

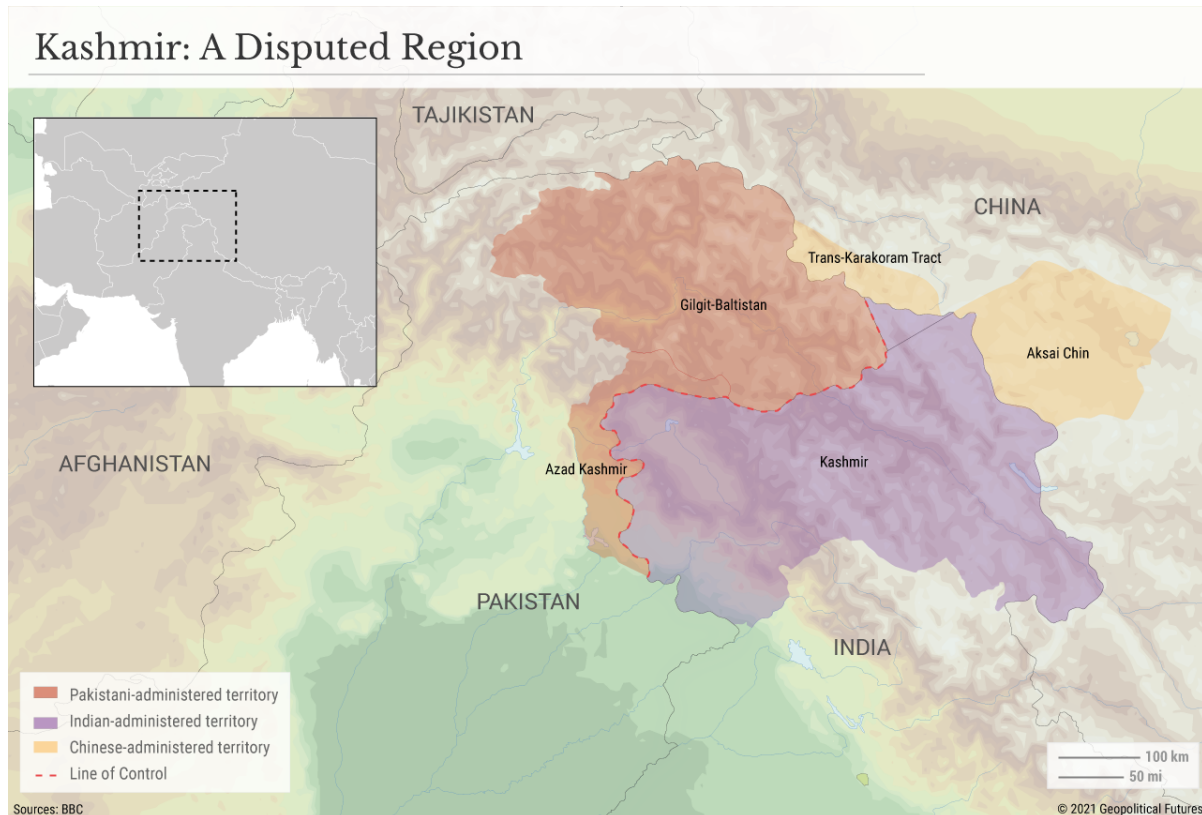
What the Latest India-Pakistan Conflict Means for the US

by Kamran Bokhari - April 25, 2025

A recent attack in the India-controlled region of Kashmir, reportedly conducted by Pakistan-backed militants, came at a bad time for the government in New Delhi. Whereas India was once poised to benefit from the U.S.-China trade war, it now must turn its attention to Pakistan. China, for its part, is a staunch regional competitor of India's and so has much to gain from this distraction, which, in turn, undermines U.S. efforts to manage its affairs with Beijing. It seems that now, as always, India's strategic environment is preventing it from achieving its geopolitical potential.

On April 24, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said his country would "identify, track and punish" those responsible for the April 22 attack, which killed 27 people in the Kashmiri tourist town of Pahalgam. He also announced a rash of retaliatory measures, including the closure of its only border crossing, the degradation of diplomatic relations and, crucially, the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty. Bracing for potential military conflict, Pakistan's National Security Committee, led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, held an emergency session in Islamabad, warning that any move by India to divert the flow of water lawfully belonging to Pakistan would be "considered an act of war."

