Trump brings America's Cold War tactics back to India-Pakistan equation

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The historic camaraderie between US presidents and Pakistan's military brass seems to be making a comeback as Donald Trump engages with his 'favourite Field Marshal', Asim Munir



Washington's evolving regional strategy risks a return to the historic hyphenation of India and Pakistan as Islamabad asserts its role as a key mediator.

While the US Cold War policy of treating India and Pakistan as a single unit is long past, Washington's periodic actions raise genuine questions about its quietly reverting to calibrated re-hyphenation. Despite being the promoter of terrorism and its structural infirmities with the army's overarching role, Pakistan has often leveraged itself to a pole position and punched well above its weight. Case in point is Islamabad emerging as a key mediator in the US-Iran War, President Donald Trump's "favourite Field Marshal" Asim Munir leading the charge. The US political juggling merits a deeper introspection as implications transcend the hyphenation redux.

The bonhomie between the US presidents and Pakistan's generals has historic precedents. In the 1950s, Pakistan joined US-led alliances — namely, the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) — and signed a 'Mutual Defence Agreement'. During this period, the self-declared Field Marshal Ayub Khan, the ruler of Pakistan, was in the good books of the US President Eisenhower. In 1971, it was General Yahya Khan, who, as President and Chief Martial Law Administrator of Pakistan, acted as intermediary between US President Nixon and Chinese PM Zhou Enlai by facilitating Secretary Henry Kissinger's visit to Beijing. Again, in the 1980s, General Zia-ul-Haq, as president, served US interests in Afghanistan by organising jihad against the Soviets.

During the US deployment in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2021, Pakistan played a double role as a non-NATO ally, simultaneously providing safe sanctuaries to the Taliban. As the US prepared for withdrawal, Pakistan facilitated the 2020 Doha peace talks between America and the Taliban. Post American withdrawal from Afghanistan, US-Pakistan relations entered a phase of "benign neglect" marked by deep mutual suspicion. In fact, during his first term, Trump blamed and accused Pakistan of 'lies and deceit' and providing 'safe havens' to the terrorists while receiving billions in US aid. Even erstwhile US President Joe Biden snubbed former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran by refusing to take his call.

Since 2025, Pakistan has undertaken a number of initiatives to project a narrative of strategic resurgence. These included signing the 'Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement' with Saudi Arabia, expanding ties with Turkey (a possible step towards an Islamic NATO), outreach to Bangladesh and leveraging high-end defence exports to over half a dozen countries. However, the most dramatic shift was Islamabad's improvement of ties with Washington. With the support of all-weather ally China coupled with above deft moves, Pakistan regained prominence in South Asia — gliding right into the sweet spot. Delhi's obsession with Islamabad also helped the latter to garner political mileage in seeking strategic parity.

It is Pakistan's military leadership that has catapulted Islamabad on the global stage by substituting civilian-led foreign policy with defence diplomacy. In June 2025, Asim Munir made history as the first serving chief to meet a sitting US president at the White House. The high-profile luncheon meeting indicated deepening US-Pakistan ties. Islamabad went out of the way to charm Trump, including nomination for the Nobel Prize and joining Washington's 'board of peace' on Gaza.

It is evident that Munir has managed to position Islamabad as an indispensable mediator, vindicating Pakistan's hybrid model of governance. He was the main architect for the Islamabad peace talks on April 11-12. Although the talks collapsed, the stage has been set for Round Two, with hectic back channel parleys undertaken by Munir and Co. Trump has said that he may visit Pakistan if the deal to end the war is finalised in Islamabad. He once again publicly heaped praises on the field marshal and PM Shehbaz Sharif for their efforts as mediators, calling them great people. The next round of peace talks is likely to take place in Islamabad sometime this week.

Despite the tenuous relations with Iran, the aggrieved UAE, and serving as a conduit for the Chinese arms to Tehran, Pakistan has been able to navigate the highly riddled terrain. With Israel and Lebanon agreeing to a ten-day ceasefire and Iran declaring the Strait of Hormuz to be open for commercial shipping — though a blockade persists — it appears that the next round of talks could result in some kind of peace agreement. This will mean a big win for Pakistan and boost its standing in the Islamic world.

Islamabad's geopolitical pivot and projection as the key negotiator have inevitably revived the old concerns in Delhi about the US slipping back to the days of hyphenating India and Pakistan. The optics are undeniably uncomfortable with Pakistan in the global spotlight. While in the US strategic framework, India occupies a central place in the Indo-Pacific to balance out China, yet Pakistan well serves America's regional, narrow transactional interests.

Pakistan's reset may be pragmatic rather than transformative, but it has definitely resulted in erosion of India's influence in the region. Delhi's strategic calculus is bound to get more intricate given the emerging geopolitical architecture in the Middle East, with Islamabad playing a pivotal role, duly backed by Beijing. This demands India build greater strategic clarity and leverage its growing geopolitical weight to shape the outcomes rather than merely reacting or fence-sitting. Peace in West Asia is in India's geo-economic interests, besides opening opportunities for Delhi to play a greater role in the region.

The current situation is a stark reminder that diplomacy is a dynamic process with no fixed positions — interest-driven policies constantly review the preferences. So is the case with the India-Pakistan dehyphenation matrix, which is being stress tested by the prevailing contingencies. While structurally, India may not be re-hyphenated with Pakistan, the shadow remains whenever America tends to opt for a short-term rebalancing act.

(The writer is a war veteran, former assistant chief and currently professor of geostrategy & international relations. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.)