



India, Pakistan, and the Pulwama Crisis

Updated February 26, 2019

Overview

On February 14, 2019, an explosives-laden SUV rammed into a convoy carrying paramilitary police in India's Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) state. At least 40 personnel were killed in the explosion. The suicide attacker was a member of Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), a Pakistan-based terrorist group that claimed responsibility for the bombing. The attack took place in Pulwama in the heart of the Kashmir Valley, site of a 30-year-old separatist conflict that pits the Indian government against Kashmiri militants who seek independence for India's only Muslim-majority state or its merger with neighboring Pakistan. Islamabad claims the disputed territory and is widely believed to have provided arms, training, and safe haven to militants over the decades. On February 26, Indian jets [reportedly](#) bombed a JeM facility inside Pakistan. The crisis has renewed fears of war between South Asia's two nuclear-armed powers.

Although the attack—the single-deadliest in the history of the Kashmir conflict—reportedly was undertaken by a local Kashmiri, New Delhi [insists](#) that JeM leadership and planners across the de facto border in Pakistan are protected by Pakistan's intelligence agencies; it thus [holds](#) Islamabad responsible for the violence and has faced immense domestic pressure for retaliation. Pakistan quickly condemned the bombing while [rejecting](#) New Delhi's "self-serving narrative," noting that JeM is banned in Pakistan. Washington [condemned](#) the attack "in the strongest terms." A White House [statement](#) called on Pakistan to "end immediately the support and safe haven provided to all terrorist groups operating on its soil" and indicated that the incident "only strengthens our resolve" to bolster U.S.-India counterterrorism cooperation. Numerous Members of Congress [expressed](#) condemnation and condolences on social media.

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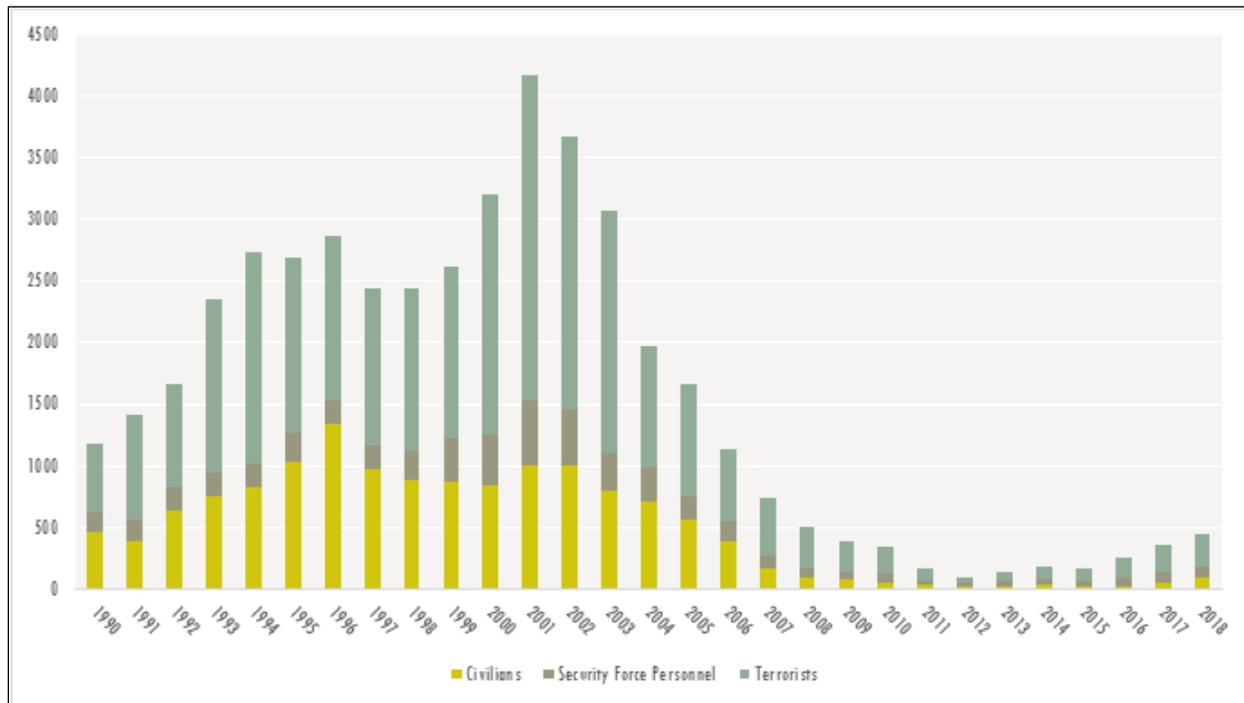
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Figure 1.



