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Unpacking the May 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis

Mutual Perceptions, Nuclear Escalation
Risks, and De-escalation Pathways

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Introduction

The May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis marked the most severe military confrontation between the two nuclear armed neighbours since the 1971 India-Pakistan war.

Following a terrorist attack on 22 April in Pahalgam in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), that killed 26 people, India accused Pakistan of orchestrating the attack, a claim Pakistan categorically denies and describes as a false flag operation. Delhi responded on 7 May by launching punitive precision strikes across the international border aimed at alleged terrorist infrastructures in Pakistan. In the days that followed, both sides engaged in intense military exchanges involving missiles and drone strikes, artillery fire, and cross-border shelling. The confrontation concluded on the evening of 10 May, when a ceasefire was announced after an agreement between the two states was reached through the hotline between the Director-General's Military Operations (DGMO) of both countries, following diplomatic engagement, including involvement from the United States.

This report investigates how escalation and de-escalation unfolded with a focus on how practitioners and expert communities in India and Pakistan perceived these dynamics. Drawing on 30 semi-structured online interviews with experts and former diplomats and military personnel from India and Pakistan, the study provides a fascinating insights unexplored window on how the two nuclear policy communities understood the crisis starting point, the management of escalation, and the mechanisms that enabled de-escalation. The data generated through the interviews has been triangulated¹ with other sources of data (e.g., speeches, statements by political

and military leaders and officials, print and online media reporting and commentary, and publications that have come out on both sides since the end of the crisis).

From the outset, the May 2025 crisis generated two deeply divergent interpretations within practitioner communities in India and Pakistan regarding its starting point, escalation, and resolution. India viewed the Pahalgam attack as Pakistan-backed cross-border terrorism that necessitated punitive action. Pakistan, by contrast, rejected this framing and claimed that the Pahalgam attack was a false flag operation that India used to justify its military action. These asymmetric narratives reflect a broader and long-standing debate within the India-Pakistan nuclear dyad as to whether there exists meaningful space for limited uses of conventional force between the two adversaries without this triggering nuclear escalation. Ultimately, this clash of narratives underscores the extent to which perceptions—rather than objective conditions—drove escalation during the May 2025 crisis.

To explore the dynamics of escalation and de-escalation in the May 2025 India-Pakistan nuclear crisis, the report applies two established conceptual frameworks.

¹ See Norman Denzin, *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978).

The first is the 2008 RAND report by Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, and Roger Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*. Morgan et al. recognise the importance of differentiating escalation pathways, identifying three types: deliberate, inadvertent, and accidental.² A key question this report asks is which of these types of escalation were prevalent during the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis.

The second framework is developed in Mark Bell and Julia McDonald's "How to Think About Nuclear Crises" (2019). They identify two variables that shape escalation dynamics in nuclear crises: (i) the incentives for nuclear first use and (ii) the controllability of escalation. Variation across these two variables creates four possible models for nuclear crises: the staircase model, the stability-instability model, the brinkmanship model, and the firestorm model.³ Another key question of this report is to uncover which nuclear crisis model, if any, fits the India-Pakistan May 2025 crisis.

While both frameworks conceptualise escalation largely in terms of objective or structural conditions, they give limited attention to its psychological dimension. In contrast, this report focuses on perceptions of escalation and de-escalation dynamics among practitioners and expert communities in India and Pakistan.

Bell and McDonald highlight the importance of the perceptual dimension, however, this lies outside of the scope of their framework. They acknowledge that perceptions of incentives for first nuclear use and controllability of escalation may diverge from reality in ways that shape crisis behaviour.⁴ This report, therefore, extends their model to examine the May 2025 crisis through a perceptual lens. It argues that, while India and Pakistan both perceived escalation as controllable and had low incentives to strike first with nuclear weapons, there was greater risk-taking at the conventional level as both sides believed they could

engage in limited conventional exchanges below the nuclear threshold, leading to unprecedented levels of conventional escalation.

While Morgan et al. and Bell and McDonald help explain how the May 2025 crisis escalated, understanding how the crisis ultimately de-escalated lies outside of the purpose of their frameworks. To address this gap, the report draws on BASIC's *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia: Mutual Confidence, Risk, and Responsibility* (2024), which focuses on the mechanisms that have historically enabled de-escalation in India-Pakistan nuclear crises. The 2024 report highlights the importance of "mutual confidence" that each side will refrain from forcing the other into either a humiliating defeat or escalating to the nuclear level.⁵ This confidence is underpinned by the shared fear of nuclear war and maintained through four key mechanisms: (i) intimate enmity⁶; (ii) confidence-building measures (CBMs); (iii) face-saving narratives; and (iv) outsourcing escalation control to third parties.⁷ By applying this framework, the report analyses how far these mechanisms operated as a brake on the crisis escalating to the nuclear level.

The report is structured into three parts:

- **Part 1** outlines the conceptual frameworks used to analyse escalation and extends these frameworks to incorporate perceptual dynamics.
- **Part 2** examines the crisis escalation dynamics, including the divergent Indian and Pakistani perceptions and competing narratives.
- **Part 3** explores de-escalation dynamics, drawing on BASIC's earlier work to show how mechanisms—particularly third party involvement, CBMs, and face-saving narratives enabled both sides to contain the crisis and step back from further escalation.

2 Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, and Roger Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (RAND Corporation, 2008), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG614.html>.

3 Mark Bell and Julia McDonald, "How to Think About Nuclear Crises", *Texas National Security Review* 2(1) (2019), p.42, <https://tnsr.org/2019/02/how-to-think-about-nuclear-crises/>.

4 Bell and McDonald, "How to Think About Nuclear Crises", p.44.

5 Chiara Cervasio, Nicholas J. Wheeler, and Mhairi McClafferty, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia: Mutual Confidence, Risk and Responsibility* (BASIC, 2024), <https://basicint.org/report-crisis-prevention-and-management-in-south-asia/>.

6 As highlighted by Cervasio, Wheeler, and McClafferty in *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia* (p.14), this term captures India and Pakistan's close ties that have been established through a shared history, common cultural heritage, and geographical proximity, combined with enduring hostility rooted in the 1947 of British India and resulting territorial dispute over Jammu and Kashmir.

7 Cervasio, Wheeler, and McClafferty, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*.

Conceptual Framework

In International Relations (IR) scholarship, a crisis is generally understood as a period of acute tension in which actors perceive a threat to their core interests, decision-making is compressed, and the probability of conflict increases.⁸

Importantly, crises in this general sense do not require kinetic exchanges to take place. A nuclear crisis is defined as an interaction between two nuclear-armed states involving a “change in type and/or an increase in intensity” of hostile behaviours, with a heightened probability of military hostilities that destabilises the relationship and is prompted by a disruptive act or event.⁹ The May 2025 crisis can, therefore, be classified as a nuclear crisis because, although nuclear weapons were not used, their presence fundamentally shaped incentives, perceptions, and the dynamics of escalation.

As this report will illustrate, both sides perceived low incentives to strike first with nuclear weapons, suggesting that nuclear deterrence remained stable at the strategic level. At the same time, this very stability paradoxically encouraged greater risk-taking at the conventional level, as decision-makers on both sides believed that they could engage in limited conventional exchanges without crossing the nuclear threshold.

To analyse perceptions of escalation during the May 2025 crisis, the report draws on two established conceptual frameworks. The first, Morgan et al.’s *Dangerous Thresholds*, sets out three different types of escalation: deliberate, accidental, and inadvertent. The second, Bell and McDonald’s ‘How to Think

About Nuclear Crises’, identifies two variables that they argue explain whether a crisis between nuclear adversaries may escalate to the nuclear level. Applied together through the perceptual lens, these frameworks offer insights into the escalation dynamics of the May 2025 crisis, including which crisis model it most closely followed and whether the escalation that occurred can be best understood as deliberate, accidental, or inadvertent.

1.1 Understanding Existing Nuclear Crisis Escalation Models

Morgan et al. define escalation as a process by which a conflict broadens in intensity or scope, crossing threshold(s) that is considered important or significant by one or more participants.¹⁰ Morgan et al. identify three main categories of escalation: deliberate, inadvertent, and accidental.¹¹

Deliberate Escalation

Deliberate escalation occurs when a state or actor intentionally takes actions that cross an escalatory threshold—accepting that doing so may intensify a conflict—in order to gain strategic advantage. This process is often likened to climbing an ‘escalation ladder’, a concept introduced by Herman Kahn who identified 44 potential “rungs” or stages of escalation representing progressively more intense forms of conflict—including nuclear conflict.¹² Actors engaging in deliberate escalation seek to move up selected rungs to gain strategic advantage while deterring the adversary from escalating further. Morgan et al. emphasise that deliberate escalation seeks to convince the adversary that responding will leave

⁸ Charles F. Hermann, *International Crisis: Insights from Behavioral Research* (New York: Free Press, 1972); Glenn Herald Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

⁹ Bell and McDonald, “How to Think About Nuclear Crises”, p.42.

¹⁰ Forrest et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, p.8.

¹¹ Forrest et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, pp. 20-28.

¹² See Herman Kahn *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965).

them worse off than refraining.¹³ Such actions might include expanding the geographical scope of operations, increasing the intensity of attacks, conducting demonstrations of capability (e.g. missile tests) or issuing explicit threats.

Inadvertent Escalation

Inadvertent escalation happens when intended actions unintentionally escalate a conflict by crossing thresholds that the adversary perceives as threatening or provocative—but which the escalatory actor did not perceive as likely to be interpreted in that way. The escalatory outcome is therefore a product of “a lack of understanding of how the opponent will view the action” due to “incorrectly anticipating the second- or third-order consequences of the action in question.”¹⁴ Such actions might include, for example, military exercises, intelligence-gathering operations, cyber intrusions intended for reconnaissance, or the deployment of missiles—all of which may be misread as preparations for offensive actions. Since inadvertent escalation is not the product of a conscious decision to escalate, it cannot be deterred. Instead, reducing its likelihood requires improving mutual understanding and communicating red lines.

