

India-Pakistan Relations Since 2000: A Chronicle of Conflict, Diplomacy, and Enduring Tensions

Report Date: 2025-07-15

Executive Summary

The relationship between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan since the turn of the 21st century has been a volatile and complex tapestry woven with threads of deep-seated historical animosity, persistent conflict, and fragile, often-interrupted, peace initiatives. This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted interactions between the two nuclear-armed South Asian neighbors from 2000 onwards. It examines the major military and terrorist incidents that have defined the era, including the 2001 Indian Parliament attack and subsequent military standoff, the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, the 2016 Uri attack and retaliatory “surgical strikes,” and the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis. The report delves into the continuous state of tension along the Line of Control (LoC), analyzing the dynamics of ceasefire agreements and their frequent violations. Furthermore, it assesses the trajectory of diplomatic relations, with a particular focus on the structured peace efforts embodied by the Composite Dialogue process and its successor. The analysis also considers the crucial, and often contentious, role of international actors, primarily the United States and China, in mediating crises and shaping regional geopolitics. The central, unresolved dispute over Kashmir and the persistent issue of cross-border terrorism emerge as the primary drivers of conflict, consistently undermining efforts toward normalization and sustainable peace. This document synthesizes extensive data to present a holistic overview of a relationship characterized by a dangerous “stability-instability paradox,” where nuclear deterrence has prevented full-scale war but has failed to stop limited conflicts, proxy wars, and severe crises that continue to threaten regional and global security.

Major Incidents and Escalations

The period since 2000 has been punctuated by several high-profile crises that have brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war, each incident leaving a lasting scar on bilateral relations and reshaping strategic doctrines on both sides. These events, primarily triggered by major terrorist attacks on Indian soil, have consistently led to military mobilization, diplomatic breakdowns, and intense international scrutiny.

The 2001 Indian Parliament Attack and 2001-2002 Military Standoff

The audacious terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001, served as the immediate catalyst for one of the most dangerous military standoffs in the subcontinent’s history. At approximately 11:40 AM, five heavily armed terrorists belonging to the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) infiltrated the Parliament House Complex in New Delhi. Using a white Ambassador car with a forged Home Ministry sticker, they breached initial security before their vehicle collided with the Vice President’s motorcade, alerting security personnel. A fierce gun battle ensued, lasting for about an hour, during which all five terrorists were killed. The attack resulted in the deaths of nine Indian personnel, including police and Parliament security staff, and injured at least 17 others. Fortunately, over

100 Members of Parliament and government officials who were inside the building at the time, including then Home Minister L.K. Advani, escaped unharmed.

India's response was swift and unequivocal. The government immediately blamed the Pakistan-based militant groups Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), alleging direct support and guidance from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Home Minister Advani labeled it the "most audacious" act of "Pakistan-sponsored terrorism." India issued a formal diplomatic demand, or *démarche*, to Pakistan, insisting it cease the activities of these groups, apprehend their leaders, and freeze their assets. Pakistan officially condemned the attack and denied any involvement, with some officials suggesting it was an Indian-staged drama to defame the Kashmiri "freedom struggle."

The diplomatic fallout rapidly escalated into a full-blown military crisis. India launched **Operation Parakram**, its largest military mobilization since the 1971 war, deploying an estimated 500,000 to 800,000 troops to the border in Kashmir and Punjab. Pakistan responded in kind, mobilizing around 300,000 to 400,000 troops. With both nations having declared their nuclear capabilities in 1998, the massing of forces and the movement of ballistic missiles closer to the border ignited fears of a nuclear exchange, marking the first major nuclear crisis of the 21st century. The Indian military formulated plans for a limited offensive in January 2002, targeting terrorist camps in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Intense international diplomacy, led by the United States and the United Kingdom, worked to de-escalate the situation. The Bush Administration, concerned about a nuclear war and the potential diversion of Pakistani troops from the hunt for Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, engaged in high-level talks. A pivotal moment came on January 12, 2002, when Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf delivered a landmark speech. Under immense pressure, he condemned the Parliament attack, banned five jihadi organizations including LeT and JeM, and pledged that Pakistan would not permit any terrorist activity from its soil. This speech led Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to call off the planned January offensive. However, tensions flared again in May 2002 after the Kaluchak massacre, where terrorists killed 34 people, mostly the families of Indian soldiers, near Jammu. India once again prepared for a major offensive, but further diplomatic intervention, including a US warning to India about potential economic consequences, helped avert war. The standoff officially ended in October 2002 with the phased withdrawal of troops from the border, followed by a formal ceasefire agreement in November 2003. The crisis cost India an estimated US\$3.5 billion and resulted in nearly 800 Indian military casualties, primarily from accidents and mine-laying operations during the mobilization.

