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## 4. Tactical Successes and Strategic Challenges in Indian Defense Policy

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A short but startling conflict overshadowed Indian defense policy in 2025. On May 7, in retaliation for a gruesome terrorist attack the previous month, India launched Operation Sindoor against nine sites associated with terrorist groups based in Pakistan. Following the inevitable Pakistani retaliation, the two sides traded tit-for-tat air and missile attacks against a growing set of military targets before agreeing to a ceasefire. The conflict lasted only four days, but it was startling because of the scale of India's initial attack, the extensive use of new technologies such as drones and cruise missiles, and the rapid escalation of the conflict to include strategic targets deep inside Pakistan. A chorus of Indian domestic opinion declared victory, and almost instantly, this short conflict changed public discourse about Indian defense policy.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the postcrisis triumphalism, however, this chapter will show that the underlying conditions of Indian defense policy remain troubled. Major reforms to higher defense organization and major procurement necessities—both of which are critical for Indian military capabilities—remain stalled. More fundamentally, entrenched historical and political constraints distort operational and force structure planning and limit the prospects for reform. The Indian military's posture remains disproportionately weighted to its continental

land borders rather than the wider Indian Ocean region, the army in particular remains disproportionately weighted toward Pakistan, and recent political direction to encourage self-reliance comes at the expense of capability development.

Set against that background, India's performance in Operation Sindoor was superficially impressive but strategically ineffectual. India's military capabilities and doctrine did usher in a new approach to managing the threat of Pakistan-based terrorism. But this new approach is far from decisive and is replete with its own challenges and risks. The conflict also field-tested Pakistan's Chinese-origin military equipment and prompted hopeful claims that the Chinese military itself may be weaker than it appears. But despite India besting Pakistan in battle, Operation Sindoor should give India cause for concern, rather than undue confidence, in managing the threat from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China.

This chapter explores the current state of Indian defense policy in four parts. First, it offers a brief update on the slow progress of highly anticipated reforms and procurements; second, it outlines the deeper structural constraints that distort policymaking and retard reforms; third, it evaluates the strategic shift brought by Operation Sindoor;

and finally, it shows how the conflict revealed Indian operational challenges, especially against the PLA.

## THE “YEAR OF REFORMS” THAT WASN’T

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On New Year’s Day 2025, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh declared 2025 would be the “year of reforms.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, many reforms of the defense organization were highly anticipated but long delayed. The position of the chief of defence staff (CDS) was established in 2019, but it was supposed to be simply the first phase in a train of further reforms. Some minor reforms have been enacted, such as the establishment of tri-services agencies to coordinate efforts on cyber, space, and special forces. In 2025, the Indian military released new joint doctrines for cyber operations, amphibious operations, special operations, airborne and heliborne operations, and multidomain operations; and it established a new joint education corps.<sup>3</sup> The Indian Army unveiled new types of formations—known as Rudra brigades and Bhairav battalions—and field-tested them in exercises in November. It even hinted at a new doctrinal concept known as “Cold Strike” to replace the erstwhile “Cold Start”—although early indications suggest that may be little more than informal nomenclature change rather than anything substantial.<sup>4</sup>

The most high-profile and potentially high-impact reform, however, remains unrealized. The first CDS was assigned the task of implementing the establishment of joint theater commands. The Indian military is currently organized around seventeen single-service commands—none of which are even collocated with each other—that are responsible for the training, planning, and operations of their respective service’s forces. Joint theater commands, which most advanced militaries have used for years, would allow the military to better coordinate the plans and operations of

its various services in a given geographic area, or theater. The first CDS, Gen. Bipin Rawat, was given three years to implement the reorganization to theater commands, known as *theaterization*, but encountered significant resistance from entrenched bureaucratic interests. In particular, the Indian Air Force has consistently opposed theaterization because, it argues, parceling units across multiple theaters would deny it the ability to rapidly reposition and concentrate capabilities across different areas, which is doctrinally considered a key strength of airpower.

In 2025 the Indian military leadership continued its inconclusive negotiations over theaterization. At a military conference in August, the chief of air staff, Air Chief Marshal A. P. Singh, seemed to offer a fruitful compromise. He suggested that planning and operations could be conducted jointly at a single national-level headquarters—that is, he proposed that jointness need not also entail multiple theater commands, as reform debates had previously assumed. The air force leadership likely made this suggestion—which would finally overcome its primary objection to theaterization—because it felt vindicated by the dynamics of the May conflict. But the other services nevertheless opposed this alternative pathway to jointness.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the Indian military did not announce any progress toward establishing an Integrated Rocket Force (IRF). The Indian military has openly contemplated the idea of an IRF since 2021 (taking inspiration from China’s joint missile force) as a way to centralize command and control for conventional missiles.<sup>6</sup> India has begun to invest more resources in developing such capabilities, and it used them extensively in Operation Sindoor in May 2025. But despite its prominence in the 2025 conflict, and despite Pakistan announcing plans for its own joint rocket force,<sup>7</sup> the Indian military has not yet unveiled its IRF.

As the travails of theaterization reform and the IRF have shown, in the past as well as in 2025 such

organizational reforms demand a clear vision and direction from the military's civilian leadership, which, in the Indian system, means the Prime Minister's Office. In the absence of that direction, military services each have many veto points to dilute or stall reforms to safeguard their own corporate interests.

