Pre-emption, Precision and Perception

Strategic and Doctrinal Lessons for India from Operations *Rising Lion* and *Midnight Hammer*

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Introduction

Warfare today is characterised not merely by territory gained or adversaries neutralised, but by the ability to shape perceptions, compress timelines and dominate across multiple domains. Contemporary wars have witnessed a tectonic shift in the goals of war, the rules of war, the players and the instruments of war, reshaping its character and unlimiting its boundaries. It is an era of C5ISR-based saturation stand-off attacks with space-based NPT and AI empowering precision strikes, while quantum communication makes the channels secure. Technology is transforming the character and the future of warfare.

The recent Israel–Iran confrontation, culminating in Operations *Rising Lion* and *Midnight Hammer*, demonstrates a shift towards operations designed to be swift, surgical and strategically synchronised. Both the campaigns, while distinct in their tactical execution, were rooted in a shared imperative, i.e., deter further aggression through pre-emption, precision and multi-domain domination.

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For India, the lessons are timely. Given some similarities of beyond visual range strikes in the Indian context, the planning, conduct and post-operation follow-up actions merit introspection as relevant to the Indian context. India must internalise, innovate and prepare, as future conflicts will demand smart warfighting where the battlespace geometry is matched by cognitive geography.

This commentary explores how India can draw critical lessons from these operations, not only to reinforce deterrence but to institutionalise a national response mechanism that is integrated, agile and technologically superior.

Operational Overview

Operation Rising Lion: Israel's Doctrine at Work

Unfolding in April 2025, *Operation Rising Lion* was Israel's immediate response to Iranian drone and missile attacks on its territory. Over three days, the Israeli Air Force, in coordination with cyber and space assets, struck command-and-control centres in Shiraz, Isfahan and strategic air bases near Tehran. According to the official sources of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the strikes neutralised radar systems, nuclear development corridors and IRGC-linked sites without significant collateral damage. The strikes were preceded by creating psychological paralysis through the assassination of top military leadership and the nuclear scientists of Iran.

Notably, the operation was preceded by a calculated campaign of misdirection, including fake radar signatures and cyber-jamming of Iranian air defences. Israeli platforms operated deep within Iranian airspace, a feat achieved through synchronised suppression of enemy air defence and electronic warfare efforts.

Operation Midnight Hammer: Strategy in Motion

Launched on 22 June 2025, *Operation Midnight Hammer* was a US-led strike campaign against Iranian nuclear infrastructure, drone hubs and command nodes. Sparked by the threat of nuclear proliferation, the operation unfolded over 20 hours (18 hours in traversing and 2 hours in bombing), combining stealth bombers, cyber disruption and electronic warfare. The hallmark of the campaign was its clarity of purpose, i.e., degrade Iran's nuclear programme, reaffirm red lines and exit with strategic messaging intact. The strategic deception was built in by President Trump's ambiguity of time and intent.

The operation was a "strategy in motion", where civil–military fusion, tempo control and pre-emptive logic coalesced to deliver effect without entrapment. The campaign's integration of space-based ISR, dynamic targeting, deception routing and narrative dominance set a new benchmark for future conflicts.

Comparative Analysis: Precision Without Protraction

While the two operations differ in origin (*Midnight Hammer* being US-led 'Bombing for Peace', and *Rising Lion* a unilateral Israeli campaign), both demonstrate the viability of short-duration, high-impact military operations that prioritise perception over attrition.

Table 1 Comparative overview of Operations Midnight Hammer and Rising Lion

Parameter	Operation Midnight Hammer	Operation Rising Lion
Trigger	Iran's nuclear ambition on the threshold	Iranian missile and drone barrage
Objective	Degrade Iran's nuclear capability; restore deterrence	Deter escalation; signal resolve
Duration	18+2 hours (Flying + Strike)	12 days
Domains Engaged	Air, Missiles, Cyber, Space, Information	Air, Missile, Cyber, Electronic Warfare and IW
Outcome	Strategic reset; no protracted war; ceasefire attained	Escalation averted; tactical success

While Israel created the situation, the US struck decisively. Both campaigns were rooted in a few shared principles:

- *Defined political objectives*: There was no ambiguity about the 'why' or the 'when'. These were not open-ended campaigns.
- *Multi-domain integration*: Airpower was backed by cyber and space, with real-time C5ISR shaping target engagement.
- *Perception management*: Both governments controlled the narrative, not just domestically but globally.
- *Exit strategy built in*: Operations concluded once goals were met. There was no extension under political or military pressure.

