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## India and its Western Muslim Neighbourhood

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#### Abstract:

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been in power in India for more than sixteen and a half years. Modi is serving a third term, which means he will have been in power for fifteen consecutive years. The BJP is known for representing the Hindu nationalist ideology, called *Hindutva*, which promotes Hindu hegemony and is particularly opposed to Islam, practised by approximately 14% of the Indian population, or more than 172 million citizens. This ideology has a more direct impact on India's relationship with Pakistan than with Afghanistan, Iran and the Arab Gulf countries. In Indian foreign relations, the economy is the most important factor, as evidenced by its interactions with West Asia, where the ideological weight of *Hindutva* is secondary.

#### Keywords:

India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Persian Gulf.

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## **Introduction: foundations of Indian foreign policy**

India has traditionally been perceived as a global leader, a vision that has not always been recognised by other countries. At a time of transition in the international order, in which power is shifting towards Asia and India's position becoming more prominent, opportunities to achieve a higher status are closer than ever. To this end, India has not only managed to climb to fifth place in the global economy, but its potential as Asia's third major power is transcending the boundaries of the southern continent, where it has traditionally dominated and from where it projects its power beyond the patterns of friendship/enmity it has managed in the past.

Similarly, the international scenario favours this shift towards a higher status, as China's assertiveness in other Asian regions is increasing interest in what India can contribute as a counterweight. Thus, gradually, as the New Delhi government acquires the material capabilities to become the global player it has so long desired, recognition as such is reflected in its greater international interaction. Consequently, India is present in the strategic calculations of the United States and other global powers, such as the European Union, Japan, China and Russia (Kapur, 2023: 19).

India's foreign policy has reflected, as in the case of other countries, a process of adaptation to internal changes in the country, South Asia and the world. The priority is to base relations with other countries on development. Thus, the economy is the central factor in the formulation of foreign relations.

The evolution of foreign policy doctrines has shown two uneven phases, strongly marked by the period of decolonisation and the fall of the Soviet Union. In the initial phase, foreign policy was guided by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, leader of the Indian National Congress (INC) and the longest-serving in office (1947-1964). Nehru championed non-alignment as a way to navigate a bipolar world, with a strategy of avoiding serving either of the two global leaders. The trauma of decolonisation, the needs of state-building, laying the foundations of postcolonial India, divided in two after the partition of Pakistan, and escaping underdevelopment, guided the country in its early years.

However, Nehru abandoned his dream of a pan-Asian bloc and solidarity among post-colonial countries when he lost the 1962 war against China. In the 1970s, with the alignment of the United States and China, the Indian government moved closer to the

Soviets, while maintaining its non-aligned position with the bloc. However, the rapprochement between Pakistan, the United States and China led India to align itself more closely with the Soviet Union, a position that materialised with the signing of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in August 1971. In this way, foreign policy began to take on a more realistic and less idealistic tone. The intervention in the war of liberation of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) by West Pakistan in December 1971, for which it had Soviet backing, demonstrated India's ability to intervene in the neighbourhood if its security was seriously affected.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, India entered a new phase that ended its isolation. Foreign policy was placed at the service of economic development, and the country began to integrate into the market economy. The process has been gradual, led by several leaders, starting with Narasimha Rao (1991-1996), followed by the first leader of the Indian Nationalist Party (Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP) to win the general election, Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1996 and 1998-2004), Manmohan Singh (INC, 2004-2014) and Narendra Modi since 2014. These leaders continued the work of integrating India into the world and moving it away from the economic isolationism (Menon, 2021: 301) that was more common in its early years.

Indian foreign policy maintains the desire to preserve autonomy in decision-making and exists in accordance with its economic development interests. With the BJP in government, *Hindutva* is no longer solely an internal ideology, although the ideas it can export are more characteristic of soft power and a friendly image than of the more explicit chauvinism displayed at the domestic level.

*Hindutva*, a priori, could be considered an obstacle for India's relations with Muslim-majority countries, but this does not seem to be the case. Relations with these countries are based solely on common commercial interests. India follows the same pattern in its relations with various countries, regardless of the nature of their governments. Thus, rather than forming alliances with ideologically like-minded countries, India prefers to establish bilateral, multilateral and plurilateral associations or partnerships around a specific interest or issue. What Samir Saran calls 'clubs of coincidence' (Saran, 2015: 624), groupings in which there is room for manoeuvre and flexibility in decision-making.

Indian foreign policy is not lacking in ideas or values, although these do not systematically guide its actions. Preferences tend to be established with countries that have had a similar historical experience, such as those that were part of the Non-Aligned Movement and the G-77 (Menon, 2021: 301), thereby maintaining the interest and need to promote a multilateral order. The governments in New Delhi have shown a preference for a system with multiple actors, in an egalitarian order, without hierarchies or hegemonies, based on rules (inspired by international law), democratic and pluralistic, and with a multidirectional policy.

India's relationship with Pakistan and Afghanistan falls within the *Neighbourhood First Policy*, while Iran and the Persian Gulf countries are considered the *extended neighbourhood*. With Pakistan, however, there is hardly any bilateral relationship left. The trauma of partition, the wars fought between the two countries and the use of jihadism to attack India by groups supported by Pakistan, as part of its strategy to reclaim the territory of Kashmir, have exhausted the possibility of dialogue. Pakistan's behaviour has, in fact, contributed to the poor image of Muslims in India, who, without having participated in its actions, are condemned because of the religion they profess.

### ***India and Islam: centuries of heavily politicised history***

The debate on the relationship between India and Islam is highly complex. Centuries of history between the first arrival of Arab traders in the 8th century on the western coast of Malabar, and invasions from the west and Central Asia, introduced the religion through trade and conquest, respectively.

