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From restraint to resolve

How India's national security policy changed in twelve years, 2014 to 2026



Kamlesh Bhagatkar

Author & Geopolitical Analyst

About this paper

In May 2014 a new government took office in New Delhi with a single-party majority, the first in thirty years. This paper asks what that government did with India's national security policy over the twelve years that followed, from the swearing-in on 26 May 2014 to November 2026.

I should state my position at the start. I think the record is a good one, and this paper argues that case. I have studied Indian security policy for about seven years as a writer, and I have come to believe that the changes made since 2014 were overdue, mostly well judged, and in several areas better than anything the country managed in the previous quarter century. A reader who wants a neutral survey should know that this is advocacy.

Advocacy is only worth reading when it is honest about facts. So I have tried to keep three habits throughout. Numbers come from official statements, budget papers and Parliament answers, and I name the source in the text where a figure matters. Where the government's account is disputed, I say who disputes it. Chapter 16 sets out the strongest criticisms of the record and the places where the work is plainly unfinished, because a case that hides its weak points does not deserve to persuade anyone.

The paper has seventeen chapters. The first two describe what was inherited and the thinking that replaced it. Chapters 3 to 6 deal with Pakistan, Jammu and Kashmir, China and the borders. Chapters 7 to 10 cover the armed forces, the defence industry, deterrence and the sea. Chapters 11 to 14 turn to internal security, law, intelligence and technology. The last three chapters cover diplomacy, the criticisms, and what I think the next ten years require. A timeline and a table of figures follow at the end.

Kamlesh Bhagatkar
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Twelve years in twelve findings

India's security policy before 2014 rested on an assumption that restraint was the safest course. After the Mumbai attack of November 2008 killed 166 people, the country's answer was a dossier and a diplomatic campaign. The government that took office in 2014 came to a different view: that restraint without cost for the attacker invites the next attack. Most of what follows flows from that one change of mind.

1. A terror attack traced to Pakistan now draws a military response. The pattern was set after Uri in 2016, repeated on a larger scale at Balakot in 2019, and written down as policy after Operation Sindoor in May 2025.
2. The Prime Minister said on 12 May 2025 that India will not accept nuclear blackmail and will not separate terrorists from the governments that shelter them. No earlier government had said this in public.
3. Article 370 was read down on 5 August 2019 and the Supreme Court upheld the decision on 11 December 2023. Jammu and Kashmir voted in an Assembly election in 2024 with a turnout of about 64 per cent.
4. On the China border, India matched a Chinese build-up in 2020 with its own, held its positions through four winters, and secured disengagement at the last two friction points in October 2024.
5. Border roads, tunnels and bridges that had waited decades were built. The Atal Tunnel, the Sela Tunnel and the Chenab rail bridge all opened in this period.
6. The post of Chief of Defence Staff, recommended after Kargil in 1999, was created in 2019. Three theatre commands are now in the approval stage.
7. Defence exports rose from Rs 686 crore in 2013-14 to Rs 38,424 crore in 2025-26, according to the Ministry of Defence.
8. The defence budget grew from Rs 2.53 lakh crore in 2013-14 to Rs 7.85 lakh crore in 2026-27.
9. India completed its nuclear triad with the first deterrence patrol of INS Arihant in 2018, tested an anti-satellite weapon in 2019 and a multiple-warhead Agni-V in 2024.
10. Districts affected by Left Wing Extremism fell from 126 to 11 by late 2025. On 31 March 2026 the Home Minister said the deadline he had set for ending Naxalism had been met.

11. In the Northeast, a run of peace accords brought thousands of cadres out of the jungle, and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act was lifted from large areas.
12. India evacuated its citizens from Yemen, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Sudan and Iran, and became the first country its neighbours called in a crisis.

The record has gaps, and I do not hide them. Manipur has not healed since May 2023. The Pahalgam attack of April 2025 and the Delhi blast of November 2025 showed that intelligence can still fail. Theatre commands are late. Fighter squadron numbers are below the sanctioned strength. The country still has no published national security strategy. Chapter 16 deals with each of these.

My overall judgement is that India in 2026 is harder to attack, harder to coerce and better able to arm itself than India in 2014. The rest of this paper explains why I think so.

CHAPTER 1

What the government inherited in 2014

To judge twelve years fairly, start with the position on the first day. The security establishment that the new government took over in May 2014 had capable people and a long list of problems that successive committees had already diagnosed. What it lacked was decisions.

A decade of attacks without a reply

Between 2005 and 2013 Indian cities were bombed again and again. Delhi was hit in 2005 and 2008, Mumbai's suburban trains in 2006, Jaipur and Ahmedabad in 2008, Pune in 2010, Mumbai again in 2011, Hyderabad in 2013, and a political rally in Patna in October 2013. The worst was Mumbai in November 2008, when ten gunmen from Lashkar-e-Taiba held the city for three days and killed 166 people.

India's response to Mumbai was to gather evidence, hand dossiers to Pakistan and press the case abroad. Military options were considered and set aside. I understand the reasoning of the time: the economy was fragile after the global financial crisis and escalation carried risk. But the men who planned the attack lived openly in Pakistan for years afterwards, and Rawalpindi drew the natural conclusion that an attack on India carried a diplomatic price and nothing more.

Reforms recommended and shelved

The Kargil Review Committee reported in 1999, and the Group of Ministers that followed it recommended a Chief of Defence Staff in 2001. The Naresh Chandra Task Force repeated the advice in 2012 in a milder form. By 2014 the post still did not exist. The three services planned, bought and trained largely on their own.

Procurement was in a worse state. The tender for 126 medium fighter aircraft had been issued in 2007 and a winner chosen in 2012, yet no contract was signed. In March 2012 a letter from the Army chief to the Prime Minister became public; it described shortages of tank ammunition and ageing air defence. A report of the Comptroller and Auditor General tabled in 2015, covering the period up to 2013, found that stocks of many types of ammunition would last far fewer days of intense fighting than the Army's own norm required.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute recorded India as the world's largest arms importer for 2010 to 2014. A country of India's size was buying its rifles,

its artillery and its fighters abroad, and in 2013-14 it exported defence goods worth only Rs 686 crore.

Borders left undeveloped by design

On the northern border the neglect had been a policy choice. In September 2013 the then Defence Minister, A.K. Antony, told the Lok Sabha that China was far ahead of India in border infrastructure, and that for many years independent India had believed the best defence was to leave the border undeveloped. He called that approach a mistake. A few months earlier, in April 2013, Chinese troops had pitched tents in the Depsang plains and stayed for three weeks.

The Maoist belt and the Northeast

Inside the country the picture was no better. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had called Naxalism the greatest internal security challenge India faced. In April 2010 Maoists killed 76 Central Reserve Police Force personnel in a single ambush in Dantewada. In May 2013 they wiped out much of the Chhattisgarh Congress leadership at Jhiram Ghati. The Home Ministry counted 126 districts as affected by Left Wing Extremism. In the Northeast, several insurgent groups were still active, and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act covered most of the region.

I list all this to set a baseline, and I do not think the people in charge before 2014 were careless about India's safety. Many of the ideas the new government acted on had been written down by its predecessors. The files were ready; what changed was that someone signed them.

CHAPTER 2

The doctrine: from strategic restraint to assured response

India has never published a national security strategy, and the present government has not published one either. Critics treat this as proof that there is no strategy. I read the record differently. Over twelve years the government's actions and statements have followed a consistent set of ideas, and it is possible to set them down.

An attack will be answered

The first idea is the plainest. For decades Pakistan's army used militant groups against India on the calculation that India would not hit back across the border, partly from caution and partly from fear of nuclear escalation. The policy since 2016 has been to break that calculation by making the reply certain.

Ajit Doval, who became National Security Adviser in May 2014 and still holds the post, had described the logic in a lecture a few months before he took office. He said a state can deal with terrorism in a defensive mode, or it can go to where the offence comes from. He called the second approach defensive offence. The cross-border raid of 2016, the air strike of 2019 and the missile strikes of 2025 are that idea put into practice, each one larger than the last.

Nuclear weapons will not shield terrorism

The second idea took longer to state openly. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal was meant, among other things, to stop India from using its conventional strength in reply to terrorism. Balakot in 2019 showed that Indian aircraft could strike inside Pakistan proper without the conflict turning nuclear. After Operation Sindoor the Prime Minister said it in a national address on 12 May 2025: India would not tolerate nuclear blackmail and would strike at terrorist hideouts operating under its cover.

India's own nuclear doctrine has not changed. It still commits to no first use and to a credible minimum deterrent. What changed is India's willingness to act below the nuclear threshold.

