

The Kashmir Conflict: A 70-Year Struggle Between India and Pakistan (1947-2025)

The conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir stands as one of the world's most intractable territorial disputes, spanning more than seven decades since the 1947 partition of British India. At its core lies the disputed accession of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir to India—a controversial decision that has triggered four major wars (1947-48, 1965, 1971, 1999), countless skirmishes, and a prolonged insurgency. The introduction of nuclear weapons by both nations in 1998 transformed the conflict into a potential global catastrophe, while the most recent military escalation in May 2025—with India's "Operation Sindoor" strikes and Pakistan's retaliatory actions—represents the most dangerous confrontation in over two decades. As casualties mount and tensions escalate between these nuclear-armed neighbors, understanding the historical trajectory and complex dimensions of this conflict has never been more urgent.

The Origins of the Kashmir Dispute (1947-1948)

The Partition of British India and the Princely States

The roots of the Kashmir conflict lie in the hasty and traumatic partition of British India in 1947, which created the independent dominions of India and Pakistan. While British-administered territories were divided largely along religious lines, the 562 princely states that existed under British paramountcy faced a complex choice: accede to either India or Pakistan, or attempt to remain independent^[1]. The Indian Independence Act of 1947 specified that "the suzerainty of His Majesty over the Indian States lapses, and with it, all treaties and agreements in force at the date of the passing of this Act between His Majesty and the rulers of Indian States"^[1]. This legal framework gave princes nominal freedom to determine their states' futures, though practical geopolitical considerations often dictated their choices.

Jammu and Kashmir represented a particularly complicated case due to its strategic location, diverse population, and mixed religious demographics. The princely state was ruled by Maharaja Hari Singh, a Hindu monarch, even though Muslims constituted approximately 77% of the population. This demographic reality created a natural expectation among Pakistani leaders that Kashmir would join their Muslim-majority nation. However, the Maharaja hesitated, hoping to maintain independence in the new geopolitical landscape. His indecision was influenced by concerns that the state's Muslims might oppose accession to Hindu-majority India, while Hindus and Sikhs could become vulnerable under Pakistani rule^[1]. The Maharaja's delay created a vacuum that would soon be filled by conflict.

Early signs of the Maharaja's inclination toward India appeared when he dismissed his prime minister Ram Chandra Kak, who had advocated for independence, on August 11, 1947^[1]. This move suggested a tilt toward eventual accession to India, alarming Pakistani leaders who had been making various efforts to persuade the Maharaja to join Pakistan. These efforts reportedly

included personal letters from Mohammad Ali Jinnah promising "every sort of favourable treatment," followed by lobbying of the State's Prime Minister by Muslim League party leaders^[1]. As the Maharaja's indecision continued, tensions escalated rapidly, setting the stage for the first military confrontation over Kashmir.

The Tribal Invasion and Instrument of Accession

The catalyst for Kashmir's formal accession to India came in October 1947, when tribal militias from Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province invaded the princely state. According to multiple sources, these tribal forces were supported and possibly organized by Pakistani authorities, including the Northwest Frontier Province's Chief Minister Abdul Qayyum Khan^[1]. While Pakistan has historically denied direct involvement, evidence suggests that plans for both an armed insurgency in western Kashmir and a Pashtun tribal invasion were finalized by mid-September 1947, with the approval of Pakistani Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan^{[1] [2]}. The invasion began with thousands of tribesmen entering Kashmir, advancing toward Srinagar while engaging in widespread violence.

Faced with this existential threat and unable to defend his territory, Maharaja Hari Singh made an urgent appeal to India for military assistance. The Indian government, led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, agreed to provide military support but insisted that Kashmir must first legally accede to India. On October 26, 1947, the Maharaja signed the Instrument of Accession, formally joining the state to India^{[3] [2]}. Lord Mountbatten, the Governor-General of India, accepted the accession the following day, though with an important proviso: that it would eventually be submitted to a "reference to the people" after the state was cleared of invaders^[1]. This qualification reflected India's position that "only the people, not the Maharaja, could decide where Kashmiris wanted to live" ^[1].

The legality of this accession has remained contested. India maintains that the Instrument of Accession has "perpetual validity" and constitutes a legally binding agreement that made Kashmir an integral part of India^{[3] [4]}. Sheikh Abdullah, leader of Kashmir's largest political party, the National Conference, endorsed the accession, lending it local political legitimacy^[1]. Pakistan, however, has consistently rejected the accession's validity, with Jinnah claiming that India acquired it through "fraud and violence" ^[1]. This fundamental disagreement over the legitimacy of Kashmir's accession to India has undergirded the conflict for over seven decades, with each side presenting historical and legal arguments to support its territorial claims.