The myths about Islam and its role in Indian history are numerous. The most common message is that of the violence of conquest, pillage, forced conversions and the power of the sword. Much of this narrative ignores other realities, such as the introduction of the religion gradually among the native population, integrating into the social fabric over time (Ballesteros Peiró, 2013: 120). But as Amartya Sen states, this appropriation of history serves the interests of the Sangh Parivar group in describing India as inherently Hindu, ignoring history. Besides wanting to prevail politically and socially, this ideology provides popular support through various socialisation and recruitment programmes for citizens into Hindutva, an especially relevant element among the Indian diaspora (Sen, 2005: 43).

This ideology sees India not only as a Hindu-majority country, but as one of exclusive identity, and Muslims are the target of stigmatisation that marks them as outsiders. These ideas were already circulating in the 19th century, but with the BJP's rise to power, they have become normalised. Hinduism, however, does not have a unified structure or a universally accepted set of sacred books (Andersen and Damle, 2019: 77). There are multiple practices and understandings of the religion. The term became popular with the publication of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's 1923 book *Hindutva. Who is Hindu?* The idea emphasises the unity of Hindus and their cohesion, according to which, in India, as their homeland and sacred land, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs have a place alongside Hindus, given that their religions were born in the land, while Christians and Muslims do not, since their religions originated in other countries.

The legacy of the division of India at independence has weighed heavily on Muslims. On the one hand, the creation of Pakistan based on the Muslim nationalism led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah at the head of the Muslim League left a residue of suspicion regarding their loyalty. However, the fact that, for many Indian Muslims, the country's partition represented a betrayal (Ahmed, 2019: 14) is ignored. Jinnah is presented as the villain responsible for the territorial division of India and its strategic weakening. In the words of Savarkar:

"the new Islamic enemies not only aspired to crush Hindu political power... they also had a ferocious religious ambition... millions of Muslim invaders from all over Asia descended on India, century after century, with all the ferocity of their mandate to destroy Hinduism, which was the soul of the nation..." (Savarkar quoted by Sarkar, 2001: 156).

However, there is no evidence to prove that they were fanatics, and it is unknown that the dynasties became Indianised, with patronage of Hindu religious institutions and members of this religion within the Mughal courts.



Similarly, the promoted view is that Muslims are separatists irredeemably conditioned by the dictates of a static and inflexible religion. Yet this ignores the role of figures such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan or Abdul Kalam Azad, who worked for a united India and rejected its division based on religious communities. From 1947 onwards, Muslims were presumed to support Pakistan, which contrasts with the reality, namely an acceptance of India and

a series of multiple identities that do not necessarily have Islam as their sole source. Furthermore, believing that Muslims in India identify more with their neighbours or with Middle Eastern countries ignores the multiplicity of identity factors, such as social class, caste (which determines occupation and social stratification), region of residence, language, gender, and political ideology.

The events of the 20th century, the rise of Islamism and the impact of the 9/11 attacks added further tension to coexistence. With each terrorist attack carried out by groups backed by Pakistan, such as Lashkar-e Taiba (LeT) or Jaish-e Mohammad (JeM), the blame fell on Indian Muslims, who were made to feel complicit or unwitting accomplices in their neighbour's designs. Attacks such as those on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 or in Mumbai (2008), increasingly polarised the population against Muslims, facilitating the popularity of the *Hindutva* discourse.

### **Pakistan: the world through the prism of identity and the barred entry to Afghanistan**

The creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1947 divided Indian territory, as shown in Map 1, and the territorial claim over Kashmir marked the bilateral relationship from a position of confrontation. Unlike India, Pakistan fell under the Western sphere during the Cold War. Its goal was to find a patron strong enough to help it counterbalance India's conventional power.

At a regional level, Pakistan's opposition to India's hegemony in South Asia has ideological roots that have made the zero-sum game an impediment to cooperation, not only between neighbours but also in other Asian regions, such as West Asia and the Middle East. In the case of the Gulf countries, Pakistan has traditionally sought to isolate India on the basis of belonging to the Islamic religion. Likewise, its proximity to other US allies has kept Pakistan connected to generous patrons who have financed an unstable economy, heavily burdened by mismanagement and the centrality of the ideological (anti-Indian) element in Pakistani foreign policy.

### ***Traditional rivalry: a three-way strategy***

Pakistan and India have fought at least four wars (1947-48, 1965, 1971 and 1999), all instigated by the military *establishment* in Rawalpindi and ending in defeat. According to Zions' definition, an irrational revisionist state is one that is incapable of revising its policy against the *status quo*, despite having suffered a significant defeat (Zions, 2006). In seeking ways to counter India's military power over it, this *establishment* first sought, as mentioned above, the backing of a strong ally and then the creation of unconventional forces to wage a hybrid opposition against India. The first attempt took place shortly after independence, when Pakistan infiltrated thousands of insurgents across the border to take Kashmir by force in October 1947, calling the operation a *jihad* under the command of an officer, Akbar Khan, who took the nom de guerre Tariq (after Tariq bin Ziyad), leading the 'liberation forces' (Haqqani, 2005: 29).

The obsession of this *establishment* with India and its monopoly over defence and foreign policy has prevented the maintenance of a functional bilateral relationship, although there have been episodes of concord. Much of Pakistan's strategic culture is based on the perception of threat. Throughout history, the Pakistani Army has deployed five main India-centric narratives that prevail in strategic culture:

1. The assumption that India does not accept the two-nation theory
2. The certainty that Pakistan is the only country capable of curbing India's hegemonic ambitions
3. The belief that India started all the wars with Pakistan
4. The conviction that India is not the superpower it believes itself to be, minimising its power because 'it is Hindu'
5. The principle that India is the root cause of Pakistan's security problems (Fair, 2014: 136-137)

Part of the principles that formed Pakistan contained in the two-nation theory (Hindus one, Muslims another) is known as the 'ideology of Pakistan'. This ideology is monopolised by the Army, which has taken upon itself the defence of the country's physical and ideological borders. The first military leader to add ideological borders as a

factor to be defended was General Yahya Khan (1969-1971), under whose rule the eastern half of the country was lost, becoming Bangladesh.

