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Kashmir at the Crossroads: Analyzing Third-Party Mediation and the India-Pakistan Rivalry

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Abstract: *This research paper investigates the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan, with a specific focus on the Kashmir conflict and the critical role of third-party mediation in de-escalating tensions. The central question addressed is: How effective are third-party interventions in mitigating the Kashmir dispute and facilitating a sustainable resolution between India and Pakistan? Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the study analyzes historical instances of third-party mediation, including U.S. interventions during the Kargil crisis and the 2001–2002 military standoff, alongside other diplomatic efforts by international actors such as the World Bank and the USSR. It also examines bilateral negotiations and the limited role of the United Nations in addressing the Kashmir issue. The findings reveal that while third-party mediation has been successful in preventing immediate military confrontations, it often lacks the depth required to address the root causes of the conflict, such as deep-seated mistrust and the exclusion of Kashmiri voices from the dialogue. The paper argues that for long-term stability, major powers must transition from a crisis management approach to promoting sustainable peace through inclusive dialogue, confidence-building measures, and arms control agreements. Ultimately, addressing the underlying grievances and aspirations of the Kashmiri people is essential for a lasting resolution to the India-Pakistan rivalry.*

Key Words: Third Party Mediation, Kashmir Issue, US, USSR, World Bank

Introduction

The longstanding rivalry between India and Pakistan, primarily rooted in the territorial dispute over Kashmir, remains one of the most enduring and complex conflicts in the international system (Zulfiqar et al., 2024). Since their creation in 1947, India and Pakistan have engaged in multiple wars, skirmishes, and crises, often revolving around their claims to the predominantly Muslim region of Jammu and Kashmir. This protracted conflict has deep historical, political, and religious dimensions, compounded by both countries' competing national identities and strategic interests (Ganguly, 2001). While the conflict has fluctuated between periods of high-intensity warfare and diplomatic engagement, the issue remains unresolved, posing significant risks to regional stability, particularly in the context of nuclearization.

At the heart of this dispute lies Kashmir, a region claimed in full by both nations but controlled in parts by each. Following the partition of British India, the princely states of Jammu and Kashmir were faced with the decision of whether to join India or Pakistan. Its ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, controversially acceded to India, sparking the first Indo-Pakistani war in 1947–1948. The conflict was eventually brought to the United Nations, which called for a ceasefire and proposed a plebiscite to allow the Kashmiri people to determine their future. However, the plebiscite was never held, and Kashmir has since remained a flashpoint for India-Pakistan relations (Bose, 2003).

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Both nations' strategic concerns, national identities, and domestic political pressures have prevented a lasting solution to the Kashmir conflict. Pakistan views Kashmir as a legitimate part of its territory, primarily due to its Muslim-majority population, and perceives India's control over the region as an extension of colonialism. India's position, particularly under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is that Kashmir, including the Pakistan-administered areas, is an integral part of India. The Modi government has taken a hardline approach, significantly altering the diplomatic landscape by excluding the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, which represents various Kashmiri separatist factions, from dialogue and framing the issue strictly as a bilateral matter between India and Pakistan (Fair, [2014](#)).

The geopolitical dimension of the India-Pakistan rivalry, particularly the involvement of great powers, has also played a significant role in shaping the conflict. During the Cold War, both countries aligned themselves with competing global powers, with Pakistan securing military and economic assistance from the United States, while India, although officially non-aligned, developed close ties with the Soviet Union. These alliances further complicated the regional security dynamics and influenced the conduct of both countries during major conflicts, such as the 1965 war and the 1971 Bangladesh War (Cohen, [2004](#)).

Third-party mediation has been a recurrent feature in attempts to resolve the Kashmir conflict and other disputes between India and Pakistan. The Indus Water Treaty of 1960, mediated by the World Bank, is often cited as one of the most successful instances of third-party intervention, as it has endured various conflicts between the two nations (Wolf & Newton, [2008](#)). Similarly, the Soviet Union's role in brokering the 1966 Tashkent Agreement after the 1965 war and the United States mediation during the 1999 Kargil crisis exemplifies the impact of external actors in de-escalating tensions (Zartman, [2001](#)).

However, despite these efforts, the conflict over Kashmir remains intractable, with both sides deeply entrenched in their positions. While the international community, including the United Nations, has periodically intervened in the conflict, its role has often been limited to crisis management rather than conflict resolution (Lamb, [1997](#)). In recent years, the strategic realignments of both countries—Pakistan's growing reliance on China and India's deepening ties with the United States—have further complicated the prospects for peace, raising concerns about the broader implications of this rivalry for regional and global security (Tellis, [2008](#)).

