

India's Western Front Problem

To become the global power of its ambitions, India needs to resist the temptation to view the subcontinent as the totality of its security concerns.



While it will take days, if not months, to find out the details of the April-May 2025 India-Pakistan [conflagration](#), what should be clear to Indian strategists and policymakers is that a country that seeks to be a global power cannot afford the illusion of geographical insularity. India has a unique geostrategic location at the confluence of South, Southeast, Central, and West Asia, and the Indian state needs the ability to focus on challenges on both the continental and maritime fronts. Furthermore, the existential strategic—security and economic—challenge India faces is from [China](#), not Pakistan.

The latest crisis demonstrated this once again, where we saw [Indian media](#),

largely television but also social media, fixate on Pakistan instead of looking at the strategic big picture. Treating each provocation from Islamabad as the epicenter of strategic meaning confuses a tactical echo with a structural tremor. The recent military confrontation may stir nationalist fervor and animate political theatre, but to allow it to monopolize India's strategic gaze is to fall prey to a perilous provincialism.

India stands at a crossroads where its historical grievances intersect with the tectonic shifts of a changing world. In such a moment, the impulse to retaliate—particularly in the face of yet another assault, perhaps a terror attack in Kashmir—carries with it both the [allure of resolution](#) and the danger of regression. For it is not the scale of the provocation that matters but the choreography behind it. Responding in kind may satisfy public emotion, but it risks stepping into a design that is not of India's making.

There is, embedded within the theater of Pakistan's belligerence, a subtler, more insidious logic. Pakistani army chief [General Asim Munir's](#) goals were both domestic and external.

On the domestic front, the army has regained its lost popularity and [rallied Pakistanis around their army chief](#). On the external front, for some years now, Pakistani policymakers have been concerned about the country's isolation and irrelevance in the global arena. The Kashmir dispute was no longer discussed or talked about. This conflagration may have once again brought global attention to Pakistan and to the Kashmir dispute, prompting the Indian government to respond diplomatically by [dispatching bipartisan political envoys](#) and experienced diplomats to key global capitals to influence international opinion.

Over the last few decades, China has sought to [encircle](#) India by building relations with all of India's South Asian and Indian Ocean neighbors. China

seeks to tie India down to South Asia and has consistently used Pakistan for this purpose. The India-Pakistan border is roughly the same length as the India-China border, even though the former, unlike the latter, is largely demarcated, fenced, and monitored. Yet, India has historically focused more on its border with Pakistan than that with China.

For China, India's entanglement in what appears to the outside world as a perpetual regional conflict is beneficial. Every Indian military and intelligence asset deployed westward is one less deployed against China on the northern front. India's landward focus, away from the maritime arena, helps Chinese ambitions in the Indian Ocean region and the broader Indo-Pacific. Every crisis with Islamabad distracts New Delhi from emerging as a dependable pole in an increasingly multipolar world. By keeping India's strategic vision trained upon the subcontinent, China forestalls the broader recalibrations that would enable New Delhi to project power beyond its immediate periphery.

This is even more critical since India's strategic environment is rendered fragile by the subtle disintegration of old certainties and new alignments. Key among this is the transformation underway across the Atlantic. Historically, American presidents have viewed India through the lens of strategic altruism. With the return of Donald Trump to the American presidency, [transactionalism](#) appears to be the [driving force](#) instead of strategic alliances and partnerships.

India's [historical partnership](#) with Russia, too, is under strain. Ever since the Sino-Soviet split of 1966, India has viewed Russia as the continental balancer against China. India's biggest nightmare is a Sino-Russian relationship that is reminiscent of pre-1966. Moscow's [tempered](#) response to India's military posture—marked by its advocacy for renewed dialogue and the restoration of mutual trust between India and Pakistan—bears a striking resemblance to

the Soviet Union's posture during the [1965 Indo-Pakistani War](#). It is also symptomatic of a deeper reorientation: Russia's recalibration of legacy alliances and present imperatives. Today, Russia no longer offers India the predictable solidarity of yesteryear.

India's military-industrial [cooperation](#) with Russia remains intact, and during the India-Pakistan conflict, [the S-400 missile defense system](#) performed well. However, Russia's political calculus has grown increasingly ambivalent. Delhi may have to contend with the uncomfortable reality that sentiment cannot substitute for strategy. Over the last few years, the global security architecture has been redefined, not through large coalitions or alliances but through the granular sedimentation of new alignments.

When Russian forces crossed into Ukraine over three years ago, and the old specter of a bipolar order seemed to stir once more, it was not ideological harmony but shared expediency that brought Moscow and Beijing into a closer [embrace](#). China saw in Russia's isolation a window—an opportunity to bind a weakened partner in threads of trade, technology, and financial leverage.

What emerged was an asymmetrical intimacy: Russia the supplicant, China the steward. Beijing propped up Moscow, but only to the extent that it served Chinese interests. Strategic dependence, after all, is a delicate game—too much, and it breeds resentment; too little, and it invites collapse.

However, fault lines remain. A trade deal between the United States and China [may embolden China further](#), and Russia, a nation historically allergic to subordination, may yet chafe at its junior status. Similarly, a [sudden detente between Washington and Moscow](#)—still a distant but not impossible scenario—could strip China of its asymmetric advantages.

For India, this volatility offers both peril and promise. It necessitates a

fundamental reassessment of Delhi's [foreign policy priors](#). It calls for an investment in institutional analysis—capable of parsing the complexities of the Sino-Russian dynamic and its inevitable frictions. While it reinforces the strategic autonomy and nonalignment impulses of the Indian state, it also demands nimble and nuanced diplomacy to take advantage of possible opportunities. It requires proactive, not reactive, diplomacy and strategic thinking instead of knee-jerk responses.

To become a [developed country by 2047](#) and the global power of its ambitions, India needs to resist the temptation to view the subcontinent as the totality of its security concerns. The real test of India's strategic prowess will lie not in its response to the next flare-up in Kashmir but in its ability to shape events both in its neighborhood and beyond that may not command headlines but will have long-term ramifications.

To be reactive is to live at the mercy of others' decisions. To interpret, anticipate, and act with clarity of purpose—that is the privilege of true power. The provocations from Pakistan and the equivocations from Russia are not merely challenges; they are signals. India's destiny will be shaped less by the skirmishes it endures than by the vision it brings to the wider transformation, which is now quietly remaking the world.

About the Authors: Aparna Pande and Vinay Kaura

[Aparna Pande](#) is the Director of the Initiative on the Future of India and South Asia at the Hudson Institute.

[Vinay Kaura](#) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Affairs and Security Studies at Sardar Patel University of Police, Security, and Criminal Justice in Rajasthan, India.

Image: Pradeep Gaurs / Shutterstock.com.