



# Warfare at the Nuclear Edge: Strategic Scenarios and Escalation Dynamics in South Asia

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## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The partition of British India in 1947 was a watershed event shaped by complex religious, cultural, and political factors, resulting in the establishment of two [separate nations](#) — India, with a Hindu-majority secular state, and Pakistan, envisioned as a homeland for South Asia's Muslims. The decision, hastily implemented by the departing British administration, unleashed unprecedented communal violence and massive population displacements. Estimates suggest that between 10 to 15 million people migrated across the newly drawn borders (debatably logical), and as many as [one million lost their lives](#) in widespread inter-communal bloodshed.

At the heart of the post-partition contention lies the princely state of Jammu and

Kashmir, a predominantly Muslim territory ruled by Maharaja Hari Singh, a Hindu monarch. Singh initially aimed for independence but, confronted by invading Pakistani tribal militias in October 1947, sought Indian military assistance and subsequently [acceded Jammu and Kashmir to India](#). This accession triggered the First Indo-Pakistani War (1947–1948), marking the beginning of the enduring Kashmir dispute. A UN-brokered ceasefire in 1949 resulted in the establishment of the Line of Control (LoC), dividing Kashmir into Indian-administered and Pakistani-administered regions. However, the ceasefire was not accompanied by a permanent political resolution, embedding the Kashmir issue deep within the [India–Pakistan rivalry](#).

Hostilities reignited prominently during the Second Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, prompted by Pakistan's "Operation Gibraltar," an attempt

to infiltrate forces into Indian-administered Kashmir to incite local rebellion. This conflict, marked by fierce ground battles particularly along the Punjab front, eventually culminated in the Soviet-mediated Tashkent Agreement (1966), which restored the [\*status quo ante bellum\*](#) without addressing underlying territorial claims. The third major conflict between India and Pakistan erupted in 1971, driven by internal political and ethnic tensions within East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). The Pakistani military's suppression of the Bengali independence movement triggered a refugee crisis, leading India to intervene decisively in support of Bengali separatists. The result was a [\*swift military victory for India\*](#), the creation of Bangladesh, and a catastrophic defeat for Pakistan. Over 93,000 Pakistani soldiers surrendered — one of the largest mass surrenders since World War II — inflicting lasting psychological and strategic [\*scars on Pakistan\*](#).

After decades of conventional conflicts, India–Pakistan hostilities entered a new phase with the advent of nuclear capabilities in the late 1990s. Both nations tested nuclear weapons in 1998, introducing a complex nuclear deterrence dynamic to their historically hostile relationship. This nuclear backdrop framed the 1999 Kargil Conflict, a limited yet highly consequential clash precipitated by Pakistani infiltration into Indian-controlled territories along the LoC in the high-altitude Himalayan sector of Kargil. India

