

Opinion Nirupama Rao writes: What makes this face-off with Pak structurally different is China's embedded role

As China bolsters Pakistan and the US returns to crisis diplomacy, India must recalibrate terms of engagement

The recent bout of hostilities between India and Pakistan has once again exposed the fragility of deterrence in South Asia. This time, however, the conflict cannot be framed solely as a bilateral flashpoint. While the triggers remain familiar — cross-border provocation and military response — the broader context has shifted significantly. The United States, returning to its well-worn role of crisis manager, has momentarily revived the India-Pakistan hyphenation that New Delhi has long worked to dismantle. More consequential, though, is the increasingly visible footprint of China in Pakistan's military posture. The conflict may have started on the Line of Control, but it now plays out in a strategic triangle, with each vertex holding different stakes and tactics.

India's retaliatory response has delivered tactical benefits. It demonstrates a credible shift from passive restraint to active deterrence. Domestically, it bolsters political legitimacy. Internationally, it signals that India will not tolerate a return to the era of consequence-free provocation. However, such tactical assertiveness must be weighed against strategic cost. Each military exchange, especially when it invites global mediation, draws India back into a regional frame it seeks to transcend. The goal must be to win engagements without re-entering a cycle that diminishes India's identity as a global — not merely South Asian — actor.

The reappearance of hyphenation in global discourse, particularly through American statements seeking to "own the ceasefire", is a diplomatic regression. For over two decades, India has sought to decouple its international positioning from Pakistan, leveraging its economic scale, democratic governance, and global partnerships. Yet, crisis has a gravitational pull. Even momentary equivalence — intended as diplomatic symmetry — risks legitimising Pakistan's parity narrative. India must engage diplomatically but reject frameworks that reduce its global profile to regional conflict management. The message must remain clear: This is not a clash of equals but of a rules-based state and a revisionist actor.

The US's posture has been cautious but familiar. During the first Trump administration, mediation was often offered impulsively, with Kashmir at times invoked as a bargaining chip in the broader Afghan calculus. The current US administration has reverted to a traditional playbook — urging restraint, activating diplomatic channels, and engaging both sides with public neutrality. While this reflects institutional continuity, it also underscores the limits of trust in India-US relations when it comes to crisis scenarios. Despite deeper strategic ties — spanning defence, technology, and Indo-Pacific cooperation — the US's reflex remains de-escalation over alignment. For India, this is a reminder that strategic partnerships do not always translate into narrative control. Pakistan has seized the moment to showcase US involvement as a form of recognition. By amplifying external mediation, Islamabad attempts to recast itself not as a provocateur but a co-equal party in a bilateral dispute. India must resist responding on those terms. Strategic maturity lies in letting others claim headlines while securing outcomes. India must continue deepening bilateral mechanisms with key partners like the US, where cooperation ranges beyond crisis flashpoints. That breadth is the best antidote to Pakistan's narrow frame.

The signalling around the Indus Waters Treaty — raising the prospect of re-evaluating its operational commitments — is a serious escalation cue. The treaty carries immense symbolic weight. India's statements are likely aimed at increasing pressure without intending immediate disruption. Still, it is a message with regional reverberations. Water is both a national and an

ecological security issue, and changes to the Indus framework would invite international scrutiny, including from China. India must wield this instrument with caution — visible enough to signal resolve, but restrained enough to avoid irreversible fallout.

What makes this confrontation structurally different is China's embedded role. Beijing is not merely a diplomatic shield for Pakistan but a material enabler. Pakistan's current air capabilities are heavily influenced by Chinese platforms —from the co-produced JF-17 to the advanced J-10C fighters, and from Wing Loong drones to HQ-9B air defence systems. This represents more than procurement; it is doctrinal alignment. Chinese systems allow Pakistan to reduce dependency on Western suppliers while gaining combat parity with Indian platforms like the Rafale. India must prepare for conflicts where adversaries are networked, platforms are interoperable, and escalation is layered with ambiguity.

The use of Chinese materiel in the present crisis, if confirmed, changes the rules of engagement. Pakistani J-10Cs, armed with PL-15 long-range missiles and shielded by Chinese air defence systems, narrow India's traditional air superiority. In any engagement, India risks confronting Chinese-origin hardware, doctrine, and possibly real-time support. The two-front threat, long theorised, now finds real-time validation. Strategic planners must absorb this reality: Pakistan no longer acts alone, and China no longer stays outside.

With this evolving configuration, the risk of episodic conflict becoming the norm is real. Limited engagements followed by quick ceasefires may prevent war, but they also entrench a cycle of confrontation. This rhythm serves neither India's strategic ambitions nor regional stability. Each flare-up diverts diplomatic bandwidth, distracts from structural reform, and reinforces old narratives. India must aim not just to deter conflict, but to shift the conflict paradigm. That requires both doctrinal innovation and narrative superiority.

The global response, too, remains trapped in contradiction. While much of the world acknowledges India's strategic maturity and global responsibilities, it defaults to treating South Asian crises as bilateral flare-ups needing urgent mediation. This undermines the idea of India as a stabilising Indo-Pacific power. India's diplomatic task is twofold: To internationalise its strategic vision while localising its disputes. That means engaging global institutions not merely as stakeholders in peace, but as validators of India's wider role.

Ultimately, this is not a moment of collapse but one of recalibration. India is confronting a new strategic geometry: Crises are triangular, platforms are shared, and narratives are contested as much as borders. The US will remain a tempering actor, but not an arbiter of truth. China will remain a silent catalyst. Pakistan, emboldened by both, will remain a spoiler. India's task is to respond when needed, restrain when possible, and reinforce its role as a power whose stability is not defined by others' volatility. In conflict, as in diplomacy, maturity lies not in escalation, but in the control of the terms of engagement.

The writer is a former foreign secretary and ambassador