Accidental Escalation

Accidental escalation is also unintended but differs from inadvertent escalation as it results from entirely unplanned or unforeseen events. These events may emerge from accidents, such as errors, technical failures, misidentification of targets, or breakdown in command-and-control. Like inadvertent escalation, accidental escalation cannot be deterred in the traditional sense, because it does not result from a conscious effort to escalate. Reducing its likelihood instead depends on designing systems with a high degree of reliability and by creating procedures designed to reduce such risks.¹⁵

Bell and McDonald’s framework complements Morgan et al. by focusing on escalation dynamics in bilateral nuclear crises which, they argue, are shaped by two key variables. The first is the strength of incentives to use nuclear weapons first. They highlight two factors that contribute to first use incentives. One is if there is a large asymmetry in the size and capabilities of nuclear forces between the states involved in the crisis, creating a “use them or lose them” dilemma for the weaker state and potential damage limitation incentives for the stronger state.¹⁶ The second variable is the controllability of escalation, which captures whether leaders have the ability to manage and limit escalation if a nuclear crisis intensifies. High controllability requires reliable command-and-control, clear signaling (accurate interpretation of each other’s signals), centralised decision-making, and sufficient warning times. By contrast, low controllability arises from fragmented authority, short decision-making windows, and failures of signalling, all increasing the likelihood of escalation.

Bell and MacDonald argue that these two variables determine both the likelihood of nuclear use and the dynamics of crisis escalation. Using this framework, they identify four possible crisis models: the staircase model, the brinkmanship model, the stability-instability model, and the firestorm model.¹⁷

Staircase Model

The staircase model applies when a crisis involves high incentives for nuclear first use and a high degree of escalation control.¹⁸ In this setting, leaders can consciously and strategically move up or down the ‘staircase’ of escalation, making deliberate choices rather than being swept along by uncontrollable dynamics. Calibrated signalling through both conventional and nuclear forces is feasible, allowing leaders to communicate intentions and red lines clearly. However, nuclear superiority or the possession of limited nuclear options in such a scenario can involve strong incentives for nuclear first use, thereby creating extremely dangerous situations. States are unlikely to enter a staircase-type crisis over minor issues, but rather such situations arise when vital national interests are at stake. Despite their controllability, the step-by-step nature of escalation means each decision carries grave risks of crossing the nuclear threshold.

13 Forrest et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, pp.20-21.

14 Forrest et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, p.23.

15 Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, p.27.

16 Bell and McDonald, “How to Think About Nuclear Crises”, p.44.

17 Bell and McDonald, “How to Think About Nuclear Crises”, p.44.

18 Bell and McDonald, “How to Think About Nuclear Crises”, p.46.

Brinkmanship Model

The brinkmanship model features low incentives for nuclear first use and low escalation controllability. In these crises, leaders on either side cannot credibly threaten deliberate first use, because mutually assured destruction would produce catastrophic consequences for all sides, making any attempt to strike first irrational. The defining feature is that leaders do not have full control over the pace and extent of escalation, and the risk of nuclear conflict is driven by the possibility of miscalculation, failure to interpret signals accurately, accidents, and loss of control, increasing the potential for inadvertent escalation. Political leverage arises not from rational threats of first use, but from manipulating the shared risk of uncontrolled escalation.

By bringing the crisis to the brink of nuclear catastrophe, a state can pressure its opponent to back down, as neither side wants to risk the ultimate disaster.

The outcome of a brinkmanship crisis is, therefore, determined by what Thomas Schelling called a “competition of risk taking” where the balance of political resolve—who is more willing to risk a catastrophic nuclear war—is the decisive factor for escalation rather than the conventional or nuclear balance.¹⁹

Stability-Instability Model

The stability-instability model describes crises characterised by low incentives for nuclear first use and high escalation controllability. Within their framework, the stability-instability model is the most stable crisis model in terms of risks of nuclear escalation as neither deliberate first use nor uncontrolled escalation are likely.²⁰ This model—also known as the stability-instability paradox—suggests that nuclear deterrence creates strategic stability at the highest level, while paradoxically increasing the likelihood of lower-level conflicts. In such a scenario, both states are deterred from initiating an all-out nuclear war due to the catastrophic consequences of retaliatory second strike.

This mutual fear makes deliberate nuclear first strike an unsustainable option. Because nuclear war is deemed untenable, states can feel emboldened to engage in lower-levels of conflict. The nuclear deterrent acts as a ‘ceiling’ on escalation, reassuring both states that minor provocations will not spiral out of control and threaten their core strategic interests. This paradox suggests that nuclear weapons, while preventing large-scale war, do not guarantee overall peace and instead shift the competition between adversaries to lower levels of violence. The India-Pakistan relation is frequently described as a stability-instability paradox due to the fact that both countries’ possession of nuclear weapons has created a climate that has made lower-levels of conflict more likely as both sides believe they can avoid a full-blown conventional or nuclear war.²¹

Firestorm Model

The firestorm model represents the most dangerous type of nuclear crisis, combining high incentives for nuclear first use with low escalation control. In this scenario, leaders face intense pressure to strike first but lack the ability to manage or contain the conflict once it begins. Escalation in a firestorm crisis is often driven by fear that the adversary will strike first. Due to rapid pace and lack of control, states cannot effectively communicate their intentions or red lines. Since the crisis is prone to swift nuclear escalation, the conventional balance is less relevant than the nuclear balance. A state with perceived nuclear superiority may be tempted to launch a preemptive strike to gain a decisive advantage. As Bell and McDonald note, these crises are rare and likely to occur only when national interests are at stake—such as between an established nuclear power and a smaller, less-equipped nuclear power.²²

19 Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

20 Bell and McDonald, “How to Think About Nuclear Crises”, p.46.

21 See Michael Krepon, ‘The Stability-Instability Paradox, Misperceptions, and Escalation Control in South Asia’, in Rafiq Dossani and Henry Rowan (eds.), *Prospects for Peace in South Asia* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 261-284.

22 Bell and McDonald, “How to Think About Nuclear Crises”, p.50.

1.2 Expanding Existing Nuclear Crisis Escalation Models

By applying Morgan et al.'s categories of escalation with Bell and McDonald's variables, this report captures which types of escalation (deliberate, accidental, or inadvertent) were prevalent during the May 2025 crisis, and examines how the crisis intensified, based on the strength of nuclear first use incentives and controllability of escalation. However, both models leave an important dimension underexplored: psychological dynamics that shape escalation pathways. As noted, Bell and McDonald acknowledge that perceptions of incentives for nuclear first use and controllability of escalation may diverge from objective conditions in ways that shape crisis behaviour.²³ In South Asia, where crises are frequent and historical distrust runs deep, perceptions, cognitive biases, and interpretations of the adversary's behaviour played a central role in shaping escalation during the May 2025 crisis, influencing both India and Pakistan's decision-making and risk calculations at each stage.

Responding to this gap, this report considers psychological dynamics, and in particular perceptions and misperceptions, as a third variable.²⁴ This variable helps explain why escalation may occur even when first-use incentives are weak and escalation is controllable. Under the shadow of misperceptions, even minor action, accidents, or defensive manoeuvres have the potential to spark rapid and uncontrolled escalation. Two types of psychological dynamics identified in the literature provide crucial insights into how perceptions and misperceptions can drive escalation: peaceful-defensive self-images and inherent bad faith models.²⁵ Actors operating with peaceful/defensive self-images view their actions as necessary for defence and security, while simultaneously interpreting the other side's behaviour as aggressive or threatening. As Robert Jervis argues in *Perceptions and Misperceptions in International Politics* (1976), such self-images create dangerous security dynamics, where leaders often fail to recognise that their actions are perceived as threatening, while simultaneously assuming hostility from the other side must be deliberate.²⁶ This produces a

fundamental misperception, where each side believes its own intentions are peaceful and defensive, while assuming the other's intentions are aggressive. Peaceful/defensive self-images limit each side's ability to empathise with the adversary's fears, reinforcing the perception that the other is acting aggressively, even in response to defensive measures.

In parallel, inherent bad faith models shape how each side interprets the other's intentions, assuming malign intent even in cases where actions are cautious or limited.²⁷

When a state operating with a peaceful-defensive self-image fails to clearly communicate its intentions or provide credible assurances, the adversary—operating under a bad faith model—interprets this lack of clarity as confirmation of hostile intent, intensifying distrust and escalating the crisis.

While the above frameworks help explain the logic of escalation during the May 2025 crisis, it does not itself explain how de-escalation was achieved. Building on BASIC's 2024 report, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*, this study adopts a complementary framework for analysing de-escalation, which can be understood through the mechanisms that enabled both sides to step back from further escalation. The 2024 report found that previous India-Pakistan crises have been contained through confidence that each side can be relied upon to show restraint in time of crisis by not pushing the other into a choice of a humiliating defeat or escalating the nuclear level.²⁸ This "mutual confidence" is driven by the shared fear of nuclear war, as well as four additional mechanisms: outsourcing escalation control to third parties (primarily the United States), CBMs, face-saving narratives, and intimate enmity.²⁹

²³ Bell and McDonald, "How to Think About Nuclear Crises", p.44.

²⁴ See Robert Jervis, *Perceptions and Misperceptions in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

²⁵ See Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Trusting Enemies: Interpersonal Relationships in International Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁶ Jervis, *Perceptions and Misperceptions*.

²⁷ Wheeler, *Trusting Enemies*.

²⁸ Cervasio, Wheeler, and McClafferty, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*.

²⁹ Cervasio, Wheeler, and McClafferty, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*.

