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**OP  
SINDOOR**

ONE AIM. ONE MISSION. ONE NATION.



**TOUCH THE SKY WITH GLORY**

This is a joint paper written by CAPSS and CHPM to commemorate the first anniversary of Operation Sindoor. Gp Capt VP Naik writes about how the operation has reshaped regional geopolitics and reaffirmed India's strategic autonomy. Mr Adrien Fontanellaz writes about how the Indian Air Force has done what most air forces of the world only aspire to do. Together, the articles highlight a rising India and bring out that no amount of soft power can ever replace credible and effective hard power.

## **When Strategy Met Geopolitics: 88 Hours of Precision, Power and Purpose**

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History often treats anniversaries as occasions for nostalgia. Operation *Sindoor*, however, evokes something very different. For a nation long affected by state-sponsored terrorism, it represents not merely a military operation but a defining moment in India's evolving approach to deterrence, strategic signalling, and calibrated response. It demonstrated how national anger could be translated into precise military action and credible political messaging.

What will endure is not merely the strikes by themselves, but the clarity of purpose, restraint, and institutional confidence they displayed. More importantly, the operation highlighted the priorities of the Indian Armed Forces: speed over spectacle, precision over mass, integration over service-specific silos, and narrative dominance over the prevailing ambient clutter.

For decades, India's strategic resolve has been frequently questioned. Op *Sindoor* did not create national resolve; it organised and operationalised it. From the surgical strikes after the 2016 Uri attack to the 2019 Balakot airstrike and finally Op *Sindoor*, India has been progressively raising the threshold of response. For the first time, India used precision as a strategy, whose effects were forceful enough to impose costs yet restrained enough to avoid uncontrolled escalation. Equally important was India's messaging from the outset that the operation was counter-terrorism-focused and not aimed at conflict expansion. That distinction strengthened international legitimacy and prevented diplomatic isolation. In effect, Op *Sindoor* transformed credible military capability into strategic coherence.

India's future security environment is likely to be defined by blurred thresholds and persistent contestation, where peace and conflict coexist in a continuous grey zone. Adversaries will increasingly rely on proxy actors, cyber intrusions, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion. Terrorism itself is unlikely to disappear; instead, it will mutate and manifest in different forms. India, therefore, requires a full-spectrum response capability extending beyond purely kinetic retaliation.

The operation also demonstrated that the requisite degree of air control coupled with precision-strike capability will determine the freedom of action of land and maritime forces. Future conflicts will demand integrated, multi-domain responses that combine cyber operations, electronic warfare, space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), and precision strikes within compressed timelines. Op *Sindoor* gave a glimpse of it; the future will demand it as a baseline.

Modern warfare will unfold simultaneously across physical and cognitive domains. In such an environment, the first narrative may matter as much as the first strike. Shaping international opinion will become as important as sustaining domestic cohesion, while the adversary's perception will emerge as a target alongside its military infrastructure. India's lack of an institutionalised information warfare architecture remains a critical weakness. Strategic communication, when decentralised, loses its significance. Dedicated structures must plan, execute and sustain narrative creation before, during and after operations.

The greatest risk is that Op *Sindoor* remains an exception rather than becoming an institutional practice. India must codify a doctrine of calibrated response linking different forms of provocation to kinetic, cyber, economic, informational, legal, and diplomatic options. The objective should be to maintain predictability in intent while preserving unpredictability in the response mechanism. The adversary must remain uncertain not about whether India will respond, but about how and where it will do so.

Achieving this requires structural reform. India has long acknowledged the need for integration but has struggled to move beyond institutional inertia. Decision superiority depends on information dominance, which in turn requires dismantling of bureaucratic silos and service-specific fiefdoms. Future conflict will not favour static, geography-bound structures. It will favour agile, mission-oriented organisations capable of imposing costs rapidly and repeatedly.

India should therefore move towards permanently integrated, multi-domain capable task forces supported by flexible command-and-control structures designed around missions rather than geography. These structures would enable faster decision-making, reduce procedural delays, and provide political leadership with multiple calibrated response options.

At the same time, caution is essential. Strategic success often creates the temptation for overreach. India must avoid template thinking because no two crises will unfold identically.

Escalation is not a switch but a ladder requiring constant calibration. Another *Sindoor*-like strike may succeed operationally while failing politically, or vice versa.

High-tempo operations also depend on accurate intelligence. Errors in target selection or delayed communication can rapidly reverse narrative advantage and impose disproportionate strategic costs. Structural agility must not create ambiguity in command responsibility. Unity of command and clarity in decision-making remain non-negotiable.

India must avoid a mismatch between ambition and capability. Sustainable strategy depends upon economic resilience, technological capacity, diplomatic influence, and military readiness. Repeated kinetic responses, even when justified, may gradually erode international tolerance if legitimacy is assumed rather than continuously reinforced. Ultimately, Op *Sindoor* achieved three objectives simultaneously: it restored deterrence credibility, demonstrated control over escalation, and integrated military action with political messaging. Few operations manage to accomplish all three while retaining long-term relevance.

The operation's enduring significance lies not in the scale of force employed, but in the repeatable strategic logic it revealed. It reflected an India seeking greater strategic autonomy while remaining rooted in restraint and calculated statecraft. The operation ended quickly, but its implications will shape India's strategic choices long after the headlines fade.

