

# ISAS Insights

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## What Drives the Indo-Pakistani Rivalry?

*What drives the Indo-Pakistani rivalry? This paper challenges a number of extant explanations, ranging from the memories of partition, innate Hindu-Muslim discord, the Pakistani claim to Kashmir and mutual misperceptions. Instead, it draws on a body of literature in international relations to argue that the relationship involves two states with markedly different preferences. One of them, India, is a status quo power and a security seeker. The other, Pakistan, is a revisionist state, which is dissatisfied with the territorial arrangements in the region and seeks to upend them. The paper then traces the sources of Pakistan's revisionist behaviour.*

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### Introduction

What ails the Indo-Pakistani relationship is a matter far from trivial as the fate of nearly a fifth of humanity is involved. They are nuclear-armed rivals, they have fought four wars (1947-48, 1965, 1971 and 1999) and they have been embroiled in a number of crises over the past 70 years. Several of these crises, especially those in 1987, 1990 and 2001-2002 brought the two countries precipitously close to the brink of war. Multilateral, trilateral and, subsequently,

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bilateral efforts to end this conflict ultimately proved to be futile after some initial promise. For example, following India's referral of the Kashmir dispute to the United Nations, a series of efforts was mounted between 1948 and 1960 under its auspices to terminate the conflict. Later, in the aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian border war, there was an important Anglo-American endeavour to bring about rapprochement between the two warring states. Still later, after the 1965 Indo-Pakistani conflict, the Soviet Union attempted to broker an accord. Under the terms of the Tashkent Agreement that resulted, both powers agreed to return to the status quo ante but the underlying cause of the dispute remained unresolved. Following the 1971 India-Pakistan war, there was a strictly bilateral attempt to settle the dispute. Though this agreement did herald a long period of peace in the subcontinent, it too did not bring the discord to a close. Various recent attempts, especially on the part of the United States (US), at promoting reconciliation have also proved to be equally ineffectual. In recent months, there has been a spate of border clashes, including one in early June 2017. The hostility seems to be virtually unrelenting and the dispute is seemingly intractable.

## **Competing Explanations and their Limits**

Explanations for the Indo-Pakistani rivalry abound. Some suggest that it is rooted in the tragic legacy of the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 which left at least one million people dead and over ten million displaced. Indeed, a noted Indian scholar-diplomat, Sisir Gupta, argued that the relationship of hostility could be traced to the images that the two sides formed of each other in the wake of partition. There is probably some credence to this argument. However, with the passing of the generation that lived through the horrors of partition, surely some of that hostility should have dissipated.

Another popular argument suggests that the two states are implacably at odds because of their respective majority populations – Hindu and Muslim. To quote the American poet, W H Auden, is it because of “their differing diets and incompatible gods”? This argument, despite its popular currency, is actually quite lacking in precision. There is no question that there had been Hindu-Muslim discord in the subcontinent in the historical past. However, there were also important moments of cooperation between the two communities and, indeed, various syncretic movements that sought to find common ground.

A third argument suggests that the problem stems from the persistence of the territorial dispute over Kashmir. In this view, Pakistan's elites believe that they have a legitimate claim to Kashmir because of its proximity to Pakistan and its Muslim-majority status. There is an element of truth to this proposition too. However, the robustness of this claim was surely undermined when East Pakistan (albeit with India's assistance) broke away in 1971 and became the sovereign state of Bangladesh. If religion alone could not be the basis of nation-building, what moral claim does Pakistan still have on Kashmir? Furthermore, for all practical purposes, between 1971 and 1989, the Kashmir issue was dormant. It was only the outbreak of a mostly indigenous, ethno-religious insurgency in the Indian-controlled portion of Kashmir that saw a revival of the territorial dispute.

A fourth contention holds that the problem is one of mutual misperceptions of intent. This argument suggests that neither party really intends to do the other harm. Instead, they are caught in what scholars of international relations refer to as a "security dilemma". In a global order where there is no supreme sovereign which can guarantee the security of states, they are forced to fend for themselves to ensure their survival. Accordingly, they arm themselves to hedge against an uncertain future. After all, today's friend could well become tomorrow's adversary. Intentions can easily change; all that the states can focus on are capabilities. Given this state of affairs, it simply makes sense for each state to have the necessary military wherewithal to protect itself. This, in turn, leads other states to arm themselves, fearful that they may leave themselves vulnerable to future coercion. The Indo-Pakistani conflict, in this formulation, is an ideal case of a security dilemma. As each side has armed itself, the other has felt threatened and, in turn, expanded its own capabilities. This has contributed to a spiral of hostility even though neither side had entertained hostile intentions.

Though seemingly quite plausible, this argument is not without limitations. The historical record belies this seemingly benign explanation for the hostile relationship. For example, even amidst the disarray of partition, Pakistan, not India, initiated the first Kashmir war of 1947-48. Clearly, it was not India's arming of itself that precipitated Pakistan's decision to launch the war. Nor did India undertake an effort to bolster its military capabilities when Pakistan chose to forge a military alliance with the US in 1954. Indeed, despite being quite distressed with the emergence of this security nexus, India did not embark on a major weapons acquisition process to counter what could have been deemed as a budding, potential threat to its security. It is evident, therefore, that the relationship cannot properly be deemed to be a security dilemma.

