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The India-Pakistan Crisis: Background and Outlook

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Table of Contents

- I Background of the Conflict 1
- II Current Tensions 2
 - The Rise of Hindu Nationalism 3
 - The Repeal of Article 370 and Changes Kashmir’s Legal Status 3
 - Intelligence Warfare and Support for Separatist Groups 3
- III Conflict Transformations and Changing Rules of Engagement 4
- IV International Dimensions 4
- Conclusion 6

On 22 April, militants attacked a group of Hindu pilgrims in the Pahalgam area of Indian-administered Kashmir, leaving 26 dead. India accused Pakistan-backed separatist groups of being behind the attack, but Pakistan denied any connection. However, Indian authorities closed border crossings, expelled Pakistani diplomats, and suspended the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty. Pakistan, in turn, considered this a “hostile act amounting to a declaration of war,”¹ and responded by closing its airspace to Indian aircraft and threatening to suspend the 1971 Simla Agreement, which delineated the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir.

The escalation between the two countries went beyond the traditional dynamics of the conflict. India carried out airstrikes targeting bases inside Pakistani territory, while Pakistan responded by firing tactical missiles at Indian border areas, threatening to expand further the scope of the war between the two nuclear powers. The situation was brought under control through American mediation. Yet the risk of another escalation remains ever-present, given the rise of nationalist rhetoric in both countries, the growing domestic pressures facing the countries’ respective governments, and economic challenges combined with social tensions, which could lead to a major military confrontation.²

I Background of the Conflict

The roots of the Indian Pakistani conflict date back to British colonial era. Britain dominated then ruled the Indian subcontinent for several centuries, during which it fomented sectarian tensions. When it decided to withdraw in 1947, the Raj was partitioned into two states, Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan, based on the notion that coexistence between Hindus and Muslims was impossible. The process of partition resulted in vast waves of displacement and widespread sectarian violence that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides. Britain refused to offer independence to the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, instead giving it a choice to join either India or Pakistan.

However, the Hindu ruler of the Muslim-majority territory, Maharaja Hari Singh, attempted to gain independence. This sparked Pakistani fears that the move was a prelude to the region’s eventual annexation by India. Pakistani tribes, supported by the country’s newly established army, launched an attack against the region on 17 October 1947, in an effort to annex it to Pakistan by force. This led to the first armed conflict with India over Jammu and Kashmir. The government of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru sent military forces into the region by air after Maharaja Singh’s signing of the “Instrument of Accession” with India, which Pakistan rejected, considering it illegal.

¹ Anupreeta Das, Pragati K.B. & Zia ur-Rehman, “How India’s Threat to Block Rivers Could Devastate Pakistan,” *The New York Times*, 24/4/2025, accessed on 18/5/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/54oyw>.

² Asif Shahzad, “Exclusive: Pakistan Defence Minister Says Military Incursion by India Is Imminent,” *Reuters*, 29/4/2025, accessed on 18/5/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/oi327>.

The 1947 - 1948 war left India in control of approximately two-thirds of the region. In January 1948, India filed a complaint with the United Nations Security Council, which responded by issuing Resolution No. 47 on 21 April 1948. The called for a ceasefire between the two sides, and the withdrawal of Pakistani forces – including tribal fighters – from the region, followed by a reduction in the number of Indian forces to the minimum necessary to maintain security, in preparation for a free and fair referendum under UN supervision, which would offer the people of Kashmir self-determination and the right to choose whether to join India or Pakistan.³ A ceasefire was concluded through UN mediation in 1949, resulting in the establishment of an armistice line intended to halt the hostilities in Kashmir.

Yet despite subsequent resolutions affirming the same principles – in 1949, 1950, 1951, and 1957 – the referendum has yet to be carried out to this day, due to the divergent positions of the two sides. India demanded a complete withdrawal of Pakistani forces first, while Pakistan believed that India was obstructing the vote and seeking to consolidate its annexation of the territory. Thus, the UN resolutions remained unenforced, and the territory became a perennial source of tension in relations between India and Pakistan, which engaged in repeated rounds of clashes, interspersed with interventions by regional and international powers adopting divergent positions and interests. This led to three direct wars (in 1947-1948, 1965, and 1971), in addition to the two-month Kargil War in 1999.

The 1980s witnessed armed confrontations pitting Indian forces deployed in the region against Kashmiri separatist movements such as the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), which staged an armed rebellion. This prompted India to send military forces in the region. It has frequently accused Pakistan of supporting the rebels. Since 1947, at least 70,000 Kashmiris have been killed in armed clashes with Indian forces stationed in the region.⁴ After both India and Pakistan each announced that they now possessed nuclear weapons, in the late 1990s, the conflict entered a fragile new phase of mutual deterrence, threatening the security and stability of the whole of South Asia. The situation was further complicated by the Indian Pakistani conflict's role within the framework of great power competition and the struggle for influence and control of economic corridors.