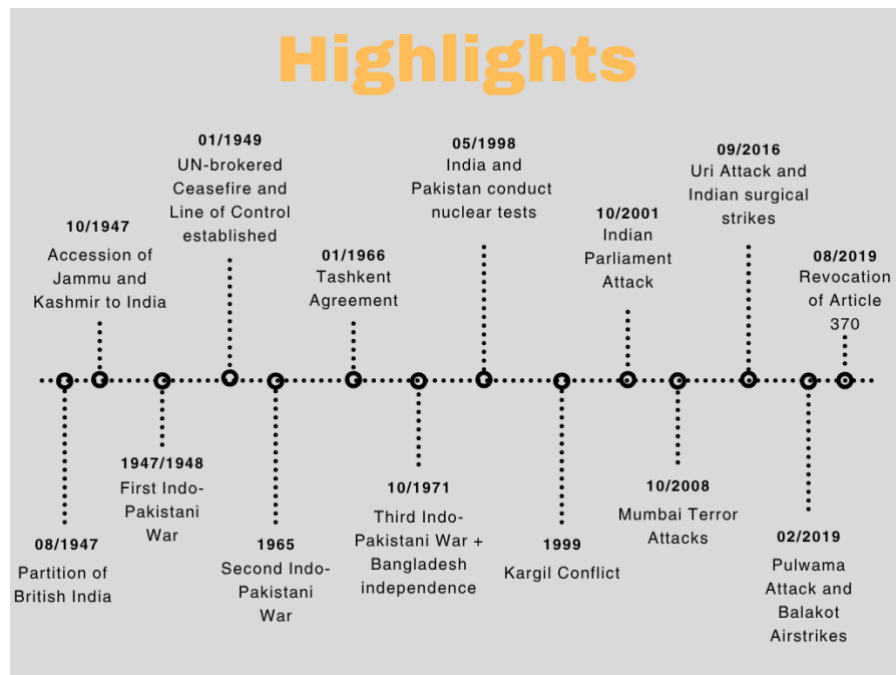
successfully regained its positions through military operations, but the conflict drew severe [\*international criticism\*](#) for bringing two nuclear-armed nations perilously close to [\*full-scale war\*](#). Tensions shifted toward asymmetric warfare in subsequent years, with Pakistan-based terrorist groups frequently accused of carrying out attacks on Indian soil. In December 2001, militants linked to *Jaish-e-Mohammed* and *Lashkar-e-Taiba* targeted the Indian Parliament, resulting in a major military standoff known as "Operation Parakram," during which India mobilized approximately half a million troops along the border. War was narrowly averted following [\*international diplomatic interventions\*](#). In November 2008, *Lashkar-e-Taiba* orchestrated a devastating terrorist attack in Mumbai, killing over 170 people. The attackers specifically targeted luxury hotels, a busy railway station, and a Jewish center, in an assault described as India's "9/11." This event significantly damaged bilateral relations and led India to suspend formal peace talks with Pakistan, demanding decisive action [\*against terrorist networks\*](#) within Pakistani territory.



In 2014, Narendra Modi was elected for the first time as Indian Prime Minister, marking the beginning of a period - still ongoing - of firm promotion and often imposition of Hindu nationalism. The period from 2016 onwards witnessed intensified military responses by India to terrorist provocations. The Uri attack in September 2016, in which militants killed 19 Indian soldiers at an army base in Jammu and Kashmir, prompted India to conduct well-publicized "surgical strikes" against terrorist infrastructure across the LoC. This marked a decisive strategic shift in India's handling of terrorism emanating from Pakistan. In February 2019, following a suicide bombing in Pulwama, Kashmir, killing 40 Indian paramilitary personnel and claimed by *Jaish-e-Mohammed*, India executed airstrikes deep inside Pakistani territory at Balakot. Pakistan retaliated with its air operations, resulting in an aerial dogfight and the capture of an Indian pilot, whose subsequent release helped defuse tensions. The Balakot episode underscored a new threshold for Indian military response and signaled heightened [risks of escalation](#) in the nuclear age. Later in 2019, the Indian government's controversial revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special autonomous status (Article 370) further intensified regional tensions. This action removed significant local autonomy and divided the state into two union territories directly governed by Modi. Pakistan viewed this as a

unilateral and provocative action, downgrading diplomatic relations, halting bilateral trade, and appealing for international mediation, thus highlighting the continued volatility and [geopolitical sensitivity of the Kashmir issue](#).

The historical trajectory of the Kashmir dispute demonstrates that it remains a deeply embedded geopolitical conflict, underpinned by religious identities, nationalistic narratives, and strategic calculations. Both India and Pakistan continue to perceive Kashmir as a core component of their national identity and security policies, thereby maintaining the region as a persistent flashpoint in South Asia and a focal point of [global security concerns](#).



## SOCIAL-DEMOGRAPHIC DIASPORA

The deep-rooted division between the Pakistani and Indian people is not a mere historical event, it is a very real and present reality.

