

Understanding India's 'Surgical Strike' Special Operations and Pakistan's Response

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Abstract

There is no systematic examination of India's special operations' doctrinal thinking under the new "Surgical Strike" lingua in the extant literature. To fill this gap, this article resurrects Sun Tzu's ingenious principles of special operations as an embarkment point. Accordingly, it unpicks India's idea and practice of surgical strike specialoperations and its relationship to broader military strategy. Plausibly, nuclear weapons have induced strategic restraint and caution in India-Pakistan relations. However, nuclear weapons could not affect the decades-long underlying power-political antagonism between them. India is developing its armed forces to gain strategic advantage by exploiting the existing stability-instability paradox against Pakistan. For this purpose, it has weaved together and tailored various doctrines for different levels of warfare, including surgical strikes under the rubric of special operations. To reinforce conventional deterrence, Pakistan promptly makes preventive, proportionate, and non-escalatory adjustments in its military

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capabilities (both conceptual and material). To understand India's concept of surgical strike and Pakistan's response, this article employs a methodological framework of analysis and synthesis with theoretical and policy implications. On the theoretical side, it underlines the enduring relevance of classic principles of special operations espoused by Sun Tzu. On the policy front, it reinforces that states tend to pursue special doctrine for different levels of warfare, with seamless integration. India and Pakistan have entered a fresh round of special operations, causing enormous conceptual and operational implications.

Keywords: Special Operations, Surgical Strike, Military Strategy, India, Pakistan

Introduction

Pakistan and India, since their independence, have been engaged in a spectrum of conflicts that continue to pose a threat of escalation. Unlike the past, future conflicts have the potential to quickly escalate into a full-scale war amidst a fast-changing politico-strategic milieu. With the dawn of the 21st century, India is continually refining its doctrinal thinking, developing, and expanding its military capabilities to exploit the stability-instability paradox against Pakistan. To this end, India has developed doctrines named "Limited War," "Cold Start," and "Surgical Strike" below the nuclear threshold. This is evident from the statements of Indian military leadership, which has continuously asserted that India reserves the right to punish Pakistan with a preemptive strike under its limited war doctrines. Indian military doctrinal thinking and capabilities go side by side. They have, in fact, a symbiotic relationship, which

further promotes war hysteria in the Indian political and military echelon against Pakistan. It is essential to mention here that India has institutionalized and disseminated its doctrinal thinking through the Cold Start Doctrine (2004),³ Basic Doctrine of the Indian Air Force (2012),⁴ Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces (2017),⁵ and Land Warfare Doctrine (2018).⁶

Under its proactive doctrinal military thinking, India is trying to achieve a strategic advantage against its neighbors. Fundamentally, India is attempting to redefine the meaning of borders, territoriality, geopolitics, and power relations in South Asia. India conducted surgical strikes against Pakistan to display its willingness and capabilities to introduce a new standard in the region. To reinforce deterrence at all levels, Pakistan responded in kind. However, these strikes and counterstrikes are fraught with dangers. Given the intrinsic relationship between different levels of war, such special operations and counter operations may quickly escalate the situation towards a major war.

This article is divided into four main sections. It begins by outlining a few enduring principles of special operations espoused by Sun Tzu. The second section distills the meaning of a surgical strike and identifies its place within the perimeters of the special operations. The third section tries to establish the Indian doctrinal thinking and practice of surgical strikes as a special operation. Finally, it summarizes Pakistan's

³ Walter C. Ladwig III, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine," *International Security*, Vol. 32, no. 2 (Winter 2007/08), 158-190; General Bipin Rawat, "We will Cross Again," interview by Sandeep Unnithan, *India Today*, January 4, 2017.

⁴ Indian Air Force, *Basic Doctrine of the Air Force-2012* (New Delhi: Directorate of Operations, 2012), 3-30.

⁵ Headquarters, Integrated Defence Staff, Ministry of Defence, India, *Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces-2017* (New Delhi: Directorate of Doctrine, 2017).

⁶ Indian Army, *Land Warfare Doctrine-2018* (New Delhi: Government of India, December 2018).

understanding and proportionate responses to reinforce security and stability in the region.

