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**REFRAMING THE INDIA-PAKISTAN KASHMIR CONFLICT:
DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF SPACE, POWER AND IDENTITY**

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ABSTRACT

The Kashmir conflict remains one of the most enduring geopolitical disputes in South Asia, symbolizing broader tensions between India and Pakistan. While existing studies have predominantly examined the issue through realist or postcolonial lenses, comparatively limited attention has been given to how evolving geopolitical discourses actively reshape national identities, legitimize power claims, and constrain pathways for conflict resolution. Employing the framework of Critical Geopolitics and qualitative discourse analysis, this study investigates how state actors, media institutions, and international bodies construct competing geopolitical imaginaries of Kashmir. It argues that these discursive practices—rooted in postcolonial legacies and reinforced by contemporary great-power rivalries—reproduce Kashmir as a symbolic arena of legitimacy, sovereignty, and existential security rather than a negotiable political space. This analysis demonstrates that entrenched discursive framings do not merely describe the conflict but actively sustain it by constraining diplomatic thinking and marginalizing local voices and alternative perspectives. By reconceptualizing Kashmir as a discursive and identity-based struggle, this study advances critical geopolitical scholarship while offering policy-relevant insights. It underscores the need for discourse-sensitive and inclusive approaches that move beyond territorial fixation toward mutual recognition and cooperative security.

Keywords: Kashmir conflict, national identity, power, critical geopolitics.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Partition of British India in 1947, conflicts between India and Pakistan have endured, most prominently over the long-standing territorial dispute concerning Kashmir, a region of strategic significance located in the northernmost part of the South Asian subcontinent. Although the leaders of both nations initially expressed a willingness to coexist peacefully following the separation, developments in the subsequent decades have revealed a starkly different reality. Despite successive bilateral dialogues, United Nations-mediated efforts, and diplomatic initiatives such as the Simla Agreement (1972) and the Lahore Declaration (1999), a permanent resolution of the dispute remains elusive, with tensions periodically escalating into armed confrontation (Hanif Siddiqi, 2023). Both sides have suffered varying degrees of loss over time, and there is little indication that the conflict will be resolved in the immediate future. Interwoven with questions of religion, identity, and territorial control, Kashmir's contested sovereignty continues to impede regional stability and cooperation, including within multilateral platforms such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Indeed, SAARC remains structurally constrained in fulfilling its principal objectives of fostering regional stability and economic integration, as its charter precludes deliberation on bilateral and contentious issues such as the Kashmir dispute, which Salihi (2023) identifies as a central obstacle to the organization's effectiveness.

Existing scholarship offers valuable insights into the origins, persistence and resolution efforts surrounding the conflict. Realist analyses emphasize struggles for power, military deterrence, and strategic dominance (Alam et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2021). Constructivist scholars, meanwhile, highlight the social construction of identity and the ideational roots of enmity (Bertucci et al., 2018; Theys, 2018). Postcolonial interpretations, in turn, attribute the enduring rivalry to the colonial legacy of the Partition of British India and the politics of communal division (Jawad & Shabbir, 2025; Kim, 2023). Studies have examined various approaches and perspectives for resolving the Kashmir conflict. The literature identifies several factors that have hindered meaningful progress toward resolution. For instance, Tuhin (2020) argues that the suspension of trade ties between the India and Pakistan, along with repeated cross-border terrorist attacks, has rendered prospects for a solution increasingly untenable. Others, such as Abbasi (2020), Singh (2022), and Rawan and Inam ur Rahman (2020), demonstrate that media narratives have played a significant role in fueling the continued escalation of tensions. Additionally, Firdos and Ghulam (2017) indicate that periodic calls for a referendum have contributed to India's reluctance to engage in certain resolution initiatives. More notably, findings from Kuszewska (2022a) contend that mutual suspicions, malice, deceit, and a persistent reluctance to cooperate exacerbate tensions while overshadowing shared interests between the two countries. Similarly, Rida (2022) notes that the involvement of non-state actors, coupled with the neglect of fundamental human needs—such as security, identity, recognition, and personal development—further complicates efforts at conflict resolution.

The intensity of the conflict between the two parties has fluctuated over time, exacerbated by the absence of a definitive and enduring settlement. In this context, understanding how geopolitical discourses shape the dynamics of the Kashmir dispute is particularly important. While previous studies have examined the conflict through realist and postcolonial lenses, relatively few have systematically explored how geopolitical discourse has reshaped the identity-based narratives and policy orientations of India and Pakistan.

This paper addresses this gap by applying the framework of Critical Geopolitics, which conceptualizes space and geography as socially and politically constructed through discourse (Agnew, 2016;

Fregonese, 2024). Rather than viewing geopolitics as a static contest over territory, critical geopolitics examines the language, narratives, and representations through which states construct sovereignty and legitimacy. In the context of Kashmir, competing discursive practices between India and Pakistan not only portray each other as existential adversaries and legitimize ongoing militarization and securitization, but also shape domestic political dynamics, foreign policy orientations, and regional alignments. Employing qualitative discourse analysis, this study examines state statements, media portrayals, and international commentaries that collectively construct the geopolitical imagination of Kashmir. By analyzing these discursive practices, the paper highlights the symbolic and ideological dimensions of geopolitical rivalry that conventional realist or liberal approaches often overlook.

