



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

Cognitive Warfare and India's Deterrence Challenge

Author

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1. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the Nation on 'Operation Sindoor' via video conferencing on May 12, 2025 Source: [PIB](#)
2. India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri Briefing the media on 'Operation Sindoor', in New Delhi on May 10, 2025. Source: [PIB](#)
3. Lieutenant General Shri Rajiv Ghai Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) along with Air Marshal A.K Bharti Director General Air Operations (DGAO), Director General Naval Operations (DGNO) Vice Admiral AN Pramod and Major General S.S. Sharda briefing the media on 'Operation Sindoor', in New Delhi on May 12, 2025. Source: [PIB](#)

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Introduction

India's response to Pakistan-backed terrorism has shifted from strategic restraint towards calibrated deterrence by punishment. The surgical strikes of 2016, the Balakot air strike of 2019 and Operation Sindoor of 2025 were intended to establish that major terrorist attacks would invite direct military costs without necessarily leading to uncontrolled escalation.

The success of this strategy, however, depends not only on the costs inflicted but also on the conclusions Pakistan draws from them. Cognitive warfare complicates this process by contesting operational outcomes, shaping perceptions of capability and resolve, and advancing competing explanations of escalation and conflict termination. Operation Sindoor illustrates this problem. India viewed the confrontation as demonstrating a credible punitive option, while Pakistan portrayed its response as having constrained Indian action. The result was deterrence ambiguity as both sides could interpret the crisis as validating their own strategy.

This policy brief examines how cognitive contestation affects India's effort to deter Pakistan-backed terrorism. It traces the evolution of India's strategy and explains why deterrence depends on how military action is interpreted. It then uses Operation Sindoor to analyse the competing claims of both sides. Finally, it considers how India can strengthen deterrence by shaping Pakistan's calculations before, during and between crises.

India's Evolving Strategy of Deterrence

India's strategy for deterring Pakistan has shifted over three decades from restraint to calibrated punishment. India's conventional superiority over Pakistan, established by 1971, was increasingly circumvented below the threshold of war by Pakistan's use of proxy terrorism under nuclear cover. For most of the period that followed, India's answer was strategic restraint. Operation Parakram in 2001 exposed the limits of military mobilisation as coercion, and the decision not to use military force after the 2008 Mumbai attacks marked the defining expression of the old posture.

The shift in Indian strategy began with the surgical strikes of 2016, which established that India was prepared to consider the use of force across the Line of Control. The

Balakot air strike of 2019 widened the geographical and operational scope of retaliation by employing air power against a target inside Pakistan. Operation Sindoor in 2025 represented the most consequential shift in India's approach, with strikes both on terror infrastructure and Pakistani military facilities over a period of four days.

The emerging strategy can therefore be described as one of calibrated deterrence by punishment. Its form is retaliatory, with military force employed after a terror attack has occurred, but its purpose is deterrent. By imposing visible costs, India seeks to influence Pakistan's future calculation about the utility and risks of permitting, supporting or failing to prevent a major terrorist attack on Indian soil.

This strategy rests on three broad propositions. First, terrorism carries direct and increasingly consequential costs. Second, India retains flexibility over the timing, target, and scale of its response. Third, force is calibrated so that punishment can be imposed without allowing the operation to lose its political purpose. Punishment and restraint are not opposites within the strategy. Punishment demonstrates resolve, while restraint communicates limits and preserves space for conflict termination.

Yet, military action does not automatically produce deterrence. A strike may destroy its assigned target and demonstrate political will, but its strategic effect depends on the lesson the adversary draws from it. India may regard an operation as proof that terrorism will incur unacceptable costs. Pakistan may interpret the same confrontation as evidence that it can absorb Indian action, retaliate effectively and prevent India from imposing punishment without consequence.

India's strategy should consequently be understood as an attempt to reshape Pakistan's cost-benefit calculation. This makes communication and interpretation central to the strategy. Pakistan must understand what behaviour triggered the response, what India's action was intended to demonstrate and what consequences could follow another terror attack. Conflict termination must not dilute the warning that the use of force was intended to convey.

Cognitive warfare complicates this process. It can obscure operational outcomes, contest evidence, and manipulate perceptions of resolve. India's deterrence challenge is, therefore, not only to possess and employ military power, but also to preserve the intended meaning of that power in a contested cognitive environment.