Other long-awaited reforms were similarly stalled. Despite perennial reporting that the Indian government has developed a national security strategy, none has ever been publicly released. Such a document would be a critical instrument of top-down guidance to align various strands of national security policy, a mechanism to enforce bureaucratic accountability, and a clear signal of Indian policy intent.<sup>8</sup> But it remains elusive, probably because the government perceives a public strategy document as an unneeded and unwelcome hindrance to its freedom of action.

The Indian military also failed to advance some major and long overdue equipment acquisitions. The navy certainly achieved a significant expansion of its order of battle in 2025, with plans to commission ten new ships.<sup>9</sup> However, those new additions represent the culmination of lengthy procurement processes that began several years ago. The navy was unable to advance the procurement of major new platforms in 2025, such as aircraft carriers and submarines, which it has been seeking for years.

Similarly, the air force continues to languish with a grossly understrength order of battle. With the retirement of the last of India's MiG-21 aircraft in September, the air force's strength slipped to twenty-nine squadrons, compared with a mandated strength of forty-two squadrons. Delays in the production of indigenous Tejas fighters continued in 2025. And after years of delays, the air force finally decided in August to abandon the tender process for its multirole fighters and to seek instead a direct government-to-government purchase of 114 more Rafale fighters, to be built in

India.<sup>10</sup> These lengthy procurements will still not be completed until well into the 2030s.

## STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES UNMET

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The Indian defense establishment is in dire need of reform because it faces abiding structural challenges. In the absence of a regular and systematic first-principles review of strategic needs, such as a national security strategy process, its national security planning decisions therefore typically reflect annual cycles of interservice and bureaucratic negotiations, where change is reactive and incremental at best. Usually, it is too little, too late. Over time, these structural distortions have limited the policy options available to its leaders and raised the barriers to policy change. These challenges are legion, but the events of 2025—especially the conflict with Pakistan in May—threw three such challenges into particularly sharp relief. Each inherently entails trade-offs. New Delhi's choices between these trade-offs shape how effectively India can meet national security needs but also reveal the depth of the structural policymaking constraints it faces.

## WESTERN VERSUS NORTHERN BORDERS

India is permanently pressed up against its two main security rivals, Pakistan and China, on its western and northern borders, respectively. It has a much bloodier history of conflict with Pakistan, having fought four conventional wars and engaged in countless skirmishes and crises. In this context, the May 2025 conflict was the latest in a long evolution of militarized friction with Pakistan that began at the point of the two countries' independence decades ago.<sup>11</sup> However, the strategic challenge posed by China is more consequential and more difficult to manage for India. China is a significantly more powerful adversary, with abiding geopolitical incentives to suppress Indian power and influence. Indeed, the simultaneous dangers that Beijing poses to India's sovereignty, economic

security, and role in the world are unprecedented in Indian history.<sup>12</sup>

New Delhi's national security elite have for years accepted that China, not Pakistan, is India's principal strategic rival. But India continues to underinvest in countering China.<sup>13</sup> And a deep reservoir of historical enmity, inflamed by an inevitable drumbeat of crises, continues to distort Indian defense prioritization so that Pakistan still attracts a disproportionate share of Indian resources and attention.<sup>14</sup>

This distortion remains pronounced in the narrow domain of ground force dispositions between the western and northern borders, despite India taking steps to correct it in recent decades. In 2014 the Indian Army formally established a major new formation, 17 Corps, its first Mountain Strike Corps. India already had three strike corps dedicated to launching offensives against Pakistan; this would be the first such offensive corps designated to the China border. But soon after its establishment, New Delhi truncated the plan after raising only one subordinate division because of a shortage of funds.<sup>15</sup> Following the outbreak of the 2020 border crisis at Ladakh, India redesignated one of its Pakistan-facing strike corps to a China-facing mission.<sup>16</sup> It also reallocated some formations previously tasked with counterterrorism or internal security to a border defense role at the Line of Actual Control (LAC).<sup>17</sup> The trend of bolstering defenses against China was clear—but limited. Even after the reallocations of army formation responsibilities, more of the Indian Army is assigned to Pakistan-facing missions than China-facing missions; by one account, some twenty divisions remain directed against Pakistan, with sixteen against China and two deployable nationwide.<sup>18</sup> With renewed alarm over the Pakistan threat, after Operation Sindoor and the contemporaneous thaw in India-China relations after the Ladakh crisis, this trend of rebalancing the Indian Army's posture is likely to be over, at least for now.

In fact, concerns over China's unstoppable influence may paradoxically contribute to the ongoing imbalance in favor of the western border. For years the Indian national security elite has fretted about a potential two-front "collusive" threat—the idea that Pakistan and China may deliberately or opportunistically attack India simultaneously. This has long been the worst-case planning scenario for the Indian military, even if it is politically unrealistic. But Operation Sindoor highlighted that India may no longer face a collusive two-front problem but now "one front, reinforced," in which China actively and in real time supports Pakistani operations against India.<sup>19</sup> By making the western border that much more dangerous, China may actually breathe new life into Indian threat perceptions of Pakistan, retarding efforts to rebalance the Indian Army's disposition toward the northern border. Operation Sindoor, then, certainly did not address this deeply entrenched structural distortion that demands a heavy military presence against Pakistan, and if anything it served to exacerbate it.

