

Can India and Pakistan control a new cycle of escalation?

India's missile strike was the largest aerial attack on Pakistan in 50 years

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Editor's note (May 7th 2025): This article has been updated.

SHORTLY AFTER midnight on May 7th, two weeks after a [terrorist attack](#) in Kashmir, Indian missiles streaked into Pakistan. India said it had hit "terrorist infrastructure" at nine sites in Pakistani-administered Kashmir and in Punjab. Pakistan said that India had

struck six locations in those regions. It denied the sites were used by terrorists and said it had shot down five Indian fighter jets, a claim not confirmed by India. It was the largest aerial attack on Pakistan in more than 50 years.



After the strikes, both sides exchanged artillery and small-arms fire across the "line of control" dividing Kashmir, which is claimed wholly and ruled partly by both countries. India said that killed 13 people

on its side; Pakistan said 31 of its civilians were killed in the shooting and the Indian air strikes. But this is almost certainly just the start of the nuclear-armed neighbours' confrontation. Pakistan said India damaged a hydropower dam and called the attack "an act of war". Pakistan's army said it would hit back "at a time and place of its own choosing". It also said that it shot down 12 Indian aerial drones that entered its airspace in the early hours of May 8th and that killed one civilian. India said on May 8th that it had "neutralised" an attempted overnight missile and drone attack by Pakistan on several military targets and had responded "in the same domain with same intensity" by targeting air-defence radars and systems at several locations in Pakistan.

India's government had hinted at military retaliation ever since accusing Pakistan-based militants of being involved in an attack on tourists in Kashmir on April 22nd, which killed 26 civilians. That was the bloodiest assault there since 2019 and the deadliest on Indian civilians since one in Mumbai in 2008.

Before its strikes, India had taken non-military action, exploring new ways of responding to what it sees as persistent Pakistani-backed terrorism. Yet India decided that a military response was essential. That is partly for deterrence: the foreign secretary, Vikram Misri, said that Pakistan-based terrorists planned more attacks. But India is also trying to satisfy a furious public. Mr Modi has been under pressure to go beyond his responses to the last big militant attacks in Kashmir. In 2016 he sent soldiers into the Pakistan-ruled part of the region, and in 2019 he ordered air strikes on Pakistan. Having claimed to have brought peace and prosperity to Kashmir since scrapping its semi-autonomous status in 2019, his policies and security forces are under scrutiny.

The Indian strikes on May 7th were notable for three reasons. One is that India appears to have fired the missiles and guided bombs from its own territory. "This cowardly and shameful attack was carried out from within India's airspace," said Pakistan's army. If that is true,

India may have been trying not to repeat its experience in 2019, when an Indian fighter was shot down over Pakistan and its pilot captured. Several Indian news outlets reported that India had fired SCALP cruise missiles and dropped Hammer smart-bombs from French-made Rafale fighter jets. The relative success of those tactics may depend on the veracity of Pakistan's claims to have shot down three Rafale jets, one SU-30 and one MiG-29. India has not commented officially on the claim. But Indian and foreign media reports suggest that three aircraft may have crashed in Indian territory. Reuters reported that three Indian pilots involved were in hospital.

As in 2019, India attacked undisputed Pakistani territory as well as Pakistani-held Kashmir. The distinction this time is that it targeted four sites in Punjab: Pakistan's most populous province, and its most politically and economically important one. India said that its target in the city of Muridke, which is 30km from Lahore, Punjab's capital, was a training camp for Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), an Islamist militant group that has deep ties to Pakistan's intelligence service and that Indian officials say was behind the latest terrorist attack in Kashmir. India says its target in the Punjab city of Bahawalpur was the headquarters of Jaish-e-Mohammed, another jihadi outfit with ties to Pakistani spooks.

India's decision to strike Punjab is escalatory. But the third feature of the strikes is that everything else appeared designed to minimise the risk of full-scale war. Pakistan said India's attack had targeted civilian areas, damaging mosques and killing innocents including women and children. But India said that its strikes were "focused, measured, and non-escalatory". It said that it had not struck military, economic or civilian targets, but only "known terror camps" from which attacks on India had been directed. Footage played at an Indian news conference showed what appeared to be precision strikes on individual buildings. India seems eager to provide Pakistan with an off-ramp.

Will Pakistan take it? After India attacked in 2019 it carried out a retaliatory air strike. Pakistan could attempt another counter-strike, if India did indeed thwart an overnight missile and drone attack from it. But Pakistan will probably choose its response with care, doing enough to placate its people and to restore a modicum of deterrence. Its defence minister, Khawaja Asif, told broadcaster Geo News that Pakistan would hit only Indian military targets and not civilians. That might involve strikes against symbolic targets which are unlikely to cause mass casualties.

Still, the risk of further escalation remains. India told foreign governments that it would retaliate for any Pakistani counter-strike. India said it briefed Marco Rubio, America's secretary of state, after the attacks. But if American officials might once have used their clout in both countries to defuse the crisis, their appetite and ability to do so this time is less clear. Donald Trump initially responded with insouciance, saying the two sides had been fighting for "centuries". He later urged them both to stand down: "They've gone tit-for-tat, so hopefully they can stop now." ■

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