

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

Operation Sindoor: Japan's Response

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May 23, 2025

S*ummary*

Japan's statements as well as media coverage have sought to impose a hyphenating lens on Operation Sindoor and its aftermath, consistent with its Cold War-era attitude of linking India and Pakistan. There is scope for significant improvement in the Japanese position if it is to be a reliable ally in India's fight against state-sponsored terror.

Introduction

The recent escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan has elicited a range of opinions from across the international spectrum. These ranged from staunch support of India’s justly-exercised right to self-defence against the heinous attack on tourists in Pahalgam perpetrated on 22 April 2025 as well as certain countries’ tacit (or not so tacit) support for Pakistan’s actions. Japan, too, has released a number of statements that reflect its stance on the issue. These are made more pertinent by the fact that Japanese Defence Minister Gen Nakatani visited India in the immediate wake of the attacks and days before India launched Operation Sindoor to avenge the 26 deaths inflicted by Pakistan-backed proxies there.

Yet, amidst much concern, one can also discern a fundamental reluctance on Tokyo’s part to minimise its relations with Pakistan despite deepening multi-dimensional ties with India. Indeed, its recent statements as well as media coverage have sought to impose a hyphenating lens on Operation Sindoor and its aftermath, consistent with its Cold War-era attitude of linking the two countries. As such, there is scope for significant improvement in the Japanese position if it is to be a reliable ally in India’s fight against state-sponsored terror.

Japan’s Relations with India and Pakistan

It is worth considering that Tokyo has, even as it progressively ramped up its engagement with New Delhi, continued to maintain strong ties with Islamabad. Since 1952, when relations with Pakistan were established, Tokyo has retained significant interests in that country in line with the Cold War-era emphasis placed on it by the United States.¹

After the Cold War ended, Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu was the first Japanese prime minister to visit Pakistan (1990), followed by Their Imperial Highnesses Prince and Princess Akishino (1992), the Prince being the brother of then newly-installed Emperor Akihito. Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, who is widely recognised in India as the signatory to the Global Partnership with India, subsequently visited Pakistan as well (2000), as did his Foreign Affairs Minister Makiko Tanaka (2001) and several Special Representatives and Envoys (2002). Ties with Islamabad were deepened when the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001, which gave it critical geopolitical significance. Thus, most Japanese high-level visits to India resulted in the dignitaries visiting Pakistan as well, including Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in 2005.²

This cycle was seemingly broken by Shinzo Abe when he became Prime Minister in 2006. After Abe, no Japanese Prime Minister has visited Pakistan to date, while several have visited India. Some, like Abe, did so repeatedly, in 2007, 2014, 2015

¹ “[Japan-Pakistan Relations \(Basic Data\)](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 18 April 2025.

² Ibid.

and 2017. His successors, Yukio Hatoyama (2009), Yoshihiko Noda (2011) and Fumio Kishida (2022, 2023) maintained the tradition. Incidentally, Hatoyama and Noda belonged to the then-Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), now known as the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, (CDPJ), indicating that relations with India had become a bipartisan priority for Tokyo. In 2013, Their Majesties the (then) Emperor and Empress also visited India, lending further gravitas to bilateral ties.³

At present, Japan–Pakistan ties, while nowhere near the scale of Japan–India ties, nevertheless continue. As of 2024, 74 Japanese companies operate in Pakistan, as against India’s 1,400. Trade between Japan and Pakistan stands at 180.6 billion Japanese Yen (JPY) in 2023, whereas India’s trade with Japan stood at 2,333 billion JPY in the same year. Foreign Direct Investment from Japan is also light-years apart, with Pakistan’s 5 million US dollars (USD) comparing unfavourably with the over 43 billion USD invested in India by 2024. The list of treaties, bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding signed with New Delhi far outmatch those signed with Islamabad.⁴ On all these metrics, it would appear, New Delhi and Islamabad cannot be compared when it comes to engagement with Japan.

Japanese Reactions to Operation Sindoor

Nevertheless, there remains a persistent thread in Japanese thinking of viewing the two South Asian nations as linked entities. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, reactions emanating from Japanese officialdom were uniformly condemnatory. Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba called up Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 24 April to convey his condolences and assure India of his country’s support.⁵ Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya issued a statement on the same day condemning the attacks and assured India that Japan would stand with it in bringing the perpetrators to justice.⁶ Defence Minister Gen Nakatani, in his bilateral meeting on 5 May with Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh, prefaced his comments with expressions of condolence and support.⁷

This tone underwent subtle changes when India exercised its legitimate right to self-defence by destroying terror camps operating in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir on 5 May as part of Operation Sindoor. The official statement released by the Foreign Ministry in the wake of the initial airstrikes on 7 May, while retaining the initial language of condemnation for terror in all its forms and condolence for those killed in the terror attacks, nevertheless endeavoured to strike a balance when it

³ [“Japan-India Relations \(Basic Data\)”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1 April 2025.

