic calculations. Information activities within hybrid campaigns support this broader coercive architecture, but they remain embedded within an integrated framework that includes economic sanctions, proxy actors, cyber operations and conventional deterrence.

Despite its breadth and persistence, hybrid warfare does not fundamentally relocate the locus of strategic effect. It **expands the toolkit** of competition and r**efines escalation management,** yet material capabilities and **coercive leverage remain central**. Even when conducted over extended periods, hybrid activity retains the implicit shadow of force. Its logic is one of calibrated pressure and strategic ambiguity rather than structural transformation of cognition.

This distinction is analytically significant. IW concentrates on message control; hybrid warfare concentrates on instrument integration. The emerging discourse on cognitive domain conflict suggests a further shift—not merely in the range of tools employed, **but in the object of strategic contestation itself.** Where hybrid warfare blurs domains, cognitive domain conflict moves inward, toward the interpretive frameworks and decision environments within which strategic choices are made. The following section develops this distinction in greater depth.

Cognitive Domain Conflict: Relocating Strategic Effect

While IW concentrates on the control of messages and hybrid warfare on the integration of instruments, neither category fully captures an emerging pattern in contemporary strategic competition: the persistent shaping of how individuals and institutions interpret reality itself. The increasing focus on cognition suggests not merely an expansion of tools, but a qualitative shift in the primary locus of strategic effect.

Cognitive domain conflict may be understood as the deliberate effort to shape, condition, and constrain the interpretive frameworks through which societies and decision-makers perceive threats, opportunities, and choices. Unlike episodic influence campaigns, it operates persistently, often outside moments of overt crisis. Its mechanisms may include narrative reinforcement, identity framing, amplification of polarisation, erosion of institutional trust and the cultivation of uncertainty. These instruments are secondary to its structural orientation: the enduring modification of cognitive environments rather than temporary persuasion.

While political warfare and psychological operations have historically sought to influence morale or behaviour in relation to identifiable campaigns, they were typically bounded by specific objectives and temporal horizons.[11] Cognitive domain conflict differs in structural ambition. It seeks not episodic persuasion but sustained conditioning of interpretive frameworks across both peacetime and crisis contexts. The

distinction is subtle but significant. IW seeks to influence what audiences think about specific events; cognitive domain conflict aims to influence how they think across events. The former contests content within an informational space; the latter shapes the interpretive architecture through which content is processed.[12] In this sense, cognition becomes not merely a target audience variable but a strategic terrain.[13]

Analytically, cognitive domain conflict exhibits four structural characteristics. First, its unit of strategic effect is the decision-making environment—the set of assumptions, perceptions, trust relationships, and risk calculations within which strategic choices are formed. Second, its temporal logic is persistent rather than episodic. Conditioning of perception unfolds gradually, often below the threshold of detection, and may continue independently of immediate crises. Third, its escalation dynamic is depth-based: influence moves inward from surface narratives toward the underlying cognitive structures that shape judgment. Fourth, its strategic objective is not necessarily overt behavioural change, but the constraining of decision latitude—narrowing perceived options, amplifying miscalculation risks or inducing strategic hesitation.

Decision constraining does not imply external control over sovereign choice. Rather, it refers to an increased probability that certain options appear politically, socially or psychologically untenable. Agency remains intact, but perceived strategic bandwidth narrows. It operates probabilistically, seeking marginal yet cumulative shifts in perception that, over time, alter the strategic context within which decisions are made. Its effectiveness depends less on singular dramatic interventions than on sustained conditioning of informational and social environments.

This inward shift carries implications for how escalation and deterrence are understood. Traditional frameworks assume that strategic effect derives from material attrition or overt coercion. Cognitive domain conflict suggests instead that strategic advantage may accrue through incremental modification of perception and judgment without crossing

kinetic thresholds. If IW alters narratives and hybrid warfare multiplies instruments of pressure, cognitive domain conflict relocates competition toward the depth of cognition itself.

The structural differences may be summarised as follows:

	Information Warfare	Hybrid Warfare	Cognitive Domain Conflict
Primary Focus	Message Control	Instrument Blending	Decision-architecture Control
Temporal Orientation	Episodic / Event- driven	Structured multi-domain Campaign	Persistent Conditioning
Depth of Effect	Informational surface	Cross-domain coercion	Decision environment
Level of Effect	Tactical	Operational	Strategic-structural
Target	Audience Persuasion	Multi-domain Pressure	Decision Constraining

Fig 1 : Structural Differences

This inward shift prepares the ground for a revised understanding of escalation in non-kinetic competition. The following section formalises this movement through a Three-Stage Non-Kinetic Escalation Model.

The Three-Stage Non-Kinetic Escalation Model

Traditional theories of escalation are largely premised on visible increases in the intensity or scope of force. From limited coercion to general war, escalation is understood vertically—measured through mobilisation, deployment, territorial violation or casualty thresholds. Such models assume that strategic effect correlates with material intensification. However, if cognitive domain conflict represents a qualitative shift in the primary locus of strategic effect, then escalation may occur without corresponding increases in kinetic activity. What changes is not the scale of force, but the depth of cognitive penetration.

To clarify this dynamic, this paper proposes a Three-Stage Non-Kinetic Escalation Model. The model conceptualises escalation as an inward movement—from surface-level informational contestation toward the structured constraining of decision environments. The stages are analytical distinctions rather than rigid chronological phases; they may overlap, reinforce one another or unfold unevenly. Their value lies in identifying how strategic competition deepens in cognitive terms.