II Current Tensions

Several factors have led to the latest escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan, particularly since 2014, most prominently:

³ United Nations, United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 47 (1948) on the India-Pakistan Question*, Adopted on April 21, 1948, S/RES/47(1948), accessed on 18/5/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/xnmv3g>.

⁴ Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS), *Structures of Violence: The Indian State in Jammu and Kashmir* (Srinagar: September 2015), accessed on 18/5/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/lozi1d>.

The Rise of Hindu Nationalism

When the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of India's current Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, it brought with it a hardline Hindu nationalist discourse and an agenda of strengthening the country's Hindu identity. This undermined the secularism that had long formed the basis of coexistence among India's various religions and sects, and diminished the religious tolerance and space for diversity that had traditionally characterized the country. This provoked resentment among minorities, particularly the country's Muslims, who number more than 200 million.

This trend has been starkly reflected in India's policies in Jammu and Kashmir, where tensions have escalated as a result of the central government's tightening of security measures and arrests of separatist leaders and opponents of India's military presence in the region. This has increased public resentment against the central government and added to the growing number of young people recruited to Islamist groups seeking to expel Indian forces from the region. The result has been an increase in attacks against these forces, most notably the 2016 Uri attack, in which 19 Indian soldiers were killed and nearly 30 wounded.⁵ India blamed the attack on Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), a militant group it accuses Pakistan of supporting. Since then, their bilateral relations have been hostage to security incidents, and the two sides have engaged in skirmishes and reciprocal attacks. Meanwhile, a comprehensive political dialogue to resolve all their outstanding disputes through peaceful means, including the Jammu and Kashmir region, has faltered.

The Repeal of Article 370 and Changes Kashmir's Legal Status

In August 2019, the Indian government revoked Article 370 of its Constitution, which had granted Kashmir a special form of autonomy. The decision constituted a marked escalation in political and security terms; Pakistan considered it a violation of international law and an attempt at the "forced annexation" of the region.⁶ Later that year, tensions escalated further with an attack on an Indian military convoy in the Pulwama area that killed 40 Indian border guards.⁷ India subsequently struck military positions in the Pakistani-controlled part of Kashmir, prompting Pakistani airstrikes against India.

Intelligence Warfare and Support for Separatist Groups

India accuses Pakistan of supporting "jihadist groups" active in Kashmir, particularly Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Islamabad, for its part, accuses New Delhi of supporting separatist groups in Pakistan's largest province, the southwestern region of Balochistan. Pakistan accuses India's foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), of interfering in its

⁵ "India Blames Pakistan for Deadly Kashmir Attack," *BBC News* 18/9/2016, accessed on 18/5/2025, at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/cwyneele13qt>.

⁶ "Article 370: What Happened with Kashmir and why it Matters," *BBC*, 6/8/2019, accessed on 18/5/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/d24oc>.

⁷ "Kashmir Attack: Tracing the Path that Led to Pulwama," *BBC*, 1/5/2019, accessed on 18/5/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/z4xyi>.

domestic affairs and carrying out targeted assassinations of leaders accused of anti-India activities. These activities have further increased tensions between the two countries.

III Conflict Transformations and Changing Rules of Engagement

The year 2025 is shaping up to be a pivotal year in the relationship between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. A clear escalation on several metrics suggests a breakdown in the traditional rules of engagement, leading to a new pattern of conflict between them. This new form of conflict is not limited to direct military engagement or the border dispute; rather, it is tending towards greater complexity due to the interplay of domestic calculations, ethnic tensions, transnational political projects, and the intensification of competition between major powers with a stake in the conflict.

This situation reflects a structural shift in the nature of the confrontation between the two parties, which has become difficult to contain through traditional diplomatic tools. Conversely, a drift toward a direct military confrontation between the two nuclear powers would not appear to be a rational option for either party, given the immense human, political, and economic costs it would inflict not only on India and Pakistan, but also on the entire South Asian region – one of the most fragile regions in the world in terms of collective security. This necessitates greater involvement by the major powers, led by the United States, China, and Russia, to put forward mechanisms and initiatives to contain the conflict and prevent it from escalating into a potential nuclear confrontation.

This shift became particularly evident when Pakistan responded to India's attacks with marked resolve, launching tactical missiles at targets in the border region and shooting down several Indian aircraft in a large dogfight. As fears rose that the situation could slide into a full-scale confrontation, US President Donald Trump intervened – in the face of clear Indian public anger – to broker a ceasefire, setting a rare precedent for direct international intervention in the conflict. Shortly afterwards, Indian and Pakistani air commanders agreed to halt military operations and resume dialogue.