This research paper examines the various dimensions of the India-Pakistan conflict, focusing on the role of third-party mediation, bilateral efforts, and the involvement of great powers. By analyzing key historical events and geopolitical shifts, this paper seeks to understand the factors that have perpetuated the conflict and the potential avenues for resolution.

Theoretical Framework

Third-party intervention is said to play an essential role in the resolution of a dispute. Most importantly, third-party intervention is especially relevant in this area when the parties cannot settle the issue by themselves. The approach is guided by a belief that the intervention of an external actor may provide or exert an influence that the parties cannot brush aside (Khan & Azim, [2023](#)). This is further supported by the report by Bercoitch and Houston (1996) that third-party mediation is most effective in cases where both parties have deadlocked, as was the case with India and Pakistan, as history gives reasons for grievance and territorial claims over Kashmir, which cannot be mutually resolved between these two parties.

Based on mediation theory, mediators who have no interest whatsoever in the final resolution of the dispute or are seen as neutral or influencing a position have a greater possibility of success in their efforts at mediation. India-Pakistan relations quite starkly illustrate this principle, where powerful states like the United States are involved in the dynamic relationship. The U.S. mediation in both the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, as when during the Kargil crisis and the 2002 military standoff, was effective not only because of its diplomatic weight but because both India and Pakistan recognized the country's stakes in maintaining regional stability, especially in a nuclearized environment.



Further to the postulation of the same theory, mediation by international organizations or states with an interest in preventing the destabilization of a region often leads to more durable outcomes, as echoed by Zartman (2001). This dynamic is seen in the case of the Indus Water Treaty, which was mediated by the World Bank and has gone to date and withstood various conflicts between the two countries since 1960. This further strengthens mediation since water resources are a very important asset to both nations, and therefore, the World Bank can leverage this as a condition to ensure compliance from either side.

In the words of mediation theory, interventions by third parties like this typically occur at a point in time when the risks of noncooperation—such as regional instability or international sanctions—are sufficiently high to encourage the parties in conflict to negotiate in good faith.

The Kashmir Conflict in Indo-Pak Relations

Pakistan and India have been living in a hostile environment ever since their inception (Zulfiqar et al., 2024). They have fought wars, and border skirmishes have become routine. Considering the partition plan, it is evident that Kashmir should have been part of Pakistan, being a Muslim-majority region (Wani, 2013). However, India considers it its own territory and has adopted a very hard stance on the Kashmir issue. The BJP's view on Kashmir is particularly clear; they consider the entire Kashmir region, including Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (Azad Kashmir), as an integral part of India. Before the BJP government led by PM Modi, India was somewhat convinced that there was space for trilateral engagement in resolving the Kashmir issue. Therefore, they were not reluctant to allow Hurriyat leaders to travel to Pakistan, nor did they object to meetings between Pakistani officials and Hurriyat leaders. However, when Modi's government came to power, they introduced a new strategy, limiting the issue to only Pakistan and India, leaving no space for the All Parties Hurriyat Conference in the dialogue between Pakistan and India. Consequently, in August 2014, PM Modi decided to cancel the foreign secretary-level meeting with Pakistan because the High Commissioner of Pakistan stationed in Delhi, Abdul Basit, met with separatist leaders in Delhi. Indian officials claimed that this was an interference in their internal affairs (Mohan, 2015).

Pakistan supports the role of the people of Kashmir in resolving the issue, as they have been fighting for their freedom since 1846 (Treaty of Amritsar), as discussed by Mridu Rai. The people of Kashmir have never surrendered since then, but after the 1987 election, which was blatantly rigged by the Congress party, the movement took a new turn, and they began militant activities. In the 1990s, the separatist movement split into two branches. The first branch favoured an independent state, believing that Indian-occupied and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir should be reunited, forming a sovereign, secular, and democratic state of Kashmir where every Kashmiri, irrespective of religion, would be allowed to live. This viewpoint was spearheaded by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). However, the Buddhist and Hindu minorities feared religious persecution, believing that in an independent state of Kashmir, the overwhelming Muslim majority would jeopardize their rights. They looked to the Indian government for the preservation of their rights. They further argued that if the demand for an independent state were to be pursued, it should be limited to the Kashmir Valley, where Muslims are in the majority.