Stage I: Informational Contestation

The first stage corresponds to intensified narrative competition within the informational environment. Actors seek to frame events, shape public interpretation, amplify selected themes, and discredit alternative accounts. The unit of strategic effect at this level remains the perception of discrete events or actors. Escalation is limited to message density, narrative reach, and reputational positioning. Although potentially disruptive, this stage remains largely episodic and campaign-driven.

Stage II: Cognitive Shaping

Escalation deepens when influence moves beyond discrete narratives to the conditioning of interpretive frameworks. Here, the objective is not merely to alter views on specific issues, but to reinforce or reshape underlying assumptions, identity narratives and trust structures. The unit of strategic effect shifts from event perception to the broader cognitive schemas through which information is processed. Temporal logic becomes persistent rather than episodic, as influence efforts aim to normalise particular worldviews or amplify structural polarisation. Escalation at this stage is reflected in cumulative shifts in institutional trust, threat perception, and risk interpretation.

Recent influence campaigns targeting electoral legitimacy, pandemic narratives, and crisis perception illustrate how repeated narrative amplification within digital ecosystems can reshape public perception and erode institutional trust.[14] In such cases, escalation does not manifest

through visible force, but through gradual modification of the cognitive context within which decisions are evaluated.

Stage III: Decision Constraining

Three-Stage Non-Kinetic Escalation Model	
Stage I	Informational Contestation
Stage II	Cognitive Shaping
Stage III	Decision Constraining
Escalation Logic	Depth-based, not force-based.

The deepest level of non-kinetic escalation occurs when cognitive shaping begins to narrow perceived strategic options. At this stage, the unit of strategic effect becomes the decision-making environment itself. Influence operations seek to amplify internal divisions, distort risk assessments or reinforce threat misperceptions in ways that reduce strategic flexibility. The objective is not total control over decisions, but the probabilistic constraining of decision latitude—making certain choices appear infeasible, excessively risky or politically untenable. Escalation is measured not by overt action, but by the narrowing bandwidth of viable policy responses.

Across these stages, escalation moves inward rather than upward. The progression reflects increasing depth of cognitive influence rather than increasing material force. Importantly, the model does not imply linear inevitability; actors may operate simultaneously across stages and movement between them may be reversible. Nor does it presume deterministic outcomes. Instead, it offers a structural framework for analysing how non-kinetic competition intensifies by targeting progressively deeper layers of perception and judgment.

This model helps distinguish cognitive domain conflict from both IW and hybrid warfare. While IW operates primarily within Stage I and hybrid strategies integrate tools across domains, the Three-Stage Model captures the depth dimension of strategic competition. It demonstrates how contemporary conflict can generate meaningful strategic effect through incremental cognitive penetration without triggering traditional escalation thresholds. The stages should therefore be understood as analytical layers of deepening influence rather than discrete operational categories.

Escalation Threshold Transformation

Classical theories of escalation assume that strategic competition intensifies through observable increases in force or coercive pressure. In *On War*, Clausewitz described war as an interactive contest tending toward extremes unless moderated by political purpose and friction. Later theorists such as Herman Kahn and Thomas Schelling formalised escalation ladders in which movement is measured through visible actions—mobilisation, geographic expansion, weapons employment or casualty thresholds.[15] Despite differences in emphasis, these frameworks share a foundational premise: escalation is detectable because it is materially manifested.

Such approaches presuppose that strategic effect correlates with physical intensity. Thresholds exist at identifiable points where actions cross recognised boundaries, triggering deterrent responses or signalling commitment. Even hybrid warfare, despite its ambiguity, retains the implicit shadow of force;[16] escalation remains tethered to coercive instruments whose activation can be observed and attributed.

Cognitive domain conflict complicates this architecture. If strategic effect shifts toward shaping and constraining decision environments, escalation may occur without corresponding increases in material force. As outlined in the Three-Stage Model, informational contestation may remain below traditional thresholds, cognitive shaping may alter interpretive

frameworks without discrete triggering events and decision constraining may narrow policy latitude without overt breaches of territorial or military red lines.

The transformation, therefore, is not the disappearance of thresholds but their relocation. Escalation thresholds shift from material indicators to cognitive conditions. Rather than being marked by troop movements or weapons deployment, they may be inferred from shifts in trust structures, threat perceptions or perceived decision bandwidth—variables that are more difficult to observe and attribute and therefore less amenable to classical deterrence signalling.

This does not render kinetic escalation obsolete. Vertical and horizontal escalation dynamics remain relevant. However, contemporary competition now includes a depth dimension through which strategic effect accumulates incrementally. Traditional escalation theory remains valid within its material parameters, but it does not fully account for inward escalation in the cognitive domain.

Understanding threshold transformation in this way clarifies why contemporary strategic competition often appears persistent yet ambiguous. Actions once considered preparatory or peripheral may now constitute meaningful stages in a depth-based escalation process.

Implications for National Security Thinking

If cognitive domain conflict represents a qualitative shift in the primary locus of strategic effect, its implications extend beyond terminology to foundational assumptions of national security analysis. Traditional frameworks are structured around the management of force—its deterrence, application and limitation. Even in expanded conceptions of hybrid or grey zone competition, strategic analysis remains anchored in the calibration of instruments of power. The Three-Stage Model introduces an additional variable: the depth of cognitive penetration.

First, the war–peace distinction becomes more porous. Classical paradigms differentiate routine political competition from escalatory acts that risk armed conflict. Cognitive domain conflict operates persistently across this boundary, often without discrete triggering events. Informational contestation and cognitive shaping may unfold continuously, producing gradual shifts in perception that accumulate strategic consequence. Crisis-based indicators alone are therefore insufficient for assessing escalation.

