

This is South and Central Asia. It's home to the earth's highest mountain range and largest river delta. Thousands of years ago, a network of trade routes called the Silk Road ran through this vast terrain, connecting east to west. Today, the region is densely populated and diverse, with one quarter of the world's population spread across just 7 percent of the world's landmass.

But despite its common history, this is one of the least integrated places in the world. Trade among South and Central Asian countries is the lowest of any region. The stagnation stems largely from a deep mistrust between the region's biggest and most powerful countries, India and Pakistan.

The two neighboring countries are home to 83 percent of the region's population, and yet annual trade between the neighbors is currently valued at less than \$2 billion, roughly the same amount as the U.S. and Canada have in a single day. The lack of infrastructure or cooperation between India and Pakistan makes it far more efficient for goods to travel through Dubai, instead of taking a direct route across this shared border. Some economists estimate that if tariffs were lifted, this amount could grow tenfold to more than \$20 billion, creating more jobs and increasing the quality of life on both sides of the border.

The acrimonious relationship between India and Pakistan not only hinders domestic and regional trade; it affects the stability, security, and future of the region and beyond, largely because both countries are nuclear-armed.

So how did this relationship get so bad? Back in 1947, the long-held colony of British India was declared independent and split into a predominantly Muslim Pakistan and an officially secular but mostly Hindu India. The division of this once-shared land into two separate nations is known as the partition of India. The newly drawn borders separated families and communities, and it sparked one of the greatest migrations in human history. As millions of Muslims migrated to West and East Pakistan and millions of Hindus and Sikhs migrated to India, violence was widespread. Hundreds of thousands of people died in the chaos.

In the decades that followed, the rivalry and distrust between the neighboring countries intensified. Pakistan continues to see India as an existential threat, while India believes Pakistan seeks to weaken the Indian state through terrorism.

Transcript: An Overview of South and Central Asia

Since the partition, the two countries have fought one another in four wars. One of these conflicts centered on East Pakistan, where growing political discontent and cultural nationalism were brutally suppressed by the government in West Pakistan. An estimated ten million refugees poured into India. The Indian government intervened on behalf of separatists in the east, spurring a war between India and the rest of Pakistan. India ultimately won, and East Pakistan became the new country of Bangladesh.

Today, tensions continue to flare between India and Pakistan. This is Kashmir, a disputed area that both countries claim to be their own. Its de facto border is called the Line of Control, and it is one of the most dangerous flashpoints in the world. India and Pakistan regularly fight over this contested territory — fighting that could easily escalate to all-out war and even the use of nuclear weapons.

In the decades since the partition of the subcontinent, the two neighbors have taken vastly different paths. India is the world's biggest democracy and one of its fastest growing economies. It's made great strides in development and has a booming technology sector but faces challenges providing infrastructure and social services for its billion-plus people. Projected population increases could further add to India's challenges, as hundreds of millions of Indians still lack reliable access to electricity, clean water, and toilets.

India has ambitions to play a larger leading role in the world but will have difficulty doing so without improved relations with Pakistan. And Pakistan will not accept India taking on a dominant regional stature.

Pakistan is more a democracy in name than in reality. The Pakistani military and intelligence services play an outsized role in government and drive much of the country's policymaking. GDP growth is relatively high in Pakistan, but corruption and terrorism, as well as a massive debt and a large and growing population, makes for an uncertain future.

Amid these problems, Pakistan has sought help from other countries. For many years, Pakistan and the United States have shared a limited strategic partnership. The U.S. worked with Pakistan to fight terrorism, especially in neighboring Afghanistan. However, there is a mutual distrust between the U.S. and Pakistan, particularly as Pakistan has been widely accused of

Transcript: An Overview of South and Central Asia

providing sanctuary to members of the Taliban, an Islamic extremist group. Pakistan and others in the region are also central to the Belt and Road Initiative, a series of ambitious China-led infrastructure projects. While India has refused to participate, China has focused on Pakistan in particular, pouring more than \$100 billion into Pakistani ports, highways, and pipelines. These massive investments have drawn the two countries closer together. India views this with suspicion, given its long history of friction with China. Meanwhile, India and the U.S. have grown closer in recent years, in part to counter China's growing presence in the region, which both countries see as a threat to their own interests.

Despite there being much to gain from cooperation, the issues keeping tensions between India and Pakistan high are deep-seeded and will continue to not only hinder the region's economic integration but inflame its security concerns. And because of the two nuclear arsenals at play, a security threat for this part of the world is unquestionably a security concern for all.