The paper contributes to the literature by repositioning the Kashmir issue within a discursive and identity-based framework, offering an alternative to conventional strategic or territorial interpretations. It argues that achieving a sustainable resolution requires the deconstruction of entrenched geopolitical narratives and the cultivation a new discourse centred on mutual recognition and cooperative security in South Asia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Critical Geopolitics, which provides an interpretive lens for understanding how geopolitical space, power, identity, and global alignments shape both the underlying causes of and potential pathways toward resolving the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan (Aryal & Muneer, 2024). Critical geopolitics posits that geography and geopolitical narratives are not objective realities but socially constructed discourses that both influence and are shaped by global political developments (Agnew, 2016; Fregonese, 2024; Squire, 2024). While this framework emphasizes the importance of geography, spatiality, discourse, and representation, it also critiques mainstream approaches that privilege power structures and formal institutions. It challenges the traditional assumption that geopolitics is an objective and value-neutral enterprise by revealing how political elites, state institutions, and media actors construct geopolitical narratives to legitimize territorial control and national security agendas (Squire, 2024). In contrast to classical geopolitics which views geography as a fixed determinant of state behaviour, critical geopolitics rejects such determinism. Scholars argue that deterministic perspectives often overlook environmental factors and cartographic biases (Haverluk et al., 2014), as well as marginalized perspectives and human security concerns (Macała, 2015). By foregrounding these neglected dimensions, critical geopolitics calls for a more inclusive understanding of space—one that integrates human security, environmental interdependence, and the politics of representation into the analysis of international relations.

From an analytical perspective, earlier studies have employed a range of theoretical approaches to explain the protracted conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Among these, realism has emerged as a dominant framework in International Relations, emphasizing material interests, power dynamics, and state-centric behaviour. It posits that states act rationally to maximize their security and ensure their survival (Deudney & Ikenberry, 2017; Lott, 2018; Sheikh, 2023). Conversely, constructivism challenges realism by arguing that international relations are socially constructed, highlighting the role of identities, beliefs, ideas, norms, and interests in shaping state behaviour (Dück, 2020; Hawley, 2021; Lott, 2018). In parallel, balance-of-power theory (Mylonas, 2024) suggests that stability in world politics emerges from a relatively equitable distribution of power among states; when a single state becomes excessively dominant, others are likely to counterbalance its influence to restore systemic equilibrium (Andersen & Wohlforth, 2021; Lawson, 2023; Walt, 1985). Taken together, these

theoretical perspectives underscore the importance of material power, social constructions, and systemic dynamics in explaining interstate conflict. However, they remain limited in accounting for how geopolitical meanings, spatial narratives, and discursive practices actively shape state perceptions and policy choices in contested spaces such as Kashmir.

Theoretically, as applied in this paper, Critical Geopolitics conceptualizes the Kashmir conflict as a complex web of historical narratives, national ambitions, and evolving geopolitical interests. Kashmir's strategic location has attracted the attention of both regional and global powers, extending beyond India and Pakistan alone (Butt, 2024). China's engagement in the broader Himalayan region adds a further layer of complexity, particularly given its control over territories such as Aksai Chin. Moreover, the region's challenging terrain, which encompasses critical water resources feeding major river systems such as the Indus River, renders Kashmir a highly prized asset within the broader geopolitical landscape (Abbasi, 2015). In this context, the deployment of military strategies, nuclear posturing, and diplomatic manoeuvres represents not merely expressions of intent but strategic practices within an ongoing contest of influence and deterrence, further entrenching the complexity of the conflict.

Furthermore, upon closer examination, Kashmir transcends the mere boundaries delineated on a map. It is a region inhabited by dynamic communities whose everyday lives unfold amid breathtaking natural landscapes and an enduring sense of grief and longing (Husain, 2019). Local residents frequently find themselves caught between narratives constructed by distant decision-makers and their own lived realities, which are deeply rooted in aspirations for peace and the affirmation of identity (Husain, 2019). Local initiatives—whether advocating for increased autonomy or total independence—serve as expressions of a profound desire for recognition.

More intriguingly, recent developments, including India's abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution of India in August 2019, which revoked Kashmir's special status, alongside intermittent border skirmishes, have further exposed the fragile nature of any existing détente between India and Pakistan (Adil & Raja, 2023; Jha, 2023; Pandya, 2022). While international actors occasionally call for dialogue and renewed commitment to peaceful resolution (Kim, 2023), the situation on the ground continues to be shaped by entrenched narratives and mutual distrust (Butt & Najjar, 2024). Water rights, regional economic interdependencies, and shifting global alignments have further complicated efforts toward a sustainable peace process (Sharifi et al., 2024). The convergence of these factors creates a complex dynamic in which each diplomatic gesture is laden with uncertainty.

Ultimately, the Kashmir conflict reflects a struggle between the legacies of the past and the demands of the present. It embodies tensions rooted in territorial aspirations, ideological commitments, and the deep human desire for belonging and recognition, even in regions marked by prolonged conflict. This raises an important question: how can contemporary diplomacy reconcile the burdens of history with commitments to peace? Addressing this challenge may require not only innovative political frameworks but also genuine recognition of the lived experiences and narratives at the heart of the conflict.

From a realist perspective, the Kashmir conflict is rooted in a history of wars, border skirmishes, and enduring hostility between India and Pakistan. This pattern reflects not only a territorial dispute but also a broader rivalry involving nuclear capabilities. For instance, Alam et al. (2016) argue that both states are driven by the pursuit of national interests, with each actively advancing its strategic objectives. Similarly, Rizky and Pahlawan (2016) contend that the conflict is propelled by the pursuit of power, viewed as the primary means of achieving resolution. This struggle can also be understood in light of India's position as the principal regional power, maintaining dominance due to its large population,

geographic advantages, strategic location, advanced military capabilities, abundant natural resources, and technological capacity (Fawcett & Jagtiani, 2024). In contrast, Pakistan seeks to counterbalance India, acting as a strategic counterweight despite being comparatively weaker in economic strength, technological capability, and geographic advantages (Khan et al., 2021). Consequently, the dispute over Kashmir is framed as a struggle for power and control, often resulting in the curtailment of the liberties of the Kashmiri people.