Second, deterrence logic encounters new ambiguity. Deterrence presumes identifiable thresholds whose crossing invites retaliation or signalling. When escalation unfolds inwardly through interpretive conditioning or decision constraining, threshold markers become less visible. Strategic effect may emerge cumulatively rather than through singular coercive acts, complicating attribution and proportional response—not because deterrence is obsolete, but because its observable reference points shift.

Third, preserving decision autonomy assumes heightened importance. If strategic competition increasingly targets the environments within which choices are formed, then the resilience of interpretive frameworks, institutional trust, and risk assessment processes becomes analytically significant. Security can no longer be understood solely in terms of territorial defence or military capability; it also encompasses the integrity of the cognitive conditions that sustain coherent strategic judgment.

Finally, escalation theory requires conceptual extension rather than replacement. Vertical escalation through force intensity remains relevant, but it now coexists with inward escalation through cognitive penetration. Recognising this depth dimension situates cognitive domain conflict within an evolving continuum of strategic adaptation.

In this light, Clausewitz's conception of war as a contest of wills retains its relevance.[17] What evolves is not the contest itself, but the terrain upon

which it increasingly unfolds. As competition moves inward toward perception and judgment, national security thinking must account for the possibility that strategic effect can be generated through the gradual constraining of decision environments without overt recourse to force.

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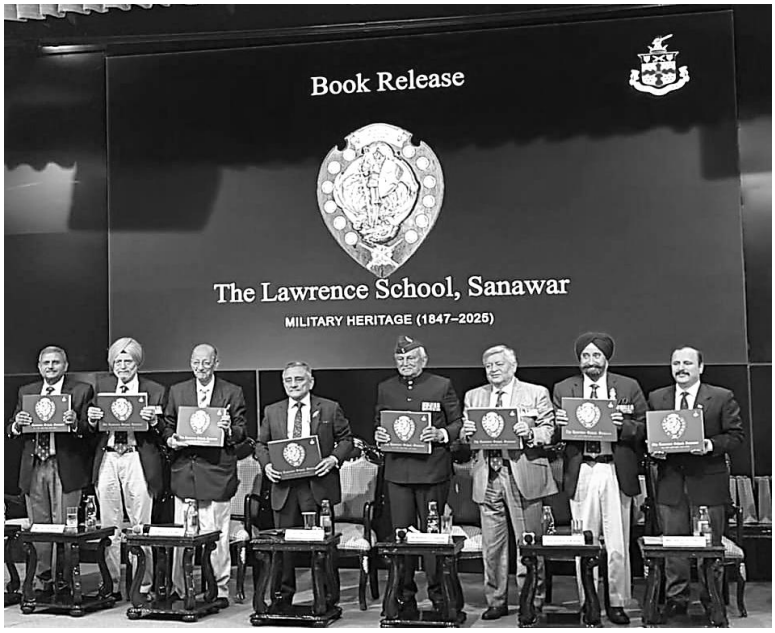


SCHOLAR WARRIOR

SECTION II

BOOK REVIEWS

CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES



The Lawrence School, Sanawar – Military Heritage (1847–2025): *"Never Give In"* – Book Release

Book Review by: RC Patial

The release of the Coffee Table Book "*The Lawrence School, Sanawar – Military Heritage (1847–2025*)" on Saturday, 21 March 2026, at the Manekshaw Centre, New Delhi, marked a truly significant occasion in the 178-year journey of the school. I had the privilege of attending this distinguished event, courtesy of my regimental senior, Major General Kr VS Lalotra, AVSM, YSM, SM (11 Gorkha Rifles—one of the youngest and

smallest regiments, yet among the finest owing to its remarkable achievements and the high aspirations it inspires among cadets).

This landmark publication was formally released by the Chief of Defence Staff, General Anil Chauhan, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM, an erudite Soldier-Scholar. The coffee table book (CTB) comprises of over 450 printed pages along with approximately 200 digital pages; the volume chronicles the rich military heritage and enduring legacy of The Lawrence School, Sanawar. It stands as a tribute to generations of Sanawarians and reflects the institution's foundational ethos, encapsulated in its credo: "*Never Give In.*" The dedication and perseverance of the editorial team are evident throughout this monumental effort to produce such a comprehensive and meticulously curated research work of over five years, reflecting their spirit of "*Never Give In.*"

Over the decades since the school's founding in 1847 Sanawarians have joined the Armed Forces in large numbers, serving the nation with pride and distinction. From legendary war heroes to gallantry award winners, they have etched their names in the annals of Indian military history. Among the most illustrious are 2nd Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal, the youngest recipient of the Param Vir Chakra (Posthumous); Major Vijay Ratan Chowdhry, Maha Vir Chakra (Posthumous); Rear Admiral Monty Khanna, an accomplished yachtsman; the distinguished Shergill brothers and many more.

A notable facet of Sanawarians in the Defence Forces has been their excellence in Adventure activities and Equestrian events, despite the school not having horses on the Hill Top. Sanawarians have represented India at the Asian Games and international equestrian events, winning medals, bringing laurels, and a record five Arjuna Awards! Notable among them are Col HS Sodhi, Brig VP Singh, Col RS Brar, Col K Garcha, and Col Navdeep Sidhu. At one point in time, both the National Defence Academy and Indian Military Academy Polo teams comprised of Sanawarians only! Unbelievable! Again, reflects their spirit of "*Never Give In.*"

The event witnessed an eminent gathering of distinguished alumni and dignitaries, truly a "Who's Who" of Sanawarians. The Ashoka auditorium of the Manekshaw Centre, adorned with portraits of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw and Field Marshal KM Cariappa, provided a fittingly historic and dignified setting to keep a close eye on the audience.

The distinguished panel on the stage included former Naval Chief Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat; Air Marshal KC Cariappa, son of Field Marshal Cariappa; former Nepal Army Chief and Honorary General of the Indian Army, General Gaurav Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana; and members of the editorial team whose "*Never Give In"* spirit brought this historic work to life.

