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TESTING THE DRAGON'S ARSENAL: THE ROLE OF CHINESE J-10C FIGHTERS IN THE MAY 2025 INDIA–PAKISTAN WAR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE KASHMIR CONFLICT

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Abstract
The May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis was the most intense military conflict between the two countries in decades and soon turned into a matter of the second category, which is regarded as the first large-scale testing of Chinese high-end airpower in South Asia. Central to that discussion was the Chinese-supplied J-10C fighter of Pakistan, which, according to Reuters, citing the U.S. officials, was reported to have been engaged in at least two shootdowns of Indian aircraft in the first aerial engagement of 7 May 2025. Acknowledging later that India was (initially) losing air, other reports after the conflict indicated that one of the Rafale and at least two others of the Indian air force could have been lost, although precise numbers were in dispute. The present paper is a qualitative case-study that employs the method of document analysis and process tracing in order to investigate the role of the J-10C into the conflict as well as to evaluate its wider aspects of the Kashmir dispute. Three interconnected reasons why the J-10C was significant to the paper include: as a battle platform in a beyond-visual-range conflict, as a demonstration of the further development of China-Pakistan strategic alliance, and as a rhetorical tool that transformed the perception of the crisis in Kashmir. The paper also states that the importance of the aircraft is not in the crude kill numbers but in its contribution to deterrence, escalation and strategic discourse. The war proved that non-nuclear-based operations are getting increasingly more technologically thick, rapid and increasingly geographically wide. Kashmir is becoming, in this setting, a place where not only territorial competition but also competitive signaling with military weaponry, coalition politics, reputational testing of advanced weapons systems are also taking place.

Keywords: J-10C fighter aircraft; May 2025 India–Pakistan war; Kashmir conflict; qualitative case study; deterrence stability; China–Pakistan relations; air combat; South Asian strategic studies

Introduction
The India-Pakistan conflict of May 2025 was caused by the 22 April 2025 attack in Pahalgam, in the Indian-controlled Kashmir, on 26 civilians. Reuters termed it as the worst assault on civilians in India in almost twenty years. Pakistan denied its involvement and India accused militants associated with Pakistan. On 7 May, India opened attacks, which it described as strikes against terrorism camps, on both Pakistan and the Pakistan-administered territory, and a crisis went on to last four days of air, missile, drone and artillery fire before a ceasefire was declared on 10 May. Later policy analyses and Reuters had agreed that this was the worst India-Pakistan fighting in decades (Bowen, 2009).
Even though the catalyst was Kashmir, the conflict soon had a wider strategic connotation. The Chinese built J-10C fighter of Pakistan came into the limelight of world attention with Reuters reporting that a Pakistani J-10 shot down at least two Indian military planes including an Indian

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

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Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

Rafale. Later on, Reuters reported that the Chief of Defence Staff of India, General Anil Chauhan, admitted that the Indians initially suffered losses in the air, but refused to give figures. This was further reported by Reuters in August 2025, that the air chief of France, General Jérôme Bellanger had been shown evidence that India had lost three fighters, including a Rafale. These reports did not resolve the disputed narratives of the war entirely, but they confirmed that the initial aerial war action was not an insignificant skirmish and the J-10C had become the focus of how the war was being viewed (Sasikumar, 2019).

This is important since the J-10C was not simply a political plane. In March 2022, Pakistan commissioned the Chinese-designed J-10C as a fourth-generation planner clearly in the central context of the Indian threat. At the time, Reuters reported that the aircraft was introduced by the Pakistan Air Force as a major addition to the combat capability, with later analysis by Reuters describing the May 2025 battle as a unique chance of world militaries to observe combat systems in both China and Western countries in action. Practically, the crisis turned a two-side conflict into a broader-scale war case concerning Chinese military technology, European fighting jets, and hypothetical airpower in the Indo-Pacific.

There are two questions posed in this paper. To begin with, what was the actual involvement of the J-10C in the conflict in May 2025? Second, what is the implication of this role as far as the future of the Kashmir conflict is concerned? Their main point is that the J-10C was both tactical, strategic and symbolic. Strategically, it helped Pakistan to win the counter air battle on the initial day of the war. It was a strategic measure that made Pakistan have more confidence in its self-assurance to retaliate Indian punitive attacks below the nuclear level. Metaphorically, it transformed the war into the reputational test of Chinese military technology and thus broadened the concept of a Kashmir crisis beyond the territorial issue (Reilly, 2010).

