

India-Pakistan Relations: Understanding the Nature of the Conflict between the Two Nuclear Neighbors

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Introduction

India and Pakistan relations have been tumultuous and can be termed as one of the most enduring and complex conflicts in modern international relations. Born from the traumatic partition of British India in 1947, this antagonistic relationship between the two neighbors has shaped South Asian geopolitics for over seven decades, evolving from territorial disputes to nuclear standoffs, and encompassing broader questions of regional power dynamics and

global influence. The use of terrorism by nonstate actors in the Jammu and Kashmir region and beyond as an instrument of state policy by Pakistan has further complicated the matter leading to distrust between the two nuclear armed rivals. In recent years, the conflict has taken new dimensions, delving deep into the abyss of irreconcilability, drawing both nuclear powers to a brief war in May 2025, which ended quickly, but without a guarantee of non-recurrence.

Tracing the roots of Enduring Conflict

The partition of British India in 1947 created two nations based primarily on religious lines without resolving fundamental questions of territory, identity, and resources. The immediate aftermath witnessed massive population displacement, communal violence, and competing claims over princely states, particularly Kashmir, which became the primary flashpoint for future conflicts. The first Indo-Pakistani war (1947-1948) established the pattern that would define their relationship: military confrontation over Kashmir, scope for and resistance to international mediation, and temporary ceasefires that failed to address underlying drivers of conflict and grievances. This conflict established Kashmir not merely as a territorial dispute but as a symbol of each nation's foundational narrative—for Pakistan, as the unfinished business of partition, and for India, as a test of its secular, pluralistic identity.

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The second Indo-Pakistani war in 1965 demonstrated how quickly bilateral tensions could escalate into full-scale conflict, while the 1971 war marked a decisive shift in regional power dynamics. India's military intervention supporting the independence of East Pakistan (which was named Bangladesh) inflicted a strategic defeat and a permanent state of anguish

on Pakistan, establishing India's conventional military superiority and in a way driving Pakistan toward nuclear weapons and proxy warfare which gained momentum with the Afghan jihad in the late 1970s.

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By the time the Kargil conflict occurred in 1999, both nations were acknowledged nuclear powers. The war, which occurred after Pakistani invaders occupied strategic mountain tops in Kashmir's Kargil area, revealed newer dynamics. The nuclear weapons prevented full-scale conventional war, but they still created space for limited conflicts, as each side calculated that nuclear deterrence would prevent escalation beyond certain thresholds.

Era of Assertiveness and Strategic Recalibration

Since 2014, under the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, India's Pakistan policy has undergone a significant shift. Greater military assertiveness, diplomatic isolation strategies, and the elevation of national security concerns in domestic politics can be identified as some of the components of this policy. India's actions demonstrate that it has abandoned restraint to

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Pakistani provocations, which was probably the mainstay of the policies of the previous regimes. For instance, in October 2016, India carried out cross-border military operations on terrorist infrastructures across the Line of Control (LoC) in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). The LoC serves as the boundary between the two countries. India's action followed a terror attack on an Indian Army base in Uri in Jammu & Kashmir on 18 September, resulting in the killing of 17 soldiers. Departing from its traditional approach of diplomatic protests and defensive measures, the Indian government publicly acknowledged its military operations and claimed that the surgical strikes have been able to destroy terror launch pads, which served as infiltration bases for Pakistani terrorists to enter Indian Kashmir.

inside Pakistani territory crossed several red lines and triggered a dangerous escalation cycle that brought both nuclear-armed nations to the brink of broader conflict. In August 2019, the Indian government took another major policy decision of revoking Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. This article granted special autonomous status to Jammu and Kashmir. This constitutional change, accompanied by a communications blackout and massive security deployment, fundamentally altered the legal and political status of Kashmir. The move served multiple objectives: fulfilling a key ideological commitment of the BJP, asserting Indian sovereignty over the entire territory, and presenting Pakistan and the international community with a fait accompli.

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The same response was repeated in 2019. On 14 February 2019, a suicide terror attack was conducted by Pakistan-based terrorist organization Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), leading to the killing of 40 soldiers travelling on a highway in Pulwama in Jammu & Kashmir. The JeM is a proscribed organization by the United Nations. Twelve days later, in the early hours of 26 February, India struck the biggest training camp of JeM in Balakot, a town in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa province. India claimed that a very large number of JeM terrorists, trainers, senior commanders and groups of jihadis who were being trained for suicide attacks were killed. India's decision to conduct airstrikes deep

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India adopted a proactive strategy aimed at economically and diplomatically isolating Pakistan, hoping that this would compel Pakistan to abandon its support for terrorism against India. To this end, India suspended bilateral trade and leveraged its expanding international relationships to advocate for Pakistan's isolation in matters related to terrorism. This approach proved successful in forums such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), where Pakistan was placed on the 'grey list' from June 2018 to October 2022 due to its failure to combat terror financing. However, it had little impact on its India policy.

