

THE 2021 INDIA-PAKISTAN CEASEFIRE AND THE ROAD AHEAD



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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report examines the 2021 India-Pakistan ceasefire agreement, a significant breakthrough in reducing violence along the Line of Control in Kashmir. Despite previous failures of similar arrangements, the understanding has remarkably endured for over four years, bringing relief to border communities. The report analyzes how both nations interpret the agreement differently—Pakistan viewing it as a step toward broader dialogue and India focusing on reducing border violence—while offering recommendations for strengthening this rare diplomatic success. Its longevity depends on sustained political commitment, continued military restraint, and Pakistan's efforts to address cross-border terrorism.

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Executive Summary

- On February 25, 2021, India and Pakistan's Director Generals of Military Operations agreed to strictly observe the 2003 ceasefire agreement along the Line of Control (LoC) and address core issues that could disturb peace.
- This understanding followed a period of escalating violence, with India reporting 5,133 ceasefire violations (CFVs) in 2020, resulting in 46 Indian deaths, while Pakistan reported over 3,000 violations, causing 28 civilian deaths and 257 injuries.
- The ceasefire has remarkably endured for over four years, with no deaths of Indian soldiers or civilians from CFVs reported since January 2022.
- Strategic necessities drove both nations to this agreement - India sought to avoid a two-front challenge while managing tensions with China in Eastern Ladakh, while Pakistan faced economic instability, rising militancy, and security concerns following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.
- The nations maintain different interpretations of the ceasefire's scope - Pakistan views it as a pathway to broader dialogue, including on Kashmir, while India focuses specifically on reducing border violence with addressing cross-border terrorism as a precondition for further engagement.
- Border communities have experienced significant relief, with Indian farmers resuming cultivation of lands abandoned for over two decades and development projects accelerating in border regions.
- The 2003 ceasefire agreement provides an important historical context - initially successful in reducing CFVs from 2,841 to just four within a year, it unraveled starting in 2013 with the killing and mutilation of Indian soldiers at the LoC.
- Key factors in the 2003 agreement's breakdown included diminished political commitment following leadership changes, terror attacks (particularly the 2008 Mumbai attack), and local military incidents that triggered escalatory responses.
- The recent surge in terrorist violence in the Jammu region raises concerns about the potential impact on the current ceasefire, with attacks witnessed in 8 of 10 Jammu districts in 2024, including areas previously terror-free for over a decade.
- Sustaining the 2021 ceasefire requires continued political commitment from both governments, Pakistan, addressing cross-border infiltration and terrorism, the establishment of restraint protocols, regular flag meetings between local commanders, and enhanced communication mechanisms.
- The collapse of the 2003 agreement demonstrates that the ceasefire's longevity cannot be taken for granted. Its sustainability rests on continued political will, military restraint on both sides and Pakistan's efforts to curb terrorism.
- While the 2021 ceasefire may not resolve deeper bilateral disputes, it provides significant humanitarian benefits to border populations and offers an opportunity to maintain stability along the LoC while building mechanisms to prevent future escalation.

Introduction

On February 25, 2021, the Indian Ministry of Defence (MoD) issued a statement that the Director Generals of India (DGsMO) and Pakistan had “agreed for 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.” the two DGsMO also agreed to “address each other’s core issues and concerns which have propensity to disturb peace and lead to violence.”^[1]

This surprise announcement came in the backdrop of increasing violence along the Line of Control (LoC) and the international border (IB) in Jammu and Kashmir. In 2020, India reported 5,133 ceasefire violations (CFVs), resulting in 22 Indian civilian and 24 security personnel deaths. Pakistan’s figures likewise showed over 3,000 Indian violations in 2020, causing 28 Pakistani civilian deaths and injuring 257 (Pakistan does not provide figures for deaths of security personnel).^[2]

The February 2021 ceasefire understanding was not a new agreement but called for a strict observance of the 2003 ceasefire agreement between the two countries. Although there have been some sporadic incidents of cross-border firing, the agreement holds.

