



***THE WASHINGTON FACTOR IN INDIA-
PAKISTAN TENSIONS: A KAUTILYAN
PERSPECTIVE***

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Following the deadly terrorist attacks in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir on April 22, Delhi and Islamabad engaged in immediate diplomatic and security [measures](#) and [countermeasures](#). This period of heightened tension culminated in a four-day military clash that ultimately concluded with an "[understanding](#)" between the two nations. The international community's response to these events has varied, encompassing widespread condemnation and condolences, appeals for de-escalation and restraint, and expressions of enthusiastic or cautious support for India or Pakistan. These reactions, viewed through the lens of ancient Indian strategic thought, starkly highlight the enduring primacy of political interests in the global arena, echoing the rajamandala (circle of states) theory articulated by Kautilya. Within this framework, the response of the United States—arguably occupying the position of the udasina (neutral king) in India's rajamandala—warrants scrutiny.

The US in India's rajamandala

Kautilya's seminal [Arthashastra](#) conceptualizes the intricate web of interstate relations through the rajamandala, a construct comprising 12 distinct categories of states. The defining characteristics of each state within this system are determined by a confluence of three key factors: geographical proximity, the prevailing balance of power, and the state's intentions or

disposition (bhavin). Applying this ancient wisdom to contemporary geopolitics, the United States arguably embodies the quintessential udasina—the neutral king—within India's rajamandala.

"One outside (the sphere of) the enemy, the conqueror and the middle king, stronger than (their) constituents, capable of helping the enemy, the conqueror and the middle king when they are united or disunited and of suppressing them when they are disunited, is the neutral king."

In the context of the post-Pahalgam scenario, India assumes the role of the vijigishu (the aspiring conqueror), Pakistan its immediate ari (enemy), and China potentially fits the description of the madhyama (middle king) or parshnigraha (rear enemy), given its geographical proximity and complex relationship with both India and Pakistan. The United States, geographically distant from this immediate sphere of interaction, possesses a comprehensive national power that surpasses that of India, Pakistan, and China. Historically, Washington has strategically navigated the dynamics between these actors, often shaping their interactions in pursuit of its own national objectives.

India has cultivated a strategic partnership with the US, elevating it to the status of a mitra (ally) since the turn of the century, in line with Kautilya's framework that acknowledges the significance of external allies. His enumeration of the seven elements of state power uniquely includes mitra as the final component, a resource to be tapped when internal balancing proves ineffective to achieve foreign policy objectives. The US has reciprocated this alignment, driven by considerable strategic convergences, resulting in a demonstrably strengthening bilateral relationship over the past decade.

From an Indian perspective, the United States is an important strategic partner with growing alignment of interests across several domains, notably in counter-terrorism. Washington, in turn, has witnessed a growing divergence, and even outright contestation, of its interests with Pakistan, primarily due to Islamabad's enduring "[iron brother](#)" relationship with Beijing, America's principal strategic competitor. Against this backdrop, Delhi would have likely anticipated a more robust and unequivocal response from Washington

following the Pahalgam attacks, moving beyond mere condemnation and calls for restraint to a more direct attribution of blame and support for India's security concerns.

Despite Washington's affirmation of "[full support](#)" to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on May 2, its reluctance to explicitly hold Pakistan accountable for its role in fostering terrorism has been conspicuous. This contrasts with the aftermath of the 2019 [Pulwama attacks](#), where Washington adopted a significantly more assertive stance against Pakistan, both in terms of assigning blame and acknowledging India's right to self-defence. Some analysts attribute this shift in response to the absence of a "formally claimed responsibility" by a specific Pakistan-based terrorist group for the Pahalgam attacks, unlike Jaish-e-Mohammed's claim for Pulwama. However, statements from US [Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth](#) and Vice President JD Vance, hinting at US support for India's right to self-defence post-Pahalgam, suggest that a lack of definitive evidence was not the primary constraint.

What has changed?

Notwithstanding recent vacillation and flip-flops of President Trump, a growing sentiment has emerged within Washington over the past few years, suggesting that its significant [bet on India](#) has not yielded the anticipated returns in countering the dual challenges posed by Russia and China. The proliferation of intense and protracted global flashpoints, and the resulting alignment of major powers on opposing sides, have severely tested India's delicate balancing act. Furthermore, Washington's apparent shift in strategic focus from the Indo-Pacific towards the conflicts in Russia and the Middle East has arguably diluted the strategic convergence that once defined the US-India partnership.

The strategic value derived from the bilateral relationship is evident for both New Delhi and Washington, albeit tempered by an inherent power asymmetry that renders the relationship multifaceted and complex. India, as the relatively weaker partner, is naturally circumspect in its alliance with a stronger power to avoid potential manipulation. Conversely, the

US delicately balances its approach towards its ally, based on the attitude it exhibits. For Kautilya:

"The ally is permanent because of (exclusive) feelings of friendship, fickle because of (his feelings) being common to the enemy, indifferent when not interested in either, with feelings for both when interested in the two."

From Washington's perspective, India remains a significant, albeit smaller, ally. Drawing upon Kautilya's wisdom, a stronger ally (the US) would be advised to bolster the power of an ally who aligns with the *vijigishu* (in this case, the US), manage the growth of an ally who shows potential to become too powerful, ensure that a weak ally remains neither excessively weak nor overly strong, prevent a fickle ally (one equally inclined towards the adversary) from defecting, support a weak ally seeking help from the conqueror and the enemy so that he doesn't turn to the enemy, and assist an ally in crisis to overcome their adversaries independently.

Given Delhi's cautious approach to fully "identifying" with US strategic objectives and its continued growth in power, Washington may be resorting to measures designed to keep India strategically tethered. Arguably, the recent strains in bilateral relations concerning the alleged plot to assassinate a US-based Sikh separatist, the evolving situation in Bangladesh, and the recent re-hyphenation of India and Pakistan with an offer to mediate on Kashmir, could be interpreted as strategic manoeuvres by the stronger ally to subtly influence a weaker ally perceived as unwilling to fully comply.

The partnership ahead

While the convergence of interests between Washington and New Delhi is sufficient to sustain their partnership, it may not be comprehensive enough to entirely bridge the inherent power gap. India, committed to safeguarding its strategic autonomy, will likely continue to navigate its relationships with other major powers, including Russia, based on its own national interests. By the same logic, the US may see strategic value in maintaining a relationship with Pakistan. In the long term, India's demographic dividend, growing economic influence, advancing military capabilities, and expanding diplomatic footprint will likely serve as the enduring anchors that keep the US engaged—driven by

both economic opportunities and geopolitical considerations.

In conclusion, the path forward for the US-India relationship necessitates strategic maturity on both sides, particularly in appreciating the underlying principles guiding the other's strategic behavior. Washington's constructive involvement in India's domestic growth is not only beneficial for New Delhi but also serves America's broader strategic objectives in the subcontinent and the Indo-Pacific. The inherent differences in their approaches to partnerships—India's preference for strategic autonomy versus America's inclination towards alliances—will likely persist as a point of friction. However, viewed through a Kautilyan lens, this dynamic tension might be understood not as a flaw in the relationship, but as a natural consequence of their respective strategic positions and objectives.

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