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CLOSING THE CONVENTIONAL GAP: INDIA'S INTEGRATED ROCKET FORCE AS A STRATEGIC NECESSITY

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**Closing the Conventional Gap:
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as a Strategic Necessity**



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"We need a missile force. Today, you will see that rockets and missiles have become intertwined because if we want to achieve an impact, both rockets and missiles can deliver it. We are looking towards a rocket missile force because, as you know, Pakistan has established a rocket force, and China has also created such a force. It is the need of the hour that we also establish such a force"

~ General Upendra Dwivedi, former COASⁱ

Abstract

The changing nature of warfare in the twenty-first century has solidified long-range precision-strike capabilities and missile warfare as decisive instruments of conventional deterrence and military effectiveness. Contemporary conflicts, such as the Russia–Ukraine war, the Middle East conflict, and India's Operation Sindoor, demonstrate that future wars will increasingly be shaped by the ability to conduct rapid, precise, and coordinated non-contact strikes against critical military and strategic infrastructure. Against this backdrop, India faces a growing two-front conventional deterrence challenge from both China's People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) and Pakistan's newly established Army Rocket Force. Despite possessing

advanced missile systems such as BrahMos, Pralay, and Pinaka, India's strike assets remain dispersed across the three services, limiting their operational effectiveness. This issue brief argues for the urgent establishment of an Integrated Rocket Force (IRF) as a dedicated tri-service command to consolidate long-range strike capabilities, enhance jointness, strengthen Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities, and bridge India's conventional strike gap. It discusses the hurdles that cause delays and provides recommendations to overcome those hurdles. It concludes on the note that an IRF is no longer merely a modernisation initiative but a strategic necessity for safeguarding India's security interests in an increasingly contested regional environment.

Keywords: Non-Contact Warfare, PLARF, IRF, A2/AD, Non-conventional deterrence, Operation Sindoor, Russia-Ukraine War, Middle Eastern conflict.

Introduction

In an era when conflicts and geopolitical tensions worldwide are rising to unprecedented levels, the contemporary world order is undergoing a paradigm shift in how wars are fought, as warfare is rapidly yet profoundly transforming from Contact Warfare (CW) to Non-Contact Warfare (NCW). Countries have begun restructuring, reinvesting in, and modernizing their arsenals. Missile warfare has emerged as a key form of deterrence strategy among countries. The ongoing conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Middle Eastern crisis, have demonstrated that the ability to conduct deep precision strikes can significantly alter the balance of power even before conventional forces come into direct contact.ⁱⁱ For India, a country that stands at a critical point in its journey for military modernisation and integration, and faces a two-front threat from two hostile nuclear-armed countries in its immediate proximity, vis-à-vis Pakistan and China to its western and eastern borders, respectively, the challenges are immediate and concerning. While India possesses a credible nuclear deterrence capability and a highly capable military, a considerable gap remains in its conventional long-range strike architecture. Therefore, the need to establish an Integrated Rocket Force (IRF), a unified, autonomous tri-service command dedicated to long-range precision missile strike systems, has become a

strategic necessity for India to address emerging challenges and enhance operational readiness. This would not only enhance India's conventional deterrence capabilities but also allow India to conduct long-range, precise, and coordinated strikes inside enemy territory. The question is no longer whether India needs such a force, but rather how quickly it can be set up, given that both China and Pakistan have already established their respective independent rocket forces.

