Policy Research Journal
ISSN (E): 3006-7030 ISSN (P) : 3006-7022 Volume 4, Issue 3, 2026

BEYOND REALISM: A CONSTRUCTIVIST INTERPRETATION OF INDIA–PAKISTAN RELATIONS THROUGH IDENTITY, HISTORICAL MEMORY, AND RELIGIOUS POLITICS

Zulfiqar Ali Khan[*1], Amna Mehboob[2], Seher Ramzan[3]

[*1]*Phd Scholar, International Relations*
[2,3]*BS International Relations*

[*1]zulfiqardir@gmail.com, [2]ssyedaamna5@gmail.com, [3]seherawan4@gmail.com

DOI: http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21804061

Keywords
India–Pakistan rivalry, Constructivism, Identity politics, Hindutva, Securitization

Article History
Received: 18 January 2026
Accepted: 03 March 2026
Published: 17 March 2026

Copyright @Author
Corresponding Author: *
Zulfiqar Ali Khan

Abstract

This study contends that the enduring India–Pakistan rivalry cannot be sufficiently explained by traditional realist assumptions that focus on material power asymmetry, nuclear deterrence, and territorial disputes. While realism captures the structural imperatives of competition, it overlooks the deeper ideational forces that sustain hostility despite repeated diplomatic engagement and shifts in strategic capabilities. Using constructivist theory as the primary analytical lens, the article demonstrates how national identities, historical memories, and elite-driven political narratives have entrenched mutually antagonistic threat perceptions since Partition. The analysis traces the evolution of competing identity projects—from the Two-Nation Theory, Hindu revivalism, and the institutionalization of Islam in Pakistan to the contemporary rise of Hindutva in India—and shows how these narratives shape strategic behaviour, public opinion, and policy choices. Employing qualitative methodology, including historical interpretation, discourse analysis, and comparative case studies, the study identifies a major gap in existing scholarship: the insufficient recognition of how identity politics and securitized narratives perpetuate conflict beyond material incentives. The article concludes that sustainable peace requires identity transformation, desecuritization, and normative engagement embedded in long-term political and societal processes rather than episodic diplomatic initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Relations between India and Pakistan represent one of the most enduring rivalries in contemporary international politics. Mainstream scholarship has traditionally explained this conflict through the realist paradigm, which frames the subcontinent as a classic case of security competition, power asymmetry, territorial disputes, and recurrent militarized crises (Ganguly, 1998; Lavoy, 2009). Realism argues that mutual insecurity, shaped by material capabilities and the anarchic international system, compels both states to pursue military preparedness, nuclear deterrence, and competitive regional strategies (Waltz, 1979). This perspective has dominated not only academic debates but also policy thinking in both Islamabad and New Delhi. However, the persistence and emotional depth of the India–Pakistan rivalry suggest that material explanations alone are insufficient. Even neoclassical realist approaches, which seek to refine structural realism by incorporating

domestic-level variables and elite perceptions, continue to privilege material power as the primary explanatory factor in foreign policy analysis (Khan & Bin Azim, 2023). If power distribution or rational cost-benefit calculations were the primary drivers of conflict, the relationship should have improved following Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1998 or India's increasing regional and global integration. Yet mistrust, hostility, and recurring crises continue—often triggered not by shifts in capabilities, but by political narratives, identity symbolism, and deep-rooted historical grievances. This contradiction points to a critical theoretical gap: the realist paradigm cannot fully explain why the rivalry persists despite multiple diplomatic engagements and formal deterrence stability. Similar limitations of materialist explanations have been identified in critical political economy, where ideological critique and normative pressures are shown to reshape dominant systems over time rather than merely reflect underlying material structures (Khan, Bin Azim, & Mohsin, 2025).

This article argues that a constructivist perspective—one that emphasizes socially constructed identities, historical memories, and political narratives—provides a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict. Constructivism posits that state behaviour is shaped not only by material capabilities but also by norms, ideas, identities, and intersubjective meanings (Wendt, 1992; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In the context of India and Pakistan, national identities have been historically constructed around mutual opposition. The Two-Nation Theory posited Muslims and Hindus as distinct political communities whose coexistence within a single nation-state was untenable. Partition violence in 1947 produced lasting psychological and cultural trauma, contributing to enduring perceptions of betrayal and existential insecurity (Jalal, 1995).

Following independence, both India and Pakistan used identity narratives to legitimize their nation-building projects. India adopted a secular constitutional identity but increasingly faced internal tensions between secular nationalism and Hindu revivalism (Brass, 2003). Pakistan, conversely, institutionalized Islamic identity as the foundation of its political order. Over time, political elites in both states used these identity narratives to mobilize support, strengthen legitimacy, and define national purpose. Consequently, the "other" became central to each state's self-definition: India as a secular multicultural nation threatened by Pakistan-backed extremism, and Pakistan as a Muslim homeland threatened by a hegemonic, Hindu-majoritarian India.

