



Sanskriti IAS

22nd April 2026



IMPORTANT

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BOMBS WILL GO OFF IF NO AGREEMENT: U.S. PRESIDENT

Vance trip to Pak on hold, Iran says no talks under threat

His deadline ending today, Trump pushes for quick deal

Jonathan Swan, Elian Peltier, Tyler Pager & Farnaz Fassihi
Washington, Islamabad, April 21

US VICE President J D Vance's trip to Pakistan for a second round of negotiations with Iran has been put on hold after Tehran failed to respond to American positions, a US official with direct knowledge of the situation said Tuesday.

Iran, for its part, said it had not yet decided whether to resume talks with the US.

With the two-week truce set to expire Wednesday in Iran, it was unclear what steps, if any, Iran or the US would take next. Talks could resume at a moment's notice though President Donald Trump has suggested that he did not want to extend the truce without a longer-term agreement.

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Esmail Baghaei, said Iran had not decided

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Billboards near the Serena Hotel in Islamabad where the second round of talks between the US and Iran were to take place. AP

Diplomatic road long, arduous but why 'grand bargain' remains goal

C Raja Mohan
New Delhi, April 21

AS WASHINGTON and Tehran inch towards a second round of negotiations, the idea of a "grand bargain" is very much at the centre of the complex diplomatic dynamic between the two sides. For two adversaries locked in intense and seemingly irreversible hostility since the 1979

Islamic Revolution, the very articulation of such an ambition marks a significant shift.

Yet the fragility of the moment is evident. Confusion over the opening and closing of the Strait of Hormuz; arguments over rival blockades; US President Donald Trump's optimism Tuesday about a "great deal," and his threats to attack

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Vance trip to Pak for Iran talks put on hold

whether to even go to Pakistan. He blamed it on “contradictory messages, inconsistent behaviour and unacceptable actions by the American side,” according to the nation’s state broadcaster, IRIB.

But in private, two senior Iranian officials had said Monday that an Iranian delegation was making plans to travel to Pakistan Tuesday and to resume talks. The Iranian officials said that parliament speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf would attend negotiations with the US if Vance were there.

Speaking to CNBC Tuesday, Trump expressed optimism

about potential talks but said that the US military stood ready to bomb again if no deal was struck with the Iranian government. “We don’t have that much time,” he said.

(Associated Press adds: Trump warned that “lots of bombs” will “start going off” if there’s no agreement before the ceasefire deadline, and Iran’s chief negotiator said Tehran has “new cards on the battlefield” that haven’t yet been revealed. Ghalibaf accused the US of wanting Iran to surrender. “We do not accept negotiations under the shadow of threats,” he wrote in an X post.

Pakistan said Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar met with the acting US ambassador in Islamabad to urge a ceasefire extension. Dar also met with the ambassador from China, a key trading partner with Iran.

On Tuesday, the US said its forces boarded an oil tanker previously sanctioned for smuggling Iranian crude oil in Asia. The Pentagon said in a social media post that US forces boarded the M/T Tifani “without incident.” The US military did not say where the vessel had been boarded, though ship-tracking data showed the Tifani in the Indian Ocean between Sri

Lanka and Indonesia Tuesday. The Pentagon statement added that “international waters are not a refuge for sanctioned vessels.”)

Even if the sides return to the negotiating table, many sticking points remain – on Iran’s nuclear programme, for instance, and on the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic conduit for oil and gas. The threat of Iranian attacks has throttled shipping traffic through the strait, prompting an American blockade of Iranian ports that the US Navy says has forced 28 ships to turn around.

– THE NEW YORK TIMES

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Diplomatic road long

Iran's infrastructure if Tehran doesn't agree; and the questions very late into this evening over Iranian participation underline the deep mistrust that continues to shadow the talks. If even preliminary coordination remains so contested, the path to a comprehensive settlement will be arduous.

The Trump administration, however, appears committed to thinking big. Vice President JD Vance, expected to leave for a second round of talks in Pakistan soon, has framed the negotiations not as incremental diplomacy but as the quest for a "grand bargain"—an effort to secure a decisive, system-shaping agreement. The objective is expansive: a comprehensive settlement that trades limits on Iran's nuclear programme and regional posture for full economic normalisation and reintegration into the global system.