Thus, under this idea, Islam was considered the backbone of the country. The military's instrumental use of religion has at least three objectives: 1) as a way to unify the country by providing an ideology that transcends ethnic or provincial affiliations; 2) to mobilise and prepare the population for war and justify its high budget; and 3) to motivate soldiers by spreading the idea that Islam gives them supernatural advantages (Fair, 2014: 86).

While Pakistan has traditionally linked bilateral relations to the resolution of the Kashmir conflict, seeking to internationalise it and calling for a referendum under UN Resolution 47, India's traditional position has been to consider the conflict negotiable bilaterally and, more recently, as an exclusively internal matter. This shift became definitive following the revocation in August 2019 of the special status enjoyed by the part of the territory administered by India, which was enshrined in Article 370 of the Constitution.

Given the poor relationship with Afghanistan and India, Pakistan needed to pacify one of its borders in order to focus on securing the Kashmiri territory. The idea of strategic depth consisted in cultivating a friendly government in Kabul that would neutralise the independence demands of national minorities such as the Pashtuns and Baloch, and keep India away from its rear, since successive Afghan governments have rejected the border known as the Durand Line and claim the areas populated mainly by Pashtuns in Pakistani territory.

For Pakistan, the objective remained Kashmir, focusing its strategy on cultivating irregular forces and promoting Islamism. In the 1950s and 1960s, in order to neutralise Kabul's claim over Pashtunistan, the government of Ayub Khan and the Pakistani intelligence agencies hosted in their territory the Islamist leaders and groups persecuted by the Afghan government. These groups found refuge in Pakistan and established alliances with like-minded parties (Yama'at e Islami and Yamiat e Ulema e Islam), with the objective of one day taking power in Kabul. For its part, India saw these alliances as interference in Afghan sovereignty.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (1971–1977) fostered alliances with Islamists through the intelligence services to gain greater influence in Afghanistan in 1973, through the Pakistan Foreign Affairs Office, which created an Afghan cell to organise various Islamist groups under the

leadership of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Burhanuddin Rabbani (Haqqani, 2005: 104). Bhutto used the idea of the domino effect on Asia, exaggerating the perception of the danger posed to Pakistan by the USSR before it invaded Afghanistan, thereby securing US military aid. Thus, in 1973, training camps were established in the two tribal agencies of Waziristan, where paramilitary units of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas Frontier Corps, commanded by Pakistani army officers, trained Afghans who had escaped Daoud Khan's anti-Islamist repression following his coup d'état in 1973 (Fair, 2014: 121). From 1975 onwards, Pakistan supported a series of insurrections in Kabul, which led to further repression and a greater exodus of Afghan Islamism. It is estimated that between 1973 and 1977, around 5,000 militants were trained on Pakistani territory (*ibid.*: 122).

With the Soviet invasion and the arrival of economic, military and arms aid from the United States and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan channelled part of that aid to irregular forces fighting India in Kashmir, which formed links with the Afghan jihad. Groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e Mohammad (JeM) are the legacy of this policy. However, faced with the impossibility of the mujahideen groups sharing power in Kabul after the Soviet withdrawal and the ensuing civil war, Pakistan saw the Taliban as a new asset to keep India out of its backyard.

The rise of Al-Qaeda after the 9/11 attacks inspired LeT and JeM to expand their attacks to the rest of Indian territory, further deteriorating relations to the point of severing them. The impact of the attacks generated growing rejection among the Indian population towards rapprochement with Pakistan. However, after winning his first term in 2014, Modi considered the possibility of reaching out to the government of Nawaz Sharif, in whom he found an ally for peace. His surprise visit to Lahore in December 2015 was key, given that he was arriving from Afghanistan, a country with which India was strengthening ties. The good rapport between Sharif and Modi ended a few days later when a Kashmiri terrorist group (suspected of being backed by Jaish-e-Mohammed) killed eight Indian soldiers at the Pathankot air base. Since then, Modi has not reached out again.

### ***Taliban 2.0? India's position***

There is a tendency to underestimate the importance of Afghanistan and view it solely through the prism of conflict. Although it has no access to the sea, it is a pivotal state

between three Asian subregions: Central, South and West Asia. Its strategic importance is therefore key to the Asian continent (Kugelman, 2022: 232) and connectivity between these subregions.

The enmity between India and Pakistan has been evident in their relations with Afghanistan. While India supported the Soviets during the invasion, Pakistan and the United States worked to support the mujahideen. India was close to the government of Mohammed Najibullah after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. However, given Pakistan's considerable influence, the government of Narasimha Rao decided to approach various factions, regardless of their ideology or proximity to Pakistan (Choudhury, 2019). Similarly, India is reaching out to the Taliban. For the latter, India is an option to balance Pakistan's overdependence.

The past, in this sense, does not define present relations. Between 1996 and 2000, India backed the anti-Taliban forces of the Northern Alliance or United Front, especially the forces of Ahmad Shah Massoud, without granting recognition to the movement, as Pakistan did. After the dissolution of the Taliban Islamic Emirate and the rise of the Afghan Republic in 2001, rivalry with Pakistan brought New Delhi closer, which invested in development aid and infrastructure, especially in the majority Pashtun areas of the country, as a way of winning over the population and its leaders and to keep Pakistan on edge regarding its role on Afghan territory (ibid.). Likewise, thanks to the Indian government, Afghanistan entered the South Asian regional association in 2007 (Kugelman, 2022: 234).

India and Afghanistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement and a Preferential Trade Agreement in 2011, making India the largest investor in the region and the fifth largest globally (Brookings, 2017). India was responsible for the construction of the Zaranj-Dilaram motorway, the Salma dam and the Parliament building, as well as generous investment in education (construction of schools and donation of scholarships). India also became an admired and respected country in Afghanistan during those twenty years, in stark contrast to Pakistan, which was rejected for its interference and support for the Taliban (D'Souza, 2011). The Indian government also provided military training to the Afghan Armed Forces and Police, as well as weapons, albeit in limited quantities. If New Delhi and Kabul have not strengthened their bilateral relationship, it has been due to the

lack of a direct line of communication, as the Pakistani government has consistently refused to grant transit rights.

