



Photo shows a portion of the border fence separating India and Pakistan near Ahknoor, India. The Indian government built the fence in the hopes that it would stop infiltrators. (Ami Vitale / Getty Images)

# The Pakistan Factor in India's Rise: Not a Constraint, Still a Challenge

*Michael Kugelman*

Since independence in 1947, Pakistan has fought three major wars and one limited conflict with India, its eastern neighbor. It rejects India's rule over Jammu and Kashmir. It has harbored terrorists who staged attacks in India, and it has produced tactical nuclear weapons meant to target India. For decades, Pakistan has used prominent global platforms like the U.N. to center attention on India's policies, especially in Kashmir, in order to shame New Delhi.

For all these reasons, Pakistan has long posed a challenge to New Delhi. However, Pakistan is unlikely to constrain India's efforts to become a global power because of its own limited clout; its global image problem; its serious internal challenges, which give it strong incentives to minimize tensions with India; and India's capacity to neutralize Pakistan in South

Asia, where Islamabad has some influence. All this said, India is still vulnerable to asymmetric threats and destabilization risks emanating from Pakistan. Additionally, with India-Pakistan reconciliation not in the cards any time soon, there is always the risk of a fresh bilateral crisis that distracts India from its efforts to deepen its role on the global stage.

## **A Manageable Challenge**

There are several reasons why Pakistan is unlikely to constrain India's global rise.

## **Power Asymmetry**

India is a more powerful country, based on multiple metrics: It is larger, more populous, and has a bigger army. Its conventional military force capacities are,



on many levels, superior to those of Pakistan. This power asymmetry extends abroad as well. Pakistan lacks the global clout to counter India in the world. Because it is not a military, diplomatic, or economic power, it struggles to gain entry to the most prestigious and influential groupings, like the G20. Pakistan is certainly active in multilateral organizations regionally and around the world, from various U.N. bodies to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, and Organization of the Islamic Cooperation. But Islamabad doesn't enjoy enough clout within these groups to leverage them to undermine or isolate India. Pakistan does use the annual U.N. General Assembly meetings to condemn Indian policies. But strong criticism is no curb on India's activities or aspirations.

### Image Problems

Another challenge Pakistan faces abroad is its image. Because of its legacy of military rule, accusations that it shared nuclear secrets with other countries, and state sponsorship of some terror groups, among other factors, it has struggled – especially in the West – to be seen as a credible, trusted actor. This means that Islamabad's messaging at the U.N. and other global platforms to highlight India's policies in Kashmir and its repressive actions more broadly will invariably fail to resonate with a critical mass of foreign governments. Indeed, such messaging often falls on deaf ears. Pakistan isn't helped by the fact that most countries – including those in the Muslim world – view India as an important trade partner and prefer to overlook the concerning Indian domestic policies flagged by Islamabad.

### Relatively Calm Relations

Another reason Pakistan doesn't constrain India's rise is that the bilateral relationship, while always volatile, has settled into a relatively calm phase that has the potential to last for an extended period. Historically, one of the major triggers for tensions is the Line of Control (LoC), the disputed border that divides India- and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. It has long been a source of violence – whether in terms of Pakistani militants using the LoC to enter India-administered Kashmir to stage attacks, or cross-border firing between the two militaries. However, Islamabad and

New Delhi signed a new border truce in February 2021 that has produced significant decreases in violence.

Both countries today arguably have a strong, long-term interest in minimizing tensions. Pakistan's house is in complete disorder, with the country simultaneously facing an acute economic crisis, political paralysis, and a resurgence of Islamist terrorism. It can't afford – literally – any trouble with India. A telling data point came last year, when an Indian supersonic missile was accidentally launched and flew 75 miles across Pakistan before crashing to the ground. At another moment, this could have escalated into a major crisis. But Pakistan's response was remarkably restrained, with a sharply worded statement condemning the missile launch but not much else. Pakistan's "polycrisis" – especially its economic malaise – is as serious as it is complex, with no easy solutions, suggesting that Islamabad will want to ensure its relationship with New Delhi remains relatively trouble-free for quite some time into the future, so that it can focus on its internal issues.

