

Sovereignty through Indigenization: Redefining India's Counter-Terrorism Strategy Post-Operation Sindoor

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Abstract

India has witnessed multiple waves of terrorism since 1945, shaped by both internal and external factors. In recent history, Operation Sindoor, a tactful military response launched in May 2025 following the brutal terrorist attack in Pahalgam points out a figurative shift in India's counter-terrorism policy. This paper situates the operation within broader terrorism theory, evaluates India's evolving security strategy, and interrogates the legal, political, and ethical dimensions, multilateral approach, to understand state responses to terrorism. By analyzing the integration of indigenous defense technologies and the synergy between military action and diplomatic engagement, this study interprets Operation Sindoor not merely as a tactical event but as a symbolic and structural transformation in India's counter-terrorism posture. It argues that India has successfully transitioned toward a "dual-track" strategy that seamlessly blends hard-power deterrence with assertive multilateralism, underpinned by an indigenous ecosystem that ensures strategic autonomy.

Keywords: *Operation Sindoor, Terrorism, Counter – terrorism, India, Jammu and Kashmir*

Theoretical Foundations and the Historical Context of Indian Counter-Terrorism

Terrorism, of course as a phenomenon, cannot be bounded by linear descriptions.

Probably, the best way to define terrorism is to label it is a strategic tool used by non-state actors to accomplish political goals through the methodical use of violence and terror. According to academics like Bruce Hoffman (2017), terrorism is essentially a communication act, intended to affect a large population that extends well beyond the immediate victims. Likewise, according to Martha Crenshaw (2011), terrorism is a “deliberate creation of fear” that uses psychological weakness in order to compel political compromises. These theoretical criteria have been verified in India’s multi-decade battle against a variety of insurgencies, from the prolonged dispute in Jammu and Kashmir to the Khalistan Movement in the 1980s. In the past, India’s reaction was defined by “strategic restraint”, a theory intended to manage internal security by legal and paramilitary measures whilst limiting escalation into a full-scale nuclear battle with Pakistan. However, the advent of transnational Islamist terrorism, cutting across boundaries, especially after 1993 Mumbai Bombings and the 2008 Mumbai attacks, posed a growing risk to this stance. Significant turning points were the 2016 Uri incident and the 2019 Pulwama bombing, which indicated the limits of defensive tactics and led to the philosophical, more so, doctrinal shift favoring “proactive deterrence”. This development implies that India now sees counterterrorism as a comprehensive strategic challenge that necessitates the deployment of power outside its borders with the objective to attack the infrastructure of terror at its origins rather than considering it as a mere internal policy crisis thereby raising concerns with respect to the procedural aspects of policy formulation itself (Fair, 2014).

What lies at the heart of this transition towards a confrontational stance is the recognition of the basic premise on which the theory of “strategic restraint” is based upon i.e. the identification of India’s tolerance level as a lack of determined willpower to resolve issues with immediate effect thereby often encouraging, rather provoking, state sponsored acts of terrorism. According to scholarly research on deterrence, a state must exhibit both the ability and the will to impose consequences that exceed any perceived advantages for the aggressor to be able to effectively avert unconventional attacks. What prevented India from laying this kind of security setting was its past experiences complimented by internal threats, especially Maoist (Naxalite) insurgencies in central India, which required the government to strike a balance between aggressive military operations and socioeconomic growth. Nevertheless, the outside challenge

posed by organisations like Jaish-e-Mohammad(JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) demanded an alternative approach to the hitherto existing security scenario, one that takes into account the logistical locations and safe areas situated beyond the Life of Control (LOC). The events preceding Operation Sindoor in 2025 marked the pinnacle of this doctrinal development. The final impetus for this change was the 22nd April incident of Pahalgam that involved the horrific attack and killing of 26 innocent victims. Amidst this deep crisis, the Indian administration was deeply obliged to re-evaluate its whole security architecture owing to the attack's extreme brutality followed by the religious profiling of the victims. Resultantly, India abandoned the calculated restraint philosophy and adopted a wider strategy which fuses military strike capabilities with both domestic industrial self-sufficiency and legal engagement.