This ambition departs sharply from the logic of the 2015 nuclear deal, which was deliberately narrow and technocratic. That agreement sought to cap Iran's nuclear capabilities but

did not address the broader sources of geopolitical conflict between Washington and Tehran, or the interests of US allies neighbouring Iran. The emerging framework now aims at broadening the settlement.

In its essence, the proposed bargain is sweeping. Iran would accept stringent and verifiable constraints on its nuclear programme, potentially including a rollback of enrichment levels, tighter inspection regimes, and limits on stockpiles of highly enriched uranium. More consequentially, Tehran would be expected to recalibrate its regional strategy—reducing support for non-state armed groups and scaling back its influence across theatres such as Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

In return, the United States would move towards dismantling its long-standing and massive sanctions architecture against Iran. This would involve lifting both primary and secondary sanctions, unfreezing Iranian financial assets, and facilitating Tehran's return to global energy markets and financial

networks. The end goal is not merely arms control, but a broader economic and political normalisation.

Recent reports suggest that both sides are exploring steps that will allow each to claim early gains while preserving leverage for subsequent stages. This, of course, is easier said than done. Powerful veto-wielders in both capitals can mix many elements of the proposed grand bargain.

Internal divisions in both Washington and Tehran help generate mixed signals, weaken negotiating credibility, and undermine the entire process. Any movement towards a grand bargain is likely to be in clearly defined stages.

The most plausible pathway begins with a political understanding—a broad memorandum outlining principles of de-escalation, mutual recognition, and the desired end-state. This would then be followed by detailed technical negotiations on nuclear verification, sanctions relief, and regional security, with carefully calibrated sequencing.

Even here, the challenges are formidable. Verification of nuclear commitments, though complex, falls within the competence of established interna-

tional mechanisms. Far more difficult is the question of regional behaviour. Measuring and enforcing limits on influence exercised through non-state actors presents a conceptual and operational challenge that diplomacy has rarely resolved successfully.

Sequencing remains another major obstacle. Iran will demand credible and front-loaded sanctions relief to justify concessions; the United States will insist on demonstrable compliance before relinquishing economic leverage. Bridging this gap will require a finely balanced process of reciprocal steps, with built-in safeguards against backsliding.

Despite all the challenges, the logic of a grand bargain persists. After decades of coercion, confrontation, and failed incrementalism, both sides are confronting the limits of their current strategies. Although the obstacles are substantial, and the risks of failure high, the fact that Washington and Tehran may sit down for another round of talks is a cause for modest optimism.

(C. Raja Mohan is a contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express)

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A year on from Pahalgam, tracking the security shift



DEEPTIMAN TIWARY & AMRITA NAYAK DUTTA

A YEAR ago, the tranquility of the Baisaran meadows in Jammu & Kashmir's Pahalgam town was shattered by automatic gunfire. Three terrorists emerged from the tree line and killed 25 tourists and one local pony handler. For the security establishment in Jammu & Kashmir, the April 22 tragedy was a systemic shock. Never before had tourists been targeted at such a scale. It forced a re-think of both assumptions and deployment.

Twelve months on, as tourist footfall begins to recover, the shift in the Valley's security posture is visible. The emphasis has moved from reactive containment in urban centres to a more dispersed, intelligence-led grid — one that seeks to dominate high-altitude terrain, integrate local networks and rely more heavily on surveillance and precision operations. Yet, even as the grid has adapted, gaps exposed by Pahalgam continue to shape the conversation within the security establishment.

Recognising the gaps

The Pahalgam attack marked a rupture in the narrative of "normalcy" that had guided administrative policy in the preceding years. A sustained decline in urban violence and a surge in tourism had encouraged the opening up of remote, high-altitude destinations across the Pir Panjal range — Sthan Top, Boota Pathri and dozens of other sites were among nearly 75 locations made accessible after the pandemic.

"These locations, while breathtaking, were strategically precarious; they sat on or near historical infiltration corridors where militant presence, though intermittent, never fully disappeared," said a security establishment officer.