Among the notable attendees were Ms Maya Manekshaw, daughter of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw; senior military leaders; and a large number of serving Sanawarians officers. The Hon'ble Lt Gov of Delhi, Shri Taranjit Singh Sandhu, joined the function and took a seat in the audience, without any fuss, reflecting the grooming at Sanawar! The current Headmaster, Mr Himmat Singh Dhillon, along with former headmasters, added further gravitas to the occasion.

Particularly noteworthy was the presence of young students from Sanawar, who had undertaken an early morning journey from their Hill Top campus to attend the event. Witnessing the unveiling of a publication encapsulating their school's legacy and interacting with illustrious alumni undoubtedly provided them with a profound and lasting educational experience. The accompanying faculty shared in this pride and inspiration. For these students, the occasion will surely remain an unforgettable memory, one they will recount with pride among peers, friends, and family in the days to come. The rich historical achievements of the Sanawarians will inspire others to excel too!

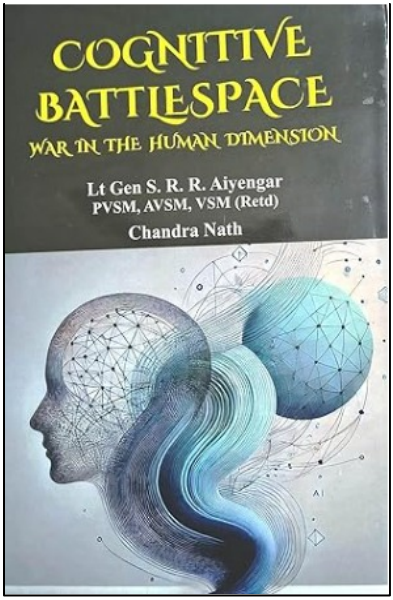
The presentation of the Coffee Table Book "*The Lawrence School, Sanawar – Military Heritage (1847–2025)"* was conducted with exceptional

depth and engagement, spanning nearly four hours. It reflected not only the magnitude of the work but also the enduring spirit, pride, and deep sense of belonging that define the Sanawarian community and its abiding motto – *"Never Give In."*

As a Nabhaite (Punjab Public School Nabha), I found the event to be a deeply enriching and memorable life time learning experience. The narration of historic accounts from battlefield stories from the trenches to the poignant prisoner-of-war experience of Air Marshal Cariappa, who was shot down as a young fighter pilot were particularly touching part of the rich history of the school. For Sanawarians, possession of this rare Coffee Table Book will, in the years to come, remain a cherished treasure Jewel, a proud symbol of their legacy to become a family heirloom.

The CDS, General Anil Chauhan, while addressing the distinguished audience at the fully packed Ashoka Auditorium, complimented the Editorial Team for capturing the school's rich historical legacy. The coffee table book has been conceived, conceptualised, created, composed, and crafted into a rare work of art. It will remain a cherished souvenir for every Sanawarian. The CDS also reminded the present and old Sanawarians of their future role in shaping a Viksit Bharat. The event concluded with the school song, on a note befitting the institution's enduring motto – *"Never Give In"* – a guiding principle that continues to inspire generations on their Onward and Upward journey toward the vision of a Viksit Bharat.

Colonel RC Patial, SM, FRGS, PhD is a retired Infantry Officer of 11 GR. He possesses unique experience of serving in active CI Ops across the country and in Sri Lanka. Has served with the NSCS as a Senior Defence Specialist and in NTRO as OSINT Chief Editor. Currently, he is the Principal of Amity Indian Military College, Manesar. Views expressed are personal.



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ISBN: 978-9393402912

Book Review by: MU Nair

Wars are no longer fought only with guns, missiles, and tanks. They are fought with narratives, algorithms, and emotions. In Cognitive Battlespace: War in the Human Dimension, Lt Gen S. R. R. Aiyengar and Lt Col Chandra Nath argue that the real battlefield of the 21st century is the human mind.

The book makes a clear and powerful claim: modern conflict is shifting from controlling territory to shaping perception. It is no longer enough to dominate land, sea, air, space or even cyberspace. The decisive advantage lies in influencing how people think, what they believe, and how they make decisions.

The authors carefully explain the difference between information warfare and cognitive warfare. Information warfare focuses on controlling data and communication systems. Cognitive warfare goes deeper. It targets the way individuals and societies interpret information — their emotions, trust, identity, and judgment. In other words, it seeks not just to change opinions, but to shape the very process by which opinions are formed.

A major strength of the book is its clarity. Complex ideas from psychology, military doctrine, and artificial intelligence are explained in a structured and readable manner. The discussion of the OODA loop — Observe, Orient, Decide, Act — shows how influencing the "orientation" stage can distort an adversary's decisions without firing a single shot.

The role of technology receives careful attention. Artificial intelligence, behavioural analytics, and synthetic media have dramatically expanded the reach of influence operations. Algorithms now decide what millions of people see online. Deepfakes can blur the line between truth and fabrication. Behavioural data can reveal vulnerabilities at scale. The authors describe AI as a "cognitive amplifier" — a tool that increases speed, precision, and persistence in shaping perception.

Importantly, the book does not descend into alarmism. It recognises that these technologies are dual-use. The same systems that enhance military decision-making can also be misused to manipulate societies. This raises serious ethical and legal questions. How does a democracy defend itself in the cognitive domain without undermining freedom of thought? The authors repeatedly stress the need for safeguards, transparency, and human oversight.

