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OPERATION SINDOOR: REDEFINING NOTION OF VICTORY IN THE MODERN LIMITED WARS

LT GEN A B SHIVANE PVSM, AVSM, VSM (RETD)

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Lieutenant General A B Shivane PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd) is the former DG Mechanised Forces and a Strike Corps Commander.

"After just four days of calibrated military action, it is objectively conclusive: India achieved a massive victory. Operation Sindoor met and exceeded its strategic aims—destroying terrorist infrastructure, demonstrating military superiority, restoring deterrence, and unveiling a new national security doctrine. This was not a symbolic force. It was decisive power, clearly applied."

- *John Spencer, Chair of Urban Warfare Studies and host of the Urban Warfare Project Podcast at West Point*

Abstract

The April 2025 Pahalgam terror attack marked a watershed moment in India's evolving counterterrorism and strategic doctrine. Traditional paradigms of victory—measured in territorial acquisition and enemy attrition—have become obsolete in the age of multidomain conflict. Today, psychological dominance, strategic signalling, narrative warfare, and escalatory control define success. Operation Sindoor reveals India's transition toward an integrated, technology-enabled, doctrine-driven warfighting

approach. This paper explores the attack, response, operational features, politico-military aims, cognitive effects, and the implications for future deterrence and doctrine.

Introduction: The New Terrain of Conflict

Warfare in the 21st century is no longer confined to defined battlefields or uniformed combatants. The aim, objectives, tools, players and narratives have redefined the notion of victory. No two wars are the same nor do blind lessons of modern wars and conflicts application to a different operational environment make a professional analysis.

 The evolution of modern limited wars has blurred the lines between war and peace, state and non-state actors, military force and psychological influence. Conflicts today are prosecuted through the coordinated use of irregular proxies, disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, economic warfare, and strategic signalling, all under the nuclear threshold.

The April 2025 Pahalgam terror attack must be viewed through this lens—an assault that was not merely about inflicting casualties but aimed at shaking India's social harmony, economic vitality, and internal confidence. The role of the three brother alliances and China's use of Pakistan as a proxy against India. Indeed, what Hezbollah is to Iran, Pakistan is to China.

The attack's strategic intent of Pahalgam's cowardly massacre of innocents was to provoke internal communal strife, undercut tourism, and challenge India's post-Article 370 consolidation of Kashmir. It was also to possibly divert the internal turbulence within the nation which got more exposed during the operation. It was a hybrid act of war, and India's response, Operation Sindoor, emerged not merely as retaliation but as a calibrated display of new-age military statecraft.

The Crisis of Certainty in Modern Limited Wars

In today's battlespace, "victory" is not about hosting a flag or a green over-red flare, but a terrain to be contested—psychologically, virtually, ideologically, diplomatically,

technologically and militarily. With the rise of hybrid warfare, marked by blurred lines between war and peace, state and non-state, contact and non-contact, manned and unmanned, kinetic and non-kinetic, physical and digital, the idea of success has fragmented into a spectrum: No one will win the war; it is who will lose less !!!!!- all about the cost-benefit ratio.

In the Indian subcontinent, this ambiguity is weaponised through proxy war of terror, disinformation campaigns, nuclear posturing, and multi-domain coercion. The Pahalgam terror attack, while a kinetic incident, was also designed to score psychological and narrative victories.

Shades of Victory: Era of Deniability and Ambiguity

Contemporary definitions of victory tend to relate to a comparative or competitive successful outcome rather than absolute victory. The quality of end states achieved versus those preconceived would rest on the strategic notion of such bargaining power to make the adversary conform to one's will. Ironically, in reality, it often fails to impede the opposition 's will and ability to resist or resume hostilities. The complexities surrounding contemporary war, diplomacy and strategy thus necessitate redefining the notion of victory and defeat in varying shades. Victory and defeat, although opposites are not binary. The lexicon of decisive victory is as ambiguous as the perplexity of decisive defeat. Victory consists not solely of overcoming the enemy forces; it must include the attainment of the political objective for which the war was waged. Defeating an opponent militarily is not identical to achieving the object of war, the reason for which the war was fought. Thus, success or failure in war is replacing victory or defeat with scales of success varying from "victory, win, not lose, stalemate or status quo, not win, lose to defeat". These scales are closely related yet independent variables that can be used in analysing and understanding conflict. Simply stated, the outcome could be better, status quo or worse, which could change with the passage of time and perceptions of adversaries.