The second separatist group consists of individuals with predominantly Islamist views who advocate for jihad as a means of achieving their objectives rather than a democratic struggle. This faction is primarily led by religious elites in the Kashmir Valley, who envision either merging with Pakistan or forming an independent Islamic state with strong ties to Pakistan (Ganguly, 1998). Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, the largest militant group in this movement, and Harakat-ul-Mujahideen, another key player, spearhead this armed insurgency. Additionally, various political parties sympathetic to Pakistan operate under the umbrella of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, an organization advocating for Kashmir's right to self-determination through either peaceful or militant means (Schofield, 2000; Bose, 2003). This Islamist faction's rise has played a significant role in escalating the violence in the region, particularly during the 1990s insurgency (Ganguly, 1997).

Strategic Alliances and Geopolitics in India-Pakistan Rivalry

Although territorial conflicts and religious ideology have played a major role in the India-Pakistan rivalry, one cannot deny the influence of great powers and Pakistan's unique geopolitical positioning. Shortly after its inception, the Cold War was at its peak, and Pakistan had to balance against India. India was the superior

counterpart, and the initial gestures between the two countries were not promising. To counterbalance India's strength, Pakistan formed an alliance with the United States. Early in 1952, Pakistan expressed its willingness to join the Middle East Defense Organization (MEDO). Shortly afterwards, Pakistan formally joined the Baghdad Pact in 1955, an alliance backed by the United States. After the revolution in Iraq, the treaty was renamed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1958. Similarly, after France's defeat in Indochina, the U.S. administration sought to strengthen the political system and prevent the possible spread of communism in the region. As part of its strategy, the U.S. created a collective security regime in the region, and Pakistan, being part of Southeast Asia, joined the eight members who met in Manila in September 1954 to sign a defence treaty called SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization). In 1959, a Bilateral Defense Agreement was signed between the U.S. and Pakistan, stipulating that if either country was attacked, the U.S. would take appropriate action after mutual consent. Pakistan worked hard to gain U.S. support on all issues and forums but did not receive full backing because the U.S. was more interested in India due to its potentially large economy and geostrategic position. Although the U.S. was the main weapon supplier to Pakistan in the 1950s, President Eisenhower made it clear that these weapons would not be used against India (Jabeen, [2011](#)).

On the other hand, India was a non-aligned country but leaned more towards the communist bloc. Initially, the U.S. expressed interest in befriending India, but after India's cold response, the U.S. turned to Pakistan to contain the communist wave. Later, during the 1971 war, when the U.S. and China supported Pakistan, India moved closer to the USSR, and both countries signed a defensive treaty of friendship. During this period, Pakistan and India were on opposite sides of the Cold War competition. In the 1980s, the U.S. helped Pakistan in the creation of the Mujahideen, who were later used by Pakistan in Kashmir against India as freedom fighters (Hussain, [2007](#)). However, in the changing geopolitical scenario, there has been a realignment of alliances in the region. Pakistan is increasingly aligning with China in diplomatic, strategic, and economic spheres. From 1954 to 1964, Pakistan and the U.S. enjoyed an excellent strategic partnership, with about 71% of Pakistan's total weapons imports coming from the U.S. However, during the 1965 war, the U.S. adopted an even-handed policy and stopped supplying weapons to Pakistan, prompting Pakistan to look toward China. Between 1965 and 1973, Chinese weapons exports to Pakistan rose to 59%. In recent years, the import of Chinese weapons by Pakistan has increased significantly. Between 1950 and 2018, Pakistan imported 41% of its total arms from China, and from 2015 to 2019, 73% of its arms imports came from China. Malik, [2021](#)). India, being a traditional ally of the USSR and later Russia, also seeks to reduce its dependency on Russian weapons. As the second-largest importer of weapons from 2016 to 2020, India aims to diversify its arms suppliers, although 60% of its 1.6 million-strong army still relies on Russian weapons (Pandit, [2021](#)). While India is looking to the U.S. as a potential ally, it has also signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) with the United States. This is a crucial defence deal that experts believe will strengthen bilateral relations and help counter China (Kuchay, [2020](#)).

Similarly, India has joined the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which includes Australia, the United States, and Japan, with the primary aim of reducing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region (Bhatnagar, [2021](#)).

