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## The India-Pakistan Conflict: Regional Rivalries, Security Dilemmas, and the Search for Peace

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### Abstract

The longstanding conflict between India and Pakistan remains one of the most intractable and deeply rooted geopolitical disputes in South Asia. Originating from the 1947 Partition and the contested accession of Jammu and Kashmir, the conflict has since evolved into a multifaceted struggle encompassing territorial, ideological, nationalistic, and religious dimensions. This paper critically examines the nature and evolution of the India-Pakistan conflict, particularly focusing on the Kashmir dispute, the entrenched narratives of national identity, the dynamics of security dilemmas, and the impact of external actors. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as the Regional Security Complex Theory, subaltern realism, and liberal international relations theory, the study analyses how historical legacies, political structures, and material as well as ideational factors have sustained the conflict. It also investigates the militarization of the region, the role of the media, and the complex interplay of civil-military relations in shaping foreign policy, especially in Pakistan. The paper further explores pathways to conflict resolution, emphasizing the potential of multi-track diplomacy, confidence-building measures, cultural and economic cooperation, and inclusive peacebuilding strategies that extend beyond elite negotiations. While the prospects for lasting peace are hindered by deep mistrust, political instability, and structural impediments, the study underscores the need for a paradigm shift in both narrative and policy that centres human security, mutual respect, and regional cooperation as foundational principles for sustainable peace.

**Keywords:** India-Pakistan relations, Regional Conflict, Kashmir conflict, Security dilemma, Nationalism

## **1. Introduction**

The enduring conflict between India and Pakistan, rooted in the violent upheaval of the 1947 Partition, remains one of the most complex and protracted disputes in modern history. At its heart lies the contested region of Kashmir—a territory whose political fate has become deeply entwined with competing national identities, historical grievances, and strategic rivalries. This paper seeks to unravel the intricate layers of this conflict by exploring its historical origins, the security dilemma that perpetuates militarization, and the powerful forces of nationalism that shape perceptions on both sides. Beyond the immediate bilateral tensions, the involvement of external actors and the evolving geopolitical landscape have further complicated prospects for peace. Despite numerous attempts at dialogue and confidence-building, entrenched mistrust, ideological divides, and the legacy of violence continue to impede meaningful resolution. Through a multidisciplinary lens, this study highlights the persistent challenges and explores pathways toward conflict transformation—emphasizing that sustainable peace in South Asia demands not only political negotiation but also reconciliation at societal levels.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Conflict, as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, emerges from a confluence of factors including competing interests, identity politics, historical grievances, and structural asymmetries in power (Deutsch, 1973; Fisher, 1997). These factors interact dynamically, often entrenching hostilities and impeding efforts at resolution. In the South Asian context, the protracted conflict between India and Pakistan is deeply rooted in the traumatic legacy of the 1947 Partition, the contentious accession of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, and the ongoing disputes over territorial sovereignty.

Understanding the India-Pakistan conflict demands a nuanced analysis that goes beyond the geopolitical and military dimensions. It necessitates an examination of the political, social, psychological, and historical narratives that have evolved over time to sustain this enduring rivalry. This paper seeks to address two central questions: First, what does "conflict" signify in the specific historical and political context of India-Pakistan relations? Second, what are the potential strategies—both conventional and unconventional—for sustainable conflict resolution between the two nations?

The significance of these questions is underscored by recent events that reflect the escalating nature of tensions. As Aqil Shah (2025) observes, "Pakistan's military has a history of using proxy groups against India. A faction linked to Lashkar-e-Taiba—which was behind the deadly 2008 Mumbai attacks—claimed responsibility for the April massacre in Pahalgam, located in Indian-administered Kashmir. Although Pakistan denied any role

in the incident, India remained unconvinced. In response, India took the unprecedented decision to unilaterally suspend the Indus Water Treaty—a landmark agreement facilitated by the World Bank in 1960 to regulate water sharing vital for Pakistan’s agriculture, irrigation, and hydropower. While the treaty had withstood multiple wars and periods of heightened tension, this time was different.”

This development not only marked a shift in India's diplomatic calculus but also signalled the growing fragility of institutional mechanisms meant to mediate bilateral tensions. It is in this context of deepening distrust and strategic recalibration that the need for a reconceptualization of conflict—and pathways to its resolution—becomes imperative.

