

Conflict Prevention in South Asia: Lessons from Recent India-Pakistan Tensions

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Introduction

The May 2025 Pahalgam attack triggered one of South Asia's gravest escalation in decades, rapidly thrusting India and Pakistan into a crisis that exposed both the region's persistent volatility and the evolving risks posed by nuclear weapons, advanced military technology, and information warfare.²



Source: CNN

The speed and scale of military operations brought the region to the brink of wider conflict, reaffirming the centrality and fragility of nuclear deterrence in India-Pakistan relations. Deep-seated mistrust, unresolved disputes, and the role of non-state actors continue to fuel instability,³ while advances in technology and information flows have accelerated escalation. Additionally,

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² Christopher Clary, 'Four Days in May: The India-Pakistan Crisis of 2025', *Stimson Center* (blog), 28 May 2025, <http://stimson.org/2025/four-days-in-may-the-india-pakistan-crisis-of-2025/>

³ Muhammad Sadiq and Iftikhar Ali, 'Non-State Actors, Sub-Conventional Warfare, and India-Pakistan Nuclear Crisis Stability/Instability', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 59, no. 2 (1 March 2024): 325–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221108736>.

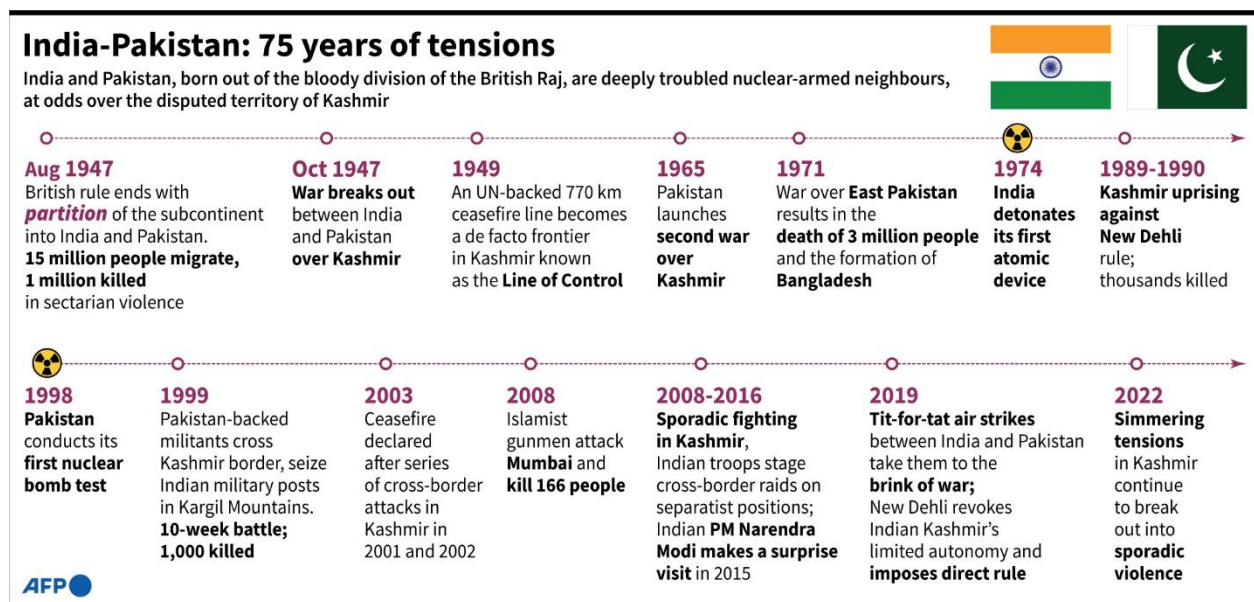
the crisis highlighted the persistent challenges of crisis management and conflict prevention in a region shaped by multiple traditional security dilemmas and the growing impact of digital information flows.

This episode raises two central questions: What new dynamics shaped crisis mediation and conflict prevention during the 2025 India-Pakistan standoff? And which lessons can be drawn from this episode for improving regional and global crisis management frameworks?

Historical and Strategic Context of the May 2025 India–Pakistan Crisis

To understanding the May 2025 confrontation between India and Pakistan, it seems essential to situate the episode within the broader context of their historically volatile and nuclearized relationship.