In light of the hostility of the Afghan Republic's governments towards Islamabad, Pakistan continued to cultivate the return of the Taliban to power and, from 2014, began constructing fencing along the border with Afghanistan. Yet, while Pakistan supported the Afghan Taliban, it persecuted its own. The Pakistani Taliban Movement (Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan, TTP) emerged around 2007, as a result of discontent with the military government of Pervez Musharraf, both for its alliance with the United States and for the attack on the Red Mosque in Islamabad, whose leaders had challenged the government to impose sharia as state law. The bombing of the mosque and the subsequent death of hundreds of insurgents and students generated a wave of rejection that materialised in the founding of the TTP.

Precisely, the TTP has poisoned Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan after the Taliban retook Kabul in August 2021, once international troops had withdrawn and following the Doha Agreements. The attacks are constant, and the de facto Afghan government does not seem interested in ending their activities on Afghan soil. Violence in Pakistan increased by 56% in 2023 (Ballesteros Peiró, 2025), and its government, increasingly frustrated with Kabul, is proceeding to expel Afghan refugees from its territory, including those with regularised status and decades of residence.

India is approaching Kabul cautiously, even if it generates rejection, given the ideological nature of the Taliban regime. Even so, in January 2025, the Indian Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri, and the acting Afghan Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, met in Dubai, taking advantage of both countries' good relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to address various issues. It is a wake-up call regarding the various changing dynamics in the region (ibid.). Especially important for India is Afghanistan as an access route to Central Asia and the usefulness of Delhi's relationship with West Asia, in particular the importance of connectivity with Iran and the geoeconomics of the Arab Gulf countries.

### **The importance of the Persian Gulf**

As already mentioned, Delhi's policy changed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with which India was not formally aligned, but with which it had the aforementioned 1971

treaty (also in response to the alignment of the United States and China, India's main rival and against which it lost a war in 1962).<sup>1</sup> From the 1990s onwards, India focused on its economic development, for which access to the energy markets of the Gulf, a nearby region with easy access by sea, was a priority.

As India has become more confident in its international interactions, its ability to engage with countries with which it previously had little contact has increased. In the case of the Persian Gulf countries, Pakistan's traditional proximity kept India relatively distant in the past. However, governments in New Delhi have moved from viewing these countries as a group of semi-feudal petro-states, promoters of instability and various forms of Islamism (Mohan, 2020), to potential allies.

Likewise, economic needs must be added to regional pressures. The conflict between India and China along the border accentuates competition in the Indian Ocean (Baruah, 2023: 89). Similarly, given the need to avoid the negative effects of the Great Global Competition between the United States and China, India seeks a third way, although an alternative system to growing bipolarity has not yet been defined (Menon, 2023).

It is precisely in this scenario that India is developing its 'look west' policy, under which the Gulf countries are defined as part of its extended neighbourhood. This vision was initiated during Singh's term in office and accelerated by Vajpayee in response to the need to secure access to other markets and energy sources (Tandon, 2016: 353; Menon, 2021: 227). China's recent access to this maritime space, where India once prevailed due to its privileged position, has increased competition between the two countries for access to Gulf resources and to ensure the protection of sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

The formulation of this 'look west' policy aligns economic necessity and commercial expansion under concepts of national role that Holsti defines as leader of a subsystem (South Asia), independent, active and supporter-liberator (Ashwarya, 2023: 584). Furthermore, India sees itself as a peaceful mediator, avoiding the formation of alliances and commitments to major powers (Holsti, 1970: 280). Added to this role, inspired by the Nehruvian legacy, is the reformulation that has been transforming Indian geopolitical visions since the 1990s. As a rearticulation of its geographical representations, India has gone from being a non-aligned country to one that, as mentioned above, displays

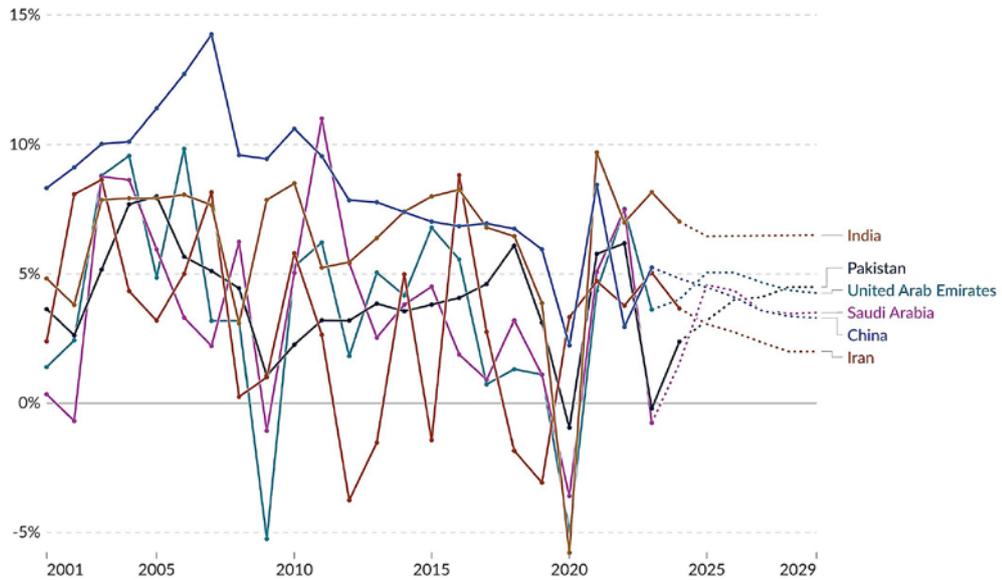
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<sup>1</sup> See also Arrieta Ruiz's chapter in this monograph for more details on India's role in the Gulf.

characteristics of leadership, although it retains features of the more traditional Nehruvian strategic discourse (Mohan, 2019: 306).

