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The War of Disruption

Early Strategic Lessons from the US-Iran War and Implications for Indian Force Design

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Contents

1 Executive Summary

This paper argues that disruption can defeat destruction: a weaker actor structured to absorb the opening blow and impose sustained cost can prevail by outlasting the adversary's political will. India must build both to impose that cost on a stronger adversary, and to deny a weaker one the parity narrative. The binding constraint is institutional.

The US-Iran war provides empirical evidence for India's dual security compulsions: it must simultaneously build forces capable of both imposing costs and absorbing them.

- **The China Challenge (Asymmetric Weakness)** India must deter China by imposing high costs and denying it cheap dominance.
- **The Pakistan Challenge (Asymmetric Strength)** India must withstand Pakistan's disruptions, denying them the parity narrative the disruption strategy seeks to orchestrate.

1.1 Key Findings

- **Strategic Failure** The US air campaign achieved tactical dominance but failed to convert it into a political or strategic victory.
- **Frugal Defence** Iran demonstrated that targeting an adversary's forward bases and support systems provides a cheap, highly disruptive defence.
- **Saturated Missile Defences** The mass deployment of manoeuvring re-entry vehicles (MaRVs) appears to have degraded the reliability of top-tier interceptors, including THAAD and Arrow-3.
- **Depleted Stock:** The US spent nearly half of its precision munitions and interceptors in just seven weeks, needing it 4-5 years to restock. India's supply situation is structurally worse.
- **Chinese Tech Collusion:** Iran's precise targeting relied on a covert 2024 Chinese spy satellite (TEE-01B). Pakistan is likely to continue to receive similar space-based intelligence from China as they did in Operation Sindoor.
- **India's True Bottleneck** India's greatest constraint is its slow institutional decision-making velocity, not a lack of military hardware.

1.2 Force Design Implications

- **Three Immediate Priorities**
- Conventional Rocket Force as the leading instrument, a drone force at scale, and a dedicated SEAD/DEAD (Suppression and Destruction of Enemy Air Defences) capability.

- A medium-term naval shift adding the Sea-Based Conventional Strike Platform (SBCSP) in addition to the carrier capabilities.
- Simultaneously, hardening of defences through dispersed basing, expanded interceptor capabilities with civil resilience, and integrated air and missile defence.
- **Two Institutional Requirements**
- A National Multi-Domain Operations Headquarters.
- A strategic communication capability connected to the same operational picture. None of the force-structure measures above can be fully realised without these two institutional reforms.

2 Introduction: The War We Misread

2.1 Operation Epic Fury failed to validate Western assumptions that US air superiority would create rapid strategic decisiveness.

> Operation Epic Fury is the American name for the air and missile campaign against Iran that opened on 28 February 2026. It followed the twelve-day Israeli-Iranian exchange of June 2025, a precedent the campaign's planners largely discounted. The opening wave killed the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, within hours. Over 6,000 combat sorties had been flown by mid-March and some thirteen thousand targets struck across seven weeks of intensive operations. The Strait of Hormuz stayed closed throughout. A memorandum of understanding signed in mid-June 2026 set a sixty-day settlement window and lifted the naval blockade, with both sides still striking each other while the talks ran. Seven weeks of kinetic operations concluded in a contested ceasefire rather than a clear US-Israeli victory.

Iran successfully closed the Strait of Hormuz and undertook strike operations against regional infrastructure and US forward bases. The judgement is not an outsider's. Reviewing the campaign at CSIS on 24 July 2026[1], Lieutenant General Clint Hinote, formerly the US Air Force's deputy chief for strategy, granted that the military objectives were being met but called the translation into strategic success "the weakness in this entire operation," adding that the present outcome would not have sat within the theory of success drawn up in February.

A further lesson concerns institutional orientation. The CSIS reviewers noted that a quarter-century of operations against lesser adversaries had left the US force optimised for uncontested air and spectrum, and that its enabler network and forward bases paid a price for assumptions that no longer held. The Indian parallel is narrower but real. India's reorientation toward China is already under way, but it is largely continental and northern. The proposed maritime strategy—dominating Indian Ocean choke

points and weaponizing the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as forward offensive platforms—requires specialized strike assets that India's land-centric force structure cannot yet provide. Although the conceptual shift toward the sea is correct, maritime force posture continues to lag the preparedness levels on land. This analytical failure arose from ignoring the preceding 2025 Twelve-Day War and applying a flawed theory of coercion against an adversary prepared for resilience. Rather than matching American airpower, Iran's doctrine successfully prioritised surviving initial strikes, preserving its offensive capabilities, and eroding the adversary's political will.

For India, this conflict serves as an empirical, real-time example of the dual threats posed by China's advanced anti-access/area-denial architecture and Pakistan's integrated asymmetric capabilities. Because modern airpower encompasses multi-domain air, missile, drone, and maritime strike capabilities, the doctrinal lessons of the Gulf War demand a comprehensive re-evaluation of India's entire joint-force design and planning, rather than of its air force alone.

2.2 Indian force planning usually considers the China and Pakistan fronts as two distinct problems, with each requiring its own capabilities, doctrine, and force structure. This paper argues that they are better addressed as one problem viewed from two directions. A single missile-led, institutionally integrated force can manage both threats. India's relative power dynamic is inverted on each front: India is the stronger power against Pakistan but the weaker against China. This implies that a defensive capability on one front becomes an offensive one on the other.

2.3 The paper further argues that India's limitations are not primarily weapon systems, though there is a challenge in that regard, but the decision and action velocities. The missing element is a civilian-led national headquarters capable of multi-domain-operations. This measure would reduce decision delay and enable a whole-of-nation approach, without adopting the civil-military control that China, Iran, and Pakistan employ in varying forms. As an empirical case study, the US-Iran conflict illustrates how a weaker power can impose sustained costs on a superior opponent, translating the theory of disruption into concrete effects.

3 Analytical Frame: From Domain Superiority to System Competition

3.1 **Airpower within a system**. Airpower does not produce strategic outcomes on its own against a resilient adversary. It must work within a multi-domain strike system of missiles, drones, electronic warfare, and a coherent kill chain[2].