Peace on the border comes before business as usual

With China the government has held to one condition since 2020: relations cannot be normal while the border is abnormal. The External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, repeated this for four years, in Beijing's hearing and elsewhere, until the disengagement

of October 2024. During that time India kept about 50,000 additional troops forward in Ladakh, restricted Chinese investment, and banned hundreds of Chinese apps. Trade continued, which critics point to, but political and military normalisation waited for the border.

Self-reliance is a security policy

The fourth idea is that a country which imports its weapons has rented its security. Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence began as an industrial programme and has become part of the doctrine. The war in Ukraine, which disrupted Russian spares, and the fighting of May 2025, in which Indian-made air defence and missiles did much of the work, both strengthened the argument.

Security is run from the centre of government

The fifth idea is about machinery. The National Security Council Secretariat was restructured in 2018 with three deputy advisers covering internal, external and technology matters. A Defence Planning Committee under the National Security Adviser was set up the same year. In 2019 the adviser's post was given Cabinet rank. A National Maritime Security Coordinator was appointed in 2022. The effect has been to pull defence, intelligence, diplomacy and technology policy into one office that answers to the Prime Minister.

Some former officials worry that this concentrates too much in one place. It is a fair concern. Against it I would set the experience of the years before, when the Home Ministry, the Defence Ministry, the services and the intelligence agencies each held part of the picture and no one was responsible for the whole.

Strategic autonomy, used actively

The last idea is an old Indian one given new use. India buys oil and air defence from Russia, builds jet engines and drones with the United States, sits in the Quad with Japan and Australia and in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation with China. The government calls this multi-alignment. In practice it means India takes each relationship for what it offers and accepts no veto from any partner over the others. Chapter 15 looks at how this has worked.

CHAPTER 3

Pakistan and cross-border terrorism

The government did not begin with a hard line on Pakistan. Narendra Modi invited Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to his swearing-in in May 2014, and on 25 December 2015 he made an unannounced stop in Lahore, the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister to Pakistan in more than a decade. Eight days later, on 2 January 2016, gunmen attacked the Pathankot air base.

India even allowed a Pakistani investigation team to visit Pathankot that March, a step with no precedent. Nothing came of it. I mention this history because the argument that the government never gave dialogue a chance is wrong on the facts. The policy hardened after the outreach was answered with attacks.

Uri and the surgical strikes, 2016

On 18 September 2016 four attackers entered an Army camp at Uri and killed 19 soldiers. Eleven days later, on the night of 28 to 29 September, Army special forces crossed the Line of Control and hit launch pads where infiltrators were waiting. The Director General of Military Operations announced it at a press conference the next morning.

Indian forces had crossed the Line of Control before. The difference in 2016 was that the government owned the operation in public. Announcing it removed Pakistan's option of pretending nothing had happened and told every future planner in Rawalpindi that the Line of Control was no longer a one-way street.

Pulwama and Balakot, 2019

On 14 February 2019 a suicide bomber drove a car full of explosives into a Central Reserve Police Force convoy at Pulwama and killed 40 personnel. Jaish-e-Mohammed claimed responsibility. On 26 February Indian Air Force Mirage 2000s crossed into Pakistan and bombed a Jaish training camp near Balakot in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

This was the first Indian air strike on Pakistani soil since the 1971 war, and the target lay beyond Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), in territory Pakistan itself does not treat as disputed. Pakistan's air force responded the next day; an Indian MiG-21 was shot down and its pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, was captured and then returned on 1 March. The damage at Balakot is disputed, and Pakistan denies that the

camp was hit. For the purpose of deterrence the more important fact is not in dispute: India used air power inside Pakistan, and the crisis ended without nuclear use.

India followed up outside the military field. It withdrew Most Favoured Nation trade status and raised customs duty on Pakistani goods to 200 per cent. On 1 May 2019 the UN Security Council's sanctions committee listed the Jaish chief, Masood Azhar, as a global terrorist after China lifted a hold it had kept in place for a decade. Pakistan had been placed on the Financial Action Task Force grey list in June 2018 and stayed there until October 2022, which raised its borrowing costs and forced it to convict some terror financiers.

Pahalgam and Operation Sindoor, 2025

On 22 April 2025 terrorists killed 26 people in the Baisaran meadow near Pahalgam. Most were tourists, and survivors said the attackers asked victims their religion before shooting. The next day the Cabinet Committee on Security placed the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 in abeyance, closed the Attari border post and cancelled visas for Pakistani nationals.

In the early hours of 7 May India struck nine sites in Pakistan and PoK in an operation that the official briefing said lasted about 25 minutes. The targets included the Jaish-e-Mohammed headquarters at Bahawalpur and the Lashkar-e-Taiba complex at Muridke, both deep in Pakistani Punjab. India said it had hit terrorist infrastructure only and had avoided military and civilian sites.

Pakistan replied with drone and missile attacks on Indian military positions and cities over the next three nights. India's layered air defence, which combined the Russian S-400 with the Indian-made Akash missile and the Akashteer control system, stopped most of them. On 10 May India struck a number of Pakistani air bases, including Nur Khan near Rawalpindi. That afternoon Pakistan's Director General of Military Operations called his Indian counterpart, and firing stopped from 5 pm.

Both sides lost aircraft, and the numbers are contested. The Indian Air Force chief said in August 2025 that India had shot down five Pakistani fighters and one large aircraft. Pakistan claims it downed several Indian jets; the Chief of Defence Staff acknowledged that India lost aircraft on the first night and then changed tactics, without giving a figure. I would rather have the full account, and I expect it will come with time. The strategic result is clearer than the tally: India hit the headquarters of both main anti-India terror groups, struck the air bases of a nuclear-armed state, and stopped when its aims were met.

The policy after Sindoor

The Prime Minister's address on 12 May 2025 turned practice into stated policy. He set out three points. A terror attack on India will get a fitting reply on India's terms. India will not accept nuclear blackmail. India will make no distinction between the leaders of terrorism and the governments that sponsor them. He added that terror and talks cannot go together, and that water and blood cannot flow together.

The last phrase referred to the Indus Waters Treaty. India has kept the treaty in abeyance since April 2025 and says it will stay that way until Pakistan credibly and irrevocably gives up support for cross-border terrorism. A Court of Arbitration in The Hague has ruled, most recently in an award reported on 31 August 2026, that the treaty remains in force. India has never accepted that court as lawfully constituted and rejects its awards. I think India's position is defensible. A treaty of goodwill, signed on the stated basis of friendship, cannot bind one party forever while the other sponsors the killing of its citizens.

After the fighting the government sent seven all-party delegations of MPs to 33 countries to explain India's case, with opposition members leading some of them. On 28 July 2025 the security forces killed three terrorists near Srinagar in Operation Mahadev; the Home Minister told Parliament they were the men who had carried out the Pahalgam killings.

Has deterrence worked? Pakistan-based groups have not stopped trying, and Pahalgam itself came six years after Balakot. But the pattern of the years before 2014, when a mass-casualty attack every year or two went unanswered, is gone. Each attack now costs the sponsors something they value, and the cost has risen each time.

CHAPTER 4

Jammu and Kashmir after Article 370

On 5 August 2019 the government ended the special status that Jammu and Kashmir had held under Article 370 since 1950, and Parliament passed a law dividing the state into two Union Territories: Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. The change took effect on 31 October 2019. Of everything in this paper, it is the decision that drew the most criticism at home and abroad, and I think it has been borne out better than its critics expected.

Why it was a security decision

Article 370 is usually debated as a constitutional question. It was also a security problem. The separate status gave Pakistan a standing argument that Kashmir's place in India was provisional. It kept many central laws out of the state, including laws that protected the rights of women, Scheduled Castes, and refugees who had lived there since 1947 without the vote in state elections. And it sustained a local political economy in which separatism paid.

The government's view was that seventy years of special status had produced neither integration nor peace, and that ending it would remove the ambiguity on which both Pakistan and the separatists depended. On 11 December 2023 a five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court upheld the decision unanimously. The court held that Article 370 had been a temporary provision, and it directed that Assembly elections be held by September 2024.

What the numbers show

The Home Ministry told a parliamentary committee in November 2024 that terror incidents in Jammu and Kashmir had fallen by more than 70 per cent since 2019. Attacks on civilians, by the same account, came down from 73 in 2019 to 10 in 2024 up to that point. Organised stone pelting, which ran into hundreds of incidents a year before 2019, was recorded as nil in 2023 and 2024. The shutdown calls that used to close the Valley for weeks at a time have stopped.

Independent trackers count differently and show a less even decline, with a rise in incidents during 2020 to 2022 before the fall. Even on those counts the trend from 2022 is downward. The National Investigation Agency's cases against the funding networks of separatist groups, begun in 2017, did a good deal of the work by cutting off the money that paid for street violence.