In India, communal violence has been recorded in instances such as: in 1992's "Babri Masjid demolition" where a Mosque was destroyed by a Hindu Mob, the 2002 Gujarat riots in which Muslim and Hindus turned violent killing hundreds on both [sides](#), or even the 2020 Delhi Riots where once again blood was spilled between the two groups with the death of 53 people and 200 [injured](#). These are just some of the more evident examples of division between

the populations. Yet, it is helpful to remember that not all Indians - Hindus or Muslim - have a deep hatred of the other group. India is an incredibly populous country, which means instances like the aforementioned are bound to happen. Nonetheless, these events still teach a deeper lesson. According to the Sachar Committee Report of [2006](#), the Muslim community within India reported socio-economic and educational disadvantages of Indian Muslims. Some of the cited disadvantages were: lower literacy and education levels, higher poverty, higher rates of low-paying jobs, lower access to public services, and under-political representation. Speaking of politics, some

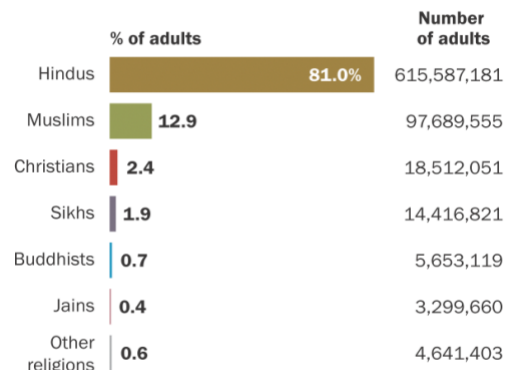
accuse Indian politics of having been discriminatory towards the Muslim minorities. The [Citizenship Amendment Act](#) appeared to exclude Muslims from the fast-track citizenships, effectively prolonging the time to earn citizenship. Moreover, the push for a [Uniform Civil Code](#) has also been criticized due to the supposed imposition of Hindu norms over Muslim ones; which, in theory, should be part of religious freedom under constitutional Indian law. To further Hindu nationalism, [Article 370](#) has been revoked. This effectively stripped Jammu and Kashmir's special status and constitutional autonomy, while interjecting a higher degree of Indian (military) presence in a majority-muslim region. All of these are dots on a line that points towards social distress among the groups.

In Pakistan, the situation is equal but opposite. Non-Muslim minorities, especially Hindus and Christians, have been subject to targeted [blasphemy laws](#). According to sections 295-298 of the Pakistani Penal code, any actions deemed offensive towards the Muslim creed will be punishable, including the death penalty. As with any speech law, the interpretation of what

is considered as a breach becomes discretionary. Therefore, if Pakistani officials really want to detain someone, justifying it with blasphemy laws is particularly easy. For example, in [2022](#) a Hindu worker was wrongly accused of blasphemy, sending shockwaves of terror within the Hindu community in Pakistan. Thankfully he escaped lynching. As previously [reported](#) by news organizations, forced conversion is an unfortunate reality in Pakistan. Even Hindu girls have been reported to be coerced into conversion. Furthermore, social exclusion is once again leading to poor access to sanitary services, as Hindus are likely segregated in *bastis*, which are secluded colonies. Fear of the mob pervades many Hindus in Pakistan. This glaring issue can be exemplified through the 2021 [mob attack](#) on a Hindu temple as a response to a bail for a eight year old Hindu child. The temple was burned and vandalized. It turned so violent that the Pakistani army was deployed to restore order. Overall, after research, it is fairly evident that non-Muslims are seen as second-class citizens in Pakistan.

## India is majority Hindu, but religious minorities have sizable populations

India's adult population by religion (2011 census)



Note: Based on adults ages 18 and older, excluding the union territories of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep.  
Source: Census of India, 2011.

"Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Pew Research Center

## POPULATION BY RELIGION

Administrative Unit	(In percent)					
	Muslim	Christian	Hindu (Jati)	Qadiani (Ahmadi)	Scheduled Castes	Others
Pakistan	96.28	1.59	1.60	0.22	0.25	0.07
Rural	96.49	1.10	1.80	0.18	0.34	0.08
Urban	95.84	2.59	1.16	0.29	0.06	0.06
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	99.44	0.21	0.03	0.24	*	0.08
Rural	99.65	0.03	*	0.22	*	0.08
Urban	98.42	1.06	0.11	0.31	0.01	0.09
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Rural	99.63	0.04	0.03	0.21	0.03	0.06
Urban	98.16	1.17	0.32	0.10	.007	0.23
Punjab	97.21	2.31	0.13	0.25	0.03	0.07
Rural	97.66	1.87	0.15	0.19	0.05	0.08
Urban	96.25	3.27	0.06	0.37	0.02	0.03
Sindh	91.31	0.97	6.51	0.14	0.99	0.08
Rural	88.12	0.14	9.77	0.12	1.79	0.06
Urban	94.67	1.84	3.08	0.17	0.14	0.10
Balochistan	98.75	0.40	0.49	0.15	0.10	0.10
Rural	99.42	0.06	0.15	0.14	0.12	0.10
Urban	96.61	1.49	1.58	0.16	0.05	0.10
Islamabad	95.53	4.07	0.02	0.34	*	0.03
Rural	98.80	0.94	*	0.23	*	0.03
Urban	93.83	5.70	0.03	0.40	*	0.03

\* Refers to a very small proportion.

Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics

## ONGOING TENSIONS

On April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2025, in Pahalgam, Kashmir and Jammu, 27 individuals were brutally murdered by terrorist members of The Resistance Front. This group is a smaller off-brand version of the infamous Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistan-based terror group which is widely accepted to be as such, even by the United Nations. Interestingly enough, the Resistance Front switched narrative. Initially they claimed the attack, but then blamed it on Indian intelligence as propaganda and that it was all orchestrated and carried out by Indian agents. Needless to say, it was a false accusation. 26 individuals were killed in the attack, who were for the most part Hindu but also some christian and a muslim too. The attackers asked the tourists to recite islamic scriptures to identify

their victims immediately. If the person would not be capable of doing so, then they would be shot by their Ak 47s.

On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, the *Indus Waters Treaty* was suspended by India, effectively cutting down significantly water supplies for Pakistan - marking a serious diplomatic escalation. This, along with the expulsion of Pakistani diplomats, Pakistan's closure of its airspace to Indian carriers, truly led most to believe that total war was inevitable. Pakistan also set aside the *Simla* agreement which pushed India and Pakistan to resolve their issues bilaterally while also respecting the line of division in Kashmir and Jammu. The upcoming weeks were characterized by military skirmishes in

the region. However, arguably Pakistani drones and missile strikes did little to no damage due to the Indian army having intercepted them almost immediately. Therefore, from the 23rd of April to May 6th, tensions were slowly escalating.

### *Operation Sindoor*

In Hindu tradition, sindoor—a red vermilion powder—is worn by married women as a symbol of their husband's life and well-being. Upon a husband's death, the sindoor is traditionally removed, marking the transition to widowhood. By naming the military response "Operation Sindoor," India paid tribute to the profound personal losses endured by these women and underscored the emotional gravity of the attack.

On May 7th, in retaliation, India executed precision strikes targeting terrorist camps in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The operation utilized military technology, including Akash missiles and suicide drones, and was completed within 23 minutes. India emphasized that the strikes were focused on terrorist infrastructure and avoided Pakistani military establishments to prevent broader escalation. In fact, they struck nine - alleged - terrorist headquarters in Pakistan. The latter claimed to have shot down Indian fighter jets, and the two actors continued exchanging strikes back and forth, including spreading cyber operations of misinformation. It all lasted until May 10th, when a ceasefire was finally brokered.

Overall, Operation Sindoor has been recognized as a significant shift in India's counter-terrorism strategy, demonstrating a more assertive stance against cross-border terrorism and setting a new precedent for future responses.

