A Fragile Pause: Caught Between Nuclear Signaling, Off-Ramps, and Escalation Traps

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Pause, Not Peace

The May 10 ceasefire between India and Pakistan may have temporarily halted active military hostilities, but it has done little to provide reassurance of a return to stability or predictability in the region. Although the crisis followed a familiar script—terrorist provocation, Indian retaliation, reciprocal military strikes, and an externally brokered de-escalation—the cadence of military activity, retaliation

target profile, and the nature of signaling suggest a shift in the dynamics of the confrontation. While much analysis often tends to fall into the pattern of 'fighting the last war' by drawing familiar comparisons, the 2025 confrontation resists easy analogies.

Unlike past crises—Kargil (1999), the 2001–02 terror attacks, Mumbai terror attacks (2008), or Balakot (2019)—this confrontation was also marked by the conspicuous absence of the 'N' word from Pakistan's senior leadership until fairly late into the conflict. Aside from a handful of sporadic remarks by mid-level officials and politicians, the nuclear dimension remained muted. The only notable reference to nuclear weapons, in the form of a later-retracted National Command Authority (NCA) meeting, came just hours before the ceasefire and appeared to be aimed more at an international audience than as a credible deterrent signal.

> *However, the nuclear dimension this time loomed not in overt threats, but in its deliberate ambiguity. The near silence of formal nuclear signaling, broken only by subtle cues and warnings, just to be walked back on, may itself be seen as a signal. It suggested not restraint, but a confidence in mutual vulnerability. This makes the current pause not a step toward resolution, but a lull under the long shadow of further escalation.*

From Tripwire to Tactic: Pakistan's Saber Rattling or the Lack Thereof

Historically, in crises, such as in 1999, 2002, and 2019, the Pakistani leadership has been quick to invoke the nuclear card, sometimes even before the escalation begins. The intent behind such signaling is often understood as serving three core purposes: swiftly restoring deterrence, compensating for conventional military asymmetry, and internationalizing the crisis.

Crisis / Year	Early Nuclear Signalling?	By Whom	Signalling/Key Statements
Kargil Conflict,1999	Yes	Pakistani officials: • PM Nawaz Sharif • Foreign Secretary Shamshad Ahmad • Military Spokesman Brig. Rashid Quereshi	• Nawaz Sharif: "Confident… to meet [an armed attack] on equal terms." • Shamshad Ahmad: "We will not hesitate to use any weapon in our arsenal…" • Quereshi: "Right to retaliate by whatever means…"
2001	Implicit Signalling	• Pakistani military (reported)	• Pakistan reportedly moved Hatf-1 and Hatf-2 ballistic missiles closer to the international border (and Indian cities).
2001–02 Standoff	Yes	• Pakistani leadership • Missile tests • President Pervez Musharraf	• Musharraf (2002): "As a last resort the atom bomb is also possible."
Surgical Strike Denial, 2016	No (Outright denial)	• PM Nawaz Sharif • Pakistan Army • A Bajwa (ISPR)	• Sharif: Military capable of thwarting "any evil design." • Bajwa: Indian claims "false propaganda," routine cross-LoC fire.

Balakot Airstrike, 2019	Yes	• National Command Authority (NCA) meeting called by PM Imran Khan on the same day of the airstrikes.	
Current Crisis	No (Top-level)Yes (Second-tier)	• Second-tier voices / institutional murmurs • Aborted NCA announcement • Railway Minister • Ambassador to Russia	• Railway Minister: "Pakistan's nuclear weapons are not for display… 130 nuclear warheads aimed only for India." • Ambassador to Russia: "Full spectrum of power could be used."

In the present crisis, the usual choreography—missile tests, fiery rhetoric, and stern NCA statements—was either softened or postponed. This pause suggests a calculated waiting posture – perhaps assuming, based on historical patterns, that India's response would be limited and symbolic. But Pakistan's invocation of the NCA, four days into the standoff, was brief and ultimately reversed—either due to internal confusion, international pressure, or both. The break from the past patterns lies not just in the delay, but also in the walk-back after crossing that threshold. What explains this break from the pattern?

i. ***Timing and calculus:*** One explanation is structural disarray. Pakistan had time to prepare—after the Pahalgam massacre, there was no ambiguity that a retaliatory Indian strike was coming. And given India's past patterns (2016, 2019), Islamabad likely assumed any response would be calibrated, largely symbolic, and

designed to avoid escalation. This assumption provided cushion space: a chance to bolster air defense readiness and posture forces without needing to activate overt nuclear signaling.

i. ***Escalation Dynamics:*** The initial Indian strikes avoided military infrastructure, hitting only terror camps, as expected. The NCA was triggered only after a Pakistani military response led to a second wave of Indian retaliation—BrahMos strikes on air bases—but it was soon denied and/or walked back on, indicating that Pakistan had expected the crisis to level off and plateau, without escalating further. The signaling came not as a first line of deterrence but as a fallback option if the escalation breached assumed limits.

i. ***Strategic Recalibration*:** The delay reflects a deeper strategic recalibration. The use of nuclear signaling not as a tripwire but as a pressure release mechanism suggests Pakistan may be seeking to internationalize the crisis, now without appearing reckless. Nuclear threats carry diminishing returns when overused. By delaying them, Pakistan may have sought to preserve its credibility and create more favorable conditions for diplomatic intervention.