The 2021 Ceasefire: Interpretations and Trends

The 2021 ceasefire was born out of the larger strategic interests of both sides. For India, embroiled at the time in a tense standoff with China in Eastern Ladakh, stabilizing the LoC with Pakistan was essential to avoid simultaneous escalation on two fronts. Concurrently, Pakistan was facing substantial internal challenges, including economic instability, rising militancy, and a fragile security environment. Pakistan also needed to focus on its western border in view of the impending US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

While both sides have demonstrated a positive commitment to the ceasefire understanding, subtle differences persist in their interpretation of the agreement. The mention of addressing “each other’s core issues and concerns” has been seen in Pakistan as a commitment to resolving the main issues plaguing relations between the two countries.

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, while welcoming the ceasefire, called on New Delhi to take “necessary steps to meet the long-standing demand & right of the Kashmiri people to self-determination according to UNSC resolutions.”^[3] Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi hailed the ceasefire as “a positive development” and suggested “it could be a good start for the future.” However, Qureshi emphasized that India would have to “abide by this ceasefire agreement with sincerity” and noted, “How can we make progress on the issue of occupied Kashmir unless the environment is conducive?”^[4]

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In 2023, some commentary in Pakistani newspapers suggested that following the 2021 ceasefire, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was scheduled to travel to Pakistan in April 2021 as part of efforts to establish friendly relations and reopen trade. This did not happen as the Pakistani leadership feared a popular backlash over what could be seen as a sellout on Kashmir.^[5]

In contrast, India's interpretation is more limited and focused on reducing violence along the LoC rather than opening a larger dialogue. When asked about the ceasefire understanding, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said, "India desires normal neighborly relations with Pakistan. We have always maintained that we are committed to addressing issues, if any, in a peaceful bilateral manner. On key issues, our position remains unchanged."^[6]

The key issue for India is Pakistan's support for terror activities in India. Following the understanding, Army sources reiterated that there would be "no let-up" in counter-terror operations as a result of the agreement, adding that the agreement with Pakistan was "an attempt to bring violence levels down", but the Army retained the "right to respond" in case there is a terror attack in the future.^[7]

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Given the complexity of India-Pakistan relations and the divergent interpretations surrounding the agreement, there were initial concerns about the ceasefire's long-term sustainability. Nevertheless, the ceasefire has successfully endured for over four years, demonstrating noteworthy resilience amid ongoing bilateral challenges.

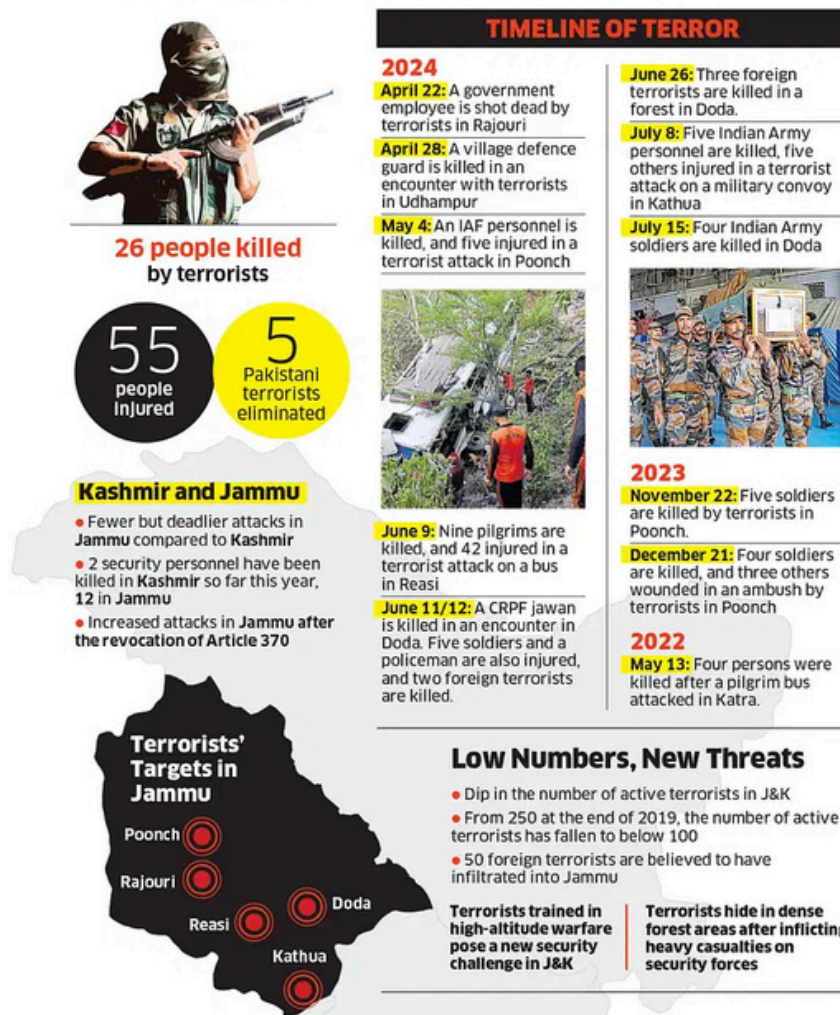
In August 2023, Ajay Bhatt, the Minister of State in the Ministry of Defence, stated in Parliament that since the 2021 understanding, there had been just three incidents of CFVs and no incidents of shelling along the LoC. Not a single soldier or civilian has been killed in CFVs since January 2022.^[8]