The kill chain is the sequence of steps needed to complete a strike: finding, fixing, tracking, targeting, engaging and assessing. Each step depends on the one before it, so breaking a single link defeats the strike without destroying the platform at the end of it. This is why airborne early warning aircraft, tankers, satellite links and ground radars repay attack more than fighters do. Iran's campaign against American enablers attacked the chain rather than the platforms it fed.

It also requires a complementary land or naval component if military success is to translate into lasting political effect. Precision-strike capability remains necessary, but Iran's case shows it is no longer sufficient: persistence and the capacity to impose sustained cost now determine outcomes as much as precision and decisiveness do. The central contest in this war was the kill chain: finding, fixing, tracking, and engaging targets, rather than platform-against-platform combat. Disrupting the opponent's kill chain proved more consequential than any individual action.

3.2 **Destruction without a political mechanism**. Air operations can inflict large-scale destruction. Converting that destruction into political outcomes requires either internal regime vulnerability or complementary instruments; Iran faced limited, manageable dangers from the first, and none of the second. Iranian leaders had spent two decades building an architecture designed to absorb the opening blow and outlast the adversary's political timeline. When Iranian decision-making frameworks survived the rapid decapitation of top leadership within seventy-two hours, Washington attempted to substitute political objectives with purely military targets. This shift failed. A campaign without a clearly defined metric for victory cannot measure strategic progress. The campaign's own reviewers identified a sharper version of the same trap. Hinote, who wrote his doctoral work on decapitation strikes, argued that the opening wave was so successful it removed the very interlocutors who could have delivered a concession.[3] An operation that began as decapitation became one of coercion, and the two worked against each other. Destruction had eliminated the mechanism through which destruction was meant to produce a result.

3.3 **Limitations of crewed air power**. The conclusion that airpower failed to compel Iran addresses crewed, platform-centric aviation rather than the broader air-and-missile systems. The missile and drone dimensions succeeded, closing the Strait of Hormuz, degrading forward bases, and forcing the negotiation, while the manned campaign achieved no independent political outcomes. Rather than displacing airpower, doctrine must mandate that crewed platforms hand over the opening phase of the air offensive to uncrewed systems, entering only after the threat environment is reshaped.

3.4 **Early crewed intervention offers tactical value but introduces disproportionate strategic risk.** An expended missile is a munition, whereas a lost aircraft risks captured

aircrew. The standoff logic of Operation Sindoor explicitly sought to avoid this political liability.

> Operation Sindoor was India's response to the Pahalgam attack, conducted between 7 and 10 May 2025. Indian strikes were delivered by standoff weapons launched from within Indian airspace, which kept aircrew out of Pakistani hands. Fifteen days separated the attack from the response. Pakistan used that interval to conduct over sixty diplomatic engagements to India's four before kinetic operations began, and had created the external framing before Indian strikes. The operation recurs through this paper as the nearest Indian analogue to the sequencing, saturation and narrative problems the US-Iran war exposed.

Missiles must lead where crewed platforms risk the most and contribute the least. This operational sequence is highly relevant beyond just dense, early-stage air defences. Standoff systems achieve comparable efficacy against static targets while preserving crewed aviation's payload capacity and dynamic re-tasking advantages for the sustained campaign that follows.

3.5 None of this contests the tactical record, which was formidable: local air superiority within two days, some thirteen thousand targets struck, and the most successful decapitation strike in modern history.[4] The argument is not that airpower was applied badly. Pressed on the charge of failure at the same CSIS discussion, General Jim Slife, a former Vice Chief of Staff, answered it with a question of his own, "failed to do what?"[5] and he is right to ask it . The campaign did not fail to destroy . It failed to coerce . The distinction locates the ceiling correctly . No refinement of how airpower was applied would have reopened the Strait, halted the missile fire, or produced the concession Washington sought . This was because those outcomes were never within airpower's gift once the political mechanism to exploit the destruction was absent . Iran's continued resistance under seven weeks of bombardment is the proof: destruction without a mechanism to convert it does not compel . That airpower alone could not produce the political result in this case is not a critique the campaign's architect's resist; it is the conclusion they reach .

4 The US-Iran Campaign: Dominance Without Decision

4.1 **Operational achievements without credibility**. The United States rapidly achieved air superiority over Iranian airspace, neutralising Iranian air assets within hours. Over 6,000 combat sorties[6] were flown by mid-March. The Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, was killed in the opening wave on 28 February 2026. Yet in May, US media estimated that Iran retained roughly two-thirds of its air force, the bulk of its missile-launching capability, and the capability to mine the Strait of Hormuz. [7] American strategic decisions were being made on information

optimised for political acceptability rather than operational accuracy . 'Air superiority' over Tehran is more accurately described as control of the upper airspace than as uncontested freedom of operation . The contested lower band, where enabling assets were most exposed, remained dangerous throughout .

4.2 **The enabler targeting problem.** The campaign's primary assessment reveals a deliberate operational shift: the systematic destruction of enabling networks was more damaging than the loss of frontline combat assets. These assets provide essential theatre battle management, range, and endurance as the operational nervous system of extended air campaigns. The loss of an E-3 AWACS on an unprotected taxiway and damage to multiple KC-135 tankers at Prince Sultan Air Base[8] highlighted the problematic exposure of forward basing. Precision strikes also degraded fixed strategic sensors, including several AN/TPY-2 radars[9] . Satellite analysis confirmed extensive damage across 16 sites in 8 nations, amounting to $2.6 billion in aircraft alone [10]. These precision attacks were enabled by a covertly acquired 2024 Chinese TEE-01B reconnaissance satellit e[11]. This converted US Central Command's traditional, sprawling basing posture from a power-projection asset into a vulnerable strategic and operational liabili ty.

4.3 **Fixed bases, carriers, and the disaggregation.** Fixed bases enabled high sortie generation, but emerged as the campaign's most significant structural vulnerability. An Iranian F-5 variant conducted a low-altitude bombing run on Camp Buehring and even penetrated layered Patriot defences[12]. This demonstrated that high-end systems calibrated for high-end threats can be defeated by low-end tactics that exploit structural gaps. Carrier aviation offered a partial answer through disaggregation, i.e. distributing strike capability across more ships so no single loss is catastrophic. China's emerging fleet of new Type 076 drone carrier ships[13] adopts this principle .

