

# SPECIAL REPORT

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## The 2021 India-Pakistan Ceasefire: Origins, Prospects, and Lessons Learned

By Christopher Clary



An Indian Army soldier stands at a post along the Line of Control that divides the Indian- and Pakistani-administered parts of Kashmir on December 16, 2020. (Photo by Channi Anand/AP)

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### Summary

- On February 25, 2021, India and Pakistan announced a ceasefire along the Line of Control (LOC) that divides the Indian- and Pakistani-administered parts of Kashmir. It has proven to be the most enduring confidence-building measure between the two countries since 2016 and the most enduring attempted LOC ceasefire in more than a decade.
- Without ceasefires in place, the LOC has been among the world's most violent areas, with civilians often paying the price for hyper-local violence that rarely has an operational or strategic purpose. As media environments in India and Pakistan become increasingly sensationalist, even such localized violence may escalate.
- Two factors appear essential for an enduring LOC ceasefire: *senior level buy-in* in both capitals and a *heightened third-party threat* faced by at least one of the rival states.
- Despite its endurance, the 2021 ceasefire remains fragile and vulnerable to events and circumstances such as terrorist attacks, changes in political or military leadership, and shifting regional relations.
- Prospects for bolstering the ceasefire include reopening overt dialogue channels, institutionalizing normalcy on the LOC, and exploring other military confidence-building measures.



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**CONFLICT  
ANALYSIS &  
PREVENTION**

## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the durability of the February 2021 ceasefire between India and Pakistan along the Line of Control in Kashmir in the context of previous ceasefire attempts—in 2000 and 2001, 2003, 2013, and 2018—between the countries. The report also discusses how the current ceasefire could lead to improved India-Pakistan relations and provides recommendations for policymakers to reinforce the ceasefire. The report was commissioned by the South Asia Program at the United States Institute of Peace.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Christopher Clary is an associate professor of political science at the University at Albany, State University of New York. His research focuses on the sources of cooperation in interstate rivalries, the causes and consequences of nuclear proliferation, US defense policy, and the politics of South Asia. He is the author of *The Difficult Politics of Peace: Rivalry in Modern South Asia*, published by Oxford University Press in 2022.

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Pakistani Kashmiris collect belongings after their house was hit by Indian shelling in Neelum Valley along the Line of Control (LOC) on October 22, 2019. Ceasefires improve the lives of people living near the LOC. (Photo by M. D. Mughal/AP)

## Introduction

On February 25, 2021, India’s Press Information Bureau and Pakistan’s Directorate of Inter-Services Public Relations issued a rare joint statement. It disclosed that the director generals of military operations had spoken on their dedicated hotline and had agreed to “strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease firing along the Line of Control and all other sectors with effect from midnight 24/25 Feb 2021.” They had done so “in the interest of achieving mutually beneficial and sustainable peace along the borders” and “to address each other’s core issues and concerns which have propensity to disturb peace and lead to violence.” The Indian media was quick to ask what it all meant. Yet spokespersons in New Delhi and Islamabad were as quick to downplay any broader import of the ceasefire for the countries’ relationship.<sup>2</sup>

Many observers viewed the agreement with skepticism. They doubted that it could achieve even a minimal goal of lowering the exchange of fire along the Line of Control that divides the Indian- and Pakistani-administered parts of Kashmir. In the decade prior to 2021, there had been three announced ceasefire attempts between India and Pakistan in Kashmir—in January 2013, in December that same year, and in May 2018. All three efforts lapsed, and some barely had a discernible effect on violence. Therefore, it is not surprising that, within days of the 2021 ceasefire announcement, hawkish Indian analyst Sushant Sareen wrote, “Given th[e] track record, it is quite befuddling why anyone would attach any hope to this latest agreement.”<sup>3</sup>



Despite such understandable skepticism, the agreement has now held longer—much longer—than its 2013 or 2018 predecessors. It is the most enduring India-Pakistan confidence-building measure since the collapse of overt bilateral discussions in 2016. The ceasefire’s continuation both improves the lives of people living near the LOC and dampens one potential source of an India-Pakistan crisis, making its durability a matter of interest not just for the region but for the world. Yet there are signs that the ceasefire is fraying amid political shifts in New Delhi and Islamabad. In this context, this report seeks to answer a series of interrelated questions. Why has this ceasefire held while others have failed almost at the outset? Under what circumstances is this ceasefire likely to endure, and conversely, what might be the warning signs of imminent failure? Are there things that India and Pakistan and outside observers can do to increase its durability?

## Why Was a Negotiated Ceasefire Necessary?

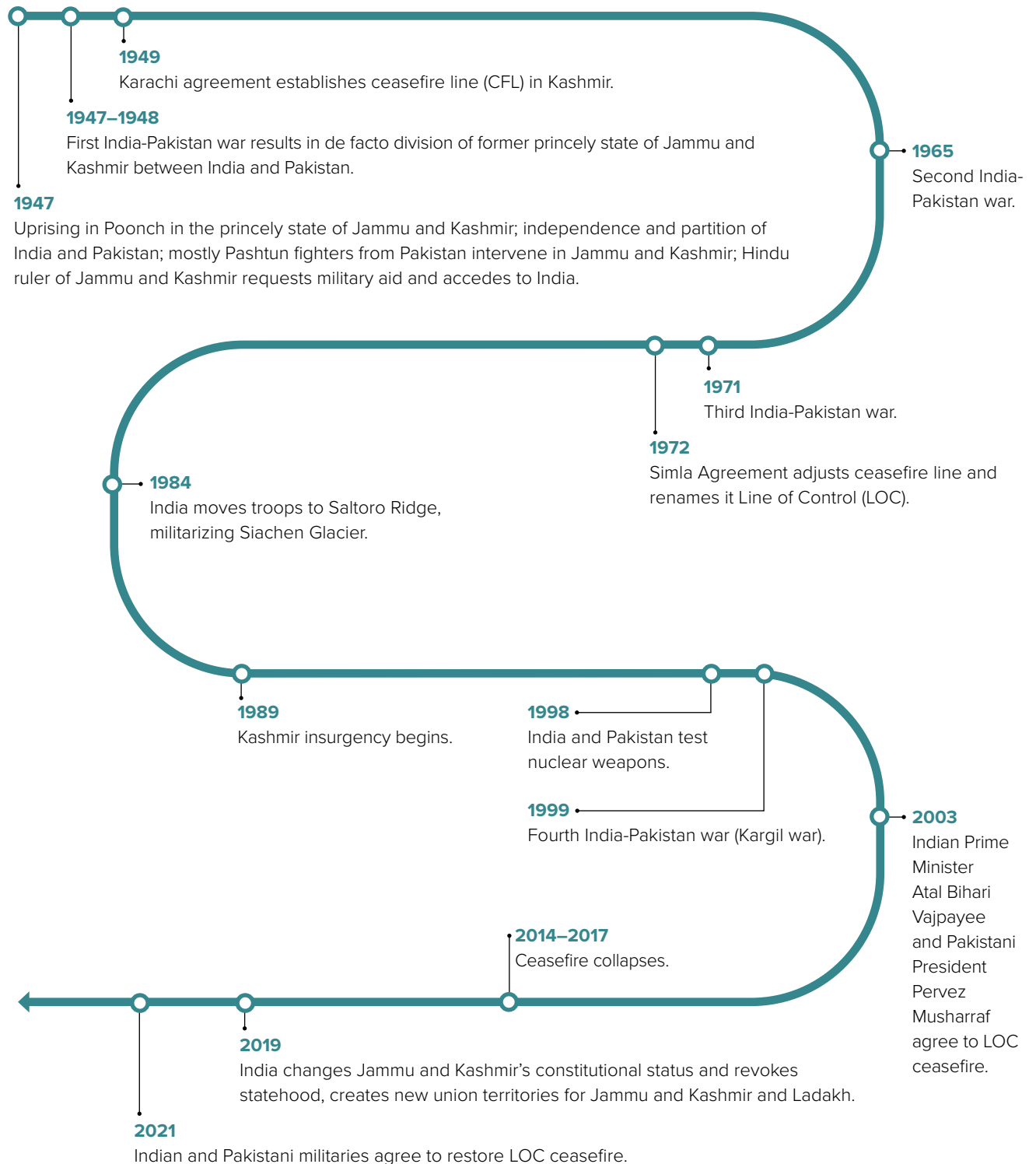
The India-Pakistan rivalry is an outlier in interstate politics in terms of the longevity of its militarized disputes and the frequency with which those disputes generate high levels of violence. There have been recurrent clashes and cross-boundary violence along India and Pakistan’s contested frontiers for most of their 75-year shared history as independent states. Their rivalry is principally—though not solely—motivated by a territorial dispute over the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. After the partition of British India in 1947, newly independent Pakistan feared that Jammu and Kashmir, one of the largest princely states, would accede to newly independent India because its ruler was Hindu. This fear was realized, but Pakistan saw the accession as illegitimate since Jammu and Kashmir’s population was largely Muslim. War ensued.