Nevertheless, this perspective does not fully account for the deeper differences in beliefs, ideas, and norms that fuel animosity between the two countries, including historical tensions such as the Urdu-Hindi language divide and differing views on practices such as cow slaughter. Constructivist scholars analyze the Kashmir conflict through the lens of ideational factors that shape and influence state behavior (Bertucci et al., 2018; Bhavesh, 2011; Jackson & Jones, 2011; Theys, 2018). From this perspective, the conflict signifies the importance of non-material forces extending beyond territorial disputes and military competition to encompass deeply entrenched social and cultural differences. Historical evidence indicates that the two nations have long been divided by disputes over language, religious perspectives, and significant historical experiences (Michael, 2018; Shafique, 2011).

Furthermore, it is important to note that majority of Kashmiris are Muslims, sharing religious ties with populations in Pakistan. These shared affinities are reflected in cultural practices, social values, and aspects of everyday life. At the same time, perceptions within India—as reflected in certain state policies—have at times framed Kashmiris through a national security lens, contributing to tensions and episodes of violence (Constantin & Carlà, 2025). Thus, the conflict reflects both material and non-material dimensions, encompassing the pursuit of power and dominance alongside the complex interplay of ideational and sociocultural factors in shaping its dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative discourse analysis (QDA) to examine the geopolitical narratives, identity constructions, and discursive practices that shape the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan. This qualitative design is particularly well suited to exploring how the language and discourses of political actors and states construct national identities, legitimize territorial claims, and situate the conflict within both international and domestic contexts (Augoustinos, 2025; Joshi, 2023; Zajda, 2020). The Kashmir conflict extends beyond a spatially-defined territorial dispute; it functions as a discursive battleground in which India and Pakistan construct competing narratives to assert legitimacy (Joshi, 2023; Mughal et al., 2025). The application of discourse analysis enables the researcher to elucidate the ideological underpinnings, power asymmetries, and strategic framings employed by political actors, media organizations, and institutional bodies. This paper identifies and analyses key themes related to geopolitical objectives and identity politics in the interactions between India and Pakistan.

In terms of research design and rationale, the study adopts a critical-geopolitical discourse analysis approach, integrating insights from critical geopolitics and critical discourse analysis (CDA). This hybrid design facilitates a systematic interpretation of how geopolitical narratives are constructed through language and how such narratives reinforce state legitimacy and territorial claims (Agnew, 2016; Augoustinos, 2025; Fregonese, 2024). The approach focuses not only on what is said but also on how discourse constructs geopolitical realities, particularly in framing sovereignty, identity, and security.

The selection of this methodology aligns with the study's theoretical foundation, which views geopolitics as a socially constructed field shaped by power, ideology, and spatial representation. Through QDA, this study examines how India and Pakistan project competing narratives of Kashmir to consolidate national identity and justify their policy actions, and how these narratives are mediated through political communication and international institutions (Adil & Raja, 2023; Mughal et al., 2025).

The study draws upon four primary categories of textual data to investigate the discursive construction of the Kashmir conflict, with historical sources tracing narratives back to 1947 (Ganguly, 2023; Kim, 2023). The core empirical data focus, however, is contemporary—particularly post-2019, following India's abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution of India—including recent state statements and media discourse up to 2025 (Adil & Raja, 2023; Aryal & Muneer, 2024; Mughal et al., 2025).

The first category comprises official state documents and statements, including speeches delivered by Indian and Pakistani leaders, parliamentary debates, and press releases issued by their respective foreign ministries, with emphasis on the 2019–2025 period. The second category includes media texts, such as editorials, opinion pieces, and news articles from reputable Indian, Pakistani, and international outlets, which influence both public perception and diplomatic narratives surrounding Kashmir. The third examines reports and resolutions issued by international organisations, particularly the United Nations, highlighting the global framing and legitimacy discourse of the conflict. Finally, the fourth category considers academic and policy commentaries that either shape or reflect elite geopolitical discourse in South Asia, offering insights into how knowledge production contributes to the persistence of geopolitical imaginaries in the region.

The analysis employs critical discourse analysis to derive pertinent themes. Within this framework, themes were generated through data familiarisation and manual coding, while triangulation was applied during the interpretative process. Cross-referencing among media, political, and institutional texts ensured analytical rigour and reliability.

CONFLICT'S BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The historical narrative surrounding the discord between India and Pakistan is complex and multidimensional. At its core, the conflict is rooted in tensions arising from several interrelated factors: the partition of British India in 1947, the contested status of Kashmir, the development of nuclear capabilities, and the subsequent proliferation of terrorism. Historically, tensions between the two states can be traced to the colonial period under British rule, during which India remained under British control for nearly two centuries. During this period, India's population comprised three major religious communities: Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs.

Historical evidence suggests that Britain employed a 'divide and rule' strategy to govern its vast and heterogeneous Indian territories, mirroring approaches later adopted in Malaya (present-day Malaysia) (Jawad & Shabbir, 2025; Khoso, 2024). This strategy intensified communal divisions and set different groups against one another. By fostering internal conflict, the British effectively diverted attention away from imperial domination and maintained control over the region (Jawad & Shabbir, 2025).