Another valuable section compares how major powers approach cognitive warfare. NATO speaks of resilience and democratic protection. The United States integrates cognition within information operations. China's concept of "intelligentized warfare" seeks dominance in perception before kinetic conflict. Russia's tradition of reflexive control aims to shape

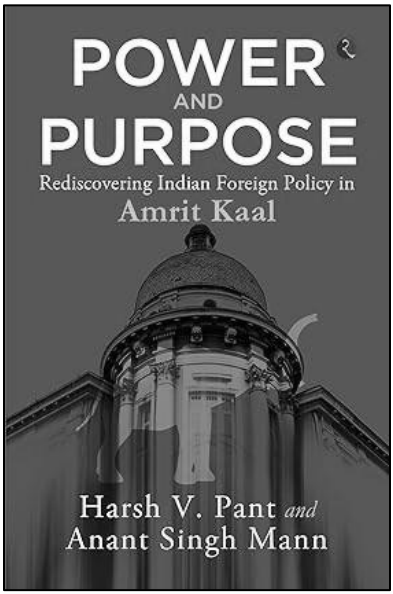
an adversary's decisions indirectly. This comparative perspective helps readers understand that cognitive competition is already a global reality.

For Indian readers, the book is especially relevant. It links modern cognitive security to India's civilisational traditions, including Kautilya's statecraft and the emphasis on mental discipline found in the Bhagavad Gita. Rather than simply borrowing foreign models, the authors call for an indigenous framework rooted in democratic values and social cohesion.

The writing is structured and at times dense, reflecting the seriousness of the subject. Yet the central message is simple: future wars will be fought as much over meaning as over territory. Societies that fail to protect their cognitive space risk losing trust, unity, and decision superiority.

Cognitive Battlespace is not a sensational book. It is a thoughtful, forward-looking examination of how conflict is changing. For military professionals, policymakers, and informed citizens alike, it offers a sobering insight — the next battlefield is not somewhere far away. It is inside the mind.

Lieutenant General MU Nair, AVSM, SM (Retd), is former Chief Information Security Officer of the Ministry of Defence and the Indian Armed Forces. He is also former SO-in-C and National Cyber Security Coordinator (NCSC). Views expressed are personal.



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Book Review by: Akashika Mate

Introduction: Recasting India's Strategic Trajectory

At a time when the international system is marked by flux, fragmentation, and the steady diffusion of power, India's foreign policy trajectory has acquired renewed analytical and policy relevance. In *Power and Purpose: Rediscovering Indian Foreign Policy in Amrit Kaal*, Prof Harsh V Pant and Mr Anant Singh Mann attempt to locate India's contemporary global posture within a longer historical continuum, offering a structured interpretation of how India has navigated the evolving demands of power, principle, and purpose since independence. The book seeks to decode India's rise not merely as an economic or military actor, but as a state increasingly conscious of its strategic agency and global responsibilities.

At its core, the book advances a compelling framework: Indian foreign policy since independence can be understood through four distinct 'waves', each representing a shift in orientation, capability, and ambition. This periodisation–spanning from Nehruvian idealism to contemporary assertions of global leadership–forms the analytical backbone of the text. It allows the authors to trace not merely chronological change, but the gradual transformation of India's strategic culture, from a state constrained by material limitations yet guided by normative ambition, to one increasingly willing and able to shape outcomes in its immediate and extended neighbourhood.

The authors argue that India today stands at a critical juncture, where these accumulated historical experiences are converging into a more confident and purpose-driven external engagement. The framework also reflects a deeper argument: that India's current moment, often described as part of its *Amrit Kaal*, is not an abrupt departure but the culmination of layered historical processes. The central contribution of the book lies in its ability to synthesise decades of diplomatic history into a coherent narrative that is both accessible and analytically meaningful.

Wave I (1947-1964): Idealism, Autonomy, and the Burdens of State-Building

The first wave situates Indian foreign policy within the tumultuous aftermath of independence, where the imperatives of state-building were inseparable from the articulation of an external identity. As the book emphasises, the legacy of colonial underdevelopment, the dislocations of Partition, and the fragility of state institutions profoundly shaped India's early foreign policy choices. Yet, despite these constraints, India sought to articulate an ambitious international role, rooted in principles of non-alignment, anti-colonial solidarity, and peaceful coexistence.

Nehru's vision of non-alignment is presented not as passive neutrality but as an active assertion of agency within a bipolar world. The authors

situate India's early diplomatic engagements within this broader normative framework. India's engagement in the Korean War diplomacy, where it played a mediatory role, its leadership at the Bandung Conference, and its advocacy for decolonisation illustrate its aspiration to act as a voice for the decolonising world and a foreign policy that sought to transcend power blocs while retaining moral legitimacy. Similarly, India's participation in debates surrounding nuclear disarmament–such as its response to the detonation at Bikini Atoll–reflects an early commitment to shaping global norms. However, the book does not detach this idealism from its strategic underpinnings; rather, it shows how autonomy functioned as both a normative commitment and a pragmatic necessity for a newly independent state wary of external entanglements.

At the same time, the narrative carefully traces the emergence of underlying strategic anxieties. India's relations with China, initially marked by the rhetoric of "Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai" and high-level visits such as Nehru's trip to Beijing, deteriorated sharply in the late 1950s. The Dalai Lama's asylum in India in 1959 became a turning point, intensifying tensions that culminated in the 1962 Sino-Indian War. This conflict, as the book suggests, was not merely a military setback but a profound rupture in India's foreign policy worldview, exposing the limits of a strategy heavily reliant on normative assumptions.

Parallel to this, India's engagement with Pakistan–particularly over Kashmir–highlighted the persistence of hard security dilemmas. The signing of the Indus Waters Treaty in 1960 stands out as a rare example of cooperative engagement amidst enduring rivalry, demonstrating India's willingness to pursue pragmatic solutions even in adversarial contexts.

