

India-Pakistan: Avoiding a War in Waiting

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What's new? Triggered by a terror attack in Indian-administered Kashmir, a four-day flare-up in military hostilities between India and Pakistan killed around 70 military personnel and civilians before ending in a ceasefire on 10 May. But the truce remains fragile, as mutual recriminations and mistrust lower the threshold for armed confrontation.

Why does it matter? The fighting marked the first time the two sides had launched missiles deep inside each other's territory since both gained nuclear power status. The risks of resurgent conflict in the event of another terror attack are high, and with it the danger that another cycle of retaliation begins.

I. Overview

A four-day conflict in May marked the most serious confrontation between India and Pakistan in decades as the two nuclear-armed powers struck deep in each other's territory. Sparked by a terrorist massacre of civilians in the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir in April, fighting targeted military facilities and civilian settlements, killing around 70 on both sides. Urged on by foreign powers, above all the U.S., Britain and Gulf countries, the two states signed up to a ceasefire. But prospects for durable peace remain slim. Both governments, claiming to have emerged victorious from the clashes, persist in hostile posturing and nationalist bombast.

Blaming Pakistan-based militants for the terror attack that killed 26 civilians in Jammu and Kashmir on 22 April, India launched Operation Sindoor a fortnight later. Its air strikes deep into Pakistani territory and Pakistani-administered Kashmir sought to hit what New Delhi described as “terrorist infrastructure”. Pakistan immediately retaliated, claiming to have downed several Indian jetfighters. Military hostilities escalated fast and at an alarming scale. Both sides resorted to missile strikes, heavy artillery fire and – in a first – deployment of weaponised drones across their shared border and the Line of Control (LoC), the informal frontier that separates the Indian and Pakistani parts of the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

Danger levels rose even higher on 9-10 May as India attacked three Pakistani air force bases, including the highly sensitive Nur Khan base in Rawalpindi, home to the country's military headquarters. Launching Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos (a term taken from the Quran meaning “firm, united structure”), Pakistan attacked air bases and military installations deep inside Indian territory and Indian-administered Kashmir. As concern grew that the two South Asian rivals might be edging toward all-out war, international efforts to temper the hostilities picked up speed. On the evening of 10 May, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that both countries had agreed to an immediate ceasefire, which was confirmed soon after by Pakistani and Indian authorities.

The ceasefire has stilled the fighting, spurred the redeployment of troops away from the border and allowed both sides to claim victory. But their grievances remain unresolved, while bellicose rhetoric is running high in both countries. Supporters of India's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government expressed a degree of disappointment at the ceasefire, believing that New Delhi had abandoned the fight from a position of strength. Their cavils appear to have prompted Prime Minister Narendra Modi to assert that the ceasefire is merely a tactical pause. He has also threatened to respond robustly to any future terror attack, insisting that he would see no difference between militants and their sponsors – namely, in New Delhi's view, the Pakistani state. Pakistan's military, whose domestic standing is grounded in its ability to safeguard the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty, has warned it would retaliate in kind if India were to attack again.

Diplomatic ties between the sides remain at a low ebb. Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has offered to restore relations with India, but the Modi government appears to have little appetite for that after the failure of previous attempts at détente and anxiety over a backlash from its nationalist base. Despite their mistrust, India and Pakistan should endeavour to set up a high-level back channel that could help avert further military clashes. The events of May suggest that the absence of any means to resolve differences encouraged both sides to step up their use of retaliatory violence towards ever more threatening and lethal military force. With nuclear weapons the last resort of both sides, a brake on brinkmanship is becoming imperative.

II. Two Versions of Near-war

India and Pakistan have a long history of conflict dating back to their independence and the partition of British India in 1947, including three wars and several forays into armed conflict.¹ Their dispute over

¹ Crisis Group Asia Statement, "Pulling India and Pakistan Back from the Brink", 8 May 2025; "Deadly Kashmir Militant Attack Raises Temperature Between India and Pakistan", Crisis Group Q&A, 25 April 2025. For background on the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, see "Keeping Kashmir on the Radar", Crisis Group Commentary, 27 January 2022; Crisis Group Asia Report N°310, *Raising the Stakes in Jammu and Kashmir*, 5 August 2020; "Calming India and Pakistan's Tit-for-Tat Escalation", Crisis Group Commentary, 1 March 2019. "Deadly Kashmir Suicide Bombing Ratchets Up India-Pakistan Tensions", Crisis Group Commentary, 22 February 2019; Crisis Group Asia Report N°224, *Pakistan's Relations with India: Beyond Kashmir?*, 3 May 2012; Crisis Group Asia Report N°79, *India/Pakistan Relations and Kashmir: Steps Towards Peace*, 24 June 2004; Crisis Group Asia Report N°69, *Kashmir: The View From New Delhi*, 4 December 2003; Crisis Group Asia Report N°68, *Kashmir: The View From Islamabad*, 4 December 2003; Crisis Group Asia Report N°70, *Kashmir: Learning from the Past*, 4 December 2003; Crisis Group Asia Report N°41, *Kashmir: The View From Srinagar*, 21 November 2002; Crisis Group Asia Report N°35, *Kashmir: Confrontation and Miscalculation*, 11 July 2002.

the territory of Jammu and Kashmir triggered two wars (1947-1948 and 1965).² The war of 1971 erupted after India intervened militarily on behalf of the Bengali struggle for independence in Pakistan's eastern wing, which led to Bangladesh's independence. From May to July 1999, both sides also clashed in Jammu and Kashmir's Kargil district after Pakistan dispatched its forces to the region and India retaliated by launching a major military operation. On that occasion, all-out war was averted following U.S. mediation. In 2019, the two sides engaged in short-lived air combat following a terror attack in Jammu and Kashmir that killed 40 Indian troops.³

Even so, their latest military confrontation is the most significant in the decades following the 1971 war. The May clash marked the first time that the two have struck deep into each other's territory since both acquired nuclear power status.⁴ In the aftermath, the two sides have not surprisingly offered starkly contrasting accounts of the cause, course and outcome of the confrontation to their domestic and foreign audiences.

