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Nearly two weeks after India and Pakistan reached an uneasy cease-fire, neither New Delhi nor Islamabad agree on what happened preceding it. India blames Pakistan for the April 22 terrorist attack in Indian-administered Kashmir that left 26 people dead; Pakistan denies responsibility. On May 7, India launched retaliatory missile strikes against targets in Pakistan associated with known terrorist groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed; both sides dispute the scale and impact of these attacks. That barrage prompted further salvos that led to the downing of Indian fighter jets (according to Pakistani and international media) and Pakistani jets (according to Indian media). Drones and missiles whizzed across the border in both directions, with the governments and national media offering dueling claims about targets hit, infrastructure destroyed, and lives lost. Fighting came to an end after senior U.S. officials pressed both sides to step back from the brink, but even here the fog of war prevails; while Islamabad thanked U.S. President

Donald Trump for helping bring the fighting to an end, New Delhi denied that any mediation took place.

Although the dust remains in the air, some outcomes are clear. The recent fighting represents a significant escalation in the cross-border disputes that have periodically flared between India and Pakistan. Unlike India's limited punitive strikes in the past, this offensive pressed deeper into Pakistani territory. India's Operation Sindoor ranged far beyond Pakistani-administered Kashmir into Punjab, Pakistan's heartland, eventually hitting not just the facilities of militant groups but also military targets, including air bases. In recent decades, fighting has mostly been confined to the border region around the disputed territory of Kashmir. In May, Pakistan's major metropolises and many big cities in northern India were on high alert.

With its strikes, the Indian government hoped to demonstrate strength to a public that wanted revenge for the terrorist attack in Kashmir. But by venturing deeper into Pakistan and hitting a broad array of targets, India also wanted to reestablish deterrence and discourage Pakistan's military from backing militant groups active in Indian territory. In that effort, India will probably be disappointed. Rather than deterring its rival, India precipitated a retaliation that ended up burnishing the Pakistani military's reputation and boosting its domestic popularity. Paradoxically, India's retribution has handed the Pakistani army its biggest symbolic victory in recent decades. And that will hardly discourage Islamabad from reining in the proxy war against New Delhi or from risking future flare-ups between these two nuclear-armed states.

CLIMBING THE LADDER

Pakistan's military has long used proxies against India. A group affiliated with Lashkar-e-Taiba, which famously staged a bloody attack on Mumbai in 2008, claimed responsibility for the April massacre in Pahalgam in Indian-administered Kashmir. Pakistan denied any involvement in the incident, but that didn't persuade India. Soon after the attack, India took the unprecedented step of unilaterally suspending the Indus Water Treaty, an agreement brokered by the World Bank in 1960 to manage the flow of

water critical for hydropower, irrigation, and agriculture in Pakistan. The treaty had endured several wars and militarized disputes between the two countries, but no longer. The government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi eventually coupled this diplomatic act with its military attack on a slew of targets in Pakistani territory. It may have hoped that these efforts would assuage the domestic outrage over Pahalgam without provoking a wider conflict. But here New Delhi miscalculated.

Indian officials underestimated how much the Pakistani military needed to demonstrate its own war readiness and resolve, both to India and to its domestic audience. According to accounts in the Pakistani and international press, Pakistan's Chinese-made jets and air defense systems shot down several Indian fighter planes, including a French-made Rafale. That amounted to a major symbolic victory for Islamabad. It also encouraged Pakistan to test Indian air defenses with a spate of drone and missile attacks. And it revealed the limitations of India's presumed air supremacy, renewing the Pakistani military's confidence that it can hold its own in a limited conflict despite India's conventional superiority.

The crisis came when the public image of the Pakistani army and that of its chief, General Asim Munir, had plummeted. It has now helped restore the military's domestic legitimacy. Munir faced a backlash over the crackdown on the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party of Imran Khan, the country's former prime minister and most popular leader. The army had imprisoned Khan on politically motivated corruption charges in May 2023, prosecuted his supporters in military courts after they attacked military installations, and blatantly put its thumb on the scale in February 2024 parliamentary elections that cemented the power of PTI's major rivals. That political dissension was compounded by the country's parlous economic situation; Pakistan came close to a debt default in 2023, at a time when crippling inflation reached 38 percent. Economic angst has helped fuel political dissent. The army forcefully crushed a PTI march on Islamabad in November 2024, but the party's supporters inside and outside the country have waged a relentless campaign on social media against Munir, which the military has described as "digital terrorism."