The First Kashmir War and UN Intervention

Following Kashmir's accession, India airlifted troops to Srinagar on October 27, 1947, beginning what would become the First Kashmir War. Indian forces gradually pushed back the tribal militias and Pakistani forces from the Kashmir Valley, though they were unable to reclaim all territories. The fighting continued into 1948, with regular Pakistani army units becoming increasingly involved despite initial denials of participation^[1]. During this period, the conflict claimed thousands of lives and created the first wave of refugees. Particularly tragic episodes included the Rajouri Massacres beginning in November 1947, in which an estimated 30,000 Hindus and Sikhs were killed, and the Mirpur Massacre later that month, which claimed approximately 20,000 Hindu and Sikh lives^[1].

In January 1948, facing military stalemate and international pressure, India referred the Kashmir dispute to the United Nations Security Council under Article 35 of the UN Charter^[1]. On April 21, 1948, after hearing arguments from both sides, the Security Council adopted Resolution 47, which outlined a three-step process for resolving the dispute^{[5] [6]}. The resolution called for Pakistan to withdraw all its nationals who had entered Kashmir for fighting, for India to progressively reduce its forces to the minimum level required for maintaining law and order, and finally, for India to appoint a UN-nominated plebiscite administrator who would conduct a "free and impartial plebiscite" to determine Kashmir's final status^{[5] [6]}.

Both India and Pakistan raised objections to various aspects of Resolution 47, though they welcomed mediation by the UN Commission established by the resolution. Through its efforts, a ceasefire was achieved on January 1, 1949, establishing the ceasefire line that would later evolve into the Line of Control^[5]. However, the promised plebiscite never materialized due to disagreements over the demilitarization process. Pakistan insisted on simultaneous withdrawal of forces, while India maintained that Pakistani forces must withdraw first as specified in the resolution^[1]. By December 1949, the UN Commission declared its failure to implement a truce, leaving the Kashmir dispute unresolved and establishing a pattern of international mediation efforts that would prove ineffective over the decades to come.

Escalating Tensions and the Wars of 1965 and 1971

The Road to the Second Kashmir War

The period between the First Kashmir War and 1965 was marked by deteriorating relations between India and Pakistan, with Kashmir remaining the primary point of contention. By the early 1960s, the situation began to deteriorate significantly, with increasing border incidents and accusations of ceasefire violations from both sides. In April 1965, there were numerous ceasefire violations by Pakistan, and by May, Pakistani forces had occupied three hill features overlooking the Srinagar-Leh Highway, enabling accurate artillery fire on this critical transportation route^[7]. These actions indicated growing Pakistani aggression and a willingness to alter the status quo established by the 1949 ceasefire.

The immediate trigger for the Second Kashmir War came in August 1965, when Pakistan launched Operation Gibraltar, a covert military operation designed to infiltrate Pakistani soldiers and guerrillas into Indian-controlled Kashmir^{[7] [8]}. The operation's ambitious goal was to incite a rebellion among the Kashmiri population, conduct guerrilla attacks against Indian infrastructure, and ultimately overthrow the Indian administration to install a pro-Pakistan government^[7]. This strategy reflected Pakistan's belief that the Kashmiri population would rise in support of such infiltrators against Indian rule—a miscalculation that would prove costly.

Operation Gibraltar failed to achieve its objectives for several reasons. Most critically, the local Kashmiri population did not revolt as Pakistani planners had anticipated. Instead, many Kashmiris reported the infiltrators to Indian authorities, enabling India to identify and engage the Pakistani forces^{[7] [8]}. As the operation faltered, Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri made a significant policy statement, declaring that "India cannot go on pushing the Pakistanis off its territory. If infiltration continues, we will have to carry the fight to the other side" ^[7]. This marked

a pivotal shift in India's defensive posture and signaled its willingness to escalate the conflict beyond Kashmir's borders if necessary.

The 1965 War and Its Aftermath

The Second Kashmir War officially began on August 5, 1965, when Indian forces crossed the ceasefire line to counter Pakistani infiltration. The conflict expanded significantly when Indian forces captured the strategically vital Haji Pir Pass (8,652 feet high) between August 26-28, 1965, cutting a major infiltration route and connecting two separate areas of Indian-controlled territory^[7] ^[8]. This decisive tactical success demonstrated India's military capabilities and growing resolve to defend its territorial claims through offensive action when necessary.