A. *The Pahalgam Attack*

On 22 April, militants killed 26 civilians in Jammu and Kashmir, the vast majority of them Hindu tourists, in the deadliest attack on civilians in over two decades in the conflict-affected region. India

² Pakistan based its claim to Kashmir on the region's Muslim majority population and geographical contiguity, the two principles applied to partitioning British India between the successor states. Princely states, however, were given the option to accede to either country. Kashmir's Hindu ruler first hesitated in exercising that option. He then opted for India, signing the instrument of accession to obtain Indian military support after Pakistani Pashtun tribesmen invaded Kashmir, followed by regular Pakistani forces. India holds that the princely state of Kashmir legally acceded to India in October 1947. But in Pakistani perceptions, India is in unlawful occupation of Jammu and Kashmir since it had acknowledged that its control over the region, in accordance with two UN Security Council resolutions (1948, 1950), would be a temporary arrangement. While India demands that Pakistan hand over one-third of the territory it captured in the 1947-48 war, Pakistan calls for the holding of a plebiscite, based on UN resolutions, to give Kashmiris the choice of opting for either Indian or Pakistani sovereignty. The conditions stipulated by the UN resolution 47 adopted on 21 April 1948 for holding such a plebiscite, however, have not been met: Pakistan did not withdraw its forces from Jammu and Kashmir, hence India, reluctant to hold the plebiscite, did not reduce its forces either. See Crisis Group Asia Reports N°69, *Kashmir: The View from New Delhi*, 4 December 2003; N°68, *Kashmir: The View from Islamabad*, 4 December 2003; Christopher Snedden, *Understanding Kashmir and Kashmiris*, New Delhi, 2015, p. 187.

³ Samina Ahmed, "Nuclear Weapons and the Kargil Crisis: How and What have Pakistanis learned?", Lowell Dittmar, ed., *South Asia's Nuclear Security Dilemma: India, Pakistan and China*, New York, 2005. "Balakot, Deterrence, and Risk: How This India-Pakistan Crisis Will Shape the Next", *War on the Rocks*, 11 March 2019.

⁴ India gained nuclear weapons capability in May 1974 when it held its first nuclear weapons test, and formally declared that status following nuclear tests on 11 and 13 May 1998. On 28-29 May 1998, Pakistan conducted nuclear tests to demonstrate its own capability.

immediately attributed the massacre to Pakistan-based militants, who have carried out attacks in Indian-administered Kashmir since the late 1980s when rising Kashmiri discontent with New Delhi sparked an armed insurgency against Indian rule.⁵ A relatively new militant group, The Resistance Front (TRF), initially claimed responsibility for the attack, but then retracted; India considers the TRF a proxy of the better-known Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, a Pakistan-based jihadist group that has carried out a series of lethal attacks in India over the last three decades.⁶ The killings ignited nationwide outrage, piling pressure on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to take military action against Pakistan. Accusing Islamabad of long-standing support for jihadist proxies in Jammu and Kashmir, New Delhi vowed to retaliate forcefully.

Within hours of the attack, New Delhi announced a series of punitive measures against its neighbour, including a further winnowing of diplomatic ties (these had already been scaled back in 2016, and again in 2019), closing the only border crossing between the two countries and shutting down air space for all Pakistani-registered aircraft.⁷ Indian authorities also suspended the Indus Waters Treaty “until Pakistan credibly and irrevocably abjures its support for cross-border terrorism”.⁸

Pakistan’s National Security Committee (NSC), the country’s top security body chaired by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, condemned the Indian government’s moves and denied the country harboured any support for jihadist proxies when it met on 24 April. The body warned that “any threat to Pakistan’s sovereignty and to the security of its people will be met with firm reciprocal measures in all domains”, and mirrored New Delhi’s measures by downgrading diplomatic ties and severing air and road links. The NSC also warned that “any attempt to stop or divert the flow of water belonging to Pakistan” under the Indus Waters Treaty “would be considered an Act of War”.⁹ It added that Pakistan reserved the right to suspend the Simla Agreement – which India and Pakistan signed in 1972 to promote the peaceful resolution of bilateral disputes – “till India desists from its manifested behaviour

⁵ Crisis Group Report, *The View from Srinagar*, op. cit.

⁶ “What is the Resistance Front, the group claiming the deadly Kashmir attack?”, Al Jazeera, 23 April 2025; “As pressure mounts, TRF denies involvement in Pahalgam attack”, *The Hindu*, 26 April 2025.

⁷ “Statement by Foreign Secretary on the decision of the Cabinet Committee on Security”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 23 April 2025. Diplomatic ties had steadily deteriorated following a militant attack on an Indian airbase in January 2016, and worsened after another suicide attack killed 40 paramilitary personnel in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019.

⁸ The 1960 Indus Waters Treaty, brokered by the World Bank, distributes the waters of the Indus Basin’s six rivers between India and Pakistan. Under the treaty, India has access to the waters of the basin’s three eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas and Sutlej), and Pakistan to the three western rivers (Indus, Jhelum and Chenab).

⁹ Press release, National Security Committee (NSC) Meeting, Prime Minister’s Office, Government of Pakistan, 24 April 2025.

of fomenting terrorism inside Pakistan; trans-national killings and non-adherence to international law and UN Resolutions on Kashmir".¹⁰

While denying Indian allegations that the Pahalgam attackers had any cross-border connections, Prime Minister Sharif declared on 26 April that Pakistan was "open to participating in any neutral, transparent and credible investigation" of the Pahalgam attack.¹¹ New Delhi regarded Sharif's offer as disingenuous, pointing to Pakistan's track record after previous terror attacks in 2008, 2016 and 2019. Indian officials stated that Pakistan uses evidence provided by India to "cover its tracks", "defend the terrorists ... and obstruct the path of investigation."¹² Islamabad for its part insisted that New Delhi's belligerent rhetoric was intended to whip up domestic support, and that it had received "credible" evidence that India was planning a military attack. In response, Pakistan put its armed forces on high alert.¹³

¹⁰ On Pakistani allegations of Indian state support to terrorism within its border, see Section III.A. The NSC statement also referenced the indictments of top Indian officials and intelligence operatives in the assassinations or attempted assassinations of Canadian and American Sikh citizens of Indian descent within Canadian and U.S territory. Under the Simla Agreement, signed after the 1971 India-Pakistan war, both countries committed to resolving future disputes, including over Jammu and Kashmir, bilaterally. The agreement also converted Jammu and Kashmir's ceasefire line into the Line of Control (LoC).

¹¹ "PM Sharif says Pakistan open to credible, transparent probe into Pahalgam attack", *Dawn*, 26 April 2025.

¹² "Transcript of Special Briefing on OPERATION SINDOOR", Ministry of External Affairs, 8 May 2025.

¹³ On 28 April, Pakistan's defence minister said Pakistan had reinforced its forces because it appeared that conflict with India was imminent.