Over the years, negotiated ceasefires have been necessary to curb violence in Kashmir and prevent any escalation in severity and scope that would make the conflict unmanageable. India and Pakistan have fought four wars (1947–1948, 1965, 1971, and 1999), of which three centered on Kashmir. The 1971 conflict was not triggered by the Kashmir dispute, but its outcome still had a considerable impact on that dispute.

The first war over Kashmir resulted in a military stalemate and a negotiated ceasefire. That ceasefire eventually led to a formal agreement that was signed in Karachi, Pakistan, on July 27, 1949. The agreement principally established a *ceasefire line (CFL)* that delineated the positions of both sides.<sup>4</sup> On one side of the CFL lay what Pakistan called *āzād* or “free” Kashmir, while on the other side lay what India called simply Jammu and Kashmir. (India’s changes to how it governed this territory in 2019 are discussed later, in the section titled “The 2021 Ceasefire.”) This line, however, was not the only important Kashmir boundary for India-Pakistan relations. The CFL started just north of the modern Indian village of Dhalan in Jammu District. Below that point, though, the frontier between the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir lies not within Pakistan-administered Kashmir, but within Pakistan’s Punjab Province. India refers to this boundary as the *international border (IB)*, since India does not claim any territory beyond it. Pakistan refers to it as the *working boundary (WB)*.<sup>5</sup>

FIGURE 1.

## Selected major events in the India-Pakistan conflict



In 1965, India and Pakistan fought their second war over Kashmir. That war also resulted in a stalemate, and the Tashkent Declaration signed the following year returned relations to the status quo ante, including with regard to the CFL and IB/WB.<sup>6</sup>

In 1971, the two countries began a third war, but this time over the fate of East Pakistan. India triumphed in that conflict, separating Pakistan's eastern wing from its western half, resulting in an independent Bangladesh. Although Kashmir was not the focus of the conflict, India saw an opening to make headway on the issue. At the 1972 peace talks in the small Indian city of Simla (now Shimla), New Delhi was unwilling to return to the status quo and instead sought a more meaningful change. The resulting Simla Agreement replaced the 1949 ceasefire line in Kashmir with a new *Line of Control (LOC)* that represented the force positions on December 17, 1971, at the conclusion of the conflict.<sup>7</sup> But while Kashmir was a theater of fighting in the 1971 war, the gains and losses for each side were relatively modest, and hence, the LOC differs only slightly from the CFL in a handful of places.<sup>8</sup> There are, however, more meaningful differences between the LOC and CFL in the normative context of violence. The Simla Agreement commits both countries to settling "their differences by peaceful means through bilateral negotiations or by any other peaceful means."<sup>9</sup> And India interprets this commitment as nullifying any prior agreement to a United Nations (UN) role in Kashmir.<sup>10</sup> (Under the Karachi agreement, UN observers monitored the CFL.)

The Simla Agreement is also silent on defense construction in close proximity to the ceasefire line. Under the previous agreement, this construction had restrictions. Consequently, while a contested norm against such construction persists, "both sides have violated the norm with impunity" since 1971, as Harcharanjit Singh Panag, a retired Indian lieutenant general, has argued.<sup>11</sup> Without UN observers, third-party verification of encroachments has become much less likely and less consequential.

In essence, both sides have been free to take more proactive defense action along the LOC. Widespread hostilities, however, did not emerge until a large-scale insurgency in Kashmir in the late 1980s. Military officials on both sides of the Kashmir divide observed a stark change in the quantity and quality of violence along the LOC and IB/WB. India believed that Pakistani forces were facilitating terrorist infiltration into Indian-administered Kashmir, and accordingly, New Delhi deployed troops to the border area in an attempt to compel policy change.<sup>12</sup> Military action frequently reached ferocious levels over the coming decades, with thousands of artillery shells and mortar rounds bombarding the area in short spans of time, resulting in dozens of fatalities and even more casualties.<sup>13</sup>

The Kashmir insurgency was not the only development in the 1980s with continuing relevance to violence across the Kashmir divide. To understand that development, though, it is important to note that the Karachi and Simla agreements only demarcated a portion of the disputed Kashmir frontier. The 1949 agreement failed to delineate the boundary beyond its northernmost point—eventually identified as a map reference point, commonly referred to as *NJ 9842*—after which the line went "north to the glaciers."<sup>14</sup> This ambiguity did not cause any significant trouble for several decades, but as modern mountaineering techniques made access to this glacial area possible, a dispute about who should control it arose and the area became popularly known as the Siachen Glacier. In 1984, believing Pakistan might seize the glacier, India acted preemptively

and airlifted troops to secure key positions in the Salto mountain range on the western edge of the glacier. Pakistan scrambled to capture as many posts as possible on or adjacent to that same range. The line that divides the two countries' long-standing posts is referred to as the *Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL)*, but it is not reflected in the Simla Agreement.<sup>15</sup>

All areas—along the IB/WB, through the LOC, and concluding with the AGPL in Siachen—are covered by slightly different legal obligations as well as formal and informal norms. Yet across all of them, the prospects for violence are far greater than across any other India-Pakistan boundary. In fact, in the absence of (relatively uncommon) negotiated ceasefires, these different areas along the Kashmir divide have been among the most violent places on the planet since the 1980s.

Considerable violence across the LOC (or IB/WB or, to a lesser extent, the AGPL) is hyper-localized.<sup>16</sup> Bored soldiers are permitted to take shots at the other side to maintain morale. Soldiers shoot toward a noise in the night, in what is sometimes referred to as “speculative” firing. If small-scale violence does wound or kill someone on the other side, then a tit-for-tat cycle can begin. It might spread horizontally to another post that has a good vantage point of attack for retributory fire, or it might escalate vertically, with commanders ordering heavy firing, mortar rounds, artillery shelling, or even limited cross-border raids.

It is important to emphasize that while much of the cross-LOC violence is tactical in nature, very little of that violence meets larger operational—let alone strategic—ends. To the extent that operational necessity can be argued at all, it follows a certain dominoes logic: if a post is endangered because of enemy action, then it might fall, and if that post falls, then neighboring posts might be vulnerable and, in turn, a small valley might be at risk. This disconnect from broader political and strategic circumstances is why Indian scholar Happyman Jacob argues that “autonomous military factors” are behind many episodes of violence along the LOC.<sup>17</sup>

Obviously, it is costly for militaries and security forces to indulge in such violence. But financial costs and military hardships are not the only worrisome aspects that make firing across the LOC a problem. First, such violence is not confined solely to the armed servants of both states. Civilian populations live close to the LOC and IB/WB on both the Indian and Pakistani sides. India has fenced over 435 miles (700 kilometers) of the LOC and IB/WB, with fencing typically 0.3–2.5 miles (0.5–4 kilometers) back from the “zero line” of the LOC.<sup>18</sup> Thus, some villages are ahead of the fence or behind the fence but still vulnerable to firing. The Indian government estimated that in 2014, more than 400 villages were vulnerable to Pakistani firing and that about 215,000 families had been affected by ceasefire violations in the prior two years.<sup>19</sup> In addition to occasional loss of property and loss of life, this situation generates an enormous amount of disruption for these civilians, who must be evacuated during shelling.<sup>20</sup> Pakistan has far less fencing, and in some cases, the civilian population may be ahead of the forward posts near the LOC or IB/WB. Pakistan's civilians are similarly vulnerable to the dislocation that comes with firing cycles. Just as tit-for-tat violence against soldiers can signal displeasure, tit-for-tat violence that endangers or displaces villagers is used to show seriousness by both sides. Civilians are literally and figuratively caught in the cross fire.<sup>21</sup>

Second, violence that begins for autonomous military reasons—tit-for-tat cycles and attempts to establish escalation dominance in a sector—can quickly enter the popular imagination. This possibility has only grown as media environments in India and Pakistan have become more

decentralized and sensationalist.<sup>22</sup> In the face of perceived adversary provocation, there is considerable evidence that political leaders in India and Pakistan might benefit from being publicly perceived as having hit back.<sup>23</sup> On top of military inclinations for escalatory spirals, this implies there also can be political incentives for such escalation once either side engages in provocative violence.

