

Can India and Pakistan de-escalate tensions after Pahalgam attacks?



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India and Pakistan are in the middle of their biggest crises in years, after the terror attack in India-administered Kashmir, where 26 people—25 Indian civilians and a Nepali—were massacred while picnicking in a meadow near the town of Pahalgam on April 22, 2025. Both nuclear armed nations have fired war rhetoric and hostile diplomatic offensives, shaking the stability of the region and the rest of the world, already dealing with two ongoing, deadly wars, and a fragile world order. Needless to say, both nations must urgently engage in de-escalation. But the political reality of de-escalating the current volatile situation between India and Pakistan is much easier said than done. There's little precedent that the nuclear-armed nations would spike a hot war; however, the short- and long-term stability in South Asia after the deadly Pahalgam attacks appear bleaker than ever before.

Though India and Pakistan have exchanged fire across the Line of Control (LoC) since the deadly attack, threats of military actions have echoed louder than actual military actions. But alarming non-kinetic responses have dominated the tit-for-tat exchanges. India has put in abeyance, the historical Indus Water Treaty—a water sharing agreement brokered by the World Bank in 1960, that has survived three wars between the two nations. The Indus treaty governs the distribution of waters from the river and its tributaries, which feed 80 percent of Pakistan's agricultural sector. If India cuts Pakistan's access to the Indus River, the long-term blows to Pakistan's agrarian economy and its people would be dire. Pakistan has also suspended the Simla Agreement, which among other matters recognises the LoC as the de facto international border between the nuclear-armed nations in Kashmir.

India and Pakistan have been at loggerheads regarding Kashmir, a region both administer partially but claim in its entirety. The last flare-up in the region occurred before the BJP-led Indian government abrogated Jammu and Kashmir's autonomous status under Article 370 in the Indian Constitution, in August, 2019. On February 14, that year, a Kashmiri young militant in the district of Pulwama in Indian-administered Kashmir drove a car with a large stash of explosives into a convoy of Indian Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) forces, killing at least 40 of them. India at the time immediately accused Pakistan, and Islamabad denied any complicity, and called it a "false-flag" operation. India launched diplomatic offensives and Pakistan retaliated. India revoked Pakistan's most-favoured nation status, suspending trade at the land border at Wagah, among other punitive measures, and a



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total of 48 bilateral agreements were reviewed for suspension. It is noteworthy that the fiery responses to Pahalgam attacks have followed similar patterns to the Pulwama bombings. But there are key differences which make the current conflict more complicated. Pahalgam marks a disturbing shift in the recent history of conflict between India and Pakistan in Kashmir. The attacks were distinctly brutal; the victims were civilians—similar to the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks—and reportedly, Hindus and generally non-Muslims were targeted, and horrifically massacred. It strikes at the core of BJP's Hindu nationalist sentiments.

Most importantly, in the 2019 Pulwama bombing, there was much more clarity regarding the perpetrators. Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), listed as a "Pakistani terrorist group" by the US, UK, and UN claimed responsibility. On February 26 of that year, India launched airstrikes—its first "targeted" cross-border strike since 1971—in Balakot, Pakistan, and claimed to have killed a "large number" of militants and commanders at a JeM training camp. Pakistan retaliated with air raids, shooting down an Indian jet. The jet's pilot, Abhinandan Varthaman, was subsequently captured by Pakistani forces and held hostage for political bargain. Under the prisoner protocol, Prime Minister of Pakistan at the time, Imran Khan, announced Varthaman's release, presenting it as a "goodwill gesture." Tensions de-escalated, with India achieving its military and strategic objective and Imran Khan's domestic audience presented with the optics of a victory against India.

India justified its airstrikes after the Pulwama bombings as an exercise of self-

defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter. This time around underscoring international legitimacy under Article 51 with a dossier of evidence is more challenging for India, notes Anisha Dutta, a New-York based Indian journalist. Till date, there remains a lack of clarity regarding the identity of the perpetrators of the Pahalgam attack that led to the most aggressive exchanges between the rival neighbours in six years. The United

banning Lashkar-e-Taiba in 2002. However, ten years later, in June, 2022, a member of the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba, and one of the masterminds of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, Sajid Mir, was handed a 15 year jail sentence by a Pakistani anti-terrorism court; Pakistan had claimed that Mir was dead for years preceding the arrest. Incumbent Defence Minister Khawaja Asif also claimed in the recent Sky News interview that Lashkar-e-Taiba is currently "extinct" in Pakistan. While India is yet to expose a direct link of the perpetrators of the Pahalgam attack to the banned terror group, and particularly to the state of Pakistan, the latter has also presented no evidence that the attack was a false-flag operation as it claims.