PHYSICAL
- MILITARY
- SPATIAL
- MATERIAL
- ECONOMIC

MORAL
- IDEOLOGICAL
- CULTURAL
- SOCIO POLITICAL
- EMOTIONAL

VICTORY / DEFEAT

PERCEPTION
- BELIEF / LOGIC
- AGGRESSOR / VICTIM
- ASSESSOR ??

TEMPORAL
- RECUPERABILITY
- POST CONFLICT OUTCOME

SHADES OF VICTORY

DEFEAT → LOSE → NOT LOSE → STALEMATE → NOT WIN → WIN → VICTORY

(Figure By Author in Ch1: Battle Ready for the 21st Century, CLAWS, Pentagon Press, 2021)

The Pahalgam Terror Attack: Anatomy of Hybrid Aggression

On April 22, 2025, five well-trained militants infiltrated the Baisaran Valley, unleashing terror that killed 25 Indian tourists and a local Muslim guide. This was a soft target—unarmed civilians in a leisure setting. The use of M4 carbines, thermal gear, and encrypted communications revealed the attackers were no amateurs. It also revealed the Chinese signatures on the arms and radio sets used by terrorists. The Resistance Front (TRF), a known proxy of the Lashkar-e-Taiba, claimed responsibility, citing a fictitious resistance to demographic change.

The deeper architecture is traced back to former Pakistani Special Forces officer Hashim Moosa and operational planning linked to the ISI. This was an act of strategic signalling—masked in local insurgency, orchestrated by the Pakistani deep state, but with the encouragement and tacit support of China.

The attack aimed to fracture the social fabric, disrupt economic recovery in Kashmir, and elicit either Indian overreaction or strategic confusion. In essence, it weaponized perception and psychology.

Modern Limited Warfare: Decoding the New Rules of Engagement

Modern Limited warfare blends five principal dimensions:

- **Precision and Standoff Capability:** Combining manned and unmanned systems.
- **Conventional + Irregular Operations**: Combining army-backed insurgency with proxy terror.
- **State Sponsorship with Deniability**: Utilizing terrorist fronts to maintain plausible deniability.
- **Information & Cognitive Warfare**: Manipulating social media, spreading disinformation, and destabilizing belief systems.
- **Cyber and Economic Disruption**: Targeting financial infrastructure, banking systems, and digital public goods.
- **Asymmetric Leverage**: Provoking a larger state into response traps under nuclear shadow.

In this warfare landscape, **victory is redefined**: not by physical conquest, but by achieving **psychological dominance, strategic denial**, and **narrative legitimacy**.

Op Sindoor Likely Politico-Military Aims: A New Threshold Doctrine

Wars are fought by nations and executed by the military as one component of national power. The diplomatic, economic and political dimensions shape the conditions drawing confidence from the military dimension. A strong political will is a fallout of the confidence and trust in the nation's armed forces.

The Centre of Gravity of Pakistan in the War against Terror remains the Pakistan Army, the state within the state. Thus while a decisive defeat requires long wars like 1971 and may be an illusion, discrediting it in the eyes of the nation in limited war will remove it from its crowning glory.

The politico-military aim was supposedly: "To degrade Pakistan's terror infrastructure, impose costs on its military complex for sponsoring terrorism, establish a new deterrence threshold, and restore public confidence in India's national security posture". It was a message both to adversaries and allies— terrorism will now be met with structured, visible, and assured multidomain retribution. This reshaped India's deterrence architecture. Operation Sindoor was not about warfighting; it was about deterrence to compellence, and defining a new normal.

Military Strategy and Objectives

The operation was anchored in a **limited war strategy** under the nuclear threshold, supported by full-spectrum dominance across air, land, sea, cyber, and information domains. The essence was standoff precision warfare with a clear and escalatory targeting philosophy. The military objectives included:

- Destruction of **high-value terror infrastructure** in Pakistan-occupied Jammu & Kashmir (PoJK) and deep within Pakistan's mainland.
- Decapitation of **terror leadership** operating under ISI protection.
- **Degradation of Pakistan's air and retaliatory capabilities** to nullify response options.
- Tri-service posturing **to dominate the conventional escalatory ladder.**
- **Shaping global and domestic narratives** to isolate Pakistan diplomatically and ideologically.