The May 2025 crisis escalated more intensely than previous India-Pakistan confrontations because each side interpreted the same events through drastically divergent perceptions and it therefore demonstrates how perceptual asymmetries can drive escalation.

Understanding Escalation Dynamics of the India-Pakistan May 2025 Crisis

The following section illustrates how escalation during the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis intensified despite there being low incentives for nuclear first use and high degree of controllability.

As a result, the conflict operated at a much higher rung of the escalation ladder—where nuclear stability still provided a ceiling against all-out war even as instability at lower levels of conflict increased significantly. That said, and highlighting the value of incorporating perceptual variables into Bell and MacDonald’s framework, the interviews revealed a critical divergence in the thinking of Indian and Pakistani interviewees as to how far there were low incentives for nuclear first use in the crisis. Another critical finding is that the crisis was primarily driven by deliberate escalation in Morgan et al.’s terms, though risks of accidental and inadvertent escalation were also present. As explored below, a focus on the perceptual dimension also helps explain why escalation occurred even when first-use incentives are weak and escalation is otherwise controllable as perceptions and misperceptions amplified instability generating one of the most intense episodes of conventional confrontation between India and Pakistan since 1971.

2.1 Divergent Perceptions of Crisis Starting Point and Key Escalatory Moves

The May 2025 crisis escalated more intensely than previous India-Pakistan confrontations because each side interpreted the same events through drastically divergent perceptions and it therefore demonstrates

how perceptual asymmetries can drive escalation. This contributes to enriching our understanding of nuclear crisis escalation dynamics and the existing crisis models as set out by Bell and McDonald by showing how divergent interpretations and misperceptions of intent and red lines can amplify escalation, even when both sides claim they are exercising restraint.

A defining feature of India-Pakistan relations is the recurring pattern of nuclear crises, triggered in the wake of terrorist attacks in Indian-administered J&K. A terrorist attack in Indian-administered Kashmir is attributed by India to Pakistan-based militant groups that India accuses the Pakistani state of actively sponsoring but which Islamabad denies.³⁰ In response to the terrorist attacks, India has carried out since 2016 an ever-escalating pattern of military and diplomatic retaliatory measures against Pakistan. For example, following the 2016 Uri and 2019 Pulwama terrorist attacks—both attributed by India to Pakistan-based groups—India launched direct military operations against Pakistan.³¹

The May 2025 crisis followed this familiar pattern, but the level of escalation increased significantly.³² Following the events in Pahalgam on 22 April 2025, initially claimed (and later retracted) by the Resistance Front (TRF), an offshoot of the Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), India accused Pakistan of supporting and sponsoring the attack. Pakistan denied any involvement.³³ In the following days, India announced several diplomatic

30 Christopher Clary “Four Days in May: The India-Pakistan Crisis of 2025” (Stimson Center, 28 May 2025), <https://www.stimson.org/2025/four-days-in-may-the-india-pakistan-crisis-of-2025/>.

31 Christopher Clary, “Reflections on Pulwama-Balakot at Five Years” (Stimson Center, 27 February 2024), <https://www.stimson.org/2024/reflections-on-pulwama-balakot-at-five-years/>.

32 Interviewee 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 26, 28, 29, and 30.

33 M. Sudhir Selvaraj, “A Primer on Resistance Front, the Group Behind the Pahalgam Attack”, *The Diplomat*, 30 April 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/04/a-primer-on-the-resistance-front-the-group-behind-the-pahalgam-attack/>.

measures, such as the temporary suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT)—an unprecedented move as the treaty has withstood previous crises and diplomatic breakdowns and has never been suspended before—along with the expelling Pakistani diplomats, recalling its own staff from the High Commission in Islamabad, and shutting down the Attari-Wagha border.³⁴ In response, Pakistan also expelled Indian diplomats, closed its airspace to Indian aircraft, suspended all trade with India, and announced suspension of the 1972 Simla Agreement and holding other bilateral agreements with India “in abeyance”.³⁵

Interviews revealed a persistent asymmetry in perceptions between India and Pakistan regarding when the crisis began that echoes long-standing divergences on both sides.³⁶ From India’s perspective, the crisis began with what India characterised as an act of state-sponsored terrorism emanating from Pakistan, demanding a calibrated response to signal deterrence and resolve.³⁷ In this framing, *Operation Sindoor*—and earlier uses of force such as the 2016 surgical strikes and even more so the 2019 Balakot airstrike—are seen as justified retaliation and necessary to protect national security, rather than initiate a wider conflict. India claims that through the DGMO hotline on 7 May, it communicated that its operations were limited to terrorist infrastructure, while avoiding collateral damage and refraining from striking Pakistani military assets.³⁸ Indian analysts have highlighted that Indian actions were intended to impose costs for terrorist attacks on Indian soil, indicating that if Pakistan did not escalate and respond militarily, India was ready to stop.³⁹ That said, Pakistan viewed the cross-border strikes as escalatory regardless of intent.⁴⁰

In Pakistan’s perspective, the crisis begins with India’s military strike across the international border. Islamabad consistently denies state involvement

in such attacks and portrays Indian operations as unprovoked acts of aggression.⁴¹ For Pakistan, actions like *Operation Sindoor*, are the first escalatory step. In this framing, India’s narrative of counter-terrorism is viewed as a cover for military adventurism. Pakistani officials and several analysts⁴², as well as interviewees⁴³, argued that India might use or amplify terrorist incidents as false flag operations as a tool of statecraft, serving to assign blame, delegitimize Pakistan internationally, and justify unilateral military interventions.⁴⁴

This perceptual divergence between India and Pakistan extends beyond perceptions of the crisis onset. In the wake of the events in Pahalgam, Pakistan offered to participate in a joint investigation into the attack, an offer that India rejected. Pakistan framed its offer as transparency and confidence-building.⁴⁵

Pakistan framed its offer as transparency and confidence-building.⁴⁶ From India’s perspective, however, such offers are viewed as “ploys” designed to deflect attention from Pakistan’s alleged sponsoring of terrorism. Interviews with some former Indian officials noted that Delhi’s deep skepticism toward joint investigations stems from the negative experience of one of those following the 2008 Mumbai attack.⁴⁷ India claims it provided Pakistan with evidence that LeT were responsible for the attack

34 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Statement by Foreign Secretary on the decision of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), 23 April 2025, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl%2F39442>.

35 “Pakistan rejects Indian announcement to hold Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance”, *Radio Pakistan*, 24 April 2025, <https://www.radio.gov.pk/24-04-2025/pakistan-rejects-indian-announcement-to-hold-indus-waters-treaty-in-abeyance#:~:text=Noting%20the%20reckless%20and%20irresponsible.in%20Islamabad%20person%20non%20grate>.

36 See also Sunaina Danziger, Grace Easterly, Zeba Fazli, Gillian Gayner, Sameer Lalwani, Tyler Sagerstorm, Brigitta Schuchert, Chloe Stein, Elizabeth Threlkeld, and Akriti (Vasudeva) Kalyanker, *From Kargil to Balakot: Southern Asian Crisis Dynamics and Future Trajectories* (Stimson Center, 2020), <https://www.stimson.org/2020/from-kargil-to-balakot-southern-asian-crisis-dynamics-and-future-trajectories/>.

37 Golani, “Operation Sindoor”, p. 2.

38 Interview 9, 12, 13, and 21. See also Clary “Four Days in May”.

39 Anish Vohra, “The Military Dimension of Operation Sindoor” in Anil Golani (ed.) *Operation Sindoor: Rewriting the India Pakistan Rulebook* (New Delhi: Centre for Air Power Studies, 2025), p. 14.

40 “Act of war”: Pakistan pledge retaliation to India deadly attack”, *Al Jazeera*, 7 May 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/7/pakistan-decries-act-of-war-vows-retaliation-as-india-launches-strikes>.

41 Malik Qasim Mustafa, “Undermining Regional Stability: India’s Crisis Behavior and the Erosion of South Asian Strategic Norms” in Rabia Akhtar (ed.), *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post Pahalgam* (Centre for Security, Strategy and Policy Research and the Institute of Regional Studies, 2025), p. 293, <https://csspr.uol.edu.pk/cssprebook/>.

42 See Rizwana Abbasi, “Narratives of Blame: False Flag, Non-State Actors, and India’s Strategic Use of Crises” in Rabia Akhtar (ed.), *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post Pahalgam* (Centre for Security, Strategy and Policy Research and the Institute of Regional Studies, 2025), <https://csspr.uol.edu.pk/cssprebook/>.

43 Interviewee 2, 16, 22, 27, 29, and 30. See also Abbasi, “Narratives of Blame”; Asifa Tanveer, “From Ganga to Pahalgam: India’s Arc of Strategic Deceit”, *Policy Perspectives* 1(2) (2025): 91-120, jstor.org/stable/48839054?seq=1; Zahir Kazmi, “No Space for War: Marka-e-Haq and the Logic of Deterrence in South Asia (BASIC, 20 May 2025), <https://basicint.org/no-space-for-conventional-war-between-india-and-pakistan/>; Jillian Kestler-D’Amours, “Kashmir updates: Pakistan claims Pahalgam attack ‘false flag operation’”, *Al Jazeera*, 24 April 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2025/4/24/kashmir-attack-live-india-summons-pakistani-envoy-hunts-pahalgam-gunmen>.

44 Abbasi, “Narratives of Blame”.

45 “PM Shehbaz says Pakistan open to ‘neutral, transparent’ probe into Pahalgam attack”, *The Dawn*, 26 April 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1906694>.

46 “PM Shehbaz says Pakistan open to ‘neutral, transparent’ probe into Pahalgam attack”, *The Dawn*, 26 April 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1906694>.

