

# COMING HOME: ON RELEASE OF INDIAN PILOT WG. CDR. ABHINANDAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

With [Pakistan's decision to release Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman](#), tensions between India and Pakistan may finally wind down. The gesture, which [Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan called an offer of peace and goodwill](#), must be appreciated, although there is evidence to suggest that there was pressure from other countries on Islamabad to make such an announcement to prevent further escalation from India. If Wing Commander Abhinandan's return provides the space for diplomacy to take over, it is because it gives both countries the opportunity to signal a victory of sorts. Islamabad will project itself as having done the decent thing, and New Delhi is likely to claim that its tough stance compelled his return. There have been a number of incidents that took the subcontinent to the brink of a conflict that could have quite easily spiralled out of control — from the Pulwama attack to the Indian air strikes on Balakot, to attempted attacks by Pakistani military aircraft in Jammu and Kashmir, and the IAF pilot's capture. The sense of uncertainty was only made worse by the utterances of public figures and the media on both sides, who tried to score points domestically. In India, within a few weeks the image of a nation in grief determined to fight terrorism appeared to have given way to triumphalism over the Balakot strikes. Pakistan went the same way after it foiled an attack across the Line of Control that saw both sides take down each other's aircraft. Videos of Wing Commander Abhinandan being manhandled by a mob before Pakistani soldiers moved in to protect him did not help. As a result, the focus changed within a few days from India's outrage over the terror strike to two nuclear neighbours poised for conflict.

Abhinandan Varthaman release: World leaders work behind the scenes to avert India-Pakistan conflict

It is time for New Delhi and Islamabad to use the pause afforded by the relief over the release to decide on the rules of engagement. Pakistan must realise that the time for denial and obfuscation is over. Unless it begins to act on India's and the world community's concerns about Pakistan-based terror safe havens in a time-bound manner, the two nations could be back on the brink of war if there is another trigger. If it does act, it could herald a paradigm shift in India-Pakistan engagement and help fix its own fragile economy. This has a precedent: the period that followed then-Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's 2003 announcement on shutting down terror groups, when Pakistan's military actually showed some results in the matter, was the most productive phase of engagement between the two countries in recent decades. Significantly, it was a time of economic growth and stability too for Pakistan. New Delhi must be ready to show both flexibility and a determined focus on Pakistan's action against terror groups, including the Jaish-e-Mohammad. This is the best way to build constructively on the international consensus built post-Pulwama in India's favour.

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