

# Air Power Under the Nuclear Shadow

## Operation Sindoor and the Logic of Strategic Restraint

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*Operation Sindoor (May 2025) represents a significant development in the evolution of air power, deterrence, and limited war in South Asia. Conducted in response to the Pahalgam terrorist attack, the operation involved precision strikes against terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir while deliberately avoiding Pakistani political leadership, critical national infrastructure, and core military command structures. This article examines Operation Sindoor through the analytical lens of John Warden's Five Rings Model and argues that the operation reflected a modified application of classical air power theory. Rather than seeking systemic paralysis through attacks on the adversary's inner strategic rings, India employed selective targeting and strategic restraint to generate coercive effects while managing escalation risks amid mutual nuclear deterrence.*

*The study demonstrates that the significance of Operation Sindoor lay not only in the targets that were struck but also in those deliberately left untouched. By focusing on terrorist infrastructure while avoiding state-centric targets, India sought to impose costs, communicate resolve, preserve legitimacy, and maintain escalation control simultaneously. The article further situates the operation within broader debates on coercive diplomacy, limited war, and deterrence in South Asia, drawing on the*

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works of Thomas Schelling, Robert Pape, Vipin Narang, Walter Ladwig III and Rajesh Rajagopalan.

*The article argues that Operation Sindoor reflects an emerging pattern in India–Pakistan crises in which military force functions less as an instrument of decisive victory and more as a mechanism of strategic communication. The recurring trajectory from Uri (2016) to Balakot (2019) and Sindoor (2025) suggests the evolution of a distinct South Asian model of limited war under the nuclear shadow, where calibrated force, selective targeting, and escalation management are central to deterrence practice. The study contributes to both air power theory and South Asian strategic studies by highlighting how contemporary military operations increasingly derive effectiveness from restraint as much as from destruction.*

**Keywords:** *Operation Sindoor; Air Power; Five Rings Model; Coercive Diplomacy; Strategic Restraint; Deterrence; Escalation Management; India–Pakistan Relations*

## INTRODUCTION

The character of air power has undergone a significant transformation in the 21st century. Advances in precision-guided munitions, intelligence networks, drones and space-based capabilities have expanded the range of military options available to states confronting security challenges. At the same time, the rise of hybrid warfare and the growing prominence of non-state actors have complicated the application of classical air power theories that were developed primarily for conventional interstate conflicts. These developments raise important questions about the role of air power in limited wars conducted under nuclear deterrence.

Operation Sindoor, launched by India in May 2025 following the Pahalgam terrorist attack, provides a useful case study for examining these questions. The operation involved precision strikes against terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir while deliberately avoiding Pakistan's political leadership, critical infrastructure, and other high-value state targets. This apparent restraint presents an interesting puzzle for air power theory. If air power is most effective when directed against an adversary's critical centres of gravity, why were some of the most strategically significant targets consciously left untouched?

This article argues that Operation Sindoor demonstrates an inverted application of Warden's Five Rings Model in which strategic effect was generated not by attacking inner rings but by deliberately avoiding them. Strategic restraint itself became a form of coercive signalling under conditions of nuclear deterrence. Rather than seeking to paralyze Pakistan's

state apparatus, India employed air power as a calibrated instrument of coercive signalling, targeting terrorist infrastructure while carefully managing escalation risks. The significance of the operation, therefore, lies not only in the targets that were struck but also in those that were deliberately avoided.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine Operation Sindoor and its implications for contemporary air power theory. The case study method is particularly suitable because it enables an in-depth analysis of a strategically significant event situated within a specific political, military and regional context. Operation Sindoor provides a valuable case for assessing the applicability of classical air power concepts to hybrid conflict environments characterised by the interaction of state and non-state actors under conditions of nuclear deterrence.

The analysis utilises process tracing to examine the relationship between the Pahalgam terrorist attack, India's subsequent military response, target selection decisions, and the broader strategic outcomes of the operation. Particular attention is paid to how India's targeting choices reflected both operational objectives and considerations of escalation management. This approach facilitates an evaluation of whether the operation conforms to, departs from, or adapts the assumptions embedded in John Warden's Five Rings model.