## **Operation Sindoor in the Context of Air Warfare in the 2020s**

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During the 2010s, air power was mainly employed in asymmetric conflicts in which advanced air forces operated against insurgent or non-state actors with little effective air defence capability. Western air forces conducted thousands of sorties against groups such as the Taliban and the Islamic State with minimal risk, particularly when flying at medium or high altitude. Likewise, the Russian Air Force carried out prolonged bombing campaigns in Syria with near-total impunity. Direct confrontations between advanced military powers were rare and limited, with Operation *Bandar* in 2019 among the few notable examples.

This paradigm shifted in 2020. That year, Azerbaijan successfully neutralised much of the powerful Armenian air defence network. It achieved this through the “Karabakh Chest” operation, which combined decoys, reconnaissance and attack drones, loitering munitions, electronic warfare, helicopters, and long-range artillery coordinated through an effective command-and-control infrastructure. Once air superiority was secured, Azerbaijan used it to support rapid ground offensives, ultimately achieving victory within weeks. Although many observers credited Azerbaijan’s success primarily to drones, the conflict demonstrated that unmanned systems were only one component of a broader, coordinated strategy. Manned aviation also played a key role, flying around 1,000 combat sorties during the war. Meanwhile, Armenia’s own air force, including its modern Su-30SM fighters, contributed little to the fighting.

From February 2022 onward, both Russia and Ukraine deployed extensive integrated air defence systems that combined advanced radars, electronic warfare, and layered Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) networks, severely restricting the freedom of action of manned aircraft. Ukraine entered the conflict at a major disadvantage. Its air force was far smaller than Russia’s and relied largely on outdated Soviet-era aircraft, while Russia fielded advanced fighters such as the Su-30SM, Su-35S, and MiG-31BM, equipped with superior radar and missile capabilities. Even the later

introduction of limited numbers of F-16AM and Mirage 2000-5 fighters into Ukrainian service did not fundamentally alter this imbalance.

As a result, Russia maintained air superiority near the front line, enabling continuous high-altitude glide-bomb attacks against Ukrainian positions. Ukrainian strike aircraft, by contrast, were forced to fly at very low altitude to avoid detection and remained vulnerable to long-range Russian missiles and S-400 systems. Moreover, both sides increasingly relied on drones and cruise missiles to strike targets deep behind enemy lines, while Russia also employed ballistic and aero-ballistic weapons. In parallel, both militaries conducted sophisticated Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD) operations involving electronic warfare, unmanned systems, ballistic strikes, and special forces.

In June 2025, Israel attacked Iran with extensive American support. Both nations resumed their aerial onslaught at the end of February 2026 with much greater intensity. The American-Israeli coalition possessed overwhelming superiority compared to Iran's obsolete air force. Unable to challenge Israeli and American aircraft directly, Iran relied mainly on its extensive SAM network to deny complete enemy air supremacy. However, defending such a large territory against highly advanced air forces proved difficult given the limited number of modern systems available. Iran retaliated primarily with drones and missile strikes rather than manned aviation, while the survivability of many Iranian assets depended foremost on passive measures such as dispersion, camouflage, and underground facilities designed to withstand aerial attacks.

Operation *Sindoor* offered another example of modern high-intensity air conflict. Over 88 hours, the Indian and Pakistani air forces, together with their air defence systems, engaged in an intense aerial duel. India initially succeeded in striking terrorist infrastructure deep inside Pakistan, but the Pakistanis responded swiftly.

Islamabad subsequently launched several waves of drones, loitering munitions, missiles, and rocket artillery, but India's air defences countered most of these attacks. At the same time, the Indian Air Force (IAF) used loitering munitions to degrade Pakistani air defences before carrying out precision strikes against several major Pakistani air bases. Though India employed relatively few air-to-ground munitions, the operation demonstrated its ability to strike critical targets at will, proving that it had achieved effective air superiority. Facing this situation, Pakistan requested a ceasefire, which India accepted after achieving its political and military objectives.

At this stage, the singularity of Operation *Sindoor* becomes evident. It was the only occasion on which two first-tier air forces, similarly equipped and trained, battled each other in a context of near numerical parity, considering that the IAF did not commit all of its assets. Both forces were equipped with significant numbers of 4+ and fourth-generation combat aircraft, force multipliers—including Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS)—long-range air-to-air and air-to-ground munitions, and substantial arsenals of drones and loitering munitions. They could also rely on highly capable air defence systems such as the HQ-9B and the S-400. This alone demonstrates that Operation *Sindoor* ought to be closely studied and scrutinised by air warfare analysts worldwide. Moreover, the fact that one side emerged victorious within 88 hours, in this context of technological parity, further reinforces this point.

However, the significance of *Sindoor* goes beyond the tactical and operational levels for two main reasons. First, it took place under a nuclear threshold, as both sides possessed significant nuclear arsenals. Second, it is one of the rare cases in which the political leadership of one belligerent managed to develop a cohesive and realistic strategic framework, define clear and attainable objectives, and then allow its military to operate freely within those parameters. This stands in contrast, for example, to the current American administration. Therefore, *Sindoor* ought to attract the close scrutiny of the strategic community as well.