These objectives were pursued with surgical precision, psychological clarity, and doctrinal innovation.

Targeting Philosophy: From Camps to Sponsors

India's targeting philosophy in Operation Sindoor was a **marked departure** from previous calibrated actions. It rejected the artificial separation between "non-state actors" and their military sponsors. By hitting Bahawalpur, Sargodha, and key sectors in Punjab province—deep within Pakistani territory—India made it clear that geography would no longer shield culpability. Targets included:

- Terror training camps run by LeT, JeM, and Hizbul Mujahideen.
- Safe houses used by high-ranking terror operatives.
- Communication hubs, radars, EW systems and drone control centres.
- Forward and rear airbases used for UAV operations and fighter deployments.

The underlying doctrine was clear: **dislocation, denial, disruption, and decapitation—both of capability and command**.

Force Application: Joint, Precise, Multidomain

The force application matrix in Operation Sindoor demonstrated seamless tri-service synergy and the ability to fight an integrated multi-domain high-technology war with superior outcomes. The Indian Air Force executed primary kinetic strikes using Rafale jets equipped with SCALP cruise missiles and HAMMER glide bombs, guided by real-time satellite and drone-based ISR. Indian Army artillery units and Air Defence provided denial and destruction, while the Indian Navy deployed in the Arabian Sea, effectively dominated the maritime domain, boxing in Pakistan's western fleet and eliminating maritime escalation options.

These strikes—conducted across space, cyber, electronic, air, and ground domains—paralysed Pakistan's command systems while preserving escalation control. The success of these operations signalled India's transition to fifth-generation conflict, where non-contact force, psychological dislocation, and strategic tempo define dominance. It is a warfighting paradigm where platforms, precision, and perception converge to create decisive effects without prolonged ground engagements.

Operation Sindoor broke conventional norms by striking targets well inside Pakistan's heartland, and exploiting its limited strategic geographical depth—areas previously considered off-limits. This erasure of the geographic sanctity of Pakistan's core regions sent a chilling message: **no part of the state is immune** if it harbours or supports terror infrastructure.

India employed a matrix of high-tech platforms, doctrines, and synchronized operations:

- **Air Power**: Rafales and Su-30MKIs used stand-off weapons to strike targets deep.
- **Artillery and Loitering Munitions**: K-9 Vajra guns, drones, swarms and loitering drones engaged cross-LoC and trans-IB targets.
- **Naval Maritime Dominance**: In fleet and carrier battle groups along with submarines offensively deterred maritime proxy activities.
- **Space and Surveillance**: Indigenous satellites and associated capabilities enabled real-time ISR.
- **AI-Driven Targeting**: Data fusion centres processed ISR feeds into real-time attack vectors.

- **Integrated Multilayered and Multi-tiered AD:** The tri-service integrated high technology AD grid neutralised the entire spectrum of air threats with a state-of-the-art C&R system seamlessly networked with the weapon end in real-time.

This multidomain integration allowed India to **attack, deny, degrade, and dominate**—without crossing the borders and calling the nuclear bluff in its escalation control.

Escalatory Control and Strategic Signalling

Unlike in the past, Operation Sindoor maintained tight control over the escalatory ladder and preparation to dominate each level with planning and preparation for each level of escalation. Key issues remained:

- **No Civilian Targets**: All strikes avoided civilian infrastructure.
- **Limited Temporal Window**: Operation lasted under 96 hours.
- **Selective Disclosure**: The government released only select satellite images.
- **Global Consultations**: Backchannel diplomacy with France, the US, and the UAE ensured support.
- **Maritime Force**: In maritime dominance posture playing into the adversary's psychological domain and being postured for the next level of escalation.

Pakistan's response—drone intrusions (courtesy drone powers- China, Turkey and Azerbaijan), and failed air and artillery strikes—was tactically ineffective and strategically cornered. India intercepted the bulk of the UAVs and responded by degrading all the airbases, showcasing overwhelming asymmetry. A superior favourable air, ground and maritime situation was achieved in the least time and at minimal cost.

