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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Force Has Its Limits: Iran, Asymmetric Deterrence and Lessons for Middle Powers

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"How should India apply the "vulnerability as leverage" doctrine in its own deterrence posture against Pakistan and in managing the Strait of Hormuz dependency for crude imports?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Indian Express draws lessons from the Iran-Israel 12-Day War of June 2025 — vulnerability becomes leverage when middle powers exploit interdependencies, while overwhelming force fails to produce decisive political outcomes. India must calibrate its own deterrence around economic chokepoints, strategic patience and supplier diversification rather than rely on conventional escalation alone.

THE 12-DAY WAR AND ITS SETTLED OUTCOME

Between June 13 and June 24, 2025, the Israeli Air Force struck Iran's nuclear infrastructure at Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan in a sustained campaign that aimed to set back, if not destroy, the Iranian enrichment programme. On June 22, 2025, US B-2 stealth bombers joined the campaign under Operation Midnight Hammer, targeting hardened facilities with massive ordnance penetrators. Iran responded with ballistic and cruise missile barrages on Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities, and through proxies — the Houthis from Yemen, a battered Hezbollah from Lebanon, and Iraqi militia formations — that extended the conflict's geography across the region. On June 24, 2025, a ceasefire took hold.

The settled outcome reveals the limits of overwhelming force. The Iranian nuclear programme was estimated to have been set back by two to three years — not eliminated. The regime survived, with its Revolutionary Guard Corps intact and threshold capability preserved. Sanctions enforcement, already eroded, continued to leak through Iranian oil discounts to large Asian buyers. Most importantly, the political objective that maximalist Israeli and American voices had articulated — regime collapse, an end to Iran's regional posture — did not arrive.

VULNERABILITY AS LEVERAGE

The deeper logic of the outcome is what the editorial calls vulnerability as leverage. Iran's strategic position rests not on conventional military parity with Israel or the United States — it does not possess that parity — but on its ability to convert geographic and economic chokepoints, and the regime's own willingness to absorb civilian costs, into instruments of cost imposition on the adversary's supply chains and on the global economy.

/ VULNERABILITY	STRATEGIC EFFECT
Strait of Hormuz	~20% of global oil and ~25% of LNG transit; mere threatened closure raises crude prices and insurance premia worldwide
Bab-el-Mandeb / Red Sea	Governs Suez Canal approach; Houthi missile and drone threats forced major shipping lines to reroute around the Cape in 2024-25
Iranian oil discount sales	Sustained the war chest despite sanctions; large Asian buyers continued procurement at discounts
Nuclear threshold ambiguity	Functions as deterrent without crossing the line that would invite a coordinated international response
Proxy network	Houthis, Hezbollah remnants, Iraqi and Syrian militias — distributed cost-imposition capability

This is not military parity. It is asymmetric deterrence by interdependence — the converted weakness of being economically and geographically constrained into a leverage that the strong cannot easily neutralise without paying disproportionate global economic costs themselves.

INDIA'S PARALLELS

The Indian parallels are concrete and operationally relevant.

First, energy import dependency. Approximately 30 per cent of India's crude oil imports transit the Strait of Hormuz as of 2026 — down from ~45-50 per cent in 2024 through active supplier diversification (Russian crude, US, Latin America, West Africa). The Strategic Petroleum Reserves at Visakhapatnam, Mangalore and Padur, supplemented by commercial stocks held by Indian oil marketing companies, provide a cover of roughly 9.5 days strategic and a further bracket of commercial supply — adequate to absorb short-term shocks but insufficient for a sustained Hormuz disruption.

Second, diaspora and remittance vulnerability. Approximately nine million Indian citizens live and work across the West Asian Gulf states. Remittances from this diaspora are estimated at around $50 billion annually — among the largest single bilateral remittance flows in the world. Any sustained West Asian conflict puts these workers and their financial flows at risk simultaneously.