In September 2024, Lieutenant General Rajiv Ghai, the commander of Srinagar-based 15 Corps, said that the ceasefire understanding has been sustained and is very much in force.^[9] The Indian Army issued a similar statement in February 2025, after a skirmish at the LoC, stating that the ceasefire was intact and continued to be observed.^[10]

The halt in firing has provided immense relief to the local population of both countries. People in border villages lived in constant dread, and entire villages were often evacuated during periods of intense firing. In January 2018, more than 40,000 villagers in the Jammu region fled their homes after heavy shelling by Pakistan Rangers.^[11] Firing from the Indian side led to Pakistani civilians leaving their villages for safer areas.^[12]

The period of peace has permitted the locals to resume their daily activities without fear. For example, farmers in the Hiranagar area of Jammu have resumed cultivation near the IB after more than twenty years.^[13] Development activity and infrastructure projects in the border areas have also picked up, providing much-needed succor to the population.

In the last year, there has been a surge in violence in the Jammu region. In 2024, terror attacks were witnessed in 8 of the 10 Jammu districts, some in areas that had remained terror-free for more than a decade.^[14] This has raised some concerns over whether increased violence in the Jammu region could impact the ongoing ceasefire. To better understand this, it would be instructive to study the reasons for the breakdown of the 2003 ceasefire agreement.

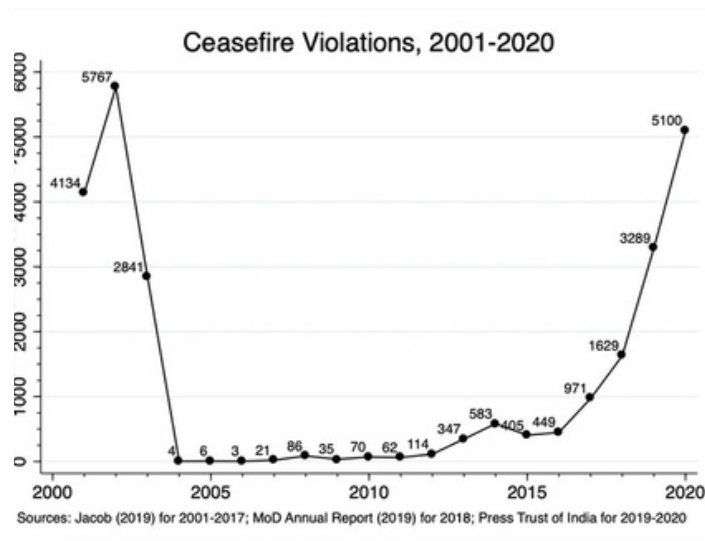


Source: Deccan Herald Graphics

Breakdown of the 2003 Agreement

The 2003 ceasefire agreement resulted from Pakistani Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali's announcement on November 23, 2003, that troops had been ordered to "demonstrate a complete ceasefire from the day of Eid."^[15] Two days later, India responded with a statement that the DGsMO of the two countries had agreed to observe ceasefire on the IB, LoC, and Actual Ground Position Line (Siachen sector) in Jammu and Kashmir with effect from midnight of November 25, 2003.