### *Real de-escalation?*

Despite a ceasefire brokered on May 10, 2025, both countries remain on high alert, with India asserting that any future acts of terrorism will be met with decisive action. Two days later, India's Prime Minister Modi was clear in denouncing terrorist attacks as vile, and that India will have a zero-tolerance policy towards these attacks. The day after Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif announced a Day of Gratitude, because Pakistan won the war. Obviously this was an incredibly misleading and factually wrong statement, as neither India nor Pakistan achieved anything concrete other than a renewed reminder that there is a clear underlying issue of trust between them. Notwithstanding the ceasefire, the situation is still quite fragile. As a matter of fact on May 21st, Pakistan was a victim of a school bus bombing in Khuzdar, and India was blamed for supporting this incident; however, no group claimed responsibility. Three days



later, Indian Home Minister Amit Shah overtly stated that Pakistan is undoubtedly sponsoring terrorism. Unfortunately, this seems a likely possibility due to various points of reference. Firstly, Pakistan has historically supported militant groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba to maintain leverage against India, especially in Kashmir. Secondly, it makes sense for Pakistan to have ties with the Kashmir Insurgency, because by supporting them, it can apply asymmetric pressure on India; not only it is in their interest as the terrorist groups support Pakistan, but they can always deny involvement with the terrorists while simultaneously using them as proxies. Although, the plausible deniability is undermined by historical ties, and not least of which is the alleged presence of Pakistani officials - whose names have been released by India - at the funerals of the designated terrorists. This signals tacit state approval or ideological alignment with these actors. Lastly, Pakistan has had inconsistent crackdowns on the terrorist organizations, even technically banning them, and yet enforcement is often still weak. Many rebrand or operate under different names with minimal interference, reinforcing perceptions of state complicity. These points reflect allegations and assessments from multiple countries and institutions; Pakistan has officially denied supporting terrorism and claims to have suffered greatly from terrorism itself.

What truly is not logically sound, is that Pakistan claims to suffer from terrorism and yet does not make it a domestic priority; any other state, with this level of terrorist activity in the region, would have much more consistent and decisive counter measures. Unless of course, there is some degree of complicity.

## GLOBAL ACTORS

In the wake of escalating conflict between India and Pakistan following India's Operation Sindoor, several global powers swiftly intervened to prevent further escalation. The United States led the effort, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Vice President J.D. Vance initiating urgent diplomatic outreach to both New Delhi and Islamabad within hours of India's strikes. U.S. mediation, though downplayed publicly by India, was instrumental in brokering the May 10 ceasefire. Rubio facilitated backchannel communications that allowed for a synchronized military pullback. Ultimately, President Trump publicly claimed credit for negotiating the ceasefire, highlighting Washington's central role as crisis manager.

The United Kingdom also played a significant role. While aligning with its Western allies, London maintained diplomatic contact with both India and Pakistan. British

officials emphasized bilateral resolution frameworks, in deference to India's aversion to overt third-party mediation. Their support lent additional weight to the push for restraint, reinforcing the Western diplomatic front without overstepping regional sensitivities.

The Gulf States—particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—moved rapidly to apply regional pressure. Riyadh dispatched envoys to both capitals within 48 hours, reportedly offering economic incentives to de-escalate tensions, especially to Pakistan. The UAE provided quiet diplomatic channels, complementing U.S. efforts while maintaining its image as a neutral interlocutor. These states used their ties with both countries to push for calm, thereby amplifying Washington's message while preserving regional agency.

China adopted a cautious approach. While traditionally closer to Pakistan, Beijing issued general warnings against instability and stressed the dangers of nuclear escalation. China's strategic investments in both countries, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and trade interests involving Indian ports, incentivized Beijing to push for the status quo without overtly favoring either side.