Third, the Pakistan parallel. Pakistan's strategic posture is itself a study in vulnerability-leverage — proxy warfare through Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, the explicit rejection of No First Use of nuclear weapons, the calibrated ambiguity over tactical nuclear weapons that constrains India's escalation ladder. India's doctrinal response — Cold Start studies, the surgical strikes after Uri in 2016, the Balakot air strike in 2019, and Operation Sindoor in May 2025 — has been the gradual construction of a calibrated kinetic capability that imposes costs while staying beneath the nuclear threshold.

INDIA'S RESPONSE TOOLKIT

India's response to the chokepoint and dependency problem has been multi-track.

- **Strategic Petroleum Reserves expansion:** Phase I commissioned at Visakhapatnam (1.33 MMT), Mangalore (1.5 MMT) and Padur (2.5 MMT); Phase II Padur and Chandikhol expansion approved and under construction.
- **Supplier diversification:** Russian crude share rose above 30 per cent in the period after 2022, alongside continued procurement from West Asia, the United States, Brazil, Guyana, and African producers — reducing single-source dependency.
- **Chabahar Port and INSTC:** Long-term lease signed by India Ports Global Limited with Iran in May 2024 for development and operation of Shahid Beheshti terminal at Chabahar — a corridor that bypasses Pakistan, connects to Afghanistan and Central Asia, and aligns with the International North-South Transport Corridor.
- **IMEC corridor (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor):** Announced at the September 2023 G20 New Delhi Summit; combines rail and shipping links across the Gulf, Israel, Jordan and the European Union to reduce dependence on a single Hormuz-Suez route.
- **National Green Hydrogen Mission 2023:** A long-horizon hedge — domestic green hydrogen production reduces fossil fuel imports over a 15-20 year horizon.
- **Indian Ocean Region engagement:** IORA, MILAN exercises, Quad maritime security working group, Information Fusion Centre — Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) at Gurugram for maritime domain awareness.

THE DOCTRINAL SYNTHESIS

India's doctrinal evolution combines two strands. Kinetic deterrence has been progressively demonstrated — Uri 2016, Balakot 2019, Operation Sindoor in May 2025 — through calibrated cross-border strikes that impose costs without breaching the nuclear threshold. Vulnerability-leverage thinking, by contrast, has been built into the economic and infrastructure response — SPR, supplier diversification, alternative corridors, green hydrogen, IORA engagement.

The Iran-Israel war's lesson is that neither strand suffices alone. A power that relies only on kinetic escalation invites asymmetric counter-cost imposition through chokepoints and proxies. A power that relies only on strategic patience and economic resilience invites repeated adversary aggression unrestrained by fear of retaliation. The hybrid posture — calibrated kinetic readiness plus structural economic resilience — is what middle powers actually need.

UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

GS Paper 2 — India's Foreign Policy in West Asia GS Paper 3 — Energy Security, Internal Security, Defence

- **Iran-Israel 12-Day War (June 13-24, 2025):** Israeli strikes on Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan; US B-2 strikes June 22, 2025 (Operation Midnight Hammer); Iranian missile barrages; ceasefire June 24, 2025.
- **Strait of Hormuz:** roughly 20 per cent of global oil and a quarter of LNG transit; India's largest crude transit chokepoint (approximately 30 per cent of imports as of 2026, down from ~45-50 per cent earlier through diversification).
- **Bab-el-Mandeb:** Suez approach; Houthi disruption forced Cape rerouting through 2024-25.
- **India's Strategic Petroleum Reserves:** Visakhapatnam (1.33 MMT), Mangalore (1.5 MMT), Padur (2.5 MMT); Phase II Padur and Chandikhol under construction.
- **Crude supplier diversification:** Russia, United States, Brazil, Guyana, African producers alongside traditional West Asian sources.
- **Chabahar Port:** Long-term lease signed by IPGL with Iran in May 2024 for Shahid Beheshti terminal — Pakistan-bypass corridor aligned with INSTC.
- **IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor):** Announced at G20 New Delhi Summit, September 2023.
- **National Green Hydrogen Mission 2023:** Long-horizon fossil-fuel hedge.
- **Indian Ocean Region architecture:** IORA, MILAN exercises, Quad maritime security, IFC-IOR Gurugram.
- **India's calibrated kinetic doctrine:** Uri surgical strikes (2016), Balakot air strike (2019), Operation Sindoor (May 7-10, 2025).
- **Pakistan asymmetric posture:** No First Use rejection, proxy warfare through LeT and JeM, tactical nuclear ambiguity.

