

ENDURING RIVALRIES: IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE PURSUIT OF PEACE IN THE INDO-PAK REGION

Zulfiqar Ali Khan (Corresponding Author)¹, Fazal Malik², Muhammad Zai Khan³

¹ MPhil International relations, Quaid i Azam university Islamabad, Email Zulfiqardir@gmail.com

² MPhil Pakistan studies, Quaid i Azam university Islamabad.

³ BS International Relations, University of Haripur

Abstract

This paper examines the longstanding rivalry between Pakistan and India, rooted in their historical partition and shaped by competing religious and national identities, which continue to influence their geopolitical dynamics. The core question addressed is: How do identity politics, religion and regime factors shape the persistent conflict between Pakistan and India, and what are the prospects for peace? Drawing on Bennett's framework of enduring rivalries, the paper explores how both countries' national identities—Muslim nationalism in Pakistan and Hindu nationalism in India—have been reinforced by political regimes, religious radicalization, and militarization, particularly concerning the Kashmir conflict. The research uses a qualitative approach, employing historical analysis and comparative political theory to assess the influence of key events, such as the rise of Hindutva in India and Islamization in Pakistan, on bilateral relations. The findings suggest that while identity politics, regime types, and public perception are central to the persistence of conflict, there are also opportunities for cooperation, notably in public support for dialogue and trade. However, religious polarization and aggressive military posturing remain major obstacles to peace. The paper concludes with a call for pragmatic diplomatic engagement, de-escalation of military tensions, and increased people-to-people exchanges as a way forward, alongside addressing core issues like Kashmir through multilateral platforms, with an emphasis on human rights and self-determination.

Keywords: Enduring rivalry, Muslim nationalism, Hindu Nationalism, Nationalist identities.

Introduction

The enduring rivalry between Pakistan and India has profoundly shaped the geopolitical landscape of South Asia, defining the region's dynamics for decades. This tension originates from the deep wounds inflicted by the partition of the subcontinent, which forced millions to migrate across newly drawn borders. Many of these migrants were subjected to violence and plunder by hostile groups on both sides, leaving a legacy of trauma that has fueled lasting enmity between the two nations. As J.N. Dixit once remarked, despite their many commonalities, Pakistan and India remain in perpetual conflict, even though they could otherwise enjoy amicable relations (Dixit, 2003).

Shortly after securing independence, Quaid-e-Azam, in a meeting with the Bombay (now Mumbai) Chamber of Commerce, expressed a vision of peaceful coexistence. He stated, "We will live in Pakistan, and you will live in India. In this way, we will be neighbors. We want to live in a friendly way, as friends in trade and commerce, like two brothers" (Yaseen, Jathol, & Muzaffar, 2016).

However, this vision has not been enough to prevent the two countries from engaging in border skirmishes, limited wars, and tense standoffs. Despite this, there remains an underlying desire to resolve their differences through mutual cooperation and collaboration. Though substantial success has been elusive, both countries still recognize that their destinies are intertwined in achieving harmony and mutual cooperation (Malik, 2019).

Enduring Rivalry

Bennett defines enduring rivalry as "a dyad in which two states disagree over the resolution of certain issues between them for an extended period of time, leading them to commit substantial resources... toward opposing each other, and in which relatively frequent diplomatic or military challenges to the disputed status quo are made by one or both of the states" (Cox, 2010). The conflict between Pakistan and India fits this description, as their rivalry has persisted for decades, marked by numerous militarized disputes over the years.

While ideologies based on religious identity offer a compelling explanation for the partition, they do not fully account for the ongoing disputes between the two states, especially given the asymmetry between them. India is a much more powerful country, while Pakistan, though weaker, strives to maintain credible minimum deterrence by increasing its military budget, forming alliances with powerful states, and developing both conventional and non-conventional capabilities (Rai, 2004).

India and Pakistan have held negotiations on various issues, including Sir Creek, Siachen, and the Tulbul or Wular project. However, these negotiations have largely been unsuccessful due to the deep-seated hostility, mistrust, and hatred between the two countries. Neither Pakistan nor India has been willing to shift their positions or find common ground for resolving these disputes. As a result, military confrontations have persisted, causing immense suffering on both sides of the border (Yaseen et al., 2016).