The 2008 Mumbai Terror Attacks

From November 26 to November 29, 2008, India's financial capital, Mumbai, was subjected to a horrific series of coordinated terrorist attacks that resulted in 175 deaths, including numerous foreign nationals, and left over 300 people injured. The attacks were meticulously planned and executed by ten members of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist organization. The ten heavily armed Pakistani militants arrived in Mumbai by sea, hijacking an Indian fishing trawler and killing its crew before using inflatable speedboats to come ashore. They then split into teams and launched simultaneous assaults on multiple high-profile targets, including the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus railway station, the Leopold Cafe, the Oberoi Trident and Taj Mahal Palace luxury hotels, and the Nariman House, a Jewish community center. The ensuing siege lasted for nearly 60 hours, with Indian security forces, including the elite National Security Guards (NSG), engaging the terrorists in prolonged gun battles, particularly at the two hotels. The entire ordeal was broadcast live, capturing a horrified global audience.

Overwhelming evidence, including the confession of the sole surviving attacker, Ajmal Kasab, pointed to the attack's orchestration from Pakistan. The ten attackers had undergone extensive marine and

combat training in camps in Muzaffarabad and Mansehra, Pakistan. Investigations revealed a “control room” in Karachi from which handlers, including key LeT figures like Sajid Mir and Zarrar Shah, directed the gunmen in real-time via Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) calls. Key masterminds identified included LeT’s military chief Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi and its founder Hafiz Saeed. The reconnaissance for the attacks was conducted by David Coleman Headley, a Pakistani-American operative who, according to U.S. investigators, was recruited and run as an agent by officers from Pakistan’s ISI in tandem with Lashkar.

The aftermath of the Mumbai attacks plunged India-Pakistan relations to a new low. India suspended the ongoing Composite Dialogue peace process and demanded that Pakistan take decisive action against the perpetrators. While Pakistan initially denied any link, it later admitted that Kasab was a Pakistani citizen and launched a stalled and widely criticized trial against several suspects. The incident exposed significant intelligence failures, as U.S., British, and Indian agencies had all picked up fragments of intelligence about a potential plot but failed to connect the dots. In response to the attacks, India undertook a major overhaul of its security architecture, establishing the National Investigation Agency (NIA) as a federal counter-terrorism body and strengthening coastal security. The attacks solidified India’s stance that “talks and terror cannot go together,” a position that has defined its policy towards Pakistan for years to come.

The 2016 Uri Attack and Surgical Strikes

On September 18, 2016, in a pre-dawn raid, four heavily armed militants attacked an Indian Army brigade headquarters in Uri, Jammu and Kashmir, near the Line of Control. The attackers used incendiary ammunition, lobbing grenades that set fire to temporary tents housing soldiers, resulting in the deaths of 19 Indian army personnel. Most of the casualties were from the initial fire. A six-hour gun battle ensued, in which all four militants were killed. The attack occurred during a period of significant unrest in the Kashmir Valley following the killing of Hizbul Mujahideen commander Burhan Wani.