⁴ Ibid.; “Japan-Pakistan Relations”, MOFA Japan.

⁵ [“Japan-India Summit Telephone Talk”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 24 April 2025.

⁶ [“Message of Condolences from Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi Following the Terrorist Attack in Kashmir”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 23 April 2025.

⁷ [“日印防衛相会談について”](#) (Japan-India Defence Ministers’ Dialogue), 防衛省 (Ministry of Defence of Japan), 5 May 2025.

came to India’s counteraction.⁸ It characterised India’s actions as an ‘attack’ on terrorist facilities, with the Japanese version using the word 攻撃. This word, which carries nuances of offence and aggression, carries a significantly negative cadence in the language, indicating implicit condemnation of India’s decision to neutralise terror camps.⁹

The Foreign Ministry in the same statement expressed ‘deep concern’ that ‘recent series of events’ would call forth ‘reprisals’ and had the potential to ‘escalate into a full-scale military conflict’. It called on both Pakistan and India to ‘exercise restraint and stabilise the situation’ through ‘dialogue’.¹⁰ This meant that a state that defends itself against heinous terror attacks launched by a state that actively sponsors terrorism (and has admitted as much in official statements) is equally responsible for maintaining the peace, and must perforce engage in dialogue with the latter. Juxtaposing this statement with the lack of Japanese support for India the last time the two South Asian neighbours went to war in 1999, it is clear that Japan’s support for India *vis-à-vis* Pakistan continues to be tinged by a desire to observe equivalence between the two countries.

The Japanese Embassy in New Delhi issued a series of advisories to the 8,000 plus Japanese residents in India, which also uses unfavourable language in its characterisation of India’s actions. The heading of the first advisory reads, “インド軍によるパキスタンへの軍事攻撃に伴う注意喚起”, which in translation can be rendered as ‘Advisory Regarding the Military Attack by the Indian Military on Pakistan’. Further, it goes on to explain that ‘インド軍がパキスタン国内に対して軍事攻撃を行った’, which when translated can be read as ‘The Indian Armed Forces conducted military attacks *inside* Pakistan’.¹¹ Needless to say, this completely suppresses the fact that it was *terror sites* within Pakistan, including locations in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir that were hit.

Subsequent advisories issued by the Japanese Embassy on 7, 9 and 10 May correct these errors to a great extent by replicating information derived from the briefings conducted by officials of the Armed Forces and Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri on 7 May and beyond. The title of the advisory, however, remains the same.¹²

⁸ “[The Situation in Kashmir \(Statement by Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi\)](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 7 May 2025.

⁹ “[「攻撃」の英語・英語例文・英語表現](#)”, *Weblio.jp*.

¹⁰ “Statement on Kashmir”, MOFA Japan.

¹¹ “[インド軍によるパキスタンへの軍事攻撃に伴う注意喚起 \(その1\)](#)” (Advisory Regarding the Military Attack by the Indian Military on Pakistan, No. 1), 在インド日本国大使館 (Embassy of Japan in India), 7 May 2025.

¹² “[インド軍によるパキスタンへの軍事攻撃に伴う注意喚起 \(その2\)](#)”, 在インド日本国大使館 (Embassy of Japan in India), 7 May 2025; “[インド軍によるパキスタンへの軍事攻撃に伴う注意喚起 \(その3\)](#)”, 在インド日本国大使館 (Embassy of Japan in India), 9 May 2025; “[インド軍によるパキスタンへの軍事攻撃に伴う注意喚起 \(その4\)](#)”, 在インド日本国大使館 (Embassy of Japan in India), 10 May 2025.

Explaining Japanese Ambivalence

It is interesting at this juncture to note that when India and China faced off against each other in Doklam in 2017 and in Galwan in 2020, Japanese statements were much more forthrightly supportive of India’s stance.¹³ In this, one can discern the lineaments of Japan’s geopolitical interests. In sum, as many Japanese strategists have been pointing out, India’s border issues with China make it a valuable ally to Japan, because of the potential for combined pressure on both China’s eastern maritime front as well as southwestern territorial front.¹⁴ Thus, it suits Japan to support India’s stance on issues across the Line of Actual Control.

On the other hand, Pakistan, as a key member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), serves as one of the key interlocutors in Japan’s engagement with the Muslim world, especially with West Asia. Since several members of the OIC from this region also belong to the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), from whom Japan purchases vast quantities of fossil fuels, it is obvious that Japan thinks it has an interest in not unduly antagonising it.¹⁵ Pakistan’s location could also offer a possible entryway into Afghanistan and Central Asia, another region where Japanese interests have begun to emerge. Maintaining a certain level of good relations enables Japan to retain an alternative to Mongolia, which, sandwiched as it is between Russia and China, offers only limited opportunities as a waypoint for the flow of fossil fuels and strategic minerals such as produced by the Central Asian republics.