Understanding and Addressing the Conventional Gap

For decades, India's conventional military strategic posture has been heavily relying on large standing armies, layered air Defences, and a sizeable but ageing Air Force fleet, which was well-suited and equipped for the 20th century, mainly characterised by land battles, aerial superiority, and naval blockades, but the threat landscape has dramatically changed in the 21st century. Warfare, especially in the 2020s, is largely dominated by unmanned, contactless, and hybrid strategies, gradually replacing the traditional hand-to-hand combat tactics. Major powers are investing heavily in modernising their military capabilities while also enhancing their conventional inventories. In recent years, missile-based deterrence has emerged as the preferred conventional strategy among countries, mainly due to its non-contact nature and comparatively low operating costs. China, with its People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF), currently has the largest conventional missile arsenal, with over 2,500 missiles in its inventory.ⁱⁱⁱ China has invested extensively in the development of the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF), which serves as a critical pillar of Chinese military power. The PLARF operates a wide spectrum of ballistic and cruise missiles capable of striking targets across the Indo-Pacific region. These systems provide Beijing with significant anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities and enable it to conduct precise strikes against enemy military infrastructure, logistics hubs, airfields, and command centres. Conceptually and structurally, the PLARF is a mirror construct of the Russian Strategic Rocket Forces (RSRF) and is designed with a dual-use architecture in mind: nuclear retaliation and conventional missile-striking capabilities.^{iv} Although the PLARF's primary objective is centred on strategic deterrence and is based on China's no-first-use (NFU) doctrine, recent years have seen decreasing mentions of the doctrine in the PLA's official records and papers.^v Strained diplomatic ties, ongoing tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and China's cartographic aggression along the eastern borders, especially around the

Arunachal region, put India in a concerning situation. India, in contrast, has traditionally relied on air power and conventional ground offensives for deep strike operations. While platforms such as the BrahMos missile, Pinaka rocket system, and various ballistic missiles offer considerable capabilities, they remain dispersed across different services and commands.^{vi} This fragmentation limits their potential effectiveness during high-intensity conflicts.

Consequently, India lacks a dedicated organisational structure comparable to China's Rocket Force to coordinate long-range precision strikes. With Pakistan already existing as a sworn adversary along the western borders and China's PLARF threat on the eastern frontiers, India needs to speed up the process to establish its IRF (Integrated Rocket Force), and does not need to await the theatreization to come into effect.^{vii}

Lessons from Contemporary Cases

There have been several modern conflicts in recent years that clearly demonstrate the importance of long-range precision strike systems. Wars of the 21st century have redefined the meaning of 'winning': they are no longer focused on the outright destruction of enemy forces; rather, they are won by crippling, disrupting, and destroying the enemy's critical infrastructure.^{viii} The Russia-Ukraine war is perhaps the best-suited example, as it marks the first instance of interstate war/ conflict that has seen large-scale deployment of ballistic and cruise missile technology. Since 2022, more than 13,300 missiles have been launched.^{ix} These missiles are mostly used to strike critical infrastructure on both sides, primarily electric power grids, military installations, critical mineral depots, and oil refineries.^x Most of these have been launched by Russia, while Ukraine is mostly relying on long-range drones. Throughout the war, Russia has used various kinds of long-range air, ship, and ground-based missile striking systems on Ukraine, but the backbone of Russia's long-range striking arsenal is its land-based ballistic and cruise missile systems.^{xi} Although ground forces are also involved in the war, the majority of the damage is caused by missile systems. The second example is the Middle Eastern conflict of 2026 between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the combined forces of the United States and Israel. The conflict began on February 28th, 2026, with the joint forces of the U.S and Israel launching coordinated strikes on Iran, with the strikes targeting the Iranian military, critical