India, meanwhile, confronts a growing threat from China on its northern border, and it doesn't want to be burdened by tensions on both its northern frontier with China and western frontier with Pakistan. In fact, New Delhi likely agreed to the border truce with Islamabad in great part to allow it to focus more on its northern border. To be sure, Islamabad has not forgotten about the bloody events of 1971, when Indian forces backed separatist rebels in what was then East Pakistan in a conflict that led to the new state of Bangladesh. Consequently, many Pakistanis insist that India still harbors designs on Pakistani territory, including Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Such concerns are likely misplaced. Given the extent of India's China challenge, the idea of India making a play for Pakistan-administered Kashmir – a move that could trigger a new war – is fanciful.

So long as India-Pakistan relations are relatively stable, as they are now, India's relations with Washington won't be impacted. The U.S. government strongly supports a workable India-Pakistan relationship, given that Washington's core interest in South Asia is stability. If India-Pakistan relations worsen, and especially if there is a serious crisis, U.S.-India relations could experience a distraction in that Washington





Indian Border Security Force personnel and Pakistani Rangers (in black) lower their respective flags during the daily beating of the retreat ceremony at the India-Pakistan Wagah Border Post, about 35 kilometers (22 miles) from Amritsar in November 2021. (NARINDER NANU / AFP via Getty Images)

would – as has been the practice in the past – seek to mediate to ease the crisis. The only scenario under which an India-Pakistan crisis could hurt the U.S.-India relationship is if India provokes a crisis or conflict – for example, by launching a preemptive military strike in Pakistan meant to deter a potential terrorist attack, or by unilaterally revoking the Indus Waters Treaty, an accord that apportions control of shared river water resources between upper riparian India and lower riparian Pakistan. Still, because Washington invests more strategic significance in its relationship with New Delhi than it does with Islamabad (it views India as its biggest strategic bet in South Asia to help counter China, a close ally of Pakistan), and because the U.S.-India relationship is simply more healthy, stable, and trust-based than the U.S.-Pakistan one, it's hard to imagine any type of India-Pakistan crisis, no matter the perpetrator, resulting in enduring harm for U.S.-India ties.

### **Viable Workarounds**

A final reason why Pakistan is a manageable challenge for India is that New Delhi has viable workarounds that it can deploy in the one place abroad where Islamabad does have some reach and influence – and that is

South Asia itself. Pakistan doesn't have a legacy of warm relations with many governments in the region, but it is a member of the only South Asia-wide regional organization, The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and it has been able to project influence in Afghanistan through its longstanding ties to the Taliban.

However, SAARC has been ineffective, largely because it operates on unanimity and India and Pakistan rarely agree. In recent years, India has further weakened SAARC – and by extension Pakistan's agency as a regional actor – by leading efforts to scale up cooperation, mainly through electricity-sharing arrangements, with BIMSTEC. This is another South Asia regional organization, but Pakistan is one of two SAARC countries (Afghanistan is the other) that isn't a member. In effect, India has used sub-regionalization tactics to undercut Pakistan regionally.

Furthermore, Pakistan has seen its fortunes sink in Afghanistan. The Taliban takeover, instead of strengthening ties between Islamabad and Kabul, has instead produced serious tensions between the Taliban and their former Pakistani patron, mainly over terrorism and border issues. These tensions have



created an opening for New Delhi, which decided to partially reopen its embassy in Kabul in 2022. New Delhi hasn't recognized the Taliban regime, and its diplomatic engagements have been very limited. But at the least, Pakistan's strategic advantage in Afghanistan (relative to India) has been neutralized by its tensions with the Taliban and India's surprisingly nonhostile relationship with Taliban-led Afghanistan. The Taliban have called for good relations with India, and even vowed to deny space to terror groups that threaten it (such promises, however, should be regarded with skepticism, given the Taliban's long track record of not turning on its militant allies, which include the India-focused, Pakistan-sponsored Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed – both of which have enjoyed a presence in Afghanistan).

Pakistan's troubles in Afghanistan offer another possible geopolitical advantage for India: Tensions between Islamabad and the Taliban may complicate efforts pursued by Islamabad in recent years to generate new connectivity projects that link Pakistan and Afghanistan to Central Asia – a region that both India and Pakistan view as strategically significant, mainly because of its energy riches. One of the first initiatives in this regard is an accord envisioning a new transnational railroad that links Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan. New Delhi, meanwhile, is disadvantaged by a lack of direct land access to Central Asia, because Pakistan doesn't give India transit rights. Given this constraint, any setback for Pakistan would be a big boost for India, which has sought to strengthen ties with the Central Asian states in recent years. Its presidency of the SCO in 2023 gives it additional opportunities to enhance engagement with the region.

