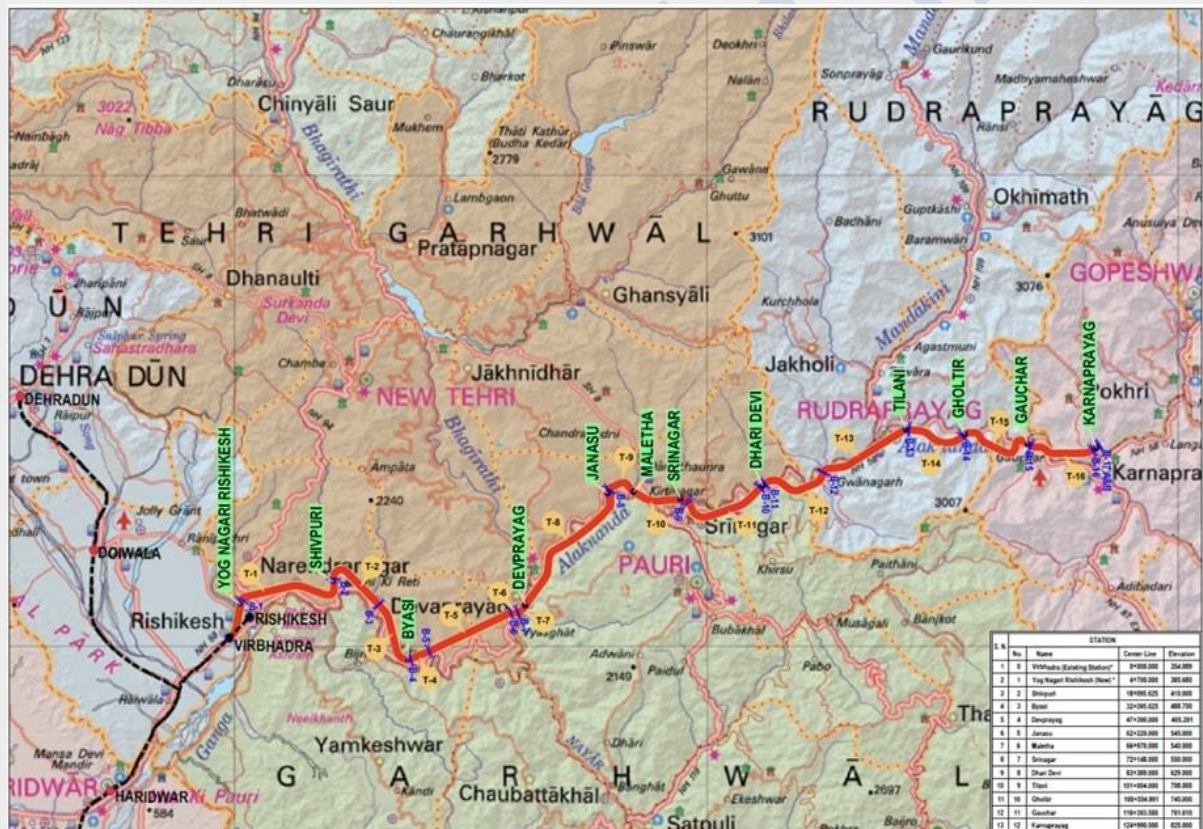


## 1. Significance of Railways completing breakthrough for India's 'longest transport tunnel' in Uttarakhand

### Why in News?

Union Minister for Railways Ashwini Vaishnaw and Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami witnessed the "tunnel breakthrough" of tunnel no. 8 on the Rishikesh-Karnaprayag railway in the Himalayas last week. It marked a major milestone towards what is slated to be the longest transport tunnel in India.

A tunnel breakthrough is the point or moment when a tunnel being excavated from both ends finally connects, marking the completion of a critical phase of tunnel-building. Spanning a length of 14.58 km, tunnel no. 8, or the Janasu tunnel, falls on the Devprayag to Janasu stretch of the Rishikesh-Karnaprayag line, an ambitious project of the Indian Railways.



