

## INDIA'S LIMITED WAR FIGHTING DOCTRINES AND THE MAY 2025 PROVOCATION: CHALLENGES TO DETERRENCE AND STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA

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### **Abstract**

*The May 2025 conflict between India and Pakistan highlights the growing dangers of conventional conflict or limited war, which risks slipping out of control, thus increasing the risks of nuclear exchange. Rather than engaging in negotiations for dispute resolution, the Indian government has continuously been transforming its conventional war-fighting doctrine to establish hegemony through compellence. Indian strategic thought and technological modernisation can be identified as primary drivers behind this Indian behaviour, as it aspires to create a Greater India or Akhand Bharat. From 1947 to the nuclearisation of South Asia, India once changed its war-fighting doctrine. However, from 2003 onwards, the Indian armed forces have been continuously going through a transformative and restructuring phase. Using massive retaliation as nuclear blackmail against Pakistan, India aspires to create space for limited conflict and surgical strikes using advanced weapon systems, under the Dynamic Response Strategy, below the nuclear thresholds as a new normal. At the same time, Indian Integrated Battle Groups would be ready to undertake offensive operations under the Cold Start Doctrine, if the conflict escalates to a full-scale conventional war. This paper evaluates Indian conventional war-fighting doctrines while concluding that Pakistan needs to diversify its response options to raise the retaliatory cost so as to deny India space for a limited war below the nuclear thresholds. Due to domestic pressures and the desire to dominate escalation rungs, any limited conflict in South Asia carries high risks for slipping out of control, thus ending in a nuclear exchange.*

**Keywords:** Cold Start Doctrine, Pro-Active Operations, Dynamic Response Strategy, Full Spectrum Deterrence, Credible Minimum Deterrence.

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## Introduction

Indian conventional doctrine, which went through a significant overhaul and reform under former Indian army Chief General Sundarji in the 1980s, envisaged severing Pakistan through deep manoeuvres. However, it became redundant after the Nuclearisation of South Asia in 1998. After the nuclear tests, Pakistan adopted the doctrine of Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD), which replaced the bilateral equation of Existential Deterrence, also referred to as Non-weaponised Deterrence. Despite projecting China as a primary threat to Indian security, due to terrain limitations and outstanding disputes with Pakistan, the bulk of Indian conventional forces remained available for deployment alongside its Western border against Pakistan.

Nonetheless, the geographical size of India, in comparison to Pakistan, placed Indian forces at a disadvantageous position as the availability of early warning and surveillance systems almost made it impossible for India to hide the movement and deployment of its offensive/mechanised forces. Moreover, the timeframe involved in large-scale mobilisation provided Pakistan sufficient time to strengthen its defences, besides assessing the likely theatres where Indian forces could have launched the offensive. The Indian military practically experienced these constraints during the Twin-Peaks Crisis of 2002. Furthermore, the bilateral nuclear deterrence equation in South Asia profoundly curtailed the Indian conventional response options against Pakistan. This new reality frustrated the Indian military commanders and political leadership, who started looking for alternative options to justify keeping such a sizable military. Resultantly, the Indian army contemplated several military doctrines, strategies and nuclear force postures against Pakistan from 2003 onwards, some of which were promulgated through publicly available doctrinal papers.

The purpose of these Indian conventional doctrines, notably the Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) and the Pro-Active Operations (PAO) strategy, was to explore the possibility of fighting a limited conventional war below Pakistan's presumed nuclear thresholds, primarily for political gains. Pakistan realised that the Indian desperation to create space for a limited conflict below nuclear redlines is fraught with dangers and could spiral out of control, thus increasing the possibility of nuclear exchange. There were no assurances that the conflict would unfold according to the perceived battle plans, and therefore, under certain circumstances, could have created pressures for contemplating nuclear use options. Therefore, to address the issue of prevalent conventional asymmetries

with India, and to raise the stakes and costs for Indian aggression under nuclear overhang, Pakistan modified its nuclear doctrine to Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) within the ambit of CMD in 2011. FSD clearly communicated to India that there was no space for a limited war or conflict below the nuclear thresholds, and the only rational path for ensuring peace and stability was initiating bilateral dialogue for the resolution of long-standing disputes like Kashmir, Sir Creek, Siachen and water, etc. However, on the contrary, rising Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) in India envisioned an expansionist and hegemonic agenda of creating a Hindu Rashtra or Greater India (Akhand Bharat). Hindu nationalists showed no interest in dialogue but instead continued exploring the possibility of fighting a limited war against Pakistan to serve the political ends. These hegemonic ambitions have been continuously demonstrated since the fallaciously claimed surgical strike of 2016 and most recently during the May 2025 conflict.

This Indian hostility towards Pakistan and aspirations to establish regional hegemony can be attributed to numerous factors, including deep-rooted anti-Pakistan sentiments fuelled by growing awareness about Indian strategic thought, Hindu populism and acquisition of advanced technologies to be tested on the battlefield, and fulfil the ambitions of annexing Pakistani territory, notably in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan. These ambitions would serve as essential milestones in fulfilling the dream of Akhand Bharat, using war for political expediency and winning the election. The desire of the Indian government to create space for limited war below nuclear thresholds through evolving the Dynamic Response Strategy (DRS) needs to be evaluated, as it carries far-reaching implications for nuclear deterrence and regional peace and stability.

### **Understanding the Drivers behind Indian Doctrinal Changes within a Theoretical Framework**

There can be numerous motives for states to develop hegemonic tendencies and aspirations for expanding the national boundaries. At the same time, these hegemonic motives may overlap for different states. They may lead to split conclusions in specific case studies due to divergent political and strategic cultures, strategic thinking and national objectives. The Indian aspirations to establish regional hegemony and aggressive behaviour for territorial expansion can be best understood within the theoretical framework of Indian Strategic Thought and the acquisition of advanced and sensitive technologies, understood as Technological Determinism.