### **The China Contrast**

It's instructive to contrast Pakistan with China, India's other rival, which poses much more of a challenge to India's global aspirations than does Pakistan. China is larger than India and has a bigger military. It routinely provokes India on their disputed border, and New Delhi has struggled to deter Chinese incursions. It has a deepening commercial footprint in South Asia, and a growing naval presence in the western reaches of the Indian Ocean region. For these reasons, as well as a border clash in 2020 that killed 20 Indian troops, the

India-China relationship is tenuous now than it has been at any other time since the two fought a war in 1962.

Additionally, China – a military and economic power – has the clout to counter India abroad. Beijing can wield its veto power to keep India out of prestigious global forums that New Delhi hopes to join – such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group and (if U.N. reforms were to allow for member expansion) permanent membership in the U.N. Security Council. Additionally, China has geopolitical leverage that can potentially be used in ways that imperil Indian interests. For example, the war in Ukraine is increasing cash-strapped Russia's economic reliance on Beijing. That growing reliance means more Chinese leverage. Beijing could well press Moscow – a longtime Indian friend – to reduce arms supplies to India, or to increase engagement with Pakistan.

In effect, China is powerful militarily, economically, and geopolitically. It has the capacity to check Indian power regionally and more globally, and its own relationship with New Delhi has hit rock bottom (this hasn't prevented robust bilateral trade, though India has a large trade deficit with China). Pakistan, by contrast, doesn't have this global clout. Additionally, its own policy focus for the foreseeable future is internal, meaning it has a strong interest in not picking any fights with India.

### **No Time for Complacency**

This isn't to say that India's rise won't be impacted by Pakistan further down the road. Pakistan is not as powerful as India, but its alliance with China ensures a steady supply of military support from Beijing. So long as the U.S. and India continue to strengthen their relationship – bilaterally as well as through multilateral arrangements like the Indo-Pacific Quad – China and Pakistan will have strong incentives to elevate their own partnership. This means that India's policy of deepening partnership with Washington and its Pacific allies will make Pakistan stronger, because it will receive greater support from Beijing. Furthermore, Beijing can be counted on to amplify Pakistan's messaging against India with its own strong statements in global forums, including rhetoric that assails India's Kashmir policy.





## Asymmetric Threats

Also, Pakistan has compensated for India's superior conventional military power by developing two asymmetric force capacities that pose threats to India. One is the harboring of anti-India militant groups. Pakistan has cracked down on these militants in recent years because of pressure from the Financial Action Task Force, a terrorism financing global watchdog that had put Pakistan on a watch list. But these networks have not been altogether dismantled. The second asymmetric force capacity is nuclear weapons (both countries officially became nuclear weapons states in 1998). Pakistan has never renounced a no-first-use policy, meaning that any exchange of hostilities, no matter how modest, runs the risk of a Pakistan-prompted nuclear escalation. The two sides have demonstrated a strong comfort level with using conventional force under the nuclear umbrella; in 2019, India responded to a terrorist attack by Pakistan-sponsored terrorists with a retaliatory air strike in Pakistan, which Islamabad followed with its own retaliatory air strike. The more conventional force used, the greater the chance of escalation to nuclear levels.

## Destabilization Risks

To be sure, with Pakistan focused on its internal tumult, no conflict scenario is likely to emerge anytime soon. But Pakistan's internal crises could cause other types of concerns for India. Over time, the factors that make Pakistan's domestic turmoil especially concerning – default risks, a lack of cohesion within the military, low morale within the police, no coherent plan to tackle a terrorism resurgence – could trigger unrest and destabilization in the country. In reality, Pakistan's military would likely step in to avert a worst-case, civil-war-like scenario. But if not, New Delhi would face the risk of its own worst-case scenario: destabilization in Pakistan spilling into India. During a visit to New Delhi more than a decade ago, an Indian security analyst told the author: "If Pakistan goes down, we don't want it to take us down with it." Even though New Delhi is now focused laser-like on China – India's biggest security concern – that sentiment hasn't lost its relevance in India today.