4.4 **The munitions expenditure rate crisis**. There was a cost-exchange criticality throughout. In the first four days, Patriot batteries fired 943 interceptors[14], roughly 18 months of combined US manufacturing output. Over 7 weeks, the United States expended approximately 45% of its precision-guided munitions stockpile, including at least half its THAAD interceptors and nearly half its Patriots. Replenishment will require 4 to5 years[15] in addition to simultaneous requirements for Taiwan, Korea, and European

What seven weeks cost the United States: • 943 Patriot interceptors fired in the first four days, roughly 18 months of combined US production • About 45 per cent of the precision-guided munitions stockpile expended • At least half the THAAD interceptors and nearly half the Patriots • 4 to 5 years to replenish, against simultaneous Taiwan, Korea and European requirements • $2.6 billion in aircraft losses, across 16 sites in 8 nations

5 The Iranian Missile and Drone Campaign: Modified Chinese A2/AD Doctrine

5.1 **Two wars, two metrics: The war of disruption Is winning.** The conflict witnessed two wars being fought on two metrics. The United States fought a war of destruction, measured in targets struck. Iran fought a war of disruption, measured in days the Strait remained closed and the pricing of oil. A campaign can succeed by its own measure and fail by its adversary's, which is what happened. Iran did not need to outlast American military capability; it only needed to outlast American political will. This resolve steadily eroded as the administration's preference for rapid, decisive outcomes generated acute time pressure.

As of July 2026, the war of disruption was winning: the Strait stayed closed, the strike campaign persisted, and the regime functioned. A memorandum of understanding signed in mid-June set a 60-day settlement window and lifted the naval blockade[16], but the situation remains tenuous, with both sides still attacking each other even as they talk. The fact that a significantly weaker actor maintained its strike capabilities four months into the conflict, right into the negotiation phase, only strengthens the core argument.

5.2 **The Chinese inheritance and the three-layer architecture.** A weaker actor created that outcome through a layered denial architecture. Iran's architecture is a cruder, resource-constrained version of the anti-access and area-denial doctrine[17] China has developed: targeting the enabling architecture rather than combat platforms, layered denial across depth, and integrating missile, drone, and electronic warfare effects without a symmetric air capability. China's version is far more capable, and Indian planners should treat what Iran demonstrated as a lower model.

This tiered defence framework is based on three mutually protective tiers:

- **Outer Layer (MRBMs/IRBMs)** Targets static regional basing and critical enablers.
- **Middle Layer (SRBMs, Cruise Missiles, Drones)** Strikes manoeuvre forces, naval assets, and maritime ports.
- **Inner Layer (Strait Closure)** Ensures low-cost, asymmetric maritime denial to sever the choke point. These layers operate in synergy. The outer tier shields the inner tier by neutralizing U.S. counter-intervention forces, while the inner tier inflicts the economic paralysis that gives the system its strategic leverage. Consequently, defeating one layer does not dismantle the architecture. And while the U.S. campaign damaged all three, it failed to disable any one.[18]

5.3 **Infrastructure targeting**: System-destruction warfare. Iran's infrastructure strikes were a calculated coercive strategy against the pressure points of rentier Gulf states.[19] Water was critical: with over 90% of Kuwait's drinking water and 70% of Saudi Arabia's

drawn from desalination, disruption of these facilities threatened daily survival. The strikes constitute system-destruction warfare: they target nodes that sustain both military operations and civilian life. The sustained closure of the Strait imposed political costs on every importing nation, regardless of theatre developments.

System-destruction warfare: The concept comes from Chinese military writing on defeating an adversary's operational system rather than destroying its forces. The targets are the nodes that hold the system together: power generation, water, ports, communications and command. In the Gulf rentier states those nodes also sustain civilian life, so one strike produces military and political effect at once. Over 90 per cent of Kuwait's drinking water and 70 per cent of Saudi Arabia's is drawn from desalination. For India the consequence is that the whole state becomes the target set, which places civil resilience inside force design rather than beside it.

5.4 **The arsenal:** Mobility, hardening, and MaRV at Scale. Iran shifted to solid-fuelled, road-mobile systems that eliminate the pre-emption window: unlike liquid-fuelled missiles, they need no lengthy, detectable fuelling before launch, and mobility denies the adversary a fixed target to strike first.

Manoeuvring re-entry vehicles: A ballistic warhead follows a predictable path once it re-enters the atmosphere, and a hit-to-kill interceptor is cued to a computed impact point. A manoeuvring re-entry vehicle changes course in the terminal phase. Interceptors have a finite divert capacity, the amount of course correction available in the last seconds of flight, and a warhead that manoeuvres late exhausts that capacity faster than fire control can recompute the solution. Iran's Fattah-1 manoeuvres in the terminal phase. The Fattah-2 adds a hypersonic approach from an unexpected axis. THAAD, Arrow-3 and the S-400 family were built against ballistic profiles rather than against this one.

It produced roughly 2,000 of these systems by February 2026[20][21], with 90% of its underground facilities reportedly still active after 40 days of bombardment .

The large-scale employment of manoeuvring re-entry vehicles (MaRV) is new. The Fattah-1's terminal manoeuvres[22] overcome a hit-to-kill interceptor's divert capacity faster than fire control can adjust. The Fattah-2[23] uses hypersonic speed to approach from unexpected directions . Theatre defences like India's S-400[24] and the U. S. THAAD[25] were not designed for this profile, which are of the same class of highly manoeuvrable, non-ballistic threats as China's DF-21D (MaRV) and DF-17(hypersonic glide)..[26] The saturation architecture does not depend on penetrating any single la yer. It pressurises all layers simultaneously, exhausting reserve capac ity.

5.5 **Limits of the analogy.** The US-Iran conflict provides an empirical baseline rather than a direct operational blueprint. While Iran relied on extreme geographic compression and the

US aversion to casualties, India will face neither of these against China. Three core structural asymmetries define this strategic gap:

- **ISR capabilities:** Iran's highest-end targeting depended on borrowed intelligence, whereas the PLA operates a sovereign, multi-sensor kill web via hundreds of Yaogan satellites[27]. This capability is exportable to Pakistan.
- **Electronic Warfare:** Unlike Iran's localised suppression, China's 'Multi-Domain Precision Warfare' doctrine[28] integrates cyber, electronic, and kinetic strikes, threatening pre-emptive disruption of India's IACCS and civil power and communication grids.
- **Industrial Capacity:** Iran reconstituted its forces via smuggling, while China's military-civil fusion framework manufactures ordnance at scales that dwarf Indian or Western capacities.
- **The lower-tier A2/AD Strategy:** Iran's was a vastly less capable version of this operation. India's architectures currently risk being completely overwhelmed by the Chinese iteration. c Further, wartime restrictions[29] on U.S. Gulf bases expose the fragility of foreign alliances, proving India's need for operational self-sufficiency. Because nuclear deterrence and economic engagements naturally limit Sino-Indian conflicts, asymmetric capabilities such as a Conventional Rocket Force, drone mass, and sea-based strike platforms are essential – not for total victory, but to deter and limit conflict.