Strategic thought can be described as “a set of cognitive beliefs, norms, assumptions and principles, derived from the oral and written chronicles of influential thinkers, religious leaders, scriptures and doctrines, military strategists and political philosophers, which shapes the collective identity, culture, world view and modes of behaviour with other communities, both within and outside the national boundaries.”<sup>1</sup>

Indian aspirations for exclusiveness and hegemony can be traced back to its ancient history and comical religious chronicles and reconstructed cultural history, authored by the superior Brahmin caste.<sup>2</sup> This revisionist and fanciful illusion of Hindu exclusivity and supremacy, which started thriving in the era of the 1930s, sought inspiration from the emerging populist ideologies in Europe, Nazism and Fascism. These sweeping waves of nationalism gave momentum to the rising tide of intolerant Brahmanism, which was subsequently named Hindutva.<sup>3</sup> This expansionist Hindutva ideology envisioned to unite the neighbouring states of India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar into one supremacist Hindu Rashtra called ‘Akhand Bharat’.<sup>4</sup> These aspirations are ostensibly reflected in Indian military doctrines and foreign policies as well. While India’s strategic thinking has a deep-rooted connection with its ancient history, religious texts like the Vedas, Puranas, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, etc., the ultimate guide to Indian military thinking is considered to be Kautilya’s Arthashastra. It was the first comprehensive manifesto, comprising the principles of statecraft, foreign policy, governance, warfare, art of war and an all-encompassing worldview,<sup>5</sup> which still fascinates the Brahmin caste who are the torch bearers of Hindutva and Akhand Bharat ideologies.

Another decisive factor behind Indian doctrinal changes can be identified as technological advancement, be it domestic or foreign procured. The debate on whether technology drives policy or policy drives technology remains inconclusive. Nevertheless, in the Indian case, it can be clearly observed that rapid military modernisation and procurement of advanced technologies from developed countries had a profound effect on Indian doctrinal thinking. It therefore becomes imperative to study the theory of “Technological Determinism” in the context of Indian doctrinal changes. Technological determinism postulates that a state’s rationale for advanced weapon systems, including nuclear weapons, shapes the state’s fundamental policy choices and behaviour. Consequently, it is the technology that eventually shapes the course of future events within and

outside the region.<sup>6</sup> The theory further elaborates that the improvements in technology, whether it is indigenously developed or acquired from abroad, would lead to a transformation in the state's behaviour. This behaviour change would increase the urge to weaponise, and this aspiration for weaponisation could relegate other critical states' priorities to the lower tiers.

Therefore, in pursuit of technological advancement, a state would feel pressures for establishing institutional mechanisms, which in turn can become drivers for innovations and improvements in the military capabilities and doctrines. Indian doctrinal changes can unmistakably be attributed to the technological advancements. Several state institutions, either government-owned, like Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), Bharat Dynamics, etc., or private enterprises like TATA Advanced Systems, Reliance Engineering Limited, Mahindra & Mahindra Limited, and Kalyani Group, etc., are spearheading the technological advancements in India. This military-industrial complex in India, under the control of Indian scientists and corporate heads, forms the basis to steer the Indian defence and foreign policies in collaboration with the political and military elites.<sup>7</sup>

### **Indian Conventional War Fighting Doctrines**

After the partition of the sub-continent, the Indian leadership effectively used its military, which inherited the British and colonial legacy, in an offensive role and annexed several princely states in violation of the partition plan. In later years, Indian Prime Minister Nehru focused on enhancing India's status and role in global politics through economic growth and diplomatic efforts, so he did not accord priority to the budgetary needs for Indian military modernisation. Therefore, Indian military capabilities and war-fighting potential remained modest and limited in scope.<sup>8</sup> However, after facing defeat in the Indo-China War of 1962, Indian political leaders realised the significance of modernising the Indian armed forces. Several scholars argued that Indian war-fighting doctrine in the post-1971 war era was based on the concept of counter-offensive and defence in depth,<sup>9</sup> which can be contested, as during the 1971 war, India clearly had an offensive role in erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Even before the 1971 war, Indian forces invaded and annexed several princely states, including Junagadh, Manavadar, Hyderabad, Kashmir and Goa.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, while the posture of counter-offensive and defence in depth may have existed in Indian

doctrinal manuscripts, in reality, Indian forces assumed an offensive role since partition in 1947.

### **Post-1962 Doctrine**

The Indian modernisation of armed forces after the 1962 Indo-China war did not focus on mechanisation aspects, due to technological limitations, and primarily included light weapons and equipment related to infantry and tactical units against the Chinese threat.<sup>11</sup> However, after the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan, the Indian leadership realised that due to international diplomacy, it would not be possible to claim a swift and conclusive victory without the help of mechanised forces and thus established a panel in 1975 to propose prospective size and modernisation of the Indian armed forces by the year 2000.<sup>12</sup> Although the panel proposed mechanisation and technological modernisation of armed forces to include modern aircraft, tanks, artillery guns, and other weapon systems, no policy implementation mechanism was adopted to address technological constraints. From the 1980s onward, technological acquisition and gradual modernisation of the Indian armed forces started influencing the Indian behaviour, and an ambitious Indian army chief, General K. Sundarji, pushed forward not only military modernisation but also transformed the Indian war-fighting doctrine.<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that the technological advancement in the Indian armed forces led to changes in the Indian military's doctrinal thinking.

### **Sundarji Doctrine 1986**

General Sundarji envisioned a swift and decisive victory against Pakistan by employing mechanised formations in a blitzkrieg manner. He believed that due to increased population centres and the canal system in the Punjab region, an offensive would be slow and costly in terms of finances and human fatalities.<sup>14</sup> Sundarji doctrine envisaged deploying seven holding corps all along the Pakistani border, while placing three strike corps in central India (Ambala, Mathura and Bhopal). The holding corps comprised static and mechanised divisions. They were assigned a defensive role to hold the attacking formations of the Pakistan army. In contrast, the three Indian strike corps and the reorganised Army Plain Infantry Divisions (RAPIDS) were required to commence their blitzkrieg operations through deep manoeuvres in the Thar-Cholistan theatre and sever Pakistan into two halves.<sup>15</sup> Sundarji doctrine was put to the test in 1986/87 in two interconnected planned offensives, Trident and Brasstacks, which were actual war plans against Pakistan but were disguised as a large-scale military exercise.<sup>16</sup> A parallel contingency included a strike on Pakistan's nuclear facility at Kahuta

during the war.<sup>17</sup> However, Pakistan's swift deployment of armed forces and nuclear capability (termed as existential or non-weaponised deterrence) compelled the Indian military to call off the operation, exposing the weakness of the Sunderji doctrine.<sup>18</sup>

