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South Asia

Kashmir, India, Pakistan: on the history and internationalist stakes of a state of war

- Features -

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This article attempts to take stock of the recent ‘hot’ crisis between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Many factors need to be taken into account. Recent events are undoubtedly part of a long history of military tensions and wars dating back to the disastrous partition imposed on the sub-continent by British imperialism in 1947. In recent years, however, profound changes have affected the countries concerned, as well as the geopolitical environment, regional management of water resources and the weapons used. So we cannot assume that history will simply repeat itself almost identically. This is perhaps the main question before us: what's new? The answer, of course, lies primarily with the left-wing organisations in the region. I shall confine myself to submitting some elements of analysis or hypotheses for discussion and criticism, even if I have to revise later my copy.

The partition of 1947 imposed a gigantic forced displacement of population, concerning approximately 15 million people, according to religious criteria. Muslims were grouped together in Pakistan in the west (in the Indus basin) and in the east of the sub-continent (in the Ganges basin, East Pakistan having become Bangladesh after the war of independence in 1971). However, there is still a very large Muslim population. Many, but not all, of the Hindus who used to live in ‘Muslim’ territory have joined India.

Kashmir is a Himalayan country that was included within the borders of the British Empire. Its population is predominantly Muslim. It was fractured by the so-called ‘unfinished’ partition of 1947 and the First Indo-Pakistani War that followed. A vote on self-determination was promised, but obviously never took place. Pakistan now occupies the territories of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan; India the territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh; China Aksai Chin and the Shaksgam Valley.



[Map of Kashmir showing sub-regions administered by different countries]

Constant tension and three wars

The consequences of the imperial policy of 'divide and rule' are still being felt, but mainly because the ruling elites are constantly rekindling them. This latent state of low-intensity warfare is used by the Pakistani and Indian regimes to marginalise or silence opposition, to appeal (with varying degrees of success) for national unity, to divert attention from social problems, to justify the size of military budgets, and so on.

Three high-intensity wars took place. The first in 1947-1949, in the wake of partition. It ended under the aegis of the UN with the establishment of a line of control cutting Kashmir in two (this was not a recognised border). The second in 1965-1966 and the third in 1999, on the heights of Kargil, resulted in several thousand deaths on both sides. The fighting takes place at high altitude in extremely trying conditions.

India acquired nuclear weapons in 1974, in response to China, with whom it is also in conflict on the Himalayan border. Pakistan imported the appropriate technology and carried out its first tests in 1998 (it is the only Muslim country to possess it). However, just as in Europe, the 'balance of terror' has not put an end to military conflicts, even if the situation is very different from that on the Korean peninsula, where it is difficult to ignore the risk of 'slippage'. France, for its part, is trying to politically 'normalise' the idea of its use by referring to its research into 'tactical' weapons - a dangerous smokescreen. Universal nuclear disarmament remains a top priority.

The unfolding of the current crisis

On 22 April, an armed religious group carried out an attack in Pahalgam in the eastern part of Kashmir (under Indian occupation). India denounced Pakistan.

On 7 May, New Delhi launched Operation Sindoor. In addition to the usual artillery fire on either side of the Line of Control in Kashmir, its air force and drones attacked numerous targets in Pakistani territory.

The conflict is escalating, with Pakistan sending drones to destroy targets deep inside India, including airports.

In both countries, the media have inflamed war nationalism. But it is clear that the massive use of drones, in particular, has changed the situation. The Indian bourgeoisie was party to the patriotic hysteria, sobering up and demanding that Prime Minister Narendra Modi agree to a ceasefire. India is trying to take advantage of the Washington-Beijing conflict to attract international capital. Fanning the embers of anti-Muslim ideology is good for the ethno-nationalist policy of the BJP (Modi's party), which aims to complete the process of illiberal 'Hinduisation' of the country - but military insecurity is bad for business.

India has always felt superior to its neighbour Pakistan. Demographics, strategic depth (1,600 km from east to west), economic capacity and today a racist ideology feed this feeling. Strategically, Pakistan does not have these advantages. The long-standing links between the army's secret services and the Afghan Taliban on its north-western border should have made it a 'friendly' country, giving it a certain strategic depth. The Afghan Taliban have now become its main enemies, supporting the Pakistani Taliban.

However, Pakistan's defences have proved more effective than expected. Its pilots are better trained than those of its large neighbour. It is equipped with an air fleet and Chinese missiles that can hit the attacker from very far away. Five Indian aircraft are reported to have been shot down, including the French Rafale, while its countermeasures to protect against missiles do not appear to have been effective or activated.

However, Islamabad cannot sustain a lasting war effort. The country is drowning in debt and under intense pressure from the IMF. With each country claiming victory, the ceasefire agreement was signed on 10 May and announced on 12 May. It is only a truce, not a peace. After whipping up the BJP supporters, who do not understand this truce, Narendra Modi declared that the Sindoor operation was not over, that it had even become a permanent policy of the government. He is thus preparing for important elections, particularly in the state of Bihar, by continuing to stir up 'anti-Muslim hatred' against his neighbour, as well as against India's large Muslim community (around 15% of the total population). Christians are also the target of Hindu fundamentalists, advocates of Hindu supremacism (Hindutva).

Who carried out the Pahalgam attack?

Who is the armed fundamentalist group that carried out the terrorist operation on 22 April in Pahalgam, in Indian-occupied Kashmir, killing 26 perfectly innocent people? India immediately denounced the Lashkar-e-Taiba, thus directly implicating Islamabad, since the LeT is linked to the Pakistani army. However, there is nothing to indicate that this is the case.

The identity of this organization remains unknown, but the hypothesis that the attack (absolutely reprehensible in its terrorist nature) was not ordered by Pakistani services, but was carried out by a Kashmiri group in its own right, must be seriously considered.