6 Implications for India: A Strategic Reorientation

6.1 **The reorientation.** These lessons converge on a single strategic conclusion: the threats India faces from China and a colluding (Chinese-equipped) Pakistan exceed the capabilities Iran deployed against the United States. Consequently, India must reallocate investment toward proven capabilities, away from legacy vulnerabilities, and toward mitigating those vulnerabilities that remain. Reorientation demands three critical operational shifts: sequencing manned aviation behind initial missile and drone salvos to reduce political risk and preserve limited numbers; diversifying naval force structure by introducing distributed strike vessels alongside aircraft carriers; and upgrading civil-military infrastructure for multidomain operations, including civil defence to survive missile and drone targeting.

6.2 **Operationalising the 2025 Joint Doctrine**. These requirements provide the concrete operational substance for enabling India's August 2025 'Joint Doctrine for Multi-Domain Operations'[30]. That doctrine lacks specific structural instructions, even as it correctly proposes a whole-of-nation, multi-domain approach[31] to replace traditional, sequential upper conflict band

campaigns . The Iranian conflict demonstrates that an adversary's opening salvos will specifically target unhardened networks, enablers, and forward bases . India's broader multi-domain framework remains highly vulnerable without implementing these identified measures .

6.3 **Bi-directional differentiated strategies.** India's force-structure problem is one of dual asymmetry. Against Pakistan, India is confronting a weaker actor that has deliberately restructured to avoid contact and seek to impose disruption quickly, before India can use its conventional advantage. Against China, India is the weaker actor, and by such a margin that logical procurement cannot overcome the gap. Many of the same instruments serve both directions, but for strike systems the logic inverts: a capability that is defensive against one adversary is offensive against the other, while measures such as hardening and civil defence serve both fronts alike.

6.4 **Against Pakistan: Velocity of response, effective communication and the nuclear threshold**

6.4.1 **Enlarging the sub-nuclear band – advantage India**. The Army Rocket Force Command, raised in August 2025 to manage Pakistan's conventional missiles separately from its nuclear forces, has elevated the Pakistani nuclear threshold. Pakistan's articulated Quid Pro Quo Plus doctrine[32], and the public statements of the Army Rocket Force Command's own commander[33], indicate a posture built to contest India in the sub-nuclear band . Pakistan now believes that by creating effective multidomain capabilities (including a conventional missile force, cyber and space warfare capabilities) and through perception management, it can fight and win against India.

> Quid Pro Quo Plus is Pakistan's articulated response doctrine: an Indian strike will be answered with one of greater weight, delivered quickly enough to close the exchange before India can move again. Read alongside the Army Rocket Force Command, raised in August 2025 to hold conventional missiles separately from nuclear ones, it describes a posture built to contest India inside the sub-nuclear band rather than to reach past it. The planning consequence for India is that the band widens, and a wider band favours the stronger conventional power, provided that power is willing to operate in it.

This rise in nuclear threshold could potentially work to India's advantage, as India is the stronger conventional power. The expanded band potentially creates horizontal and vertical spaces for the application of India's national power to produce clear, visible victories that Pakistan cannot deny or reframe. India must create overwhelming conflict-winning capabilities for this space, such as missiles and drones, strategic communications, and multidomain decision-making structures. To use these strengths fully, India must possess the political will to operate decisively within this band, since a strategic tool is only advantageous if India is prepared to use it. Of course, stronger Indian conventional

capabilities may embolden Pakistan to escalate towards the nuclear threshold rather than deter it, and compress the space rather than widen it. Indian planning and will should cater for both.

6.4.2 **Lethal velocity is the crux**. Against Pakistan, the asymmetry is far lower than in the US-Iran case. Both sides hold credible airpower and missile capability, and the tactical nuclear posture compresses the escalation ladder. The central challenge is lethal velocity: quick national decision-making and swift, heavily damaging strikes against air bases, command nodes, and missile infrastructure before they are employed effectively. Pakistan's expanding Fatah precision-guided missile family, developed via Chinese technology transfer, severely constrains Indian air defence interception windows. The missiles range from the tactical Fatah-1 (140 km) and highly accurate Fatah-2 (290–400 km) to the longer-range Fatah-4 (750 km) and projected Fatah-5 (~ 1,000 km).[34] These missiles can threaten critical targets across northern and central India while operating from deep within Pakistani territory. Pre-delegated response authorities and continuous, real-time intelligence on launcher deployments are essential to mitigate this threat. India should prepare for escalatory strikes on dual civil-military targets if Pakistan adopts a stratagem similar to Iran's, and for land operations if necessary.

6.4.3 **Denying the parity narrative**. What Pakistan seeks is not territory but a narrative: strike India in a manner that can be depicted at home as a victory[35],[36], then escalate the framing toward nuclear instability to induce Western intervention before India completes its response . India should defeat the sequence at each step .

- **Swift response before the narrative closes**. The 15-day interval between the Pahalgam attack and the Sindoor strikes was the window in which Pakistan shaped the external framing. Velocity is a narrative value as much as an operational one and that is the strongest argument for recommending pre-delegated authority and a missile-led opening phase.
- **Defence of India's politically vulnerable targets**. Expand and ensure air and missile defence of those targets whose visible loss would enable Pakistan's narrative, instead of focusing on defending military targets alone.
- **Target Pakistani military credibility**. Strike air bases, headquarters, and visible platforms that damage the credibility of the Pakistani military with the population. Escalate to dual-use military-commercial enterprises, which are dear to the military-commercial complex. These are key conventional military and economic assets and are difficult to rebuild. This step must explicitly not strike at the strategic nuclear enablers, to avoid nuclear escalation,
- **Integrated strategic communication**. India's state narrative must be rapid, unified, and highly adaptive, fully synchronised with concurrent military and diplomatic lines of effort. That requires a standing communication cell

embedded inside the joint multi-domain headquarters, not a body improvised after a crisis starts.