The study draws upon multiple sources of evidence, including official government statements and press briefings issued by Indian and Pakistani authorities, military assessments, open-source intelligence (OSINT), satellite imagery analyses, reports produced by policy research institutions and think tanks, and relevant academic literature on air power, deterrence and coercive diplomacy. The use of diverse sources enables integration of available information and helps mitigate the limitations of relying on a single narrative.

At the same time, the analysis acknowledges important methodological constraints. Many operational details remain classified, while claims regarding strike effectiveness, casualties, aircraft losses and battlefield outcomes are often contested by the parties involved. The prevalence of information warfare, strategic messaging, and competing narratives further complicates independent verification. Consequently, the study does not seek to establish definitive operational outcomes. Instead, it focuses on the strategic logic of target selection, official signalling, and the broader implications of the operation for understanding the evolving role of air power in hybrid conflicts and nuclearised security environments.

## EVOLUTION OF AIR POWER THEORY AND PRACTICE

The development of air power has been shaped by technological innovation, military experience and evolving strategic thought. Early air power theorists sought to define how aviation could influence the outcome of wars, producing ideas that continue to shape contemporary military doctrine.

Among the earliest and most influential thinkers was Giulio Douhet, who argued in *The Command of the Air* (1921) that future wars would be decided through strategic bombing. Douhet believed that an independent air force could bypass battlefield stalemates and directly attack an adversary's industrial base and civilian morale, compelling political surrender.<sup>1</sup> Although later experience revealed important limitations in these assumptions, particularly regarding civilian resilience and air defence capabilities,<sup>2</sup> Douhet established air power as an independent strategic instrument. Another influential theorist, Billy Mitchell, emphasised the importance of air superiority and argued that aviation would fundamentally transform warfare by reducing the effectiveness of traditional land and naval forces. Unlike Douhet's focus on strategic bombing, Mitchell highlighted the role of air power in achieving operational dominance and supporting joint military campaigns.<sup>3</sup>

The World War II and the Cold War tested and refined these theories. Strategic bombing campaigns demonstrated both the potential and limitations of air power, while advances in jet propulsion, radar systems and nuclear weapons expanded its role from battlefield support to strategic deterrence. Air power increasingly became a tool not only for fighting wars, but also for shaping adversaries' behaviour through the threat of force.

A major conceptual shift emerged during the late Cold War with John Warden's Five Rings model. Rejecting traditional attritional approaches, Warden viewed the adversary as an interconnected system composed of leadership, system essentials, infrastructure, population and fielded forces. He argued that air campaigns should focus on critical vulnerabilities within these rings to paralyze the enemy's ability to function. The apparent success of coalition air operations during the 1991 Gulf War significantly enhanced the influence of Warden's framework in contemporary air power doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

The post-Cold War era introduced precision-guided munitions, stealth technology, satellite navigation, real-time intelligence networks and unmanned aerial systems, enabling increasingly precise military operations.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, the rise of hybrid warfare, drones, cyber capabilities and information operations has expanded air power beyond the traditional aerial domain.<sup>6</sup> Contemporary conflicts increasingly involve a combination of

conventional and non-conventional threats, requiring air power to function as a multi-dimensional instrument of military and political influence. These developments raise important questions regarding the continued applicability of classical air power theories, particularly in conflicts involving non-state actors and nuclear-armed adversaries.

### **Warden's Five Rings Model and Its Limitations in Hybrid Warfare**

John Warden's Five Rings model remains one of the most influential frameworks in modern air power theory. Developed during the late Cold War and popularised through its application in the 1991 Gulf War, the model conceptualises the adversary as an integrated system composed of five concentric rings: leadership, system essentials, infrastructure, population, and fielded forces.<sup>7</sup> According to Warden, military success is achieved not through attrition but by identifying and striking critical nodes within these interconnected rings, thereby paralyzing the enemy's ability to function as a coherent system.

