

1. **lose face** (phrase) – be humiliated, be embarrassed, be less respected (publicly).
2. **spiralling** (adjective) – relating to the process of increase/decrease of something.
3. **stand-off** (noun) – deadlock, stalemate, impasse (in a dispute/conflict).
4. **high-stakes** (noun) – high risk, danger.
5. **anyone's guess** (phrase) – very difficult to predict.
6. **entail** (verb) – cause, result in, bring about.
7. **calibre** (noun/adjective) – standard, level/grade, quality.
8. **in so far as** (phrase) – to the extent that.
9. **the fog of war** (phrase) – a state of confusion/disorder caused by war.
10. **rung** (noun) – level, stage, degree.
11. **daring** (adjective) – bold, brave, fearless/audacious.
12. **retaliatory** (adjective) – termed as a revenge against someone.
13. **run-up** to (noun) – a period/time before an important event.
14. **surgical strike** (noun) – the military attack aimed to cause damage on a particular target with small/no collateral damage to surroundings.
15. **playbook** (noun) – strategies.
16. **ignorance** (noun) – incomprehension, unawareness, innocence.
17. **set something in stone** (phrase) – used to highlight that something is fixed/unalterable.
18. **hollow** (adjective) – meaningless, empty, valueless/futile.
19. **bluff** (noun) – fake, false show, deception/sham.
20. **pre-emptive** (adjective) – preventive, precautionary, protective.
21. **fallout** (noun) – adverse results; repercussions, after-effects.
22. **dissuade** (verb) – discourage, deter, prevent.
23. **status quo** (noun) – the present situation, the current state, the existing state of affairs.
24. **restraint** (noun) – control, restriction, limitation.
25. **skirmish** (noun) – fight, battle, clash.
26. **get off** (phrasal verb) – leave, exit, disembark.
27. **take the high moral ground** (phrase) – claim that one's ideas or beliefs are morally better/superior than rival's ideas/beliefs.
28. **war of attrition** (noun) – a military strategy consisting of aggressive attempts to win a war by wearing down (weakening) the enemy to the point of collapse through continuous losses in personnel and materiel.
29. **attendant** (adjective) – accompanying/associated, connected, related.
30. **pounce** (verb) – attack suddenly, jump on, leap on.
31. **arch-rival** (noun) – adversary, opponent, nemesis.
32. **humiliation** (noun) – embarrassment, disgrace, discomfiture.
33. **discreetly** (adverb) – in a careful and far-sighted manner.
34. **precedent** (noun) – previous example/instance, prior instance, exemplar.
35. **emissary** (noun) – envoy, ambassador, diplomat/consul.

## Living on the edge

### India and Pakistan need to find a way to keep de-escalating tensions without either losing face

The possibility of the ongoing India-Pakistan military stand-off spiralling out of control cannot be overstated, given the high stakes involved with regard to national reputations, military redlines and, most undeniably, domestic political considerations. The limited air war over the Line of Control (LoC), shooting down of each other's aircraft and, equally importantly, the capture of an Indian fighter pilot by Pakistan have further complicated what was initially believed to be a crisis that might not go beyond round one (the terror attack in Pulwama and the Indian air strikes on Balakot). With Wednesday's limited air war, the two sides completed round two, and it's been anyone's guess what round three may entail. Thursday's late evening joint press briefing by the three services gave no definite indication of de-escalation even though the tone of the conference did not suggest escalation.

### Mapping the escalation

In days ahead, if there is no clear de-escalation, we are likely to witness more fire assaults on the LoC with high calibre weapons and stand-off strikes without crossing the border using short-range air-to-surface or surface-to-surface missiles against each other. In so far as this does not involve more pilot captures, deep strikes in each other's territories and extending to the International Boundary sector, it could still potentially remain contained. But, as they say, miscalculations and mistakes can easily take place in the fog of war whereby the stand-off could move up the next rung of escalation.

Let's take a step back and recapture how we got to two rungs up the escalatory ladder. To begin with, by carrying out a daring air strike deep inside the Pakistani mainland, India crossed the redline, from the Pakistani point of view. It meant clear and present reputational damage for the Imran Khan government as well as the Pakistan military. Their retaliatory strike against India was something they felt compelled to undertake. On the Indian side, coming in the run-up to the general election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government couldn't have but responded to a terror attack that took the lives of 40 of its men in uniform. A military response was expected, but choosing to strike inside mainland Pakistan was perhaps not wise.