6.5 **Against China: Denial, survivability, and cost-imposition**

6.5.1 **Neutralising structural asymmetry through political deterrence**. India must deny China a cheap or uncontested dominance. Against China, India faces a stark structural asymmetry. Beijing's advanced air defences (S-400/HQ-9) and massive conventional missile force render absolute air superiority an unrealistic objective. This forces the IAF to operate in a permanently contested environment. Because China's ISR, industrial, and geographic advantages are so vast, India cannot impose total strategic disruption. Instead, the realistic objective is deterrence through cost imposition, which raises not just military friction but also the political price of aggression.

6.5.2 **Limits of the disruption framework**. Using disruption to defeat destruction is inherently a weaker actor's strategy. Unlike the US-Iran dynamic, China holds the dominant position and can simultaneously execute destruction and disruption. Consequently, India faces a dual reality: it must use asymmetric disruption to impose costs as the weaker power, while simultaneously preparing politically and militarily to endure a massive, destructive MDO campaign prosecuted by a superior adversary. The disruption thesis defines India's operational options, not the full magnitude of the threat.

6.5.3 **Surviving the initial salvo.** China's A2/AD architecture is designed to neutralise IAF bases before aircraft can become airborne. PLA firepower-campaign doctrine[37] prioritises massed missile and rocket fire against command, air defence, and logistics from the outset. India's response must include the capacity to absorb the blow through resilience, dispersal, deception, and retain offensive capability.

6.6 **Means for cost imposition**

India must create or augment these offensive levers that, together, not singly, create political and military costs the Chinese leadership cannot dismiss easily.

6.6.1 **Continental lever**. Interdicting PLA deployment and logistics on the Tibetan Plateau, along with direct strikes into the south-western mainland, targets the surface arteries sustaining Chinese forces on the frontier: the G214, G219, G317, and G318 highways, and the Qinghai-Tibet Railway at Nagqu and Golmud.[38] Bridge and tunnel nodes are the priority. High-altitude bridge destruction results in sustained interdiction, as repair is seasonally constrained. Kunming lies roughly 900 kilometres from Dibrugarh, reachable from Assam and Arunachal on a bearing that avoids Tibet or Bhutan, placing China's south-western logistics within range of Indian missile systems, including Pralay[39], extended-range BrahMos, and Nirbhay [40]. Deeper targets require a 3,000- to 3,500-kilometre conventional ballistic missile that India does not yet hav e.

6.6.2 **Maritime lever**. This is the lever China cannot neutralise from its side of the Himalayas. The Andamans offer India launchpads that could survive a Chinese first strike, since the short-range force along the G219-G318 arc[41] can reach North Bengal, Assam and Arunachal but not the Andamans. Strikes from south-west China would be feasible but complicated by violating Myanmar airspace, and also create air-offensive openings. Land-based systems deployed across the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, overlooking the Six-Degree Channel and Malacca Straits, turn geography into a credible threat to Chinese commerce. Upto 80% of Chinese energy imports[42] pass through this chokepoint . Forward-deploying longer-range systems here makes the archipelago an offensive position rather than a defensive chokepoint, and puts China's South China Sea bases and Hainan Island submarine pens within reach .

6.6.3 **Punish collusion**. The third measure applies only to a specific contingency and must be diplomatically calibrated, not militarily. Should Chinese personnel again operate alongside the Pakistani military, as AVIC engineers did in May 2025[43], then Chinese assets in Pakistan, including economic corridor infrastructure and the Gwadar complex, would become legitimate retaliatory targets. This signals to Beijing that collusion carries severe and avoidable costs.

6.6.4 **Each of these levers is conventional and clearly non-nuclear.** They target China's military infrastructure, supply lines, and economy, while strictly avoiding its nuclear forces and command systems to prevent escalation. This replicates the crisis-management model used with Pakistan, a deliberate boundary that Beijing already expects India to maintain.

7 Structural Requirements for Force Design

The requirements below address the operational gaps highlighted by the US-Iran conflict and provide the means to use them. They are grouped into five heads: missile and drone strike capabilities; air force aspects; tailored naval ship design; and institutional reforms.

7.1 A conventional rocket force (CRF) and the sequencing doctrine

7.1.1 **The gap: No conventional rocket force**. The Strategic Forces Command (SFC) manages India's nuclear missiles. There is currently no dedicated conventional ballistic-missile force with its own command, ISR, targeting systems, and doctrine. But that may change: the Chief of the Army Staff stated in January 2026 that India is raising a dedicated rocket-cum-missile force[44], noting that India's principal adversaries already such a force. The proposal follows the strategic logic Russia and China have pursued for three decades: both invested in missile forces as the

primary instrument of strategic effect. They accepted asymmetry relative to US airpower in exchange for the ability to deny air superiority and threaten US forward deployment at lower cost to themselves. The US-Iran war proved that concept in combat.

> The Conventional Rocket Force proposed in this paper is a single command holding India's non-nuclear ballistic and cruise missile inventory, with its own ISR, targeting cycle, launch units and doctrine. It stands apart from the Strategic Forces Command, which controls the nuclear instrument and answers only to the Cabinet Committee on Security. That separation is what allows conventional strikes to be launched at scale without signalling nuclear intent. The Chief of the Army Staff stated in January 2026 that India is raising a dedicated rocket-cum-missile force. Pakistan raised its Army Rocket Force Command in August 2025. China's PLA Rocket Force holds the conventional and nuclear inventories under one command.

7.1.2 **The sequencing logic**. The CRF must lead strikes in the opening phase. Missiles, loitering munitions, and drone strikes can deliver major effects against adversary integrated air defence systems (IADS), command nodes, air bases, and ISR that manned air cannot on the same scale, at the outset, and without aircrew risk. India's limited high-performance aircraft, a debilitating consequence of grossly delayed production and failed acquisition endeavours, are too valuable to expend early against intact air defences. They are also too few, against a two-front requirement, to absorb the attrition that a parity contest imposes. While uncrewed assets mitigate high-risk threats to secure airspace, crewed platforms can exploit this degraded environment for specialised missions that require human flexibility, precision, and heavy payloads.

