



ENDLESS STRIFE IN KASHMIR: CONCEPTS ON HOW NOT TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

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I. Introduction

Clearly, it was impossible to divide India on the basis of separate religious groups on one side or the other, because they were bound to overlap.
Jawaharlal Nehru, 1950.[1]

The smoke of battle has dissipated. It has become quieter again in the Kashmir Valley, the holiday paradise for many Indian tourists. The terrorist attacks and the subsequent military clashes in April/May 2025 briefly brought the issue of Kashmir back into the international spotlight. After the military showdown between India and Pakistan, a ceasefire was reached surprisingly quickly.

Apparently, neither of the two opponents was interested in a long-lasting war. However, the conflict over the status of Kashmir, which has been unresolved for almost eight decades, has by no means come any closer to a solution. The causes of the conflict have not been eliminated by the current ceasefire. The unresolved situation of divided Kashmir has led to several wars between India and Pakistan. The irreconcilable positions on the fate of Kashmir remain a source of tension between the two neighbouring countries with ramifications in the region.[2] The fact that India and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons adds to international concern and unease.

The narrative in both India and Pakistan now is: It was a victory for us. The Indian government may have gained considerable support among the domestic public with its decisive execution of “Operation Sindoor”,[3] and the Pakistani army, which has frequently manipulated the country's politics and staged multiple coups, likely gained popular support with its equally decisive retaliatory response. But the damage to bilateral relations is considerable. Some of the few bilateral agreements (especially the Indus Waters Sharing Treaty) were suspended. Indo-Pakistani cooperation or even a solution to the Kashmir conflict is out of the question in the short term.

The roots of this conflict lie not only in the Muslim religiously-based nationalism of Pakistan, enforced by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, and the opposite of this, the secular multi-ethnic India upheld by India's leaders. Both Pakistan and India laid claim to the entire territory of Kashmir after the partition in 1947. In addition to the nationalistic approaches, there are causes of an inner-Kashmiri nature. In the meantime, Hindu-motivated nationalism has also prevailed in India. India sees the Pakistan-based terrorist groups, especially Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, as the reason for growing terror over the past three decades. Pakistan denies supporting terrorism. But the causes of the conflict also lie in Kashmir itself. The majority Muslim population of Kashmir feels oppressed by India's government. Kashmiris demand the independence of Kashmir. In addition to the conflicting claims of India and Pakistan, there is also the separatist desire for an independent Kashmir.

Kashmir consist of layers of problems: First, there is the division of the subcontinent, in which the future of Kashmir remained open. Second, the differences intensified when the political leaders in India and Pakistan closely linked the parts of Kashmir that had fallen to them to the country's respective national identities. Third, an emotionally charged domestic politics derives from this. Fourth, Kashmir has a military dimension because some border sections in the region are still disputed today, which are not strategically decisive, but which have already led to wars (notably the one between India and China in 1962). Fifth, since the late 1980s, the militant separatist movements were added.[4] The Kashmir conflict has a historical, legal, territorial, competing national and nuclear dimension.

[1] From a speech in Parliament: Millions on the Move, 17 March 1950, Jawaharlal Nehru (1961, 457).

[2] Jammu and Kashmir were princely states during the colonial period. Along with Ladakh, they are part of the disputed territory in northern India controlled by India, consisting of the predominantly Muslim Kashmir Valley, the predominantly Hindu Jammu, and the Buddhist-dominated Ladakh.

[3] The name Sindoor was chosen in honour of the women widowed by the Pahalgam terrorist attack. Sindoor is a vermilion powder traditionally pressed onto women's foreheads to mark them as married women.

[4] Cohen (1995) mentioned these five dimensions already in 1995.

In this report,[5] I analyse the origins of the conflicts, trace the different phases of wars, terrorist attacks, and the diplomatic rapprochements that repeatedly failed. I compare the military potentials of the opponents and ask what the future might look like after the recent military confrontations. The countless efforts to resolve the conflict, both bilaterally between the two hostile neighbours and internationally, have repeatedly failed for almost 80 years. The attempt to find a way out of the impasse with confidence-building measures also failed. A discouraging result. The persistent tensions in the Kashmir Valley serve as a reminder of how some conflicts remain unresolved despite repeated attempts at negotiation and intervention.

II. The bloody legacy of colonial times

In August 1947, British rule over the Indian subcontinent ended after a long struggle by the Indian National Congress for independence. But the "ecstasy of freedom was attended by the agony of partition", as the Encyclopaedia Britannica puts it.[6] The division into Pakistan and India was the British government's attempt to pacify the increasing tensions between Muslims and Hindus, an attempt that had largely failed. A hastily drawn border separated India into three parts: India, West- und East Pakistan. The result was an unprecedented exchange of the population. Millions of Muslims migrated to Pakistan and Hindus in the opposite direction. This mass migration was accompanied by extreme communal violence with an unknown number of deaths. Estimates vary widely between 200,000 and 2,000,000 dead.[7]

All Indian territories under the British Raj and the approximately 500 princely states were to be integrated into either Pakistan or India. However, the status and fate of Kashmir remained unresolved. The Hindu Maharaja of Kashmir, Hari Singh, ruled over a majority Muslim Kashmir. Both India and Pakistan claimed the entire territory for themselves. Under pressure from the invasion of Pakistani militias, the Maharaja, who had consistently refused to abdicate, asked India for military support. This was the beginning of the first Kashmir War in 1947.

