

Indian Military Doctrinal Evolution and its Limitations: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

India's military doctrinal evolution has taken place according to New Delhi's diversifying threat perceptions. This research article discusses the evolution and fundamentals of Indian military doctrines with respect to John Mearsheimer's concept of three basic offensive war strategies. The research has highlighted the deficiencies in Sundarji doctrine which led to the transition towards a swift and limited war strategy in the form of Cold Start Doctrine (CSD). This article evaluates the strengths and limitations of CSD, and how it failed to achieve its full functional capacity due to operational shortcomings of the Indian military. The article further briefly discusses Pakistan's Full Spectrum Minimum Credible Deterrence (FSMCD), involving employment of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) to lower nuclear threshold for thwarting India's CSD, as well as Quid Pro Quo Plus (QPQP) strategy which incorporates nuclear as well as conventional forces to deter India's aggression at all levels. The study also assesses Uri (2016) and Pulwama-Balakot Crisis (2019) to analyse the Indian military actions and Pakistan's retaliation with respect to transforming Indo-Pak military doctrines. The article also deliberates India's future aspiration of theaterisation, aimed at creating unified theatre commands to enhance operational efficiency. The enduring security dilemma between the two nations is used as a framework to understand why India is undertaking doctrinal transition and incorporating force theaterisation. The article concludes by exploring the challenges which India is likely to face for theaterisation of its military forces and its potential impact on the South Asian strategic stability.

Keywords: India, Pakistan, Sundarji Doctrine, Cold Start Doctrine, Full Spectrum Minimum Credible Deterrence (FSMCD), Quid Pro Quo Plus, Security Dilemma.

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Introduction

India's military doctrines have undergone significant transformations in recent decades. Since the Sundarji Doctrine of 1980s designed for large-scale defensive-offensive warfare,¹ to the more dynamic and aggressive Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) in the early 2000s, these shifts have been presumably driven by India's need to address evolving security threats, especially from Pakistan and China. As India's security environment has become more complex, India is now in process of military theaterisation to better counter the threat of a two-front war against China from North and Pakistan from West.² Besides overcoming India's threat perceptions, these doctrinal shifts also highlight New Delhi's ambitions of becoming regional hegemon by possessing multi-domain operational capability which can effectively project India's interests at the regional scale.

By using the concept of the security dilemma, this article evaluates the evolution of India's military doctrines and analyses their relative strengths and limitations in a volatile and nuclearised South Asian environment. The study also delves into Pakistan's countermeasures, particularly the employment of Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs). This doctrinal expansion on both sides of the border signifies the intensification of the security dilemma in South Asia, where each state's military modernisation and doctrinal shifts trigger countermeasures from the other, further heightening regional instability. By examining India's recent moves toward joint operations and theaterisation, this study offers an analysis of India's evolving military strategy and its implications for regional security.

Indo-Pak Security Dilemma

The concept of security dilemma, coined by John H. Herz in 1950, still holds relevance as far as understanding military strategies and doctrines is

¹ Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army: Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 207-9. Initial aspects of the "Sundarji Doctrine" were tested in the early 1980s under the tenure of General Krishna Rao.

² Pradeep S Mehta, "Bridging the Gaps: The Genesis and Future of Indian Military Theatre Commands," *Economic Times*, December 24, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/bridging-the-gaps-the-genesis-and-future-of-indian-military-theatre-commands/articleshow/106248380.cms?from=mdr>

concerned. According to him, the security dilemma is, “a structural notion in which the self-help attempts of states to look after their security needs, regardless of intention, tend to lead to rising insecurity for others as each interprets its own measures as defensive and the measures of others as potentially threatening.”³ Security dilemma, also called spiral model, describes a situation where actions taken by a state to increase its security are perceived as threatening by other states, leading them to take similar measures, thereby increasing the overall insecurity in the region.⁴

This concept is highly relevant to the evolution of India’s military doctrines. From a research perspective, applying the security dilemma framework provides valuable insight into how India’s doctrinal shifts have ignited an arms race in the region. India shifted from the Sundarji Doctrine due to a lack of flexibility in force employment and the risk of strategic nuclear weapons possessed by Pakistan. In an attempt to exploit the deterrence gap below the nuclear threshold, India crafted the CSD for fighting limited and rapid conventional war against Pakistan. While it was aimed at providing India with a deterrence mechanism in response to Pakistan’s sub-conventional warfare, it generated significant concern within Pakistan. This threat perception led to the development of TNWs in the shape of Nasr Hatf-IX missile system, designed to counter India’s rapid and multi-front armoured invasion.

Similarly, India’s current move toward theaterisation — the restructuring of its military commands into integrated theatres for joint operations across services⁵ — can be analysed through the lens of security dilemma. While India views this doctrinal evolution as necessary for improving military readiness and joint operational capability against Pakistan and China, it could compel both states — China and Pakistan, to further strengthen their military prowess and further deepen their military relations. This cycle of action-reaction reflects the security dilemma, which

³ John H. Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism* (University of Chicago Press, 1951), 157.