Finally, it bears mentioning that there have been several much more ambitious, enduring episodes of violence along the CFL/LOC—for instance, those aimed at larger-scale land grabs, which on one notable occasion included India’s preemptive seizure of the Siachen Glacier in 1984. The seizure of Siachen combined with earlier “post jockeying” immediately after the 1971 war just southwest of NJ 9842 (near the mountain pass Chorbit La in 1972)—as well as subsequent alleged intrusions (particularly in the Qamar sector, which lies between the Chorbit Valley and NJ 9842, in 1988)—created a firm belief in both militaries, but especially Pakistan’s, that areas not defended by force would not be protected by paper agreements. This reinforced the need to defend those posts at all costs as violence in Kashmir intensified in the late 1980s. Increasing firing into the Pakistani-administered Neelum Valley area also encouraged Pakistani planners to consider how they could escalate violence horizontally in the northern areas of Kashmir in order to counter India’s advantages elsewhere in the region. This mentality contributed to Pakistan Army planners’ attempting to seize large chunks of territory northwest of the Indian town of Kargil in 1999.<sup>24</sup>

That year, Pakistan Army forces ended up seizing territory substantially larger than the land taken earlier during the alleged Chorbit La and Qamar intrusions—it was more comparable to the Indian capture of the Siachen Glacier. However, India’s Siachen operation occurred in an area not delineated in maps of the CFL/LOC, whereas Pakistan’s Kargil operation seized territory that had been clearly delineated. Neither India nor the international community was willing to accept a large-scale redrawing of the LOC, triggering the fourth India-Pakistan war in 1999, which concluded with Pakistan’s withdrawal.

The Kargil war reaffirmed the sanctity of the LOC, but it hardly ended land grabs or post jockeying on a smaller scale. Not all positions of either side are easily defended or resupplied. After all, the LOC is not a carefully negotiated border—it merely reflects the location of military forces following prior wars.<sup>25</sup> Panag has written about how, in Kargil’s aftermath, he oversaw an operation to seize a post near Chorbit La in 2000.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on interviews with several Indian Army officers, Jacob has reported that a much broader Indian campaign to seize and hold posts at dozens of locations along the LOC was considered in 2001. The 9/11 attacks and the renewed US-Pakistan partnership in their aftermath led Indian leaders to abandon the plan.<sup>27</sup> Pakistani military officers periodically discuss their concern that in the event of a downturn in relations with India, New Delhi might contemplate authorizing a “Kargil in reverse.”

As evidenced by all the above, ceasefires are necessary in Kashmir to halt day-to-day local violence, inhibit the escalation of such violence in severity or scope, and contribute to an atmosphere where aggressive land grabs are viewed as unnecessary. Yet ceasefires have been the exception rather than the rule for the last 35 years. Why and when have they succeeded and failed? This report turns to those questions next.



# Why and When Do Kashmir Ceasefires Succeed?

Since the late 1980s, ceasefires along the LOC were attempted from 2000 to 2001 and in 2003, 2013, 2018, and 2021. Of these, only the 2003 and 2021 ceasefires can be considered successful. Two conditions seem essential for ceasefire success: *senior leader buy-in* in both capitals and a *heightened third-party threat* faced by at least one state. The 2003 ceasefire also proved meaningful politically because it occurred alongside a broader confidence-building process, which may have contributed to its durability. Ceasefires have failed when these conditions have shifted, making the tenuous cooperation vulnerable to shocks that can lead to a spiral of violence.

## 2000–2001 CEASEFIRE

Initial interest in a ceasefire in Kashmir was the indirect consequence of the Kargil war. Rather than unfreezing the LOC, as Pakistan Army planners had intended, the 1999 Kargil gambit was an operational failure and inadvertently brought considerable international support for preserving the LOC status quo. It also exacerbated a preexisting civil-military dispute in Pakistan, eventually resulting in Pervez Musharraf, the land grab’s architect and a Pakistani general, ousting Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from power in October 1999.<sup>28</sup>

The new government, with Musharraf as chief executive, soon was subject to nonproliferation and coup sanctions. Islamabad also faced heightened scrutiny as the US government and other foreign partners in 2000 sought to “discernibly lower the level of violence along the LOC and inside Kashmir.”<sup>29</sup> This international pressure may have served as a kind of third-party threat that provided the impetus for contemplating a *détente*. Attempts soon followed to coordinate a ceasefire along the LOC, including cessation of activity by Kashmiri militant groups, principally the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), and by at least some Indian security forces in Kashmir. However, while Indian and Pakistani forces as well as the HM declared for at least short periods over the next year and a half that they were ceasing fire as a goodwill gesture, none of the unilateral moves proved enduring amid charges of inadequate adherence.<sup>30</sup> HM’s ceasefire was exceptionally short-lived—mere weeks—because of a dispute between Kashmir- and Pakistan-based militant leaders. That internal split would eventually lead to the killing of a moderate, Kashmir-based HM leader, Abdul Majid Dar.

Following these failed ceasefire efforts in Kashmir, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee turned to high-level diplomacy. After repeated messages through diplomatic channels that Musharraf truly was interested in rapprochement with India, Vajpayee opted to test Musharraf’s sincerity by hosting a bilateral summit in Agra, India, in July 2001. However, that meeting failed to produce a joint statement for reasons that are still disputed by its participants but that seem to include an internal split among the Indian senior cabinet members about whether Pakistan needed to make a commitment to halt cross-border terrorism before India committed to serious dialogue on Kashmir.<sup>31</sup>

Jacob writes that, notably, during this same period of nascent rapprochement, the Indian Army was apparently planning an aggressive operation along the LOC, although such plans were eventually shelved after the 9/11 attacks.<sup>32</sup> The attacks shifted Washington's focus from India-Pakistan rapprochement to securing aid from Islamabad and New Delhi in the emerging war on terror.

After the failures of the Kashmir ceasefires and the Agra summit, India-Pakistan relations collapsed into crisis at the end of 2001. The ceasefire efforts over Kashmir began to fall apart following a terrorist attack on India's Kashmir legislative assembly on October 1, 2001. Indo-Pakistani rapprochement then halted completely following a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001. India fully mobilized its army for the first time since 1971, and Indian troops began shelling at the LOC, returning violence along the line to high levels.

Fearing now that the India-Pakistan conflict might endanger its efforts in Afghanistan, the United States refocused its efforts on securing concessions from Musharraf that would prevent a war. India's threats of large-scale punitive military strikes combined with US pressure seemed to convince Musharraf that it was necessary to decrease visible support to Pakistani militant groups operating in Kashmir as well as pledge publicly that Pakistani territory could not be used for terrorism. Indian troops eventually demobilized in fall 2002 without having launched punitive operations.

## 2003 CEASEFIRE

Out of the 2001–2002 crisis emerged the most promising period in Indo-Pakistani relations since the 1970s. Vajpayee offered to restart peace talks during a rally in Srinagar, the Muslim-majority capital city of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, in April 2003. Full diplomatic relations, which had been severed in the 2001–2002 crisis, were restored that May.<sup>33</sup> Behind the scenes, secret discussions involving the head of India's external intelligence agency, C. D. Sahay, and the director general of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, Lieutenant General Ehsan ul-Haq, appeared to bolster the overt signs of progress.<sup>34</sup> In August, Musharraf publicly indicated his continued interest in a ceasefire along the LOC and within Indian-administered Kashmir.<sup>35</sup> In October, the Indian government announced that Deputy Prime Minister L. K. Advani would be willing to meet with Kashmiri separatists, while the minister of external affairs, Yashwant Sinha, announced that a variety of transportation and other links would be reestablished with Pakistan.<sup>36</sup> This set the stage for Pakistan Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali to announce on November 23, 2003, that Pakistani troops would observe a "complete ceasefire" effective on the Islamic religious holiday Eid al-Fitr, a few days hence.<sup>37</sup> Two days later, the director generals of military operations (DGMOs) agreed in their weekly phone call "to observe a ceasefire with effect from midnight tonight along the international border, LOC and Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) in Jammu & Kashmir."<sup>38</sup>

Along with pressure from Washington, the much-increased terror threat environment within Pakistan may have helped secure Musharraf's buy-in (given his support for US-led efforts in Afghanistan). Two attempts on his life by Islamic militants within 11 days in December 2003 may have further reinforced Musharraf's sense that relaxing tensions with India was necessary to permit Pakistan to get its house in order.



