

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

AMMAR ALI JAN

09.06.2025

Towards Disaster

Now that the dust has settled after the battle between India and Pakistan – the most significant aerial conflict between the two countries to date – it is worth reflecting on its wider significance. What were its origins and how will it affect the politics of the region? The immediate trigger was the terror attack in Pahalgam carried out by Kashmiri militants in late April, in which 26 tourists were killed. The Indian government accused its Pakistani counterpart of having orchestrated the shooting. Pakistan denied the allegations and offered to launch a joint investigation, but the Indian political class was implacable, and began beating the drum for war. Pakistan's military high command declared that the country would retaliate against any aggression, raising the possibility of nuclear confrontation. It was not long before the two sides began to exchange fire, leaving 31 dead over the next four days.

The conflict erupted on 7 May, when India fired a barrage of missiles at so-called 'terrorist sites' inside Pakistan. More than two dozen civilians were killed, including at least one child. Pakistan's military responded by deploying Chinese-manufactured J10 aircraft armed with PL-15 missiles – which meant that the conflagration was, on one level at least, a test of the PRC's military hardware against that of the West. As reports began to circulate that five Indian jets had been downed in the battle, some defence analysts remarked that the real winner of the skirmish was China.

Both sides immediately claimed victory after this initial round of hostilities. Yet hopes of a swift negotiated settlement were dashed on 8 May, when India sent a large number of Israeli-manufactured drones into Pakistani territory. The Pakistani military claimed it had intercepted nearly all of them before they could damage civilian or military infrastructure. But the onslaught was stepped up two days later, with more Indian drones and missiles hitting

densely populated civilian areas in Pakistan's major cities. At this point the Pakistani military leadership decided to retaliate with aerial and drone strikes of its own, some of which targeted Indian airbases. Talk of nuclear escalation suddenly seemed credible, and panic began to spread.

Accounts of what happened next are varied. One version suggests that, having thwarted India's attempt to assert its aerial superiority, Pakistan effectively forced its neighbour to accept a ceasefire. Others claim that Pakistan was feeling cornered and signalled its readiness to use the nuclear option if the conflict persisted, which accelerated talks to end the fighting. Either way, backdoor negotiations with Washington ended up brokering a fragile peace which Donald Trump announced on social media, claiming credit for the deal. In India, critics alleged that the government had buckled under US pressure without achieving any of its war aims. In Pakistan, the atmosphere was euphoric. Many there believe that the Chinese-backed Air Force has now successfully re-established military equilibrium and undermined India's claim to regional hegemony.

The recent conflict follows decades of tension, periodically erupting into violence, over the disputed status of Kashmir. Both India and Pakistan asserted sovereignty over the Muslim-majority territory after partition in 1947 – the former seized two-thirds of the area while the latter claimed the remaining third – and have since turned it into one of the most militarized regions in the world. After four decades of anger and agitation in the occupied valley, the Indian military's alleged rigging of the 1987 elections provoked a series of mass riots. They culminated in an armed insurgency in 1989 led by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), which seeks to establish a secular independent state. Throughout the 1990s, many of the groups fighting in the territory received training in militant camps across Pakistan. The Indian military responded to the unrest with a brutal counter-insurgency strategy involving extrajudicial killings, sexual violence and torture. In 2001, Pakistan itself sought to clamp down on Kashmiri militant groups and designated them as terrorist organizations, yet it continued to maintain its official support for Kashmir's right to self-determination. (Pakistan has always been confident that the overwhelming majority of Kashmiris would favour joining Pakistan if given the choice; but this is no longer certain, as discontent over inflation and repression has heightened the appeal of nationalist forces demanding separate statehood for Kashmir.) Still, these Kashmiri groups retained deep roots in Pakistan, which made them difficult to dismantle. This difficulty was perceived by the Indian state as an unwillingness on Pakistan's part to combat terrorism, which deepened the animosity between the two countries.

The issue finally became a global flashpoint in 2019 when the Modi government abolished Article 370: a provision that had granted considerable autonomy to the Kashmiri state. Delhi claimed this was merely an attempt to normalize Kashmir's political status, yet it was seen by most Kashmiris as a direct attack on their identity and civil liberties. Resistance was met with intensified repression, which over the last six years has succeeded in stamping out most public dissent. The Modi regime was able to assert victory, claiming that it had stabilized the situation and restored order in the disputed territory. It was only with the Pahalgam attacks that this narrative was undermined.