### **Limited War Fighting Doctrines 2003 Onwards**

During the 2001-02 crisis, the Indian army carried out large-scale mobilisation to deploy Indian armed forces in 'Operation Parakram' under the Sunderji doctrine. However, it took over three weeks for the Indian formations to complete the operational deployments, which provided Pakistan enough time to make counter moves and strengthen its defences, after which the international diplomacy swung into action. The failure of Operation Parakram led the Indian top brass to conclude that the Sunderji doctrine against Pakistan was no longer feasible and was instead a risky option due to the possession of nuclear weapons by both states. Moreover, due to the role of international actors in diffusing the crisis through mediation, and the advent of advanced surveillance and intelligence capabilities, the Indian army couldn't achieve its objectives against Pakistan in such a limited timeframe, after mobilising the forces for large-scale operations.<sup>19</sup> The age of the Sunderji doctrine had thus come to an end. In the post-2002 environment, the Indian army contemplated several war-fighting doctrines to fight a limited war against Pakistan under nuclear overhang.

### **Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) and Pro-Active Operations (PAO) Strategy**

In the aftermath of failed Operation Parakram, then Indian army chief General Sundararajan Padmanabhan initiated a process for re-evaluating the Indian army's war-fighting doctrine while seeking inspiration from the German blitzkrieg operations of the 1940s. Under the new war-fighting doctrine, the Indian army was to be structured into combined operation teams, also known as Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs), comprising infantry, engineers, artillery, and mechanised formations for limited ground operations.<sup>20</sup> The new Indian Army CSD was officially made public in April 2004 under General Nirmal Chander Vij. CSD envisaged reorganising the three-strike corps into eight IBGs and deploying them forward near the Pakistani border for initiating offensive operations within 72-96 hours of mobilisation and making shallow manoeuvres up to 40 to 80 km, from different locations under the cover of IAF and Naval Aviation, while remaining below the nuclear thresholds. Under the CSD, the holding corps were also restructured as "pivot corps", which were augmented with additional armour

and artillery resources and were assigned to hold the defences and carry out limited offensive operations under certain contingencies.<sup>21</sup> The CSD was aimed at the destruction of Pakistan's armed forces' offensive capability and holding shallow chunks of territory for subsequent political bargaining rather than severing Pakistan into two halves.

In 2004, the Indian army chief, General Deepak Kapoor, enumerated five imperatives behind the CSD. First, in a two-front war scenario, Indian armed forces should be able to fight a conventional war while maintaining a balance alongside the Chinese and Pakistani fronts. Second, the Indian military should be able to fight under a transformed battlefield environment due to several new factors, like the possession of nuclear weapons by Pakistan and new means of warfare in cyber, information, electronic and sub-conventional warfare domains. Third, the war should be fought in the enemy's territory while ensuring protection of neighbouring and littoral states, fourth, the changing nature of warfare makes it imperative to integrate tri-services, Army, Air Force and Navy in a composite war-fighting strategy and fifth, India must incorporate technological advancement and electronic warfare means in the future warfighting plans and doctrines.<sup>22</sup> However, in an interesting twist of events, the then Indian army chief, Vijay Kumar Singh, denied the existence of CSD in September 2010 and stressed that India's military posture was primarily defensive. This was in response to a WikiLeaks cable in which the US Ambassador Timothy Roemer, while analysing the CSD, had termed the Indian army mobilisation process as "slow and lumbering."<sup>23</sup>

In 2016, Colonel (retired) Vivek Chada, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), disclosed that CSD comprised two parts and only the first part of CSD, comprising retaliatory or counter-offensive elements, was made public, while the classified part remained hidden from the public sphere.<sup>24</sup> This assertion was further validated by another renowned Indian defence analyst, Colonel (retired) Ali Ahmed, who explained that under CSD India had two options, first to launch the offensive with the IBGs and halt the operations after limited incursions, and second, to pursue the success of IBGs further deep into Pakistani territory with one or two strike corps, capturing more territory but stopping just short of an all-out war threshold. Ali named the first option 'Cold Start and Stop', while the second option is 'Cold Start and Continue'.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it can be concluded that the classified part of the CSD probably comprised offensive operations or a PAO strategy to include the option

of employing the Indian strike corps in an offensive role deep into Pakistani territory. It was naïve and imprudent for Indian military planners to believe that such a large-scale offensive would keep the conflict below the nuclear threshold.

The offensive element of the CSD-POA strategy notably synchronised with the IAF Doctrine of 2012, which envisaged deep aerial (surgical) strikes against Pakistan's military targets with stand-off weapons.<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that CSD was conceived during the rule of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) after the 2001-02 escalation, and therefore, the Indian National Congress (INC) Party was less enthusiastic to operationalise the CSD and never officially acknowledged its existence.<sup>27</sup> The INC government also remained reluctant to appoint a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) who was mandated to reform the war-fighting doctrines of the Indian armed forces, as was proposed in the Kargil Committee report. Many scholars are of the opinion that due to the above administrative and operational problems, CSD and PAO could never be fully operationalised and probably only existed on paper.<sup>28</sup>

However, after the hardliner leaders of the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) came to power in 2014, CSD-PAO was brought back to life. General Bipin Rawat, who was appointed as Chief of Army Staff in December 2016, re-initiated the program for structural reform in the Indian Army in response to Pakistan's FSD. In 2017, Indian Army Chief General Bipin Rawat confirmed that CSD was operative and meant to serve the ends of conventional operations.<sup>29</sup> The Indian Army Integrated Defence Headquarters promulgated a Joint Warfare Doctrine in 2017, while the Indian Army released the Land Warfare Doctrine in 2018.<sup>30</sup> These doctrines mandated Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff, a tri-service organisation, to develop operational battle plans in the light of directions from Higher Defence Organisations,<sup>31</sup> which were to be subsequently executed by the IBGs placed under the Combined Arms Operational Headquarters.<sup>32</sup>

Indian Joint Warfare Doctrine also envisioned enhancing coordination and synchronisation between the inter-services to conduct joint or combined arms operations by enhancing the capabilities for non-contact and hybrid warfare. This new doctrine was apparently a departure from the concept of CSD, as the emphasis was on integration of tri-services and improving their coordination for joint actions.<sup>33</sup> CSD was primarily the initiative of the Indian Army. Under CSD, the IAF and Indian Navy were to operate as subordinate services to the Indian