- **Indian diaspora in West Asia:** roughly nine million workers; remittances about $50 billion annually.

Mains Questions:

1. "Force has its limits when the weaker state weaponises its vulnerabilities." Examine this proposition with reference to the Iran-Israel war of June 2025 and its lessons for Indian deterrence.
2. India's energy security is structurally exposed to the Strait of Hormuz. Critically evaluate the policy response, including Strategic Petroleum Reserves, supplier diversification, Chabahar and IMEC.
3. India's calibrated kinetic doctrine — from Uri 2016 to Operation Sindoor 2025 — represents a deliberate posture between strategic restraint and overwhelming escalation. Analyse the doctrinal logic.
4. Operationalisation of Chabahar Port through the May 2024 long-term lease is a strategic move in India's West Asia and Central Asia policy. Discuss its connectivity, security and geo-economic implications.

Keywords: Iran-Israel 12-Day War, Natanz Fordow Arak, Operation Midnight Hammer, Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, Strategic Petroleum Reserves Visakhapatnam Mangalore Padur, Chabahar Port May 2024 lease, IPGL-Iran, INSTC, IMEC, G20 New Delhi Declaration, National Green Hydrogen Mission 2023, Operation Sindoor, Uri surgical strikes 2016, Balakot 2019, IORA, MILAN exercises, Quad maritime security, IFC-IOR Gurugram, vulnerability-leverage doctrine, asymmetric deterrence, calibrated escalation, Indian diaspora West Asia, remittances $50 billion

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> *Indian Express's underlying argument is that the Iran-Israel war has overturned a comfortable assumption — that overwhelming force translates predictably into political settlement. It does not, when the weaker state has weaponised its vulnerabilities. For India, the question is not whether to develop kinetic capability — Operation Sindoor has answered that — but whether to invest with equal seriousness in the economic, infrastructural and diaspora resilience that converts adversary chokepoints into manageable risks. Strategic patience without kinetic credibility is appeasement; kinetic credibility without economic resilience is brittleness. Both are needed.*

Source: Indian Express — Editorial Pages

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

The Iran-Israel 12-Day War (June 2025) and the Houthi disruption of Red Sea and Bab-el-Mandeb shipping demonstrate that

overwhelming military force fails to deliver decisive political outcomes when the weaker state weaponises its vulnerabilities — asymmetric deterrence, civilian costs and global supply-chain leverage often outperform kinetic escalation.

✓ SUPPORTING

- Despite Israeli air strikes on Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan, US B-2 strikes under Operation Midnight Hammer on June 22, 2025, and massive force asymmetry, the Iranian regime survived, the nuclear programme was set back but not eliminated, and the ceasefire of June 24, 2025 left Iran with threshold capability and reduced sanctions enforcement.
- The Strait of Hormuz (carrying roughly 20 per cent of global oil and a quarter of LNG) and Bab-el-Mandeb function as chokepoints whose mere threatened closure imposes massive economic costs on the West and on energy-importing economies, including India, regardless of who wins militarily.
- India imports approximately 30 per cent of its crude oil through the Strait of Hormuz (reduced from ~45-50 per cent earlier through active diversification) and has Strategic Petroleum Reserves at Visakhapatnam, Mangalore and Padur covering roughly 9.5 days of strategic plus ~64 days of commercial stocks — adequate for short shocks, inadequate for sustained disruption.
- India's calibrated escalation doctrine — surgical strikes after Uri 2016, Balakot 2019, and Operation Sindoor in May 2025 — and its Chabahar Port operationalisation (long-term lease with IPGL-Iran from May 2024) reflect a strategic patience model that combines kinetic readiness with vulnerability-leverage thinking.