The ceasefire yielded immediate benefits, with firing plummeting from 2841 incidents in 2003 to 4 in 2004. The data on CFVs from 2003 to 2014 is given below. Data up to 2014 has been listed because, by this time, the ceasefire agreement had completely collapsed. In subsequent years, the CFVs kept mounting, reaching a peak of over 5,000 in 2020.



In its initial years, the 2003 agreement was successful as it was coupled with the political will of the leaders in both countries to move ahead in bilateral relations. In 2008, events in both countries changed dramatically. President Musharraf, facing increasing domestic opposition and a threat of impeachment, resigned in August 2008 and went into exile.

2008 saw a series of terror attacks in Jaipur, Bangalore, Ahmedabad, and Delhi — and culminated in Mumbai. The Mumbai attack, broadcast live over four harrowing days, marked a turning point in India-Pakistan relations. India froze the composite dialogue process, and the political incentive to engage with Pakistan waned. However, the government decided to adopt strategic restraint, preferring diplomacy over a military response. This is also reflected in the fact that there was no significant increase in CFVs along the border immediately after 2008.

The real unraveling of the ceasefire began in 2013. On January 8, two Indian soldiers were killed and their bodies mutilated in an ambush near the LoC in the Rajouri sector of the Jammu region.

The action led to widespread outrage in India. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said that this incident had seriously damaged the ongoing peace process and "after this dastardly act, there can't be business as usual with Pakistan." General Bikram Singh, the Chief of Army Staff of India, said, "We reserve the right to retaliate at a time of our choosing."^[16]

The LoC immediately heated up, with both sides accusing each other of violating the ceasefire agreement. Despite a flag meeting between the two armies, CFVs continued.^[17] There were a series of incidents where Indian patrols close to the LoC were targeted with improvised explosive devices and mines planted on patrol routes.

On August 6, five Indian soldiers were killed in a cross-LoC raid in the Poonch sector of the Jammu region. There were some reports that the Indian soldiers were killed in retaliation to four Pakistanis killed near the LoC in the Kashmir region on July 29.^[18] The Poonch incident triggered a strong reaction from the Indian side, with very heavy firing exchanges throughout the month of August.

Firing along the LoC was continuing when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September. Both leaders agreed that the

precondition for forward movement in the relationship is an improvement of the situation on the LoC, where there have been repeated ceasefire violations.^[19]

In an attempt to calm the situation, the DGsMO of India and Pakistan met on the Pakistani side of the Wagah border on December 24, the first such meeting in 14 years. Both sides showed their commitment to maintaining the sanctity and ceasefire on the LoC and reiterated their resolve to continue efforts to ensure ceasefire, peace, and tranquillity on the LoC.^[20]

However, after a brief lull, firing started again in April 2014 and, by October, had spread to the IB sector in Jammu, displacing thousands of civilians. Media reports indicated that Indian forces had been given a free hand to deal with the situation appropriately and reject talks until all firing from Pakistan stopped.^[21]

By 2014, the ceasefire agreement was effectively dead, and the intensity of firing depended on the state of bilateral relations. India hardened its stance against terrorist activities from Pakistan and conducted the surgical strikes in 2016 and the air strike against the Balakot terror camp in 2019. This led to further escalation at the LoC and IB and CFVs rose sharply to 2140 in 2018 and 3479 in 2019.^[22]

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The investment of the political leadership in India and the military leadership in Pakistan is essential for the success of any agreement. Additionally, local military factors play a huge role in CFVs. Casualties among troops deployed on the LoC and IB will invariably trigger a response.

