

# INDIA'S SHIFTING STRATEGIC CONCERNS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

The U.S. President Donald Trump's latest gaffe has introduced another thorn in what is now clearly an unsettled India-U.S. relationship. His claim, on Monday, that [India sought U.S. mediation in Kashmir](#) will pinch the Narendra Modi government more because it strikes at a vital interest: India's territorial integrity. But if we had been more attuned to international shifts, we would have noticed that structural trends in South Asia have been changing over the past several years. While India's hand is not as strong as we sometimes believe it to be, there might be opportunities to leverage the international situation further down the road.

If we step back and evaluate the India-Pakistan equation over the past five years, what stands out is that both sides proceeded from a perception that each holds an advantageous position. India's confidence emanated from Mr. Modi's electoral victory in 2014 that yielded a strong Central government and expectations of stable ties with all the major powers. Mostly overlooked in India, Pakistani leaders too have displayed confidence that the international environment was moving in a direction that opened options for Pakistan that were unavailable in the previous decade. This included the renewed patterns of Pakistan's ties with the U.S. and China, with the latter reassuring Pakistan and, most importantly, the Army on their respective strategic commitments and bilateral partnerships. In the U.S.'s case, this appears to have been undertaken discreetly to avoid ruffling India's feathers, with the result that the enduring aspects of U.S.-Pakistan ties remained obscure, but still very real. In the past few days, the resilience of that relationship has come out into the open. Let us not ever forget that this is a military alliance forged in the 1950s. Historically, U.S. policymakers have always sought to restore the alliance with Pakistan whenever Islamabad's ties with China became stronger. India has borne the brunt of this recurring geopolitical dynamic.

Much of Pakistan's contemporary leverage can of course also be traced to the ongoing phase of the Afghan conflict. It fended off the most dangerous phase when U.S. policy might have shifted in an adversarial direction, or instability in the tribal frontier areas might have completely exploded. Thus, the Pakistan Army perceives itself in a position of strength where Washington, Beijing, and even Moscow have recognised Pakistan's role in a future settlement on the conflict in Afghanistan. So, both India and Pakistan perceive themselves to be in a comfortable strategic position. At any rate, the evolving roles and interests of third parties are becoming significant again, and how Delhi leverages the international environment will determine the success of its overall policy.

Both the U.S. and China have overlapping interests in regional stability and avoidance of a major subcontinental conflict. While each maintains deep ties with Pakistan for different reasons, it is unclear to what extent their longer term interests coincide with India, which seeks a structural transformation in Pakistan's domestic politics and external behaviour. The U.S. and China appear content with, or probably prefer, a Pakistan with a strong Rawalpindi, along with competent civilian governance structures and an elite with a wider world view. A Pakistan that looks beyond South Asia could be a useful potential partner in burden sharing, ironically for both the U.S. and China. For Washington, the Pakistan Army is an insurance card for persisting security challenges such as regime survival for U.S. client states in West Asia as well as for the containment of Iran. For China, a stable Pakistan can be a partner in the Belt and Road initiative and future continental industrial and energy corridors. As the writer Andrew Small underlines, Beijing's large economic investments "come with some clear expectations about the choices that Pakistan's political and military leadership make about their country's future".

In sum, both the U.S. and China seek a strong, stable and secure Pakistan that controls its destabilising behaviour because that undermines their wider regional interests. For the U.S., a revisionist Pakistan pulls India inward and away from potential India-U.S. cooperation on Asian geopolitics. For China, it undermines its industrial and connectivity projects in Pakistan, while negatively impacting India-China ties. Hence, evolving interests of the great powers in South Asia might not necessarily portend an adverse geopolitical setting for India in the medium term. This is even more plausible if the widening comprehensive national power gap between a rising India and an unstable Pakistan make the latter's traditional role as a balancer or spoiler unattractive in the eyes of the great powers. As Pakistani scholar Hussain Haqqani predicts, "You can try to leverage your strategic location as much as you like, but there will come a time... when strategic concerns change."

So, while it is reasonable to forecast that both the U.S. and China benefit from a more normalised Pakistan, India's policymakers should also remain clear-eyed that neither country would be willing to expend much strategic capital in an ambitious policy to reorder the domestic scene or civil-military relations in Pakistan. In any case, Indian statecraft is essential to reorient perceptions of the great powers. Maintaining that India has the right and the capacity to adopt an active defence posture — that is, blocking the flow of cross-border terror by proactive operations on the Line of Control (LoC) along with reserving the option for more ambitious punitive strikes in response to major terrorist attacks on Indian military targets — would play an important part in shaping how third parties view Indian interests and thereby assume constructive roles in managing Pakistani behaviour.

If India ever asks third parties to assist in the region, it should be for a cessation of Pakistan's proxy war in Kashmir, and, once an atmosphere of peace has been established, to persuade Pakistan to accept the LoC as part of a final territorial settlement similar to the offer by Indira Gandhi in the 1972 Shimla negotiations.

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