B. Four Days of Conflict

Prime Minister Modi met with army and security chiefs on 29 April, granting operational freedom to the armed forces to respond to the Pahalgam attack as they saw fit.¹⁴ A week later, in the early hours of 7 May, New Delhi announced it had launched cross-border missile strikes on nine sites, targeting “terrorist infrastructure” in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and the province of Punjab.¹⁵ These included Muridke and Bahawalpur, towns known to host the headquarters of the Laskhar-e-Tayyaba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), the two largest jihadist outfits India claims are currently active in Indian Kashmir.¹⁶ The Indian government called its operation “Sindoor”, endowing it with the symbolic meaning of delivering justice to victims of the Pahalgam terror attack.¹⁷

Claiming its strikes had killed 100 terrorists, New Delhi described them as “measured, non-escalatory, proportionate, and responsible”.¹⁸ Emphasising it had not targeted military sites, the Indian government insisted that its actions were pre-emptive in nature, with the aim of deterring future terror attacks. Senior officials also portrayed Operation Sindoor as retaliation not just for the Pahalgam massacre, but a long list of deadly attacks perpetrated by the LeT and JeM dating back to 2001.¹⁹

Pakistani forces retaliated swiftly, declaring that its air force had downed six Indian jet fighters involved in Operation Sindoor.²⁰ It also said India had struck six locations (not the nine claimed by New Delhi), including four in Punjab province (on the cities of Bahawalpur and Muridke, as well as on villages in Sialkot and Shakargarh districts) and two in Pakistan-administered Kashmir (in Bagh and Muzaffarabad cities). Rejecting India’s claims that it had only targeted terrorist hubs, Islamabad claimed the strikes had in fact destroyed civilian

¹⁴ “Transcript of Special Briefing on OPERATION SINDOOR”, op. cit.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “What were the targets India says it destroyed in Pakistan?” Reuters, 7 May 2025; Shiv Shankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India’s Foreign Policy*, New Delhi, 2016, p. 91.

¹⁷ Sindoor is a vermillion powder that is worn mainly by married Hindu women along the parting of their hair. The name of the operation thus alluded to vengeance for the Hindu wives whose husbands were targeted in the terror attack at Pahalgam, a tourist resort popular with couples on honeymoon.

¹⁸ “Transcript of Special Briefing on OPERATION SINDOOR”, op. cit.

¹⁹ Ibid. Also, Crisis Group interview, former Indian foreign secretary, New Delhi, July 2025.

²⁰ Pakistan initially claimed to have downed five Indian jets, but in early June, the Pakistan air force confirmed that six Indian fighter jets were downed on 7 May, including three Rafale planes, a Mirage 2000, a MiG-29 and a Su-30MKI. India has not officially confirmed losing any planes, though in late May India’s chief of staff gave interviews in which he seemed implicitly to admit to the losses, without sharing specific details. “Indian military chief acknowledges loss of jet fighters in May conflict with Pakistan”, CNN, 31 May 2025; “Air force credits Cobras with ‘six IAF kills’”, *Dawn*, 6 June 2025.

infrastructure, including mosques, and killed 37 civilians, nearly half of whom were women and children.²¹

A series of tit-for-tat strikes ensued, with both sides using missiles and weaponised drones that could be deployed without soldiers needing to cross the border.²² On 8 May, the Pakistani military said several Indian drones had killed civilians in overnight strikes across the country, from Lahore to the port city of Karachi, before being shot down. From its side, New Delhi claimed to have neutralised the air defence system in Lahore, and repelled attempts by Pakistan to target cities across northern and western India with weaponised drones and missiles. Both sides also used heavy artillery to fire across the Line of Control (LoC), the informal frontier that separates the Indian and Pakistani parts of the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region. The exchange of fire, which resulted mainly in civilian deaths on both sides, effectively ended the 2003 ceasefire along the LoC that the two sides had recommitted to in 2021.²³

On 9-10 May, both sides claimed the other had upped the ante. India accused Pakistan of launching drone attacks and missile strikes against military targets, and retaliated by targeting at least eleven military sites.²⁴ The Pakistani military insisted it had in fact responded to Indian missile strikes on air force bases in Rawalpindi, Chakwal and Shorkot. The Nur Khan base in Rawalpindi, the most sensitive of those targeted, serves as the home of the country's military's headquarters; it is also close to the capital Islamabad.²⁵ In the early hours of 10 May, Pakistan's military announced its response: the launch of Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos, part of a broader campaign called Marqa-i-Haq that began on 7 May.²⁶ Pakistani missiles, rockets and armed drones targeted at least five Indian air force bases and military installations and facilities in Punjab, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Indian-administered Kashmir.²⁷ While both Indian and Pakistani military representatives

²¹ “Pakistan downs 5 Indian jets as retaliation for late-night strikes at six sites: officials”, *Dawn*, 7 May 2025.

²² Crisis Group Asia Statement, “Pulling India and Pakistan Back from the Brink”, 8 May 2025. Pakistan claimed to have downed at least 77-Israeli-made Indian drones; India claimed to have destroyed hundreds, including Turkish-made, Pakistani drones.

²³ The back-channel talks that led to this agreement were facilitated by the United Arab Emirates.

²⁴ “Transcript of Special Briefing on OPERATION SINDOOR”, Ministry of External Affairs, 10 May 2025.

²⁵ A Pakistani defence analyst said India's attack on the Rawalpindi base was chiefly responsible for Pakistan's more forceful military response. Crisis Group telephone interview, July 2025.

²⁶ The term, Bunyan-um-Marsoos, taken from the Quran, means “firm, united structure”. Marqa-i-Haq translates as the “battle for justice”.

²⁷ Pakistan's military said the targets included the Adampur, Udhampur, Pathankot, Suratgah, Sisra, Bathinda and Halwara airfields as well as the S-400 missile system in Adampur and the Beas storage site for the nuclear-capable Brahmos missile India had used to attack military targets. India acknowledged limited damage at only four sites: Adampur, Udhampur, Pathankot and Bhuj. “Pakistan

claimed that their opponent's attacks had caused little damage, it was becoming clear that the brakes on conflict were lifting and both sides were ready to hit ever more strategically sensitive targets.

As the missile strikes intensified, Washington's fears that conventional hostilities might escalate toward the nuclear threshold grew.²⁸ Top U.S. officials, particularly Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who had remained in close contact with leaders on both sides throughout the four days, redoubled their efforts to quell the fighting. After some "alarming intelligence" regarding possible "dramatic escalation", the White House also played a hands-on role, with Vice President J.D. Vance conveying the administration's concerns directly to Prime Ministers Modi and Sharif.²⁹ Other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Iran also approached both sides to push for de-escalation.