Two broad conclusions can be drawn from the breakdown of the 2003 ceasefire agreement. First, the investment of the political leadership in India and the military leadership in Pakistan is essential for the success of any agreement. When the leadership showed commitment, ceasefire violations went from thousands to almost zero in 2003.

For this investment to continue, Pakistan must address the issue of cross-border terrorism and infiltration. If terror attacks continue, it puts pressure on the Indian government to respond, and the rhetoric sharpens. This often results in a loosening of restraint on troops deployed on the border.

Second, local military factors play a huge role in CFVs. Casualties among troops deployed on the LoC and IB will invariably trigger a response. The unraveling of the 2003 agreement began in 2013 when Indian soldiers at the LoC were killed in cross-border raids. Terror attacks in the hinterland do not necessarily result in firing at the LoC, but incidents at the LoC, which can be almost directly attributed to the Pakistan Army, force local commanders to react immediately.

In a situation where thousands of soldiers are deployed in an almost eyeball-to-eyeball situation at the LoC, there is considerable leeway for the local troops to respond to any danger without seeking higher approval. Once firing starts, there is an invariable tit-for-tat response, particularly if there are casualties on either side. Neither side wants to be seen as weak, and escalation occurs.

Recommendations to Strengthen the 2021 Understanding

The 2021 ceasefire understanding has been a significant step toward reducing violence along LoC and IB in Jammu and Kashmir. Despite occasional violations and tense bilateral relations, it has held for over four years, providing a rare period of calm on the border. However, sustaining and strengthening this ceasefire requires addressing underlying challenges and building on progress.

- **Political Will.** Sustaining the ceasefire requires strong political will from both governments. Both sides have shown a commitment to honoring the agreement, and this should continue. Since there are few official contacts between New Delhi and Islamabad, backchannel lines should remain open. Several reports have indicated that the 2021 understanding was a result of backchannel contacts, mostly between intelligence and security officials in third countries.^[23]
- **Address Cross-Border Infiltration and Terrorism.** India's political commitment to the ceasefire depends on Pakistan restraining its terror groups and checking infiltration. While terror attacks in the hinterland may not directly lead to CFVs, they vitiate the overall security environment. Questions are then raised about India continuing with the ceasefire even as infiltration continues.
- **Establish Restraint Protocols.** Some suggestions have been made that India and Pakistan should consider converting the 2021 ceasefire understanding into a formal, signed agreement with an explicit protocol. India is reluctant to formalize the ceasefire until there is concrete Pakistani action on terrorism. However, some restraint protocols could be discussed in flag meetings and implemented on the ground. These could include not targeting populated areas, avoiding escalating to heavier weapons like mortars and artillery, prohibition on sniper firing, etc.
- **Regular Flag Meetings.** Both sides could decide on a frequency of flag meetings to be held in pre-determined locations. These meetings should be conducted even if no incident has occurred. Regular meetings between local commanders would help build confidence and discuss irritants that could lead to CFVs. Instead of a tendency to deny any wrongdoing, communications must be honest and open with the aim of jointly addressing issues.
- **Enhance Communication Mechanism.** Currently, hotlines exist between the DGsMO and at a few selected places on the LoC. Both sides could agree to increase the number of hotlines so that local incidents can be speedily reported and resolved without a horizontal spread of CFVs.

Conclusion

The 2021 ceasefire understanding has been a rare success in the otherwise volatile India–Pakistan relationship. Yet, its longevity cannot be taken for granted. The ceasefire's sustainability rests on continued political commitment, military restraint on both sides and a genuine effort from Pakistan to curb terrorism and infiltration.

The lessons from the breakdown of the 2003 agreement make clear that even well-intentioned arrangements unravel quickly in the absence of political will and a lack of trust on the ground. Therefore, while there is calm on the LoC, the focus must now shift to strengthening the mechanisms that could prevent local military actions from escalating. The 2021 ceasefire may not resolve deeper bilateral disputes, but it offers an opportunity to keep the LoC stable and bring relief to the local population.

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