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How India-Pak war will affect global and regional political order

The recent India-Pakistan war, though limited in scope, has triggered significant geopolitical reverberations by showcasing Chinese military superiority and prompting a strategic reassessment in Washington.



The China angle in regional geopolitics

Beyond the oft-repeated rhetoric of the Pakistan-China relationship being “all-weather” and “iron-clad,” the recent India-Pakistan war may come to be seen as its first major demonstration in action. Pakistan’s use of Chinese PL-15 missiles, deployed from Chinese-made J-10C fighter jets to successfully engage French-made Rafale aircraft, has underscored the strategic depth of this partnership. This has received considerable international attention, both in the media and otherwise. This show of alignment is particularly notable given recent

strains in the Pak-China bilateral relationship, including attacks on Chinese interests and infrastructure projects within Pakistan.

The outcome of India-Pakistan war means Washington will have to rethink its strategy. With Pakistan importing almost 80 per cent of its weapons—which also includes cooperation in the field of military technology—from Beijing, the supply ensured to help Islamabad maintain the balance of power vis-à-vis New Delhi. More than this, China's policy was also motivated by its desire to counter-balance Washington's efforts to boost India against China. Ironically enough, it was only days before the recent war that the US Vice-President was in India to discuss ways to collectively counter China. But China's support for Pakistan meant that New Delhi remained preoccupied more with Pakistan than China in a strategic sense. With this war, New Delhi's focus will be more on Islamabad than China for at least a few more years to come. By the same token, China will most likely continue to help Pakistan develop its defence capability. Even before the war took place, media reports in Pakistan and China revealed ongoing talks between Beijing and Islamabad for the sale and purchase of J-35 fifth-generation stealth fighter jets.

These developments highlight at least four key takeaways. First, China's defense technology—likely tested in actual combat for the first time—has proven effective enough to attract interest from other regional powers. Its demonstrated performance could prompt these countries to purchase and integrate Chinese systems into their own militaries. This, in turn, would strengthen China's position in the regional arms market and help it outcompete rival defense exporters. Second, China's willingness to export advanced military technology—such as the PL-15 missile and J-35 fighter jets—signals a broader strategic intent to deepen its global partnerships. This approach is consistent with Beijing's “no-limits” alliance with Moscow.

Third, the demonstrated effectiveness of Chinese weaponry against India could encourage regional states to reassess their foreign policy alignments, potentially fostering deeper integration with Beijing over New Delhi. This trend is already evident in countries like Sri Lanka and the Maldives, where pro-Beijing political shifts have gained momentum—most notably in the Maldives, where the new government compelled Indian troops to withdraw. Fourth, Pakistan's military successes in this conflict challenge a common narrative in global discourse: that partnerships with China inevitably lead to economic “debt traps.” On the contrary, Pakistan's economic ties with China appear to have laid the foundation for robust military-to-military cooperation, illustrating how economic integration can support broader strategic alignment.

India's position in Washington's arc

Can Washington still push—with enough confidence—India as its key ally? What is the material reality of India's standing within the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)? If the QUAD was ever to become a military alliance, the only power in the region that the US expected to be effective on its own against China is/was India—not only because India and China have a long history of rivalry, but also because India remains a big military power. Needless to say, it is the only nuclear power part of the QUAD from the Indo-Pacific region. In this sense, it can maintain deterrence vis-à-vis Beijing. But nuclear deterrence can prevent a nuclear war, as is evident from the recent India-Pakistan conflict. It cannot necessarily prevent conventional conflict. Can India act as the front-line ally for Washington in the region in a conventional war?

The outcome of India-Pakistan war means Washington will have to rethink its strategy. It can take two shapes. First, it is very much possible that Washington will deepen its cooperation with New Delhi. Donald Trump has already offered to sell F-35 fifth-generation stealth fighters. (Russia has also offered New Delhi to sell its own fifth-generation Su-57 jets.) This, however, will necessarily involve China deepening its cooperation with Pakistan. As a result, an arms race will be triggered in the region.

A second strategic path for Washington could involve renewed engagement with China. While the timing of the Trump administration's trade negotiations with Beijing may coincide with the outcome of the India-Pakistan conflict purely by chance, it nonetheless suggests that even a confrontational administration has not entirely ruled out dialogue as a preferred tool. Washington might also pursue a dual-track approach—engaging China while simultaneously strengthening military alliances elsewhere.

However, in the wake of shifting dynamics following the India-Pakistan conflict, the US will likely need to reassess its regional strategy and consider alternatives to India. Japan, for instance, emerges as a strong candidate. With its recent push toward military normalization and a growing appetite for deeper strategic engagement, Tokyo could become a more prominent partner in Washington's Indo-Pacific security architecture.

To be clear, this does not imply a fundamental rupture in US-India relations. But it is increasingly likely that Washington will place India's role under careful review, potentially redefining its status as the principal frontline ally in countering China. In response to China's growing influence and military reach, the US will need to significantly bolster the defense capabilities of other regional actors—most notably Japan and Australia—as part of a broader strategic recalibration.

Salman Rafi Sheikh, May 24, 2025

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