Ordinary life tells its own story. The administration recorded more than two crore tourist visits in 2023 and again in 2024. In May 2023 Srinagar hosted a G20 working group meeting on tourism. Cinema halls reopened in the Valley after three decades.

The vote

The clearest evidence came from elections. In the Lok Sabha election of 2024, Jammu and Kashmir recorded a turnout of about 58 per cent, the highest in 35 years according to the Election Commission. In the Assembly election held in September and October 2024, the first in ten years, turnout was close to 64 per cent. The National Conference won, and Omar Abdullah became Chief Minister. A party that had opposed the 2019 decision took office peacefully under the new arrangement, which is how a democracy is supposed to work.

The government has said statehood will be restored, and the Supreme Court recorded that assurance. It has not happened yet, and I think it should happen soon. The promise was made to the people of Jammu and Kashmir, and keeping it would complete the argument that 2019 was about integration.

Connectivity

On 6 June 2025 the Prime Minister opened the Chenab rail bridge, the highest railway arch bridge in the world, and with it the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla line. The Kashmir Valley is now connected by rail to the rest of the country in all seasons. For the Army this shortens the supply line. For a fruit grower in Sopore it means a market in Delhi.

Pahalgam and after

The attack at Pahalgam in April 2025 was a deliberate strike at this recovery. It was aimed at tourists because tourism had become the sign of normal life. Terrorism in the region has also shifted south of the Pir Panjal since 2021, with ambushes in Rajouri, Poonch and Reasi, which suggests that pressure in the Valley pushed the groups to find softer ground.

What I noticed most after Pahalgam was the reaction in the Valley itself. Shops shut in protest, people marched against the killings, and the Assembly passed a resolution condemning the attack. Ten years earlier the public mood would have been far more divided. That change in sentiment is harder to measure than incident counts, and to my mind it matters more.

CHAPTER 5

China and the northern border

China is the harder problem. Its economy is about five times the size of India's, its defence budget is several times larger, and it sits on a 3,488 km border that has never been agreed. No Indian government can settle this in a single term. What the government could do was stop the slow loss of position that had become normal, and I think it did.

Doklam, 2017

In June 2017 Chinese army engineers began extending a road on the Doklam plateau, in territory claimed by Bhutan near the point where India, Bhutan and China meet. The road would have brought Chinese forces closer to the Siliguri corridor, the narrow strip that connects the Northeast to the rest of India. Indian troops crossed into the area on 16 June and physically blocked the work.

The stand-off lasted 73 days. Chinese state media threatened war almost daily. India said little in public and did not withdraw. On 28 August both sides pulled back and the road was not built. India had acted on behalf of a smaller neighbour, on ground that was not its own, against a stronger power, and had held its position. Bhutan noticed, and so did other capitals in the region.

Ladakh, 2020

In April and May 2020 China moved large forces up to the Line of Actual Control in eastern Ladakh and blocked Indian patrols at several points. On the night of 15 June a clash in the Galwan valley, fought with clubs and stones under agreements that bar firearms, killed 20 Indian soldiers including Colonel B. Santosh Babu. China admitted eight months later that four of its soldiers had died; Indian and other estimates are higher. These were the first deaths on that border in 45 years.

India's response had three parts. The Army moved about 50,000 additional troops, with tanks and artillery, into Ladakh and kept them there through winters at altitudes above 14,000 feet. In late August 2020 Indian special forces occupied heights on the Kailash range south of Pangong Tso, which gave India something to bargain with. And the government widened the contest beyond the border: it banned 59 Chinese apps on 29 June 2020 and more later, and it had already required government approval for investment from countries sharing a land border with India.

Talks between corps commanders ran to more than twenty rounds. Disengagement came in stages: the Pangong Tso banks in February 2021, Gogra in August 2021, Patrolling Point 15 in September 2022. The last two points, Depsang and Demchok, were settled by an understanding announced on 21 October 2024, and two days later the Prime Minister met President Xi Jinping at Kazan.

What India gained by waiting

Critics say India accepted buffer zones in some places where its troops used to patrol, and that is true of the earlier stages. At Depsang and Demchok patrolling resumed. I would ask the critics what the alternative was. India could not evict a larger army by force without a wider war, and it would not accept the new positions as permanent. So it matched the deployment, refused normal relations and waited. After four and a half years it was China that agreed to restore patrols.

Since then the relationship has thawed with care. The Kailash Mansarovar Yatra resumed in the summer of 2025. The Prime Minister travelled to Tianjin for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit at the end of August 2025, his first visit to China in seven years, and direct flights restarted that October. Border officials met in Beijing in May 2026 and in New Delhi in August 2026 and discussed delimitation and border management.

None of this means the threat has passed. The additional troops have not gone back to their peacetime locations, and de-escalation is still to come. China supplied Pakistan with aircraft, missiles and, by the Indian Army's account, live intelligence during the fighting of May 2025. The Deputy Chief of Army Staff said in July 2025 that India had faced one border and three adversaries. China is also building a very large dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo, upstream of the Brahmaputra, and India has asked for transparency on it at each recent meeting. The government treats the thaw as a way to manage the relationship, and I think that is the correct amount of trust.

Arunachal Pradesh

China claims Arunachal Pradesh and calls it South Tibet. Since 2017 it has published several lists of Chinese names for towns, rivers and mountains in the state, the latest in 2025, and it objects each time an Indian leader visits. The government's reply has been the same on every occasion: Arunachal Pradesh was, is and will remain a part of India, and invented names change nothing. It has backed the words with the Sela Tunnel, new airfields and the Vibrant Villages Programme described in the next chapter. At

Yangtse near Tawang in December 2022, Indian troops pushed back a Chinese attempt to occupy a ridge, and the Defence Minister reported it to Parliament within days.

Reducing economic exposure

Trade with China has kept growing, and the deficit with it. The government's answer has been selective: keep Chinese firms out of telecom networks and other sensitive sectors, screen investment, and use production-linked incentives to build electronics, solar and pharmaceutical supply chains at home. Mobile phone manufacturing is the success so far; India went from importing most of its phones in 2014 to exporting them in large numbers. Dependence on Chinese components, rare earth magnets and active pharmaceutical ingredients remains high, and China's export restrictions on rare earths in 2025 were a reminder of how that dependence can be used.

CHAPTER 6

Building the border

An army can only fight where it can reach. For sixty years India's side of the Himalayan border had poor roads by choice, on the theory that an invader would find them useful. China built highways and railways up to its side. The present government dropped the old theory, and I count the building programme that followed as one of its least noticed achievements.

Roads, tunnels and bridges

The Border Roads Organisation's capital budget has risen several times over since 2014, and environmental and forest clearances for strategic roads within 100 km of the border were simplified. The results are visible on the map.

The Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie road in Ladakh, 255 km long and under construction for nearly two decades, was completed in 2019. It runs close to the Line of Actual Control up to the Karakoram Pass, and many analysts think China's moves in 2020 were partly a reaction to it. The Atal Tunnel under the Rohtang Pass, 9.02 km long, opened on 3 October 2020 and gave Lahaul and the road to Leh a link that stays open in winter. The Sela Tunnel in Arunachal Pradesh, opened on 9 March 2024, does the same for Tawang. The Zojila Tunnel, which will keep the Srinagar to Leh road open all year, is under construction.

In the Northeast the Dhola-Sadiya bridge over the Lohit, 9.15 km long, opened in 2017, and the Bogibeel rail and road bridge over the Brahmaputra in December 2018. Bogibeel had been sanctioned in 1997. Both can carry tanks, and both cut the time needed to move forces into Arunachal Pradesh by many hours.

Airfields and railways

Advanced landing grounds in Arunachal Pradesh were rebuilt and reopened. In Ladakh the airfield at Nyoma, at about 13,700 feet and close to the Line of Actual Control, has been upgraded to take fighter and transport aircraft. Rail lines to Sikkim and towards Tawang are being built, and the line to the Kashmir Valley, described in Chapter 4, is complete.

Villages as the first line

The Vibrant Villages Programme, approved in February 2023 with an outlay of Rs 4,800 crore, funds roads, power, telecom and livelihoods in villages along the northern

border in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Ladakh. The reasoning is that an inhabited border is a watched border. For decades people had been leaving these villages for lack of work and services. The Home Minister launched the programme at Kibithoo in Arunachal Pradesh, which officials used to call the last village in India and now call the first.