For India, where lines between tactical response and strategic messaging often blur, this clarity is a lesson in itself.

Strategic and Doctrinal Lessons for India

Civil–Military Fusion and Political–Military Synchronisation

Both operations were anchored in strong civil–military synergy. The political leadership was not merely a recipient of military briefs but a co-author of escalation ladders, exit strategies and public messaging. Strategic planning decisions were not merely military, they were political, diplomatic and informational, executed with seamless synchronisation. Civilian leadership was not just informed but intimately involved in scenario planning, escalation matrices and even messaging plans. The war cabinet's structure allowed operational freedom to commanders while ensuring political objectives remained central.

India must institutionalise a War Cabinet model where the Prime Minister, Defence Minister, NSA, CDS and Service Chiefs convene to simulate, plan and communicate in real-time. There must be seamless sharing of intelligence and coherence-cum-synchronisation of the application of all tools of national power. This can only happen if a national security strategy with scenario-building exercises is institutionalised.

India's experience in *Operation Sindoor* reflected nascent strides in this direction, yet the same needs to be refined and institutionalised.

Command Integration: The Real Weapon

The actual victory for the US–Israel side wasn't in the explosives dropped but in the orchestration. *Operation Midnight Hammer* revealed a warfighting model India can't afford to ignore. The integration of Strategic Command, Space Command, Cyber Command and Theatre Command was frictionless. Bombers launched from Missouri were tracked by space-based ISR assets, redirected mid-flight via AI-backed command nodes, and supported by cyber jamming campaigns that blinded Iranian radars. And above all, a deception element (e.g., decoy flight path to Guam) was strategically successful.

It was everything *Operation Eagle Claw*, America's botched 1980 Iran rescue mission, wasn't. It was not just a strike. It was a symphony of invisible domains—electromagnetic, orbital, cognitive.

India's military, still siloed in service-specific mindsets, is decades away from achieving this level of fusion. Unless integration at the theatre level becomes real, not rhetorical, India will remain a platform-rich, outcome-poor force. India has taken some tiny steps towards integration and transition to real-time multi-domain operation rooms, interoperable data links and

mission-level tasking. Yet, a lot more needs to be done. The cobwebs are more in the cognitive domain than in the physical domain.

Moreover, C5ISR capability must evolve into a Combat Cloud, a 24/7 AI-enabled grid connecting satellites, sensors, shooters and commanders. As *Operation Rising Lion* demonstrated, C5ISR without delay is the new battlefield currency.

Strategic Communication and Narrative Warfare

Both the US and Israel exercised strategic narrative dominance. Joint press briefings by political and military leaders, direct messaging to adversaries, and narrative shaping through international media were integral to mission success.

Future conflicts will be as much about perception as about attrition. New Delhi must integrate narrative shaping into war planning, from pre-conflict signalling to post-strike justification. There is a need for the apex level (Prime Minister, Defence Minister, Defence Secretary and Chief of Defence Staff) to address such press conferences for strategic impact, similar to the follow-up of *Operation Midnight Hammer*.

India must appoint a Director General of Strategic Communication, reporting to the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and the National Security Advisor (NSA), capable of controlling the pre-, during- and post-conflict narrative. Every bullet must be followed by a coherent, integrated sentence. Every strike, by a story, the silence of individual stories is no longer strategic or plausible. Strategic communication must be at the strategic level and differentiated from 'Review of Situation' tactical briefings.

Precision Without Attrition: Effect-Based Targeting

Rather than seeking mass attrition or ground occupation, both the campaigns focussed on rendering critical infrastructure inoperable, i.e., command nodes, drone facilities and communication hubs. India must transition towards Effect-Based Operations (EBOs). As in *Operation Midnight Hammer*, where precision missiles destroyed air defence coordination centres, India's doctrine must prioritise systemic paralysis over territorial gain.

This shift demands investment in long-range stand-off weapons, like hypersonic glide vehicles, AI-enabled UCAVs, Pralay and BrahMos variants, and swarm drones. A "Doctrine of Precision Mass": Volume + Accuracy + Simultaneity, must be codified.

India must not just prepare to fight, but to fight smart and finish faster. Precision missile stockpiles, hardened command structures and cross-domain attack doctrines must move from paper to practice.

Proactive and Pre-emptive Doctrine

Operation Rising Lion and *Operation Midnight Hammer* did not wait to absorb a larger blow. They acted at a threshold that was political, not kinetic. The lesson for India is clear, i.e., pre-emption strikes must not be taboo. India has moved from strategic restraint to strategic assertion, but must now move on to multi-domain strategic pre-emption.