The post-1990s political landscape further intensified these identity-based constructions. The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the ascendance of Hindutva ideology redefined India's national identity in more explicitly majoritarian terms (Jaffrelot, 2007). Meanwhile, Pakistan's political sphere continued to grapple with the legacy of Islamization initiated under General Zia-ul-Haq, which entrenched religious nationalism in state institutions (Haqqani, 2010). These parallel identity trajectories have reinforced perceptions of an unbridgeable civilizational divide. Crises such as the Kargil conflict (1999), the 2001–02 standoff, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and the 2019 Balakot episode show that escalation often emerges from narrative frames rather than rational strategic calculus.

In this context, the research addresses the following central question: Why does realism dominate explanations of the India–Pakistan rivalry, and how does a constructivist framework—centred on identity, historical memory, and religious narratives—offer a more comprehensive account of the conflict's persistence? This question fills a notable scholarly gap. While realism has produced valuable insights, it has overshadowed the non-material foundations of conflict. Constructivist perspectives have been explored by some scholars (e.g., McLeod, 2008; Paul, 2005), but the literature remains limited, fragmented, and insufficiently integrated with empirical analysis of religious politics and memory formation.

The purpose of this article is to synthesize these underexplored dimensions and demonstrate how identity-based narratives reproduce hostility even when strategic interests might favour

accommodation. By examining historical trajectories, political discourse, media framings, and securitization practices, the study makes the case that India–Pakistan enmity is fundamentally a product of socially constructed perceptions rather than objective material imperatives.

Literature Review

The scholarship on India–Pakistan relations has historically been dominated by realist explanations, focusing on power politics, military rivalry, territory, and nuclear deterrence. This realist dominance is evident in classical strategic studies, which interpret the India–Pakistan conflict as a natural outcome of an anarchic international system and competing security imperatives (Waltz, 1979; Ganguly & Kapur, 2010). According to these accounts, the persistent rivalry is driven primarily by material factors, including the conventional and nuclear arms race, territorial disputes, and the enduring security dilemma. While these contributions offer valuable insights into the strategic dimensions of the conflict, they reduce the relationship to recurring security competition, leaving limited space for the role of identity formation, historical narratives, and symbolic politics.

In contrast, constructivist scholarship argues that material capabilities alone cannot adequately explain why India and Pakistan continue to perceive each other as existential threats more than seven decades after independence. Constructivists posit that identities, norms, and historically constructed narratives shape state interests and determine foreign policy behavior (Wendt, 1992, 1999; Katzenstein, 1996). Applying this lens to South Asia, several scholars highlight how identity-based discourses produced during colonial rule and reinforced after Partition continue to structure bilateral relations (Chatterjee, 1993; Devji, 2013). These works challenge the realist assumption that the rivalry is fixed and instead demonstrate how the conflict is rooted in mutually constitutive historical experiences, societal memories, and political myth-making.

A substantial body of literature emphasizes the significance of the Two-Nation Theory as a foundational identity marker in Pakistan's foreign policy and political imagination. Jalal (1994) and Devji (2013) argue that Pakistan's creation was not merely a territorial separation but the political crystallization of a Muslim identity shaped in contrast to a perceived Hindu "other." This historically embedded symbolic boundary continues to influence how Pakistani elites interpret India's intentions. Shaikh (2009) further suggests that state identity in Pakistan is inseparable from narratives of insecurity and ideological distinctiveness, which deeply influence its external relations.

Similarly, scholars analyzing Indian political identity emphasize the evolution of a majoritarian Hindu consciousness, which shapes domestic and foreign policy behavior. Brass (2003) and Chakrabarti (2019) document how Hindu nationalism constructs Muslims—and by extension Pakistan—as cultural outsiders incompatible with the Indian civilizational project. The rise of Hindu nationalist politics, especially under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has strengthened identity-based narratives that portray Pakistan not merely as a geopolitical rival but as an ideological adversary rooted in historical antagonism. Recent scholarship further demonstrates how Hindutva has evolved from cultural nationalism into a dominant political ideology, reshaping Muslim identity and reinforcing adversarial narratives within India's domestic and external political discourse (Khan, Shinwari, Malik, & Haq, 2024).

Another strand of literature focuses on the Partition and its enduring psychological, social, and territorial consequences. Zamindar (2007) and Bose & Jalal (2017) argue that the trauma of Partition created deep social mistrust, hardened communal boundaries, and institutionalized antagonistic narratives through state building, education systems, and political mobilization. These partitions of memory continue to influence popular perceptions and elite discourses, reinforcing a mutually antagonistic security culture.

