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SPOTLIGHT

Escalation Between India and Pakistan Brings Limited Risk of Full-Scale War

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Following India's missile attacks on several targets in Pakistan on 7 May, there have been increasingly serious armed clashes with the use of, among other things, artillery and aviation by both countries. India's actions were a response to the 22 April attack in the Indian part of Kashmir by terrorists that the Indian authorities accuse Pakistan of supporting. Despite being the most serious armed escalation between the countries since the so-called Kargil War in 1999, it is unlikely to escalate into a full-scale war.

Why did India attack Pakistan?

India justified its attack as a response to the 22 April terrorist attack in Pahalgam in Indian Kashmir, which, according to Indian authorities, is blamed on the Resistance Front, a little-known group seen as linked to the Lashkar-e-Toiba terrorist organisation based in Pakistan. It was also meant to be a preventive measure against possible further terror acts by Pakistan-based groups. After quickly linking the attack in Pahalgam to Pakistan based on experience with similar incidents (e.g., the 2008 Mumbai attacks by Lashkar-e-Toiba), Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi came under intense domestic pressure to retaliate. The political and diplomatic sanctions previously imposed on Pakistan (e.g., expulsion of some diplomats, closure of the only active border crossing, suspension of the Indus Water Treaty) did not seem to satisfy the public. In addition, Pakistan's attitude of rejecting all Indian accusations as unfounded and not taking action against extremist organisations influenced the Indian government's decision to take military action. At the same time, the choice of targets (including avoiding military and government installations) indicated a desire to limit further escalation. India wants to present its actions as a fight against international terrorism.

How has the situation on the border between India and Pakistan escalated?

On the night of 6-7 May, the Indian Air Force conducted a 25-minute operation, code-named *Sindoor*, in which nine places in Pakistan were bombed. In addition to several targets in the Pakistani part of disputed Kashmir, targets in Punjab across the internationally recognised border were also shelled for the first time since 1971. The Indian side maintains that it attacked "terrorist infrastructure" and succeeded in eliminating many members of major terrorist organisations operating from Pakistan, such as Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. According to Pakistan the attacks were an unwarranted act of aggression and that 31 civilians were killed. Pakistan maintains that, in self-defence, it shot down five Indian fighter planes (including the French-made Rafale) and a number of drones (which India has not yet confirmed). It has also conducted intensive artillery shelling in Indian Kashmir, in which more than a dozen people were killed. Pakistan has reserved its right to "avenge" and respond militarily to an Indian attack at a time of its choosing. As a result in the days that followed, both sides carried out further escalation operations exchanging attacks on a number of targets using missiles and drones. At the same time, there was intensive information warfare and diplomatic efforts to solidify the parties' narratives on the course of events.

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What has been the international response?

India's attacks have prompted widespread fears of war between the nuclear powers and calls for "restraint" and de-escalation on both sides. At the same time, the response from other countries reflects their strategic ties with India and Pakistan. Unequivocal condemnation of India was issued by, among others, Turkey, while China considered the action "regrettable". Israel expressed full solidarity with India and fully recognised its right to defend itself against terrorism. A more neutral stance was adopted by Western partners, such as France, the EU, and the U.S., and by Russia, which reiterated its condemnation of terrorism but called on both sides to de-escalate. The limited support for India is probably due to the lack of clear evidence linking the attacks in Pahalgam to the Pakistani authorities. This raises the difficulty of assessing the compatibility with international law of the violation of Pakistan's sovereignty based on India's security interests. The Indian authorities are closely monitoring the positions of the various countries on the situation, which is likely to translate into future bilateral relations.

What are the effects of the escalation?

Through controlled armed escalation, both sides have achieved their important strategic objectives. The Indian authorities can speak of successes at the domestic, regional, and international levels. In domestic politics, Prime Minister Modi reaffirmed his image as a strong leader who avenged the Pahalgam terrorist attack and delivered justice for the victims. In relations with Pakistan, India has tightened its response in comparison to a similar situation in 2019 (when India attacked only one site), which is expected to increase deterrence against similar terrorist attacks in the future planned from Pakistan. Finally, on the global stage, India has publicised the problem of cross-border terrorism originating in Pakistan and has perpetuated the practice of defending

against terrorist attacks in the form of action outside its own borders. Pakistan, on the other hand, has succeeded in reminding the world of the problem of the "disputed" Kashmir (both countries control part of the territory, although they recognise it entirely as their own) and undermining Prime Minister Modi's success in stabilising the region after it was stripped of its autonomy in 2019. By claiming it has shot down five Indian aircraft, the Pakistani army has reaffirmed its combat capability and image as a defender of the country. This creates a convenient moment for both sides to declare victory and de-escalate.

Is there a risk of a full-scale war?

Despite rising tensions and the risk of the situation getting out of hand, the outbreak of a full-scale India-Pakistan war still seems unlikely. Such a scenario is not in the interest of either side and would be the result of a miscalculation. India is interested in creating the conditions for rapid economic development and growth in international importance, which would not be served by war and destabilisation of its region. Also, Pakistan, struggling with an internal security crisis and a difficult economic situation, would risk losing a war in a clash with its stronger neighbour. Therefore, after the exchange of fire along the border persists for some time, the conflict is likely to shift from a military phase to a diplomatic dispute. India will, however, maintain the retaliatory measures introduced after the attacks in Pahalgam. Of particular importance will be the announcement of infrastructure development on the rivers flowing from India to Pakistan, which could pose an existential threat to the Pakistani population's access to water in a few years' time. India will also seek international isolation and increased pressure on Pakistan to take concrete steps to combat anti-India extremist organisations. The risk that another major terrorist attack in India could again bring countries to the brink of war will persist.