

WARFARE REIMAGINED: ALGORITHMIC WARFARE AND THE SHIFTING INDIA-PAKISTAN STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE

By
Sardar Jahanzaib Ghalib

Research Associate
Arms Control & Disarmament Centre, ISSI
Email Address: s.jehanzaib@issi.org.pk

Edited by
Malik Qasim Mustafa

June 4, 2025

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Source: *SME Magazine*.

Modern warfare has undergone a significant transformation from traditional land-based confrontations to technologically driven, cross-domain engagements, as evidenced by the recent trajectory of India-Pakistan tensions. In the past, territorial attacks, ground operations, artillery, and conventional military manoeuvres were the defining characteristics of conflicts between the two countries. However, in the present day, these conflicts have evolved from cross-border strikes to algorithmic warfare; the battlefield has further expanded to airspace, the electromagnetic spectrum, cyberspace, and hybrid warfare. This expansion was at full display in the recent India-Pakistan tensions. On May 7, 2025, India, under Operation “Sindoor,” initiated serious escalation by launching missile strikes against Pakistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K).¹ The Indian Air Force (IAF) deployed Dassault Rafale jets, which carried out the operation using the SCALP long-range air-launched cruise missile and Highly Agile Modular Munition Extended Range (HAMMER), an air-to-ground, precision-guided missile system.² Pakistan responded immediately

¹ “May 7, 2025 India Launches Attacks on Pakistan After Kashmir Massacre,” *CNN*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/india-pakistan-attack-kashmir-tourists-intl-hnk>.

² “Scalp, Hammer Missiles & Kamikaze Drones: How India Used Precision Weapons to Punish Pakistan under Operation Sindoor,” *The Economic Times*, May 7, 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/new-updates/scalp-hammer-missiles-kamikaze-drones->

by intercepting 5 Indian combat aircraft and an IAI Heron drone, Medium-Altitude Long-Endurance (MALE) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), through ground-to-air and air-to-air defence systems and with fighter jets predominantly of Chinese origin equipped with PL-15 beyond visual range (BVR) missiles.³

India claimed that these attacks were their response to the terrorist attack of April 22, 2025, on tourists in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) in Pahalgam, which left 26 men dead. In a subsequent press briefing, Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri claimed that the missile strikes “focused on dismantling the terrorist infrastructure and disabling terrorists likely to be sent across to India.”⁴ He was joined by Indian military officials Colonel Sofiya Qureshi and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh, who displayed a map during the briefing marking out areas what India alleged were 21 “terrorist camps” in Pakistan and AJ&K.⁵ While these allegations were completely unsubstantiated, they were strategically timed to provide cover for an offensive military manoeuvre against Pakistan and to manipulate international narratives. Pakistan described these Indian strikes as an “unprovoked attack, targeting innocent people, mosques, and residential areas.”⁶

Cross-Domain Escalation: Algorithmic Warfare and Strategic Retaliation

On the night of May 8, 2025, India deployed loitering munitions, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), autonomous drones like Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) Harop, and MQ-9B SkyGuardian, a remotely piloted aircraft system (RPAS), to strike into Pakistan's urban centers, like Lahore, Rawalpindi, Attock, etc.⁷ These kamikaze drones are a combination of a UAV and a missile. They are capable of flying low and fast and have enhanced Artificial Intelligence (AI) capacity that can help them avoid air defences, provide advanced Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), and have targeting capabilities while hovering over a targeted area before striking it.⁸ India also employed its

how-india-used-precision-weapons-to-punish-pakistan-under-operation-sindoor/articleshow/120948968.cms.

³ Sophia Saifi, Regan Jerome Taylor, Ross Adkin, Rhea Mogul, Helen, “India Launches Strikes Deep Inside Pakistan and Pakistan Claims Indian Jets Shot down, in Major Escalation,” CNN, May 7, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/06/asia/india-pakistan-kashmir-conflict-hnk-intl>.

⁴ “Operation Sindoor: What’s the Significance of India’s Pakistan Targets? | India-Pakistan Tensions News | Al Jazeera,” *Al Jazeera*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/7/operation-sindoor-whats-the-significance-of-indias-pakistan-targets>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “India Launches Strikes Deep inside Pakistan.”

⁷ “Pakistan Downs 12 Indian Drones Across Multiple Locations: DG ISPR,” *The Express Tribune*, May 8, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2544672/pakistan-downs-12-indian-drones-across-multiple-locations-dg-ispr>.

⁸ “HAROP: 3 Things about the UAV Believed to Have Been Used by India against Pakistan,” *The Indian Express*, May 9, 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/harop-india-pakistan-operation-sindoor-capabilities-9991081/>.

swarm drone, which are integrated with AI-enabled targeting modules that can provide real-time image processing via satellite relay.