Overlying all these may be the preferences of Japan’s security guarantor, the US, which has traditionally retained a good working relationship with Pakistan despite the growing importance afforded to India in its strategic calculations. In fact, there is evidence that Japan has expectations of incorporating Pakistan into its Indo-Pacific push. In 2022, as the two countries celebrated 70 years of bilateral ties, Prime Minister Kishida in an address to the 19,000-strong Pakistani diaspora in Japan announced as much, noting not only its cooperation in anti-terror operations (a manifest contradiction in terms) but also expressing hope that Pakistan’s cooperation could be secured in order to realise ‘a free and open Indo-Pacific’ (自由で開かれたアジア太平洋の実現に向け、日本パキスタン間でもぜひ協力していきたい).¹⁶

¹³ TNN, [“Doklam Stand-off: Japan Backs India, Says No One Should Try to Change Status Quo by Force”](#), *The Times of India*, 18 August 2017; ANI, [“Japan Backs India on LAC Situation, Opposes Any Change in Status Quo by China”](#), *The Times of India*, 3 July 2020.

¹⁴ Takuya Matsuda, [“Opinion: Getting the Quad Ready for a Protracted War”](#), *Nikkei Asia*, 21 April 2025; Satoru Nagao, “Japan-India Security Cooperation amidst Regional Flux”, in Harsh V. Pant and Madhuchanda Ghosh (eds), *India and Japan: A Natural Partnership in the Indo-Pacific*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2024, pp. 179–180.

¹⁵ 南龍太 (Ryuta Minami), [“日パキスタン国交70周年「関係は青天井」 日本在住者10年で2倍 震災支援や中古車、ハラルで貢献”](#) (70th Anniversary of Japan-Pakistan Relations: Relationship is ‘Blue Skies Ahead’, Residents in Japan Doubled in a Decade, Contributions to Disaster Relief, Second-hand Cars and Halal Food), *Yahoo! Japan News*, 29 April 2022.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Another aspect worth noticing is the Japanese lack of experience with state-sponsored terror, especially of the fundamentalist Islamist variety. Surrounded by mature states with largely-stable ideological structures, Japan’s last brush with mass terror was in 1995, when the release of sarin gas in several underground subway trains caused the deaths of 13 people and injured thousands.¹⁷

Prior to this attack, Japan mainly faced varieties of left-wing extremism throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with prominent examples such as the Japanese Red Army (日本赤軍) performing acts of violence with varying rates of success.¹⁸ The closest example of state-sponsored terror directed at Japan would be the campaign of abduction and hijacking conducted by agents of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), also known as North Korea, which had mostly concluded by the 1990s.¹⁹ As such, it is not difficult to argue that Japanese ambivalence regarding Pakistan’s continued use of terror stems both from an outsized faith in diplomacy to resolve tensions as well as from a misunderstanding of its activities as part of the regular business of states, which in turn, leads to a refusal to see Indian evidence of Pakistani state actor involvement as a sufficient condition for policy change.

Conclusion

Japan’s reaction to the current state of affairs on the subcontinent leaves much to be desired, though it must be said that its understanding has expanded manifold in the years since the end of the Cold War. As the two countries embark on a new phase of their relationship under the recently-propounded India–Japan Defence partnership in the Indo-Pacific (IJDIP), it is high time that officials and analysts in Tokyo pay greater attention to the risks inherent in equating India with Pakistan, a so-called ‘iron brother’ of strategic rival China, that can in future play a questionable role in Japanese calculations of building greater consensus on the adverse fallout of China’s rise. On the other hand, Indian policymakers would do well to seek to understand the strategic motivations underlying Japan’s reluctance to definitively reassess its engagement with Islamabad.

¹⁷ Mari Yamaguchi, “[30 Years After Deadly Tokyo Subway Gassing, Survivors and Victims’ Families Still Seeking Closure](#)”, *Associated Press*, 20 March 2025. Even this attack was perpetrated by a religious death cult operating domestically, which believed that an assault on existing government structures was vital to reform the country under their leader, Shoko Asahara (a pseudonym of Chizuo Matsumoto), who promised that only he had the solution to ‘save’ the country from a ‘coming Apocalypse’.

¹⁸ 三木武司 (Takeshi Miki), “[あさま山荘事件：連合赤軍がたどり着いた悲惨な結末](#)” (The Mt. Asama Incident: The Tragic End of the United Red Army”, *Nippon.com*, 19 February 2022.

¹⁹ “[絶対に諦めない！ 北朝鮮による日本人拉致問題](#)” (We Won’t Give Up! The Issue of Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea), 政府広報オンライン (Public Relations Office of the Government of Japan), 27 January 2025; Andrei Lankov, “[Destination Pyongyang: The Yodo Hijacking Incident, 50 Years On](#)”, *Commentary, NKNews*, 7 April 2020.

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