The working assumption within the security grid had been that militant groups would continue with familiar patterns — targeted attacks in towns or direct engagements with security forces. The possibility that tourists, in relatively unguarded meadows, could become primary targets had not been fully factored in.

In effect, many of these destinations were "soft frontiers", opening up faster than they could be secured. The closure of over 50 such sites in the immediate aftermath



of the attack was, as a former Director General of J&K Police put it, "an acknowledgement that the push for normalcy had outpaced the expansion of the security grid".

From roads to ridges

If the attack exposed a vulnerability, it also triggered a structural shift in deployment. Over the past year, security forces have established 43 Temporary Operating Bases — where troops can operate for a short, fixed period — across the higher reaches of the Pir Panjal range, with personnel from the CRPF and Rashtriya Rifles now stationed at altitudes ranging from 3,000 to nearly 9,000 feet.

The idea is to deny militant groups the advantage of terrain. By occupying ridgelines and forested heights, forces aim to disrupt the traditional infiltration-to-execution cycle, where small modules would enter through forest corridors, lie low, and strike when opportunities arose.

As one J&K Police officer described it, the shift is from "holding the road" to "holding the ridge" — a move away from visible, road-centric security towards terrain dominance in areas that were previously thinly monitored.

Extensive patrols for operations and area domination exercises across the Valley floor and in the higher reaches were part of the Army's summer strategy.

Additional changes include deploying additional police and CRPF detachments closer to vulnerable areas and relocating some of the existing ones. The strength of paramilitary and police personnel was also beefed up for "static duties", which include

Security personnel keep watch in Pahalgam.

Tech support
Alongside redeployment, the security grid has leaned more heavily on technology and local integration

In the past year, over 50,000 individuals linked to the tourism economy have been brought onto an Aadhaar-linked database and issued QR-coded identification

deployment at checkposts.

Technology, 'human firewall'

Alongside redeployment, the security grid has leaned more heavily on technology and local integration. In the past year, over 50,000 individuals linked to the tourism economy — pony handlers, guides, photographers and vendors — have been brought onto an Aadhaar-linked database and issued QR-coded identification.

The intent is twofold: to enable instant verification in tourist zones and to reduce the risk of over-ground worker networks embedding themselves within the service economy. Officials describe this as creating a "human firewall" around key tourist circuits.

Surveillance, too, has expanded. A range of border surveillance equipment is being procured. Facial Recognition Devices have been installed at transit points and drone corridors provide continuous aerial monitoring over vulnerable meadows and trekking routes. The emphasis is on maintaining a security presence without the overt militarisation that could deter visitors. This combination has allowed the administration to gradually reopen many of the sites that were shut after the attack. But it also raises questions around privacy and the long-term sustainability of such intensive monitoring — issues that remain largely unaddressed in official discourse.

Intelligence-led precision

Perhaps the most significant shift has been towards intelligence-driven operations. In July 2025, under Operation Ma-

In J&K, the emphasis has moved from containment in urban centres to a dispersed, intelligence-led grid. Yet, some gaps still remain

hadev, security forces tracked and eliminated the three-member module behind the Pahalgam killings, using a combination of human intelligence and drone surveillance.

Since then, officials point to a series of targeted operations as evidence of a more "intel-first" approach. This includes the dismantling of the so-called "Doctor Module" in November 2025. More recent operations — the neutralisation of the Saifulah group in the Kishtwar-Doda belt and the busting of a transnational Lashkar-e-Taiba recruitment module earlier this year — have followed a similar pattern: precise, intelligence-backed strikes with minimal collateral damage.

The emphasis, officials say, is on tracking networks across geographies rather than reacting to isolated incidents.

Security forces are focusing on real-time lateral communication between themselves to cut down their response time to any incident. There has also been a focus on better information and intelligence sharing between all agencies.

Drone focus

The Army has undertaken the procurement of a variety of drones. Some of them have surveillance cameras while others can be armed with grenades. There is also a large-scale procurement of counter-drone systems to offer an effective umbrella against incoming aerial threats — a key lesson drawn from Operation Sindoor. All-terrain vehicles are also being procured to reduce reaction time.