India's bold assertion that 'an act of terror is an act of war' must evolve from a political declaration to a military doctrine. Further, to be proactive and pre-emptive, it must transition into 'Threat of Terror = Assured Retribution'.

This requires six pillars:

1. *Clear Thresholds*: Define what constitutes a trigger: mass-casualty attacks, strategic infrastructure sabotage, or verified intelligence of imminent action. This requires a major upgrade in India's operational intelligence domain and covert efforts.
2. *Escalation Management*: Build a ladder of options, from cyber and Electronic Warfare to kinetic decapitation strikes, each with political control but military autonomy. Future warfare capabilities need to be inbuilt to fight smart through smart 'Atmanirbharta'. The present model is not suitable.
3. *Repeatability*: Equip the forces with rapid-response drone and missile brigades, tri-service task forces and joint cyber ISR cells.
4. *Cognitive Warfare*: Redefine Strategic Communications empowered with narrative control pre-, during- and post-conflict.
5. *C5ISR Integration*: Build a 24/7 AI-enabled combat cloud linking satellites, sensors, shooters and decision-makers.
6. *Doctrinal Formalisation*: Codify the Cold Strike doctrine into a national strategy, reviewed annually and exercised regularly.

It is premised on credible intelligence indicating an imminent terror threat, a surge in terrorist infrastructure, or escalating proxy war activities originating from Pakistan that pose a direct threat to India's national security. It is aimed to:

- *Deny* the adversary options.
- *Disrupt* their systems and tempo.

- *Degrade* their capacity and narrative.
- *Dominate* escalation and post-conflict framing.

Missile, Rocket and Drone Strike Capability: Doctrine of Precise Mass

What the Iran–Israel crisis makes painfully clear is this: in modern deterrence, platforms matter less than integration. The US and Israel didn't just fire missiles, they fused command nodes, ISR feeds, cyber assets and kinetic platforms into a seamless grid. That's deterrence by orchestration.

The larger threat is from China, whose military capability differential remains substantial both in quality, technology, quantity and defence military industrial base. It is here that the concerns lie in missile capability, air defence and defence industrial capacity.

There is a need for a Missile, Rocket and Drone Strike Force at each theatre level by restructuring and reorganising the existing Artillery Division into a Strike Force. This would be over and above the Strategic Force Command that exists.

Denial, Domination and Depth

Both *Rising Lion* and *Midnight Hammer* operated on two verticals: denial (through suppression of capability) and domination (through seizure of initiative). India must move beyond the logic of limited, linear operations. Multi-vector entries, simultaneous domain engagements, and a sense of overwhelming verticality must define future operations.

The concept of layered denial, especially in grey zones, cyber and space, must be embedded in India's warfighting playbook. Capability building for denial must be based on the equipping philosophy of 'Capability-cum-Opportunity', and not 'Threat-cum-Capability'. Similarly, our deterrence must be based on 'Denial and Domination' rather than just punishment or assured retribution. Depth is today ambiguous with the weapon system reach and thus must be part of the battlespace dislocation effort.

The Illusion of Decapitation: Covert and Overt Leadership Targeting

The most celebrated photograph from the Israel–Iran war was not from the cockpit of a bomber or a drone feed. It was the image of four senior IRGC generals seated in a bunker after the strikes, each with a white cross digitally overlaid on their chest, a message sent by Israel's Unit 8200: "We know exactly where you are. You live because we chose not to kill."

This was not war. This was psychological warfare at 4K resolution. Post assassination, over a dozen top military hierarchy and another dozen top

nuclear scientists of Iran were assassinated by Israel; the fear of assassination is real and impacting the minds of the hierarchy.

Such messaging, non-kinetic, targeted, escalatory, defines 21st-century power. India, too often focused on the physical domain, has yet to master this grammar of psychological dominance and covert expertise.

Escalation Management and Conflict Termination

Perhaps the most critical takeaway is the clarity of the exit strategy. Neither campaign sought regime change. When objectives were achieved, operations ceased, and political messaging took over. India must define escalation ladders with exit points and conflict termination profiles, reviewed periodically and rehearsed at the highest levels.

Operation Sindoor revealed India's capacity to dominate escalation without overstretch. This must now be formalised into an *escalation control doctrine* with built-in multi-domain convergence at each rung.

Such a doctrine must have:

- Defined exit points at each level of retaliation.
- Pre-approved diplomatic messaging templates.
- Wargamed post-strike containment plans.
- Integrated economic, cyber and narrative levers.

Escalation control is not about doing less, it is about doing just enough, and knowing when to stop.