7.1.3 **The political cost of a nameable loss**. Political calculations reinforce the operational logic. 24 MQ-9A Reaper drones[45] lost over 6 weeks, at roughly $ 720 million, produced no political crisis. A single F-15E shot down over Iranian territory needed a rescue that cost a further ten aircraft. [46] The political spectacle of American aircrew in Iranian hands overrode military calculation . The larger financial loss carried no political weight; the nameable human one carried almost all of it . Wing Commander Abhinandan's capture[47] during the 2019 Balakot crisis produced the same logic on a smaller scal e. Operation Sindoor validated this philosophy: the manned strikes were by standoff weapons from within Indian airspac e.

This is also the assessment of senior practitioners of airpower. Analysing the same F-15E rescue in the CSIS discussion, Hinote observed that a captured weapons systems officer "paraded in Tehran on TV" would have made every political objective harder, and that the United States was willing to commit scores of aircraft to prevent that single outcome.[48] He drew the force-design conclusion directly: the shift now is toward having "the majority of forces in contact" be unmanned, with crewed aviation held back as "the next echelon where you are doing some of the cleanup."

The deeper point is that unmanned systems do not just precede manned ones but they enable them. Hinote described the method used against Iran: one-way attack drones flown as a cloud within which the "exquisite" munitions were concealed thereby forcing the defender into a stream of impossible air defence decisions. This exhausted the interceptors that a manned aircraft package would otherwise have met. The unmanned mass opens the door through which anything crewed can survive to follow. This answers the objection that missiles and drones should accompany manned aviation rather than lead it: they lead because their function is to create the conditions under which manned entry is survivable at all. Hinote anticipated an architecture of "waves," unmanned and exquisite systems employed in succession against defended areas. Their launch is dispersed to ground and naval units rather than fixed air bases and handed upward to theatre-level fire control. This is the same distributed land-and-sea launch model this paper proposes for the Conventional Rocket Force and the Sea-Based Conventional Strike Platform.

7.1.4 **Pre-delegation norms**. Optimising operational sequencing requires pre-delegated authority and pre-positioned targeting. Without this institutional framework, political timing constraints force decision-makers to deploy the fastest available instrument rather than the most strategically suitable one.

7.1.5 **Capability requirements**. India must develop SRBMs in the 150-to-500-kilometre class for Chinese forward bases in Tibet and Pakistani bases such as at Sargodha, and MRBMs in the 500-to-2,000-kilometre class with MaRV-equipped warheads to defeat Chinese terminal defences. Launcher survivability through road-mobile systems, cave-sheltering, and shoot-and-scoot tactics is *sine qua non*.

The strategic-depth requirement extends targeting to the logistics corridors sustaining forces in Tibet: the G219, G214, G317 and G318 highways; and the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, where bridges and tunnels are priority targets. Reaching these requires a dedicated long-range conventional ballistic missile in the 3,000- to 3,500-kilometre range. The current inventory does not include this platform, making it an urgent developmental requirement. The chokepoint-denial, the South China Sea artificial island bases and Hainan naval base strike missions require an MRBM in the 1,500-to-2,500-kilometre class, forward-deployed to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

7.1.6 **Resolutions for objections to a CRF**. To establish its validity, this proposal must counter four likely objections regarding the creation of a CRF:

- **Cost and duplication** Critics may argue that a CRF replicates existing capabilities within the Indian Air Force and the Strategic Forces Command. However, the SFC remains strictly nuclear-dedicated, while the IAF's conventional strike capacity is inherently constrained by platform and

aircrew availability during initial hostilities. The CRF adds capabilities without risk as elaborated earlier.

- **ISR dependence**. Opponents note that a missile force is limited by the quality of its targeting data, an area where India's capabilities need improvement. This deficit, however, calls for the synchronised development of space-based and airborne ISR alongside the CRF, rather than abandoning the capability.
- **Command-and-control complexity**. Integrating a new force risks creates an isolated bureaucratic silo. To mitigate this, the CRF's targeting and release authorities must be embedded directly within the proposed multi-domain operations headquarters and theatre structures. This implies institutional reform alongside CRF development.
- **Escalation ambiguity**. The risk of conventional strikes triggering unintended nuclear escalation is managed by deploying strictly declared, non-dual-use-capable missile platforms. It also necessitates careful targeting and calibration, and the explicit avoidance of the adversary's strategic assets. These objections define the necessary operational conditions for the CRF's success rather than diluting its strategic necessity.

7.2 **A drone force at Scale**

7.2.1 **Four tiers and saturation by swarming.** India's drone requirements span four tiers. The first comprises long-range, one-way attack drones (1,000–2,500 km) for mass strikes on fixed targets. Existing systems, such as the Nagastra-1[49], require significant scaling and range extensions to achieve operational mass. The second tier utilises high-endurance MALE and UCAV systems (24–48 hours) for mobile strikes and area denial. The third employs loyal-wingman platforms to operate alongside crewed aircraft, extending sensor range and absorbing attrition. A critical fourth capability bridging the other tiers is swarm operations. This involves using autonomously networked, low-cost drone swarms to execute multi-vector saturation attacks that exhaust enemy interceptor capacity. As demonstrated in Operation Sindoor, these cheap platforms can overwhelm conventional air defences before they can react, enabling a $20,000 asset to destroy a multimillion-dollar radar. [50]

7.2.2 **The production bottleneck**. This drone capability must be created through indigenous production. Past experience indicates that cost and demand are not major obstacles. The problem is the mismatch between continuously-advancing drone technologies (a 12- to 18-month cycle) and a procurement mechanism geared toward 5- to 10-year platform timelines. A drone procured against a 2024 specification may become obsolete. The solution is a modular platform design, enabling software and payload upgrades without platform replacement, with procurement contracts structured accordingly.

