OPERATION SINDOOR AND INDIA'S EVOLVING SECURITY DOCTRINE: FROM STRATEGIC RESTRAINT TO CALIBRATED RETALIATION

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Abstract

In May 2025, India launched Operation Sindoor, marking a significant turning point in the evolution of its national security strategy. Initiated in response to a deadly terrorist attack in Pahalgam, the operation entailed precise, coordinated strikes targeting terror infrastructure deep within Pakistan and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. Unlike earlier retaliatory measures, Sindoor signified a move away from strategic restraint towards a doctrine of calibrated, cost-imposing responses that integrated military precision, advanced technology, and diplomatic assertiveness. This analysis explores the strategic rationale, execution, and doctrinal foundations of the operation, while also examining its influence on defense procurement reforms, deterrence strategies, and geopolitical signaling. Based on government briefings, think tank evaluations, and open-source intelligence, the study suggests that Operation Sindoor has reshaped India's approach to limited warfare, bolstered deterrence credibility, and altered its stance on hybrid threats in South Asia. It concludes with considerations on the long-term sustainability of this approach, potential escalation risks, and the institutional reforms necessary to strengthen India's emerging security framework.

1. Introduction

On May 5, 2025, India launched Operation Sindoor in response to a deadly terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir, that killed 36 civilians and security personnel. Unlike earlier limited actions, Sindoor went beyond tactical retaliation and marked a decisive shift in India's security doctrine. The 96-hour campaign combined precision strikes, multi-domain coordination, and clear diplomatic messaging. Targets included high-value terror hubs and infrastructure deep in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Jammu & Kashmir (PoJK), such as Bahawalpur and Sialkot(DD News, 2025; Shivane, 2025). For the first time, New Delhi formally articulated a three-pillar doctrine: decisive retaliation, no tolerance for nuclear blackmail, and no distinction between terrorists and their state sponsors (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2025). This represented a move away from traditional strategic restraint aimed at crisis containment.

This paper examines Operation Sindoor as a watershed in India's evolving security posture. Drawing on government releases, think tank analyses(Indian Centre for Policy Studies, 2025; Amos, 2025), and media reports, it explores how the operation has redefined cross-border deterrence and hybrid warfare while shaping the broader contours of India's national security doctrine.

2. Strategic Rationale and Execution

Operation Sindoor was launched to re-establish credible deterrence after the April 29, 2025 Pahalgam attack, which killed 36 civilians and security personnel

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and was traced to Pakistan-based handlers (DD News, 2025). Unlike the 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot airstrike, Sindoor expanded the theatre dramatically, striking 24 terror launchpads and 11 Pakistani airbases, including deep targets in Bahawalpur, Muridke, and Sialkot (Al Jazeera Staff, 2025). This conveyed a clear message: no geography is beyond India's reach. The operation was marked by speed and precision. A 30-minute aerial assault used Rafale jets, drones, and SCALP and HAMMER missiles, supported by cyber and electronic warfare units. The Navy positioned strike groups to threaten Karachi, while the Akashteersystem intercepted hostile drones, showcasing India's network-centric warfare capabilities (Shivane, 2025). Strategic signaling was integral. Fifteen minutes before the strike, the Army released a teaser video"Ready to Strike, Trained to Win" and afterward, the Air Force showcased "Unseen. Unstoppable. Unmatched" footage to reinforce confidence at home and abroad. MP Shashi Tharoor's phrase "sindoor ka badla khoon" captured the cultural and emotional resonance of the response (India Today, 2025). Importantly, India calibrated its actions to avoid war. Targets were confined to terror hubs and strategic bases, minimizing civilian casualties while keeping diplomatic space open. High-level delegations briefed world capitals, and the Indus Waters Treaty was suspended to add economic leverage(Indian Centre for Policy Studies, 2025; Amos, 2025). Global powers largely endorsed India's right to self-defence, reflecting its growing legitimacy in counterterror operations. Operation Sindoor thus represented a seamless blend of precision, doctrine, and diplomacy a campaign that asserted sovereignty, imposed costs, and carefully managed escalation.