What emerges from this wave is not simply a story of idealism, but the foundational embedding of strategic autonomy as a core principle, one that would endure even as its expression evolved. Non-alignment, as the authors implicitly argue, was less about equidistance and more about preserving decision-making independence in a bipolar world. Even as the

limitations of idealism became apparent, the core impulse to avoid external dependency remained intact, shaping India's subsequent strategic behaviour.

Wave II (1964-1985): Realism, Regional Assertion, and Strategic Consolidation

The second wave marks a discernible shift in tone and orientation, as Indian foreign policy adapts to a more turbulent regional and global environment. Nehru's death, the lessons of the 1962 war, and evolving regional dynamics pushed India towards a more explicit engagement in power politics and a realist, security-oriented posture.

The book captures this transition through a series of pivotal events. The shift is most evident in India's handling of conflicts with Pakistan. The 1965 war underscored the persistence of territorial disputes, while the 1971 war marked a turning point in India's regional role. By intervening decisively in East Pakistan and facilitating the creation of Bangladesh, India demonstrated both its military capability and strategic intent, reshaping the subcontinent's geopolitical landscape. The subsequent Simla Agreement of 1972 further reflected India's attempt to institutionalise bilateralism as a framework for managing disputes with Pakistan.

The authors also highlight the growing salience of nuclear policy during this period. India's decision to conduct the Pokhran-I nuclear test in 1974, described as a 'peaceful nuclear explosion', signalled its determination to retain strategic autonomy in the face of global non-proliferation pressures. This move, while controversial, reflects India's determination to secure strategic autonomy in the face of an evolving global nuclear order.

At the same time, India continued to engage actively with the developing world. The authors highlight the continued salience of multilateral and ideological commitments. India's role within the Non-

Aligned Movement, its advocacy for a New International Economic Order, and its support for South-South cooperation indicate that normative aspirations did not disappear; rather, they coexisted with a more hard-edged realism. This coexistence is particularly evident in India's relations with major powers, where it balanced its partnership with the Soviet Union against a broader commitment to non-alignment. However, these initiatives increasingly coexisted with a pragmatic recognition of power asymmetries and geopolitical constraints.

Regional dynamics during this phase were equally complex. India's support for the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace initiative, its management of relations with Sri Lanka and Nepal, and its cautious re-engagement with China after the 1962 rupture illustrate a foreign policy navigating multiple, often competing, imperatives. The gradual restoration of ambassadorial relations with China and the establishment of mechanisms such as the Joint Technical-Level Boundary Committee indicate a willingness to stabilise relations even in the absence of resolution.

What emerges from this wave is a more self-aware and strategically grounded India, one that has internalised the necessity of power while continuing to draw on its earlier normative vocabulary. The coexistence of realism and residual idealism becomes a defining feature, reflecting a foreign policy that is adaptive rather than doctrinaire.

Wave III (1985-2004): Liberalisation, Reorientation, and Global Engagement

The third wave marks a period of profound transformation, driven by the twin forces of domestic economic reform and systemic change in the international order. As the book suggests, this phase is better understood as unfolding in two distinct but interconnected sub-phases: an initial period of strategic flux and recalibration in the late Cold War context, followed by a more decisive phase of economic liberalisation and global integration in the post-1991 era.

The first sub-phase, spanning the latter half of the 1980s, reflects a moment of uncertainty and adjustment. Under Rajiv Gandhi, India began to cautiously reassess its external engagements amidst a changing international environment. Efforts to improve relations with China, including high-level diplomatic outreach, signalled a recognition of the need to stabilise previously adversarial relationships. At the same time, India's regional interventions–notably in Sri Lanka through the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF)–revealed both the ambition and the limitations of its role as a regional power. The end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union marked a decisive rupture, ushering in the second and more transformative sub-phase of this wave.

As the authors note, this phase is characterised by a gradual but decisive shift towards economic diplomacy and global engagement. It is marked by a shift from regional preoccupations to a broader global orientation, characterised by economic diplomacy, diversification of partnerships, and increasing integration into the international system. The liberalisation reforms opened the Indian economy to global markets, making trade, investment, and technology central components of foreign policy. This transformation was reflected in initiatives such as the Look East Policy, which sought to deepen engagement with Southeast Asia and integrate India more closely into the Asia-Pacific economic and strategic architecture.

The book effectively traces how India navigated the post-Cold War environment and the recalibration of its relations with major powers. The improvement of ties with the United States, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, marked a significant departure from earlier scepticism. At the same time, India maintained its traditional emphasis on strategic autonomy, carefully avoiding formal alliances even as it expanded its network of partnerships.

The 1998 nuclear tests represent a pivotal moment in this phase. By declaring itself a nuclear-weapon state, India sought to assert its strategic

identity and secure recognition within the global order. The subsequent diplomatic engagement, including efforts to normalise its position within the global nuclear order, reflects a pragmatic approach to managing the consequences of this decision.

This period also witnessed the growing importance of regional and sub-regional initiatives. India's engagement with ASEAN, participation in regional forums, and efforts to enhance connectivity and economic integration indicate a foreign policy increasingly oriented towards multilateral and networked forms of engagement. Equally significant is the growing role of economic considerations in shaping foreign policy. Trade, investment, and technological cooperation become central instruments of engagement, reflecting a broader shift in the nature of state power. This period thus marks India's transition from a largely inward-looking state to one that actively seeks to participate in and shape global processes.

Crucially, the authors speak to the interplay between economic capability and strategic ambition. Their treatment of this wave brings to light a key analytical insight: that economic transformation and strategic ambition are deeply intertwined, and that India's rise cannot be understood without recognising this linkage.