Deterrence in a Contested Cognitive Environment

Deterrence is commonly understood as the prevention of an unwanted action by convincing an adversary that the expected costs and risks will outweigh the likely gains. It rests on three connected elements. The first is capability - the means to impose

a cost. The second is credibility - the adversary's belief that the cost will be imposed. The third is communication - the threat must reach the adversary and be understood as intended.

Deterrence is, therefore, both a material and a cognitive condition. Capability is indispensable, but it has deterrent value only when the adversary recognises it and believes that it may be used. Thomas Schelling, in his book *Arms and Influence*, captured this relationship by describing "the power to hurt" as bargaining power. Force could influence an adversary without being fully employed because the prospect of further harm shaped expectations and choices.¹

Robert Jervis placed perception and misperception at the centre of deterrence. Military capability alone may not deter if intentions are misunderstood, threats are discounted, or restraint is interpreted as weakness. The meaning of a signal is, therefore, not determined by the sender alone, but by how the receiver interprets it through prior beliefs, expectations and existing images of the adversary.²

Subsequent deterrence scholarship has expanded well beyond the original Cold War focus. The Fourth wave of deterrence theory has examined terrorism, non-state actors, asymmetric adversaries and so-called rogue states.³ Recent scholarship has proposed a possible Fifth wave concerned with efforts to counter hybrid and grey-zone threats.⁴

Cognitive warfare refers to the deliberate and continuous manipulation of perception and interpretation of events to gain strategic advantage. Its target is not the flow of information, but the conclusions drawn from it. Conducted before, during and between crises, it operates in the same space as deterrence itself.

Deterrence theory has never neglected perception, communication or the possibility of misinterpretation. What has changed is the environment in which signals now travel. Digital platforms deliver competing claims directly to the public and decision-makers at a speed no official communication can match; fabricated evidence is now

¹ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

² Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 58–113; Robert Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception," *International Security* 7, no. 3 (Winter 1982–83): 3–30.

³ Jeffrey W. Knopf, "The Fourth Wave in Deterrence Research," *Contemporary Security Policy* 31 (April 2010): 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523261003640819>.

⁴ Sean Monaghan, "Deterring Hybrid Threats: Towards a Fifth Wave of Deterrence Theory and Practice," Hybrid CoE - The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-paper-12-deterring-hybrid-threats-towards-a-fifth-wave-of-deterrence-theory-and-practice/>.

cheap to produce, and authentic evidence is easier to distort. There is an ongoing debate about treating cognitive warfare as a separate domain of operations.⁵

Cognitive warfare need not destroy military capability if it can make that capability appear ineffective, exaggerated or politically unusable. It need not eliminate resolve if it can make the leadership appear divided or unwilling to bear costs. Nor must it prevent a message from being transmitted if it can distort its meaning, discredit its source or overwhelm it with competing claims. The central issue is, therefore, not simply whether a deterrent signal has been sent. It is whether the signal remains recognisable after passing through a contested information environment.

Operation Sindoor provides an important test case through which to examine this problem. India and Pakistan did not merely employ military force. They also competed to define what the confrontation had demonstrated about capability, resolve, escalation control and the future balance of deterrence. The crisis revealed how cognitive contestation can shape the strategic meaning of military action and carries important lessons.

Operation Sindoor and the Contest Over Deterrence

Operation Sindoor should be understood as an attempt to reshape Pakistan's calculation regarding future terrorist attacks. India sought to demonstrate that a major terror attack would invite direct military punishment and that Pakistani retaliation would lead to additional costs. In the initial briefing on May 7, 2025, Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri described the operation as measured and focused on terrorist infrastructure, while explaining that there was a "compulsion both to deter and to pre-empt."⁶ After the conflict terminated, Prime Minister Narendra Modi presented Operation Sindoor as establishing a "new normal" under which future terrorist attacks would receive a response on India's terms.⁷

Pakistan had the opposite deterrent objective. It wanted to show that India could not impose military punishment without itself incurring high costs. Its response was intended to demonstrate the capability and resolve to retaliate and preserve the credibility of Pakistan's own deterrent posture. Pakistani analysts subsequently

⁵ Hervé Le Guyader, "Cognitive Domain: A Sixth Domain of Operations?" <https://hal.science/hal-03635898/document>

⁶ "Statement by Foreign Secretary: OPERATION SINDOOR." <https://www.mea.gov.in/speeches-statements?dtl/39473>.

