

UPSC CSE & APSC STUDY MODULE

# India's Evolving Strategic Doctrine:

## *Calibrated Force, Strategic Autonomy, and the New Logic of Deterrence*

GS-II | GS-III | Essay | Ethics | APSC General Studies

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### Section 1: Key Terms and Explanations

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*Understanding the conceptual vocabulary of strategic affairs is indispensable for answering questions in GS-II and GS-III. The following terms, drawn from the broader discourse on India's security doctrine, form the bedrock of this topic.*

#### A. Strategic Doctrine and Deterrence

- **Strategic Doctrine:** A state's overarching framework governing when, how, and with what instruments it will use military force. India's doctrine has historically emphasised restraint, but recent developments signal a shift toward proactive, calibrated responses. Think of doctrine as the rulebook a state writes for itself — except that rivals are always watching to see how seriously it takes those rules.
- **Deterrence:** The effort to prevent an adversary from taking an undesirable action by convincing them the costs will outweigh the benefits. Deterrence can be by punishment (making aggression painful) or by denial (making aggression futile). India's traditional deterrence relied on diplomatic signalling; the newer posture adds credible military compellence.
  - **Minimum Credible Deterrence (MCD):** India's declared nuclear posture — maintaining just enough nuclear capability to assure retaliation without entering an arms race. MCD does not mean the smallest possible arsenal; it means the smallest arsenal that an adversary will take seriously.
  - **Conventional Deterrence:** Using non-nuclear military superiority to deter limited conflicts or proxy aggression. The challenge is making conventional responses credible without triggering nuclear escalation.
- **Compellence vs. Deterrence:** Deterrence is about preventing action; compellence is about forcing an adversary to change behaviour already underway. A surgical strike aimed at making a state stop supporting proxy violence is compellence, not mere deterrence.

#### B. Escalation Management

- **Escalation Ladder:** A conceptual framework (associated with Herman Kahn) depicting progressively more severe rungs of conflict, from verbal threats to tactical nuclear use. States try to signal resolve while staying below rungs that would be unacceptable to the other side.
- **Escalation Dominance:** The ability to credibly threaten to move up the escalation ladder faster or more effectively than the adversary. India's multi-domain strikes demonstrated an attempt to achieve escalation dominance in the conventional rung, below the nuclear threshold.
- **Nuclear Threshold:** The point at which a state would consider using nuclear weapons. Deliberately ambiguous thresholds create uncertainty, which can deter conventional adventurism. Pakistan's 'full spectrum deterrence' posture implies a lower threshold; India's posture keeps it deliberately unclear.

- Sub-conventional / Grey Zone Operations: Actions below the threshold of conventional war — terrorism, proxy militias, information operations, cyber intrusions. Most India-Pakistan hostility has lived in this space since 1998.

### C. Multi-Domain Operations

- Multi-Domain Operations (MDO): A modern military concept wherein land, air, sea, cyber, and space domains are integrated into a single, coherent operational plan rather than treated as separate battlefields. The maturity of a military is increasingly measured by its MDO capability.
- Jointness: The degree to which the three armed services (Army, Navy, Air Force) can plan and execute operations together, sharing intelligence and coordinating firepower in real time. Historically, India's inter-service coordination was weak; recent structural reforms have sought to address this.
- Chief of Defence Staff (CDS): A single military authority responsible for fostering jointness and integrated planning. The post was created in India in January 2020, marking a significant organisational reform in civil-military relations.
- Theatre Commands: Proposed unified geographical commands that would bring all three services under a single commander for a particular region or mission. India is in the process of setting these up — a reform closely watched by strategic analysts.

### D. Geopolitical Concepts

- Strategic Autonomy: India's longstanding foreign policy principle of preserving the freedom to make independent decisions without being locked into any single alliance. It traces back to Nehru's non-alignment but has been reinterpreted under subsequent governments to mean multi-alignment — engaging all major powers without being subordinate to any.
- Proxy War / Proxy Violence: A conflict in which a state supports non-state actors (militant groups, insurgents) to achieve strategic objectives while maintaining official deniability. Pakistan's use of non-state actors against India is the paradigmatic case studied in the Indian security context.
- Internationalisation of Disputes: Pakistan's consistent diplomatic strategy of framing the Kashmir issue as an international matter requiring third-party intervention, rather than a bilateral India-Pakistan question. India consistently opposes this framing, insisting on bilateralism per the Simla Agreement (1972).
- Third-Party Mediation: Involvement of a neutral external actor (a state, the UN, or a multilateral body) in mediating a dispute. India's historical rejection of mediation reflects its view that any external involvement legitimises Pakistan's internationalisation strategy.
- Transactionalism in International Relations: A foreign policy approach that treats relationships primarily as exchanges of specific benefits rather than on the basis of shared values or long-term strategic vision. Transactional partnerships are conditional and shift with changing interests — making them simultaneously useful and unreliable.
- Indus Waters Treaty (IWT): A 1960 water-sharing agreement mediated by the World Bank, giving India rights over three eastern rivers and Pakistan over three western rivers. The treaty has survived multiple wars, making any linking of it to security behaviour a significant departure from precedent.

### E. India-Specific Strategic Terms

- Line of Control (LoC): The de facto boundary between Indian-administered and Pakistani-administered Kashmir, established after the 1971 war and formalised in the Simla Agreement. Strikes beyond the LoC into what India calls 'Pakistan's strategic depth' represent an escalatory departure from earlier norms.
- Strategic Depth: A military concept referring to the geographic distance between a state's frontlines and its vital centres (capital, logistics hubs, weapons storage). Pakistan's concern about Indian strikes on targets within its strategic depth — i.e., well inside its own territory — is a persistent feature of bilateral tensions.
- Cold Start Doctrine: An Indian Army operational concept (officially denied but widely discussed) designed to enable rapid, limited conventional strikes into Pakistani territory before nuclear weapons could be deployed. It is relevant because it represents India's attempt to create usable military options below the nuclear threshold.
- Indigenous Defence Production / Atmanirbhar Bharat in Defence: India's policy of reducing import dependence and building domestic defence manufacturing. Recent military operations have provided real-world validation for domestically designed systems, boosting confidence in this programme.