⁴ Shiping Tang, “Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis,” *Strategic Studies*, vol. 18 (2009): 587-589.

⁵ Pradip R. Sagar, “India Set for its Biggest Military Reform as Integrated Theatre Commands Awaits Final Government Nod,” *India Today*, September 10, 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/india-set-for-its-biggest-military-reform-as-integrated-theatre-commands-await-final-govt-nod-2597327-2024-09-10>

will ultimately heighten regional instability. This dynamic highlights how the evolution of Indian military doctrines and the resulting future joint theatre commands must be analysed not only in terms of India's security needs, but also in the context of regional security dynamics. This increased and aggressive Indian strategies are contributing to an increased risk of conflict, whether through arms races or miscalculations.

John Mearsheimer's Three Strategies of Offensive Warfare

The gradual transition of the Indian military doctrines reflects India's shifting focus from existing war strategies. From John Mearsheimer's perspective, there are three basic types of offensive war fighting strategies: i. attrition, ii. blitzkrieg, and iii. fait accompli. Attrition refers to fighting prolonged battles and wearing down an enemy's defence while inflicting heavy losses. This strategy greatly depends upon numerical size, firepower volume, and availability of resources for fighting forces. The force with superior manpower, firepower and material base usually prevails in battles of attrition.⁶ Blitzkrieg focuses on rapidly piercing through enemy's defences by exploiting the vulnerable for undermining command and control and disrupting the logistical network. Blitzkrieg strategy usually involves employment of armoured forces which represents a robust combination of mobility, firepower, and protection.⁷

Fait accompli is an offensive strategy for limited conflict and aims to seize well-defined and crucial objectives. The success of this strategy is dependent on speed, precision, and surprise of offensive forces, in order to achieve the desired objective before the defending enemy could mount any credible defence.⁸ Indian doctrinal evolution reflects all these three strategies. The Sundarji Doctrine was based on attrition; Cold Start relied on blitzkrieg; while contemporary strategy of using surgical strikes is designed to achieve specific objectives quickly before Pakistan or the international community could dilute India's assertive actions.

⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Cornell University Press, New York, 1983), 33-35.

⁷ Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 35-39.

⁸ Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 53-56.

Sundarji Doctrine

Since 1974 India has maintained “a non-aggressive, non-provocative defence policy based on the philosophy of defensive defence” as described by the Indian former Defence Minister, George Fernandes.⁹ Sundarji Doctrine, named after General Krishnaswamy Sundarji, was the Indian military’s operational war doctrine from 1981 to 2004.¹⁰ It was tested during Brasstacks exercises which took place from November 1986 to March 1987 in Rajasthan Desert.¹¹ The doctrine aimed to leverage quantitative strength of India’s conventional military for fighting decisive battles on the western front with Pakistan. The doctrine rested on two key principles: first, India’s conventional forces are numerically superior and thus could eventually overrun Pakistan’s defences particularly in a prolonged conflict; second, India’s strategic depth would allow it to absorb and eventually repel initial attacks and counterstrike against Pakistan at an advantageous time and location.

Under this doctrinal framework, the Indian army was restructured into holding and strike corps. In total, seven holding corps were deployed in proximity to Pakistan’s border,¹² and three strike corps were stationed in central India for counter-offence.¹³ The holding corps, comprising of infantry and artillery formations, were configured to absorb an offence from Pakistan and possessed limited offensive capability due to presence of few armoured formations.¹⁴ In contrast, every strike corps was built around an armoured division supplemented by mechanised infantry and artillery. In the event of war, holding corps’ fundamental task was depletion of Pakistan’s offensive momentum. Later, it was the responsibility of strike

⁹ George Fernandes, “The Dynamics of Limited War,” *Strategic Affairs*, vol. 7 (October 16, 2000), 16.

¹⁰ Tariq M. Ashraf, “Doctrinal Reawakening of Indian Armed Forces,” *Military Review*, vol. 84, no.6 (November-December 2004), 54.

¹¹ Iram Khalid, “Brasstacks Crisis 1986-1987,” *South Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1 (January-June 2012), 38-39.

¹² V.R. Raghavan, “Limited War and Nuclear Escalation in South Asia,” *Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 8, no.3 (February 2008), 8.

¹³ Raghavan, “Limited War and Nuclear Escalation in South Asia.”

¹⁴ Raghavan, “Limited War and Nuclear Escalation in South Asia.”

corps to launch counterattacks with armoured columns, and, if needed, penetrate deep into Pakistan's territory through intense attritional battles.¹⁵

Limitations of Sundarji Doctrine

Despite possessing formidable retaliatory potential, India repeatedly fell short in dissuading Pakistan. Operation Parakram (2001), which was launched in response to the Indian Parliament Attacks (2001), failed to achieve strategic surprise, incurred heavy losses, and exposed the Indian Army's slow troop mobilisation.¹⁶ The failure of Operation Parakram (2001), which was the first example of India's mass mobilisation against Pakistan after nuclearisation of South Asia, revealed four major structural and operational shortcomings of the Sundarji Doctrine.

