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Beyond Binary Choices: India's Case for a Multi-Pronged Pakistan Strategy

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Expert Speak [Raisina Debates](#)

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Deterring Pakistan requires preserving strategic flexibility through a calibrated mix of military, covert, diplomatic and economic instruments—not abandoning any one tool.

Author

Context

India's Pakistan policy should move beyond the binary debate of military retaliation versus restraint.

Facts

Uri (2016), Balakot (2019) & Operation Sindoor (2025) demonstrate India's calibrated use of conventional military use.

India has kept Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) in abeyance, adding economic coercion to its counter-terrorism toolkit.

Analytical Crux

Pakistan-sponsored terrorism requires a multi-domain concave strategy rather than reliance on a single instrument. While overt military strikes create credibility and impose visible costs, covert operations, diplomatic isolation and economic measures such as the suspension of the IWT provide sustained pressure without necessarily escalating to full-scale conflict. However, Kinetic responses alone cannot address locally facilitated terrorist attacks, underscoring the need for stronger intelligence, internal security and force preparedness. Strategic flexibility, therefore, should remain the cornerstone of India's Pakistan policy.

Verbatim Quotes

“Ultimately, the choice is not between overt action and restraint, but between strategic rigidity and strategic flexibility.”

- Kartik Bommakanti

India must lead in securing the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb

India must lead in securing the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb

On the heels of the Strait of Hormuz crisis comes the new threat – a Strait of Bab el-Mandeb crisis. On July 16, Reuters reported that Iran had instructed the Houthis to close the Strait (which is between Yemen and the Horn of Africa) if the United States attacked Iran's power plants.

Whether the Houthis have the capacity to threaten the Strait or whether this is part of Iran's signalling to the U.S. is secondary. What is important is that this represents a risk to one-third of India's entire trade.

Revisiting 2024

We have been here before. When the Gaza war started in October 2023, the Ansarallah group in Yemen, also known as the Houthis, claimed solidarity with the Palestinians and launched drones and missiles at Israel. From November 2023 to March 2024, the Houthis targeted at least 40 vessels in the Red Sea, claiming that the vessels were linked to or bound for Israel.

In response, the U.S., together with allies including Singapore and Sri Lanka, launched Operation Prosperity Guardian (December 2023) to ensure "freedom of navigation" in the Red Sea. This was followed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2722 (2024), which was adopted in January 2024. Israel also carried out unilateral strikes against the Houthis. The Indian Navy rescued the crew of a British tanker after it was set on fire (January 26-27, 2024). By the time the U.S. declared a ceasefire in May 2025, the Houthis had been weakened, but much of the damage had already been done.

Marine insurance companies tend to be highly risk-averse. With over 90% of the world's shipping insured by just 12 protection and indemnity (P&I) clubs, shipowners have limited room to negotiate. Between November 2023 and March 2024, at least 2,000 ships avoided the Suez Canal and instead sailed around the Cape of Good



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Hope. This delayed critical imports to India. Global shipping routes effectively reverted to what was being done 170 years ago. Egypt lost a quarter of the Suez Canal's revenue. By July 2024, Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat had filed for bankruptcy.

This time around, the situation is more unpredictable. With U.S. forces in the region focused on Iran, it is unclear whether they will seek to secure the Red Sea as they did before.

Even in 2024, when India-bound ships were attacked by the Houthis, New Delhi had to lean directly on Tehran to bring the attacks to a halt. But that was a different time for India-Iran ties. Meanwhile, the UN Security Council is more divided today than ever before, and even if it manages to call for "freedom of navigation" in the Red Sea, it is unlikely to pass a resolution approving a force to implement that call. China is also likely to again take a unilateral approach to protecting its shipping in the Red Sea through quid pro quos with the Houthis.

If the Houthis resume attacks on shipping in the Strait, the impact on India's economy – which is already reeling from the Strait of Hormuz crisis – would be dire. While India has now ordered that no Indian mariner be deployed on ships bound to or from the Strait of Hormuz, extending the same restriction to a busy route such as the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb would not be easy and would adversely affect the safety and welfare of thousands of Indian seafarers.

What India should do

In 2024, France stayed out of a U.S.-led operation to guard its role in mediating between Hezbollah and Israel in Lebanon. Those conditions no longer exist. However, France and Japan – two countries that need shipping lanes in the Red Sea for their connectivity with Asia and Europe respectively – maintain bases in Djibouti, perched on the Red Sea. Their navies have also

conducted joint drills with the Indian Navy, which creates an opportunity for India to pre-empt a recurrence of the events of 2024.

India therefore needs to pro-actively build a naval taskforce in collaboration with France and Japan to deter attacks on shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb.