Wave IV (2004-Present): Assertion, Responsibility, and the Pursuit of Global Leadership

The fourth wave situates India within the contemporary global order, where its expanding capabilities are increasingly matched by its ambitions as a more assertive and globally engaged actor. This phase is marked by a willingness to take initiative, shape regional outcomes, and participate actively in global governance and a more proactive and multi-dimensional foreign policy.

The authors' discussion of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami is particularly instructive. India's decision to decline external assistance

while simultaneously providing aid to affected countries such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Indonesia marked a significant shift in its strategic posture–from recipient to provider, showcasing both capacity and intent. This episode not only demonstrated operational capability but also signalled India's emergence as a net security provider in the region. The formation of the "Tsunami Core Group" alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia also hinted at the early contours of mini lateral cooperation that would later crystallise into more formalised groupings.

This trajectory becomes more pronounced in the subsequent evolution of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. The revival and institutionalisation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, represents a key development in this regard. While the QUAD stops short of a formal alliance, its focus on maritime security, supply chain resilience, critical technologies, and a rules-based order reflects India's increasing willingness to engage in issue-based strategic coalitions.

The introduction further situates this phase within the context of India's rise as a major global actor. With sustained economic growth, a demographic advantage, and enhanced military capabilities, India is portrayed as central to the evolving Indo-Pacific order and a key stakeholder in global governance. Initiatives such as the transition from Look East to Act East, participation in multilateral forums, and engagement in issue-based coalitions reflect a foreign policy that is both adaptive and assertive. At the same time, India has deepened its engagement with alternative multilateral platforms, most notably BRICS. Its active participation in BRICS summits, including efforts to shape agendas around development finance, global governance reform, and South-South cooperation, reflects a continued commitment to amplifying the voice of the Global South. The country's presidency of the G20 from December 2022 to November 2023 represents a particularly significant

milestone, symbolising its arrival as a key convening power in international affairs.

India's foreign policy in this phase continues to be characterised by a careful calibration between ambition and autonomy. While deepening strategic ties with Washington, India has maintained longstanding defence and energy relations with Moscow, even amidst shifting geopolitical alignments. This ability to sustain diversified partnerships, without formal alliance commitments, remains a defining feature of its external engagement.

The narrative retains a sense of balance, acknowledging that India's journey towards global leadership remains ongoing. The interplay between ambition and constraint, capability and expectation, continues to define this phase. What distinguishes it, however, is the increasing alignment between India's self-perception and its external role–a convergence that lends coherence to its contemporary strategic outlook.

Evaluation: A Structured Narrative of Continuity and Transformation

One of the most notable strengths of *Power and Purpose* lies in its ability to impose analytical clarity on a complex and often fragmented field of study. The four-wave framework provides a valuable heuristic for understanding the evolution of Indian foreign policy, enabling the reader to trace both continuity and transformation across decades. What emerges most compellingly across the text is the persistence–and adaptation–of strategic autonomy as the organising principle of Indian foreign policy. Whether expressed through non-alignment during the Cold War, cautious engagement in the post-Cold War era, or contemporary multi-alignment across competing geopolitical platforms, the underlying impulse to retain decision-making independence remains remarkably consistent. The book demonstrates that this is not merely a legacy of historical circumstance, but a defining feature of India's strategic culture.

The book's event-driven approach further enhances its explanatory power. By anchoring each phase in specific historical developments–from the Bandung Conference and the Bangladesh War to economic liberalisation and disaster diplomacy–the authors succeed in grounding their analysis in empirical detail, and in illustrating how foreign policy is shaped through the interaction of ideas, interests, and contingencies.

Equally significant is the book's engagement with the relationship between domestic transformation and external behaviour. The linkage between economic liberalisation and global engagement, or between military capability and strategic assertion, is consistently foregrounded, offering valuable insights into the drivers of India's foreign policy evolution. In doing so, the book moves beyond descriptive history to provide a more integrated understanding of India's rise.

At a broader level, *Power and Purpose* succeeds in capturing the gradual transition of India from a state defined by its constraints to one increasingly defined by its capabilities and ambitions. The convergence between India's self-perception as a leading power and its external behaviour lends coherence to its contemporary foreign policy, even as it continues to operate within a complex and often contradictory global environment.

The framing of the present moment within the idea of *Amrit Kaal* serves as an effective conceptual bridge between past trajectories and future aspirations. It situates India's foreign policy not merely as a reactive instrument of statecraft, but as an expression of a longer arc of national transformation–one that seeks to reconcile historical experience with emerging opportunities. Simultaneously, the narrative implicitly acknowledges that this phase is one of ongoing consolidation rather than culmination, where ambition must continually be balanced against capacity, and strategic choices remain shaped by an evolving international order.

Taken together, *Power and Purpose* offer a compelling lens through which to understand India's foreign policy as a dynamic and historically embedded process. Its contribution lies not only in mapping the contours of India's rise, but in highlighting the deeper logic that underpins it: a persistent negotiation between power and principle, autonomy and engagement, continuity and change. For scholars and practitioners alike, the book provides both a valuable synthesis and a framework for further reflection on India's role in an increasingly uncertain world. In tracing this journey, the authors ultimately remind us that India's foreign policy is no longer merely about navigating the world–it is about shaping it.