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister whose family originated from Kashmir, described the situation in the Constituent Assembly (Legislative) as follows:

The raiders from West Punjab into the Jammu province increased in number and spread out over that province... The raiders were highly organized, had competent officers and modern arms... It is impossible to escape the conclusion that the raids on Kashmir were carefully planned and well organized by the Pakistan authorities with the deliberate object of seizing the State by force and then declaring its accession to Pakistan. This was an act of hostility not only to Kashmir but to the Indian Union..." Nehru adds: "Pakistan denied that fact and during the long discussions before the Security Council they not only went on denying it... (Nehru 1961, 444, 446 and 452)

The first Kashmir War caused thousands of deaths on both sides. Between 12 and 15 million people fled to India or Pakistan. In 1948, India took the conflict to the UN Security Council. In Resolution 47, the Security Council called for a ceasefire and a referendum on Kashmir's future, which never took place. Finally, in 1949, the hostile neighbours agreed on a ceasefire line that effectively divides Kashmir between India (approx. 2/3) and Pakistan (approx. 1/3). The United Nations established a Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) in 1949, which still exists today to oversee the agreed ceasefire. With a staff of presently 106 civilians and experts, the UN mission is more symbolic in nature than capable of exercising actual border control.[8]

[5] I would like to thank Kevin Clements, Keith Krause, Ramesh Thakur and Stein Tønnesson for useful comments on an earlier version of the paper.

[6] Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/India-Pakistan-conflict>.

[7] <https://www.britannica.com/event/Partition-of-India>

[8] <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/unmogip>

So far, India and Pakistan have fought four wars with each other. After a few military skirmishes and after Pakistan carried out covert operations beyond the ceasefire line in 1965, the battle for Kashmir escalated into a large-scale, short, three-week but bloody war, which also claimed several thousand casualties on both sides. But the war did not change the disputed course of the border (Cohen 2002, 32–60).

The Bangladesh War of 1971, known in Bangladesh as the Liberation War, was the result of an internal crisis in crisis-ridden Pakistan. Several million refugees from Bangladesh, who made their way to India were the reason and consequence for India's military to intervene. This war was not about Kashmir, but about the secession of East Pakistan, in which the great powers also took sides and partly supported the war effort: the USSR on the side of India, the USA and China on the side of Pakistan. Both the 1965 and 1971 wars led to intensified rearmament efforts; both sides increased their military capacities. Apart from the formal designation of the temporary border as a "Line of Control" (LoC), little changed in the situation, which had existed for around 25 years.

The so-called Kargil War took place in 1999, when militants from Pakistan infiltrated and occupied a strategically important area in the Kargil district in the Indian-controlled part of Kashmir. This coincided with the signing of the Lahore Declaration, by which both countries committed themselves to peacefully resolving the status of Kashmir. The approximately 5,000 Pakistani guerrillas were beaten back by the Indian armed forces. Reports on casualties vary. There were several hundred soldiers killed and over one thousand wounded on each side. Although India had the upper hand militarily in the wars over Kashmir, nothing changed in the disputed territorial relations along the Line of Control. In the wake of these wars, Kashmir became one of the most militarized regions in the world.

Timeline

1947	Partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan
1947	First Kashmir War
1948	UN Security Council calls for a ceasefire and referendum on the future of Kashmir
1949	Karachi Agreement: a ceasefire line, effectively dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan
1960	Indus Waters Treaty mediated by the World Bank
1965	Outbreak of the second war over Kashmir
1966	Agreement of Tashkent: India and Pakistan signed an agreement to settle disputes through peaceful means
1971	War over East Pakistan: Bangladesh independence
1972	Shimla Agreement: In the wake of the Bangladesh War, an official line of control (LoC) is created as a territorial border
1974	Test of a nuclear explosive device by India
1987	Beginning of the insurgency in Kashmir
1998	Nuclear tests by India (five) and Pakistan (six)
1999	Declaration of Lahore: Diplomatic efforts to normalize relations, three months later another war
2001	Agra Summit: visit of Pakistani President General Musharraf to India; attack on India's Parliament
2003	Cricket diplomacy: symbolic gestures such as General Musharraf's visit to a cricket match in India
2008	Cross-border trade across the LoC; attacks in Mumbai
2014	India's diplomatic efforts to improve relations
2016	Militants attack an Indian military base; 18 soldiers are killed
2018	Kashmir-wide anti-Indian protests for an independent Kashmir
2019	Bomb attack: 40 Indian soldiers die, Indian airstrikes in Pakistan, but de-escalation of the conflict
2019	Revocation of autonomy status: Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh; control by the central government in New Delhi
2023	Deadly military clashes between India and Pakistan
2025	Terrorist attack in Pahalgam followed by a short air war and military action that included aerial bombing by India and Pakistan; agreement on a ceasefire

Kashmir's history demonstrates the ebb and flow of this conflict over the past eight decades. Phases of war in addition to low-level military conflicts, as well as terrorist attacks, were interspersed with sometimes long periods of rapprochement and diplomatic efforts toward a solution (see section IV.). However, a resolution to Kashmir's status remains elusive.