The western and eastern borders

On the Pakistan and Bangladesh borders the work has been of a different kind: fencing, floodlights, and electronic surveillance along riverine stretches where a fence cannot stand. The jurisdiction of the Border Security Force was extended in October 2021 to 50 km inside the border in Punjab, West Bengal and Assam, mainly to deal with drones dropping weapons and drugs.

The Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh deserves a mention here. It had been signed in 1974 and left unratified for 41 years. Parliament passed the constitutional amendment in May 2015, and the two countries exchanged 162 enclaves that July. A border that had been a patchwork became a line, and about 50,000 people who had lived without a state acquired one.

On the Myanmar border the government decided in early 2024 to fence the full 1,643 km and to end the Free Movement Regime that had allowed people to cross without papers. The decision is contested by communities with family on both sides, and I return to it in Chapter 12.

CHAPTER 7

Reforming the armed forces

India's armed forces went into the twenty-first century with a command structure designed in 1947. There were seventeen single-service commands, none of them joint apart from the small one in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and the three chiefs dealt with a civilian Defence Ministry in which they had no formal place. Every review since 1999 had said this must change.

The Chief of Defence Staff

The Prime Minister announced the post of Chief of Defence Staff from the Red Fort on 15 August 2019. General Bipin Rawat took office on 1 January 2020, twenty years after the Kargil Review Committee had asked for it. With the post came a new Department of Military Affairs inside the Defence Ministry, headed by the Chief of Defence Staff as its Secretary. For the first time uniformed officers ran a department of the Government of India, with authority over promotions, postings and the day-to-day business of the three services.

General Rawat died in a helicopter crash on 8 December 2021, and the post lay vacant for nine months, which cost the reform time. General Anil Chauhan held it from September 2022 until May 2026 and led the forces through Operation Sindoor. General N.S. Raja Subramani took over on 31 May 2026.

Towards theatre commands

The purpose of the Chief of Defence Staff is to create integrated theatre commands, in which one commander controls the Army, Navy and Air Force assets in a region. The legal basis is in place: the Inter-Services Organisations (Command, Control and Discipline) Act of 2023, in force since May 2024, lets a joint commander exercise authority over personnel of all three services.

The design has taken longer. The Air Force had real objections to dividing a limited number of squadrons among theatres, and it was better to hear them out than to overrule them. Reports in 2026 describe a plan for three commands: a northern one facing China, a western one facing Pakistan, and a maritime one. The recommendations went to the Defence Ministry in April 2026, and the proposal needs the approval of the Cabinet Committee on Security. It is late. I would still rather have a structure the three services have agreed to than one imposed in 2021 that they resented.

In the meantime jointness has advanced in smaller ways: joint logistics nodes, a common communications network, cross-postings of officers between services, and new tri-service agencies for cyber and space set up in 2019. The Defence Ministry declared 2025 its Year of Reforms.

Agnipath

In June 2022 the government changed how soldiers, sailors and airmen are recruited. Under Agnipath, recruits serve four years, and up to a quarter are retained for a full career. The rest leave with a lump sum of about Rs 11.7 lakh and preference in police and paramilitary recruitment.

The scheme provoked protests when it was announced, and veterans have criticised its effect on regimental cohesion. Those concerns deserve a hearing, and the retention share may well need to rise. The reasons for the scheme are sound, though. The average age of an Indian soldier was about 32, high for an infantry army that fights at altitude. And the pension bill had grown so large that it was crowding out equipment: pensions take Rs 1.71 lakh crore of the 2026-27 budget. A younger force with a smaller long-term pension liability leaves more money for modernisation.

Other changes

One Rank One Pension, a demand of ex-servicemen for four decades, was implemented in November 2015. The National War Memorial opened in New Delhi on 25 February 2019; until then independent India had no national memorial to its own war dead. The 41 ordnance factories, run as a government department since colonial times, were reorganised into seven corporations on 1 October 2021. Women now command units and enter the National Defence Academy, a change the Supreme Court pushed and the services have carried through.

CHAPTER 8

Making weapons at home

In 2014 India made very little of what its forces used. The public sector built Russian and European designs under licence, private companies were largely shut out, and exports were negligible. Twelve years later India sells missiles, artillery and patrol vessels abroad. I think this is the change with the longest consequences of any in this paper.

The policy tools

The government used a handful of instruments together. Foreign investment in defence manufacturing was opened to 74 per cent through the automatic route in 2020. The Defence Acquisition Procedure of 2020 put Indian-designed and Indian-made equipment at the top of the order of preference. Five positive indigenisation lists now name 509 items that the services may buy only from Indian sources after set dates. About three quarters of the capital procurement budget is reserved for domestic industry. Two defence industrial corridors, in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, were announced in 2018, and the iDEX scheme, started the same year, funds start-ups to solve problems the services set.

Above all the government let private companies in. Tata, Larsen and Toubro, Bharat Forge, Adani and hundreds of smaller firms now make aircraft structures, guns, drones and ammunition. In October 2024 the Prime Minister opened the Tata and Airbus plant at Vadodara that will assemble C-295 transport aircraft, the first private final assembly line for military aircraft in the country.

What the figures say

Measure	Around 2014	Latest
Defence budget	Rs 2.53 lakh crore (2013-14)	Rs 7.85 lakh crore (2026-27)
Capital outlay for the forces	Under Rs 1 lakh crore	Rs 2.19 lakh crore (2026-27)
Defence production	Rs 46,429 crore (2014-15)	Over Rs 1.5 lakh crore (2024-25)
Defence exports	Rs 686 crore (2013-14)	Rs 38,424 crore (2025-26)

Countries buying Indian defence goods	A handful	More than 80

Sources: Ministry of Defence statements, Union Budget papers. The 2025-26 export figure was announced by the Defence Minister on 2 April 2026.

Exports in 2025-26 were up about 62 per cent on the year before, and public sector undertakings accounted for a little over half. The government's target is Rs 50,000 crore by 2029-30. The best known sale is the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile to the Philippines, a contract worth about 375 million dollars signed in January 2022, with the first batteries delivered in April 2024. Armenia has bought Indian rocket launchers, artillery and air defence systems.

Platforms

The aircraft carrier INS Vikrant, about 45,000 tonnes and designed and built in Kochi, was commissioned on 2 September 2022. India joined the small group of countries that can design and build a carrier of that size. The Air Force ordered 83 Tejas Mk1A light combat aircraft in February 2021 and 97 more in September 2025. The Army ordered 156 Prachand light combat helicopters in March 2025; the Prachand was designed to operate at the altitudes of Siachen and Ladakh. The Navy has more than fifty ships on order, nearly all in Indian yards.

Where India could not yet build, it bought, and it bought faster than before. The stalled 126-aircraft tender was replaced in 2016 by a direct agreement with France for 36 Rafale fighters, all of which were delivered by the end of 2022. A deal for five S-400 air defence regiments was signed with Russia in October 2018 despite the threat of American sanctions. Apache and Chinook helicopters, M777 howitzers, and in October 2024 a contract for 31 MQ-9B long-endurance drones came from the United States. In April 2025 India signed for 26 Rafale-M fighters for the Navy's carriers.

The test of May 2025

Operation Sindoor was the first time much of this equipment was used in combat. BrahMos missiles hit Pakistani air bases. Akash batteries, linked by the Akashteer control network built by Bharat Electronics, brought down drones and missiles alongside the S-400. Indian-made loitering munitions and counter-drone systems were used in numbers. The Prime Minister said afterwards that the world had seen what made-in-India weapons could do, and export enquiries rose in the following months.

The first budget after the operation raised defence spending by about 15 per cent, to Rs 7.85 lakh crore, with the capital head up by more than a fifth. On 15 August 2025 the

Prime Minister announced Mission Sudarshan Chakra, a ten-year programme to build a layered national air and missile defence shield covering military and civilian sites by 2035.

What still lags

Deliveries of the Tejas Mk1A have run well behind schedule, largely because the American supplier was late with engines, and the Air Force has about 30 fighter squadrons against a sanctioned 42. India still cannot build a modern jet engine on its own. The Kaveri programme did not deliver one, and the agreement to co-produce General Electric's F414 in India is the present route. Research spending is low. These are the gaps I would put first in the next ten years, and the Air Force chief has said as much in public, which I take as a healthy sign.

CHAPTER 9

Nuclear, missile and space deterrence

India's nuclear doctrine, published in 2003, has two commitments: no first use, and massive retaliation against a nuclear attack. The government has kept both. In August 2019 the Defence Minister remarked at Pokhran that what happens in future depends on circumstances, which caused a flurry of commentary, but the doctrine was not amended. The work of these twelve years has gone into making the retaliation credible.