Thus, external actors, particularly great powers, have influenced Pakistan-India relations in three key ways. First, they have reduced the asymmetry of power between the two belligerent states— the U.S. and China have helped Pakistan develop its conventional and non-conventional capabilities (Lavoy, [2009](#)), while Russia has aided the Indian Army in increasing its capabilities (Pant, [2018](#)). Second, during the Cold War, the U.S. prudently diminished the role of the USSR as a hegemonic power, with Pakistan and, particularly, the Mujahideen playing pivotal roles. Some of these Mujahideen groups later went to Kashmir as freedom fighters, providing stiff resistance to Indian forces (Byman, 2005). Lastly, the deepening relations between Pakistan and China pose a threat to India's vital interests in the South Asian region and beyond (Small, [2015](#)). Similarly, the Indo-U.S. strategic relationship is creating a power imbalance in South Asia, ultimately escalating tensions in the region (Tellis, [2016](#)).



Major Indo-Pakistani Crises

Pakistan and India have been in a perpetual struggle ever since their inception. Kashmir has always been a flashpoint between these two belligerent states. On October 26, 1947, when Maharaja Hari Singh decided to accede to India without considering the ground realities, the local Kashmiri people, soon joined by tribesmen from Pakistan's tribal areas, initiated an armed struggle against the Dogra Raj, which ultimately forced the Pakistani government to intervene in May 1948. Following a request from the Indian government, the UN intervened and proposed a plebiscite to decide Kashmir's future. (Jaffrelot, 2004) However, after the Pak-US defence deal, the Indian Prime Minister refused to conduct the plebiscite in May 1956. (Ziring, 2019) Similarly, after the Rann of Kutch incident, Pakistan launched Operation Gibraltar and Operation Grand Slam, which provoked India, leading to an attack on September 6, 1965. Pakistan successfully defended itself against the massive Indian forces, and the timely intervention of great powers made a ceasefire possible between the two countries. (Sattar, 2007)

The context of the 1971 war was different. In the 1970 election, the Awami League won an overwhelming majority in Bangladesh. After the Yahya Khan government's reluctance to transfer power, the Awami League launched an armed struggle against the Pakistani government, which was later assisted by the Indian Army. Eventually, Pakistan was badly defeated by the Indian forces, with about 90,000 (combat and non-combat) soldiers imprisoned, and East Pakistan gained independence. After successful negotiations, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto secured the release of Pakistani forces from Indian prisons, but the hallmark achievement of India in the Shimla Agreement was that both countries agreed that Kashmir is a bilateral issue to be resolved bilaterally, and any third-party involvement would require mutual consent. (Zaidi, 2017)

The 1980s were also marked by tension and drama. India accused Pakistan of supporting the Sikh movement (Singh, 2014), and in 1984, India captured the Siachen Glacier. In the same year, Pakistan uncovered a secret plan involving India, possibly supported by Afghanistan or Israel, to attack the Kahuta nuclear laboratory. The United States played an important role in mitigating the crisis. Tensions peaked in 1986-87 when India conducted the Brass Tacks military exercise, prompting Pakistan to move its forces toward the border. Once again, the U.S. intervened, convincing both countries to withdraw their armies. (Sattar, 2007)

Moving further, after allegations of corruption in the 1987 elections, the people of Kashmir began an armed struggle against the Indian government, with India accusing Pakistan of supporting the Mujahideen in their fight. The situation became very tense, and once again, the U.S. intervened to restore peace between the two countries. Another massive conflict arose soon after both countries conducted nuclear tests. At Kargil, the Pakistani Army intruded into Indian territory. Initially, Pakistan denied the presence of its troops in Kargil, but later, after facing heavy Indian retaliation and with irrefutable evidence, Pakistan admitted to its presence and requested the U.S. to facilitate a safe withdrawal. Bill Clinton played a vital role in de-escalating the conflict. (Shafiqat, 2009)

After the Kargil incident, while the Indian Parliament was discussing corruption scandals related to the procurement of weapons during the Kargil operation, it was attacked by terrorist groups. The Indian Prime Minister blamed Pakistan-based militant organizations, Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba, for the attack. As a result, India began mobilizing its forces, leading to the possibility of a major military confrontation, as both nuclear-armed nations had mobilized about one million troops. Although the Indian Foreign Minister was convinced that there would be no full-scale war, other leaders and the ground situation did not entirely rule out the possibility. Then, on January 12, 2002, Musharraf delivered a speech promising that there would be no future infiltration and that Pakistan would act against any militant organization, thereby reducing tensions and averting war. Finally, there was the infamous Mumbai Attack, where allegedly ten terrorists from Pakistan went to Mumbai and killed about 166 innocent people. (Noor, 2007) Soon after the Uri attack, PM Modi took a very harsh stand against Pakistan and made Pakistan responsible for the attack. He said that the blood of 18 Indian jawans will not be forgotten. We will do our level best for the isolation of Pakistan in the world. Soon after that, the director general of the military operations said that India would not allow cross-border terrorism, and recently, the infiltration has increased. Soon after that, a special force of the Indian army thrashed. The LOC infiltrated deep into Pakistani soil about two and a half kilometres, dismantled the terrorist launching pad and went back

without any casualties. And the operation continues from 12:30 to 4:30 am. This is what India claims. However, Pakistan's GD ISPR overtly nullified the so-called surgical operation and said there was only crossfire at LOC initiated by the Indian forces (Ganguly, [2016](#))