IV International Dimensions

The dynamics of the Indo-Pakistani conflict cannot be understood in isolation from the evolving international context. The conflict has become a major cornerstone of competition between world powers, first and foremost the US and China. The Indian subcontinent is one arena where the strategic, economic, and geo-security interests of major powers intersect, meaning that every escalation between New Delhi and Islamabad represents a significant test of the international system's ability to manage crises and prevent a slide into a broader regional confrontation.

The arena of geo-economic competition between China and India has expanded from Kashmir to the Indian Ocean, extending into key economic spheres such as technology, infrastructure, and supply chains. South Asia is also becoming an increasingly important pillar for the future of the global economy. In this context, China is working to strengthen its partnership with Islamabad,

in the framework of the \$65-billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), one of the most ambitious elements of Beijing's international Belt and Road Initiative. Meanwhile, the US is seeking to strengthen its defence and economic ties with India, as part of its strategy to contain China in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and to position India as an alternative to China in global supply chains.

The situation is further complicated by Washington's calculations regarding Pakistan's nuclear capabilities, which, since they were officially unveiled in the late 1990s, have been the cornerstone of the equation of mutual deterrence between Islamabad and New Delhi. Pakistan acquired these capabilities within the context of a strategic balance imposed by India's military superiority; however, domestic, regional, and international changes since 2001 – particularly with the escalation of terrorist threats – have prompted increasing questions by some Western powers, led by the US, about the stability of Pakistan and its control over these weapons. These powers have increasingly hinted at the need to monitor the country's nuclear program, citing fears of escalating domestic chaos and the risk that nuclear capabilities could fall into the hands of "irresponsible parties." Armed groups such as the Pakistani Taliban and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ) are cited as examples of this threat, which could exploit any future security vacuum.

Behind this security rhetoric, however, are indications of a deeper strategic agenda seeking to reduce or neutralize Pakistan's nuclear deterrence in the medium term, in order to grant India strategic superiority as a recognized nuclear power, especially in the context of the growing partnership between India and the US.

This agenda benefits from several factors, most notably the systematic media discourse that portrays Pakistan as an unstable nuclear-armed state, supporting Indian demands for international protection of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, on the basis that instability and successive economic crises have reduced Islamabad's ability to modernize or protect its nuclear facilities, in the context of transformations within the Pakistani military and its relative decline in regional influence compared to previous decades. Conversely, India faces no serious international demands to dismantle its own nuclear arsenal; rather, it is viewed as part of an "alliance of democracies" in the face of China, a perception that provides it with political and strategic cover and keeps its atomic programme beyond accountability.

Accordingly, the conflict between India and Pakistan is a key factor in the shifting postures of major powers in the region. Conversely, however, the persistence of bilateral tensions complicates US efforts to build cohesive regional blocs in Asia, and undermines the stability needed to establish an effective balance of power in the face of China's accelerating expansion. On the other hand, Russia is trying to maintain a balanced relationship with both New Delhi and Islamabad as it seeks to play a greater role in Asian security without openly throwing its lot in with either side.

Furthermore, regional powers such as Türkiye and Iran are actively exploiting these tensions to enhance their own diplomatic influence, each according to its own strategic calculations. The intertwining of the Indian Pakistani conflict with the calculations and rivalries both of major international powers

and aspiring regional powers means that this conflict cannot be resolved through bilateral means. Rather, these dynamics make it a complex issue in which geopolitical considerations are interlinked with the rise of nationalist tendencies, economic interests, and cross-border defence strategies.

Conclusion

The conflict between India and Pakistan remains one of the most prominent flashpoints of regional tension in Asia, and one of the few conflicts worldwide that entail the potential use of nuclear weapons. However, the current context demands that both sides consider political solutions, particularly in an environment marked by economic challenges, demographic pressures, and shared environmental risks. At the same time, the divergent positions of India and Pakistan on the future of Jammu and Kashmir remain key to the perpetuation of this decades-old conflict. India continues to lay claim to the entire region, including the parts administered by Pakistan and China, as part of its sovereign territory. Meanwhile, Pakistan sees the region as the core of its dispute with India, an issue that must be resolved in a manner that meets the aspirations of its residents. Given the complexity of the regional and international landscape, the optimal solution would appear to lie in the recognition of the Line of Contact as a temporary dividing line, along with efforts to calm the situation and avoiding escalation and a focus on improving the living conditions of the peoples of both countries, along with practical steps to rebuild the eroded trust between the two parties until a permanent solution can be reached that fulfils the aspirations of the Kashmiri people for self-determination.