## **CONTINENTAL VERSUS MARITIME FOCUS**

India's national security, of course, cannot be reduced simply to two land borders; it faces growing threats on all sides. The land borders pose obvious dangers and have been the source of all of India's conventional wars and military crises. But India also faces emerging strategic risks in the vast oceanic expanse to its south, in the Indian Ocean Region. India has traditionally dominated this maritime zone and still retains some distinct advantages over all other regional powers. However, China's rapidly expanding naval power and strategic influence in the Indian Ocean region pose clear and growing strategic risks for India. Unless India adapts quickly, it risks losing its dominant position in the near future.

The land borders and the maritime region present starkly different threat environments for India. The land borders have been the vector of all external direct threats to Indian territory

since independence—that is, wars in 1947–48, 1962, 1965, 1971, and 1999 and countless other crises, including the Ladakh crisis in 2020–24 and Operation Sindoor in 2025. These threats challenge India’s cherished sovereignty, and they inflict death on Indian soldiers and civilians. For both reasons, they are very emotive.

In contrast, threats to India in the Indian Ocean region have been relatively distant, indirect, and infrequent. In the 1980s India launched two expeditionary operations—one into the midst of a civil war in Sri Lanka, when it grew concerned by the threat of ethnic conflict spilling over, and another into the Maldives, when it quickly thwarted an attempted coup. In both cases India was at least as motivated by the need to assert its regional primacy and keep other powers such as the United States out of the region as it was by the local security threat. The Indian Navy retains a role in conventional deterrence and combat. It was deployed, for example, in Operation Sindoor to threaten strikes against ground targets and to contain the Pakistan Navy, although it never fired any weapons.<sup>20</sup>

Generally, India’s strategic role in the Indian Ocean is dominated by more indirect, nontraditional security challenges. It has reinforced its coastal defenses against seaborne terrorism, policed regional waters against illegal fishing, conducted multiple humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions, and joined operations to counter piracy in the northwestern Indian Ocean. Much of India’s peacetime military presence is designed to provide security to smaller regional states, both directly through surveillance operations and patrolling, and indirectly through capacity building for local forces. Threats are more modest—at least on the surface.

In fact, however, China’s military expansion does pose very real and growing strategic risks to India.<sup>21</sup> The PLA Navy is already the largest in the world, measured by the number of ships. Its rate of shipbuilding is stupendously faster than those of its

rivals—for example, in 2014–18 it launched more naval shipping tonnage than the entire Indian Navy. Moreover, a larger proportion of its new fleet comprises larger vessels, capable of longer range and endurance, indicative of an intent to build an oceangoing capability beyond the first island chain. Indeed, Chinese strategic documents openly declare a need to maintain a robust security presence in the northern Indian Ocean, in particular, in order to exercise control of vital shipping lanes and resources. To support these strategic ambitions, China maintains a permanent military presence of several ships in the Indian Ocean, operates a military base in Djibouti, and is establishing a growing network of dual-use ports that its naval vessels can use for sustainment. It also maintains a high and increasing tempo of survey and intelligence ship deployments to the Indian Ocean to monitor Indian military activities—including during Operation Sindoor, for example, when ostensibly civilian Chinese vessels may have surveilled Indian Navy ships off the Pakistan coast.<sup>22</sup> Its survey ships, in particular, suggest an intent to better understand the undersea operating environment in the Indian Ocean in preparation for a larger and sustained submarine presence in the near future.<sup>23</sup> The risk of China’s presence in the Indian Ocean, in sum, is not of a clear and present danger to Indian forces today, but it clearly shows a rapidly emerging challenge: a large military presence that will seriously contest Indian interests to an unprecedented degree in the next decade.

India’s defense posture has not kept pace with this evolving situation. It remains distorted, wedded to historical perceptions and practices and unable to adapt with alacrity. For decades the army has dominated the Indian military, with the lion’s share of personnel and defense budgets. Its 1.2 million personnel represent about 84 percent of the military, with an additional 1.6 million paramilitary troops tasked with border security and internal security.<sup>24</sup> The army also receives approximately 57 percent of the defense budget, although from 2024 the government no longer provides full

details of each service's allocation.<sup>25</sup> In large part this army dominance of the military is locked in by structural factors; the government is statutorily committed to providing pensions to army retirees, which represent a relatively large portion—almost 25 percent—of the total defense budget.<sup>26</sup> Unless New Delhi were to increase the size of the defense budget overall, which is highly unlikely given trends of the past decade, it could only marginally reallocate funds between services.

The structural bias in favor of managing continental threats has only deepened in recent years, as a result of security crises on the borders. The Ladakh crisis on the border with China, beginning in 2020, shattered India's previous illusions that it could reach a low-cost détente with China on the border. Even as the border crisis formally ended in 2024, restoring a degree of normalcy in the bilateral relationship, India's massive troop and infrastructure reinforcement continues. The crisis ushered in a new normal of a heavier military presence on the border. India rushed to reinforce its positions there beginning in 2020, requiring significant funding to deploy and sustain massive additional forces in inhospitable terrain.<sup>27</sup>

