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The Kashmir Attack Reignites Tensions in South Asia

By Iftekhharul Bashar

SYNOPSIS

The deadly attack in Kashmir on April 22, 2025, starkly illustrates the persistent threat of Islamist terrorism in South Asia. Its timing and nature underscore escalating India-Pakistan tensions, raising critical concerns about regional security, religious polarisation, and broader geopolitical ramifications.

COMMENTARY

On April 22, 2025, at least four heavily armed militants opened fire on civilians in Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam, a normally peaceful tourist area in Indian-administered Kashmir. The attackers, dressed in military uniforms, [killed 26 people](#). This makes the attack the deadliest on civilians in India since the 2008 Mumbai attacks carried out by Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), a Pakistan-based militant group also known as [Jamaat-ud-Dawa \(JuD\)](#).

Among the dead were [25 Indians and a foreign national](#). Over 20 others were seriously injured. Eyewitnesses reported that the attackers [separated](#) Hindus from others before opening fire on them, indicating a communal motive behind the massacre. The attack aimed to sow fear and deepened religious divisions in India.

Kashmir remains a significant focal point of religion-based conflict in India and the broader South Asian region. Islamist terrorist groups have often exploited the long-standing tensions in Kashmir to advance their agendas, occasionally associating their actions with the concept of "Ghazwatul Hind" – an eschatological concept, frequently invoked by jihadist groups, of a final battle between Muslims and non-Muslims for the Indian subcontinent.

While there is no definitive evidence linking the attackers directly to this specific prophecy, the region's persistent instability and the unresolved Kashmir conflict foster an environment in which jihadist groups advocating this ideology can gain traction.

The Perpetrator and Motive

While a group calling itself The Resistance Front (TRF) – [banned](#) by India as a terrorist group in 2023 – claimed responsibility for the attack, Indian officials confirmed that it is a front for LeT. Founded in 1993, LeT is known for its goal of integrating Kashmir into Pakistan and has allegedly received covert support from elements within Pakistan. While India [strongly asserted](#) that the attack involves Pakistan-based militant groups, definitive, publicly available proof directly linking Pakistan to the planning and execution of the attack has not been presented. Pakistan has denied the accusation and calls for a [neutral investigation](#).

The militants framed their assault as a response to the Indian government's policy of resettling non-locals in Kashmir. Besides this, the attack served ideological and political aims: to reignite militancy in the region, provoke communal backlash, and strain Indo-Pakistani relations. The broader ideological underpinning of such attacks often includes narratives like Ghazwatul Hind.

While the attackers' primary objective may have been tactical and political, the broader ideological ecosystem in which such acts are justified includes Islamist narratives. In recent months, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have intensified vernacular propaganda in India, using regional languages to radicalise and recruit. Their media arms are pushing jihadist content, invoking themes like Ghazwatul Hind, and inspiring small terror networks.

Timing and Geopolitical Context

The timing of the attack appears calculated to coincide with US Vice President J. D. Vance's [official visit to India](#) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Saudi Arabia, a trip he [cut short](#) following the incident. The attack came less than a week after Pakistan Army chief General Asim Munir had publicly reinforced Islamabad's position on Kashmir, calling it the country's "[jugular vein](#)" and promising continued support for the "freedom fighters". This confluence suggests the attack was meant not only to disrupt peace in Kashmir but also to send a message to nations engaged in ongoing diplomatic engagement with India.

The scale of the attack is reminiscent of LeT's Mumbai attacks in 2008, particularly in terms of its cross-border implications. It also follows the 2019 Pulwama suicide bombing, which killed 47 Indian security personnel and triggered Indian airstrikes on Balakot in Pakistan. The recent assault is part of a larger pattern of high-impact attacks coinciding with geopolitical flashpoints.

Following the April 22 attack, the Indian government launched a large-scale security operation in Kashmir, with Prime Minister Modi overseeing it.

Implications for India

The attack represents weaknesses in the Indian intelligence and security apparatus, especially given that the Home Affairs Minister Amit Shah had reviewed Jammu and Kashmir's preparedness just two weeks earlier. Critics argue that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government overstated its success in pacifying Kashmir following the 2019 abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution which revoked the special status, or autonomy, granted to [Jammu and Kashmir](#) – a region administered by India, including a large part of Kashmir which has been the subject of dispute among India, Pakistan, and China since 1947. The region, which had been touted as peaceful and open for tourism, was exposed as still deeply vulnerable.