### Annual GDP growth, 2001 to 2029

Annual percent change in gross domestic product<sup>1</sup>. This data is adjusted for inflation.



Data source: International Monetary Fund (2024) OurWorldinData.org/economic-growth | CC BY

1. Gross domestic product: Gross domestic product (GDP) is a measure of a country's economic performance. It represents the total monetary value of all final goods and services produced within its borders over a specific time period, typically annually or quarterly. GDP includes consumption, government spending, investments, and net exports (exports minus imports). It can be measured in current prices (nominal GDP) or adjusted for inflation to reflect GDP in constant prices (real GDP). GDP is used to gauge the health of an economy, with increases indicating growth and decreases signaling contraction. Policymakers, economists, and analysts use GDP to make informed decisions, track economic trends, and make comparisons between countries.

This Indian shift is in line with other global changes. On the one hand, there has been a shift in US priorities, which in turn has generated a reaction in the Indo-Pacific region. President Barack Obama's pivot towards Asia went hand in hand with a reluctance on the part of the United States to continue acting as the guarantor of security for its Gulf partners. The fall of long-standing allies, such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, created insecurity among other leaders in the region in the wake of the Arab Spring protests (2010-2011). War fatigue in Iraq and Afghanistan led to resistance to intervention in Syria, despite President Bashar al-Assad crossing the red line that Obama had identified as triggering a<sup>2</sup> response. The perceived withdrawal from the Middle East, together with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

<sup>2</sup> In August 2012, Obama pointed to the use of chemical weapons against the Syrian population as the limit that would trigger a US military response. When Al-Assad used chemical weapons, the expected reaction did not occur.

(JCPOA) by the P5+1 with Iran, signalled the intention to close the Iranian chapter and move on to other priorities.

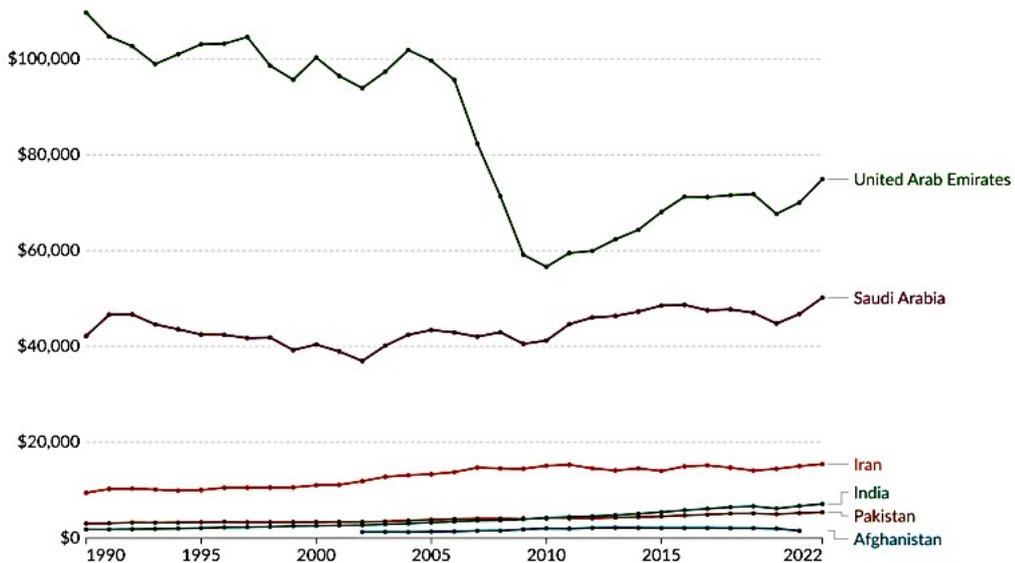
Although President Donald Trump allayed the fears of the Saudi leadership, the lack of reaction after the Houthi attacks on Aramco's oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula led the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to adopt a more proactive attitude for their own defence. Thus became evident the change in the doctrine of security and protection of energy installations that the United States had guaranteed for decades to its Arab Gulf partners (Al Saif, 2024). From the Gulf countries' need for self-sufficiency to India's doctrine of strategic autonomy, a convergence of interests was established.

### ***What the economy has united, ideology will not divide***

India is the world's fifth largest economy, set to become the third by the end of the 2030s, surpassing Japan and Germany and just behind the United States and China (García Herrero and Ketels, 2023). India has considerably improved the dynamism and openness of its economy compared to previous years. As shown in Figure 1, it is one of the few countries maintaining high economic growth which, although having declined in the past year, remained at 7% annually (according to the IMF for 2024). In contrast, Pakistan grew by 2.4%. The country showing the least growth in 2024 was Saudi Arabia (1.5%), but if we take its GDP per capita into account (Figure 2), the impact is smaller than in Pakistan (US\$50,188 in the Saudi case and US\$5,377 in the Pakistani). China's growth has slowed (4.8%), the UAE (4%) follows at a similar pace, and Iran, despite sanctions, maintains a growth rate of 3.7%.

**GDP per capita**

This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in the cost of living between countries.



Data source: World Bank (2023)

OurWorldinData.org/economic-growth | CC BY

Note: This data is expressed in international-\$<sup>1</sup> at 2017 prices.

1. International dollars: International dollars are a hypothetical currency that is used to make meaningful comparisons of monetary indicators of living standards. Figures expressed in international dollars are adjusted for inflation within countries over time, and for differences in the cost of living between countries. The goal of such adjustments is to provide a unit whose purchasing power is held fixed over time and across countries, such that one international dollar can buy the same quantity and quality of goods and services no matter where or when it is spent. Read more in our article: [What are Purchasing Power Parity adjustments and why do we need them?](#)

Relations between India, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are oriented towards what they call a pragmatic vision, free from ideologies and normative interference in their own affairs. It is in this scenario that Indian policy fits in and Pakistani policy clashes. In the Gulf countries, India finds partners with whom it can diversify its markets and provide alternatives to ensure the security of the SLOCs through which its energy and trade circulate. In the other direction, the Saudis and Emiratis are able to diversify their energy exports to the world's fifth largest economy, while also obtaining cheap labour, collaboration for the construction of connectivity infrastructure and diversification of their economies. National interest and stability are the conditions for their development, as reflected in their respective 2030 visions (2035 in the case of Kuwait), which emphasise transnational issues such as climate change, artificial intelligence and technology.