On February 14, 2019, the Indian paramilitary force was carried by a convoy of vehicles on the national highway of Jammu to Srinagar. The convoy was hit by an SUV car laden with explosion at Pulwama District of Indian-occupied Kashmir. This was the deadliest attack, killing about 44 persons of CPRF (Central Reserve Police Force), and 20 were injured. The responsibility for the attack was accepted by the proscribed Jaish-e-Muhammad. The Indian side claim that the planner of the attack has links with the Pakistani state. The government of Pakistan overtly negated the allegation and condemned the attack. Most importantly, the boy who attacked the Indian forces was a native Kashmiri. It was his frustration due to the humiliation of Indian forces which compelled him to blow himself up (Editorial, [2019](#)).

The tension between the two countries started to pile up, and both countries summed up their envoys. Then, there was a furious response from PM Modi, who said that the armed forces are free to decide the place, nature, and intensity of retaliation against the foe. And choose both diplomatic and military options. Diplomatically, India Launched a furious complaint against Masood Azhar, the chief of Jaish-e-Muhammad, and finally, they were successful when China pulled back their hands from his support on 1st May. The Security Council adopted the proposal of France, the UK and the US (Chandur, [2019](#)).

Militarily, India responded after 12 days of the Pulwama attack. On the 26th of February, IAF jets went deep into Pakistani soil, this time crossing the international border for the first time after the 1971 war, and allegedly bombed the JeM camp, which was located in the Balakot area of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. As a result, the DG ISPR of Pak Force said, "Wait for our response, and we will surprise you". The next day, on February 27, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) conducted an air strike in the Nowshehra area of Indian-occupied Kashmir (Khan, [2019](#)). Chasing the PAF jets, IAF jets crossed the border and after dogfighting, Pakistani authorities claimed that they had shot down two IAF jets (Mig-21 and Su-30MKI). Indian said that no SU-30MKI had been shot and further said that the Mig-21 shot down the PAF F-16 jet then after it was shot down. However, Pakistan denied the Indian Claim. The wreckage of the Mig-21 fell inside Pakistani territory, while the Su-30MKI fell into the IOK. The Mig-21 was flown by the wing commander Abhinandan and was captured by the Pak Army. (Naqash, [2019](#)) Later he was handed over to the Indian authorities in order to deescalate the tension between the two nuclear power. ("Abhinandan: Captured Indian pilot handed back by Pakistan," 2 March 2019)

Approaches to Conflict Resolution in Indo-Pak Relations

Pakistan and India have mainly adopted three methods for resolving their mutual issues: the role of the UN, bilateral engagements, and third-party mediation. (Malik, [2019](#))

Role of the United Nations (UN)

Despite the UN's failures in fully resolving the conflicts between Pakistan and India, it has played a significant role. The UN first intervened to end the 1948 conflict. On January 9, 1949, the UNSC passed a resolution stating that a plebiscite would determine the fate of the Kashmiri people. (Wani, [2014](#)) Similarly, the UN played an important role during the 1965 war. However, it was unable to prevent the 1971 hostility, which ultimately led to the disintegration of Pakistan. Recently, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) played a significant role in securing consular access to Kulbhushan Jadhav, asking Pakistan to reconsider the verdict against him and to provide him with the opportunity for a fair trial. (Shah, [2019](#)) Despite its failures, the UN is still considered a viable forum for both countries.

Bilateral Engagement

India and Pakistan have engaged in bilateral negotiations for a long time. Although there have been short-term successes, they have failed to solve their problems in the long term. Their first successful engagement was the Liaquat-Nehru Pact in 1950, in which they agreed to address each other's minority issues. Among other issues, Kashmir has occupied a central position. In 1953, Prime Ministers Muhammad Ali Bogra and Jawaharlal Nehru met for the first time to resolve the Kashmir issue. Both leaders agreed to solve the issue



peacefully. However, when Pakistan received security assistance from the US in 1954, India suspended the negotiations. (Raza, [2002](#)) In 1958, Feroz Khan Noon met Nehru for the second time, and both sides again showed a willingness to resolve issues on the eastern border (Hussain, [2009](#)).

