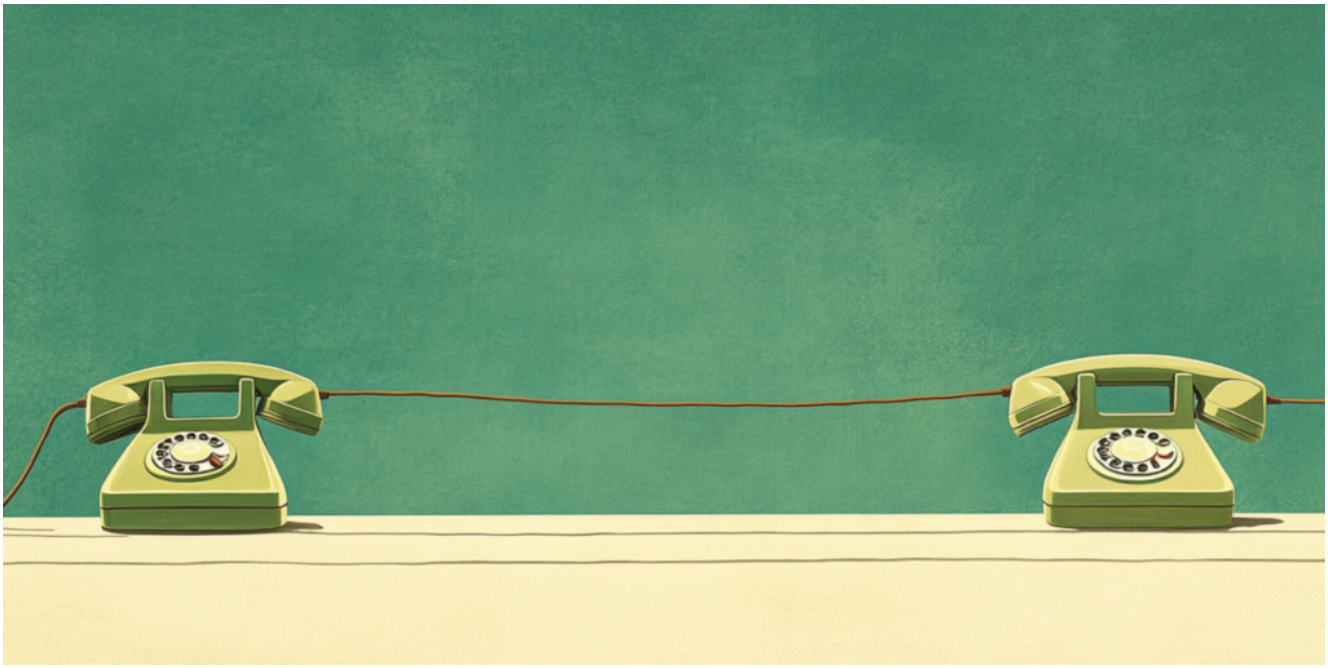
The Hotline That Prevented War: India-Pakistan Crisis Management Through Military Diplomacy

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On May 10, 2025, as tensions between India and Pakistan reached a dangerous crescendo threatening to spiral into full-scale conventional warfare, a single telephone call changed the trajectory of South Asian security. At 15:35 hours, Pakistan's Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) initiated contact with his Indian counterpart, setting in motion a communication that would halt military operations across land, air, and sea by 17:00 hours the same day. This pivotal moment underscores both the critical importance and inherent limitations of existing crisis management mechanisms between two nuclear-armed adversaries.

The announcement by India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri came as a welcome surprise to a world watching the fourth day of escalating hostilities with growing alarm. The agreement to

cease operations, with both DGsMO scheduled to review the situation on May 12 at 12:00 hours, demonstrated the enduring value of direct military-to-military communication channels even in the most heated moments of conflict. Yet this incident also revealed the precarious nature of peace in the subcontinent, where a single hotline serves as the primary bulwark against catastrophic escalation.

The Architecture of Military Communication: A Proven but Limited Framework

The May 10 ceasefire was not an anomaly but rather the latest successful deployment of a well-established, multi-tiered communication mechanism that has evolved to manage the complex security relationship between India and Pakistan. This framework operates on multiple levels, ranging from local commanders addressing routine border incidents to DGMO-level interventions for matters that threaten broader stability.

> *At the grassroots level, local military commanders regularly communicate through established hotlines and flag meetings to resolve issues ranging from inadvertent border crossings by shepherds and cattle to more serious concerns involving unauthorized military presence or terrorist activities. These mechanisms handle the daily friction points along the Line of Control, preventing minor incidents from escalating into major confrontations.*

However, when situations develop the potential for significant escalation, as occurred in the lead-up to May 10, the matter ascends to the DGMO level, where senior military leadership can engage directly to find solutions. This system has proven its worth on multiple occasions, most notably during the February 2021 understanding between the two DGsMO that brought sustained calm to the border until the Pahalgam attack on April 22, 2025, once again shattered the peace.

