Cold Start to Cold Strike

Reimagining India's War Doctrine in the Age of Multi-domain Conflict

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India's long-debated Cold Start doctrine (CSD), shaped by the post-Parakram experience, offered tempo in theory but remained constrained by strategic restraint, limited jointness and the realities of the 21st-century multi-domain battlespace. Operation Sindoor, conducted after the April 2025 Pahalgam attack, changed that. It demonstrated calibrated precision strikes and tech-enabled force application below the nuclear threshold, with clear objectives and controlled escalation. This calls for a review of force application doctrine to align it with the challenges of future wars. The article proposes a doctrinal shift from reactive deterrence to a proactive strategy, through a Cold Strike doctrine that is repeatable, intelligence driven and designed to dominate the escalation ladder while strengthening deterrence. It frames future conflict as compressed, sensor rich and defined by 'precise mass', where drones, missiles, cyber disruption and narrative contestation converge. The article further argues that the gaps must be closed, particularly in intelligence fusion, data centricity, unmanned aerial systems, artificial intelligence-driven autonomy and narrative control. It advances a roadmap centred on integrated Command, Control, Computers,

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Communications, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C5ISR) and combat cloud architectures, civil–military fusion, doctrine-led capability development, including the case for a dedicated rocket-cum-missile force, and data-centric networked operations. Cold Strike is not a refinement of Cold Start; it is a departure from it.
Keywords: *Cold Strike Doctrine; Multi-Domain Warfare; Strategic Pre-emption; Escalation Dominance; C5ISR and Network-Centric Warfare; Precision-Mass*

"*Cold Strike Doctrine must be India's strategic message, delivered with lethality, precision, and integrated, multi-domain synergy, to deter, deny, degrade, and dominate future multi-domain threats.*"

Introduction

A doctrine is only as powerful as the will that underwrites it and the capability that delivers it. For over two decades, India has been toeing the line on the idea of 'Cold Start', a reactive, conventional retaliation strategy that promised enhanced tempo but lacked deterrence and was not aligned with the multi-domain dynamics of the 21st-century battlespace. Cold Start lived between political hesitation and military ambition, and that gap killed its credibility.

Then came Operation Sindoor, a punctuation mark in India's strategic history.[1] It showed not only intent but also integration. It demonstrated that India could strike across domains and still dominate the escalation ladder without strategic overstretch. For the first time, India executed a calibrated, multi-domain, tech-enabled operation below the nuclear threshold, with clearly defined objectives. It marked a shift from reactive deterrence to proactive compellence and from restraint to calibrated assertion. It also demonstrated politico-military harmony.

While India leveraged its indigenous platforms and maintained global legitimacy during Operation Sindoor,[2] vulnerabilities remain in intelligence fusion, strategic autonomy, integrated force application and narrative control. Pakistan, though politically shaken, retains hybrid warfare tools and is modernising its armed forces, but faces a new Indian deterrence construct.

The Cold Start doctrine (CSD) served as a theoretical deterrent to Pakistan's sub-conventional aggression, but the character of war has changed with new players, tools, technologies, threats and rules. It is an era of multi-domain warfare: diverse, integrated and yet converging, with all elements of national power weaponised and synchronised into a single orchestra. Conflict

is now defined by compressed timelines, stealth, beyond-visual-range fires and accelerated kill chains, with the ascendancy of 'precise mass' through saturation attacks by swarms and missiles.[3] The aim is to 'deny' the adversary options; 'disrupt' their systems and tempo; 'dislocate' and 'degrade' their capacity and narrative; and 'dominate' the escalation ladder with a periodic conflict-termination profile.

The CSD was not aligned with these realities and thus mandated a review. This deny, disrupt, degrade, dominate construct, the 4D framework, is the analytical scaffold used throughout the article to test each proposed reform, which distinguishes the article's approach from a general survey of capability gaps to a Cold Strike strategy. Thus, India now needs a 'Cold Strike' doctrine—not a variation of the old, but a fundamental shift towards a repeatable, pre-emptive and strategic posture of deterrence through denial and domination. In other words, a strategy that turns Pakistan's low-cost, high-benefit proxy-war option into a high-cost, low-benefit model.

The sections that follow examine the current doctrine and its limitations, the case for a doctrinal shift and the operational and technological factors that make it necessary, before turning to how India might traverse this transition. The related discussion of force restructuring, a dedicated rocket force and net-centric architecture runs throughout as an instrument of this doctrinal shift, not as a separate argument in its own right.

Cold Start Doctrine (CSD): Military Ambitions–Strategic Disconnects

Cold Start remains India's current doctrine of record for limited war below the nuclear threshold; no successor has yet been formally adopted, which is precisely the gap this article aims to address. The CSD emerged in India's strategic discourse after the 2002 military stand-off between India and Pakistan, known as Operation Parakram.[4] Cold Start was conceived and operationalised within the Indian Army alone. Therefore, the article uses 'Indian Army' where a point is specific to the land force and 'Indian military' or 'India's armed forces' only where the army, navy and air force are jointly concerned.

Following the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament by Pakistan-backed militants, the Indian Army took months to mobilise troops along the western border, a delay that exposed significant operational gaps and a lack of strategic clarity on initiating conflict. The delay allowed the Pakistan Army to mobilise and move its troops, including its reserve strike forces, to the

contested border. Lacking strategic surprise, the Indian Army withdrew after a 10-month stand-off.[5] In after-action reviews, the military concluded that the size of the strike corps made mobilisation and manoeuvring difficult, and that the lack of offensive capability was a serious handicap to rapid military action against Pakistan.

The Indian Army began internalising the CSD in 2004,[6] marking a shift away from India's policy of strategic restraint and posturing towards a strategic, assertive and offensive option[7] aimed at achieving the politico-military aim below the nuclear threshold. The objective was to enable swift, calibrated retaliation that could impose costs on adversaries like Pakistan without triggering nuclear escalation. The Indian Army's CSD, also known as SNIPE (Short Notice, Intense, Proactive, Escalatory) operations,[8] had a military character. Still, it lacked the political will and, as always, remained contingent on the political guidance of the government of the day, whether through strategic messaging or Cabinet Committee on Security approval. It revealed a politico-military misalignment and a civil–military disconnect, which could either paralyse the response or lead to unintended escalation.

At its core, Cold Start transformed static 'holding' corps into 'pivot' corps capable of launching in situ forces for a 'limited offensive' within 6–24 hours, followed by an escalatory launch of rapidly mobilised strike corps battle groups within 48–72 hours, with force infusion every 24-hour cycle. These highly mobile Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) were designed to conduct multiple shallow thrusts, supported by intense 100-gun artillery fire, which was to be selectively exploited by follow-on, larger divisional offensive IBGs for a depth offensive within the perceived nuclear threshold. The operations were to be supported and complemented by the other services, as appropriate to the overall plan, with the Indian Army in the lead. The emphasis was on surprise, speed and simultaneity to dislocate enemy defences, paralyse command chains and seize early initiative before international mediation could curtail military options.

