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India's Pakistani Challenge Betwixt Two Behemoths

By P. S. Suryanarayana

SYNOPSIS

The ongoing military confrontation between India and Pakistan, following a terrorist attack which Delhi blames on Islamabad, may reveal how far the Indian factor matters to the US-China rivalry. An under-stated US move for a security partnership with India in the Indo-Pacific and China's conditional effort to pivot towards Delhi are in the spotlight in this evolving geopolitical crisis. Can India advance its own interests in this complex situation?

COMMENTARY

The terrorist attack at Pahalgam in India's Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir on 22 April 2025 has caused a [cascading tide of tensions](#) between Delhi and Islamabad. With India launching military strikes against ["terrorist" sites in Pakistan](#) on 7 May in retaliation, the respective attitudes of the United States and China will influence Delhi's strategic calculus. It is too early to predict the outcome of this geopolitical crisis, but two relevant factors stand out.

In February, US President Donald Trump announced a seemingly low-key but significant choice of India as a new security partner in the Indo-Pacific. Equally important is China's perception of Islamabad as a protégé in dealing with both India and the US, despite intermittent terrorist attacks on Chinese personnel and projects in Pakistan. Significantly, Chinese President Xi Jinping indicated, in April 2025, a degree of willingness to bring India to his side in the evolving Sino-American rivalry. Such realpolitik calculations by China and the US will be tested in the current military conflict between India and Pakistan.

Nuances of Postures by US and China

The pro-ceasefire postures of both Washington and Beijing, soon after India's counter-terror attacks on Pakistan and the latter's retaliatory strikes, do not seem to have deterred Delhi. China's initial [expression of "regret"](#) over India's military response may have been of some comfort to Pakistan.

Furthermore, Xi's [joint statement](#) with Russian President Vladimir Putin on 8 May 2025, especially on the issue of nuclear weapons, seems to apply to India and Pakistan, too. While India, like China, has a policy of "no-first-use" of nuclear weapons, Pakistan does not share such a self-restraining embargo. This is as volatile as any other factor in the current situation. Delhi will be watching if Beijing would restrain Islamabad.

Trump has [not taken any diplomatic initiative](#) after expressing utmost concern and also offering to defuse the latest India-Pakistan conflict. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio appeared to hold the scales even while talking to Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and India's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar on 8 May. Rubio emphasised "the need for ["immediate de-escalation"](#)". Earlier, however, in the wake of the terrorist attack in April, he expressed solidarity with India, while calling on Pakistan to [act against terrorist activities](#).

This subtle but noticeable shift in US attitude does not align with Trump's "[special bond](#)" with Delhi. A view is also gaining ground in China that Xi might not be able to play a [peacemaker](#) role. China's special ties with Pakistan are seen to rule out this possibility. Immediately apparent, therefore, are the limits of Xi's and Trump's recent moves to draw India to their respective sides. What, however, were the long-term calculations of these two leaders in trying to pivot towards India?

A Recent US-India "Congruence"

An inconspicuous, defence-related paragraph 6 of the [Joint Leaders' Statement](#), issued after Trump hosted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in February 2025, marked a potential high in US-India ties. Separately, in a routine ceremonial message to Delhi in April, Xi set new benchmarks for Sino-Indian engagement, appearing willing to look at India afresh in the Trump-disrupted geopolitical landscape.

In a complex paragraph, Trump and Modi set aside conventional caution in the US-India engagement. They "committed [themselves] to break new ground to support and sustain the overseas deployments of the US and Indian militaries in the Indo-Pacific, including enhanced logistics and intelligence sharing, as well as arrangements to improve force mobility for joint humanitarian and disaster relief operations along with other exchanges and security cooperation engagements".

The long-winded passage ranked as Washington's first-ever announcement of willingness to "support and sustain" joint operational deployments of US and Indian military forces in the Indo-Pacific. No less significant was Trump's commitment to "break new ground" to foster US-India "force mobility" in a region China views as within its security perimeter.

Until now, India has consistently deployed its Navy in the Indo-Pacific for professional training, operational readiness and goodwill visits to the littoral states. Some of those deployments were undertaken under the US-India training-or-exercise framework or as part of their Malabar exercises involving also Japan and Australia. Furthermore, the Indian Navy participates in other countries' fleet reviews, besides exercising with partner countries in the Indo-Pacific, like Japan and Singapore.