### **3. Research Methodology**

Within international relations theory, conflict is frequently categorized as either constructive or destructive (Galtung, 1996). Constructive conflict, though adversarial, has the potential to generate positive social or political change through dialogue, reform, or structural transformation. In contrast, destructive conflict results in violence, entrenched hostility, and cyclical instability. The India-Pakistan conflict largely falls into the latter category, having been punctuated by multiple wars—in 1947, 1965, 1971, and the 1999 Kargil conflict—as well as sustained periods of cross-border terrorism and military standoffs (MPIDSA, 2020). The persistent and volatile nature of this conflict exemplifies a protracted, identity-driven dispute, where claims over territorial sovereignty intersect with religious nationalism and competing historical narratives, thereby reinforcing intractability (Zartman, 2000).

Lederach (1997) argues that conflicts rooted in identity, memory, and historical trauma require more than conventional peace agreements. They necessitate transformative, long-term approaches to peacebuilding that encompass societal healing, reconciliation, and inclusive dialogue. In the context of India and Pakistan, deeply entrenched narratives surrounding the Kashmir dispute, national pride, and religious identity not only shape state behaviour but also influence public opinion, making resolution efforts exceedingly complex (ORF, 2019). Consequently, any meaningful conflict transformation strategy must involve a multi-stakeholder approach—incorporating not just state actors, but also civil society organizations, grassroots peacebuilders, academic voices, and diaspora communities that influence transnational discourse.

The theoretical lens guiding this analysis is the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), formulated by Buzan and Wæver (2003). RSCT posits that security dynamics are shaped by interactions across four levels of analysis: domestic, regional, interregional, and global. These structural factors have played a significant role in shaping the trajectory of the India-Pakistan conflict and continue to obstruct avenues for peaceful resolution.

RSCT allows for an understanding of how threat perceptions are constructed, institutionalized, and perpetuated through both material and ideational dimensions.

To enrich this framework, insights from Subaltern Realism (Ayoob, 1995, 2011) and Liberal International Relations Theory (Moravcsik, 1997, 2010) are also integrated. While subaltern realism emphasizes the internal vulnerabilities and state-building challenges faced by postcolonial states, liberal IR theory highlights the role of domestic political institutions, interdependence, and international cooperation in mitigating conflict. As Wojczewski (2014, p. 319) succinctly states: “The theoretical framework for the analysis is the regional security complex theory (RSCT) devised by Buzan and Wæver (2003). The structural factors on the four levels of analysis—domestic, regional, interregional and global—proposed by the theory have shaped the India–Pakistan conflict in a crucial way and that these factors have impeded a conflict resolution in the past. The RSCT is combined with insights of subaltern realism (Ayoob, 1995, 2011) and liberal international relations (IR) theory (Moravcsik, 1997, 2010). The proposed analytical approach enables us to study not only how material and nonmaterial factors on different levels of analysis facilitate specific threat constructions and contribute to their persistence, but also how changes can occur.”

Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a comprehensive analytical foundation for understanding the persistence of conflict in South Asia and for exploring innovative and context-sensitive pathways to resolution.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Historical Background and Kashmir Dispute**

The roots of the Kashmir conflict can be traced to the turbulent period of Partition in 1947, when British India was divided into the sovereign states of India and Pakistan. At the time, princely states were given the option to join either dominion based on geographical contiguity and the wishes of their populations. The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, under the rule of Maharaja Hari Singh, initially opted for independence, seeking to maintain autonomy amidst the geopolitical upheaval (Schofield, 2003). However, this position shifted dramatically following an incursion by tribal militias from Pakistan, which was seen as an attempt to force accession. In response, the Maharaja formally acceded to India, leading to the deployment of Indian troops and the beginning of the first Indo-Pak war.

India's acceptance of Kashmir's accession came with the assurance that a plebiscite would be held to ascertain the will of the Kashmiri people—a promise that has remained unfulfilled (Bose, 2003). The United Nations intervened in 1948, calling for an immediate ceasefire and proposing a

framework for a plebiscite, contingent upon the withdrawal of Pakistani forces and demilitarization of the region. However, mutual distrust, divergent interpretations of the ceasefire terms, and entrenched strategic interests prevented the implementation of this proposal.

Today, Kashmir remains a deeply contested and divided region. India governs the territory comprising Jammu and Kashmir (now reorganized into two Union Territories as of 2019), while Pakistan controls Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan (MPIDSA, 2018). What began as an interstate dispute has morphed over decades into a layered and multidimensional conflict. It now includes elements of indigenous dissent, armed insurgency, and proxy warfare, with both external and internal dynamics at play.