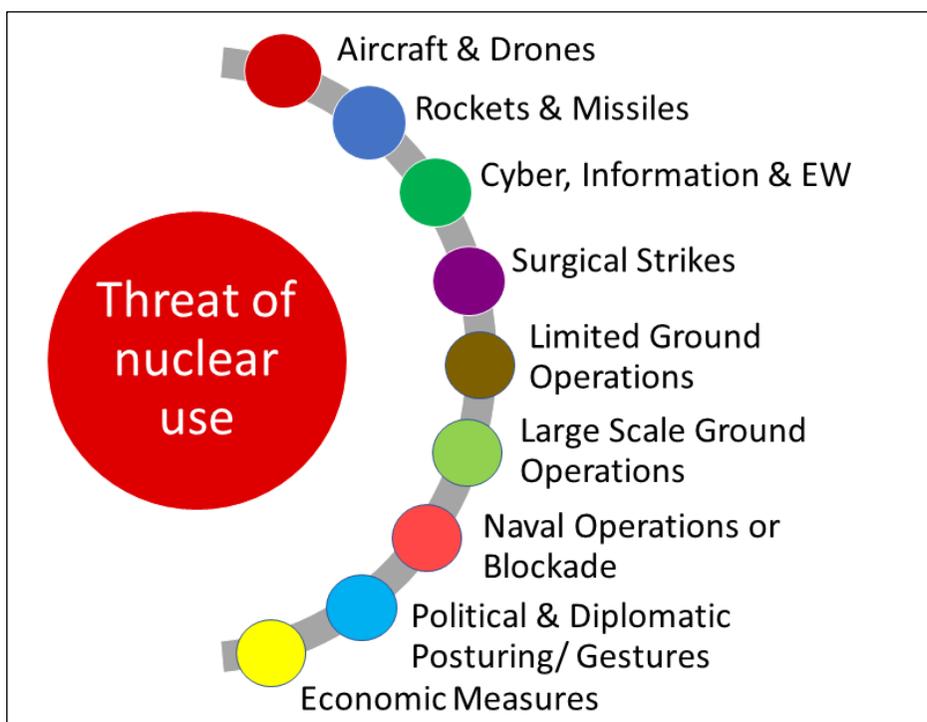
Army. Consequently, the IAF and Indian Navy were never comfortable with the idea of CSD due to the subservient role assigned to them on the battlefield.<sup>34</sup> It was becoming apparent that operationalisation of the CSD-PAO strategy was facing problems due to opposition from the IAF and the Indian Navy for becoming subservient to the Indian Army during the war and the conduct of military operations. One of the most ambitious projects launched by the Indian army was to transform the army into a model of IBGs from the existing division-level force structure. This restructuring was designed for the rapid deployment of IBGs for the CSD-PAO by establishing Integrated Theatre Commands (ITCs).<sup>35</sup>

Despite India's not officially forsaking the CSD-PAO strategy, the efficacy of these doctrines remains in limbo. The principal reason for the ineffectiveness and redundancy of CSD was Pakistan's adoption of FSD deterrence posture within the ambit of CMD. Under FSD, Pakistan inducted short-range nuclear-capable missile systems, notably Nasr, Babur and Raad. It introduced several doctrinal changes in conventional war plans by embracing the New Concept of War-Fighting. Pakistan's new concept constrained the Indian defence officials from operationalising the CSD, which, therefore, was considered a risky option to execute by Indian military planners.<sup>36</sup> Numerous scholars argued that Indian ambitions to fight a limited conventional war below the perceived nuclear thresholds remain a hazardous option, as there are no guarantees that Indian perceptions about Pakistani nuclear redlines would be accurate. These could not inadvertently be overstepped in the middle of a war. This scenario could become more plausible in case the Indian forces, pushing through Pakistani defences under the CSD-PAO, either experience a surprising victory or a stunning defeat, a situation that risks frustrating either side to contemplate the nuclear option. Interestingly, the Indian nuclear doctrine already contains implicit provisions to exercise pre-emptive nuclear options if it perceives an immediate nuclear threat.<sup>37</sup>

### **Dynamic Response Strategy (DRS) and ITCs**

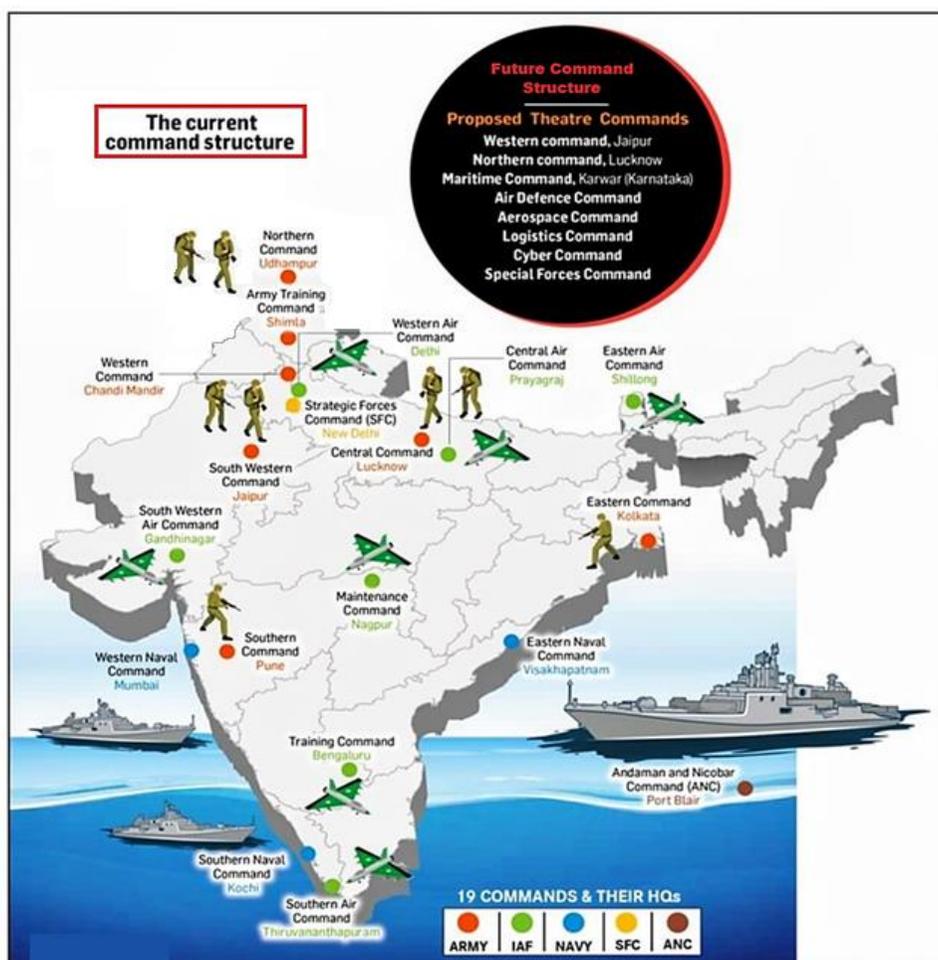
In Mar 2020, while speaking at a seminar on land warfare in New Delhi, the Indian army chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane stated that in the context of a two-front war scenario, along the Pakistani and Chinese borders, the Indian military was focusing on a dynamic response while remaining below the threshold of an all-out war. Referring to the Balakot surgical strike, General Naravane elaborated that, "*if you play the escalatory game with skill, military ascendancy can be established in short cycles of conflicts that do not necessarily lead to war.*"<sup>38</sup> Not enough information is available in public on DRS, which is still evolving and

