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Strategic Importance of Wakhan Corridor: Navigating Interests of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China

Dr Zahid

Impact of India's Strategic Autonomy on its Quad Membership

Azfar Bilal Qureshi, Rubia Shoukat

Climate Change and the Arctic Ocean: Exploring Geopolitical Shifts and Strategic Interests in the Region

Shereen Hashum

The Geopolitical Impact of Pakistan's Victory in the Four-Day War with India

Azhar Ali



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Artificial Intelligence, Autonomy and the Human Factor: Strategic Lessons from the 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis

Amber Afreen Abid¹, Sher Bano²

Abstract

This study critically examines the 2025 India-Pakistan crisis, highlighting the failure of India's Artificial Intelligence (AI)-centric, space-integrated, military strategy and the decisive success of Pakistan's human-led, doctrine-driven response. Despite India's substantial investment in militarized AI, satellite-based Intelligence, Surveillancet and Reconnaissance (ISR) networks and Autonomous Weapon Systems (AWS), its overreliance on algorithmic warfare led to operational paralysis, strategic misjudgment and ultimate defeat. In contrast, Pakistan's victory stemmed from superior command and control, adaptive air and cyber operations and a national culture of resilience and unity. Through effective integration of manned reconnaissance, electronic warfare and moral resolve, Pakistan neutralized India's technological advantage. The conflict underscores enduring truths about warfare: technology cannot replace human judgment, institutional discipline or strategic clarity. As South Asia enters a new era of AI and space militarization, Pakistan's conduct offers a model of responsible deterrence, emphasizing selective modernization, defensive innovation and strategic restraint. This analysis reaffirms that the future of conflict will be shaped not only by machines but also by the intellect, willpower and adaptability of those who wield them.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Strategic Stability, Doctrine, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance Networks, Pakistan, India, Deterrence

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Introduction

In recent years, India has pursued an aggressive trajectory in integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) with its satellite-based Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. This transformation was part of a broader doctrinal shift aimed at leveraging emerging technologies to achieve strategic superiority in the South Asian region. New Delhi's vision involved fusing AI-enabled systems with satellite-based sensors and networked platforms to create a seamless architecture for real-time battlefield awareness, autonomous decision-making and precision strike capability.³ Influenced by global trends in algorithmic warfare and inspired by the operational success of AI-enhanced ISR in Western militaries, India framed technological superiority as the decisive factor in future conflicts.⁴

The heavy reliance on autonomous systems, vulnerable communication links and predictive analytics lead to inflexibility and unexpected vulnerabilities. Meanwhile, over-engineering and overconfidence in machine learning-driven command decisions could create a system optimized for control, but not for uncertainty, ambiguity or strategic surprise.⁵

The May 2025 crisis revealed a profound disconnect between India's technological ambition and its strategic effectiveness, thereby exposing the limits of New Delhi's technological determinism. Despite possessing highly sophisticated AI-augmented ISR systems, India's military strategy faltered when confronted with Pakistan's adaptive, resilient and human-centric response. Rather than achieving uncontested superiority, India's AI-centric doctrine proved fragile under operational stress.

In contrast, Pakistan responded not by attempting to match India's technological sophistication but by integrating emerging technologies in a more modest, deliberate and adaptive manner. It approached AI and ISR tools through a constructivist lens, embedding them into a broader framework of doctrine, culture and leadership. Pakistan's doctrine, shaped by decades of asymmetric military experience and a deep culture of strategic caution,

³ Shashank Joshi, "India's AI Gamble: Space, Surveillance, and Strategic Posture," *International Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2023): 897-913.

⁴ Michael C. Horowitz, "Artificial Intelligence, International Competition, and the Balance of Power," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (2018): 36-57.

⁵ S. Paul Kapur and Vipin Narang, *Technology, Strategy, and Stability in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

emphasized operational resilience, mission command and the intelligent use of human judgment within digital systems.⁶ Rather than pursuing AI for prestige or determinism, Pakistan selectively integrated it to augment, not replace, human-led operations. These included defensive deception, rapid force dispersion, electronic warfare techniques designed to disorient AI-driven targeting algorithms, and ISR fusion systems. Pakistan's strategic culture, rooted in defensive realism and crisis management under nuclear deterrence, thus provided a more flexible and resilient framework than India's AI-centric operational strategy.⁷

This research challenges the prevailing narrative of technological determinism in modern warfare, the notion that superior technology alone guarantees battlefield success. While emerging technologies like AI and ISR satellites offer transformative potential, their efficacy depends fundamentally on how they are embedded within national doctrines, military institutions and leadership cultures.⁸

The May 2025 conflict underscores that it is not the technology itself, but its integration with strategy, adaptability and human resources that shape outcomes. Pakistan's success illustrates that states with limited technological means can still prevail through doctrinal innovation, robust leadership and strategic coherence.

