



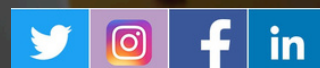
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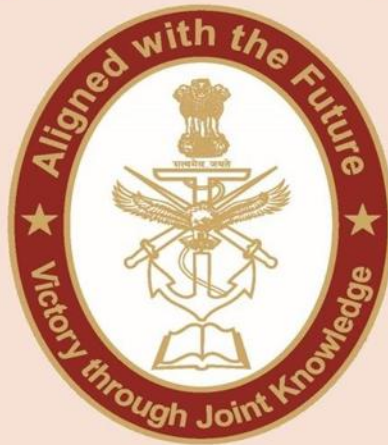
# INDIA'S BOLD NEW DOCTRINE: TURNING 'ACT OF TERROR = ACT OF WAR' INTO REALITY

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(RETD)

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# CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



## CENJOWS

**India's Bold New Doctrine:  
Turning 'Act of Terror = Act  
of War' Into Reality**



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### Introduction

As the cinders of Op Sindoor seemed to settle down, the Indian Government made a powerful and bold declaration: “*An act of Terror is an Act of War*.” For a nation straddled nearly for four decades by Proxy War waged by Pakistan, this was more than just a statement<sup>ii</sup>, it was a bold strategic message to the domestic audience and the global community. But promises in geopolitics are only worth the weight of the action they inspire. Operation Sindoor, launched in response to the Pahalgam attack, set the stage for a new kind of national security posture. The real question now is: Can India make this promise stick—and ensure that its enemies take it seriously? Has it added a new Deterrence to our responses to terrorism? Have we graduated from Deterrence to Compellence? What will be the future notion of

victory? Will it curb proxy war by Pakistan which has dynamics of deniability and ambiguity? Many more easy questions but difficult answers.

The answer lies not just in military firepower but in clear strategy, readiness, and a consistent will to act. It also lies in the nations' focus on military modernisation efforts both in terms of resources and timelines. But as India builds its deterrence against terrorism, it must strike a careful balance, acknowledging the rise of China as an even greater strategic challenge. Terrorism is just one of the lower domains of threat more likely but less intense. India must thus focus not only on counterterrorism but also on ensuring that its resources and capabilities are directed towards securing its borders from multiple threats through a multidomain capability building based on a capability cum opportunity model.

## **Operation Sindoor: A Glimpse of What's Possible**

India's response to the Pahalgam attack was swift and decisive. Operation Sindoor was a show of precision, stand-off technology warfare that demonstrated India's ability to hit hard, in-depth and fast—without escalating into a full-scale war. Using drones, UAS, missiles, airstrikes, and non-kinetic capabilities, India neutralized over 100 terrorist operatives, dismantling terror infrastructure, and destroying military installations and assets deep inside Pakistan in a borderless war. What made it truly remarkable, however, wasn't just the strike—it was the signal it sent: India is no longer afraid to fight back, and it can do so without triggering an all-out war. It also brought forth a new horizon of dealing with nuclear sabre-rattling and bold decisions.

But here's the crux of the issue: can India do it again? And again, if necessary? Is it a 'mowing the lawn' strategy? Would 'uprooting the lawn' be a more hurting and lasting strategy? A one-time show of force is not enough. What India needs is a repeatable, credible doctrine for Proxy War—one that ensures any act of terror will be met with a response that makes the cost of terrorism too high for its

sponsors to bear. The national security doctrine hopefully under formulation will hopefully consider these.