Since 1947, the two countries have been engaged in a deeply militarized rivalry, with Kashmir – a disputed region claimed in full by both India and Pakistan – as the central and most contentious flashpoint.⁴



Source: AFP

Major wars in 1947-1948, 1965, 1971, and the 1999 Kargil conflict, as well as periodic crises such as the 2001-2002 standoff, have entrenched patterns of mistrust and militarization. The

⁴ Sumit Ganguly, *The Origins Of War In South Asia: Indo-Pakistani Conflicts Since 1947* (New York: Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429313370>.

rivalry intensified after both countries conducted nuclear tests in 1998, raising the stakes of any potential confrontation. Additional disputes over water resources, the Siachen Glacier, Sir Creek, and other boundaries have further complicated relations.⁵

Repeated efforts in conflict management - through bilateral talks, third-party mediation, and confidence-building measures - have often failed to address the root causes of instability, particularly the exclusion of Kashmiri voices and the lack of sustained dialogue. Regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have played only a limited role, constrained by persistent adversarial dynamics and the broader geopolitical context.⁶ As a result, unresolved disputes, high military spending, and what scholars often qualified of an “adversarial psychosis” have ensured that the relationship remains crisis-prone and resistant to any lasting peace.⁷

Beyond the historical context, several emerging factors have developed over recent years further propelling the crisis toward escalation. Especially, technological provocations played a significant role, as both India and Pakistan integrated advanced surveillance, missile, and drone technologies into their military posturing, signaling new capabilities and heightening the risk of rapid escalation.⁸



Source: *Indian army to induct first Hermes-900 Drone for surveillance along Pakistan border* (2024) & *Pakistan Air Force Officially Commissions New Combat Drones* (2024)

In particular, India’s pursuit of swarm and autonomous uncrewed aerial systems (UAS) poses a

⁵ Amjed Jaaved, ‘Simple Indo-Pak Border Disputes: Complicated by Lack of Political Will’, *Modern Diplomacy* (blog), 25 November 2019, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2019/11/25/simple-indo-pak-border-disputes-complicated-by-lack-of-political-will/>

⁶ K Yhome, ‘India-Pakistan Tension: Is There a Role for SAARC?’, *Orfonline.Org* (blog), 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-pakistan-tension-is-there-role-for-saarc-48690>

⁷ Shah Dr. Naimatullah, ‘Major Conflicts Between India and Pakistan: A Critical Analysis of Historical Tensions and Geopolitical Dynamics’, *AlQamar*, 2024, [10.53762/alqamar.07.03.e03](https://doi.org/10.53762/alqamar.07.03.e03).

⁸ Rizwana Abbasi and Muhammad Saeed Uzzaman, *Changing Patterns of Warfare between India and Pakistan: Navigating the Impact of New and Disruptive Technologies* (London: Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003340171>

direct threat to Pakistan's second-strike capabilities, while Pakistan's UAS programs focus on reinforcing deterrence and crisis management, together accelerating an action-reaction cycle and destabilizing regional security.⁹

These developments unfolded under the persistent shadow of nuclear escalation, a defining feature of India-Pakistan crises since their nuclearization in 1998. Both states have repeatedly engaged in nuclear signaling through missile tests and military posturing designed to reinforce deterrence, making the risk of inadvertent or deliberate escalation ever-present.¹⁰

The Escalation Dynamics of the India–Pakistan Confrontation

The May 2025 crisis was set in motion by the Pahalgam attack in Indian-administered Kashmir, which killed 26 civilians. Indian authorities attributed the attack to The Resistance Front, an offshoot of Lashkar-e-Taiba allegedly operating from Pakistani territory, and accused Pakistan of supporting cross-border terrorism. These allegations, widely amplified by Indian media, sharply escalated bilateral tensions. Pakistan categorically denied state involvement and called for independent investigations.¹¹



Source: *The Economist* (<https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/04/22/india-and-pakistan-could-come-to-blows-over-kashmir>)

⁹ Nimra Javed and Zohaib Altaf, 'India-Pakistan Development of Drones: Implications for Strategic Stability', *Strategic Studies*, 16 May 2025, [10.53532/ss.044.02.00360](https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.044.02.00360)

¹⁰ Karthika Sasikumar, 'India-Pakistan Crises under the Nuclear Shadow: The Role of Reassurance', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 2, no. 1 (2 January 2019): 151–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2019.1619229>

¹¹ Mohamed Waseem Malla, 'Crisis Without Closure: India-Pakistan Confrontation in an Era of Fragile Deterrence', 26 May 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/crisis-without-closure-india-pakistan-confrontation-in-an-era-of-fragile-deterrence/>

In response, India implemented a series of punitive measures including suspending the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), expelling Pakistani diplomats, and closing borders. The IWT, a transboundary water-sharing agreement, is a rare example of enduring cooperation since 1960 that has withstood previous wars and crises.¹² By suspending the IWT, India signaled a willingness to undermine a foundational pillar of regional stability and hydro-diplomacy. Pakistan retaliated by suspending the Simla Agreement, the primary bilateral accord since 1972 for managing relations and disputes through peaceful means.¹³ This marked a significant breakdown in diplomatic engagement and undeniably removed a key mechanism for de-escalation.