47 Interviewee 6, 9, and 21.

and that the attackers were Pakistani nationals,⁴⁸ but Islamabad failed to take meaningful action against the perpetrators.⁴⁹ This experience, as some Indian interviewees highlighted, has entrenched deep skepticism toward any joint investigations in the wake of terrorist attacks.⁵⁰

From Pakistan's perspective, India's refusal to cooperate on joint investigations is interpreted as an effort to control the narrative and avoid neutral scrutiny of its claims.

Pakistani officials portray such offers as demonstrations of transparency, while India's rejections are seen as strategic attempts to control the narrative and pre-empt any challenge to its version of events.⁵¹

The May 2025 crisis also revealed a fundamental clash of narratives between India and Pakistan about whether there is space for conventional conflict under the nuclear shadow. From India's perspective, the May 2025 crisis was a demonstration of its ability to respond conventionally in the presence of nuclear weapons to perceived Pakistani-backed cross-border terrorism without triggering nuclear escalation.⁵² The Indian Prime Minister was quick to frame the unprecedented level of India's conventional military response as the "new normal", claiming

"If there is a terrorist attack on India, a fitting reply will be given. We will give a befitting response on our terms only. We will take strike action at every place where the roots of terrorism emerge. Secondly, India will not tolerate nuclear blackmail. India will strike precisely and decisively against terrorist hideouts developing under the cover of nuclear blackmail. Thirdly, we will not differentiate between the governments sponsoring terrorism and the masterminds of terrorism."⁵³

India's belief that it has carved out space below for conventional operations below the nuclear threshold rests on its declared No First Use (NFU) nuclear policy.⁵⁴ From India's perspective, Operation Sindoor signaled India's intent to not let Pakistan's nuclear capability deter it from using conventional force, thereby carving out space for conventional military action below the nuclear threshold.⁵⁵

Pakistan has refuted India's claim of creating a "new normal" and does not give any public legitimacy to the notion that there is increased space for conventional uses of force under the nuclear shadow.⁵⁶ Instead, Pakistan claims that its military operations in May 2025 denied India this space, reaffirming the credibility of its full-spectrum deterrent strategy. This is highlighted in an official press release, which stated:

"Pakistan's effective counterstrikes have reinforced the credibility of its deterrence and dispelled any illusion of India's conventional superiority or its ambitions to impose hegemony in the region. While India propagates the notion of establishing a "new normal" in bilateral relations, our restrained response has reaffirmed that the only acceptable norm is respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity."⁵⁷

From Pakistan's perspective, the crisis demonstrated that deterrence held firm, and in attempting to test Pakistan's deterrence posture, India "not only miscalculated the response but also failed to achieve escalation dominance."⁵⁸ Pakistani analysts have argued that India's failure to achieve significant conventional gains is itself evidence that deterrence held. They frame *Operation Bunyanum Marsoos*—Pakistan's response to *Operation Sindoor*—which involved missile and drone strikes against Indian military installations, as a calibrated and measured retaliation that demonstrated Pakistan's ability to match India conventionally without breaching the nuclear threshold.⁵⁹

48 Jawed Naqvi "India hands over Mumbai 'evidence' to Pakistan", *Dawn*, 6 January 2009, <https://www.dawn.com/news/337599/india-hands-over-mumbai-evidence-to-pakistan#:~:text=NEW%20DELHI%2C%20Jan%205:%20India%20on%20Monday,to%20Pakistan%20evidence%20of%20the%20links%20with>.

49 Farzana Shaikh, "Rising tensions resurface Pakistan's credibility - and India's backfiring policy on Kashmir" (Chatham House, 6 June 2025), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/05/rising-tensions-resurface-pakistans-credibility-problem-and-indias-backfiring-policy>.

50 Interviewee 6 and 9.

51 Abbasi, "Narratives of Blame".

52 Manpreet Sethi, "The Challenge of Cross-Border Terrorism Under the Nuclear Shadow—A Revisit Through Operation Sindoor", in Anil Golani (ed.), *Operation Sindoor: Rewriting the India Pakistan Rulebook* (Centre for Air Power Studies, 2025), p. 77.

53 Prime Minister's Office, "English rendering of PM's address to the Nation", Press Information Bureau (PIB), Government of India, 12 May 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2128268>.

54 Anil Golani, "Operation Sindoor: An Overview" in Anil Golani (ed.), *Operation Sindoor: Rewriting the India Pakistan Rulebook* (Centre for Air Power Studies, 2025), p. 9.

55 Arun Sahgal and Ambuj Sahu, "Operation Sindoor established India's New Response Doctrine Towards Pakistan" (BASIC, 21 May 2025), <https://basicint.org/operation-sindoor-establishes-indias-new-response-doctrine-towards-pakistan/>.

56 See Rabia Akhtar (ed.), *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post Pahalgam* (Centre for Security, Strategy and Policy Research and the Institute of Regional Studies, 2025), <https://csspr.uol.edu.pk/cssprebook/>.

57 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, "Transcript of the Weekly Media Briefing by the Spokesperson, Friday, 16 May 2025", 16 May 2025, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/transcript-of-the-weekly-media-briefing-by-the-spokesperson-on-friday-16th-may-2025?mission=media-briefings>.

58 Zahir Kazmi, "No Space for War: Marka-e-Haq and the Logic of Deterrence in South Asia" (BASIC, 20 May 2025), <https://basicint.org/no-space-for-conventional-war-between-india-and-pakistan/>.

59 Kazmi, "No Space for War".

These opposing narratives surrounding the May 2025 crisis dynamics highlight a dangerous divergence in strategic perceptions.⁶⁰ While India believes it has demonstrated space for conventional exchanges below the nuclear threshold; Pakistan insists that deterrence remains credible and that it can match India conventionally without resorting to nuclear escalation. As one interviewee observed, this mismatch is “one of the most alarming elements” of the crisis, as it encourages greater “risk acceptance behavior on both sides” in future confrontations.⁶¹ When each side believes it has successfully controlled escalation according to its own interpretation, it increases the risk for potential misperceptions, miscalculations, and unintended escalation in any future crisis. These divergent narratives represent not just a difference in rhetoric but a fundamental mismatch in strategic perceptions. What one side perceives as success is denied by the other, perhaps leading the first to take bolder steps in the future while the second feels compelled to respond more swiftly and forcefully.

The May 2025 crisis illustrates how perceptions and misperceptions can shape escalation dynamics in a nuclear crisis. Divergent interpretations of the crisis starting point produced mirrored risk-taking that increased the potential for miscalculation.

Misperceptions decreased both controllability and stability, highlighting the limits of nuclear deterrence in managing conventional escalation. The May 2025 crisis, therefore, enriches Bell and McDonald’s framework by illustrating how perceptual asymmetries, divergent narratives, and the stability-instability paradox interact to shape escalation pathways.

The May 2025 crisis reflects the logic of Bell and McDonald’s stability-instability model, representing a more intense manifestation of its dynamics as the crisis unfolded at a higher rung of the escalation ladder. Viewed through the perceptual lens, this intensification was driven by both sides believing that their own restraint meant that they maintained a controllability of the crisis, even as reciprocal misperceptions encouraged significantly riskier forms of conventional action, leading to significant escalation compared to previous crises. This underscores how perceptual dynamics can amplify the stability-instability paradox beyond previously observed thresholds. That said, it is also important to recognise how interpreting the crisis as an example of Bell and McDonald’s stability-instability model can be at variance with how most Pakistani experts—including some of those interviewed for this report—understand the dynamics of South Asian deterrence.⁶² The stability-instability model assumes that nuclear deterrence enables conventional conflict by insulating actors from the fear of nuclear escalation. However, Pakistan’s declaratory policy and force posture aims to do the opposite: to close the perceived space for conventional escalation by signaling that conventional aggression could trigger nuclear thresholds. This logic is not about enabling conventional uses of force at lower levels but preventing the use of large-scale conventional force under the shadow of nuclear deterrence.

2.2 Unpacking Escalation Types and Dynamics

Overall, the May 2025 crisis marked an acceleration and intensification of escalation dynamics in South Asia, driven primarily by deliberate escalation. The integration of advanced technologies, compressed decision-making timelines, and intense domestic and rhetorical pressures created an escalating environment that was more complex and volatile than previous India-Pakistan crises. By extending the operational and geographical scope of the conflict, the crisis raised the baseline from which future confrontations will begin.

60 Rabia Akhtar, “Two Rivals. One Crisis. A War of Narratives”, (BASIC, 30 June 2025), <https://basicint.org/two-rivals-one-crisis-a-war-of-narratives/>.

61 Interviewee 7.

62 See Akhtar (ed.), *Strategic Reckoning*; Kazmi, “No Space for War”; Syed Imran-ul-Hassan, “The Limits of Limited War and the Dangers of Escalation Dominance in the Aftermath of the Pakistan-India 2025 Crisis” (BASIC, November 2025), <https://basicint.org/the-limits-of-limited-war-and-the-dangers-of-escalation-dominance-in-the-aftermath-of-the-pakistan-india-2025-crisis/>.

Box 1: Chronology of key military and diplomatic moves in the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis

22 April 2025

Pahalgam Attack

- Gunmen attacked tourists in Pahalgam in India-administered Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), killing 26 people.
- The Resistance Front (TRF), an offshoot of Lashar-e-Taiba (LeT) claimed responsibility but later retracted it.⁶³

23 April

India's Diplomatic Measures

- India accuses Pakistan of supporting and sponsoring the terrorist attack.
- India suspends the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), Pakistani visas, Pakistani nationals, expels Pakistani diplomats, and closes the Wagah-Attari border.⁶⁴

24 April

Pakistan's Diplomatic Measures

- Pakistan denies involvement in the attack, calling it a "false flag operation".⁶⁵
- Pakistan closes airspace and trade with India, expels Indian diplomats, and threatens to suspend all bilateral agreements with India—including the 1972 Simla Agreement.⁶⁶

25 April–6 May

- Tensions simmering as both countries engage in heavy cross-border shelling and skirmishes along the Line of Control (LoC).