India and Pakistan have a long and sordid history that includes four wars fought against each other since they both gained independence from Britain in 1947. The current episode is the fifth time a Pakistan-based Islamist group has attacked India in the past 25 years. Previous ones include the December 2001 assault on the Indian parliament, the November 2008 Mumbai attacks, the 2016 attack on an army brigade headquarters and the 2019 suicide bombing targeting a security forces bus in Pulwama. Despite all these escalations, New Delhi did not retaliate with force until 2016. The government described its response that year as a surgical strike across the Line of Control (the division between India- and Pakistan-administered parts of Kashmir) involving a task force of special forces, who infiltrated across the line and destroyed a militant hideout on the Pakistani side and returned safely. Pakistan denied that it had even been infiltrated, saying it was the usual firing from the Indian side of the Line of Control. Either way, the incident set a new precedent whereby India would no longer refrain from targeting militant facilities in Pakistan.



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Three years later, after the Pulwama attack, New Delhi did much more than attack across the Line of Control: It sent fixed-wing aircraft to strike a suspected militant facility in the northwestern Pakistani town of Balakot, located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Pakistan responded with airstrikes of its own, hitting targets on the Indian side of the Line of Control. Amid the fracas, a MiG-21 was shot down, and its pilot was captured by Pakistani forces. (He was quickly repatriated.) This was the first time since the 1971 war that warplanes from the two sides crossed the Line of Control, and in doing so, they set the bar much higher for the next time there would be an attack.

Two years after the incident, Pakistan and India reestablished a ceasefire on the Line of Control that has held for four years. Notably, however, India in 2019 stripped its Jammu and Kashmir state of the autonomy it had enjoyed since independence and bifurcated the region into two union territories. The move hurt bilateral relations further and has blocked Pakistan's attempts at normalizing ties ever since.

In recent years, the two rivals have been able to avoid clashes largely because of their respective preoccupations with other issues. Pakistan has been forced to manage a historic political and

economic crisis that was triggered when the military leadership parted ways with then-Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022. The military has since faced the most significant challenge to its dominance of the country's political system, even as the country's financial situation continues to spiral out of control. Meanwhile, it faces two insurgencies in the two provinces on its western flank with Afghanistan and Iran.

India, for its part, has tried to parlay its success as a regional player onto the global stage. By September 2022, the country overtook the United Kingdom to become the world's fifth-largest economy by nominal gross domestic product. More recently, it has emerged as a major strategic partner of the United States, collaborating in a wide range of areas in the defense, intelligence-sharing, technology development, and investment and trade domains. Put simply, India does not want a difficult bilateral relationship with Pakistan to distract from its global ambitions.

The U.S., meanwhile, sees India as a key ally in its efforts to counter China. Washington's November 2017 move to revive the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, consisting also of Japan and Australia, was designed to bring India into the security architecture of the Western Pacific. Six months later, the Pentagon added the Indian Ocean basin to the area of responsibility of the old Pacific Command, renaming it the Indo-Pacific Command and thus further cementing India's role as a critical player in the Asian maritime space. Even if India were not constrained by South Asian security, it would need time to upgrade its military capabilities to be able to become an effective U.S. partner.

Similarly, Washington would like for India to be a manufacturing alternative to China so that it can ease its dependency on its exports and thus its exposure to Chinese leverage. New Delhi is extremely keen to play that kind of geoeconomic role. But it will have a hard time achieving that goal if it has to worry about attacks from Pakistan-based militants. India simply cannot escape the insecurity in its strategic environs.

This is all welcome news for China. Beijing has its fair share of problems with Pakistan, but all things equal, it believes the India-Pakistan conflict will weaken the U.S.' hand. And it will likely complement China's own military buildup on the border with India – which has accelerated in recent years and which is designed to force New Delhi to spend costly resources to defend itself in high-altitude terrain. In that way, India will have less bandwidth to devote to bluewater navigation in the Indian Ocean, much less the Pacific.

Thus, the India-Pakistan standoff ultimately contravenes Washington's strategy to contain China. And here, the timing matters because the U.S. is trying to extricate itself from conflicts around the world. The Trump administration is trying to end the wars in Ukraine and Gaza and avoid another

one with Iran. Now, it will need to focus on South Asia too.

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