Following years of sustained violence and unrest, Indian political actors increasingly mobilized popular demands for independence. In response, Britain enacted the Government of India Act of 1935 (Shakoor et al., 2024). This legislation restructured the political framework of British India; however, ultimate

authority remained vested in the British Crown. The Act laid the institutional foundations of Indian governance by allocating legislative seats to representatives of different religious communities, with Hindus receiving the majority of seats, alongside Muslims and Sikhs. Nevertheless, by institutionalizing political representation along religious lines, the legislation further exacerbated communal divisions, reflecting the British strategy of divide and rule (Naveed & Raza, 2024).

Subsequently, two dominant political organizations emerged. The Indian National Congress, which primarily represented Hindu interests, was led by Jawaharlal Nehru. In contrast, the All-India Muslim League, advocating Muslim political interests, was headed by Muhammad Ali Jinnah. In the ensuing elections, Nehru and the Indian National Congress secured a majority of parliamentary seats, while the All-India Muslim League suffered significant electoral losses. With limited representation in the newly formed governments, Jinnah expressed concerns that the Muslim community faced increasing marginalization and potential subjugation under what he perceived as Hindu-dominated governance (Kumar, 2022; Maitra et al., 2023). These concerns intensified as violence against Muslims erupted in several regions of the subcontinent, particularly in Punjab, Bengal, and parts of Uttar Pradesh. As a result of a series of religion-based communal clashes, Jinnah shifted his focus towards a broader political objective: the establishment of an independent state of Pakistan, in which Muslims would constitute the majority population (Ahmad, 2024; Shabbir et al., 2024). He subsequently mobilized Muslim communities to advocate for a distinct and sovereign state.

Following Britain's decision to withdraw from India, Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, sought to mediate between Nehru and Jinnah and ultimately consented to the partition of India along religious lines. Consequently, Pakistan was designated as a homeland for the Muslim majority, while India largely reflected Nehru's vision of governance. Thereafter, the former British provinces were permitted to determine their respective affiliations, a process that significantly heightened tensions and precipitated widespread violence between the two newly formed states. According to Kumar (2022), approximately one million people became refugees in a single night, fleeing a level of brutality unparalleled even in the annals of India's history.

Amid the partition of British India in 1947, several princely states that were not directly governed by Britain were given the option to join either of the two newly formed nations or to remain independent. These decisions were typically made by rulers taking into account geographical proximity and, in some cases, the preference of the populace. The regions of Jammu and Kashmir, located along the newly established border between India and Pakistan, had a predominantly Muslim population, despite being ruled by a Hindu monarch (Kumar, 2022; Maitra et al., 2023; Shabbir et al., 2024; Shakoor et al., 2024). In 1947, segments of the Muslim population in Kashmir revolted in Poonch. As the situation escalated, armed groups from Pakistan became involved, strengthening local resistance and intensifying the conflict. Facing mounting internal rebellion and external intervention, the ruler sought military assistance from India and, in return, agreed to accede to India. The decision triggered the first war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. A ceasefire was later mediated by the United Nations Security Council in 1949, establishing a ceasefire line that effectively divided the region, with Pakistan gaining control over a portion of the territory (Ganguly, 2023). While Pakistan argued that Kashmir's Muslim majority justified its incorporation into Pakistan, the Indian government, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, rejected this demographic rationale. Instead, India maintained that the territory had been legally ceded through the Instrument of Accession, signed by the Hindu monarch, Maharaja Hari Singh, on October 26, 1947 (Raghavan, 2010). This divergence established a foundational tension between Pakistan's principle of communal self-determination and India's emphasis on territorial legality and secular nationalism.

Building on the unresolved tensions stemming from the initial conflict, a second war between India and Pakistan erupted over Kashmir in 1965. This conflict resulted in significant loss of life and further entrenched the large-scale deployment of military forces along both sides of the Line of Control (LoC) (Chaudhuri, 2021). Consequently, Kashmir remained territorially divided and heavily militarized, evolving into one of the most militarized regions in the world, with both countries deploying aircraft, artillery, tanks, and substantial troop contingents along the LoC. Building on this entrenched militarization and unresolved sovereignty dispute, reports indicate that the 1987 election in Kashmir was manipulated, resulting in the pro-India party being declared the victor (Abbas, 2003). This episode marked a critical turning point, reinforcing perceptions among many Kashmiris of political disenfranchisement and the denial of their long-standing right to determination. Over time, this persistent sense of exclusion and injustice contributed to the escalation of violent resistance. This culminated on February 14, 2019, when a suicide bomber targeted Indian security forces near the Kashmir border, igniting renewed confrontation between the two states. Nearly 40 Indian soldiers were killed in the attack (Siyech, 2019). Following investigations, the Indian government attributed the attack to an Islamic militant organization operating from Pakistan. Twelve days later, India conducted airstrikes in northwest Pakistan. In response, Pakistan launched a retaliatory operation and shot down at least one Indian aircraft in the vicinity of Kashmir (Joshi, 2023).

At present, the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir remains one of the most complex and enduring geopolitical challenges in contemporary international relations. Since the Partition of British India in 1947, the region has been entangled in a protracted and multifaceted conflict shaped by unresolved territorial claims, competing national identities, and recurring cycles of militarization. These tensions have been further intensified by shifting global power configurations and the pursuit of regional strategic ambitions. The escalation of the crisis in April 2025 marked a significant intensification of these longstanding rivalries, unfolding within an increasingly polarized international environment characterized by confrontational rhetoric and heightened strategic uncertainty (Kousar et al., 2023).