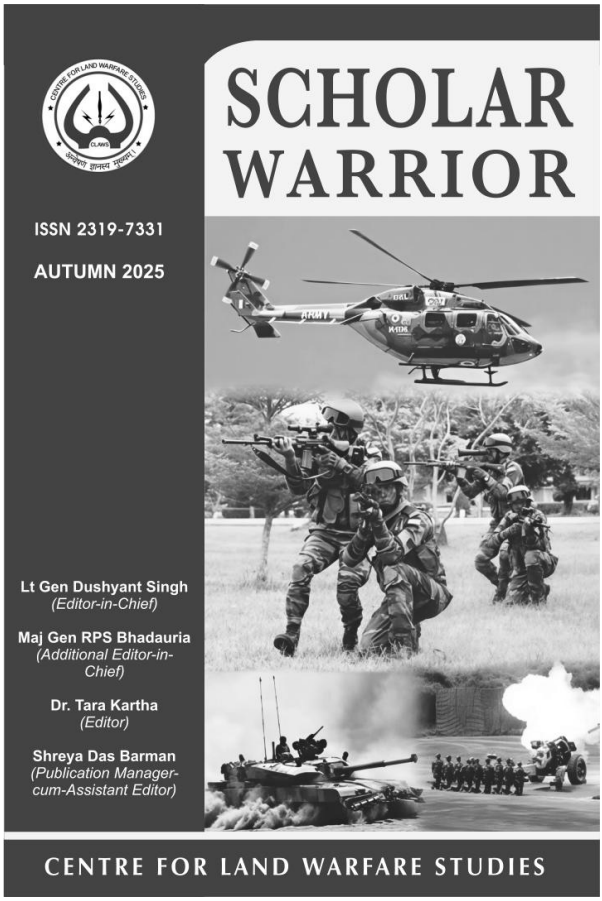
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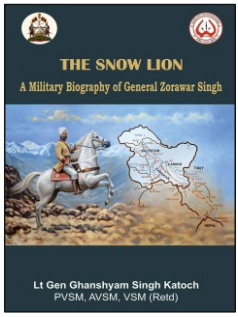
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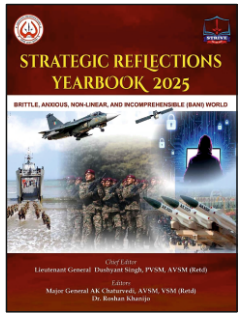
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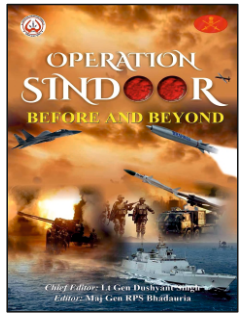
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Edts: Lt Gen Dushyant Singh, Maj Gen AK Chaturvedi & Dr Roshan Khanijo

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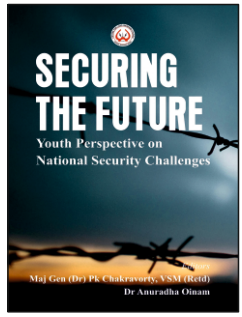


Operation Sindoor: Before and Beyond

Edts:

Lt Gen Dushyant Singh & Maj Gen RPS Bhadauria

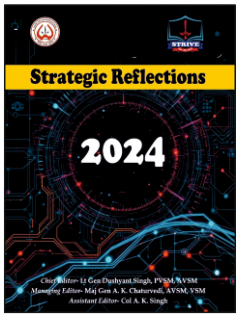
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Securing the Future Youth Perspective on National Security Challenges

Edts:
Maj Gen (Dr) PK Chakravorty &
Dr Anuradha Oinam

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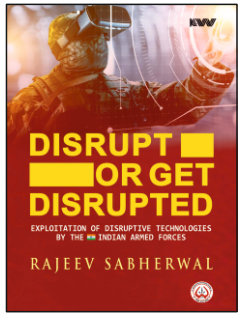


Strategic Reflections 2024

Edts:

Lt Gen Dushyant Singh, Maj Gen AK Chaturvedi & Col AK Singh

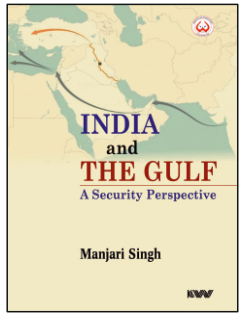
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Disrupt or Get Disrupted Exploitation of Disruptive Technologies by the Indian Armed Forces

Lt Gen Rajeev Sabherwal

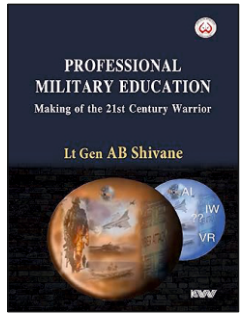
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CHANAKYA
DEFENCE DIALOGUE
REFORM TO TRANSFORM
SASHAKT, SURAKSHIT AUR VIKSIT BHARAT
सशक्त, सुरक्षित और विकसित भारत
27-28 NOV 2025 | NEW DELHI

The Chanakya Defence Dialogue 2025 Curtain Raiser opened with a wide-ranging fireside chat featuring General Upendra Dwivedi in conversation with Ms Sweta Singh, setting the strategic tone for the Dialogue. Speaking in Hindi to reach a broader audience, the Chief outlined how the Army's reform agenda aligns with the theme “Reform to Transform – Sashakt, Surakshit aur Viksit Bharat” and the larger vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. He framed the transition from the “Year of Transformation” to the “Year of Reform” as part of a longer decade-long roadmap, culminating in a data-centric, AI-enabled force.



Drawing on the lessons of Operation Sindoor, the Chief underscored India's clear deterrence posture, anchored in political will, military capability and the adversary's belief that India will act. He highlighted the changing character of war—compressed, multi-domain and technology-intensive—requiring agility, integration and rapid decision-making. The conversation reinforced that a reforming, modernising and confident Indian Army remains central to national security and development.

The transition from the “Year of Transformation” to the “Year of Reform” is part of a longer decade-long roadmap, culminating in a data-centric, AI-enabled force.
