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# INDIA'S NEW DEFENCE DOCTRINE: FROM STRATEGIC RESTRAINT TO DECISIVE RESPONSE

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### India's New Defence Doctrine: From Strategic Restraint to Decisive Response



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#### Introduction

India's national security approach has shifted its gears in the last seven decades, reflecting the country's ever-evolving political and geopolitical goals and realities. From the traditional threats to the multifaceted threats of the contemporary era, India's grand strategy of prioritising its national security interests and securing them has expanded in scope and complexity. This article focuses on India's tactical security changes when dealing with external threats, particularly Pakistan. From practising strategic restraint early on to etching a new security doctrine where perpetrators are held accountable and face consequences of their actions, India has come far.

India's security environment has evolved through wars, unstable politics, great power politics, and the ongoing threat of cross-border terrorism. In the last decade, India's security framework has adopted a policy of proactive and punitive measures against terrorism and its sponsors. This position was solidified by the historic operations such as the 2016 Uri surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot airstrikes. The 2025 Operation

Sindoor was extraordinary; it marked a new dawn in India's security doctrine, bringing the tri-services together with greater impact and purpose.

## **From Partition to Proxy War**

In 1947, the Indian subcontinent was partitioned not merely by the ink on the frail papers but by shaking hands and bleeding hearts. The partition ripped through the country like a sharp pair of scissors through a fabric, tearing away centuries of shared history and culture. The partition led to the emergence of two nations based on different state models. India emerged as a secular, democratic republic with a pluralistic constitutional vision. On the other hand, Pakistan established itself based on the religion which influenced both its internal and foreign policies.<sup>1</sup> Within months of independence, the lingering issue of Kashmir sparked the first India-Pakistan clash.

The then ruler of Jammu & Kashmir, Maharaja Hari Singh, wanted to remain an independent state. In the words of American Indologist William Brown, the maharaja "disliked the idea of becoming a part of India, which was being democratised, or of Pakistan, which was a Muslim state."<sup>2</sup> However, along the border, notably between Kathua and Akhnoor, there had been sporadic Hindu-Muslim skirmishes, making the situation tense. To make the situation worse, more than two thousand Pakistan tribal militias with modern weaponry, backed by their army, raided Muzaffarabad.<sup>3</sup>

In the next two days, the towns of Domel, Garhi, and Chinari fell. The column now moved along the Uri axis and reached Baramulla, plundering and torching the town.<sup>4</sup> Srinagar, the capital city, was under imminent threat. This compelled Maharaja Hari Singh to sign the 'Instrument of Accession' on October 26, in lieu of intervention by India to evict the raider.<sup>5</sup> The clash concluded in 1948 with a ceasefire, which divided the territory between India and Pakistan. This early encounter established the seeds of long-term animosity.

The decades that followed witnessed several clashes. The 1965 war resulted in Pakistan's misperception that Kashmiri dissatisfaction would spark an uprising against the Indian rule. Instead, India launched a powerful counteroffensive. Pakistan faced another strategic setback in 1971 when Bangladesh was created, providing India's overwhelming conventional dominance.<sup>6</sup> These recurrent failures compelled Pakistan

to reconsider its counter-terror policy. Unable to match India's military might, it resorted to asymmetric warfare, where it started training, financing, and assisting non-state actors to commit insurgency and terrorism on Indian land.

This theory took its most sophisticated form in the late 1980s and 1990s, when Pakistan-backed militants entered Kashmir and launched strikes across India.<sup>7</sup> The 1999 Kargil War was a continuation of Pakistan's war, carried out on the misjudged assumption that nuclear weapons had allowed room for limited combat. Pakistan planned to change the ground realities by disguising the regular army as terrorists and infiltrating over the Line of Control (LoC). India replied with military might and diplomatic subtlety, effectively re-establishing the status quo.

Despite the decades of strife and provocation, India has maintained an image of strategic restraint. The 2001 Parliament attack and the 2008 Mumbai attacks were serious acts of terrorism, but India continued to avoid the violation of international borders. This restraint arose from a number of causes, including a desire to prevent escalation, respect for international conventions, and trust in diplomatic channels. However, as terrorism spread and Pakistan continued to assist terrorist organisations with impunity, India's patience dwindled. The cost of constraint outweighed its advantages. A shift was inevitably underway.

### **The Breaking Point**

India right now is at the focal point for geopolitical complexities, keeping its national security under continual threat. Cross-border terrorism emerged as one of India's most serious threats in the early 1990s. Pakistan's growing ties with extremist organisations like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) facilitated a series of catastrophic strikes.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the severity and complexity of terrorism increased, forcing India to reassess its security architecture. The 1993 Mumbai blasts, one of the worst terror acts in Indian history, exposed the severity of cross-border terrorism.