Among the many areas of contention, Kashmir holds paramount significance. The issue of Kashmir is viewed from different perspectives, depending on one's interests and ideology. At its core, the Kashmiris have been fighting for their right to self-determination, which is a recognized universal right in democratic societies. However, the conflict has evolved into a complex geopolitical struggle between Pakistan and India (Rizvi, 1994). The Kashmir issue has remained unresolved for decades. On January 1, 1948, after a violent conflict, India sought intervention from the United Nations (R. Khan, 1969). The UN mediated a ceasefire, and military officers from both sides established a ceasefire line. However, India has never fully complied with the agreement, as both nations desire different outcomes. This ongoing conflict continues to pose a serious security threat to the entire region (Wirsing, 1998).

UN Resolutions and the Kashmir Issue

On January 20, 1948, the UNSC adopted Resolution 39, aimed at providing a peaceful settlement to the Kashmir issue. According to the resolution, a commission of three members was to be formed, with one member nominated by India, one by Pakistan, and the third chosen by mutual agreement of the two nominated members. Later, on April 21, the UNSC adopted another resolution, primarily focused on resolving the Kashmir issue. After detailed discussions with both parties, the UNSC expanded the previous commission (Resolution 39) from three to five members. These members were from the United States, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Argentina, and Colombia. Their mandate was to visit both countries, assist in resolving the issue, restore peace in the region, and create favorable conditions for a plebiscite that would determine the future of the Kashmiri people.

The resolution provided a roadmap for the plebiscite. According to the plan, Pakistan was to first withdraw all forms of violence from Kashmir, including its regular army and tribal fighters. In the

second step, India was to gradually reduce its military presence to a level sufficient only for maintaining law and order. Finally, the Indian government was to create an environment conducive to the smooth conduct of the plebiscite under UN supervision (Bhattacharjee).

Pakistan and India have remained in a hostile relationship since their inception, with wars and border skirmishes becoming routine. Considering the partition plan, it is clear that Kashmir, as a Muslim-majority region, should have become part of Pakistan (Wani, 2013). However, India claims Kashmir as its own territory and has taken a firm stance on the issue. The BJP's view on Kashmir is especially rigid; they consider the entire Kashmir region, including Pakistan-administered Kashmir (Azad Kashmir), as an integral part of India. Before the BJP government, led by Prime Minister Modi, came to power, India was somewhat open to trilateral engagement in resolving the Kashmir issue. At that time, India allowed Hurriyat leaders to travel to Pakistan and did not object to meetings between Pakistani officials and Hurriyat leaders. However, under Modi's government, a new strategy was introduced, limiting discussions to Pakistan and India, with no space for the All Parties Hurriyat Conference in the dialogue. Consequently, in August 2014, PM Modi canceled a foreign secretary-level meeting with Pakistan after Pakistan's High Commissioner in Delhi, Abdul Basit, met with separatist leaders in the city. Indian officials viewed this meeting as interference in their internal affairs (Mohan, 2015).

Pakistan supports the involvement of the Kashmiri people in resolving the issue, as they have been fighting for their freedom since 1846, as discussed by Mridu Rai. The Kashmiri people have never surrendered, but after the 1987 election—blatantly rigged by the Congress party—their movement took a new turn, leading to militant activities. In the 1990s, the separatist movement split into two factions. The first faction favored an independent state, believing that both Indian-administered and Pakistan-administered Kashmir should be reunited to form a sovereign, secular, and democratic state where all Kashmiris, regardless of religion, could live freely. This view was championed by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). However, the region's Buddhist and Hindu minorities feared religious persecution, believing that in an independent Kashmir, the overwhelming Muslim majority would threaten their rights. They looked to the Indian government for protection. They also argued that, if independence were pursued, it should be limited to the Kashmir Valley, where Muslims form a majority.

The second separatist faction consists of individuals with purely Islamic views who prefer jihad over democratic struggle. This movement is led by the valley's religious elites, who believe that Kashmir should either merge with Pakistan or become an independent Islamic state with friendly relations with Pakistan. This faction is led by groups such as Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and Harqat-ul-Mujahideen, with various other political parties sympathetic to Pakistan organized under the umbrella of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (R. Ganguly, 1998).

To conceptualize the relationship between Pakistan and India, we will first identify the factors influencing their relations, followed by an examination of the events that either normalize or worsen their interactions.

Identity and Nationalism

Identity plays an important role in strengthening nationalism. While it has positive aspects, it can also contribute negatively to ethnic conflict. Due to its significance and the growing interest among scholars, defining the term precisely is challenging. However, it can be simply defined as “a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes” (Fearon, 1999). Identities of groups and individuals are shaped by the interaction between material and normative structures in their environment. The material structure is characterized by the distribution of economic resources and political power systems, while the normative structure consists of belief systems, shared ideas, and values (Afzal, 2014).