Sun Tzu and Special Operations

Although no proper theory of special operations is available in the literature, classic strategists have eloquently touched upon the subject. In this regard, the master strategist, Sun Tzu, stands tall among the others. He is the oldest and the most famous Chinese military thinker and army general. In so many ways, his work has long-lasting effects on strategic thinking and practice. Sun Tzu's book *The Art of War* offers a set of critical operational concepts, which explicitly informs about special operations short of war. This includes extraordinary forces, indirect tactics, intelligence, surprise, and deception. Sun Tzu endorsed the idea of special operations forces and warfare by stating: "To ensure that your whole host may withstand the brunt of the enemy's attack and remain unshaken, this is affected by maneuvers direct and indirect."⁷

The concepts of direct (normal) and indirect (extraordinary) forces do merit careful consideration. The normal forces distract the adversary, whereas the extraordinary forces act when and where they are least anticipated. Sun Tzu's reference to extraordinary forces is akin to special operations forces, capable of carrying out operations where they are least expected. In continuation, he emphasized the tactics of extraordinary forces. According to him, the tactics of extraordinary forces are inexhaustible and infinite as the heavens and the earth.⁸ By implications, the commander must conceive of special operations in a whole range of ways and across domains.

⁷ Sun Tzu, *the Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles (Leicester: Allandale Publishing, 2000), 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Sun Tzu wrote an exclusive chapter on intelligence and its significance for warfare. To him, foreknowledge accords a clear edge over the enemy. Interestingly, special operations forces are often secretly employed behind the enemy lines to collect intelligence for strategic and tactical purposes.⁹ Parallel to this, reliable, actionable, and timely intelligence is also essential for the successful conduct of special operations. Without better intelligence, special operations become susceptible to risks and failures. Sun Tzu succinctly penned down:

Hence it is only the enlightened ruler and wise general who will use the highest intelligence of the army for spying and thereby achieve great results. Spies are the most critical element in war because they depend on an army's ability to move.¹⁰

Surprise is another cardinal principle for the successful conduct of special operations. Sun Tzu unequivocally stressed the element of surprise while planning special operations. In the first chapter of his book, he underlined: "Attack him where is unprepared; appear where you are not expected."¹¹ Insofar as Special Forces are smaller in size and operate behind the enemy lines without properly sustained firepower, the element of surprise becomes foundational in the execution of special operations. Subsequently, Sun Tzu prompted the importance of deception in conducting special operations. He asserted:

All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him feel we are near.¹²

⁹ Adam Leong Kok Wey, "Principles of Special Operations: Learning from Sun Tzu and Frontinus," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 33, no. 2 (2014), 136.

¹⁰ Sun Tzu, *the Art of War*, 62.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

With limited military strength and supplies, special operations force greatly value the element of deception. They master the techniques of camouflage and distraction.¹³ Through the environment of deception, Special Forces can perform missions efficiently and safely. These five operational principles (extraordinary forces, indirect tactics, intelligence, surprise, and deception) espoused by Sun Tzu provide an important vision to frame and comprehend the nature of special operations in the contemporary world.

Surgical Strike: A Variant of Special Operations

Defining a surgical strike is not as easy as one might think. Although the surgical strike is a different doctrinal military term, academicians, politicians, military individuals, and organizations have slightly (or even radically) different perspectives on it. To begin with, the expression “surgical strike” is composed of two words: a) surgical and b) strike. Depending upon the contexts, they have different meanings and usages. According to Lexico, surgical means “done with great precision,”¹⁴ whereas strike means “inflict a blow.”¹⁵ William Safire believes the strike is a deterrent preemptive strike rather than a mere surprise attack.¹⁶ Similarly, he refers surgical to special tactics, which ought to be “precise, quick, clean, and incisive”.¹⁷ Surgical strike, according to James Cartwright and Amos Yadlin, is a well-targeted military campaign, with “the least collateral damage and potential for escalation”.¹⁸ Michael Noon terms the surgical strikes as “shorter duration direct” military

¹³ Adam, “Principles of Special Operations” 137.

¹⁴ “Surgical,” *Lexico*, Available at: <https://www.lexico.com/definition/surgical>. (Accessed on November 17, 2021).

¹⁵ “Strike,” *Lexico*, Available at: <https://www.lexico.com/definition/strike> (Accessed on November 17, 2021).

¹⁶ William Safire, “On Language; On Surgical Strike,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1986.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ James Cartwright and Amos Yadlin, “Israeli or U.S. Action Against Iran: Who Will Do It If It Must Be Done?,” *The Atlantic*, May 29, 2013.

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actions and “longer duration special reconnaissance assignments.”¹⁹

Mark Regev, the former Israeli prime minister's spokesperson, portrays surgical strikes with humane coloration and contrasts it with indiscriminate use of force.²⁰ US Army Special Operation Command (USASOC) Manual presents the most detailed meaning of the term by recording: “The execution of capabilities in a precise manner that employs special operations forces in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover or damage designated targets, or influence threats.”²¹

In the preceding, one can safely underline a few common attributes of a surgical strike. These include: 1) it is a variant of special operations; 2) it involves special strike forces; 3) It is speedy and targeted; 4) it is based on actionable intelligence; 5) it avoids collateral damage and escalation; 6) it implicitly serves strategic purposes, especially during peacetime; 7) it involves explicit sanctioning of higher political and military leadership. In a nutshell, a surgical operation is a special contingency military plan and action against a key enemy target amidst a fast-closing window opportunity.