7 May

- 1:05-1:30 am IST: India launches *Operation Sindoor* targeting 9 alleged terrorist camps located in Pakistan as well as Pakistan-administered J&K.⁶⁷
- According to Indian claims, India communicated through the DGMO hotline that it was willing to stop the conventional operation if there was no escalation from Pakistan.⁶⁸
- Pakistan claims to have shot down 6 Indian Airforce jets.⁶⁹

63 Usaid Siddiqui, Alma Milisic, Jillian Kestler-D'Amours, and Edna Mohamed, "Updates: India shuts borders with Pakistan after Pahalgam attack in Kashmir", *Al Jazeera*, 23 April 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2025/4/23/kashmir-attack-live-india-looks-for-gunmen-after-26-killed-in-pahalgam>.

64 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of India, "Statement by Foreign Secretary on the decision of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), 23 April 2025, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/39442-statement+by+foreign+secretary+on+the+decision+of+the+cabinet+committee+on+security+ccs>.

65 Jillian Kestler-D'Amours, "Kashmir updates: Pakistan claims Pahalgam attack as 'false flag operation'", *Al Jazeera*, 24 April 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2025/4/24/kashmir-attack-live-india-summons-pakistani-envoy-hunts-pahalgam-gunmen>.

66 "India, Pakistan announce tit-for-tat measures, sever ties", *Kashmir Times*, 24 April 2025, <https://kashmirtimes.com/news/india-pakistan-announce-tit-for-tat-measures>.

67 "New Delhi Asserts It Is Well Prepared to Retaliate If Islamabad Escalates Situation After 'Operation Sindoor'", *News on AIR*, 7 May 2025, <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/indian-armed-forces-launches-operation-sindoor/>.

68 Anil Golani, "Operation Sindoor: An Overview", in Anil Golani (ed.), *Operation Sindoor: Rewriting the India Pakistan Rulebook* (Centre for Air Power Studies, 2025), p.3.

69 Clary, "Four Days in May", <https://www.stimson.org/2025/four-days-in-may-the-india-pakistan-crisis-of-2025/>.

8 May

- Pakistan launched drone and missile attacks overnight against Indian military installations.⁷⁰
- India strikes Pakistani air defence radars and systems early morning.⁷¹
- US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, spoke with Pakistani Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, encouraging immediate de-escalation and efforts to improve direct dialogue between India and Pakistan.⁷²
- US Vice President JD Vance stated in an interview on the conflict, calling for de-escalation whilst stating that “we’re not going to get involved in the middle of a war that’s fundamentally none of our business.”⁷³

9 May

- The US received intelligence suggesting India had launched a BrahMos missile to strike Pakistan, raising concerns within the Trump administration about possible nuclear escalation.⁷⁴
- 9pm PKT / 9:30pm IST: Vance calls Modi expressing concern about the probability of “dramatic escalation”, encouraging India to communicate with Pakistan directly to de-escalate.⁷⁵
- Rubio speaks with Pakistani Army Chief Asim Munir, urging both countries to find ways to de-escalate and offers US assistance in starting talks to avoid future confrontations.⁷⁶

10 May

- Around midnight IST: Indian Air Defence system intercepts a suspected Pakistani Fatah-II short-range ballistic missile near Sirsa.⁷⁷
- 1:10am PKT / 1:40am IST: India launches missile strikes against 11 Pakistani airbases.⁷⁸
- At around 2am PST / 2:30am IST: India strikes Nur Khan Airbase.⁷⁹
- Pakistan launches *Operation Bunyanum Marsoos* targeting several Indian military bases.⁸⁰
- Intense fighting along the LoC and further drone and missile attacks by both sides continued throughout the early hours.⁸¹

70 There are divergent narratives regarding whether Pakistan launched retaliatory strikes. The Indian account is that, following Operation Sindoor, Pakistan conducted missile and drone strikes against Indian forward posts along the LoC (see Anish Vohra, “The Military Dimension of Operation Sindoor” in Anil Golani (ed.), *Operation Sindoor: Rewriting the India Pakistan Rulebook* (Centre for Air Power Studies, 2025), p.14). In contrast, the Pakistani narrative denies attacks on Indian positions on 8 May, framing this as signalling strategic restraint (see Syed Ali Zai Jaffery, “Signalling Stability: Crisis Communication and the Grammar of Deterrence in South Asia” in Rabia Akhtar (ed.), *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post-Pahalgam - May 2025* (Centre for Security, Strategy and Policy Research and Institute of Regional Studies, 2025), p.316).

71 Press Information Bureau, Government of India, “Pakistan’s Bid to Escalate Negated - Proportionate Response by India”, 8 May 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2127670®=3&lang=2>.

72 US Department of State, “Secretary Rubio’s Call with Pakistani Prime Minister Sharif”, Press Release, 8 May 2025, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/05/secretary-rubios-call-with-pakistani-prime-minister-sharif-2>; US Department of State, “Secretary Rubio’s Call with Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar”, 8 May 2025, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-rubios-call-with-indian-external-affairs-minister-jaishankar-3>.

73 Stuti Mishra, “Vance says it is ‘non of our business’ to intervene in India-Pakistan conflict”, *Independent*, 9 May 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/india-pakistan-tensions-jd-vance-trump-b2747728.html>.

74 Alexander Ward, Robbie Gramer, and Shan Li, “Trump’s War Embrace of India Turns Cold”, *Wall Street Journal*, 2 August 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/india/trumps-warm-embrace-of-india-turns-cold-f8d0bbee>.

75 Alayna Treene, “Vance called Indian prime minister to encourage ceasefire talks after receiving alarming intelligence, sources say”, *CNN*, 10 May 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/05/10/politics/vance-modi-india-pakistan-intelligence>.

76 US Department of State, “Secretary Rubio’s Call with Pakistani Army Chief Asim Munir”, 9 May 2025, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-rubios-call-with-pakistani-army-chief-asim-munir/>.

77 Clary, “Four Days in May”.

78 Clary, “Four Days in May”; Vohra, “The Military Dimensions of Operation Sindoor”, p.14.

79 Clary, “Four Days in May”.

80 Clary, “Four Days in May”; Khalid Kidwai, “Restraint by Design: Pakistan’s Deterrence Logic and the May 2025 Crisis” in Rabia Akhtar (ed.), *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post-Pahalgam - May 2025* (Centre for Security, Strategy and Policy Research and Institute of Regional Studies, 2025), p.9.

81 Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam, Shivam Patel, Charlotte Greenfield, and Aftab Ahmed. “Explosions reported after India and Pakistan agree ceasefire”, *Reuters*, 10 May 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/pakistan-says-three-air-bases-targeted-by-indian-missiles-2025-05-10/>.

- 7:30am PKT / 8am IST: Reports indicate that Pakistan's Prime Minister had called a meeting of the National Command Authority (NCA)⁸² but this was denied a few hours later by Pakistan's Minister of Defence Khawaja Asif.⁸³
- Around 8am PKT: Rubio and Munir speak on the phone⁸⁴, where Rubio secured Pakistan's agreement to pursue a ceasefire or in a call shortly afterwards with Pakistani's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar.⁸⁵
- 8:45am PKT / 9:15am IST: Pakistan's DGMO attempted to call his Indian counterpart but the Indian DGMO Lt Rajiv Ghai did not pick up as he was reportedly in a meeting and could not take the call.⁸⁶
- Around 11am PKT / 11:30am IST: US readout released of Rubio's call with Jaishankar, where Rubio emphasised the need for de-escalation and re-establishing direct communication to avoid miscalculation.⁸⁷ According to an article in the *Hindustan Times*, Rubio conveyed that Pakistan was willing to agree to a ceasefire to which Jaishankar responded that such a proposal would need to come through the DGMO hotline.⁸⁸
- Around 11:30am PKT / 12pm IST: Foreign Minister Dar reiterated requests via Pakistan's mission in New Delhi for talks to take place through the DGMO hotline.⁸⁹
- 12:45pm PKT / 1:15pm IST: A call between Indian and Pakistan DGMOs takes place.
- 3pm PKT / 3:30pm IST: Another call takes place between the DGMOs where formal ceasefire agreement was reached, effective 4:30pm PKT / 5pm IST.⁹⁰
- Around 4:55pm PKT / 5:25pm IST: President Donald Trump announces both countries agree to an immediate ceasefire following US mediated talks.⁹¹
- 5:30pm PKT / 6pm IST: India announces ceasefire agreement without any reference to US involvement.⁹²

82 "Pakistan PM calls meeting of body that oversees nuclear arsenal, say Pakistan military", *Reuters*, 10 May 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-pm-calls-meeting-body-that-oversees-nuclear-arsenal-says-pakistan-2025-05-10/>.

83 Sourjya Bhowmick, "Pakistan defence minister denies reports of nuclear command authority meeting", *The Telegraph*, 10 May 2025, https://www.telegraphindia.com/world/pakistan-defence-minister-denies-report-of-nuclear-command-authority-meeting/cid/2098523#goog_rewarded.

84 Clary, "Four Days in May".

85 Clary, "Four Days in May".

86 Clary, "Four Days in May". See also "Call for pause in Indo-Pakistan hostilities was bilateral, no Trump role: Foreign secretary Vikram Mishra to parliamentary committee", *The Times of India*, 21 May 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/call-for-pause-in-indo-pakistan-hostilities-was-bilateral-no-trump-role-foreign-secretary-vikram-misra-to-parliamentary-committee/articleshow/121278433.cms>.

87 Clary, "Four Days in May"; US Department of State, "Secretary Rubio's Call with Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar", 10 May 2025, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/05/secretary-rubios-call-with-indian-external-affairs-minister-jaishankar/>.

