

— THE SUBCONTINENT FILE — INAUGURAL DISPATCH —

THE INDIFFERENCE DOCTRINE

or, why New Delhi has stopped picking up the phone

*For seventy-five years, Pakistan was the fixed axis
of India's strategic world. Wars, crises, attacks, ceasefires —
every Indian foreign-policy reflex began
by asking what Pakistan was about to do.*

That era has ended.

*Not because the disputes have been resolved.
Because India has concluded that Pakistan
no longer merits sustained strategic engagement.*

A NOTE TO READERS

This is the inaugural edition of **The Subcontinent File**, a new section of the *Geopolitical Intelligence Review* dedicated to India's strategic environment, its neighbours, and its evolving place in a multipolar world. The Iran File continues. The Gulf File debuts this week. The Dhurandhar trilogy remains where it has always lived.

Forty-nine editions to date; this is the fiftieth. *Considered without urgency. Written without flattery. As ever.*

By JASPER CREED | Defence & Strategic Affairs Correspondent

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■ ACT I — THE END OF THE OLD AXIS

For three quarters of a century, the organising question of Indian foreign policy was: *what is Pakistan about to do?* Every doctrine, every deployment, every diplomatic feint, every defence procurement, every winter posture of the army on the Line of Control, every summer posture of the diplomats at the United Nations — all of it was scaffolded onto the assumption that Islamabad was the question, and New Delhi's job was to answer it.

That assumption has, quietly and almost without commentary, expired. The expiration was not declared. There was no doctrine speech. There has been no white paper. But the operational evidence is now sufficient to read the change as settled. Pakistan is no longer the organising principle of Indian foreign policy. China is. Pakistan has been demoted to the residual category, where it sits alongside other secondary irritants — the Maoist insurgency in central India, the Khalistan question in the diaspora, the periodic eruptions in the Northeast — as a problem to be managed by police and intelligence apparatus, not negotiated with by foreign service and prime ministers.

What has replaced rivalry is not reconciliation. It is something more interesting, and from Islamabad's perspective more disquieting. It is *strategic indifference*: a deliberate choice to deter, punish, and disengage — but not to negotiate, mediate, or invest the diplomatic resources that would treat the other side as a co-equal interlocutor.

THE OPERATIONAL LEDGER OF INDIFFERENCE

- **The Indus Waters Treaty**, in suspension since April 23, 2025, has not been restored. There is no diplomatic process underway to restore it. There is no Indian official authorised to discuss its restoration.
- **Operation Sindoor**, in May 2025, established a new doctrine: Indian strikes on Pakistani territory in response to a terrorist attack are now standard, rather than escalatory. The threshold has been lowered, and Islamabad has acknowledged the lowering by adjusting its rhetoric — but not its behaviour.
- **The Modi-Sharif silence**. The two prime ministers have not exchanged a single direct communication in this calendar year. Not a phone call. Not a back-channel cable. Nothing.
- **The mediator refusal**. When Trump offered to mediate the May 2025 crisis, New Delhi did not say no. It said, more devastatingly, nothing. It allowed the offer to die of its own irrelevance.
- **The SCO and the BRICS** have continued to provide perfunctory venues where Indian and Pakistani officials are in the same room. Indian readouts of these meetings have not, since 2024, mentioned Pakistan by name. The omission is the message.
- **The Hormuz crisis**, in which Pakistan inserted itself as the self-appointed mediator: New Delhi did not endorse the role, did not contest it, and did not acknowledge it. The mediation has been allowed to proceed as Islamabad's private theatre.

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■ ACT II — WHY CHINA NOW ORGANISES THE MAP

If Pakistan is no longer the organising principle, what is? The answer is delivered in figures, not in speeches.

India's defence budget for FY 2026 is approximately seven point eight lakh crore rupees. Of the operational and capital expenditure that can be tagged to a specific theatre, **over sixty percent is now directed at the China frontier**. Eight years ago, the corresponding figure was approximately thirty-five percent. The Northern Command, headquartered at Udhampur, has been re-resourced. The Eastern Command, at Kolkata, has been doubled in importance. The Western Command, which historically handled the Pakistan front, has not been de-resourced — but it has stopped being the priority. The maths has been redone.

