Partners or Spectators? America's Role in India's Security Calculations Post-Op Sindoor

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By the end of the recent India-Pakistan crisis, the U.S. demonstrated that despite recent shifts in international politics and a new grand strategy, it was ultimately Washington that, one way or another, had to intervene to bring the conflict to a mutually agreeable pause. It also did so while retaining a significant degree of fidelity to its MAGA posture of avoiding hyper-intervention in the affairs of others. Nevertheless, the overall crisis raises significant questions about the current and future state of India-U.S.

relations. These trends need to be recognized and appreciated in order to stabilize ties going ahead.

The India-U.S. strategic discourse and unmatched expectations during the latest crisis

The strategic discourse over the last two decades has been marked by the U.S. prioritizing India over Pakistan in pursuit of its own long-term strategic interests, as Pakistan and China have simultaneously drawn closer to each other to offset the growing U.S.-India strategic partnership. This broad dynamic contained certain nuances. For instance, Washington sought to enhance ties with Pakistan even as it drew closer to India. This had been done to cater to imperatives of crisis-mediation, cooperation in Afghanistan, as well as to limit growing Chinese influence in Pakistan. Almost relatedly, South Asia had also seen the U.S. and China probe and achieve cooperation during an India-Pakistan crisis with the common pursuit of de-escalation in mind.

India's sources of relative dissatisfaction

Operation Sindoor has complicated this broad discourse to a degree. Although the U.S. has been helpful, it has not been perceived as leaning towards India during this crisis. This perception has stemmed from several factors: the U.S. has not framed terrorism as the central issue; it has equated India and Pakistan, portraying the crisis as a longstanding, complicated feud with minimal stakes for itself; and it has simultaneously promoted the ceasefire agreement while re-hyphenating India and Pakistan and seemingly endorsing the internationalization of the Kashmir issue.

> *In contrast, Pakistan is viewed as having significantly benefited from Chinese military, strategic, and diplomatic support. By comparison, few analysts have identified any tangible gains for India from the U.S. side. Some retired officials have also observed that due to end-user agreements*

and various conditions imposed by the U.S., Pakistan has decided to rely almost exclusively on Chinese jets and weaponry.

Russian systems and 'friendship' get a positive assessment

In social media circles, credit is being given to Russia due to widespread media portrayals of the S-400 system as a robust aerial shield that Delhi had been able to construct. This was utilized to boost civilian morale in the midst of drone and missile attacks by Pakistan. Unsurprisingly, reports on India's interest in the S-500 are now emerging. Comparatively, even as Pakistan engaged in drone operations, credit was given to mostly Israeli drones on the Indian side, given that the MQ-9B Predator drones from the U.S. have still not been inducted. Even as India employed P8-I jets to track targets and Pakistan military assets from the Arabian Sea, it did not feature as a star performer in the campaign. Hence, going forward, there would be slightly greater doubts about the immediate utility and dividends of the India-U.S. strategic partnership.

This stands in significant contrast to Washington's enhanced reputation following the Balakot strikes of 2019, when the U.S. took a clear pro-India position, as well as during the Galwan crisis of June 2020, when the Trump administration provided key intelligence assistance and urgent supplies of various kinds to Indian frontline troops. The U.S. had also squarely blamed China for the escalation back in 2020. However, even at the time, President Trump's arguably off-the-cuff remarks about mediating between China and India were poorly received in Delhi, leading to a coordinated rejection of the offer by both Beijing and Delhi.

The U.S.'s relative and perceived ambivalence during and after Op Sindoor has also led to reports that express concern over its recent approval of a sale of AIM-120C-8 AMRAAMs to

> *Turkey. A report notes how India is concerned that, due to the strengthening Pakistan-Turkey strategic nexus, such U.S.-supplied weaponry could fall into Pakistan's hands.*

Strategic Crossroads: Potential Impacts on New Delhi's foreign policy

> *Sensitive to the need to get on the right side of the Trump administration, the Indian government has not reacted sharply against President Trump's latest comments on the ceasefire. The government is likely to assess the President's remarks as 'playing to his own domestic gallery'. India will look to invest in nurturing relationships with key officials in the administration as a buffer against the President's unpredictability, mainly Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Vice President JD Vance. However, the long-term consequences of relative dissatisfaction with the U.S. are bound to emerge to some degree and in yet unanticipated ways.*

Militarily, India may have some reason to be unhappy with the Rafale, especially when compared to the elevated expectations of recent years. Pakistan's cost advantage—in the form of significantly cheaper J-10 jets and missiles—has become a growing concern. Given that it is estimated that Pakistan may start inducting 5thGeneration J-35 fighters from China in the next few years, India's scramble for its own 5th gen aircraft will intensify. This is likely to bolster Russia's efforts to promote its own Su-57 aircraft.

However, a certain path dependency on Dassault and the Rafale has already been set, with India finalizing the agreement on 26 additional Rafales for the Indian Navy just last month. More to the point, corroding strategic trust and convergence between India and the U.S. will pose new obstacles for the common aim agreed between PM Modi and President Trump of enhancing Indian purchases of U.S. defense platforms in the

coming years.