First, a doctrine designed for fighting large scale conflict can be ineffective in fighting limited conflict. Initiating a full-scale conflict as a punitive measure against limited hostilities is not only unjustifiable but also unlikely to attain political goals. Second, the mobilisation of deeply positioned strike corps is a cumbersome process which undermines the element of surprise. This not only grants the adversary a leverage to enhance its defences but also provides sufficient time for the international community to intervene to diffuse the crisis. Third, it is easier to detect, track, and engage corps sized formations both during peace time and crisis. Particularly against a nuclear armed adversary, concentrating such a significant conventional force makes them an appealing target, thereby compromising their deterrent value. Lastly, the offensive capability of the holding corps was inadequate to launch an effective counter-attack against Pakistan. The Indian army's overwhelming dependency on strike corps for large scale offensive operations not only undermined the overall combat potential but also made India's military actions predictable.¹⁷ This predictability allowed Pakistan and China, to undertake counter-

¹⁵ Pravin Sawhney and V. K. Sood, *Operation Parakram: The War Unfinished* (SAGE Publications, New Delhi, June 23, 2003), 81.

¹⁶ Muhammad Ali Baig, "Cold Start – Hot Stop? A Strategic Concern for Pakistan," *NDU Journal*, vol. 34 (2020):81.

¹⁷ Pravin Sawhney and V. K. Sood, *Operation Parakram: The War Unfinished* (SAGE Publications, New Delhi, June 23, 2003), 163.

developments, intensifying the action-reaction cycle inherent in the security dilemma and limiting India's strategic flexibility.

The failure of the Sundarji Doctrine stemmed from its focus on punitive retaliation, which enabled Pakistan to undermine Indian deterrence through sub-conventional means and to deter Indian conventional forces with its nuclear weapons. To specifically address sub-conventional threats, India ultimately developed a doctrine for limited yet decisive responses — the Cold Start Doctrine (CSD).

Cold Start Doctrine

After drawing lessons from the failure of Operation Parakram, the Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) as a war fighting concept was introduced in April 2004. It was, specifically, designed to allow conduct of swift yet limited operations without breaching the nuclear threshold. This limited aim doctrine sought to keep conflict restricted within conventional domain in order to fully leverage India's conventional military strength while avoiding risks of inadvertent escalation.¹⁸ The adaptation of CSD required a significant restructuring of India's military at multiple levels — tactical, operational and strategic. The offensive component reorganised into eight Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) each of which would be a division sized formation comprising of armoured, mechanised infantry, artillery, and mobile air-defence units.¹⁹

According to the plan, each IBG would be specifically designed to carry out rapid breakthrough operations by exploiting the vulnerabilities in Pakistan's defence system. In the nuclearised South Asia, a division-sized IBG could yield better results than larger strike corps by focusing on mobility and “mass power” rather than sheer numerical strength. Additionally, holding corps were planned to reconfigure into ‘pivot corps’ with added armour and artillery which would subsequently enhance their

¹⁸ Sawhney and Sood, *Operation Parakram: The War Unfinished*, 164.

¹⁹ Himanil Raina, “Integrated Battle Groups Are India's Response to Pakistan,” *The National Interest*, November 18, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/integrated-battle-groups-are-indias-response-pakistan-36402>

offensive capabilities.²⁰ In a hypothetical scenario, in case of conflict with Pakistan, three to five IBGs would make shallow penetrations of 50-80 kilometres within three to four days.²¹ These IBGs would employ 'bite and hold' strategy while the pivot corps would conduct defensive as well as offensive manoeuvres to complicate Pakistan's military reaction. Combat readiness and mutual coordination are paramount as rapid pace and precise fire power will determine the extent Indian forces would be able to degrade Pakistan's military cohesion to the point of no recovery.²² Plans for dedicated IBGs, however, are yet to achieve full culmination.²³

Advantages and Limitations of Cold Start Doctrine

Conceptually, CSD provided five key advantages over India's previous conventional war doctrines. First, the division-sized, forward-deployed IBGs granted more robustness and flexibility in offensive operations. Their smaller size would allow better control, leading to rapid, and more effective result-driven operations. Second, while IBGs would deliver impactful blows to enemy forces, their lack of decisive offensive power makes them less threatening than full-strike corps. Thus, unlike strike corps, which could pose an existential threat to Pakistan, IBGs would give little room and justification for employing the nuclear option.²⁴ Third, the incorporation of more offensive elements in pivot corps would allow them to serve as strike units if a large-scale military response is needed while sustaining inherent defensive capabilities. This operational flexibility would enable the Indian military to pursue both offensive and defensive strategies with the same corps.²⁵ Fourth, division-sized IBGs are more difficult to detect, track, and target than larger corps formations. Pakistan's reconnaissance assets would face the complex

²⁰ Walter C. Ladwig III, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars? India's New Limited War Doctrine," *International Security*, vol.32, no.3 (2007): 165.

²¹ S. Paul Kapur, "India and Pakistan's Unstable Peace: Why Nuclear South Asia is Not Like Cold War Europe," *International Security*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 138-139.

²² Gurmeet Kanwal, "Cold Start and Battle Groups for Offensive Operations," *ORF Strategic Trends*, vol. 4, no. 18.

