CENTRE FOR AEROSPACE POWER AND STRATEGIC STUDIES

In Focus

New Delhi

CAPSS In Focus: 09/2026

13 February 2026

Shaping the Wartime Interplay Between Politics and Military

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Keywords: Op Sindoor, Defence Organisation, Geopolitics, Political and Military

"The military doesn't start wars. Politicians start wars."

William Westmoreland

Background

Colin S. Gray, a noted analyst, said that in war, "Politics is the master." He went on to note that "politics provides strategy with its purpose, while strategy provides politics with the way in which that purpose may be realized in practice." [1] Technology, tactics, and weapons may hog the limelight, but ultimately, it is politics that matters. Fast forward to Op *Sindoor*, a spectacular military operation characterised by brevity, lethality, and swiftness. Unforgettable images of the extensive destruction of Pakistani airbases were shown on TV channels, confirming Indian dominance. There were, however, other remarkable series of images flashed on TV channels before the launch of the kinetic operations. These were some of the numerous meetings held by the Prime Minister (PM) of India with the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), service chiefs, National Security Advisor (NSA), Ministers of Defence, External Affairs, and Intelligence chiefs. The PM also reportedly held separate meetings with each of the service chiefs. The images of these serious meetings were soon forgotten, overshadowed by the stunning pictures of the cratered runways, destroyed radars, and wrecked Command and Control (C2) complexes. However, those meetings between the PM and other stakeholders were highly significant to the unfolding of Op *Sindoor.*

These meetings were the first and most critical step in ensuring the success of the kinetic operations. To appreciate the importance of these meetings in the context of Op *Sindoor*, it is essential to understand the significance of the process of setting political goals and converting them into military objectives. The process of setting goals and aligning means with ends require interaction and consultation among agencies. An appropriate formal higher defence organisation structure best facilitates this process.

Outlining Political Goals and Military Objectives

War is a complex and ill-defined concept, riddled with numerous uncertainties. One of the major uncertainties relate to articulating political goals and translating them into military objectives. Harmonising the ends, ways, and means may seem surprisingly simple at first glance, but politics and the military have their own idiom and jargon, which complicates the interaction between the two

and results in an imbalance. No formula or theory is at hand to help achieve this harmony. But a mismatch invariably proves unforgiving.

The interplay between political goals and military objectives is becoming increasingly complex, as wars today have moved beyond the use of armed force. The military's actions need to be supported and coordinated with diplomacy, information operations, intelligence, and other supporting functions. This complexity tends to create a gulf between the two. Political goals are broad and long-term, while the military objectives tend to be specific and short-term. This difference in perspectives can create many a slip between the cup and the lip. Liddell Hart had cautioned that the political leadership must ensure that the political goals are achievable with the military means available. Politics must not demand from the military what is practically impossible. [2] The military objectives should support the achievement of the political goal.

Geopolitics, trade interdependency, and formalisation of most inter-state boundaries have rendered political goals of the past, such as the capture of territory or the subjugation of an enemy country, unviable. Total wars are rare. Goals have thus become subjective, such as coercion or compelling an adversary to change their behaviour. Then there are even more confounding political goals, such as regime change, nation-building, restoring democracy, or arresting the spread of an ideology. Such political goals are difficult to translate into military objectives, leading to a mismatch between political and military ends.

Mismatch Between Political and Military Ends

History is replete with instances of a mismatch between political and military objectives. Vietnam is an oft-quoted example of a mismatch between the broad, long-term political goal to arrest the advance of communism and the military objectives. United States (US) military objectives evolved as the war progressed from a support and advisory role to counteroffensive, counterinsurgency, aerial bombing, and, at one point, the controversial body count. Some battles were won, but ultimately it became apparent that the US military did not possess the capability to overcome the determined Viet Cong and stop the spread of an ideology. In the 2003 Iraq War, military victory was declared after just three days of operations. Still, the political goal for which the war was waged, of bringing in a friendly and democratic regime after ousting Saddam Hussein, was never accomplished.

Analysts have termed the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) operations in Sri Lanka "India's Vietnam," citing similar mismatch. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to prop up the communist regime, but got bogged down in a costly war against homegrown religious guerrilla insurgency. This contributed in no small measure to the subsequent Soviet implosion. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks

on the World Trade Centre, the US political objective was to oust the Taliban from Afghanistan and establish a democratic government. While the Taliban fled to Pakistan's wild frontier-lands, establishing a democratic set-up in Afghanistan proved unattainable. The mismatch proved tragic, as witnessed in the chaotic and humiliating US withdrawal after a 20-year-long war. In the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there was a mismatch between the initial objective of seeking Kyiv's capitulation and the Russian capability to achieve it. Russian overconfidence and underestimation of the determined 250,000-man Ukrainian Army pitted against a Russian force of 150,000 to 190,000, forced it to change its plans. Once the goal of capitulation was abandoned, Russian armed forces were bogged down in an attrition-based land war, which has continued even after three years, ruining both Ukraine and Russia.[3]