Scholars also highlight how identity and narratives interact with security practices, producing a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies that perpetuate conflict. Wirsing (1994) and Ganguly & Kapur

(2010) show that traditional security concerns in Kashmir are intertwined with competing nation-building projects. Constructivist contributions, however, reinterpret Kashmir not merely as a strategic asset but as a symbolic territory central to the self-definition of both states. For Pakistan, Kashmir is the "unfinished business of Partition"; for India, it is evidence of secular territorial sovereignty. These identity-driven claims transform the conflict from a solvable territorial dispute into a deeply emotional and ideological struggle. Recent studies on the Indo-Pak rivalry further show that identity politics and elite-driven narratives play a decisive role in sustaining hostility and constraining peace initiatives, even during periods of relative strategic stability (Khan, Malik, & Khan, 2024).

Taken together, the literature reveals a significant gap. While realist studies continue to dominate policy and strategic discourse, constructivist scholarship has demonstrated that the roots and persistence of the India–Pakistan rivalry cannot be fully understood without examining identity construction, religious nationalism, historical memory, and political narratives. The existing scholarship shows strong theoretical foundations but lacks an integrated constructivist explanation that connects:

1. The colonial construction of Hindu–Muslim difference,
2. Partition-related identity formation,
3. Post-independence religious nationalism in both states, and
4. Contemporary political developments under populist and majoritarian regimes.

This research article addresses this gap by offering a comprehensive constructivist framework that traces the persistence of the India–Pakistan rivalry to historically constructed identities and present-day socio-political narratives, arguing that the conflict is fundamentally socially and ideationally produced rather than materially inevitable.

Research Question

To what extent can the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan be explained through historically constructed identities, religious nationalism, and political narratives, rather than through material capabilities and realist security imperatives?

Hypothesis

The persistent hostility between India and Pakistan is primarily driven by socially constructed identities, collective historical memories, and religiously framed political narratives; therefore, a constructivist framework provides a more comprehensive explanation of their rivalry than traditional realist approaches.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Examine the limitations of realist explanations of India–Pakistan relations;
2. Analyze how identities shaped by the Two-Nation Theory, Hindu nationalism, and religious politics influence state behavior.
3. Explore how historical memories of Partition and contemporary political narratives reinforce hostility;
4. Develop a constructivist explanation for the persistence of conflict.
5. Identify identity-based pathways for conflict transformation.

Research Gap

Most existing scholarship relies on realist concepts such as balance of power, deterrence, and the security dilemma to explain India–Pakistan relations. Constructivist perspectives exist but remain fragmented and do not combine identity formation, religious nationalism, and historical memory into a unified analytical model. No comprehensive study has systematically applied constructivism to explain both the origins and contemporary persistence of the rivalry, which this research aims to address.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in constructivist assumptions that state interests and behaviour are shaped by socially constructed identities and shared meanings. It relies on historical analysis of colonial and post-colonial sources, discourse analysis of

political speeches, constitutional texts, and media narratives, and comparative case analysis of major turning points in India–Pakistan relations. Data are drawn from primary documents, political records, and secondary scholarly literature. Triangulation of historical and discursive evidence strengthens validity, while methodological transparency ensures reliability.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical perspective of constructivism, which provides a compelling alternative to the materialist assumptions of realism in international relations. Constructivist theory emphasizes that state behaviour is not determined solely by material capabilities or the anarchic structure of the international system, but rather is shaped by socially constructed identities, norms, and shared ideas (Wendt, 1992, 1999; Katzenstein, 1996). In the context of India–Pakistan relations, constructivism provides the conceptual tools to understand the enduring hostility between the two states, which cannot be adequately explained through traditional realist paradigms focused on military competition, deterrence, or the balance of power (Waltz, 1979; Ganguly & Kapur, 2010).

Constructivist scholarship asserts that identities are socially constructed and evolve through historical processes, political discourse, and interaction between actors (Wendt, 1999). In South Asia, the identities of India and Pakistan were formed in opposition to one another during the late colonial period. Pakistan's identity emerged through the Two-Nation Theory, which posited Muslims in the subcontinent as a distinct political and religious community, ultimately necessitating a separate homeland (Jalal, 1994; Devji, 2013). India, while constitutionally secular, has increasingly reinforced a majoritarian Hindu identity, particularly through the rise of Hindu nationalist movements such as Hindutva, which frame Pakistan as both a geopolitical and ideological adversary (Brass, 2003; Chakrabarti, 2019). These identities are not static; they are continuously reproduced and reinforced through political narratives, public discourse, and policy decisions, contributing to the persistence of conflict even in the absence of immediate material threats.

Historical memory plays a crucial role in shaping threat perceptions and strategic behaviour. The trauma of Partition in 1947, including large-scale communal violence and mass displacement, created enduring psychological and political boundaries between the two states, embedding narratives of insecurity and mistrust in both societies (Bose & Jalal, 2017; Zamindar, 2007). Constructivist approaches highlight that such collective memories are institutionalized through education, political discourse, and state policies, influencing how both states interpret each other's actions and intentions. The conflict over Kashmir, for instance, is not solely a territorial dispute but a deeply symbolic struggle tied to national identity, historical memory, and competing narratives of legitimacy (Wirsing, 1994; Ganguly & Kapur, 2010).