²³ Rajat Pandit, "New Government to Decide on Army's Integrated Battle Group plan," *Times of India*, June 10, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/new-government-to-decide-on-armys-integrated-battle-group-plan/articleshow/110854869.cms>

²⁴ Ladwig, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars," 166.

²⁵ Ladwig, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars," 166.

challenge of monitoring all IBGs making it harder for Pakistani intelligence to anticipate India's true intentions in times of heightened tension.²⁶ Finally, the smaller size of IBGs would make them less appealing targets for nuclear strikes. Enhanced mobility and additional armour would significantly improve the survivability of these forces in the event of nuclear engagement.²⁷

Despite numerous efforts to augment the operational capabilities of the Indian combat forces, substantial gaps persisted, limiting India's ability to fully meet the minimum requirements for the CSD. Additionally, Pakistan's countermeasures both nuclear and conventional, further complicated the Indian military options. . Four primary shortcomings that challenged the practical implementation of CSD are as follows:

First, in a defensive scenario, Pakistan is equipped with extensive anti-tank resources that can be deployed in static, forward, and mobile defences. Consequently, the Indian armoured units, though numerically superior, lack the assured capacity to break through Pakistan's defence system without suffering considerable loss. Second, the element of surprise is essential for the CSD's success, but Pakistan possesses a comprehensive array of surveillance and reconnaissance assets including Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) systems, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)s, and ground-based radars. These capabilities enable Pakistan to monitor deep into the Indian territory, making it difficult for India to amass forces near the border without triggering the Pakistan's defence system. Third, the Indian ground forces possess limited fire support units, with a particularly low count of self-propelled artillery, attack helicopters, and unmanned combat systems, all of which restrict their offensive effectiveness. Fourth, the Indian Air Force (IAF) has traditionally operated independently of the ground force doctrines, and even if it aligns with the CSD's objectives, it lacks the assets needed to simultaneously provide air cover and close air support to the Indian Army. The IAF's lack of strength,²⁸ coupled with a shrinking capability gap between

²⁶ Ladwig, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars," 167.

²⁷ Ladwig, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars," 167.

²⁸ Manu Pubby, "As Fighter Strength Dips below 1965 Level, Air Chief Vows to Fight with Whatever We Have," *Economic Times*, October 06, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/as-fighter-strength-dips-below-1965-level-air-chief-vows-to-fight-with-whatever-we-have/articleshow/113992521.cms?from=mdr>

the IAF and the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), undermines a vital component necessary for CSD's implementation. Lastly, the 'bite and hold' strategy lacks a clear endgame. Even if the Indian forces were to seize key territory, their ability to hold it against Pakistani counterattacks remains uncertain. This could also incentivise Pakistan to open a new front, escalating the conflict and defeating CSD's primary objective of keeping the conflict limited and ultimately to avoid crossing the nuclear threshold.²⁹

Pro-Active Operations (PAOs) and Surgical Strikes

Pro-Active Operations Doctrine (PAO) retains many components of CSD but focuses more on rapid, limited yet robust time-sensitive pre-emptive strikes in retaliation of hostile aggression. According to the PAO doctrine, the Indian military seeks to swiftly mobilise and execute surgical strikes across the border while keeping the scale of strike limited yet effective to avoid and deter further escalation. However, it's worth noting that since there is no official acknowledgement regarding differentiation of both doctrines, so any comparative proposition of both doctrines is calculative speculation at best.

India's surgical strikes can be regarded as a manifestation of India's PAO doctrine, underscoring its requirement of time-sensitive, limited yet decisive retaliatory strikes while minimising the risk of escalation to full-scale war. This approach, in theory, grants Indian military operational flexibility to respond against varying degrees of threats. The examples of the Uri Crisis (2016) and Pulwama-Balakot Crisis (2019) can be explored to evaluate the effectiveness of India's newly adopted surgical strike strategy.

Uri Crisis (2016)

The Uri Crisis (2016) took place on September 18, 2016 when 19 Indian troops were killed in an attack on the Indian Army Brigade Head-Quarters

²⁹ Ahmad Ibrahim, "Deterrence Consistency and Counters Against Cold Start Doctrine," *Command Eleven*, January 03, 2018, <https://www.commandeleven.com/deterrence-consistency-and-counters-against-evolving-cold-start-doctrine/>

(HQ).³⁰ India levelled baseless allegations against Pakistan and vowed to take revenge. After ten days, India made frivolous claim that it had conducted retaliatory surgical strikes across Line of Control (LoC) in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The strikes, as argued by the Indian officials, took place on September 28-29, 2016 and resulted in the killing of several alleged militants.³¹ Pakistan, however, categorically refuted these claims and stated that only routine cross-border firing had taken place.³² Despite multiple demands made by Pakistan, India failed to provide any credible proof to support its claim.³³ Further, Pakistan also facilitated a visit of international and national media to prove that no such strikes took place, describing the claims — baseless and a fabrication by India to bolster its narrative. However, reports in the media indicated that the claims of alleged strikes were to satisfy the Indian public sentiments and political point scoring by the then regime led by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.³⁴ The crisis significantly heightened tensions between India and Pakistan, with both countries engaging in heated rhetoric and military posturing. The crisis proved to be detrimental for India owing to the fact that instead of signalling India's willingness to exercise assertive response against Pakistan undermined its credibility. The crisis, however, once again showcased the fragility of peace between both the neighbouring states.