But then, New Delhi's war planners were also trying to stretch the success of the surgical strikes of 2016 (since Pakistan didn't respond to them) by extending its scope beyond Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), a strategy that may not have panned out as planned.

From a more conceptual point of view, by carrying out a strike against Pakistan in its Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, India wanted to create a new military normal between the two sides, i.e. counter-terror air strikes inside Pakistan would now be a regular feature, something, one could argue, straight out of the American and Israeli counter-terror playbooks. If Pakistan had faked ignorance of an attack in Balakot, which it initially did, or decided not to respond to it, India would have set the new military normal in stone. Moreover, yet another denial from Rawalpindi would have run the risk of Pakistan's military threats being rendered hollow and the associated conventional and nuclear bluffs being called, in full public view. Knowing fully well the implications of a non-response, Pakistan therefore opted for, I would say, a minimal air strike across the LoC.

What further complicated matters for the Pakistani war planners was India's use of the phrase 'non-military pre-emptive strike'. While the term 'non-military' was meant to signal to Pakistan that the attack was against the terror camp and not against its military, the 'pre-emptive' part was unacceptable to the Pakistani side, I would imagine. A successful, and un-responded to, Indian pre-emptive strike, once again from the American playbook, would have meant that India could now keep the option of striking anywhere inside Pakistan to take out terror camps which it believes poses a threat to India. Recall that the 2016 surgical strikes were projected as a 'retaliatory strike' than a 'pre-emptive one', unlike the attack on Balakot. That again, would have been a major problem for Pakistan.

In that sense, this week's escalation is the fallout of a misplaced Indian belief that it could change the military normal between the two sides, and the Pakistani refusal to let that happen. To that extent, if the crisis doesn't escalate any further, Pakistan would have successfully dissuaded India from altering the status quo.

## **Signalling restraint?**

Given the fact that round two of the military engagement so far has been confined to the LoC skies, it is possible to argue that the two countries want to keep the engagement limited with the possibility of some air skirmishes and then perhaps call it quits. If the limited spatial scope of the strikes is indeed intentional, and not just a result of Pakistan limiting its attacks above the LoC, we could potentially look forward to more signalling for de-escalation, in addition to Pakistan's announcement that the captured IAF pilot, Abhinandan Varthaman, would be released "as a gesture of peace".

And yet, there are several challenges to this assessment. For one, India did not gain any military advantage over Pakistan in round two, which makes it difficult for New Delhi to claim victory. More so, Pakistan's

custody of an Indian pilot has made New Delhi look weak, and the BJP-led government certainly would not want to look weak in the run-up to the general election. Given that the first conventional shot was fired by India (even as the trigger was the terror attack in Pulwama), would it be possible for India to get off the escalation ladder with Pakistan taking the high moral ground with Wing Commander Varthaman's release? Equally important is the issue of how either side can convey to the other a desire for de-escalation without being seen as blinking first, if indeed there is a desire for de-escalation. At the end of the day, the BJP needs a victory over Pakistan, which the latter will not give without a war of attrition and the attendant dangers of escalation. India may not want to go down that long-drawn-out path of uncertain outcomes, certain damage and difficulties of spinning narratives of victory and loss in the age of social media and instant communication, and with the Opposition ready to pounce on it.

## On a de-escalation plan

For arch-rivals such as India and Pakistan, public commitment on de-escalation is not a charming option given the potential future narratives about humiliation. Third party mediation also looks easier said than practised — Islamabad might not trust Washington as a neutral mediator, Moscow might not have enough interest, and Beijing's good offices will not find any takers in New Delhi. Unless there is some creative way the U.S. can discreetly mediate between the two countries, third party mediation is looking difficult.

The other easier option is to open back-channel negotiations between the two sides. This has precedent in the **India-Pakistan** context. As a matter of fact, there were quiet back channel negotiations between Islamabad and New Delhi at the height of the Kargil conflict, even as the U.S. was trying to defuse tensions. If indeed the two countries are keen on taking this road, they would need to immediately send their respective back-channel emissaries, preferably to a third country, to hold discreet talks on how to de-escalate. They would need to work out a solution which will be seen as a win-win deal even if in reality it might not be exactly so.

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