## Section 2: Main Arguments and Substantive Analysis

*This section unpacks the core intellectual framework of India's emerging strategic posture, examining its constituent claims, the evidence supporting them, and the counterarguments that complicate any triumphalist reading.*

### A. The Core Thesis

The fundamental argument is that India has arrived at a strategic inflection point where intent and capacity have aligned in a historically unusual manner. This alignment enables a mode of statecraft that is simultaneously assertive and calibrated — willing to impose costs on adversaries through military means while carefully managing escalation to prevent a broader conflict. This is not a sudden leap but the culmination of decades of capability-building, institutional reform, and doctrinal evolution.

### B. Key Claims and Supporting Evidence

#### 1. Military Jointness Has Matured

- The integration of Army, Navy, and Air Force in a complex, multi-phase operation is evidence that India's long-criticised inter-service coordination has improved substantially following structural reforms.
- The CDS framework, Integrated Defence Staff, and moves toward Theatre Commands reflect an institutional architecture better suited to modern MDO than the older service-specific command structures.
- Indigenous systems performing effectively in operational conditions validates the Atmanirbhar Bharat programme in defence and increases confidence in sustaining such capability domestically over time, reducing vulnerabilities associated with import dependence.

#### 2. The Nuclear Threshold Is Not as Constraining as Previously Assumed

- India demonstrated that carefully calibrated conventional operations can be conducted beyond the LoC without triggering nuclear escalation — challenging the argument that nuclear deterrence creates a complete 'stability-instability paradox' that immunises Pakistan's proxy activities.
- The Stability-Instability Paradox (Glenn Snyder, 1965): At the strategic (nuclear) level, mutual deterrence creates stability, but this very stability may encourage risk-taking at lower (conventional, sub-conventional) levels. India's response seeks to puncture this paradox by raising the costs of lower-level aggression.
- However, the risks are real: Pakistan's 'full spectrum deterrence' doctrine — which implies low-yield tactical nuclear options — means escalation management is not India's decision alone. This remains the central vulnerability in any calibrated conventional response strategy.

#### 3. Multi-Domain and Maritime Dimensions Signal Expanded Operational Canvas

- The maritime dimension of any response — extending naval presence and deployment — signals that India considers itself a two-front power capable of projecting force in multiple theatres simultaneously.
- For a continental power like India, establishing maritime operational credibility alongside land and air operations is strategically significant. It signals to China as much as to Pakistan.

- The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as a strategic canvas is increasingly central to India's grand strategy, connecting its maritime deterrence posture with its ambitions as a net security provider.

#### 4. Diplomatic Conditioning Has Become More Sophisticated

- Linking previously insulated domains — water, trade, connectivity — to the broader security context signals that India will impose multi-dimensional costs, not just military ones.
- This represents a move from issue-specific bilateralism (treating each domain — trade, water, people-to-people ties — separately) to a comprehensive conditionality framework. The Indus Waters Treaty suspension (or modification) as a pressure tool would have been unthinkable in earlier diplomatic calculus.
- However, this strategy has limits: weaponising water risks humanitarian consequences, could set problematic precedents for other transboundary water-sharing arrangements in South Asia, and may invite retaliation through asymmetric means.

### C. Counterarguments and Complications

- **The Narrative Battle:** If external actors — particularly the United States — claim credit for de-escalation, it undermines India's claim to have acted as a fully autonomous, unilateral cost-imposer. The ambiguity over whether de-escalation was self-managed or externally brokered is strategically consequential.
- **US Transactionalism:** The United States accepts India's framing as counter-terrorism only insofar as it is convenient for Washington's own strategic objectives. The India-US relationship, while substantively stronger than at any previous point, retains a transactional logic in crises involving Pakistan, reflecting Washington's continuing (if diminished) interest in Pakistani cooperation on Afghanistan, counter-terrorism, and regional stability.
- **China's Learnings:** Beijing is recalibrating its assessment of India based on demonstrated operational capability. This may lead to greater Chinese support for Pakistani military modernisation, complicating India's strategic calculus in a two-front scenario.
- **Domestic Sustainability:** Sustaining a high-tempo, multi-domain military posture requires sustained defence expenditure, technology self-reliance, and institutional continuity. India's defence budget as a percentage of GDP has been declining, raising questions about whether the political will translates into adequate fiscal commitment.

## Section 3: Historical Evolution of India's Strategic Posture

*India's strategic behaviour is not easily understood without tracing its historical trajectory. The following timeline traces key inflection points.*

Period / Event	Strategic Significance
1947 — Accession of Jammu & Kashmir; First Kashmir War	Established the LoC and the UN dimension of the dispute; India's referral to the UNSC was later seen as a strategic mistake, legitimising internationalisation.
1962 — Sino-Indian War	Traumatic defeat exposed India's military unpreparedness; catalysed defence modernisation and a lasting strategic suspicion of China; also weakened Nehru's non-alignment credibility.
1971 — Bangladesh Liberation War	India's most decisive conventional military victory; creation of Bangladesh as a strategic encirclement of Pakistan; Simla Agreement (1972) established bilateralism principle.
1974 & 1998 — Nuclear Tests (Pokhran)	India's entry into the nuclear club; 1998 tests triggered international sanctions but also forced Pakistan to openly test. Established the nuclear dimension permanently.
1999 — Kargil War	First conventional conflict between two nuclear-armed states; India confined response within the LoC, establishing the restraint-above-LoC norm it would later break; established moral high ground in international eyes.
1984 — Operation Meghdoot	Seizing Siachen Glacier; illustrated India's willingness to take pre-emptive conventional action for strategic advantage even at high cost.
2001-02 — Operation Parakram	Following Parliament attack; massive military mobilisation that ultimately produced no action; questioned India's resolve and credibility; led to re-examination of limited war options.
2008 — Mumbai Attacks; diplomatic aftermath	India chose restraint under US pressure; reinforced Pakistani belief that nuclear deterrence protected proxy actions; intensified the search for a new doctrine.
2016 — Surgical Strikes (Uri Response)	India for the first time publicly acknowledged cross-LoC strikes; broke the norm of operational silence; established a new threshold by claiming targeted strikes on 'launch pads'.
2019 — Balakot Airstrikes	First aerial strike on Pakistani territory since 1971; penetrated beyond LoC into Khyber

	Pakhtunkhwa; demonstrated further escalation of India's willingness to cross previous thresholds.
2020 — Galwan Valley Clash with China	Shifted strategic attention to the northern front; accelerated defence acquisitions; forced India to manage a two-front challenge simultaneously for the first time in decades.
Post-2020 — CDS Creation, Theatre Command Reforms	Institutional restructuring for jointness; long-pending reforms finally implemented, reflecting political will to modernise military organisation.
2025 — Operation Sindoor (Pahalgam response)	Multi-domain operations extending beyond LoC into Pakistan's strategic depth; maritime dimension added; linked diplomatic conditioning (water, connectivity); generated narrative contest over US role in de-escalation.

