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WAR IN SOUTH ASIA IS A WAKE-UP CALL

Achieving Peace Through Strength in an Age of Industrial Deterrence

By Shyam Tekwani

Abstract

The brief war between India and Pakistan last month did more than test military readiness. It exposed the uneven terrain of South Asia's defense-industrial capabilities. India's push for autonomy was stress-tested in real time. Pakistan's dependency on China narrowed its room for maneuver. Across the region, smaller states diversified, preferring co-development to procurement.

For the United States and its partners, this was not just a wake-up call, but a mutual stress test. Credibility now hinges not on declarations but on delivery. In an era where deterrence must be reestablished through persistent presence, forward capability, and alliances that can perform under fire, South Asia's emerging industrial competition offers a stark lesson: the winners will not be those who promise the most, but those who deliver first, and who endure.

While the narrative draws on real events and capabilities, it includes select scenario-based vignettes, which are labeled accordingly, to illustrate plausible defense-industrial contingencies in South Asia.

The War as Warning

• <u>Scenario 1:</u> The Test

The following is a scenario-based extrapolation grounded in current defense-industrial trends, designed to illustrate how a future South Asian conflict might unfold, and what it would reveal.

In South Asia, war is no longer a distant possibility. It happened last week.

Cities like Lahore and Jammu traded fire. <u>Drones lit up night skies</u> from Rawalpindi to Amritsar. Indian Su-30s, Mirage 2000s, and Rafale fighter jets struck deep into Pakistani territory under *Operation Sindoor*. Rafales, equipped with <u>SCALP cruise missiles and Hammer bombs</u>, were used in precision strikes across <u>Pakistan-administered Kashmir</u>. Pakistani air defenses responded with <u>Chinese-origin surface-to-air missiles</u>, while drones from both sides—<u>India's Israeli-made Herons</u> and Pakistan's Chinese Wing Loongs and Turkish Songar systems—laced the skies. Short-range ballistic missiles followed. The result: power outages, panic, and a public awakening to how fast deterrence can unravel.

Yet beyond the battlefield, through the smoke, the war revealed something more consequential: the infrastructure of trust and capability that undergirds deterrence itself. Not just the jets or the generals, but the factories, the spares, the software patches, the systems maintained, and the deals signed, or delayed, years earlier.

South Asia is undergoing a realignment of defense-industrial power. India wants to produce, not just procure. Pakistan is tethered more tightly than ever to China's and, increasingly, Turkey's military-industrial support. Smaller states like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are hedging, searching for flexibility, not dependence. At stake is not just survivability, but sovereignty.

• <u>Scenario 2:</u> The Indo-U.S. Sustainment Cell

For the United States, long used to leading with hardware and following with diplomacy, the rules have changed. It is no longer enough to announce alignment. Reestablishing deterrence in South Asia now requires more than presence. It requires persistence, prepositioned infrastructure, and partnerships that remain functional under pressure. The real contest is about delivery, who co-develops, who stays present after the summit, who delivers when radars go dark, and supply chains seize up.

The window to shape South Asia's defense trajectory is still open. But after last week, it is narrowing, and the trust required to enter that window must now be earned in systems that launch, adapt, and relaunch: not in statements.

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War as Stress Test

India's ambitions for defense-industrial autonomy became more than aspiration during <u>Operation</u> <u>Sindoor</u>, its retaliatory campaign against Pakistan. The pressure was immediate. Drone inventories had to be replenished, air defense batteries reloaded, strike platforms serviced. Indigenous systems like <u>DRDO-developed Akash missiles</u> and Bharat Electronics radars were deployed. But the operation's cutting edge remained foreign: Rafale jets, newly inducted from France, carried out highprecision strikes using SCALP cruise missiles and Hammer bombs. Israeli-made Heron drones provided targeting data and post-strike assessments. The battlefield was multinational, but the logistics had to be national.

This wasn't just a test of tactics. It was a test of tempo. The question wasn't who flew, but who could relaunch. In that moment, both India and Pakistan rediscovered a hardened realism, a warrior ethos not rooted in rhetoric, but in readiness. Agility, adaptability, and industrial resilience mattered more than prestige platforms. Deterrence was defined not by posture, but by the speed of recovery under fire.

Pakistan claimed to have downed six Indian fighter jets, including Rafales. India, in turn, reported the destruction of fighter aircraft, airborne early warning systems, and a C-130 transport plane. These competing narratives spread rapidly, blurring the boundary between documentation and dramatization.