The doctrine envisioned several theatre-based IBGs being deployed along the western front. Accordingly, the holding corps were reorganised as pivot corps, with battle groups aligned with a theatre offensive alongside the strike corps. Similarly, IBGs would be adapted and restructured for deployment along the northern and eastern borders. The doctrine was validated through a series of test exercises, each refining the synergy among Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, joint force interoperability and real-time battlefield awareness.

Pakistan, subsequently, responded with doctrinal shifts,[9] including the so-called 'New Concept of War Fighting' (NCWF), to improve inter-service coordination, reduce or eliminate the mobilisation differential, address developments in tactical nuclear weapons and shift its deterrence rhetoric, viewing Cold Start as an existential threat. Yet, India perceived it as a credible conventional counter to proxy warfare and terrorism, a doctrine designed to remain under the nuclear tripwire while deterring future provocations.

The CSD was intended as a signalling tool, a coercive instrument of deterrence and a hedge against strategic paralysis. It remained one of the many options available. However, a post-analysis of its paralysis under test, such as in terror attacks—26/11 Mumbai in 2008, the 2010 Pune German Bakery bombing and the attack at the Indian Air Force Airbase at Pathankot on 2 January 2016—highlighted five disconnects, which together constitute the core pitfalls of the doctrine:

1. *Political will:* The political will to up the ante through strong action remained wanting. The comfort zone remained in strategic restraint. While the response to Uri and Pulwama saw strategic restraint being overcome, the response was one of strategic constraint, with shallow, symbolic objectives, assertiveness or pre-emptive intent. Deterrence without resolve is signalling without consequence.[10]
2. *Operational readiness*: Encompasses operational preparedness and effectiveness; addresses hardware gaps and technology voids; and addresses force integration and Command, Control, Computers, Communications, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C5ISR) capabilities, all of which remained tardy. The domains developed in isolation, with a focus on the kinetic domain. Also, capability gaps turned speed into a vulnerability.
3. *Strategic messaging and deterrence*: The CSD failed to deter Pakistan's proxy war, prompting Pakistan to develop an NCWF with tactical nuclear weapons to curtail the CSD. The debate continued without meaningful change. Thus, deterrence failed to deter either Pakistan or China.
4. *Jointness and synergy*: The synergy and interoperability of joint operations, critical for SNIPE operations, were limited and cocooned. The legacy structures, doctrines and training persisted. Jointness remained procedural, not operational.

5. *Escalation management*: The potential for unintended escalation loomed, unaddressed. The focus was on the conflict-termination profile and territorial gains. As a result, the exit strategy remained undefined.

Although the CSD was never battle-tested, its core tenet, with strategic refinements, led to the formulation of its more relevant variant, the Cold Strike doctrine.

Three reasons have been responsible for this shift. First, the character of war has changed faster than Cold Start could adapt: compressed kill chains, precision mass and multi-domain sensor fusion have outpaced a doctrine built around corps-level mobilisation. Second, the aforementioned disconnects show that Cold Start's credibility gap was never resolved by refinement alone; each retest under crisis, from 26/11 to Pathankot, reproduced the same political, technological and jointness shortfalls. Third, Operation Sindoor has demonstrated that a pre-emptive, technology-enabled, escalation-controlled alternative is operationally achievable, removing the main objection, feasibility, that had previously kept Cold Start in place by default. Together, these three reasons, and not dissatisfaction with Cold Start in the abstract, have made a doctrinal shift necessary rather than merely desirable.

From Cold Start to Cold Strike: Contours, Construct and Force Application Matrix

Cold Strike is not just Cold Start version 2.0;[11] it is its replacement. It replaces mobilisation for retaliation with readiness for pre-emption. It is enabled by dominant battlespace awareness, integrated digital targeting, cyber dislocation and mass precision kinetic and non-kinetic strikes, achieved not through platforms alone but through seamless civil–military fusion and inter-domain synergy. It is 'Cold', not because it avoids fire, but because it is executed with clinical calculation, featuring pre-emptive, surgical and lethal kill chains. Its message is: 'Hit First, Hit Hard, Hit Where it Hurts and Hurt where it Lasts'.[12] This requires the highest levels of operational readiness, an amalgam of operational effectiveness and preparedness. Figure 1 depicts the contours of this transition and the resultant force application matrix.



Figure 1 Cold Start to Cold Strike: Contours
Source: Author's own construct.

Cold Strike: Military Force Application Matrix

The application of military force under the Cold Strike doctrine is not contingent on the legacy retaliatory response to a terror attack. It operates at a higher level of multi-domain strategic pre-emption. It is premised on credible intelligence indicating an imminent terror threat, a surge in terrorist infrastructure or escalating proxy-war activities originating from Pakistan that pose a direct threat to India's national security. The doctrine is, therefore, proactive, pre-emptive, offensive and escalation-controlled. As mentioned earlier, it aims to:

1. Deny the adversary options;
2. Disrupt systems and tempo;
3. Degrade capability and narrative; and
4. Dominate escalation and post-conflict framing.

Figure 2 depicts the sequential phases through which this force application matrix unfolds.

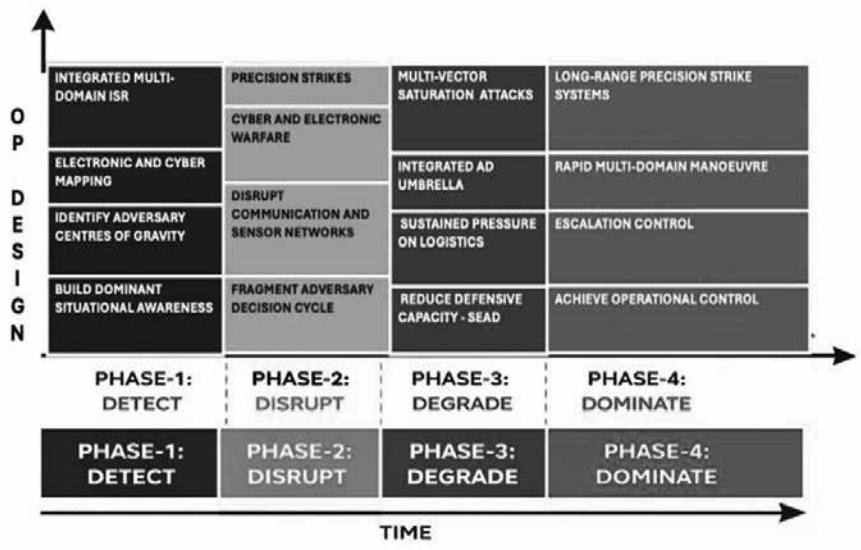


Figure 2 Phases of Cold Strike
Source: Author's own construct.