At the center of the model lies leadership, which represents the state's political and military decision-making apparatus. The second ring consists of system essentials, including energy resources, finance, food supplies, transportation networks, and other functions necessary for societal survival. Infrastructure forms the third ring and includes communication systems, industrial facilities and logistical networks. The fourth ring comprises the population whose support sustains the state's war effort, while the outermost ring consists of fielded military forces. Warden argued that attacks directed towards the inner rings would produce disproportionate strategic effects compared to conventional battlefield engagements against military forces alone.<sup>8</sup>

The Five Rings model, however, was developed primarily with centralised state adversaries in mind. The model assumes the existence of identifiable leadership structures, critical infrastructure, integrated economic systems, and a population whose morale can be influenced through military pressure. These assumptions were broadly applicable to conventional state actors such as Iraq during the Gulf War.<sup>9</sup> The question that arises in contemporary security environments is whether such a framework can be applied to non-state actors engaged in hybrid warfare.

Organisations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) differ fundamentally from the type of adversary Warden envisioned. Unlike Saddam Hussein's Iraq, these organisations do not operate through centralised state institutions, possess limited fixed infrastructure, and

rely on decentralised networks for recruitment, financing, training and communication. Their organisational resilience is derived precisely from the absence of the systemic vulnerabilities that Warden sought to exploit.<sup>10</sup>

The leadership ring, for example, is considerably less vulnerable in terrorist organisations than in conventional states. Militant groups often maintain redundant command structures, decentralised decision-making mechanisms and established succession plans. The elimination of individual leaders may degrade operational effectiveness, but it rarely leads to organisational collapse.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the concept of system essentials is difficult to apply because terrorist organisations do not depend upon nationally integrated power grids, transportation networks, financial institutions, or industrial production. Their support structures are frequently dispersed across informal financial networks, safe houses, charitable fronts, online communication platforms and transnational ideological linkages.<sup>12</sup>

The infrastructure ring also presents challenges. While terrorist training camps, launch pads and logistical facilities can be targeted, these assets are often mobile, concealed, inexpensive to replace, and embedded within civilian environments.<sup>13</sup> The population ring is equally problematic. Unlike states that depend on broad societal support, militant organisations typically draw support from narrower ideological constituencies, making them less susceptible to population-centric pressure. Finally, fielded forces in terrorist organisations consist of dispersed cells and small operational units rather than conventional military formations, limiting the effectiveness of traditional targeting strategies.<sup>14</sup>

These limitations do not render Warden's framework irrelevant. Rather, they suggest that its analytical utility must be adapted when examining hybrid conflicts involving state and non-state actors. In such environments, the principal target may not be the terrorist organisation itself but the broader strategic ecosystem within which it operates. The challenge, therefore, becomes not how to paralyze a terrorist network through systemic attacks, but how to employ selective force in ways that impose costs, communicate resolve and manage escalation.

Operation Sindoor provides an opportunity to explore such an adaptation. India selectively targeted terrorist infrastructure while consciously avoiding Pakistan's political leadership, military command structure and critical national infrastructure. In doing so, the operation reflected a modified and inverted application of Warden's logic. The significance of target selection lay not merely in what was struck but also in what was deliberately left untouched. Consequently, Warden's framework remains useful not as a model

of organisational paralysis but as a lens for understanding strategic restraint, coercive signalling, and escalation management in nuclear deterrence.

### **OPERATION SINDOOR (7 MAY 2025): INDIA'S PRECISION STRIKE**

Operation Sindoor demonstrates how contemporary air power can serve as an instrument of coercive signalling in nuclear deterrence. Rather than a stand-alone punitive strike, the operation evolved into a limited four-day military confrontation between India and Pakistan, illustrating the interaction between precision air power, escalation management and strategic communication.

The crisis originated on 22 April 2025 when terrorists attacked tourists in Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir, killing 26 civilians and injuring more than 20 others. Indian authorities attributed responsibility to The Resistance Front (TRF), widely regarded as a proxy of Lashkar-e-Taiba, and linked the attack to Pakistan-based terrorist organisations, including Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Intelligence assessments reportedly identified planning and support networks operating from Bahawalpur and Muridke.<sup>15</sup> The attack generated significant domestic pressure on the Indian government to undertake a visible retaliatory response while avoiding uncontrolled escalation between two nuclear-armed states.