currently at a nascent stage; however, there are clear indications that with the development and acquisition of advanced technologies by India, the BJP-RSS government started contemplating more innovative response options besides CSD-PAO, notably the DRS and Pivot to North strategy for managing a two-front war. While the Pivot to North strategy is simple, in which the Indian Strike Corps, located at Mathura, has been assigned the role of Mountain Strike Corps to launch an offensive from the Ladakh region against China, DRS is a more complex and multifarious strategy. Indian DRS envisages response options in multiple domains, including space, air, ground, sea, cyber, AI and electronic warfare, while integrating these in a single agile and cohesive framework of operations through the concept of network centric warfare,<sup>39</sup> while employing the threat of massive retaliation to deter the adversary from escalating the conflict to nuclear level. Therefore, it can be concluded that DRS envisages the use of multiple response options either in a particular theatre or in multiple theatres, under the threat of nuclear use or nuclear blackmail.



To formalise DRS, the BJP-led government appointed General Bipin Rawat as CDS to head the newly established Department of Military Affairs (DMA). It tasked him to restructure the Indian armed forces from the existing 17 single-service operational commands to three Joint or ITCs and five specialised commands. After appointing General Bipin Rawat as the first CDS, he was also

tasked by the government to carry out organisational reforms in other services as well, so as to bring synergy and jointness within the Indian armed forces. Under the newly proposed command structure, each command will be self-sustaining with autonomous logistics systems, communication systems and training modules, etc.<sup>40</sup> The foremost task for General Rawat was to establish two Joint Operational Commands, starting with the Maritime Command and the Joint Air-Defence Command, followed by two continental ITCs, one in the North for China and the other in the West for Pakistan. A comparison between the existing Commands and the proposed ITC structure may appear as follows:<sup>41</sup>



Therefore, according to existing literature, the Indian army is expected to be restructured into three specialised commands, i.e. Cyber Command, Logistic Command and Special Operations Command, in addition to five ITCs, i.e. Western Command, Northern Command, Maritime Command, Air Defence

Command and Aerospace Command.<sup>42</sup> India already has two theatre commands, Andaman & Nicobar Theatre Command and Strategic Force Command. Some scholars maintained that initially India had plans to establish five ITCs, which were later revised to three ITCs.<sup>43</sup> In 2019, India established three joint structures, which included the Defence Space Agency, the Defence Cyber Agency and a joint Special Operations Division, but there is no conclusive information on whether these existing commands and agencies will be merged into newly established commands or exist as per the current status.

Although the DRS and ITCs are still in an evolutionary stage, Operation Sindoor, launched on 7 May 2025, was planned and executed to validate the DRS and the integration status of the existing assets and systems. While describing the contours of Operation Sindoor, former high-ranking Indian officer wrote that Indian Air Force used French made SCALP cruise missiles, Israeli drones like Harpy, Harop, Sky Striker, and operationalized AI-powered Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) in synchronisation with Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping which were seeking guidance from satellites and indigenously developed Indian Regional Navigation Satellite Systems (IRNSS), also known as Navigation with Indian Constellation (NavIC). Operationalisation of these capabilities shows that India has embraced the essence of Multi-Domain Operations (MDO).

These operations were planned to conduct synchronised warfare across multiple axes with speed and precision. Deep strikes conducted against Pakistani strategic installations reflect the Indian transition from tactical retaliation to strategic coercion, while conducting punitive strikes and deterring retaliation, thus adopting a pre-emptive posture and not just a reactionary doctrine.<sup>44</sup> These sentiments reflect that the Hindutva expansionist ideology has deeply penetrated within the Indian government, besides civil and military institutions, and preemption has been accepted as a new norm while ignoring the nuclear dangers. The integration within the Indian Command structures under the DRS may involve the following patterns:

Domains	Assets and Systems	Integrated Arms/ Forces and Functions
Space	Satellites, A-SAT weapons, GIS Mapping, IRNSS or NavIC, Anti-Ballistic Missile Defence systems	Integration between IAF, Indian Navy, and land forces for target acquisition, conducting deep strikes,
Air	IAF, drones (UAVs and UCAVs),	

	Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS), Air Defence systems, hypersonic missiles	countering adversary's aircraft, missiles, and drones, jamming and anti-jamming operations and drone warfare
Land	Ground forces, attack helicopters, special operation teams, and local air defence systems, ground-based RADARS and command and control systems for navigation	
AI and EW	Air Defence systems, UCAVs, Directed Energy Weapons (DEW), Lasers, Microwaves and Electro-magnetic Weapons	
Sea	Submarines (both conventional and Ship Submersible Nuclear or SSN submarines), sea-launched missiles, AWACS, aircraft carriers, attack frigates/boats	Integrate the Maritime Theatre Command, Naval forces and maritime special forces.
Cyber	Cyber-attacks, cyber defence, network security	Protect all ITCs and critical infrastructure, and carry out cyber-attacks
Strategic Forces	Nuclear armed missiles, hypersonic missiles, aircraft and submarines (Ship Submersible Ballistic Nuclear or SSBN submarines)	Integrate forces in control of silo and TEL-based missiles, nuclear-armed aircraft and naval vessels.