Thus, the May 2025 crisis offers a powerful case study of how technological determinism fails, while constructivist integration succeeds in shaping war outcomes. Moreover, the case holds broader implications for the future of warfare in the Global South. As more militaries adopt AI and ISR systems, the experience of South Asia in May 2025 illustrates the risks of overreliance on untested experimental technologies or systems and the enduring importance of strategic balance. It invites policymakers and military strategists to reconsider the assumption that cutting-edge technology will automatically translate into dominance, especially when adversaries possess the will and capacity to adapt.

⁶ International Institute for Strategic Studies. *Nuclear Deterrence and Stability in South Asia: Perceptions and Realities*. IISS Primer (London: IISS, 2021).

⁷ Ashley J. Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001).

⁸ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

India's Militarized AI-Space Strategy: A Flawed Approach

Significant investments in space militarization have marked India's pursuit of a technologically advanced, AI-enabled military strategy. India's AI-space doctrine epitomizes technological determinism: the belief that mastery of advanced systems would automatically yield superiority. Platforms such as the Cartosat and Radar Imaging Satellite (RISAT) series of satellites, designed for high-resolution optical and radar imaging, respectively, form the core of India's ISR constellation. The deployment of the Electromagnetic Intelligence-gathering Satellite (EMISAT) further augments India's capabilities for monitoring electromagnetic signatures across hostile territories.⁹ Complementing these systems, India experimented with autonomous drone swarms, battlefield robotics and AI-driven decision-support tools to create what appeared to be a cutting-edge military ecosystem geared toward rapid detection, targeting and engagement.¹⁰

However, this technologically ambitious approach was deeply flawed in its overreliance on automation, centralized ISR architecture and predictive algorithms. Rather than enhancing strategic agility, India's AI-space integration inadvertently created critical operational vulnerabilities, particularly when confronted by Pakistan's decentralized, adaptive and deception-based military tactics during the May 2025 crisis.

Rigid AI Targeting

One of the main weaknesses of India's approach was the inflexibility of its AI-based targeting systems. Algorithms trained on historical patterns and predefined behavior models failed to adapt when Pakistani forces employed irregular and deceptive maneuvers. For instance, Pakistan successfully exploited these rigid targeting parameters by using decoys, electronic spoofing and manipulating thermal and radar signatures. These techniques confused AI models, which were unable to distinguish between real and false targets due to induced ambiguity.¹¹ The inability of machine learning systems to grasp

⁹ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India's Military Space Ambitions: Challenges and Opportunities," ORF Occasional Paper 302, 2021.

¹⁰ Ritu Sharma, "Emerging Technologies and the Future of Indian Warfare," *Journal of Defence Studies* 16, no. 2 (2022): 45-68.

¹¹ Petr Topychkanov, "AI and Pakistan's Nuclear Command-and-Control System." In *The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Strategic Stability and Nuclear Risk in South Asia*, edited by Petr Topychkanov, SIPRI, 2020. 47-51.

contextual nuance, a strength still retained by human operators, proved costly during dynamic combat situations.¹²

Overreliance on ISR Feeds

India's ISR systems, though sophisticated, operated within a highly centralized and latency-prone architecture. Decision-making processes were often bottlenecked by the need to validate satellite data and generate machine-analyzed threat assessments.¹³ In rapidly evolving tactical environments, such as urban or mountainous engagements, this dependence on ISR created delays that prevented Indian forces from responding in real-time during the May 2025 crisis. By contrast, Pakistan relied more on tactical autonomy at the unit level, enabled by commanders who were trained to act with limited digital oversight. This approach proved more effective in fluid, time-sensitive scenarios.