The limits of adaptation

Despite these changes, the security grid remains far from impermeable. Two constraints continue to dominate internal assessments: infiltration and intelligence gaps in difficult terrain.

The delay in deploying dedicated all-weather surveillance capabilities — following setbacks in recent satellite missions — has limited the ability to maintain continuous watch along the Line of Control, particularly in adverse weather. Ground sensors and drones, while effective, remain vulnerable to the Valley's climatic extremes.

More fundamentally, human intelligence in dense forest zones continues to lag. The thick canopy of the Pir Panjal still provides enough cover for small, mobile "hybrid" modules to evade detection, at least temporarily. "Once a terrorist enters, he is going to do something. As long as Pakistan keeps pushing, something or the other will keep happening. It is a good thing that it is currently busy on its western front due to its battle with the Taliban," said a central security establishment officer.

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• WEST ASIA CONFLICT

Was US seizure of Iran ship legal? What maritime framework says

Arav Shah
New Delhi, April 21

ON SUNDAY, the US intercepted and seized the Iran-flagged cargo ship *Touska* in the Gulf of Oman as it attempted to get past the American naval blockade near the Strait of Hormuz. The USS *Spruance* struck and damaged the *Touska*'s engine room, following which Marines boarded and took custody of the vessel. The Iranian merchant ship had reportedly ignored warnings by US Central Command for almost six hours leading up to the attack.

The US defended the operation as lawful enforcement to protect the integrity of its blockade on Iranian ports, which has been in place since April 13. Iran said both the blockade as well as the operation constituted "acts of piracy". Here's how international law treats both claims.

What's the status of the conflict?

The US-Israeli alliance began the war on Iran on February 28. Iran responded by effectively "closing" the Strait of Hormuz. A temporary ceasefire took effect on April 8, but, days later, US President Donald Trump announced a naval blockade to restrict Iran's oil exports. Iran retaliated by targeting foreign-flagged oil tankers. In this crisis, the key legal question concerns the "status" of the conflict and the exact geographic coordinates of the US blockade, the details of which remain unknown.

The 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) regulates peacetime activities. International conflicts, meanwhile, are governed by the Law of Active Combat (LOAC), which is also known as International Humanitarian Law. The LOAC says an "international armed conflict" exists whenever there is a "resort to armed force between States", regardless of whether a formal declaration of war has been made.

This is where the transition from a ceasefire becomes legally tricky. A ceasefire is merely a pause in fighting, not a legal end to a war. The US may view the underlying February conflict as still active and argue, therefore, that imposing a blockade is a lawful resumption of hostilities. Iran, however, may argue that the ceasefire functioned as an end to the fighting, making the blockade an attack in peacetime. A naval blockade is strictly a wartime operation, according to maritime law.

So what does international law say?

Should it be determined that the US and Iran are in an active state of armed conflict, the rules of peacetime are immediately suspended, and the laws of naval warfare apply. The legality of the US operation hinges on which framework is currently applicable to the situation.

PEACETIME: Had the April 8 ceasefire been legally binding, the US actions would be definitively illegal. The governing law would be the UNCLOS, which guarantees commercial ships the "freedom of the high seas".

UNCLOS does not grant foreign militaries the "right of visit" to forcibly board a ship merely to enforce unilateral economic sanctions. Through this lens, firing upon the *Touska* would be a violation of Iranian sovereignty. While Tehran has called this "piracy", UNCLOS Article 101 states violent action taken to meet private ends is termed as piracy and cannot be achieved through sovereign agendas.

WARTIME: If the ceasefire collapses, UNCLOS evaporates, and the US invokes the LOAC. Here, the following doctrines could be applicable:

The San Remo Manual: While the Geneva conventions protect individuals, San Remo is the universally recognised code governing naval warfare and the capture of property at sea. Paragraphs 128 and 135 of the manual grant "belligerent" warships the right to visit and search merchant vessels while providing provisions for the capture of enemy-flagged vessels.

Prize law: The capture of the *Touska* under the San Remo guidelines is complemented by Prize law, a historical law of the sea. It allows Washington to bring the *Touska* before a domestic Prize court to legally transfer the title of the ship and its cargo to the US. But the last time a US Prize court convened was around the time of World War II.

