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Q17

The terms 'Hot Pursuit' and 'Surgical Strikes' are often used in connection with armed action against terrorist attacks. Discuss the strategic impact of such actions.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · GS III · 12 marks · Internal Security and Extremism

Linkages between development and spread of extremism.

Core demand of the question

- Define **hot pursuit** and surgical strikes as used after terrorist attacks
- Discuss their strategic effects on deterrence, escalation, law, and diplomacy
- Balance military gain against political and nuclear-risk costs in India's neighbourhood

Revision summary

Hot pursuit is an immediate chase across a boundary; a **surgical strike** is a limited, precise hit on a camp.

India's Myanmar 2015 and LoC 2016 actions are the living examples in this debate.

Gains are deterrence, morale, and a signal to sponsors.

Risks are escalation, civilian harm, and a rebuilt sanctuary.

The tool works only with narrow aims, evidence, and follow-on diplomacy, not as a substitute for police and intelligence.

Introduction

Hot pursuit is a fast chase of attackers across a boundary before they melt into a safe haven. A **surgical strike** is a short, planned hit on a specific camp or launch pad, then a return, meant to be **limited and deniable or at least contained**. India used the first language after the **2015 Myanmar operation** against militants, and the second after the **September 2016 strikes across the Line of Control** following the **Uri** attack. The strategic question is what these acts do to **deterrence and to the next war**, not only to tonight's headline.

Body**What the terms mean in practice**

- **Hot pursuit** stresses **immediacy and continuity** of the chase; it is borrowed from maritime law but used loosely on land.
- A **surgical strike** stresses precision, limited aims, and a political message: the State can reach the camp, not only absorb the blast.
- Both are **below a full conventional war** and are aimed at non-State groups that use another territory. In South Asia they still touch a **nuclear-armed** rival or a sensitive neighbour.

Strategic impact - gains

- **Deterrence by punishment:** a group and its handlers cannot assume that Indian soil is a free firing point. After Uri, the public and the force needed a visible reply; silence can also be read as weakness.
- **Initiative:** the security forces set time and place instead of only patrolling for the next fidayeen.
- **Domestic cohesion and morale** of troops who have taken casualties; that is a real strategic resource in a long counter-terror campaign.
- **Signalling to sponsors:** plausible deniability of camps becomes costlier if India is willing to cross a line on a narrow aim.
- **International narrative:** if evidence of the terror attack is shared, a limited strike can be framed as self-defence under **Article 51** of the UN Charter, rather than as aggression - though others will contest the facts.

Strategic impact - risks and limits

- **Escalation ladder:** the other State may reply on the Line of Control, in Kashmir, or with a larger conventional move. Nuclear overhang makes misreading deadly.
- **Sanctuary adaptation:** camps thin out, move deeper, or hide among civilians; one raid does not end the industry of terror.
- **Neighbour sovereignty:** **hot pursuit** into a friendly or fragile State (as in the Myanmar debate) can strain diplomacy even when that State also wants the militants gone.
- **Legal and reputational cost** if civilians die or if the operation cannot be distinguished from a raid on regular troops.
- **Tit-for-tat on Indian soil:** terror groups may seek a bigger spectacular to restore their brand after a strike.
- **Alliance and great-power reaction:** partners may privately approve and publicly urge restraint; that mixed signal must be planned for.

Using them as strategy, not as theatre

- Pair the strike with **diplomacy, FATF-type financial pressure, and intelligence** so the camp is not rebuilt in a month.
- Keep **aims narrow** and **communication controlled** so the other side has a ladder down.
- Strengthen **border and police** so the next module cannot be launched while the television debate still runs.
- Do not treat every local ambush as a case for crossing; **threshold and evidence** protect the tool from inflation.

Flow diagram

Terror attack -> Hot pursuit or surgical strike
 Hot pursuit or surgical strike -> Deterrence morale initiative
 Hot pursuit or surgical strike -> Escalation and sanctuary shift
 Diplomacy intelligence finance -> Deterrence morale initiative
 Escalation and sanctuary shift -> Nuclear and diplomatic cost

Conclusion

Hot pursuit and surgical strikes can restore deterrence, morale, and a measure of initiative after a terrorist attack. They also climb an escalation ladder beside a nuclear neighbour and can scatter rather than finish a group. Their strategic value holds when aims stay limited, law and evidence are prepared, and diplomacy and intelligence continue after the troops are home.

Facts & figures

Hot pursuit

Rapid chase of attackers into another jurisdiction before they regroup; a land use of a term with older maritime-law roots.

Surgical strike

A short, targeted military action against a specific terror launch pad, intended to stay below a general war.

Myanmar operation 2015

Indian operation against militants after the Manipur ambush, widely discussed as hot pursuit on another State's soil.

Uri and LoC 2016

Army camp attack at Uri in September 2016, followed by announced strikes on terror launch pads across the Line of Control.

UN Charter **Article 51**

Inherent right of self-defence if an armed attack occurs; the legal frame States invoke for limited cross-border action.

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