⚠ COUNTER

Strategic patience and vulnerability-leverage thinking can degenerate into perpetual restraint if not paired with credible kinetic deterrence; Pakistan's no-first-use rejection and continued proxy warfare show that adversaries only respect leverage when it is backed by demonstrated willingness to impose costs.

→ WAY FORWARD

India should institutionalise a hybrid posture — expand Strategic Petroleum Reserves (Padur Phase II), diversify crude suppliers (US, Brazil, Guyana, African producers), accelerate the National Green Hydrogen Mission and renewables, operationalise IMEC and INSTC as

Hormuz-alternative corridors, deepen Quad maritime security and IORA engagement, and maintain the calibrated kinetic doctrine demonstrated through Operation Sindoor.

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MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

Recent West Asian conflicts demonstrate that overwhelming military force often fails to deliver decisive political outcomes when the weaker state weaponises its vulnerabilities. Analyse this proposition with reference to the Iran-Israel 12-Day War and draw lessons for India's deterrence posture. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

The Iran-Israel 12-Day War of June 2025, in which overwhelming Israeli and American force failed to deliver a decisive political settlement, has revived a structural lesson for middle powers: vulnerability, when consciously weaponised, often functions as leverage in ways that conventional military superiority cannot neutralise.

BODY

Between June 13 and June 24, 2025, Israeli air strikes targeted Iran's nuclear infrastructure at Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan; on June 22, 2025, US B-2 bombers struck under Operation Midnight Hammer; Iranian missile barrages reached Tel Aviv; and proxy attacks by the Houthis and a degraded Hezbollah extended the conflict's geography. The ceasefire of June 24, 2025 produced a settled outcome in which the Iranian nuclear programme was estimated to have been set back by roughly two to three years — but not eliminated — the regime survived, threshold capability persisted, and the broader sanctions architecture continued to leak through Iranian oil discounts to large Asian buyers.

The deeper logic of the outcome was vulnerability as leverage. The Strait of Hormuz carries an estimated one-fifth of global oil and a quarter of LNG; Bab-el-Mandeb governs Suez access; and Houthi missile and drone threats forced major shipping lines to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope in 2024-25, raising freight rates and insurance premia worldwide.

India's parallels are concrete. Approximately 30 per cent of Indian crude oil imports transit Hormuz (down from ~45-50 per cent earlier through active supplier diversification); the Strategic Petroleum Reserves at Visakhapatnam, Mangalore and Padur provide roughly 9.5 days of strategic and a further bracket of commercial cover; and roughly nine million Indians work in West Asia, sending home remittances of about $50 billion annually.

Pakistan's asymmetric posture — proxy warfare through LeT and JeM, the rejection of No First Use, the calibrated nuclear ambiguity — is a parallel exercise in vulnerability-leverage. India's doctrinal evolution since Kargil — Cold Start studies, the surgical strikes of Uri 2016, Balakot 2019 and Operation Sindoor (May 7-10, 2025) — reflects a calibrated kinetic doctrine that deliberately stays beneath the nuclear threshold while imposing costs.

India's economic response toolkit has matched this: SPR expansion under Padur Phase II, supplier diversification raising Russian crude share above 30 per cent at one point post-2022, operationalisation of Chabahar Port through a long-term lease signed with IPGL-Iran in May 2024 as an INSTC-aligned corridor bypassing Pakistani routes, and the National Green Hydrogen Mission (launched 2023) as a long-horizon fossil-fuel hedge.

CONCLUSION

India's posture should remain hybrid: a credible kinetic doctrine demonstrated through Operation Sindoor, paired with economic resilience that converts adversary chokepoints into manageable risks. The Iran-Israel war's lesson for middle powers is that force has limits, vulnerabilities can become leverage, and strategic patience — when backed by demonstrated willingness to impose costs — outperforms overwhelming escalation.

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