Key Components

These are the seven factors that require sustained attention if Cold Strike is to move from concept to operational capability:

1. *Readiness escalation protocol*: In situ forces are progressively elevated through readiness postures to ensure rapid mobilisation, posture and application of force.
2. *Air defence and internal security measures*: Comprehensive defensive measures, including air defence systems, force protection protocols and critical infrastructure security, are fully activated before the initiation.
3. *Activation of non-kinetic domains*: Simultaneously, offensive operations in the non-kinetic domain are initiated before kinetic actions as part of shaping operations. This includes:
    - cyber operations targeting adversary networks;
    - electronic warfare to disrupt communications and surveillance; and
    - information warfare to shape perceptions, both domestic and international.
4. *Initial kinetic response*: Precision stand-off strikes, delivered by drones, long-range missiles and air-delivered munitions, are launched against

designated terrorist infrastructure, command nodes and military assets that support or shield terrorist operations.

5. *Multi-domain escalatory cycles*: The application of escalatory force is structured into time-sensitive operational cycles, calibrated to the enemy's response. These cycles span land, air, sea, cyber and space, with the strategic objective of controlling escalation dynamics without breaching thresholds that risk strategic overreach. Nuclear sabre rattling will not affect operations, given India's robust nuclear policy of 'no first use' and the massive retaliation construct.
6. *Transition from Cold Strike to contact warfare*: The doctrine remains prepared for vertical escalation. If the situation demands it, IBGs may be deployed for ground operations. In such a scenario, Cold Strike transitions seamlessly into contact warfare, with objectives ranging from degrading capabilities to capturing territory.
7. *Cognitive warfare and narrative shaping*: Dominance in the cognitive and informational domain is not episodic but a persistent peacetime effort. This effort must scale in parallel with readiness levels and combat operations, ensuring that narrative supremacy complements physical force to achieve comprehensive deterrence.

The doctrinal difference between Cold Start and Cold Strike lies in their targeting philosophies, joint force application, technology infusion, multi-domain integration, escalation management and civil–military fusion, all of which together support a whole-of-nation approach. Figure 3 depicts the salient differences between Cold Start and Cold Strike.

Cold Start Doctrine	Cold Strike Doctrine
Mobilisation after Provocation	Pre-emptive, Proactive, Preventive
Platform-centric warfare	System-centric warfare
Land Centric - Individual Domains	Multidomain Centric
Deterrence by Punishment	Deterrence by denial and dominance
Attrition focused	Mvre W and Dislocation

Figure 3 Cold Start Versus Cold Strik- Doctrinal Construct

Source: Author's own construct.

Note: Mvre W is Manoeuvre Warfare.

Doctrinal Transformation: Need for a Rocket Force

The character of war is undergoing rapid, irreversible change. Long-range precision fires, unmanned systems and integrated sensor networks now shape operational outcomes at unprecedented speed. While land, sea and air power once defined the primary tools of war, the 21st-century battlespace has added cyber, space and information as additional domains. This has altered the geometry of warfare and blurred geographical boundaries. A key impact of these multi-domain operations is the deep-strike precision capability. The force structure question is taken up here only to the extent that it enables Cold Strike, since a force construct is meaningful only insofar as it serves the doctrine it is built to execute.

China and Russia have institutionalised deep-strike capability through dedicated Rocket Forces, recognising that precision strikes across domains can disrupt enemy command structures, weaken air defences and halt mobilisation before traditional manoeuvre formations engage. For India, facing the prospect of a two-front war with nuclear-armed adversaries, the absence of such a unified capability creates a significant doctrinal gap.

This is why India needs an Indian Rocket Force.[13] A dedicated missile and rocket command would unify doctrine, training, ISR integration, targeting workflows and escalation management. It would enable pre-emptive denial, counterforce options, battlefield-paralysing strikes and long-range conventional deterrence. It would free the air force from over-reliance on strike roles and provide ground forces with overwhelming fire support without crossing nuclear thresholds. It would also improve war preparedness on both fronts and signal strategic maturity.

International Precedents: What Other States' Doctrines Teach India

Cold Strike is not without precedent abroad. China's systems confrontation doctrine rests on: a dedicated Rocket Force; a Strategic Support Force that fuses cyber, space and electronic warfare; and a Central Military Commission that holds unified joint command authority. These features convert heavy investment into a coherent kill chain rather than parallel service programmes. Israel's mowing the lawn doctrine works because of a compressed political–military decision loop, in which the Prime Minister, the Defence Minister and the Chief of Staff can authorise and review strikes within hours, and because periodic operations are treated as routine maintenance of deterrence rather than exceptional escalation. The United States' (US) Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) effort, including its execution in Operation Midnight Hammer, shows the value of centralised strategic communications

running alongside kinetic action, so that the narrative of a strike is controlled as tightly as the strike itself. Russia offers a cautionary counterexample: its reconnaissance-strike complexes performed well in isolated engagements, but the wider war in Ukraine exposed a doctrine lacking genuine jointness, sustainment or accountable command, a reminder that hardware and concepts alone do not make a doctrine credible.

Four attributes recur across the doctrines that have proved durable, and these are the attributes India would need to make Cold Strike work rather than merely declare it:

1. A single authority empowered to fuse intelligence, targeting and effects across services, rather than committees that coordinate after the fact.
2. A decision architecture able to authorise pre-emptive or retaliatory action within hours, not weeks.
3. A defence industrial base able to sustain repeated operations, not a single one.
4. A standing strategic communications capability that runs before, during and after every action.

Where India already has analogues, in the Network for Spectrum, the Cabinet Committee on Security and the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), the task is to tighten and empower them. India currently lacks two critical elements—a unified rocket force and a peacetime-rehearsed decision architecture. Closing these two gaps is the central objective of the recommendations that follow.

Strategic Pre-emption: The Heart of Cold Strike

India's earlier strategic culture has often leaned towards reactive postures. Galwan, Pulwama and Uri, all triggered responses, but only after casualties. Operation Sindoor signalled a shift towards strategic assertion, acting resolutely but only in response to provocation. Cold Strike must go a step further. It must operationalise strategic pre-emption.

Strategic pre-emption is a time-bound intervention grounded in credible intelligence. It draws on fused ISR, pattern mapping and real-time threat attribution. The new doctrine must recognise that the **threat of terrorism** can now justify **pre-emption**, not just retaliation. Terrorism is no longer an address; it is an algorithm. Cold Strike is about dismantling that algorithm before it executes.

Escalation Management: From Aversion to Orchestration

One of the least understood, yet most essential elements of modern warfare is escalation control. Operation Sindoor shattered the myth that limited war in a nuclear environment is impossible. It achieved dominance without escalation.

India managed the escalation ladder,[14] dominating at each stage without strategic overstretch. It also synchronised each rung with diplomatic messaging, economic levers and cyber disruption. This was a manifestation of multi-domain escalation control and dominance, with each step spanning multiple domains, synergised to produce a conflict profile at the end of each ladder.

Future strategy must formalise this into a national doctrine. Escalation templates, pre-war-gamed scenarios, national security simulations and real-time political–military convergence must be institutionalised.