US doctrine: The San Remo Manual also underpins the US Navy's Commander's Handbook on the Law of Naval Operations. The handbook dictates that enemy merchant vessels "may be captured whenever located beyond neutral territory". Assuming that the war remains active, *Touska* can be classified as an "enemy merchant vessel". However, the handbook holds no legal weight in a peacetime scenario.

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● WEST ASIA CONFLICT

Pope vs President: Papal authority and the differing strands of faith

Anagha Jayakumar
New Delhi, April 21

AMID THE West Asia conflict, US President Donald Trump found a new antagonist: Pope Leo XIV, the supreme head of the Catholic Church.

The 70-year-old pontiff has made multiple statements criticising not just the war on Iran started by the US and Israel but also the capture of Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro. He has spoken of "tyrants" and said Jesus "does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war". Trump, meanwhile, has responded by saying the Pope was "weak on crime" and "terrible for foreign policy". US Vice President JD Vance said Leo should stick to matters of morality.

Both sides have since attempted to tone down the tensions. The episode, however, highlights a rare confrontation between political power and the Vatican's moral authority, in which the Trump administration seeks legitimacy.

The Pope's authority

The Pope is the visible head of the Cath-

olic Church, which regards Jesus Christ as its invisible head. He is also the Bishop of Rome. As the supreme pontiff, the Papacy or the Pope's office presides over the Holy See, the central governing body of the Church and Vatican City, which enjoys formal diplomatic relations with other nations. Its jurisdiction empowers it to make decisions on matters of faith and morality for 1.3 billion Catholics located worldwide.

In international law, the Holy See occupies the status of a sovereign juridical entity. The Holy See possesses a full legal personality in international law by virtue of the diplomatic relations it enjoys with 180 states and its membership in several international organisations.

Additionally, the Holy See is "treated as a subject of international law having the capacity to engage in diplomatic relations and to enter into binding agreements with one, several, or many states under international law that are largely geared to establish and preserving peace in the world". (*Papal Diplomacy and the Quest for Peace*, John A. Lucal and Robert John Araujo, 2005)

Most notably, the Holy See continues to

Trump and the Church

● After Donald Trump signed an executive order on erecting a border wall with Mexico in his first term, Pope Francis said it was a Christian calling 'to not raise walls but bridges...'

● Francis' successor, Pope Leo, called the Trump administration's immigration policies 'inhuman'. After US forces captured President Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela, he criticised 'diplomacy of force'

function as a non-territorial institution even when there is no pope. Thus, Trump's attacks on Leo do not negate the institution of the Papal office.

Matters of faith

The row puts an administration seen as "Christian friendly" at odds with the largest institution of Christianity. This, however, can be explained by the narrow Christian base that helped return Trump to the White House — white, evangelical Protestant Christians. The 2025 Public Religion Research Institute Survey revealed that this subset held strongly authoritarian views; the same survey also correlated high authoritarianism with lower education and income.

A Pew Research Centre study from April 2025 noted that white evangelical Christians remain Trump's strongest supporters, with nearly two-thirds supporting his spending cuts and tariffs on the US's trading partners. However, this share has declined from 66% in February 2025 to 58% in January 2026.

Trump has sought to cement this relationship, creating a White House Faith Of-

fice led by long-time supporter and pastor Paula White-Cain. He has also created a Task Force to "Eradicate Anti-Christian Bias" led by Pam Bondi.

Also relevant is Pete Hegseth's ties with the denomination through the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches, a 20th-century movement calling for the implementation of biblical law and a theocratic state structured on Christian patriarchy.

At its core, this brand of Christianity is at odds with what the Pope represents. The Vatican's tradition seeks to check state power through moral authority. Leo's American origins make this tension harder to miss.

History of clashes

Pope Leo is not the lone pontiff to disagree with a global leader over geopolitical tensions. The tussle between the authority of the Church and the State is a tale as old as time. In 1076, Henry IV, the Holy Roman Emperor, insisted that he had the authority to appoint bishops, while Pope Gregory VII argued that the Church held the authority. The ruler ordered the Pope to be deposed, while Gregory excommunicated Henry in turn.