## **Why ‘Mowing the Lawn’ Matters: Learning from Israel’s Playbook**

Strategic thinkers often compare India to Israel, both democracies are constantly under threat from non-state actors backed by state sponsors. Israel’s defence strategy, which is built on demonstrating military strength as a way of discouraging opponents has many complex hurdles including the situation where they must deal with terrorist groups like Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The deterrence strategy of ‘mowing the lawn’ showed its limits in recent events like the 7 October 2023 barbaric attacks by Hamas have highlighted weaknesses in a simply punitive approach and emphasized that a more comprehensive, all-encompassing strategy involving diplomatic measures as well as trading political situations is needed to create long-term stability in the region. It has raised the importance of a comprehensive integrated deterrence. Israel’s “mowing the lawn,” strikes don’t wait for a catastrophic event; they’re pre-emptive, designed to keep the enemy on its heels. Over time, this creates a predictable rhythm of deterrence: Hamas may regroup, but it knows there will be a price to pay.

India has largely responded episodically—Pathankot, Uri, Pulwama, and now Pahalgam. Yet Act of Terror+ Act of War is neither pre-emptive nor offensive in its statement. Each time, the response has been stronger, but it’s still reactive, lacking the kind of institutionalized doctrine that ensures predictability and consistency. To be truly effective, India must turn its outrage into a permanent pre-emptive and proactive offensive posture. The next time we have intelligence of Pakistan Terror outfit, we must strike not wait for it to manifest, the cost to their sponsors must be clear before they act. It may be well said but that will define a bold leadership and military compellence doctrine<sup>iii</sup>.

## What India Needs to Do Next: Six Key Pillars

To turn this doctrine from a political statement to reality, India must move quickly and decisively across several key areas:

1. **Clear Thresholds** – What constitutes an “act of terror”? Defining the threshold—whether it’s mass-casualty attacks, sabotage of critical infrastructure, or cross-border incursions—will prevent paralysis and overreaction. Or is it a threat and signature of terrorism? A cost-benefit analysis is important.
2. **Escalation Control** – A quick, hard strike doesn’t need to mean a full-blown war. India must develop and deploy precision tools—cyberattacks, drones, long-range missiles—that inflict damage without triggering an all-out conflict. Yet responses must be integrated into the overall escalatory ladder.
3. **Repeatability** – One strike is not enough. India needs a system that enables swift, repeatable responses. This means investing in the right technology, establishing rapid-response units, and making military action second nature.
4. **Investing in State Art C5ISR** – To act with speed and precision, India's military needs empowerment and a relook at its C5ISR capabilities for an institutionalised 24x7 architecture like the Israelis with AI-integrated predictive analysis. Real-time Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) are key to seamless multi-domain operations and deterrence construct.
5. **Narrative Control** – India must not only act decisively but also control the narrative. Every military strike must be paired with strategic diplomatic messaging to shape global perception and maintain international support. India’s cognitive warfare capabilities are suboptimal and need major reconstruction.

6. **Modernization For Future Wars** – The tools of modern warfare are evolving quickly. India needs to prioritize investment in drones, loitering munitions, artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled targeting systems, and other cutting-edge technologies to stay ahead of adversaries. A right balance between kinetic: non-kinetic; manned: unmanned: contact and non-contact is important. A caution is that the euphoria of Op Sindoor must not dilute a balanced capability building for the entire threat spectrum based on one sub conventional model. India has a disputed border and peculiar operational environment- this must not be ignored in replicating global conflicts.

### **Deterrence Alone Isn't Enough: The Case for Compellence**

In the old world of warfare, deterrence—convincing an enemy not to act—was the gold standard. But in today's hybrid conflict world, deterrence isn't always enough. Compellence, the art of forcing an adversary to change course by imposing costs, maybe even more effective. It is pre-emptive and proactive – a culture not exhibited so far by India.

In India's case, compellence means not just deterring Pakistan from attacking but making them reverse course when they do. A sustained, calibrated series of military strikes can create a clear cost-benefit analysis for Pakistan: continue supporting terrorism, and pay the price every time. The new normal must be **'Threat of Terrorism = Act of Punishment'**. Bold, new but mandated if we are looking for a new normal. If deterrence is about making the cost of aggression too high, compellence is about making the cost of backing down just as high.