Act of Terror = Act of War: Transforming into a Military Doctrine

India's bold assertion that an act of terror is an act of war[15] must evolve from a political declaration to a military doctrine. Operation Sindoor proved it can be done; but it must be done again and again. Further, to be proactive and pre-emptive, it must transition to *Threat of Terror = Assured Retribution.* This requires six pillars:

1. *Clear thresholds*: Define what constitutes a trigger: mass casualty attacks, sabotage of strategic infrastructure or verified intelligence of imminent action. This requires a major upgrade to India's operational intelligence domain and covert efforts.
2. *Escalation management*: Build a ladder of options: from cyber and electronic warfare to kinetic decapitation strikes,[16] each with political control and military autonomy.
3. *Repeatability*: Equip the forces with rapid response drone and missile brigades, tri-service task forces and joint cyber ISR cells.
4. *Cognitive warfare*: Establish a Director General (DG) Strategic Communications, empowered with narrative control pre-, during and post-conflict.
5. *C5ISR integration*: Build a 24/7 artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled combat cloud that links satellites, sensors, shooters and decision makers.
6. *Doctrinal formalisation*: Codify the Cold Strike doctrine into national strategy, with annual review and regular exercise.

Deterrence to Compellence: Shaping Adversary Behaviour

Deterrence in today's security landscape cannot rest solely on fear of retaliation. The architecture must rest on denial, making it impossible for the enemy to succeed, and on domination, projecting capability and will across domains. Deterrence today is perception-led, AI-assisted, cyber-resilient and domain-fused.

While deterrence seeks to prevent an adversary from taking an action, compellence aims to force the adversary to reverse, abandon or alter an action already initiated. It is proactive, sustained and persistent, relying on the credible inevitability of continued pressure and action to achieve the desired outcome.

Every terror hub destroyed, and every proxy node dismantled, must become part of a predictable rhythm; what Israel calls 'mowing the lawn'[17] must transition to the Indian model of 'uprooting the weeds'. The cost of sustaining terrorism must outweigh its strategic value.

Fusion Warfare: From Geography to Domains

Gone are the days of single-front, two-front or multiple-front wars. What India faces is fusion warfare, where Pakistan receives Chinese ISR, drones and media support, and where Bangladesh amplifies narratives seeded from across the border. It is no longer collusion but a fusion of fronts and efforts.[18]

India must transition to the following capability-based domain of functional commands before establishing a course for Integrated Theatre Commands:

1. Cyber Command to degrade proxy capabilities and infrastructure.
2. Space Command to dominate real-time C5ISR and communication.
3. Drone and Missile Division for every theatre to saturate the adversary's second tier.
4. Cognitive Command to dominate perception, narrative and morale.
5. Rocket Force to enable pre-emptive denial, counterforce options, battlefield paralysis strikes and long-range conventional deterrence.

This is not jointmanship. It is domain integration by design, not coordination by chance. These commands are proposed because Cold Strike cannot be executed without them, not as a separate organisational reform.

Narrative Warfare: The Battle beyond Bullets

Perception is the modern payload. Victory is half-won if the world does not understand why you acted. In Op Sindoor, India acted brilliantly but spoke

softly. In Operation Midnight Hammer, the US spoke before, during, and after the strike.[19]

India needs a professionalised strategic communications structure under the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), integrated with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Press Information Bureau (PIB), and trained in legal warfare, narrative control and rapid rebuttal. Global legitimacy is shaped not by action alone but by its framing. The need for a DG Strategic Communication under the CDS is imperative to dominate the cognitive domain in peacetime and wartime through proactive narrative play. Battlefield geometry must be complemented by cognitive geography. Victory is no longer about battlefield triumphs; it is about dominating the mind, the message, the messenger and the multi-domain fight.

Reclaiming the Data Battlespace: Technology Colonialism, Data Sovereignty, Security and Survivability in the Digital Age

India is facing a quiet, yet consequential shift in national security. Control over data, once treated as a technical or commercial matter, has become central to strategic power. External digital ecosystems increasingly draw on sovereign data generated within India, often beyond India's visibility or control.

In an era when algorithms shape decisions before forces are mobilised, the ability to control and secure data is no longer optional; it is foundational. For India, the inability to secure, govern and exploit sovereign data at scale would create structural vulnerabilities across the military, economic and technological domains. In future conflicts, decision superiority will increasingly depend upon the ability to generate, process and protect data faster than an adversary. The question is whether intent can be converted into capability in time. India must address data sovereignty, security and survivability as part of a National Strategic Data Mission.[20] Every command should serve as a node in a combat cloud, updating C5ISR in real time, executing strikes with predictive precision and fusing intelligence across domains.

The experience of recent conflicts demonstrates that data has become a strategic resource comparable to energy, industrial capacity and logistics. Battlefield awareness, target acquisition, cognitive operations and autonomous systems, all depend upon resilient data ecosystems. Consequently, data sovereignty must be viewed not merely as a cybersecurity concern but as a prerequisite for national power.

Technology and Tempo: The Engines of Cold Strike

In modern warfare, data is ammunition; algorithms are force multipliers; and AI drives the tempo. The competitive advantage in future conflicts is likely to accrue to forces capable of integrating sensors, decision-making systems and precision effects faster than their adversaries. Ukraine, West Asia and the Red Sea[21] have demonstrated that the side capable of compressing the observe–orient–decide–act cycle enjoys disproportionate operational advantage regardless of force size.

The military architecture of Cold Strike will be shaped by affordable autonomous systems, AI-assisted targeting, satellite imagery, integrated sensor kill webs enabled by C5ISR, data security and cyberwarfare. Figure 4 displays the technologies empowering the success of Cold Strike doctrine.



Figure 4 Technology Stack Empowering Cold Strike

Source: Author's own construct.

Cold Strike cannot succeed without investment in the following seven essentials:

1. hypersonic glide manoeuvrable ballistic missiles;
2. loitering munitions and drone swarms;[22]
3. cyber-offensive and electronic warfare weaponry;
4. quantum-secure communications and secure data;
5. high-altitude long-endurance unmanned aerial systems and counter-unmanned aerial systems;
6. C5ISR integrated capability; and
7. space-based navigation, precision and targeting (NPT)[23] and offensive space-based capability.

These are not luxuries. They are preconditions for preventing war or for winning it without fighting. The Cold Strike doctrine depends on techno-tempo supremacy, the ability to act faster, smarter and more simultaneously than the adversary.

Why Tri-Service Net-centricity is Non-Negotiable

Multi-domain operations require land, air, maritime, cyber and space effects to be planned and executed as a single continuum. This is impossible without a unified communication and data backbone. However robust individually, legacy service-specific networks cannot support theatre-level operations that require synchronised decisions in near real time.

Comparable transformations are underway across major militaries. The US is pursuing JADC2,[24] while China has invested heavily in integrated joint operations and systems confrontation capabilities. Both recognise that information superiority and network integration have become central determinants of military effectiveness. India's transformation must therefore be viewed as part of a broader shift in contemporary warfare.