Misguided Strategic Assumptions

Underlying these vulnerabilities were misguided strategic assumptions within Indian leadership circles. India's military planners increasingly place trust in algorithmically generated assessments over traditional battlefield intuition and human judgment. In several instances, AI-generated threat maps and operational suggestions are followed with minimal human skepticism, leading to flawed deployments and misaligned priorities.¹⁴ This faith in technological objectivity ignored both the inherent biases in training data and the contextual blind spots of AI, particularly in unconventional warfare environments. By contrast, Pakistan's strategy maintains a balance between machine input and human oversight, recognizing that war is as much a psychological and social contest as a technological one.¹⁵

The Absence of Human-Machine Synergy

While India's technological capabilities appear formidable on paper, they lack the human mastery and doctrinal adaptability required for

¹² Michael C. Horowitz, "Artificial Intelligence, International Competition, and the Balance of Power," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (2018): 36-57.

¹³ S. Paul Kapur and Vipin Narang, *Technology, Strategy, and Stability in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

¹⁴ Shashank Joshi, "India's AI Gamble: Space, Surveillance, and Strategic Posture," *International Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2023): 897-913.

¹⁵ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

high-pressure, unpredictable conflict environments. The Indian military's approach to AI is largely additive, introducing automation into existing systems without corresponding changes in doctrine, training or command philosophy.¹⁶ This creates a gap between capability and competence. Technologies like drone swarms and satellite surveillance are not inherently flawed, but their deployment in rigid, top-down command structures without real-time adaptability renders them strategically ineffective.

Technological determinism blinded India to the social dimension of war. It assumed machines would reduce uncertainty, ignoring that adversaries actively exploit and manipulate rigid systems. In contrast, Pakistan's emphasis on human-machine collaboration, flexible decision-making and the decentralization of command allowed it to respond creatively to India's technological advancement. The 2025 conflict thus underscored that technological overmatch does not equate to strategic superiority, particularly when the adversary effectively weaponizes flexibility, deception and doctrinal innovation.

Indian Aggression: A Technological Gamble

The 2025 India-Pakistan crisis marked a watershed moment in the strategic landscape of South Asia, testing the real-world effectiveness of AI-enabled warfare in a contested environment. On the night of 6–7 May 2025, India initiated Operation Sindoor, a high-risk military campaign grounded in algorithmic warfare and network-centric doctrines. The operation aimed to deliver a quick, decisive blow to Pakistani command and control infrastructure, using a constellation of AI-guided platforms operating across multiple domains.

The campaign began with Rafale-led multirole fighters launching precision-guided cruise missiles, supported by loitering munitions and autonomous drone swarms, all targeting pre-designated nodes identified through AI-generated ISR analysis. Indian strategists, drawing confidence from real-time satellite feeds and machine learning-based targeting algorithms, sought to compress the decision-action cycle and overwhelm Pakistani defenses before a coherent counter-response could be mounted.¹⁷ Yet, despite

¹⁶ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India's Military Space Ambitions: Challenges and Opportunities," ORF Occasional Paper 302, 2021.

¹⁷ S. Paul Kapur and Vipin Narang, *Technology, Strategy, and Stability in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

the apparent sophistication of its operational model, India's technological gamble quickly unraveled.

Pakistan's Counter-Response: Adaptation, Deception and Doctrinal Excellence

Pakistan's approach illustrates social constructivism: technology acquires meaning only when embedded in doctrine, leadership and culture. Rather than pursuing AI for prestige or parity, Pakistan deliberately integrated modest technological tools within a resilient doctrinal framework.

Pakistan responded with a layered and adaptive defense strategy that neutralized the advantages of India's AI-centric offensive. Rather than attempting a symmetrical technological response, Pakistan weaponized flexibility, electronic disruption and doctrinal preparedness to confound India's high-tech systems.

Electronic Warfare and Drone Disruption

One of Pakistan's most effective countermeasures was the deployment of advanced Electronic Warfare (EW) units, which targeted the communication links and navigational systems of India's drone swarms and loitering munitions.¹⁸ These units deployed jamming, spoofing and frequency-hopping disruption to confuse autonomous platforms that relied on precise Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) signals and real-time data transfer for coordination.¹⁹ As a result, many Indian drones deviated from flight paths, collided mid-air or failed to locate viable targets.

Decoy Deployment and AI Confusion

In addition, Pakistan executed a wide-scale decoy deployment campaign, simulating high-value military installations using radar reflectors and electromagnetic signatures. These measures exploited the pattern-recognition limitations of India's AI targeting systems, which struck several decoy positions under the false assumption of their authenticity.²⁰ As

¹⁸ Vikram Mittal, "Electronic Warfare Is Key To Indian And Pakistani Military Strategies." *Forbes*, May 15, 2025.