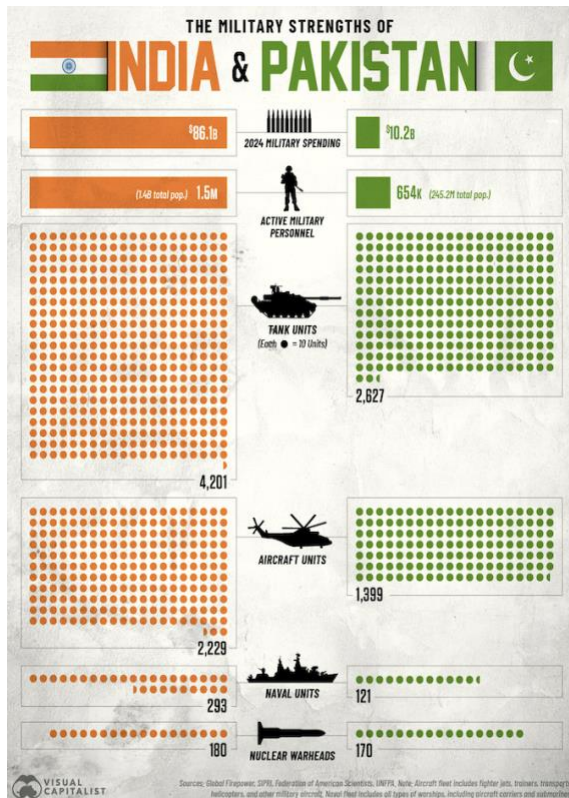
Russia remained largely passive. Moscow called for peace and reiterated past agreements like the Simla Agreement and Lahore Declaration but avoided direct involvement. Likely motivated by its arms sales

to both nations and a strategy of neutrality, Russia chose to stay diplomatically distant.

In sum, the 2025 crisis triggered a rare convergence of global powers urging restraint. While these efforts successfully halted immediate hostilities, they did not resolve deeper issues such as Kashmir and cross-border militancy. The ceasefire was a testament to coordinated diplomacy, yet it remains a temporary fix to a deeply entrenched conflict.

## MILITARY SCENARIOS

The military composition of India and Pakistan largely differ and if one simply relies on the manpower and vehicles they possess, India is one step ahead.



Source: Visual Capitalist from an aggregate of Global Firepower, SIPRI, Federation of American Scientists, and UNFPA.

As with any prediction, foreseeing the progression of the India-Pakistan war has to be taken with a grain of salt. For this reason, there might be any of the following three outcomes: Short, Medium, Long. We identified that up to three weeks would constitute a short-term war, medium up to three months, and beyond that it would be considered long-term. These points of

references were chosen on the basis of previous India-Pakistan wars and their duration.

### Short War Scenario

*Outcome:*

- Likely a Stalemate
- Limited Indian Gains

We foresee that a short-duration war is the most probable form of military conflict between the two nuclear-armed states in the modern geopolitical context. Such engagements, similar in nature to the Kargil War of 1999 or the more recent Operation Sindoor, would likely be contained within the boundaries of the Line of Control and result in limited tactical successes for India. These might include the neutralization of terrorist camps, seizure of small tracts of strategically insignificant territory, or the disruption of logistical lines. However, despite India's conventional military superiority, multiple factors would limit the conflict's scope and prevent it from evolving into a decisive strategic gain. Chief among these are Pakistan's demonstrated capacity for rapid mobilization, its significant familiarity with the terrain in Kashmir, and the near-certain diplomatic intervention by the international community. Furthermore, both India and Pakistan have nuclear arsenals, inherently favoring rapid de-escalation and mutual

restraint. The degree of restraint, we suspect, is purely speculative.

We believe that the situation would echo the early stages of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, where, notwithstanding the alleged overwhelming Russian military advantage, the Kremlin failed to yield proportionate strategic success due to international reaction, operational missteps, and entrenched defensive tactics by the Ukrainians - supported by Western powers. Therefore, in this scenario, India would demonstrate its capacity and willingness for punitive action and would prove deterrence — yet ultimately failing to alter the fundamental balance of power or resolve any underlying issues.

### *Medium-Term War Scenario*

#### *Outcome:*

- *Likely Indian Decisive Victory*
- *Conditional on Nuclear Threshold Not Being Crossed*

A medium-duration war would provide India with the time and logistical room to fully exploit its superior military capabilities. In such a conflict, we believe that India would likely move beyond limited retaliatory strikes to launch a broader, coordinated military campaign aimed at degrading Pakistan's conventional capabilities, particularly its air force, artillery, and mechanized ground units.