What was less ambiguous was the exposure of structural gaps. India encountered the cost of delayed indigenization. <u>Tejas fighter production lagged</u>. The Future Infantry Combat Vehicle (FICV) project <u>remained stalled</u>. The <u>MQ-9B Predator deal</u> with the United States had gone cold, caught between regulatory hesitation and <u>strategic ambiguity</u>. These weren't new problems. But they had never collided so directly with the tempo of live operations.

India's push toward defense self-reliance, though politically compelling, remains encumbered by persistent delays and execution gaps. Air Chief Marshal Amar Preet Singh recently underscored this, <u>bluntly stating</u> that not a single indigenous defense project has met its deadline. These are not minor overruns, they are structural delays that compromise operational readiness and force planners to work with uncertain delivery timelines. From the Tejas Mk1A to a range of domestically developed drones and munitions, flagship efforts of India's defense-industrial strategy, the gap between ambition and delivery is no longer tolerable. The consequence is strategic: when timelines slip, forces compensate with legacy platforms, uneven inventories, and rapid improvisation. Singh's remarks call not only for speed, but realism—an alignment of doctrine, industrial capacity, and delivery discipline. Without it, even the best strategies remain grounded.

On the U.S. side, strategic engagement remained strong, shaped by well-established export protocols designed to ensure stability and oversight. As operational tempos shifted, license processes remained grounded in rules-based frameworks. Technology transfer arrangements continued to evolve, steadily progressing toward deeper operational integration. American involvement was consistent with its commitments to transparency, capacity-building, and long-term regional interoperability.

And yet, war did what dialogue could not. India invoked emergency procurement authority, slashed red tape, and greenlit forward repair hubs along the western theatre. A single-window clearance platform was activated within 48 hours to expedite co-production requests. A bilateral drone production cell was authorized. For the first time, it was production tempo, not procurement prestige, that shaped India's response.

This is where sharper policy becomes visible. India began converting field need into factory doctrine, mapping high-consumption munitions, prioritizing repairable platforms, and integrating local firms into sustainment cycles. These are not just tactical fixes. They are building blocks for strategic autonomy under fire, and cornerstones of regional deterrence.

• <u>Scenario 3</u>: Pakistan's Tactical Dependence and Strategic Friction

Pakistan followed a parallel trajectory, only with different dependencies. The JF-17, a Chinesedesigned and locally assembled fighter, led its air campaign. Surveillance and loitering drone operations leaned on <u>China's Wing Loong</u> and <u>Turkey's Songar platforms</u>. But during the conflict, both systems revealed seams. Firmware updates were delayed. Software support routed through Beijing added hours to response time. Some strike drones suffered communication glitches mid-sortie, possibly due to encryption mismatches. When the drones returned, the debrief was not about payloads, but about the lag.

<u>Images of downed UAVs</u> and blacked-out cities spread across social media. In Islamabad, the debate wasn't whether Pakistan had partners. It was whether those partners had performed, on time, without condition, under fire.

For countries hedging between East and West, dual-track diplomacy collapsed in contact. During peacetime, ambiguity provided leverage. In war, it became paralysis. In those moments, the only question that mattered was: who answers the call, and who stays on the line?

The Smaller Players, the Bigger Picture

Often overlooked, South Asia's smaller states are increasingly shaping their own defense futures. Bangladesh's <u>Forces Goal 2030</u> includes systems from China, Italy, and Turkey, but Dhaka is also engaging with European suppliers - France, Germany, and the U.K. - on localized maintenance, cyber protection, and limited co-production. These aren't prestige purchases. They're strategic hedges. In a region where today's supplier can become tomorrow's coercer, diversification is deterrence.

Sri Lanka is exploring <u>radar integration with Japan</u>. France has resumed quiet engagement through maritime sensors and non-lethal assets. Israeli firms, known for their expanding global cyber footprint, have reportedly expressed interest in offering perimeter and surveillance tools to smaller South Asian states, including the Maldives. While details remain limited, such engagements are not merely transactional, they are architectural. They shape how states conceptualize layered resilience in an increasingly unpredictable region.