Preliminary evidence suggests that these new investments came at the cost of investments in naval capabilities. Whereas in the previous two decades New Delhi had made significant investments in new surface combatants, submarines, and long-range aircraft, it approved fewer major new platform acquisitions since 2020. It certainly maintained and even increased its tempo of naval exercises and operations, but that did not reflect an intent to build capability for the future. It also inaugurated new platforms, most notably its first indigenously produced aircraft carrier, and even allocated higher budgets for naval capital investments—but these were lagging indicators of intent, reflecting the continuation of programs or government approvals from the previous decade. The same type of government approvals for new investments have been scarce since 2020. India is

therefore failing to keep pace with its earlier rate of naval capacity building, let alone accelerating it to meet the emerging challenge posed by China.<sup>28</sup>

The Indian defense establishment is not blind to the risks in the Indian Ocean. As noted, India is increasing its rate of military activity and security cooperation with regional states. But these oceanic challenges pale in comparison to the more urgent and more fatal threat on its continental borders. In 2023 the then chief of army staff, Gen. Manoj Pande, characterized the China border as “the most important aspect of our operational environment.”<sup>29</sup> This view is a consistently held position. The CDS, Gen. Anil Chauhan, delivered a speech in September 2025—that is, after Prime Minister Modi's vaunted direct talks with Xi Jinping—in which he asserted, “The boundary dispute with China is India's biggest challenge and will continue to remain so.”<sup>30</sup> Added to this, the May 2025 conflict with Pakistan has reignited Indian concerns about cross-border terrorism and China-Pakistan collusion, as I noted above.

The issue, therefore, is a matter of prioritization. Indian defense spending has declined over the past decade, as a share of national budgets and GDP, despite the acute crisis at Ladakh.<sup>31</sup> Given that budgetary scarcity, New Delhi finds it politically untenable to reallocate resources away from the currently lethal threats for the sake of projected but unproven risks in the Indian Ocean.

## **SELF-RELIANCE VERSUS MILITARY READINESS**

One of the Modi government's signature policy initiatives has been the quest for self-reliance, dubbed *Atmanirbhar Bharat*. The rationale for indigenous industrial production became obvious with the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions to global supply chains and was reinforced with the Ukraine war, which demonstrated the importance of domestic industrial capacity in contemporary conflict. At the same time, the Indian defense industry suffers the

well-known problems of inefficiency and incapacity. It is dominated by sixteen Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs), large and generally sclerotic state-owned enterprises that, despite marginal attempts at reforms, have proven remarkably resistant to performance improvement. India therefore continues to rely on foreign sources of armaments, especially for high-technology equipment.

India faces an invidious trade-off between two equally understandable imperatives: the need to develop domestic sources for defense production and the need to deploy effective weaponry for current operations. The shift to greater self-reliance is a long-term process, requiring technological innovation or transfer of technology from foreign partners, as well as investments in production plants and cultivation of a skilled workforce. In the meantime, India's defense leadership faces immediate operational threats. Indeed, soon after the announcement of the Atmanirbhar Bharat policy, then CDS Gen. Bipin Rawat bluntly acknowledged this trade-off. He noted that the Indian military should give indigenization its full support, even if that meant accepting weapons with only 70 percent of the military's technical requirements until domestic industry improved.<sup>32</sup> He clearly judged—as the Indian government and military apparently have decided—that a temporary compromise of military effectiveness would be a cost worth paying for strategic self-reliance.

Thus far, the government claims great success in the process of indigenization, although its narrative is often misleading. The government began implementing Atmanirbhar Bharat through *negative import lists*, which often reflected already-existing domestic sources of equipment rather than a new domestic substitution for imports. They did not, therefore, spur domestic procurement, at least in the initial stages.<sup>33</sup> As a complement to indigenization, the government has also proclaimed great success in defense exports, which have traditionally been negligible from India.<sup>34</sup> But most of the growth in Indian defense

exports actually consists of components built in India as part of international supply chains, rather than finished weapons systems sold to foreign militaries. For example, the US defense prime contractor, Boeing, fabricates the fuselages for its Apache attack helicopters in India, accounting for a large segment of Indian defense exports to the United States.<sup>35</sup>

The direction of change—in favor of domestic production—is clear, but the pace of change remains halting. Even in Operation Sindoor, during which the government's narrative was careful to stress the value of indigenous equipment, many of the most vital weapons systems were imported. India's initial strike and subsequent air defenses relied heavily on foreign-origin combat aircraft, cruise missiles, loitering munitions, and area air defenses.

Senior Indian military officers have faithfully adhered to national policy by declaring the importance of domestic production, but they often barely conceal their doubts that Indian armaments producers are up to the task. Some of the staunchest skeptics have been senior leaders of the air force—unsurprisingly, given the air force's dependence on high-technology equipment and its increasingly dire need for recapitalization. In 2024 the then Vice Chief of Air Staff A. P. Singh warned that Atmanirbhar Bharat would require an extraordinary level—and implicitly, an unlikely level—of joint effort and must not compromise military preparedness.<sup>36</sup> His skepticism was underscored and debated by a chorus of other active and retired leaders.<sup>37</sup> Upon assuming responsibility for the service as chief of air staff, Air Chief Marshal A. P. Singh became even more outspoken. In early 2025, he was caught on microphone expressing his exasperation with the country's prime aircraft manufacturer, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), saying "I am just not confident of HAL."<sup>38</sup> Barely three months later, in prepared remarks after Operation Sindoor, he lamented, "Not a single project that I can think of has been completed on time."<sup>39</sup>

Such military leaders recognize that developing domestic innovation and production capacity is a long-term project at best, if it is achievable at all by Indian DPSUs. Certain key components remain insurmountable technology bottlenecks. India remains entirely dependent, for example, on foreign-sourced aircraft jet engines but still harbors ambitions for developing and producing fifth-generation aircraft. Even aside from such bottlenecks, as long as such projects remain in the grip of DPSUs such as HAL, the Indian Air Force faces lengthening delays to replace its ageing inventory. Similar problems plague everything from submarines to infantry assault rifles, for which delays forced the government to procure foreign equipment.<sup>40</sup> New Delhi has now made self-reliance a cornerstone of its defense policy—a fact only highlighted by government narratives surrounding Operation Sindoor and its lessons—even though the costs in military effectiveness are apparent.

