

# The impact of the latest flare-up between Pakistan and India

By Angelo Katsoras

The recent escalation in the long-simmering conflict between Pakistan and India is the most significant in many years and has the two nuclear-armed rivals once again at each other's throats. India launched air strikes against Pakistan on May 7 in response to a deadly militant attack on tourists in Indian-administered Kashmir on April 22. India asserts Pakistan supported and aided the attack, a charge Pakistan has denied.

Amid the fog of war and conflicting claims, India reported hitting terrorist infrastructure at several locations in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and Punjab. Pakistan denied that these sites were used by terrorists and claimed to have shot down five Indian fighter jets and destroyed several Indian security checkpoints along the Line of Control. Soon after, both sides targeted each other's military bases with drones and missiles, just before a ceasefire was announced.

In an unprecedented move, India has also suspended the Indus Waters Treaty, which had been in effect since 1960. Some analysts see this as a dangerous shift toward the weaponization of water. The Indus River system is vital to Pakistan, as over 80% of its arable land depends on this water supply.<sup>1</sup>

## Historical background

This latest round of hostilities is the continuation of decades of tensions over the disputed region of Kashmir, which began after India was partitioned in 1947. Both nations claim the entire region, but each controls only a part of it. Since gaining independence from Britain in 1947, India and Pakistan have fought three full-scale wars in 1947, 1965, and 1971—and have had dozens of more minor clashes over the past two decades.

Since India (1974) and Pakistan (1998) became nuclear powers, however, their armed conflicts have been limited to aggressive skirmishes, as both sides have taken steps to avoid crossing the nuclear red line.

## Great power rivalry complicating the landscape

A new era of great power rivalry looms over the long-running conflict between the two nations.

Despite its traditional policy of non-alignment, India has increasingly aligned itself with the United States as successive American administrations have courted the South Asian giant to counterbalance China's global influence. Both economic and defence ties have been strengthened. In recent years, India has increased its arms purchases from the United States, France, and Israel. Russia remains India's largest arms supplier, but its share of this market has declined to 36% in 2020-2024 from 55% in 2015-2019 and 72% in 2010-2014.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note, however, that India has significantly increased its energy ties with Russia. From December 2022 to the end of March 2025, India purchased 38% of Russia's oil exports, a significant increase from low single digits prior to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.<sup>3</sup>

Where Pakistan is concerned, Washington's influence over the country has waned in the past decade as it moved into China's orbit. Pakistan is a key participant in China's Belt and Road Initiative and is purchasing more and more of its weapons from China. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, China has supplied 81% of Pakistan's imported weapons over the past five years.

These shifting alliances make it more challenging for the major powers to assume the role of a neutral arbiter between the two countries.

## What lies ahead?

The most troubling aspect of the recent military escalation is the potential use of nuclear weapons. While estimates vary, it is believed that Pakistan and India each possesses approximately 180 nuclear warheads.

The good news is that both sides appear to have agreed to a ceasefire, though each has accused the other of violating it. The situation seems to be calming down as both countries claim to their populations to have come out on top in this four-day conflict. This follows the trend of previous flare-ups. In the past two decades, they have engaged in several major skirmishes. Each time, the two sides have engaged in tit-for-tat military exchanges, declared victory, and then de-escalated. Their nuclear arsenals serve as a reminder to each other not to take things too far.

The bad news is that the growing use advanced weapons such as drones, fighter jets, and missiles have made it easier for both sides to target areas outside the traditional disputed territory of Kashmir, escalating limited conflicts to higher levels of violence. This stands in sharp contrast with what happened in 2016, when India sent special forces into Pakistan-administered Kashmir without any retaliation from Pakistan, and in 2019, when both sides launched rapid airstrikes with limited impact. This makes it increasingly difficult for both sides to walk the fine line of a military response that satisfies domestic audiences while avoiding the spiral of ever more aggressive counterattacks.

<sup>1</sup> "Can India really stop river water from flowing into Pakistan?," BBC April 25, 2025

<sup>2</sup> "Trends In International Transfers 2024," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2025

<sup>3</sup> "March 2025 — Monthly analysis of Russian fossil fuel exports and sanctions," CREA, April 15, 2025



It is important to note, also, that both sides have economic reasons to de-escalate. A prolonged conflict would significantly hinder India's ambitions to become one of the world's leading economic powers, making it more difficult to capitalize on the U.S. economic pivot away from China. For Pakistan, after years of economic turmoil, a protracted conflict would undermine its tentative IMF-backed economic recovery and send the country back into recession.

A crucial measure of the ceasefire's longevity will be whether India reinstates the Indus Waters Treaty.

## **Bottom line**

Several factors, including new weapons technology and shifting great power alliances, will make this ceasefire tenser than previous ones. Even if full-scale war remains unlikely, the potential for increasingly aggressive hostilities to break out and for miscalculations to be made by either side in the future remains elevated.

Finally, this on again, off again conflict zone adds to the geopolitical tensions on the global landscape already marked by the war in Ukraine, conflicts in the Middle East, great power rivalry, and growing protectionism. This conflict between Pakistan and India also risks reinforcing the view among smaller countries that the way to protect themselves from larger geopolitical rivals is to build their own nuclear arsenals.



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