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India-Pakistan Conflict in Spring 2025

India and Pakistan in early May 2025, engaged in the worst fighting between the two nuclear powers in decades. The crisis was sparked by the deadliest terrorist attack in Kashmir since 2019 and the government of India's retaliation against the government of Pakistan, which it holds accountable for the attack. The countries maintain conflicting territorial claims in Kashmir, which has been divided by a heavily militarized Line of Control (LOC) for over five decades. A ceasefire reached on May 10 appears uneasy, and U.S. policymakers, including in Congress, have called on the two governments to address lingering tensions and expressed concerns about the security, economic, and humanitarian implications of a sustained conflict.

Spring 2025 Crisis

On April 22, 2025, gunmen killed 26 people near Pahalgam, a rural tourist site in Indian-administered Kashmir. The attackers reportedly targeted Hindus; 25 of the dead were Indian Hindu tourists. A little-known Islamist militant group, "The Resistance Front" (TRF), initially appeared to claim responsibility, but has since denied being involved. Indian officials maintain that TRF is a front for the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a U.S.-designated terrorist group responsible for previous mass-casualty attacks inside India. President Donald Trump expressed on social media that the United States "stands strong with India against Terrorism," and offered India's government and people "our full support and deepest sympathies," sentiments reiterated by the State Department.

The government of India has not presented evidence of a Pakistani link to the attack, but on April 23 initiated retaliatory measures—most notably holding in "abeyance" the bilateral Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) of 1960, on which Pakistan depends for water supply. India's defense minister vowed those responsible for the attack would "soon get a befitting reply." Pakistan's government—which expressed condolences for the loss of life and denies any role in the attack—denounced India's "reckless and irresponsible behavior" and launched its own countermeasures. Each country revoked visas for the others' nationals. Indian security forces launched a crackdown in the Indian-administered Kashmir Valley, detaining at least 1,500 and demolishing homes. Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi reached out to world leaders; he appeared to be laying grounds for military action against Pakistan. Secretary of State Marco Rubio reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to counterterrorism cooperation with India and encouraged India to work with Pakistan to de-escalate.

Military Operations

Late on May 6 and into May 7, India's military launched "Operation Sindoor" with drone and missile strikes on nine

alleged terrorist targets in both Pakistani-held Kashmir and Pakistan proper, including the alleged LeT headquarters and that of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)—another U.S.-designated terrorist group—both in Pakistan's Punjab heartland. The strikes were India's most extensive since 1971. Pakistan condemned them as "an unprovoked and blatant act of war"; its prime minister promised "a strong and uncompromising response." India's defense ministry called them "focused, measured and non-escalatory in nature," claiming no Pakistani military facilities were targeted and no civilians harmed. Pakistan said at least 31 people were killed, including women and children, while India said at least 15 Indian civilians were killed by Pakistani shelling on its side of the LOC. Pakistan asserted that its forces had downed five Indian aircraft, which India denied.

Figure 1. Map of the Kashmir Region



Source: CRS. Boundaries, USDOS and ESRI.

Over the next three days, cross-border drone, missile, and artillery exchanges continued; India targeted Pakistan's air defense system and purported military targets in 11 Pakistani cities. (Pakistan's six largest cities are within 110 miles of the border.) Pakistan rejected claims that India had hit any "terrorist infrastructure" and accused India of deliberately targeting civilian areas and a hydropower project in Kashmir. India blamed Pakistan for killing civilians with "unprovoked" shelling, which impacted 15 Indian cities and towns near the shared border.

May 10 Ceasefire

Early on the morning of May 10 (evening in South Asia), President Trump announced on social media that, after a night of talks "mediated" by the United States, the two countries had agreed to an immediate ceasefire. Pakistan and India government officials quickly confirmed this, although neither mentioned third-party involvement. Secretary Rubio announced a "U.S.-brokered" deal, and Pakistan's prime minister followed by thanking the United States "for facilitating this outcome." India, in contrast, did not acknowledge Washington's involvement, with Indian government sources reportedly saying the ceasefire was

worked out “directly between the two countries.” India’s ruling party dismissed reports of U.S. pressure and insisted the agreement came on Delhi’s own terms. President Trump vowed to work with both countries “to see if, after a ‘thousand years,’ a solution can be arrived at concerning Kashmir.” Some analysts opined that Secretary Rubio’s late May 9 call to Pakistan’s army chief—widely considered to be the de facto most powerful figure in that country—was a pivotal moment in U.S. diplomatic efforts.