Infact, one of the most audacious counterterrorism initiatives in Indian history was Operation sindoor, which was initiated on May 6-7, 2025 in response to the terror assault in Pahalgam on April 22, 2025. In military and scholarly circles, it has been characterised as both decisive and controversial. It is credited for attacking the nine terror infrastructure targets deep into Pakistan and Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK). In addition its military aspects, Operation Sindoor was crucial in setting a benchmark for India's counterterrorism strategy. Sindoor underscored that no terrorist center crossing the borders and the LOC is inaccessible for the Indian military, making a difference from the 2016 surgical strike and 2019 Balakot airstrike that depicted India's resilience against serious terrorist assaults (Pant, 2025). The headquarters of Lashkar-e-Taiba (Muridke), Hizbul Mujahideen (Muzaffarabad) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (Bahawalpur), were among the primary targets of this unprecedented military operation led by India. These organisations had been considered a cross-border terror threat for decades, but they had escaped retaliation due to Pakistan's frequently used threat of invoked nuclear war in addition to the absence of risk taking attributes and necessary military capabilities issues that India was grappling with (GOI, 2026). Appearing like a seamless web, this operation had disproved a number of long-held beliefs in India's diplomatic and strategic thinking. For the first time, New Delhi has declared that any terrorist strike in the future will be seen as an act of war and that it will not differentiate between terrorists and those who encourage it. This expression is significant because it explicitly imposes culpability on the Pakistani state, stating that their decisions

to pursue the policy of terrorism can no longer constitute “plausible deniability”. The Pakistani state must recognise the fact that cross-border terrorism against India is no longer a “cost-free option”, even though they may have drawn varying conclusions out of the events that unfolded from Operation Sindoor. Pakistan will automatically have to incur real and unbearable costs upon failing to realise the gravity of this issue (Behera, 2025).

Remarkably, the Operation was given this figurative name “Operation Sindoor” in a bid to connect state actions with cultural analogies. The state portrayed its military response as a moral and safeguarding effort to reclaim the ‘honor’ of the nation and the victims by using the moniker Sindoor (Vermillion), which is a traditional symbol of existence, respect and longevity in Indian Culture (PIB, 2025). Bruce Hoffman’s (2017) argues, that counterterrorism must address psychological and emotions avenues of war as much as the physical, is absolutely in sync with this symbolic framing. As the IAF carried out precision strikes and the Indian Army supplied real-time ground information and surveillance, the operation’s execution further demonstrated a high degree of inter-service coordination. According to official accounts from the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) the strikes were a “non-military preemptive action” directed exclusively at terrorist organisations, upholding a legal defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter (UN, 1945). With this accuracy, India was able to manage the risk of a full-scale conventional conflict while also accomplishing its tactical goals, which included destroying over 100 high-value targets and breaking down logistical networks. While processing the entire series of events behind the arrival of this security turning point, India has established a “new normal” in the subcontinent, where state-sponsored terrorism will eventually be dealt with a massive military response rather than a merely diplomatic protest, as indicated by the strategic precision exhibited during Operation Sindoor (Pant, 2025). The subsequent sections in this article carry forward the operational ramifications of Operation Sindoor, the broader regional dynamics at work and how India’s reaction to terrorism has evolved.

The Pahalgam Incursion and the Operational Mechanics of Operation Sindoor

On 22 April 2025 a terrorist attack in Baisaran Valley of Pahalgam that was an example of an attempt to sabotage, but deliberately the sabotage was aimed at

destroying public trust, destroying cohesion in the community and economic security of the Kashmir valley tourism industry. Target selection was not haphazard. Tourists and newlywed couples were strategically selected to gain the most international press attention while also igniting religious tensions within communities domestically. The attackers had linked themselves to Pakistan-based militant networks, apparently as a subgroup of the mainstream terror group, with links to Pakistani military and intelligence institutions (The Hindu, 2025). Eyewitness testimony corroborated that the victims were detached from their captors and killed for religious conviction, a move that no doubt went against the grain of sectarian retaliation. Attackers had complex infantry weapons, M4 carbines, which cannot easily be purchased in India, indicating the presence of state level, more importantly, an outside logistical support.