Pulwama-Balakot Crisis (2019)

Unlike Uri (2016), the Pulwama-Balakot Crisis (2019) actually resulted in an exchange of air-strikes by both India and Pakistan. The cross-border

³⁰ "Militants Attack Indian Army Base in Kashmir," *BBC News*, September 18, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-37399969>

³¹ "India Claims Surgical Strikes against Militants in Pakistan," *Washington Post*, September 29, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/india-hits-militant-launchpads-in-pakistan-in-escalation-between-nuclear-armed-rivals/2016/09/29/e0145168-d97e-4149-977a-24d08b16ea0b_story.html

³² "Surgical Strikes: Pakistan rejects India's claims," *Al-Jazeera*, September 30, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/9/30/surgical-strikes-pakistan-rejects-indias-claims>

³³ M Ilyas Khan, "India's Surgical Strikes in Kashmir: Truth or Illusion," *BBC News*, October 23, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-37702790>

³⁴ Parashant Jha, "Modi Goes beyond Knee-Jerk Reaction to Uri, Harps on Pak's Vulnerabilities," *Hindustan Times*, September 25, 2016, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/pm-modi-s-three-pronged-response-to-pakistan/story-bl5wED5ZXXMBgFTevvEDEJ.html>

strikes quickly escalated. The crisis started on February 14, 2019, when a suicide bomber attacked convoy of Indian occupied paramilitary forces, killing more than 40 personnel.³⁵ The attack resulted in widespread outrage within India and the Indian government blamed Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) for orchestrating the attack. On February 26, 2019, IAF struck targets in Balakot located in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province, marking the first time since 1971 that Indian fighter jets violated Pakistani airspace and hit targets inside Pakistan's sovereign territory. India claimed that air-strikes successfully destroyed JeM training camps and killed dozens of alleged under training militants. However, the Indian government like the Uri case failed to provide credible evidence to support its claim.³⁶ Analysis by neutral observers revealed that the IAF actually missed the intended targets.³⁷

Pakistan, categorically, denied India's official stance and stated that the air-strikes hit an uninhabited area and no loss of life had taken place. However, since air-space of Pakistan was violated and its territorial integrity was compromised by the Indian strikes, Pakistan determined that a response by PAF was crucial to maintain credibility of its conventional deterrence. Next day on February 27, 2019, PAF launched retaliatory strikes along the LoC and engaged six targets. The IAF's attempts to thwart PAF retaliatory strikes resulted in first-ever air-to-air engagement between both rivals since 1971. PAF downed an Indian Mig-21 Bison. The pilot, Wing Commander, Abhinandan Varthaman was captured and taken into custody by the Pakistan Army.³⁸ Also, PAF claimed of shooting down a Su-30MKI in air-to-air combat over the Indian territory using AIM-120C5 beyond-visual-range

³⁵ Rifat Fareed, "Kashmir Suicide Attack Kills Dozens of Indian Security Forces," *Al-Jazeera*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/14/kashmir-suicide-attack-kills-dozens-of-indian-security-forces>

³⁶ Asif Shahzad and Abu Arqam Naqash, "Pakistani Villages Asks: Where are Bodies of Militants India Says it Bombed," *Reuters*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-village/pakistani-village-asks-where-are-bodies-of-militants-india-says-it-bombed-idUSKCN1QH298/>

³⁷ Nathan Ruser, "Did Balakot Air Strike Hit their Target? Satellite Imagery raises doubts," *The Wire*, March 01, 2019, <https://thewire.in/security/balakot-airstrikes-india-pakistan-satellite-images>

³⁸ David Cenciotti, "Indian Air Force MiG-21 Bison Shot Down By Pakistan Air Force Jet," *The Aviationist*, February 27, 2019, <https://theaviationist.com/2019/02/27/indian-air-force-mig-21-bison-shot-down-by-pakistan-air-force-jet/>

(BVR) missile.³⁹ Amidst the ongoing operation, an Indian Mi-17 helicopter also crashed killing all onboard after being struck by India's own Spyder Surface-to-Air-Missile (SAM) system.⁴⁰ Pulwama-Balakot crisis was the litmus test of the IAF and PAF combat capabilities. IAF failed to precisely engage the assigned ground targets and repel the immediate PAF counterstrike.⁴¹ The out-ranged stand-off weapons, out-classed air to air missiles⁴² and the questionable expertise of the Indian pilots to execute such complex multi-tasking,⁴³ raised doubts about actual combat potential of IAF.⁴⁴

Both Uri (2016) and Pulwama-Balakot (2019) crises represents significant moments in the evolution of the Indo-Pak security environment. In both cases, India and Pakistan managed to avoid a broader conflict. However, both episodes highlighted the fragility of peace in the region and the potential for miscalculation between two nuclear-armed neighbours. The crisis also reinforced the role of nuclear deterrence in