Nepal and Bhutan are investing in micro-capacities: secure communications, disaster-response drones, encrypted transport networks. The Maldives, already hosting an Indian-supported coastal radar grid, is reportedly seeking to expand its maritime situational awareness, exploring options that may include ASEAN-aligned interoperability. These states are not waiting for permission. They are wiring fallback systems, quietly, incrementally, purposefully.

This foundational layer - local diagnostics, timely delivery, and operational co-presence - remains an opportunity for deeper U.S. engagement. For this is precisely where strategic trust is forged, not at the summit, but in the simulator. A radar battery delivered on time. A software patch arriving before a drill. That's not goodwill, it's governance. In a region increasingly defined by uptime, even small systems carry strategic weight.

These states want more than talking points. They want sustained presence, local diagnostics, and transferable know-how. Not handshakes, hardware. Not declarations, data rights. And they want the assurance that partnerships will perform under operational pressure.

This opens a path for modest but transformative policy. The U.S. could establish a South Asia Sustainment Hub, a rotating logistics and maintenance initiative based in a neutral third country. It could offer joint certification programs for local engineers. It could subsidize encrypted software packages tailored for regional ISR needs. These are not grand strategies. They are instruments of peace through strength, built not in glass towers, but in hangars and data bays.

Innovation, too, is moving downstream. Startups in Dhaka are developing low-cost harbor sensors for port security. Engineers in Colombo are prototyping modular relief kits for disaster zones. These aren't auxiliary contributions; they are frontline resilience. They reflect a region refusing passivity, experimenting, hedging, adapting; one spare part, one system node, one local line of code at a time.

Co-Production or Coercion

In South Asia, defense cooperation is no longer ideological. It is logistical. China delivers fast. Turkey delivers flexibly. Russia delivers what's familiar. And the United States delivers standards, but often too slowly. In a region where the tempo of response matters more than its origin, trust is now timed.

India watched. Bangladesh recalibrated. Bhutan accepted European development support, with embedded trainers, not just kits. The Maldives turned to South Korea for maritime radars, chosen not for branding, but for reliability. A pattern is forming: don't commit too deeply, but diversify decisively. Choose deliverability over declarations. Prioritize presence over prestige.

Turkey's presence is expanding. For some, it represents welcome agility; for others, it resembles China's model, speed with strings. Pakistan saw the limits of both. Mid-sortie firmware delays, encryption mismatches, and coordination gaps with Turkish systems reminded Islamabad that dependency, however modern, remains vulnerability.

France, firmly aligned with India, has frozen major military exports to Pakistan. Israel, meanwhile, continues to offer India a pipeline of specialized systems, loitering munitions, cyber suites, border

sensors. But its capabilities are being quietly courted by others, those who seek performance without entanglement.

For the United States, the moment presents an opportunity to deepen its approach, advancing from platform provision to co-developing resilient, interoperable capabilities with South Asian partners. South Asia is no longer just a buyer's market. It's a co-developer's frontier, where the most valuable export is reliability under duress. That means building modular supply lines, not just headline deals. It means embedding field teams, accelerating licensing reforms, and co-designing systems that are update-resilient and downtime-proof.

Delivery is no longer a transaction. It is a message. Every part that arrives on time extends influence. Every missed deadline cedes it. But influence is no longer unilateral. It is co-assembled, built through mutual dependency, tested through shared urgency.

There is a window to lead, but only through frameworks that enable shared uptime. The U.S. could propose a Joint Rapid Integration Facility for ISR drones and <u>loitering munitions</u> in South Asia. It could initiate a Multinational Firmware Security Forum focused on mid-sortie reprogrammability. These are not glamour platforms. But they are tempo-capable, fault-tolerant, and co-maintained. They are how alliances hold when latency breaks them elsewhere.

<u>Attritable systems</u>, cheap, scalable, easy to train, are no longer niche. They are political necessities. They allow states to deter without escalating, to absorb without fragmenting. They make room for partnerships that do not demand doctrinal alignment, only operational trust.

They are the future. And those who help build them, not sell them, will shape the next deterrence cycle.

The Factory is the Frontline

This war redrew the battlespace. The <u>frontline</u> wasn't just the Line of Control; it was the assembly lines in Bengaluru, the drone hangars in Hyderabad, the radar calibration bays in Rawalpindi, and the Turkish logistics nodes sustaining Pakistan's UAV operations. What mattered wasn't who launched first, but who could relaunch, repair, and reload. Replenishment became deterrence.