While many countries faltered in translating political goals into achievable military objectives, the USA's inability to turn military victories into strategic success stands out. This was true of major campaigns as well as small wars. This phenomenon was observed in Vietnam, the Iraq War of 2003, Afghanistan, as well as in the interventions in Syria, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and many other countries. In most cases, the military achieved its objectives of winning battles, but these victories did not further the achievement of the political ends for which the wars were waged. The identification of political goals and their translation translating these into relevant and achievable military objectives necessitates a rigorous, torturous process of discussion and consultation. Some researchers have attributed the problem to a bifurcation, in which military professionals concentrated on winning battles and policymakers focused on diplomacy and political management before and after the war. This bifurcation tended to hamper the complex process of harmonising military objectives and political goals. [4] The gap or mismatch may have arisen due to several reasons, but the absence of a formal enabling system or structure appears to have hampered the interaction and consultation processes. Could the existing, highly dispersed higher defence organisation, with limited avenues for interaction, hamper coordination between policymakers and the military? The jury is still out on whether the earlier mismatch between politics and the military in wars will be overcome in President Trump's second term.

Indian Experience

India's record in this regard is somewhat sketchy. The 1962 war revealed a major mismatch between capability and goals. In the 1965 war, a balance of sorts emerged. The 1971 war witnessed a very high degree of synergy between politics and the military. The Kargil war demonstrated cohesion and synergy, and Operation Cactus (1988) in the Maldives was another example of a well-coordinated political and military strategy. The IPKF operations appear to be an aberration.

Op *Sindoor*, however, stood out as a textbook case of harmony between the political and military ends. The numerous meetings between the PM and the CDS, service Chiefs, External Affairs Minister (EAM), Defence Minister, NSA, and intelligence chiefs apparently shaped the political goals and the military operations that followed. Plans were based on updated intelligence inputs and coordinated diplomatic outreach. The political goal of compelling Pakistan to change its behaviour, being subjective, required an appraisal of the levels of force or degree of destruction necessary. Clarity was also needed regarding the escalation matrix when anticipated enemy reprisals occurred. It was due to these extensive discussions and planning that the armed forces were granted full operational freedom and went on to achieve the military and political objectives.

The lessons from Op *Sindoor* are that setting political goals and harmonising the military objectives with these goals are essential for success. The operation also highlighted the need to coordinate diplomacy, intelligence, and other supporting functions with military operations. To achieve this, all stakeholders need to avoid working in silos and interact and consult with one another to coordinate activities. This interaction and coordination should ideally be facilitated by an appropriate structure for higher defence management.

Conclusion

Harmonising the political goals and military objectives is the first crucial step before the employment of the military. The consequences of a mismatch can prove unforgiving, and once operations commence, it may be too late to institute corrective measures. Translating political goals into military objectives and coordinating them with supporting functions, such as diplomatic and intelligence inputs, requires discussions and consultations among concerned agencies. A formal higher defence management structure should ideally facilitate such interaction.

This learning is relevant because India is in the midst of a serious debate over the restructuring of its higher defence organisation. One of the models being mooted is the theatre command structure, similar to that of the US military. As discussed earlier, the US military and policymakers were on many occasions unable to harmonise the ends, ways, and means, resulting in military victories that did not necessarily contribute to the achievement of political goals. While this mismatch could be attributed to several reasons, a formal enabling structure may have helped overcome these shortcomings. In view of this, even as the debate on India's restructuring of the higher defence organisation rages, it must be ensured that the infirmity observed in the USA's inability to convert military victories into strategic successes must not be permitted to creep into India's revised setup.

Notes:

[1] Colin S Gray, *Strategy and Politics* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

[2] Milan Vego, "Converting a Political- to a Military-Strategic Objective," *Joint Force Quarterly,* vol. 112, February 16, 2024, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3680005/converting-a-political-to-a-military-strategic-objective/. Accessed on February 05, 2026.

[3] Denys Davydenko, Margaryta Khvostova, Dmytro Kryvosheiev and Olga Lymar, "Lessons for the West: Russia's military failures in Ukraine," European Council on Foreign Relations, August 11, 2022, https://ecfr.eu/article/lessons-for-the-west-russias-military-failures-in-ukraine/. Accessed on February 05, 2026.

[4] Antulio J. Echevarria II, "Toward an American Way of War," US Army War College, March 2004, p. 7. https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA421512.pdf. Accessed on February 05, 2026.