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# India and Pakistan: Neighbours Who Do Not Talk to Each Other

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*Operation Sindoor has pushed India and Pakistan further apart. Domestic compulsions have locked both sides into narratives of victory and perpetual conflict. India's aim of isolating Pakistan has not succeeded and Pakistan on its part sees no reason to initiate a dialogue.*

Almost a year has passed since the terrorist massacre of tourists in Kashmir on 22 April 2025, and India's retaliation 16 days later with a military operation against Pakistan, which Delhi blamed for the attack.

Operation Sindoor escalated into a war fought almost entirely in the skies. From the intervening night of 7 and 8 May 2025, when India bombed alleged terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK) and Pakistan, until the afternoon of 11 May 2025, when both sides called a ceasefire, the hostilities lasted four days.

All wars tend to leave lasting changes on the ground for the sides involved, and this one was no exception. Previous India-Pakistan encounters led to talks when the hostilities ended, and a long-term dialogue between the two countries. His four-day war has had the opposite effect. It has pushed the two nations further apart.

This article looks at the post-Sindoor dynamics in both countries, and what this means for India-Pakistan relations.

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In India, post-Operation Sindoor, relations with Pakistan are defined in terms of a "new normal" of "unending war". Strategic affairs thinkers close to the establishment hailed the operation as establishing a "new doctrine of response" to cross-border terrorism.

In an address to the nation on the evening of 12 May 2025, two days after the ceasefire of 10 May 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the agreement as a "pause" in Operation Sindoor. After this, the government's media managers sent word that the word "ceasefire" was not to be used.

> That India and Pakistan should resolve their issues bilaterally flows from the 1972 Shimla Agreement, and is something of a sacred cow in India's Pakistan policy.

"Pause" was a response to the political backlash that greeted the ceasefire announcement, from the opposition and from Modi's own Hindutva constituencies. This was particularly due to the claim by United States President Donald Trump that the US had "mediated" the truce. At a time when many Indians had come to believe that India was winning the war, this suggested that the Modi government had capitulated to US pressure. That India and Pakistan should resolve their issues bilaterally flows from the 1972 Shimla Agreement, and is something of a sacred cow in India's Pakistan policy. It was meant to override the multiple United Nations (UN) resolutions on Kashmir that followed the first India-Pakistan war over Kashmir, fought from October 1947 to December 1948. Over the last five decades, Delhi has routinely pushed back any offers by outside parties to help resolve the Kashmir issue.

But it was also inevitable that the world would get involved in India-Pakistan crises from the time both countries went nuclear in 1998. Since then, whenever India and Pakistan have clashed, the world has taken notice.

On several occasions, US presidents have stepped in to defuse India-Pakistan crises. The Bill Clinton administration prevailed on Pakistan to call a ceasefire and withdraw unconditionally from the Kargil heights in 1999. The George W. Bush administration prevailed on India not to mount a military retaliation against Pakistan after the 2001 terrorist attack on Parliament, and after the Kaluchak terrorist strike in June 2002.

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President Trump claimed, in a tweet at the time, that his administration had been involved in resolving the crisis in the aftermath of India's 2019 cross-border military strike at Balakot. India had also sought the help of the US and other global powers, including China, to get Pakistan to rein in terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed under the sanctions architecture that came up in the UN after 9/11.

When Modi was first elected as Prime Minister, he attempted a personalised style of diplomacy with Pakistan, hoping to make a mark in this way. Rajiv Gandhi had done that , towards the end of his only term in office, when Benazir Bhutto was the Prime Minister. He was the first Prime Minister to visit Pakistan after Jawaharlal Nehru in 1960, when the Indus Waters Treaty was signed. Rajiv Gandhi's visit led to another enduring achievement, the Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities. From 1992, without a break, the two countries have exchanged a list of each other's nuclear installations every year on January 1. Rajiv's visit almost led to another agreement, on the demilitarisation of Siachen, but political opposition and military advice made Delhi rethink the plan.

In December 2015, when Modi made a surprise stopover at Lahore on his return home from Kabul to visit the then prime minister Nawaz Sharif, India was still smarting from the 2008 Mumbai attack. When Rajiv visited, the country had just emerged from a decade of martial law under General Zia ul Haq. Benazir had just been elected, and the Army was still regrouping after the shock of Zia's death in a plane crash. The democratically elected civilian government had a voice. Benazir's Interior minister Aitzaz Ahsan is even said to have handed over a list of Khalistani militants to India, an "allegation" he has contested ever since. In 2015, the civil-military dynamic was different, Under the veneer of the first proper democratic transition in 2013, when Sharif was elected, the army was quietly reconsolidating its hold under a new chief. Days after Modi's Christmas day visit to see his "friend", the Pathankot airbase was attacked by the Jaish-e-Mohammed. Modi was still confident enough in his cross-border diplomacy to allow a team of Pakistani investigators to tour the airbase some weeks later. The turning point came with the September 2016 attack at the Uri brigade headquarters, and the retaliatory surgical strike. Since then, Modi's cultivated "strongman" image has been one of non-compromise with Pakistan. In this narrative, Modi, unlike his predecessors, has never let Pakistan off the hook when terrorists have struck India. In this narrative, a ceasefire has no place, let alone one claimed to have been mediated by a third party.