## Emerging Trends and Lessons for Deterrence and Regional Stability

### Aspirations to Establish Hindu Rashtra and Akhand Bharat

The acquisition of advanced technologies is enabling Indian political leaders and military commanders to accomplish their long-standing ambition of transforming India into a Hindu Rashtra to establish Akhand Bharat subsequently. The rising Hindutva sentiments have gradually and systematically been penetrating within the Indian army over the last several years, especially since the BJP came to power in 2014, and made a controversial appointment of the army chief General Bipin Rawat.<sup>45</sup> BJP has been promoting senior military officers who are aligned with the extremist Hindutva ideology. This was illustrated once army

chief, General V. K. Singh, joined the BJP after retirement in 2014 and was elected as a member of the Indian parliament. In 2019, former Vice Chief of Army Staff, Lieutenant General Sarath Chand and in 2022, former Indian Army Chief General Joginder Jaswant Singh also joined the BJP.<sup>46</sup>

There were reports that General Bipin Rawat was appointed as army chief, after superseding two senior lieutenant generals, due to his close association with hardliner Indian National Security Advisor (NSA), Ajit Doval, belonging to the BJP. It was actually Doval who later played an essential role in General Rawat's appointment as CDS.<sup>47</sup> General Rawat echoed hardliner Hindutva sentiment while in service, by giving anti-Muslim statements while defending the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Registration of Citizens (NRC), which were specifically meant to target Indian Muslims. General Rawat also supported the action of an Indian military officer using unarmed Kashmiri Muslims as a human shield.<sup>48</sup>

The hardliner BJP-RSS government officials and Indian military chiefs have repeatedly shown their intent to annex Azad Jammu and Kashmir as a first step towards creating Akhand Bharat. The Indian defence minister Rajnath Singh has repeatedly said that India plans to annex the Pakistani-administered or Azad Kashmir.<sup>49</sup> In September 2019, Indian Army Chief General Rawat also stated that the Indian Army was ready to occupy Azad Kashmir and was waiting for the government's orders. In January 2020, Indian Army Chief M. M. Naravane repeated the same statement that the Indian Army would attack to claim Azad Kashmir as and when the government issues the orders. In December 2024, the wall portrait in the army chief's office, depicting a 1971 war trophy, was replaced with a portrait containing images of Krishna's chariot, Arjuna, Garuda and Chanakya Kautilya with a mix of modern and ancient weapons, which reflected epic stories of the Mahabharata.<sup>50</sup> In another controversy, Indian army chief General Upendra Dwivedi, while wearing uniform, visited an ashram of Hindu yogi, Jagadguru Rambhadracharya, in Madhya Pradesh, in May 2025. The Hindu yogi, later told the media that he had asked the Indian army chief to annex Pakistan's administered (Azad) Kashmir, and the Indian army chief promised to fulfil his wish.<sup>51</sup> These developments and statements clearly show that the Indian hardliners are seeking inspiration from their ancient religious texts and thinkers in pursuit of their expansionist and hegemonic agenda, using technology as a catalyst.

## **Increasing Risks of Escalation and an All-Out War**

The brinkmanship demonstrated by the hardliner Hindutva government in May 2025 undermined the deterrence equation in South Asia. This pattern can be observed since September 2016, once the Indian army claimed to have conducted a “so-called” surgical strike across the Line of Control (LoC). Since then, the Indian hardliner government has been probing the nuclear thresholds of Pakistan almost every three years. In February 2019, the IAF conducted a surgical strike across the international border in Balakot in response to frivolous accusations by Pakistan behind the Pulwama attack. In March 2022, a BrahMos missile, fired from Ambala, crashed near Mian Channu. After a delay of two days, once Pakistan raised the issue through diplomatic channels, the Indian government claimed that the missile was launched accidentally. On 7 May 2025, in one of the most brazen acts of aggression, India launched attacks deep inside Pakistan using BrahMos and air-to-surface SCALP cruise missiles, semi-autonomous armed drones armed with loitering munitions, and artillery to fire across the LoC. It is likely that in future, after getting embarrassed by the Pakistan Air Force twice, first in 2019 and later in 2025, India may consider initiating hostilities in the maritime domain.<sup>52</sup> While Pakistan’s FSD prevented India from launching a ground offensive under the CSD-PAO strategy, these surgical strikes since 2016 are being conducted under the DRS, which, although still in an embryonic stage.

The latest Indian aggression under the ‘Operation Sindoor’ indeed was an attempt to validate the command and control and integration aspects between the tri-services to draw lessons for structuring the ITCs. India's targeting strategy in Operation Sindoor against Pakistani strategic bases, assets and command and control systems clearly illustrates India's growing inclination towards adopting a decapitating counter-force strike posture, aimed at paralysing Pakistan’s strategic and nuclear response options and subsequently paving the space for a conventional war. There are signs that India is aspiring to adopt the Israeli pre-emptive strike model,<sup>53</sup> and recent Israeli decapitating strikes against Iran during Operation Rising Lion, which killed most of the top Iranian military commanders, may have only strengthened Indian faith in such an option.

Though Pakistan responded to Operation Sindoor with calibrated and measured counter-strikes against Indian bases and air-defence systems, several scholars considered Pakistan’s response as cautious and proportional, while short of Quid-Pro-Quo Plus (QPQ+).<sup>54</sup> Pakistan could have targeted Indian strategic

locations, aircraft carriers and other Indian critical infrastructure to deter it from undertaking such reckless actions in future. Although such a response could have further increased the risks of escalation, equally dangerous and destabilising is the idea of creating a new normal of fighting a limited war below the nuclear thresholds. Pakistan's policy of continuously demonstrating restraint and responsibility has a flip side of India perceiving it as a state of self-deterrence.

India has claimed that it will consider conducting similar strikes in future as well, claiming it to be a 'new normal' in South Asia. Keeping in view the irrational mindset and hegemonic ambitions, India may consider a combination of options under the so-called new normal, including launching ground operations in Kashmir, while exploiting the situation, as a significant number of Pakistani troops are deployed along the western border for counter-insurgency operations. This mindset carries extreme risks due to miscalculation, misperception or accident leading to a full-scale war which could result in a nuclear exchange. To avoid that risk, Pakistan may have to consider additional air defence and Suppression of Enemy Air Defence (SEAD) systems against drone and aerial attacks while considering strong retaliatory options in future that carry a much higher cost and thus unacceptable to India.