A Kashmiri border villager and an Indian Army soldier are pictured on November 26, 2003. Long accustomed to running for cover, villagers were visibly relaxed following the November 23 ceasefire as they grazed their animals and tended wheat and barley fields near the Line of Control. (Photo by Fayaz Kabli/Reuters)

Unlike the 2000–2001 effort, this LOC ceasefire largely held for nearly a decade with almost no violations. India recorded only single-digit alleged violations from 2004 through 2006 and then double digits through 2012, compared with over 5,000 in 2002 and nearly 3,000 in 2003. (All data on ceasefire violations comes from India since Pakistan does not routinely release estimates of ceasefire violations, and the UN observer tally is confidential.) Although alleged infiltration attempts from Pakistan-administered Kashmir into Indian-administered Kashmir continued, they largely flattened or declined between 2006 and 2015. Meanwhile, fatalities in Indian-administered Kashmir gradually declined through 2013, reaching their lowest levels since the insurgency began in the late 1980s. (See figure 2, which graphs the alleged violations, infiltrations, and fatalities recorded by India from 2000/2001 to 2021.)

Vajpayee's role in the peace process was cut short by Indian voters in the 2004 general election held in April and May, when they ousted his coalition government. But the new Congress Party–led successor coalition in New Delhi, led by technocratic Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, was willing to give talks a chance. Most of the optimism felt by senior officials in Islamabad and New Delhi came from ambitious discussions occurring in secret or in the so-called back channel between appointed representatives from both governments. Those quasi-secret talks centered

on making the LOC a peaceful but more permeable frontier, freer for people-to-people and economic transactions. The officials sought to negotiate a military withdrawal in Siachen and resolve a lingering territorial dispute far from Kashmir, along the Sir Creek estuary in the Indus River Delta on the border between India and Pakistan. Yet despite their apparent progress, nothing was ratified before the back-channel process collapsed as Musharraf's regime lost popularity because of domestic political mismanagement in Pakistan.<sup>39</sup>

Without Musharraf keeping the military in line and without progress in political talks to placate hawks in Pakistan, India-Pakistan progress was vulnerable to spoilers. The most optimistic visions of the back-channel process were shattered by the Pakistani militant terror attacks in Mumbai, India, in November 2008. Although Singh never gave up on diplomacy during his tenure as prime minister, he faced increasingly intense criticism of his approach to Pakistan—including from within his Congress Party. Across the border, the post-Musharraf government led by President Asif Ali Zardari lurched from crisis to crisis. The fractured Pakistani national security team had no time to devote to rapprochement with India, and the doves had no ability to overrule the hawks even if they had the time to devote to negotiations. Increasing violence along the LOC became both a symptom of the worsening relationship and a salient rationale for avoiding conciliatory moves. India's high commissioner to Islamabad (2013–2015) assessed later that heightened clashes on the LOC in 2012 quashed hopes of India-Pakistan trade normalization and that continued cross-LOC violence “meant that even a formulaic official dialogue” was no longer “doable” for Singh's government as it approached its final months before required elections in 2014.<sup>40</sup>

## 2013 CEASEFIRE

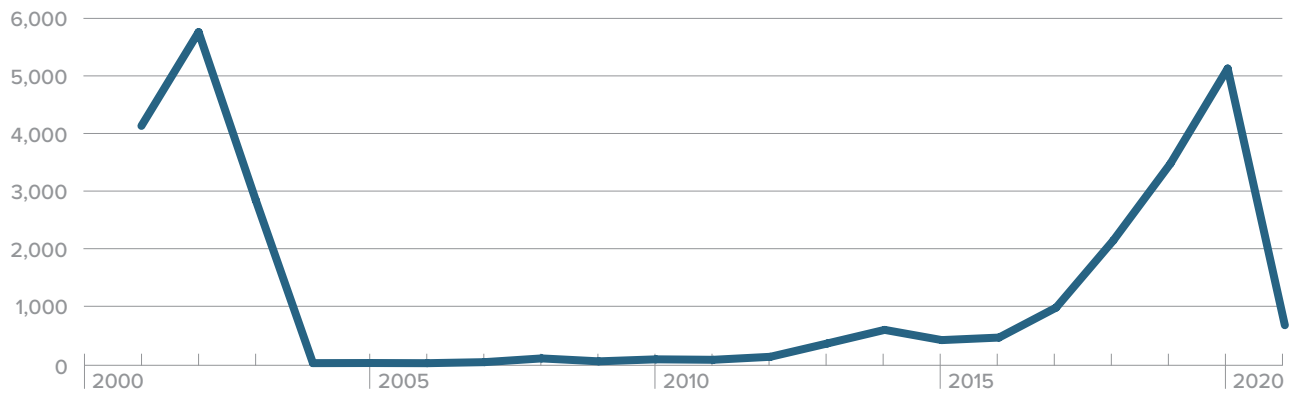
In January 2013, the two countries' DGMOs agreed “to de-escalate the situation along the Line of Control” and ordered their forces to adhere to the ceasefire.<sup>41</sup> But this effort was short-lived, bringing firing down only for the first half of the year. At the political level, Singh and newly returned Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif agreed in September on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly “to task the DGMOs to suggest effective means to restore the ceasefire.”<sup>42</sup> After months of delay, and a change in Pakistan army chiefs, the leaders' agreement eventually led to a rare in-person meeting of the DGMOs—the first since July 11, 1999—at the Wagah-Attari border crossing in Punjab in December 2013.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, that meeting had an at best transitory impact on the rise in ceasefire violations, perhaps suppressing such violence during the months immediately prior and after the meeting but achieving little more.<sup>44</sup> Many Indian observers and some Pakistani ones assessed that the worsening violence along the LOC after mid-2013 was at least in part an effort by the Pakistan Army to restrict Sharif's ability to pursue rapprochement with India absent explicit military concurrence.<sup>45</sup>

On the campaign trail in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate for prime minister, Narendra Modi, sensed weakness in the ruling government's Pakistan approach. He alluded to a willingness to talk but stressed in a May 8, 2014, interview, “Do you think it is possible to have a discussion amidst the deafening noise of bomb blasts and gunshots? So, to have a reasonable discussion, first the blasts and gunshots have to stop.”<sup>46</sup> But Modi's tough words did not presage another ceasefire to clear the air for talks upon his assumption of the prime ministership later that month. Instead, they heralded growing violence along the Kashmir divide. By the end of

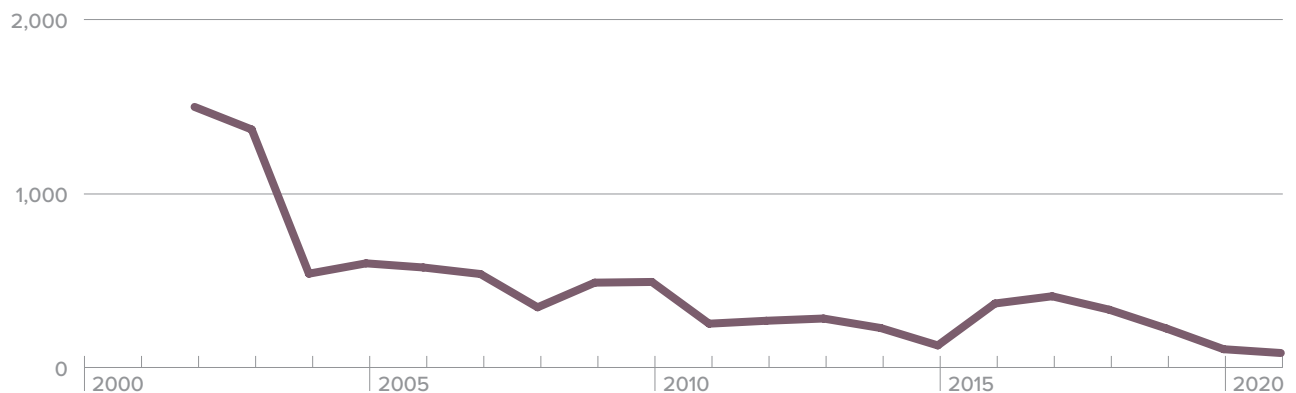
FIGURE 2.