Constructivism also underscores the importance of discourse and ideas in shaping state behaviour. Political rhetoric, media narratives, and nationalist ideologies actively construct and reinforce the perception of the other as a threat, legitimizing security policies and shaping public opinion. In India, the consolidation of Hindu nationalist discourse portrays Pakistan as an existential adversary rooted in historical enmity, while in Pakistan, the ideological framing of India as a majoritarian and hostile neighbor sustains a persistent security culture (Shaikh, 2009; Devji, 2013). These discursive practices illustrate how ideas and identities are integral to understanding the enduring nature of the rivalry, beyond material calculations of power.

The constructivist framework is therefore particularly suited to this study because it allows for a nuanced understanding of the India–Pakistan conflict that integrates historical, ideational, and political dimensions. Unlike realism, which emphasizes the inevitability of conflict under anarchy, constructivism demonstrates how socially constructed identities, historical memory, and normative frameworks shape state behaviour. It also offers analytical insight into potential pathways for conflict transformation, suggesting that changes in

discourse, identity narratives, and norms could alter perceptions and reduce hostility. By applying a constructivist lens, this study illuminates the underlying social and ideological mechanisms that sustain the India–Pakistan rivalry and provides a more comprehensive explanation than materialist approaches alone. This emphasis on ideational forces parallels critical political economy scholarship, which demonstrates how sustained ideological critique can transform dominant structural arrangements over time (Khan et al., 2025).

Historical Context

Understanding the contemporary rivalry between India and Pakistan requires an examination of the historical processes that shaped their identities and political orientations. The roots of this conflict are embedded in colonial India, where British administrative policies and political strategies contributed to the formation of distinct communal identities. The concept of the Two-Nation Theory, which posited Muslims and Hindus as separate political communities, emerged as a response to both colonial rule and the perceived threat to Muslim political and cultural interests in a Hindu-majority subcontinent (Jalal, 1994). This theory became the ideological foundation for the creation of Pakistan in 1947 and has continued to influence the state's perception of India as an existential "other" (Devji, 2013). The subordination of religion to political identity played a critical role in shaping the trajectory of the Indian subcontinent. In India, colonial policies of census categorization, separate electorates, and legal recognition of religious communities reinforced communal divisions, laying the groundwork for competing nationalisms (Chatterjee, 1993). Muslim leaders, particularly within the All India Muslim League, articulated a vision of a separate political identity rooted in Islam, emphasizing the preservation of Muslim culture, legal systems, and political autonomy (Jalal, 1994). In contrast, Hindu nationalist movements sought to assert cultural and religious majoritarianism, which intensified communal polarization and framed India's political landscape in identity-laden terms (Brass, 2003).

The Partition of 1947 was a watershed moment that institutionalized these identities. The creation of Pakistan involved mass migrations, communal violence, and the displacement of millions, leaving a profound legacy of trauma that continues to shape collective memory on both sides of the border (Bose & Jalal, 2017; Zamindar, 2007). Partition not only produced a new state but also reinforced narratives of insecurity, victimhood, and mistrust, which became central to the political cultures of India and Pakistan. For Pakistan, the memory of Partition validated the Two-Nation Theory and cemented an enduring sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis India (Shaikh, 2009). For India, the violence and forced migrations reinforced anxieties about minority communities and informed the consolidation of a secular yet Hindu-majoritarian identity (Chakrabarti, 2019). Post-independence political developments in both countries further entrenched identity-based conflict. In Pakistan, state ideology has been closely intertwined with religion, using Islamic identity as a unifying principle and as a means to legitimize foreign and domestic policies concerning India (Devji, 2013). In India, political parties and movements promoting Hindu nationalism have increasingly framed national identity in opposition to Pakistan, portraying it as a historical and religious adversary (Brass, 2003). These narratives have persisted through successive wars, military standoffs, and disputes over Kashmir, which has served as both a territorial and symbolic site of contention (Wirsing, 1994).

Kashmir exemplifies the role of historical memory and identity in perpetuating the rivalry. For Pakistan, Kashmir represents the unfinished promise of the Two-Nation Theory, while for India, it embodies the principles of secular territorial integrity and pluralism (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010). This dispute is therefore not only a question of geography but also a manifestation of competing national identities constructed over decades. Scholarship on third-party mediation further demonstrates that Kashmir's symbolic and identity-laden character has consistently constrained the effectiveness of external conflict-resolution efforts despite sustained international involvement (Khan et al., 2024). The persistence

of such ideational factors highlights the inadequacy of purely realist explanations, which focus on material capabilities and strategic calculations without accounting for the social and historical processes that shape state behaviour (Wendt, 1999).