¹⁹ Vikram Mittal, 2025.

²⁰ "South Asia's New Arms Race: How India-Pakistan Drone Clashes Are Escalating Military Competition," *Daily Management Review*, accessed August 19, 2025, https://www.dailymanagementreview.com/South-Asia-s-New-Arms-Race-How-India-Pakistan-Drone-Clashes-Are-Escalating-Military-Competition_a11738.html.

Horowitz has noted, algorithmic warfare is highly vulnerable to adversarial deception, particularly when systems are trained on datasets lacking the diversity to distinguish between real and engineered cues.²¹

Adaptive Air Defenses and Strategic Discipline

Pakistan's air defense, particularly units operating the LY-80 (HQ-16) platforms, adopted a strategy of selective engagement.²² Rather than reacting uniformly to all incursions, commanders withheld fire against decoys or low-value assets, preserving missile stocks for credible threats. This judicious use of firepower, combined with a decentralized command model, ensured sustained defensive capacity throughout the crisis.²³ Meanwhile, Pakistan's strategic reserve forces remained dispersed, avoiding detection and maintaining readiness for escalation, which India's algorithms failed to anticipate due to their reliance on conventional massing patterns.

India's faith in machine-led warfare proved deeply misplaced when confronted by a well-prepared adversary employing a blend of human leadership, deception and flexible doctrine. The Indian campaign's dependence on pre-scripted targeting logic and centralized ISR denied it the ability to adapt mid-operation, especially when its data inputs were corrupted or misleading. In contrast, Pakistan's decision-making processes empowered field commanders, respected the ambiguity of the battlefield and adapted to the fluid nature of high-stakes conflict under nuclear overhang.²⁴

The triumph of Pakistan's defense in this crisis reveals a fundamental truth in contemporary warfare: that strategic coherence and adaptability often matter more than technological advantage. While India possessed the more advanced hardware and informational capabilities, Pakistan leveraged cognitive and doctrinal superiority to frustrate and ultimately reverse the offensive.

²¹ M. C. Horowitz, "The Promise and Peril of Military Applications of AI," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2018.

²² "HQ-16A LY-80 SAM," *Army Recognition*, May 9, 2025, <https://armyrecognition.com/military-products/army/air-defense-systems/air-defense-vehicles/hq-16a-china-uk>.

²³ "The First Drone War Opens a New Chapter in India-Pakistan Conflict," *BBC News*, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwy6w6507wqo>.

²⁴ Rajesh M. Basrur, *Minimum Deterrence and India's Nuclear Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Pakistan's Strategic and Operational Excellence

During the 2025 crisis, Pakistan's armed forces showcased a model of multi-domain warfare rooted in doctrinal discipline, human leadership and adaptive innovation. Faced with India's AI-heavy offensive under Operation Sindoor, Pakistan did not attempt to match technology for technology. Instead, it relied on a comprehensive strategy that emphasized command flexibility, real-time responsiveness, precision targeting and cyber disruption.

Superior Command and Control

Central to Pakistan's success was its decentralized and flexible command and control structure, which allowed rapid response to India's unfolding strikes. Leveraging a network of mobile command posts and secure communication channels, Pakistan maintained operational continuity even under electronic duress. Unit-level commanders were granted autonomy to act within the commander's intent, facilitating faster tactical adjustments than India's algorithmically delayed decision loops could accommodate.²⁵ Pakistan's model was consistent with historical military effectiveness literature, which emphasizes initiative-based leadership and bottom-up responsiveness in dynamic conflict environments.²⁶

Precision Counterstrikes

Pakistan Air Force (PAF) played a decisive role by executing precision counterstrikes against key Indian forward-deployed assets. Unlike India's AI-targeted systems, PAF squadrons relied on manned reconnaissance, Human Intelligence (HUMINT) and selective electronic intercepts, which allowed them to engage verified, high-value targets such as supply depots, radar installations and mobile missile units.²⁷ Pakistan's strike coordination center integrated live intelligence with human analysis, ensuring that its air strikes were both accurate and strategically calibrated. The resulting impact neutralized significant portions of India's offensive momentum while preserving Pakistan's own operational depth.