Ultimately, it was Washington's diplomatic intervention that appeared to be the most influential in putting an end to the fighting. On the evening of 10 May, President Trump announced that the two countries had agreed to a ceasefire.³⁰ Pakistan and India both confirmed the cessation of hostilities. But their respective versions as to how the ceasefire came about clashed – and continue to clash.³¹ Islamabad, which highlighted the pivotal role played by U.S. diplomacy in reaching the truce, insisted that the Indian military had offered a ceasefire, which Pakistan then accepted.³² This interpretation of events enabled Pakistan's government to consolidate ties with the Trump administration, which were subsequently reinforced by high-level meetings, in particular between the U.S. president and Pakistan's army chief Asim Munir in June.

New Delhi, on the other hand, claimed it was the Pakistani military that had requested the ceasefire via a hotline between the two countries' directors general of military operations (DGMOs), and downplayed the role of external, particularly U.S. intervention in

²⁸ 'rattles' India with firm response as patience runs out", *The News*, 11 May 2025; "Transcript of Special Briefing on OPERATION SINDOOR", op. cit.

²⁹ Following the ceasefire, President Trump said U.S. mediation "stopped a nuclear conflict. ... Millions could have been killed". He also claimed to have used trade incentives to persuade both sides to put an end to the fighting. "Trump says U.S. stopped Pak-India 'nuclear war'", *Dawn*, 13 May 2025; Ankit Panda, "Foggy Slope to Armageddon: The first South Asian Crisis of the third nuclear age", *The Caravan*, 17 June 2025.

³⁰ "Vance called Indian Prime Minister to encourage ceasefire talks after receiving alarming intelligence, sources say", CNN, 10 May 2025.

³¹ Truth Social post by @realDonaldTrump, 5:25pm, 10 May 2025.

³² "DPM Dar says Pakistan, India have agreed to a ceasefire with immediate effect", *Dawn*, 10 May 2025; "Statement by Foreign Secretary" press release, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 10 May 2025.

³³ "Put it on record that Pakistan never requested a ceasefire", said Pakistan's military spokesperson. "Deterrence re-established, say armed forces", *Dawn*, 12 May 2025.

securing the truce.³³ Regardless of the claims and counter-claims, it was evident that neither side wanted to escalate further, and that international mediation provided both with an opportunity to opt out of the path of worsening confrontation.

III. Tripwires, Threats and a Fragile Peace

After four days of conflict marked by a welter of misinformation, both India and Pakistan declared victory.³⁴ The Indian government said it had honoured pledges to hit the perpetrators of the Pahalgam attack deep into Pakistani territory. The Pakistan government lavished praise on its army and air force for delivering lethal blows against a much larger military adversary. As for the 10 May ceasefire, it continues to hold and the high-level military hotline between the two states has stayed active, reducing the risk of resurgent conflict caused by mis-calculations and misunderstandings involving their armed forces. Remaining in periodic contact since 12 May, the DGMOs have agreed to a phased reduction of forward troop deployments along the international border, redeploying personnel to their pre-7 May positions and helping to stabilise the frontier zone. Both militaries also support the creation of a more permanent mechanism for de-escalation.

Although the border is now quiet, the ceasefire has only frozen the conflict, while the hotline between the DGMOs could be disrupted should tensions escalate once again. Both militaries remain on high alert, while neither nationalist rhetoric nor potential triggers of fighting have subsided. The fear subsists that by mistake or intention either side could feel compelled to turn to its nuclear arsenal. An Indian security expert warned that New Delhi's pre-emptive strikes have arguably destabilised and embittered relations between the two more than strengthened India's deterrence.³⁵ "Both sides have now declared victory in a conflict that resolved nothing", one Pakistani security analyst concurred.³⁶

³³ The Indian government downplays U.S. diplomatic involvement, deeming it to be harmful to its public standing. "Statement by Foreign Secretary", press release, Ministry of External Affairs, op. cit.; "Foreign Secretary's statement on the telephone conversation between PM and U.S. President", press statement, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 17 June 2025.

³⁴ Soon after the hostilities erupted, social media users on both sides engaged in fully fledged disinformation campaigns. False claims about military victories were broadcast as breaking news, with AI-generated and recycled footage used to support these claims, often heightening tensions between the sides. See "How social media lies fueled a rush to war between India and Pakistan", *The Guardian*, 28 May 2025; "How misinformation overtook Indian newsrooms amid conflict with Pakistan", *Washington Post*, 4 June 2025.

³⁵ Sushant Singh, "Vermillion Lines, Delusion or Deterrence", *The Caravan*, 1 June 2025.

³⁶ Zahid Hussain, "A war without end", *Dawn*, 28 May 2025.

A. *Proxy Armed Violence*

India and Pakistan have long been at loggerheads over the other's alleged support for militant and separatist groups operating on their respective territories. The Indian government believes that active Kashmiri militants are entirely a creation of Pakistan, and that the Pahalgam attack was an attempt to undermine the peace and stability it claims to have brought to Jammu and Kashmir.³⁷ Since India attributes all militancy in Kashmir to Pakistan-based jihadist groups supported by Islamabad rather than disaffected locals acting out of their own volition, any major attack of the sort witnessed in Pahalgam threatens to prompt a wave of retaliatory strikes (see Section III.B).

Establishing the truth of New Delhi's accusations is no easy matter. While there is no doubt that Pakistan actively supported the insurgency in Indian-administered Kashmir in the late 1980s and 1990s, it is difficult to determine the precise extent of its current support for local militants, despite the ardent claims of the Indian authorities. New Delhi's August 2019 suspension of Kashmir's semi-autonomous status, alongside its heavy-handed response to Kashmiri dissent, fuelled public disaffection in the region and gave a fillip to militancy.³⁸ This has led to the emergence of new militant outfits, such as The Resistance Front, which pledge to oppose the reforms New Delhi has sought to impose and which Kashmiris perceive as yet another bid to reinforce central Indian control over the region.³⁹

Hardly a week has gone by in recent years without an encounter between Indian security forces and militants, many of whom have been identified as local Kashmiris rather than solely Pakistani infiltrators.⁴⁰ As a result, a deadly terror attack has remained a constant threat. "All it takes is two mad men with guns", one Kashmir-based security official said.⁴¹ At the same time, the strengthening of India's security apparatus in the region has made it difficult for militants to operate

³⁷ "India's EAM Jaishankar calls out Pakistan, Slams Proxies and Nuclear Black-mail", WION, YouTube, 1 July 2025.