Why? Because the strategic facts have. China has built, since approximately 2017, the most ambitious infrastructure-and-power-projection apparatus the Indo-Pacific has seen since 1945. It has expanded maritime presence in the Maldives, deepened investment in Sri Lanka, concluded submarine deals with Pakistan, and delivered, during the May 2025 flare-up, intelligence support to the Pakistani military that was visible enough for Indian planners to model. Beijing also revived the Yuan-class submarine programme for Pakistan in the same window. The China-Pakistan strategic dyad is now a single planning problem. It cannot be addressed as two.

There is, additionally, the matter of trade. India and China conducted approximately one hundred and eighteen billion dollars of bilateral trade in 2025, of which India's deficit was approximately ninety-nine billion. This is not a manageable number. It is a structural dependency. The semiconductor inputs, the active pharmaceutical ingredients, the rare earths, the solar cells, the lithium, the specialty chemicals — all of these flow one way. The Modi government's Atmanirbhar Bharat programme has, on the most charitable reading, begun to dent perhaps four of the twenty-three structural dependencies. The other nineteen are intact, and several are deepening.

When you have an adversary with whom you conduct a hundred and eighteen billion dollars of trade, ninety-nine billion of which you owe, you do not have the luxury of treating any other adversary as a peer competitor. China is the planning problem. Pakistan is the operational problem. The hierarchy is settled, even when the speeches do not say so.

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The hierarchy is settled, even when the speeches do not say so."*



■ ACT III — THE LOGIC OF NOT ENGAGING

Why indifference, specifically? Why not, say, a managed peace process? Or a structured rivalry with regular dialogue, the way the United States and the Soviet Union maintained communications throughout the Cold War? There are four reasons New Delhi has settled on indifference, and they form the spine of the doctrine.

I. TO PREVENT DISTRACTION

Strategic resources are finite. Diplomatic bandwidth is finite. Cabinet attention is finite. Every hour spent managing a crisis with Pakistan is an hour not spent on China, the Indo-Pacific, the Quad, the BRICS chairmanship, or the post-war Gulf architecture. Indifference is, at root, a form of attention discipline.

II. TO ENCOURAGE DE-HYPHENATION

For decades, the world spoke of 'India-Pakistan' as if it were a single compound noun. New Delhi has, since approximately 2014, been waging a long campaign to be spoken of as 'India' — without the hyphen. Refusing engagement is the most effective way to make Pakistan sound like a footnote, rather than a co-equal counterpart.

III. TO INTERNALISE CRISIS MANAGEMENT

By refusing third-party mediation — American, Saudi, Qatari, Turkish — New Delhi keeps every crisis management decision inside its own chain of command. External mediators introduce their own incentives, their own face-saving requirements, their own theatre. Indifference removes them from the room.

IV. TO LET ASYMMETRY DO THE WORK

India's economy in 2026 is approximately ten times the size of Pakistan's. Its defence budget is approximately nine times. Its foreign exchange reserves are approximately fifty times. Time, in other words, is on India's side. Indifference lets that asymmetry compound. Engagement would freeze it.

Each of these reasons is, on its own, defensible. Collectively, they describe a doctrine that is internally coherent, operationally sustainable, and broadly consistent with how rising powers have historically managed demoted rivals. The interesting question is not whether the doctrine is correct. It is whether the doctrine is sufficient.

***"Time, in other words, is on India's side.
Indifference lets that asymmetry compound.
Engagement would freeze it."***



■ ACT IV — WHAT INDIFFERENCE CANNOT DO

Three things, on the available evidence.

First, indifference cannot prevent a crisis. It can only shape how the crisis unfolds once it has begun. Pakistan, deprived of conventional engagement, has fewer interlocutors at the diplomatic level. It also has fewer constraints. When the next attack comes — and on the historical pattern of Pulwama, Uri, the Mumbai siege, and Pahalgam, another attack will, in due course, come — the absence of standing diplomatic channels means the response will be calibrated faster, with less back-and-forth, and with less ability to climb back down the escalation ladder. **Indifference makes for cleaner deterrence and messier de-escalation.**

Second, indifference cannot deliver a settlement. There is no peace dividend. There is no roadmap. There is no Camp David, no Oslo, no Belfast moment in this doctrine, because the doctrine has been explicitly designed to forgo all such moments. Kashmir remains where it has always been: contested, garrisoned, integrated administratively, and not internationally settled. Indifference is a posture. It is not a destination.