India has signed a framework agreement and a cooperation agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council and is negotiating a free trade agreement. With the UAE, India and the United Arab Emirates signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement in

2022, as well as a strategic security partnership, a trilateral dialogue involving France (UFI) and the I2U2 (India, Israel, the United States and the UAE), a precursor to what later became the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). It also maintains a memorandum of understanding on nuclear cooperation with the UAE signed in September 2024 for cooperation in civil nuclear energy.

	Exports		Imports	
	Amount in millions of dollars	Total percentage	Amount in millions of dollars	Total percentage
<b>Afghanistan</b>	355.45	0.08	642.29	0.09
<b>Pakistan</b>	1,188.85	0.27	2.88	0.00
<b>Iran</b>	1,222.20	0.28	625.14	0.09
<b>UAE</b>	35,625.02	8.15	48,025.58	7.08
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	11,558.57	2.64	31,416.37	4.6
<b>Qatar</b>	1,700	0.39	12,342.5	1.81
<b>Kuwait</b>	2,103.22	0.48	8,362.82	1.23
<b>Oman</b>	4,426.47	1.01	4,502.89	0.12
<b>Bahrain</b>	9,094	0.20	829.4	0.12

Table 1. India's trade (2023-2024). *Source:* Indian Ministry of Commerce

The dissonance with Pakistan is evident. While it remains anchored in revisionism and its competition with India, ideology and transactionalism have ended up affecting its relations with the Gulf and other allies, especially under the government of Imran Khan (2018–2022). Political instability harms Pakistan's economy, with the consequent loss of partners and increasing dependence on Chinese investment (Haqqani, 2022).

The ideological transition of these states is also reflected in the minimisation of the impact of regional conflicts, as demonstrated by the signing of the Abraham Accords. While the

rhetoric of the governments in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi emphasises the need for 'reconciliation' and de-escalation, Pakistan still does not recognise Israel, something that India did in 1950, although it did not establish full diplomatic ties until 1992. Both the Saudis and the Emiratis, despite being traditional allies, have distanced themselves from Pakistan, both because of their own interests and as a result of the exhaustion of the dynamics that the Islamabad government imposes on its international relations. India has entered this region in full force and Pakistan will find it difficult to keep it at bay.

The importance of Delhi for Gulf markets and its economic and political weight is evident. In addition to the normative aspect (respect for sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs), the relationship with the region also represents a geopolitical imperative characterised by the fact that "the absence of certain resources leads to alliances being established with countries that have them at their disposal" (Dijkink, 1998: 294). Geoeconomics, therefore, is the main motivation driving India towards these countries.

These interactions also take place through cultural and historical symbols, as demonstrated by a revealing example: the participation of Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj in the 46th summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Abu Dhabi in March 2019. The invitation came directly from Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, who, in turn, was the guest of honour at the Indian Republic Day parade in New Delhi two years earlier.

The last invitation to the annual OIC meeting extended to India was from Morocco in 1969. However, despite having the third largest Muslim population in the world, behind Indonesia and Pakistan, the delegation was unable to attend due to opposition from the Islamabad government. In fact, the neighbouring country has repeatedly refused to allow India to join this forum, despite the support of countries such as Saudi Arabia, which proposed in 2006 that India should become part of the organisation as an observer, and Bangladesh in 2018, which also called for reforms to include India as an observer (Khatu, 2019).

The Emirati invitation came in the wake of the wave of solidarity towards India following the February 2019 terrorist attack, in which a military convoy was attacked by JeM in the Kashmiri district of Pulwama, killing 46 Indian soldiers. While India gained international support, Pakistan was met with condemnation. Consequently, its foreign minister, Shah

Mahmood Qureshi, did not attend the summit in protest at India's presence. Another sign of international weariness with support for irregular strategies came when China lifted in May of that same year the veto it had maintained on four occasions against the inclusion of Masood Azhar, leader of JeM, on the Security Council's sanctions list relating to ISIL, Al-Qaeda and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities.

***Iran versus the rest of the region***

India's relationship with Iran has been marked by the Islamic past of the Safavid and Mughal empires, whose exchanges maintained the idea of closeness, not only geographically but also culturally. The language of the Mughal court was Persian, a language that disappeared from the administration of the north of the country when the British established English as the official means of communication. In the 20th century, Iran's position in the Western axis, with its alignment with Pakistan in the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), did not sit well with the non-alignment pursued by the Nehru government.

Although there was no contact after the 1979 Revolution, successive Iranian governments saw India as an alternative to mitigate the impact of US sanctions (Soltaninejad, 2023: 62). In 2001, President Mohammad Khatami and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee signed a strategic partnership agreement during their visit to Iran through the Tehran Declaration. Two years later, the New Delhi Declaration was signed during the Iranian president's visit to India. The main areas of interest were access to the Iranian energy market, the importance of developing connectivity infrastructure between the two countries, and interest in entering Central Asia, increasing the importance of Afghanistan (*ibid.*: 64).