## **Notes towards an Alternative Explanation**

Other arguments for what drives the contentious relationship can also be adduced. However, the ones delineated here provide a fair sampling of the scholarship on the subject. Since all of these arguments have some flaws, what might constitute a better explanation for what drives this enduring rivalry? Also, how might it end? The remainder of this paper will spell out a theoretical argument, adduce appropriate evidence to support it and then sketch out possible and likely pathways which could lead to a termination of this long-standing rivalry.

To fathom the origins of this rivalry, it is important to understand that political scientists tend to differentiate states between those that are status quo powers and others that are deemed to be revisionist powers. The status quo states are those that do not harbour any territorial ambitions. They are mostly concerned with preserving their security and do not have expansionist ambitions. The revisionist powers, on the other hand, are those states that are dissatisfied with the existing territorial arrangements and are prone to territorial aggrandisement. The central argument is that the status quo powers are content with the existing territorial arrangements while the revisionist powers are dissatisfied with them and are predatory.

How does this conceptual scheme explain the Indo-Pakistani rivalry? It posits that Pakistan, owing to certain structural features of its polity, is a revisionist state. The revisionism, in turn, can be traced to the pattern of civil-military relations in the country. Within three years after emerging from the detritus of the British colonial empire in 1947, India had managed to fashion a working, democratic constitution. This constitutional dispensation, along with free and fair elections as early as 1952, effectively established a distinct form of civil-military relations. The Indian military, from the outset, was placed under firm civilian control.

However, a similar process did not take place in Pakistan. The country encountered significant hurdles in the drafting of its initial constitution. Worse still, as both historians and political scientists have shown, the administrators of the country, faced with the daunting tasks of maintaining political order in the wake of partition, steadily relied on the army. This reliance, coupled with the failure to form representative institutions, contributed to the country's first military coup in 1958. With the military then firmly ensconced in office until 1969, the building of popular, representative institutions in the country was stultified. As the economic historian,

Douglas North, had shown in his seminal work, institutions once embedded in an environment, are notoriously resistant to significant change. Not surprisingly, the Pakistani military, having gotten a taste for the perquisites of office, was hardly willing to return docilely to the barracks. The dramatic shock of the 1971 war and the break-up of Pakistan discredited the military for some time. Unfortunately, the political leadership, under President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, failed to place the country on a path of democratic consolidation. As is well known, the military establishment, which had been chafing under the civilian dispensation, staged a comeback. Since then, while Pakistan has alternated between civilian and military rule, there has been one important constant: the military establishment has evolved into a virtual veto-player in the political and institutional landscapes of the country.

Even when legitimately-elected civilian governments have assumed office, the military has zealously guarded its prerogatives. Most pertinently, to ensure that its privileges are not curtailed in any fashion, it has systematically engaged in threat inflation. To that end, over the last several decades, it has dramatically expanded its role within both Pakistan's state and society. The role expansion has given it an ability to manipulate the mass media, shape the writing of civics textbooks, own substantial tracts of prime real estate in major urban areas, run lucrative farms in rural districts and, above all, exercise significant control over critical foreign and security policy issues. Specifically, without exaggeration, it can be argued that the Pakistani military has virtually controlled the critical foreign and security policy choices towards India and a handful of other states. As a consequence, it has justified very substantial military budgets well in excess of the country's legitimate security needs. In the process, it has turned Pakistan into a quintessentially predatory state and not a mere security-seeking state.

## **Pathways to Rapprochement?**

If this analysis is indeed correct, what policy prescriptions for seeking India-Pakistan rapprochement flow from it? Before outlining a suitable policy guidance, it might be useful to briefly discuss some options that have been proffered but may have important defects. One strategy that is frequently bandied about involves promoting economic interdependence between the two states. Though apparently quite attractive, this argument has two important problems. First, it may place the proverbial cart before the horse. The Pakistani military establishment is hardly likely to support the emergence of such interdependence. Second, even

if it did, much of the extant empirical literature in international politics fails to show that there is a clear-cut positive relationship between economic interdependence and peace between rivals.

Another approach that enjoys varying degrees of support amongst certain elite communities in both countries involves the promotion of people-to-people contacts. Though such a tactic seems to hold promise, it is unlikely to end the impasse. The growth of such constituencies is unlikely to undermine the exalted position that the Pakistani military establishment has appropriated for itself in the country's political order.

If neither of these two pathways is likely to promote reconciliation and peace, what other avenues remain open? Two possible routes could be suggested. The first may already be under way. Despite a number of socio-economic problems that the two countries share, their trajectories are increasingly diverging. India has, in spite of being sandbagged with ethnic and religious cleavages, pockets of endemic poverty and the uneven quality of its institutions, succeeded in forging ahead to become a power of some significance in South Asia and beyond. It is, in fact, steadily expanding the gap between itself and Pakistan along a range of material indicators. If its growth does not falter and if it can make some headway with various other prevalent shortcomings, it will simply widen the existing chasm. Consequently, over time, regardless of Pakistan's efforts to needle it, the results will be insignificant. Pakistan may remain at odds but the rivalry, for all practical purposes, may well be at an end.

The other possible route, while unlikely from today's vantage point, would require the discrediting of the Pakistani military establishment. As discussed earlier, this did happen once. Unfortunately, the political leadership failed to seize that moment and proceed towards democratic consolidation. Since Pakistan has again made a rocky transition to democracy and has taken some fitful steps towards bolstering it, another endogenous or exogenous shock, though not necessarily of the magnitude of 1971, may still engender a transformation of its ossified political dispensation which privileges the military. Such an outcome could then lead to a gradual easing of the unrelenting hostility towards India that it has spawned and fostered.

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