Domestically, the attack is expected to harden public sentiment and may embolden the BJP to take more hardline positions, which could lead to increased marginalisation of Muslims and communal polarisation, especially as calls for retaliation grow louder in domestic political discourse.

Minority rights groups warn that the Hindu nationalist government may use the tragedy to consolidate power and justify stricter controls on dissent and civil liberties. It should be noted that there has been a [74 per cent increase](#) in anti-minority hate speech in 2024. This incident could now inflame nationwide tensions and trigger a surge in communal violence.

Regional Implications

Tensions between India and Pakistan have escalated following the attack. Both countries are exchanging gunfire along the Kashmir border daily. India has sharply [downgraded](#) its ties with Pakistan. It has also suspended the Indus Waters Treaty, a crucial 1960 agreement governing the shared use of transboundary rivers, closure of the vital Attari-Wagah border crossing, expulsion of Pakistani diplomats, and for certain Pakistani visa holders to leave India within 48 hours.

In retaliation, Pakistan has warned of [suspending the Simla Agreement](#). This 1972 accord had underpinned efforts to resolve disputes through peaceful means. Pakistan has also halted trade with India and closed both land and air routes between the two countries.

Pakistan has expressed concern over the Pahalgam attack but denied involvement. Nevertheless, it continues to face allegations of supporting terrorism through proxy groups like LeT. The [Pakistani origin](#) of at least two of the alleged assailants and previous statements from Pakistani officials are being interpreted by the Indian side as a tacit endorsement of such actions.

Militarily, a response akin to the 2019 Balakot airstrikes is possible. Regionally, this would destabilise an already volatile border and shift attention away from broader cooperative initiatives such as trade and climate adaptation. More concerning, it provides jihadist groups with justification for recruitment and future attacks.

Lessons Learned

The attack near Pahalgam underscores three key lessons for India:

- First, despite Indian claims of peace in Kashmir, militant networks remain active and capable of high-profile violence.
- Second, Pakistan's alleged use of non-state actors in its proxy war continues to disrupt regional peace, necessitating coordinated international action and preventive diplomacy.
- Third, ideological narratives fuelling such violence must be countered through education, online monitoring, and interfaith engagement.

The Way Forward

India must reassess its Kashmir strategy – not only in terms of security deployment but also community relations and governance. It is important to take steps to ensure social cohesion, respect diversity, and ensure coexistence. Alienating Indian Muslims will only pave the way for extremists to exploit the situation. Trust-building with local populations, investments in youth education, and regional dialogue with credible stakeholders in Pakistan are essential.

Likewise, Pakistan has a serious responsibility to do its part and take credible measures to ensure regional peace and security by thoroughly investigating and clamping down on terrorist groups operating within its borders. This includes actively dismantling their infrastructure, preventing recruitment and financing, and prosecuting those involved in planning or supporting such attacks.

SAARC could serve as a platform for regional counterterrorism efforts, but its existing instruments, like the 1987 Suppression of Terrorism Convention, have been underutilised due to a lack of enforcement and political will. After the Kashmir attack, SAARC could have helped reduce tensions between India and Pakistan, but political rivalry has hindered its effectiveness. To ensure regional stability and prevent future conflicts, South Asia needs to strengthen SAARC and consider innovative approaches, learning from other regions like Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

The April 2025 Pahalgam attack is a reminder that terrorism remains a potent and evolving threat in South Asia. Far from being a relic of the past, militancy in the region now thrives at the volatile crossroads of religious extremism and geopolitical rivalry.

Amidst the increasing tensions between India and Pakistan, subtle yet significant changes are emerging within the region's jihadist domain. Once a fringe concept, the notion of Ghazwatul Hind has increasingly featured in jihadist propaganda across South Asia, becoming a powerful rallying cry in militant messaging aimed at destabilising the Indian subcontinent. If lasting peace is to be achieved, both India and Pakistan must confront not only the operational networks behind such violence but also the ideological foundations that sustain them.

Dismantling these enablers – whether structural, ideological, or strategic – requires a bold shift from confrontation to cooperation. The choice before the region is stark: escalate the cycle of violence or chart a path toward dialogue, mutual accountability, and regional co-operation and resilience. Only the latter holds the promise of a secure and stable South Asia.

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