Duration of Wars

There are no templates for the duration of the war. It may be a cold strike of limited duration like *Op Sindoor* or a long-drawn-out conflict like the wars in Ukraine and Middle East. *The critical aspect is self-reliance, war stamina and war endurance of the nation.* Thus, while the aim could be to fight a short-duration war, it could end up as a long-duration, endless conflict. Thus, war initiation, conflict management, identifying the desired end-state and conflict termination are important strategic constructs that must be deliberated and allow flexibility in the face of an evolving operational situation.

Technology and Force Development Implications

Space and Cyber as Core Warfighting Domains

Military space and cyber capabilities were central in both operations, enabling positioning, navigation, targeting, communication and disruption. India must establish a fully empowered Military Space Command as a critical

domain and elevate cyber warfare to a strategic theatre. Satellite resilience, orbital path manoeuvrability, revisit time orchestration, launch-on-demand capabilities, multiple defence satellite integrated architecture, including LEO and offensive cyber toolkits, must be prioritised.

The imperative is not merely to develop hardware but to integrate space into theatre-level battle management systems. Space is not a support domain anymore, it is a warfighting domain.

Long-Range Precision and Stealth

The defining aspect of *Midnight Hammer* was the ability to strike beyond geography with precision. Distance became irrelevant when technology and tactics aligned. The cruising range of bombers/aircraft with multiple aerial refuelling has changed the concept of distance. Long-range cruise missiles and stealth drones ensure stand-off engagement. India must scale its precision strike capability, whether via BrahMos variants, Pralay missiles, or long-endurance Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs). Precision is deterrence in the post-modern battlefield. Stealth bombers and modern strike aircraft are today critical for battlespace success.

Operation Midnight Hammer also reinforced a crucial principle of modern conflict, i.e., precision mass. It is not enough to strike accurately, one must strike with volume, simultaneity, and beyond expectation. India must evolve a 'Doctrine of Precise Mass' that employs long-range ballistic missiles, hypersonic glide vehicles, deep-penetration aerial assets and AI-embedded drone swarms into a single, integrated offensive saturation package.

Such a doctrine would ensure that saturation attacks are not only technologically possible but doctrinally planned and operationally optimised. The aim is to dislocate the adversary, and physically, mentally, morally and technologically paralyse his cognitive and physical capabilities. Hypersonic glide weapons, with their unpredictable flight profiles, manoeuvrability and compressed timelines, can penetrate even layered defence architecture and evade ballistic missile defence systems. Simultaneously, mass-scale AI-enabled drones and swarms must saturate airspace, distract interceptors and destroy high-value targets.

The success of such a doctrine hinges on integration across services and platforms, supported by a future-relevant balanced inventory and net-centric capabilities. India's future strategic posture must combine precision, speed and volume, not as separate concepts but as a unified warfighting instrument.

However, in the Indian operational environment, there are disputed borders both with China and Pakistan. Thus, while technology will be a force multiplier and Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) critical assets, boots and tracks on the ground will continue to matter. India now needs to codify a Cold Strike Doctrine, a fundamental shift towards a repeatable, pre-emptive and strategic posture of deterrence through denial and domination. India also needs a strategy that turns Pakistan's low-cost, high-benefit proxy war option into a high-cost, low-benefit option or China's salami-slicing options into humiliation.

SEAD (Suppression of Enemy Air Defence) and Aerial Superiority

In the opening hours of *Operation Midnight Hammer*, ensuring the survivability of the strike package was non-negotiable. Central to this was the deployment of high-speed suppression assets designed to neutralise Iranian surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems before they could engage. In the case of *Operation Midnight Hammer*, the shaping of SEAD through a 12-day prior duel between Israel and Iran significantly contributed to its success.

Yet no Air Defence system is foolproof. Iran's missile inventory, spread across hardened sites, mobile platforms and proxy conduits, remained largely intact. Its ability to launch a mass cruise and ballistic missile retaliation in response to the strikes made one thing brutally evident, i.e., missile defence, no matter how advanced, can only degrade, not eliminate it. Arrow-2, Arrow-3 and David Sling intercepted many; Iron Dome and THAAD did their part. But some missiles got through. The narrative of "successful interception" rang hollow when cities across Israel and US bases in Iraq and Syria felt the thud of residual impact.

India must enhance its SEAD capacity through Advanced Anti-Radiation Guided Missiles, decoys, EW pods and stealth UCAVs. Establishing "strike corridors" through suppression is non-negotiable. Yet, be prepared to fight through the corridor.