infrastructure, and most importantly, the Iranian leadership under the codename '*Operation Epic Fury*'.^{xii} The strikes also resulted in the death of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, when his residence was targeted during the first round of strikes on the 28th of February. The Iranian forces retaliated heavily by targeting U.S military establishments, bases, and assets in the Middle East. They also seized complete control of the Strait of Hormuz, closing it to commercial traffic and leading to a global economic and fuel crisis. Current estimates show that over 15,000 long-range ballistic strikes were conducted by the U.S forces, and more than 3000 missiles were launched in retaliation by the Iranian forces.^{xiii} What makes this conflict important is the fact that it is a completely non-contact-based war, with no ground-based offensives, and relying completely on long-range missile and drone-based strikes. This conflict is thus an example of the rapidly changing nature of warfare and the magnitude of damage it can cause in a limited span of time. The third, and perhaps the most substantial, example for India is the set of lessons from '*Operation Sindoor*,' which India launched in retaliation to the Pahalgam massacre of 22nd April 2025, striking terrorist camps across the borders on 6th and 7th May 2025, and the subsequent escalations by Pakistan in the days after, which ultimately led to India striking Pakistan's military installations and bases. The strikes conducted by India were purely non-contact-based, using advanced missile systems such as the BrahMos air-to-air supersonic cruise missile, which proved to be a game-changer.^{xiv} On the defensive front, the Russian S-400 and the indigenous Akash missile air defence systems proved critical in demonstrating India's conventional deterrence capabilities, neutralising threats mid-air. Pakistan mainly relied on long-range drones and Chinese air-to-air missiles such as the PL-15E to strike the targets, although most of them were successfully neutralised. The most important lesson that India learned from Operation Sindoor was that it highlighted the importance of rapid, precise retaliation, integrated surveillance, and stand-alone conventional strike capabilities, highlighting certain operational realities out of which two stand out: the speed of retaliation matters as much as the scale, and conventional striking systems strengthen deterrence capabilities.^{xv} The most alarming development for India, post Operation Sindoor, was the establishment of the Pakistan Army's autonomous rocket forces on 14th August 2025, to increase conventional deterrence capabilities and enhance the army's combat capability.^{xvi}

With this development, India now faces a two-front threat on its borders, Pakistan's ARF towards the west, and China's PLARF towards the east. These conflicts reveal a common lesson: future wars will increasingly be won by those who can identify, target, and destroy critical assets at long ranges with precision and speed. They also highlight the fact that the era of prolonged ground-based battles is fading and that the advent of the '*stand and strike era*' is imminent.

India's Integrated Rocket Force and What it Would Do

Former CDS, late Gen Bipin Rawat PV, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, YSM, SM, VSM, ADC, had proposed the concept of India's Integrated Rocket Force in 2021.^{xvii} The IRF is proposed to be an integrated tri-service organisation, which is expected to deal with non-contact warfare consisting of conventional missiles that include short-range to medium-range missiles such as the Pralay, cruise missiles such as BrahMos, and subsonic Long range Land Attack Cruise Missiles (LR-LACM).^{xviii} The Integrated Rocket Force, once operational, would consolidate India's entire inventory of long-range strike systems: ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, hypersonic missiles, and loitering munitions under one unified command with its own doctrine, targeting architecture, logistics chain, and battle management systems.^{xix} The IRF would be kept separate from the Strategic Forces Command, established in 2003, which handles nuclear deterrence and operates under the Nuclear Command Authority (NCA) led by the Prime Minister.^{xx} The key point that differentiates the IRF from China's PLARF is their structural organisation. While the PLARF has a dual-task architecture that addresses both conventional and nuclear deterrence, the IRF is expected to address only conventional deterrence.^{xxi} Overall, the rationale for establishing India's Integrated Rocket Force is to counter China's PLARF and its growing presence along India's borders in recent years. It also aims to increase jointness and synergy among the three branches of the armed forces by bridging the operational gap and consolidating the fragmented missile arsenals across the forces into a single autonomous command, thereby streamlining the process of theatreization. A unified command enables mass coordination, i.e., the ability to launch simultaneous, time-on-target strikes against an adversary's air Defences, command-and-control (C2) nodes, logistics infrastructure, and military concentrations in the critical opening phase of a conflict.^{xxii} This is precisely the capability that gave the PLARF its central role in Chinese war-fighting doctrine, and it is precisely what India

lacks. The IRF, as mentioned earlier, would greatly enhance India's conventional deterrence posture and provide it with advanced A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) capabilities, especially along the Himalayan borders.^{xxiii} Ultimately, an Integrated Rocket Force provides India with strategic signalling capabilities, which is the ability to visibly surge missile units, conduct large-scale exercises, and demonstrate targeting reach across the Himalayas, creating a deterrent effect in peacetime. It is a language Beijing understands, having used it extensively in its exercises around Taiwan.