In the early hours of 7 May 2025, India launched Operation Sindoor, a coordinated tri-services operation targeting terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. During a roughly 25-minute strike window, Indian forces attacked nine identified terrorist facilities, including Jaish-e-Mohammed infrastructure in Bahawalpur and Lashkar-e-Taiba facilities in Muridke. Indian officials emphasised that the operation deliberately excluded Pakistani military installations, government facilities and critical national infrastructure, reflecting an effort to maintain escalation control while demonstrating resolve.<sup>16</sup>

The operation relied on the integration of advanced air and space capabilities, including Rafale aircraft equipped with long-range precision-guided munitions, unmanned aerial systems, satellite-enabled intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and network-centric command-and-control systems. Indian officials described the operation as intelligence-driven and designed to maximise precision while minimising collateral damage. The strikes were subsequently accompanied by extensive strategic communication efforts, including official briefings that presented intelligence assessments and visual evidence intended to justify the operation domestically and internationally.<sup>17</sup>

What transformed Operation Sindoor from a limited counter-terrorism strike into a broader military confrontation was Pakistan's response. Between 7 May and 10 May, both sides engaged in a series of military actions involving drones, missile strikes, air-defence systems and cross-border attacks.<sup>18</sup> Pakistan attempted retaliatory strikes against Indian military targets, while India employed layered air-defence networks, including the S-400 system, to intercept incoming aerial threats.<sup>19</sup> The crisis developed into a sustained four-day military confrontation involving multiple domains of warfare, including air, missile, drone, cyber and information operations. The episode highlights both the opportunities and limitations of air power in contemporary hybrid conflicts, where military action serves not only to destroy targets but also to communicate strategic intent, shape adversary behaviour and preserve escalation stability.

### **Pakistani Perspective and Contested Narratives**

Pakistani authorities presented a markedly different account. Pakistan condemned Operation Sindoor as an 'unprovoked act of war' and 'blatant aggression', claiming that the strikes targeted civilian areas, including residential buildings and a mosque, resulting in at least 26–31 civilian deaths, including women and children.<sup>20</sup> Pakistani military spokespersons, via DG ISPR, asserted that Indian munitions struck populated areas in locations such as Kotli, Muzaffarabad and Bahawalpur, causing significant civilian casualties and damage to non-military infrastructure.<sup>21</sup>

In response, Pakistan launched Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos, retaliatory drone and missile strikes on Indian military installations in Jammu, Pathankot, Srinagar and Awantipora between 7 May and 8 May. Pakistani officials claimed success in downing multiple Indian aircraft (estimates ranging from 3 to 5 jets, including possibly Rafales), though these claims remain contested and partially disputed by independent visual analyses.<sup>22</sup>

This information warfare dimension exemplifies the conflict's hybrid nature. Both sides engaged in competing narratives: India released strike footage and satellite imagery to demonstrate targeting discipline, while Pakistan amplified reports of civilian harm through state media and diplomatic channels. Independent verification has been challenging due to restricted access in PoK, the fog of war, and reliance on partisan open-source intelligence (OSINT). Limited third-party assessments, such as those from Western media and think tanks, suggest some civilian impact occurred, though the scale remains debated.

This contested narrative underscores the limitations of applying classical air power theories in hybrid, nuclear-shadow environments. Classical theorists' emphasis on breaking enemy morale through decisive strikes is complicated here by modern information operations, which can shape international perception and constrain escalation more than physical destruction.

### STRATEGIC SIGNALLING THROUGH SELECTIVE TARGETING: THE INVERSION OF FIVE RINGS MODEL

Operation Sindoor provides an opportunity to examine how classical air power theory can be adapted to contemporary hybrid conflicts operating under the constraints of nuclear deterrence. While John Warden's Five Rings model was originally designed to identify critical vulnerabilities within a centralised state system, the logic of the operation suggests a modified application of the framework. The inverted Warden model refers to deliberately avoiding leadership and system-essential targets while selectively engaging lower-order nodes to manage coercive signalling and escalation. Rather than seeking to paralyze Pakistan as a state, India selectively targeted terrorist infrastructure while deliberately avoiding the higher-order strategic rings associated with the Pakistani state.<sup>23</sup> The significance of the operation, therefore, lies not merely in the targets that were struck but equally in those that were consciously left untouched.