ANALYSIS OF THE DIMENSIONS OF THE CONFLICT

The dispute between India and Pakistan is complex and deeply entrenched, shaped by an interwoven set of historical, political, and cultural factors. Rather than operating in isolation, these factors have interacted over time to influence both the trajectory and persistence of the conflict. Historical evidence suggests that they not only contributed to the conflict's initial emergence but have also continually reinforced and intensified it up to the present day. As Bose (2021) argues, the causes of the Kashmir conflict can be broadly categorized into external and internal dimensions, encompassing geopolitical rivalries, military considerations, sociopolitical dynamics, and patterns of international engagement.

Geopolitical Dimension

Kashmir's distinctive geopolitical position constitutes a central driver of the conflict (Imsirovic, 2021). Its strategic significance extends beyond territorial symbolism to include critical military and economic considerations (Jahan, 2020). Consequently, the conflict has long transcended regional boundaries, attracting sustained international scrutiny, particularly given that both India and Pakistan are nuclear-armed states. This nuclear dimension significantly elevates the global stakes and complicates diplomatic engagement, as any military escalation carries the potential for catastrophic consequences for regional and international security (Imsirovic, 2021).

These risks have been further intensified by recent political developments, most notably the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special constitutional status by the India government in 2019. This move marks a decisive shift in India's approach to governing the region and has prompted allegations that its policies reflect elements of settler-colonial practices (Ahuja & White, 2025; Kanjwal, 2023). Such developments have heightened concerns over demographic reconfiguration and the erosion of Kashmiri political autonomy, thereby deepening local grievances and reinforcing resistance to Indian rule (Kanjwal, 2023).

Additionally, geopolitical narratives rooted in colonial legacies, identity formation, and the enduring pursuit of sovereignty by both states have profoundly shaped the dynamics of the Kashmir conflict over time. On the one hand, the conflict is closely intertwined with the construction of national identities and geopolitical imaginaries that have informed the region's political landscape since its inception. Leaders on both sides have repeatedly articulated such narratives at key moments. For instance, General Asim Munir, Pakistan's Army Chief during the Overseas Pakistanis Convention 2025 held in Islamabad on April 16 2025, reiterated a long-standing justification for a separate homeland:

Our forefathers believed that we were different from Hindus in every possible aspect of life. Our religion is different. Our customs are different. Our traditions are different. Our thoughts are different. Our ambitions are different... That was the foundation of the Two-Nation Theory. It was laid on the belief that we are two nations, not one. (Mukul, 2025)

At the heart of this rhetoric—the Two-Nation Theory—lies a deliberate effort to re-legitimize Pakistan's ontological security and territorial claims.

In contrast, Jawaharlal Nehru, widely regarded as a founding father of India sought early on to delegitimize the Two-Nation Theory by advancing a vision of India as a secular, multi-ethnic state. This vision stood in sharp contrast to Pakistan's identity as a homeland for Muslims. Nehru asserted that, "...we will not tolerate any communalism in this country and that we are building a free, secular State, where every religion and belief has full freedom and equal honour, where every citizen has equal liberty and equal opportunity..." (Nehru, 1958, p. 61). By defining Indian identity through secularism, Nehru aimed to establish an ontological and ideological basis for incorporating Muslim-majority Kashmir into a pluralistic Indian Union.

Building on this discursive construction, the characterization of the Kashmir conflict solely as a 'territorial dispute' risks obscuring the enduring colonial legacies and contemporary identity-based politics that shape the region. Such a perspective reduces the human dimension of the Kashmiri struggle, framing it as a localized issue rather than as part of a broader continuum of colonial occupation and settler-colonial dynamics (Kanjwal, 2023; Korbel, 2021). Notably, some analyses argue that the actions of the Indian military in Kashmir—particularly since 1947—reflect a settler-colonial logic, wherein the control and transformation of land, including ecologically vital forest regions, serve state interests while marginalizing local identities and historical narratives (Kanjwal, 2023). This perspective integrates identity as a lived cultural experience into the broader context of the conflict, illustrating how sovereignty and control are constructed through both material and symbolic means.

For both India and Pakistan, national identities have played a central role in shaping their divergent narratives regarding the ownership of Kashmir. India's self-conception as a secular, multi-ethnic state stands in sharp contrast to Pakistan's identity as a homeland for Muslims, thereby highlighting the

fundamental contradictions embodied in Kashmir (Latham, 2025; Malcy, 2021). The Muslim-majority character of the region further complicates India's narrative, often contributing to the portrayal of Kashmiri Muslims as 'the other,' a framing that reinforces binary sectarian divisions and nationalist sentiment (Udupa, 2024; Duschinski & Ghosh, 2017;).

At the same time, sovereignty claims advanced by both India and Pakistan are grounded in constructed historical narratives that serve to legitimize their respective territorial aspirations. In the Indian context, Kashmir is frequently depicted as an integral component of national history and cultural identity, often articulated through a Hindu-centric perspective that downplays or marginalizes the region's Muslim heritage (Duschinski & Ghosh, 2017; Zutshi, 2004). This selective framing functions to rationalize state involvement in Kashmir, at times portraying local communities as external threats to national unity and integrity (Civic Media Observatory, 2025; Korbel, 2021). Conversely, Pakistan's narrative emphasizes the protection of Muslim identity and rights in Kashmir, framing its engagement as a moral duty and ideological obligation (Latham, 2025). As a result, this rivalry continues to shape and reinforce evolving national identities in both countries, with Kashmir remaining a central arena for geopolitical contestation and ideological struggle (Singh, 2019).