As the initial phase of the war unfolded, Pakistan launched Operation Grand Slam on September 1, a major offensive aimed at capturing the Akhnoor region in Jammu to cut off Indian supply lines^[9] ^[8]. This operation initially achieved some success but was ultimately stalled by Indian resistance. In response, India opened a new front by attacking across the international border into Pakistani Punjab, forcing Pakistan to redeploy troops from the Chhamb operation to defend its heartland^[10]. The conflict had now escalated well beyond Kashmir into the first full-scale war between the two nations since independence.

The war continued until September 23, 1965, with intense fighting across multiple sectors including air battles over Punjab^[9]. Despite initial expectations of Pakistani victory based on perceived superior military equipment and India's recent defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the conflict ended in what most observers consider a military stalemate. International pressure, particularly from the United States and Soviet Union, led to a ceasefire and subsequent peace negotiations. The Soviet-brokered Tashkent Declaration, signed on January 10, 1966, committed both sides to withdraw to pre-conflict positions and restore diplomatic relations, though it failed to address the fundamental dispute over Kashmir's status.

The 1965 war resulted in approximately 3,000 Indian military casualties, including deaths, and thousands more on the Pakistani side, plus significant civilian casualties^[8]. While inconclusive in territorial terms, the conflict strengthened India's resolve to maintain control over Kashmir and dispelled Pakistani assumptions about easy military victory. The war also internationalized the Kashmir dispute further, bringing greater Cold War dynamics into play as the Soviet Union supported India while the United States and China tilted toward Pakistan.

The 1971 War and the Simla Agreement

The third major conflict between India and Pakistan erupted in December 1971, primarily over the Bangladesh liberation movement but with significant implications for Kashmir. While this war originated in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), where the local population had launched an armed resistance against Pakistani rule, fighting quickly spread to multiple fronts, including the western border regions of Punjab, Rajasthan, and Jammu and Kashmir^[11]. The conflict demonstrated how the broader India-Pakistan rivalry inevitably drew Kashmir into its orbit, even when the immediate causes lay elsewhere.

The 1971 war began officially on December 3, when Pakistan launched Operation Chengiz Khan, a series of preemptive air strikes against Indian air bases in northwestern India^[11]. Pakistan

maintained these strikes were a response to India's support for Bangladeshi guerrillas, while India characterized them as unprovoked aggression. India responded with a comprehensive three-pronged offensive across land, air, and sea, achieving what the CIA described as "complete air superiority" in East Pakistan^[11]. While the most decisive fighting occurred in the east, leading to East Pakistan's independence as Bangladesh, significant combat also took place along the Kashmir front.

The war ended on December 16, 1971, with Pakistan's decisive defeat and the creation of Bangladesh. The conflict resulted in hundreds of thousands of casualties across all sides and significantly altered the geopolitical landscape of South Asia^[11]. For Kashmir, the most important consequence emerged in the post-war settlement. With Pakistan severely weakened by the loss of its eastern wing and the capture of approximately 93,000 prisoners of war, India possessed unprecedented leverage in negotiating a new framework for the Kashmir dispute.

The Simla Agreement, signed on July 2, 1972, by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Pakistani President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, established the fundamental diplomatic architecture that has governed the Kashmir dispute for decades since^[12] ^[13]. The agreement converted the 1949 ceasefire line into the Line of Control (LOC) and committed both countries to "settle their differences by peaceful means through bilateral negotiations" ^[12]. This provision has been repeatedly cited by India to reject international mediation, including by the United Nations, arguing that Kashmir must be addressed bilaterally as per the Simla Agreement.

A particularly significant aspect of the Simla Agreement was its establishment of the Line of Control, which both sides agreed "neither side shall seek to alter unilaterally, irrespective of mutual differences and legal interpretations" ^[12]. While the actual demarcation process took until December 1972 to complete due to complexities on the ground, the LOC has remained the de facto border between Indian and Pakistani-controlled portions of Kashmir ever since^[13]. Indian diplomats have sometimes claimed that a tacit understanding existed to eventually convert the LOC into an international border, though Pakistani officials have consistently denied this interpretation^[12].

