



[Could Clashes Between India and Pakistan Develop into Full-Scale War?](#)

Recent military actions between India and Pakistan have elicited concern regarding the possibility of an all-out war. The inflaming of tensions and cross-border strikes by the neighboring countries have arisen in the aftermath of last month's Pahalgam attack whereby 26 civilians were killed in an Indian-administered region of disputed Kashmir. India accused Pakistan of being behind the attack, a charge which Pakistan vehemently denies, leading to a standoff which eventually devolved into clashes between the two countries. Analysts have noted that the risks of further escalation and a spiraling of the situation are significant, especially considering the more centralized areas where India has chosen to carry out its strikes in Pakistan this time – a distinct difference from the 2019 India-Pakistan border skirmishes. Back then, India struck a single and remote location in Pakistan as opposed to its current ones which have hit more densely populated parts of Pakistan's Punjab province – a place not targeted since 1971 – and its administered areas in Kashmir. As a result of this, issue experts argue that Pakistan's leadership will feel that it possesses the right to respond to India in a fairly large manner. Still, a full-scale war is considered unlikely due to the high risks and consequences, however, the situation remains volatile as global actors urge both nations to exercise restraint and work to de-escalate through diplomacy.

Although flare-ups between India and Pakistan are not an abnormal occurrence, with recent episodes taking place in 2016 and 2019, India's military strikes this time around have been deemed to be markedly more aggressive than the aforementioned instances. Several were carried out in Pakistan's populous Punjab region, which had not been attacked by India since the two countries fought a full-scale war in 1971 that ultimately resulted in the establishment of Bangladesh as an independent nation. Shelling, the exchanging of fire, and drone attacks have been seen across both sides of the Line of Control (LoC) in disputed Kashmir, as well as areas along the India-Pakistan border. Some observers have suspected that India may feel that any strong criticism of its actions from the United States and other global leaders is unlikely, and therefore, it has license to be more aggressive than it otherwise would normally be. On the flip side, Pakistan is making a clear effort to portray India's military actions as belligerent, and in doing so, seeking to convince the world that the strikes necessitate a defensive response while at the same time rallying the public in support of one.

In helping to explain why things transpired the way that they have, subject matter experts have drawn attention to factors seemingly influencing the actions of the Modi government in India. Following the late April Pahalgam attack, there has been a high level of pressure on Indian officials to forcefully initiate a military action against Pakistan. As one commentator stated, "it would have been unfathomable for India's government not to respond militarily, given Modi's self-projection as an administrator who is strong, confident, and decisive." Furthermore, the Pahalgam attack had sparked a desire for retribution among the Indian public against those viewed as the enablers behind it – whether this is in fact accurate or not, it was certainly what many Indian government officials convinced a large segment of the population regarding who was responsible for the attack.

Adding to the seriousness of the circumstances surrounding the cross-border strikes between India and Pakistan is the fact that the two countries are among the world's nuclear-weapon states, with both possessing a substantial number of nuclear warheads. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) – a think tank that conducts research and provides data on armaments and military expenditures – estimates that Pakistan and India

each possess about 170 nuclear warheads. This component undoubtedly contributes to the international alarm regarding any spike in hostilities, as has manifested over the preceding weeks. Since the two countries declared themselves nuclear weapon states back in 1998, each has developed an arsenal that includes long-range missiles which have enough of a range to target the other. Additionally, India and Pakistan are believed to be two of the world's five-largest arms importers, demonstrating the scope of their weapons stockpile, and thus the potential devastation of an expanded and wider-scale conflict between the two. In fact, India was the second-largest arms importer across the entire globe between 2020 and 2024 (behind only Ukraine), while Pakistan's imports during the past decade have increased by a whopping 61 percent.

The current state of affairs has led many to describe it as the most serious crisis and expansive military clashes between the neighboring countries in decades, as there have been accounts of initiated attacks in India and Pakistan well beyond their disputed Kashmir border. The scale of the military exchanges and the level of rhetoric on both sides mean it will be challenging to diffuse hostilities, and with the back-and-forth escalations, the region finds itself at a junction where a misstep runs the risk of widening the conflict even further. Whether this happens or not, and to what extent, remains to be seen.