

Pakistan airspace closure: Over 800 weekly flights of Indian airlines may be impacted; IndiGo suspends flights to Tashkent, Almaty

Indian airlines may suspend flights to a few destinations where it may be operationally or financially unviable to operate flights that circumvent the Pakistani airspace, according to industry experts.

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According to industry insiders, while it is still too early to assess the impact, the airlines' costs are bound to rise, which could translate into higher airfares for passengers. (Credit: Pixabay)

With Pakistan closing its airspace to Indian airlines from Thursday evening, over 800 flights a week are likely to be impacted by longer flight times, increased fuel burn, and a few other complexities related to crew and flight scheduling, all of which would increase operational costs. The initial impact is already visible with Indian airlines' flights from North India to West Asia, the

Caucasus, Europe, the UK, and North America's eastern region switching from their routine paths to longer routes, adding anywhere between 15 minutes to a few hours to the journey, depending on the distance and the location of the destination.

Meanwhile, the Indian carriers are working to adjust their schedules to factor in the ban from Pakistani airspace. On Friday, IndiGo announced the suspension of its daily flights from [Delhi](#) to Almaty and Tashkent in Central Asia from April 27 and April 28 until "at least" May 7.

The airline said that with the airspace restrictions imposed by Pakistan and limited rerouting options, both the Central Asian cities are now outside the operational range of its existing fleet of narrow-body aircraft. IndiGo added that the closure of Pakistani airspace would affect 50 of its international routes, which may require schedule adjustments.

All major Indian airlines operate international flights to destinations to the west of the country, and many of these flights were routinely overflying Pakistan. Air India operates flights to West Asia, Europe, the UK, and North America, while IndiGo operates flights to West Asia, Turkey, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Air India Express, Akasa Air, and SpiceJet's west-bound international flights are to destinations in West Asia.

According to data from Cirium, an aviation analytics company, currently there are almost 400 weekly westward international departures from North Indian airports—Delhi, Amritsar, Jaipur, and [Lucknow](#)—that were routinely flying over Pakistan. Given that all these flights have return legs, the total number of affected flights goes up to around 800 from these airports. Of these, around 640 flights are from or to India's largest airport—Delhi's Indira Gandhi International airport—which is likely to be the most affected due to the move by Pakistan. Additionally, a handful of ultra-long-haul flights from other Indian cities like [Mumbai](#) are also getting impacted as their flight paths used to go through the Pakistani airspace.

In fact, flight tracking data shows that some of Air India's ultra-long-haul flights to and from North America had to take technical halts—planned stops for refueling or crew change—at European airports like Copenhagen and Vienna on Friday, breaking the journey of the otherwise non-stop flights. These included the airline's Delhi-Washington and Delhi-New York flights, both of which took a stopover in Vienna, and its Delhi-Chicago, Delhi-Toronto, Delhi-Newark, Mumbai-New York, and Vancouver-Delhi

flights, which took a halt in Copenhagen. The airline had announced on Thursday that some of its international flights “will take an alternative extended route” in view of the airspace closure by Pakistan.

The last time when Pakistan closed its airspace for an extended period—in 2019 following the [Balakot](#) airstrikes by the Indian Air Force—some of Air India’s flights to North America had to take technical halts midway on a regular basis. Air India has so far not commented on whether such halts on the ultra-long-haul flights will now be a routine occurrence.

These are still early days and airlines are busy chalking out their schedules to adjust to this new reality. According to industry insiders, while it is still too early to assess the impact, the airlines’ costs are bound to rise, which could translate into higher airfares for passengers. Additionally, airlines from other countries will get cost and time advantage over Indian airlines as the Pakistani airspace remains open for them.

All this is forcing Indian airlines to adjust their schedules, and could even lead to them suspending flights to a few destinations where it may be operationally or financially unviable to operate flights that circumvent the Pakistani airspace, like IndiGo’s flights to Almaty and Tashkent.

According to sources in airlines, flight schedules are being worked on, and the carriers could soon announce changes to their schedules and even their networks to provide clarity and schedule stability to flyers. Indian carriers have so far not commented on the likely financial impact of Pakistan’s move and a clearer picture of the impact—financial as well as operational—is likely to emerge over the next few days.

When Pakistan closed its airspace for over four months in 2019, Indian airlines are estimated to have lost around Rs 700 crore due to higher fuel expenses and operational complications that came with longer routes many of their flights were forced to take. Air India was the worst affected Indian carrier at the time, as it operated more west-bound international flights than other airlines. Moreover, it was and continues to be the only Indian airline that operates long-haul and ultra-long-haul flights to Europe and North America.

Since then, other Indian airlines—particularly IndiGo—have also expanded their international networks to include various destinations that can be served by their existing fleets that mainly comprises narrow-body jets. IndiGo is the only Indian airline that currently flies to destinations in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey.

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