

Sardar Patel's Legacy and Operation Sindoor

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INTRODUCTION

Who knows if there would have been an Operation Sindoor if Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (SVP) had his way in national decision-making?

The question really is whether the imbroglio of Pakistan's strategy of 'bleeding India with a thousand cuts' would have existed if Sardar Patel had handled the accession of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) rather than Nehru? First, Sardar Patel would not have stopped the Indian military till the job was done since he was not in any way influenced by Sheikh Abdullah's machinations. In effect, Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) would not have existed. Second, with his clarity and resoluteness, as displayed in amalgamating the princely states, he would have done away with issues such as Article 370 earlier on. And, finally, the true assimilation of J&K would not have been hostage to power brokers like the Abdullaha or Muftis.

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BLEEDING INDIA WITH A THOUSAND CUTS

To 'bleed India with a thousand cuts' was Pakistan's undeclared strategy since independence, and a declared one by General Zia ul Haq. India has had to follow an expensive and bloody Counter-Insurgency (COIN) programme, especially since the 1990s. Innovative ideas such as establishing Rashtriya Rifles Battalions (manpower drain on the army) and Line of Control (LoC) fencing (resource drain) kept being implemented for decades. The brilliant strategist, General SK Sinha (Governor J&K) also implemented the Unified Command Grid that brought all agencies in COIN on the same page. However, the controls in Pakistan to up the ante were never really eliminated.

The attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001, galvanised a massive deployment in Operation Parakaram, which reportedly cost almost 800 casualties but did not achieve its aim. The nuclear overhang deterred any action by India's three strike corps. This led to a rethink in strategy to beat the 'nuke conundrum.' First, a No-First-Use (NFU) declared doctrine allowed conventional missile use across the border. Then, a 'Cold Start' strategy allowed all prevailing pivot corps in defensive positions to be strengthened to take offensive (nibbling) actions across the spectrum. This too did not deter Pakistan for too long, and it was back to its old albeit modified ways of bleeding India.

The surgical strikes by the Indian Army post-the Uri attack on September 28-29, 2016, were on a bigger scale than the usual tactical actions like the Border Action Team (BAT) at company levels. Proof was easy to collect literally. However, the escalated air actions on the Balakot terrorist camp in Pakistan on February 26, 2019, while being extremely precise and successful, had the issue of lack of Battle Damage Assessment (BDA). The lessons from Balakot on longer-range precision weapons, integrated air defence, multiple sources for BDA, and much more, were fully understood and corrected subsequently.

The gloves truly came off in Operation Sindoor in 2025. This time the infamous 'restraint' was replaced by a cold and resolute strike that virtually disabled the Pakistan Air Force, and called it the nuclear bluff.

SVP'S CORE VALUES/COMPETENCIES

To glean the values and beliefs of the 'Iron Man of India,' one only needs to read about how he went about assimilating the hundreds of princely states into the Indian Union. But there is much more that he espoused, and tried to influence Nehru on, regarding the geopolitical realities and national security.

The debate dilemma between Nehru and Patel has been written about extensively, for example, over the issue of J&K. P Chopra (2002) in his book, wrote, "*Patel later admitted to Baxi Ghulam Mohammad his inability to resolve the Kashmir issue due to a lack of Nehru's trust.*"¹ It is alleged that it was Sardar Patel who pressurised Nehru in 1947 to launch Indian troops by air on the same day as the signing of the Instrument of Accession to prevent the fall of Srinagar, as evidenced by General Sam Manekshaw's account in Prem Shanker Jha's book,² with VP Menon saying to Colonel Sam Manekshaw at the moment when the Instrument of Accession was signed by Hari Singh, "Sam we've got the Accession."³

A prerequisite of a strong, united and prosperous India before any idealism in foreign policy comes out clearly in Sardar Patel's

1. P. Chopra, *Inside Story of Sardar Patel: The Diary of Manibehn Patel, 1936-50* (Michigan: Vision Books, 2002), As cited in Prithvi Singh, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15858495>.
2. Prem Shankar Jha, *Kashmir 1947: Rival Versions of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996).
3. Rediff notes: Excerpted from Jha., *Ibid.*, with the publisher's permission. Accessed on August 8, 2025, from <https://m.rediff.com/freedom/0710jha2.htm>. Also interview of Sam Manekshaw. Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/XXruYX9MpVs>.

