

Luck stands between de-escalation and disaster for India and Pakistan

Sooner or later, the luck will run out

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THE SPECTACLE of India and Pakistan teetering on the threshold of war and then backing off is both alarming and familiar. This time the odds remain in favour of de-escalation, as before. Yet the past two weeks show that relations between the two nuclear powers, which have flared into open conflict four times since partition in 1947, are increasingly unstable and dangerous. It is more important than ever that the two sides address their differences, including Pakistan's

reckless indulgence of militant groups, which threatens itself and India.

On [May 7th Indian missiles struck Pakistan](#) and the Pakistani-ruled part of Kashmir, a territory both sides claim. These were in retaliation for a [terrorist attack on April 22nd](#) that killed 26 civilians in the part of Kashmir that India controls. It says it has intercepts that show militants from Pakistan were to blame. Pakistan, meanwhile, denies this and says that it has shot down several Indian warplanes. It is threatening further counter-strikes. Artillery duels along the de facto border in Kashmir are growing in intensity and killing civilians. The outside world, following a well-worn script, has urged both sides to step back.

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Something like this pattern has occurred several times since 2000. Yet look closer and this conflict is changing. Pakistan's decay has been unstoppable. The country endures a rolling economic crisis; its democracy is rigged by its army, led since late 2022 by General Asim Munir, a pious hardliner. Remarkably, the state enables or tolerates militant groups within its borders, including Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which has a history of atrocities against Indians. Other terrorists, including those operating from Afghanistan, killed 1,612 Pakistanis last year in 444 attacks, the worst toll for a decade. As Pakistan sinks, India is rising: its GDP is now ten times larger than its troubled neighbour's, having been five times larger back in 2000.

New weapons technology is changing the conflict, too. India has increased arms spending since the last mini-war in 2019. It has acquired warplanes from France and boosted its drone capabilities. Pakistan, for its part, has bought new fighters and missiles from China, from which it now imports 81% of its arms, up from 38% just 15 years ago. Following the wind-down of the war on terror and the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in 2021, America and Europe pay less

attention to Pakistan. Once Western presidents and prime ministers had to indulge, humour, bribe and threaten Pakistan in order to ensure its half-co-operation. Now they more often ignore it.

The combination of an unstable Pakistan, an arms race and outside indifference is dangerous. Fortunately, the military exchanges have so far been measured. True, India's missiles struck deeper into Pakistan than ever and hit more sites. But they appear to have targeted militant camps. Its aircraft remained in Indian airspace. During skirmishes in 2019 the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi foolishly stoked jingoism at home. This time government rhetoric and the public mood have been more restrained. Pakistan, meanwhile, may have salvaged its wounded pride by shooting down Indian warplanes, possibly using Chinese air-to-air missiles. It reserves the right to take further action; India says it has foiled one attempt by Pakistan to hit back with drones and missiles. Still, there is an off-ramp from Armageddon.

Unfortunately, unless the conflict's underlying causes are tackled, it will surely flare up again. India needs to end its self-defeating repression of the part of Kashmir it controls. This has a Muslim majority and has been subject to more centralised administration since 2019, resulting in militarisation, clampdowns on free speech and abuses of human rights. But the bigger problem is Pakistan's tolerance of militants which it has long viewed as a source of asymmetric leverage. Although Pakistan's involvement in the atrocity of April 22nd is not proven, a group linked to LeT initially claimed responsibility. It then issued a denial, saying that its social media had been hacked. Pakistan's timeworn strategy is to sponsor destabilising attacks and then call for stability.

America has some bargaining power, and the Trump administration should urge Pakistan's government to shut down terror camps and prosecute militant leaders. International organisations that still have influence over Pakistan, including the IMF and the global anti-terrorist-financing watchdog, should demand it does more.

In the new multipolar world other countries should pull their weight, too. China has become Pakistan's most powerful patron but its citizens have been victims of terrorism there. The Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, should put pressure on Pakistan. They have long been friendly with it, but their economic interests are now aligned with giant India. With luck the latest outbreak of violence will fit the familiar pattern. But sooner or later luck will run out. ■

Editor's note (May 8th 2025): This article has been updated.

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