



Research Paper

“Operation Sindoor: India's strategic Counter-Terrorism Response”

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Abstract:

“Operation Sindoor” represents a watershed moment in India's counter terrorism strategy and military doctrine. Started on 7th May, 2k25, in response to the devastating ‘Pahalgam terrorist attack’ that claimed 26 civilian lives, the tri-service military operation marked the most expansive cross-border strike of India since the 1971 war. This present paper seeks to examine the operation's strategic context, execution, technological deployment and far-reaching implications for South Asian geopolitics and global counter-terrorism doctrines.

Keywords: Operation Sindoor, Counter-terrorism, South Asian geopolitics, strategic Implications, Pahalgam attack

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I. Introduction:

In the pre-dawn hours of 7th May, 2k25, the Indian Armed Forces executed “Operation Sindoor”, a meticulously planned precision strike operation targeting ‘terrorist infrastructure’ across nine locations in Pakistan and ‘Pakistan-occupied Kashmir’ (‘PoK’). Named after the sacred red vermillion symbolizing resolve and sacrifice, the operation was conceived as India's decisive response to the ‘Pahalgam terrorist attack of April 22, 2k25’, which represented the deadliest assault on civilians in the region since the 26/11 attacks. The operation's significance extends beyond its immediate tactical objectives, representing a fundamental shift in India's ‘strategic’ posture from reactive deterrence to proactive offensive defense. This transformation reflects what analysts have termed the emergence of the “Sindoor Doctrine”, a new paradigm in India's counter-terrorism approach that emphasizes precision, jointness and ‘strategic’ restraint while maintaining the credible threat of disproportionate retaliation.

II. Strategic Context and Background:

2.1. The Pahalgam Terror Attack

The catalyst for “Operation Sindoor” was the horrific terrorist attack at Baisaran Valley, Pahalgam, on 22nd April, 2k25. Four to five heavily armed terrorists, equipped with the American-made M4 carbines and AK-47 assault rifles, systematically targeted tourists based on their religious identity. The attackers, belonging to ‘The Resistance Front’ (‘TRF’), an offshoot of the Pakistan-based ‘Lashkar-e-Taiba’ (‘LeT’), segregated victims by ‘religion’ before executing 26 individuals, including 25 Indians and 01 Nepali national. The attack's methodology was particularly egregious, with terrorists forcing potential victims to recite Islamic prayers to identify ‘non-Muslims’, then executing ‘Hindu and Christian tourists’ at point-blank range while sparing women and children. Among the victims were newly married couples, a Navy officer married just a week prior and an Intelligence Bureau official shot dead in front of his wife. The attackers utilized military-grade equipment, including helmet-mounted cameras to record the massacre, indicating sophisticated logistical support and external coordination.

2.2. Intelligence Assessment and Target Selection

The Indian response was predicated on comprehensive intelligence gathering conducted over 15 days following the ‘Pahalgam attack’. The Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) provided coordinates for nine

strategically vital terrorist facilities, while the National Security Advisor Mr. Ajit Doval reportedly conducted over 15 high-level meetings with security and defense officials to oversee planning and execution. The target selection process was intelligence-driven and methodical, focusing on dismantling the operational capabilities of three primary terrorist organizations like the ‘Jaish-e-Mohammed’ (‘JeM’), the ‘Lashkar-e-Taiba’ (‘LeT’) and the ‘Hizbul Mujahideen’. The targeted facilities included training camps, command centers and operational headquarters across Pakistan's Punjab province and PoK, marking the first time since 1971 that India struck targets deep within Pakistan's heartland.

III. Operational Execution and Military Technology:

3.1. Multi-Domain Strike Architecture

“Operation Sindoor” demonstrated unprecedented tri-service coordination, involving the Indian Army, the Navy and the Air Force in a synchronized 25 minutes operation. The operation started at 01:05 AM and ended by 01:30 AM, showcasing the precision timing and coordination that characterized the new military doctrine of India. The Indian Air Force played the main role, deploying Rafale multirole fighters as the principal strike platform. These aircraft were armed with advanced precision-guided munitions specifically selected for their accuracy and ability to minimize collateral damage while maximizing destructive impact on hardened targets.