## Alleged violations, infiltrations, and fatalities, 2000/2001–2021

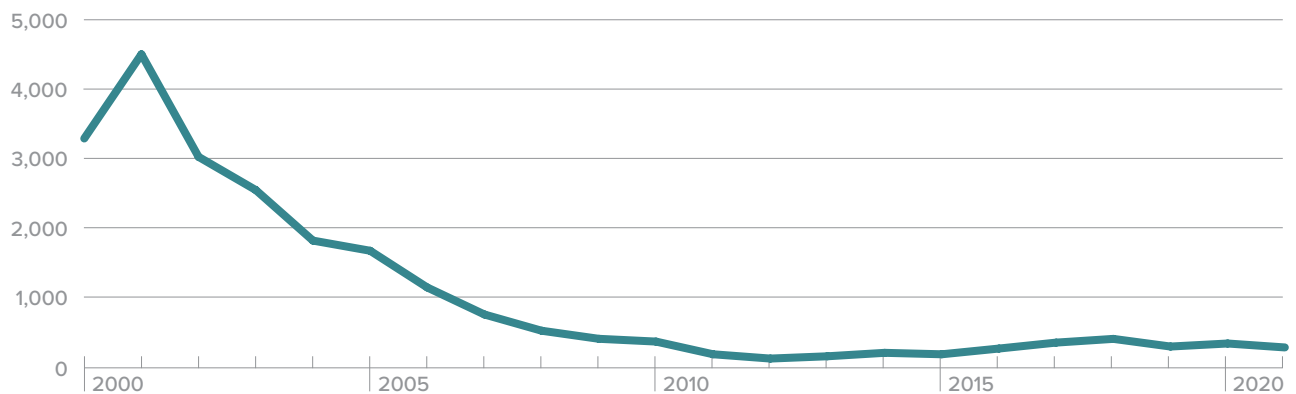
### ALLEGED CEASEFIRE VIOLATIONS BY PAKISTAN IN INDIA-ADMINISTERED KASHMIR



### ALLEGED INFILTRATION ATTEMPTS BY PAKISTAN INTO INDIA-ADMINISTERED KASHMIR



### FATALITIES IN KASHMIR INSURGENCY



**Source:** Data on ceasefire violations and infiltration attempts for 2001–2015 compiled by Happyymon Jacob and 2016–2021 by the author from official Indian government sources, including the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Lok Sabha, and the Press Information Bureau; data on fatalities compiled by the author from the South Asia Terrorism Portal and Lok Sabha.



2014, Indian official sources assessed that total ceasefire violations in 2014 exceeded those of the prior year by 68 percent. George Perkovich and Toby Dalton report that Pakistani officials were especially surprised by India's decision to expand "the scale and geographical scope of cross-border shelling along the working boundary in Kashmir in fall 2014."<sup>47</sup> Jacob argues that the "unprecedented" violence in this area during that year was part of a conscious BJP effort to project toughness ahead of Jammu and Kashmir legislative assembly elections in November and December 2014—elections in which the BJP went on to perform well.<sup>48</sup> An electorally focused young BJP government in New Delhi and a Pakistani government dealing with a civil-military split over how best to manage India consequently failed to restore a ceasefire in Kashmir.

## 2018 CEASEFIRE

After the late-2014 Jammu and Kashmir elections, violence calmed modestly. Sharif and Modi engaged in visible diplomacy, culminating in Modi's surprise decision to visit Sharif's family estate in the city of Raiwind on December 25, 2015. Yet their efforts did little to arrest Kashmir violence. Instead, India-Pakistan relations soured dramatically following the attack on the Pathankot air station in India less than one month later. The firing on the LOC and IB/WB worsened. Talks between India and Pakistan effectively ceased.

At the end of 2016, Lieutenant General Qamar Javed Bajwa was promoted to become Pakistan's army chief. Bajwa was extremely familiar with problems associated with firing in Kashmir, having commanded units responsible for the LOC and IB/WB. Most notably, he served in the Force Command Northern Areas and later as the commander of the X Corps (responsible, along with the I Corps, for Kashmir). Bajwa had a reputation as a pragmatist on India policy.<sup>49</sup> Following his promotion, the civil-military split became at least temporarily less contentious than the splits preceding the 1999 Kargil conflict and the failure of the 2013 attempts to restore the ceasefire.

Although Bajwa's appointment did not usher in immediate dividends for the India-Pakistan relationship, which was in a post-Pathankot funk, improvements slowly emerged in the coming months, especially after Imran Khan's assumption of prime ministership in August 2018. By October 2017, the two countries' national security advisers (NSAs) were again talking by phone.<sup>50</sup> By the end of the year, the NSAs were quietly meeting again in person, albeit in a neutral venue like Bangkok rather than either capital.<sup>51</sup> The NSA channel was likely activated again in March 2018 to help break a cycle of increasingly unpleasant harassment of each country's diplomats posted to the other country.<sup>52</sup>

A few months later, another attempt to coordinate an LOC ceasefire was made. On May 16, 2018, India's Ministry of Home Affairs announced that the central government had asked "Security Forces not to launch operations in Jammu and Kashmir during the holy month of Ramzan [Ramadan]," beginning later that day.<sup>53</sup> This was widely seen as a concession by the BJP to the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the local Kashmiri party that was a BJP coalition partner in the Kashmir legislative assembly. Whatever mix of domestic and international politics propelled the ceasefire, less than two weeks later, on May 29, the two militaries again announced an agreement to "fully implement" the 2003 ceasefire "in letter and spirit."<sup>54</sup>

According to India's records, this effort effectively led to a temporary decrease in monthly ceasefire violations, from more than 250 on average prior to the May ceasefire announcement



Indian Army Director-General of Military Operations Lieutenant General Vinod Bhatia, third from right, arrives on the Indian side of the Wagah-Attari border crossing after a meeting with his Pakistani counterpart, Major General Aamer Riaz, on December 24, 2013. Unfortunately, the meeting had an at best transitory impact on the rise in ceasefire violations. (Photo by Prabhjot Gill/AP)

to fewer than 40 on average in June, July, and August. At the end of Ramadan, though, the Indian government announced it would not be extending the pause on offensive operations, citing the continuation of terrorist attacks despite government restraint.<sup>55</sup> Data from outside groups affirm that militant attacks during the ceasefire were comparable to those in earlier months. In the absence of a broader initiative within Kashmir, the ceasefire along the LOC proved to have a short life. Although the DGMOs met again in August to discuss the ceasefire, they were unable to prevent an escalation in violence.<sup>56</sup> Reported monthly violations slowly crept up from September onward, and by 2019, they were once more averaging nearly 300.<sup>57</sup>

Why the 2018 ceasefire failed is difficult to assess definitively. Pakistan's improving security environment may have reduced interest in a deal from government and military leaders. A bigger factor, however, may have been the BJP's fear of being perceived as weak in the face of continuing violence in Kashmir. As noted earlier, at the state level, the BJP was part of a coalition with an ideologically divergent Jammu and Kashmir PDP. The Ramadan ceasefire was withdrawn on June 17. Two days later, the BJP withdrew support for the PDP-led coalition government in Kashmir, with most commentators attributing that decision and the ceasefire decision to BJP concerns about preserving support in its core constituencies among the Hindu population in Jammu and more broadly nationally as New Delhi prepared for elections in early 2019.<sup>58</sup>

The proposition that the BJP did not want to appear weak on Kashmir seems plausible given that New Delhi did not also halt other lines of rapprochement with Pakistan. Notably, Bajwa was privately and publicly associated with an effort that same year to ease the ability of Sikh pilgrims to travel within the Kartarpur corridor between two major Sikh religious sites, one of which (Gurdwara Darbar Sahib) is in Pakistan's Punjab near the India-Pakistan border.<sup>59</sup>

## 2021 CEASEFIRE

The India-Pakistan relationship returned to a state of acute crisis in February 2019, triggered by violence in Kashmir dozens of kilometers away from the LOC (discussed below). Although this short but dangerous crisis resolved rapidly, in its aftermath and later that same year, Modi's government decided to fulfill an earlier campaign pledge to remove Jammu and Kashmir's special status within the Indian constitution (under Articles 35A and 370). And, in August 2019, it divided the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories: the Jammu and Kashmir territory and a newly named Ladakh territory. These changes have, at least temporarily and perhaps indefinitely, reduced Kashmiris' voice in local affairs. Given anticipated Kashmiri anger about that move, New Delhi employed heavy-handed military repression to ensure that protests in the Kashmir Valley would not spiral out of control. These 2019 events delayed the resumption of a ceasefire by more than a year and complicated Pakistani civilian interest in rapprochement with India.

