



'All bets could be off'

Pivotal moment for nuclear-armed rivals

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The brutal militant attack that killed 26 people in one of Kashmir's most scenic spots has shattered the region's relative calm, turning a popular tourist destination into a scene of horror - and sparking fears of a fresh conflict between nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan.

Soon after the attack in which gunmen emerged from dense pine woods and opened fire on families picnicking and riding ponies, India's defence minister, Rajnath Singh, vowed a "loud and clear response".

A little-known outfit called the Resistance Front claimed responsibility for the attack, but India believes the group to be a

proxy for the Lashkar-e-Taiba terror group or another Pakistan-based faction. Pakistan denies backing insurgents, but says it does support Kashmiri calls for self-determination.

The massacre has reignited tensions between the two neighbours, which have fought three wars over the disputed Muslim-majority territory and come close to conflict repeatedly.

"This is a pivotal moment for the region. We have two nuclear-armed neighbours staring at each other," said the US foreign policy author and South Asia expert Michael Kugelman. "All bets could be off."

Among its first retaliatory moves, India announced the expulsion of the Pakistan high commission's defence, navy and air advisers; the closure of a critical border trading point; and - for the first time - the suspension of the landmark Indus waters treaty.



If the terrorists hoped the assault would win support from Kashmiris or revive separatist sentiment, they miscalculated: more than a dozen Kashmiri groups staged a complete shutdown of stores and businesses to mourn the victims, while locals held protest marches chanting: “Tourists are our lives.”

“Kashmiris are genuinely appalled,” said Siddiq Wahid, a distinguished professor at the department of international relations at Shiv Nadar University.

Militant violence has plagued Kashmir, claimed by both Hindu-majority India and Islamic Pakistan, since an anti-India insurgency began in 1989.

Thousands have been killed, although violence has tapered off in recent years.

In a controversial 2019 move, India’s prime minister, Narendra Modi, revoked Jammu and Kashmir’s semi-autonomous constitutional status, splitting the state into two federally governed territories. The government also allowed non-local land ownership to integrate Kashmir with the rest of India further.

The security clampdown reduced militant activity and tourism surged - a record 3.5 million people visited the valley in 2024. Modi has framed Kashmir’s “normalisation” as a political triumph.

▲ *Mourners at the funeral of Adil Hussain Shah, one of 26 people killed in the terrorist attack on Tuesday*

PHOTOGRAPH: DAR YASIN/AP

Modi’s swift return from an official visit to Saudi Arabia signals the government’s determination to respond. Delhi may opt for cross-border strikes, as it did after the 2019 Pulwama suicide bombing that killed 40 Indian paramilitary troops, analysts said.

“India cannot twiddle its thumbs. Once the escalatory ladder is revved up, it can go out of hand,” said one Indian security analyst. “You cannot read Modi, you can’t predict the man. He is very muscular.”

What heightens the dynamics of the Kashmir attack is the timing - during the first official trip to India by the US vice-president, JD Vance, who has emphasised strengthening defence ties and praised India as a strategic partner.

In 2002, India and Pakistan came very close to full-scale war after a terrorist attack on the Indian parliament that Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based militants. The US, at that time, played a key role in de-escalating the crisis.

“The messaging we are seeing from senior officials points to the US being fully behind India - and it would not stand in the way of how India will respond,” Kugelman said.