It is important to note that surgical strike encompasses and exploits the controversial ideas of preemption and prevention. It also tends to supplement the operations of compellence and deterrence. In doing so, it attempts to give legitimacy to its offensive nature during peacetime. Furthermore, it is distinct from a standard raid strike.

¹⁹ Michael Noonan, “The Seductiveness of Special Ops” *War on the rocks*, March 3, 2015.

²⁰ “Gaza crisis: Israeli strikes 'as surgical as possible,” *BBC News*, April 06, 2021.

²¹ Headquarters, Department of Army, US, *ADRP3-05 Special Operations* (Washington: Army Doctrine Publication, 2019), 3.

Special operations involve not only distinct forces but also functions. There are two major variants of special operations: 1) surgical strike and 2) special warfare. The difference between a surgical strike and special warfare is summarized in table 1.

Surgical Strike	Special Warfare
Lethal Capabilities only	Both lethal and non-lethal
Applied to shape the operational environment	Facilitate leveraging indigenous forces
Speed, precise, and ascalable and surprise	Go slow, go long, and go local
Damage and destroy targets	Building and maintaining partnerships

Source: Special Operations Forces in Unlit Spaces.²²

Raid is a small, basic, routine combat activity to attack a forward post and patrolling party along the borderline. One of the raid's main goals is to dominate the borderline. Usually, raids are not sanctioned by the highest political and military authority levels. Contrarily, surgical strike seeks strategic purposes. It entails relatively deeper penetration, sophisticated targets, and a more complex operation, a longer period of preparation, updated actionable intelligence, and greater integration with wider doctrinal military thinking.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that surgical strike special operations purportedly provide an easy way out of pressing strategic problems. In reality, surgical strikes are fraught with dangers of failure and escalation, as each step in the strategic realm has strategic

²² Joseph A. Royo, "Special Operations Forces in Unlit Spaces: Understanding the World's Dark Spots in the Context of SOF Operational Planning," *The Land Warfare Papers*, Vol.101, (June 2014), 9-10.

consequences. Equally important, the surgical strike has serious moral and legal issues in contemporary international relations.

Indian Surgical Strike Special Operations: New Lingua for New Warfare

Arguably, India carried out the so-called surgical strikes as a part of its sub-conventional/low-intensity conflict operations. Low-intensity conflict is the “politico-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war, and above the routine, peaceful competition among states.”²³ It can range from subversion to the use of military force. Subversive operations are classified as indirect, while the employment of armed forces is described as direct.²⁴ Nonetheless, military power is used with the utmost restraint, precision, and discrimination. These direct military actions, therefore, necessitate authority, intelligence, meticulous planning, and the requisite military assets. Even though special operations are often associated with offensive and defensive operations on a conventional level, they are also instrumental in low-intensity conflict operations. It is essential to underline that low-intensity warfare is increasingly becoming common in the developing world and has serious regional security repercussions.

The Indian government first associated the term surgical strike with the self-proclaimed raids conducted across the Line of Control (LoC) in 2016 and then with the Balakot air strike, which occurred deep into Pakistani territory in 2019. At the time of Uri, Indian Director General Military Operations (DGMO) Lt. Gen. Ranbir Singh called the intelligence-based mystery actions of the Indian Army Special Forces across the LoC against the impending threat of alleged non-state actors' infiltration

²³ Department of Defense, US, *Fundamentals of Low Intensity Conflict* (Washington: Headquarters of Army and Air Force, 1990), 1

²⁴ Ibid.

into India as a “surgical strike.”²⁵ Again in 2019, the Indian Air Force (IAF) portrayed the Balakot surgical air strike as an intelligence-based non-military preemptive strike against alleged non-state actors linked to Jammu & Kashmir’s armed independence movement.²⁶ On both occasions, the Indian political and military establishment appeared to be justifying direct military actions under the excuse of imminent terrorism threats. Similarly, New Delhi contended that the launching pads of the non-state actors are not pure military targets and instead fall into the non-military target category. It hoped to conceal its aggression behind the guise of self-defence and just use of force. On the other hand, Pakistan has vehemently denied the existence of an alleged camp at the Balakot site.²⁷ Fundamentally, the use of the words “preemption” and “surgical” was a strategic signal to Pakistan that India would not be deterred from striking whenever and wherever its interests were threatened.