Overlaid on this preexisting policy of self-reliance, the rupture in bilateral Indian-US relations has placed further importance on Indian self-reliance. Even as ties gradually mend, the damage to political trust in the relationship is most likely permanent. The Indian political class and national security elite is united in its skepticism of American reliability as a strategic partner.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, while this political dynamic heightens the incentive for pursuing self-reliance, it does nothing to deliver self-reliance. The obstacles to Atmanirbhar Bharat are structural, rooted in institutional inadequacy, and India will therefore continue to struggle to overcome them.

## A NEW—BUT DIFFICULT—WAY TO MANAGE PAKISTAN

Set against this background, Operation Sindoor in May 2025 was a notable departure for Indian defense policy at both tactical and strategic levels. At a tactical level, most obviously, India used a range of sophisticated new technologies

to strike deep into Pakistan. From the initial strike against terrorist targets on May 7, and throughout the conflict, India deployed long-range air-launched missiles, ground-based cruise missiles, and uncrewed loitering munitions. This equipment allowed India to project power against Pakistan, including against well-defended military sites. In subsequent days, both sides exchanged waves of drone and missile attacks. Both sides escalated significantly on the night of May 9–10, with Pakistan launching its retaliatory offensive against Indian air bases, dubbed Operation Bunyan Marsoos, and India launching strikes against at least eleven Pakistan air bases. Those Indian strikes included Pakistani facilities of strategic importance, such as Nur Khan, the Pakistani military high command's primary air base, and possibly Kirana Hills, a reported nuclear storage site.<sup>42</sup> India's air and drone campaign had effectively struck multiple long-range targets with precision.

At least as importantly, India was able to use a layered array of air defense systems, from short-range guns to very long-range area defenses, to defend itself against Pakistani air and drone attacks. These systems allowed India to weather Pakistan's counterattacks, comprising primarily small drones, without suffering major losses, and they also effectively neutralized Pakistan's reported use of ballistic missiles.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, India's greatest losses were incurred not from drones or missiles but from the reciprocal artillery exchanges across the Line of Control (LOC) that divides Kashmir, which probably killed dozens of civilians.<sup>44</sup>

To achieve those effects, India deployed a range of relatively new high-technology equipment. In its strike operations, India used SCALP air-launched cruise missiles and Hammer air-dropped long-range precision bombs, launched from Rafale fighters, all of which were acquired between 2020 and 2022—that is, since the last India-Pakistan crisis. Given the scale of the operations, India also used various types of loitering munitions and its supersonic BrahMos cruise missiles—most of

which were acquired only in the past decade—for the first time in combat. For air defense it relied heavily on the S-400 and Akash surface-to-air missile systems and various shorter-range systems, tied together by the Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS). Some of these systems, such as the Akash and the IACCS, are indigenously developed or produced and were trumpeted as evidence of the successful indigenization of Indian defense manufacturing.<sup>45</sup> Those sourced internationally have been procured from partners such as France, Israel, and Russia and, notably, not the United States.

For all these impressive outcomes, Operation Sindoor was not an unalloyed triumph. After weeks of speculation, the CDS admitted to having lost some aircraft in its initial assault on the terrorist sites but still refused to detail the types or numbers.<sup>46</sup> Subsequent reporting suggests those aircraft losses may have been fundamentally due to flawed Indian intelligence, which underestimated the range and lethality of Pakistan air-to-air missiles.<sup>47</sup>

More broadly, the Indian state still struggled to master the information domain. It clearly learned and implemented important lessons from its botched information strategy during the 2019 Balakot strike against Pakistan, when a failure to release evidence of its strike led to rampant speculation that the strike had failed. In 2025, in contrast, the Indian military assiduously released clear and irrefutable evidence of the precision and effectiveness of its initial strikes against terrorist targets. Then, in live daily press briefings, often accompanied by full-motion video replays of missile strikes, the Indian military and Ministry of External Affairs soberly and credibly demonstrated the targeted and effective nature of their campaign. Despite the attempt to set the narrative, these official statements were muddied by rampant misinformation, especially on social media. The volume of mistruths was so great that New Delhi could not hope to counter it all. In some

cases, however, such as the question of Indian aircraft losses or whether Kirana Hills was struck, Indian officials' failure to set the record straight allowed speculation to continue to persist.

Overall, however, India largely prevailed at a tactical level. It struck effectively against terrorist targets in its opening salvo and repeatedly hit Pakistani military targets, including strategically valuable airfields, while defending itself against any significant counterstrike. And it could achieve all those effects without pilots having to cross over into Pakistani airspace. The combination of new long-range missiles and loitering munitions allowed India to reduce the risk to its personnel and avoid a repeat of the 2019 capture by Pakistan of a downed Indian pilot. These tactical effects could only be achieved with the use of relatively new, high-technology equipment.