In retaliation, Operation Sindoor, launched by India during the night of May 6 to 7, 2025, depicting India's most extensive cross-border military campaign to date in the post-Kargil era, hitting nine different terror-infrastructure sites in the depths of Pakistan and Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK). On the one hand, where the 2016 surgical strike was limited to a single field of special forces operating within a narrow geographical area, Operation Sindoor was multi-domain and coordinated with land based forces on one day and air and unmanned systems on the next. On 7 May the air battle involved 114 aircraft from the Indian Air Force and the Pakistan Air Force, the largest BVR aerial engagement over South Asia since 1971 (Basrur, 2025). Precision-guided munitions, comprising air-launched BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles and SCALP deep strike missiles, were employed to render command centres, training camps, and infiltration launch pads inoperable while aiming to intentionally reduce civilian collateral damage; a tactical and diplomatic calculation (Basrur, 2025).

The main targets of India's brave action were Let (Muridke), JeM (Bahawalpur) and Hizbul Mujahideen (Kotli) bases. In this process, notably, more than 70 terrorists were killed, including close relatives of JeM commander Masood Azhar. The first strikes were completed in a startlingly short amount of time, roughly 23 minutes, highlighting operational effectiveness and the element of surprise induced by tactics like radar blackouts and the skillful application of NOTAMs (Notice of Airmen). In retaliation, between May 8 -10, 2025, three Indian civilians were killed by Pakistani drone strikes and cross-border firing

in retaliation. India replied staunchly to this by applying commensurate force to neutralise about 11 Pakistani airbases, including Rahim Yar Khan Airbase in Rawalpindi, thereby destroying 20% of Pakistan's air force infrastructure. Whilst deploying diplomatic steps globally by briefing almost 42 countries about the operation, including the UAE, Russia and the U.S, Modi gained favourable reviews for maintaining transparency. PM's continuous monitoring went on in the middle of it all. Modi continued to oversee developments continuously, presiding over several security consultations and offering strategic counsel. Finally, after obtaining the intended operational goals, PM Modi finally confirmed the terms of the ceasefire on May 10, 2025.

The Indian Air Force, Indian Army, and the Indian Navy showed outstanding tri-service synergy under PM's strategic suggestions and the military leadership operational command. Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh praised this tri-service for accomplishing their goals and for their remarkable discipline exhibited during this fierce battle. To quote him "they could have done much more....." (Kumar, 2025, para. 1), but without injuring any innocent individual and with the least amount of collateral damage, they portrayed their humungous courage. The human element - the training, diligence and bravery of the Armed forces personnel - was what guaranteed success, even though advanced weaponry played a significant role. "Our weapons are advanced... our soldiers have demonstrated exemplary courage...", the chief of Defence Staff stated in the post-operation briefing (CDS Gen Anil Chauhan, 2025, para. 4). According to various scholars, this operation also served as an example of India's Integrated Deterrence Matrix that integrates various powers levers for a comprehensive deterrence effect including the 'Military Domain' comprising targeted attacks using cutting-edge weaponry demonstrating conventional strength, 'Digital Domain' that pushed information control, electronic warfare and cyberspace operations, 'Economic Domain' including financial pressure, trade restrictions and sanctions, 'Diplomatic Domain' involving international outreach to obtain support from other countries and 'Narrative Domain' that depicts the efficacy of an effective communication approach in shaping global perception (Pallathadka & Roy, 2025).

Aatmanirbhar Bharat and the Technological Sovereignty of the Indian Defence Ecosystem

