

The Asim Munir Conundrum and Indian Options

Fluctuating Norms in a Chaotic World

In an era where global norms and conventions once held sacrosanct are seen as tools of opportuneness; strategic partnerships are resultantly being measured in instant deliverables than principles. The United States (US), for long the self-proclaimed custodian of the 'Rules-based Order', has itself breached these norms occasionally to forfeit moral authority to define the next set. The contemporary American foreign policy seems to be prioritising immediate gains over ideological consistency. Pakistan Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Munir, with his elevated status and firm control over Pakistan's security apparatus, has been invited (visited) US twice in last two months. The US administration's assignation with Munir is a clear example of this policy. It also emphasises the persistent spectacle where Washington episodically remembers Pakistan's usefulness, when the situation so dictates. US actions are motivated by its self-interests rather than fundamental changes in its long-term strategic alignment.

Even as the Pakistan Chief presents himself as the most effective and decisive US partner, such embodiments from US incidents can encourage risky adventurism from Pakistan. India's challenge is to exploit this disorder to further its own interests. Its best interests are achieved by remaining unruffled, acting with exactitude and letting its intrinsic strength play out such episodes.¹

US Engagement with Pak COAS

Munir has visited the US twice in quick succession over the last two months. On 18 June 2025, he found himself on a sudden luncheon with US President Donald Trump, making it the first time Trump hosted a military Chief rather than a head of State in such a setting. He also engaged with US think tanks, scholars and media, aiming to recalibrate Pakistan's global narrative and expand ties beyond security issues during the June trip. He promoted Pakistan's counterterrorism role, economic potential and commitment to regional stability while warning against hybrid warfare. Munir urged transforming Pakistan-US relations

into a multidimensional partnership based on strategic convergence and mutual respect.²

Munir's second visit in under two months in first week of Aug 2025 was purportedly aimed at expanding military-to-military ties and attending the farewell and change-of-command ceremonies of the US Central Command Commander General Michael E Kurilla and his successor, Admiral Brad Cooper, at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa. The optics of both the events were as lurid as the tacit message that US still sees value in Pakistan's military strongman.

During his recent trip, Munir also held talks with senior US defence and political officials, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dan Caine. He affianced Pakistan's diaspora, urging them to support national investment and development. The visit coincided with enhanced US-Pakistan alignment on counterterrorism and US designation of Baloch insurgent groups as terrorist organisations. For India, this is neither a surprise nor a cause for panic, but a cue to recalibrate our stance for an increasingly chaotic world order.

Tampa Dinner Episode

Asim Munir made his provocative statements including the nuclear threats, Indus River comments and the Mercedes vs. dump truck analogy during a black-tie dinner on August 8, 2025, held in Tampa, Florida. The event was hosted by businessman and Pakistan's honorary consul, Adnan Asad, and included around 150 guests from the military, business, and diplomatic communities.

Asim Munir's statements made from US soil epitomise a clear escalation in Pakistan's rhetorical posture toward India. The threat scripts a shift from targeting military objectives in future conflicts to key economic and energy infrastructure. The explicit pointing to the Jamnagar economic hub also signals a disturbing readiness to shift from battlefield confrontation to economic disruption strategies. He referenced a social media post that paired a Quranic verse (from Surah Al-Fil) with a photo of Mukesh Ambani, saying it was meant to convey, "What we will

do the next time". Munir also said that if Pakistan faced an existential threat, "We'll take half the world down with us". He also threatened to destroy future Indian dams on the Indus with missiles and warned about missile strikes if the Indus Waters Treaty remains suspended. Munir's discourse intertwined theology and nationalism, beginning with scriptural recitation, invoking Pakistan's founding on the *Kalma* (Islamic declaration of faith) and appealing to a sense of divine destiny.

India should look at such orotundity not as a cause for concern but as a consequence of the global flux, the Trump factor and a test of its strategic maturity and resilience in a turbulent world order.

The US-Munir Affiliation

The US has unfailingly preferred dealing with Pakistani dictators over its civilian leaders, from Zia-ul-Haq and Pervez Musharraf to Asim Munir, because of the operational advantage that civilian governments cannot match. Munir's role in foreign policy reflects the traditional dominance of Pakistani military Chiefs in shaping external alignments. In a private dinner during the visit, Munir publicly threatened to target India's Jamnagar refinery, operated by Reliance Industries Limited.³ For the US, the Pak army offers strategic geographic leverage as Pakistan sits at the confluence of South Asia, the Middle East, Central Asia and China's Belt & Road corridor. This gives it logistical and intelligence significance in US reckonings for Central Asia, Iran and even Chinese containment.⁴ Pakistan military in comparison to its unstable civilian governments, is a centralised and dependable conduit for executing tactical aims and a more reliable partner for short-term priorities like managing Afghanistan, countering Chinese influence and addressing regional security. Munir also offers a means to handle crises, expediate back-channel talks and influence theatres where US has limited reach.