Third, indifference cannot, by itself, manage the China dimension. The Pakistan demotion is intended to free resources to handle China. But the demotion does not change the structural fact that, in any future India-Pakistan crisis, China will be present — as supplier, as intelligence partner, as logistical backstop, as the country that signals to Islamabad which thresholds are safe to cross. **You cannot demote a rival whose patron is your principal adversary, and treat the demoted rival's patronage as a separate file. The two files are now one.** Sanyal would say so, were he asked. He has not been asked, but the position is consistent with everything his career suggests he believes.

***"Indifference is a posture.
It is not a destination."***



■ ACT V — WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING MONTHS

Five operational indicators that will, in the coming six months, either confirm the doctrine or quietly reveal its limits.

I. THE BRICS SUMMIT. India hosts. Xi attends. Putin attends. Pezeshkian, conditions permitting, attends. Sharif sends a foreign minister, at most. If the summit produces a substantive India-China readout and a perfunctory India-Pakistan one, the doctrine is confirmed.

II. THE NEXT TERROR ATTACK. Whenever it comes, watch the response time. If it is faster than seventy-two hours from incident to retaliation, the doctrine is operating at full speed. If it stretches beyond a week, something has shifted.

III. THE KASHMIR ELECTORAL CYCLE. Local elections continue. Watch whether New Delhi permits any opposition figure perceived to be soft on Pakistan to win a meaningful office. The answer will be informative.

IV. THE CHINA TRADE DEFICIT. If it widens further, the doctrine's central premise — that India can simultaneously demote Pakistan and contain China — comes under pressure. The deficit is the doctrine's silent vulnerability.

V. THE MUNIR FACTOR. Field Marshal Asim Munir, on the available evidence, is preparing for a constitutional adventure that may, in due course, make him formally what he is already informally. If Pakistan's domestic order changes — if a quasi-presidential, military-civilian hybrid emerges, with Munir at its centre — the indifference doctrine will be tested by an interlocutor New Delhi will, at some point, have to either acknowledge or formally refuse to acknowledge.

The doctrine, in summary, is a deliberate refusal of the old reflex — a refusal to wake up every morning asking what Pakistan is about to do. It is a hard-won discipline. It is also, in its quiet way, a small act of liberation. For the first time in seventy-five years, India is conducting its foreign policy as if Pakistan were not the principal question to be answered. Whether this proves to be the right discipline at the right moment, or whether it proves to be the discipline that fails at the wrong moment, will depend on indicators that are not yet visible. Creed will, in subsequent dispatches, watch the indicators. The reader is, as always, invited to choose which three of the five to weight most heavily.



■ **THE SUMMARY IN FIVE LINES**

Pakistan was the question.

China is the question now.

Pakistan is the residual.

India will not pick up the phone.

Time is on India's side; the doctrine lets it compound.

*Indifference is a strategy.
It is not, however, a settlement.*

*"For the first time in seventy-five years, India is conducting its foreign policy
as if Pakistan were not the principal question to be answered."*

CONNECT WITH CREED

A PERSONAL INVITATION FROM THE CORRESPONDENT



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*The Review now lives, with all fifty editions and the Dhurandhar trilogy archived, at jaspercreed.com.
Readers are warmly invited to visit, to read, and — should they wish — to write to the correspondent
through the Review's new 'Write' page.*

— JASPER CREED —

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Empirical anchors: the IWT suspension since April 2025; Operation Sindoor (May 2025); the Trump mediation offer and India's non-response; the May 2025 China-Pakistan submarine deal; India's FY 2026 defence budget allocations; the approximately USD 118 billion India-China bilateral trade and the approximately USD 99 billion deficit therein; the May 2025 China-supplied targeting support to

Pakistan during the air engagements; the cumulative pattern of Indian readouts at SCO and BRICS meetings since 2024.

Characterisations and assessments are the correspondent's own.

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Doctrine.