As Foreign Minister, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto made serious attempts to resolve the Kashmir issue, meeting his Indian counterpart Swaran Singh in December 1962 and May 1963. Although they held six rounds of meetings, they could not reach an appropriate formula for resolving the Kashmir issue. (Raza, [2002](#)) The Simla Agreement was another bilateral success, enabling Pakistan to secure the release of about 90,000 prisoners of war (PoWs) and committing both countries to resolve their issues bilaterally. (Jaffrelot, [2004](#)) Similarly, in July 1989, Rajiv Gandhi visited Pakistan and met Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, where both leaders agreed to draft an agreement on the Siachen issue, but it did not materialize. In 1985, both countries reached an important agreement that India and Pakistan would never attack each other's nuclear sites. (Ali, [2001](#))

The 1990s were marked by continuous dialogue. In 1991, India and Pakistan agreed to provide prior information on military movements and to prevent airspace violations. In 1992, they agreed never to use chemical weapons against each other. In 1997, Prime Ministers I.K. Gujral and Nawaz Sharif met in the Maldives during the SAARC summit and discussed bilateral issues. Later, in 1999, Prime Minister Vajpayee visited Lahore and signed the famous Lahore Declaration. (Padder, [2012](#))

At the Agra Summit (July 14–16, 2001), Vajpayee and Pervez Musharraf discussed the Kashmir issue, but they were unable to produce a joint declaration as Vajpayee withdrew at the last moment. (Sattar, [2007](#)) However, the process continued until the 2008 Mumbai attack. Three days before the Mumbai attack, President Zardari attended a conference via video link and stated that Pakistan would not initiate nuclear war (Chari et al., [2009](#)). The Mumbai attack not only derailed the composite dialogue process but also shattered hopes for meaningful dialogue in the future. Despite this, on July 16, 2009, at Sharm el-Sheikh, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani met with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The Pakistani Prime Minister raised concerns about Indian involvement in the Balochistan militancy, and the Indian Prime Minister reassured him of noninterference in each other's states. However, when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh returned to India, he faced heavy criticism from political opponents and the Indian media, forcing him to backtrack. Again, in 2010, both Prime Ministers met on the sidelines of the SAARC summit but failed to restart the dialogue process (NDTV, 2010).

When Modi became the Prime Minister, in bilateral diplomacy, he started with an amicable environment. Before assuming his duties in office, he offered a generous invitation to his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, along with other leaders of the South Asian countries, for his oath-taking ceremony in May 2014 (Bano, [2014](#); KUMAR, [2017](#)). Unexpectedly, Nawaz Sharif didn't talk about the Kashmir issue, and political pundits profess that the new dawn is rising. It made it possible for both prime ministers to make arrangements for the foreign secretary-level meeting and reaffirm that they would remain in touch. It was decided that the formal meeting would be held in July 2014. However, when the High Commissioner of Pakistan invited the Hurriyat leaders for an Independence Day celebration, the Indian official considered it a betrayal and cancelled the foreign secretary-level meeting (Mohan, [2015](#)).

While continuing his cooperation-defection policy, he once again met the Pakistani Prime Minister during the Cricket World Cup 2015 and sent his foreign secretary to Islamabad for the road map of bilateral dialogue. ("Jaishankar arrives in Islamabad, pak hopes visit will kickstart dialogue," [2015](#)) Later, on July 15, 2015, at the SCO summit in Ufa, both the Prime Ministers agreed on the national security advisors level meeting to discuss Modi's presence in the upcoming SAARC summit and, more importantly, to discuss terrorism. But when Pakistan insisted on the inclusion of the Kashmir issue, and then the subsequent events of terrorism in Gurdaspur and Udhampur further reinforced the Indian stance on the importance of Terrorism. Pakistan's insistence on the NSA meeting with the Hurriyat leaders further antagonized the Modi administration and threatened to cancel the dialogue. The end result was the cancellation of the meeting, but this time, it was from the Pakistani side based on the argument that Pakistan would never accept any precondition for negotiation between the two countries. The NSA and Advisor on Foreign Affairs, Sartaj Aziz, further said that under the Indian conditions, the meeting would serve the desired purpose (Syed, [2015](#)).