3.2. Advanced Weapons Systems

The technological sophistication of “Operation Sindoor” was evident in the weapons systems deployed:

- **SCALP Cruise Missiles:** Also known as Storm Shadow, these long-range air-launched cruise missiles provided India with deep-strike capability extending beyond 500 kilometers. Manufactured by MBDA, these missiles utilize advanced navigation systems integrating inertial navigation, GPS and terrain-referencing technologies, allowing low-altitude flight to evade radar detection while maintaining surgical precision.
- **HAMMER Precision-Guided Munitions:** Developed by French company Safran, these all-weather air-to-ground precision-guided bombs combine GPS, inertial navigation and laser guidance systems. With a range of approximately 70 kilometers, HAMMER munitions proved particularly effective against fortified structures and mobile targets.
- **Loitering Munitions:** The operation employed kamikaze drones capable of hovering over target areas before executing autonomous strikes. These systems provided real-time surveillance and target verification, enabling surgical strikes on time-sensitive targets while supporting reconnaissance missions.
- **BrahMos Supersonic Missiles:** India's indigenous supersonic cruise missile system was deployed for rapid, bunker-busting operations against high-value targets. With speeds exceeding Mach 2.8 and a range of 450-500 kilometers, BrahMos missiles provided unparalleled penetration capability against hardened infrastructure.

3.3. Target Analysis and Damage Assessment

The nine targeted locations were strategically selected based on their operational significance to terrorist organizations:

- **Masjid Subhan Allah, Bahawalpur:** The JeM headquarters located 100 kilometers from the International Boundary, serving as the primary center for leadership and operations.
- **Markaz Taiba, Muridke:** The LeT headquarters where the 26/11 Mumbai attack perpetrators, including Ajmal Kasab, received training.
- **Syedna Bilal Camp, Muzaffarabad:** The Major JeM staging area for arms, explosives and jungle survival training.
- **Sawai Nala Camp, Muzaffarabad:** LeT training center where terrorists involved in multiple attacks, including Pahalgam, received preparation. The strikes resulted in confirmed elimination of over 100 terrorists, including high-value targets such as JeM leader Abdul Rauf Azhar, involved in the IC-814 hijacking and Daniel Pearl's murder. Additionally, ten family members of JeM Chief Masood Azhar were reportedly killed, representing a significant degradation of terrorist leadership structure.

IV. Escalation Dynamics and Pakistani Response:

4.1. Pakistani Retaliation and India's Counter-Response

Pakistan's response to “Operation Sindoor” demonstrated a pattern of escalatory behavior that ultimately validated India's ‘strategic’ calculations. On May 8, 2025, Pakistan launched coordinated drone and missile strikes targeting over a dozen Indian military installations across Northern and Western theaters, including Srinagar, Jammu, Pathankot, Amritsar and Bhuj. India's robust Integrated Counter-drone Grid and layered air defense systems successfully intercepted these attacks, with debris conclusively traced to Pakistani origin. The failure of Pakistan's retaliatory strikes highlighted the technological and ‘strategic’ superiority that India had achieved through decades of defense modernization. In response to Pakistani escalation, India conducted precision strikes against Pakistani air defense systems in ‘Rawalpindi, Lahore and Karachi’ on May 8. The 23 minutes operation

successfully neutralized the air defense radar of Lahore and demonstrated the ability of India to penetrate Pakistani airspace at will, while bypassing Chinese-supplied defense systems.

4.2. Ceasefire and Continued Violations

Following sustained military pressure and international diplomatic intervention, Pakistan's Director General of Military Operations contacted his Indian counterpart, leading to a ceasefire agreement effective from 1700 hours IST on May 10, 2025. However, Pakistan's subsequent violations of the ceasefire, including continued drone intrusions and cross-border firing, demonstrated the fragility of the agreement and the need for sustained deterrence.

V. Strategic Implications and Doctrinal Evolution:

5.1. The Emergence of the Sindoor Doctrine

“Operation Sindoor” has crystallized into what ‘strategic’ analysts term the “Sindoor Doctrine”, representing a fundamental shift in India's counter-terrorism approach. This doctrine is characterized by four core pillars. They are discussed below.

- **Proactive Defense Through Offense:** India demonstrated its willingness to conduct preemptive strikes against ‘terrorist infrastructure’, regardless of their location, thereby shifting from reactive to proactive deterrence.
- **Asymmetric Response:** The operation showcased India's ability to respond disproportionately to terrorist provocations, targeting not just immediate threats but the entire terrorist ecosystem including state sponsors.
- **Strategic Restraint with Precision:** While maintaining escalatory control, India demonstrated the capability to inflict maximum damage on ‘terrorist infrastructure’ while avoiding civilian casualties and military installations.
- **Unitary Command and Coordination:** The seamless integration of tri-service operations under unified command structure highlighted India's evolution toward joint warfare capabilities.

5.2. Technological Demonstration and Defense Diplomacy

“Operation Sindoor” served multiple ‘strategic’ objectives beyond immediate counter terrorism goals. The operation functioned as a comprehensive technology demonstration, showcasing India's indigenous defense capabilities to potential international partners. The successful deployment of domestically developed systems, including the ‘Akash missile system’, ‘Surya VHF radar’ and various indigenous air defense platforms, reinforced India's “Atmanirbhar Bharat” initiative. This technological demonstration has significant implications for India's defense export ambitions, particularly in Southeast Asia and Africa, where countries seek credible alternatives to traditional defense suppliers. The operation's success enhances India's credentials as a technology capable power and potential security provider in the “Indo-Pacific region”.