#### **Leadership: The Ring That Was Deliberately Avoided**

In Warden's framework, leadership constitutes the most important ring because it represents the political and military authority responsible for directing the state's activities. Strategic attacks against leadership aim to cause systemic paralysis by disrupting decision-making processes and command structures.<sup>24</sup> During Operation Sindoor, however, India deliberately avoided targeting Pakistan's political leadership, senior military commanders, General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi, or other symbols of state authority.

This restraint is strategically significant. India possessed the capability to target deeper and more sensitive nodes within Pakistan's state apparatus, yet consciously chose not to do so. Such restraint suggests that the objective was not regime coercion or state paralysis but the imposition of limited costs on terrorist organisations linked to the Pahalgam attack.<sup>25</sup> By avoiding Pakistan's leadership ring, India communicated that its military action was punitive rather than existential, thereby reducing the risk of uncontrolled escalation between two nuclear-armed states.

### **System Essentials: Demonstrating Capability Through Restraint**

The second ring in Warden's model comprises system essentials such as energy infrastructure, transportation networks, financial systems, communication grids, and other assets necessary for the state's functioning. Classical air campaigns often seek to disrupt these systems in order to generate strategic pressure and reduce the adversary's ability to sustain military operations.

Operation Sindoor notably avoided such targets. No attempts were made to disrupt Pakistan's national electricity networks, transportation corridors, financial institutions, telecommunications systems, or other critical infrastructure. This absence is analytically important because it demonstrates that the operation was not designed to undermine the Pakistani state's ability to function. Instead, the selective exclusion of these targets reinforced the message that India's objective was limited and focused. By demonstrating the ability to conduct precision strikes while refraining from attacks on critical national infrastructure, India communicated both capability and self-imposed limits. The operation thus functioned as an exercise in coercive diplomacy rather than strategic destruction.<sup>26</sup>

### **Infrastructure: The Primary Focus of the Operation**

The third ring, infrastructure, constituted the principal target set during Operation Sindoor. Indian strikes focused on terrorist training facilities, operational camps, logistical hubs and associated infrastructure linked to organisations such as Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Locations such as Bahawalpur, Muridke, and other identified facilities represented the operational backbone of militant activity directed against India.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike national infrastructure in Warden's original framework, terrorist infrastructure is decentralised, dispersed, and often embedded within civilian environments.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, these facilities remain important because they provide training, recruitment, planning and logistical support for militant operations.<sup>29</sup> By targeting these sites, India sought to impose direct costs on terrorist organisations while avoiding actions that would be interpreted as attacks on the Pakistani state itself.

The emphasis on infrastructure reflects a shift in the application of air power from systemic paralysis to selective disruption. Rather than attempting to destroy an adversary's entire war-making capacity, the operation focused on degrading specific operational nodes associated with cross-border terrorism.

### **Population: Avoiding Civilian Harm and Preserving Legitimacy**

Warden viewed population as an important component of the adversary's system because public morale and societal resilience contribute to the state's capacity to sustain conflict. Historically, air power theorists such as Giulio Douhet argued that attacks on civilian morale could accelerate political collapse.<sup>30</sup> Contemporary conflicts, however, operate within a vastly different normative and informational environment.

Operation Sindoor was characterised by repeated official claims emphasising precision, discrimination and the avoidance of civilian casualties. Indian officials consistently framed the operation as a counter-terrorism strike directed against militant infrastructure rather than the Pakistani population.<sup>31</sup> Although Pakistan disputed these claims and alleged civilian casualties, the operational logic presented by India emphasised limited targeting and proportionality.

The importance of this approach extends beyond humanitarian considerations. In an era of real-time media coverage, satellite imagery, and open-source intelligence, civilian casualties can rapidly undermine political legitimacy and alter international perceptions. Consequently, the deliberate avoidance of population-centric targeting reflects both strategic and diplomatic calculations. Maintaining legitimacy was as important as achieving military effects.