Overall, the Indian rationale behind the strikes was three-fold. First, the Indian government sought to defame Pakistan internationally by associating its ties to terrorist organizations. It aimed to portray Pakistan as a state that sponsors terrorism around the world. The narrative that Indian officials developed before and after the strikes evidently demonstrated this. “The land of Taxila, one of the greatest learning centres of ancient times is now hosting the ivy league of

²⁵ “Transcript of Joint Briefing by MEA and MOD,” *Ministry of External Affairs, India*, September 29, 2016, Available at: https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/27446/Transcript_of_Joint_Briefing_by_MEA_and_MoD_September_29_2016 (Accessed on November 17, 2021).

²⁶ Deepshikha Ghosh, “India Strikes After Pulwama Terror Attack, Hits Biggest Jaish-e-Mohammed Camp In Balakot,” *NDTV News*, February 26, 2019, Available at: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-struck-biggest-training-camp-of-jaish-in-balakot-large-number-of-terrorists-eliminated-governm-1999390> (Accessed on November 17, 2021).

²⁷ News Desk, “India Refuses to Share Proof of Air Strikes in Balakot,” *Dawn News*, March 03, 2019.

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terrorism,” an Indian envoy said at the United Nations.²⁸ The goal was to malign Pakistan before the international community.

Secondly, pre-emptive strikes aimed to probe Pakistan's defence systems. It also wanted to test Pakistan's resolve and coerced it into not retaliating. Moreover, the Indian strategists hoped to calibrate their future military contingency plans in accordance with Pakistan's response. Thirdly, the Indian government sanctioned the surgical strikes in 2019 to stoke nationalism and create favorable domestic conditions for elections. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) used this tactic to gain public support, which had been on the wane before the strike but had soared following the strike. Undoubtedly, the war frenzy generated a sympathetic environment for the BJP, which was needed to win the 2019 general elections. The Indian opposition parties aptly emphasized that the 2019 strike was a political charade staged solely to win public sympathy.²⁹

Indian Surgical Strike Operations Doctrine

This section traces and illustrates doctrinal inspiration underlying Indian surgical strike operations; as such complex undertakings require the institutionalization of a particular way of warfare. During the first two decades of the 21st century, India developed and tested different military doctrines to cover the entire conflict spectrum. Chronologically, India put its major theater war Sunderji doctrine into practice during the compound military of 2001/2002. This doctrinested on the premise of placing seven holding corps along the Pakistan border for defence

²⁸ “India's Right of Reply during the General Debate of the 71st session UN General Assembly,” *Ministry of External Affairs, India*, September 16, 2019, Available at: https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/27422/Indias_Right_of_Reply_during_the_General_Debate_of_the_71st_session_UN_General_Assembly_on_September_21_2016(Accessed on November 17, 2021).

²⁹ Web Desk, “Under Modi Govt, Surgical Strike Happens Just Before Elections: Congress,” *India Today*, October 20, 2019.

while three strike corps carried out the mission of cutting Pakistan into two halves.³⁰ The operation Parakram aided India in evaluating the Sunderji doctrine's viability in a nuclear setting.³¹ Building on this, the Indian army conceived the Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) for limited war operations. It was designed to allow for shallow penetration into Pakistan's territory within a short period, ranging from 72 to 96 hours.³² After subsequent reassessment and reorganization of the strategic field and the margin of maneuver, the Indian political and military echelon decided to introduce low-intensity conflict operations against Pakistan. Accordingly, during the second decade of the 21st century, the Indian Armed Forces institutionalized an exclusive surgical strike special operations doctrine on a sub-conventional level.

The Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces-2017, for example, contained explicit understanding and direction for surgical strike special operations. The doctrine springs from a "proactive and pragmatic philosophy" to combat various threats across the conflict spectrum. Within this context, it enjoins "surgical strikes" under the pretense of "terror provocation" on the sub-conventional level of the spectrum of conflict.³³ It enunciates special operations ought to be carried out by the specially developed forces of the Indian Armed Forces (Army, Air Force, and Navy) in enemy territory in all three dimensions – land, air, and navy. In this regard, the Indian army is mandated to operate in all three dimensions. Indian navy is tasked with the maritime domain. Indian Air Force is sanctioned, among other things, for "precision strikes at the target of critical importance."

³⁰ Farrukh Saleem, "Understanding India," *The News*, December 04, 2016.