Military and Strategic Dimension

The military and strategic-security dimensions constitute a critical facet of the India–Pakistan dispute over Kashmir. Over time, the interplay of longstanding grievances, deep-seated mutual mistrust, nuclear deterrence dynamics, and divergent geopolitical strategies has contributed to both the escalation and entrenchment of this bilateral conflict. Both countries have engaged in multiple high-intensity wars and numerous skirmishes, primarily centred on the Kashmir region, resulting in a persistent state of low-intensity conflict and sustained militarisation along the Line of Control (LoC) (Chaudhury, 2025; Imsirovic, 2021). Since the partition of British India in 1947, Kashmir has remained a central flashpoint, prompting three major wars: the 1947–1949 conflict, the 1965 war, and the Kargil War in 1999 (Rousset, 2025). The unresolved status of Kashmir, combined with the militarisation of both states, is further exacerbated by the absence of a formally demarcated border. This lack of a clearly recognized territorial boundary perpetuates tensions with both governments repeatedly leveraging it to justify nationalist rhetoric and increased military expenditure (Imsirovic, 2021; Rousset, 2025).

The introduction of nuclear weapons has profoundly reshaped the strategic calculations of both nations, adding a high-stakes dimension to an already volatile geopolitical environment. Despite these risks, nuclear deterrence has contributed to preventing escalation into full-scale war. In this context, the principle of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) remains central, as both countries remain acutely aware of the catastrophic consequences of any nuclear exchange (Glaser, 2025). At the same time, both India and Pakistan have consistently signalled their willingness to engage in military action. This is particularly evident in Pakistan's reliance on its military established in shaping Kashmir policy. For instance, in response to India's Operation Sindoor in the Kashmir region, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif declared, as quoted by Al Jazeera, "We resolve that we will avenge the blood of our innocent martyrs" (Singh, 2025). Reinforcing this position, Pakistan's Army Chief, General Asim Munir, stated, "Our stance is absolutely clear, it was our jugular vein, it will be our jugular vein, we will not forget it. We will not leave our Kashmiri brothers in their heroic struggle" (Singh, 2025). From this perspective, the military establishment frames the dispute not merely as a political or diplomatic issue, but as a fundamental security imperative. This stance conveys a clear deterrent signal to India: regardless of internal or external pressures, Pakistan's armed forces remain steadfast in safeguarding what they

perceive as a vital interest in Kashmir. Moreover, framing Kashmir as an existential concern reinforces national cohesion and directly links the issue to Pakistan's identity and strategic military objectives.

Conversely, following the Pulwama attack in February 2019, which claimed the lives of over 40 Indian paramilitary personnel, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared, "We will give a befitting reply" (Press Information Bureau, 2019). This statement became a rallying call for the Balakot airstrikes, India's first cross-border air operation since 1971. From a military-strategic perspective, this episode marked a shift from a policy of strategic restraint to a more proactive approach involving limited conventional retaliation. The declaration signaled India's willingness to cross the LoC to target militant infrastructure, thereby elevating the deterrence threshold against what it perceives as Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. Additionally, it provided the Indian military with explicit political authorization for offensive planning beyond previously established operational red lines. Consequently, this episode exemplifies India's evolution from a largely reactive defensive posture to a more calibrated strategy of offensive deterrence.

Furthermore, military escalations have underscored the tactical capabilities of both armed forces (Awais Khan & Batool, 2025; Glaser, 2025; Zeeshan, 2024). These developments arguably reflect the continued willingness of both India and Pakistan to engage in conflict-driven interaction. Pakistan's military, for instance, has demonstrated a capacity for precision strikes, particularly in response to Indian missile attacks on civilian targets, thereby shaping domestic public perceptions and influencing international narratives surrounding the conflict (Chaudhuri, 2021). By contrast, India has increasingly sought to project force deeper into Pakistani territory during periods of confrontations, capitalising on even limited operational windows. Such behaviour raises serious concerns regarding the potential for escalation, particularly given the nuclear capabilities of both states and the close proximity of major urban centres on either side of the border (Ahuja & White, 2025).

Socio-Political Dimension

From a critical geopolitics perspective, the Kashmir dispute cannot be reduced to a bilateral territorial contest between India and Pakistan; rather, it constitutes a contested geopolitical space shaped by state discourse, colonial legacies, and everyday practices of power. The socio-political dynamics of Kashmir are deeply embedded in postcolonial state-building projects, in which territorial control is equated with sovereign legitimacy. In Indian-administered Kashmir, governance has been discursively and institutionally structured as a client regime dependent on New Delhi, rendering local political authority subordinate to metropolitan strategic imperatives (Kanjwal, 2023). This spatial configuration legitimizes exceptional forms of rule, normalizing militarization, surveillance, and coercive governance as instruments of national security.

Such practices have sustained a prolonged state of emergency (Hussain, 2021; Rashid, 2020), transforming Kashmir into a securitized space where dissent is routinely framed not as an expression of political agency but as a threat to territorial integrity. Within this geopolitical imagination, Kashmiri subjectivities are marginalized, and alternative political futures are rendered largely illegible. Nevertheless, indigenous resistance movements—most notably the Political Conference and the Plebiscite Front—have historically contested this dominant spatial narrative by advocating for a plebiscite, thereby reclaiming Kashmir as a political space of self-determination rather than a fixed geopolitical object (Kanjwal, 2023; Malik, 2019).