88 Shishir Gupta, "View: India was ready for round II, Pakistan begged US for intervention on May 10", *Hindustan Times*, 18 May 2025, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-was-ready-for-round-ii-pak-begged-us-for-intervention-after-operation-sindoor-101747540885978.html#google_vignette.

89 Clary, "Four Days in May".

90 Clary, "Four Days in May".

91 Commentary Donald J. Trump Posts From Truth Social, *Twitter*, 10 May 2025, <https://x.com/TrumpDailyPosts/status/1921196713986892023>.

92 PIB India, *Twitter*, 10 May 2025, https://x.com/PIB_India/status/1921183842422931582; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Statement by Foreign Secretary", 10 May 2025, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/39488/Statement_by_Foreign_Secretary_May_10_2025.

Deliberate Escalation Dynamics

The May 2025 crisis was primarily characterised by deliberate escalation, with both sides making calculated choices to raise the level of confrontation—as one Pakistani interviewee described—taking it “up a notch”.⁹³ India’s *Operation Sindoor* involved missile strikes against alleged terrorist infrastructure deep within Pakistan’s territory, representing a deliberate crossing of a significant geographical threshold. Pakistan’s *Operation Bunyanum Marsoos* was equally deliberate. Through missile and drone strikes against Indian military assets, Pakistan sought to reassert its conventional and strategic deterrence whilst avoiding disproportionate escalation.⁹⁴ India’s suspension of the IWT further demonstrated deliberate escalation, designed to put pressure on Pakistan at a moment of heightened military tension. Together, these actions reflected a pattern of deliberate escalation with both sides demonstrating a willingness to climb higher on the conventional rung of the escalation ladder.

The May 2025 crisis, therefore, differed from earlier episodes not simply in scale but in a dangerous progression up Kahn’s classic escalation ladder.⁹⁵ Most notably, for the first time, two nuclear armed states exchanged missiles against each other’s territory—an escalatory rung far higher than any reached during previous India-Pakistan crises.⁹⁶ The episode was also marked by rapid deployment of advanced technologies and a dramatic expansion of the operational battlefield. Interviewees on both sides repeatedly stressed that the crisis did not represent a break from past patterns but an acceleration of trends, setting a new, more dangerous baseline for future confrontations.⁹⁷

Earlier crises help illustrate this trajectory. In 2016, India’s “surgical strikes” across the LoC following the Uri attack signalled a willingness to use limited punitive military force in response to cross-border terrorism. The 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis intensified this pattern with both sides employing airpower against each other’s territories for the first time since 1971. Yet, these earlier episodes avoided direct targeting of sensitive military infrastructure. By contrast, in May 2025, both states crossed these long-standing thresholds. They conducted strikes beyond the LoC, extending deep into each other’s

mainland and widening the geographical scope of the conflict. The confrontation also crossed a long-standing threshold with both sides directly targeting each other’s military infrastructure across the international border, assets that were previously considered as off-limits in earlier nuclear crises. As one interviewee explained, the next confrontation “will not start from zero. It will start from where [India and Pakistan] left it on May 10th.”⁹⁸

The crisis unfolded as a multi-domain confrontation that extended beyond traditional ground skirmishes, aerial dogfights, and shelling across the LoC, incorporating drone operations, missile strikes, and cyber-attacks.⁹⁹

Both sides employed drones, using swarm tactics and loitering munitions to probe and overwhelm the other’s air defences. This marked the first instance of drone warfare in South Asia, leading several interviewees to describe it as the region’s first “non-contact war”.¹⁰⁰

Deliberate escalation also extended beyond the military domain with India suspending the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT). Signed in 1960, the IWT divides the Indus Basin between the two states, granting India control over the three eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej) and Pakistan control over the three western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab).¹⁰¹ The Treaty has survived previous crises and diplomatic breakdowns, remaining largely off-limits during periods of heightened tensions. Several interviewees, therefore, noted that India’s suspension of the IWT represents a significant departure from past practices.¹⁰²

93 Interviewee 25. See also Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, quoted in Syed Iffran Raza, “Deterrence re-established, say armed forces”, Dawn, 12 May 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1910381>.

94 Mustafa, “Undermining Regional Stability”, p. 293.

95 Kahn, *On Escalation*. See also Rohan Mukerjee, “Climbing the Escalation Ladder: India and the Balakot Crisis”, *War on the Rocks*, 2 October 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/climbing-the-escalation-ladder-india-and-the-balakot-crisis/>.

96 Interviewee 3, 4, 10, and 15.

97 Interviewee 1, 4, 7, 9, 11, 18, 19, 20, 25, and 26.

98 Interviewee 2.

99 Rabia Akhtar, “Escalation Gone Meta: Strategic Lessons from the 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis” (Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 14 May 2025), <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/escalation-gone-meta-strategic-lessons-2025-india-pakistan-crisis#:~:text=The%202025%20India%20Pakistan%20crisis%20has%20once%20again%20brought%20South,drone%20warfare%2C%20and%20cyber%20operations.>

100 Interviewee 6, 11, 14, 18, and 20.

101 Anuttama Banerji, “Shared Interest: Why India and Pakistan Should Strengthen the Indus Waters Treaty” (Stimson Center, 27 June 2024), <https://www.stimson.org/2024/a-shared-interest-why-india-and-pakistan-should-strengthen-the-indus-waters-treaty/>.

102 Interviewee 4, 14, 18, 24, 25, 27, and 28.

India's missile strikes against Pakistan's airbases, particularly the Nur Khan airbase, in the early hours of 10 May are also an example of deliberate escalation. The base is located close to Pakistan's National Command Authority (NCA), which is the supreme decision-making body when it comes to Pakistan's nuclear decision-making. India's decision to conduct missile strikes deep into Pakistan was based on the assumption that there remained sufficient conventional space below the nuclear threshold. As one Indian former military interviewee noted "India struck the target that it wanted to. The fact that it was near the nuclear site was in a sense a message that [India] could [reach] anywhere inside Pakistan."¹⁰³ By striking so close to Pakistan's NCA, was India sending a signal to Pakistani decision-makers that it was prepared to move to even higher levels of escalation should Pakistan retaliate further? That said, India was careful not to mobilise its land forces in a way that threatened a ground attack across the international border—such an attack crossing one of Pakistan's nuclear red lines.¹⁰⁴

Risks of Accidental and Inadvertent Escalation

Although the crisis unfolded primarily through deliberate escalation, latent risks of accidental and inadvertent escalation were significant. While such escalation did not materialise in the terms set out by Morgan et al., the combination of geographical proximity, compressed decision-making timelines, and the use of advanced technologies created conditions in which misjudgements or technical failures could have rapidly intensified the situation. Pakistan claimed that some Indian missile strikes hit civilian areas, including religious sites, causing casualties.¹⁰⁵ If that were the case, such outcomes may have been unintended but could still have provoked further escalation. Moreover, with drones and aircraft from both sides operating in close proximity to the border, the risk of malfunctions, crashes, or accidental incursions across the LoC was ever present. The 2022 accidental launch of an Indian BrahMos missile, which occurred in peacetime, had already illustrated the danger of technical failures. In the far more intense atmosphere of the May 2025 crisis, a

similar incident could have been perceived as a deliberate attack, prompting immediate retaliation. Some interviewees stressed that in such a compressed crisis environment, the potential for an unintended technical incident to cause a crisis to spiral out of control is extremely high.¹⁰⁶

Disinformation and misinformation during the May 2025 crisis played a critical role as potential accelerants of inadvertent escalation.

Both governments accused the other of waging information warfare, with conflicting reports from official, media, and online sources. Both Indian and Pakistani interviewees noted that the sheer volume of contradictory reports made it difficult to distinguish between authentic and unreliable sources.¹⁰⁷ Deepfakes were particularly prominent during the crisis, including fabricated videos and audio clips of Indian officials apologising to Pakistan and Pakistani leaders conceding defeat to India.¹⁰⁸

The most significant risk of inadvertent escalation, however, emerged from India's deliberate strikes against the Nur Khan Airbase. Despite the possibility that this could be signaling, former Indian military official interviewees maintained that the strike was not intended as a strike on nuclear facilities.¹⁰⁹ From the Pakistani perspective, however, regardless of intent, the proximity of the strike to the NCA could have heightened perceived nuclear risks in Islamabad and could have been interpreted as signalling a capability to "decapitate" its nuclear command-and-control structure (NC3), potentially undermining its ability to retaliate.¹¹⁰ There were reports that Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif convened a meeting of Pakistan's National Command Authority (NCA)¹¹¹ but this was later denied when Pakistan's Defence

¹⁰³ Interviewee 9.

¹⁰⁴ Arzan Tarapore, "Operation Sindoor and the Evolution of India's Military Strategy Against Pakistan", *War on the Rocks*, 19 May 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/05/operation-sindoor-and-the-evolution-of-indias-strategy-against-pakistan/>.

¹⁰⁵ Zamir Akram, "From Crisis to Consensus: Building a Case for Strategic Restraint", in Rabia Akhtar (ed.), *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post Pahalgam* (Centre for Security, Strategy and Policy Research and the Institute of Regional Studies, 2025), p.122.

¹⁰⁶ Interviewee 1, 4, 7, 14, 18, 20, 21, 25, 28, 29, and 30.

¹⁰⁷ Interviewee numbers 3, 7, 10, 14, 21, 22, 25, and 28.

¹⁰⁸ Ruhee Neog, "A Live-Streamed Crisis: Technology and the Erosion of Information Control in the 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis" (BASIC, 7 October 2025), <https://basicintorg/a-live-streamed-crisis-information-control-technology-and-the-2025-india-pakistan-crisis/>.

¹⁰⁹ Interviewee 6 and 10.