Three crucial factors form the backdrop to the conflict. The first, and longest-standing, is the denial of Kashmiri people's right to self-determination. The second is the character of the regimes in Delhi and Islamabad, both of which have turned to increasingly authoritarian methods as their political legitimacy has weakened. And the third is the New Cold War between the US and China which has reshaped the region's role in the world-system. Together, these interconnected dynamics have pushed India and Pakistan towards disaster. How did they develop historically?

Independent India was initially a 'dirigiste' state, driven by a strong developmentalist and egalitarian ethos which emerged from the anticolonial struggle. Nehru's project involved an ambitious industrial policy as well as state support for the country's peasantry and a Non-Aligned approach to foreign affairs. He assumed a leading role in the Bandung Conference of 1955 and became a major advocate of the Palestinian cause. Yet, from the beginning, this outlook suffered from various inconsistencies. Nehru and his Congress party failed to undertake a radical restructuring of land, caste or industrial relations. Peasants' and workers' struggles – especially those led by communists – were violently suppressed. India's supposed commitment to Third World solidarity was undermined by its wars with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965-71), as well as its unabashedly colonial relationship with Kashmir from 1948 onwards. Such contradictions generated strong opposition from both the right and the left, paving the way for new movements based on class, caste and religion, which eventually tore apart the Nehruvian consensus.

The outcome was the triumph of the Bharatiya Janata Party, a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization founded on deep enmity towards Muslims and Pakistan. Having won only two seats in the 1984 elections, the BJP shot to national prominence after it led mobs to destroy a mosque allegedly built on the site of the historic Hindu temple in Ayodhya. As the Congress-led government liberalized the economy and dismantled the dirigiste state in the early 1990s, many influential business groups aligned themselves with this resurgent strain of Hindu

nationalism as an alternative to organized left-wing forces. Narendra Modi – the former Chief Minister of Gujarat, who was credibly accused of having overseen the murder of more than a thousand muslims in that role – came to embody this ‘Hindutva-corporate alliance’ and was elected prime minister in 2014. Multinational corporations, from Microsoft and Amazon to CitiBank and JPMorgan Chase, thus developed closer ties with India’s elite and increased their investments in its emerging market. The effect was to globalize the country’s economy and help to reorient its politics towards Washington, culminating in the Modi-Trump meeting in early 2025, where the two leaders signed a ‘US-India Major Defence Partnership’. America has been explicit that its goal is to further the containment of China by turning India into a regional counterweight – an agenda which Delhi fully embraces. Modi’s government hopes that by ingratiating itself with the US it can establish India as the region’s unrivalled power. This, in turn, has led to a closer relationship between Israel and India, including military cooperation and plans for building the ‘India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor’ to counter China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Many Hindutva supporters referred to the Pahalgam attack as ‘our October 7th’ and demanded that Pakistan be ‘reduced to Gaza’ in its wake.

Pakistan has also been firmly in the US-led camp since it signed the SEATO and CENTO military pacts with the US in 1954 and 1955. As a frontline state in America’s anti-communist containment strategy, Pakistan benefited from significant amounts of American aid throughout the Cold War period. The only serious challenge to US hegemony since the state’s inception was the left-wing government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, which was overthrown in a violent US-backed coup in 1977. Since then, the Pakistani economy has been heavily reliant on rents obtained from imperialist wars in the Middle East. One of the darkest aspects of this legacy was the so-called ‘Afghan Jihad’, a CIA-supported clandestine operation that turned Pakistan into a base camp for militant organizations fighting against the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan during the 1980s. Fuelled by US dollars and Saudi patronage, thousands of Pakistanis joined a global network of Islamist militants that encompassed hundreds of Madrassahs and Jihadi training camps.

Pakistani politicians have routinely used the threat of Indian aggression to justify the militarization and securitization of the polity, casting any significant opposition force as an agent of Delhi. This dynamic has tightened the army’s stranglehold on politics and allowed it to crush dissent, particularly in the restive provinces of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. With the onset of the ‘War on Terror’, however, the US’s regional priorities shifted. Islamist militancy was no longer a useful cudgel against communism; it was now the

ultimate enemy of humankind. The Pakistani military was thus forced to reverse its policy of supporting Islamist forces and begin fighting against them. This was no easy task, because by that time the militants had become deeply entrenched in Pakistan's state institutions, civil society and transnational arms networks. The counter-insurgency soon descended into a bloodbath, claiming 40,000 civilian lives between 2001 and 2018.