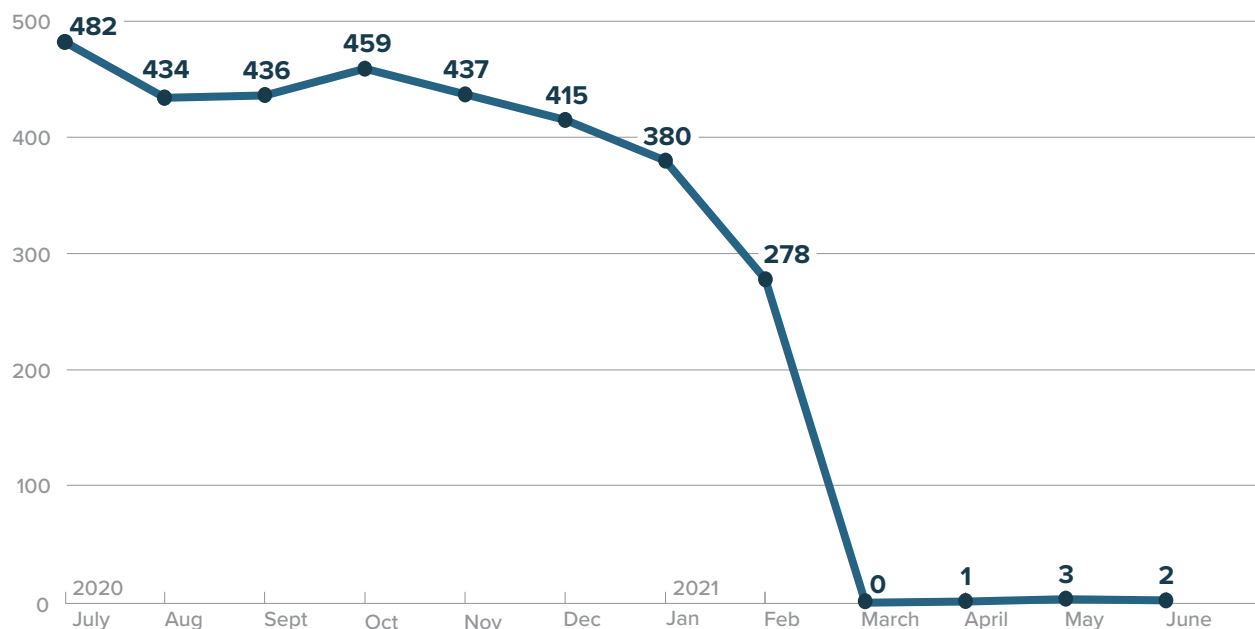
On February 14, 2019, a suicide bomber attacked a convoy of Indian paramilitary forces in the Pulwama district of Indian-administered Kashmir, killing 40 personnel.<sup>60</sup> This attack triggered Indian retaliatory standoff air strikes on a facility associated with the terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammed in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. The strike did not appear to result in any Pakistani casualties, but India contests that claim.<sup>61</sup> Pakistan then launched retaliatory air strikes. During those strikes, an air-to-air skirmish led to the downing of an Indian fighter aircraft and the ejection of its pilot, who landed in Pakistani territory and was captured by locals. The tense situation was quickly defused, however, with the release of the captured pilot. Pakistan never provided a full accounting of the episode, but both Khan and Bajwa have been credited with deescalating the crisis, while several third-party interlocutors—including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States—have claimed some credit for their crisis management efforts.<sup>62</sup>

Later in 2019, New Delhi abrogated Kashmir's special constitutional status and divided Kashmir into two union territories. Pakistan protested the decision and associated Indian restrictions on Kashmiri rights, and there was a substantial increase in anti-Indian rhetoric. Khan repeatedly compared Modi to Nazi leader Adolf Hitler.<sup>63</sup> (Khan subsequently claimed that the Army pressured him to pull back on such comparisons lest he jeopardize back-channel diplomacy.)<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, the rhetorical escalation did not cause a serious military or diplomatic crisis. According to India's estimates, firing on the LOC worsened, but only modestly given the already high levels of firing—from just under 300 monthly ceasefire violations on average in 2019 to more than 400 on average in 2020.

By the end of 2020, Pakistan and India appeared to have reentered back-channel conversations through the NSAs and intelligence channels, according to media accounts. The Pakistani NSA, Moeed Yusuf, publicly dismissed such accounts as "baseless," although a careful reading of his denials indicates they do not fully refute the totality of press claims.<sup>65</sup> Subsequently, on

FIGURE 3.

## Alleged ceasefire violations by Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir, July 2020–June 2021



**Source:** Press Information Bureau, Government of India, August 3, 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1741907>.

February 2, 2021, Bajwa gave a highly publicized speech to a military audience in which he stressed, “It is time to extend [the] hand of peace in all directions” and that “Pakistan and India must resolve the longstanding issue of Jammu and Kashmir in a dignified and peaceful manner.”<sup>66</sup>

### ONGOING 2021 CEASEFIRE

The new ceasefire was announced on February 25, 2021. It was immediately successful. According to Indian data, firing along the LOC and IB/WB plummeted from 380 incidents in January to zero in March (see figure 3). From the official start of the ceasefire through December 31, 2022, there were fewer than 10 violations of the agreement, and only one ceasefire violation took place in 2022, according to India’s Ministry of Defense.<sup>67</sup>

Just a few weeks after the ceasefire announcement, Bajwa publicly emphasized that he viewed India-Pakistan rapprochement as crucial to Pakistan’s economic success but that a durable peace process would require India to create a “conducive environment” in Indian-administered Kashmir.<sup>68</sup> These public statements corresponded with Bajwa’s private signals to India that he desired building a path toward “a 20-year or so moratorium [on violence in Kashmir]” to provide space for meaningful rapprochement.<sup>69</sup> Bajwa’s worldview led him to forge a consensus

within the Pakistan Army with which he could make an institutional commitment to comply with the ceasefire.

Yet if Bajwa was hoping to elicit an Indian restoration of Jammu and Kashmir statehood, that milestone obviously was not achieved or even promoted by New Delhi. Even progress toward less ambitious goals was not evident in the public domain. While it is impossible to rule out quiet progress in the back channel, hints of progress typically appear in public commentary. Without such hints, Pakistanis alleged that India was content to accept the ceasefire with no further overt progress. Bajwa's apparent complaints to US officials that Indian policy in Kashmir was complicating his conciliatory approach provided further evidence that meaningful back-channel advances were not being made.<sup>70</sup>

India's middling course between broad rapprochement and heightened confrontation requires explanation. Why not continue the pressure on Pakistan through heightened firing on the LOC or attempt a peace process as attempted earlier, under Vajpayee, Singh, and even Modi himself? One possible answer is that there are competing impulses in India's contemporary Pakistan policy. First and most pressingly, a quieter Kashmir lowers the risk associated with redeploying Indian forces from the country's western front with Pakistan to its eastern contested boundary with China. Since May 2020, when there were deadly clashes in the Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh over the disputed Himalayan border region, China has represented the heightened third-party threat commanding the Indian military's attention. Since those clashes, India has been reorienting several divisions of army and paramilitary personnel from the Pakistan front to China front.<sup>71</sup>

However, these strategic moves seem at cross-purposes with New Delhi's domestic political inclinations toward Kashmir, particularly since India's recent actions appear inconsistent with previous symbolic or substantive concessions to accommodate stated Pakistani goals. Prime Ministers Vajpayee and Singh were willing to reduce the security force presence and hold out the prospect of increased power sharing with the Jammu and Kashmir state government in exchange for the prospect of Indo-Pakistani rapprochement. But New Delhi's current approach toward Kashmir can be most charitably described as integrationist. Absent the higher level of autonomy and distinct local laws New Delhi once granted to Kashmir, the area will subsume many more migrants from elsewhere in India, and they will vote in elections (whenever they take place), participate in the Kashmiri economy, and generally dilute any grievances retained by long-term residents of the Kashmir Valley.<sup>72</sup> The new union territory of Jammu and Kashmir will not retain the more expansive vision occasionally entertained during prior discussions between the national government and local Kashmiri leaders dating back to the 1950s. Nationally, the BJP likely wants to project an uncompromising vision to its core supporters. Locally, the party has already achieved success in the Hindu-majority districts of and around Jammu and likely expects even greater success with new voters in Kashmir.<sup>73</sup>

Beyond these shifting domestic political incentives, Indian skeptics of substantive overt dialogue with Pakistan have ample examples they can reference to argue against it, starting nearly 25 years ago with India-Pakistan talks leading to a summit in Lahore in 1999. Such critics argue that the Lahore process led to the Kargil conflict in 1999, the Agra summit led to the attacks on the Kashmir legislative assembly and Indian parliament in 2001, the back channel's collapse led to the attacks in Mumbai in 2008, and Modi's Raiwind visit led to the Pathankot airbase attack



in 2016. These skeptics may overstate the evidence of a close causal connection, but it seems undeniable that prior attempts at composite dialogue have been associated with aggressive spoiling behavior. This line of thinking suggests that political dialogue might expose India to concrete dangers and Modi to public embarrassment. Consequently, a ceasefire divorced from political dialogue has appeal. It contains a built-in verification mechanism, a built-in option for tit-for-tat punishment if it were to break down, and limited political risk.