These new military capabilities at the tactical level created new options at the strategic level. For years, New Delhi had few good military options to coerce Pakistan. As the mobilization of Operation Parakram in 2001–2 showed, India's default military option against Pakistan-based terrorism was the threat of a major conventional war. This proved unworkable or unbelievable in successive crises.<sup>48</sup> After years of strategic paralysis in the face of unrelenting Pakistan-based terrorism, India began exploring options below the threshold of major conventional operations. Thus, following a terrorist attack at Uri in 2016, India launched a small special operations raid across the LOC in a notable departure from previous instances of inaction. Following an attack at Pulwama in 2019, it launched an air strike against Balakot. That Indian response crossed multiple thresholds: using airpower for the first time since 1971 and striking in undisputed Pakistani territory. In that context, the Indian response to the Pahalgam attack in 2025 represented a further evolution in this trajectory.

India's emerging military strategy against Pakistan-based terrorism rests on a new theory

of victory based on imposing *survival costs*.<sup>49</sup> India is no longer content with the symbolism of a token raid or the threat of future punishment. It recognizes that Pakistan-based terrorism is basically undeterrable; the terrorist groups and their Pakistan Army sponsors cannot be dissuaded from their intent to attack India. Instead, if New Delhi can directly and repeatedly target terrorist leaders and infrastructure, it may force them to devote scarce resources and attention to survival, reducing their capacity to plot violence. As Prime Minister Modi made clear soon after the conclusion of Operation Sindoor, these groups can no longer count on a safe haven in Pakistan: “There is no such place in Pakistan where terrorists can sit and breathe in peace. We will enter their homes and kill them.”<sup>50</sup>

In his victory speech after Operation Sindoor, Modi also said that India will repeat such military action when prompted by a future terrorist attack.<sup>51</sup> In so doing, he all but committed India to a near-automatic response. Indeed, the repeated, cumulative effects of such military action are central to the concept of imposing survival costs on the adversary.<sup>52</sup> This strategy has antecedents in Israel’s approach to Hamas and Hizballah—in limited conflicts prior to the annihilation of Gaza—and in the US drone campaign against al Qaeda senior leaders in Pakistan.<sup>53</sup> And it is complemented by the recent peacetime campaign of targeted assassinations of terrorist leaders in Pakistan.<sup>54</sup> As with all those campaigns, the strategy tacitly accepts that India’s campaign will not end Pakistan-based terrorism: It can only, at best, reduce its frequency and severity.

Indeed, within months, events demonstrated that the new strategy would not ameliorate the threat of terrorism. After a bomb blast struck New Delhi in November, the Indian government issued a measured response, bereft of any mention of retaliation against Pakistan;<sup>55</sup> authorities knew immediately that the perpetrators had been self-radicalized Indians, with no apparent backing

from Pakistan.<sup>56</sup> In such cases, a military strategy for terrorism is clearly irrelevant.

Whatever its effects on terrorism, the strategy inaugurated by Operation Sindoor all but guarantees a future conflict regardless of the scale of the terrorist provocation. New Delhi has explicitly tied its hands, proclaiming that India will, as a matter of policy, respond to subconventional attacks with conventional force. India has thereby relinquished policy flexibility. Moreover, in his victory speech Modi also declared that India will no longer distinguish between terrorist groups and the Pakistan Army, as it did in Operation Sindoor. Henceforth, it will target them all.<sup>57</sup> So the next conflict will begin with state-on-state conventional combat, skipping the lower rungs of escalation and prompting both sides to strike decisively for early advantage.

Similarly, Pakistan will also have virtually no freedom of action. Given the scale and widely broadcast effects of India’s conventional military strikes, the Pakistan Army will no longer be able to plausibly deny them as they did in 2016 and 2019. It will have nonnegotiable political compulsions to react forcefully. Pakistan has traditionally used nuclear threats to elicit American diplomatic intervention.<sup>58</sup> This tactic seemed to bear fruit in the 2025 crisis, so it will probably learn that escalating the conflict is the surest pathway to American intervention and a favorable resolution.

Operation Sindoor has therefore revealed and locked in crisis dynamics whereby Pakistan will not be deterred, and the subsequent crisis will trigger a rapidly escalating conflict. This is the product of state policy in both India and Pakistan, but it is inflamed by public opinion. During Operation Sindoor, public opinion in India was tinged with bloodlust. Even elite opinion leaders could barely disguise their glee over a conflict in which India could demonstrate superiority over its rival. The ceasefire was greeted in some quarters with dismay. In the next crisis, the government will

have to contend with public pressure for more violence and more brash displays of Indian power.

India's tactical successes in Operation Sindoor—and hyperbolic public narratives—have already created an Indian collective memory of the 2025 crisis as a decisive victory, even if its strategic outcomes are largely negative. The conflict's immediate aftermath triggered a dramatic downturn in US-India relations, and a concomitant thaw in US-Pakistan relations.<sup>59</sup> Pakistan and its terrorist proxies are not deterred. Cross-border terrorism will continue, and the next conflict will be more dangerous. If the emerging strategy of imposing survival costs works at all, it will take years and multiple iterations to yield results. In the meantime, this politically lucrative strategy will likely dominate India's approach to Pakistan as a whole. The tactical success of Operation Sindoor offers a superficial balm for the problem of cross-border terrorism and an especially narrow military tool that is wholly inadequate to manage the much more complex, and inherently political, rivalry with Pakistan.

