

India should tread warily

by M. K. Bhadrakumar,* India



M. K. Bhadrakumar
(Picture ma)

(CH-S) In the Indian region of Kashmir, suspected extremists opened fire on tourists on 22 April, killing at least 26 people according to police reports. Most of the victims were visitors from various parts of India, as well as several people from the resort

area near Pahalgam. The situation between India and Pakistan escalated immediately – in the Kashmir region, which has been disputed for decades, the two neighbouring countries accuse each other of stirring up unrest.

In a timely reminder, even as Indians are demanding robust retaliation for the terrorist attack in Pahalgam in Kashmir, the US president *Donald Trump* pulled aside Prime Minister *Narendra Modi* to signal that *conversations with India on a trade pact*¹ were “coming along great” and announced that the two countries “will have a deal on tariffs.”

If there could be a gentle reminder about India’s national priorities at this point in time, this is it. Trump has a way of conveying what words and clichés cannot spell out when it comes to war and peace. It is just as well that Modi may have responded by deciding that much as India’s resolve to deal a crushing blow to terrorism should never be in doubt, “the complete operational freedom to decide on the mode, targets and timing of the response” shall rest with the armed forces.

The PM reportedly expressed complete faith and confidence in the professional abilities of the armed forces. It is a *historic decision*² by any elected government in power in a democracy by any

* M. K. Bhadrakumar has worked for about three decades as a career diplomat in the service of the Indian Foreign Ministry. He has served as ambassador to the former Soviet Union, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Germany and Turkey. His texts mainly deal with Indian foreign policy and events in the Middle East, Eurasia, Central Asia, South Asia and Pacific Asia. His blog is called “Indian Punchline”.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi (centre) chairs a meeting with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh (left), National Security Advisor Ajit Doval (right) and senior military officials in New Delhi on 29 April 2025. (Picture ma)

reckoning. The implications are profound, since, at the end of the day when the final hour of reckoning comes, there is also a flip side to it in terms of delegation of authority – namely, the famous Barnaby Rule (widely credited to late Donald Rumsfeld) comes into play. That is to say, whoever breaks the china shall also be obligated to mend it.

Interestingly, Modi revealed his decision at an exclusive meeting that was attended by Defence Minister *Rajnath Singh* and the national security advisor *Ajit Doval* (who is also known to be doubling up as the tsar of India’s covert operations abroad) as well as the top brass. Home Minister *Amit Shah* was not present.

Later in the evening yesterday, Modi also received *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief*³ *Mohan Bhagwat* at his residence in a gesture “emphasising national interest over protocol”, as a national daily noted. However, there should be no misconceptions over how Bhagwat’s mind is working. Five days back, he had remarked, “We hope for a strong response (to Pahalgam attack).”

Bhagwat had said, “There is pain in our hearts. We are angry. But to destroy evil, strength must be shown. [...] Hatred and hostility is not in our nature. But neither is silently enduring harm. A truly non-violent person must also be strong. If there is no strength, there is no choice. But when there is strength, it must be visible when needed.”

From all indications, it is entirely conceivable that the government is weighing military options to target Pakistan after the April 22 terror attack. Pakistan seems to sense it, too. *Tensions are*

*spiralling*⁴ along what used to be the *Line of Control* (LoC) up until this week, which itself is fast dissolving as Pakistan has decided to hold in abeyance all bilateral treaties with India including Simla Agreement in response to Delhi's moves on the diplomatic track.

The international reaction so far, as Trump's latest remark testifies, shies away from endorsing the war option. Simply put, no country, including our "time-tested" friend Russia or the so-called Global South, has any understanding for the sentiments expressed in India favouring military action against Pakistan. On the other hand, China has taken an *exceptionally supportive position*⁵ underwriting Pakistan's sovereignty and security.

Put differently, as Bhagwat underscored by drawing inspiration from our ancient epics, India is arrogating to itself the *moral prerogative to deploy its military strength*⁶ in a "visible" manner in an external environment in the thermonuclear age amidst highly complicated geopolitical manoeuvring by the big powers and the international community, which, again, is transitioning from one world order to another that is struggling to be born.

Make no mistake, this is going to be hugely consequential going forward. Pakistan, in fact, has *warned the international community*⁷ that any military moves by India shall be "responded to assuredly and decisively [...] onus of any escalatory spiral and its consequences shall squarely lie with India." Implicit in the statement is a veiled threat that even a nuclear threshold may be reached if push comes to shove.

Indeed, Pakistan's nuclear doctrine allows for first strike if the nation's survival is deemed to be under threat. Three thresholds have been spelt out: denial of water flow into Pakistan (under the Indus Waters Treaty); any naval blockade; and foreign occupation of Pakistani territory.

Taking into account the totality of the emergent situation, Pakistan is unlikely to bend. It keeps insisting that it is also a victim of terrorism originating from India. And it has openly hinted that it will not hesitate to climb the escalatory ladder in the event of any Indian offensive. Suffice to say, unless India opts for the Russian course of a war of attrition spread over years, which is simply out of the question, a rapid escalation could be in the cards.

Therein lies the rub: How to de-escalate when (not if) the need / contingency arises? Arguably,

India still has a closed mind in mediation by third parties even in the radically changed post-cold war international setting.

On the other hand, India has only a tenuous communication link with Pakistan, which, presumably, remains open still – the "hotline" between the two Directors-General of Military Operations. Howsoever tenuous the link is, at a time when emotions are running high on both sides, some thought should be given to keep it open – and, importantly, not to hesitate to use it. After all, the two militaries have a long history of being sensible, realistic, pragmatic adversaries who understand each other.

They know war is serious business, especially for the men in the prime of their youth who would lay down their lives in the firing line without batting an eyelid for the sake of the nation – and indeed their own families and dependants in our far-flung country are stakeholders, too. There is a human factor even in hybrid wars – or covert operations.

Sometimes, countries that behave like lotus eaters⁸ leading a life of dreamy, indolent ease, need a rude awakening. If this is one such moment, then, the death of 26 Indians wouldn't be in vain.

Source: <https://www.indianpunchline.com/india-should-tread-warily-on-battlefield/>, 30. April 2025

¹ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/donald-trump-says-tariff-talks-with-india-going-great-expects-a-trade-deal-soon-101745953085967.html>

² <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2025/Apr/29/pm-modi-says-armed-forces-have-full-freedom-to-decide-on-targets-timing-of-response>

³ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/rss-chief-mohan-bhagwat-meets-prime-minister-modi-in-wake-of-pahalgam-terror-attack/article69506330.ece>

⁴ <https://kashmirreader.com/2025/04/29/loc-flare-up-in-poonch-kupwara/>

⁵ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202504/1332978.shtml>

⁶ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/teaching-lesson-to-hooligans-is-also-our-religion-rss-chief-mohan-bhagwat-on-pahalgam-terror-attack-101745680274161.html>

⁷ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2025/Apr/30/india-planning-military-action-in-next-24-36-hours-will-face-consequences-pakistan-2>

⁸ Lotus-eater is a term from Greek mythology. The lotus eaters appear in Homer's *Odyssey*. They live on an island and feed on the fruit of the lotus flower. This has a numbing effect: anyone who eats it forgets their goals and desires – especially their desire to return home – and falls into a state of indifference and sluggish contentment.