7.3 **Suppression, basing, and integrated air defence**

7.3.1 **Suppression as the precondition**. The catastrophic military and political effect of Iran's destruction of the E-3 AWACS and damage to KC-135 tankers[51] highlighted how enabler destruction was the most disproportionate attack vector in the US air campaign. The IAF's existing SEAD capability, the Rudram-1 anti-radiation missile on the Su-30MKI[52], supplemented by Harpy and Harop loitering munitions, needs to be expanded and integrated across delivery platforms . The conflict also proved that SEAD/DEAD effects can be created by missiles and drones as effectively as by manned packages at lower military and political costs . Long-range loitering munitions, anti-radiation drones, and missile-delivered electronic-warfare payloads launched from outside the defended zone create a safe environment so that manned strike aircraft no longer need to wait for a separate SEAD package . Operation Sindoor demonstrates that SEAD/DEAD is required even in limited contingencies, as adversary air defences will be active regardless of the scale of conflict . In these lower conflict band scenarios, where tolerance for aircraft or personnel loss is minimal, standoff missiles and drone-delivered payloads are the optimal operational choice .

7.3.2 **Hardened and dispersed basing**. Forward basing must be hardened and dispersed further. Bases at Leh, Srinagar, Nal, and Bhuj were designed for a pre-precision-strike environment. Hardened shelters, dispersal pathways, and base-defence upgrades are being executed, but the requirement is for acceleration. They need to face the Iran-demonstrated threat profile rather than the legacy one.

7.3.3 **Optimising integrated air defence architecture.** While integration via the Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) is substantively established, the architecture remains vulnerable to low-altitude saturation attacks. To mitigate this, India must expand the system downward and outward. This achieved by networking low-altitude radars, integrating very short-range air defence (VSHORAD) and man-portable air defence (MANPADS) layers into the common operational picture, engineering node redundancy, and delegating engagement authority to the lowest practical level. The operational framework is based on the adversary profile:

- **The Pakistan vector (pre-emption).** Countering saturation relies on pre-emptive counter-launcher operations. This approach necessitates real-time, accurate intelligence and pre-delegated strike authority to neutralise threats before launch.
- **The China vector (resilience)**. Due to the sheer scale and capabilities of the PLA Rocket Force, counter-launcher suppression is operationally and logistically infeasible. This strategy focuses on passive defence and population resilience, asset dispersion, facility hardening, and tactical deception to absorb an initial salvo while preserving retaliatory capabilities.

7.4 Sea-based conventional strike platform (SBCSP)

7.4.1 **The case for a SBCSP**. The Iran case, combined with the Chinese Type 076 deployment and the UK Navy cancelling destroyers in favour of drone command ships,[53] highlights the necessity of the maritime missile-drone platforms in future conflict. The Indian Navy needs a similar vessel primarily for sea-based land-attack. The proposed SBCSP is a mixed-platform vessel in the 20,000-to-25,000-ton range, whose primary armament is a 200-cell vertical launch system for BrahMos and Pralay-class land-attack missiles, supplemented by carriage of 30 to 50 medium STOL/VTOL UAS for ISR and land/sea strike. The vessel carries no crewed fixed-wing aircraft. Its role is to sustain the tempo of land attacks that current surface escorts and submarines cannot generate. It operates under the protection of air-defence, anti-submarine, and other assets.

7.4.2 **Naval arm of the rocket force**. The SBCSP is the naval component of the conventional rocket force. It augments the land-based force and reaches areas beyond the land component's range. Against the Pakistani western seaboard, it would deliver a sustained strike at a tempo that carrier aviation cannot generate.

7.4.3 **Disaggregation, rather than a second carrier**. Distributing strike capabilities across multiple smaller ships ensures that the loss of a single vessel is not critical. Dispersal matters because maintenance and training cycles leave only about 50% of the fleet available at any time. The Navy should focus on new assets like the SBCSP-class, working alongside aircraft carriers rather than replacing them.

7.5 Resilience challenges: ballistic missile defence, scale of vulnerabilities and Civil Defence

7.5.1 **Scant Defences.** The interceptor depletion crisis is the central logistics finding of the war.

CSIS data indicates the United States expended 45 to 50% of its key interceptor and offensive missile stockpiles[54] in 7 weeks against an adversary far weaker than China. India's ballistic missile defence position is structurally worse. India BMD capability currently consists of the S-400 across five squadrons[55] . Phase I of the indigenous programme is declared ready but not deployed and Phase II is in advanced trials .[56] Project Kusha[57] is expected only in the late 202 0s. None are designed to intercept manoeuvring re-entry or hypersonic glide vehicles, and none are integrated across the three services under unified comma nd.

India's ballistic missile defence, mid-2026: •S-400: five squadrons • Indigenous BMD Phase I: declared ready, not deployed • Phase II: advanced trials • Project Kusha: expected late in the decade • None designed to intercept manoeuvring re-entry or hypersonic glide vehicles • None integrated across the three services under unified command

7.5.2 **Geographic vulnerabilities.** The defensive problem is geometric before it is procurement-dependent.

How close the Chinese launch points are: • Chandigarh, Delhi and Lucknow: 450 to 580 km from Ngari Prefecture positions on the G219 • Guwahati and Dibrugarh: 250 to 500 km from G318 positions • Kunming: about 900 km from Dibrugarh, on a bearing that avoids Tibet and Bhutan • Fifty Indian cities of one million or more, alongside economic nodes at Bengaluru, Mumbai and Jamnagar • The threat systems are DF-11A and DF-15 class SRBMs, held in larger numbers than the missiles that cover the rest of India

Fifty cities with populations of one million or more sit alongside critical economic nodes at Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Jamnagar, so high-value targets run into the hundreds. The asymmetry against China is worse as the missile geography is closer than often perceived. Chandigarh, Delhi, and Lucknow fall within 450 to 580 km of Ngari Prefecture launch points on the G219. Guwahati and Dibrugarh are within 250-500 km of the G318 positions. These value objectives are well within the range of Chinese SRBMs, the DF-11A and DF-15 families,[58] whose availability exceeds that of the longer-range missiles covering the rest of India. The primary challenge is to counter SRBM saturation across the entire northern arc at volumes that Indian interceptor capabilities cannot match. A further complication is that a ballistic missile defence system that exhausts its interceptors against conventional saturation may not have sufficient capacity for a nuclear contingency in the same window. China's saturation attack and a live nuclear contingency would draw on the same interceptor stock, an allocation problem current planning does not resolve.

6.5.3 **Viable response: retaliation and resilience**. No force structure can fully insulate a nation against systems-destruction warfare, because the entire state becomes the target set. The realistic objective is to raise the adversary's targeting costs by two means.