What was incredibly unique about Operation Sindoor from a strategic standpoint is that it outperformed the Aatmanirbhar Bharat's initiative domestically produced platforms. India was world's largest arms importer for many years, a reliance that has major strategic ramifications in addition to financial costs. Export controls, end-user agreements, maintenance dependencies, the actual risk of supply interruptions or politically promoted technical restraints by the suppliers calculating their own diplomatic balances are all inherent loopholes of weapons system created by foreign acquirement. Nonetheless, by 2025, persistent policy change had significantly changed this foreign weapon import setting, where Operation Sindoor served as the ultimate combat confirmation than the transition to indigenous capacity was a strategic change rather than merely a preference for the acquisition. The DRDO-developed Akash Surface-to-Air Missile system methodically neutralised Pakistan's retaliation drone swarms and cruise missile on the evening of 7 to 8 May. Technical expertise and doctrinal maturity were demonstrated by Akash's capacity to function in autonomous engagement style, tracking and deflecting several ongoing threats without regular human operator input (PIB, 2025). Given the political demands of the war, the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile's seeker and propulsion components were gradually indigenised, giving it stand-off strike capability that no foreign-origin substitute could have guaranteed. And its reliability against hardened targets deep within Pakistani territory proved that indigenous precision-strike design was the right investment. Operation Sindoor also demonstrated the breadth of India's burgeoning defence-industrial base. For the first time in an Indian military campaign, domestically produced UAVs and loitering munitions served as the primary intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance layer. Bangalore-manufactured SkyStriker loitering munition along with IdeaForge's ISR platforms offered persistent surveillance of PoK to enable real-time intelligence feeds for strike coordinators to respond, including changing target lists as the operation progressed (PIB, 2025). India additionally showed "offensive drone doctrine" when it fired Harop munitions at four Pakistani air defence points and destroyed at least one radar installation by this fire (Drones launched, radar destroyed, 2025). Pakistan later said Indian drone strikes on May 9 and 10 hit over a dozen targets, including military bases

in Karachi, Lahore, and Rawalpindi (Have India and Pakistan started a drone war?, 2025). The quantitative picture supports the qualitative one. The figures obtained for fiscal year 2024–25 from the Ministry of Defence indicate that 92 per cent of all defence procurement contracts were granted to Indian vendors, which is around Rs 1.68 lakh crore (PIB, 2025).

Above all, this a tactical achievement, primarily because, the foundation of a real strategic autonomy is “technological sovereignty”, which is the ability to create, manufacture and enhance one’s own weapons system without consulting outside sources. Due to end-user constraints and supplier-led maintenance processes, foreign-origin systems usually fail to replicate the responsiveness of native platforms, which were repurposed based on combat feedback during fighting. The FATF framework needs to be revisited in order to address the drone warfare aspect. Its scope should be expanded, going beyond the definition of terror funding to especially include the acquisition of commercial space technologies and services by terror proxies and front companies that support them (Pillai, 2025).

However, India’s security establishment must now integrate these lessons: maintain the private sector’s involvement, concentrate on the urgent modernisation of legacy platforms such as Sukhoi-30-fleet (262 aircraft spread across 13 squadrons), and guarantee that the domestic defense-industrial ecosystem receives the necessary funding and policy support. This was largely due to delays, which reduced combat readiness through legacy upgrades. The core of India’s armament should unquestionably be Indian; imports should only be used for the most urgent short-term requirements.

The Dual-Track Strategy: Calibrated Deterrence and Assertive Multilateralism

India’s response to Pahalgam was unquestionably more complex than only its military components. A strategy posture that struck a balance between rigorous diplomatic statecraft in multilateral forums and hard power on the battlefield was immediately articulated during Operation Sindoor. This dual-track strategy represents the most developed expression India’s post- Balakot counter terrorism doctrine to date. It combines calibrated conventional strength with a favourable international narrative campaign. The military component depended on India’s demonstrated capacity to function in “gray zone” below