India's advantages in economic strength, weapons' production, satellite surveillance, and cyber capabilities would become more pronounced in this timeframe. The Indian Armed Forces' ability to operate simultaneously across multiple theatres — air, land, and sea — would stretch Pakistan's defense architecture, forcing it into a reactive stance. We claim that attrition would heavily favor India, and Pakistan's military-industrial replenishment capacity is unlikely to keep pace with sustained losses. Unlike Ukraine without NATO back-up, India alone would be capable of sustaining a war of attrition much more comfortably than Pakistan.

Nevertheless, if the leadership of Pakistan interprets the situation as existential, there would be a definite increase in the probability of a nuclear response. Furthermore, the possibility of third-party involvement cannot be overlooked. China's strategic partnership with Pakistan might manifest in diplomatic pressure, cyber operations, or even covert logistical support. This could drag the conflict into a prolonged geopolitical stalemate, akin to the grinding attrition seen in Eastern Europe. This leads us to the third scenario.

## *Long (Protracted) War Scenario*

### *Outcome:*

- *Pakistani unconventional tactics*
- *India turns into a War Time economy*
- *High Risk of Nuclear Escalation*

We retain that a long war would virtually guarantee India's *conventional* dominance. Over time, the disparity in economic reserves, manpower replacement, technological superiority, and control over supply chains would allow India to dismantle Pakistan's *conventional* warfighting capacity. Pakistan would likely deploy *unconventional* tactics such as acts of terror, or the endgame that is nuclear engagement.

Thus, this dominance comes at an unsustainable cost. As Pakistan's strategic depth erodes, so too does the threshold for nuclear escalation. A drawn-out conflict that leads to significant territorial loss, regime destabilization, or military collapse would almost certainly cross these red lines. Moreover, the strain on Indian resources and the risk of civilian and military casualties over a protracted timeline could result in domestic political instability. International actors—particularly the United States, China, and Russia—would intervene diplomatically to avoid a nuclear catastrophe, but their leverage may diminish as the war spirals out of control. Paradoxically, the more India "wins" in a conventional sense, the closer both nations inch

toward an apocalyptic outcome. The war would not end in strategic resolution but in mutual ruin, making it a lose-lose scenario despite India's initial advantages. All of this transitions to the last scenario.

## *Nuclear War*

Due to the unpredictability of war, and as we mentioned, in any point in time of any of the previous scenarios, a nuclear exchange could technically become a reality. On paper, India would never commence a nuclear strike on Pakistan due to its NFU policy. Yet, arguably, in times of war logical claims and promises can easily be broken. Pakistan never claimed that it follows a no-first-use policy, so if it ever deems India as a mortal threat, then it probably will make use of them. Documents suggest that Pakistan's nuclear doctrine allows for the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the face of [existential threats](#).

Ultimately, the most likely of these scenarios is that if either of the two do not strike an initial blow so destabilizing to their foe in days within the beginning of the conflict, then it will protract in time. While India has more than enough manpower and military strength to take down the Pakistani regime, the latter can easily deploy proxy fighters that inevitably might create proxy fights similar to those that unfortunately have characterized many Middle Eastern regions.



## STRATEGIC LESSONS FROM THE INDO-PAKISTANI CONFLICT: AN NSSI ANALYSIS

Drawing from the recent escalations and the broader historical context, we came up with three fundamental strategic lessons that might explain the structural dynamics of the Indo-Pakistani conflict. These lessons extend beyond military calculations and underscore the enduring consequences of colonial legacies, the persistent challenge of asymmetric warfare, and the irreplaceable role of international diplomacy in containing escalation between nuclear-armed states.

### *Historical Legacies and Structural Injustice: The Colonial Foundations of Conflict*

At the root of the modern India–Pakistan conflict lies the careless and geopolitically myopic partition of British India in 1947. Decisions taken by former colonial powers—particularly Britain—laid the groundwork for enduring hostility by drawing arbitrary borders, overlooking deep-seated religious, economic, and social divides, and failing to establish mechanisms for long-term conflict resolution. The British partition has woven the violent mistrust that is still present in the region.

