

Why Trump Calmed the India-Pakistan Clash

Peace and security for the two South Asian countries would make it easier to contain Beijing.

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Humor aside, Mr. Trump has helped to calm the region and scored his first major diplomatic achievement. On April 22, terrorists said by India to have come from Pakistan shot dead 26 civilians in Pahalgam, a bucolic resort in Kashmir 125 miles from the de facto border between India and Pakistan. (The ability of the terrorists to penetrate so deep into India is proof of their

murderous sophistication and of the weakness of India's military intelligence.) India retaliated by launching missile attacks on terrorist redoubts in Pakistan on May 7. An armed confrontation broke out between the two nuclear-armed countries—more intense than a skirmish yet too circumscribed to be called a war—before a U.S.-brokered cease-fire brought an end to the fighting on May 10.

Mr. Trump has taken credit for the halting of hostilities, and he has done so in his usual bombastic manner: “I said, ‘Come on, we’re going to do a lot of trade with you guys. Let’s stop it. Let’s stop it. If you stop it, we’ll do a trade. If you don’t stop it, we’re not going to do any trade.’ ”

What should we make of these events, and of Mr. Trump's role? I asked Husain Haqqani, by some measure the world's most objective Pakistani when it comes to India. Pakistan's ambassador to the U.S. from 2008-11, he is now a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, a Washington-based think-tank.

Mr. Haqqani notes that Mr. Trump initially showed no interest in the conflict. “Another American president would have gotten into it much earlier,” he says, “and would have been working through it from the very start, on a moment-by-moment basis.” He cites the example of Bill Clinton in 1999, when India responded forcibly to Pakistani intrusions into mountainous Indian territory near the northern town of Kargil.

“The Clinton administration started working the phones as soon as the Kargil intrusions were discovered,” Mr. Haqqani says. “They talked to China, and they tried to get everybody to isolate Pakistan, because they thought Pakistan had been in the wrong.” In the case of the recent clash, it was only when “it became apparent that this could actually escalate further because a Pakistani air base had been hit”—the Nur Khan base in Rawalpindi, close to

Pakistan's nuclear assets—"that the Americans said, 'This is dangerous territory. This goes beyond punishing the terrorists.'" Mr. Trump intervened "only when things were right on the edge. But then, because they were on the edge, the effectiveness of the American pushback was also greater." In fact, he says, "by staying out of the fray early, the Trump administration improved the chances of the success of its intervention when it did finally intervene."

Mr. Haqqani acknowledges what all Indians believe—that Pakistan has a longstanding policy of using terrorists to bleed India, trusting that its nuclear weapons will shield Pakistan against major Indian retaliation. This view is held by every Western government as well as Japan. Few states outside the Muslim world and China—Pakistan's all-weather friend—deny that Pakistan exports terrorism as part of its state policy. And yet, Mr. Haqqani says, "the world didn't come to India's support the way it wanted, or expected."

Why? "India jumped the gun," he says. "Even if it was sure that Pakistani terrorists killed people in Pahalgam, you still have to persuade the world." He points to how the Bush administration laid out the case for why it believed al Qaeda was responsible for the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001—and only then went after them. "There was also the question of proportionality in the Indian response. People want to change Pakistan. And they're right to want to do so. People don't want to destroy Pakistan." The world's alarm was compounded by a jingoistic Indian media, which brayed for blood and called on the country's navy to bomb the Pakistani port of Karachi.

India, Mr. Haqqani says, was "trying to be Israel, but without having the clout Israel has with the U.S." That said, he adds that "Israel gets plenty criticized by the rest of the world." Although India hasn't been criticized for its use of force, world leaders called for de-escalation almost immediately after India's first strikes. "India made the mistake of thinking that Pakistan

can be treated like Gaza. Pakistan is not Gaza.”

In my view, distinct from Mr. Haqqani’s, where India can emulate Israel is in having a smarter response to terrorism, taking out terrorists on Pakistani soil by stealth and assassination. It has done so in the past, though not nearly as frequently—or efficiently—as the Israelis have in their region. Simply put, India’s counterterrorism competence doesn’t match Israel’s.

In the longer term, the U.S. has an obvious stake in securing peace between India and Pakistan. Mr. Trump needs India as part of his strategy to contain China. The more secure you make India against Pakistan, the freer India will be to help take on China. If India is to be useful to the U.S. as a counterforce to Beijing, it has to be relieved of its Pakistan headache.

For that to happen, however, India has to act with greater wisdom against its obnoxious neighbor—and with much less bluster. India needs to use its head, not thump its chest.

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