### Pre-Independence Roots

- The strategic culture of the Indian subcontinent has deep roots in Kautilyan statecraft — the Arthashastra's mandala theory, which envisages a state surrounded by potential adversaries and allies in concentric circles, counsels pragmatic use of all instruments of state power (diplomatic, economic, military, psychological) as a coherent whole. This is arguably closer to India's current 'comprehensive conditionality' approach than to Nehruvian idealism.
- British India's strategic management of the 'Great Game' — the rivalry with Russia for influence in Central Asia — left an institutional inheritance in the Indian military's staff college traditions, but also a bias toward continental security thinking that left maritime strategy underdeveloped for decades after independence.

## Section 4: Logical and Philosophical Foundations

### A. Realist Foundations

- The dominant logic underpinning India's shift is structural realism — particularly offensive realism (John Mearsheimer), which argues that states in an anarchic international system must maximise relative power to ensure survival. India's demonstrated willingness to impose costs reflects a realist recognition that restraint, while morally admirable, can be strategically costly if it creates incentives for continued aggression.
- Waltzian Structural Realism vs. Classical Realism: Kenneth Waltz emphasised the structure of the international system as the primary driver of state behaviour; Morgenthau emphasised the role of human nature and power politics. India's strategic trajectory reflects elements of both: structure (nuclear bipolarity in South Asia) constrains options, but leadership choices and state capacity matter enormously.

### B. Kautilyan Statecraft

- The Arthashastra's concept of Saptanga (seven elements of the state: ruler, territory, treasury, army, allies, forts, and law) offers a holistic framework for state power that anticipates modern comprehensive national power assessments.
- Kautilya's concept of Mandala — where the immediate neighbour is a potential adversary and the neighbour's neighbour is a potential ally — maps well onto India's relationships: Pakistan is the proximate adversary; Afghanistan, Iran, and Gulf states become potential counterweights.
- The Arthashastra counsels using all four means (Sama — persuasion, Dana — gifts/incentives, Bheda — division/discord, Danda — punishment) in a calibrated sequence. India's evolving approach toward Pakistan incorporates all four: dialogue (sama), economic connectivity offers (dana), driving wedges between Pakistani military and civilian establishments (bheda), and military strikes (danda).

### C. Just War Theory and the Ethics of Calibrated Force

- The classical Just War tradition (jus ad bellum — just cause for going to war; jus in bello — justice in conduct of war) is philosophically relevant. India's framing as counter-terrorism positions its actions as a just response to a just cause — protection of innocent civilians.
- Michael Walzer's Just and Unjust Wars: Walzer argues that targeting non-combatants (as terrorism does) constitutes a supreme emergency justification for forcible response. Counter-terrorism operations that themselves observe proportionality in targeting can claim moral legitimacy.
- Proportionality and Discrimination: International humanitarian law requires that military responses be proportionate to the threat and discriminate between combatants and civilians. Calibrated responses — targeting known militant infrastructure rather than civilian areas — reflect these principles in practice.

### D. Constructivist Dimensions

- Alexander Wendt's constructivism argues that the identities and interests of states are not fixed but are shaped through interaction. India's strategic identity is being reconstructed through

demonstrated action — each military response rewrites, at least partly, how India is perceived by Pakistan, China, and the international community.

- The 'New Normal' argument: Each crossing of a previously held threshold becomes the new baseline for future calculations. 1971 made Bangladesh liberation conceivable; 1999 made surgical cross-LoC action thinkable; 2016 made public acknowledgement of such strikes normal; 2019 made airstrikes into Pakistani territory survivable. Each step reshapes the strategic grammar.

## E. Epistemological Considerations — What Can We Know?

- Strategic outcomes are notoriously difficult to attribute. Did India's response actually deter future proxy attacks? Did it impose sufficient costs to change Pakistan's strategic calculus? Counterfactual reasoning (what would have happened absent the response?) is inherently uncertain.
- The Problem of Contested Narratives: Both India and Pakistan construct self-serving narratives around the same events. Strategic reality exists in the gap between these narratives. International observers, including the US and China, read through their own strategic prisms. This is not relativism — some claims are better evidenced than others — but it counsels epistemic humility about triumphalist readings.



## Section 5: Novel Features and Unique Ideas

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### A. The Multi-Domain Escalation Ladder as Strategic Grammar

- India appears to be constructing a graduated response ladder below the nuclear threshold: diplomatic protest → economic pressure → surgical strikes (LoC) → aerial strikes (beyond LoC) → multi-domain strikes (beyond LoC, maritime) → comprehensive conditionality (water, trade). Each rung imposes progressively higher costs while remaining nominally below nuclear triggers.
- This is novel in the South Asian context because it systematises what previously appeared as ad hoc responses. If credible, it creates a deterrence architecture for sub-conventional aggression that the nuclear umbrella previously made impossible.

### B. Linking Insulated Domains — Comprehensive Conditionality

- The decision to link the Indus Waters Treaty and connectivity frameworks to security behaviour is genuinely innovative. Earlier Indian governments treated water as a humanitarian necessity insulated from political disputes. Treating it as a strategic lever is a significant conceptual shift.
- **Feasibility Assessment:** The IWT has World Bank mediation provisions and robust international backing. Unilaterally modifying or suspending it has legal complications under international law. The more feasible lever may be slowing or halting cooperation on specific water infrastructure projects rather than wholesale treaty abrogation.
- **Precedential Risks:** Using water as leverage sets a precedent that could be used against India in its own relations with upper-riparian states — China controls headwaters of several rivers flowing into India and could draw from this playbook.

### C. Domestic Defence Validation as Strategic Messaging

- Every successful deployment of an indigenous weapons system serves dual purposes: military (operational effectiveness) and strategic (signalling). When indigenous systems perform well, it tells adversaries that India's domestic production lines cannot be disrupted by sanctions or export controls the way import-dependent arsenals can.
- This is a qualitatively different form of deterrence — not just 'we will hit you' but 'we can sustain hitting you indefinitely without external supply chains'.