A New Crisis Unfolds

The most recent and significant escalation occurred following the 22 April 2025 terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir, when terrorists gunmen belonging to the Resistance Front (TRF) killed 26 people—mostly Indian tourists. This attack was the biggest targeting civilians in over two decades. The TRF, which claimed responsibility for the attack, is considered by the Indian security establishment as a proxy for Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a much bigger Pakistanbased terror group, which has been active in Kashmir for decades. The LeT, which is proscribed by the UN and several other countries, was responsible for the attacks in India's financial hub Mumbai in 2008 killing more than 160 people. India's reaction to the Pahalgam attack marked a significant escalation in its approach to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. The Prime Minister announced India's decision to suspend the Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan with immediate effect, along with the closure of the Attari-Wagah Border crossing between the two countries and a travel ban for all Pakistani nationals. It expelled some Pakistani diplomatic staff, which was responded to equally by Pakistan. On 6 May, India launched Operation Sindoor, i.e missile strikes on targets in Pakistan in what it termed "surgical precision strikes" against terrorist infrastructure.

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The suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty posed a significant long-term threat to Pakistan, given the country's reliance on river waters for agriculture and hydroelectric power. Pakistan viewed this as an "act of war," underscoring the existential nature of the threat. In response, Pakistan closed its airspace to Indian aircraft and suspended all trade with India, which led to an intense four-day conflict between the two nuclear-armed rivals. The crisis derailed India's Indo-Pacific ambitions and 're-hyphenated' its relationship with Pakistan in international discourse. By late July 2025, India claimed to have killed all suspects involved in the attack, but the broader implications continue to reverberate, with the Indus Waters Treaty suspension creating a new dimension of coercive diplomacy.

Regional and Global Dimensions

India-Pakistan The conflict has become enmeshed with broader great power competition, particularly with the United States and China, adding new complexities to the bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan. American policy has evolved significantly since the Cold War, when the US often tilted toward Pakistan. The post-9/11 period saw complex engagement with both countries particularly with the US reliance on Pakistan for counter terror operations in Afghanistan. In recent years, US-India relations deepened substantially, with America viewing India as a crucial partner in maintaining Indo-Pacific balance against Chinese expansion. The elevation of India to Major Defense Partner status, civil nuclear cooperation agreements,

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and intelligence sharing arrangements have created unprecedented strategic convergence. The American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 has further altered these dynamics, with reduced need for Pakistani cooperation and increased focus on containing China. India became a lynchpin of this strategy.



China's relationship with Pakistan, often referred to as an "all-weather friendship", has been vital for economically struggling Pakistan, offering crucial support while also serving Chinese strategic interests in counterbalancing India's rise. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor valued at over \$62 billion, is the flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative undertaken in areas which India claims as its own, pushing New Delhi to criticize the project as non-transparent and an affront to its territorial sovereignty. From China's perspective, Pakistan fulfils several strategic roles: it provides alternative routes for Middle Eastern energy supplies, acts as a platform for projecting power in the Indian Ocean, and serves as a counterweight to India. However, Beijing's relationship with India has evolved as well. Despite their border standoff and other contestations, economic ties between the two have strengthened even as strategic competition intensifies. This development creates constraints on how far Beijing is willing to go in supporting Pakistani positions.



Since May 2025, these truisms have undergone rapid transformations. American President Trump has repeatedly claimed credit for ending the four-day war between India and Pakistan. While his direct involvement in resolving the conflict remains debatable, US officials—Vice President J.D. Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio — did engage in discussions with both Indian and Pakistani officials, including the prime ministers of both nations, before the hostilities ceased. Pakistan acknowledged Trump's role in concluding the conflict and even nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. In contrast, India has consistently refused to recognize any external influence, insisting that the cessation of hostilities was the result of direct negotiations between the two countries. This dismissal by India, along with other factors, may have led to a significant reversal in US policy towards India, manifesting in suspension of trade talks and imposition of 50 percent tariff on Indian exports to the US.