³¹ Nitin Gokhale, "India's Doctrinal Shift," *The Diplomat*, January 25, 2011, Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2011/01/indias-doctrinal-shift/> (Accessed on November 20, 2021).

³² Walter C. Ladwig III, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars?," 165.

³³ Ministry of Defence, India, *Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces-2017*, 13.

Operationally, three services can conduct special operations separately or in conjunctions with each other. For the efficient execution of precision strikes, the Joint Doctrine underlines the value of quality intelligence and “direct command.”³⁴ Although special operations forces are isolated from the main combat force, the doctrine reckons the “possibility of sub-conventional escalating to a conventional level.”³⁵ It astutely directs a conception of conventional scenarios arising from sub-conventional warfare and instructs three services to develop synergetic responses to dominate the escalation ladder.

In conjunction with the Joint Doctrine, the Indian Army Land Warfare Doctrine 2018 provides pointers on the surgical strike operations. It envisions more substantial operational capabilities for “punitive response to greater depth, effect, sophistication, and precision” along the Line of Control.³⁶ Not to mention it emphasizes the significance of timely and assured intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance for precision employment.³⁷ Similarly, the Indian Air Force (IAF) published a revised doctrine in 2012. In keeping view of the evolutionary nature of air power and the requirement to stay relevant across the conflict spectrum, it presented exhaustive narratives of the basics of air power development and employment.³⁸ The Air Doctrine is blunt and obvious in highlighting the significance of air power in dominating the sub-conventional conflict operations. To put it into perspective, it envisioned both the non-kinetic and kinetic support role of air power on a sub-conventional level. Some of these roles include: 1) conducting surveillance, reconnaissance, and intelligence of targets; 2) providing air mobility and logistics to ground forces involved in low-

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Indian Army, *Land Warfare Doctrine-2018*, 3.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Christina Goulter & Harsh V. Pant, “Realignment and Indian Airpower Doctrine,” *Air University Online Journal*, January 02, 2022.

intensity operations, 3) targeting the leadership of non-state actors, 4) destroying infrastructures of non-state actors, 5) and evacuation and extraction missions.

For the successful employment of air power on the sub-conventional level, the doctrine espoused a few pre-requisites: political will, integration, surveillance grid, intelligence, targeting and collateral damage, escalation, training, night/weather capability, and media.³⁹ India seemingly pursued these doctrinal injunctions for the 2019 Balakot surgical strike. For example, Indian political leadership explicitly sanctioned the cross-border offensive air strike. Similarly, New Delhi directly commanded and directed the strike operation. Not surprisingly, all possible intelligence sources, surveillance, and reconnaissance were integrated and employed. During the conduct of the strike, collateral damage was consciously avoided. Wider contingency plans were developed and put in place in case an offensivestrike prompts escalation with Pakistan.⁴⁰ The designated squadrons were adequately trained beforehand. The selected crew was ready to operate different capabilities under different weather conditions. Finally, Indian media was effectively used to garner public support for such offensive air strikes against Pakistan. Indeed, this doctrine provided a blueprint for the planning and execution of the Balakot strike.

It is worth recalling that the Indian Air Force had conducted three major exercises to validate these doctrinal underpinnings, focusing on striking the targets with precision, which is rudimentary for sub-conventional operations to avoid collateral damage. These exercises

³⁹ Air Headquarters, *Basic Doctrine of the Air Force-2012*, 109-110.

⁴⁰ Air Marshal, B S Dhanoa, "Balakot Air Strike Anniversary: Dhanoa Reveals about the Trick Which Fooled Pakistan," interview by Jagwinder Patial, *ABP News*, February 27, 2020, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_xpEZOdgKg (Accessed on November 20, 2021).

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included all operational IAF platforms to be mission-ready simultaneously to perform high-risk operations under intense pressure in a shorter time, which is another criterion for success when executing sub-conventional offensive strikes. The exercises were conducted at the Pokhran firing range. They were concerned with accurately locating and destroying ground as well as air targets. During these drills, all of the IAF's systems were tested, including firing different munitions in real-time. Importantly, these exercises also synergized operations day and night. The following lines provide the salient characteristics of these military drills.