¹¹⁰ David E. Sanger, Julian E. Barnes, and Maggie Haberman, "Reluctant at First, Trump Officials Intervened in South Asia as Nuclear Fears Grew", *The New York Times*, 10 May 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/10/us/politics/trump-india-pakistan-nuclear.html>.

¹¹¹ "Pakistan PM calls meeting of body that oversees nuclear arsenal, says Pakistan military", *Reuters*, 10 May 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-pm-calls-meeting-body-that-oversees-nuclear-arsenal-says-pakistan-2025-05-10/#:~:text=Reuters%20Plus%20Pakistan%20PM%20calls%20meeting%20of%20body%20that%20oversees%20nuclear%20arsenal,Dayal,%20Editing%20by%20YP%20Rajesh>.

Minister stated no such meeting was scheduled.¹¹² That said, if pre-emption fears on Pakistan's part were present, this aspect of the crisis could reflect elements of the brinkmanship model, where the risk of uncontrolled nuclear escalation may pressure one's opponent to back down. However, an interview with another Indian former military official claimed that they were confident that the incident would not lead to nuclear escalation because "if you go nuclear it is going to affect both sides equally badly."¹¹³

The Nur Khan episode raised concerns outside of the region and likely contributed to the US decision to intervene in the crisis—discussed in more detail in the subsequent section of this report. An article in *The New York Times* reported that following the Indian strikes on the Nur Khan Airbase, US officials grew concerned that Pakistan would interpret the strikes as a threat to its NC3 infrastructure, causing the crisis to spiral out of control.¹¹⁴ According to a *Wall Street Journal* article, US intelligence suggested that India had launched a BrahMos missile to strike Pakistan, prompting fears within the Trump administration that the crisis might escalate to the nuclear level.¹¹⁵

The most significant risk of inadvertent escalation, however, emerged from India's deliberate strikes against the Nur Khan Airbase. Despite the possibility that this could be signaling, former Indian military official interviewees maintained that the strike was not intended as a strike on nuclear facilities.

112 Sourjua Bhowmick, "Pakistan defence minister denies reports of nuclear command authority meeting", *The Telegraph*, 10 May 2025, https://www.telegraphindia.com/world/pakistan-defence-minister-denies-report-of-nuclear-command-authority-meeting/cid/2098523#goog_rewarded.

113 Interviewee 10.

114 Sanger, Barnes, and Haberman, "Reluctant at First".

115 Alexander Ward, Robbie Gramer, and Shan Li, "Trump's Warm Embrace of India Turns Cold", *Wall Street Journal*, 2 August 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/india/trumps-warm-embrace-of-india-turns-cold-f8d0bbe>.

De-Escalation of the India-Pakistan May 2025 Crisis

Following four days of intense military exchanges, India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire on 10 May 2025.

To understand how the crisis was ultimately de-escalated, it is necessary to examine the factors that influenced both sides to step back from further escalation. BASIC's 2024 report, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia* highlights that India-Pakistan nuclear crises have historically been managed through confidence in the shared belief that neither side will push the other into a position where it must choose between accepting a humiliating defeat or escalating to the nuclear level.¹¹⁶

This "mutual confidence" is driven by nuclear restraint or the shared fear of nuclear war but it is reinforced by additional mechanisms: escalation control to third parties, CBMs, face-saving narratives, and intimate enmity.¹¹⁷ Assessing the role of these mechanisms during the de-escalation of the May 2025 crisis, this section finds that only the first three were operative. Moreover, while these mechanisms may have contributed to de-escalation, the dominant perception on the Indian side is that India effectively 'won' the crisis by demonstrating a greater willingness to climb the escalation ladder. From the Pakistani perspective, however, this has fuelled concerns that India is pursuing a strategy of 'escalation dominance'¹¹⁸—defined as the ability to control the escalation ladder by having the capacity to impose disproportionate costs on the adversary whilst denying them the ability to escalate or respond effectively, thereby forcing them to back down.¹¹⁹

116 Cervasio, Wheeler, and McClafferty, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*.

117 Cervasio, Wheeler, and McClafferty, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*.

118 Interview 1, 3, and 15. See also Abbasi, "Narratives of Blame", p.214; Rabia Akhtar, "Conclusion - India's Doctrinal Drift and the End of the Equilibrium: South Asia's Next Decade" in Rabia Akhtar (ed.) *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post-Pahalgam - May 2025* (Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research and Institute of Regional Studies, 2025), p.311.

119 Kahn, *On Escalation*.

3.1 Outsourcing Escalation Control to Third Parties

The most visible and widely reported factor in de-escalation was the intervention of third parties, especially the United States. Historically, the United States has played an important role as a crisis intermediary, persuading both sides that the other will pursue a path of restraint.¹²⁰ Other international actors, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom, also engaged diplomatically during the May 2025 crisis to encourage restraint and de-escalation.

Initially, US engagement in the crisis was hesitant, with Vice President JD Vance calling it "none of our business", suggesting that India and Pakistan should resolve the crisis bilaterally.¹²¹ However, US diplomacy did become more active as escalation progressed. It is not yet clear exactly what triggered the US's decision to become more involved in the crisis, however, as explained in the previous section, there were reports about fears among US officials over the possibility of nuclear escalation.¹²² As a result, the US became increasingly active in seeking a mutually acceptable off-ramp. Interviews revealed that it's not yet clear what the specific off-ramp was,¹²³ but President Donald Trump later claimed credit for facilitating a ceasefire, linking it to a prospective trade deal.¹²⁴

120 Cervasio, Wheeler, and McClafferty, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*. See also Moeed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia* (Stanford University Press, 2018); Rabia Akhtar, "Managing nuclear risk in South Asia: A Pakistani response", *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* 27(1) (2017): 62-63. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2016.1264217?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

121 Stuti Mishra, "Vance sats 'non of our business' to intervene in India-Pakistan conflict", *Independent*, 9 May 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/india-pakistan-tensions-jd-vance-trump-b2747728.html>.

122 Ward, Gramer, and Li, "Trump's Warm Embrace of India Turns Cold".

123 Interviewee 6, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21, and 27.

124 Chiara Cervasio and Nicholas J. Wheeler, "Restraint at Risk: The Anatomy of India-Pakistan De-escalation" (BASIC, 12 June 2025), <https://basicint.org/restraint-at-risk/>.

Official narratives from India and Pakistan on US involvement differ markedly. Pakistani analysts argue that de-escalation occurred because of US diplomatic involvement. Islamabad publicly thanked Washington and other international actors for their efforts to broker peace, while New Delhi downplayed the role of third party involvement, insisting the ceasefire was a bilateral agreement requested by Pakistan. *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia* noted Pakistan's growing distrust in the US as an impartial intermediary following the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis. As several interviewees highlighted, however, the May 2025 crisis has reaffirmed the trust that Pakistan has in the United States as a third party facilitator.¹²⁵

For India, crisis de-escalation is interpreted through the lens of controlled escalation. Rather than de-escalation emerging from mutual restraint, this perspective suggests that the crisis ended because India believed it had secured a superior position on the escalation ladder, compelling Pakistan to step down.

India portrayed its actions as “focused, measured, and non-escalatory”, limited to targeting terrorist infrastructure, and that Indian leadership was prepared to halt operations after its initial strikes, with escalation beyond 7 May occurring in response to Pakistani retaliation.¹²⁶ India's final strikes on 10 May are presented as a decisive step after which New Delhi was ready to de-escalate.

3.2 Confidence-Building Measures

Beyond third party and especially US intervention, some interviewees acknowledged the value of CBMs in functioning as fragile but vital guardrails that helped contain the crisis but they ultimately did not prevent the crisis from breaking out in the first place.¹²⁷ Among these, the DGMO hotline proved effective in facilitating the ceasefire agreement. Direct communication between the two militaries on 10 May enabled both sides to coordinate the suspension of hostilities and prevent further escalation. The hotline served as a practical channel through which the ceasefire was formalised and implemented at the operational level.¹²⁸ Its consistent use throughout the crisis underscores the continued relevance of military-to-military communication as a crisis management tool in South Asia.

The sustained use of the DGMO hotline stands in contrast to several previous India-Pakistan crises. As highlighted elsewhere by BASIC, there have been moments when the hotline fell silent or was not used because each side feared the other might use it to mislead or deceive the other about its real military intentions.¹²⁹ The fact that both sides continued to use the hotline throughout the May 2025 crisis—as interviewees highlighted—suggests that it maintained a degree of operational credibility amidst the deep distrust. As Bell and McDonald highlight in their framework, communication is key to shaping the controllability of a crisis. For example, states with well-established channels through which they can signal intent and red lines are better able to control escalation than those relying on unreliable or ad hoc channels or solely on public signaling.¹³⁰

However, the effectiveness of the DGMO hotline is ultimately bounded by the level of trust on both sides. Due to deep distrust and entrenched bad faith assumptions—where each side interprets the other's actions as having malign intent—both sides have not always been transparent as they could be sharing information during crises, and there are fears that the other might be using the hotline for deception purposes.¹³¹ A further challenge is signal interpre-

¹²⁵ Interviewee 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 15, and 20.

¹²⁶ Golani, “Operation Sindoor: An Overview”.

¹²⁷ Interviewee 1, 2, 4, 5, 15, 18, 19, 20, and 21.

¹²⁸ Clary, “Four Days in May”.

¹²⁹ Rabia Akhtar, Chiara Cervasio, Ruhee Neog, Alice Spilman, and Nicholas J. Wheeler (eds.), *Crisis Communications: Indian and Pakistani Perspectives in Responsible Practices* (BASIC: London, 2023), pp. 4-5, <https://basicint.org/compedium-crisis-communications-indian-and-pakistani-perspectives/>.

¹³⁰ Bell and McDonald, “How to Think About Nuclear Crises”, p. 45.