The militarization of the region has significantly impacted civilian life, fuelling cycles of violence, human rights concerns, and socio-economic stagnation. The ongoing presence of armed forces, curfews, communication blackouts, and insurgent activity has made Kashmir one of the most heavily militarized zones in the world (Bose & Jalal, 2021). This historical trajectory underscores the enduring complexity of the Kashmir dispute and its central role in perpetuating the broader India-Pakistan conflict.

#### **4.2. Security Dilemma and Militarization**

The concept of the security dilemma offers a critical lens through which to understand the sustained hostility between India and Pakistan. It refers to a situation wherein actions taken by a state to enhance its security—such as military buildup or alliance formation—are interpreted by others as aggressive, prompting reciprocal measures and leading to an unintended escalation of tensions (Jervis, 1978). Since their inception in 1947, both India and Pakistan have been ensnared in this dynamic. The stakes were significantly heightened in the late 1990s with the formal nuclearization of both countries, adding a grave, existential layer to their already volatile relationship (Tellis, 2001).

Along the Line of Control (LoC), both nations maintain substantial troop deployments and regularly engage in low-intensity conflicts, including artillery exchanges and sniper fire. These militarized interactions reinforce the security dilemma, where each side's defensive measures are perceived as offensive provocations by the other. India views Pakistan's support for insurgents in Kashmir as an extension of cross-border terrorism, undermining national sovereignty and security. Conversely, Pakistan often frames its actions as support for the Kashmiri right to self-determination, thus justifying its engagement from a normative standpoint (Fair, 2014). This cycle of mutual suspicion and reactive militarism continues to undercut possibilities for diplomatic engagement. Confidence-building measures and peace initiatives are frequently derailed by acts of violence or political rhetoric, with military posturing dominating the narrative over dialogue and reconciliation (MPIDSA, 2019).

In examining the structural roots of this persistent insecurity, the internal dynamics of civil-military relations in Pakistan merit special attention. Veena Kukreja (1991), in her seminal analysis, highlights the pervasive influence of the military in Pakistan's political landscape. She asserts that the military, far from being a mere defence institution, operates as a formidable political actor that has repeatedly undermined civilian supremacy through coups, policy dominance, and institutional entrenchment. This power imbalance is particularly evident in the formulation of foreign policy, especially regarding India and Afghanistan.

Kukreja argues that Pakistan's fragile political institutions, chronic instability, and weak civilian leadership have facilitated the military's consolidation of authority. This dominance is often legitimized under the guise of national security, with India portrayed as an enduring existential threat. As Kanti Bajpai (2011) notes in his engagement with Kukreja's work, the military's narrative of perpetual threat sustains a security-centric worldview that impedes democratic deepening and reinforces antagonistic Indo-Pak relations. Consequently, this entrenched civil-military imbalance not only distorts Pakistan's internal political development but also perpetuates a confrontational approach to regional diplomacy.

### **4.3 Nationalism and Identity Politics**

Nationalism and identity politics play a central role in framing the contours and intensity of the India–Pakistan conflict. In India, secular nationalism—anchored in the constitutional commitment to pluralism—has increasingly come into tension with the rise of Hindu nationalism. This ideological shift has significantly influenced the country's stance on Kashmir. Hindu nationalist narratives tend to view Kashmir not merely as a territorial issue but as an inseparable part of India's civilizational heritage, which makes political compromise appear as a betrayal of national unity (Jaffrelot, 2015; Zahoor, 2020). Consequently, any attempt at negotiation is often met with suspicion and resistance, both politically and socially.

In Pakistan, nationalism has historically been shaped by the two-nation theory, wherein the protection and promotion of Muslim identity underpin the ideological foundation of the state. Within this framework, Kashmir represents not only a territorial dispute but also the unrealized promise of Partition. The idea that Kashmir's Muslim-majority population should have acceded to Pakistan remains deeply embedded in the national consciousness (Rashid, 2010). As such, the Kashmir issue serves both as a rallying point for national unity and a strategic tool for domestic political legitimacy, often employed by successive governments and political actors (Nasir, 2018).

This interlinking of national identity with the Kashmir dispute has contributed to the hardening of positions on both sides. Rather than being viewed as a political or humanitarian issue, Kashmir becomes a symbolic

terrain where competing national ideologies collide. This politicization significantly narrows the space for compromise, as concessions are equated with ideological surrender or national weakness. Moreover, the conflict is sustained by narratives of mutual demonization, with each state portraying the other as an existential threat to its identity and values (Basit, 2015).