Human beings live in different communities and develop certain similarities and dissimilarities, which allow them to be distinguished from one another. Those who exhibit similar behaviors are considered the in-group, while those who behave differently from that group, but similarly within their own group, are the out-group for the former and the in-group for themselves (Rubin & Badae, 2007). Identities are highly effective in organizing people into different political groups, which can become sources of either conflict or cooperation. Before the rise of nationalism, families, clans, and religions were the primary sources of identity and in-group formation. In modern times, nationalism has come to dominate international politics (Afzal, 2014).

Muslim and Hindu Nationalism

The foundation of the Pakistan-India rivalry lies in two distinct identities: Muslim and Hindu. As a sense of nationalism began to emerge among Muslims in Hindu-majority India, the “Two-Nation Theory” came to the forefront. This theory asserted that Hindus and Muslims are two distinct identities with different cultures, histories, and civilizations, making coexistence impossible (Majid, Hamid, & Habib, 2014). On the other hand, there was resentment among upper-caste (Brahman) Hindus, who felt that their caste supremacy was under threat. They sought to create more space for themselves in the politically and economically complex world by forming a Hindu identity. The construction of Hindu identity was driven by a reinterpretation of the Brahmans' role in Hindu religio-cultural traditions. They also aimed to replace the feminized Orientalist view of Hindus, who had been subjugated by Muslims and the British, with a more masculine tradition. This new religio-cultural tradition needed to be protected, which led to the militarization and antagonism of Hindus. They justified this by accusing Muslims of corrupting their traditions and expressed a desire to rediscover the glory of their past (Afzal, 2014). Despite these developments, there was a movement for unity in the subcontinent, represented by a secular identity led by Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. They sought to embrace the diversity of the subcontinent and avoid the division of India along social, religious, or other lines (Basrur, 2015).

Political Culture and Public Perception

The political culture of both countries is influenced by religion. Political culture refers to the political behavior and values of a collective group or individual, and it can be described as the normative judgments and shared views of a population about their political system (Winkler). Religious identities are at the core of the conflict between the two countries, and the increasing polarization and religious radicalization have made peace seem like a distant dream. Religion plays a significant role in government formation. Pakistan has evolved from a Muslim to an Islamic state, while India is gradually shifting from a secular to a Hindu state. In both countries, religion has taken center stage, influencing decision-making processes (Dyehouse, 2014).

Role of Religion in Indian Politics

Religion began to play a significant role in Indian politics in the 1920s when V.D. Savarkar introduced the concept of Hindutva (Zulfikar Ali Khan, September 4, 2024). However, the rise of electoral politics around this ideology took place in the 1990s. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a nationalist party that promotes the Hindu nature of India and whose ideology is based on Hindutva, first came to power in 1998 and again in 1999 under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), governing until 2004 (Misra, 2018). In 2014, and again in 2019, the BJP returned to power with a clear majority. Today, the BJP is the most prominent political party in India, owing to its strong organizational structure. It serves as the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has a widespread presence across India. All of these entities are connected to Hindutva ideology, and their views on non-vernacular religions are clear (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). The BJP's history is marked by violent acts against non-Hindu religions, most notably the

demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by RSS volunteers in 1992 and the 2002 Gujarat massacre under the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi (Kapur, 2014).

The BJP also holds a hardline stance on the issue of Kashmir. In 1952, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, a founding member of the Jana Sangh, condemned Pakistan's invasion of Kashmir, describing it as a national humiliation. He argued that although India is a peace-loving nation, there are limits to its patience in the face of aggression, and he criticized India's political elite for its response (A. Ganguly, 2017).

Role of Religion in Pakistani Politics

In Pakistan, the role of religion has fluctuated over different eras, but its influence in mainstream politics has always been evident. From Muhammad Ali Jinnah to General Ayub Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, leaders with moderate and progressive views have used religion to some extent. The real wave of Islamization began during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime. Zia introduced constitutional amendments and supported Islamist parties to legitimize his government (Nasr, 2007). After Zia's dictatorship, both major political parties attempted to promote democratic values, but ultimately formed alliances with Islamist groups. When the Taliban established a government in Afghanistan, a new wave of Islamization spread across the region. However, when General Musharraf took power, he introduced the concept of "enlightened moderation" and sought to implement a secular version of Islamic governance. Despite his efforts, Musharraf struggled to legitimize his rule and faced several assassination attempts by militants. Islamist political parties capitalized on the Afghan Jihad, winning control of the NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and securing 11% of seats in the National Assembly. Musharraf also tried to shift Pakistan-India relations but achieved limited success (Fayyaz, 2012).