This group operated a long way from the demarcation line without sophisticated means, with the basic weaponry of any guerrilla group, it seems (automatic weapons, but no quality explosives), in an ultra-militarised zone where long-distance travel is dangerous. The situation in Jammu and Kashmir continues to worsen for its inhabitants, both socially and religiously. The autonomous status from which the territory 'benefited' never meant much in practice, but the fact that it was repealed in 2019 heralded a brutal hardening of New Delhi's colonial policy of dispossession, giving impetus to the Hinduisation of the administration, and so on. There were so many 'disappeared persons' that they are referred to as 'half-widows', women who do not know whether their husbands are dead or alive. A repressive situation that my Indian comrades denounce in no uncertain terms. Under these conditions, it would be surprising if no local resistance groups were formed.

Conditions are much less drastic in the Kashmiri territories under Pakistani administration.

There is no doubt that the army and the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) trained and mentored the terrorist organisations operating in Jammu and Kashmir. Recently, however, the situation has changed. Many of the fundamentalist groups based in Pakistan are said to have become autonomous, pursuing their own objectives. As for the Afghan Taliban, they support the Pakistani Taliban (the Tehreek Taliban Pakistan, TTP)... who are fighting the military and control part of the country. They have supplied them with heavy weaponry taken from stocks left by the United States and its local supporters when they left the country in a hurry in 2021.

Pakistan has long lived under direct or indirect military regimes (as it does today, with Shehbaz Sharif's government as a front), with democratic periods being only interludes. Now, however, it is going through a regime crisis that is probably unprecedented. The Pakistani army has been very unpopular since it threw its erstwhile protégé, Imran Kahn, into prison after he had become too powerful and remained surprisingly popular. A high-ranking Pakistani officer can swagger about after the attack in an attempt to restore his image, but the call for national unity behind the military caste seems to have gone unheeded for the time being, whatever the anger felt by the population after the attacks of Operation Sindoor, which targeted not only military installations but also religious schools (madrasas) and mosques that were no longer fundamentalist training centres.

Geopolitics of water and power

Regional tension has been considerably aggravated by the Modi government's decision to suspend the Indus Treaty. The equitable sharing of its waters is vital for Pakistan, contributing in particular to the irrigation of agriculture in Punjab, the country's breadbasket. Signed in 1960, this treaty provides a mechanism for stable cooperation between the two countries, something rare enough to warrant mention. This suspension, taken in the wake of the Pahalgam attack, amounts to a veritable act of hostility. As we know, in an era of global warming, control of water resources is becoming even more of a strategic issue than in the past.

Turkey and other states in the Near and Middle East mediated to stop the fighting. They will also defend Pakistan - one of the world's largest Muslim countries, along with Indonesia, and the one that could give them access to nuclear weapons. But the two powers that count remain the United States and China. Who can predict what Trump will do tomorrow? Then there is Beijing.

The 'Pakistan corridor' is of major importance to the Chinese regime, enabling it to bypass India to the west and gain access to the ocean. The north-south route to the port of Gwadar (under construction) starts in Pakistan-administered Kashmir (in Gilgit-Baltistan) and ends in Baluchistan, a conflict zone where various independence resistance movements operate (sometimes supported by India?) and where the Pakistani army is especially brutal (people 'disappear' here too). Chinese investment is considerable and its armed forces are present all along the corridor, under cover of the security services of... Chinese companies. Beijing's grip is so obvious that it has caused some upheaval among the Pakistani elites, but it looks very much like a *fait accompli*.

This is a fact that the Modi regime cannot afford to ignore.

Taking account of the new, looking at things from a different angle, acting as an internationalist

We need to think in the 'new'. In the case that interests us here, the 'new' is considerable: in India, the exclusionary dynamic of Hindutva (Modi claims the entire borders of the former British Empire); in Pakistan, a major regime crisis in a country plagued by regionalism and armed conflict; an upheaval in the geography of fundamentalist movements; the accelerating effects of the climate crisis; the renewal of geopolitical stakes with the unknown factor represented by the future of another regime crisis, the one into which the United States is sinking and whose repercussions will be global...

It is normal for each organisation to begin by analysing the state of the regional crisis, let's say from the point of view of its own country and its own political orientation. However, in order to take the analysis further and take joint action across borders, we need to make an effort to look at the situation from a different angle, by observing the situation as seen from other countries involved in the crisis (and other organisations with which we want to take action).

This is true in Europe (Western Europeans should see the Ukrainian war as it is experienced in Eastern Europe), or for a European trying to understand a distant Asian crisis...

Internationalism is obviously the plumb line for forces claiming to be on the left in the event of military conflict. The two parliamentary communist parties - the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI M) - have failed in their responsibilities by supporting the government's decision to launch military

action against Pakistan. On the other hand, the vast majority of my comrades in the countries concerned have maintained this plumb line against the current and in the face of intense pressure for national unity or militarism, keeping their stand in favour of full recognition of the Kashmiris' right to self-determination, a primary duty for Pakistani, Indian and... Chinese activists.

Implementing this right to self-determination is not easy, not least because each Kashmiri territory has been separated for decades. Nevertheless, until the Kashmiris' right to self-determination is recognised, there will be no lasting solution to a regional crisis that is being exploited by many established powers, both state and non-state.

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Source [ESSE](#). Translated by the author with the help of DeepLpro.

Corrections were made on May 18 at 10 a.m. concerning the large presence of Muslims in India (around 15% of the total population), who are not concentrated in the historic state of Hyderabad (now Andhra Pradesh and Telengana), but are present in many states. Another concerning the position of my Indian comrades, who have taken into account the possibility that the organization responsible for the Pahalgam attack was a local formation.

PS:

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