

## Opinion – Sliding the Security Zip Line: An Igniting of the India–Pakistan Crisis?

Written by Ido Gadi Raz

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IDO GADI RAZ, MAY 26 2025

On April 22, 2025, Rishi Bhatt, an Indian tourist in the Baisaran Valley in Kashmir, slid down a zipline, smiling at his phone camera. He was enjoying the sunny afternoon while capturing dozens of picnickers below him in the green valley. Suddenly, as Bhatt made his way down, gunshots and shouts were heard. As he later realized, one of the deadliest terrorist attacks India had witnessed in recent years had just taken place. What Bhatt did not know was that the terror attack by the Resistance Front group, which claimed the lives of 26 people, would trigger a security zipline in the region, leading to a violent conflict between the two South Asian nuclear powers. This would have grave implications for the security of India, Pakistan, and beyond. As the threshold for war between states decreases, terrorist organizations may exploit this momentum to amplify chaos within and between these countries.

The collective shock in India was immediate. The documented scenes of tourists being killed by Islamists for being non-Muslims were unusual and therefore pushed New Delhi to take unprecedented steps. Militant attacks had occurred before in the areas of Jammu and Kashmir, primarily coordinated by the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), an Islamic Salafist militant group with links to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) that was responsible for several attacks on Indian security forces. However, civilian casualties were rare in an area with a Muslim majority. Thus, the Baisaran Valley attack was also viewed as an anti-Hindu assault, further inflaming religious tensions in the subcontinent.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—known for its Hindu nationalist agenda and for using rhetoric portraying Muslims as a threat—responded immediately. After publicly accusing Pakistan of orchestrating the attack, India suspended the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) with Pakistan, a move that could lead to a significant water shortage for millions of Pakistanis. Additionally, India began preparing a military response, though the scale of this operation remained unclear at the time. In response, Pakistan denied any involvement in the attack. However, after learning of New Delhi's actions concerning the IWT, it warned that suspending the treaty would constitute an act of war. Eventually, on May 7, India launched Operation Sindoor, targeting nine sites identified as “terrorist infrastructure” in Pakistan and issuing a clear warning that any Pakistani response would be met with retaliation.

Despite this deterrence effort, Pakistan declared that retaliation was inevitable. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif stated, “For the blatant mistake that India made last night, it will now have to pay the price.” In addition, several reports later claimed a surprising success for Pakistani defenses, which allegedly downed five Indian warplanes. On May 10, Pakistan launched Operation Bunyan al-Marsus, striking seven Indian sites with ballistic missiles. Though the scope of damage remained unknown, the Indian response reflected another deterioration, as it launched dozens of drones and missiles aimed at Pakistani military bases across the country. In turn, Pakistan also launched drones at targets on Indian soil, marking the official onset of the first drone war in South Asia.

Just as another escalation seemed inevitable, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that India and Pakistan had agreed to a fully mediated ceasefire. From India's perspective, it declared that any future terror attack or Pakistani strike would be considered an act of war. Ironically, this statement heightened the stakes even further: if India were to act on this declaration, then any militant attack could potentially trigger a future war between nuclear-armed

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states—one that might be much harder to stop. On one hand, Pakistan undoubtedly maintains a degree of control over terrorist groups in Kashmir, particularly Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). However, terrorist organizations can be unpredictable and do not always adhere strictly to the directives of their sponsors. Furthermore, other terrorist groups ideologically opposed to Pakistan, such as the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), may exploit the opportunity to instigate chaos in the subcontinent by launching attacks. Even isolated attacks can yield significant psychological and propagandistic gains amid heightened tensions.

On the other hand, Pakistan's preoccupation with its conflict against India has allowed other terrorist organizations to increase their activities within its territory. Merely days before the ceasefire declaration, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility for killing 20 Pakistani security personnel in South Waziristan. Simultaneously, during exchanges of fire with militants from the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), two Pakistani soldiers were killed in the region of Balochistan. It is plausible that both organizations could exploit Pakistan's engagement on multiple fronts to further their attacks against the Muslim-majority state.

Notably, the TTP enjoys substantial support from Afghanistan's Taliban government, which maintains highly strained relations with Pakistan and has facilitated cross-border attacks into the nuclear-armed state. Concurrently, recent months have witnessed the Taliban's gradual rapprochement with India, which has strengthened its influence in Afghanistan through economic cooperation and humanitarian aid to Afghan civilians. This development should be particularly concerning for Pakistan, especially at a time when its already complex Afghan front continues to grow increasingly complicated.

Nevertheless, the recent escalation may also have significant implications for India. Firstly, India has established a high deterrence threshold—essentially signaling its readiness for war with Pakistan. Therefore, even if a minor violation occurs, India will face a choice between maintaining its declared stance by initiating conflict or retreating and thus undermining its credibility. Importantly, in the current confrontation, India did not emerge unequivocally victorious, if at all. Although the exact damages on both sides remain unclear due to governmental secrecy, the apparent downing of its fighter jets has sparked discussions highlighting a possible superiority of the Pakistani Air Force over its Indian counterpart. If previously India perceived itself as holding a clear military advantage based on prior analyses and victories, this assumption might now be compromised.

Moreover, despite India's diplomatic efforts to garner support from the West and other global powers, it found itself isolated in this conflict. No significant international actor, aside from Israel, explicitly supported India's claimed right to self-defense. Notably, the United States, whose relations with India have significantly improved since Donald Trump's return to office for a second presidential term, issued a neutral and conciliatory message urging both India and Pakistan to resolve their differences bilaterally (though Trump eventually announced the ceasefire). This reality should profoundly resonate with Indian officials, as in the event of a full-scale war with Pakistan, international support remains uncertain.

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge Pakistan's ongoing severe political crisis, compounded by an imbalance between its civilian government and military establishment. Consequently, decision-making processes within this nuclear power may be far from rational, and recent escalations could advance radical ideas, potentially edging closer to the possibility of nuclear conflict. While this scenario might still appear distant, ultimately, the Kashmir attack has bound both Pakistan and India towards the same precarious trajectory, or in other words, sliding down the same zip line.

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## About the author:

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