But there is another crucial factor: while India focuses on counterterrorism and compellence in the short term, it must not lose sight of the larger threat posed by China. As China grows more assertive in the Indo-Pacific, and along India's northern borders, India must ensure that its military preparedness is not only shaped by the terrorism threat but also by the looming presence of China's growing military and economic power.

## India's Path Forward: A Unified Strategy for Compellence, Retribution, and Capability Building

India doesn't need to mimic Israel's approach—but it does need its version of **“Assured Pre-emptive Retribution”**. A doctrine that allows India to strike with impact, control, and credibility. Here's how:

- **Formalise the Doctrine:** It's time to write down a formal, graduated response strategy—modular, legal, and flexible.
- **Train for Consistency:** Red-team exercises simulating terror attacks and responses will ensure that military action becomes second nature.
- **Fight Smart Equip Smartly:** The world of counter-terror is changing. The terrain no longer dictates strategy—technology does. The ends need to be redefined and the ways and means must be smart. The Pahalgam response must be remembered as the moment when the country turned decisively toward smart war—a war of intelligence, invisibility, and innovation. But more than that, India must strike a balance in its military spending and strategy, ensuring that its focus on counterterrorism does not come at the cost of building a comprehensive defence capability to counter China's growing presence in the region. Yet the Indian Government must realise Op Sindoor was a wakeup call – Viksit Bharat<sup>iv</sup> cannot happen without Suraksit Bharat, and Suraksit Bharat requires budgetary support and defence reforms. Internally the Defence Forces must also introspect on such capabilities for future wars.
- **Transformation: Review Structures and Doctrines:** The need is to review present structures, PME, doctrines and their joint operations capability to ensure rapid response and integration of air, land, sea, space and cyber forces. Technology absorption both in niche technology and timelines must empower the force.
- **Strategic Messaging:** Establish a more potent Cognitive Warfare organisation that shapes narratives, dominates the cognitive space and counters enemy propaganda.

- **Balanced Defence Posture:** As India deals with terrorism, it must not neglect the broader challenge posed by China. While investing in counterterrorism capabilities, India must continue modernizing its military, particularly in areas like air superiority, missile defence, and naval power. Both against Pakistan and China the flank of decision will be the Sea. We must recognise this as professional first. It must avoid the trap of overstretching resources and help maintain a balanced approach that considers both immediate threats and long-term strategic interests.
- **Equipping Philosophy:** The present threat cum capability building model must give way for a more proactive and perspective capability cum opportunity-based model to be ready and relevant for the future. This will empower a pre-emptive and proactive operational military strategy and also help in adding teeth to a redefined deterrence based on denial and domination.

## **Conclusion: Credibility is the True Currency of Power**

India's declaration that terrorism is war is not just a political slogan. If India is serious about this doctrine, it must back it up with action—and consistency. Operation Sindoor was a good start, but it can't be the end. A one-time strike won't make India's adversaries think twice about sponsoring terrorism. What will make them think twice is a proven, repeatable, and credible doctrine backed by the threat of sustained action.

In the volatile world of geopolitics, the real currency isn't power—it's credibility. If India can turn political musings into military capabilities, the time is NOW. It can set a new standard for global counterterrorism strategy and put Pakistan on the back foot. However, while preparing for the short-term sprint, the long-term marathon must not be compromised. Preparing for the larger, more complex challenges posed by China's ambitions must not be destabilised. In balancing these threats, a Surakshit Bharat India will demonstrate that it's not just responding



to terror—it is shaping its strategic course of Viksit Bharat with foresight and resolve.

In the end, we need to debate further on two issues:

**1. Do we want the Israeli model of mowing the lawn or the Indian model of Uprooting the lawn?**

**2. Which is a better strategic model- Act of Terror = Act of War or 'Threat of Terrorism = Act of Punishment' a better model?**

Only time will speak for itself, whether Op Sindoor has been an inflexion point at a strategic level or just an operational victory. One thing which stands out loud and clear is – **WELL-DONE INDIAN ARMED FORCES: WE ARE PROUD OF YOU.**

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