²⁵ "KJ 500 Network Warfare Arrives: Pakistan's Command and Control Leap, Threatens India's Skies." *Defence Security Asia*, June 2025.

²⁶ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

²⁷ Ahmed Khaled. "How the Pakistan Air Force Outmanoeuvred the Indian Air Force." *BD Military*, June 2025.

Cyber Superiority

Pakistan also demonstrated cyber superiority by deploying offensive cyber capabilities that disrupted India's communications and ISR coordination networks.²⁸ According to leaked after-action reports, Indian command units experienced data delays, false targeting inputs and widespread network instability, believed to be the result of Pakistani malware attacks on Indian satellite relays and tactical cloud systems.²⁹ This cyber campaign blinded India's real-time awareness, preventing effective follow-up strikes and delaying reinforcement movements. In modern warfare, where ISR is the linchpin of operational tempo, cyber dominance functioned as a strategic equalizer, compensating for India's advantage in hardware.³⁰

Moral and National Resolve

Perhaps the most underappreciated element of Pakistan's success was the moral cohesion and national resolve of its military and citizenry. Faced with a technologically advanced offensive, Pakistani forces responded with high morale, fueled by a clear national narrative of defense and sovereignty. Civil-military coordination ensured logistical support, national media reinforced public confidence and no signs of internal dissent were reported in the ranks.³¹ This human factor proved decisive, as India's technologically dependent formations suffered from lower cohesion under stress, especially when automated systems began to fail.

By the end of the conflict, Pakistani forces had: (i) targeted advanced Indian surveillance equipment and drone systems; (ii) established air superiority; and (iii) disrupted India's digital battlespace in cyber and information domains.

Indian Strategic Collapse

In stark contrast to Pakistan's cohesive and adaptive campaign, India's AI-reliant military strategy collapsed under battlefield conditions. While India

²⁸ "Pakistani Cyber Offensive Hits Indian Systems, BJP Website," *The Express Tribune*, May 10, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025.

²⁹ "Operation Sindoor: Govt Digital Infrastructure Faced 75% of Cyber Attacks," *The Times of India*, May 14, 2025.

³⁰ Michael C. Horowitz, "Artificial Intelligence, International Competition, and the Balance of Power," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (2018): 36-57.

³¹ "Pakistan rallies around the military. But political unity is elusive," *The Washington Post*, 16 May 2025.

entered the conflict with superior hardware including Rafale jets, S-400 missile systems, loitering munitions and AI-integrated ISR platforms, it failed to integrate these assets within an effective and adaptive doctrine. The result was a technologically advanced yet strategically brittle response.

Ineffective Air and Missile Defense

India's much-touted S-400 Triumf air defense system and the indigenous Akashteer battlefield air defense network was ineffective against Pakistan's low-altitude, mobile and time-sensitive strikes. The S-400 system, optimized for high-value aerial threats, was unable to respond effectively to Pakistan's precision missile attacks and manned aircraft flying at low altitude.³² Meanwhile, Akashteer suffered coordination issues, worsened by ISR confusion and network degradation caused by Pakistani cyberattacks.

AI Decision Loops and Tactical Paralysis

India's machine-dependent decision architecture proved to be a liability in fast-paced combat. AI systems, trained on peacetime data and structured war games, struggled to adapt to the asymmetric tactics employed by Pakistan. Automated response algorithms created delays in engagement decisions, often waiting for confirmation loops that failed under cyber interference. These delays in action allowed Pakistani forces to seize the initiative and exploit Indian hesitation.³³

Collapse of Morale

As operational losses mounted and communications faltered, Indian morale eroded rapidly. Several forward units, unable to communicate with higher headquarters or confirm orders, withdrew prematurely or surrendered equipment intact.³⁴ The Indian public, initially fed narratives of a quick victory through superior technology, grew increasingly disillusioned as reports of battlefield failures and strategic confusion emerged. Analysts have long warned of the dangers of technocratic hubris in warfighting, where overconfidence in

³² Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India's Missile Shield and the Challenges of Integrated Air Defence," *ORF Issue Brief* no. 581, 2023.