⁷ "English Rendering of PM's Address to the Nation (May 12, 2025)."

https://www.mea.gov.in/speeches-statements?dtl/39498/English_rendering_of_PMs_address_to_the_Nation_May_12_2025.

argued that India had failed to establish an uncontested punitive option and that Pakistan's response had constrained Indian freedom of action.⁸

These competing objectives provide the baseline for examining the crisis. The central issue is not simply what India and Pakistan intended to communicate, but what each believed the confrontation ultimately demonstrated. That meaning was contested through disputed military claims, selective evidence, official messaging and competing explanations of how the conflict ended.

Contesting Military Capability

The first cognitive contest concerned the military capability underpinning India's deterrence strategy. Operation Sindoor sought to demonstrate that India could identify and strike terrorist infrastructure at considerable depth, penetrate Pakistani defences and expand the target set if Pakistan retaliated. The credibility of deterrence depended on India displaying its military superiority over Pakistan.

Pakistan had a strong incentive to weaken this signal. Its official and media narratives emphasised claims concerning Indian aircraft losses, the effectiveness of Pakistani air defences, and the costs imposed through retaliation. These claims sought to suggest that Indian strikes were neither as effective nor as sustainable as India claimed. Christopher Clary's early assessment stated that the crisis was characterised by exceptional disinformation and misinformation, with the Government of Pakistan making many unsubstantiated claims.⁹

The cognitive contest centred on how military outcomes were interpreted. Pakistan sought to portray Indian losses as evidence that the punitive option carried prohibitive costs and could not be repeated with confidence. India sought to demonstrate that any losses sustained did not prevent it from continuing or expanding military action. The issue was, therefore, not whether every platform survived or every target was destroyed, but whether India retained the capability to impose significant costs despite Pakistani resistance.

Cognitive warfare cannot overturn material outcomes, particularly because Pakistan's military possesses its own operational reports, intelligence and battle-damage

⁸ For Pakistani assessments, see No Space For War: Marka-e-Haq And The Logic Of Deterrence In South Asia - BASIC. Analysis. May 20, 2025. <https://basicint.org/no-space-for-conventional-war-between-india-and-pakistan/>;

Akhtar, Rabia. Stability under Pressure: A Pakistani View on Nuclear Deterrence after Pahalgam. https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/ifri_akhtar_stability_under_pressure_2026.pdf

⁹ "Four Days in May: The India-Pakistan Crisis of 2025 • Stimson Center." Stimson Center, May 28, 2025. <https://www.stimson.org/2025/four-days-in-may-the-india-pakistan-crisis-of-2025/>.

assessments. However, through selective evidence and exaggerated claims, it can construct an interpretation in which India's military action appears less effective, less sustainable and less credible as a future deterrent threat.

This points to a deeper problem than public misinformation. Pakistan's military establishment may privately hold an accurate assessment of its losses, but it has publicly committed itself to a narrative of victory, celebrated through national commemoration and elevation of the Army Chief to a constitutionally privileged Field Marshal. Having assured its population that Indian action was defeated, it cannot readily act on its private knowledge in the next crisis without contradicting its own account. Pakistan's public narrative may thus narrow the political space for caution and increase pressure to demonstrate resolve in a future crisis.

The relevant deterrence question is, therefore, not whether India has a superior military capability, nor even what Pakistan's establishment privately concludes about India's punitive options. It is whether Pakistan can politically afford to act on those conclusions.

Contesting Resolve and Escalation Control

The second cognitive contest concerned political resolve. Operation Sindoor was intended to show that India's willingness to impose costs would not be weakened by Pakistani retaliation, the possibility of military losses and the risk of a wider confrontation. The relevant question was no longer whether India possessed the military capability to strike, but whether it would continue to do so once the costs increased.

India's continuation of operations after Pakistan responded demonstrated that retaliation had not forced restraint, and India would accept further risk rather than let Pakistan's response close the confrontation. Pakistan, on the other hand, portrayed its retaliation as a demonstration of its resolve not to accept an Indian cross-border military strike passively.¹⁰

A related contest concerned escalation control. India presented its actions as calibrated. Strikes began with terrorist infrastructure and expanded only after Pakistan retaliated, raising the level of military action while keeping it tied to its political purpose. Pakistan advanced the opposite reading that India could not set the scale, pace and direction of the confrontation unilaterally, and that further escalation would expose it to increasing risk. The contest, in the end, was over whether the same

¹⁰ Al Jazeera. "'Act of War': Pakistan Pledges Retaliation to Indian Deadly Attacks." Accessed July 19, 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/7/pakistan-decries-act-of-war-vows-retaliation-as-india-launches-strikes>.

escalation showed India's continuing initiative or Pakistan's ability to impose limits on it.