The insurgency in Kashmir escalated in the 1990s with the mass recruitment and training of young men and equipping them with weapons from across the border. The 2001 Parliament attack was a direct attack on Indian democracy. The subsequent 2008 Mumbai attack drew international attention to Pakistan's state-sponsored

terrorists and their networks. Despite these incitements, India remained committed to silent condemnation. It increased diplomatic pressure, enhanced internal security, and averted further reprisal. While this positioning gave India the moral high ground globally, its deterrent impact was diminishing.

The demand to bring a shift in the doctrine grew among the Indian public, political groups, and strategic communities. India's rapidly modernising military, increased global clout, confident diaspora, and political will paved the way for a more assertive security approach. The breaking point hit in 2016.

### **New Doctrine Emergence**

The attack on the Indian Army Brigade headquarters in Uri on September 18, 2016, was a watershed moment. This terrorist-initiated action killed eighteen Indian troops and injured over 30, many of whom were burnt by the grenade blasts in their respective tents.<sup>9</sup> This sparked nationwide outrage. For many Indians, this marked the end of tolerance of decades of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. The pressure for a decisive reaction was higher than ever.

On the night of September 28, 2016, the Indian Army carried out a surgical strike across the Line of Control (LoC) against terrorist launch facilities in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).<sup>10</sup> This was the first time India had officially confirmed cross-LoC raids, indicating a new aggressive posture, directly holding Pakistan accountable and exhibiting the ability and willingness to retaliate beyond its own boundaries. Most importantly, it represented a major change in the security doctrine.

This trend echoed in the 2019 Pulwama attack, where a suicide bomber drove an explosive-laden SUV into a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) convoy on the Jammu-Srinagar highway near Pulwama in J&K.<sup>11</sup> India intensified its reaction by deploying the Air Force to strike a key Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) training centre in Balakot, which is deep inside Pakistan's territory. The Balakot airstrikes were significant since they breached the Line of Control (LoC) proving India's will to utilise all military options, even in a nuclearized environment.

Pakistan's attempt to respond the next day was foiled by India's defensive operations, adding to India's credibility in its new strategy. From Uri to Balakot, India demonstrated that it would no longer be intimidated by the threat of escalation and that the age of quiet condemnation of cross-border was over.<sup>12</sup>

## **The New India**

India's new posture towards Pakistan combines strong diplomatic isolation and measured military deterrence. The age of merely reactive actions is over; New Delhi has embarked on a proactive, consequence-driven approach. From isolating Pakistan on the diplomatic stage to cutting trade ties, India's new approach towards Pakistan has changed its global image from sympathy seeker to that of a nation that needs to be scrutinised and held accountable for its actions. Following the 2016 Uri assault and again after the 2019 Pulwama assault, India's worldwide outreach resulted in broad recognition of Pakistan-based groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed as global terrorists.<sup>13</sup>

This worldwide confidence is reflected in India's growing military posture, where collaboration across the Army, Navy, and Air Force has been critical to preparedness. The recent 'Operation Sindoor' demonstrated a paradigm shift in India's defence strategy, from compartmentalised service response to integrated, tri-service coordination.<sup>14</sup> Operation Sindoor highlighted India's capacity to undertake synchronised operations on land, in the air, and in water, with each service providing information, mobility, and artillery to the others. Such operations promote jointness, reduce reaction time, and display India's capability to carry out difficult operations in a variety of terrains. The focus on jointness is also consistent with India's overall security vision of a military that is flexible, technology-driven, and capable of quick, decisive action in various locations.

## **Conclusion**

India's national security doctrine has undergone a paradigm shift. The new doctrine, born from decades of provocation and formed by shifting internal and global trends,

rejects prior passivity, and leans towards proactive deterrence. The shift, exemplified through operations like the Uri Surgical Strike and the Balakot Airstrikes, demonstrates that India is not only prepared to defend but also anticipate, punish, and eliminate threats. This is more than just a military adjustment; it is a political and strategic repositioning. India now communicates with power, drawing on information, clarity, diplomatic weight, and public commitment.

As South Asia faces new challenges and uncertainties, India's evolving policy conveys a clear and uniform message that those who support terrorism will suffer the consequences, regardless of borders, location, or nuclear posture. New India is marked not just by caution but also by determination, clarity, and a willingness to act. This policy will continue to affect regional geopolitics, ensuring that the country remains cautious, assertive, and unwavering in its defence of sovereignty and security.

#### **DISCLAIMER**

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## Endnotes

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