speeches and actions. VP Menon has quoted him as saying, "It will be folly to ignore realities; facts take their revenge if they are not faced squarely and well."⁴

Patel, in his letters and in the Cabinet meetings, repeatedly asserted that India should adopt policies that suit its national interests, and, therefore, should have different policies for different countries.⁵ Patel was of the firm conviction that India's position as a world power would be recognised by all when the external security of India was not to be doubted. He was a visionary in the context of the defence needs of the nation. He urged for the establishment of strong security forces in order to protect the country from external and as well as internal issues.⁶

An indicator of Patel's pragmatism was his opinion of recognising Israel as a nation. In a letter to Nehru (March 28, 1950), he wrote, "... the delay in the recognition of Israel because of the feelings of our Muslim citizens on this question probably cost us of the goodwill of Israel and countries interested in it. I also pointed out that even some of the Muslim countries had recognised Israel, but we had not out of deference for the views of our Muslim brethren."⁷

Sardar Patel clearly saw China's geopolitical ambition of suffocating India's, or rather Nehru's delusional faith in China's peaceful intentions because of the shared experiences of colonialism. Patel wrote his famous letter identifying China's intent and the threat it posed to India on November 7, 1950, when

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4. V.P. Menon, *The Story of the Integration of the State* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1956), p. 494.
 5. Shakti Sinha and Himanshu Roy, eds., *Patel: Political Ideas and Policies* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2018).
 6. Vijay Srivastava and Sapan Asthana, "Interpreting the Political Economic Thoughts of Sardar Patel and its Contemporary Relevance", *World Focus*, Vol. 44, No. 518, February 2023, p 30 (ISSN 2230-8458).
 7. R. Kumar, *Life and Work of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel* [New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd., 1991], p. 19. (ISBN13: 9788171563005)

Nehru wanted to recognise Tibet as part of China. Unfortunately, he could not support this pragmatic approach for long as he passed away the following month, in December. He was proven prophetic after 12 years when Nehru gave away Tibet in 1954, and China attacked India after grabbing Tibet in 1962.⁸

Nishu Sharma and Rajeev Kumar (2019) bring out the China dilemma debate between the two very clearly:⁹

Patel presciently warned Nehru that “while we regard the Chinese as friends, they do not regard us as their friends” (Patel’s letter to Nehru, 1950). Nehru, taking a different approach, confidently predicted that such a situation was “unlikely” in the “foreseeable future”. Nehru ruled out any such intention on the Chinese part. Moreover, he rejected Patel’s advice of modernizing the army and making adequate security provisions since it would “cast an intolerable burden on us, economic or otherwise, and it would weaken our general defence position.

In summary, some of the qualities, values and beliefs that Sardar Patel exemplified and walked-the-talk were: **clarity of vision; discipline; a national focus - unity of effort; pragmatism; adaptability; self-reliance (*atmanirbharta*); and, a professional and non-partisan military.** These are of great relevance to military doctrines and war-waging. In fact, they all form part of the Principles of Air Warfare.

8. Hari Desai, “Sardar Patel: Battling Against Odds,” *Asian Voice*, October 24, 2016, <https://www.asian-voice.com/Community/Sardar-Patel-Battling-Against-Odds>. Accessed on August 8, 2025,

9. Nishu Sharma and Rajeev Kumar, “Sardar Patel’s Vision of the Contemporary World: Ideas on Geopolitical Environment,” *Mahatma Gandhi Central University Journal of Social Sciences (MGCUJSS)*, Vol. I, Issue 1, April-September, 2019.

OPERATION SINDOOR

Modern air warfare has shifted from air dominance to airspace denial. Multilayered Air Defence (AD) and long range Air-to-Air Missiles (AAMs), as seen in Operation Sindoor, have created a contested battlespace. In fact, India, with its fully integrated and mostly indigenous AD systems was able to thwart all the Pakistani attacks. Ironically, the blue skies are now becoming a no-go zone for traditional air operations. After the first night of attacks on terrorist centres, the Indian Air Force (IAF) adapted well to this reality. Stand-off weapons being the new force multipliers, were extensively used. For example, the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM), Long Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM), BrahMos, SCALP, and HAMMER allowed strikes from outside enemy air defence kill zones. Autonomous swarms sent in by Pakistan were countered by integrated modern and legacy systems. Sovereign hardware, communication and Artificial Intelligence (AI) indigenous software development for combat vectors and Manned-Unmanned Teaming (MUM-T), were recognised as vital to operations. This is work in progress.

