Firstpost.

How Operation Sindoor signals strategic shift, redraws red lines for Pakistan

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(File) Operation Sindoor displayed on the screen during a press briefing by the Indian armed forces, in New Delhi, Sunday, May 11, 2025. PTI

Every military clash between India and Pakistan has exposed the latter's sinister designs with ignominious outcomes. In October 1947, Pakistan surreptitiously attacked Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and illegally occupied one third of the state. In 1965 it invaded India with the aim to grab J&K, but the attempt failed miserably. In 1971, Pakistani aggression ended in its breakup, debunking the 'Two Nation' theory. Even in 1999, Pakistan's Kargil misadventure was a disaster, which was tantamount to its national humiliation.

The recent military standoff in the aftermath of a brutal terrorist attack in Pahalgam on April 22, 2025, came as a severe jolt to Pakistani military rulers, who were forced to clamour for a ceasefire.

As a retaliation to the Pahalgam massacre, India launched "Operation Sindoor" on the night of May 6-7, targeting nine terrorist camps through precision aerial strikes. It resulted in killing over

100 terrorists, including prominent ones like Yousf Azhar, Chief of 'Lashkar e Taiba' (LeT), and Abu Jindal, causing a serious setback to Pakistan's military-terror nexus. It was for the first time since 1971 that air strikes were undertaken across the international border (IB), signifying a major shift in India's response to the cross-border terrorism.

The magnitude of India's action was evident from an hour-long aerial standoff between the two sides, wherein over 70 fighter jets from the Indian Air Force (IAF) and around 50 from the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) were involved, leading to possibly the biggest air combat since World War II.

Pakistan retaliated by targeting 26 Indian cities and defence installations with swarm drones and missiles. However, India's robust, multi-layered air defence formed an impenetrable shield and effectively foiled Pakistan's design. Never before have India's indigenous equipment, along with Russian and Western platforms, been pitched against the Chinese systems.

In the counterstrike, India targeted major Pakistani airfield bases across the entire length of the border, including Nur Khan, Rahim Yar Khan, Sialkot, Lahore and Karachi, besides critical air bases in Sargodha and Jacobabad, closely linked with nuclear infrastructure, inflicting heavy damage.

On May 10, Pakistan launched "Operation Bunyan-un-Maroos" – attempted aerial strikes against 16 Indian airfields but met with little success. The Line of Control (LoC) witnessed intense firing involving the use of heavy artillery and high-calibre weapon systems. Amidst heightened tension, on May 10, a ceasefire came into effect at Pakistan's bidding.

The four-day standoff witnessed India raising the escalatory bar and junking Pakistan's assumptions with far-reaching ramifications, as enumerated below:

- "Operation Sindoor" marked a tectonic shift in India's strategy in its fight against terrorism, evident from the intensity of reprisal. The politico-militant intent was to deter the Pakistan Army with a clear message – mend the ways or face the consequences. In his address to the nation on May 12, two days after the ceasefire, PM Modi emphatically stated that India will not be blackmailed by the nuclear threats, and any act of terrorism by Pakistan will be treated as an act of war.

There are a number of takeaways for India from the recent skirmish. Deterrence, being the sum of intent and capability, was amply demonstrated during 'Operation Sindoor'. To make the deterrence more credible, India needs to significantly enhance its military capability, given two-front scenarios are now a foregone reality. It is high time to formulate the national security strategy and war-fighting doctrine. The 'National Comprehensive Power' and warfighting potential are no more an option but an imperative.

Given India's strategic interests as an emerging regional power, force projection capability is crucial. In modern warfare, air domination is a prerequisite to shape the battlefield environment. Air power stands out as the sword arm and not a supporting one, as was once propagated by General Rawat, the first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). Recently, Air Chief Marshal AP Singh, Chief of Air Staff, has forthrightly brought out the need to bridge the capability gap vis-à-vis China. Incidentally, the Chinese Air Force has around 200 J-20 fifth-generation stealth fighter jets in its inventory. On the other hand, India's 'Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft' (AMCA), a fifth-generation stealth fighter programme, is still in the early stages, with production likely to begin after a decade.

There are reports about China fast-tracking production of another stealth fighter J-35, which Pakistan is set to acquire. This will seriously upset the existing strategic balance. A strong navy is vital for power projection where carrier battle groups provide the winning edge. Submarines do not substitute for aircraft carriers, as the two are mutually exclusive.

India needs to execute limited responses at short notice, as in the current faceoff, Pakistan got adequate time to prepare. This implies restructuring of the higher defence organisational setup. Deep-rooted military reforms are required to accelerate defence modernisation programmes. Besides, defence spending needs to be enhanced to three per cent of the GDP. The vulnerability gaps must be realistically analysed and effectively addressed with a sense of urgency. It is necessary to undertake a reality check of *Atma Nirbhar* self-reliance programmes so these do not impinge on operational efficiency.

Our foreign policy definitely merits recalibrations, and a more proactive approach is needed. Investment in real-time narrative building through diplomatic channels and global media is

paramount to counter Pakistan's misinformation campaign as well as China's Grey Zone Warfare (GZW). A recent initiative aimed at global outreach by sending seven delegations composed of eminent political leaders and diplomats to various countries is a step in the right direction. Defence diplomacy has emerged as an important component in the prevailing international ecosystem.

Operation Sindoor stands out as a pivotal moment in India's fight against terrorism with a paradigm shift in its strategy and redefined red lines. Being a nation's call, it implies that every instrument of the state must be optimally employed to take the fight to its logical conclusion. Here on, the rules of the game are set to change, making Pakistan's proxy war a cost-prohibitive proposition.

The writer is a war veteran, currently Professor of Strategic and International Relations. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.