Nuclear signaling in the present crisis served more as a channel for diplomacy than a true escalation threat. It was used to trigger off-ramp conversations, not push toward the next rung of the ladder. But that creates risk. If nuclear signaling becomes the primary mechanism for controlling escalation, it may eventually lose its credibility or be misread. In each invocation, it is harder to tell which signals are performative and which are real.

India's Evolving Deterrence Playbook

On the other hand, India's response combined a tone of diplomatic restraint with a firm approach to deterrence. The Foreign Secretary's initial remarks emphasized de-escalation and diplomatic restraint, signaling a preference for stability. Yet, Prime Minister Modi's address made clear that India would "not differentiate between conventional and unconventional attacks," implying resolve and deterrence. Days later, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's call for IAEA inspections of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal further emphasized concerns over "irresponsible" behavior. This mixture of diplomatic caution and firm political rhetoric calls into question the space below the nuclear threshold for maneuvering, introducing an element of strategic ambiguity that will impact the nature of the next crisis.

i. ***Blurred Boundaries:*** By erasing the traditional distinction between state-sponsored terrorism and state aggression, India reinforces its right to respond militarily—a measured effort to uphold national security in a complex threat environment. But if every proxy strike is treated as a casus belli for military retaliation, does the escalation ladder become shorter—and steeper?

i. ***Ambiguity as Pressure:*** India's mixed messaging creates asymmetric pressures. For Pakistan, the absence of clear thresholds increases the unpredictability of Indian responses. This can either delay nuclear signaling, as seen in 2025, or accelerate it in future crises, depending on perceptions of intent and pressure.

i. ***A Hardening Posture:*** India's strikes on targets near Pakistan's alleged strategic infrastructure at Kirana

> Hills—close to the Nur Khan and Sargodha air bases, combined with rhetoric about refusing to "give in to nuclear blackmail," point to a more assertive posture. While Air Marshal Bharti categorically denied targeting Kirana Hills, the perceived proximity to nuclear assets remains sensitive. The practical damage to air bases is often temporary – hangars, runways, or fuel assets that can be taken offline briefly, and usually restored within hours or days. But their symbolic and strategic impact can be outsized, especially if the location is seen as adjacent to nuclear infrastructure or military leadership nodes.

> *Its posture had, until now, enabled New Delhi to carve out space for operational flexibility under the nuclear umbrella, demonstrating resolve without provoking uncontrollable escalation. But how far can this approach be stretched before the room for calibrated responses disappears altogether?*

The Ceasefire as Mirage: A Faster, Harder, Riskier Crisis Template Emerges

The key takeaway from the current crisis isn't how nuclear weapons are likely or unlikely to be used – they remain a last-resort option for both sides. But what *has* changed is the proximity of nuclear signalling to conventional action, and the erosion of space between escalation ladders. If in this crisis India's strikes on military bases were seen as warnings rather than a prelude, then how many more such warnings can occur before one is misread?

> *The deeper question, then, is not whether deterrence held – it did, narrowly – but how long these back-and-forth cycles can continue before a miscalculation, misinterpretation, or technological failure triggers a crisis no one can pull back from. The 2025 crisis was not just another tactical flashpoint—it marked a shift in the region's escalation*

> *baseline. Both India and Pakistan walked away claiming success, but the perception of victory on both sides has laid the groundwork for greater risks ahead.*

India sees its BrahMos strikes as having compelled the ceasefire. Pakistan views its delayed nuclear signaling as evidence that deterrence remains effective. These opposing narratives have hardened domestic postures and increased the likelihood of future escalation. India's declarations of its evolving doctrine imply greater willingness to retaliate without courting global sympathy. Pakistan's more ambiguous nuclear messaging, meanwhile, may reflect a deliberate tactical choice—or simply the symptoms of its strained and disjointed civil-military system grappling with heightened international scrutiny, economic fragility, and political instability. Either way, the crisis stability that once rested on clear red lines and predictable thresholds may no longer hold. Every Pakistani strike now invites more assertive retaliation. Every Indian response that avoids major escalation sets a precedent—and a political expectation—for the next one.

Unlike 1999, when Kargil reset the escalation ladder and reimposed relative predictability, the 2025 crisis institutionalized ambiguity. It has codified a norm of silent sabre-rattling, where deterrence rests on uncertain signals and compressed timelines.

This is no return to the old cycle. It is the emergence of a new, far more dangerous one, marked by ambiguous doctrines, precision capabilities, hyper-politicized threat perceptions, and shrinking windows for de-escalation. The ladder of escalation has been repositioned on a steeper, narrower, and more volatile terrain.

Against the mirage of stability of the ceasefire, this crisis shows both sides testing new boundaries of escalation. The

confrontation did not restore deterrence; it normalized ambiguity. Strategic signaling has not disappeared—it has been deliberately muted, transformed into a policy of opacity. Each time nuclear signalling is used, its credibility changes—either by inflation or erosion. If it continues to be treated as a bargaining chip to draw in third parties, it may crowd out the very strategic clarity that deterrence is supposed to provide. This silence, while offering little maneuvering space, also clouds thresholds and invites miscalculation. And in a region where perception drives policy, such ambiguity can be dangerously destabilizing.

As the space for sub-threshold action now narrows, both sides face a dangerous paradox: more restraint might now require more risk. The next crisis may not wait for red lines to be crossed—it may be triggered due to the very absence of them.