³⁸ India has sought to deflect blame for the growing alienation in the region by blaming it entirely on Pakistan. See "76 Terrorists active in J-K, 59 are foreign terrorists: Govt sources", ANI, 13 March 2025; "Why more locals in Kashmir are becoming militants", BBC, 5 August 2021; "Violence in Kashmir: Why a Spike in Killings Signals an Ominous New Trend", Crisis Group Commentary, 28 June 2022. For background on Kashmir since the 2019 assertion of central rule by New Delhi, see "Kashmir Votes to Repudiate Rule from the Centre", Crisis Group Commentary, 14 October, 2024 and "Flareups and Frustration as Kashmir Waits for a Vote", Crisis Group Commentary, 8 March 2024.

³⁹ The security forces believe the new crop of militant outfits are proxies of older organisations such as Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, which they claim Pakistan has created to avoid scrutiny.

⁴⁰ The number of militancy-related violent incidents stood at 369 in 2019, 415 in 2020, 460 in 2021, 457 in 2022, 267 in 2023 and 210 in 2024, with 114 so far in 2025 according to an independent assessment. See "Number of Terrorism Related incidents Year Wise, Data Sheet, Jammu and Kashmir", South Asia Terrorism Portal.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Indian security official, June 2025.

with the same intensity as before. Most militants killed since 2019 have been inadequately trained and equipped, and have died within days of joining the armed struggle.⁴²

Pakistan for its part has repeatedly argued that the Laskhar-e-Tayyaba, which it officially banned in 2002, is unable to plan and conduct attacks from inside its border. “Those people, whatever is left of them, they are contained”, Defence Minister Asif insisted days after the Pahalgam attack. Some are under house arrest, while others are in custody”.⁴³ After being banned, the LeT re-emerged as the Jamaat-ud-Dawa, operating as its charity front, which was also banned in 2008 following the terror attack in Mumbai.⁴⁴ In 2019, LeT leader Hafiz Mohammad Saeed was arrested and convicted on terror financing charges; he is currently serving a 31-year jail sentence. Pakistan also banned the JeM in January 2008 and subsequently its so-called charity arm, the Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation, in May 2019. The following year, the government froze the properties and assets of both banned groups.⁴⁵ But U.S and Indian officials believe that the two outfits continue to maintain networks and operate freely within Pakistan.⁴⁶

On 17 July, the U.S. State Department designated The Resistance Front, the group that had initially claimed responsibility for the Pahalgam attack, a foreign terrorist group, branding it a “front and proxy” of the (already designated) LeT.⁴⁷ Pakistan’s foreign ministry responded that “any linkage with LeT (...) belies ground realities”, adding that Pakistan “has effectively and comprehensively dismantled” LeT and arrested and prosecuted its leadership.⁴⁸

⁴² Some analysts believe Pakistan lost control over anti-India militants in the early 2000s, but Pakistan insists that it has clamped down on such groups. See Christopher Clary, *The Difficult Politics of Peace: Rivalry in Modern South Asia* (New York, 2022), p. 279; “FO says Pakistan has ‘dismantled’ terrorist outfits amid U.S. designation of group blamed for Pahalgam attack”, *Dawn*, 18 July 2025.

⁴³ “Pakistan official calls for international inquiry into Kashmir terror attack”, *The New York Times*, 25 April 2025. Pakistan had banned Laskhar-e-Tayyaba in 2002 following the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament and the Jaish-e-Mohammad in 2008. Both were designated as terrorist organisations by the UN Security Council.

⁴⁴ The 2008 Mumbai attacks were a series of terror assaults that involved a 60-hour siege on hotels, a railway station, and a Jewish centre, resulting in more than 160 deaths. Crisis Group Asia Report N°164, *Pakistan: The Militant Jihadist Challenge*, 13 March 2009.

⁴⁵ “11 groups banned for having links with JuD, others”, *Dawn*, 12 May 2019; “Pakistan freezes 964 assets of banned JuD, JeM”, *The Express Tribune*, 17 September 2020.

⁴⁶ “Who are Pakistan-based LeT and Jem groups targeted by India?”, *Reuters*, 7 May 2025.

⁴⁷ “Terrorist Designation of The Resistance Front”, press statement, Marco Rubio, U.S. Secretary of State, 17 July 2025.

⁴⁸ “FO says Pakistan has ‘dismantled’ terrorist outfits amid U.S. designation of group blamed for Pahalgam attack”, *Dawn*, 18 July 2025.

Indian officials nevertheless insist that Pakistani denials of any state support for – or even the presence in the country of – anti-Indian jihadist outfits must be backed up by far stronger enforcement action.

Meanwhile, Islamabad holds India responsible for supporting groups that have long targeted security forces and civilians within its territory.⁴⁹ New Delhi, Pakistani leaders say, instigates terrorism within Pakistan through hardline Baloch separatist outfits such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and the Islamist jihadist Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban), both of which have inflicted heavy casualties on Pakistani security forces.⁵⁰ Between January and June 2025, the two groups orchestrated a total of 502 attacks that claimed the lives of 284 security personnel and 267 civilians.⁵¹

New Delhi has rejected Pakistan's claims that it backs anti-Pakistani militants, decrying these accusations as an attempt to divert international attention from Islamabad's continued support for anti-Indian jihadist groups.⁵² Even so, both the Baloch separatists and the Pakistani Taliban publicly backed India during the May hostilities.⁵³ The Pakistan military has since claimed that India has unleashed its proxies “to foment terrorism” in the country in the wake of the May attacks.⁵⁴ On 12 August, after the U.S. State Department added the BLA and its military wing, the Majeed Brigade, to its Foreign Terrorist Organisation list, Pakistan's interior minister posted on X that “This is a major diplomatic victory for Pakistan and another defeat for our eternal enemy”.⁵⁵

B. *New Military Doctrines*

The conflict in May has reshaped the already fraught relations between the two countries in ways that make the current truce hard to

⁴⁹ “India region's top state sponsor of terrorism: COAS Munir,” *The News*, 27 June 2025.

⁵⁰ Just a few weeks after the May conflict, Pakistan's defence minister referred to the BLA and TTP as “Indian proxies”. “BLA and TTP are Indian proxies, govt will prove Indian involvement in Khuzdar bus attack: Asif”, *Dawn*, 22 May 2025.

⁵¹ See the [website](#) of the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies.

⁵² “Baseless’: MEA rejects Pak claim on India role in Balochistan suicide attack”, *The Indian Express*, 22 May 2025.

⁵³ On 11 May, the BLA spokesman issued a statement on social media, pledging support to India “in any military action against Pakistan”. On 8 May, in a statement on its Telegram channel, the TTP condemned the Pakistan military and claimed it had “provided intelligence” to India about Pakistani targets. Cited in Tariq Parvez, “Post-Sindoor terror threat”, *Dawn*, 14 June 2025. Parvez headed Pakistan's National Counter-Terrorism Authority.