VI. International Response and Diplomatic Consequences:

6.1. Global Support for India's Actions

The international response to “Operation Sindoor” was predominantly supportive of India's right to self-defense against terrorism. Key international partners, including the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE expressed their support for India's position while emphasizing the need for restraint and diplomatic resolution. The European Union (EU) and all 27 member states issued a unified statement supporting India's counter-terrorism efforts. The US President Donald Trump expressed solidarity with India, affirming its sovereign right to combat terrorism while urging restraint and diplomatic engagement. Israeli officials, drawing parallels to their own counter-terrorism experiences stated that “terrorists have no sanctuary” and supported India's right to defend itself. Russia, while calling for restraint from both sides, explicitly condemned all forms of terrorism and expressed concern about military escalation. This nuanced response reflected Russia's ‘strategic’ partnership with India while maintaining relations with Pakistan.

6.2. Strategic Communication and Narrative Management

India's diplomatic strategy emphasized proactive engagement with international partners, briefing key allies including the United States, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Russia within hours of the operation. The consistent message emphasized India's measured and responsible approach, highlighting those strikes targeted only ‘terrorist infrastructure’ while avoiding civilian and military installations. However, analysts have noted that India initially ceded narrative space to Pakistan's claims, allowing misinformation about aircraft losses and civilian casualties to dominate early coverage. This experience has highlighted the importance of ‘strategic’ communication in modern warfare, where narrative control is as crucial as battlefield success.

VII. Military Strategic Lessons and Future Implications:

7.1. Transformation in Warfare Paradigms

“Operation Sindoor” marked a significant evolution in South Asian warfare, representing what analysts term the subcontinent's first “non-contact war”. The operation demonstrated that modern conflicts can achieve ‘strategic’ objectives without traditional ground force deployment, relying instead on precision-guided munitions, advanced surveillance systems and real-time intelligence. This transformation has profound implications for future military planning and defense procurement. The operation showcased the primacy of air power, intelligence systems and precision strike capabilities over traditional force structures. The limited casualties on the Indian side (5 military personnel) compared to the extensive damage inflicted on ‘terrorist infrastructure’ validates this ‘strategic’ approach.

7.2. Deterrence Theory and Nuclear Dynamics

“Operation Sindoor” challenged traditional deterrence equations in South Asia, particularly the role of ‘nuclear weapons’ in preventing conventional retaliation. Pakistan's inability to escalate effectively despite its nuclear capabilities demonstrated that ‘nuclear weapons’ provide limited deterrence against precisely targeted counter-terrorism operations that avoid ‘strategic’ assets. India's new doctrine explicitly rejects “nuclear blackmail” as a shield for terrorist activities, establishing that responses to ‘terrorist attacks’ will be on “India's terms” regardless of nuclear posturing. This represents a maturation of Indian ‘strategic’ thinking, where ‘nuclear weapons’ are viewed as instruments of last resort rather than comprehensive deterrents against all forms of conventional response.

7.3. Regional Stability and Arms Race Implications

While “Operation Sindoor” achieved its immediate objectives, it has implications for regional stability and potential arms race dynamics. Pakistan's demonstrated vulnerability to precision strikes may drive investment in advanced air defense systems, counter drone technologies and asymmetric warfare capabilities. The operation's success may also influence Chinese ‘strategic’ calculations, particularly regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea, where similar precision strike capabilities could alter regional balance. India's demonstration of technological sophistication and operational effectiveness sends indirect signals to China amid ongoing border tensions in Eastern Ladakh.

7.4. Economic and Defense Industrial Implications

“Operation Sindoor” provided real world validation of India's defense industrial capabilities, particularly in areas of precision-guided munitions, air defense systems, and command-and-control infrastructure. The successful deployment of indigenous systems alongside imported platforms demonstrated the maturation of India's defense ecosystem. The operation's technological success has boosted confidence in Indian defense products, potentially accelerating export opportunities and reducing import dependence. Companies involved in developing indigenous systems, including ‘Bharat Dynamics Limited’, ‘Hindustan Aeronautics Limited’, and various private sector entities, have gained credible performance credentials.

7.5. Defense Procurement and Technology Transfer

The operation highlighted the importance of technology transfer and indigenous production capabilities in modern warfare. The successful integration of ‘French SCALP’ missiles and ‘HAMMER’ bombs with Indian platforms demonstrated the value of defense partnerships that include technology transfer provisions. Future defense procurement decisions will likely prioritize systems that can be produced domestically and integrated with indigenous platforms, supporting the “Atmanirbhar Bharat” initiative while ensuring operational effectiveness.