III. Terror from below – and above

Regional elections in Kashmir, which observers considered rigged, with electoral fraud, intimidation, obstruction of opposition and falsification of results, triggered a long period of unrest and uprisings beginning in 1987. Many young Kashmiris lost faith in the democratic process and turned to armed resistance. Armed groups played and still play an important role in the uprising against Indian dominance. In the following years, the armed groups were recruited and trained by Pakistan to protest what they perceived as a puppet government in Kashmir and to break away from Indian dominance. Deep historical grievances, socioeconomic disadvantages, and Pakistani interventions led to persistent unrest (Kumar 2025; Jacob 2016).

This armed resistance, according to the Indian government, was not only tolerated by Pakistan, but also supported. In the following decade, the armed groups carried out numerous bomb attacks, mainly against Indian security forces. The figures on the victims vary greatly. It is estimated that up to 80,000 people were killed in the armed attacks (Kumar 2025). According to the Indian government, there were 41,000 dead in three decades: 14,000 civilians, 5,000 security forces and 22,000 militant insurgents. In total, almost 70,000 attacks are reported.[9]

Constant unrest often brought India and Pakistan to the brink of renewed war. The governments of Pakistan and India accused each other of supporting insurgencies. Attempts to pacify the insurgency through talks between the Indian government and some of the armed groups were thwarted by renewed bombings. While India has long denounced the Pakistani military's support of the armed insurgency and blames Pakistan for the unrest, Pakistani officials accuse India of supporting the separatist guerrilla organization Balochistan Liberation Army, which seeks to secede from Pakistan's troubled province of Balochistan in southwest Pakistan. Whether or not these mutual accusations are empirically substantiated, relations between India and Pakistan are continually strained by the insurgencies, and tentative attempts at rapprochement have hardly any chance.

What do we know about the militant/terrorist groups?

Lashkar-e-Taliba (LeT), based in Pakistan but now banned there; founded in the late 1980s, classified by the UN, US, and others as a terrorist group; aims to end Indian control over Kashmir.

The Resistance Front (TRF), a frontline or faction of Lashkar-e-Taliba (LeT), founded after the abolition of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019; has carried out several attacks on tourists and migrants.

Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), founded in 1989, primarily Kashmiri membership; pro-Pakistani with close ties to the Pakistani secret service ISI. Greatly weakened by internal division and targeted killing of leaders.

People's Anti-Fascist Front (PAFF), active since 2019, is considered the representative of the Jaish-e-Mohammed. Focused on online propaganda, attacks on security forces and civilians.

Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Muhammad's army, wants to unite Kashmir with Pakistan, founded in 2000, has several hundred supporters in Pakistan, as well as in the southern part of Indian-controlled Kashmir and in the Kashmir Valley.

Kashmir Tigers, founded in 2021, the name, deliberately without religious connotations, is intended to signal local roots, the goal is the end of Indian control over Kashmir.

Jammu and Kashmir have enjoyed a certain political autonomy since the partition, guaranteed in the Indian constitution by Articles 370 and 35A. They made Kashmir's status unique in the Indian Union, undercutting the argument that Kashmir was as Indian as any and every other state. Indian citizens could not migrate to and settle in Kashmir, could not acquire property there, and could not vote in Kashmir. To Pakistan it was proof that Kashmir's status remained unresolved. It was a longstanding anomaly.

[9] Government data reported in Hindustan Times, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/the-anatomy-of-kashmir-militancy-in-numbers/story-UncrzPTGhN22Uf1HHe64JJ.html>

In August 2019, the Hindu nationalist government of Narendra Modi revoked these two articles, divided the state into three parts (Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh), downgraded the state to Union Territories, which are normally reserved for small areas, and placed Jammu and Kashmir under the control of the government in New Delhi. Article 370 limited the power of the central government in the Kashmir region to defence, foreign policy, and communications. Article 35A stipulated that only permanent residents could own land, participate in elections, and seek employment in the local government. In the spring of 2020, a law followed that allowed citizens of India from outside Kashmir to settle there permanently and acquire land.

International Crisis Group concludes: “These reforms have kindled widespread anger among Kashmiris, who see them as part of a strategy for changing the region’s ethnic, social and religious contours.” And furthermore: “Although most Kashmiris still aspire to independence, many locals now support any militants they consider capable of confronting Indian security forces, including pro-Pakistan and Islamist groups” (International Crisis Group 2020).

