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42/26

Learning from Other People's Wars

How India Studies Contemporary Conflicts, and Why Its Lessons Are Only Slowly Moving Beyond Service Lines



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23 November, 2026

Keywords: Military Learning, Lessons Learnt, Jointness, Whole-of-Nation Approach, India

Abstract

This paper finds that India observes widely but learns selectively. Its lessons on drones, air defence and restructuring are sound but remain within individual services, while whole-of-nation lessons on munitions, energy, infrastructure and civil defence remain thin. The cause is structural: no national security strategy, no cross-government owner of lessons and restricted war histories. The paper proposes joint and national lessons bodies working to a common framework.

Introduction

Few states have watched recent wars as closely as India. Since 2022, the Russia–Ukraine War, the Israeli campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon, the June 2025 strikes on Iran, and the 2026 United States (US)–Israel–Iran War have filled Indian seminar halls, journals, and television studios. Operation Sindoor in May 2025 gave Indian observers a war of their own against which to test what they saw abroad.

Observation, however, is not learning. A lesson is learnt only when it changes doctrine, organisation, training, equipment, or national preparedness. This paper asks how India studies contemporary conflicts, and why that study has yielded mainly service-specific lessons rather than whole-of-nation ones.

The argument is that India observes widely but learns selectively. This is the author's assessment, not the result of a systematic survey. The lessons India acts upon are sound, but they

cluster within individual services. Learning is beginning to move beyond service lines, but slowly and without an institutional home. This pattern, termed here "service-bound learning," reflects the structure of India's national security system more than the quality of its analysts.

A Framework for Assessing Military Learning

Stephen Rosen, in Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military, showed that peacetime innovation depends on new theories of victory and career paths that reward them. Learning from other people's wars sits between the two: wartime evidence without wartime pressure, but also without first-hand data.

Tom Dyson's work stresses that militaries often identify lessons without embedding them. It suggests a learning cycle of six stages: observation, analysis, validation, dissemination, implementation, and evaluation. This paper adds two tools: a classification of lessons by breadth, from arm and service to joint and whole-of-nation; and an India-first relevance test against India's adversaries, geography, capabilities and political objectives.

In the author's assessment, Indian learning is uneven across the cycle. Observation is abundant, but analysis is uneven. Validation, through wargaming or red-teaming, is rare. Dissemination and implementation work well within services but poorly across them. Evaluation is almost absent from the public record.

How India Studies Contemporary Conflicts

Indian study of foreign wars comes from service war and staff colleges, think tanks, and retired officers commenting in print, on television and online. The volume is impressive; the quality is uneven. Much is evocative: a chronology, a list of weapons used and a set of observations.

Sources compound the problem. India has no access to combatants' records, and few Indian analysts work from Russian, Ukrainian, Persian, or Hebrew material. Much study therefore relies on Western media and think tanks, importing their framing along with their facts.

Most studies are also service-specific. Each tends to find in foreign wars evidence for its own priorities, and few studies connect the domains. John Boyd's essay Destruction and Creation

describes the remedy: breaking ideas out of separate domains and recombining them. Indian study of war seldom attempts that synthesis.

The Evidence Problem

Evidence is rarely graded/categorised/grouped, and "official claims" are often treated as equivalent to independent assessment. US officials claimed that Iran's missile and drone industrial base had been largely destroyed, yet leaked assessments soon credited Iran with much of its missiles and launchers. Analysts warned that falling launch rates reflected Iranian choices as much as lost capacity. Commentary, in India as elsewhere, that accepted early claims at face value risked drawing the wrong conclusions.

The pace of commentary adds pressure. Television debates and online channels reward speed; claims circulate before evidence matures, and corrections seldom follow. A simple discipline would help: grading sources for reliability and information for credibility.

What India Has Learnt

The record of action is more encouraging than the record of analysis. The Army's "Rudra" restructuring creates integrated brigades, Bhairav light commando battalions, Shaktibaan artillery regiments for drones and loitering munitions, and Divyastra batteries that combine drones with air defence. Emergency procurement after Operation *Sindoor* prioritised unmanned systems, counter-drone capability and electronic warfare. Mission Sudarshan Chakra aims to build a layered air defence shield for strategic and civilian sites by 2035. The Ministry of Defence declared 2025 a "Year of Reforms. After attacks on merchant shipping in late 2023, the Navy deployed destroyer and frigate task groups to the Arabian Sea and expanded maritime surveillance. The Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) has described drones as "claws in the sky," called for manned–unmanned teaming, and cited a 2026 US friendly-fire incident over Kuwait as a warning on domain awareness.

Attribution also needs care. The Army's restructuring, rooted in a 2022 study and announced after Operation Sindoor, draws at least as much on earlier plans and India's own war as on Ukraine or Gaza; foreign wars appear to have reinforced these lessons rather than originated them.

The drone and counter-drone lesson: observed in Ukraine, limited validation in combat during Operation Sindoor, yet disseminated through new formations and implemented through

procurement. Its evaluation remains outside the public record. The lesson on protecting high-value enablers has stalled at observation. On the breadth scale, nearly all these measures are arm- or service-specific.

