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The four-day near-peer air war

Peter Layton
Griffith University and Australian Defence Force

In May 2025, India and Pakistan fought a near-peer air war. Such conflicts are rare, providing insights the more frequent lop-sided air wars do not. At the time, understanding the conflict was hindered by considerable active disinformation (Mushtaq, 2025). Accordingly, events are first revisited before operational implications are discussed.

Wednesday, 7 May

Just after midnight, India attacked nine designated terrorist camps as part of a strategy of deterrence by punishment (Clary, 2025). Seven were near the border with Pakistan and attacked using precision-guided artillery and drones, reportedly SkyStriker loitering munitions. The deep strikes involved SCALP subsonic cruise missiles, AASM Hammer missiles, and some BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles launched from Rafale, Mirage 2000 and Su-30MKI aircraft. This operation involved some 72 Indian fighters undertaking offensive and defensive missions in four coordinated waves (Syed, 2025b).

As the Indian aircraft took off, 42 Pakistani air defence fighters were launched to be in place when the attack commenced (Syed, 2025a). Pakistan appeared to have had a high-quality air picture, fused from data passed by airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft, ground based short- and long-range radars, electronic surveillance and allegedly space-based sensors (Rawat, 2025). This allowed Pakistan to score its biggest success of the four days: the downing of two, maybe three, Indian fighters: a Rafale, a Mig-29 and perhaps an Su-30. These losses were apparently to PL-15 air-to-air missiles fired from the J-10C fighters of 15 Squadron (Syed, 2025c).

The Rafale loss occurred at an unusually long range of some 180 kms. Third party targeting, reportedly from AEW&C aircraft, was used so the target was unaware it was being engaged until less than a minute before PL-15 impact (Defence Security Asia, 2025). Tactically surprised, India suspended crewed aircraft operations for two days. The problem appears an underestimation of Pakistan's air-to-air missile ranges and so an Indian intelligence failure (Shah & Patel, 2025). Of interest, no Indian or Pakistani aircraft entered the other country's airspace during the four-day air war.

Thursday, 8 May

Pakistan retaliated principally by launching drones against more than 12 military facilities in both north-western India and Kashmir (Patil & Rawat, 2025). Most were shot down. India in response attacked air defence radars and systems at some 11 military facilities using Israeli-made Harpy and Harop anti-radar drones. Banshee target drones were probably used as decoys. It seems a least one air defence system in Lahore was damaged. Pakistan claimed 25 drones shot down (Biswas, 2025).

Friday, 9 May

A mutual drone war began involving ongoing reconnaissance missions, electronic emitter mapping missions, strikes and decoy flights (White, 2025). India continued targeting air

defence sites, striking four while losing 48 drones to Pakistani fire. Pakistan escalated, launching some 300-400 drones, mostly of Chinese and Turkish origin, against 26 Indian locations. Thesedamaged at least four military airbases (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). Overall, India assessed it engaged about 600 Pakistani drones across the war using 750 short-range SAMs and some 1,000 anti-aircraft guns coordinated through the Akashteer automated air defence control and reporting system (Sharma, 2025; Singh, 2025).

Saturday, 10 May

Late on 9 May, Pakistani shifted to more sophisticated drones, including the Turkish-Pakistani Yiha-III loitering munition, and began using the 140km range Fatah-I rocket (Rawalpindi, 2025). Pakistan targeted some 15 Indian airbases but only achieved limited damage at four locations as most drone and rocket attacks were defeated. Hinting at a possible escalatory step, Pakistan launched a 400km range Fatah-II rocket in the direction of Delhi however, this was intercepted over Sirsa just after midnight (De, 2025).

About two hours later, India launched a large-scale attack against 11 Pakistani airbases using decoy and anti-radar drones, 15 BrahMos missiles, SCALP cruise missiles, and Rampage air-launched ballistic missiles. This disabled runways and damaged command centres and aircraft shelters forcing Pakistan to relocate aircraft to rear bases outside Indian missile range (TOI News Desk, 2025). A ceasefire was agreed at 3:35pm that day.

Evaluation

India achieved its initially stated aim of damaging the assessed terrorist camps on the first night. In contrast, Pakistan's retaliatory attacks were not just ineffectual but demonstrated that India's air defence systems were effective. India's additional attacks after the first night further suggested India could potentially readily gain air superiority over eastern Pakistan through an offensive counter-air campaign (Organiser, 2025). While Pakistan's fighters could defend against Indian crewed aircraft attacks, the nation's air defence system could not comprehensively prevent rocket, missile and drone attacks. Pakistan's eastern airbases would become unusable if hostilities continued. The four-day air war became an air superiority battle that India implicitly won.

Implications

The four-day air war continued the trend of the last few years of crewed combat aircraft being just one of the means air operations now use (Layton, 2025b). Crewed aircraft are now being used increasingly cautiously with rockets, missiles and drones instead picking up more and more of the warfighting burden. This increased use of dissimilar means dramatic changes for air defences as fighter aircraft alone are no longer sufficient. Ground-based surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft guns and electronic warfare jammers are now essential, even if many of each are needed to provide area coverage or to defend multiple widespread point targets.

Pakistan's fighter success highlights that third party targeting is likely in future fighter-versus-fighter engagements. An AEW&C aircraft or a ground-based radar may be distant but will now present a threat in being able to cue and guide air-to-air missiles launched by radar-silent fighters. In electronic warfare terms, not just the higher frequency radars of hostile fighter aircraft will need to be countered but also the lower frequency radars of these now potential cueing systems.

Third party targeting also means longer range air-to-air engagements will become common. This reinforces the decades-long trend of shorter range visual engagements becoming rare (Stillion, 2015). Moreover, it suggests aircraft flying near national borders could be engaged by hostile aircraft that remain even well inside their own territorial airspace. Borders are becoming wide potential weapons engagement zones, perhaps 150km or more deep.

The short sharp air war between India and Pakistan fits into the broad trends shaping air warfare. Air superiority still matters but now requires both defending against, and attacking

with, rockets, missiles and drones. Crewed aircraft are no longer enough, making embracing heterogenous airpower important (Layton, 2025a). Air power is constantly evolving. Air forces need to as well.

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