

A New Reality in the India-Pakistan Conflict

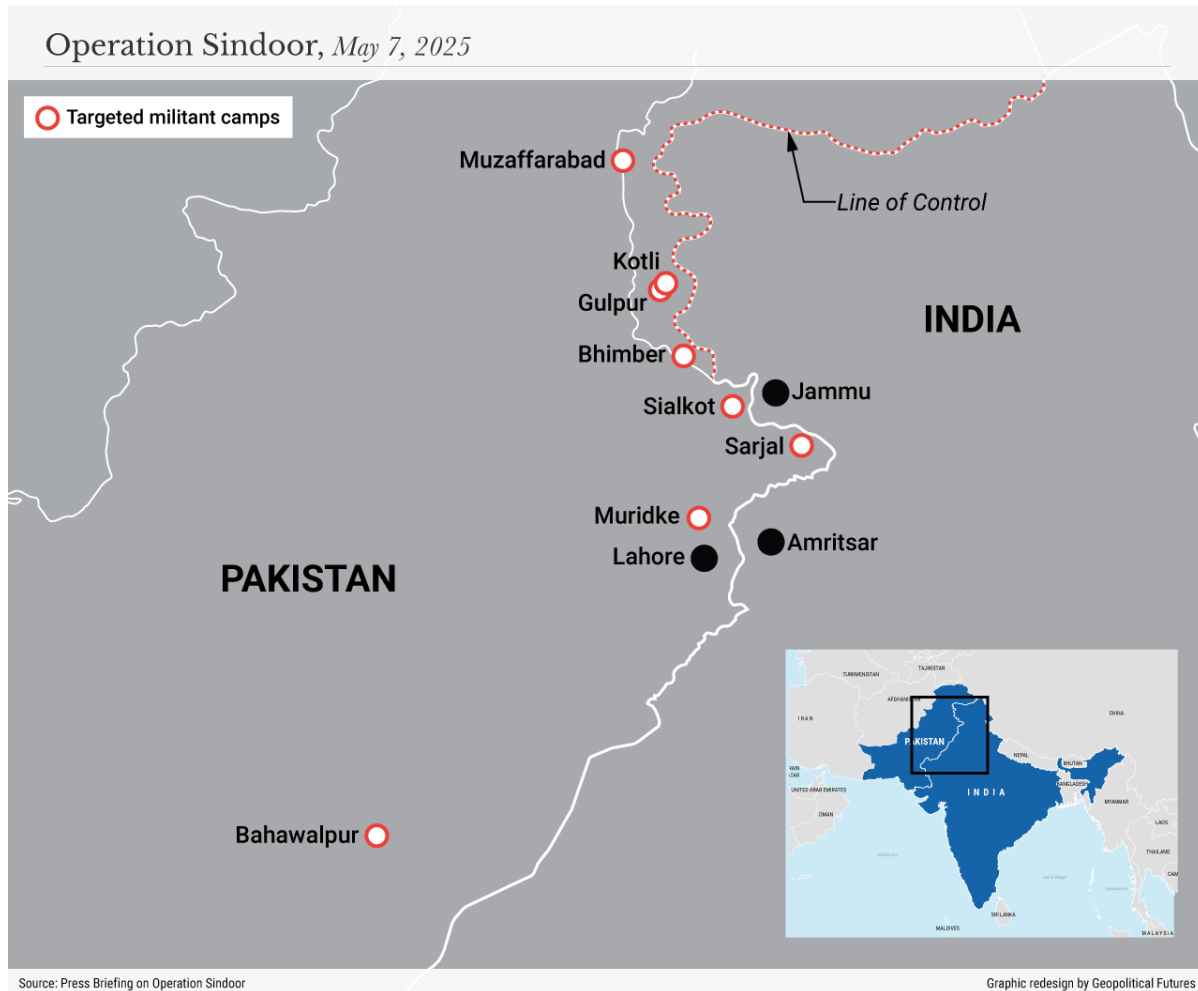
by Kamran Bokhari - May 8, 2025

India and Pakistan this week became the only nuclear powers to engage in a significant conventional military conflict with one another, but there are some indications that the episode may be over. China, which is aligned with Pakistan and was the source of some of Islamabad's most effective weapons in the latest clash, has appealed to both sides to stop the fighting. Evidently, Beijing wants to avoid a major escalation, which was our concern initially.

Nevertheless, a new reality has taken shape in South Asia. India has normalized direct attacks on Pakistani soil and even crossed a new threshold, striking in Pakistan's core region of Punjab. Meanwhile, Pakistan shot down multiple Indian military aircraft, demonstrating that future strikes could be much costlier. Were the conflict to escalate, China might feel compelled to step in, which would spur the United States – which is increasingly close to India – to respond. So, while the incident seems closed, the underlying forces and risks remain.

