Issue Brief

November 2026
No: 561

Dharma–Realpolitik in the Sub-Conventional Domain: India's Strategic Approach to Pakistan's Proxy Warfare Under a Nuclear Overhang

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Abstract

Pakistan's reliance on proxy warfare under a nuclear overhang has defined India–Pakistan security relations for over three decades. Conventional asymmetry has encouraged Pakistan to employ terrorism, irregular warfare and information operations while exploiting the stability–instability paradox to constrain India's conventional options. India, in turn, has moved from prolonged restraint towards calibrated coercion, including Surgical Strikes (2016), Balakot (2019) and Operation Sindoor (2025).

This article argues that interpreting India's behaviour as a binary choice between moral restraint and coercive Realpolitik is inadequate. Dharma and Realpolitik are complementary principles: ethical legitimacy can coexist with a calibrated coercive statecraft. Examining Pakistan's strategic paradigm and India's responses since Independence, the paper contends that a dynamic Dharma–Realpolitik synthesis can impose costs while preserving escalation control, international legitimacy and regional stability.

Keywords: Indian Strategic Culture, Pakistan, Proxy Warfare, Stability–Instability Paradox, Nuclear Deterrence, Dharma, Realpolitik, Operation Sindoor

"The memory of states is the test of truth of their policy. The more elementary the experience, the more profound its impact on a nation's interpretation of the present in the light of the past".

—Henry Kissinger

Introduction

Since Independence, India's security environment has been shaped by two distinct but interrelated challenges viz. conventional military confrontation and sub- conventional conflict. While the former manifested itself through the wars of 1947-48, 1965, 1971 and 1999, the latter has evolved into a prolonged campaign of proxy warfare, cross-border terrorism and information operations directed primarily by Pakistan's military establishment. Unlike conventional wars, where the identity of the aggressor and the threshold of conflict remains unambiguous, sub-conventional warfare deliberately exploits the space below the threshold of

declared war, thus blurring the distinction between state and non-state actors while complicating political decision-making and military response. Over the past three decades, this has emerged as the defining characteristics of India-Pakistan Security Relationship, compelling India to continually reassess the relationship between strategic restraint, coercive deterrence and the legitimate use of force (Freedman, L. 2013).

Pakistan's proxy warfare is rooted in its strategic culture, civil-military imbalance and enduring perception of India as a principal threat. Cohen describes the evolution of a national security state in which the armed forces gained primacy over defence, identity and political discourse (Cohen, S.P. 2004); Christine Fair similarly links irregular warfare to the Pakistan Army's belief that proxy conflict under nuclear protection can offset India's conventional superiority. Proxy warfare thus became pivotal as well as an enduring instrument of national strategy (Fair, C.C. 2014).

The overt nuclearisation of South Asia in 1998 reduced the perceived likelihood of full-scale war while widening space for lower-intensity aggression— the Stability–Instability Paradox**.** From Kargil through Parliament, Mumbai, Uri and Pulwama, Pakistan appeared to calculate that nuclear deterrence constrained Indian conventional retaliation. India's response consequently evolved towards calibrated military and non-military instruments intended to impose costs without uncontrolled escalation (Snyder,G.H. 1965) (Jervis, R.1984) (Narang, V. 2014).

India's response is therefore best understood not as a transition from *Dharma* to *Realpolitik*, but as their gradual synthesis. Across crises from 1947–48 to Operation Sindoor, strategic effectiveness increasingly rested on combining moral legitimacy with calibrated coercive power while preserving stability, escalation control and India's civilisational ethos.

Dharma–Realpolitik and the Sub-Conventional Domain: A Strategic Framework

Contemporary conflict increasingly occurs below the threshold of declared war through proxies, cyber and information operations, economic coercion and irregular forces. Hybrid conflict combines conventional and irregular means to alter the status quo while complicating response; success depends as much on political endurance, signalling and calibrated coercion as on battlefield victory (Hoffman, F.G. 2007).

For India, sub-conventional conflict also raises a question of strategic culture. ‘Dharma’ emphasises righteous conduct, legitimacy and restraint; ‘Realpolitik’ prioritises national

interest and effective state power. Treating them as mutually exclusive, however, obscures India's evolving response to Pakistan-sponsored proxy warfare (Tanham, G.K. 1992).

Classical Indian thought did not separate *Dharma* from effective statecraft. *Dharma* supplied the normative basis of rule, while Kautilya recognised diplomacy, intelligence, alliances, deception and force as legitimate means of protecting the state. The relationship is therefore a balance between ethical legitimacy and pragmatic power, not a philosophical contradiction (Arthashastra, 1992).

