



Pahalgam and Beyond - Operation Sindoor and India's Options



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The recent terrorist attack in Pahalgam that resulted in the death of 26 innocent lives led to intense speculation and debate on the involvement of Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism and the action that India as a country needed to take. Public pressure in a democracy for justice and action is indeed understandable and justified, and the day's government found itself in an unenviable situation to 'do something.' Having carried out surgical strikes in the past by special forces in 2016, post the Uri terror attack and by the IAF in 2019, post the Pulwama terror attack, the expectation from the domestic constituency had only increased. While diplomatic steps taken by the government to hold the Indus Water Treaty in abeyance, expulsion of military advisors, closing of the border and revoking visas of Pakistan nationals were carried out immediately, these would take time to fructify and take effect. Terror attacks in Jammu and Kashmir, followed by plausible deniability and the willingness to cooperate for a joint and impartial probe by Pakistan, is a familiar playbook that India had only got weary of listening to. Diplomatic support from the international community has been more than forthcoming, along with the advice for India to exercise restraint.

India exercised restraint, albeit for a period of fifteen days that seemed like eternity, until 'Operation Sindoor' was carried out on the night of 06-07 May 2025. In a deliberate and carefully planned attack that was focused, measured and non-escalatory, the Indian Armed Forces struck nine terrorist training camps, indoctrination centres, and staging areas inside Pakistan and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. These were targeted based on credible intelligence, ensuring no loss to civilian lives and property and no military targets were struck. Pakistan indeed was taken by surprise and

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has since then reacted with drone and missile attacks, targeting Indian cities and airfields. The raison d' être of the Pakistan military, which considers itself the sole guardian of its security, is keeping the threat from India alive. Not reacting to the present situation would only have undermined its credibility and sanctity. India has not been reticent and has responded by targeting the air defence network of Pakistan from Lahore to Karachi. The onus for further escalation now rests with Pakistan, and international opinion is already against Pakistan, with the world having realised that the scourge of terrorism emanates from the country with the tacit support of the state. Any further attack by Pakistan on Indian military targets would be at its peril, as India has already demonstrated that it would respond appropriately.

Having briefed global leaders and envoys from friendly foreign countries who understand India's predicament and the need to act against terror, India today stands on high moral ground as a responsible nation. The need for 'just' action within a specified time was felt by the leadership, which did respond, not only by sending a clear message to Pakistan that acts of terror would not be tolerated but also to its citizens that the nation would do all it could to protect its citizens. The Indian Air Force, which played a significant role in neutralising the targets, is better equipped than it was post Pulwama in 2019. The air defence umbrella that the IAF provides has ensured that the population has remained safe despite relentless attacks by Pakistan. The impregnable air defence system of the IAF, integrated with the smallest unit on the ground, remains ever vigilant and ready to respond with alacrity. Military power and capability take years to build and develop, and crises do not come knocking to give a warning. The nature of airpower is such that nations cannot necessarily buy the airpower they need in good enough time when they need it.

The Indian government has resolutely displayed its will to act against state-sponsored terrorism in bringing the perpetrators of this heinous act to justice. The Indian Armed Forces, which responded in a measured and calibrated manner at the outset, has ensured that the 'Integrated Air Defence' put in place by the IAF and controlled by the Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) responded in a manner that precluded any damage to IAF bases and cities by the attacks carried out by Pakistan. In addition, the retaliation to these attacks has been carried out by the IAF's long-range weapons that have caused damage to military targets in Pakistan.

Nations chart their destinies through their polity and actions. Having eschewed violence post partition in 1947, India has emerged as a peaceful and progressive nation that is counted as a

growing and responsible power in the comity of nations. Pakistan, on the other hand, has used state-sponsored terrorism as a policy through which it attempted to stymie India's growth while using its geostrategic location as an advantage to curry favour from the West. While the jury is out on whether the chickens have finally come home to roost as far as terrorism is concerned in Pakistan, both India and Pakistan can ill afford to get drawn into a conflict that could simmer unabated. Intelligence failures have plagued India since Kargil, Pulwama, Doklam and Eastern Ladakh. Having taken a slew of measures since then to plug the gaps, the recent incident serves as a stark reminder that it is not enough, and India needs to take a hard look at the shortcomings within while simultaneously making attempts to isolate Pakistan diplomatically.

Building military capability and capacity cannot be neglected, and efforts must continue unabated. The absence or lack of capacity of a national instrument of power cannot be offset by diplomacy or economic means. India's predicament is unenviable to say the least, as far as its national security is concerned. A strong and capable military will deter, and a united and cohesive national resolve to act will mitigate such threats from fructifying in the future. While the nation stands united in grief and anger, public sentiment should not get divided on communal lines, or else we would be playing into the hands of our adversary. India's secular fabric, that is its innate strength, needs to be preserved and protected at all costs.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])