

# The hot LoC: What is the nature of India-Pakistan ceasefire understanding

For more than a week, the Pakistan Army has violated the ceasefire along the Line of Control every night, drawing a proportionate Indian response. What is the nature of the ceasefire understanding between the two countries? Why do violations take place, and why do they stop?

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Army personnel patrolling along the Line of Control in Kashmir. (File, August 2020)

Pakistani troops violated the ceasefire along several sectors at the Line of Control (LoC) and International Border for the eighth consecutive night on Thursday. The Indian Army has responded to each of these violations in a “calibrated and proportionate manner”.

The violations by Pakistan, which began after the April 22 terrorist attack in Pahalgam in which 26 civilians were killed, and the Indian response, have not caused any deaths on either side thus far.

But the violations represent the most intensive breakdown of the ceasefire since the Indian and Pakistani Directorates General of Military Operations (DGMOs) renewed it through a joint statement in February 2021.

How did the India-Pakistan ceasefire originate and evolve? What do violations of ceasefire in times of crises indicate?

### The LoC: nature & evolution

The India-Pakistan ceasefire, as it stands today, is less of an agreement and more of an understanding.



A ceasefire between two conventional militaries is usually established after the cessation of war hostilities, along a line on the ground on the two sides of which each force has established its effective control.

In the case of India and Pakistan, such a ceasefire was last established in December 1971. The line for this was largely the same as the “Ceasefire Line” that was established by the Karachi Agreement (1949) after the 1948-49 war.

The Simla Agreement (1972) re-characterised this line as the “Line of Control”, a military border without “prejudice to the recognised position of either side” – which means this is not a legally recognised international border but a holding line for both militaries.

The LoC runs for approximately 740 km from near Sangam in Kashmir to Point NJ-9842 near the Siachen Glacier. In Jammu, the line changes into the International Border (IB) for India, since it

has no territorial claims on Pakistani Punjab on the other side. But for Pakistan, the IB is a “Working Boundary”, since it claims Jammu on the Indian side – and hence deems the border unsettled.

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Over the decades, the LoC has acted as the *de facto* border between India and Pakistan.

Given the background and military character of the LoC, on-ground positions on either side have been defended mostly by the two armies (unlike the IB which is managed solely by India’s Border Security Force and the Pakistani Rangers) with extensive defensive structures and large numbers of troops.

The soldiers on each side are mandated to ensure that the other side does not attempt “unilateral changes” to the LoC (which otherwise shifts quite literally as the snow melts or accumulates seasonally in Kashmir), and to prevent unauthorised infiltration – of both soldiers and civilians such as shepherds, etc.

The high number of soldiers from two nuclear armed countries with a history of wars positioned eyeball-to-eyeball across each other makes the LoC perpetually prone to tensions.

Cross-border firing, along with the infiltration of Pakistan-sponsored terrorists, especially since the beginning of the insurgency in Kashmir in 1989, or raids by Pakistani “Border Action Teams” has meant that the ceasefire “agreement” does not really exist. Technically, it lapsed when the first exchange of fire happened after 1972.

Since then, whenever cross-border firing stops after a few exchanges, the two sides reach an “understanding” to return to the ceasefire. At certain times such as in the 1990s or between 2016 and 2021, there were more than a thousand yearly violations – the 1990s, especially, are often referred to as a “free for all” by veterans of the Indian Army’s Northern Command.

In a Shakespearean sense, then, the ceasefire has been “more honoured in the breach than the observance”. (*Hamlet*, Act I)

### **The violations: stops & starts**

Why do the violations occur and why do they stop?

**Ceasefire violations along the LoC** have increased during every crisis since 1972, including those executed to impose military costs on the other side.

Such violations have ranged from limited small-arms fire to full-fledged cross-border operations such as the Indian surgical strikes against terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan occupied Kashmir in 2016.

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Sometimes, these violations can be the result of local dynamics on the ground, largely disconnected from political developments.

These “Autonomous Military Factors” (Happymon Jacob, *Line on Fire: Ceasefire Violations and India-Pakistan Escalation Dynamics*, 2019) are a product of the way both militaries function at the border, which include the need to constantly “test” the units on the other side, maintain troop morale, military vendetta, or to establish “moral ascendancy” over the other side.

Thus, the resolve of a new local commander on one side may be tested by an older commander on the other side through a round of artillery shelling or small- or medium-arms fire.

As several Indian generals including former Northern Army Commander Lt Gen H S Panag have said, there are no strict rules of engagement that prevent one side from firing at the other.

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There is, however, a body of unwritten standard operating procedures and mechanisms to resolve differences.

These include “flag meetings” between local commanders, as well as hotlines such as that between the two Directorates General of Military Operations in New [Delhi](#) and Rawalpindi.

However, these do not – and are not intended to – ensure that future violations do not occur. The LoC, then, is a peculiar border where violence is normal, and mutually controlled through communication mechanisms.



## Current crisis: What now?

In 2021, both militaries had an incentive to cease violations across the LoC and reach yet another “understanding”, invoking the 2003 understanding before the India-Pakistan Composite Dialogue.

The Pakistan Army was facing new internal threats and a freshly destabilised border with Afghanistan. For the Indian Army, the ceasefire provided a chance to focus better on the threat from China at the [Line of Actual Control](#) (LAC) in Ladakh.

As violations dropped to about a few dozen incidents per year, local populations benefited. Cross-border shelling directly impacts border villages, with stray shells or bullets killing civilians. The benefits were visible in bumper crop yields and more stable livelihoods.

Both India and Pakistan have incentives to continue this understanding. Indeed, since 2019, when the two countries snapped diplomatic and economic ties, formal channels of bilateral communication have been active only at the military level.

Lt Gen Paramjit Sangha, who was the Indian Director General of Military Operations in 2021, said the hotline at the Directorate is used almost every week to take stock of developments along the LoC. During any significant incident, the Directors themselves speak to one another.

Nominated officers from the DGMOs spoke over the hotline on April 29. The Indian side strongly objected to continuing Pakistani ceasefire violations, it was reported.

Cross-border firing allows Pakistan to keep pressure on Indian forces and probe for weaknesses, especially as it apprehends military action from India in response to the Pahalgam attack.

For India, apart from responding to the Pakistani violations, there is a need to address new issues such as that of the BSF jawan who has been in Pakistani detention ever since he inadvertently crossed the IB in Punjab on April 23. During times of crises, such accidental crossings act as leverage for one side over the other.

Cross-border firing is usually both the first measure that either side takes during a crisis, as well as the most controlled of military actions that draws from decades of experience along the LoC. But the risk of escalation remains.

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