The Indian government uses draconian laws, some of which date back to the colonial era, to silence militant uprisings, but also protests from civil society. People disappear; extrajudicial killings are committed without any legal consequences for the security forces.

Arundhati Roy (2020), one of India's best-known authors, sharply criticizes the Indian government for the discriminatory law of 2020 and writes that the government imposed a curfew on the Indian part of Kashmir and that the military brutally cracked down on demonstrators because, from Delhi's point of view, they are terrorists. The government in Delhi censored the press and shut down the Internet and telephone connections for weeks. A recent article in *Le Monde diplomatique* describes Modi's control of the press as “censoring, harassing, arresting” (Chaudhury 2025). Thousands of opposition politicians and journalists, around 4,000 so-called ‘troublemakers’, ended up in prison, many to this day. The people in the Kashmir Valley, the overwhelming majority of whom reject Indian citizenship and have been fighting for their right to self-determination for decades and feel besieged and militarily occupied.

The Indian government uses draconian laws, some of which date back to the colonial era, to silence militant uprisings, but also protests from civil society. People disappear; extrajudicial killings are committed without any legal consequences for the security forces. Special legislation, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (Jammu and Kashmir) of 1990, authorises military personnel to use force when more than five people gather. Literally, it says that if the security forces consider that it is necessary for the maintenance of public order, then they can “fire upon or otherwise use force, even to the causing of death, against any person who is acting in contravention of any law or order for the time being in force in the disturbed area prohibiting the assembly of five or more persons or the carrying of weapons or of things capable of being used as weapons or of fire-arms, ammunition or explosive substance.”^[10] International Crisis Group concludes: “The Special Powers Act also creates a climate of impunity because it shields soldiers from trial in civilian courts without the central government’s permission.” (International Crisis Group 2020).

In recent years, it had initially become quieter in the Kashmir region. Exact figures on the security forces stationed in the region are not known. In the reporting after the attack of April 2025, up to half a million soldiers and police were mentioned.^[11] After the state of emergency was declared in 2019/2020, New Delhi sent around 40,000 additional soldiers. The promised election of the regional parliament was not held until 2024. Although parliament can deliberate and decide on local matters, decisions require the approval of the central government.

^[10] <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/1953/1/a1990-21.pdf>.

^[11] <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article255992046/Kaschmir-Sie-verschonten-ganz-klar-die-Frauen-und-schossen-auf-die-Maenner.html>.

The massive military and police presence led to a decrease in terrorist attacks. At the beginning of April this year, India's Home Minister Amit Shah declared during a visit to Jammu and Kashmir: "The Modi government has completely dismantled the ecosystem of terror in Kashmir, thereby strengthening peace and stability in the region." He went on to say "that Articles 370 and 35A were obstacles, preventing Kashmir from being fully integrated with our country." In his opinion, this ended "a tainted chapter of post-independence history and initiated a new chapter of Kashmir's development in tandem with the rest of India." [12]

New Delhi felt safe with its tough line on Kashmir. This optimistic assessment illustrates how much the Indian government was surprised by the terrorist attack in April 2025. It is an open question if the self-confidence of the Indian authorities may have motivated the attackers to strike.

IV. Diplomatic initiatives to solve the Kashmir conflict

1. DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF[13]

The history of diplomatic efforts, bilateral, international or Track II initiatives, between India and Pakistan is marked by rapprochement and setbacks, by hopeful contacts, normalisation of relations, but also by the breakdown of promising interactions. In the first Kashmir war, India appealed to the United Nations. In the **Karachi Agreement** of 1949, India and Pakistan agreed on an armistice, but the demarcation of the border remained controversial and unresolved.

In January 1966, the Soviet Union mediated between India and Pakistan after the extensive war of 1965. In Tashkent, Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Pakistani President Muhammad Ayub Kahn, who had seized power in a coup, signed the so-called **Tashkent Declaration**, which provided for a ceasefire line and the withdrawal of troops to their pre-war position and the normalization of relations.

India won a military victory in the war over East Pakistan in 1971. Pakistan had to recognise the independence of Bangladesh. In the Simla Agreement of 1972, the two countries agreed to resolve all outstanding conflicts bilaterally, including the status of Kashmir. The agreement included a commitment to respect the Line of Control. The **Simla Agreement** seemed to offer a solution to the conflict by postponing a final decision to first improve the bilateral relations. But the agreement did not contain much more than renaming of the provisional border into a formal Line of Control. The fragile political situation in Pakistan did not allow the government in Islamabad to take the envisaged steps towards normalization.

In 1999, under the first BJP government, the **Lahore Declaration** was signed. Both sides committed themselves to the peaceful settlement of disputes and, above all, to the denuclearization of the Indian subcontinent. Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said: "We must bring peace to our people" and India's Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee replied: "We owe this to ourselves and to future generations." [14] Symbolically, a bus connection was established between Delhi and Lahore, but this process of rapprochement was short-lived. Only three months later, the Kargil War ended the thaw. The war ended after India regained control of the Kargil region.