- **Reciprocal risk creation**. Deterring the Chinese doctrine requires holding Beijing's own value objectives at credible risk of conventional strike. This offensive capability makes India's defensive limitations tolerable.
- **Civil resilience**. A state that structures its population for conflict owes it a credible system of warning, shelter, and institutional continuity. This is best achieved by expanding the mandate of the efficient National Disaster Management Authority to include wartime civil defence rather than resuscitating the current infirm civil defence structures (or creating yet another machinery). Civil Defence is an escalation-management lever in this conflict band: a population prepared to endure bombardment preserves the government's political capacity to fight, while a society in shock forces termination on unfavourable terms.

7.6 The missing capstone: A national Multi-Domain Operations Headquarters

7.6.1 **The democratic solution to decision latency**. China, Iran,

or Pakistan accelerate decision-making by removing civilian checks. India, however, needs to compress decision delay while preserving democratic oversight. The existing constitutional framework already allows for this, through a national Multi-Domain Operations Headquarters (MDO HQ) inside the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS).

7.6.2 **Core design features.** Led by a Deputy National Security Adviser and reporting to the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), the MDO HQ would complement the CDS: the CDS commands the military instrument, while the MDO HQ directs the broader national system. The Strategic Forces Command (SFC) remains entirely separate, with its nuclear responsibility and answerable only to the CCS. That separation firewalls the nuclear chain from conventional operations.

- **A single operating picture**. Fusing data from all military and civilian sensors into a unified, real-time view of the cyber, space, informational, and infrastructure domains.
- **Pre-delegated authority**. To match compressed timelines, the CCS pre-delegates clear operational boundaries to the CDS and MDO HQ, enabling a national-level mission command. The boundaries are fixed in peacetime by the political executive, so that authority is available when degraded communications may otherwise force a pause.
- **A shifting gradient of ownership**. Control transitions across the conflict spectrum. The MDO HQ leads the non-kinetic domains of cyber defence, space, and narrative; ownership is shared for grey-zone operations; the military assumes command in the event of physical contact. Standoff strikes are executed by the CDS, while the MDO HQ manages the accompanying diplomatic escalation framing and strategic communications.
- **Concurrent campaign management**. The definitive justification for a dedicated MDO HQ is based on operational capacity. Once hostilities begin, non-kinetic campaigns, spanning cyber, information, and infrastructure, will intensify rapidly. The CDS and theatre commander managing the physical battle cannot simultaneously direct these surrounding domains at the required tempo. The MDO HQ addresses this by executing these campaigns concurrently and in synergy with the kinetic fight. Neither the CDS alone nor an expanded secretariat can perform this function. ## 6.7 Strategic communication and narrative initiative

7.7.1 The US-Iran war and Operation Sindoor demonstrate that in limited conflicts, the narrative contest matches the tempo of physical operations and is decided in the opening hours. Strategic communication, encompassing rapid attribution, evidence release, and disinformation rebuttal, must therefore be treated as core operational capabilities rather than as adjunct afterthoughts.

7.7.2 **Operation Sindoor exposed critical synchronisation gaps:** while India's verification processes prioritised absolute

accuracy over velocity, Pakistan executed over sixty diplomatic engagements to India's four before kinetic operations even began, successfully capturing the external narrative.

7.7.3 While democracies face inherent verification delay, this structural disadvantage can be mitigated by embedding strategic communication directly into the MDO HQ. Providing this capability with a shared real-time picture and pre-delegated release authority allows India to counter adversary disinformation at the velocity of events. This would be vital in denying Pakistan parity narratives, and pressurising China politically through our own strikes. Resolving this gap requires organisational and authority reform, not financial resources alone.

8 Velocity and Crisis Stability

8.1 **The velocity questions** The proposed structural requirements, the Conventional Rocket Force, massed drone capabilities, and the MDO HQ, are reactive, catch-up measures to counter capabilities already operationalised by China, Pakistan, and Iran. Translating these requirements into capability faces two parallel hurdles: procurement velocity (acquisition timelines) and adaptation velocity (the speed at which the force structure shifts to match evolving warfare).

Implementation is often structurally impeded in India by an institutional risk-aversion that punishes erroneous action over costly inaction. This is intensified by deep-seated professional scepticism of the capacity of autonomous systems to replicate crewed situational awareness. However, as the regional security environment shifts, marked by enhanced Chinese influence and a US diplomatic re-engagement with Pakistan, the window for implementation of these fresh operational lessons remains narrow, before institutional inertia manifests.

8.2 Crisis stability

8.2.1 Proposals for pre-delegated authority, missile-led opening phases, and a sub-nuclear Conventional Rocket Force may challenge traditional crisis-stability theory. Three conditions resolve this concern:

- **Asymmetric mobilisation tempos.** Standard stability models assume symmetrical mobilisation. When one actor generates combat power more quickly, external mediation inherently penalises the slower actor (as seen in Sindoor and Iran). These recommendations allow India to secure limited objectives within the compressed timelines dictated by international diplomacy.
- **Varying external leverage.** While third-party mediation can impose crisis stability within the India-Pakistan dyad, it is demonstrably less effective in the Sino-Indian context, which remains bilaterally managed (e.g., the Doklam and Galwan incidents).

- **Judicious pre-delegation**. The core risk of distributed launch authority overcoming political authority is structurally resolved by linking pre-delegation strictly to predefined trigger conditions rather than granting blanket autonomy.

9 Conclusion

The US-Iran conflict imposed considerable operational costs on the world's largest air force. It demonstrated that disruption defeats destruction when the weaker actor structures its forces to absorb the opening blow and outlast the adversary's political will. That is the paper's central finding. It does not mean airpower is finished. What it cannot do, without a complementary instrument and without its survival protected, is force a resilient adversary to stop.

India's primary defence challenge is institutional, not material. While weapon acquisition requires political will, it is a secondary obstacle compared to structural reform. Without a centralised national MDO HQ, technological upgrades will remain siloed, service-level improvements rather than a cohesive national capability. Furthermore, lacking an integrated strategic communication organisation means India yields the opening narrative in crises and concedes the parity that Pakistan's strategy is built to manufacture. Because these reforms require organisational authority rather than financial capital, their continued absence is a deliberate and strategically indefensible choice. The reorientation proposed here is a conceptual shift, not a procurement list: two fronts as one problem, institutional velocity before hardware, and disruption as the instrument that lets the weaker power impose cost, and the stronger one deny parity.

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