Insurgency, Nuclear Capabilities, and the Kargil War

The Rise of Insurgency in Kashmir (1989-1999)

The relative stability established by the Simla Agreement began to unravel in 1989 with the eruption of an armed insurgency against Indian rule in the Kashmir Valley. This insurgency emerged after years of political disenfranchisement and alienation among Kashmiri Muslims, exacerbated by allegations of rigged elections and erosion of autonomy^[1]. While initially led by groups seeking independence based on demands for self-determination, the insurgency was quickly co-opted by Pakistan-backed jihadist organizations advocating merger with Pakistan^[1]. This marked a significant shift in the Kashmir conflict from conventional interstate warfare to asymmetric guerrilla tactics and terrorism.

Pakistan's involvement in the insurgency took various forms, with India consistently accusing Pakistan of hosting, financing, and training militant groups operating in Kashmir^[14]. Pakistan has maintained that it provides only "moral and diplomatic support" to Kashmiris fighting for self-

determination, denying direct military involvement^[14]. However, evidence suggests substantial Pakistani support for groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, which have been designated as terrorist organizations by many countries and implicated in numerous attacks beyond Kashmir, including the 2008 Mumbai attacks^[14].

The insurgency transformed Kashmir into one of the world's most heavily militarized regions. India deployed hundreds of thousands of security forces to combat militants, leading to frequent allegations of human rights abuses including extrajudicial killings, torture, and disappearances^[1]. Counterinsurgency operations were coupled with increased militarization and what critics describe as repression of the local population^[1]. Meanwhile, various insurgent groups engaged in targeted killings, bombings, and other attacks against security forces, government officials, and civilians deemed collaborators.

One of the most devastating consequences of the insurgency was the mass exodus of Kashmiri Hindus (Pandits) from the Valley in the early 1990s. Targeted killings and threats forced an estimated 100,000-300,000 Pandits to flee their ancestral homes, fundamentally altering Kashmir's demographic composition^[1]. This exodus remains a deeply divisive issue, with Pandits demanding justice and the right to return safely, while some Kashmiri Muslim leaders minimize the scale and causes of their departure.

The 1990s saw steadily escalating violence with tens of thousands of casualties, including militants, security forces, and civilians. By the late 1990s, the insurgency had spread to parts of the Jammu region and was increasingly dominated by foreign militants rather than local Kashmiris^[1]. This period set the stage for the next conventional conflict between India and Pakistan, demonstrating how asymmetric warfare could eventually trigger direct interstate confrontation.

Nuclear Tests and Changing Strategic Dynamics

The strategic landscape of the Kashmir conflict transformed dramatically in May 1998 when both India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests, officially declaring themselves nuclear powers. On May 11 and 13, 1998, India conducted a series of nuclear tests known as Pokhran-II, ending decades of nuclear ambiguity^[15]. Pakistan quickly followed with its own tests at Chagai Hills on May 28, 1998^[15]. These tests fundamentally altered the security calculations of both nations and internationalized the Kashmir dispute in new and dangerous ways.

India's decision to test nuclear weapons followed years of frustration with the international non-proliferation regime, particularly the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). India had withdrawn from CTBT negotiations in 1996, citing the failure of nuclear powers to accept a time-bound framework for disarmament and objecting to entry-into-force provisions that would require India's ratification^[15]. The election of a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in March 1998 created the political conditions for India to cross the nuclear threshold openly.

Pakistan's response to India's tests was predictable and swift. Despite international pressure and offers of economic incentives to show restraint, Pakistan conducted its own nuclear tests. Indian Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani's threatening statement suggesting that India's nuclear status should cause Pakistan to "watch its step in Kashmir" likely reinforced Pakistan's

determination to demonstrate its own nuclear capability^[15]. The exact number of tests conducted by both countries remains disputed, with Pakistan possibly inflating its numbers for political reasons^[15].

The international community responded to the tests with widespread condemnation and sanctions. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council presented a united front, imposing various economic penalties and technology restrictions on both countries^[15]. However, these measures proved temporary and ineffective in reversing the nuclear reality of South Asia. Within a few years, sanctions were lifted as geopolitical considerations, particularly after the September 11, 2001 attacks, led to improved relations between both countries and the United States.

The nuclearization of the India-Pakistan conflict created what scholars have termed a "stability-instability paradox." While nuclear weapons reduced the likelihood of full-scale conventional war due to the risk of escalation to nuclear exchange, they paradoxically may have encouraged Pakistan to pursue more aggressive sub-conventional tactics, believing that nuclear deterrence would prevent Indian retaliation^[15]. This dynamic would be tested just one year after the nuclear tests in the mountains of Kargil.