Rudraprayag line

At present, the longest rail tunnel in India is 12.75 km long, between Khari and Sumber Stations on the Katra-Banihal Section of the Kashmir line or the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Rail Link (USBRL). The longest road tunnel is the Atal tunnel on the Manali-Leh highway, which is 9.02 km long.

### The significance

Beyond the larger project, the breakthrough matters because it signifies the first successful tunnel boring machine (TBM) use in the Himalayan terrain and the first by the Indian Railways. TBM is a special machine for excavating tunnels through hard rocks. Unlike the blasting method, it reduces the disturbance to the surroundings and the cost of lining the tunnel.

Along with TBM, the New Austrian Tunnelling Method (NATM) has also been used, involving controlled and small-scale excavation. NATM was earlier used for constructing tunnels on the Katra-Banihal section. The TBM has tunnelled 10.4 km in tunnel no. 8, with 4.11 km excavated through NATM.

### **The rail link**

The Rishikesh-Karnaprayag rail link project is 125.20 km long. Of this, 104 km or 83 per cent of it is in the form of tunnels. It is a single-line broad-gauge network. The alignment has 12 new stations, 16 main tunnels and 19 major bridges covering five districts – Dehradun, Tehri Garhwal, Pauri Garhwal, Rudraprayag and Chamoli – in Uttarakhand.

### **Evacuation tunnels**

Apart from the 16 main tunnels, the project will have 12 escape tunnels of 97.72 km length and 7.05 km long cross passages. The escape tunnels are built alongside the main tunnel to provide a safe passage for people to evacuate in an emergency, like a fire or accident.

### **Bridges**

The project includes five important bridges, one each on the Ganga and the Chandrabhaga, and three bridges over the Alaknanda. The longest bridge in the project is Srinagar Bridge no. 9, which will be half a kilometre long. The highest bridge is the Gauchar Bridge, at 46.9 meters.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: Indian Express

## **2. Pahalgam attack: How 'The Resistance Front' grew, spread in Kashmir**

### **TRF Kashmir Attack**

The Resistance Front (TRF) has claimed responsibility for the Pahalgam attack that killed 26 tourists. Terrorists fired at tourists in the Baisaran meadow in South Kashmir's Pahalgam, killing tourists and a local pony operator. The Resistance Front (TRF) is an offshoot of the Pakistan-based terror group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).

### **When did The Resistance Front surface?**

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) declared the TRF a "terrorist organisation" under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in January 2023. The government said it was engaged in propaganda on terror activities, recruitment of terrorists, infiltration of terrorists and smuggling of weapons and narcotics from Pakistan into Jammu and Kashmir.

But the TRF first started making headlines in 2020. In May of that year, five Army commandos were killed in a gunbattle in Keran, in which five TRF militants were also killed. Similar clashes occurred around that time in Handwara and Sopore, killing security personnel.

Two key events had taken place before this.

The first was the revocation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 in August 2019. The second was the decapitation of the LeT in Kashmir in 2018.



#### **How did The Resistance Front grow?**

The Lashkar-e-Taiba was founded around 1985, and one of its main goals was merging the whole of Kashmir with Pakistan. However, by the end of 2018, it had suffered significant reverses at the hands of Indian security forces.

2018 witnessed the wiping off of the top leadership drastically reduced LeT's

strike capability in the Valley.

Then came the revocation of Article 370.

#### **Pakistan aiming to respond**

According to sources in the security forces, Pakistan wanted to retaliate against this, but was mindful of its greylisting by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). The FATF is an inter-governmental body which tracks terrorism financing. If it believes that a country is not doing enough to prevent international money laundering and terrorist financing, it puts the country on the grey list. This impacts the country's ability to attract international investment and engage with banks and other international financial institutions.

Thus, it wanted a militant outfit in Kashmir that sounded more "secular and indigenous". Hence they opted for 'Resistance' — that has some currency in global politics — in its name."

