

PAKISTAN'S KASHMIR QUANDARY AMID INDIA'S REGIONAL RISE

by
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The [return of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif](#) to Pakistan in October 2023 from self-exile in London raised many expectations. However, neither did Nawaz Sharif become the Prime Minister after the general elections in February 2024, though his party leads the government, nor has Pakistan left any stone unturned in raising the Kashmir issue—something that exasperates India. Many Pakistan watchers in India had hoped for a resumption of diplomatic dialogue between India and Pakistan.

Experts in India believed that Nawaz Sharif had the convincing capability to restore dialogue with India due to Delhi's ease with Sharif during his past terms as Prime Minister. With Nawaz's brother and former [Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif taking over the office](#), Delhi sticks to its cautious optimism of maintaining a status quo until Pakistan takes severe actions against the menace of terrorism. The recently launched [election manifesto](#) of the ruling Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) promises to accelerate the development of robust infrastructure along the "Indo-Pakistan" borders by introducing "technological solutions on fenced portions to make fencing smarter."

Delhi's unwillingness to normalize relations with Pakistan emanates from the failure of formal and back-channel talks because of the continuing terror attacks. India has been a victim of Pakistani-exported terrorism for a few decades now, including the 2008 Mumbai attacks. This enduring tension has not only perpetuated animosity but has also overshadowed attempts at regional cooperation. The historical context of Kashmir serves as a backdrop to this complex relationship, further complicating efforts toward peace and stability in the region.

Islamabad's Fixation on Kashmir

Kashmir, a Himalayan territory claimed in full but ruled in parts by India and Pakistan, has been

the bone of contention between the two since the Partition of India in 1947. After seven decades, the issue still takes up the paramount space in frozen bilateral ties. For [India](#), Kashmir is an integral part of it, and by abrogating Article 370 in the Indian Constitution – giving special autonomy to Kashmir – in 2019, Delhi marked a dead-end to the issue. But for Pakistan, the issue still remains unresolved, with the newly elected Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif invoking the Kashmir issue in his maiden speech in the House, suggesting the passing of a resolution for the "[freedom of Kashmiris](#)".

Furthermore, Prime Minister Sharif raised the Kashmir dispute during his first overseas visit to Saudi Arabia. The [Joint Statement](#) from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan emphasized the importance of "dialogue between Pakistan and India to resolve the outstanding issues between the two countries, especially the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, to ensure peace and stability in the region." Also, during a [joint press briefing](#) with the visiting Iranian President, Sharif had raised the Kashmir issue and sought Iran's support. While India sees no space for external actors in raising or discussing the Kashmir issue, Pakistan continues to seek international support on Kashmir, especially from the Islamic world.

India's Growing Ties with the Middle East

However, in the last decade, the terms of India's engagement with the Islamic World, especially the Middle East, have seen a 360-degree change towards the positive side. From Prime Minister Narendra Modi taking several trips to the Middle East, [receiving the highest state honors from](#) the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, inaugurating a Hindu temple in UAE, and getting eight Indian nationals on death row in Qatar released, it all showcases the growing bonhomie between India and the Middle Eastern countries.

India's cooperation with the Middle East extends beyond bilateral relations with new strategic connectivity initiatives like the [I2U2](#) Group, comprising Israel, India, the UAE, and the United States, that aim to deepen collaboration in energy and transportation and the [India-Middle East-Europe](#)



[Economic Corridor](#) (IMEC) to bolster economic development by fostering connectivity and integration across two continents, thus unlocking sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

India's ascent to the fifth-largest global economy and its expanding defense capabilities have set the stage for renewed engagement with the Middle East. The region's burgeoning potential as an emerging open society has spurred collaboration in sectors ranging from financial investments to science and technology and facilitated labor mobility. This shift in the Middle East's perspective towards India extends beyond historical concerns like Kashmir and Pakistan, fostering a more nuanced and multifaceted relationship that transcends religious lenses.

As the Global South joins India in condemning global terrorism and the Middle East moves away from a solely religious perspective to engage with India, Pakistan faces a considerable challenge in adapting to the shifting regional dynamics. Also, with India aligning with the global community in condemning terrorism and its alleged sponsors, notably Pakistan, while fostering a deepening partnership with the Islamic world, Pakistan faces a pressing need to reassess the duration of the Islamic world's support for its stance on Kashmir.

Pakistan's Internal Dynamics

With its dwindling economic capabilities, unstable government, and unsafe investment environment, Pakistan is becoming less attractive to foreign investors. This trend is exacerbated by the governance model, stringent tax regimes, and acute state control, all of which are heavily influenced by the military. Pakistan's key allies and supporters on the Kashmir issue, notably Saudi Arabia, are showing signs of [reevaluating](#) their one-way economic contributions towards Pakistan. This potential shift in Saudi policy could have far-reaching implications for Pakistan's financial health and diplomatic leverage in the region.

Similarly, Pakistan's 'all-weather friend' China faces an acute challenge to its investment in Pakistan. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been subject to tribal warfare within Pakistan. In the last two years alone, the CPEC has been [targeted](#)

multiple times. In [March 2024](#), five Chinese nationals lost their lives in terror attacks on Gwadar Port—a critical strategic component in the CPEC. [Beijing has condemned the attacks and sought an investigation into the matter](#). These developments raise pertinent questions about the stability and security of China's investments in Pakistan, potentially prompting Beijing to reconsider its investment strategy in the region.

Also, Pakistan's economy is cash-strapped, with a [GDP of USD 374 billion and a projected growth rate of only 2%](#), much lower than [India's 6.2% growth rate and GDP of USD 4,112 billion](#). Pakistan's overall economic challenges include high inflation, fiscal deficit, and reliance on international loans. The country struggles with a balance of payments crisis, necessitating frequent bailouts from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and friendly nations.

To conclude, with the current state of its politics and economy, the changing global power dynamics with India finding international support and the changing equation between the Islamic world and India, Pakistan will have to rethink its Kashmir strategy beyond Islamic solidarity. India, on the other hand, has reasons to celebrate its growing ties with the Islamic world, considering its minority Muslim population is taking note of it. Meanwhile, it is imperative for Pakistan to reassess its priorities and move beyond its fixation on Kashmir. It is time to contemplate whether the Islamic world will persist in providing both moral and material support on the Kashmir issue.

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