<b>Country of residence</b>	<b>Indian citizens* (2024)</b>	<b>Percentage of total remittances received (2020)</b>
<b>Bahrain</b>	327,807	

<b>Iran</b>	10,765	
<b>Kuwait</b>	995,528	2.4
<b>Oman</b>	686,635	1.6
<b>Qatar</b>	836,784	1.5
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	2,463,509	5.1
<b>UAE</b>	3,568,848	18

Table 2. Indian population in the Persian Gulf and remittances. Sources: Ministry of External Affairs of India ([www.mea.gov.in](http://www.mea.gov.in)) and Reserve Bank of India (\*Includes non-residents and persons of Indian origin)

However, the weight of the sanctions imposed in 2005 following the discovery of Iran's nuclear programme has slowed India's rapprochement with Iran, reducing the potential for both countries. It is important to understand that the New Delhi government may or may not approve of the nature of the Tehran government, but that does not mean it will refrain from establishing relations with it. While Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in July 1968 and ratified it in February 1970 (Rassouli, 2015: 50), neither India nor Pakistan are signatories, both being *de facto* nuclear powers. For India, the NPT is seen as an instrument that divides the world between those who had nuclear weapons and those who did not, creating a nuclear elite (Sarkar and Ganguly, 2018), in reference to the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

For the United States, it has been necessary to cultivate India's loyalty and keep it away from Iran through incentives that demonstrate that its bilateral relationship could be more beneficial than that with Tehran. The 2008 nuclear agreement with the United States sought to distance India from Iran, despite not being a signatory to the NPT. After the signing of the JCPOA, however, Delhi and Tehran grew closer, with the United Kingdom doubling its purchase of hydrocarbons in the first year after the lifting of sanctions alone (Soltaninejad, 2023: 68) and investing in the Shahid Behesti terminal in the port of Chabahar as the centrepiece of the relationship. Following the port, the construction of a railway to connect with Afghanistan and Central Asia was settled during the 2016 visit, although the arrival of President Donald Trump in the White House cut short this rapprochement. Despite everything, Iran and India signed a ten-year agreement in May

2024 to continue developing the port with the Indian (Indian Ports Global Limited, IPGL) and Iranian port authorities.

Apart from sanctions, one reason why Delhi attaches less importance to Iran than to other Gulf countries is related to the Indian diaspora. The growing number of Indian citizens abroad has become a priority in its foreign policy. According to data from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs website in November 2024, the total number of Indian citizens abroad (209 countries) stands at 35,421,987. As Table 1 shows, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have a high number of Indian citizens, which is why India focuses its interest on them as a priority. In fact, the UAE is the second country in the world with the highest number of Indian citizens, after the United States, with Saudi Arabia in fourth place, behind Canada.

In terms of the economic value of the diaspora, according to World Bank data, India is the largest recipient of remittances in the world, surpassing China and Mexico, receiving a total of US\$89.127 billion between 2021 and 2022. The country from which the largest amount of income comes is the United States (23.4% of total remittances), followed by Canada, the United Kingdom and South Africa, which together account for 30% of the total. The second most important region in economic terms is the Gulf, with 28% of remittances, led by the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (RBI, 2022).

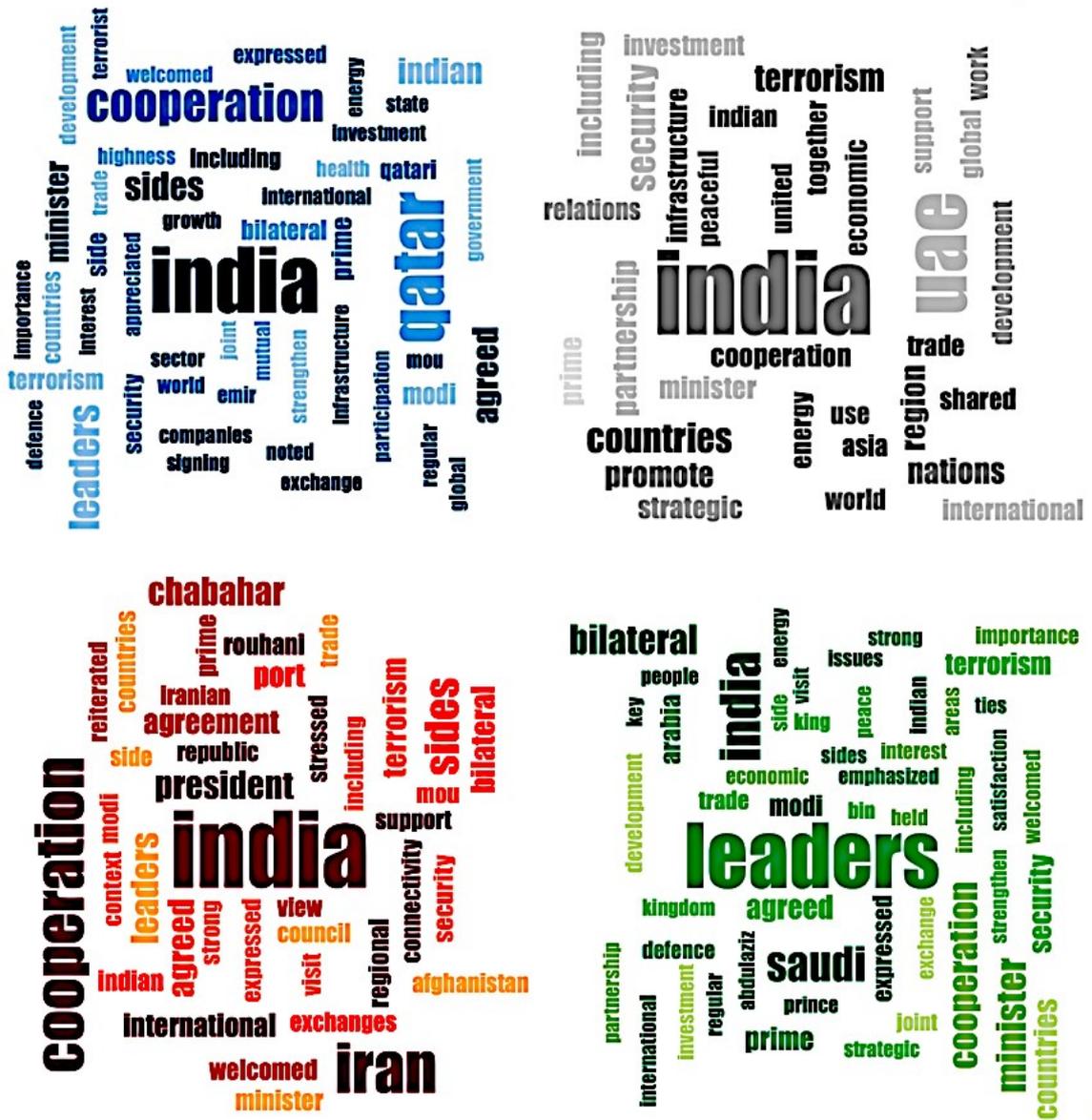
The importance of these countries is reflected in Narendra Modi's speeches during his official visits. According to Henrikson, the visits "represent the international relationship that is deemed most worthy of attention" (cited in Flint, 2006: 56). Modi travelled to ten Middle Eastern countries on fourteen occasions between 2014 and 2023 (out of a total of 133 trips abroad according to the official PMIndia website), with the Gulf region being the main destination. Of the rest, 62 were to 26 countries in Asia (Japan being the main destination, along with other countries in the immediate neighbourhood and Southeast Asia).