After 1999, a whole series of confidence-building measures were initiated. In 2001, the Indian Prime Minister invited his Pakistani counterpart to a summit in Agra. But the talks did not lead to a breakthrough because neither side was prepared to make concessions. The two governments initiated a multi-track diplomacy that not only improved bilateral relations but also involved pro-independence groups from Kashmir. Symbolic initiatives such as so-called "cricket diplomacy" (the visit of Pakistani President Musharraf to a cricket match in India in 2003) were also intended to strengthen the still fragile relations (Wagner 2024).

[12] Press Release, Govt. Of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2089702>.

[13] See Khanna and Kumar (1992).

[14] Quoted in New York Times, May 10, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/05/world/asia/india-pakistan-kashmir-history.html>.

In the mid-2000s, a breakthrough was made. Pakistani and Indian “back channel” negotiators negotiated a highly confidential **framework agreement** that provided for the disarmament of armed groups, troop reductions, more autonomy for the regions of Kashmir and joint development efforts. There was a genuine desire on both sides to go beyond merely “freezing” the conflict and come to a long-term settlement. However, three developments prevented a solution: Armed non-state actors with maximalist positions were spoilers. In addition, political unrest in Pakistan, related to both Kashmir and the situation on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, prevented the conclusion of this promising agreement. Both governments faced strong domestic nationalist opposition that were not willing to compromise. The attacks on the Indian parliament in 2001 and the attacks in Mumbai in 2008, which killed 172 people, led to break down of the talks. Bilateral diplomatic efforts have repeatedly collapsed (Malone 2011).

When Narendra Modi was elected prime minister in 2014, he promised a neighbourhood policy (Wulf 2013; Bhatnagar and Passi 2016). He wanted to improve relations with neighbouring countries and, in a historically unique event, invited the heads of state of the neighbouring countries to his inauguration. It was a diplomatic gesture, and it was remarkable that Pakistani Prime Minister Nawas Sharif accepted the invitation. But border incidents and diplomatic tensions quickly ended the peace initiative. The relations quickly soured again. There is a lack of dialogue between the two countries after New Delhi blamed jihadist groups in Pakistan after a 2016 bombing. India demands verifiable measures from the Pakistani government against the terrorist group before the start of talks and a normalization of relations.

After a suicide bombing in 2019 that killed 40 Indian paramilitaries, India retaliated with airstrikes on Pakistani territory. These were the first such far-reaching reactions since the war in 1971, with Pakistan responding immediately and dogfights of fighter jets ensued, in which an Indian MiG-21 was shot down. After fierce artillery duels and numerous other border violations, it was surprisingly possible to renew and confirm the ceasefire of the early 2000s in February 2021. But broader diplomatic initiatives have been limited. Efforts to prevent reigniting the military conflict again have focussed primarily on maintaining the ceasefire agreement.

2. THE ROLE OF FOREIGN POWERS

In addition to the United Nations, which mediated together with Great Britain in the wake of the first Kashmir war, it was above all the Soviet government in 1966 through whose mediation the Tashkent Declaration came about. While China has been clearly on Pakistan's side for decades, it cultivates an iron-clad friendship with Pakistan and supports the country militarily, especially through arms deliveries. US mediation in the Indo-Pakistani conflict has been varied (Joshi, 2025). In the 1965 war, the US imposed an arms embargo on both countries. During this time, the US government was preoccupied with the Vietnam War, leaving the role of mediator to the Soviet Union.

At the time of the 1971 war, the Nixon administration encouraged the Chinese to deploy troops in the Himalayas to forestall Indian intervention on behalf of the East Pakistani insurgents. Pakistan publicly expressed and appreciated Chinese support, but it was thin on the ground and “fell well short of what many in Pakistan had hoped for...” (Small 2015, 16). According to Yahya Khan, former Commander-in-Chief of Pakistan’s armed forces and later Head of Government, China would “continue to support Pakistan morally, economically, and politically, but its capability to intervene militarily in the 1971 war was limited.”^[15] The US government favoured Pakistan and sent an aircraft carrier group into the Bay of Bengal. In the wake of this war, India and the Soviet Union concluded the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.

In the Kargil War in 1999, the US played a decisive diplomatic role. After the Clinton administration concluded that the Pakistani military had planned the invasion, Clinton did not hesitate to blame Pakistan for the risk of war between the two nuclear-armed countries. It was the first time that Washington publicly sided with India (Riedel 2019). Pressure from the Clinton administration was crucial to the withdrawal of Pakistani fighters and troops.

[15] Quoted from Khan’s memoirs by (Small 2015, 14).

In the early 2000s the US government position was shaped by the war on terror. Pakistan became an essential partner in the US war in Afghanistan. At the same time, while the US refrained from direct mediation in the Kashmir conflict, enhanced diplomacy, military cooperation and economic agreements intensified US-India relations. As of the mid 2010s the US tilt towards India became more pronounced as India's economic and geopolitical role grew.