3. Cost Imposition as a Doctrine

A defining feature of Operation Sindoor was the shift from deterrence by denial to deterrence by punishment, rooted in cost imposition. Earlier, India often relied on limited responses and diplomacy, which did little to change the behavior of terror sponsors. Sindoor marked a deliberate turn, signaling that any attack would trigger swift, disproportionate retaliation across multiple domains.Militarily, India destroyed more than two dozen terror camps and eleven Pakistani airbases, crippling logistics hubs, training sites, and ammunition depots of groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed (DD News, 2025; Al Jazeera Staff, 2025). By striking runways and radar systems, India blunted Pakistan's ability to mount a credible counteroffensive, reducing its response window from days to hours (Shivane, 2025).India also expanded deterrence into non-military tools. The temporary suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty was both symbolic and practical, underscoring that water and economic levers could supplement military action (Amos, 2025). Diplomatically, India shared evidence of Pakistan's complicity and precision of strikes, winning support from powers like the U.S., France, and Russia (Indian Centre for Policy Studies, 2025). Psychologically, releasing footage of the strikes projected confidence, shaped narratives, and bolstered public morale (India Today, 2025).

This doctrine has since been codified into three principles:

1. Decisive retaliation against terror threats.

2. Zero tolerance for nuclear blackmail.

3. No distinction between terrorists and their state sponsors (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2025).

By adopting this framework, India conveyed that terrorism will be treated as state-sponsored aggression requiring full-spectrum response. While long-term deterrence will depend on Pakistan's behavior, the precedent is clear: India will impose costs across military, economic, and diplomatic domains whenever its sovereignty is challenged.

4. Post-Operation Industrial Mobilisation
One of the most remarkable outcomes of Operation Sindoor was the rapid and coordinated mobilisation of India's defence industrial base, which played a crucial role in ensuring operational sustainability and post-strike preparedness. Unlike past conflicts where India

heavily relied on imported platforms and munitions, the Sindoor campaign witnessed a deliberate and confident deployment of indigenously developed technologies, signaling a new era in India's military-industrial synergy.

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), in collaboration with private sector players under the Make in India framework, enabled the real-time deployment of Akashteer air defence systems, electronic warfare platforms, and AI-based threat monitoring tools (Shivane, 2025). Indigenous unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) like the Rustom and swarm drones developed by Indian startups were used for reconnaissance, loitering strikes, and post-strike assessment, greatly enhancing the efficiency and accuracy of the operation (DD News, 2025).This level of defence production responsiveness was made possible by institutional reforms in procurement and manufacturing over the previous five years. The establishment of the Defence Production and Export Promotion Policy (DPEPP) 2020, creation of seven defence public sector undertakings (DPSUs), and the emphasis on defence innovation hubs had already laid the groundwork for faster indigenisation and public-private collaboration (Ministry of Defence, 2023). Operation Sindoor served as a stress test for these reforms, which, by all indications, passed with commendable results.