The paper has been divided into six sections. It describes the qualitative approach after examining the regional and conceptual background. It then discusses how the J-10C contributed to the role of fighting, how the performance of the platform is related to other potential integration of the kill-chain, and the bigger picture consequences of deterrence, crisis stability, and the emerging military politics of Kashmir. The paper is clear on its part in distinguishing between the verified information, reasonable inference and arguments that are still under dispute in the public record (Bowen, 2009).

Background: Kashmir, Airpower and the China-Pakistan Military Nexus.

When India got its independence in 1947, Kashmir has remained the core territorial and symbolic question in India-Pakistan relations. In January 1949, the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan was established to oversee ceasefire in Jammu and Kashmir and the mission still remains in existence, which only goes to underscore the long institutional history of the dispute. However there is a significant alteration in the nature of the conflict. It was no longer a crisis in Kashmir that was just about insurgency, artillery exchanges and diplomatic pressure by 2025. It was now a high-tech competition and featured cruise missiles, drones, electronic warfare, air defense, and stand-off air combat (Sasikumar, 2019).

The military balance was changed as well since the Pulwama-Balakot crisis of 2019. In May 2025, Reuters reported that India and Pakistan had greatly developed their capabilities since 2019. India had commissioned 36 French-built Rafales, and procured the Russian S-400 air defense system, whereas Pakistan had commissioned j-10 fighters, and HQ-9 air defense system of Chinese origin. The two parties had increased their drone stocks as well. Analysts quoted in Reuters cautioned that such upgrades augmented the chances of intensifying even in a minor struggle since both parties were now more competent and more self-confident than ever before (Reilly, 2010).

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

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Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

The March 2022 induction of the J-10C by Pakistan was not a one-off purchase choice though. Reuters termed the induction as part of the pakistani attempt in conjunction with its longtime Chinese alliance to counter the conventional benefits of India. The J-10C, also known as the Vigorous Dragon, was introduced as a contemporary multi-use aircraft that would augment a fleet of JF-17s, Mirages and deteriorating F-16s. Strategically, the plane was a wider trend: Pakistan has been using Chinese platforms to maintain the capability of denial against an Indian military that is larger. The May 2025 war was a violation of ancient geographical restraint as well. NBR observed that previous Indian retaliatory measures to terror attacks had mostly been confined to the territory under Pakistan control in Kashmir, but in 2025 India launched attacks against not only Pakistan controlled area, but also Pakistani Punjab. Grare stated that the nuclear factor still limited the conflict, but that the geographic boundary was no longer predominant and the weapons were newer and cheaper and possibly more disruptive. This was also mentioned by Stimson who said that the crisis was one that had transcended past thresholds in terms of geography, systems used and military impacts (O'Donnell, 2017).

That background should be taken into account when explaining why the J-10C gained so disproportionate attention. The plane was at the crossroads of various fears: the plausibility of Indian airpower modernization, the readiness of Chinese military technology, the effectiveness of conventional deterrence by Pakistan, and the fact that a crisis caused by Kashmir could be more concise and intense and less manageable. That is, the J-10C did not merely make part of the conflict; it turned out to be a narration of what type conflict had been developed in South Asia (Kuszewska, 2022).

Methodology

The qualitative case-study design is used in this study. Yin states that case study research is quite effective in terms of bounded phenomena, which presuppose paying attention to problem definition, design, data collection, and analysis. The phenomena that is bound here is the position of the J-10C in the four-day May 2025 India-pakistan crisis and what that position signifies with regards to the Kashmir conflict. Due to the fact that the research question is one of meaning, sequence, and strategic effect, as opposed to one of numerical causation per se, a qualitative case-study design is suitable.