India's air defence topology is fragmented. The S-400 is powerful, but coverage gaps persist in the multi-tiered and multi-layered Air Defence architecture. There is no fully networked pan-India air defence system. The present architecture is military-based, not at the national geographical level.

Air dominance, as achieved in the Israel–Iran war, cannot be replicated in the Indian context in relation to its adversaries. Yet, air power alone cannot win battles and needs to be complemented by missiles and drones. Further distance punishment must be complemented by an adaptive multi-dimensional manoeuvre.

AI Integration in Precision Warfare

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer a futuristic endeavour but a battlespace manifestation. *Operation Midnight Hammer* had aerial systems and support software embedded with AI across the kill chain. India must accelerate the integration of AI into the decision and kill chain, both on platforms and decision support systems. Future conflict demands compression of the OODA loop and assured precision kill chains to outpace the adversary. India must invest much more in this field at multiple levels. AI must be treated as a combat multiplier, one that turns sensors into shooters and ISR data into actionable options at the least cost and minimum time.

Quantum Communication and Secure Command Chains

The fragility of legacy communication networks under cyber and electronic attack was evident. In contrast, the coalition's deployment of prototype quantum communication channels ensured the survivability of command and control, even under denial-heavy environments. India must invest more in quantum-encrypted networks, photon-based key distribution, and hardening of tri-service strategic foolproof communication.

Leadership and Professional Military Education

The real strength of *Operation Midnight Hammer* lay in its leadership coherence. Political resolve, military precision and diplomatic clarity came together. The President was not just a political figurehead, he led the war communication. The Joint Force Commander had theatre-level autonomy. The National Security Advisor chaired the escalation matrix cell.

For India, this means ensuring the National Security Council Secretariat is warfighting ready. Theatre commanders must be war-gamed in political-strategic messaging. Crisis leadership must be both decentralised and unified. That is, one nation, one decision grid and one escalation plan.

India must re-engineer its Professional Military Education (PME) system:

- Make PME joint at all levels, especially for emerging operational areas (cyber, EW, space, ISR) in a multi-domain environment.
- Shift curricula towards simulation, operational design and predictive analytics.
- Institutionalise fellowships and exchanges with Indian academic, strategic and technology institutions.

Commanders of tomorrow must be multi-domain thought leaders, not single-domain specialists.

India's War-Waging Capability and Defence Ecosystem

The success of such operations hinges on readiness, both institutional and industrial. The US was able to execute *Operation Midnight Hammer* because its munitions, platforms, leadership and doctrines were in a state of combat readiness, i.e., self-sufficient and self-reliant.

India's defence ecosystem must move from being a buyer's market to a builder's economy. It must strengthen the Public–Private Partnership to integrate the private sector, especially start-ups and MSMEs, into mainstream acquisition and R&D.

Public–Private fusion, MSME innovation corridors and technology partnerships must transition from policy to practice. The defence sector must become war-waging ready, not procurement-paralysed. There is a need for 'Smart Atmanirbharta' to fight smart, and a matching budgetary envelope.

Strategic Discourse and Vision

Similar to the Centre for Contemporary China Studies (CCCS), a think tank of the Government of India, there is a need for the Centre for Contemporary Pakistan Studies (CCPS). The payoffs will be in terms of proactive strategic thinking about the threats along India's western borders.

National Citizens' Security Culture

No security strategy is complete without societal resilience. A *National Citizens' Security Culture* must be cultivated to make security a collective civic responsibility. Citizens must be sensitised to both kinetic and non-kinetic threats, especially disinformation and sleeper cell infiltration. The government should institutionalise civil participation through initiatives like the initiative under CAPSI (Central Association of Private Security Industry), integrating it as an auxiliary force to support national security efforts.

Conclusion

Operation Rising Lion and *Operation Midnight Hammer* have reaffirmed a strategic axiom, i.e., pre-emption, precision, perception and preparedness can achieve what prolonged attrition cannot. It has also established the need for a multi-domain capability building and the right balancing of domains. For India, surrounded by active threats and hybrid adversaries, these operations serve not as blueprints for analysis but as frameworks for adaptation.

Deterrence today lies not in declarations, but in demonstrable capability, doctrinal clarity and integrated response mechanisms. India's journey

from *Surakshit Bharat* to *Viksit Bharat* will depend on its ability to strike first with lethality and speed in a multi-domain architecture, strategically communicate clearly, and be at a high level of operational readiness for escalation dynamics.

When deterrence fails, and it often will, outcomes will be decided by the clarity of doctrine, agility of force and unity of political–military resolve. India must be future-ready for multi-domain threats to its national interest and sovereignty.