Further, the swift replenishment of high-end munitions like Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs), loitering drones, and surface-to-air missiles manufactured by Bharat Dynamics Ltd. and private players highlighted a growing self-reliance in the high-technology segment of warfare. This ensured that India's strategic depth was not just about reserves, but about responsive production cycles that can meet sudden spikes in operational demand (Amos, 2025).The post-operation procurement directives issued by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) further reinforced the momentum. Emergency procurement windows were activated to restock and upgrade precision-guided systems, night-fighting capabilities, and integrated air defence batteries. The government also advanced trials for indigenous combat platforms such as the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) and armed versions of the Tapas drone, accelerating the transition from prototypes to battlefield-ready assets (Indian Centre for Policy Studies, 2025). Prior to the operation, Indian Railways and road networks enabled the covert movement of troops and equipment, reflecting improved civil-military logistical coordination. After the strikes, this infrastructure facilitated the swift repositioning of forces to prevent or manage escalation and ensured the timely transfer of equipment back to repair and manufacturing units. An often-overlooked element of industrial mobilization was India's utilization of cyber and space-based assets. The fusion of ISRO's satellite imagery with AI-powered threat mapping tools allowed Indian commanders to monitor Pakistani troop movements in real time. This integration highlighted the expanding role of the civilian space sector in strategic security, signifying a key aspect of India's evolving security doctrine. Essentially, Operation Sindoor was more than just a series of front-line strikes; it was a demonstration of India's behind-the-scenes readiness, rooted in a progressively capable and flexible defense production ecosystem. By showcasing its capacity to fight, replenish, and escalate rapidly within days, India conveyed a powerful message to adversaries: deterrence relies not only on intent but also on industrial resilience and strategic depth.Operation Sindoor also underscored the importance of dual-use infrastructure and industrial mobilization.

5. Policy Reforms in Defence Procurement

The success of Operation Sindoor was rooted in years of defense procurement reforms aimed at decreasing reliance on imports, promoting indigenization, and establishing faster, more agile systems. The operation served as a tangible validation of these reforms, especially in emergency procurement and operational preparedness. The Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP 2020) simplified categories such as "Buy (Indian)" and set clear timelines, facilitating rapid

approval and deployment of drones, missiles, and air defense equipment (Ministry of Defence, n.d.). Equally important were Emergency Procurement Powers, delegated to the armed forces in 2022, which allowed purchases up to ₹300 crore without prior MoD approval. These powers were invoked within 72 hours to restock munitions and surveillance assets (Indian Centre for Policy Studies, 2025).Private sector participation, encouraged under iDEX, also proved crucial. Startups supplied drones, loitering munitions, and AI-based platforms that were rapidly adapted for combat. Meanwhile, DPSUs like HAL, BEL, and BDL showed improved turnaround, aided by digitized processes and vendor flexibility (Amos, 2025).Operation Sindoor also enhanced India's appeal for foreign technology partnerships. France, Israel, and the U.S. offered expedited transfers in hypersonic, cyber, and quantum systemsrecognition of India's ability to integrate advanced technologies into doctrine. Building on these gains, the MoD is preparing a Strategic Capabilities Modernisation Roadmap 2030 to expand R&D and shorten procurement cycles (Indian Centre for Policy Studies, 2025).In sum, Sindoor validated procurement reforms not just on paper but in practice. The rapid flow of equipment and interoperability across services reflected a maturing ecosystem proactive, agile, and aligned with India's evolving security needs.

6. Challenges and Risks

While Operation Sindoor stands as a watershed moment in India's national security doctrine, it also brings with it a new set of strategic, operational, and geopolitical challenges. As India transitions from a posture of strategic restraint to one of calibrated retaliation, it enters a more assertive security paradigm that requires constant preparedness, resource management, and international navigation.

6.1 Risk of Escalation

The foremost concern is the potential for escalation. Though India executed Operation Sindoor with precision and restraintcarefully avoiding civilian infrastructure and communicating its limited objectivesretaliatory actions carry an inherent risk of triggering broader conventional conflict. Pakistan's nuclear doctrine remains ambiguous, and any future operation could prompt brinkmanship, especially if retaliatory thresholds are misinterpreted (Amos, 2025).However, India has addressed this risk through credible deterrence mechanisms. The operational tempo of Sindoor, which neutralized 11 airbases and degraded Pakistan's second-strike capability within hours, signaled India's readiness to pre-empt escalation rather than react to it (Shivane, 2025). Still, sustaining this edge will require constant modernization and scenario-based war-gaming.