The analysis of the studies is based more on documents. According to Bowen document analysis is defined as a methodic process to go through or analyze printed and electronic documents and he observes that document analysis is particularly effective on qualitative case studies. Bowen goes further to highlight that document analysis gives the researcher the ability to elicit meaning, derive meaning and build empirical knowledge using textual and visual documents. That is especially so in the case of a modern-day military crisis when much of the pertinent information is scattered throughout news stories, government releases, and think-tank evaluations and institutional writings.

Process tracing is also applied in the paper. Reilly defines process tracing as a technique of determining, verifying, and checking causality mechanism in case studies particularly in situations where time and sequence are critical. It is applicable in situations where the researcher wants to know how an issue or event develops out of the given conditions to a given outcome. In this case, process tracing assists in the re-creation of the route between the Pahalgam attack and the 7 May air battle and the air battle with the wider alterations in regional signaling and Kashmir-related crisis dynamics.

It can be found in the source base of reporting of Reuters and policy analysis by the Stimson Center, the National Bureau of Asian Research, and the Council on Foreign Relations. Reuters is especially significant as it not only reported on the time of events, but also showed

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Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

investigative reporting in the future, including interviews with officials and analysts. The initial evaluation by Stimson is useful as it clearly alerts about serious restrictions of data in a public domain and the distribution of misinformation. NBR and CFR aid in placing the conflict in the more general discussions of escalation, deterrence and the evolving India-Pakistan strategic landscape (Hall, 2014).

This method has limitations. There is biased information of the war, states hide their defeat, propaganda is widespread, and post-war accounts are disputed. Stimson directly writes that the May 2025 crisis produced the highest amounts of misinformation and disinformation, which still obscure the perception of what happened. Reuters also carried a similar news of conflicting claims by both India and Pakistan over the loss of aircrafts, performance of their missiles and battlefield results. That is the reason why this paper will not state that it has provided a definite scorecard of the war. It, rather, aims at determining what one can say with some reasonable level of confidence, and interpret the strategic implication of those facts (Hall, 2014).

The J-10C in the May 2025 Conflict

The first battle and introduction to the J-10C participation.

The initial battle determined the whole conflict. Reuters gave five strikes on 7 May in India in which New Delhi claimed that the strikes were directed to nine sites which it claimed were terrorist infrastructures whereas Pakistan claimed that there were six strikes which were not militant camps. Soon after, Pakistan boasted that it had shot down some Indian planes in retaliation, which India had initially dismissed as fake news. However, two officials of the U.S. stated within a day that Pakistan had fired air-to-air missiles with Chinese-made J-10s killing at least two Indian jets and shooting down at least one of them, a Rafale (Bowen, 2009).

This mattered not merely due to the number of aircraft that was reported to be lost, but what type of engagement it was. In 7 May, Reuters reported the encounter as a one hour night combat of about 110 aircrafts, which was the largest air engagement in the world in decades. The two parties are said to have kept their planes mostly within their airspace as they fought on beyond-visual-range levels. That is analytically important: the role of the J-10C cannot be comprehended with the olden close-range dogfight images in mind. It operated in an advanced stand-off conflict that was influenced by sensors, missiles, data connections and tactical surprise (O'Donnell, 2017).

Platform versus system

One significant input of subsequent Reuters coverage was to make it more complicated that a Chinese jet had merely flown into a Western jet. According to Reuters website, in August 2025, the downing of at least one Rafale had its center of gravity in Indian intelligence failure over the range of the Chinese-made PL-15 missile. The Indian and Pakistani officials reported by Reuters that the Indian pilots were sure that they were not within the firing range of the Pakistani missiles, as they considered the range of the missile to be about 150 kilometers, the PL-15 that struck the Rafale fell about 200 kilometers according to the Pakistani officials. People who were mentioned in the article by Reuters indicated that situational awareness and the success of the kill chain would make this difference instead of a platform-versus-platform comparison. This distinction is crucial. The J-10C issue was significant since it was integrated into a machine of machines. According to Reuters, Pakistani officials said they had a kill chain between air, land, space sensors, with the Data Link 17, developed by Pakistan, and the support of a Swedish-made surveillance aircraft. That story is that the J-10s would be externally fed the radar pictures and could cut their own radar emissions thus making them difficult to detect. British air warfare expert Greg Bagwell told the Reuters that the side that had the most

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Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

situational awareness won. That is, the J-10C was not only important as a kind of airframe, but as a shooter node in a larger networked architecture (Collier, 2011).