India swiftly blamed Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) for the attack. The Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) stated that items recovered from the slain terrorists, including weapons, grenades with Pakistani markings, GPS devices, and food supplies, pointed to their origins in Pakistan. Home Minister Rajnath Singh labeled Pakistan a “terrorist state” that should be isolated by the international community. Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry rejected the allegations as “baseless and irresponsible,” accusing India of a knee-jerk reaction to deflect from the situation in Kashmir.

The Uri attack led to a significant shift in India’s strategic response to cross-border terrorism. Ten days later, on the night of September 28-29, 2016, the Indian Army announced it had conducted “**surgical strikes**” against militant launch-pads across the Line of Control in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The Indian DGMO stated that the operation was based on specific intelligence about imminent terrorist infiltrations and had caused “significant casualties” to the terrorists and their supporters. The strikes were widely seen as a departure from India’s long-standing policy of “strategic restraint” and were intended to send a clear message of resolve. The operation was planned and executed with a high degree of secrecy, reportedly involving special forces commandos who infiltrated across the LoC to destroy multiple targets.

Pakistan’s military, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), denied that any surgical strike had taken place, claiming instead that it was merely an instance of cross-border firing in which two Pakistani soldiers were killed. They dismissed India’s claims as a “fabrication of the truth” intended for domestic consumption. The diplomatic fallout included India’s withdrawal from the 19th SAARC summit scheduled to be held in Islamabad, which led to the summit’s postponement after other member states followed suit. The incident also led to a freeze in cultural and sporting ties. The surgical strikes marked a

new, more assertive phase in India's counter-terrorism policy, establishing a precedent for punitive cross-border military action.

The 2019 Pulwama Attack and Balakot Airstrikes

The India-Pakistan relationship experienced its most severe military crisis since the 1999 Kargil War in February 2019. On February 14, a suicide bomber rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into a convoy of India's Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir, killing 40 personnel. The attack, the deadliest on Indian security forces in Kashmir in three decades, was claimed by the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). The suicide bomber was identified as a local Kashmiri youth, highlighting a trend of increasing local recruitment into militant ranks.

India immediately blamed Pakistan for the attack, vowing a "befitting reply." In a significant escalation, on February 26, 2019, the Indian Air Force (IAF) conducted an airstrike deep inside Pakistani territory. Twelve Mirage 2000 fighter jets crossed the Line of Control and targeted what India described as a major JeM training camp near the town of Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. This was the first time since the 1971 war that Indian warplanes had crossed the LoC. The Indian government termed the operation a "non-military, preemptive action" and claimed to have killed a "very large number" of terrorists. However, Pakistan and several independent international observers, citing satellite imagery, disputed these claims, stating that the Indian bombs had hit an uninhabited wooded area, causing no significant damage or casualties.

Pakistan retaliated the following day, on February 27, with its own airstrikes, dubbed "**Operation Swift Retort**," targeting military installations in Indian-administered Kashmir. This led to an aerial dogfight between IAF and Pakistan Air Force (PAF) jets. During the engagement, an Indian MiG-21 Bison was shot down over Pakistani-controlled territory, and its pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, was captured. India claimed to have shot down a Pakistani F-16, a claim Pakistan denied and which was later cast into doubt by international reports. The capture of the Indian pilot brought the two nuclear-armed nations to the precipice of a wider conflict. Intense international pressure, including from the US, UAE, and Saudi Arabia, helped de-escalate the crisis. On March 1, Pakistan released Wing Commander Varthaman as a "gesture of peace," a move that provided a crucial off-ramp to the confrontation. The Pulwama-Balakot crisis demonstrated a new, higher-risk threshold for conflict, with India showing its willingness to strike mainland Pakistan and Pakistan demonstrating its capability to retaliate in kind, reaffirming the dangerous dynamics of deterrence in the region.

The Line of Control: A Perpetual Flashpoint

The Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border dividing Kashmir, has remained a zone of perpetual military confrontation throughout the 21st century. While major crises capture headlines, the LoC is the site of continuous, low-intensity conflict characterized by ceasefire violations (CFVs), infiltration attempts, and artillery duels. A landmark **Ceasefire Agreement was reached in November 2003**, which brought a period of relative calm and was a cornerstone of the Composite Dialogue process. For several years, it largely held, providing much-needed relief to civilian populations living along the border.