³³ Shashank Joshi, "India's AI Gamble: Space, Surveillance, and Strategic Posture," *International Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2023): 897-913. S. Paul Kapur and Vipin Narang,

³⁴ *Technology, Strategy, and Stability in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

tools can obscure the need for robust leadership and human adaptability.³⁵

Here, technology served strategy, not the other way round. By embedding emerging tools within its doctrinal culture of defensive realism, Pakistan demonstrated the constructivist logic that war is socially and institutionally constructed, not technologically predetermined.

Strategic Lessons: Man over Machine

The 2025 India-Pakistan conflict stands as a pivotal moment in the evolution of modern warfare, not merely due to the technologies deployed but because of the profound strategic truths it reaffirmed. Above all, the crisis illustrated that warfare remains an inherently human endeavor, where leadership, discipline and moral cohesion ultimately determine outcomes, not machines alone. India's defeat demonstrates that AI and ISR superiority cannot guarantee success. Deterministic thinking creates fragility when adversaries exploit machine rigidity and data vulnerabilities.

Technology as a Tool, not a Substitute

As advanced as India's AI-enabled systems appeared, they proved vulnerable when pitted against an adversary that understood the limits of technology and emphasized adaptability. India's defeat illustrates that AI and ISR superiority cannot guarantee success. Deterministic thinking creates fragility when adversaries exploit machine rigidity and data vulnerabilities. Pakistan's military demonstrated that technology must serve strategy, not replace it. This principle echoes classic strategic theory from Clausewitz to Biddle, who argue that the essence of war lies not in material superiority, but in the integration of technology with training, cohesion and sound judgment.³⁶

India's overreliance on automation produced an illusion of control. The assumption that AI could reduce the fog of war, or make real-time decisions faster and better than humans, collapsed when unstructured, adversarial behavior overwhelmed machine learning algorithms trained on peacetime patterns.³⁷ In contrast, Pakistan's forces relied on seasoned military leadership,

³⁵ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

³⁶ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³⁷ Michael C. Horowitz, "Artificial Intelligence, International Competition, and the Balance of Power," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (2018): 36–57.

honed through experience in counterinsurgency and conventional operations, to read battlefield cues and react effectively under pressure.

The Limits of Artificial Intelligence in War

The 2025 war also highlighted the significant limitations of AI in complex, unpredictable conflict environments. AI systems, particularly those trained on structured datasets, struggled to process deceptive patterns, unexpected maneuvers and information denial strategies employed by Pakistan. While algorithms excel at recognizing predictable patterns, they falter in ambiguity-rich, adversarial decision environments, which remain the hallmark of high-intensity warfare.³⁸

Pakistan capitalized on these vulnerabilities by deploying non-standard tactics, employing decoys, electronic jamming and deception, which AI could not readily interpret. Indian autonomous systems, unable to verify data in real-time or question their programming, struck false targets or hesitated in critical moments.³⁹ A form of algorithmic paralysis that compounded India's strategic confusion.

In contrast, Pakistan's human-led decision-making model enabled flexibility and accountability at every level. Unit commanders adapted to battlefield contingencies, reevaluated plans in real-time and acted with clarity of intent, elements that AI currently cannot replicate, especially in complex, high-stakes scenarios. Pakistan's victory stemmed from embedding technology into doctrine, training and leadership. Technology was an enabler, not a determinant of success.

Victory through Vigilance, Discipline and Moral Unity

Pakistan's strategic victory in 2025 also stemmed from qualities machines cannot emulate: vigilance, discipline, moral conviction and national unity. The military's cohesive doctrinal training, strong command culture and enduring civil-military synergy allowed it to sustain operations, absorb shocks and respond decisively. Pakistan framed its defensive campaign around strategic patience and calibrated retaliation, avoiding unnecessary escalation

³⁸ M. L. Cummings, "The Role of Humans in Autonomous Warfare," *Military Review* 101, no. 2 (2021): 54–63.

³⁹ S. Paul Kapur and Vipin Narang, *Technology, Strategy, and Stability in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

while preserving military initiative.⁴⁰

Furthermore, national resolve and public morale played a critical role. As the crisis unfolded, Pakistan's narrative of sovereignty, defense and national dignity galvanized public support. Civilian and military leadership remained aligned, reinforcing institutional confidence and ensuring logistical resilience. By contrast, India, despite apparently superior systems, suffered from a breakdown in morale, institutional overreach by technocratic elements and a public disillusioned by unmet expectations.⁴¹

Guardian of Strategic Stability

Ultimately, Pakistan's success reaffirmed its role as the guardian of strategic stability in South Asia. By defeating a technologically superior adversary through smart warfare, Pakistan demonstrated not only military capability but also strategic maturity. Its ability to integrate traditional doctrine with selective technological tools, while maintaining restraint under nuclear overhang, preserved regional deterrence equilibrium and deterred further escalation.