To begin with, the Indian Air Force conducted the Iron Fist 2016 exercise as a follow-up to Iron Fist 2013. The exercise involved 181 IAF aircraft, with the goal of demonstrating "capability to punish" over the entire spectrum of aerial operations.⁴¹ It was designed to assess the IAF's operational capability in real-time operations, with all its delivery systems effectively targeting an enemy. Gagan Shakti, which commenced on April 12, 2018, was the largest exercise the IAF had ever undertaken.⁴² The purpose of the exercise was to validate the precision of armaments and to improve the efficiency of IAF employment during intense and shorter periods of engagements with the adversary.⁴³ One of the most critical aspects of the exercise was the delivery of precision weaponry from aerial platforms in a real-time situation.⁴⁴ Finally just two weeks before Balakot surgical strike, IAF planned the Vayu Shakti

⁴¹ Franz-Stephan Gady, "Indian Air Force Might: 181 Aircraft to Participate in Large Combat Exercise in India," *The Diplomat*, March 18, 2016, Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/indian-air-force-might-181-aircraft-to-participate-in-large-combat-exercise-in-india/> (Accessed on November 20, 2021).

⁴² Vimal Bhatiya, "IAF Kicks Off Its Biggest Combat Drill Gagan Shakti in Jaisalmer," *Times of India*, April 12, 2018.

⁴³ Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "Conclusion of Exercise Gagan Shakti-2018," *PIB India*, April 24, 2018.

⁴⁴ Waqar Ahmed, "Indian Air Force Exercise and its Objectives," *The News*, April 23, 2018.

exercise on February 16, 2019. The exercise showcased IAF's latest doctrinal innovation and operational capabilities. While commenting on the salience of the exercise, IAF Chief B S Dhanoa stated: "We are showcasing our ability to hit hard, hit fast and hit with precision, hit during the day, hit during the night, and hit under adverse weather conditions through our autonomous bombing capability."⁴⁵ He did not mince words to correlate the exercise with the prospective surgical strike operations across the border by maintaining: "While wars are few and far between, we have an ever-present sub-conventional threat so today we showcase our ability to punish, our ability to insert and extricate our troops from hostile territories."⁴⁶

It is essential to mention that India's determination to employ air power to counter so-called sub-conventional threats has diversified the country's special operations capabilities. The use of air power was formerly deemed too risky by India's political class, which opposed using it to target sub-conventional threats, particularly across the border. The Indian Air Force (IAF), on the other hand, holds a different opinion. It was eager to employ its assets after the Indian air chief proposed air strikes against alleged terror sites in Azad Kashmir following the 2008 Mumbai attacks.⁴⁷ Owing to the ongoing Global War on Terrorism, the then Indian political leadership did not sanction direct action and only approved subversive activities against Pakistan.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the 2019 strike marks the end of the political elite's era of restraint amidst power transition in the international security system and the start of a new level of regional confrontation. The decision was long due because of

⁴⁵ Ajai Shukla, "Vayu Shakti 2019: Air Force Demonstrates Mega Firepower at Pokhran", *Business Standard*, February 16, 2019.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ George Perkovich and Toby Dalton, *Not War? Not Peace? Motivating Pakistan to Stop Cross Border Terrorism* (India: New Delhi, Oxford University Press), 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

the IAF's consistent advocacy, which had been persuading the political establishment for longer. The decision to utilize air power in sub-conventional warfare was the IAF's fantasy, which was realized only because of the Modi regime's political support during the Balakot strike.

Pakistan's Response

Pakistan prudently and strategically assessed India's provocative surgical strike special operations. In this regard, the Pakistani decision-makers explored the Indian surgical strike's intended political, military, and strategic purposes. They have presumably highlighted the following net political designs: 1) India is seeking to exercise strategic autonomy by violating the Pakistani airspace; 2) by undermining the 2003 Line of Control Ceasefire Agreement, it is attempting to advance its position over Jammu & Kashmir; 3) the surprise Indian attack is intended to undermine the Pakistani people confidence in its armed forces; 4) By citing non-state actors as a pretext of attack, it is attempting to portray Pakistan as a terrorism-sponsoring state internationally; and 5) it is renewing its efforts to establish regional hegemony by diluting the meanings of borders and territoriality.

In line with this, the Pakistani government viewed significant consequences in the military realm. It has plausibly underlined that India is endeavoring to demonstrate its technologically driven operational capabilities and prowess across the border. Along with this, it also aims to demoralize Pakistan's military. In the strategic sphere, the Indian armed forces intend to dilute the veto power of the Pakistani nuclear weapons. Taken together, the Indian provocative surgical strike challenged Pakistan's national security in many ways.