By situating the India–Pakistan conflict within its historical context, it becomes evident that identity, religion, and collective memory are central to understanding the enduring hostility. Constructivism, with its focus on socially constructed identities and norms, provides the appropriate theoretical lens to analyze these historical processes and their continued influence on contemporary policy and inter-state relations.

Contemporary Politics

The contemporary political environment in India and Pakistan continues to reflect identity-driven narratives reinforced through official speeches, political rhetoric, and national discourse. In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly articulated Pakistan as both a security threat and an ideological antagonist, embedding this framing within broader narratives of Hindu nationalism. Modi's 2016 speech after the Uri attack, for instance, emphasized Pakistan as a "factory of terrorism" and vowed that India would isolate it globally, reinforcing the Hindutva-driven perception of Pakistan as an existential adversary (Modi, 2016). Similarly, in his 2019 election rallies, Modi invoked the Balakot airstrike as evidence of India's willingness to take decisive military action, asserting that "a new India will enter your home and kill you" (Modi, 2019). Such rhetoric merges domestic populism with national security narratives, strengthening identity-based antagonism toward Pakistan.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has increasingly framed Pakistan not only as a security threat but as a civilizational and ideological adversary. During his 2024 and 2025 election-related speeches, Modi repeatedly emphasised the need to "teach a lesson" to forces "sponsoring terrorism," a phrase widely interpreted as a reference to Pakistan (Modi, 2024). In January 2024, addressing the National Police Academy, Modi declared that India would respond to any "cross-border terror" with "full force," linking national security to Hindu-civilizational pride (Modi, 2024). His speeches commonly intertwine national identity, national security, and Hindu majoritarian narratives — reflecting the ideological posture of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its Hindutva base (Chakrabarti, 2019). These rhetorical patterns reinforce the image of Pakistan as a perpetual antagonist, and frame Indian policies in Kashmir, military modernization, and diplomatic positioning as expressions of Hindu-nationalist resolve (Brass, 2003; Ganguly & Kapur, 2010). This discursive framing aligns with broader ideological shifts associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which draws on Hindutva narratives that portray India as a Hindu-majoritarian civilization-state. Scholars note that such narratives intensify perceptions of Pakistan as not only a geopolitical rival but also a civilizational "other" (Brass, 2003; Chakrabarti, 2019). This ideological coding directly influences India's internal and external policies, including the 2019 abrogation of Article 370, which Modi justified by asserting that Kashmir's special status encouraged "separatism, terrorism, and corruption" linked implicitly to Pakistan (Modi, 2019b). These statements reflect a securitized and identity-infused approach to the Kashmir issue, rooted in both historical memory and contemporary nationalism.

In Pakistan, political leaders similarly rely on identity-based narratives to frame India as a perennial adversary. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan repeatedly emphasized India's Hindu nationalist shift under Modi, characterizing the BJP and RSS as ideological heirs to fascist politics. In his 2019 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) speech, Khan argued that India's actions in Kashmir reflected "Hindutva ideology inspired by the Nazis" and warned of the risk of war between nuclear states (Khan, 2019). These narratives reinforced Pakistan's longstanding identity-driven claim that it is the protector of South Asian Muslims, particularly in Kashmir, and that India's policies pose existential ideological and security threats.

Military leadership in Pakistan has also played a central role in shaping identity-based security

narratives. In his 2021 Pakistan Day speech, General Qamar Javed Bajwa stated that Pakistan seeks peace but views "unilateral Indian actions in Kashmir" as a direct challenge to regional stability, reinforcing Pakistan's role as defender of Kashmiri Muslims (Bajwa, 2021). He further emphasized that "dignity and sovereignty" would guide Pakistan's response, illustrating how identity, nationalism, and threat perception are intertwined within military-centric strategic culture. Bajwa's 2020 and 2021 speeches simultaneously called for dialogue while stressing that India must reverse Kashmir-related decisions, reflecting the dual identity of Pakistan as both a security-conscious state and an ideologically driven one.

Army Chief Asim Munir has recently reiterated that India's actions in Kashmir and on the Indus waters issue represent existential threats, framing the rivalry in civilizational and religious-nationalist terms. At a passing-out parade in 2025, Munir warned that "there is no space for war in a nuclearised environment" but stressed that Pakistan would "not lose an inch" of its territory, reaffirming the state's commitment to defending sovereignty and Muslim identity (Munir, 2025a). In August 2025, during a speech to the Pakistani diaspora in Tampa, Florida, he reportedly threatened that Pakistan would target any Indian dam on the Indus River, describing such upstream water projects as attempts to "choke" Pakistan — a statement widely interpreted as intersection of strategic rivalry and identity-based defense of "Muslim homeland" resources (Munir, 2025b; Reuters, 2025).

