

India and Pakistan need mediators not weapons suppliers

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Six months after fighting a short war in May, south Asia's two perpetual rivals are frenetically surveying the world's weapons market to procure deadly arms for their next round of confrontation. The countries that played a key role in coaxing the nuclear-armed neighbours to end hostilities are now ironically selling them a wide array of top-of-the-line fighter jets, combat choppers, missile defence systems, hypersonic missiles and suicide drones for billions of dollars.

The ceasefire has endured for several months, but occasional gunfights between allegedly Pakistan-backed rebel fighters and Indian troops in Kashmir are a reminder of how easily the fragile peace can come unstuck. With repression unleashed by the Hindu nationalist government of Indian Prime

Minister Narendra Modi on Kashmiris at an all-time high, and young men in the region still willing to take up arms and resist, the question is not if but when the next round of conflict will erupt. Bombings in New Delhi and Islamabad earlier this week, which killed nearly two dozen people, could spark yet another round of war.

The intensity of the last one does not bode well for the region. I was roused from sleep on a cool May night by two back-to-back explosions rattling my bedroom windows. The blasts were from the downing of an Indian fighter jet that crashed into a school a few miles east of where I live. For four days, south Asia teetered on the precipice as the two countries hurled missiles and drones at each other's military bases, ammunition depots and civilian homes.

After the April massacre of 25 Hindu vacationers and a Kashmiri horseman in Pahalgam, in southern Kashmir, New Delhi blamed Pakistan for aiding rebel fighters (Islamabad denied complicity in the atrocity). Modi vowed to "punish every terrorist and their backers" and ordered missile launches, fuelling a

round of tit-for-tat strikes between the two sworn enemies. The Trump administration took credit for a ceasefire that was supported by the UK, China, Turkey and several Arab countries.

Unfortunately, it appears that those nations' concern for peace is now outweighed by arms suppliers' desire to profit from the frenzied race between India and Pakistan to outgun each other. Both countries have turned to trusted

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allies to beef up their respective conventional arsenals. Modi is looking to acquire more than 100 Rafale jets from Dassault in France, nine years after buying 36 such fighters for \$8.7bn. The Indian Air Force is also keen to obtain "two to three squadrons" of stealth fighter jets, either the Russian Sukhoi-57 or American F-35. India may

now balk at the idea of buying US jets, due to Trump's latest policies and the souring of bilateral ties; that would edge New Delhi closer to its historically most reliable arms supplier: Moscow.

The Indian military is desperate to procure modern multirole combat jets as it fears losing its technological edge over Islamabad — a risk laid bare during the brief war earlier this year. Pakistan's fighter pilots downed multiple Indian jets using, among other tools, the Chinese-made J-10C, sending the share price of its maker, Avic Chengdu Aircraft Co Ltd, up by 36 per cent over two days of trading.

China, with which India has a testy relationship, agreed to fast-track supply of 40 J-35 stealth fighters to its ally, Pakistan. Indeed, the Chinese military leadership seems so pleased with Pakistan's performance in the May confrontation that it now appears willing to indulge Islamabad's every wish. In August, Beijing supplied the Pakistani military with the Z-10ME, an all-weather combat helicopter, less than two weeks after India received its first batch of Apache AH-64E attack helicopters from the US.

China also intends to provide its ally with KJ-500 early warning aircraft and HQ-19 missile defence system. It has not been disclosed by either country how Pakistan plans to pay for the procurement of these arms.

The enormous economic benefits to be gained from the sale of weapons in south Asia — both India and Pakistan have been major arms buyers since 1947 — has made for some strange bedfellows. Russia, a country at odds with France and the US in Ukraine, finds itself on the same side as several Nato members in the subcontinent, now accounting for 36 per cent of India's arms imports followed by France with 33 per cent.

The shortsighted policy of arms sales that bolster the conventional arsenals of two nuclear powers could prove calamitous for the whole world. Rather than lining their pockets by arming India and Pakistan to the teeth, the US, China and other world powers must encourage the two neighbours to seek a negotiated resolution to their disputes.

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