The J-10 C and the stabbing of Indian beliefs.

The political impact of the battle of 7 May was direct. The Rafale had become an investment in prestige platform and capability following the 2019 crisis and Reuters had reported before the war that India and Pakistan had modernized their forces in such a way that increased the risk of escalation. The initial defeats were significant since they were a stab to beliefs that India had a qualitative air advantage that was unchallenged due to its modernization that began in 2019. Although India still had the capability to ratchet up in the future of the conflict, the initial encounter proved that Pakistan could inflict costs rapidly and in a credible manner. That interpretation is indirectly supported by the statements made by India itself. General Anil Chauhan, quoted in Reuters, said that India had lost early on in the air, but later corrected its strategy and returned, on 7, 8, and 10 May in great numbers, to attack Pakistani air bases in deep areas of Pakistan. He further emphasized on the cause of such losses and what India did afterwards. This has an analytical significance since it confirms that the result of the first day obligated adaptation on the maximum level of operations. The importance of the J-10C is thus not only in attrition but also in disrupting the first stage assumptions and pace by India (Khan, 2003).

What remains disputed

Meanwhile, one needs to take care. Pakistan boasted of killing more Indians than it had been independently reported, and India alleged that it had shot down several Pakistani planes, which Pakistan denied. In August 2025, Reuters reported that the chief of the air force of India claimed it had shot five Pakistani fighters and one other military aircraft in the May fighting but Pakistan denied that any Pakistani plane had been shot down. The air chief of France stated that he had observed three Indian casualties, one of them being a Rafale, though India officially did not indicate their number. These conflicting claims demonstrate that there is still no accurate scorekeeping. In the case of a qualitative study, though, one does not need one hundred percent confidence in the score to make general conclusions. Some of these propositions can be fairly well justified: the use of J-10Cs during the initial air battle was made by Pakistan; India lost its aircraft in the first incidents; at least one Rafale was probably lost; the experience was of international importance because it provided one of the first open demonstrations of Chinese-origin air fighting systems in actual war conditions. Such a high degree of assurance is sufficient to interpret the strategic connotation of the J-10C despite the possible controversies surrounding some tactical aspects (Kaura, 2020).

The J-10C as Strategic Signal

A military first in the Chinese military.

The relevance of the J-10C was far more than South Asia since it was viewed by many people as a test of Chinese military credibility. The Reuters news was that the battle would be reviewed by the militaries of the world to gain knowledge on the performance of fighters, tactics used by pilots and air-to-air missiles, particularly since the conflict had the Chinese and European systems in direct warfare. Reuters quoted analysts stating that air warfare communities in China, the United States, and Europe would be highly interested in the ground truth on what has occurred. The wider focus put the J-10C into perspective that was much greater than what **Pakistan considers its own order of battle.** This geopolitical aspect was strengthened later. In June 2025, Reuters also reported that Indonesia was considering the acquisition of Chinese J-10 fighter jets and that it would consider the reports that a Pakistani J-10 had downed several Indian jets. In November 2025, Reuters reported that a U.S. commission found that Chinese

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

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Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

ran a disinformation campaign to undermine the French Rafale following the India-Pakistan war another indication that the reputational war over what occurred in May was part of a larger arms-market and information war. It does not matter whether all the charges in that post-war information struggle are accurate, but the bigger picture is that the J-10C had joined the international defense signaling ranks (Khan, 2003).

China-Pakistan relations and the expansion of the theatre of Kashmir.

