

Geopolitics

Why India's Pakistan Policy Needs a Serious Review

The case is not for a reset, but for sober management of a fraught relationship



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Wire fence between India and Pakistan

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It has become almost an article of faith in India's strategic discourse that the only choice on [Pakistan](#) lies between punitive resolve and naive

accommodation. That binary is misleading and has quietly impoverished our thinking.

The case for reviewing India's Pakistan policy is not a case for a reset, nor for a fresh initiative to seek friendship. There is no realistic possibility of either at present, given the structural constraints that define the relationship. Foremost among these is the Pakistan Army's *raison d'être*: its dominance of the Pakistani state rests on the manufactured conviction of an existential threat from India. No amount of Indian goodwill can dissolve an enmity that sustains the institution wielding power in Islamabad. The argument here is narrower and more pragmatic. India needs to manage this relationship better and to stop viewing it largely through the lens of domestic politics.

The policy has not met its objectives

Let us begin with an honest audit. By its own declared yardsticks, India's Pakistan policy has not achieved its core objectives. The Pahalgam attack of April 2025 demonstrated, with brutal clarity, that the signalling effect of Balakot had not deterred terrorism. The carefully constructed proposition that a calibrated kinetic response would raise the cost of cross-border terror to unsustainable levels did not survive contact with reality. Operation Sindoor in May 2025 did establish greater space for conventional operations below the nuclear threshold, and that is a genuine gain. But it came bundled with a liability that has been insufficiently examined: the "new normal" of forceful kinetic responses has hardened into an expectation trap.

The "new normal" refers to a posture in which forceful, visible military strikes have become the publicly celebrated response to cross-border terrorism. Over time, such strikes shift from exceptional measures to the default instrument of statecraft, creating public and political expectations that every major terrorist incident must be answered with comparable kinetic action. That dynamic narrows strategic choice, raises escalation risks, and can make subtler, non-kinetic options politically difficult to pursue.

The logic of this trap is worth spelling out. Once a forceful military response becomes the benchmark, every future terrorist outrage generates domestic pressure for a comparable or larger strike. The government is left with diminishing room to choose responses calibrated to circumstance rather than to public sentiment. Yet in many situations a non-kinetic, unpredictable, covert, or deliberately delayed action would be both less escalatory and more effective in imposing costs. By converting the military strike into the default and most visible instrument, India has narrowed its own menu of options. Sajid Farid Shapoo's argument that India's path lies in cumulative compellence across multiple domains, rather than in the thunderclap of a single strike, deserves far more attention than it has received in a discourse addicted to spectacle.^[1]

The cost of severed channels

The second deficiency is the absence of political channels. India's posture of refusing dialogue until terrorism ends sounds morally unimpeachable, but it has frozen us into a reactive stance that neither shapes Pakistan's internal trajectory nor moderates its external alignments. The price of this self-imposed silence becomes most visible during crises. When escalation ladders are obscured and there are no functioning lines of communication, the management of a confrontation passes to outside powers. The ceasefire diplomacy of May 2025 illustrated this uncomfortably. The only bilateral channel of communication available during the 87-hour conflict was the one between the Directors General of Military Operations of the two armies. Even the diplomatic channel was kept in abeyance. A relationship without channels does not become less dangerous; it becomes more dependent on the attention and goodwill of third parties, precisely at the moments when Indian autonomy matters most.

This predicament is reinforced by a strategic environment that has grown markedly less hospitable. The comfortable assumption that Pakistan could be diplomatically isolated has been overtaken by events. Far from being isolated, Pakistan has used the post-Sindoor period to expand its

diplomatic space. It has formalised a mutual defence pact with Saudi Arabia, securing both financial relief and a measure of strategic relevance that its material capabilities alone would not command. It has positioned itself as an interlocutor between Washington and Tehran, and its army chief has been received at the White House. The Pakistani establishment has managed to cultivate Donald Trump and the charmed circles around him with a blend of flattery and blandishments. As some observers have noted, Pakistan has enhanced its diplomatic profile without any change in its underlying capabilities, while India's standing has been questioned. Islamabad's gains may be tactical and transient, but it is clear that the isolation strategy has yielded unimpressive returns.