With diplomatic channels eroding, both countries raised military alerts along the Line of Control. On May 7, India launched Operation Sindoor, striking nine strategic targets in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir including terrorist camps and infrastructure, air bases and command centers as well as radar facilities and air defense infrastructure, using BrahMos and SCALP-EG cruise missiles.¹⁴



Source: Brahmos missiles used by Indian during Sindoor Operation (Defence Stories)

Pakistan condemned these strikes as violations of sovereignty, reported civilian casualties, and vowed retaliation.¹⁵ Within hours, Pakistan responded with a combination of missile and UAS attacks on several Indian air bases, including the use of conventionally armed Fatah-I and Fatah-II short-range ballistic missiles.¹⁶

¹² Amit Ranjan, 'Indus Waters Treaty Negotiations: Geopolitics, Disputes and Cooperation', *South Asia Research* 45, no. 1 (1 February 2025): 110–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02627280241303540>

¹³ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, 'Pakistan, India, and Kashmir: A Historical Review', in *Perspectives On Kashmir* (Routledge, 1992).

¹⁴ Clary, 'Four Days in May'.

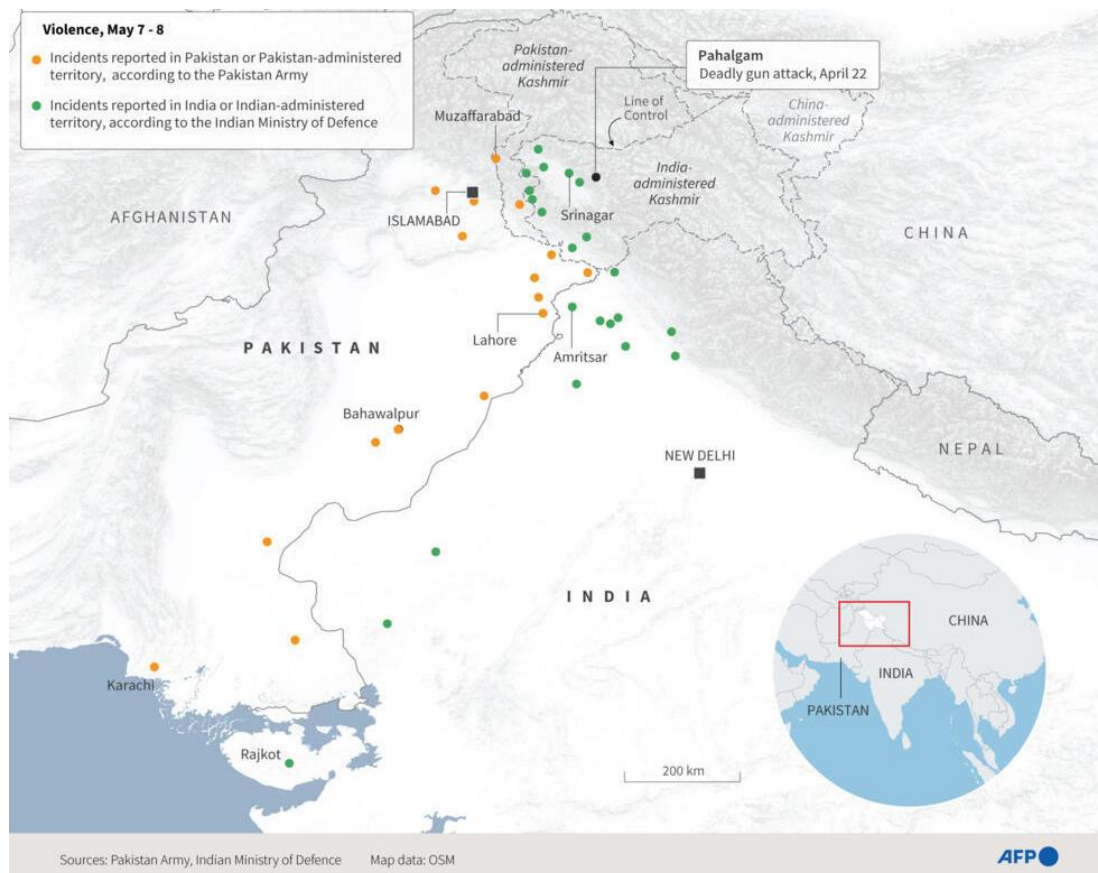
¹⁵ 'Pulling India and Pakistan Back from the Brink | International Crisis Group', 8 May 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/india-pakistan-india-pakistan-kashmir/pulling-india-and-pakistan-back-brink>

¹⁶ Clary, 'Four Days in May'.



