

DYNAMICS OF MODERN CONFLICT: BREAKING THE MYTHS

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INTRODUCTION

The terror attack in Pahalgam on April 22, 2025, abruptly halted an encouraging period of economic stabilisation in Jammu and Kashmir.¹ In retaliation, the Indian armed forces conducted a series of exceptional strikes against select terrorist installations in Pakistan in the early hours of May 7, 2025 (Operation Sindoor).² As retaliation, Pakistan carried out a large-scale drone offensive against India, targeting multiple locations across the country. According to the Indian Army, approximately 500 small drones were launched in a coordinated swarm, focussing on 24 cities spread

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1. Sanjay Khajuria, "J&K's First Eco Survey Since Death of Article 370 Paints a Rosy Picture", *The Times of India*, March 7, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jammu/jks-first-eco-survey-since-death-of-article-370-paints-a-rosy-picture/articleshow/118774540.cms>. Accessed on May 18, 2025.
2. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "Operation Sindoor: India's Strategic Clarity and Calculated Force", May 14, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2128748>. Accessed on May 16, 2025.

across Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Gujarat.³ This was followed by India's precision strikes on Pakistan's Air Defence (AD) surveillance radars, Surface-to-Air Guided Weapons (SAGWs), and air bases over the next three days. The conflict came to an uneasy pause on the evening of May 10, 2025, with both sides claiming a decisive victory. It stands as the most recent and shortest engagement of its kind.⁴

The Indian government has made concerted efforts to clarify important aspects of the ongoing conflict through a series of press releases covering strategic clarity,⁵ *Aatmanirbharta*,⁶ synergy,⁷ and intentions⁸. There has been extensive analysis of the events encompassing the conflict. The prime minister's address indicated that the operation would serve as India's template response to any future act of terrorism on Indian soil, aided and abetted by Pakistan.⁹

A study of this limited India-Pakistan engagement, alongside the Russia-Ukraine War and the Gaza conflict, has revealed specific tactical and strategic lessons for the future employment of air power. This article aims to analyse the complex nature of modern-day conflicts to identify certain postulates that have been dispelled.

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3. "500 Pak Drones Target 24 Indian Cities in 210-Min Attack: Army", *News Arena Network*, May 10, 2025, <https://newsarenaindia.com/nation/500-pak-drones-hit-24-indian-cities-in-210-min-attack-sources/43779>. Accessed on May 20, 2025.
 4. Shaghil Bilali, "Indo-Pak Ceasefire: Shortest Wars in History; As India-Pakistan Warlike Situation Ends, Know Battles with Shortest Fates", *Zee Business*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.zeebiz.com/india/news-indo-pak-ceasefire-date-time-shortest-wars-in-history-after-warlike-situation-ends-battles-with-shortest-fates-bangladesh-british-zanzibar-six-day-israel-armenia-georgia-360807>. Accessed on May 15, 2025.
 5. n. 2.
 6. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "Operation SINDOOR: The Rise of Aatmanirbhar Innovation in National Security", May 14, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2128746>. Accessed on May 18, 2025.
 7. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "Operation SINDOOR: Forging One Force", May 18, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2129453>. Accessed on May 18, 2025.
 8. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "Operation Sindoor Not Just a Military Action, but a Symbol of India's Political, Social & Strategic Will Power: Raksha Mantri", May 11, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2128133>. Accessed on May 18, 2025.
 9. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "English Rendering of PM's Address to the Nation", May 12, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2128268>. Accessed on May 15, 2025.

BREAKING THE MYTHS OF MODERN CONFLICT

*Myth 1: The Battlefield Is Fully Transparent*¹⁰

It is often assumed that modern sensors and surveillance make the battlefield completely transparent, leaving no room for surprise or deception. Growing technological capabilities have led many to believe that tracking every enemy movement is possible. Technology is a double-edged sword that provides both parties equal opportunity to innovate. Any transparency in a battle zone will likely be transitory and susceptible to failure. Camouflage, concealment, and deception may effectively counter these modern systems. Despite advanced surveillance, both Russia and Ukraine have used concealment, electronic warfare, and deception (such as decoys and tunnels) to evade detection and strike unexpectedly.¹¹

In Summary: While technology has helped enhance situational awareness, the persistent 'fog of war' and effective counter-measures ensure that perfect battlefield transparency remains a myth. While technology has undoubtedly changed the nature of battle, the question of air superiority remains equally complex in today's conflicts.

