

# India and Pakistan test nuclear red lines

Previous cautious conflicts have followed unwritten rules that prevented escalation

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With roughly 170 nuclear warheads apiece, India and Pakistan have evolved a singular approach to armed conflict. Both sides are willing to use force, but cautiously and according to unwritten rules that aim to prevent escalation.

The last large-scale conflict between the countries — the 1999 Kargil war — took place in the shadow of successful nuclear tests by each side the previous year and typified a new era in ultra-caution: only ground forces were used.

In recent years, however, those informal rules have been loosened, with both countries brandishing weapons and tactics not seen in the post-nuclear era. Air power was first witnessed in 2019, with strikes into Balakot that hit undisputed Pakistani territory for the first time in almost half a century.

This week's fighting started with air strikes too, launched by India on both Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. But the attacks, which Islamabad said killed 32, were deeper into Pakistan than before — one strike was 100km from the border — and hit multiple targets, including urban areas.

“One really important threshold that both India and Pakistan have respected was the use of air power against each other. That source of restraint has now entirely, I think, evaporated,” said Ankit Panda of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and author of the 2025 book *The New Nuclear Age*.

Prior to their publicly testing nuclear weapons in 1998, wars between the countries were far more intense and involved full-scale conventional conflict, with thousands of casualties. The nuclear-era deterrent effect has made them think twice before escalating.

Muhammad Aurangzeb, Pakistan's finance minister, said his country's nuclear arsenal was vital to protect against its much larger neighbour.

“These are two nuclear armed countries. For me, this is the great equaliser,” he told the Financial Times. “That should lead to deterrence on both



**Old enemies: experts fear a widening of military conflict between the nuclear-armed neighbours**

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sides . . . It should never ever go into that space.”

But three decades of managed — almost choreographed — conflicts may have lulled both sides into believing that escalation can always be controlled. The increasingly sectarian tensions fuelling the rivalry between the Islamic republic and Hindu-dominated India have put pressure on their military to ignore precedent and test the limits.

“The nuclear domain is a very important thing. It is a paradigm which has to be understood deeply,” said Lieutenant General Raj Shukla, a security analyst and retired Indian army commander.

“We know what the red lines are, and not the red lines that you brandish as a cover for a terror rampage,” he added, referring to the killing of 26 civilians, mostly tourists in India-administered Kashmir last month, which New Delhi linked to Islamabad. “This is not how to use the nuclear rattle.” Pakistan denies any connection to the massacre, and has called for a “neutral” investigation.

Elizabeth Threlkeld, a fellow with the US Stimson Center, said mutual suspicions “make de-escalation more difficult . . . and risk driving escalation

in the wake of future [militant] attacks”.

That risk would increase, she added, if cross-border military strikes became a “more normalised” way for the countries to respond to domestic terrorism.

Maleha Lodhi, a former Pakistani ambassador to the US and UN who is now a political analyst, acknowledged that the “stability” of nuclear deterrence had been tested. “Limited war under a nuclear overhang is dangerous but both sides have engaged in it in the past and know when to stop,” she said.

Shortly after India's retaliatory strike on Pakistan, the hotline between its military chiefs was put to use, indicating that an important deconfliction channel was open, she added.

But few doubt that other red lines — such as refraining from the use of ballistic missiles, or fighting at sea — will be crossed if the present conflict continues.

“Nuclear signalling” has also become more common. In 2019, India's nuclear ballistic missile submarine flushed out its launch tubes — a visible indication of readiness — during the border skirmish, according to Panda.

Pakistan tested two short-range ballistic missiles capable of carrying tacti-

cal nuclear weapons days before the attack on Wednesday. “Fear of nuclear escalation lingers over Indian and Pakistani leaders,” said Panda. The “good news” was that both countries' leaders used conflicts to accomplish essentially political goals “while also positioning themselves for de-escalation”.

He added: “The bad news is that their ability to control the sequence of events in a fast-moving crisis like this, with the fog of war thick, with disinformation on both sides, with nationalist populations calling for retribution, becomes a lot more difficult to do.”

While resorting to nuclear weapons is unthinkable, so is the prospect of losing a conventional war, as Pakistan did in 1971 when the war ended with the country essentially carved in half.

“They want to see nuclear weapons as a deterrent,” said one foreign official in South Asia. “Certainly nobody on either side wants it to get anywhere near that threshold. That does not mean there couldn't be a miscalculation.”

*Charles Clover in Vilnius, Andres Schipani in New Delhi, Humza Jilani in Islamabad and Krishn Kaushik in Mumbai*

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