It is also far from assured that the "new normal" of India's punitive posture in response to acts of terrorism emanating from Pakistan will indeed prove a deterrent. Compounding the problem is the fact that China extended an unprecedented level of operational support to Pakistan during Operation Sindoor, including assistance in fusion of weapon platforms, provision of positioning data, real-time ISR inputs, and technical advice, which has altered deterrence dynamics.

The trap of domestic framing

Underlying these failures is a deeper distortion: the tendency to view Pakistan policy through the lens of domestic politics. When responses to terrorism are calibrated to political resonance and news channels rather than to strategic effect, the result is a policy optimised for the wrong audience. Deterrence is a message addressed to an adversary; when the audience becomes the domestic gallery, the message to Islamabad is muddled. The expectation trap and the political-framing problem are two faces of the same coin. Both substitute the appearance of resolve for its substance.

What management looks like

What, then, is the alternative? It is emphatically not the non-reciprocal logic that animates India's Neighbourhood First policy. Pakistan is deliberately,

and correctly, excluded from that framework. The policy's core principles — non-reciprocity, development partnership, and cooperative regionalism combined with strong bilateral engagement — simply have no purchase in a relationship defined by structural rivalry, unresolved territorial claims, and adversarial security dynamics. To pretend otherwise would be to misread the nature of the Pakistan Army's institutional DNA, which is built around hostility to India. This relationship cannot be transformed anytime soon. It can, at best, be managed.

Management has concrete components. The first is a wider and more imaginative repertoire of calibrated responses to terrorist provocations, one that does not reflexively default to the most escalatory and most visible option. The second is the institutionalisation of crisis-management channels and back-channel communication, and keeping diplomatic lines open, so that escalation ladders remain visible to both sides and miscalculation is less likely in the fog of a crisis. The third is keeping open the option of acknowledging occasional helpful gestures by Pakistan, like the restoration of the India-Pakistan ceasefire understanding along the Line of Control in February 2021, at a time when India was under considerable pressure along its northern borders with China and taking carefully calibrated steps towards more stable relations. The fourth is to ringfence India's enormous economic and diaspora stakes in West Asia, a region where Pakistan has lately found fresh patrons and where Indian interests are too large to be left exposed.

It is essential to be clear about what dialogue and communication are, and what they are not. They should never be projected as a reward for Pakistan's good behaviour, to be dispensed once terrorism ceases and withheld until it does. They are, rather, indispensable tools for managing a difficult and dangerous relationship. The former High Commissioner Sharat Sabharwal captured the stakes precisely: coercion without diplomacy risks becoming an endless journey of conflict and crises.^[2] A relationship between two

nuclear-armed neighbours sharing a long and contested border cannot be conducted entirely through the grammar of force.

None of this requires India to lower its guard, weaken its deterrent, or extend trust Pakistan has not earned. Hard power remains the bedrock, and India's advantages in military capability, economic weight, and demographic scale remain intact. The argument is for adding instruments, not removing them; for replacing a posture that is reactive, escalatory by default, and shaped by domestic optics with one that is deliberate, multidomain, and shaped by strategic purpose. A rivalry that cannot be resolved must still be governed. Recognising that is the first step towards a policy that serves Indian interests rather than Indian sentiment.

[1] Sajid Farid Shapoo, "Beyond Limited War: India's Path to Strategic Coercion After Pahalgam," *The Diplomat*, 29 April 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/04/beyond-limited-war-indias-path-to-strategic-coercion-after-pahalgam/>.

[2] Sharat Sabharwal, "Problem Persists, Enter Diplomacy," *Indian Express*, 8 May 2026.

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