⁵⁴ Army chief Asim Munir accused India of doubling down on its use of anti-Pakistan proxies after the May conflict. “Islamabad will provide evidence BLA, TTP are India-backed proxies”, *The Express Tribune*, 22 May 2025; “India doubling down on proxy war after clear defeat by Pakistan, says COAS Munir”, *Dawn*, 10 July 2025.

⁵⁵ “Pakistan welcomes U.S. designation of BLA, Majeed Brigade as foreign terrorist organisations”, *Dawn*, 12 August 2025.

sustain. Two days after the ceasefire came into force, Prime Minister Modi said in an address to the nation that India had merely suspended Operation Sindoor, not ended it, and that its future course would depend on Pakistan's behaviour. "Operation Sindoor has carved out a new benchmark in our fight against terrorism and has set up a new parameter and new normal", he explained.⁵⁶ These comments, which he has repeated since then, alongside those of other senior Indian officials, suggest that from now on the government will be inclined to treat any terrorist attack on its territory as an act of war from Pakistan, and consider retaliatory action, including deep into Pakistani territory, as entirely legitimate.⁵⁷

By erasing the distinction between militants and alleged state patrons in Pakistan, India's new military doctrine heightens the risk of another conflict. Given that Pakistan will inevitably respond to any Indian attack, it makes the onset of a retaliatory tit-for-tat far more likely.⁵⁸ Indeed, Pakistan has also appeared to shift its military doctrine, with Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar emphasising that the armed forces' "quid pro quo plus" response to India's attacks in May was now the "new normal".⁵⁹ The military high command warned India that "any attempt to challenge Pakistan's sovereignty or territorial integrity, ever again, shall be met with a swift, full-spectrum, and decisive response".⁶⁰

Pakistani authorities have also noted that New Delhi's stance means militants, regardless of their country of origin or ideology, may seek to exploit an opportunity to spark armed conflict between the two states. Bilawal-Bhutto Zardari, Pakistan's former foreign minister, whose Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) is a major coalition partner in the Sharif government, has warned against leaving the fate of "our two great nations" in "the hands of these nameless, faceless, non-state actors".⁶¹

C. Domestic Audiences

Domestic pressures could also play a role in triggering conflict between India and Pakistan. In the wake of the May attacks, the Indian

⁵⁶ Press release, "English rendering of PM's address to the nation", Prime Minister's Office, Government of India, 12 May 2025.

⁵⁷ "India would strike deep into Pakistan if provoked by terror attack, warns Jaishankar", *The Hindu*, 10 June 2025. Also, press release, "English translation of Foreign Secretary's statement on the telephone conversation between PM and U.S. President", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 17 June 2025.

⁵⁸ In an August media interview, the Pakistani military spokesman warned that the armed forces would react to any Indian attack by striking deeper into India: "They also need to understand that they can be hit anywhere". "Nonsense": DG ISPR rubbishes rumours of Field Marshal eying presidency", *The News*, 6 August 2025. Crisis Group telephone interview, Karachi-based security analyst, July 2025.

⁵⁹ "Pakistan to resist 'weaponisation of Indus waters'", *Dawn*, 1 July 2025.

⁶⁰ "11 soldiers martyred, 78 wounded while defending Pakistan in Indian attack: ISPR", *Dawn*, 12 May 2025.

⁶¹ "U.S. can force India into 'dialogue with Pakistan'", *The Express Tribune*, 7 June 2025.

government, having first raised expectations of victory against Pakistan before agreeing to a ceasefire, sought to assuage disappointed supporters at home. Modi's statement about India merely pausing its military operations against Pakistan could be read in this light.⁶² Likewise, the Indian military has since made unproven claims regarding its feats during the clashes. Delivering a lecture in Bengaluru on 9 August, the air force chief claimed that Indian planes shot down six Pakistani jet fighters and one other military aircraft – the exact number of Indian planes that Pakistan claimed to have downed in May.⁶³ Fanned by a jingoistic media, the Indian public has been led to expect immediate and successful retaliation as a normal rather than exceptional response to a terror attack. The BJP government's Hindu nationalist supporters could well demand even more potent military strikes on Pakistan the next time conflict erupts.⁶⁴

In Pakistan, the Indian attacks brought about the kind of national unity that has long eluded the politically divided country, with the public rallying behind its armed forces.⁶⁵ Even former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, which has been immersed in a protracted power struggle with the Sharif government and the military high command, praised the armed forces, lauding their performance against a much larger foe.⁶⁶

Army chief Asim Munir was a major beneficiary of this tide of pro-military sentiment. In late May, the government promoted him to the rank of field marshal in recognition of his "strategic leadership and decisive role" in the May conflict – the first time that an elected gov-

⁶² "English rendering of PM's address to the nation", op. cit.

⁶³ "India shot down six Pakistani military aircraft in May, air force chief says", Reuters, 9 August 2025. These claims were made without any visual or third-party evidence. Rejecting the assertion that any Pakistani plane had been shot down, Pakistan's defence minister said such "comical narratives" were "crafted for domestic political expediency", adding, "if the truth is in question, let both sides open their aircraft inventories to independent verification". "Defence minister rubbishes Indian air chief's 'comical' claim of downing Pakistani aircraft in May conflict", *Dawn*, 9 August 2025. See also Sushant Singh, "False Bravado", *The Caravan*, 10 August 2025.

⁶⁴ A video that went viral over social media captures the mood of the government's supporters. See "Lyricist Manoj Muntashir's strong video message to PM Modi after terror attack", *India Today*, 24 April 2025; "In 1st Mann ki Baat post Pahalgam, Modi talks of anger among Indians, vows 'harshest response'", *The Print*, 27 April 2025.

⁶⁵ For background on Pakistan's political crisis, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°345, *Disputed Polls and Political Furies: Handling Pakistan's Deadlock*, 28 November 2024; Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°178, *Pakistan: Inchings toward Contested Elections*, 6 February 2024; and Crisis Group Commentary, "Pakistan at the Tipping Point?", 12 May 2023.

⁶⁶ On 13 May, PTI leader Imran Khan posted on X: "our soldiers defeated Modi on both aerial and ground fronts. ... I pay tribute to the Pakistan Air Force and all our military personnel for their professionalism and outstanding performance".

ernment has granted this title to an army chief.⁶⁷ Since the military's domestic legitimacy and its broad political sway will continue to rest on its ability to defend the country's sovereignty, a robust response to any future Indian strikes is all the more likely.