Public Perception

Public perception plays a crucial role in shaping the politics of every state, influencing and altering government decisions (Z. A. Khan & Azim, 2023). In the case of Pakistan and India, public opinion is highly antagonistic on both sides. Even before Modi's government came to power, a Pew survey conducted on June 21, 2011, revealed negative perceptions between the two nations. According to the survey, only 14% of Pakistanis held a positive view of India, while 75% had unfavorable opinions. Similarly, Pakistanis saw India as a greater threat than Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. On the other hand, Indians had a similar perspective, with 65% holding unfavorable views of Pakistan and only 14% expressing positive opinions. Despite these negative perceptions, majorities in both countries supported bilateral talks and increased trade. Regarding Kashmir, 80% of Pakistanis believed that the issue was central and that without its resolution, improving bilateral relations would be impossible. Since the BJP took power, public opinion in India towards Pakistan has further deteriorated, with 73% of Indians holding negative views in 2016 (Bruce, 2016).

Regime Factor

In addition to identity politics, regime type plays a pivotal role in shaping both the internal politics of India and Pakistan, as well as their bilateral relations. Pakistan's political landscape has been heavily influenced by the military, which has imposed several martial laws since its independence. Even during periods of civilian rule, the military exerts significant influence over the country's political and foreign affairs (Ganguly, 2012).

Research indicates that Pakistan's military tends to adopt a more conciliatory stance toward India when it holds direct power. For example, during General Pervez Musharraf's rule, despite the Kargil conflict in 1999, his later tenure witnessed diplomatic attempts such as backchannel dialogues over Kashmir (Bajpai, 2020). Conversely, when the military is not in direct control, as during civilian regimes, its influence is often channeled through more aggressive policies,

fostering an environment of intolerance and hostility toward India (Cohen, 2013). This duality reflects the institutional tensions within Pakistan, where the civilian government may push for dialogue and peace, while the military, even when not officially in power, has a strategic interest in maintaining an adversarial stance for security and domestic legitimacy.

In contrast, India's stable democratic system allows for more continuity in its foreign policy, though nationalist identity politics can heighten tensions, especially during electoral cycles (Bajpai, 2020). The interaction between regime types in both countries, especially Pakistan's military dominance, significantly affects the trajectory of India-Pakistan relations.

Conclusion

The enduring rivalry between Pakistan and India, deeply rooted in their distinct religious and nationalist identities, has continued to shape their strained relationship since the traumatic partition of the subcontinent. This conflict, centered around historical grievances, has led to repeated skirmishes, wars, and a persistent state of distrust. The Kashmir issue remains the most significant and contentious flashpoint, reflecting the deeper ideological and territorial disputes between the two nations. Despite numerous attempts at reconciliation, including bilateral talks and international mediation, the core issues remain unresolved, largely due to the failure to address the underlying identity politics and the strategic interests that drive the conflict.

Opportunities for improving relations, however, are not entirely out of reach. Both nations could benefit from fostering mutual understanding and trust, which might be achieved through sustained dialogue and cooperative initiatives. By focusing on shared interests, such as economic growth, regional stability, and global standing, Pakistan and India can gradually reduce the animosity that has long defined their relationship. Engaging in activities that promote people-to-people connections and cultural exchanges could further help to bridge the divide, allowing both societies to see beyond the historical animosities that have fueled the conflict. However, for this to be effective, India must avoid the placement of populist narratives in its policies and focus on upholding the true spirit of democratic principles. Similarly, Pakistan should concentrate on strengthening its own democracy, as a robust democratic system could lead to more stable and peaceful relations between the two nations.

Any approach to peace must also be realistic and acknowledge the complex power dynamics at play. A strategy that combines diplomatic engagement with a prudent level of security preparedness is essential to ensure that any progress made is not undermined by external or internal forces. Additionally, Immanuel Kant's theory of Perpetual Peace and the Democratic Peace theory of Michael W. Doyle suggest that long-term peace is achievable if both nations commit to strengthening their democratic institutions and principles. The international community, particularly influential powers, can play a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and supporting confidence-building measures.

Ultimately, a sustainable peace will depend on the willingness of both nations to transcend their historical animosities, embrace democratic principles, and engage in constructive dialogue. This process will require patience, resilience, and a shared vision for a future where both nations can coexist peacefully, with their identities respected and their sovereignty preserved. Only through such a balanced and comprehensive approach can the long-standing rivalry between Pakistan and India be transformed into a more stable and peaceful relationship, benefiting not only the two nations but the entire region.