VIII. Challenges and Limitations:

8.1. Intelligence and Targeting Challenges

Despite its success, “Operation Sindoor” revealed certain limitations in intelligence capabilities and target assessment. The operation's effectiveness depended heavily on accurate intelligence regarding terrorist camp locations and leadership presence. Future operations will require enhanced human intelligence networks and real time surveillance capabilities to maintain operational effectiveness. The challenge of distinguishing between ‘terrorist infrastructure’ and civilian facilities in densely populated areas remains a significant constraint on similar operations. ‘Advanced target identification technologies’ and ‘enhanced precision munitions’ will be essential for maintaining operational success while minimizing collateral damage risks.

8.2. Escalation Management and Strategic Communication

The operation highlighted the importance of escalation management and ‘strategic’ communication in modern conflicts. India's initial silence regarding operational details allowed Pakistan to shape the narrative around aircraft losses and civilian casualties, potentially undermining the operation's ‘strategic’ messaging. Future operations will require integrated ‘strategic’ communication plans that provide timely, accurate information to domestic and international audiences while maintaining operational security. The balance between transparency and security remains a critical challenge in the information age.

IX. Future Implications and Recommendations:

9.1. Doctrinal Development and Institutionalization

The success of “Operation Sindoor” necessitates its institutionalization within India's defense doctrine and training curricula. Military academies and staff colleges should incorporate lessons learned from the operation into their ‘strategic’ studies programs, ensuring that future military leaders understand the operational and ‘strategic’ principles underlying the “Sindoor Doctrine”. The operation's multi-domain approach should inform joint warfare training exercises and inter-service coordination mechanisms. Regular joint exercises simulating similar scenarios will maintain operational readiness and inter-service coordination capabilities.

9.2. Technology Development and Procurement

The technological requirements of “Operation Sindoor” should guide future defense research and development priorities. Enhanced precision-guided munitions, improved surveillance systems and advanced electronic warfare capabilities represent critical areas for continued investment. The operation demonstrated the value of indigenous defense capabilities, suggesting that future procurement decisions should prioritize domestic production and technology transfer agreements that support long-term ‘strategic’ autonomy.

9.3. Regional Engagement and Diplomacy

While maintaining deterrence capabilities, India should engage in sustained diplomatic efforts to address underlying sources of regional instability. The success of “Operation Sindoor” provides India with enhanced credibility in regional and international forums, creating opportunities for leadership in counter-terrorism cooperation. Enhanced engagement with international partners on counter-terrorism issues, particularly through multilateral frameworks, can help institutionalize the principles underlying “Operation Sindoor”, while building broader coalitions against state-sponsored terrorism.

X. Conclusion:

“Operation Sindoor” signifies a transformative moment in India's ‘strategic’ evolution, marking the transition from reactive deterrence to proactive offensive defense. The success of this operation in achieving its immediate objectives while maintaining escalation control demonstrates the effectiveness of precision-guided conventional responses to terrorist provocations. The emergence of the “Sindoor Doctrine” launches new parameters for India's counter-terrorism strategy, emphasizing technological superiority, joint operations and ‘strategic’ restraint. This doctrinal evolution reflects India's growing confidence in its military capabilities and its commitment to defending national interests against asymmetric threats. The broader implications of the operation extend beyond bilateral India-Pakistan relations, influencing regional ‘strategic’ calculations and global counter-terrorism practices. The successful demonstration of precision strike capabilities without ground force deployment offers a model for addressing terrorist threats while minimizing escalation risks. However, the long-term success of the operation will depend on sustained commitment to the principles underlying the Sindoor Doctrine i.e precision in targeting, restraint in execution and consistency in ‘strategic’ messaging. The integration of these principles into India's broader defense doctrine and ‘strategic’ culture will determine whether “Operation Sindoor” represents a tactical success or a genuine ‘strategic’ transformation. As India continues to face evolving security challenges in an increasingly complex regional and global environment, the lessons of “Operation Sindoor” provide valuable guidance for future counter-terrorism operations. The emphasis of the operation on technological advantage, international cooperation and ‘strategic’ communication offers a framework for addressing contemporary security challenges while maintaining India's commitment to responsible ‘strategic’ behavior. The ultimate measure of Operation Sindoor's success will be its ability to deter future ‘terrorist attacks’ while contributing to broader regional stability. Early indicators suggest that the operation has succeeded in raising the costs of state-sponsored terrorism while demonstrating India's resolve and capability to protect its citizens and interests. The continuation of this deterrent effect will require sustained commitment to the ‘strategic’ principles and capabilities that made “Operation Sindoor” possible.

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