The durability of this communication framework reflects its

practical design and the mutual recognition by both militaries of its essential role in conflict management. Unlike diplomatic channels that can become entangled in political posturing, military-to-military communication often maintains a professional focus on operational realities and immediate security concerns. The fact that these channels remained open and effective even during the intense four-day standoff of May 2025 speaks to their institutional strength and the professionalism of the officers involved.

> *Yet the May 10 communication also highlighted the limitations of relying primarily on military channels for crisis management. The conflict had evolved beyond traditional border skirmishes to encompass operations across multiple domains and geographical areas, raising questions about whether existing mechanisms are adequate for managing increasingly complex scenarios.*

Operation Sindoor: A New Paradigm of Retaliation and Its Implications

The May 2025 crisis marked a qualitative shift in the dynamics of the India-Pakistan conflict, exemplified by the scope and strategic objectives of Operation Sindoor. Unlike previous engagements confined to border areas, this operation demonstrated India’s willingness to strike deep into Pakistani territory, targeting nine terrorist headquarters and training facilities across Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir and mainland Pakistan, including Punjab province.

The operation’s characteristics—its scope, magnitude, weapon systems employed, and target selection—suggested a level of retaliation that arguably exceeded the traditional purview of the DGMO, whose primary responsibility centers on Indian Army operations. This evolution reflects India’s declared strategy of increasing the cost of Pakistan’s state-sponsored proxy war beyond bearable thresholds, fundamentally altering the

escalation calculus that has governed subcontinental conflicts for decades.

India’s strategic communication following Operation Sindoor was equally significant. Through coordinated briefings by the Ministries of External Affairs and Defence, India clearly articulated its limited objectives while simultaneously warning of proportionate responses to any Pakistani escalation. This measured approach demonstrated sophisticated crisis management, combining decisive military action with diplomatic signaling to prevent uncontrolled escalation.

Pakistan’s response, however, revealed the persistent challenges in managing conflicts with a state that continues to view terrorism as a legitimate policy instrument. By escalating through attacks on both civil and military targets, Pakistan brought the confrontation to the brink of conventional war, demonstrating how quickly situations can deteriorate despite initial restraint by one party.

> *The success of the May 10 communication in halting this escalation should not obscure the underlying structural problem: Pakistan’s continued reliance on state-sponsored terrorism ensures that future crises are virtually inevitable. With India’s declared intention to respond more forcefully to future terrorist attacks than it did during Operation Sindoor, the region faces an escalating cycle that existing communication mechanisms may struggle to contain.*

Strengthening Crisis Management: Recommendations for Enhanced Stability

The May 2025 crisis offers valuable lessons for strengthening crisis management mechanisms between India and Pakistan. While the DGMO-level communication successfully prevented war, the episode highlighted several areas that require urgent attention to enhance stability and reduce the risk of catastrophic escalation.

First, the sanctity and confidentiality of military-to-military communication channels must be preserved and protected. These conversations provide crucial space for military leadership to step back from escalation without public loss of face. The effectiveness of such channels depends on maintaining their professional character and ensuring that both parties refrain from making irresponsible public statements or engaging in media rhetoric that could undermine future communications.

However, accountability mechanisms require significant enhancement. The February 2021 ceasefire understanding, despite simultaneous press releases from both DGsMO, failed to specify public conditions for maintaining the ceasefire. This ambiguity allowed Pakistan to avoid accountability while providing room for interpretation that ultimately facilitated the breaking of commitments. Future agreements should include joint statements or simultaneous press releases signed by both DGsMO, clearly articulating the agreed-upon conditions and establishing public accountability frameworks.

> *The current crisis management architecture, while functional, appears inadequate for the evolving nature of India-Pakistan conflicts. Drawing from successful models like the India-China special representative mechanism—where National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and China's Wang Yi maintain dedicated communication channels alongside established military hotlines—India and Pakistan should consider appointing special representatives with dedicated crisis management mandates.*

Such a system would provide multiple layers of communication, ensuring that various types of crises can be addressed through appropriate channels. While military-to-military communication excels at operational issues, political-level dialogue may be better suited for addressing underlying policy disagreements that fuel recurring crises.

The May 10, 2025, communication that prevented war stands as both a testament to the value of existing crisis management mechanisms and a warning about their limitations. As India and Pakistan navigate an increasingly complex security environment characterized by expanding military capabilities and persistent underlying conflicts, strengthening these mechanisms becomes not just advisable but essential for regional and global stability. The hotline that prevented war in May 2025 may not be sufficient to prevent the next crisis from escalating beyond control.