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Drifting Further from Resolution: The Escalating Afghanistan-Pakistan Crisis

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Expert Speak Raisina Debates

Published on Mar 25, 2026



The Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict has escalated towards a near-war despite a fragile mediated truce, driven by TTP tensions and deepening mistrust that increasingly impede resolution

Author



Context Pakistan & Afghanistan agreed to a temporary truce during Eid al-Fitr on March 18, 2026 mediated by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkiye, amid escalating border clashes.

Facts

Pakistan launched Operation Ghazab Lil-Haq, targeting Taliban infra after cross-border attacks linked to TTP.

Taliban responded with 'Radd al-Zulm', claiming captures of Pakistani posts & heavy losses inflicted.

UNAMA reported at least 42 civilians killed & 104 wounded in Afghanistan from Feb 26 to March 2 clashes.

Pakistan airstrike on Kabul's Omid Hospital killed 400+ per Taliban, called precision hit on ex-US base by Pakistan.

Analytical Crux

The article argues that the conflict has shifted from a terrorism issue (TTP) to a direct confrontation between two states. Pakistan expected the Taliban to act against the TTP, but the Taliban refused, calling it Pakistan's internal matter. This has created deep mistrust and a security dilemma, where both sides see each other as threats. Combined with regional instability & internal pressures, this makes any ceasefire temporary and fragile, with high chances of future escalation.

Verbatim Quotes

“The initial optimism in 2021 about a cooperative and strategically aligned relationship has now eroded into a ‘near-war’ situation.”

“Ceasefire fragility stems from mutual accusations, civil toll backlash and no concessions, risking regional spillover amid Iran crises and trade halts.”

Article - 2: The responsibility to protect & the war against Iran

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The Responsibility to Protect and the War Against Iran

Mar 25, 2026 | PETER SINGER and SAVITA PAWNDAY

The US-Israeli war on Iran has fueled allegations that the Responsibility to Protect doctrine created a permissive environment for military intervention. But R2P was designed to address only mass-atrocity crimes – and to ensure restraint, legitimacy, and accountability when the international community confronts their perpetrators.

Context

The article examines the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) doctrine in the context of ongoing US-Israeli war against Iran. It argues that while some attempt to link R2P to the conflict, the doctrine was designed to prevent specific mass atrocities under UN oversight rather

than provide a loophole for unilateral strikes.

Facts

- R2P Origins : Established following the 1994 Rwandan genocide, where approx. 800,000 Tutsis were massacred while the world "stood idly by".
- Legal Constraints : Under 2005 UN World Summit agreement, any military action taken under R2P must be authorized by the UNSC.

- Casualties in Iran : Amnesty International estimated that Iranian government killed between 5,000 & 20,000 protesters, a figure the late Ali Khamenei admitted was in 'thousands'.

Analytical Crux

The central argument is that the US-Israeli war against Iran is not a legitimate application of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. Critics who suggest R2P created a "permissive environment" for this intervention misunderstand the norm's strict criteria, which require military action to be a last resort that does "more good than harm". The author contends that the real global failure is not an excess of intervention, but rather the 'selective' and inconsistent application of international law, where states condemn atrocities only when it suits their political interests.

Verbatim Quotes

"R2P did not create a loophole in international law. On the contrary, it was designed to ensure restraint, legitimacy and accountability when the international community confronts mass-atrocity crimes."

"The central challenge facing world is the persistent failure to mobilize collective action to protect populations from the gravest crimes."

Article - 3 : Democracy dissent & the national image debate

Democracy, dissent and the 'national image' debate

The dramatic 'shirtless' protests by the Indian Youth Congress (IYC) at the India AI Impact Summit on February 20 triggered a debate on the limits of dissent and the response of the ruling party. As soon as the visuals of IYC workers going shirtless to protest the India-U.S. trade agreement went viral, several leaders from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were quick to describe it as an "anti-national" act and called Congress leader Rahul Gandhi a "traitor" who was determined to tarnish India's global image. The Delhi Police quickly filed charges, including rioting and promoting enmity between groups, and arrested 14 IYC members.

Does protesting against the government in front of international delegates at the AI summit dent the country's image? While there can be a debate on the manner of protests, it is not uncommon to find protesters at international events. Such protests are often seen as a demonstration of democratic credentials.



Sandeep Phukan

affairs of the state. The executive, or the government, is another organ of the state, just as the legislature and the judiciary are. In a democracy, the state would also include a healthy opposition that would provide the checks and balances.

