

The United States' Role in the Recent India-Pakistan Crisis

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Summary

The United States played an important role in brokering a ceasefire in the recent India-Pakistan Crisis. However, its haphazard and confused approach to crisis diplomacy has heightened the risks in the subcontinent for the long-term.

In early May 2025, triggered by the shocking Pahalgam terrorist attack, India and Pakistan engaged in an intense and wide-ranging four-day conflict. On 10 May 2025, the two sides agreed to a ceasefire that the United States (US) claimed it had brokered. New Delhi [denied American role](#) in the ceasefire negotiation.

The back-and-forth between Washington and New Delhi has obscured the strategic implications of the US' role in the whole crisis. This time, Washington threw away the [well-established playbook](#) for managing South Asian crises that successive administrations has developed over decades. The result was confused signalling and ad hoc measures that exacerbated the risks and weakened US ability to intervene in future crises. While thankfully a ceasefire was achieved this time, the long-term dangers for the subcontinent have substantially increased.

Since the 1998 India-Pakistan nuclear tests, one of the central goals of the American policy in South Asia has been to prevent any crisis spiralling out of control. The US has activated its crisis management mode during the [1999 Kargil War](#), [2001-2002 Twin Peaks Crisis](#), [2008 Mumbai Terror Attacks](#), 2016 Indian LoC strike and [2019 Balakot airstrike](#). Although American crisis diplomacy has had varying degree of influence on different crises, it has always been present. The central challenge for Washington has been to contain escalation while avoiding the moral hazard of encouraging India or Pakistan to engage in risky behaviour by signalling that the US will always step in to defuse the crisis.

Since the President Donald Trump's first term, the US' South Asia crisis diplomacy has destabilised because of two contradictory impulses in Washington. On one hand, Trump has signalled his desire to withdraw the US from its traditional role as the guarantor of international order, especially its commitment to maintain stability and security in various parts of the world. On the other hand, the knee-jerk instinct to prevent crisis escalation in South Asia beyond nuclear threshold still persists in the Washington establishment.

This tension in the American policy was evident when Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed carried out a terror attack on Indian troops in Kashmir. Mike Pompeo, US Secretary of State, and John Bolton, US National Security Adviser, issued statements expressing support for "India's right to self-defence" and denouncing Pakistan's support of terrorism but not calling for restraint. Nevertheless, when US officials felt there was a risk of nuclear escalation after

India carried out an airstrike in Pakistani territory, [Pompeo](#) and [Bolton](#) engaged in late-night high-wire diplomacy to de-escalate the situation. Notably, Trump was not briefed about the crisis until the next morning.

In the recent crisis, 14 days passed between the Pahalgam attack and the Indian strikes into Pakistan. In the past, US presidents signalled their involvement at the start of a crisis by [issuing statements](#) that they were personally monitoring the situation, they had discussed the issue with their national security teams or calling for restraint. This time Trump dismissed the issue on 25 April 2025 by [stating](#), “[t]hey’ll get it figured out one way or the other”. Contrastingly, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio [publicly called for restraint](#). Unlike previous instances when top US officials personally visited New Delhi and Islamabad to read the mood and cool temperatures, no high-profile visits took place after the Pahalgam attack. In the past, the US had privately pressured Pakistan into offering concessions on terrorism to placate the Indian side. If such pressure was applied this time, it yielded no result.

Washington continued its public posture of aloofness once conflict began on 6 May 2025. “I guess people knew something was gonna happen...I hope it ends very quickly”, Trump reacted to the news of Indian strikes. The conflict was “fundamentally none of our business and has nothing to do with America’s ability to control it”, said [US Vice President J D Vance](#) on 9 May 2025.

Yet, the crisis diplomacy machinery in Washington was already gearing up. [Rubio spoke with both sides](#) on 8 May 2025, urging de-escalation. On 9 May 2025, [the G7 called](#) for de-escalation. On 10 May 2025, Rubio broke with past tradition by [publicly offering us mediation](#) to “avert future disputes”.

By 10 May 2025, Washington was [growing fearful of nuclear escalation](#), especially after India struck close to Pakistani nuclear forces headquarters. Top US officials now engaged in high-intensity diplomacy. India-Pakistan ceasefire was announced shortly thereafter, for which Washington claimed credit, another deviation from past practice. While New Delhi vehemently denied the US’ role in mediating the ceasefire, Islamabad thanked Washington, suggesting that American influence was at least effective in bringing Pakistan to the table.

Washington’s erratic policy produced worst of both worlds. Its initial posture of indifference allowed for rapid conflict escalation. Its final hastily organised intervention may have helped bring about the ceasefire but it also intensified the moral hazard. The US has signalled that even if claims to be aloof at first, it will intervene if a South Asia crisis becomes too hot. This will encourage risky behaviour and nuclear brinksmanship on the subcontinent.

Trump [complicated the situation](#) further by taking credit for the ceasefire, offering to mediate in the Kashmir dispute and insisting that he used trade as a leverage in the mediation. These politically sensitive claims have irked New Delhi, diminishing Washington’s effectiveness as a mediator in future crises.

Risks of escalation in South Asia are rising as India-Pakistan power differential widens, New Delhi adopts an aggressive security posture and political instability increases in Pakistan.

Weakened US crisis diplomacy capabilities in this moment will only exacerbate the challenges.

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