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The Difficulty of Being Good – Air Power Version

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Operation Sindoor demonstrated that no place within the boundaries of Pakistan is beyond the reach of the Indian Air Force (IAF). Right from North of Islamabad to Karachi in the South and Jacobabad in the far West, numerous targets were punitively hit with pinpoint accuracy. However, when operating against a rogue state with military-terror fusion, there are significant costs one pays for being a responsible state. These are the costs you pay for being a professional military of a functional state that operates within legitimate frameworks. This article examines four key factors that impose costs on an air war fought by the good side in such a scenario.

Surprise: Following the heinous attack on tourists in Pahalgam, PM Modi announced during a campaign speech that, *“India will identify, trace and punish every terrorist, supporter and conspirator. We’ll pursue them to the end of the Earth. They will be punished beyond their imagination.”*¹ Thus, Pakistan knew there was going to be an attack. It was only a matter of when and where. The element of surprise, a fundamental principle of war, was therefore partially lost. To draw a comparison, surprise was a key factor in the spectacular results of the opening attacks in wars like Germany against Poland in World War II, the Pearl Harbour attack by the Japanese during the same war or Israel in 1967. Since Pakistan orchestrated the terrorist attack, it followed it up by increasing its Air Defence alert states on the following days. Additional resources that aren’t deployed during peacetime were possibly operationalised and added. However, it is interesting to note that it is not the side that begins the war that always wins. Japan and Germany lost in the Second World War.

Terrorists Vs Terrorism Sponsor Dilemma: The first Press Release on Op Sindoor released after the strikes on terrorist camps on May 07, 2025, stated that, *“Our actions have been focused, measured and non-escalatory in nature. No Pakistani military facilities have been targeted. India has demonstrated considerable restraint in selection of targets and method of execution.”*² While this message conveyed self-imposed restriction of avoiding military targets, it imposed significant operational costs. While the name ‘Air Defence’ (AD) systems may sound innocuous, there is nothing defensive about them. They are potent missiles and guns that can engage and destroy targets as far as they can (a few hundred kilometres). The military operates these in most countries (some non-state actors also have AD systems). On May 07, 2025, the AD systems were out of bounds for targeting due to India’s restraint of destroying only terrorist targets. In the age of long-range AD weapon systems, even the airspace on own side of the border is unsafe. That is why, in any air operation, one of the first sets of actions is to neutralise the enemy’s air defences. Going into an airspace (even one’s own) with the enemy AD effective is comparable to walking into a minefield without destroying it.

Human Shield: The Indian government's press brief on May 08, 2025 indicated that Pakistan had used civilian airliners as a human shield in the air.³ Additional Protocol I of 1977, Article 51.7, of the Geneva Conventions states that, "*The presence or movements of the civilian population or individual civilians shall not be used to render certain points or areas immune from military operations, in particular in attempts to shield military objectives from attacks or to shield, favour or impede military operations. The Parties to the conflict shall not direct the movement of the civilian population or individual civilians in order to attempt to shield military objectives from attacks or to shield military operations.*"⁴ Accordingly, India had shut its airspace to civilian flights during the conflict. However, in Pakistan, civilian airliners carrying passengers of various nationalities were still operating close to the International Boundary. More interesting is the fact that **they were being operated deliberately well outside their published schedules, coinciding with the launch of drones and missiles by Pakistan.** Pakistan was using these civil airliners as a shield for the launch of its drones and missiles against India. Air Defence systems rely on electronic signatures to determine friend vs foe/military vs civilian. Electronic Warfare (EW) operations are routine in any conflict that disrupts these signals. Thus, the chances of misidentification and hitting a civil aircraft were high. Therefore, for the sake of the safety of the civilians in the airliner, you don't fire your AD weapons at the cost of losing tactical advantage. When you are good, you don't hit an enemy hiding behind civil airliners while he can hit you.

Restraint in Scale: On subsequent days, IAF targeted 11 airbases, command and control centres, air defence radars, etc. Some comments on social media questioned the rationale of the choice of targets, especially runways. They argued, "*Why waste expensive missiles on something that could be repaired with mud and cement in days?*" This can be answered in two ways. Firstly, one may even have sixth-generation fighter aircraft. But without a functional runway, they are useless. Therefore, there is a tactical sense in grounding multiple squadrons of aircraft by destroying the operational surfaces. Secondly, India's objective was political signaling and not destruction. Pakistan's operation was named '*Bunyan-al-Marsoos*', meaning '*a solid wall*'.⁵ **Indian weapons could defeat layers of air defences in the most heavily defended air bases of Pakistan and land with pinpoint accuracy on the chosen targets right from Rawalpindi to Karachi. It symbolically demonstrated that there was no wall and that their operation was a sham.** "No place in Pakistan is safe" was driven home without resorting to excessive loss of lives. A rogue state would shell civilians, attack places of worship, hospitals, etc, to cause massive loss of lives. A responsible state exercises restraint adequate to achieve its objectives, albeit at an escalated cost to itself.

For all those with the question in mind as to whether it is even necessary to behave well against a rogue state, the answer can be found in the stanza of the Prayer of the National Defence

Academy (NDA). It goes like this, “Awaken our admiration for honest dealing and clean thinking, and guide us to choose the harder right, instead of the easier wrong.”⁶ **That’s the difficulty of being good.**

NOTES:

¹ “PM Modi Switches to English in Stern Message to Pahalgam Terrorists: 5 top quotes,” *The New Indian Express*, April 24, 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/pm-modi-bihar-english-message-pahalgam-terrorists-9963235/>. Accessed on May 13, 2025.

² Press Information Bureau, India, “Operation Sindoor: Indian Armed Forces Carried Out Precision Strike at Terrorist Camps,” <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2127370>. Accessed on May 13, 2025.

³ Republic World, “Pakistan using Civil Planes as Human Shields: Wing Commander Vyomika Singh,” *YouTube*, May 09, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNISErR1drY>. Accessed on May 13, 2025.

⁴ International Humanitarian Law Databases, “Article 51 - Protection of the civilian population,” <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/article-51?activeTab=>. Accessed on May 14, 2025.

⁵ “Pakistan Launches Military Operation Named 'Bunyan-um-Marsus' Against India,” *Samaa TV*, May 10, 2025, <https://www.samaa.tv/2087333229-pakistan-launches-military-operation-named-bunyan-um-marsus-against-india>. Accessed on May 15, 2025.

⁶ Sandeep Thapar (@sandythapar), “The NDA prayer, read out each morning in the muster. Maybe the Parliament some day will adopt something on these lines for the elected representatives!,” *X (formally Twitter)*, February 28, 2020, 7:15 a.m., <https://x.com/sandythapar/status/1233206587055058944?lang=ar>. Accessed on May 15, 2025.