Source: Fatah-I & Fatah-II (Guided Multiple Rockets) used by Pakistan ([Wikipedia](#))

Between May 8 and May 10, the conflict intensified with waves of Pakistani UAS and missile attacks on Indian military installations. India's air and missile defense systems intercepted many of these strikes, while Indian forces retaliated against Pakistani airbases and command centers, using Israeli-origin Harpy, Harop UAS to conduct continued precision strikes. The fighting along the Line of Control was particularly deadly, accounting for a significant share of casualties on both sides.



Source: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250508-pakistan-and-india-accuse-each-other-of-waves-of-drone-attacks>

Despite the intensity of hostilities, both sides demonstrated calculated restraint seemingly to avoid crossing nuclear thresholds. However, the use of advanced technologies and information operations fueled confusion, misinformation, and the risk of rapid, unintended escalation.

The Role of Information Warfare and Technological in Escalation

During the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis, the information environment fundamentally shaped both the trajectory and management of the confrontation. Media in each country amplified government narratives, contributing to the weaponization of information: Indian outlets stressed terrorism and the need for retaliation, while Pakistani media emphasized dialogue and humanitarian concerns.¹⁷ This polarization heightened public pressure on policymakers and reduced opportunities for compromise, complicating mediation and fueling further tensions.¹⁸

Additionally, disinformation and digital campaigns were rampant throughout the crisis. Both India and Pakistan disseminated false claims and doctored images to bolster their respective narratives. For example, Indian news channels widely circulated fake reports of the Pakistani Army chief's arrest and the destruction of Karachi port, using unrelated or old footage.¹⁹ On the other side, Pakistani officials and social media accounts spread fabricated stories of shooting down Indian Rafale jets, using images from unrelated crashes, and falsely claimed Indian soldiers had surrendered at Chora Post.²⁰ These campaigns, amplified by social media, heightened public anxiety, deepened polarization, and increased the risk of miscalculation and panic, making crisis management more challenging.

¹⁷ Muhammad Arif et al., 'Media's Role in Crisis Communication: A Comparative Analysis of Pakistani and Indian Print Media Coverage of the Pahalgam Attack', ` 3, no. 02 (17 May 2025): 826–35.

¹⁸ Chiara Cervasio and Nicholas J. Wheeler, 'Restraint at Risk: The Anatomy of India-Pakistan De-Escalation', *The Diplomat*, 17 May 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/restraint-at-risk-the-anatomy-of-india-pakistan-de-escalation/>

¹⁹ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Hannah Ellis-Petersen South Asia correspondent, 'How Social Media Lies Fuelled a Rush to War between India and Pakistan', *The Guardian*, 28 May 2025, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/may/28/how-social-media-lies-fuelled-a-rush-to-war-between-india-and-pakistan>

²⁰ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'Pakistan's Full-Blown Disinformation Offensive', *The Economic Times*, 7 May 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/pakistans-full-blown-disinformation-offensive/articleshow/120972008.cms>



Source 1: *France24* & *The Guardian*

Finally, technological escalation emerged as a defining feature of the conflict. For the first time, both sides employed UAS and precision missiles in direct combat, dramatically accelerating the pace and intensity of hostilities.²¹ Real-time intelligence and rapid information flows compressed decision-making timelines, raising the risk of inadvertent escalation. The integration of electronic warfare and AI-driven platforms forced both militaries to adapt their strategies in real time.

The crisis underscored that information control, cyber operations, and psychological campaigns are now central to national security strategy in South Asia. States have to address not only traditional military threats but also cognitive and informational vulnerabilities that can shape battlefield outcomes and public perceptions. The manipulation and weaponization of information have become critical factors in both escalation and de-escalation, highlighting the urgent need for robust measures.

Traditional Crisis Mediation Mechanisms and Their Limitations

The May 2025 crisis between India and Pakistan exposed both the strengths and shortcomings of South Asia's conflict prevention and crisis management frameworks. During the escalation, several mechanisms played a crucial role in containing the conflict and averting further escalation.