As Harshe (2025) notes, the roots of the Kashmir conflict lie in the divergent processes of state formation and nation-building that took place in India and Pakistan post-Partition. India's project of integrating Kashmir relied on the ideals of secular nationalism, whereas Pakistan invoked the two-nation theory to justify its claim. These foundational ideologies continue to shape the discourse and limit pragmatic engagement. Harshe further emphasizes that any sustainable resolution to the Kashmir issue is contingent upon broader improvements in India–Pakistan relations. He proposes a dual strategy: firstly, reconstructing the conflict-affected region of Jammu and Kashmir through inclusive governance and infrastructure development; and secondly, promoting peace-oriented initiatives via trade and economic cooperation, which have been historically neglected but hold transformative potential.

Choudhury (1971), in his historical examination of Indo-Pak relations between 1947 and 1965, provides a comprehensive analysis of the Kashmir conflict. He discusses critical factors such as territorial disputes, minority rights, and the contentious issue of water sharing. Choudhury attributes the deep-seated mistrust between India and Pakistan to the absence of effective governance mechanisms and the persistence of mutual suspicion. His work underscores how these unresolved tensions escalated into military confrontations, laying the groundwork for the entrenched hostility that continues to define bilateral relations today.

#### **4.4. Role of External Actors**

The India–Pakistan conflict has not evolved in isolation; it has been significantly shaped by the involvement of external actors, including regional powers, global superpowers, and international organizations. Among these, China and the United States have played particularly influential roles.

China's strategic alliance with Pakistan has long been a critical variable in South Asia's security matrix. Beijing's infrastructural investments in Pakistan-occupied territories, particularly through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that runs through Gilgit-Baltistan, have added layers of complexity to the Kashmir dispute. India views these activities as direct infringements on its sovereignty, which, in turn, reduces the space for bilateral negotiations and introduces a third-party dynamic into an already tense dyadic relationship (ORF, 2020). China's interests are not limited to territorial considerations; its partnership with Pakistan serves as a broader strategic counterbalance to India's regional influence.

The United States, on the other hand, has oscillated between acting as a mediator and prioritizing its strategic interests. During the Cold War and into the War on Terror, the U.S. maintained a dual role: supplying arms to both nations at different times and offering diplomatic interventions during moments of heightened tension. Washington's engagement has often been driven less by a commitment to conflict resolution and more by concerns over regional stability and counterterrorism imperatives (Tellis, 2011). While the U.S. has occasionally encouraged bilateral dialogue, its material support—particularly military aid to Pakistan—has sometimes been perceived by India as undermining its security.

International organizations such as the United Nations have consistently advocated for a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute, especially through Security Council Resolutions and appeals to international law. However, the efficacy of such efforts remains limited due to the extreme sensitivity around issues of sovereignty and non-intervention. Both India and Pakistan have used international platforms to advance their narratives, but neither has demonstrated sustained willingness to internationalize the conflict in a way that allows for binding third-party mediation (MPIDSA, 2017).

Post-9/11, the global focus on terrorism significantly altered the external environment of the conflict. Pakistan's historical support for non-state actors in Kashmir came under increased international scrutiny, affecting its global image and foreign policy posture. As Fair (2014) notes, the intensification of counterterrorism discourses placed Pakistan's strategic calculus under pressure, even as it continued to differentiate between "good" and "bad" militants in its regional strategy.

More recently, emerging technological and informational threats have introduced volatile new dimensions into the conflict. Disinformation campaigns and media sensationalism have played a destructive role in escalating tensions. As Aqil Shah (2025) highlights, during crisis situations, nationalist media on both sides often spread misinformation, including fabricated reports of attacks or victories, in the absence of verified communication. For instance, exaggerated claims by Indian television news channels during recent confrontations—including false reports of attacks on Karachi or the seizure of Pakistani cities—created a hyper-nationalist environment that fuelled public hysteria and impaired rational policymaking. At the same time, Pakistan's state-controlled narratives have also played a role in misrepresenting ground realities. The absence of transparent, real-time diplomacy and the prevalence of emotionally charged media narratives amplify the risk of miscalculation.