Western powers have consistently evaded responsibility for this historical engineering, often framing contemporary tensions as the sole burden of South Asian nations. Yet, by disregarding complex societal dynamics and prioritizing expedient withdrawals, they effectively paved the way for sustained conflict. Human history suggests that where there are competing interests—especially regarding territory, religion, or resources—conflict becomes nearly inevitable. When a geopolitical architecture is constructed with conflict in its blueprint, it is unsurprising that states and societies follow the path laid before them.

This is not merely a matter of historical grievance; it is a strategic reality. The Kashmir dispute is not just about land or identity; it is about ideology, water resources, and regional power dynamics. The Indus Waters Treaty, historically a pillar of bilateral cooperation, has now become a potential weapon. The 2025 suspension by India signaled not only diplomatic rupture but the strategic use of ecological leverage in warfare. Any modern analysis of Indo-Pakistani tensions must begin with an understanding that present hostilities are not just reactions to recent events but are rooted in foundational fractures designed by external powers.

## *Asymmetric Warfare and the Limits of Conventional Superiority*

As we highlighted, one of the defining features of the India–Pakistan standoff is the asymmetrical nature of warfare. While India holds clear conventional superiority—both in terms of military capacity and economic resilience—its strategic freedom is repeatedly undermined by the persistence of asymmetric threats originating from Pakistan-based militant groups. Organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, long alleged to have ties with Pakistani intelligence services, operate not just as rogue entities but as instruments of a broader geopolitical strategy. These groups target both civilians and military installations, use religious ideology to mobilize support, and operate with plausible deniability. Their strategy aligns with known asymmetric warfare doctrines: blending into civilian populations, employing shock tactics, avoiding formal uniforms or insignia, and pursuing political aims through sustained violence. These organizations endure because they exploit the structural weaknesses of open societies and often enjoy at least tacit state protection.

What makes this case uniquely dangerous is that Pakistan, a nuclear-armed state, not only tolerates but at times appears to endorse or facilitate such proxies. This presents a strategic conundrum: how does a conventional power like India respond meaningfully to

terrorism when the sponsor of that terrorism is itself protected by a nuclear umbrella?

Lastly, most importantly, in contemporary warfare it seems that if a state sponsors terrorism, it is incredibly difficult to tackle it in a substantial manner. It seems that asymmetric warfare is almost as effective as normal warfare. The latter may ultimately swing wars, but asymmetric warfare is extremely enduring and hard to completely eradicate. In other words: defensively or as a pressure tool terrorism is incredibly resilient and relatively effective, instead as an actual form of political change - especially in a war - it never brought real results.

## *The Indispensability of International Diplomacy and Strategic Deterrence*

If there is one consistent theme across episodes of Indo-Pakistani escalation, it is the indispensable role played by international diplomacy. Whether during the Kargil conflict, the 2001 Parliament standoff, the 2019 Balakot strikes, or the 2025 Operation *Sindoor*, global powers have played a critical role in preventing total war.

The logic is simple but powerful: in a world of nuclear weapons, diplomacy is not optional. It is the frontline of deterrence. The complex web of alliances functions not only to balance

power but also to contain irrational escalation. China's involvement through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) makes it an interested stakeholder in regional stability, even as its territorial disputes with India heighten risks. The United States, long an ally of Pakistan and increasingly a strategic partner of India, walks a delicate diplomatic line that can sometimes serve as a crucial buffer.

Multilateral frameworks, back-channel communications, and economic interdependencies contribute to the containment of hostilities. But diplomacy requires capable actors—leaders and institutions who understand the stakes, can mediate conflicting interests, and possess the credibility to pressure both sides. In the absence of such actors, escalation becomes more likely,

especially when domestic political pressures in India and Pakistan reward belligerent posturing.

## CONCLUSION: A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE FOR REALISM AND RESTRAINT

The Indo-Pakistani conflict is no longer just about national pride or territorial claims. It is a convergence of strategic interests, religious ideology, asymmetric violence, ecological power, and global geopolitics. Recognizing this complexity is essential. For both India and Pakistan, the greatest challenge is not how to win the next war—but how to avoid it.