*Myth 2: Air Superiority is Compulsory for Victory*¹²

This point indicates the typical hangover of typical air power doctrines that profess attainment of control of the air before further military operations. While this was valid in classical military campaigns such as the World Wars, it has not been evident in recent conflicts. The variant nature of modern-day conflict may not allow a concerted effort to suppress enemy air defences before exercising the military option. More importantly, the kind and extent of objectives to be achieved are decisive factors in determining whether such a process is feasible.

10. Ankit K., "Operational and Tactical Shifts: How Modern Wars are Reshaping the Battlefield," Observer Research Foundation, June 15, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/operational-and-tactical-shifts-how-modern-wars-are-reshaping-the-battlefield>. Accessed on May 14, 2025.

11. Nicola Bonsegna, "The Strategic Role of Decoys in the Conflict in Ukraine", *The Defence Horizon Journal*, October 31, 2024, <https://tdhj.org/blog/post/decoys-conflict-ukraine/#:~:text=Ukraine%20has%20effectively%20employed%20these,effective%20in%20deceiving%20the%20enemy>. Accessed on May 14, 2025.

12. Indian Air Force, *Basic Doctrine of the Indian Air Force*, 2012, p. 26.

India's strike on May 7, 2025, was conducted under the full glare of an enemy in a heightened state of alertness.¹³ Though complete details are not yet available, it can be said with assurance that the strikes engaged intended targets without meaningful interference from the enemy. Surprise as an attribute was achieved despite overwhelming and adverse conditions, warranting further examination. Secondly, 'achievement of air superiority' itself is an expensive and laborious process. Despite its numerical and technological advantage, Russia has failed to achieve any notion of air superiority in Ukraine.¹⁴ The availability of cheap options such as drones and massed rockets, as seen in the Israel-Hamas conflict, further complicates the issue.¹⁵ This is not to say that control of the air is not desirable; instead, the concept must be modified according to the conflict's dynamics, such as limited objectives and political direction. Concepts such as dynamic air dominance have been suggested but have lost veracity due to definitional constructs. A more nuanced idea of 'control of freedom of action'—maintaining the ability to operate militarily across all domains via suppression such as electronic warfare, cyber, and space, and ensuring an adequate diplomatic environment—may be considered to ensure military success. The military commanders must be equipped to employ air power most suitably for the battles of tomorrow, which, in turn, would require them to understand the nuances of modern-day conflicts.

In Summary: While air superiority remains crucial, recent conflicts suggest that it does not ensure strategic success or quick resolution, as adversaries adapt with dispersed tactics and innovation. Effective warfare now requires integrated, multi-domain approaches beyond mere control of the skies. Just as air superiority alone cannot guarantee victory, the promise of modern technology and precision weaponry to prevent collateral damage also deserves closer scrutiny.

13. Rudra Chaudhuri, "Indian Airstrikes in Pakistan: May 7, 2025," *Carnegie India*, May 7, 2025, <https://carnegieindia.org/posts/2025/05/indian-airstrikes-in-pakistan-may-7-2025?lang=en>. Accessed on May 14, 2025.

14. Yuri Zoria, "UK Intel: Russia Fails to Secure Air Superiority 1,000 Days into Ukraine War", *Euromaidan*, November 22, 2024, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2024/11/22/uk-intel-russia-fails-to-secure-air-superiority-1000-days-into-ukraine-war/>. Accessed on May 15, 2025.

15. John F Antal, *Next War: Reimagining How We Fight* (Havertown, USA: Casemate Publishers, 2023), p. 57.

Myth 3: Technology and Precision Prevent Collateral Damage¹⁶

A key aspect of military planning in today's information age is avoiding collateral damage. The growing confluence of state and non-state actors has led to the proliferation of dual-use facilities. Such non-state actors are often close to the general populace, increasing the probability of collateral damage, as seen in the Gaza conflict, where civilian casualties and infrastructure damage have remained high despite precision-guided munitions and advanced targeting.¹⁷

Although the collateral damage may be attributed to indiscretion on the part of the Israeli forces, Indian Air Force (IAF) strikes on terrorist infrastructure, air defence radars, SAGW units, and air bases have suggested intent and capability to engage targets with limited or no collateral damage. However, the belief that modern air power can deliver 'surgical' results with minimal collateral damage has been repeatedly challenged. In the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, both sides have suffered from unintended strikes and collateral damage, especially when using standoff munitions or drones in contested environments.