Pakistan's nuclear threshold. For many years, it was believed that India's options for a suitable conventional response to cross-border terrorism were severely limited by Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons. Operation Sindoor builds on the 2019 Balakot strikes, revealing that this deterrence architecture is not as hermetic as Pakistan's planners had wished. By directing strikes at readily observable terror infrastructure rather than the Pakistani state military assets, India was able to take advantage of an area in which Islamabad's nuclear doctrine does not offer legitimate reasons for retaliation (Pant, 2025). Pakistan's consolidation of nuclear power under the 27th Amendment — widely seen by scholars as institutional nervousness as opposed to boldness — was an indication that the nuclear blackmail strategy had been tried and failed (Pant, 2025). It requires stronger early-warning architectures for India, to ensure that when it comes to future conventional operations, they are not accidentally operating on escalatory thresholds. The diplomatic track ran in parallel. Even as strikes were prosecuted by Indian Air Force (IAF) platforms, the Ministry of External Affairs appealed to the global community to help position India's actions in the context of international law of self-defense. The outcome was notable in that the US, France and Israel each affirmed India's sovereign right to act, with Washington pointing to a 'steeply upward trajectory' of bilateral defence ties (PIB, 2025). This diplomatic cover had come after years of security diplomacy — entrenching India within multilateral security architectures and bilateral defence partnerships that had amassed enough relational capital to garner international understanding during periods of kinetic action. India's international outreach after Operation Sindoor was precisely based on three pillars-

a. Terrorism as a Global Threat

Pahalgam was intentionally linked by India to the September 11 attacks, the October 7 Hamas attack, and the country's own 26/11 strikes in Mumbai. The intention was to prevent the world from trying to frame Operation Sindoor as part of "Indo-Pak tensions", which implies symmetrical blame, and to characterise India's response as a legally justifiable act of self-defense in accordance with accepted international standards. Additionally, this framing avoided Pakistani propaganda that depicted Islamabad as the victim of Indian attack.

b. Scrutiny of International Financial Flows to Pakistan

Within days after Pahalgam incident, India publicly protested to the IMF'S disbursement of a billion dollar loan tranche to Pakistan (Pallathadka & Roy, 2025) raising serious concerns about whether foreign financial aid was essentially funding the state structure that permits cross-border terrorism. India has indicated that future Pakistani involvement under the Indus Waters Treaty may be connected to verifiable counter-terrorism benchmarks -a significant expansion of India's economic influence - and is pushing for stricter conditions on financial aid.

c. Pushing for International Designation of Terror Entities

India used the UNSC 1267 and the FATF to offer intelligence on Pakistan's noncompliance with counter terrorism requirements for financing and to push for reinforcement of compliance, which was previously restricted through diplomatic engagement alone. International standards of state responsibility for non-state actor violence have begun to be redefined by such campaigning, and the effects go well beyond the India-Pakistan relationship. Theoretically, Alex Schmid's (2011) argument that effective counter terrorism must address the "operational environment" of terror groups through a combination of military force and legal-institutional persecution fits in with India's dual-track policy. The three pillars of the ecosystem supporting terror groups with ties to Pakistan are financial flows, ideological backing and resource assistance from state actors. India used a strategy that affected all three at once. Physical infrastructure was destroyed by this strike; multilateral financial pressure rendered the Pakistani narrative illegitimate. This all-encompassing strategy prevented Indian military intervention's customary diplomatic retaliation and demonstrated that force may be used as a regulated tool of statecraft rather than an impulsive response. Keeping in mind as to what may be obtained through closer engagement with India, South Asian neighbours have largely maintained deliberate neutrality, indicating the minimal practical leverage Pakistan can currently offer as an economic or security partner. The question of whether India's strategic actions would eventually persuade regional states to abandon 'performative neutrality' and take a more active role in the implementation of counter terrorism frameworks is still open, but the incentive pathway is clearer than ever.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, Operation Sindoor is a paradigm shift in the role and characteristics of India's national security capabilities from passive accommodation of provocations and response to diplomatic protest in post-war India to power characterized by the precision with which it uses military force, the discipline in which it builds legitimacy in an increasingly militarized world, as well as, the clear and deliberate purpose in the strategic investments in domestic capability. It has set new standards for deterrence in South Asia, has confirmed India's indigenous defence ecosystem under conditions of live combat, and it provides a replicable model of dual-track statecraft that other regional powers navigating asymmetric threats within nuclear-shadowed environments might glean from. The operation has also sent a message to the international community that the architecture of global counter-terrorism needs to change — including commercial space technologies, international financial conditionalities and multilateral designation mechanisms — if it is to be sufficient to deal with the new state-enabled non-state actors around the world. The strikes are done; the doctrine they've proved, and the institutional reforms they've called for, are just starting to remake the strategic future of the region.

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