D. *Disputes over Water Sharing*

Disputes over water sharing, if left unresolved, also risk fuelling tensions that could potentially spark armed conflict between the two neighbours. After New Delhi placed the Indus Waters Treaty "in abeyance" in the wake of the Pahalgam attack, India's home minister asserted the agreement would never be restored.⁶⁸ Calling on India to respect its international obligations under the treaty, Islamabad has warned that it would have no choice but to act, including militarily, should New Delhi store or divert waters of the three western rivers allocated to Pakistan under the treaty. These rivers constitute a lifeline for millions of Pakistanis, accounting for close to 80 per cent of the country's overall water use, and up to 90 per cent of the water used for irrigation.⁶⁹

Despite the many frictions in the bilateral relationship since the treaty came into force 65 years ago, it survived unscathed. But India has shelved a treaty that contains no provision for unilateral suspension.⁷⁰ Pakistan, which is at a disadvantage given its downstream location, has expressed its readiness to discuss modifications to the treaty so as to adapt to India's evolving needs since it was signed in 1960, including population growth and clean energy. But it has insisted this can only be done through the treaty's dispute resolution mechanisms.⁷¹ On 27 June, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled that India's decision did not affect its competence to continue hearing Pakistani objections to two Indian hydro-electric projects.⁷²

⁶⁷ Though the five-star position is an honorary rank, it has strengthened army chief Munir's standing within the military high command. "COAS elevated to field marshal for 'decisive role' in Marka-i-Haq", *Dawn*, 21 May 2025.

⁶⁸ "When will India restore Indus Waters Treaty? Amit Shah answers", *The Hindu-stan Times*, 21 June 2025.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Karachi-based environmental expert, July 2025. See also Khan, op. cit. "Pakistan's lifeline at risk: Sherry urges action on Indus Waters Treaty crisis", *Dawn*, 22 May 2025.

⁷⁰ That said, well before the Pahalgam attack New Delhi refused to accept treaty mechanisms, such as the Court of Arbitration, to resolve water-sharing disputes. The process for cooperation and dispute resolution includes bilateral talks at meetings of the Permanent Indus Waters Commission, which has one commissioner from each country. Unresolved disputes are referred to a neutral expert and legal disputes to an international Court of Arbitration. Khan, op. cit. See also "Explained: Permanent Court of Arbitration tribunal ruling on Indus Waters Treaty dispute", *Bar and Bench*, 5 July 2025.

⁷¹ According to Article XII, the treaty can only be modified through mutual agreement. "Holding Indus treaty in abeyance has no legal cover, says minister", *Dawn*, 25 May 2025.

⁷² Press statement, The Indus Waters Western Rivers Arbitration (Islamic Republic of Pakistan vs Republic of India), Court of Arbitration, The Hague, 27 June

A press release by the court noted that “the terms of the Treaty’s object and purpose, do not allow either party, acting unilaterally, to hold in abeyance or suspend an ongoing dispute settlement process.⁷³ On 8 August, interpreting the Indus Waters Treaty, the court’s award said “India shall ‘let flow’ the waters of the western rivers for Pakistan’s unrestricted use”.⁷⁴

India considers the Indus Waters Treaty to be outdated and unfair, and believes it is high time to revise it. It argues that there has been a fundamental change in circumstances since the treaty was enacted and suspended the treaty in reprisal for the Pahalgam attack, declaring that Pakistan had committed a material breach of the treaty by backing anti-India militants.⁷⁵ For now, India does not have the infrastructure needed to store or divert the water crossing into Pakistan. But it has plans to drastically reduce the share of water granted to Pakistan under the Indus Waters Treaty by building new dams and other retention structures. After suspending the treaty, Prime Minister Modi reportedly told officials to expedite the planning and execution of such projects.⁷⁶

Pressing ahead with these plans could spur a hostile military response from Islamabad.⁷⁷ Pakistan’s army chief warned on 11 August that “we have no shortage of resources to undo the Indian designs” regarding the Indus waters. “We will wait for India to build a dam, and when they do, we will destroy it”.⁷⁸

2025. The court was hearing Pakistan’s challenges to the design elements of two Indian run-of-the river hydropower projects, Kishanganga and Ratle, in Indian-administered Kashmir. Pakistan initiated the present arbitration proceedings in 2016, and India requested the World Bank to appoint a neutral expert. The Court of Arbitration was established and a neutral expert appointed in 2022. India has since refused to accept the legality of the court. For India’s position, see “Matters pertaining to the illegally constituted so-called Court of Arbitration,” press release, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 27 June 2025.

⁷³ Cited in “Pakistan urges India to resume functioning of IWT after Hague court’s supplemental award”, *Dawn*, 30 June 2025.

⁷⁴ The court stated, that “the award is binding on the parties and without appeal”. “Award on Issues of General Interpretation of the Indus Waters Treaty”, press statement, International Court of Arbitration, 11 August 2025.

⁷⁵ “The Indus Water Wars: What Comes Next?”, *The India Forum*, 29 May 2025.

⁷⁶ “India weighs plans to slash Pakistan’s water supply in a new Indus River project”, Reuters, 16 May 2025. In reference to water sharing, Modi has declared that “terror and talks cannot go together; terror and trade cannot go together. And water and blood cannot flow together”. “India PM Modi warns Pakistan of more strikes if there is a ‘terrorist attack’”, Reuters, 12 May 2025.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, Islamabad-based security analyst, July 2025.

⁷⁸ “COAS says India won’t be allowed to choke Indus river”, *Dawn*, 11 August 2025. Earlier, on 2 May, Pakistan’s defence minister had also warned, “if they attempt to build any kind of structure, we will strike it”. “Pakistan to strike structures if India tries to block water, warns defence minister”, *The News*, 2 May 2025.

E. The Nuclear Dimension

The May conflict has provided a stark illustration of how the risks of escalation between the two nuclear armed neighbours are higher than in the past. While the four-day confrontation remained far below the nuclear threshold, it was arguably closer to it than ever before. For this reason, India's new doctrine of systematic retaliation against Pakistan in the event of a terrorist attack raises new dangers. The next time conflict erupts, domestic pressures could prompt India to strike even harder, and trigger an equally forceful Pakistani response. As both sides up the military ante, the demands to hit back and temptations to deploy ever greater force could unfold in ways that both states find difficult to control.⁷⁹

In his 12 May speech, Prime Minister Modi specifically warned that India “will not tolerate any nuclear blackmail” – in other words, that Pakistan's nuclear weapons capability will not deter India from attacking it in response to a terrorist attack.⁸⁰ But the assumption that limited conventional strikes against Pakistan will trigger retaliation that will always remain below the nuclear threshold, and that any ensuing conflict will quickly subside, are hazardous ones.