³⁹ "Second Indian Aircraft Was Shot down by PAF Pilot Nauman Ali Khan, Details Surface," *News*, March 04, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/439733-second-indian-aircraft-was-shot-down-by-paf-pilot-nauman-ali-khan-details-surface>

⁴⁰ Dinakar Peri, "How Did an Indian Air Force Mi-17 Helicopter Get Shot down by the IAF?," *Hindu*, June 02, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/how-did-an-indian-air-force-mi-17-helicopter-get-shot-down-by-the-iaf/article27400844.ece>

⁴¹ Did Balakot Airstrikes Hit Their Target? Satellite Imagery Raises Doubts," *Wire*, March 01, 2019, <https://thewire.in/security/balakot-airstrikes-india-pakistan-satellite-images>

⁴² Forward deployed aircrafts are used for point defense roles and are kept in hardened shelters for safety. Only after 27/2 air combat, India initiated construction of shelters for its fighter fleet. See, "Great Step! Missile, Blast-Proof Shelters to Be Built for IAF Fighter Jets near Pakistan, China Borders," *Financial Express*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/great-step-missile-blast-proof-shelters-to-be-built-for-iaf-fighter-jets-near-pakistan-china-borders/1513371/>

⁴³ Through-out 27/2 confrontations Indian personnel conducted series of training mistakes. Like Mi-17 pilots didn't turn on IFF system (Identification of Friend or Foe) and Indian Air Defense fired SAM without completing SOPs. See, Rajiv Tyagi, "Fratricide? When a Mi 17 V5 Helicopter Fell to the Death of Six IAF Personnel on Board on Feb 27," *Citizen*,

<https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/4/16594/Fratricide-When-a-Mi-17-V5-Helicopter-Fell-to-the-Death-of-Six-IAF-Personnel-on-Board-on-Feb-27>

⁴⁴ In BVR combat between PAF F-16 and IAF Su-30MKI, Indian R-77 missiles were out-ranged by Pakistan's Aim-120C missiles. Now IAF is replacing Russian R-73 with Israeli Derby-ER BVR missiles. See, "IAF Plans to Arm Its Su-30MKI Fleet with I-Derby ER BVRAAMs," *Jane's 360*, May 30, 2019, <https://www.janes.com/article/88867/iaf-plans-to-arm-its-su-30mki-fleet-with-i-derby-er-bvraams>

preventing further escalation. In parallel, they showcased India's growing assertive approach to exploit the gaps in Pakistan's nuclear deterrence for exercising kinetic options, which so far has been successfully deterred by Pakistan's conventional forces.

Pakistan's Deterrence Dynamics

According to Pakistan's National Command Authority (NCA), Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) provides a qualitative response to India's evolving military concepts, such as CSD and PAO.⁴⁵ With limited economic resources, Pakistan cannot afford a conventional arms race with India and has thus prioritised a nuclear deterrent strategy to balance the regional power dynamics without being directly tied to India's conventional buildup.⁴⁶

By developing TNWs, Pakistan lowered its nuclear threshold, effectively deterring potential aggression from the Indian forces. Central to this approach is the Nasr (Hatf IX) missile, specifically designed as a countermeasure against conventional threats posed by CSD. The Nasr, first tested on April 20, 2011, utilises a dual-tube Transporter Erector Launcher (TEL) which enhances mobility and "shoot-and-scoot" capabilities.⁴⁷ With a maximum range of 70 kilometres and a low-yield nuclear payload estimated at 0.5 to 5 kilotons, the missile's thrust vectoring nozzles allow for in-flight manoeuvrability, increasing its survivability against ground-based air defences.⁴⁸ Pakistanis view Nasr as a powerful deterrent, stating it has "poured cold water" on the Cold Start Doctrine.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Adil Sultan, "NCA's 'Full Spectrum' Response," *Express Tribune*, November 7, 2013, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/628052/ncas-full-spectrum-response/>

⁴⁶ Fayyaz Walana, "General Assembly Statement: PM Urges UN Session on N-Disarmament," *Express Tribune*, September 27, 2013, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/610061/general-assembly-statement-pm-urges-un-session-on-n-disarmament-front-page/>

⁴⁷ "Pakistan Successfully Test-Fires Nuclear Capable Hatf-9," *Express Tribune*, April 20, 2011, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/152425/pakistan-test-fires-nuclear-capable-missile/>

⁴⁸ Mansoor Ahmed, "Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Their Impact on Stability," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/30/pakistan-s-tactical-nuclear-weapons-and-their-impact-on-stability-pub-63911>

⁴⁹ "Nasr Pours Cold Water on India's Cold Start Doctrine: Bajwa," *Dawn News*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1343581>

The thresholds of Pakistan’s nuclear strategy are ambiguous. What level of threat will result in nuclear use by Pakistan at tactical, operational, and strategic level, is not officially defined. This strategic ambiguity limits opportunities for India to initiate a kinetic conflict without substantial risk. Although FSD alone may not prevent limited strikes from India, Pakistan has emphasised the need for conventional deterrence as well. The Quid Pro Quo Plus (QPQP) policy incorporates both nuclear and conventional capabilities, offering a layered defence strategy against India’s potential limited actions.⁵⁰ Despite India’s numerical advantage in conventional forces, practical constraints hinder its full utilisation. In limited confrontations, such as the 2019 Balakot episode, training, skill and discipline of forces is of more value than the number of army personnel. Pakistan’s multi-layered strategy allows it to maintain a balanced posture, countering India’s increasingly assertive military doctrines.