Moreover, from a critical geopolitics perspective, the coercive practices employed by the Indian state in Kashmir constitute not merely security measures, but spatial techniques of control that reproduce

sovereign authority through violence. Numerous international organizations have documented extensive human rights concerns, with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2019) identifying systemic abuses, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary detentions carried out by security forces. These practices have been characterized by some advocacy groups as constituting war crimes and, in more extreme interpretations, as acts of genocide (Bhatia, 2017).

The persistence of such practices is further enabled by the muted response of the international community. Comparable to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' principle of non-intervention in addressing human rights violations in Myanmar (Haryono et al., 2024), many states have refrained from directly challenging India's increasingly militarized governance of Kashmir, thereby normalizing exceptional forms of violence through diplomatic silence (Chin, 2024). This pattern of geopolitical restraint reinforces a hierarchical global order in which strategic partnerships often outweigh commitments to humanitarian accountability.

Consequently, the continuation of alleged human rights abuses has intensified an ongoing humanitarian crisis in Kashmir. Restrictions on mobility, prolonged securitization, and punitive administrative measures have undermined access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and clean water, thereby deepening social grievances and entrenching resentment among the Kashmiri population (Bhatia, 2017). In critical geopolitical terms, this crisis illustrates how human suffering can become normalized as a collateral outcome within dominant state-centric narratives of security and territorial sovereignty.

Additionally, existing evidence indicates that identity plays a central role in shaping the socio-political dynamics of the Kashmir conflict, intersecting with geographic, religious, and cultural factors. Historical and ongoing tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities, coupled with competing nationalist ideologies, further exacerbate divisions and complicate governance and reconciliation efforts (Bhatia, 2017; Saad Ul Haque, 2024). This identity-based dimension is closely linked to broader questions of territoriality and sovereignty, which are frequently instrumentalized within nation-state narratives. Such representations often reduce the conflict to labels such as 'ethnic clashes' or 'insurgencies,' thereby obscuring historical context and lived experiences, and simplifying complex socio-political realities into narrowly defined political or military concerns (Kanjwal, 2023; Saad Ul Haque, 2024).

Consequently, the socio-political environment is further shaped by tensions surrounding resource allocation, while public sentiment increasingly influences governmental policies responses. Community demands for justice and rights may generate pressure for reform, thereby highlighting pathways toward reconciliation. Conversely, public apathy or disengagement can perpetuate coercive policies and cycles of retaliation, ultimately constraining opportunities for an equitable and sustainable resolution of the conflict (Bhatia, 2017; Saad Ul Haque, 2024).

International and Regional Dimensions

The Kashmir conflict has evolved into a highly internationalised geopolitical contest, in which the strategic interests of global powers actively shape local dynamics and influence the prospects for conflict resolution. From a critical geopolitical perspective, the rivalry between India and Pakistan extends beyond a bilateral territorial dispute, constituting instead a geopolitical narrative co-constructed both by domestic and external actors. Following recent escalations, major powers—particularly the

United States and China—have undertaken diplomatic initiatives aimed at redefining red lines and de-escalating tensions, underscoring the pivotal role of international diplomacy in managing relations between two nuclear-armed states (Ahuja & White, 2025; Robert Lansing Institute, 2025). This dynamic demonstrates that the Kashmir conflict cannot be understood solely through local or historical lenses; rather, it emerges from the intersection of domestic, regional, and global power structures.

The involvement of major external powers—most notably China and the United States—continues to significantly shape the trajectory of the conflict, as their strategic, economic, and diplomatic interventions influence regional alignments and broader geopolitical narratives. China’s strategic investments in Pakistan, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), illustrate how external actors actively reshape the geopolitical landscape, generating new alliances that challenge established power configurations in South Asia (Kousar et al., 2023; Aryal & Muneer, 2024). Similarly, the United States continues to leverage its influence over both India and Pakistan to foster conditions conducive to dialogue and conflict management. For instance, it has encouraged leaders from both countries “to exercise restraint and prioritize diplomatic engagement” (Congressional Research Service, 2025). Additional forms of engagement include dual-track monitoring of human rights conditions (Congressional Research Service, 2020) and local elections (Bukhari, 2024). In these roles, the United States functions as a subtle mediator, employing backchannel diplomacy, promoting human rights frameworks, and exercising calibrated strategic restraint (Bhatia, 2017). Such involvement illustrates how external actors actively participate in the co-construction of geopolitical narratives, positioning Kashmir as a symbolic arena for the projection of influence and the legitimization of broader state interests.

At the same time, the evolving relationship between Russia and Pakistan, particularly in the context of regional cooperation, points to a gradual strengthening of bilateral engagement (Khattoon et al., 2023). Since the 2010s, Russia–Pakistan relations have undergone a notable transformation, characterised by expanding defence cooperation and economic partnerships, which have, in turn, reshaped regional alignments and generated concern in India (Gosh, 2024). These developments illustrate how regional alliances are actively constructed through strategic, economic, and defence engagements, thereby reconfiguring the South Asian security landscape. From a critical geopolitics perspective, this evolving alignment underscores that the Kashmir conflict is embedded within broader international power configurations, where major powers influence regional stability, recalibrate threat perceptions, and shape the policy options available to both India and Pakistan.

Challenges of International Organizations in Handling the Conflict

International organizations, particularly the United Nations (UN), have encountered persistent difficulties in engaging effectively with the Kashmir conflict. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), in particular, has struggled to address Kashmir alongside competing global crises, revealing both structural and political constraints in managing protracted and sovereignty-sensitive disputes (Kousar et al., 2023). Historically, UN-led negotiations have yielded limited substantive outcomes, highlighting the limitations of narrowly state-centric and episodic diplomatic approaches (Bhatia, 2017). These challenges underscore the need for more inclusive peacebuilding frameworks that incorporate a broader range of actors beyond the state level and better reflect the conflict’s complex political, social, and identity dimensions.