Kinetic vs. Non-Kinetic Balance: The Strategic Right Balancing

A purely kinetic response to proxy terror is often insufficient—and sometimes counterproductive—if not embedded in a non-kinetic strategic framework. The challenge lies in balancing physical dominance with psychological, informational, legal, diplomatic, and economic superiority. This balance is flexible with responses readjusting to escalatory ladders. One such base response model could be as given below:

Domain	Role	Objective
Kinetic (short of full-scale war)	Strikes by drones'/missiles/ SF, Air strikes by BVR ammunition, shallow raids across LC etc, counter-infiltration operations	Punish, deter, deny, dislocate and disrupt
Information Warfare	Real-time narrative control, misinformation neutralization	Shape perceptions
Legal/Normative	International diplomacy, FATF pressure, lawfare	Isolate Pakistan
Civil-Military Synergy	Intelligence-led policing, social outreach	Prevent radicalization
Digital Warfare	Cyber shields, content policing, influence ops	Offensive Digital Denial & Defence
Economic Leverage	Trade denial, holding IWT in abeyance, infrastructure disruption via sanctions	Coerce non-kinetically

A denial and domination pre-emptive and proactive military posture must be augmented with anticipatory cognitive and economic strategy. ***This multidimensional approach is what defines modern full-spectrum deterrence with a 'Whole of Nation' approach.***

Information and Cognitive Dominance: The Silent Theatre

Kinetic warfare superiority alone is no longer sufficient for military success or even a military advantage. Victory or defeat in the information age is dominated by actions going viral in an instant by an adversary controlling the information domain. **Perception management has thus become the new centre of gravity and narratives are scripting history.**

In modern warfare, information is firepower. India's cognitive strategy included:

- **Narrative Pre-emption**: The MEA issued real-time updates supported by visual proof. The targets engaged post-strike were intimated through a log to Pakistan. Clarity of intent and capability.

- **Media Management**: Embargoed briefings by MEA and Tri services followed by the three DGMOs and finally the PM ensured coherence and credibility.
- **Cyber Scrubbing**: Thousands of pro-TRF, anti-India handles were de-platformed. Own offensive cyber and IW played the part of silent warriors.
- **Framing the Conflict**: The operation was always presented as counter-terror operations, securing the diplomatic legitimacy of a Dharma Yudh.

This decisive control over the cognitive battlespace secured **domestic unity**, **global support**, and **adversary dislocation and disorientation**.

Civil-Military Synergy: Political Will, Derivative of Operational Capabilities

At the heart of Operation Sindoor's success was a rare but essential alignment between **political will and military execution**. The government exhibited strategic clarity and risk acceptance, authorising deep strikes with full knowledge of potential escalation. The armed forces having given the Government all options with execution capacity, executed the mission with:

- Flawless planning and rapid mobilisation.
- Integrated jointness among the Army, Navy, and Air Force.
- High-grade operational security and information discipline.
- Real-time situation updates to national leadership.

The need for a **National Security Doctrine/ Strategy and budgetary cum acquisition reforms** came to the fore. It also highlighted that more deliberations are required in the requirement and formulation of Theatre Commands. While Op Sindoor was one option at one end of the wide threat spectrum, **any transformation must be based on defined outcomes better than the present capability at the warfighting end without enlarging the OODA loop.**

Pahalgam and the Notion of Victory

In the context of the Pahalgam terror attack and Pakistan's continued use of proxy war as state policy, India must recalibrate its strategic posture to reflect the realities of full-spectrum deterrence and limited conflict. The proxy war in Kashmir, fuelled by Pakistan's revisionist ideology, is likely to continue under the nuclear overhang to

avoid confrontation. Therefore, limited wars with defined objectives—especially in the LoC sector—will gain prominence. **The notion of victory must shift from total conquest (capture of territory to dislocation, denial and degradation) to achieving psychological ascendancy, punitive strikes-both kinetic and non-kinetic cum covert, and actions aimed at degrading Pakistan's military in the eyes of the nation.** A strategy of "Punitive Deterrence" must involve calibrated military responses, political, economic and diplomatic punitive actions against Pakistan, and robust internal governance to nullify own fault lines within the Valley. True deterrence will rest not only on India's military capability, but on its credibility, clarity of objectives, and ability to impose costs that Pakistan cannot afford, thereby rendering its proxy strategy untenable.