## Section 6: Sustainability of the Strategic Posture

### A. Military / Institutional Sustainability

- Theatre Command Completion: The proposed theatre commands — which would truly integrate services under single operational commanders — are still under finalisation. Until they are operationalised, jointness remains partially structural rather than fully institutional. Sustainability of MDO capability requires completing this reform.
- Atmanirbhar Bharat in Defence — Progress and Gaps: India has made genuine progress in artillery, missiles, and small arms indigenisation. However, high-end platforms (jet engines, advanced semiconductors for electronic warfare, nuclear propulsion technology) still depend on foreign collaboration. Closing these gaps will take 10-20 years at minimum.
- Human Capital in the Military: The Agnipath scheme (short-service military enlistment) raises concerns about whether a rapidly rotating force can maintain the institutional memory and technical proficiency required for complex MDO. This is an unresolved tension in India's defence posture.

### B. Fiscal Sustainability

- India's defence expenditure has hovered around 1.9-2.1% of GDP in recent years — below the often-cited NATO benchmark of 2% and significantly below what China spends (2.2-2.4% of a much larger GDP). Sustaining a more assertive posture will require higher, sustained defence investment.
- Opportunity Costs: Every rupee allocated to defence is a rupee not allocated to health, education, or infrastructure. India's development imperatives create genuine fiscal competition. A strategic posture premised on military superiority must be embedded in a broader political economy framework.

### C. Diplomatic Sustainability

- Strategic autonomy is not cost-free. India's refusal to align with any single bloc requires sophisticated multi-vector diplomacy, simultaneous management of relationships with the US, Russia, China, the Gulf, and Europe. As these relationships increasingly demand clearer alignment (particularly in the context of US-China rivalry), maintaining genuine equidistance becomes harder.
- Narrative Ambiguity: If the perception of external de-escalation (US involvement in ceasefire) persists in international consciousness, it progressively weakens India's claim to autonomous strategic action. Each subsequent crisis will be tested against this template.

### D. Constitutional and Legal Dimensions

- The Constitution of India vests war-making powers in the executive — the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) is the primary decision-making authority. Parliamentary oversight of military operations is limited, raising questions about democratic accountability for military decisions.
- International Legal Framework: Actions beyond the LoC are legally complex. India's framing as counter-terrorism (invoking self-defence under UN Charter Article 51) is legally defensible if evidence of state support for non-state actors can be established. The International Court of

Justice and UN Security Council remain potential forums for Pakistan to contest Indian actions — another reason narrative management matters so enormously.



## Section 7: Challenges and Obstacles

### Seven Categories of Challenge

1. **ESCALATION RISK** — Nuclear backstop: Pakistan's tactical nuclear doctrine creates genuine risk that conventional operations trigger nuclear responses.
2. **NARRATIVE CONTESTATION** — Ambiguity of US role: Perceived third-party mediation undermines India's strategic autonomy narrative.
3. **TWO-FRONT CHALLENGE** — China factor: Chinese support for Pakistani military modernisation and simultaneous pressure on the northern border stretches Indian capacity.
4. **INSTITUTIONAL GAPS** — Incomplete theatre commands, Agnipath concerns, and technology dependence in high-end systems.
5. **FISCAL CONSTRAINTS** — Declining defence-to-GDP ratio; competing development expenditure priorities.
6. **LEGAL-DIPLOMATIC EXPOSURE** — International humanitarian law, IWT obligations, and risk of Pakistan securing UNSC sympathy.
7. **DOMESTIC POLITICAL ECONOMY** — Nationalism can pressure governments to over-escalate; civil-military interface quality varies with political cycles.

### A. Escalation Risks — In Detail

- **The Stability-Instability Paradox Redux:** Pakistan's full-spectrum deterrence (including battlefield nuclear weapons / TNWs) explicitly lowers the threshold. If India pushes harder at the conventional rung, the risk of Pakistani TNW use increases. TNW use, even limited, crosses a qualitative threshold that would almost certainly trigger a massive Indian nuclear response — precisely what Pakistan's deterrence is designed to prevent, creating mutual deterrence at multiple levels simultaneously.
- **The 'Fog of War' Problem:** In fast-moving, multi-domain conflicts, the risk of miscalculation — misidentifying targets, misreading signals, incorrect attribution — increases sharply. Command-and-control reliability on the Pakistani side (given the role of the military's intelligence wing in sponsoring non-state actors) is an additional uncertainty.

### B. The China Complication

- China's assessment of India has changed: a state capable of complex conventional operations in its western theatre is a more capable adversary in its northern theatre. This may accelerate Chinese investment in Pakistani military modernisation as part of its own deterrence strategy.
- Chinese-origin weapons systems in Pakistan's inventory performing (or not performing) in operational conditions provides Beijing real-world data on its own equipment — a secondary strategic outcome of any India-Pakistan conflict that benefits China regardless of the result.
- **CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) Dimension:** Chinese economic investments in Pakistan mean any India-Pakistan conflict has consequences for Chinese assets and interests — introducing a second-order deterrence constraint on both India and Pakistan that is poorly understood.



## Section 8: Multidimensional Analysis

### A. Social Dimension

- **Domestic Nationalism and Public Opinion:** Military action, when successful and well-narrated, generates significant domestic approval, creating political incentives for governments to respond militarily to provocations even when diplomatic solutions exist. This can be a healthy expression of national resolve or a dangerous driver of escalatory pressures, depending on the quality of political leadership.
- **War and Civil Society:** Escalation affects civilian populations on both sides of the border. Military operations generate refugee flows, economic disruption in border areas, and psychological trauma. Kashmir's civilian population — already subject to decades of conflict — bears disproportionate costs.
- **Impact on Minorities and Social Cohesion:** Periods of military confrontation between India and Pakistan invariably generate heightened communal tensions within India, particularly targeting Muslim citizens. The state has a responsibility to protect internal social harmony even while projecting external firmness.
- **Assam / Northeast India Angle:** Northeast India's security has historically been linked to Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China — not directly to Pakistan. However, intelligence networks and smuggling routes connecting Pakistan-backed organisations to insurgent groups in the Northeast (including arms flows and funding) mean that any weakening of Pakistan-based militant infrastructure has indirect positive security externalities for Assam and neighbouring states.