Furthermore, the emergence of drone warfare and cyber operations adds unpredictability to future confrontations. These asymmetric tools blur traditional boundaries of warfare, complicating existing frameworks of

deterrence and diplomacy. They also raise serious questions about accountability, escalation control, and the role of third-party actors in crisis management. Thus, while external actors have the potential to influence de-escalation, their involvement often introduces additional complexities. Strategic alignments, power politics, and informational warfare frequently undermine constructive diplomacy and exacerbate insecurity in the region.

#### **4.5. Prospects for Conflict Resolution**

Over the decades, peace initiatives between India and Pakistan have encompassed a range of diplomatic and confidence-building efforts, including bilateral dialogues, confidence-building measures (CBMs), Track II diplomacy, and back-channel negotiations (ORF, 2019). Landmark agreements such as the Simla Agreement (1972) and the Lahore Declaration (1999) laid foundational frameworks aimed at peaceful dispute resolution and normalization of relations. However, these efforts have repeatedly been undermined by outbreaks of violence, cross-border terrorism, and political upheavals.

Scholars argue that sustainable peace requires moving beyond elite-level diplomacy toward multi-track peacebuilding. Lederach's (1997) conceptualization of peacebuilding emphasizes engaging multiple layers of society—grassroots initiatives, cultural exchanges, and economic cooperation—as essential mechanisms for fostering mutual trust and social reconciliation. The Military and Political Dynamics Studies Association (MPIDSA, 2018) similarly underscores the importance of people-to-people contact and institutionalized dialogue in mitigating long-standing enmity.

Central to any viable peace process are political will, significant reduction of militarization along contentious borders, and sincere attention to human rights concerns, particularly in Kashmir, where civilian populations have borne the brunt of the conflict (Bose & Jalal, 2021). Yet, despite intermittent dialogues and ceasefires, the prospects for conflict resolution remain elusive. Deep-rooted mistrust, entrenched historical grievances, and unresolved territorial disputes continue to block progress.

The cyclical nature of hostilities—marked by wars, skirmishes, and insurgencies—exemplifies the fragile and volatile nature of bilateral relations. Incidents of cross-border terrorism, compounded by political instability and assertive military posturing, repeatedly derail peace overtures. Furthermore, powerful domestic constituencies within both nations—ranging from political factions to military establishments and nationalist groups—often benefit from sustaining a hostile narrative, thereby complicating efforts at rapprochement.

The challenge is further compounded by inconsistent diplomatic engagement and the pernicious influence of hyper-nationalistic media rhetoric, which frequently inflames public opinion and constrains

policymakers. Emerging security threats such as cyber warfare and drone operations introduce new uncertainties and escalation risks, rendering the conflict environment increasingly precarious.

Taken together, these structural, ideological, and technological barriers form a complex web that hinders the possibility of a lasting and meaningful resolution. Any durable peace will require addressing these multifaceted challenges comprehensively, with sustained commitment from both state actors and civil society.

## **5. Conclusion**

The India-Pakistan conflict remains one of the most deeply entrenched and multifaceted disputes in modern international relations, shaped by a complex interplay of historical grievances, nationalistic ideologies, and enduring security dilemmas. Achieving lasting peace between the two nations continues to be an extraordinarily difficult endeavour, yet a combination of sustained political dialogue, incremental trust-building measures, and concerted efforts at societal reconciliation offers potential pathways toward resolution.

This study has explored the persistent and layered nature of the rivalry, tracing its origins back to the 1947 Partition, which created divergent national identities and strategic competition, most notably over the disputed region of Kashmir. Pakistan regards Kashmir as an unresolved issue stemming from Partition, viewing its claim as integral to its national identity and statehood narrative. Conversely, India asserts Kashmir as an inalienable part of its sovereign territory, a stance firmly embedded within its civilizational and constitutional framework.

Pakistan's perception of India as a dominant regional power has been a driving force behind its nuclear strategy, employing deterrence to offset what it views as existential threats. Despite numerous efforts by international actors—including the United Nations and the United States—to mediate and facilitate dialogue, the conflict remains unresolved. The global post-9/11 War on Terror has further complicated the geopolitical dynamics, with both countries seeking to shape American policies and public opinion to support their respective narratives on terrorism and influence, particularly in Afghanistan.

Ultimately, this paper underscores how deep-seated mistrust, ongoing heavy militarization along contested borders, and unresolved territorial disputes continue to obstruct meaningful progress toward peace and stability in South Asia. Without addressing these structural and ideological barriers through sustained, multi-layered engagement and a genuine commitment to reconciliation, the prospects for a durable and comprehensive resolution will remain bleak.

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