After sindoor, Indian diplomacy could not find a credible way to handle Trump's claim in a manner that would satisfy all sides, and so resorted to denying it. Timelines were also painstakingly created and disseminated of who called whom, who did not take whose call, and who asked for the "stoppage" first. India was also unable to come clean about reported Indian Air Force aircraft losses, despite hints dropped publicly by senior officers of the armed forces that losses had been incurred during combat.

Large sections of Indians, including within the armed forces, continue to believe that India came close to "finishing the job" or "finishing Pakistan". What this means in practice is not articulated, even by those who make these demands.

Consider one scenario: a Syria-like fragmentation of Pakistan. The now frequently made promise of "we will bring back Pakistan-occupied Kashmir" represents another. Neither would be in India's interests. A Pakistan splintered along political, sectarian, and social lines, and in possession of nuclear weapons, should be an Indian nightmare.

As for PoK, even if "bringing it back" were achievable, it would not be like retrieving a suitcase from lost and found. It would mean the physical military occupation of a large region. Even presuming that China remained uninterested, such a move would create a Russia-Ukraine-like situation in South Asia, destabilising the entire region.

It would place an enormous economic burden on India, and shatter forever the aspirations of its 1.5 billion people for homes, quality healthcare, education, and jobs-in short, a better life than the one they have now.

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India's leaders can never tell these truths to the people. The only realistic solution on Kashmir is for both sides to accept the Line of Control as an international boundary. In February 1994, against the backdrop of a rising and expanding Kashmiri insurgency, India's Parliament adopted a landmark unanimous resolution affirming that Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India and demanding that Pakistan vacate PoK. India's communally divisive politics, more sharply evident over a decade of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule, and the government's Pakistan policy are now two sides of the same coin.

> Despite the initial confidence in Delhi … that Modi's "personal chemistry" with Trump would see the relationship through, India-US ties are in rough waters.

The international isolation of Delhi as Operation Sindoor escalated into a drone war should not have come as a surprise. Global powers had stood in solidarity with India to condemn the terror strike at Pahalgam, and the US had said India had the right to defend itself. But the world baulked when Operation Sindoor began and Pakistan responded.

As the exchanges continued, India quickly went from being a victim to being one side of a war between two nuclear-armed nations. After the ceasefire, the government had to send out teams of politicians and diplomats to convince the world of Pakistan's perfidy and long history of cross-border terrorism. The world offered tea and sympathy, but remained unconvinced, asking for evidence of a Pakistani hand in the Pahalgam attack.

The main shock for India, however, was yet to come, and it was a double blow. The first was how swiftly the most important pillar of its foreign policy for over two decades-its ties with the US-unravelled. This was possibly triggered by India's rejection of Trump's claim of having mediated the ceasefire. The second was the apparent failure of another foreign policy objective: the isolation of Pakistan.

Despite the initial confidence in Delhi in the months leading up to Trump's inauguration that Modi's "personal chemistry" with him would see the relationship through, India-US ties are in rough waters. During Modi's visit to the US in February 2025, the government remained optimistic and appeared not to have anticipated that the US president would single out India for special punishment, eventually imposing a 50% tariff on Indian exports to the US, including a "secondary sanction" of 25% tariff for purchasing oil from Russia.

These sudden tariffs set the stage for negotiations towards a trade deal aimed at doubling total bilateral trade to $500 billion by 2030, as agreed during Modi's visit. After many hiccups, a framework trade treaty was agreed in January 2026, but it drew criticism in India as one-sided, since it opened the door to US sectors that had previously been shut out.

The Modi government said the final agreement would come in March, but this has been put off in the wake of the US-Israel war on Iran, which has upended much of what was earlier taken for granted about global trade. Delhi's helplessness in the face of Trump's whimsical and vindictive treatment, and its inability or unwillingness to stand up to him, was starkly evident when, at the start of the US-Israel war on Iran, the US announced that it had permitted India to buy Russian oil for just one month.

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The second shock was the unanticipated rise of Pakistan on the world stage. Delhi had spent much diplomatic energy over a good part of the last decade trying to isolate and stigmatise its western neighbour as a sponsor of terrorism. Pakistan had indeed appeared to lose much of its strategic relevance when the US military and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces exited Afghanistan after a hasty deal with the Taliban.