The plane was also a symbol of the richness of the China-Pakistan strategic relation. The news that China is the close ally and largest military equipment supplier of Pakistan is not new to Reuters as observed before the conflict. Reuters subsequently gave reports during the war, citing Indian charges that Pakistan was receiving live inputs supplied by China but no evidence was presented in public and there was a denial by Pakistan. Chinese authorities in their turn described defense cooperation with Pakistan to be ordinary bilateral cooperation without being aimed at the third party. The reality of battlefield level Chinese aid has been a point of controversy, but the war certainly revealed that a Kashmir crisis could neither be discussed through bilateral India-Pakistan prism. The geopolitical widening of the issue is important, since it alters the symbolic form of a crisis. When the success of the J-10C of Pakistan is interpreted as confirmation of the Chinese systems, then any further conflict in Kashmir would be viewed not only as a territorial dispute at the local scale but also as a proxy conflict to test the outer military ecosystem. This does not imply that China is made a direct belligerent. It implies that platforms, supply chains, doctrine, and reputation of China would be part of the meaning of the conflict. That evolution adds strategic concentration to Kashmir: there are more people to reach, more reputational interests, and more motifs to need to pursue aggressive narrative control (Khan, 2003).

There are implications on the Kashmir Conflict.

Traditional space that is below nuclear threshold.

The implication of the J-10C episode on Kashmir that has the greatest repercussions is its impact on the way the two parties consider the possibility of conventional operations at the non-nuclear level. According to Reuters, general Chauhan said that the nuclear threat did not exist at all in the war and India switched strategies when it was losing early and then targeted further attacks. Stimson also made the conclusion that despite the nuclear weapon massively conditioning both parties, the overt nuclear signaling was lower than in most of the previous crises, and both had tried to calibrate the escalation. NBR also made an assertion that the nuclear factor continued to put a limit on the conflict despite the changing geographic and technological boundaries of the conflict as well (Hall, 2014).

That is the destabilizing nature of this combination. There is still nuclear deterrence, but it can now be co-existing with the increased confidence in the limited conventional punishment and denial. The apparent Pakistan success on J-10Cs on the 1 st of the day can make it delude itself into believing it can foil any further Indian credible punishment without hitting nuclear limits. The subsequent Indian strikes, in its turn, can lead Indian planners to the belief that even when tactical adaptation and stand-off precision strikes have been used, it is possible to regain the escalation dominance even after its initial losses. It is not the threat that one or the other party desires complete war. The risk is that the two can now think that a wider range of limited war options is available (Ganguly, 2008).

A shorter period of warning and more profound strikes.

The 2025 warfare equally implies that the future crises involving Kashmir can occur with less warning periods and a profound profile of strikes. Both Reuters and Stimson reported that there was no sign of a manned aircraft ever crossing into the airspace of the other, but both sides

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Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

employed standoff attacks, drones, missiles, and air defense suppressions to attack another in an attempt to deliver an increasingly sensitive attack. NBR has posed that India had attacked even further into Pakistani territory than some had expected, as well as targets of high military and symbolic significance. The J-10C applies here as it puts Pakistan in a better position to be able to match Indian aircraft in range, something that could push India further to stand-off reactions, drone reactions, and missile-intensive reactions. In the case of Kashmir, this implies that the Line of Control can lose its centre stage because the immediate geographical line of war can stay the same but still the political centre of the conflict. Violence in Kashmir can continue to precipitate crises yet the military exchange can become more and more a broader cross border battlespace between Punjab, Rajasthan, major air bases, radar sites and command linked facilities. The J-10C, in that regard, adds to the deterrence ecology of Kashmir by transforming the appearance of the early air-denial and by affecting the types of targets that each party feels might be effective (Kaura, 2020).

Narrative war for Kashmir and the symbolic control over it.

Another implication is with respect to narrative warfare. The crisis of 2025 was not resolved on 10 May, discursively speaking. Stimson underlined the fact that the war produced extraordinary misinformation and fake news. According to Reuters, there was a turnaround of claims, dismissals, part admissions, and subsequent counter-claims. The reported J-10C shootdowns were used by Pakistan to display technological expertise and equality. India wanted to re-framing of the conflict to its subsequent corrective tactic and further retaliatory attacks. The struggle of narratives then became a part of the strategic decision.

This is important to Kashmir since the conflict has never been entirely about territory only. The military events are evidenced in more general politics narratives: the competence within the state, the national determination, and the trustworthiness of alliances, and the possibility to control the escalation. The J-10C was well off as the symbolic treasure trove of the Pakistani dragon in combat, which, in particular, provided it with a significant source of symbolism in its homeland and in some areas of the entire strategic community. India, on the other hand, had a problem of maintaining the deterrent credibility having accepted initial losses. The ability to regulate the interpretation of the limited events occurring at the battlefield may as much determine success in the future as the actual events (Kaura, 2020).