India and Pakistan both claimed victory. Indian officials claimed successful targeting of Pakistani bases, eliminating an air radar system in Lahore, and killing more than 100 militants at “terrorist camps” in Pakistan. Pakistani officials claim to have hit 26 military targets inside India and to have downed five Indian fighter jets. Both sides claimed to have killed 40-50 of their adversary’s soldiers. Analysts see limited evidence the ceasefire reflects a return to previous patterns of restraint, and Kashmiris on both sides of the LOC appear anxious about possible renewed fighting. Some observers are skeptical that India’s military retaliation will have any meaningful deterrent effect on Islamist terrorists.

India has long rejected third-party involvement in its disputes with Pakistan, leading to reported frustrations in Delhi over perceptions that the ceasefire came only after U.S. “pressure” and that the U.S. President’s rhetoric portrays India and Pakistan on equal terms. Delhi has reiterated its position that Kashmir must be addressed bilaterally, disputed President Trump’s claims that trade incentives led to the ceasefire, and has remained silent on U.S. offers to mediate the Kashmir dispute.

Background

Since Britain’s 1947 withdrawal and the partition and independence of India and Pakistan, the status of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has remained unsettled. India and Pakistan have fought four wars since 1948, three of them over the disputed region. The most recent occurred in 1999, one year after both demonstrated nuclear capabilities. The Indian-held, Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley has been the locus of a simmering separatist war since 1989, with violence peaking in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Former Pakistani officials have admitted to fueling that conflict by supplying weapons and training to militants.

India largely cut off bilateral engagement following a 2019 Pulwama, Kashmir, suicide bombing that killed 40 Indian paramilitary soldiers and was traced to JeM. A 2003 ceasefire along the LOC was reestablished in early 2021 and largely held through mid-April 2025. India’s government holds Pakistan’s government responsible for cross-border anti-India terrorism, while Islamabad emphasizes reported human rights violations in the Valley. PM Modi’s Hindu nationalist government sought to highlight new infrastructure development and a growing tourism sector as evidence of a new “normalcy” in J&K, formerly India’s only Muslim-majority state. Observers say that years living with a heavy security presence and limited civil rights have led to “festering alienation” in the region.

Potential Implications

Observers’ foremost concern during the India-Pakistan conflict has been the possible escalation up to or across the nuclear threshold, with nuclear rhetoric seen as a leading indicator of escalation. Analysts noted the reported May 9 convening of Pakistan’s Nuclear Command Authority as “soft” nuclear signaling. Fears of nuclear escalation arguably were a central motivator of U.S. government involvement. The conflict also negatively impacted international travel and trade, and disrupted markets.

India’s position on the IWT is yet to be clarified, and some reporting indicates Delhi has already launched hydropower work beyond treaty provisions. Some Indian scientists have argued that climate change has rendered the treaty unfair to India. At least 80% of Pakistan’s agricultural sector is reliant on the flows of the Indus and two of its tributaries. Islamabad calls water “a Vital National Interest of Pakistan,” saying any attempt to stop or divert the flow of water belonging to Pakistan under the IWT “will be considered as an Act of War.” Any Indian abrogation of the IWT could put India at risk of China—Pakistan’s closest diplomatic ally—moving to block the flow of the Brahmaputra River, a key water lifeline for India.

The conflict probably gave the adversaries new data about performance of weapons systems previously untested in combat. Observers say Pakistan’s PRC-supplied aircraft outperformed Indian counterparts, and Indian analysts claimed success for their Russian-supplied S-400 air defense system. It is not clear if India’s BrahMos missiles were employed. China, in particular, likely gained considerable combat intelligence from the conflict.

U.S. Engagement and Congressional Interest

For decades, U.S. policy has broadly encouraged India-Pakistan dialogue and sought to prevent bilateral conflict between the two nuclear-armed states. Since 2005, the United States and India have pursued a strategic partnership—in part as a counter to China’s growing influence—and bilateral security cooperation is much expanded after decades of Cold War-era estrangement. Congress and four successive presidential Administrations have acted to broaden and deepen U.S.-India ties. U.S.-Pakistan relations, a close alliance during the Cold War, have thinned over the past 15 years as Pakistan’s strategic relevance to the United States arguably has declined.

Some Members of Congress expressed concern about escalation; the Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee implored the two governments “to exercise restraint and prioritize diplomatic engagement,” saying “The world can ill afford instability in South Asia.” The Ranking Member of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on South and Central Asia asserted, “It is imperative that stability is restored to this critically important region.” Congress historically has played a role in addressing India-Pakistan tensions through hearings, legislation, and statements on issues including nuclear proliferation, counterterrorism, and human rights.

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