With unresolved facts, the main question hovering over the conflict is how the current crisis will de-escalate, and whether a military action from both nations remains inevitable. What seems certain for now, is that if India retaliates, so will Pakistan. India and Pakistan have exchanged fire over the LoC, and it would be a mistake to conclude the lack of overt military actions and the calls for restraint from the international community as signs that tensions are diffusing. The likelihood of more muscular military actions by both countries—similar to Pulwama—cannot be ruled out with domestic factors of both nations at play. Pakistan is on the brink of bankruptcy, and other serious abuses" against Kashmiri residents.

It seems plausible, for now, that Modi would respond according to the public's demand for action against the perpetrators of the attack. In an interview with Fox News, US Vice President JD Vance stated that, "We have been in close contact with our friends in India and Pakistan." He added, "Our hope is that India responds to this terrorist attack in a way that doesn't lead to a broader regional conflict," and urged Pakistan to cooperate with India. Vance's statement, acknowledging India's counterterrorism imperatives suggests lack of US opposition to a response of sorts, from India—one that would be more face-saving than escalatory.

A provocative large-scale attack from India and the possibility of an all-out war that threatens hits to an already sluggish Indian economy would require India to break rank with powerful international allies urging for restraint. As such, it seems unlikely. On the geo-economic front, JD Vance remarked that India has "taken advantage" of Washington, and that "Prime Minister Modi is a tough negotiator, but we're going to rebalance that relationship." US President Trump said on April 30, that negotiations were coming along "great," and India is poised to be the first to strike a tariff deal with the Trump administration. With that context in mind, a response from India that could potentially draw criticism from the US would be unpragmatic.

Ajay Bisaria, India's high commissioner to Pakistan during the Pulwama bombings, recently told BBC, that he views escalation as inevitable while noting that there exists a "de-escalation instinct alongside the escalation instinct." Both the Pakistani and Indian governments are walking a tightrope, between de-escalating very cautiously for their national security interests, while tending to the turbulent domestic political factors for their respective nations. But a *faux pas* on either part could lead all such political theories to free-fall into an unprecedented conflagration, threatening the security of all of South Asia. What is clear for now though, is that even after significant lull, India and Pakistan's years' worth of bilateral progress on the Kashmir issue, can be diminished in a matter of minutes. The most pressing solution, for long-term security and stability between India and Pakistan remains in navigating the end to the Kashmir impasse.

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with a largely unpopular government and frequent protests taking place, even as recent as November last year, demanding the release of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Under the circumstances, escalatory attacks could politically unite the nation, at least temporarily.

On April 30, Pakistan's information minister had written on X, that the government had "credible intelligence" that India would take military actions in 36 to 48 hours. The deadline passed without any action from India, while calls for de-escalation from China, the US, and the EU, ramped up. Narendra Modi's government also faces questions regarding the security lapses in a highly militarised area—though

The American dream betrayed: Silencing voices

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The United States of America, once self-proclaimed as the bastion of freedom, equality, morality, and the ultimate authority on democracy and human rights—or so Hollywood would have us believe—has long been complicit in waging wars that ruthlessly murder innocent men, women, and children around the world. Although the "American dream" is often portrayed as a quaint house in a serene suburb with a white picket fence and a golden retriever in its backyard, the actual American dream of a self-aware taxpayer is simply not to have their hard-earned money siphoned into the trillion-dollar military-industrial complex that perpetuates cycles of violence and devastation abroad. They would much rather have access to affordable healthcare, housing, and higher education.