The process of dialogue doesn't stop there. The resumption of dialogues was once again announced on 30th November 2015, after the meeting of both Prime Ministers at the climate change summit in Paris. After that, the national security advisors of the two countries, Ajit Doval and Nasir Khan Janjua, the foreign secretaries S. Jaishankar and Azaz Ahmad Chaudhury met in Bangkok, and a range of issues were discussed, including the Kashmir issue, the Matters related to terrorism and tranquillity and peace along the line of control (Haider, [2015a](#)). It was followed by the meeting of Sushma Swaraj, the foreign minister of India, and the PM of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, after the Heart of Asia conference. Again, they agree to restore the dialogue process. Then, PM Modi made a surprise visit to Lahore; apparently, he came to attend Nawaz Sharif's daughter's wedding (Haider, [2015b](#)). Along with this, they agreed to conduct a meeting with foreign secretaries to sketch the road map for the formal dialogue. All these improvements were badly hampered by the terrorist attack in Pathankot on the IAF base (India Air Force). But this time, the Indian response was very prudent. They didn't make any striking allegations against Pakistan. But form a joint investigation team (JIT). The JIT will visit the point of the incident at Pathankot. They did it in March 2016, and after that, some sources on the Pakistani side said that the incident was caused by India. Soon after that, on 7th April, Pakistan cancelled the dialogue process. They said that India is once again cornering the Kashmir issue, and thus, we will not reciprocate by allowing the Indian JIT team to visit Pakistan. This happened a day after when the Indian foreign secretary S Jasishankar praised the Indian government for successfully keeping the focus on Terrorism (Gilani, [2016](#)).

The Indian soft response to the Pathankot attack was unusual under Modi`s government. Some analysts believe that it was a trap for Pakistan. According to them, at least, it would be a tacit recognition of Pakistani involvement in cross-border terrorism. Otherwise, PM Modi's views regarding Pakistan are very clear. After the killing of Burhan Wani, a new wave of freedom movement emerged. There were protests all around, and the protesters were aggressively handled by the Indian authorities. As usual, Pakistan supported the ongoing protests for the self-determination of the Kashmiri people and also invited India for a peaceful solution to the Kashmir issue. Instead of accepting the offer, Modi responded by accusing Pakistan of atrocities in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (Azad Kashmir) and Baluchistan (Reuters, [2016](#)). Similarly, his response regarding the Uri and Pulvama attacks was the true defection of his cognition. In both cases, the Modi administration tried to give harsh responses. He tried to isolate Pakistan internationally, revoke the most favourite nation-state status and adopt an offensive strategy by targeting the militant bases inside the Pakistani territory (Malik, [2019](#)). On February 25, 2021, India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir. This marked the longest-lasting confidence-building measure between the two nations since 2016 and the most durable LoC ceasefire in over a decade (Clary, February 6, [2024](#)).

Third-Party Mediation

The third-party has consistently played a fruitful role in India-Pakistan relations. In 1960, both countries signed the Indus Water Treaty, mediated by the World Bank. Water is essential for the livelihood of people, and both countries are highly conscious of this fact. In 1948, India, as the upper riparian state, stopped the flow of rivers into Pakistan. This was a serious concern for Pakistan for two reasons: first, the fertile land of the Indus Plain would turn barren, and second, the entire disputed area, including Jammu and Kashmir, would come under India's complete control. (Yaseen et al., [2016](#)) The treaty was acceptable to both sides, and the issue has been effectively managed since then. (Miner, [2009](#)) Similarly, the British played a key role in resolving the Rann of Kutch controversy between Pakistan and India. (Qureshi, [1972](#)) The Tashkent Declaration also played a significant role in maintaining regional peace after the 1965 war, with the USSR mediating talks that led to the return of captured territories. (Rajan, [1966](#)) In the 1980s, three major threats were averted through third-party mediation. In 1984, intelligence reports suggested that India might target Pakistan's nuclear assets. In 1986-87, India conducted a massive military exercise, which Pakistan perceived as a possible threat, leading to its own military exercise and creating a tense environment. Finally, the militancy in Kashmir in 1989-90 further heightened tensions. All these threats were mitigated through the mediation of the United States. ([Chari et al., 2009](#)) Similarly, the Kargil crisis was successfully managed by the United States. (Lavoy, [2002](#))



Another key instance of third-party involvement came during the 2001–2002 military standoff between India and Pakistan, following the December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament, which India attributed to Pakistan-based militant groups. During this period, both countries mobilized their forces along the border, raising the risk of a full-scale war. The international community, led primarily by the United States and the United Kingdom, engaged in intense diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and British Prime Minister Tony Blair played instrumental roles in encouraging dialogue between the two sides and urging restraint (Paul, 2005). These efforts were largely successful in preventing open conflict, demonstrating the influence of third-party mediation in crisis situations.