How this distinction plays out in practice depends largely on the institutional design of the state, the distribution of power within it and how a ruling party frames its relationship with them.

Federal structure tensions

The concept of an all-pervasive "strong leader" necessarily leads to the notion of a strong state, where the distinction between dissent and sedition may dissolve. The extent to which this tendency manifests itself, however, is shaped by the constitutional arrangement of the state.

In the Indian context, the Constitution has been described as a document that is federal in structure and unitary in spirit. While there is a neat division of responsibilities in the central and the State Lists, the Union government has been accorded primacy in the Concurrent List – subjects over which both State governments and the Centre have jurisdiction.

Parties arguing for a "strong" state often adopt a reading of the Constitution that focuses on the unitary spirit of the document, and any contrarian position is viewed as an attempt to weaken the Centre. From this perspective, excessive regional assertions are sometimes seen as carrying the potential to encourage centrifugal tendencies.

Those who insist on the federal structure of the Constitution emphasise its pluralistic design, with different linguistic, cultural and ideological currents coexisting within the constitutional framework.

Political parties or ideologies alone do not shape our understanding of the state and the government; it is also influenced by the historical experience of the state with separatist movements and internal security challenges.

Intelligence and security agencies prefer

political messaging through mass media that pushes towards creating a 'one nation, one identity' narrative. Such messaging not only reinforces a strong and powerful Centre but also acts as a safeguard against any centrifugal force.

And the mass media acts as a force multiplier, especially when political communication has become visual and performative. Every evening, TV anchors issue certificates of patriotism and sit in judgment on what constitutes an anti-national act. In doing so, they merge the line between the government and the country, often arguing that criticism, when amplified globally, are used by actors to question the legitimacy of the state.

Be it the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in 2019 or the farmers' agitation of 2020-21, a large section of the mass media accused the protesters of playing into the hands of the forces that are inimical to the country. And, therefore, a protest against policy became a protest against the nation.

The tension between these two approaches reflects a deeper debate about the nature of nationalism in a democracy – whether unity is best preserved through a celebration of diversity or the assertion of a singular national identity.

Deeper questions

The debate sparked off by the IYC protests goes beyond what constitutes a 'decent' protest. It raises larger questions about how a democracy negotiates the space for dissent while maintaining national cohesion.

A confident nation derives its strength not merely from uniformity but also from its ability to accommodate competing voices within the constitutional framework, while remaining alert to attempts that may challenge the unity and integrity of the State.

The real test of democratic maturity lies not in the absence of dissent but in the willingness to engage with it without conflating criticism of the government with disloyalty to the nation.

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Democratic strength lies in engaging dissent without equating it to disloyalty to the nation

Perspective that might not sit well

In democracies, dissent is often considered a safety valve through which citizens not only express disapproval of a particular policy but also participate in the governance process. Such a view, however, does not fit well into the narrative of parties that seek to project strong and decisive leadership, where the personality and charisma of the leader drive the decision-making process.

In 1976, when former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency in the country, Congress president Dev Kanta Barooah had famously said, "India is Indira, Indira is India." Though no BJP leader has gone to the extent of equating Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the country, they routinely brand any serious criticism of him or his government as "an attack on the nation".

The projection of an all-pervasive leadership often blurs the line between the government and the state. In theory, though, there exists a clear one: the state is sovereign, permanent and supreme, while the government manages the

Context This article examines the fallout of shirtless protests during the 2026 India AI Impact Summit. It uses this event as a springboard to discuss the increasingly blurred lines between the Indian government (the temporary executive) and the sovereign entity) in the modern

Indian state (the permanent political landscape.

Facts

Historical Parallel : 1976
Emergency-era slogan "India is Indira, Indira is India" to illustrate the historical tendency of ruling parties to equate a leader with the nation.

Constitutional Tension : The debate highlights the friction between India's 'unitary spirit' (strong central control) and its 'federal structure' (pluralistic regional identities).

Analytical Crux

The central argument is that the 'strong leader' narrative in a democracy often results in the conflation of dissent with disloyalty. While a democratic state theoretically includes the opposition as a vital 'safety valve' for governance, the current political climate - aided by performative mass media - often frames criticism of government policy as an "anti-national" attack on the country's global image. The article suggests that a nation's true democratic maturity is measured by its ability to accommodate competing voices rather than demanding a singular, uniform national identity.

Verbatim Quotes

"The projection of an all-pervasive leadership often blurs the line between the government and the state."

"The real test of democratic maturity lies not in the absence of dissent but in the willingness to engage with it without conflating criticism of the government with disloyalty to the nation."

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