Commanders must understand that air strikes may not always be the best option to engage an enemy entrenched among civilians. They must have all options and decision matrices to evaluate them before acting. The use of artificial intelligence is expected to help in this endeavour. Additionally, moral and legal aspects must be weighed before engaging such targets with air strikes. Precision-guided munitions and accurate targeting have reduced some risks of civilian casualties; however, unintended damage persists, especially when adversaries operate among civilians.¹⁸

In Summary: Despite advances in precision and targeting, the risk of collateral damage remains, and technology alone cannot

16. Robert A Pape, "The True Worth of Air Power," *Foreign Affairs*, 83, 2004, *Heinonline*, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/fora83&div=34&id=&page=>, p. 116. Accessed on May 15, 2025.

17. D. Padma Kumar Pillay, "Israel-Hamas Conflict: Between Legitimate Combat and Inadmissible Violence," MP-IDSA, November 28, 2023, <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/israel-hamas-conflict-between-legitimate-combat-and-inadmissible-violence>. Accessed on May 15, 2025.

18. Amos C Fox, "Precision Paradox and Myths of Precision Strike in Modern Armed Conflict," *The RUSI Journal*, 169, 1-2, (2024), pp. 62-74.

overcome the ethical and operational dilemmas involved. Beyond the debate over precision, ethics, and moral values, questions have been raised about the relevance of manned platforms in an era of rapid technological change.

Myth 4: Manned Aircraft Are Obsolete¹⁹

During Operation Sindoor, Pakistan's use of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) to saturate Indian air defences was ultimately unsuccessful, highlighting the effectiveness of India's air defence systems.²⁰ Ukraine's early success using UAS led some to believe in the invincibility of such options. However, their subsequent employment in contested airspace has dispelled this notion.²¹ The most suitable employment of such systems is likely to augment conventional attack methods to support a larger air attack by causing saturation of enemy air defence or as FPVs (First-Person Views) supporting ground offensives. These systems add to the fog of war and aid in Situational Overload (SITOL) on the part of the enemy; however, it is unlikely that they lead to the attainment of independent decisive objectives.

UAS have provided innovative operational options, but manned aircraft play a vital role in missions requiring unique cognitive skills such as adaptability, human judgment, and situational awareness. The future of air power lies in the effective integration of manned and UAS platforms.²²

In Summary: While unmanned systems have expanded operational possibilities, manned aircraft remain essential for complex missions,

19. Justin A. Jaussi, and Herbert O. Hoffmann, "Manned Versus Unmanned Aircraft Accidents, Including Causation and Rates," *International Journal of Aviation, Aeronautics, and Aerospace*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2018, p. 3.

20. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "Akashteer: The Unseen Force Behind India's New War Capability," May 16, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2129132#:~:text=It%20is%20the%20sharp%20edge%20of%20India's,that%20intercepted%20and%20neutralised%20every%20inbound%20projectile>. Accessed on May 16, 2025.

21. Alex Horobets, "The Development of Unmanned Systems in Ukraine", *European Security & Defence*, April 9, 2025, <https://euro-sd.com/2025/04/articles/43553/the-development-of-unmanned-systems-in-ukraine/>. Accessed on May 14, 2025.

22. Himanshu Sharma, "Common Misconceptions About Modern Warfare", *TopTenz*, December 1, 2020, <https://www.toptenz.net/common-misconceptions-about-modern-warfare.php>. Accessed on May 19, 2025.

and the future of air power lies in the effective integration of both. As the mix of manned and unmanned systems evolves, the effectiveness and reliability of modern air defence systems have also come under the spotlight in recent conflicts.