Dangerous Escalation

The full picture of Operation Sindoor, India's retaliation for an April 22 terrorist attack that killed 26 tourists in India-controlled Kashmir, may not become clear for some time. According to available information, early on May 7 local time, India launched missile strikes on nine targets across eastern Pakistan, from Kashmir to Punjab, the country's most populous province. The strikes hit facilities linked to Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, groups with long records of attacks in India. At least two dozen Pakistani civilians died and at least 50 were injured. During the operation, Pakistani forces shot down at least three Indian aircraft – reportedly including multiple French-made Rafale fighter jets – along the Line of Control (LOC) in the Kashmir region.



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Two factors will determine how much the conflict escalates from here. The first is India's assessment of the strikes' effectiveness and the cost of losing aircraft. The second is the scale of Pakistan's retaliatory response, which officials in Islamabad say has been authorized. India says it targeted militant groups and avoided Pakistani military targets, but Pakistan's response will inevitably focus on Indian military facilities and personnel. Such a shift in targeting greatly raises the risk of further escalation, even though both sides have powerful incentives to avoid a larger war.

But even if the worst is over, the nearly 80-year rivalry between the two countries has entered a dangerous new era. Their confrontation has escalated gradually since September 2016, when Pakistan-based militants attacked an Indian brigade headquarters and New Delhi responded with a special operations raid on a militant base on the Pakistani side of the LOC. After another militant attack in February 2019, Indian aircraft conducted strikes on a militant facility in Pakistan's Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa province. With the addition of the May 7 operation, India has normalized strikes inside Pakistan, including its core region of Punjab.

A Failure of Deterrence

Each step up the escalation ladder is constrained – until it isn't. For decades, New Delhi chose restraint. During the heyday of Pakistan-supported militancy in India-controlled Kashmir in the 1990s, it declined to take the fight to Pakistan on multiple occasions – including during the 1999 Kargil War, when Pakistani soldiers joined militants in crossing the LOC and seizing mountaintop positions, sparking a limited conflict that summer. Likewise, after Pakistan-based militants attacked the Indian parliament in December 2001, New Delhi mobilized its armed forces but held back throughout a standoff that lasted much of the following year. Even after the November 2008 Mumbai attacks, which left 166 people dead and hundreds more wounded in the country's financial hub, India opted against a military response.

What kept a lid on each of these confrontations was the fear that a limited war could spiral into nuclear conflict. India officially acknowledged its nuclear power status in May 1998, and a couple of weeks later, Pakistan conducted its own nuclear weapons tests. However, for the better part of a decade, India has sought the means to use limited conventional force to compel Pakistan to rein in its militant proxies, without triggering Pakistan's nuclear thresholds. New Delhi believed it had done so in the wake of its 2019 airstrikes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

The April 22 militant attack in Kashmir, however, showed that deterrence had collapsed. A limited strike would no longer suffice, and the Indian public demanded a tougher response. But with greater force comes greater risk. Thus, India's May 7 operation was calibrated. It struck multiple targets but did not enter Pakistani airspace and steered clear of Pakistani military installations. New Delhi knew that Islamabad would defend itself and almost certainly retaliate, but it aimed to reestablish deterrence without inviting escalation.

Pakistan and China

Whether Pakistan sees things the same way is still unclear, but the cost it managed to impose on India was substantial. In perhaps as little as half an hour, Pakistani forces downed at least three Indian aircraft, a testament not only to Islamabad's preparedness but also its capabilities. The critical new element was apparently China-supplied air-to-air PL-15 missiles, which have a range of 300 kilometers (185 miles) and proved effective against the French-made Rafales (and potentially Russia-made aircraft as well) in India's inventory. Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group, maker of the PL-

15 missiles, has also supplied Pakistan with aircraft such as J-10 and JF-17 fighters, the latter having been jointly developed with Pakistan Aeronautical Complex.

Beyond the immediate implications for India and Pakistan, the battle damage assessment is relevant to China and its Western rivals. The apparent efficacy of China-made missiles against Western and potentially Russian air platforms could boost the reputation of China's military hardware without forcing Beijing to expose potential weaknesses in its own personnel or command and control. It could also raise questions in Washington about New Delhi's capabilities as an ally in the U.S.-China rivalry.

For now, China can reap the benefits of India's preoccupation with Pakistan and consequent reduction in New Delhi's ability to work with the United States to Beijing's detriment. However, should the India-Pakistan conflict escalate, China could be forced to become more involved, potentially even risking a conflict of its own with India. The conflict could also become a major issue for the United States, further hindering the Trump administration's efforts to reduce the demands on the U.S. military to police the globe.

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