Pakistan's use of deniable actors under nuclear protection exploits ambiguity, complicates attribution and constrains conventional retaliation. Effective coercion must influence adversary calculations through credible threats and controlled escalation. India's response therefore requires neither passive restraint nor unrestricted retaliation, but calibrated cost imposition that preserves legitimacy and escalation control (Schelling, T.C. 1966).

Pakistan's Strategic Paradigm: Evolution of a Security State

Pakistan as an Idea: Identity and Strategic Culture

Pakistan's reliance on proxy warfare reflects history, ideology, institutional evolution and threat perception. Together these produced a security-centric strategic culture in which military power became central to national identity, state legitimacy and the enduring rivalry with India (Booth, K.1979) (Snyder, J.1914).

Pakistan emerged from the *Two-Nation Theory*, but religion alone did not erase ethnic and political diversity. In this setting, India increasingly became the external adversary against which national identity and security narratives were organised (Cohen, S.P. 2004).

Partition, the first Kashmir conflict and the unresolved status of Jammu and Kashmir reinforced this dynamic. Kashmir became linked to the unfinished agenda of Partition and Pakistan's ideological legitimacy, allowing security concerns to overshadow other national priorities and strengthening the foundations of the national security state (Cohen, S.P. 2004).

The National Security State: Military Dominance and State Legitimacy

Weak civilian institutions and recurring political crises enabled the Pakistan Army to expand from defence into governance, foreign policy and economic decision-making, while

presenting itself as guardian of *'Pakistaniyat'*, national unity and territorial sovereignty (Rizvi, H.A. 2000).

Military rule under Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Zia-ul-Haq and Pervez Musharraf institutionalised this dominance. Even under civilian governments, Pakistan's policy towards India, Afghanistan and nuclear strategy remained heavily influenced by the Army, thus, reinforcing its claim to be the principal custodian of Pakistan's security and ideological foundations (Nawaz, S. 2008) (Shah, A. 2014).

Conventional Asymmetry and Strategic Adaptation

The 1971 defeat exposed Pakistan's political and military weaknesses without changing its revisionist objectives towards India. What changed were the means: as conventional asymmetry widened, Pakistan increasingly sought instruments capable of imposing sustained costs while avoiding engagements in which India's material superiority could prove decisive (Fair, C.C. 2014).

Nuclear Deterrence and the Stability–Instability Paradox

The 1998 nuclear tests transformed rather than ending the India–Pakistan rivalry. Mutual nuclear deterrence reduced the perceived space for large-scale conventional war while expanding opportunities for limited conflict below the nuclear threshold (Tellis, A. J. 1997) (Sagan, S.D., Waltz, K.N. 2003).

Pakistan viewed nuclear weapons as an equaliser against India's conventional superiority. Its posture evolved from Credible Minimum Deterrence towards Full Spectrum Deterrence, including battlefield systems such as Nasr, intended to complicate Indian planning and constrain limited/ full scale conventional operations (Khan, F.H. 2012).

Snyder's *Stability–Instability Paradox* explains how nuclear stability can encourage lower-level conflict; Schelling similarly highlights signalling and risk manipulation in controlled escalation. Applied to South Asia, nuclear deterrence leveraged Pakistan with perceived space for sustained sub-conventional operations (Snyder, G.H. 1965) (Schelling, T.C. 1966).

Pakistan's deterrence posture sought to deny India space for limited retaliation and create uncertainty across the escalation ladder. By offsetting conventional asymmetry through escalation risk rather than parity, Islamabad aimed to induce restraint even after serious

terrorism or cross-border aggression, thereby protecting the strategic utility of proxy warfare (Carnegie, 2015) (Khan, F.H. 2012).

Proxy Warfare as an Instrument of Statecraft

Proxy warfare followed logically from conventional asymmetry reinforced by nuclear deterrence. Non-state actors offered plausible deniability, lower political and economic costs, attribution problems and the ability to impose continuing internal security burdens without formally crossing the threshold of interstate war (Cohen, S.P. 2004).

The Soviet-Afghan War institutionalised this method by creating recruitment, training, finance and ISI-linked networks. After the Soviet withdrawal, parts of this infrastructure were redirected towards Jammu and Kashmir, where LeT, JeM and HM became important instruments of Pakistan's coercive strategy (Coll, S. 2000).

Proxy warfare also shaped narratives, complicated attribution and shifted escalation-management burdens onto India while imposing disproportionate political, economic and psychological costs. Therefore, it could be inferred that support rendered to militant organisations as an enduring component of the Pakistan Army's strategy, aimed less at decisive victory than at eroding India's political resolve while retaining deniability (Fair, C.C. 2014).