At the same time, international involvement in Kashmir remains highly contested—especially by India, which has consistently opposed external intervention in what it regards as an internal sovereign matter. This sensitivity necessitates a constrained and often indirect role for international organizations. While such entities are widely acknowledged as important contributors to peacebuilding, the direct enforcement of peace agreements may prove counterproductive, particularly in democratic contexts where sovereignty is accorded paramount importance (Bhatia, 2017). This dynamic helps explain why previous UN peacebuilding initiatives in Kashmir have faced criticism for their perceived lack of legitimacy, a factor that has significantly undermined their effectiveness in the current geopolitical environment (Din, 2025).

Nevertheless, the persistent stagnation in relations between India and Pakistan creates a limited yet important space for international mediation (Khan et al., 2024). Rather than engaging directly in negotiations, external actors and institutions may be better positioned to support long-term stability by fostering a conducive environment for peace. In this regard, major powers are increasingly encouraged to transition “from a crisis management approach to promoting sustainable peace through inclusive dialogue, confidence-building measures, and arms control agreements” (Khan et al., 2024, p. 64). The UN Security Council’s historical difficulty in mediating the Kashmir dispute illustrates a broader tension between global normative frameworks and the territorial and identity-based claims of local actors (Kousar et al., 2023). Accordingly, while international involvement remains vital for sustaining dialogue and promoting accountability, it must remain carefully calibrated. As overt enforcement risks undermining local legitimacy and provoking resistance, particularly within democratic states such as India where sovereignty is accorded paramount importance (Bhatia, 2017).

Strategic Implications of the Conflict

From a critical geopolitics perspective, the protracted conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir has evolved beyond a conventional territorial dispute into a strategically constructed geopolitical narrative through which both states assert power, legitimacy, and regional influence. Military capabilities are not deployed solely as instruments of territorial defense (Khan & Khan, 2021), but are also discursively mobilised to project national identity, deterrence, and geopolitical relevance within a broader regional and global order (Imsirovic, 2021). In this framing, Kashmir emerges as both a symbolic and strategic space through which competing imaginaries of sovereignty, nationalism, and security are produced and reproduced. The ramifications of the conflict extend across South Asia, shaping regional security dynamics (Alam et al., 2023) and attracting external actors with vested geopolitical interests, notably China and the United States (Mohan, 2025). Persistent tensions in Kashmir also divert political and diplomatic attention from pressing regional challenges, including counterterrorism efforts and engagement in Afghanistan and Central Asia, illustrating how geopolitical rivalries reconfigure broader patterns of international relations (BBC, 2025; Imsirovic, 2021).

At the same time, critical geopolitics highlight the role of ideology, nationalist discourse, and militarised state practices in sustaining instability between India and Pakistan. The mutual construction of threat narratives reinforces a security dilemma in which military preparedness is normalised and legitimised, rendering the risk of escalation—nuclear confrontation—plausible (Deliso, 2025). Within this context, the spectre of nuclear conflict functions not only as a material risk but also as a powerful geopolitical signifier that shapes strategic calculations and international perceptions. The Kashmir conflict thus exemplifies how geopolitical discourse transforms contested spaces into sites of existential threat, where identity politics and security logics mutually reinforce one another.

From this perspective, international involvement in Kashmir is not neutral but is shaped by political interests and competing narratives. As the conflict encompasses both interstate disputes and intrastate tensions, external engagement becomes increasingly complex and must be carefully calibrated to avoid reinforcing state-centred narratives or marginalizing local voices. Critical geopolitics emphasises the importance of situating international responses within the historical and socio-political contexts that shape local grievances, rights-based claims, and collective identities (Imsirovic, 2021). Effectively addressing the Kashmir conflict therefore requires a multifaceted approach that interrogates colonial legacies, challenges exclusionary identity politics, and foregrounds human rights concerns. Such an approach creates space for more inclusive dialogue and reimagines geopolitical engagement beyond militarised and state-dominated frameworks, opening pathways toward more emancipatory possibilities for conflict resolution.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir transcends territorial disputes and historical grievances; it reflects a complex interplay of geopolitical narratives, identity construction, and strategic interests shaped by both domestic and international actors. Drawing on Critical Geopolitics, this study demonstrates how political elites, media discourses, and institutional practices have persistently constructed and reproduced antagonistic national identities, framing the “Other” as a perpetual and existential threat. Such discursive formations not only legitimize processes of militarization and securitization but also constrain the scope for diplomatic engagement and peace-building initiatives. From this perspective, spatial imaginaries surrounding Kashmir remain deeply embedded in postcolonial anxieties, assertions of national identity, and broader global power configurations.

The involvement of external powers—notably the United States, China, and Russia—further complicates the regional security environment, often reinforcing zero-sum logics rather than facilitating cooperative security frameworks. Consequently, resolving the India–Pakistan conflict requires more than strategic bargaining or confidence-building measures; it necessitates a fundamental reconfiguration of dominant geopolitical narratives. This study contributes to the critical geopolitics literature by illustrating how discourse functions as a central mechanism of postcolonial power in South Asian politics. By deconstructing entrenched narratives and advancing alternative imaginaries grounded in mutual recognition, shared historical experiences, and regional interdependence, critical geopolitics offers a viable pathway toward a more sustainable and peaceful South Asia.

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