India would also do well to engage Egypt and Saudi Arabia. They had refused to join the alliance against the Houthis in 2024, given their own stance on Gaza. This time, with their economies at stake, they may not stand by. On July 20, the Houthis announced a "maritime embargo" on Saudi ships, seen as a threat against their transit through the Bab el-Mandeb. India needs to engage with these nations proactively to help secure the Red Sea, from the Suez to Bab el-Mandeb, while keeping its other partners in the region informed.

A rules-based maritime response

It needs to be emphasised that this would be a theatre-specific "Trade Protection Task Force" of navies, rather than a strategic alliance. In addition to ships and personnel, the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region hosted by India could provide the necessary maritime domain awareness, while France and Japan could complement these efforts with on-ground logistical support. The constituent navies could agree on joint rules of engagement in response to any hostile attacks. They could provide security cover or escorts requested by commercial and civilian vessels transiting the Strait, especially those bound for Europe, India, or Japan. The task force would serve as a lasting demonstration of India's resolve to ensure "respect for maritime rules and norms" as part of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).

India has both the responsibility and the capability to prevent the Bab el-Mandeb from becoming a literal "Gate of Tears" this time.

Context Amid renewed Houthi threats to disrupt shipping in the Red Sea, India should assume a proactive maritime security role by leading a theatre-specific naval task force with France & Japan.

Facts

Nearly one-third of India's trade passes through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.

During the 2023-24 Red Sea crisis, over 2000 ships diverted via the Cape of Good Hope.

France and Japan maintain naval bases in Djibouti, making them natural partners for an India-led maritime initiative.

Analytical Crux

Maritime security is fundamentally linked to economic resilience & supply chain stability. Disruptions at Bab-el-Mandeb affect insurance premiums, shipping costs & global trade far beyond the immediate conflict zone. Instead of depending exclusively on US-led coalitions or UN interventions, India should strengthen issue-based maritime cooperation under SAGAR through a limited trade-protection task force. Such an approach would safeguard India's commercial interests, reinforce its role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean and uphold a rules-based maritime order without entering formal military alliances.

Verbatim Quotes

"India has both the responsibility & the capability to prevent the Bab-el-Mandeb from becoming a literal 'Gate of Tears' this time."

- Raja Karthikeya

Governor's role in Centre-state relations - A balancing act



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The Governor's Role in Centre-State Relations: A Balancing Act



EPW Engage

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The office of the governor, often regarded as the lynchpin of India's federal framework, is increasingly becoming a site of tussle between the union and state governments. While the governor was envisaged as a neutral constitutional functionary, acting as a connecting thread between the union and the state governments, the rise in the number of controversies and contestations surrounding this post have drawn serious concerns about the politicisation of gubernatorial powers. This EPW Intervention delves into the constitutional debates surrounding this post, the extent of the governor's powers, the relevance of the 2025 Supreme Court judgment, attempting to chart a way forward within the framework of India's quasi-federal setup.

Context There is growing constitutional friction between Governors and elected state governments, particularly over delays in granting assent to bills.

Facts

- Article 163 does not explicitly define the Governor's discretionary powers, while Article 200 prescribes no timeline for deciding on Bills.
- The Punchhi Commission recommended replacing the Governor's removal at the "pleasure of the President" with removal by the state legislature.

- In "Assent, Withholding or Reservation of Bills (2025)", the Supreme Court held that courts cannot prescribe mandatory timelines, though prolonged inaction remains subject to limited judicial review.

Analytical Crux

The office of the Governor is intended to function as a constitutional bridge between the Union & the States, not as an instrument of political contestation. Ambiguities in Articles 163 & 200 have increasingly generated disputes over legislative assent & gubernatorial discretion. While the Supreme Court has clarified that indefinite delays are constitutionally impermissible, it has also reaffirmed the limits of judicial intervention by refusing to impose rigid timelines. Durable reform will require clearer constitutional conventions, objective appointment practices and greater accountability to preserve the spirit of cooperative federalism.

PSIR 2025, Paper II : "Would you agree with the contention that India's inclination to lean on a 'more aggressive hyper-realist posture' has gained a new momentum in the aftermath of the Pahalgam terrorist strike? Comment."

PSIR 2025, Paper II : India invoking strategic autonomy towards both the USA and Russia, by rejecting the US offer of mediation on Kashmir and refusing to criticise Russia.

GS-2 2024 : Geopolitical and geostrategic importance of Maldives for India, with a focus on global trade and energy flows, and its effect on India's maritime security.

GS-2 2025 : Energy security as the dominant kingpin of India's foreign policy, linked to India's influence in Middle Eastern countries.

PSIR 2025 : "Examine the constitutional provisions and nature of advisory jurisdiction of Supreme Court of India. Evaluate your answer with relevant examples." Asked for the first time, and asked in the year the Presidential Reference was made.

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