The concern that some observers have is that skeptics in Pakistan may perceive the ceasefire as a bad deal for Bajwa and for Pakistan. Rather than breaking a cycle of enmity and leading to rapprochement, the ceasefire has not yet had any broader payoff.

To skeptics on both sides, it is important to emphasize that a limited payoff should not be discounted. After all, the ceasefire has meant a meaningful improvement in the lives of soldiers along the LOC and paramilitary personnel along the IB/WB. A ceasefire has also meant a dramatic improvement for villagers near the contested Kashmir frontier. General Asim Munir replaced Bajwa as army chief following Bajwa's scheduled retirement in November 2022. Whether Munir has concluded a limited payoff is sufficient for a continued ceasefire, which carries with it the slow ossification of the Kashmir divide, remains to be seen. Some doubt he and other senior generals will be as open to rapprochement as Bajwa. Brigadier (Ret.) Feroz Hassan Khan, Bajwa's old commanding officer, was gloomy in his assessment prior to Munir's selection as Bajwa's successor: "With Bajwa gone soon, India has lost yet another golden opportunity of stability in relations."<sup>74</sup>

## Prospects for the Ceasefire

The current ceasefire is a rare example of politically meaningful India-Pakistan cooperation since 2019. As such, it is extraordinarily exposed to external and internal political shocks. Decision-makers have few levers to pull to express frustration or anger at a development in the bilateral relationship.

There are reasons to fear that shocks may come. Pakistan is navigating a drawn-out political crisis that has already led to the departure of Khan as prime minister in April 2022. A fragile coalition government of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) governed from April 2022 to August 2023. It was replaced by a caretaker government in advance of national elections scheduled for February 2024. Like the coalition government that preceded it, the caretaker government depends on the military for political survival.

Overlaying this political fragility is uncertainty over whether Munir shares Bajwa's opinions about Pakistan's political landscape and the preferred approach toward India. In addition to potential policy discontinuity, each transition in military and political leadership contains a risk that the handover of authority might be exploited by spoilers. A full understanding of the 2008 Mumbai attacks is not in the public domain and realistically may never be, but one explanation attributes the attacks to post-Musharraf transitions in Pakistan. In this telling, a new director general of Inter-Services Intelligence, Lieutenant General Ahmad Shuja Pasha, "lost track" of Mumbai attack planning, resulting in devastating attacks and bilateral crisis without the full cognizance of Pakistan's military or civilian leadership.<sup>75</sup> The Mumbai crisis is also instructive because it further destabilized the PPP government in 2008, complicated Pakistani crisis management, and aggravated a preexisting cleavage between Prime Minister Yousuf Raza

The current ceasefire is a rare example of politically meaningful India-Pakistan cooperation since 2019. As such, it is extraordinarily exposed to external or internal political shocks. Decision-makers have few levers to pull to express frustration or anger at a development in the bilateral relationship.

Gilani and President Asif Ali Zardari. The already fragile Pakistani power structure would struggle under the weight of crisis management.

There are several recent signs that the uneasy civil-military union that has governed Pakistan since Khan's ouster has found it difficult to secure the leader buy-in necessary to accomplish even routine diplomacy with India. In late summer 2022, as Pakistan was beset by widespread and catastrophic flooding, the finance minister expressed

willingness to consider Indian aid and reopen limited trade ties to help manage the economic calamity.<sup>76</sup> Such a proposal seemed noncontroversial to many observers since Pakistan had accepted Indian aid in 2005 following a severe earthquake centered in Azad Kashmir and again in 2010 following severe flooding.<sup>77</sup> But the next day, Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif did not support his minister when asked about the prospects for renewed trade with India. Instead, he told the international media, "There won't have been problems about trading with India but genocide is going on there and Kashmiris have been denied their rights. Kashmir has been forcibly annexed through [India's] abolition of Article 370 [of its constitution]." He then said he was willing to talk with Modi, but India and Pakistan "cannot live in peace without resolving these issues."<sup>78</sup>

This rhetorical escalation was unexpected. The Sharif family had acquired a reputation as being comparatively dovish on India, and Shehbaz in particular had been associated with civil-military discord in 2016 over the military's reluctance to crack down on anti-India militant groups.<sup>79</sup> Regardless of whether Sharif's interjection reflected his sincere beliefs or he just feared that hawks in the military or other parties might object to an India opening, the situation does not inspire optimism about Pakistani policy toward India in the months to come; the ceasefire's fate may hinge on such political calculations.

Even before Sharif's public intervention, India appeared hesitant to extend aid. Modi publicly offered only his condolences to those affected by the floods, and in the aftermath of Sharif's statement, Indian government officials were quick to stress they had never offered post-flooding disaster relief to Pakistan.<sup>80</sup> This may reflect a strategic calculation that India's interests benefit from Pakistani economic distress, or it may reflect a domestic political calculation that Modi and the BJP's brand would benefit from taking a hard stance toward Pakistan. Certainly, while many Indian voters seem willing to give Modi considerable deference, evidenced by his undeniable popularity, those same voters express strong disapproval toward Pakistan.<sup>81</sup>

Like all Indian leaders, Modi must make political calculations across multiple electoral contexts and timelines. His government will face national elections no later than April 2024, but the BJP has to contend with routine state-level electoral contests. There were seven state-level legislative assembly elections in 2022, nine took place in 2023, and seven are anticipated in 2024 alongside or after national polls. Pakistan has uneven salience across India but is likely more important in several northern states. Additionally, if legislative assembly elections do take place in the new union territory of Jammu and Kashmir, then policies toward Pakistan will have center stage in a contest that will take on outsize importance in Indian public discourse given

the audacity of the Modi government's policy moves in that former state. In 2014, the Modi government assumed that voters in Jammu and Kashmir would reward forcefulness along the LOC. The government may make a similar calculation in the coming months, with dangerous implications for the ceasefire's longevity.

With leader buy-in tenuous at best, past ceasefires have proved vulnerable to shocks. Thus, it is worrisome that these domestic political calculations may interact with three factors that are partially but not fully under the control of leaders in India and Pakistan. First and foremost is terrorism targeting India. There might be a repeat of the types of high-profile terrorist attacks that scuttled prior ceasefires and conciliatory initiatives between India and Pakistan. The Kashmir legislative assembly (2001), parliament (2001), Mumbai (2008), Pathankot (2016), and Pulwama (2019) attacks all offer ready examples. Of course, there were other attacks that did not trigger crises or severe relationship downturns, but they certainly could have. These incidents include the Red Fort terrorist attack in India (2000) and the Mumbai train bombings (2006). Even several medium-profile attacks, against the Kashmiri Hindu Pandit community for instance, could cause India's national leaders to view the ceasefire as failing and to shore up their security credentials by resuming cross-LOC violence.

It is important to stress that a terrorist attack could rupture the ceasefire without any intentional decision by Pakistani decision-makers to increase violence against India. Attacks in Kashmir continue, whether as a result of an incomplete ability of Pakistani agencies to halt them or an unwillingness by those agencies to do so. As anti-India groups appear to shift to Taliban-governed Afghanistan for safe haven, Pakistan may be afforded greater deniability—perhaps sincerely so—in operations planned by those groups. Once launched, attacks can “succeed” in unpredictable ways. A 2016 attack on an Indian Army camp at Uri killed 19 people. Yet a majority of the casualties in that attack reportedly died from burns suffered because they were housed in non-fire retardant tents. Alternative tent material or different weather conditions might have meant the difference between the sort of attack that invites overt retaliation—which Modi authorized in this case in the form of “surgical strikes”—and the type of attack that can be overlooked.

