

# INDIA'S GRAND STRATEGY ON PAKISTAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

When a society's patience wears thin, one of two things typically happen. Either its leaders embark on a bold new direction, or they spin a story for their domestic audience and carry on as before. What the Modi government has undertaken recently, in response to Pakistan's relentless proxy war, defies a neat description. It is true that an impending national election provided abundant motives to make political capital through publicised air strikes. There is little doubt on that score, and many have called upon the government to resist from brazen use of the 'national security' card in mobilising public opinion.

Nevertheless, the willingness to take the fight to the Pakistani heartland and cultivate a measure of uncertainty is a clear departure from the policy of strategic restraint. Regardless of the specific tactical outcomes from India's air strike — whether it was intended as a warning shot to demonstrate "capacity and will" or whether it sought to degrade high-value targets — the signal to Pakistan and its benefactors was unambiguous: India could respond to a major Pakistani-linked terror attack in ways that would undermine the costless proxy war that Pakistan has waged since 1989. And, even if the main impetus for this shift in strategy was domestic politics in India, the geostrategic consequences will outlast this phase.

What has India got from the air strikes? We can point to three gains. The idea that India has a right to pre-emptive self-defence — a right that so far has been the exclusive privilege of the Western powers — has been legitimised by the reaction and behaviour of the great powers during the crisis. The External Affairs Ministry's February 26 statement spelled out the Indian case as a "non-military pre-emptive action" to make it consistent with the norms that have been guiding other major states in their counter-terrorism policies. The idea that the Pakistan army and its intelligence services could wage a costless proxy war against Indian military targets in Kashmir has also been challenged. By signalling that India has the ability to strike at specifically those targets that are intended to inflict casualties on Indian security forces instead of waiting to confront these proxies on Indian soil, it has created a measure of uncertainty in the minds of Pakistani planners. In strategic vocabulary, this would be described as active defence — passive defence being when you fight on terms set by your adversary. While total deterrence is unrealistic, Delhi has made the other side conscious that its actions could produce unpredictable consequences. Ambiguity about future Indian responses to state-sponsored terror, it is envisaged, will persuade Pakistan to tread more carefully. Finally, by raising the stakes in a long-standing proxy war, Delhi has brought Pakistan's patrons to consider more responsible and active roles in persuading it to restrain its destabilising behaviour. Changing perceptions of third parties is directly linked to India's resolve to adapt its posture of strategic restraint.

The next challenge before Indian security planners is to incorporate this approach as part of a grand strategy. What could be its principal elements? What goals should India seek? Should it focus solely on Pakistan's external behaviour, or more logically also keep an eye on its internal structure as part of a long-range effort to re-orient domestic incentives inside Pakistan? How can other pieces of the geopolitical puzzle in terms of Pakistan's international allies and partners, specifically the U.S. and China, be rejigged closer to India's aims and interests? Finally, what measures could India take to formulate an enlightened approach towards J&K that can straddle the trifecta of security, economic development, and governance?

The military counterpart of an Indian grand strategy would involve a more robust internal security framework, including the introduction of more advanced counter-terror capabilities and doctrines that seek to substantially minimise Indian military casualties in Kashmir (since 2008, 740

security forces personnel have lost their lives), patiently building covert proxy capabilities that impose reciprocal costs on Pakistani security institutions, and a more sophisticated conventional military posture that can offer the political leadership a variety of highly limited and targeted options to degrade the flow of terrorist networks while also presenting the Pakistan army with a costly choice to escalate to a bigger conventional clash. There is nothing unusual or provocative in this approach.

There is a geopolitical counterpart to an Indian strategy too. It must be recognised that although Pakistan cannot be isolated, its patrons and allies, many of whom seek to develop deeper ties with India, can be persuaded in their own interests to influence Pakistani behaviour. We are already seeing evidence of this. In remarkably similar ways, China, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia are nudging Pakistan to rein in its destabilising behaviour. Notice China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's remarks after the Russia-India-China Foreign Ministers' meeting in late February: "We agreed to jointly combat all forms of terrorism... Especially important is to eradicate the breeding grounds of terrorism and extremism." While their reasons might be selfish, vigilant third parties can work to India's advantage. But nobody is going to help a country that sits on its hands.

Unless India conceives a broader plan to alter Pakistan's behaviour and its internal setting, it will find it difficult to sustain international support and it would only embolden the Pakistan army to up the ante knowing the Indian side is utterly unprepared for a serious game. India can engage in calculated risks, avoid publicising everything it does, and yet remain receptive to engagement with the civilian government and, more importantly, the Pakistani people, towards whom it must exude a vision of peaceful coexistence. To evoke George F. Kennan, "The greatest danger that can befall us in coping with this problem... is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping."

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