The Kargil War of 1999

The Kargil War of 1999 represented the first direct military confrontation between India and Pakistan after both countries had openly declared their nuclear capabilities. The conflict began in May 1999 when India detected Pakistani forces and militants occupying strategic positions on the Indian side of the Line of Control in the Kargil district of Kashmir^[16]. These forces had infiltrated during winter months when Indian troops typically vacated high-altitude posts due to extreme weather conditions. According to security analysts, Pakistani planning for the operation may have begun as early as autumn 1998, just months after the nuclear tests^[16].

The Pakistani intrusion aimed to cut the vital road linking Srinagar and Leh, potentially isolating Indian forces in Siachen Glacier and forcing India to negotiate over Kashmir from a position of weakness. However, India responded with a massive military operation to recapture the heights, combining ground assaults with extensive air support while carefully limiting the conflict to the Kargil sector to prevent broader escalation^[16]. The international community, including traditional Pakistani allies like the United States, pressured Pakistan to withdraw, fearing nuclear escalation.

The Kargil War resulted in significant casualties on both sides. According to Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes, 524 Indian soldiers died and 1,363 were wounded, while India claimed 696 Pakistani soldiers were killed^[16]. Pakistan has never officially acknowledged its casualties or even the direct involvement of its regular army in the conflict, maintaining that those who fought were "Kashmiri freedom fighters" despite substantial evidence to the contrary.

The conflict ended in July 1999 when Pakistani forces withdrew under international pressure, particularly from the United States. On July 4, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif met with US President Bill Clinton in Washington and agreed to pull back forces to the Pakistani side of the Line of Control. The war exposed serious intelligence failures on India's part and demonstrated the dangers of miscalculation in a nuclear environment. It also damaged

Pakistan's international standing while strengthening India's position that Pakistan was actively destabilizing Kashmir through infiltration and proxy warfare.

The Kargil War is widely considered a strategic and political defeat for Pakistan, as it failed to achieve territorial gains, internationalize the Kashmir issue as hoped, or force India into negotiations. For India, despite the tactical surprise and initial setbacks, the successful recapture of all lost territory reinforced its determination to maintain the Line of Control. The war also highlighted the paradoxical role of nuclear weapons-while they may have prevented escalation to a full-scale war across the entire border, they created a dangerous environment where limited conflicts could potentially spiral toward catastrophe.

The Kashmir Dispute in the 21st Century

Diplomatic Initiatives and Military Standoffs (2000-2018)

The early 21st century witnessed alternating periods of dialogue and confrontation between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Following the Kargil War, tensions remained extremely high, culminating in the 2001-2002 India-Pakistan military standoff. This crisis was triggered by a December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament, which India attributed to Pakistan-based groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. India mobilized approximately 500,000 troops along the border in Operation Parakram, while Pakistan responded with its own massive deployment. For nearly ten months, the two nuclear-armed nations stood on the brink of war, with international diplomacy working intensively to prevent escalation.

The standoff eventually de-escalated without war, leading to a period of improved relations. Between 2004 and 2008, India and Pakistan engaged in the "Composite Dialogue Process," addressing eight key issues including Kashmir, terrorism, and trade. This period saw meaningful confidence-building measures, including the establishment of a bus service across the Line of Control allowing divided Kashmiri families to meet. The ceasefire along the LoC, established in November 2003 and reaffirmed by both nations in 2021, largely held during this period, reducing civilian casualties and cross-border violence^[17].

However, this diplomatic momentum was shattered by the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, which killed 166 people over three days. India blamed Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba and suspended the dialogue process. Evidence linking the attackers to elements within Pakistan created deep distrust in India regarding Pakistan's commitment to combating terrorism^[14]. The attacks highlighted how terrorism had become intertwined with the Kashmir dispute, with groups initially focused on Kashmir expanding their operations to target Indian cities and interests beyond the disputed territory.

The period between 2008 and 2018 saw sporadic attempts to restart comprehensive dialogue, but these were frequently derailed by terrorist incidents or border clashes. Ceasefire violations along the LoC increased substantially, with hundreds of incidents reported annually. Each violation triggered retaliatory fire, creating cycles of escalation that endangered civilian populations living near the border. Despite these tensions, both countries maintained communication channels and took steps to manage specific crises before they could spiral into larger conflicts.

Throughout this period, the internal situation in Indian-administered Kashmir remained volatile. Major civil unrest erupted in 2010 following an allegedly staged encounter killing, and again in 2016 after the death of young militant Burhan Wani, whose social media presence had made him a symbol of a new generation of Kashmir militants^{[1] [14]}. These protests, involving primarily Kashmiri youth, demonstrated the persistent alienation and political grievances underlying the conflict, even during periods of reduced militant violence.