### B. Political Dimension

- **Civil-Military Relations:** The relationship between elected civilian government and the military establishment is a foundational question of democratic governance. In India, the military is constitutionally subordinate to civilian authority, but the quality of civil-military interface — including how well civilian leadership understands operational realities and how well the military respects civilian policy constraints — varies. Strong civilian oversight ensures that military operations serve political objectives rather than developing institutional momentum of their own.
- **Strategic Communications as Political Tool:** How military operations are narrated domestically has profound political implications. Claiming success for operations creates political capital but also raises expectations for future operations, potentially constraining future governments' ability to exercise restraint.
- **Opposition and Democratic Accountability:** Military operations of strategic significance should ideally have cross-party support to project national unity. However, the temptation to weaponise national security for partisan advantage — and the opposition's temptation to question any government's security credentials — reduces the quality of democratic deliberation on defence matters.

### C. Legal Dimension

- **UN Charter Article 51 — Right of Self-Defence:** States have an inherent right of self-defence, including pre-emptive self-defence in some interpretations, if an armed attack has occurred. India's framing of counter-terrorism as self-defence is legally supportable if it can demonstrate that attacks were state-attributable.

- Distinction in International Humanitarian Law (IHL): IHL requires distinguishing between combatants and civilians. Targeting militant infrastructure rather than population centres is legally and morally important. Violations of IHL — even in a 'justified' conflict — expose India to international legal proceedings and damage its narrative.
- The Indus Waters Treaty — Legal Exposure: The IWT is a binding international agreement. Unilateral suspension or abrogation without going through the dispute resolution mechanism (Permanent Indus Commission, followed by World Bank arbitration) would breach India's international legal obligations and set a damaging precedent. India's leverage is better exercised through slowing joint commission meetings, disputing technical interpretations, and applying upstream infrastructure pressure within treaty parameters.

## D. Ethical Dimension

- The Ethics of Deterrence: Is it ethical to threaten severe consequences — including civilian-proximate military action — to prevent greater harm? The consequentialist argument is that effective deterrence prevents far greater suffering than it threatens. The deontological counter-argument (Kant) is that using the threat of harm as a means — even to prevent greater harm — treats human beings as instruments rather than ends in themselves.
- Proxy Violence and Moral Responsibility: States that sponsor non-state actors who kill civilians bear moral responsibility for those deaths. The ethical case for holding state sponsors accountable — including through military means — is substantially stronger when the sponsoring state actively facilitates, funds, and directs violence rather than merely tolerating it.
- The Ethics of Water: Using a transboundary water resource as a coercive tool raises profound ethical concerns, particularly if downstream populations who had no role in sponsoring violence would bear the consequences of water scarcity. There is a meaningful moral distinction between imposing economic costs on a state and imposing suffering on its civilian population.

## E. International Dimension

- Global Multipolarity and India's Position: The emergence of a multipolar world — with the United States declining in relative dominance, China rising, and regional powers asserting themselves — creates both opportunities and challenges for India. It opens space for strategic autonomy but also means fewer reliable guarantors of regional stability.
- India-US Relations — Strategic Partnership with Transactional Core: The Quad, AUKUS adjacency, INDUS-X defence technology agreements, and India's growing role in Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy all reflect genuine convergence. But in specific crises involving Pakistan — where the US still needs Pakistani cooperation for various regional objectives — the relationship's limits emerge. India must plan for this transactional floor even while maximising the partnership's strategic ceiling.
- Pakistan's Recalibration: Rawalpindi's (Pakistani military's) calculation of what is tolerable aggression against India must now factor in the demonstrated willingness of Indian conventional forces to operate across previously sacrosanct thresholds. This is the deterrence dividend — not the elimination of proxy aggression but its prospective reduction because the costs have risen.
- China-Pakistan Military Axis: The deepening of the China-Pakistan security relationship — weapons transfers, joint exercises, CPEC security provisions — means India increasingly faces a coordinated adversarial axis rather than two separate bilateral challenges. Long-term strategic planning must account for potential coordination between Beijing and Rawalpindi.

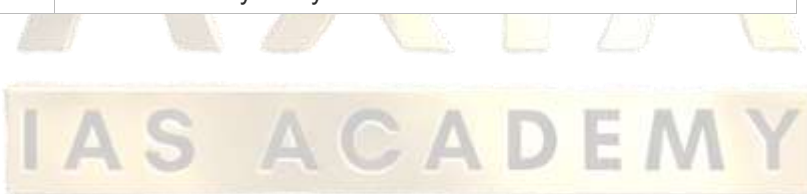
## F. Economic Dimension

- **Defence-Development Trade-off:** India's per capita income remains relatively low; hundreds of millions live in poverty. Resources allocated to military capability come at a direct opportunity cost for social expenditure. Sustainable security requires a growing economy that can fund both development and defence — making economic growth itself a security priority.
- **Impact on Trade and Investment:** Military confrontations affect investor confidence, trade flows through the subcontinent, and the broader South Asian economic integration agenda. South Asia is the least economically integrated region in the world relative to its size — and bilateral India-Pakistan tensions are the primary reason. A more stable deterrence architecture, paradoxically, could eventually enable economic normalisation.
- **Atmanirbhar Bharat — Economic Multipliers:** Defence indigenisation has economic externalities — technology spillovers to civilian industries, job creation in the defence manufacturing sector, import substitution benefits. However, these benefits materialise slowly and require sustained investment, patient capital, and effective public-private partnership frameworks.



## Section 9: Linkages with NCERT Textbooks

NCERT Book / Class	Relevant Chapter(s) and Connection
Political Science — Contemporary World Politics (Class XII)	Chapter: 'Cold War Era' — Explains deterrence theory, arms race logic, and the stability-instability paradox; 'Security in Contemporary World' — Covers traditional and non-traditional security threats.
Political Science — Indian Constitution at Work (Class XI)	Chapter: 'Executive' — Civil-military relations and Cabinet Committee on Security; President's role as Supreme Commander of Armed Forces; Parliamentary oversight of defence.
History — Themes in World History (Class XI)	Colonialism and post-colonial state formation; how British Indian strategic inheritance shaped India's defence establishment.
Geography — India: People and Economy (Class XII)	Chapters on India's water resources (Indus, Ganga systems) — essential for understanding the Indus Waters Treaty dimension; strategic geography of Jammu & Kashmir.
Political Science — Politics in India Since Independence (Class XII)	Emergency, civil-military relations, and the evolution of India's foreign policy from non-alignment to strategic engagement.
Economics — Macro Economics (Class XII)	National income, government expenditure, and the fiscal trade-off between defence and social spending — relevant to sustainability analysis.