### **Fielded Forces: Punitive Action Without Conventional War**

The outer ring of Warden's framework consists of fielded forces. In conventional warfare, these include armies, navies, air forces, and other organised military formations.<sup>32</sup> In hybrid conflicts, however, the distinction becomes less clear. Terrorist organisations do not possess conventional military structures, but they do maintain operational cadres, training units, launch teams, and militant networks that perform similar functions.<sup>33</sup>

Operation Sindoor targeted these operational elements indirectly through attacks on training camps, launch facilities and support structures associated with militant activity.<sup>34</sup> Importantly, India avoided large-scale attacks on Pakistan's conventional military forces during the initial phase of the operation. This distinction reinforces the campaign's limited character. The objective was to punish and disrupt terrorist actors rather than initiate a broader conventional conflict with Pakistan.

The selective targeting of militant operational capabilities demonstrates how fielded forces can be conceptualised differently in hybrid warfare.<sup>35</sup> The

focus shifts from defeating conventional armies to degrading the operational effectiveness of non-state actors while maintaining escalation control.

### **Implications for Deterrence and Escalation Management**

Operation Sindoor offers important insights into the evolving relationship between air power, deterrence, and escalation management in nuclearised security environments. Traditionally, the effectiveness of air power was often measured by its capacity to destroy military capabilities, paralyze critical infrastructure, or compel adversaries through overwhelming force. However, the operation suggests that the strategic value of contemporary air power increasingly lies in its ability to enable calibrated coercion below the threshold of major war.<sup>36</sup>

The operation demonstrated that precision air strikes can serve as instruments of punishment and communication simultaneously. By targeting terrorist infrastructure linked to cross-border attacks while deliberately avoiding Pakistan's political leadership, critical national infrastructure, and core military command structures, India employed force in a manner that sought to influence adversary behaviour without provoking uncontrolled escalation. The significance of the operation, therefore, extended beyond its immediate tactical effects. The strikes were designed not only to destroy selected targets but also to convey political resolve, establish credibility, and communicate the limits of Indian military objectives.

This finding resonates with Thomas Schelling's conception of military force as a bargaining instrument. Schelling argued that the utility of force often derives less from its destructive power than from its ability to shape an adversary's expectations and calculations.<sup>37</sup> Viewed through this lens, Operation Sindoor can be understood as an exercise in coercive diplomacy. The operation sought to impose costs on terrorist organisations and their supporting networks while signalling that India possessed both the capability and willingness to respond to future attacks. At the same time, the careful selection of targets communicated restraint, thereby preserving opportunities for de-escalation.

The operation also highlights the growing importance of precision and discrimination in contemporary deterrence strategies. During the Cold War, deterrence was often associated with the threat of massive retaliation. In contrast, modern limited conflicts increasingly rely on the credible threat of selective and proportionate force.<sup>38</sup> Precision-guided munitions, advanced intelligence networks, real-time surveillance, and integrated command-and-control systems provide states with a wider range of response options between

diplomatic protest and large-scale war. These capabilities enhance deterrence by making military responses more credible and politically sustainable.

For India, Operation Sindoor appears to reinforce the gradual emergence of a deterrence framework that seeks to impose direct costs on cross-border terrorism while remaining below Pakistan's perceived nuclear thresholds.<sup>39</sup> This dynamic resonates with arguments advanced by Vipin Narang, who observes that regional nuclear powers often employ calibrated conventional operations while attempting to avoid escalation triggers embedded within their adversaries' deterrence posture.<sup>40</sup> Earlier episodes, including the 2016 Uri surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot air strikes, reflected similar efforts to expand the space for limited conventional action under conditions of mutual nuclear deterrence. This trajectory reflects a broader evolution in Indian strategic thinking, in which India has increasingly sought response options that enhance deterrence credibility without crossing thresholds likely to trigger major escalation. Operation Sindoor appears to represent a continuation of this trend. Walter C. Ladwig III's analysis of India's evolving limited-war concepts similarly suggests that Indian strategic planners have sought military options capable of imposing costs on adversaries without provoking full-scale conflict.<sup>41</sup> Operation Sindoor demonstrates how precision air power may increasingly serve that function in contemporary crisis environments.

The operation also contributes to ongoing debates regarding the stability-instability paradox in South Asia.<sup>42</sup> Nuclear deterrence may reduce the likelihood of large-scale war while simultaneously creating opportunities for lower-level conflicts and coercive actions.<sup>43</sup> Operation Sindoor illustrates how states increasingly seek to exploit this space through carefully calibrated military operations.