India's use of Rafale jets, armed with SCALP cruise missiles and Hammer bombs, was precise. But it exposed constraints. Maintenance loops were routed through Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) in Europe. Mid-conflict reprogramming required encrypted French liaison. India's strike capability hit targets, but its autonomy was throttled by supplier bottlenecks.

In response, India quietly authorized forward repair hubs near the western front. Loitering munition assembly lines were accelerated. Domestic firms received emergency contracts to produce field-repairable drone chassis. For the first time, India responded not only with firepower, but with supply chain reform.

This is where policy became operational. India began issuing "local uptime mandates" for high-use systems. DRDO embedded support teams with private drone vendors. A new directive required any

imported platform to be field-serviceable within Indian territory by year's end. It marked a shift toward resilience by design, deterrence not declared, but sustained in circuitry.

Pakistan's story mirrored this shift, though with different friction. The JF-17 flew frequently, but servicing delays emerged when Chinese technicians were unavailable. Turkish drones offered agility, but one failed during a night sortie due to firmware lag and encrypted bandwidth saturation. On paper, the systems were formidable. In practice, they stumbled at tempo.

For the United States, this is the real test. It does not need to be the cheapest or the fastest. But it must be the most dependable. That means forward-staging sustainment teams, granting temporary export waivers during live crises, and partnering on attritable systems that local partners can build, modify, and repair themselves.

Washington could operationalize this through a U.S.–South Asia Sustainment Compact: a tri-track platform combining logistics access, co-training residencies, and joint performance benchmarks. Dull in form, decisive in function. These are not prestige tools. They are the quiet implements of peace through strength.

Because delivery is no longer the end of the deal, it is the beginning of deterrence. Systems must launch, recover, relaunch. They must adapt mid-mission. They must reboot while under fire.

The war proved what theory often forgets: the factory is not behind the line. It is the line. It is where deterrence is rebuilt, or broken.

What Comes Next

The war may be over, but its messages remain. The next disruption in South Asia may not come from a missile, it may come from a delayed chip, a grounded drone, or a supplier that goes silent when the line is live.

The region is no longer debating alignment. It is benchmarking trust. India is auditing every supplier that failed during *Operation Sindoor*. Pakistan is reevaluating whether strategic partnerships translate to wartime performance. In Dhaka, Colombo, and Male, the question is no longer who promises, but who performs, and who stays online when systems begin to fail.

This is no longer a defense competition. It is a delivery economy. The winners will not be those with the grandest doctrines, but those with the fastest uptime, the fewest dependencies, and the lowest friction. This is what it means to reestablish deterrence, not through pronouncements, but through performance.

For the United States and its partners, the opportunity remains, but it is no longer conceptual. It must now be made visible: in test bays, logistics depots, and co-developed systems resilient to stress. That means establishing a drone resilience hub, jointly staffed by Indian, Bangladeshi, and American engineers, capable of rapid testing, maintenance, and turnaround. It means creating a dedicated clearing cell for parts and firmware approvals, able to bypass or expedite licensing procedures when operational timelines demand it. And it means launching an attritable innovation challenge: a

cooperative design sprint focused on developing Indo-Pacific-ready, low-cost ISR and strike platforms that can be built fast, repaired locally, and deployed in swarms.

These are not abstract initiatives. They are the architecture of peace through strength in the Indo-Pacific. They do not require sweeping treaties. But they do require trust on both sides: that the U.S. will meet operational urgency with procedural flexibility, and that its partners will commit to shared readiness, not just symbolic alignment.

Every crate that arrives on time is deterrence. Every missed part is a vulnerability.

This war reminded the region that deterrence is not declared; it is assembled. Not in conference rooms, but in toolkits. Not in white papers, but in repair bays.

The next war, if it comes, will not start with rhetoric. It will start with a question: who can reboot faster?

And when the skies went dark, it wasn't doctrine that mattered. It was who stayed online.

The war didn't arrive quietly. It was flagged, forecasted, and unleashed. But what followed did. The real shift—the recalibration of trust, the collapse of ambiguity, the recognition that deterrence now lives in crates, updates, and uptime—came silently. Like a parcel in Conrad's London, sealed in gray paper, carried without fanfare. Not in thunder, but in firmware. Not in declarations, but in delivery. Not with a bang, as Eliot warned, but with a backlog—assembled in silence, undeniable once seen.



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