These interpretations could shape behaviour in the next crisis. India appears to have concluded that it demonstrated resolve, retained sufficient control over escalation, and is willing to employ calibrated force after another terrorist attack. Should Pakistan conclude that retaliation successfully restricted India's choices, it may again rely on military response and escalation risk to contain Indian punishment. Pakistan could enter the next confrontation with excessive confidence in its ability to manage escalation. This risk is sharpened by its public commitment to a narrative of success, which makes caution harder to justify even where internal assessment recommends it.

Contesting Conflict Termination

The final cognitive contest concerned why military operations ended and what their termination revealed about deterrence. From India's perspective, the cessation of hostilities was a deliberate political decision taken after the immediate military objectives had been achieved and the intended warning delivered. India had demonstrated its willingness to act, responded to Pakistani escalation and retained further military options. Ending the confrontation was an exercise of restraint and political control, not a sign that India lacked the capability or resolve to continue.¹¹

This interpretation was central to India's deterrent message. A strategy of calibrated punishment requires not only the ability to impose costs, but also the ability to limit military action once its political purpose has been served. Indefinite escalation would have weakened the claim that Operation Sindoor was a controlled response to terrorism rather than the opening stage of a wider war. India presented termination as consistent with its political objectives.

Pakistan's account inverted this. Its narrative portrayed the cessation of operations as evidence that Pakistani retaliation had raised the military and political costs sufficiently to force India to stop.¹² Under this interpretation, Pakistan's response had preserved deterrence by showing that Indian punishment could be resisted and contained.

Claims about external diplomatic engagement sharpened this disagreement further. India maintained that the understanding to cease military action was reached directly

¹¹ Hindustan Times. "Indian Air Force Was 'on Song' That Night: Air Chief Marshal AP Singh on Op Sindoor." August 26, 2025. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indian-air-force-was-on-song-that-night-air-chief-marshal-ap-singh-on-op-sindoor-101756229045564.html>.

¹² Arab News. "Pakistan Observes 'Day of Gratitude' to Honor Nation's Response to Indian Strikes." Accessed July 19, 2026. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2600940/amp>.

through the two Directors General of Military Operations and rejected claims of third-party mediation.¹³ Other accounts emphasised the role of the United States in facilitating de-escalation.¹⁴ These competing explanations affected whether termination was understood as an Indian decision, a consequence of Pakistani retaliation, or the result of external pressure.

For India, the challenge is to ensure that conflict termination does not dilute the warning conveyed by military action. The reasons for stopping, the objectives achieved, and the conditions under which action could resume must be communicated clearly. Otherwise, Pakistan may read a limited operation through its own preferred frame and conclude that retaliation or external pressure will again prevent India from sustaining punishment.

The long-term significance of termination will depend on the lesson Pakistan carries forward. If it concludes that India stopped because its objectives were met but remained capable of imposing further costs, deterrence is reinforced. If it concludes that its response compelled India to halt, it may continue to regard future Indian actions as containable. Conflict termination is thus not merely the end of a military exchange, but part of the signal that shapes expectations about the next crisis.

Taken together, these contests left no agreed understanding of what the crisis had established. The result was deterrence ambiguity. India could read the confrontation as proof that it had expanded the space for punitive action. Pakistan could read it as proof that it was able to limit that action. The same events validated both strategies.

For India, the challenge is not only to demonstrate capability and resolve, but also to ensure that military action produces a more durable change in Pakistan's behaviour. This requires examining how deterrence can be strengthened in a cognitive environment where the strategic significance of military action remains contested.

Strengthening India's Deterrence in the Cognitive Warfare Environment

Operation Sindoor demonstrated India's capability and political willingness to impose military costs after a major terrorist attack. However, converting this capability into a durable change in Pakistan's calculations requires more than military actions. India must define the deterrent effect it intends to achieve, assess whether Pakistani expectations and behaviour have changed, shape those expectations continuously

¹³ Haidar, Suhasini. "No Third Party Mediation during Operation Sindoor: Government Officials Refute Intervention Claims by China and U.S." India. The Hindu, December 31, 2025.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/no-third-party-mediation-during-operation-sindoor-government-officials-refute-intervention-claims-by-china-and-us/article70457958.ece>.

