

What an Indian missile malfunction says about US-Pakistan relations
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Bloggers

At around 7 p.m. on Wednesday, March 9, an Indian missile landed in Pakistani territory. No one was killed or hurt, and Pakistan chose to react responsibly.

The Pakistan military spokesman made details of the missile's flight path public, pointed out that it "endangered many national and international passenger flights both in Indian and Pakistani airspace, as well as human life and property on the ground," and demanded an explanation from India.

*India responded two days later, **blaming** a "technical malfunction" for the "accidental firing of a missile." "It is learn that the missile landed in an area of Pakistan," said an official statement, which described the incident as "deeply regrettable" but stopped short of apologizing to Pakistan.*

India and Pakistan both possess nuclear weapons, are constantly suspicious of each other and have fought four wars since their independence. An accidental missile launch, which is not immediately notified to the other side, could have started a fifth war under different circumstances. Every time India and Pakistan fight, there is fear of escalation to nuclear war.

*In this instance, Pakistan's restraint and India's belated admission of its error avoided the worst fallout. But India's **decision** to set up a high-level Court of Enquiry should not suffice for the matter to be set aside. Pakistan has a right to know what happened and what mechanisms India is now putting in place to avoid recurrence of similar accidental missile launches.*

*So far, no other country has supported Pakistan's **demand** for a "joint probe to accurately establish the facts surrounding the incident." India and Pakistan currently do not have ambassadors in each other's capitals since India broke off all official*

interaction over Pakistan's alleged support for terrorism in Indian controlled territory.

Nuclear-armed rivals need to communicate, if for no other reason than to avoid catastrophic consequences of accidents and misunderstandings. Its reservations about Pakistan's support for jihad in Afghanistan and Jammu and Kashmir notwithstanding, India still needs to engage with Pakistan over matters such as its March 9 accidental missile launch.

For Pakistan, the incident offers a moment of self-reflection. Although Pakistan has a reasonable case in this instance, its demand for greater Indian transparency has received little attention from the international community. Even Pakistan's close ally and "all-weather friend" China offered a tepid [response](#).

"China urged the two countries to set up a reporting mechanism to avoid such incidents and share information," said Zhao Lijian, a spokesman at China's foreign ministry. "Pakistan and India are both important countries in South Asia, bearing responsibilities for maintaining regional security and stability." It was hardly the demand for Indian accountability that Pakistan might have expected.

The U.S. State Department did not view the issue as anything to be concerned about. According to spokesperson [Ned Price](#), "We have no indication as you also heard from our Indian partners that this incident was anything other than an accident. We refer you of course to the Indian Ministry of Defense for any follow up. They issued a statement on March 9th to explain precisely what had happened. We don't have a comment beyond that."

In matters involving India and Pakistan, there seems to be a willingness on the part of China and the U.S., as well as other countries, to consider the Indian narrative as more plausible. Even in an incident that raises questions about India's missile safety mechanisms, there is a presumption that India will act responsibly. Pakistan did not get the brownie points it expected for its responsible and subdued behavior.

International relations are less about individual events than they are about cumulative perceptions of nations about other nations and their ties to one another. In addition to lingering doubts about support for terrorism, Pakistan's leaders seem to have lost support and respect abroad with broken promises and populist rabble-rousing against other states.

Only recently, Prime Minister Imran Khan lambasted European envoys for writing him a joint letter seeking Pakistan's support for a resolution in the United Nations General Assembly condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The European Union ambassadors had only done what ambassadors are supposed to do. They sought support for their governments' position with a polite letter.

Instead, Khan publicly ridiculed them and said, "I want to ask the European Union ambassadors: Did you write such a letter to India?" Addressing a political rally, Khan mocked the EU ambassadors, saying, "What do you think of us? Are we your slaves ... that whatever you say, we will do?"

The envoys' letter had made no demands and there was nothing in their letter that suggested subservience or slavery. The Pakistani prime minister's anti-EU rant was in the same vein as his remarks the day after the Taliban retook Kabul last August. Then he had [spoken](#) about how the Taliban had "broken the shackles of slavery."

The U.S. and E.U should have reacted more firmly to the landing of an Indian missile inside Pakistan. That they are not doing so may be a message to Pakistan's prime minister to get off his high horse and understand that countries you abuse can ignore you when you need their attention.