Pakistan re-energized its grand strategy to counter the Indian designs effectively. To this end, it directed and coordinated various elements of its national power. Pakistan vehemently denounced the

Indian military actions at the diplomatic and international levels. It dismissed the Indian claims of the 2016 surgical strikes, calling them "delusion and fabrication of truths."⁴⁹ On the Balakot strikes, the National Command Authority (NCA), the highest decision-making authority in the country's defence, condemned the strikes as reckless Indian behaviour intended to placate the domestic audience during an election season. The Indian misadventure, according to Pakistani foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, was a grave violation of the Line of Control. Pakistan reserved the right to respond.⁵⁰ The then military spokesperson, Major General Asif Ghafoor, claimed that the enemy air force did not strike any targets and that no one was killed.⁵¹ Moreover, the Pakistani government denied that India had surprised Pakistan, vowing to respond to Indian aggression at a place and time decided by Pakistan. "You will never be able to surprise us, and we have not been surprised," Asif Ghafoor asserted.⁵² "We were ready, we responded, we denied."⁵³ The net Pakistani response was that the Indian air force failed to hit its intended targets due to the prompt response of the Pakistani air force. The Indian government sanctioned the surgical strikes to incite nationalism to create favorable domestic conditions for elections. On the other hand, Pakistan will respond at its time and place. In line with these policy commitments, the Pakistani airforce effectively carried out well-restrained counter-air strikes under its deterrent doctrinal thinking.

⁴⁹ Ellen Barry and Salman Masood, "India Claims 'Surgical Strikes' Across Line of Control in Kashmir," *New York Times*, September 29, 2016.

⁵⁰ Murali Krishnan and S. Khan, "Pakistan Vows Retaliation After India's Airstrikes on Alleged Militant Camps," *DW News*, February 26, 2019.

⁵¹ George Steer, "From Suicide Bombing to Captured Pilot: A Timeline of the Latest Crisis in Kashmir," *Time*, February 28, 2019.

⁵² National News, "Time for India to Wait for Our Response: ISPR DG Debunks New Delhi's Claims on LoC Violation," *Dawn News*, February 26, 2019.

⁵³ Muhammed Anis and Muhammed Saleh Zafir, "We will Pick Time, Place to Hit Back," *The News*, February 27, 2019.

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In order to restrict space to Indian surgical strikes and maintain conventional deterrence in the immediate future, the Pakistani military has inducted a variety of sophisticated and advanced weaponry capable of countering threats in challenging environments. Following the 2019 Balakot strikes, the force development strategy underwent significant revisions. Military and political leadership in Pakistan concluded that to maintain deterrence against India, they needed to undertake preventive, proportionate, and non-escalatory steps that thwart India from striking below the nuclear threshold. To this end, Pakistan procured, inter alia, fighter jets, air defence weapons systems, radars, and armed drones. Introducing and deploying air defence weapons systems, such as the HQ-9 surface-to-air missile system, improves airspace deterrence. The HQ-9 has a long-range and is easily deployable, allowing it to secure and make impenetrable airspace. According to Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Pakistan, the system was officially inducted into the court of arms on October 14, 2021, with the primary objective of having a "Comprehensive Layered Integrated Air Defence (CLIAD)."⁵⁴ In the absence of a costly Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system, Pakistan can use the abovementioned capability to safeguard its airspace at a lower cost. Furthermore, the Balakot strike prompted Pakistan to speed up the induction of the J-10 Vigorous Dragon, which Pakistan first selected in 2006. The 4.5th generation aircraft has Active Electronic Scanned Array (AESA) radar and is equipped with Beyond Visual Range (BVR) capability.⁵⁵

Parallel to this, Pakistan has also purchased modern radars and drones. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has inducted and operationalized the American-made TPS-77 MRR long-range radar to improve situational awareness. The radar has a detection range of 300 to 500 kilometers

⁵⁴ Samuel Cranny-Evans & Gabriel Dominguez, "Pakistan Army Commissions HQ-9/P Air-Defence System," *JANES*, October 15, 2021.

⁵⁵ Sebastien Roblin, "China's J-10C Is No F-35, But It is a Cutting-Edge 4.5-Generation Jet," *National Interest*, August 06, 2020.

and can even detect aerial threats in valleys.⁵⁶ Coupled with this, the PAF inducted a Chinese-made YLC-8 long-range radar to close low-level air defence vulnerabilities.⁵⁷ In a cluttered electronic warfare environment, this radar system effectively detects stealth fighter and helicopter aircraft with an extended range of 500 km.⁵⁸ Previously, the PAF lacked this capability. Aside from that, Pakistan has shown keen interest in new and advanced drone systems to help with border surveillance. Cai Hong-4 (CH-4), Un-crewed Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), was procured from China that can stay in the air for an extended period of time and have the potential to strike the enemy as well as to conduct surveillance.⁵⁹ This has increased PAF's ability to monitor country's airspace round the clock.