Background

Three full-scale wars and a constant state of military preparedness on both sides of their border have marked over seven decades of bitter rivalry between India and Pakistan. The acrimonious partition of British India into two successor states in 1947 and the unresolved issue of Kashmiri sovereignty have been major sources of tension. The military Line of Control (LOC) dividing the two countries in Kashmir is often identified as a potential nuclear “flashpoint.” Both countries formally claim the territory, with India controlling roughly two-thirds, including the fertile Valley region, and Pakistan administering the remainder as Azad Kashmir. A low-intensity separatist war began in 1989, with violence peaking in the late 1990s and early 2000s (see [Figure 2](#)). India blames the conventionally weaker Pakistan for perpetuating the conflict as part of an effort to “bleed India with a thousand cuts.” Pakistan denies materially supporting Kashmiri militants and highlights Indian human rights abuses in the state, which the [U.N. Human Rights Commission](#) and other [watchdogs](#) have called serious and widespread. The longstanding U.S. position on Kashmir is that the issue should be resolved between India and Pakistan while taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

Figure 2. Fatalities in Jammu and Kashmir, 1990-2018

Source: Indian government data via the South Asia Terrorism Portal.

Transnational Militant Groups in Pakistan

The U.S., Indian, and other governments, along with the United Nations, have for decades expressed concerns about the activities of Islamist militant groups in Pakistan, many of them with transnational aspirations. JeM is among at least ten U.S.-designated [Foreign Terrorist Organizations](#) based in Pakistan. With at least [several hundred armed supporters](#), JeM was founded in 2000 by Masood Azhar, by [some accounts](#) with the support of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI). JeM was responsible for lethal 2001 attacks on both the Indian Parliament and the J&K legislature that nearly led to an India-Pakistan war. India accuses Azhar himself of orchestrating a January 2016 attack on an Indian air base at [Pathankot](#), as well as involvement in a September 2016 assault on an Indian army base near [Uri](#), Kashmir.

Indian Options

India's options for military retaliation are [limited](#), given Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons, seasonal constraints in the Himalayan region, and the diffuse nature of militant facilities in Pakistan. Following the 2016 Uri attack, New Delhi reported having launched a "[surgical strike](#)" in Pakistan-held Kashmir; Pakistan denied this occurred. The February 26 air strike on an alleged JeM camp near Balakot, Pakistan, [may represent](#) an effort to mollify domestic anger while providing Pakistan [space to deescalate](#). Other [military options](#) include using ground operations and/or further air strikes. Diplomatically, India has sought for years to isolate Pakistan, and New Delhi [intends](#) to redouble this effort, as well as take actions to hurt Pakistan economically. India also [promises](#) to end water-sharing with Pakistan under the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty.

The China Factor

Despite its long-running conflict with Pakistan, India's key rival in the 21st century is China, in part due to China's decades-old role as Pakistan's primary international ally and benefactor, and more recently in response to Beijing's growing presence and influence in the Indian Ocean region. New Delhi's animus toward Beijing has a direct link to the Pulwama attack: since 2016 China has singlehandedly [blocked](#) a U.N. Security Council effort to designate Masood Azhar as a Global Terrorist under [UNSCR 1267](#). The current crisis puts to the [test](#) Beijing's willingness to continue shielding its Pakistani allies from international opprobrium.

U.S South Asia Policy and Congressional Interest

A long-standing goal of U.S. policy in South Asia has been to prevent India-Pakistan conflict from escalating to interstate war. For decades, this meant the United States avoided actions that overtly favored either party. In recent years, however, Washington has grown closer to India while relations with Pakistan continue to be viewed as clouded by deep mistrust. The Trump Administration "[suspended](#)" security assistance to Pakistan in late 2017 and has significantly reduced nonmilitary aid to Islamabad, while simultaneously deepening defense relations with New Delhi. Yet any U.S. impulse to "[tilt](#)" toward India is largely offset by Islamabad's current, and by most accounts vital, role in [facilitating](#) Afghan reconciliation negotiations. Thus, while the U.S. National Security Advisor reportedly has [expressed](#) support for India's "right to self-defense against cross-border terrorism," Washington's [dependence](#) on Pakistan in Afghanistan is likely to constrain U.S. involvement.

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