A ceasefire was quickly agreed upon after the last clash in 2025. There was a diplomatic dispute over whether it had been mediated by the United States. At the beginning of the conflict, the US government vacillated between silence and vague warnings of escalation. Trump wrote: "They'll figure it out one way or another."^[16] Then Trump wrote several times on social media that he had acted as a moderator. "After a long night of talks mediated by the United States, I am pleased to announce that India and Pakistan have agreed to a full and immediate ceasefire. Congratulations to both countries on using common sense and great intelligence."^[17] The Indian government appeared extremely annoyed that Trump had posted the news before India could do so. Clearly, the government in New Delhi emphasized that it had negotiated the ceasefire bilaterally with Pakistan without the Trump Administration. Trump's statement was apparently just another one of his usual boastful self-congratulations. India resents foreign bullying. Manoj Joshi (2025), an Indian based commentator, concludes that India has systematically eschewed the idea that a third party should play a role in resolving the Kashmir issue. The message to Trump was clear: Kashmir is not a stage (Kaura 2025).

The European Union, an important trade partner of both India and Pakistan, hardly plays a role as mediator. Kaja Kallas, the EU's foreign policy representative, called for restraint, de-escalation and dialogue, but did not criticize, to the annoyance of the Indian government, Pakistan for its support of terrorist groups. India's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar condemned European "double standards" regarding EU support for Ukraine, saying that "India needs partners, not preachers" (Malhotra 2025, 68).

V. Dramatic Shift in Policy or Recurring Pattern?

1. THE 'NEW NORMAL'

India's Prime Minister Modi announced after the April attack in the Kashmir Valley that India will "identify, track and punish every terrorist and their backers. We will pursue them to the end of earth. The time has come to raze whatever is left of the terror haven."^[18] Modi's new hard-line policy can be explained by the fact that India has run out of patience with Pakistani support for terrorist groups. The Indian government is no longer willing to tolerate Pakistan's support for the insurgents in Kashmir. Whether this strategy will succeed in eradicating terrorism is an open question. The reactions following the terrorist attacks in April and the military clashes in May 2025 initially suggest that there is presently hardly any chance for rapprochement.

India holds the Pakistani government responsible for the attacks. Naturally, Pakistan sees things very differently. Just recently, Army Chief Asim Munir spoke of Kashmir as Islamabad's 'jugular vein' and advocated the so-called 'two-nation concept', according to which Hindus and Muslims belong to two different nations. Thus, Muslim-majority Kashmir would belong to Pakistan.^[19] Positions on Kashmir remain widely divergent even after the recent confrontation.

[16] Quoted in The Times of India, 26 April 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/theyll-figure-it-out-one-way-or-another-donald-trump-on-india-pakistan-tensions-after-pahalgam-terror-attack/articleshow/120633075.cms>.

[17] The Times of India, 26 May 2025, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/mediation-or-informal-diplomacy-decoding-trumps-claims-of-brokering-india-pakistan-truce/articleshow/121392105.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

[18] Quoted in Indian Express, 25 April, 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/modi-first-speech-pahalgam-attack-2025-9963537/>.

[19] Quoted in Deccan Herald, 17 April, 2025, <https://www.deccanherald.com/world/paks-army-chief-calls-kashmir-jugular-vein-invokes-two-nation-theory-saying-we-are-different-from-hindus-3498546>.

The government in New Delhi initially responded with a calculated escalation: half of the diplomats were withdrawn from Pakistan, Pakistani diplomats in India were expelled, the border crossing at Attari-Wagah was closed, and the Indus Waters Treaty was suspended. Presently, a diplomatic freeze exists between the hostile neighbours. Both have long since withdrawn their ambassadors from their respective capitals.

The Indian government is now pursuing a new policy towards Pakistan and has made it clear that any act of terrorism will be considered a war (Pant and Patil 2025, 7). Pakistan must expect that, if needed, 'Operation Sindoor' will be repeated. India not only wants to respond to Pakistan, but also to eliminate the basis for terror, as Defence Minister Rajnath Singh explained: "We will not only trace those who perpetrated this incident. We will also reach out to those who, sitting behind the scenes, have conspired to carry out the nefarious act on the soil of India." [20] Pakistan, for its part, took up the baton and threatened retaliation: "If there is any challenge to Pakistan in any context, then our army is ready for it. And no one should remain under this misconception — a fitting and immediate response will be given," Pakistani Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar announced. [21]

What is perhaps new is the determination and consistency with which the Indian government wants to respond to Pakistani attacks, and ... not only holds the Pakistani government responsible for terror but also wants to hold it accountable

In essence, India's 'new normal' policy means: "that each act of cross-border terrorism constitutes an act of war and will be met with a measured and proportionate kinetic response" (Bisaria 2025, 93). According to Thakur (2025, 8), the old normal, that has been replaced is

strategic restraint, indefinite patience, international diplomatic costs and economic penalties... In the new normal, India will unilaterally determine Pakistan's culpability for any terrorist attacks in India and retaliate appropriately against locations, targets, munitions and delivery platforms of its choosing, while retaining the freedom to climb the ladder of escalation based on how Pakistan responds.