## Section 10: UPSC CSE Syllabus Mapping

GS Paper / Segment	Specific Syllabus Entry and Relevance
GS Paper II — International Relations	Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests; India and its neighbourhood; bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements. (Primary relevance for India-Pakistan dynamics, India-US relations, India-China triangle.)
GS Paper II — Governance	Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation. (CDS creation, Theatre Commands, Agnipath — institutional design questions.)
GS Paper III — Internal Security	Various Security Forces and agencies and their mandate; border management; linkages between development and spread of extremism; role of media and social networking sites in internal security challenges. (India's counter-terrorism doctrine, proxy war, intelligence failures.)
GS Paper III — Defence and Security	Challenges to internal security through communication networks, role of media and social networking sites, cyber security, money laundering and its prevention; Defence, Science and Technology. (Indigenous defence production, multi-domain operations.)
GS Paper III — Economy	Inclusive growth and issues therein; Government Budgeting. (Defence budget as % of GDP; defence-development trade-off; Atmanirbhar Bharat economic multipliers.)
GS Paper IV — Ethics	Attitude; moral and political attitudes. Ethical issues in international relations. (Just War theory; proportionality; ethics of deterrence; water as coercive tool.)
Essay Paper	Abstract and value-based topics often intersect with security, autonomy, and state behaviour. ('Is strategic autonomy compatible with alliances?' / 'Can deterrence be ethical?')
APSC General Studies	Northeast India's security environment; Assam's border security; India-Bangladesh-Myanmar connectivity; insurgency and counter-insurgency; AFSPA.

## Section 11: Philosophy, Epistemology, and Deepest Syllabus Linkages

### A. Philosophical Frameworks for Analysis

#### Kautilya (Arthashastra)

Saptanga — comprehensive national power; Mandala — concentric circles of adversaries and allies.

Danda (punishment) as the last resort, but legitimate instrument of statecraft.

The good ruler's primary obligation is rajadharma — protecting subjects from external harm.

Realpolitik without moral nihilism: Kautilya acknowledges that dharmic constraints limit even necessary violence.

#### John Rawls — Justice as Fairness (A Theory of Justice, 1971)

Rawls' veil of ignorance: behind the veil (not knowing whether you are Indian or Pakistani), what security arrangements would you choose?

Rawlsian analysis suggests both populations would choose arrangements that minimise the risk of military confrontation — implying that stable deterrence (preventing conflict) serves justice more than escalation.

The Law of Peoples (1999): Rawls extends his framework to international relations, arguing that 'decent peoples' have obligations to maintain peace and refrain from aggressive war.

#### Amartya Sen — Development as Freedom & Identity and Violence

Sen warns against singular identity frameworks — defining people primarily as Hindu, Muslim, or Pakistani, etc. — as the root of violence.

His capability approach asks: does the security policy expand the real freedoms of people, or does it merely project state power?

Relevant to the argument that sustainable security requires addressing poverty, exclusion, and identity-based grievance — not only military deterrence.

#### Michel Foucault — Discourse, Power, and Narrative

Foucault's analysis of how 'truth' is constructed through discourse is directly relevant to the narrative battle around military operations.

The state that controls the dominant narrative about what happened in a conflict effectively wins a secondary battle.

Every military operation generates competing 'discourses' — India's (counter-terrorism), Pakistan's (aggression), the US's (mediated peace) — and power determines which discourse becomes the received wisdom.

## B. Epistemological Angles for UPSC Ethics and Essay

- Pragmatism (William James, John Dewey): Is a strategic doctrine 'true' in the sense that it works — does it achieve the outcomes it promises? The pragmatist test for deterrence is empirical: does it reduce proxy attacks over time? This is ultimately an observable (if difficult to measure) question.
- Critical Theory and IR (Robert Cox, Andrew Linklater): Problem-solving theory (realism, liberalism) takes the existing order for granted and asks how states can operate within it. Critical theory asks who the existing order serves and what alternatives are possible. Applied here: does a deterrence-based order serve ordinary people on both sides of the border?
- Epistemics of Strategic Intelligence: How do decision-makers know what they claim to know? Attribution of terrorist attacks to state sponsors requires intelligence assessments that are inherently probabilistic, not certain. Decision-making under uncertainty — acting on best available evidence while acknowledging its limitations — is a sophisticated epistemological challenge that affects moral responsibility for military action.



## Section 12: Way Forward — Policy Recommendations

### Short-Term (1-2 years)

Complete Theatre Command operationalisation — at minimum, the peninsular and northern commands — to institutionalise MDO capability.

Establish clear, articulated escalation management protocols between the CDS, NSA, and Cabinet Committee on Security to prevent ad hoc crisis decision-making.

Develop a formal strategic communication framework: who speaks for India, what messages are sent to which audiences (domestic, Pakistan, US, China), and through which channels.

Strengthen bilateral intelligence sharing with the US, France, and Israel to improve attribution capability for cross-border attacks — reducing the evidentiary problem in future crises.

### Medium-Term (3-10 years)

Accelerate Atmanirbhar Bharat milestones in jet engine technology, advanced electronics, and precision munitions — reducing import dependence in the most operationally critical categories.

Invest in Track-II and Track-III diplomacy channels with Pakistan — back-channel communications that survive public hostility and provide crisis management options when official channels are frozen.

Reframe the Indus Waters Treaty within a climate-resilience and co-development framework — transforming a potential coercive lever into a confidence-building measure that serves long-term Indian interests better than weaponisation.

Deepening economic and security partnerships with Afghanistan (if conditions permit), Iran, and Central Asia to reduce Pakistan's strategic depth by tightening India's own strategic reach.

### Long-Term (10-25 years)

Pursue a South Asian security architecture that addresses the root drivers of Pakistan's reliance on proxy warfare: its security establishment's survival-linked incentive to maintain India as an existential threat. This requires patient engagement with Pakistani civil society, business community, and younger military officers who may have different threat perceptions.