However, the ceasefire began to fray significantly in the subsequent decade, with sporadic breaches escalating into a near-complete breakdown by the late 2010s. The years 2016 to 2018 saw a dramatic increase in CFVs, resulting in dozens of military and civilian deaths on both sides. The year 2020 witnessed the highest number of violations since 2003, with nearly 5,133 incidents recorded. These violations were often used by Pakistan, according to Indian officials, to provide covering fire for infiltrating terrorists.

In a surprise move, the Directors General of Military Operations (DGsMO) of both countries announced in **February 2021** that they had agreed to strictly observe all agreements, understandings, and ceasefires, recommitting to the 2003 accord. This led to a dramatic reduction in cross-border firing and brought a fragile peace back to the LoC. This truce was beneficial for both sides; it allowed India to focus on its border standoff with China, while providing Pakistan's military establishment space to deal with a struggling economy and internal political turmoil.

Despite the ceasefire on the LoC, India maintains that Pakistan's proxy war has continued unabated through other means. There has been a surge in targeted killings of civilians, particularly Hindus and non-locals, in the Kashmir valley by newly emerged proxy groups like The Resistance Front (TRF), which India asserts are fronts for LeT and JeM. Furthermore, there has been a significant increase in the use of drones by Pakistan for surveillance and smuggling of weapons, narcotics, and money across the border. A resurgence of militancy has also been observed in the Rajouri-Poonch sector, south of the Pir Panjal range, with several deadly ambushes on Indian troops in 2022 and 2023, indicating continued infiltration. The 2021 ceasefire, while holding on the LoC itself, has not ended the underlying conflict, which has merely shifted its tactics and focus.

Diplomatic Engagements and Peace Initiatives

Despite the backdrop of unremitting hostility, the period since 2000 has also been marked by significant, albeit ultimately unsuccessful, attempts at dialogue and peace-building. The most structured of these was the **Composite Dialogue Process (CDP)**, first conceived in 1997 and formally re-launched in 2004. This process was designed to be a comprehensive framework to discuss all outstanding issues simultaneously, preventing either side from stalling talks by focusing on a single contentious point.

The Composite Dialogue was structured around eight key issues, or "baskets": Peace and Security including Confidence Building Measures (CBMs); Jammu and Kashmir; Siachen; Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation Project; Sir Creek; Economic and Commercial Cooperation; Terrorism and Drug Trafficking; and Promotion of Friendly Exchanges. Between 2004 and 2008, four rounds of the dialogue were held. This period saw some tangible progress, particularly in CBMs. The 2003 LoC ceasefire was a major achievement. New transport links, such as the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakot bus services, were established, connecting the divided parts of Kashmir for the first time in decades. Nuclear CBMs, like the pre-notification of ballistic missile tests, were agreed upon, and a hotline was set up between the Indian Coast Guard and Pakistan's Maritime Security Agency.

However, on the most contentious issues, progress was minimal. On **Jammu and Kashmir**, while back-channel talks reportedly explored President Musharraf's "four-point formula" (involving demilitarization and joint management), no formal agreement was reached. On the **Siachen Glacier**, the world's highest battlefield, talks remained deadlocked over India's insistence on authenticating current troop positions before any withdrawal, a condition Pakistan refused. Similarly, disputes over the **Sir Creek** maritime boundary and the **Wullar Barrage** water project saw no resolution.

The most significant impediment to the dialogue was the issue of **terrorism**. India consistently maintained that progress was contingent on Pakistan taking credible and verifiable action to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism on its soil. The creation of a Joint Anti-Terrorism Mechanism in 2006 proved ineffective. The 2008 Mumbai attacks delivered the final blow to the Composite Dialogue, leading to its immediate suspension by India.