The triad at sea

A no-first-use policy only deters if the adversary knows it cannot destroy India's weapons in a first strike. Submarines provide that assurance, because a submarine on patrol cannot be found and hit in advance. On 5 November 2018 the Prime Minister announced that INS Arihant, India's first nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, had completed its first deterrence patrol. That completed the triad of land, air and sea-based weapons. A second boat, INS Arighaat, was commissioned on 29 August 2024, and more are being built at Visakhapatnam.

Longer reach, multiple warheads

The Agni-V missile, with a range of more than 5,000 km, brings all of China within reach from launch sites deep inside India. On 11 March 2024, in a test named Mission Divyastra, India flew an Agni-V carrying multiple independently targetable warheads. One missile can now threaten several targets, which makes any missile defence much harder to rely on. In November 2024 the Defence Research and Development Organisation tested a long-range hypersonic missile.

Space

On 27 March 2019, in Mission Shakti, India destroyed one of its own satellites in low orbit with a ground-launched interceptor. Only the United States, Russia and China had done this before. The test was conducted at a low altitude so that most of the debris fell back within weeks. Its purpose was deterrence: India depends on satellites for communication, navigation and surveillance, and it needed to show that an attack on them could be answered in kind.

A Defence Space Agency was set up the same year. In October 2024 the Cabinet Committee on Security approved a third phase of space-based surveillance involving 52 satellites, many of them to be built by private industry. The NavIC regional navigation

system gives the forces positioning data that no foreign government can switch off. The fighting of May 2025, in which targets deep inside Pakistan were located and struck with precision, depended on these assets, and the lesson drawn afterwards was that India needs many more of them.

Entry into the export control clubs

For decades India was a target of the technology denial regimes set up after its 1974 test. That has been reversed. India joined the Missile Technology Control Regime in June 2016, the Wassenaar Arrangement in December 2017 and the Australia Group in January 2018. Membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group is still blocked by China. The three memberships made it easier to buy sensitive technology and, as important, to sell missiles such as BrahMos abroad.

Calling the nuclear bluff

I return here to a point from Chapter 2, because it is the largest change in deterrence in this period. For twenty years after 1998, Pakistani officials hinted at nuclear use whenever India considered a military reply to terrorism, and much of the world's diplomacy during each crisis went into restraining India. In 2019 and again in 2025 India used force inside Pakistan and the threatened escalation did not occur. Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons, built to deter an Indian land offensive, turned out to be of little use against stand-off strikes that seized no territory. I think India found the space between doing nothing and all-out war that its planners had sought since 2001.

CHAPTER 10

The Indian Ocean and maritime security

About 95 per cent of India's trade by volume moves by sea, and most of its oil arrives through two narrow passages, the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb. For much of its history independent India thought about security as a matter of land borders. The government has given the sea far more attention, and the Navy has become the service through which India is most visible abroad.

SAGAR and after

In March 2015, in Mauritius, the Prime Minister set out a policy he called SAGAR, Security and Growth for All in the Region. It committed India to help smaller Indian Ocean states with coastal surveillance, hydrography, disaster relief and training. Ten years later, again in Mauritius, he widened it under the name MAHASAGAR.

The policy has practical content. India has given patrol vessels and aircraft to Mauritius, Seychelles, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mozambique and Vietnam. Coastal radar stations in several island states feed a common picture. The Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region, opened at Gurugram in December 2018, tracks merchant shipping and hosts liaison officers from partner navies. In February 2024 India and Mauritius opened a new airstrip and jetty on Agalega island, which extends the reach of maritime patrol aircraft over the south-west Indian Ocean.

First responder

When Male's water plant failed in December 2014, Indian ships and aircraft delivered drinking water within hours. After the earthquake in Nepal in April 2015, the cyclone in Mozambique in 2019, and the earthquake in Myanmar in March 2025, Indian relief arrived first or among the first. During Sri Lanka's economic collapse in 2022 India provided about four billion dollars in credit, fuel and food, more than any other country or lender gave that year. Help of this kind is security policy. A neighbour that has been helped in its worst week is less likely to hand a port to a hostile navy.

The Navy against pirates and missiles

From late 2023, as Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea drew Western navies north, Somali piracy returned. The Indian Navy deployed more than ten warships across the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden, its largest such deployment. On 16 March 2024 the destroyer INS Kolkata, with marine commandos dropped by an Air Force C-17, retook the hijacked bulk carrier MV Ruen about 2,600 km from the Indian coast.

All 17 crew were rescued and 35 pirates surrendered and were brought to Mumbai for trial. Indian ships also went to the aid of several merchant vessels hit by drones and missiles, whatever flag they flew.

India did this without joining the American-led coalition in the Red Sea. It acted under its own flag and its own rules, which is the multi-alignment of Chapter 2 applied at sea.

A bigger fleet, built at home

On 15 January 2025 the Navy commissioned a destroyer, a frigate and a submarine on the same day in Mumbai, all three built in India. With INS Vikrant in service the Navy operates two aircraft carriers. The Cabinet has cleared two nuclear-powered attack submarines to be built at home. The Navy's stated aim is a force of about 175 ships by 2035.

Partners and access

Logistics agreements with the United States, France, Australia, Japan, Singapore and others let Indian ships refuel and resupply at their bases, from Djibouti to Guam. Since 2018 India has had access to Duqm in Oman. In May 2024 it signed a ten-year contract to operate the Shahid Beheshti terminal at Chabahar in Iran, which gives a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia that avoids Pakistan. The Malabar naval exercise now includes all four Quad navies.

China's navy is the reason for much of this. It is the largest in the world by number of ships, it has a base at Djibouti, and its survey vessels and submarines visit the Indian Ocean regularly. Chinese-built ports at Hambantota and Gwadar sit on either side of India. India cannot outbuild China ship for ship. What it can do is hold the advantage of geography in its own ocean, and the investment in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which sit across the approaches to the Malacca Strait, serves that purpose.

CHAPTER 11

Ending Left Wing Extremism

I live in Nagpur. Gadchiroli, for many years one of the worst-affected Maoist districts in the country, is a few hours' drive away, and people in Vidarbha have grown up with news of landmines and ambushes there. So I watched this part of the record more closely than most, and it is the part I find hardest to argue with.

The scale of the problem

At its peak the Communist Party of India (Maoist) ran what it called a Red Corridor from the Nepal border to Andhra Pradesh. It collected taxes, ran courts, blew up schools and roads, and killed anyone it suspected of helping the police. The year 2010 saw 1,936 violent incidents and 1,005 deaths of civilians and security personnel, by the Home Ministry's count.

The approach

The National Policy and Action Plan of 2015 combined force, roads and rights. The security side meant pushing permanent camps of the central police forces and state units deep into areas the Maoists had held for decades, including Abujhmad, a forested region of about 4,000 square km in Bastar that the state had never properly surveyed. Chhattisgarh's District Reserve Guard, recruited from local tribal youth and surrendered Maoists who knew the forest, did much of the fighting.

Behind the camps came roads, mobile towers, bank branches, ration shops and schools. The Home Ministry reports thousands of kilometres of road and thousands of mobile towers built in the affected districts. A camp gave a village its first contact with the state that was not a patrol passing through. Surrender policies offered cadres money, land and training, and hundreds took the offer each year.

The last push

In August 2024 the Home Minister, Amit Shah, said at Raipur that Naxalism would be finished by 31 March 2026. Setting a public date was a risk, and many people, including some in the security forces, thought it unwise.

The operations that followed were the most intense in the history of the insurgency. The Home Minister said 290 Maoists were killed in 2024. In April and May 2025 a three-week operation on the Karreguttalu hills on the Chhattisgarh and Telangana border killed 31. On 21 May 2025 the District Reserve Guard killed Nambala Keshava Rao,

known as Basavaraju, the general secretary of the party, in Abujhmad. He was the first leader of that rank to be killed in the conflict.

The organisation then came apart from the top. In October 2025 the politburo member Mallojula Venugopal Rao surrendered in Gadchiroli with about 60 cadres, and days later more than 200 gave up their weapons together at Jagdalpur. In November 2025 Madvi Hidma, the commander blamed for the Dantewada and Jhiram Ghati massacres, was killed.

Year	Districts affected by Left Wing Extremism
2014	126
2018	90
2021	70
2024	38
April 2025	18
October 2025	11, of which 3 "most affected"

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs statements. Violent incidents fell from 1,936 in 2010 to 374 in 2024, and deaths from 1,005 to 150, by the Ministry's count.

On 31 March 2026 the Home Minister said the deadline had been met and that the country was effectively free of Naxalism. Reports at the time differed on the exact count of districts still listed, from none to two, and I have not seen a final official table. What is beyond argument is the direction. An insurgency that had lasted since 1967, and that a Prime Minister once ranked above every other internal threat, no longer holds territory or a functioning central leadership.

