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With eyes wide open

The escalation between India and Pakistan has put Kashmir in the global spotlight again. The conflict could become even more dangerous in the future

The preliminary outcome of the latest military confrontation between India and Pakistan following the terrorist attack in Pahalgam, India, is seen very differently by the two sides. While India appears to have been more successful militarily, President Donald Trump's announcement that he wants to mediate in the Kashmir conflict has brought Pakistan an unexpected diplomatic success. Both developments have put the conflict back on the agenda not only in New Delhi and Islamabad, but internationally.

A total of 26 people, mainly Hindus, were killed in the attack in Pahalgam on 22 April. Responsibility was initially claimed by The Resistance Front (TRF), which experts believe to be a local offshoot of the terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba. The most severe terrorist attack in terms of civilian casualties since the attacks in Mumbai in 2008 was a major setback for the efforts of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to normalise the situation in the new Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. With the dissolution of the only Muslim-majority state, the Bharatiya Janata Party fulfilled a key election promise in August 2019. Although Kashmiri parties protested against the measure, which granted the region less autonomy, there was no major militant resistance.

No lasting peace in sight

Most recently, the security situation in Kashmir has improved and tourism has increased. A new direct railway connection with New Delhi symbolises the aspired integration of the region into the Indian heartland. However, the terrorist attack in Pahalgam illustrates that the normalisation sought by the government has failed. India's retaliatory attack on terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan as part of the Sindoor military operation was supported by all parties. However, after Trump announced a ceasefire and suggested mediating the conflict, Modi faced criticism from extreme Hindu nationalist groups. They accused him of

diplomatic weakness and demanded a continuation of the military operation against Pakistan.

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In Pakistan, India's sanctions, in particular the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, and the military strike led to cross-party solidarity with the military. Domestic political controversies receded into the background, such as the dispute between the government and the opposition party of imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan, the tense economic situation and criticism of the dominant role of the military. Chief of the Army Staff Asim Munir has been able to further expand the already strong position of the military in recent months. Unlike his predecessor, he favours a confrontational approach towards India. Pakistan has always sought to internationalise the Kashmir conflict and therefore welcomed the US mediation initiative.

Even after the ceasefire on 10 May, a lasting peace between India and Pakistan is not in sight. Modi declared that India had established a new 'normal' in the fight against terrorism with the Sindoor military operation. India had already responded to terrorist attacks from Pakistan with smaller military operations in 2016 and 2019.

In the first wave of strikes on 7 May, India attacked a total of nine targets of terrorist groups, but explicitly no military installations of the Pakistani army. Striking among these were the attacks on the headquarters of the Lashkar-e-Taiba in Muridke and the Jaish-e-Mohammed in Bahawalpur in Punjab province. Both groups are responsible for a number of terrorist attacks in India, including the failed storming of the Indian Parliament in 2001 and the 2008 Mumbai attack in which over 160 people were killed.

Pakistan retaliated by attacking Indian military installations, triggering a far-reaching spiral of escalation. According to military experts, this resulted in one of the largest air battles in decades. For the first time, modern Chinese weapons systems clashed with Western systems. Pakistani fighter jets of Chinese origin are said to have shot down at least one Rafale fighter jet of the Indian Air Force. According to *The New York Times*, the Indian military strikes not only against the infrastructure of terrorist groups, but also against Pakistani military facilities were apparently more successful than the Pakistani counter-strikes.

A bitter diplomatic setback

In the past, the US has acted as a mediator in crises between India and Pakistan on several occasions, for example in 1999, 2001/2002 and 2019. It was also the most important international player in the current crisis. Initially, the US government showed little interest in acting as a mediator. Only the Indian attack on an airbase in Rawalpindi – the headquarters of the Pakistani armed forces, near which the strategic planning department responsible for nuclear weapons is located – prompted the American administration to intervene. On 10 May, Trump announced a ceasefire between the conflicting parties in a tweet and offered to mediate in the Kashmir conflict.

For India, the American intervention was a bitter diplomatic setback, while for Pakistan it was an unexpected success. Firstly, India has rejected international mediation in the Kashmir conflict for decades. Secondly, the American approach is likely to reinforce the reservations of parts of the political elite in New Delhi, who – unlike Russia – do not see the US as a reliable international partner.

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In contrast to the American portrayal, India stresses that Pakistan requested a ceasefire in the bilateral talks. The Indian government also emphasises that there was no nuclear signalling by Pakistan and that there was therefore no cause for concern about a nuclear escalation. Pakistan, on the other hand, supports Trump's account and claims that India proposed a ceasefire after talks with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Kashmir remains a conflict that could escalate at any time. Talks between India and Pakistan are unlikely in the foreseeable future. India's priorities are the fight against terrorism and the return of the part of Kashmir controlled by Pakistan. Pakistan, on the other hand, is pushing for a comprehensive dialogue on Kashmir and the reinstatement of the Indus Waters Treaty.

Domestically, the crisis has strengthened the nationalist camps in both countries. Modi is facing increasing pressure from Hindu nationalist groups who are demanding even more decisive military action against Pakistan. In Pakistan, the military under General Munir has emerged from the confrontation as the political victor. The suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty by India is also likely to boost Islamist hardliners in Pakistan, who had already tried to start a 'holy war for water' years ago.

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In bilateral relations, it remains to be seen whether and to what extent military strikes such as Operation Sindoor will reduce Pakistan's support for terrorist groups. The reciprocal sanctions have brought the already weak political, economic and social contacts to a virtual standstill, which is likely to make communication in future crises considerably more difficult. The nuclear potential of both states does not contribute to the stabilisation of their relations, but rather enables limited conventional conflicts, as could already be observed in the Kargil War in 1999.

In the global context, it remains to be seen whether the internationalisation of the Kashmir conflict will be a lasting success for Pakistan. For India, Trump's interference in particular initially meant a setback in relations with the US, which had steadily improved over the past 20 years. India is seen as a key partner in the US Indo-Pacific strategy to contain the rise of China. Another setback is that India is once again being mentioned in the same breath as Pakistan. This contradicts India's endeavours to position itself as a major power in the international system and as an independent pole in a multipolar world. The Kashmir conflict is thus back on the international stage and could become even more dangerous in the future.



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