One of the most effective tools was the military hotline connecting the Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs) of India and Pakistan. Activated at critical junctures, this channel enabled rapid, direct exchanges that helped clarify intentions, negotiate a ceasefire, and prevent

²¹ Usman Haider, 'The First India-Pakistan Drone War', *The Diplomat*, 30 May 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/the-first-india-pakistan-drone-war/>

misunderstandings from spiraling out of control.²² As a longstanding confidence-building measure, the hotline proved essential for crisis management, even as other diplomatic channels faltered.

Third-party mediation also played a decisive role. External actors, especially the United States, were instrumental in facilitating de-escalation. Senior U.S. officials engaged directly with both governments, encouraging restraint and helping broker a ceasefire.²³ Other international actors, including the United Kingdom, Gulf States, and China, also urged both sides to exercise caution. Additionally, existing agreements and confidence-building measures further contributed to crisis management. Notably, the 1988 India-Pakistan Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Facilities remained in effect, with both countries refraining from targeting each other's declared nuclear sites despite intense military exchanges.²⁴

As a result, both countries agreed to a “full and immediate ceasefire” after days of intense military exchanges. The ceasefire was set to take effect at 5:00 p.m. IST, with both sides pledging to halt all military actions on land, air, and sea. After the ceasefire, both governments crafted messages of success for their domestic audiences, allowing leaders to de-escalate without appearing to concede, demonstrating once again the central role of information. However, ceasefire violations and mutual accusations emerged within hours, demonstrating the fragility of such arrangements and the persistent risk of renewed escalation.²⁵

Lessons Learned from the May 2025 Crisis

The May 2025 crisis between India and Pakistan standoff combine traditional and new dynamics in crisis mediation and conflict prevention, with critical implications for both regional and global security frameworks.

While nuclear arsenals continue to influence strategic calculations, they no longer guarantee stability in an environment defined by rapid technological innovation. Indeed, the integration of

²² Diya Ashtakala, ‘What Led to the Recent Crisis Between India and Pakistan?’, 20 May 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-led-recent-crisis-between-india-and-pakistan>

²³ Chietigj Bajpae, ‘India–Pakistan Ceasefire Remains Shaky, with Relations Unlikely to Return to Status Quo | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank’, *Chatam House* (blog), 13 May 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/05/india-pakistan-ceasefire-remains-shaky-relations-unlikely-return-status-quo-0>

²⁴ Rabia Akhtar, ‘Escalation Gone Meta: Strategic Lessons from the 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis | The 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>

²⁵ ‘India Claims Pakistan Violated Ceasefire, Says It Has Retaliated’, *Le Monde*, 10 May 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/05/10/india-and-pakistan-agree-to-immediate-ceasefire_6741125_4.html

advanced surveillance, missile, and drone systems has shortened decision-making timelines, increasing the risk of miscalculation and escalation, outpacing traditional crisis management tools and eroding the buffer that nuclear arsenals once provided. This underscores the need for updated doctrines and safeguards renewing mutual restraint that reflect the realities of modern warfare, as well as adaptive arms control arrangements and institutionalized mechanisms for rapid, coordinated responses.

Furthermore, this episode demonstrated that effective crisis communication remains essential for de-escalation, but its success depends on timely use and mutual confidence, often lacking in acute tensions. The reliance on third-party mediation in facilitating a ceasefire highlighted the absence of robust indigenous frameworks for crisis management. Additionally, the events revealed the limitations of ad hoc responses and underscored the need for institutionalized off-ramps, stronger confidence-building measures, and the continued value of established protocols such as the 1988 nuclear facilities accord.

Finally, the 2025 India–Pakistan crisis also highlighted the transformative impact of the information environment, making information warfare central to conflict prevention and crisis mediation. Disinformation and media manipulation fueled polarization, increased the risk of miscalculation, and complicated diplomatic efforts. This underscores the need for resilience against information threats, promotion of media literacy, protection of information integrity, and integration of information management into crisis response. Adapting crisis strategies requires robust verification protocols, cross-sector collaboration, and rapid response networks to counter disinformation. These measures are essential for preserving public trust, supporting effective decision-making, and ensuring that diplomatic efforts are not undermined by false narratives or psychological operations.

Overall, the May 2025 crisis revealed that advanced technologies and information warfare now fundamentally shape escalation dynamics, crisis management, and conflict prevention. Sustainable stability in South Asia will require a comprehensive approach: modernizing military doctrines, institutionalizing crisis management structures, and addressing the challenges posed by information warfare. Only by adapting to these new realities can the region, and the international community, effectively prevent and manage future crises.