What must follow

Rights groups have raised questions about some encounters and about the treatment of villagers caught between the two sides, and those complaints should be investigated properly. The larger risk is neglect. The Maoists recruited where the state was absent and where tribal people had lost forest and land without redress. If the roads are maintained, the schools staffed and the forest rights claims settled, the movement will stay finished. I would watch the Bastar budget over the next five years more closely than the encounter figures.

CHAPTER 12

The Northeast

For half a century the eight states of the Northeast were treated in Delhi as a distant security problem. Dozens of armed groups operated there, many from camps in Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The government's approach has been to sign settlements with every group willing to talk, act against those that would not, and connect the region to the rest of the country.

The accords

The list is long. A framework agreement with the largest Naga group, the NSCN (IM), was signed in August 2015, though a final settlement has not followed. The Bodo accord of January 2020 ended an insurgency that had cost thousands of lives in Assam. The same month an agreement settled more than 30,000 displaced Bru people permanently in Tripura after 23 years in camps. Accords followed with Karbi groups in 2021, with Tripura's tribal groups, with the pro-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom in December 2023, and with Manipur's oldest valley-based armed group, the UNLF, in November 2023. Assam settled long-running boundary disputes with Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh.

By the Home Ministry's count more than 10,000 cadres have laid down arms in the region since 2014. The Ministry reports that insurgency incidents in 2023 were about 70 per cent lower than in 2014, and civilian deaths more than 80 per cent lower.

Rolling back the special powers act

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act gives soldiers wide powers of search and arrest in areas declared disturbed, and it has been resented in the region for decades. As violence fell, the government withdrew it: from all of Tripura in 2015, from Meghalaya in 2018, and from 2022 onwards from most of Assam and from many police station areas in Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. No previous government had reduced its footprint on this scale. The lifting of the Act is the measure I trust most, because a government removes such powers only when it is confident they are no longer needed.

The neighbours' part

Insurgents need sanctuaries. In June 2015, after an ambush killed 18 soldiers in Manipur, Army special forces struck camps across the Myanmar border within days. Bangladesh, under Sheikh Hasina's government, handed over wanted leaders and

closed camps on its soil. That cooperation is less certain since the change of government in Dhaka in August 2024, and India will have to work to keep it.

Connectivity

The Bogibeel and Dhola-Sadiya bridges were described in Chapter 6. Railway lines have been pushed towards the state capitals; the line to Sairang near Aizawl opened in September 2025 and gave Mizoram its first proper rail link. New airports opened at Pakyong in Sikkim and Hollongi near Itanagar. The Prime Minister and his ministers have visited the region far more often than any of their predecessors did. Attention of that kind does not show up in incident counts, but people in the region notice it.

Manipur

Manipur is the exception, and I will not minimise it. On 3 May 2023 violence broke out between the Meitei community of the valley and the Kuki-Zo communities of the hills. More than 250 people have been killed and about 60,000 displaced. Police armouries were looted. The two communities now live apart, separated by buffer zones manned by central forces.

The government was slow. The Chief Minister stayed in office for 21 months after the violence began, and President's Rule came only in February 2025. The Prime Minister visited in September 2025. Looted weapons have been recovered in part, and talks with groups on both sides continue. The decision to fence the Myanmar border and end the Free Movement Regime, taken in early 2024, was a response to the belief that arms, drugs and people were crossing freely; Naga and Mizo groups with kin across the border oppose it. I think a fenced and regulated border is right in principle, and that it must come with a crossing system that lets families meet. Manipur needs a political settlement that both communities accept, and no amount of force will substitute for one.

CHAPTER 13

Law, intelligence and the money behind terror

Counter-terrorism is mostly unglamorous work: tracing bank transfers, sharing a tip between two agencies in time, building a case that will survive a trial. The changes in this field since 2014 have had less attention than the military strikes, and they have probably prevented more attacks.

Stronger agencies

The National Investigation Agency was created after the Mumbai attack. In 2019 Parliament widened its remit to cover offences against Indians and Indian interests abroad, and added human trafficking, counterfeit currency and cyber-terrorism to its list. The agency has opened branches across the states and reports a conviction rate above 90 per cent in the cases it has taken to judgment.

An amendment to the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in 2019 allowed the government to designate individuals as terrorists, where earlier only organisations could be listed. Masood Azhar, Hafiz Saeed, Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi and Dawood Ibrahim were the first names notified. The new criminal code that came into force on 1 July 2024, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, defines a terrorist act in the general criminal law for the first time.

The Multi Agency Centre, which pools intelligence from central and state agencies, was extended to district level. NATGRID, a system proposed after the Mumbai attack to let investigators query immigration, banking, telecom and travel databases from one place, finally went into operation.

Following the money

From 2017 the National Investigation Agency pursued the financing of separatism in Kashmir, arresting leaders and businessmen who moved money from Pakistan through trade across the Line of Control and through hawala. That trade was suspended in 2019. As Chapter 4 noted, street violence fell sharply once the funds stopped.

In September 2022 the government banned the Popular Front of India for five years after coordinated raids across fifteen states. Abroad, India pressed the Financial Action Task Force to keep Pakistan on its grey list from 2018 to 2022. India's own evaluation by the Task Force in 2024 placed it in the category of countries requiring only regular

follow-up, a rating few large economies hold. In November 2022 New Delhi hosted the No Money for Terror ministerial conference, and a month earlier a special meeting of the UN Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee opened at the Taj Mahal Palace hotel in Mumbai, one of the sites of the 2008 attack.

Bringing fugitives back

On 10 April 2025 Tahawwur Rana, accused of helping plan the Mumbai attack, was extradited from the United States after the American Supreme Court rejected his final appeal. It had taken sixteen years. In July 2025 the United States designated The Resistance Front, the Lashkar-e-Taiba offshoot that first claimed the Pahalgam attack, as a foreign terrorist organisation.

Extremism abroad

India has also pressed Western governments about Khalistani extremists who operate from their soil, raise funds and threaten Indian diplomats. This led to a serious breach with Canada after its Prime Minister alleged in September 2023 that Indian agents were linked to a killing there. India rejected the allegation. The two countries restored their High Commissioners in 2025 after a change of government in Ottawa. The episode was costly for both sides. It did establish, I think, that India will not treat violent separatism directed at it as another country's free-speech question.

The limits

The security forces must stop every plot, while a terrorist group needs only one success. Pulwama in 2019, Pahalgam in April 2025 and the car bomb near the Red Fort on 10 November 2025, which killed more than ten people and which investigators traced to a cell of radicalised professionals, each got through. After each one the agencies found gaps: in sharing between state and central units, in watching explosives precursors, in protecting places where crowds gather. Chapter 16 comes back to this. The system is far better than it was in 2008, and it has still not reached the standard the threat requires.

CHAPTER 14

Cyber, technology and economic security

A modern state can be hurt without a shot being fired: by an attack on its power grid, by a cut in the supply of chips or rare earths, by pressure on its currency. The government has treated these as security questions, which earlier governments mostly did not.

Cyber defence

The Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre was set up under the Home Ministry in 2018, with a national helpline, 1930, for reporting online fraud. In 2022 the Computer Emergency Response Team made it mandatory for companies to report breaches within six hours. A Defence Cyber Agency was created for the armed forces in 2019. During Operation Sindoor Indian networks faced a large wave of attacks from Pakistan-based and allied groups, and officials said the critical systems held.

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023 gave India its first data protection law. I think the next step should be a full cyber command and a published national cyber security strategy; a draft of the latter has been with the government for several years.

Trusted telecom

After Galwan the government moved to keep high-risk vendors out of the country's networks without naming any country. The National Security Directive on the Telecommunication Sector, approved in December 2020, requires operators to buy equipment only from sources the government has cleared as trusted. Chinese vendors were left out of the 5G rollout that began in October 2022. A fully Indian 4G stack, built by C-DOT, Tejas Networks and Tata Consultancy Services, now runs on the state operator's network, which puts India among the few countries that can build their own telecom core.

Chips, quantum and artificial intelligence

The India Semiconductor Mission, approved in December 2021 with Rs 76,000 crore, has brought fabrication and assembly projects to Gujarat and Assam, and the first chips packaged in India came off the line in 2025. India will not be self-sufficient in advanced chips for many years, but it has begun, and a country that makes none has no bargaining power at all. The National Quantum Mission of 2023 and the IndiaAI Mission of 2024 fund research in two fields that will shape codes, sensors and weapons.