Pakistan's strategic relations with China have also come under increasing stress as US objectives have changed. After the Sino-Soviet split and the Sino-India War of 1962, Pakistan began cultivating close ties with the PRC as a means of countering its eastern neighbour; Washington, which began pursuing its own rapprochement with China under Nixon, did not stand in the way. As late as 2015, Pakistan was still able to occupy a privileged position between these two world powers: joining the multi-billion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) while still acting as the primary conduit for NATO supplies to US military bases in Afghanistan. Yet over the last decade this approach appears to have run its course, as Pakistan has faced relentless US pressure to abandon its strategic relationship with China and align squarely with the West. The Pakistani elite is split between its pro-Western and pro-Chinese factions – threatening the state's capacity for long-term planning.

As its long-standing geopolitical position has become increasingly untenable, the Pakistani regime has also suffered a major legitimacy crisis on the domestic front. It is grappling with skyrocketing inflation, including major hikes in energy prices, and severe cuts to health and education budgets imposed by the IMF. With Imran Khan and his PTI party on course to win last year's elections, the government resorted to blatant rigging to keep him out of office. It dealt with the ensuing protests and criticism by jailing opponents, Khan among them, and banning social media sites. All this has coincided with intensifying attacks by the separatist Baloch Liberation Army and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, a militant organization of religious extremists committed to overthrowing the federal state.

To understand the recent outbreak of conflict, then, one must look at several overlapping elements. The Kashmiri people refuse to surrender their right to self-determination, despite being brutally repressed by India and largely abandoned by Pakistan, and continue to mount resistance in violent and non-violent forms. Indian belligerence against them is clearly linked to the electoral calculus of the ruling BJP, whose Hindu-nationalist politics are based on punishing various 'outsider' groups. At the same time, Pakistan has slid further into militarism, accelerating its war against internal opponents and consolidating the army's role as the supreme decision-making power – which has created a hawkish consensus at the

highest levels of the state. Finally, the US is determined to turn India into a bulwark against China, while the Chinese themselves are attempting to prevent encirclement by the West by building strategic alliances with countries including Pakistan. These dynamics have further destabilized the already tense India-Pakistan relationship.

Wartime fervour can only provide a temporary distraction from the deepening social contradictions by which both countries are beset. Modi's economic agenda, based on privatization and deregulation, has failed to deliver for the majority of Indians. Today, the country's richest 1% hold 40% of the wealth. Trade unions have called a general strike for 6 June to protest the excessive power of corporate capital, while farmers continue to organize strong community resistance. The government has no response other than to continue its crackdown on Muslims and dissidents, especially in Kashmir, where people have been arrested or abducted in recent weeks as part of a sweeping 'counter-insurgency' operation.

Pakistan, on the other hand, remains a rentier state addicted to proxy wars and short-term super-exploitation, run by a military which can only cling to power through naked electoral fraud. The country's elites are now planning to sell off more of its natural resources and open up its land to international mining companies, in the hope that more foreign investment will arrest the ongoing economic spiral. Last year, a version of this programme was introduced in the Sindh province, where the government attempted to divert six canals from the River Indus in order to entice foreign capital into the corporate farming sector; it was later defeated by a mass movement which brought millions of ordinary people onto the streets. To avoid a repeat of this scenario, the government is ramping up repression in other areas it seeks to plunder. Groups such as the Awami Action Committee, a small political party in the Himalayan region of Gilgit-Baltistan which has vocally criticized this land-grabbing agenda, have been proscribed and their activists arrested. Whether the government can silence its critics through such coercive means remains to be seen. There is little doubt that, over the coming years, the struggle against mining-without-consent is likely to become a major focus of opposition to military rule.

The heavy-handed treatment of dissidents signals the extent to which the discourse of 'national unity', which both India and Pakistan have deployed in recent weeks, is out of step with the realities of the region: poverty, inequality, predation. When it comes to managing such problems, these states can easily switch from waging external warfare to fighting the 'enemy within', targeting internal critics rather than foreign rivals. Military escalation abroad is linked to the hardening of state power at home. In this region of two billion people, a staggering 40% still live below the poverty line, bearing the brunt of underdevelopment and

communal conflict. Only by fighting back against their exploiters can they change the conditions that lead to war.

Read on: Tariq Ali, 'On the Brink?', Sidecar.

27 MAY 2025 [POLITICS](#)