#### **About TRF**

Unlike local militants, who have no training, these new militants seem to have trained hard. As far as we know, they are trained for at least six months before being inducted. The outfit has a mix of both local and foreign militants so that it looks indigenous. The surprising part is that the local militants are also very well trained in Pakistan.

The TRF is active on social media channels, such as Facebook, Telegram, and WhatsApp, where it posts propaganda videos and claims responsibility for various attacks.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

Source: Indian Express

### **3. Desperate step in desperate times: Pakistan's intent behind Pahalgam attack**

#### **Why Now?**

A day after the Pahalgam terror attack, India announced a slew of diplomatic measures against Pakistan, including the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, expulsion of Pakistani personnel from India, and closure of the Attari border post.

Officially, Islamabad has denied any involvement. But initial investigations, and more importantly, the larger geopolitical context in which the attack has taken place, leave little doubt about Pakistan's role.



### **Pakistan in dire straits**

Pakistan today is a country in dire straits. Consider the following facts.

\* For years, Pakistan was a key partner to the United States with regards to its objectives in Afghanistan — there could neither be war nor peace in Afghanistan without Islamabad's support. With Washington pulling out of Kabul

in 2021, the leverage that Pakistan enjoyed with the Americans is mostly gone.

And as it faces a crippling economic crisis, the US has not stepped in to bail Pakistan out, as it had repeatedly done in the past.

\* The Gulf states too have refused to open up their coffers. There is fatigue among the Gulf states about having to repeatedly bail Pakistan out, and a sense that Islamabad has not given them much in return for doing so over the years.

\* Even China has seemingly grown impatient with Pakistan. Beijing has poured in billions of dollars to develop infrastructure in Pakistan as a part of its flagship Belt and Road Initiative. But many of China's projects in Pakistan remain stalled today.

Corruption and inefficiency aside, Pakistan's inability to deliver on security promises has been responsible: in recent years, a number of Chinese engineers and project supervisors have been killed by Baloch terrorists. Although China remains Pakistan's biggest patron, the two countries' bilateral relationship is not what it used to be even in the very recent past.

\* The Taliban regime in Kabul has not been the client state Pakistan had hoped it would be. Instead, it has turned rather hostile. Regions bordering Afghanistan have witnessed a spate of attacks on both civilians and military personnel.

Far from providing "strategic depth" to Pakistan against India, Taliban-ruled Afghanistan has become a serious security vulnerability.

\* Pakistan's border with Iran has not been much better. Just last week, eight Pakistani migrant workers were shot dead in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province by a Baloch militant outfit. Last year, both countries targeted alleged "terrorist sanctuaries" on the other side of the border with missile strikes.



Such is the situation with its western neighbours today that some analysts would say Pakistan's border with India is its most peaceful one at the moment.

All in all, Pakistan's economy is in doldrums, its security situation is deteriorating, even as it feels more and more marginalised and isolated on the international stage.

### **'India taking advantage'**

In the eyes of Islamabad, India is taking advantage of Pakistan's dire situation by isolating and marginalising it. New Delhi, in recent years, has acted as if Pakistan simply does not matter, that it is but a minor distraction for a country with ambitions of becoming a superpower.

This is perhaps most obvious with regard to India's Kashmir policy, which treats Pakistan as a non-factor that is in no position to interfere with the largely successful attempts to bring stability and prosperity to the region. Contentious as it may be, the abrogation of Article 370 on August 5, 2019, which revoked Kashmir's special status, was the strongest signal that India is looking to fully integrate the region with the rest of the country, regardless of Pakistan's soft-stated position on the matter.

And in recent years, there has undoubtedly been a steady improvement in the economy and daily lives of Kashmiris, who ultimately benefit from stability in the region, regardless of their personal opinion of the ruling dispensation in Delhi. That a record number of tourists from all over India have been flocking to Kashmir is the ultimate bellwether of "normalcy".

New Delhi has also successfully pushed the US to "de-hyphenate" its relations with India and Pakistan. That US Vice President J D Vance is currently on an official trip to India, with Pakistan being nowhere on his itinerary is proof of this fact.