At the same time, the operation reveals the increasing complexity of escalation management in the age of hybrid warfare. Military actions are now accompanied by information operations, cyber activities, drone attacks and competing strategic narratives.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, escalation is no longer determined solely by battlefield dynamics. Public perception, media coverage, diplomatic signalling, and information warfare have become integral components of contemporary deterrence interactions. The competing Indian and Pakistani narratives surrounding Operation Sindoor illustrate how strategic outcomes are increasingly shaped by battles over legitimacy and perception as much as by kinetic effects.

The broader implication is that air power is evolving from a predominantly war-fighting instrument into a multi-dimensional tool of statecraft. Its value lies not merely in its capacity to destroy targets but in its ability to generate

political effects, communicate resolve, reassure domestic audiences, deter adversaries, and manage escalation simultaneously. Operation Sindoor demonstrates that the success of contemporary air campaigns may increasingly depend on the careful calibration of force rather than the pursuit of decisive military destruction. In this respect, the operation provides an important case study for understanding the role of air power in limited wars and hybrid conflicts conducted under the shadow of nuclear deterrence.

### TOWARDS A SOUTH ASIAN MODEL OF AIR POWER UNDER NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Operation Sindoor should not be understood as an isolated military episode but as part of a broader evolution in India's use of calibrated military force under conditions of nuclear deterrence. If we view it alongside the Uri surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot air strikes, the operations uncover an emerging pattern in India's crisis behaviour that departs from both traditional conventional warfare and classical theories of strategic bombing. These operations have increasingly employed limited, precision-based military actions designed to deter cross-border terrorism, restore deterrence, and communicate political will while deliberately managing escalation risks. These episodes collectively suggest the gradual emergence of a distinct South Asian model of limited war in which air and special operations function primarily as instruments of coercive diplomacy and strategic signalling.

The trajectory began with the Uri surgical strikes in September 2016. Following the terrorist attack on an Indian Army brigade headquarters at Uri that killed 19 soldiers, India conducted cross-Line of Control (LoC) raids against terrorist launch pads located in PoK. The operation represented a deliberate crossing of the LoC by Indian Special Forces to conduct punitive strikes against terrorist camps.<sup>45</sup> Although the Uri operation relied primarily on Special Forces rather than air power, it established the strategic logic of calibrated cross-border retaliation, which was subsequently expanded through precision aerial strikes at Balakot and matured during Operation Sindoor. Though geographically limited and tactically modest, the operation marked a significant shift in Indian strategic behaviour. Therefore, the operation combined military retaliation with deliberate political restraint, signalling resolve without seeking escalation.

The Balakot airstrikes of February 2019 further broadened this approach. It was an operation conducted in response to the Pulwama terrorist attack. The Indian Air Force employed Mirage-2000 aircraft equipped with precision-

guided munitions to strike a Jaish-e-Mohammad training facility near Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Unlike the Uri operation, which remained confined to PoK, Balakot represented the first acknowledged Indian air strike inside undisputed Pakistani territory since the 1971 war. The operation, therefore, carried substantial escalatory potential. However, India's target selection remained carefully calibrated with strikes focusing on a terrorist training facility.<sup>46</sup> Subsequent Indian official statements consistently framed this operation as a 'non-military pre-emptive strike', which reflect an attempt to construct a legal and diplomatic narrative that distinguished counter-terrorism operations from conventional armed conflict. Although Pakistan responded with retaliatory airstrikes the following day, both states exercised restraint to prevent further escalation, illustrating the continuing influence of nuclear deterrence on crisis management.

Operation Sindoor represents the sophisticated manifestation of this evolving strategic trajectory. While the operation incorporated advanced precision-strike capabilities, space-based intelligence, and network-centric command systems unavailable during earlier crises, its underlying strategic logic remained consistent. As demonstrated throughout this study, India confined its attacks to terrorist infrastructure associated with Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba while consciously avoiding Pakistan's state apparatus. Even as the crisis expanded into a four-day multi-domain confrontation, India's initial targeting decisions reflected a continued commitment to calibrated force rather than unrestricted military escalation. The significance of Operation Sindoor, therefore, lies not simply in technological strides but in the continuity of strategic behaviour observable across successive crises.