### **Restraint, Retaliation and Dominance Rungs of Escalation Ladder**

During the surgical strike of 2019, Pakistan showed responsibility and restraint in retaliation. However, some scholars argue that India probably considered these gestures of restraint as signs of hesitancy, weakness and indecisiveness,<sup>55</sup> and thus was emboldened to challenge the notion of deterrence by creating space for conflict below the nuclear threshold. Therefore, on 7 May 2025, India conducted one of the most irresponsible missile strikes deep inside Pakistani territory, though it lost several aircraft during the combat. However, this loss did not deter India from launching even more brazen and reckless drone and missile attacks against Pakistani strategic installations. Although Pakistan announced the policy of QPQ+ after the 2019 clash, Pakistan's response to Indian aggression was restrained on the first two days of the conflict. Pakistan only conducted proportional strikes on the final day, 10 May 2025, as Pakistan did not want to push the region into a full-scale war. However, Pakistan's restraint was considered by India as a sign of weakness, and thus India could not be deterred from escalating the conflict and Indian strikes, and a few Indian scholars questioned the efficacy of Pakistan's FSD, terming it a bluff while claiming to have

established a new normal.<sup>56</sup> This clearly implies that Pakistan will have to demonstrate a more robust and comprehensive response, capable of inflicting unacceptable damage, against future Indian aggressive actions to re-establish deterrence and deny India space for creating a new normal.

Another very dangerous dimension which emerged during the conflict was the cyber-attacks, fake news and propaganda, not only on social media but even on the Indian mainstream media as well, due to which it was not possible to ascertain which side was dominating the escalation rung. Fake news and propaganda gave the Indian public a false sense of victory during the conflict, which transformed into outright embarrassment at a later stage once the facts started getting published in the international media.<sup>57</sup> Such patterns could spiral conflict out of control, as due to emotionally charged domestic public pressure, both parties could try to project in the media that it is actually dominating the escalation process, regardless of the real situation on the ground. This race to dominate the escalatory rungs could force either side to use more sophisticated weapons and cyber-attacks against critical infrastructure and strategic sites, which could result in unintended and disastrous consequences. Pakistan would have to develop advanced cyber-defence capabilities against crippling cyber-attacks while taking proactive measures of continuously monitoring the Indian mainstream and social media to timely respond to fake news by projecting facts, while avoiding misleading content and news. This would deny India the potential to project to its domestic public through the media that it is dominating the escalation rung.

### **Temptations for Pre-emption**

There is increasing evidence that due to acquisitions of advanced weapon systems, Indian doctrinal thinking is shifting towards conducting a pre-emptive counterforce first strike. Indian policymakers have been evaluating the possibility of conducting a splendid counterforce first strike against Pakistan's nuclear command and control structure, selected strategic nuclear assets and locations to pre-empt and wipe out Pakistan's capability to target Indian strategic locations and cities. Indian policymakers perceive that this scenario would pave the way for them to wage a full-scale conventional war against Pakistan without the fear of nuclear retaliation.<sup>58</sup> It appears that the Indian hardliner government is employing the post-October 2023 Israeli strategy of targeting top military commanders and the command and control system of Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran. However, this is a very fanciful and far-fetched scenario as India cannot acquire the ability to completely take out Pakistan's nuclear forces, even in the distant future.

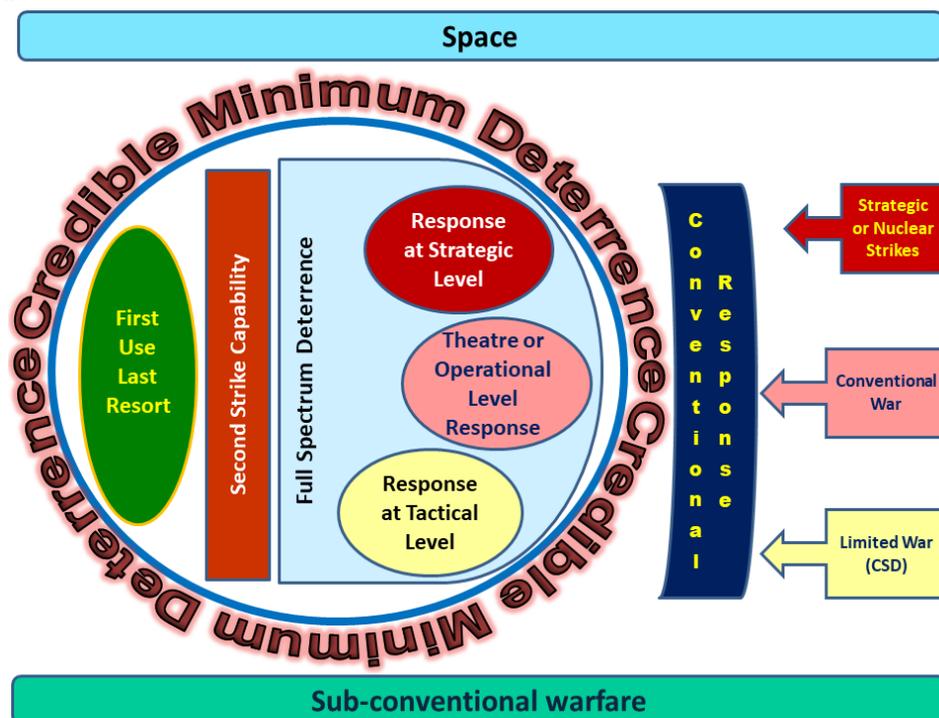
Historically, Indians have consistently grossly overestimated their capabilities while underestimating Pakistan's retaliatory options. Any such reckless action would not only fail but would also trigger an assured retaliatory strike from Pakistan. Recent Indian strikes, conducted deep inside Pakistani territory, under Operation Sindoor, illustrate that Indian hardliner Hindutva leaders may contemplate similar bolt out of the blue type strikes against Pakistan's nuclear command and control centres and strategic assets in future. Pakistan may thus have to develop an alternate command and control system and would have to harden its strategic locations and command and control structure to counter such an Indian attempt. Pakistan may consider developing an automated early warning and response system, similar to the 'Dead Hand System' developed by the Soviet Union and the US during the Cold War, to discourage India from considering such a reckless action with more technologically advanced weapon systems in future. Despite lacking the capability to conduct a decapitating first strike, such a contemplation by India is destabilising, irresponsible and dangerous for the region.