Following the 2008 Mumbai attacks, third-party mediation played a pivotal role in reducing tensions between India and Pakistan, preventing an escalation into military conflict. The United States, particularly through the intervention of then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, played a central role in this effort. After India accused Pakistan-based group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) of orchestrating the attacks, the risk of conflict significantly increased. Rice visited both countries, urging restraint and cooperation, which helped prevent immediate military retaliation from India while pressuring Pakistan to act against terrorist networks on its soil (Pant, 2009).

In addition to Rice's diplomatic efforts, other high-ranking U.S. officials, such as John Negroponte and Admiral Mike Mullen, worked to maintain open communication between India and Pakistan. This mediation also pushed Pakistan to arrest several individuals linked to the attacks and allowed the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to assist in the investigation, further solidifying the U.S. role in defusing the crisis (Fair, 2011). Despite these efforts, the situation remained delicate, with longstanding issues of terrorism and insurgency in Kashmir still straining relations (Kronstadt & Vaughn, 2009).

In more recent years, third-party mediation has been most visible during the aftermath of the 2019 Pulwama attack. This incident, which involved a suicide bombing carried out by a Pakistan-based militant group that killed 40 Indian paramilitary personnel, significantly heightened tensions between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. India's retaliatory airstrikes inside Pakistan and Pakistan's subsequent counterattacks brought the two countries to the brink of war. During this time, the United States, China, and Saudi Arabia emerged as key mediators. The U.S. administration, under President Donald Trump, along with Saudi Arabia, pressured both sides to de-escalate, while China, a close ally of Pakistan, played a behind-the-scenes role in encouraging restraint (Rizvi, 2020). These efforts helped ease tensions and avoid a larger military confrontation.

Conclusion

The longstanding conflict between India and Pakistan, especially over Kashmir, remains deeply entrenched, with both countries demonstrating a weak history of resolving outstanding issues bilaterally. Mistrust, Pakistan's support for separatist movements, and India's exclusion of Kashmiri voices from dialogues have hindered progress. Despite several bilateral engagements, these issues persist, making third-party interventions crucial. Major powers like the U.S., U.K., China, and Saudi Arabia have effectively de-escalated tensions during crises, such as the Kargil conflict and the 2001–2002 military standoff. However, these interventions have focused on short-term crisis management rather than providing sustainable solutions to the root causes, such as the unresolved Kashmir issue.

While third-party mediations have been successful in preventing full-scale wars, they have failed to resolve core disputes. The nuclear capabilities of both India and Pakistan make this a critical issue for global security, demanding that the international community move beyond crisis mitigation to address the underlying problems driving this conflict. Great powers, with their historic ties to both nations, must play a more proactive role in encouraging dialogue, fostering peace, and establishing mechanisms for confidence-building and arms control. This would not only stabilize the region but also address the long-term aspirations of the Kashmiri people.

India's great power ambitions are a significant factor in shaping its foreign policy. As it seeks a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), and a larger role in global governance, India must address its regional challenges, including the ongoing

human rights violations in Kashmir. The international structure will increasingly compel India to resolve regional disputes to enhance its credibility as a responsible global actor. Additionally, India's aspirations for global leadership necessitate strong economic growth, which is closely linked to regional stability. The surrounding region, with its immense economic potential, offers India significant opportunities to boost its economy, but these opportunities can only be fully realized if India engages constructively with its neighbors, including Pakistan.

To compete with other great powers on the international stage, India must also ensure that its regional relationships are stable and mutually beneficial. Resolving conflicts like the Kashmir dispute will not only enhance India's standing but also unlock economic benefits that are crucial for maintaining its growth trajectory. Regional cooperation will allow India to tap into the economic potential of South Asia, enhancing trade and connectivity, which are essential for its long-term development.

To cut it short, while third-party interventions have successfully de-escalated tensions between India and Pakistan, a shift from crisis management to proactive peacebuilding is essential. The international community, particularly major powers, must focus on addressing the root causes of the conflict to achieve lasting peace. Given India's aspirations for global leadership, it cannot afford to ignore its regional challenges, including the Kashmir issue and relations with Pakistan. By addressing these challenges and fostering regional cooperation, India will not only secure its regional interests but also enhance its standing on the global stage, positioning itself as a key player in international politics and economics.

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