Building the Strategic Arsenal for Shadow Wars

The need is for the Armed Forces to redefine their threat matrix based on likelihood and severity. Further, graduate from a reactive and defensive outdated model for capability building of the 'Threat cum Capability' to the 'Capability cum Opportunity 'model. To effectively define and secure a comparative advantage in this new paradigm, India must develop seven key capability verticals:

- **National Security Strategy**: Issue a National Security Strategy for the synergised application of all elements of national power against the entire threat spectrum; articulating rules, triggers, and thresholds. In light of this document **reconsider the need and structures of Tri-Service Theatre Commands.**
- **Strategic C5ISR and Cognitive Surveillance**: Real-time satellite, drone, and AI-integrated surveillance in sensitive zones and predictive analysis. Crowd sentiment analysis and behavioural monitoring through social media analytics. Invest in real-time satellite constellations, launch on-demand capability, LEO satellites, AI-based sensor fusion, and autonomous drones.
- **Right Balance Vectors to Future War Domains**: Right balance kinetic to non-kinetic; manned to unmanned; contact to non-contact vectors in an era of standoff precise mass battlespace.
- **AI-Enabled Precision Warfare Systems**: The integration of drones into the operational doctrine along with precision munition capability, robust indigenous

production, and integration of AI technologies will be the key to building a capable, versatile, and future-ready force for punitive strikes.

- **National Information Warfare Architecture:** A more potent architecture and structure for Information Warfare, Psyops, influence operations, and counter-narrative cells.

- **Covert Hybrid Deterrence:** Special Forces and intelligence agencies/ espionage activities capable of punitive actions with plausible deniability. Focused high-impact high-visibility operations on radical Islamist outfits, Pakistan military and terrorist leadership in response to attacks such as Pahalgam.

- **Legal and Normative Counter-Coercion:** Enhanced use of FATF, UN, and IMF platforms to attribute and isolate Pakistan. Establish global norms on proxy terror accountability. The proxy plays by China and the 'Three Brother Alliance' must not only be exposed but acted upon at the national level.

- **Civil Resilience and Strategic Communication:** Strategic briefings, unified media messaging post-terror events. Proactive community engagement models to resist radical narratives. Pakistan's and China's superiority in Offensive Information Warfare must be neutralised.

- **Non-Kinetic Warfare (NKW) Offensive and Cyber Dominance:** AI-powered narrative bots to pre-empt or neutralize disinformation. Capability to strike adversarial infrastructure digitally both proactively and in retaliation. NKW covers within its ambit three war-waging capabilities: cyber operations, electronic warfare and cognitive warfare. NKW corresponds closely to the concept of Information Warfare, which enunciates that IW comprises cyber operations, EW and psychological warfare.

- **Exploit the Exposed Internal Pakistan Faultlines**: Complement overt with a symphony of covert orchestra for the music to play.

Conclusion: Rethinking Victory in the Age of Blurred Wars

The future battlefield is not just a place—it is a multidomain battlespace with a cognitive domain predominant. In this landscape deterrence and the notion of victory is more in the cognitive domain and warfare is narrative-first.

India must therefore recalibrate its understanding of success in conflict. **Instead of defining victory by just what can be severely degraded, it must also be measured by what can denied, what can be preserved, and what can be shaped—particularly the public mind.** For too long have we been surprised, forced to react and curtailed in our response. The time is for denial, dislocation, domination and punitive multidomain disruption. Thus, capabilities must be built in accordingly. The imperative is doctrinal reorientation, right balancing threats and capabilities including kinetic vs non-kinetic, and realigning our structures and PME for future wars. Further **Pakistan is one end of the threat spectrum with Chinese proxy collusivity to make one front into a combined two front. Our capabilities thus must cater for the entire spectrum of threats in a more realistic manner.**

Pahalgam is not just a turning point, it is a case study in the warfare of ambiguity, and the need for clarity of purpose, capability, and communication. It has also showcased that geopolitics and the war on terror have shades of grey and often intermingle with external collusive players. The challenge remains the beckoning of a National Security Strategy for a time-sensitive integrated national response. **The next round could well be different and sooner than expected. The operational Victory of Op Sindoor stands defined by India, Strategic deterrence - time shall tell. The Indian Defence Forces have done the Nation once again proud and must be empowered for the next round.**

DISCLAIMER

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