Operational friction is already evident. Integration of air defence systems, sharing of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) feeds, harmonisation of software-defined radios and establishment of joint logistics nodes continue to face avoidable delays stemming from network fragmentation. These are not technological failures; they are institutional failures.

Concerns about security differences across service networks do not hold up to scrutiny. Encryption standards are comparable and cyberthreats target the force as a whole rather than individual services. Fragmentation, in fact, increases vulnerability by creating seams that adversaries can exploit. Partial trust in joint operations is an operational risk.

True net-centricity requires moving beyond federated systems stitched together at limited interfaces. It demands a single operational fabric in which data is discoverable, prioritised, trusted and acted upon based on mission and role, not service affiliation.

Mosaic Defence and Manoeuvre Warfare

Originating from the US Department of Defense's concept of 'Mosaic Warfare',[25] the approach seeks to replace dependence on a few high-value platforms with a distributed network of interconnected capabilities. The objective is to create a force that remains operational despite attrition, disruption or degradation of individual components. Resilience, rather than concentration, becomes the organising principle. Figure 5 depicts the conceptual features of Mosaic Defence.

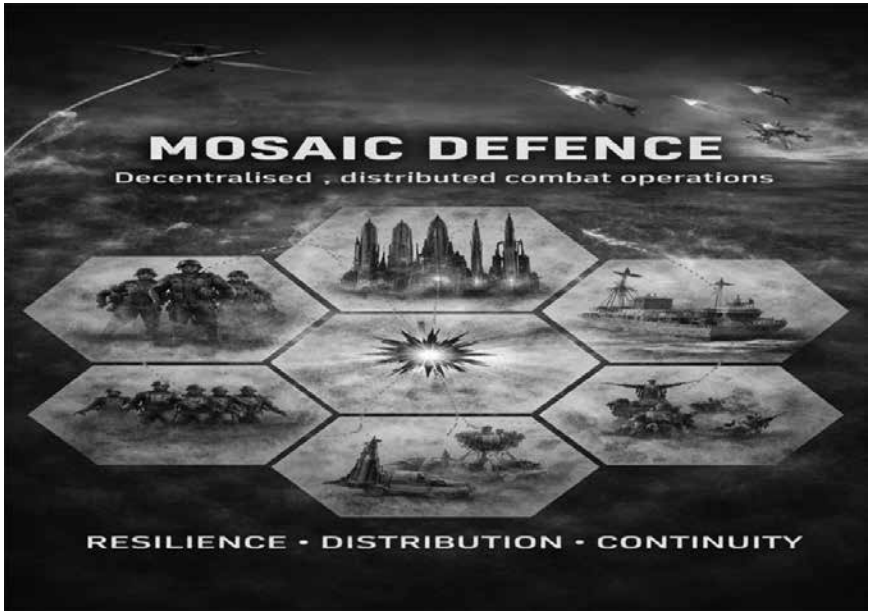


Figure 5 Mosaic Defence Concept
Source: Author's own construct.

Mosaic defence marks a shift away from hierarchical dependence on command. It is built on distributed authority, redundancy and pre-delegated intent. The goal is not to prevent damage but to maintain continuity despite damage. This approach complicates adversary planning. It eliminates the

expectation of quick decisions and introduces uncertainty about escalation and termination.

India must build a distributed, resilient and network-enabled force capable of sustained operations in contested environments. Achieving this requires doctrinal reforms, technological investments and institutional adaptation. It also calls for integrating functional commands into centralised theatre commands. The vulnerability of centralised systems to early disruption necessitates a re-evaluation of existing doctrines and structures.

The West Asia war has also shown that manoeuvre warfare has not disappeared, rather it has evolved.[26] While mass and concentration, once decisive, are now supplemented by precision targeting of critical vulnerabilities, this shift causes dislocation, leading to physical and psychological paralysis. In their place, dispersion and fluidity are now dominant. Small, networked units, enabled by unmanned systems, conduct distributed manoeuvres, making detection and response more difficult. The focus shifts from simply holding ground to shaping effects. Lower-level initiatives become essential, requiring training cultures that emphasise adaptability over strict adherence to plans.

This evolution does not invalidate classical manoeuvre warfare. Rather, it extends manoeuvre into the cognitive, informational and electromagnetic domains. Dislocation is increasingly achieved by disrupting decision systems, communications and perception, and not by physical destruction alone.

Architecture before Acquisition

Achieving tri-service net-centricity does not require wholesale procurement. The principal challenge is institutional rather than technological. India's military already possesses many of the constituent elements required for network-centric warfare. The gap lies in integration, governance and interoperability. Existing infrastructure, particularly the Network for Spectrum, provides a strong foundation. The challenge lies in migrating all services to a common architecture, establishing shared data frameworks, standardising encryption and access protocols and enforcing joint governance.

Unified network monitoring, role-based access control, common identity management and integrated satellite resource allocation must replace service-specific practices. At the tactical level, validated radio waveforms for use in contested electromagnetic environments are critical. Equally important is clarity of ownership. Net-centricity cannot remain a distributed responsibility. It requires a single empowered authority with the mandate to design,

implement, enforce and evolve the tri-service communication and data ecosystem. Without clear accountability, integration will continue to drift.

Civil–Military Fusion and Decision Architecture

A fragmented chain can delay no strategy; it delays the flow of command. Operation Midnight Hammer's brilliance came not only from its weapons but also from its governance and the sharpest civil–military fusion.[27] War rooms brought politicians, diplomats and generals under one roof.

India must institutionalise the National Security Strategy (NSS) through a whole-of-nation approach, granting real-time delegated authority, defining escalation matrices and providing response templates. The political leadership, the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS), Ministry of Defence (MoD) and military leadership must function through an integrated decision architecture capable of generating coherent strategic direction and rapid operational responses.

A crisis cannot be the first time the decision structure is tested. Cold Strike demands peacetime rehearsal for wartime readiness. The lessons of Operation Parakram, Balakot and Operation Sindoor, all point towards the importance of decision speed. Modern crises unfold across military, diplomatic, economic and informational domains simultaneously. Decision structures designed for sequential processing risk becoming operational liabilities.

Exit Protocols and Conflict Termination

History suggests that the most difficult phase of war is often not its initiation but its termination. Tactical success does not automatically translate into strategic advantage. The US experienced this in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan;[28] and Russia is facing similar challenges in Ukraine. For India, future limited conflicts must therefore incorporate conflict-termination mechanisms from the outset. Military objectives, diplomatic messaging, escalation thresholds and post-conflict outcomes should be aligned before the first strike. Operation Sindoor underscored the importance of maintaining escalation control while preserving strategic initiative. Future doctrine must institutionalise this principle.

Conflict termination and exit strategies require a coherent politico-military construct that aligns military action with strategic objectives. Operation Sindoor, for instance, concluded when its intended aims were achieved—not because of external pressure or diminishing resolve, but because India had established escalation dominance,[29] operational control and narrative superiority.