Myth 5: Modern Air Defence Systems Are Impenetrable²³

The Iron Dome, touted as highly reliable, was eventually overwhelmed by the sheer volume of rockets and drones from Hamas.²⁴ This demonstrates that the statement ‘modern air defences are impenetrable’ is incorrect. It exposed the vulnerability of one of the best air defence systems to saturation attacks by cheap, low-cost weapons. Ukraine made it difficult for a much larger air power to achieve air dominance by employing layered and dynamic air defence options.

However, no system is ever foolproof and during adversity, belligerents would evolve strategies to overwhelm or bypass defences. This highlights the importance of keeping many defensive options available to the military commander. More importantly, in a prolonged conflict, one must be ready to absorb certain damage during the saturation of the air defence set-up.

In Summary: Even with sophisticated defences in place, the duration and decisiveness of contemporary wars remain unpredictable, challenging the notion that modern conflicts are necessarily short and conclusive.

Myth 6: Wars Are Becoming Short and Decisive²⁵

There is a persistent myth that the overwhelming use of counter-force options would lead to a quick and decisive victory. Contemporary conflict history has tended toward protracted engagements with unclear goals and changing strategies. Some have argued that

23. Joel Block, “A Laws of War Review of Contemporary Land-Based Missile Defence System ‘Iron Dome,’” *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2017), pp. 105-128.

24. Iain Boyd, “How Hamas Evaded Israel’s Iron Dome Air Defense System,” *Defense One*, October 17, 2023, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2023/10/how-hamas-evaded-israels-iron-dome-air-defense-system/391285/>. Accessed on May 16, 2025.

25. Raphael S. Cohen and Gian Gentile, “America’s Dangerous Short War Fixation”, *Rand*, March 31, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/03/americas-dangerous-short-war-fixation.html>. Accessed on May 17, 2025.

the use of air power has been avoided due to the likely escalation and protracted engagements, especially in the Indian context.²⁶ A counter-argument is that the India-Pakistan conflict was not a full-fledged war but a low-intensity conflict, with limited objectives. Despite the extensive use of air power in such conflicts, it has proved incapable of resolving the dispute by itself. Contrary to popular belief, most modern-day conflicts have been protracted and indecisive, without clear-cut victors. The expectation of swift, decisive wars is a persistent myth not supported by recent history.²⁷ Russian intentions to achieve a swift victory have faced spectacular failure in the face of a resilient, motivated, and ingenious adversary. A similar argument can be made in the case of Israel's plans to annihilate Hamas. The victor is more likely to be decided by the ability to adapt to conflict dynamics.

In Summary: Most modern conflicts are protracted and indecisive, with air power rarely delivering a swift resolution. In addition to the myth of speedy victory, another persistent belief is that achieving first-shot capability can secure lasting success on the battlefield.

Myth 7: First Shot Capability Ensures Success²⁸

First-shot capability or the longest vector has often been touted as the ultimate key to success. First-shot capability provides an advantage in combat; however, there must be options in range, manoeuvrability, and redundancy to establish a successful pattern of engagement. Engaging the enemy at the farthest is not always possible or probable. Instead, today's battle manager must have various options to engage the enemy. Artificial intelligence can help reduce the burden on the battle manager in identifying the best choice.

26. A. J. Kolhatkar, "Escalation and Air Power," *Journal of Defence Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2024, pp. 106-127.

27. Cian O'Driscoll, "Don't Believe the Movies: In Modern Warfare, Victory is a Myth", *Scroll.in*, January 3, 2020, <https://scroll.in/article/948593/dont-believe-the-movies-in-modern-warfare-victory-is-a-myth>. Accessed on May 19, 2025.

28. Devin L. Cate, "The Air Superiority Fighter and Defense Transformation: Why DOD Requirements Demand the F/A-22 Raptor," Air War College, Maxwell Paper No. 30, Air University Press (2003), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep13648.pdf>. Accessed on May 18, 2025.

In Summary: While striking first can provide an advantage, resilience, adaptability, and sustained operations often determine success in modern conflict. However, initial operational advantage does not always translate into broader strategic gains, prompting a closer look at the relationship between battlefield success and ultimate victory.