Strategic Synthesis

Pakistan's strategic paradigm rests on four mutually reinforcing elements: an identity and threat narrative centred on India; military dominance within the state; nuclear deterrence designed to offset conventional asymmetry; and proxy warfare used to exploit the space below major war. The synthesis is important because each element protects the others: nuclear risk shields sub-conventional action, proxies impose costs without conventional exposure, and persistent rivalry reinforces the military's institutional centrality. India's strategic problem is therefore systemic rather than episodic. Effective response requires a corresponding synthesis, legitimacy and restraint to preserve political freedom of action, combined with credible, calibrated coercion to alter Pakistan's cost-benefit calculus. This interaction forms the bridge to India's evolving ‘Dharma–Realpolitik’ approach.

Evolution of India's Dharma–Realpolitik: A Historical Assessment of Strategic Responses to Pakistan

India's Strategic Culture: Foundations of Dharma–Realpolitik

Independent India's strategic outlook combined civilisational values, anti-colonial thought and nation-building imperatives. Under Nehru, peaceful coexistence, non-alignment, sovereign equality and negotiated settlement encouraged diplomatic engagements, international legality and military restraint, while retaining force for defence of sovereignty and order (Raghavan, S. 2010).

Indian strategic thought was never purely idealist. *Rajadharma* required justice and protection of the state, while *Kautilyan* statecraft legitimised prudent use of power. Early India generally favoured restraint because political consolidation, development and international legitimacy were priorities; force remained available, but mainly against overt aggression (Arthashastra, 1992).

The First Kashmir War (1947–48): Legitimacy Before Military Decisiveness

Strategic Context. In 1947, Pakistan-backed tribal and irregular forces entered Jammu and Kashmir to seize territory before India could respond an early use of deniable irregular warfare. India intervened after accession, but despite favourable battlefield momentum, referred the dispute to the United Nations in January 1948 (Lamb, A. 1991).

India's Response: Dharma–Realpolitik Assessment. The decision reflected a strong preference for legality and peaceful settlement, placing legitimacy above the pursuit of complete military advantage.

Strategic Takeaway. India secured international legitimacy but left unresolved strategic vulnerabilities that Pakistan would continue to exploit through increasingly sophisticated forms of irregular warfare.

The 1965 War: Controlled Escalation and Strategic Restraint

Strategic Context. Believing India vulnerable after 1962 and encouraged by external military assistance, Pakistan launched Operation Gibraltar to foment insurgency in Kashmir and, after its failure, escalated through Operation Grand Slam in the Chhamb sector (Prasad, S.N. and Thapliyal, U.P. n.d.).

India's Response: Dharma–Realpolitik Assessment. India opened a front across the international border in Punjab, widening the conflict and demonstrating resolve. Yet its political objective remained limited to defeating the offensive and restoring the status quo rather than imposing enduring punitive costs.

Strategic Takeaway. Military success restored the status quo but failed to transform Pakistan's strategic calculus, thus underscoring the limitations of conventional deterrence in the absence of sustained coercive pressure.

The 1971 War: Decisive Force with Moral Legitimacy

Strategic Context. Pakistan's post-election political crisis and Operation Searchlight produced mass violence and nearly ten million refugees into India, converting an internal Pakistani crisis into a major Indian security and humanitarian challenge (Raghavan, S. 2013).

India's Response: Dharma–Realpolitik Assessment. New Delhi delayed intervention while building international support and securing geopolitical space, including through the Indo-Soviet Treaty, before employing force against clearly defined political objectives (Dixit, J.N. 2001).

From the perspective of Dharma–Realpolitik, 1971 was the 'first mature synthesis of legitimacy and coercion'. Force followed diplomatic preparation, served defined objectives and produced decisive results, yet India did not exploit victory for open-ended punitive aims against West Pakistan.

Strategic Takeaway. The 1971 War demonstrated that decisive military power acquires enduring legitimacy when employed in pursuit of clearly defined political objectives and supported by sustained diplomatic preparation - the first mature expression of India's Dharma–Realpolitik approach.

Kargil Conflict (1999): Responsible Escalation under the Nuclear Shadow

Strategic Context. Soon after the 1998 nuclear tests, Pakistani regulars and irregulars crossed the LoC and occupied Kargil heights, calculating that nuclear deterrence would constrain India's response while enabling limited gains and renewed international attention to Kashmir (Malik, V.P. 2006).

India's Response: Dharma–Realpolitik Assessment. Operation Vijay combined determined air-land action with a deliberate decision not to cross the LoC. This imposed military costs while denying Pakistan grounds for wider escalation and strengthened India's diplomatic position.