Over the years, Indian diplomacy has actively sought support from various countries

regarding its position on Kashmir. These efforts have included bilateral negotiations and lobbying in both regional and global forums. The United Nations General Assembly has frequently been a platform for both India and Pakistan to criticize each other—India accusing Pakistan of promoting terrorism, while Pakistan raises accusations of human rights violations against India. As a result of India's diplomatic efforts, several countries have supported its stance on the bilateral nature of the Kashmir conflict. India's strong diplomatic profile may have also led some countries to remain silent in the face of Pakistan's accusations regarding human rights violations in Kashmir. However, aside from Israel, none have explicitly endorsed India's cross-border operations in Pakistan. This became evident when India sent delegations of Members of Parliament and former diplomats to various countries to garner support for Operation Sindoor. The EU has adopted a realpolitik approach, pushing for dialogue, as it views India as a key trading partner, particularly at a time when the US, under President Trump, is upending the transatlantic alliance. France with whom India has strong defense ties came out in support of India.

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The digital age has added new dimensions to India-Pakistan competition, with both countries engaging in information warfare, cyber operations, and social media campaigns against one another. The role of diaspora communities in Western countries has also become more significant, creating new diplomatic battlegrounds in capitals like Washington, London, and Toronto.

Pakistan's Regional Calculus

For Pakistan, the conflict with India has become both central to its identity and also a constraint on its regional and global aspirations, complicated by economic vulnerabilities and fluctuating strategic importance to major powers. Pakistan's advocacy for Kashmir has been a cornerstone of its engagement with the Islamic world, but the effectiveness of this strategy has diminished significantly. The muted response of major Islamic countries to India's Article 370 revocation revealed the limitations of Pakistan's Kashmirbased diplomacy. Countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE remained notably silent or even expressed understanding of India's actions, reflecting their growing economic interests with India. Similarly, Pakistan's cry for support during Operation Sindoor did not elicit much response, barring Turkey, Azerbaijan, and China.

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While Chinese support through CPEC has provided crucial economic lifelines, it has also created new dependencies that constrain Pakistan's strategic autonomy. The terms of Chinese loans and investments have raised concerns about debt sustainability sovereignty, with Pakistan risking becoming a Chinese client state. Pakistan's economic challenges have become increasingly severe, with recurring balance of payments crises and limited industrial development. These problems are partly attributable to resources devoted to the India conflict and missed opportunities for regional economic integration. The lack of normal trade relations with India has prevented Pakistan from accessing one of the world's fastest-growing major markets.

India's Global Power Aspirations

India's relationship with Pakistan somewhat become integral to its emergence as a global power, serving both as a demonstration of its capabilities and a constraint on its resources. New Delhi's assertive approach has been designed partly to demonstrate its willingness and capability to use force in pursuit of its interests—a key attribute of great power status. The surgical strikes and Balakot operations were as much about signaling to global audiences as they were about deterring Pakistani actions. The Indian government repeatedly claims that this muscular approach has enhanced India's international standing, with many countries appreciating India's restraint in not allowing conflicts to escalate to full-scale war while demonstrating its capacity for measured

response. The international community's relatively muted response to India's Kashmir policy changes reflected recognition of India's growing strategic importance.

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However, this persisting conflict that has lasted decades also imposes significant costs on India's global emergence. Military spending necessitated by Pakistani threats diverts resources from development and economic growth. For a developing country like India, this is a significant drain of resources. The conflict has also prevented the realization of economic benefits from South Asian integration, with normalized trade relations potentially increasing bilateral trade from the current \$2 billion to over \$20 billion.

Conclusion

The India-Pakistan conflict has evolved from a post-colonial territorial dispute to a complex rivalry that intersects with global power competition, economic development challenges, and emerging security threats. In the past decade, India has demonstrated greater willingness to use military force while leveraging its growing international stature to deter and

isolate Pakistan diplomatically. The crisis in May 2025 marked a new phase in this rivalry, with India introducing water as a strategic tool through the Indus Waters Treaty suspension. The conflict remains one of the most significant obstacles to South Asian development and integration. While both countries have learned to manage their rivalry without full-scale war, they have not yet found ways to transform it into cooperation that could unlock the region's economic potential. As both countries face new challenges from climate change, technological disruption, and shifting global power balances, such transformation may become increasingly pressing.

The involvement of great powers adds both constraints and opportunities. While US-India strategic convergence and China-Pakistan cooperation provide each country with external support, they also create new dependencies and limit autonomous decision-making. The challenge for both countries is to manage these relationships while preserving enough independence to pursue conflict resolution. Several factors could influence the future trajectory of the conflict. India's continued economic growth may eventually create conditions where it feels secure enough to pursue

more cooperative approaches, while Pakistan's economic challenges may compel reassessment of confrontation costs. External pressures from great powers may also create incentives for regional stability. Or it can go downhill as well. A full-scale war can result in nuclear brinkmanship with disastrous consequences. The global powers and the international community, despite their involvement in the Ukraine war and the Gaza conflict, need to pay closer attention to this lingering conflict in finding innovative ways for conflict resolution.

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