India's retribution has handed Pakistan a major symbolic victory.

For the time being, that pressure has abated. To a domestic audience, the military has been able to present itself as a triumphant force, guarding the country from Indian aggression. A Gallup Pakistan poll found that 96 percent of Pakistanis believe their country was victorious in the recent fighting. The military's calls for national unity have momentarily drowned out public concerns over political repression and the country's deep economic woes. Munir has emerged from the confrontation with India stronger. As a reward for his leadership in "defeating the enemy," the country's nominal civilian government has elevated Munir to the highest military rank of field marshal, making him only the second officer to hold that title after Mohammed Ayub Khan, the general who led the country for a decade after a military coup in 1958.

Worse for India, its attempt to reestablish deterrence backfired. New Delhi hoped that a punitive response, backed by the threat of economic coercion, might discourage Pakistan from engaging in proxy warfare. Instead, the recent hostilities will likely have the opposite effect. Indian attacks on militant sites in Muridke and Bahawalpur did little to damage Pakistan's jihadi infrastructure. The military-run Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's most important intelligence agency, had ample time to relocate its prime assets to safety. In any case, planning and launching terror attacks on India is not dependent on fixed structures vulnerable to enemy fire. Pakistan fully retains its capacity to use terrorism to rattle India.

Indeed, far from deterring the Pakistani military, India's attacks may suggest to the generals that their provocative strategy is working. The military, which has ruled Pakistan for much of the country's history, has long used hostility toward India to deflect from its own failings. For example, with little evidence, it has blamed New Delhi for backing the resurgent Tehrik-e-Taliban, a militant group at war with the Pakistani state, as well as separatists in southwestern Balochistan province—India denies all these accusations. Even compared to his recent predecessors,

Munir had taken a visibly hard-line approach to India. Less than a week before the Pahalgam attack, he invoked the "two-nation theory," or Pakistan's founding idea that Hindus and Muslims are two distinct and fundamentally incompatible civilizations, at a convention in Islamabad. In his words, "Our religions are different, our cultures are different, our ambitions are different." Describing Pakistan as a "hard state," he vowed to continue backing the Kashmiris' "heroic fight" against Indian occupation.

Many in India, including Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, interpreted Munir's antagonistic posturing as evidence of his personal "religious bigotry." But his remarks and subsequent actions also reflect the imperatives of the military as an institution. Although the general has conservative views, Pakistani officers are socialized into an organizational culture that fixates on India as an implacably hostile neighbor. The continued waging of Pakistan's subconventional war against India is ample proof that institutional indoctrination and interests matter more than the personal characteristics of the army's top commander. (Qamar Bajwa, Munir's immediate predecessor, was perceived as more conciliatory toward India, but even he presided over a major provocation, the February 2019 attack by Jaish-e-Mohammed on Pulwama that killed 40 Indian paramilitary soldiers and prompted Indian airstrikes on Pakistani territory.) The recent fighting has not shaken these convictions. Indeed, Pakistan's generals are not about to change course.

AN ESCALATION TOO FAR

The generals think that way even though the possibility of nuclear war looms over any conflict between the two neighbors. Although India has adopted a "no first use" policy since it tested nuclear weapons in 1998, senior Indian officials have indicated in recent years that the country's nuclear restraint is not cast in stone and that India may review the policy in the future. As the weaker South Asian power (in conventional terms), Pakistan does not have a no-first-use policy. Instead, it has maintained the right to strike first if faced with imminent defeat or major territorial losses to India. After India enunciated its "cold start" doctrine, a plan to launch

a rapid conventional incursion to capture Pakistani territory as punishment for cross-border terrorism, in 2004, Pakistan further lowered the nuclear threshold by threatening to deploy tactical nuclear weapons against Indian forces on its territory.

It is not altogether surprising, then, that Pakistan has a penchant for nuclear posturing. Much to New Delhi's chagrin, Islamabad has successfully used the specter of nuclear war in its previous standoffs with India to precipitate a timely U.S. intervention. For example, according to then U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the two sides came perilously close to a nuclear exchange during a 2019 crisis after India informed the Americans that Pakistan was preparing to deploy nuclear weapons. That threat triggered hectic American diplomacy that ultimately led to the return of the captured pilot of a downed Indian jet, providing both sides with an off-ramp.