References

Afzal, M. M. (2014). *Bharatiya janata party and the indian muslims*. Karachi Pakistan: Oxford university press.

- Basrur, R. (2015). India's policy toward pakistan. *Political Science, International Relations, Regional Studies*.
- Bhattacharjee, K. (August 18, 2019). What is the un's stand on kashmir? *The Hindu*.
- Bruce, S. (2016). How indians see their place in the world. *Pew Research Center*, 19.
- Cox, E. W. (2010). Why enduring rivalries do—or don't—end. *Press, Firstforum*.
- Dixit, J. N. (2003). *India-pakistan in war and peace*: Routledge.
- Dyehouse, A. R. (2014). Religious disparity in india and pakistan: The prospect of peace through the literary views of salman rushdie and manil suri. *Eastern Kentucky University*.
- Fayyaz, S. (2012). *Pakistan response towards terrorism: A case study of musharraf regime*. University of Birmingham,
- Fearon, J. D. (1999). What is identity (as we now use the word)? *Unpublished manuscript, Stanford University, Stanford, Calif*.
- Flåten, L. T. (2016). *Hindu nationalism, history and identity in india: Narrating a hindu past under the BJP*: Taylor & Francis.
- Ganguly, A. (2017). Dr. Syama prasad mookerjee: A selfless patriot. In: Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation.
- Ganguly, R. (1998). India, pakistan and the kashmir dispute. *Asian Studies Institute & Centre for Strategic Studies*.
- Jaffrelot, C., & Verniers, G. (2020). The BJP's 2019 election campaign: Not business as usual. *Contemporary South Asia*, 28(2), 155-177.
- Kapur, R. (2014). The ayodhya case: Hindu majoritarianism and the right to religious liberty. *Md. J. Int'l L.*, 29, 305.
- Khan, R. (1969). The kashmir problem: Its handling in the United Nations. *Journal of the Indian Law Institute*, 11(3), 273-292.
- Khan, Z. A., & Azim, N. B. (2023). Expanding the horizon of foreign policy analysis: A neoclassical realist approach. *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs*, 6(2).
- Majid, A., Hamid, A., & Habib, Z. (2014). Genesis of the two nations theory and the quaid-e-azam. *Pakistan Vision*, 15(1), 180.
- Malik, M. S. (2019). Pakistan-india relations. *Strategic Studies*, 39(1), 59-76.
- Misra, S. (2018). Understanding the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party. *Observer Research Foundation Issue Brief*, 1-16.
- MOHAN, C. R. (2015). *Modi's world expanding india's sphere of influence*. New Delhi: Harper Collins.
- Nasr, S. (2007). Pakistan after islamization: Mainstream and militant islamism in a changing state. *Asian Islam in the 21st Century*.
- Rai, M. (2004). *Hindu rulers, muslim subjects: Islam, rights, and the history of kashmir*: Orient Blackswan.
- Rizvi, G. (1994). *India pakistan and kashmir problem 1947-71 (ed.) perspectives on kashmir by dr kaniz fatima yousaf*. Paper presented at the Pakistan Forum, Islamabad.
- Rubin, M., & Badaea, C. (2007). Why do people perceive ingroup homogeneity on ingroup traits and outgroup homogeneity on outgroup traits? *Personality Social Psychology Bulletin* 33(1), 31-42.
- Wani, H. A. S., Andi. (2013). Understanding kashmir conflict: Looking for its resolution. *SUSURGALUR*, 1(2).
- Winkler, J. R. Political culture. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- Wirsing, R. (1998). *War or peace on the line of control?: The india-pakistan dispute over kashmir turns fifty*: IBRU.
- Yaseen, Z., Jathol, I., & Muzaffar, M. (2016). Pakistan and india relations: A political analysis of conflicts and regional security in south asia. *Global Political Review*, 1(1), 1-9.

- Zulfiqar Ali Khan, J. u. R. S., Fazal Malik, Rafiul Haq. (September 04, 2024). From identity to dominance: Unpicking the intersection of hindutva and muslim identity in india. *International Journal Of Contemporary Issues In Social Sciences*, 3(3).
- Bajpai, K. (2020). *India-Pakistan Relations: International Relations and Politics of South Asia*. Routledge.
- Cohen, S. P. (2013). *The Idea of Pakistan*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Ganguly, S. (2012). *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions Since 1947*. Columbia University Press.