> …Pakistan's shuttle diplomacy is something that many in India are having trouble coming to terms with, including External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, who called it dalaali (brokerage).

Within five years, however, Pakistan's stock has risen. It is now one of three countries, along with Turkey and Egypt, trying to end the US-Israel war on Asia. This may come to nothing. The US continues to prepare for a ground invasion of Iran, which has demonstrated it can retaliate in a manner that Trump and his advisers seem unable to anticipate. At this stage, Trump sounds more eager for an off-ramp than Iran, which has conveyed that it has no trust in the US, after being bombed during two earlier rounds of negotiations, in June 2025, and February 2026. Still, Pakistan's shuttle diplomacy is something that many in India are having trouble coming to terms with, including External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, who called it dalaali (brokerage). Had Modi assumed a similar role, Jaishankar might have chosen a different word-given that "Vishwaguru" and "Vishwamitra" were the terms used merely for assuming the rotating presidency of the Group of Twenty (G20).

Instead, Modi signalled that Delhi had chosen a side through his visit to Israel on 25 and 26 February 2026, just two days before his host Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Trump attacked Iran and eliminated the country's top leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. India did not condemn the assassination-the first time the leader of a sovereign state has been eliminated by another country or countries.

Pakistan's new global stature, distinct from the notoriety that long dogged it for its "terrorist factories", did not develop overnight. It goes back to Operation Sindoor, and the perception within Pakistan that it won that bout with India. Pakistanis believe that their air force gave India a bloody nose by bringing down several of its fighter aircraft. Delhi's silence on independent international reports of these losses made has added to Pakistan's sense of victory.

There is clearly more than one view on who won and who lost Operation Sindoor. What is uncontested, however, is that it was decisive in one respect: it changed the political dynamic within Pakistan in favour of Army Chief Asim Munir.

Until 7 May 2025, Munir was perhaps the most hated army chief since Zia ul-Haq. His control over Pakistan faced a strong pushback from the supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, whom Munir had jailed on corruption charges. Operation Sindoor, however, tightened Munir's grip on Pakistan and all but pushed the Imran Khan problem out of view.

Munir's fortunes changed on 8 May 2025, hours after unconfirmed reports emerged of Indian jets being shot down. Speaking in parliament that day, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif declared victory. That should have been the opening for an off-ramp, but the war continued. Both sides deployed drones, and on the morning of 10 May 2025, India hit several Pakistani air bases. The ceasefire followed a few hours later.

> Pakistan shares a 1,000-km border with Iran … and what happens in Iran has an immediate echo in Pakistan, where Shia Muslims are 20% of the population and constitute a significant minority.

Celebrations in Pakistan began almost immediately. The government declared 11 May 2025 as Yom-e-Tashakkur, or the Day of Thanks, to the Pakistan armed forces, and victory parades followed. Pakistan, which has always found it advantageous to internationalise the Kashmir issue, publicly thanked Trump for his claimed mediation in bringing about the ceasefire. Prime Minister Sharif later handed Trump's team a copy of his government's letter to the Nobel committee nominating Trump for the Peace Prize.

Days later, the Sharif government conferred the rank of Field Marshal on Munir. Murmurs within the Pakistan Air Force that the army chief had little or no role to play in the four-day war were quickly drowned out in an outpouring of government praise. Munir is now expected to remain in office until 2030, making him the most powerful army chief Pakistan has ever had without seizing political power in the manner of Zia or Pervez Musharraf.

Much to India's dismay, Trump has warmed to Pakistan-a country he had described in his first term as one to which the US had "foolishly" given "more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years", adding that "they have given us nothing but lies and deceit". That tweet now forgotten, Field Marshal Munir has become Trump's "favourite field marshal", whom he invited to lunch at the White House, to much consternation in India.

Pakistan's present role as facilitator of an indirect diplomatic effort for peace in West Asia is partly due to the trust Trump appears to repose in Munir, and partly a consequence of compulsions arising from the Strategic Mutual Defence Pact it signed with Saudi Arabia last year, and the fear of what an endless war could mean for Pakistan itself.

For Pakistan, this war is not being fought in a faraway place. It shares a 1,000-kilometre border with Iran to its southwest, and what happens in Iran has an immediate echo in Pakistan, where Shia Muslims make up 20% of the population and constitute a significant minority.

Khamenei's assassination triggered widespread protests and violence in Pakistan, in which more than 30 people were killed. Munir and the civilian government led by Shehbaz Sharif have walked a tightrope between Iran and the Gulf monarchies, with many of whom it has close relations.. The oil shock from the war has already delivered its first blows to an already precarious economy. As the US prepares to put boots on the ground in Iran, Pakistan could find itself drawn into yet another war against yet another neighbour. The Saudis would want Pakistan to make good on the mutual defence pact. The Sharifs also owe the Saudis in other ways, including for saving them from Musharraf in 2000. The US may want to use Pakistani territory.