Munir attends an army training exercise in Mangla, Pakistan, May 2025

Inter-Services Public Relations / Reuters

In this round of violence, Pakistan also resorted to nuclear signaling. Ahead of India's retaliatory attack, Pakistani Defense Minister Khawaja Asif warned the world in late April that Pakistan would consider using nuclear weapons if "there was a direct threat to our existence." After India hit key Pakistani air bases, including the strategically located Nur Khan base close to the army's general headquarters and the country's nuclear command center, Pakistan did not just retaliate conventionally. Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif immediately summoned an emergency meeting of the National Command Authority, which oversees the country's nuclear arsenal and is tasked with approving the use of the weapons, to send a calculated message to India—and everybody else. Modi has warned that Pakistan's "nuclear blackmail" will not prevent India from striking against terrorist sanctuaries on its soil, but the nuclear saber rattling sufficiently alarmed Washington that it stepped in. In fact, Trump has claimed that his administration did not just broker a cease-fire but also prevented a "nuclear conflict."

An optimistic view of the confrontation would be that both sides responded with appropriate and measured retaliation without overplaying their hands. Put differently, the two rivals did not want to risk the catastrophic costs of a nuclear war and managed to find a timely off-ramp by inviting American mediation. (To be sure, India denies that the United States played a major role in producing the cease-fire, a rhetorical position that reflects New Delhi's insistence that its conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir is merely a bilateral issue, not one that needs "internationalization.")

Although the crisis did not spiral to the nuclear level, its rapid escalation showed the paradoxical effects of the countries' ownership of nuclear weapons. Nuclear deterrence can reduce the probability of a full-scale conventional war but it can also breed instability by widening the space for lower levels of conflict, including skirmishes and terrorism. In other words, the possession of nuclear weapons may have incentivized risky confrontations that pass just below the ambiguous nuclear threshold. A pessimist could justifiably point to the hazardous outcomes that this

dynamic could produce. As militaries strike a wider variety of targets with an ever-evolving arsenal of new weapons, the possibility of disaster balloons. No matter how rational Indian and Pakistani leaders may be, the risk of miscalculation or misunderstanding in the absence of reliable crisis communication channels makes every future flare-up more dangerous.

ASSAILING THE OTHER

The cease-fire is by no means a lasting peace. Both sides have grounds to claim victory that can, for at least some time, keep a lid on tensions. Pakistan's military can boast of balancing India's conventional power, reviving international focus on the Kashmir dispute, and re-hyphenating India with Pakistan when India's great-power ambitions have it looking to shed the baggage of this local rivalry. For his part, Modi has bolstered his vaunted image of being a vigilant *chowkidar*, or watchman, among his Hindu nationalist base, pointing to the precise targeting of known militant centers deep inside Pakistan.

But two new dimensions—disinformation and drones—add unpredictable levels of danger to future standoffs. Although Pakistan's media were hardly objective in reporting the crisis, Indian TV news channels took war hysteria to a new peak by concocting or amplifying falsehoods, including strikes on the port of Karachi and the supposed capture of Pakistani cities. The jostling jingoistic media narratives further exacerbated tensions amid a lack of direct communication.

The introduction of armed drones has opened a new front in the conflict. As the crisis unfolded, fleets of loitering (self-detonating) drones launched by both sides created widespread public panic and fear. Drone technology will likely shape both escalation and restraint in future crises. India and Pakistan can more readily deploy drones and exacerbate tensions without the political and military risks associated with the use of manned aircraft. To be sure, the act of intercepting or destroying drones will probably be less escalatory than the shooting down of conventional aircraft. But the use of drones in great numbers widens the remit of any future clash, in turn widening the possibility of escalation.

Despite the cease-fire, New Delhi has asserted that it has merely paused its offensive. It could resume its attacks at any time to punish future incidents of cross-border terrorism. A single terror attack could destabilize the region by triggering another cycle of retaliation and counterretaliation. For now, Indian policymakers still likely believe that the Pakistani military has been at least temporarily deterred from future adventurism because of its higher expected costs. That is not how Pakistan's generals see it. They have emerged out of the crisis stronger and more determined to stand up to India, with their domestic position bolstered and their battlefield reputation enhanced. Cooler heads would exercise restraint from a proxy war because Pakistan can ill afford repeated confrontations with an economically and militarily more powerful rival—nor to court the risk of nuclear escalation. India, too, should not want perpetual conflict with Pakistan when it seeks to be a great power. But any respite from violence will likely be temporary as long as one side still believes that it has something to gain from assailing the other.