**A reluctant escalation**

Sitara Noor

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In a rather surprising turn of events, Iran and Pakistan conducted military strikes in each other’s territory last month. The escalation started when Iran, in an unprecedented move, launched missiles and drone strikes in Panjgur, Balochistan on January 16, killing three civilians including two children. Iran claimed that the attack was aimed at the militant group ‘Jaish al-Adl’, which was allegedly behind some terrorist attacks in Iran.

Iran’s unprecedented military action received massive criticism from the Pakistani government and people, who largely have a favourable view of Iran. Pakistan’s Foreign Office spokesperson while condemning the attack stated that Pakistan reserved “the right to respond to this illegal act”.

Initial condemnation was followed by Pakistan recalling its ambassador from Tehran as well as the suspension of various activities such as the ongoing border trade committee meeting in Chabahar. Iran’s attack occurred at a time when Pakistan’s caretaker prime minister had just met the Iranian foreign minister on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, and the navies of the two countries were busy in a joint naval exercise in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

After some initial restraint, Pakistan responded with a similar attack against terrorist hideouts in Iran’s Sistan province. The military operation was code-named ‘Marg Bar Sarmachar’ in Farsi which is loosely translated as ‘death to guerrilla fighters’. Pakistan’s calibrated response and careful selection of words in the statement following counterstrikes is also noteworthy.

The statement by the ISPR mentioned that “Pakistan carried out effective strikes against hideouts inside Iran used by terrorists responsible for recent attacks in Pakistan.” The statement with a de-escalatory tone offered an off-ramp and further added that “going forward, dialogue and cooperation is deemed prudent in resolving bilateral issues between the two neighbouring brotherly countries.”

Mirroring Iran’s statement, Pakistan emphasized that it was attacking the hideouts of a terrorist outfit inside Iranian territory and that its target was not Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). As duly noted by legal experts, Pakistan’s counterstrikes were not phrased as self-defence in response to Iran’s strikes because that would have required Pakistan to target the source of those strikes, which was the IRGC in this case.

Attacking the IRGC would have caused a greater possibility of a major escalation, which Islamabad clearly wanted to avoid.

From the Iranian side, this attack seems to be a case of misdirected anger. With Israel’s ongoing brutal war in Gaza, Iran’s inability to take any action against Israel directly has led to massive domestic pressure. To offset that pressure, Iran had attacked some of the softer targets in Iraq and Syria, claiming that it attacked Mossad’s base and ISIS hideouts. Another motive for Iran could be to widen the ongoing regional conflagration and increase the cost for countries allegedly working with or promoting US interests.

However, this approach entails risks for Iran, as it has the potential to erode Tehran’s carefully cultivated image of invincibility, highlighting its vulnerabilities to attacks. The fact that the Iranian political leadership was meeting Pakistani counterparts the same day in a rather cordial manner also hints at the possibility that the missile attack could have been instigated by the IRGC and was not a well-thought-out political decision by the Iranian political leadership.

For Pakistan’s political and military leadership, the Iranian missile attack came as a complete surprise. Amidst ongoing domestic unrest as a result of delayed elections and other pressing security challenges – such as terrorism, and threats from Afghanistan and India – the Iranian attack opened a third front, posing a significant strategic dilemma for Pakistan.

Both Iran and Pakistan have levelled various accusations against one another in the past, including allegations of cross-border firing and terrorist attacks. However, no incident has triggered such a significant reaction. The Iranian missile strike crossed a red line by violating Islamabad’s sovereignty and challenging the credibility of Pakistan’s armed forces.

Choosing restraint would have had severe repercussions, potentially emboldening other regional threats such as the Taliban in Afghanistan as well as India to undertake similar actions in the future. Additionally, it could incentivize India, which had cordial relations with Tehran and had already issued a statement in support of Iranian action, to exploit these fault lines for its advantage and engage Pakistan on multiple fronts.

Domestically, inaction would have likely invited criticism from people. Amidst risks of wider conflagration, a sudden de-escalation following high-level bilateral engagements is an equally surprising outcome and demonstrates a mutual desire to establish the status quo ante. Both nations have reached an understanding to revert to the situation before January 16, opting for peaceful engagement.

It is also noteworthy that while Iran is widely believed to have a latent nuclear capability and Pakistan is a nuclear-armed state, there was no nuclear dimension to this brief military conflict between the two. Nonetheless, this brief spat underscores the fragility of regional security and highlights the need for an institutionalized framework.

The writer is an associate at the Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University.