India will hope that there will be enough stability not only in Pakistan, but also in New Delhi's relationship



Security officials offer funeral prayers next to the coffins of policemen who were killed in multiple explosions caused by fire in a munitions cache at a specialist counterterrorism police station in Kabal town of Swat Valley, in Pakistan's northwestern region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, on April 25, 2023. (Abdul Majeed / AFP via Getty Images)

with Islamabad, to ensure that Pakistan doesn't become a dangerous distraction to India's efforts to step up its global role.

## Pathways to Reconciliation

Reconciliation, much less peace, remains elusive. Pakistan's internal mess means Islamabad has no policy bandwidth to allocate to such an ambitious goal – and India will have no interest in pursuing peace with a country in acute crisis mode. At any rate, any government in Pakistan would know that undertaking a formal dialogue with Narendra Modi, a hard-line Hindu nationalist leader, would be close to political suicide. This is because of the repugnance with which most Pakistanis view Modi, due to his policies in Kashmir – especially his decision to revoke India-administered Kashmir's special autonomous status – and his views and policies toward Indian Muslims. Modi and his





Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will likely be reelected for a third term in 2024 and stay in power for another five years. Because of the weakness of the Indian opposition, the BJP could well stay in power beyond then, even if Modi doesn't stay on as premier.

As for Modi and the BJP, they've talked tough on Pakistan since January 2016, when terrorists attacked an Indian air force base soon after Modi made a surprise visit to Pakistan (New Delhi accused Pakistan-sponsored terrorists of being behind the attack). Extending an olive branch to Islamabad wouldn't appear to be a politically prudent move for a ruling party that has consistently sought to isolate and ignore Pakistan – and that won reelection in 2019 and has triumphed in key state elections since then.

Any pathway to reconciliation would require confidence-building measures (CBMs) and other trust-generating acts. Tellingly, over the last few years, aside from the 2021 LoC truce, there have been precious few – and at a moment when they would have been especially helpful. India and Pakistan didn't establish any mechanism to cooperate during the COVID-19 pandemic. After Pakistan's catastrophic floods in 2022, there were no efforts to restore some border trade with India in order to allow Pakistan to import

badly needed cheap food products. India and Pakistan haven't established any new initiatives to combat air pollution, or other shared and worsening climate threats. Instead, earlier in 2023, fresh tensions broke out around the mediation mechanism for the Indus Waters Treaty – one of the few enduring triumphs of India-Pakistan cooperation.

One ray of hope did emerge in the spring of 2023, when Pakistan's foreign minister, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, accepted an invitation from New Delhi to attend a foreign ministers meeting of the SCO in Goa in May (India chairs the SCO in 2023). This development helped move the needle forward a bit, but it will amount to little without any follow-on CBMs – and the political environment in both countries militates against the possibility of bigger steps toward reconciliation.

At any rate, for India, CBMs are less of a priority than is the broader goal of minimizing tensions with Pakistan. New Delhi will face no shortage of obstacles in its efforts to become a bigger global player – from the rise of China to India's enduring struggles at home with defense manufacturing, poverty, and corruption. India would prefer that Pakistan not be added to this long list.



**Michael Kugelman** is the South Asia Institute director at the Woodrow Wilson Center, where he is responsible for research, programming, and publications on the region. His main specialty is Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan, and U.S. relations with each of them. Kugelman writes monthly columns for Foreign Policy's South Asia channel and monthly

commentaries for War on the Rocks. He also contributes regular pieces to The Wall Street Journal's Think Tank blog. He has published op-eds and commentaries in The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Politico, CNN.com, Bloomberg View, The Diplomat, Al Jazeera, and The National Interest, among others. He has been interviewed by numerous major media outlets, including The New York Times,

The Washington Post, Financial Times, The Guardian, The Christian Science Monitor, National Geographic, BBC, CNN, NPR, and Voice of America. He has also produced a number of longer publications on South Asia, including the edited volumes "Pakistan's Interminable Energy Crisis: Is There Any Way Out?" (Wilson Center, 2015), "Pakistan's Runaway Urbanization: What Can Be Done?" (Wilson Center, 2014), and "India's Contemporary Security Challenges" (Wilson Center, 2013). He has published policy briefs, journal articles, and book chapters on issues ranging from Pakistani youth and social media to India's energy security strategy and transboundary water management in South Asia.

Kugelman received his M.A. in law and diplomacy from the Fletcher School at Tufts University. He received his B.A. from American University's School of International Service. Follow him on the X platform [@michaelkugelman](https://twitter.com/michaelkugelman).