



India's Strategy of Escalation Dominance

By

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Recent statements by [Indian Air Force Chief Marshal AP Singh](#) and [Indian Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi](#) reflect how India's military doctrine is transforming, which, in recent years, has undergone a significant shift and is marked by a more offensive and assertive approach. India continues to expand its military modernization program beyond its defense needs, as evidenced by its ranking as the world's [second-largest](#) importer of military equipment, alongside its huge [investment](#) in indigenization.

India's strategy of escalation dominance, aimed at acquiring the ability to control the pace, intensity, and outcome of a conflict at each successive rung of the escalation ladder, as well as termination on its own terms, is underway. There are indications of development of such a strategy. Conventional superiority, strategic signaling, ready-to-use nuclear forces, and crisis management are all examples. Its strategy of escalation dominance, coupled with damage limitation, is supported by multilayered missile and air defense systems and canisterization of its nuclear-capable missile for a ready-to-use force, as well as cyber and space capabilities.

These capabilities are considered key to a state's [escalation dominance strategy](#). However, India's [escalation dominance](#) in South Asia is not only accelerating the intensity of the security dilemma by increasing its own security but also deepening the threat perception of the adversary—weakening the strategic stability of South Asia.

In 2004, India revealed its Cold Start doctrine, a limited warfighting offensive plan to achieve conventional objectives within a limited time frame. Later, two more doctrines, known as the Joint Doctrine for Indian Armed Forces and the Land Warfare Doctrine, were issued in 2017 and 2018.

Recently, the Indian government announced a joint exercise by the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force, named [Cold Start](#), in the first week of October 2025. The exercise aimed to test drones and counter-drone systems that officials labelled as the biggest such drill to be conducted since the May India-Pakistan conflict.

On September 25, 2025, the Indian Ministry of Defense announced that India had conducted a successful flight test of a rail-based Agni-Prime intermediate-range ballistic missile (MRBM). This is the first railway-based ballistic missile, which the minister called "[under a full operational scenario](#)." A rail-based launcher is considered a significant development since the missile can move freely across the national rail network. This increases the flexibility of the system in terms of its [operational capability and survivability](#), as well as its ability to be deployed quickly.

The development is part of India's ongoing military modernization program by fielding more types of weapon systems. A rail-based launcher, compared to fixed silos and road mobile launchers, has the advantage of quick deployment, maneuverability, and greater chances of survivability. With the test, India has joined a select group of nations with this capability.

India's counterforce capability, followed by emerging trends in its nuclear posturing and technological developments, play into Pakistan's fears. Indian ambitions for conventional counterforce capabilities that can decapitate Pakistan's retaliatory nuclear capability only increases Pakistan's fears. Reportedly, India is also pursuing a missile capable of carrying a [bunker-buster](#). Its potential to cause massive destruction could cross Pakistan's threshold for nuclear use, thereby leading to a serious crisis.

These ambitions require expansion of India's nuclear arsenal in terms of more missiles, more warheads, and more fissile material to fulfill the requirements of its emerging nuclear posture, which is detrimental to regional peace and stability. India's pursuit of an escalation dominance strategy vis-à-vis Pakistan could be perilous and lead to retaliation and war, as [true escalation dominance is rarely attainable in any](#) confrontation.

It is not something that is a feasible policy objective. Ending conflict on favorable terms remains a perilous policy objective. This is the capability of a state to dictate the endgame of a conflict, ensuring that peace is maintained on its own terms, not the opponent's.

Nevertheless, India's policy of escalation dominance in South Asia is escalatory, while remaining elusive. The recent four-day conflict is the latest example of India's objectives to end the conflict on advantageous terms militarily, economically, and diplomatically. For instance, after its strike inside Pakistan, the Indian government immediately started to claim the success of Operation Sindoor, praising its [military capabilities](#) and technological strides.

On the diplomatic level, India anticipated the international community's response to the attacks and support for the Indian stance to strengthen its regional and international standings. However, the failure of the Indian strategy was exposed at the military level when India faced tough retaliation from Pakistan, resulting in the reported loss of its six jets, besides damage to its key military installations, including its costly defense systems. At the diplomatic and economic levels, [Trump's](#) repeated claims of credit for ending the conflict question its long-held stance of strategic autonomy and rejecting third parties' role in resolving the Kashmir dispute. After the ceasefire, Trump claimed that to end the conflict between India and Pakistan, his threat of extremely high [tariffs](#) was instrumental in reaching a ceasefire agreement.

India has been unable to achieve the desired outcomes from the conflicts it has initiated many times over the past two decades. Latest statements from the Indian military leadership also show that India is unsatisfied with the outcomes of its strategy. It is more useful to treat escalation dominance as a philosophical aspiration than as a feasible policy objective, especially against a country that has a qualitative edge over the initiator of the crisis. Therefore, advanced technologies could be decisive in any future conflicts, but it could be that reciprocal development can offer a counter-capability in the same-domain deterrence and thus may challenge escalation dominance. Pakistan's policy of full-spectrum deterrence is instrumental in countering Indian ambitions at every level of the escalation ladder. India's pursuit of escalation dominance complicates the regional security dynamics, which already lack institutionalized Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), a nuclear risk-reduction mechanism, and an arms control framework aligned with the emerging technologies.

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