Prime Minister Modi's address to the Nation on 12 May made clear what Pakistan can expect in future:

Operation Sindoor has carved out a new benchmark in our fight against terrorism and has set up a new parameter and new normal. First, if there is a terrorist attack on India, a fitting reply will be given... Secondly, India will not tolerate any nuclear blackmail. India will strike precisely and decisively at the terrorist hideouts developing under the cover of nuclear blackmail. Thirdly, we will not differentiate between the government sponsoring terrorism and the masterminds of terrorism. [22]

Is this policy so new? Didn't India and Pakistan react in the past in a tit for tat fashion when border disputes arose? What is perhaps new is the determination and consistency with which the Indian government wants to respond to Pakistani attacks, and that it not only holds the Pakistani government responsible for terror but also wants to hold it accountable. Is the next militarily clash programmed or does Indian determination act as a deterrent?

[20] Quoted in The Times of India, 24 April 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/perpetrators-as-well-as-the-conspirators-behind-the-scenes-will-face-strong-response-defence-minister/articleshow/120562899.cms>.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Prime Ministers Office, 12 May 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2128268>.

2. THE INDO-PAKISTAN MILITARY BALANCE

The military fight in May 2025 saw the most serious clashes since the 1971 war. The conflict escalated and the heavy mutual attacks remained without a decisive military victory for either side. India began Operation Sindoor with air strikes (missiles and fighter jets) on various targets in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir and the core area of Pakistan.[23] The Indian military wanted to destroy the 'terrorist infrastructure'. While India reported the deaths of fighters, Pakistan spoke of civilian victims of the Indian attacks. Pakistan responded with artillery fire at the LoC and reported the shooting down of five Indian fighter jets, including a French Rafale of the Indian Air Force.

Table: Military Balance

	India	Pakistan
Military Expenditure (billion US \$)	86.1	10.2
Military Expenditure (% of BIP)	2.4	2.9
Active Troops (million)	1.476	0.660
Paramilitary & Gendarmerie (million)	1.616	0.291
Reserves (million)	1.155	n.a.
Selected Major Weapon Categories (number)*		
• Aircraft	721	465
• Attack helicopters	44	42
• Major battle tanks	3750	2537
• Artillery	10001+	4619
• Frigates	15	11
• Submarines	18	8
• Aircraft carriers	2	0
Nuclear warheads (number)	180	170

*Only armed forces

Sources: SIPRI Military Expenditure Data Base, <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>, IISS, *Military Balance*, chapter 5, Asia, Federation of American Scientists, *Status of World Nuclear Forces*, <https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

[23] Precise targets are mentioned in Patil, Samir and Rahul Rawat, (2025).

As a result, the fighting turned to drone and other missile attacks, in which civilian targets were also hit (Basur 2025). Indian commentators spoke of an action-reaction cycle of escalation (Patil and Rawat 2025, 21), while India's Deputy Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri has said at the beginning of Operation Sindoor: "These actions were measured, nonescalatory, proportionate and responsible." [24] Both sides claimed military successes: on the one hand, the destruction of terrorist infrastructure and military targets, and on the other hand, the shooting down of fighter jets. In particular, the shooting down of the Rafale fighter jet led to an unfriendly verbal exchange about its military significance. While Pakistan highlighted the special performance of its Chinese-made J10 fighter jets, which shot down India's Rafale, India's military leadership admitted to losing fighter jets due to a "tactical mistake, which we made." [25]

Apparently, India destroyed large parts of the terror infrastructure in its initial strikes as well as most of Pakistan's air defence systems in the next wave. Conversely, in between the two sets of Indian strikes, Pakistan succeeded in destroying several Indian aircrafts. Both parties have given conflicting accounts of the results of their military actions and there is no reliable conclusive independent assessment. Nothing has changed in the disputed territorial relations between the two powers. For the future, this means that there may be another reason for further military action at any time. The military potential of both sides is enormous, with India having a great quantitative advantage.

India and Pakistan navigate a precarious balance, especially since nuclear weapons are occasionally mentioned by the Pakistani side. Even though Prime Minister Modi has responded that he won't allow himself to be blackmailed by nuclear means, a nuclear escalation cannot be ruled out entirely (Ajayakumar 2025). Pakistan has now announced that it will continue to increase its military budget, despite an economic crisis in the country. [26] India's strategic objective is to provide a calm environment to fully exploit India's potential for economic development.

