CENTRE FOR AEROSPACE POWER AND STRATEGIC STUDIES

In Focus

Burden of Proof: Latest Dynamic in Air Power Employment Calculus

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Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_Air_Force_Rafale.jpg

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Introduction

It is said in Judiciary circles that Justice must not only be done, but also seem to be done. This article aims to draw a similar analogy to the employment of Air Power, especially in the backdrop of Operation *Sindoor.* The highest echelons of the Indian Air Force (IAF) repeatedly acknowledged that during the 2019 Balakot air strike, there was insufficient visual proof to demonstrate its success.[12] In stark contrast, an ample number of videos/photographs have been provided to the electronic/digital media to validate the likely extent of damage caused by the successful strikes by the Indian Armed Forces during Operation *Sindoor.*[3] This suggests fundamental implications for doctrines prescribing the employment of Air Power moving forward.

Analysis

Traditionally, the analysis of strike damage formed part of the broader sequence of battle damage assessment (BDA) that feeds into subsequent mission planning.[4] It has been a vital mission-planning tool for decision-makers, especially in the military, revealing the extent of damage to the target and the need for additional waves of attack to neutralise its operational capabilities. However, it had never attained the stature of a prerequisite for proving the success of an operation. The times have changed drastically from when acknowledging damage was considered part of the military ethos.

This phenomenon has become even more acute, given the lengths to which nations and civilisations go to control the strategic narrative. While the latest technologies have brought greater visibility through satellite and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) inputs, they have also enabled digital media to spread like wildfire. The case of "Doosra banda"[5] reeks of motivated social media campaigns to engineer a narrative directed at a domestic media and fallible international audience that is keener on what comes first than on what is correct.[6] In this environment, how is the employment of Air Power affected? It gets affected in a multitude of ways: -

> **(a)   Operational Choices:**   It is beginning to fundamentally influence target selection. The Vice Chief of Air Staff (VCAS), Air Marshal Narmdeshwar Tiwari, reflected on how the armed forces narrowed down to selecting nine targets out of many identified during strike preparation.[7] This suggests that some evidential priorities were factored into target selection, leading to the selection of targets on whom damage could be unambiguously documented. Traditionally, targets have been chosen solely on operational considerations, such as the concentration of terrorist training infrastructure and their headquarters. Parallel arrangements

were made to plan BDA missions to obtain the requisite assessment. Increasingly, these missions are likely to provide documentary evidence of the damage to the international and national media. As far as Operation *Sindoor* is concerned, the targets specifically for IAF were the terror headquarters at Muridke and Bahawalpur, a good 30 km and 100 km inside Pakistan territory, respectively.[8] Targeting these sites offered the dual advantage of military strategic value and demonstrable visual proof of damage against legitimate targets, satisfying military requirements for both strategic value and proof generation. The contrast with Balakot is instructive for all to see.

Choice of Weapon has evolved beyond the traditional criteria of lethality, precision and cost-effectiveness. The VCAS, while displaying live strike footage, demonstrated how the use of weapons with integrated sensor packages enabled real-time documentation.[9] Another manifestation of this aspect is the inclusion of unmanned systems specifically for strike documentation, beyond those mandated by BDA considerations. Moving forward, this is likely to affect the entire procurement process, force structuring, mission planning, and execution.

(b)   Phase and Timing of Campaign: The proof-driven employment structure must be considered in the context of the campaign's phase. Since it had to be a surprise strike with a limited window for targeting, every weapon had to deliver what it meant to. More than that, every weapon hit should be comprehensively proved to have made an impact. The same cannot be said of campaigns elsewhere, such as in Ukraine and Gaza. However, for such short and swift conflicts with limited objectives on the part of at least one of the belligerents, the need to factor in provability, especially in Air Power employment, needs to be considered.

(c)   Strategic Communication Architecture: Despite the efforts of the Indian armed forces, this aspect still requires further institutional refinement. As observed during engagements spanning the last two decades[10], the Indian follow-up to a military action has been nuanced, relying on accurate data collection and formal public communication through media briefings. This reflects how a civilised nation behaves; however, what has changed recently is the promulgation and consumption of social media outlets. The IAF, on its part, has made considerable efforts to release strike videos, pre- and post-satellite images, and detailed damage assessments for public consumption.[11] This is not to say that the Indian system is ineffective, but there is room for improvement, especially regarding institutionalised mechanisms for narrative management. Cognitive warfare demands systemic integration of communication into operational design.[12] The enemy, meanwhile, is openly demonstrating how it managed the narrative in its favour during the conflict.[13]

To manage a coordinated, effective, and timely follow-up, it is imperative to institutionalise communication procedures and systems.[14] Training and simulations can only thrive in a system mandated and designed to support them. It would require a flow of aural, visual, and digital information to vantage points that can further decide and regulate its flow to the requisite avenues. This would improve the efficiency and viability of communication; otherwise, it is likely to grow stale and appear to be a manufactured response to enemy propaganda.

(d)   Operational Viability: The most significant factor affecting a military planner is the operational viability of undertaking such an operation. While it does affect the employment of Air Power in ways it never has till now, provability must not come at the cost of operational effectiveness. The damage caused by long-range surface-to-air weapons has been unprecedented.[15] As noted earlier, this would require subtle changes and inclusions at the procurement stage, while balancing economic considerations. Training would need to align with these weapons and their respective procedures. The most crucial aspect planners need to understand clearly is that this is another factor to be managed and must in no way offset operational effectiveness. Especially as AI-enabled and autonomous weapons rise, it is prudent to maintain positive visual feedback to address legal and ethical concerns. A calculated percentage of weapons with such capabilities would need to be factored in, especially given the likelihood of short, swift conflicts in the neighbourhood. This remains true for India, considering the nuclear dimension unlikely to yield a protracted contest.