## CAUSE FOR CONCERN, NOT CONFIDENCE, AGAINST CHINA

Pakistan's conventional military arsenal is overwhelmingly sourced from China, with several recent acquisitions operating on the front line of combat in 2025. Its mainstay fighter, the JF-17, was codeveloped with China and produced in Pakistan, and its most advanced combat aircraft, the J-10CE, was procured from China starting in 2022. Its primary beyond visual range air-to-air missile, the PL-15, was acquired from China within the past decade. Its most advanced long-range air defense system, the HQ-9, was acquired from China starting in 2021. All these systems were extensively used in 2025 and their performance scrutinized.

In the immediate aftermath of Operation Sindoor—indeed, before it even concluded—analyses began inferring what the conflict signified for

Chinese military equipment and possibly even Chinese military power. The earliest reports were decidedly mixed. Especially since Pakistan inflicted some Indian losses in aerial combat, analysts began drawing tenuous conclusions about the comparative performance of Chinese and Western weapons systems, even suggesting that they had worrying implications for a potential conflict over Taiwan.<sup>60</sup>

Soon after the conflict, however, Indian commentaries, smug after the positive denouement of the crisis, began underscoring the implications for China. Some press accounts, probably based on government briefings, extensively highlighted the weaknesses in multiple Chinese systems, from aircraft to missiles to air defenses.<sup>61</sup> The government itself explicitly drew attention to the Chinese origin of Pakistani equipment, noting, for example, that the “Indian Air Force *bypassed and jammed Pakistan's Chinese-supplied air defence systems . . . demonstrating India's technological edge.*”<sup>62</sup> The Deputy Chief of Army Staff, Lt. Gen. Rahul Singh, extended those claims by asserting that China provided not only equipment and intelligence support to Pakistan but also real-time monitoring and advice during the conflict. It was, in other words, a “live lab” of combat with India, with India confronted by not a single adversary but three: Pakistan, China, and Turkey.<sup>63</sup>

In fact, however, Operation Sindoor offers little insight into China's military power, and the insights it does provide are problematic for India. The performance of Pakistan's military equipment cannot be extrapolated to the PLA because the PLA uses higher-quality variants of that equipment and deploys them in larger quantities and with more sophisticated doctrine. Indian intelligence analysis conceded that Pakistan operates significantly lower-performance Chinese-origin equipment than the PLA, with shorter-range variants of the PL-15 air-to-air missile and the HQ-9 air defense system, for example.<sup>64</sup> China also boasts a significantly more elaborate network of

sensors and weapons, securely connected, than Pakistan; more rigorous training standards; and a more refined application of *multidomain* operations tying together air, ground, and electronic systems. The two militaries may operate some similar base models of some systems, but their overall capabilities differ vastly.

In some cases even Pakistani forces—less capable than those of China—may have performed comparatively well against their Indian adversaries. In particular, India lost aircraft on the first night of the conflict in part because it sought only to strike terrorist targets, without attempting to first neutralize Pakistani air defenses, as normal doctrine would dictate. India’s military chief subsequently conceded that, following those losses, India changed its tactics. However, on that first night the Pakistan Air Force was still able to detect, track, and destroy some Indian aircraft, despite India’s surprise attack. A press investigation subsequently reported that this capability was enabled by better aerial command and control, by secure datalinks between Pakistani sensors and fighters, known as Data Link 17, and by PL-15 air-to-air missiles that had a much longer effective range than Indian forces had previously estimated.<sup>65</sup> An Indian Air Force assessment reportedly arrived at similar conclusions about Pakistan’s better-networked force.<sup>66</sup>

Therefore, far from providing India confidence about its prospects against the PLA, Operation Sindoor should provide warnings: India faced some operational vulnerabilities and would face much greater vulnerabilities against a better-equipped and more sophisticated PLA.

After the conflict, the Indian national security elite began to identify what it regards as the primary lessons of Operation Sindoor. Many of the lessons pertained to the national strategic level—especially regarding the dangers of the Pakistan-China axis, the need to adopt cutting-edge technologies, and the imperative for India to develop and produce weaponry indigenously.<sup>67</sup> These observations

were therefore primarily a repetition and validation of well-worn strategic tropes that prevailed before the conflict.

At the operational level, the core lessons learned also reinforced existing trends rather than unveiling new insights about war. Both sides used drones extensively, echoing the widespread use of drones in the Ukraine conflict. Therefore, expert and official opinion about Operation Sindoor itself, and what it might reveal about the evolving character of war, began to coalesce around drone and counterdrone technology and the problem of air defense more generally. A military think tank report described the ubiquity of small drones as a “paradigm shift” that required major force structure changes.<sup>68</sup> The Indian Army was quick to issue contracts for “emergency procurement”—that is, relatively small and rapid procurement that bypasses the normally ponderous acquisition processes—for a range of drone, counterdrone, and air defense equipment.<sup>69</sup> A senior officer announced that the army plans to solicit further procurement tenders worth over \$200 million in drone-related equipment by the end of 2025.<sup>70</sup> The Chief of Army Staff, moreover, announced a plan to establish drone platoons in each infantry battalion and surveillance drone and loitering munition batteries in artillery regiments.<sup>71</sup> Some of those force structure concepts were very likely in development well before Operation Sindoor, but the conflict doubtless reinforced prior beliefs that drones should be a cornerstone of the future Indian military.