From the perspective of Dharma–Realpolitik, Kargil demonstrated that decisive force, escalation control and international legitimacy could reinforce one another, while disproving the assumption that nuclear deterrence would paralyse India's conventional response.

Strategic Takeaway. Kargil demonstrated that responsible escalation could enhance both military effectiveness and diplomatic legitimacy, but it also revealed that limited conventional success alone was insufficient to alter Pakistan's long-term strategic behaviour.

Operation Parakram (2001-02): The Coercion Dilemma

Strategic Context. After the December 2001 Parliament attack, India launched Operation Parakram and mobilised nearly half a million troops, signalling willingness to impose major conventional costs (Perkovich, G. 1999).

From a Dharma–Realpolitik perspective, Parakram exposed the limits of slow conventional mobilisation. India had superior force but lacked timely, calibrated options below Pakistan's perceived nuclear threshold, revealing a mismatch between proxy aggression and available responses.

Strategic Takeaway. Operation Parakram exposed the diminishing utility of prolonged conventional mobilisation against proxy aggression and became the catalyst for India's search for more agile and credible coercive response options.

From Mumbai to Balakot: Evolution of India's Calibrated Deterrence (2008–2019)

Mumbai (2008): High Watermark of Strategic Restraint. The 26/11 attacks by Lashkar-e-Taiba struck civilians, infrastructure and symbols of India's economic resilience, imposing severe political and psychological costs while exploiting Pakistan-based networks and deniability (Tellis, A.J. 2009). Pakistan's strategic logic remained consistent: use a non-state actor; complicate attribution and rely on nuclear risk and international pressure to constrain Indian retaliation (Fair, C.C. 2014).

From the perspective of Dharma–Realpolitik, Mumbai marked the highest point and limitation of restraint. India's diplomatic and internal-security response strengthened resilience

but imposed few immediate costs, reinforcing perceptions that proxy warfare remained relatively low risk (Pant, H.V. 2019).

Uri (2016): Breaking the Psychological Barrier. After the attack on the Uri Brigade Headquarters, India publicly acknowledged Cross LoC Surgical Strikes against terrorist launch pads. Limited in scale but significant in signalling, they demonstrated willingness to impose direct military costs below the threshold of major escalation (Ladwig, W.C. 2007).

Balakot (2019): Redefining the Escalation Threshold. Following the Pulwama suicide attack, the Indian Air Force struck a Jaish-e-Mohammed facility at Balakot inside mainland Pakistan, thus expanding the geography and instrument of calibrated retaliation (MEA, 2019), thereby projecting Vertical Escalation for the first time through actions in Air Domain.

Balakot qualitatively expanded India's coercive options: air power crossed the international boundary against a terrorist target while avoiding Pakistani military installations. Pakistan's subsequent aerial response showed that limited conventional exchanges could occur under a nuclear backdrop without automatically becoming full-scale war (Subramaniam, A. 2015).

The operation integrated military action, diplomacy and strategic communication. By describing the strike as a non-military, pre-emptive counter-terrorism action against a terrorist organisation, India sought to preserve international understanding and escalation control (Pant, H.V. and Bommakanti, K. 2019).

Operation Sindoor (2025): Consolidating the Dharma–Realpolitik Framework

Strategic Context. After the Pahalgam terrorist attack, Operation Sindoor applied lessons from earlier crises and represented the latest stage of India's calibrated-response evolution (MEA, 2025).

Pakistan's Strategic Logic. Continued reliance on proxies reflected the belief that deniable actors could impose costs while nuclear deterrence constrained large-scale Indian retaliation (Fair, C.C. 2014).

India's Response: Dharma–Realpolitik Assessment. Operation Sindoor combined precise action against terrorist infrastructure with defined objectives, diplomatic outreach,

strategic communication and escalation management (MoD, 2025). Unlike isolated reprisals, it integrated intelligence, military capability, diplomacy and narrative management into one coherent national response (PIB, 2025). Unlike earlier episodes, military operations were neither isolated tactical actions nor purely symbolic demonstrations of resolve. Instead, they formed part of an amalgamated broader strategy that manifested into a Coherent National Response while adopting both Vertical as well as Horizontal Escalation Models.

From the perspective of Dharma–Realpolitik, Operation Sindoor consolidated "India's evolution by combining ethical legitimacy with credible coercive capability" (Chadha, A. 2025).

Comparative Assessment: Evolution of India's Strategic Response

A comparative assessment reveals a clear progression: 1947–48 and 1965 emphasised legitimacy and restraint; 1971 reconciled decisive force with political legitimacy; Kargil demonstrated responsible escalation under nuclear conditions; and Parakram exposed the limits of prolonged mobilisation.