Build India's comprehensive national power across all dimensions — economic, technological, soft power — to create a widening capability gap that makes proxy conflict increasingly irrational from Pakistan's perspective.

Position India as a credible net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region, extending deterrence to smaller neighbours and building a security architecture that reduces Chinese and Pakistani space for manoeuvre.

Invest in conflict resolution mechanisms within Kashmir — addressing genuine political grievances of the population — to reduce the pool of recruits available to proxy actors.

## Northeast India / Assam Specific Recommendations

- Strengthen the Assam Rifles and integrate them more effectively with Army intelligence networks to address cross-border infiltration from Myanmar-based groups with Pakistan-linked funding.
- Fast-track the ASEAN connectivity projects (Kaladan, Stilwell Road, India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway) that would extend India's strategic and economic reach eastward, reducing the periphery's dependence on Kolkata's supply chains and providing strategic depth in the event of China-linked challenges.
- Address Assam-specific security challenges — ULFA(I) residual presence, Bodo factions, and the interface between illegal immigration and insurgent recruitment — as integral parts of India's overall sub-conventional security management.



## Section 13: Previous Years' Questions — UPSC & APSC

### A. UPSC Mains — GS Paper II (International Relations)

Year	Question
2023	India's foreign policy has shifted from non-alignment to multi-alignment. Discuss the implications of this shift for India's strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.
2022	Explain the significance of the Quad in the context of the evolving Indo-Pacific security architecture. How does it affect India's relations with China?
2021	Assess the challenges in India-Pakistan relations and suggest measures to improve bilateral ties. What role does terrorism play in complicating these relations?
2020	Discuss the strategic significance of the India-US defence agreements (LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA) for India's military modernisation.
2019	India's Act East Policy has been upgraded to 'Act East'. Examine its significance for Northeast India and the country's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific.
2018	Differentiate between 'strategic autonomy' and 'non-alignment'. Is India successfully maintaining strategic autonomy in the current international scenario?
2017	India's bilateral relations with China have entered a turbulent phase. Analyse the factors contributing to the current state of India-China relations.
2016	The nuclear doctrine of India is based on 'No First Use' and 'Minimum Credible Deterrence'. Evaluate its effectiveness as a deterrence strategy.
2015	Terrorism is emerging as a global phenomenon. Discuss its implications for India's internal security and the measures adopted to combat it.
2014	Discuss the impediments in India-Pakistan relations. What confidence-building measures can be adopted to improve ties?

### B. UPSC Mains — GS Paper III (Internal Security & Defence)

Year	Question
2023	Critically examine the progress made under Atmanirbhar Bharat in the defence sector. What are the remaining challenges?
2022	Examine the role of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in enhancing jointness among the three armed services. What reforms are still needed?
2021	Discuss the concept of 'hybrid warfare' and its manifestation in India's neighbourhood. How should India respond?
2020	Border management remains a critical challenge for India. Discuss the various dimensions of border management and the measures adopted by India.
2019	What are the major challenges faced by India in countering cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan? Evaluate the effectiveness of India's counter-terrorism strategy.
2018	Assess India's nuclear doctrine in the context of evolving security threats. Is 'No First Use' a viable policy going forward?
2017	Discuss the threats posed by left-wing extremism to India's internal security. Are the measures adopted by the government adequate?

2016	Discuss the significance of the 'surgical strikes' conducted by India across the Line of Control. How do they fit into India's evolving security doctrine?
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### C. UPSC Mains — GS Paper IV (Ethics)

Year	Question
2022	Discuss the ethical dimensions of using military force in international relations. Under what conditions can war be considered just?
2020	Critically examine the ethical issues involved in the use of drones and other autonomous weapon systems in counter-terrorism operations.
2018	Ethics in international relations often involves a conflict between state interest and humanitarian obligations. Discuss with suitable examples.
2015	The interests of the individual and those of the state sometimes conflict. Discuss with examples from the area of national security policy.

### D. UPSC Prelims — Relevant Questions (Theme-Based)

Year	Question / Theme
2023	Which of the following statements regarding India's nuclear doctrine is correct? (No First Use; minimum credible deterrence — standard MCQ format)
2022	The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) comprises which of the following countries? (Standard factual MCQ)
2021	What is the 'Stability-Instability Paradox' in strategic studies? (Conceptual Prelims MCQ)
2019	Which agreement provides for reciprocal access to military logistics for the US and India? (LEMOA — factual MCQ)
2018	The Indus Waters Treaty was signed between India and Pakistan with the mediation of — ? (World Bank — factual MCQ)
2016	With reference to the Line of Control, consider the following statements. (Standard factual-analytical MCQ on LoC history)

### E. APSC Mains — Relevant Questions

Year / Paper	Question
2023 — General Studies II	Examine the security challenges specific to Northeast India. How are they linked to India's relations with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China?
2022 — General Studies II	Discuss the role of Assam Rifles in maintaining security in Northeast India. What reforms are needed to make it more effective?
2021 — General Studies II	India's Act East Policy has special significance for Assam and the Northeast. Elaborate on the opportunities and challenges it presents.
2020 — General Studies II	Analyse the impact of insurgency on the socio-economic development of Assam. What measures has the government taken to address it?
2019 — General Studies I	Examine India's foreign policy towards its immediate neighbours in the context of its overall security doctrine.



## Section 14: Model Answers

### MODEL ANSWER

**Q: Critically examine India's evolving security doctrine from 'strategic restraint' to 'calibrated assertion'. What are its implications for regional stability? (UPSC Mains GS-II / GS-III, 250 words)**

India's security doctrine has traversed a significant arc — from a decades-long posture of strategic restraint to a more assertive framework of calibrated conventional response. This evolution did not happen overnight; it represents the slow accumulation of capability, institutional reform, and political will.

The restraint era (1947-2015) was characterised by a preference for diplomatic tools, reluctance to acknowledge cross-LoC operations, and acceptance of the nuclear deterrence framework as an effective ceiling on Indian response options. The 1999 Kargil War exemplified this: India confined itself strictly within the LoC even under provocation, establishing moral high ground at the cost of operational opportunity.

The shift began with the 2016 surgical strikes — publicly acknowledged cross-LoC operations — and deepened with the 2019 Balakot airstrikes. The latest chapter in this evolution extended operations beyond the LoC into Pakistan's strategic depth across multiple domains simultaneously. Indigenous systems performing effectively reinforced confidence in sustained capability.