Pakistan's dire economic state gives Munir added sway as both allies and adversaries recognised that army's leadership remains guarantor of policy continuity.

Implications of Munir's Rhetoric

Asim Munir's belligerent grandiloquence and openly brandishing nuclear preferences seems to be a premeditated attempt at consolidating his domestic authority, averting attention from Pakistan's economic and political crises and revitalising the 'Madman Nuclear Doctrine'. By dispensing threats from US soil, Munir has sought to concurrently caution India and prompt US of Pakistan's disruptive capacity, possibly intending to leverage diplomatic, military or economic concessions. With American attention and probable concessions in hand, Munir may be tempted into deliberate miscalculations, misreading ceasefires or pauses for more aggressive posturing against India. The danger is not just direct military action, but the use of hybrid tactics like terror proxies, ceasefire violations and diplomatic brinkmanship to test India's resolve.⁵ Any such attempts may prove counterproductive for Pakistan, particularly considering Operation Sindoor's spotlighting of Pakistan's proxy vulnerabilities and India's formidable deterrence which is more agile and less tolerant of nuclear brinkmanship.

India understands that global powers operate on shifting interests and not fixed loyalties. As alliances and equations change, India must stay adaptable and work pragmatically to shape these shifts in its favour.

India's Options

India's quick, strong and robust diplomatic rebuttal underscores the high stakes and amplified tensions in the regional security dynamics. Ministry of External Affairs strongly denounced Munir's remarks, dismissing them as 'Nuclear Sabre-rattling' and asserting that New Delhi would not be cowed by nuclear blackmail. The MEA called Pakistan an "irresponsible state with nuclear weapons".

India should respond with strategic patience, confidence and focus on long-term interests, resisting overreactions to the oculi of US-Pakistan activities. Washington's transactional military flings with Pakistan cannot lessen India's structural and enduring value as a stable democracy, buoyant economy, vast market and steadfast partner. India

should pursue strategic autonomy by following independent policies, whether in energy imports from Russia, trade deals with the EU or emphatic water diplomacy. It should concurrently espouse conditional reciprocity to reward cooperation and penalise hostility.⁶ It must also strengthen trade and technology dialogues with Washington to make the Indian market indispensable despite tariffs and expand defence and energy cooperation with US firms to create powerful commercial stakeholders in India's favour. Simultaneously, India can leverage its partnerships with Europe, Japan and the Gulf to offset any short-term US drift. It should continue to quietly use backchannel diplomacy to emphasise Pakistan's economic fragility and history of overpromising. In doing so, India must retain strategic firmness on Kashmir while projecting its reliability as a long-term democratic partner.

Consolidating intrinsic strengths such as demographics, political stability, and economic self-reliance is essential for resilience and deterrence, alongside strategic communication to expose Pakistan's nuclear brinkmanship as the habitual tactic of an irresponsible state, reinforcing global awareness of the threat this poses to regional stability. Ultimately, the Munir episode is a reminder that the US will act in pursuit of its interests, and India's task is to leverage its growing influence to ensure such tactical gestures become irrelevant. This multi-pronged approach would reassure the Indian population, keep US engagement alive and ensure Pakistan's current upswing remains tactical and passing rather than strategic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Munir episode is a lesson in realpolitik. The US will continue to pursue its interests, even if it means engaging with actors that are anathema to its stated values. India must carefully manage growing regional alignments, diplomatic sensitivities and domestic political optics amid a fast changing geopolitical environment should act with confidence, leverage its growing power and build a strategic posture so robust that a tactical US flirtation with Pakistan becomes a footnote, not a point of contention.

Endnotes

¹ Indo - US Ties Face Difficult Moments, The Morning Standard, 09 August 2025

² Pak Army Chief courts US Opinion Makers, Omer Farooq Khan, The Tribune, 22 June 2025

³ The Importance of Asim Munir, IE, 14 Aug 2025.

⁴ Munir Makes Extraordinary Nuclear Threat from US soil, Times of India, 11 August 2025

⁵ Global Lessons in Realpolitik, Jyoti Malhotra, The Tribune 21 June 2025

⁶ Pak woes persist amidst Munir's Rise, Rana Banerji, The Tribune, 14 July 2025

⁷ India no longer a Soft State to Suffer Pakistan in Silence, Tilak Devasher, The Tribune, 12 July 2025

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