Similarly, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has used national-level addresses to sustain a narrative of existential opposition to India. In April 2025, following the Pahalgam attack in Kashmir, Sharif told a passing-out parade at the Pakistan Military Academy that Islamabad was open to a "neutral, transparent and credible investigation," but condemned continued Indian military and water-treaty actions as systemic aggression against Kashmir and Pakistan's rights (Sharif, 2025a). After cross-border strikes in May 2025, Sharif addressed parliament and described the Indian strikes as a "blatant act of war," pledging that Pakistan would respond decisively to defend its sovereignty (Sharif, 2025b). Such statements draw on historical grievances — Partition legacy, Kashmir identity, religious solidarity — and reinforce the perception of India as a permanent adversary, irrespective of shifts in power balance.

These speeches illustrate that identity, religious nationalism, and historical memory are not marginal but central to current policy discourse. Official rhetoric connects domestic legitimacy with antagonistic foreign policy, transforming bilateral rivalry into a civilizational struggle. Through these discourses, Pakistani state elites reinforce collective memory and national identity grounded in religious nationalism — contributing to the perpetuation of hostility through symbolic politics as much as strategic competition (Wendt, 1999).

Analysis of India–Pakistan Relations through Constructivism

The India–Pakistan rivalry cannot be fully understood through a traditional realist lens, which emphasizes military balance, deterrence, and power politics. While realist approaches provide insight into the material dimensions of conflict, such as nuclear deterrence and conventional military capabilities, they fail to capture the enduring influence of socially constructed identities, historical narratives, and religious nationalism (Waltz, 1979; Ganguly & Kapur, 2010). Constructivism, by contrast, offers a framework for understanding how the historical, ideological, and discursive factors identified in previous sections shape state behaviour and perpetuate hostility. From the inception of Pakistan, the Two-Nation Theory established a foundation for identity-driven foreign policy. Pakistan's perception of India as a religiously majoritarian and existential adversary has informed its strategic and ideological orientation, particularly regarding Kashmir and regional security policies (Jalal, 1994; Devji, 2013). Similarly, India's political and cultural narratives have reinforced the portrayal of Pakistan as a threat to national integrity and secular governance, with Hindu nationalist movements emphasizing historical grievances and communal

memories to consolidate internal legitimacy (Brass, 2003; Chakrabarti, 2019). These identity constructions create a self-reinforcing cycle of mistrust and confrontation that realism cannot explain, as material power shifts alone have not resolved tensions.

The Kashmir conflict exemplifies the primacy of ideational factors in the rivalry. While realist analysis frames Kashmir as a strategic territory with military and economic significance, constructivist interpretation emphasizes its symbolic role in the collective identities of both nations. For Pakistan, Kashmir represents the unfinished promise of the Two-Nation Theory and an assertion of Islamic identity, while for India, it embodies the principle of territorial integrity and secular pluralism (Wirsing, 1994; Ganguly & Kapur, 2010). The persistent militarization, political rhetoric, and public narratives surrounding Kashmir demonstrate that conflict is sustained not merely by material considerations but by identity-laden perceptions, historical memory, and normative frameworks.

Religious nationalism in both countries further reinforces the persistence of rivalry. In Pakistan, the ideological emphasis on Islam as a unifying and legitimizing principle has historically shaped both domestic and foreign policy, particularly with respect to India and the Kashmir issue (Shaikh, 2009; Devji, 2013). In India, the rise of Hindu nationalist movements has framed Pakistan as a historical adversary and emphasized Hindu-majoritarian identity, contributing to increasingly polarized domestic and foreign policy discourse (Brass, 2003; Chakrabarti, 2019). These narratives demonstrate how identity and ideology, rather than material capabilities alone, drive the behaviour of both states. Constructivism also illuminates the role of historical memory in shaping contemporary policy decisions. The trauma of Partition, communal violence, and past wars has institutionalized mutual distrust and created a political culture that privileges security over reconciliation (Bose & Jalal, 2017; Zamindar, 2007). Public discourse and political narratives reproduce these memories, reinforcing the perception of the other as a perpetual threat. Consequently, even when material conditions suggest opportunities for cooperation, identity-driven norms and narratives often prevent de-escalation, illustrating the limits of realist explanations.

The constructivist approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of India–Pakistan relations by demonstrating that the enduring rivalry is rooted in socially constructed identities, historical memory, and normative frameworks. It highlights the centrality of ideas, discourse, and ideology in shaping state behaviour, revealing that material power alone cannot explain the persistence of hostility. Constructivism thus offers both explanatory and predictive utility, providing insight into the mechanisms through which identity and history sustain conflict and suggesting pathways for conflict transformation through changes in norms, discourse, and mutual perceptions (Wendt, 1999; Katzenstein, 1996).