Cornering Strategies: Sindoor is never put in a corner! Lessons from common life teach that one must never corner an adversary so much that, finding no escape route, he fights like a man possessed. Just look at cats when left with no options. Similar logic applies to painting yourself into a corner: never create a situation where you are forced into a corner with diminishing options to wriggle out with your honour intact. Operation Sindoor exemplifies this strategy so beautifully.

Pakistan, at the behest of other players and drivers, took a risk that didn't make sense to anyone else except its generals. And it got into a corner, where its honour, if there was any in the first place, is now rooted in false narratives, hostage to the truth coming out at regular intervals. India, by allowing an escape route to a temporal ceasefire, did not paint itself into a larger

economic corner that would have resulted from a larger conflict or war.

And there's an attendant windfall of the proof of capabilities that shocked other adversaries, including a fillip to *atmanirbharta* and defence exports, and self-confidence in geopolitics, among many others. Only results matter: there are no permanent ethics on 'how' in geopolitics! As Churchill once said, *"However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results."*

As per the disclosure by the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), supported by videos/photos of damages, Operation Sindoor was able to achieve the following main targets/objectives:

- Nine terrorist camps, with about 100 terrorists killed.
- 11 air bases hit.
- One strategic aircraft in the air: Airborne Early Warning and Control/Electronic Intelligence (AEW&C/ELINT).
- Two underground Command and Control (C2) centres (Murid and Chaklala).
- Six radars, crippling their surveillance network.
- Two Surface-to-Air Ground Weapon systems (SAGW systems at Lahore and Okara).
- Runways of Sargodha and Rahim Yar Khan.
- One Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) hangar at Sukkur.
- One AEW&C hangar at Bholari, with an aircraft inside.
- Jacobabad F-16 hangar, with many F-16 jets destroyed.
- Five fighter jets in the air shot down.

It is estimated that the Indian Army achieved the following:

- More than 100 Pakistan posts damaged.
- 17 posts completely destroyed
- At least 16 Pakistan soldiers killed in shelling and firing
- In the three months post Operation Sindoor, 19 terrorists killed in action, including the perpetrators of Pahalgam.

The integrated air defence, with a preponderance of indigenised systems, did a phenomenal job of destroying more than 700 drones, three ballistic missiles, and intercepting all Turkish and Chinese armed UAVs. Apart from this, Pakistan's Navy was put under pressure, and perhaps, the Indian Navy addressed strategic targets which have still not been completely disclosed.

The entire conflict was planned around control of the escalation ladder. Declaration at every stage to the adversary with a promise of higher retribution in case of a response ensured that India's military was in control of the escalation dynamics. And, of course, the attacks on May 9/10, 2025, collapsed the Pakistan Army's will to continue.

India's emphasis on development and procurement of drones and UAVs since 2019 paid off spectacularly in a mostly no-contact warfare, a first in the subcontinent. The integrated air defence with indigenous software achieved a feat that shocked the world.

While narratives matter, their credibility matters more. Pakistan claimed a false success mainly for its domestic audience, but the truth is filtering out in a graduated manner.

RELEVANCE OF SVP's LEGACY

Clarity of vision and will, two characteristics amply displayed by Sardar Patel in his political life, are fundamentals to nation-building. In Operation Sindoor too these were the fundamental premises. The previous IAF chief put out recently,

On May 07, 2025, fifty-four years after the 1971 conflict, the Indian Air Force (IAF) successfully displayed its offensive capabilities by targeting deep inside Pakistan's Punjab, with long-range air-to-ground weapons. The IAF's fighter aircraft did not need to cross the International Border (IB) to launch these weapons. This effective use of offensive air power, while retaining escalation dominance,

reflected meticulous planning and preparations by the IAF during Operation Sindoor.¹⁰

Just like Sardar Patel's no-nonsense approach and focus, the government displayed evidence of a whole-of-nation approach in the reaction to Pahalgam, e.g. Operation Sindoor, clubbed along with other more substantial measures like putting in abeyance the Indus Waters Treaty. There was a clear demonstration of the newer concept of 'offensive air defence' by the armed forces¹¹; as evidenced by the Pakistan losses in the air and on the ground, enumerated by Air Chief Marshal AP Singh, CAS, on August 9, 2025, in a Bangalore public seminar (LM Katre Memorial Lecture). If one can frame a term 'strategic dismembering,' the CAS' statement echoes it succinctly, "Satellite analytics reveal that several of Pakistan's forward operating bases and air defence systems suffered severe degradation—marking a strategic setback to their regional aerial posture."¹²