Revocation of Article 370 and Its Aftermath

On August 5, 2019, the Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi took a unilateral step that fundamentally altered Kashmir's status by revoking Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which had granted Jammu and Kashmir special autonomous status^[14].

Simultaneously, the government downgraded and bifurcated the state into two union territories- Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh-placing them under direct federal control. This dramatic move fulfilled a longstanding ideological commitment of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had campaigned on integrating Kashmir more fully into India.

The revocation was preceded by massive security deployments, house arrest of local political leaders, suspension of internet and communication services, and restrictions on movement and assembly. India defended these measures as necessary to prevent violence, while critics characterized them as a severe crackdown. According to various reports, India deployed between 500,000 to 800,000 soldiers, imposed a region-wide lockdown, and detained thousands of people^[14].

Pakistan condemned the revocation as a violation of the Simla Agreement and UN resolutions, which stipulated that neither country should unilaterally alter the status quo in Kashmir^[14].

Pakistan downgraded diplomatic relations with India, suspended bilateral trade, and launched an international diplomatic campaign to highlight what it termed India's illegal actions. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan warned of potential "ethnic cleansing" and raised the issue at various international forums, including the United Nations General Assembly.

The international community expressed concern about the humanitarian situation while generally avoiding direct criticism of India's sovereign decision. The United Nations urged both countries to exercise restraint and emphasized the importance of protecting human rights. China, which controls part of the broader Kashmir region (Aksai Chin), objected particularly to the creation of Ladakh as a separate union territory, considering this a challenge to its territorial claims.

For Kashmiris, the revocation of Article 370 represented a profound shift in their relationship with India. While the Modi government promised that the change would bring development, investment, and greater integration with the national mainstream, many Kashmiris viewed it as disempowerment and a demographic threat to the Muslim-majority region. The extended communication blackout, which included the world's longest internet shutdown in a democracy, severely impacted daily life, education, healthcare, and the economy, compounding feelings of alienation among the local population.

The Pahalgam Attack and Its Consequences

The latest chapter in the Kashmir conflict began with a devastating terrorist attack in Pahalgam, a popular tourist destination in Indian-administered Kashmir, on April 22, 2025. According to multiple reports, the attack targeted primarily Hindu tourists, killing 26 individuals^[18] ^[17] ^[14]. This incident occurred during a period of relative stability in Kashmir and rising tourism, which had been promoted by the Indian government as evidence of normalization following the 2019 constitutional changes.

Indian authorities quickly attributed the attack to Pakistan-based militant groups, claiming that two of the three suspects involved came from Pakistan^[17]. Indian officials alleged that the attack was carried out by organizations like Lashkar-e-Taiba, which has been designated as a terrorist group by India, the United States, and other countries^[17]. India presented this attack as further evidence of Pakistan's continued support for cross-border terrorism, though it did not immediately provide substantiated proof of Pakistani involvement.

Pakistan categorically denied any connection to the Pahalgam attack, maintaining its position that it does not sponsor terrorism but only supports Kashmiris' right to self-determination through diplomatic and moral means^[17] ^[14]. Pakistani officials suggested that the attack might have been carried out by indigenous Kashmiri groups responding to what they characterized as Indian oppression, or potentially by elements seeking to derail any prospects for regional dialogue.

The Pahalgam attack received widespread international condemnation, with many countries expressing solidarity with India while urging restraint. The incident revived longstanding debates about cross-border terrorism, state sponsorship of militant groups, and appropriate responses to terrorist attacks in a nuclear environment. Within India, the attack generated public outrage and pressure on the Modi government to deliver a forceful response, particularly given the ruling BJP's nationalist security platform and previous promises to deal firmly with terrorism.

In the two weeks following the attack, India reportedly gathered intelligence indicating that "further attacks against India were imminent" from Pakistan-based militant groups^[18] ^[17]. This intelligence, combined with domestic political pressure and the memory of previous attacks, set the stage for India's most significant military action against Pakistan in decades-Operation Sindoor.