From Mumbai to Balakot, India moved towards calibrated deterrence integrating limited force, diplomacy, strategic communication and escalation management. Operation Sindoor consolidated this approach without making force the default instrument of statecraft. Viewed collectively, this evolution adapts rather than abandons India's civilisational ethos. 'Dharma' supplies legitimacy, restraint and political purpose; 'Realpolitik' supplies coercive capacity. Their synthesis enables proportionate cost imposition while preserving escalation control and normative legitimacy.

Strategic Imperatives: Operationalising the Dharma–Realpolitik Framework

The historical assessment indicates that India must institutionalise 'Dharma–Realpolitik' across national power, moving from episodic crisis management to sustained cost imposition while preserving escalation control and legitimacy (Menon, S. 2016). Certain recommendations for the same are enumerated below.

- ***Institutionalise a Whole-of-Government National Security Architecture.*** Permanently synchronise political leadership, intelligence, armed forces, diplomacy, cyber, financial enforcement and strategic communication to shorten decision cycles and ensure coherent sub-conventional responses (Mohan, C. R. 2003).

- ***Develop a Multi-Domain Deterrence Architecture***. Deterrence should span across military, cyber, space, information, economic and technological domains, widening calibrated options and complicating Pakistan's response calculations (Hoffman, F.G. 2009).
- ***Expand the Spectrum of Calibrated Response Options***. Political leadership needs choices between restraint and major war: intelligence-led covert action, Special Forces, precision strike, cyber and electronic warfare, autonomous systems and AI-enabled intelligence fusion. Such a spectrum enables proportionate costs below major conflict (Ladwig, W.C. 2007).
- ***Institutionalise Integrated Information and Narrative Operations***. Synchronise military action with diplomacy, legal documentation, public communication and digital information activity. Against deniability and disinformation, the information environment is itself part of deterrence (Jacob, H. 2019).
- ***Build Rapid Grey-Zone Response Mechanisms***. Permanent inter-agency structures should link intelligence, political decision-making, diplomacy and military execution, supported by pre-planned response matrices that accelerates calibrated action while preserving political choice (Freedman, L. 2013).
- ***Preserve Escalation Dominance through Technological Superiority***. AI, autonomous systems, precision weapons, cyber, electronic warfare, space-based intelligence and unmanned platforms can improve speed, discrimination and proportionality, thus strengthening coercive effectiveness and political control (Chadha, A. 2025).
- ***National Strategic Communications Department.*** Establish an apex-level department to fuse diplomatic, military, informational, intelligence, cyber and economic communication within a coherent national framework, enabling unified strategic messaging, proactive narrative shaping and effective countering of adversarial information campaigns.

Conclusion: Towards a Dharma–Realpolitik Framework for India's Sub-Conventional Strategy

The Indo-Pak experience shows that neither absolute restraint nor unrestricted coercion offers a durable answer to proxy warfare under a nuclear overhang. India has instead evolved towards a ‘Dharma–Realpolitik’ synthesis combining ethical legitimacy with calibrated

coercive power. The paper's central contribution is 'Dharma–Realpolitik' as an indigenous framework for sub-conventional strategy— ethical legitimacy strengthens credible force, while calibrated force reinforces legitimate state action, offering a sustainable basis for deterrence. As conflict shifts towards hybrid, cyber, information and grey-zone confrontation, 'Dharma–Realpolitik' links military capability, technology, diplomacy and information power with normative credibility under nuclear deterrence (Freedman, L. 2016). Ultimately, India's strategic tradition emphasises 'disciplined, proportionate and legitimate power'. Institutionalised through integrated national power, technology and political restraint, the synthesised approach offers a viable framework for deterrence and next-generation conflict.

"The conduct of foreign affairs is a matter of the application of power, and the application of power is a matter of the exercise of judgment".

—George F. Kennan

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Colonel Atin Chadha was commissioned in 14th Bn The Rajput Regiment in Dec 2007. An alumnus of CTW MCEME, IMA Dehradun & DSSC Wellington, the officer has extensive operational experience in varied terrain profile including company commander tenures in Rashtriya Rifles, along LAC (both Eastern Ladakh & ALP) as well as Desert Sect. He has tenated the appointment of GSO-2 (Ops) of an Armoured Brigade, Brigade GSO-1 of an Independent Armoured Brigade and Col GS (Ops) of a Strike Corps. He has done all mandatory Army Courses and the officer's international exposure includes UN MILOB in Israel, Lebanon & Syria. He Commanded 30th Bn The Rajput Regt along LC in SHAA of Kargil Sect. Presently the officer is attending Higher Command Course at Army War College, Mhow.

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