Critical minerals and energy

China processes most of the world's rare earths and lithium, and in 2025 it restricted exports of rare earth magnets, which stalled car factories in several countries including India. The National Critical Mineral Mission, approved in January 2025, funds exploration at home and the purchase of mines abroad; a public sector venture has already taken lithium blocks in Argentina.

On energy the government made a choice in 2022 that drew much criticism in the West. When Russian crude became available at a discount after the invasion of Ukraine, India bought it, and Russia's share of India's oil imports rose from under two per cent to more than a third. The External Affairs Minister's defence was blunt: India's first duty was to its own consumers, and Europe was buying far more Russian energy than India. The purchases kept fuel prices and inflation in check for 140 crore people. When the United States imposed a penalty tariff over the purchases in August 2025, India did not give way, and the matter was eased by a trade understanding in early 2026.

Financial resilience

Foreign exchange reserves stood at about 300 billion dollars in early 2014 and crossed 700 billion in 2024. A reserve of that size is a defence against the kind of currency pressure that forced India to pledge gold in 1991. The Unified Payments Interface and the RuPay card network mean that everyday payments in India do not depend on foreign card companies, a point whose value became clear when Western networks withdrew from Russia in 2022.

Drones

The fighting of May 2025 was India's first drone war. Pakistan sent several hundred drones over three nights, and India used its own loitering munitions in reply. The government had banned imports of finished drones in 2022 and set up an incentive scheme for domestic makers. After Sindoor it placed emergency orders for counter-drone systems and loitering munitions with Indian firms. Components, especially motors and batteries, still come largely from China, and replacing them is the urgent task in this sector.

CHAPTER 15

Diplomacy as security

A country's security depends on who will sell it weapons, who will share intelligence, who will vote with it at the United Nations and who will stay neutral when it has to fight. Indian diplomacy since 2014 has been run with those questions in mind, and it has been unusually active. The Prime Minister has visited more countries than any of his predecessors, including many that no Indian Prime Minister had visited in decades.

The United States

Defence ties with Washington moved further in these twelve years than in the fifty before. The United States named India a Major Defence Partner in 2016. Three agreements that earlier governments had hesitated over for a decade were signed: on logistics in 2016, secure communications in 2018 and geospatial data in 2020. Together they let the two militaries refuel at each other's bases and share encrypted and satellite information. American aircraft, helicopters, howitzers and drones entered Indian service, and in 2023 General Electric agreed to co-produce fighter engines in India.

The relationship was tested in 2025. President Trump claimed credit for the May ceasefire, which India has consistently said was agreed directly between the two armies at Pakistan's request. In August he raised tariffs on Indian goods to 50 per cent, half of it as a penalty for buying Russian oil. India neither retaliated in kind nor changed its oil policy. On 31 October 2025 the two defence ministers still signed a new ten-year defence framework. I read that sequence as evidence that the partnership now rests on shared interests strong enough to survive a bad year, and that India can say no to Washington without losing it.

Russia

India kept its old partner while building the new one. It bought the S-400 system in 2018 under threat of American sanctions that were never applied, and those batteries proved their worth in May 2025. It bought discounted oil after 2022. The Prime Minister also told President Putin in public in September 2022 that this was not an era for war, and he visited Kyiv in August 2024. President Putin came to New Delhi in December 2025. Russia's growing dependence on China is a long-term worry for India, and it is one more reason for the push to make weapons at home.

The Quad, Europe and Japan

The Quad of India, the United States, Japan and Australia was revived in 2017 and raised to the level of leaders in 2021. India has kept it from becoming a military alliance while using it for maritime surveillance, undersea cables, critical minerals and vaccines. France has become India's most dependable Western defence partner: it supplied the Rafale and the Scorpene submarines and has never attached political conditions to either.

West Asia

The change in India's standing in the Gulf is one of the least expected results of this period. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, once seen in Delhi mainly as Pakistan's patrons, are now large investors, energy suppliers and security partners. About 90 lakh Indians live and work in the Gulf. India has, at the same time, drawn closer to Israel on defence technology and kept its access to Iran through Chabahar. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor was announced at the G20 summit in New Delhi in September 2023. The mutual defence agreement that Saudi Arabia signed with Pakistan in September 2025 was unwelcome in Delhi, and it shows that the Gulf states balance their relationships as India does.

The neighbourhood

The neighbourhood has been harder. Bhutan remains India's closest friend. Sri Lanka, after the rescue of 2022, signed a defence memorandum with India in April 2025. The Maldives elected a president in 2023 on an "India Out" platform; India withdrew its military personnel as asked, kept its aid flowing, and within a year relations had recovered to the point that the Prime Minister was chief guest at the Maldivian independence day in July 2025. Patience worked there.

Bangladesh is the worry. Sheikh Hasina's government, which had been India's best security partner in the region, fell in August 2024, and relations with its successors have been cool, with attacks on minorities and the revival of Islamist groups causing concern in India. With Afghanistan India has taken a pragmatic course: the Taliban foreign minister visited New Delhi in October 2025 and India upgraded its mission in Kabul to an embassy. The Taliban's own quarrel with Pakistan made that easier.

Bringing Indians home

A government's first security duty is to its own citizens, wherever they are. In April 2015 Operation Raahat evacuated more than 4,600 Indians from Yemen under fire, along with about 960 nationals of 41 other countries who had asked India for help. Op-

eration Devi Shakti brought Indians and Afghan Sikhs and Hindus out of Kabul in August 2021. Operation Ganga brought about 22,500 Indians, most of them students, out of Ukraine in 2022. Operation Kaveri evacuated about 3,800 from Sudan in 2023, and Operation Sindhu brought Indians out of Iran and Israel in June 2025.

Each of these needed the Air Force, the Navy, the embassies and, often, a direct call from the Prime Minister to a foreign leader for safe passage. Indians abroad now expect that their government will come for them, and other governments have begun to ask India for the same help.

A voice in the room

India's presidency of the G20 in 2023 produced a consensus declaration at a time when the members could agree on almost nothing about Ukraine, and it brought the African Union in as a permanent member. During its term on the UN Security Council in 2021 and 2022, India chaired the Counter-Terrorism Committee. The Vaccine Maitri programme sent Indian-made Covid vaccines to about a hundred countries. These things build the goodwill a country draws on in a crisis. After Pahalgam, governments across the world condemned the attack, and few criticised India's reply.

CHAPTER 16

The criticisms, and where the work is unfinished

I said at the start that I would set out the case against the record. Here are the criticisms I take most seriously, with my answer to each. On some of them I think the critics are right.

There is no written strategy

India has no published national security strategy. The Defence Planning Committee was asked to draft one in 2018 and nothing has been released. Critics say that without a document, ministries pull in different directions and Parliament cannot hold the government to its own goals.

I agree that one should be published. The usual defence, that a written strategy would tie the government's hands or reveal too much, does not convince me; the United States, Britain, Japan and even Pakistan publish theirs. Chapter 2 showed that a consistent doctrine exists in practice. Writing it down would help the services plan and would tell adversaries exactly where India's lines are.

Intelligence still fails

Pulwama, Galwan, Pahalgam and the Red Fort blast each caught the system by surprise. At Pahalgam a meadow full of tourists had no security presence. The critics are right that these were failures, and the government has not been open enough about what went wrong in each case. A public inquiry on the model of the Kargil Review Committee, at least for Pahalgam, would do more good than harm.

In fairness, the number of plots stopped never makes the news, and the trend in attacks across the country outside Jammu and Kashmir has been sharply down since 2014. No major Indian city suffered a mass-casualty terror attack between 2014 and the Delhi blast of 2025, after a decade in which they were annual.

China gained ground in Ladakh

The opposition has argued that the buffer zones created during disengagement cost India patrolling rights and grazing land, and that the government avoided a full debate in Parliament. Local representatives in Ladakh have raised the grazing issue as well.

Chapter 5 gave my answer: the alternatives were war or acceptance, and India chose a third course that ended with patrols restored at Depsang and Demchok. I do think Parliament should have been told more. A democracy at odds with a secretive neighbour is stronger when its own public knows the facts.

Defence spending is too low

The defence budget has tripled in rupees, but as a share of GDP it has stayed a little under two per cent, pensions included. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence has asked for three per cent. The Air Force is at about 30 squadrons against 42 sanctioned, and the Navy's submarine fleet is ageing.

This criticism is sound. The government's reply is that it had to repair the public finances, build infrastructure and fund welfare for a poor country, and that faster growth is itself the foundation of military power. That was a defensible order of priorities in 2014. After May 2025 the case for a higher share is stronger, and the 15 per cent rise in the 2026-27 budget suggests the government agrees.