These deployment represented a significant shift in Indian strategy: from overt military projection to covert, precision-targeted attacks intended at disruption, provocation, and destabilization. This shows India's correlation with broader multidomain warfare (MDW) and its utilisation of war-fighting strategies, which incorporate not just traditional combat but also algorithmic, cyber, information, and drone warfare. MDW aims to secure victory on the battlefield and to disrupt the decision-making processes of adversaries by creating uncertainty in responsibility through the blame-game and promoting strategic fatigue to undermine strategic stability.⁹ The utilization of kamikaze drones in densely populated urban areas is a form of coercion that is intended to affect the morale of civilians and the security of the state. The utilization of these drones represents a significant shift in its coercive doctrine that employs AI and autonomous systems to execute low-visibility, precise strikes aimed at undermining internal security environment. It raises security concerns regarding the proliferation of dual-use drone capabilities¹⁰ and exposes India's growing dependence on external military technologies. The deployments of loitering weapons indicate India's strategic concerns more than their technological capabilities, as targeting mainland Pakistani cities signals Indian desperation in an attempt to trigger a response from Pakistan.

Despite the asymmetric nature of the drone attacks, Pakistan's responses towards Indian aggression have shown its tactical agility. Pakistan, while demonstrating situational awareness, neutralised many of these drones over major cities through anti-aircraft systems and a quick response force.¹¹ In response to India, Pakistan under 'Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos' targeted critical Indian military sites and logistics. Pakistan claimed to have targeted and destroyed India's S-400 Modern Long-Range Surface-to-Air Missile (MLR SAM) system, designed for both air and missile defence at locations including Bhoj and Adampur. Pakistan also struck several other high-value targets, such as the BrahMos missile storage facility in Beas, airfields in Udampur, Suratgarh, and Pathankot, a field supply depot, and a radar installation in Poonch. At the same time, various strategic military sites, including the KG Top, the Field Supply Depot in Uri, an Artillery Gun Position in Derangyari, and the

⁹ Rebecca Segal, "Who 'Does' MDO? What Multi-Domain Operations Will Mean For—and Require Of—the Army's Tactical Units - Modern War Institute," Modern War Institute, November 3, 2023, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/who-does-mdo-what-multi-domain-operations-will-mean-for-and-require-of-the-armys-tactical-units/>, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/who-does-mdo-what-multi-domain-operations-will-mean-for-and-require-of-the-armys-tactical-units/>.

¹⁰ Alisha Anand and Wenting He, "AI Disruption, Peace & Security," 2022, https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/UNIDIR_ID22_AI_Disruption_Peace_Security_Conference_Report.pdf.

¹¹ "Pakistan Downs 12 Indian Drones Across Multiple Locations."

BrahMos battery site in Nagrota, were targeted.¹² Additionally, a cyber operation reportedly disrupted up to 70 percent of the electricity supply in Maharashtra Power grid.¹³ According to Pakistan's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MOIB), "As part of Operation Bunyan-al-Marsoos (Iron Wall), a successful cyber offensive was launched targeting key Indian digital infrastructure". The operation disrupted major websites including those of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited (MTNL), and the Crime Research Investigation Agency. The Ministry further stated that over 2,500 surveillance cameras across India were also accessed during the operation.¹⁴

In addition, the Indian media with bigger legacy and social media platforms, disseminated fabricated and misleading stories, which represented a further component of this hybrid warfare in the form of misinformation and disinformation. Following the escalation, a huge level of misinformation was published that claimed military victories, which were later debunked by neutral observers. Indian media claimed that Indian forces had destroyed a Pakistani F-16 fighter aircraft and a JF-17 Thunder in aerial combat.¹⁵ These claims were not substantiated by any credible evidence or wreckage verification. Similarly, Indian social media and television networks disseminated stories that the Indian Navy's INS Vikrant had conducted a long-range strike at the Karachi Port,¹⁶ destroying strategic infrastructure, and also fabricated video recordings showing blasts near the Prime Minister's residence in Islamabad and claiming extensive damage to critical Pakistani infrastructure. These narratives were intended to sow alarm and confusion among the Pakistani public while simultaneously misleading international audiences. India's multi-domain pressure strategy is integrally linked to its manipulation of the information domain, which involves the dissemination of fabricated narratives of military victories and the false attribution of aggression to Pakistan. These misinformation campaigns are intended to create misunderstandings and justify their aggression both regionally and globally. By weaponizing both technology and narrative, India is not only violating international law but also destabilising the security structure of South Asia.

¹² "Operation Bunyan Al Marsoos: Pakistan Hits India Hard," *The Nation*, May 11, 2025, <https://www.nation.com.pk/11-May-2025/operation-bunyan-al-marsoos-pakistan-hits-india-hard>.

¹³ "Pakistani Hackers Hit Maharashtra Power Grid in Cyberattack," *ARY News*, May 9, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqIYFkK4xik>.

¹⁴ "Operation Bunyan-Al-Marsoos: Pakistan Launches Cyber Strike Against Indian Digital Assets," *MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING (MOIB), PAKISTAN*, May 12, 2025, <https://moib.gov.pk/News/65433>.