¹⁴Unpacking The May 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis: Mutual Perceptions, Nuclear Escalation Risks, And De-Escalation Pathways - BASIC. BASIC News. March 31, 2026. <https://basicint.org/unpacking-the-may-2025-india-pakistan-crisis/>.

between crises, and protect its signals from manipulation in a contested information environment.

Plan the Intended Deterrent Effect

Military planning should begin with a clear understanding of the conclusion India wants Pakistan's military-security establishment to draw. Operational objectives identify the targets to be struck and the military effects to be achieved. Deterrent objectives must go further by specifying the behaviour India seeks to prevent, the costs it intends to demonstrate and the expectations it wants to create about future action. The political purpose, military action and the deterrent effect should be planned together.

The primary audience is not the Indian public or the international media. It is Pakistan's military-security establishment, which plays the central role in decisions concerning terrorist organisations, national security and military escalation. Indian signalling must be based on an understanding of the interests, assumptions and vulnerabilities of the Pakistan Army rather than principally on the requirements of domestic political communication.

Military options must be prepared before a crisis occurs. Improvised responses may demonstrate flexibility, but they are less likely to produce a coherent deterrent effect. Planning should anticipate likely Pakistani retaliation, identify the conditions in which India may widen or limit its response, and preserve political choice as the confrontation develops.

There must be a degree of uncertainty to India's actions. Pakistan should understand which conduct will trigger punishment and should regard India's willingness to respond as credible. It should not be able to predict with confidence the form, scale, duration or limits of that response. A major terrorist attack should carry certainty of retaliation but uncertainty over how far the costs may widen, particularly if Pakistan responds militarily.

Assess Changes in Pakistan's Calculations

India cannot judge deterrent success primarily through its own declarations, domestic approval or assessments of operational performance. The relevant test is whether Pakistan's military now expects another major terrorist attack to produce costs and risks greater than any anticipated benefit. Such an assessment must distinguish between punishment and behavioural change.

India thus requires a sustained assessment of Pakistan's behaviour. It should examine changes in military doctrine, operational planning, force posture, training and official or professional military writings. It should also assess whether Pakistan has altered

its support for or tolerance of terrorist organisations capable of provoking another major confrontation. This judgement cannot be made immediately after a crisis. Deterrence concerns expectations about future consequences, and evidence of change may emerge only over time.

Several questions should guide this assessment. Does Pakistan expect India to respond in greater strength after another attack? Does it believe that its retaliation can contain Indian action? Does it expect external diplomatic pressure to limit Indian action before India can impose substantial costs? Most importantly, has the expected cost to Pakistan of enabling another major terrorist attack increased?

India should also determine whether Pakistan's institutional learning differs from its public narrative. A government may proclaim success while privately correcting military weaknesses or placing tighter limits on terrorist groups. Conversely, restrained public statements may hide an internal belief that India's responses can still be contained and managed. Deterrence analysis must rely on patterns of behaviour rather than rhetoric alone.

One cautionary note is essential. The assessment must also take into account the Pakistan Army's institutional interests. For the Pakistan Army, confrontation with India is not only a security problem but a source of institutional primacy, budgetary priority and political authority.¹⁵ A behavioural change will come only if these interests are directly threatened.

Deterrence Must be Shaped Between Crises

The cognitive dimension of deterrence does not begin when a terrorist attack occurs and end when military operations stop. Pakistan's expectations about Indian capability, resolve and likely behaviour are formed continuously through military preparedness, diplomatic activity, political signalling and the consistency with which India sustains its declared policy.

India should use the period between crises to reinforce the costs attached to future terrorism. Visible military preparedness is one part of this effort, but deterrence must also draw upon diplomatic, economic, financial and legal instruments. Applied together, these should establish an expectation that support for terrorism will generate cumulative consequences that persist beyond a short military exchange.

Diplomacy must focus on pre-crisis conditioning rather than post-crisis persuasion. India should systematically document terrorist networks, expose their sources of support, share evidence with important partners and reduce Pakistan's ability to rely

¹⁵ C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)

upon deniability. Such preparation can shape the international environment in which a future crisis unfolds and preserve India's political room for action. Pakistan benefits when a confrontation is presented as a conventional dispute with India as the initiator. New Delhi must establish in advance that the originating trigger is cross-border terrorism, not the military response it subsequently provokes.