6.2 Budgetary and Resource Constraints

India's increased reliance on high-precision munitions, space assets, and drone warfare implies a higher financial outlay for sustained deterrence. While reforms in defence procurement have improved efficiency, the cost of readiness remains steep, especially when juxtaposed with pressing social sector demands (Ministry of Defence, n.d.). As India aims to modernize its forces under the "Atmanirbhar Bharat" mission, careful resource allocation and prioritization will be essential.This challenge also underscores the need to expand India's defence exports—not only to fund future acquisitions but also to build strategic leverage in regional markets. A self-reliant industrial base that contributes to GDP and foreign policy is vital for long-term security sustainability.

6.3 International Scrutiny and Narrative Management

Although India's actions received broad support or neutral responses globally, operations of this scale are always subject to international scrutiny, particularly by watchdogs, media outlets, and multilateral forums. The ability to maintain the moral high ground depends on consistent adherence to international law, transparency, and diplomatic engagement.India successfully demonstrated this during Operation Sindoor by releasing real-time strike footage, sending high-level delegations abroad, and emphasizing its right to self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter (Indian

Centre for Policy Studies, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025). However, future operations must also be accompanied by agile information diplomacy to counter misinformation and adversarial propaganda, especially in the digital domain.

6.4 Technological Dependence and Supply Chain Gaps

Despite significant strides in indigenization, India continues to rely on foreign technologies and components, particularly in propulsion systems, sensors, and high-end weapon guidance systems. In times of conflict, geopolitical dependencies can become vulnerabilities if supply chains are disrupted or partners become risk-averse (Amos, 2025).To mitigate this, the government has accelerated technology transfer agreements and promoted domestic R&D. The success of startups during Operation Sindoor highlights the growing capability of India's innovation ecosystem, but scaling and standardizing this innovation remains an ongoing challenge. In conclusion, Operation Sindoor has established a new standard in India's security posture, while simultaneously creating a more intricate strategic environment. Although challenges such as escalation risks, financial constraints, international scrutiny, and technological gaps are significant, they are manageable. Through proactive recognition and mitigation of these issues, India can sustain and strengthen its security doctrine without jeopardizing its global reputation or internal priorities.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Operation Sindoor marks a definitive shift in India's national security doctrine from a posture of strategic restraint to one of calibrated, multi-domain retaliation. It demonstrated India's willingness and capacity to impose costs on adversaries through precision strikes, strategic signalling, and synchronized diplomatic outreach. The operation was not merely a military event but a comprehensive assertion of sovereignty, blending technology, deterrence, and policy clarity. India's approach during Sindoor rested on a clear doctrinal triad: decisive retaliation against any terror threat, zero tolerance for nuclear blackmail, and no distinction between terrorists and their state sponsors. This new doctrine helped India reframe cross-border terrorism not as isolated acts but as components of state-complicit aggression. By targeting deep infrastructure in Pakistan and maintaining escalation control, India conveyed strength without destabilizing the region.

Several key enablers underpinned the success of the operation:
• Swift industrial mobilization driven by indigenous platforms and startups.
• Procurement reforms that enhanced the armed forces' flexibility and responsiveness.
• Seamless coordination among agencies, integrating cyber, space, military, and diplomatic efforts.
• Effective narrative management through strategic media releases and diplomatic communications.

Nevertheless, this strategic shift entails new responsibilities for India. Moving forward, the country must:

1. Continually invest in indigenous technologies to maintain strategic autonomy and resilience during crises.

2. Strengthen inter-service and civil-military coordination to facilitate faster, smarter, and more adaptable responses.

3. Exercise fiscal discipline by expanding defense exports and optimizing R&D investments.

4. Develop sustained capabilities for information warfare to ensure India shapes the global narrative effectively.

5. Formalize conflict de-escalation protocols to preserve diplomatic space even after punitive measures.

Ultimately, Operation Sindoor was more than a retaliationit was a carefully calibrated message to the world. India commits to safeguarding its sovereignty with not only courage but also competence; with not only strength but also maturity. This sets a precedent for

future strategic actions that are bold yet balanced, rooted in national interest, and aligned with international legal standards and peacekeeping norms.

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