Myth 8: Battlefield Success Equals Victory²⁹

In the social media and information technology age, turning a military success into a visible victory has become increasingly complex. The timeline of events in recent conflicts indicates that, despite military success, it is left to the capabilities of the belligerent to prove such success and ensure victory. The non-availability of substantial visual proof to confirm the Balakot strikes altered the narrative in another direction. The war of narratives is also dictated by one's ability to present details quickly, even without veracity. This was visible in how Western media picked up threads from the Pakistani camp in the latest conflict as truths. After a specific period, the same lie turns into established truth due to sunk cost on the part of the publisher.

There is an urgent need for an institutional mechanism, especially in the military set-up, to manage the narrative during a conflict. An ad-hoc arrangement would only lead to sub-optimal results and the submerging of truth in a heap of fake news. However, suggesting that everything is gloomy would be pessimistic. The recent India-Pakistan engagement and the government's follow-up to engage in perception management via multiple press releases is a novel step towards narrative building and countering the adversary's narrative. There is also an attempt to engage with the world by formulating seven all-party delegations reflecting the Indian resolve against terrorism.³⁰

29. Carl Von Clausewitz "Democracy and Battlefield Success," in Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 58.

30. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "On One Mission, One Message, One Bharat: Seven All-Party Delegations will Soon Engage Key Nations under Operation Sindoor", May 18, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2129392>, Accessed on May 19, 2025.

In Summary: Tactical or operational gains on the battlefield do not automatically translate into strategic or political victory, as modern wars are shaped by complex, often ambiguous end states and evolving objectives.

Myth 9: Battles Are Fought Only on the Frontiers³¹

In the 21st century, wars are fought on frontiers and in a multi-domain environment. The evolution and proliferation of the cyber and space domains diversify warfare options and indicate a return to the concept of *total war*. Increasingly, the manifestations of conflict reverberate in other military and civil domains, including economics and industry, affecting every aspect of the nation.

In Summary: Modern warfare increasingly blurs the lines between the frontlines, rear areas, and cyber, space, and information domains, infiltrating civilian space away from the battlelines. These apparent myths reveal modern-day conflict's complexity and evolving character, underscoring the need for adaptable strategies and critical reassessment of long-held assumptions.

CONCLUSION

Although the list is not exhaustive, it indicates an urgent need to adapt and break the set mould of doctrinal precepts from which our strategies have evolved. The analysis of recent conflicts suggests that many age-old assumptions regarding the employment of air power and modern warfare have been challenged. Advances in technology, the proliferation of unmanned systems, and the increasing complexity of the battlespace have challenged traditional doctrines and exposed the limitations of established concepts such as battlefield transparency, air superiority, and the decisiveness of short wars. As seen in the India-Pakistan engagement and the Russia-Ukraine and Gaza conflicts, adapting rapidly, integrating diverse capabilities, and maintaining flexibility in planning and execution are now paramount.

Military commanders and policy-makers must recognise that rigid adherence to doctrinal precepts would lead to sub-optimal

31. "The Battle of the Frontiers", *Land of Memory*, <https://www.landofmemory.eu/en/sujets-thematiques/the-battle-of-the-frontiers/>. Accessed on May 18, 2025.

decision-making in complex and dynamic environments. An adaptive approach tuned to critical analysis and adaptive enough to embrace multi-domain operations, according to the varying character of conflict, is essential for success. It is critical to integrate the latest technologies, a deep understanding of the risks of escalation, and robust information management to shape favourable outcomes.

Ultimately, it is apparent that no strategy can guarantee the desired results in every circumstance. However, preparedness, adaptability, and a willingness to challenge entrenched assumptions will equip states and commanders to respond effectively when decisive moments arise. As history shows, the pace and character of warfare can shift rapidly; those who are nimble and forward-thinking will be best positioned to shape events rather than be shaped by them. The most important aspect for a statesman and military commander to consider is to be aware of these terms and be adaptable enough to modify the strategies. As Vladimir Lenin once said, "There are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen."³² One must be ready when the opportunity arrives.

32. Scott L. Friedman, "There are Decades Where Nothing Happens; and There are Weeks Where Decades Happen: Vladimir Ilyich Lenin," *Journal of Hepatology*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2014, pp. 471-472, <https://www.journal-of-hepatology.eu/action/showPdf?pii=S0168-8278%2813%2900839-8>. Accessed on May 18, 2025.