Continuity is essential. India's deterrent posture should not depend entirely upon a particular government or international alignment. It must be institutionally embedded so that it survives changes in political leadership, shifts in the external strategic environment, and long periods without confrontation. Pakistan must view India's policy as a durable strategic condition rather than a temporary political reaction.

Protecting the Integrity of Deterrent Signals

A deterrent signal may be clearly designed but still lose credibility once it enters a contested information environment. India, therefore, requires deterrent signal resilience: the capacity to preserve the clarity and credibility of its message despite deliberate manipulation, disputed evidence and competing interpretations.

India should not expect an uncontested narrative nor respond to every false claim. Such an effort would be neither possible nor strategically useful. India should distinguish between routine misinformation and claims that could materially affect Pakistan's assessment of Indian capability, political resolve and escalation options. This requires a standing inter-agency mechanism to verify contested claims, identify those that are significant, and coordinate military, diplomatic, and political communication during a crisis.

Official credibility is essential. India should be explicit about what is confirmed, what is provisional and what cannot be disclosed for operational reasons. Exaggerated or weakly supported claims may offer short-term political benefits, but they weaken confidence in official communication and make future deterrent signals easier to challenge.

India must also communicate with sufficient speed. An information vacuum allows adversarial claims to establish the initial understanding of events, which may be difficult to reverse even after credible evidence emerges. Speed, however, should not come at the cost of accuracy. The requirement is a system capable of releasing verified information quickly while protecting intelligence sources and operational capabilities.

Signal resilience also depends on the channel. A public statement contested in a saturated environment is the weakest carrier of a deterrent signal, and India should not rely on it alone. Direct military-to-military communication, including the DGMO

hotline, delivers intent to the establishment without crossing the contested public space. Evidence shared with partner governments and credible international institutions carries weight that India's own assertions do not. A message conveyed through enough independent channels ensures that no single contested narrative can erase it.

The objective is to ensure that manipulation cannot obscure the central warning that India possesses credible military options, is willing to employ them after major terrorist attacks, and retains the capacity to impose further costs if Pakistan escalates.

Anticipate Third-Party Amplification

Operation Sindoor showed that the cognitive contest surrounding deterrence may extend beyond India and Pakistan. Pakistan's employment of Chinese-origin platforms and weapons gave China a direct commercial and reputational stake in how their performance was judged. Claims concerning the J-10C fighter and PL-15 missile were amplified through Chinese state-linked media and became part of a broader debate over the relative effectiveness of Chinese and Western military systems.

A subsequent report by the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission alleged that Chinese actors used mislabelled photographs and video-game footage to discredit the Rafale and promote Chinese aircraft after the conflict.¹⁶ China rejected the allegation. Although the extent and coordination of such activity remain contested, the episode demonstrates how a third party with strategic and commercial interests can reinforce one side's account of military capability.

For deterrence, this matters because Pakistan's signalling was based partly on the claim that it possessed the means to impose high costs on Indian air power. Amplification through a larger external media and diplomatic ecosystem could strengthen that claim, influence wider assessments of the military balance and reinforce Pakistan's belief that Indian punitive action can be contained.

The strategic requirement is not to enter every debate over competing platforms, but to identify when third-party amplification begins to distort assessments that bear directly on deterrence. The India-Pakistan deterrence relationship may remain bilateral in its immediate military purpose, but the cognitive environment in which it is interpreted can be significantly wider.

¹⁶ US-China Economic and Security Review Commission; "2025 Annual Report to Congress." <https://www.uscc.gov/annual-report/2025-annual-report-congress>.

Conclusion

Operation Sindoor demonstrated India's capability and willingness to impose military costs in response to Pakistan-backed terrorism. It did not, however, produce a shared understanding of what the confrontation had established. India read the crisis as proof of a credible punitive option, while Pakistan portrayed it as proof that Indian action could be contained. Cognitive contestation hardened both interpretations, and the end result was deterrence ambiguity.

The cognitive dimension must, therefore, be treated as integral to deterrence, planned before the military action, protected during the operation, and sustained between crises. Its purpose is to ensure that capability is recognised, restraint is not mistaken for lack of resolve, and termination does not erase the warning conveyed by the use of force.

The lasting test of Operation Sindoor will not be which side presented the more persuasive account of the confrontation. It will be in the choices made in Rawalpindi before the next crisis. The measure of deterrence in the cognitive age is not whether India can punish, but whether Pakistan decides that the next provocation is no longer worth the risk and costs it will entail.



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