Indian Military Theaterisation

India is currently undertaking military theaterisation to restructure the Indian Armed Forces into integrated theatre commands. Instead of working as discrete units, Army, Navy and Air Force will operate under the aegis of a unified operational command in a given war theatre. Instead of 17 different commands of tri-services, five theatre commands will be raised. Later, the plan revised to formulate three theatre commands instead of five. The basic idea is to streamline command and control, enhance jointness and improve the military’s ability to conduct coordinated multi-domain operations.⁵¹

The Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces (JDIAF), released in 2017, undertook fundamental transition in India’s military strategy by stressing joint warfare and integration of tri-services for achieving multi-domain operations’ capability. By ensuring synergy between conventional forces, nuclear forces, space and cyber warfare capabilities, Indian planners

⁵⁰ “Pakistan’s Policy of Quid Pro Quo Plus: Remarks by Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai (Retd) at IISS London,” *Strafasia*, February 07, 2020, <https://strafasia.com/gen-kidwai-speech-iiss-ciss-workshop-london-6-february-2020/>

⁵¹ Bhaswar Kumar, “Indian Military Theaterisation Plans Gathers Pace, but China has 8 Year Lead,” *Business Standard*, May 15, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/indian-military-theaterisation-plans-gather-pace-but-china-has-8-year-lead-124051501339_1.html

hope that future conflicts can be won with improved coordination. Central to the doctrine is network-centric warfare, enabling real-time intelligence sharing and rapid decision-making. JDIAF also places emphasis on developing jointness in training, logistics, intelligence, and decision-making processes within the Indian armed forces. Overall, the JDIAF aims to create a more integrated and robust Indian military, capable of responding to both conventional and unconventional threats in a volatile and complex strategic environment of future.⁵²

Although not a direct product of JDIAF, the broad contours of military theaterisation align with fundamentals of JDIAF like integration and jointness across the services. The JDIAF emphasises the need for tri-service integration and unified approach to modern warfare in form of multi-domain operational capability, which are also foundational principles for military theaterisation.

After establishment of Chief of Defense Staff (CDS) post in 2019 and commencement of work on crafting framework for theatre commands, it was anticipated that India would be able to raise its first command within three years.⁵³ However, by the beginning of 2025, no theatre command has been raised. Strong disagreements between tri-services over the basic structuring have hampered progress on theaterisation,⁵⁴ despite basic agreement on the broad contours of theaterisation.⁵⁵

By following a bottom-up approach instead of top-to-bottom approach, Indian military is currently focused on jointness and integration of services as an initial step before undertaking theaterisation. A bottom-up approach

⁵² “Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces,” *HQ Integrated Defence Staff – Ministry of Defence*, April 2017.

⁵³ Amritya Nayak Dutta, “India’s Joint Military Theater Command Process to Finish in 3 Years,” *Print*, February 04, 2020, <https://theprint.in/defence/indias-joint-military-theater-command-process-to-finish-in-3-years-says-cds-bipin-rawat/359711/>

⁵⁴ Snehes Alex Philip, “India’s Military Theater Commands could be Delayed as there is no Consensus on Basic Structure,” *Print*, June 17, 2021, <https://theprint.in/defence/indias-military-theater-commands-could-be-delayed-as-theres-no-consensus-on-basic-structure/679292/>

⁵⁵ Snehes Alex Philip, “Army, Navy, IAF Finally 99% in Agreement over Structure of Proposed Theater Commands,” *The Print*, June 28, 2023, <https://theprint.in/defence/army-navy-iaf-finally-99-in-agreement-over-structure-of-proposed-theater-commands/1646390/>

refers to a strategy where the Indian military focuses on achieving jointness and integration of the tri-services at operational and tactical levels first, before implementing a broader, overarching framework of theaterisation. The first theatre command will be raised against Pakistan's front with headquarters in Jaipur.⁵⁶ This command will also serve as a test bed for evaluating the challenges and issues with theaterisation. Indian army's South Western Command, Western Command, Southern Command, and elements from Northern Command will merge together with IAF's Western Command, South Western Command, and elements from Central and Southern Commands, to constitute a unified Pakistan-centric Western Theater Command (WTC). Later, China-centric theater command dubbed as the Northern Theater Command (NTC) will be based in Lucknow. Karwar is expected to be the headquarters of India's Maritime Theater Command (MTC).⁵⁷ Unlike Pakistan and China-centric land-based theater commands, which will be rotated between the army and air force, Maritime Theater Command will be headed by the navy only.⁵⁸