¹⁵ "Fake News Galore in Indian Media," *The Express Tribune*, May 9, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2544840/fake-news-galore-in-indian-media>.

¹⁶ Zeeshan Ahmad, "The Night India Wiped Pakistan Off the Map...in the Newsroom!," *The Express Tribune*, May 9, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2544945/the-night-india-wiped-pakistan-off-the-map-in-the-newsroom>.

In response, Pakistan's information security framework operated in real time to expose and counteract these narratives. India's accusations that the Pakistani military had fired missiles at 15 locations within its territory have been vigorously refuted by Pakistan and termed the allegations as "false, baseless, and politically inspired."¹⁷ In a joint news conference on May 8, 2025, Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar and Director General, Inter Services Public Relations, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry said that "These accusations are part of a broader campaign by New Delhi to divert attention from internal challenges and military shortcomings."¹⁸ They further stated that "Such fake news reports are being spread to create an impression that Pakistan is also carrying out attacks on India. By disseminating these fabricated stories, India is seeking to justify its continued blatant aggression against Pakistan."¹⁹ This deliberate spread of misinformation and disinformation highlighted India's aggressive strategy of destabilizing regional peace through information manipulation. Pakistan referred to Indian aggression as an 'Act of War' because India not only violated international law but also exacerbated tensions while undermining the potential for diplomatic resolution and regional stability.²⁰

Legal, Strategic, and Ethical Implications

These evolving dynamics underscore a critical shift in modern warfare which was not there in the past, as it is no longer solely defined by the physical control of territory or by traditional means; rather, it has added a layer of complex and advanced technologies that include AI, information warfare, sensor systems, cybersecurity, and electromagnetic domains. The recent India-Pakistan tensions have evolved South Asia's deterrence framework and have introduced a new layer of complex emerging and disruptive technologies, with the use of AI-powered drones that are capable of autonomous decision-making and target acquisition. These developments have the potential to result in inadvertent escalation, miscalculation, or unauthorised use of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) if left unchecked. The serious escalation inherent in India's 'Operation Sindoor' represents a concerning evolution in paradigms related to regional peace and stability via purposefully weakening conventional deterrence by the deliberate act of hybrid warfare.

¹⁷ Kashif Imran, "Pakistan Denies Indian Accusations of Attacks in Punjab, Kashmir as Both Neighbors Continue to Trade Fire," *Arab News*, May 9, 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2600081/%7B%7B>.

¹⁸ "Islamabad Rejects Delhi's Claim Pakistani Military Struck 15 Locations in India," *Tribune*, May 8, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2544734/pakistan-rejects-indian-allegations-of-cross-border-strikes-warns-of-decisive-response>.

¹⁹ "India Dropped Missiles in Amritsar to Fuel Anti-Pakistan Sentiments among Sikhs: Ishaq Dar," Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MOIB), Pakistan, May 9, 2025, <https://www.moib.gov.pk/News/65428>.

²⁰ "'Act of War': Pakistan Pledges Retaliation to Indian Deadly Attacks," *Al Jazeera*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/7/pakistan-decries-act-of-war-vows-retaliation-as-india-launches-strikes>.

The deployment of loitering munitions and missile strikes by India against civilians and infrastructures in Pakistan and AJ&K is not only an act of unprovoked aggression but also a violation of established international norms. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the 'Principle of Proportionality under Article 51- Protection of the civilian population'²¹ states "Even if there is a clear military target, it is not possible to attack it if the expected harm to civilians or civilian property is excessive in relation to the expected military advantage." These attacks are justified on the basis of unproven facts and politically-driven charges, which are part of a larger Indian policy of normalising cross-border operations under the guise of counterterrorism despite the lack of credible evidence.

However, the actions are both strategically and ethically irresponsible, as they aim to undermine the traditional deterrence framework by provoking an adversary into a retaliatory response, potentially escalating military adventurism and were directed against civilian populations. The deliberate deployment of these systems in densely populated civilian areas points out India's aggressive behaviour in violating legal and ethical boundaries. Although on May 10, 2025, the two countries had mutually agreed on a ceasefire,²² the present trajectory establishes a perilous precedent in which state-led aggression is camouflaged in the language of preemption and counterterrorism, thereby establishing the conditions for perpetual instability. India's hegemonic and revisionist behaviour poses a threat to the fragile deterrence equilibrium in South Asia, raises the likelihood of inadvertent escalation, and propels the region towards a new era of technologically enabled, norm-defying conflict that challenges both strategic stability and international legal frameworks, if left unchecked.

²¹ "Article 51 - Protection of the Civilian Population," International Committee of the Red Cross, accessed May 10, 2025, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/article-51>.

²² "India and Pakistan Agree Ceasefire: What Does It Mean?," *Al Jazeera*, May 10, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/10/india-and-pakistan-agree-ceasefire-what-does-it-mean>.