The contrast with Iran, compared to the GCC countries, is evident in the concepts present in the Indian Prime Minister's speeches. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, between 2014 and 2022, Modi made two visits to Saudi Arabia (2016 and 2019), one to Iran (2016), another to Qatar (2016) and four visits to the UAE (2015, 2018, 2019 and 2022). An analysis of the speeches given in these countries (see Figure 1) shows

that India is one of the most frequently mentioned words, given that the main objective of these visits is to enhance the country's reputation and transform its image in the region.

Modi addresses all countries in terms such as brothers, friends and neighbours, emphasising the maritime connections that have brought them closer together for centuries. The centrality of security is shared with the Saudis and Emiratis, especially with regard to maritime trade. Relations are defined in terms such as trade, development, markets, growth and investment, and the way to reach these agreements is through cooperation, partnerships, bilaterally, by mutual agreement, inclusively and under mutually beneficial agreements.

Modi mentions security and terrorism in the Saudi case fifteen and fourteen times respectively, while in the Emirati case, they are thirteen and eleven respectively. In the memoranda of understanding signed bilaterally with India, the fight against terrorism is one of the priorities, but in Modi's case, this is presented in benign terms, through cooperation, development and connectivity "to shape new paths of peace and prosperity" (Press Information Bureau, 2016). It does not escape the Gulf partners that when India mentions terrorism, it usually thinks of Pakistan, a reference that was endorsed by President Trump during Modi's visit to Washington in February 2025.



Footnote<sup>3</sup>.

India presents itself discursively as a major emerging power that "contributes to the progress of global peace and stability" (Press Information Bureau, 2015). Thus, in his speeches, Modi presents India through civilisational language as the *vishwaguru* or leader/teacher of the world, a country whose wisdom gives it a unique mission in the world (Hall, 2019: 83), which he in turn describes as a family or *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*.

<sup>3</sup> The analyses were carried out using the MAXQDA 2022 programme on published texts, with the most frequently mentioned words appearing in larger font. The sequence includes the five most frequently cited words for every fifty. The colours assigned are: Iran, red; UAE, grey; Qatar, blue; and Saudi Arabia, green.

Iran, Modi emphasised that "the nature of global relations requires an attitude more suited to this century and not to the mindset of the last century" (author's translation from English. Press Information Bureau, 2016), suggesting that the era of sanctions and coercion is over. In May 2024, India signed a ten-year contract to continue investing in Chabahar, despite Trump's second term heralding a new era of maximum pressure on Iran. However, India is not giving up on the importance of the north-south transport corridor through Iran and Afghanistan to Central Asia and Russia.

## Conclusions

*Hindutva* ideology has not slowed India's projection among its Muslim neighbours. While the idea of civilisation permeates foreign relations through the use of terms such as *vishwaguru*, the Islamic legacy itself is used instrumentally and differentially in its domestic and foreign policies. Although the emphasis in relations with West Asia is on the economy and more pragmatic interests, India sometimes uses Islam as a means of connecting with the Gulf countries.

In the case of Minister Swaraj's speech at the OIC, in which she did not mention Pakistan directly even once, she said, "The 185 million Muslims are a microcosm of India's diversity... they practise their faith in harmony with each other and with their non-Muslim brothers... which has prevented Muslims in India from falling prey to the poisonous propaganda of radical and extremist ideologies"<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Translated from English by the author. *Times of India*. India addresses OIC for first time, says terrorism destroying lives, destabilising regions. 1/3/2019. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-addresses-oic-for-first-time-says-terrorism-destroying-lives-destabilising-regions/articleshow/68218471.cms>



There are also other specific cultural connections, such as in image 1, in which Modi congratulated Muhammad Bin Salman on his birthday by referring to the arrival of Islam in India in the 8th century in Kerala. Through the figure of King Cheraman Perumal, who travelled to Mecca and was one of the first Indian converts to build what is believed to be the first mosque in India (Ballesteros Peiró, 2013: 124), a soft power is projected that connects with the Gulf and neutralises Pakistan's accusation of Islamophobia against the Indian government. Quotes of this kind attempt to whitewash the less pleasant side of *Hindutva* and are particularly useful for approaching Gulf partners, although they are more the exception than the rule.

India's ascendancy is also evident in the number of relationships and contacts it has established with various actors, with Pakistan being the only exception. While India has exhausted political channels, even though diplomacy continues to play a role, Pakistan's ideological nature makes it difficult to adopt a more pragmatic relationship. The possibility of a Pakistan-China double front continues to affect New Delhi's calculations, which must seek other actors to facilitate its access to the resources necessary to acquire the economic status that will establish it as a global power. To this end, its rapprochement with the United States is key, but Delhi will continue to seek agreements with all kinds of actors, including those who have traditionally been on the opposite side.

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