Conclusion

The burden of proof has now transcended the realm of BDA and is now an essential consideration for Air Power employment. Operation *Sindoor* thus highlights a larger paradigm shift in military doctrine, suggesting provability as a crucial operational parameter in the modern information environment. Thomas Schelling describes communication as an essential aspect of deterrence along with capability and intent.[16] The same is true of military actions today, as communications come out into full public glare. For this to remain relevant, it would need timely, authentic visual proof to support the narrative.

In this regard, Operation *Sindoor* demonstrated the systematic integration of proof generation into operational structures, including target prioritisation, weapon choices, campaign phasing, visible escalation control, optimal communication mechanisms, and limited social media engineering. Moving forward, it would require a revisit to institutionalise this aspect into military planning, which would demand modifications to procurement procedures, training curricula, and operational procedures. Procurement would require a deeper analysis to arrive at the optimal percentage of

such weapons and equipment. Communication systems for a ready flow of information with inbuilt regulatory provisions need to be conceived and operationalised at the earliest. A broader introspection would be required to integrate communication mechanisms into operational structures. Training and Simulation would need to follow up.

It has been repeatedly stated that *Sindoor* has laid to rest the ghost of Balakot, but what remains a concern is perception management, especially in the age of social media. The enduring lesson remains that in contemporary conflict, perception shapes reality and damage as an operational objective must not only be done but also seem to be done.

Notes:

[1] "Ghost of Balakot' laid to rest: Air Force chief on why videos of Operation Sindoor mattered" *Times of India*, August 9, 2025, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/ghost-of-balakot-laid-to-rest-air-force-chief-on-why-videos-of-operation-sindoor-matter-watch/articleshow/123204862.cms. Accessed on November 21 2025.

[2] Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), "Three Years After Balakot: Reckoning with Two Claims of Victory", *Stimson*, February 28, 2022, https://www.stimson.org/2022/three-years-after-balakot-reckoning-with-two-claims-of-victory/, Accessed on November 21 2025.

[3] "Op Sindoor | Very Easy to Start a War...,", *NDTV* Defence Summit video footage, August 29, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yeh1UR-jJ4w, Accessed on November 21 2025.

[4] "Joint Publication 3-60: Joint Targeting," US Joint Chiefs of Staff, United States of America, January 31, 2013, https://www.justsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Joint_Chiefs-Joint_Targeting_20130131.pdf. Accessed on November 21, 2025.

[5] "3 Years of Balakot Airstrike: Exclusive Eyewitness Account", *Indian Defense News,* February 23, 2022; https://www.indiandefensenews.in/2022/02/3-years-of-balakot-airstrike-exclusive.html, Accessed on November 21, 2025, Pakistan initially acknowledged capturing two pilots via a DG ISPR briefing, but quickly retracted.

[6] Ibid

[7] "Less than 50 weapons to end conflict': IAF on Op Sindoor", *Times of India,* August 30, 2025, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/less-than-50-weapons-to-end-conflict-iaf-on-op-sindoor-details-why-pak-asked-for-ceasefire/articleshow/123600869.cms, Accessed on November 21, 2025.

[8] "Vice Air Chief Reveals Details Of Op Sindoor, Shows New Footage", *ABP* Live, August 30, 2025, http://news.abplive.com/news/india/within-48-hours-vice-air-chief-reveals-details-of-op-sindoor-shows-new-footage-1797466, Accessed on November 21, 2025.

[9] NDTV, n. 3.

[10] For historical context on India's evolving military response patterns, see Ministry of Defence press releases "2016 Uri surgical strikes", Press Information Bureau, https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=151242, "2019 Balakot airstrike", Ministry of External Affairs, https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl%2F31090%2FStatement+by+Foreign+Secretary+on+26+February+2019+on+the+Strike+on+JeM+training+camp+at+Balakot, and "2025 Operation Sindoor," Press Information Bureau https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2149356, Accessed on November 21, 2025.

[11] ABP Live, n. 8.

[12] Christoph Deppe, Gary S. Schaal, NATO Allied Command Transformation, "Cognitive warfare: a conceptual analysis," *Frontiers*, https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/big-data/articles/10.3389/fdata.2024.1452129/full, Accessed on November 21, 2025.

[13] "The Current Life with Information Minister Attaullah Tarar", *The Current*, *YouTube,* June 7, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcFvH9GPSkY . Minister Tarar describes the room as "where we won the narrative war from.", Accessed on November 21, 2025.

[14] "Commander's Handbook - Strategic Communication," *US Joint Forces Command, United States of America, DTIC*, October 27, 2009, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA544861.pdf; "Allied Joint Doctrine for Joint Targeting, AJP-3.9," 2021, *NATO,* November, 2021 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/618e7da28fa8f5037ffaa03f/AJP-3.9_EDB_V1_E.pdf, Accessed on November 21, 2025.

[15] "'Could look deep inside': IAF chief reveals 'longest kill' during Op Sindoor; shares losses suffered by Pak" *Times of India*, October 3, 2025, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/4-5-f-16s-destroyed-iaf-chief-on-what-turned-tables-in-op-sindoor-calls-pak-narrative-manohar-kahaniya/articleshow/124285354.cms, Accessed on November 21, 2025.

[16] Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 34-47. Schelling argues that deterrence requires three elements: capability, intent, and credible communication.