The danger of overlearning

Simultaneously, there is a danger that both parties, as well as external observers, can learn too much due to a single conflict. Reuters cited experts saying there was insufficient knowledge to generalize upon a single encounter, such as the unknowns in weapon loads, training, and interaction between technical performance and practice. Analysts like Bagwell, who were quoted by Reuters, warned that the battle should not be used to demonstrate the superiority of Chinese air assets or Western air assets in general. The warning has significance both to policy and scholarship (Ganguly, 2008).

A qualitative interpretation of the conflict will give a balanced conclusion then. The J-10C failed to leave India powerless and it was not a decisive solution to the conventional balance. India modified, increased in other fields and, nevertheless, retained strike talent. But the J-10C did demonstrate that Pakistan could impose significant initial expenses and challenge the initial stage of a war in mechanisms that frustrate Indian thought processes. In the case of the Kashmir controversy, that suffices to change the behavior of future crises without the eventual modification in the overall long-term balance of power (O'Donnell, 2017).

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

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Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

Discussion

The fact suggests a larger conceptual argument: the J-10C was not as much a denial weapon or a perception-changer as it was a means of sending signals to allies. Operationally, it was linked to a beyond-visual-range interaction which was networked. It served the strategic purpose of preserving the credibility of the conventional resistance to the Indian punitive action by Pakistan. On a political level, it transformed the Kashmir-induced crisis into a demonstration of the Chinese defense-industrial significance. These three functions complemented each other. The fact that a shootdown is reported is more important when associated with a competitor prestige platform; it is more important when the prestige platform has a symbolic meaning to procurement, alliances politics and military reputation.

This observation also assists in understanding why the effect of the J-10C on Kashmir is more than that of purely military scales. Kashmir has been a long-run administration that has been governed by a volatile mix of land rivalry, insurgency, ceasefire regulation and nuclear shadowing. What 2025 demonstrated is that there is a possibility that the next crisis will be solved more through the veil of speedy conventional signaling: who gets the easy initial strike, who can adjust best, and who could promote a convincing screenplay in front of the international diplomacy solidifying the battlefield. The J-10C would matter in such a contest when it is not winning Kashmir in itself, but it alters the conditions under which military credibility is determined in terms of the Kashmir crises. The expression; Testing the Dragon, Arsenal is analytically useful but it is to be treated with some caution. It is true that the May 2025 conflict was a test of the Chinese-provided platform and its missile system in actual war conditions. But what was actually put on the test was bigger, whether Pakistan through its Chinese-enabled military modernization had progressed to a stage where it could withhold its political and operational benefits of rapid punitive attack on India. Available evidence indicates that the answer to this was yes at least on the first day of fighting. The results of that discovery have a direct implication on the manner in which future Kashmir crises will be initiated, fought, and construed.

Conclusion

It has been proposed in this paper that the importance of the J-10C in the India and Pakistan conflict in May 2025 was not restricted to the tactical combat capabilities and that the role of the aircraft in the Kashmir discord is more than that. The aircraft was operationally significant since it formed a portion of the effective first-day counterair response by Pakistan, which was said to have led to the loss of at least two Indian aircraft and probably at least one Rafale. It was of strategic significance since it made Pakistan believe that it can respond to an air campaign of India at the very beginning of crisis. And it had symbolic significance since it turned the conflict into a test of Chinese military credibility and expanded the geopolitical sense of a Kashmir-induced war.

In the case of Kashmir war, the consequences are bleak. The conflict is taking an increasingly technological and perception-based direction. The gap in conventional military space that is below the nuclear threshold seems to be increasing and not decreasing. The crises of the future can be characterized by more intense stand-offs strikes, shorter decision-making periods, and more intense narrative competition on the events in the battleground that are of limited size. Within this kind of a setting, the J-10C can be viewed not as a fighter plane, but as a pointer of the way Kashmir is being shifted into a networked deterrence, coalition-supported signaling and high-speed escalation control theater.

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Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

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