Moreover, as India improves its ties with other Islamic countries in the Gulf, Pakistan has been little more than a silent spectator. It is noteworthy that the attack in Pahalgam took place while Prime Minister Narendra Modi was on an official visit to Saudi Arabia, a country which had been a steadfast ally to Pakistan during its wars with India, especially in 1971.

### **Pakistan's desperate gambit**

It is in this context that one can see a certain logic behind why Pakistan would take this rather desperate step. The terror attack in Pahalgam is essentially an attempt by Pakistan to assert that it is still a regional power which cannot simply be ignored or cast away as a non-factor, and the sense in India that "Pakistan does not matter" is misplaced.

This appears to make sense in the light of Pakistan Army Chief General Asim Munir's statements last week, in which he repeatedly invoked the logic of the "two-nation theory".

"Our religions are different, our customs are different, our traditions are different, our thoughts are different, our ambitions are different. That was the foundation of the two-nation theory that was laid there. We are two nations, we are not one nation," General Munir said at the Overseas Pakistani Convention in Islamabad on April 15.

Beyond trying to shore up support for the beleaguered Pakistani establishment, this was essentially Munir saying that Pakistan is a country with its own identity, and thus has its own place in the world, which cannot be ignored and belittled.

In his statements, Munir also invoked Kashmir, which he referred to as the “jugular vein” of Pakistan. “Our stance is absolutely clear, it was our jugular vein, it will be our jugular vein, we will not forget it. We will not leave our Kashmiri brothers in their heroic struggle,” he said.

The attack in Pahalgam, can thus also be seen as an extension of Munir’s statements from last week: it is not only an attempt to undermine the progress made towards “normalcy”, but also a message to India that Kashmir cannot be stabilised without Pakistan as a stakeholder, and that India’s policy of integration is unacceptable to Islamabad.

Note that the precise timing of the attack, with PM Modi in Saudi Arabia and US Vice President Vance in India, suggests that it is as much a message to the rest of the world, as it is to India. Pakistan wants the world to know that it is still a critical player in the region, and has the capacity and capability to cause a serious security situation with potentially global ramifications, to prevent which there is no choice but to engage with Islamabad.

And even if the world reacts negatively to Pakistan — indeed countries from around the world have issued unequivocal condemnations of the terror attack — (Pakistan hopes) this will prompt greater engagement with it, if only as a bad actor. Amid its current international isolation, engagement of any kind would probably be received by Islamabad as a win.

### **India’s path forward**

The first order of business for India is to analyse what went wrong. Were their lapses in the security arrangements? Were we too complacent? How can such attacks be prevented in the future so that tourists continue to travel to Kashmir without fear or trepidation?

An honest assessment is necessary to ensure that the progress Kashmir has been witnessing is not undone. And the Centre must leave aside its political differences with the National Conference, avoid a “blame-game”, and make the elected government an active stakeholder in this process.

Internationally, in the immediate term, India will certainly try to ensure that Pakistan remains isolated. If Pakistan believes that terror is a way to force other countries to engage with it, India will make sure that it is not.

With regards to retaliating against Pakistan, what is most important is that no action be taken based on emotions and public sentiment.

In the medium- to long-term, the attack should prompt India to rethink its assumption that Pakistan has been completely neutralised, and does not matter anymore. I have always believed that India has to engage with Pakistan. To completely isolate a neighbour with which it shares a 3,000 km border makes no sense. We have to continue talking to Pakistan, if only to know what it is thinking.

Moreover, New Delhi must appreciate that there is no one Pakistan. There is the Pakistani establishment, the elected government, as well as the people of Pakistan. Each constituency needs to be dealt with differently, and even if India has frayed relations with one of them, say the Army, it should continue to engage with the others.

At the end of the day, India's long-term policy vis-à-vis Pakistan and Kashmir has to be centred around the people of Kashmir, and the region's development and stabilisation. The attack must not interrupt the progress that is being made.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

Source: Indian Express

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