Cold Strike must have built-in exit ramps, fine-tuned to a pragmatic conflict-termination profile, to realise the desired political outcomes. Each rung on the escalation ladder must also have a pathway back, not merely to peace, but to a position of post-conflict advantage.

Making of the Military-Industrial Complex

A credible Cold Strike capability cannot be built on imported platforms alone; it requires a responsive military-industrial ecosystem that can anticipate, adapt and deliver solutions at the speed of conflict. Strategic autonomy demands that India transform its defence industrial base from a procurement-driven model to a mission-oriented partnership among the armed forces, scientists, academia, startups, public and private industry and the state.

The future battlefield will reward the ability to rapidly conceptualise, develop, field and upgrade technologies, rather than merely possessing large inventories of legacy systems. The mismatch between operational urgency, technology development cycles and acquisition timelines must therefore be addressed at its root.

At present, India's defence innovation ecosystem remains constrained by fragmented structures, slow translation of ideas into field capability and limited integration between users and developers. For Cold Strike to succeed, the soldier must be at the centre of the innovation cycle, with operational challenges directly shaping research, design, testing and production. A seamless framework linking battlefield experience with indigenous research and development (R&D), private enterprise and policy execution is essential. Such an ecosystem will not only enhance readiness for short-duration, high-intensity conflicts, but also provide the technological depth, resilience and industrial capacity required to sustain strategic advantage.

The armed forces must, thus, become active participants in the innovation cycle rather than end users of finished products. Operational formations should routinely generate capability requirements, participate in experimentation and accelerate battlefield adaptation through iterative feedback.

Summary of Recommendations: Operationalising Cold Strike Doctrine

Cold Start emerged as a response to the operational lessons of Operation Parakram and sought to provide India with a credible limited-war option below the nuclear threshold. Its central premise was rapid mobilisation and

shallow territorial offensives designed to impose costs without triggering strategic escalation. While the doctrine represented an important adaptation to its time, technological, operational and geopolitical developments now require further evolution. Table 1 sets out the principal points of departure between the two doctrines.

Table 1 Cold Start versus Cold Strike: Comparative Doctrinal Attributes

Cold Start	**Cold Strike**
Mobilisation-centric	Readiness-centric
Territorial objectives	Effect-based objectives
Contact warfare	Non-contact warfare
Sequential operations	Simultaneous multi-domain operations
IBGs	Multi-domain task forces
Platform-centric	Network-centric
Days	Hours

Source: Author's own.

Limitations and Risks of Cold Strike

While Cold Strike offers a compelling framework for responding to contemporary security challenges, it is not without risks and limitations. No military doctrine is a universal solution, and its effectiveness will ultimately depend on the quality of intelligence, institutional preparedness, technological resilience and political judgement. A realistic assessment of these limitations is therefore essential.

The first and perhaps most critical vulnerability lies in intelligence. Cold Strike relies heavily on accurate, timely and actionable intelligence to enable pre-emptive and precision operations. Faulty assessments, incomplete information or misidentification of targets could result in operational failure, unintended collateral damage or strategic embarrassment. In a doctrine that seeks to compress decision cycles, the consequences of intelligence errors are magnified.

A second risk is escalation miscalculation. While Cold Strike is designed to achieve strategic effects below the threshold of major war, adversaries may interpret pre-emptive or punitive actions differently. Military operations intended as limited coercive signals could trigger wider retaliation, particularly in a nuclearised environment such as South Asia. Effective escalation management, clear political objectives and robust communication channels will therefore remain indispensable.

The prospect of China–Pakistan collusion[30] poses another challenge. Future crises may not be confined to a single front. Pakistan could seek to exploit Chinese military, technological or diplomatic support, while China may leverage a crisis to exert pressure along the Line of Actual Control. A doctrine focused exclusively on one adversary risks creating vulnerabilities elsewhere. Consequently, Cold Strike must be designed within the broader framework of India's two-front contingency planning.

Cyber disruption is an additional concern. Cold Strike depends on interconnected networks, real-time intelligence fusion, AI-enabled decision support and resilient communications. Adversaries are likely to target these systems through cyberattacks, electronic warfare and information operations. The more networked the force, the greater the need for redundancy, resilience and recovery mechanisms.

Finally, Cold Strike risks excessive dependence on technology. Precision weapons, autonomous systems and digital networks can confer decisive advantages, but they cannot replace sound strategy, leadership, logistics or combat endurance. Technology should be seen as an enabler rather than a substitute for military fundamentals. Future conflicts are likely to reward forces that effectively combine technological sophistication with operational adaptability and human judgement.

Cold Strike, therefore, should be viewed not as a risk-free doctrine but as a framework for managing uncertainty more effectively than potential adversaries. Its success will depend not merely on acquiring new capabilities but also on building resilient institutions, robust decision-making processes and a balanced approach to deterrence and escalation.

Core Pillars of the Cold Strike Doctrine

Cold Strike is not merely a military doctrine but a comprehensive framework for employing national power in an era of multi-domain conflict. The following pillars outline the critical reforms required across force design, decision making, technology, intelligence and strategic communications to operationalise the doctrine and ensure its effectiveness in future crises and conflicts.

Pre-emption as Policy

Contemporary conflicts increasingly demonstrate that deterrence credibility depends not only on the capacity to retaliate but also on the ability to act before an identified threat matures into an attack.

India's reactive and defensive doctrines must change their mindset. India must evolve from 'Act of Terror = Act of War' to 'Threat of Terror = Act of Pre-emption'. This is not rhetorical bravado; it is a strategic necessity. When patterns of provocation are evident, and actionable intelligence is fused in real-time, pre-emption becomes preservation.

Precision Mass: From Platform-centric to Effect-based Warfare

Operation Sindoor proved that India can strike with precision. However, the future will demand saturation with precision, a doctrine of 'precise mass' that targets not just territory but also capability, command chains and cognition; that is, precision based on precise intelligence. Hypersonic glide weapons, drone swarms, decoy missiles and suppression of enemy air defence (SEAD) packages must become the opening volley, not the escalation ladder.

This is where India's investments in BrahMos variants, Pralay, AURA unmanned combat aerial vehicles, AI-embedded kill chains and net-centric ISR must converge. Effect-based operations must become the operational grammar, not tactical exceptions.

Force Design: Ready, Agile, Lethal, Survivable and Multi-role

India's armed forces must shift from mass to precision and from platform-centric thinking to capability-centric design. In the Galwan sector, rapid moves and boots on the ground mattered. In Op Sindoor, quick, precision strikes and target discrimination defined effectiveness. Further, readiness levels must evolve from Cold Start to Cold Strike.

A modern Indian force must:

1. Prioritise mobile, integrated firepower units by combining artillery, ISR, missiles, drones and electronic warfare within single integrated brigades.
2. Deploy terrain-specific force design: Cold Strike-capable IBGs for plains and mountains; air-mobile light infantry with integrated Special Forces capability; and integrated firepower brigades in high-altitude zones.
3. Expand Territorial Army and reserve units for static security, freeing regular forces for frontline operational agility.
4. Institutionalise multi-domain, technology-oriented task forces as the next level of IBGs: not just in name, but operationally integrated.