Several common characteristics emerge when these three operations are examined comparatively. First, each operation employed calibrated force designed to impose limited but politically meaningful costs. Second, all three operations relied upon signalling directed at multiple audiences. Domestically, they demonstrated the government's resolve in responding to terrorism; internationally, they demonstrated India's rebuke to its inherent right of self-defence against non-state actors operating from Pakistani territory and simultaneously communicated to Pakistan that India possessed capabilities and political will to undertake limited conventional operations. Strategic signalling, therefore, became as important as battlefield outcomes themselves. Third, the operations shared limited political and military objectives. They were designed to degrade terrorist infrastructure, impose reputational and operational costs upon military organisations, and reinforce deterrence against future cross-border terrorist attacks. Finally, these operations demonstrate

the increasing importance of precision targeting and escalation management. Precision enables states to impose costs selectively while reducing collateral damage and preserving diplomatic legitimacy. Operation Sindoor exemplifies this evolution by demonstrating how precision itself becomes an instrument of strategic communication.

Taken together, these developments suggest the emergence of what may be conceptualised as a 'South Asian Signalling Model of Limited War'. Unlike classical theories of air power that emphasise decisive victory through strategic paralysis, this model prioritises calibrated coercion, selective targeting, strategic communication, and control of escalation. Military force functions less as an instrument for defeating the adversary than as a mechanism for restoring deterrence, shaping political perceptions, and influencing future behaviour without provoking uncontrolled escalation. The strategic effectiveness of such operations derives as much from deliberate restraint as from the application of force itself.

The progression from Uri to Balakot and finally to Op. Sindoor demonstrates increasing confidence in employing limited conventional force under the protection of nuclear deterrence while simultaneously revealing the growing centrality of precision, political signalling, and escalation management in contemporary South Asian security. This emerging pattern provides an analytical framework that complements the recognition that, in nuclearised regional conflicts, strategic success increasingly depends on the careful management of violence rather than its unrestricted application.

## CONCLUSION

Operation Sindoor represents an important case study in the evolution of air power in an era shaped by hybrid warfare and nuclear deterrence. While the operation was launched in response to a specific terrorist attack, its significance extends beyond its immediate military objectives. The campaign demonstrated how precision air power can be employed not only to impose costs on adversaries, but also to communicate political resolve while managing escalation risks.

The operation also highlights the growing role of air power as an instrument of coercive diplomacy. Precision strike capabilities provide states with options that fall between diplomatic protest and large-scale war, enabling calibrated responses under conditions of mutual nuclear deterrence. At the same time, the experience of Operation Sindoor underscores the

increasing importance of information operations, technological integration, and escalation management in shaping strategic outcomes.

For India, the lessons of Operation Sindoor extend beyond a single military operation. Sustaining the credibility of such strategies will require continued investment in advanced air and space capabilities, intelligence and surveillance systems, integrated command networks, and emerging technologies. As the regional security environment becomes increasingly complex, the ability to employ force in a precise, proportionate, and politically calibrated manner is likely to remain a critical component of India's security strategy.

Ultimately, Operation Sindoor demonstrates that the effectiveness of contemporary air power is no longer measured solely by the destruction it can inflict. Equally important is its ability to generate political effects, signal resolve, and achieve strategic objectives while avoiding uncontrolled escalation. In that respect, the operation offers valuable insights into the changing nature of air power in the 21st century.

While this article employs Warden's Five Rings Model as an analytical lens, Operation Sindoor ultimately reveals dynamics that extend beyond the framework's original assumptions. Unlike the state-centric air campaigns for which Warden's model was designed, India–Pakistan crises occur under conditions of mutual nuclear deterrence and involve interactions among state and non-state actors. Strategic success derives not from systemic paralysis but from carefully calibrated signalling through selective targeting and deliberate restraint. The recurring pattern visible in Uri, Balakot and Sindoor suggests the emergence of a distinct South Asian model of limited war in which military force functions primarily as a tool of deterrence communication rather than as a means of achieving decisive battlefield victory.

Future research may conceptualise this pattern as a 'South Asian Signalling Model of Limited War' under Nuclear Deterrence.

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