Most of these lessons pass the India-first test. Analysis of Operation Sindoor highlighted the value of long-range precision weapons, persistent surveillance and networked air defence. Some transfers, however, need care. Ukraine's attritional war on open plains does not map neatly onto the Himalayas, where altitude, cold and terrain limit drone endurance. Operation Sindoor itself showed that manned air power and stand-off weapons delivered decisive effects. The right lesson is balance between high-end platforms and cheaper mass.

Other lessons have received less attention. In March 2026, an Iranian strike on Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia severely damaged an E-3 airborne warning aircraft, along with aerial refuelling tankers, a direct warning about protecting high-value enablers on Indian air bases. Iran's decentralised command, which survived the killing of its senior leadership but complicated escalation control, offers a lesson for Indian command resilience.

Why Learning Stays Service-Bound

The following factors explain why Indian learning clusters within the services.

(a) First, the absence of a published national security strategy defining objectives, threats and priorities across government. Without it, studies lack a common yardstick for relevance, and each service applies its own. George Tanham, in Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay, noted over three decades ago that India showed little habit of formal, written strategic planning.

(b) Second, the ownership. Lessons processes sit within the services, and often within arms. No body owns lessons that span ministries. Anit Mukherjee, in The Absent Dialogue: Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Military in India, describes an "absent dialogue" between politicians, bureaucrats and the military. The same gap appears in learning: civilian ministries rarely see the study of war as their business.

(c) Third, the openness. In 2021, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) approved a policy to declassify war histories, yet the 1965 and 1971 histories remained restricted, and the official

history of the 1962 war is still confined to a few service libraries. A community that cannot study its own wars openly is poorly placed to study others'.

(d) Fourth, wargaming, operational analysis and open-source intelligence are underused, so lessons remain assertions rather than tested propositions. Finally, a professional culture persists. Deference discourages critical analysis. Studies produced generally fill a seminar calendar rather than serve a research agenda. The result is a literature rich in first impressions and poor in second thoughts.

The Missing National Layer

The clearest cost of service-bound learning is the thinness of whole-of-nation lessons.

Munitions depth is the first example. The 2026 middle-east conflict depleted roughly two-thirds of US Patriot interceptor stocks, by a Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) estimate that the Pentagon has not confirmed. Surge production requires peacetime planning between the armed forces, industry and finance.

Energy is the second. After Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz in March 2026, shipping traffic fell by about 95 per cent from pre-war levels, and Gulf crude exports fell by nearly half. For India, strategic reserves and supply diversification are a war-planning issue.

Critical infrastructure is the third. Iranian drones struck commercial data centres in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, and Iranian-linked groups attacked water and energy utilities. No single service can protect grids, telecommunications and financial systems.

Some whole-of-nation measures are visible. The ban on foreign drone imports has built a domestic drone industry, and in May 2025 the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) directed civil defence drills in 244 districts. But a single round of drills is not a civil defence system. Lessons on adversaries' use of commercial space also remain underdeveloped, although alleged Chinese commercial imagery supported Iranian targeting of US bases.

Two further gaps deserve mention. Wartime public communication is a national task, yet inflated claims and delayed disclosure erode credibility. Millions of Indians also work in the Gulf. India's evacuation record is strong, from Operations Raahat, Ganga, and Kaveri to Operation Sindhu

from Iran and Israel in June 2025. The gap lies in the economic shock of a prolonged war: lost remittances and returning workers. Neither features prominently in Indian studies, or, if it does, public knowledge/dissemination are poor.

Institutionalising Learning

Service-bound learning is a feature of structure, not a failure of individuals. Ukraine offers a model: its feedback loops carried battlefield lessons to designers and trainers within weeks, while the same lessons went unapplied at Gulf bases until attacks began.

Existing bodies have not filled the gap. The Defence Planning Committee, created in 2018 under the National Security Adviser (NSA), spans the services and the defence, foreign and finance ministries, but its remit is planning and capability development rather than studying war. Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff, its secretariat, has net assessment and lessons functions, but these remain military in scope and largely unpublished.

First, a Joint Lessons Learnt Centre under the Chief of Defence Staff should study foreign and Indian conflicts with tri-service and civilian staff. Second, a standing cell within the National Security Council Secretariat should draw whole-of-nation lessons with ministries, states and industry. Third, both should apply a common framework: clear questions, graded evidence and an India-first relevance test. Fourth, findings should formally feed into joint doctrine, capability planning, training, and war reserves, with a record of action taken. Finally, there should be national-level war games at inter-ministerial level on the same. These exercises should be done once every year.

Conclusion

India is not short of attention to other people's wars. It lacks a system that converts attention into national learning. The lessons it has acted upon, in drones, air defence, restructuring and jointness, are largely sound. But they remain largely bounded by service lines and cross them only slowly. Closing that gap requires an owner, a framework and a process, and a habit of treating the study of war as a national responsibility. The outcome of a long conflict depends as much on factories, power stations and public confidence as on the fighting forces. Otherwise, India risks learning the military lessons of others' wars while paying in full for its own.

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