Challenges and The Way Forward

While the case for an Integrated Rocket Force is strategically sound and important, challenges at multiple levels of the system are delaying the process. The first issue is the institutional disjunction among the Indian tri-services. The Army, Navy, and Air Force have historically guarded their domains with considerable vigour. The Army views its missile artillery as integral to land battle doctrine. The Air Force considers its air-to-air missile systems and deep-strike capabilities to be its sovereign operational territory.^{xxiv} The Navy is hesitant to transfer control of ship-launched BrahMos variants. Creating a fourth pillar that draws assets from all three will require a level of inter-service agreement that has proved elusive even in less contentious domains. The post of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) was created on 24th December 2019 by the government to address institutional fragmentation and promote jointness and integration among the three forces.^{xxv} The subsequent establishment of theatre commands, long delayed but gradually moving forward, represents the structural framework within which an IRF would logically sit. Theatreization and the IRF are, in fact, mutually reinforcing: theatre commanders need assured access to long-range strike assets, and the IRF needs the joint command architecture that theatres provide. The second issue is budgetary constraints, and although the budget has increased significantly over the years, intense competition persists among manpower costs, capital acquisitions, and modernisation priorities. Despite the challenges, India's vision of an Integrated Rocket Force is gradually taking shape, with the theatreization project being put on a fast track, especially after the episodes of Operation Sindoor, with former CDS Gen Anil Chauhan playing a key role in tri-services integration and push for modernisation of the Indian Armed Forces.^{xxvi} India must now take certain steps to ensure smooth progress and the establishment of the Indian Integrated Rocket Forces.

Recommendations

- Frame a conventional strike doctrine with a nuclear firewall, backed by a legislative mandate. HQ IDS, under the CDS with CCS approval, should draft a conventional-only strike doctrine within 18 months that explicitly excludes dual-capable systems from IRF control, signalling clearly to Pakistan and China that IRF launches carry no nuclear implication. This should be paired with an executive order compelling a fixed-schedule transfer of strike assets (Pralay, BrahMos regiments/ship-fire-control) from the services to the IRF, softened by incentives such as retained logistics ownership and protected career pathways for seconded officers.^{xxvii}
- Establish the IRF as a distinct command with a single reporting line to the CDS, with the CISC as coordinating staff, removing the dual-subordination ambiguity.
- India need not build the IRF from scratch, as it already possesses an existing and working framework in the Strategic Forces Command. Given the similarity in structure and operational mechanisms between the IRF and the SFC, India can selectively draw from the SFC by using its targeting protocols and initial cadre, but build a separate operational culture suited to conventional warfighting (higher tempo, delegated release authority, live ISR integration), and design the force for survivability from day one, mobile, dispersed, and partly hardened basing, since IRF assets will themselves be priority counterforce targets. .
- Build a concrete ISR/C4ISR backbone with the DSA and DCA, specifying measurable targets (satellite revisit rates, a joint targeting cell, sensor-to-shooter benchmarks) rather than asserting "multi-domain integration" as a given.
- Lastly, fund the IRF explicitly and engage internationally within India's strategic autonomy limits. Ring-fence a capital allocation distinct from service modernisation budgets and commit to scaling indigenous production (DRDO/DPSU) to match doctrinal requirements. Limit QUAD engagement to bilateral technology dialogue rather than "joint targeting concepts," which risk feeding a QUAD militarisation narrative that Beijing could exploit.

Conclusion

India stands at a critical juncture in its military modernisation journey. The strategic environment is becoming increasingly complex, characterised by great-power competition, rapid technological change, and persistent security challenges from both China and Pakistan. While India possesses capable armed forces and a credible nuclear deterrent, the absence of a dedicated conventional long-range strike institution creates a significant operational gap. The establishment of an Integrated Rocket Force offers a practical and strategically sound solution to this challenge. Such a force would enhance conventional deterrence, strengthen joint warfighting capabilities, provide rapid precision strike options, and help balance the growing missile capabilities of India's adversaries. More importantly, it would align India's military posture with the realities of twenty-first-century warfare, where precision fires and long-range strike capabilities increasingly determine strategic outcomes. In an era defined by speed, precision, and technological superiority, an Integrated Rocket Force is not merely an option for India; it is an urgent strategic necessity.

DISCLAIMER

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