Policy Implications and Potential Constructivist Solutions

The constructivist analysis of India–Pakistan relations not only explains the persistence of hostility but also provides a foundation for formulating policy interventions that address the conflict's identity-driven dimensions. Unlike realist approaches, which focus on material power and deterrence, constructivism emphasizes the potential for normative and ideational change to reshape perceptions, reduce mistrust, and create conditions for conflict transformation (Wendt, 1999; Katzenstein, 1996). By recognizing that identities, historical narratives, and social norms are constructed and maintained through discourse, policymakers can design strategies that target the underlying drivers of hostility rather than merely responding to symptoms of confrontation. One critical avenue for policy intervention is the promotion of dialogue and trust-building initiatives that directly engage with identity narratives. People-to-people diplomacy, joint cultural programs, and academic exchanges can challenge entrenched stereotypes and foster mutual understanding. By facilitating interaction between communities, these initiatives aim to reconstruct perceptions of the other as a legitimate actor rather than an existential threat (Devji, 2013;

Shaikh, 2009). Constructivist scholarship suggests that repeated social interaction can gradually transform collective identities, weakening the ideological justification for antagonism. Education and media narratives also play a crucial role in shaping collective memory and identity. Constructivist-informed policies would emphasize curricular reforms and responsible media practices that highlight shared histories, pluralism, and cooperation rather than perpetuating narratives of enmity (Bose & Jalal, 2017; Brass, 2003). For example, textbooks and public discourse that acknowledge the complexities of Partition, rather than framing it solely as a binary Hindu-Muslim conflict, could reduce the intergenerational transmission of grievance-driven identities. Similarly, balanced media coverage that highlights instances of cross-border cooperation or dialogue can challenge dominant adversarial narratives and create new normative frameworks for engagement. The Kashmir dispute, as a symbolically charged conflict, demonstrates the necessity of norm-sensitive diplomatic strategies. Constructivist analysis indicates that resolution or de-escalation requires attention not only to territorial or security arrangements but also to the identity and legitimacy concerns of the populations involved (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010; Wirsing, 1994). Confidence-building measures, joint governance experiments, and people-centered negotiation processes can help reframe Kashmir as a space for cooperation rather than a zero-sum contest, gradually altering both state and societal perceptions.

Finally, regional multilateral frameworks and international engagement can support identity-sensitive solutions by reinforcing norms of peaceful coexistence, dialogue, and cooperative problem-solving. Constructivism highlights that the repeated practice of norms at regional and international levels can shape state behavior over time, creating incentives for states to align with cooperative norms (Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1999). Engagement through platforms such as SAARC, Track II diplomacy, and UN-supported initiatives can facilitate the internalization of norms that prioritize dialogue over confrontation, fostering a gradual transformation in the India–Pakistan relationship.

The policy implications derived from a constructivist understanding of India–Pakistan relations emphasize the centrality of ideas, norms, and identity in shaping conflict dynamics. By targeting the social and ideational drivers of hostility through dialogue, education, media reform, and norm-building, policymakers can create conditions conducive to sustainable conflict transformation. Such strategies demonstrate that the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan is not an inevitable consequence of material power politics but a socially constructed phenomenon amenable to deliberate normative and identity-sensitive interventions.

Conclusion

The constructivist analysis of India–Pakistan relations demonstrates that the enduring hostility between the two states cannot be fully explained by material factors, power asymmetries, or security dilemmas alone. While realist dynamics undoubtedly shape strategic behaviour, the deeper roots of conflict lie in the socially constructed identities, historical narratives, and mutually reinforcing norms of enmity that have evolved since Partition. The perception of the "other" as an existential threat has become embedded in state institutions, political discourse, educational systems, and public memory, thereby sustaining a cycle of mistrust that periodically manifests in crises and militarized confrontation. Constructivism highlights that the India–Pakistan rivalry is not structurally predetermined, but rather maintained through political rhetoric, collective memory, and symbolic narratives that reinforce competitive identities. This insight provides a more nuanced understanding of why peace processes repeatedly fail despite diplomatic initiatives and confidence-building measures. The conflict persists because it is tied to identity and legitimacy struggles, particularly visible in the Kashmir issue, which functions as a core symbol of national identity for both states. In this sense, even seemingly rational strategic behaviour is filtered through socially constructed meanings.