An underlying belief of Sardar Patel was in the unity of a diverse country as a premise to move forward on future goals. The Indian warfighting machine's unity of effort was on display, as multifarious agencies such as the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), Multi-Agency Centre (MAC), Defence Image Processing and Analysis Centre (DIPAC), Aviation Research Centre and Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), among many others, collaborated to fill the real-time intelligence matrix for targeting. This was at the

10. Air Chief Marshal V R Chaudhari, "Reshaping the Battlefield: The Decisive Role of India's Air Power in Op Sindoor," in DS Hooda and Happymon Jacob, eds., *Operation Sindoor: India's New Doctrine of Deterrence* (Council for Strategic and Defence Research & PAXANALYSIS (OPC) Pvt. Ltd, 2025).

11. Diptendu Choudhary, "Balakot Plus Plus: Positioning Offensive Air Power at the Centre of Indian Deterrence," Observer Research Foundation, www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/balakot-plus-plus-positioning-offensive-air-power-at-the-centre-of-indian-deterrence. Accessed on August 6, 2025.

12. CAS lecture on August 9, 2025, in a Bangalore public seminar (LM Katre Memorial Lecture)

heart of the success. Lessons from Balakot ensured a combination of human and tech sensors to provide battle damage assessments.¹³

Newer domains such as cyber and space were vital to the shock administered to Pakistan, and also the world. For example, since the Global Positioning System (GPS) can be jammed (and was, in Kargil 1999), indigenous NavIC (Navigation with Indian Constellation) satellites were crucial for weapon guidance, including the one in the spotlight i.e. BrahMos. Further, cyber breaches were limited to 150 out of a 1.5 million attacks.¹⁴

A university's concept paper for a national seminar on SVP's Vision puts it very succinctly:

SVP championed a professional, non-partisan military that would function as a cornerstone of the democratic state. In his discussions with military chiefs, SVP underscored allegiance to the Constitution and civilian power, guaranteeing that the armed forces would stay subordinate to democratic rule. Also, his emphasis on a robust defence infrastructure highlighted his conviction over the necessity of modernisation.¹⁵

Looking around India, and even Asia and Africa, one can see militaries dominating the decision-making framework of almost all nations, including China. Some, like Pakistan, virtually own the country. However, India has been able to have the most

13. Ashish Vohra, "The Military Dimension of Operation Sindoor," in Anil Golani, ed., *Operation Sindoor: Rewriting the India Pakistan Rulebook* (New Delhi: Centre for Air Power and Strategic Studies, July 2025), pp. 11-35.

14. "Pakistan-Allied Hackers Launched 15 Lakh Cyber Attacks on Indian Websites; Only 150 Successful," Press Trust of India, May 13, 2025, <https://www.ptinews.com/story/national/Pakistan-allied-hackers-launched-15-lakh-cyber-attacks-on-Indian-websites;only-150-successful=/2550835>. Accessed on August 10, 2025.

15. Concept paper for national seminar on 'Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's Vision and its Relevance to Indian Armed Forces, Paramilitary Forces, NCC, NSS and Agniveer', REVA University, 2025.

professional and potent armed forces that are apolitical and non-partisan, even though they are fully involved in aid to civil power.

CONCLUSION

Sardar Patel led by example and action in not only consolidating India, but displayed an exemplary pragmatic vision and foresight on all aspects of domestic and foreign policy. This kind of pragmatism has eluded India, except for the last decade. Operation Sindoor was a culmination of putting together a coherent and awe-inspiring display of the qualities that SVP stood for: a whole-of-nation approach to planning, adaptability in execution, control of the escalation ladder, understanding the adversary, among others.

The paper traces how the gloves truly came off in Operation Sindoor, with 'restraint' being replaced by cold, calculated and resolute strikes that virtually disabled the Pakistan Air Force. The fundamentals of the whole strategy were based on the enduring principles that Sardar Patel had demonstrated in his public life. The paper endeavours to bring that out with relevant examples.