Trump laid out a whole-of-military game plan for potential US-India togetherness, involving their navies and other defence forces, in a region where China, too, has interests. India's reciprocal commitment was also an actionable "first". In a clear elevation of strategy, the two countries agreed to make "arrangements to improve force mobility [of both sides] for joint operations". Unique was the concept of joint "security cooperation engagements".

Masterfully vague and designed to camouflage real intentions, it shrouded potential US-India activities for "security" in the Indo-Pacific. It was safe to assume that China was the primary target of such "security cooperation". Nevertheless, Washington and Delhi still have their respective and collective issues to settle with Beijing and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA).

A veteran Indian diplomat, Prabhat P. Shukla, annotated the aforesaid paragraph 6 thus: "It talks of breaking new ground, indicating some forethought [by the two countries]. Both will sustain their overseas military deployments in the Indo-Pacific, not just for humanitarian purposes, but also for "security cooperation engagements. One would surmise that one area of such [joint] deployment would be in and around Taiwan; there is equally a possibility of US military aid [for Delhi] in case India should require it, going beyond intelligence sharing".

Trump's apparent idea of having US-India military deployments to protect Taiwan might strike many as an improbable speculative scenario. The key question was about Trump's stake in seeking "security cooperation engagements" with India in a region where China is deeply concerned. First and foremost, Delhi has, for several years, refused to endorse China's claims of sovereignty over Taiwan because Beijing has not acknowledged India's sovereignty claims over some disputed areas. This has become known as the "One-China" versus "One-India" [clash of principles](#).

The second and equally significant factor that could have influenced Trump is India's weight as America's "major defence partner" since 2016, even though India is outside the orbit of US allies. Indeed, in 2015, US President Obama and Modi had agreed on a "Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region". Looking beyond the "Vision", they agreed to "develop a [roadmap](#)... enabling both our nations to better respond to diplomatic, economic and security challenges in the region". The South China Sea figured in that vision as a sub-region of joint US-India concern. The "roadmap" was not developed, giving Trump an opportunity in 2025 to invite India for "security cooperation engagements" to address America's [Taiwan](#) and India's China challenges. The [PLA is a challenge](#) to both the US and India in the Indo-Pacific.

"Benchmarks" for China-India Ties

Trump's apparent tilt towards India in February 2025 framed the geopolitical

landscape for Sino-Indian ties that Xi spelt out in April. In a message marking 75 years of China-India diplomatic engagement, [Xi urged both sides](#) to “seek a way, which features peaceful coexistence, mutual trust, mutual benefit and common development”.

Despite alluding to peaceful coexistence, Xi conspicuously avoided three key benchmarks featured in the seminal 1954 Sino-Indian “*Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence*”: mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, and mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs. The absence of these three values of good neighbourliness underscores the “One-China” versus “One-India” clash of principles. Each side does not recognise the territorial claims of the other.

Much could be said about India as a trade-plus-investment opportunity for China and vice versa. However, Xi knew about India’s paramount aspiration for a global role. For the first time at the highest political level, he urged Beijing and Delhi to “jointly promote a multipolar world and greater democracy in international relations”. Xi’s [counsel](#) reflected a game plan to keep India on his side. If a “joint” Sino-Indian promotion of a multipolar world is possible, he might not be averse to Delhi becoming a pole, or power centre, in a new global order. In sum, Xi’s message had the overtones of a conditional pivoting towards India to meet the Trump challenge.

Conclusion

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passes through Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Both these areas are administered by Islamabad but claimed by India as its sovereign territories. The CPEC projects in these areas might, therefore, be vulnerable to an accidental or calculated Indian attack, which could draw China into the India-Pakistan conflict.

India’s “counter-terror” airstrikes on Balakot in Pakistan in 2019, even though the targets were not part of the CPEC, had, nonetheless, prompted Beijing and Islamabad to agree to “[take forceful measures](#)” to “safeguard... the construction of the CPEC”. Beijing’s CPEC-related sensitivity and Washington’s insistence on “de-escalation” are key factors that might shape Delhi’s pursuit of a counter-terror military strategy.

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