The Indian government does not only rely on its military superiority in shaping the difficult relationship with Pakistan but also uses economic levers. India, for example, suspended the Indus Waters Treaty, which is important for Pakistan. This treaty, agreed between the two countries in 1960, is a potentially powerful weapon. The Indian government has threatened a blockade in previous conflicts. If New Delhi follows through with this measure, it will have serious consequences for Pakistan's agriculture and the population's water supply. Pakistan's economy, already in a desolate state, depends on a functioning agriculture. Pakistan's crisis would worsen. However, this step cannot be implemented in the short term. To actually deprive Pakistan of access to the Indus water, India would have to build new dams in the upper reaches of the Indus. In addition, this strategy could backfire. India, for its part, depends on the goodwill of China for the use of the waters of the Brahmaputra (Jamal 2025). India will probably try, as in the past, to isolate Pakistan internationally, as well as to restrict trade and other economic relations.

India's post-Pahalgam strategy represents a fundamental shift from reactionary diplomacy to calibrated geo-economic coercion. By instrumentalising critical economic levers—water, trade, connectivity, and multilateral diplomacy—New Delhi is pursuing a cumulative deterrence approach designed to impose long-term strategic costs on Islamabad without breaching military thresholds. (Gupta 2025, 79).

[24] Quoted in New York Times, 7 May 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/07/world/asia/india-pakistan-conflict.html>

[25] Quoted in Financial Express, 31 May 2025, <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/tactical-mistake-which-we-made-chief-of-defence-staff-responds-to-whether-india-lost-jets-in-op-sindoor-rejects-nuclear-escalation/3863800/>.

[26] Financial Times, 10 June 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/2c6b28bc-c90d-4d4b-8e0b-18f4652bcb90?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

VI. Conclusion

What could be a sustainable solution to the problem? For almost eight decades, all previous attempts at a peaceful solution have failed. New Delhi's effort over the past five years to maintain law and order with a powerful police and military presence in Kashmir appears to have failed as the latest attack illustrates. The Indian government has successfully marginalised Pakistan internationally; this has been quite successful, thanks to India's economic power and political clout on the one hand and Pakistan's political fragility and economic weakness on the other. However, India's international dominance is not leading to calm the troubled Kashmir. Neither side is willing to compromise.

The Indian government should not focus almost entirely on punishing Pakistan. The lack of opportunities for democratic participation by Kashmiris are a significant root cause for the emergence and resurgence of violence. Therefore, the central government in New Delhi should address the anxiety and the needs of the local population. This is probably a necessary but not a sufficient condition to react to the armed groups that act as spoilers. But presently, there is no mainstream political party in Kashmir, India or Pakistan that would actively promote peace or that is positioned to act as peace party. Such efforts are limited to NGOs and diaspora activists.

Kashmiris fear that New Delhi is trying “to engineer demographic change in the only Muslim-majority region” (International Crisis Group 2025). But if the Modi government would restore the region's revoked autonomy, this would mean establishing again a two-tier type of citizenship, preventing non-Kashmiris to settle, work and buy property in Kashmir, which Kashmiris could do everywhere else in India. The government should address the fears of marginalisation among Kashmir's Muslim population. This, however, is entirely inconsistent with the policy of prioritising Hinduism at all levels of society, which Modi and his government have been pursuing for years.

Three decades ago, Stephen P. Cohen wrote:

The Kashmir crisis has deep historical roots. Particularly egregious are those elements of the crisis that stem from imperial conflicts of the 19th century. The British acquired Kashmir, but did not make it part of British India; they established a boundary with China (and with the Afghans), but the boundaries were never fully demarcated. It seems absurd that two billion people should be entangled by conflicts generated by imperial governments that no longer exist. (Cohen 1995)

In the meantime, more than three and a half billion people in the region are affected by these conflicts and the legacy of the poorly demarcated boundaries. Although most of the disputed borders are strategically unimportant, they remain a cause for likely conflict.

Given the emotional national significance, both in Pakistan and in India, of emerging victorious, there is no easy way to overcome the conflicting and irreconcilable ideas about the status of Kashmir. The wars and additional military skirmishes to date do not offer an optimistic perspective, although both India and Pakistan as well as divided Kashmir would benefit from a peaceful solution. International Crisis Group proposes a “looser federation of the two parts of Kashmir” (the Pakistani- and Indian-controlled parts of Kashmir). This would allow people to trade and cross borders. A 'soft' frontier would be created in the place “where both physical and cultural boundaries between India and Pakistan were somewhat fuzzy” (International Crisis Group 2025).

Of course, the danger of another war still exists. It is reassuring, however, that the armed forces in both India and Pakistan are arguing and operating rather cautiously but vigilantly, as both sides are aware of the risk of a large-scale war with an uncertain outcome.

Now would be the time for bold and innovative ideas. However, they are hardly to be expected in view of the recent conflict and the heated emotional debates in both countries. Is this bilateral dispute particularly intractable? Other bilateral conflicts (like Korea and Israel/Palestine) illustrate how complicated conflict resolution of bilateral conflicts can be. If a solution seems impossible, as the historical evidence suggests, at least dispute management could ease tensions. Détente, diplomacy and dispute management have worked over fairly long periods between wars. Probably a new period of détente is the best situation for which the two neighbours can aim.

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