The 2025 Military Escalation: Operation Sindoor and Beyond

India's Strike Operation Sindoor

In the early hours of May 6-7, 2025, India launched "Operation Sindoor," a major military offensive targeting multiple locations in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. According to Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, the strikes targeted nine sites associated with what India termed "terrorist infrastructure," some linked to the Pahalgam attack^[18] ^[17]. The operation's name carries symbolic significance-in Hindi, "Sindoor" refers to vermilion, a red powder that Hindu women apply on their foreheads or hair partings as a marital symbol, possibly alluding to the Hindu tourists targeted in the Pahalgam attack^[17].

The scale and scope of Operation Sindoor represented a significant escalation from previous Indian responses to terrorist incidents. While India had conducted "surgical strikes" across the Line of Control following the 2016 Uri attack and airstrikes near Balakot after the 2019 Pulwama attack, the May 2025 operation struck deeper into Pakistani territory, including sites in Punjab province-Pakistan's most densely populated region^[17]. This marked the first military engagement of this magnitude since the two countries' last full-scale conflict more than fifty years ago, raising immediate concerns about potential escalation.

Indian military representatives claimed the strikes targeted facilities linked to Islamic militant organizations, describing them as "terrorist camps" serving multiple functions, including recruitment, training, and weapons storage^[17]. They stated that advanced technology and precision munitions were employed to minimize civilian casualties, though they did not provide specific details about techniques or weaponry used. The stated justification for the strikes was preemptive action based on intelligence indicating imminent further attacks from Pakistan-based terrorist networks^{[18] [17]}.

The human cost of Operation Sindoor has been substantial. According to Pakistani military sources, at least 26 civilians were killed and 46 wounded in the strikes^{[18] [17]}. Reports from affected areas described significant damage to infrastructure and civilian residences. In the city of Maffar in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, residents reported fleeing their homes and seeking refuge in nearby hills as India commenced airstrikes on parts of the city^[18]. These firsthand accounts underscore the impact on civilian populations caught in the conflict, regardless of the military objectives.

Pakistan's Retaliation and Escalation Risk

Pakistan's response to Operation Sindoor was swift and forceful. Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif denounced the Indian strikes as a "blatant act of war" and convened an emergency national security meeting to coordinate the country's response^[18]. Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif announced that Islamabad "will not take long to settle the score," indicating that military operations were already underway^[18]. This rhetoric represented the most belligerent exchange between the nuclear-armed neighbors in decades.

The Pakistani military claimed to have taken immediate defensive and retaliatory actions. According to Pakistani sources, they struck Indian military installations and shot down five Indian fighter jets, though India has not verified this claim^[17]. However, local officials in Indian Kashmir reported to Reuters that three fighter jets had crashed in different areas during the night, with all pilots subsequently hospitalized^[17]. These reports suggest significant aerial combat occurred, though details remain contested by both sides.

Beyond the immediate military response, Pakistan notified the United Nations Security Council of what it termed its right to respond appropriately to India's actions^[17]. Lt. Ahmed Shar Chaudry, spokesperson for the Pakistani military, asserted that Pakistan would "undertake all necessary actions to protect Pakistan's honor, integrity, and sovereignty, regardless of the cost" ^[17]. This language, while diplomatic, carried implicit nuclear connotations given Pakistan's known doctrine of potential nuclear use in response to existential threats.

The risk of further escalation remains acute as of May 7, 2025. Both countries have nuclear arsenals estimated at over 100 warheads each, along with missile delivery systems capable of reaching major population centers. Pakistan's nuclear doctrine explicitly includes the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons against conventional Indian forces if they threaten Pakistani territory—a posture known as "full-spectrum deterrence." India's nuclear doctrine emphasizes "no first use" but promises massive retaliation to any nuclear strike. This creates a dangerous escalation ladder where conventional conflict could potentially spiral toward nuclear exchange if either side miscalculates or feels existentially threatened.

Reports from police and witnesses indicated intense shelling and gunfire across the Line of Control in Kashmir following the initial strikes^[17]. This pattern of border violence has historically been difficult to contain once initiated, as local commanders on both sides often have authority to respond to perceived violations without seeking higher approval. The ceasefire along the LoC, reaffirmed by both nations in 2021 but now effectively abandoned, had been one of the few functioning confidence-building measures between the two countries^[17].

Current Status and Future Prospects

As of May 7, 2025, the situation remains highly volatile with both India and Pakistan locked in their most dangerous military confrontation since the 1999 Kargil War. The international community has responded with urgent calls for restraint and de-escalation. Major powers including the United States, China, and Russia have likely initiated diplomatic efforts behind the scenes, though the immediacy of the crisis may limit their effectiveness. Previous conflicts have seen these powers play crucial mediating roles, particularly the United States, which helped end the Kargil War through direct presidential intervention.