Theatre commands are late

The first Chief of Defence Staff was given three years to bring about jointness. Almost seven years on, the commands do not exist. I dealt with the reasons in Chapter 7. The delay is real, and the fighting of May 2025, which needed all three services to act together within hours, showed both how far informal jointness has come and why the formal structure should not wait any longer.

Manipur

Chapter 12 covered this. The response was slow, and the state remains divided. It is the largest internal security failure of the period.

Hard laws and civil liberties

Rights groups and many lawyers argue that the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act is used too widely, that bail under it is nearly impossible, and that conviction rates in cases filed by state police are low. They point to the long communications shutdown in Jammu and Kashmir after August 2019 and to the detention of political leaders at that time.

I think the 2019 restrictions in Kashmir saved lives; the widely predicted bloodbath did not happen. They also went on longer than they needed to. On the Act, a law this strong needs prompt trials and a review mechanism with teeth, and the courts have be-

gun to insist on both. Security and liberty are both duties of the state, and a government confident in its record can afford to be generous with the second.

Too much in too few hands

Security decisions are concentrated in the Prime Minister's Office and the National Security Adviser, and India's intelligence agencies have no statutory basis or parliamentary oversight. The concentration has brought speed, which was needed. Over time a system that depends on a few individuals becomes fragile. Placing the intelligence agencies under an Act of Parliament, with a small cleared committee to oversee them, would strengthen them, and I hope this government, which has the majority and the credibility on security to do it, takes it up.

The neighbourhood has drifted

Bangladesh, Nepal and for a time the Maldives moved away from India, and China's presence in each has grown. Some of this is beyond any Indian government's control, since small neighbours will always balance a large one. But India's delivery on promised projects has often been slow, and Dhaka in 2024 showed the risk of resting a relationship on one leader.

CHAPTER 17

What the next decade needs

If the argument of this paper is right, India enters the late 2020s in a stronger position than it has held at any time since 1971. The danger now is complacency. Pakistan's army has not changed its aims and, by all accounts, drew its own lessons from May 2025. China's lead in military technology is widening in several fields. Here is what I think the government should do with the position it has built.

Write the strategy down

Publish a national security strategy within a year, and review it every five. Much of the content exists already in speeches and in practice. Putting it on paper would settle arguments between the services over money and give the theatre commanders their tasks.

Finish the command reform

Get the three theatre commands through the Cabinet Committee on Security and stand them up by 2027. Give the Chief of Defence Staff the authority over operations that the post still lacks. Every year of delay is a year in which the next conflict would be fought with a structure everyone agrees is outdated.

Spend more, and spend it on the right things

Move defence spending towards 2.5 per cent of GDP over five years. Put the increase into the areas where May 2025 showed the need: air defence under Mission Sudarshan Chakra, long-range precision missiles, drones and counter-drone systems, surveillance satellites, and fighter squadrons. Raise the research budget sharply and open more of it to private firms and universities. Treat the jet engine as a national mission on the scale of the nuclear submarine programme.

Fix intelligence

Commission an independent review of the Pahalgam and Red Fort failures and publish what can be published. Invest in local human intelligence in the Pir Panjal belt, where technology has not been enough. Give the agencies a legal charter.

Use the water

The Indus Waters Treaty is in abeyance, but abeyance changes little on the ground until India can store and divert water. The hydropower and storage projects on the Chenab

and Jhelum that the treaty had delayed should be built quickly, along with the canals needed to carry water to Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan. This will take years, which is a reason to start now.

Secure the peace at home

Restore statehood to Jammu and Kashmir. Reach a political settlement in Manipur. In the former Maoist districts, keep the administration in the villages after the camps thin out, and settle forest rights claims. In each of these places the security forces have created an opening, and only politics and administration can use it.

Reduce dependence on China

The thaw on the border should not slow the work of building supply chains for electronics components, drone parts, pharmaceutical ingredients, solar cells and rare earth magnets. The test for each should be simple: could India keep its factories and its forces running if China stopped supplying it tomorrow?

Hold the neighbourhood

Deliver projects in neighbouring countries on time, build ties across party lines in each capital, and keep the first-responder habit. It costs India little and buys a great deal.

What to watch

Three decisions over the next eighteen months will show whether the momentum holds. The first is whether the Cabinet Committee on Security clears the theatre commands. The second is the size of the capital allocation in the 2027-28 defence budget. The third is how India answers the next major terror attack traced to Pakistan, because the policy announced on 12 May 2025 will be judged on the first occasion it is tested.

APPENDIX A

Timeline, 2014 to 2026

Date	Event
26 May 2014	Narendra Modi sworn in as Prime Minister; Ajit Doval appointed National Security Adviser days later
March 2015	SAGAR policy for the Indian Ocean announced in Mauritius
April 2015	Operation Raahat evacuates Indians and foreigners from Yemen
June 2015	Special forces strike insurgent camps across the Myanmar border
July 2015	Enclaves exchanged with Bangladesh under the Land Boundary Agreement
November 2015	One Rank One Pension notified
June 2016	India joins the Missile Technology Control Regime
29 September 2016	Surgical strikes across the Line of Control after the Uri attack
June to August 2017	Doklam stand-off with China, 73 days
June 2018	Pakistan placed on the Financial Action Task Force grey list
October 2018	S-400 air defence contract signed with Russia
5 November 2018	INS Arihant completes its first deterrence patrol
26 February 2019	Air strike at Balakot after the Pulwama attack
27 March 2019	Mission Shakti anti-satellite test
5 August 2019	Article 370 read down; Jammu and Kashmir reorganised
1 January 2020	General Bipin Rawat takes office as the first Chief of Defence Staff
15 June 2020	Galwan valley clash; 20 Indian soldiers killed
3 October 2020	Atal Tunnel opened
1 October 2021	Ordnance factories reorganised into seven corporations
January 2022	BrahMos export contract signed with the Philippines
February to March 2022	Operation Ganga evacuates Indians from Ukraine

June 2022	Agnipath recruitment scheme announced
2 September 2022	INS Vikrant commissioned
May 2023	Ethnic violence begins in Manipur
September 2023	G20 summit in New Delhi
11 December 2023	Supreme Court upholds the Article 370 decision
11 March 2024	Agni-V tested with multiple warheads
October 2024	Assembly election completed in Jammu and Kashmir; disengagement agreed at Depsang and Demchok
22 April 2025	Pahalgam attack; Indus Waters Treaty placed in abeyance the next day
7 to 10 May 2025	Operation Sindoor
21 May 2025	Maoist general secretary Basavaraju killed in Abujhmad
6 June 2025	Chenab rail bridge and the rail line to Kashmir opened
15 August 2025	Mission Sudarshan Chakra announced
31 October 2025	Ten-year defence framework signed with the United States
10 November 2025	Car bomb near the Red Fort, Delhi
1 February 2026	Defence budget raised to Rs 7.85 lakh crore
31 March 2026	Home Minister says the deadline for ending Naxalism has been met
2 April 2026	Defence exports for 2025-26 announced at Rs 38,424 crore
31 May 2026	General N.S. Raja Subramani takes office as Chief of Defence Staff

APPENDIX B

Then and now: selected figures

Indicator	Around 2014	Latest available
Defence budget	Rs 2.53 lakh crore (2013-14)	Rs 7.85 lakh crore (2026-27)
Defence exports	Rs 686 crore (2013-14)	Rs 38,424 crore (2025-26)
Defence production	Rs 46,429 crore (2014-15)	Over Rs 1.5 lakh crore (2024-25)
Chief of Defence Staff	Recommended, not created	In place since 1 January 2020
Nuclear ballistic missile submarines in service	None	Two commissioned by 2024
Aircraft carriers	Two, both bought abroad	Two, one built in India
Districts affected by Left Wing Extremism	126	11 (October 2025)
Left Wing Extremist violent incidents	1,936 (2010 peak)	374 (2024)
Assembly election turnout, Jammu and Kashmir	About 65 per cent (2014)	About 64 per cent (2024), with no boycott call
Export control regimes joined	None of four	Three of four
Foreign exchange reserves	About 300 billion dollars	About 700 billion dollars

Figures are from the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Home Affairs, Union Budget papers, the Election Commission and the Reserve Bank of India, as cited in the chapters. Where an independent count differs from the official one, the text says so.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kamlesh Bhagatkar

Kamlesh Bhagatkar is an author and geopolitical analyst from Nagpur, Maharashtra. He has followed India's foreign and security policy closely for about seven years and writes on geopolitics and current affairs at kamleshbhagatkar.com. His next book, *Nineteen Days*, is on Pahalgam and Operation Sindoor. He runs an information technology business with offices in Nagpur and Bengaluru.

The views in this paper are the author's own. Readers who find an error of fact are asked to write in through the website so that it can be corrected.

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