India's armed forces must evolve into a force that is leaner yet sharper, networked yet agile, lethal yet survivable, and above all, relentlessly focused on operational readiness. Future effectiveness will depend not on mass alone,

but on the ability to rapidly sense, decide, adapt and deliver decisive effects across the battlespace.

Multi-domain Mastery: Fusion, Not Collation

Recent conflicts in Ukraine, West Asia and the Indo-Pacific have shown that military operations increasingly unfold across multiple domains simultaneously, requiring effects to be synchronised rather than merely coordinated.

This must be foundational to India's Cold Strike doctrine, an integrated, multi-domain warfighting doctrine. The need is for functional commands, and not the much-hyped theatre commands on the immediate horizon. Cyber, space, air defence and C5ISR need to be integrated at the theatre level. The artillery division must be restructured into a Missile–Drone Strike Force. All combat units need to review legacy structures to adapt to future warfare.

Civil–Military Synergy: One Grid, One Brain

India's civil–military apparatus has made strides, but decision latency remains a vulnerability. Recent conflicts have shown that military effectiveness increasingly depends on integrating political decision-making, military operations, diplomatic engagement and strategic communications within a unified framework. Effective crisis management requires institutionalised mechanisms that enable continuous interaction between political leadership, military commanders, diplomats and intelligence agencies.

India must move beyond the traditional Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) centric decision-making framework and institutionalise an integrated national war-management architecture. The CDS, the National Security Adviser (NSA), the defence secretary and theatre commanders must operate within a pre-authorised, regularly war-gamed and politically empowered decision ecosystem capable of responding at the speed of modern conflict.

In future crises, strategic success will depend not on convening meetings but on making timely decisions and executing them with precision. Equally, the long-delayed NSS must finally be articulated. A nation aspiring to be a leading power cannot afford to enter crises without a formally stated strategic framework to guide policy, military planning and national mobilisation.

Strategic Communications and Narrative Dominance

Operation Sindoor's Achilles' heel was narrative diffusion. It acted boldly but communicated softly. In contrast, Midnight Hammer had the US President, the defence secretary, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Chairman hold

joint press briefings. In addition, the allies were informed and the media was managed. The enemy was, thus, disoriented.

India must appoint a DG Strategic Communication, reporting to the CDS and the NSA, who is capable of controlling the pre-, during- and post-conflict narrative. A coherent, integrated sentence must follow every bullet; and every strike must be followed by a story as the silence of individual stories is no longer strategic or plausible. Strategic communication must be at the strategic level and differentiated from 'Review of Situation' tactical briefings.

Intelligence Fusion and Operations Security (OPSEC): The Kill Chain must Think

Contemporary operations consistently demonstrate that success depends on the fusion of satellite imagery, airborne surveillance, cyber intelligence, human intelligence and electronic intelligence within a common operational picture.

India must build dynamic target folders, red team its strike plans and secure communications with quantum encryption and photon-based key distribution. The OPSEC is not paranoia; it is a precondition.

Escalation Management: From Taboos to Templates

Escalation management cannot be improvised during conflict. Political signalling, military responses and diplomatic engagement must be rehearsed and institutionalised in advance.

India managed the Op Sindoor escalation with finesse. It managed the escalation ladder, dominating at each stage without strategic overstretch. It also synchronised each rung with diplomatic messaging, economic levers and cyber disruption. This was an era of multi-domain escalation control and dominance, with each step involving multiple domains, synergised to achieve a conflict-termination profile at the end of each ladder.

India must formalise escalation matrices, civilian–military simulations and diplomatic pre-briefings. These must not be an afterthought.

Conflict Termination: Know When to Stop, Know What You have Achieved

Successful military operations require clearly defined political objectives and pre-determined conflict-termination criteria. India must learn this art. Conflict termination must be planned from the outset, and a periodic conflict-termination profile must be integrated into every escalation ladder. It is not surrender; it is shaping outcomes.

Operation Sindoor shattered the myth that limited war in a nuclear environment is impossible. It demonstrated dominance without ignition. Future strategy must formalise this into a national doctrine. Escalation templates, pre-war-gamed scenarios, national security simulations and real-time political–military convergence must be institutionalised.

Defence Industrial Ecosystem: From Buyer to War Wager

No Cold Strike capability can be credible without a resilient logistics backbone and a self-reliant defence manufacturing ecosystem. Modern conflicts will be decided not only by the ability to launch the first strike, but also by the capacity to sustain operational tempo, replenish losses and rapidly regenerate combat power. Recent conflicts have reinforced the importance of maintaining sufficient inventories, production capacity and logistical resilience to sustain operational tempo. India must similarly institutionalise a defence ecosystem that is predictable, scalable, agile and sovereign.

Public–private fusion, micro, small and medium enterprise (MSME) innovation corridors, and technology partnerships must move beyond policy intent to an integrated, war-prepared industrial architecture. The defence sector must shift from a procurement-centric model to a capability-generation model—designed to deliver at operational speed rather than be constrained by procedural timelines. The requirement is for smart *atmanirbharta*, not self-reliance for its own sake, but indigenous capacity that enables India to fight smarter, sustain longer and maintain decision advantage. This demands a matching budgetary commitment aligned with the realities of future high-intensity, technology-driven conflict.

Doctrine to Delivery: Translating Vision into Combat Capability

Cold Strike should not be seen as a rejection of Cold Start but as its doctrinal evolution. Cold Start addressed the challenge of delayed mobilisation and limited war under a nuclear overhang; and Cold Strike seeks to address the realities of precision-strike systems, multi-domain operations, pervasive surveillance, AI and compressed decision cycles. The objective is not to replace manoeuvre with technology, but to integrate contact and non-contact warfare within a single, scalable framework of coercion.

India can navigate this transition in three phases rather than as a single leap. In the near term, roughly two years, the priority is doctrine and decision architecture: formal codification of Cold Strike; appointment of a DG Strategic Communication; and the first rounds of joint political–military war gaming, none of which require new platforms. In the medium term, roughly

2–5 years, the priority shifts to force generation: standing up the Rocket Force; migrating services onto a common, network-centric architecture; and fielding the drone and missile brigades described earlier. In the longer term, five years and beyond, the priority is institutionalisation: full functional command integration; a mature mosaic defence architecture; and a defence industrial base capable of sustaining repeated operations rather than one-off ones. Sequencing matters here because a decision architecture and codified doctrine can be built with existing resources and deliver credibility quickly, while the force generation and industrial steps that follow are what make that credibility durable.

The strategic trends outlined in this study suggest that future military effectiveness will increasingly depend upon readiness, integration, precision and decision superiority. India's challenge is not merely to adapt to these trends but to institutionalise them within doctrine, force design and national security planning.