First officially laid out in 2003, India has a “no first use” nuclear doctrine. Pakistan's nuclear doctrine, which remains opaque, does not endorse a no-first use policy.⁸¹ But neither doctrine necessarily guarantees stable nuclear deterrence in the region. India rules out striking first but its doctrine, branded “credible minimum deterrence”, is based on massive retaliation. In the event of a first nuclear strike, return strikes would aim to “inflict unacceptable damage”.⁸² The basic tenet of Pakistan's nuclear policy is also credible minimum deterrence, aimed at warding off Indian nuclear threats or a major conventional attack. But since it is a smaller country and faces a stronger adversary, Pakistan's nuclear planners say it could deploy nuclear weapons if armed hostilities threaten a major loss of territory or the destruction of its military.⁸³

⁷⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Karachi-based nuclear non-proliferation expert, July 2025.

⁸⁰ “English rendering of PM's address to the nation”, op. cit. Unlike their rival conventional capabilities, which largely favour India, there is close to nuclear parity between India, which has around 180 nuclear warheads, and Pakistan, which has an estimated 170 nuclear warheads. See the [website](#) of the Centre for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation.

⁸¹ Pakistan's nuclear policy been kept deliberately ambiguous so as to respond to India's evolving threats. See Sitara Noor, “Pakistan's Evolving Nuclear Doctrine”, *Arms Control Today*, October 2023.

⁸² The Cabinet Committee on Security reviews the implementation in practice of India's nuclear doctrine. Press release, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 4 January 2003.

⁸³ Composed of the top civilian and military leadership, Pakistan's National Command Authority is responsible for the command, control and operational decision-making of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. Noor, “Pakistan's Evolving Nuclear Doctrine”, op. cit.; F. S. Ajazuddin, “Fire and air”, *Dawn*, 5 June 2025.

Pakistan insists that its conventional capabilities are sufficient to counter any Indian attack, as they did during the clashes in May, meaning it has no need to resort to its nuclear arsenal.⁸⁴ Furthermore, both sides appear to believe that nuclear deterrence will successfully prevent a slide into all-out war. During the May conflict, a senior Pakistani ex-diplomat noted: “India’s reckless actions escalated the crisis to a dangerous level and drove it into uncharted territory – almost to the edge of all-out war. But its military brinkmanship had to stop well short of Pakistan’s known nuclear red lines. Thus, were it not for the nuclear factor, a full-scale war could have broken out”.⁸⁵ A former top Indian security official concurred that nuclear weapons capability means that both sides were conscious of the need for “managed hostility” that remained below the nuclear threshold.⁸⁶

Even so, the shared understanding that neither side is willing to endorse a potential nuclear escalation may not be as strong as it seems. In the absence of robust communication mechanisms or effective guardrails to defuse tensions, many observers believe the risk of a slide into all-out war, with nuclear deployment a possible recourse, cannot be ruled out. As an Indian analyst put it, the next crisis could “erupt faster, escalate more intensely, and risk nuclear exchange sooner”.⁸⁷ Pakistan’s chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff appeared to concur. Speaking in late May at the Shangri-La Dialogue forum, Asia’s largest defence conference, he said: “This (conflict) lowers the threshold between two countries who are contiguous nuclear powers”, which implies “greater risk on both sides, not just in the disputed territory (Jammu and Kashmir) but for all of India and all of Pakistan”.⁸⁸

While both sides insist that deterrence between the two is stable and there is no intention to deploy nuclear weapons, the risks of inadvertent use in a fast-moving, volatile conflict are high.⁸⁹ For instance, each other’s nuclear intentions could be misread if a missile strike were to hit central military command and control, or cause the death of top civilian leaders. Amid rapidly escalating conventional armed hostilities across a long shared border, and in the absence of robust lines of communication, Indian and Pakistani leaders might have a

⁸⁴ Responding to Modi’s 12 May speech, the Pakistan foreign ministry said, “Pakistan’s conventional capabilities are adequate to deter India, without the self-imposed ‘nuclear blackmail’ that New Delhi suffers”. “Pakistan seeks IAEA probe into nuclear material theft in India”, *Dawn*, 16 May 2025.

⁸⁵ Maleeha Lodhi, “The nuclear factor”, *Dawn*, 12 May 2025. Lodhi was Pakistan’s ambassador to the U.S., UN and UK.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, former member, National Security Council, New Delhi, June 2025.

⁸⁷ Sushant Singh, “India-Pakistan cease-fire cements a dangerous baseline,” *Foreign Policy*, 15 May 2025.

⁸⁸ “Escalation can outpace diplomacy with no crisis management in place, warns Pakistan’s top general”, *Dawn*, 1 June 2025; “Pakistan, India start reducing troops after border clashes: CJCS”, *Reuters*, 30 May 2025.

⁸⁹ “India accidentally fires missile into Pakistan”, *BBC*, 11 March 2022.

few minutes to respond to the perceived threat of a nuclear attack.⁹⁰ The former top Indian security official cited above also cautioned that domestic political pressures could imperil the restraining influence exerted by both countries' nuclear capabilities on armed conflict.⁹¹

Concern that a war between the two states could spiral into the use of ever more deadly weapons is one of the reasons that the recent clashes triggered international alarm. Historically, the U.S. has played a fire-fighting role in South Asia, regularly pulling India and Pakistan back from the brink of war. This influence once again served its purpose during the May crisis. That said, the window of opportunity for diplomatic intervention was shorter than on earlier occasions, and could shrink further if the next crisis starts from a higher rung on the escalation ladder while India's trust in Washington is wilting.

IV. Conclusion

Four days of armed conflict between India and Pakistan in May concluded with a precarious pause rather than a solid ceasefire. The region could again slip into further clashes should India attempt to put into effect its “new normal” – the stated intention that it respond to any terrorist attack in which it suspects the hand of Islamabad by striking targets on Pakistani territory. Constrained by domestic political pressures, both New Delhi and Islamabad may feel they have little choice but to act if and when provoked. Still, the May conflict demonstrated that conducting limited strikes while avoiding retaliation, escalation and a slide into all-out war is becoming increasingly difficult.

With nuclear weapons come responsibility. There is a high risk that the next round of armed hostilities could escalate at an alarming pace. That would leave little room for the sort of diplomatic intervention by countries such as the U.S. that has put out India-Pakistan fires in the past. Washington's interest in the region and standing with New Delhi appear to have flagged in recent months. Ultimately, it is up to India's and Pakistan's leaders to bypass nationalist clamour, overcome their mistrust and seek a peaceful path to resolving their many differences.

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⁹⁰ In May, for instance, India struck military targets in Pakistan with the dual-use nuclear-capable BrahMos missile.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, former member, National Security Council, New Delhi, June 2025.