The military-bureaucratic establishment, or "militablishment", may extract rent for assisting the US as it did after 9/11, but the costs for the country would be far greater. Iran is not Afghanistan. Any Pakistani cooperation with the US in this war risks its cautious balancing act, alienating Iran, and opening the door to Israel, all of which could in turn unleash a backlash fiercer than anything the country experienced over two decades of serving as a back office for the US invasion of Afghanistan.

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What are the chances of India and Pakistan returning to the negotiating table at this time, or even in the near to mid-term future-which is another way of saying "in our lifetime"?

India-Pakistan peace-making has been a Sisyphean project for seven decades: a task that risks failing the moment it begins, or even before it begins. The short period between 2003 and 2008, when India and Pakistan engaged in a full-spectrum dialogue, with people to people contact at its peak, is now referred to as the "golden era" of bilateral ties. The Mumbai attacks of 2008 put paid to that. And since then, engagement has been sporadic and short-lived. At this time, the two countries have set their own course and have had no public engagement beyond their downgraded diplomatic missions in each other's capitals. The Pahalgam atrocity remains a fresh wound in an already long history of bad blood.

Past opportunities-such as the Pakistani military's pitch for trade with India in 2021 and the recommitment to the 2003 unwritten ceasefire-did not lead to any further positive developments. The reluctance of both sides to appear "weak" to their own domestic audiences by pushing for engagement is not unique to India and Pakistan.

> On the Indian side, the narrative of a forever war is being entrenched in public opinion. Even the small openings that used to exist-such as Bollywood and cricket-are having the oxygen sucked out of them.

This is precisely why the aftermath of Operation Sindoor should have opened a door. Both sides claim victory, bolstered by unshakeably strong domestic narratives. This should make it easier to say, "Let's talk". South Asia's tragedy is that with India and Pakistan, it is never the right time to talk. The only contact between the two is the institutionalised mechanism of the hotline between the Directors-General of Military Operations, a direct line between the two militaries, essentially to manage tensions on the Line of Control. Even a backchannel, which both sides used to good effect in the 1990s and through the 2000s, has not been activated. The absence of meaningful contact between two hostile neighbours is risky, especially if these neighbours have sworn never to make peace. In Pakistan, public opinion is on a sugar high, basking in a new and heady global spotlight. Pakistan's "open war" on Afghanistan (now in "pause" mode) is virtually being waged as a war against an "Indian proxy". Pakistan has always alleged that the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan is a creation of India, and dots are now being joined between Delhi's engagement with the Afghan Taliban and the latter's support for the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.

On the Indian side, meanwhile, the narrative of a forever war is being entrenched in public opinion. Even the small openings that used to exist-such as Bollywood and cricket-are having the oxygen sucked out of them. Both have been successfully weaponised, or "Hinduised" as evident from the success of the film *Dhurandhar* and the widespread approval for the deliberate, state-orchestrated unsportsmanlike conduct during cricket matches.

> *"Dhurandhar"* the film has appealed to a large section of Indians who need assurance from fiction, if not fact, that its current leadership is the only one capable of defeating India's enemies.

India's policy that good neighbourliness will be conditional-"blood and water cannot flow together"-and Munir's controversial speech urging Pakistani parents to tell their children stories so that they "don't forget they are different from Hindus", together reinforce the message that both sides are content to live side by side in hostility.

Those four days in May 2025 were scary enough for civilians in the line of fire on both sides. If that was not enough, what is happening in West Asia now should have brought home the consequences of modern warfare. How long can India and Pakistan continue under the shadow of an ever present risk is a question the citizens of these two countries will ask, if not now, then at some point in the future. The penny has to drop some day. One can only hope it does before the leadership on both sides sleepwalks their countries into another war.

While we wait, can Delhi play a different sort of *Dhurandhar*, and muster the courage to break the narrative? *Dhurandhar* the film has appealed to a large section of Indians who need assurance from fiction, if not fact, that its current leadership is the only one capable of defeating India's enemies. The films do not confuse viewers with contrary information such as loss of aircraft. Outside the packed cinemas, in real life, *dhurandhar* means the Atlas-like ability to carry a burden of great weight, with strength, resolve and intelligence.

As Trump is now realising, making peace is more difficult than fighting a war. Both India and Pakistan need a *dhurandhar* today to shoulder this weight, leaders who can break this dangerous impasse, who know the risks of conflict and the cost of war, and would not be afraid to talk about it. In India, a real *dhurandhar* would have had the clarity and intelligence to back Pakistan's efforts to bring the war in West Asia to an end. A real *dhurandhar* would have certainly not sneered at those efforts.

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