Operation Sindoor demonstrated that India possesses the political will, operational capability and strategic confidence to impose costs below the threshold of major war. The challenge now is to translate those operational lessons into enduring doctrinal and institutional reforms. The operation marked India's shift from strategic restraint to strategic assertion. It must now transition to strategic pre-emption under the Cold Strike doctrine. The future lies in credible, measured retaliation that redefines deterrence, not through escalation, but through dominance in the mind space and escalation control. Victory today is not about land; it is about perception, preparation and purpose. India must now codify this doctrine, institutionalise its responses and ensure that the certainty of retribution remains matched by the unpredictability of its form.

This outlines the future trajectory of warfare and the direction India must take. It is not merely an adaptation to the changing character of conflict, but a forward-looking doctrine that must shape force design, capability development and operational thinking. India must aspire to lead this transformation[31] rather than remain a follower in the next era of warfare.

Risk Mitigation Strategies

India must move from a posture of strategic ambiguity to one of deterrence clarity. This requires doctrinal innovation, institutional reform and technological acceleration.

1. *Develop the NSS*: India needs a transparent, cross-domain deterrence framework that clearly defines thresholds and proportional responses

across kinetic, cyber, space and narrative domains. The NSS will also identify threats beyond national defence, including economic, trade, energy and climate security. Alongside the NSS, a National Technology Strategy must be developed to complement it.

2. *Create a unified ISR, Space and Cyber Command*: Integrate intelligence fusion with real-time battlefield awareness through satellites, drone swarms, signals intelligence and AI. Establish a Cyber Command with defensive and offensive capabilities, integrated into national military planning.
3. *Operationalise dual-theatre rapid response forces*: Pre-deploy air-mobile, rapid-action units with terrain-specific specialisation. Equip these units with integrated communications, UAVs and electronic warfare assets. Retain a rapid deployment reserve to bolster the nominated theatre of decision or address emerging vulnerabilities.
4. *Establish a strategic cognitive warfare architecture*: A dedicated organisation focused on cognitive warfare to counter misinformation, shape international perception and conduct influence operations, in coordination with the MEA, the MoD and the intelligence agencies, needs to be put in place.
5. *Public–private defence-tech synergy*: Create a defence innovation ecosystem linking startups, academia and the DRDO. Incentivise swarm drones, AI for surveillance, post-quantum encryption and war-gaming simulations. The need is for an integrated defence industrial complex with assured supply chain management.
6. *Diplomatic and economic diversification*: A Cold Strike capability requires strategic autonomy and resilience to external pressure. Reducing dependence on vulnerable supply chains, especially in critical sectors, is essential to ensure uninterrupted access to energy, technology, raw materials and defence inputs during periods of heightened tension or conflict. Expanding economic partnerships with Africa, the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and operationalising connectivity initiatives, such as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, will strengthen India's strategic depth and sustain long-duration national power.
7. *Indian Ocean Region (IOR) maritime collaboration*: Cold Strike operations require assured access, mobility and protection of critical maritime lifelines. India's geographic advantage in the IOR must be leveraged through deeper maritime cooperation, logistics arrangements, information sharing and a coordinated presence with partners, including

Australia, France, Indonesia, Japan and African coastal states. Such partnerships enhance maritime domain awareness, secure supply routes and complicate adversary manoeuvres.

8. *Sovereign data architecture as a national strategic mission*: In a technology-driven battlespace, data is the foundation of decision superiority. Cold Strike requires a resilient, secure and sovereign data architecture to enable real-time intelligence, multi-domain integration, AI-enabled decision support and protection against cyber disruption. Therefore, building trusted data ecosystems must become a national strategic mission integral to future warfighting capability.

Cold Strike cannot be viewed only as a military response mechanism; it is a whole-of-nation capability built upon strategic resilience, assured logistics, information dominance and the ability to sustain decision advantage under pressure.

Strategic Recommendations

1. *Institutionalise strategic futures planning*: A National Security Futures Cell, under the NSCS, must conduct continuous scenario building, threat simulations and policy stress testing.
2. *Doctrinally driven force modernisation*: Link defence procurement and R&D to doctrinal needs—not to event-driven political cycles or sluggish bureaucratic control, but to time-sensitive needs. Develop indigenous doctrines for drone swarms, space denial and narrative warfare.
3. *Integrated threat attribution framework:* Create a legal–intelligence fusion architecture enabling timely and credible attribution of hybrid attacks across cyber, social and kinetic domains.
4. *Civilian grey-zone resilience protocols*: Institutionalise national emergency drills, build community resilience networks and deploy AI-driven rumour control tools. Create a National Citizens Security Culture, with the Central Association of Private Security Industry (CAPSI) as the driver under the Ministry of Home Affairs.
5. *Strategic talent reserves*: Maintain a trained pool of cyber warriors, narrative analysts and AI-ops experts for rapid deployment in high-risk scenarios. Institutionalise this as a Territorial Army model.
6. *Narrative sovereignty framework*: Launch a globally trusted Indian media platform to shape international discourse and counter adversarial propaganda.

7. *Rocket Force, networking and data-centric operations:* These will be the most effective deterrent, especially against China.
8. *Functional commands* must precede the much-hyped Integrated Theatre Commands, and the mosaic defence architecture must be examined.

Conclusion: Cold Strike—The Doctrine that Must Win

Operation Sindoor has reshaped South Asia's strategic calculus. For India, it signifies not only an operational success but also a doctrinal leap in navigating the triad of proxy terrorism, nuclear overhang and joint warfare. Yet a single successful operation does not constitute a doctrine, and India cannot afford to mistake one for the other. The future, however, remains turbulent. Operation Sindoor must not be an anomaly, but the beginning of an era of proactive deterrence, technological sovereignty and strategic clarity. In this triangular battlefield of India, Pakistan and China, certainty must be forged through preparation, coherence and relentless recalibration.

Cold Strike should be seen not as a rejection of Cold Start but as its logical evolution. The changing character of warfare, advances in precision-strike technologies, the growing importance of data and networks and the emergence of multi-domain operations collectively demand a doctrinal framework centred on readiness, decision superiority and integrated national power. Whether India formally adopts such a framework remains a matter of policy. What is no longer a matter of policy, but of operational fact, is that the lessons from recent conflicts increasingly suggest that the future of war will be shaped less by mobilisation and more by the ability to generate strategic effects at speed, scale and precision.

Cold Start prepared India to mobilise faster. Cold Strike prepares India to decide faster, strike smarter, dominate escalation and terminate conflict on its own terms. The distinction is not semantic. It is the difference between a doctrine built for the last war and one built for the next.

Read against the 4D framework set out at the start of this article, the pitfalls identified in Cold Start, the international precedents examined and the phased roadmap proposed, this conclusion follows directly from the analysis rather than asserting it: the case for Cold Strike rests on a documented doctrinal gap, a tested operational alternative in Sindoor and a sequenced, resourced path from one to the other. What remains is not a question of validity, but of will. Doctrines do not win wars by existing on paper; they win by being resourced, rehearsed and ready before the next crisis arrives. Cold Strike must be that doctrine, not eventually, but now.

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