Besides the air domain, Pakistan also enhanced its conventional land capabilities. It has tested and deployed Fateh-1 Multiple Launch rocket systems, which has a range of about 150 kilometers.⁶⁰ Fateh-1 was prioritized to lessen dependency on Nasr short-range nuclear-capable missiles. In the meantime, Pakistan has increased its armored forces' effectiveness in countering Indian ground thrust. In this regard, Pakistan purchased VT-4 tanks from China and entered them into service to bolster the strike capabilities of ground forces. Additionally, to increase its firepower Pakistani army procured SH-15 self-propelled

⁵⁶News Desk, "Pakistan Improves Defence with Two New Radar Systems," *Global Village Space*, November 29, 2021, Available at: <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.globalvillagespace.com/pakistan-improves-defence-with-two-new-radar-systems/%3famp> (Accessed on December 11, 2021).

⁵⁷ Web Desk, "PAF has Added New Radar Equipment to Its Air Defense Monitoring System," *Bol News*, December 02, 2021, Available at: <https://www.bolnews.com/latest/2021/12/paf-has-added-new-radar-equipment-to-its-air-defense-monitoring-system/amp/> (Accessed on December 11, 2021).

⁵⁸ P.C. Katoch, "China's Anti-Stealth Radar," *SP'S Aviation*, November 02, 2021.

⁵⁹ Gabriel Dominguez, "Pakistan Receives Five CH-4 from China," *JANES*, January 27, 2021.

⁶⁰ News Desk, "Pakistan Tests Multi-Launch Rocket System," *Dawn News*, January 08, 2021.

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howitzer from China in the early half of this year.⁶¹ The system has an approximate range of 50 kilometers. It can fire satellite and GPS-guided munitions.⁶² The system has provided the Pakistan army with precision artillery targeting capabilities that it previously lacked. The Pakistani navy's combat surface and sub-surface ships, radars, and command & control systems have also been modernized.

The Pakistani armed forces refined several doctrinal concepts for different levels of war after the Balakot incident. Pakistan has conducted military exercises across three domains to validate new ideas and weaponry. For example, it has conducted the "National Air Defence exercise," which focuses on synergistic and integrated employment of defensive and offensive forces.⁶³ The exercise, which also involved army air defense assets and was coordinated by the PAF air defense command, affirms the integration of sensors and targeting systems from all services under one roof to enhance conventional deterrence. In a realistic threat environment, the exercise involved scrambling fighter jets and force multipliers simultaneously. Its goal was to boost the Pakistani armed forces' offensive and defensive operations prowess. Pakistan went for this military drill after realizing that if the country's air defence were under one command rather than multiple, the response to the Balakot incident would have been considerably better. The unification of air defence assets under an integrated air defence command led by the air force is a classic example.

⁶¹"Pakistan Receives First Chinese-Made SH-15 155mm Self-Propelled Howitzers," *Army Recognition*, January 25, 2021, Available at: <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.armyrecognition.com/defense-news-january-2022-global-security-army-industry/pakistan-receives-first-chinese-made-sh-15-155mm-self-propelled-howitzers.html> (Accessed on December 11, 2021).

⁶²Christopher F Foss, "NORINCO marketing SH-15 155 mm Artillery System for Export," *JANES*, June 10, 2020

⁶³Muhammad Anis, "PAF Conducts National Air Defence Exercise," *The Nation*, February 04, 2022.

Conclusion

Sun Tzu's classic treatise provides critical insights into mapping the Indian thinking and practice of surgical strikes' special operations. Inspired by the US and Israeli surgical strikes, India is fast developing and executing its special operations doctrine to exercise strategic autonomy against Pakistan. India may eventually feel tempted to broaden the scope of surgical strikes across domains, employing a range of indirect tactics and Special Forces. To deny any military space to India, Pakistan instills the survival/deterrent doctrinal spirit into its special operations warfare. Accordingly, it is conceiving its training institutions, force composition, and command & control systems. It is essential to underline that both countries are increasingly linking their special operations strategy with their overall military plans. As surgical strikes are designed for operational and strategic purposes within a nuclearized environment, these special operations undertakings and counter undertakings have a high risk of quickly developing into a full-fledged war. In this backdrop, regional and international communities must revisit their apathy towards the conduct of Indian provocative special operations. Instead of viewing Indian surgical strikes as isolated and benign sub-conventional military actions, they need to reckon with surgical strikes' operational and strategic purposes, as well as their link with wider military strategy. Deep inside an opponent's territory, special operations seriously threaten the institutions of the border, territoriality, geopolitics, balance of power, diplomacy, and international law. Therefore, regional and international players must exert pressure on India to abandon irrational and risky military actions in the interests of regional peace and stability.