¹³¹ Cervasio, Wheeler, and McClafferty, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*, p. 25.

tation. For communication to work, each side must correctly understand what the other is signaling, but deep distrust, cognitive biases, and the possibility of deception make accurate interpretation uncertain. As a result, while the hotline facilitates communication, it cannot fully overcome the risks of misperceptions or inadvertent escalation in high stakes crisis situations.

The May 2025 crisis also reveals the limitations of such a channel when it is not always trusted or backed by sustained political will. While it was instrumental in negotiating and implementing the ceasefire, the authority to initiate or approve such an agreement ultimately resides with the political leadership. Once the political decision to proceed with a ceasefire has been made, the DGMOs use the hotline to negotiate the terms of the agreement. As interviews revealed, this structural limitation means that the hotline's effectiveness is contingent on the readiness of political leaders to pursue de-escalation.¹³²

Another CBM that played a role in the crisis is the 1988 Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack Against Nuclear Installations and Facilities (here after the Non-Attack Agreement), under which both countries pledge not to target each other's declared nuclear facilities.¹³³

Some interviewees highlighted that this agreement held firm throughout the crisis, preventing strikes on sensitive nuclear sites and ensuring that the confrontation, whilst intense, remained below the nuclear threshold.¹³⁴ The continued observance of the Non-Attack Agreement prevented the crisis from crossing into the nuclear domain, maintaining a crucial threshold of restraint to not target each other's declared nuclear facilities. Its endurance underscores the importance of CBMs that can function in the midst of a crisis.

However, the Non-Attack agreement does not address the growing issue of conventional-nuclear entanglement. For instance, India's strikes on Pakistan's airbases during the crisis—particularly the Nur Khan airbase—involved locations where nuclear-capable delivery systems were either co-located or nearby, highlighting a situation where conventional attacks could inadvertently threaten nuclear assets or trigger a nuclear response. This raises questions about the limitations of the Non-Attack Agreement. While neither side directly targeted facilities and installations protected under the Non-Attack Agreement, the dangers of conventional-nuclear entanglement highlight the dangerous deliberate escalation—as evidenced by strikes on the Nur Khan airbase—as well as the risk of inadvertent nuclear escalation.

3.3 Face-Saving Narratives

A notable feature of the May 2025 crisis was the construction of face-saving domestic narratives. Both governments framed the outcomes of their actions as a success, allowing de-escalation to occur without either side appearing to be backing down. India's narrative centred on *Operation Sindoor*, presented domestically as “tactical success”, demonstrating India's ability to respond to and deter cross-border terrorism.¹³⁵ Pakistan, by contrast, claimed that its deterrence had held firm, preventing India from pushing further, as well as claiming to have shot down several Indian Rafale jets.¹³⁶ Such narratives served domestic audiences and allowed both governments to claim that they had the upper hand and achieved their objectives.

As several Indian and Pakistani interviewees observed, by crafting domestic narratives of success, each side was able to signal it had achieved its objectives during the May 2025 crisis without appearing to be backing down.¹³⁷ This approach mirrors patterns seen in earlier confrontations, most notably the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis, where both countries similarly claimed victory in order to maintain domestic credibility.¹³⁸

¹³² Interviewee 3, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20, 28, and 30.

¹³³ Agreement between India and Pakistan on the Prohibition of Attack Against Nuclear Installations and Facilities (India-Pakistan Non-Attack Agreement), signed 31 December 1988, https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/india_pakistan_non_attack_agreement.pdf.

¹³⁴ Interviewee 15, 19, and 25.

¹³⁵ Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, “Operation Sindoor: Forging One Force”, Press Information Bureau (PIB), Government of India, 18 May 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2129453#:~:text=Operation%20SINDOOR%20was%20thus%20not,land%2C%20air%2C%20and%20sea>.

¹³⁶ Sanaullah Khan, “Pakistan downs 5 Indian jets as retaliation for late-night strikes at 6 sites: officials”, *Dawn*, 6 May 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1908824>.

¹³⁷ Interviewee 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 20, and 28.

¹³⁸ Cervasio, Wheeler, and McClafferty, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*.

Several interviewees highlighted that in India, for example, the crisis unfolded against the backdrop of local elections, creating strong incentives for political leaders to respond decisively to perceived aggression.

However, as highlighted elsewhere, there is no evidence to suggest that the crafting of face-saving narratives by both sides was a decisive factor in de-escalating the crisis.¹³⁹ Moreover, interviewees cautioned that reliance on face-saving narratives of victory carries significant risks for future crises.¹⁴⁰ As highlighted in *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*, such narratives reinforce the belief on both sides that they can emerge victorious in the eyes of domestic audiences.¹⁴¹ This dynamic heightens the risk of ‘commitment traps’, in which both Indian and Pakistani leaders may feel compelled to either match or outdo their actions in future crises. These ‘commitment traps’ may be difficult for leaders to escape as a crisis unfolds, as leaders who make public threats but fail to follow through risk domestic backlash for appearing weak.¹⁴²

Domestic politics further magnifies these pressures. Several interviewees highlighted that in India, for example, the crisis unfolded against the backdrop of local elections, creating strong incentives for political leaders to respond decisively to perceived aggression.¹⁴³ Combative rhetoric and nationalist narratives can heighten expectations for decisive action. As one interviewee noted, “if you start beating the war drums, then your constituency will demand some action that matches the rhetoric.”¹⁴⁴ In such scenarios, divergent claims of success can reinforce commitment traps, making leaders feel compelled to escalate rather than show restraint, thereby increasing the risks of escalation.

139 Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, “India’s Post-May Signalling and the Erosion of Restraint in South Asia” (BASIC 4 December, 2025), <https://basicint.org/indias-post-may-signalling-and-the-erosion-of-restraint-in-south-asia/>.

140 Interviewee 4, 7, 11, 13, 16, 18, and 28.

141 See also Cervasio, Wheeler, and McClafferty, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*.

142 Interviewee 3, 7, 19, 26, and 28. See also Cervasio, Wheeler, and McClafferty, *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*.

143 Interviewee 1, 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 16, 19, 20, 22, 24, 25, and 29.

144 Interviewee 11.



Conclusion

The May 2025 crisis marked the most intense military confrontation between India and Pakistan since the 1971 war.

Although incentives for nuclear first use remained low, the crisis revealed how technological advancements, compressed decision-making timelines, and perceptual biases can create rapid escalation at the conventional level and decrease controllability.

The crisis followed the familiar pattern of the stability-instability model, but at a much higher and more dangerous rung of the escalation ladder. The presence of nuclear weapons prevented the crisis from spiraling into all-out war, yet instability at lower levels of conflict increased to levels much higher than in previous India-Pakistan crises. Both sides interpreted the crisis through divergent perceptions where one side's perceived success is denied by the other, encouraging both sides to adopt more risk acceptance behaviour. Escalation unfolded primarily through deliberate escalation, though risks of accidental and inadvertent escalation were ever present.

At the same time, elements of the brinkmanship model—where leaders do not have full control over the pace and extent of escalation, and the risk of nuclear conflict is driven by the possibility of miscalculation, failure to interpret signals accurately, accidents, and loss of control—were present. The proximity of India's strikes to Pakistan's NC3 infrastructure, the pace of escalation, and the potential for

technical failures and misperceptions created conditions where escalation could have become inadvertent and potentially uncontrollable, particularly when adversaries interpret each other's actions as having malign intent.

The crisis also illustrates the limits of escalation control. Both India and Pakistan attempted to calibrate their conventional actions along the escalation ladder, yet compressed decision-making timelines, advanced technologies, and perceptual asymmetries increased the potential for the crisis to spiral out of control. India believes it has carved out space for conventional exchanges without triggering a nuclear response, whereas Pakistan believes its deterrence holds firm and that it can match India conventionally without resorting to nuclear escalation.

From India's perspective, the crisis ended because it believed that it had achieved a superior position on the escalation ladder, forcing Pakistan to step down. From Pakistan's perspective, however, India's actions were seen as an attempt to achieve escalation dominance. If Pakistan believes India is pursuing this strategy, it may respond by raising its own baseline, taking more escalatory or risk acceptance steps in future crises to counter India's perceived advantage.

These dynamics highlight how perceptions of escalation dominance can amplify risks, making crises harder to control even when both sides believe they are acting with restraint.

Applying BASIC's framework from *Crisis Prevention and Management in South Asia*, this report demonstrates how various mechanisms operated to bring about an end to the crisis. De-escalation depended on a combination of mechanisms, namely outsourcing escalation control to third parties—particularly the United States—and the role of bilateral CBMs. While US intervention once again provided a critical safety net at a moment of acute crisis, the unevenness of its engagement underscores the inherent risks of relying on third parties for crisis management. Moreover, outsourcing escalation control to third parties does not make up for the absence of institutionalised crisis management mechanisms.¹⁴⁵ The combination of inconsistent US engagement and divergent narratives about how the crisis de-escalated underscores the need for more robust bilateral crisis management mechanisms.

¹⁴⁵ Interviewee 1, 3, 4, 7, 13, 14, 18, 20, 21, and 28.

To conclude, the May 2025 crisis can be seen through the prism of an increasingly dangerous stability-instability model—one where deliberate escalation dynamics combined with mutual misperceptions are decreasing crisis controllability.

This suggests that India-Pakistan crises could be moving more towards a brinkmanship model, where incentives for nuclear first use are low but leaders struggle to control escalation, engaging in a competition of risk taking and pushing crises closer to the risk of nuclear war in order to pressure the other side to back down. If divergent perceptions persist—particularly around strategies of escalation dominance—the mechanisms that prevented the May 2025 crisis from spiraling out of control may not be sufficient in future crises, underscoring the urgent need for renewed efforts in bilateral crisis management and prevention in South Asia.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Cervasio and Wheeler, "Restraint at Risk".

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