Attempts were made to revive talks in subsequent years. In 2015, the dialogue was rebranded as the "Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue," but it failed to take off following the 2016 Pathankot airbase attack. Since then, formal dialogue has remained frozen. India's official position, hardened after the Pul-

wama attack, is that “talks and terror cannot go together.” Pakistan, on the other hand, insists that dialogue is the only way forward and that the Kashmir issue must be central to any talks. The revocation of Article 370 by India in 2019, which stripped Jammu and Kashmir of its special autonomous status, further complicated matters, with Pakistan downgrading diplomatic ties and suspending bilateral trade in response. As of 2025, diplomatic relations remain at a historic low, with high commissions functioning without high commissioners and virtually no political engagement.

The Role of International Mediation

Given the nuclear dimension of the India-Pakistan rivalry, the international community, particularly the United States, has frequently played a role in managing crises, though its involvement is often informal and contested. India has a long-standing and firm policy of **bilateralism**, enshrined in the 1972 Simla Agreement, which states that all disputes will be settled peacefully through bilateral negotiations without third-party intervention. India has consistently rejected any offers of formal mediation, especially on the Kashmir issue.

The **United States**, however, has acted as a de facto crisis manager on several occasions. During the 1999 Kargil War, President Bill Clinton’s intervention was decisive in compelling Pakistan to withdraw its forces. In the 2001-2002 standoff, US and British shuttle diplomacy was crucial in pulling the two nations back from the brink. After the 2008 Mumbai attacks, Washington pressured Pakistan to cooperate while urging restraint from India. During the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis, US officials were in constant communication with both capitals, and their intervention was instrumental in securing the release of the captured Indian pilot, which de-escalated the situation. The nature of US involvement is typically informal, relying on diplomatic leverage and high-level political engagement rather than formal mediation frameworks. However, its perceived “tilt” towards India in recent years, as part of its broader Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China, has led Pakistan to question its neutrality.

China, as Pakistan’s “all-weather ally,” plays a significant but different role. Its deep economic and military ties with Pakistan, including the multi-billion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), give it considerable leverage. Beijing has consistently supported Pakistan’s position on the international stage, including at the UN Security Council. India views China’s role with suspicion, accusing it of providing diplomatic and material support to Pakistan and complicating India’s security environment through a two-front challenge. While China calls for dialogue and restraint during crises, its clear alignment with Pakistan makes it an unacceptable mediator for India.

Other international actors, including the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, have also played quiet, behind-the-scenes roles in facilitating communication and urging de-escalation during major crises. However, the primary dynamic remains one of Indian insistence on bilateralism, Pakistani attempts to internationalize the Kashmir dispute, and US-led efforts at informal crisis management.

Conclusion

The trajectory of India-Pakistan relations since 2000 is a stark illustration of an intractable conflict defined by a repeating cycle of tentative peace overtures shattered by acts of violence. The unresolved status of Kashmir and the persistent threat of cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan have remained the two central pillars of contention, creating a deep and enduring trust deficit that has scuttled every major diplomatic initiative. While the Composite Dialogue process represented the most structured attempt at peace, its failure underscores the fundamental divergence in the two nations’ core priorities: India’s focus on ending terrorism versus Pakistan’s insistence on the centrality of the Kashmir dispute.

India's strategic posture has visibly evolved from one of "strategic restraint" to a more punitive and assertive doctrine of preemption, as demonstrated by the 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot airstrike. This shift reflects a growing impatience in New Delhi with what it perceives as Pakistan's use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy. The nuclear capabilities of both nations have created a dangerous paradox, preventing all-out conventional war but simultaneously allowing for high-risk brinkmanship and sub-conventional conflict to fester under the nuclear umbrella. As of 2025, the relationship is characterized by a dangerous diplomatic and political stalemate. Without a fundamental change in strategic calculations, a sustained commitment to dialogue free from the shadow of violence, and a resolution to the core disputes, the future of India-Pakistan relations is likely to remain fraught with tension, instability, and the ever-present risk of catastrophic conflict.

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