### **Deterrence Stability in South Asia**

Two overlapping concepts, deterrence and self-deterrence, have remained under discussion in South Asia. K. Subrahmanyam precisely explained these by saying that, "*exercise of deterrence is a matter of perception while the self-deterrence is a state of mind*".<sup>59</sup> Analysing the pattern of crisis and conflict in South Asia, from 2001 to May 2025, it can be concluded that deterrence stability in South Asia is eroding due to lingering disputes, which creates a stability-instability paradox. Persecution of Kashmiris by Indian military forces generates sentiments of deprivation, resentment and vengeance, thus perpetuating violence leading to crises. Consequently, the deterrence stability at the strategic level remains under stress due to a perpetual state of crisis at the lower end of the conflict spectrum. To divert global attention from its atrocities in Kashmir, India always scapegoats Pakistan by staging self-orchestrated incidents due to the latter's political, diplomatic and moral support for the Kashmiris' legitimate freedom struggle. Even senior Indian government officials have accused the BJP-RSS government of orchestrating false flag operations, like Pulwama and Uri, for political gains.<sup>60</sup> The same pattern was witnessed after the Pahalgam incident, once the Modi government accused Pakistan of the incident without any evidence. The BJP-RSS government fuelled the public sentiments against Pakistan to create a favourable environment for the election victory in Bihar. Such crises help the Indian

government to create space for a limited war below nuclear overhang and undermine deterrence in South Asia.

Speaking during a seminar at Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), former head of Pakistan's nuclear forces Lieutenant General Khalid Kidwai (retired) said that the rhetoric of Indian hardliner leaders cornered themselves in a 'political commitment trap', compelling them to break down deterrence and escalate the situation by striking targets deep inside Pakistan. This compelled Pakistan to retaliate and re-establish deterrence. He further stated that it was due to Pakistan's FSD, which compelled India to forsake CSD and instead adopt DRS.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, while FSD prevented India from operationalising CSD, Pakistan will probably need to come up with a formidable response against DRS. The concept of deterrence is premised on the notion of mutual vulnerability, in which the punitive cost dissuades an adversary from aggression due to the cost outweighing the presumed benefits. Likewise, strategic stability stems from the mutual vulnerability of strategic forces, due to which neither side sees any incentive in striking first. An ideally stable situation would be the absence of factors having potential for crisis or conflict.<sup>62</sup> Pakistan's FSD can be understood as follows:



The above graphical depiction of FSD indicates that it would be challenging to cover the DRS within the ambit of FSD. In South Asia, the

acquisition of advanced systems like AI-based semi-autonomous drones, SEAD and early warning capabilities, stand-off precision weapon systems like BrahMos and SCALP cruise missiles, advanced air-defence systems like S-400, fighter jets and SSBNs is encouraging a risk-taking and irresponsible behaviour within the Hindutva-led Indian government, which has stressed deterrence to its limits. Pakistan will have to formulate a tangible and befitting conventional response against DRS. Therefore, in case of similar future actions by India under the DRS, Pakistan, instead of showing restraint, will have to devise a strong retaliatory conventional response, QPQ plus, in tangible terms, to incur higher cost for Indian aggression. Only by projecting unacceptable cost to India against any aggression, the space for a limited war under the nuclear overhang can be denied to India. This necessitates that Pakistan will have to maintain a significantly large conventional missile inventory besides efficient air defence and early warning systems to protect against attacks through a swarm of drones, fighter aircraft and slow-moving cruise missiles.

## **Conclusion**

The plausibility for a major showdown between India and Pakistan in future is increasing. The rising tide of Hindu populism or Hindutva has transformed India's proclaimed secular outlook and the BJP-RSS duo is transforming India into a Hindu Rashtra while aiming to establish Akhand Baharat by annexing its neighbouring countries. Annexing Azad Jammu and Kashmir appears to be one of the immediate priorities of Hindu hardliners. The Indian strategic thought is driving the hardliner agenda and the advent of advanced technologies and high-end military hardware, is driving Indian leaders to pursue rapid military modernization to accomplish their agendas. This transformation is visible within the Indian armed forces as well which are in a state of transition since the nuclearization of South Asia. With the advent of nuclear deterrent by India and Pakistan, the Indian numerical advantage in conventional domain became irrelevant and redundant. Consequently, to justify maintaining a large size military, which could not be utilized to wage a full-scale conventional war either against China or Pakistan due to nuclear deterrence, Indian political leaders and military officials had to find a plausible justification for such a large size force. Therefore, the idea of waging a limited war under the nuclear overhang was promoted by the Indian defence officials under different war-fighting strategies like CSD, PAO, Theaterization and DRS.

The May 2025 conflict between India and Pakistan has raised the spectre of nuclear use in South Asia. With the help of advanced technologies, India conducted deep strikes inside Pakistan which indicates that Indian may be contemplating to adopt a pre-emptive strike posture in future, under the so-called “new normal” strategy. Pakistan may have to invest in its conventional ballistic and hypersonic missile capabilities, air-defence systems, cyber-defence capabilities, armed drones and airborne early warning systems. Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) systems are extremely costly with limited success rate in interception and may not be a feasible option. The conflict also highlighted that Pakistan needs to deepen its defence and economic relations with China while reducing dependency on the western equipment and technologies.

The Israeli pre-emptive strikes against Iran may motivate Hindutva hardliners to follow the Israeli playbook. Therefore, the possibility of a surprise counterforce strike by India, aimed at knocking out Pakistan’s nuclear command and control centres, is becoming conceivable, despite its zero possibility of success. Pakistan will have to devise costly conventional response options to deter India from conducting such destabilizing strikes in future. Apparently, Pakistan’s response and retaliation since 2016 has been considered insufficient by India. Though raising the cost through large-scale punitive retaliation will increase the risks of escalating the conflict into a full-scale war, but such risks will equally exist in scenarios if India conducts similar strikes in future under the so-called new normal.

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