The national focus on air defense reached a crescendo with Prime Minister Modi’s independence day speech on August 15, in which he unveiled a new program known as Sudarshan Chakra. This program aims to provide, by 2035, “complete security” from enemy attack on all critical military and civilian infrastructure in the country. And Modi pledged that this new umbrella of weapons systems, presumably consisting of multiple distinct capabilities, will be manufactured in India.<sup>72</sup>

Just three months after the May conflict, the operational lessons of Operation Sindoor had become a major new national security policy.

India's enthusiastic embrace of the obvious operational lessons of Operation Sindoor carries risks. The greatest risk is that India may overlearn the lessons of the conflict. It has already begun to transpose the tactical experience of four days of combat into force structure planning, defense industrial priorities, and probably future operational plans. Not surprisingly, the military services have interpreted the lessons of Operation Sindoor in ways that confirm and amplify their prior force structure and planning decisions. For example, given the standout success of its air defenses in Operation Sindoor, the services would naturally be tempted to redouble their investments in those winning capabilities.

However, there are no guarantees that the next conflict will resemble the last one. In fact, the history of warfare suggests the opposite: The dynamics of future conflicts are exceptionally difficult to predict and are almost guaranteed to surprise military planners, especially given the head-spinning pace of technological innovation. Some Western analyses of the Ukraine war have already highlighted the perils of overlearning from the extensive use of drones and overinvesting in drone capabilities. Despite the dazzling stories of innovative drone technology and tactics in Ukraine, drones are relatively easier to counter than traditional artillery, so a heavy reliance on drones may leave future forces with easily neutralized and ineffective firepower.<sup>73</sup>

This will be especially true against a highly capable and adaptive adversary like the PLA. No doubt China closely observed the conflict, not least because it likely provided real-time support to Pakistan. It will learn its own lessons, on both Indian capabilities and tactics specifically, and on the vicissitudes of contemporary conflict with stand-off precision weapons more generally.

More broadly, the situation and likely scenarios on the LAC present a vastly different operational challenge for India. A conflict—or coercion short of a conflict—in the high Himalayas is more likely to hinge on ground forces controlling rugged terrain features. China has assiduously built the infrastructure to support such operations and to gain escalation dominance in the event of conflict. The Indian Army assesses that, thanks to these recent infrastructure upgrades, the PLA has been able to withdraw to garrisons 100–150 km from the LAC but could still surge forces to the border within two to three hours, a rate of reinforcement that the Indian Army cannot hope to match.<sup>74</sup> Thus, while Operation Sindoor has dazzled the country with drones and air defense lasers, India still lacks answers to the most fundamental problems it is likely to face. India's next conflict, especially if it must confront China, will be fought very differently, but initial evidence suggests that India may be preparing to refight the last one.

## CONCLUSION

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India's defense policy in 2025 was overshadowed by Operation Sindoor. Once again—in a pattern that repeats throughout Indian history—the urgent exigencies of operations became a priority, crowding out space for less urgent but arguably more important strategic considerations. India faced and dispatched a serious threat to its national security. But it has not devised a way to curtail cross-border terrorism, it may draw the wrong lessons for deterring China, and it did nothing to address the structural challenges that dominate India's defense policy.

Even if India enacts major reforms to its defense organizations—for example, with the creation of joint operational commands—it will continue to face difficult policy trade-offs. It will still have to wrestle with balancing the threats on the northern and western borders, the continental threats and

maritime risks, and the imperatives of self-reliance and military readiness. Addressing those structural trade-offs does not need a new organization and would not be solved with more resources. Instead, it demands a process of national security strategy making. India has never established a system for developing a national strategy but desperately needs one to navigate the increasingly complex environment it faces.

New Delhi's defense policy difficulties are only sharper now, since the sudden rupture in US-India relations and the concomitant warming of US-Pakistan relations in the aftermath of the conflict. Indeed, that devastating outcome suggests that Operation Sindoor—or at least the political handling of the conflict after the cease fire—was a major strategic setback for India. At one level the partnership continues to function almost autonomously. Even at the depths of the bilateral spat, senior officials still joined a 2+2 intersessional meeting, and the US and Indian Armies still conducted their annual Yudh Abhyas exercise.

At a political level, however, the bilateral crisis has thrown into sharp relief another set of competing imperatives that entail a difficult trade-off: power versus strategic autonomy. Developing the strategic partnership with the United States is India's surest pathway to greater national power. It offers India unparalleled economic, military, and technological dividends. But pursuing that lucrative partnership requires the Indian government to expend domestic political capital, to overcome entrenched bureaucratic skepticism of the United States, often cloaked as a considered preference for strategic autonomy. That skepticism of the United States has naturally skyrocketed as a result of the summer spat, so further developing the bilateral relationship, for the sake of building national power, will now entail greater political costs for the Indian government. Alternatively, the Indian government could choose a path of less political resistance at home, allowing the relationship with Washington, DC, to wilt while making a

high-minded claim to strategic autonomy. To the extent that Operation Sindoor catalyzed the rupture in bilateral relations, then, it not only elicited misleading claims of operational effects but also triggered enormous strategic risks for India.

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