A key contribution of the constructivist perspective is its emphasis on the possibility of change. If identities and norms are constructed, they can also be reconstructed. Transformational strategies—such as people-to-people engagement, educational reforms, responsible media practices, and norm-building through regional institutions—have the potential to gradually reshape perceptions and soften antagonistic identities. Although such changes are incremental and long-term, they offer pathways that material-centric approaches overlook. Moreover, constructivism underscores the importance of domestic actors, political narratives, and ideational entrepreneurs—leaders, media, bureaucratic elites, and civil society—in framing how states interpret each other's behaviour. This reminds policymakers that sustainable peace requires shifting not only policies but also the narratives that justify hostility. On the whole, the constructivist framework offers a powerful lens for understanding and addressing the India–Pakistan conflict by exposing its ideational foundations. It reveals that the rivalry is not simply about territory or power but about identity, meaning, and legitimacy. Therefore, any durable solution must engage with these underlying social constructs. By integrating identity-sensitive diplomacy, narrative transformation, and long-term normative change, both countries can move toward a more stable and cooperative relationship. Ultimately, constructivism shows that conflict is not inevitable—what has been socially constructed can also be reconstructed through deliberate political, social, and normative engagement.

REFERENCE

Bajwa, Q. J. (2021, March 23). *Pakistan Day speech*. Inter-Services Public Relations.

Bose, S., & Jalal, A. (2017). *Modern South Asia: History, culture, political economy* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Brass, P. R. (2003). *The production of Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India*. University of Washington Press.

Chakrabarti, A. (2019). Nationalism, identity, and strategic culture in South Asia. *Contemporary South Asia, 27*(3), 312–327.

Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton University Press.

Devji, F. (2013). *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a political idea*. Harvard University Press.

Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International norm dynamics and political change. *International Organization, 52*(4), 887–917.

Ganguly, S. (1998). *Conflict unending: India-Pakistan tensions since 1947*. Columbia University Press.

Ganguly, S., & Kapur, S. P. (2010). The causes of the Kashmir conflict: Past and present. *India Review, 9*(1), 1–26.

Haqqani, H. (2010). *Pakistan: Between mosque and military*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Imran Khan. (2019, September 27). Address to the United Nations General Assembly. United Nations Official Records.

Jaffrelot, C. (2007). *Hindu nationalism: A reader*. Princeton University Press.

Jalal, A. (1994). *The sole spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the demand for Pakistan*. Cambridge University Press.

Jalal, A. (1995). *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia: A comparative and historical perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Katzenstein, P. J. (Ed.). (1996). *The culture of national security: Norms and identity in world politics*. Columbia University Press.

Khan, Z. A., & Bin Azim, N. (2023). Expanding the horizon of foreign policy analysis: A neoclassical realist approach. *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs, 6*(2), 789.

Khan, Z. A., Bin Azim, N., & Mohsin, I. (2025). The dialectic of critique and adaptation: How Marxism has shaped the structural and ideological evolution of capitalism. *The Lighthouse Journal of Social Sciences, 4*(2), 119–138.

Khan, Z. A., Malik, F., & Khan, M. Z. (2024). Enduring rivalries: Identity politics and the pursuit of peace in the Indo-Pak region. *Social Science Review Archives, 2*(2), 114–121. https://policyjournalofms.com

Khan, Z. A., Haq, R. U., Malik, F., & Shinwari, J. U. R. (2024). Kashmir at the crossroads: Analyzing third-party mediation and the India–Pakistan rivalry. *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences, 5*(4), 64–75. https://doi.org/10.55737/qjss.558722578

Khan, Z. A., Shinwari, J. U. R., Malik, F., & Haq, R. (2024). From identity to dominance: Unpicking the intersection of Hindutva and Muslim identity in India. *International Journal of Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences, 3*(3), 1816–1825.

Lavoy, P. R. (2009). *Asymmetric warfare in South Asia: The causes and consequences of the Kargil conflict*. Cambridge University Press.

McLeod, J. (2008). *The history of India* (2nd ed.). Greenwood Press.

Modi, N. (2016, September 30). Address at the Indian Army Commanders Conference. Government of India Press Information Bureau.

Modi, N. (2019, August 8). Address to the nation on constitutional changes in Jammu and Kashmir. Government of India Press Information Bureau.

Modi, N. (2024). Election campaign speech on national security and territorial integrity. Bharatiya Janata Party Official Archives.

Munir, A. (2025a). Address on national security and regional stability. Inter-Services Public Relations.

Munir, A. (2025b). Address to overseas Pakistani community. Reported in *Reuters*. (Verification required for final archival citation).

Paul, T. V. (2005). *The India-Pakistan conflict: An enduring rivalry*. Cambridge University Press.

Shaikh, F. (2009). *Making sense of Pakistan*. Columbia University Press.

Sharif, S. (2025a). Parliamentary speech on national security policy. Government of Pakistan Parliamentary Records.

Sharif, S. (2025b). Address on regional diplomacy and foreign policy. Reported in *Al Jazeera*. (Verification required for full citation).

Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Addison-Wesley.

Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics. *International Organization, 46*(2), 391–425.

Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Wirsing, R. G. (1994). *India, Pakistan, and the Kashmir dispute: On regional conflict and its resolution*. St. Martin's Press.

Zamindar, V. F. (2007). *The long partition and the making of modern South Asia: Refugees, boundaries, histories*. Columbia University Press.