The crisis occurs against the backdrop of significant recent developments in the legal framework governing India-Pakistan relations. According to reports, Pakistan suspended the Simla Agreement in April 2025 in response to India's abeyance of the Indus Waters Treaty, following Pakistan's alleged involvement in the Pahalgam massacre^[12]. This mutual abandonment of key bilateral agreements that have governed relations for decades represents a dangerous erosion of conflict management mechanisms and suggests deepening institutional hostility beyond the immediate military confrontation.

Domestic political factors may complicate de-escalation efforts. Many Indians have expressed support for the strikes, with statements like "Pakistan has been testing our patience. The positive aspect is that India is retaliating" and "The strikes are strong response. priority should remain on eradicating terrorism at its roots" ^[17]. This public sentiment may limit the Indian government's flexibility in seeking diplomatic solutions. Similarly, Pakistani leadership faces intense pressure not to appear weak in the face of Indian strikes on its territory.

Looking forward, experts warn that "the potential for escalation is greater now than in recent times, given the intensity of India's offensive" ^[17]. Several factors distinguish this crisis from previous confrontations: the strikes on Pakistan's populous Punjab province rather than just disputed territories; the current absence of functioning bilateral agreements; heightened nationalist sentiment on both sides; and the abeyance of the ceasefire along the LoC. While nuclear deterrence may ultimately prevent full-scale war, the risk of miscalculation or unintended escalation remains significant.

Any sustainable resolution to the current crisis-and the broader Kashmir dispute-would require addressing the underlying political issues that have fueled seven decades of conflict. These include the status of Kashmir, cross-border terrorism, water rights, confidence-building measures, and inclusive political processes that address Kashmiri aspirations. However, the immediate priority must be de-escalation of current hostilities to prevent catastrophic consequences for the region and potentially the world.

Conclusion

The 70-year conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir represents one of history's most intractable and dangerous territorial disputes. From its origins in the flawed partition process of 1947 and the controversial accession of Kashmir to India, through four conventional wars and countless skirmishes, to the current precarious military standoff, the dispute has demonstrated remarkable persistence while evolving in response to changing geopolitical contexts. What began as a conventional territorial disagreement has transformed into a multifaceted conflict involving nuclear deterrence, asymmetric warfare, competing nationalisms, and the aspirations of the Kashmiri people themselves.

The historical trajectory reveals several consistent patterns that have perpetuated the conflict. Chief among these is the fundamental disagreement over Kashmir's legal status-with India insisting on the finality of the 1947 Instrument of Accession and Pakistan rejecting its validity. The promised plebiscite outlined in UN Resolution 47 never materialized, leaving both sides claiming legitimacy for their positions based on competing interpretations of historical events and legal documents. This core dispute has been complicated by shifting military power balances, the introduction of nuclear weapons, rising religious nationalism on both sides, and internal dynamics within Kashmir itself.

The nuclearization of the conflict in 1998 created a paradoxical situation that continues to shape the dispute today. While nuclear weapons have likely prevented another full-scale conventional war after 1998, they may have encouraged greater risk-taking in limited conflicts and facilitated Pakistan's strategy of supporting non-state actors against India. The Kargil War of 1999 demonstrated both the restraint imposed by nuclear deterrence (as the conflict remained geographically limited) and the dangers of miscalculation in a nuclear environment. The current Operation Sindoor crisis presents similar dynamics, with conventional military actions occurring under the shadow of nuclear capabilities.

For the people of Kashmir, the human cost of this prolonged conflict has been immense. Tens of thousands have died in the fighting since 1947, with particularly heavy casualties during the insurgency years of the 1990s and early 2000s. Hundreds of thousands have been displaced, including the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits. Civil liberties have been restricted under security measures, while economic development has been stunted by instability. Yet despite these hardships, Kashmiri identity and aspirations for self-determination have persisted, complicating both Indian and Pakistani narratives that reduce the conflict to a bilateral dispute.

As India and Pakistan stand once again on the brink of potentially catastrophic conflict in May 2025, the immediate priority must be de-escalation through diplomatic channels. However, sustainable peace will require addressing the underlying causes of the dispute rather than merely managing its symptoms. This would necessitate genuine bilateral dialogue, meaningful

inclusion of Kashmiri voices, effective measures against terrorism, and international support for negotiated solutions. The alternative-continued cycles of violence under nuclear shadow-poses unacceptable risks not only to South Asia but to global security.

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