The doctrine's logic is compellence: raising the cost of proxy violence to a level that makes continued sponsorship strategically irrational. Three implications for regional stability emerge. First, it challenges the stability-instability paradox by making low-level aggression more costly. Second, it risks escalation — particularly Pakistan's tactical nuclear doctrine means every conventional rung carries escalatory uncertainty. Third, it forces China to reassess India as a more versatile adversary.

The way forward requires institutionalising this posture through theatre command completion, fiscal commitment to indigenisation, and parallel diplomatic channels to prevent miscalculation. Assertiveness guided by prudence — not nationalism — must remain the governing principle.

### MODEL ANSWER

**Q: Discuss the ethical dimensions of using calibrated military force in international relations, with specific reference to counter-terrorism operations. (UPSC Mains GS-IV / Ethics, 250 words)**

The ethics of military force in international relations has been debated from Kautilya's Arthashastra to Michael Walzer's Just and Unjust Wars. Calibrated force — the deliberate use of military means targeted at specific objectives while minimising civilian harm — occupies a morally complex position.

The consequentialist case rests on the argument that credible deterrence prevents greater long-term harm. If precise strikes on militant infrastructure reduce the incidence of mass-casualty attacks on civilians, the net ethical balance favours intervention. Effective deterrence is a form of violence prevention.

The deontological critique (Kantian) cautions that treating violence — even proportionate violence — as an instrument risks normalising the logic of force. Kant's categorical imperative asks: what if every state adopted the same doctrine? Universalising the right to cross-border counter-terrorism operations creates a world of overlapping, self-justified military interventions.

Just War theory offers a middle path: *jus ad bellum* (just cause, proportionality, last resort, legitimate authority) and *jus in bello* (discrimination between combatants and civilians, proportionality in conduct). Counter-terrorism operations can satisfy these criteria if evidence of state sponsorship is clear, less harmful means have been exhausted, operations target combatants, and civilian casualties are minimised.

The ethics of coercive water diplomacy — using shared natural resources as pressure tools — present additional concerns. Imposing costs on a state through water restriction affects civilian populations who bear no responsibility for state-sponsored violence, raising questions of collective punishment.

For a civil servant, the takeaway is clear: ethical conduct in national security requires evidence-based decision-making, proportionality in means, transparency in accountability, and genuine commitment to civilian protection on all sides of the border.

## MODEL ANSWER

**Q: Examine the significance of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and Theatre Commands for India's military modernisation. What reforms are still pending? (UPSC Mains GS-II / GS-III, 250 words)**

The creation of the Chief of Defence Staff in January 2020 marked the most significant structural reform in India's higher defence management since independence. For decades, the absence of a single point military authority had perpetuated inter-service rivalry, duplicate procurement, and poor joint operational planning.

The CDS serves as the principal military adviser to the government on tri-service matters and heads the Department of Military Affairs. The CDS's mandate includes fostering jointness across the three services, facilitating inter-theatre movement of forces, and eventually overseeing the creation of theatre commands.

Theatre commands would reorganise India's existing seventeen single-service commands into integrated geographical or functional commands — each responsible for all military operations in a defined zone. The proposed architecture includes an air defence command, maritime theatre commands, and land-based theatre commands for the western and northern frontiers.

The significance for modernisation is substantial: theatre commands would force integrated planning, reduce duplication, enable multi-domain operations under unified command, and create career incentives for officers across services to develop joint warfare expertise.

Pending reforms remain substantial. Theatre command finalisation has encountered bureaucratic and inter-service resistance. Service chiefs are reluctant to cede operational authority. The relationship between theatre commanders and the CDS requires careful statutory clarification. The Agnipath scheme raises questions about force quality within theatre commands. Procurement

timelines for enabling technologies — modern surveillance, communication networks, logistics — remain stretched.

Completing the theatre command architecture within a defined timeline, with clear legislative backing, is the single most important institutional reform for sustaining India's emerging multi-domain military posture.



## Why This Issue is UPSC-Critical — Summary and Note-Making Tips

### UPSC Relevance Summary

GS-II: Directly maps to international relations (India-Pakistan, India-US, India-China), foreign policy, and governance (CDS, theatre commands, civil-military relations).

GS-III: Core to internal security (counter-terrorism doctrine, proxy war), defence (indigenous production, military modernisation), and economic dimensions (defence budget).

GS-IV: Provides rich material for ethics questions on just war, proportionality, dual-use coercion (water), and ethical governance of military power.

Essay: Themes of strategic autonomy, deterrence ethics, and the tension between restraint and assertion lend themselves to abstract essay topics.

APSC: Assam-specific security dimensions (Northeast insurgency linkages, border security, Act East Policy) make this directly relevant to APSC General Studies.

### Note-Making Tips

- **Conceptual Spine:** Build your notes around the deterrence ladder — each rung from diplomacy to multi-domain military action, with the nuclear threshold as the ceiling. This single framework organises most GS-II and GS-III content on this topic.
- **Quote Bank:** Memorise two or three precise conceptual formulations — 'stability-instability paradox', 'compellence vs. deterrence', 'calibrated assertion' — which can be deployed in both Prelims MCQs and Mains essay introductions.
- **Timeline Mastery:** The historical evolution section in this module (1947 to present) should be memorised as a crisp ten-point timeline. It anchors any GS-III 'historical evolution' component in a Mains answer.
- **Philosophy Integration:** For GS-IV and Essay, having three to four philosophical frameworks (Kautilya, Rawls, Just War, Foucault) with one-line summaries of their application to this topic is sufficient. Over-quoting philosophers without connecting to the actual policy question loses marks.
- **Answer Structuring:** The ideal GS-II / GS-III Mains answer on this topic should move: context → doctrine evolution → current posture → implications → challenges → way forward. Each section should be 40-50 words in a 250-word answer.
- **APSC Angle:** Always add one paragraph on Northeast India / Assam in any answer to this topic for APSC. Link it to the Act East Policy, Assam Rifles, and cross-border insurgency dimensions.
- **Current Affairs Integration:** Update this module regularly. Any new India-Pakistan development, US mediation claim, or Pakistan military spokesperson statement is directly relevant and should be added to the 'current affairs layer' of your notes.

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