This lesson is not new but urgently relevant in the AI age: machines can assist war, but cannot wage it alone. Victory still belongs to the side with superior leadership, doctrinal clarity and the human will to adapt.

Conclusion

India's aggressive pursuit of AI and space-based militarization, encapsulated in its 2025 military doctrine, culminated not in dominance but in defeat. Despite possessing a formidable array of ISR satellites, AI-guided weapons and automated defense systems, India failed to appreciate a central tenet of strategic theory: technology is a force multiplier, not a force determinant.⁴² The 2025 conflict highlighted the vulnerabilities inherent in over-automation, including algorithmic rigidity, decision latency and the erosion of human accountability in warfare.

⁴⁰ Christopher Albin-Lackey, "Pakistan's Strategic Masterstroke," *Financial Times*, May 2025.

⁴¹ Ritu Sharma, "Emerging Technologies and the Future of Indian Warfare," *Journal of Defence Studies* 16, no. 2 (2022): 45-68.

⁴² Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

In stark contrast, Pakistan's triumph was rooted in resilience, doctrinal clarity and human excellence. Its armed forces demonstrated that disciplined leadership, adaptive tactics and moral conviction could outperform algorithmic warfare. Pakistan's operational doctrine, grounded in real-world experience and strategic restraint, enabled it to absorb the initial shock of India's high-tech offensive and mount a calibrated, multi-domain response, achieving decisive results without crossing red lines or triggering uncontrollable escalation.⁴³

More broadly, Pakistan's success in 2025 affirms a foundational lesson for 21st-century military strategy: victory in war still depends on the cognitive and moral strengths of human actors, not the sophistication of digital systems. As new technologies proliferate from quantum ISR platforms to autonomous weapons, states must resist the temptation to delegate critical decisions to machines. Instead, the integration of technology must be guided by sound doctrine, robust institutions and ethical command structures.⁴⁴

As South Asia enters a new era of militarized AI and dual-use space technologies, Pakistan's conduct in the 2025 crisis offers a model of strategic prudence under pressure. Far from engaging in technological arms-racing, Pakistan has emphasized defensive innovation, seeking to modernize its forces without sacrificing command responsibility or crisis stability. This approach reflects its consistent view that strategic deterrence and conventional readiness are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive.⁴⁵

Pakistan's future posture will likely be defined by:

- (i) Selective modernization of AI, cyber and space capabilities within a doctrinal framework;
- (ii) Institutional investment in training and civil-military cohesion;
- (iii) Continued emphasis on strategic restraint under the nuclear threshold; and
- (iv) Active engagement in regional confidence-building measures and diplomatic initiatives to avoid unintentional escalation.

In doing so, Pakistan reaffirms its role as the responsible custodian of

⁴³ "Can Pakistan's Strategic Doctrine Withstand Indian Sabre Rattling?," *Pakistan Defence*, accessed June 2025.

⁴⁴ Michael C. Horowitz, Greg Allen, and Elsa Kania, *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Warfare* (Washington, DC: CNAS, 2020).

⁴⁵ S. Paul Kapur and Vipin Narang, *Technology, Strategy, and Stability in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

South Asian strategic stability, a nuclear power committed not only to defending its sovereignty but also to preserving peace through balance, not brinkmanship.

The 2025 conflict offers enduring lessons for other regional and global powers:

- (i) Technological superiority does not equal strategic supremacy;
- (ii) Human leadership remains irreplaceable in war and peace;
- (iii) National unity, institutional discipline and doctrinal clarity are the true pillars of deterrence in the AI age.

The 2025 India-Pakistan conflict demonstrated the clash of two theoretical paradigms. India's strategy embodied technological determinism, a misplaced belief that AI and space superiority would dictate outcomes. Pakistan's strategy embodied social constructivism, where technology's role was defined by doctrine, leadership and national culture. In the shadow of this conflict, Pakistan emerges not only as the tactical victor but as the strategic adult in the room, capable of integrating innovation with restraint, strength with stability and power with responsibility.