Take the case of the Palestinians, a people who have suffered catastrophically since the October 7 Hamas attacks, and Israel's indiscriminate bombings, arbitrary detentions, starvation, forced displacement, and mental and physical torture. Year after year, they are stripped of their dignity and basic human rights under the Israeli occupation forces—a horror that is funded by the US government and broadcast to the entire world in technicolour. If you, as someone living in the US and as a human being with a heart that yearns for justice, feel compelled to take to the

streets to protest these atrocities or even share an informative post on social media, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) may come knocking to revoke your visa, detain, or deport you.

If you seek to escape the psychological warfare stemming from watching a genocide live, you may exercise your constitutionalised freedom of speech and assembly and raise your voice against the injustices scapegoated under the banner of Israel's "self-defence." Unfortunately, doing so could place your livelihood, your safety, and your future at risk. The same country that claims to be the beacon of democracy will punish you for exercising your legal rights because your actions are simply not congenial to the Trump administration's policies.

Since March of this year, the situation has worsened dramatically, descending into a surreal Orwellian dystopia where *Big Brother* watches your every move. International students, like myself, are bearing the brunt of this blatant disregard for the constitution. Across the US, students have been subjected to tear gas, police brutality and harassment on college campuses under both the Biden and Trump administrations for advocating for Palestinian freedom and calling for the boycott and divestment from companies that directly profit from Israel's genocide of the Palestinians. Since Trump has retaken the wheel, the crackdown on immigrants and non-immigrants alike has intensified.

It was only recently that Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian student from Columbia University who led protests against the genocide in Gaza, was picked up illegally by ICE despite



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FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

having a green card. His 8 month pregnant wife's relentless pleas to visit him were ignored for more than a month, and she had to give birth to their first child without Khalil by her side.

The intense crackdown on immigrants has even affected Bangladeshi students in the US, who are gripped with fear and anxiety over their student visas being revoked. Many have had to clear out their social media of pro-Palestine posts and self-censor their conversations over the phone. Some have cancelled trips back home amidst notices from their universities warning they may not be able to return under the current political climate. Even green card holders re-entering the

country fear arbitrary detention or deportation at the John F Kennedy International Airport. Students worry that if green card holders can be harassed, deporting a student visa holder would be insignificant in comparison.

I have been forced to write under a pseudonym as my family lives in the US, and their association with me may adversely affect their travels to and from Bangladesh. The US has forced us to self-censor our advocacy by weaponising fear and threatening the safety of our families and futures. Our advocacy feels so incriminating that we have to make a choice between standing for what is right and protecting ourselves and our loved ones. The country

has criminalised standing up for justice by blatantly infringing on the rights of its citizens, immigrants and particularly students.

Elite private institutions such as Columbia, Harvard, and the University of Pennsylvania have faced federal funding cuts and coercive attempts by the Trump administration to interfere in their curriculum and governance, all under the banner of combating antisemitism and curbing campus activism for Palestine. While Columbia caved, Harvard resisted the demands and sued the Trump administration for its unwarranted funding cuts and encroachment on their internal academic matters.

This situation reveals a sinister and dark truth about the state of

democracy in the US. The ongoing immigration crackdown is simply yet another symptom of declining freedom in the US and the double standards that run deep into the fabric of its foreign and domestic policies. The targeting of pro-Palestinian voices is nothing new, but the Trump administration's attempt at manufacturing consent for siphoning billions into the Israeli war machine by harassing those who came to the US for a better future is a new and disturbing low. During the Obama era, there at least existed a facade that the US cared about democracy and human rights on its own soil.

The suppression of dissenting voices is a trait of authoritarian regimes, not democratic countries, and certainly not of the very champion of democracy itself. Immigrants and non-immigrants alike being subjected to this nightmarish treatment by ICE and adjacent agencies show loopholes in the US legal system, touted as one that upholds justice.

Civil liberties must be protected at all costs. Universities must push back to protect their autonomy against an increasingly suppressive and intolerant government that seeks to undermine free speech and remove diversity and equality from US society. This is no longer just about Palestine. It is about the rapid, systematic dismantling of long-held "American values" accelerated by Trump and his entourage. The values of justice, morality and freedom need to be reclaimed. The people's tolerance for the crackdown on dissent and disinformation is a ticking clock; only time will tell whether the "American dream" is gone for good.