WTC will be the largest command and will be configured to deal with Pakistan specific threats by incorporating the doctrinal lessons of CSD and PAOs. Limited synergy, difference in employment methodologies, and lack of force compatibility are the prime factors that have always compromised the Indian military's ability to execute CSD. However, with dedicated tri-services assets at its disposal, WTC may be better postured to conduct multi-domain operations against Pakistan. While avoiding any breach of Pakistan's nuclear threshold, this command may be able — at least in theory — to employ rapid, limited, yet decisive actions in a network-centric environment to subdue Pakistan's conventional defences,

⁵⁶ "Integrate Command Centers in Lucknow, Jaipur, and Trivandrum; Here's How India Plans to Counter China-Pak Threats," *Economic Times*, September 05, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/integrated-command-centers-in-lucknow-jaipur-and-trivandrum-heres-how-india-plans-to-counter-china-pak-threats/articleshow/113087481.cms?from=mdr>

⁵⁷ Huma Siddique, "India's Maritime Theatre Command Structure: Know More about it," *Financial Express*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-indias-maritime-theater-command-structure-know-more-about-it-2139633/>

⁵⁸ Snehash Alex Philip, "Army, Air Force to Take Turns at Helming of 2 of India's Proposed Theater Commands, Navy to Head Third," *The Print*, July 13, 2023, <https://theprint.in/defence/army-air-force-to-take-turns-at-helming-2-of-indias-proposed-theater-commands-navy-to-head-third/1664937/>

while denying Islamabad the justification to employ tactical or strategic nuclear weapons. This approach appears synonymous to CSD/PAOs, however, with integrated tri-service assets, WTC will be better postured to effectively employ its combat prowess in synergy to achieve desired outcomes.

India's gradual transition in its doctrinal posture and military theaterisation represents New Delhi's persistent security dilemma. In the past, India's threat perceptions were pre-dominantly Pakistan specific. From the Sundarji to Cold Start doctrine, all doctrines were crafted to tackle nuclear-armed Pakistan. However, the decision to theaterise its forces reflects, how seriously New Delhi perceives the likelihood of a two-front war. Splitting tri-services' commands into two very distinct theatre commands may present a valid solution for the time being. But it's worth noting, as dictated by the concept of security dilemma, that both China and Pakistan will formulate countermeasures accordingly. Although it's unlikely that Pakistan will also undertake theaterisation, the rapid advances in the military capabilities of China and Pakistan could eventually overstretch Indian resources and create complications for the distribution of resources between theatre commands. Ultimately, resource distribution will challenge India's ability to utilise multiple theatre commands, particularly to support high-intensity conflict on more than one front.

The current scenario in South Asia reflects the validity of theoretical reasoning made by John Herz and John Mearsheimer's offensive realism. The action-reaction pattern inherent in the security dilemma appears unavoidable in this case. As India strengthens its military, Pakistan and China are likely to perceive it as a threat, leading them to adapt and re-structure their own military postures. This interaction, as Mearsheimer would argue, highlights the inherent unpredictability and danger of military competition in a region already fraught with historical tensions and prolonged territorial disputes.

India's military transition to an integrated theatre command structure could enable faster and more efficient deployments against Pakistan, potentially before Pakistan can mount an effective response. This shift may alter Pakistan's perception of the strategic balance, prompting a need for re-evaluation. The Pakistani military will feel compelled to reassess its

capabilities, threat perceptions, operational strategies, and tactics to confront an adversary with a more integrated and agile military. The primary goal would be to enhance coordination among the army, navy, and air force, ensuring a unified and timely response to potential threats in an increasingly fast-paced and technologically advanced environment.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Evolution in India's military doctrines reflects New Delhi's endeavour to overcome intensifying security challenges associated with Pakistan's enduring rivalry and growing friction with China. The transition from the Sundarji Doctrine to the CSD was driven by a desire to exploit the conventional war-fighting space below the nuclear threshold. However, operational shortcomings within the Indian military have undermined the full realisation of CSD. Moreover, Pakistan's deployment of TNWs further complicated India's strategic calculus, challenging the effectiveness of its limited war doctrine. The study of the Uri (2016) and Pulwama-Balakot (2019) crises reveals India's struggle to seek space for conventional confrontation against Pakistan. India is now undertaking further doctrinal refinements, with respect to the two-front security dilemma. This also now includes aspirations for theaterisation aimed at enhancing joint operations and operational efficiency. However, the path to theaterisation presents significant challenges, including inter-service coordination and strategic coherence. Such postures and attempts are likely to impact the South Asian strategic stability. India's evolving military strategy remains constrained by the region's security dynamics, raising questions about its ability to fully implement its doctrinal ambitions without exacerbating tensions with Pakistan and China.

⁵⁹ Syed Ali Abbas and Amna Saqib, "India Shift to Theater Commands: Response Options for Pakistan," *South Asian Voices*, August 30, 2024, <https://southasianvoices.org/southasianvoices-org-sec-c-pk-r-india-theater-commands-08-20-2024/>