Although the connection between terrorism against India and a breakdown in bilateral relations is typically the concern, an attack in Pakistan could also rupture the ceasefire. The terror threat in Pakistan has subsided considerably from its peak in the late 2000s and early 2010s, but several groups currently target the state as well as Chinese entities operating in Pakistan. These groups include, but are not limited to, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan militant group based along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, the Balochistan Liberation Army based in Afghanistan, and the Islamic State Khorasan Province, which is an Islamic State affiliate that operates throughout Central and South Asia. Given their divergent political aims, they have distinct reasons for their targeting choices, but all groups seek to weaken Pakistani security forces as well as diminish Chinese support for the state. While the true views of Pakistan's counterterror specialists are difficult to glean, Pakistani officials often publicly state that such groups operate with Indian encouragement if not covert Indian backing.<sup>82</sup> In 2023, Pakistan appears to have been the site of several targeted assassinations of alleged anti-Indian militants residing in Pakistani territory, which have also been ascribed to Indian intelligence agencies.<sup>83</sup> There is consequently continual fodder for hawks within the Pakistani establishment who seek

to escalate militancy in Kashmir or terror attacks elsewhere in India. Thus, an increase in such attacks could also chip away at support for the ceasefire in the senior ranks of the Pakistan Army, especially given Bajwa's departure.

Finally, Sino-Indian rapprochement might endanger the ceasefire. Although Bajwa signaled interest in an India-Pakistan détente almost at the outset of his tenure as army chief, he was in office for more than four years before he was able to announce a Kashmir ceasefire. While there are several possible explanations for this, by far the most commonly offered is that India was more interested in a ceasefire after the Sino-Indian Galwan clashes of 2020. Indian Army personnel had to be redeployed to the contested Line of Actual Control with China, and a reduction of tensions along the LOC with Pakistan made such a move considerably less risky. Another explanation is the additional austerity concern imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic; it underscored the need to prioritize the threat from China. If Sino-Indian tensions dissipate in the coming months, however, India could afford greater violence on its western border since it would be able to focus resources on that theater without opening vulnerabilities on its north-eastern frontiers. In this scenario, triggers for renewed violence on the LOC would likely not be ignored, potentially causing violence to escalate to previous high levels.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

When the 2021 ceasefire was announced publicly, former Indian diplomat T. C. A. Raghavan stressed, “We have to wait and see . . . whether it is a tactical arrangement that has been reached because it was convenient to both sides to do so at this stage or whether it is only the beginning of a major political initiative. We don't know as yet.”<sup>84</sup> To some extent that uncertainty lingers, even though the accumulated available evidence so far indicates that only a tactical arrangement was and remains possible. Regardless, nearly three years of quiet along the LOC has been meaningful to many who can go about their days with less fear of imminent violence.

Unfortunately, tactical arrangements without any strategic ballast are fairly easy to jettison. This ceasefire could fail quickly, like those shorter attempts from 2000 to 2001 and in 2013 and 2018; or it could fail slowly, like the 2003 ceasefire, which survived in attenuated form even after the 2008 Mumbai attacks. There were signs that ceasefire adherence was beginning to fray in 2023, even as the ceasefire held.<sup>85</sup>

As outlined in this report, some type of failure is certainly possible, because the ceasefire is vulnerable to changing political winds and external circumstances—which then raises two key questions. First, should efforts be made to reinforce it? Put simply, doing so will not only further secure improvements in the lives of military personnel in the field and local residents in Kashmir, but also help foreclose one channel of inadvertent escalation in the broader bilateral relationship. Second, how could it be reinforced? Three major avenues for bolstering the ceasefire exist.

**Rebuild overt channels of dialogue.** The 2003 ceasefire endured in part because of political buy-in and a well-functioning back-channel dialogue. Today, there are elements of these factors, but the overall environment stands in stark contrast. Despite the current ceasefire's success, the India-Pakistan diplomatic relationship is extraordinarily tenuous. Since August 2019, following Pakistan's recall of its high commissioner from New Delhi and expulsion of India's high

commissioner from Islamabad after India abrogated Article 370, diplomatic relations have been anemic. In the absence of meaningful high-level diplomatic talks, lower-ranking diplomats have had to manage the official diplomatic relationship.

The situation obviously did not stop both countries from negotiating the outlines of the ceasefire agreement, which, as discussed earlier, reportedly took place through the NSAs and may have involved intermediaries from both states' intelligence services. Additionally, track 1.5 contacts—where serving Indian officials find themselves with serving Pakistan officials amid a broader gathering of mostly nongovernmental experts—appear to have occurred. Yet while back channels and covert talks are fine—and arguably preferable—for negotiating breakthroughs in the relationship, they are less good for working out the many mundane activities that might accompany true normalization. The other clear disadvantage of the current arrangement is that since high commissioners are not present in both capitals, both states have lost one option available to them to signal displeasure during any future crisis. With diplomatic presence already reduced, it is more likely that either state might opt to sever relations entirely in a future crisis, dramatically complicating the normal management of bilateral relations. Although this point may seem cynical, one benefit of resuming overt diplomatic dialogue is that it could be suspended in the event of provocation, giving leaders another option besides ending the ceasefire. On balance, rupturing the ceasefire may be more attractive and more likely when rupturing dialogue is not possible.

While India and Pakistan are fully capable of finding venues for dialogue, outside observers should continue to sponsor track 2 (nongovernmental) and track 1.5 contacts to provide easy opportunities for message passing. Broader, multilateral dialogues are probably more attractive for government observers that may want to float proposals quietly and without the scrutiny that bilateral discussions, even nongovernmental ones, sometimes attract.<sup>86</sup>

**Institutionalize normalcy on the LOC.** Prior ceasefires and periods of Indo-Pakistani rapprochement have often been accompanied by a much broader relaxation of rules around cross-LOC movement. Prominent examples include dedicated bus routes, visa-free travel for Kashmiris, and cross-LOC trade. Such broader initiatives expand the constituency for normalcy. They improve the lives of individual Kashmiris and provide hope that, at some future date, the LOC might be irrelevant in South Asia, just as European integration has decreased the salience of prior territorial disputes in Europe. There are few inherent risks in resuming these initiatives—after all, the relevant agencies managed them for many years until they ended for political signaling purposes. Nor is there much historical evidence that they would be politically salient enough to result in the sort of alleged spoiling attacks that have occurred after summitry.

There are other ways to institutionalize normalcy on the LOC, but they would be much trickier to negotiate and execute. These include limitations on construction within a certain distance of the LOC (or IB/WB) or demarcations with physical markers. Some previously negotiated limitations, especially on construction, still exert a vestigial normative influence on when violence is considered permissible. If they could be negotiated again, they might help reduce potential triggers for local-level violence.

**Consider other military confidence-building measures that are valued by Pakistan's military.** If there is a perceived danger that too much political progress between the civilian leaders of



India and Pakistan might prompt a backlash from the intelligence agencies or military establishment in Pakistan, then one form of cooperation might sidestep that danger: mutually beneficial military confidence-building measures. The ceasefire is one such example, since the primary beneficiaries are the Indian and Pakistani soldiers at the front lines. Progress on demilitarization of the Siachen Glacier, which has been within reach multiple times in the last three decades, also would ease the burden for both militaries. The current wider availability of remote sensors, uncrewed aerial vehicles, and space-based surveillance tools should make any demilitarization much less risky than it would have been in prior eras.

Sponsored research at US national laboratories and think tanks should focus on obstacles to and best practices for potential confidence-building measures for the region, with the aim of generating vetted templates that Indian and Pakistani policymakers could pull off the shelf in the event of possible political rapprochement.<sup>87</sup>

The ceasefire has intrinsic benefit but also was designed to build confidence to permit more ambitious steps. Absent progress in the above three areas, it is easy to imagine a reversion to crisis and daily violence with no gains for either side. Besides obvious benefits for those living in and posted to the Kashmir region, reinforcing the ceasefire should help insulate the broader bilateral relationship from crisis.



A core line of effort for current US policy is to support India's continued rise and regional leadership.<sup>88</sup> A more normal India-Pakistan relationship continues to be a prerequisite for India's rise. An India trapped in military conflict and crisis with Pakistan to its west cannot achieve its developmental goals while managing a rising China to its east. And a Pakistan obsessed with India cannot fix its multifaceted internal challenges, including domestic instability and economic stagnation. Since the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan's importance in US policy has diminished, but it has not disappeared. As Lloyd Austin argued in 2019, prior to becoming US secretary of defense, Pakistan "is a nuclear armed state, and it has Al Qaeda in its backyard" and consequently will remain strategically important to the United States.<sup>89</sup> The difficult reality is that both India and Pakistan will demand US attention, and their bilateral problems cannot be ignored.

The current ceasefire may be a fragile foundation upon which to build, but a more resilient foundation is sadly unavailable. Careful, thoughtful, and quiet construction work on that shaky foundation is the order of the day.

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